# WILDER VOICE

SPRING 2018 : VOLUME 13, ISSUE 25

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

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

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## STAFF



*Image by Leah Yassky*

*Photograph by Anna Stearn*

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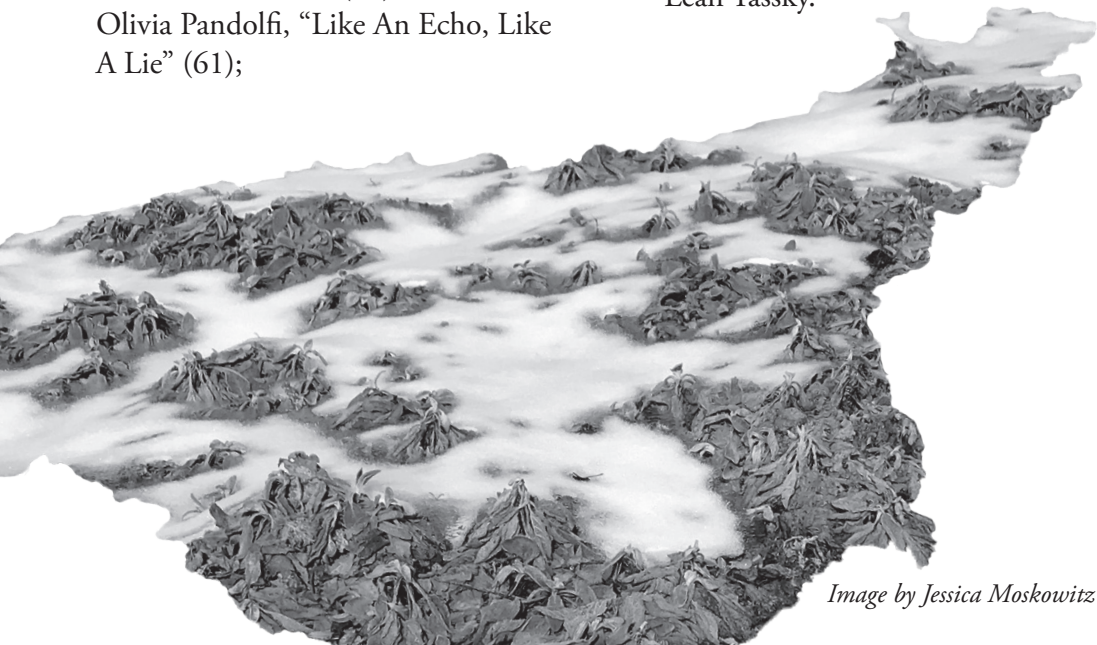


*Image by Jessica Moskowitz*


# 향수병

## CHARLOTTE PRICE

From A Far
What nationality
Or what kindred and relation
what blood relation
what blood ties of blood
what ancestry
what race generation
what house clan tribe stock strain
what lineage extraction
what breed sect gender denomination cause
what stray ejection misplaced
Tertium Quid neither one thing nor the other
Tombe de nues de naturalized
What transplant to dispel upon

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, from *Dictee*

*There have been 200,000 South Koreans adopted abroad since the end of the Korean War in 1953.*

One of those was you, my mom, shot across the ocean (in a plane?) accompanied by some random woman, headed into the arms of an equally unfamiliar woman. Did she hold you on the flight, were you afraid, were you lonely? Did you cry?

To think of this is too strange. I imagine instead that you came in a small dinghy or floating basket covered with blankets, like Moses in my Bible coloring book. Maybe you walked here across the ocean, fully grown and fully clothed, emerged onto the shore of this country, your hair tangled with seaweed and robes dripping with salt water.

*The Korean War marked the beginning of Korean adoption in the U.S. as 1,000 "mixed blood orphans" that had been fathered by American army men and Korean women faced racial stigmatization and isolation from Koreans that valued racial homogeneity. It seems important to mention here the undeniable connection between war, specifically violent U.S. interventions abroad, and increased foreign adoptions between the two countries. There are hidden yet undeniable histories of violence behind adoptions; not only war, but histories of children being forcibly, coercively removed from mothers, histories of cultural death, of racial isolation.*

The tidal oscillation of your Korean left us swimming in the aftermath of your push and pull. One morning we would wake to the smell of *japchae* and find pieces of paper scribbled with tiny Korean characters tucked into our notebooks. The whole family would parade dressed in traditional silken Hanboks, still stiff and creased from boxes. During one of these cultural outbursts you sent me to Korean Immersion camp in Minnesota. During another you went to Korea for nine months, leaving me and my brother Owen to subsist on microwaved Indian food that dad made. Our house still holds artifacts of these inundations: a box of Hanboks, folded and packed away, bowls of stale sweet potato noodles, Korean picture books tucked among English ones.

Sometimes when I come home from school break and we are the only two in the house, I will curl in bed next to you and cry and cry as you tell me these stories. This is me trying to catch and hold this strange family history; the story of how we came to be.

*Post-WWII, thousands of children were sent from Japan to the U.S. Post-Vietnam war, many refugee children were sent to white American homes. As U.S.-sanctioned state violence rose in the Central American countries of Guatemala and El Salvador, orphaned children, usually from indigenous families, were brought to the U.S. Not to mention histories of violence and coercion within the United States with the infamous efforts of the Bureau of Indian Affairs during the fifties to put displaced Native American children in homes of white families as a mode of cultural destruction.*

In high school my orchestra-stand partner was a fierce, trenchcoat-wearing lesbian adopted from China. We lost all our music and never practiced, so we fake-played from the back of the second violins. I think we considered ourselves fraudulent Asians. There was a certain shame disguised in our humor as we doodled boobs on our music instead of listening. From her, I learned the words *Twinkie* and *whitewashed*, I used them to explain myself. *The* Twinkie™ *and all its creamy, cakey, golden goodness needs no introduction.* Twinkie—yellow on the outside, white on the inside, an Asian person that acts so white it warrants an explanation.



*Photograph courtesy of the author*

*Long after the war had ended, Korean adoption continued. The infrastructure put in place to expand post-war democratic relations between South Korea and receiving countries is called by some an economic market specializing in the "export of babies."*

This seems strange, feels strange to write. Adoption is political, it is economic. It is also extremely personal. Let's not forget these are people we are talking about—they are too easily abstracted into figures, abstracted into historical moments. This is me, lying next to you in your bed, wiping my snot on the pillow, trying to make sense of these incongruous histories.

*There have been more than 200,000 South Koreans adopted abroad since the end of the Korean War in 1953.*

—

You left for nine months, and came back with a suitcase full of stone bowls,
You told me later about how you did strange things while you were there,
You rode the subways for hours, talking to no one.
You said that they looked at you funny, how funny to see someone that looked like them,
But when you spoke it was all wrong, they asked what was wrong with you
You said you were adopted.

In her paper "The Origins of Korean Adoption: Cold War Geopolitics and Intimate Diplomacy," Elena Kim marks the travel through space of an adoptee's return to their country of birth as a "journey back through time, a temporalization of space," postulating that "Traveling such a temporal path entails multi-directional movements, not simply from present to past or future, but sometimes from one present to another." You—a multidimensional time traveler—I imagine you swinging somewhere between here and there, caught in the space-time continuum, between the past that was and that present that could have been. The plane that you came here on suspended somewhere over the Pacific Ocean. In one possible future, I was never born. We talk over Skype in our living room across the many hour time difference an ocean away. You are blurry, your movements lag.

I wrote you to ask you about this; to ask you about many things that I have never fully known. You responded by Word document sent through email.

> *I had this feeling that if I could just become Korean enough to "pass" as a real Korean, I could go back, be accepted back, or at least feel that I was choosing to leave Korea on my own terms. It was not something I was even aware of, but deep down, I felt anger, deep shame and sadness, which made my relationship to the country and to my Korean friends very complicated. Studying the language was difficult, if not impossible. I could never get any traction. I would get very good at it, then stop for so long I would have to start up again as a beginner.*

*Images by Rachel Weinstein*

*When I was in Korea, I felt like someone else. I was a nomad. I refused to have a cell phone. I took no pictures. I kept to myself. I would leave odd little care packages around, with clothing and other essential items wrapped in bags. On doorsteps. Near park benches. At bus stops. No idea why. I felt homeless. Or I was caring for the homeless. It felt like a communication to the entire country.*

—

The area in Maine where you grew up was almost completely white, besides you and Mina, your adopted sister. This superimposed white identity has become part of our personal history. This whiteness created by an erasure created me, created a void every time I try and trace back the lines of my descent in my head and instead just hit the wall of my skull. Every time I am racialized.

*Being adopted, I think I imprinted on my white family from birth. In elementary school, I could not honestly tell I was Asian when I looked in the mirror. In fourth grade, I remember riding home on the bus, looking at my school picture all the way home, wondering how people could tell I was Asian.*

In "Adoptees as 'White' Koreans: Identity, Racial Visibility and the Politics of Passing Among Korean American Adoptees," Kim Park Nelson traces location and dislocation of whiteness in Korean adoptees. Complex racializations of Asian Americans in the U.S. at that time meant that Korean adoptees were racialized as white by adoptive families. This familial unification over the claiming of white American culture as a "single culture and national identity" meant assimilation at the cost of erasure of ethnic difference.

I don't know if they took away your names when they adopted you
Or if someone just forgot to tell them
You were called Jenny, your sister Sarah.
Bearing the names of the white folks in Maine as masks.
They made you search for those names
with them you found your lines of kinship, or lack of.
Now you Sun-mi, and she Mina
A reclamation? A return?

*It is not until grad school, age thirty, when I first learned to write my name in Korean. A Korean friend's mother taught me how to write "Sun-mi." I was like a kindergartener, my letters all big and shaky.*

—

One of Huffington Post's explanations for why so many people are adopted from Korea is because of a *jus sanguinis* ("right of blood") clause within laws of Korean citizenship, stating that automatic citizenship is obtained only if you are recognized as the child of a Korean national *father*. This clause was complicated by the fact that pre-1998, abandoned or stateless children found within the Korean territory were automatically naturalized, perhaps explaining why 80-90 percent of children born to single mothers in Korea were abandoned. Though this clause was dismembered in 1998, allowing for children born to Korean mothers to also

become citizens, the shame and stigma of being a single parent remains. This shame tied to the blood laws and blood lines, a blood-oriented culture that I cannot fully understand, is countered by the shame of Korea as a developed country whose children are abandoned and that sends so many children to families overseas.

My brother and I are your only blood relatives, your only Korean relatives.

I don't know your adopted parents' names. Somehow it just never came up. All I know is that your mom was outrageous and loved animals. You told us once about the time she gave mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a bird. They rescued horses, nearly dead, skin and bone, patchy balding horses that they would haul in their VW bus with the seats put down: Floyd, Mustard, and Gentle Ben, Black Beauty, all ferocious and damaged. Sometimes I wonder what they were thinking, your parents, when they adopted a child from Korea and one from the Dakota Sioux Tribe, in addition to their two white white white biological sons. You said your mom adopted you because she wanted girls, girly girls, real girls. Instead they ended up with you, an unruly tomboy who refused to wear pantyhose.

Though your adopted parents died before I was born, the material goods that they passed on still reside in our house—an antique wooden table, a cast iron sewing machine, a technicolored orange afghan. But these remnant possessions are not sufficient to reconstitute an extended family. When I think of your side of the family, I think instead of the Korean families in Amherst that you befriended. We would visit their houses that smelled funny and felt warm. We ate *japchae* in the living room of their blue apartment building, we ate *japchae* in the basement of the Korean church; me and my brother holding the crinkly cellophane fish that we had made as a Sunday school activity in our sticky hands—*japchae*—I remember disliking the rubbery clear noodles. They were too false, too plastic.

It wasn't until recently that I learned the importance of food, of Korean food. The AsZian Fuzzzion food that you would make: lo mein noodles in hard taco shells, a side of Annie's mac and cheese—white culture meets diasporic longing. I scoured the internet for food recipes that you refused to teach me, or didn't know how:

mykoreankitchen.com
bonappetit.com
budgetbytes.com
aspicyperspective.com
tasteofhome.com
Taste of home?

I filled in the gaps of information that you can't learn online; I asked my white friends who were "into fermenting" how to brine the kimchi. They taught me how to push the cabbage leaves under the salty water with a bowl, so they don't get moldy. After weeks my kimchi tasted like the sour of defeat, and anger at the things you were never able to teach me. Do I succeed in fooling them? I wonder. ARE YOU FOOLED? The only mark of authenticity is my twinkie yellow outer shell that I hide behind. *But I learned these recipes from the internet,* I want to scream. *No I do not know how they are supposed to taste, no they do not remind me of home.*

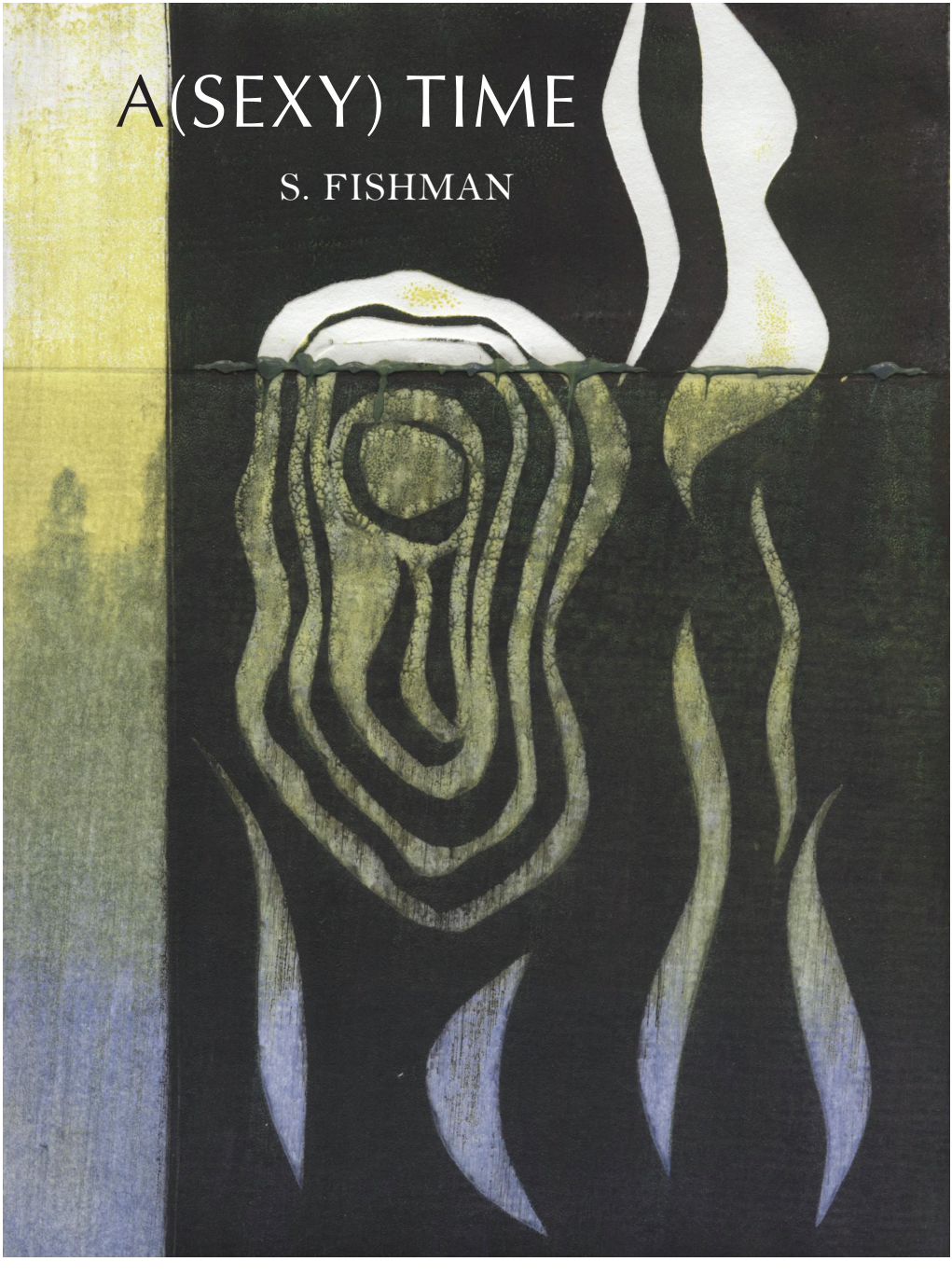
Regardless, it feels vastly important that I create this food. All of my racialized insecurities, all of the ways that I perceive myself as false, or vastly not enough melt away as I stand in the co-op kitchen surrounded by all of the Koreans I have met here. I cannot express in words how deeply whole it feels to be sitting in the basement covered in bits of messy bibimbap, and too sour kimchi, and internet recipe amalgamated inventions, surrounded by all of you, quietly slurping tofu stew that tastes of home, real or imagined. We exhale collectively, out of our mouths come small soft clouds of fire.

At the end of your response to a list of questions I sent you about this piece, you wrote me this, titled *Charlotte and Owen*.

> *If I strip away all the "cultural markers" or checklists that I have created—fluent in the Korean language, able to make kimchi, and everything else that I once thought necessary to do in order to "be Korean"—I am left thinking about, well, you…*
>
> *Perhaps there are many paths when it comes to identity. I am learning this from you. Recently, I learned that making kimchi by your side, with you leading the way, humming and so carefree about "everything kimchi," made me feel so happy and whole.*
>
> *Maybe integrating a Korean-American identity, or any identity for that matter, can be more fluid, more forgiving than I could have ever imagined. Did I need to live through all these stories to arrive at this place? Perhaps this interview is an unexpected gift, a roadmap for anyone on a quest, with a few lovely shortcuts along the way. May anyone following along feel invited simply to start where we left off, chopping cabbage, humming, and feeling free.* •

# A(SEXY) TIME

S. FISHMAN



It's cold for summer and genuinely an awful date when we sit on benches by the river on the Upper East Side drinking the beer I've bought for us. S is talking about moving to Oregon or somewhere. At this moment, I'm a 75-year-old butch in a blue mini-dress with tits flying amok and bouts of glitter rubbed carelessly just below the corners of my eyes. It's in the third beer that I'm thinking we're definitely going to smooch, and it's about time because a true old butch—even an eighteen-year-old in femme drag—should have kissed a lesbo by now. We're back at her place, more beer appears, and I lean my head against the bed frame.

Apparently it's sexy time when S turns the lights off and wordlessly slips her knee between my thighs. We start smooching, and as her teeth knock clumsily around my mouth, a familiar feeling seeps in. As it becomes clear that I'm on the cusp of full dissociation, logic and reason tell me it's time to fuck: To my understanding, that is the duty which comes with a performance as the *good butch*. At this time, my definition of *good butch* is essentially, *an emotionless dude who's a dutiful top in the sack*. So I'm fucking S, and after hearing what is presumably an orgasm, she's going down on me, and at this point I'm essentially watching this happen from across the room. Then, it's a quick reassurance—*that's okay, I'm good*—from the depths of my inner stone butch, and a brief bout of spooning before I'm using my phone flashlight to track down my strappy sandals. In my haste, I forget my underwear buried among piles of crap on the floor, and bawling into the phone to a friend of mine on my way home, I'm undoubtedly feeling the breeze.

Up until this point my past experiences in the realm of sexy time solely included porny performances as a balls-grabbing *hot girl*. During these episodes in my late teenage life, sex meant asserting power in order to derive some kind of entertainment from an otherwise dissociative penis-focused affair. Crucial to these experiences was an utter physical and mental indifference, which, whilst fucking men throughout many grand years of repression, I attributed completely to an unwillingness to accept my queerness. A date with S meant getting rid of that baggage all at once, becoming the queer I was always meant to be after one quick fuck. I essentially repurposed all the tools and forms of intimacy learned from dudes I'd fucked to create a queer sexual identity.

My attempt at dating *a la* the horny teenage boy I may one day become culminated in a panic: a panic over fucking. I use the term "horny teenage boy" lightly, but what I mean to describe is a hormone-ridden seventeen-year-old eager to get his dick wet. The trope itself is a product of compulsory sexuality, the idea that all humans are inclined to fuck and perform a sexual identity of desire. The point is, if I was going to fuck, it wasn't going to be as simple and sexy as I'd hoped after coming to terms with my dyke-dom. Hence, a panic over fucking. Countless interactions with others have confirmed time and again that sexuality and gender identity which diverts from the absolute norm is a cause for panic. Even while you're not fucking and not worried about it, someone else is undoubtedly worrying about it for you.

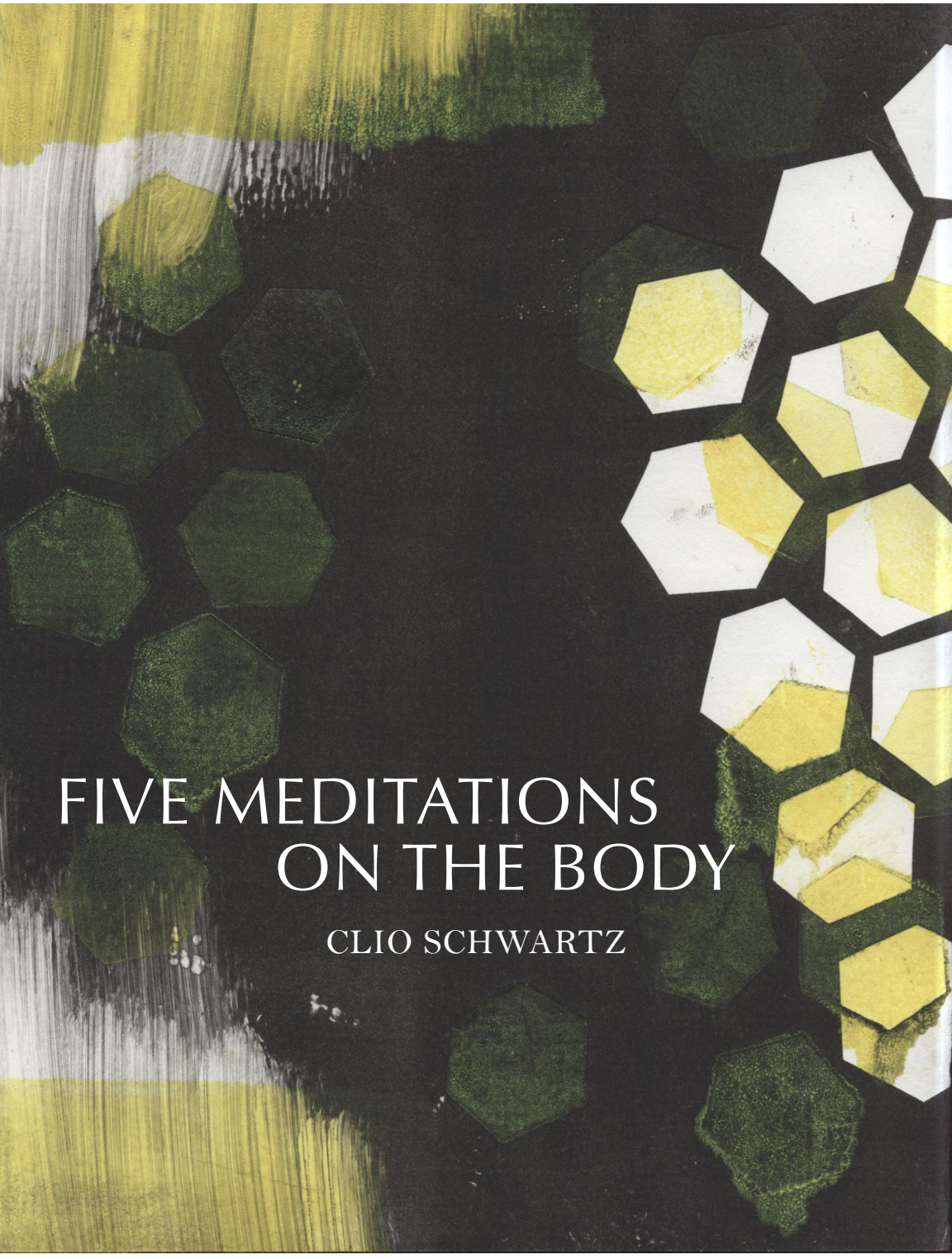
I'm not currently a horny teenage boy, nor is this a problem to be dealt with. Many people understand asexuality to mean a lack of desire, a total aversion to any form of sexy time, and although this may be true for some, asexualities are pluralistic, ranging from total horndog to sex- and romance-averse. My identification as *not a horny teenage boy* may be where I place myself on this spectrum, though an asexual-identifying person is by no means necessarily not fucking. This kind of label is useful to a good old boy like me and, had I been introduced to it earlier, could've been useful to the aforementioned baby dyke crying commando on a long cab ride home. Asexuality provided the vocabulary for the spectrum of who's fucking, who's not fucking, and who that's important to. Having only heard of sexless relationships needing to be "spiced up" and of the narrative of sexual repression assigned to closeted queers, the idea of not fucking, and still having feelings of love or

*Prints by Bridget Conway*

intimacy, never occurred to me. However, as my mother once generously reminded me, her freaky genderqueer child, in a conversation about my sexual life, it's very possible to "make myself come with someone else!" My Republican mother's willingness to imagine slightly nonnormative intimacies can set an example for us all.

A friend of mine, N, is a sweater-wearing English major at a fratty university who goes on a date with a dude for the first time. Sitting in the booth of an Ann Arbor diner, they're talking about the op-ed N is writing, his date listening intently. Suddenly, he looks at this dude over a plate of eggs over-easy and imagines them fucking. The heat rises, the sweaters come off, the masculinity simply oozes out in beads of sweat. N tells me that this is a pivotal moment for him. He can imagine them fucking without any feelings of disgust or shame. For him, an envisioned fuck legitimizes his queerness, makes it tangible, even easy. This fuck signifies that he's a big queer, and he's going to bang a hot dude into the sunset. His existing baggage around intimacy—which we all have a fair dose of—would simply disappear after a good orgasm. In a cloudy flashback, I see my baby femme self, chock-full of dissociative sexual experiences with cis men, diving blindly into S's bed on 86th and Lexington Ave. He tells me this story and I think, good job, you've shed one small layer of shame. Because being able to fantasize about embracing queerness *is* a great thing. What I ask is that my dear friend not think of his queerness as reliant on a sex drive. I want him to consider his desires and whether they're being reflected accurately onto this brunch boy. What was unfulfilling to him during his career of solely fucking women could open up possibilities for his future queer interactions. Straight relationships and interactions don't ask for a diversion from intimacy as we tend to define it. When repression and shame are part of one's narrative of queerness, as they so often are, it's useful to ask basic questions about how we want to be intimate. "Do I want to fuck?" and if so, who, where, when, why, is a decent start. I'm certainly not saying there's anything unexciting about a hunky babe with egg dripping down his face; rather, I'm wary of sex as a qualifier for queerness.

It's like when I tell my brother that M and I are together but not fucking. I think I use the phrase "casual emotional romance." He responds, "isn't that just friendship?" which is not a bad question, nor an original one. Where does one draw the line? If I spend half of my time fucking my platonic roommate and the other half maintaining an asexual romantic relationship with a partner, which of the two is my friend? Which my lover? My brother, a cis man and comedy writer—a fatal combination—approaches me with curiosity and suspicion because my romantic experience hardly resembles his. And then I understand that many of the romances I have or once had or will have may be classified as just friendships. It takes me a long time to recognize that my romance with M is a romance. That the number of smooches we share or times we get nice and naked in front of each other doesn't define our interaction. That M not kissing me at times when in previous romances I would've expected it doesn't mean that they don't feel things for me. My expectations were tainted by interactions where sex and minor sexual cues took absolute precedence, and where my desires weren't acknowledged, many times because I didn't know they mattered; for me, kissing had existed as a tool for validation and security rather than a form of getting close to another person or being sexy together. This mode of being together—all the not-fucking in the world, plus all the baggage of two repressed queers, plus telling each other how crazy hot we are—could go unrecognized as a romance. And then I'm asking myself if my brother would recognize romance if he wasn't fucking it. •


FIVE MEDITATIONS
ON THE BODY
CLIO SCHWARTZ

## I. MY BODY AS APPARATUS

I want to dictate the means and the end of my being.

I have built a life-long habit of ignoring my body as a form of resistance. Trying to prove my adaptability and inner strength, I've spent years shoving the most basic of human needs to the back of my consciousness, suppressing physical exhaustion, hunger, and pain. Maybe it comes from a reluctance to submit to my body. Sometimes I think I need ultimate control over my existence. I don't want to waste a moment that could be used for something more productive or exciting on something as banal as the body. And yet, here I am, trying to process and come to terms with my corporeal form.

I've pushed my body to its limits—how long can I go without water? Food? Sleep? Just how much do I actually need to survive? I forget what my body needs to feel good, and I lose track of the warning signs. Confused as to why I've been fainting every few days, I realize that I haven't been hydrating.

My psychiatrist asks me if I ignore my body's needs as a form of stoicism. "Stoicism?" I ask. "Maybe you've heard it portrayed as having grit," she elaborates. Bending to the will of my body feels absurd—what does it say about me and my strength if I must give in to this form, a form explicitly for my own use? Shouldn't I be able to force my body to submit to my intellect? Much better to bravely endure the repercussions of exerting my power over my body than to listen to its needs.

In the same way that my body is perceived as a healthy body, although I have been carrying chronic illness around with me for upward of eight months, my body is perceived as a woman's body, despite the fact that I feel unconnected to womanhood. My friend tells me that, after meeting me, her mother tells her: "I look at Clio and I just see a woman." This plays in my head every time I look in the mirror for a month or so, then it's relegated to the intrusive thoughts that show up every now and then when I'm feeling particularly anxious about my gender presentation. How do I reconcile the way people perceive me and the way I feel? This same mother is never able to get my pronouns right, and doesn't hear her mistakes—but upon meeting a more masc-presenting friend, immediately catches on to gendering them correctly. I go home and cry. Am I not trans enough? Do I not look trans enough?

In this nebulous area of non-binary-ness that doesn't present androgyny in its traditional form—AFAB people dressing masculinely and embracing masculine traits—I feel lost. My friend makes a post on Instagram about people being tripped up about her gender, and my heart sinks with the realization that I would love that experience; to have someone stumble over my pronouns ("he—they? she?"), or call me sir and then wrinkle their brow and squint a little. I feel so limited in this body that is so excessively feminine. Even when I'm binding, even with my hair buzzed short, nobody ever thinks twice about their perception of me.

The way my body looks is perceived and gendered so differently from who I am, and yet I feel no desire to change it. What is the point of rejecting womanhood if there's no physical, perceived manifestation of said rejection? The amount to which I choose to perform my gender shifts as easily as a breeze. Some days I wish to have no body at all.

II. MY BODY AS SPECIMEN

In the beginning, I'm not too concerned. It's August. Waves of numbness spread through my face and I can't move my head without feeling so dizzy that I collapse, but this isn't the first time. My friend drives me to urgent care and they take two vials of blood. A mono spot (negative), and a complete blood count (normal). On the off chance that I have Lyme a second time, they give me doxycycline, which my body can't keep down. Three days later, I go to Cleveland Clinic.

I'm apprehensive about going to the doctor—they always call me Madeline, no matter how many times I clarify, and the number of times they refer to me as a woman is exhausting. This time I am on the fence about coming out to the doctor as non-binary. Maybe they'll write something in my file, and I'll never have to deal with this again.

"I'm not a woman," I begin to explain. "So you want to be a man?" the doctor asks me after I tell her I'm non-binary.

"No, not at all! I'm not a man or a woman. I'm a third gender, non-binary. Not on the binary." I stumble through a second explanation, already regretting the decision to come out. It sounds clumsy and I feel like a zoological attraction that she suddenly doesn't understand, rather than someone she can relate to.

Later, I check my file online.

**NOTE: Patient is non-binary and would like to be addressed as Ze (instead of he or she)**

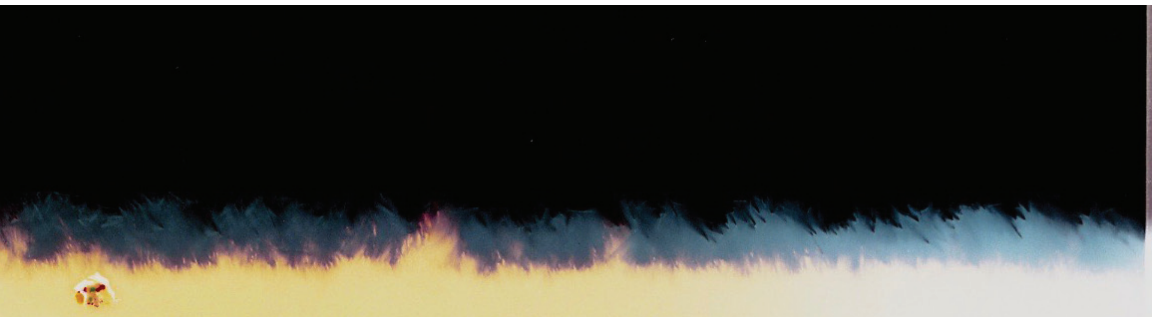
**HPI:**
Madeline Cleo Shwartz (goes by Cleo) is a 19 year old non-binary female presenting today to establish care and address new onset intermittent dizziness and facial numbness. She recently moved from NY to Cleveland for college.

Not only did I never ask for the pronoun "ze," the file goes on to use "she" for me throughout the entire document. Although this is the first of many doctor appointments, it is the last time I come out.

They take seven vials of blood from me. Everything comes back normal, except the Lyme, which has results that don't make sense. Due to the Lyme results, they refer me to the Infectious Diseases specialist. I put off making an appointment for six weeks, emotionally exhausted from the last appointment and overwhelmed by the chaos of September. When I go to my mom's for October break, I realize I am so fatigued that I can only spend an hour or two out of bed each day. I call Cleveland Clinic, but the earliest they can get me in to see the Infectious Diseases specialist is December 6. I spend the next six weeks deeply exhausted and pushing myself to live a normal life, pushing myself to the very edge of my limits.

Throughout this whole ordeal, I feel crazy. Nothing feels normal, and yet nobody can find anything wrong with me. And fatigue is too nebulous and invisible: Everyone at Oberlin is tired all the time, and I don't know if I'm being overdramatic or if this is real. Doctors—including my psychiatrist—keep asking me if my fatigue is depression-related (maybe because I'm trans?) but I know what that feels like and I'm mentally stable. I need there to be something wrong with me, some diagnosis, so I can get some closure with this illness.

On December 6, they take thirteen vials of blood. I am finally diagnosed with mono, with evidence of past Lyme. I push through finals, with one emergency incomplete. I feel defeated, helpless, and alone in my exhaustion. I see another doctor in New York after I spend two weeks bedridden with no signs of improvement. She takes another seven vials of blood



from me. After twenty-nine vials of blood, four doctors, and five months, I am finally told that I have healed from three types of mono, all of which I had at the same time throughout fall semester, without knowing. Now I have post-viral fatigue, an unexplained affliction that can last months, or years.

Twenty-nine vials of blood, four doctors—it felt like a lot while it was happening, but it isn't until February that the quantity really hits me, with the arrival of a steep medical bill my insurance won't cover. In addition to other medical debt my family had been struck with in the fall semester, this feels like a slap in the face. Impostor syndrome comes rushing back. Did I really need all that testing? I could have just endured, evoking the stoicism I had internalized for years prior to this extended illness? And with no way to quantify my fatigue or the degree to which I have healed, it is hard not to feel self-indulgent and, in some ways, useless as I attempt to scale back my commitments and workload.

## III. MY BODY AS INCANTATION AND RITUAL

At the end of December I move into my friend's apartment in Brooklyn. It has a skylight, and I can keep it just as clean as I like because for a blissful month, I will be alone. After spending several weeks practically bedridden at my mother's home, I sacrifice her care in exchange for the independence and agency solo living will allow me. And with this newfound independence I find the space and time to learn my body. After spending months detachedly ignoring my illness, I suddenly am allowed to lean into it. I mourn the loss of my ignorant trust in my body, and I mourn the time lost putting my life on hold.

But I find the edges of my form stretching, filling this body up; imagining shapes and pouring my body into them. I spend more time naked and I take long, hot baths, moisturizing afterwards. Treating my body tenderly allows for a new burgeoning of love where before there had been only a distaste. When I can stand for long enough, I cook complete, beautiful meals. I drink liters and liters of water, as constant as breathing.

And most of all, I sleep. Fitfully at first—hyper-realistic nightmares flood my subconscious and shake me awake, cold and sweaty. I reach for the glass of water by my bed and blearily knock it all over my nightstand, soaking my journal. And then, after a time, more peacefully. Dreamless sleep.

Awakening from this dreamless sleep feels like stepping onto a new planet. I move slowly and cautiously, hyper-aware of my breathing and balance, holding onto the wall and chairs as my body adjusts. When I take risks and push myself to walk unsupported, I faint and have to rebuild my confidence. Falling again and again is humbling—a necessary reminder of how fragile I am.

In January, I have just enough energy to take on one activity a day. Most days this is something like lunch with a friend; sometimes it's more ambitious, like a paper-making workshop. And yet somehow I no longer feel useless and alone, as I did throughout December. I am learning a lot. I know how to feel when I am hungry, or dehydrated, or physically exhausted, in ways that hadn't yet become intuitive for me before this illness. This body that had been background noise for so long, almost two decades, reveals itself to me as rich with so much more than pure utility.

It is hard to internalize the idea that my fingertip is just as much me as my mind. This merging of self, or extension of self from intellectual to physical, starts to take place as I begin to dance alone in my living room. Soon it becomes compulsive: a daily ritual. I dance until I can't breathe, which at first is a laughably short period of time but it grows longer. Being able to express an emotion or thought by moving my body in a certain way allows me to recenter my sense of self in the body. Rather than journaling, I move viscerally, bypassing intellectual processing. My fingertips become as saturated with emotion as my mind, as the rest of me. I drip heavy with emotion.

## IV. MY BODY AS PERFORMANCE

The growing understanding of my body's physical limitations coincides with a renewed interest in my gender identity and expression. I cut my hair again, despite knowing that my body is unequivocally perceived as that of a woman. A physical rejection of femininity feels impossible to me, and I make very little effort to counter that, perhaps because I know that no matter what lengths I go to there is no chance that people will see me otherwise. My mother likes to remind me that I am on the cutting edge of social development; that I should be patient with the general public. Patience is hard to summon. Despite my frustration with the inability of most to see me as non-binary, my gender doesn't seem as tied to my physical presentation as others would expect. And then what is gender? Is it the way I am talked about? Is it relevant to the people I kiss and the kinds of relationships I engage in? I am comforted by the theory that all gender is performative, but it is hard to break from the societal narrative that informs me that mine is especially so.

In the same way that passing as healthy in a society that stigmatizes the chronically ill is a privilege, I recognize that passing as cis allows me a lot of ease in the way I navigate a transphobic world. It can be difficult to weigh the pain of pretending to be what I am not against the pain of the bigotry directed at who I am. "I look at Clio and all I see is a woman." These are the moments that I mistrust my own sense of my gender. What if this is a phase after all? What if I am really a girl? The cisheteropatriarchy is extremely talented at seeding that kind of self-doubt. I value my femininity and the empathy and tenderness that has been nurtured in me, but I don't know how much of this is truly who I am and how much of it was taught into me. I don't know how to delineate between true identity and a reaction to my environment. And is there even a delineation? It is impossible to remove myself from my environment, so perhaps my true identity is only a reaction to my environment. I struggle to feel my gender throughout my body despite having learned, over the course of January, to channel my sense

*Image by Francesca Ott*

of emotional self throughout my physical self. Perhaps I had been dealing with my gender identity through the same lens of stoicism I had used to understand my body. This chasm between body and gender is a fundamental disconnect that feels insurmountable. I try anyway.

V. MY BODY AS MIRROR

This is what I grapple with as I heal, so slowly it is nearly imperceptible, or rather only perceptible over the course of several months. There are no day-to-day little successes. The healing is not an uphill battle—it is a slog. It is like finally turning a corner and crashing into a glass wall, finding myself thrown backwards, bruised. Trying to figure out my relationship to gender surprises me in how accurately it parallels this. I find one way to think about my presentation, or the way I'm perceived, or my relationships to others, and as soon as I turn that corner and hit that wall, I am thrown back into chaos. I had imagined that I'd move linearly from confusion to an innate understanding of my gender identity, but the more I come to terms with the limitations of my body and my being, the more unclear I become.

My gender is invisible and yet integral to my identity and experience of this world; simultaneously, my illness creates limitations for me that can't be seen by the untrained eye. I am reluctant to let this chronic illness define my identity and so I downplay it—but it feels so much a part of me that the fact that it can't be seen sometimes feels like an injustice to its significance in my life.

One function of the mirror is to establish a relation between the human and its reality. In the same way, I see my gendered reality reflected back at me in my chronic illness. Because of the peace I must make with my body throughout this chronic illness, I am able to establish a more concrete understanding of the way my gender affects my interactions with the world. Seeing this mirrored reflection of my struggle with gender identity has shocked me. I never expected to find understanding of either in the other, and yet coming to terms with the limitations of my body in both respects takes a similar kind of emotional work. I am in no way resolved about either experience; rather, I am actively working to sort through them in tandem.

At the beginning of September, I start to grow my hair out. I wake up in April and am consumed by the urge to shave it all off. Dead weight is suddenly gone and I feel reborn. For the period of time that I adjust to my buzzed head, I have no way of grounding myself in reality. I look in the mirror and don't recognize myself. It is immensely comforting. •



*Prints by Bridget Conway*

# ANKLE DEEP IN MUD & WATER:

# MORALITY & PERFECTION IN OBERLIN'S LANDSCAPE

PREFACE

There is a Gnostic theory that Eve's serpent, rather than a harbinger of Satan, was actually a gift from Sophia (Σοφία, wisdom).

His message was: This world is false. Your reality, this garden, has been contrived by Yaldabaoth, and he is insane.

So when Eve ate of the apple she fell not into sin, but into a state of freedom from illusion.

MUD

*"You need not worry about me; the most that I worry about is that I shall get stuck in the mud and cant get out."* - Oberlin student's letter home, 1851

Mud! Dripping from boots, from the wheels of carriages, from the hooves of runaway hogs; tracked across the floors of Tappan Hall, on skirts, on hands, under nails, smeared on books. The principle ingredient in the early days of Oberlin was mud. The wet, clay-ey mess of (mostly) fallow, thick earth on everything. If you haven't already noticed, Oberlin is a swamp, and was to an even more alarming extent before the college found a way to properly drain itself. This mess, this swamp, is described in one student's letter home from 1845: "The soil is very clayey, I should think, for when it rains it is very muddy and there are so few sidewalks that it is very difficult to walk more than a rod without getting a free shoe in the mud." Another student wrote, "I was more disappointed in the appearance of the soil, than in any one thing. It looks almost like a swamp." One resident was so taken with the "Ohio Mud" that he devoted an entire newspaper article to the subject titled simply: "Mud!!" Tenured faculty member James M. Buchanan abandoned his position in part because of the swamp, and Reverend Charles Grandison Finney himself wrote that "had it not been for the good hand of God in helping us at every step, the institution would have been a failure because of its ill-judged location."

THE PARTING OF TREES

So why journey away from the rolling hills of the East coast to this glacial plain, this muddy, muddy swamp?

It seems this "hastily decided upon" location was chosen less for its individual qualities than for the fact that Ohio, not so long ago, was the frontier. Ohio, and likewise Oberlin, were virtuous in their separation from other parts of the world, not necessarily in and of themselves. The benefits of separateness were the foundational ideology that brought Oberlin's first missionaries bushwhacking. Oberlin was not just different from other institutions of higher learning back on the east coast, it was *separate*. It existed "eight miles from everywhere," meaning "eight miles from sin" (according to Oberlin historian Geoffrey Blodgett), and the corruptions that festered in more civilized parts of the frontier. Yet this connects Oberlin to the most vital facet American historical self-imagining: Manifest Destiny. It was then possible (and important) to create a perfect utopia, a nineteenth-century hankering that did not receive as large an amount of popularity again until the sixties.

Much like Oberlin's founders, those first students arrived in this area via a parting of trees. A Mrs. Dascomb wrote of her first journey to Oberlin, "When we were passing through the woods, I was so delighted with the black squirrels, the big trees, & above all, the beautiful wildflowers," that at times while riding on the carriage she forgot to watch out for "scraggly limbs that every now and then gave us a rude brush." She almost

"*[got her] eyes torn out,* seconded perhaps by an unceremonious *lash* from a neighboring bough, wd. [would] Recall [her] to the duty of self preservation. Glad were [they] when an opening in the forest dawned upon [them] & Oberlin was seen." And what could she have seen? The tangled fingers of budding trees part ways to reveal a (mostly) barren clearing. A few structures shudder closely together, a few men meander around in pairs, talking in low voices. If she arrives around sunset then, stepping down from the carriage to narrowly avoid moistening her laced shoes in a puddle, she sees her reflection, windswept hair blending with the sky above, softly graced now with light orange wisps.

BITS OF BONE // ORIGINAL LANDSCAPE

Oberlin itself was less than aesthetically appealing for many of its first visitors. There is an abundance of students' letters home complaining of the lack of scenery, opportunities for swimming, and soil that was, well, ubiquitous. One disgruntled visitor wrote of Oberlin, "In the first place it is surrounded by trees. You cannot see more than two miles at the farthest… The bildings are not very near each other and probelay would look very lonesom to you as you are accostomed to see them surrounded by shade trees and [shrubbery] while here it is a rare thing to see even a rose bush."

Though Oberlin was surrounded by a dense "primeval" forest, for some reason it never occured to first settlers to save some of these trees on the campus proper. By 1846, only two trees stood in Tappan. Likewise, the abundance of mud made sidewalks hard to construct, the clay soil made farmer's lives difficult, and even in the regions near Plum (Plumb) Creek where natural beauty was more readily available to be gazed upon, "old log bits, bits of bone, peaces of leather, &c—stumps, rail fences &c. &c." got in the way. Yet, "when attempting to take in a different point your heels fly from under you," and the observer would fall flat in a puddle of Ohio mud. Much of Oberlin's early relationship with its environment consisted of embattling it in a struggle, or taking refuge from it. Frontier communities, while offering the unique ability to world-make away from constructed civilization, also had the unique challenges of whatever natural environment they chose to settle on.

To add to this muddy mess were farm animals and fowl running amok across the village. In 1841, "75 Hogs Turned loose in the beautiful Village of Oberlin—to ravage, waste & discomfort & Destroy the fairest portions of our gardens, vex the peaceable Inhabitants, and in particular to war against to most defenceless, *Ladies & Children.*" The loose hogs raised such an issue that not one or two, but three whole committees were formed under town ordinances for the explicit and sole purpose of dealing with the abundance of rampant farm animals. The animals were apparently not passive trespassers, either. Citizens often reported being "assaulted" by wayward livestock. Cows, pigs, and chickens would "swarm upon and soil the sidewalks and crowd themselves into whatever door yard is open to their forcible assault." Individuals who refused or neglected to contain livestock would be "notified & admonished" and "void of all regard to the rights of his neighbor & the community." A hog was not "morally responsible for his actions," so "the owner must of course be morally responsible for all trespasses by his Hogs."

The hogs served to muddy the streets and were, in part, what made it necessary to implement sidewalks and boardwalks. The mud made just the act of walking in early Oberlin hilariously difficult. The few boardwalks constructed to aid foot travel proved slippery as a result of poor construction and/or livestock tracking mud onto their surfaces, and numerous letters home detail students falling over themselves while walking, especially those students wearing

petticoats, or, "the fairer sex." Apparently, sidewalks were also capable of inhering moral virtue. In 1861, the editor of the local paper declared, "One fourth of the walks in our otherwise moral and orthodox village are indecently dangerous. A proper degree of risk is exhilarating, but the amount we daily encounter, is destructive and discouraging."

Here, Oberlin's land management blends oddly with the village's perceived moral duty to be a tidy, well-ordered community and live in accordance with the town's founding sensibilities. After pushing their way through the trees and settling in a swamp, clear lines needed to be drawn between the natural and the civilized. Which is ironic, considering Oberlin left civilization in order to exist outside of what it deemed to be morally corrupt. Yet Oberlin felt it had a duty to prove to the rest of the world, and indeed to God, that despite its departure, it was still a suitable, perhaps even utopian, alternative to civilization elsewhere. Oberlin was infused with morality, and apparently the things that were most likely enemies of this morality were natural elements that threatened to overtake an otherwise proper society. Yet even still, Oberlin *had* mud, it *had* hogs, and these were physical markers of its geographic and ideological departure. Oberlin was in the frontier, but only so long as these natural frontier elements didn't encroach on its proper society. Hogs were only morally corrupt when on the loose, and somehow a "degree of risk is exhilarating," at least according to the paper.

## BITS OF BONE // FIRST WOMEN

Though Oberlin loves to pride itself on being the pioneer of coeducation, Oberlin's first women were admitted on the basis of a "means to end," according to Oberlin historian and former professor of history Geoffrey Blodgett. Apparently, Oberlin found it primarily important to educate the "minds of those who were going to make first impressions on small children." The more Christian teachers and missionaries, the better.

Female students at Oberlin had the apparent reputation of being far less outwardly radical as a direct result of coeducation. Blodgett cites some nebulously termed "recent studies in women's history," which show that emancipated college women in the nineteenth century became huge agitators in the suffragist cause, settlement house projects, and other reform movements. Yet these "agitating" women were mostly recruited out of women's institutions in the East. Blodgett claims, "One can find very little evidence of feminist militance at Oberlin before the Civil War, and when it emerged it was slapped down." Even after the war when suffrage movements gained traction in other parts of the country, Oberlin was "strangely passive" and perhaps even "hostile" on the subject. Women were more likely to be indoctrinated into missionary work or married off after graduating Oberlin. "Perhaps part of the reason for this," says Blodgett, "is that Oberlin women in their formative college years learned stern daily lessons in how to behave in the presence of men. They learned that they were expected to behave like ladies."

Yet women were rarely even in the presence of men. The sexes were separated in all areas of college life except the most highly surveilled: dining halls and classrooms. Up until the 1890s, even library hours were segregated. According to Blodgett, "Having embarked in somewhat ad hoc fashion upon authentically radical arrangements for bringing large amounts of men and women together for educational purposes, college authorities spent the rest of the century trying to curb the most feared consequences of what they had done." What could be more damaging to a pious Christian community's reputation than a "sexual scandal"? So in order to prove itself worthy of existence, an "air of conservatism" surrounded the institution with regard to coeducation. Extra stress was put on Oberlin's first women to "behave."

Women were also, not surprisingly, relegated to the domestic tasks required in village homes and dormitories. They washed dishes, ironed, and sewed for other students. This

*Photos by Lydia Moran*

provided a welcome break from the natural fatigue the female brain was inevitably prone to after spending a period of time studying. One woman wrote on behalf of the "young ladies": "After having our mind absorbed in some abstract subject until we become weary with intense thought, we repair to some household duty & the mind & body becoming relaxed, we return to the page we left & grasp the thoughts with avidity, & instead of the pale face which too often belongs to the student we see a continual freshness & glow… here domestic economy, which is true should be inoculated by the mother is carried on to still greater perfection, here knowledge of domestic affairs, high intellectual culture & even refinement of manners are considered as consistent with each other."

PERFECTION // MANUAL LABOR

*"It is primarily in the realm of educational innovation that the Oberlin colony tried to find the latchkey to perfection."* - Geoffrey Blodgett

The domestic chores relegated to Oberlin's first women were part of a larger system of manual labor, enacted to both combat the natural obstacles to frontier life and somehow instill in young men and women the virtues ingrained through laboring in the woods. The system was an attempt to both engage with Oberlin's landscape and cultivate its likeness to God's kingdom. In the eyes of the institution, Learning and Labor were inseparable from one another: "It meets the wants of man as a compound being, and prevents the common amazing waste of money, time, health, and life," proclaimed the first College report.

Oberlin became known as the "poor man's college," in contrast to older institutions in the East. It allowed students of little means an education at the cost of their physical labor in Oberlin's initial construction. Indeed, the system's ability to provide alternate modes for covering the financial cost of an education was in part what attracted Black student applicants—some formerly enslaved people, some not—to apply. Black students seeking college degrees in the nineteenth century were met with countless obstacles, financial and otherwise, that resulted from systemic racism; Oberlin was by no means exempt from this reality, but did create limited opportunity within it. This system allowed lower income students, both Black and white, to access an Oberlin education, though not all who applied were in need of the financial assistance. As a result, many of the earliest applications highlighted an applicant's moral virtue, physical prowess, and good nature, without any mention of scholarship. A Middlebury student wrote to Oberlin in an expression of his wish to transfer: "I think the classical books which are studyed [at Middlebury] have a bad influence in forming the characters of young men. They have in a great measure an attendance to corrupt the habits, morals, and minds of those who pursue them, to say nothing of the time which is lost in commiting to memory ideas which are of no consequence."

One student wrote in 1837, just four years after town and college were founded: "Nearly all the labor since this Institution was was first established, has been chopping, logging and burning brush; and this too, a great portion of this year, *ankle deep in mud and water!*" Oberlin's earliest students cleared the land, constructed buildings, conducted special projects for private residences, etc. One early timecard reads: "2 hours burning Stumps, 3 Hours building walk for Prof. Finney, 3 Hours hanging Gate etc., 4½ Hours preparing … sewer for Prof. Finney." Eight cents an hour was the going rate for shoveling manure; seven cents for "picking up sticks."

In service of this belief in Oberlin's heavenly potential, students worked: felling trees, cutting the stumps away from their roots, dragging the stumps to a brush pile, lighting the pile

on fire, standing and staring into the flames, covered in mud, cicadas droning overhead, the smell of wood smoke drifting around them…

The driving force behind this "perfectionism" that influenced Tappan and his peers was a departure from belief in the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Calvinism placed heavy emphasis on mankind's original sin: when Eve bit into the apple and fraternized with Satan in the garden. Because of this sin, Calvinists believed each person had their own pre-determined fate in the afterlife. The ripple effects of Eve's first sin had made it entirely impossible for humans to *not* sin.

But the breakup of Calvinist theology was ushered in by an age that was no longer entirely status-oriented, but celebrated the achievements of the self-made man. Along with this, a heavier emphasis was placed on human achievements, and the possibility of human *perfectionism*. This is partially why Oberlin's founders felt motivated to create a utopian community, why they placed so much emphasis on the morality of this community, and why they ultimately held the men and women behaving in this community to high standards of judgement. They hoped that they could somehow *teach* perfect behavior through manual labor and later, the inauguration of coeducation.

## PERFECTION // LADIES AS CIVILIZING INFLUENCES

In the same way working the land was thought to bring about stronger character in Oberlin students, women were also thought to be civilizing and moralizing forces for their male peers. Apparently, working alongside women "exploded" the male idea that "a lady is a toy or a plaything" according to the Oberlin *Evangelist.*

One male student wrote after moving to an all-male boarding situation that he missed dining with women because, "Without the restraining and refining influence of ladies, it is found impossible to maintain decorum, and instead of our meals being a place to cultivate refinement and to refresh our minds from our studies, it is only a place for satisfying hunger."

What is it about women that was so able to provide such "refreshment?" The same student wrote earlier: "The society of such a collection of boarders, is just what could be expected from a lot of young men living secluded from ladies. Some would like to have everything carried on in the best of order, but others only wish to swallow their food and run." Manual labor, a system that made for "sound bodies and clear minds," perhaps possessed refreshing properties similar to those conferred by sitting next to a woman and engaging her in conversation over dinner. Like a cool breeze, like a stroll in the garden after being cooped up in the library all day. Something different, something immutable, something primal.

By their very presence, women allowed Oberlin another step forward to that ephemeral latchkey to perfection—men were made closer to the ideal civilization through socializing with the opposite sex. Having women around perhaps kept Oberlin from becoming a sort of primeval male colony in the woods. Having women nearby was also a way for men to manage their sexual urges. The presence of real women, the very hum of them intellectually and physically working, supposedly put male urges to rest—like a lullaby.

Yet while feminine presence was grounding for men, it was also akin to a fresh breeze. So their etherealness, their natural mannerisms, had to be reigned in, segregated to avoid too much enticement. A balance was struck between the natural and the civilized. Perhaps we can draw a parallel here to those unscrupulous hogs: only immoral when on the loose.

ARBORETUM // NEURASTHENIA

*"The natural look of the Arb has occasionally had to withstand planning and domesticating impulses brought to bear upon it from both town and college."* - Robert Stinson, *Oberlin Tribune* columnist

It is funny then, that Oberlin women were in apparent need of a place of retreat themselves, and that this place of retreat could only be located far from men, far from academia, at the edge of civilization itself.

The mid-1870s saw increasing discussion about a need for "a place for women to walk in quiet meditation." This place had to be, most importantly, out of the way and in seclusion from male students. It had to be physically and socially separated from men: "a tract of land of seventeen acres containing the only bit of primeval forest left immediately adjacent to the village," the same forest we now call "the arb."

Ladies Grove itself was a much smaller area of the sweeping acreage of the Oberlin Arboretum, located a bit northwest from what students now consider to be the arb proper, with its reservoirs and prairies and illegal fire pits. It was an alleviation of an Oberlin-specific coeducational dilemma, keeping men separated from women in all spaces not heavily supervised to avoid a sexual scandal, and even more so, women seperated from men, to calm their nerves in peaceful pursuit of "contemplative rewards." Like all other aspects of the lives of women on this campus, the Ladies Grove was another attempt at keeping pure the impressionable minds of the "fairer sex." Again, Oberlin reached for perfectionism by way of separation. Ladies could reach their ideal serene state outside the civic lines drawn by others.

If we can understand Ohio as an imagined frontier again, the water of Plum Creek running past miles and miles of "primeval" forest, separated infrequently by agricultural and clustered communities... If we place these women walking at the edge of this, teetering perhaps on the final line drawn between rural piety and rural wilderness…

It was a world unto itself where these Victorian women could find cure for their "hysteria," in the warm woolen arms of this wilderness. During the early eighteenth century, Neurasthenia, a make-believe "nervous affliction" originally attributed to the possession of a uterus, was increasingly thought rather to be a neurological phenomenon brought about by the stresses of daily life. The Oberlin Arboretum was at first a place where Victorian ladies could escape these stresses. Perhaps separation for these women had a similar effect to the one Oberlin's founders pursued when they left the coast; salvation by separation, revelation by seclusion.

When Eve bit into that apple, was she given knowledge that her world had been contrived by an insane deity? What messages, what wisdom, was imparted to those women in the fluttering of

thousands of leaves? *The world you imagine to be real is actually fabricated to limit you.* What else could quell the "hysteria" bred by an insane patriarchy? Where else could liberation from illusion become possible?

Truthfully, there's not much in the Ladies Grove. Two engraved brick posts swept off the intersection of Morgan and South Prospect Street by the curved, muddied arm of a footpath mark its entrance to this day. Down past these pillars, a hill slopes gently into a forest interspersed with thin trees and tangled underbrush. On cloudy days, when the trees are barren, the forest is foreboding, the spaces between trees reveal more spaces between other trees and the cemetary to the right stands in ominous salute. But when it is sunny, maybe at the beginning of spring, or at dusk in late fall, the forest stands in subtly perceptible communication with itself. Frogs murmur, squirrels perform acrobatics overhead; and in the late hours of the day, the jeers of cicadas merge into one impenetrable wall of warm sound.

Is this what Eve heard as she bit into the apple?

MUD

Several women glide through the grove in pairs; a few tread in solitude. One lone woman stoops to kick a clump of mud from her shoe, another snaps a twig in half as she passes under a low branch. Around and around they move, the plumes of their dresses elegantly spill out from their hips like clouds, like pockets of air.

The sun begins to set, turning the sky to a pink and orange froth. They murmur, blending their voices with the loudening symphony of frogs, the babbling creek.

It gets darker, the light trickles in grey. Few women remain; most have carried off to make curfew, to slide into bed, to light their candles. But several don't. They continue breathing deeply, trailing fingers across moss, across lichen. Suddenly, one woman trips. Her counterparts look over their shoulders and smirk but she is unfazed, she wanted to be closer to the ground, anyway.

Fingers moving cautiously now, the woman cranes her neck forwards and spies a small boulder. She plants her elbow in the soil and rolls it over to reveal a tangled knot of earthworms.

Most women are gone now. One stays.

This woman takes the knot into her lap and watches as it strains against the pressed linen of her dress. Then the worms move deeper, they are looking for a parting in the soil. •

*Drawings by Jamie Vincent*

NOTE

I want to acknowledge the little information available on the experiences of Black women within the college's domestic labor system and their role in the college's moral negotiations within coeducation. The works cited in this piece focus on the experiences of the earliest female students at Oberlin and do so without fully acknowledging the disparity in experiences between women of different identities. Published in 1943, Robert Samuel Fletcher's *A History of Oberlin College* in particular generalizes the student body's experiences as those of white students, erasing the individual experiences of students of color. I sought to write a piece focusing on Oberlin's initial relationship with its landscape and how this mirrored the indoctrination of coeducation, but there are many factors beyond gender that influence a student's experience at Oberlin and it is important to acknowledge these complexities.

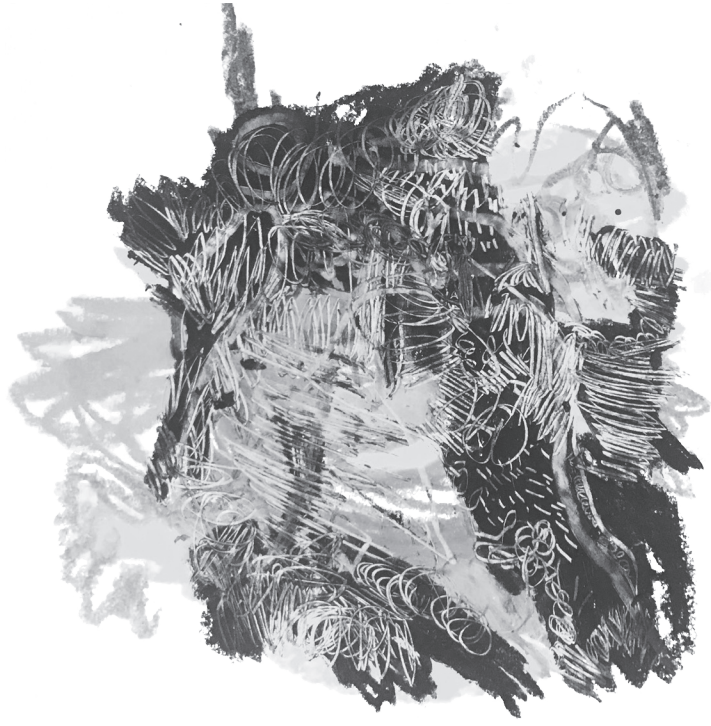
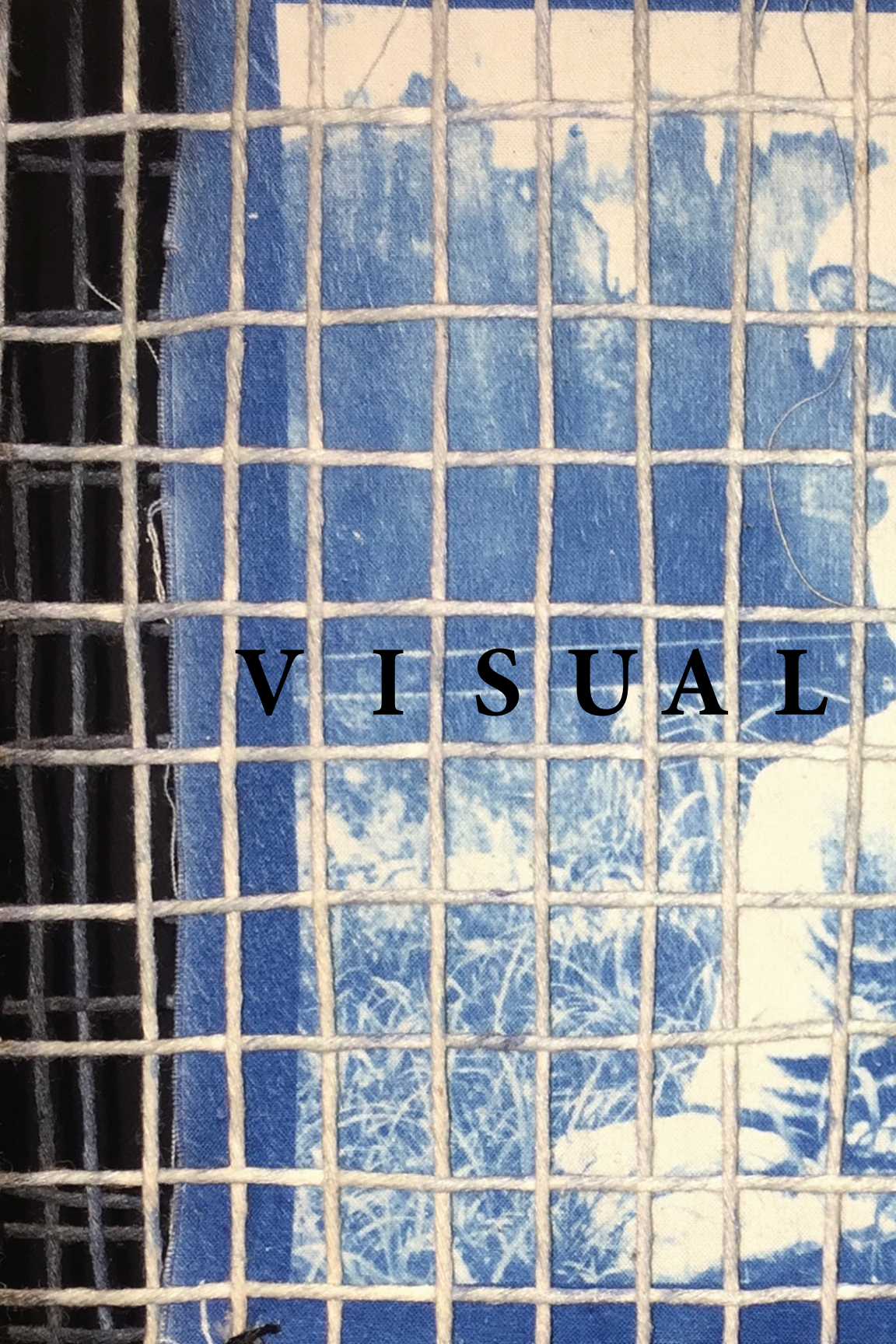


*Image by Patrice DiChristina*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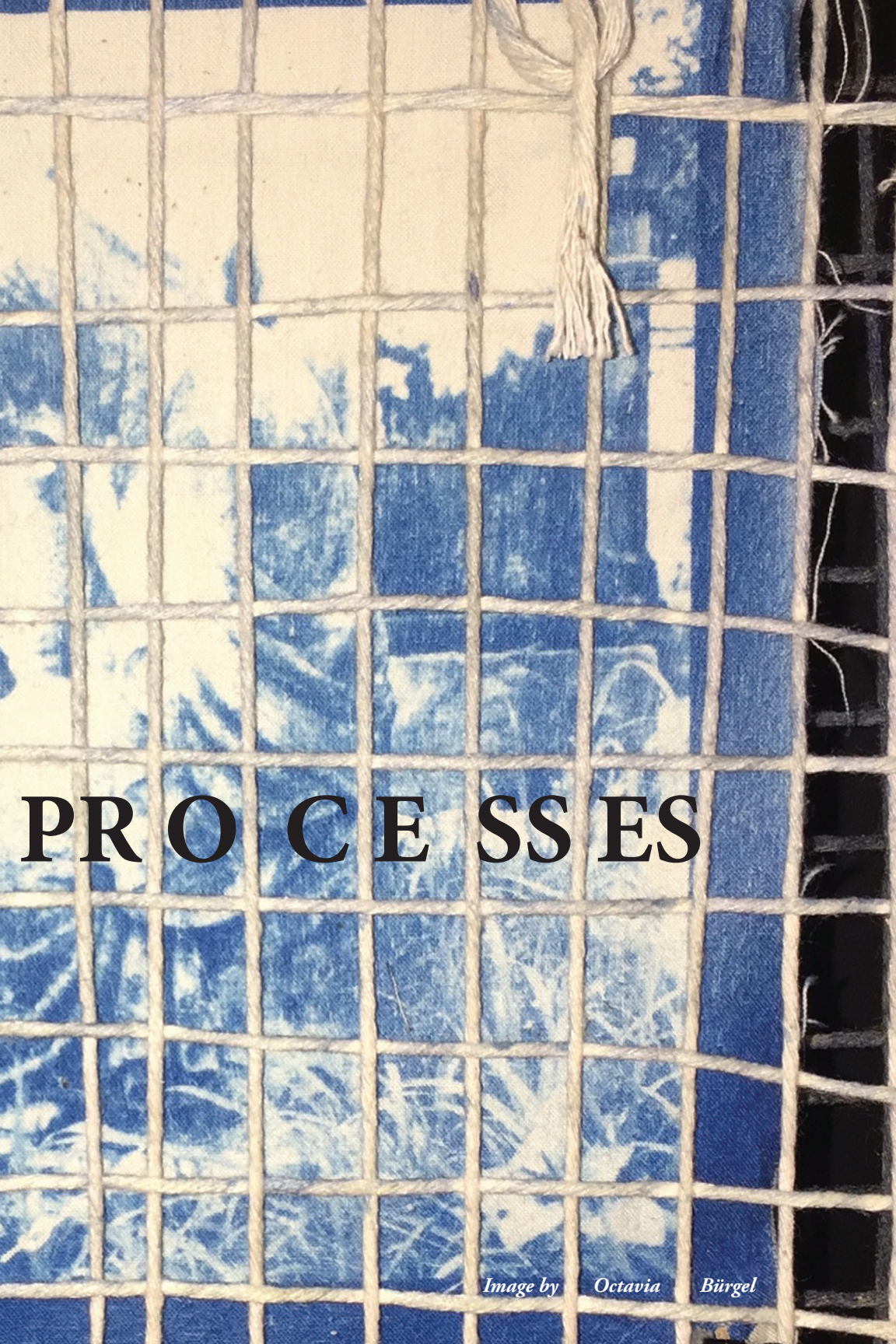
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Image by Octavia Bürgel


# JULIA SCHRECENGOST

**Bridget Conway: Do you have an artist's statement for your senior studio or just your approach to your work in general?**

Julia Schrecengost: This year I've really been exploring sculpture and printmaking and the intersections between the two in my half-time show, which was an installation. There were no prints, but for my final show I'm going to incorporate a lot of monotypes using the same found materials I use in my sculpture work. [The show includes] some monotypes that have nets coming out of them and are physically embedded into the paper to reference the nets that I have been hand tying and casting in plaster that are also going be shown in the space hanging from the ceiling. I've just been experimenting with repetitive processes that I am instinctively drawn to, like tying knots over and over again, [and] wrapping wire around stuff. That also ties into printmaking, which is itself a very repetitive and laborious process. The themes that I'm exploring right now are all kind of related to chronic pain stemming from a lot of childhood leg injuries I had playing basketball, and processing how that's affecting my body as I age. It's getting more and more tangible. The pain—it's more of a daily thing now. And so the repetitive and laborious processes for me are sometimes an act of physical endurance, especially with printmaking. It sort of feels like I'm channeling the same energy I put into sports into art making, but it has a very different product.

**BC: One thing I've noticed about your work is that it often does come out at the viewer. Even with some monotypes, you've used the materials to emboss the paper. Is there something that you're trying to get across with having such three-dimensional and natural works?**

JS: Yeah, I'm trying to communicate a sense of tension in my pieces. In the way that they're hung, there's a lot of empty space. I'm trying to reference the things that are going on inside of our bodies that we're not really aware of and these random pains that seem to have no source. I'm referencing things like ligaments, tissues, veins, and bones in a very abstracted way. I'm also referencing neuro pathways of pain and how they extend beyond the body, by casting shadows on the wall or onto prints from my sculptures as a way to tie the concepts together.

What else am I trying to do? I also work with a lot of found objects, things that when I'm at home or when I'm traveling, I find and think would be interesting to manipulate. I also just don't really like spending money on expensive art supplies, so finding things in the trash or on the side of the road is a great way to navigate that. And also you can't really plan on finding something like that. It's a moment that I want to replicate, like how I'm feeling when I find it. I like to go for walks in the woods and just think a lot and collect plants or anything that catches my eye. And then when I'm making a piece I'm processing the same things as I am when I'm walking, since walking can be painful physically, and you know, if you're going through something painful mentally too, it's helpful to process those things by walking, and by then collecting and using those collected items to make art.

**BC: When you're looking, whether in the woods or in the trash or something, what kinds of things are you drawn towards? And then on the basis of that, how much of your work is planned? And how much of it is improvised based on what is available to you?**

JS: When I'm looking at plants, I like to take things that are dead but used to be alive, so I'm not like ripping [them] away from the earth. I like to only take what's offered to me. I'll take something like a flower that was once soft but has become hard or something that is now soft but was once hard. It's like going through this evolution that I'm continuing on in my work. When I'm on vacation with my family at the beach, I like to wander the shoreline and I've found a bunch of bleached, washed up nets and driftwood and sea glass. I like taking objects

from places that I spend a lot of time in a way that feels significant to me, so then I can take a piece of those experiences with me.

Talking about how much of my work is planned, pretty much none of it is. I have a lot of materials, and I think about which ones want to work together and then I sort of limit myself to those materials. And then I decide what processes to use to manipulate them. As I'm going, I don't have any real sense of what it's going to look like in the end. I just try for it to feel whole and harmonious, and have interesting composition and a lot of movement.

**BC: How much do you feel that you're in conversation with your own work? What's the balance between you and your work? If you're making things spontaneously and responding to the process, do you see a separation between you and your work?**

JS: When I started making a lot of nets, I started by just doing the process of tying up the string and making knot after knot. It really depends on what the material wants to do in terms of how it turns out, but it's definitely a reflection of myself because a lot of it comes from the subconscious and my own instincts. Thinking about how that relates to the sports I used to play, I did my best when I wasn't thinking about injury and was just very fluid in movement and relying on instinct. And then when I got injured, I was always aware of the limitations of my body and was more scared to do things. Now that I'm making art, I'm trying to make art about the limitations of the body while still remaining instinctual in my making.

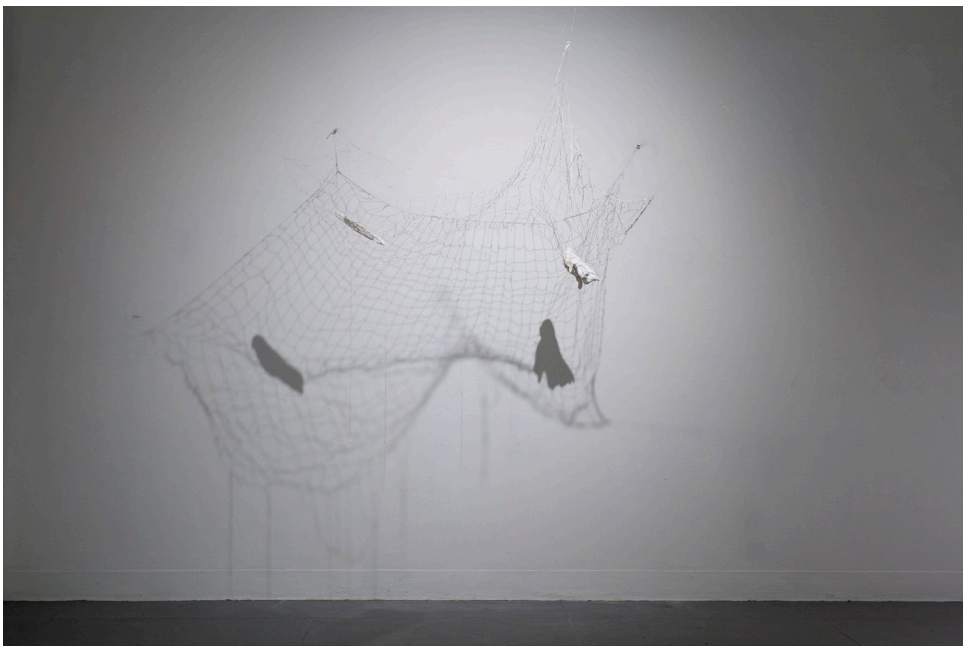
**BC: That makes a lot of sense. I think because, especially with the sculptures you make with nets or found wood, it feels very immersive and bodily. This net you have on the wall of your studio, for instance, feels very big and immersive.**

JS: Yeah! And that will all look very different when I'm done with it. For instance, I found this medical grade plaster bandage that I've been wrapping [around] the driftwood and it feels really satisfying to wrap it up, like it's like a limb or something. Then, when it's all white, it kind of looks like bones. And I'm going to attach those to the net via plaster. A lot of my processes recall surgery or

other semi-violent actions towards the body. I have a few pieces in which I've threaded copper through a hole in a piece of metal or stitched into latex. I kind of view art making like the process of sustained recovery. It often makes me physically feel worse, but it makes me feel more whole and at peace with my body, emotionally and mentally.

**BC: How has your art practice changed or grown at your time at Oberlin? Is there anything that you thought that you would never appreciate that you've learned to appreciate or things that you thought you would always stick with that you have realized that you've moved on from?**

JS: At Oberlin, my practice was changed completely. Before I got to college, I was mostly making realistic paintings and I was getting really frustrated because they were taking a long time and it wasn't fun anymore. My first semester here, I didn't take any art classes and I was feeling really lost. And then I took a class with Nannette and Julie Christiansen, the last Materials and Methods class. It was on installation and performance, and that's when I started getting really interested in installation and the idea that art is a lot more than just something on a canvas. And then my sophomore year, I took a screen printing class with Kristina and that just totally changed my whole perception of art making. I really wanted to master the technical aspects of it. My designs got a lot more abstract, and it opened me up to experimentation. [...]
I think that it is really important for me to be a part of an arts community and feel inspired by my peers and help them out as a way to help myself to grow. I really changed a lot since coming here, and I'm pretty happy with where I'm at right now. •



# MAYA HOWARD-WATTS

*As we sit on the concrete bench outside the Allen to chat, MHW picks up and meditates on a loose strip of grout.*

**Julia Friend: So tell me a little bit about how you got into art here.**

Maya Howard-Watts: I declared [a studio art major] literally the last possible day. So I came into school thinking I was going to be a bio major on the pre-med track. Because I had a lot of conflicting feelings about going to college, especially at a private Liberal Arts school. So I thought, "OK, so you have the privilege to go here, so you need to be a doctor." That's just how it worked out in my mind, and I think that I saw that as a very tangible way to help people—literally healing, you know? And I took a bio class here and it just literally killed me, on top of the fact that all the intro classes are just designed to weed you out. [...] And there was a guy in my bio class… we were just hanging out one night, and he asked, "Hey, do you want to look at some paintings by Basquiat?" And—it sounds so cliché now—and I replied "Sure, who's that?" And he pulls out this book, this big book, beautiful glossy pages. And we were looking at it—Basquiat was the first black artist I was ever introduced to, and something just clicked for me. I was looking at these paintings and these drawings, and thought, "Oh my god, this is how it's supposed to be; this is what art looks like; I have to do art."

**JF: That's such a visceral response. What about it [was visceral]?**

MHW: It was, it was; that's the word. What about it—later on that night we were watching Basquiat interviews, and the way that he speaks is genius. We were watching clips from *The Radiant Child*, a documentary, and there was an interview where this guy—and I think this is common with Black artists, especially with white interviewers, where there's this element of laughter that's violent. People turn to tropes, and as [Basquiat] famously said, "I don't want to be a museum mascot." […] The way that he manipulated this interview, and the way that he spoke was amazing to me, and it comes through in his work… A lot of what he does, and you see it in his paintings and drawings, they're just cluttered, they're full, they're packed with all of these symbols—copyright, trademark, quotation marks, words, all of these anatomical drawings, everyday items—and it became clear to me that [by] gathering these things in his pieces, you get a good sense of place and deep observation. There's a rhythm in the way he repeats visual symbols.

**JF: I definitely see a lot of those elements in your own work. How have those translated as you've become an artist yourself?**

MHW: I think that looking at that work gave me a few things, and it wasn't instant. I mean, it's really been happening over four years here because like I said: [before Oberlin] I didn't do art, I didn't have any interest in art until I realized, "Oh, I have to, I have to." After that point I stopped going to bio class, and I'd be sitting in Tappan for five hours a day, just drawing. I couldn't stop. It became a way for me to heal—to draw the same tree over and over again for hours at a time. And of course it will never come out the same every time, because we're not machines. That carried over in my wrapping, this binding motion—the repetitive action allows me to get in a rhythm that gives me headspace and muscle memory.

**JF: Yeah, I was very struck by the video of you wrapping twine around your legs. Can you speak on that? What were you thinking about while you were doing that?**

MHW: That was the second shoot I did of that. Initially I had this idea to have this triptych of photographs of me bound. But the photography was just too stagnant. I needed people to see the movement of my body. So I went back after lying in bed for days feeling depressed, and I told myself, "Get up, and go do it." And

that's where it came from. I heard people ask [in critiques], "How did you get that way? We didn't see you bound." So I decided to swap [the photos] out for the process.

**JF: And then you get more of the rhythm.**

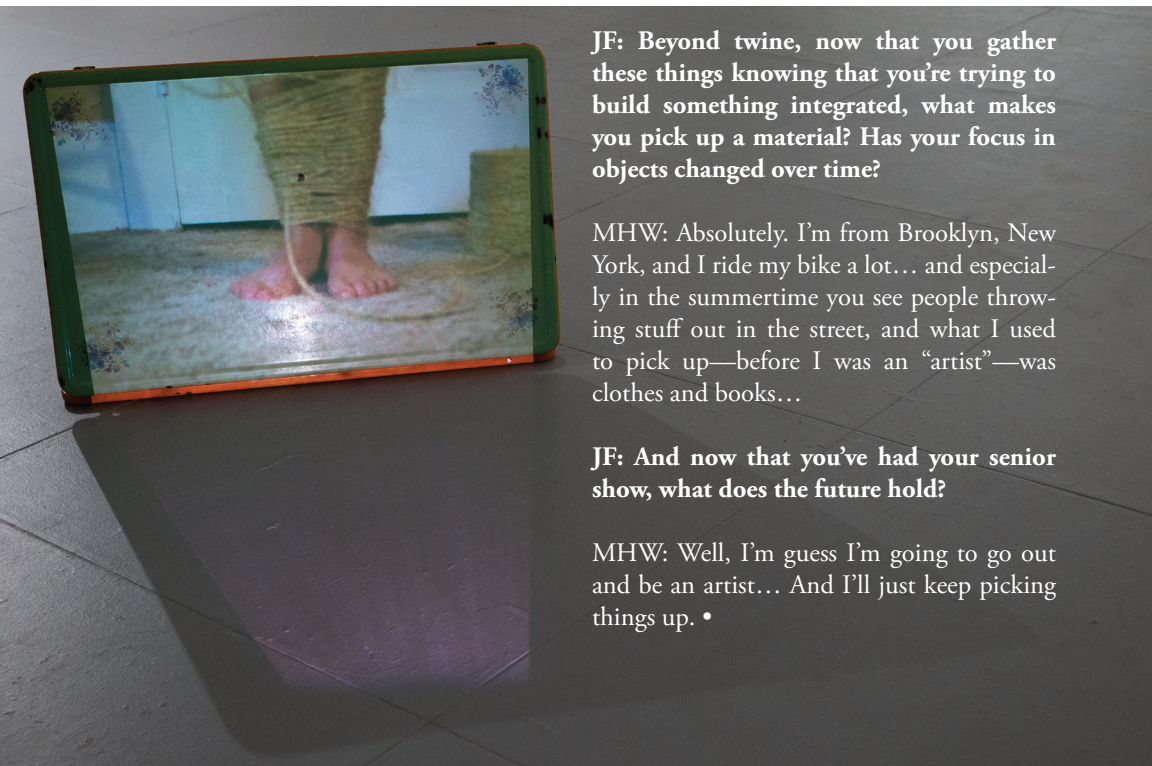
MHW: Right! And I think that is how I feel a lot of the time: I feel bound. On that day, I felt bound to my bed. Sometimes I walk outside and I feel bound to what I imagine what other people think about me, how they treat me. So binding other objects, doing it to myself, gave me this cunning agency that I was really attracted to.

**JF: Material is also very important to you, right?**

MHW: It is very important to me. Going back to Basquiat, something that he made me realize were things I already did, which helped me to become an artist. One of which is that I'm a collector, a hoarder. I mean walking over here I picked [up this piece of grout]…

**JF: Yeah, I noticed that! So talk to me about scavenging.**

MHW: So [Basquiat's] collecting all of these observations; he's making and collecting all of these pieces of the world, and twine was a material that I collected… It's this tick that's been with me since I was a kid. There's some sort of power in finding these things that people don't see—that they walk past or don't consider—that are very real. This [referring to the grout piece] had a life; this looks like a binding substance. So what is that? What is it doing? This is now charged; this has lived a life. So the twine—I was in the Allen, and I saw this piece by Jackie Winsor called "Four Corners." The piece is a sculpture made of wood and hemp, and I gravitated towards the wrapping and wrapping of the hemp. I thought it was so powerful. And I don't know what it was, maybe I couldn't get my hands on hemp and I found twine, but I was struck by the idea of fibers. And suddenly it was, "OK, now I have to read up on twine!" These things come to you, and it's not accidental. There's this history behind twine, which is maybe why I was so drawn to it.



**JF: Beyond twine, now that you gather these things knowing that you're trying to build something integrated, what makes you pick up a material? Has your focus in objects changed over time?**

MHW: Absolutely. I'm from Brooklyn, New York, and I ride my bike a lot… and especially in the summertime you see people throwing stuff out in the street, and what I used to pick up—before I was an "artist"—was clothes and books…

**JF: And now that you've had your senior show, what does the future hold?**

MHW: Well, I'm guess I'm going to go out and be an artist… And I'll just keep picking things up. •

# OCTAVIA BÜRGEL

**Bridget Conway: Do you have an artist's statement or intention for work that you're working on right now, or work that you've worked on in the past?**

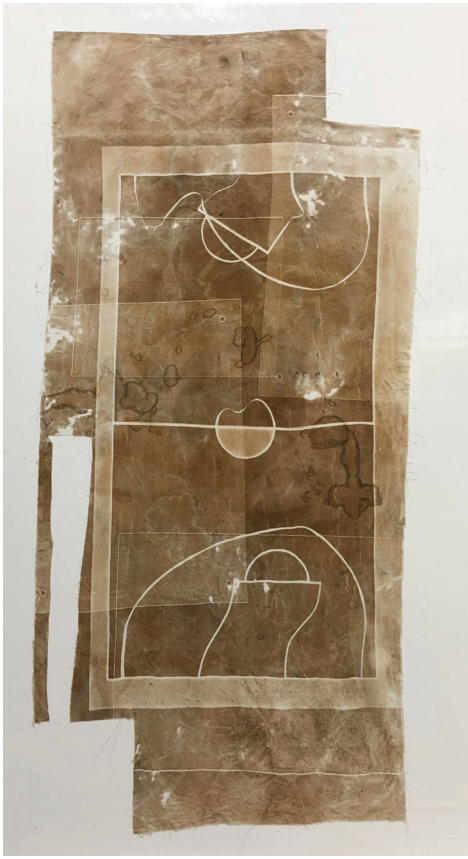
Octavia Bürgel: Well, I don't have an artist statement currently that I'm proud of, but I make work that's largely photographic. I've been doing photography for eight years at this point. I mostly do work that talks about race in some capacity, as it directly relates to my experience. Recently, I've felt like my most comfortable ways to talk about that have been through abstraction, although the majority of my work is largely representational or figurative. I've been dealing a lot with ideas of identity and construction and how we can represent facets of identity through abstraction, but also through the repetition of specific motifs and imagery and ideas.

**BC: What are some of those abstractions or other motifs that you rely on in such a representational media?**

OB: I've been doing a lot of things with image distortion. So mostly distorting images to the point that they're unrecognizable, and then questioning whether or not those images can realistically be called photographs. I think a lot of my real interest in photography is also embedded in the physical technique, the literal techniques and processes that are required in order to make a photograph. And so I think my work is very process-based because it's consistently informed by whatever—however I'm printing or distorting the image. So recently, this woodblock that I just printed is like this photograph of a bunch of Oberlin baseball players in the 1800s. I'm trying to distort that to reshape the narrative about the importance of education, because this is like our school. And I think there's a real way that sports and white maleness lend themselves very easily to glory and celebrity. And I feel like we talk so much about the 'great American sports' and all of these things, but also this project for me is really about being like, yeah, OK those things are interesting, but like specifically at Oberlin, the legacy that we brag about has directly to do with the legacy of slavery. I feel a lot of my work is a constant sort of questioning and hopefully the work itself can be a process of answering.

**BC: Do you want to speak a little bit about the work that you either brought or that you wanted to bring?**

OB: Yeah, I'll talk a little bit about the work I wanted to bring. So, I think for a long time—and this also very much coincides with my experience of growth and developing a sense of self and identity, in my college career. Because I think my earlier [work] or the work at least that I was doing when I... first started doing photography, it was just very simple. You know, you have a camera and you take pictures. And that's just like what I did for years. Then I took a couple of photo classes here and there and the projects that I was doing were sort of related to identity, but more through like space. And then when I got to Oberlin, I started talking about my identity in this way that was mostly through self-portraiture. And I've found, oddly enough, that self-portraiture is a thing that I feel very comfortable doing. I think because you just need one person to do it. So more and more, as I've been in school and reading a lot about many of the Black artists who have come before me and who have been dealing with ideas of Blackness and abstraction, and Blackness as an abstraction, as a state of nothingness and death, I've been very much starting to be pulled in a more abstract or theoretical direction, and so I did this piece... last semester, it doesn't have a title, but I was thinking a lot about landscapes and specifically urban landscapes, because every time I would go home to New York I was walking around and there's just textures and colors and sounds and everything. And I was just like, Oh my God, you can't synthesize a place into a photograph.



I have a lot of thoughts about photos in general too, but I think photographs, people usually think of as being reductive in some sense, as being a flattening of a real experience. And I definitely buy into that idea to a certain extent, and so last year I was really starting to think about landscape and textile. And so I did this piece that was—making these prints, both photographic and screen-printed—images of basketball courts because they're just… I think that there's just so much to be said for the basketball court as a symbol, as a graphic symbol. First of all, just because it's so recognizable automatically, but also the court in so many Black communities is a really fraught space where it's at once supposed to be representative of freedom and joy and the ability of movement and, I guess to a certain extent, the awareness of having a body is directly tied into any kind of physical activity. But then on the other hand, it's also for many people a source of life and hope and the idea that… I don't know, it's just so much, it's such an image of success, and I think that I just really wanted to trouble that invention. I was using a variety of media, and I was taking these images, of basketball courts and kind of… oh, I was distorting them! Oh my god, I didn't even realize, but I was messing with them so they would print a little weirdly.

Before that, I guess the piece that sort of [...] thinking a lot at the end of last year about race and that was really the first time that I was directly talking about race, because before that, my work that was mostly self-portraiture and it consisted of exactly that. But I would kind of just be like "Oh, this is about identity," without putting any real kind of term onto it, because I think my experience of being half white and half Black always made me into a weird kind of thing that nobody really knew what to do with, where I felt ostracized from my white family and also ostracized from my Black family, and just didn't really know if it was even remotely possible for me to talk about race because I didn't know what I was. But also, I think so much of the experience of being a Black person and the experience of being a mixed person or any kind of person who is somehow "uncategorizable" or an anomaly, is feeling literally ignored and fully invisible. And so it's really important to me that people actually have to be able to look at the work and engage with the work and not brush the work off.

Yeah, it took me awhile to figure out. So I started making work about Black masculinity, because I just had been thinking so much about all of these relatives that I had, and family members and friends. And all of these ideas are coming directly in a time when police brutality is, it's constant, it's everywhere. It's impossible to get away from. And so not working within some kind of response to that or some kind of very emotional feeling about the way that this constant stream of murder was affecting me, felt, I don't know, a little bit disingenuous. So I started making this work

about Black masculinity by just sort of compiling archived family photos and printing them using a nineteenth-century photographic process. And I was printing on silk and that was the first time that I had ever printed on a material that wasn't photo paper and it felt really, really exciting and freeing to be exploring different types of material. And so, for that piece specifically, it was really the silk that was so important to me because the whole "I can't breathe" slogan was just everywhere and so I was just —these images need to be able to breathe, they need to be able to move. They can't just exist as this flattened thing, and so now I feel, I'm very much in this phase of trying to understand how photography can be not a reductive thing but an additive process. And how can you make photos and prints and these very two dimensional objects into some construction of a life or an identity.

**BC: Where do you see your work going from here? What are your next projects planned for you know, senior year? Different media or continuing with photography?**

OB: I feel like I'm always going to be using photography in some sense... I don't know if that's true, but I do know that the times that I've taken extended gaps from any kind of photo-related work have felt really, really weird...there are a lot of ideas that I've really been trying to work through this semester specifically about mixedness, of being mixed of any background. And I have been really fascinated because we've been doing a lot of readings in this printmaking class and also in this translation workshop that I'm in here. They've been mostly kind of theoretical texts, but they examine the ways that, for example, in translation, the way that there's this dichotomy between the original and the copy, and the original and the facsimile. And the same I think can be said for printmaking. And photography too, you have the original moment and then you have a photograph, or you have the matrix or the drawing or whatever the idea is, and then you have the print. I think that that applies really well to a mixed race identity because there is the feeling of being other, and the feeling of being uncategorizable comes from being viewed as a copy, in a sense. But I do really want to start getting more sculptural and definitely less… I don't want to say less figurative, because also some of the ideas that I—one of the main ideas that I want to do is fashion-related. And I think that there's just so much to be done with fashion in terms of making it into art, and I also think that there's so many ways that there can be fashion that is specifically for an outsider identity, and how does that represent us. So that's kind of what I'm going to be working on next year, but I'm also working on a lot of other things. •

# SOMETIMES WALK OUTSIDE

GILLIAN PASLEY

Sometimes walk outside
Sometimes walk outside on streets where you live Sometimes live
Sometimes walk on broken glass
Sometimes walk outside on streets where you live
Sometimes die on streets Sometimes walk on broken glass
Sometimes die on broken glass on streets where you live
Sometimes die on streets
Sometimes die outside on streets where you live Sometimes die on broken glass on streets where you live
Sometimes die outside
Sometimes die outside on streets where you live
Sometimes live on streets where people die Sometimes die outside
Sometimes live on broken glass
Sometimes live on streets where people die
Sometimes live inside but die on streets Sometimes live on broken glass
Sometimes walk on broken glass on streets where you live
Sometimes live inside but die on streets
Sometimes live Sometimes walk on broken glass on streets where you live
Sometimes walk outside.

*Drawing by Lexi Mitchell*

# AND NOW A COUPLE OF WORDS FROM A WHITE PICKET FENCE:

How now, brown cow, how
red the heavens streak at dawn how
shrill and warbled the rooster's morning cackle how
the whole Earth now seems to vociferate in
anticipation of another morning broken.

How greener the pastures on each side from the last how
sweet a whiff of sunshine through the trees how
soft the fleece how fat the sow how
each day seems to slip through the slats
until the crickets peep and it's moonlight on the
meadow.

How black the night, how grave the vow, how
can you blame me, I mean really how—
can you possibly blame me, how one dark evening
fate stole through the slits while I slept still—
some old evil spirit, here to turn a good thing bad.

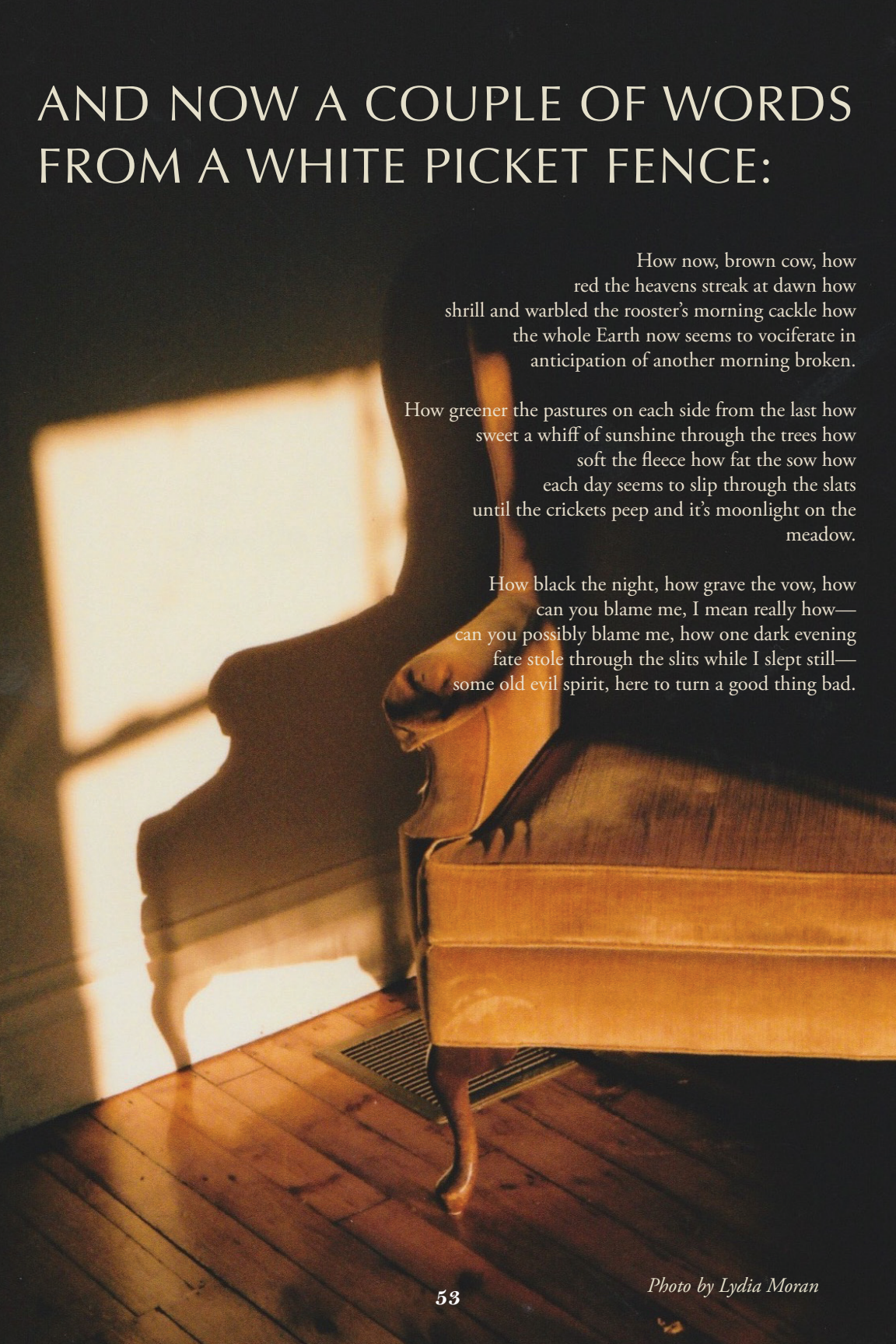


*Photo by Lydia Moran*

# DIASPORA

## JACOB FIDOTEN

like nylon on nylon a sound I have always felt deeper than the ear—shalom he said first meeting me shalom before I started shalom when I was finished shalom when hot oil anointed my forehead reverberated

the next day an uninhibited music but still scratching internally this lousy phallus never taught me to catch a football but I still learned to fear emasculation

there are too many people to blame in a day I like to compromise and blame myself I move through streets with the tepid entropy of cannabis burnt in the dense summer air surrounding the brittle branch posture held rigid by urge

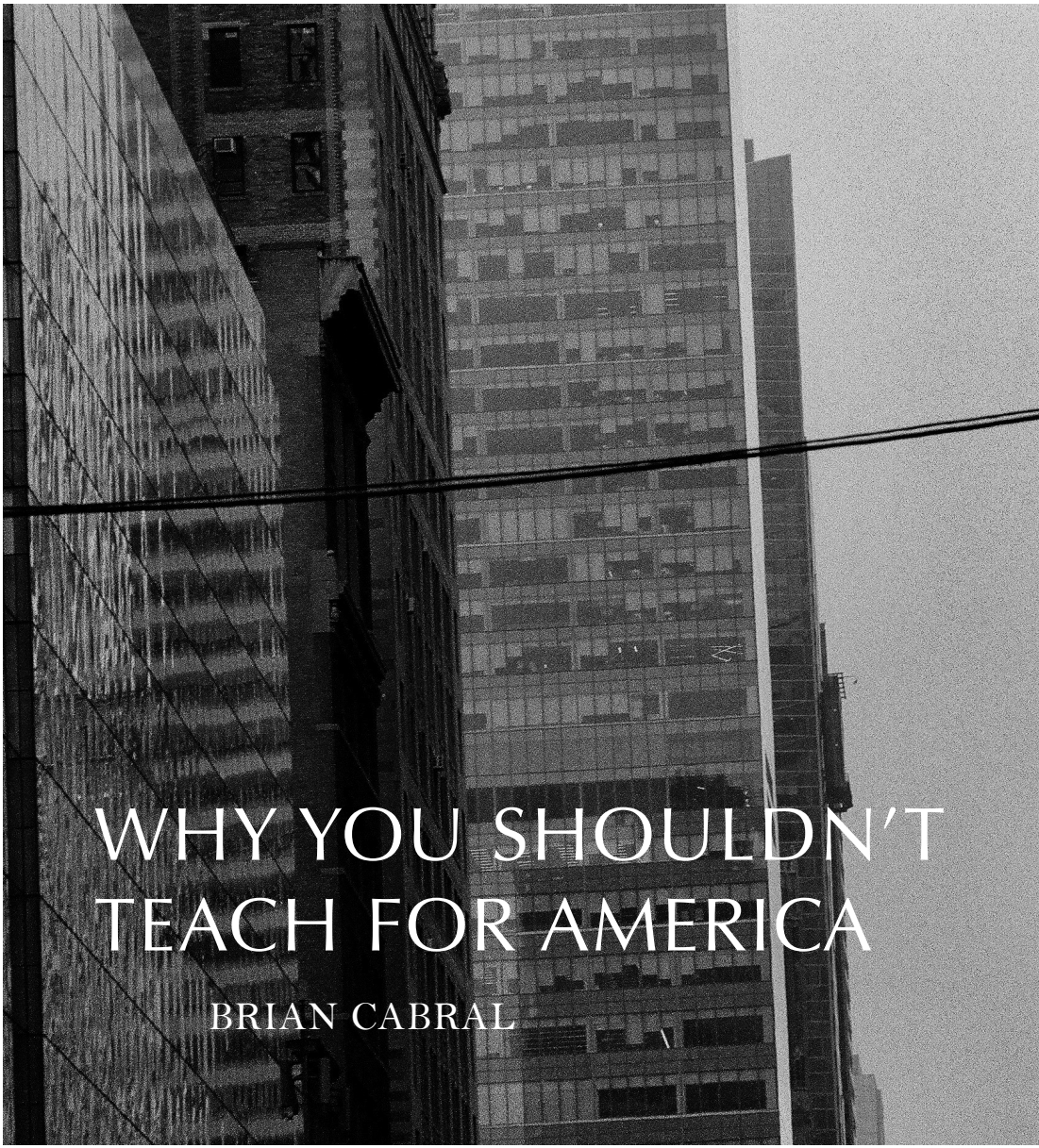
quickly dispersed as we collapse into briar those tangles always stiffen and the eyes gloss over in defense cover is blown by the thin line of tear salt on the glasses

the covenant was made to burden the breaker the manna was bug shit and we still thanked god he called me weak and I thanked him on the way out

# UNVOICED CONSONANCE

When I first came to high school I couldn't say the word. It was somewhere inside me, but something scaled, pointed down towards my stomach, so that when I tried to pull it upward it lurched against the grain and scraped my esophagus. When I finally coughed it out, it was pallid. It flopped weakly on the floor in a pool of blood and bile. My throat ached for days after. The next time it came out clean, still sickly but able to crawl around the room and touch the other boys, shocked when they passively succumbed to its pressure. It looked at me and bared its teeth, more bone than face, and I saw now that it had learned its strength. My throat was raw but recovered in hours. Mine was still different than the other boys': theirs were upright, standing so I smelled chest. Theirs bear-hugged and fist-bumped and did so without affection. I continued to spew it until it stood strong, capable of confrontation. Even when its fitness peaked I would still taste blood in its wake.

*Drawing by Julia Friend*



# WHY YOU SHOULDN'T TEACH FOR AMERICA

BRIAN CABRAL

In October of 2017, I had a phone conversation with a recruiter from Teach for America (TFA) and nearly landed a full-time job. After I answered her questions about my upbringing and current life interests, she assured me that my application would be accepted if I submitted one. "You'd be a great addition for us," she said. I considered this. I thought about how great it would be to land this job and to know what I would be doing for at least a year after graduation. But then I remembered that it was TFA and decided not to pursue it at all.

My reluctance to work with TFA has been shared by other people before me, but there are also many who believe in the mission and service of the organization. What TFA members are offered for their one- to two-year service at first glance is unclear, but the gist I got from my conversation with the recruiter was that TFA provides a livable, full-time teacher salary dependent on which region you teach in, health insurance, and the opportunity to spearhead a classroom without having a teaching license or any prior teaching experience. The recruiter also promised a strong network of TFA alumni and connections to graduate or professional programs as bait to try and recruit me. This is a good opportunity, especially for young professionals who have just graduated from college. But this tempting offer fails to consider the impact that such an organizational model has on the students at the low-income, underfunded schools that TFA partners with. I think that most newly recruited teachers who just graduated college are more invested in the benefits offered by the organization than the national concern of teacher shortages in urban public schools across the country.

As someone who values education, I am conflicted in my opinion on TFA. On one hand, yes, it provides graduating seniors like me job security for one- to two-years where we are able to gain experience and use TFA as a stepping stone to progress into our careers. On the other hand, no, it does not benefit the low-income, racially segregated student

demographics in the schools that TFA works with. I situate myself as both a potential participant of TFA and a former student at one of those schools.

I attended Social Justice High School (SOJO), a small public high school in Chicago, between 2010 and 2014. The school is primarily comprised of Latino/Hispanic and Black/African American students. During my junior year, I overheard my principal in conversation with the school counselor about partnering with Teach for America. She had said, if I remember correctly, "They out they damn minds." She justified her reluctance to partner with TFA with the fact that in other public schools, the majority of the TFA teachers are white college graduates. This is concerning, because despite obtaining a college degree, many of the TFA teachers are not knowledgeable about the school culture or culturally aware of how to teach the racially and economically diverse student population found in the schools they end up in. Had TFA promised to bring teachers of color to SOJO, I still think my principal would have said no. She firmly stated that the lack of teaching or pedagogical training hindered rather than helped the learning and development of high school students. A combination of these interactions and my relationships with teachers in high school inform the perspective that I have towards TFA. My biggest suspicion of TFA is the distinction between what the organization is, and what it does, compared to what it *claims* to do.

Teach for America prides itself on being a nonprofit organization that provides a useful service for communities in need. One of TFA's values is service: It directly addresses the teacher shortages found in many public and charter schools across the country. It asks college graduates, who are presumed to be well-equipped to become teachers, to join in order to gain experience and skills necessary for other jobs. At the same time, their participation in TFA will have a positive impact on students in the schools. Because of this, many college seniors see TFA as a viable option after graduating because they earn a full-time salary, gain experience, and are able to pat themselves on the back for serving communities that need teaching positions filled. Why, then, are people so critical of TFA? Why did I push away the idea of working for them?

TFA only offers temporary employment. To my knowledge, based on interactions with the recruiter and peers who have done TFA, I understand that the most time you can spend with the organization is two years. If you opt in for a second year, you will most likely be placed at a different school than the one you were placed in for your first year. This means that the service you are providing for schools in need of teachers is short-term and fails to address long-term needs. TFA teachers gain meaningful experience and learn how to manage a classroom along the way, but this short-term stint benefits the teacher more than it does the student body. Shouldn't the learning process and achievement of the students be what's most important?

I have peers who made the decision to work for TFA, who refused to join or who are currently weighing the benefits and drawbacks of joining the organization. I spoke with some of them in order to gain insight on this matter; my intention was to figure out whether or not they share my concerns about TFA. One of them, who graduated from Brown University, opted into a second year with the organization in the Los Angeles region, and was placed in a different school than he had worked during his first year. As a product of public schools, he initially joined to give back to the school system that had helped him get into college. He shared that despite not being placed in the school that he wanted, he was servicing schools that needed teachers, and that was enough for him. When I asked him why he decided to opt for another year with TFA, his response was simple: job security. However, he does not intend to stay in the field of education after his second year with TFA; instead, he said he'd rather work at a think tank. Another peer who decided

to join TFA in the summer of 2018, shared a similar sentiment about the ways that TFA uses 'service' to lure college graduates into becoming teachers. But she's also a firm believer that TFA is a good option for those who intend to remain in the field like she does. "It's good experience to become better teachers," she said. Another peer of mine who graduated from Oberlin in 2016 mentioned that he joined TFA not for its mission, but because it allowed him to teach without having to go to school for teaching; it will be at most two years of his life and then he gets to move on. Once again, mandating a short-term commitment benefits the teachers and not the students in the schools.

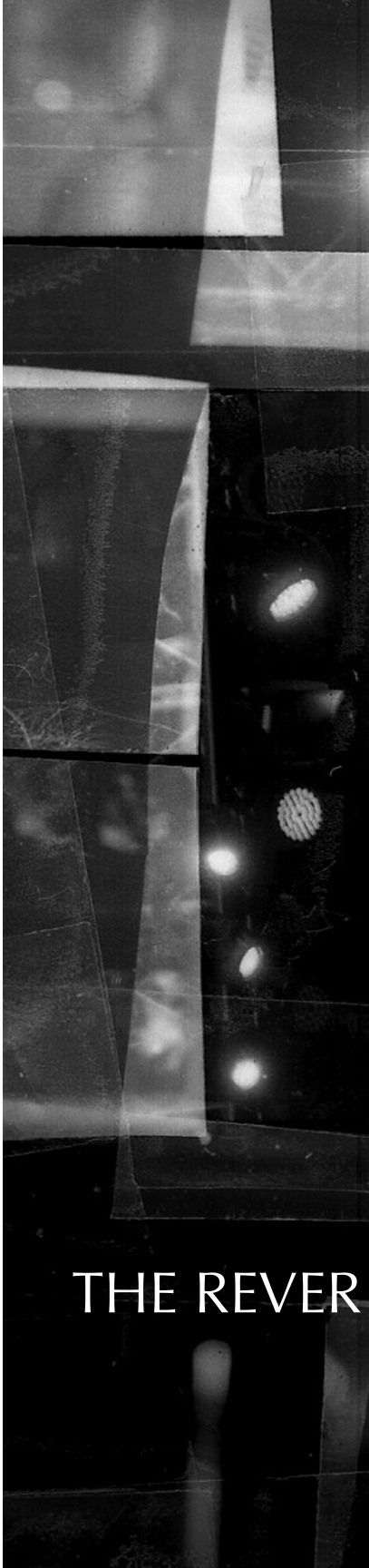
As part of my independent research, I interviewed young men of color who had attended SOJO at one point in their high school trajectory. In those interviews, I asked them about their interactions with teachers, and many of them talked about teachers who have worked at the school for at least four years. Most of them were able to name at least one teacher from SOJO that taught or mentored them throughout their time in high school. One of the young men praised teachers at SOJO who have been there for a long time: "I wouldn't have been done with high school without them… they annoyed me, yeah, but they cared for me," he said. Remember that SOJO did not partner with TFA, instead, all teachers were full-time employees under the Chicago Public School system. Many had prior experience with teaching or student teaching, and because of those experiences, these teachers were able to connect with SOJO students and witness their growth as they progressed through school. For short-term teachers, this experience and interaction with students is not possible.

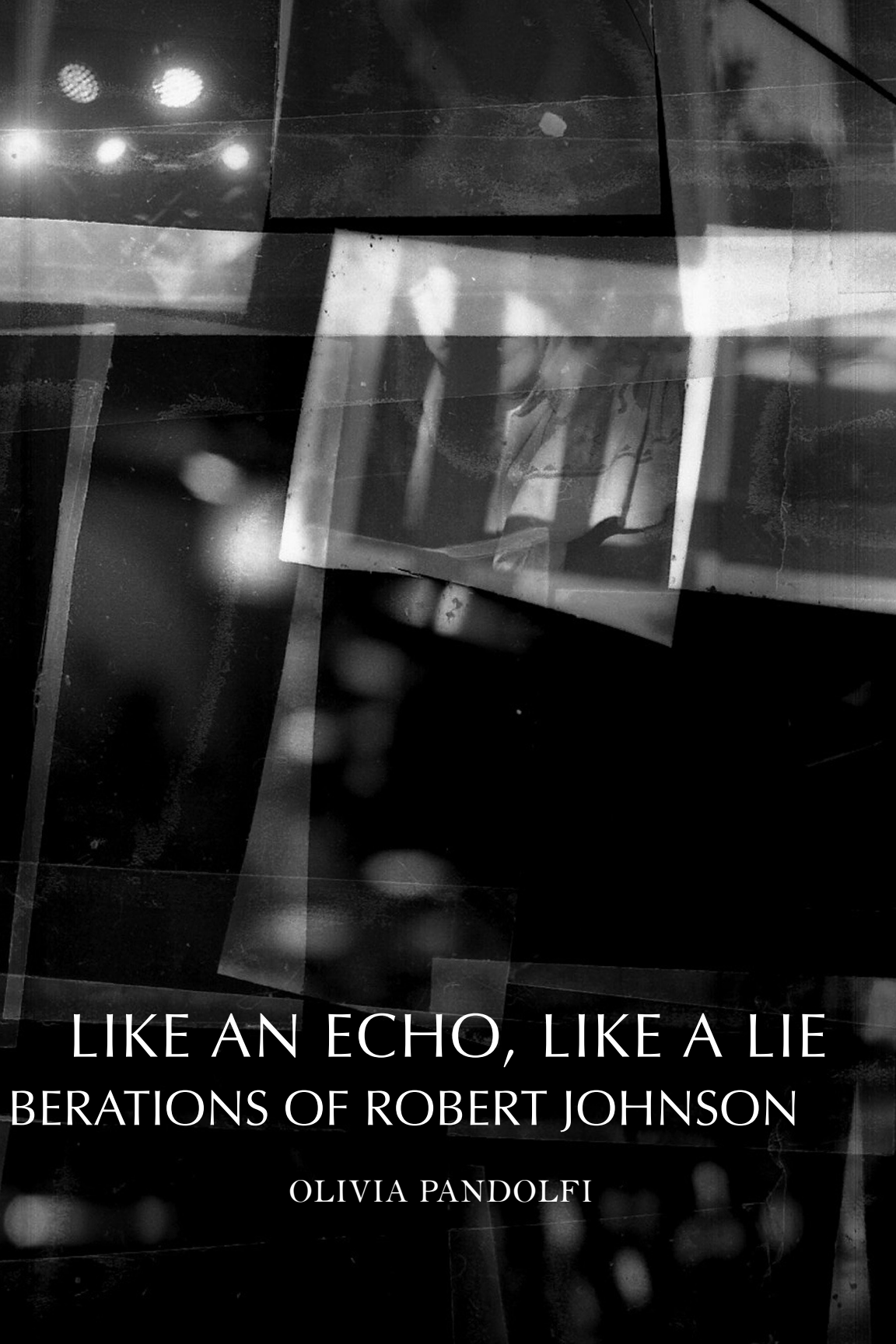
Teach for America has been successful at recruiting short-term teachers for many public and charter schools across the country. I mean, they almost had me too. The organization will continue to exist and

*Images by Francesca Ott*

expand, but the reason why I decided not to take an offer from the TFA recruiter came after considering the adverse effects on the students. A friend of mine told me that TFA is transparent about their short-term model, which is a selling point for college graduates because many want to go on to do other things. Why not provide them with an opportunity to get experience, serve as teachers and role models, and then move on with their lives? I get this. But who is this truly benefiting? Certainly not the students. Sure, TFA teachers have positive interactions with the students, but are their students' academic needs being met? How do you leverage the inexperience of TFA teachers with the fact that many of their students are low-income and/or students of color? Previous research by Pedro Noguera and others has shown that schools of this demographic struggle the most academically—having short-term teacher guidance will not help this matter.

While TFA has made improvements over time, it is still unable to improve the educational inequality brought about by teacher shortages in public schools. Short-term teacher appointments and trainings do not prepare teachers for the classroom, and it is a faulty way of framing 'service' for college graduates. TFA must rethink its organizational model to consider privileging the impact on the students of the communities they are trying to serve, instead of the convenience it provides the teachers. Maybe then I would have considered Teach for America after college. •





# LIKE AN ECHO, LIKE A LIE

## BERATIONS OF ROBERT JOHNSON

OLIVIA PANDOLFI

*Prelude*

On December 13, 1938, Carnegie Hall was filled with a listening silence. At a program of appreciation for Black music in America called *From Spirituals to Swing,* thousands of audience members heard first static, then an insistent voice, issue from the cone of an amplified phonograph. The audience probably listened hard—they were hearing the voice of a dead man.

John Hammond, the Columbia Records talent scout who organized the concert, had sent word down to Mississippi to invite Robert Johnson, the voice's owner, to play his blues music on the program, only to hear back that he had died mere weeks before. Hammond was told that the singer's whiskey had been poisoned by the jealous husband of one of his mistresses. But having heard one of his records, Hammond included Johnson's music in the concert anyway, maybe because he still needed a representative of backwoods blues music and didn't have time enough to find a replacement, or maybe because he didn't want anyone but Johnson.

It was in all likelihood the first time someone played a record in Carnegie Hall to a packed house. The song was "Preachin' Blues." In it Johnson sang, as he often did, about traveling and dying and playing music, over a shuffling guitar riff.

> *Woke up this mornin', blues walkin*
> *like a man*
> *Woke up this mornin', blues walkin*
> *like a man*
> *Worried blues, give me your right hand*

I say he sang, and I mean that the needle traced the grooves in the record, and that the vibrations carried through the phonograph and over the PA system, and all of these small motions delivered the living breathing voice—like a lie, like an echo—into the ears of the concertgoers.

> *The blues is a low-down shakin'chill*
> *Is a low-down shakin' chill*
> *You ain't never had em, I hope you*
> *never will*

The crowd heard plenty of live music that night, but they heard the absent Johnson too, heard him alive and twice-reflected, his clear voice carrying out above the seats, filling up all the space they could see.

—

*The First Origin Story of Robert Johnson*
*based on Peter Guralnick's account in his book*
Searching for Robert Johnson

Born May 8, 1911, Robert Leroy Dodds Spencer passed his early years in Hazlehurst, Mississippi and then Memphis, Tennessee, under the care of his mother Julia Major Dodds and stepfather Charles Dodds. Robert's biological father was Noah Johnson, a plantation worker whom he never met. At age seven or eight, Robert returned to the Delta, near Robinsonville, MS, where his mother and her new husband, Dusty Willis, raised him into adolescence. Going by either Robert Johnson or Little Robert Dusty then, he may or may not have gone to school in Commerce, outside Robinsonville. He had beautiful handwriting but was "anti-education." His wife died in childbirth at age sixteen. Robert Johnson's musical mentor, Son House, recalls "little boy" Johnson (at age nineteen or so) being distinctly unskilled at playing guitar. "A racket," House called his playing, but when Johnson returned two years later, remarried and fresh from rambling travels around the Mississippi River Delta, his sudden proficiency—even mastery—made House's jaw drop.

This part of the story has grown to the status of legend. Even if you don't recognize the name Robert Johnson, you have undoubtedly heard a story about a person selling their soul to the devil in exchange for musical talent. Like most myths, this one has an untraceable genesis, but most attribute it to Robert Johnson because of the frequent appearance of the devil figure in his songs, and because

of his unexplained and apparently drastic improvement as a musician. Johnson's story has been made into movies, books, songs, even a federal postage stamp collection, and his music itself was one of the single greatest influences on the development of rock 'n roll. As influential as his music has been—and it is influential, with artists like Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, and the Rolling Stones covering his songs and citing him as an inspiration—the devil myth has transcended him to become an idiom unto itself. He haunts our imaginations because he died so young, but the devil story is the one that snags in our souls.

Describing the mythic origin story of another famous bluesman named Tommy Johnson (no relation to Robert), his brother LeDell Johnson said,

> *...the reason he knowed so much, said he sold hisself to the devil. I asked him how. He said, "If you want to learn how to play anything you want to play and learn how to make songs yourself, you take your guitar and you go to where a road crosses that way, where a crossroad is. Get there, be sure to get there just a little 'fore 12:00 [AM] that night … You have your guitar and be playing a piece sittin there by yourself... A big black man will walk up there and take your guitar and he'll tune it. And then he'll play a piece and hand it back to you. That's the way I learned to play anything I want."*

Son House was convinced that the same thing had happened with Robert Johnson: It was the only explanation for his sudden abilities. Growing a reputation, Johnson traveled all around, riding by train, or being pulled behind a tractor in a corn wagon. At his stops he established connections, a woman in every town to take care of him. Shy but direct, he would ask for their company, and for the most part they accepted his advances. The relationships would end either when the woman's husband or boyfriend came back or Johnson left town. In spite of these relationships, he remained something of a loner—guarded, cryptic. He could play anything, picking a tune up after listening to it once on the radio.

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*On the devil, lightheartedness, and sin*

Several of Johnson's songs casually mention walking with the devil, talking to the devil, living with the devil closeby no matter where he goes: "Me and the Devil Blues" starts with the two of them *walking side by side* and ends with Johnson asking to *bury my body down by the highway side / so my old evil spirit / can get a greyhound bus and ride.* How seriously can we take his references

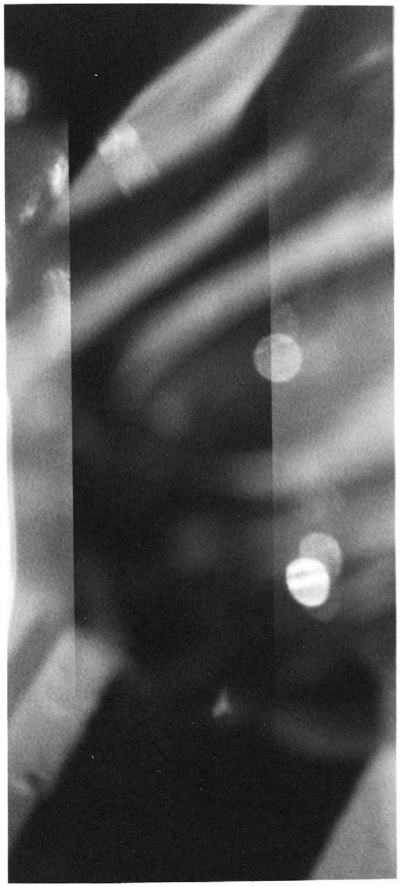
*Title image by Francesca Ott*

to the devil? Hearing the music now, it's easy to take him very seriously, imagining that he is speaking grave truths about his sins, about the cosmic consequences of his lifestyle. But the figure of the devil, with its multivalent and prolific representations, can be hellish or corny, divine, tragic, or—funny. Humorous or fiendish interpretations of the devil—the trickster figure, the rebel son—are nearly as common as the more classical imagery of an evil soul-keeper in the underworld.

What music historian Tom Graves calls "devil talk" in Robert Johnson's time and place was familiar to his audiences, a dialogue that invoked the devil not to inspire fear or awe but to tap into heavily saturated religious imagery for humor's sake. Of his listeners, Graves writes, "They probably didn't give a second thought to Johnson's depictive musings on the subject, certainly not enough to seriously believe he was actually in league with the devil." Like telling an inside joke, Johnson mentions the devil because it is already a part of how people made sense of the sorrows in their lives—to take it too seriously is to fall into the all-too-common tendency to romanticize and rhapsodize on the theme of Johnson past the point of meaning.

This "devil talk" likely came from the relationship between Puritan Christianity and West African religious traditions, which commingled in Black religious practice in the South as a result of slavery. The syncretism between these two traditions also blurred distinctions between the Christian devil and the West African deity Legba, a spirit or guardian of the crossroads who is recognized by various names in different parts of Africa and the diaspora (Eshu in Benin, Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba in Haiti). Because both figures are associated with souls and the gateway between the human world and the divine, many historians think that the folklore image of the devil at the crossroads comes directly from Legba's mythology. Legba is also the deity of trickery, music, and language, known to take delight in chaos and act unpredictably, though he has nothing to do with sin or punishment. More than one devil appears in blues folklore then—the punisher of sins from Southern Christianity and the trickster guardian of the crossroads from West African religions—and Johnson's devil is either, neither, or both.

So yes, maybe Johnson uses the devil as a joke, or a specific intimacy with his audience and the complex religious confluences they shared. Or maybe he talks about the devil so much because he knows how real it is, more even than the preachers do. Greil Marcus writes in his rock 'n roll history classic, *Mystery Train*, that "the blues singers, in a twisted way, were the real Puritans. These men, who had to renounce the blues to be sanctified, who often sneered at the preachers in their songs, were the ones who really believed in the devil; they feared the devil most because they knew him best." To live the life



of a blues singer, especially a traveling one like Johnson, meant to drink, to womanize, to be uprooted, and most of all, to do so on the dime of the devil's music: a life path through the very Puritan American South that might have produced all kinds of guilt. But the self-awareness of blues singers as sinners and their resulting fixation on the devil feels like a matter-of-fact confession, a wrestling with quotidian devilishness that is neither tragic nor romantic. It's small, feels ordinary, to open the door to Satan's knock and tell him, like Johnson does in "Me and the Devil Blues," that you *believe, it's time to go.*

*Mechanics of Recording I*

At the turn of the twentieth century, acoustic recording was the best way anyone knew to capture sound and translate it into a physical form. To record a sound, an acoustic gramophone's diamond-tipped stylus would move with the vibrations and carve grooves into the wax coating of a record. The grooves would either be vertical, "hill-and-dale," or lateral, side-to-side—physical mirrors of the sound itself. When the record was played back, a needle would manually, acoustically retrace the paths that had been engraved in the record's surface, and send the resulting vibrations to the diaphragm, where they echoed out through a cone-shaped amplifier. The sounds that came from a gramophone were therefore reproductions of the original sound waves, a sort of twice-removed reflection. A conduit for the presence of the artist.

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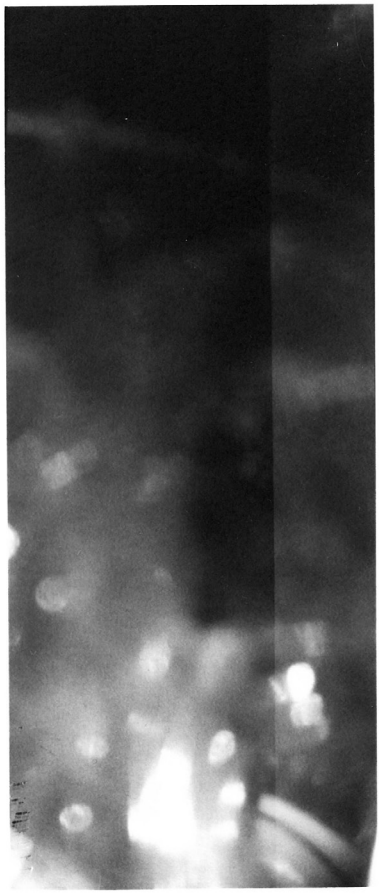
*The Second Origin Story of Robert Johnson based on Tom Graves's account in his book* Crossroads

Born May 8, 1911 in Hazlehurst, MS, Robert Leroy Johnson also went by the name Robert Spencer. He was "an outside child," something of a misfit, partly but not only because he was born out of wedlock and never knew his biological father. He was his mother's eleventh child, and learned to play music from



an older brother named Charles Leroy, who later became a pianist. His first instruments were the diddley bow—a one-string folk instrument made of a length of broom wire stretched between two nails—and the Jew's harp, an ancient sort of precursor to the harmonica. He then learned the harmonica, a sound which, together with the diddley bow, would come to shape his unique style on guitar.

Music was Robert's escape from his difficult home life and the oppressive atmosphere of the cotton plantations in Mississippi. As a young man, he lived with his stepfather Dusty Willis in Robinsonville, Mississippi, who tried and failed to teach him a work ethic by making him pick cotton. Robert went briefly to school at the Indian Creek School in Tunica, but a lazy eye probably prevented him from continuing for long. Unhappy and in search

of a different life, he ran away from home. He was known to go to juke joints on Saturday nights and drink corn whiskey while listening to the bluesmen play. This musician's life attracted him and pulled him away from home, and he spent some time traveling and playing in the Delta. But at eighteen, he fell in love and got married to a local girl, Virginia Travis, who soon afterward died during childbirth in April of 1930. This moment was a crossroads for Robert; a black curtain fell across his life, not only because of his grief in losing his wife and child, but also due to her family's accusations that he had neglected her at her hour of greatest need. From that point on, Robert would never again stay in one place, but wandered between towns and women, accompanied only by his music and his drinking habit.

*Mechanics of Recording II*

After 1925, electrical recording replaced acoustic recording, a development that meant sounds could be reproduced in higher quality more easily. In acoustic recording, the sound waves' ability to carve wax with precision and to reflect the actual range of frequencies in a sound was limited—what was recorded ended up being the softly defined middle of the sound, without the overtones and undertones you can hear in a real voice. Electrical recording adapted some of the technology used in telephones to turn sound waves into electrical signals that were more accurate, giving clarity to the lowest and highest frequencies. Recordings now retained the sound of the room where they were made, microphones being more sensitive to subtle reverberations and echoes than the horns of the acoustic recording days. Once recording was electrified, the clear range of audible expression expanded, but the playback system worked much the same as it had before—a needle retracing the grooves, following, echoing. As overlapping harmonics bring the voice into focus, slowly the absences diminish, the gaps fill in.

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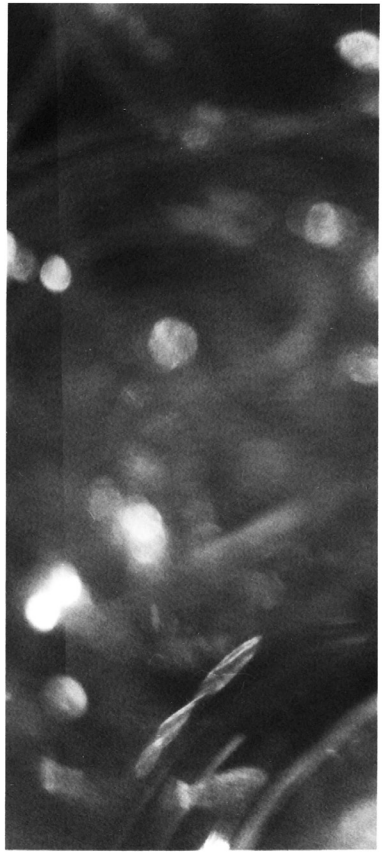

*The Third Origin Story of Robert Johnson*
*Based on Elijah Wald's book* Escaping the Delta

Born May 8, 1911, Robert Johnson lived first with his mother, and then a man named Charles Dodds, who was also known as Charles Spencer. Johnson was introduced to music during his childhood, and it eventually drew him away from home; he became a regular juke joint performer either in Arkansas or south of the Delta, and while he was away married a woman named Callie Craft. He had one "bad" eye and a lot of confidence, and would always look sharp regardless of how many days he had spent riding in railcars wearing the same suit. He went traveling with Johnny Shines, another blues player, from Memphis to New York to Indiana to Kentucky in the early thirties. Shines once witnessed him bring a whole room

of adults to tears with the slide guitar on his song "Come On in My Kitchen."

> *You better come on in my kitchen*
> *It's goin' to be rainin' outdoors*
> *Ah the woman I love, took from my best friend*
> *Some joker got lucky, stole her back again*
> *You better come on in my kitchen*
> *It's goin' to be rainin' outdoors*

Johnson recorded sixteen songs in San Antonio, TX, for the American Record Corporation (ARC) in November of 1936, and another thirteen in Dallas in June of 1937. Then he spent some time in Arkansas, and might have put together a band with a drummer and a pianist, playing what was later called "jump blues." By 1938 he was back in the Delta, specifically in Greenwood, MS. He played frequently at a club just outside of-Greenwood, and the owner eventually suspected Johnson of getting involved with his wife. He decided to poison Johnson's whiskey to get rid of him. Johnson died on August 16, 1938 at about age twenty-seven, either from this poisoning, syphilis, or pneumonia, depending on the account you believe. Some people who claim to have witnessed it remember Johnson losing his wits in his final hours and howling like a dog.

The death certificate, which says that Johnson played banjo instead of guitar and misspells his father's name, also cites a Greenwood plantation owner's opinion that Johnson died of syphilis, noting by way of explanation that he was a musician. These inaccuracies in the official record are a final violence to Johnson, on top of the already numerous violences inherent in life for Black people in the early-twentieth-century Delta. It's reasonable even to question if this death certificate belongs to the right Johnson, or to another banjo-playing one we know nothing else about.

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*The devil is a stand-in*

There are some blues songs, usually ballads, that have many different versions—the same characters act differently depending on if you hear the version sung by a chain gang in Georgia or an old bluesman in Tennessee. Singers add and take away stanzas and rhymes, start and end the action at different points, collectively weaving together the deeds of an outlaw like Staggerlee or the story of the mean sheriff and Poor Lazarus, figures who billow into myth. The origin stories of Robert Johnson work much in the same way, with overlapping and conflicting details that congregate and disperse, making way for empty spaces and simultaneous truths.

So it is not so much the image of Robert Johnson shaking hands with the devil over his newly tuned guitar that seems to have taken hold in our national imaginary, but the *lack* of an image, the blankness that stands in its place. The devil story is one we like to tell because it is literally unimaginable. Our inability to visualize the physical materiality of that scene is what allows us to take the Robert Johnson story—the two known photographs of him, his recordings, and the wildly various and conflicting impressions he left on those who met him—and run.

We run in so many directions with that idea—of selling your soul to the devil for musical talent—that we have left Robert Johnson standing at the mythical crossroads, howling out his blues to the wilderness, in either the clearest and most proximate act of selfhood possible, or the loneliest and least traceable.

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*Mechanics of Recording III*

The move from acoustic to electrical recording in the twenties expanded the range of sound frequencies that could be produced in high quality—expanded the record's ability to tell the truth. It also eliminated the need for artists to play directly into the recording horn in order for their sound to be registered by the stylus. Before, the choreography of recording

many musicians at once was a complex affair, requiring louder instruments to be placed further away from the horn and quieter ones closer, so that the balance was right in the recording. During solos, an instrumentalist would run up to the horn in order to deliver their phrase before retreating back into the group. The push and pull of sound around the horn was physical, dynamic.

With electrical recording, though, the musician sat somewhere in a room and the recording equipment around them could be adjusted to create what a lead researcher with Bell Labs called "the illusion of the presence of the artist." The recordist could manipulate the electrical signals' volume, dimension, and clarity to bend the sound waves into the voice, the guitar, the harmonica, that manifest on the record itself. The power of the recordist, dispersed throughout his electrical equipment, could be felt like a puppeteer tugging strings: pulling a riff a little closer to the audience, letting out the slack on a voice, leaning into the overtones or the undertones, shaping, turning, distorting.

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*The Fourth Origin Story of Robert Johnson*
*Based on the account given in the* Radiolab *episode "Crossroads"*

The origin of the Robert Johnson myth is more important than the origin of the man himself, although they are tied up together. After a time traveling around the Mississippi Delta, in 1929, Robert was married in at age nineteen to a woman named Virginia. They settled down to a happy domestic life on their farm. She became pregnant soon afterward, and when the time came for the baby to be born, she went to stay with her family. Robert was to follow after her, but he went out of town to play a gig just before she went into labor, only discovering when he returned that she had died during childbirth. Virginia's family ostracized him for this, blaming him for killing her by playing the devil's songs. The grief of this experience is what turned Robert from a mediocre musician into an exceptional one—grief and guilt are what tore him from his life and then pushed him, haunted, back into it. That grief is what people refer to when they tell the devil story—the devil is just another name for death.

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*Record-keeping and white authority*

The government record of Robert Johnson's death, his official death certificate, is skewed because it relies on the opinion of a white plantation owner rather than taking the accounts of Black musicians who actually witnessed his death. The certificate is probably the most blatant instance of white authority distorting what we can know about him, but it is just one of many examples. The afterlife of his music commits another contortion, proliferating a legacy based in mythology.

Both the myth of Robert Johnson and his music were revived in the later twentieth century, supposedly due to the interest of white rock and roll musicians, who were already making their fame on the theft and reappropriation of Black art forms (the blues being prominent among them). It was artists like Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones covering Johnson's songs that brought him into the national consciousness; their romanticization of his tortured-artist soul and young death was another kind of reaping. It is worth noting that they deeply admired Johnson and meant to pay tribute to him, not only exploit his talents and mythic pull. But it is equally worth mentioning that they were ultimately the ones getting paid.

With the white band covers, the white government records, and moreover the many white ethnomusicologists who have populated the blank spaces of Robert Johnson with speculation, some solid research, and rhapsody on the theme of his sold soul—our attempts to see and hear the truth of Johnson are tied up in the violences of white authority. It only feels possible to see beyond this, to

stand facing Johnson, by listening to his records. Through the vibrations, the receivers, the diaphragms, the styluses writing grooves into wax, we can summon his voice and guitar out of a speaker, hear him sing:

> *I got to keep movin', I got to keep movin'*
> *Blues fallin' down like hail, blues fallin' down like hail*
> *Hmmm-mmm, blues fallin' down like hail, blues fallin' down like hail*
> *And the days keeps on worryin' me*
> *There's a hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail*

—

*Postlude*

The twenty-six songs that we have from Robert Johnson are the products of two recording sessions: one in San Antonio, TX, in November of 1936 and one in Dallas, TX, in July of 1937. In San Antonio, he was one of several acts scouted out by ARC, including a cowboy swing band and two groups of Mexican musicians.

Here are three accounts of what happened in that room. All are equally true.

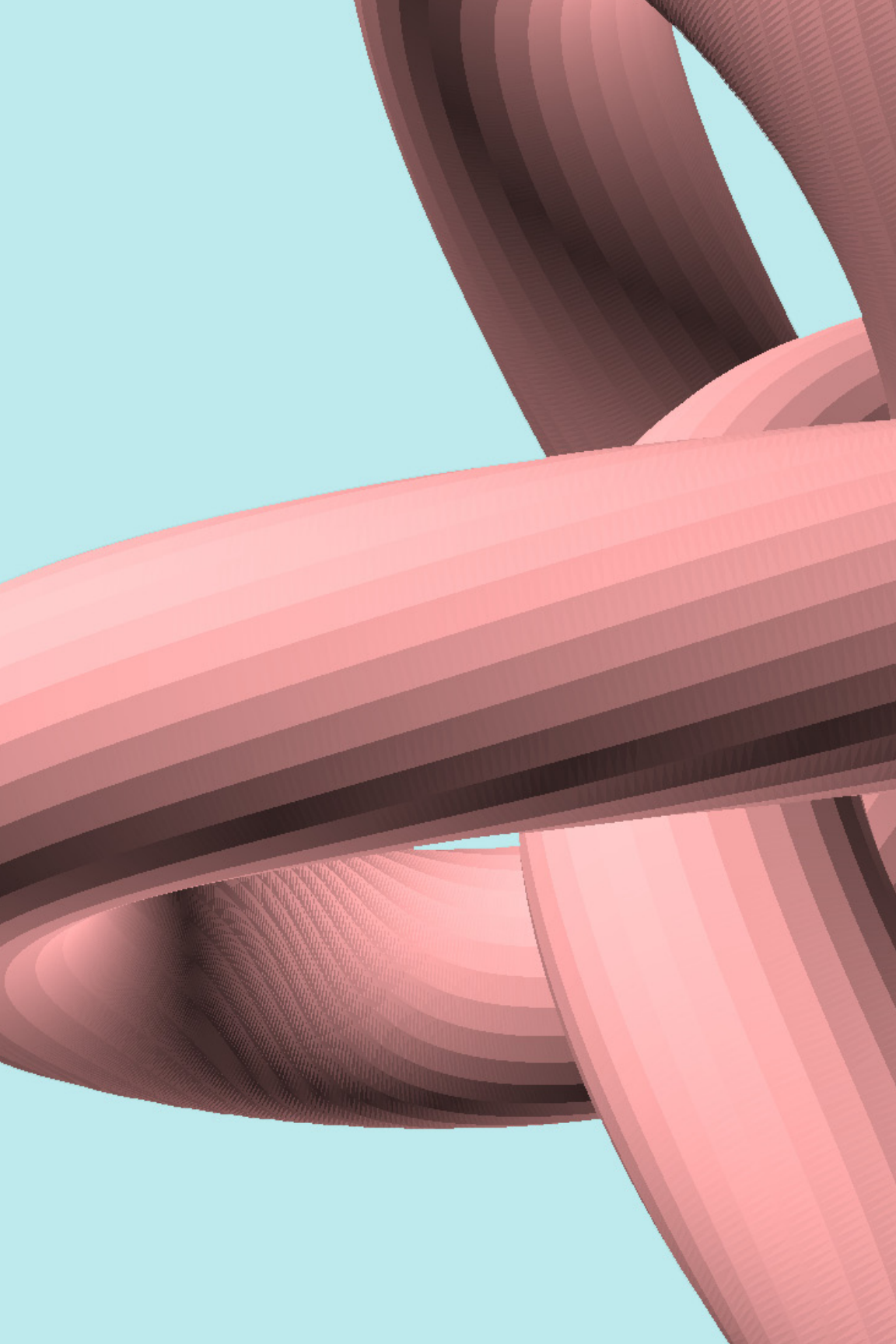
*Johnson had never played in a studio before. The other musicians' eyes followed his every move. Suffering a bad case of stage fright, he turned away from the microphone toward the corner of the room. He drew a breath and closed his eyes, and began to play, letting his high clear voice rise straight from his chest.*

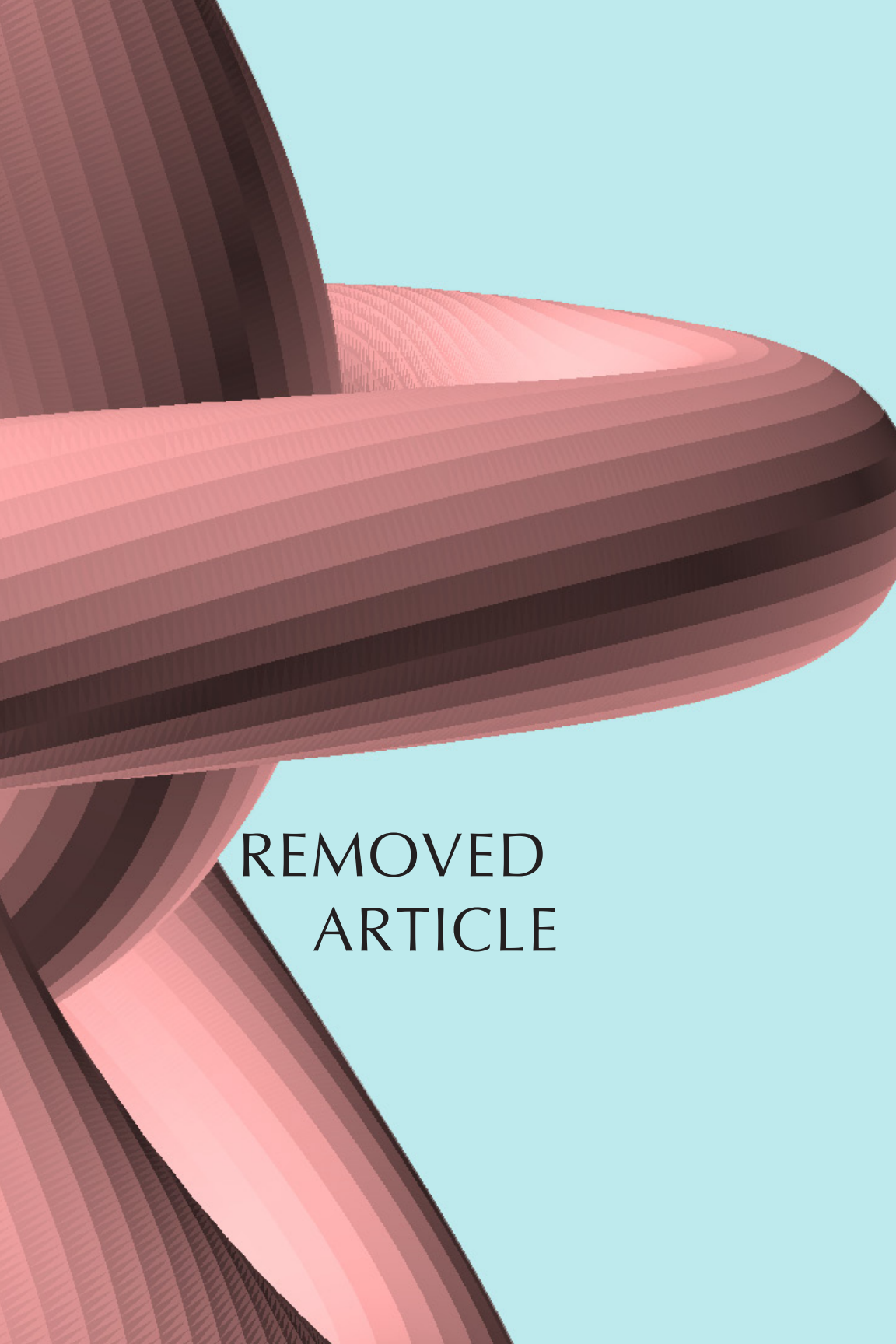
*Johnson sat facing the corner, turned away from the other musicians, to hide his patented picking patterns and slide hand. Dressed slick and sharp in a suit like he always was, he gave one glance over his left shoulder at the recording technician, just long enough to see him nod. He played the first chord, coaxing the whine out of it. His gaze rested on his left hand and followed the chords as they changed.*

*Robert Johnson mostly played in living rooms and crowded juke joints, and he never had an amplifier. He had learned to make the room do the amplifying for him. When he sat down in the studio, he faced the corner so that the sounds of his guitar and his voice would dissipate into the room. Even though his back was to the receiver, his voice sounded like it came from the walls themselves. He screwed up his face in concentration, sliding his hand and his voice together up the octave and back down, holding a wavering note before letting it fall, stomping the floor on two and four.* •

*Images by Naomi Langer*

*Prints by Ian Ruppenthal*

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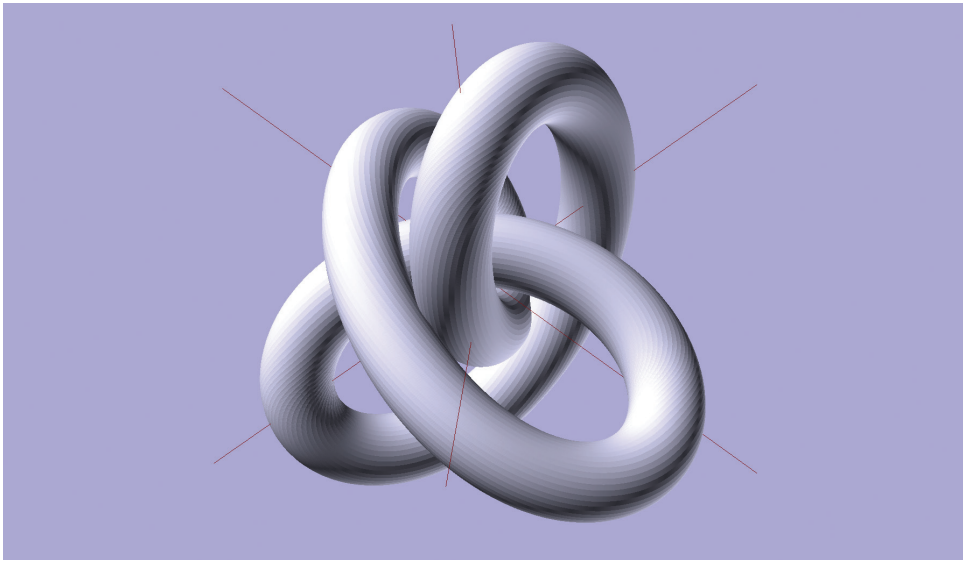
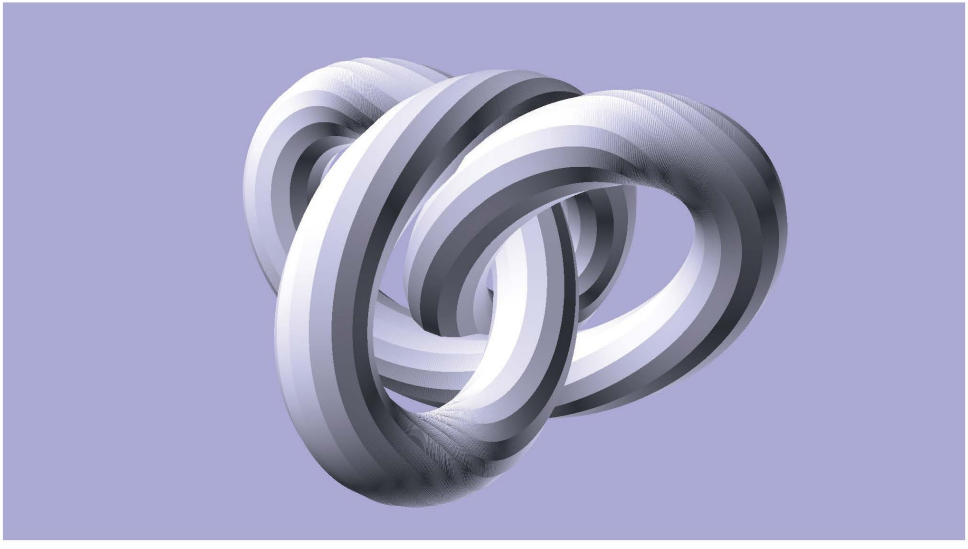
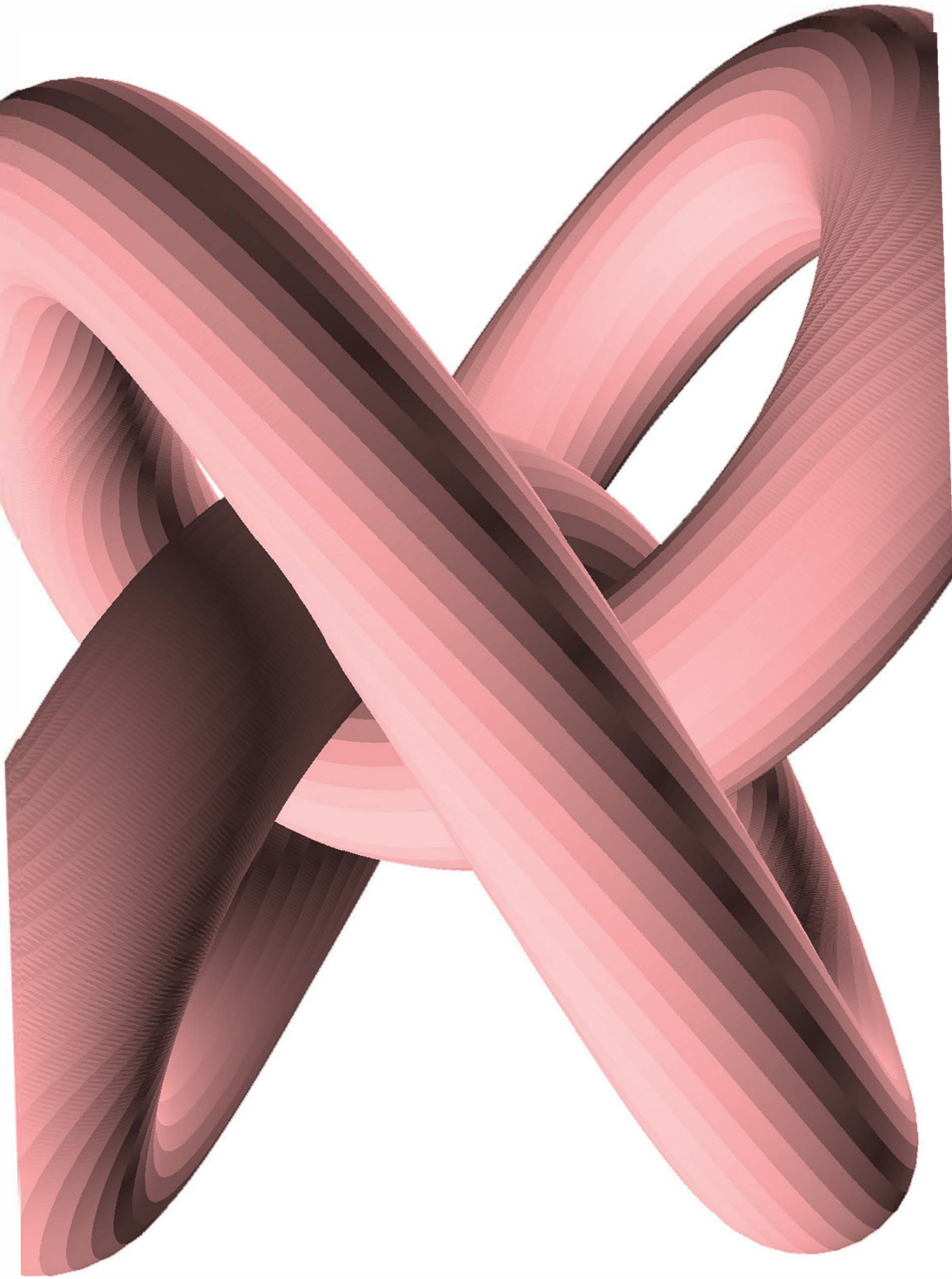
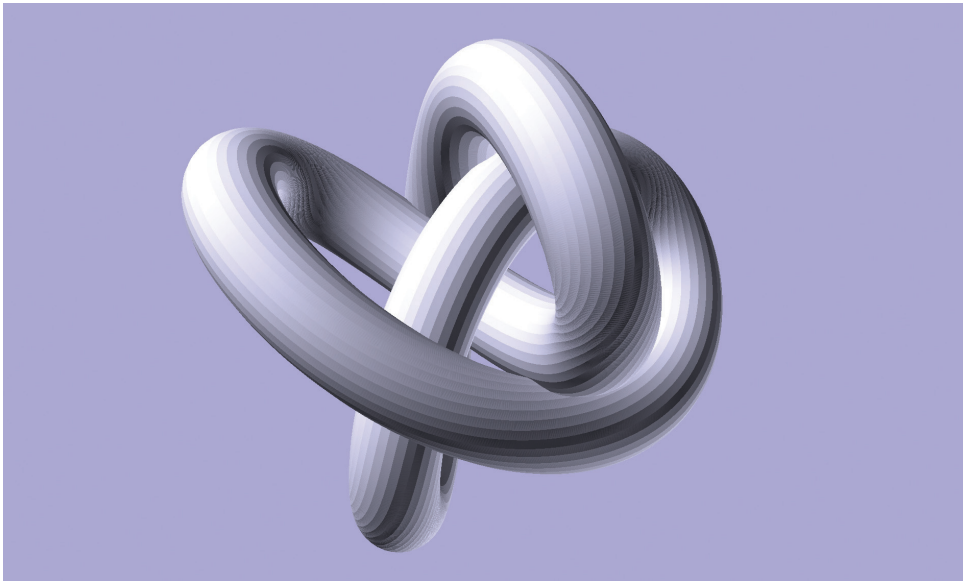
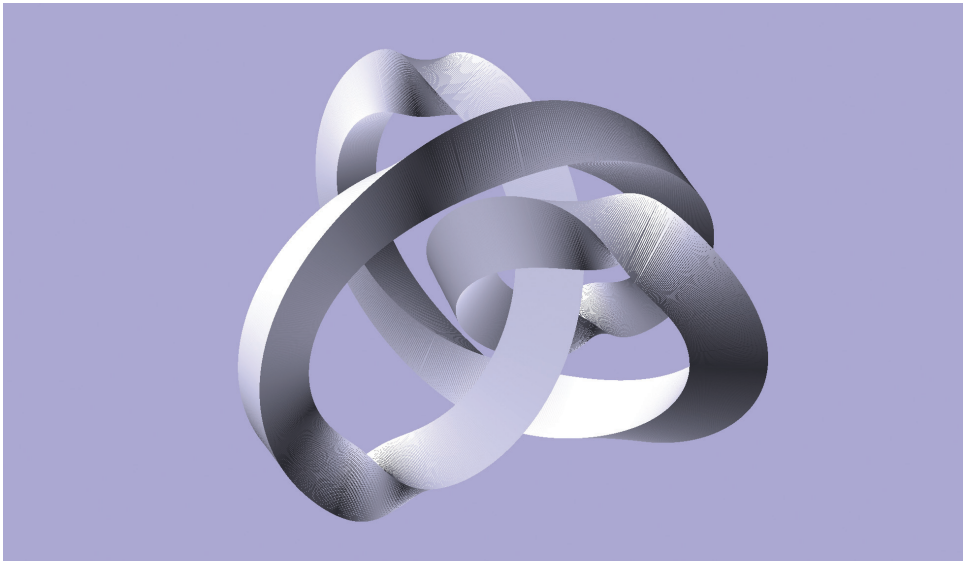
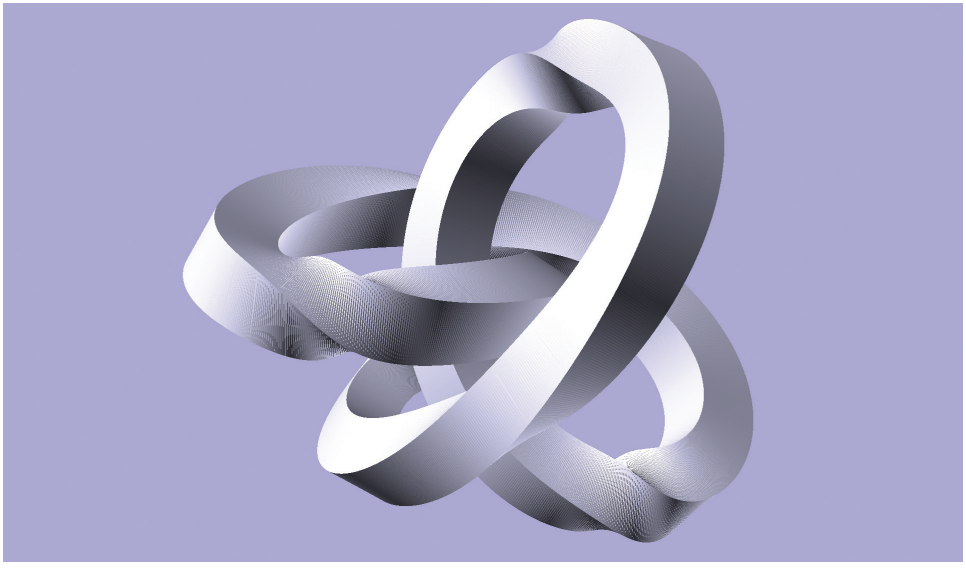








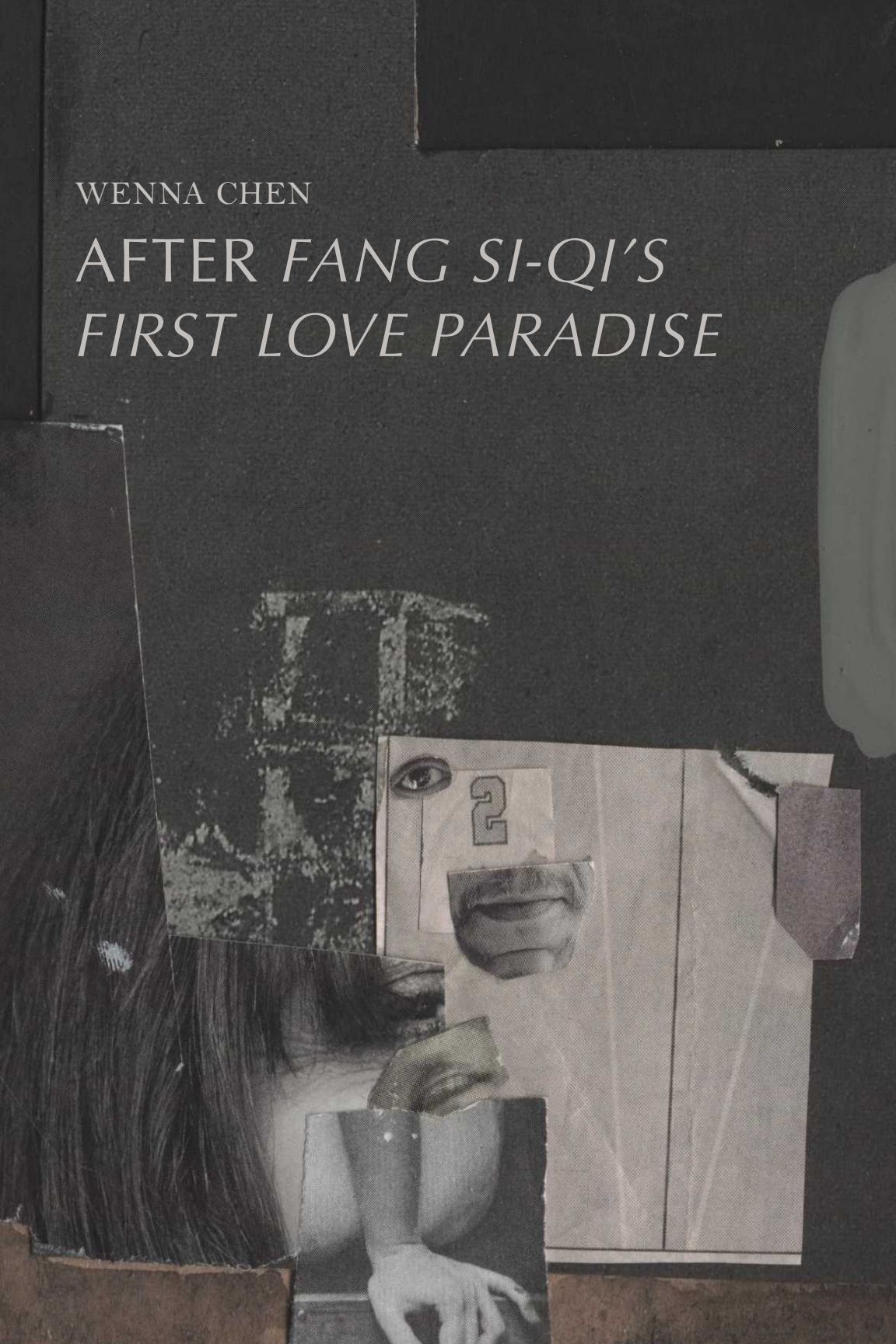




*Images by Leah Yassky*

WENNA CHEN

# AFTER *FANG SI-QI'S FIRST LOVE PARADISE*



## CONTENT WARNING

This piece involves content concerning sexual assault and suicide. Please read with caution and care.

In high school, there was no merry celebration for the end of last period when the 5:00 PM bell rang and the teachers dropped their chalks. Mechanically stuffing books and question sets into their backpacks, two-thirds of my schoolmates proceeded to go to cram schools, where they paid private tutors to hammer knowledge into their brains. On top of the traditional high school curriculum, students in cram schools are expected to take intense courses that coach them to become nothing but test-taking machines. Cram schools blossomed first into a building, then two, then a whole block, and eventually settled down to an entire district. After ten hours of school, thousands of Taiwanese students crowded into the cramming districts, craving more force-fed knowledge that was somehow the golden ticket to attend top-notch universities.

Yi-Han Lin was one of the students whose backpack bore nothing but a dozen question set copies. She was the brightest among us all. With a perfect score on the college entrance exam, she was admitted to the best university in Taiwan for a Bachelor's degree in pre-med. A few years later, her life took a detour when she decided to study Chinese literature. A few years after that, she stopped her life once and for all, leaving behind only an apologetic note.

Lin's life was once mine. We crossed the street in the same blue skirts that covered our knees and white uniforms that gave away the colors of our bras. We squeezed into buses with our packs of friends and giggled loudly, annoying the other passengers. And every night, we studied the mountains of books piled up in our rooms. But at some point, our lives started to stray. Lin took off before me and I'm left to wonder what went wrong.

—

*"I can't pull out what has been thrusted inside me." —Yi-Han Lin*

—

Lin's death would have been swallowed by the indifference of society had her beauty and rare talent failed to garner public admiration. With big brown eyes, round pink cheeks and a dimpled smile, she was the girl that made guys twist their necks when she walked by. Her life should have left its final footprint at a small column of the local newspaper and dissipated from public memory, but the only novel she managed to publish before the end changed everything. With Lin's name on the cover, *Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise* leaped to the top of the best-seller list in a heartbeat. Beneath its smooth pink cover lay a heartbreaking story tagged with Lin's note: *Based on a true story, for the girl who is still waiting for her angel and B.*

—

*"I don't want people to read this book with the sentiment 'Oh, thank god it's not real.' I don't want them to leave their feelings behind and just move on with their lives." —Yi-Han Lin*

—

Every drop of ink in the book was arranged with meticulous discretion. Lin wrote and tweaked until the exquisite metaphors, abandoning traditional syntax and grammatical governance, became something entirely her own. The story of *Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise* centers around a girl named Fang Si-Qi whose life unraveled once the Li family moved into a lavish building in downtown Kaohsiung, the most flourishing city in southern Taiwan. When Guo-Hua Li, a renowned cram school teacher who specialized in Chinese literature, became thirteen-year-old Si-Qi's new neighbor, he preyed on her innocence. Li was an experienced predator who knew how to exploit teenage girls under his care in the name of love. Si-Qi was thirteen the first time Li raped her, but she was eighteen the last time she woke up beside Li in a motel bed. During their last encounter, Li snapped a shot of Si-Qi's nude body, which

was the final tipping point for Si-Qi. In the end, she was left to spend the rest of her life in a psychiatric hospital.

Lin's writing is compelling in the most repulsive way. She captivates her audience in the scenes of horror. She didn't just want her audience to watch and register what happened, she wanted us to feel every scene and the pain that came with it. Because of that, this book was the most miserable reading experience in my life.

—

*"I am a malicious writer. My writing was never inspired by the noble hope to redeem anyone, not even to save myself. More than anything, I want every single one of you to feel Si-Qi's pain, the pain that could destroy everyone on earth had they tasted a mere fraction of it." —Yi-Han Lin*

—

Fiction or not, *Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise* spoke for Lin when she gave up the chance to utter another word. The news of Lin's suicide traveled at an unprecedented speed. Within a few hours, the whole of Taiwan woke up to talk about her death over breakfast. On the same day, Lin's parents issued a statement through her publisher that sent the public over the edge:

*Dear friends,*

*Thank you for grieving with our loss. There are a few things we'd like to say:*

*The source of our daughter's suffering, the nightmare that had haunted her for years, and the reason that her depression was never cured started with the sexual assault that took place in her life eight to nine years ago.*

Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise *was the true and painful reflection of our daughter's psyche after she was violated by a renowned cram school teacher.*

*What happened to the characters in the book—Si-Qi, Xiao-Qi, and Yi-Ting—all happened to our daughter. She structured the story that way to protect us and the family.*

*She wrote the book in hope of stopping similar tragedies from repeating themselves. We ask all parents, boys, girls, and men that know kindness, to protect the suffering Fang Si-Qis with tenderness and warmth.*

*Our daughter is gone. We would never be able to hear her call for Daddy and Mommy again, but we hope people can remember her by her smile.*

*Lastly, if you really feel sorry, please pass this message to everyone in Taiwan. Please buy this book and pass it to the parents and children that are in dire need of help and comfort.*

*Bing-Huang Lin & Jia-Fang Lai, April 28, 2017 (Guerrilla Publishing)*

Stunned by the revelation and poignant emotions in this message, thousands of Taiwanese people flocked to bookstores in search of *Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise.* The book skyrocketed up the best-seller list until there weren't any available copies left for sale. While most of us awaited our copies, those who had dedicated an all-nighter to devour it were all asking the same questions: "Who did this to Yi-Han Lin?" "Who is Guo-Hua Li in real life?" "I know a Chinese literature cram school teacher whose taste in antique collection matches Li's." The society would do anything to satisfy its morbid curiosity. As snowballing rumors electrified the public sphere, people were pointing fingers at every suspicious figure that allegedly fit the description of Guo-Hua Li. This unusually polished letter had earned Lin's parents country-wide empathy and indignation on top of an exuberant sales boost. If the message was furnished with the intent to manipulate public predilection or commercialize Lin's death, the Lins had overachieved their goals.

Most of us are vigilantly aware that public rumors, when stirred, become imbued with destructive force. But this case was a rare exception. Infected with profuse indignation,

the online community shouldered the burden to answer justice's calling; people began to tear Lin's story apart, searching for traces of evidence that would point them to the perpetrator. In the frenzy, Kaohsiung city councilmen Yong-Da Xiao made a blatant statement that rocked the boat.

In graduate school, Xiao had been an enthusiastic activist who pledged for political democracy in Taiwan along with the 6,000 students marching in the Wild Lily student movement. He then worked as a faculty member in multiple schools around the Kaohsiung area before founding the Kaohsiung Teachers Association and successfully running for three consecutive terms of councilmenship. Seated in the center of a conference room, Xiao combed through his manuscripts as the press settled down. The only poster on the wall behind him plainly read: "Expose faculty predators—there shall not be another Fang Si-Qi." Swiftly extending his arm to test the microphone, Xiao began the announcement in unwavering composure and confidence: "According to my investigation, the offender is a Chinese literature teacher currently employed by Tong Xin cram school. His name is Kuo-Xing Chen." In a split second, the room droning with frizzy movements withered into a graveyard of dead silence. Xiao refused to reveal the source of his investigation due to protective confidentiality, but he did not shy from further revealing himself. "I swear on my political career to expose this corrupted teacher. And I will not back off until he admits to what he has done."

Immediately, cram schools associated with the accused severed ties with Chen, cancelling all his classes and expelling him from employment. Kuo-Xing Chen's daughter, an amateur model, was the next to pay the price while her father remained unresponsive to the accusation. Swarming to Tiffany Chen's modeling fan page, people rained a gruesome attack on her and her family. Tiffany was forced to shut down the page full of hateful comments and lost her career to the gravity of collective speculation.

At the heat of this rippling havoc, Readmoo, a virtual ebookstore, released a series of videos that documented their interview with Lin prior to her death. In a thin pink blouse that draped loosely over her chest, Lin rested her hands on her criss-crossed knees. She was alive. Light shimmered in her eyes as she unscrolled a note on her lap—this was the closest I could ever get to her.

Chewing on every word carefully before spitting them out, Lin pieced her first sentence with meticulous precision: "After reading my book, many would conclude that this is a story about how a girl was exploited and raped. But that's not entirely accurate. This story is about how a girl fell in love with her abuser."

However, Lin had no intention to delve into sexual exploitation or rape. Instead, she gave the audience a literature review of her book. While the majority of her peers wandered into literature studies with anything but heartfelt passion, she enrolled because she was obsessed with it. "In high school, I was crazy about Eileen Chang's work," she said. "I could recite the whole set, from the very first word to the last, exactly as they are. My fixation scared me so much that I put Chang's books away and started reading a bunch of translated literature to dilute her voice in my head."

After Lin was diagnosed with depression, she spent most of her time at home. During this time, she read hundreds of books that ranged from *Tender Is The Night* to *A Personal Matter*. At one point, her obsession for literature inadvertently blossomed into an admiration for writers. Enticed by their pen and talent, Lin trusted the masters behind those exquisite literary miracles to be equally astonishing in character. As a romantic, Lin fell the hardest when reality betrayed the trust she endowed in literary aesthetic and humanity. "For me, the most painful thing to watch in *Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise* is how easily Li, as a person who knew literature, exploited its aesthetic power and defied its legacy. He spoke love in so many ways, each of which

mesmerizing, but he never meant any of them," said Lin during the interview.

—

After his two-week silence in this scorching controversy, Chen finally launched a statement. In the belated letter, he painted a picture of himself that the public did not recognize.

*Dear friends,*

*My name is Kuo-Xing Chen, not Kuo-Hua Li. I want to apologize to my family and everyone who has been following this incident. … With regard to Mr. and Mrs. Lin's loss and grievance, I declined to come forward in the first place. However, as the situation grew out of control, I had to make my statement:*

*First of all, I did not go off the grid or attempt escape. I did not, as rumored, spend the time of my silence destroying evidence. I have been in Taipei the whole time, trying to cope with the gravity of public rumors. …*

*Second, I first met Ms. Lin when she became my student in February 2009. Our interaction was limited to class time. It wasn't until August 2009—when she became a rising college freshman—that we engaged in a two-month relationship. During the affair, we were no longer faculty-student bound. Mr. and Mrs. Lin broke up the relationship upon notice. And my wife's forgiveness marked the end of this affair.*

*Third, as indicated in her interview, Ms. Lin had suffered from severe depression since the age of sixteen, the time in which we didn't even know each other. …*

*Fourth, during her book primier conference, Ms. Lin clearly stated that she was not the main character in the book, disappointing everyone. …*

Chen expressed overt willingness to cooperate with the prosecution as this incident evolved from gossip to a criminal investigation. After pulling out communication records between involved parties and deciphering Lin's encrypted online journal, the prosecution studied Lin's past work while interrogating associated witnesses. Based off the evidence they managed to collect, the prosecution drew a conclusion that threw Taiwan into the height of inflammatory hysteria: Kuo-Xing Chen was acquitted from every charge.

He walked free because the cram school record and witnesses indicated that Lin was over sixteen—the age to give legitimate consent—the first time they met. He walked free because two of Lin's best friends testified that Lin had happily introduced Chen as her boyfriend on three separate occasions and had never mentioned being raped. He walked free because Lin had withdrawn from cram school in June and they had started texting the moment she ceased to be his student. He walked free because Lin was eighteen the first time they had sex on August 11, 2009. He walked free because hospital records showed that Lin had attempted her first suicide after her parents broke up. And even though Lin brought up "rape" and "being coerced" in her therapy session, he walked free because Lin also called this episode "a love affair." The official verdict was a document that disassociated this case into a bundle of facts devoid of any emotion. At the end, it plainly recited, "Apart from the informer's subjective speculation, there is a lack of conclusive evidence to establish that the accused was guilty of charge."

Chen did not walk away because the evidence wasn't enough to prove him guilty in the realm of law: He walked free because he knew that modern justice left a grey area for those it failed to prove innocent. Rape is too narrowly defined by Taiwanese law; a man is labeled a rapist only if he violates a woman's body against her will, but the authority couldn't lay a finger on the man who played on a girl's feelings just to get into her pants. Instead of leaving the case in an innocent man's suit or a criminal's jumper, Chen walked away as one who failed to qualify as either.

—

This case had haunted me for months since I shut *Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise*


ussell close behind

in a cold sweat. Twenty pages into the story and the pain within was already tearing me apart. Lin's words, infiltrating the defensive rationale and suspicion I had as a reader, destroyed the barrier of mental energy I was willing to invest in reading someone else's story. Her pen peeled off my skin and shoved me into the sea of intimate horror. I do not doubt that this story originated, at least in part, from her personal experience.

The interviews with Lin's best friend and publisher confirmed my dreadful intuition. On February 26, 2016, Lin's best friend, May, received the first draft of *Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise*. May recounted, "It was a 10,000-word manuscript. Yi-Han said she found her voice in writing and decided to start working on the piece she had been constructing for the past seven years." Every week, Lin would send May another 10,000 words. May was Lin's first audience and editor. "My reaction to the story was probably similar to the majority of others. It was an extremely uncomfortable reading experience and I was beyond disturbed by the pain packed within Yi-Han's words. But at the same time, I felt strangely satisfied," May continued. "As her friend, I was most worried about her mental state. She must have been suffering in conscious pain when she poured herself out on the paper. The way she wrote, she was self-inflicting at the same time."

—

*"You couldn't pull yourself to watch the nauseating details of rape in real life, but you are able to keep reading it in my book. Why? Because the pain satisfies the worst of your curiosity. It hurts, but at the same time, it brings you contentment. You know you shouldn't watch, but you did it anyway." —Yi-Han Lin*

—

Guerrilla Publishing was the least attractive among all the publishing companies that contacted Lin. They had a specific taste for topics excluded from the mainstream and were chronically understaffed. Even though many of their past publications received awards, Guerrilla Publishing remained a meaningless name to the majority of Taiwanese people. After the initial introduction to the manuscript, the head of Guerrilla Publishing, Pei-Yu Guo, declined to publish Lin's book. "As a reader, I was impressed by her script. But as an editor and a publisher, I was afraid that I would cause Lin more harm when giving her feedback. My life experience was limited; I did not find it in myself the confidence to navigate what the characters in the book were experiencing."

An unofficial, part-time member of Guerrilla Publishing at that time, Nini Chang, was the only one who thought that it was a mistake to turn Lin down. Chang had never worked as an editor, but she had a strong feeling about Lin's story. "I cried for two days when I looked up Yi-Han's blog and read what's on it. I was shocked to find out that her perspective on this world matched mine almost perfectly. It was as if she spoke for me. Our experience doesn't necessarily overlap—I had never been that severely traumatized, nor had I actually been hospitalized—but I could take in the emotions in her story. And if I can, I want to protect her, or be her company in sailing through all this."

At first, Lin was reluctant to review Chang's offer from Guerrilla Publishing due to its trivial size and peculiar interest. But after several meetings, they agreed on a preliminary contract. Before entrusting her work to Guerrilla Publishing, Lin approached Chang with one lingering question. "If the press makes a fuss out of my work, would you, on behalf of Guerrilla Publishing, side with me?" The team promised to do so. A few months later, *Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise* was printed and finely wrapped for sale.

Prior to launching the first edition of their hard work, Lin and her publishing team sat down to map out a story for any press complications, such as: what if the media draws a parallel between the story

and Lin's private life? In the interview with Lin's editors, Guo recounted that Lin did not mind people knowing that the book derived from her personal experience. In fact, saying this out loud would be relieving for her. Lin's only concern lay with her family. After a futile attempt to deter Lin from publishing *Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise*, Lin's parents insisted against any confession to the press. Lin compromised. Guo said, "[Lin] was afraid that, once we went public about what happened to her, the consequent societal perception would cause her family more harm, so we had a consensus to tell everyone that the book was based on a friend's experience." People had their suspicions, but the story managed to contain public speculation until Lin's suicide ignited the chaotic outbreak.

Chang's phone rang nonstop the morning Lin died. On the phone, Mr. Lin asked Chang to publish a statement on behalf of Guerrilla Publishing. "After an emergency meeting in the morning, we decided to issue an official statement through the company site. When Lin's family, the people that she cared about the most, had asked for a voice, we wanted to help deliver a clear message and consolidate its credibility among rumors and aimless speculation," Guo explained. But the weight of Lin's life unsettled the team. In the days that followed, members of Guerrilla Publishing struggled in doubt as they interrogated themselves repeatedly: Have we kept our promise to side with her or did we do something wrong?

They never knew the answers to those questions the same way I never found the answer to mine: How did things go so wrong so fast?

—

Kuo-Xing Chen might not be made guilty by law, but public moral trial hung him relentlessly. He was reckless at best, cunningly corrupted at worst. And many, like me, found our moral compasses bent toward the abominable end of that spectrum. From the cell phone record, the prosecution uncovered that Chen had started texting Lin four days before she withdrew from cram school, four days before the legal boundary of faculty and student expired. Lin replied to his text two weeks later and they communicated extensively in the following months until the relationship halted. This suspicious timeline, coupled with other narratives entangled in the case, was more than enough to dismiss the convenient claim of coincidence. Instead of clumsy recklessness, Chen's demeanor warranted questionable intention.

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*"The Kuo-Hua Li in my life is still alive and he won't die anytime soon. I still walk on the street and see his name up on the billboards. There would always be another victim and the same thing keeps happening to those girls."*
*—Yi-Han Lin*

—

Chen might be the most conspicuous figure that drove Lin to take her own life, but he was not alone. When Lin's parents talked about their daughter, the one thing they neglected to mention was how they may have contributed to this tragedy. Lin's family had long indulged in the glorious privilege of being part of the high-class elite society: Mr. Lin was a doctor famous for his extraordinary accomplishments in medicine, and Lin was the beautiful daughter whose precocious talent made the front page before she graduated from high school. They were "the perfect family" in Taiwanese society, but wearing their pride came with great cost. According to Lin's editors and close friend, Lin's parents did not report the case when they discovered that an authoritative male was taking advantage of their daughter in a romantic relationship. Upon discovery, the Lins confronted the accused and his wife at a deluxe booth in Sheraton Grande Taipei Hotel. After Lin's parents

went into a lopsided verbal rampage for an hour, Chen's wife threatened to sue Lin for adultery and exclaimed, "If I go to court and make the whole thing public, Lin is the one who would to pay the ultimate price."

In the days that followed, Lin's parents kept their silence. They did not report the case after Lin calmed down from the rush of love and realized that she had been exploited. They did not report the case when Lin wanted to seek justice for the assault. And they held Lin back when she demanded to tell her story.

I think that the pressure to maintain the glowing façade of perfect family denied Lin's need for a voice and forced her to bury her feelings internally. I think that Lin's parents rejected any means to publicize the incident at the expense of their daughter's well-being because they were petrified of marring the family name. I think that Lin's parents attributed the encounter to Chen's corrupted character as much as to Lin's senselessness. I think that, while Lin's parents knew that their daughter was the victim, they still couldn't help but render what happened as a disgrace. I think that Lin knew how the value of honor, face and feminine chastity fostered the culture of victim-blaming. And I think that she knew exactly where she stood: a victim who needed to convince everyone that she was a victim.

—

*"While she was packing for college, Si-Qi opened her mouth and let her words flow out with artificial innocence, 'I heard that a student in my school got together with one of the teachers.'*

*'Who is it?' Her mom asked.*

*'I don't know.'*

*'Never too young to be a slut.'*

*Si-Qi sank into silence. At that moment, she decided that she was going to stay silent for the rest of her life." —Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise*

—

A society that follows the conservative norm of gender roles and power dynamics inevitably buries victims of sexual assault. And the education that repels sex creates more victims. In elementary school, Taiwanese children began to realize that boys and girls have different reproductive organs. We were curious about the differences in our anatomy, but teachers at school were only willing to talk about numbers, Chinese characters, and English alphabets. In junior high school, we were introduced to the biological mechanism of reproduction through science courses, but that was far from enough to satisfy our blooming curiosity. We started to sneak readings and materials that would appall our parents and consulted them for sexual knowledge covertly. In high school, sex education could be summarized in one sentence: Do not have sex. The teacher would stand on the podium for the entire afternoon showing us cases of STDs, accidental pregnancy, and a million reasons not to trust any means of protection, but never once did they talk about sexual assault or the meaning of consent. Never once did anyone teach us how to protect ourselves. Taiwanese education is essentially sexphobic. It taught us reproduction, but we had to self-teach ourselves everything about sex. It painted sex with the color of embarrassment and hurdled many into the unbroken silence that emanated not subtlety, but negligence. This broken system produced 30,000 teenagers the year Lin graduated from high school, all of whom grew up to become potential victims or perpetrators.

—

*"At the table, Si-Qi spoke in a way like she was putting butter on bread. 'We seem to have everything in our family except sex education.'*

*Her mom stared at her in dismay, 'What sex education? Sex education is for people who need sex. Isn't that how education works?'*

*Si-Qi understood then, that her parents were forever absent in this story. They skipped*

*class, yet they thought school hadn't even started yet." —Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise*

—

Lin spent the last chapter of her life putting her story into *Fang Si-Qi's First Love Paradise*. She hoped that her audience could read with her—which many of us did—but we didn't necessarily take away the message intended for us. "I have no intention or hope for this book to change the world in any way. In fact, I don't even want to connect with the big words or societal structures," said Lin. Instead of tracing the broader stroke of a long-term system, Lin wanted us to remember every girl that shared Si-Qi's story. "It scares me when the 'smart, progressive, and politically correct' people talk about structures. They are ambitious, but they are also conveniently oblivious. The structure is determined by thousands of cases, each one with a victim just like Si-Qi. Those are humans, not numbers." •


*Images by Brad Boboc*

# A BOOK ABOUT HAPPINESS CONSISTING OF POEMS AND DIALOGUES

## BY DMITRI ALEKSANDROVICH PRIGOV
## TRANSLATED BY ISAK SAAF

### TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

I found Prigov accidentally. A video clip with that appealing VHS quality, in which he recited an alliterative poem at a level of Russian beyond my own. I toyed with the idea of translating him, and in the process began to appreciate his printed poetry, his art exhibitions, his enormous character. He told absurd jokes about the atrocities of Russian and American history without ever growing sentimental or ideological, a pitfall even for the best of the Russian poets. He follows in the Russian tradition of absurdism, if the absurd can be called traditional.

Although his topics are often political, it would be a disservice to call Prigov simply a dissident—his writing is usually too arcane to be clearly read as criticism. He brings the mysticism of Soviet hero worship to the fore and makes us confront it, bends it into something closer to real forms of power. His poetry is the pure absurdist admission that life is at best a place where we dance around meaningtly encounter it. The politics of his work will never touch my pulse as closely as they might for those who knew Soviet power, but his broad sense of the absurd and of the mystical or essential nature of power is still familiar. At least I hope it is.

Prigov was born in 1940, just before the Great Patriotic War, and died in 2007. His work was not officially printed in the Soviet Union until 1986, although it was circulated abroad and in Samizdat. This particular cycle of poems dates to 1985, one of the 36,000 that he claimed to have written before the millenium.

The translation came easily. His language is simple and straightforward. Many of the dialogues are riffs on famous phrases by the authors with whom he speaks, and I've done my best to render them into simple English that would slander neither Pushkin nor Prigov. Naturally, I hope that the chaos and mystery remains.

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### NOTICE:

This book was born from a love for Dialogues, Poems, and—naturally, naturally—for happiness.

There is no happiness in life
But there is peace and will
There is no will in life
But there are certain inevitabilities
Nothing in life is inevitable
Save severity and humility
There is no humility in life
Save to be thankful and to rejoice
And to be thankful
And to be thankful
And to rejoice, and to rejoice, rejoice
And to be thankful, to be thankful, thankful
And to rejoice.

*Image by Francesca Ott*

Dialogue #1
Dostoevsky: What is happiness?
Prigov: What is happiness?
Dostoevsky: To take a child!
Prigov: To take a child!
Dostoevsky: An infant!
Prigov: An infant!
Dostoevsky: To take a drop of his blood!
Prigov: A drop of blood!
Dostoevsky: A drop of blood!
Prigov: A droplet!
Dostoevsky: What is a drop of blood?
Prigov: What's a drop of blood?
Dostoevsky: What are you saying—blood?
Prigov: What am I saying—blood?
Dostoevsky: Really—blood?
Prigov: Blood!
Dostoevsky: What does blood mean to you?
Prigov: What does blood mean?
Dostoevsky: It doesn't mean anything!
Prigov: It doesn't mean anything!
Dostoevsky: That's all, then!

---

There's some flowers, and a trough
There's a rocking chair. There's something buried.
Something
Probably a corpse—
This is how the porch looks.

---

There's some air, and a little water
There's a brother. There's a sister.
And there the earth is folded over.
Probably something buried
Probably a corpse

---

There's a field, and a forest
There's the edge of heaven
There's a village, let's just say, forgettable
And a little closer the earth
Is bursting out
Where the corpse, probably, tried to climb.

---

There is no truth in life
But there is understanding and reason
There is no reason in life
But there is logic and sobriety
There is no sobriety in life
But there is choice
There is no choice in life
Save to forgive and to rejoice
And to rejoice, rejoice, rejoice
And rejoice, and rejoice
And rejoice
And to forgive
And to rejoice

---

In life, there is no love
But there is tenderness and friendship
There is no friendship in life
But there is lust and desire
There is no desire in life
Save to dissipate and to rejoice
And to dissipate, and dissipate
And to dissipate, and dissipate
And dissipate
And to weep! To weep, to weep!
And weep again! And weep and weep!
And to rejoice and rejoice and rejoice!
And to dissipate!

---

There's the kitchen, and the bathtub
Which kitchen? And which bathtub?
Just a kitchen. Just a bathtub
And what smells so strange, underneath the bathtub?
Probably a corpse, growing stale.

---

There's a man, right fucking there, and his fucking grandmother
There's power, right fucking there, and fucking glory
That's all there fucking is
I don't see a fucking thing
Except—
A corpse, probably

Dialogue #2
Stalin: There is no happiness in life!
Prigov: But Dostoevsky said….
Stalin: What did Dostoevsky say?
Prigov: Something about an infant's blood.
Stalin: And what is Dostoevsky?

---

Prigov: What is Dostoevsky?
Stalin: He is ten letters!
Prigov: Ten letters!
Stalin: And what happens if we take one away?
Prigov: What then?
Stalin: Then he's Ostoevsky!
Prigov: Ostoevsky!
Stalin: And what if we take another three?
Prigov: What then?
Stalin: Then he's Oevsky!
Prigov: Oevsky!
Stalin: And what if we take another three?
Prigov: What then?
Stalin: Then he's Sky!
Prigov: Sky!
Stalin: And another two?
Prigov: Another two!
Stalin: Then he's Y!
Prigov: Y!
Stalin: And another?
Prigov: Another?
Stalin: There is nothing!
Prigov: There is nothing!
Stalin: There is nothing!
Prigov: There is nothing!
Stalin: And no droplets of blood.

---

There is no glory in life
But there are connections and acquaintances
There are no connections in life
But there is thirst and freedom
There is no freedom in life
Except to choose purely
How purely!
Lord!
How pure! How pure!
And pure! And pure!
Lord! How pure!
How pure!
Lord! How pure how pure!
How pure it is to choose

*Drawings by Julia Friend*

---

There is no childhood in life
But there is school and youth
There is no youth in life
But there is maturity and age
There is no age in life
But there is eternity and bliss
Eternal bliss!
And eternity, eternity and eternity
And bliss, and eternity
Eternity, eternity!
And bliss!

---

A town—no larger than a shed
Dim and quiet as the dead
Pale and wretched
By snow—tormented
All in chaos
As Buddha crouches
Snow begins to lay
Like a cat watching its prey
Attentively

---

Here is the stage, the curtainous layers
Here is the play, and here are the players
Aristocrats—
How lovely!
Here's Uncle Vanya, Ranevskaya and Lopakhin
And the stink of something
A corpse, probably
(Boris Godunov's)

There is Pushkin, there's Dostoevsky
There's Gorky, and there's Mayakovsky
There is Caesar, and there's Chapaev
And there's Prigov—what's he digging for?
A corpse
probably
ours.
Collectively.

Dialogue #3
Pushkin: There is no happiness in life!
Prigov: Well, what is there?
Pushkin: There is peace and will!
Prigov: What about the infant?
Pushkin: What infant?
Prigov: Just an infant!
Pushkin: He has his own will!
Prigov: And what about the drop of blood?
Pushkin: Whose blood?
Prigov: His blood!
Pushkin: It has its own will!
Prigov: And what about the dagger?
Pushkin: It has its own will!
Prigov: Then what am I to do?
Pushkin: You have your own will!
Prigov: And if I don't want it?! I don't, I don't!
Pushkin: Then there is peace!
Prigov: And if I have no peace?!
Pushkin: Then that is your will!

---

The wind a silvered sheet
That twists and hides us
That flies along the street
And lands beside us
And bumps into me
And grows embarrassed
I look at her
And at the street
And life, like a Buddha
Of extraordinary age.

Dialogue #4
Stalin: There is no happiness in life!
Prigov: Pushkin already said that!
Stalin: And what else did Pushkin say?
Prigov: There, there is peace and will!
Stalin: Will?
Prigov: Will!
Stalin: And just what is this Pushkin?
Prigov: What?
Stalin: He is seven letters!
Prigov: Seven letters!
Stalin: And what if we take one away?
Prigov: What then?
Stalin: Then he's Ushkin!
Prigov: Then he's Ushkin!
Stalin: And what if we take another?
Prigov: What then?
Stalin: Then he's Shkin!
Prigov: Then he's Shkin!
Stalin: And if we take another?
Prigov: Another?
Stalin: Then he's Hkin!
Prigov: Then he's Hkin!
Stalin: And if we take another?
Prigov: Another?
Stalin: Then he's Kin!
Prigov: Kin!
Stalin: And another?
Prigov: Another?
Stalin: Then he's In!
Prigov: In!
Stalin: Another!
Prigov: Another!
Stalin: He's N!
Prigov: N!
Stalin: And another letter?
Prigov: Another letter?
Stalin: There is nothing!
Prigov: There is nothing!
Stalin: There is nothing!
Prigov: There is nothing!
Stalin: And no will!

*Image by Hannah Sandoz*

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There is no life in the world
But there is something like it
There's nothing like that in the world
But there is something else
There is nothing else in the world
But there is something like that
Like that!
Like that!
O!
Lord! Yes!
Like that like that like that like that!
God!
Like that!

---

There is ownership, and economics
There is efficiency, and Reaganomics
There is the Dollar, and the Ruble
And there, buried, is some sort of corpse
Ownerless

---

There is glorious valor, and revelry
And a garden that is shining
There are grinding tanks, there, cloak and dagger
But something is buried here—
A corpse, probably

---

This city is Moscow—the capital
This is London, and this—Sevastopol
This is the South, and the North
And this is a corpse
Still unburied

---

In Life—There is no death
Only rape and murder!
There is no murder in life
But there is parting and oblivion
There is no oblivion in life
But there is metapsychosis and memory
Memory! Memory! Me-ee-mmory!
        Mee-mmm-oory! Memmmmory!
        And murder, and memory-memory
Memory!
Eternal Me-eeee-mmmory!
Of HIM!
AMEN!

---

There is shit, there is phlegm
There is crap, there is vomit
There is a thick nest of filth
But there is still a sliver of light!—

---

A corpse, probably
Here is a coffin, and a corpse
Here is corpse, and a coffin
Well, then what's at the funeral?
They're burying everything else.

Dialogue #5
Stalin: There is no happiness in life!
Prigov: No happiness!
Stalin: What is there, then?
Prigov: What is there?
Stalin: There is Stalin!
Prigov: There is Stalin!
Stalin: And what is Stalin?
Prigov: What is he?
Stalin: Stalin is our glory in battle!
Prigov: Glory in battle!
Stalin: Stalin is our fleeting youth!
Prigov: Fleeting youth!
Stalin: Going to war with a song, he is victorious!
Prigov: Victorious!
Stalin: The people are for Stalin!
Prigov: For Stalin!
Stalin: And what else is Stalin?
Prigov: What else?
Stalin: He is Three Great Principles!
Prigov: Three Great Principles!
Stalin: And what else is Stalin?
Prigov: What else?
Stalin: He is Five Great Thoughts!
Prigov: Five Great Thoughts!
Stalin: He is Six Great Letters!
Prigov: And what if we take one away?
Stalin: What then?
Prigov: Then he's Talin!
Talin: Talin!
Prigov: And if we take away another?
Talin: Another?
Prigov: Then he's Alin!
Alin: Alin!
Prigov: And if we take away another?
Alin: Another?
Prigov: Then he's Lin!
Lin: Lin!
Prigov: And another?
Lin: Another?
Prigov: Then he's In!
In: In!
Prigov: And another?
In: Another?
Prigov: Then he's N!
N: N!
Prigov: And another!

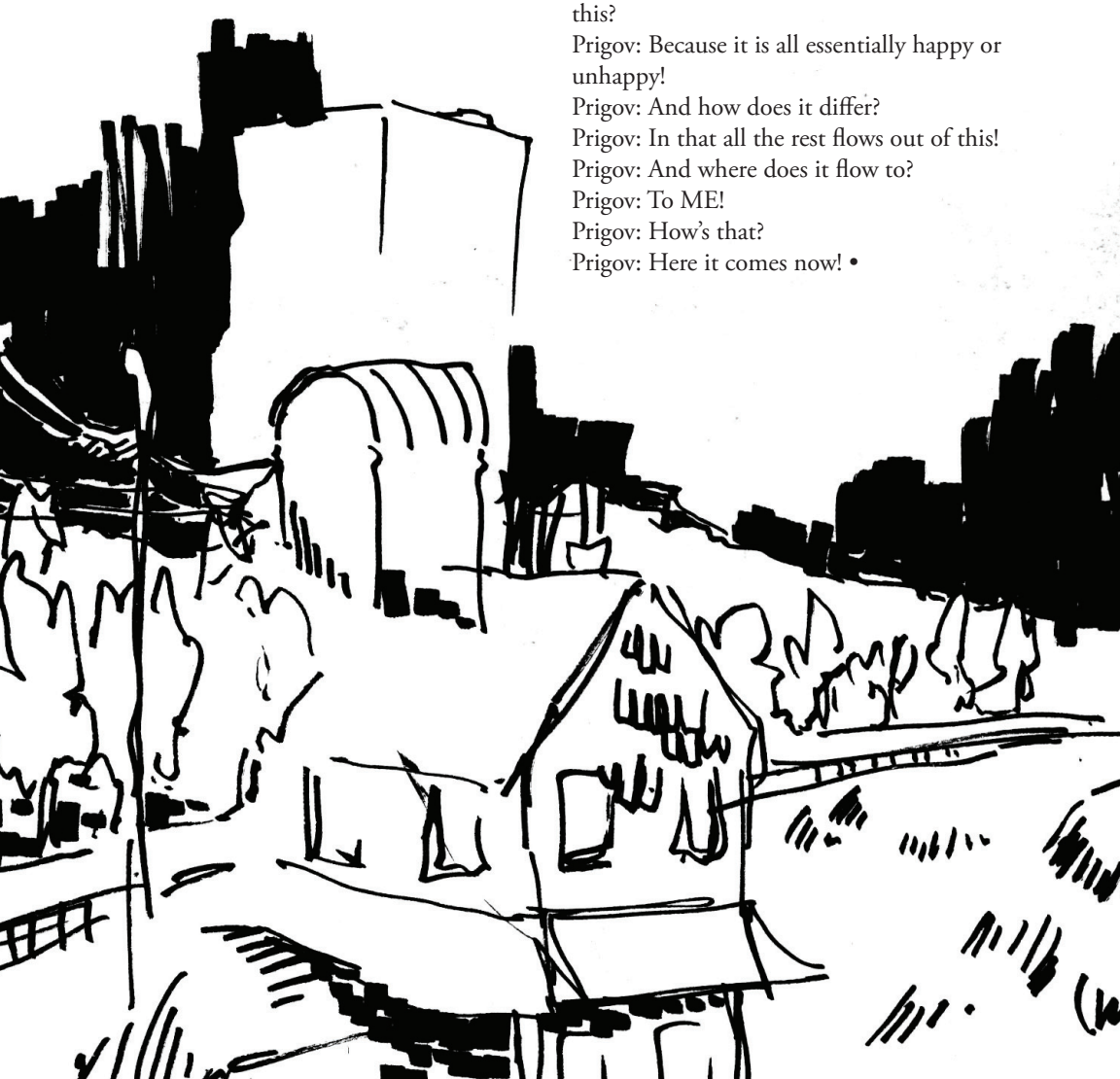
---

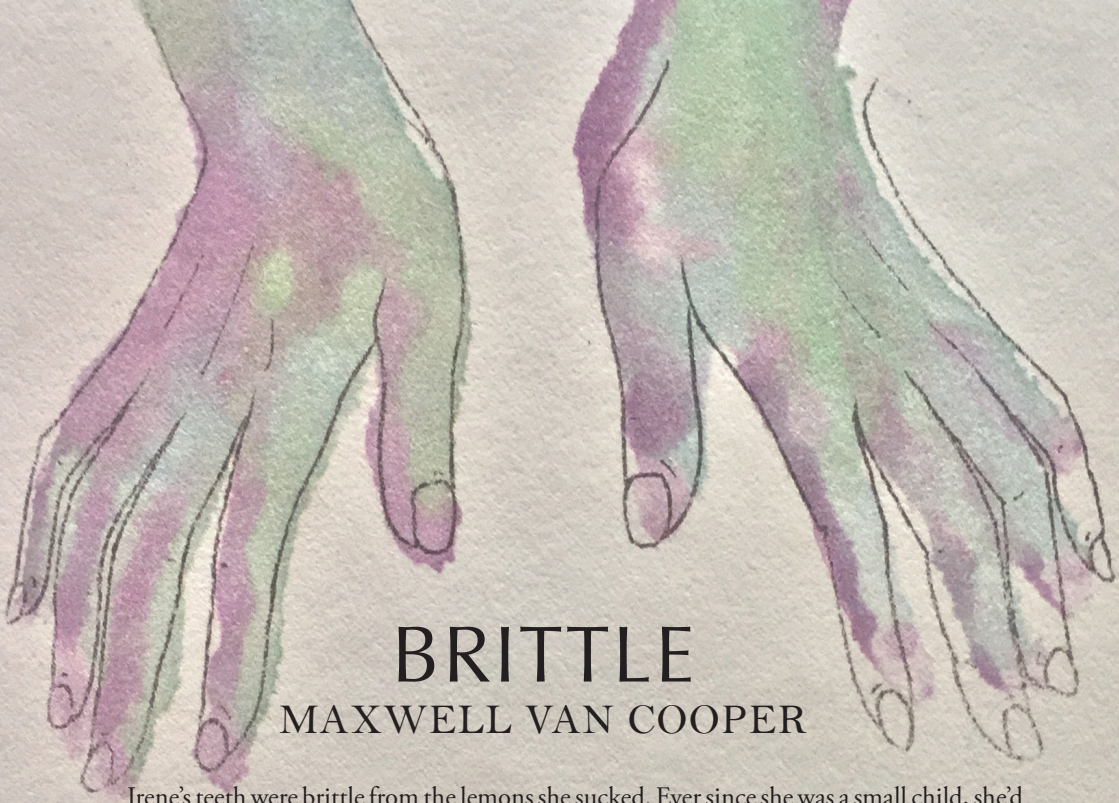
There is nothing in life
And that which there isn't is already gone
There's none in the world
And that which there is is already gone
But there is still a little bit left
Which means there's something
There is a little still in life
Where means there's something
Good Lord! There's something there
    There is, there is, there is! It's there!
    God! It's there! It is! It is!
    Lord, there's something there! There is!
    It's there, Lord!
Lord, it's there!

---

Effeminate like Laura's song
Like laurel leaves, like Northern Lights
But rushing, like the stream along
The bank, or like Aurora's light
Her rays descending in a throng
That rake up winter with their hands
You see—around here, winter's long
So, so long. A winter.
And winter, winter is so long
A long winter
With such frost enfrosted
And such a winter, and such frost
A long and frosty winter.
A landscape.

Dialogue #6
Prigov: What is happiness?
Prigov: And what is happiness?
Prigov: And what is unhappiness?
Prigov: What is unhappiness?
Prigov: And what is the distinction?
Prigov: It is that when there is happiness, there is no unhappiness.
Prigov: And what is the similarity?
Prigov: It is that when there is unhappiness, there is still happiness.
Prigov: And what else is there?
Prigov: There is all the rest!
Prigov: And how does all that resemble all this?
Prigov: Because it is all essentially happy or unhappy!
Prigov: And how does it differ?
Prigov: In that all the rest flows out of this!
Prigov: And where does it flow to?
Prigov: To ME!
Prigov: How's that?
Prigov: Here it comes now! •





# BRITTLE

## MAXWELL VAN COOPER

Irene's teeth were brittle from the lemons she sucked. Ever since she was a small child, she'd take the curious yellow orbs, delicately place one atop her tongue, and bleed it dry. Sometimes, as a little girl, she'd beg her mother to slice them after eating fish sticks and watching TV. The citrus would sting the inside of her nostrils, just like the man's cologne—clean and crisp, like his white oxford shirts her mother ironed for hours as he sat smoking a cigar. Citrus and smoke clung to the furniture, even hours after he left in the morning. Sometimes, as a small child, when Irene was very displeased with him, she'd cut them herself, and piece by piece she'd suck every last drop of the entire fruit down. Her teeth felt strange and static, but the tartness was alarming, and that was nice. She could never think over the acidity.

Forty lemons for the forty years perched sweetly across her kitchen counter. Pink and rose tiles covered the kitchen, accented by the lace curtains that were oh-so-divine. Black-Eyed Susans stood in a vase on the corner table, overlooking her neighbor's front yard. Near the flowers was a lounge chair where, in the morning, she would sip her chamomile tea and read last month's *Life* magazine. Always tea, never coffee: it stained the teeth. She liked to look at the celebrities and think about their lives. Where did they play when they grew up? Why did they all wear the pink, not red lipstick? What were their fathers like? Had they been good fathers? Irene liked to imagine getting tea with them. Patrick Swayze would compliment the yellow drapes in the dining hall. Molly Ringwald would ask for some lemonade. And Irene would just giggle like a schoolgirl. Not a hair out of place, not a stain on their teeth.

Sometimes as she drank her tea, she'd see Mr. and Mrs. Sanders' children playing ball. How dirty their clothes got in the springtime. Irene took quiet solace in knowing that if they were *her* children, they'd always be very clean. They'd run in after their play, wipe their shoes at the door, and she'd offer them some meringue pie. They'd eat at her little table with the marigolds, always asking for more. How funny children are. Their stomachs are never

quite full. Thomas is outgrowing his clothes already, the brute. Jane has dimples just like her father. But somehow, the dirt always seems to seep into the saffron tablecloth. They know she bought it last week. Why put their grubby hands on the table, their muddy legs kicking against the stools? How ungrateful. Their piggy smiles mock her, their laughter echoes in the house. Sometimes children have to have the dirt beat out of them, just like her Persian rugs. Sometimes there are white crisp collars and large hands, and sometimes there are grains of dirt everywhere, embedded in her skin like a code. He leans down, the sharp acidic scent splits the nerves in her body, he says if you have dirt on your soul, you won't go to heaven. But it's a good house for children. A good house indeed.

After her morning tea, she would get into a gray muted dress suit, pick up her briefcase, and drive her yellow vintage Cadillac. She was a makeup saleswoman. *Enchanted Cosmetics* was the nice company that had given her a job when she was seventeen after her miscarriage, and they'd treated her oh-so-fine. She was one of their most esteemed employees—she even got a card at Christmas. *Thanks for the years - X*, red-nosed Rudolph exclaimed. She kept every single card above the electric fireplace. It was nice to be appreciated. Irene loved her job—she'd knock on a door, and some nice woman in her thirties would answer, maybe with a daughter or son clinging to her dress, they'd chat, Irene would introduce herself, and after a couple minutes, the nice woman would invite Irene inside. Indiana had such nice neighborhoods.

While the mothers apologized for the mess, offered her a seat, or scolded their children, Irene would survey the domain. Sometimes the houses had couches she had seen in *Pottery Barn* catalogues, sometimes the wood was varnished and shined, sometimes the women wore pearl earrings. But sometimes the houses were cramped, the dishes dirty, the floor chewed and clawed. Irene liked these homes the best. She would raise an eyebrow, purse her lips. My, what lovely curtains you have.

Either way the suitcase was opened, and out came lipsticks and mascaras, eye shadow and eye primer, and her favorite—a yellow eye shadow called *Bumble Bee Bliss*. Irene was a professional. No matter what their homes looked like, she'd smile and treat them all the same. And the mother with the curly mop of hair and the mother with the tooth gap would *ooo* and *aaa* at the beautiful display. Yes, it is quite beautiful, Irene thought.

Sometimes a waiffy, confused mother asked her to leave. Irene puckered her lips. It displeased her so. She rose slowly to give her a second chance. Don't you want to look pretty for your husband? With things so crazy, she said, with the Soviet Union about to nuke the world to bits, isn't it nice to just enjoy the little things in life? And the mother did stare at her so queerly. Irene wasn't queer. Sometimes the mother said, no, no, her husband would be coming home soon and it was really time to go. It displeased her so. How she would like to tell that dumpy mother her home is ugly. Her children are brats, her floors are dirty, and she mustn't be so so so very selfish because he won't like that one bit, not one bit, not a bit of dirt not a bit of dust don't track in the mud Irene your shoes are filthy, you are filthy. He puffs his cigar and says that we won't be accepted to the Kingdom of Heaven if we aren't clean in and out. Straight from the gospel itself. Take a sponge and wipe the dirt away, confess and God will wash away the sin and grime. His teeth are like razors that cut his fresh linen, and she does shiver as he takes her hand, like raw lemons being squeezed on a fresh cut, but it's ok, Mother says it's ok. Maybe it isn't so strange to suck lemons, maybe she likes her saffron curtains and marigolds.

No one ever bought *Bumble Bee Bliss*.

It was days like these when she'd pack up her baggies of cosmetics, throw them in the trunk, slam the trunk of her yellow Cadillac, get in the door of her yellow Cadillac, turn the key in the ignition of the yellow Cadillac, and by God she would drive that yellow Cadillac all the way down the South End. Past all the cornfields and stop signs, as a tempered sun

glared in her rearview mirror. Past the peeling playgrounds, and the water treatment center, past the cornhusks, there she'd find the trailer. Its silver reflection wavered under the sun. A dulled jockey statue with a broken eye guarded the front door, its plastic frame decorated by weathered Christmas lights. A faded sign that read *Madame Mystic's Palm Reading* hung aslant on the window's screen. The trailer was next to the county graveyard, small tombstones christened the earth in rows, tall monuments proudly towering behind.

Irene ignored the various broken beer bottles, and opened the trailer door. The stink was undeniable. Irene was greeted by a squirrel and a crow, new additions to the taxidermy collection which sprawled throughout the trailer. Irene raised an eyebrow. Across the trailer, an old crone in a Christmas sweater sat by the TV. Next to her was a half empty bottle of Jack Daniels, and a small tin of chewing tobacco. She crooned from her corner. Knock, why don't you?

Ma'am, I don't mean to disturb you ma'am, but I gotta see him, ma'am. Irene quivered with excitement. She was practically levitating. Ma'am, please.

The old woman coughed, and waved her over. Irene took a seat on the TV. Her own home was far nicer. The woman settled into her faded arm chair and spat a thick black liquid into a can on the floor. Her face looked like a prune, her teeth yellow from years of black coffee and chain smoking. Irene took out three twenties, her hands shaking, and let them fall into the woman's palm, careful not to touch her paper skin. The woman's face twisted into a grimace, she took Irene's hand, and squeezed it so tight, so tight she thought it might break. Calm yourself, Irene. Lemme see what your father has to say. The old crone closed her eyes, and rocked back and forth like a small child. Her lips rippled with inaudible words. Irene wished the psychic had drapes. Some yellow drapes would really help lighten up the place.

After seventeen and a half minutes, the crone opened her eyes. Her lips parted as if to speak. Irene eagerly leaned in. The old woman's eyes widened, and she erupted into a fit of coughs. Irene winced. He says, the old crone spat, he likes what you've done with the house.

*Image by Rachel Weinstein*

He says, he likes the couch you bought from *Sears*. He's sorry for what he's done. You know that, Irene.

Can you ask him to leave me alone?

Lord, I sure will.

Does he really like the paisley?

He says it matches the rug from *Bed 'n Bath*.

I thought of him when I got it.

I know you did, Irene.

Irene would arrive home around 6:30 PM. Tulips and roses encircled her house. She'd enter and admire the spotless baseboards. She'd make herself some chicken and peas, and eat it on the circular table with the Black-Eyed Susans. They'd smile at her as she ate in silence. It was too dark to see Mr. and Mrs. Sanders' yard or children. Overall, it would be a good day. She'd turn on her cassette player, and Billie Holiday's clear voice would fill the room.

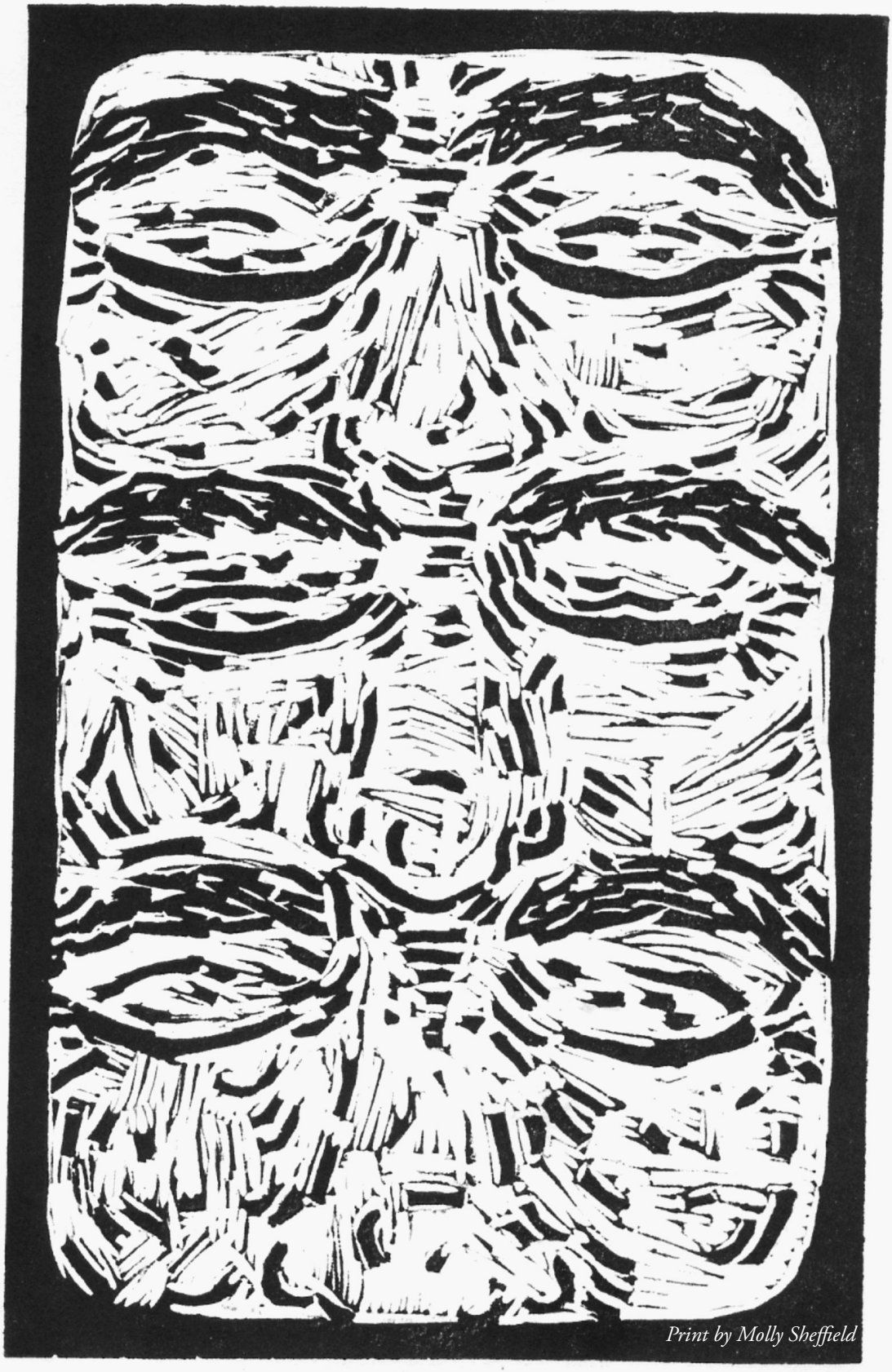
*I'll be seeing you*
*in all the old familiar places*
*that this heart of mine embraces*
*all day through*

As she delicately dabbed the corners of her mouth, she felt his presence. He sat across from her, just as he did when she was a child, and it is oh so nice for him to be home. And she forgives him for all the terrible things the man does, as men do. She offers him some chamomile tea, he compliments the new china. This is how it was always meant to be. His citrus cologne enwraps her, and she knows she is home.

Would you like a lemon?

Yes, I think I would. •

*Prints by Bridget Conway*



*Print by Molly Sheffield*

THANKS FOR READING

*Prints by Molly Sheffield*

## IN THIS ISSUE...

**Charlotte Price** on adoption and cultural erasure, **S. Fishman** explores nonnormative intimacies, **Clio Schwartz** meditates on gender and chronic illness, **Lydia Moran** takes a walk in Ladies Grove, **Brian Cabral** interrogates Teach for America, **Olivia Pandolfi** listens to the devil's riff, and a reflection on Yi-Han Lin from **Wenna Chen**…

## ALSO...

**Maya Howard-Watts**'s organic sculptures, nets and prints from **Julia Schrecengost**, the photographic manipulations of **Octavia Bürgel**, a translation by **Isak Saaf**, the poetry of **Gillian Pasley** and **Jacob Fidoten**, and a story from **Maxwell Van Cooper**.

*Front and back cover by Jessica Moskowitz*