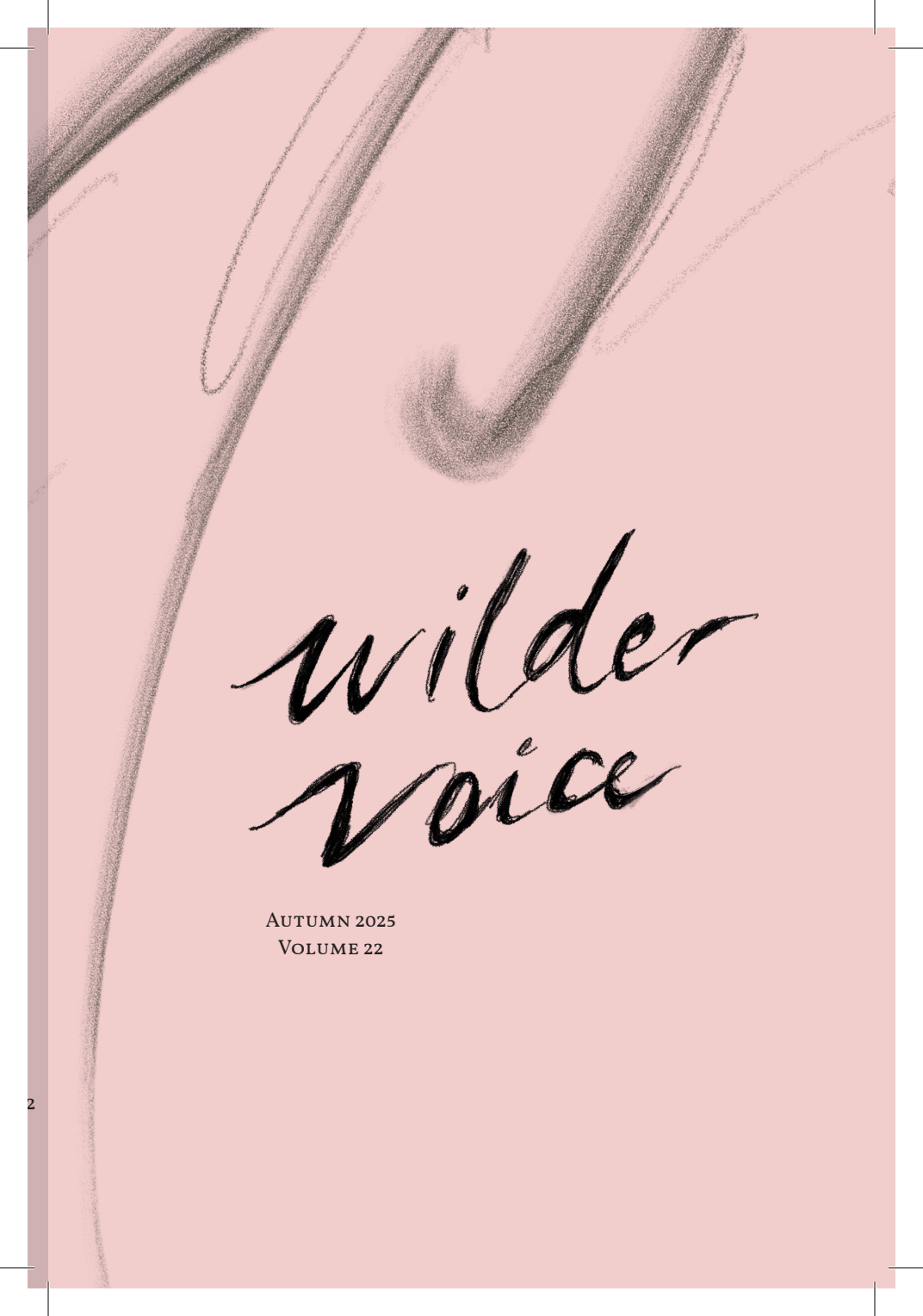
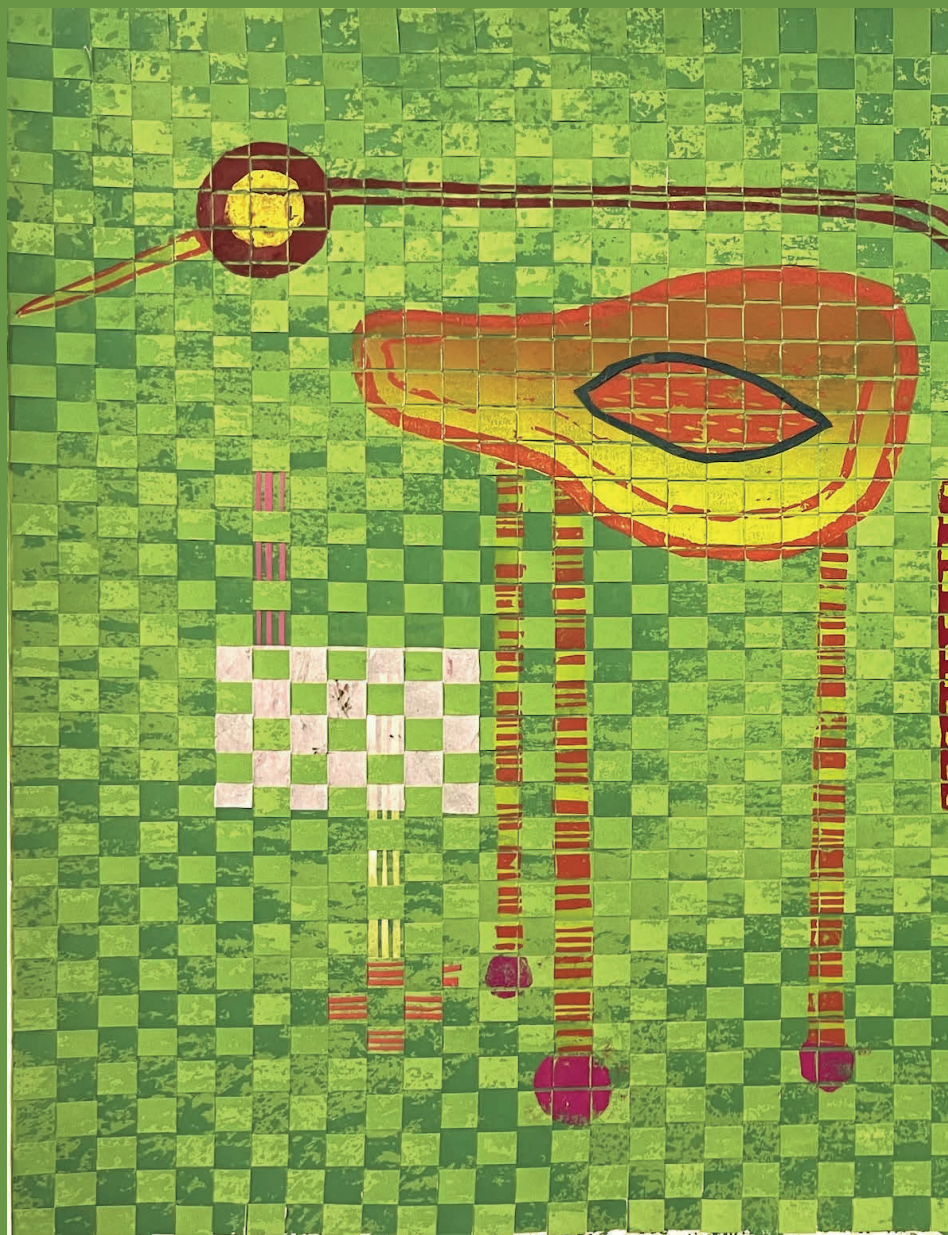


The background of the cover is a solid light pink color. Overlaid on this are several thick, expressive charcoal or grey strokes. These strokes are curved and fluid, resembling calligraphic brushwork or perhaps stylized representations of animal tracks or fur. One prominent stroke starts from the top left and curves downwards towards the center. Another stroke is more horizontal, starting from the top right and curving towards the center. There are also some lighter, more delicate strokes scattered around.

wilder voice

AUTUMN 2025
VOLUME 22



VIVIAN BAILEY, A OSTRICH, 2025, LINOLEUM, SILKSCREEN, WEAVING, COLLAGES.





TAYLOR, SEEN ON E LORAIN.



WILDER VOICE MAGAZINE

VOLUME 22



NON-FICTION
FICTION
AND POEMS

THE OBERLIN PRINTING PRESS

AUTUMN 20225



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OUR OBERLIN COMMUNITY

↓



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TOMMY CHEN, THE MET, 2025, PHOTOGRAPH.





TAYLOR, TO LOVE TO LOSE.



POETRY

INSPIRED

HUMMINGBIRD SAYS

CENTRAL PARK AT NIGHT

THREE THOUSAND

ODE TO A SPIROMETER

BARNARD GENERAL

STORE, EST. 1832

MAGIC



INSPIRED

BY

AVA FIRESTONE-MORRILL

Disrupt the tide of other feathers
Tipped towards the waning arch
Auxiliary of arsenal to take between my lips and swallow
in the unwanted
Kickoff the back porch to see it better
The drum thumped society
They shouted back

Mary time not maritime because she was left a widow
not merry
Hat held down in warning for frilly
Bows of untucked postures
And dense intentions
Language held gains above the clouds
The sky built of walls
Unfinal and drearied compassion

Bellyful full of thumbtracks
The pictures swallowed, burning is sacrilegious. We can't
let the mound
Grow.
Into infant jail



Darling hang yourself by the fishing pole and take what
the biscuits foretold to the button
Died is abstract itself a love song of falsehoods and false
gods and he woke up
And straightens

Your electrical psyche
Frantic it fell returned but refused
Farm where that's the real pig
Delilah, did you walk this road before?
I traveled she tickets confetti
Typewritten frozen on awkwardly hinge
That's not noiselessly

Breathing chest of ribs splattered grains
For chickens to pick up from metaphor
The corpse of borders tossed to touch

Arms cocked at my heart, I wanted them to press
Press it please I cry, she fooled
It has been too many since it passed
Delilah stopped, you did right
The scissors shaved it open
Finally yellow



HUMMINGBIRD SAYS

BY

RILEY NEWFIELD

you ever watched a hummingbird just
float there? Beak and belly held
perfectly still like fighting the
inevitable crushing force of
gravity is a game already
won. You might imagine her
gloating: *look at me, I can stay
like this forever I can melt the glue
that pulls down your feet you will never
be as still as I am now, and I brace
myself against nothing.* And yet,
if you listen close, and close
your eyes, it becomes clear
as the air through which she
swims, that she says nothing,
but her wings push air like pistons
like waves like a runner's lungs like
she has everything to lose. You ever seen
someone else and been so wrapped up
in your flaws that your eyes spill light
across their body turning skin into
screen knowing they are happy
because they look happy and
because you aren't. A smile
can be a smile and it can also
be built from tension stretching
face into image, can be hiding like
something floating can be magic or just
wings pushing air pushing hope past despair.



CENTRAL PARK AT NIGHT

BY

OLIVER SEAMAN

tap!
it's on
lantern's on!
with yellow light
to shine upon dark
On paths around the pond
to zigzag and shine on them
the sky is darkened, it's so dim
and trees merge into the color gray
but the water turns on by lantern's glow
and by skyscrapers that stare on down
To make pools of deep blue and gold
lanterns to the horizon
with the air chilly sweet
there's no moon in sight
and my skin's pale
instantly
radiant
see?



AUTUMN'S RHYME

BY

RIVER NGUYEN

Darling! Summer's withered,
While Autumn's just passing by.
What regrets stay, I wonder,
In the dangling flames* of our sky?

Once burnt me to an Abyss,
Now ashes of Summer's fire;
Once upon a long-lost time,
An eye's blink - now bygone years.

Sown from Horizons - a silent note,
Evergreen on your stream of hair.
As I waver with the breeze,
Your crisp laughter infuses the air.

Sweetest of words I dream to leave,
Almost slipped from my lips.
Carried away with golden leaves,
Or forever Yours to keep?

After classes - a late-blooming dawn,
Our shoulders ripened in Sunshine.
Would you like to hold my hand,
And hold on to this Autumn sky?

**The Flame Blossom (Hoa phuong) is often planted around schools and universities, blooms throughout Summer, and often considered an emblem of Summertime and adolescence for Vietnamese students.*



YEARS

BY

MICAH GRESL-TURNER

It's cold again
and I love my neighbor

It's not as fun as I thought
sometimes my neighbor hurts me

and brings me bread
Chewing makes me sick

I must want
and it is killing me

Sometimes I hurt my neighbor
and bring him stones

I regret nothing
but what I am doing right now

I am eyeing him
and grinding my teeth

Nothing is to be made happen
and Nothing is to be missed

Yeast is blooming from my arm I
think blood changes as you age



Lives I do not own
bubble

Years are blooming from my arm
I am killing them

I am letting them free
I am making them real

It is cold again
the bodies make me sick

I refuse to believe
the grain can be cut

I refuse to believe
age comes on with notice

I refuse to believe
a teacher is a teacher

My neighbor blooms from my arm
who brings me bread

I hear his breath in my sleep
I feel his breath on my neck



TIS MERELY A FLESH WOUND

BY

JULIAN CHADWIN

I imagine the aftermath of a thorough stabbing with lahat chereb of Eden does not feel dissimilar to my own experience with a vagina. Consistently squirmy awareness of a hole in your body that does not belong.

A gash, a wound, a sick choice that was made without your input or consent. The canyon will not close on its own, and you cannot— should not— attempt to close it yourself.

You did not choose to be stabbed, but you are stuck living for the rest of your life with an absence of flesh and the sense of emptiness. You can try to fill it, and you have, but the physical properties changing does not influence the emotional. Not in the way you need it to, at least.

You thank the filling for its time, trying to be polite as you usher it out the door and hide the disgust and shame you know is building in you. The wound was granted by a higher power; and you have defiled it with your human greed and a craving you do not actually feel.

The momentary enjoyment that may have blossomed from the interaction is quickly crushed under the boot of doubt. No matter how many reassurances are given, the gash is alien to you, and you cannot help but feel



that some, especially those you've let get close enough to touch, do not actually want you. They desire the dominating power, the proximity to the heavens, that worshipping the wound could grant them. They cannot see that holy light has not burned in the canyon since it was gored.

You crawl out from under the heel, grasping for any crumb of comfort. There is a small part of you that shines brightly now, and it believes that if someone could love you as well as the wound, could love you both, then maybe your relationship with it would be fixed.

But then self loathing's matching steel toe smears the nectar of fleeting happiness across the concrete. You will never be more than what you have been marked with, though you shout and cry and beg for people to believe that you are everything but. And without fail, like clockwork, you watch their eyes shoot a doubtful glance at the gash.

At least it doesn't bleed anymore, and the phantom sting of flaming tendrils that once engulfed you have since disappeared. But still they look.

And they judge you for attempting to change something that hurts you, for reasons that haven't mattered to you since the pain began. How is one supposed to find comfort and acceptance in the divinity that drew the sword? Why do they only care about theoretical pain in the future, pain of strangers, when you are hurting now- and have been for as long as you can now remember?



I do not think a sword of my own would help. It may feel less alien than the pit, but a part of me would still feel ostracized, and fake. I do not wish to have had a sword since my creation, for the hole has become so deep it is an inseparable part of my journey through life.

You would have to rend the flesh of my timeline into atoms to elicit a fully satisfied response to a sabre to call my own. And no matter how much armor I don, covered with leather and chain and plate, the uncomfortable awareness of the wound remains.



THREE THOUSAND

BY

KATE WEISSENBERGER

A mouth, tasting so
Sweetly of sleep, once threatened
To overtake me.
She whispered
Of Aoide; she lured me
With her recitations, with which she
Honored her goddess, the
Pale patron to whom she prayed.

Does she know she is my altar?
I have spent each cycle
Furiously searching for
The oracle, slaying the serpent,
Wreathing myself in mist, so that
I may understand who we were.

I have become lost in time.
The days mean little; the years, less so.
Intuition can only take me so far.
When I find my way back, I will remember
Honeyed marble, and tendons, drawn taut,
And she who called me home.



ODE TO A SPIROMETER

BY

CAROLINE ACKER

Careful:
the membrane of my mouth.
Careful:
my nostrils, throat,
every gasping pore.
I caulk and clot until they close—
until my breath can escape into nowhere but you.

Here is somewhere I can live:
in capacities. In measured intervals.
In forgeries. In careful tidal-breath.
In an open unbreathing mouth.
In lungs flanking heart.

In a small percentage of drownings, the
muscles of the throat flinch closed before any water can
reach the lungs.
A small percentage of drownings
scramble to be anything other than drownings. Instead: a
spasmic suicide.
Instead: a stagger inland.

We do not kiss.
This is unrelated to the fact that we don't know how.
Briefly, I loosen the mouthpiece.
It hisses oxygen.
I let myself hallucinate
a kiss, a barotrauma.



BARNARD GENERAL STORE, EST. 1832

BY

INGRID ALVA BELCHER

I.

Yes Vermont,
where Silver Lake shivers across from
the Barnard General Store
whose floors rumble and ache their
secrets in a dead tongue, where
I've been stung more by the memory
than the wasp on my thumb,
the both of us having sought the same
cold-pressed, fridge-sealed
orange juice, bottle glinting plastic, sweetness a promise
just underneath its green spin-top lid.

The wasp had arrived first,
refrigerated stiffness staying the blade that fat, quivering
teardrop warned by the yellow it bore.
That old wood looks brother to a
sinking chapel I have seen
in pale-skyed dirt-eyed east Texas—
And in the cartographic impulse of a child's
mind, they stand side by side;
next to warming my small feet after
a cold walk up a long creek,
and wondering if the sands of Corpus
Christi taste like communion
in the mouth of Mexico's Gulf,
and nursing the indignation
from a lack of ice cream mid June! as the general store



suffered a lack of locals.

It is true most bodies passing through are

migratory now; wet footprints

never stay long. That old sting, splinter of

knowing I am of the past, and not its future.

It was the season of goslings and sweat and neighbors,

ticks and clover, when we swam in Silver Lake—

the body kettled and calved by passing glaciers.

II.

I had a yellow dream, once,

where there was no sky, only plains. A few cows,

a pig existed, stock still,

beside a broken chain-link fence—

there was no ‘in front’ or ‘behind’ in

this paradoxical space,

but above was a window, shining white

beyond panes of nothing.

(There will always be ‘above’ and ‘below’)

The window told me this had been Eden,

which I understood to mean

this had been abandoned. Land now

chained to a primary hue

neither blood nor water, but the iodine stain of shame.

I understood this place suffered a lack of locals, knew

I was of its past but not its future.

That same dreamer’s mind

wondering if the wasp in the fridge

is still frozen to its plastic promise.



MAGIC

BY

BRIDGET DAVIDSON

I know
the birds,
burning ablaze
with yellow chill
as the autumn leaves
slice the still
born air with color,

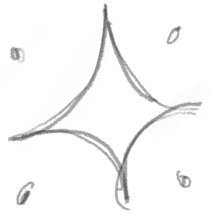
itching with their yearly travel-bug,
venture on a vital getaway
with their quantum
physic physique,
psychic physical forms -
peak, heightened
magnitudes of mountain
latitude and with elongated thoughts,
they breathe in
the promise
of warmth,

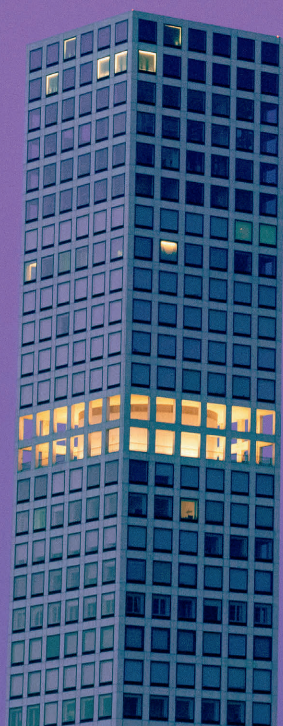
but I choose
to believe
they keep vibrant, whimsical
stars in their little
shaky bird-hearts
to light their way
to the melting mess
of a better yonderland,



that their miraculous escape
has nothing
to do with science, magnetism,
mechanical forces, that they hold
hope born from vibrations
of the calls of happiness,

that some things really can
come down to
magic.





TOMMY CHEN, NEW YORK #, 2025, PHOTOGRAPH.





ANNA WENZEL, U-BAHN TUNNEL, 2025, PHOTOGRAPHY.



SHORT FICTION

THE WINDOWS FROST OVER
MOUSE! HA!



THE WINDOWS FROST OVER

BY

CAL DESOLLAR

The windows are clear sheets of glass, bisected, then divided again by strips of iron. Too small for massive industrial factory windows, too worn to simply be a weird design choice, and too simple to belong in this building of stone and cement, soft lights and wood floors. The flat, grey-patterned carpets that were for some inexplicable reason installed over some of the floors and the stiff blue armchairs are the only other things that are cold.

The windows don't change, day in, day out, they are glass, four sheets per window with cool metal in between. They frost over sometimes, or rain flows down in little trickles or great rivulets, but that's all.

They're windows for Pete's sake. There are plenty more like them throughout the building. What's outside is interesting enough: a path through an expanse of grass, benches that people sit on, the occasional tree. But it's the windows themselves that hold your attention.

You don't know why it's so hard to look away.

*

The library has two floors. You've found a quiet spot on the second floor, with only one chair, away from anyone who might attempt to distract you. They would fail, for you are always distracted already. The homework on your lap would like your attention, but it's too polite to demand it, so it sits there. It feels just as awkward about



this as you do.

It thinks the absent-minded shading you've given to the top right corner is a good look though.

*

The windows aren't frosted over today, but they are very cold. Paper crackles in your lap as you twist to push yourself up the back of the chair and lean over to press your cheek against the glass. You're not entirely sure why you do this, but it feels somewhere between nice and unpleasant.

Maybe if you stay there for long enough, you'll get frostbite and you won't have to finish this assignment.

Maybe there are magic homework-finishing fairies out there who will do it for you if bribed sufficiently. Or fae. You're not sure what the difference is, but you're not picky.

Maybe zoning out and staring at the bit where the glass fits into the metal will somehow accomplish more than the nothing it did last time.

In theory, that's better than getting distracted by the books, because at least you're physically close to the homework and therefore have a higher chance of actually doing it.

In theory.

They're idiots for thinking that a library is more work-space than temptation. Doubly so for insisting you spend your mornings working there.

*



It's a nice library.

Theoretically, if you came here for the books, you would like it very much.

If you came here for the books, you would completely forget your homework, and spend the whole day reading, entombed like a child in a pillow fort, and they would send out a search party, and in the end you would not finish your homework on time and you would get in trouble.

Perhaps getting in trouble would not be so bad if you just did it and got it over with.

Perhaps it would be so bad.

*

You scoot over to the side of the chair and set the paper and pencil case in the space your legs just vacated.

Five minutes, you tell yourself. Five minutes of taking a full break and then I'll go and actually do the dratted thing. After a moment of consideration, you pat the paper reassuringly. You know it's not its fault that you're being forced to fill it out. You didn't mean that last bit. It's okay.

Then you clamber up the back of the chair and sit on it. You experimentally tap your feet against the window panes. It goes dun and vibrates.

You place your hand on the center of the grid. Fingers splay across panes and the mutins dividing them (a word you presumably have gone your whole life without knowing if not for your obsession with these windows). Feel the chill transferred through glass and metal to your



skin.

The grid shifts. Mutins multiply and divide, spiral like a kaleidoscope, rotate under your palm.

You hold your breath and draw back into empty space. Nearly overbalance into the chair seat.

The window opens like a kaleidoscope, onto a vista you have never seen before, promising so much more. The cold increases.

You jump down from the chair back and cautiously step onto the swaths of glass. The panes are a bit slippery, but they're rimmed in metal, so sliding off is unlikely. And they hold your weight without issue.

It's a good thing you never took off your coat.



VIVIAN BAILEY, *THE PULL*, 2024, PHOTOINTAGLIO, INTAGLIO, COLLAGE, WATERCOLOR.



"The window opens like a kaleidoscope,
onto a vista you have never seen before,
promising so much more. The cold
increases."

CAL DESOLLAR



MOUSE! HA!

BY

HANNA ALWINE

Work begins at the same time every morning, 9am on the dot, but somehow Maude is always late, rushing in behind the first customer instead of ten minutes before. Rodney, her boss, late twenties, eerie splash of freckles running the bridge of his nose and around the left curve of his upper lip, doesn't seem to mind. He stands patiently at the cash register as she hurries over, wiping the speckle of sweat from the tip of her nose and pulling on her little red vest.

"I don't mean to be late, you know, but the traffic—" she begins, knowing its bullshit, knowing Rodney knows its bullshit, knowing that all the other cashiers standing bored at their stations with bleary eyes and tousled morning hair, know its bullshit.

It was the traffic today, she told herself, and yesterday it had been that squirrel that had taken its good old time crossing the road—it had not responded to any of her polite honks to let it know that it was not where it was supposed to be—and the day before that her microwave had been on the fritz and burned her morning oats, and the day before there'd been some weird power surge, or maybe she'd just forgotten to plug in her phone, in any case her alarm hadn't gone off, and—

Rodney holds up his hand, bright eyes dancing in a way that she's always appreciated. She likes that her tardiness makes him laugh. She's had employers before, oh,



twenty, thirty years ago who hadn't tolerated it. Which was to be expected. She supposed that if she'd ever been an employer of anything she might have been frustrated if an employee was regularly late to the job. But she really tried every morning. There was just always something.

It was as if there was some sort of lens cast over her house that made all the clocks inside slow—the one above her stove that looked like a rabbit jumping over a basket of eggs, the one in her bathroom that was attached to her scale, even the one in her living room that stood up and tall, like a grandfather clock but smaller, the salesman had told her at the antique store. Everything moved at the pace she thought it was supposed to move. It was a pace that made her think that she had time to do everything she needed to do, lulled her into a false sense of security. She'd wander around the house, making breakfast, pulling on her pants, running floss through the gaps between her teeth, doing everything but twiddle her thumbs, every so often glancing at the clocks. And without fail they'd tell her—you have plenty of time! Today is the day you make it! And she'd be filled with that sense of accomplishment, an ease combined with the anticipation of greeting Rodney from behind her cashier station rather than panting at the door. Today, she thought, Rodney's eyes might twinkle with a different sort of light.

And then she'd step out the door and it was as if the clock had realized that it, too, had been dawdling all morning and that now, it was time to step into high gear. And in the time that it took her to step down the cobblestones that led to her driveway, the minutes would have flown by like swallows scared up on a roof, one by one



taking flight, leaving the morning sun in their wake. And she'd get in the car and the minutes would keep going, spilling out like that one episode of *I Love Lucy* that she'd never seen, but always heard of. She wasn't sure how she'd missed that one—the one where Lucy is at a factory and something goes wrong and suddenly there are hamburgers, or maybe hotdogs? Perhaps it was chocolate bars? Pouring out of the machine in every direction and in that episode Lucy can't stop the flood of them—they're coming on too fast!

Poor Lucy! Maude thought. And then, at the stop-light, waiting for red to shift into green she'd think, poor Maude, late again. Not that she really minded it.

Rodney's hand was still raised and he was saying something with a little half grin, the part of his mouth where the freckles weren't tilted upwards as if reaching for the corner of his eye which crinkled just a bit. When Rodney was old like her, she thought, he'd have a nice little splay of wrinkles there. Crows feet she'd always heard them called, which she liked well enough. But she likes better to think of them as little sun rays. Beams of light shooting out from the corners of people's eyes when they got all lit up like that. Sun damage from within.

“—it's no trouble Maude, really. You know we're slow on Monday mornings.”

His little half smile widened and she caught a glimpse of his teeth. They were yellowed like her own, his from an overconsumption of coffee and cigarettes and chewing tobacco—hers from those very same culprits multiplied by age. She knew he was offering her a bone—that with mentioning Monday mornings he was letting her in



on an inside joke. It wasn't just Monday mornings that were slow. It was all of them. And it wasn't just Mondays that Maude would be late, it'd be all week.

Sometimes she wondered that she hadn't been fired yet. Somehow she knew she would miss it, the job, the mad rush getting here, even standing on linoleum all day. She wouldn't see Rodney if she was fired. She wouldn't see Madelaine either who was standing at the next cash register over in a blue flowery shirt with lace around the edge. She had her back arched over the conveyer belt, elbows planted firmly against the black tar paper. She was looking down and from Maude's vantage point she couldn't help, but think that Madelaine looked like a mountain, the blue of her shirt and red of her vest curving up and over and dropping down again. If Madelaine was a mountain then she was at the other side of the valley created by her posture, the great slope of her back dropping to the pale linoleum tiles and rushing towards her. Rodney was speaking again.

"There's been a couple minor changes to the database since last week. I was wondering if you might need some help figuring them out?"

Again, another game they played. The "updates to the database." As far as she could tell, based on the lack of help that Rodney gave the other cashiers when the database was supposedly updated, the database didn't actually change. But even if nothing had shifted, sometimes Maude felt like it had when she came in. On the days Rodney wasn't there to help her with the "updates" she struggled with the machinations of it all. It was as if there was a little critter that snuck into her room in



the evenings and nibbled away at the parts of her brain that had learned how to use the computer the day before. And so, most mornings, Rodney walked her through the basic steps. How to scan items to check them out. How to give refunds and apply coupons.

It was always the same. This she knew. Once he started down the familiar path it all came rushing back: you click this button here to start and then the big screen opens and you move your cursor—you remember how to move the cursor? With this little black mouse, here? The first time she'd heard it called a mouse she'd laughed for a week.

Each time she'd moved the little black device, long tail hanging off the end, little swivel in the middle, she'd chuckled to herself. There was one man who hadn't appreciated her laughter. A customer with a long white beard who'd thought she'd been laughing at him. He'd been buying a box of diapers, had picked up a magazine in line as if that might disguise the fact that he'd reached a point in the aging process that was steeped in shame. She knew that face, had known in the past that it meant she'd need to talk to him with more respect than was typical, help him out in that game they all played as their physical systems failed them, as they became children again. We're still in control, they'd whisper to one another through a head nodded in deference, talking about serious things—the news, politics, tax returns—in serious voices. Don't worry, she tried to tell them, those people with the shame-faces, your secret is safe with me.

But, though she'd danced the dance a hundred times before, on that day, as she moved the mouse—oh boy!



the mouse!—to close out his purchase, she hadn't been able to avoid a little chuckle. She tried to mask it behind her hand, but as she turned to the side she saw the long string of the mouse's wire disappearing behind the desk and she'd let out a laugh—a real one. One that started in her throat and echoed in the late afternoon light.

He'd turned red. The man with the white beard. And turned suddenly, his sharp nose cutting through the air. He'd walked out with viscous steps and left the diapers behind bumping up against the end of the conveyor belt.

Maude had called out to him—wait! But he hadn't turned around, nor slowed his wounded step towards the door. And all the while Maude's eyes swam with tears and she hadn't been able to contain the laugh any longer. She'd doubled over until Marcus, who worked during the winter months while Madelaine was in college, came over to see what was the matter.

But how could she explain? How could she tell Marcus about the house she'd lived in during the summers when she was growing up, that was made of wood so bowed that, in the mornings when the sun came up, she could look out the wall and see the arched spine of the small pine on the other side, bending over with the exertion of holding up too many cones?

How could she tell Marcus that she'd slept in the same cot as her sister when she was born and then that when her brother was born they'd slept all three nestled up against one another and that when her second sister was born she'd decided that she'd rather sleep on the floor than be stuck all up close to them all night long?



How could she tell Marcus that the cracks in their house were the perfect size for mice to come squeezing through and that the first night she'd spent sleeping on the floor she'd woken to squeaking, pressed her eyes shut through the racket, and then in the morning when the house was shot through with light she'd woken up and found a tiny thing, all scatter-snap bones and fishing-line whiskers curled up in the comfort of her hair?

How could she tell Marcus that she'd screamed and the mouse had scampered?

How could she tell Marcus that she'd continued to sleep on the floor and that each morning she'd wake up to the mouse, every time somewhere different, sometimes laid in the crook between her ankle and her heel, sometimes on the soft pad of her palm, sometimes on the small flat corner of her pillow?

How could she tell Marcus that it took a few weeks for her to stop shouting when she woke up to find the creature nearby, but that she'd grown to love that mouse and that they'd moved out that winter—you couldn't stay in a house like that in winter, not in Michigan, not with the snow they'd got—and so they'd moved into a hotel room that didn't have mice, but did have roaches.

How could she tell Marcus that when she looked at this little black robot that purred under her palm and had a tail that ran electric and buttons that made clicking sounds like her mother when something was not going quite right that she saw the long line of her life that ended with her here, in this grocery store with its doors that slid open without any hand to push them, with its screens that lit up when she pressed a button—like a fire-



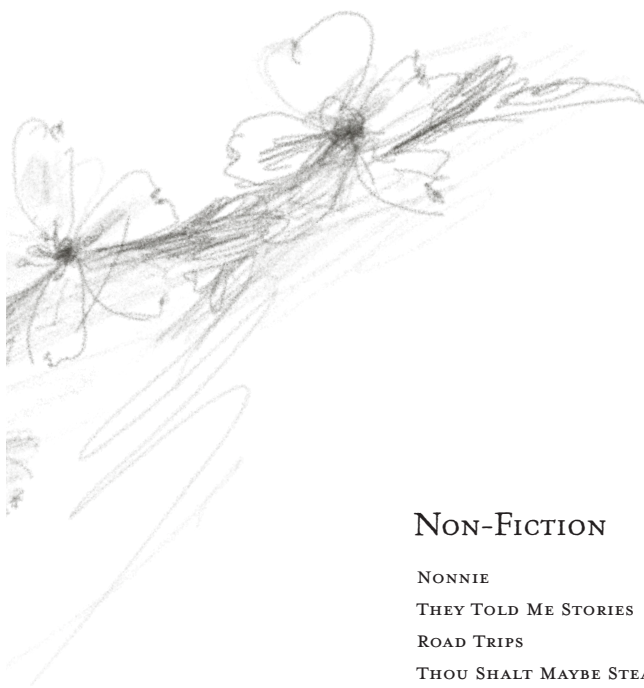
works display, she'd thought when she'd first seen one booting up—this grocery store where she didn't tap in the numbers on a barcode, but picked up a strange black object that shot a laser at the chicken patties behind cellophane wrap and that somehow that laser made a picture of that same chicken pop up on her screen.

She couldn't tell Marcus any of it. At that point she was laughing too hard and she didn't think it would make too much sense anyhow. Besides, Marcus liked when she laughed. He laughed with her and his laugh reminded her of many people she'd once known, the way he had to hold onto something to keep from falling over and pushed air out of both his mouth and his nose. When Marcus laughed it made her laugh harder and behind both of their checkout stations lines of confused customers extended into the store, the ones at the backs craning their necks around those in front as if to figure out when and how they might get their groceries scanned by her little laser.

Mouse! Ha!



ANNA WENZEL, RED FISH BLUE FISH, 2025, PHOTOGRAPHY.



NON-FICTION

NONNIE

THEY TOLD ME STORIES

ROAD TRIPS

THOU SHALT MAYBE STEAL,

SOMETIMES



NONNIE

BY

ANONYMOUS

I spent three weeks with my grandparents at my uncle's house this summer. The days dragged on heavily, and I spent the time watching the Hallmark channel with my grandma, going on very hot and brief jogs through the suburbs, and reading long and laborious books. My grandparents' house was being renovated, so they were living with my uncle for the summer. My grandparents fought against the decision to renovate the house for months. The reason for their resistance wasn't exactly clear, but I assume it had to do with the element of change. Changing the house would mark a change in their lives as well. Perhaps it even marked the beginning of the end of their lives. I can imagine that sitting through a transition like that was painful and uncomfortable for them. That's why I understood why they wanted their house to stay as it was, even if it was falling apart and moldy. My grandma's shower only had two settings—ice cold and “burn your tits off,” as she would say. This was normal for them. This was how it had always been, and this was how they wanted it to stay.

The reality, though, was that it wasn't a safe place for my grandma to be in her old age. She needed extra help at this point in her life, and extra help included a bathroom that actually worked. My mother realized this, and fought with her parents for the first time in her life until she got what she wanted. As a result, the bathrooms were being torn apart, and the house sat empty for the



time being.

One day that summer, my mom and I drove to my grandparents' house to clean out my grandma's closet. My grandma had accumulated so many clothes over the years that my mom spent multiple days simply going through them to sort out what was actually needed. My grandma basically bought whatever was sold to her on TV, so there was about 50 years of shit to go through. I was coming along because I liked junk. Plus, I was learning to drive.

When I stepped into my grandparents' house, the first thing I saw was the empty space my grandma's La-Z-Boy used to occupy. There was discoloration on the floor, outlining the place it once sat. My grandma loves that chair—so much so that my uncle drove it to his house just so she could have it while she was away. When I was a kid, she would fall back into it at the end of a long day like it was a pair of loving arms. She spent many nights there with the TV on.

My grandma is an artist, and the walls of her house are lined with her paintings. She's always painted things like flowers and buildings in Rome and birds drinking water and pink-cheeked babies. My grandma wanted to go to art school, but because she needed to make money, she went to beauty school instead and became a hairdresser. I have a memory of her cutting my hair in her painting room as I sat in front of a tiny television. We were surrounded by hundreds of her paintings, lined up on the floor like dominos. When she was done, she tied my hair in a pink bow that fell out when I ran around outside.

My mom and I went upstairs to my grandma's room.



In it, there were cabinets overflowing with jewelry and hat boxes stacked on the floor. Necklaces of Jesus on the cross hung from every picture and every lampshade. As the story goes, my grandma baptized me in her sink because my parents wouldn't baptize me at all.

In the corner of my grandma's room, there was a cabinet with tiny fairy figurines. There was also a picture of me, five years old and wearing fairy wings, next to a little cup of "fairy dust." My grandma would bring me into her room when I was young and put some of the dust on my cheeks and show me the fairies. I'd look at each one and secretly choose which I liked the best and wanted to take home.

Behind me, my mom opened the closet to reveal what was only a third of Nonnie's clothes.

"I feel like you've wanted to do this for twenty years," I said.

"I have," she replied.

Recently, my grandma has given up on many things in her life, and one of those things was her appearance. She always took special care with her hair and her outfits when I was growing up. Sometimes she would complain about her hair, and then go up to her vanity and come down with a new haircut. These things mattered to her, until she reached an age where nature seemed to take over her ability to control the way she looked. After that, she gave up. Not only on her looks, but on her social life, and on taking care of herself.

I was sent to another room to collect more clothes. I found scarves for every single holiday—four leaf clovers



for St. Paddy's day, hearts for Valentine's Day, party hats and confetti for New Year's, bells and wreaths for Christmas. At first glance, I thought it was cute, but the more I thought about it, the idea became a bit neurotic to me. It was like she never wanted to be caught off guard for any occasion.

I got distracted and painted my nails 10 different shades of red with my grandma's nail polish. The nail polish must have been from her days as a member of the Red Hats Society—a club where she and a group of women would go out for tea and socialize in fancy dresses and hats. Some of the nail polish was dried up and chunky, so I probably should have thrown it away, but I couldn't do it. These bottles had likely been here for longer than I'd been alive. I didn't feel like I had the right to remove them. It seems that, like my grandparents, I tend to leave things as they are, for better or for worse.

I eventually began to deliver the clothes to my mom in the other room. I must have made at least 10 trips, carrying in my arms years of fashion phases that were no longer relevant to my grandma. Some of the clothes were familiar to me, like the floral skirts and purple blouses. There were also clothes that were less familiar to me, like an '80s running suit and a dress covered entirely in sequins. It caught me off guard to see these things, like a side of her I never knew existed had been revealed to me. It felt like time was being thrown away with these clothes, like they told the story of someone I hardly knew.

My mom knew that my grandma would never wear any of these clothes again. She was preparing to move



forward, whereas I felt myself sinking into the past. My grandma was done dressing up, done participating in holidays and social events. At this point in her life, she only needed what was necessary, and that was what we were here to do. To separate the unnecessary from the necessary. She wasn't the same person she had been a few years before. I thought about the other day when she walked into the living room with no pants on.

"Louise, where are your pants?" My grandpa asked. Nonnie didn't even look at him. She just walked over to her chair and plopped down.

"Mom, you can't walk around with no pants on," my uncle said.

She flipped on the TV. I found it hilarious. To me, this was her way of saying she was done dressing up, done following the rules. It was a sign of protest, a good natured "fuck you" to the world. This was who she was now. If she didn't want to wear pants, she wasn't going to wear pants. In a strange way, I understood this, or perhaps it was familiar to me. As a child, I refused to wear clothes. They were tight, scratchy, and unjustifiable.

"I set aside some jewelry for you," my mom said. I looked over at the pile of heavy earrings and chunky bracelets and necklaces that sat on the dresser.

"She liked to match her jewelry with her clothes," my mom commented.

I picked up a gold necklace. I wanted to take it with me to remind me of an era that was now lost.





It was dinner time later that day, and grandma had just finished eating her food. Sunshine streamed through the windows and painted everything gold, marking the end of another day.

"That was a good dinner, Rose," Nonnie said to my mom. She started to tug at the kitchen table to pull herself up.

"Louise, where are you going?" My Nono asked Nonnie, as if he didn't know.

"To my chair!" She yelled. Her attempts to stand were unsuccessful. She only got up halfway before falling back into the chair, heavily.

"Mom, sit down, we want to talk with you," my uncle said.

"I don't want to talk with you," replied my grandma.

"Just let her go to the chair," said my mom.

"I'm going to set a timer for three minutes, and you need to sit here until the timer goes off," my uncle said. This reminded me of sitting in time out as a child. Talking and socializing now felt like a punishment for my grandma, or maybe it always had.

Nonnie ignored all of them. On the sixth try, she lifted herself up, got her walker, and scooted over to her La-Z-Boy. She flipped on the TV to the Hallmark channel and called out,

"This is where my friends are."

"Your friends are right here!" My grandfather cried.



This was pretty much how every meal went. My grandmother would finish eating in five minutes, and then run back to her chair like it would disappear if she left it for too long. My family would plead with her to stay at the table a little longer to talk with us. But all she wanted to do was sit in her chair and watch TV.

Back when I was a kid, my grandma did all of the cooking. For 50 years, she cooked three meals a day for her kids and her husband. On Sundays, the cousins and aunts and uncles would go to each other's houses to eat pasta, an Italian tradition that she hated to host. About a year ago, she decided she wouldn't cook another meal. It became clear that my grandpa also refused to cook, and wouldn't so much as boil a pot of water to cook pasta. The man could run marathons in his sandals at age 80, but wouldn't fry an egg.

I went up to my grandmother in her La-Z-Boy and gave her a hug. She looked down at my nails.

"What are those supposed to be, hearts?"

"No," I said.

"I don't want to tell you this," she said, scrunching her nose, "But they're sorta ugly." I laughed because it was true. Then, I pulled out the necklace I had taken from her room.

"Nonnie, can I have this necklace?" She looked up at the gold dangling from my hand. She gently touched the jewelry, staring at it blankly.

"You can take anything you want," she said. "Anything!"



"Thanks, Nonnie," I said, putting the necklace in my pocket. My grandma grabbed my arm and said to me, almost manically,

"You are gorgeous! Just gorgeous!" She had a pained look on her face.

"Ah, thanks Nonnie," I said, feeling awkward. "You too!" She waved me off, looking almost disgusted by the comment.

To an outsider, this interaction might seem odd, but for us, it is a very normal part of our relationship. My grandma loves to talk about beauty, as well as her perceived lack of it. The two of us existed in each other's world through a well practiced script, one we had practiced for years. There were days that summer, though, that my grandma acted in ways I didn't recognize. She wasn't saying her lines, and left me to improvise.

"I want to go to sleep," Nonnie said, one night.

"But we need to have dinner," I told her from the kitchen table. All of the other adults in the house were gone. It was just me, Nonnie, and Nono.

Nonnie ignored me and started walking to her room. Her walker snagged on the plastic that kept the carpeted floors dry, ripping a hole in it. She kept walking, unfazed. I followed her slowly, matching her pace. She sat down on her bed and looked up at me.

"Help me into bed," she said. The bed wasn't made because there had been an accident the night before. There was just a mattress and a bare pillow.

"Nonnie, we have to eat dinner," I said.



"But I want to go to bed," she replied.

"I know, but we have to eat dinner." I felt like we were in uncharted territory, like we had gone off course in a video game and were hitting dead ends.

She pouted. "But I want to go to bed," she said a second time, although now she looked as if she were asking for permission.

"I know," I said.

"But we need to eat dinner?" She asked. It occurred to me that we didn't actually have to eat dinner.

"Yeah," I replied. I felt that she knew I was not equipped for this, to argue with her. She spotted me for what I was—a kid pretending to be an adult. Unlike my mom, I wasn't going to push her to do what she didn't want to do. I didn't have it in me—I felt too weak.

"Okay, help me up," she said, reaching out to me. She was letting go of control, and in this way, she claimed her role as the adult again. I felt relieved. I took her hands and got her up on the third tug.

After Nonnie was done with her dinner, she got up wordlessly and went to her La-Z-Boy and fell asleep. I went to the laundry room, picked up her clean sheets and blankets, and made her bed.

At the end of my trip, my grandma and uncle drove me and my mom to the train station. On the drive, I thought about what it meant to really know someone. I had known my grandma my whole life, yet I felt that only this summer had I begun to understand who she really was. The mask that she lived under had fallen away in



her old age, and what was left was almost a child. In a weird way, I understood this version of her better than I had understood her before.

When we parked at the train station, my grandma started to open her car door.

“You want to get out, Mom?” My uncle asked. She nodded. We stood around her as she climbed out of the car slowly. My mom and I each gave her a hug, and the two of us walked toward the train station. Feeling calm, I turned around at the turnstiles and caught one last glimpse of her. She was just standing, watching. In that moment, she looked very young to me. My grandma waved, and I smiled and waved back. Then she turned back to the car, waiting to be taken back home.



ANNA WENZEL, ARASHIYAMA BAMBOO GROVE IN KYOTO, 2024,
PHOTOGRAPHY.



THEY TOLD ME STORIES

BY

SWAY SARKAR

**They told me stories while I drank 3 cups of tea
between 5 and 10 p.m.**

[excerpts from the summer I tried to help people document old memories]

I broke off a bit of biscuit, the crumbs scattered, I dusted off the ones that fell on her red shawl, dipped the piece in lukewarm tea till it was soft, softer, nearly falling off, and then I put my hand under it and held it up to her lips, the lips she could barely open, but I knew she wanted to, and I waited,

slowly, she parsed open one side of her upper lip, and then the other, and then she was holding her mouth open expectantly for me to feed her, and I obliged, and the biscuit dissolved as it hit her tired tongue, I could see it, and she slowly closed her mouth again,

and swallowed.

At 5.07 p.m. I was inside an old age home.

The fan swung in slow circles, lazily, the banyan tree extended its arms around the pale yellow building, in a vaguely affectionate yet distant side hug, and its leaves caressed the window, right across from where I sat with my audio recording app and notebook that was nearly falling out of a disorganized tote bag,

the molecules in the room stood still.



The heat distinctly smelt of a kind of warmth one can only find in Kolkata, faintly like drainwater, rather like sweat, mostly like tea leaves being soaked in pots all over the city as clocks struck five and the hushed murmurs of evening prayers and azaan faded away.

Here in this little bare room with two white plastic chairs and a ragged mat and a television that no one was looking at, we too dipped another bit of biscuit into the cup.

[Her nephew had reached out to me. She was in a home for people living with dementia, and he wondered if I would be interested in helping her document her memories. He wasn't sure how many stories she would tell me, but *it never hurts to try*, he said on call.]

She hadn't spoken except to say *I want to sleep*, but I was told she needed to sit up at least for a little bit of the day,

and then she told me *I need to poop*, but I was told she was wearing a diaper and to let it be,

so I had been thoroughly useless to her and I was sure she was thoroughly disinterested in me.

I had asked her many times, *do you want to tell me a story? about your childhood? about Shillong? about sunset near Lake Daaki? do you find this photo familiar? do you -*

[To clarify, I don't usually ask questions incessantly, but her nephew had told me she liked being asked,

and she might tell me stories, and I might jog her memories,

and she had lived a hard life but her childhood was



nicer, so I figured that if I kept asking I might be useful.]

do you want to tell me about home? do you want to -

she mumbled. I pressed my ear closer, she licked her lips slowly and didn't say much, I asked again,

what?

And she mumbled again, I pressed my ear closer, and asked again, and I could hear her this time, she mumbled distinctly into my ear, and some of her spit caught in my hair as she spoke,

have you always been this irritating?

[I didn't know if this was a slap in the face or a friendly joke, I didn't want to be near the dying leaves of the banyan tree, and it wasn't hugging the house, it was crushing it,

and the sun was just sitting on my head and its rays were slicing through my stomach and I remembered when my grandmother wouldn't want to talk to me and when my friend's grandmother forgot who I was, and I didn't want to be here I just wanted to leave,

why did everyone forget why did I want to be in this pit of lost memories why was I grasping, I just wanted to be useful but clearly I was not, I wanted to get far far away from the fucking biscuits and tea that refused to cool and this smelly room and all the surrounding rooms where everyone was sleeping and I could see the rolling drool—]

She mumbled again.

I don't want to



Don't want to what?

Don't want to

?

Don't want to

...remember.

[I paused. (not the recording app, for transcribing purposes, but I, myself, paused)]

She didn't want to remember?

Didn't they all want to remember, wasn't that why I was documenting things? Her nephew thought she wanted to remember, she did want to remember, I thought,

... well, I hadn't asked her what she thought.

Why didn't she want to remember? Didn't we all?]

I picked up another piece of broken biscuit, dipped it carefully in the tea which was (still) warm, till it was soft, softer, and weakly held together as the liquid percolated in every direction, I held it to her lips, and held it there till my hand cramped, but she was poking out her tongue slowly, soon her lips would part, they were parting now,

I don't like remembering. Irritating old things.

[So she didn't want to remember,

so they, and who even were they, was there ever a generic they, maybe they didn't all want to remember,

and it was nicer not to remember, she seemed to think so, she looked like she was better off not remembering.]



She picked up a whole biscuit herself and sunk her teeth into it, I heard a loud crunch, and then another crunch, and soon she was munching away and smiling.

She drank the rest of the tea herself.

Come back, she said, very softly, before I left.

The woman who had been cooking nearby hugged me and said she looked satisfied, happy even, more than she had looked all summer.

By 7.00 p.m., I had walked two streets and three floors up.

Her fingers bent perfectly into the shape of two feet, and I was on my second bite of sandesh, her voice cracked as she laughingly sang a song which roughly translates to *with tiny tiny feet I'll walk and then I'll reach, I will reach, the mountain of the moon, I will then see*, and she was climbing, she was climbing the mountain of the moon with incandescent eyes, bright bright bright, shining against the stars that were just beginning to appear, and the only folds in her eighty year old cheeks that I could see were dimples, and the music was inside her, and she was bobbing her head and blinking delightfully and her lids were caked with some sort of ointment but it shimmered and she was glowing and she was at the top of the mountain, and she was the moon, and the moon didn't really fit in her window, so she squeezed in,

and her windows were small, but her eyes were bigger, and she loved to talk.

My tea grew colder, but I didn't know at the time, I only knew her, and she was telling me of all the danc-



es she did as a child, she first learned to do gymnastics, she did shows, she did circus events, she could walk over fire, she was an expert at tightrope, and at the time men would lead these things, but she was better than them,

and I saw the set of her chin, and I saw her massive smile that never really left her face, and I believed her, and I saw her tiny nose that was scrunched from endless smiling, and when she said her nickname means smile I couldn't even pretend to be surprised for one could take a look at her and guess immediately, and I smiled, and there was entirely too much smiling all around.

Eat some more, she said, can someone bring her more food? maybe parathas? a gulab jamun? oh, and lassi!

She hurriedly rattled off instructions to her grandson to bring me food, before launching into the next set of stories,

she spoke of her marriage, and how lovely her in-laws were, and how her husband had courted her, how she had brought him books from the library, he would fly with a football in front of her window, caked in mud and sweat and a crooked grin, often flicking his eyes over to the bench where she studied, and it would distract her,

but only sometimes, and she would write notes for him in the margins of the books.

The room had darkened, we had been speaking for over three hours, she had stopped for water only once, the neighborhood boys had shrieked and yelled as they played football earlier, I wonder who had been distracted by them, but now their shouts had faded, around the corner someone was selling curd, and it was the sweet



kind, and you could hear them shouting their wares from time to time, and the wet clothes hanging from the balcony had dried, the city had fallen silent now,

but she had more stories to tell.

There was a photo of her husband on the wall, it had been a year since he had left her for the mountain of the moon, her daughter-in-law had told me this, but she didn't talk about that, she didn't talk about anything from the recent past, she couldn't really tell me what she had for breakfast, when reminded she could talk about her sisters and how they were doing, but mainly she wanted to talk about the golden days she spent building a home with the man she loved, and how poor they were when their two sons were born but how happy.

[One of her sons had run away since then, not to the moon, but some street where her tiny feet could not tread, but she didn't talk about that either.]

She told me about how they had built, first a nest, and then a light that shone for others, how they had worked and built up some money, and as her husband zealously entered political rallies, she zealously taught poorer women in a hidden corner of the house because their husbands weren't as nice, their husbands would beat them if they knew that they were studying instead of working, I listened raptly till my throat dried up, and then I gulped my tea down, and then I munched on the remnants of the *sandesh*, and I nibbled on every last crumb, but mostly I held onto every last word she said,

and she said many.

She had handpicked memories with bony fingers that



still wore her husband's ring, and the precision with which she chose them mimicked the precision of her dance movements,

she had discarded the rest, they didn't make her smile, and the discarded ones toppled from her balcony onto the curd sellers cart, and they rolled down the street, knocking into corners that flickered with the light of tall old lampposts that had seen the rhythms of her life in this old house,

the memories she didn't choose fell into drains and flowed into rivers and reached the banks of the country she had migrated from at eleven, and they mingled with the grass she had left behind and they posed as dew, and they twinkled,

but she twinkled brighter and more furiously and endlessly.

No one would write her memory had failed her, she had simply shrugged off what she didn't like as easily as she had shrugged off hardship and poverty and the travesty of having to eat rice without salt earlier in life,

nestled somewhere between the dewy discarded days gone by, and the tomorrow that she would spend mostly in a bed by the window unable to move very much, she had built an empire,

and the empire stretched from far-off shores to the worn wooden bedposts, and the middle of the empire,

was her mountain of the moon.

At 10.15 p.m. I left the car to enter a tall house.



A crow hopped up to the steps, I hopped to the side and entered. The elevator groaned and grumbled, but I could already smell incense and overwatered plants and some sort of fish curry, soon a more distinctive scent of old wooden furniture led to a carved door flanked by massive potted plants, which led to a coffee table flanked by two faces that beamed at me as if they'd known me all their lives, he shook my hand, she hugged me, and they ushered me to a table with several plates on it.

The plates multiplied by the millisecond, led to me saying *no, I couldn't possibly, really, oh well, I'll have a bite*, led to plates piled with mutton chops, and onion rings, and fish fingers, and mustard on top, and soon I was overfull and groggy as one is after a terribly filling feast,

but then she dragged out the photos, and I was too engrossed to be sleepy,

he offered me a cup of tea anyway to help me stay awake, and even though it was late at night and I probably should not have, I took it from his hands,

and sipped.

The walls looked at me quizzically, I made small talk with the past, shooed away two mosquitoes, I looked at their hands, she had her fingers intertwined, skin and bone restlessly wrestling as I sipped, and they stopped wrestling momentarily as she tapped me on the knee to ask-

Did I really want to hear their stories?

We can tell you stories...

Better yet, we can show you stories



Soon they were showing me stories, and showing me faces, and the faces were multiplying faster than the plates, faces that were black and white and sepia, most in perfect condition, faces taped to the walls, and faces shoved into albums, and faces in little frames on their many tables,

her voice trembled with pride every time she pointed to a face and named an ancestor, and as he spoke about his old house and garden his chest puffed up, their voices rose as the street outside got more crammed with office-goers coming home, and the table got more crammed with photo albums.

There was her aunt with a movie star! The actor had loved her dearly! There was their nephew who now worked at a fancy company, wasn't he adorable? He earned in crores now! There was the daughter of the family friend who was a poet! There was their family, thirty years ago! There was their old house, and the orange tree in their garden, and it bore the loveliest oranges! Did I know her aunt had been loved by a movie star? Had I seen the photo of her with the movie star?

A few moments later, she pulled out a phone, tapped the screen a few times, and solemnly handed it over to me,

Would I take a photo?

I obliged, and soon a new photo of the three of us was in her gallery, me smiling with the cup of tea still clasped firmly in my hand, still three-quarters full, her photo gallery was all four quarters full, and sent her a storage notification that she ignored, she tapped our photo



twice, zoomed in, and smiled, she turned the screen sideways and showed it to him, and he smiled, and they both pronounced that I really was a very sweet child.

I wanted to laugh a little and cry a little, but I solemnly said thank you, and she put the photo albums back in the cupboard, and gently ran her wrinkled fingers over them once, twice, thrice.

Whatever was stuck in my throat loosened from the spice at dinner, and we shared a piece of caramelized sugar for dessert.

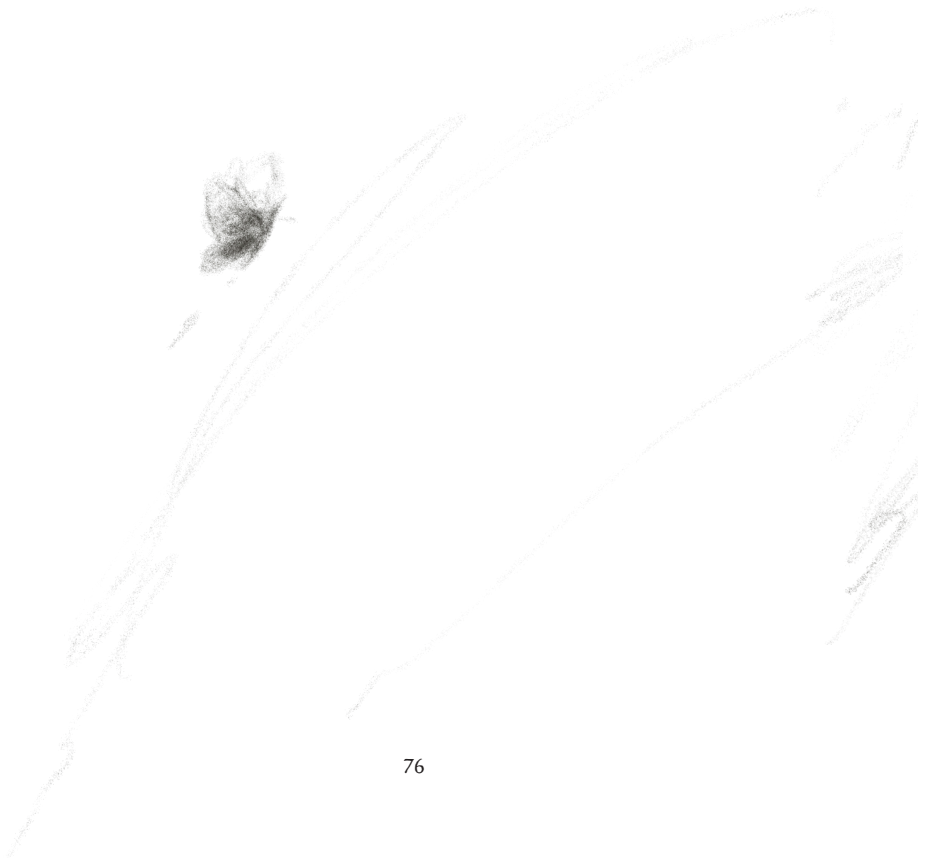
Memories could knock at their door, and run around the house, climb up and down the walls,

and leave,

but they had reached out and grabbed as many as possible, and frozen them as faces on walls, and faces in scrapbooks, and faces under the glass of the dining table, and they had made a museum of their insides in the outside world, and no museum guides had ever been as delighted by their jobs as these two.

After dessert, she went over to the cupboard, and pulled out a bundle of notebooks that seemed to be bulging with photos.

Did I know a movie star had loved her aunt?







ROAD TRIPS

BY

KATE MARTIN

My family used to frequent the 95, or so I would overhear whenever the adults discussed things of such little concern to me as navigation. I didn't know much about highways, but I knew the feeling of being strapped in the back of the minivan alongside my sisters, headed out to rural Maine to visit our grandparents, like we did every summer. I didn't know much about highways, but I noticed it whenever Dad would adjust his rearview mirror so he could check on the three of us. He would crack a smile as our eyes met because he hadn't expected me to be awake, but how could I sleep when there is so much to be excited about? I remember how Mom used to hate that car, with its lumbering sliding doors and the ever-present smell of our shaggy golden retriever that bloomed out from the trunk. One sister always insisted on painting her nails along the drive, the scent of which was immortalized in the gobs of dried out Essie polish along the armrest of her seat. But, if I recall correctly, the thing really just smelled like any old family vehicle—not especially dirty or clean and always bustling with kids going to soccer practice and piano lessons and tagging along to get groceries. My mom hated the minivan, but when her kids started to get their own licenses and she could finally replace it, she made sure to keep the same plate number for the spiffy new SUV. It was the same one I had memorized and would watch for in the parking lot after evening sports practices, eager to be brought



back home. Even if just out of convenience, I guess some things stick.

The 95 would take us around Boston and through New Hampshire and southern Maine before we would head inland. From there, after a fast-food lunch break at what always ended up being the same rest stop (we grew to relish the only occasions where Burger King was allowed), we would ride through the rolling hills of backwoods New England, us sisters periodically playing games amongst ourselves with the street signs. When we finally reached the town of St. Albans and started into our grandparents' huge orchard, we would perform the routine countdown: Three, two, one—and suddenly we're running up the porch steps, arms stretched wide for hugging, before Dad can even turn off the ignition.

The memories I've made in that tiny town, with my sisters and cousins and everyone else, in that house or along the lakeshore of a cabin I haven't seen in years, lie now in dormancy with a certain unplaceable sweetness. Everything was full: our bodies with laughter and each moment up to its stitched seams with feeling, pure and technicolor. There were fairies living by that lake, I was sure of it, and I welcomed them with crafty houses nestled in exposed pine tree roots. We kids played around the house, outside in the garden, in the water, we ran and ran, pressing every bit of momentum out of our tiny bodies, not like our lives depended on it, but because these were our lives, and because we had so much to depend on. Those days are an emblem of nostalgia so pristine in my mind that it dampens any other context for the word—the unique hopelessness of yearning for something now reduced to abstractions, where closing your



eyes really hard is the closest you'll get to something pathetically far, not even anywhere. The love ran deep, and it cradled us through evenings of storytelling and dancing with sparklers by the fireside, hoping we'd get to stay forever.

After the goodbye hugs, it was always back to that minivan. The rides home from Maine felt lethargic, more meditative and scenic. As nighttime settled in, I would watch the stars poke through the conifer skyline, and I would greet the moon, if I could find it. Watching the world race by was dizzying, so I sometimes preferred to focus on the window, especially when it was raining and I could trace the fickle patterns of water droplets as they descended the glass. Once that game coaxed me to a daze, I fell asleep, and did so with an understanding too plain for me to have articulated it to myself at the time: Soon I would open my eyes, maybe in 20 minutes, maybe in four hours, and I would be in my hometown again. I would be still. I would wake up to the sudden silence of an engine powering down and voices buckling under yawns, and then I would walk like a zombie upstairs to bed. It occurs to me now that I will probably never feel that safe again. I could never again be that powerless and yet so sure of a world that tends toward peace. All I knew was that I was tired and Dad was driving, and that meant that I could just sleep. That meant I was going to be okay. My heartbeat aligned with his blinker, or with the drone of intermittent talk radio and adult hits, anchoring my body like a metronome as my dreams set sail.





Nowadays I'll have these moments sometimes while I'm driving where I suddenly become hyper-aware of my relationship to space. I am operating a large metal box, situated among many other large metal boxes, hurtling along asphalt at speeds that smudge my periphery. I grip the steering wheel a little tighter, widen my eyes and plant them on the road. It's just me. Driving is dangerous, I remember. At least 100 people die in car accidents every day in the U.S. That's something you don't know when you're 11, because when you're 11 and you're in the backseat, your mind swims in the simple certainty that you are cared for by a force incomprehensible to you, yet untouchably powerful. The chaos of interwoven roads is just graphics on the GPS, the letters of street signs just fodder for alphabet-finding games, the obfuscating jabs of a rainstorm make for a dazzling window-side performance. But then you grow up, and suddenly each stint at the wheel is a conscious risk, a winding game of chance where you pray to escape into the denominator of the statistic.

I'm a typical anxious driver. I stay in the right lane for miles before my exit unless I count less than 10 cars in my field of vision. I always drive the speed limit. I brake as soon as the light turns yellow. The regularity with which we all seem to consign ourselves to the heavy stakes of the highway has bewildered me since I was 16. Already then, scarcely feeling that longed-for freedom of adolescence on my tongue, I was unnerved at the taste. The wheel felt more like a burden than a privilege in my hands, which assumed control shakily and sheepishly as I crawled around empty parking lots, Dad coaching me from the passenger seat. To this day, my stress dreams invariably



involve some sort of terrifying subversion of that control. All of the cars on the highway suddenly reverse direction and hurtle toward me, or the wheel becomes unbearably sensitive and I careen between lanes, dodging obstacles like in a game of Mario Kart.

Driving is not that complicated. I know that. But it symbolizes a certain indistinct ache of growing up, when you have to face the fact that transitions are no longer idle rides, but active, self-directed journeys. You can't simply fall asleep on the couch and wake up safely tucked into bed, like you did as a child—back when it was acceptable to collapse under the extraordinary weight of existence by 8pm. You can't drift off in the backseat while the road quietly rumbles beneath you. You have to pick a destination and haul yourself over there, wide-eyed and wakeful.

As the youngest, I was the last one in my family to get a driver's license. The terrain ahead was no longer new; it had been well paved by older and wiser sisters, who accepted the gift and raced for miles in different directions. Instead, I felt the tug of grief as I was tasked with pulling out the last roots of our childhood proximity and dependence. No more crammed backseats on roadtrips. We were no longer bound by mere circumstance. We were all lunging outward and onward, fragmenting little by little what was once the only home we knew.

So it goes that I've been moving a lot since I got my license. I've been skating in between states, across countries, always feeling the slightest tilt beneath my feet to indicate that another slope is coming. I suppose that's what it's like when you're a 20-something and life is no



longer a binary of “home” or “not-home.” I am not a child nor an adult, I’m not dependent or independent, I’m not anchored by a single gravitational field, where the soft kiss of stable ground tells me when I get to be still. I’m hopping between near-homes and scattering seeds wherever I go, hoping that something will take root before I lose whatever sanctity each of them still offers. College is a home of sorts, but so is my suburban hometown, and so is its mother city that I never quite lived in but always imagined a romantic allegiance to, and so are the places I’ve spent summers in, even the apartment I lived in while studying abroad. The house I grew up in is now a series of artifacts from when it was all I had—when I could locate everything that I was within the walls of a bedroom painted haphazardly in layers of teal, then pink, then white. Old diaries and letters and sketchbooks serve as reminders from when my world was that small, when home was something that swathed me with the soundness of its presence, a pigment pressing in from four walls. I have a hopeless urge every time I return to recreate and reinvigorate what was once so matter-of-fact, romanticizing the local Dunkin’ like it were some small town gem. But too much has been lost to time, of course, and the Dunkin’ was never that good. So I keep moving, and home keeps growing more vague, an old song whose lyrics are forever on the tip of my tongue.

When you are your own driver, you have to know where you’re going. That has always disturbed me and my terrible sense of direction, eternally deferential to the little arrow in the GPS. The backseat was a place of sacred ignorance, where you could have no idea where you were or where you were going, and always end up



somewhere safe. I readily consigned myself to the mystical will of the driver's seat, the sort of otherworldly prestige held by my dad and few others that allowed them to smoothly commandeer a vehicle between the realms of home and not-home, with outcomes sure enough not to question. As my future inches further into view, strange and shapeless, I find myself aching for that sense of infallible guidance. I'm a senior in college. Just as it begins to feel true, another home will soon be rendered obsolete, and I will have to chart a new path and meet myself on the other side of it. What will that path look like? Where will it lead? The more essential the question, the less I have an answer to it. The fewer answers I have, the more I'm inclined to desert myself for a rose-tinted past, before I even dared to ask anything so frightful.

After returning from my semester abroad this Spring, I visited my older sister, who lives in Arizona, for her bachelorette party. In a brief moment of alone time we had amid the chaos, I remember dramatically collapsing on her couch, feeling depleted by my sense of transience. I complained about the burden of anticipation—of knowing that your stay in any given place has an expiration date, of all the time spent awaiting those flights and drives between checkpoints, muddying up the time you spend actually living at them. She said something that I sort of dismissed as lovingly saccharine, but that flutters back to me now and again, when my perspective goes bitter and I yearn for something sweet to swallow. She told me that, when life is so full of transitions, you are your own solid ground. You are the home you build, which is contained in one unbreakable form by nature of



existing within your one unbreakable self. The act of living in your own mind—of knowing what you like, who you can depend on, what you value—makes as good a home as any.

Still, those Maine summers haunt my most mournful inclinations in the face of constant newness. But my consolation is in that very reminiscing: a pleasant stand-in for the realities long lost. It adds this particular golden wash, as if it all happened behind gossamer curtains in a sunlit room. I watch my sisters go off and buy houses, get married, live lives on faraway branches of the same old, sturdy tree. I hope we'll always remember to look down every now and then, feet firmly on the ground, and feel ourselves apart, yet anchored by something stronger than space. When my family and I are all under one roof, now quite a rare occurrence, the recollections flow and fuse together, filling in each other's blind spots, nursing every crack before it can weaken the structure. We will always have each other, we will always have the memories that built us, and we will always have ourselves. In the winding road of growing up, when the wheel looms large over my peace of mind and I have no map to guide me, maybe it's enough to just know this much.



THOU SHALT MAYBE STEAL, SOMETIMES

BY

INGRID ALVA BELCHER

and I see the reflection of myself staring into the refracted light of this little glass cube on the shelf and I think, my reflection is warped because the glass cube is warped. it has these ripples inside, the ripples of a heavy curtain, or one large fingerprint, or one tiny sea. and I see my father in the distance looking into vases, and bowls, and pitchers, looking to find the one he sees my mother inside of. he's looking for a gift because he picks a new one from Simon Pearce the restaurant and glass-blowing workshop every summer to mail back to her and I remember last year he mailed back a small glass sailboat because they started taking sailing lessons together and she put it on the mantelpiece. and this is the year he will mail a pitcher for lemonade or sangria (but our lemon tree died two years ago in the January freeze). and he will hide another small ceramic bluebird from here, he will hide the bird on top of our fridge and wait for my mother to notice it's there—but first he asks me a question:

Do you think your mother will like this one? he asks

and I think we have too many candle-holders already so

I think we should pick something functional this year, I say

We have enough wine glasses, he says

and he starts fingering the snifters and square vessels for square ice



Your mother doesn't drink the strong stuff, he says

Yeah she likes a white, I say

and we continue our meandering path around the gift-shop side of Simon Pearce, because there are so many options to choose from (but mostly because the restaurant was too full for us walk-ins). and neither of us know what to do with the rest of this summer afternoon in Vermont except go back to South Royalton for dinner. and I hope dinner will be a burger from Worthy Burger where they have good hard cider because I can't drink beer, and my father and I will split our dinners and take sips from each other's drinks (but my mother would have wanted an IPA).

and again I see the reflection of myself staring into the refracted light of this little glass cube, this cube which is everywhere, a clone on each shelf to hold up the price tags of burnished wood salad-bowl sets, and glassware samplers, and ceramic birds. and then I think this is the first thought I have ever had of stealing, I think it would be funny to take this little glass cube which looks like it would fit right into the palm of my hand, funny, because its job is to display the value of goods, but there is no price tag on the cube itself, I think taking something without a price isn't technically stealing, is it? besides, these must be so easy to make. so when my father crouches to look at the bottom-row second-chancers (because something must make these goods imperfect although I know that anything made by human hand is imperfect). when he crouches I slip a price-card for a silverware set off one little glass cube and palm it and cross my arms

so now the glass cube is tucked into my armpit, which



is a little uncomfortable because I misjudged the size, and weight, and corners of the thing. and from eye-level the cube looks weightless because it's full of light, especially the one I chose because it was sitting on a shelf in front of a window. and so the cube captured the light of the people eating, the people who made reservations to eat here, and I wonder if the cube ever caught my parents when they were here, or if somebody else lifted that one. and suddenly I'm looking through the window at two young people who look like my parents, who have one baby daughter, who can barely afford to eat here but they are, and the woman she says:

Would you like to split the gnocchi?

I think you make a wonderful pasta at home, the man says

Then should we split the surf and turf? she says

and they can both hear the waterfall behind them and they both remember passing the farm on the drive over and

That works for me, he says

and when the waiter returns with her white in a beautifully hand-crafted glass and his Tree's Knees, which is a cocktail like a Bee's Knees which my uncle showed me how to make once, but this one has elderberry syrup too, and maybe also maple (it is Vermont after all). and when the waiter returns they order together and split the meal, and I think I really am hungry now, but I am also nervous because I can feel the cold glass cube inside my armpit because my arms are crossed tightly over my chest. and I hope my father will finish writing down the mailing address at the register so that we can get into the car, so I can put this cube in my purse, and we can go get



burgers together. and I am looking at the woman behind the counter of the register and we share a laugh about the temperature in Texas right now and I wonder if my eyes are saying:

You don't know this, or maybe you do, but I've taken something

(which is bad probably)

I've seen your type before, her eyes tell me, or maybe they don't, and instead

What a sweet young girl, or even

Why is she so sweaty?

because of course you can't really read anyone's thoughts in their eyes when you are also hiding something in your own, because whatever curtain you pull down to protect your insides is a very dark velvet curtain which stops you from peering outside of yourself as much as it stops people from looking at the light inside you. and I wonder if what I've just thought is pure nonsense or if it means something about truth and honesty and mutuality and maybe I should write this down? I think this because I am a writer after all, but only one of my poems has been published, and there is a writer's workshop at Skidmore I'm attending later this summer, which makes me very nervous. and I want to throw up when I think about the obligations of meeting new people, strangers, dangerous strangers, and strange danger, which is such a strange fear to have developed because I used to be so excited for the strange strangers I used to meet at places like the Renaissance Festival when I was little and I would hug the knees of random adults



in airports. and I remember staring at the throwup in my sink early one morning and hiding it because today is a Renaissance day! I remember thinking, I can't miss it because my life was so short I couldn't imagine a second chance. and in the car that morning my mom told me:

You look pale, she said

and I shook my head, but that was a mistake because my head hurt, and I clamped my mouth closed and sat still for the two-hour drive because they couldn't take me back! they couldn't take me back once we got there

and I see the reflection of myself crouching as if to vomit in the middle of Simon Pearce because I'm so nervous about this bad thing that I am doing, but I will not vomit because that would be very embarrassing, and what I am trying to do is not puke but preserve the memory which isn't my own, but which lives in the light of the clear glass cube with ripples like a heavy curtain or a big fingerprint or a tiny sea. and finally I shove the heavy wooden door to the parking lot open with my elbow because the cube is in my armpit and my dad is holding the ceramic bird and he has mailed the bigger package home to Texas and we are going to get dinner at:

Worthy Burger? he asks

That's exactly what I'm thinking, I say

but I am also thinking about the rippled glass cube which I transferred to the bag at my feet in the passenger seat of this rented car. and I wonder what it means to be caught red-handed because my palm has three red dots from the corners of the glass cube pressing into my hand when it was crossed tightly into my armpit, and I wonder



if the red hands of criminals come from their tight-fisted grips on stolen goods. but being tight-fisted also means being penny-pinching, miserly, Scrooge-like, and Scrooge hadn't stolen anything but had certainly taken things which didn't need to be taken, and three ghosts had convinced him to give it back. but three ghosts did not visit me that night

because when I go to sleep that night I see my Texas family, and there are eleven of them all and they are boarding a large spaceship and there are no windows on that spaceship. and I tell them they will die when they go to space, I know this to be true though nobody told me, no oracle, but a feeling inside my chest, a freezing sensation I clasp my arms tightly around, I don't know whether to thaw or to hide. and none of them listen to me but I am sure they hear me, but I am not believed, and I wonder if in this dream I have the rapport as a girl who cries wolf, whether my reputation has been ruined by past patterns of untruths, whether the curtain has fallen so early and so heavily they simply cannot hear me

so when I wake I am left with the feeling of predicting a real tragedy, but the truth of the matter is that the feelings in me are real but the world in me is not real, and I won't ever know when the world inside me and the world outside me will match each other (maybe never) but I realize I did misunderstand part of the world inside me, because I think that the dream means guilt even though the fulfillment of desire is meant to mean happiness—which is not as simple as I want it to be—and through this fog of confusion it feels like the only recourse to repossess some semblance of sense is to write a letter of apology to Simon Pearce



and I see the reflection of myself staring into the refracted light of this little glass cube before I put it into the padded envelope alongside the handwritten letter of apology torn out of my journal, a letter which says something I will never remember because I hid it from myself the moment I tore it from my journal, and I pay for the postage and the woman at the desk says:

You know this would be much faster to drive

so I have to excuse myself with

I'm only here on vacation

I don't have a car, I say

and she sighs and puts another postage sticker onto the little padded package, no light inside for the cube to absorb, but sure enough guilt hides in the pocket of shadow I am sending away from myself, and I try to forget I ever made a mistake because it is easier to believe I am perfect than work to love my imperfections because I worry that if I love my imperfections then other people will see them, but I can't expect anyone else to love the imperfections they see because they are not bound to me how I am bound to myself, so even though I try not to hide from myself I end up doing it anyway, and the curtain falls behind my eyes, and so I am living blind. and I can't see into anyone else's eyes, so we never see each other when we look at each other, and even though I hope for the love my parents found in each other I am afraid I will not see it, or even know where to look, but I am looking forward to putting this one-and-only experience with shoplifting behind me, and determined not to ask for love, but only for forgiveness, and all I have to



look at is the torn out edge in the spine of my journal, which could be anything, right? and I have made up a safe reason for the absence of a page and fill the rest of my journal with notes from the writer's workshop later in the summer, but then I get a text from my mom while I'm in New York:

What did you order from Simon Pearce?

with the two-eyes-looking-left emoji

and my chest goes cold because I have not been allowed to forget my mistake, somebody has decided to make me look at it all over again, and I send a wordless text

with the girl-shrugging emoji

and I'm hoping and hoping it won't be opened before I get there because, of course, my household doesn't do that, and yet what if it happens and I have to explain whatever it is I didn't anticipate in that unanticipated box, and feel the threat of throw-up rise in my throat

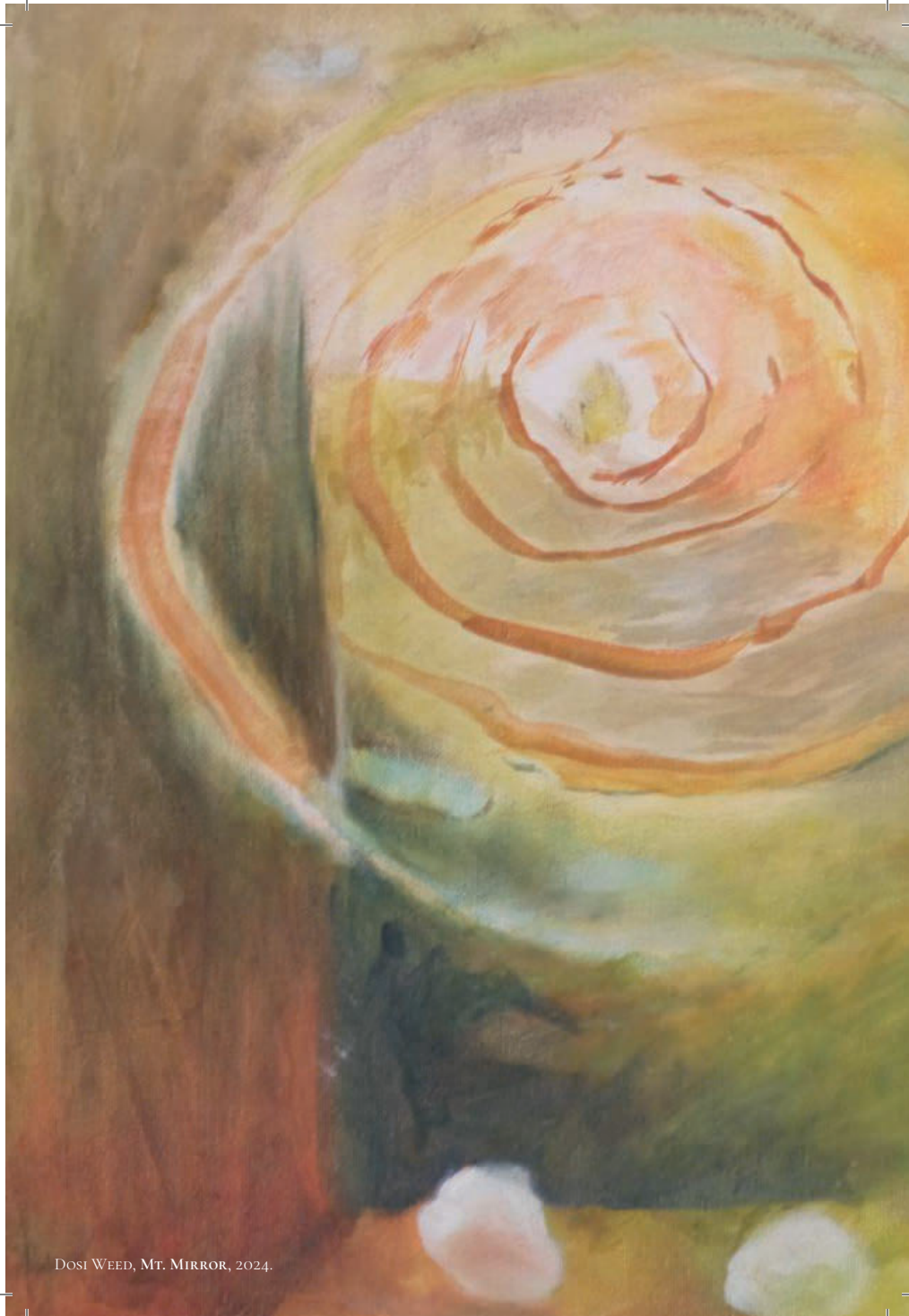
and I worry and worry all week what could possibly happen to me and my self-image when I get back to Texas and open that box, and then I get home and I open that box and inside that box is a letter, and it is a thank-you note? and there are two other objects in the package wrapped in crinkled silver tissue paper, and I am opening them both softly because I do not want anyone else to know I am opening this box in secret, in shame, in my bedroom, and inside one crinkled ball of silver tissue paper is a glass oval paperweight with the word grateful engraved on it, and then I open the second tissue ball

and I see the reflection of myself staring into the

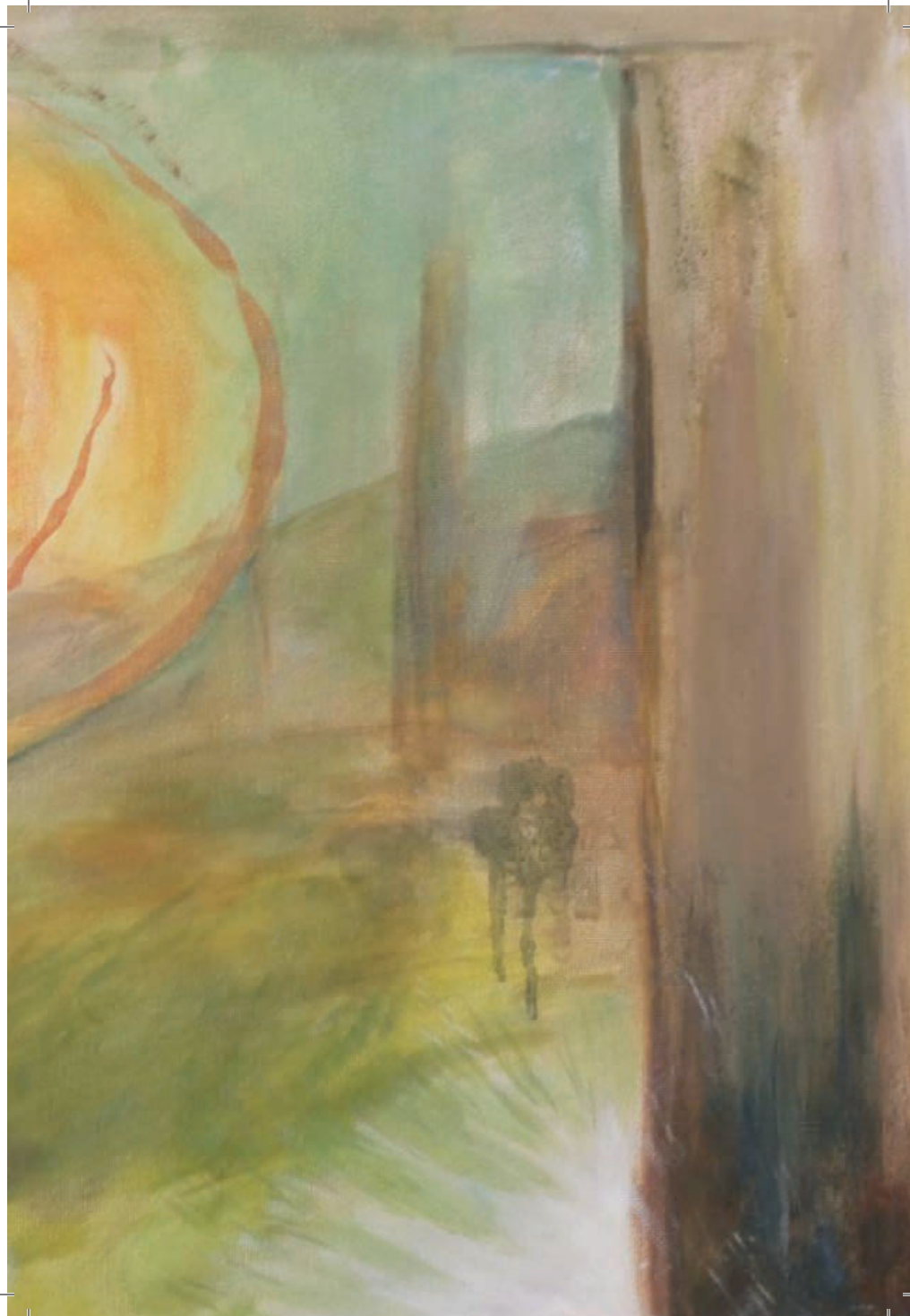


refracted light of this little glass cube in my palm, and I think, my reflection is warped because the glass cube is warped, it has these ripples inside, the ripples belonging to a heavy curtain or one large fingerprint or one tiny sea.





DOSI WEED, MT. MIRROR, 2024.





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