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# Wilder Voice

Spring 2024

Wilder Voice

Volume 19





# Wilder Voice Magazine

Volume 19: Spring 2024

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# CONTENTS

## **The Rice that Feeds Us.....8**

by Rinchen Heffelfinger

## **Hidden Heartbreak.....14**

by Katie Priscott

## **Things to Remember.....24**

by Henry Feller

## **Leeching.....32**

by Hanna Alwine

## **Brunch & the Bloody Mary.....40**

by Shira Friedman-Parks

## **Ode to Soaking Your Nose in Salt Water.....53**

by Clara Carl

## **An Obituary for Playmobil.....54**

by Eliza Greenbaum

## **asian girl big titties.....68**

by Rinchen Heffelfinger

## **Rag Tag Dorm Cooking.....70**

by Annie Kelley

## **How Not Being a Comedian Changed My Life....77**

by Erika Scharf

## **On Top of the World.....85**

by Emery Haze

## **Zayde.....98**

by Cole Mirman

## **Portrait of a Girl.....76**

by Micah Gresl-Turner

# CONTRIBUTING ARTISTS

Greta Arbogast.....54-55, 96-97

Julia Argilan.....63, 77

Felix Brem.....35, 52, 56, 64

Sidnhy Cheng.....21, 81, 84, 87

Zoe Cox.....32

Shira Friedman-Parks.....4, 40-50

Sage Gordon.....cover, 26, 27, 59

Annie Kelley.....8, 76, 98

Sam Kennedy.....6-7, 83

Olli Krietzman.....17, 18, 22, 39, 90-91

Ava Leone.....60, 66-67, 69

Veronica Mahoney.....31, 79

Thomas Rodriguez.....72-73

Bella Schmitt.....14-15

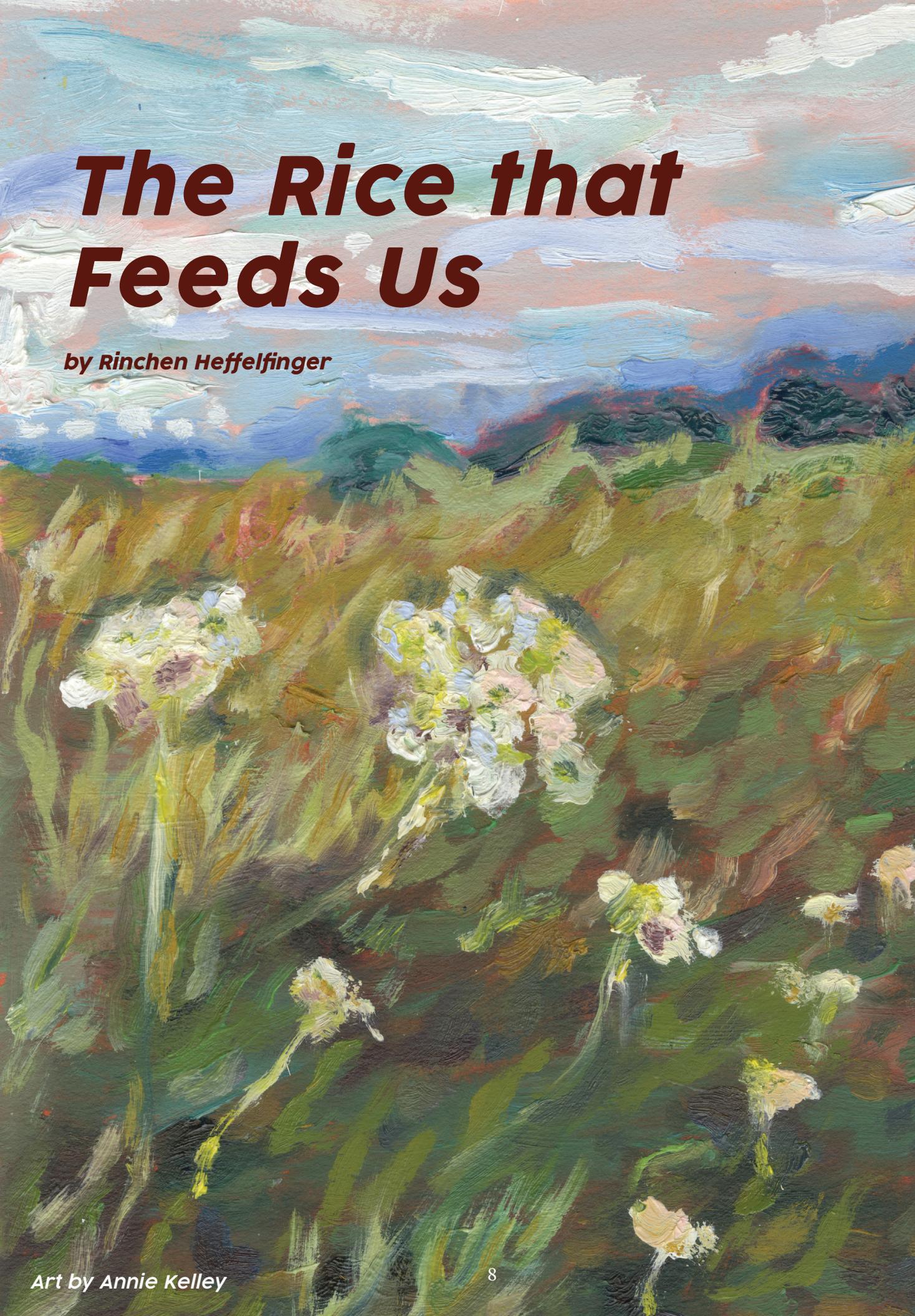
Vyvia Shen.....2-3, 29, 36, 71, 104-107

Julia Stuart.....75, 93, 103, 107

Dosi Weed.....12-13, 24-25

# The Rice that Feeds Us

by Rinchen Heffelfinger



*The hot white of flickered lilies lights the dark muddied waters, and I see, in scenes, an eel bleeding life into the flowers which surround me.*

Chuchu and his buddies are back from their trek carrying burlap potato sacks filled with mangoes. Their warm yellow curves peek over the hem of each bag.

They're small—about the size of my hand when folded, fingers flat down, stepping up the meat of where my thumb connects to my palm—which means they'll be sweet. Not like that shit we have in the US, that wastes its energy growing and diluting. I promise, the ones the size of my hands are the sweetest.

The next couple weeks following a southern trek through the jungle, we all eat at least one mango a day. I want to savor the sticky moments they make until they rot—slick the juice down my skin and leave threads of pulp strewn like hairs across my forearms to dry and shed in the sun—and I do.

“This is your favorite time of the year, huh?” Chuchu observes me, and the little valleys fanning out of the tails of his eyes deepen. Even when he isn’t smiling you can see the tilling drag out towards his temples. I nod.

“It’s like a heart.” My mouth is dripping while my hands grip the organ feeding me.

“Maneater,” Tenzing chimes in, grinning in that squinty way guys think looks so appealing, before kicking his head back to laugh. The squint, like most of his moves, is plagiarized.

“Prefix a wo- to that and you’ll be dead on.” The only fulfilling response to an inappropriate comment is something equally inappropriate.

“Cha! You’re starting to sound like one of our clients,” Tenzing says.

“Chuchu, where’s your head at? You hear what this rookie is saying to me?” I dart my eyes back to Tenzing but don’t dare turn my head—one of the many things I have over him is the ability to not laugh at my own joke. You’d think that these trekking guys who spend weeks in the wilderness would be well versed in self-satisfaction, but they’re always looking for an audience.

Chuchu continues to unload mangoes from his bag into a too-small wooden bowl on the living room table—fitting their odd bends into each other, like stacked yellow stones.

“Stop provoking her, Tenzing” he says, head still down, focused on his task.

“You let Himani run this house for real, JP.”

“Let her! She’s only here for a few months at a time anyways,” Chuchu exclaims, looking up, his seeded skin in bloom before me. Karma John peers around the open frame separating the kitchen from the living room and shouts like he’s further from us than he is.

“You bring back another baccā for us?”

Tenzing and I laugh loud enough to acknowledge the joke but quietly enough that uru and chuchu don’t have to. The snapping of green chilis under uru’s knife fills the room.

“Who wants aloo roti?” Uru coos. Stuffing a mouth with hot roti is the politest way to shut someone up. Our tongues sweep over the surface of a story. Our teeth, hollow and rounded, have molded to the shape of a gag.\*

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The sky is hot with sweat and holding her breath. Engorged like a plastic water bottle under the warmth of the sun, inflating against a stripped screw top.

“God, it’s gorgeous out. There’s nothing like monsoon season, but I was getting tired of trekking through the rain.” Dave is the kind of client every trek leader hopes for. A proud outdoorsman, he never tires (or more likely, has too much pride to let it show), and could care less about trekking in poor conditions.

There’s this kind of western trekker who will happily lick their wounds — pluck leeches from their bloodied feet and listen to them sizzle in the fire, like slips of paper, wet with ink marking empty new year’s resolutions.

He’s also a great tipper and tells his other lawyer friends (who all say they’ll switch to environmental law at some point) about how All Seasons Trek has the most hospitable trek leaders, that they’ll never want to go back to the US after experiencing the simplicity of life in Nepal.

Close ahead is a single story wooden lodge; its roof an alternating stack of sheet metal, straw, and cow dung, save for the small gap through which the deep exhales of a wood stove billow. The savory vapor of black pepper, ginger, and cardamom wafts towards them down the dirt road.

The lodge owner greets JP with a “Namaste dai,” and leans her forehead to pressed together hands, greeting each guest. Her earlobes pour out of her like clay colored water—the once circular piercing sinking to a slit from years of wear. Heavy gold eroded flesh to make a ravine in this woman. Now a thread of red wool is tied to her earring at one end and slung over her cartilage at the other, just to keep the gauge from deepening.

A pot of butter tea is simmering behind her with its hat tilted in salutation. There is a ritual to drinking chiya, in which the host continuously replenishes their guest’s cups against their will, and must artfully aim the spout of the thermos as the guest attempts to dodge a fourth serving. JP eludes his by excusing himself from the table. He hears Dave stutter the same “Dhérai mithō,” he does at every house he’s offered food at, and the squealing *ahhhhs* that it elicits, before closing the door behind him.

Architecture in the terai seems to appreciate feeling small in the vastness of rice paddies. The outhouse sits at the bottom of an amphitheater of tiered plots, structured to make you remember just how thick the crust of the earth is. A lush bowl molded into the land, filled with rice, ready to feed her people.

A baby’s croon calls out, muffled by the hum of scavenging bugs. Drawn to the woven handle of a basket protruding from the grasses, JP answers. Ground water is seeping through gaps in the bamboo, crawling up the sides of the infant, and swaddling him in a cool shadow undeterred by the sun. It continues to envelop him with each rise and fall of his rounded belly—like blood being pumped into a hollow limb. He’s covered in his own feces, and attracting flies that his little face tries to twitch away. Finally, he is harvested from the earth, and after briefly opening his eyes to meet JP’s, stirs back to sleep in the arms of a stranger.

“Didi Ā’unuhōsa,” JP says, beckoning their host outside. She sees the baby in JP’s arms and shuts the door behind her.

“Yō kō baccā hō?” She sighs an “Aiyah,” and begins. Lakshmi, a mute woman who cooks and cleans at the lodge, was raped by a man passing through the village. Fearing the social repercussions of having a child out of wedlock, she hides her baby in the rice paddy while she works. Only Lakshmi and the host, who let her stow herself in a small back room during the end of her pregnancy, know about the baby. He must be kept too quiet to adorn him in the little anklets whose jangles mark a baby’s first steps, though nobody was thinking that far ahead.

JP muses to himself—the baccā’s head resting in the crook of his elbow. *I’ve always wanted a child.*

⋮⋮⋮

“That’s terrible,” Dave shakes his head and lowers his eyes to the carpet for a moment, following the yellow border as it turns, until he’s back where he started.

“But you and your wife, you want to adopt him? What does that process even look like here?” There goes the lawyer.

“We’ve been wanting a child...but haven’t been so lucky. It’s very different from in the US. My mother raised three kids in addition to her own six.”

“She sounds like she was a great woman,” he says in the wistful tone people only use when they’re talking about the dead.

“She was, but what I’m getting at is, it’s an informal process. It’s pretty normal for villagers with more resources to raise or support children in their communities, but because he was born violently and out of wedlock—I’ll ask for the village leaders’ blessings to raise him with me in Kathmandu.”

“Well, I want to be of whatever help I can be. He would be your son, of course, but maybe I could sponsor his education.” Somewhere far behind the mist in Dave’s eyes, there glimmers a tax deduction.

“If you’re willing, I won’t turn you down.”

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The way a body inflates during resuscitation—like a top sheet catching wind on its way down to the bed. I nourish the empty vessel with my breath, and the cavity is cleansed in the long droning coos of a harmonium folding in on itself. We carry on this way for many days, breathing life into each other. On hot days, I wait for dirt to settle, and cool his back in the clear shallows of rice water. Smashing bāt to a gluey pap between my hands and letting him suckle from my fingers, when he starts to weep.

\*Alexander Chee, “The Autobiography of My Novel,” *How To Write an Autobiographical Novel*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2018), 20.



The sun is setting and we're waiting for Lakshmi to return, but she's held up in her room, watching the moon rise over the valley in little flickers of milky light that shine through the cracks of wooden walls. Rocking herself with her knees to her chest, fearing someone will pluck the roof off, and watch the planks fall flat around her, like the petals of a night blooming jasmine.

She's praying for the marshy water to pull up towards the stars, and carry her baby with it to a sky filled with dūdha and the will to nurse. This is his first migration, and like many migrations it is both involuntary and cosmically significant.

Then, just as quickly as it rose, the tide falls. A crashing wave plunges him down like a hand into the earth, planting him deep in a sea of groundwater. Gravity curves him like a horseshoe, limbs flying above him, wilting into my belly. He is caught in a cradle of roots, whose starchy tendrils flick around him, searching for an opening. Weaving in patterned motions about him like a dumbar kumari. Unearthed, I pick the twine from the points they've tethered themselves to, leaving two brown moles on either side of the small of his back. It's harvest time.



HIDDEN HEA

RTBREAK

LESSONS FROM A  
FRIENDSHIP  
BREAKUP

BY KATIE PRISCOTT

**T**ell me about your worst breakup. No, really. I want to know about the stinging tears of mascara, the spoon bending as you carved out a scoop of Ben & Jerry's, the Taylor Swift or Whitney Houston or R.E.M. that soundtracked the aftermath. The devastation clawing at your ribcage when you heard someone else say their name. The way you never thought you could hurt that badly, until you had no choice.

Now tell me: would you give the same answer if asked about your worst friendship breakup? Were you eight, a friendship bracelet stomped into the wood chips of the playground? Were you 13, watching a clique fade away into the fluorescent light of a suburban shopping mall? Were you 18, breezing past their car in the school parking lot and feeling tectonic plates move beneath the blacktop?

Could you answer at all? I could.

There's a certain unspoken social contract signed when you start dating someone new: either it's going to last forever, or it won't. That's not to trivialize romance—love is a beautiful thing, and that heartbreak is truly genuine. But my working theory is that friendship breakups are so viscerally painful because that straightfor-

ward contract doesn't exist in friendship. No matter when a friendship comes into your life, you don't consent to the idea of it being retracted or fractured. I didn't go through life with my best friend accepting the caveat that she would later be the person who best knew how to hurt me.

There are countless examples in media of the ideal love story, so much so that romantic love is seen as the most important kind of relationship. People make careers out of rom-coms and Hallmark cards, all flowers and flash mobs and dramatic confessions in the rain, and these ideas still serve as models that shape our thinking. It's force-fed to us that romance should be the center of our lives, while our friends are often relegated to the side plots. Think about it: how present is the quirky best friend character in the movie once the love interest with a swoon-worthy smile and swoopy hair appears on screen? If anything, friendships are often treated as a waiting room for relationships to come.

There's another key point in there: friendships aren't monogamous. Most people have only one romantic partner at a time, but not only one friend. Among those multiple friends, different friends serve different roles in your life. You might

go to Friend A for her amazing advice, Friend B for his book recommendations, or Friend C if you need a getaway car driver. A romantic partner is more likely to check more boxes, and be the person you go to for everything.

Additionally, because there isn't the expectation of singularity with friends (i.e., they can't cheat on you), bonds of trust are constructed differently than in a romantic relationship. They often aren't as clearly defined. They can be bent much further for much longer, with small slights building up until suddenly, there is either a rebuild or an ending. But the shared area in the venn diagram of platonic and romantic breakups is how hurtful all of these endings can be.

To investigate this taboo of friendship breakups, I spoke to some folks familiar with the subject coming from different vantage points. Some are from my hometown, some are from Oberlin, but all of their names have been changed for pri-

vacy. Here are the takeaways from those conversations, and from a little life experience of my own.

### **Lesson 1: Not all breakups are created equal.**

*I don't know if I think that they're bad people, I just think that they did a lot of bad things to me that changed me fundamentally. (Iris)*

Each person I spoke to had a different experience that influenced their specific breakup. Iris was phased out of a trio friendship with seemingly no explanation. Allison and Kelsea each had a decade-long friendship that warped into something they could no longer recognize. Sadie went through both a high school friend turning her friend group against her and a slow-burn fade from a friendship formed in kindergarten.

My friendship breakup was with some-





one who had been a constant presence in my life since elementary school. (For our purposes, we'll call her Cameron.) By my senior year of high school, we did nearly everything together and told each other nearly everything. But during my first semester at college, I started feeling like things were being kept from me. Being the confrontation-phobic Libra that I am, I tried to let it go, but I began to censor myself in return. This tension eventually led to a huge fight and months of us not speaking at all. Mutual friends asked what was going on, and I just didn't have an answer. Last summer, there was a moment where it seemed like we could work things out, but the incredibly awkward conversation we had demonstrated that there was no way we could ever go back. We had two completely opposite perceptions of what actually happened, and there was no way to meet in the middle.

I think of that experience like getting bangs and subsequently trying to grow them out. The change was very blunt and sudden before it was drawn out for an exhaustingly long time, it was character-building, and it changed the way I looked at myself.

Obviously any advice needs to be taken with a grain of salt, especially from a 19-year-old college student. Just like friendships are not one size fits all, neither are their endings. There's no "best" way to handle these situations other than simply doing the best you can at a given time.

**Lesson 2: When someone tells you or shows you who they are, believe them.**

*Looking back, I let it go on too long. I let another year pass, which put me in a position of feeling even more anxious and confused, all while trying to push away those feelings and be like 'Everything's going to be fine, everything's going to work out, friends go through ebbs and flows, this is just a weird time for us.' (Allison)*

A few of the people I spoke to felt totally blindsided by their friendship breakups, while others said they could see it slowly approaching. They ignored red flags, like their friend gossiping about them to other people or not really listening when they spoke.

In the thick of the radio silence between me and Cameron last spring, I found myself feeling incredibly angry. If I really break it down, I wasn't even the angriest at her. I was angry at myself for the times I ignored something I shouldn't have and justified being treated that way because "that's just how she is." I could no longer ignore the way rage coiled in my belly, in the gut I never listened to, like a snake ready to strike.

"The cherry on top," Allison explained, "was realizing that she didn't give a shit about me when I had major losses in my life. She did the bare minimum to show up for me. And I would never treat a friend like that."

The line between forgiveness and permissiveness is a dangerously thin one. But eventually, there has to be a breaking point.

**Lesson 3: Social media will probably not be helpful. Shocker.**

*I don't know why I haven't unfollowed them, because it would make my life so much easier. Because every time I see anything of theirs on social media, it's like I'm dragged back into the very epicenter of it. (Iris)*

Social media is a tricky subject in the best of times. Attempting to understand a person based on their online presence is impossible, because so much of what is presented is only surface-level or fully fabricated. Some of the people I spoke to referred to the toxic role social media played within the friendship itself. Kelsea mentioned the feeling that activities were being planned for the sheer purpose of

taking Instagram photos, Sadie found out her friends hung out without her through social media posts. Alison even described her ex-friend confronting her about her Venmo transaction history: Venmo stalking is a new frontier altogether.

In the context of a friendship break-up, the viewfinder of the metaphorical camera goes from being directly in a person's life to being on the outside looking in. Sadie described the uncomfortable change from "taking the photos and writing the caption and being the first one to comment, to watching from afar and not knowing whether to like it, looking at them and not recognizing the people they're with." Ultimately, with the sudden lack of context and knowledge about their life, you probably won't gain much from analyzing someone's Instagram activity for a hidden meaning. It's a photo of their breakfast, not a hieroglyph.

I had to wrestle with whether it was worth it to deconstruct how my graduation or past birthdays were captured. I couldn't decide whether it would ultimately feel superficial or cathartic to do so. To Sadie's point, it was much harder to decide about the photos where I knew Cameron was the one behind the camera (and there were lots of those).

#### Lesson 4: The memories never break up with you.

*I think that's the most painful thing, thinking about all the future things you talked about with your best friend. Your heart kind of lurches a bit when you see something that reminds you of that person, but you can't reach out the way you did in the past. (Allison)*

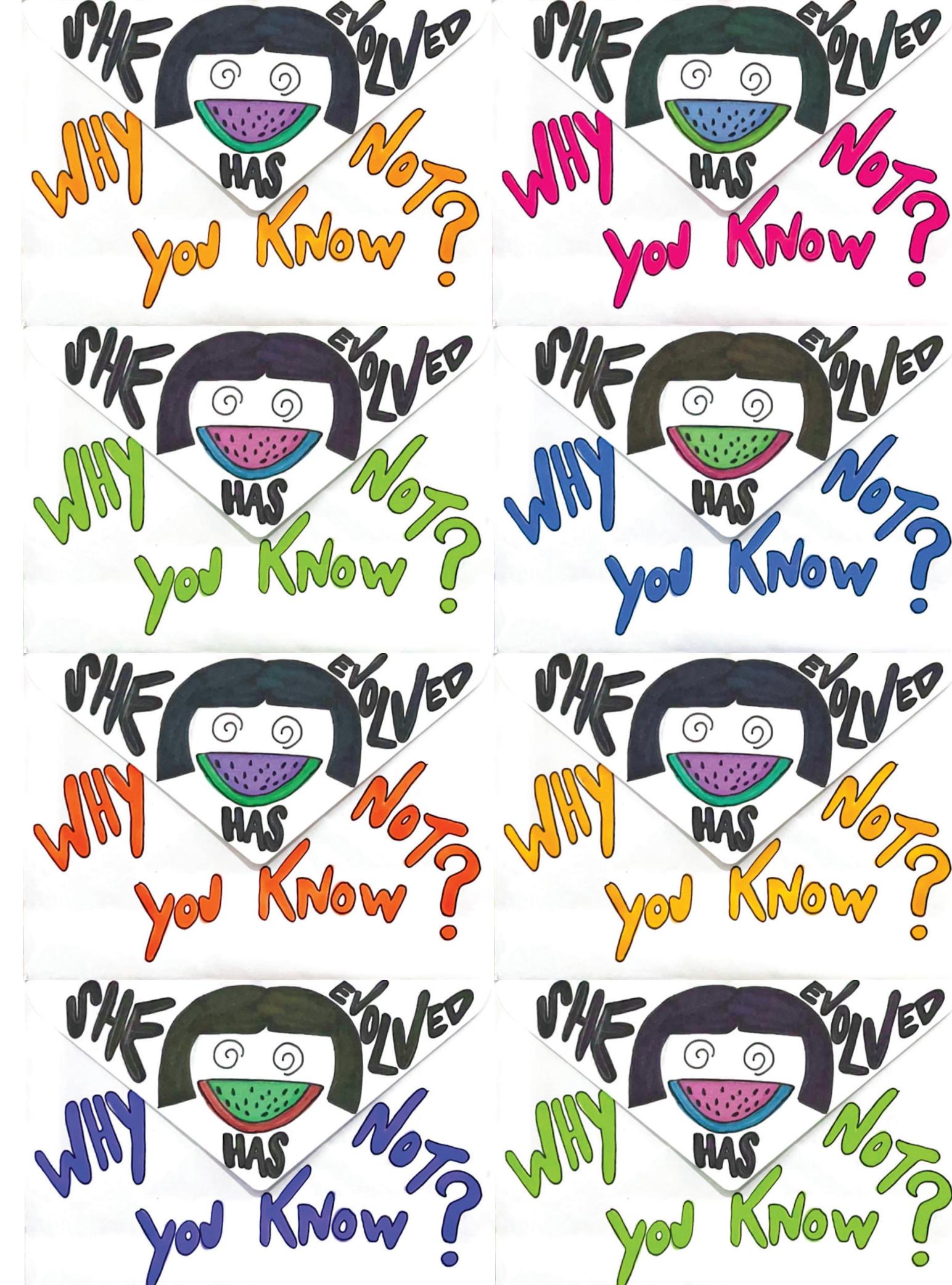
I asked all of the interviewees about how they handled physical mementos, and this was one of the instances where their answers varied greatly. Alison and Kelsea both expressed that they wanted to purge all of the mementos given to them by their ex-friends, from mugs to clothing to physical pictures. Iris said that one of her

ex-friends was very crafty, so there is still a box in their childhood home of all the projects they made for her. Sadie didn't find the physical objects to have that same importance to her. It goes to prove the first lesson, that there is no "correct" way to respond to any of these situations.

For me, it was a mixed bag. Some items were just items, some had so much meaning attached that I shoved them in the back of my closet to avoid having to look at them. The Polaroids came off the bulletin board, but I couldn't bring myself to throw them out entirely. The hardest ones to deal with were the ones that snuck up on me. A technician fixing something in my dorm last year complimented a piece of my decor, and I immediately answered, "Thanks, my best friend gave it to me!" We hadn't spoken for three months at that point, but it was a reflex of a response. The same thing happens when I hear a song that we used to scream in the car together or catch an episode of a TV show we binged together. It happens less now, but sometimes the thought of texting her the TikTok that I know she'd find funny floats to the front of my mind before I can stop it.

Allison said that the moments she found hardest to deal with weren't memories from the past, but goals for the future they had shared. She said it was strange going shopping for her first apartment by herself or thinking about her kids, not knowing this person she was once so sure would be their aunt.

Avoiding any psychological jargon, memories and emotions are deeply linked. If there is a memory from when you were really young or something seemingly small that you can picture like it was yesterday, chances are that there is a strong emotional connection that can't be undone easily. Allison described her former friend as "one of these people who was always there for you through things... And not just sad things, but celebrations: 'I got the job!' or 'Oh my gosh, I went on this amazing date with this person!' or 'I got





the role!' And it's always the first person you call because they're your right hand person." When strong emotional memories are all tied to the same person, it's no surprise that they reappear or feel more intense when they do come up.

**Lesson 5: You don't owe them anything. But you owe everything to yourself, so feel your feelings.**

*I'm learning that it's okay to not forgive. My sister has pointed out to me: even if I don't forgive them, I have to someday figure out how to forgive myself for it all. (Iris)*

Iris told me a story about how she and her former friends wrote letters addressing their future selves. She said she knows her friends have opened the ones she sent them, but theirs remain sealed in the box with everything else they gave to her. She referred to them almost like Pandora's Box, saying, "I just know if I do open

them, I will need to be in a very specific emotional place to do that. And I haven't gotten there yet."

In my situation, I felt a sense of obligation to 'be the bigger person.' I figured I had to just suck it up and forgive her, because the alternative meant creating a life for myself that she was no longer a part of. When reconciling proved impossible, I felt guilty all over again, like the events had more weight when I knew that our fight was final rather than an uncharacteristic obstacle.

Complicated, intertwined emotions are characteristic of any breakup, romantic or platonic. One person I interviewed used poetry as an outlet, someone else likened her vent sessions with friends to reality TV show reunions. Whatever form your feelings come in—whether that be anger, dread, sadness, even relief—you have to take time to acknowledge them, before they take control of you.

**Lesson 6: The bad news is that things will never go back to the way they were. The freeing news is that things will never go back to the way they were.**

*I established that I couldn't let it happen again, that I needed to have new standards. And ever since then, my friendships have been very strong and validating. (Sadie)*

Everyone I spoke to agreed that their past friendship's end will influence, or already has influenced, the way they pursue friendships in the future. Kelsea said she now trusts her gut when something doesn't feel right. Sadie explained that she sets clear expectations with friends, and Allison communicates even when it might feel awkward. Iris said that she doesn't trust as easily as she once did.

As with most things in life, perspective is everything:

**Unfortunately:** These situations will change the way that you handle friendships.

**Fortunately:** These situations will change the way that you handle friendship.

**Unfortunately:** You're different now.

**Fortunately:** You're different now.

Everything you've been through becomes a kind of data for the future. You have new information you didn't before, you've felt feelings you hadn't felt before. To borrow my haircut analogy from Lesson 1, you know what bangs look like on you now and why you will never go back. You're tougher now, wiser now. This perspective, just like any good friend, should enrich your life.

**Lesson 7: No matter how isolated you feel, you are not alone.**

*In some ways, you take a step back and see all the things you didn't realize when you were in the moment. (Kelsea)*

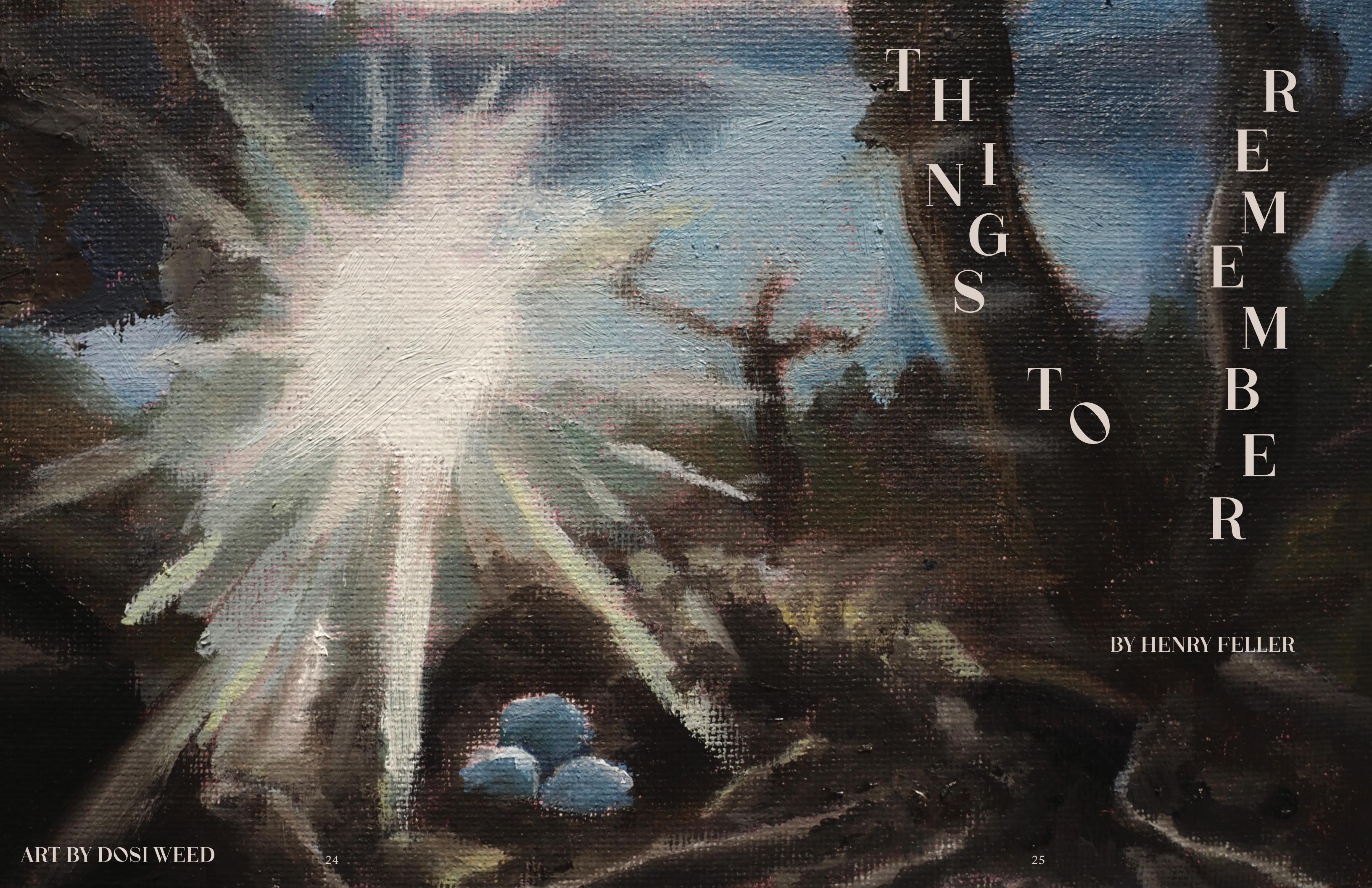
It's a massive cliche, but you really aren't. If the conversations that I was able to have for this article are any indication, these situations are far more common than we might believe. As cumbersome as these feelings are, the fact that they are shared means they are far from abnormal or rare.

The behavior that I heard about in some of these interviews was appalling, from body shaming to fake stories being spread, and can we circle back to the Venmo-stalking? But while the actions can't be explained, it makes sense that friendships will evolve as we go through transitional periods in our life: high school, college, early adulthood, the inevitable completion of the development of the frontal lobe, and in the future even marriage and parenthood.

What I'm realizing (though I will revisit this thought once the aforementioned frontal lobe development finishes) is that the events that are the most grueling to go through are often the ones that produce the most growth. Kelsea said in her interview that "there are certain people in your life that are there for certain reasons." For better or for worse, I think that's absolutely true.

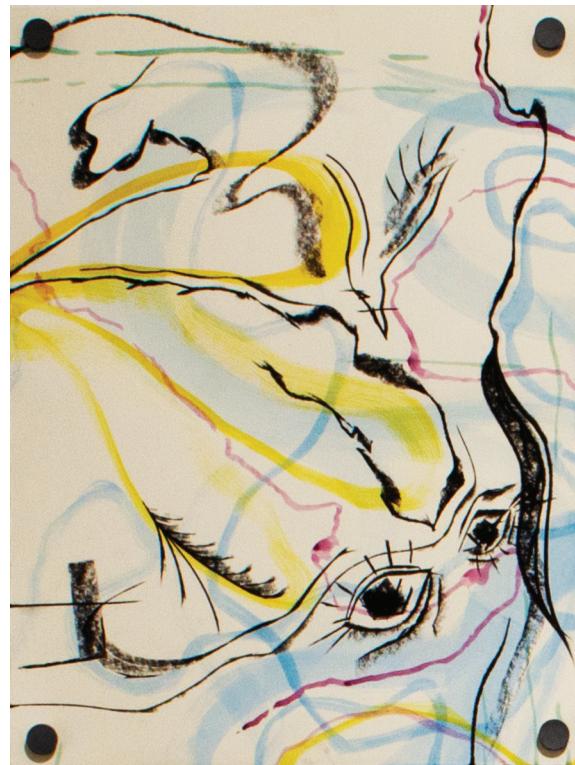
Part of me is curious about how Cameron would have written this piece. I wonder if she would dispute the way I explained the chain of events, if she learned anything from me, if I hurt her in a way that I never knew I did. It would be easier if I just wanted her to suffer, if this essay was actually an exposé. But we were best friends for so long for a reason. It's a strange, ironic feeling: I want to forgive her the exact same amount that I want to hate her.

No one asks for the person that they learned every lesson with to become the lesson, but some lessons have to be learned, and hopefully, that life experience will make each subsequent one a little easier to understand.



THINGS  
TO  
REMEMBER

BY HENRY FELLER



As I write this piece, I am sitting on the stool that I would normally use to climb up into a mattress in my dorm. I am 20 years old. My hair is unwashed and I accidentally fell asleep in what I wore to class. I am currently putting off studying out of fear of my competency in the material and this only makes me fear it more (a vicious cycle). Despite my stress and scatteredness, I am so much more different than I used to be. I treat myself better, both physically and mentally. I self-sabotage less and advocate for myself more. While

my progress has been anything but linear, every passing year I feel more confident in myself, my talents, my offerings to the world, and my growth. This is my present, my immediate present, that I have now captured in writing.

I feel lucky, because I feel as though I know who I am. Even if I am woefully incorrect, I feel excited to be corrected. Below is an introduction to myself, my immediate self, that I attempt to capture in writing.

I like to read and dress nicely.

I have a passion for cooking and homemade gifts and poetry (ancient and modern) and fungi and Studio Ghibli movies and delicatessens and queer history and transsexual manifestos and pretty desserts and seashells and world music and working with my hands.

I grow my hair out as a reclamation of my boyhood and because I wanted to be Tarzan when I was in the fourth grade.

I try to participate in one random act of kindness a day.

I consciously participate in the act of memory.

I like candles but don't burn them because I want them to stay intact forever. As you can imagine, I have a very difficult time burning novelty candles and I have to really get over myself to do it.

I am fearful.

Everpresently fearful.

Like most young adults transitioning into adulthood, I have developed a deeply human, primal fear of death. In recent moments this fear has completely overtaken my psyche, paralyzing my body in the deeper parts of the night. I see it on the horizon, and suddenly it is rushing towards me, becoming the fate of tomorrow as

two decades  
have already left the sphere of my control.

It is in these moments that a chill spreads from my chest to my fingers. I hyperventilate. My vision vignettes. I feel vomit rising in my throat, and all softness evaporates from my mouth. I remember, in these moments,

that I am going to die.

And not only will I die,

I will decline before that. I will spend more time than I do now in a doctor's office, on an operating table, under anesthesia, in recovery. My eyes may cloud and my ears may blur sound. I may break bones, lose teeth, develop arthritis. What strikes me, in the moments in which I contemplate my physical decomposition, is the accompanying deterioration of my memory/  
My mind/  
My skills/  
My desires/  
My self.

There are few scarier things I can think of than "losing my mind." Although I am quite aware of the drama that phrase holds, I have believed it has occurred several times before. In the depths of the panic attacks that plague me yearly (formerly monthly or even weekly), in the heights of my anxiety and its worst

psychosomatic manifestations, I have believed with all sincerity that I am "losing my mind." Age-related mental deterioration can take several forms, from the dulling of one's earlier memories to neurodegenerative disorders that eat away at one's ability to think, speak, and move. I fear the whole of this spectrum as I do death: I fear what I will not experience until it is impossible to return to a time without its presence.

Have I lived without the presence of fear?

For those of us who fear abnormally often, as I do, and who are not represented in the psychological profiles of their family, there's an additional fear that grows from this neurological alienation—the fear of beginning the illness. You can almost see it, perverting the branches of your family tree with an affliction previously unknown, all gnarled limbs pointing back to you. Even if children aren't in one's future, fear like what I aim to describe is insidious and pervasive, creating a degree of separation between those who do and do not experience it. Such a degree of separation only makes those afflicted feel more isolated. Profoundly more alone. Your thoughts have chances to echo and malform until they become so abstract that it's unintelligible what they once were.

They just keep shifting shapes, the next scarier than the last until you have crossed a threshold into psychosomatic stress so great, it is properly labeled with the word "attack." You feel a chill spread from your chest to your fingers. You hyperventilate. Your vision vignettes. You feel vomit rising in your throat, and all softness evaporates from your mouth.

This is where I found myself the night before I began the titular list of memories I keep.

In my notes app lives a list called "things to remember." After a sleepless night, I was mobilized, filled with an urgency



to write down all early memories I had, spanning Chicagoan restaurants and loud concerts and childhood shows. The next day, I looked upon this list and saw the potential for a library.

*Sitting in front of the kitchen window at Floriole Cafe & Bakery on a metal high chair next to my mom. Eating a slice of baguette with a small metal cup of mascarpone cheese.*

*The smell of Pia's Pineapple hair conditioner from the Circle of Friends. Buying this conditioner at Snippets, the rainforest-themed barbershop five minutes away from my house (by car). Getting my hair cut by Tom, who had a French accent and a slimish mustache, while playing video games from the '90s.*

*Having Ciao Bella raspberry sorbet at my grandparents' house from the plastic two-tone bowls. Sitting with them at the dining table before they moved. Grey tiled floor, ovens from the '60s-'70s, vase full of flowers, and a door to the backyard.*

The listed memories above all are from the first ten years of my life, expanded upon with a short synopsis of sensory detail and giving me the cues needed to bring the memory to the forefront of my mind. Within the next few days, this list exploded as I relished the control and power I felt over my mortality by remembering my past. Today, this list of memories is separated by sensory experience, allowing me to really travel through the sounds, tastes, and visions of my early and late childhood.

I prioritize these memories as I know they will be the first to leave my mind once inevitable age-related deterioration has begun. I prioritize these memories as I am so much more different than I used to be.

I was less burdened by expectations and envisioned futures.  
I was happier, for many reasons.  
I saw my parents as unfailing and invincible protectors.

I saw myself as others saw me.  
I saw myself as doctors saw me.  
I was not developed enough to conceptualize death.  
I was not developed enough to fear so violently.

Appreciating existence is a hard thing to do, yet it's expected of everyone as a requirement of being alive. I'm not of the mindset that you must be in love with being alive all the time—from personal experience, I can tell you that black-and-white thinking like this often breeds guilt and feelings of unworthiness. It is also much easier to lose sight of why existence is meaningful when production takes up so much of the time that would otherwise be spent on sincere and significant enrichment. This list of random "things"—"things" that remind me of love and intensity and color and sense that make being alive so special—has, in a few ways, given me a stronger grasp upon how my life has been so full.

Full of

wild strawberries on a Canadian hiking trail

and

pink beach towels with ice cream cone designs

and

Halloween costume catalogs from Chasing Fireflies.

There is so much that I forgot to celebrate simply because I forgot it was there, at least at one point in time.

To revisit the present: I am 20 years old, and I am getting healthier.

I know this because I am afraid of death.

Death keeps me up at night in ways it did not used to. Death is no longer a reliable source of comfort for me. Oh god, I'm afraid to die.



***Oh god, I'm afraid to die.***

*Note: As someone with his own small basket of mental illnesses, I have a very complicated and storied relationship with death. Experiencing a mortal, primal fear of death has made me feel a little more neurotypical about being alive and, in some ways, has helped me to better internalize how special it is to be able to leave the world better than you left it in any capacity. Death has not always been so frightening to me. To anyone reading who is struggling to feel like being alive is in any way worth it, my heart is with you and I urge you to seek the help, love, and support you deserve. Here is a link to various community-based resources for all: <https://translifeline.org/resources/community-based-crisis-support/>. These sources offer support without alerting police and focus on both self-support and support for others through community crisis management. I hope you're doing well, and I hope there is something about today you will one day write down.*



by Hanna Alwine

**T**here is a woman sleeping in the field. She has been there for two days. Her skin is sticky to the touch, layers of morning dew and afternoon sun built one on top of the other.

Sometimes she lays there with her eyes pressed shut (does she dream?) and shifting side to side beneath the cover of her lids. Other times she merely dozes, eyes fluttering open periodically as if to check that she is still alive. On rare occasions, her eyes flutter open and remain that way, fixed on some undeterminable point in the distance. But other than the fluttering of her eyelids, the woman does not move.

Her arms remain slightly spread at her sides, her fingers dig into the richness of the soil, her feet—bare, muddied—pointed lazily away from one another, seeking a balance that is mirrored in the push and pull of the summer breeze. She does not speak. She does not eat. She barely breathes, the rise and fall of her chest imperceptible except to the soil in which she lies. She is a fallen angel in the dirt, hair mousy from lack of attention, skin dark from the sun.

...

She waits. She soaks up the particular bitterness of the soil. She waits. She bathes in the spiced sweetness of the mid-morning sun. She waits. It is coming.

...

The waiting woman is my mother, though in this moment, she does not know herself as such. She does not know me yet. She does not know that her mousy hair will one day be mine. She does not know I fear the dark. She does not know the game we play, counting caterpillars on stalks of milkweed in the spring. She does not know the me that she will grow in the cavity of her body. The me who she will come to know more intimately than anyone she has even known, perhaps even herself, then just as quickly become strangers to in the sinusoidal manner of mothers and daughters coming together and falling apart.

The waiting woman knows nothing of motherhood. She only knows that she is a girl (though the world has insisted she is now a woman). The waiting woman knows that she was a girl and that she now knows pain.

For years she had thought pain was the sidewalk rushing to greet your knee. She had thought pain was the bee biting at the soft skin above her navel. Years before, she knew pain as an acquaintance, armed with scrapes and welts and broken skin. It is only now that she understands the brevity and innocence of this relationship.

The woman who lies in the field knows pain with an uncomfortable intimacy. This pain sits at her bed in the middle of the night and scrambles her head with the blunt end of a wooden spoon. This pain slips its fingers beneath her ribcage and pinches at her lungs. It comes in waves when she least expects it. Waiting for the bus stop. Shopping for bath towels. Eating miso soup.

She met this pain three months prior in a little red room with shades pulled low over the windows to protect the outside world from the stench of sickness that lingered there. Her father, who she remembers best as a young man, lay wilted, overtaken by his shadow. His flesh had been stripped away by disease. His mind was no longer solid and there was residue on the pillow from where it had come leaking out of his ears. The quilts ballooned around him as if waiting for the final order to swallow him up.

She'd knelt at his bedside, clasped a skeletal hand in her own. She'd looked at him the way a mother does. She'd stroked his head, which bobbed bald and shining on his emaciated body. She'd peered into his eyes in which no flicker of recognition surfaced. She'd looked at his chest which bowed inward with the weight of the sickness and she'd given him her heart. She clawed it from her chest and broke it into several pieces, pressed those pieces of cardiovascular promise into his palm and closed his fingers around them, whispering in his ear, *Keep it safe for me.* She'd left the room, rivulets of red tracing her cheekbones, eight ounces lighter than

when she'd entered. The carpet is still stained where she'd knelt, soaked through to the plywood underlay.

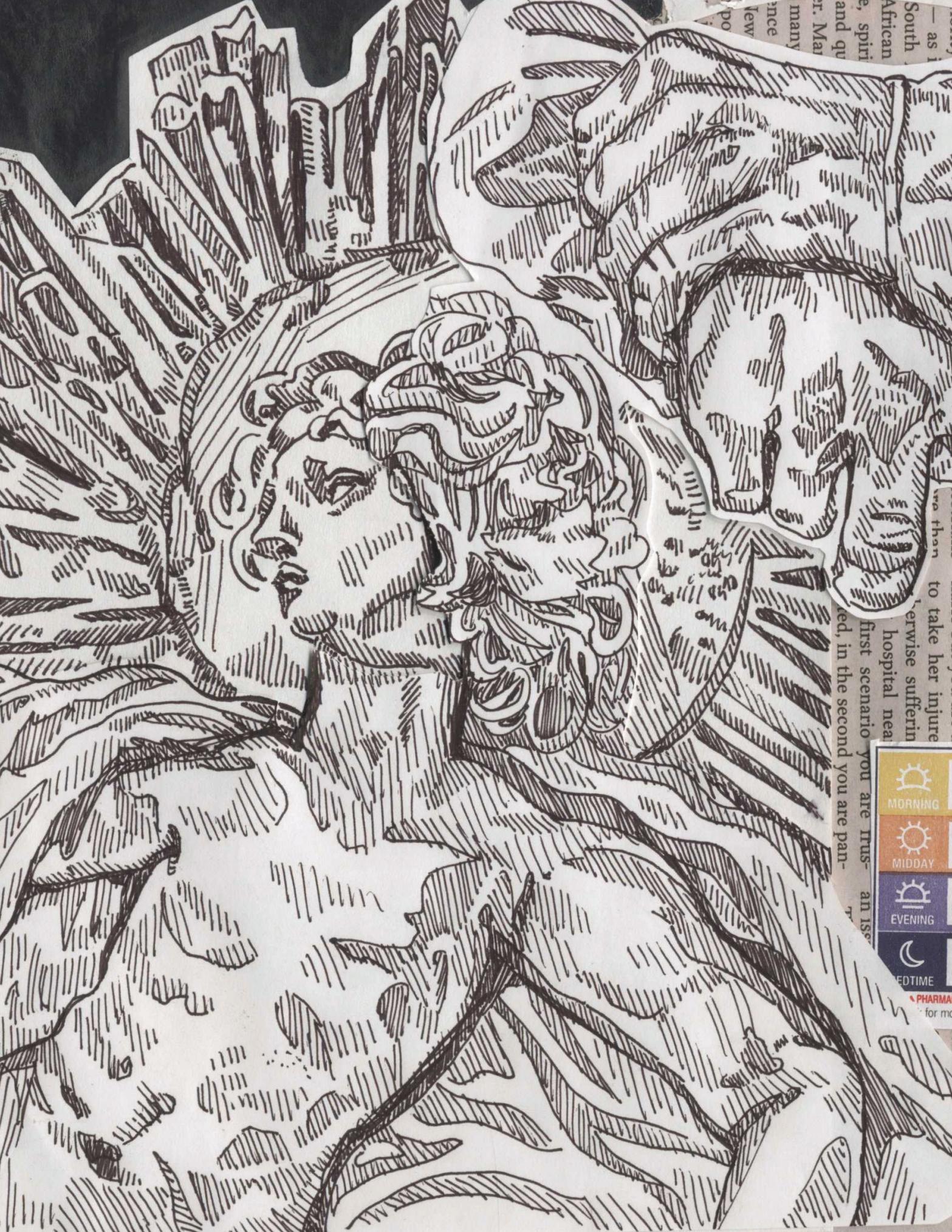
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On the third day in the field, the waiting woman (who would one day be my mother) opened her eyes and knew what she'd been waiting for was her heart. She'd found it in the field—a field that was really a hilltop that overlooked a gorge—found it in the way the wind sighed through the grasses and the soil shifted beneath her shoulder blades and the sky crushed against the hard line of the far off mountains. Her heart was in the uniform line of hard shelled ants that made their way across the bridge of her outstretched finger and the blood red of cardinal wings and the sun filtered through delicately veined leaves.

After those first two days in the field she never spent another full night, but came nearly every day to hear the rush of wind against the back of her neck and through her fingertips. It was her hilltop she'd somehow stumbled upon, this perfect untouched piece of wilderness that belonged only to her and her heart. She thought she'd stumbled on some pure and perfect untouched piece of wilderness that belonged only to her and her heart.

But my father (who was not my father yet) had also been drawn to this hilltop. Unlike my mother, he was not searching for his heart. He had one, bold and bright and filled with blood, notched deep within his chest.

Instead, my father was searching for his muse. Like my mother he'd found what was lost on the hilltop. He'd found inspiration in the sting of the nettles and the long shadows cast in late afternoon. He'd found peace in the way the stars lived as buttons sewn onto the blanket of the night sky with so little black velvet in between. He lived for the yearning





scream of the screech owl and the way it echoed across the valley.

So my mother found her heart and my father found his muse and on one sunkissed afternoon they found each other, startled like jackrabbits who had lived their lives in isolation.

And so began their courtship dance, my father immediately smitten (he who held his unwieldy heart on his person), my mother less certain (she whose heart lived in the foothills and hid among the stones). But step by step, through dips and spins and midnight stars and afternoon sun they found a rhythm that balanced the thunderous beating of my father's heart and the soft splintered thrum of my mother's. And so the hilltop became to them what it hadn't been before.

...

It is here that their story starts to crumble, begins that downward spiral from what was Before and what is Now. When my parents tell this story, it is here that my mother rubs her eyes and calls it a night. It is here the tick begins in my father's jaw and he insists he must take a walk outside. He always comes back more frustrated than he was before. He expects soil where there is asphalt and cool breeze where there is only trapped air. It is here, in the story, when the first balloons arrive.

The mountains are still distant shadows against the dark blue of the dawn when they sweep in, buoyed by the front of an oncoming storm. There were only three in that first convoy. Three flames that fired, lighting up the dawn before the sun had a chance to wink open her burning eye. Three baskets filled to the bursting, brimming with unexpected travelers.

My mother and father didn't see the balloons arrive that morning. They didn't see them land on the top of their hilltop,

baskets snapping the delicate spines of the switchgrass and little bluestem. They didn't see the way the rabbits skittered into the underbrush, noses trembling as if caught in sudden frost. They didn't see the way the balloons fell from the sky, one great motion as the trio of multicolored lungs heaved their last breath.

My mother and father didn't arrive until late that morning, the feathers of sleep still soft on their eyelids, the taste of sunrise still sweet on their tongues. As they walked along their softly trodden paths, they closed their eyes and turned their faces towards the sun. They clasped their hands tightly together and listened to the sounds of the morning. A jay bird called out the hour. The wind blew through the reeds and rustled up rabbits whose paws hit against the earth in an irregular pattern. The sounds were new and familiar, the same echoes arranged in a different sort of symphony. But over it all, they were greeted by something entirely different. A revving of engines, a cacophony of metal striking metal.

They hurried along their path until they reached the summit of their hilltop and peered out from behind bushes and brambles onto the beginnings of a city that never sleeps. The balloons may have arrived only that morning, but their passengers had been busy. Already there was a quasi-structure looming out of the earth. Bricks dropped at hard angles in a place where worms scrawled curling script through mud and the clouds cast curving shadows across the grasses. Straight lines introduced where there had been none.

There were six tin soldiers standing at attention on the hill. Six plastic men with freshly laundered faces enacting the plans of some higher power only they knew by name. My mother and father (who weren't my mother and father yet) stopped and stared. They'd heard of plastic people and the way they took hills and ironed them out to avoid the dan-

gers of falling off cliffs. They'd heard of plastic people and the way their mouths moved in unison, heads full of fabricated thoughts and prayers. They'd heard that plastic people weren't born plastic, but had once been made of flesh and blood like themselves, but up close they could hardly believe this to be true.

They didn't speak to the group right away, but slid back down the hill through the briar and the brush. They'd built an army in a day, calling upon their friends from other hills and acquaintances from the cities and strangers from the suburbs where they lived among throngs of other plastic people.

They'd gone back to the hill and spoke in one voice, telling the soldiers of wild spaces few and far between and of their connection to the land. They'd begged and pleaded, trying to appeal to the non-plastic pieces of those gathered—the skin behind their earlobes and at the crooks of their elbows, the sliver of nail on their left pinky fingers and the furrows in their brows.

But the plastic people did not budge. That's the thing about plastic. It has a funny way of sticking around. You can writhe and scream and rage and shout and still it remains: the plastic bottle washed ashore, the grocery bag slipping through tires down a highway medium, the string of bottle caps noosed around a seagull's neck.

The plastic people refused to leave. They set up shop. They made it clear they were there to stay. Slowly the hill became a house became a town became a village became a city. Slowly the army my parents (who weren't my parents yet) returned to where they'd come from. They needed to protect their own hills, their own wild spaces slipped into hidden cracks in the cities and the suburbs. Many of them had already fought and lost their own fights for other fields and hilltops and grassy knolls. They knew well the resilience of polyurethane skin.

My mother and father (who perhaps were not my mother and father at all) stayed hidden in the underbrush as more balloons arrived, more straight lines were penciled out against the curve of the earth, more grasses were trampled, more cigarette butts thrown against the drying dirt. They stayed until they could bear it no longer, until they knew it was time to leave. Together they stumbled down the hill, my mother trailing her heart out of her feet in painful splintered chips, my father's muse siphoned out through his fingertips like sand crumbling into the soft blow of the wind. They found themselves on asphalt, bare feet prickling at the unexpected heat. The sun had been trapped in the black macadam and they felt her desperate efforts to get out.

I've never known my mother with her heart, nor my father with his muse. I've glimpsed them occasionally, those selves they've hidden behind plexi-glass. I see it when my mother (who is my mother now) goes out to water her plants as the sun comes up over the trees. She is alone, but if I am up early enough I watch her through my window. Her skin is golden then, her wrinkles cast in shadows. I see it when my father sips coffee on our front step on Sunday mornings, a book open in his lap. He doesn't go to church, but sits in communion with the oaks in our front lawn. Sometimes I think he misses the community of a parish. I think he appreciates the silence more.

In these moments I want to take my parents and set them loose. I want to cut their leases and their harnesses, undo the locks to their cages, tell them—go! be free! be wild! be untamed!

Instead, I join them in their reverent solitude. I plant my own flowers. I read my own books. I learn to like coffee and the warm way it cradles my throat. I do not go to church, but I do make time to sit among the trees. I do not go looking, for my heart or for my muse or for any other abstract concept I may have lost along the way.



:::

Instead I lie in wait, and let the wild come find me.

# Customs of Corruption

Brunch &  
the Bloody  
Mary

by Shira Friedman-Parks



"You get up when the world is warm, or at least, when it is not so cold. You are, therefore, able to prolong your Saturday nights."

*Guy Beringer, 1895, Inventor of Brunch*

**B**runch is an illusion of the good life. It is fun; it is social; it is glamorous in one way or another. In all its combination of various elements, brunch is leisure. American sociologist Thorstein Veblen defines leisure as consumption "beyond the minimum required for subsistence" which also "undergoes specialization as regards the quality of the goods consumed."<sup>1</sup> This certainly applies to brunch, which often aims to provide innovative flavor combinations within familiar breakfast food structures. Brunch can definitely get fancy, with long lines, pomp, and exposed-brick aesthetics that hypocritically reference an "industrial working life, without the work itself, [while] the actual work that goes into making brunches happen is conspicuously left out of the celebrated brunch narrative."<sup>2</sup>

But while brunch is notoriously expensive and busy, this is not to say that it is only participated in by the leisure class. Rachael Popowich, a cook at Toronto's quintessential brunch spot Aunties & Uncles, reflects on how brunch is sought out as conspicuous consumption—an act of embodying status through the consumption of wealth-associated goods<sup>3</sup>—regardless of disposable income: "A lot of people who don't have a lot of disposable income will choose to use what they do have on brunch, just to feel like, 'On my day off, I can dabble in this lifestyle.'"<sup>4</sup>

The concept of brunch was first documented in an 1895 opinion piece by Guy Beringer, entitled "Brunch: A Plea." Beringer proposes a "corruption of breakfast and lunch,"<sup>5</sup> at half past

noon, as an alternative to Sunday Mass. This way, people could stay out later on Saturday nights, and still commune in the morning, just later in the day, and without the religious part. His vision of brunch is sociable and cheerful, with three courses of fish and meat, and beer or whiskey in place of tea or coffee.

Indeed, the history of brunch is intertwined with that of cocktails. The Prohibition Act of 1919 prohibited the sale of alcohol, and was enforced from 1920 to 1933; as brunch was entering the mainstream, so too was alcohol re-legalized with the Prohibition Act's repeal. Farha Bano Ternikar, author of *Brunch: A History*, writes:

"Many of the earliest brunch cocktails were some combination of vodka or champagne and fruit juices. Citrus juices had already been popularized as a breakfast tradition, so juice-based cocktails were a natural outcome of the combination of Prohibition and brunching, especially with the popular idea that 'the hair of the dog that bit you' was the best cure for a hangover."<sup>6</sup>

A century later, we seem to agree: "Brunch is a breakfast that begins with a cocktail," William Grimes writes in his 1998 New York Times opinion piece, "At Brunch, The More Bizarre The Better."<sup>7</sup> To Veblen, this in and of itself is a mark of leisure. He writes: "Drunkenness and other pathological consequences of the free use of stimulants therefore tend in their turn to become honorific...of the superior status of those who are able to afford the indulgence."<sup>8</sup> In other words, drinking in the morning, socially looked



down upon as a vice or symbol of incompetence, can alternatively be a symbol of status in the right context. If you don't have somewhere to be, something to do, or someone to take care of, comfortably spending ten dollars or more on a cocktail at brunch is a performance of leisure that you get to both experience and display to others. Popowich agrees: "It's like adults getting to be mischievous children. *Ooh, we'll drink at breakfast. Let's be naughty. We're going to spend all this money on eggs and feel fabulous.*"<sup>9</sup>

**E**pitomizing the mischief of cocktails at brunch is the Bloody Mary. A corruption in and of itself, the Bloody Mary combines tomato juice, vodka, horseradish, hot sauce, and lemon. While it's an extremely popular brunch staple, it is also, understandably, very divisive.

And truthfully, until I tried it, the Bloody Mary baffled me, scared me, even. Becky Lang of The Tangential says it well: "Do you think Bloody Marys are disgusting because they are salty, bitter and strange? You're not alone."<sup>10</sup> My first Bloody Mary was split three ways at Saturday brunch on my twenty-first birthday at the Feve. This was when I discovered my love for the salty, bitter, and extravagant. It was savory; it was spicy. It was topped with pickles and peppers, with a whole skewer dedicated to olives. My eyes were opened. I understood that my life had always been leading up to this point.

The Bloody Mary of today is defined by seven key features:<sup>11</sup>

- 1) tomato juice;
- 2) the base spirit, often vodka;
- 3) savory additives such as Worcester-shire sauce, or beef consommé;
- 4) spices and herbs;
- 5) the burn: horseradish and hot sauce;
- 6) acid, often lemon juice; and
- 7) aromatic garnishes, such as celery, or, more excitingly, skewers of meat, cheese, and pickled vegetables.

**T**he Bloody Mary's strangeness makes you wonder who could have invented such a mouth-wateringly savory treat. It would be easy if there was one person who published "Bloody Mary: A Plea" like Guy Berringer did with brunch. Unfortunately, the origin of the Bloody Mary is heavily debated, and understandably so, because who wouldn't want to have invented it? Still, a few main characters stand out: Fernand Petiot, George Jessel, Henry Zbikiewic, and Mary Brown Warbuten.

In his prime, Fernand Petiot wore rimless glasses and dressed like a professor. He was born in Paris, France in 1900 to parents who owned a boarding house. At the age of 16, Petiot began working at the infamous Harry's New York Bar (in Paris) as a kitchen boy, moving his way up to bartender and gaining the nickname "the Frog."<sup>12</sup> Here, he is said to have made a tomato juice and vodka cocktail. Some doubt this because no tomato juice cocktail was included in Harry McElhone's (of Harry's New York Bar) 300-recipe book, *Barflies and Cocktails*, published in 1927<sup>13</sup>, but I don't think that can truly imply its nonexistence.

George Jessel was born in New York City in 1898 to a playwright and a ticket seller. By age 10, he began appearing on Broadway, later settling into a lifelong career of comedy with "ethnic" humor, divorce scandals, and campaigning for

Ronald Reagan. Some remember him as the “toastmaster general of the United States.”<sup>14</sup> In 1927, while Petiot was in Paris and Barflies and Cocktails failed to publicize his tomato vodka cocktail, George Jessel claimed he invented it after a night of drinking in Palm Beach, Florida. As a potential hangover cure, the hotel bartender had offered him something he called vodkee, a pungent potato-smelling vodka no one had drunk in six years. Inspired by his sister-in-law’s use of tomato juice as a hangover cure, Jessel recalls telling the bartender, “Get me some Worcestershire sauce, some tomato juice, and lemon; that ought to kill the smell.”<sup>15</sup>

He is quoted more gracefully in a Smirnoff ad:

“I think I invented the Bloody Mary, Red Snapper, Tomato Pickup, or Morning Glory. It happened on a night before a day and I felt I should take some good, nourishing tomato juice, but what I really wanted was some of your good Smirnoff Vodka. So I mixed them together, the juice for the body and the vodka for the spirit, and if I wasn’t the first ever, I was the happiest ever.”<sup>16</sup>

#### George Jessel’s Bloody Mary

1.5 OUNCES VODKA  
3 OUNCES HEAVY TOMATO JUICE  
WORCESTERSHIRE SAUCE  
LEMON JUICE

Critics argue that canned tomato juice didn’t debut in the US until 1928, manufactured by the College Inn Tomato Factory. Where was he getting his tomato juice from? I’m not sure I buy this; tomatoes are juicy enough. But I do find it hard to trust that he, hungover, asked for all those ingredients.

Henry Zbikiewic, a bartender of unfortunately unknown origin at the Prohibition-era speakeasy 21 Club in Greenwich Village, was also known for making tomato juice and vodka cocktails around this

time, but it’s unclear whether he invented them. Since George Jessel was a frequent customer of the 21 Club, it’s possible some collaboration was afoot.

Fernand Petiot left Paris for Ohio in 1925, eventually settling in New York in 1933, where he worked at King Cole Bar at the St. Regis Hotel. There, he introduced a drink to the menu that he called the Red Snapper: vodka, tomato juice, citrus, and spices. Legend has it, he originally wanted to call the drink the Bloody Mary, but the name was deemed too offensive by the hotel owner’s son. In a 1964 interview with *The New Yorker*, Petiot reveals his recipe:

“I initiated the Bloody Mary of today. George Jessel said he created it, but it was really nothing but vodka and tomato juice when I took it over. I cover the bottom of the shaker with four large dashes of salt, two dashes of black pepper, two dashes of cayenne pepper, and a layer of Worcestershire sauce; I then add a dash of lemon juice and some cracked ice, put in two ounces of vodka and two ounces of thick tomato juice, shake, strain, and pour. We make a hundred to a hundred and fifty Bloody Marys a day here in the King Cole Room and in the other restaurants and the banquet rooms.”<sup>17</sup>

#### Fernand Petiot’s Bloody Mary

4 DASHES SALT  
2 DASHES BLACK PEPPER  
2 DASHES CAYENNE PEPPER  
1 LAYER WORCESTERSHIRE SAUCE  
1 DASH LEMON JUICE  
CRACKED ICE  
2 OUNCES VODKA  
2 OUNCES THICK TOMATO JUICE

The bloody bit of the name seems intuitive for a viscous red drink, even more so than the name Red Snapper, which is just a red fish. And it’s not unbelievable that a woman’s name is involved, considering the association of womanhood with blood. How does Mary, then, fit into the puzzle?





i.

The title “Bloody Mary” is mainly associated with the sixteenth century English queen, Mary I. Her father was Henry VIII, who famously broke up the Catholic church, reinventing divorce in order to leave Mary’s mother. Mary was downgraded from Princess to Lady and separated from her mother. When Henry VIII died, nine-year-old Protestant Edward VI became king, only to die before reaching the age of sixteen. Though Mary was not officially heir to the throne, she fought her way into reigning, becoming the first English queen, corrupt in her own right. Mary spent her five years as queen restoring the Catholic Church, ordering 280 Protestants to be burned at the stake before she died in 1558.<sup>18</sup> Many consider her notorious title of Bloody Mary to be rooted in misogyny; her father ordered the deaths of way more people, an estimated 57,000 to 72,000<sup>19</sup>, and no one calls him Bloody Henry.

ii.

Bloody Mary is an American ritual associated with young girlhood. You turn off the lights; you go in front of a mirror; you say “Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary,” and Mary will appear, looking back at you. Maybe she has blood on her face. Maybe you have to flush the toilet three times. It’s often a slumber party activity; some scholars theorize a connection to pre-pubescent menstruation anxiety. This Mary, unrelated to English monarchy, is associated with theoretical witches Mary Whales and Mary Worth, or even the Virgin Mary.<sup>20</sup>

iii.

Soon after mixing his first makeshift hangover blend, George Jessel recalls giving one to his friend Mary Brown Warbuten. It tumbled down her white evening gown before reaching the floor. Smocked in tomato and vodka, she laughed: *Now you can call me Bloody Mary, George!*



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## Ode to Soaking Your Nose in Salt Water

by Clara Carl

Five minutes in waiting  
for two minutes on the kettle.  
Too hot to dunk your face in,  
to surrender without flinching.  
After eight minutes in water,  
the pus purges itself. White  
beads of salt melt down,  
leave your skin soft and red.  
Head bowed, one eye focuses:  
Water spilled on the table.  
I don't want to leave this house.  
Head bowed, socked feet dig  
into old carpet for the last time.  
Smells like banana bread and  
chopped walnuts in the kitchen.  
Turn your back to the tile and  
you don't have to look at the coffee  
grounds embedded in the grout.  
You can only tip salt into  
a steaming mug so delicately.  
Behind the water is a Prayer Card  
for Single Parents: God grant me  
the time, the money, the hands.  
Behind the water is a line drawn cat,  
resting at the bottom of the mug.  
Eight minutes in the water and  
mouth breathing gets uncomfortable.  
Head rises like Venus from foam,  
pus forms its happy ring around the  
wound. The other eye focuses on light  
streaming through gaunt curtains.  
The throbbing will subside. The pus  
will drain. The salt will dissolve.

# AN OBITUARY FOR PLAYMOBILS

BY ELIZA GREENBAUM



If any of my childhood toys were sentient, they would be scarred for life. I was not the sort of kid to play nicely with toys. My imaginary world was set in a post-apocalyptic land where civilization had been obliterated by a great flood. My plastic fairies and my Playmobs, tiny plastic figurines with dotted eyes, were the only survivors. They all lived atop a mountain (my playtable) safe from the rising ocean levels (my rug). My personal favorite toy was a clown named Wally who looked like he belonged to the *Saw* franchise. Wally was also a fairy hunter with links to an underground black market for fairy wings. My stuffed animals were gods amongst the Playmobs and fairies; all toys worshiped the might of Bear Bear, Mrs. Moose, and Sheepie the Sheepdog. The toys competed for the attention of the gods like the rituals in *The Hunger Games*. The world of my toys was fucked up. And God, I miss that world.

I sold and donated nearly all of my Playmobil toys. I never sold Wally, although I lost him around middle school. I suspect he is hidden in a crevice somewhere in my childhood house that I moved away from long ago. I only have a few stuffed animals left. They are stacked neatly in a bin away at home. I held on to those stuffed animals, more for nostalgia than

anything else, although I cannot remember the last time I took a stuffy out of the bin. I occasionally try to remember the imaginary horror-esque world of my toys but in total honesty, those memories are fading. I sometimes wonder whether I should mourn for all the Playmobs and stuffies that I have sold, donated, or simply lost. But how do you mourn what you cannot remember?

It pains me to admit this, however, I fear that I am losing my creativity. My childhood toys are gone or ignored - the imaginary world I created is in the process of being forgotten. I regularly ask myself whether adults can maintain the same level of imagination as children. To be frank, I am frightened of the answer.

Playing is universal. Even baby animals like to play. The author Judy Cole explains that “young ravens hold body-surfing ‘competitions’ down the slopes of wintery rooftops; juvenile elephants create impromptu water slides along muddy riverbanks.”<sup>1</sup> Over fall break, I decided to visit Central Park Zoo, where there was a group of goats frolicking in the children’s zoo section. They were still babies and their fur looked soft and blankey, having not yet roughened into adulthood. The baby goats sprinted in circles,

nipping at each other's ears and chasing each other while the adult goats ignored them; they were far too mature for any of that nonsense. A part of me was frustrated. It seemed wrong that there were expectations of growing up and maturing, even in the world of goats.

I remember clearly one viciously hot day during the summer before my senior year of college. I was at the beach with the sun blistering my skin red and children screaming everywhere. I scrunched my eyes shut and tried to block out the sound. Nevertheless, it was impossible to nap and I could still hear those kids. They

## They were making mansions from sand castles; they were flopping in the shallow water and pretending to be mermaids.

were making mansions from sand castles; they were flopping in the shallow water and pretending to be mermaids. They were happy. I pulled out my earbuds to listen to music and drowned out their noise. I was not annoyed at them. Only jealous.

The brain is like a muscle. The more that you use it, the stronger it is. Children spend more time playing with their imaginations compared to adults, so of course their levels of creativity are higher. In 1968, scientists George Land and Beth Jarmon<sup>2</sup> devised a test for NASA to select the most innovative scientists and engineers.<sup>3</sup> The assessment was to simply look at a problem and come up with a new, creative idea. This test worked so well for adults that Land and

Jarmon decided to try it with children, they first tested the children at age five, then retested the same children at age ten, and again at age fifteen. 98% of the five year olds scored at the genius level for creativity. At age 10, 30% achieved the genius level. At age 15, the percentage dwindled to 12%. When the test was given to 280,000 adults with the average age of 31%, only 2% scored within the genius level. I could have taken the test myself, but I did not want to know the answer.

An experiment called The Marshmallow Challenge continues to prove this. Students are placed together in small groups and told to build the tallest building structure using spaghetti sticks, tape, string, and one marshmallow to be placed at the tippy-top. This exercise was done with postgraduate students in business and law school. It was also performed with kindergartners. The kindergarten students easily achieved the best results.<sup>4</sup> Their constructions were taller and more interesting, masterpieces that most of the graduate students could not achieve. The graduate students were always too focused on structure; they needed to assign jobs, draw out their architectural plan, so on and so forth. However, the kindergartners simply played with their imaginations and worked together. So of course, the kindergartners succeeded in collaborative creativity when the graduate students couldn't.

Children are creative because they have a greater sense of curiosity, as they do not fully understand the world. Scholars Allison Gopnik and Caren M. Walker proposed that children utilize their imagination to create answers about confusing aspects of the world around them, where there are so many things that make absolutely no sense.<sup>5</sup> For example, think of a child playing in a bathtub. The child believes heavy objects should sink to the



bottom of the tub and that lighter objects should float. The child is confused when a light marble plummets downwards and their heavier toy truck remains afloat. This does not make *any* sense. The child must use their imagination to understand what is happening; perhaps the truck has a motor or it can secretly fly? It is easy for children to be imaginative because the world is still new.

I recently met up with a boy, Sam, who I used to babysit. He is 11 years old now and at the stage of life where he is putting away his toys. Sam and I often played with his Legos, plastic blocks, and brightly colored trucks. He was an architect as a child and structured monumental buildings from his toy blocks. He was filled with energy; it was the sort of energy that you can only maintain when you are a child. Children breathe differently compared to adults. The normal respira-

tory rate for adults is 12 to 16 breaths per minute. The normal respiratory rate of a school child is 18 to 30 breaths per minute. And the normal respiratory rate of a preschooler is 22 to 34 breaths per minute.

Children are growing at these ages and their bodies require more oxygen.<sup>6</sup> Kids have significantly quick metabolic rates compared to adults which results in larger-than-life levels of energy.<sup>7</sup> According to the Royal Children's Hospital, "young children have significantly higher metabolic rates than adults, and therefore have a higher oxygen demand, which in turn results in higher respiratory rates."<sup>8</sup> So in other words, children must breathe quickly in order to maintain a speedy metabolism for their high levels of energy.

I used to watch Sam sprinting around the room, playing and creating new games



for his toys, and somehow never growing tired. I was honored Sam allowed me to be a part of his play world. We were designers of beautiful buildings with his Legos, we were rock stars on his set of plastic drums that likely gave his mother a headache, and around Christmas we were secret spies in search of any hint of Santa Claus. I often wondered why that boy's energy never dwindled. The answer is simple: he was breathing more rapidly than any of the adults around him, myself included. And maybe Sam had more life in him from all that breath.

I had not seen him in years and his mother messaged me, asking me to keep an eye on him while she was out of the house. She explained he didn't need a babysitter but it would be nice for him to have company while she was gone. So I headed over.

Sam always used to say he was five and a half. The half seemed important to him because

being five is a world away from being five and a half. When I saw him again, I asked how old he was. "11," he replied. Some instinctual part of me waited for him to add 'and a half,' but he was silent and I had to acknowledge that he wasn't a little kid anymore.

Spending time with an eleven year old is far different than spending time with a five and a half year old. His playroom was no longer a playroom but rather a "hang-out" room. The plastic drums, the toy blocks, and that mountain of Legos were all replaced with a sleek couch and a TV set. The room looked like the perfect place for a group of middle schoolers to grab a soda, watch a show, and chill out. I scanned the room, wondering if there was even one Lego wedged between the couch cushions. There wasn't.

## I scanned the room, wondering if there was even one Lego wedged between the couch cushions.

"You're growing up," I said.

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "I guess I am."

"Are you looking forward to middle school?" It was a random question he had probably been asked a thousand times before.

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Growing up is sorta weird. Y'know, I'm going to be leaving college soon. I'll be going into the real world and that feels *really* weird."

I remember Sam paused to look me very directly in the eyes. "Well, how do you think I feel?" he replied. "I'm going into middle school!"

The two of us settled atop the couch in comfortable silence and he pulled out a Wii. I supposed that neither of us were truly children anymore. We were

both still growing up; he was nearing middle school and I was on the precipice of the real world. I had no idea which one of us was about to undergo the bigger transition, however, one matter was very clear. Growing up is something that never ends. People are constantly maturing and changing. The child that decides to donate their set of Legos is growing up, the adult who is about to get married and start a family is growing up, and the senior citizen who holds their first grandchild is growing up. There will always be some form of life transition looming in the future. I sunk deeper into the couch, feeling overwhelmed by my thoughts, as Sam whooped my ass in Mario Kart.

I asked Sam if he still had any of his old toys left. He replied that the ones he still had left were in a box in his closet.

"There's this thing I really want to show you!" he replied. He abruptly jumped off the couch, which reminded me of how he used to bounce around the house in spurts of energy as a kid. He returned with an iPad. "I need to show you this really cool thing!" Sam demanded.

He pulled up an app with a little planet logo. "You can look at the stars with this app!" he explained. "Isn't it cool?" And yes, it was cool. Through the app you could look up specific stars, zoom in on certain planets to see their rocky exteriors, read about their gravitational orbits through a fact list on the screen, and fantasize about a life beyond Earth. Sam was no longer a kid who played imaginary games in his head. He was fascinated by the real world. He still viewed the world with a sense of magic. However, his sense of childhood wonder had shifted from focusing on Santa Claus to stars. We were still playing. But we were playing with planets and sparkly constellations from the app instead of his old plastic toys. I thought it was beautiful. It is easy for children to be imaginative as the world is new and shiny. But even as adults, there is always something new and exciting to play with in our heads. At that moment, I felt like growing up was not such a terrible thing.

I sometimes still wish I could go back in time. However, I have no idea what I would even do. I once asked my mother if she missed playing with her toys. She answered honestly. "It was a beautiful memory. I don't think if I tried to go back it would have the same level of vividness and joy." Perhaps playtime is better left as a memory and only a memory. But I prefer to believe the experiences children gain from playing remains with them even as adults; as if it is ingrained in their bones. Nevertheless, I am aware that once childhood slips we may never be able to obtain it again.

I asked a few of the people in my life about the games they used to play as children. I was simply curious whether those

memories had lingered in their heads or faded away. One friend laughed as he remembered marching with a military procession of boys for a water gun fight, another friend smiled while describing her stuffed animals with fur too soft for words. "But I donated them all," she said with a little sigh. My parents also laughed, reminiscing about their childhoods. It was strange to picture my mother riding around on a tricycle through all the stops of Mr. Rogers' neighborhood in her basement, or to imagine my father strolling through town with his imaginary friend, Ina, whispering in his ear. But one matter was clear. The imagination from childhood had stayed with people. Those experiences had not been lost, even if they now only existed in memory.

I spoke to my grandparents recently. They obliged me when I asked if they had any memories of playing with toys. My grandfather's voice was soft when he spoke about his old trains. My grandmother laughed over how she used to dress herself up like a prima donna, in pins and jewelry. I asked whether she ever thought about her old toys and she answered swiftly. "Oh no, I never think about it. You live 24/7 so I don't really remember everything. You live in the present." I could have asked more questions. However, I felt vaguely guilty trying to coax answers from my grandparents about a childhood they did not fully remember. Besides, they wanted to ask me about school and what was happening in my life. They were more interested in the present than old memories. Behind the phone receiver, I silently wondered if there was something wrong with me. Why was I so obsessed with the past? Why could I not live in the present like a normal adult?

Not knowing what to do with myself, I decided to visit a Dungeons and Dragons club on campus. I had never played Dungeons and Dragons before. I knew absolutely nothing about the rules of the game. I wondered if it would be played in a dark, cavernous room with



players that hunched their backs to stare intensely as they rolled dice. Instead, the room that I entered was cozy. There were plush chairs and a shaggy rug. The Dungeon Master (the referee and storyteller of the game) immediately pulled up a chair for me. "Do you want us to tell you about our characters?" she politely asked. I nodded.

I jotted the characters down furiously in my notebook, while aware that nothing I wrote could ever give true justice to the descriptions I heard. There were so many characters: a buff elf, a dwarven clown lady fighting to end discrimination against short people, a fox girl cleric, a pirate elf, a regal lumberjack lesbian, and even a sentient rock. Someone had doodled a snail on the whiteboard. "That's Mave the Snail," the Dungeon Master explained. "She can speak to the characters and help

them out. She might be evil. We're still figuring it out." The game proceeded and everyone sat up, straight as rulers, to get into character. They were now in their own mythical world without reality to distract them. The players laughed, they warred, they cast spells on one another, and then they laughed some more. Despite being adults, the players were able to escape into their own imaginary world and simply play.

I still am scared that I am losing my creativity. It no longer feels natural like when I was a child. Instead, escaping into imagination is a choice. I can never return to being a child. But sometimes I close my eyes while listening to music and allow my mind to daydream, so I feel like a child again, playing in my own world.



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by richen heffelfinger

# asian grl big titties

Fuck me  
on this kantha  
its orange flowers stained  
Repeatedly - stamped into fabric  
Wilted the way water dries on wood floors  
stretching  
potent at its core  
then faded  
the way I wake up after  
Cherries

halved and hung to sun-dry  
scatter their pits on the ground

Groundless  
though the soil is fertile

I prefer the warm side with the green pillar  
and black figures — statues du jardin des tuilleries!  
Dissecting  
Keeping their dark bellies pressed  
face down  
on the mattress

Honestly,  
I don't think you have  
Or the gold on my left nostril?  
It's not even mine  
but you are  
and it fucks  
me

Please fuck me  
Crouching to you beneath my skin?  
all the colors that fill my room?  
Have you seen me painted in them?  
and all the colors that fill my room?  
Have you seen me painted in them?  
Have you seen me painted in them?



# *Rag Tag Dorm Cooking*

*by Annie Kelley*

*T*he first intrusion into the silence of orientation week in J-House was a half-heard discussion of birthday cake.

***“I didn’t have any measuring cups...”*** a man’s voice announced from the other side of my door. ***“I eyeballed...”***

*J*padded on stocking feet out of my undecorated dorm room and down a moss-colored hallway, suddenly full of students. We moved past the bathroom, where a stranger had removed the garbage unseen again today, past an oddly sterile kitchen without any measuring cups. From the other side of a cluster of residents in the common room, I heard the voice again.

***“I made him a birthday cake—it’s for my roommate, and...”***

*R*oommate agreements bled into announcements. I thought about the things I left behind at my house in Wisconsin. There was my sourdough starter, the cuts of mutton we butchered saved in the freezer, the recycling bin only I knew when to take out.

***“I have an announcement,”*** said a man holding a pot containing an unknown-substance.

***“If anyone wants some,”*** — he held up the pot— ***“I made a birthday cake.”***

*T*he pot of cake was incongruous against the ordered sterility of the dorm. Before me, I realized, was an entirely new phenomenon: rag-tag dorm cooking.

*M*y first school was Deep Springs—a two-year work college and operational cattle ranch in the high desert of Inyo County, CA. After I graduated, I moved to a small town, Viroqua, WI, where another Deep Springs alum was the program director of both the Driftless Folk School—a nonprofit dedicated to teaching traditional crafts such as spoon carving, chicken butchery, and plowing with oxen—and Thoreau College, an educational experiment which seeks to provide holistic and nature-based education to young adults.



The house in Wisconsin where Thoreau students and interns lived was the kind of colorful American foursquare whose implicit midwestern Protestant ethic would have forbid its own quiet magnificence, if its architects had ever stopped to think of a beautiful house as a frivolity. Luckily, they did not, and so it had little flourishes in the woodwork and hydrangeas around the porch. On my arrival, jars of odd vegetables were piled high and dried herbs hung from the walls along with posters of the Waldorf theory of life stages. Bachelor pad clutter laid unorganized on tables. Thankfully, my first two years of higher education, during which I served as a cook, a farmer, and, most importantly, a janitor, had taught me what to do when presented with an unstewarded residence. Over the next few early autumn days, coworkers, mentors, and future friends learned my name as I sat on the floor of the kitchen organizing spices and stuffing refuse into garbage bags. I lived there for a year and nobody ever gave me a key. I don't think a key existed.

The pot of cake haunted me that night in J-House while I tried to sleep on the stiff mattress in my cavernous dorm room. I brushed my teeth in the morning. I stood looking at the mysteriously clean trash can. Then the cause of my unease struck me: at college, we are not allowed to do our own housework.

Near the end of my year in Wisconsin, we butchered the year's broilers at the small farm owned by the program director in the warm green glow of the building's summer. I chattered excitedly with my friends about stock and organ meat as my hands explored the well charted, yet externally undiscovered country that is the inside of a chicken.

"Do you think," one of the other interns asked the program director, hosing blood off a plastic folding table, "that animals have souls?"

"I think they do," he responded. "But I think

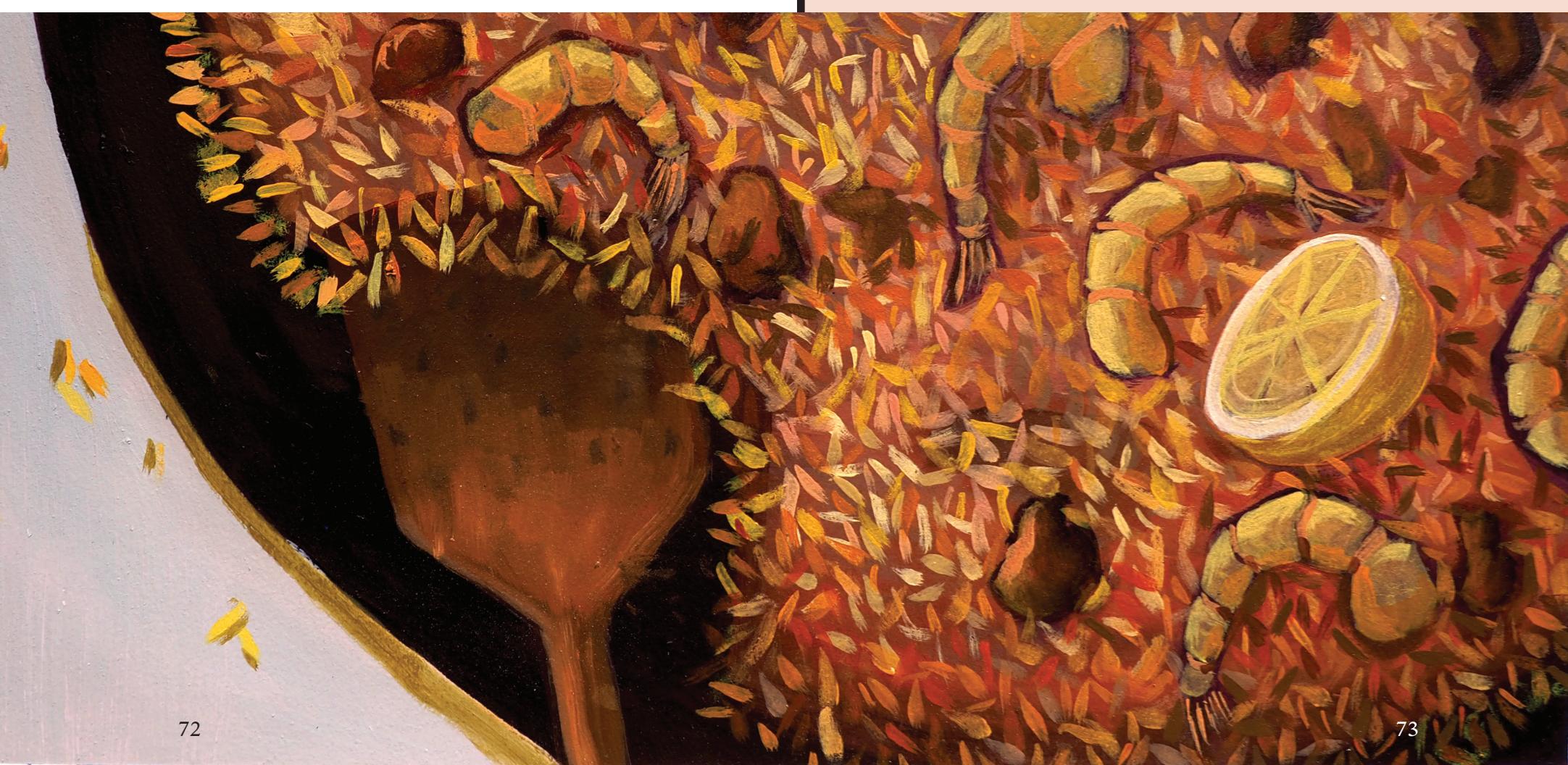
*the soul of a herd animal is in the herd and not the individual.*" The truth of this statement struck me. It struck me as well that, in doing the work of agriculture, people must also adopt a decidedly communal sense of self. Both at Deep Springs College and in Viroqua, I was willing to take on messy and difficult physical tasks for the community without ever seeing this work as unpleasant or degrading.

At Deep Springs, for instance, somebody pulled me aside one evening and told me the dairy girl had COVID-19 and that I would be waking up at 4:00 AM the next morning to milk cows. So I woke up at 4:00 AM, stumbling against the dark of the kind of deep wilderness where the mountains are visible only by the absence of stars, and leaned my head into the warm crook of a cow's flank to milk it. When I was finished milking, the stars were still out. For many months as a dairy girl, I walked among them for a long time before starting my day.

The much fainter stars in Oberlin did not comfort me the way the truly rural ones had. I returned to my house from my walk and loitered around a group of students drinking out of scratched up mugs. "I made pesto pasta," an intoxicated voice said. "But it's gone now. Do you want a drink?" I did. He asked me if I was a first-year. I told him that I was a junior transfer and would be a senior if I hadn't taken a gap year. I showed him pictures of horses and cows on my phone. He was tall and blond and slumped against the doorframe talking to me after everyone else had gone to sleep.

Did I want, he asked, to make butter cookies with him tomorrow?

The American system of college strongly discourages students from living and eating without institutional oversight. This is an unusual state of affairs. In the rest of adult life, authorities will discourage us from breaking the law and showing up late to work. It will be rare, however, for anybody to discourage us from cleaning our own bathrooms. Effectively, this system requires most students to pay someone to shop for them, clean for them, and cook their food, rather than doing this labor themselves. This model of pedagogy, in which emerging adults take a few years off from all responsibilities other than school, is, admittedly, good for academic training. I wonder, though, if this is actually good training for the fullness of an adult life.



*V*iroqua, WI is a dairy farming community. The glaciers which flattened the Midwest missed the driftless geographical region in which Viroqua resides, rendering it hilly and unsuitable to large scale corn agriculture. In the 70s, back-to-the-land hippies moved there and teamed up with pre-existing farm families and Amish communities to form successful dairy cooperatives. Anachronistically, in the context of the modern United States, the region has maintained a functional small-scale dairy economy. Most people there are, in some ways, involved with producing or preparing food. The Folk School and Thoreau College are very much a product of this ethos. Crafts, a folk school assumes, the traditional work of the hands, are enriching and worthwhile, even after they stop being economically useful.

*T*he butter cookie recipe had four ingredients: flour, butter, sugar, and salt. We mixed them in the same pot he used to make the cake and the pesto pasta and he rolled out the cookie dough with a wine bottle as I sat on the counter. This began a long string of culinary escapades. At first, we only had a few plates which somebody left behind, and a novelty apron from his grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary. Slowly, though, we acquired the trappings of domesticity which college forgets. We bought non-butter knives. Then we got a can opener after a messy experience stabbing a can of chickpeas for hummus. Borscht turned out to be such a transcendent and all-encompassing experience that we bought a potato peeler. And just like that, I was sucked into the world of rag-tag dorm cooking.

*T*here are kinds of work whose goal is simply to sustain human existence and there are kinds of work whose goal is something other than this. At Oberlin we train for the second kind of work—to be artists, composers, researchers, activists, and business people—and we outsource the first kind of work—cooking and cleaning and landscaping and garbage collection—to others. The pro-

fessionalized world most Oberlin students emerge from and then sink back into does not esteem sustenance and domestic work. I grew up in Silicon Valley, where I learned that cleaning and cooking (anything which wasn't on The New York Times' website) was a sign of oppression, or sexism. Either way, it was not something a person would choose to do voluntarily. But when I moved to smaller interdependent agricultural communities, I realized that this devaluation of physical work is not universal.

*T*his different attitude towards the work of mundane subsistence, I suspect, belies a different cultural attitude towards human meaning. The cultures of Silicon Valley and Oberlin both implicitly assume that progress (either technological or social) is the best impetus for human action. But an over-emphasis on progress often denies us engagement with the very joys of daily life—the eternal breath of laundry and dishwashing and shared meals—whose peaceful continuance is arguably the end which social and technological progress should seek. Keirkgaard once said that the task of faith is always enough for a human lifetime. Many in every generation may not come that far, but none comes further. I would argue that the same sentiment holds true for the mundane yet dignified work of a good human life. Cooking and cleaning are always enough for a human lifetime—many do not go that far but none go further.

*A*s it sometimes happens, my culinary partner also became my romantic partner. We formed the kind of OSCA-girlfriend/meal-plan-boyfriend blended-household ideal for navigating Oberlin if you're the sort of person who likes sometimes not

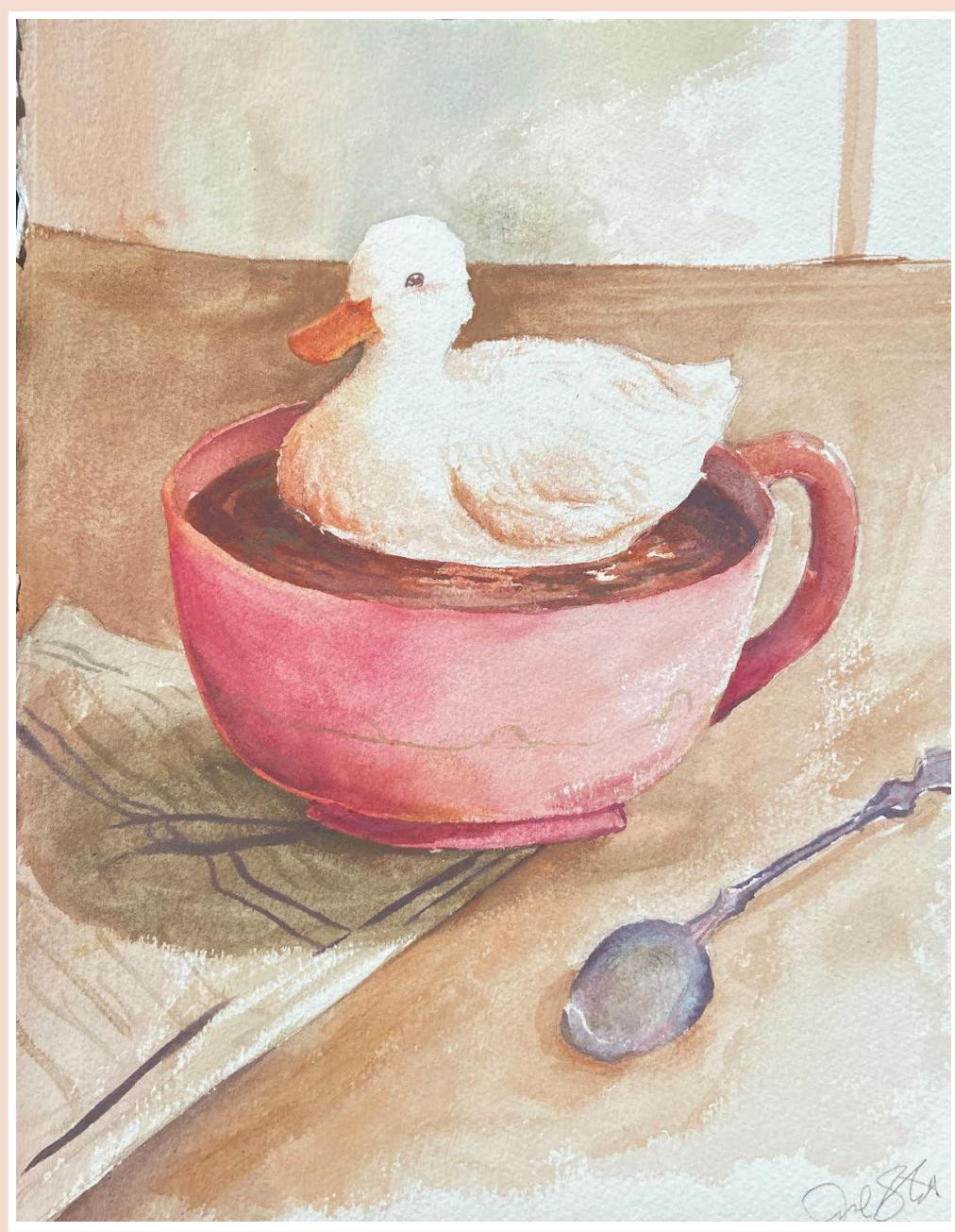
getting food poisoning and sometimes eating things other than beans. On the night when we made 'white people tacos,' his DeCafé Doritos and my Brown Bag Co-op beef, cheese, and vegetables waited downstairs. But I lingered at the bay window of my room and peered down the street at the shoveled segments of sidewalk. The winter I spent in Wisconsin, I woke up early in the morning and plunged into weather—70, 80, 90 degrees from room temperature—and shoveled snow. My path segment met the paths made by the neighbors

to the left and right of me and together we created a little communal maze amidst a vast blanket of white.

*T*hat summer, intrigued by this more interdependent life, I spent a week visiting an intentional community called Community Homestead elsewhere in Wisconsin. As I shoveled cucumbers into pickling jars, I probed one of the community's founders for words of wisdom. She told me that joining a community because you love community is like marrying someone because you love love. There has to be a shared goal. It is possible that my sample is biased, but I suspect that most truly successful communities have a shared goal of work. Small towns, work colleges, intentional communities, even religious communities function because they are comfortable engaging collectively in the messy and joyful shared task of sustaining labor.

*M*y boyfriend and I returned from the MIGA with our ingredients. He fumbled for a frying pan higher up on a shelf than I could reach and I started dicing onions finely and efficiently. For a second, surrounded by the containers and spices, I felt like I was in my own house. The scent of onion and beef frying swirled around ornate cabinets, piles of potatoes, and a pot that no longer had to be a receptacle for cake. Coming to college is a privilege, but it has also often kept me from the joyful work of subsistence. Rag-tag dorm cooking, though, has helped me to see that this work will still be waiting for me afterwards.

**It's always waiting for everybody.**



*Uter by Julia Stuart*





Garlic Still Life by Annie Kelley

# How Not Being a Comedian Changed My Life

by Erika Scharf



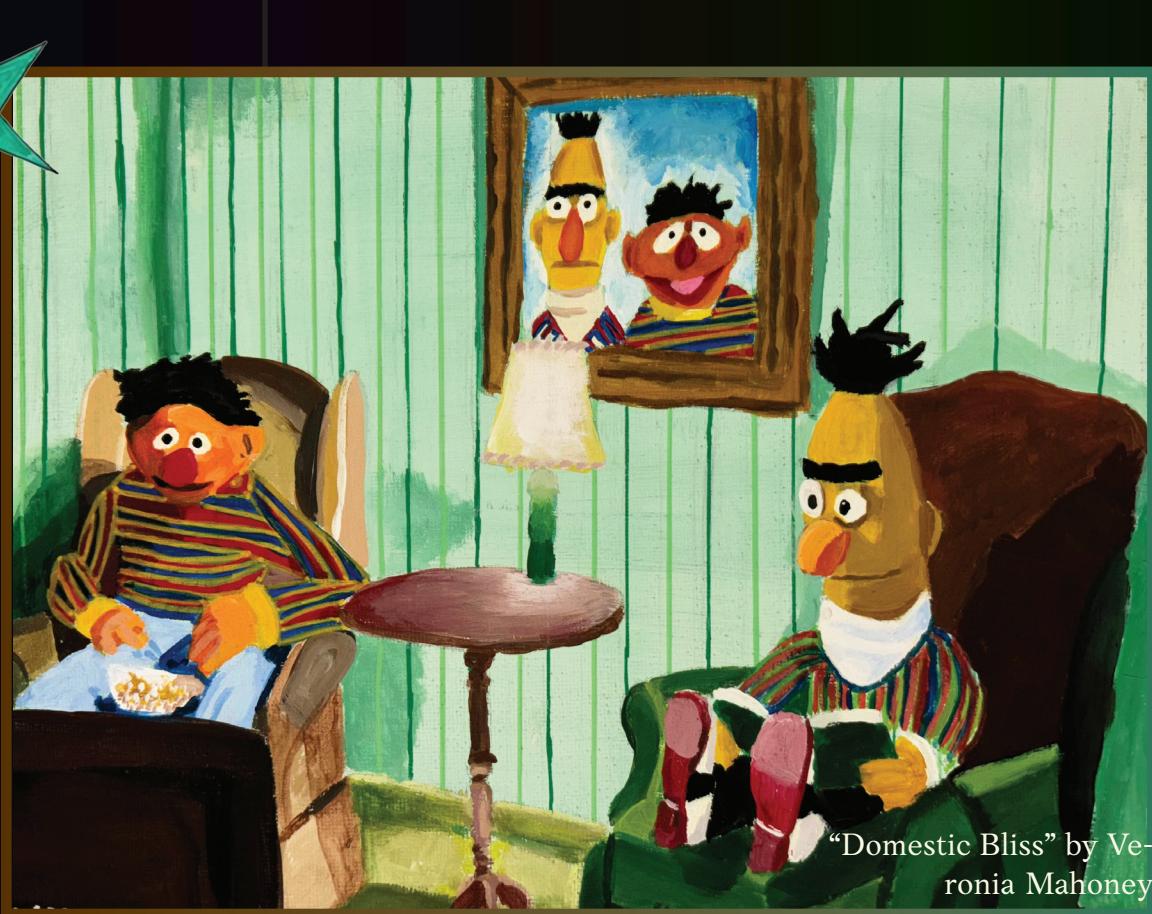
Were you a One Direction stan, a Tumblr-MCR-P!ATD-twenty one pilots die-hard, a dystopian novels junkie, or did you have a different fixation during your formative adolescent years? Me, I was a mixture of all of the above. I think I made my dad buy me Hunger Games magnets while listening to *A Fever You Can't Sweat Out*. However, my impressionable years of 11-15 were devoted to something completely different than most kids: comedy.

As a pre-teen, I had a heightened sense of self-awareness of my place in the world, and I was desperate to "not be like other girls" (I know right? Sounds pretty silly now). Like many adolescents of this age, I desperately wanted something that made me different, but needed something to fixate on and cling to and identify with. So although I pored over the novels of John Green and learned 70% of my vocabulary from Ryan Ross, I was really interested in comedy. Specifically, I had a love for Saturday Night Live and Jimmy Fallon. I am not a comedian, nor do I think I was ever destined to become one. I think sometimes I am a funny person, but I have never been the class clown or the designated funny friend. So why comedy? And how has comedy been so meaningful in my life?

My interest in SNL began with my parents. They would watch it—not even as dedicated fans, but as passive enjoyers—and I started to love it. I would watch vintage SNL clips and memorize the words to sketches, trying to emulate their impressions. I would do cartoon drawings of the actors on SNL adorned with their famous catchphrases: "Well isn't that special?" "We're here to pump you up!" "More cowbell!" I bought a book about the history of SNL and would excitedly read passages aloud to my dad. Still, my favorite

part became "Weekend Update" with Seth Meyers. I thought his wit and straight-faced telling of the news was hilarious. And who could forget, of course, the cameos of his beloved Stefan? I loved Seth Meyers, and when he got his own show in 2014, I anxiously waited all night to watch the first episode. But I turned on the TV at the wrong time—an hour earlier—and I stumbled upon Jimmy Fallon on *The Tonight Show* instead.

I loved Jimmy Fallon. This seems really silly to write now, considering how random an interest this was, but I really did love him. On *The Tonight Show*, he would play fun games with his guests; some of my favorite were Lip Sync Battles, 5-Second Summaries (usually of famous movies), True Confessions, and The Box of Lies, where you have a random object and either tell your partner the truth of what is in the box or make up some outrageous lie. I remember my mom bought me the board game set for Christmas one year so we could play together. It was so exciting to watch Jimmy bring out the serious side in actors like Helen Mirren and Samuel L. Jackson, to see him show off his perfect comedic timing with his *SNL* comrades—Tina Fey, Andy Samberg, Bill Hader, and Amy Poehler. Jimmy could also do impressions—I used to mimic his cadence of Jerry Seinfeld or Nicolas Cage in the hopes that I could do those impressions too—and he had the iconic band The Roots playing with him. What I loved about Jimmy Fallon the most, though, was his aura of kindness. As I write this now, I realize that Jimmy's "kindness" was most likely a carefully fabricated persona, one that did not necessarily mirror his real personality offstage. But at 11 years old, I thought he was amazing. I thought it was incredible how kind and compassionate he seemed to be to every guest, something that not every late night host would do. A lot of other late night hosts would jab at the celebrities, and if the stars were women, there was no doubt a slew of sexist and sexualized remarks. Jimmy Fallon didn't do that though; he seemed to care



"Domestic Bliss" by Veronica Mahoney

about all of them, and the guests seemed comfortable around him. Seeing this on TV made me want to strive to be as kind as him. I remember telling my friends in 8th grade that my idol was Jimmy Fallon, and someone raised her eyebrow and said: "You want to be the host of *The Tonight Show*?"

"No," I said. This aggravated me. I didn't want to be a comedian, and I certainly didn't want to be famous; what I wanted was for people to see me the way I saw Jimmy Fallon, as someone really genuine and caring.

As I grew older, my Jimmy Fallon phase waned and grew to other forms of comedy. In high school, it transferred to adult animation like *Bob's Burgers*, *Family Guy*, *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, and then it became *Conan*.

Although in high school my fixation on comedy was not as strong as in middle school, it was still incredibly important in my life.

Comedy was not only important in shaping my identity: it served as an antidote to my anxiety. I have always struggled heavily with anxiety. I didn't realize how powerful and overwhelming this anxiety was over my life until just recently, but I had been living anxiously for all my life. Before now, when I finally got to see a counselor and find treatment, I didn't know how to help myself. All I knew was that comedy made me feel good. It made the anxiety that I always carried disappear. Comedy was different from any other form of escapism I love: Comedy was a place where I could feel free. I could be authentically silly and not have to think about anything except whatever subplot Brian and Stewie had or the newest remote from *Conan*. I could feel my muscles relax every time I watched comedy. Every day is a struggle for me with my anxiety; I have to work a little harder each day to get to a baseline of 0. Comedy has always brought me joy and peace, something I don't know how I would live without.

Comedy also came to represent something more than just laughter and joy when I got to high school. In 9th grade, I joined the Speech and Debate team, and I auditioned for Humorous Interpretation. HI was a category where students would perform comedic pieces, usually from movies or plays. I had incredible stage fright and was scared sick about talking in front of people, much less performing; but I loved comedy, and I wanted to try. And something gave me the confidence to try—this is where Mr. R comes in.

Mr.

R was my 9th grade English teacher. He was also my mock trial coach for all four years of high school, and a former HI state champion of Ohio. I think the idea of why comedy was important to me is apparent in how influential

Mr. R was in my life. I had heard amazing stories about Mr. R from my cousin who was four years older than me. My cousin, who skipped school frequently, would talk about how he was such a great teacher and how he was the only reason she went to school half the time. She would laugh about how she could joke with him and how easy going and helpful he was. Following in my cousin's footsteps, I had him for freshman and senior year. On top of that, he was the Marching Band announcer, and I played flute and piccolo in marching band. Because of Marching Band and Band Camp over the summer, I got to know him fairly well before classes started in late August. I was amazed by him! I have always felt very strongly that if you are to have one virtue in life, it should be kindness. You should spread kindness wherever you go. You should be the Jimmy Fallon of your community. And Mr. R was the Jimmy Fallon of Niles, Ohio. It felt like everybody loved him, and it was easy to see why: he was unbearably kind. He was polite without exception, always made time to talk to people, and never made anyone feel embarrassed or left out. To me, that was the epitome of kindness. He would make small connections with people, and remember something about them they said two weeks ago. He would joke with people and would make everyone feel welcomed and included. This was the type of person I wanted to be. Mr. R showed me someone who embodied everything that I believed in.



**A**s the year went on, Mr. R continued to impress me. Not only was he incredibly kind to everyone, he was also so smart. In class, I was fascinated by the plethora of knowledge he had about poetry, novels, Shakespeare.

My friends and I, book nerds and aspiring English majors, adored that class. It wasn't only a place where we could feel safe and accepted, it was also incredibly fun. I have vivid memories of our class studying *Hamlet* and Mr. R doing hilarious voices for the characters. Like Jimmy Fallon, he wasn't afraid to be silly. And like Jimmy Fallon, he always made an environment that was welcoming and fun.

**J**in Speech and Debate, I tried to be fearless in my HI performances, but the knots in my stomach would twist until I felt like I couldn't breathe.

Everyone I competed against was both funny and incredibly confi-



*Art by Siânby Cheng*

dent. Despite watching comedy all the time, I didn't do very well in HI, and I frequently got low scores. I improved as the year went on, but I was so shy and scared to speak in front of people that my act would become stale and awkward when I performed. I had just come from a period in my life where I was obsessed with comedy and would practice my impressions, accents, and regrettable stand-up routine in the mirror. As the year went on and my scores stayed stale, I began to think I was really bad at humor, and this disheartened my personal sense of self. While my coaches in Speech gave me tips to settle my anxiety, and my teammates were kind and supportive, I couldn't shake the nerves. Here's what I found though:

I would get petrified to go up there and speak and I felt like crying every day. It wasn't until one day that I told myself that if Mr. R did this as a high schooler, I could too. Something changed when I realized that. I didn't qualify for state or even win a tournament. But I started getting better and more confident. Even as a performer today, I get intense stage fright and anxiety. But I think about how confident and brave I am now, how willing I am to try and fail. I don't know if I would've had that confidence without the influence of Mr. R.

**J**in my senior year of high school, I had Mr. R again for College Credit Plus writing classes. College Credit Plus was a dual enrollment program where high school students could take college credit classes at their high school with their high school teachers. Mr. R taught Writing I and II, and he was also the designated Creative Writing teacher, so I had him for two class periods straight. Our COVID-19 lockdown happened the spring of my junior year, so senior year we were on a hybrid system, and I was going to school on the days my friends were at home, since we were categorized by last names (A-L on Mondays and Wednesdays, M-Z on Tuesdays and Thursdays). Also, in my junior year, I went through a really scarring breakup. Coupled with the isolation of COVID, I became depressed. By senior year, I wanted to leave as soon as possible. I ached for the day I could finally leave Niles and explore college where no one knew how embarrassing I acted junior year, and painful memories would not surround me every time I went to school. The only thing that still made me excited and happy to go to school was Mr. R.

**J**ust like in freshman year, he made class entertaining and enjoyable. My friend and I started to make him analyze Taylor Swift songs with us at the end of class, and if there was time, we would watch their respective music videos. He would read over all my college applications and would give me extensive advice. He was always there to listen to me and guide me when I was feeling like I never wanted to come to school again. In senior year, I became just like my cousin wanting to skip school every day, and just like her, the only thing that made me want to stay was Mr. R.

**A**s a mentor, he taught me everything he possibly could in a relatively short span of four years. As a coach in Mock Trial and as a teacher, he was not only supportive and encouraging, but also challenging. I felt such a desire to impress him that I worked incredibly hard in high school. When I think back on high school, I am pretty embarrassed how driven I was by this need to impress him. Coming to college, this drive turned into a drive to impress myself more than anyone else. But when I reflect on all that work I did, I realize that it was because I was so driven and studious that I earned enough scholarships to go to my dream college, Oberlin. I am not saying Mr. R is the sole reason I am successful, but no other teacher pushed me as hard in my studies, no other teacher so strongly encouraged and fueled my love of learning. He had this vision of me as a true scholar, and I didn't just want to live up to it, I wanted to exceed it. Today, I really don't care what people think of me. But his influence in my life made me who I am.

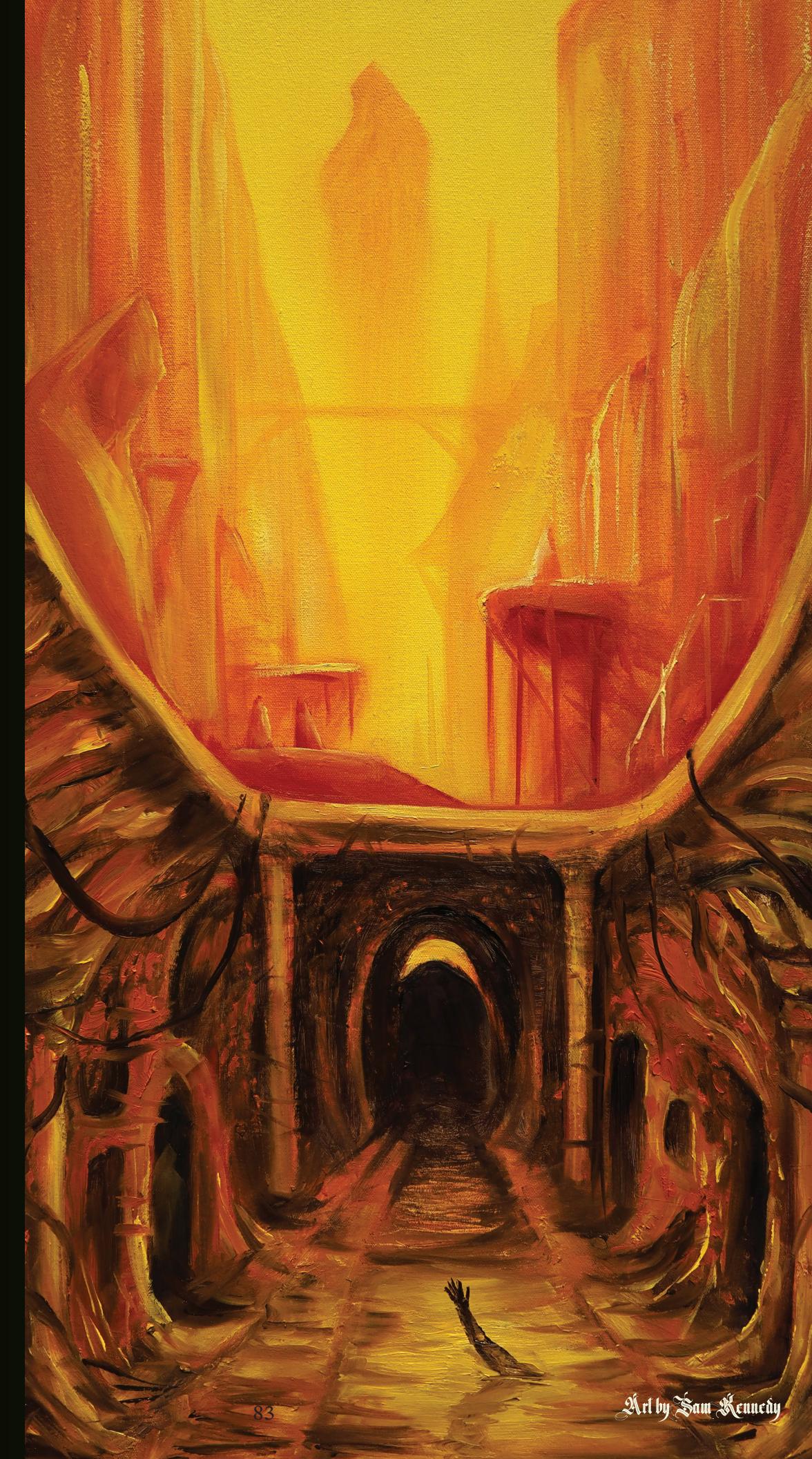
**J**he best thing, I realize now, is that he always made me feel like I was accepted for who I was. Just like Jimmy Fal-

lon always showed kindness to his guests, Mr. R became someone to say that despite whatever faults or mistakes I made, I was still accepted. I was always welcome.

**A**nd I think that type of validation is much more reassuring when it comes from someone you truly admire. It felt like 13-year-old me was hearing Jimmy Fallon, appearing to me just as he does on *The Tonight Show* stage with his star-studded smile in his blue suit and striped tie, telling me that he was personally proud of me.

**J**ust like the illusion of Jimmy Fallon faded as I got older, I realized too that Mr. R was not perfect either—none of us are. But at the end of the day, he was someone I wanted on my side. He was someone I enjoyed talking to, someone I really liked as a person, and someone I knew would be a constant figure of support for me.

**C**omedy will always be a part of what made me who I am. I am not fixated on it in the same way as when I was a tweenager, but I still love it. It still serves as an antidote to my anxiety, and listening to Conan O'Brien's podcast once in a while (okay, maybe more than that) helps me get through the day. Now this is the part where you think I am going to tell you I did stand-up and killed it, but that's not true. I still have no desire to be a comedian, and I no longer practice my impressions in the mirror (okay, that one might not be totally true). But I will always love comedy for giving me consolation when I need it most.





T r o m s ø  
T r o m s ø  
N o r w a y

# ON TOP OF THE WORLD

The greatest four days of the greatest four months of my life were last-minute. Yeah. Because of the expense and popularity, most people plan trips to Tromsø, Norway and other Arctic Circle locales weeks to months in advance. Meanwhile, I planned mine less than two weeks in advance, and the only reason I did it at all was because of my friend Sijia. On November 13th, 2023, we were texting about Thanksgiving break plans since our Copenhagen study abroad program was giving us the week off. It was starting to really sink in that I wasn't going to be able

to return to the States for the annual Thanksgiving reunion of my *ima*'s side of the family, so I hadn't made any plans and was looking for stuff to do. She said that she and Ethan, a friend of hers I met at Halloween, were going to Tromsø from November 22nd to 26th, and I immediately asked if I could go with. I'd been dreaming of going to the Arctic Circle for years, and thought going to Copenhagen would be my chance, but classes and nerves delayed me. I'd become so confident since coming to Copenhagen, and yet something about traveling elsewhere, truly alone, still spooked me.

by  
Emery Haze

Reading this, you probably thought I stuck with them the whole time, and came away with two best friends. Well, I didn't. I actually barely saw them; once we got to Tromsø and went to our separate hotels and activities, they pretty much vanished from my mind. I know that sounds callous, and I've been mulling over why I did it. All these months later, I think I know. I'd realized rather quickly that inviting myself along might've been a social flub, especially since they were going alone and doing things on a much tighter budget than I. By doing my own thing, I could give them their alone time back while simultaneously making the most of my time there. I think I also saw them as a safety net: If I needed help or company, I could call them up. Otherwise,

I could enjoy being on top of the world, and leave Tromsø without regrets.

"something about traveling elsewhere, truly alone, still spooked me"

Because I took the same flight as Sijia and Ethan to Tromsø, we all had a layover day in Oslo.

It could've been the day the three of us spent together. But it wasn't. I had my own itinerary, including a self-serve sauna. There were several of them in the city, little wooden rooms that floated on the gray Oslofjord, and this caused a mix-up with my Uber driver. I expected to feel panic—an earlier me would've been terrified at being lost in a cold capital city—but instead all I felt was a brief prick of annoyance, then calm as I determined Plan B: walk or call another Uber? I was a ten-minute walk from the sauna, so I pulled my hood tight and went on my way. In the sauna, I sprawled on the lower bench and lay still, lulled into a meditative state by the relaxing rock of the water. My mind slipped into a pleasant nothingness, and I focused only minutely on the rise of my diaphragm beneath my hands, and the occasional drip of steam-sweat along my skin. Thanks to my *ima*, I got my sea legs young, so I was as steady on the water as I was on land, and my inherit-

ed love of the ocean made me even more relaxed. When I was ready to leave, I checked my phone to see how many hours had gone by. Only forty minutes had passed. That night, before meeting Sijia and Ethan for dinner, I went to the Christmas market near our hotel. Nothing stood out until I came across a stall selling scarves. The textiles came in a myriad of soft colors and they felt as if they were made of Truffula trees. The pair of vendors spoke very little English, but from their words and the scarf label, I gleaned that they had come all the way from Nepal to sell their cashmere goat scarves. I hadn't planned on buying anything, but the vendors were so attentive and the scarves so soft that I couldn't bring myself to walk away without one. I really do share my *ima*'s affinity for sensory-indulgent impulse buys.

The next morning, I saw Sijia and Ethan for the last time on that trip to fly to Tromsø. We landed at 11:00 AM, as the sun was rising. I snapped the first in a series of breathtaking photos: the tracks in the tarmac's layer of snow, the sunset's colors streaking the sky, the mountains towering in the distance. It was the most idyllic welcome scene I could've asked for, and yet, there was a cloud on my horizon. It was November 23rd, Thanksgiving, and for the first time in my memory, I was missing out on the family reunion. My *ima*'s family is huge and deeply connected, with no shortage of relatives to catch up with and traditions to fulfill. I wouldn't be in this year's cousins' photo on my aunt's staircase, or at the kids' table (called that despite almost all of us cousins being over 18, with some of us in our 30s) waiting for my turn to say what I'm thankful for. *Ima* had agreed to play a video of me for the thankfulness speeches and someone would hold up my photo in the cousins' photo, but it wasn't the same. I think missing Thanksgiving was another reason I was so determined to make the most of my time in Tromsø. When I look back on these photos and stories and remember why I



wasn't there, I'll remember vacationing with Huskies and mountains—a pretty good reason to miss this one reunion—instead of simply being financially unable to go back.

I did so much in those four days in Tromsø, too much to fit in this one essay. The screenshot I took of my map at the airport shows me on top of the world, but truthfully, I was in another world altogether, one of wildlife and endless horizons and dark skies streaked with light, of warm cocoa and sweet pancakes and thick woolen sweaters. Each quaint building, lined with snow, was like something out of a storybook illustration, watercolor and colored pencil delicately mixed. Lights glowed against storefronts packed with all kinds of souvenirs: moose meat to loose-leaf teas, troll figurines to clothes, puzzles to books both saturated with the Aurora Borealis. I filled my days with activities, determined to savor every second, every inch of this Arctic wonderland. There was so much to learn, so much to experience, so many people to chat with. And that last one was a new one, I assure you. I'd never before looked forward to chatting with strangers. I saw it on almost all of my tour group experiences: the two Husky kennels, the Aurora Borealis bus chase, and the whale watching.

My first Husky experience was my first night in Tromsø: an extensive doggy-cuddle session and traditional dinner. When my tour group arrived, thick, wet snowflakes were whipped around by strong winds, their paleness breaking up the stark darkness, but it didn't bother the Alaskan Huskies—a sled dog type that crosses the weatherproof Siberian Husky with strong, energetic hunting and working dogs—at all. In fact, many of them seemed energized by the weather,

sitting atop their individual kennel-hut and gazing around as if on sentry duty. The tour guide, a young man from Australia who'd moved to Tromsø a few years ago, said there were 200 in all. I could believe it. The kennel-huts stretched far into the distance, which wasn't hard through the snow, but we heard the distant barks and howls of Huskies vying for attention from the night's visitors. As I moved from curious nose to eager tongue, I was amazed to see the Huskies' coats shed the snow before it even melted, and I marveled at how muscled and lithe they were, a far cry from the fluffy Siberian Huskies we tend to have as pets. Before dinner, the tour guide took us into the puppy pen, where

“ preteen puppies clambered over each other for a chance to chew on the cord of our tour guide's boot. Loud and curious, they were as immune to the snow as their elders, although they hadn't yet figured out that their water would freeze if they didn't drink it quickly enough. I befriended a British family on holiday during the bus ride and chatted with them through the experience. I even sat with them at dinner, where the kennel staff talked about raising and training the dogs and had a retired sled dog in the hut for us to pet.

The next day, I rose early to go to another Husky experience. This kennel had 140 dogs and, after suiting up in the provided gear and a few minutes of cuddling, we'd get to meet our dog teams and drive our own sled. I was paired with the only other single visitor: a German girl in her mid-twenties called Tatjana. She'd come with friends to Tromsø, but only she had wanted to do the Husky experience, so they'd agreed to meet up afterward. Our dog team had two females in heat in the lead, then old man Volvo in the middle, then two younger males. We were at the back of the pack, and we

*I was in another world altogether, one of wildlife and endless horizons and dark skies streaked with light, of warm cocoa and sweet pancakes and thick woolen sweaters.*

started off with Tatjana driving and me taking pictures. With the reindeer pelt warming my back and my feet braced on the sides of the sled, I carefully took photos of the landscape. We were on top of a mountain, and the snowfield around us was unbroken, save for the worn sled path.

Despite it being 1:00 PM, the sun still hovered at the horizon, streaking the pale sky with pastel hints of color. The world felt both enormous and intimate; there was so much around me, vastly stretching in every direction, and yet my awareness seemed to end at the edges of the dogsled. Halfway through the hour-long ride, it was my turn to drive. Tatjana turned around to take a photo of me and I nearly cried when I first saw it; I didn't know I could look that happy. I'm a little thing, so I had to put both feet on the brakes and really sink my weight down to put enough force to stop the strong, energetic dogs. It wasn't a problem until we bumped over a snow-covered rock or root a bit too fast. I lost my footing, and it was only thanks to my grip on the handlebar that I wasn't left behind. Unfortunately, since neither Tatjana nor I knew the verbal command for 'stop' and it was too dangerous for Tatjana to dig her feet into the ground to slow us down, I ended up being dragged behind the sled for nearly a minute. It would've been so easy to panic or cry, but instead, I laughed the whole way, too thrilled to be upset. Eventually, news traveled up the line that I'd been thrown, so the tour guides accompanying us stopped the ride. The guide at the midpoint came racing back to check on me, and as I regained my footing, I breathlessly assured him I was okay. Lesson unlearned, Tatjana and I decided to lag behind the slowpokes in front of us so we could let our team run full-pelt for a stretch. The thrill was well worth the risk of getting thrown again which, thankfully, didn't happen. When we returned to base to return the gear, several people asked if I was okay, and I happily reported that I was fine and struck up conversation with them. When I woke up the next morning, I hadn't a single bruise, but my muscles ached like I'd been beaten head-to-toe. Still riding the high from the previous days and looking forward to the days to come, I didn't care a bit. If anything, the soreness was a welcome reminder of the thrill.

**THE ARCTIC'S EXTREME CONDITIONS AND UNIQUE BEAUTY SEEMED TO ATTRACT THE KIND OF PERSON I WAS BECOMING**

“ IS THAT NOT A SIGN OF LOVING BEING ALONE ON TOP OF THE WORLD?



imagined them as slow-moving, but if you blinked, you'd miss the shorter flares. The gentleman I sat beside had a great iPhone camera, and he was happy to share his excellent photos with those of us whose cameras weren't so great.

The whale watching was on my last full day in Tromsø. I struggled to find the meeting point, but noticed other people milling about, so I called out to ask if they were also looking for the whale watching tour, and they were. It wasn't long before one of the tour guides came to show us where the boat was, and I quickly got settled. Tired from coming home so late from the bus chase, I slept the two hours it took to arrive at the whaling area, lulled to sleep by the boat's undulations. I woke up to an incredible view. The distant mountains had to be akin to the ones surrounding the town, yet the pale gray mist shrouding them made them look like something out of a half-forgotten dream. The ocean was rolling and gray, the waves capped with white, and I wished I could see the mountain shore. The whale sightings were even more magnificent. We soon saw a pair of humpbacks in the distance, their ridged backs breaking the ocean surface, but not coming up quite high enough for their tails to show. A half hour later, our tour guides were notified of a nearby pod of orcas. When we arrived, a small research boat was hovering mere meters from them with a researcher perched on the bow to get their equipment as close as they safely could. Another tourist boat wasn't quite as close, but certainly within disrespectful distance. A part of me wished our tour guides were irresponsible enough to get closer, but a much larger part of me knew that that was a horrid, selfish idea: The orcas' health and safety came far, far before anyone's desire to gawk at them. Wrapped in my warmest clothes, I stood out in the snow and wind with the rest of the group to squint at the distant dorsal fins. There were so many of them, including two calves. After carefully following them for a bit, the tour guides

reported that the orcas had located a massive school of fish and we'd soon be treated to a feeding frenzy. It wasn't as visually exciting as hunting behaviors such as throwing seals and dolphins into the air with a mighty tail-whack, or as visceral as attacking large enough prey to bloody the water (why do

"humans find that so appealing?"), but

the frothy water and circling fins were certainly amazing to witness. I pictured their imposing forms hunting in coordinated pairs, a tactic that made them one of the ocean's top predators. By the time they finished feeding, it was time to head back.

Interspersed among the sightings was conversation with the young mother and gentleman in my couch area. While the mother rested, I happily entertained the daughter by marveling at the outfits she created for the girls in her foam sticker dress-up book. The gentleman had a fantastic camera and, like the man on the bus chase, happily shared his photos and videos. On the way back, the three of us chatted, pausing only when a young woman in the next couch area got seasick. Thankfully, I had some extra Bonine on me, and knew enough about treating nausea to help her through it with her head between her knees and ice from the bar on the back of her neck. I was ringing with pride as the woman slowly recovered, and the praise from my companions made me warm all over.

I didn't realize how much I'd come to savor my newfound social skills until I wound up in a situation where I'd wanted to use them and wasn't able to. On my last night, I had an Aurora Borealis dinner cruise. For the first time all trip, I was the only single tourist in the group. I struck up a conversation

with two couples as we waited to board and was looking forward to eating with them, but I ended up being seated apart from them. The young couple next to me were immersed in their phones and each other, so conversation wasn't an option, and I wasn't going to walk over to the people I'd spoken to. Strangely, it bothered me even more than the meal lacking good vegetarian options, and almost as much as the lack of Aurora Borealis sightings. Lonely and unsettled, I read on my phone and texted my folks to entertain myself. The only thing that kept the cruise from being a bust which I'd consider asking a refund for was the view of the townlights and the vivid Aurora Borealis that crossed the sky just as we left the boat. It was the best way to change the tone of the night.

To this day, I wonder why I felt so confident chatting with these strangers. Was it proof that I'd grown and I wanted to indulge in it? Did it feel safer, after all the times people had rejected me after getting to know me? All I know was that it was

so out of character for me. An earlier me would've been on my phone anytime something wasn't actively going on. A more recent, but still outdated, version of me would've tried to maintain contact with any "friends" I might've made, not understanding the concept of tour group friends. This me exchanged amiable farewells with my companions at the end of each experience, and I didn't see any of them again.

Despite this, I still savored my alone time. I saw proof of this in my extensive window shopping and in the four museums I attended. In Oslo, I went to the Paradox Museum, and in Tromsø, I went to Polaria, the polar aquarium, on the 23rd; the Troll Museum on the 24th; and the Polar Museum on the 26th. In each of them, I relished my solitude. I didn't have to persuade anyone to come with me, didn't have to wait on anyone before going to the next exhibit or feel rushed by their moving on (even if they told me to take my time), didn't have to worry about boring or annoying anyone with my nerdy



ART BY JULIA STUART

enthusiasm and commentary. So many social expectations were lifted; I could be my weird, nerdy self for as long as I wanted. My visit to Polaria best displays this.

**I**t was my first Tromsø activity, and I arrived with my nose red and runny with cold. The aquarium was small, so it didn't take me long to see all the quirky fish and shells, all residents of the Arctic. I took endless photos and videos for personal enjoyment and writing reference. I peered as close to the creatures as I safely could, marveling at their muted colors and unusual shapes. I probably looked like an overgrown child, but I didn't care; I was focused on learning, and relishing the joy that marine life gives me (it combines two of my favorite things—animals and water).

I went up to the seal tank early to ensure I had a good spot for the feeding demonstration. They had a harbor seal couple and their pup, a type of seal I'd seen at other aquariums, and two female bearded seals, displayed only in Arctic-area aquariums. Large and whiskered, they blobbed their fat brown bodies around on land and effortlessly glided through the water, twitching their thick whiskers as if showing them off. I grinned and giggled like it was just me and the seals. I'd realized I was the only individual visitor, but looking back, I realized I was the only one in the whole place without a companion. The adult seals obeyed commands as one, were fed as one; Leo, the pup, might've been behaving alone but he had his trainer all to himself, and the eyes of almost every visitor upon him. There were two cashiers at the gift shop, three trainers, and at least two of every creature, even the preserved crabs in the display cases. But, taken as I was by all animals, I was quite content to be alone. There was no one to take viewing turns with, no one wanting to go or leave before I wanted to, no one groaning I'd spent too much at the gift shop or bought a trinket I'd never touch again.

**I** never appreciated my solitude more than when I first returned to my Kollegium apartment. The moment I stepped inside, a weight lifted off my shoulders as my tiredness took center stage. Traveling took so much out of me, but it was worth it, this time more than any other. With no roommate to ensure I didn't wake, I was able to settle in my way. I had less than three weeks in Copenhagen, but it hadn't hit me yet; it was only in the last ten days did it hit me that I was leaving, and returning to a place whose only redeeming qualities were my family, handful of friends, and the societal norm of being able to pet most people's dogs.

**D**uring my time abroad, especially those precious four days in Tromsø, I discovered a version of myself I didn't know existed. I was social and bold and open and free and, above all, content. When my Uber driver dropped me at the wrong self-serve sauna and I was essentially lost in Oslo, an earlier me would've catastrophized. This me merely pulled out my map and started walking. When I needed to call my hotels about my reservations, an earlier me would've gotten a friend to do it, or found a way not to call. This me called like I didn't even know the meaning of phone anxiety. When I was in crowds, an earlier me would've been irritably full of anxiety and reliant on distractions. This me chatted with those around me and took deep breaths when the tall, hot bodies started to overwhelm me.

**S**o many tourists had come in a group, but many of the people from or living in Tromsø were alone, independent, and at peace. One of them was a Frenchman who prided himself on making the Northernmost crêpes before the Northernmost church. I came across him on my final night and, hungry from my lackluster cruise dinner, I happily got in line and chatted while I waited. He stood at his cart in the snow all day, nearly every day, hands and face pre-

vented from freezing from the heat of his griddle, his body and feet swamped in clothing. He was so amiable and at ease, and his crêpe was fantastic. The Arctic's extreme conditions and unique beauty seemed to attract the kind of person I was becoming, and it wasn't a new phenomenon. Famed Norwegian explorer Henry Rudi went to the Arctic 40 times and overwintered 25 times—is that not a sign of loving being alone on top of the world? (Here's a fun fact: he became famous across Norway for killing 713 polar bears—an atrocious number by our standards, but a brilliant survival feat). Is that why I loved it so much?

**D**id I have to go so far away from home to see how far I've come? I think so. This best version of myself simply wasn't possible in the States. I was stuck in an exhausting political scene that merged politics and morals and seemed to breed extremists like rats. Vegetarian meat alternatives were costly and tasted bad. Healthcare was abhorrently expensive and littered with red tape. On a personal level, as a result of my own incompetence and elements outside my control, I relied on my parents and college to provide food and transportation for me; my nourishment, entertainment, and ability to work were limited by their limits. I thought I didn't like going out because I rarely had the chance to. On family vacations, I lacked the transportation and nerve to do things on my own, and even if I'd had it, my *ima* wanted us to do stuff together. At college, I was around people who held my rumor-exaggerated mistakes against me, giving me no chance to prove how I'd improved, and as the hurts piled up, I wondered why I should go on living when the future was just going to be more of the same. My smiles and small talk were natural but forced, a result of years of DBT. I was exhausted at the end of each day, savoring every minute I could unmask.

**I**n Copenhagen and Tromsø, I learned about a political scene that separated morals and politics in countries that protected minorities, had socialized healthcare, and enjoyed delicious, healthy food where meat was more expensive than vegetarian alternatives. On a personal level, it was up to me to sink or swim, and to choose how to spend my time and money; it turns out I'm quite capable and frugal, and the public transportation and walkable cities showed me I quite like going out. Best of all, I had a truly fresh start with the best version of myself, and I saw just how far I'd come. I realized that I wasn't the problem, or at least not all of it; I made good conversation with just about everyone I met, and I had the means and confidence to go places I never thought I'd go. I barely thought about all the things that made me a disquieting, annoying oddity in America; I let myself be myself, uninhibited by the fear of social consequences. In a sentence, I had proof that a better future existed. Full of peace and hope, I came home tired because of all the walking, my mask unnecessary.

**A**ll my doubts, anxiety, and limits disappeared when I was on top of the world, and now that I'm back in the States, I'm stuck in old circumstances, hurts, and weaknesses, my situation all the more agonizing because I know how much better things could be. The best version of myself isn't here anymore, so I'm planning possible futures around trying to bring her back: city-based internships, graduate school in America and Europe, a gap year to travel Europe, and more. I'm considering every factor possible—political climate, healthcare, food, feeling protected and valued by my governing bodies, big city vs. suburbia, temporary vs. permanent living—because what I want, more than anything in this world, is to be truly happy again. I don't care where. I don't care how.

I just want to be happy.





# Zayde

by Cole Mirman

My zayde, a stolid man with a fearsome mustache, never learned much English, a fact he brandished as a point of personal pride. He would repeat that words had power and that he didn't want to give up his Yiddish, always without further elaboration—while my father would go on and on about how that didn't make sense and how the pride must have been an act Zayde put on to hide some secret embarrassment at his lack of ability. They had this argument so often it became routine, like the small glass of plum brandy Zayde drank every morning or the cigar he puffed on every night while he read *The Daily Forward*.



Meanwhile, my brother Mikhael would speculate that maybe Zayde's real embarrassment was that he just didn't have much to say. Dad called him "a man of few words"; Mikhael said he was really a man of no words occasionally forced to act out of character. In such moments when he did speak, his speech was soft, stilted, as though muffled by that great hairy mustache of his. We had to lean in to hear him mutter that words had power, or that he wanted to keep his Yiddish, or that we should know more of it, or that he was heading off to Canal Street to buy whiskey or to Brooklyn to pick up some dry goods or to Long Island to work in the pipe factory and would return in the evening. Mikhael reasoned that since that one language on its own was already more than Zayde was suited to in terms of self-expression, he certainly didn't require another; only I couldn't figure why he would then be so attached to that first tongue that he barely used.

In our Jersey neighborhood, he appeared not only unassimilated, but uncivilized—savage, even, with his bristly mustache and full head of hair—a Neanderthal that got lost and found itself on the streets of West New York. He even moved with an apish shamble; when he schlepped his cart of dry goods along his route or entered our house clutching an enormous bag of men's smoking pipes, he always looked like some prehistoric hunter hauling his latest kill or returning with some game he'd trapped.

This semblance was not helped by how, thanks to his crepuscular habits, his breath stank brutally of Slivovitz and his wool suits smelled like sheepskin pelts worn around a primeval fire. Nor did it help that he got his brandy and his clothes from the same places as the whisky he bootlegged and the dry goods he sold door-to-door, and his pipe from the very factory where he worked, as though he lived entirely off himself, off things he caught, relying on them for his sustenance and even for the furs he wore, a true primitive man. West New

York, Canal Street, Brooklyn, Long Island...

these were his hunting grounds. The other kids in our area, somewhat scared of him, called him "the Caveman."

My dad and brother didn't think much better of him—although they often accused Zayde of hiding embarrassment with haughtiness, I think, in reality, they were the ones embarrassed by him and doing precisely that. For me, however, the qualities they disliked in him instead imbued him with a certain mystique, and as a youngster, I regarded him with reverence; the way he invoked the power of words, he seemed the keeper of some mysterious, kabbalistic magic; a primitive, sure, but less "hunter-gatherer" and more "primeval shaman."

Drawn to him, perhaps hoping to learn something, I'd often accompany him along his route, helping him push the cart through our neighborhood. Our neighborhood—dirty gray streets lined by tenements of plain brown brick dressed in the dark metal of window bars and fire escapes—gulls squawking on the waterfront and horns groaning distant in the harbor—that grimy, industrial feel—the smell of garbage, damp pavement, and the sea.

Or I'd sit with Zayde in our cellar on piles of coal, next to the furnace and the wine press, helping him mend pipes in the dim light. While we worked down there, he would teach me more Yiddish by making me trace words in the paper. He'd explain references I didn't understand; I remember him telling me the story of the golem, a silent protector molded from clay and brought to life by the Hebrew letters inscribed on its forehead. Words have power, Zayde would say. Thinking back, it could be that his reverence for words was why he so seldom expended them, why he held onto his Yiddish like it was a finite resource. Or maybe it was the other way around—maybe he cared about words so much because he had so few.

When we came up from the cellar, the seats of our pants would be black with coal dust, as

though we were carrying its subterranean darkness up with us. Annoyed, my father would brush me down and complain that Zayde would ruin my clothes and my eyes, making me work down there in the dinge and gloom. This was another argument they had all the time—Zayde would reply that the dust of one's own land never ruined one's clothes and that reading the mother tongue never ruined anyone's eyes, and then my father would say that we moved here so his children could grow up free, not laboring in a dungeon, and then Zayde would respond that growing up away from one's earth and without the power of Yiddish words was no improvement and certainly no freedom, and on and on they'd go.

One day, listening to this debate, I asked them to tell more about why we left the Pale. I retained only a few fragmented images of life there—green moss on gray masonry—a great wooden water wheel creaking as it turned in a clear current babbling over glossy round stones—thick black soil scented with the centuries.

"There were pogroms," my father explained, "when the Cossacks would ride in and massacre us." Now talking more to me than to Zayde: "We were merchants and traders, but we couldn't own property—the family mill belonged to our Russian neighbor. After your great-grandparents died, he repossessed it, leaving us in poverty. We subsisted on scraps—"

**WE ATE SCRAPS, ZAYDE MURMURED, BUT WE HAD OUR WORDS.**

"What about the deed to the mill?" my father retorted. "To 'our earth'? Did we have those words?"

**WE HAD OUR WORDS, ZAYDE REPEATED.**

Perhaps this explained why he possessed so few today—perhaps the words Zayde had before

were taken from him, or simply lost—to the Pale as we left—at sea during our Atlantic crossing—in the shuffle of Ellis Island—on unfamiliar Jersey streets.

Zayde wasn't wrong to say that we, too, were losing them. We never went to shul, as there were none nearby, and my brother and I rarely attended cheder—to get there, we had to cross rough Irish and Italian neighborhoods where other boys would harass and chase us. Sometimes we'd escape; sometimes they'd catch us but my brother would talk our way out; other times he'd fail and they'd beat us and leave us lying bruised in some alleyway and we'd have to limp the rest of the way. and we'd have to limp the rest of the way.

My brother was a fast talker, maybe too fast for his own good—he talked us deeper into trouble as often as he talked us out of it. Maybe all the words that skipped Zayde wound up in him instead; certainly, Mikhael had all the aptitude for English that Zayde didn't, and between that language and Yiddish, Mikhael regarded the latter as fondly as Zayde did the former. In my brother's view, Yiddish just got us beaten, while English had the actually powerful words, which could at least sometimes make things better instead of always worse. As we grew, our bullies always growing faster, the route to Hebrew School never getting easier, I wondered if Mikhael was right, if Zayde really was just a crazy old man.

But then one day Mikhael complained about our bullies to our father, who recommended using humor to defuse such situations—my brother applied this plan by mocking them, which of course only antagonized them further. They chased us all the way back to our own neighborhood, where they cornered us against a brick wall. There were five of them, each as big as us two put together, but Mikhael kept on teasing them; he'd start a joke, and they'd slog him in the stomach, and Mikhael, doubled over, would wheeze

the punchline; they'd strike him across the face and his nose would bleed, and he'd taunt them again through gritted, red-stained teeth.

I tried to shut him up, to no avail. He was keeping them away from me, I realized—but it wouldn't work much longer. That might have been our last stand, our last moment before we ended as two stains on the bricks, but then he arrived: a small man with a big mustache, smelling of pipesmoke and plum brandy, pushing a cart of dry goods.

He stopped and regarded the gang of boys, who similarly stopped and stared back. Calmly, even tenderly, he brought out his pipe and packed it with tobacco, struck a match against his cart's wooden side, lit the pipe, took a long puff, and then exhaled into their faces, all while maintaining unwavering eye contact.

The boys exchanged glances.

That's the Caveman, one said.

I heard he came here from Russia, another added.

I heard he hunted bears.

I heard mammoths.

He doesn't look so tough, the oldest boy remarked.

We could take him.

### *But none of them moved*

Zayde erupted with a scolding tone, admonishing them in Yiddish, chiding, chastising, chastening, chewing them out, on and on for a full minute. They shrank before his words. He concluded with a sharp sweep of his arm, bringing his pipe back up to his lips, and a barked command in English:

“Now go!”

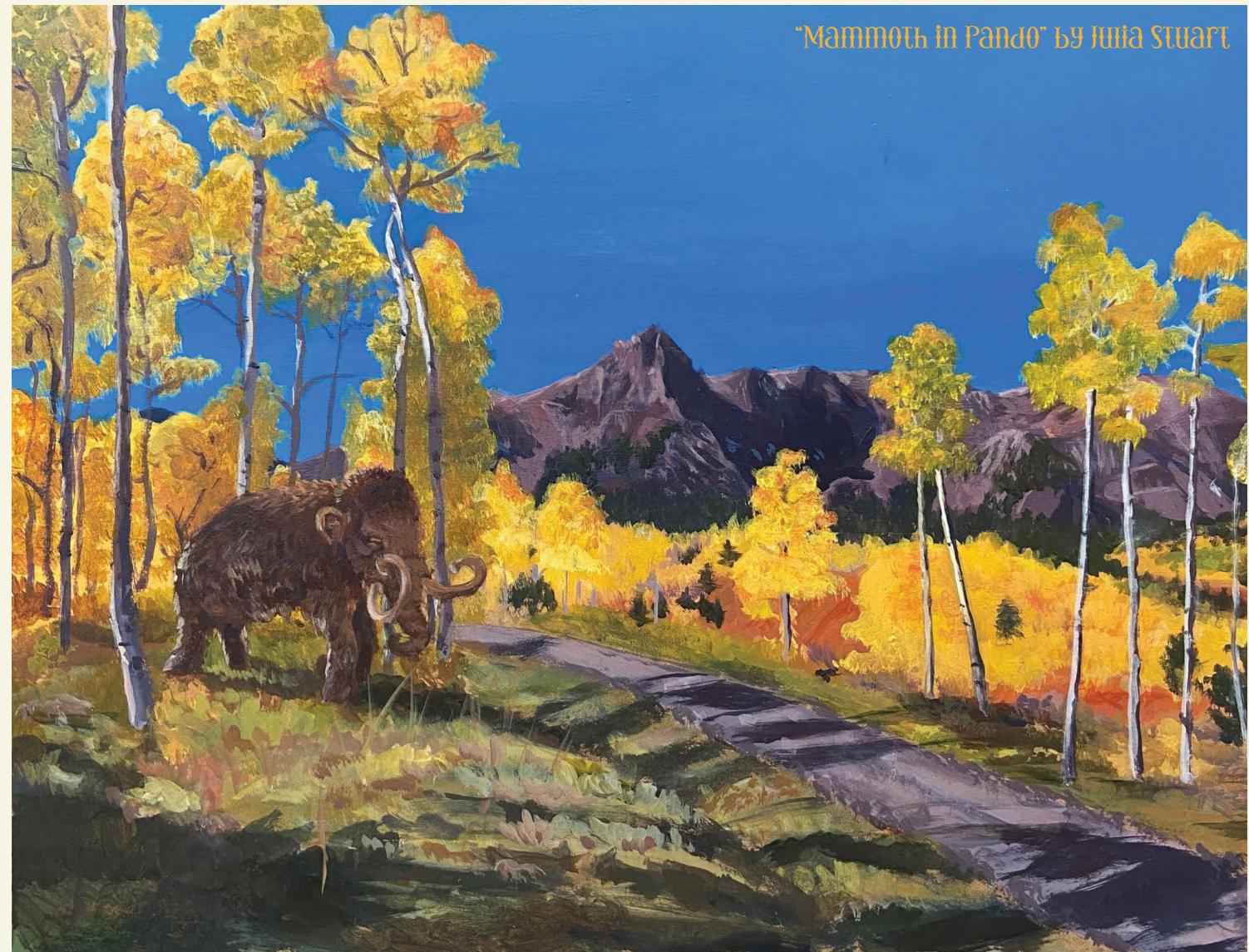
### THE BOYS TURNED AND FLED

Without another word, clutching his pipe in his teeth, Zayde helped Mikhael up into the cart, seemingly unbothered by the blood that ruined the sheets and bedding there, and together we pushed him home. My brother and I never went to cheder again after that, but Mikhael finally began attending Zayde's impromptu Yiddish lessons in the cellar, trading the red stains of blood for the black of coal dust.

With that, Dad gave up on keeping us from there, and Mikhael and I, now older and more receptive to Zayde's truth, realized that despite his appearance and nickname, he was no brute, nor shaman. For one thing, he was quite sharp, with a good head for figures and business, able to explain every detail in the financial news, although he'd had no formal education. Moreover, Zayde was a sweet man; a sensitive man; a family man. He invariably read all the obituaries, and each month he'd visit the cemetery to place a small stone on the grave of his late wife—my grandmother, lost to influenza. Like her, he took in a great many stray cats, whom he spoiled with prodigious quantities of milk.

He remembered her not only with visits and cats, but also with his hacking cough, which he'd developed during the pandemic and, perhaps with the aid of his pipe habit, never lost. That cough was such a constant for so long, it surprised us all when it finally did him in, even though he'd been coughing blood for several weeks and refused to see a doctor, despite my father's pleading.

This was during the Depression—we'd fallen on bad times and lost ownership of our house, forcing us to pay rent to stay there, and Zayde had been working twice as hard. He was lugger a barrel of raw whiskey in through the door when he leaned over hacking into his sleeve, then leaned further until he was hanging onto the door frame, still



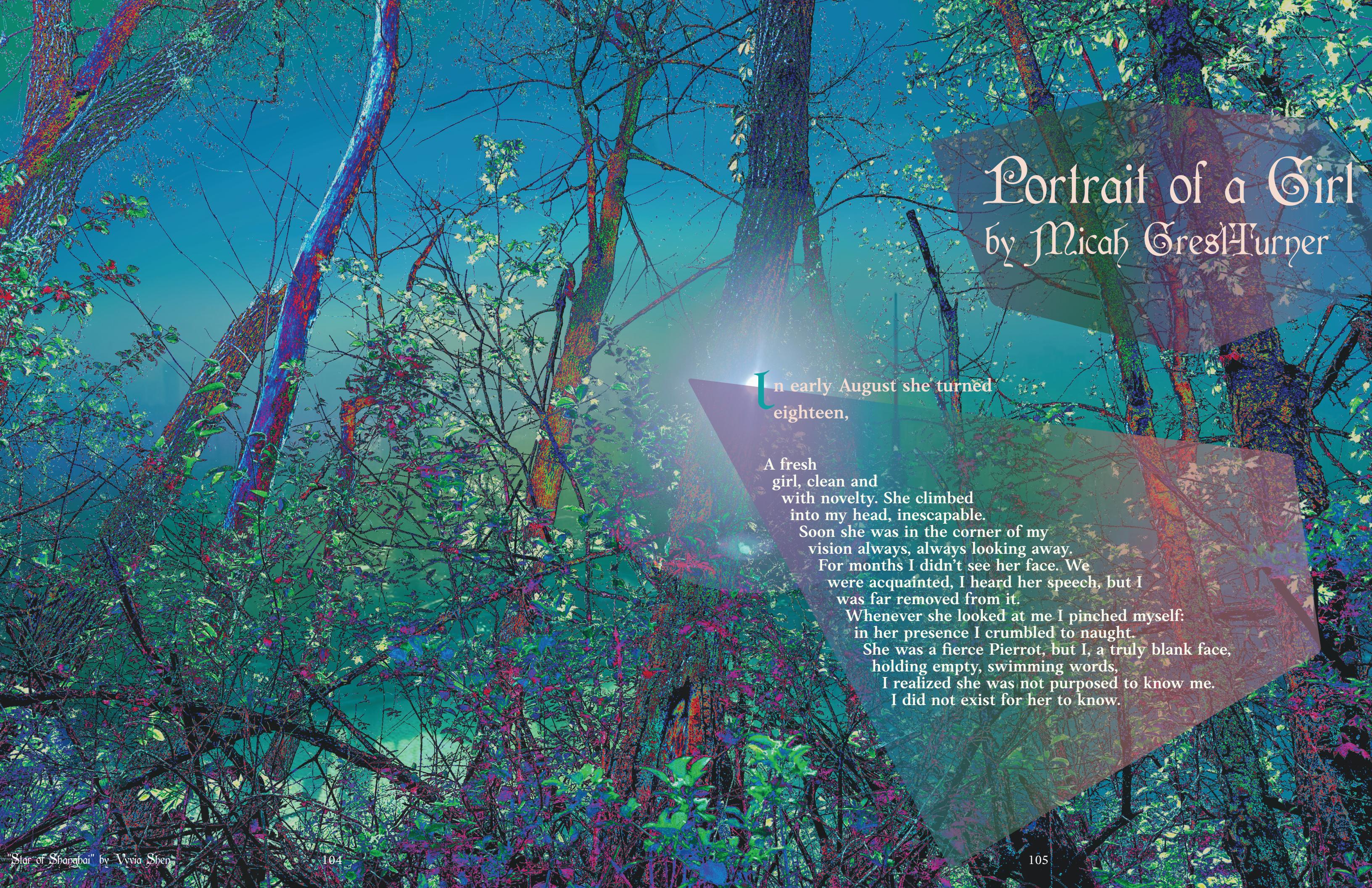
“MAMMOTH IN PANDOR” BY JULIA STUART

coughing, then further still so he was doubled over like he'd been slogged in the stomach, still coughing, then even further so he was crumpled on the ground, where he stopped coughing and never got up. We found the trash can in his room stuffed with bloodied tissues; the issue was far worse than he'd let on. He was sixty-four.

We couldn't give him a Jewish burial, as the only funeral parlor in town was a Christian one. They trimmed his mustache and combed his hair; lying pale and tidy in his casket, he no longer looked like himself, like a caveman that got lost and found itself on the streets of West New York. Still,

I kept feeling I only had to lean in a little closer to hear him mutter that words had power, or that he wanted to keep his Yiddish, or that we should know more of it, or that he was heading off to Canal Street to buy whiskey or to Brooklyn to pick up some dry goods or to Long Island to work in the pipe factory and would return in the evening. But no—he'd finally lost his Yiddish, was now truly a man of no words.

At last, he was assimilated.



# Portrait of a Girl

by Micah Gresham

In early August she turned eighteen,

A fresh  
girl, clean and  
with novelty. She climbed  
into my head, inescapable.

Soon she was in the corner of my  
vision always, always looking away.

For months I didn't see her face. We  
were acquainted, I heard her speech, but I  
was far removed from it.

Whenever she looked at me I pinched myself:  
in her presence I crumbled to naught.

She was a fierce Pierrot, but I, a truly blank face,  
holding empty, swimming words,

I realized she was not purposed to know me.  
I did not exist for her to know.

**E**ven  
so, the world bent around her  
presence.

All plants turned towards her, a beacon of  
colored adornments, draped with lace and cotton,  
she could even speak, her mouth curling smoothly  
like smoke:

The apocalypse was given to John on a stone tablet.

**H**er blood runs thick and grounding through her  
light arms,  
such as the crimson crane stood, tall outside the class  
window, filtering the light:  
That's where I'd be truly happy.  
I'd like to do something like that.

**E**ven her smile at some sharper girl felt like a fiery  
glare,  
Her eyes slid anywhere but, glazed yet cradling the  
whole world inside,  
a jagged green lake in that iris with bone all  
around.  
And she contained whirlpools in some  
infinitesimal space under the abdomen,  
She bled in abundance bloody dark fruit.  
I watched her for years, even after she left. She  
did not change,  
the well of all English at her finger, sparkling red  
across the page.  
She does not know barrenness: Her head is  
turned forever from that sterile end,  
the fixed marble sleep that kisses me each  
morning, clutching my fat like a vice.  
Her neck and wrists teem with life, yet move as  
move the undead.

**E**For  
I have loved  
you so, states the  
gynecologist.

To know God, you must know Him  
through Me, gestures the professor.  
And know that I am with you always, sighs the  
childhood bedroom.

**T**rust in me,

she whispers from her newsprint fan of scribbled longhand,

**T**rust in God,

she sings across the New World country expanse,

**T**rust in God—the mumbled dissertation in the doorway—  
lorries laugh in the warm air and the drugstore is holy and silent.



"Our Home" by Julia Stuart

# Colophon

The Volume 19 Spring Issue of *Wilder Voice Magazine* was published on May 6, 2024 and was released for distribution at Wilder Hall, 135 West Lorain St, Oberlin, OH 44074. The volume was printed on 8.5" by 11" paper. The typeface used for the body text and page numbers is Anko, a mixed style of Old Style Roman serif manufactured by Eko Bimantara. The cover and front matter use the typeface Clearface, designed by Victor Caruso and Morris Fuller Benton and published by ITC. Inner titles and bylines use the following typefaces (in order of appearance): Cocogoose Pro; Romantice; Love; Adorn Garland; Roman Antique; Marco; Overwave; Victoriandeco Regular; Velvet; Gaistro; Luminari; Optima; Lemosty; Bodywork; Middle Earth; Little Witches; Chicago Makers; Chalkduster; My Underwood; Magnific Chaos; Monteiro Lobato; Astrena; Laughing Frog; Cardinal; Wonderworld; Athelas. Publication of this issue could not have been possible without the help, time, and patience of Erika Scharf, Jane Taylor, Reyah Doshi, Shira Friedman-Parks, Vyvia Shen, Tina Zwaget, Wendy Brill, and the rest of Wilder Voice's staff and contributors.



“IMG\_6266.JPG” (2024)  
charcoal on paper

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## About the Cover

Selected works by Sage Gordon ‘24



“March 23 2008” (2023)  
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