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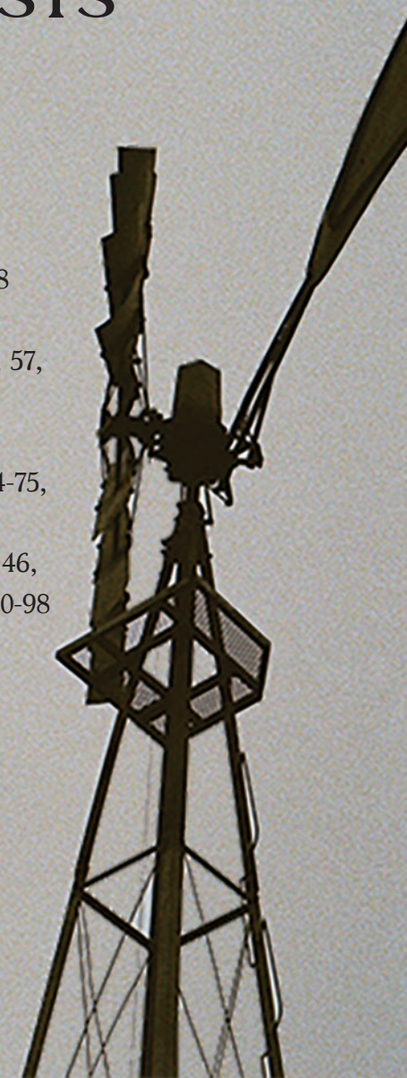
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Art by Wiley Martinez

Things That I Don't Know

by Dorothy Levine

Why vanilla doesn't taste how it smells.
If trees can feel their leaves,
and if they miss them once they fall.
How to find the answers
to most math problems.
How to tell time
without counting on fingers.
Where nightmares come from.
Why you can lucid dream,
when I cannot.
How long "I love you"s last,
and who said it first.
Why people know the names
of every celebrity,
and we seem to know none.
Who invented corduroy,
and how telephones work.
When chickens' eggs became food
and why you hate when they're runny.
Why I collect red leaves
only to let them shrivel.
What to do when someone
compliments me.
What to say (to you)
when "I miss you"
isn't enough.



Art by Clea Gunn

Art by Lila Liebeskind

Road Trip Story

by Catherine Horowitz

Penn Station, New York, 3:00 PM.

I'm in a parking lot in the center of New York City. I haven't been around this many people in weeks. It's the middle of August and the air is thick, making the buildings and cars and people look soft and hazy. I'm wearing a shirt that I bought a few days ago in Tennessee, and shorts I bought last week in Georgia. I watch the bus that I've spent the past four hours in pull away, and then I watch Lila walk across the street and out of my life. We are only a few yards from the first place we met, a hallway leading out of Penn Station. Soon, Lila will be in that exact same hallway, alone this time, buying a ticket to somewhere I will probably never see again.

I think road trips are a lot like stories; you start in one place and end up somewhere else, a long way away from where you began. I went on this road trip because it was something I had always wanted to do. It felt drastic, and it felt necessary. I also went because Lila wanted to go.

Lila and I met a week into the pandemic. I had been sent home from studying abroad, and she was about to graduate. In the early days of the pandemic we would text from 10 a.m. to 6 a.m. every night. Even after that, we talked every day for over a year—every day up until the road trip. Eventually, we started visiting each other; once in New York, then for weekends in New Haven where she lived. It was a textbook situationship, and we'd been discussing a road trip since the beginning. After months of talking about it, it only made sense to really do it.

Road trips are a lot like stories, or maybe stories are a lot like road trips. But either way, whether they're satisfying or abrupt, or they leave behind more questions than answers, stories have to end.

Ocean City, Maryland.

It's the end of July, and Lila and I are standing in front of the ocean, watching lightning illuminate the dark clouds. The weather here is warm and calm; this lightning is distant, harmless. Lila's friends are collecting shells a little way down the shore. In the distance, we can hear the sounds of the Ocean City boardwalk: a ferris wheel, pop music from 2014, people moving in and out of the tacky gift shops. Lila looks at her weather app to see where the storm is; it's moving south, down the coast, and not going to hit land for a while.

Ocean City is one of many beach towns that make up a stretch of land in Maryland and Delaware. It's long and narrow, built along a busy road called Coastal Highway—kind of like a dingy Vegas on the beach. Lila and her friends are staying in an Airbnb across the street from a gas station and a pirate-themed mini-golf course. I've driven two hours to stay with them tonight, and tomorrow, Lila and I will drive south. We've been planning this for a while.

We walk back from the ocean, our feet sinking into the sand. The lightning flashes behind us as we walk along the boardwalk and down the busy streets, the same ones that we will follow tomorrow, until they eventually become the open road. The same ones that will take us to farmland and mountains and cities we've never been to. Ocean City feels safe, manageable, but when I look out at the highway disappearing into the dark horizon, I realize that soon I'll be surrendering myself to forces completely out of my control—to a story unfolding in directions I can only imagine.

Assateague Island, Virginia.

We spend most of the day driving across bridges. They pass under long tunnels and over stretches of sand jutting out into the ocean. There's a moment when we look to either side of the narrow road and can't tell where the water ends and the sky begins. It's all white, like we're in the clouds, except for the blurred orange sun behind all the fog and the mist. We roll the windows down, and it's silent all around us—even the ocean wind seems eerily calm. Inside the car it's quiet, too, but a comfortable, still sort of quiet. It feels a little like we're flying.

Bishopville, South Carolina.

If you take I-95 through North Carolina, you'll pass billboards that feature bright paintings of cacti and sea creatures and fireworks. They say things like "You're always a wiener here!" and "Too much tequila!" They all advertise South of the Border: twenty-nine miles, seventeen miles, ten, five.

In the early days of I-95, South of the Border was the halfway point between New York and Florida. It's right on the border between North and South Carolina, and it's home to a mini golf course, a motel, an amusement park, and the largest indoor reptile exhibit in the U.S. It's impossible to avoid when taking I-95; the interstate takes you right through.

Twenty-nine miles before South of the Border, Lila gets a migraine. We pull over and she takes an Advil. Seventeen miles before, we sit by the side of the road as she holds ice to her head. Five miles before, I see the signs and buildings towering in the distance, but Lila can only see stripes and spots of light. When we finally pass through South of the Border, we stop and sit outside a bright pink ice cream shop covered in pictures of pigs. She puts her head on my shoulder as I find a hotel.

The hotel is on an empty stretch of land—it's just that and a Waffle House for miles. That night, we fall asleep at 9:30. In the morning, Lila's migraine is gone and we get sandwiches from the Waffle House. We spend four dollars on them, but they taste like a million.

Congaree National Park, South Carolina.

It's the first day of August, and it's hot. I'm covered in mud from canoeing down Cedar Creek, and sweat from hoisting the canoe onto my car a few hours ago. Now, I'm in the Walmart parking lot trying to find a battery-operated fan to put in the tent; we're camping around a lake where the low is about 80 degrees, and we've barely slept because of the heat. My head hurts, and I feel nauseous. That's when I start crying, right there in the middle of the parking lot, for some reason I can't explain. I feel ridiculous and exposed in front of all the people entering the store, and when Lila returns from getting ice for the cooler, I can tell she notices. I wish she didn't.

I don't know if it's the heat or the nausea or the tears, but in the car driving back to the campsite, I finally bring up the topic we've so successfully not brought up for months now. "I don't know where we stand," I say. "I'm going back to school and I need to know what we are to each other."

Lila looks straight ahead. "I don't either," she says.

"I think we need to talk about it."

"You go first."

I tell her how I feel; I like her. I don't want to see anyone else. We're basically in a relationship already—we just haven't said so. She doesn't say anything for a little while.

This is the part of the story where she's supposed to tell me she wants to be with me, too, that we're stupid for not having established it before. If life made sense the way it does in stories, that's what would have happened.

But Lila says, "I don't know what to do."

She tells me that she's afraid of committing too much, and that she's worried about our age difference. She's been worrying for a while. I ask if there's anything I've done to make her feel like this, but she says no. I'm glad we're driving; I don't know if I can look at her directly. I tell her she can talk to me about it—I don't want her to feel like she needs to keep it to herself. Then, she sees a family of deer in the woods by the car. She points them out. We change the subject.

That night, a storm hits. We both lie awake, listening to the rain hit the trees above us. Lila checks the storm tracker on her phone again; the faint lightning that we see through the fabric of the tent is coming from right across the lake. It could hit us at any time and send branches crashing down to our tent. Like the night before, I barely sleep because of the storm. But this time, I pretend I don't notice that Lila can't sleep either.

The next day it's still raining and we run to the car, spreading the tent out in the trunk so it can dry. We don't talk about it.

Savannah, Georgia.

The rain has stopped when we arrive in Savannah, but the atmosphere is still gray and wet. We check into our hotel, in disbelief at how nice it is after sleeping in the woods. This was the one hotel we'd splurged on. It's a brick building near the center of the city with old, ornate rooms and winding staircases.

Art by Clea Gunn

There is a delicate space between us in our room once we are alone. I don't bring up our talk from yesterday; I don't have anything else to say about it. Still, us not talking about it seems to say even more. We cautiously put our things down and comment on the velvety furniture. Lila lies on the bed, and I sit next to her. When I talk, she answers with one-word statements, or sometimes says nothing at all. Eventually, she takes a shower. I go out to the patio, a sprawling courtyard with trees scattered throughout. I drink lemonade and listen to people talking about their dinner plans.

Savannah feels old and overgrown. It's famous for the Spanish moss draping from its trees, a silvery garland that hangs down onto benches and statues and squares and makes all of them seem not quite of this world. It's also built on a graveyard. Colonial Park Cemetery is in the city center, surrounded by tall iron fences and home to crumbling gravestones untouched since 1850. But the cemetery actually extends far beyond its gates, under Savannah's streets—the final resting place of over 10,000 people. We go on a ghost tour, and our guide tells us about seeing strange lights around cemetery walls. We scream at all the right moments.

Afterwards, we get key lime pie and sit at a table in the center of the city. Savannah is lively and charming and beautiful. Our feet hurt from all the walking, and we take our shoes off as we finally head back to the hotel. The invisible walls between us seem to have broken down for the moment. Conversation is easy, like it used to be, and we laugh at ourselves walking through the city barefoot. We stay up later than we ever have before; there's something about the city that makes the heat and sweat and hard conversations feel like they happened in a different lifetime, to different people. Neither of us wants it to be the next day, when we have to leave this one behind.

Art by Sophie Winner



Loft Mountain, Georgia.

We spend the next day driving across Georgia. The sun goes down early, and the sunset lasts for a long time. Everything is tinted in shades of gold—the road in front of us, the grass and rolling hills around us, the peach stands we pass on the highway. Beside the road, we see a pile of cows napping underneath a tree, the sunlight coming through the leaves, making them glow a little in the light. We drive further into the mountains, and the road winds through old towns that look frozen in the past. We keep stopping to look out over them as the horizon turns red and orange and purple. The drive lasts longer than we mean it to.

Our campground is in Loft Mountain State Park, and it's called the "Squirrel's Nest." It's completely dark when we arrive, but everything is illuminated by the string lights and lanterns our neighbors have set up. It smells like campfires and grills, and fireflies dance around our tent. I hear string instruments playing a few campsites over, and maybe a trumpet. People are laughing; I imagine they're dancing too.

Art by Clea Gunn

Nashville, Tennessee.

Nashville is our one stop between the mountains of Georgia and the mountains of Tennessee. We still feel their presence throughout the drive there, and we sometimes see them looming in the distance. When we don't, we see billboards advertising the Smokies, telling us that "the mountains are calling."

In Nashville, we walk to Centennial Park. There's a man by a big pond feeding the geese; they flock around him as he plays music and paints elaborate portraits of them. We sit on swinging chairs near the geese and drink lemonade. That afternoon we visit a vintage store, and Lila picks out a button-up shirt for me. She shows me how to roll up my sleeves properly and buys a long skirt for herself. She stands next to me in the mirror; we look like an old-fashioned lesbian couple. I think Lila realizes it too.

That night we get into an argument. I want to walk around the downtown area and find some live music. Lila is worried about COVID, and I tell her we don't have to go. She's upset because she thinks I'm disappointed. I'm upset because she's upset with me. We drop the subject and order pizza. Now there are two things we can't talk about.

Cataloochee, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, North Carolina.

The only entrance to the Cataloochee campground in the Smoky Mountains is a long, winding path up a tall mountain. Your cell service will cut out halfway up, so don't rely on Google Maps for directions. Right after losing service, you'll see a statue of Bigfoot, and the paved road will turn into dirt. There's an elk herd living near the campground, and about twenty other campers. Not many distractions, save for the kids at the site next to us, who bring us wildflowers, and the camp host, a muscular woman named Ginger who gives us hiking recommendations. Besides that, it's just us. I don't know how I feel about it. Lila seems to feel the same—she downloads TV shows for us to watch in the tent when it gets a little too quiet.

Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

The quickest way to get from the North Carolina side of the Smoky Mountains to the Tennessee side is Newfound Gap Road, a 30-mile drive straight through the park's highest mountain passes. The road ends in Gatlinburg, a mountain town known as the gateway to the Smokies. Although it's next to a national park, it's a resort town—one of the tackiest I've ever been to. We go to a moonshine store and sample flavors like pickle and strawberry cream, and we see ads for Dollywood on what seems like every existing surface. Lila is being quiet again, but I pretend I don't notice. We're staying at the Bear Creek Motel, the kitchiest motel we could find that wasn't exorbitantly priced. All the rooms have drawings of bear paw-prints on the doors.

This hotel room is the first one we've been in with two beds. We put our things on separate ones, and I tell myself I'm not going to make it weird. That night, Lila sits next to me. I get up to turn the light off, and when I come back, she's still there. I lie down next to her. We don't touch. In the morning we get breakfast at the Pancake Pantry; it's as tacky as they come.

Blue Ridge Parkway.

At 469 miles, the Blue Ridge Parkway is America's longest scenic byway. It begins in the Smokies and then winds up through the spine of the Blue Ridge mountains, alongside rivers and through tunnels, until it reaches Shenandoah National Park. It consists of only two lanes with no intersections; it does, however, have designated overlooks, a folk art center, and a famous bakery. We take the parkway up to our campsite in Shenandoah, and reach our destination just as the sun begins to set. It's in a grassy clearing hidden away from the other campers, a welcome change from the rocks and sand that cover most campsites. Here, everything is bright green and alive, and the trees remind me of the ones in my yard in Maryland. I see signs around the park for D.C., 70 miles away, but on the horizon nonetheless. It's not quite home yet, but it's getting there; I feel like I'm about to round the corner onto my street, about to start recognizing the signs and the storefronts.

Art by Lila Liebeskind

Shenandoah National Park, Virginia.

For the first time the next day, we get back to our campsite long before sunset. I've bought a patch from each park we've visited, and Lila sews them onto my backpack. We take out all our leftovers from the cooler and spread them on the picnic table. It's a feast.

Later we drive to a stone overlook to watch the sun sink behind the mountains. We don't mean to stay for long after, but we do, sitting on the wall high up above the Shenandoah River, looking at the sky as the stars come out. Lila shows me the Milky Way, and I show her all the constellations I know the names of. We try to find towns in the mountains below us, little patches of lights blinking on and off in the darkness. Further out, we see lightning again, but this time it's faint and distant; we can only really see it if we squint. It's coming from a storm far away, one that will never reach us, one we can only imagine ever seeing.

Tomorrow, we will drive until we get to my house in Maryland. Lila will meet my family and see my childhood bedroom. The next day, we'll take the Metro to a bus station, and the bus will take us to New York City, and another bus will take me to Boston alone. In only two days I will have traveled almost half of I-95, the same length I just traveled in two weeks. It all seems so far away. But now, here, we sit with our feet dangling off the stone ledge, eating pesto and looking at storms happening in other states. It feels good; it feels like an ending.

Penn Station, New York, 3:10 PM.

Lila and I look at each other in semi-disbelief; neither of us says it, but we know we aren't going to see each other again. We met here months ago, when everything seemed open and full of possibility. Now, standing here again, it feels like we're barreling toward one inevitable destination: the end of the story, abrupt and sudden and not what we'd anticipated just a few weeks ago. She turns around, and I sit against the side of a building as she gets smaller and smaller. Eventually I can't distinguish her from all the hundreds of other people going into the station, other people who are going home after a long time away, who are leaving places with questions unanswered, who are meeting people for the first time, or who just said goodbye without really saying it and are now moving on, to other times and places and people, left without a real ending.

"Spiraling" by Aislinn Cannistraro







"Desktop Air Fryer" by Brock Bierly

Drift

Oceanography in three easy steps

by Wiley Martinez

I.

"A watched pot never boils"
even though the coffee is hot
cubist centimeter water
tigers' tummies are solar cells
that's why seabreezes keep you cool
transmission of heat by motion
on the way to Lake Michigan
transferences of energy
make our pots of coffee or tea
from incompressible substance

II.

Physical properties of seawater
reviewed by experts in the discipline
who send results back to the editor
decision: accept/reject/revision
just look at the ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS section
voluminous comments from three people
moving heat around, phase changes happen
as cool as it is, it's not peer reviewed
it's the main ingredient in coffee
these are just some resources you can use
a lesson in human anatomy
a nonpolar universal solvent
we call it the mickey mouse molecule

III.

Down here in the asthenosphere
like our longitudinal timezone
oceanic-continental
each landmass reflects the other
magnetic stripes are everywhere
ridges: viscous & volcanic
post-pangeal rejigsawing
transformative & convergent
continent breakup/collision
the theory of plate tectonics

Stories From Down Home

by Sadie Owens



Art by Lila Liebeskind

Before

MOMAW WAS BORN in the holler of Pikeville, Kentucky during the summer of 1940. I don't know much about what Pikeville is like; I've only been there once when I was very young. Even then, my anxiety overwhelmed me, so I spent most of the trip crying and shaking, wanting to go back to what I knew. I remember things moving slower there—voices, stories, and cars. It unsettled some deep part of me.

Pikeville gave Momaw a Southern drawl, knobbly knuckles from doing the washing, a feisty will, and berry-picking stories she'd tell me as I fell asleep. It did not give her a GED or a drivers' license, but it did give her Popaw, who, as far as I know, had both. They married when she was 16 and, after he was done with the war, they moved to Canton, Ohio in hopes of a better life.

I am Momaw's daughter's daughter's daughter, but she took on raising me when I was just a baby. She was my mom, dad, and everything in between, just like she'd been for my mom and grandma before me. I like to think that, from the moment I was born, the biggest part of me belonged to her. Still, there is some hurt in the fact that my Momaw raised kids until she died at 79.

During

From the moment I was born, my family says they talked to me "like I was an adult." It is probably because of this that I said my first word at only a few months old: bird. Popaw would sit rocking me on the porch of my childhood home in Canton, birdwatching, telling me about all the creatures that he saw. He was a rough man, but I listened intently, and my voice came out earlier because of it.

I have so many memories of writing and reading, even before I knew quite how they worked. I remember sitting in front of the window in our living room, clumsily dragging a chunky crayon across my tiny journal, trying so desperately to write. I asked Momaw how to do it, told her I really wanted to, just didn't know how. I am not sure what she said, but I don't remember her teaching me. I'm not sure that she could have taught me if she tried.

What I don't have many memories of, at least not that early, is speaking. I went to kindergarten a small and quiet thing. A lot happened inside of my head, but not much of it came out; whatever filter was between my mind and my mouth was undoubtedly blocked up by something. There was a lot of pressure, even then—I was the kid who didn't go to preschool but knew her ABC's, who was polite and shy, wore little pink cowboy boots and caught on quick. I think that speaking might have been too risky; so many folks had told me I was smart that I was afraid I'd prove them wrong.

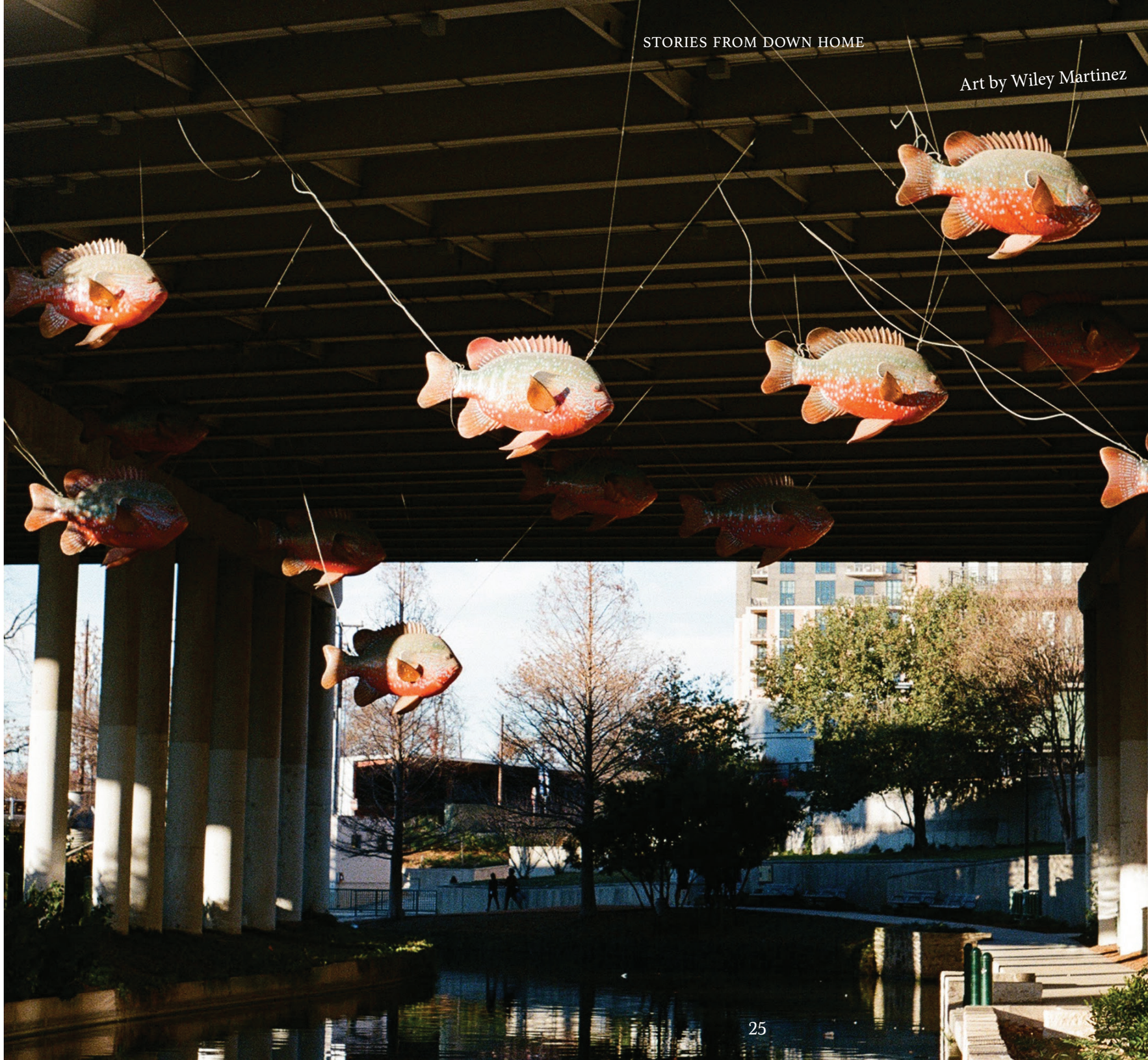
I spoke a lot to Momaw, though— about birds, about books, and about Hannah Montana. I talked to her about aliens and Kentucky and my friends, and she told me funny stories from down home, like how one day, she told me, she and her eight siblings went to catch a fish to eat, but they forgot to descale it and cooked it with the scales on. She couldn't spell, but neither could I, and she sure was a great storyteller.

: : :

As I got older, I got bolder and less reflective. I joined theater, and, most formatively, the debate team. I learned words like constituents and ethical and justice, staged protests, wrote essays, and won gold keys and championships. I felt like the master of language, like I had lived up to how smart everyone told me I'd always been—I'd studied the way the Cleveland kids talked, and I was rewarded for it. Words were like a weapon; my tongue was quick and sharp against anyone who didn't see the world as a revolution waiting to happen.

I was not as nice to Momaw as I used to be. The more words that I learned and the better I got at using them, the bigger divide between who I wanted to become and who she was. Her misspelled grocery lists made me angry, and the way she pronounced things made me itch. She did not fit into the narrative that had been created for me since I'd tried to write my first sentence, the character that my family always saw me as: the one who would "get out", the smart one, the one who was more than what my mother and her mother had been. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy; my family hated how poor and dumb we were so much that they made me hate those parts of us, too. So I cast them away, and I criticized the fact that Momaw didn't.

Art by Wiley Martinez



She didn't understand who I was becoming, I thought, and our language was the thing that separated us. We lived in the same house, surviving on the same $1,000 Social Security check every month, but I talked like someone who was above all that. I was glad for the fact that the kids in my AP classes couldn't tell how different our lives really were. I dreamt about Yale and Columbia until I watched a video of Oberlin students talking about what it was like to go to school there. They were so smart, so articulate, so full of passion— everything I wanted to be.

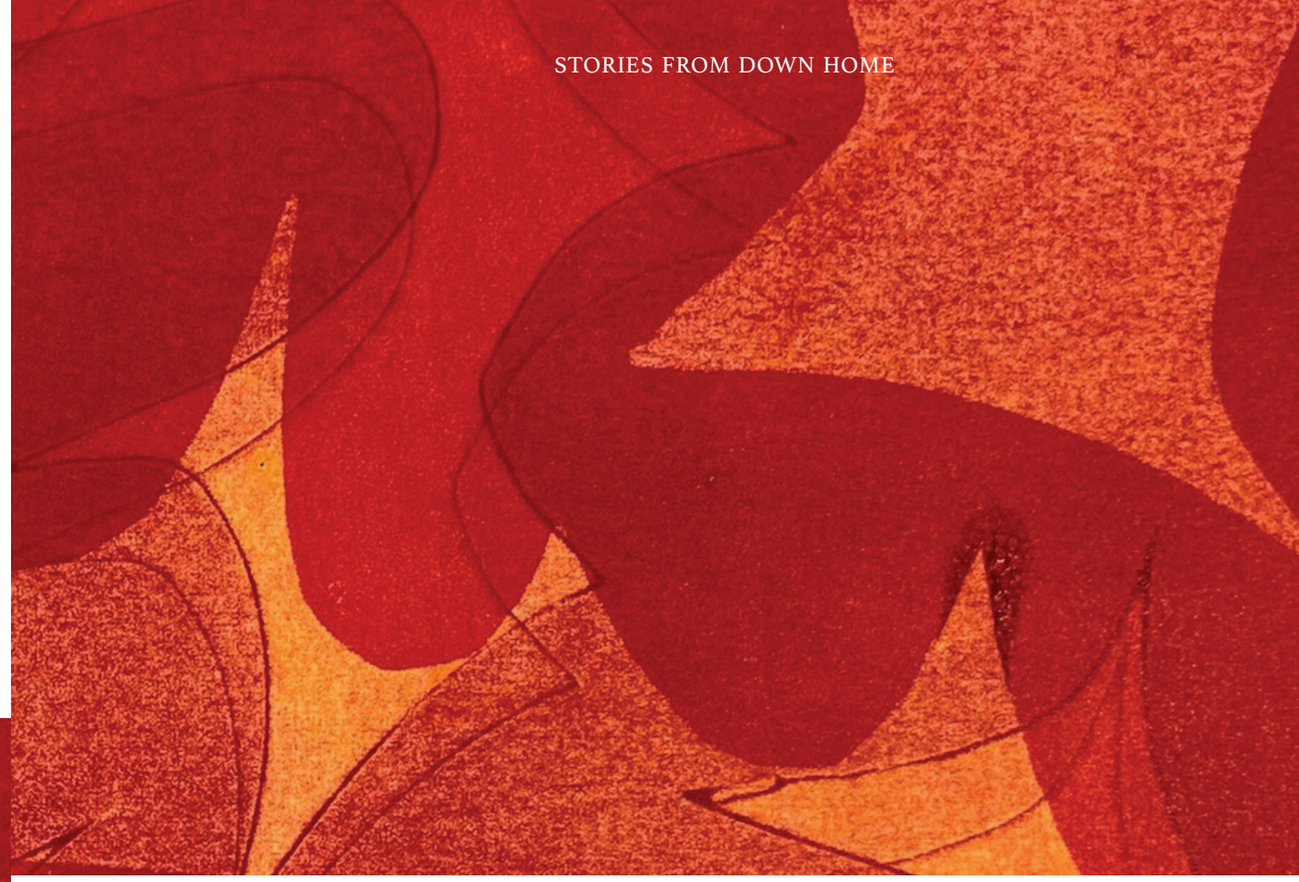
I applied ED to Oberlin and got in. Everyone celebrated, and my Momaw did, too, but she said she'd never go all the way up there. She asked why I wouldn't go to Malone, a local school, and marry my high school sweetheart. I rolled my eyes. The shame inside of me turned into anger. I am better than that, I thought. She doesn't understand what a big deal this is. She doesn't understand how much I can do. I let myself believe that this meant I'd outgrown the version of the world that Momaw could comprehend.

After

Momaw died in our living room in Canton, Ohio in the fall of 2019. I realize that this is an abrupt way to tell you, but this is how I felt, too—she was healthy when I left. Only a week after I'd moved to college, I rushed home to say goodbye. In her last moments, I talked a lot to her. I apologized for correcting her, for pestering her, told her how grateful I was for all



Art by Clea Gunn



she'd given me: the elephant figurines that sat on my desk, the stories about fish, the money she'd come up with to send me on school trips, and most importantly, the ways she saved my life. She said it was okay, and she asked me to sing.

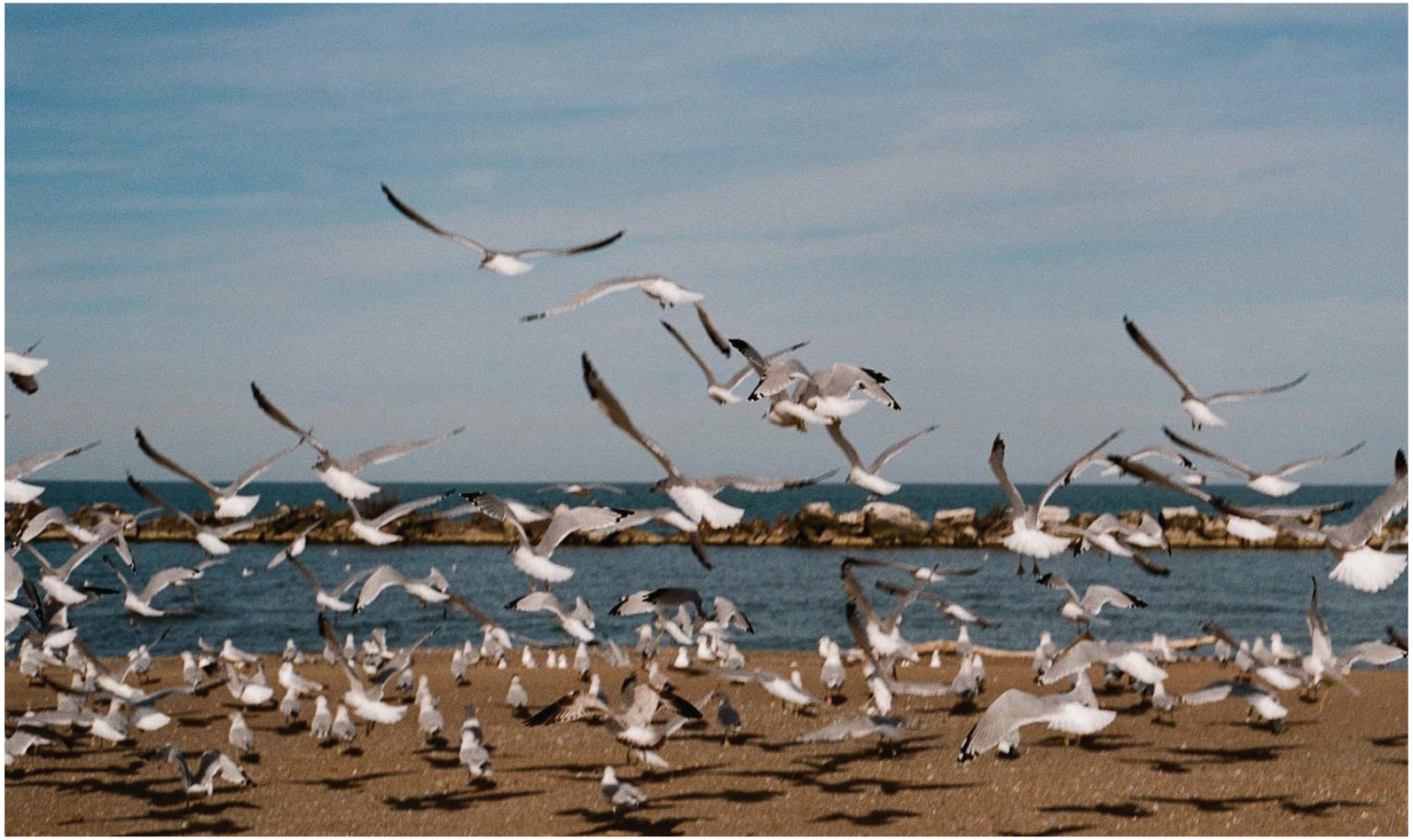
When I moved to Oberlin, it felt like I was living amongst the people I'd always meant to be with, the "real" intellectuals. When Momaw died, I threw myself deeper into this narrative than I'd ever been before, but the classroom was overwhelming. My classmates didn't talk like Cleveland kids like I'd expected or prepared for; they talked like D.C., New York, and L.A. kids. The big words I knew rolled off their tongues like they'd known them forever. I felt younger than I'd ever felt before. I felt, to put it gently, fucking stupid.

The realization that I could not escape where and who I'd come from hit me like a train. The things I'd snapped at Momaw for, I felt judged for doing myself— mispronouncing, misspelling, misunderstanding. I realized that the world was bigger than I expected it to be. It was humbling, and it hurt.

Continued

The words I chose became a marker of my worth from a young age. Looking back, it all makes sense; because I was "smart" at a young age, my family believed that I'd be the only person to escape what's called "the curse." While everyone else stayed in Canton, got blue-collar jobs, lived paycheck-to-paycheck, and fell to addiction and crime, my mind gave me the chance

Art by Wiley Martinez



to do more. College was the way out—the way to class mobility, wealth, and hope. It makes sense why a kid placed under that sort of pressure would reject any behaviors that didn't fit into what an "intelligent" person looked like, and no one was writing characters like Momaw in the novels I read in AP Lang. Those were the women I was supposed to be. I think that some part of me corrected the way she spoke because I wanted people to respect her as much as I did. I was on the path to save all of us from being poor, and I wanted to take her with me, so I demolished the parts of us that didn't fit. It's what the classroom told me to do.

One Friday last fall, I drove to the Goodwill in Oberlin in an effort to cheer myself up. At that time, and still sometimes now, I wasn't sure who I could call to explain the hurricanes inside of me, Canton and Oberlin and Momaw and Not Momaw all ricocheting in my head. I have always presented myself as polished and quick-witted—how would I explain the last two years of my life to someone here, a place that still feels foreign to me in a lot of ways?

I wandered through the aisles looking for mugs, one of my favorite treasures, but stopped when I noticed a glass dish that looked so much like the ones Momaw used to line our walls with. She was obsessed with Fenton glass, even went so far as to ask to take trips to the warehouse to pick out new treasures for her birthday. I picked it up, tears welling in my eyes, when I heard a voice creep up from behind me.

I can tell ya how to figure out how much that's worth. It was a woman's voice with an Appalachian accent, maybe a little like how Momaw's used to be. I turned around and she took the glass from me as if I'd offered it, showed me where to look for the stamp.

This is real beautiful, she said, a real good find. She handed it back and picked up a crock pot, telling me how it would be a good bargain if it wasn't broken. All the while, my heart seemed to stop. I realized at that moment that this was the most at home I'd felt since I'd moved to Oberlin College—standing there, in the aisle of Goodwill. The woman's voice soothed me in so many ways that I didn't know I'd needed. I related more to her than any of the people I sat next to in Ethics or American Politics, and she was easier to talk to than any of my friends. I realized that the voice I'd silenced in Momaw was the voice that felt the most authentic, most precious, to my life. It unraveled every part of me, and I realized the greatest truth of all, at least from my perspective:

Language is not for classrooms. Language is for loving and hating and cursing and misunderstanding and mispronouncing, and Momaw's will forever be the most familiar language of all. This does not make me poor, or stupid, or unrefined. It makes me hers. It makes me me.

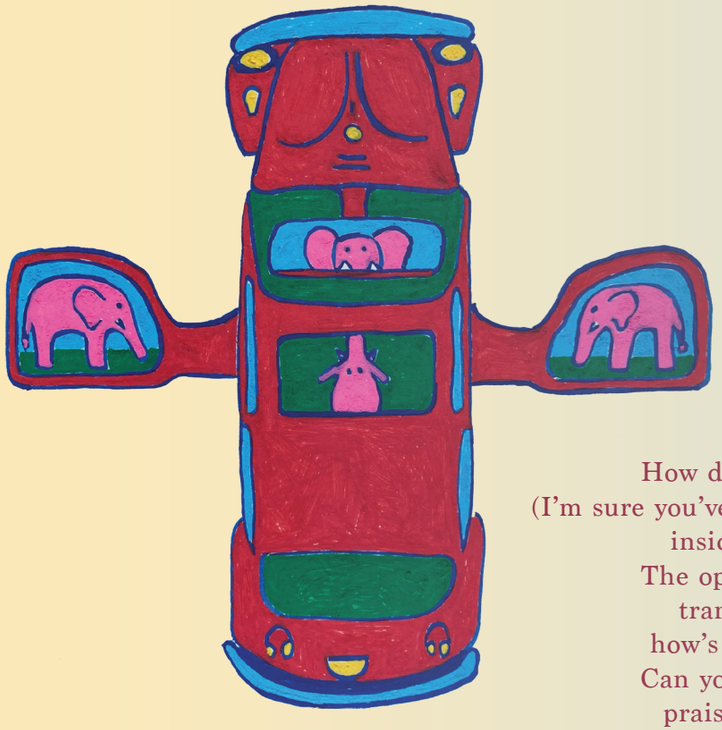
Beyond

I don't blame myself for being indoctrinated by academia's propaganda; poor, dumb kids from Canton join the Army, and poor, smart kids go to college and get good at Standard Academic or White Mainstream English. I still love language because it made me who I am, but I hate the way I used it to become someone that I will never be—a Hathaway Brown kid that I probably wouldn't get along with, anyway. There is something about the mystery in never having to think about language that made me crave linguistic perfection even more—but I let that go around the same time I decided this story was worth telling. I have realized, now, that sounding like everyone else doesn't make the fact that you're first-gen go away.

Momaw didn't sound like the families at Oberlin College's parents weekend, and I never will, either, but I think that might just be what Oberlin College needs. I spent so long thinking about what this higher education could teach me that I forgot what lessons I might have for others, and that I have something that many other folks don't; generations of women like Momaw in my voice, a voice peppered with Ohio and Kentucky and strength and everything in between. And for now—for us—that is enough.

Trunk

by Wiley Martinez



How do you fit four elephants
(I'm sure you've heard this one before)
inside of a red Volkswagen?
The opening/closing sequence
transforming the literature
how's it useful for elephants?
Can you prescribe overzealous
praise to the wings of desire
inside of a red Volkswagen's
chronotope configuration?
How to fit four elephants in
temporal/spatial relations:
make heterotopic mirrors
inside of a red Volkswagen.
Our intrinsic connectedness
to paraphrase in simpler terms
is how, for you, elephants fit
inside of a red Volkswagen.

Back Brake Companion

by Brock Bierly



To All the Boy Bands I've Loved Before

by Catherine Horowitz

Art by Lila Liebeskind

If Ringo Starr wasn't a Beatle, he would have been a hairdresser. He was born on July 7, 1940, and often got sick when he was a child. He had an overprotective mother. Ringo isn't his real name, but you knew that already.

We don't know whether George Harrison was born on February 24 or 25, 1943, but he celebrated on the 25th up until the 1990s. He was the youngest Beatle, and met Paul McCartney on the bus on the way to school at age 14.

The Beatles were originally called the Quarrymen. John Lennon was the first member—he formed the group in 1956, Ringo didn't join until 1962, and they didn't record their first album until 1963. They recorded the album in less than 13 hours.

It's like mythology to me, stories that existed in the background of my life since before I can remember. When I was learning to read in preschool, I had a big book of Greek mythology where I learned about Pandora's box and Odysseus sailing around the world. I heard the story of Noah's ark and the Red Sea parting at Ohr Kodesh's Mommy and Me group when I was three. But my parents taught me the story of the Beatles: four working-class boys from Liverpool who, in less than a decade, changed music forever. To me, the Beatles were just as massive and distant and legendary as the gods, just as fundamental in how I viewed the world as the Torah. I still can't fully see them as real people. This is how the world works: the sky is blue, the sun rises in the East, and the Beatles are the greatest band of all time.

I started listening to the Beatles when I was two weeks old because my parents played them to put me to sleep. They were obsessed. They played Beatles music at the dinner table, in the living room while I played, and in the car wherever we drove. Some of my first memories are of singing along in the backseat with my younger brother—neither of us fully knew English yet, but we knew every word to Rubber Soul. My brother liked John because they shared a name. My favorite was Paul because he was left-handed like me. It'd been this way for as long as I can remember, all the way through my childhood: just me and my family and the Beatles. Always present, always with their floppy hair and matching suits and cheerful, wisecracking personas, forever young and vibrant. Back then, I didn't like seeing pictures of the Beatles in their later days, when their hair was grown out and when they'd seen and experienced more than perhaps they ever imagined at age eighteen.

Even when I'm older and learn that not everyone grew up knowing all four members' names and everything about their lives, nothing can truly compare. I

watch the opening of the film A Hard Day's Night, where crowds follow the Beatles in cars, pressing their hands against windows and trying to fight their way inside. "That would be me," I always say. My mom says it too. I don't know why. I don't know what it is. There's just something about them.

As I enter adolescence, it's not just the Beatles I gravitate toward without really understanding why; it's really any boy band I encounter. When I'm ten I keep a picture of Joe Jonas on my dresser. When I'm twelve I learn all the choreography to my favorite K-pop videos. Boy bands are the throughline of my life, the thing that has followed me, whether I like it or not, from preschool to high school to college. It all feels a little involuntary; if I wanted to stop loving them I don't know that I could. I guess that makes this more of a love letter than an essay, although that's embarrassing to say. But if I've learned anything from boy bands, it's that sometimes what's cliché and sentimental is the most true.

What is a boy band? It depends on who you ask. Merriam-Webster defines it as: *a small ensemble of males in their teens or twenties who play pop songs geared especially to a young female audience.* Fair enough. Wikipedia, however, defines boybands a little differently: *a vocal group consisting of young male singers, usually in their teenage years or in their twenties at the time of formation, singing love songs marketed towards girls. Many boy bands dance as well as sing, usually giving highly choreographed performances.* This definition is a little more specific and raises some questions about what kinds of groups *really* qualify as boy bands. It seems like, similar to important things like love and success, everyone has their own distinct definition of what a boy band is.

I asked people to come up with their own, and, as expected, everyone had slightly different requirements:

- "When I hear the word boyband I think of a group of young men who all sing, don't really play instruments, and are often marketed for commercial success and their attractiveness to young women rather than artistic integrity."
- "Boy bands have a very curated image. Each boy has a very distinct aesthetic. PG-13."
- "A band whose music is of the pop genre and focuses on loving girls and who are all masculine presenting. Also there's gotta be a craze."
- "A musical pop group comprised of young men whose work is fun and dance friendly and often appeals to young women."
- "It's more of an image than anything else I feel. Mostly image, secondarily music."
- "Boys in a band targeting to teenage girls."
- "A band with 3+ young male singers who usually don't play instruments and that is also usually created by a manager or company."



Art by Nina Hoyt

TO ALL THE BOY BANDS I'VE LOVED BEFORE

Do boy bands only perform pop music? Do boy bands have to dance? Can boy bands play their own instruments? Do they need to be commercially successful? It is, perhaps, one of those unsolvable mysteries that we'll just have to live with. Perhaps the definition of boyband will always be amorphous and ever-changing, like all of pop culture. Really, though, to me a boy band is more of a feeling than anything that can truly be encompassed in a succinct definition. You know a boy band when you see it.

Sure, some boy bands are small ensembles, but some, like South Korean group NCT, have twenty-three members. NCT has four different subunits, and some members have never met one another. But they're a boy band. The Jonas Brothers do not dance and do play instruments, but they are unmistakably a boy band. When I was ten, my friends all loved Fall Out Boy and obsessed over individual members. Fall Out Boy isn't necessarily pop music, but they're a boy band. When I was eleven, my dad took me to see West Side Story at an old movie theater, and I become obsessed with the Jets for a few months. They're not real, but they sing and dance. Boy band. In a broad sense, a boy band is really just a group of boys who entertain. Anyone and anything can be a boy band.

The summer after sixth grade, Ringo is my favorite Beatle. I like that he's kind and awkward and that his eyes always look a little sad. A few months later I dress up as vampire Ringo Starr for Halloween and wear my dad's suit jacket as a costume. The jacket is way too big and my drawn-on fake mustache is lopsided, but I'm convinced that I've never looked better.

But first, my parents send me off to Jewish summer camp in the mountains of Pennsylvania, and on night one my cabin competes in the camp talent show. I'm shorter and clumsier than my cabinmates. They've started wearing makeup, while my only real accessory is thin, too-small glasses. I don't want anyone to see me or, really, to look at me at all.

For the talent show, we're performing *I Want it That Way*. We're wearing our best 90s attire and dancing to corny choreography that our counselors prepared for us. But we're supposed to dress like *boys*. Nobody likes this idea. In the end, I'm the only one who really looks like a Backstreet Boy: I'm wearing a backwards baseball cap, a denim jacket, and my counselor's oversized sports jersey. I'm practically swimming in it. And so I'm front and center, mouthing, "Can't reach to your heart / When you say / I want it that way" and doing all the dance moves full-out, like I've never danced before. We win the talent show that night, and something is unleashed. Everyone is looking at me, but I'm okay with it. I want them to look more. I wear the baseball cap more days than not that summer.

That's the summer of 2012: the summer of One Direction. My cabinmates all have posters of them taped up next to their bunk beds, and while only days before boy bands had been all I could think about, I want nothing to do with this one. Every night, my cabin gathers in a group to look at the posters. It's a ritual of sorts, pointing at them and fighting over who would be best with who, trying to top one another with trivia knowledge, imagining weddings and families with these boys they've never met and never will. This is important.



Art by Wiley Martinez

My cabinmates will form identities and friendships around these late-night talks at summer camp, at sleepovers, and in their rooms on the phone after school. Talking about the boys they have crushes on will shape how they grow up and grow to understand themselves.

But I sit in the back, not saying anything, promising myself that will never be me, hoping that nobody looks my way. It's almost silly in retrospect, how disgusted I am by these boys only a little bit younger than the Beatles were when they recorded *Love Me Do*. But I am. I don't want anyone to even think I could be interested.

Because I'm not attracted to any of them. I know I'm not. I can't fully admit it to myself at the time, but I think I know that what I like about boy bands is their style, their charisma, their over-the-top, flashy, harmless masculinity. There's something addictive about them that I want for myself.

"You'd be great with Louis," my cabinmates say to me. I'm embarrassed, but I can't say why. "He looks like a little boy," I say, outraged. I keep listening to the Beatles and dressing like the Backstreet Boys. I like the boy bands that, at least in 2012, feel safe from all this.

When you think of a typical boy band fan, you don't think of lesbians. But there is a long and significant history of lesbian subcultures centered around boy bands, and, more generally, young male pop stars. In the early 2010s, lesbians impersonating Justin Bieber became an internet phenomenon. Kate McKinnon portrayed him on *Saturday Night Live*, a video entitled "Lesbian Bieber Barbershop Quartet" went viral, and a blog dedicated to "Lesbians Who Look Just Like Justin Bieber (But Make Better Life Choices)" became wildly popular. In her essay "Sexing Elvis", Sue Wise describes how Elvis served as a companion who she could identify with as a young gay person who (for reasons she did not yet know) felt that she didn't fit in with her peers. Drag king performance groups with names such as the Backdoor Boys also frequently parody boy bands. Of course, One Direction is not an exception to this decades-long trend. The drag group Every Direction made its debut in 2013, and in 2017, Tegan and Sara tweeted about their love for Harry Styles. In her article "Lesbian Fandom Remakes the Boy Band," Jessica Pruett explores how lesbian fans have turned the boys of One Direction into certified "butch icons."Although we may think of boy bands as a heterosexual cultural phenomenon centered around their attractiveness to young girls, the truth is that marketing teams and publicists do not dictate what their subjects mean to people. But, when I was eleven, I didn't realize the potential I had to like boys in my own, distinctive way. All I knew was that my cabinmates were girls in a different way than I was a girl. They liked things in a way I could never like something.

That summer, after camp ends and I return home to Maryland sunburned and energized, I see Paul live for the first time. It's always just the first names. Always "Paul" or "John" or "George," like I know them personally—and, of course, it feels like I do. "Paul would never say that," I say when I watch movies about the band. I've watched hours and hours of behind-the-scenes footage. I've listened to studio bloopers and read interviews and

biographies. And when I finally see Paul, from the second-highest section of Nats Park, I don't think I can process how real it's all become. In the flesh, Paul is a small dot in the center of the baseball field, not the god looming in the background of my childhood or the friendly companion I've known my whole life. For a second I'm forced to confront the fact that I don't know who Paul McCartney is, really, and that I never will. I feel intensely small in comparison to all the places he's been and experiences he's had—the fact that he's a person like I am, but a person I can't ever understand. But he jokes with the crowd and sings all the songs I know, and I remember my version of him, the one that I have created and gotten to know since I was an infant. At the end of the night he plays "Live and Let Die" and, as fireworks explode overhead, I feel like I've discovered some new emotion previously inaccessible to humans. I rewatch the blurry videos I took for weeks. It's all my parents and I talk about: "remember when Paul played Day Tripper? Remember when Paul did a cover of Something?" It's ours, and nobody else's.

In December, I turn thirteen. I have my Bat Mitzvah and I drink wine for the first time. I quit soccer and start learning guitar. I finally let myself say that I'm gay. And that's when, two months later at my friend's birthday party, I also let myself say that I like One Direction. It's a Saturday night, and she forces me to finally, *finally*, watch a video of them in action. It's a 7-hour livestream of One Direction answering questions, playing games, and performing a few songs from their new album. They're funny and charming, like the Beatles in their early days. I'm hooked. And for some reason, I'm finally okay with it.

At first, I'm humiliated. I approach my parents after dinner one night with my iPod Nano and ask if I can buy the new One Direction album. I can see the shock on their faces. "We thought you hated them!" says my mom. "We thought you were above that kind of music," says my dad. But I buy the album. I listen to it all the way through that night.

I leap into my obsession at full speed, rapidly making up for the time I've lost. I watch all their music videos and read up on their life stories. I spend 45 minutes one night watching their video diaries from the X Factor, and then watch them again the next day. Louis is my favorite after all, but because he's short and loud and awkward. Like me and Ringo, he's the funny one who looks younger than he actually is, who nobody can really take seriously. I try to emulate Harry, though—flannels and bandanas and a windswept, carefree hairstyle that I look ridiculous trying to capture. It feels good to dress like a boy, act like a boy. It feels like something that belongs to me.

Why is it that so many lesbians idolize male pop stars? Pop culture scholars are attempting to answer this exact question, and there is currently an emerging discussion in this field on the butch, queer, or lesbian "potential" of boy bands. Some speculate that the music itself caters to this potential through its lyrical ambiguity. Songs like *I Want It That Way* and *It's Gonna Be Me* address a vague "you" as opposed to a specific gendered figure, and they avoid overt sexual references. But even more so, songs explicitly addressing women provide a potential for fans to insert themselves as the narrators. You don't need to be the person being sung to—*you* can be the singer!

"Spring Bloom" by Chloe Casdali

In her article "I Want It That Way," Gayle Wald explains the importance of image as well. Wald describes a "girlish masculinity" that permeates boy bands' aesthetic and overall persona. Boy bands are not masculine in a traditional sense; they fashion their own forms of masculinity that are stylized, campy, and decidedly performed. They often dress in an androgynous manner and adopt youthful, boyish personas—these are, after all, boy bands, not man bands. As Georgina Gregory puts it, more simply, "They look like dykes." This performative blurriness of gender, Gregory writes, provides a valuable point of identification for young lesbians who are negotiating their own uncertain gender and sexual identities. Because it's so clear that they are performing, because they're so over-the-top at all times and curate distinct aesthetics and roles, boy bands offer themselves as personas fans can adopt, or templates fans can use to construct their own identities. I didn't want to date Louis Tomlinson or Paul McCartney. I was them. I wanted to look like them. I wanted to be like them. I wanted to be a heartthrob who could wear bright tailored suits and vests, who could sing and dance in this weird kitschy way that, somehow, girls are obsessed with.

This is where there's real power in lesbian boy band fan culture: by creating lesbian icons that were never intended to exist, these cultures place fans—often adolescents and young adults—as the ones in power. When you are a fan of something, you can turn it into whatever you want it to be. You can reinterpret what it represents, and through it explore the potential of your own identity.

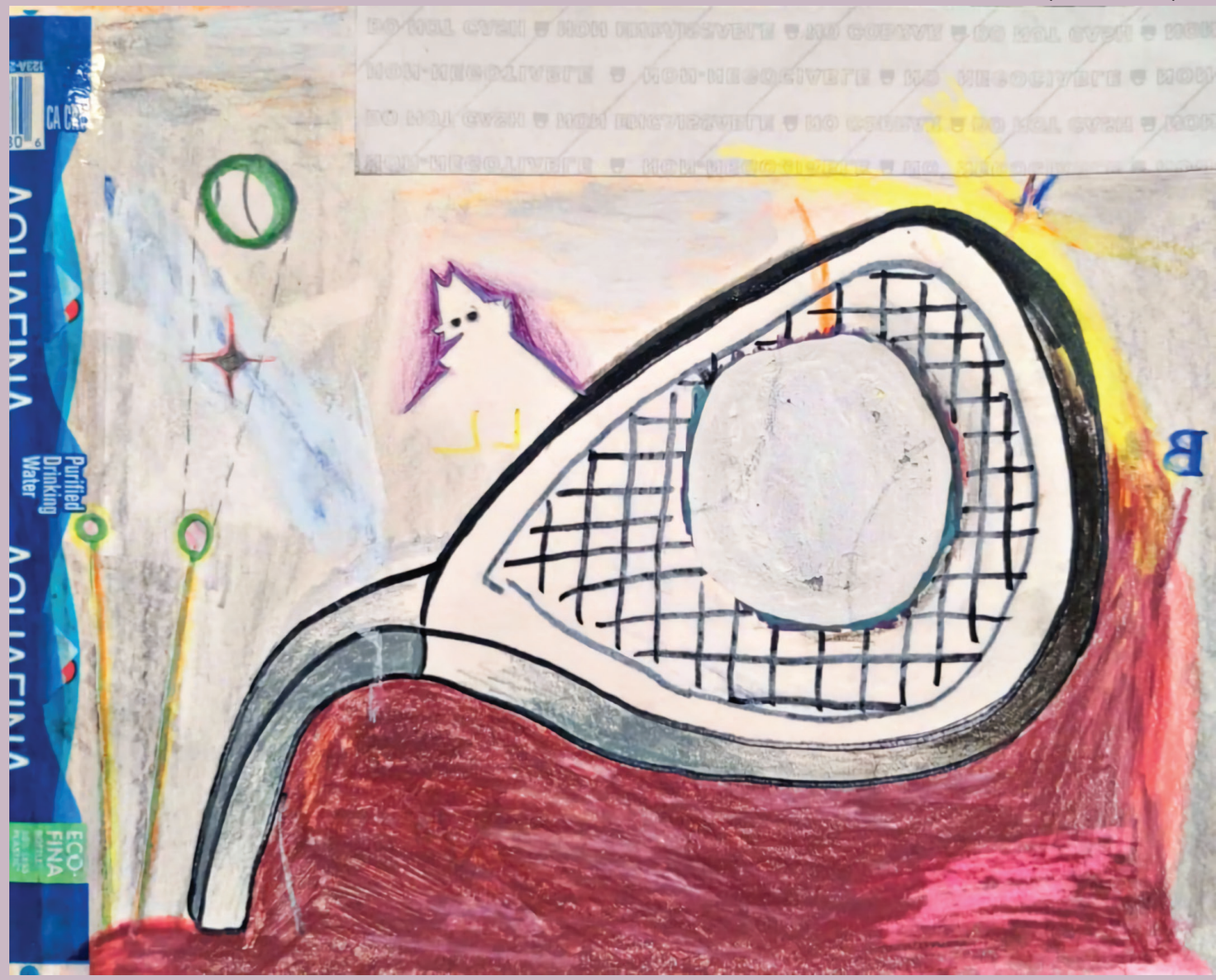
When discussing the drag king group Every Direction, Jessica Pruett also interviewed each member of the band. Here is her takeaway from her interview with Shannon, who performs as Niall Horan:

> "Shannon says that her love for the boy band at first felt like a joke, but that interacting with other fans sparked a deeper interest in the band's queer potential. In her interview, she noted that having access to a community of fans who were dedicated to making the boy band's queer subtext visible inspired her to think more deeply about 1D's relevance to her own gender and sexual identity. What Every Direction's unique performance aesthetic highlights is the sincerity that characterizes lesbians' relationship to boy bands. The love and intimacy with which the routine is crafted, the evident earnestness with which it is acted out."

Being a fan of something is fun. But what Pruett's interview gets at is the fact that it is more than just that. It's important. It means something.

By the time I'm a freshman in high school, Louis Tomlinson has transformed into the awkward "bad boy" of the group, no longer the youthful class clown I fell in love with. I like the later Beatles songs, with their sweeping orchestras and complicated lyrics. I learn to play Dear Prudence on the guitar, and Golden

"BOLL" by Brock Bierly



Art by Nathaniel Coben



Slumbers makes me weep. John's music is my favorite because it's wistful and nostalgic. Things have changed. And on a warm day in late March, I find out that Zayn has left One Direction. I'm fifteen, but I have to leave class so nobody sees me cry. Soon, of course, the rest of the band follows in Zayn's footsteps and, although they present their split as a hiatus, I know that it's over. I shouldn't take it as hard as I do, but for some inexplicable reason it feels like my childhood is coming to an end. At this point in my life I have loved One Direction for years but they have shaped who I am for even longer. I watch their last performance together on the X Factor a few months later, and the lyrics feel like they're meant for me: you and me got a whole lot of history.

This is when, for the first time, I ask my mom why she loves the Beatles so much. Like me, the Beatles were the soundtrack of her life before she knew who they were. She tells me that her first memory was of sitting in a high chair in her uncle's Mexican restaurant and hearing Hey Jude. She was too young to like it or dislike it; it was just there, a backdrop to everything else. Her mother, my grandmother, had a vinyl record of Rubber Soul, and she remembers hearing it while playing with her siblings. A few years later, she borrowed her older brother's Beatles albums and she listened to them intently with headphones on, focusing on every word, every instrument. There are no throwaway songs, she says. Every one is a perfectly crafted gem. The Beatles are her past, present, and future—her childhood, and her first love, and what she's passed down to her children. She danced to them at her wedding. Their songs, to her, are the best company—like old friends. It doesn't matter that she was five years old when the Beatles themselves broke up; it's what they mean to her that shaped her life, and that continues to shape it. Together, we keep talking about boy bands. I share my love for One Direction with her, and show her my favorite songs. We listen to bands we both love like the Beach Boys and the Jackson 5, and we discover new ones as the years go by.

In September 2021, I finally see Harry Styles in concert. George is my favorite Beatle now, and his Abbey Road denim-on-denim outfit is my signature look. But tonight, I'll be wearing lavender and leather pants, and pearls to match Harry's. When I look at myself in the mirror, I realize I finally, almost, kind of, have his hair from 2013. "Style," says a voiceover when Harry rises up out of the stage in matching lavender, "is the answer to everything. To do a dangerous thing with style is what I call art."

Toward the end of the night Harry plays What Makes You Beautiful. He swore once, years ago when he and I both were much younger, that he would play it at every concert. So far, he hasn't broken that promise. Harry Styles is a global superstar, and everyone knows most of the songs. It's one of the only concerts I've been to in a venue this large where we all stand, we all sing, we all dress for the occasion. But now, when he sings the first song he was ever famous for, the arena vibrates. We all know every word—and for a few minutes, we're all ten years younger. Songs like this can immediately transport you back to a place, and a time, and a feeling—what it was to be 12 at summer camp, with music playing on your counselor's speaker as you lie on the grass and, when nobody else is watching, hum along. Our past, our present, and our future too, are there with us.



Monotype by Clea Gunn
Photo by Wiley Martinez

Multiverse Theory

For March 11th, 2022

by Rose Rasor

Lately, I've been thinking a lot
about all the other possible worlds:
pages of books in a library
that stretches on beyond
understanding, roots and branches
of a tree whose growth defies
any gravity. Universes stacked
like card-decks, only a whisper
apart yet never touching.
I hope she's doing good out there–
the other me, the funhouse mirror
reflecting all the paths not taken.
I hope she's never choked on fear
behind a mask's faceless blue,
that these two years have been nothing more
than a calendar's flipped pages
and not a lifetime carved upon her heart.

I hope she cut her hair on a whim
and got a sunburn and went to class hungover.
I hope she's been sick on heartache
and cried in a shitty airport bathroom.
I hope she got lost in an unknown city
and watched her phone die helplessly.
I hope she rubbed her feet raw dancing
in shoes she should have known better
than to trust and forgot a jacket
as she shivered on a house party's porch.
And I hope, above all things,
that her heart is worn with use,
each beat a note in a steady melody
that needs no guidance.

Photos by Wiley Martinez

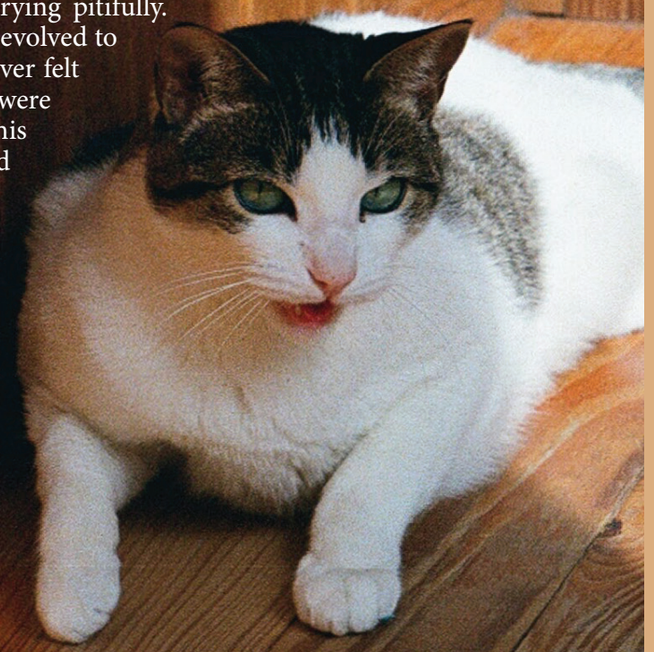
Strays

by Peter Fray-Witzer

A meow is something you always think you have heard wrong the first time. It's only on the second or third that you realize "wait, there's actually a cat out here."And then, if you are me, on the (painfully) early morning the day before your college classes start, you turn around to see a little cat trotting towards you out of a drainage pipe, and without a second thought, you scoop her up and carry her inside.

It was somewhere around five in the morning. I had spent the last fifteen some-odd hours on a train from Boston, Massachusetts, to Elyria, Ohio– my typical commute back to Oberlin College in the fall. I had just moved the last box into my dorm room and said my quick goodbye to the lovely woman who drove me from the train station to campus, ready to flop onto a completely bare mattress and sleep for as long as my body would allow me to. That was when I first heard the cat.

She was a young cat, probably less than a year old, with white and black spots, and was crying pitifully. People love to say that cats' meows evolved to mimic newborn babies, but I've never felt that the cries of my cats at home were all that reminiscent of a human; this cat's yowls, on the other hand, would get any new parent running to the cradle. She trotted up to me, out of a drainage pipe, crying the whole way. But when I scooped her up, she was instantly soothed.



Once in my room, she walked around purring, carefully inspecting each of my still-unopened boxes, butting her head gently against my legs.

I was slumped up against the wall sort of numbly, bone-tired and feeling a little disconnected from reality as the little cat wove between my legs. It was far too early for this. I couldn't deal with all of my conflicting thoughts: She might have rabies. You really are not allowed to have a cat in your college dorm. Oh my god she's meowing again, she is going to wake everyone up. Most prevalently though, throughout the whole morning, I could not stop thinking, this is my cat.

I've always had a soft spot for cats. My family has two, both shelter rescues, but for some reason I have always dreamt of saving some poor lost kitten and taking it in. It seemed somehow heroic to me, conducive to the kind of lifelong bond people aspire to have with their pets– more so even than effectively doing the same thing by adopting a shelter cat, the personal involvement of physically finding and taking in had a greater appeal for some reason. My sister had expressed similar dreams to me. She once complained to me about how she was seeing all these videos come across her social media of people taking in stray kittens, saying "When is it my turn? Where are all the stray kittens? Why haven't I found one?" I had actually done it. And something about stumbling upon this cat right at the moment I returned to campus, when I, too, was feeling lost, made my finding her feel like fate.

I called just about everyone I knew, including my friend who worked at the local cat shelter, to no avail. No stores were open where I could get her food, or a carrying case so that I could go to sleep and leave her contained. And even if I did manage to contain her, she was loud, so much so that I feared I'd wake someone who would report me to the college for having some unsanctioned stray in my dorm. I brought her outside after she got so rambunctious that waking someone really was a worry, and I tried to stay with her until the shelter opened up. I tried trapping her in an empty cardboard box to no avail- each time I got her inside she managed to weasel her way out. I willed the sun to rise faster as I walked around in the grass with her, watching her scamper around. She usually didn't stray too far but occasionally I did have to chase after her a bit. The process was made significantly harder by the fact that I started to not want to touch her. I realized there's a pretty fine line between a playful kitten getting a little too rowdy and a cat succumbing to rabies- one of the first warning signs, actually, is a cat who acts incredibly friendly and then suddenly lashes out, which she did a few times, with a sort of wild look in her eyes. It wasn't safe to keep her. It wasn't easy to let her go. In the end, I watched as she ran down the street, hoping really desperately that I would be able to find her again. Then I went to bed.

The next morning I looked around for her and found nothing. I knew I was going to be at least a little obsessed; not only did I know I was not going to fully stop looking around for this cat. That morning, something clicked into place that I realized I really hadn't thought about before– there are really a bunch of stray cats around Oberlin, and a lot of people devoted to their wellbeing. The owner of Ginkgo Gallery, Liz Burgess, fosters stray kittens in the back of her shop, which students frequently visit to see and play with. There's also a shelter in town called Community Action to Save Strays (abbreviated as CATSS) which focuses ex-

clusively on felines. As I started talking to more people about finding the stray cat that I'd briefly taken in, I discovered that just about everyone knew of at least one stray cat they had seen multiple times on campus. Cats wander around all the time in Oberlin apparently, so much so that many people leave out food for them, create little cat shelters so they will have warmth in the winter, and name the furry visitors that show up regularly on their porches. Coming from a town around the same size and with a similar population as Oberlin, this confused me. Far from considering their presence normal, I had hardly ever seen stray cats at home. My town didn't have its own animal shelter, much less one devoted just to cats. I started wondering why strays are actually so common in Oberlin. And, most importantly, why did people care about them so much?

About a month after I took in my stray and subsequently let her go, I met up with my friend Lucas, a worker and board member at CATSS, to try to get some answers about the stray cats in Oberlin. He encouraged me to bring my bike to meet him, and we rode for around ten minutes before arriving at a small brown-brick building that I'd never noticed before. The first snowfall of the season was gently drifting down around us as he fumbled with his key before pushing open the door to reveal a room just barely twice the size of my dorm, lined with large cages.



Only a few of the cages had occupants, Lucas explained, because CATSS had just had an adoption event in partnership with Petsmart, and a lot of them (including, according to Lucas, a huge cat named Mr. Snugglepants) had recently found homes. Lucas himself has a special agreement with the college wherein he is allowed to foster cats from the organization until they are adopted, as emotional support animals. As far as the college knows, he is currently fostering one cat, named Charlie. Some people who have gone to his dorm might think he has another, identical cat named Caroline, but as Lucas explains, "it's just one cat, it just moves really fast." He had been given the choice of fostering just one of the cats, but had been convinced to take both after it was explained to him that they were a bonded sibling pair. The sense of duty that compelled him to take both kittens despite having no plan for how he would explain the extra cat to ResEd fascinated me.

His "singular" cat was also at the adoption event, and although there was someone interested in them, they backed out because the cats responded badly to his dog. Even more cats had been adopted through Friendship Animal Protective League (Friendship APL), an animal shelter in Elyria with which CATSS sometimes partners for vet visits and help finding cats permanent homes. Eight cats had been transferred to Friendship APL, Lucas said, and in the four days between the transfer and our interview, all of them had gotten adopted. He also said CATSS had approached him with the offer of transferring his cat(s), but he refused; as he put it, "not my babies!"

Lucas showed me around the small space. The cages occupied most of the dim room, but there was also a small table surrounded by a couple of folding chairs, a little counter space, and a maroon loveseat pushed up against the sole window, all of which were cluttered with cat toys, paperwork, pens, and various knicknacks. There were only three cats in the cages; Lucas gestured to them and said "You can just open the latches and let any of them out." "Really?" I said, looking around. I was used to my cats at home, who would wreak havoc on this room, which seemed, despite the clutter, to be organized in a way that just tenuously allowed it to retain efficiency. Lucas seemed unconcerned.

"We've got Martha here" he said, gesturing to a stout brown tabby in a cage near the floor on the left, "Then we have Licorice," – he pointed across the room to an incredibly fluffy black tomcat – "and Wanda's on cage rest. And Licorice doesn't like other cats. He can be a little aggressive, but that's just his play style." He unlatched Martha's cage, and she slipped easily down to the floor, immediately comfortable inspecting my shoes and sniffing my hands. We sat on the stone floor and let Martha trot merrily around us and jump up on the furniture. To my surprise, throughout the entire time, she didn't knock anything to the ground.

After we had spent a sufficient amount of time cooing over Martha, I asked Lucas if he knew where most of the rescue cats came from.

"Our area of operation is the Oberlin school district," He said. "So if there's a cat that they ask us to come trap, or they say 'we have these kittens', if it's outside the Oberlin School District then we as a board vote if we want to take them, but we will automatically take anything inside the Oberlin school district."

"So people put calls into you to trap stray cats, like instead of calling animal control?" I asked.

"Yeah basically, and if they call the police department the police will refer them to us." Lucas said, "So most of them come from the Oberlin School district but actually recently a lot of them have been coming from outside the district and that's... we're trying to be more careful now because we sort of overcommitted ourselves at one point. So that's why a lot of them got transferred."

When I asked Lucas why Oberlin had so many stray cats, he was hesitant at first. "I think we have about as many cats as other places do. I think because you're familiar with CATSS, and because I work for CATSS...that's why I see so many." he said. I pressed him further, explaining that, despite not really being involved di-





rectly with CATSS, I'd seen far more strays here than I did in my similarly-sized and populated town at home. " I do know people tend to dump cats out on - is it '58? The one that goes by IGA? Yeah. That road, once you get out of the Oberlin district line, a lot of people dump in those forests." He admitted. "Literally throw – there's a house, we have a standing agreement that we can go trap there whenever, because she has so many cats, because she's on the edge of forest land, so people will just…they'll just throw them out of the side window of a car. Last time I went there I saw probably six or seven strays."

I tried to contain my horror. Lucas, though clearly horrified himself, had nonetheless talked about the dumped cats somewhat flippantly, as though he could no longer bring himself to be shocked after seeing so many mistreated cats. I was sure, once he said it, that similar things happened in my hometown- less or more I wasn't sure- and that I simply didn't know because I didn't see it.

"And then one of the reasons we have a more prevalent cat population is we're surrounded by farmland, so there are a lot of barn colonies," he continued, identifying several of the more prevalent cat colonies nearby that CATSS makes sure to keep tabs on.

"When you say 'colony'," I asked, "what makes up a colony of cats?"

"They'll breed and have their own kids and then continue to multiply. Just a bunch of cats that live together."

"Like...cat communes, living in barns?" I laughed.

"Yeah. They're all feral though, so we can't take them." Lucas pointed to Licorice, who he took out of his cage, putting Martha back into hers " We trapped him up the street actually. We actually have all these cages set up because at one point they were overflowing, they were all filled with cats." He sat back down, idly stroking Licorice, who contentedly purred and wandered between us. "So colonies, we actually found out that Friendship APL has a colony, they actually do a lot of TNR–that's Trap Neuter Release–appointments. They do a lot of those, so cats that can't go back to where they were, like if they were in a dangerous place, have a colony that they look after behind their building."

"So you neuter, and then... put a cat into a pre-established colony, to make sure it's okay? "We don't." He said "But they do. Because we're so small we don't really have an established colony. I think once or twice we've spoken to people who maintain colonies, and we do that."

Before talking to Lucas, I'd imagined stray cats just kind of wandered around alone, picking at garbage piles, hunting mice, keeping hidden in gutters or fields. But cats, thought to be such independent, antisocial animals, band together just like any other lost creature – and shelters integrate new cats into existing communities to keep them safer on the streets, like leaving a baby on someone's doorstep. The way we take them in, cats take in their own kind.

"There is something I want to show you, though, if I can find it." Lucas said. He got up and looked around, then walked to a closet around the corner. After a minute of rummaging, he pulled something out with a flourish. It was, essentially, a tower of pom-poms, most of them shades of brown, black, and gray, arranged into a pyramid, with two larger pom-poms at the top. He knew he'd thrown me off guard. "This," he said, suddenly shifting into the register one would expect from a speaker at a podium who's about to reveal the thing that will make potential donors in the crowd go wild, "this is a visual diagram of how many kittens can be made if these two cats"- he gestured at the two larger pom-poms- "are not fixed."

He stood back and let me survey the sculpture. There were, by my estimation, at least fifty pom-poms crammed together on the small structure, giving me the distinct impression that the cats they represented were elbowing one another aside. It was, at the same time, shocking and objectively ridiculous.

"Okay" I said hesitantly, attempting the appropriate blend of reverence and horror at the sheer number. "Over the course of how many years?" Lucas said he didn't know, but he assumed their entire lifetime. He explained that they mostly just bring this to a lot of events to show people why they should fix their cats, but I was intrigued, and sat down to actually do the math with pen and paper. I calculated that the average cat will have two to three litters per year, with an average of four cats in each litter, meaning that over a ten-year lifetime (though many cats will live longer), just two cats mating could produce around eighty kittens. "Eighty kittens? Really?" Lucas nodded and said that sounded about right.

I asked to take a look at one of the traps, and Lucas obliged, pulling one down from a shelf above the cages. Licorice, now getting his turn to wander around the room,

almost wandered into the trap's open gate, and Lucas shooed him away. Lucas showed me some of the features of the trap. It looked, essentially, like a long metal cage, not much taller than your average house cat, with a metal door at one end, hinged at the top with several latches, some to keep it propped open, and some that kept it closed once it shut. The actual trapping mechanism was fairly simple. You put food in the very back, and a pressure plate on the far end shuts the spring-loaded latch when the cat steps on it. He showed me how to set the trap, then told me to try it. I fumbled awkwardly through the steps with his guidance, and he told me to do it again until I could set up the cage on my own.

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Sitting on the cold concrete floor of the CATSS office with this simple metal trap, it would be easy to underestimate how much CATSS actually does – it covers the entire thirty-six square miles of the Oberlin School District and beyond, taking on more responsibility for that insane amount of kittens even than animal control. And safely bringing in just one cat takes a mind-boggling amount of effort; each cat has to be individually trapped, by a single person, then taken to a vet appointment almost immediately, appointments that take advance planning, are difficult to secure, and often have to be canceled at the last moment if the trap fails and the cat gets away.

The way that CATSS – and Lucas – care about strays may seem like that of a particularly devoted category of animal-lovers and rescue groups, but stray and lost cats have wormed their way into our culture in some unexpected ways. The narrative of saving the stray is incredibly appealing to people- for evidence one need look no further than social media, where people are constantly posting videos of themselves finding animals with resounding positivity in the comments, as is the case on Tiktok especially, where the #straycat tag alone boasts over one hundred million views. My love for strays is not as niche as I might have thought.

I was forced to wonder, then – what does this mean? What does it say about humans that we care so deeply about lost animals, that we want so desperately to care for strays? The optimist in me thinks perhaps our fierce desire to protect strays is proof that humans, despite all our shortcomings, can be good. That we put effort into correcting our mistakes. Stray cats – everywhere, not just in Oberlin – are unequivocally our fault. Our limited available research suggests that there are about thirty-two million stray cats in the United States alone, and that over three-fourths of those live in urban areas. They are castaways. And those numbers are only growing. Say what you will about cats being wild creatures, once we took them into our homes they became ours- once we cast them out, the stray cat population became our problem. The way humans take ownership of strays is a recognition. We take in a cat. We make it well. We need to do this, to say I'm sorry - I'm sorry I did this to you. Let me make it right.

But in the months I spent thinking about my own decision to take in my stray, this theory began to seem like an oversimplification, and a self-congratulatory one at that. As much as I want to believe saving strays, in general, is a fully altruistic practice, I had to admit to myself that uglier reasons exist. Humans have an incredible savior complex. We feel the need to both exert power over and feel intense compassion for animals; the idea of a lost pet prompts feelings of

both pity and ownership. I had, after all, found my stray when I was in a state of particular emotional vulnerability, after moving to a new place and at the peak of my exhaustion. Is that not a big factor in our "saving" of lost animals? Do we not project onto the poor lost kitten in an attempt to feel better about ourselves, and feel like heroes? What makes us think animals want or need to be rescued?

In the months after losing my stray, during which I had picked up several books on the psychology of keeping and rescuing animals in hopes of finding the reason behind my obsession, I discovered a select cadre of psychologists who had noted as I had how strange the phenomenon of keeping cats actually was. The phrase that came to me as I knelt on the cement floor next to the steel cat trap Lucas had laid out for me was a paragraph from The Lion in the Living Room: How House Cats Tamed Us and Took Over the World" by Abigail Tucker that seemed to me to almost ooze shame: "They don't need to remain among us. They are cats after all. They can always step back into what's left of the wild."

With this sentence in mind, and a building sense of guilt, I asked Lucas what he thought it meant about humans that we needed so desperately to tame and take in strays. Should we just let them remain wild? Were we even doing the right thing?

He nodded knowingly. " I mean, a feral cat isn't going to enjoy being around people, and so it's important to fix them so that they can't continue to reproduce and exponentially grow our cat population. But at the same time if cats enjoy being around people, then why not bring them indoors and keep them out of the cold– it gets very cold and snowy here, a cat's going to have an interesting time being outdoors." As if to prove this point, Licorice jumped up on the couch by the window, pushing open the blinds to reveal the snowstorm that had started while we were inside.



Left: “Beyond Orbit” by Clea Gunn

Below: “High Talk” by Aislinn Cannistraro, excerpt from “High Talk” by W.B. Yeats.



Our voices ca
Some few ha
Give tongue;

The women
And yet gav
We picked e
What hour c
And in that
And underst
Those image

Some day we
And find our
And wide av
Stumbling u
Then stumbl
Then cleanin
And chants
circling hounds.

HIGH TALK

Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches the eye.
What if my great-granddad had a pair that were twenty foot high,
And mine were but fifteen foot, no modern stalks upon higher,
Some rogue of the world stole them to patch up a fence or a fire.
Because piebald ponies, led bears, caged lions, make but poor shows,
Because children demand Daddy-long-legs upon his timber toes,
Because women in the upper storeys demand a face at the pane,
That patching old heels they may shriek, I take to chisel and plane.

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has run wild,
From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from father to child.
All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all. A barnacle goose
Far up in the stretches of night; night splits and the dawn breaks
loose;
I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on;
Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn.

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When Mothers Eat Their Young

by Jada-Leigh McGregor

I was eating in bed. A little clear plastic cup of dry granola with raisins on the top. I sat the cup in the aisle between my breasts. They were flopped over the sides of my torso, so the cup sat prettily, perfectly flat. From the neck down I was flush against my bed, staring down my nose at my laptop. It was playing a nature documentary, one distracting enough for the tears slow in their tracks and dry. I was amid a careful selection process with my granola. One big piece, one small, and a raisin in every bite until I reach the second-to-last one; that raisin was to be saved for the last morsel of grain so the last bite was as good as the first. Obviously.

I eat them in threes with a mechanical arm. Cup, mouth, cup, mouth. I have to do everything by touch because it's pitch black even though it's only eight, EVEN THOUGH this day has been so long already, yet I don't turn on the light. It still hurts to move and I don't want to see me, my belly and what is not there. A raisin squishes between my molars as I watch, transfixed when the lioness eats the cub she wasn't able to bond with.

My fingers reach into blackness for granola and soon I'm dropping little nuggets of grain on my chest. I try not to cry about it because that's stupid but. I wanted it to be right. I go in a line up my chest, pecking at the skin like the granola is birdseed, until I grasp hold of my necklace between my fingernails, only recognizing it as nonfood when the chain bites at the back of my neck. It's a small round cut green gem. It sparkles in the light, when there is any. And for the briefest moment, I think, if I could, if the gem wouldn't make little cuts all the way down my throat and big enough tears in my stomach, for my intestines to leak through, I would eat it, too.



Art by Clea Gunn



Racing For Everyone

by Stephanie Manning

Everything else became muted when I put my racing helmet on. The sounds of the chattering people in the go-karting arena, the generic 2010s rock music in the background, and even all my other thoughts became dim. But some things were vivid: me, my go-kart, and the track that lay ahead of me. A reconstructed aircraft hanger tucked away near the Cleveland Hopkins International Airport was far from the bright lights and excitement of a professional race. But I was there because it was the closest I could get to being a racer myself.

I love driving, but as it turns out, I'm not cut out for racing. My seven-minute racing experience would later be summed up by the simple fact that although my kart started first, I finished last. For most of the race, I found myself preoccupied with not crashing, wrestling with a steering wheel which felt particularly hard to turn. At times my mind wandered to thoughts of Stella — my beloved midnight-blue Mercedes — who sat parked right outside. Indeed, when I got back in the car, I've never been so happy to turn the wheel a full 90 degrees.

In driving, and in most things, I appreciate situations where being predictable and minimizing risk is a good thing. But there were some rare moments on track where, as I picked up speed, the wind rushing through the helmet visor I had forgotten to close, feeling the thrill of success as I finally managed a smooth exit from a corner, that I started to feel like I'd shifted from driving into racing.

"How'd you do?" one of my fellow racers asked me after the fact, as we shed our racing gear at a nearby table.

Cue my mental flashback to all the times he and his friends had passed me. 'Terrible."

"Steering's heavy, ain't it?"

"Oh, absolutely!"

Even in the unlikely event that I had revealed myself as a racing prodigy, at the ripe old age of twenty, a career in karting for me is unfortunately long past. But the group of young boys in the race after mine were much closer to the ideal starting age. Those boys in particular, though, didn't seem to have the spark. Their race constantly stopped and started as they failed to clear various corners, and one of them rather impressively managed to get himself stuck on top of one of the red-and-black safety barriers. "Turn the wheel!" one of their dads yelled from a nearby table. Easier said than done.

For many people, go-karting is a fun, if occasional activity; you might have gone karting at someone's birthday party as a child. But for racing enthusiasts and kids with big dreams of racing cars for a living, there's a lot more to karting than meets the eye. Where will the next great driver be made? More likely than not, the answer is the karting track.

Within the top American racing series, NASCAR and IndyCar, you'll find plenty of karting success stories. And the same is true outside of the U.S. Consider Formula 1, a racing series based in Europe that holds events all around the world. Even if you've never watched a race, maybe you've heard of the Netflix documentary series Formula 1: Drive to Survive. The viral popularity of the show, which premiered its fourth season in March, has converted many unsuspecting viewers into racing fans—particularly in the U.S., a place where interest in Formula 1 has long remained niche. Binging the first three seasons this past summer turned me from a casual, watch-the-Indy-500-every-year racing fan into a schedule-my-weekends-around-races kind of gal.

One thing's for sure: if you haven't heard of Formula 1 by now, you will soon. And just like the top names on this side of the Atlantic, dig a little deeper into the history of the current Formula 1 racers and you'll find that almost all of them leveraged successful karting careers to take their place in one of the highest echelons in motorsport. How did they get there, and what will it take for more young racers to do the same?

To achieve success as a driver, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. But though not all racers start with karting, most of them do, and for good reason—nothing can replace the experience you get behind the wheel, known colloquially as "seat time." The more seat time you can get, the more you can learn, and the better driver you can become. The small size of karts, combined with recent technological advancements that have made them quite sophisticated, make these mini vehicles a natural avenue for getting an early start.

The first kart was the invention of Southern California resident Art Ingels, an engineer by trade who created the kart in 1956 by drawing on his experience building full-size racing cars at the company Kurtis

Art by Wiley Martinez



Art by Wiley Martinez

Kraft. Casual races among Ingels and friends in the Rose Bowl parking lot soon developed into dedicated karting tracks, the Go-Kart Club of America, and a new staple in American popular culture. The idea was introduced in Europe by 1960, and soon the Commission Internationale de Karting (CIK) was founded, spawning the World Karting Championship and an association with the FIA, the governing body of Formula 1 racing. In less than fifty years, karting had transformed from a backyard project into a global fascination, one that was launching the careers of racers both in its country of origin and elsewhere.

Despite the worldwide appeal of karting, the separation between the European and American motorsport worlds left Formula 1 overshadowed in American racing circles for decades. But with the surge in Formula 1's popularity stateside, speculation has intensified about what young talent will become the first American in decades to achieve Formula 1 fame. Whoever they are, such a driver will likely get their start on a karting track. For an example of just such a place, I found myself looking no further than my Northeast Ohio backyard.

A former karter himself, Kris McCrone knows how fundamental karting is to the sport of racing. The Ohio native's father fostered his love for the world of motorsport, and was there every step of the way as he and his brother progressed from driving karts into driving full-size cars. At the age of twenty, things were looking promising for McCrone, who was on the cusp of negotiating a major sponsorship deal. But during that same week, his dad passed away, a crushing blow that led both McCrone and his brother to walk away from the racing world all together.

About four years ago, however, the thrill of motorsport called him back in. After his kids became curious about his history as a racer, he found himself back out on track with them. Within six months, he was buying chassis and engines again, just like old times. "I knew in my heart, in my soul, that I was going to do something inside of karting and something inside of motorsport," McCrone told me. "I just didn't know when and where."

Now the CEO and founder of McCrone Motorsports, a kart shop and race team based in Lorain, McCrone has his sights on something big—the construction of a new karting track in Cromwell Park on Lorain's east side. Ironing out the proposal was not a quick process; McCrone and the Lorain Port Authority have been developing it since March 2021. But with the approval of the Lorain City Council and a final site plan in progress, the project should be able to break ground in July or August.

A new kart track will not only be an economic boon to the community, but also a fantastic opportunity for young racers to get their start. In addition to a rental kart track, where anyone can race, there will also be a track for competition karting, where things start getting serious. "We'll be bringing in big events from people all across the US and some from outside the US," McCrone said. "And there's a natural feeder program from trying the rental cars to then getting your own parts—it's a natural progression to grow the sport."

Given a track to start, the path may seem simple. Begin with karting, move to full-size cars, rack up some competition success, and fight your way to the top. But the path to get there is littered with obstacles. And the truth is, to get more talented drivers of all kinds into the sport, changes need to start from the very beginning.

As karts became more sophisticated, evolving from a hobby into a pipeline to a serious professional career, the sport has unsurprisingly become more and more expensive. Let's say you're a young kid at the beginning of your karting career. The first big expense will be purchasing your own kart, which can cost anywhere from $1500 to $5000 used and will certainly need to be replaced over the years as you grow and get better. But buying a kart is like buying a violin — if you want to succeed, the physical object on its own is not enough. You need to join a group to



hone your skills, and you'll need to upgrade your equipment as you improve. And you need to practice.

These costs add up quickly. Club membership and race entry fees, kart tires, race gas, kart parts, engine maintenance, and travel expenses combined with the cost of the kart itself can easily make one season at even the lowest levels of karting cost thousands of dollars. And for those who don't have a lot of money to spare, it's a catch-22: competing in more races is more expensive, but the more races you do, the better you get. So if you're serious about karting, either you come from a wealthy family, or you've somehow managed to snag a sponsor, who will help fund your racing career in exchange for promoting their product or brand. But finding sponsors can be tricky, especially for those without established connections in the racing scene.

The importance of funding only becomes more important post-karting. To become the best of the best, drivers must make their way through a variety of mid-tier championship series, working their way towards the impressive results that will get them noticed by big teams (and big sponsors). It's a long road with no guarantees, and every successive step requires more investment. A single season of Formula 2—a crucial rung on the ladder to get to Formula 1—can cost up to several million dollars.

Sabré Cook understands these challenges very well. By the age of eight, the Colorado native was driving karts, slowly but surely making her way up through local and regional competitions to compete on a national and international stage, and winning her first karting World Championship at age 13. With experience in the U.S. F2000 and Indy Pro 2000 Championships, her ultimate goal is to race in IndyCar, but her driving experience has taken her around the globe, most recently to Europe for a one-of-a-kind opportunity called W Series.

Founded in 2018, W Series is a championship affiliated with Formula 1 designed to give women racers a more equal playing field and platform to gain

the experience needed to advance their careers. Cook was the only American selected for the 2020 season. Although the American presence is still subdued in European racing circles for now, it's not for a lack of trying. "There's a lot of young guys right now that are trying to get into F1 as Americans," Cook told me in a November 2021 phone interview. "And honestly, the only thing that stops them or anybody else is all the same. It's money and politics—those are the two main things that stop people's upward progression."

Cook has experienced this struggle plenty of times over her career. While competing in the 2019 Indy Pro 2000 Championship, for example, she was forced to drop out after running out of funding following just two rounds. It's a frustrating roadblock to her career, and one that's prevalent at all levels of motorsport. "What prevents most racers from getting where they want to go is just purely based on lack of sponsorship."

The struggle to find a sponsor has hit women drivers particularly hard, something that Catherine Bond Muir set out to change when she founded W Series in 2018. Muir knew that creating a more equal playing field for all drivers starts with sponsorship, or the lack of it. The decline of female drivers interested in competing in single seaters is primarily due to sponsors specifically targeting young male drivers, hoping that they would be able to make it to Formula 1, she told Insider. "I think it was all to do with money. The money that was going into male drivers. The young boys, the karters, if they don't have rich parents they need to raise the money through sponsorship," Muir said.

In the W Series, the drivers are not required to bring any sponsorship with them to race, allowing them to participate for free, a philosophy that Cook wholeheartedly stands behind. If there were less emphasis on sponsorship, she believes, more racers would be able to participate, while also preventing the mental burnout that has led many a racer to have to step away from the sport they love. "Honestly, it's



Art by Sophie Winner

like I have probably at least three to four full-time jobs, and I'm trying to do all the things, and it's a lot."

But when Cook was invited to participate in the W Series, she was initially skeptical. She and her fellow women have spent their careers fighting to be respected as equals to their male counterparts — why purposefully box themselves in in an all-women series? But, as she told a reporter in a 2021 interview, she quickly learned it was less about the series itself and more about the experience. "When I went to the first event, they were just like, 'This series wasn't created to separate you. And it wasn't created to say, you can't do it with a man. This is just basically a stepping stone to give you more room to develop and grow, so that way you can go back and do better against the boys.'" Removing the sponsorship requirement is just one of the ways W Series aims to create a competitive environment all while furthering these drivers' careers. The other is the fact that all drivers race on identical equipment, a rarity in the world of Formula 1, where the teams spend millions of dollars to design and develop a new car each season. And the series' $500,000 grand prize is nothing to scoff at either.

Despite its successes, however, Cook said W Series has also struggled with some of the problems that have long plagued its drivers: funding and resources. Like with karting, seat time, track time, development resources, and opportunities are a must, even at the most foundational levels of the sport. These opportunities are missing for many talented drivers—a result of ingrained institutional problems that will take more than W Series to solve.

There is a solution to a lot of these money problems, Cook says, but it's harder than it sounds. "I know it's wishful thinking and it's probably never going to happen, but if the teams were responsible for coming up with the funding, and the drivers weren't required to bring the money, I think that would change the landscape in motorsports completely," Cook told me. "Because then you want the good drivers and you're just going to only pick the good drivers, and you're not gonna have these people that just come in with tons and tons of money and take seats away from more deserving drivers."

Back in Ohio, the idea of funding as it relates to aspiring young drivers is certainly on Kris McCrone's mind. At the end of the day, he says his goal with building a racing track like this is philanthropic, with a focus on the youth of the city. Summer camps offered for no charge to local kids will give them a chance to experience the sport, to feel what it's like to be a racer, and to learn mechanical skills while they do it. And for those with exceptional talent, more opportunities may be available.

"We've had discussions in regards to corporate sponsors picking up the ticket for someone who's showing promising talent and giving them the opportunity to run more on a regional circuit or a national circuit," McCrone said, adding that as of now, such plans are theoretical. "We've got to get the facility up and operating first, and start working with the community and



"Layered Rose" by Chloe Casdali

Art by Lila Liebeskind

the youth first, before we can start looking at opportunities for ourselves or other corporate entities to sponsor children to pursue racing outside of Cleveland."

McCrone emphasized that the facility will be more than just a racing track; it will be a family entertainment complex. With the addition of a kid park, simulated racing rigs, and a coffee shop, he aims to "create an atmosphere where this is not just about racing, where we can grow individuals and grow the youth of the community."

"We're just trying to just do our little part, and get involved with them and give them an opportunity to be mentored and guided and encouraged," he said. "Maybe they pursue a career in motorsport, or they just learned some technical aptitude that they can translate to other skill sets as well." Another idea on the horizon is partnering with Lorain County Community College to create certification programs or even a two-year associate's degree in race engineering. It's a goal that hits on a fundamental, but often underappreciated aspect of motorsport—it's more than just the drivers.

McCrone has also noticed the growing popularity of motorsport in the American market. And when I asked some reasons why, he brought the conversation around to what sparked my interest in this article in the first place—Drive to Survive. "It's so entertaining because people who aren't around the sport have never been exposed to what actually occurs behind the scenes of what happens on a racetrack," he said. "It's not only increased awareness of the sport, but more importantly, it's attracted more people who typically would never have gone to a race of any kind." And with three Formula 1 races in the US now scheduled for the 2023 season (in Miami, Austin, and Las Vegas), it seems like that level of attention is sure to go up from here.

No matter where they are right now, all of those drivers' careers and many more can be traced back to the karting track, tracks not unlike the one I raced on a chilly November day in Northeast Ohio. Before I spoke to Sabré Cook and learned her story, and before Kris McCrone's plans had even become public, I knew that to write about karting, I had to experience it for myself. As the faintest snowflake drifted by the window, the roar of the planes landing at the Cleveland airport echoing in the distance, I considered the prohibitive costs for me to get here. One race alone, plus a registration fee as a first time racer, resulted in a total cost of almost 30 dollars.

Racing, like any sport and any arts field, is an investment, of time and passion, certainly, but also money. As I watched the young boys in the race after mine zoom by, I wondered how the makeup of that young group would change if it was a little less expensive to race there. If there were more women racers young girls could look up to. If racing could focus less on money and more on merit.

There's a lot of work to do, and we're at the starting line. The engines are revving, the excitement is building, and the countdown is starting. One thing's for sure: there's a long, winding road ahead.

Don’t Wake the Dead

by Ben Shaffron-Davis

As I lay awake, arms at my sides,
my eyes as heavy as bags of sand,
I found myself visited by the sky’s youngest child,
delivered from the clouded mass above.

He descended without noise,
and I paid him no mind,
until he began knocking at my door
with the gray limbs of a tree.

With gnarled fingers, he lifted up a pair of gloves,
colored by stripes of pearl and sepia,
Plain in appearance,
yet shining in colored contrast.

A gift for you, he said, *to warm your stiff fingers.*
My fingers need no such warmth,
I responded back,
Although I couldn’t seem to reach them anyhow.

The child withdrew the offer,
but was soon back with another:
a rose, freshly picked,
Black as a raven’s feathers.

A gift for you, he said, *to soothe your eyes.*
My eyes will not be soothed,
I retorted,
Although I then realized how little I could see.

The child withdrew again, pausing, for a moment,
before he returned with his final gift,
pulling aside to reveal a dark hole
angling down, deeper into the unknown.

A gift for you, he said, *to capture your mind.*
My mind seems to have been clouded already,
I said, finally shaking out of my torpor,
Now begone, and release this cursed trick at once!

As if satisfied, the wood grew still.
I have played no trick, nor laid no curse,
the child seemed to smirk,
I merley came to observe the state of things.

Explain yourself! I blustered,
But as I tried to sit up, my ceiling seemed to shrink,
And before my eyes I saw, carved plainly in small print:
Batesville Casket Company.

Art by Wiley Martinez

In Search of My Self

THIS PIECE HAS BEEN PUBLISHED UNDER A PSEUDONYM.

by Ellie Williams

I write to think, and when I write about the summer of 2021, the adjective that I am most drawn to is Californian. Perhaps I am drawn to this adjective merely due to the fact that I spent much more time sitting in the sun than in years past. Perhaps it is because I have read no less than ten Joan Didion books since January, most of which deal either directly or by implication with California. Perhaps it is because this summer was, personally, colored by the 1960s, a distinctly Californian era if there ever was one. Perhaps it was the color of the sky, as my sleepy New England town was quite literally invaded not only by a natural, local haze, but by the smoke and smog from the wildfires that burnt out west. On one particularly apocalyptic afternoon, the smoke made the sun turn a bloody orange as it hung in the sky, waiting to set. I was driving a friend home when we noticed it. We were driving along a bridge over some swampland, surrounded by that color as it seeped through the clouds and dipped into the sky on either side of us. I remember she felt scared. I don't remember if I felt much of anything.

I spent a lot of time driving this summer. Driving myself, driving other people, driving just to drive. I spent a lot of time driving just to drive the Little Blue Car, a stick-shift convertible my mother spent a pretty penny on back in the 1990s. Whenever I was behind the wheel of that Little Blue Car, I felt like a child again. I became addicted to that feeling. I drove that Little Blue Car so much that I would sometimes get into an automatic and slam down a clutch that didn't exist in a fruitless attempt to prevent an engine, whose machinations I could not affect, from backfiring as I started it up.

As I drove that Little Blue Car, the image that would filter through my mind was of Joan Didion, in her yellow Corvette Stingray, sipping on a Coke as she slid up and down the Pacific Coast Highway to and from her house in Malibu, Play It As It Lays and The White Album still mumbling,

febrile and inchoate (to use two of Didion's favorite words), in the back of her mind, the sky an omen of Charlie Manson's Helter Skelter, the voice of a somber tenor wailing from the radio. I see myself planted in the passenger seat.

This image was comforting, but the driving itself was slightly ominous. I felt as though I was on the move physically, but mentally stationary. The trees, the houses, the passers-by, the hours, the seasons, a year of my life all passed me by, as though I did not believe in their existence.

This is, I think, the principal side effect of a larger post-pandemic but also mid-pandemic existential search for my self, for who I was when the pandemic began. I was somebody then, and I am not that somebody anymore, but I want to be them again.

When July of 2021 rolled around after 15 months of quarantine, it seemed incorrect that summer came, that the general mood was that we should have glossed over said quarantine, that we should have pretended that we are the same people we were in March of 2020, instead of admitting we are all completely lost and changed. The fact of the matter is that quite a bit happened in my pandemic life (and in all of our pandemic lives) and I was not actually alive for any of it. I am bogged down by questions whose answers are not nearly as simple as they should be, e.g., "What do you mean, I'm a sophomore in college? What do you mean Grandma's dead? How can I be 20 if I don't remember turning 19, let alone being 19?"

It seems this all runs deeper than mere coming-of-age angst, and has no balms as simple as growing up a little longer. I have grown up, and it has done me no good.

There is only one self I know, but it has disappeared. We are back to a so-called normalcy: I am in classes again, I have new friends, I have a life that I need to live before it passes me by. To do so, I myself must also return to normal.

So I spent the summer trying to find my self again.

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To recap: the center did not hold, things fell apart, the gyre widened so totally that it now stretches from horizon to horizon. You say it's the second coming? Well, I've got news for you, pal—it's already here!

I think the moment I lost touch with my self came after spending the first month of quarantine more or less normally. I was present in my Zooms, I was reading at an excellent clip, I felt alive without feeling abandoned. But after that month, it became clear that we had been misled when we'd been told that the changes wrought by COVID-19 were temporary matters, and things began to seem distant and illegitimate. Certain facts about my life seemed imagined. I would wake up in the mornings and find that the day before had been nothing but a sour dream. It was from this point on that for the next fifteen months, until around July of 2021, I would feel disconnected from my self.

So it should not shock you to hear that I was feeling a bit unmoored, and decided rather early on in the summer of 2021 that I would find a way to retether to my self by the time I returned to college in the fall.

The first day life was once again coherent and real came in early July when I got my wisdom teeth out, the irony being that I was drugged to high hell from 10 a.m. onwards. Somehow in spite of this (or because of it?),

it was the first day whose events seemed to carry over to the next for the first time since I lost my self.

It was also on that day, once I had partially sobered up, that I began driving regularly again. I have trouble focusing, and driving is just enough stimulation to make focus come easily. It was during these sessions of driving over the summer, on average less than an hour each day, that I first attempted to understand the plot of what had happened during my disconnected year. I would tell myself something indisputable, like, e.g., "I spent the last nine months at college. I lived in a far away place for nine months. I did. I know I did. I have the scars to prove it." These were facts, facts of my own life, and yet I could not accept them as true. The driving, at least, gave me the requisite time and focus to debate their veracity, though I always came to the same conclusion that they could not be real—if they were, what happened to high school, what happened to college? Why did I not feel the former end and the latter begin?

Over time, the questions I asked myself began to get more specific. What do I remember doing during my final classes of high school, on Zoom? When I arrived at college, why did I immediately leave to buy a burger from a local restaurant and a novel from the bookstore instead of, say, meeting new people? I had a 19th birthday, but who was witness to it? I asked these questions because I felt the plot of my life needed to be continuous. I needed to get back to my self, distant though they seemed.

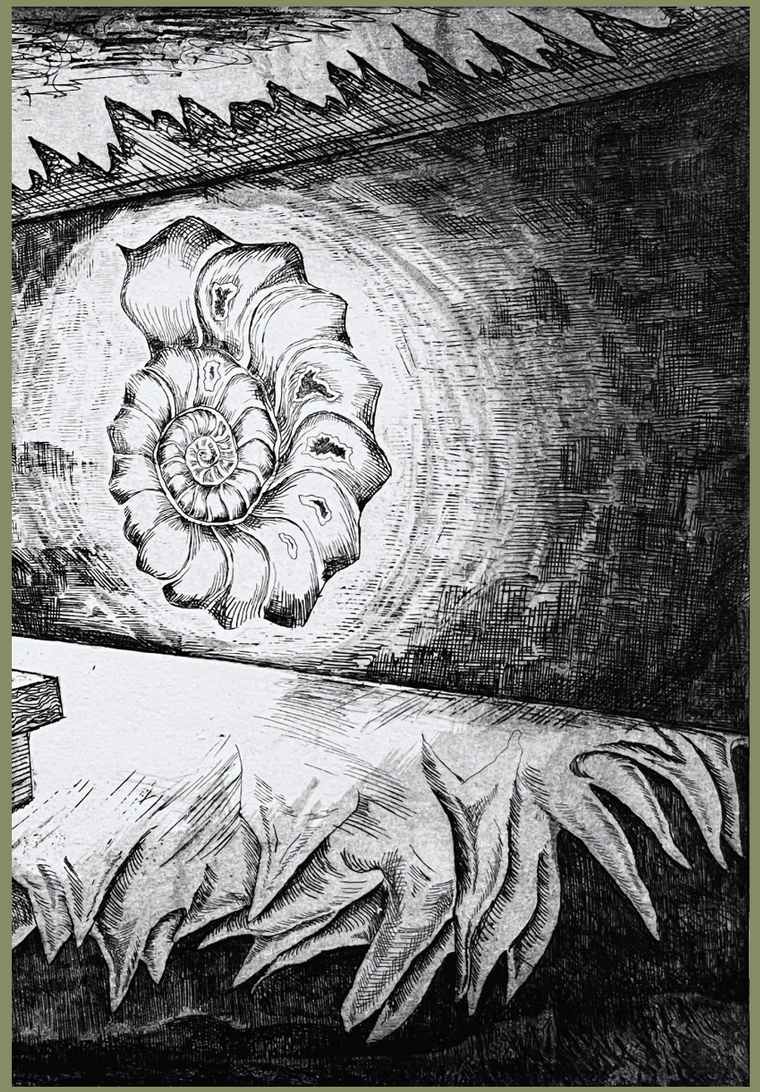
As of yet, I have not been able to get back, and though I am narrating this interrogation as a past event, I continue to have the same questions today that I did over the summer of 2021. And still, I find myself unable to answer the simplest of them.

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"Moments Before Dawn" by Chloe Casdali



While I tried many times to do a variety of things to answer these questions in search of my self, I ultimately had only four moments that really felt as though



they worked, only four moments that reminded me distinctly of the self I had been and was looking to become again.

These moments, in total, are rather disparate. The only common factors between any of them are that they did not occur at home, and were preceded by long stretches of driving. I believe it was the act of driving—or, more specifically, the introspection it allowed me—that was the impetus for reconnection. Or, maybe the distance the driving created, driven like a wedge between me and my everyday experiences, allowed me enough separation from contemporary realities to find my self. Though frankly, it seems that whether it was the distance or the introspection is factually irrelevant, because I did what I set out to do, however fleetingly.

I suppose it would be good, now, to get specific. These four moments were a wedding, a reunion, a sojourn, and a funeral.

The wedding came in late July of 2021, when the pandemic, though apparently ended by somewhat regular vaccination, was still rather raw. My wisdom teeth had come out a mere two weeks prior, and I was not yet used to living again. The wedding was also the first time in over two years I had seen much of my extended family. The drive allowed me to remember the connections I had felt with them in years past. In being forced to consider those connections again, I was also reminded viscerally of the person they assumed I was—my self—and I found it somewhat easy to play to their expectations when we finally reunited at the wedding. I was charming, I was polite, I refused alcohol instead of admitting there was nothing I wanted more than to down an entire bottle of wine for various tangential reasons. Unfortunately, it was all acting, and I could tell even in the moment that the character I was portraying felt distinctly fabricated, at least to me.

The second event was a reunion in August of 2021 with a friend I had not seen in over a year. Before the pandemic I had seen them with some infrequent

regularity, so to recall their presence, how I loved to be with them, and who I was with them, felt like an important step in my process of reconnecting. I have not seen them since, and I wish that I could see them again. I found during our time together that I certainly felt different with them than I had at any other recent point, though exactly what was different is still difficult to articulate. It may have been love. Once, 22 months before our August reunion, I had told them I loved them, and I still do, though this is one of the facts that has fallen through the cracks. Though, in a way, I am rather comforted by the continuity of this love, as though I could hope to have some crude form of the reconnection to my self I desire were I somehow able to trace my love back through time. I have not yet succeeded with this method.

The third event I'm calling a sojourn, which I took to the site of the original Woodstock festival in Bethel, New York. I went to see John Mulaney perform. This was in mid-September of 2021. While I do enjoy Mr. Mulaney's comedy, more important to me were the places I visited along the drive. I took a detour of many hours through Vermont and the Hudson River Valley, and I saw many beautiful places that I had been meaning to see for a very long while. I saw the other side of the Green Mountains, I went to my favorite little burger joint in the world, and I meandered around the grounds of a manor named Rokeby I have had an inexplicable attachment to for years. Each place brought back distinct memories of the person I had been when I fell in love with them. These scenes in rural New York were perhaps the closest I came to being my self again, purely and totally the person I lost in my disconnect, because they were things, places, whose meaning transcended time. None of them had changed, and they could not reveal any change in me, so it was easier to view my self through them without being beaten back by reflections of my present. They will tell you about the impossibility of time travel, but my personal experience of these places tells me that you can travel back in time, if only you are given the proper stimulus. I am afraid, though, that such travel is skin-deep. Being inert, these places did not allow the reconnection I desired; they allowed only a more distinct view of my self, without the noise of other voices of other people in other lives. The wall between me and my self was still stolid.

The final event was a funeral. It was a funeral for someone who should have been at the wedding but was not. It was for someone whose death I still have not dealt with. It was for someone whom I think of every time I look at the moon. That she is dead is traumatizing, and I mourn her now as I mourned her then. It was through this that I was finally able to brush up against my self, and it nearly killed me. And all I'm left with are questions. I returned to my self, I did what I wanted for a brief moment, but was it worth it? Was the pain worth it? And is it fucked that I felt most like my self at my grandmother's funeral?

I mention these moments in such a passing manner because I myself do not yet truly know what to do with them, do not yet know how they fit into my life, and I cannot yet claim otherwise. The truth is I'm not sure I could if I tried, as I have had no success in the hundreds of attempts I've made over the past months. I simply refuse to cohere.

Art by Lila Liebeskind

In each of these moments of successful reconnection, I highlighted some underlying issue that prevented them from truly reconnecting me to my self, though I suppose the more important and universal problem with these four moments is that they had absolutely no lasting effect, except to remind me of how unmoored I actually am. They were revivals of something past, something irretrievable, something I had to move on from, and it was disheartening to learn I must move on from my self.

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Besides these four moments, there were many failures to reconnect during the summer of 2021, too many to count, all of them hardly worth mentioning, except for one: my mother. I failed her. I could tell, in a visceral way, that she was as lost and confused as I. The pandemic has not been easy for her; she has been traumatized by it too, and I suppose I thought that bringing her self back would bring my self back by some transitive property. Unfortunately, though, through little fault of her own, she has been unable to do anything not required by either her job or her mother's declining health. She has not reconnected. In fact, she only grew more distant, fled further from her self, which, as someone trying to do the opposite, was painful to watch. I try not to blame her for this, particularly since I was the one who put my own unspoken expectations on her in the first place, but it is alluringly easy to blame her for not caring about her self, or not being able to care about her self, in the same way that I was trying to care for both her and my selves. Really, though, she has done all she can, though that has amounted mainly to not giving up, to continuing to get up out of bed every morning and undergo the excruciating hell of living. I see much of my own struggles repeated in her, and I fear I have lost the plot to depression as much as she has.

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I share these as moments that highlight how broken my psyche is coming out of the pandemic, how lost I feel in my own life, but these moments are small potatoes compared to what must be the most significant breakage from my self. This occurred not during the summer, but on October 4th, 2021. It was on October 4th that my identity, the main fabric of my self, was torn in half.

I will not narrate what happened with any specificity; it will suffice to say that we necked. For the first time in my life I kissed another human being and I liked it almost as much as anything else that I have ever done in my life. And it was that moment that ripped me apart, because for years I have thought, nay, known that I am asexual. And yet in that moment I felt rather sexual and I liked it quite a bit and I didn't know what to do with that. I desperately didn't know what to do with that. Every other disconnect from my self I had been able to weather because they had been disconnected facts about the events of my life, never about my identity. They were things I felt a connection to, but they were also separate from me in some way. My sexuality, though, is as fundamental as my gender, my name, the process by which my brain works. It defines how I am able to relate to my self and other people. I cannot treat it like any other disconnect because it is uniquely damaging. To affect my sexuality is to permanently affect my personhood. I did not know what to do with this new revelation, which inevitably led me to panic. In the course of that week I suffered four panic attacks, the worst being on October 7th. And do you know what I did when I panicked that night? Do you know what instinct took over, drove me through the final loss of my self? I walked to my car and buckled myself in.

I sought to go driving again, whether for the physical or mental space I do not know. I know only that I wanted to go away and never look back.

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It is somewhat spooky how the facts of your life will fill in accidentally. In a moment you realize that you will never forget what you just experienced, that every day for the rest of your life you will be defined, at least in a small way, by what just occurred. That these moments are not spectacular is by design.

It was a small, meaningless little kiss, but I still have not gotten over it, and I

Art by Nina Hoyt



"Touched by God" by Sophie Winner

don't know that I ever will, though I have most certainly gotten over he who kissed me. (Perhaps "gotten over" as a choice of diction is too dry. It should suffice to say that I have genuinely forgiven you for any hurt I attributed to you, and I hope that you can forgive me, too.) That kiss will haunt me forever, as the clearest example of just how little I am my self anymore.

I feel as though I have moved past nothing, and yet, when I look around, I am in completely different environs. The world has moved on without me, I can say to myself, but even as I utter the words I know I am lying. It is a lie to say that I haven't changed since March of 2020, a lie to say that I can still be my self, a lie to say that because I felt comatose the entire pandemic I must have missed it. To lie to myself like that is madness. I know it will accomplish nothing, and yet I am desperate for it to fix everything.

I am desperate to reconnect, to return, but I have come to realize that I can only move on. The self I spent the summer looking for exists now only in theory. That is, perhaps, the most Californian aspect of this summer, out of all of them: not only the search for my self, nor the hope that I may be my self again, but the idea that such an imposter can even be said to exist in the first place. California is a place of illusions, of trickery, of so-called movie magic. It reassures us that everything will be okay, that everything will return to normal, that I may be my self again, if only I find some consistency in my character. But I have tried, desperately, and found only that I cannot be my self again. She may be alive in California, but in reality she is gone. She is the dead; I, the living, must pick up the pieces on my own terms, as must you.

Easier said than done.

Art by Clea Gunn

I lost my left earring

by Gina Thompson

I lost my left earring
last night, sitting
on a bench, kissing
a boy.
That's never happened before.
The boy, not the earring.

I've lost an earring before,
it was blue,
a gift from my parents
and when it was gone I cried.

Last night's earring was blue too,
but losing it didn't make me cry,
just curious.

The other earring looks different now.
I look at it a lot, the one that's not lost.

I think about losing and gaining.

You know what was strange?
It was my left earring
not my right, not the one
pressed against a boy's shoulder,
but the cold one,
the lonely one that was lost.
The right earring was
pushed and shifted, I worried
it would fall.

Yet the right was alright
and the left got left behind.

The left earring is out there
somewhere under a bench
or in a pavement crack,
but I don't care.
The right earring is next to my bed
near my head when I sleep,
and I look at it a lot.
It reminds me that sometimes
you have to lose something to gain something—
a single for a pair,
an earring for a kiss.

Art by Clea Gunn



Art by Sophie Winner

My Mother's Face

by Jada-Leigh McGregor

She's looking at you. No, that's not true. You wish she was looking at you. Because you're staring at this point and she's got her tired, tired face buried in her hands. Their wrinkles are lined with grey from the cold. Her puffer coat pulls taut as she caves in on herself. She can't look at you because she's just trying to drag herself through this moment, this news. The disappointment, her disappointment, spears you in the chest, claws at your insides. And you take that head on. You deserve it. You ruined this moment. *Look at me.* If you tried to scream at her it would come out a dead whisper. The tears have rubbed your throat raw. So you just stare *look at me.*

You're separated by the width of this white room. White walls stained yellow with water damage, white tiles curdling grey. The checkered pattern distorts under your swinging, socked feet. The tears dribble down your cheeks and they don't stop. They may never stop. You and her cry in harmony across the sterile space. You take her pain and thread it around yours. She cowers in the corner, as far away from you as possible, hunched over in a brown rickety chair. You swing your legs as she shrinks into a woman you've never seen before; one that can be broken. One that can look weak.

He comes forward, emerging from the corner of your vision, to place a hand on your mother's shoulder. She retreats further into herself. The other people in the room suddenly blur into place, flitting around, talking in low voices, drifting in and out of the room. Your eyes stay on your mother, and his attempt at comfort, that limp tepid hand sinking into her form. If you tried to cross that expanse and do the same, offer comfort, she would push you away, or worse, hold you tight even though you're the one hurting her. She's hiding her face but what would she see if she did look at you? A scared little girl masquerading as a woman? You wonder, if she ever does look at you again, in a day a week a year, on the subway ride home, how different it will be. How much of that disappointment will linger in her gaze like snowflakes on eyelashes. If she'll ever be able to look at you again without remembering this moment.

I can't tell what I remember. I don't really know the color of the tiles, or the walls, who was in the room, their names, if they were even speaking English. All I know is what my mother looked like when I broke her.

Why We Breathe

by Peter Fray-Witzer

When I walked into the basement of the Oberlin Hotel, I was prepared to watch something like a concert. Well, a concert with a lot of art. Being friends with Fiona Giménez-Collins, one of the visual artists of *Why We Breathe*, I had heard a lot about the winter term project—and about how its purpose was to experiment with the coalescence of visual art and music. What I was expecting was something like a typical performance space, perhaps with a projection on the back wall and several prints. Instead, art filled every empty space; prints, textiles, and projections hung from the ceiling around the performers, overlapped with them, and turned the whole stage into a collage of musicians and art. As the musicians started up and projections began to play (not on a single surface, but on a number of hanging pieces), I felt that the music and art were weaving through each other. And, even more vividly, I remember feeling that I had never seen anything like this before.

Why We Breathe is a mixed-media performance that is difficult to describe, but I can say that it was incredibly striking in its combination of aesthetic and auditory features. Hands were showcased in many of the suspended and translucent prints, helping the audience draw connections between the distinct instruments they both heard and saw—and the art forms they were viewing. The hand, as the act of creating, was the point of convergence between music and visual art. One of the most poignant examples was a semi-translucent print affixed in front of the hands of the pianist, on which a projection suddenly came to life: a recording of glowing hands, mirroring the movements of the player's. On a sheet of spray-painted acetate, shining, coppery fingers illuminated the keys below them, following the player like fiery ghosts.

Watching all of the hands, projected and tangible, around the room, I couldn't help but see how very similar their movements were: the momentary alighting of the fingers on piano keys, the manipulation of a bow with infinitesimal muscles, the pressure of fingertip pads on upright

Art by Lila Liebeskind



bass strings, the slight pull to manipulate angle and alter sound, the microscopic movements that changed a drumstick's direction mid-air... All so purposeful. I was awestruck.

And then there was the music. Though it cannot be divorced from the visual aspects of the performance, it was, in itself, quite impressive. The musicians involved in *Why We Breathe* also became composers, working together to create the final musical score. In crafting this composition, they had hoped to create a piece that meandered through different tones and feelings, something unique in its range across mediums and genres, with sections inspired by classical music, jazz, metal, and modern funk. In an interview, Maya Irizarry, *Why We Breathe*'s violinist, said that she hoped the audience would be "taken on a journey of different genres, like changing stations on a radio," a feeling they definitely achieved. The influences of each genre were distinct and recognizable: The jazz sections—with those quick, textured riffs—contrasted the lively funk and the piercing metal and the melodious, melancholy clas-



Art by Saffron Forsberg

sical segments. Still, the seamless transitions between each—and the fact that the same instruments underscored so many different genres—made even seemingly disparate modes of musical expression feel like relatives.

Important to note, as well, is the fact that the score was engineered to give way to long sections of improvisation, which were not simply sprinkled in: They made up around half of the piece—if not more. The improvisation spanned sections not only of jazz and rock (in which it might be more common to hear long solos), but of classical and funk, as well. Not relegated to any particular genres, this improvisation pointed to the value of breaking traditional musical confines. It also, counterintuitively, created a unity in the piece and aided its cohesiveness. The audience learned to recognize and expect these improvisational solos—usually preceded and followed by a particular musical motif—and they grounded them in the piece's rhythm.

Despite the loose structure and lack of notated music, improvisation created its own compositional challenges. It is by no means easy. As Irizarry noted, "there's a thin line between experimentalism and randomness." In other words, improvisation is not a free-for-all: A musician can't get away with playing random notes on a whim. It has to be creatively calculated—providing an edge to the sound, while still fitting in enough with the composition to not seem disjointed. The refined experimentalism showcased in the improvisation of *Why We Breathe* required not only seasoned musicians, but also relentless individual and collective practice. "While there isn't a specific narrative," said Irizarry, "there is an arc to the performance. There's a shape to it."

The sections of improvisation also inspired the visual artists, who sat in on many of the practice sessions, sketching out ideas and letting the music inspire their visions for the aesthetics of the piece. They were surprised to find that, often, the same motifs would come up in the work of visual artists who were listening across the room from each other: The music prompted similar visual representations. At other times, the studio artists had entirely different understandings of what the music meant to them visually, having interpreted what they were hearing in separate ways. It was a fascinating exploration of artistic interaction.

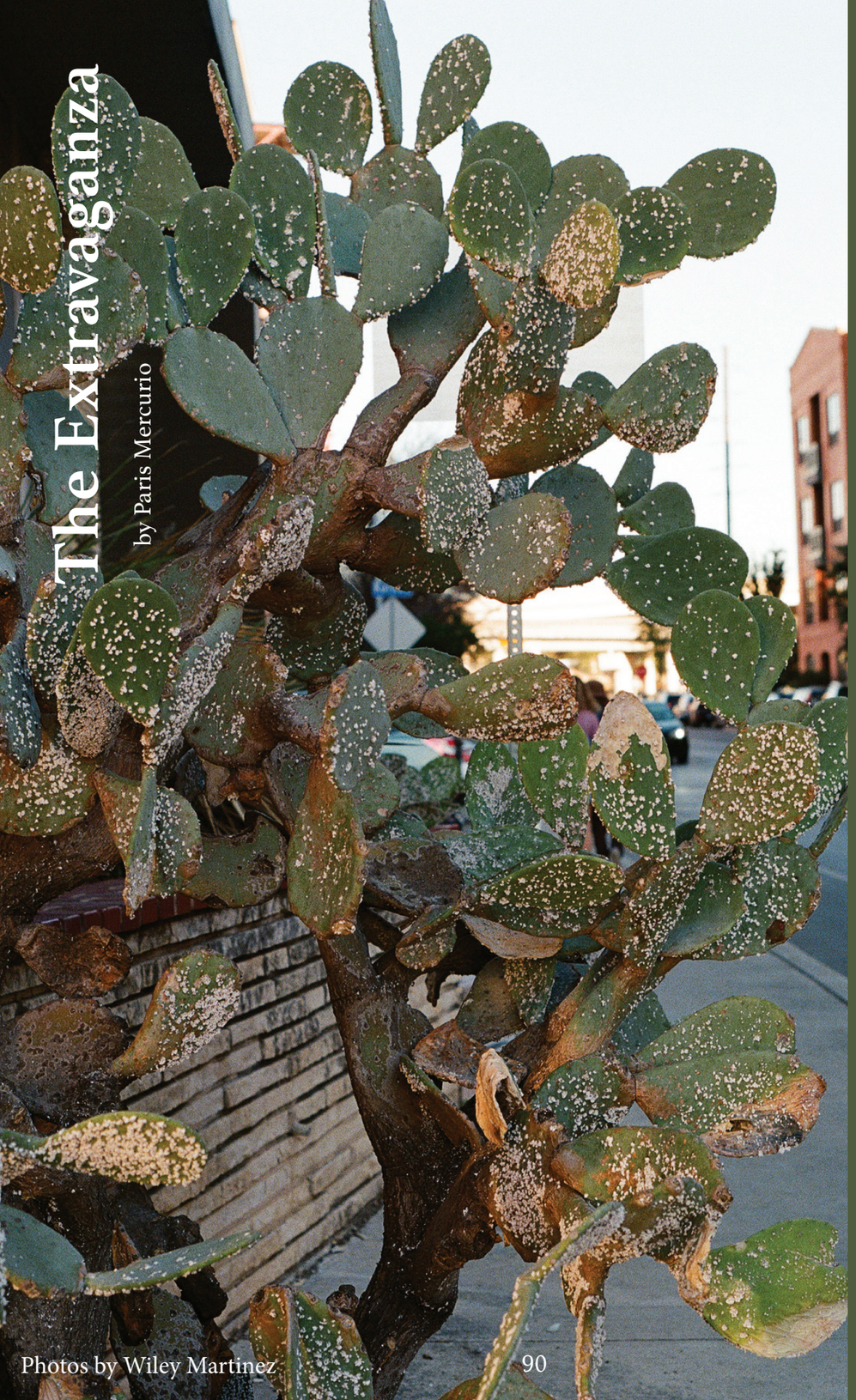
The improvisation also created challenges for the visual artists, particularly Milo Hume, who worked with the many projections accompanying the musical composition. During the performance, he raced around to different monitors, manually calibrating which videos and images were projected during different sections—based on what best fit the music's tone. It was a difficult correspondence to negotiate, as much of the sound wasn't predetermined. Nevertheless, the artists were able to strike a remarkable balance with the music, creating a visually stunning (and, perhaps more impressively, visually cohesive) experience.

Because *Why We Breathe* intended to celebrate creative processes, it is important to note that such artistic endeavors and explorations were not without difficulty. At the beginning of the project, the members were not sure that they would be able to bring their vision to fruition at all—because of a lack of funding. The group tried to apply for several small grants through the college, but they were denied. Irizarry mentioned that one of the grants sought to fund mixed-media endeavors. It seemed like it was tailor-made for their project. so it came as a surprise when they weren't accepted. Applying to these grants—which, Irizarry noted, included emailing the college, drafting statements, compiling portfolios, and writing bios for individual contributors—took a significant amount of time, for which the participants weren't compensated. After asking around, they never discovered who actually did secure the grant. Although they had requested a comparatively tiny amount of funding for such a project—somewhere around five hundred dollars—they were told it wouldn't be possible for them to get any

kind of compensation. While Irizarry echoed the sentiments I had heard from Giménez-Collins about not needing a monetary incentive to create, they were both disappointed that a lack of financial help from the college was the biggest obstacle to their creativity. “The institution doesn’t support us,” said Irizarry. “It’s all student initiative.”

Why We Breathe is not only a perfect example of the ingenuity of Oberlin students and their ability to translate visions into performances, but it is also a stunning showcase of artistic and collaborative exploration at its best. As an audience member, the most striking features of the piece were its interactions between musical and visual compositions, but the show is also deeply reflective in nature. The actual art—the true experiment of the project—was only partially represented in its performance: The impetus of *Why We Breathe* was rooted just as completely in process as it was in product. The piece is about collaboration, about whether or not visual artists and musicians can understand each other, and about how their mediums interact. It sees different artistic endeavors and lays them on top of one another—metaphorically and literally—pointing to the necessity humans have found in art. When different modes of self-expression are combined, it becomes clear that they serve the same end—both fulfilling an innate desire to create. The title of the piece, then, intentionally interacts with the performance itself, suggesting that art—its collaboration, ingenuity, and improvisation—is why we breathe.

Art by Lila Liebeskind



The Extravaganza

by Paris Mercurio

Photos by Wiley Martinez

We hadn't expected the Extravaganza to look the way it did, but then again, we had no clue what to expect.

"We're sure this is the right place?" Kate asked.

Sarah looked down at Google Maps one last time. "This is definitely it."

Ahead of us, music emanated from a small, ivy-covered pavilion. I took a deep breath as we approached; there was no way of knowing what we were about to walk into.

The venue was set up like a miniature wedding or a sweet sixteen, with several round tables scattered around the floor. More than anything else, it looked like a family reunion. There was an empty space reserved for dancing, and the band was set up along the front wall. I scanned the crowd, which didn't take long; there were only around twenty-five people there. Most of them were middle-aged or older, sitting upright in their folding chairs and nodding along to the music as a handful of young children hovered around them. The families of Matt and his band members, presumably. Towards the front, I noticed a group of guys who looked about our age. An elderly man sitting at one of the back tables rose to greet us.

"I'm Matt's father," he said.

"Nice to meet you," Sarah replied. "We're big fans of your son."

The man leaned back and smiled. "He's always been creative. Musical from a young age. I'm proud that he was able to find a way to make a living out of it. He's even roped me into it... Have you folks seen *Don't Let the Riverbeast Get You*?"

We exchanged uncertain looks. A few nights before leaving school, the three of us had gotten drunk and purchased *Don't Let the Riverbeast Get You*, arguably Matt's most well-known film, for three dollars on Tubi. We found it so unsettling that we scrapped the venture less than twenty minutes in. It felt wrong, though, to admit to this kind man that we, who had traveled sixteen hours to see his son in concert, had not worked our way through his filmography.

"Oh, yes, we did watch that. A while ago, though."

He beamed. "I play Ito Hootkins!"

"Oh!" Sarah said. "Of course!"

"Ah, I see it now," I added.

Matt's dad ushered us to an empty table, where we discovered a program detailing the night's events. The first page provided a schedule for the concert: There were to be four

sets, each an hour long, with twenty minute breaks in between. We had arrived at the beginning of the second set. The program also came complete with a schedule of the following days' events--a beach party the following morning, a debut screening of Matt's next film, and a Sunday morning game of basketball--and a guide to conversing with fellow concert attendees during the breaks between sets. The Motern Extravaganza was officially underway.

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Sarah, Kate, and I had discovered Matt Farley's music that October--eight months earlier, seven months into the pandemic, and one month into our return to campus after being suddenly sent home in March of 2020. That fall, with social distancing measures in full swing, the three of us rarely spent time with anyone else. The only night of the week we didn't spend together was Tuesday, the night of Sarah and Kate's radio show. Each week, they discussed a different romantic comedy and played songs from the soundtrack. On the night they covered *The Princess Bride*, they encountered an issue: There wasn't much of a soundtrack to play. When something like this happened, they typically just played songs related to the film in some way. In their search for topical songs, they discovered one entitled "Inigo Montoya Is Out For Revenge" by an artist called Papa Razzi and the Photogs.

I was listening to the show when they played it. The singer--presumably Papa Razzi himself--yelled somewhat generic, repetitive character and plot information over a few simple piano chords. He wasn't exactly off-key, but he wasn't quite on-key, either.

We spent the following night listening to as many of Papa Razzi's songs as we could, and he had a lot of them--more than 2,000 across thirty-seven albums, actually. One of his most popular tracks, "Timothee Chalamet Is Adored by All Because He's Great," featured Papa Razzi essentially reciting the actor's filmography over an upbeat piano track: "Timothee Chalamet, Call Me By Your Name, you are in Beautiful Boy, that's a movie that you're in... You have a role in the coming-of-age comedy drama entitled Ladybird." At the end of the song, Papa Razzi asked Timothee to call him, and even provided a phone number. In "Dylan and Cole Sprouse are Awesome," he dropped the same phone number in the lyrics: "Dylan and Cole, will you guys be friends with me? My number's 603-644-0048... Call me sometime."



"Do you think that's a real number?" I asked.

"Probably not," Sarah said. "He'd get random calls all the time."

"Do you really think that many people are listening to these songs on a regular basis?" Kate asked.

There was only one way to find out: We called. He picked up halfway through the second ring. "Hello?"

"Is this, uh... Mr. Razzi?"

"Oh yes, that's me. Well, my real name is Matt Farley. Which song brought you here?"

"We were just listening to 'Dylan and Cole Sprouse Are Awesome,' and we wanted to see if the phone number was real."

"Yep, it's real. I put my phone number in a lot of my songs just to see if people will actually call it."

"Do you get a lot of calls?"

"Not many, but some. Papa Razzi is just one of my aliases, but I release music under eighty different artist names on Spotify. Each one has a different topic or theme--Papa Razzi is for celebrities and characters, but I have a band for cities and towns, household items, you name it. I've released over twenty thousand songs in total." We later learned that Matt's most popular band is The Toilet Bowl Cleaners, dedicated to songs about fecal matter, which has nearly 120,000 monthly listeners on Spotify.

"Do you guys have a favorite song of mine?" he asked. We exchanged uncertain glances.

I scrambled to remember another title. "The Timothee Chalamet song is pretty great."

"Oh, yeah," he replied. "That one's popular."

Matt's music turned out to be just one of his creative projects under the umbrella of Motern Media--a quick Google search of his name brought us to the website, where we discovered that he'd also written and directed several films. Sarah subscribed to his email list.

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Oberlin's COVID-modified schedule sent sophomores home for the spring semester and brought us back for the

summer, so after six months of separation, Sarah, Kate, and I returned to a completely different Oberlin. Most of the campus was vaccinated, and the mask mandate had been completely lifted. Nearly every rule that had governed our lives for over a year was suddenly gone. In some ways, it almost felt normal again. As nice as it was, the sudden freedom was strange and unsettling. I'd spent so much time completely isolated from nearly everyone I knew, and I wasn't sure I remembered how to socialize anymore. I felt more than comfortable with Kate and Sarah, though, so the three of us went right back to spending every moment together.

One night, Sarah received an email from Motern Media: Matt Farley announced the "Motern Extravaganza," described as "part concert, part convention." It was to be held at a secret location--outside, for COVID safety--that would only be revealed in the email confirmation of the ticket purchase. The date: September 3rd. One day after the end of our semester.

"We have to go," Sarah said. It started out as a joke, obviously. In the months we'd been at home, Matt Farley's music had become a recurring joke in our friend group. We'd celebrated each other's birthdays over Zoom with music by The Best Birthday Song Band Ever, Matt's band dedicated to birthday songs, playing in the background. During our Twilight movie marathon, we'd discovered that Matt had an entire band dedicated solely to the film franchise: The Vampire & Werewolf Experience. It was just a funny little way for us to keep things interesting while we were stuck inside and apart. But the more we joked about attending the Motern Extravaganza, the less it felt like a joke. It was actually completely possible. We were adults, we were vaccinated, we had access to a car, and we'd be out of school. Sure, we'd be cutting it a little close to move-out, but what was an adventure without a little added pressure?

"We don't even know where it's being held," Kate said. "It could be on the other side of the country, like, in California or something."

"I highly doubt that he's holding his concert in California when he lives in rural Massachusetts," Sarah replied.

"Concert slash convention," I corrected her.

"Right. Anyway, we can road trip anywhere as long as we're all committed."

We were committed. We bought the tickets, then anxiously refreshed our emails until the secret location was revealed: Hampton Beach, New Hampshire, a seaside town just eleven hours from Oberlin. We made a plan: We'd drive seven hours to my house in New Jersey on move-out day, then drive the rest of the way the following morning.

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We'd run into traffic and arrived at the Extravaganza an hour late, so the first set was just ending when we sat down.

Matt addressed the audience: "Remember, this is also a convention. Talk to each other! Make new friends! If you don't know where to start, there are some tips in the program." The other attendees stood from their seats and congregated in little groups around the pavilion.

"Should we go talk to them?" I asked, gesturing towards the group of college-aged guys.



"I think we should," Kate said. "I mean, Matt says we have to."

We flipped through our program packets to the page of conversation starters and perused the options:

1. This is weird, eh?
2. How did you discover Motern Media?
3. What's your favorite Motern Media film?

Before we could pursue a conversation, we ran into Matt Farley himself.

"Hey! Thanks so much for coming out, guys. I played the Timothee Chalamet song for you in the first set, but you weren't here yet, so I'll have to play it again later on." I stood for a moment in bewilderment. I hardly remembered mentioning the Timothee Chalamet song on the phone back in October, a full eight months before we'd even bought tickets to the Extravaganza. How did he remember? And even then, how did he know that was us? We did mention that we were from Ohio--Had we even said Oberlin? How did he put it together? I'll never know.

Matt did play "Timothee Chalamet Is Adored by All People Because He's Great" again. In fact, he played it three more times throughout the night: twice with the full band, and once as an acoustic piano ballad.

"When I wrote that song, I had no clue who Timothee Chalamet was," he admitted to his audience. "I just heard his name somewhere, so I pulled up his Wikipedia page and started recording." To his fans, Matt Farley is fairly open about his songwriting process, which is often less about "writing" and more about reciting information from the internet. He rarely records second takes.

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The third set was dedicated to dancing, and Matt's band played an upbeat selection of songs while encouraging the attendees to leave the comfort of their seats. We danced, of course.

"Everyone, we have a surprise guest!" Matt announced after a while. The music swelled as an indiscernible figure entered the pavilion. A collective gasp emerged from the crowd. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was the titular Riverbeast of Motern Media Masterpiece "Don't Let the Riverbeast Get You!" Well, it was a person dressed in the most horrifying full-body costume I'd ever seen. The Riverbeast crept towards us, and Sarah turned to me with a look of sheer terror in her eyes.

"I don't want that thing anywhere near me."

After we, very warily, danced with the Riverbeast for a while, it was time for the concert to come to an end. "I know most musicians who have been around as long as me would probably consider it a failure to be playing to an audience of thirty people," Matt said, "But I really couldn't be happier."

I believed him. Sure, Matt wasn't famous by any means. He'd barely received mainstream recognition, aside from a few stray news segments and a three-minute Jimmy Fallon slot during which he played Papa Razzi's emotional ballad "Used To Be a Pizza Hut." Most people who listened to his music had no clue who he was, but he didn't care. If anything, the few people who actually searched for his identity, called the phone number from the song, or traveled hours just to see a tiny concert full of joke songs, mattered even more. The obscurity was part of the appeal. By going along with the weirdness of it, we'd become a direct part of something much weirder than we ever could've hoped.

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The next morning, we arrived at the beach and found ourselves unable to locate Matt Farley on the sand.

"Would it be weird to call him?"

"I don't think so."

Sarah opened Spotify, pulled up "Timothee Chalamet Is Adored by All Because He's Great," and scrolled to the end of the song to hear Matt's phone number. He picked up almost right away and gave us directions. After a minute or two, we saw him in the distance. He was surrounded by a small group of people, waving and shouting, "OBERLIN! OBERLIN!"

We finally reached him. "Oberlin people! This guy went to Oberlin!" Matt gestured

towards a man we hadn't seen at the Extravaganza.

"Hey! I'm Ben," he said. "I graduated in 2018."

Ben and his friends had traveled from New York City for the Extravaganza, but they'd run into so much traffic on the way, they missed the entire thing. "Matt gave us free tickets to next year's concert, though," he said.

We spent a while talking about Oberlin: what had changed, and what hadn't. He caught us up on drama that had taken place before our time, and we filled him in on everything that had happened since. After about an hour, we decided it was time to hit the road--but not before getting a group photo with Matt Farley himself.

"How weird of a coincidence was that?" Sarah asked once we were out of earshot.

It was a huge coincidence, especially considering how few people were there, but it still felt oddly fitting. I understood why Obies would be drawn to Matt Farley. I came to Oberlin because I wanted to be surrounded by people who were weirder than I was. There was a comfort in knowing that no matter how I chose to express myself, nobody would really even bat an eye. Matt's work tapped into similar desires: being weird for weirdness' sake, doing something pointless or bizarre just to prove--to others, or even only to oneself--that it can be done. Matt had created his own brand and found an unusual kind of fame. His little corner of the internet was full of people who wanted to be a part of that, who valued that weirdness and that sense of possibility, and who devoted their attention to help spur it on.

There are rare pockets of life in which the rules of social behavior seem to go out the window. That weekend, we found ourselves with the realization that our lives were entirely our own--an obvious truth, but one so often forgotten. It was so easy to feel as though we were governed by some external set of norms, and even easier not to stray outside of those invisible lines. In reality, life provided so many little opportunities to break away. Matt Farley had built his entire career on breaking those false rules: creating a profitable music career that was only known for its strangeness, hosting an extravagant concert and convention for only a handful of fans, making ridiculous movies that only a few people would ever see. Everything he did, he did for one great reason, maybe the best reason of all: simply because he could.

"We're never going to see any of those people again, are we?" Kate asked as we walked through the parking lot.

"Not unless we decide to make this an annual thing," I said.

"We cannot come back here every year," Sarah said. "I mean, we're committed to the bit, but not that committed."

I wondered if we'd ever be this committed again. I wondered if we'd ever take another road trip just for the sake of it, just to reach something stupid. I tried not to think about it too hard. We had a long drive ahead of us, and much to talk about on the way. We got into the car, put on some music, and drove home.



Of Lone, Wandering, and Unsung Bodies

Lesbian Recognition in Cinema's Transient Other

by Saffron Forsberg

Photo (above) by Wiley Martinez
Illustrations by Saffron Forsberg

When I was seventeen, my mother showed me a movie she loved when she was around my age. It was the first foreign film she'd ever seen, she told me, a quiet French film in which Sandrine Bonnaire, tousled and rude, trudges through the French countryside, looking for food and rolling cigarettes: Agnes Varda's 1985 masterpiece *Vagabond*. My mother had thought of it all these years later, not remembering its title nor that it was directed by a lauded feminist filmmaker. When we found the film and watched it together in our tiny Southeast Texas living room, I easily envisioned my teenage mother, slight and serious, a vampiric wannabe-beatnik who just happened to have been born in small-town Louisiana, sulkily finding out just how the unapologetic Mona came to her ultimate demise.

When my mother was seventeen, she dropped out of high school and left home for Texas. She had always been a strange girl: sensitive and demandingly inquisitive. She was the youngest of many siblings, the oldest of whom was eighteen years her senior. My mother was the baby, the brat, the bird-boned little sister making a scene. She hated school but loved to read and write. She refused to style her hair or go through with her Catholic Confirmation. She wore black and befriended the tortured gay boys and was prettily unpopular. And she came from a strain of deep Southern Cajun Catholicism that prodded her poor old mother to read her teenage diary and presume she was worshipping the devil. Or such is her mythology: something I too deeply, perhaps, romanticized as a younger person when I met new friends and informed them that my mother was a "Catholic schoolgirl teenage runaway." Which, despite being technically true, is a rather saccharine sentiment considering how tough my mother had to be to live such a life, and how little she wanted to *be* a Catholic schoolgirl.

My mother ran away to Houston–an '80s Houston of legend that existed, like many American cities in the '80s, as a site of gay poverty, opioids, young runaways, AIDS, and incredible freedom. My mother was poor. She couch-surfed. She had a scattering of feline and dark-lashed boyfriends. They framed eras and photographs but always stood on the periphery of my flagrant mythologizing. For, when I was growing up, my mother liked to tell me how many things she had to learn to do after she left home before her own mother could teach her. Gay men, she told me, taught her to cook and clean, iron and mend. They, too, were runaways and Others. And, in their way, my mother, baby-faced and extraterrestrial, and these banished men understood one another. She loved them deeply and because of this, I loved them too from the distance of decades, and I understood their transience, their forging of existence – self, family, place – in a ragged Houston I only sort of knew, as noble rather than naive or irresponsible. My mother cherished, perhaps more than anything else, Otherness. So it made sense that *Vagabond* was a movie she cherished then.

Agnes Varda's *Vagabond — Sans toit ni loi*, or "with neither shelter nor law" in the original French — is perhaps the most triumphant tragedy to grace the silver screen. It is a triumphant film in its depiction of a woman whose existence is cutting and known, but not spoken of: she who wanders, who seems to come from

nowhere and in pursuit of nothing. In her abject transience, our young heroine, Mona, is perhaps the opposite of a stable young wife – she is unwashed and rude, at once brusque and sexless, and almost completely anonymous. Her singular bragging right is her ferocious, almost callous, independence of movement, that which makes her demanding, utilitarian, and altogether unintelligible unless you are one to understand her plight – one existing with little explanation in the quiet poetry of the film. Indeed, the helpful strangers she happens upon — a family of goat farmers, a fascinated professor, a maid who sees romance in her placelessness — are charmed but frustrated, seeing no way to help a woman who seems not to desire it, who seems to be pursuing nothing at all and to no effect. If you do not find yourself relating to Mona, you may want to instead take her by the shoulders and shake her, demanding to know why she dashes opportunities at sustenance in favor of stubborn aimlessness. We watch Mona give blood just to afford the money for food and furrow our brows, hissing at one another, *well then why didn't she just stay at the farm and help out?*



It is because there is no real way to connect with the recalcitrant Mona that she is unlovable. Love, too, is never something she seems to request...and is never something Varda requests of us, her audience, either. *Vagabond* is a completely unromantic film, perhaps an anti-romance. And unlike the wandering working-class woman portrayed in, say, Barbara Loden's gritty 1970 film *Wanda*, Mona never seeks, nor finds a man to grab hold of in the depths of her aimlessness. Men are sometimes tools of sexual gratification for Mona, but they mostly exist in the form of hostile gazes, sets of hands, from which she must flee. Unlike Wanda, who apathetically attaches herself to an abusive man anyway, nursing some dark illusion of heterosexual intimacy, Mona is constantly fleeing to the depths of a singular and

unkeepable aloneness. *Vagabond*, in effect, is a movie that is at once focused directly on Mona, and one that stands completely apart from her, never quite letting us in, but rather looking us right in the eyes and hoping we understand anyway. It is a sort of plotless road movie by-foot; it's a scant one-woman show with a humming ensemble cast; it doesn't make sense unless it does. It's a tragedy because it is entirely constructed of flashbacks; in the first scene, we find Mona dead. And it is, at once, a triumphant film in that it fiercely depicts something very few films even attempt: an unsentimental solitude particular to the man-less working-class woman.

When I saw *Vagabond* for the first time, I was a baby-dyke. I was in the eleventh grade. I had crooked, oily bangs, and my first girlfriend – my best friend at the time, another Other who I, with the crazed religiosity I often undertook with movies, music, and books at that age, forced to watch the film, too. I held *Vagabond* close, but it took me years to figure out why Varda's brutal feminist drama so impacted me, and why it had impacted my mother, too. Mona, I knew, was a frustrating, brutish character, yet I understood her completely and with kindred sympathy. I felt that in my mother, as well. Why? Was it just that my mother and I were both, it felt, eternally lonely freaks in the place where we ended up, and thus always daydreaming about our great and wandering escape? The pain I recognized in the film was not my own but felt as though it somehow belonged to me.

At the time, I lived where I had grown up: suburban Southeast Texas, in a sparse working-class hamlet about an hour south of Houston. My parents had moved there from the city before I was born, as they couldn't afford Houston even in the early days of its gentrification. Even so, they were city hipsters, socialist freaks in the Bush-ian depths of the suburban bible belt. My house was called "the hippie house" by sneering neighborhood kids. In it, a strange amalgamation of scavenged crap, pseudointellectual trinkets, degraded yet alphabetized paperbacks, and nods at foreign locales cluttered every surface, showcasing where my parents wished they were and, in a way, standing as a testament to how much they fucking hated where we actually were – its chemical plant smog and conformist ethos. We were poor and strange, utterly out-of-place, but we had assembled a little world: somewhere my brother and I could find our way back to after a school day of confused bullying, creationism, and pro-war patriotic pageants. Meanwhile, outside, kindly neighborhood Hank Hills scraped the Leftist bumper stickers off my parents' Volkswagen Jetta. To be witnessed as strange became normal but no less uncomfortable.

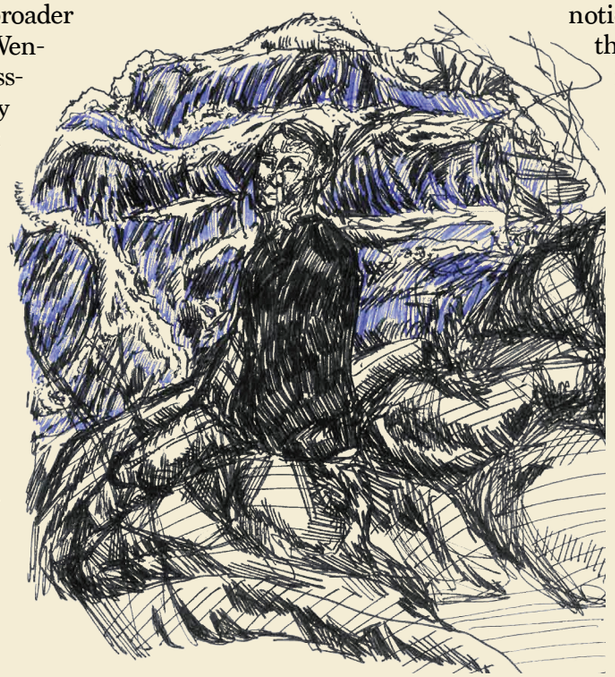
Because or in spite of this, I can't remember a time when I didn't despise where I came from. I always wanted to leave. I never knew quite where or how, but escape was a fantasy I held close from an incredibly young age. Escape, along with my mother's imagination and my own stubborn fuse, became the reason for everything I did. It was the reason I did well in school and wrote, with a private fervor, hours into every night, just trying to say anything at all. And by eighteen, it had allowed me a strange miracle: a near-full-ride to Oberlin – something I never really expected to happen to me. Oberlin College was a place, I thought, for wealthy geniuses raised in big cities by connected, educated families. I had only heard of Oberlin my senior year of high school while

researching scholarships for low-income teenagers, and I applied because it felt like a whimsical thing one does at eighteen – that which allows you to say you tried. I couldn't afford a college tour and had never been to Ohio, but the following August, I went anyway. It was a very different escape than my mother's.

When I think back on the beginning of college, my first inclination is to regard it as a time when I had to figure out how to be alone, but I know this isn't truly the case. I was always a very solitary child; I say this not woefully but as a matter-of-fact. I had a spattering of very close friendships growing up, but I always associated myself with solitude. For a long time, I vaguely attributed this to being raised strangely, or to just being innately off-kilter, or to some potent strain of introversion. Now I realize so much of it was because I was gay – a confusing, passable gay that did not manifest as Peppermint Patty masculinity nor as a gooey obsession with a female classmate, but as a sexless detachment from my peers. By ages thirteen and fourteen, it felt as though I spoke nobody's language, and nobody spoke mine. Quietly angry, I climbed into a private world of music, books, and the internet, carving for myself a safe, dull cave in which to dwell until I was old enough to leave it. By age sixteen, I had acquired a new best friend, someone to speak to, but that, too, became something else. Looking back, the alienation I faced because of my lesbianism was obvious and dotted with recognizable signposts, but I must remind myself that I had never really been forced to ponder my sexuality before, not really. My gayness came with my first relationship; I was left no time to wonder what could be or who I really was — I was immediately the subject of a shared romance. I had no idea about the infamous and excruciating "Lesbian Loneliness" nor that I had experienced it — that I had inadvertently been experiencing it my whole life. Indeed, I kindled very few non-sexual queer friendships as a teenager, nor existed among many other queer people. To be a lesbian then was not to *be* a lesbian, but to engage in Lesbianism. It was a verb, an action. I had no idea who I was as a lesbian when alone in a room with it, when it sat, unmoving, at my place setting.

And then, at eighteen, I had to. I had my first heartbreak. Living in a new place, at an age when I could change at the drop of a hat, I suddenly felt completely alone with myself, and in the jagged and particular pain of someone who was once saved from herself, and now was not. I was a lesbian who had never considered myself, suddenly alone in the world, and among other gay people who glinted with their own complications, who held identities I never before understood as possible. It was beautiful and utterly terrifying, and I quickly lost any and all sense of home. I became a transient in a crowd, a young gay woman drifting between states and identities. My lesbian body became the most tangible proof of my existence and something I could no longer afford to fight or harm; it did the crucial job of wandering. And I found myself thinking again of Mona.

Mona, like Wanda, is one of many. Cinema is rich with stories of the wanderer, the lone wolf, and the lonesome traveler. They populate road movies, coming-of-age dramas, and cowboy jaunts. In the American cultural imagination, Dennis Hopper's road movie *Easy Rider* (1969) may be that which most quickly springs to mind. But perhaps the most recognizable contemporary architect of the wanderer on film is Wim Wenders — the German director behind *Alice in the Cities* (1974) and *Paris, Texas* (1984), two classic tales of transient placelessness. In a paper entitled "Wim Wenders: A Worldwide Homesickness", Michael Covino writes that the wandering ethos of Wenders' films serves as "a reflection of a world that seems increasingly fragile and tenuous, with the constantly shifting moods of the films emphasizing this transience." (19) Indeed, narratives of transience are often used as tools of broader cultural study. Wendy Everett discusses this thoroughly in her essay "Lost in Transition? The European Road Movie, or A Genre 'adrift in the cosmos'", wherein she inspects the optimistic American road movie (that which often possesses the unsullied liberty of "the open road") in relation to its European counterparts, which suggest a less chosen, more historically-effected transience – one that exists out of necessity, and thus not suggesting a commencement in the vast, mythological bounty of individual freedom.



In these films, there also lies the implication that, within the glory of this traveled-to and thus earned freedom, one will find a home or at least a sense of sociogeographical belonging. In *Alice in the Cities*, "home" is the elusive residence of an abandoned child, Alice's, grandmother in Germany, to which German writer and near-adult-stranger Philip wishes to deposit her safely. In *Paris, Texas*, "home" is Houston, where woeful once-absent father Travis wishes, at first, to reunite with his lost love, and eventually just to reunite his son with his lost mother – home, to his ex-lover and child, is one another; home, to Travis, is "the open road" (or something). Either way, both films, like most road movies, have some notion of an end goal; the long and winding road may lead to a vast and seemingly endless horizon, but within their respective cinematic realities, an endpoint, both geographic and social, not only exists but is ever-present. And, of course, the lushest and most interesting parts of the films exist not at points A and B, but between them, leading one to confess sweetly: *it's the journey, not the destination*! But even so, there is a destination to be found.

This is not the case of *Vagabond* – which, though not itself a road movie, surely exists perpendicularly as a "wanderer movie." Because of Varda's careful and subtle cinematic poetics, little information on our main heroine is dealt unless necessary. We know Mona was once a working-class secretary, a young woman in a dead-end job, but have no real idea of her family life or cultural associations. She has no

recognizable endpoint – the audience need not even wonder if she lives or dies, for this too is immediately revealed to us – and thus the film's plot truly surrounds a sampling of peripheral voices threaded together by Mona's grimacing, nomadic existence. Her escape is the escape itself, and no such Hollywood utopia is constructed.

In its abject aimlessness, Dennis Hopper's 1980 *Out of the Blue* is comparable. Until its recent rerelease at select arthouse theaters, the film was a niche cult gem notable primarily because, in it, Hopper cast himself as a cruel and criminal absent father and eighteen-year-old Linda Manz, jarringly, as his hot-headed teenage daughter. What prevails is an unsettling time capsule of dead-end pre-Reagan-era punk counterculture and the working-class Others who seem doomed to its contradictions. It's a drugged-out depiction of a particularly American breed of coming-of-age hopelessness, and Manz, as in all her roles, seems merely to play herself – a grimy teenage girl who puff-puff-passes the joint just to stick a malnourished thumb in her mouth. *Out of the Blue*, in its throttling 94-minute run-time, is the content for an essay unto itself, but it is worth it here to point out its unique status as a "wanderer movie".

Like *Vagabond*, *Out of the Blue* is not a road movie, but it is unlike *Vagabond* in that it is also not a "journey movie" either. The film's heroine, Cebe, is a wanderer in a more figurative sense. Though she does hitchhike once, she then returns to her mother's home in a vague swath of working-class American desolation that could be Texas just as easily as it could be New Jersey (though is, of course, actually Vancouver). Her aimlessness is one belonging to a disinterested teenage punk-rocker: one most often confined to stagnancy. When Cebe does make a great escape, hitching a ride to the predation of the city to mill among freaks – read: queers and disabled people – and bump shoulders with legendary punk outfit The Pointed Sticks, she is then sent back. There is no point A, nor B; Cebe's status as a wanderer is dependent completely on her outsider identity.

So what is the origin of such Otherness? What makes Cebe such an impetuous problem child? If one were to read the film completely at face value, I suppose the drab Freudian slur "daddy issues" comes to mind; Hopper's deadbeat dad is a devoutly criminal man, sympathetic only in his self-effacing alcoholism. He's a manslaughter murderer, an abusive husband, and near the end of the film, we learn he molested his daughter as a child. His masculinity is brutally sad but recognizable to those familiar with white American poverty and the strain of masculinity it mass-produces. If one were to attribute Cebe's tragic, after-school-special behavior to her father, the film could be an uncomplicated ode to toxic masculinity and poor parenting. Cebe is not a morally abject character like her father – in fact, I'd argue she's a wholly sympathetic character – but she does possess his working-class masculine brusqueness. She's a physically small person who looks much younger than her years, yet hides, at times comically, behind a guise of tough, cocky masculinity. She's quick to anger, calling much larger strangers "motherfuckers" and threatening to beat them up. Cebe, too, is protective of her female friends, shooing away hostile male attention and often taking on a more masculine role among them. At the same time, though, Cebe loathes men, and for good reason: she is threatened with, and narrowly escapes, sexual assault several times in the film's short runtime – at one point, corrective rape is quite directly alluded to

– and a firm association is made between men and harm to not only Cebe but her mother, a woman who spends much of her time on-screen shooting smack and doting on abusive men. In an electric scene between the two women nearing the end of the film, Cebe at once claws at, and grabs hold of, her weeping mother, shouting "I HATE MEN! I HATE 'EM!" All her mother can do is nod and cry. In the world of *Out of the Blue*, maleness is violence, but masculinity isn't – not necessarily.

Maleness, too, is associated with absence; Cebe's "daddy issues" are truly just a lust for positive, relatable, and most importantly, healthily alive, masculine role models. She feels abandoned by the late Elvis Presley – a man who is referred to a few times as "the first punk" – and Johnny Rotten, just as much as she feels left by her father who is in prison at the beginning of the film. Even "Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black)", the grave Neil Young and Crazy Horse song after which the film is named, and which acts as its recurring theme song, details the fatalism of masculine rock n' roll culture; it would make for a heavy-handed sentiment if it weren't so indulgently attuned to the larger-than-life nature of the American underground. This vast masculine absence makes for a film draped in a vague and desperate grief. Cebe spends a lot of time in her tiny teenage bedroom where, among punk-rocker posters, a drum set, and a guitar, stands a rather kitsch shrine to Elvis Presley. It is before this altar that, near the film's conclusion, Cebe dons a leather jacket, slicks back her hair, and is called a "fucking dyke" by her horrified parents.



Thus, Dennis Hopper, on purpose or otherwise, has crafted a film that addresses transmasculine lesbianism head-on, and without attributing it to maleness. *Out of the Blue* is not a tired meditation on the broad societal "daddy issues" of late '70s and early '80s working-class America, but instead an unabashed look at the complexities of otherness, particularly in relation to notions of alternative masculinity. Hopper could have easily made the protagonist of this film a teenage boy and retained similar and fruitful points about a despairing climate of masculine violence alive at the time. But he didn't. Our protagonist is a dyke; a dyke played by a masculine,



working-class woman actor – Manz, the daughter of a single mother, a custodian, was discovered on the street, and had no formal training as an actor – and who is continuously constrained by male predation, the narrowness of femininity, and the limits of her own socioeconomic class. Watching Cebe gruffly and desulatorily wander across the screen, we see Mona, too. And in the tragic otherness of Cebe and Mona, a cinematic ethos of lesbian seclusion takes form – we see this, too, in their deaths on-screen: Mona of starvation and exposure, and Cebe by suicide after stabbing her father to death. The rebellion of their aloneness is unsentimental and ultimately fatal, but never condoned, never not allotted sympathy. Varda and Hopper are not preachy filmmakers; their heroines are not bad examples, but victims of a world unequipped to nurture their Otherness.

It is at this juncture that one may wonder about the limits of subtextual representation – particularly when conversing about sexuality not evidenced on-screen by, say, a love interest or a sex scene. How can one claim that Cebe and Mona are lesbians when both of these films are "anti-romances" of sorts? Neither woman is seen being physically or emotionally intimate with other women. Couldn't these characters merely be women disinterested in femininity and its assigned roles within the domestic sphere? And why does their aloneness evidence a societally admonished "sexual deviance"? Vicki L. Eaklor discusses the complexities of gay subtext at length in her essay "'Seeing' Lesbians in Film and History", where she argues that defining representation in film is not a matter, necessarily, of what one sees, but how one sees it. One of Eaklor's primary theses is that an erasure of non-explicit gay subtext on film is due to the moral and institutional criminalization of homosexuality. She writes:

> That homosexuals have been defined in this century almost exclusively by sexual activity is well established. Small wonder, then, that historians and critics, gay and straight, would demand proof of sexual intimacy between two people before labeling them homosexual. The unsettling element in this is less its relative "truth" and more its relation to the dynamic of "innocent until proven guilty," with a designation of "homosexual" seen as genuinely equal to "guilty" in this culture. (7)

Similarly, in, "Simple Pleasures: Lesbian Community and 'Go Fish'", an essay on the lesser-known independent lesbian cult film *Go Fish* (1994, d. Rose Troche), Lisa Henderson writes of a subtextual understanding of the historically non-represented – read: transmasculine lesbians, particularly those belonging to the working class – as definable by the "jolt" felt by those suddenly represented. Henderson writes:

> It is well charted territory in cultural studies of representation that people accustomed to hostile infidelities between popular depictions of their social groups and their own senses of self are mobilized by jolts of recognition, those occasions when a text makes familiar (salient, plausible) to a reality little known outside the group itself. (3)

In other words, subtextual representation of lesbianism on film need not be evidenced by the action of gay intimacy, as lesbian identity is not relegated to the romantic or sexual sphere. Lesbianism – masc, fem, or, most likely, otherwise – is an identity inherently tied to alternative gender expression, as notions of heterosexual womanhood have been so thoroughly tied to an attachment to men. One does not need evidence of lesbian behavior to deduce lesbianism, as lesbian identity stands alone with or without sexual counterparts; one is a lesbian even one is not engaging in lesbianism, just by recognizing oneself as such, and often, in being seen that way by other lesbians as well.

One also need not forget that lesbianism, as an identity, is not only defined by an attraction to other women/lesbians, but by a lack of attraction to men. This absence, in many ways, is just as important as the presence of the lesbian attraction. It creates in one an inherent otherness, an assurance that one will always be "the Other" in a heteronormative, cisnormative culture, with no concrete option to sincerely do otherwise. In *Out of the Blue*, Cebe comes across, in her gender defiance and romantic apathy, as a lesbian when viewed by other lesbians like myself, but the straight people in Cebe's life – mostly her parents – do not grow consciously concerned about this notion until her mother wails "I don't think she's even ever kissed a boy!" It is this absence of "normal" age-appropriate behavior as well as Cebe's innate masculinity that leads her parents to grow actively hostile toward her identity, going as far as to suggest that her father's friend engage in corrective rape to fix her absence of heterosexual experience. Cebe and Mona's absence of normal and effeminate domestic behaviors is, in many ways, evidence of their deeper othered identities.

Thus, trust in the validity of the subtextual content real-life lesbians recognize – sometimes viscerally – in fictional lesbians is crucial, especially when pondering a long, rarely-documented history of deep lesbian loneliness. In doing research for this essay, I sought the perspectives of other lesbians who experienced bouts of aloneness due to their status as the Other, as well as exploring my own. Community among lesbians has always been radical. Today, the internet still functions as a space for lesbians alienated by their own communties and relationships to find connection. Internet forums like r/latebloomerlesbians and r/actuallesbians host thousands of enthusiastic members, many of whom are "late bloomers": women who, far into adulthood, have just come to their

sexuality. “Had my first lesbian sex yesterday,” reports one user. “What a RELIEF to be a lesbian” confesses another. Some are anonymous, others showcase fresh haircuts in their brazen contributions to “Selfie Sunday”. All users crave a choired affirmation of their existence, of the existence of other Others before them.

This is just one iteration of such sought connection. I was fortunate to come across a fruitful paper by Heather Murray that documents and analyzes a project of letter-writing between solitary and/or closeted lesbians: “‘This Is 1975, Not 1875’: Despair and Longings in Women’s Letters to Cambridge Lesbian Liberation and Daughters of Bilitis Counselor Julie Lee in the 1970s”. In it, the real and little-spoken-of troubles of solitary lesbians are documented through letters primarily written as a means of therapeutic release. Many of the lesbians who wrote these letters to counselor Julie Lee were women who, due to their sexuality, race, class status, or disability, had justly lost faith in the psychiatric establishment. Many had been the victims of medical abuse. Letter-writing became a non-formal, non-biomedicalized means of vital and intimate release.

A pattern among many of these letters from diverse lesbian perspectives is an inexpressibility of experience – one I attribute partially to a complete lack of truthful lesbian representation in media, especially in 1975. In the essay, Murray writes that

> Some [writers] even had difficulty writing about being lesbians, as though the notion was so inexpressible that it did not lend itself easily to representation or narrative... These letter writers give voice to something quite interior, however, that does not seem to have any external image to which to liken it. Instead, the letter writers expressed feelings of profound unease whose origins are less easily traceable and that made them feel ‘unknown.’ (114 - 115)

Such is a feeling lesbians know well. It is as though we belong to a culture that is actively trying to erase evidence of our existence, with lesbian writers, artists, historians, and activists doing the daily work of reassembling this “proof”. It is the reason why Leslie Feinberg’s masterfully written pseudo-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues*, a vital historical document of working-class gayness and transness, is one hardly known by non-lesbians, and never distributed by established publishers.



When a former friend of mine borrowed my copy, she then promptly sent it back to me in the mail cross-country, writing in an accompanying letter that she, in reading the novel, “learned a lot about loneliness.”

It, too, is the reason why Cheryl Dunye’s brilliant metaphysical drama-dark-comedy *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), a film starring working-class, Black Philadelphia lesbians, is one relegated to gay internet forums and niche women’s studies classes. It is the reason why Kabi Nagata’s brutally intimate autobiographical manga *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness*, in which a culture of quiet shame is cultivated in Japanese lesbians, is one not popularized outside of LGBT circles. It is the reason why “lesbian” is a hugely popular search term among straight, cis, male consumers of pornography, while lesbians themselves have a hard time calling themselves “lesbians”. It is not that the popular cultural consciousness lacks “proof” of lesbianism, but that it lacks a common reception of *truthful* “proof” from lesbians themselves. Thus, in the work of lesbian art by lesbians, the hard work of not only instilling truths, but stripping away mistruths and fetishized understandings, must be undertaken. To portray realistic lesbianism in art is to inherently engage in a radical and unpopular act – but an important one. To create truthful lesbian art is to disprove the oppressive myth that one must always be alone in one’s identity, and that, as a woman or dyke, one must be an impersonal actor in one’s own sexuality.

For lesbians, the task of shedding away the novelty of one’s body, of making it that which exists on its own – not to tantalize, afflict, or surprise – is constant and radical. To tear one’s body from the public and repurpose it as a useful home is at once a broadly feminist act, and one particularly our own. The lesbian body, in its Otherness, becomes a vessel fiercely belonging to itself, and also one that must exist as public “proof” of truthful lesbian existence. To many, the lesbian body becomes an ever-transitory home, radically bare in its expression of Otherness, and aggressively secretive by the same token.

Home for me, a twenty-one-year-old lesbian with no permanent address, is the body I’ve always occupied, but only now find an association with. And though I understand my lesbian body as partially what allows me physical touch and belonging, I also understand it as a tool that allows me to seek autonomy in expression. I understand it as that which resembles my mother’s, that is a product of her own individual sense of Otherness, and which allows me to find comfort and utility in my own. Furthermore, I am alive. I am “proof” in that I am real and vocal in the way the fictional Mona and Cebe are not. Because the lesbian in fiction has been determined by what their body can do, I, the lesbian in reality, am sometimes alone with the weight of my identity, am sometimes left to my own devices, and am in search of any expressible truth. I find it in the artistic togetherness of those who have come before me, in their unsung truths and veiled lives. It is in the face of these truthful narratives of aloneness, of such unspeakable desire – those adopted and repurposed as lesbian representation, and those created by lesbian artists alike – that I, we, often find a home.

Nest

by Wiley Martinez

There is something that exists within
a feeling with such undesirable infamy
that overshadows my century of solitude
& keeps me company in lieu of you

not quite like a ghost in its ability to haunt
but more akin to what was once a home
but can now only be called a house, with
visible scars making it all the more dreadful

I am only fully aware of my disease
& that I am only nominally weatherproof
& that the watermarks grow on rainy days
when the people & the buckets are gone

I have tried & tried to write a lullaby
that recontextualizes the effects of oxytocin
giving me some semblance of autonomy
in my impermanent but inescapable solitude

& yet it always points me back to you
& the loving ways you tolerate & taunt
my taking of the things you have given me
& the successes you have adorned me with

but there will be no replacing the memories
they were the way they were, & that is that
I will expect you forever & for always whenever
I'm lonely as long as I'm living & after I die

Art by Lila Liebeskind

Colophon

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