*Glass Mountain* is a literary journal edited by undergraduate students at the University of Houston, dedicated to showcasing the work of undergraduate and emerging artists around the world. *Glass Mountain* publishes volumes each fall and spring.

## Cover Art

"Sam"
Angela Wells

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*Submission guidelines can be found at*
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**Sam**
Angela Wells
*Single line ink on paper*

# glass mountain

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Dedicated to everyone affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"To climb the glass mountain, one first requires a good reason."

*From the short story "Glass Mountain."*

—Donald Barthelme

1931-1989

# Letter From the Editor

My Dear Reader,

Do you know that magical moment when you find out someone has read the same book as you? You know the one I'm talking about. The sparkling realization of *oh, yes, here's someone who understands this thing about me!* The kinship of *gosh, yes, I hated that character, too.* Sometimes, if you're lucky, it's a learning experience—*wow, I never would have thought about that on my own*. Even if you have differing or even conflicting opinions from that person, you forge a connection with another human being solely by virtue of having read the same work.

Reading is one of those rare activities that, while the act itself is a solitary one, brings people together. Reading builds bridges, in the same way I used to sit on the carpet for hours with multicolored LEGO blocks, smashing together pieces of all shapes and sizes. My only goal was to build, to make connections between unlikely pieces. That is what reading does, and you don't even have to worry about stepping on the pieces when you accidentally leave them out.

Nathan Sawaya is an artist who has built (no pun intended) an entire career out of Legos. He recreates famous works of art in tiny Lego blocks in addition to his own original artwork. A few months ago, I went to his exhibit at the Houston Museum of Natural Science, before there was even a hint of the pandemic to come and while we were still choosing pieces to put in Volume 24. My biggest takeaway from the visit, besides remembering just how cool Legos are, was a quote of Sawaya's, plastered inside the exhibit on a purple plaque. "Art makes better humans, art is necessary in understanding the world, and art makes people happy. Undeniably, art is not optional."

Right now, the world is facing a pandemic, and we are limited to seeing each other virtually, whether that be by email, text, or video chat. Now is when we need to be better humans. Now is when we need to understand the world. Now is when we need to find ways to

make us happy.

The feeling I described when you find someone who has read the same thing as you is one of those "small victory" feelings, the kind that make this life worth living and the world feel a tad kinder. Now more than ever, I say we cling to those small victories. We cling to connection, to bridges, to art. It is not optional.

Nathan Sawaya takes pieces and makes a whole, and now it's time for us to do the same. We hope Volume 24 can help you build bridges and find connections. We hope Volume 24 can help you create your whole.

Yours,

Melinda Mayden
Editor, *Glass Mountain*

# *Glass Mountain* Staff Reflects

**Audrey Colombe**

Video chats—many, now. Personal spaces—students have gone home to their parents' houses, now installed in their old bedrooms. Perhaps the only somewhat-private spaces available in the present situation. Interesting museums dedicated by parents to the students' former lives as children. Stuffed animals, trophies, unmade beds, unicorn posters, lines of skinny books, baseball cap collections, group photos, piles of clothes, lamps in the shape of planets—the history in the background stops me short. An exercise in humility, this accidental invitation into the private lives of people I know only through work. Social distancing aside, it's very very touching.

**Corina Escalante**

When you become accustomed to a certain life, when everything is reliant on things happening exactly as and when they're supposed to, it seems easy. You wake up each day with no surprises. And, despite all of the times you wish things could be a little bit different, you know that it's for the best. For your best. Without schedules and routines, without a sense of normality in a world that's ever-changing, who are you? You think you simply cannot be without structure. Until one day it's all gone, and you realize...you can. You have to.

**William Faour**

How could one possibly react to this?

Distract myself? I write. I'm bingeing *The Twilight Zone.* I listen to *Cats* and *The Book of Mormon.*

Immerse myself? Watch people celebrate incompetent responses, vote against solutions?

Ignore myself? Anxiety lends me aches, pains, sniffles, but it's nothing, I'm not sick, probably.

Delude myself? Nothing's wrong. I have pets and free time, I can video chat. What's changed?

Upset myself? The bright spots ahead faded, only uncertainty remaining. I want to offer hope.

Come clean to myself. I can't offer hope. All I can do is pick from the above.

**Ashley Guidry**

You know, I shouldn't be entirely surprised by how this year is going. I mean, during my high school graduation a huge storm appeared. So, why should my college graduation be any different, if not worse? Graduation was pushed back, grocery stores are being raided by panic buyers, celebrities are acting weird, and some people can't comprehend the words 'social distancing.' Needless to say, this year is off to a great start, and we're not even halfway through. In all seriousness, it feels as though every day this virus is creeping way too close for comfort. I have actually become more appreciative of having a job and schoolwork to distract myself from this crisis. But I have no doubt that we'll push through this, we always do.

**Hales R. Harrison**

I cannot imagine a more fitting way to close out my last semester in undergraduate studies. Now that I am here, facing the exit to this tunnel I have been charging through, I am not surprised that I will not have a graduation the way all of my siblings have had. Instead, I will emerge from quarantine into a world that sees me as an adult without question. I will have both my degrees, and I will have new trauma from this very difficult "last stretch." I will have questions for this new world, both as an adult and as someone who just survived a near-apocalypse.

**Amanda Lopez (Keill)**
COVID-19 came crashing when I was dealing with school, a terminally ill parent, trying to get a job and house, and taking care of my family. Everything feels impossible to accomplish, but where there is hope there is a chance to persevere. Life doesn't stop. It can be altered and tricky, but it is continuous. As I watch the numbers climb, I experience survivor's guilt, but who's to say that when this is all over I will survive? It's best to live and love as much as possible now. For some, tomorrow may never come. God Bless. SOS.

**Elsa Pair**
I miss going on dates to restaurants. I miss going to bookstores and touching all the spines of the books. I miss casual touches—a hand against someone's arm or their back. I miss these tiny things and think of how selfish that makes me, and then I forgive myself for being selfish because the collective loss we're all experiencing is unfathomable and it's okay for us to grieve. We *should* be sad. We *should* be angry. And we should also allow ourselves to smile and laugh. I give you permission if you don't know how to give it to yourself.

**Sarah Swinford**
Spring was supposed to be all about healing for me. Last year, I was burnt out, recovering from being sick all of November, and I gave up on my original "after college" plan. When March rolled around, everything stopped. I was out of both of my jobs. I moved back in with my parents to save money. I was worried about the virus. But then I started painting and writing. I realized that this break might be the time of restful healing that I had been waiting for. It's scary, but I believe that we will get through this.

**Grace Wagner**

Writing in the time of COVID-19 is both difficult and necessary. I find myself incapable of writing, yet my desire to do so only increases. I think it's important to take a step back from work and school and give yourself time to rest, process, and grieve the life that we have lost through isolation and the lives that we are losing and will lose over the course of this pandemic. Now is the time to breathe, to think, to read, to write, to produce art if you can, and above all else, to give yourself the compassion you need.

**Keagan Wheat**

As a poet in the undergraduate poetry concentration at UH, I felt like poetry would be the one thing I could still do. But it's just too emotionally weighty. I can't find a way to read an ire'ne lara silva poem about illness in the midst of this. I've attended a couple readings virtually, but I couldn't tell you one poem read. I was just there to see that poetry was still happening.

**Rosalind Williamson**

Everything's so scary right now. People are dying; society feels like it's falling apart. We all feel helpless. Even though part of me feels like continuing to make things is pointless, a larger part of me knows that creating and engaging with art is the only thing keeping me sane. Art nourishes us; it makes us human. My inner cynic wants to deny it, but in working on *Glass Mountain* these last few weeks, it's been clear to me that in the midst of so much destruction, the best thing we can do is create.

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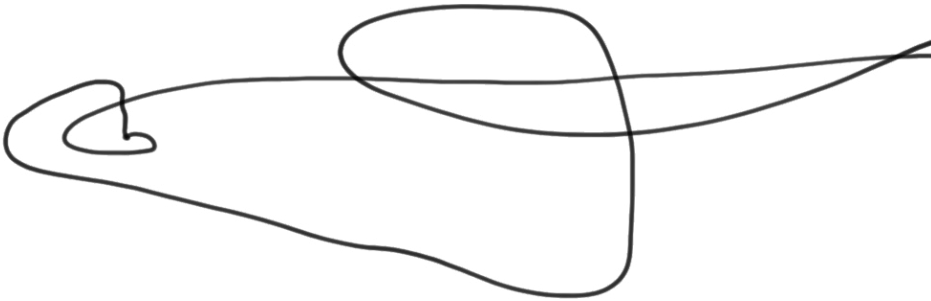


## Linda Laino

Linda Laino is an artist, writer, and teacher who has been making art in one form or another for over 35 years. Holding an MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University, she enjoys playing with words as much as form and color. Since 2012, she has resided in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico where the surreal atmosphere and sensuous colors have wormed their way into her paintings. The last few years have found her making art at residencies around the world, most recently in Spain and France. Finding beautiful things on the ground is a favorite pastime. Her art can be seen at www.lindalaino.com. Some of her essays and poetry can be found on *The New Engagement, Sheila-Na-Gig Journal* (nominated for a Pushcart Prize), *Sonder Midwest, 82 Review, Writer Advice, Life In 10 Minutes* and her blog, wordsandpictures.lindalaino.com.

# I Peel the Garlic

and think of skin
pale and open
and wanting, like yours.
Mine the color of cherries
languid and sea-varnished.
Its thin veneer heals
each night like Prometheus,
his eagle greets me again
at dawn with a talon tear.

I peel the garlic
the static crackle
recalls your savage wail
roaring mythical
like a beast
cut down, chained
and haunted, your fire
doused in grief,
even lemons can't hide
the coppery smell
the cindered flesh.

I peel the garlic
the papery petals scratch
tear like stridulous insects,
cocoon casings upturned
panicked paper boats
uncertain of rescue.

*Garlic is an ancient and bulbous vegetable.*

Allium flower, sweet and seductive
*It won't grow separated for long.*
leaves me leery of the deep roots.
Its lantern skin is
crawling with them.

I peel the garlic
make little knife wounds
before sprinkling the salt.

## Rachel Attias

Rachel Attias is a writer and librarian in Jackson, Wyoming. She's been published or has work forthcoming at *The Rumpus, The Masters Review, The Portland Review, The Blue Mountain Review, [PANK],* and more. Learn more at rachelattias.com and connect with her on social media @multi_rachel.

# Reaper

She never grew anything. She didn't even try. Didn't till the soil, didn't fold in the manure with an old metal shovel, didn't plant or weed or sit outside in the early morning with a cup of tea to chat with the seedlings. It was a stupid idea. It wasn't a big deal.

The snowfall broke records that winter, like the year before that and all the years stretching back that she could remember. If there were ever a year it didn't snow more than the one prior, she'd never heard about it. She didn't know what was worse: the cold or the fact that it didn't bother her anymore.

"You must be freezing! It's that island blood," people always joked. They'd add a little shimmy sometimes, a flourish of the hands. They may have been impersonating the Chiquita woman, from the bananas. They looked spastic.

She'd laugh. She knew her place, if not on the globe then at least in these conversations.

"That's why you're such a good dancer!" She was a terrible, clumsy dancer.

"We went to San Juan over spring break. The food was amazing! The beaches!" The look on their faces when she told them she'd never been. "Well," they'd say, rabid, "You have to go. You just have to go."

There was a memory from her first pregnancy. She'd had contractions, too early. Her mother drove her to the hospital. They turned out to be nothing, false labor, Braxton Hicks. She was dehydrated. Afterward they took a watermelon and some sparkling waters to the lake. She walked barefoot on the pebbly sand.

"Bébelo," her mother said, nudging a water against her mouth. She took small sips. She was horrified. If labor hurt that much when it was *false* ...

"Estás bien," her mother said. And, to the baby inside, "Sana, sana, colita de rana. Si no sanas hoy, sanarás mañana." Her mother lived long enough to meet the first baby, but not the second. Stom-

ach cancer took her quickly, las colitas de rana be damned.

She had her children relatively young, at a time when everyone she knew seemed to be holding off on reproducing. The first one was part accident, part excuse to get married. The second one, if she was being honest, was because her mother was dead, and she needed something to take hold of her before she sunk. It didn't work that way.

Her husband worked and she became the ama de casa. Her older child was two years old and moved like a pinball from room to room. The baby was six months. She'd send her husband videos all day when the toddler started screaming semi-coherent phrases. Her own voice was always in the background; her coaxing and cooing sounded disingenuous, but maybe only to her.

"Why don't you speak Spanish at home?" her husband asked.

"Who am I going to talk to?" She gestured toward the kids. "They can't *speak.*" That was the end of that conversation. The kids would be monolingual. It wasn't a big deal.

Sometimes, though, when they fell or stubbed their toes or cried for no good reason she'd sing. Sana, sana, colita de rana. Si no sanas hoy, sanarás mañana.

She'd never admit this to anyone, but her favorite kind of porn had always been the over-the-top, secret, incest porn, usually stepsiblings or a stepparent enjoying a clandestine fuck while another family member innocently puttered in the kitchen or folded laundry in the background, completely unaware of the two figures gyrating under a throw blanket on the couch or grinding under the sheets in the master bedroom. She liked the women because their bodies were waif-like, their breasts tiny and their stomachs flat, so different from her own postpartum paunch. She liked the men because they played clueless but weren't; they pretended to be shocked when the petite women seduced them, but the massive boners in their sweatpants told a different story.

After her second baby was born, she found out she could watch porn on her phone. She'd hold the phone in one hand, transfixed by hard cocks and firm breasts, while spoon feeding her toddler. She leaned the phone against a plastic T-Rex while playing cars with the

toddler. He liked to make them fly and crash into each other midair. She'd make the sounds of explosions with her mouth.

She'd go on like this all morning until nap hour, by which time she'd worked herself into such a state that she laid the kids down hastily, nearly stumbled over the cord of the white noise machine on her way to turn off the lights. She knew her urgency was palpable; it came off her like a stink and it made the kids anxious. They never went down easily for their naps. They cried as she left the room and shut the door behind her, as she practically ran to the bedroom and unearthed her vibrator from the closet, and while she used it on herself for all of thirty seconds before she gasped and climaxed.

Afterward she'd go back to the children. They'd only been alone for a minute, but their little faces would be red and tear-streaked, their little voices hoarse. She'd gather them and sit in the rocking chair with them on her lap. She'd sing and coo until they fell into an uneasy asleep, their little tense bodies finally slackening in her arms. Sana, sana, colita de rana. She never felt like a worse mother than in the moments after she orgasmed to incest porn, when, like a guilt-ridden, hateful creature, she tried to put her babies to bed.

The idea to start a garden came to her at the library. Some days she'd bring the children there. They had story time. The kids were too young for it, but they mostly stayed quiet if a bit fidgety. It felt good to be around other mothers. She could feel their storming. She loved their placid faces.

Just inside the front door they had a book display with a rotating theme. They'd just changed it to books about spring, flowers, and gardens. There was one book whose cover was lush and green with glossy images of dirt-covered beets and dripping lilacs. The pictures inside were close-ups of rough, cracked hands dipping into damp loam, beads of fresh water accumulating on hairy stems, early morning light dusting a vine-laden trellis. She checked it out.

There was a memory from her childhood. Many of them, actually. Her mother's rough, cracked hands dipping into damp loam. Her mother tilled the soil, folded in the manure with an old metal shovel, planted and weeded, and sat outside in the early morning

with a cup of tea to chat with the seedlings. Those seedlings most certainly learned Spanish.

That evening she greeted her husband with a smile and a pizza. The kids sat in their highchairs in front of the television, placated with bright, loud, garbage media.

"What's all that in the garage?" her husband asked. There was a modest pile of 2x4s, a new drill and driver still in the box, a package of screws, a spool of chicken wire, some metal stakes, many bags of soil and half as many of composted manure, a trowel, a shrub rake, a new metal shovel, a pair of thick gloves with leather palms, and a paper bag full of seed packets. She'd spent hundreds of dollars, blindly, ravenously. There were red welts on her forearms from unloading everything from the SUV into the garage.

"It's for the garden."

"We don't have a garden."

"We don't have a garden *yet*."

Weeks passed. Winter was stubborn. Clouds would not break; the sky held firm in its dull, mocking white. Out her windows birds circled in on her. Snow clung to the sides of the road, and the place she'd envisioned for her garden was still buried. She could wait. Nothing bothered her. Nothing made much difference to her at all.

In the meantime, she stuck to her routine. *Stepbrother finds sister's BDSM toys and learns she's a freak! Sexy tutor crams tight teen during ACT prep. Surprise anal with dad.* The anniversary of her mother's death came and went unremarked. She spoke to no one all day. Her vibrator batteries ran out of juice and she replaced them.

It was an empty time. She felt loss acutely but did nothing about it. Even the snowmelt was like something important leaving her—maybe an excuse to keep wallowing indoors, silently floating from day to day, masturbating in isolation. Or the loss was the Spanish she still dreamed in, a word of which her children would likely never utter. Or the memory of her mother's face, her smell, her voice, which trickled from her consciousness daily. Or her sex life, which had become an entirely solo affair, one shrouded in taboo and shame. So much was disappearing, and only because she did nothing to make it stay. She wasn't sure if there was anything she could do.

She resolved to seduce her husband.

At bedtime she emerged from the bathroom in a loose-fitting sports bra and a pair of his boxers, the closest thing she had to lingerie. She stood at the foot of the bed for several moments waiting for some acknowledgment until the cold got to her and she shivered her way under the covers.

She wasn't sure what to do with her body, her stomach and legs soft and hanging like spent leather. The kids were both still nursing. Her nipples chafed on everything she wore, but at least they were perky. She felt silly turning toward her husband and trying to intertwine her leg with his when he was oblivious to any twining-related efforts. She stroked his chest hair. This, at least, elicited a glance from him, and she seized her moment.

"Do you think we should..." she started and then faltered. What was the word for it? Certainly not make love—she had no interest in that at all. Sleep together? Too literal. Have sex? Too explicit; she didn't want to scare him off, or herself. She decided on a word that she almost never used.

"...fuck?"

His entire body tensed, and she thought she'd made a mistake. He found his bookmark and tucked it away, then set his novel on the bedside table.

"Sure. Yeah. Okay."

Something in his tone made her realize that he'd been thinking about this, and wanting it, for a long time. She hadn't considered this; her sexual apathy for anything outside the screen of her phone had run so deep that she assumed he felt the same. She never dreamed he'd been looking at her this whole time, noticing her, and desiring her. She was a little bit embarrassed, mostly for him.

Still, she grabbed his arms and pulled him to her and he shook with wanting. She kissed him and then pulled away. He still shook and wanted. They were both propped on their elbows and she pushed him lightly now, so that he fell back onto the pillows. He looked up at her with such incredulity and longing that she almost laughed out loud, but managed to stifle it into a smile, which he returned, his eyes a little wild, the whole of him vibrating. And then

she got on top of him.

A muffled sound came from the baby monitor, and before she could think she shut it off. It fell from the bedside table. He looked at it, worried, and she kissed him so she wouldn't have to see his face.

It took some time for him to get an erection. She worked at it with her hands and mouth. She grew frustrated; it was not like in the videos. Maybe he could sense the urgency coming off her, like the frequencies that keep her children from falling asleep when she's near. Everything she touches is imbued with uncertainty and discomfort.

Maybe he didn't notice, because he seemed to enjoy it when he was finally hard enough for her to straddle him and slip him inside her. He breathed in her ear as she worked. She was too dry to feel much, but that didn't seem to be a problem for him. She licked her fingers and rubbed her saliva all over, but it didn't last. She did this again and again. It was very distracting.

He flipped her over so that he was on top and her face was pressed into the pillow. Her leg started to fall asleep. She made no noise at all while he grunted and gasped his way to the end.

When he came inside her she wanted to vomit.

He kissed her deeply, then, and told her he loved her. Something was welling inside her and she wanted to cry, but she couldn't release something she didn't know the shape of. The thought of becoming pregnant again flashed through her mind, and this was just funny enough for her to return his words with a genuine smile. Whatever. So it wasn't like porn. It wasn't supposed to be. It was sex with her husband; it wasn't a big deal.

Time staggered on, the remaining snow piles sloughed themselves off into nothing, and the world warmed to greens, pinks, and yellows. The backyard remained uncultivated. The wood, the dirt, the seeds, the hose head, all of it stayed exactly where she put it in the middle of winter.

Summer humidity made itself cozy in the dank garage. The seeds she bought dried out and spoiled. The manure started to stink and her husband got rid of it without a fuss. The hose head surrepti-

tiously went missing, as did the trowel and the chicken wire. No one noticed their absence. The children grew. They had her mother's mouth but otherwise looked exactly like her husband. She told them about their abuelita. They had trouble pronouncing her name.

## Eliza Brewer

Eliza is a poet and essayist from Houston, Texas, studying English and Philosophy at Amherst College. Her work has appeared in *Circus, Outrageous Fortune, Polaris, The Allegheny Review,* and *Glass Mountain*. She has received awards for her work in the Amherst College Poetry Contest, Polaris' 2020 Contest for Nonfiction, and the 2019 Amherst Slam. Eliza has been a featured reader at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and The Five College Poetry Festival. She is a big sister to four siblings who are her inspiration and purpose.

# Hypochondriac's Ballad

There once was a girl who was me. When she was sixteen, in summer, her mother won an online contest and got two half-priced cruise ship tickets to Mexico. The girl had cancer. It had already begun to gather like fabric inside of her—first in her gut and then outward in crab-legs. That's where the word comes from, the greek *carcinos:* the crab and his legs which dug into the girl's stomach and then everywhere else. They served crab in the main restaurant the first night of the cruise. The girl didn't like seafood. The housekeeper folded a towel in the shape of a crab with chewy mints lying on his head for eyes on the second night. The girl who was me ate both of them. This happened exactly and entirely: he appeared and she ate his sweet eyes even though he was already crouching in her belly.

The girl draped herself across a hotel-style bed and cried, clutching her ever-contracting muscle wall, thinking, as she often did these days, that she wished she were not a macroorganism. Cells, like children, shouldn't be left unsupervised. The girl listened to her mother, who swallowed as she continued her telephone conversation. "Yes. You have to call us on this phone if you want to reach us. Uh huh, she's alright. Yeah, I brought her Zofran." After hanging up, she went to sit next to her daughter and rubbed small circles on her back. The girl felt deeply for her mother. There was so little in their life lately which was controllable. Illness was meant to be one of them, an easy call and response: fever, ibuprofen; fever, sore throat, and cough, doctor's office for a strep test. This illness was proving to be a months-long beast. The mother ached for her child, she ached to have something easy to solve for once—a respite from shuffling around an autistic child and shuffling around money she didn't have to pay the rent.

The mother tried to reassure them both, "I bet it's a gluten intolerance. I read that those can come on suddenly. Dr. Goldberg should call us even before we leave the ship." The girl already knew that this was not an intolerance. She knew that there were shellfish

making room for themselves in her body. Don't ask how, she just did. A microscopic metastasis had broken off from its sisters and traveled to take root in her consciousness. Her heart ached because she also knew that her mother couldn't add a dying child to her roster. She could see, in horrifying HD clarity, the composition of the next year of her life when she'd learn how chemo blisters your mouth and prevents you from tasting things properly. When she'd learn that cancer has a smell. She saw her mother's poorly hidden tears; felt the loss of income and attention which should have belonged to her siblings. She could feel the sinking and the bloating of her cancer-body, the ways it seemed to expand and shrink at the same time. The girl's mother tossed her an itinerary to look through. Everything seemed exhausting enough to be thrilling. The girl who was me mustered her strength and rolled onto her side.

She didn't make friends with any of the passengers while she was aboard, but she did find companionship amongst the crew. There was a Bolivian waitress who decided to take a cruise ship job knowing it was the only way she would ever be able to see the world. There was the Singaporian housekeeper who worked aboard because it meant a steady income to send home to his wife and five children whom he rarely got to see, being at sea for sometimes six months at a time. Her habits haven't changed much since then. The woman who is me loves the staff at her college to a degree that she thinks she could never love the faculty. She doesn't think it's their fault. It's only the nature of the beast; that type of academic environment is a place where it is taboo to talk about the composition of one's knowledge. This is because speaking about how you came about learning something implies that you, at one point, did not know that thing which is a vulnerable sin to admit committing where the girl studies.

And so she makes friends with people who believe, as she does, that all of learning is a re-tracing—an acknowledgment of the steps of not knowing which eventually lead to some kernel of surety. But the woman who is me has an important difference in this respect: instead of having one set of knowledge, she has two. The first set is healthy, like yours, and requires evidence and experience to build upon itself. The other is sicker. It belongs to the part of her brain

where her OCD-rooted illness anxiety disorder lives—a proper DSM-V name for that particular brand of craziness often caricatured by the neurotic young fool who spends too much of her time on WebMD. It's easy to trace the girl's healthy knowledge back to its source. First she learned to add, then multiply. She walked first, then ran. Her sick set of knowledge is much harder to understand and, therefore, much harder to live with (though she can assure you it did not come from WebMD). It comes to her in red string, cut and twisted up in hard-to-untie knots. She hopes that somewhere in there is reality, though she's never been able to loosen the knots enough to tell. Knot number one: the girl has a memory, hard and true, of hitting her small head against the drywall in her house's hallway till it gave way underneath her. She was three. She remembers blood running down her eyelashes so that she could see it, in a moment of horrible clarity, dripping in front of but not onto her eyelid. She felt a comfort in this injury because she knew its origin and here, in undeniable crimson, was its consequence. It had the clean margins that tumors lack. Even then, she had a bodily fixation. A sense of nonspecific doom lying dormant in her tissue. The fact is that she did not create that crater in the hallway. Her ex-stepfather ripped into it after one of his rampages. But this *is* a memory she carries. It may not be fact but it's as true and thick as any splitting of her skin has ever been.

There's another memory which often runs hot down her face. She had a persistent delusion, her growing up years, that she was terminally ill and that all of her family knew how ill she was but kept it a secret because they wanted to spare her the sorrow. Every kind word was proof of their acceptance of her dying and of an obligation to make her final months gentle ones. Within that delusion, she finds a knot—she remembers the day her ex-stepfather left his station at the computer. Her clumsy hands reached up and gripped the polished wood on his desk. She began to read the words on the screen. She saw her name, over and over. An email message: "Eliza doesn't have much time left. Eliza will be leaving us soon. You should come to visit." The truth is that it was a message to her teacher about a missing report card. But you must understand, to the girl, they were

the same thing—a tight knot covered in memory-ether and set fire. These knots are burnings. There is no tracing them because this set of knowledge doesn't walk or run. It sprints. The woman who is me aspirates obsession, fear, and memory. They bond like chemicals in her lungs and come out as what she knows to have happened. Please understand, for the sake of this story, all of these things she remembers happening are true, as was her cancer. If this were a narrative about how the body reacts to illness—if this were a cancer ballad with loops of tubing stuck inside her veins—she'd encourage you to ask to see the scars inside her elbow crease. She would tell you her burnings were just that: something ordered caught fire. But this is not that story and your skepticism is not welcome here. This is a story about knowing and being. The woman will not tell you how her arm stung when the nurses pricked it but she will tell you that they were two prisons, the needle and the vein, and that they were speaking to one another. She will tell you what they whispered because, like Broyard, she is intoxicated by her illness. She doesn't need a diagnosis for it to give her vertigo. If this feels like a riddle, then good. Help her to solve it. Please.

All you really need to know is that the girl who was me *did* have her cancer summer and it was as ripe of slow-rotting smell as anyone else's cancer seasons. I ask you to suspend your disbelief for the moment, knowing, as you now do, that the girl has a habit of believing she is suffering from nonexistent illnesses. Harsher ironies than the hypochondriac falling ill have happened—the optometrist who lost his sight or the girl's aunt whose husband was a pastor and an adulterer, busy buying prostitutes and singing hymnals on the weekends. So imagine, for a moment, that this happened exactly and entirely: when the girl who was me exited the boat in Cozumel, people were instantly grabbing and shoving her, sticking cheap toys in her face for purchase. She felt a rocking and almost tipped over. The girl's mother steadied her and soon they both became practiced at saying 'no' quickly, clearly, and forcefully as they moved on to their destination: Cozumel City. The next interaction they had was with a taxi driver who didn't want to take them to their destination. "You want to go to the resort, not the city," he'd say. "No," said the girl who

was me, "No, we're here to see the city. That's why we've come." She was frustrated and a little bit flushed. Being severely ill and knowing how ill you are is revelatory, *intoxicating*. The girl who was me felt as weak as she thought she'd ever be and as energized as anyone could become. Her body, deprived of basic nutrients, forgot its own weaknesses in a desperate attempt to push itself towards an ability to hunt, forage, and eat. The girl had no appetite and a level of nausea that could take down a fully grown steer. She had teeth without flesh to sink them into. She wondered, much later, if she looked as radiant to her mother as she felt during moments like this. I think she did. She let the girl sink her teeth into taxi drivers who thought they were shallow, silver-spoon resort children.

When they arrived in town, the girl began to lose the halo of fever around her. Her skin sunk, paying toll for its exaggerations. There were women and children begging on the street. The girl couldn't finish her breakfast. There were shantytowns and streets with animals sinking low into the pavement. The girl passed by a scrawny man reaching out his hand, offering beads in exchange for a dollar. The girl's mother's instincts from earlier in the day kicked in, saying "no" rudely and curtly, speeding up her pace. "Please. I'm so hungry. I need money for lunch." She stopped abruptly when she heard him. She had a rude vision, clear like revelation, of the decadent buffets aboard ship. She turned to the man, the tint in her cheeks a manic fire, made to reach for money in her pocket, and instead felt a jerk of nausea before she emptied the contents of her stomach onto the tips of his shoes and kept gagging after there was nothing left as if to say, "See, I gave you all I have." Cancer lacks tact.

The girl's mother took her back to where the ship was docked. She asked if the girl was alright to make it back aboard on her own, eyeing the customs-free wine bottles in a shop as they approached the dock. The girl answered yes and set off, walking a couple of yards before the heat started melting what was left of her body's tact and she nearly fell tumbling over the side of a narrow boarding bridge. A staff member helped her, gripping her arm and leading her back

towards her room after the girl insisted that she did not want to be brought to sick-bay. After an hour of lying in bed and listening to her headboard-neighbors fuck over and over, the girl's restless energy came back, and even though she didn't have the strength in her cells she got up to wander the boat. As she took her feet everywhere, the girl began to have a vision of being a passenger aboard a train. She took a brief pause outside the ship's spa to catch her breath. Foreboding, she thinks, is worse than imminence. When she's on the train and she gets a gut feeling that something's amiss, that a tree root may be growing in the tracks right in front of her engine's path, it's catastrophic how many catastrophes lie in the minutes when there is no impact. The longer the ride, the more time she has to see these catastrophes, marbled and multiplying in her head: death on impact, no help comes, succumbing to the elements. It overwhelms her completely. A woman with pristine nails and clear, commercial skin walks out of the spa, offering her a services menu.

The girl smiles and takes it. A deep-tissue massage costs $300. She goes back to her train. This time she can see the root with her own eyes. She is approaching it quickly; there is nothing to be done. The impact is made. No more multitudes of hurt, just one. Once she strikes the root, she either is or she isn't. It happened or it didn't and her solution is to put her head down and grind out what labor is required of her. OCD is living in foreboding. Her particular root is cancer. Why? The short answer is she doesn't know. The woman who is me learned from online support groups—one of the few places where her wildness may come into contact with someone else's—that everyone's obsessions and compulsions are hyper-specific and uniquely ritualized. She met a man there who was wracked with worry that he would one day kill his mom. Horrified, she wrote a comment: "Have you ever wanted to hurt your mom?" "No. Never, I love her more than anyone," he replied. "Then why? Why are you worried?" She hoped he'd answer her own questions for her and he did. "Because fear and reality are making love in my serotonin-deprived neurons." She didn't like the answer, though it was true. There's nothing more biological than anxiety. Survival of the fittest is sometimes just survival of the one who is afraid of the

right things. It wouldn't be hard to extrapolate that a small genetic slip could cause an anxious fixation. Instead of worrying about most things, sick-brain stones like the girl's fear one or two things in full force, all of the time. All of the time they are compelled to act in preparation for the nonexistent danger. The woman who is me is still trying to understand why it is cancer that gripped her so forcefully. She knows that understanding, in this instance, may not ever be possible. "Psychiatry," said someone on the group page, "is twenty percent recognized patterns and eighty percent marvelling at all the ridiculous ways the psyche can go belly-up for absolutely no reason at all." She knows this, but, some days, putting her illness into context is the only thing that takes it away from her.

Her therapist thinks it's cancer because it was the first thing that hit the girl squarely in the death spot. Her neighbor had it when she was five—stage four, incurable. They found it during a routine surgery. "It must've been horrifying to you," said the therapist, "to suddenly realize that you could be terminally ill for no reason at all and that it could lie secret inside of you until it was too late to do anything about it." As Ross Gay puts it, "I had the stark and luminous and devastating realization—in the clear way, not that *oh yeah* way—that my life would end." That's the death spot—the place the therapist thinks the girl who was me landed, graceless and tumbling. Her mind had a skeleton of a hypochondriac's train, it just needed a coal-fire to set off its momentum. But the woman can't explain away her bloody head at three or her childhood delusions which came about before she could even pronounce the word 'tumor.' But it's all she has for now, and so she'll take neighbor Teresa and the death spot. She'll take it and sprint with it, trying, as she always is, to catch up with her sick knowledge. There's a cleansing charcoal face mask on the services menu for the spa. Sure, she'll take the coal fire mask. Sure, she'll pay the $45 for it, and she'll tip the woman who applies it to boot.

The girl was and still is obsessed with the train-impact, the cancer. She is stranded forever in the moments before the crash inside of which she has had one thousand deaths and recoveries. She is compelled to reach the tree, to cut it off at its roots. She must warn some-

one that her body is losing itself even though it might not look like it. She knows you can't see the cancer with your machines, but you must trust her, she knows her body after all. She tries explaining that you only see the root on the tracks once it's too late. Docking in Galveston is at seven, they exit in an orderly fashion. She is disordered, she knows that, but what if this time she is right? There is one cell phone message from Dr. Goldberg. After all, ironies harsher than a hypochondriac with cancer have happened. He speaks quickly, "Everything's come back normal. I don't know what's causing Eliza's difficulties, she may just have irritable bowels." The mother smiles and pats the girl on her back. "Isn't that great news?" The girl smiles back but it doesn't reach her dermis. But she smiles still because she knew then and she knows now that the mother is the hero of this story. They walk off, the girl with a shellfish stowaway stuck inside her. The woman who is me takes a medication now that helps her to sprint and catch up with her unhealthy set of knowledge. There are times, though, when she can't keep up the pace. Each time this happens, the mother is there to remind her of what the vein and the tube whispered to one another. The woman feels awful, she knows the mother has better things to do than fielding her three AM phone call— a soft whimper, "Mamma, it's real this time. It's lymphoma. I... I can *feel* it growing in my throat. Oh god, mamma, I'm going to die." The woman who is me sincerely wishes the crash would come. There is more crying. The mother gives her time. She knows how to offer the woman rest. "I know. I'm here." The prisons, they said, "It was nice being here with you." Before meeting one another inside skin and breaking free. I feel my mamma's skin over and inside mine and yes, it is okay despite the cancer of it all.

# Art, Poetry, & Prose

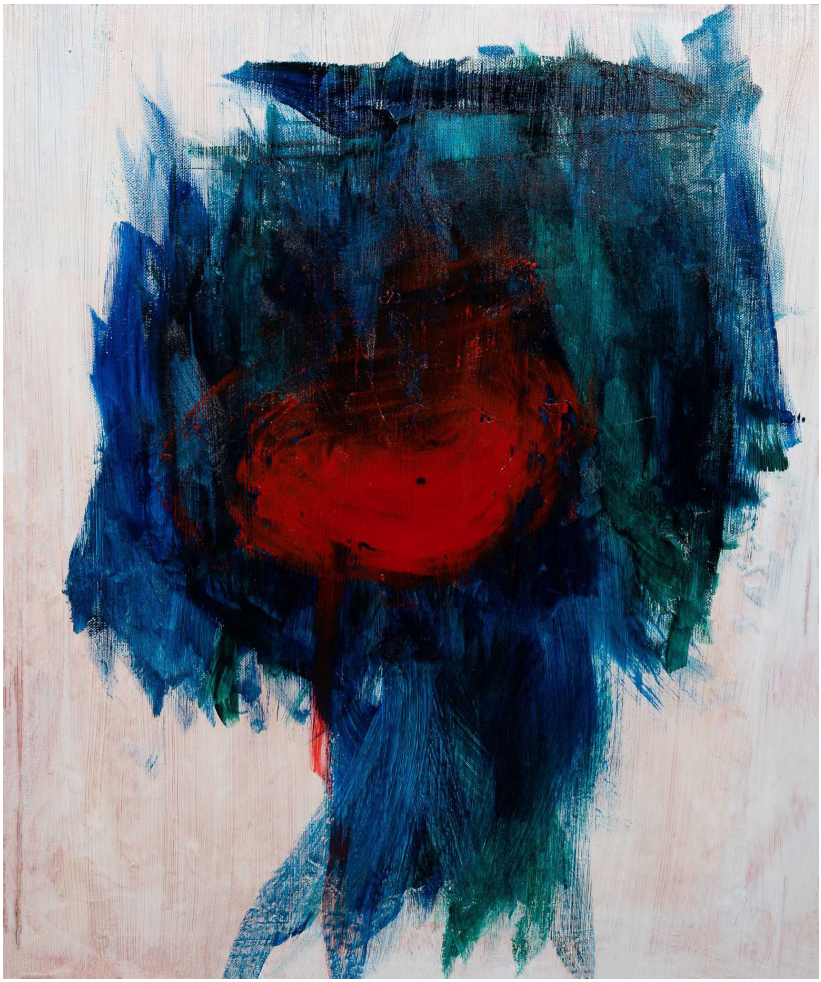
Ivy Marie

# Portrait of a Poet as a Young Woman

Nineteen tastes like black cherries
and wrapping the stem around your tongue
because someone told you once that it proved
you were a good kisser but they didn't tell you
the girl would bite. Let me try again.

Nineteen is wanting to jump off the building
just to know what it feels like but
your body keeps interrupting and the phone
keeps ringing. It's an aching so deep
and so long it carves a hole in your stomach,
so you fill it with sunflowers and when you speak
sunrays drop out of your mouth. What I'm saying

is that growing means certain suns in you die
so new galaxies shine out of the black stains on your hands.



**Untitled (2017)**
Jennifer Barker
*Acrylic On Canvas*

# Lessons in Art

Laura Braley

***Penitent Magdalene* (Donatello) – Florence, Italy – 1455 – Wood**

There is something in the clasping of the hands. The space in between them feels sacred, alive, like she has captured a spirit, her own spirit perhaps, in the womb of her fingers. The wood, too, feels somehow living, or dying. It rots as we stand here looking at her, fragile and malleable, susceptible, which makes sense given who she is and was: a prostitute molded by Jesus and his followers. Usually depicted with voluptuous lips and long, flaming hair in sticky Renaissance oils, here she stands smooth and unadorned, haggard, which necessitates stares. A person cannot walk into the small, hollow room and fail to stop short. She catches your breath, as though a real person is there behind the glass, and also not there. Her gaze is absent. She has already left this world. She is strong but thin. Tight, knotty muscles pull in her arms. The tendons in the throat draw taut, forming a deep cavity between them and slicing into the bones of her chest, bones layered with the papery skin of an old, old woman. She must've been very beautiful once. The skin of her cheeks pulls at high, delicate cheekbones and the remnants of golden paint cover her long, shredding hair. But it's the hands that make an old woman a saint.

She was allegedly kept in a chapel for fallen women, an emblem of hope for mothers and wives and prostitutes. I envision her in a small, crumbling church in southern Italy, sticky with salt from the nearby sea, a beacon. Few would truly want to be like this, though, bony with missing teeth and matted hair. Waves clapping in the ocean offer a warning. Gulls scream us back.

That summer at the ocean my mother buoyed, swollen with the toxins pumped through her veins and the drugs that dulled her brain. Her face had always been a squareish shape, angular and in-

teresting. It pillowed to a heavy, sallow oval, too thick for its own frame. She had always had this wit about her, this sharpness never far behind the eyes. And here she sat, glazed over and goofy. She laughed at indiscernible jokes, beginning a story loudly, mumbling for a moment and confidently expounding a punch line no one else could understand. It was like hearing a person's thoughts before they reached the air, birthed quickly and in images, not yet words. Like a conch shell held to the ear, echoing something so personal, so innate to its briny world that all we could ever hear was the sad, moaning song of another's mind.

In Florence, art is everywhere. It clings to the alleyways, chalked cherubs caressing behind motorcycles, to the ceilings of our classrooms in modest and beautiful frescoes, to the dusty corners of forgotten roads: a shrine to Our Lady of Sorrows. I cannot blame the other students for carrying on, for taking her in and leaving her behind. They see her, and they don't. They walk away. But there is something painful about looking at this Mary, unique and flawed, not the Madonna so pure that Michelangelo said she never aged, nor even the healthy, pulsing beauty that Magdalene once was. That pain behind the eyes, a recognition, an understanding, is what keeps me at her side. I know this woman and I cannot leave her behind. I cannot tear myself away.

Four years earlier, my sister and I walked barefoot along the sand, through the whips of grass and across the splintered and paint-chipped staircases of Cape Cod, down to the ocean. We collected rocks and shells and sea glass, as always. "I wish it would just be over. That would be easier," she said. She meant our mother sitting in the recliner in a puddle of sun at the beach cottage. The ropes of tubing and long, green oxygen tanks that had clanked in the trunk the entire car ride. The pill regimen that my father had insisted Cecily, fourteen, must learn to administer. Any number of medical or posthumous details that would be gentler and easier to have over. But I couldn't let go. "If one of us were sick, Mom would never stop. She'd never leave us," I said, unable to accept the truth. "I know," Cec said, "but she's not really Mom anymore."

***The Prisoners* (Michelangelo) – Florence, Italy – 1520 – Marble**

The day that I saw the *David,* the Accademia was sticky with tourists, some collapsing onto wooden benches to rub sore feet, others fanning themselves with flimsy museum guides. I stood on the fringes, soggy-footed and holding a dripping umbrella. Disoriented by the crowd and the rain, I had stumbled through the entrance of the gallery without a ticket and spluttered in cheap Italian as the guard pointed me back out the door. Finally inside the old, stony building, I found a quiet room in which to collect myself. The walls rumbled as thunder rolled in loud, dangerous reams. I gazed up at chalky busts lining the walls, imagined the heads of queens and dukes tumbling from their shelves and clattering in dusty heaps to the floor.

My classmates were brunching lazily, drowning powdered pancakes in syrup at the local café or consulting guidebooks as they traipsed through Prague, but I had promised my professor that I would stay in Florence, come to see the *David.* I had missed the lesson at this museum, during which she had instructed my peers to examine *David*'s disproportionate hands and sketch his exquisite musculature. I had skipped that class and, instead, had spent the day on a plane to the Netherlands in search of my mother, nearly five years dead.

I braced myself for the slow, humid slog down the long hallway and joined the crowd as it groaned toward the *David.* The masses funneled stupidly along the corridor like cattle, doughy and dripping with rain and sweat, clutching the sticky fingers of small children. I was nearly caught up in the current, too, drawn to that glowing white marble, the allure of its history. I had read that, upon completion, *David* was transported from Michelangelo's workshop on a cart rolled with logs by strong, Florentine men, Herculean miniatures in their own right, and that fools on the street threw rocks and sticks at the marble man. That Michelangelo was the third artist to attack this project and that the block of marble that would eventually become *David* lay in a churchyard for 26 years before Michelangelo got his hands on it. I had been forewarned that the

various renderings of this biblical character, Michelangelo's version joined by Donatello's effeminate bronze and barely pubescent marble, would appear on the final exam.

My mind was on these things, these factoids, and the fact that I still needed to memorize the French for a piece of art song I would perform in a few weeks, and that I needed to remember to buy a baguette on the way home. And on the thing that always seems to draw me away, to occupy the curling edges of my wandering mind: my mother. I had flown to the Netherlands, that day when I was not here in the Accademia seeing the *David,* under the pretense of seeing the tulip parade. Holland tulips. Somehow these springtime bulbs seemed like a better excuse for my absence than searching for a dead woman in all of the places I could think of. This, I suspect, was the real source of the nagging, fiddling thing happening in my mind when I saw the streak of marble that would take my breath away.

In a chance glance to the right, through the crevice of a heavy man's elbow, I saw a pearly figure, just a sliver, just enough to know that something was off. In the middle of the hallway, still facing the *David* and unable to control myself, I veered off the path and into the face of one of the miserable marble creatures. Their title alone still clatters in my ears: the *Prisoners.* I was struck dumb.

Two on each side, they lined the narrow corridor, what by all appearances was merely the antechamber to *David*'s throne room, but which, I learned later, was entitled the Hall of Prisoners. They grimaced at each other across the hallway, writhing in unison. They are the half-rendered half-brothers of the biblical hero up ahead. Yes, these too are Michelangelo's creations, their marble selected by the artist himself from the Carrara quarries, the best and the brightest. Unlike *David*, though, they are disfigured. Sharp chisel marks pock their skin like coral, like something from the depths, as though fallen beneath the murky waves from an unlucky vessel, roughed instead of smoothed by the ocean, and claimed by aquatic age or else that eerie, spoken-of Atlantis. Otherworldly, I cannot tell whether they belong to the ocean or to purgatory.

A small plaque at the head of the exhibit explained that the four prisoners had been discovered in Michelangelo's studio after

his death. I imagined the uncloaking: marble dust wafting into the air as a heavy canvas cloth was pulled away like a magic trick. The dust sparkling as an astounded Italian gawked at his find. I read on: modern art historians now claim that Michelangelo left the statues intentionally unfinished. They are symbolic, man's eternal struggle to escape the bonds of human flesh. The Italians dub this technique *non-finito,* which to my American ear feels flippant and irreverent but which merely means "incomplete." Something felt, still feels, wrong to me about this, though. This scholarly description did not match what I was looking at. Theory made live, they claimed, but all I could see was the pain.

I stared up at the first prisoner. His own skin seemed to have betrayed him. His hands, webbed and craggy, were glued to the side of his face. Knotty abdominal muscles strained under the weight of his heavy arm, draped painfully over his head. *How heavy are these statues?* I wondered. *How much can that arm weigh?*

Michelangelo, it is said, was a religious man. He believed that his art was God-ordained, that as an artist he was charged merely with shaving away the excess, revealing the man within the block of marble. Something fails to compute, though. If his role was to liberate the living being inside the marble, how could he leave these creatures to struggle? I cannot come to terms with it. Who could leave them like this? Who could walk away?

I looked into the eyes of the prisoner, at the contorted muscles, at the confusion that seemed innate and natural in his pulsing form, at the museum-goers waltzing past to gaze at the *David* while considering what flavor of gelato they should try next. I realized, half-embarrassed, that I was angry on behalf of stone, of cold, unseeing marble. But it is never just marble, is it? Dafne stuck in a tree. Hercules rolling a rock up Mount Olympus. Pain is pain is pain. And here it was in front of me, made live and frozen in marble.

I continued down the hall, taking in each painful figure. I halted at the last of the prisoners. Graceful and fawnish, he was almost beautiful. Something you might see in an old and fussy courtyard. An indefinite arm arched across his brow, obscuring a face so nearly realized you could see the trace of a thought on his lips. A secret.

The outline of one slender finger traced the smoothed skin of his shoulder, self-soothing as a child in the nighttime.

Once again, I thought of my mother. Of the instinctive cry of a girl for her mother, of the way that I rolled off my lofted bed on the first day of college classes and broke my elbow. Of the tears that seemed babyish before I knew I was broken—*who cries because they have fallen out of bed?*—but which later felt completely predictable, the Pavlovian effect of pain that yields yearning. I looked again at the prisoner. He seemed to cradle himself in his arms now, softly, softly, whispering a lullaby for grief. I could almost hear his whisper.

Before I left for Italy, I found a dusty journal tucked away in a pile of my mother's things. She had kept it when she was about my age and studying abroad in Salzburg, Austria. I came to Europe believing I might find her there, in the clear mountain air, or here in the oils and dusts of an ancient country. I had been crossing off the places that she was not. I think it sounds silly now, like I was under a spell, following some unseen being. I had fled my hometown to a distant college, fled that school for Europe, fled Florence for a remote tulip farm listening blindly for her voice. I looked at this prisoner, at his contorted limbs and sadly soothing finger. I'm starting to wonder if I am really looking for my mother at all, or if the person I've lost is myself.

Back in the States, my sister sits across from me at a coffee shop and confesses in whispers that she might not be normal. She can feel that something is not right. She is not like her peers, whose mothers did not die when they were fourteen. "Everyone says I'm so grown up, that I handle things in such a grown up way." I hear what she doesn't say—that she knows better. She's worried that no one else has realized. That no one else will be there when the floor inevitably falls out beneath her. And it will, she feels it intuitively, because who can carry this eternally? I know how to fill these gaps in conversation, to hear the words she does not say as I look at her across a mug of tea, because I know these thoughts. It is a wonder I have not realized before, have not allowed myself to feel it. There is something about hearing another person say the words that have been echoing through your own mind that make them real, that make them ter-

rifying.

***De Tuin* (Van Looy) – Haarlem, Netherlands – 1893 – Oil on Canvas**

I find her quietly, this wispy woman in a broad-brimmed hat. She sits easily, surrounded, almost swallowed by flora. This scene, so bold and unkempt, stands out among the winter-toned seascapes and stoic renderings of tulip markets that line the wall. There is something outrageous about this painting, about the woman who seems incidentally caught in the corner of its frame. She is faceless, and still so clearly alive. She sweeps an arm through the thick greenery, stretches as though in search of something, bows her head to the blooms.

The museum is intimate, tucked along the curling edges of the Spaarne, a river I had never heard of in a city I never expected to see. Bicycles line arched bridges and the sails of a windmill whisk along neutrally. It is midweek in a sleepy harbor town and no one else is here to see. I am free to stare.

She is cradled by a hillside of nasturtiums, coral, red, tangerine. I think their leaves must lick her ankles, flatten themselves against her skin until they leave crimped, shamrock-shaped impressions. Such a deep green, they spread like lily pads, pluming inside out with a gust of wind to reveal a webbed underbelly, brain cells intertwining and circuiting, humming. The Garden. She must've smelled the sweet, heavy air as she settled into the bed of leaves and her cotton skirt billowed with breath, swelling like a sail in the wind. She bends at the waist, just slightly, a delicate wrist parting the thick, strong grasses. I want to know what she is looking for.

She has no face, this mystery woman. Cream hat swathed in tulle and tilted to obscure what could be a mischievous grin, or a modest smile. Is that the slim peak of a chin or—but no, just a fold in fabric. Her body is hidden, too, tucked in among the flocks of daisies and black-eyed Susans. Is she reaching for something in the high, sharp grass? A ring dropped down into the hot, heaving soil like a seed. Stretching to graze her fingers along the tantalizing back of a velvet

bee. Or is she merely combing her fingers through the waxy greenery, coating her hands in the slick of dew to feel the hum of a garden in the morning?

I step closer and note that these are really only dabs of oil on a canvas. Layers of color, texture hardened on texture, a wash of greens and corals and creams. But it was painted outside, en plein air as the artists were calling it, on a real summer day. There might've been a breeze that picked up the swath of fabric from the hat, pulled strands of hair from their neat pins, carried a laugh across the breeze and into the next yard, where children played, where another garden grew.

I stand in this museum, in Holland, having traveled here alone to see the tulips, which now seems trivial or even reckless. I have carried an increasingly tattered copy of the journal nearly everywhere I've gone, from cafés in Tuscany to snow-capped mountains in Austria, to this museum, to little effect. Though I did travel to Salzburg, the journal proved incapable of doing the thing I thought I needed, of revealing the thing I thought I was looking for, and in a burst of uncharacteristic spontaneity and a panic of cheap flight reservations, I found myself here, staring at an Impressionist work by a little-known artist instead of at the *David.*

The museum was small and strange, filled with whirring scientific trinkets and pressed flowers and the egg of something called an elephant bird. I wandered without incident, avoiding the large sudsing machines washing the floor in the bone room and listening to the English audio guide. The painting stopped me quietly. It was not like the *Magdalene* or the *Prisoners,* which demand to be felt, to be seen. But it drew me in.

One afternoon, that last week in the hospital, I found myself alone with my mother. Other family members had slowly trickled out to the waiting room and I rested my head across her lap, numb and staring at a flashing screen. Gentle nature scenes played before me, one of a field of tulips. I wanted to point out the scene, had some inkling that tulips meant something to my mother, that she'd wanted to carry them in her wedding, but she was asleep. That week

crackles in and out of my mind, flashbulbs I can't erase. I don't know where the trip to the tulips came from, really, but I suspect it is rooted there. That some warped seed of hope sent me trundling across the continent in search of something I'd lost, suddenly and shockingly, fastening on to the last familiar image, the last breath of air.

I wonder whether my mother could tell I would be the one of her daughters to linger with her ghost. To reject the cleaning of her closet when my father and sister were so eager to get it over with and then, years later, to sift through each painfully colorful garment, each strand of costume jewelry, alone when no one else was home. To try on her skirts and sweaters. To sit cross-legged on her closet floor, a layered spectacle in beads and scarves as I made lists of which items should be given to whom—a gift or not, who knows—the faded floral purse for her sister, the beaded jacket for her mother-in-law. Did she know this would be the way of things?

When she was in college, my mother took an art history course. Before she died, but long before I could've used it, she gave me a large textbook filled with her curling print. I don't know if she thought I might one day use it in a class, or if this gift was a subtle gesture of goodbye. When I returned from Florence, I came upon that dusty book and flipped through, searching for the artworks that I'd seen and what my mother thought of them. My heart hammered when I found her notes on the *Magdalene.* I'd had to use the index: not under "Magdalene" or "Penitent," but, finally, wonderfully, with "Donatello." The pages were dusty and somewhat yellowed, but the handwriting was still clear and I thought, *I found her.* I was puzzling over the softly penciled note, "decrepit though full of life," weighing her word choice and the sway of her pencil, when I realized that these words, this handwriting, were not my mother's. Her notes were the work of a ballpoint pen, in the same blue ink and flashing, fleeting scrawl of the journal, and she had no notations for the works that I know. I set the book aside, along with this search for a person who seemed permanently inaccessible.

Impressionism captures its subject in the space between mo-

ments, in the awkward half-pose of a ballerina, in the random stretch of an arm. The movement meant to show the shifting of a moment, the play of the light, the ephemeral and changing. The things that are lost in between. *De Tuin,* which is Dutch for "the garden," is known for its unusual framing. To put the woman in the corner of the scene, mid-motion and fuzzy as is the nature of Impressionism, begs the question: what *is* the subject of this painting? Perhaps, instead of a painting of a woman in a garden, this is a painting of a garden with a woman sitting inside it.

I stand quietly, hands behind my back. I look at this painting, this portrait, and I see a woman caught in the middle – of a moment, of her life, of a random day. She is on the edges. It's not even a story about her. It's the story of a summer day in the backyard surrounded by buzzing and photosynthesis and the mix of paints on a palette. It is the story of living and dying. It is my mother slipping away quietly, silly and strange. It is me, standing alone in a silent museum in the Netherlands, looking at oil and searching for life.

# on becoming blue

Julia Merante

my grandmother tells me
this story

about a pigeon seeking acceptance
among a flock of blue jays.

like a child
hemorrhaging time

she tells me:

the pigeon rubs hydrangeas
on his feathers
trying to become delicate
like the petals.

the pigeon plucks berries
whole, trying to learn
how to become blue.

I listen to her lips:
they sound like grief
as she tells me
the pigeon dies

trying to swallow the sky.

# Venice

Chloe Ekberg

I turned on the news to see Venice is drowning. The boats are tattered, homes lost, families mourning, and all I can think about is how we once walked down those marbled streets in late August, how the air clung onto us and felt like honey on our skin. The bridges we crossed and the children we passed playing football and yelling *da questa parte, di qua?* The way you gripped my hand as we moved past the swarms of strangers dressed in summer linens. I fell in love with you there all over again. But past the cobblestone alleyways and the laundry that hung from windows that made us feel at home, Venice was sinking softly, letting the water rise. Now I look at the television and sigh. We were there, you and I. Now we're back to nights where I feel the warmth of your body and wish I was alone, to the mornings where we wake up and don't know what to say, and to the days wasted fighting about traffic, about dinner, about the future, about the handle on the bathroom door. We are sinking too, letting the water rise softly in the words left unsaid, the way your smile looks forced, the way I stumble over my words when I say, "I love you."


**Community Forensics**
William C. Crawford
*Photography*

# Rock Candy

Nat Lyle

Two years after I've left, on a Saturday, I am hand-rolling sushi in my mother's kitchen when I decide to bike to Baker Street. I've been making good tips at work. Really good tips. Sometimes sixty dollars a night. I woke up this morning thinking today was something special, and so I ran to the grocery and made it special. The cut of salmon I've chosen is richly pink and flowers like a wild rose when I draw my blade through it. My younger brother eats his fill, then me, and then there is some leftover.

I think to myself, "I haven't seen Tom in two years." That's all I think.

I'm almost sixteen, but not quite. When I left his house I felt older than I do now; two years have softened me up, and I am starting to feel young again in the places I'm supposed to. Except my knees, but that's genetic. I cry sometimes now. And once in a while I burst out laughing for no reason at all—the sun strikes me right, or I remember how I once dropped my grandmother's bowling ball down a flight of stairs and it rocketed clean through a windowpane. That memory shakes me silly now. When I choose a shirt in the morning I think hard about it. I even practice braiding my hair in the mirror in the evenings. The list goes on.

It's bright out today. The sunlight gathers in a shimmery mirage on the driveway and the heat bends air as though it's candlewax. We're shin deep in autumn; this is one of the last hot days before Minnesota plunges into overnight frosts and waxing leaves. Only the sugar maples are beginning to yellow in the sun—otherwise there is no other indication that one season shivers on the border of the next.

I take a paper dish and arrange the rolls of sushi so that they form a sectioned coil leading to the center of the plate. A couple fall apart between my thumb and forefinger and I remove them, licking the sticky rice clean from my hand. I don't want him to have any

ugly ones. When I'm done I wrap the plate and its contents over and over in saran wrap, lest anything be tossed about in my backpack, until the food is so stifled by film it's hard to tell what's beneath it.

As I do this, I am not afraid. Nerves don't reduce thoughts to static the way they used to. My hands are steady. I don't think about the ways Tom, my father, has hurt me. These days I just think of the ways he's hurt himself. He doesn't know what he's done wrong, and I don't think he ever will. I saw it in the way his grey eyes flattened like a salmon's when he threw his fists through the wall or bent my fingers backwards until I cried out. I heard it in how his throat twisted and collapsed when he finally said goodbye, as though his trachea had been expelling a plume of sawdust. I was leaving him and he couldn't fathom why. Before I left he made a final offer: I could go outside if I wanted. Not for chores—just for me. I would have this privilege once a day, if it was nice out, and under Tom's supervision. I could sit on the stone bench at the edge of our rock garden and enjoy the sunlight until it was time to cook dinner. This was how small he thought my needs were, how easily they were corrected.

I wanted to tell him about the way my fingers shook and swelled like wet balloons after he'd punished me, or about the hole in the drywall beside my bedroom. Other things, too. But I could see his confusion and pain in front of me, knotted like a ginseng root, and knew he didn't understand. Instead I said, in my most adult voice, "I just need to go."

This is what keeps me up at night. I can feel it sitting on my chest as though a branch has fallen across me. Everyone has left him and he doesn't know why. And, because I've participated in this exodus, of which I was the last, I feel culpable. I am the one who left him truly alone—everyone else had just thinned his herd.

I pull on my shoes, slip the straps of my backpack over my shoulders, and head out into the heat.

The bike over to my father's house is littered with buckthorn berries. At this time of the year they are thick on their boughs; throughout the day they bounce and roll onto the sidewalk like inky purple eyes. My father lives on the top of the hill on Baker Street. All throughout my life he'd told me if the second Great Flood came, we

would be the only ones in the neighborhood who survived. Maybe even the town. Everyone else, with their potted plants and lawn chairs, their beige sun umbrellas, their trampolines and labradoodles, would slide down the hill like water down a wing. So far the only thing I've ever seen roll down this hill are buckthorn berries. And, once, a boy with a red sled in the dead of January.

My legs aren't used to the steep incline. Pedaling to the top of Baker is an agony. As I bike I'm reminded of the salmon that swim upstream and glossy National Geographic spreads of grizzlies catching their glistening bodies midair, all that struggle reduced to a red pulp of nothing. My father and I used to take a boat out to Lake Superior once a year too, in September during the salmon run. In a little shack beside the shore he showed me how to drive a skinny knife the width of a finger up behind the fish's jaw, then down the length of its flank. Scales gathered under my fingernails, juices pooled beneath flat, speckled bodies. Proud, disgusted, I would hand my father each pink lump perfectly flayed. With the other hand I'd sweep the guts, spine, and head into a pail.

I pant like an animal until the slope momentarily plateaus, then, reduced to sweat and gasps, I walk the rest of the way. The buckthorn branches break the sunlight overhead, and I move in and out of tangled shadows as I walk. My bike wheels roll over scattered berries and spray red juice over my shoes. If someone did not know better, they'd think I'd kicked an animal to death. By the time I get to the top of Baker and see my father's house through a twiggy mesh of dead California blue spruce, I'm bathed in red up to my shins.

I hesitate at the top of the driveway. I haven't seen this house in years and it fills my mouth with bitterness, like biting into the peel of a grapefruit. For the first time, looking down upon it from the incline, I realize that it is small. *Very* small. My father hasn't kept up the garden while I've been away either; it's a simple rock garden, but the two scrubby pink azaleas framing the concrete walkway are now fringed with hardy ash seedlings fluffing their jagged plumage from beneath chunks of pink granite. One evening, two months after I'd left my father's home, I found one of these exact stones on my mother's kitchen floor surrounded by shards of glass. In the kitchen

sill the moonlight lit whatever glass remained upright, each fracture collected in a webbing as delicate as spider silk.

It would have been easier to leave the shards on the floor for the morning; if my father was coming in, he wouldn't have thrown a rock in the first place. He had thrown it to scare me. He did that sort of thing when he was hurt. Still, I fumbled in the darkness for the broom. The pink stone glittered in the moonlight as I collected the glass into a dustpan, double-bagged the shards, and dropped them into the waste bin. I swept again, but not well enough—without realizing, I'd left a trail of blood from my heel down the hall and to my bedroom. In the morning there was a dry, splotchy stain at the foot of my bed the color of a pressed poppy. Through the door, the uneasy whinny of my mother's voice.

I approach my father's door and knock three times, hard. He might be downstairs or in his workshop. He doesn't hold a job, so at the very least I know he's somewhere on the property. He never leaves.

I don't know what I am expecting, but his prompt answer stuns me. For the first time today I realize what I've done—I nearly gasp when the cold shock grips my bones. I want to run. The door swings open and we are face to face; the sunlight stretches and ends at the front step, so my eyes take a moment to unscramble all the darkness beyond the doorway. He stands six inches higher than me, grey hair and a pin-sharp nose. Across his jaw spans a russet birthmark the size of a hand, which tapers off beside his left earlobe. An electric moment of recognizance passes between us—his beard has grown out now, faded and grey. His eyes are flatter than I remember. And, in the two years that have passed, the razor-blade lines of his jaw are muted by skin having grown patchy with age. I realize I have grown up while I was away, too. I can see he's surprised. I've hit my growth spurt, cut my hair close to my scalp, and wear clothes that fit me now. It must be shocking to see me in an outfit that I have not been wearing since I was nine or ten years old, each garment having shrunk around my developing figure and bleached-grey from sunning on the clothesline. I'd left nearly everything with him. All the things I own now are things I've bought for myself.

"Charlotte," he says, "it's been a long time." Past his surprise I can see he is already exhausted. My appearance has let the air out of him, as though all this time he's held his breath. Now, deflated, he looks like he needs to be put to bed. If he's happy to see me he's hidden it well.

"I brought you some sushi," I say. "I was making some at home, so."

"Your mother's home," he says, tone landing somewhere between correction and clarification.

I don't answer that. I swing my backpack around so that it hugs my chest and tear the zipper down to the end of its track. With the other hand I shimmy out the plate and hand it to him. As he watches his head dips forward. I notice as his cheek catches light, the port wine birthmark jumps from muted to gasping red in an instant.

He doesn't invite me in; I don't expect him to. Instead he says, "I haven't made lunch yet. So," he grunts, "this is good."

"I hope you like it." I am all nerves now. Sweat suddenly begins to run down my back. My stomach squeezes into a raisin. I can't believe I've done this.

"I'll eat it," he says. His tone encourages me a little. My father is a good cook, but he had me prepare most of the meals when we lived together. I wonder how long it's been since someone has made him something to eat. Maybe two years. Guilt gives my heart a squeeze.

Before he got sick and angry we cared for one another. And I can tell, right now, this is why I am here. I am not here for the man who heard voices, who punched walls, who snapped his jaw like an animal at ghosts in the room. I am here waiting for a younger man, who looks just so, to fill the doorframe. With a port wine birthmark and both knees still working. But my father in front of me now, his grey eyes narrowed to slits in the sunlight, I know the man in my memory is not coming back. I think I already knew all of this somewhere, but now the knowledge sticks in my body and holds.

"Stay here," he says. "I have something for you, too."

He closes the door and disappears behind the thick curtains that stifle the sunlight. I don't have to see it to know that no lights are on—we always lived in the dark. Forty-five seconds pass. I stand so

still that my whole body begins shaking, as though I'm doing a plank midair.

The door opens again and there he is, holding a tall mason jar with both his hands.

"From this year's batch," he says. It's maple syrup; I can tell by its amber color, the way little opaque sugar crystals, gathered together like rock candy, stir at the bottom. Every year we'd spend a week boiling down tree sap, minding the fire in shifts as one day spilled into the next. He'd call me in sick from school to tend it. Looking at the jar in his hand I can nearly feel the sweet condensation on my bangs, the scent of burning sugar and sweat clinging to my clothes. I can sense the clamminess in my boots and steady sting in my eyes like ghost limbs of a younger self. I am there and here all at once. I pull the jar under my arm and smile.

"Thank you," I say.

"I think I finally got it right this year," he says. "Lower heat, longer burn."

"I'm excited to try it." I'm not sure what else to say.

"School's been good?" The transaction now complete, my father trades his weight between one leg and the other.

"School's great." And it is. I've never been on the honor roll before; this year will be the first. Now that I'm allowed to leave the house when I want to, I see friends over the weekends. I go to an after-school club too—I didn't make try-outs for this semester's run of *The Secret Garden,* but I'm helping build the set.

I want to return the courtesy by asking him how things have been, but I'm afraid of the way his answer will gut me. So instead I say, "I can't wait for the weather to cool down."

"It's right around the corner, can't you feel it?" My father loves talking about the weather. He doesn't quite smile, but his lips twitch.

"I can, yeah."

A pause.

"Well, I think it's time I sit down and eat," he says. I finally see it, a flash of sadness rip through his expression. Every muscle in his face tightens. He shrinks into the doorway and stands stiffly to its side, as though bracing for a blow.

I nod a hollow nod. “I hope you like it.” I’m repeating myself but I have nothing else I want him to hear. I just want him to like it. Watching him cringe away feels like pressing my hand to a burner.

He says goodbye and I say goodbye. It’s not at all like the first time. This time it feels like we are in agreement.

Once the door is closed I shimmy the jar of syrup into one of my backpack pockets and zip it shut. I bide my time a little, until I’m sure he’s walked away. After a few moments of certainty I unzip a smaller pocket at the front of my bag and grip the glittering piece of granite lodged inside.

I hold it out beside the azalea and drop it. There’s no ceremony about it, I just want it back where it belongs.

I walk up the driveway to Baker’s peak and stare at the hill that plunges downward in front of me. From up here my father’s house is barely visible; I see clippings of grey siding through plumes of blue-green pine needles, flashes of pink azalea petals, and nothing else. The jar of maple syrup is heavier than the sushi was, but the weight is reassuring. It makes me feel like I’ve left with more than I came. I don’t use my bike pedals on the way down; I let my legs go limp as the earth flies beneath the wheels. It sounds like a fishing rod unreeling into the daylight.

**Spiral**
Kirsten Hendershot
*Faber Castell ink pens on paper*

# how do you live with yourself?

Rebecca Hetherson

You take apart your skin and fold
it into squares. You sew
the pieces together and hang
it out to dry. The summer sings
a song while you wait. You pair yourself with shoes
and a red dress. Two layers on
one. When you go to sleep and the red dress is gone
and your quilt is on your dresser, your heart
beats to the sound of your hairdryer. Off
and on while your mother uses it to show how much she still
loves you.

You go back to the time where you thought you
were temporary. You look down and realize
that time is now, and yet
your words are permanent in someone else's
stomach. They ate them up
in Sharpie and cardboard.

You clap your hands when the sun rises
and the sun sets again. You push
the light up and down, ready to rise when you're ready
to rise. Shallow breaths.

You live in faded pictures and your father's
back pocket, where
a coin you gave him when
you were ten
still sits
among his change.

You cry. You swallow bits of language
that you think you'd say again, but
choose not to.

You laugh too loud and
laugh again, trying
to love yourself underwater. Your socks are wet
and you dance in them
until your toes poke through the holes and
one layer starts breaking.

You smile when magic convinces you, illusion in the form of *I love you* and a hug that could've been more. You frown
when you let yourself down, which is always
and never not. You never knot
your sweatshirt strings and that's why they slide right through
in your sleep.

You sleep a lot and in
your dreams you see a future
that you are terrified of. When you wake up, you are happy
it hasn't happened yet. You put on your skin
and your red dress, the heels you never took off. The socks
in the dryer with your mother. They both always come out breaking,
with holes in them, one
layer exposed.

The squares on you take the form of a person
who is temporary but whose words are digested.
Shallow breaths.
The night and day are stuck
in your left and right armpits.
You flash them both
when you hug someone who lied
about loving you.

It's simple, living with a wet sock
and a truth.
You speak words and watch
as the world
swallows.

**Across the Water**
Isabella Van Tassel
*Acrylic paint on canvas*

# Her into Himself

Becca Downs

Must a river
stop being
a river
the moment she
meets the sea?
Could she
continue
her path
through ocean's
lapping waves,
or does she
lose integrity
once he spits
his salty
sea breath
on her face?
The river
does not slow,
she rushes
forward, albatross
caught in a gale,
then leaps
into his claws
as he roars,
chews, digests
her into himself.

# Why I'm Afraid of the Grocery Store

Katherine Suppa

At nineteen, I stand in front of the peppers and I feel my heart rate begin to pick up. I try not to make eye contact with the little, white-haired old lady poking at the carrots next door. I keep my eyes down, pretending to be immersed in my task as if my mind isn't operating at a thousand miles per hour. I'm not entirely sure what I'm trying to avoid; there is something in the brightness of the light and the endless shelves stretching before me that makes me sweat. I am not here to chit chat. I'm here to get my groceries and get out, as quickly as possible.

The grocery store makes me feel very small, and I can't help but think of my father, who has always appeared disturbingly comfortable in buildings filled with food. It's one of few traits I didn't inherit from him. I got his loud voice, his love of puns, and, unfortunately, his nose, something I would have much preferred to get from my mother. I suppose that makes a love of the grocery store a learned behavior, a place where we are taught to find comfort in familiarity and routine. A desire for comfort is another trait my father and I share, but with different manifestations.

My discomfort in the grocery store is a more recent development, but I can't pinpoint when *exactly* it began. Sometime after college started. It feels like such an adult thing to do, to go to the grocery store with a credit card in your name and no parental safety net. Part of me thought it made me smart, as I searched the shelves for the best deal, scanning each tag for the price per unit, for the buy-one-get-ones.

It has become almost a game; how can I get the most for the least? This past summer was the first time I lived alone, and I challenged myself to spend no more than $25 each time I went to the grocery store. This continued into the school year, and somewhere along the line, this money game became an obsession. Food shopping has become an endless cycle of comparison and regret.

My bags of veggies lie at the bottom of my cart as I stand in front of the refrigerator unit, studying the chicken breasts neatly wrapped in plastic. Organic, free-range, grocery store brand. I look over price, weight, expiration date, searching for the perfect package and wishing for my father.

There is a cramping in my chest and a tightness behind my eyes because, dammit, I am not going to cry over a package of chicken; but I want to because I am so overwhelmed and anxious, and I just want someone to tell me what to do and what the right choice is, and how the hell do people do this so easily? How do they move through the world without thinking about that package of chicken that they bought and if it is bad or poisoned or cost too much or will kill someone if they cook it wrong? And then how do they not feel the ache of guilt about panicking over a package of chicken when there are people starving in Africa or dying of disease down the street or losing their loved ones?

This would be so much easier with my father by my side, bitching about the evil deli counter workers and chattering with grocery store staff with more than just mandatory politeness, his large presence a comfort, a shield. The grocery store was a safe place for us, a place we could go together even if we had been in a screaming match earlier that day, but without him, it was hard to feel safe here.

The cramp in my chest squeezes. Maybe I'm having a heart attack. That would solve a lot of problems. I grab a package of chicken, throw it into my cart, and decide the grocery store and I need a break. My meal plan will be sufficient for now.

At four, I cling to my father's leg, holding on to the rough denim behind his knees. This will be my earliest memory of the grocery store, a massive building, overwhelming to my small body, but my father likes it because the deli has a section where a man with large hands will shape soft, white cheese into balls. Fresh mozzarella, a staple in our Italian household, although I won't learn its name until I'm about six or seven. I remember standing with my father and looking at the small moons of cheese nestled on a bed of ice. I can feel my father shake with laughter, his loud voice booming, already

best friends with the cheese man.

My father has a knack for making friends with the people who work at the grocery store. It's a strange thing to witness, the way he can banter with the people behind the deli counter, how he can charm cashiers with a smile and easy conversation. He makes interacting with strangers look effortless in a way that almost makes me believe that it can be.

At twenty, I climb back into my car holding a crinkled CVS Pharmacy bag, a bottle of pills rattling at the bottom. It is January, and I am wrapped in layers of sweaters and jackets, and even though the car thermometer says it is 42 degrees outside, I am sweating.

I toss the pills onto the passenger seat and shove my key into the ignition. The car shudders to life.

My therapist will be proud of me. It had taken her months of coaxing to get me to schedule the doctor's appointment, partially out of concern for my health. I remember the look on her face when I told her I hadn't been to a doctor in about three years, not since I started college, and this fact became a weapon in her arsenal.

I don't like pills. I don't like taking them. I don't like the idea of putting a chemical into my body in the hopes that it will cure what ails me. I've always had trouble swallowing pills, anything from teeny-tiny Claritin to a course of Amoxicillin the size of horse tranquilizers; I have to take them with some form of applesauce or yogurt, tricking myself into swallowing them. Something inside me seizes as soon as I put them in my mouth, my chest and my throat constricting and no amount of water able to flush the pill down. I suppose it is this anxious reaction that prescribes the Prozac currently burning a hole on my passenger seat.

When Anita first proposed the idea of taking an anti-anxiety drug I rejected the idea hard and fast.

"No," I said to her. "I can't take pills."

That immediately turned on her therapist instinct, and she leaned forward in her chair, pen touched lightly to her lips. "Can't? Or won't?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Won't," I said. "I don't take

pills."

"Why?" It was her favorite question to ask.

Again, I thought before responding. "Because it means I'm broken."

Her shoulders softened at that, and she let it go for the time being. But a few sessions later, she had me making an appointment with a general practitioner with the intention of talking about anti-anxiety medication.

I didn't tell my mother and father about the real reason for the doctor's appointment, claiming instead that it was just a checkup. I deployed the weapon that I hadn't been to a doctor in years, and they dropped it, letting me go about my business.

When I was younger, I was a rampant liar—or a storyteller, depending on which parent you talked to. By twelve, my father had beaten almost all the lies out of me through a combination of verbal discipline and corporal punishment. My lies were no longer as prolific as they once were, except for one: I have been lying to my parents for years, faking away anxiety and depression and pretending that life comes easy to me. My logic, I thought, was simple; I don't want them to worry about me. But sometimes I'm not sure who I am trying to convince more of this—them, or me.

I don't know how to tell them about the medication. It feels like an admission of defeat, and I am sure that they will see it that way too. I'm sure I inherited their logic on medication; in middle school, despite the suggestion of several teachers, my mother refused to get me tested for ADHD.

"They'll put you on meds," she would say. "I don't want you on meds."

I didn't entirely understand her reasoning at the time, but being young and impressionable, it made an impact, and even years later, I couldn't shake the idea that medication was a bad thing.

My thoughts keep me distracted on the drive home, so much so that I almost miss our driveway. I slam on the breaks and quickly turn into it. The pills slide off the passenger seat and onto the floor. Once I am parked, I fish around for them on the ground, and once I retrieve them, I shove them deep in my purse, glad that no one is

home to hear the telltale jangle of medication against plastic. I sit in the driver's seat of the car for a moment, and just breathe.

At eighteen, I enter the grocery store beside my father as he leans heavily on a shopping cart. His knees don't work well anymore, not since he tore his menisci and had to have them removed almost six years ago. The automatic doors hiss open, releasing a rush of cool air. Grocery stores have a very distinct sound, more so than other retail locations. The beep of checkout, the clatter of cart wheels against the linoleum floor, the hum of freezers and AC and lights. It's a sound that has come to define my Sunday mornings, the same way a church choir might define others'. This is our routine, my father and I, one that will end sooner than I would like. I am hurtling quickly towards college and out of my parent's house, and soon I will be in the grocery store alone.

My father mumbles something about going to get my brother a sandwich from the deli, despite his hatred for the woman who works there. My mother and I long ago came to the understanding that my father is a drama queen. She calls it his "martyr complex," his desire to be seen as self-sacrificing. Maybe it's a product of being the oldest of three sons, of having to be "the responsible sibling" his whole life. Maybe it's what makes him so easy to talk to; it makes him quick to laugh, quick to smile, quick to please. He leaves me to collect the veggies from the shopping list my mother gave us, despite his desire to browse. I don't like it when he leaves me alone in the grocery store, but to accomplish things, I must let him. I will ignore the flipping in my stomach because it will make his life easier, make him happy. Sometimes I think we're more similar than I'd want to admit.

At twenty-one, I walk down the frozen foods aisle with my father, him pushing an almost overflowing cart while I check items off the list my mother had again insisted we take.

"I don't get it," my father says. "We don't take medication."

I almost laugh, thinking of my mother's adverse reaction to even the thought of medicating me for ADHD, despite the fact that it

probably would have helped me succeed more. Instead, I take a deep breath. I had known this conversation was coming from the moment I had first told my mother I was taking meds for my anxiety, just 10 mg of Prozac each morning. She tells my father everything (and vice versa), so even if I didn't tell him, he would find out.

"Well," I say, thinking about price tags on packages of chicken, "I do."

"But you don't need it," he says. I can hear his confusion, and I don't know how to tell him how good I have gotten at hiding the anxiety from him and my mother. I am their oldest child, their organized, controlled daughter. The child who is most likely to pay for their retirement home. The one who has her life together.

I've been lying to my parents about the anxiety for years, shuffling through life with a "fake-it-till-I-make-it" attitude that is no longer helpful. It was a Band-Aid on the problem, and now that façade is beginning to crumble.

I take another deep breath. "I do need it."

"No, you don't."

I don't know how to tell him about the panic attacks, about the constant shifting in my stomach, about the sleepless nights, and, when it gets bad enough, about the desire to not be on this planet anymore. A part of me thinks he will understand, knowing the pressure of being an oldest, best child. This is my chance to come clean.

"It's not forever," I say instead. "Just until I no longer need it."

My father is quiet. The wheels of our shopping cart squeak.

"It's helping me," I say, falling back on the same words my therapist used when she explained it to me, trying to fill the silence with anything I could. "All it's doing is showing my brain the correct way to react to things."

"How do you react that's not correct?" my father asks. "There's nothing wrong with you."

I suppose that's something every parent wants to believe, but I don't say that. Instead, I say, "Panicking, mostly," as we turn out of the aisle, towards the checkout.

"Keep an eye out for an open lane," my father says. "Everybody panics."

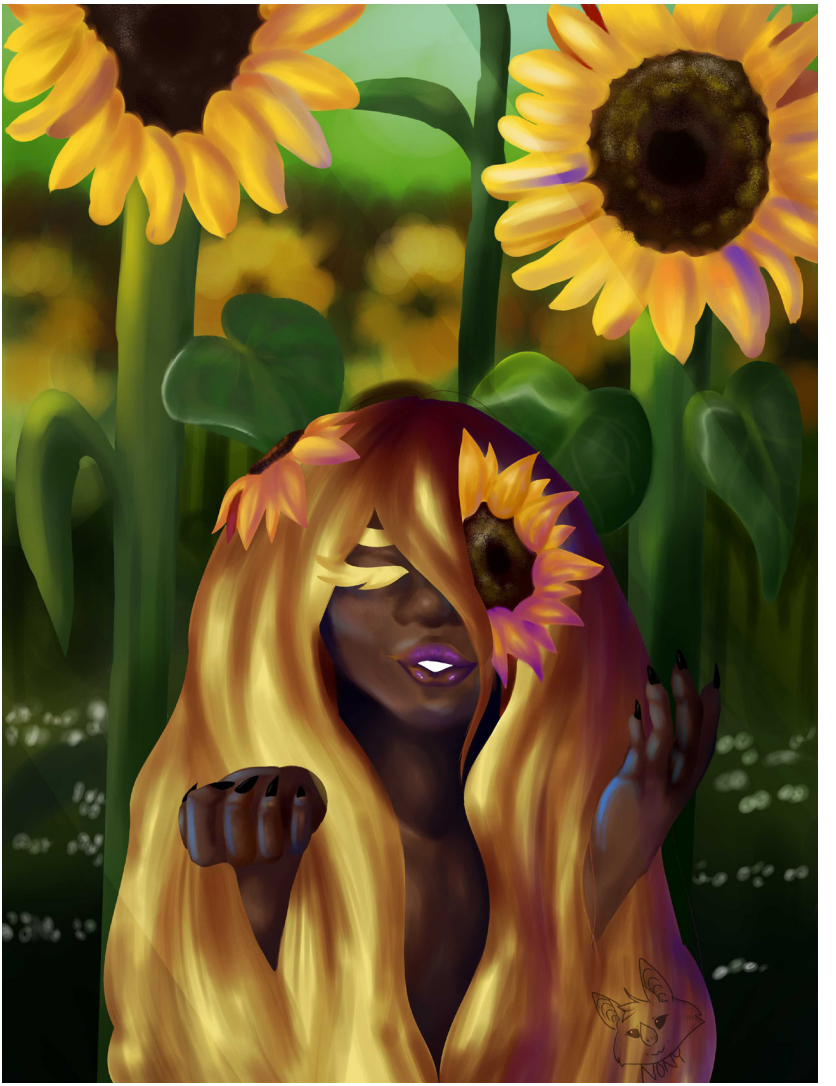
I sigh. I know from experience that the more I try to explain, the more frustrated I will get. My father is stubborn, and once he has set his mind to (or against) something, it stays that way. We used to fight, he and I, loud screaming matches that almost always ended in tears, usually for me, and it took me years to learn which things were worth the fight.

"Seven's open," I say, pointing, and deciding that this is one of those things not worth the brewing argument. Maybe one day I'll be able to explain it to him in a way that he understands, in a way that he can accept. But for now, I decide to change the topic and let us enjoy the routine of a Sunday afternoon at the grocery store.

# Samsara

Raine Bongon

It's me again
The old ball and chain.
Both the sweat-slick groom and the beautiful, beaming bride.
Except I never got on one knee and
I never made any vows.
Except I can't disappear to the local dive bar
When I get sick of myself
Because we're both manacled to the same locked ribcage.
This lover of mine, she lives deep inside
Milky, glistening bone that we call our lovely little home
And I never asked to have to love her
But oh, what a privilege.



**Field of Golden Rays**
MaryAnne Stallworth
*PaintTool SAI*

# Love Handles

Mara Lowhorn

*This is life in pink,* I said,
strawberry sweat on palms,
sweetness dripping down chins.

Connecting the dots,
freckled cheek to freckled hip,
braiding legs
until Love
sets its glasses on the bedside table.

Overripe lips scrawling promises on chests,
fingers seeking the Braille left from fishnet stockings.
Messages on thighs,
on bellies,
around necks
that only he can decode.

Hands pressing dimples into flesh,
making mountains
out of muffin tops,
pillows
from spare tires.

His body curling
around the warmth
from parts of myself
I always wished weren't there.

No longer
made to shrink
or to squint—
only to blossom.
Stretching
our big bones
across the bed,
enough room for two
melting into one,
settling like
a blanket of blush.

# Recipe for Being Black and Alive:
## Omer Ahmed

Luck

Poor aim
~~Staying inside your own apartment~~
~~Playing video games with your nephew~~
~~Not having a weapon~~
~~Being cooperative~~
God coming down and hugging you so tight
bullets can't penetrate their embrace
The sorcerer's stone
~~Being a cop~~
~~Being a veteran~~
~~Surrendering quietly~~
The angel Gabriel catching the bullets with his bare hands
~~Going to college~~
~~Being pregnant~~
Being Luke Cage
~~Handing over your license and registration carefully~~
~~Begging them not to kill you~~
~~Begging them to see your life has value~~
~~Begging them not to murder you with tears in your eyes~~
~~Having your child in the car with you~~
~~Calling your loved ones every morning and~~
~~Telling them you love them at the end of every call~~
~~Being a child~~


**Gaia, Blue Iteration**
Miranda Ramirez
*Gauche-based monoprint on paper*

# The Huangpu River

Shirley Sullivan

A series of thunderstorms rumbling along the coast from Mexico to southern California has driven up the humidity. Emma, standing by the deep end of the pool, watches her sister Rose close the shutters inside her house against the heat. The branches of a huge cypress reach across the garden and cast shadows on the surface of the water.

"It's okay to go in," Rose calls as she walks onto the terrace. A sudden breeze floats the skirt of her dress, ruffling the hair of the dog at her feet, a tan Norfolk Terrier named William Beckett. Emma looks down, tugging at the borrowed bathing suit.

"Go on," Rose says.

Emma lowers herself into the pool, working her way around a dragonfly hovering on the surface, and swims a few laps through curled mulberry leaves. She takes a deep breath and allows herself to sink straight to the bottom, wondering how long it takes to drown. She waits until she runs out of breath and opens her mouth. Above her, heat lightning flares against the horizon, reflecting off the water. Rose and William Beckett peer in at her, their faces watery and distorted.

"What are you doing?" Rose calls from the edge of the pool, her voice eerie and distant.

Emma surfaces, coughing.

"I hope the pool service remembers we're having a party tonight." Rose hands her a towel and checks her watch. "I better call them."

"I guess I've come at a bad time."

Rose gazes at her, unfocused. "What?" She slaps at a gnat. "I wonder if I should have had the garden fogged."

Back inside the house, Emma watches as Rose goes through all the kitchen drawers until she finds a pack of cigarettes and some matches. "Richard isn't keen on my smoking." She lights up and pulls

smoke into her lungs. "What did you do to your hair?"

"Like it?" Emma asks, running her fingers through the hacked-off blonde tangle. She has exchanged the bathing suit for her warmups and a pair of sunglasses and is popping candy corn into her mouth from a small sack she keeps in a pocket.

"Let's get your gear moved off the table—you always dump everything in the first available spot." She reaches for Emma's bag but before Rose can move, Emma has snatched it up.

"Oops, sorry, just checking to see if you brought your meds. So, did they give you time off for good behavior?" Rose asks.

"From the loony bin?" Emma pockets her candy and reaches for Rose's cigarette.

"I hope you don't use that term tonight."

"Why not?" She lifts herself onto the counter and addresses the dog. "I don't think our Rose wants it known that she has a sister. Especially one who's in Pond House. She prefers to think I'm not part of the family. What's your opinion on this?" William Beckett, from his dog bed by the French door, says *I heard they found you in baggage claim.* Emma studies the dog. Then to her sister: "So, you're having a party."

Rose, often speechless around her sister, takes a minute to respond. "A party, yes. Since Richard's being considered by the surgical staff at USC to join the team, we thought we should have the department heads and their wives to dinner. They're driving down for the evening. And Richard's brother. You remember him from our wedding? He'll be here too. So. Everything has to be perfect," Rose says. "It will be nice to have you, even if we didn't know you were coming."

The two sisters stare past one another.

Growing up, there were parties every weekend. The guests stayed until the sun came up. Their father George, in his two-toned wingtips and striped button downs, had been an attorney to the Stars. He was a gentle man, with kind blue eyes and thinning hair, dealing patiently with their mother Eleanor's rages and silent stares. Emma recalls her mother singing at their parties, curiously beautiful, surrounded by members of the band, dressed in a shapeless robe

of fuchsia-colored cloth, her ritual garment, her feet bare, her long straight hair parted high. Emma still holds the thrill of that voice, the beauty of it, as clear and cool as a mountain stream. She and Rose used to sit on the stairs to the pantry, after they'd drained the dregs from the cocktail glasses, listening to the sounds of the party. This was before they helped Eleanor, often crying like a poisoned bird, up the stairs to bed. The guests, mainly in the film industry, with wavering, translucent smiles and fluttering hands, drank until they fell down.

"Yeah, I'm doing so well, they let me out for my birthday."

"Oh, my God," Rose says. "I thought it was next week."

"Twenty-two today."

"Twenty-two!" There's an awkward embrace between them as Emma slips off the counter.

"So, you're doing well?"

"Doing well." Emma knew Rose needed to hear that. "Stefan's pleased that I've left the couch to sit on the floor with everyone else. And I'm showing some insight into my dreams. That's earned me points. I get to sit in his lap and play with his ears."

"Stefan?" Smoke curls between their faces as they pass the cigarette back and forth.

"Yeah, he's our therapist."

"I hope you're kidding."

"He's a Polish priest. Sometimes he watches us as if he has solved the equation but won't tell us. He's teaching us to speak Polish. Dzien dobry, jak sie masz? He has all sorts of artifacts from his previous life, and he'll trade to anyone who wants them. Foreign coins, votive candles. I gave him my watch for a rosary. But honestly, in spite of his tattoos and earrings, his stories of doing meth and cooking potatoes on a beach, you could never pick him out of a line-up of other Stefans." She can see the growing concern in the tilt of Rose's head.

"Do you still blame me?" Rose asks.

Emma takes the cigarette, inhales, and blows perfect smoke rings toward the ceiling. "See what I've learned to do." She blows one toward the dog, causing him to sneeze. "Have you ever seen a drowned person? Washed up with the current and looking bloated? Of course

you haven't, you weren't there. Mother had a one-inch crab in her ear. And kelp and some weird shit in her hair."

Rose pulls a chair from the table and sits down. She stares at her hands.

"No, wait. Blame you because you signed me up for the nut house?" Emma bursts into laughter. "Don't worry about it. Actually, it's nice there."

"You have Mother's eyes," Rose says, "and her way of looking at someone as if you'll rip their throat." No one speaks until an air conditioner kicks off in another part of the house. Rose turns her head in that direction.

"Each Sunday," Emma won't stop, "there's a small chapel service for whoever offed themselves the previous week. Thursday it was Arnold from Santa Cruz. After lunch, he confessed he'd always wanted to be a mime. Seven hours later he hung himself. I've thought about doing it, but it would be redundant." Abruptly, she shuts up.

Rose pushes her chair back and stands. "I have a party to get ready for." The caterers are going to arrive mid-afternoon. They will serve cold lobster and tenderloin of beef. And after, orange crepes. On the counter are numerous glasses and bottles of wine, one of which has been opened. Rose pours a small amount and takes a sip. "Richard should like this one."

Emma picks up an empty glass and holds it out.

"Probably not a good idea. I mean with whatever you're on. I don't know what the rules are."

"Hey, come on. It's my birthday."

"Do you have something to wear for tonight?" Rose asks, returning her glass to the counter.

Emma looks down at her gray sweats, the prescribed lunatic uniform.

"I'll lend you something." She crushes the cigarette in the sink and brushes ash from the front of her dress.

In the dining room, the sisters survey the table and the china plates. Emma lifts a linen napkin, smells it, and returns it to its place. Lush hydrangeas fill the center of the table, and more than a dozen candles wait to be lit. On the wall over the sideboard hangs

a small Milton Avery of a field full of lopsided cows. Emma always loved this painting. She touches the frame, counts the cows as she did when she was little. She examines other familiar items with her fingertips. Rose has more than the china and the napkins; she has everything that belonged to their family including Eleanor's pearls which she's wearing around her neck. "This is some fucking production," Emma says, picking up a crystal goblet, ready to drop it on the floor.

"Careful." Rose takes the glass from Emma's hand. "Let's go make some sandwiches."

Back in the kitchen, Rose pours more wine for herself, drinking it down in one quick gulp. As she opens the refrigerator, the phone rings. Emma, calm now, sits quietly.

"Yes," Rose says into the receiver. There's a long pause. "Why? I see. Well, I need you here. And this *is* for you. The two of you, don't be *too* late."

In the reflection of the glass door that leads to the terrace, Rose's face stiffens, falls apart, recomposes, in no more time than it takes to draw a single breath. She kneels, her arms around William Beckett, holding onto him as he looks up at Emma. *And you thought you were the only one who had your mother's map to a place that doesn't exist,* he says to her.

A radio is playing in the room where Emma is to sleep—it's been on since she arrived this morning. She turns it off. With a creaking sound, the house settles, then it's quiet. Her grandmother's canopied bed has a coverlet made of tufted cotton. A plump little chair sits slipcovered in chintz.

Emma hears voices in the garden below. The pool cleaners are finishing up.

She removes her dark glasses and lies across the bed, then turns onto her stomach. She imagines a room like this for herself. A bathroom with glass cabinets and thick, pale-colored towels. She'd have to change her habits to fit in to such a place. Already, her few things are scattered through the room like bits of rabbit fur, marking her trail. This morning, the ride into this rose and umber-colored settle-

ment of bridges and bicyclists and sidewalks veined with moss was a reminder that she was like a starling here, flinging itself at the windows.

The glow from the clock illuminates a framed photo of Rose and herself. She was eight and Rose was fourteen. They stood in the gentle surf of the ocean, bare-legged and sun-bleached. Rose's budding breasts were visible under her shirt, her own hair an unruly halo around her head. Rose had her first period that summer. Neither of them knew then, holding hands, easing forward in childish hope, that their mother would end her life. Nor did Emma know that the day was coming when Rose, with her matching luggage, would leave for school and she'd be left behind. To deal with a collapsing father.

She hears arguing down the hall. Richard is home. She hears the muted ticking of the grandfather clock in the downstairs hall, water swelling on the lip of the bathroom faucet, the thrum of a florescent light. Emma has yet to sign her name to this life.

When it quiets down, she leaves the room to look for Rose. She finds her at her bedroom window.

"It's starting to drizzle," Rose says. "We won't be able to sit outside."

Emma joins her, two figures in a vanishing light, their faces floating in front of them as rain splatters the panes of glass. They hear cars passing on the road.

"Do you still call yourself Emma?" Rose asks. "Or do you go by, what was the other name?"

"China Moon."

"Right. What happened to her?"

"She disappeared down the Huangpu River on her way to the East China Sea. You should have seen the monkeys lined up along the banks, waving and clapping as she went by. It was a real sendoff."

"How do you know about the Huangpu?"

"Mother used to sing stories to us about a golden boat on a long dark river."

"I don't think she meant the Huangpu. It's in Shanghai and full of bodies."

"Is it? I guess it was perfect then." Emma searches her sister's

face. "Remember the story Mother told us about a magical garden on the other side of the ocean? And the only way to get there was on a sailboat with a translucent keel?"

"What do they have you on? The doctors?" Rose asks, turning toward Emma.

"Do you think Mother wanted to reach that garden, and she couldn't find a sailboat so she decided to swim? Do you think maybe she didn't want to die?"

"Seroquel?" Rose asks.

Eleanor used to trace circles on Emma's cheeks, marking her for a life of extraordinary imaginings. Back in her room, Emma goes to the mirror, examining her face for tracks. She rubs the glass with her hand but can't see them. What she can see is Richard's brother standing in the doorway behind her. He resembles a boxer more than a radiologist, his thin hard frame, a broken nose set in a handsome face. His composed expression. When he makes no move to leave, she's suddenly aware of the shape of the room. The shape of what's to come, and she knows, with no hesitation, that this is what she wants. She feels herself heating up, as if she's edging toward an episode. She tugs the sweatshirt over her head and kicks off the pants. Past the window, she hears a rumble of thunder, and a slap of branches against the house. She closes her eyes and waits, counting the seconds—fourteen, twenty-three, thirty-six.

In the shadows of the bedroom, the outline of the furniture unclear, he pushes her against a wall, mapping her skin with his fingers. He takes his time, he's been there before.

He doesn't know that he and Emma can be seen through the window. Or, that in this moment she is watching the first guests arrive, large sedans pulling into the graveled drive with lights blazing. She sees them, in their good clothes, emerging to look around, stepping gingerly because of the rain, making their way to the house. One of the guests looks up, then another, and Emma waves. Rose, standing by the front entrance with an umbrella, walks a few feet away, looking up also.

As Richard's brother strolls off, hands in his pockets, Emma

feels unwrapped, revealed. For her, a small victory, as she's claimed a part of the day for herself. She lifts the dress Rose has left for her and slips her arms through the straps, thinking how amazing she looks. She smears blush on her cheeks, unaware that Rose has called the home where Emma resides to check if she's gone off her meds and discovers that she left without anyone knowing she had gone.

More guests arrive. Emma, in the kitchen, pouring herself a second glass of vodka, peeks out and sees Raymond from the nursing staff.

"Here you are," he says as he spots her. "You're in trouble, but I guess you know that." Raymond is wearing green, the color of halls and antiseptic smells. Of syringes and mold in the walls. He smells of cigarettes and his voice carries throughout the house.

Rose turns in his direction. The dog jumps in circles, his nails pattering against the polished oak floor.

"This is Raymond," Emma says as Rose joins them.

"I would have come sooner but the van was in use. Is there someplace we can talk?" Raymond asks.

"He's going to tell you that I ran away," Emma says.

Rose leads the way, William Beckett following. She passes Richard standing with his brother. "Make sure everyone has a drink. I'll try not to be too long."

"I'm going to tell you," Raymond says in the kitchen, the refrigerator at his back, "since you're her only family..."

"And pays the bill," Emma adds.

"...that our little Emma not only jumped the wall, so to speak, but she must have hitched her way." He turns to Emma. "Right? You hitched? That was a dangerous, dumb-ass thing to do."

"I had to come. This is my birthday party." Emma holds her glass up in a toast. "Na zdrowie!"

"I thought she had permission," Rose says. "I thought you people brought her, but then I realized...." All around them, the caterers go about the business of slicing meat and stirring sauces. The hollows of her face are deeper now. "What kind of place are you running?"

"Actually, Raymond is an out-of-work actor who deals the drugs

he steals from the pharmacy, working temporarily as an aide." Emma is talking faster now. "Not hugely qualified."

"Your sister could be asked to leave the facility," Raymond says.

"Facility?" Emma's harsh laugh attracts the attention of several guests.

"Plus, she's obviously drunk. She can't drink with what she's on, it'll send her flying."

Rose, in her good black dress, looks off, her face shadowed with exhaustion.

Emma's heart begins to beat in rhythm with the chopping of the caterer's knife. She hears William Beckett, his small ears flat against his head. *It's show time,* he tells her. All the while Raymond is talking, his voice sounding like sludge if sludge could talk, Emma's mother is singing to her from a crack in the ceiling.

*I can't tell you whyyyy*

*I can't tell you why*

Richard, with his surgeon's face, walks up and joins them, asking, "Is this going to take much longer? We have guests here that we need to attend to." Emma shoves her glass into Rose's hand and says, "I'm not broken." Then, jumping from one foot to the other, she raises her fists. Before anyone knows what's happening, she lands a blow to the side of Richard's head that sends him stumbling backward into the wine cooler.

On her way to the van, Pond House Sanitarium painted on the side, Emma, dressed once more in her sweats and wearing the pearls she filched from Rose's jewelry box, passes the last two guests arriving. They glance sidelong with slight alarm at the slender woman, as though Emma might approach them for money. She notices William Beckett has slipped out and is wandering off.

It's quiet inside the vehicle. The leather upholstery smells reassuringly familiar. It's raining again. Emma sits in the back seat while Raymond shifts into drive, glancing at her in the rear-view. She studies the back of his head, his thick hands on the wheel. As they pull onto the narrow street, wipers sweeping across the window glass, she thinks of Rose and her ruined party, her dog loose in the neighbor-

hood. Of the flesh and bones of a normal life. A life everyone assures her is so greatly desired. As they round the corner and join the late-night flow of traffic along the lighted boulevards, she smiles, feeling the triumph of her birthday and the warming comfort of the drug that Raymond gave her.

# i can't distinguish between v and w

Divya Taneja

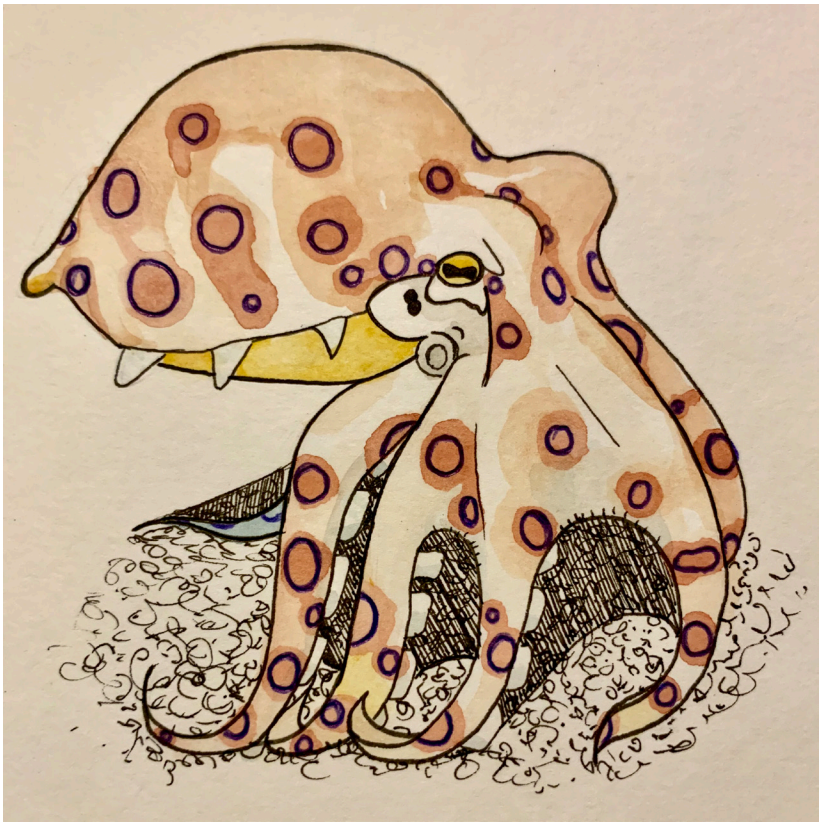
and it is not my fault
for in my mother tongue
one just adds to our v's
to make it a w
and subtract from a w
to make it a v

vaak
means voice
i pronounce it woice
but in hindi
i can pronounce vaak
vithout any problem

you see
i learned to speak english
after the colonizers
forced it down
my lips

can't you tell english
is a foreign occupation
on my native tongue
when you say
my english is really good
for an indian?

maybe one day
i vill be able to
distinguish between my v's and w's
just as vell as i can
in my
mother tongue
vithout any
problem



**Blue Ringed**
Adrien Herrick
*Pen and watercolor on paper*

# these two

Nam Nguyen

the gold and glitter
the silver and shine
all on these two little shoes
crafted with the utmost care

they reflect Chinese culture and tradition
as well as the spirit of the artist
who created them from his heart
for others and for future generations

a pair of identical souls
you can call them
or a couple of lovers
or bond of friendship

gaze at these
and you will ask
how can a human
design such delights

tight, small, humid, callous:
how can such sparkling and colorful jewels for the feet
be the cause of unbearable physical, emotional, and mental stress

two mini-prisons for the feet:
how beautiful
a spectacle
yet inside are two trapped entities

when the make-up comes off
and the gems are flipped away
the true surface reveals plainness
on which enlarging holes and tears live
and stitches abound
and dried red droplets percolate

## the window at 4am

Nalan Ergul

there's something outside my window
trying to reach inside,
eyes shining,
a low grumbling

it's four
almost dawn
i feel glued to my bed
but he won't stop

i get up
and walk towards the back door
i open it

i do the ritual call:
*pspspspsps*

there's a rustling,
the bastard comes into view,
meows at me obnoxiously,
trots inside like he owns the place

i follow him to the restroom where his food is,
he demands someone stay by his side while he eats
because he is simple and spoiled

i give his head pat pats,
close the lights,
go to bed.

there's something outside my window
eyes shining, a low grumbling,
it's the other bastard.

I get up.

**Dr. Witch Craft**
Jailyne España
*Ceramic*

# Bottled water

DS Maolalai

sweat on your lips
and salted clusters,
like peeling the top
off a can of sardines. it's a hot day
in high summer
and kissing you now
is nothing
like biting an apple.
the grass
goes upward, stacked like knives
in a rack, draining
by the sink.
somewhere
the dog loops through things,
searching for mice
and the lost nests of pigeons.
she'll come back. nothing
truly gets lost
up here. I suggest one of us
could walk to the car—we forgot
our bottled water
and I've had sunstroke
before, which you
never have.
it could be quite
romantic, but we both
are very thirsty. perhaps
I'm paranoid.
we are on a hill
and it's a beautiful hill—
no trees anywhere.

no shelter,
your dry teeth
no relief.

# Old Wounds

Chinonyelum Anyichie

The teacher had barely written the topic for the day's lecture on the blackboard when the commotion started outside. She turned sharply, facing her students, momentarily lost. She recollected herself and limped—she had had an accident which made one leg shorter than the other—towards the large metal window on the left side of the class and peered out of it into the street. The students followed her gaze and, half-standing, looked towards the window. She turned and waved them back to their seats. She walked to Chinenye's desk and picked up her handbag, perched on it. She slung it over her left shoulder, and, warning the students to remain seated and quiet, she limped hurriedly out of the class. But no sooner had she left than Obinna, the tallest boy in the class, who reigned supreme in the back, jumped over his desk and dashed towards the window.

His shouts of "Riot! *O kwa riot o!"* threw the class into a frenzied panic. The students toppled seats that had held them prisoners as they all rushed to the lone window. The tall ones covered the whole view, making the shorter ones draw desks near to climb on for a better view. Outside, people ran frantically. Shops were locked, the windows of the many tall houses in the streets were filled with heads peering out. Mallam Sanni's kiosk down the street leading to St. Andrew's church had its window, usually open, tightly shut now. *"Gini melu?"* Onyinye asked what happened to no one in particular, and just then they saw their teacher limping hurriedly, not sure whether to run or walk. Odugo wondered at how quickly she had left the school, when, only a while ago, she had been with them in class. She chuckled when the teacher tried to leap over a large gutter which would have swallowed her up had she not thought the better of it.

As if on cue the students ran back to their seats and began packing up. Desks and chairs were bound together by chains in one hurried swoop. Onyinye hugged her school bag to her chest as she waited for Odugo, who was trying to weave the metal chain around the

legs of her chair and desk. They bound up their chairs and desks that way to avoid theft, which was very common in the school. Soon, they joined the rest of the eager students who were grateful for the riot that rescued them from the ennui of schoolwork.

Obinna ran ahead of everyone, shouting and laughing, as the large school gate poured out its students. Some ran home, others roamed the streets, Obinna the towering head above them all. He joined the crowd of protesters and asked for a machete, but seeing his school uniform, they wouldn't give him one, so he took up a stick instead.

While out in the streets on the way home, Odugo got to know the cause of the commotion. The riot was a reprisal attack on the Hausas by the Igbos in Onitsha, after the former had parcelled and returned in a commercial vehicle, slain bodies of some Igbos living in the North. The riot in the country which began in the North and spread to the Eastern part resulted from a caricature of Muhammad, the holy prophet of the Muslim people, made by a Danish Newspaper called *Jyllands-Posten* on 30th September, 2005. Tensions about the caricature spread from Denmark to other countries and took hold in Nigeria in the early months of 2006, stirring up strife between Muslims and Christians. It began in Maiduguri, a state in northern Nigeria, and saw the death of many Christians, who were mostly Igbos. The religious riot which quickly spiralled into an ethnic war opened up old wounds and a mild clamour for secession arose among some Igbos who thought the attack a threat to their ethnic safety. Mosques, properties, and homesteads belonging to the northerners were burnt down. The riot raged on, drawing in more men who quickly bought new machetes, made a great show of sharpening them on the ground, and joined the crowd of protesters. The police, in a bid to contain the violence, shut down the city's major market.

As Odugo and Onyinye walked home that day through deserted streets, they saw in the faces of the machete wielding men blatant anger and sheathed sorrow over brothers brought back dishonourably. A fat middle-aged woman clad in a blue *wrappa* stood crying and clutching a rusty machete with her right hand, and with the left,

kept the loosely knotted end of her *wrappa* under her arm. She was surrounded by women who consoled her, dressed in similar fashion. Some cried, some looked on dry-eyed, but in unison, they all comforted, *"Ozugo,* it is okay, leave it to God." But the bereaved woman cried all the more, *"Mba,* I will kill them all, *Uchenna na Obiozo umu m ka fa gbulu*—they killed my sons Uchenna and Obiozo." Just then, the attention of everyone shifted from the woman to the motorcycle that sped past. On it was a young man carried on the lap of his fellow, with his head swinging loosely from his neck like a goat that had its head severed halfway. Lumpy blood dripped from his neck as the motorcycle sped fast. Odugo and Onyinye stopped and looked on, wondering if he had fallen victim to a friendly blade or from the brash struggle of a northerner who, finding himself at the mercy of death, had fought back furiously. The woman was soon forgotten and everyone shouted, *"Okada,* man, go very fast before he dies, *Chineke."* The bereaved woman threw her machete on the ground and looked on. She knew, too, that saving the living was more important than mourning the dead. Odugo thought sadly that the young man on the motorcycle would not have in his wildest dreams envisaged this end. He would have gone to market that day as usual, hoping for good sales, and when the chaos began, had been forced to fight just like his mates, pushing aside the pumping fear in his chest. Somehow, as she looked at him, she knew he wasn't going to survive, even though the motorcycle rider had stopped in front of Hope Hospital and he was being rushed in. She knew he was going to die a victim of forced bravery. She bade Onyinye goodbye distractedly as she got to the bend of her street.

She noticed the grave silence in the streets now that she walked alone. It was February 22 in that year 2006, and the Harmattan blew strong, making its presence felt on shrivelled faces and shiny lips. The dusty environment was forlorn, except for the noisy activity going on in *Aboki* Uthman's kiosk. Igbo men surrounded the defenceless kiosk, carting away cartons of Indomie noodles and beverages. The kiosk was rooted off the ground afterwards and children pounced on each other, scrambling for sweets and biscuits. The fireplace of the Mallam who sold barbecue beside it was completely destroyed

too.

Odugo met her father seated with his friends on the veranda of their low bungalow when she got home. He was dressed in a red *wrappa* tied round his waist in the male fashion, with its ends gathered and knotted generously below his navel. He had just passed *the Punch* newspaper to Ilonze, his friend, and had picked up his snuff-box, tapping at it with his knuckles, when Odugo walked in.

"Daddy, good morning, Uncle Ilonze, Uncle Nebife, good morning," she greeted. They nodded their heads.

*"Fa achunatalu unu?"* Ekwedike asked his daughter.

"Yes Daddy, we were asked to stay at home until the riot ends."

*"O di mma,* good. Go inside and take off your school uniform. I fear this riot will go on for much longer."

*"Eziokwu,"* Ilonze said. "What the Hausa people did is too bad. They don't care, once their machetes and daggers are raised, they don't put it down until they kill every Igbo, *O joka,* it is bad. If I say Biafra is the answer now *kita,* Dike, you will say I'm raving mad, yet look at how they kill us. They want us wiped off."

Ekwedike eyed him. He looked behind him and noticed Odugo was still standing at the door. "Get inside the house child," he said to her. She went in sulkily. She would have loved to sit down on the floor and offer to fan him with his raffia hand fan so she could listen to them talk. She loved to hear stories he told about the war. She knew their conversation was soon to take that turn. She went into the sitting room and saw her brother Chinonso, still in his school shorts, perched on the seat nearest the door, listening to the men. She sank listlessly into the seat with him and took off her dusty brown Cortina and white socks. She looked over at him and made to talk, but he silenced her by placing his index finger over his chapped lips. She knew he was waiting patiently for the men to leave so he could go to their father to argue about what he had heard. Ekwedike encouraged that. He loved to watch him argue. He loved looking at his brown-coloured son with the golden hair, this son who was just like him and who made him very proud. Odugo envied the rights that were given him because he was a male child. She loved to sit and argue too and didn't like it when her mother called her to the

kitchen during such times, telling her to leave 'male talks' alone and help out in the kitchen so she could know how to manage hers when the time came.

Outside, Nebife coughed from the snuff he had sniffed in too quickly. *"Utaba nwaanyi a* is too strong Dike, did she add pepper to this snuff? It gets too strongly to the head," he said after the coughing bout. Ekwedike and Ilonze laughed at him.

"Is it not the same snuff we are having or is it another, *gbo* Nebife? Just say you have been buying weak snuff all these while. This is the best, don't you know? It is meant to wash your head and clear your nose and eyes," Ekwedike said.

"Dike *biko* leave Nebife, this thing I am saying about the war, don't you see reasons with me?"

"If you are asking whether I'm in support of another war, then hear this Ilonze: NO, I am not. It is alarming how people who never experienced bloodshed clamour for it," Ekwedike said, trying to control the uneasy feeling in his stomach.

"I know, Dike, some of us may not have fought during the war but we are not unaware of all that happened. I am just saying that secession is the best for us because if you think that the presidency will get to us one day, then you are dreaming, *biko* come down from that tree you climbed to see that ridiculous sight."

"But who said I am in the fight for that, Ilonze? *Mba*, all I want is that whoever rules us should do so remembering that we are one. And this riot is simply a case of religious conflict, nothing more!"

"True, Dike, but you know how quickly it takes an ethnic turn. And while I am not in support of another war like Ilonze, I am angry with our brothers in the north. Yes I am. Ask them to come back home and establish all their multi-million businesses and erect mighty houses? *Mba,* they will not. But Hausa people keep burning their buildings and killing them. *Ekedolu fa ebe anwa[iyalic]?* Are they tied there? How many of the Hausas can you count here *gbo?* And how many buildings do you see them build here? Only wooden kiosks. Whenever you see them, they are always with their small radios glued to their ears, ready for any news of riot like this one, so they will take off overnight, *Fiam!* I do not want war, we all

want peace, except for Ilonze"—he laughed—"but all I am saying is that our people should come home and invest here, because, home is always best."

"True. East or West, home is best, like they say in Dutch, '*Oost West thuis best*.' But I understand why our people who are there do not want to return here and set up businesses. It is because things are easier and cheaper there than here"—he coughed—"I am coming," Ekwedike said, going into the sitting room. He stopped in the middle of the room on seeing his children, perched on the edge of the chair close to the door. He smiled. He walked to the dining-room, took out a bottle of water from the fridge and asked Odugo to take some to his friends. He reclined in one of the dining chairs, resting his neck on its cushioned edges, cup in one hand, bottle in the other. Chinonso hovered over him, impatient for an opening, but thought it best to wait until the men had gone.

Odugo served the men and went back inside. Stories her father told them about the war occupied her mind. He told them about how he had to journey from Eziowelle his town, to Umunnachi on foot, disguised as a mad man, to find out if his younger sister, who was married there, was still alive. But that was before he fought fear and joined the fight. He had feigned madness in order to avoid forceful conscription. He also told them about how his successful return with good news had thrown the scared family, afraid for daughter and 'mad' son, into jubilation that involved them kneeling down and bowing their heads on the red earth and eating the biggest lizard they had smoked and dried, with *garri* and salt, afterwards.

Ekwedike jumped up from the chair and stood still as a noise which sounded like running feet was heard from the back house. "Stay right where you are!" he snapped at Chinonso and Odugo who made to dash towards the direction of the noise. Ilonze and Nebife came into the sitting room, and all three men rushed to the backyard through the backdoor, stopping at the sight before them. Standing in front of the kitchen door, at the centre of the yard, were three Hausa women, all in black flowing hijabs, with babies strapped to their backs and bags on their heads. Hiding behind them and peering at the men were two children, a boy and a girl of about five

years of age. Ekwedike looked at the open gate that had led them in and made a mental note to chide his children over their forgetfulness. "Oga sorry, abeg help us. *Chineke ga gozi gi*—God will bless you," they said, speaking Igbo and making a toneless music of it.

"From where una come?" Ilonze asked.

"From Ose market Oga, we run to everywhere then come here. Abeg help us, hide us. They kill us," the woman who looked the oldest begged, bowing to them.

Ekwedike returned from locking the gate and spoke to them in Hausa. Relief spread through their faces, heaving chests rested and darting eyes settled. Odugo and Chinonso came out just then and looked on silently.

"No problem, una dey safe here, I go take you people to the barracks." Ekwedike said to them. He instructed Odugo to take them to the kitchen and give food to the children.

*"I fugo?* Can you see? Helpless women, where are their husbands?" Ilonze asked, turning to Nebife.

"Ilonze, let it alone. You know in riots you run first and think later. They must have parted ways as they ran for their lives. Dike, I suggest you drive them to the barracks later, when all quietens, if there's no curfew, that is," Nebife said. They sat on the bench beside the stairs of the kitchen, talking, while Odugo and Chinonso warmed up the *ofe akwu* and rice their mother had prepared before travelling to visit her ailing mother in Nanka.

No sooner had Odugo and Chinonso led the women and children into the kitchen than angry voices were heard outside the gate. The men sat still and stared at each other. They seemed to be thinking that a lot was lined out for the day. "Who lives here?" a coarse voice shouted, banging on the gate.

"Who is that trying to pull down my gate?" Ekwedike shouted back. He stood up and made for the gate. Nebife followed. Ilonze shut the kitchen door. Chinonso signalled the women and children to remain quiet.

"We heard that *ndi-awusa* ran in here, we just want you to release them to us, that's all," the coarse voice said.

"You heard? Who told you that and who are you people?"

"We are your brothers, Oga, just open the gate," a shrill voice said in Igbo.

Ekwedike opened the gate and saw several shiny-headed, dust ridden men. They all had their chests bare, as if they had forgotten to throw shirts over swollen bellies before rushing out of their houses.

"Oga Dike *dalu,* we will just search the yard and leave, just to be certain, we come in peace." The man with the coarse voice, who appeared to be their leader, said. He had a machete in his hand.

"You come in peace, yet you have a machete to cut down innocent people not so?" Nebife shot at him. The bald headed leader merely eyed him and looked back to Ekwe, waiting for consent. He moved aside to let them in. "Just do so quietly, I don't want a noise," he said as they trooped in, the nine of them. They searched the entire compound, opening plastic water containers and raising gallons lined up against the wall, as though the people they sought had magically become ants. The leader eyed the kitchen door and climbed the rough cemented steps leading to it. Ekwedike calmly said to him, "So I will be hiding *ndi-awusa* in my kitchen where I cook my food *eh kwa?* Come down from there." The man stood looking at the door—he seemed to be weighing what Ekwedike had said. Finally he smiled self-consciously and turned away. He joined the rest of the men and soon they left, thanking Ekwedike.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, the young girl had run to Odugo and clutched at her hand. She had looked up at her and cried "Aunty, abeg, no let them kill me," her hand, hot and shivering in Odugo's. She had brown hair, almost golden. Odugo looked down at her little face and hugged her close, pressing the side of her face to her tummy. Odugo had said nothing but inside she raged. Death was supposed to be a thing understood and feared by adults, but here was a frail little girl, barely six, robbed of her childhood carefreeness and given the fear of death. She fed the children while their mothers ate, with their nipples in the mouths of their crying babies.

Ekwedike couldn't take them to the barracks that night because of the curfew placed on the state by Governor Ngige, so they slept in the spare room close to Odugo's. That night, Odugo dreamt her

father disguised as a madman and killed the men who had come to carry the little girl away. Ekwedike woke up early the next morning and took the women and children to the barracks in his car.

Later, when the two-day riot in the state which began on the 22nd day of February ended and school resumed, Odugo got to hear of how the cattle market close to the River Niger Bridge was attacked by the Igbos. The traders who were northerners were slaughtered like their rams and their livestock divided as spoils of war. She also heard about how a little boy, who sold sachet water, gave away the hideout of some Hausa men. The little boy with his bowlful of cold sachet water had been called by the men who had hidden in a mattress store owned by an Igbo man. They had called the little boy to buy water to relieve thirsty throats and had paid him afterwards. He must have tipped off the angry men roaming the streets, because within minutes, the Hausa men were dragged away with their hands up in surrender. Their tortured bodies were dumped in a shallow hole in the street, until they were carried away at night by unknown men.

All the students would talk excitedly about all they had seen and heard afterwards, but no one talked freely about Obinna who had been found dead, lying among slain Hausa men at Bida Road. No one knew what had happened but perhaps he had fallen to the dagger of a Hausa man struggling to keep himself alive. News spread of the body of a student in green coloured shorts and yellow shirt, found with his school bag strapped to his waist, his name on his books. His classmates didn't talk about him even when they looked at the space where his desk had been before it was carried away by his father. No one ever filled that spot; it was as if they had reached an unspoken agreement to retain it for him. But the continued absence of his cackling laughter was there to remind them that he was no more.

**They told me to kill the ego**
Isabella Van Tassel
*Acrylic paint on canvas*

# A Return to Synchronous Sound

Felicia Coursen

The shuffling of your black Nikes
is what I want first, swiftly followed
by each individual crack of your knuckles;
the fumbling of your tongue against
the walls of your mouth; the hushed
secrets in my ear, which are humid
and remind me to practice holding my breath
in a 100-degree hot tub in the midst of summer.

Next, give me your left headphone:
douse me in the warped tonality
of Vera Lynn's voice and I'll press the speaker
to my earlobe and become overwhelmed
by the vibrations, which feel like my cat
sidling up next to me in front of a dying
bonfire. Can you hum the national anthem
as I press my reborn eardrum to your chest?

Teach me how to be proud of my country
again. I want to close the front door
thirty-four times, let my anxiety
chill until it is below zero; I welcome
the sensation of an ice cube sliding down
my spine: I am safe within my home.

The forecast says it is going to rain at 5 pm;
we need to lie in the middle of the street
and let ourselves be baptized by Mother Nature's
preferred lullaby. If a car runs us over,
the breakage of our ribs will become a marimba duet.

Do you have any saltwater taffy? We must
let saliva meet the roofs of our mouths:
the world's smallest oceans breaking against
the shores of our taste buds. I must impulse buy
tickets for tonight's concert in Orlando; all
that I need now is to scream out the lyrics to our song,
and know that I'm in the right key.

# Essays & Interviews

# The Swamp Between Her Legs: Ideals of Femininity and Womanhood in Helena Maria Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995)

Elsa Pair

Helena Maria Viramontes explores the complicated relationship between the marginalized woman and her perceived femininity in her novella *Under the Feet of Jesus,* juxtaposing Estrella's unconventional womanhood with the nurse's traditional femininity.

Estrella does not fit society's ideals of what a woman should be: she's Chicana, poor, and a laborer. Her clothing, often not feminine, is worn, dirty, and secondhand. The constant labor of the past several years of her life has taken a toll on her body, molding it into something that doesn't resemble the bodies of the thin, dainty white women in magazines and media. Estrella doesn't express any distress at the fact that she doesn't resemble the typical idealized woman until she encounters the nurse at the clinic.

The nurse is Estrella's opposite in every way: white, sweet-smelling, and soft-skinned from a lack of hard labor. She works, but it's a relatively easy job inside, with air conditioning, and it isn't physically demanding. When she enters the room, "She [has] on a fresh coat of red lipstick, and the thick scent of carnation perfume [makes] Estrella think she [is] there in the trailer all along, in the bathroom" (137). We see her through Estrella's eyes, and the first things about the woman Estrella fixates on—lipstick and perfume—are both stereotypically feminine things about her. These are also things that distance her from Estrella, who doesn't and never will appear traditionally feminine. The family is already in a vulnerable position with the nurse, who holds more power than them in this situation, but her appearance and displays of traditional/"ideal" femininity hit Estrella where she's already vulnerable:

> [Estrella] became aware of her own appearance. Dirty face, fingernails lined with mud, her tennis shoes soiled, brown

> smears like coffee stains on her dress where she had cleaned her hands. The nurse's white uniform and red lipstick and flood of carnations made her even more self-conscious. (137)

The fact that the nurse can make Estrella feel insecure about her own womanhood by existing in her own body highlights the power imbalance between the two women based on race and class, both of which allow the nurse to perform her femininity in ideal ways.

The scene in the clinic comes to a head when the family is forced to use their last couple of dollars—dollars that were supposed to buy gas money for the drive home—on the nurse's diagnosis, which is essentially information that they already know. Estrella is already stressed, overheated, and agitated, and in a moment of desperation and determination, she threatens the nurse with a crowbar in order to retrieve her family's money. This is the most violent and angry Estrella gets, and though her reaction is arguably justified due to the conditions of the situation and the inherent violence of the nurse taking their money in exchange for no medical assistance, Estrella feels out-of-her-body and torn:

> She did not feel like herself holding that money. She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother had requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money. (150)

In this section, Viramontes lays out Estrella's experience of being keenly aware of the difference between her feminine and unfeminine sides. With the description of the first Estrella, words like "silent" and "obediently" suggest it's the feminine version of her, docile and submissive. The contrasting Estrella—the one existing in real time, crowbar in hand—weaponizes violence and fear, using her body to threaten the nurse. An idealized feminine girl wouldn't do such a thing, and Estrella is cognizant of this.

Her awareness of her departure from her perceived femininity in this moment further distresses her, as the next line is "The money felt wet and ugly and sweaty like the swamp between her legs" (150). Here, she directly connects the sense of being split into two

(the feminine and unfeminine) to her vagina and her internalized disgust with it, calling it ugly and sweaty. It's important to note that the vagina isn't at the center of what it means to be a woman as not every woman has one. But it is at the center of womanhood, the abstract cultural ideals that dictate what being a socially acceptable woman looks like. "Ugly" is a harsh word in any context, but it's especially hateful when referring to one's own body, even more so when describing genitalia. Estrella takes the feelings of shame and self-hatred brought up by seeing the nurse easily fit into feminine ideals and subconsciously directs them at herself and her own body simply because she recognizes that she herself does not fit into these ideals.

Femininity and womanhood are concepts constructed around societal and cultural ideas of gender expression and gender conformity. In *Under the Feet of Jesus,* these concepts are unavoidable. Estrella is a girl on the cusp of adolescence, existing in a body that is by no means considered traditional and isn't always perceived as feminine. Her experience in this scene reflects the experiences of women everywhere: separating herself into the feminine and the other, the woman and the animal, the proper and the primal. Being a woman is all about dichotomies, and in this scene, Viramontes demonstrates the impossibility of marginalized women existing in the confines of femininity while still feeling like themselves.

# Feeling Trans

Keagan Wheat

In her essay "Queer Feelings," Sara Ahmed asserts that one feels queerness by "the tiredness of making corrections and departures" (424). She demonstrates how compulsory heterosexuality forces a discomfort in the queer subject by consistently making the subject see the difference between the self and the norms. She also puts this assertion into the perspective of a heterosexual subject. She explains through a metaphor using the body that when one is aligned with the norms, the person "[doesn't] tend to notice when one experiences [comfort]" (425). She uses comfort to deliberately illustrate the "ease" and the lack of distinction between "one's environment" and "one's body" (425). The heterosexual subject does not need to see "the everydayness of compulsory heterosexuality" (424).

Ahmed's idea, applied to transgender identity rather than sexuality, reveals the intensity with which one can feel being non-normative. The transgender subject consistently feels being transgender by the constant "corrections and departures" involved in having a non-normative gender identity. For instance, I "correct" the relationships I have to people, shifting from a daughter to a son. As a trans man seeking social and medical transition, I "correct" the spaces I enter and the hormones in my body by going to the men's restroom and injecting testosterone weekly.

Though the "corrections and departures" can be verbal for a trans person like those of the queer subject, they are often physical. Ahmed uses a metaphor of the body becoming seamless with its surroundings when it does not grate against the norms. Ahmed's body metaphor becomes literal using the transgender lens. The queer subject makes a verbal departure by having a boyfriend, not a girlfriend, whereas the transgender subject might have a physical characteristic that does not align with the normative ideas of an assigned gender. For example, a stand to pee device (or STP) presents an aspect of a trans man's identity that seeks to fulfill the functions of a penis ex-

pected in the normative male gender.

To address the weight of the discomfort felt by queer subjects, Ahmed points to specific "moments of ceremony (birth, marriage, death)" which are connected to compulsory heterosexuality (424). These moments might include the typical marriage vows being written for a man and woman. Transgender identity is connected to many other everyday things, like public restroom use; it also connects to weighty, ceremonious things, like birth. A transgender person using a new name must go through legal proceedings to change the name on their birth certificate. These proceedings force the transgender person to be reminded of or feel their trans identity in the slightest daily actions. For instance, all of my legal documents and identification carry my birth name, which no longer reflects my male identity. Showing my ID at a store for a purchase becomes a longer, more uncomfortable conversation due to my seemingly conflicting identification.

When implementing the body metaphor, Ahmed also describes the queer subject's discomfort as "experienced as bodily injury" (424). According to Ahmed, the queer subject experiences the compounding stress of consistently defending oneself and resisting the norms. In the context of transgender identity, "bodily injury" becomes much more visible (424). In certain views, a person assigned female at birth presenting as a man can cause or be construed as "bodily injury." Sexual reassignment surgery faces claims of being "bodily injury" because certain people, including trans-exclusionary radical feminists, believe one can only be their assigned gender—therefore viewing surgery as an unwarranted action. Since sexual reassignment surgery requires going under anesthesia, many people consider it a severe reaction to what poses, in their view, a small or nonexistent problem. In the case of phalloplasty, the patient requires multiple surgeries and recovery periods to go through the entire procedure. Bruising and bleeding are necessary. Ahmed's theory does not account for this physical visibility. This high visibility makes for an intense feeling of trans-ness. Many forums discussing top surgery, a surgery to remove breast tissue, focus on reduction of scarring, rather than the pain of recovering from a major surgery.

Hormone replacement therapy, a treatment used to make secondary sexual characteristics align more with one's gender, reminds one of the innate deficiencies seen in a transgender body by those viewing through a normative lens. If done through injections, hormone therapy causes "bodily injury" at the injection site (424). Cisgender people producing their own hormones do not have this concern; therefore, they do not have this moment of literally feeling their gender when injecting hormones.

The transgender identity closely matches Ahmed's theory about one feeling their queerness due to the outside stressors of society; however, the transgender subject takes her theory of stress and shifts it into a theory of scarring. The transgender identity lends a visible physicality that the sexual identity does not.

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# A Form of Questing: An Interview with Carl Phillips

Amanda Keill

*Carl Phillips, born July 23, 1959, is an American writer and poet. He is a graduate of Harvard University, the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and Boston University. Phillips taught high school Latin for eight years. He has published 15 poetry collections as well as* Coin of the Realm: Essays on the Life and Art of Poetry, *plus a translation of Sophocles's* Philoctetes. *He has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, An American Academy of Poets Fellowship, an Arts and Letters Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in 2002 the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award—plus many other literary awards too numerous to mention. He's also very down to earth and funny.*

*I arrived 30 minutes early to Carl Phillips's craft talk at the University of Houston on February 11, 2020. The room filled with familiar faces, UH's undergraduate and graduate students in creative writing. His talk was charismatic and amusing. He discussed 3 poems, not his own, and took questions. What I learned is (1) be purposeful with the syntax and the interruptions we create within our poems, (2) tension building is important and effective, and (3) words are seductive.*

*The following evening he read his work at a public event hosted by the Menil Collection at the Cy Twombly Gallery. He explained that he would read 14 poems because there are 14 lines in a sonnet. These included "Gold Leaf," "And if I Fall," "Morphine," and "Wild is the Wind." Carl Phillips is insightful in person. He explained that poetry can be considered "long and extended meditations of what it's like to be living in the world...[it's] a steady construction of personal mythology." He also also told us that "all poems are a form of questing" and we have the "right to want exactness and to interrogate what people assume."*

*Carl Phillips is a busy man. He left Houston the next day so we conducted our interview via email on February 14th and 15th.*

**AMANDA:** How did you discover your love of writing? Did you always want to write poetry? Does fiction interest you? Who are your influences?
**CARL:** Hmm. This turns out to be four questions...I suppose I discovered a love for writing just by reading, as a kid. I wanted to write down my own stories and thoughts, and my parents encouraged it. And no, I didn't necessarily want to write poetry at the start, but my mother wrote poems as a hobby, and that surely had an impact. I've never wanted to write fiction, as an adult, though I read it all the time. And as for influences, that would be a very long answer, if I really answered it. The short answer is the Greek tragedians like Sophocles and Euripides, all of archaic Greek poetry especially Sappho and Archilochus, Homer's *Iliad,* Shakespeare, Dickinson, Robert Hayden, Randall Jarrell, Jorie Graham, Louise Glück, Linda Gregg, Brigit Pegeen Kelley, Rita Dove.

**AMANDA:** Do you feel you have a particular style or certain themes you like to write about?
**CARL:** I do seem to think in lengthy sentences, often with inflected grammar (i.e., the verbs and their subjects move around), which might have to do with my studying classical Greek and Latin, but is just as influenced by the sentences of prose writers like Henry James and Edith Wharton...For subject matter, I write a lot about desire, the body, sex, ideas of morality, the tension between what people say we should do and what we actually want to do.

**AMANDA:** Do you feel that teaching craft benefits your own writing?
**CARL:** I feel that teaching craft—and everything else—is immensely beneficial to my own writing, since it makes me especially mindful of how poems are built, and I return with a keener eye to my own work.

**AMANDA:** Your poetry seems to be very philosophical. Would you say that you express the knowledge you already possess through your poetry, or that you develop those thoughts as you write?

**CARL:** I agree that the poems have become more philosophical. It might have to do with age, lol. But in terms of how that comes about, I've always thought of a poem as a space within which to wrestle with what can't be resolved—love, for example. Sex. Etc. Or maybe it's more accurate to say a poem is a form of questing, of journeying through experience toward something like understanding, even if it's only a temporary understanding. So I enter the poem not knowing my subject or direction, and go by instinct forward.

**AMANDA:** Given your personal background (sexuality and ethnicity in particular), I imagine there being trials and obstacles that you may have encountered. Do you have any advice for writers facing similar struggles? Would you agree that your poetry has opened doors for the writers hoping to make an impact as you have?
**CARL:** My advice is always to write the poems you absolutely have to write, without regard for how others will receive them. That's the only way to write honestly, I believe. And then it's important not to have expectations about audience. I really have only written for myself, which means in the beginning that to write was a way of understanding myself and the things I was grappling with. I didn't even think I'd be sending poems to magazines or having them in books. And not every reader has been a fan of my poems, by any means. But I am gratified to realize that there are readers out there, and especially gratified to know that my poems have opened doors for other writers but, more importantly, for other people who aren't writers at all. I've been told that my poems have helped people feel seen, and less alone—and that's given them the courage to move forward. I feel incredibly lucky to think that's true.

**AMANDA:** Personally, I struggle with being shy. After watching you perform your poetry so genuinely, I wonder if you would have any advice on public speaking and what to do if something unexpected occurs while performing?
**CARL:** I am incredibly shy! I am still nervous, to this day, whenever I walk into my classroom and start speaking. But I began as a high school teacher, and I knew that I had to pretend to be confident if I

wanted to keep the attention of 30 high school kids for five periods, five days a week. Which is to say, it involves a bit of acting. Reading one's own poems in front of people is of course scarier, because it's more personal. I'm glad that I am across as confident, but I am pretty terrified when I'm reading poems for people. The only slight help I've found is to have a glass of wine before the reading, but I'm not advising that...

**AMANDA:** Do you ever think you will run out of things to say?
**CARL:** I used to think I'd run out of things to say, but I realize that that's probably only possible if I run out of things to think about, which doesn't really happen to people until they die, I guess. I imagine we keep thinking, all the way to the end, even if no one can tell, and even if we lose the ability to articulate our thoughts. But there's still thinking. I believe poems are an ongoing record of what it's like for one person to be alive right now—so as long as I'm around, I imagine I'll have some thoughts about it.

**AMANDA:** Congratulations on your new book! So stoked to read it. Should we be on the lookout for more?
**CARL:** I'm always just working on the next poem, as opposed to writing the next book. So, I have about a book's worth of poems that I've written since *Pale Colors in a Tall Field*—at some point, I'll sit down and see what poems seem like keepers and I'll see what they shape themselves into, as a group. All poets have their own pace. So far, I seem to have a new book every two to three years—by that calculation, the next book should be in 2022 or 2023. If the world still exists.

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Omer Ahmed** is an educator, writer, and performer. He explores the cross sections of identity as well as blackness through divinity, which yields to his writing style. Omer has also been published in issue 70 of *The Penn Review,* 77 of the *Sonora Review,* the international online publication *Bareknuckle Poet,* and more. Omer currently works for Writers in the Schools and hopes to expand his love of writing to further audiences, with a high focus on the youth.

**Chinonyelum Anyichie** is a Nigerian from Eziowelle, a town in Anambra State. She obtained a Bachelor's and Master's degree in English from Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State and the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, respectively. She writes short stories and poems and makes clothes. She loves to draw too and intends to pay more attention to this interest later in the future.

**Jennifer Barker** is a lifelong artist, first taking interest in and teaching herself drawing and painting as a child. She moved away from the realistic and towards the abstract for its expressional and intellectual appeal. Through varied collegiate classes, she has vastly broadened her skillset, expanding how she thinks about and practices her art. She is currently a working artist studying for her BFA in Sculpture at the University of Houston.

**Raine Bongon** is an emerging Filipina-Canadian writer, musician, and film student residing in Vancouver, British Columbia. A dropout of the University of Victoria's esteemed Creative Writing program, she is currently pursuing a screenwriting diploma at the Vancouver Film School. She has had no previous publications thus far and can be contacted at angeliraineb@gmail.com.

**Laura Braley** is a senior undergraduate student at Elon University pursuing a degree in English with concentrations in Literature and Creative Writing. She writes about grief and art and is interested in the ways in which they intersect. Previously, her personal essay "Acting" appeared in Elon University's Colonnades literary and art journal. This piece received first place for nonfiction in the 2019 North Carolina College Media Association contest. When not writing, Laura enjoys traveling, baking, and singing classical music. Follow-

ing graduation, she will be serving with the Peace Corps, teaching English as a foreign language.

**Felicia Coursen** is originally from Lake Ronkonkoma, New York. She is currently a third-year undergraduate student at Florida Southern College, where she is majoring in English and has minors in women and gender studies and film. She has never been published in a literary magazine before, and she is honored to make her publication debut in *Glass Mountain.*

**William C. Crawford** is a photographer based in North Carolina. He invented Forensic Foraging, a throwback, minimalist approach for modern digital photographers. His new book, *Drive-By Shooting,* is available on Amazon.com.

**Becca Downs** is an Indianapolis-based writer who also enjoys running, hiking, chaotically reading seven books at one time, planning road trips around donut shops, and discussing the certain existence of Sasquatch. In 2013, she graduated with a degree in English-Creative Writing from Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis (IUPUI), where she also ran cross country and track. She always has the ingredients for a hot toddy.

**Chloe Ekberg** is a writer and an undergraduate at Elon University, pursuing a degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. When she is not writing, she enjoys hiking the Blue Ridge Mountains and being outdoors. After graduation, she hopes to work on a ranch in Wyoming and write about her experiences there.

**Nalan Ergul** is currently a student at the University of Houston, studying Art as an undergraduate. Although she doesn't have any published work, she has always had an interest in various forms of writing. She continues to simultaneously work on her art and her writing, hoping one day to create work that encompasses both areas.

**Jailyne España** is a junior at the University of Houston pursuing a BFA, a female artist, and a cancer survivor. Jailyne had her first solo exhibition, "Survivor's Dream," at Texas Children's Hospital in 2018. Her self-portrait "Jailyne" was displayed at the "Making A

Mark" art exhibition, then later displayed at the International William P. Hobby Airport in Houston. España designed the cover for the 2019 Statewide Training on Violence Against Women Conference in San Antonio.

**Kirsten Hendershot** is a 23-year-old freelance artist living in Dayton, Ohio.

**Adrien Herrick** is studying to be an art teacher and has an enduring love of cephalopods that inspired this piece. They've been making art for as long as they've been able to hold a pen and plan to continue doing so until they can't hold a pen any longer.

**Rebecca Hetherson** is a current undergraduate student in her junior year attending the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She has been published twice for her works "Dead" and "The Marble Castle" in *The Marble Collection* Spring editions 2017 and 2018 respectively. She is working towards her degree in English and a minor in psychology, with hopes to publish her own poetry collection surrounding issues of mental health and depression.

**Amanda Keill,** also known as Amanda Lopez, is the current Art Editor for *Glass Mountain.* Amanda is an artist. Her choice platform is writing—poetry, fiction, lyrics, etc. She loves photography and the color purple. She enjoys singing and playing her blue trumpet. Proud mother, daughter, and wife. She has a review published with *Shards, Glass Mountain's* online magazine and an interview published with *The Daily Cougar,* University of Houston's newspaper. She hopes that her writing will be a comfort to others and will give new perspective. Her goal in life is to be happy and to be a blessing to others.

**Mara Lowhorn** is a senior at Western Kentucky University, double majoring in Creative Writing and Popular Culture Studies. She enjoys writing fiction, screenplays, and poetry. She hopes to one day have a career that involves writing, publishing, and/or being creative.

**Nat Lyle** is a Minneapolis native currently daylighting as a project manager in downtown Vancouver. By night, she is an emerging

writer in fiction. As a graduate of McGill University, Nat is a previous recipient of McGill's Chester Macnaghten prize for her written works. When not writing, Nat can be found at her local boxing gym or sketching in a nearby cafe.

**DS Maolalai** has been nominated four times for Best of the Net and three times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections: *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016) and *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019).

**Ivy Marie** is an emerging writer from Georgia, where she is studying Creative Writing and English Literature at Mercer University. Her written work has appeared in *The Dulcimer, The Atlanta Review,* and at the SoCon Undergraduate Research Forum. She is also the 2019 winner of the Dan Veach Prize for Younger Poets. She is an intern with *Macon Magazine;* a lead writer for *The Cluster,* Mercer's newspaper; a preceptor for English courses at Mercer; and a Macon- and San Antonio-based photographer.

**Julia Merante** is a senior creative writing major at SUNY Geneseo in Upstate NY. She not only loves writing poetry, but she also loves her waitressing job at a crepe cafe and watching crime movies with her mom. After graduating, Julia plans on attending law school to continue using her words to tell stories—this time for others. She is excited to see where writing can take her.

**Nam Nguyen** is a multimedia artist who enjoys photography, filmmaking, and writing.

**Elsa Pair** is a senior at the University of Houston studying English and Psychology. She is the Poetry Editor for *Glass Mountain* and the social media manager for UH's Student Feminist Organization. She would like you to know her dog is very cute.

**Miranda Ramirez** is a writer and artist residing in Houston, Texas. You may find her publications in *Ripples in Space: Science Fiction Short Stories for Fall 2018, Glass Mountain, Shards, The Bayou Review: The Women's Issue, Coffin Bell,* and *Cutthroat's* collaboration project with the Black Earth Institute: *Puro Chicanx Writers of*

*the 21st Century*. Her visual works have been exhibited at Williams Tower Gallery, Tea+Art Gallery, and Insomnania Gallery.

**MaryAnne Stallworth** is a 24-year-old black queer artist based out of Erie, Pennsylvania. While her day-to-day job is developing software, she spends her free time crafting characters both fantastical and ordinary. Her art mediums spread from traditional pencil and paper to the world of digital art with PaintTool SAI and Clip Studio. Much of her artwork explores blackness and queer themes. Her passion lies in telling stories through her art that lead to happy endings. Her artwork is showcased under the pseudonym 'Nonykins' on Instagram and Twitter.

**Shirley Sullivan's** work has appeared in *The Tampa Review, The Carolina Quarterly, December, The Fiddlehead, Sou'wester, Harpur Palate, The Fourth River, Quiddity International Literary Journal, Writing on the Wind, an Anthology of West Texas Women Writers,* and others. Sullivan shares a farm with coyotes, rabbits, bobcats, javelinas, and colorful birds. Some believe this country is inhabited by spirits, who play amongst the clouds, rearranging the lightning bolts to suit their moods.

**Katherine Suppa** is a writer and an undergraduate student at Elon University, pursuing a degree in English: Creative Writing. She enjoys knitting and baking in her free time; she has mastered the art of pie-making and has moved on to the much more difficult task of bread. She is sure she will write an essay on that process in the future.

**Divya Taneja** is a current student at the University of Houston. She has been writing since 2011 and plans to continue doing so in the future. She also is a photographer and often incorporates her photographic work with her poetry. She aspires to publish her own book of poems and wants to be able to write screenplays in the near future.

**Isabella Van Tassel** is an 18-year-old self-taught artist from San Diego, California. She is currently an Interior Design student at Grossmont College in San Diego. She began art when she was 14 and began selling her paintings across the country at 16. Bella now has

her artwork in over 100 homes across the United States and dreams about having pieces across the world!

**Angela Wells** is a 22-year-old artist based out of British Columbia, Canada. She has been creating visual art from an early age, tackling a range of different styles, mediums, and subjects. Her quiet love of the ordinary things that surround her shine through in all of her work. Angela is perhaps best known for her single line drawings in which she captures a moment, a person, or an object in one line. More of her work can be found at angelawells.info or milk_thistlee on Instagram.

**Keagan Wheat** is the Poetry Editor for *Defunkt,* the Reviews Editor for *Glass Mountain,* and an inaugural fellow in the Writers in the Schools Emerging Writers Fellowship. Moving through the UH creative writing concentration, his poetry often focuses on transgender identity and how others, especially family, interact with that identity. He has been published by Z Publishing in *Texas's Best Emerging Poets,* the Fall 2018 Issue of the *Tulane Review,* and *Shards* Issue 4 and 7.

# shards

*Shards* is *Glass Mountain's* online literary magazine. We publish fiction, nonfiction, poetry, reviews, interviews and art on a bi- monthly basis during the academic year.

We accept rolling submissions, and best of all, it's free to submit! We accept previously unpublished submissions from any undergraduate or emerging artist. We are a platform for new voices and are continually looking for unique and diverse views to present to the world.

For more details, visit glassmountainmag.com/shards!

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# glass mountain

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