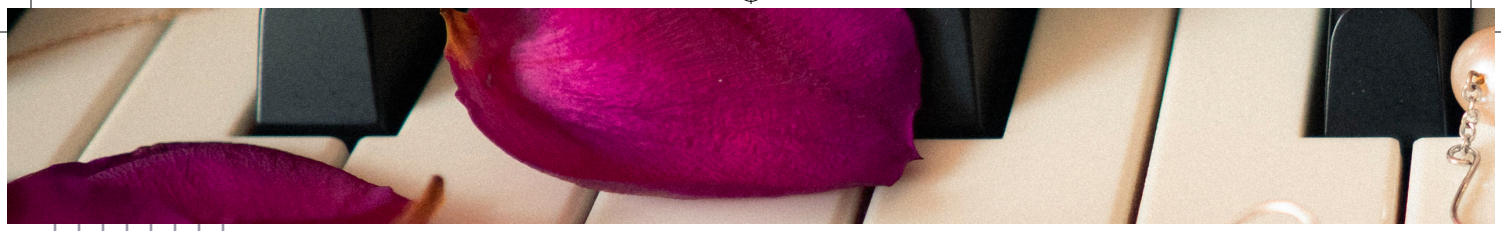
WILDER VOICE

Voyager's Edition

Volume 20

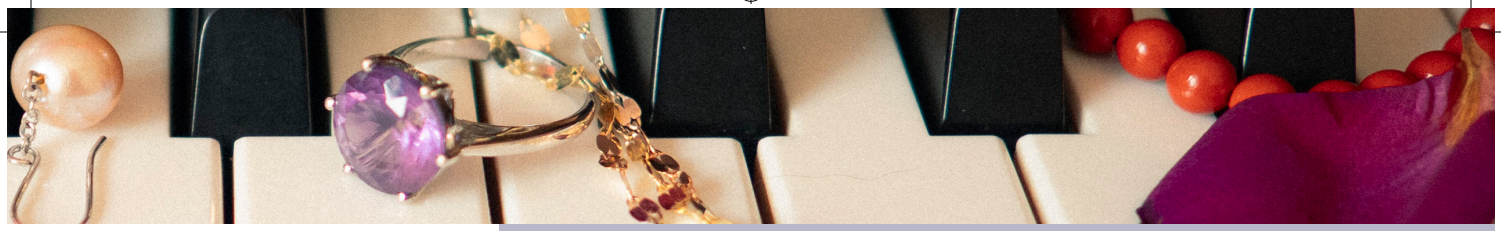
Fall 2024



When fall drapes by,
we thrash our silken threads about
until we reach the incubation of winter.



Contrary to popular belief,
we think winter is the crystal-crested height
crowning the next three withering seasons.





Wilder Voice Magazine is Oberlin's publication for creative nonfiction and longform journalism, in addition to art, fiction, and poetry.

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Wilder Voice Magazine

Volume 20 Fall 2024

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Fall whispers of something urgent, something new.



Obituary

3.20.2024

Naiya Patel-Kapka



Henry Samra

Fallen eyelashes. Hair strands floating atop muddy water. Skin, shedding. Fingernail crescents collected by dust bunnies. Droplets of blood. Bile, bile. Flem coagulated saliva.

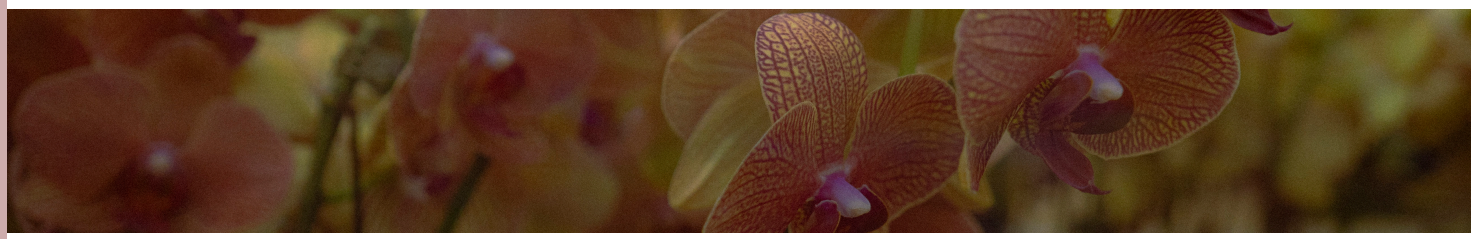
Pieces of me lie around my room, these cellular entities. Cold carcasses, dead as soon as they left the presence of their mother, my beating heart. Small bodies departed from my body, decaying. They whisper to me in the night. Dearest, dearest. They cry out to me.

In nightmares I find myself at my own funeral. Sometimes I wear a strand of baby teeth as pearls across my neck. I throw soil on my own grave and feel wisdom teeth crack my jaw, sharp buds blossoming through my gums. I cry out to myself, I cry for rebirth from loss, piece by piece, tooth by tooth. My hair is growing longer. The bulbs are planted and it is springtime. I don't mourn flower petals. Rain and sun will come again, and fallen eyelashes turn to wishes with a breath. The body is something like Karma, I think, or something like a cycle. Dead cells become magic.



The World's Final Act

Michael Cheilek-Klaiber



The world was coming to an end. Chris had known that for several months. There had been this voice in the back of his head, quietly repeating that over and over again. The end was approaching, and there was no amount of hope or denial that could stop it. Yes, he knew the world was going to end. But even so, he didn't. He paid no heed to that nagging voice he knew all too well was stating an inevitability. The end was not near, he told himself. It was not going to come. Where there should've been existential dread, there was simply a dead space of emotion. Nothing. No, Chris didn't know that the end was coming. And yet, deep within his mind, he knew it had been a long time coming.

He had gotten up the morning of the end and seen that the sky was developing a sickly reddish-black hue. The beginning of the end of the world, of everything Chris had ever known and would ever know, had started. He was not surprised. Despite the smokescreen of disbelief his brain had put up, he knew that the end was not escapable. It was going to happen, and now it had.

He spent the morning watching YouTube videos. It was Saturday, after all. He didn't have any work to do on Saturdays, so he had plenty of free time to dump down the drain. It's not like he ever did anything else on Saturdays, anyway. He closed his curtains on the riling sky and let the vortex of his computer's screen suck him into a spaceless trance. Time raced right under his nose as his glassy eyes stared at the hypnotic rectangle of light in front of him.

The ringing of an alarm jolted him out of his timeless stupor. Chris glanced down. Noon. It was time for his usual lunch. He rose out of his chair and walked out under the apocalyptic sky towards Terry's Diner. Titanic rows of midnight black clouds were gathering on the horizon. Chris barely so much as glanced in their direction. His eyes were only trained on his destination. His lunch.

Terry's Diner was half-empty. Many people typically ate their lunches later. Chris sat down at his regular table.

"I'll have the usual," he told the waiter.



As Chris waited for his lunch, his eyes absentmindedly scanned the diner. Two tables to his left, a group of five were in the middle of their lunch.

"Really, though, we deserved the end," a voice spoke up from the table.

"Well, if you mean that it was avoidable, then yes." another voice said.

"He's also saying that Earth deserved it. Because, frankly, looking at what we've done–"

"Because what I'm saying is that we just should've stabilized the reservoirs. If we had done that, then we would've completely avoided anything."

"Yeah, but, I'm saying that this is actually better. If we had avoided the end of the world, that would've been completely immoral. We deserved–"

"No, but Alex is completely wrong. Stabilizing the reservoirs would've made it worse. The problem is that we were too complacent–"

"Exactly! That's why we had this coming. I mean, frankly, we, as you were saying, deserved the end of the world, and that's why!"

"No, not because of that! Look, we deserved it because of what we were doing. Really, purifying the–no, that was just yielding to–"

The conversation was drowned out by a deafening broadside of thunder emanating from the menacingly towering clouds hanging over the atmosphere. Chris looked up, and he could see lightning dancing within the impenetrable darkness of the skyline like waves of heat. *Wait, did I leave the light on in my room?* he wondered. Not like it would be that bad. Leaving the light on for an hour longer wouldn't do him much harm. Still, he worried that he had forgotten to turn it off. He couldn't quite remember if he had flipped the switch or not. The answer to this troublesome problem eluded him, though, lost in the depths of his memory, so Chris shifted his attention to a pair of friends who had just sat down at the table next to him.

"Hey, did you hear what Paige did the other day?"

"What did she do this time?"

"So, apparently, she ran into Daniel at the store."

"No."

"Yeah, and, even better, she was wearing those weird glasses of hers, so she didn't even recognize him at first!"

"Oh my god, that's crazy!"

"No, no, and you know what she did? She asked him, thinking he was just some random customer, what his favorite–"

"No way! Don't tell me–she asked about the prepackaged noodles?"

"She did."

"Ha! That's so funny! Oh my god, I can't believe she accidentally reminded him of–what'd he say?"

A large tremor shook the ground, nearly knocking Chris off his chair. Where is my food? he said to himself. I'm a busy man, I don't–ah, there it is. The waiter served him his hamburger without lettuce but extra ketchup and his fries on the side. Deliciously unappetizing. Chris slowly consumed the tired meal as he listened to a couple sitting near the entrance of the diner.

"I know, but it's only the end of the world."

"But I'm so scared!"

"Look, we'll get through this. It won't be that bad, you know."

"But I just can't shake the feeling that it'll all be so terrible!"

"There, there. Calm down. You'll be alright. We'll be alright."

"I–I don't know! I just can't feel calm!"

"Think it through. How bad could the entire world ending be? All these things some doom-sayers have been predicting probably won't happen. It'll be a peaceful destruction of the planet, all right?"

"I... I know. You're xright. It... it won't be terrible, the end of the world... I've got to calm

down, and–"

"Hey, Chris, how are you doing?"

What? Someone talking to me? What is this? Chris looked up towards the source of the interruption.

"Oh, hey. Haven't seen you in a while, Ryan. I'm doing pretty well." he replied.

"Nice to hear. Mind if I sit with you?"

"Oh, no, not at all."

"So, have you been up to anything interesting lately?" Ryan asked.

"Oh, not much, really."

"Yeah, me neither."

There was a disquieting silence.

"Hey, you remember my film idea?" Chris finally said.

"Oh, yeah, that."

"You know, I'm going to make it someday."

"Yeah."

"I'm thinking, I'm going to start off with this snowy field, and then, you know, you'll see Albert, Sarah, and Herbert messing around in the snow, but then you'll see this rusted machinery hidden behind a tree. Foreshadowing, you know?"

"That's a great idea."

"Yeah, I'm really looking forward to making the film."

Large cracks opened up in the Earth's ground, with the glaring flames

emanating from them casting a flickering orange light against the thick clouds smothering out what little sunlight remained.

"What're you going to do with all the money from the film?"

"Well, I'm going to make it for the art of it, not the money."

"Yeah, but it is an expensive film to make, and also, you're going to make a lot of money off of it, so you might as well do something with it, right?"

"Hm... maybe I'll go buy myself a mansion or something. Some really old house, like the stuff you see in the movies, you know."

"Those old mansions are always cool."

"I wonder what I'll do once I'm a famous director. Like, I have so many cool ideas that I really want to do..."

"Hey, you remember Rose?"

"Oh, yeah, that random journalism major you had a crush on back in college?"

"Hey! Not random. A very special journalism major!"

"What, you still know her?"

"Yeah, apparently she lives a few blocks down from me. Pretty crazy, huh?"

"You just found out?"

"Oh, no, I've known that for several years now."

"I see."

"But you know, one of these days, I'm going to ask her out."

A murky smoke began to fill Terry's diner. The consuming void of the smoke nearly masked the raging conflagrations ravaging the battered soil. The Earth, in its death throes, gave off spasm after spasm as the ground collapsed into caverns of darkness and flame. The crashing sound of lighting bolt after lighting bolt gashing through the skin of the planet reverberated through the compact room.

"Oh, that's nice."

"Yeah. I mean, I've got to build up the courage to do it, but, you know, eventually I think I'll do it."

"You know, I was just thinking she'd be a great actress for my film."

"Really?"

"Yeah, no, I remember how I always thought she had a bit of a talent for that. Remember that party...?"

"Hm, now that you mention it..."

"Ok, yeah, here's the idea: the both of you act in the film as Sarah and Herbert. How about that?"

"But isn't that sad...?"

"Yeah, but in a romantic way, right? I mean, you really love her?"

"I do. You know I did years ago, right? I mean, that's why I'm planning to ask her on a date."

"So, we cast you two as Sarah and Herbert. And it's really sad, they never get each other, but you'll really get romantically attached, right? There's just so much emotion there. You'll have an opportunity to ask her out. And you know, I'll bet you two will make great movie stars. It'll be so successful, and you guys will be catapulted to fame and fortune, and we'll all move to Hollywood, and then–"

The world ended.

thru the fire



TO THE NEXT CHAPTER

Julian Cross



Do Trees Have Regrets ?

Annelies Schoolderman

Do trees have regrets ?
Does the silent birch regret,
Growing next to the weeping willow,
Whose trailing branches reach out for comfort,
Whose mournful wails fill every hour of every day ?

Do trees have regrets ?

Does the young sapling who wants only to grow one more ring,
Regret its decision to sprout so close to the lake,
Whose dark waters churn and froth,
Whose every wave poses an imminent threat ?

Do trees have regrets ?
Does the gnarled juniper regret,

Choosing to make a home on such a desolate mountainside,

Whose soil is dry and lacks nutrients,
Whose conditions are ripe for a wildfire ?
Do trees have regrets ?
Or are they forever grateful,
To have taken root at all



Abigail Harris Crowne



Trucker in Residence

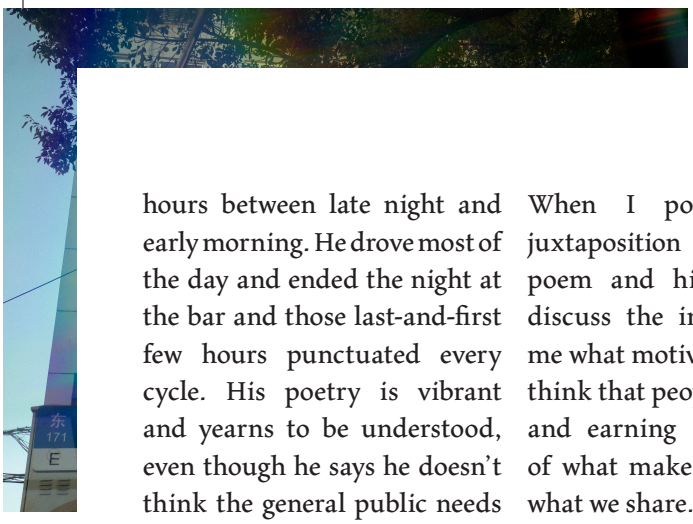
With contributions from Geoff Chasin and Ella Erdahl

Isla Chasin

I.

We gather in our dark – bewildered, alert
Consonants freeze in this liminal space, not yet dawn
Exhaust outgasses and dissipates over the rumbling
Last night hangs her arm around us, dreamily

My dad is a poet and a retired trucker. He's one year into his master's degree in creative writing with a focus on poetry. Though he's been writing for years, he only recently decided to write a poem about trucking—the part of his life that he lived in the twilight hours. He said that some of his peers had asked him why he'd never written anything about that world, but he simply hadn't thought about it. I couldn't believe that; his whole life seemed poetic to me. I was exposed to his work-life in short, abstract bursts that I took upon myself to piece together. His only trucking poem, titled "Terminal Loadout—4:45am", captures how it feels to survive in the limbo



hours between late night and early morning. He drove most of the day and ended the night at the bar and those last-and-first few hours punctuated every cycle. His poetry is vibrant and yearns to be understood, even though he says he doesn't think the general public needs to know anything about the trucking industry. His words are written with care and thrust the reader into his shoes.

When I pointed out the juxtaposition between his poem and his reluctance to discuss the industry, he told me what motivated his work: "I think that people working hard and earning a living is part of what makes us human, it's what we share...work hard, take pride in what you do, support your family and friends. Could it have been better? Yeah. But it was what it was."



II.

Consonants freeze in this liminal space, not yet dawn
The high heartbeat of youth rings in our ears
Last night hangs her arm around us, dreamily
We stand between the two worlds

Trucks are ubiquitous. Despite having a cacophonous physical existence—the rumbling engines, the squealing brakes, the sheer size of the rig—trucks operate in the background. Their consistent presence in our immediate surroundings has desensitized us to the vast network that they are operating within. My father was in trucking for 40 years. He started out as a driver and eventually ran a company of his own, learning the ropes of last mile home delivery along the way. Last mile home delivery, or simply last mile, is the process by which large





appliances are transported to clients. Businesses using this service will hire trucking or logistics companies to cover the literal last mile between the various holding locations (warehouses) and the clients' houses. In this niche of the trucking world, drivers have a relationship with every element of a delivery route, from the products that they deliver to the people that order them.





III

The high heartbeat of youth rings in our ears
The chains from the overhead doors rattle awake
We stand between the two worlds
The garish warehouse lights attack the night

My dad owes his livelihood to trucking. It's an industry that he doesn't particularly enjoy talking about, perhaps partially because it's the source of an unrelenting stress cough that is about twenty years old. "People just don't have extra money to spend," he says to me, speaking about how he doesn't think the public is responsible for the fact that truckers aren't compensated fairly. Even though I disagree with him, I don't push back. I'm an Oberlin College student and I've never driven a truck in my life. I feel naive for thinking that college students like me, and the general public, should know more about the industry. He doesn't say it, but I know he agrees.

Some may overlook this business or see it as mundane. To me, it's the most fascinating thing in the world. In 2022, the annual revenue of the trucking industry in the U.S. was $940 billion, which is nothing to scoff at. The trucking industry, specifically, is incredibly vast, and is constantly grappling to expand the services it can provide. Even though it exists wholly in the background for most of the general public, the American government is heavily reliant on the industry. The Biden-Harris administration referred to it as "a critical lifeblood of our economy." Trucking is an essential service, and truckers are considered frontline workers.





The chains from the overhead doors rattle awake
Soon a different blood will flow through our brains
The garish warehouse lights attack the night
We are commerce. We are the blood of the nation.

When I asked my dad about some of the permanent challenges in the industry, he discussed everything from the everlasting driver shortage to the industry's blindness to climate change. In his experience, consumers are also part of the industry's resistance to change: "[You could tell them that] if you pay the extra money, you'll get rid of a long-standing inequity and help the environment. No one's gonna do that." He tells me that petroleum companies spread disinformation for their own benefit, and "the dysfunction of our political system allows these problems to endure." These are major points of tension for him, and I'm sure for most of the industry right now. The idea that an essential service such as delivery is also a main contributor to the climate crisis is understandably stressful for him. While talking with him on the phone the other day, he apologized to me for the condition that the Earth will be in when I'm his age.

In his experience, climate change policies challenge consumers and the industry to choose between instant and an investment in marginal improvement over the next century. "But nobody wants to talk about climate change because it's unaffordable," he says, scrolling through his phone to pull up more numbers on trucking companies. After a little more thought, he admits that maybe if consumers were to really demand electric trucks and would be willing to pay more, the industry would respond: "But it boils down to the general public not wanting, or not being able, to put their money behind certain things." He says that the industry will not address climate change on its own. His thought is that a government mandate "levels the playing field" and the American public needs to be prepared to pay for it. His empathy for the consumer population was striking to me, even though I guess that is a skill sought after in business. An intricate knowledge of your customer base means that you've truly familiarized yourself with your place in the market. Even in this heavily economized sector, he relies on individuals to define the way the money flows. As a business owner, as a driver, and as a poet, he is always considerate of his audience.



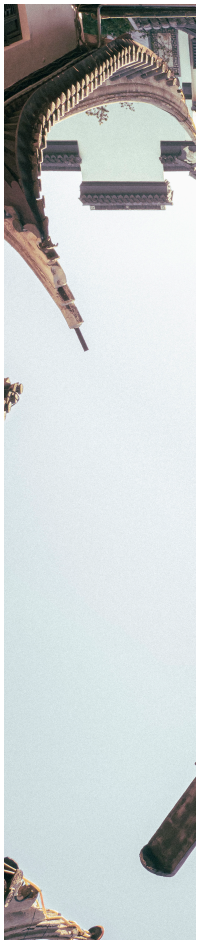


ID RATHER NOT BOIL ALIVE AS THE RESULT OF OUR OWN EXPLOITATION. CARS ARE OVERRATED. LETS RIDE MORE BIKES.

Julian Cross

V.

Soon a different blood will flow through our brains
Our dreams dissipate like exhaust.
We are commerce. We are the blood of the nation.
We crush out our last smoke, the sparks fade.



We are discouraged from caring about this industry by design, despite the fact that we, as consumers, are at the center of it. Lurking behind this discrepancy is a systemic standard that divides service workers and consumers. I called my brother to talk about writing this piece—he also grew up listening to frustrated phone calls about things like broken couches arriving at the wrong houses and drivers getting chased off lawns by angry customers. "These systems aren't built to be understood," he told me. It's an incredibly difficult task to try and understand the way the industry works from the outside: it's opaque and elusive. But even though the industry is not meant to be comprehensible, I do think its presence is meant to be acknowledged. Since before the pandemic, our reliance on trucking and its expediency has gone unchecked. During the pandemic, when the frameworks of our society were exposed and we had to reckon with our new way of life, the survival of the industry was called into question. We became even more reliant on the omnipresence of delivery vehicles that support our isolated lifestyles. The trucking industry responded to our demands, reviving itself in a matter of months to adapt to the permanent and abrupt changes that were prompted by the pandemic. As the nervous system for the general consumer population, these delivery routes demonstrate the culture of immediacy that we have developed in recent years; the industry relies on new software and AI to reconstruct the system based on customer data. Like what happens in so many industries, our pursuit of efficiency and convenience prevents us from recognizing the human hands on the wheel.





VI.

Our dreams dissipate like exhaust.
We get in line. Our eyes focus, cement hard on our boots
We crush out our last smoke, the sparks fade.
We heave the over-stuffed couches onto our trucks

The concept of optimization is inescapable across the broader environment of the trucking industry. Technology has made it possible to divide and redistribute physical pathways of transportation in a way that dismisses any human involvement within the service of delivery. AI models offered by companies like Delivery Solutions implement tracking and predictive analytics for the drivers of each route it's used on. Even though this kind of surveillance is incredibly common (tracking orders on DoorDash, for example) its intensity results in an industry that is overly reliant on electronic systems, even though it is literally driven by human beings.

VII.

We get in line. Our eyes focus, cement hard on our boots
Our bodies strain, sweat freezes in the morning air
We heave the overstuffed couches onto our trucks
Our fathers have done the same. Their memories linger.

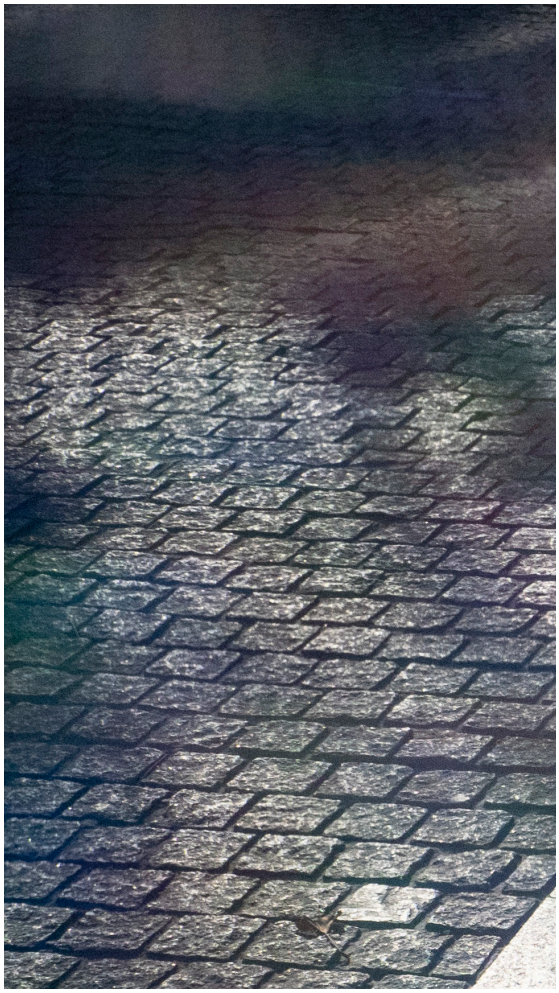
What tends to be obscured in this world of development is the humanity of the industry; the models don't exist without the drivers. Take Finn Murphy, for example. In a piece titled "Trucking as a State of Mind," author Joshua Rothman recounts a book by truck driver Finn Murphy in which Murphy turns to trucking as a way to exercise autonomy and pursue "tough work for tough men." The way he describes this impulse roots the job in a definitively human experience. Trucking to Murphy is a language through which many facets of the world are translated. He describes the frequency of his deliveries from certain stores as an index of the economy, observing from the driver's seat as businesses ebb and flow, fail and succeed. The intricacies of the experience of trucking are important to him: the products he's driving, the customers he interacts with, and even the music he listens to while he's driving are poignant moments that he takes care to include. Both Rothman and Murphy deliberately define trucking as adopting constant motion.



VIII.

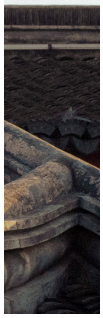
Our bodies strain, sweat freezes in the morning air.
It's dawn now. We slam our rear doors shut, protecting our loads
Our fathers have done the same. Their memories linger.
We accelerate with the grind and rising pitch of the gears.

My dad never escaped the early hours. Even in his retirement, he still wakes up at 4:30 or 5 AM, which is too late for loadout but too early to start his day. Instead of shrugging the night off his shoulders, he lets it hang in the air. He writes about it now. When I was in high school, I picked one of his old trucking jackets out of the closet on a whim. It feels like armor, heavy and secure. A truck is stitched on the chest with the words "New England Retail Express"—the first trucking company he ever worked for. The inner pockets are frayed and cannot be trusted to hold anything valuable. My dad always picks a fight with me about wearing that jacket. It's not practical, it's too worn—but it's a trucking jacket, and it has stood the test of time. I wear it and I know a little bit more about what it means to push away the night in favor of the dawn.



IX.

It's dawn now. We slam our rear doors shut, protecting our loads
We gather in our dark – bewildered, alert
We accelerate with the grind and rising pitch of the gears
Exhaust outgasses and dissipates over the rumbling



Terminal Loadout – 4:45 am.

Geoff Chasin



We gather in our dark – bewildered, alert
Consonants freeze in this liminal space, not yet dawn
Exhaust outgasses and dissipates over the rumbling
Last night hangs her arm around us, dreamily

Consonants freeze in this liminal space, not yet dawn
The high heartbeat of youth rings in our ears
Last night hangs her arm around us, dreamily
We stand between the two worlds

The high heartbeat of youth rings in our ears
The chains from the overhead doors rattle awake
We stand between the two worlds
The garish warehouse lights attack the night

The chains from the overhead doors rattle awake
Soon a different blood will flow through our brains
The garish warehouse lights attack the night
We are commerce. We are the blood of the nation.

Soon a different blood will flow through our brains
Our dreams dissipate like exhaust.
We are commerce. We are the blood of the nation.
We crush out our last smoke, the sparks fade.

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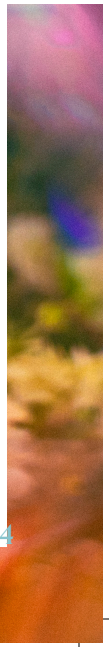


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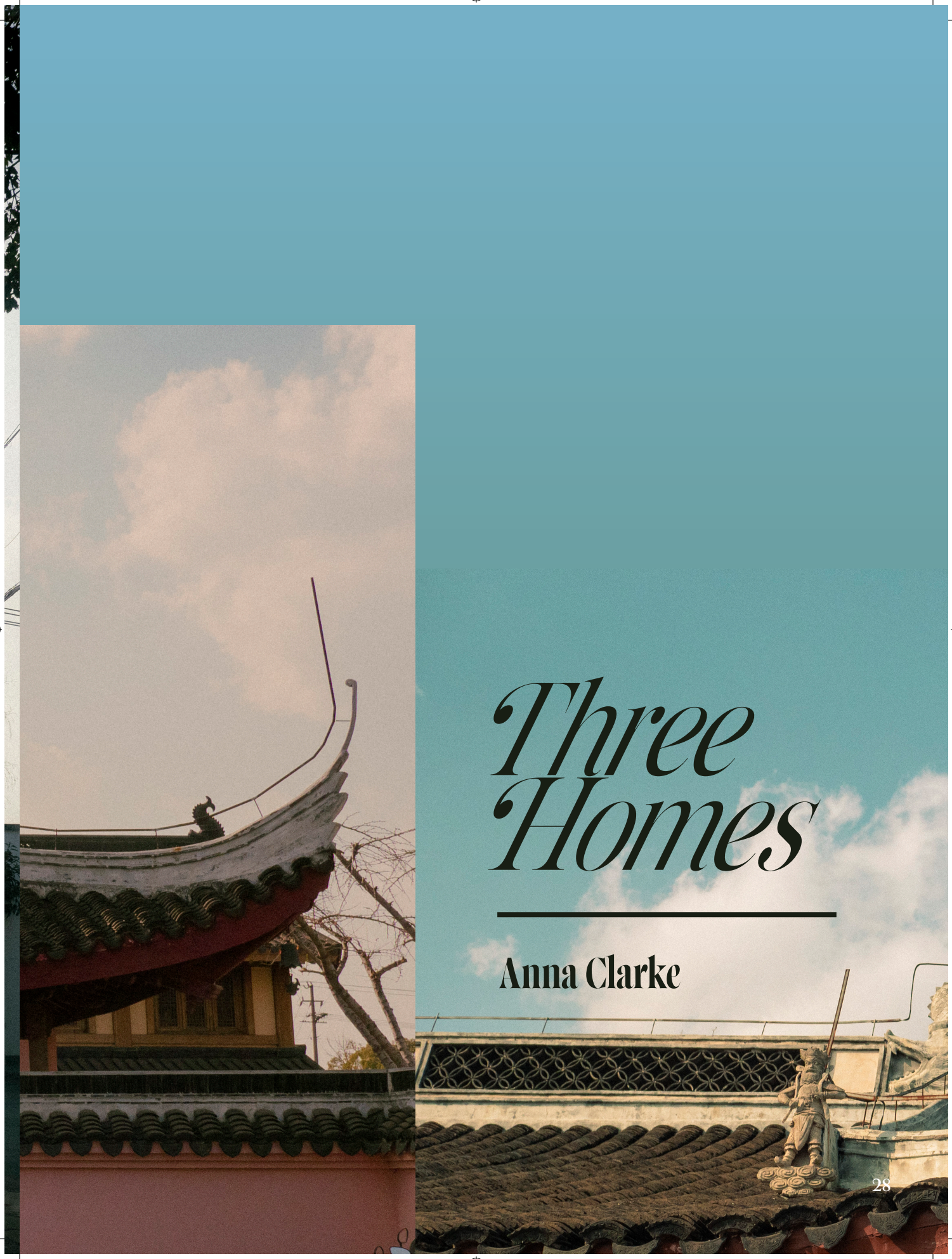


Three Homes

Anna Clarke

Chicago, Illinois

My uncles' black Schnauzer chased after me, growling in his old man voice and biting at my heels. He had his portrait in the living room, above the photos of JD, Uncle G, and my parents at my baby shower.

My parents, a lesbian couple, had met JD and Uncle G at the church that they attended. JD and G had already been together for a decade by the time they met my parents. JD had been offered a position as a priest in Chicago, and he and Uncle G had just moved into the rectory, an old building next to the church. Shortly before my birth, they asked Uncle G to be my godfather.

Shortly after my birth, my bedroom in Chicago was painted pink. A sparkly canopy hung over the bed, and painted animals covered the walls—friendly, animated giraffes and lions and bears—who danced along beams of sunlight that slipped through the curtains and into the room. Down the long hall next to my bedroom, a grandfather clock frequently sounded its ominous chimes. Despite the company of the painted animals, I had a recurring dream that the clock at the end of the hall was chasing me. A brown behemoth of wood, it loomed down their long hallway and its chimes often woke me from my nightmare. I dreamt that I ran down that long hall, trying to reach my parents bedroom, attempting to escape the eyes of the clock.

The rectory had two different apartments. The one below my godfather belonged to an old man named Tommy, the former priest. Tommy had the voice of a chain smoker and the shuffle of the nearly dead. Though I'm sure he was a perfectly kind person, his focus on antiques and Jesus did not endear him to a child. His door and walls were lined with peeling posters, each bearing photographs of Pope John Paul II and Queen Elizabeth. To me, these people were the same as Father Tommy, impossibly old and terrifying. Wall to ceiling, their white faces stared down at you, and I frequently raced down the stairs to avoid their eyes.

On my day trips out with my family, Tommy's big black Cadillac always blocked the exit of the garage. Uncle G was regularly forced to dial the rotary phone in the garage to ask him to move it. It was the only number Tommy picked up. Tommy would shuffle down several flights of stairs and climb into the front seat of his car, moving it with deliberate caution. Tommy loved the car as much as he loved the Queen Mother. It was a worshipful love, quite different from the one I was used to. My uncles always held a love composed of mutual affection for each other, a value they tried to instill in me. Nonetheless, I'm sure Tommy was grateful for my uncles' regular visits to his apartment. They cared for him to the end of his life.

The apartment itself was a formal place. It was perfect for JD, who would lounge around on his velvet parlor chairs drinking whiskey and reading the newspaper. He decorated in the style of Queen Victoria's epoch. There were religious icons and oil paintings on the walls, alongside a grand piano and various parlor chairs. It was impossible to get comfortable in those parlor chairs. They had been built for a woman in a ballgown, forcing your spine to be ramrod straight when you sat down. Though an 18th century lady would have felt right at home, I preferred the more casual rooms towards the back of the apartment. I never ate in the formal dining room. Instead, I took my meals in the TV room, on the leather couch that their old Schnauzer had claimed as his own. He growled at me whenever I tried to sit.

At the end of every night, my parents and my uncles would gather in the formal dining room for drinks. By this hour, marked by the echoing voice of the grandfather clock, I was supposed to be in bed. I would sit by the floor, playing with my Barbies and listening to the clink of glasses and the occasional burst of

laughter. I fell asleep by the door to the hum of familiar voices, but I would always wake in my bed, the covers tucked in and my stuffed animal placed into my arms.

My parents told me that JD and G were moving on the plane ride to Chicago, warning me of my painted bedroom and the boxes littering the floors. We flew to Chicago several times a year, but this plane ride marked an ending. On the trip from the airport to their apartment, my eyes flew over the lit up apartment buildings along the shore of the lake, trying to memorize their shapes. When we arrived, I wandered through the halls and tried to write down everything within my line of vision. I worried the house would fade alongside my childhood. JD and G had painted my pink bedroom a dark yellow. It was no longer a space that belonged to us. Their fragile objects were packed into boxes, with their new address written on top. I was 10 when they left Chicago, and I haven't visited since.

The Schnauzer died years ago. The current occupants of that house in Chicago have surely settled in. Still, I don't need to go through the pages of an old diary to walk those hallways in my mind.







Tacoma Park, Maryland

My aunt always said she would sell her house the moment I left for college. I never believed her.

Right around the corner from my childhood home, her yellow house sat on the hill with faded grass. It was the site of every Sunday dinner, the place I went on snow days for hot chocolate and summer days for Popsicles. She would bundle me and my best friend into her basement, our cheeks red and chapped from the cold. As the water melted from our snow pants onto the floor, she served us Girl Scout cookies she had purchased from us months before. I knew the slippery black steps down to her basement and the treats she kept for when my dog came to visit. I was a frequent visitor.

In the back of her house was the green room, where we watched TV. She had her library of first edition books and her collected paintings of blue herons and cardinals. There was a scratchy wool blanket that I lay under on sick days, when my parents sometimes sent me to her house to be pampered. She would make homemade popcorn on the stove and we would watch movies together while the wind howled outside.

When I was 14, my aunt began the gradual process of moving out. She had been with her partner for much longer than I had been alive. They decided to build a house in Virginia together. During their transition from Maryland to Virginia, she asked me to house-sit. I got used to being in her warm house by myself. I would sit at the table where I'd had so many family dinners to write, making myself a cup of tea and opening the blinds. My aunt had bought this house as a single woman in her thirties. Now, she was expanding to another house where she could live with her partner. She was only at this house on weekends, but she maintained that she would keep it in case I ever needed a place to escape to.

The house was large for one person. In



spring, tigerlilies grew along the stairs and my aunt would hang a fake parrot by the flagpole to let her neighbors know that they could come over for cocktails. Like my aunt, the house was strong and warmhearted. In winter there was always a fire in its hearth and a warm meal waiting to be served.

By the time I returned home from college for the first time, her house had been sold. I had never gotten the chance to walk through it for the last time. They had torn it up to modernize it, and I saw photos of renovated white walls and neutral colored furniture. My aunt had hoped to sell it to a family with young children, but the family she chose fell through. In the end she sold it to another single woman in her thirties,



who was an editor for the Washington Post. I wondered if this woman, who I had only seen once on her porch, would bring life and love into the house. I wondered how long she would keep it.

Now, whenever I walk past it, I pretend that nothing has changed. That if I ring her doorbell one more time, I'll hear the familiar notes of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" reverberating through the house. That I could walk through her living room, a room that hadn't been changed since she bought the house in the '80s, her china rattling in tune with my footsteps. That I could go into the kitchen with its silver refrigerator decorated with fading family photos, worn from the sunlight. I imagine she would have put the leaf on the dining room table, as if she was expecting company for dinner.

Now, her furniture has been removed from the porch. Only the white swing bench remains, but I seldom see it occupied. The new occupants have added nothing but a ring doorbell to record the mailman. The oak that sheltered her front yard has been cut down. Her American flag no longer flies and I can no longer look up her long driveway to see if her car is there, marking that she is home safely. I was 18 when I last stepped through her door. I was only a visitor, but the house felt like a home.

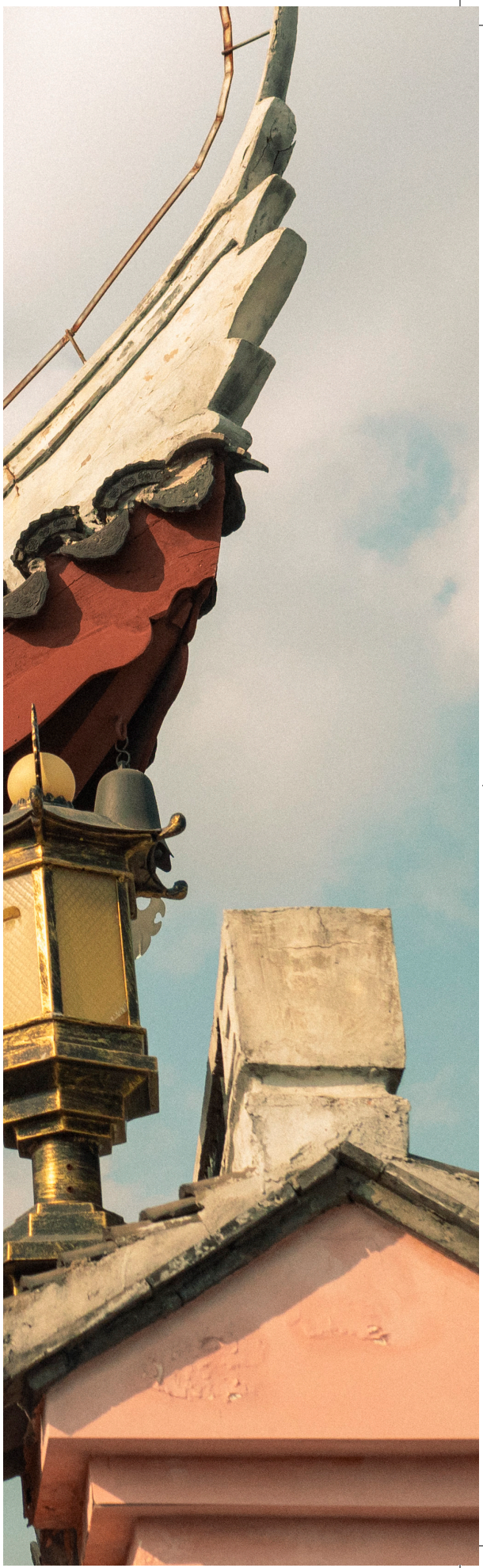
In the rooms of my memory, everything remains the same.

Oberlin, Ohio

On one of my first walks in college, I came across a brightly painted house, perched like a cupcake at the end of a long drive. It was an exquisite Victorian with a green beach towel hanging like a teardrop out of one of its window-eyes. I was seized by a sudden envy of the people who lived there. Keep Cottage, the house I had been confined to, was wholly unromantic and situated in the middle of a parking lot. This house loomed as its own entity—master of its own property, with no neighbors to peer in its large windows.

I would later learn that this house was called Johnson House, and was intended for the Jewish students of Oberlin. I finally gained access to the house when I became friends with one of the residents of the cupcake house. He had a large bedroom complete with a window seat warmed by the radiator and a boarded up fireplace. Through him, I became acquaintances with the people smoking and drinking on its front porch, guitars or speakers in hand. I got to know where to sit to avoid the puke stains on the couch and to check to see which of my friends was playing piano in the living room. There was little distinction between the forest and the football field size lawn that surrounded the house. It was as if I could escape the stress of being a college student by wandering into the wilderness that borders the house. Situated on the edge of campus, the walk there always calmed me down. When winter came with its early nights, golden light oozed from under doorways and out of windows, like a candle lit to welcome me home.

When I finally moved in, it felt like a circle coming to a close. I woke up to birdsong and a cold breeze, to the creak of the floorboards from someone running down the stairs and the smell of freshly baked cookies wafting from the kitchen. There was usually someone playing the piano in the lounge. The sound would frequently wake me, a ghost-like music passing





through my bedroom walls.

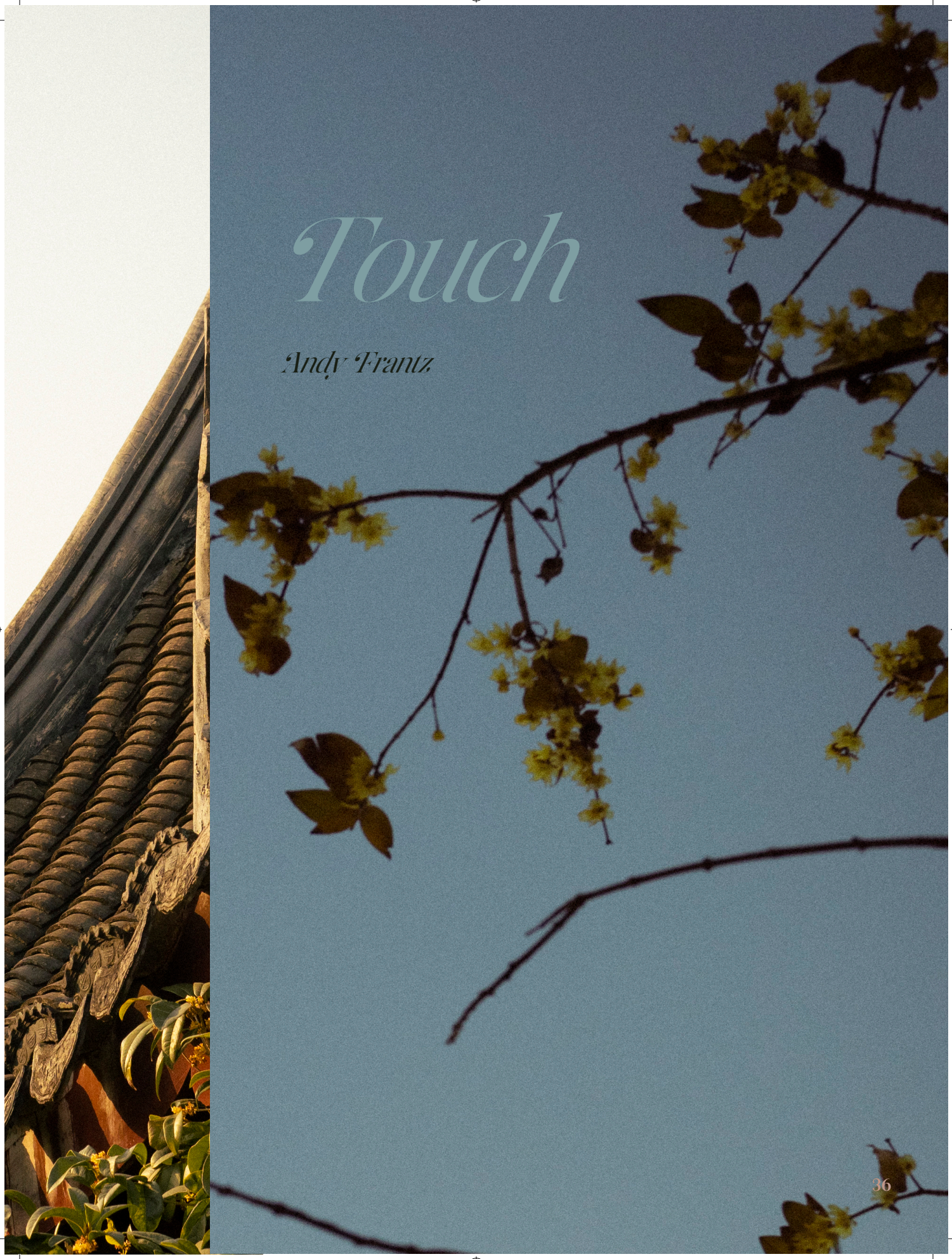
Evenings turned into wine and cheese nights. I would congregate with my friends and other random occupants of the house on the rug of someone's room. Wine would be poured into coffee mugs and we would all pull various items out to contribute: cheese from the co-op, sour gummies from DeCafé, and boxed wine purchased from Walmart. We would sit on the floor, cross legged on a shag carpet, and talk for hours until we ventured out into the cold to attend some party or concert.

I do not know how old I'll be when I exit its doors for the final time. The birds are singing and the imposter biting ladybugs swarm while I drink my morning coffee. A day will come when I will swing on this porch for the final time, and I doubt I'll recognize it as the last moment. At this moment, the house sings us awake.

Like the others, this house does not belong to me. I am merely passing through its blue doors. I am one more visitor on its porch swing, another college student breezing through a small town. But unlike the other houses I have passed through, the residents of this house don't own it either. We are all visitors. What makes it special is that the house belongs entirely to itself, free as one of the robins that made their nests along the side of its roof.

We come back likes waves
lapping at the same familiar beach,
crashing into each other
as the tides intended.
The dense air slides through my lungs
easy, smooth, and the music
shaking my eardrums is only a distant
noise to weave through.
There she is, long-haired, perfect,
draped in flowy lace and black cloth.
She grabs my arm, pulling me across the sea
of drunk twenty-somethings, and I feel
the soft contour of her palm against my wrist,
realizing that I would follow her anywhere.

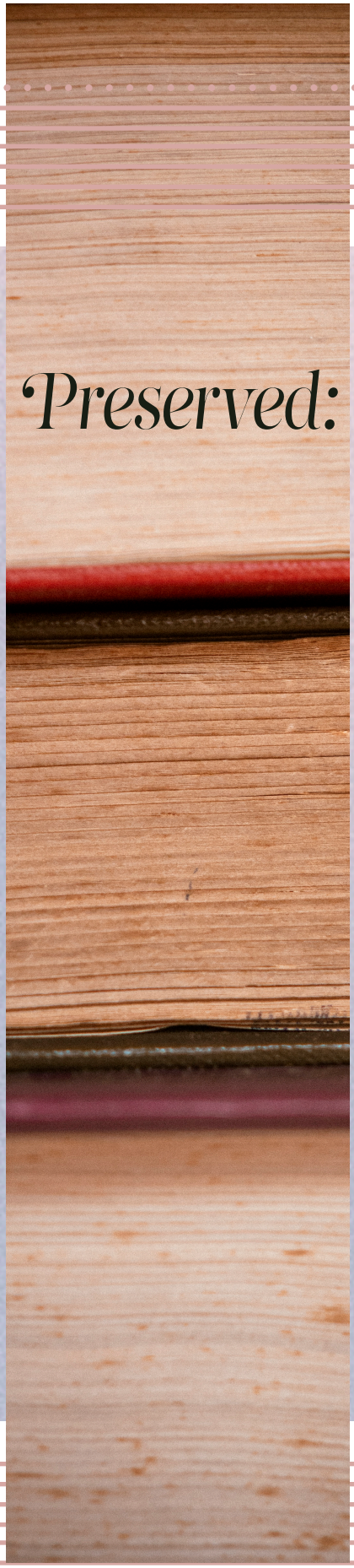




Touch

Andy Frantz

A Woman Preserved: The Ellen Johnson Pressed Between Her Books



Hanna Alwine

Walk out to the graveyard. Keep going north, but not so far that you hit the Reservoir. Look to your right. Walk down that little gravel path. There. See that low building up ahead? Look at the redwood roof and the way it mirrors the Ohio flatlands. Check out that bank of windows, this brick wall. Put your face up to the glass right here. See that concrete floor? A Frank Lloyd Wright home dropped in the middle of Oberlin, Ohio.

American architect Frank Lloyd Wright is known for his modernist structures, more sculpture than house. Highly geometric with minimalist interiors that constrict and release, his designs meld into the surrounding landscape using a restricted palette of relatively simple materials: brick, glass, concrete, wood. Oberlin's usonian—Wright's portmanteau for U.S. and utopian—was built for the Weltzheimers. Charles and Martha were a middle-class couple with three children, a number that would grow to four in the two years it took to design and build the house. In 1947, Martha—an avid follower of the architect—wrote a letter to Wright. Though

he accepted the commission immediately, it took him over a year to finalize the plans. Martha grew increasingly impatient.

During the daylight hours, the floor to ceiling windows open up to the possibility of blue skies, but, as the day lengthens, they show instead the flat, impenetrable darkness of early evening deepening into night. The house is built on a single level. No stairs. No basement. No attic, just a funny little loft in the mud room where someone has stored away two broken chairs, a microwave that no longer works, and a scattering of rat droppings. Still, the house is resplendent with hiding places. The dark cavity of the chimney. The shadowed closets behind accordion-fold wooden doors. The space behind the curtains in the master bedroom.

The house is vaguely L-shaped, so that by looking out the window of the master bedroom you can see into the living room from across the lawn. A narrow hallway, barely large enough for two people to squeak by one another on their way to or from the bathroom, runs the length of one wing. As Wright must have intended, the tight walls constrict, pressing in on both sides. The only respite from the dim crush of wood is ducking into one of the adjacent bedrooms.

The Welzheimers only lived in the forcefully solicited house for the next 14 years before Martha's



deteriorating health, her split from Charles, and their resulting financial struggles forced them to sell the house in 1962. Over the next seven years, the house changed hands between two contractors who took it upon themselves to make Wright's design more livable.

William Gaeuman is credited with the majority of the large-scale changes, subdividing the surrounding lot, creating a housing development behind the house that still exists today, and disrupting the relative privacy necessary for a house with so many windows. The French doors at the kitchen's entrance were moved from one of the bedrooms by Gaeuman, a shift which breaks up the continuous line of shelving that would have originally curved around the corner of the living room into the kitchen.

When Ellen Johnson, an art history professor at Oberlin College, bought the house from Gaeuman in 1968, she made it her mission to return it to what it had once been—restoring the wood-cut clerestory windows, retrieving the original tub to the master bedroom from a nearby farm where I like to imagine it was being used as a trough for local cows. When she died, she bequeathed the house to the Allen Art Museum as a residency for artists and writers visiting the college. Her collection of artwork, amassed over years of working directly with some of the most prolific modern and contemporary artists of the time, was donated to the college, but her presence remains in the house. Her books are still here, lined up along the shelves of that narrow hallway.

I see her sitting on the low brick wall that rounds the south side of the house. She is an old woman now, wisps of white hair fluttering wraithlike around her face; though her position, one leg folded beneath her, the other swinging free, recalls that of a young child. The windows behind her catch an image of the setting sun; turned opaque, they have lost their function of uniting the interior and exterior space. To her left, a glass of red wine; to her right, a scoop of vanilla ice cream in a yellow Formica bowl.

What form would her apparition take? It's rumored that her ghost is around here somewhere. Those creaks you hear aren't the foundation settling, she's shaking the walls. The tip-tap-plop isn't buckeyes falling on the roof, it's her running her fingers along the window panes. There used to be a portrait of her on display in the Allen Art Museum. She is wearing a shirt with lines of polka dots. Her gray hair is cropped short, just curling around the base of her ears. Her fingertips, at the end of long, knobbly fingers, just graze the tops of her knees. The corner of her mouth turns upwards, is this what they call bemused? Always a professor, she knows you have a question, and she's waiting patiently for you to ask.

Visitors over six feet tall must

duck when they enter the house. The ceilings are low, the spaces cramped, funneling you from the low-lit entrance into the main room. The room that you just came in through, the one with the low ceilings and the row of plastic chairs lined up against the wall, was originally intended as a study. After the birth of the fourth Weltzheimer child it became a nursery. Today, the room functions as a place for visitors to slip on the blue, hospital-paper booties that reduce the amount of dirt tracked in all over specially red waxed concrete floors.

There is a strange dissonance upon arrival, an understanding that this is a space intended for living while simultaneously working to reduce your footprint. Though it is a house, there is a sense that museum etiquette may still apply. Speak in hushed tones. Do not touch. Be aware of your edges. Look with your eyes, not your hands.

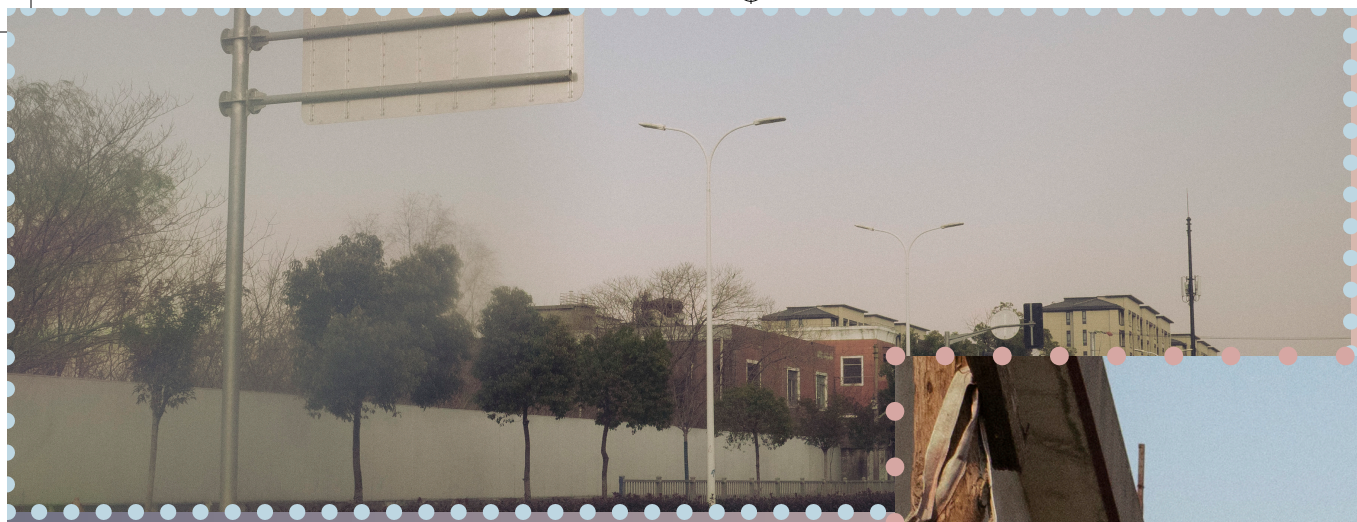
I visited the house for the first time this past January with the Allen Art Museum's 2024 Winter Term Museum Education cohort.



I tucked my hands neatly behind my back and walked with careful steps, paying attention to the jut of my elbows and the space my shoulders took up. My father's occupation as a long-time Frank Lloyd Wright enthusiast meant that visiting Falling Water and Kentuck Knob—two Pennsylvanian usonians—had been imperative to my childhood architectural education. I entered the house with an indoctrinated awe.

I gravitated towards Johnson's collection of hallway books. So this is a life preserved, I thought, desperately wanting to run my fingers down their spines. The sentiment was shared. Can we touch them? someone asked. A group of gallery guides in training, we were used to rules prohibiting hands coming into contact with the art. But this space was different and we slid the books gently off the shelves, leafing carefully through their pages as if too fast a movement might spook the printed text into flight.

We returned the books back to their shelves and our tour moved us to the other staged, exhibited, and uninhabited rooms of the house. I couldn't shake the feeling that we were doing the books a disservice. Come to life for a moment in our tender





hands, given a taste of what it might mean to be used, they were once again relegated to a life of watching from the shelf. My Linguistic Anthropology course—a desperate attempt to add some social science diversity to a humanities-ridden schedule—has been emphasizing the use of language as a verb; languaging rather than language, an active process in contrast to a passive object. I think of the shelves—what happens to language when it is left to sit and gather dust? What happens to stories when they are no longer repeated? What happens to a life that is not retold? What happens to an archive to which no one has access?

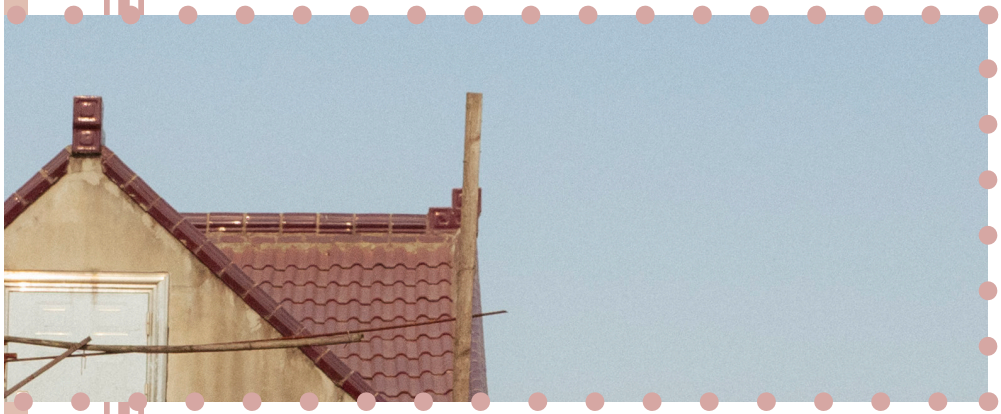
This semester I've begun the process of cataloging the collection. For four hours every Tuesday afternoon, I install myself on the little green velvet covered couch in the living room, a stack of books sitting on the coffee table before me, my computer open to a Notion spreadsheet. Retaining that tender touch, I've been paging through the books, deciphering titles in Swedish, French, and German along with incomprehensible cursive notes scrawled inside front covers.

I'm liking finding proof of life—the aforementioned front cover inscriptions, annotations in the margins, but also bits of ephemera tucked in between the brittle pages. They fall into my lap, sometimes literally: finger painted Christmas cards, type-writer punched poetry, postcards from abroad, coins in little plastic bags, faded and folded course syllabi for classes no longer taught. These objects, lost and forgotten, preserve an iteration of Ellen Johnson previously untapped. How do these tiny windows into her person craft her image? How do they fit together into a personal archive of her own making?

In its forward, a small book entitled Wee Moderns: An Anthology of Verse by Children proposes itself to be "a book of poems written entirely by children between the ages of six and twelve years." From 1932, the



book is not in bad shape, its blue cloth cover bare except for a small white patch for the title. The verses are sweet and simple.



NOW EAT YOUR VEGETABLES

It's never "Eat your candy!"
They don't say "Eat your sweets!"
It's always "Eat your carrots!"
Or, "Now Carol, eat your beets!"

It's never "Eat your pudding"
Or, "Eat your ice-cream, please."
Instead it's "Eat your squash, dear,"
Or, "Please finish up your peas."

It seems so very queer to me
The difference food can make
Why is it always "Eat your beans"
Instead of "Eat your cake?"

Carol Webb, 6 years old

I GUESS I'LL BE AN ANIMAL

"I'd like to be a walrus
Or a zebra
At the zoo.

Or maybe just a leopard
With just the spots
All showing through.

Or could I be a camel
And wear a
Hump or two.

But I guess I'll get a pocket
And just be
A kangaroo."

Kathryn Keeler, 8 years old

Between poems "A Bad Girl" by Emma Tyler and "Dusk" by Ernest Gore a small piece of white paper the size of a receipt has been folded in two. In careful cursive someone has written, "don't breathe a word—but the kids couldn't write poetry, and I had to write every damn one of these, and then make the youngsters think they'd done it! You wanted some of my own—here they are!!"

A deception unearthed: young Kathryn's ploy at reincarnation no longer seems as genius, Carol's vegetable lament reads as pandering instead of a sincere gripe. A secret whispered through time, I enter into a conspiracy. Ellen Johnson and her mischievous poet friend share a good laugh.

Sun & Moon is written in big letters across the top of a faded literary journal, the two O's eclipsing one another. Inside, there is a postcard written to "Professor Ellen Johnson." Preserved and pressed since 1977, pulled out of its hiding place into 2024. It's postmarked to the Weltzheimer/Johnson House: 127 Woodhaven Drive, Oberlin, OH 44074. The address has since changed—the

house now sits on Morgan Street.

"Dear Ellen," writes a woman whose name is indecipherable except for its first letter. B recounts her six weeks spent in "this quaint little town," identified by the postcard as Guanajuato, Mexico. She worries about the weather in Ohio and hopes Ellen is "holding up under the severe winter back there." She signs off with "lots of hugs." The picture on the front of the card, overlooking a series of sprawling houses, a line of mountains in the distance, a row of cacti in the foreground, transports. From my spot on the couch, I look out at gray clouded Ohio and think of blue skies in Mexico, imagining Ellen Johnson doing the same fifty years prior.

Yoga Made Easy proclaims a bold red title on a yellow covered book hidden between The Rejuvenation Vitamin (the powers of Vitamin E!) and Selected Poetry and Prose of Edgar Allan Poe. "Discover powers you never knew you had," the book promises, then lists off an incantation, an entrancing prophetess reaching into her bag of magic spells, her voice one you have to strain to hear, a low rasp, soft and sultry:

"Take years off your face and figure...

Strengthen every part of your body...

Increase sexual vigor...

Banish tension, anxiety, and frustration...

Build strength from ordinary air...

Discover new thinking and reasoning power...

Improve your memory, increase perception and concentration..."

Folded up inside the book are a series of exercises, some handwritten, others in blocky typewriter print. On the typewritten sheet, someone has written in pink pen next to several of the exercises—"Cannot do."

An image joins that of her on the porch. In this one, she is stretched out on a yoga mat on the red concrete floor of the living room. Light is still streaming in the windows, a house ever touched by the sun. She is lying on her stomach. She bends her elbows back, places her palms by her hips, lifts her head, then her chest. Now, she is all the way up off the floor—cobra pose, greeting the day. Maybe she smiles. Maybe she groans. She holds the position for a moment or two, then, slowly, slowly, slowly lets herself drop.

Halfway through a battered Anthology of World Poetry, a note written to Ellen Johnson on almost translucent wax-paper asks her for a comment to accompany a letter "S" is writing to "G." Punched through the bottom of the sheet is a bright yellow feather, red outlining the quill, a spot of blue at its end. The note identifies the feather's origins as that of a "beautiful parrot of Mrs. Rishoff."

There is something interesting about the ways preservation robs memories of context. I spent this past summer writing online descriptions for French 18th century dec-art objects. Candelabras. Snuff boxes. Enormous silver tureens. Miniature portraits, some sturdy enamels, others delicate little watercolors on ivory or vellum. These objects confronted the age-old predicament of decorative arts everywhere—built for interior living spaces, these objects find their meaning obliterated by museum display. Two firedogs in the museum, meant to sit on either side of a hearth, have been placed in a gallery as if free-standing sculptures. A carpet hangs up against a wall, filaments stretching as it sags to the floor. Like the furnishings of our own homes, these objects once would have been used. No longer.

The miniature portraits present a slightly different case. Those painted with watercolor on ivory or vellum were fragile, and any exposure to light caused them to take on damage. Per museum policy, these works could be displayed in small wooden cabinets that could be closed between visitor observations for six months at a time before they were put back into storage to rest. They wait there, locked away in the dark, biding their time. Too risky to restore, if these works continue to be displayed, at some point in the distant future, they will fade away completely. The options are grim.


An evolution of an artist.



Show the works and have them slowly disappear or lock them away in a dark cupboard where no one will ever see them again.

Ellen Johnson is not likely to vanish. In Oberlin, her legacy is regularly invoked, if implicitly, carried through her work at the college, her contributions to the Allen Memorial Art Museum, her establishment of the Art Rental program.

But which Ellen Johnson is preserved through these institutions? Is it the Ellen Johnson our unidentified "B" wrote from the sunny plaza in Mexico? Or the woman who shared a snide poet's secret? Where can we find the Ellen whose marginal notes declare Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollection of Early Childhood" the "greatest ode we have"? What



version of Ellen did Mark address with love and Christmas wishes on the front pages of several poetry anthologies?

On one of my first days spent paging through the books at the Frank Lloyd Wright House, I found–not stuck in a book, but between several, as if it was a work of literature in its own right–"An Open Letter to Ellen" written by her close friend and Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Allen, Athena Tacha. The letter is a response to Johnson's death.

"You were one of the most beautiful human beings I ever met."

"You loved nature and nature loved you back."

"You just couldn't live without beauty."

Even now, as I write this piece, I offer you a constructed



version of Ellen Johnson. I began this project with the hope of presenting a truer Ellen, displayed objectively through her own archive, a narrative unsullied by a biographer's voice. It is a task at which I fear I have ultimately failed. How can you encompass a life in a single article? How can you transmit someone presented through so many varied lenses, the strings of context that gave them meaning detached?

We are gathered bits and pieces, lost and found, blowing in the wind, washed up to shore.

There isn't and cannot be a complete record.

We exist on many tongues, in many mouths.

My art rental for this semester hangs above my bed, an enormous color sketch of a typewriter eraser drawn by Claus Oldenburg, a friend of Johnson. My roommate and I have gotten into the habit of asking first-time visitors to our dorm room what they think the image depicts. We've gotten a slew of responses:

Is it a tassel? A bird? A personal favorite: It's a nipple piercing! Blown up larger than life, floating in space on a white background, presented to an audience with little to no knowledge of typewriter instruments, the object



is distorted beyond recognition. Yet, framed behind a protective sheet of glass, it is perfectly preserved.


COMPUTER
BLANKET
BED MAT
SPEAKER
SHORTS x 6
PANTS x 6
SHIRTS x 10
UNDIES x 10
CLEATS
PEN x 10
BIKE
i dont own a lot.
BOOK x 1
SOCKS x 10
PHONE
BRUSH
LAMP x 2
BAG
BOARD
PASTE
CHARGER x 2
SHOES
PILLOW
PENCIL
IPAD


Milk
Eggs
Honey
Chicken
Maple Syrup
Ice Cream
Annuals
Seedlings
Perennials
Yarrow
Delphinium
Columbine
Lupine
Bell Flower
Holly Hock
Sweet William



5《米洛的维纳斯》(*Vénus de Milo*)

公元前 2 世纪末期

卢浮宫底层古希腊雕像厅

在中国，这尊雕像更多地被称为“断臂的维纳斯”。它于 1820 年在希腊米洛斯岛被一个农民发现，当时法国驻土耳其大使将它买下，并于次年赠给法国国王路易十八，随后国王将它赠给卢浮宫。作为“卢浮宫三宝”（另外两个是《蒙娜丽莎》和《萨莫色雷斯的胜利女神》）之一，这尊雕像以其高贵优雅的体态和谜团般的身世，令全世界为之着迷。

其实，由于这尊雕像缺少象征物，人们并不能完全确定其身份，是根据它的描绘手法和姿容丰韵判断它应该是爱与美之神维纳斯。

女神面容高傲而淡定，身

修鲁克王朝的制品表面只有铭文，但这件洗礼盆上布满了各种图画和花纹，更为珍贵。

在洗礼盆的外部，顶端和底端是奔跑的动物，中间是各式人物，有猎人、仆人和王族，其中，圆形装饰将骑马和站立的人物分隔开来。洗礼盆的内部和外部是同样的结构，只不过人物的行为更为丰富，有打猎、战斗和登基的场景，底座是被一圈细密花纹围绕的鱼池，华丽而精美。

十分有趣的是，在这件不大的作品中，有六处创作者的签名，也许是出于喜爱或者自豪。

7《萨莫色雷斯的胜利女神》(*Victoire de Samothrace*)

约公元前 190 年

德农馆底层达鲁中庭

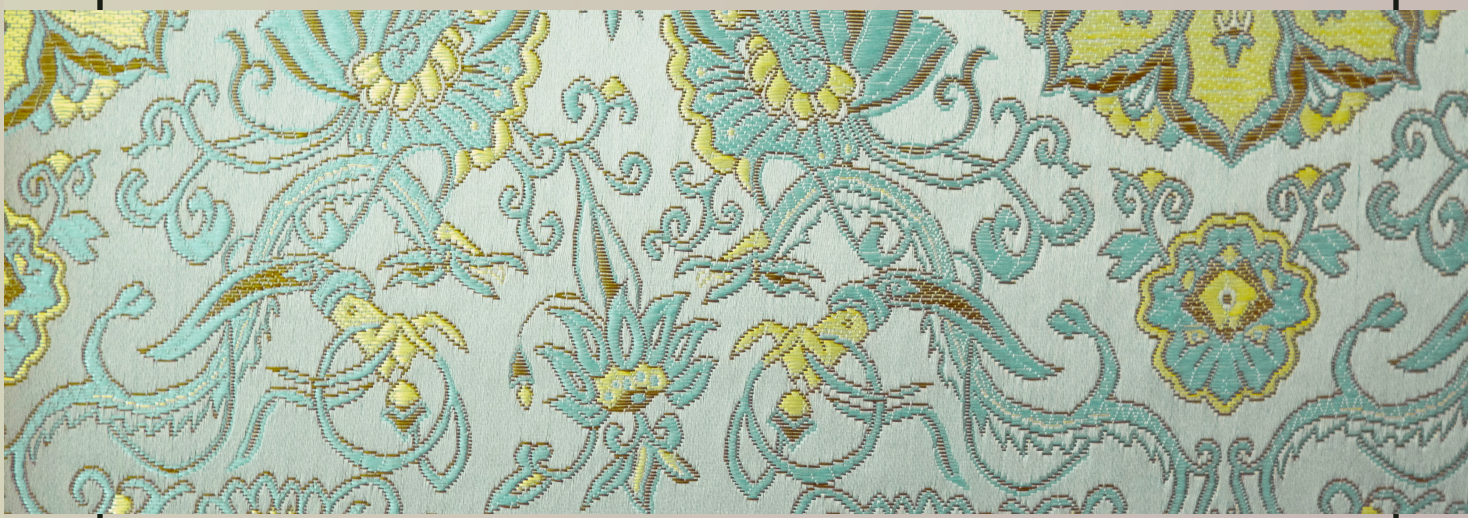


这尊女神像于 1863 年被发现于爱情海北部的萨莫色雷斯岛，萨莫色雷斯岛的万神圣地是供奉诸神之所，相传胜利女神尼凯（Nikè）曾经协助奥林匹斯众神战胜提坦巨人，将她的雕像立于此地，可能是古希腊人为了向众神祈求战争胜利。目前关于雕像的作者及年代说法不一，一



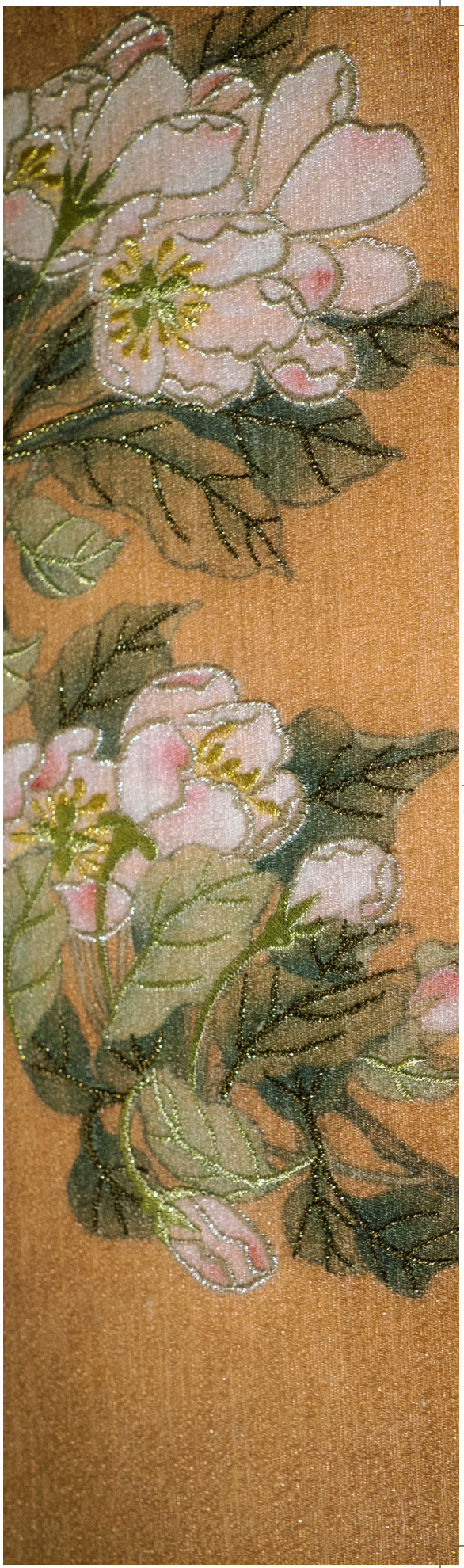
I'm Sorry I Can't Be Her *(St Catherine of Siena)*

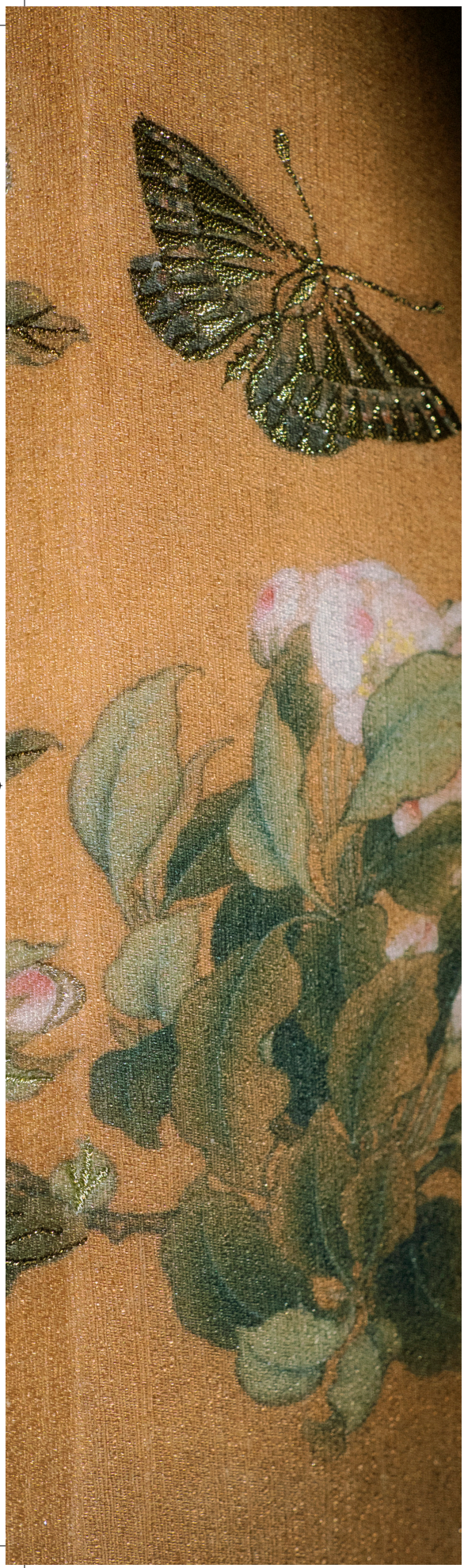
Ida Rosenstein



For the month of June, I was in Italy looking at body parts. In the Roman Forum, the marble hand of Constantine, a fragment of a once colossal statue, stretches out towards the sky. Fingers and peels of flesh enshrined in gold are scattered across churches and museums–the relics of preternatural saints. In the Borghese Gallery, you can see how Hades' fingers are carved to sink into and indent Proserpina's skin, marble made flesh. In Padua's Museum of the History of Medicine are beautifully intricate wax casts of musculature. Also here, a virtual mirror. I stood in front of it and a black hole traveled across my reflection, revealing a simulation of my skeleton for each portion it hovered over. I knew that the mirror was designed this way, to open up everybody and show the same pre-rendered, CGI bones underneath. And I thought of the time when being able to clearly count my rib bones made me ecstatic. There were plenty of ghosts from high school that I had already exorcized: Hot Topic, bangs, and auditioning for musicals as if I could sing well. My eating disorder also began in high school. Even after being in recovery from anorexia for years, there were still remnants that clung like hangnails. I wondered if I would ever be able to stop thinking about my body, if I would ever be able to stop looking so intensely.

Padua's Museum of the History of Medicine had been a stop on Oberlin's "Shakespeare In Italy" study abroad program, and one that I was particularly excited about. Before entering the building, our professor gave us a warning that some displays could potentially be triggering. She spoke of her previous visit to the museum, recalling medical "oddities" injected with formaldehyde. Entering the museum, I was anticipating preserved bodies floating in liquid, corroded skulls, and wax recreations of infections, but nothing of this nature was exhibited. All the wet specimens and bones had been replaced with tamer objects like old medical instruments. Strangely, I left the experience feeling strangely disappointed over this change. Evidence of the objects taken down at the museum only lives on through ancient Tripadvisor reviews: specimens of conjoined twins and other medical "anomalies." Needless to say, I knew that my desire to see weird bodies was inherently voyeuristic. Admittedly, morbid curiosity has always been a vice of mine. When I was younger, I often found myself preoccupied with internet rabbit holes that would, inevitably, keep me up at night. It was like rubbernecking at a roadside accident–I was deeply interested in the same things that disturbed me most.





It was no surprise that the Padua museum elected to change their exhibits; plenty of scholars and customers are critical regarding the display of human remains. Just last year, Philadelphia's Mütter Museum sparked debate over something similar. When the new executive director reviewed its vast collection of bones and body parts, he soon thereafter released a statement indicating the removal of a number of these displays. Bodies being procured unethically and without consent from the deceased are the most common reasons for these changes.

However, I didn't completely miss out on seeing human remains. Only a short walk from the museum was the Basilica of St. Anthony, an ornate church. The church houses three of the namesake saint's relics: his lower jaw, tongue, and a layer of his skin in elaborate gilded reliquaries. Unlike the remains displayed in museums, the presentation of first class relics (the preserved body parts of saints) is not contested. Relics are considered venerated objects in Catholicism: sources of healing and miracle. Saints would turn their bodies into extraordinary objects through extreme acts of penance such as self-flagellation and intense fasting. Perhaps it was because I visited the museum and the church back to back that I couldn't help but wonder: is this any different from the objectification of "abnormal" bodies in museums? When I stepped back, I saw people that only existed now in the context of their bodies. Even if they're known for their exceptional deeds, their bodies are forever claimed by holiness. Being an idol seems to leave less space for personhood. St. Catherine of Siena is dismembered across Italy: her head and thumb in Siena, her hand and body in Rome, her foot in Venice—each part an object of veneration. She is a symbol before she is a person.

I'm reminded, too, of how the Mütter's gift shop used to contain a bar of soap in the shape of their famous "Soap Lady" specimen—a saponified body of a woman whose mouth is frozen agape, demonstrating the phenomenon of corpse wax. This woman's identity is still unknown, her mummified form is the object of much speculation. Whether in a church or a museum, the display of these remains became a double-edged sword: I wanted to keep looking out of fascination but I was acutely aware that by doing so I was complicit in turning them from people into objects. I often face a similar paradox, a desire to be looked at and, simultaneously, an incredible fear of the prospect.

Even before I had developed an eating disorder, I was plagued by a feeling that my appearance was always under

surveillance. I wore my anxiety on my sleeve; my fingers were shredded and red from picking at the cuticles, my nails bitten to stubs, my oily bangs constantly hanging over my eyes. I knew that I wasn't exactly okay but I hadn't learned permissible ways of showing it yet. I wasn't soft-spoken and I didn't demurely stumble over my words. I blurted things out awkwardly and cried while presenting to the class. There was no smudged eye makeup, black coffee, or languid looks out the window. In the movies, pain made girls like Susanna Kaysen and the Lisbon sisters alluring and ethereal. It made them interesting, but it just made me weird. Despite all my resentment towards unattainable and arbitrary beauty standards, I still can't help but want to be seen as attractive by others. Nonetheless, I am very uncomfortable whenever I put myself out on display. I remember sending photos to my parents of the churches, museums, and landmarks in Italy that I was visiting. And I remember my mom constantly replied back with, "Where are all the photos of you?" I didn't know how to tell her that I was rarely taking photos of myself because I hated seeing myself. The summer heat in Italy was intense: I was sweating constantly. When I did wear makeup it would smudge and congeal. My hair grew frizzy with humidity and plastered to my face in greasy strands. I was shambling around, red-faced from the sun, and swore I could feel my skin pouring out. I thoroughly enjoyed my experience in Italy but I rarely felt pretty during it. I rarely felt like someone who could justify displaying herself in photographs. I was still recovering from an eating disorder and every photo offered the opportunity to dissect my body with surgical precision, to dismember myself into individual limbs. But because I couldn't quite escape my own self-voyeurism, I was also forced to reconcile with the fact that I wasn't as recovered as I thought I was. When my group visited the Santa Maria sopra Minerva Basilica to see the effigy of St. Catherine of Siena, it felt a bit like meeting with a ghost.

In the depths of my eating disorder, I, like many others, was obsessed with St. Catherine for her extreme, penitential fasting. Female saints are excellent fodder for the online personas of young women embroiled in eating disorder culture and communities. After all, these saints are already revered for their self-starvation taken up in the name of salvation. Online ED communities develop their own kind of art history and visual language. Many of the saints that they adopt are associated with anorexia mirabilis, the so-called predecessor of anorexia nervosa, a disease that involved intense fasting as a gateway to





spiritual enlightenment. Figures connected with the illness, such as St. Catherine of Siena, have similar status to "thinspiration" icons. A Renaissance painting of a nun will appear in the same Twitter thread as a photo of Lily-Rose Depp or Kate Moss. Through this intersection, digital relics form. The photos that circulate among users are often examples of idealized thinness, women hacked away into individual body parts to be gawked at and glorified. Close-ups on a cigarette between fingers, a thigh-gap, a collarbone, a concave stomach. In this way, the subject of the photograph is framed as a relic themself. They are usually faceless because it's easier that way for the viewer to imagine themselves as the body in the photo. It's aspirational, and it doesn't matter if the image is digitally altered. It matters that there is an ideal to strive for. Like the relics of saints, the people in these photos are reduced to merely a construction of their body. Here is the most protruding collarbone. Here is the flattest stomach. Importantly, people with bodies that do not fit this ideal are similarly objectified. Here is a body to mock. Here is a body that is a spectacle because it does not conform. Bodies are either slandered or lauded but no matter what, they will be objectified. People lose their agency and become solely defined by their bodies: an object of desire, an object of disgust, an object of scrutiny, an object of reverence. I had decided that if I was going to be on display, I would rather be aspirational than anomalous.

Just having a body was one massive contradiction. Look at me but don't look at me. Only if you'll see what I want you to. It was a delicate balancing act of tactful reveals and hiding whatever I couldn't whittle down. I wore loose t-shirts that would hang off of one shoulder, exposing my collarbone but still covering my stomach. I could only imagine myself in pieces.

For years, I had been so interested in my own pain that I tried to make it a performance. I wrote terrible poems comparing myself to Catherine of Siena. I tried to romanticize the experience into something worthy of representation. I wrote about being a "stained-glass idol on the cathedral wall," and feeling "God in the canals of (my) clavicle." Reading it back now makes me cringe and I'm very tempted to just delete the whole thing; I've already deleted most of my younger writing out of embarrassment anyways. But I think that it may be good to keep a reminder of how ridiculous my glamorization of my own illness was. I can keep myself from falling back into a cycle by cringing at how tragically beautiful I tried to depict everything. The saints starved and flagellated themselves into miraculous,

transcendent bodies; bodies that were worshiped. But bodies like the Soap Lady don't receive the same grace. They are displayed to be studied, feared, and pitied, never worshiped. Their bodies are festering and misshapen from suffering, from decay. But the saint makes suffering look so good. They are rewarded for it with incorruptible corpses and reverence. Online, when a photo of an emaciated young woman is accompanied by comments saying things like, "guess I'm not eating today," her suffering is similarly reinforced. My thought process during the depths of my eating disorder can be summarized like so: if I was going to hurt, I wanted it to have at least been worthwhile. If I was going to hurt, I wanted to hurt beautifully.



It's horrific to realize that pain truly has no greater meaning or reason. We find meaning from suffering when we heal from it or overcome it; pain in and of itself is purely erosive. Within the saint lies the myth that pain can make us worthy, exceptional even. Eating disorders operate on a similar notion. My pain will make me beautiful, and I will be praised for it. Calorie counting and purging behaviors are ritualistic. 1990s heroin chic models are idolized like the Virgin Mary. Popular usernames in these communities are things like "livingdeadgirl" and "heavenlywaif." A devotion to illness that borders on piety. Before I had anorexia, these posts would occasionally pop up on my feed, and they scared and confused me. Back then, I couldn't understand the fixation on dark undereye circles, knobby bruised knees, and sharp bones pressing through clothes.

Now though, I do understand why, sometimes, people want to commit to pain so deeply. It can feel like a competition. Eating disorders are intensely competitive mental illnesses, there's an unspoken back-and-forth of "who is sicker?" This is of course, not something that one can really define. The implication is actually "who looks sicker?" Though not too sick of course: it's a delicate balance between looking sick enough for others to be concerned, but not so sick that one, in their eyes, becomes ugly. The medicalized bodies in museums are objects of fascination because their pains have made their bodies grotesque, but pains on the bodies of saints and starving women renders them "interesting". It seems that there is a fine line between illness rendering the body deformed or tragically beautiful. In the Victorian era, dying from tuberculosis was the most poetic death that a woman could have; the symptoms turned her ideally feminine: pale, rosy-cheeked, and delicate. Conversely, syphilis was equally prominent and dangerous during the era, but its





symptoms of open sores and rashes turned it into a thing of revulsion instead—the decaying body represented a decaying morality. There are levels of acceptability to how we express our pain and display our bodies. We are only allowed to be comfortable with our bodies to a certain extent.

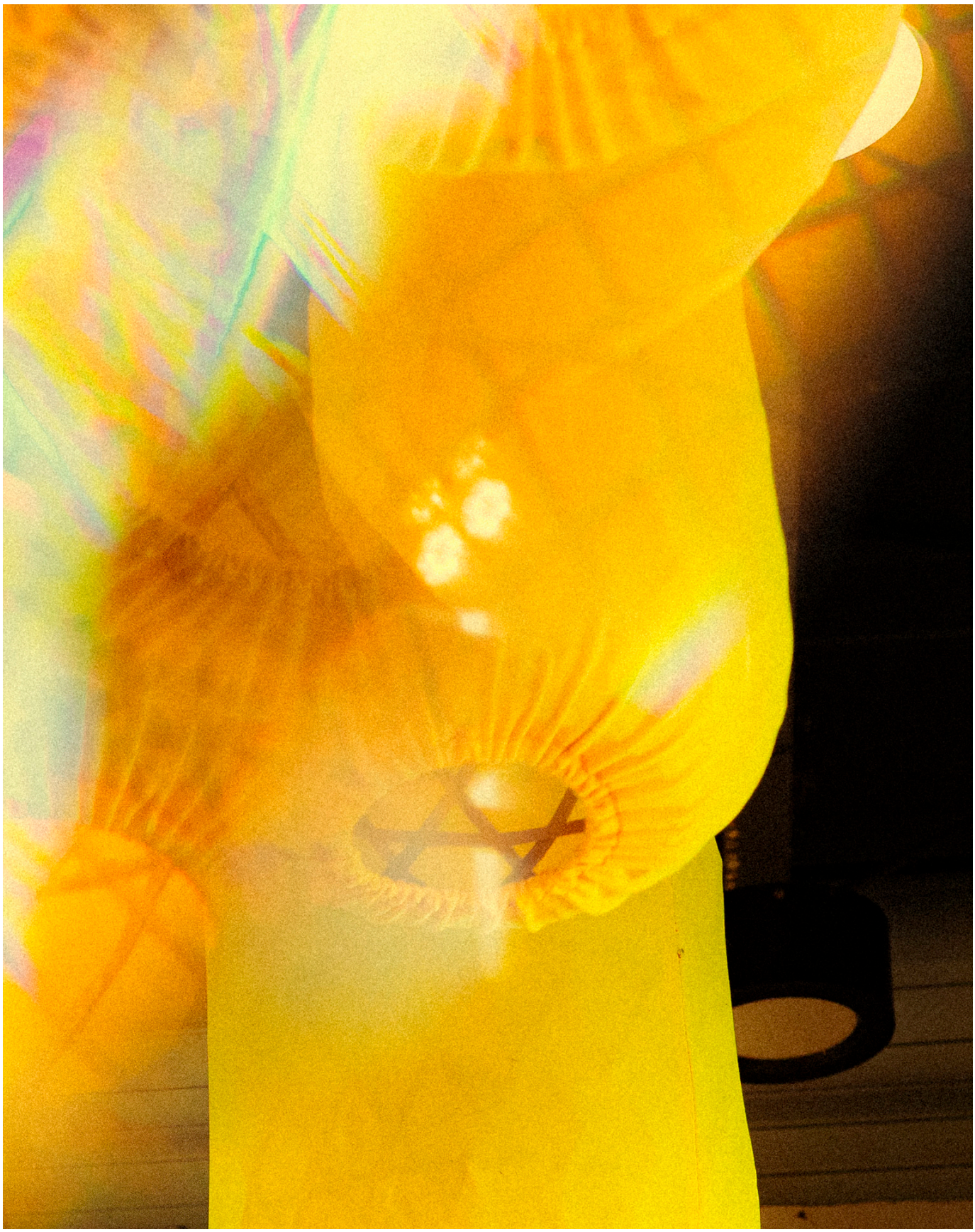
So much of our contemporary culture tells us that we will always be on display. People have grown far too comfortable with photographing and filming strangers for online clout, body trends dissipate as quickly as they appear, and people are injecting Ozempic without a second thought. Every body is a spectacle because of deeply instilled, cultural ideas of what normative bodies look like. And if pain can disrupt the conception of a normative body, then it makes sense why people would want to twist it into something magnetic and alluring; at least then it would mean something. For years, I had so badly wanted my body to speak for me, for it to make my pain visible without me having to say a word. If I spoke, I lost all plausible deniability. And it was humiliating to admit that I wanted to keep starving because I was worried it was the most interesting thing about me. I wore crop tops around the house in December so that my parents could see my spine and ribcage. I paraded around my wounds because they were affirmations that there was something to see here. Honestly I've been trying to write this essay for a while because I can't stop thinking about bodies and how long I spent objectifying mine. I keep reading about saints and body horror because I want to understand why my body still feels so haphazardly cobbled together even after I've healed.

Last June, while visiting St. Catherine's effigy in Rome, there were crowds of people placing written prayers into her tomb. They knelt on their knees and gently touched the marble as if it was her very skin. I wrote to her as well, more of a note than a prayer though. It felt awkward to write to a dead woman, but it also felt like this long metaphor of sainthood and starvation that I wrapped myself up in was finally coming to an end. Part of me, I think, just wanted to apologize for co-opting her story. I wish I could finish by telling you what I wrote on that note, but the truth is, I don't even remember. It would've been so narratively satisfying to finish where I started. I could try to spin a story where finally seeing St. Catherine after this whole journey really meant something, but it just didn't. She was there. I saw her. And I can't even recall what I said to her. She used to be some great symbol to me and now, there was only a memory I had no use for anymore. I wanted that moment to be poetic because, maybe

then, there'd be a way to turn all the pain I put my body through into a story with a purpose. Maybe then, my starvation would've felt less senseless. A nice bow to tie things up with.

However, I've learned that it's very difficult to write thoughtfully on an empty stomach. I've found things that are far more interesting than my ribcage. There's too much I want to do, I do not have time to be hungry. I've written short stories, poems, and class assignments about anorexia, and I still haven't bled the subject dry yet. I think I'll drive myself crazy if I keep self-mythologizing. I can acknowledge my pain, but I can't indulge in it anymore. I don't want to look away from my reflection, I just don't want to care so much about looking. So, Catherine, I hope this is the last time I write about you.

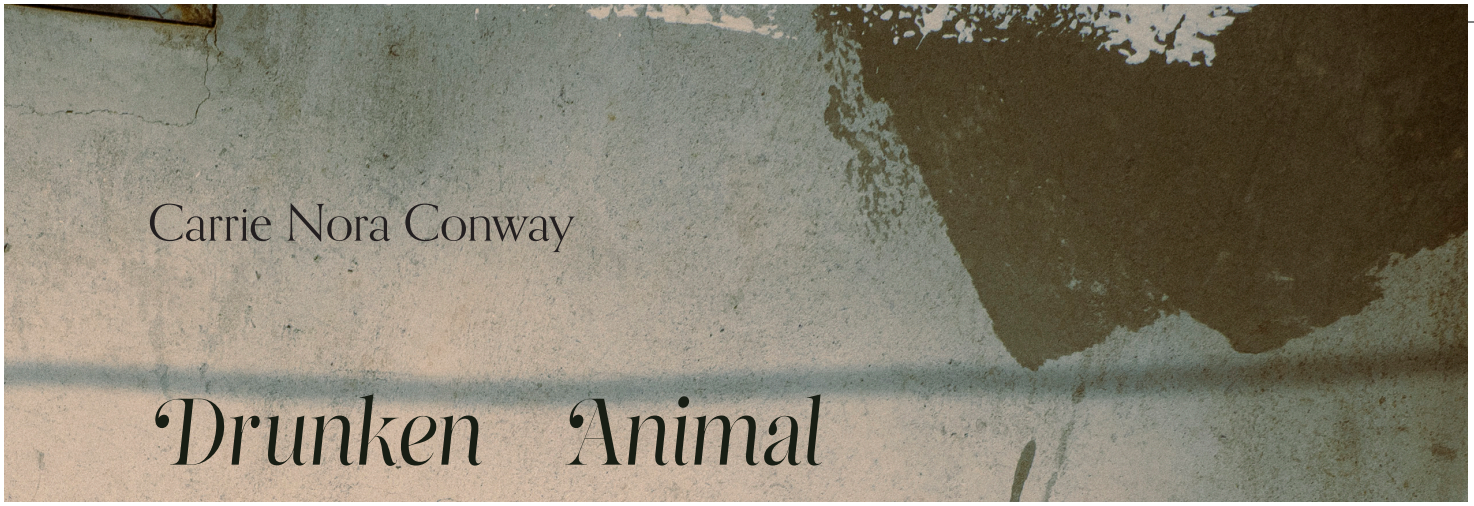






I don't remember all of it. I don't remember the details of the bad nights, screaming and crying and begging, I don't remember actions or words beyond a few scattered bits that hide in the dark corners of my mind and shrink away when I reach for them. I don't remember everything I said to you during the nights, and sometimes I don't remember the days either. I promised you that my habit was something I only did at night, but either I lied to you or forgot to keep that promise because it became a daily thing too. I don't remember that fight we had after I missed our first anniversary, and I don't remember how I reacted when my father finally died, and I don't remember the last time you told me that you loved me.

But I remember the way my movements would become freer, I remember the flush, beautiful feeling of enlightenment, I remember grinning at my naked form in the mirror, cupping my growing breasts and



Carrie Nora Conway

Drunken Animal

turning this way and that to get angles that made my face look beautiful. I would laugh until tears that stung with warmth oozed out of my eyes, tracing my hands from my tits down to my hips and feeling my dick, then back up, then back down, dick to hips to tits to hips to tits to hips to dick to hips to tits. I remember feeling less human in that moment, like I was an eagle or a panther or something that could take me away from all of it, away from having to be a person.

I remember the broad strokes of the bad nights, but only in that I remember that they were bad. I remember laughing louder, moving faster, hearing better. Being better. I remember racing you down Halsted, leaning against you as we reached that coffee store at the north end of the block, and I remember feeling your fullness in that moment and gripping you a little tighter. I remember you staring out the window to hide how close you were to crying because you were telling me "You don't look at me when we're together anymore." I remember my first drink. I remember the last one I had before you left. I don't remember the last one I had today.

Here is what else I remember. We had sex for the first time and I was sober, cursing and panting and running my fingers up your side, feeling the smoothness of your perfect skin. When we met earlier that night I asked How many months on E are you and you said Two and a half years and I said Wow I hope that's what I look like by then. You'd asked me How long have you been on it and when I told you Two months you smiled and told me that I looked good.

I had gone to that party because I was bored when Marie told me that there was something going on up in Andersonville. I'd told her that I wasn't sure if I wanted to go because Andersonville made me anxious. I went there once and it felt like every woman was trying to kill me with their eyes, trying to lift me up with their collective female mind and throw me somewhere else, to the place where all the perverted degenerates go. But Marie was the person before you that best understood me— she promised to do my makeup and that was that.

These conditions



were often ones that would require a drink—shot of vodka before leaving, shot of fireball before entering the venue—but I had forgotten to restock because I'd drank it all the night before and spent the day resting it off. Marie held my hand as we took the bus up Clark, where we were given liberal, passing glances by a few people, allies too polite or too self-righteous to express their true feelings about women like us. We got off and met one of the women she would fuck on the regular, a slim cis girl who I remember wearing some concert shirt. Marie slid an arm around her shoulders and they walked inside the house party, and I smiled a little too thinly and followed them.

You were leaning against a wall, your back and one foot planted firmly against it while your other foot steadied you, and I realized that you were one of the most incredible people I had ever seen. Marie saw where my eyes were and she pushed me towards you and told me Stop being a little bitch and go say hi, so I went over to you and said I like your boots and three hours later I was inside you.

When we were done I was cleaning up and smiled at you. You looked at me and said "You're so beautiful," and my eyes burned and I smiled wider and realized in that moment that I would remember what you said forever. Despite everything, I still do.

You moved in by the end of the summer. We were intimate for what felt like days, the heat rising on weekend mornings to make us lazy and falling at night to reenergize us, letting us act on our thoughts and desires. We pinned each other, merged our femininity, stretched it into the infinite. I remember one time when you had finished and I collapsed on top of you, feeling you shudder beneath me, and even though it had only been seven weeks I muttered "I love you" and a moment later I realized I really meant it.

One day, I came back from work and immediately mixed myself a gin, tonic, and orange juice. I had been whistled at on the L by a couple of men whose smug smiles of malice had turned into ones of disgust and fury when they got a little closer, and it was at that moment that I cursed myself for not starting the process of purchasing a firearm and a concealed carry permit. At the same time, I cursed myself for not getting on hormones before puberty. The train stopped and I slipped between the closing doors after a moment of deliberation, walking several extra blocks to the apartment. When I shut the door, I set my purse on the counter and started mixing.

When you came home I was splayed on the couch, murmuring nothing to myself as I stared at the Fire Walk with Me poster on our wall. You straddled me, smiling downward

with one hand on my cheek as you asked something like Already? It's not even six and I laughed and said something clever that I don't remember, and your smile faded just a little but I only realized this later. You said I'll make dinner and then you were off of me. I laid there, laughing to myself and pawing at the air. The memory of those men on the L slipped away, leaving me blissful and feminine and beautiful.

The second time it happened, we were at another Andersonville party. I don't know why it happened, I was already deep in and it felt like every cis woman was laughing at me so I overlaid the drink with more drink. I danced discordantly, moving loose as I cackled and spun and before I knew it I was falling over. I collided with a woman (it was Marie's girl, or was Marie's girl—they had split) and we both fell to the floor, long arm over short. I mumbled some kind of apology and then you were there, voice low and urgent as you asked me Are you okay? and I murmured something like I love you so much in response as I sat there, arms splayed over my head while not-Marie's girl brushed herself off and glared down at me. I tried to apologize, but she was already gone.

It became a habit fast, so fast that I couldn't delineate a before and after. Wake up, drink lightly, go to work, come home, drink heavier, fuck. It loosened my mind to the point of normalcy, and in the office I kept pace with the others, instead of giving them a thin smile and looking back and forth between whoever was talking. I could laugh and tell my own jokes, and it was good. I made pasta for you. I made all sorts of things for you, and



whenever you got home I would slide my arms around your waist and lift you up, feeling the curve of your chest against my head. Before you got home, I would strip down and dance around the apartment, twirling in nonsensical patterns, arms intertwining with each other, serpentine femininity. Animal love.

It was good. Sustainable, even. I learned the perfect amount to take per day, learned when to take it, and since I found that balance I stopped seeing a man in the mirror. I was the funniest person in the office. I was the sexiest person at parties. When we fucked, I was perfect and so were you. I can remember one time we were standing upright, one arm under your breasts and one in your hair to expose your neck, facing towards a mirror so I could admire us. I could taste the sweat and saliva on your skin, and it was at that point that I felt the nine months of estrogen in my body for the first time, icy and invigorating, and realized in that moment that I was a woman.



A week later, I drank a little too much in the afternoon and by the time you came home I was already in the process of scattering myself. I stumbled a little as I came to hug you and you asked Babe what's wrong? and I said Oh I'm just tired. I didn't sleep well, you wanna help me with that?

We were naked and in bed within five minutes, and that familiar feeling of hand over hand was flooding my body and it should have been exciting me. I should have been full of energy, but I was limp. My head lolled to the side and I fixed my eyes on the wall, feeling a burning mix of shame and impotence. You asked me Are you okay? and when I didn't

respond you turned me upwards to face you, and as I winced and tried to turn my head you asked Are you fucking drunk? Are you drunk right now?

I mumbled something like No I'm not and you dropped my face and climbed off me and said "Jesus, why are you doing this" and I mumbled "I'm sorry" and started to cry. After a second I felt your weight on me as you tried to calm me down, and I mumbled apologies and cried a little more and waited to fall asleep, to get away from my mistake.

It happened again. And again, and again. I lost the balance and wasn't able to perform with you. Sometimes I could pass myself off as sober for a little, but you could always tell after a few minutes. You pressed me on it, but I brushed you off with an I'm fine, I don't have a problem, just leave it and that was what I told you every time. It was sustainable, I knew it was, because I was doing just fine at work. Great, even.

I don't remember the night that it became too much. I woke up the next morning and you were awake, sitting in the chair on the other side of the room. I asked "What's wrong?" and you immediately started to cry. I looked down at my arms and started to remember bits and pieces, things that you and I (get off me you bitch get off me get the fuck off me) said. I stood up shakily, trying to comfort you, but you were up so suddenly that it made me wince.

"I can't keep doing this with you," you said. "You won't let me help you."

"What did I do last night?" I asked and you just cried (it's going to be okay just please please don't do that anymore) a little harder.

"You're going to die like this. I can't watch you do that, you need to get help because I know that having me around isn't enough."

"I'm fine, I'm fine, I don't have a (I'M SORRY I DIDN'T MEAN IT) problem, stop telling me I have a problem."

I was trying to walk towards you to feel your hands on me, but you shrank away again and inside I cursed myself for being so stupid, for doing whatever I did (what're you doing jesus what're you doing to yourself stop stop) to make you afraid of me.

"Please get help. Get help, or we can't be together anymore." The flow of your tears had slowed, and now you were backing away towards the door, and I felt a wave of nausea hit me as I realized from your body language just how badly you wanted to get out.

"Ella, I'm sorry-" I started to say, but you interrupted.

"I love you. I love you so much, but I can't keep doing this."

That was the last time.

You closed the door, and I looked down at my arms again, trying so hard to remember (I DID IT WRONG

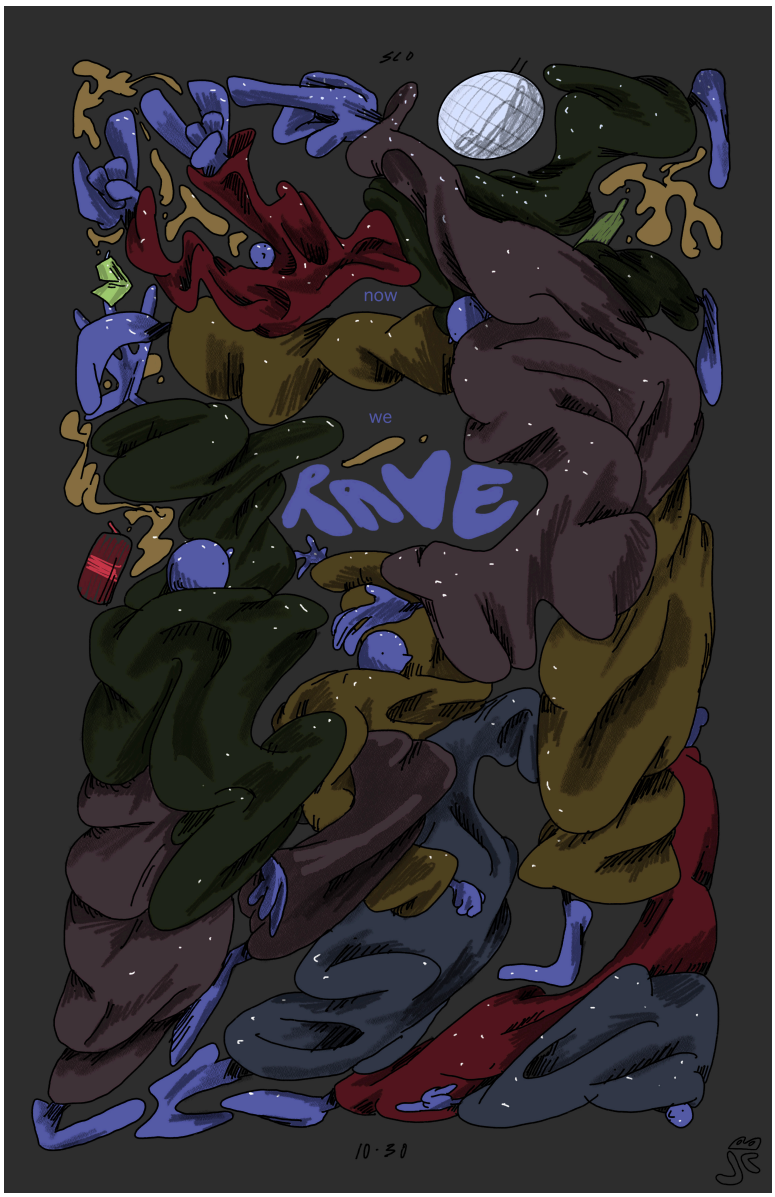
I'M SORRY I DID IT WRONG) what I had done to myself, and what that had done to you.

I haven't seen you since you moved out. I drunkenly called you a couple of times, and after the second time you must have blocked my number because the third call wouldn't connect.

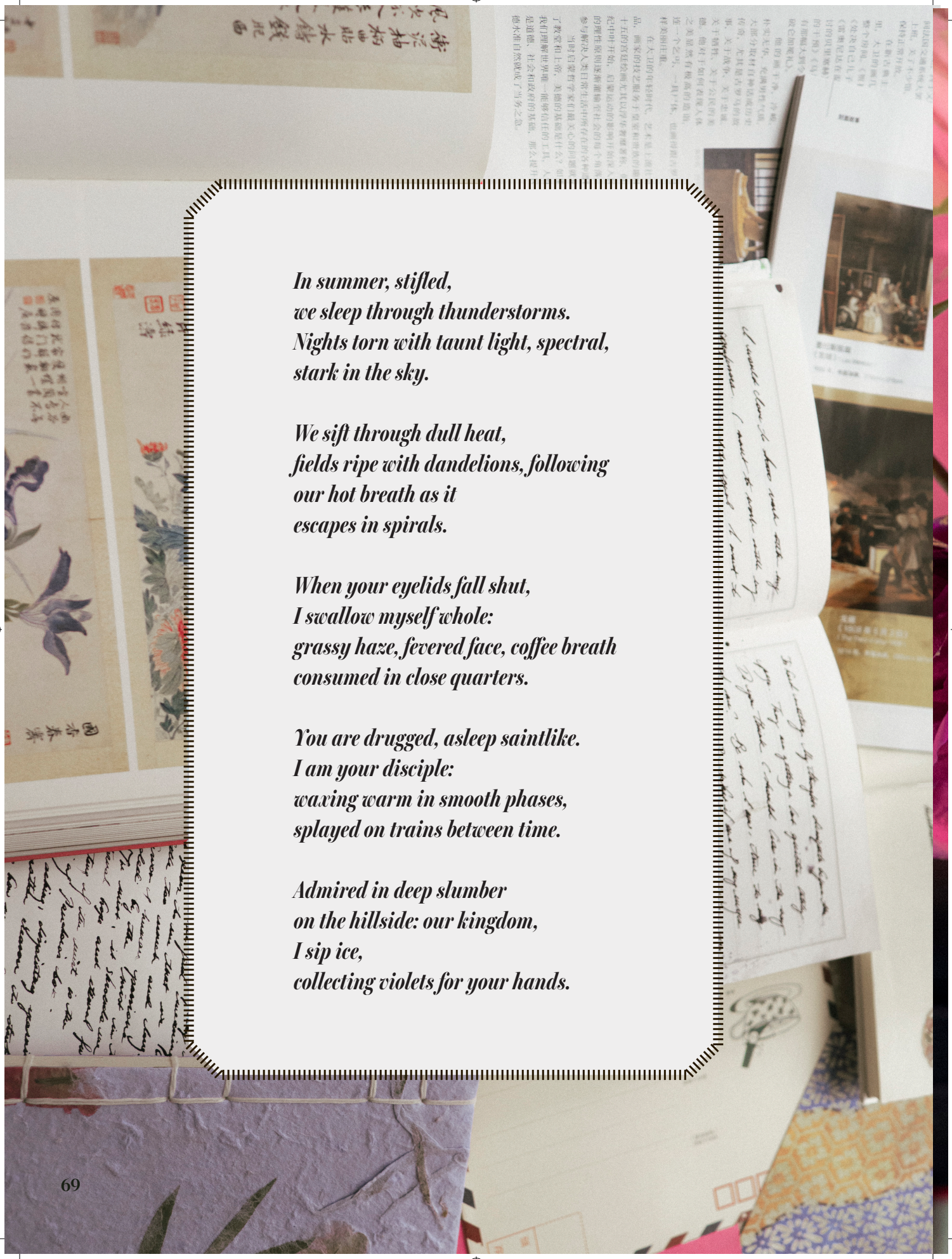
I'm doing fine at work. They still laugh at my jokes and I laugh at theirs. I still go to parties, and sometimes I find girls like me and we kiss for a little, but it's never enough. I look in the mirror after it's over and feel wrong, feel human. No matter how much I drink, I feel more like a person every day.

I've started smoking. I figured that a year and a half on hormones would be an okay time to pick it up—I've got enough estrogen in me now, right?—and sometimes I sit on the balcony, drinking and smoking and feeling myself up. When I do this, I think of you. I imagine that one day you'll come home, and I'll take you to bed and when I fuck you, I'll look at you. I promise I'll look at you.





Julian Cross



In summer, stifled,
we sleep through thunderstorms.
Nights torn with taunt light, spectral,
stark in the sky.

We sift through dull heat,
fields ripe with dandelions, following
our hot breath as it
escapes in spirals.

When your eyelids fall shut,
I swallow myself whole:
grassy haze, fevered face, coffee breath
consumed in close quarters.

You are drugged, asleep saintlike.
I am your disciple:
waxing warm in smooth phases,
splayed on trains between time.

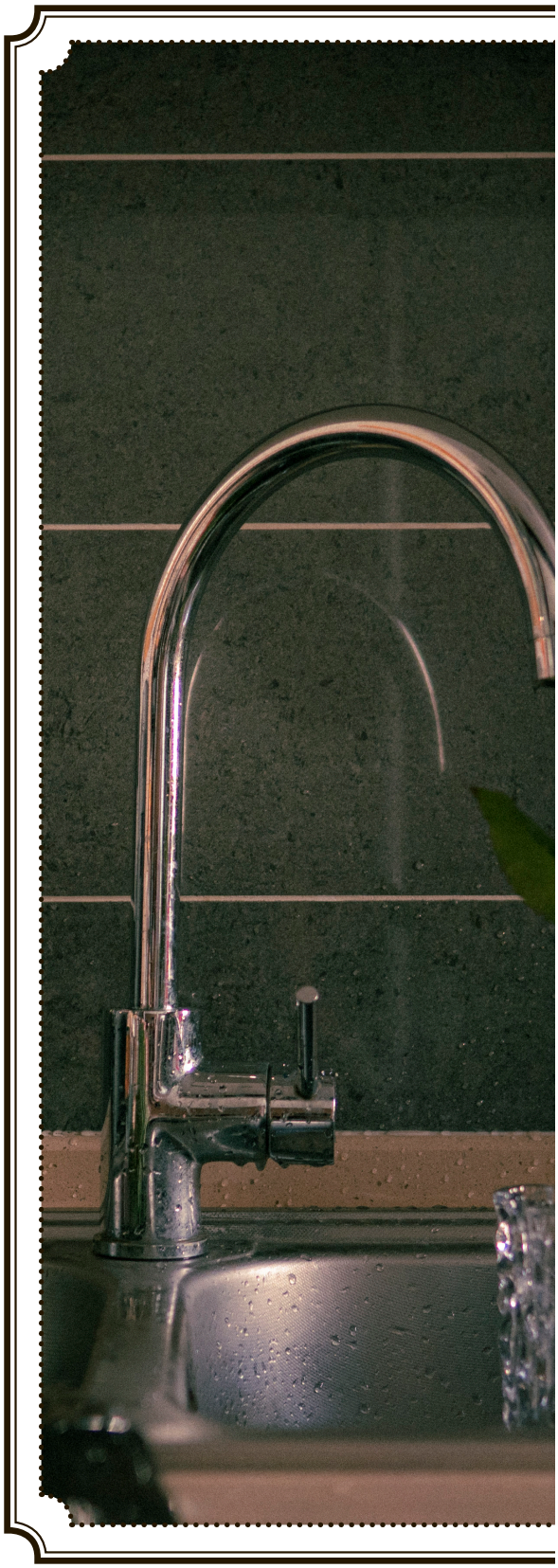
Admired in deep slumber
on the hillside: our kingdom,
I sip ice,
collecting violets for your hands.



Daphne Scroggins

Solstice







Dysuria Days

Rory Gielty

Content Warning: Descriptions of Medical Diagnoses and their symptoms.

The DSM-5 was my first security blanket. I was 13 years old when my psychiatrist slid a copy of the "Mood and Feelings Questionnaire" to me during our introductory appointment. I thought the questions were reductive, but I filled it out as truthfully as I could. I sheepishly passed back the clipboard, like I was turning in a test I forgot to study for. Even though she assured me that there were "no wrong answers," I was stunned. By the end of that appointment, I had a prescription for Zoloft. By the end of the year, I was diagnosed with depression, anxiety, PTSD, and she was building strong cases for bipolar disorder and OCD.

I clung to these labels. Psychiatry isn't straightforward, but my doctors spoke to me with confident clinicality. My diagnoses provided a sense of order and validation to my otherwise uncertain life. The criteria, which came straight from the book, could ascribe almost every facet of my identity.

A diagnosis is powerful. Putting a name to a problem opens possibilities, from medications, to support groups, to specialists. A diagnosis can affirm you—"I'm not crazy after all!" Diagnoses are complex, and can bring up conflicting emotions. Until this year, I always viewed them as a step in the right direction. They can also be contentious and vague. After dealing with the matter-of-factness in psychiatry, I thought other fields of medicine would be more of the same. And honestly, I never thought I'd get sick sick enough to find out. I knew I was doomed for talk therapy and antipsychotics for the rest of my life: Isn't that enough?

During my first semester at college, I was struck with health problems. I first noticed stinging when I went to the bathroom, and I had dark cloudy urine even when I was hydrated. My bladder would spasm throughout the day, and I developed pain similar to period cramps. I constantly felt overheated. I could hardly hold my bladder; I ran to the restroom every hour, but had a hard time going. I was ashamed and scared to see a doctor. I let it go untreated for a while because I hoped it'd resolve itself.

When I did seek help, I quickly discovered that being sick at school is incredibly inconvenient. I got a course of antibiotics from a campus nurse that didn't help. Oberlin's Student Health services dodged my follow-up appointment attempts, so I made frequent trips to the urgent care and ER within walking distance of campus.

Mercy Health made a mockery of my pain. I remember my late night stay in October 2023 most vividly: They were diligent with getting a CT scan, an IV with steroids and antibiotics, and taking blood cultures, but barraged me with undermining, accusatory questions.

My infected urine sample cup sat on the sink in my exam room for hours, shaming me. A series of RNs, a nurse practitioner, and the attending physician took turns with the interrogation.

"Are you sure you're wiping the right way?"

"Yes. Front to back." I tried not to let my frustration come through.

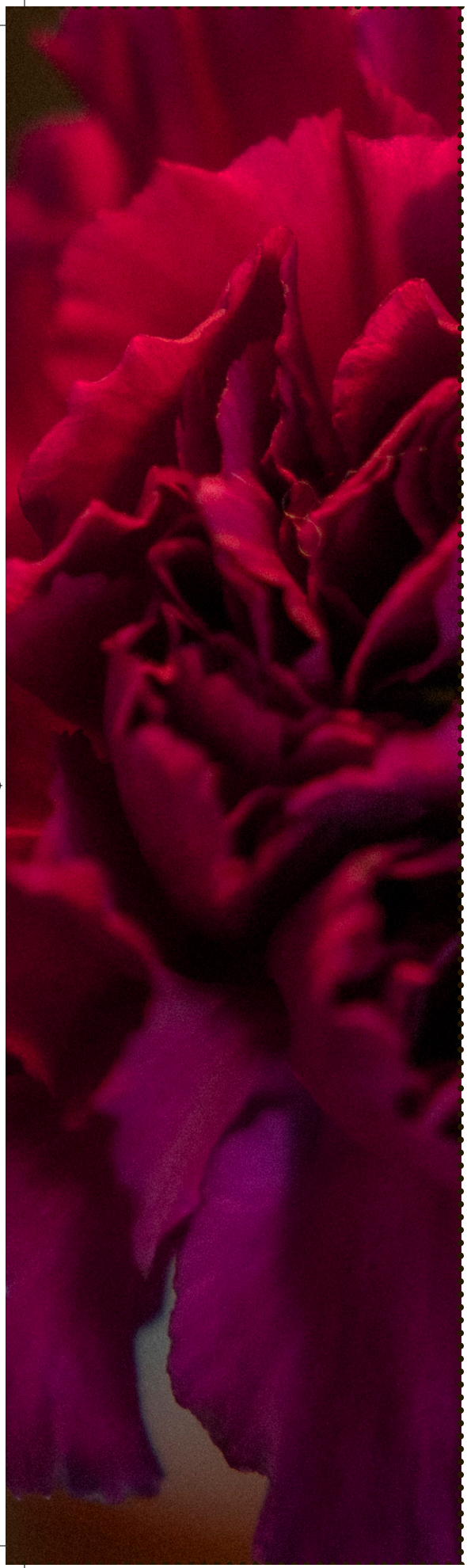
"How many sexual partners do you have?"

"One, and we use protection." I wasn't lying.

"Any chance you could be pregnant?" as if they didn't ask the last question and see an IUD recorded in my chart.

"No."

I wept in the hospital bed between providers, then wiped my tears to put on a brave face when I entered the room. I was so focused on proving myself to them that I almost forgot about the problem at hand. The dissonance between myself and the hospital staff used all of my ever-depleting



energy.

After-visit summary packets varied in the diagnoses they described. Upper and lower urinary tract infections were most common. Other times, they would list a singular symptom as my reason for seeking care. I quickly learned of the many conditions with the suffix '–uria': dysuria is painful urination, hematuria is blood in the urine, pyuria means that there's an elevated white blood cell count in the urine.

Instead of spending time with friends after classes and on the weekends, I was in waiting rooms and on exam tables. I'd calculate whether I had time to make an "urgent care run" between my 11AM and 1:30PM classes, or when I could trek to CVS to pick up more antibiotics. I was alone constantly and hardly left my dorm. In the library or dining hall, I could be found frantically texting my mom about kidney infections while chugging water and no-sugar-added cranberry juice.

At my most desperate, I couldn't even stand to deal with Mercy anymore. I spent my last $80 on Ubers to a non-affiliated express care clinic in North Ridgeville. I knew nothing about them, except that they'd accept my insurance. It was costing me everything. As they hooked me up to the vital signs monitor, my heart rate jumped to 132 BPM.

"Do you have a heart condition?" the STNA asked. The loud machine beep triggered her question right on-cue.

"Nope, just white coat syndrome."

I was squirming, and not purely out of nervousness. It was uncomfortable to sit, with zaps shooting from my groin to my bladder. No matter how tightly I crossed my legs, it lingered.

My physician's assistant of the week was a lanky guy with a mop top, baby face, and scrubs that looked like an Adidas sweatsuit. I had a hard time believing he was old enough to be a high school graduate, let alone have a master's degree. But he listened to my dissertation, took notes, and was quiet until I finished.

"I've tried Keflex, Macrobid, Augmentin, Bactrim,

but I just can't shake this UTI. Nothing is helping." If my heart rate wasn't a giveaway, the shakiness in my voice broke my facade. I couldn't be strong anymore. I just wanted to give up.

"We should do a full STD panel just to rule everything out. A swab test will detect chlamydia, gonorrhea, and trichomoniasis. The symptoms are all similar to UTIs."

It wasn't what I wanted to hear, nor did I think he was correct, but it was a different perspective. He didn't accuse or judge me for my symptoms or their potential cause. I did as he asked: swabbed myself and dropped it into the test tube.

My results came back clean. The PA from Ridgeville called to say that he did all he could, so I'd need to find a specialist. It helped to know there were kind providers out there; it was just a matter of seeking one out myself for continuous treatment. My first appointment with Beth, a urology-specialized nurse practitioner, was on my fall break home from school.

Beth was wondrous. I gave her the same story I'd told dozens of times, but I wasn't on the defensive. She was professional, yet friendly; knowledgeable, but not unapproachable. She was the first provider who could, and wanted to, commit to my case.

Beth called me "sweetie" and "dear," but it never felt patronizing. When performing procedures or exams, she'd apologize profusely for hurting me. She'd distract from the catheter prodding by asking questions about my classes. She assured me that the pain wouldn't be permanent. For the first time, my treatment was collaborative.

I saw Beth whenever I had long breaks from school. But without consistent transportation to her office in Cleveland, we corresponded via MyChart. She prescribed me more medications, sometimes the wrong ones, because she was treating me based on descriptions of my symptoms alone. Over the next few months, I took more unnecessary antibiotics: I no longer had any bacteria, but all my other symptoms were still consistent with infection.

The confusion consumed me. A string of UTIs





had evolved into something else entirely, and everyone was clueless. I tried my best to put my faith in the professionals, but at times it felt like they were guessing just as much as I was.

Eventually, Beth changed her strategy. Over a telehealth visit in January, she asked me different, somewhat guided questions. I replied as honestly as I could.

"Do you notice an increase in bladder pain with acidic foods, carbonated beverages, and caffeine?"

"Now that I think about it, yeah, I do."

"Do you experience pain with tampons and penetrative sex?"

"Yes, every time."

"I think what we're looking at isn't recurrent UTIs anymore, though you've had your fair share. We should start talking about interstitial cystitis. Next time you're available to come into the office, we should do a cystoscopy. In the meantime, let's get you a script for Elavil."

I didn't get much information on IC at that appointment, so I began to research on my own. As I sifted through dozens of womens' stories on Reddit and symptomatology on WebMD, I started to piece together an idea of what IC is. The idea of being chronically ill scared me worse than having a months-long infection; at least infections could be cured. I was also worried because there seemed to be a lot of debate on what IC actually is, leading to hesitancy diagnosing it.

Interstitial cystitis is a pelvic disorder that affects the bladder. In reality, the name is probably a catch-all for many different uncategorized bladder conditions that present similarly. Some patients have lesions or ulcers, some don't. Some have pain flares with acidic foods, others have no dietary triggers at all. Most people have discomfort when the bladder fills, and an overactive bladder causing frequent trips to the bathroom.

The way I understood it, my bladder was damaged by UTIs. A string of untreated infections triggered an inflammatory reaction or caused scarring on my bladder wall. Beth's next question was whether

the damage was visible or not. So, I scheduled my cystoscopy for early February. I was especially worried because it wasn't Beth performing it. When that afternoon arrived, I walked into the office, was greeted by the usual receptionist, and gave my urine sample to the same STNA as always.

"Go ahead and undress from the waist down, and cover up with the paper sheet. You can leave your socks on," the assistant told me once I was in the room. "The doctor will be in shortly." She closed the door behind her, and left me alone to disrobe. I trembled as I folded my pants and set them on the guest chair.

A flexible cystoscopy is a procedure in which a small, lighted camera is inserted into the urethra to examine the bladder and urinary tract. Patients are awake during the test, and a localized anesthetic is applied to the area. Upon entrance, the cystoscope fills the bladder with water or saline so the entire wall is visible.

A male doctor eventually entered the exam room, followed by a nurse who I'd seen before at my appointments with Beth. He shook my hand firmly and took out the stirrups from under me. I scooted down and placed my feet in the curved slots. The nurse handed him gel to numb the area.

I felt like a kid again, hiding behind my mom at the pediatricians' when it was time for shots. If I was shaky and nervous while waiting for the doctor to enter, true terror set in when I saw the scope camera turn on and mirror onto the TV screen to my left. I couldn't bear the thought of it going inside me, no matter how many catheters I'd endured before.

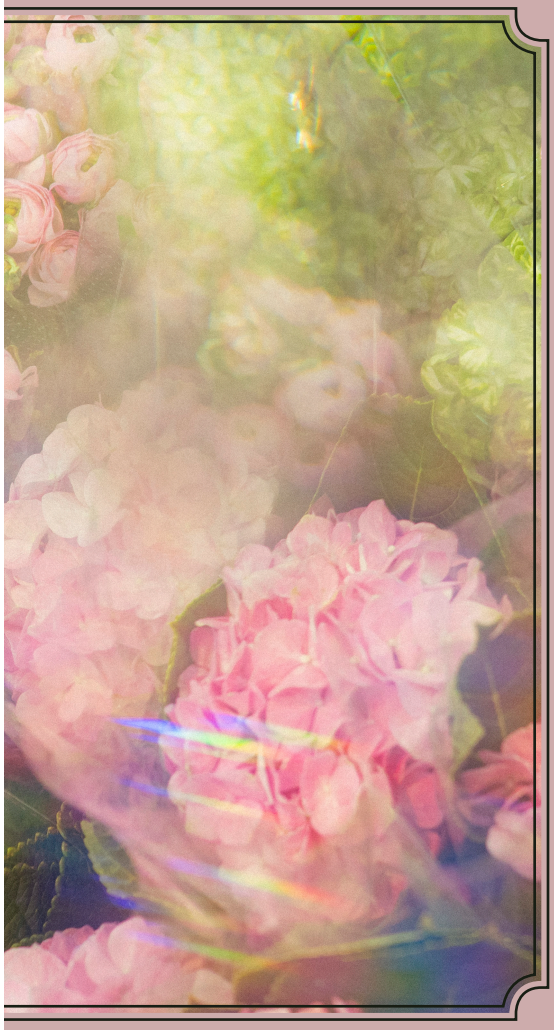
I blurted out, "How bad will this hurt?" knowing I was about to find out either way.

"Just a pinch," the doctor replied, but I could tell he was lowballing me.

I immediately got choked up as silent tears streamed down my face. The nurse, after handing the doctor the rest of the tools, passed me a box of tissues. She reached her gloved hand out to me to squeeze while the scope went in.

Beth always told me exactly what she was





doing, continuously. As she glided a flexible orange catheter inside me, she would count me down then apologize—"I'm so sorry, dear"—when she did the big push.

This doctor, whose name I can't remember, didn't understand why I was so upset. He was polite, and his bedside manner was just fine. He talked me through the "pinch" and started to distend my bladder with saline. I winced at what felt like shards of glass piercing my urinary tract, and he didn't react. He had the same kind of clinical, black-and-white disposition worn by every psychiatrist I knew.

As I watched my bladder fill up on the screen, it matched the sensation in my body. The worst was over. Now I just had to pee.

"It's the same kind of tissue as the inside of your cheek," he told me. I moved my tongue around in my mouth to feel what I could.

There were no visible lesions or abnormalities. Great, I thought, they just shoved a camera up there for nothing. I must be crazy. I expected him to dismiss my concerns like the Student Health and Mercy doctors did. But after conversing with him and later Beth, I was officially diagnosed with interstitial cystitis. Previously at psych appointments, a thick informational packet detailing any new conditions or meds was always attached to my after-visit summary. Here, I was left to drive home ruminating about the war my body is waging on itself.

Diagnoses can leave you wondering. In this case, the doctors have unanswered questions, too. I was relieved to know I had something, but the thing couldn't be more vague. Nothing felt clear. I didn't feel affirmed, or validated, or like I fit into the correct box. And treatment options weren't exactly straightforward, either. The most common words in my medical appointments from this point on were "trial and error."

The reality of a chronic illness becoming your "new normal" is daunting. It didn't hit me all at once, but in spurts. The one upside was knowing I wasn't having recurrent infections. I stopped

having intrusive thoughts about spreading bacteria and septic shock. I gritted my teeth through the cramping and stinging, until I couldn't anymore.

I started having flares just as severe as the night I spent at Mercy. I would first think, "maybe I should get this checked out" before remembering that this just happens now. There's no reason for it. It just happens.

I noticed patterns about my symptoms, and formed an internal bartering system without realizing: I can have one cup of coffee, but two feels like pissing razor blades. But if I drink enough water with it, it's usually fine.

"We treat the symptoms, not the condition," was a mainstay of my psychiatric treatment. Now, I was hearing it from my urologist.

I started a new antidepressant—off-label, for my pelvic pain. Within weeks, Elavil eased my bladder cramps, spasms, and I was able to sleep through the night again. The relief was indescribable.

In March, I began a series of bladder instillations. Once a week for six weeks, I hitched a ride to Beth's office for a quick and mostly painless procedure. Instillations repair the bladder lining with a cocktail of medications, inserted via catheter.

The longest part of these sessions was waiting for Beth to mix the medications. I knew the drill: get my vitals taken, pee in a cup, go back to the exam room and undress, then wait. Cold under the paper sheet, I'd often have 20 minutes or more alone in the room; ample time to catastrophize. Then Beth would burst in, holding graduated cylinders and syringes.

After the solution was instilled, I could leave the office right away. The important step was that I held it inside for a few hours and repositioned myself frequently. The solution needed to coat my whole bladder, so I made a habit out of jumping around and squishing my stomach throughout the rest of my morning afterwards.

I felt my bladder relax after the first three sessions, and things only continued to improve from there. I finished the series in mid-May; Beth celebrated with me at the last appointment. I went





home, and things felt relatively normal. There was a lull for the first time since last summer.

Until I forget my Elavil.

Sometimes, when I'm rooting around for my pills at night, I forget a bottle on my nightstand. I don't notice the lost weight of the little green tablet in my hand, much less when the meds are swimming in a gulp of water in my mouth. Instead, I feel it the next day. I wake up fine, but within a few hours there's nothing I can do but curl up and writhe. I take pain meds to try and counteract my carelessness, but it's too late.

My bladder contracts in short bursts. The smallest sip of water puts pressure on my organs. On these days, I still trudge my way to class, and take a seat in the back of the room. I go right back to bed after, and I don't get up for dinner.

The next day is always a chance at a fresh start. I double up on the pain meds, avoid triggers, and my water bottle never leaves my side. I give myself grace but promise myself that I'll be more careful from now on. At a July appointment, Beth simply tells me to get a pill organizer and set reminders on my phone. Instead of the "good news, bad news" schtick, it's all good today.

"I know this winter was not easy for you, my dear, but you made it through. I think we should just keep pushing along. We can always do another series of instillations or bump your Elavil if you have flares, but we're in good shape. How do you feel about a check-in in six months?"

I was skeptical, but she assured me that she was always just a MyChart message away. It's been four months so far, and I haven't needed anything. IC doesn't hold the same space in my day-to-day life that it once did. I'm passively living with a condition instead of being dictated by one.

I stood up from the visitor chair beside the exam table– I hadn't needed to undress or get an exam or catheter this time. It felt like a friendly chat more than a medical appointment.

"On your way out, you can schedule a follow-up. I'll see you in January, dear!"

beet-stained hands

Kath Sheldon

gliding across the starry sky: a graceful lark
searching, struggling to find its quai
home through the mask
of delirium caused by its rage
subtle like the spice of achiote
and red as a beet

the tangy and earthy song of the beet
crooned from the beak of the lark
sorrowful. the colonization of a spice, achiote:
capitalism built over villages so strong and quaint.
the cries of their inhabitants silenced into seething rage
anguish covered by a mask





a cracked mask
what's underneath bleeding out like juice from a cut beet
simmering rage
sings through the wind on an arrow that misses its mark: the lark
the lark flies home it is happy in the quaintne
of its nest for it knows the sweetness of achiote
pulled from the seeds of a mighty tree: achiote

tells the tale of a tree hidden by a mask
evergreens stand tall their sapling counterparts quaint
their power hidden underground in their roots like a beet
anchored to the earth as legs ground a lark
snapping when it flies away in rage

but sometimes the anchor is rage
soft like the aroma of achiote
but broken like the call of a lark
rage cannot always be masked
it can only be buried so deep before it is dug up like a beet
before being cut down to a salad in the end a meal so quaint

salad/bread/beets all so quaint
cause a stir a rage

when one cannot find anything to eat not even a be
a life void of the rich flavor of achio
hunger everlasting unable to be masked
the rumble of a stomach cuts through the lonesome cry of the dying lark

a sound so quaint
in its simplicity, like the subtle pepperiness of achiote

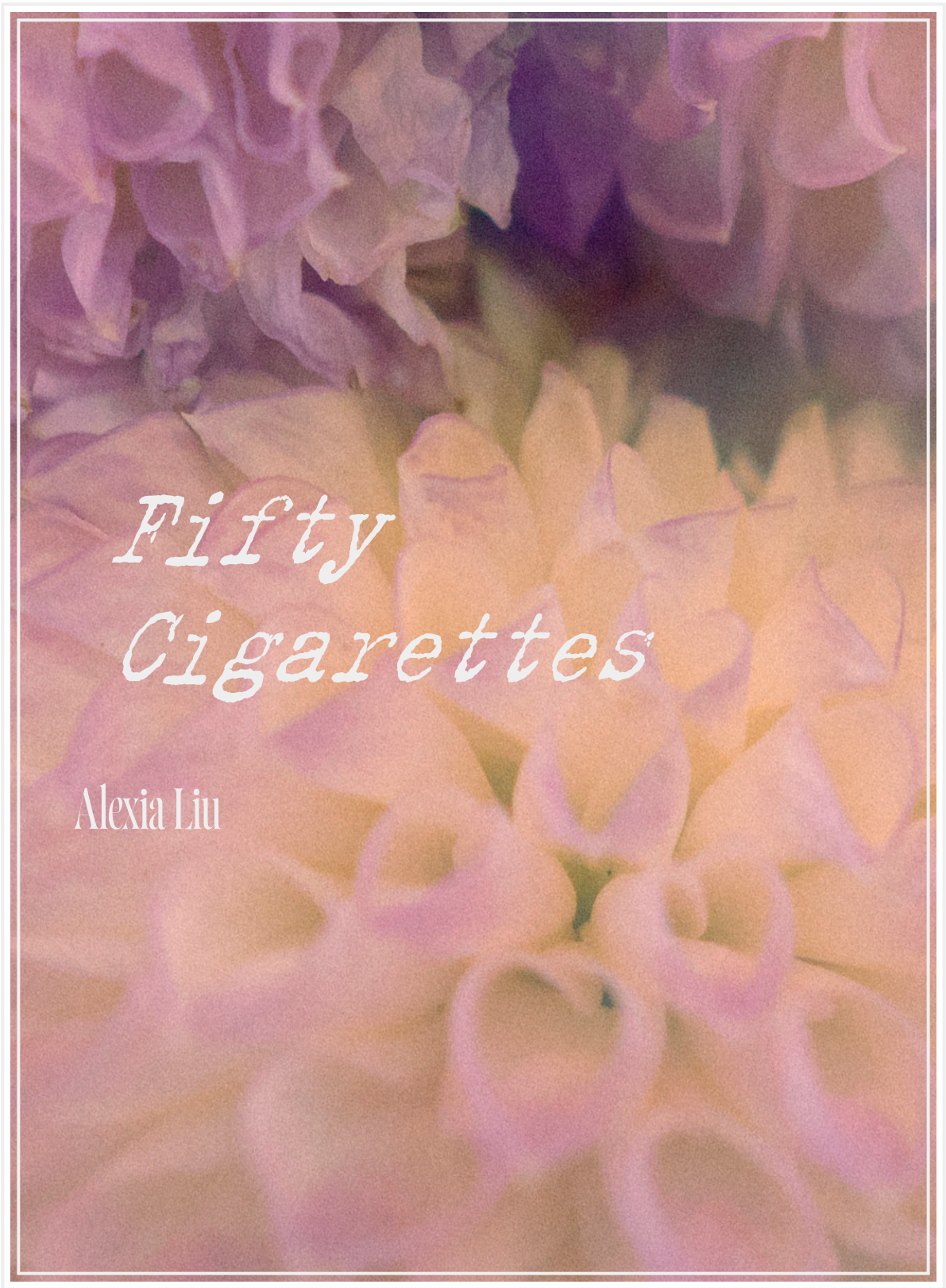
it turns sour in the mouth, succumbing to the intensity of the lark's rage
no longer masked

we wait a beat
but it seems we've heard all we will from the lark



Vyvia Shen




Fifty
Cigarettes
Alexia Liu

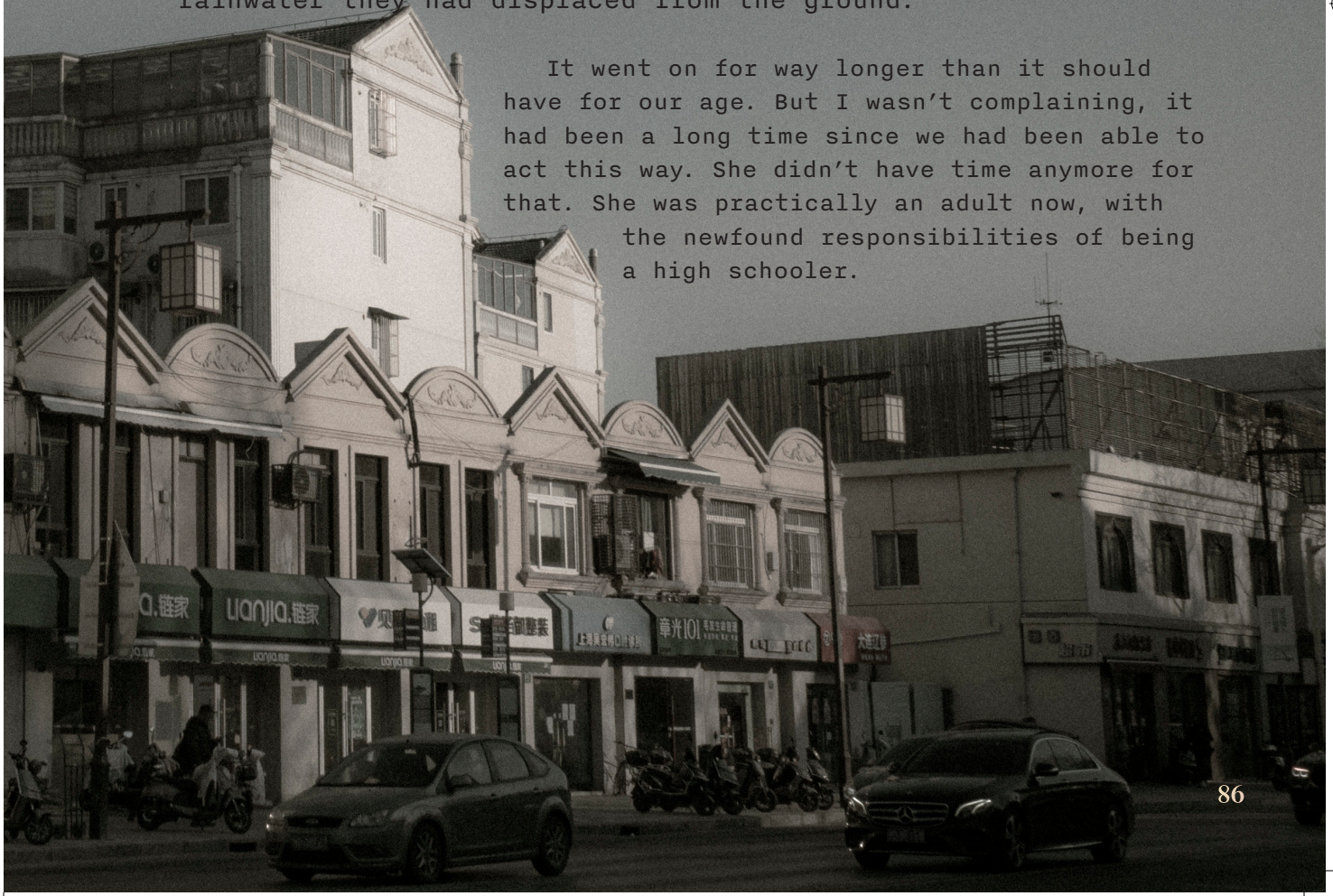
Before I could respond, a car roared past on the highway, muddy water spinning from its wheels and dousing her in it. She yelled something at the driver, and though I could not hear clearly enough, knowing her it was probably obscene. She began to make her way down, bucket swinging at her side, with the same reckless footing she had practiced when she had ascended. However, when she made the final jump, her landing was as it always was. Not even a disturbance in the air, a scuff in the dirt left behind.

She turned and looked at me. “Pussy,” she grumbled.

I smiled sheepishly and shrugged. “That’s me.” Only she was brave enough to get that close to the road.

She then grinned at me. I grinned back like an idiot until she abruptly stepped closer, shaking herself like a dog and covering me in the spray. “Hey!” I yelped. I shook myself off too, returning her favor. She accepted the challenge, and suddenly we were doing some sort of weird dance, passing the droplets back and forth, our shoes soaking through with the rainwater they had displaced from the ground.

It went on for way longer than it should have for our age. But I wasn’t complaining, it had been a long time since we had been able to act this way. She didn’t have time anymore for that. She was practically an adult now, with the newfound responsibilities of being a high schooler.





It used to be tradition for us to come down here every couple of weeks and clean up the woods surrounding the river. However, we hadn't done it for months, and this was the fourth attempt to reschedule. Though she assured me it was fine changing plans with her new boyfriend, I still felt a little guilty. The one time I had met him, he had loomed over me like I was a highly squishable insect. And it had looked as if he was actually considering stomping his foot down. It was okay if he didn't like me, of course, but I didn't want him to fight with her because of me.

We had to stop our antics when I noticed a fisherman walking in the distance, easily spotted with his neon orange and purple (a horrific but common color combination in the area, the colors of a local university's football team) sports attire. We did not like to be seen doing our work, work that was to be done quietly save for the calling of the water birds and the rustling of returning leaves. There was no use in talking to them anyway; it wasn't like they didn't know. The best we could do was simply clean up what they wouldn't have.

"Let's go this way," she whispered, gesturing at a narrow path branching off from the main one. It wasn't how we usually patrolled, but it would be easier to avoid the fisherman that way.

And it wasn't like it was a concern that there wouldn't be work to be done wherever it led.

I felt a difference in the silence between us as we walked. It was no longer because we were lost in the lull of the oaks and pines, but because there wasn't anything to say that wouldn't perish in seconds. The invisible mirrors that had seemed to exist before, bouncing words between us, had seemingly vanished. I didn't know any of her new friends. She still knew my friends, but it was different when you're a highway, an exit, and several streets apart. I pretended not to notice this and so did she, but we both knew and knew the other did too. We picked up trash along the trail as usual, only counting the cigarettes, but among our collection were various sizes and types of plastic bags, shards of beer bottles shattered in anger over empty hooks, fake rubbery worms, fishing lines previously strung from tree branches like Christmas lights, and a few lighters.

The bucket was full by the time we reached the end of the

path. It was a dead end, but quite a beautiful one. A small clearing, with a bench overlooking the river. The view was completely unobstructed, only reeds framing the gentle ebb and flow of the water. Male red-winged blackbirds sang boldly, waiting for the charmed responses from the females. The soundtrack of spring.





She walked over to the bench and was about to sit down when she made a surprised sound and picked something up from the seat. She held it out for me to see, and it was another cigarette. However, this one was untouched, entirely unsmoked. She looked thoughtful for a second, then began rummaging through the bucket, extracting each of the lighters we had found.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said, realizing what she was going to do. "I know," she said, but didn't stop. She began testing the lighters until a flame flickered weakly from one of them. She lit the cigarette, the tip catching immediately with glowing embers. I watched as she raised it to her lips and inhaled. I knew she had never smoked before, and unsurprisingly, she began coughing immediately, her face scrunching up in disgust. She promptly threw the cigarette onto the ground and stepped on it, then picked it up and tossed it into the bucket.



"And that's fifty. Fifty cigarettes," she reported, voice still raw, but as if nothing had happened. I nodded, but did not say anything. What could the 7th grader possibly say except something lame and uncool and mood ruining?

"Wait, what's that?" she said, diverting both of our attentions from the rift between us. If I looked closely though, the rift had always been there, ever since the day we'd met. Since she had introduced herself and offered conspiratorially to tell me where babies come from. She proceeded to perch on top of the monkey bars, legs swinging as she explained from above. The rift had never mattered before, but I was worried it would soon, the ground falling back into the earth and swallowing us whole, playground memories and all.

Now, I squinted at the area in the water where she was



looking. There was something large at the bottom, flat and pale and waving slightly in the water.

"Maybe some sort of carpet?" I suggested. I grabbed the trash picker-upper we had brought and stuck it into the water, attempting to pull the object up. It took several tries, and when I finally succeeded, I jumped back in horror. Floating up from the darkness was the carcass of a large fish, silvery green and half-stripped of its skin and flesh. The smell of rot immediately overtook the sweet spring air. I dropped it, and the fish's remaining scales shone like a beacon in the brackish water as it sank back into the depths. The clouded water settled slower than I thought possible.



"People are such assholes. And look," she said angrily, pointing further past the first fish. There were at least three more, bright as bone against the mud. I could not see their eyes, but I could feel their empty, accusatory stares.

"Yeah. Someone must've fileted them and then just thrown them back."

She shook her head downwardly in disgust, and we were silent for a few moments. "Do you want to go back? I think we've done enough today," she asked distantly, clearly thinking of anything but the fish. She did not look at me, continuing to stare at the flaps of flesh, rolling like strands of seagrass.



"Okay," I said, and we gathered up our things briskly and began the wordless trek back. The river continued with its song, perhaps an endless elegy. Our hands suddenly brushed, then fell apart, and I thought that the voice of its waters would never change, but perhaps, one day its melody would.



St. Patrick

Owen Spina

How often do you watch the news?

One time I visited my grandparents and they turned it off only when we told each other we were sleepy and going to bed. I don't blame them because you have to know what's going on in the outside world and living in a gated elderly community somewhere in the Pine Barrens can become sterile quick, I imagine. Instead of going to bed, I got drunk and went into the woods. My stomach was a beer keg cuz I eat everything my grandparents put in front of me, I feel bad otherwise. Another time when I was younger, my dad told me while cooking eggs that he'd looked out his shutters the night before and saw red, glowing eyes past the yard, past a row of trees. The Jersey Devil, he said, the 13th kid, the youngest kid like me. Later in the guest bedroom I cried and shouted until I passed out, all tuckered. Sometimes my Dad would let me watch old horror movies with him when Mom was out or in bed, and so he was always charged with staying in my room as I tried to sleep. If he sat in a chair and was just there, it was enough for me to be calm enough not to panic or yell. Sometimes he'd pass out in the chair waiting for me. Him being in the room was enough to stop myself from thinking Jason Voorhees or Michael Myers would come in and stab me and such.



My friend Jesse Facetimed me Yesterday and kept on for a solid hour because she'd just gotten fired from her job and she was considering taking legal action. Her parents are lawyers and give her more than a living allowance every month. She was really only working at the diner because she needed to do something and she loves the idea of being one of those old waitresses who works late shifts and always has the exact same temperament. Supposedly, her boss called her into his office Monday morning, not even waiting until Friday to drop the bomb. I don't know for

sure, because I was not there, but I bet the conversation went something like this:

"Sit down," the boss'd say.

"Okay," Jesse'd say.

"Are you trying to sabotage this diner?" His face is red the whole time. "Why, no! Why would I -" Jesse always plays the innocent.

"I didn't actually believe that you were saying what I'd heard you been saying, so I had Hank record you while you served some people by the countertop." "You did what?!?!?!"

"I had Hank record you while you served some people by the countertop. Can you leave and not come back now, please?"

"Bullshit. What'd I say then?" The top'd've blown clear off. One time I forgot to venmo her for McDonald's and she called my mom to tell her I skipped class and that she was worried about me.

"You torment our patrons. Especially the elderly. Look, I have the recording right here." And then he would press his phone and it would start playing: ""Sup? What do you want?"

"I'll have the sausage gravy and biscuits with a side of homefries. She'll have the cheeseburger deluxe with fries and a shamrock shake. I'm good with just water." "Are you sure that's what you want, ma'am?"

"Yes, what my husband said, I believe. I think so, yea."

"Right, Jesse clears her throat, "anyway, I read an article that Cornell put out last month. Sausage gravy uses a roux as its base and the article claims that rouxes could possibly be the most effective clogger of arteries in the wide world of foods. And, of course it goes without saying, but men are always more susceptible to heart complications."

"Oh..." he said, "I think I'll actually get a grilled chicken wrap instead." "Excellent choice!""

Her boss: "Miss Ritchie used to come here every morning and I haven't seen in two weeks. Go figure."

"You don't check the obituary, I guess. Welp, she-"

"Get your shit and leave, okay?"

"Okay." She casually stood up, skipping her way out the door. She made a line for the bar and grabbed two beers with each hand from the cooler.

Jesse saw my Uncle Craig and my little brother as she hit the sidewalk and catcalled them with the whistle, the one that goes "Fwoi Fwew!" They convened and she handed them two beers. Connor's eighteen but he's a smart enough kid, he used his lighter butt to pop off each cap and they started to talk. Craig and he probably came from the pub, but I know for sure they were on their way to the cemetery since it was St. Patty's Day.

The past two years, those two have tried to drink as much as they possibly can on St. Patty's in honor of my great-grandfather. It might be special if only they didn't drink with one another everyday at this point.

Connor, my little brother, left the house before Mom had the chance to kick him out with what he saved from working summers. Currently he's living with Craig, supposedly taking some time to get on his feet now that he's graduated. On his feet, to this point, has meant sitting down and watching Treehouse Masters, getting wasted, getting high and playing catch with his dog. He sits and sits some more. In my opinion, he's on a fast track to becoming incontinent if he keeps on at the rate he is. And here he is, back at the grindstone with Craigy.

When Craig was 10 or so, great-grandpa Pat (Pop-pop) told him to drive a pipe into his grave once he died and pour down a Guinness every time March 17 rolled around. So a couple years after when he for real died, Craig walked over to the fresh mound and took a hammer down on some steel-pipe.

Once it'd almost completely vanished into the ground, he took it out and cleared the inside. He attached another pipe to one end, repeated until more than six feet of pipe had submerged. After an hour of work, he struck the coffin's mahogany. So, he tensed his muscles to capacity and lifted the hammer high up before swinging down, missing and bending his ankle. He never got it set totally right, so he still has a limp.

Craig and his grandfather were exceedingly close. He'd bring Craig on duty and they'd walk up and down the aisles of grave stone. Pat, that's my great-grandfather, tended the cemetery and when it was summer, Craig joined him nightly for his prowls. They'd pass by the friends that Pat'd buried months or years before and he'd smack their grass patches and say, "Layyy back down now, boys. Lay back," before he took a drink. Craig owes his jolly nature and reputation to Pat, he had him slugging pints in front of the entire pub since he was no older than 10.

Craigy's got the protruding belly now but he was proportionally wider as a boy, and I'm sure they called him "doughboy," "Twinkie kid" or something to that effect. Every man in my family besides me has a lean back and a half-sphere beer belly. I drink hard liquor and I run every day, so it hasn't nailed me just yet.

Connor came over late to my place, the whole time talking at me with his focus cashed out on remembering. He had called me earlier in the day because he and Craig were in need of a ride to the hospital, but I was busy eating lunch. Once dusk had settled, he biked over with his hoodie up. Only after he asked did I grab two glasses and the Wild Turkey. Though he and Craig visited the cemetery only a few hours before he came over, he was having trouble relaying any of it. Once he'd polished off his first glass, his story started to straighten out.

He guessed it began innocuous enough. They were talking about the

new press release put out by the Department of Home Defense, the UFO footage that came with it. "Crazy shit. The pilots don't even know what's going on in the video. It's like that one episode of Twilight Zone," said Connor.

"Could be doing reverse psychology. What if it's just a distraction, right? Like we'll have you thinking about aliens while we steal the election."

"I'm pretty sure me, Mike and Phil saw one going past Devil's Tree."

"What's that?" asks Craig.



"A UFO."

"No, I mean what the hell is a devil's tree?"

"That tree in Basking Ridge where the farmer killed his family. A construction guy tried to cut it down but died on his lunch break."

"Oh yeah, okay. By the high school?"

"Yeah, yeah. So we were driving past the intersection that the school's on the corner of, toward the tree. We were about to light up a joint or a cigarette since we were in Mike's Jeep, you should see the interior of his

mom's car. Burn holes everywhere. And a ring of lights showed up as the sky opened past the trees. John noticed first and his voice cracked hard so that's how I remember. Then all three of us are looking up at it and it's not moving. Like it was hard to tell because we were in a fast-moving car, but it kinda just stayed there suspended in air. I've had dreams like that, like a plane levitating an inch from cracking the glass of a sky-scraper. Well we kept on driving, all kind of quiet since we were high and paranoid. Or maybe we weren't high yet, but you know how you can start feeling high just by breaking it all out and doing the ritual. Like just rolling a joint up, you already -"

"Whaddya talking about pot for?" asked Craig.

"So basically we kept on and lost it in the trees. We sped up and saw it again where the crop fields open up the forest. It was spinning in place, fast. Right there, there's a bend in the road so we became parallel to the field. One of the stray trees off the edge covered our view for a millisecond and the UFO was gone as we passed it. Wasn't the Devil's Tree, though. That covered our view, I mean."

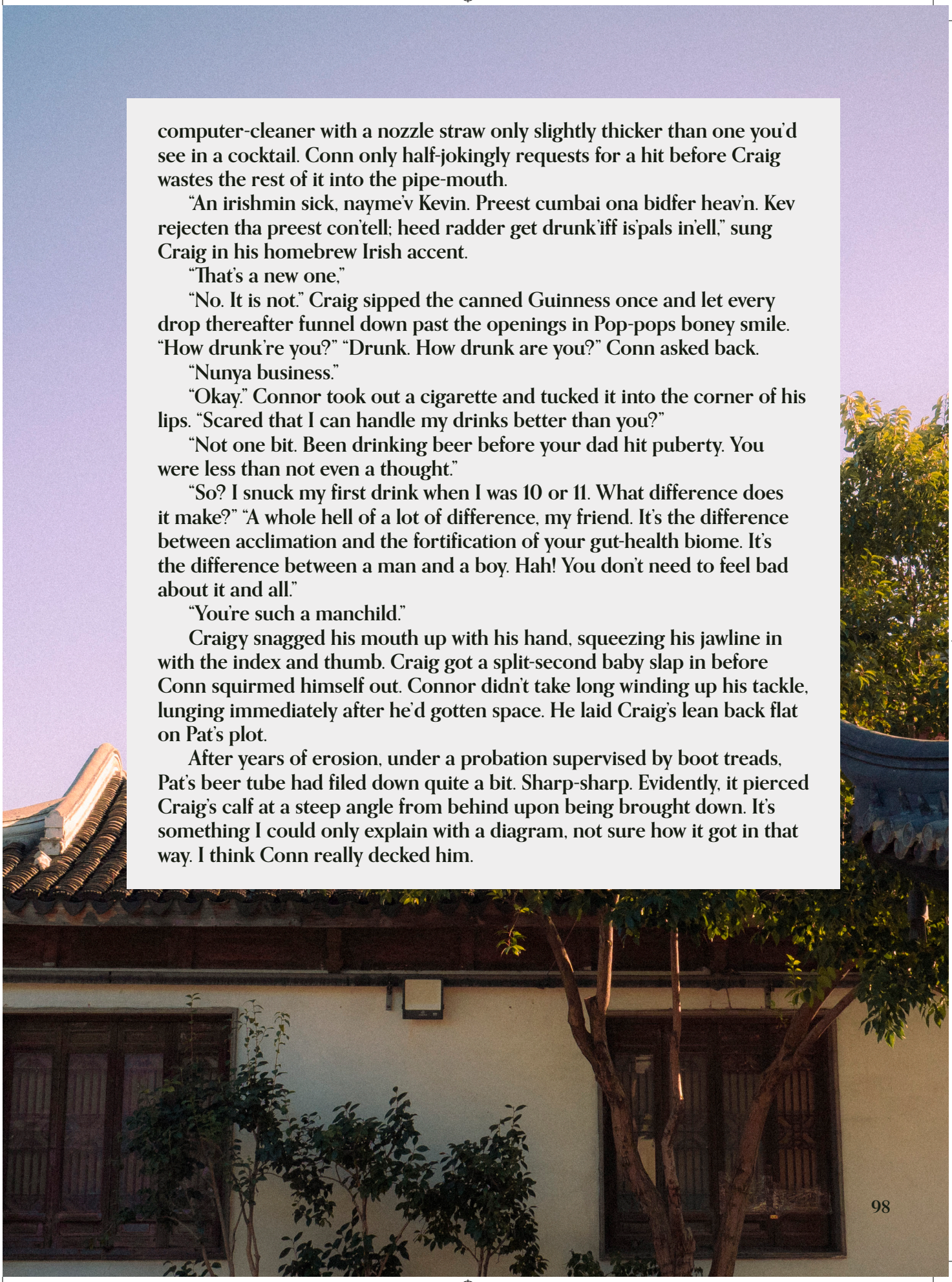
"Bullshit."

"I'm not lying, you can murder my parents if I'm lying."



Julian Cross

"Don't say that." Craig got down on his knees. He snaked a pipe-cleaner down through Pop-pop's drinking tube. He pushes it down with relative ease and twists and pulls, pushes and wrings it up. It wasn't particularly humid or hot out but in combination with his wasted head, Craig was sweating out every pigment left in his skin aside from the red in his cheeks. I've seen him put on this exact face trying to carve a Thanksgiving turkey without knowing where the spine is. Craig pulls out a can of



computer-cleaner with a nozzle straw only slightly thicker than one you'd see in a cocktail. Conn only half-jokingly requests for a hit before Craig wastes the rest of it into the pipe-mouth.

"An irishmin sick, nayme'v Kevin. Preest cumbai ona bidfer heav'n. Kev rejecten tha preest con'tell; heed radder get drunk'iff is'pals in'ell," sung Craig in his homebrew Irish accent.

"That's a new one,"

"No. It is not." Craig sipped the canned Guinness once and let every drop thereafter funnel down past the openings in Pop-pops boney smile. "How drunk're you?" "Drunk. How drunk are you?" Conn asked back.

"Nunya business."

"Okay." Connor took out a cigarette and tucked it into the corner of his lips. "Scared that I can handle my drinks better than you?"

"Not one bit. Been drinking beer before your dad hit puberty. You were less than not even a thought."

"So? I snuck my first drink when I was 10 or 11. What difference does it make?" "A whole hell of a lot of difference, my friend. It's the difference between acclimation and the fortification of your gut-health biome. It's the difference between a man and a boy. Hah! You don't need to feel bad about it and all."

"You're such a manchild."

Craigy snagged his mouth up with his hand, squeezing his jawline in with the index and thumb. Craig got a split-second baby slap in before Conn squirmed himself out. Connor didn't take long winding up his tackle, lunging immediately after he'd gotten space. He laid Craig's lean back flat on Pat's plot.

After years of erosion, under a probation supervised by boot treads, Pat's beer tube had filed down quite a bit. Sharp-sharp. Evidently, it pierced Craig's calf at a steep angle from behind upon being brought down. It's something I could only explain with a diagram, not sure how it got in that way. I think Conn really decked him.



Rom-com-enomenon:

How to Fall Back in Love with the Romantic Comedy

Katie Priscott



I was absolutely confident I knew what love was in my teenage years. After all, I had seen the movies. It looked like boomboxes held overhead outside bedroom windows, felt like sprinting through the streets of New York to get to a New Year's Eve party, tasted like Razzles candy, sounded like a breathless rendition of "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" in a soccer stadium. To me, love looked like a rom-com.

I am a fervent defender of the romantic comedy. I find them to be the perfect balance of wit, snark, and optimism—comfort food for the hopelessly (or hopefully) romantic. Even for the skeptics, there is no better movie to watch on a long flight or a sick day than a movie bearing Nancy Meyers' or Nora Ephron's name.

The genre is quietly responsible for some major elements of the cultural zeitgeist. For instance, the phrase "high maintenance" soared in usage after the release of When Harry Met Sally and has taken up residency in the lexicon.

However, I write this piece bearing some bad news. We as a society are in dire need of a renaissance: a renaissance of the romantic comedy.

Many rom-coms of our generation haven't yet cracked the formula and don't tend to pack the same emotional punch. 2023's Anyone But You took many of the components of past successful rom-coms (adapting a Shakespeare classic, claiming a song for the primary couple, farcical hijinks that include animals and a helicopter), but received lukewarm critical and public reception. There is clearly a demand and a deep rooted love for romantic comedies, so why aren't the rom-coms of the 2020s working?

Before we dive in, we need some historical context: In my mind, there are three competing contenders for the "first" romantic comedy. 1934's It Happened One Night, starring Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, is often considered the first, given its equal focus on the couple and the screwball comedy aspects. However, the film didn't lead to a trend as a result of the Hays Code censoring what was permitted on American screens from the end of that year until the 1960s. Annie Hall is considered by some to be the first rom-com of the post-Hays era, but there's a key convention of the genre that complicates the title: The featured couple doesn't end up together, which, in my opinion, is a deal-breaker. The film that brings all the romantic and comedic pieces together, complete with a happy ending, is the previously mentioned When Harry Met Sally. From then on, every rom-com was "having what she's having."

My definition of a true romantic comedy is a film centered on a particular couple coming together, with an overall light-hearted and silly tone. The characters are loveable, there's conflict that's juicy and heartfelt without feeling overwhelming, matched with a catchy soundtrack. It's not an exact formula, more of an art than a science, but none of these elements exist in a vacuum—everything needs to be just so.

One central point in this conversation about the 2020s rom-com is the tropeification of stories. This trend is largely due to social media, where posts go viral for placing books, movies, and TV shows into categories based on the tropes included in the plot: recommendations for "enemies to lovers" or "fake dating" or "second chance" with montages of posters and artwork for titles that fit the bill. Anyone But You attempts to implement all of these tropes for the sake of checking the box. Yes, Bea and Ben don't like each other. Yes, they fake-date in order to get their families to leave them alone. Yes, this is their second chance at a relationship after a failed initial attempt. However, trying to take on all of these tropes at once makes none of them feel purposeful, as if they all cancel each other out PEMDAS style, while simultaneously also "adapting" Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing.

Another huge issue in the film is the lack of

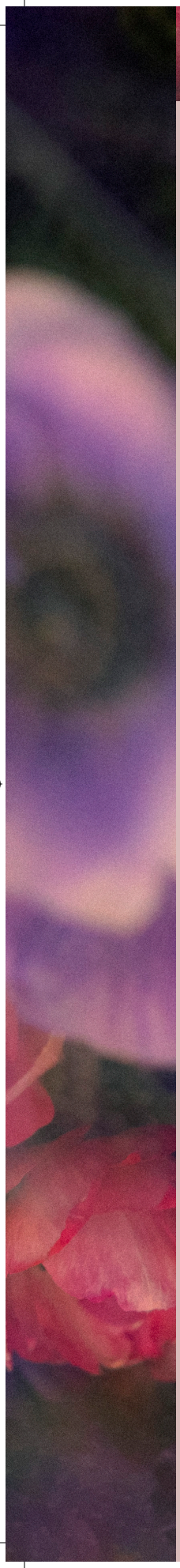


diversity. And to be clear, this issue is absolutely not limited to Anyone But You. Many romantic comedies have casts that are demographically interchangeable. It's an indisputable fact that, in real life at least, conventionally attractive straight white people with beautiful apartments are not the only people that fall in love. But in a lot of these films, that doesn't seem to be considered. In Anyone But You, this problem is as clear as day. The LGBT characters and characters of color are used for plot progression and punchlines, while Glen Powell and Sydney Sweeney are given a complete story arc. (There are some wonderfully written diverse rom-coms out there that I highly encourage anyone reading this to watch, including Love and Basketball, Crazy Rich Asians, and The Half of It. They skillfully achieve many of the tasks that Anyone But You fails to, and beyond that, beautifully showcase stories of love that go beyond the limited mold Hollywood has used for decades.)

The third glaring problem is the audience's lack of connection with the characters. We know passing details of exposition, such as Bea dropping out of law school, but that piece of information doesn't inform her dialogue, personality, or actions throughout the film. Even the characters themselves don't seem to connect with the location of Sydney. The sweeping wide shots of Australian beaches and the shiny Airbnb are objectively stunning, but it's almost too beautiful and uncanny to feel real. Thinking back to a film like 10 Things I Hate About You, another Shakespeare rom-com adaptation, Padua High School is not just a backdrop. Kat's love of literature and learning, Patrick's serenade on the steps of the stadium, even the slamming of lockers all make the place feel highly relevant and purposeful to the journey of the characters. You could transplant Anyone But You to Anywhere But Australia and it wouldn't make much of a difference.

This lack of connection to the characters has a domino effect on every other aspect of the film. Another box that Anyone But You technically checks is The Grand Gesture, where Ben takes a helicopter to the Sydney Opera House to find Bea. We are meant to see this as endearing because he faces his fear of heights (one of the only real things we know about him) and because he "knew where she would be" (i.e. the most famous landmark in the country). But the intended impact simply isn't there. The Grand Gesture is one of the most key elements of an impactful rom com, from Dylan's flash mob in Friends With Benefits to Harry's sprint through the city streets to deliver his monologue in When Harry Met Sally. It's not that these actions are particularly realistic things to do or feasible resource wise; it's that we care enough about the characters to want one of them to do something to win the other person back. Of course Patrick getting Kat a guitar in 10 Things I Hate About You doesn't absolve him of the wrong choices he made throughout the film, but the viewer is so invested in seeing them happy together, and the gift is specific to what we know about each of them.

This analysis might seem like overkill for a genre that doesn't take itself all that seriously. However, if a type of film is this beloved, it's worthwhile to look into why. Furthermore, it might not be the case that rom-coms don't take themselves seriously, but more so that the general public doesn't see them that way. Looking at the audience of romantic comedies is essential in understanding their perception. It can't be overlooked that rom-coms are treasured by teenage girls and young women. The vast majority of their interests, from boy bands to the color pink, are often cast off as frivolous and immature—but this audience segment is a box office powerhouse and a cultural force.



I was one of those young girls who fell in love with these often flawed, often corny movies about love, and I want them to be better. So, how can we induce a rom-com-enomenon? Much like Lara Jean Covey from the modern classic To All The Boys I Loved Before, I have a list:

THE NEXT GENERATION OF ROM-COMS SHOULD REFLECT REAL LIFE.

Increasing the diversity of the genre will benefit both the film industry and the viewers. Representing more races, sexual orientations, and economic statuses in these films means that more real people will see themselves represented on screen, and that young people grow up knowing that a love story doesn't look one particular way.

Furthermore–

THE NEXT GENERATION OF ROM-COMS SHOULD BE TRULY OF THE NEXT GENERATION.

This reflection of real-life also means adapting to the 21st century, as there is so much content for filmmakers to dig into based on how Gen-Z is experiencing love. It's different now, with dating apps and "talking stages" and "situationships." But (at the risk of sounding like a conspiracy theorist with a bulletin board of red string), is having a "roster" all that different from Carrie Fisher's character slamming down a box of index cards with eligible bachelors' numbers on them in When Harry Met Sally? Our culture's complicated relationship with commitment is nothing new, just the shape it's taking. Talking about it will make feeling it a little less isolating.

THE NEXT GENERATION OF ROM-COMS SHOULD HAVE AUTHENTIC, ENTERTAINING, INTENTIONAL DIALOGUE.

One modern rom-com that uses its dialogue incredibly is Crazy Rich Asians. Word choice, speaking patterns, and even what language is being spoken are tools of characterization throughout the film. (I could write a full article on the mah-jong scene between Rachel and Eleanor alone.)

Even the strongest premise can be weakened by characters using out-dated slang suggested by executives in board rooms or stilted sounding love confessions. Furthermore, while there was quickly paced banter between Bea and Ben in Anyone But You, their voices weren't distinct to who they were. While the expression in English class might be "show, don't tell," how someone "tells" "shows" a lot about them.

On a similar note of intentionality–

THE NEXT GENERATION OF ROM-COMS WILL USE TIME AND PLACE PURPOSEFULLY.

In the most memorable rom-coms, setting almost serves as another character. New York City is in the very DNA of Set It Up, similarly with Beverly Hills in Clueless. Love and Basketball goes a step further, structuring the script itself to be in quarters like a basketball game because the sport is so central to the storytelling. The content doesn't just dictate the form, the two are nearly impossible to separate. If the story could happen anywhere else, if the gorgeous location where events happen is merely a backdrop (looking at you, Sydney Opera House), something's gone awry.

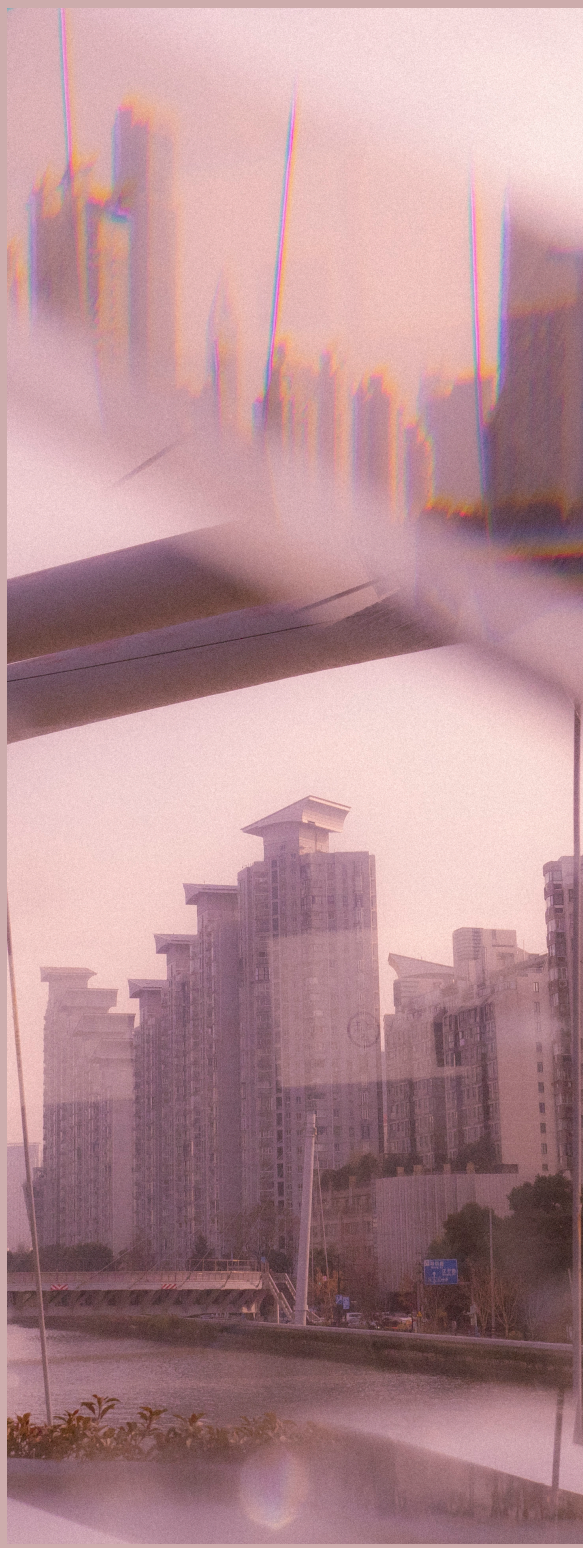
THE NEXT GENERATION OF ROM-COMS CAN'T BE AFRAID TO BE IMPERFECT, OR EVEN JUST A LITTLE BIT WEIRD.

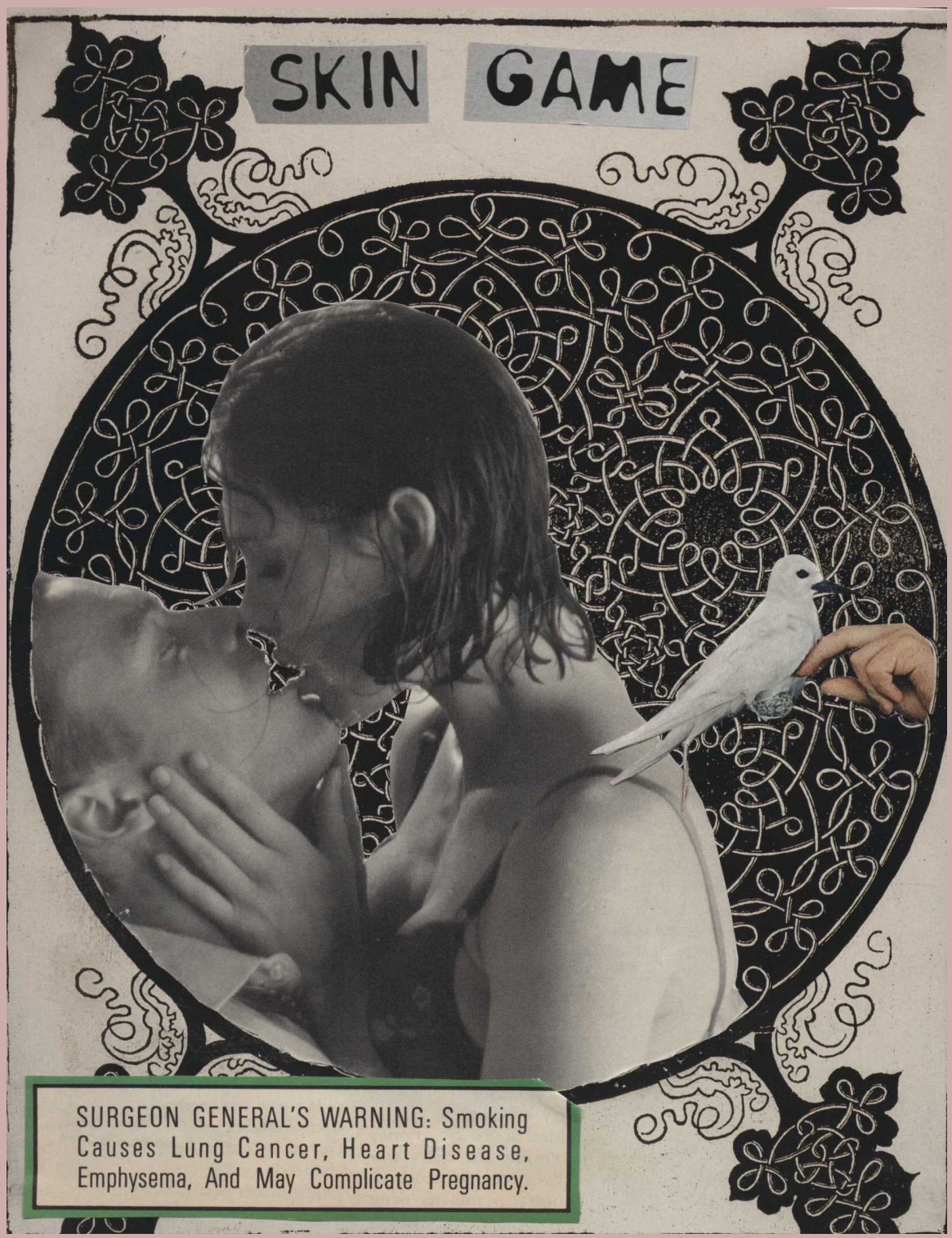
Joe Fox sets out to put a small bookstore out of business in You've Got Mail, both characters in How To Lose a Guy in 10 Days are using the other for writing material, and the entire premise of Julianne's plan in My Best Friend's Wedding is enough to make the viewer's blood boil. However, these flaws and quirks make even the most outlandish of plots feel grounded in reality, and ultimately make the audience want these characters to grow and end up with their person. Which leads me to the most important principle...

THE NEXT GENERATION OF ROM-COMS NEED TO MAKE US CARE (ABOUT THE CHARACTERS).

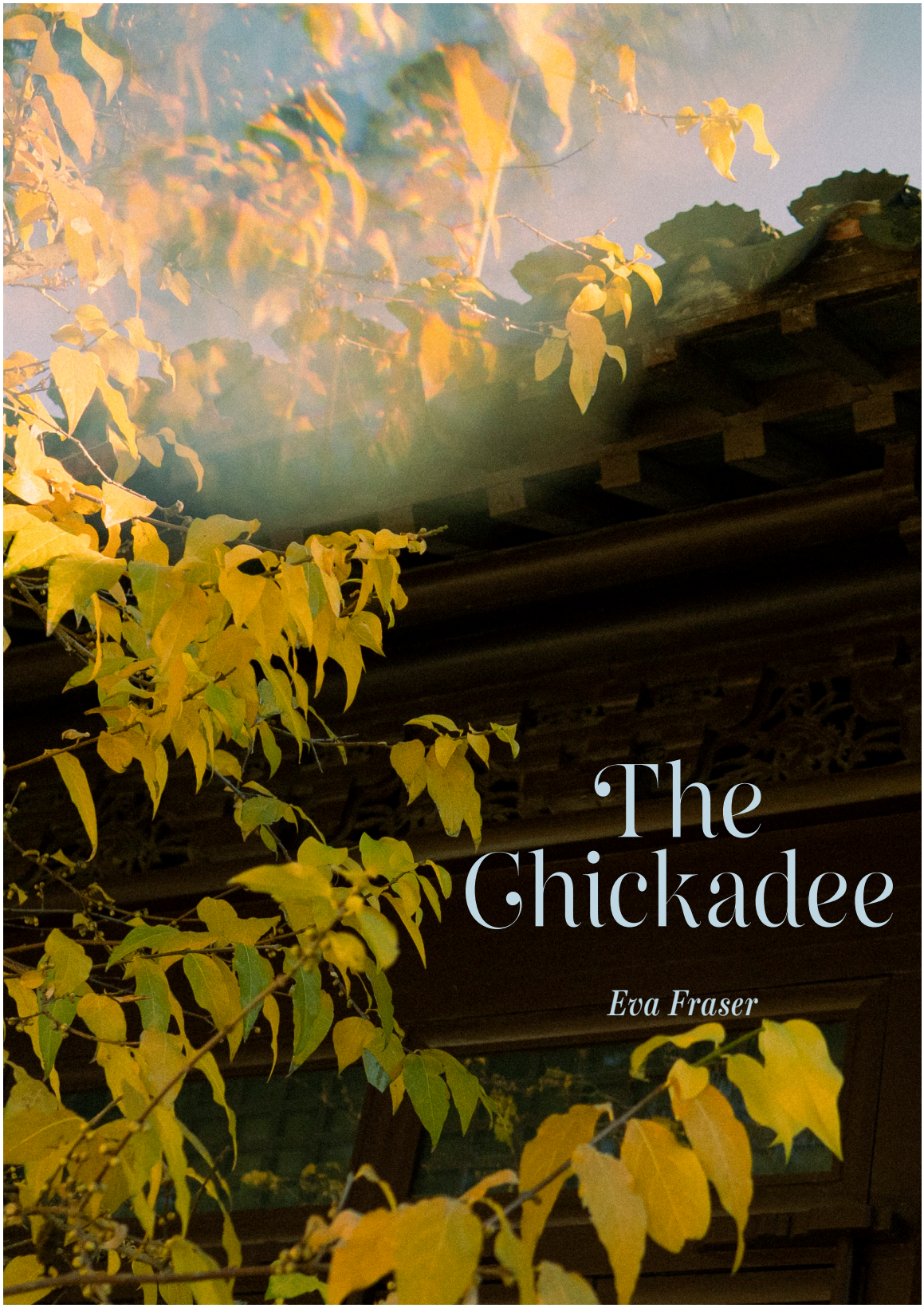
In the midst of the aforementioned apps and "talking stages" of Gen Z, there is still a desire for real connection. Perhaps that's why I, and so many of my friends and peers, rewatch these flawed but loveable movies so much. For 90-ish minutes, we can disappear into the shoes of a protagonist and root for them to find the love that we all want.

Real life is not as cheesy or well-soundtracked as the films that I have waxed poetic about, and maybe that's for the best. But at the end of the day (to paraphrase Notting Hill), I'm just a college student, writing in a magazine, asking for a romantic comedy renaissance. And I do think it's possible, through the flash mobs and third act break-ups, to bring back the joy and investment to the films that so many of us love.

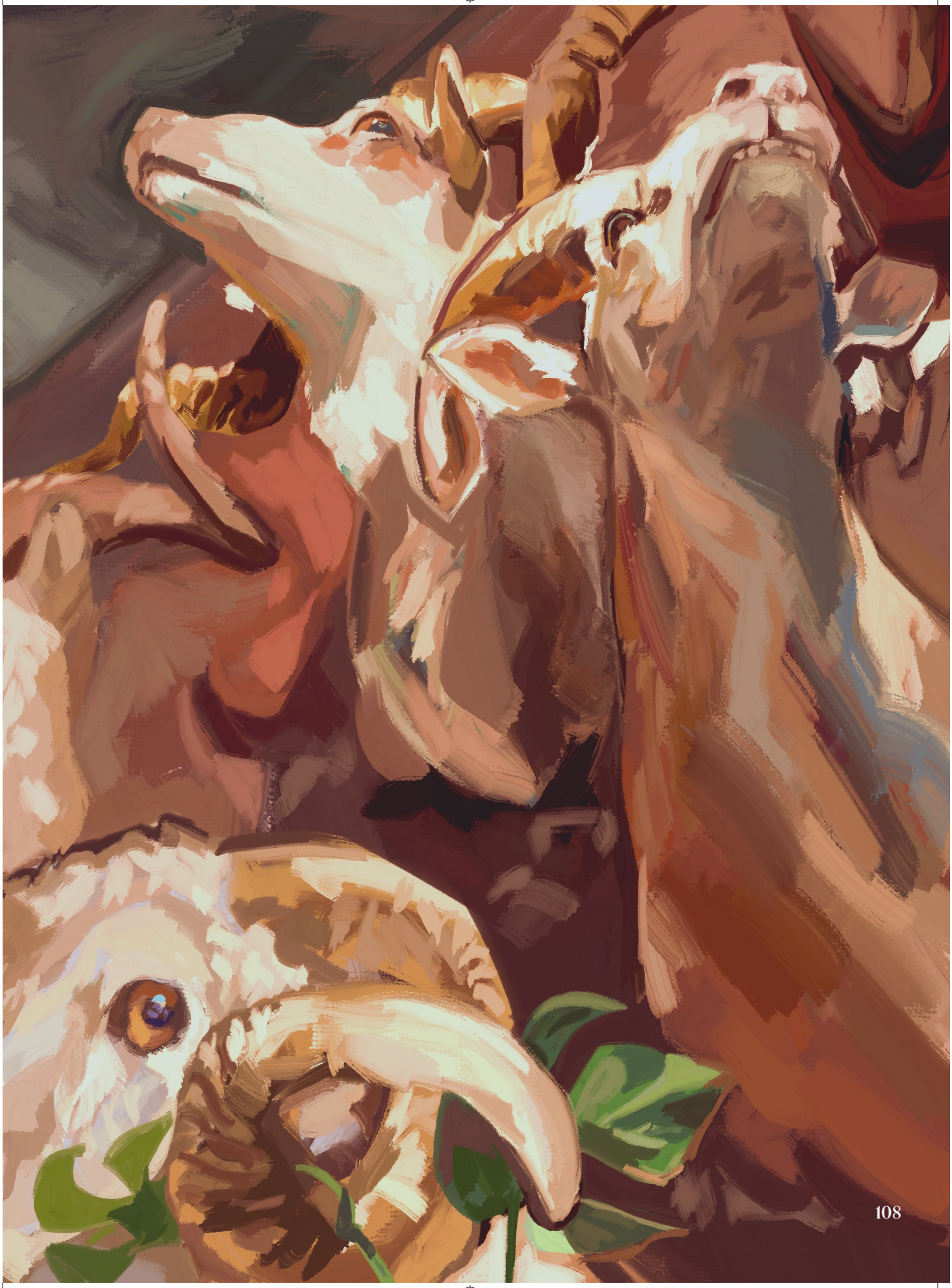




Eleanor Ford



Micah Zhu



The chickadee flits from branch to branch on her favorite birch tree, looking down at the clearing in the middle of the forest. She watches a bunny hop through the thick reeds of grass and sees its fluffy tail disappear into the thick underbrush on the other side. She eyes a squirrel on the tree opposite her, chomping away at a nut, making a variety of sounds she couldn't possibly try to mimic. There is a light breeze running through the forest and it rustles the chickadee's feathers. The warm sunlight filtering through the trees mixes with the cool breeze, creating a feeling of calm that the chickadee cannot entirely describe. To take her mind off the lack of words she has to describe this sensation, she thinks about the tasks she needs to do today: eat some seeds, maybe some berries, too, find shelter, and stay out of danger. One feeling the chickadee can describe is fear. She is always on her guard, the gentle breeze feeling untrustworthy, like it's a harbinger of a new storm — like it's fake.

The tiny bird was so lost in her thoughts that she almost failed to hear the telltale call of a hawk nearby. The breeze, as she had predicted, was bad news. She didn't think about how good it felt in the moment or how it let her have a brief reprieve from the mental load of being constantly alert, uncomfortable, and calculating. She only knew that she had to issue a warning to her friends. "Chick-a-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee!" she sang over and over until she was hoarse. The chickadee knew she had to stop singing after her burst of panic— she didn't want to stop, but she couldn't share her fear with anyone else because she couldn't appear vulnerable. She didn't want the hawk hearing her, even if it meant keeping all of her fear locked inside until the threat went away.

She stood as still as she could and waited. She watched the squirrels run up and down the trees, watched deer eat some of the grass from the clearing, and watched a group of ducklings trail after their mother. None of it was comforting anymore. All of her observations were tainted with the bitter twinge of anxiety— and rightfully so. She could not let her guard down like before. The chickadee stayed in this mindset until the sun began to fade, and the vast foliage started to envelop the forest in a yawning twilight. She had to find a place to sleep. She flew back to her favorite birch tree and found a hole just big enough for her to squeeze into but small enough to ensure that no one visited her, either. Once she was secluded and safe in the hole, she decided to finally allow herself respite from her fearful thoughts. She stayed out of danger, and that was enough. But, as she lay in the tree, tail feathers cramped up at the back of the hole, she couldn't help but feel a sense of increasing dread. The chickadee didn't understand. She was safe and out of danger; it was time to sleep. But she



Abigail Harris Crowne

couldn't. She lay awake, staring out into the darkness through the small opening of her hiding place, mind drifting back to the conniving hawk and hypocritical breeze.

The next morning, the chickadee awoke feeling overheated and alert. She had to get out of bed. She wriggled herself out of her small home and flew up to one of the higher branches of a tree a couple yards away. Just high enough to observe but not high enough to be exposed. She found some berries ripening along its branches and indulged for a while, her stomach empty from the day before when her fear took over. Once satisfied, she hid between the leaves and set to observing



again. She had a view of her favorite clearing, her squirrels, and the little bunnies. She told herself that she didn't need much else. The other chickadees she knew were all together right now, making families and celebrating the newness of spring. She didn't need that; she just needed to be safe. The chickadee was scared of anything that could bring her something unexpected— like that breeze the other day. She was so wrapped up in her desire for safety that she couldn't recognize when it was time to try something new, the uncomfortable feeling in her gut dissuading her every time she thought about it.

Footsteps crunched below the chickadee's tree. A human. The chickadee felt her heartbeat rise to an impossible frequency, her feet struggling to hold on to the branch where she had balanced so perfectly before. It looked up at her. This human, it was curious. The chickadee wanted to fly away but felt rooted in place. Despite her need to escape, she felt curious, too. All of the animals were watching from their hiding places. Even the hawk nearby didn't dare come out.

A hushed rapture fell over the forest at this human who did't keep walking, who had the same fear as the chickadee, who might have understood. They watched each other, entranced. The chickadee, experiencing a connection she hadn't recognized in years, felt that traitorous, disarming breeze from before and snapped out of her reverie, letting out her famous call, "Chick-a-dee-dee!" and flying deeper into the forest, away from the clearing, away from the sunlight. Still, the image of that human was burned into her mind. Traveling away from each other, they both wondered, "What is it like to be her?"









A letter to a Chickadee

I saw you on my hike the other day. Whenever I'm walking around in the forest, I always try to listen closely to any birds or animals that might be around. I love watching the squirrels chase each other across the branches, hiding behind a bush as the bunnies hop across the grass— unaware, and watching the birds sing from their perches on the tall trees. When I saw you, chickadee, I immediately thought of my mom. My dad always says that my mom looks like a black cap chickadee— like you— because of her dark hair and pale skin. I was filled with fond memories the moment I spotted you. I was also reminded of all the chickadees I saw in my backyard, fighting for a spot at our bird feeder. They came there so often that I started to recognize their calls. I was most fascinated with your namesake, the "chick-a-dee" call. One day, I researched the meaning of that call, and I found out that its purpose was to warn other birds of a potential danger— with more "dees" added on with the greater chance of a threat.

I know it must be hard feeling like there is a condition to your safety all the time— I will never be able to fully understand how much you are hurting and fearing every day. When I heard you echo that call, I wanted so badly to show that I wasn't a threat, but that wouldn't have worked because you have a sense of urgency and observant anxiety that wouldn't allow you to recognize my good intentions. It is hard to stop feeling constantly on edge and anxious when your whole life depends on surviving; the only thing to do is to let the emotions pass through. I know this probably sounds like a hard thing to do, and, believe me, it is— I'm still working on it myself, but it really does help. I admire you, little bird, for your resilience in the face of all of the fears you experience. Even though you're a bird and I'm a human, something tells me we might be more similar than we think.

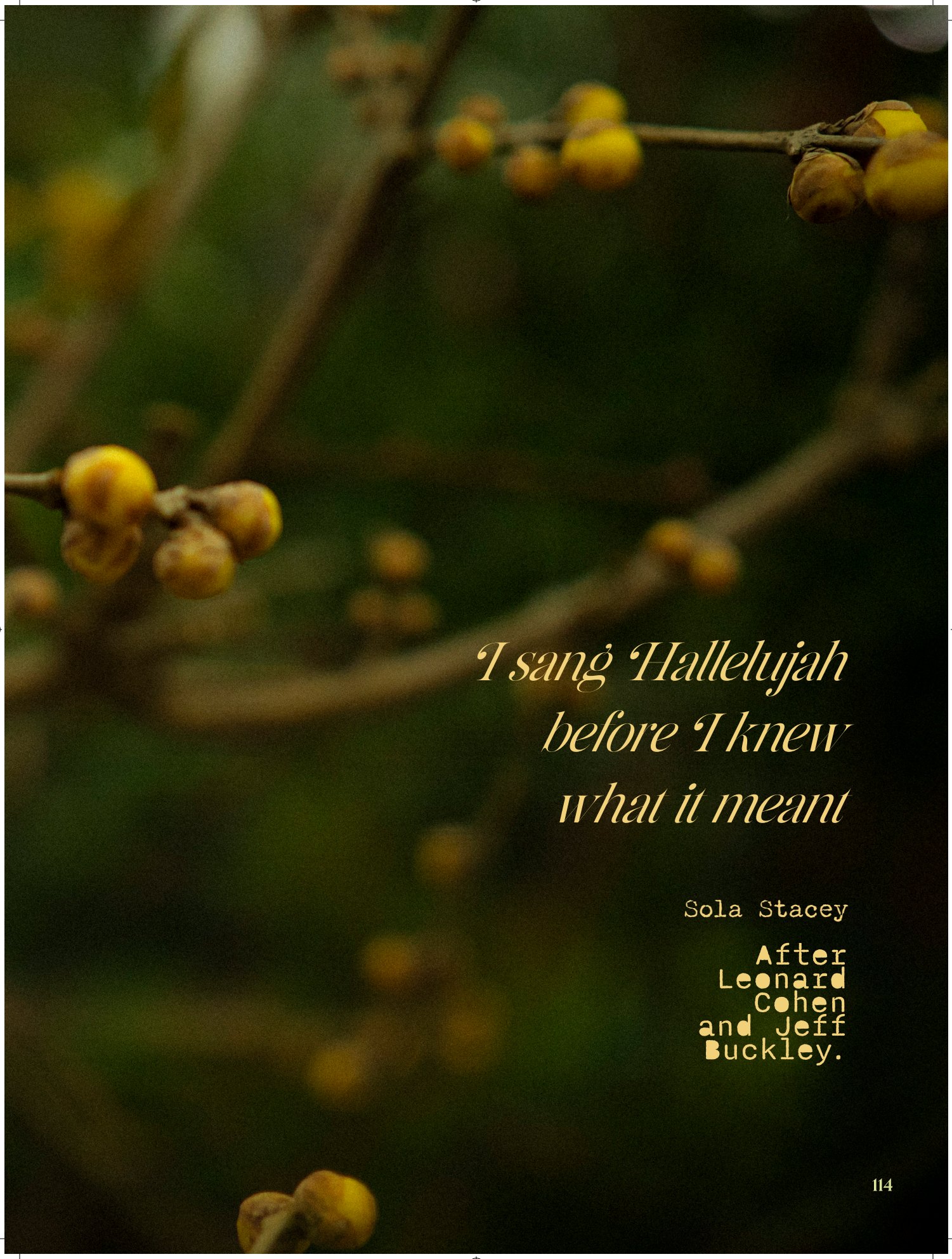




As a girl I sang Hallelujah and plucked each key, now I
sink into you as this town shrinks around me, I
felt your eyes and ignited into something you might like,
all glitter and party. I see my dad in your embered hair
and the lilac wine clung to your lip, I pretend
not to see him there, and dance with every shared moment
in my chest, both our missing pieces, every terrible thing
your mother said. Your friends pretend not to see me on the street.

There's a blaze of light in every word, it doesn't matter which you heard
The holy or the broken hallelujah

On shrinking, sinking sidewalks, on gleaming nights, I imagine
you holding me like a crucifix, the moon full as a plate
heart sings to So Long Marianne, and Suzanne,
and drowning fully clothed in the Mississippi.



I sang Hallelujah before I knew what it meant

Sola Stacey

After Leonard Cohen and Jeff Buckley.



Colophon

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