



# HINDSIGHT

# CREATIVE NONFICTION

# 2023 VOLUME III

# CREATIVE NONFICTION 2023 VOLUME III

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?



2023 • VOLUME III

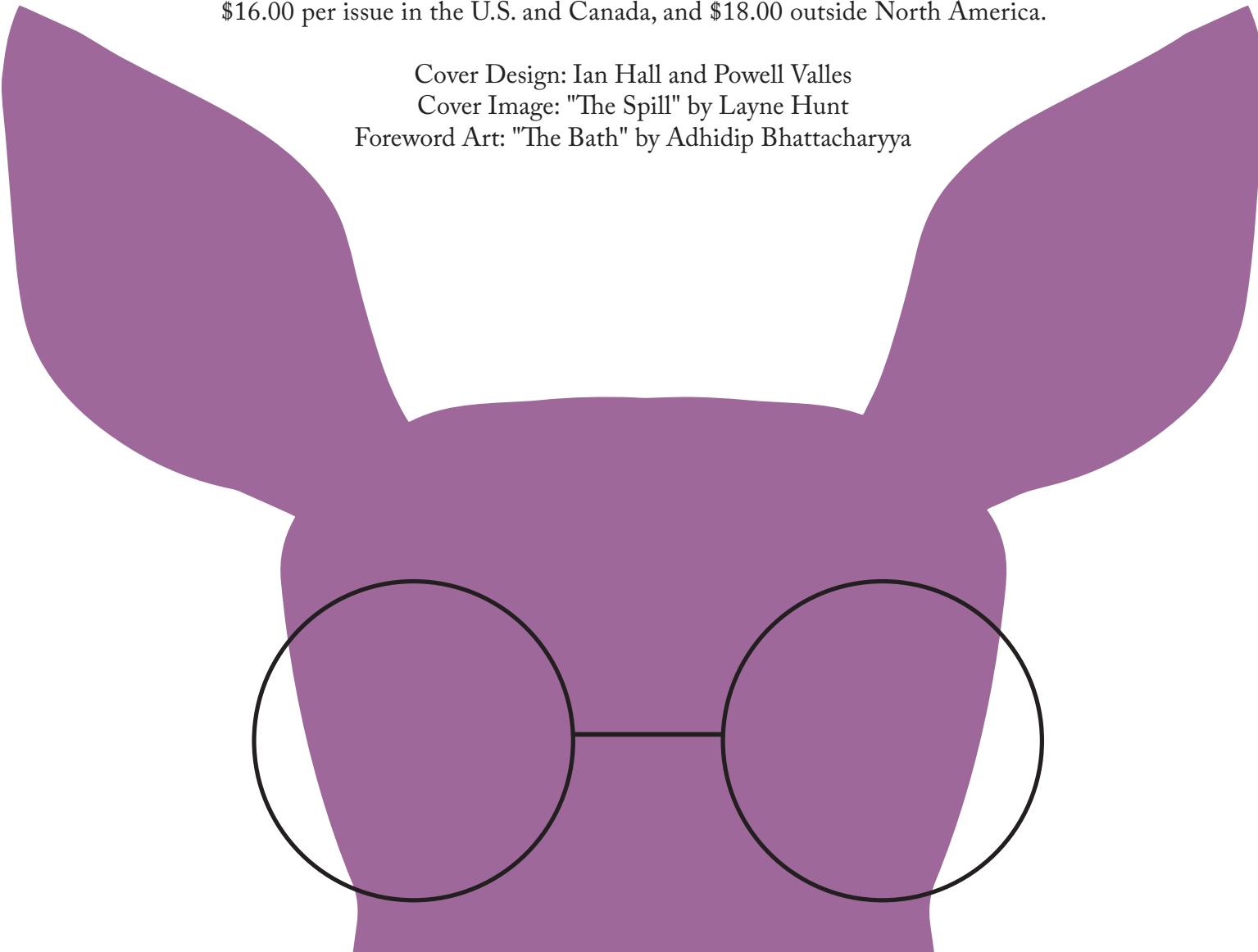
THE PROGRAM FOR WRITING AND RHETORIC  
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

HINDSIGHT

FOREWORD BY:  
ERIKA KROUSE

HINDSIGHT  
creative nonfiction

2023  
VOLUME III



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HINDSIGHT continues printing annually into its eleventh year, including its previous title, JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY. We now provide a print home and online community for all genres of creative nonfiction, nationally and internationally. We acquire First North American Serial Rights, welcoming all artists and writers of creative nonfiction to future issues. See our submission guidelines on our website: HINDSIGHTJOURNAL2020.COM.

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## FROM THE STAFF

Every spring, a motivated crew of writers, scientists, artists, and swashbucklers unites under a common goal: publishing a collection of the best creative nonfiction we can get our hands on. We take a great amount of pleasure wading through countless compelling submissions and carefully reviewing them for consideration in our volumes. The compilation of our efforts are chronicled in the following pages.

### EDITORIAL STAFF

We in the art department at HINDSIGHT are always incredibly grateful to those who can capture their fleeting experiences for us to present. Through print, paintings, photos, and the prisms of artistic representation, the breadth of submissions continue to astound us. The quality of these works received makes us incredibly grateful to be able to contribute to this encapsulation of human creativity. We consistently strive in search of incredible and unique art from a myriad of backgrounds from all over the world that serves to beautify this collective platform that is HINDSIGHT.

### ART DIRECTION

HINDSIGHT's Marketing Department would not exist without our dedicated staff. Each member takes on a different role to spread awareness of our journals, challenges each other to produce great work, and keeps the creative nonfiction genre alive at CU Boulder and beyond. Each semester we run campaigns on our website, social media accounts, and in print. Every semester brings new challenges; however, we have been able to continue expanding the HINDSIGHT audience and staff. Please enjoy the third volume of HINDSIGHT. We thank you for providing our team with valuable artwork and writing, making the process of spreading our message much easier and more meaningful.

### MARKETING

It was an absolute pleasure to lead HINDSIGHT through the completion of its third volume. In the year since the release of the second volume of HINDSIGHT, we have received so many unique, well-crafted stories and art; however, we could select only a small handful for our latest edition. It has been a privilege to provide a platform for authors and artists to express their voices and creativity.

### EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

## GET PUBLISHED

### IN PRINT OR ONLINE

Any writer, anywhere, is eligible to submit creative nonfiction prose and poetry for consideration by HINDSIGHT. Submissions go through blind review by our editorial staff. We seek only previously unpublished creative nonfiction in any of its genres:

- Creative Scholarship
- Narrative Journalism
- Humor
- Lyric Essay—the truth told with a poetic slant
- Travel, Food, and Sports Writing
- Portraiture and Memoir
- Graphic Creative Nonfiction
- Digital Compositions and Videos for Web Publication

Artists, send us your work to accompany writing in HINDSIGHT print, online, or marketing. We accept previously unpublished work including but not limited to photography, video, or music.

## JOIN OUR STAFF

Register for our Digital Publishing Practicum (WRTG 3090) or reach out to our primary Faculty Advisor for a one, two, or three-credit internship—offered for both upper and lower division students. We seek anyone wanting to learn the editorial, art, digital, business, or audio visual aspects of a print journal—no previous experience required. A position on the HINDSIGHT staff will foster professional skills while you explore diverse mediums within creative nonfiction. Staff members have autonomy and foster a student-led community to gain unparalleled experience in several fields. We strive to further the community of writers and artists across campus, and the globe.

### FIND US ONLINE AT

**HINDSIGHTJOURNAL2020.COM**





Art by ADHIDIP BHATTACHARYYA

## ON HINDSIGHT

by ERIKA KROUSE

I worked for fifteen years as a private investigator, and the job was all about human connection. If I could establish rapport with witnesses, they overshared and become invested in the case, and those informational networks solved crimes. So, it was surreal that midway through writing a memoir about the experience, *Tell Me Everything: The Story of a Private Investigation*, the pandemic hit and my human bonds degraded overnight. Isolation became customary, and I often struggled to remember my P.I. “tricks” enough to write about them. So quickly, I lost the ability to connect with people and turned into a bumbling outsider, awkward and strange. In exile from others, I no longer recognized myself. This issue of *Hindsight* shows me I wasn’t alone. The essays spotlight an escalated struggle with isolation, as many of the brilliant writers in these pages fight to understand where they belong in the world, or if they belong at all. In Edward Kincaid’s “The S.S. Rhode Island,” the narrator eats microwaved meals alone in bed, keeps his blinds closed most of the time “like my own haunted house,” and discusses suicide as preferable to facing a trip to Target. In Vivian Luckiw’s “Are You Better?” her own body distances her from friends, family, and medical professionals as her stage 4 endometriosis becomes a disability, necessitating a cane and constant pain medications. In Quentin Parker’s “To Walk in the World,” Parker explores exile from the natural world as a Black American, describing communities where Black neighborhoods were physically and metaphorically drowned, turned into lakes and parks intended for white enjoyment. “History tells us relentlessly that white land has nothing to offer Black bodies...The value of nature had never been measured in Blackness.” Parker combats fears of harassment with the reminder that “the world is my own to walk on, too.”

In “My Dad and the Gay Soldier,” Michael McGuire, a self-described “gay rebel iconoclast,” struggles to connect with his conservative veteran father. But when, in a pointed message to his son, the father narrates a story about a gay soldier he openly admired, the two of them find a safe space to bond inside that narrative. McGuire writes, “To this day I do not know if he loved me or not. I have no evidence of it. Or do I? Because I have this story he told me.” And perhaps that is how we can find kinship, despite world disasters, diverging experiences, cultural differences, and the barrenness of technology—through the open borders of narrative. In “Tracking Orbits,” Deelia Sherman investigates the entropy of our tenuous bonds but finds the solution in our orbits, our relationships and letters. Sherman writes, “We all orbit around one another, drawn to each other like magnets, connected through the gravitational forces of words and wonder.” I invite you to explore these honest, compelling essays and contribute your own sense of wonder, your own words of connection.



Erika Krouse is the author of *Tell Me Everything: The Story of a Private Investigation*, *Contenders*, and *Come Up and See Me Sometime*. *Tell Me Everything* was a *New York Times* Editors’ Choice and has been optioned for TV adaptation by 20th Century Studios. Erika’s work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Granta*, *Ploughshares*, *One Story*, and elsewhere. She teaches creative writing at Lighthouse Writers Workshop.

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## RABBITS DON'T KNOW EASTER

by DEELIA SHERMAN

There used to be this rabbit. Every now and then, my brother and I would see it lounging on the bright green neighborhood lawns. It wasn't a normal, wild rabbit. More of a bunny than a rabbit, really. He—we presumptuously labeled him a "he," because we were kids, and because we were already good friends with him in our heads—looked like someone's abandoned Easter gift or escaped pet, with his lush chestnut brown fur and his plump cheeks, and his round eyes that exuded calm domestication whenever a curious toddler or little dog attempted to befriend him. We waved every time we passed him sitting comfortably in the grass, a semi-constant character in the background of our lives. We named him Nutbrown Hare.

Eventually, Nutbrown Hare stopped showing up—hopefully taken in by a new owner, but more likely fallen victim to another, less fortunate scenario. We didn't think much of his absence. He wasn't meant for the outdoor lifestyle, to be fair. He was an indoor rabbit. I've heard of this phenomenon where animal shelters get this huge influx of abandoned rabbits a couple of

months after Easter, after the novelty of the holiday mascot has worn off and families realize the true responsibility of owning a pet. We hypothesized that this might have been Nutbrown Hare's origin and what eventually led to his end. Ironically, the day of Jesus' resurrection became Nutbrown Hare's death sentence. Nutbrown Hare didn't even know what Easter was.

My family's Easter celebrations never involved impulsive rabbit adoptions, but rather the customary suburban egg hunt and an extra-long church service, which meant wearing an uncomfortable pastel dress and visiting family from out of town. I grew up in a household of drastically differing ideologies that peacefully coexisted through some form of willing cognitive dissonance on the part of my parents. Both from the grand emptiness and rich rural culture of South Dakota, my mom and dad saw eye to eye on most topics. Most topics, that is, except for religion. Dad—having grown up just off the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation with his Oglala Lakota family—saw himself as “spiritual,” but not “religious,” maintaining that any organized religion must be a cult. Mom—Scandinavian if you look far enough up on the family tree—grew up Catholic and decided to raise her children Catholic as well, which Dad never seemed to take any issue with.

Every Sunday morning, Mom, my brother, and I would hop in the car and drive to St. Mark's Catholic Church. As the car delivered me to my hour of boredom, I would watch the houses fly past, observing the ladies walking their dogs and the rabbits dotting their lawns. At that time, I never wondered why Dad didn't go to church with us. It was just another fact of life. Rabbits belong on neighborhood lawns, and Dad doesn't go to church. Looking back, my parents must have made a mutual agreement about my religion, spoken of before my birth and before my baptism. Eventually, that agreement brought me to the soft red fabric of the church pew. I spent every Sunday morning singing hymns and forming list after list in my head of random observations to point out to Mom once the priest was done with his stories. For years, I didn't give my church routine a second thought.

But, as time went on, I realized that my family must have made some grave mistake in the way of religion. The pinnacle of doing religion “right” in my innocent eyes came in the form of my friend Catherine. Catherine had ginger-red hair and an obsession with horses. I met her in gym class when I was two years old. Our mothers chatted as we tumbled across primary color foam mats, forming some kind of parenting-alliance with each other, as mothers often do. By their all-powerful will, Catherine and I became close childhood friends, the kind of friends who've known each other essentially since birth, who've never lived life without the knowledge of each other's presence. Naturally, this led to frequent playdates and sleepovers at Catherine's house, playdates and sleepovers that occasionally consisted of following Catherine's family to church. Catherine's family had a reverence for God that I never did, even though I was theoretically supposed to. Catherine's bedroom decor consisted of horse photographs and plastic soccer trophies interspersed with pink Bible verses and flowers painted on wooden signs. I began to wonder why my mom never hung up wall art reminding me to “Trust in the Lord with all my heart” (Proverbs 3:5). Did I even trust in the Lord with all my heart? I couldn't shake the sense that I was an imposter, a lost Nutbrown Hare thrown into a world that wasn't meant for me.

For most of my youth, the hints of Indigenous spirituality Dad introduced to me existed in a completely separate part of my brain. There were days I would go to Catholic confirmation class after school, and there were days I would come home and the house would smell like burning sage. Whenever my brother woke up in the middle of the night, frightened from a horrible dream, Dad would perform a smudging ceremony to cleanse the house of bad spirits and negative energy. We attended powwows together, and Dad would remind me to feel the powerful drumbeats in my bones, the healing medicine of the music. On long mountain drives, Dad would tell me about the animals sacred to the tribes. He taught me that horses were called “sunka wakan” (or šúnkawakȟáŋ, meaning “big dog” or “holy dog”) and bison were “tatanka” (or thátháŋka, meaning “big beast”). Elk and eagles and rabbits populated my mind.

“Look up there!” Dad would say, pointing to the sky whenever he saw a raptor circling some poor prairie dog or rabbit in the fields. “Whenever you see a hawk or eagle, that's your ancestors wishing you safe travels.”

Dad would smile and grab for his camera to capture a snapshot. Now, whenever I spot a bird of prey, my confidence swells at the thought of my family watching over me. To me, that always seemed more sincere than guardian angels or confirmation saints.

Despite his knowledge, I think Dad felt disconnected from his culture, a symptom of the unfortunate cultural erasure that has forced American Indians into their less-than-ideal reality. I understand now that perhaps he believed he had no authority to try and teach me the Lakota ways, since they already seemed foreign to him and were even more removed from me. But the walls had already started to crack as I grew older and noticed the incongruities between Mom's institutional religion and Dad's spirituality. I couldn't sustain the balance, the homeostasis, that my parents had found in their relationships with religion. I soon learned that I couldn't reconcile these two worlds forever.

At Sunday School, I contentedly spent my time on crafts or coloring sheets, until the day my naive worldview was shattered. “You know,” the old ladies gossiped to each other as they watched over us that day. “Native Americans only see their crazy visions because of all those drugs. Their deities are blasphemous,” they said with matter-of-fact tones. At this devastating news,

I stopped dead in the middle of beading my “Jesus Loves Me” bracelet and instantly felt ashamed. I wished that I had the safety of some underground burrow to retreat to like Nutbrown Hare. Instead, I had to hold my tongue and listen to their hateful language, returning home more confused about who I was than ever before. Uncertainty and skepticism set themselves into my bones.

“This, right here, is the body and blood of Christ,” my confirmation class teacher told us another day, showing off the deep red Communion wine and pale Eucharist wafers. “This is the real flesh of Jesus.” I ignored his stories and enjoyed the snack, reasoning that there was no way the small morsel of bread could morph into actual tissue and muscle and blood. Impossible, I told myself. A part of me, however, remained intrigued, wondering if I would ever know for sure whether the stories were true or not. To this day, I don’t know. A part of me wants to believe. But some mysteries remain unanswered. I’ll never know what really happened to Nutbrown Hare, and I’ll never know if the bread I ate could really turn into flesh.

Today, I dance around my rocky religious landscape as best I can. It’s complicated. I no longer go to church on Sunday mornings, but sometimes, late at night, I make the sign of the cross and pray. Whenever I feel a ghostly presence, I light sage and smudge my room. I love going to every powwow I can. I listen as my brother confides in me about the resentment he holds towards God, voice full of restrained vitriol. “Where was God when I prayed?” he asks. My brother hates having grown up in a household that falsely promised him a god that would help him when he needed. I’ve asked Mom before if she thinks that maybe raising her children Catholic was an unintentional form of colonization, that maybe it aided in minimizing Indigenous spirituality. She was confused by my question. I hold no ill will towards Mom, nor towards religion, but all my life, I have been confused and torn in two. It all seems so vague, so subjective. I am searching for my own form of worship, one molded around my own beliefs rather than beliefs decided for me before my birth.

I search everywhere. At concerts, when the bass seeps into my body and rattles my bones, I feel medicine coursing through my veins like the words of a preacher or drum beats at a powwow. It’s fleeting, like a rabbit rushing past on nimble legs, but it is in

those moments I come closest to God. In the woods, surrounded by trees and mist on a crisp morning, I breathe in the cool air and touch the ground, communing with the Earth. I regard the dreamlike view of the mountains outside my window with as much devotion as I once held for Jesus on the cross above the altar. The world is rich with holiness. I choose to widen my horizons and partake in its wonders to the fullest rather than burden myself with the futile hunt for certainty. Beauty exists in both of my parents’ religious lifestyles. Only through the mosaic and the combination of every perspective can even the smallest hints of truth be found.

Nutbrown Hare, bred originally for the cushy life of a house pet, adapted quickly to brave the neighborhood streets. Despite his incomprehension of Easter, religion fundamentally shaped his life, as it did my own. Though no higher power took his input into account, he played well with the cards he was dealt. He was a combination of the tame and the wild, a product of his differing environments. I am a combination of my mom and her Catholicism, my dad and his spirituality, and the tumultuous interactions between the two. Just like Nutbrown Hare, I am an ever-changing combination of parts, reborn into new incarnations again and again, forever. Though I’ll never truly know Nutbrown Hare’s fate or my own, and I’ll never truly know what resides in the heavens, I know that I’ll always have my mom and my dad and the bright green grass on the neighborhood lawns. ☀



# TO WALK IN THE WORLD

by QUENTIN PARKER

Black people don't go hiking.



I don't hate nature. I hate insects, high humidity on a 95-degree day, freezing wind, and bird shit on the sidewalk. The years between elementary school and college were where I felt the lowest inclination to do any outdoor activities. Due to this aversion, I've never been white water rafting, rock climbing, bird watching, fishing, hunting, or gardening.

When I disclosed that my college friends and I were considering going hiking as a fun activity, both of my parents laughed. "What are you going hiking for? That's for white people."

This wasn't the first time I experienced that criticism. Something you learn growing up Black is that there are some things we have no business doing. Many of those include adventurous explorations of nature.

I often wonder if Black people avoid pursuing more outgoing ventures because of the associated risks. Journeying to the top of Mount Everest claims around five lives a year. A relatively small number but, in the grand scheme of things, five too many to be worth the trip. Dozens die every year from canoeing and kayaking. The internet shows us white people hanging from cliff edges for an Instagram photo and somersaulting thirty thousand feet in the air in parachutes. These actions are met with the usual response of disapproving hums and headshaking.

Other times I consider how accessible nature has been for Black people, and whether we'd simply been deterred from doing these things. You get to "act a fool" in nature when the consequences end with just you, and Black individuals are habitually seen as monoliths for the community. The internet also shows us the Black people who are harassed in—or ultimately, ousted from—spaces like public parks and beaches, based solely on their presence being too much of a disturbance to the non-Black people occupying those spaces. I can say I choose not to hang around outside because the elements put me in a less than ideal mood, but I know subconsciously that my existence in nature will one day, somehow, violate someone else's space.



The large Maryland house was adorned with numerous Christmas trees. Each one was meticulously decorated with different festive ornaments and twinkling lights, some in the living room, the foyer, the upstairs hallway, the bedrooms. I have to assume some of the locations, though, as I didn't get to see every one of them that night.

Walking into a room where there are no other Black people immediately sets off warning bells. It's a self-preservation response, one that isn't always needed but is there subconsciously. You can never know for certain how you're perceived as the lone person of color.

My mother, brother, and I didn't need to know what everyone else at this Christmas tree viewing party thought of us, as their eyes never left us. We'd seen less than a handful of the trees my mother's coworker had decorated her house with before we isolated ourselves to an unseen corner of the dining room. When they could spot us, we were watched like enigmas. Under their judgmental gaze I analyzed the way I was dressed. I was twelve—maybe thirteen—at the time, so I wasn't exactly styled to the nines. I tried to rationalize every way in which we could draw attention. Maybe they wondered who we knew here or why we had come. Maybe they thought we were lost and saw the pretty lights from outside.

It was my first brush with the tensions that can come up when Black people revel in the glamour of nature—even when artificial. These elegantly garnished trees were for the eyes of the older white guests. I feared the encounters we could have if just one of us left the others to take a closer look or inquire where the plants were from. Everyone but us were able to marvel at the beauty of these pampered firs. This space belonged to them.



I learned recently of the secrets buried beneath the United States' lakes. History books often omit the adverse relationship between Black people and nature. Particularly, they conceal the Black American towns that have been destroyed and "purified" with a lake or natural park. Lake Lanier is one of the most prominent of the "Drowned Towns," one in a long line of culture decimated and replaced with greenery that was more pleasing to the eye.

Oscarville, Georgia was drowned by Lake Lanier after two Black teenagers, Earnest Knox and Oscar Daniels, were accused of raping and murdering a young white girl, Mae Crow. They were tried and lynched in the same day. The white men in the area—Night Riders—killed or forced out the rest of the Black population and destroyed their land, churches, and schools. Kowaliga, Alabama was drowned by Lake Martin, along with the first Black-owned railroad. Seneca Village in New York City, a thriving Black community, was torn down in favor of Central Park. Vanport, Oregon gave way to Delta Park after a massive 1948 flood wiped out the town in a day. The Black residents there were never warned of the increasingly high water levels. Many didn't evacuate, and thousands of Black families were displaced.<sup>1</sup>

The value of nature had never been measured in Blackness. A glistening fishing spot and splotches of forest were more to the taste of the white people in those areas. History tells us relentlessly that white land has nothing to offer Black bodies, and the comfort of both racial groups could never be mutual in nature. These spaces have always belonged to the oppressor. The exclusion started when they conquered the land, then made us work tirelessly on it, then took it back by any means. If they saw fit to make more room for nature in their world, they would be sure it was solely for them and their enjoyment.



I learned to appreciate sunshine and fresh air during my first year of college. The COVID-19 pandemic had turned the campus into a ghost town, so my walks outside had gone mostly uninterrupted. I would sit at the picnic tables in front of the library and find solace in how green the grass was. I would breathe, close

<sup>1</sup> Diakite, Parker. "5 Black American Towns Hidden under Lakes and Ultimately from History Books." *Travel Noire*, July 9, 2021, [travelnoire.com/black-american-towns-hidden](https://travelnoire.com/black-american-towns-hidden).



my eyes, and bask in the warmth of the sun. Breathe again, look over my shoulder. Realize it was the sound of squirrels scouring the grass and trash cans for food, not footsteps. Sigh in relief, then hope I could enjoy five more minutes of this.

Attending a Predominantly White Institution after growing up in a Black county comes with caveats. I hadn't faced overt racism before, and aside from the Christmas party, any subtle racism has eluded me. In hindsight I can't say for sure if I had much reason to be so paranoid. My classmates were all nice, as were my professors. I'd seen other Black students around campus, though rarely in any of my classes. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that I shouldn't be outside.

I am unsure of whether Christian Cooper experienced that same feeling while birdwatching in Central Park. In 2020, Cooper captured video of a white woman who refused to put her dog on a leash, despite it being the park rules. He recorded her, as many other birders have before with unruly park-goers, and she weaponized both of their races to establish claim over her space. She called the police and emphasized that an African American man was recording and threatening to harm both her and her dog, which clearly wasn't the case on video. Cooper knew in this situation that his accolades—former assistant editor at Marvel Comics, senior editorial director at Health Science Communications, Ivy League graduate—would not protect him from the scary Black man stereotype, or the entitlement of this woman to let her dog vandalize the plants in the Ramble.<sup>2</sup> In that moment he was a Black man encroaching on a white space.

Social media has done well to emphasize these moments where Black people's enjoyment of nature were met with backlash. Black families have been harassed for having outdoor barbecues, Black children harassed for playing too loud outside, Black conservationists harassed while helping local families get connected with nature. In the eyes of many, nature is not a shared space, but rather one to be preserved from those who did not stake claim to it centuries ago. Nature is continuously kept under lock and key from Black people who simply wish to exist within it; our interest in partaking in the thrill of outdoor adventure has all but diminished.



<sup>2</sup> Betancourt, David. "Christian Cooper Hopes America Can Change. Because He's Not Going to." *The Washington Post* (WP Company, June 23, 2020), <https://washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/06/23/christian-cooper-central-park-birder-comics/>.

Our fears can, at times, be unfounded. In the moments that I looked over my shoulder while trying to enjoy the warm breeze and sunshine, I never encountered any problems for being outside. But, when I walk on campus at night, I still hope that I am recognizable as a student—that I have a place in this area. The social conditioning we endured has taught us to evade nature, and left many of us out of touch with our connection to the environment.

Nature has been used as a tool of oppression, a method of gatekeeping individuals from looking at the forests, oceans, and mountains as anything other than a means for resources. Black people have a right to go bouldering, to scuba dive, to stand in a public park and take pictures of the blooming flowers. Our space is shared between us.



If insects didn't exist, I'd be a little bit more eager to try hiking one day. My home in a largely flat state means greater exploration for hiking spots with the best scenery. I cross my fingers and hope that along the trail my presence doesn't disturb or unsettle those we pass. I drown my fears in the knowledge that the world is my own to walk on, too. ☘

A dark, moody photograph of a snow-covered landscape. In the foreground, a dark-colored car is parked on a snow-covered surface, its roof and windows covered in a thick layer of snow. Behind the car, a dense forest of tall evergreen trees is heavily laden with snow, their branches drooping under the weight. The overall atmosphere is cold and somber, with low light filtering through the snow-laden branches.

# AFTER SIX HOURS

by CHARLOTTE WHITNEY

snow-burned fingertips itch  
to pull hard on my roots.

shaking, chapped hands close over my throat,  
gouge out wet eyes with dry nails.

if I looked down from outside what would I see?  
scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle depicting something better,  
poised to join your apple cores in the incinerator.

just a faltering step toward what's decent  
good is unattainable.  
love is impossible.

not even a yawning heart is on my side.  
it screams to wake me under the covers.  
the snow has buried me.  
how alive I do not know.

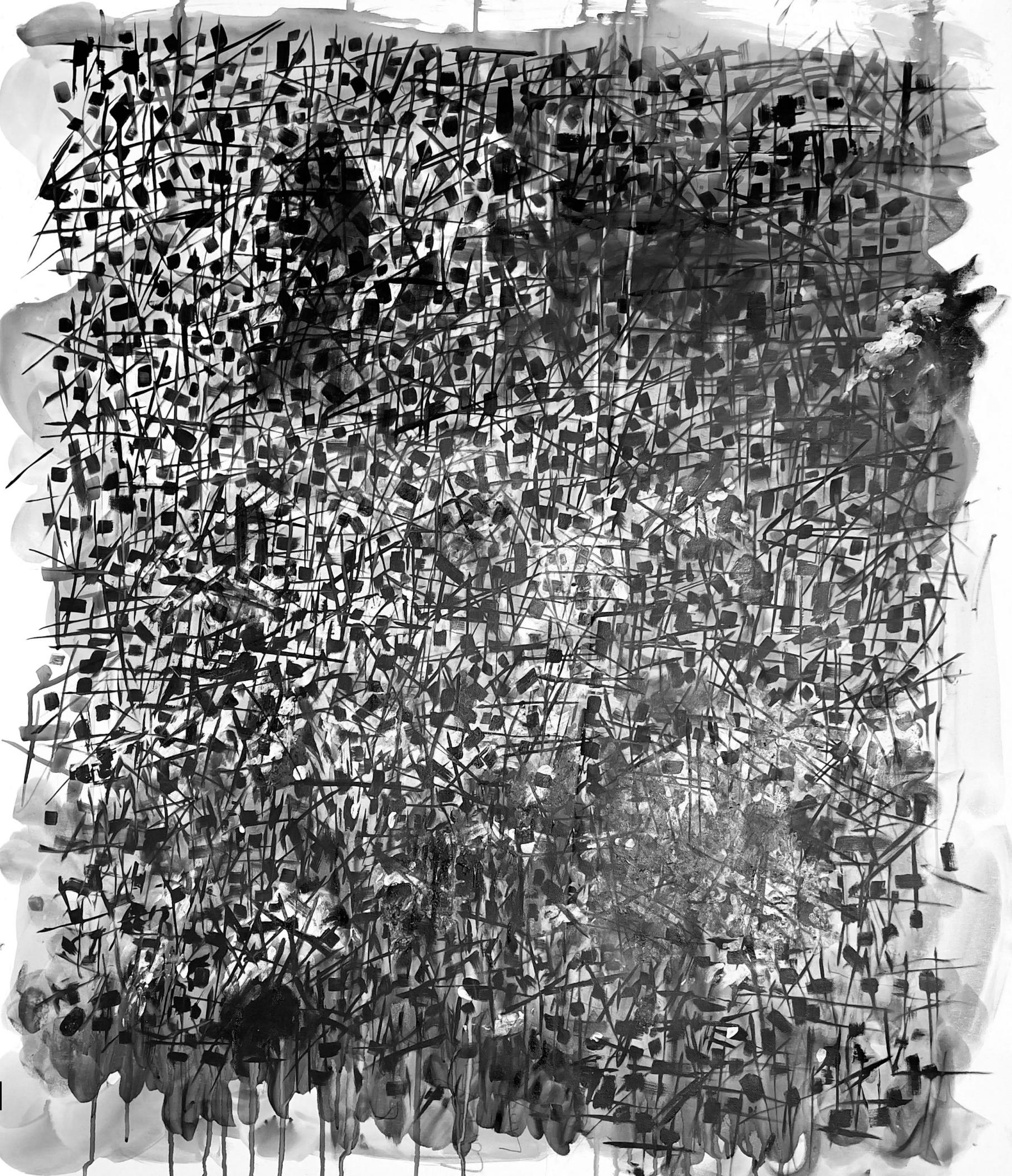
# DEATH WITHOUT A SOUL AND THE SPACETIME BETWEEN US

by S.G. GREENE

Something's happened. Something's happening.

Sweat beads on your face as the controlling drum of your heart hammers away inside your chest. Just seconds before, reality seemed within your control—the sandwich in your hand was the main goal and the last half of the day was all that was ahead. A night of work, dinner, and maybe a movie or show to cap before you fall asleep in anticipation of doing it all again the next day. Earth dances on its axis as it revolves around the shortest and most convenient path around our local star.<sup>1</sup> The temporal illusion continues as you twist into the night. But now, your brain is firing so rapidly you cannot think. Are you having a heart attack? A stroke? Are you choking on the cheap bologna sandwich you lazily made yourself when you woke up? To choke on three dollars of low effort food would be the ultimate irony of a life not fully lived. Across the creek, at rest with you in the same local reference frame, the love of your life has emerged. For

<sup>1</sup> Thorne, Kip. *Black Holes & Time Warps: Einstein's Outrageous Legacy* (Commonwealth Fund Book Program). W. W. Norton & Company, 1995, p. 551.



a moment, your time is atomically synced with theirs. A soggy piece of mayo-ridden bread drops from your slack-jawed mouth. They have locked eyes with you. Panic seizes you! Of all days, bologna! The memory of you deciding to leave the rest of your porterhouse steak and seasoned wedge potatoes for dinner later that night screams at your consciousness. Damn fool! What person would be attracted to mayo-ridden white bread and questionable meat? You toast your poorly timed sandwich to the person across the creek and, to your surprise, they toast a mayo-dipped corn dog back. Your eyes dilate. Madness rushes in.



Something's happening. Something's happened.

Out beyond the influence of Earth's gravitational field, time speeds up. In an existence where Earth has not yet split its supercontinent into seven, a main-sequence star fuses hydrogen to helium in a dance of cosmic equilibrium.<sup>2</sup> Though this star is unaware of its existence, it is winning against the crushing force of gravity. Thermal energy radiates out from its fusing core and pushes against the will of the greater universe.<sup>3</sup> It is the ultimate need to survive happening entirely by physical circumstance. Indifferent to the fact that no planets orbit its might, the star floats through space in tandem with the galactic flow of its neighbors. Across the empty silence, something wanders through. Uncaring and unaware because it is a star, it does nothing. After a long journey through the galactic plane, the beaming little traveler finally finds the willing embrace of another object. Unbeknownst to the Main-Sequence star, one of the most furious things in the universe has altered its orbit. The two do not exchange words or gestures and there is no animosity projected from one to the other. The Main-Sequence star does not care that something called the Pauli Exclusion Principle is directly responsible for causing something called "degeneracy pressure," which in turn keeps the little diabolical corpse from imploding through the universe itself.<sup>4</sup> It does not know that the little radio pulsar wandering into its gravitational influence is the equivalent of a radioactive nuclear zombie that's on fire wandering into Grandpa Lou's annual Christmas party. It does not know that one day it will find another main-sequence star and prey on its energy to topple its Tolman-Oppenheimer-Volkoff Limit.<sup>5</sup> They both are indifferent to their futures because they are stars. All is well. All is normal.



Something's happened. Something's happening.

Just as the Main-Sequence and Radio Pulsar do not know of their own existences, you do not know of theirs. All you see is the human before you. All you feel is the spacetime between. Your fingers interlock and you feel the sensation of being intimate and close. Being any closer

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Begelman, Mitchell, and Martin Rees. *Gravity's Fatal Attraction: Black holes in the Universe*, 3rd ed. Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Thorne, Kip. *Black Holes & Time Warps: Einstein's Outrageous Legacy* (Commonwealth Fund Book Program). W. W. Norton & Company, 1995, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 193-196.

would make you and them a star. No matter how hard you try, no matter how hard you press into one another, kissing their neck, their chest, their groin, you cannot fuse your soul into theirs. Skin rubs against skin. Sweat drips from your face to theirs and theirs to yours. Your hearts beat madly in unison and your nerves flare like a cosmic display. To a being that could see wavelengths in the infrared spectrum, you're both but red-orange silhouettes of energy trying to merge into one. But because your bodies cannot fuse so that your minds inhabit the same plane, you manifest a version of them in your head. Your inner selves align. When sitting alongside the creek eating your sad sandwich, you had never considered your place in the universe. Your life was a series of repetitive steps leading toward the inevitable. But then something awoke inside you. The world around became dismally apparent and then it struck you; what does it mean to be alive? Why are Earth and Sun not considered alive? The universe was not made as a playground for you to inhabit, you are just a product of cosmic happenstance. All things are born from energy. To be human is to know what this means. The sun cannot feel the electromagnetic radiation it emits, just as you cannot fuse with your love to create a singular entity. You stare into the eyes of the one who broke you free; a mortal being whose essence was forged in the same star as yours. Together, you are the afterlife of a star gone supernova, reunited in a gravity well that bore your existence. You both breathe the atmosphere like newborns struggling for their first breaths. Gazing into one another's eyes with a sort of clarity no other thing could comprehend. You picture yourself crawling out from the surface of the sun; born from a flare, the universe as Man but for the blink of the eye.



Something's happening. Something's happened.

As fast as it came, the Radio Pulsar accelerated away from the Main-Sequence. Two polar jets exploding from its poles flicker a message into the eternal night beyond.<sup>6</sup> For the Main-Sequence, it's not long before the little devil is but a blinking speck lost among the glare of its cosmic neighbors. To many curious eyes and feelers, the pulsar will be a discernable message necessitating

<sup>6</sup> Begelman, Mitchell, and Martin Rees. *Gravity's Fatal Attraction: Black Holes in the Universe*, 3rd ed. Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 44.



interpretation.<sup>7</sup> For the Main-Sequence, it would have been a fundamentally different future. The glaring radio beams are the cosmic equivalent of a relationship red flag. Even though they spin into the distance, the consequences of their brief interaction are irreversible. Through a slight perturbation in its elliptical orbit around the unknown host, its fate has been set. Another meeting is in motion. Had the Main-Sequence paired with the Pulsar, it might have had a better chance, whatever that might mean from a cosmic perspective. To keep its core burning? To keep fusing? To swell and collapse, only to explode into a spectacular fertile event? As it reaches apoapsis around the entity in which it is in orbit around, it joins its close neighbors in their uniform swing back toward the invisible apparition. They are linked. Less than a light year “down” its path, through the field of blazing jewel oases of the galactic center in which they reside, X-rays flicker off the horizon of a cosmic antichrist.<sup>8</sup> Its hunger **grows**.



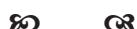
**S**omething’s happened. Something’s happening.

Ahead of you, your loved one runs away in a playful dance. Their hair blossoms in the wind as they lay their arms out to feel Earth’s tickling embrace. You’ve never consumed alcohol, yet you feel intoxicated. Your body feels at once dense as steel and as weak as bologna. You run after them, afraid that they will soon be too far away for you to feel. Laughter fills the air as the long grass around you sways in the midday sun. You take their hand and together you spin, watching the cloud and sky swirl round and round. Something fills the space unseen; a frame of reference only the two of you could understand. All time is irrelevant. It is neither moving forward nor backward nor standing still. Millions upon millions of souls who reside in the same gravity well die every second. Millions fall in love. Millions grow old. Millions are born. Millions grow bored. Millions simply watch the night sky in total disbelief, growing restless fighting between curiosity and envy. The two of you rise above the planet, hand in hand, and twist into the night sky. The universe has no power in the reference frame of the human mind. You lie next to them and

<sup>7</sup> Thorne, Kip. *Black Holes & Time Warps: Einstein’s Outrageous Legacy* (Commonwealth Fund Book Program). W. W. Norton & Company, 1995, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> Begelman, Mitchell, and Martin Rees. *Gravity’s Fatal Attraction: Black Holes in the Universe*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 59.

do something that the universe could never: imagine the future, the possibilities, the potential and best of all, new life to love. With a mindful twist of your body, you bend to the susurating grass and pluck one of the fibers from Earth. With great care and focus, you twist it into a ring and hold it high for the wind to kiss. Your loved one’s eyes open wide enough for the galaxy to spill in. You slip the earthen ring around their finger; it rains diamonds on other worlds, but not wood or grass; you are sure they are unique to home. With the knot tied, the future is set.



**S**omething’s happened. Something’s happening.

If the Main-Sequence weren’t a star, it might have begun to panic. Something was off, its field of view slightly different. Periapsis approaches. But with what? Bright flashes give away the looming beast’s presence. They are different from the Radio Pulsar’s Morse—more random and indifferent to the universe beyond. The dark madness that is pulling the Main-Sequence in stalks the cosmic night, bending the light of the background stars around its perfectly smooth horizon. For the first time since its violent birth, the Main-Sequence feels its equilibrium being tested. A force it has never felt in its two-billion-year life tugs at its approaching face. The great entity is spinning. It uses its ungodly existence to claw at the Main-Sequence through the very fabric of spacetime. To the other stars in the galactic center, their sibling dims. Its light shifts as its essence is pulled around the horizon. Time begins to slow—the greater galaxy moves faster and faster through time as the Main-Sequence moves slower. With mass comes the burden of time.<sup>9</sup> A tendril of matter snakes from the facing surface of the Main-Sequence. It spills around one end of the Black Hole’s event horizon. It has entered its ergosphere—a point of no return. There is nothing in the universe that can stop the events unfolding, yet the Main-Sequence fights as if it can best the fundamentals of the universe. Cosmic equilibrium gives way to tidal disruption. The star is pushed and squeezed as its mass begins to accrete around the event horizon. Somewhere within, the jaws of something unimaginable pull at the mass as if it were starved of matter. The tendril of gas whips around

the horizon of the black prison, exploding all its light to the opposite side.<sup>10</sup> With the blinding flash of tens of trillions of Suns, a ring is formed.<sup>11</sup> The bind is set. The demon is alive and feasting. Slow matter rubs against fast matter, and it falls inside in a grand display of law and power. The remains of the sun are whipped far into space into a future from which it had been briefly lost.<sup>12</sup> The Antichrist screams forth two magnetic beams of indescribable power in an act of indifferent hubris and bravado for all the universe to see. With the knot tied, the future is set.

<sup>9</sup> Thorne, Kip. *Black Holes & Time Warps: Einstein’s Outrageous Legacy* (Commonwealth Fund Book Program). W. W. Norton & Company, 1995, p. 100.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 549.

<sup>11</sup> Begelman, Mitchell, and Martin Rees. *Gravity’s Fatal Attraction: Black Holes in the Universe*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 59-60.

<sup>12</sup> Thorne, Kip. *Black Holes & Time Warps: Einstein’s Outrageous Legacy* (Commonwealth Fund Book Program). WW Norton & Company, 1995, p. 100.



A calamity has come.  
A calamity is coming.

With the booming force of the universe channeled through your organic vessel, your heart thunders with apoplectic fear. You can feel every tendril in your body, every fighting cell. Your knees are at risk of shattering from weakness, yet something is keeping you moving along. The glare is blinding. You squint as you pass under light after light down a hall that seems to never end. Your irises dilate, letting all the spectrum in as the radiation encircles the horizon of your eyes. There seems to not be enough air to breathe yet you manage to drink it in. There are other people running around you, indifferent to your presence. You are there but not there. All focus is upon the pale husk of a human whose clammy hand has never slipped from the indestructible grip of your own. The gurney drifts at a hard right angle into a room that seems even brighter. Figures resembling humans run about the room in a hurry. They are a blur, operating outside the influence of your own gravitational pull. For you, time moves faster. The fabric seems to be slipping through your fingers as they gain viscosity. You touch the hand of the one you love. There is no heat. Their skin grows cold. You feel other arms and hands pulling you away, but there is no budging you. You feel something they cannot feel. You see something they cannot see. You stare into the radiating lights of the operating room and all light begins to bend to your will.

You know where they are.  
You know where they are going.

With a trembling roar of agony, you feel the Calamity at the other end of the universe. In a single bound, you disappear into the void through a visceral tunnel of space and time. Tears stream down your face as all the universe bends before you in a singular circle of light and matter.<sup>13</sup> A spiral galaxy appears, and you see its horrible taunting beams of insurmountable power. Dust gives way and stars bend round your all-seeing hemisphere. Within a second, the universe snaps back into position. Everything you've known has been lost entirely. Before you, the Calamity awaits in stubborn silence. You skim along its accretion plane and feel your very soul begin to stretch. A glaring ring of fire burns along the black sphere's silhouette as light from behind is bent around. Fear nearly takes you whole.

You find a hand in the blinding light.  
Two solemn eyes stare into yours.  
You have found them.

You squeeze hold of the departing hand as the two of you slide closer to the black horizon of purgatory. You stare into their eyes, uncaring of the spherical nightmare pulling you in. Your bodies begin to stretch. You see their legs grow thin along the boundaries of nothing and everything, and everything and nothing. The black curve of an unknown dimension of space spills around the horizon on one side of you and on the other the universe bends with the spin of time. You see them shed a tear and shake their head no. The grip of their hand loosens, and they gently slip free.

<sup>13</sup> Thorne, Kip. *Black Holes & Time Warps: Einstein's Outrageous Legacy* (Commonwealth Fund Book Program). WW Norton & Company, 1995, p. 42.

"Don't!" you scream, but your voice carries away in a screaming pitch.<sup>14</sup>

A gentle look settles on their face as their body is pulled. Their being begins to shift away to the red. They see the anguish in your eyes and spread their arms wide for one last distant embrace. Their mouth opens as they recede into the darkness. A song graces your ears as its very essence is slowly redshifted from existence; the loving voice you once knew slowly becomes demonic and baritone.<sup>15</sup>

"M.a.y.b.e...y.o..u'll....t..h..i..n..k...o...f...m.e...w...h....e....n....y....o....u....  
.a.....r.....e.....a.....1.....1.....a.....1.....o.....  
.n.....e....."

¤ ¤

They are frozen. Time stops. You feel the pull. You feel the crashing of your heart hundreds of millions of light years away. Four pairs of hands seize your thrashing body and force you to the ground as the monitor chimes a monotonous tone. Your old body feels young again as the adrenaline pumps from the glands to the heart. A needle plunges into your neck and you feel suddenly very calm. Your bygone mind relaxes against the floor as a warm cloth is laid across your forehead. Your heart beats once and, from across the gulf of space and time, you feel it beat once more. The face of the one you loved is frozen in your head at the precipice of unknowing eternity.<sup>16</sup>

There they remain. ¤

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-104; 556.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 42.





## TO: EMMA

by JOAN McENHILL

Siblinghood is fickle. Each sibling grows at their own pace, or they don't. Each finds their own interests, or they don't. And each has the freedom to be their own person, or they don't. They are hopelessly intertwined and every decision that one makes will irreversibly affect the other.

Or maybe I'm just talking out of my ass.

More than that, we are twins. We are imperfect halves of each other, and everything we say and do reflects upon the other. The lives that we live will never be separate from each other, and I want you to know:

I don't want them to change.

I care about you more than anything else.

Get your own life.

Why are we always seen together on the tips of people's tongues?

You are the most important person in my life.

I love you.

We're sitting in the car together, prompted by our shared wanderlust. I hold something close to my chest as you hold the wheel. We talk about errands, dancing around our father's deteriorating health. We laugh about a video you showed me. You avoid looking in my eyes so I don't remind you of mom. It's a tense dance, more so than those of our youth, you might joke. But that doesn't leave your lips because you know that's not true.

“I guess that’s where it all started.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, most of my problems probably came from that dance studio.”

“...”

“...”

“Yeah, same.”

They could all be traced back to that Russian lady, one Teresa Lubarsky—whom I have to thank for my social anxiety, you for your issue with authority—and a joint “thank you” for our body dysmorphia. That was something that we wished we didn’t do together, because then at least one of us wouldn’t have to carry the baggage given to us by that lady’s crushed dreams.

I sat behind the painted door on the sticky Marley, trying to hide from everyone. You put rosin on your pointe shoes that caused haunting physical and emotional damage. We are not the same.

“We definitely were the same. I mean, look at us now.”

“Actually—truthfully, respectfully—no fucking way were we the same.”

“What.”

“At least you were talking to people.”

“Yeah, but the people I was talking to sucked.”

Whether we liked it or not, dance was the hobby we shared for the longest time. We fell in and out of love with it around the same time, but we still look back fondly at our formative years and wish we could warn four-year-old us not to do ballet.

We broke apart after that, after class at least. In school, we were still Joan and Emma. Emma and Joan. The twins.

Attending different high schools helped us find each other. It finally felt like we could be our own people. And it also finally felt like we found a good reason to stay out of the house, away from Mom and Dad. We started working in restaurants sophomore year and even as I type this I dread my upcoming shift as a busser, just as I did when our mom still drove us around.

I don’t remember much from our last dinner as a family, just the clinking of forks against plates. The small talk always made me feel like we could get along, until you and mom inevitably transitioned, flawlessly, into argument. After that I would run back and forth trying to repair the damage from her comment about your body; all while she forgets my name.

“Dad’s always easier to talk to.”

“Says you.”

“Am I wrong?”

“He’s easier to talk to for you, I feel like he hates me most of the time.”

“Well—”

“I don’t think he likes me all that much.”

He took you halfway across the state so you could go to an aquarium together and he looks at me like I’m a stranger when I ask him for help around the house. I hate how different we are. The amount of time that he invests in you and your interests makes me so *happy* I want to

*That was something that we wished we didn’t do together, because then at least one of us wouldn’t have to carry the baggage given to us by that lady’s crushed dreams.*

throw up. I’ve spent so many nights crying my eyes out because my dad threatened to hit me when I asked him if he could play catch with me. I wanted that cliché experience with him and I couldn’t even get that. And now we can’t even say anything bad about him because of his condition, but I’m just so tired. He doesn’t like me. He never has and I’m tired of pretending that it’s okay. I want my dad to act like small talk with me isn’t the deepest we’re ever going to get. Let me spend time with him, let him realize that he messed up with me, and he’s why I flinch whenever a man raises his voice. Let me just have that.

I know Mom is better with me than she is with you, but not by much. I know how to talk to her, and I know how to talk to you, but neither of you knows how to do that for each other. I’m a bona fide translator in my own childhood home because of the disconnect between mother and daughter.

“I’m sorry.”

“Parents suck.”

But you don’t. We might have our differences.

The way we fight.

Who we like and who we talk about over lunch.

Our taste in music.

What we want to do with our lives.

The ways we show love.

The ways we don’t.

But, you’ll always be my sister.

There will never be anyone I’m more willing to confide in. No one can match your skills with a rolling pin. No one else with whom I can communicate sans words. No one who understands the joy and hardship of having our parents and our lives. Ultimately, you’re my other half. I’d say you’re the better half and you’d say the opposite and that argument wouldn’t get us anywhere.

Being siblings with you is hard.

But you know what?

You couldn’t be anyone else.

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“You know I love you, right?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“I love you, too.” 



## SALTED COFFEE

by SOPHIE WAYMAN

**B**ANG! The gun goes off and my legs start pumping. My new track spikes comfortably grip the surface as I gracefully sprint the ever-so-familiar 400m oval. I know every turn by heart and have memorized the precise number of steps I need to take until I have to round another corner. As adrenaline courses through my veins and into every single muscle in my body, my mind is free to wander back to where it all began.



**M**y long-distance best friend, Eloise, calls me every morning and helps me drag myself out of bed. We make coffee together and sweeten it until it stings, because somehow a few of my tears always drip-drop into the mug.



**S**altwater and burnt coffee beans, delightful.



**I**t tell her that everything exhausts me, that I don't know what I'm going to do after I get this degree.

I miss you more than I've ever missed anybody, because when you are not here, I feel like I have wandered too far out of my own skin. Everything feels hot and bitter and empty and foreign. Now that I've had a taste of your presence, being without it seems impossible. You forever linger on the tip of my tongue and in the back of my mind. I don't know how I did it before, and I don't ever want to do it again. So please just stay. For me, please just stay.



**I**slip on my brand-new Twinkle Toes sparkly shoes that my grandmother bought for me during our routine back-to-school shopping trip. Horribly ugly, I realize now. But four-year-old me was enamored by their beauty. The cheap, plasticky feeling engulfed my feet and the bright-pink leather wings put a bounce in my step on the way home. But really, the only thing that mattered is that if all the other girls wore them, I had to wear them too. When I left school that first day, I realized my shoes were the only ones streaked with mud—the only ones with sticky burrs tangled up in the dusty laces.



**S**o I move on and do as I'm told and just exist. She reads me her old poetry. We both thank God we don't write like that anymore, while knowing we will hate everything we've written today in approximately a month. Can you ever really win with your art?



**M**iddle school. I strutted into school with a—let's call it unique—sense of style. I rocked my Vibram FiveFinger shoes with socks that individually hugged each of my toes like a warm winter glove. I was so proud to show off my new shoes to my

P.E. teacher, who gave a presentation to the class on the benefits of barefoot running. I could hear the soft murmurs and giggles when she showed them to the class. I realized that as I began to embrace myself, I had a smaller circle of friends that were like me. I grew sad that I couldn't be more like the other girls. Why did I think like this? I guess that I so badly wanted to fit in that I risked washing away my true identity in order to conform to the mold.

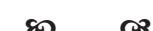


**S**he tells me to make soup, that it helps her. I go to the farmers market and pick up aromatic heirloom tomatoes and sticky yellow onions and brightly-scented cloves of garlic. I see an old lady with gray hair pick out strawberries. We make brief eye contact. Ease, I think. Youth, she thinks. Can we swap? If only I knew that she fears death. If only she knew that I fear life.



**I**stepped off the train and rode up the crowded escalator to a bustling street filled with faces. Old and young cascaded with rainbow attire. I immediately felt overwhelmed with joy and a sense of belonging as I rushed over to join the parade heading towards the Civic Center Plaza. My Old Skool Vans with rainbow soles carried me through the crowd of smiling, laughing faces. Each of these people carries a story with them, similar to my own. I had hidden my identity for so long but carried it with me every day on the soles of my feet. I lay down on the wet plaza grass and kicked my feet up, exposing the worn rainbow pattern for all to see.

Looking up at the sky as music played and as the crowds of unique faces and stories engulfed me. This feeling was almost melancholic. It was unsettling to be the same as everyone else. This time, I wanted to be different. I wanted to stand out. I needed to. I needed people to know who I was.



**“T**he grass is always greener on the other side, I guess,” I tell Eloise when I get back home. She watches me cut onions and



cry. Holding me as tight as she can from so far away. Just some more salt water in my food, as if my body doesn't have enough. This is nice, I say. It's like we're in Ratatouille, she says. I tell her I wish I could just live in her pocket and watch her do even the most mundane things like watering her plants or walking to work. Or even when she's in the midst of a war with her own everything, I need to be there for her. And my dear, it's platonic and it's perfect. Oh, how dearly I miss her.

❀ ❁

As I continued to grow up, my view of myself did, too. I realized that my shoes were, literally and metaphorically, the foundation of how I was perceived. Why should I care what people think about me and how I dress? The day before my first high school cross country meet, I slipped on my rainbow Hoka One One shoes. Perfectly shaped to my feet, the result of endless miles on the trails.

I found comfort in the black dust caked on the soles. The same sticky burrs tightly enveloping the laces that pinched my fingers when I tied them. I didn't care that they were there. In fact, it's a sign of my love for myself. Perfectly imperfect and sometimes that's painful. It hurts to not be seen as the right one.

❀ ❁

“Maybe in another lifetime. I know we're not anything anymore, but it hurts to see you thrive without me. I went into this knowing it wouldn't last. I can't deal with you anymore.”

I don't know how to come back from that. Parts of me ripped away with a single text message. Little white letters quickly typed on a screen in a matter of seconds, destroying me for a matter of years. And as you sat there on the edge of my bed giving me advice about the future you knew you wouldn't be in, I stared at you with all the love you did not return. And now you sit and watch my profile pictures change and I watch yours like you didn't promise me you were going to stay.

❀ ❁



Everything exhausts me. What will I do after this degree? I mourn the loss of her even though she's not really gone. I hear her voice every day and we talk and laugh, but somehow, it's not the same. I can't feel her laughter radiate through my chest and her smile seems dim through the screen. She left two years ago to go live on the other side of the world.

But every day, we still make coffee together and sweeten it until it stings. Because somehow, a few of my tears always drip-drop into the mug.

❀ ❁

Salt water and burnt coffee beans, tragic.

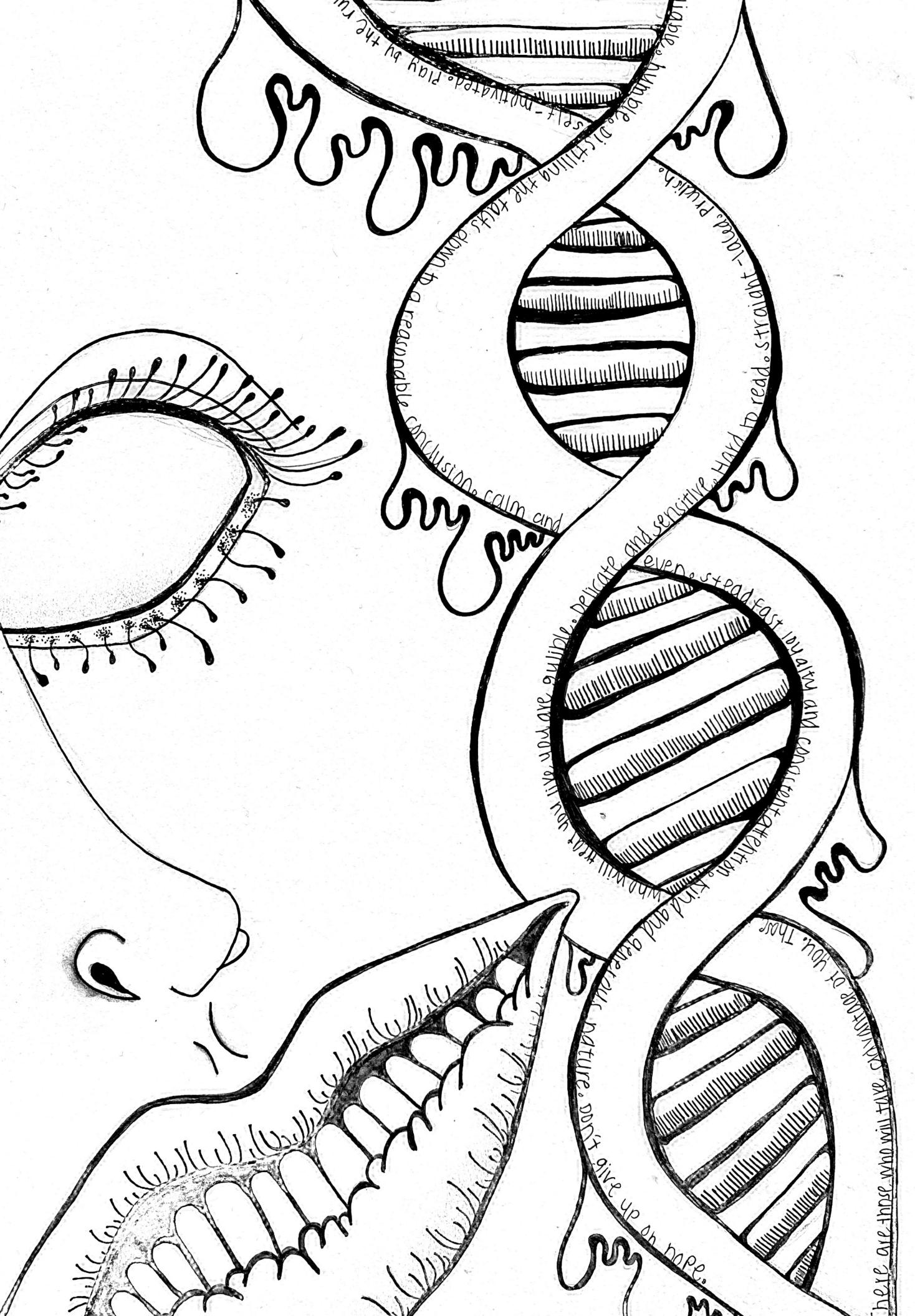
❀ ❁

BANG! The gun goes off and I sprint into the front pack of runners, carefully dodging the feet of others with swinging ponytails and clouds of dust swirling around me. I cross the finish line, feeling overwhelmed with emotion. This time, I'm happy. I am at peace with who I have become, and I am ready to take on the world.

I never thought it would come down to this. Me and her, and her and I. Approximately 5,217 miles away. She makes her coffee at night, and I make mine in the morning. She used to drink it black, but ever since she left, she joins me in adding cream and sugar. Sometimes I think that things got too overwhelming for her and that's why she left. I don't hold it against her, and she doesn't hold it against me for not coming with her.

C'est la vie. ❁





## ARE YOU BETTER?

by VIVIAN LUCKIW

xx

“Are you better?” Jack asks abruptly as he sits down across from me. He’s looking right at me with a pensive look in his eyes.

Both Hannah and I look up from our food. Before now, it was quiet, all of us eating or doing homework, and I don’t think either of us expected it to be broken so suddenly.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, setting my fork down on my plate.

“You know, your thing.” He makes a sweeping gesture towards his lower abdomen. I look down at my own. “Your period thing. Is it better?”

I blink and look back up. Hannah now shares the same expression as Jack, both of them looking at me, waiting for my answer.

“Better?” I ask quietly.



Art by LIV TIERNEY

## XI

You're weeping. Most days, you're sobbing like you're about to die. You're lucky that today you're only weeping as you step out of the car, the two boys you carpool with stumbling out behind you.

"Don't worry," Annette says as she leans out of the driver's seat. "I know what's been going on. Your mom told me everything. Every girl starts out her period this way. It'll get better once you get used to it."

You sniffle. A couple of girls in your grade shoot you judgmental glares. You turn red, a little embarrassed, and you lean back into Annette's car. "How did you? Get used to it, I mean?"

Annette shrugs. "With time." She gives you a sage-like smile. "And it'll happen for you too, eventually. You just have to be patient."

You nod slowly and step back onto the street, slamming the door behind you. Annette's dark blue minivan pulls away, leaving you standing alone in the one place you dreaded most of all. That morning, you had begged your mother to let you stay home from school. It felt like you were drowning in a sea of hellfire, and you didn't think you could make it. She had you take a couple of ibuprofen with your morning probiotics and told you to power through. If you needed to, you could go see the school nurse, and she'd come pick you up.

As you shuffle into the cold, concrete building, your face is still red from your tears and embarrassment. It's almost as red as the blood you can feel leaking through the night-time pad you'd put on maybe a half hour before. You stare at the three flights of stairs you need to take to your classroom, the burning in your abdomen as persistent as ever.

Yeah, you'd probably end up going to the school nurse today, just like you had every day for the past two weeks. Hopefully she'd be a little more sympathetic today than she normally is.

## XII

"I can't seem to find anything wrong with her," Dr. Best—or, as you call him, Dr. Worst—says as he shows your mother the pictures of the scope he performed.

"Then what could be causing her pain?" your mom asks, worry painting her voice.

"Through my best medical knowledge?" Dr. Best scratches his chin and shoots you a brief look, and you almost glare at him. You hate how he only addresses your parent, and never you. "A lot of young women at this age—especially those as emotional as your daughter—go through bouts of hysteria. Some can be so powerful as to convince them there's something actually wrong with their body. She's just scared about her periods, and her hysteria is causing her to believe she's in actual pain. You need to stop giving in to her delusions, and eventually, it'll stop. She won't have a reason to pretend anymore."

He never even looked at you when he spouted off all that bullshit. How qualified is a gastroenterologist to diagnose you with a serious mental disorder, especially since you're certain none of this is in your head? Why won't he just listen to you?

## XIII

Your parents had been trying the 'ignore the problem' solution Dr. Worst suggested. Since then, you still complain of fiery pain and near-constant periods on a daily basis. But now, they either ignore you or tell you to stop. Nothing can convince them that you still need help.

*Maybe this will*, you think as you walk into your mother's bathroom. It's 10 at night, she tucked you in an hour ago, and for the third time in twelve days, you bleed through your bedsheets. It was so bad tonight that you threw up on top of it all as well.

Your legs shake, struggling to keep you upright as you walk into the bathroom. Blood leaking down your legs, vomit drying on your shirt, and tears making shiny paths on your face. You're too afraid to speak, since there's a decent chance you'll start screaming at the top of your lungs.

Mom catches a look at you in the mirror. Her hands stop scrubbing at her face as she stares at you, a look of sheer horror frozen on her face. The air is heavy with silence, save for the running faucet and the heavy breathing you're struggling to control.

## XIV

It's only one more month. One month until you find out what exactly is wrong with you.

When you finally convinced your mom to take you for a second opinion, you found a much better doctor. Dr. White is a pediatric gynecologist, and she said she had a few ideas about the issues you're facing. She refused to tell you what those ideas were, since she didn't want you exploring WebMD, which is fair, but still kind of frustrating.

You're in too much pain to walk for more than a couple minutes consecutively, so your parents pulled you out of middle school for the last half of the year. According to Jessica, there's a rumor going around that you died. People are even saying they went to your funeral. Whatever. You don't really care about denying it. You already feel dead anyway.

You try to push yourself farther into the couch, hoping that you could disappear into it. Everything sucks.



Your dad walks in, handing you a bowl of Kraft dinner before settling down to watch season four of *Supernatural* with you. You hold back a sigh and ignore the tear sliding down your cheek as you dig into the food.

## XV

“Congratulations. You’re one in ten,” Dr. White says dryly as she walks into the room.

You look at her, scrunching your eyebrows together in confusion. Your hands let go of where they were toying with the examination table’s paper. “What do you mean?”

She gently sits down in her chair, mindful of her pregnancy belly. “You have what’s called endometriosis. Stage four,” she calls it. That word feels both vindicating and threatening at the same time. You lay a hand on your bloated, scarred stomach. Although you may be very sick, at least you know that you were never crazy.

“Essentially, what happens is the tissue that grows on the inside of your uterus is growing on the outside, all over your other organs. The tissue on the outside still menstruates, but unlike what’s in your uterus, it has nowhere to go, causing a vicious cycle inside your body.” She shifts in her seat, trying to keep herself comfortable.

## XVI

A school trip is supposed to be fun. But instead, you’re locked in a San Francisco hotel room, unable to move because you’re in too much pain.

Within the past year, you’ve been on seven different medications—both hormones and painkillers. While your periods are a lot more under control time-wise, your pain is not, and it’s still incredibly hard to move. Even physical therapy hasn’t been that helpful. Before coming on this trip, you switched to a new medication called naproxen with the hope it will help. So far, it has not.

Your A/V teacher was supposed to be helping you if you were having any troubles, as mandated by your school’s disability plan. But tonight, she ignored your pleas for help and went to get white-girl wasted with her colleagues while all your classmates snuck out to a fancy lobster restaurant for dinner. That left you here, completely alone, watching old cartoons on cheap hotel TV.

Your parents didn’t pay almost a thousand dollars for you to be stuck in your hotel room shackled down by your pain, did they? If they wanted that, they should’ve just given you a thousand dollars. It may still have hurt physically, but the emotional ache wouldn’t have been half as bad.

## XVII

As you hobble through the city, you wonder if it was truly the best idea.

Oh, you don’t regret graduating early. Not in the slightest. Your high school was hell, and getting out of there was the best idea you’ve ever made.

But university in Chicago? Maybe not. As much as you love the city and your friends, your

mobility has become much more of an issue than ever before. Without your parents or doctors nearby, you don’t have a proper support structure, and all you can do is call them every once in a while, and try to make do.

Originally, the cane was your idea, technically, since you didn’t want the wheelchair your doctor prescribed. Your pain is as bad as ever, maybe even worse, and you’re finding it more and more difficult to move around. So, Dr. White floated the idea of a wheelchair. Being so far away from her, you don’t really have access to one, so a cane is the next best thing.

You look down and grimace. You’re not sure if you’re walking with it right. People are definitely looking at you weird. All the attention is making you want to curl into a ball and start sobbing.

“Hey, bitch!” some ragged looking man yells as you trudge by him. “How dare you do something like that!”

“I cannot believe you would mock the disabled like that!” A woman your age fingers her invisible pearls.

An old couple turn their noses up at you. “Girls these days are attention-seeking monsters. I wonder if her parents are proud of their ‘cripple’ daughter.”

But you are crippled. Technically. Right?

It never works well with the cane, but you try to walk faster anyway. You probably look ridiculous, but it’s all you can do to get back to your dorm faster and start searching for universities closer to home.

## XVIII

“So, I’ve read your medical history, and—”

“I want a hysterectomy,” you blurt out, interrupting Dr. Jones. Honestly, with these massive masks over everyone’s faces, you were only 60% sure she was even speaking.

Dr. Jones, your *adult* gynecologist, blinks in surprise. “Can you tell me why?”

You sigh and firmly look her in the eye. “I’ve known since I was 15 that I can’t have kids. I’m having constant issues with pain, and meds, and mobility. Hell, I couldn’t stay in Chicago because of all the complications! I’m just done!” You take a composing breath. “I’m so fucking done, doctor. This is the best option for me.” The paper on the bed crinkles beneath your anxious fingers.

“If you want it, then you’ve researched it. That means you



know that this isn't a cure for endometriosis. There isn't one at all."

"But this is the next best thing. I know that it would be best for me. And if it helps even a little better than all of those insane medications, then I'm willing to do it." You straighten your back, trying to display your absolute certainty. "Please, Dr. Jones."

She clicks her pen and sets it down on the clipboard. "I'll look into it. After reviewing your chart, it may well be the best thing for you. But you need to know that just getting the surgery is a long process. We don't typically do it for young, unmarried women. There's going to be a mental evaluation, a thorough review of your medical records, and so much more. This conversation is only the beginning."

### XIX

This is, what? Your third appointment with someone who isn't your gynecologist? First a psychologist, then a gastroenterologist, and now it's... a fertility doctor. Wonderful. You sigh, running a hand through your hair. At least it's over Zoom so you don't have to go into the city.

The screen lights up, signaling that the receptionist has arrived. She starts by smiling at the camera, but once she sees your face, she barely covers the blatant shock that crosses it.

"I thought I was talking to someone who was considering a hysterectomy," she says, as if you're not the name on her schedule.

You fake a smile. "You are, ma'am. I'm the one getting a hysterectomy."

"But you're young! Why would you waste yourself like this?" she basically yells at me.

Your smile feels a lot tighter. "Because I'm sick, ma'am. I need to have the surgery for my own wellbeing."

The woman opens her mouth like she wants to argue, but quickly closes it. She wants to try and convince you not to, like everyone else, but at least she has the decency to stop before she starts. You're tired of listening to people who think they know your problems trying to tell you that they aren't that bad.

The woman begins her little speech. This time, you're being talked at about either freezing your eggs or donating them. You're more than happy to hear what she has to say, as long as she and everyone else to whom Dr. Jones sends you stop trying to keep

you from your hysterectomy. Nothing anyone says can convince you that having your uterus is better than not. They don't know what you've been through.

So, it was the psychologist, then the gastroenterologist, now the fertility doctor. Was there anyone else? Or can you finally be deemed ready?

### XX

I stroll up the driveway, walking through the door without knocking. Honestly, it would probably only annoy them, and it's not like they care, so I just walk in the door, taking careful steps to compensate for my tender abdomen.

I can hear Jack and Hannah in the kitchen, so I step around Jack's tubs of LEGO and walk down the short hall. Jack is standing by the stove, cooking. Judging by the smell, it's a copycat of his mother's biscuits and gravy. He sees me and gives me a short "hey," before popping the biscuits in the oven. Hannah is at the table with her laptop open, clearly frustrated with whatever she's working on. She looks at me and smiles. I walk to the table and set my tote down before carefully taking the chair next to hers, looking over her shoulder at the paper she's writing. I pull out my sketchbook to start my own homework—the perks of being an art-adjacent major.

I can feel Jack's eyes on the top of my head. I'm not sure why he's staring at me. He seems thoughtful, like he wants to say something but he's too scared. Looking up, I shoot him a vaguely annoyed glare. He startles a bit before turning his eyes back to his cast-iron. Why was he looking at me like that? I sigh, shrugging it off before Hannah and I get up and start making our plates. ☕



# FOLLOWING EQUINOX

by CHARLOTTE WHITNEY

Let us be gentle.

Now, when branches are beginning to soften in the wind  
and the moonlight seems to bathe the streets longer every night.

Let's fall into the languid rhythms of the grass,  
breathing in the final rays of sunlight before sleep.

Let's slow our heartbeats  
while we walk under streetlights wearing old jackets.

Let's clutch blankets,  
grasp hands,  
breathe words,  
sing them.  
Write them down.

Let us be gentle while the air allows.

Let's share plates,  
and touch,  
and dappled shadows cast by the growing cumulus  
that herald the new world.

Let us be gentle,  
for the clouds have asked us to be.





## BLUE FISH

by DELANEY HARTMANN

I am eighteen months old, flying through the sky. The chains that suspend me hit their peak, and I soar back down towards my dad's open palms, waiting to push the swing again. This is our Saturday morning routine. We eat scrambled eggs and sausage—he cuts mine into little pieces—pack the stroller with water bottles and toys, and head to the neighborhood playground. Once I tire of the swing, Dad lets me waddle around the park and explore. I examine shiny pebbles and run my fingers through blades of grass. I learn to trust that my legs will hold me.

My favorite feature of the playground is a large, plastic, blue fish. The fish is hollowed out in the middle to provide a bench and handle so that children can rock back and forth. Essentially a rocking-horse, this fish is my favorite because of its smooth plastic skin and big eyes. Sitting on its bench, I use the weight of my body to tip forwards and backwards, enjoying the way my stomach flips with the movement. I watch as a mother and her son approach my rocking-fish. The mother makes small talk with Dad, probably discussing the weather.

"Your daughter is so cute, and so tiny!" she says suddenly to Dad.

She doesn't know that she has hit a sore spot, as my dad and mom are concerned about my health. I was born with complications, and I am much smaller than other eighteen-month-olds. Dad tries to direct the conversation back to the weather, but the mother keeps discussing my size, and how "she can't be more than ten months old!"

Dad tells her that I am eighteen months old, and she suggests that I need to be fed more. She tells Dad that her son, Jeffrey, is two years old and so smart! As she says this, Jeffrey walks towards the fish I play on.

He points at the fish, walks back to his mother and says "Wawa! Wawa!" His mother is thrilled.

"Yes, Jeffrey, that's water! Great job." She looks to Dad and brags, "See, Jeffrey knows all sorts of things!"

I climb off the fish's bench and walk towards Jeffrey. I look him in the eye, point at the fish, and say clearly, "Blue. Fish." Dad suppresses a laugh and looks at the mother.

"I think she'll be alright," he says.



I am eight years old, in third grade. During my time in elementary school, I have learned that boys and girls are different. Boys are good at sports and girls are good at crafts. Boys are strong and girls are sweet.

I stand on the sidelines while the boys play soccer, even though I just got new cleats.

I keep my hands in my lap, even when I know the answer to the teacher's question.

I stay quiet when one boy bullies another, even though I know it's wrong.



I am eleven, in middle school.

I let the boy in Spanish class lead our presentation, even though I practiced for longer.

I sing quietly in choir, even though I know all the words.

I hear that boys are better at math than girls.



I am sixteen, in high school.

I don't speak up when a boy grabs a girl's ass without consent.

I let it slide when a teacher makes a sexist comment.

I learn to question myself.



I am twenty-one, and I meet with my therapist every week. Our topics of conversation change frequently, but there is a common thread. I want to know: How do I unlearn my cultural conditioning? I tell my therapist that I don't want to be small or quiet or demure. I want to be a woman who takes up space, speaks her mind, and is confident in herself. This process of unlearning is slow, and it is not linear. But over time, a sense of rebellion builds up inside me, and it fuels my confidence. It becomes easier to take up space and speak my mind. I raise my hand during lectures and stand up for people who need an ally. I feel increasingly comfortable demanding respect. Sometimes, my confidence falters. I tell myself that I am too bossy, or too opinionated, or too bold. But I am reminded by my therapist, my mother, and my friends that these are words given to women who can't be controlled. I do not want to be controlled.

Over many years, the conviction I was born with was teased out of me. This life teaches young girls to sit back and shut up, and it does so with impunity. If they are lucky, these girls might get the chance to unlearn this sexist conditioning, just like I am trying to do.

If I know that it's a blue fish, I say so. ☀





Art by JULIA SMITH

## MY DAD AND THE GAY SOLDIER

by MICHAEL McGUIRE

My father liked to tell war stories. When I was growing up, he told them all the time, and retold them. I was never his best witness to these alpha male narratives of bravado, preferring my Beatles records, or Mad magazine, or baking a Betty Crocker cake with mom. I had stopped hearing them after I left home. However, he had apparently withheld one particular story all his life, the one I'd always needed to hear, until a summer day's lunch when he finally told it to me.

The 1970's were winding down in San Francisco. Disco still ruled. Donna Summer and the Bee Gees were on the radio, along with the Village People extolling the virtues of the Young Men's Christian Association. My father would have been oblivious to all that. Popular culture was rapidly passing him by, as mirrored in the recent death of his hero John Wayne. Meanwhile I was still drunk on my youth and autonomy, having left home and moved to what was then being called a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah. Such was the dichotomy of those years, reconciling the bright thrill of my newly minted

adulthood with the darkness of the Jonestown mass suicide, and the assassinations of Harvey Milk and George Moscone. My father commuted into the city from the suburbs. I was just beginning my professional life, and he was on the brink of retirement. Briefly, our working lives had overlapped, and our office buildings stood five blocks apart.

My dad and I had a fraught relationship. We were never more than an unsolicited opinion away from a verbal brawl—he the WWII veteran, devout Catholic and social conservative, who had voted both Nixon and Reagan into office, and myself, the gay rebel iconoclast who threatened every one of his cherished but unquestioned beliefs. If you had asked me then what I thought about my dad, I'd have told you unequivocally that I hated him. Despite our physical proximity we rarely met. A shroud of animosity had always obscured one from the other. A few years before, he had egregiously mistreated me when he discovered the truth of my sexual preference and had never apologized. But occasionally a forgiving light broke through the murk that separated us, and I'd receive an invitation to lunch at his men's club.

My father relied on the comfort of routine, and these lunch dates always followed a strict play book. I'd wait outside his building at a punctual 11:55 a.m., then we'd walk the two blocks to the Merchants Exchange Club at the corner of California and Leidesdorff Streets. The maître d' would always seat him at his usual table. He'd always order the fillet of sole with a ramekin of tartar sauce on the side, and I always chose spaghetti with meatballs and a Coke. We'd exchange pleasantries, deferentially avoiding toxic topics like the Dan White verdict, or Anita Bryant's Save Our Children campaign. We'd steer towards the safety of a banal shore instead, updating each other on sibling news. A well-tread and familiar plot, these luncheons always followed the same quotidian scenario, governed by the ordinary and the non-controversial. But on this particularly warm and sunny day, once those usual niceties were dispensed with, the highly unusual occurred: My dad wanted to tell me a war story.

I have always believed my dad could only understand the world through the prism of his experience in WWII. And I'm sure he saw me as understanding nothing of the world at all, contaminated as I was by the gay, ultra-liberal society of San Francisco. Forever trying to interpret the modern world as seen

*Contaminated as  
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*I was still trying  
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through a war-torn America, nothing else made sense to him. This failure to grasp the necessities of change and progress was put in stark relief when the 1960's rolled around, and the shifting social norms and cultural values were upended and redefined by the generation I belonged to. Threatened to his core, that set in motion the generational conflict between us, which then escalated to operatic proportions when homosexuality was added, like fuel on flame, to the incendiary mix of radical politics and experimental drug use.

And yet, an endlessly redeeming feature of his personality was the chivalry and civility of an old school gentleman, a fast-vanishing breed. I used to try and list the things I liked about him, challenging me to come up with at least a couple, and his mild-mannered nature usually topped the list. He had graduated from Stanford University with a degree in journalism. I rated that highly, too. He clung to an obsolete version of life, but at least he wasn't desperately clutching at guns and bibles. He was sympathetic to the principles of Republican conservatism, but I appreciated his valuing common sense over conspiracy theories. And he wasn't a hothead; he could reveal a temper, but it was never mean-spirited.

At the club we had no sooner placed our orders when, without warning and without context, he suddenly launched into a swashbuckling tale of a guy on his ship in the Pacific theater during the last years of the war. He prefaced his tale by describing the man as, in my dad's less-than-charming anachronism, "a little light on his feet." This detail was key, and once he was sure I understood the subtext that this soldier was gay (the word "gay" not existing in my father's lexicon), he proceeded to tell me that he was "the bravest son-of-a-bitch on that whole goddamn ship."

I was still trying to process that bombshell of a revelation when the tale took off. It quickly darkened with war clouds falling over New Guinea, Japanese snipers hiding in trees poised to ambush, and this light-footed soldier risking his life repeatedly, running interference for his unit, and dodging incoming fire while tracking enemy positions to warn his fellow soldiers.

He'd climb the tower of the ship without a harness. He'd rush forward when others held back. He may have been reckless but only at his own peril; all his actions were invested with the



same intent, saving his buddies' lives, thus earning backslapping admiration from those brothers in arms. All this derring-do in spite of those light feet. And my father said he could cuss a mighty profane blue streak. He was gutsy and intrepid, and my father clearly was a fervent fan. This warrior had made an indelible impression; all these years later you could still hear the veneration in my dad's voice. And with an overwhelming poignancy it suddenly occurred to me that my dad had never told anyone else this story before. It was mine alone.

The waiter appeared at our table to take our dessert order. We both always had the usual, egg custard with a sprinkling of nutmeg on top. As we dug into our custard cups I waited for the end of the story. Surely there would be an epilogue, a coda. But whatever the intended point, it had already been made. There was no more mention of heroic feats by this bold and salty soldier, whom I liked to imagine dancing the light fantastic across the just-swabbed deck of the USS Ancon. The story was over. Before I had time to think about it, we had said our goodbyes outside on Leidesdorff, and I made my way down Montgomery Street blinking back the summer sunshine with a series of epiphanies detonating in my mind.

I never received the acceptance any son needs from his father. To this day I do not know if he loved me or not. I have no evidence of it. Or do I? Because I have this story he told me. And I think it means something. If it isn't a declaration of acceptance, then surely it must have been an attempt towards reaching one—a fumbling in the dark, but no less an attempt. And although he could never quite achieve it, I later came to see something noble in his willingness to try.

I walked back to work in a highly pleasurable fugue state, aware that something both mysterious and momentous had occurred, something so densely significant it was going to take years to fully assimilate its meaning. One of those exploding



epiphanies was the realization that my father in wartime had sealed a covenant of fraternal trust with a homosexual. That he had loved him then, and still praised him today. It had the power to buckle my knees as I steadied myself on a corner streetlamp. These thoughts were tumbling around in my head, and I have to think they were profound ones because I can locate myself at

an exact spot in history, at the exact hour of 12:55 p.m. at the corner of Montgomery and California Streets in San Francisco on a summer day in the year 1979 when they entered my consciousness.

Maybe I was wrong about my father's inexorable need to process his life through the lens of his war, long after that war had ended. Maybe without that framing device I would never have heard the story of my dad and the gay soldier. Maybe we all have idiosyncratic prisms we pass our experiences through in order to understand our lives. I may not have gotten much in the way of acceptance from my father, and my memories of him are scant of the tender kind, but when I think of him in that long-ago July, I can still feel the warmth of the noonday sun on my face. ☙



## TRACKING ORBITS

by DEELIA SHERMAN

Paper, pencil, envelope, stamp. Trip to the mailbox and back. Walk along the sidewalk, look at the leaves on the trees. Wait for a response. A loop of communication, a thread holding two together.

I've been thinking in circles lately. I've been thinking about the circles I belong to and the people I'm tied to through their rings. People across counties, across countries, across continents. Every one of these circles has a center of gravity keeping it tight, keeping its members from falling away into empty space. A focal point. A significant presence to hold everyone together. Maybe it's a frequently shared place or common niche interest or some inexplicable force that draws people towards one another. But no matter what that center is, we continue to circle around each other.

Across religions, glowing gold halos encircle the heads of holy figures, signifying their glory, their perfection. Around 300 BC in the place we now call Iran, the disk halo first appeared in religious art and dispersed across cultures at a rapid pace from



there. Buddha, Jesus, and deities from a multitude of religions are depicted adorned with these crowns of light.<sup>1</sup> The wholeness of the halo—the way it loops around endlessly, perfectly—captured the human mind in a way that never let go.

In an old wooden cigar box in the very back of my closet, I keep all the handwritten letters I have ever received. Its contents include words written on all kinds of materials, from crumpled lined paper handed to me in person, to postcards from family living halfway across the country, to gift bag tags ripped off of presents. I love collecting scraps of sentimental paper. There are birthday cards, confessions of love, and holiday greetings from people all over, people who've never met each other and will never even know of each other's existence. Yet somehow, they've all found a place in the cigar box in the back of my closet. I cherish that box.

How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop?

The United States Postal Service processes 17.7 million letters every hour.<sup>2</sup> That number doesn't even include letters handed off face-to-face or letters that, after pained deliberation, are never sent, forgotten in drawers. These letters draw their lines of travel between sender and receiver, crisscrossing the world's crust like Venetian cobblestone canals or like the lattice dough on top of a warm apple pie. Every hour, millions of letters containing billions of words and uncountable numbers of alphabetic characters flutter and twirl around us. We wade through our word-saturated atmosphere, watch as a's and b's and c's fall from the sky, snow globed inside spherical raindrops. Letters circle all around us.

Spinning 238,855 miles above all those letters,<sup>3</sup> the Moon hurtles through space, circling the Earth at 2,288 miles per hour<sup>4</sup> while the Earth circles the Sun at 67,000 miles per hour.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, the Earth's seven companion planets and their own moons speed around each other, all circling the solar system's central Sun. Space is made up of invisible concentric circles overlapping concentric circles like the shining ripples made by pebbles thrown in clear water. Hundreds of centers of gravity draw the matter surrounding them and those centers of gravity circle their own centers of gravity too, repeating endlessly.

Reports of strange patterns popping up in grain crops have circulated since the 17th century. They made people wonder; could these intricate designs emblazoned on the Earth be evidence of otherworldly aircraft landings? From the years 1976 to 1991, Doug Bower and David Chorley exacted the most ambitious string of "flying saucer nest" or "crop circle" hoaxes in history.<sup>6</sup> They traveled across England, pressing down stalks of wheat with garden rollers wherever they went. Despite their eventual confession, crop circle enthusiasts remain skeptical, choosing to continue wondering about the otherworldly secrets space may contain. Some circles will always remain mysteries.

<sup>1</sup> Wilson, Matthew. "The Halo: A Symbol That Spread around the World," June 24, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20210623-the-halo-a-symbol-that-spread-around-the-world>.

<sup>2</sup> USPS. "Size and Scope." Postal Facts - U.S. Postal Service, 2022. <https://facts.usps.com/size-and-scope/>.

<sup>3</sup> "How Far Away Is the Moon? | NASA Space Place – NASA Science for Kids," 2023. <https://spaceplace.nasa.gov/moon-distance/en/>.

<sup>4</sup> CALTECH Cool Cosmos. "How Fast Does the Moon Travel around Earth?," 2022. <https://coolcosmos.ipac.caltech.edu/ask/176--How-fast-does-the-Moon-travel-around-Earth->.

<sup>5</sup> CALTECH Cool Cosmos. "Why Don't We Feel Earth Move?," 2022. <https://coolcosmos.ipac.caltech.edu/ask/60-Why-don-t-we-feel-Earth-move->.

<sup>6</sup> Irving, Rob, and Peter Brookesmith. "Crop Circles: The Art of the Hoax." Smithsonian Magazine, December 15, 2009. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/crop-circles-the-art-of-the-hoax-2524283/>.

My box, within its four wooden walls, also contains envelopes, some sealed with stickers or tape, some with little wax stamps that nest perfectly in the palm of my hand. I love the ones with little wax stamps. I love the idea of lighting a candle and melting sealing wax cubes into liquid the way my box of letters melts the illusion of distance, watching the colors swirl around the tiny bowl like dolphins in a pool. I love the idea of molding intricate images onto the hot wax, stamping it onto the outside of an envelope, and then dropping it into the depths of the mailbox, trusting—hoping—that, with the help of planes and trucks and people, it will make it to its destination.

I think it's nice to hold the wax stamps in my hand. I flip and turn them over forwards and backwards like coins and I run my fingers over the ridges of their designs. One in particular, colored red spiraled with silver, depicts two half-moons, facing different directions, overlayed on a pattern of arches and diamonds.

It's hypothesized that, sometimes, a gravitational pull in space becomes so strong that it causes a singularity. According to some physicists, black holes occur when atoms compact in super-high densities, creating a singularity that nothing, not even a single photon of light, can escape from. Giant stars consume gas and decrease in volume until they collapse, yielding to the might of the gravitational pull. This creates a feedback loop and eventually an event horizon, the point of no return.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes elements of our own lives become so close that they are inseparable, transcending space and time, a testament to the power of these relationships and their centrality in our existence.

Relationships and letters hold us together like hot wax, those little disks of color that reveal how much someone cares. We all orbit around one another, drawn to each other like magnets, connected through the gravitational forces of words and wonder. Across the cosmos, all of that sweetness—those kind gestures and letters—sits at the center of our circles. Paper, pencil, envelope, stamp. Trip to the mailbox and back. Walk along the sidewalk, look at the leaves on the trees. Wait for a response. A loop of communication, a thread holding two together. ☀

<sup>7</sup> Curiel, Erik. "The Many Definitions of a Black Hole." *Nature Astronomy* 3, no. 1 (January 2019): 27–34. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41550-018-0602-1>.



# FROM THE GREYHOUND

by CHARLOTTE WHITNEY

she held your finger  
tight as the cold.  
tight as your jeans on the floor,  
tight as  
the time Annie had left in her hourglass.  
the sand made fingerprints on her back.

your feet bled tracks onto the street.  
they led back to her and  
broke you in two.  
broke two into half,  
broke halves into kaleidoscope fragments of  
a throbbing mass of bodies,  
searching.

joe could be anyone.  
a neon statue noticed only by streetlights  
and those who no one noticed.  
we watchers want warmth, too.  
we crave the animal movements you promise  
while he watches.

on a bus heading south you  
held a broken man.  
held him  
until the last drop of sweat  
dried on his forehead.  
until your thumb touched his eyelid  
for the last time.

and you held him still.





# THE DEBATE

by ERIK HOVLAND

Failure is a part of everyone's life. For some of us, it's most of our life. But the amount and degree of failure is not what matters. In the end, it's how you respond to that failure that matters.

In 2016, the world suffered a great loss. My promising career as a bench-warming second string free safety on my high school football team had just been brought to a screeching halt. Well, it wasn't so much my career being brought to a halt as it was my entire body, courtesy of a 250-pound high school sophomore, who celebrated his victory by toppling onto my arm, breaking it instantly. It quickly became apparent that I would no longer be able to play football for at least the remainder of the season. This truly devastated the rest of the team—who responded by replacing me immediately.

But like I said, it's not the failure that matters. It's how you respond to it—and my response was joining the debate team. Like they always say, "Sticks, stones, and 250-pound sophomores may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." If you aren't familiar with high school debate teams, picture a group of

incredibly insufferable people howling incoherently at each other over something that doesn't matter. I'd fit right in.

Granted, I had a lot to learn. On my first day my coach walked up and slapped a massive stack of paper down on the table in front of me.

"Here's the brief on the new topic. It's about nuclear power. Start reading."

I was horrified. "That's like 200 pages!"

My complaint was met with little more than a wry chuckle. "More like 327. Better get started."

As I quickly learned, debate is voluntary homework. It requires the participants to research and prepare a case to argue both sides of a contentious issue. It's a complicated process of creating solid arguments that you must also be prepared to counter in a challenging game of intellectual rock paper scissors. Only the most inspiring rhetoric and powerful evidence will prevail. And when you're an idiot, like me, the difficulty multiplies. But eventually, I managed to get my feet under me, and with my freshly minted cases, I was on my way to my first debate tournament.

My confidence fled the day of the first tournament. Waddling down foreign hallways in an ill-fitting suit, searching desperately for the tournament room, did not feel like the glorious comeback I had imagined. I had been assigned the affirmative side of the debate, arguing in favor of the mass adoption of nuclear power. Alas, it was far too late for cowardice. I gathered the few scraps of courage within my soul and entered the room.

I was immediately met by the piercing stare of my opponent. It seemed as though she had known I would enter at that exact moment. That look in her eyes—pure, undiluted hatred, so intense it stopped me dead in my tracks. A tense moment passed before her hateful glare vanished, replaced with an unreadable mask as her focus shifted to the large stack of paper in front of her.

Wordlessly, I crept to the table next to her to begin setting up my case, stealing looks to try to gather information. It was not good news. She wore a full suit, far nicer than mine, and more importantly, it actually fit. Her hair was pulled back so tightly it looked like she had glued it down to her scalp. She was a career politician, prepared for the greatest debate of her life; I was two kids stacked on top of each other in a trench coat, lost while sneaking into a movie theater. She stared intensely down at her case, as if she was trying to scare it into being a more effective argument. Every movement she made was precise, calculated, robotic.

*Great, I thought. My first debate round, ever, and they matched me up against the damn Terminator.* Her case file was twice the size of mine. She had a plastic tub bursting with evidence. Her timer for her speeches had double the number of buttons mine did.

After about a minute, the tension became too much for me. I had to do something before I lost my competitive nerve. I didn't know if it was normal in the debate world to act cordial with someone you knew you were about to argue, but since that's what my family always does at Thanksgiving, I figured it was worth a try. I introduced myself.

"Hi, my name's Erik. Nice to meet you." I extended a hand in greeting.

She looked shocked. Had I broken an unspoken rule?

"I'm Katie." She shook my hand hesitantly, expecting it to explode at any minute.

I needed to defuse the situation. "I, uh...like your timer. It's got a lot of buttons." Expertly done, I thought. Surely there could be no awkwardness now.

"Thank you?"

"Have you done this before?"

"Once or twice. I'm guessing you haven't." She eyed the 25% off sticker I had forgotten to peel from my tie.

"What gave it away?"

It seemed like once she realized that this was my first round, she became a completely different person. She actually seemed quite friendly. I began to think I may have misjudged her. Maybe she was just nervous, too. At last, my terror started to dissipate.

The judge came in shortly after, prompting me to return to my seat and prepare my first speech. Shockingly, high school debate tournaments are not the most popular extracurricular activity. Finding judges is not easy, so they'll take anyone they can get. I do mean *anyone*.

I knew this going in, and yet was still surprised when the judge stopped me before my speech to ask, "So are there any, like... rules I should know about or anything?"

Not the most inspiring start, but after my opponent gave an alarmingly fast and efficient rundown of the rules, I began. At first, I stumbled meekly over the words, my nerves still getting the better of me. But as I spoke, I found myself growing more confident. I had a rock-solid case, and the more of it I revealed, the more I convinced myself. I was making great—nay, exceptional points. The judge was nodding. Nodding! I had already won. This was easy! I had found my calling! Why had I ever been worried?

I ended my speech with three minutes to spare. I had been given six minutes to present; this meant I had read at twice the speed I had intended, likely rendering much of it completely indecipherable. Yet, it felt like the very concept of time had simply faltered before the strength of my argumentation.

Next came the first cross examination, where Katie would ask questions about my case to try to reveal weaknesses. This was the moment I had been dreading, but I was actually feeling fairly optimistic. After my triumphant first speech I felt like an intellectual giant, and Katie and I had gotten along quite well previously, so I was confident that it couldn't possibly be that bad.

It was, in fact, worse.

From the moment her timer started, it was already over. The friendly smile plastered on her face vanished, and she was the



merciless robot once again. For the next three minutes I endured a barrage of questions.

“Are you aware that for your second contention, subpoint 2A, you cited the 2013 Krieger report that was subsequently deemed to have an insufficient sample size to support its conclusions?”

“Well... I, uh...”

“How can you rationalize using the criterion of utilitarianism to uphold the value of justice, when utilitarianism is perfectly comfortable flying in the face of what is just, in favor of what is perceived as the maximal good?”

“Why...”

“According to your own stated values, would it not be our moral obligation to invest in existing technologies that have been demonstrated to be entirely safe rather than those that have been shown to pose significant risks to human life in the past?”

“But... I...”

It was the longest three minutes I have ever experienced. Halfway through I looked desperately to the judge for help. There was none to be found. A mix of horror and fascination played upon his face as if he were witnessing a train hitting a car parked on the tracks. All he could do was watch me be reduced to rubble, haphazardly strewn across the earth. I returned to my seat, devastated. Dejected. A failure.

But it’s about how you respond to it. Unfortunately, the only way I could respond in this case was to listen quietly for seven minutes while she flawlessly dismantled my entire case. I wasn’t sure what exactly to look for in the face of the judge to gauge how I was doing, but I was fairly certain that pure pity is not the emotion one strives to inspire.

Needless to say, the rest of the round went much the same. By the end I was reduced to babbling, incoherent, desperate responses to points I wasn’t even equipped to fully comprehend. When, at last, it was over, I sat stunned until Katie walked up to me. She extended a hand just as I had done before the round. Her vice-like grip crushed the last shred of self-respect I had managed to cling to. She then disappeared, without saying a word.

The judge was in a hurry to leave. He was packed and headed for the door like he was fleeing an active crime scene. Just before exiting, he stopped and looked back at me.

“Are you alright?” he asked, genuine concern writ large upon his face.

A choked “No” was all I could manage in reply.

“Yeah... that was really brutal, man.” With that, he was gone.

But it’s not about the failure, it’s about how you respond to it. And I responded by dedicating myself to debate. I spent countless hours honing my cases, rhetoric, and argumentation skills into a well-oiled machine, ready to challenge any idea with rigorous logic and skepticism. In other words, I became entirely unbearable to everyone around me. This was a small price to pay to avoid reliving the butchering that was my first round.

It paid off. My senior year, I found myself in the final round of the State Championship. This was my shot at redemption, at victory. Every second of the past several years had led me to this moment. And my opponent? None other than Katie.

At first, I was afraid—petrified, even. But I was no longer the bright-eyed young lad that she had humiliated and destroyed so easily. So, I gathered my resolve, and with both of our teams watching us, we started the round.

¤¤

And you know what I learned? I learned that no matter how you might fail, how completely and utterly you may embarrass yourself, if you respond to it in just the right way—you may do the exact same fucking thing again, but this time with a much bigger audience.¤¤



## EULOGY OF THE GREAT BLUE HERON

by DEVIN FARNILOE

A great blue heron stands sentry on the banks of the Cuyahoga, sweeping its gaze slowly over the landscape. Stock-still and deliberate with her observations, she acquaints herself with all the life veiled beneath the early morning fog. The salamander, unaware of the great blue heron's company but anxious nonetheless, darts from rock to rock. The spotted turtle pokes his head above water on a recon mission, eyeing the heron suspiciously. The spring peeper sings regardless of his adversary's presence, his "peep peep peep" a taunt to call the heron from her post. Minnows swim alongside a rare, prized perch.

After some time, the great blue heron opens her wings and takes flight for home. Her sycamore abuts the land of a white farmhouse, where bloodroot blossoms look like cotton balls littered at the base of trees and yellow trout lilies dip their heads toward the forest floor, breathing in the musk of decaying leaves.





Years ago, my great-grandma sat sipping her morning tea, watching out the front window of her farmhouse across from the Cuyahoga River on Everett Road. It was a supremely silent time of day as she watched the great blue heron survey its land.

For the last year of her life, every time I saw my great-grandma she was swaddled in blankets sitting in her nursing home dorm room. She never listened to the radio, read, or watched any TV.

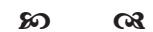
“When I walked into this room and saw all of my things, my pictures on the walls, my favorite mug—I knew I would die here,” she told me on my first visit to the nursing home.

Her short-term memory was dwindling, and I believe she sustained herself on memories of the past. I like to hope that as she lounged in her chair, she was flipping through the snapshots of her life on the inside of her mind, transporting herself.

To her home on Everett Road, where her white farmhouse was cradled in the ridges of the Cuyahoga Valley. Where on hot summer days she would swim in the Cuyahoga River near the covered bridge. Where my intoxicated Papa John drove his 1974 Ford Maverick down the driveway and kept on going straight into the river. Where Saturdays were spent drinking tea with her children, as her ever-growing gaggle of grandchildren turned her home and its surroundings into their playground.

When my father was young, he flitted through the ridges and valleys that made up my grandma’s backyard like a silver-spotted skipper. To this day, when you ask my father his favorite place in the world, his response is “Grandma’s house.”

She lived in the farmhouse with my Grandpa Ned. He was a sensible man who maintained his Chrysler K-car religiously and made the most out of the things they had. During one Saturday tea, after the home had been reduced to rubble and Grandpa Ned had been buried for a long time, she mused, “Ned was the man for me.”



The land was taken over by Cuyahoga Valley National Park in the late 90s. My great-grandma has not lived in the house on Everett Road within my lifetime, but whenever I think of her

home, it is there. We have spent countless Saturdays drinking our English tea with a splash of milk and a spoonful of sugar, but the table I have never been a part of is the one where I imagine she fits best.

Her home is no longer standing. The graffitied foundation full of profanity is all that remains. When my father and I first found the concrete slab laid bare to the early summer sun, we grieved in silence for a moment. He was mourning the loss of his sanctuary.

As I sit here on the foundation of her home, a couple years later and a few days after she has passed, I think of a quote from Wordsworth<sup>1</sup>:

[...] Grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind;  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be.

I realize it was never about the house itself.

Her home is gone, and so is she, but this land is filled with her memory, preserved forever within the protection of the park. I feel her here as I walk over the slick, wet rocks of the Cuyahoga, as I hike up and down the ridges and valleys that held some of the best years of her life. The great blue heron that watched over the rivers of the Cuyahoga while she sipped her morning tea has long been dead, but maybe the heron I pass today on my river walk is her heron’s child, or its child’s child, standing sentry to its ancestors’ memories. ☘

<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, "Splendour in the Grass", Poem Analysis, [poemanalysis.com/william-wordsworth/splendour-in-the-grass/](http://poemanalysis.com/william-wordsworth/splendour-in-the-grass/)



# DIM RED

by JAMES MEAD

You're having trouble  
swaying into and away,  
eyes tinged ochre;  
glassy shallow sick.

The tumbler in your  
boney fingers  
gleams with malice—tipping—  
thin wine on linoleum.

You're worth seeing—  
but bleary-eyed.  
You talk about other things,  
I can't even notice.

Nicked Achilles (how?)  
I don't know  
but you're leaking,  
leaking and falling.

Slip in the cocktail and  
sanguine cavern yawns,  
new lid opens,  
seeping more and more.

Spinning lights.  
Blue cut red.  
Open windows.  
Shrieking supplication.

You didn't even feel it,  
but those sterile blue gloves,  
they want terribly  
to touch and to take you.

We escape by your limping staircase,  
now together on the broken bed,  
and a rough, little tongue  
traces the vein.

But suddenly you're  
dead weight on my chest.  
Sleep it off.  
Breathe me out.

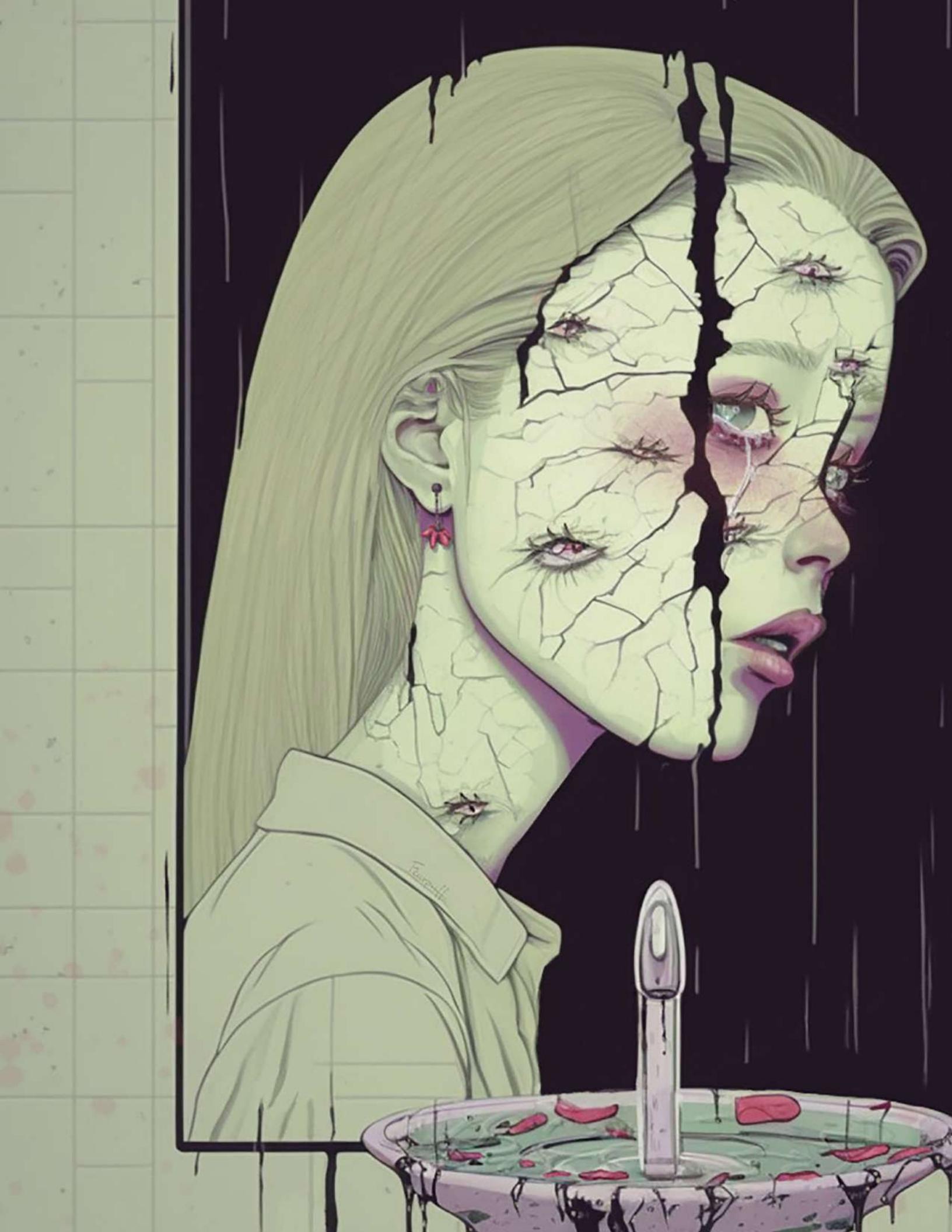
Blood on the coverlet  
may upset you terribly.  
You won't remember  
rusty irregulars.

Spewed without reason,  
obstinate by new light.  
I won't tell.  
Wounds must speak.

Now I'll shirk off your  
feather light and  
moaning yoke.

Now I'll walk home the long half hour,  
trodden gravel  
under big black boots.

There will be pavement in my ears.  
Monotone by lights out,  
then quiet again.





## THE WILD WOODS

by CHARLIE CHILSON

The Woods were home to dense clusters of mountain mahogany, juniper trees, tall fescue grasses, yucca, and prickly pear cacti. Traversing them as a child, the mahogany branches became alien tentacles, the juniper trees friendly giants, and the grasses a perfect hideout. Our abundant yucca became minefields of spiky urchins upon the ocean floor, and the prickly pear became grenades to launch against one's foes, which in my case meant my younger brother. With an untamable mop of shockingly blonde hair, darting hazel eyes, an irrepressibly devious smile, and a loud and bossy voice with just one volume setting; Beau was wild and raucous, the perfect adventuring accomplice.

It is here, in the Wild Woods as we called it, that we ran from fearsome creatures both real and imagined. Day after day we adventured along our mini-dragonback hill nestled within the Rocky Mountain foothills. From as early as I can remember, once my brother and I had finished our homeschool work, we'd firmly announce to our parents that we were embarking on an expedition into the Wild Woods. The great unknown began at the sun-scorched backdoor with peeling red paint and whining brass hinges. As the younger brother, Beau would proudly demonstrate his strength by dragging over a cinder block to hold the door open so Mom could hear us.



Art by EMMA FRIDAY

The house itself was modest and old. In 1938, our living room comprised the entirety of the house, which had been an old, one-room miner's cabin. This cabin was built in the old ghost town of Noland and was brought into our town by railcar and hauled into place with horses and logs. The handwriting we have uncovered on the structure's original framing, be it building measurements, random scribbles, or longhand thoughts, give evidence of the house's long string of owners over the years. While remodeling, an ancient unopened condom or stale pack of Pall Malls found in the walls gave us glimpses into these people's lives. Rooms added by successive owners show the echoes of the previous decades within their design. Outside in our yard, before my parents cleaned it up a bit, I remember unusual items left by the previous owner: dozens of painted plywood geese, an assortment of hubcaps that he used when creating his resonator guitars, and even a large mushroom sculpture that he made from a downturned and shingled over satellite dish that sits atop a massive old tree trunk. As a young adult writing this essay, I can appreciate the significance of the lives lived in this home, yet as a child, I gave little mind to the house itself. It was always the Wild Woods that called me the loudest.

Armed with as many wooden swords, homemade bow and arrows, and pinecone missiles as our small arms could carry, we excitedly fled the dungeon of schoolwork and chores. No matter the weather, we hollered farewell to our parents and set off on one of our quests. We marched north along the red stone path that led past pear and apple trees. The path came to an end at the edge of billowing buffalo grass, a place marking the end of our parents' domain and the beginning of the Woods. Keeping watch over the Woods is the Grotto, a place that oversees all that transpires in the Woods. A sort of shrine that contains pictures of those we have loved and lost, the Grotto is the heart of the land. A curly-branched black locust hovers over a carnival of iris, roses, potentilla, trumpet flowers, delphiniums, and flax. Hidden within this floral jungle is a thick sandstone slab with a natural indentation that collects water and serves as a drinking hole for the abundant wildlife. The Grotto is where the groomed and curated part of our yard meets and mingles with the otherworldly Martian red soil and tangled overgrowth of the Wild Woods.

*It was  
always the  
Wild Woods  
that called me  
the loudest.*

The next destination was usually The Chamber of Game Plans and Rules, a fort constructed from pruned branches pulled from the dry compost pile. The strange play of light and shadows in the fort enticed us and fired up our imaginations as we crafted the spells and rules and characters that would comprise that day's adventure. Bursting forth from our lair onto the large, steep hill, we would excitedly run up and clumsily roll down it, searching for ants, beetles, spiders, wild turkeys, foxes, and deer—all of whom were unwitting characters in our quest. Though we might brag to the contrary, we were always a bit nervous about encountering larger creatures like bobcats, mountain lions, or bears. To protect ourselves, we would dig in the hillside for "ninja powder" whenever we found the rare vein of pure white limestone within the endless red clay terrain.

As evening approached, just like in the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, Mom would call us in for dinner and we'd pretend we didn't hear her and quickly hide. Eventually, our older brother Jade, equipped with a bamboo kendo sword, would be sent to persuade us into returning home. Not even ninja powder, thrown to confuse him, nor frantic casting of spells could best the ogre known to us as Jade. After dinner, we would again ascend our hilltop, where we were treated to a bird's eye view of our sleepy little town surrounded by rolling foothills and a sweeping panorama of the stunning Rocky Mountains to the west. From our perch, the dusky light played tricks on our eyes. What we knew to be wide open meadows, fiery patches of sumac, and somber stands of blue spruce, would kaleidoscopically melt into a mighty giant as he lay his tired body down to rest upon the horizon.

For years, the Wild Woods was an entire and boundless universe for us. It was only as we got older that we realized 3rd Avenue, where we knew other neighborhood kids, was only a few hundred feet to the west. Being homeschooled in a small town that offered a rather traditional public school, other kids in the neighborhood rarely took interest in us and didn't care to join in our fantastical games. We were often met with shades of disapproval. These kids lived in grand houses with expensively landscaped yards and grand windows providing sweeping mountain views. At best, some of their parents would tell us that we were "kind of normal"



for homeschooled kids. But more commonly, they seemed visibly put off by our fixer-upper of a house, enclosed within the riot of color that burst forth as a result of my mom's incurable passion for gardening. Neighbors whose homes were higher up on the hillside viewed from their windows the same sunrises and sunsets that our family only experienced after climbing to the top of the Wild Woods. These differences, unfortunately, seemed to be part of the equation these kids used when choosing whom to play with. They didn't choose us, and for this reason, the Wild Woods became a refuge where Beau and I could create a world where all the beings we encountered were wild and engaged.

My parents were also not immune from this exclusion. They ran a small house cleaning company, in large part so that my mom, who has a Master's in Education, could have the flexibility she needed in order to homeschool us. Despite having been amiable, generous, and responsible neighbors, they wonder how all the invitations to neighborhood parties keep blowing away. Fortunately for Beau and I, they have a well curated collection of extraordinary friends whom all became deeply involved in our lives. When I was 4 years old, Beau and I started art lessons with my mom's friend Jane. She was colorfully dressed yet quietly spoken, witty yet gracefully playful, a trusted guide in all things creative, and so spirited she would even join our adventures in the Wild Woods. As a sensory kid who often found the world unbearably overwhelming, Jane was kindred and the one person who could truly relate to what it felt like to be inside my skin most

days. I admired and adored her with every cell in my body, and when her photos were placed in the grotto shrine just before my 11th birthday, I was devastated. I felt entirely hollowed out. Again, I turned to the Woods both for solace and regeneration.

Together, as a family, we soldier on, continuing what must be the longest remodel in town history, and finding even more places to start new gardens. It's the only home I've ever

known, and the only one my parents have ever owned. They met in town shortly after my mom returned from a yearlong around-the-world-trip with my oldest brother, who was just seven at the time, and just after my dad had purchased the old Soda Fountain on Main Street after finishing a decade long stint at an anarchist art commune in Wisconsin. Taken in by the history and uniqueness of the house and property, and by the flamboyant and semi-famous luthier who was selling the place, my parents decided to forego the nomadic life for a while and raise a family. Twenty-two years later, together we have crafted, restored, and reinvented every inch of this property. Today, we do more than just live in this home—the home also lives in us.

These days, capitalizing on the skills I learned at home, I now also scrub people's bathtubs for money in the winter, as well as landscape their yards in the summer. Beau is still wild, but also fiercely ambitious. At age 16 he started what has become a successful masonry business. We are all worker bees, and that makes us happy. Despite being a student at CU, I prefer to sleep outside for 7-8 months of the year. I still keep a tent pitched in the Woods, what my parents affectionately refer to as "Charlie's affordable housing." This serves to carry on the family tradition of bewildering the neighbors. While it might look to some like I am stuck in these Woods, clinging to a childhood that has passed, I am instead still learning from this land on how to embrace all of life's experiences. It is the Wild Woods that teaches and inspires me to live in, with, and for this world. ☀





Art by TASHA SMITH

## THE S.S. RHODE ISLAND

by EDWARD KINCAID

I spend a lot of time eating in my bed lately. It's a developing situation—not necessarily anything abrupt enough to make the news ticker on CNN, but it is something that should be addressed. Kind of like global warming.

I didn't used to do it. I started by eating dinner at the table like a regular, vertical person. But then I decided that I couldn't be alone with my thoughts and so I started to read a book with dinner. This proved unsustainable as my attention span waned and I kept getting dollar-store tomato sauce on my overdue copy of *The Corrections*. More than that though, it just became hard to think about *anything*, let alone to dissect a book while dissecting a thawed meatball in Barilla noodles. Sorry to my gay friends for eating Barilla noodles. They're just so damned cheap.

So, I moved to the couch: dinner and a movie. I actually bought one of those TV dinner stands. You know, the little half tables that allow you to eat and watch TV at the same time. On the whole, I have to say that it was one of the more depressing things I've bought on Amazon. Nobody with their life on track

orders a tool that makes it easier to eat microwave dinners while watching TV. A TV dinner stand can only portend decline. It's not something you *want* to buy. It's something you *have* to buy. The arrival of it via Prime was more therapy fuel than respite. But even after I got the TV dinner stand, I barely used it. You have to sit up to use a TV dinner stand. I was lying down too much.

I became more and more horizontal until I was eventually just lying down on my couch while I ate. Then eventually I realized that I was already supine, so why not take things into the bedroom? The *fait accompli* came when I moved my Netflix-emitting laptop into my room and omitted my jeans in favor of just perpetually wearing pizza grease-stained sweatpants and lying in bed. Pretty soon I would just lay there for entire days, only getting up to force myself to go to class, pick up a book, or pretend like I was doing schoolwork—and getting my freshly-microwaved, MyPlate-noncompliant breakfast, lunch, or dinner.

So nowadays I mostly just lie in bed and eat, catching up on Ukraine or watching GIFs with titles like “Satisfying Acrylic Pour,” or “Bubble Wrap goes through Shredder (SOUND ON).” When I do sleep, it’s not a particularly pleasant experience—what with all the crumbs sticking to my naked skin. I feel like I’m rolling myself in breadcrumbs, being prepared for the fryer. *Bon appétit*.

Really, I think it’s kind of funny—my eating in bed. Whenever somebody has the gall to call me during regular business hours, I grudgingly tell them “You’re interrupting my bed eating.” It’s nearly funny. And that almost makes it worth it.



I’ve begun using my final notices as bookmarks, out of spite. It’s my own form of silent protest. I did the same thing with a parking ticket I got the other day, a charge which I found officious on the part of the meter attendant. Who gives a car with a busted taillight a ticket? What makes them think I have the cash to pay a \$60 parking ticket if I can’t even buy a \$37.99 taillight?

It’s the same kind of logic that informed my landlord’s policy of charging late fees on rent. If I can’t pay \$1600 for a one-bedroom shithole with an air conditioner that emits cat piss

*You’re  
interrupting  
my bed eating.*

*The darkness  
can be a bit  
depressing.*

odors, then what makes them think I can pay a thirty dollar late fee? Was my rent and a half deposit not enough?

Want to give me a \$60 ticket for parking in the University parking lot? Well guess what, you get to live between pages 231 and 232 of *Klara and the Sun*. Want to charge \$30 for late fees and then tape a notice to my window? Guess what, you get to snuggle in the ample bosom of Dave Eggers, between pages xx and xxi of the foreword to *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. I hope there’s not a fee for that.



I keep the blinds down most of the time. I used to only do it when I napped. But now I’m pretty much always pre- or post-nap. If I’m awake. So, it’s more efficient just to keep them down. It gives the place a spooky aura. It’s atmospheric. Like my own haunted house, complete with cobwebs and poor ventilation. I should charge \$3.50 upon entry and leave a bowl of Kit Kats on the doorstep.

The darkness *can* be a bit depressing. But I feel like the energy saved by the blinds, coupled with the palliative effect of the soothing dark, more than makes up for it. Plus, it makes things look cleaner. Everything looks better in the dark. That’s why Hollisters look like they’re lit by tallow candles and rushlights. That’s (partly) why I never let the shades up. My house just looks better when it’s dark. You can’t see the pile of cans overflowing out of my trash can. You can’t see the ramen noodle crumbs on the counter. You can’t see the sink full of crusty dishes. You can’t see the Chick-fil-A bag full of trash half-shoved under my couch. Again, sorry to my gay friends for the Chick-fil-A; I might as well make a craft run to Hobby Lobby just to get the hat trick.

No. I never want to let the blinds up. Then I would see the mess I’ve made and I might even have to deal with it. Besides, I’m out of dish soap and trash bags and I have no plans for restocking. Sometimes I feel like offing myself just so I don’t have to go to Target in sweatpants and slippers again—the annoyingly telegenic door greeter beaming at me “Welcome to Target, sir!” With her fucking white teeth and khakis.

I think I’ll just keep the blinds down. The packaging called them “Venetian blinds.” *Venetian* blinds. As if Scamozzi whittled each individual slat and had Da Vinci sign off on their design.



Such a term just seems too highfalutin to denote something made out of maquiladora sweat and beige plastic. Maybe if they were gilt or had a few naked sibyls painted on them, then I could countenance such an appellation. But, as it is, they look less like *Venetian* blinds than they do a cost-saving measure by a miserly landlord.

I think keeping the blinds down makes me stronger. Like you know how blind people are supposed to have a stronger sense of hearing and smell or whatnot? I feel like my spatial awareness and auditory capabilities are increasing. So really, it could only be detrimental to let the blinds up. If I keep going like this for a few more years, then maybe I'll develop a kind of Spidey-sense. Like if someone is about to throw a punch then I'll just dodge it and scissor-kick them in the throat. I'll be able to feel things coming thanks to my self-imposed blindness. Homer, that guy was blind. And he wrote the *Iliad*. Or did he just tell it, it being an oral tradition and all? Either way, the old codger didn't need to see to be a success. Justice—justice is blind too. And everybody demands justice. They don't always get it—ACAB anyone?—but they certainly demand it. Really, letting up the blinds could only harm me.

¤ ¤

I'm a big proponent of adding a candy coating to SSRIs. Maybe some chocolate, too. I think it would decrease rates of depression. I'm not saying all SSRIs should have a thin candy shell—but there should be an option. I know that if I had some chocolate and nougat to look forward to, then I would probably remember to take mine more often. It would be something to look forward to. But, as it is right now, taking my little blue "friends" is—maybe ironically—one of the more depressing parts of my day. Which is kind of funny now that I write it down.

Sometimes I'll try to sneak it into a mustard sandwich. Or shove it down between gulps of a Coffee mate-laden Folgers Classic Roast. But I never look forward to it. Maybe they should just start putting it in the water supply. Like we do with fluoride. Hear me out: since the John Birch society isn't around anymore, there probably wouldn't even be that much kvetching.

¤ ¤

Okay. So, maybe it's not such a great idea to put SSRIs in the water supply. But it would certainly help me. Maybe we could bake it into Wonder bread. Or randomly throw a few pills into every SweeTarts packet.

¤ ¤

Everything I eat is either microwaved or from a can. My personal chefs are Messieurs Boyardee and Campbell. Either that or it's freeze-dried. I call it the Fallout Shelter Diet. But I wouldn't judge if I were you. Granted, I'm not you. But still. Don't judge. "Ye who is guilt-free shall cast the first stone," or something like that.

I get all my vegetables. If you count the Lucky Charms vegetable bits at the top of a Cup O' Noodles, then I get at least a serving every day. I even get in my grains. If you count the bezel of a Pop-Tart as a grain.

Look, I know it's not the best. But it's just so damned easy. Every time I microwave a can of Campbell's Vegetable Soup, that's a night that doesn't have to be spent cutting up vegetables, using the rough side of a sponge to half-clean the stove top, and remembering to pick up the soiled dishes off the edge of my mattress when I'm done. Plus, you have to remember that I'm doing most of this in the dark. Because letting up the blinds could only hurt me, etc.

And using a toaster—well, don't even get me going on that. There's nothing more satisfying than that initial click. When you push down the plunger, you can feel the mechanical apparatus lock into place. More satisfying yet is the finishing pop. Some toasters even ding. But I like the spring-loaded pop most. The pop of a fresh piece of toast, ready for Country Crock—it's like an orgasm. I wish I could change my ringtone to it. I probably could, but who has the time?

The pop of a soda can tab, too. To a lesser degree, but still. It lets you know that there's a delicious, frosty Coke or Dr Pepper or Mountain Dew waiting for you. The beep of a microwave is slightly less satisfying—this, of course, depending on the model of microwave. But the suggestion of it is enough to make the mouth water. Or the eyes tear up. It means there's a Hot Pocket steaming, its tantalizing cheese and pepperoni frothing under a few millimeters of mass-produced dough. Maybe you even splurged and got a Red Baron microwave pizza. Toaster pops, soda tab clicks, and microwave beeps. It's all good shit—a symphony of Capitalist calories, lulling me off to my pre- or post-nap torpor. If I lived the best life possible, I think that it would begin with a toaster pop and end with a microwave beep.

I can't help but tear up just thinking about it. ¤





Art by SUSANNA ANDREWS

## HOME BLEND

by RACHEL LYSAGHT

Dad grabs the ceramic blue teapot and carefully swishes it with hot water. “You’ve got to scald the pot—it’s the most important thing you can do. Keeps the tea hot.” He pours the water out and reaches the pot towards me. “Give it a feel.” It’s hot to the touch. The rest of the water in the kettle is slowly rumbling, its sound the low howl of the night breeze caressing window sills. He pours the remaining water in the pot and adds two tea bags, one for me and one for him. A pair of dainty cups and saucers decorated with pale yellow and dusty blue olive branches are already waiting for us on the table. He lets the tea steep for four minutes—the perfect amount of time so it’s not too weak and not too strong. “It’s a saying in Ireland when the tea is too strong that ‘you could trot a mouse across it,’ ” he chuckles.

I let him make the cup for me. The tea is a warm pumpkin orange with notes of rusty mahogany. Dad smiles when he sees the color. I can feel the warmth of the steam dance from the cup to my face, and immediately it smells of dark wood, earthy and savory yet floral and sweet. A familiar duality that brings me

back to the homes of my aunts and uncles in Ireland. I watch him pour a heaping spoonful of white sugar into my cup with a dash of milk, clouding into a pale tanbark shade, and we begin to drink.



**Y**ou would never want to offend the Irishman by equating Irish Breakfast Tea to English Breakfast. Much like we prefer our whiskey, our tea is stronger and more bitter—which is why it is naturally enjoyed with milk, sugar, and an arrangement of scones, soda bread, or biscuits such as Hobnobs and Digestives. Personally, I've always preferred custard creams with my tea—a sweet vanilla custard sandwiched by two flaky crackers—although that's not what traditionally accompanies a cup. And if you aren't a fan of the classics, supermarkets commonly have entire aisles devoted to various assortments of biscuits. Having the right biscuit is almost as important as properly preparing the tea.

Tea is served six times a day at least—one in the morning, one around 11 a.m., one after dinner (which is the name of the meal served early afternoon), one during midafternoon, one during teatime (the name of the meal that is equivalent to what we know as dinner), and tea before bed. That excludes the times it is served with guests. Tea is the first thing you're offered when you walk into the home of an Irish person, and it is the last thing you're offered after dessert.

Europe's obsession with tea began with Bohe tea (an oolong tea).<sup>1</sup> Bohe was not favorable in Asia, which made it accessible to the common people of Europe in the 1700s.<sup>2</sup> Tea became so popular in Ireland that Irish physicians started to become concerned with the effects of excessive tea drinking among the working class.<sup>3</sup> In the 1870s, economic decline in Ireland made it difficult for working classes to afford nutritious foods.<sup>4</sup> Most notably, mothers would drink grand amounts of tea as an

<sup>1</sup> Purcell, Cliona, "Tea: The Origins of Our National Drink," Waterford Treasures The Blog, Waterford Treasures, May 26, 2020, <https://waterfordtreasures.wixsite.com/wattreasuresblog/post/tea-the-origins-of-our-national-drink>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, Ian, "Insanity, Poverty and Excessive Tea Drinking in Late-Victorian Belfast," Epidemic Belfast, Ulster University, 2021, <https://epidemic-belfast.com/the-insanity-of-malnutrition-poverty-and-tea-addiction/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

appetite suppressant to quell hunger pains so that they could provide their husbands and children with the nutritious food that was difficult to afford.<sup>5</sup> By the 1890s, tea drinking was blamed for making Irish housewives "chronically dyspeptic," and some Irish physicians even coined the terms "tea drunkards" and "tea mania," which were conditions that resulted in symptoms of heart palpitations, cognitive difficulties, depression, and suicidal feelings.<sup>6</sup> Irish doctors associated tea with issues of morality and compared it to alcoholism.<sup>7</sup> But, of course, that didn't stop anybody from drinking it. We loved it too much and still do.



**W**hen I smell a cup of Barry's Gold Blend, a favorite tea brand within my family, I smell the rich floral perfumes of my aunties. I smell the musky cologne of my uncles. I close my eyes and I feel the chill of the Irish air and the warmth of the fading sun. I hear the seagulls caw and the slow pitter-patter of the horse hooves against old Dublin cobblestone and the puffing and squeaking of the double-decker buses as they make their way throughout the city. I see the fluffy clouds painted across the richly blue sky. The flavor of the tea's sweet and milky tannins is Aunt Mary's laugh and the soft melodic strings of Uncle Mark's guitar. It is the sound of my cousins singing Molly Malone in a Guinness-sponsored splendor. ☕



# CONTRIBUTORS

**SUSANNA ANDREWS** recently graduated from the University of Colorado Boulder. With ample experience creating digital and print campaigns, Susanna looks forward to starting her career in advertising.

**ABHIDIP BHATTACHARYYA** pursues painting as a hobby and way to escape from the limitations of reality. Abhidip studies Computer Science at CU Boulder as a PhD student.

**CHARLIE CHILSON** attends CU Boulder and discovered Hindsight in one of Dr. Eric Burger's writing classes.

**DEVIN FARNILOE** reports on the environment and uses experiences with nature to better understand herself and the world around her. Devin studies Environmental Journalism as a graduate student at CU Boulder.

**EMMA FRIDAY** attends CU Boulder, where she pursues a major in Sustainable Product Design and a minor in Art Practices. Emma's art skills include mediums like acrylic, graphite, charcoal, ceramic sculpture, and embroidery. The blending of Emma's two passions, dance and art, inspires her. Additionally, women's empowerment and spirituality drive her, which she explores through her creations.

**S.G. GREENE** set out on a journey to reinvent themselves after the passing of their brother. However, the pandemic hit shortly after they landed in Colorado, and their plan to meet other people ground to a halt. Instead, they found themselves writing like a belligerent scientist on the verge of finally proving their theory. The absurdity of humanity in the face of a seemingly endless universe fuels their need to write.

**DELANEY HARTMANN** works at a domestic violence shelter and hopes to specialize in gender violence advocacy. Delaney attends CU Boulder as an undergraduate student, where she majors in Political Science and Women and Gender Studies. When Delaney isn't contemplating the state of the world, she enjoys reading memoirs, cooking, and practicing yoga.

**ERIK HOVLAND** enjoys making others laugh with his writing and drawings. As a fourth-year student, Erik studies Environmental Design, with an emphasis on Architecture, at CU Boulder.

**LAYNE HUNT**, a realist before an artist, understands the world as it is, horrendously broken, but filled with opportunity. Layne appreciates the beauty that exists in the cracks and intends to emulate it with their pieces. In Layne's art, rather than reproducing reality, they use abstraction to evoke memories and emotions, creating a sense of history within each layer.

**MISHAAL JAN** graduated from CU Boulder with a BA in Astrophysics in 2020. Mishaal recently moved to Madison, Wisconsin and works for Epic Systems. Mishaal's time studying abroad in London, Rome, and Madrid inspired their photography.

**ELIZABETH KALIKA** started creating art during their childhood in the Soviet Union. Today, at 65 years-old, Elizabeth is an American citizen who raised their child by themselves. As an activist, Elizabeth wants their art to reflect their social feminist values.

**EDWARD KINCAID** pursues a double major in Art History and History with a focus on growing a thin hipster mustache as a super(-duper) senior at CU Boulder. After graduating from CU, Edward hopes to study the migratory patterns of starving artists. Edward, a feisty Sagittarius, enjoys reading the *New Yorker* and has a crippling fear of intimacy. He likes to take long walks on the beach with his pet snake Theodore, who also has a crippling fear of intimacy. Previous Managing Editor of *Hindsight*, his work underwent a blind review to get published in this volume.

**LINDSEY LEWIS** attends physician assistant school at South University in Savannah. Lindsey graduated from CU Boulder in 2021 with a B.S in Integrative physiology and a minor in Art Practices.

**VIVIAN LUCKIW** channels her history into her art. Born in Calgary, Canada, Vivian moved to the United States as a child and grew used to sudden changes and uncertain events. As a senior at CU Boulder, she majors in Cinema Studies with a minor in Philosophy. Ultimately, she hopes that one day she can publish more of her own story and inspire others to use their experiences to create their art.

**RACHEL LYSAGHT** uprooted her life in the Bay Area, California, to attend CU Boulder after falling in love with the Rocky Mountains. Rachel studies Psychology as a current sophomore at CU Boulder.

**JOAN MCENHILL** attends CU Boulder as a Junior in the BFA-Musical Theatre Program. Joan finds their passions in theatre and writing.

**MICHAEL MCGUIRE**, a San Francisco-based writer, believes in metamorphosis, and seeks to illuminate, through memoir and creative non-fiction, the shrouded road that connects who we were then, to who we've become today. When not writing, Michael can be found in the kitchen attempting to perfect his already sublime recipe for spaghetti Bolognese, or power walking with his husband through a silent Golden Gate Park at dawn.

**JAMES MEAD**, an undergraduate student at CU Boulder, studies English Literature. James works as an RA and serves in the Colorado Air National Guard in Aurora.

**ISABELL MOTTER** finds solace in embracing her femininity. Through her art, Isabell discovered a way to tap into a part of herself that she had previously been afraid to explore. Isabell's pieces combine beauty and darkness and explore the horror of her life and the beauty of survival. Despite the trauma that has marked her life, she has found a path to healing and empowerment through her art and the embrace of her femininity.

**QUENTIN PARKER** studies Creative Writing at Salisbury University. Quentin lives in Bowie, Maryland and attends college in Salisbury, Maryland. Quentin works as a fiction editor and a creative nonfiction associate editor in Salisbury University's literary magazine, *The Scarab*.

**LAURA PETERSON**, a photographer of ten years, loves to photograph beautiful people and places. Laura graduated from CU Boulder in 2020.

**ELIJAH PETTET** graduated from CU Boulder's Cinema Studies program and now works at Sunlight Ski Patrol. As a passionate photographer, Elijah feels honored to see his work paired with the beautiful and topical writing in *Hindsight*.

**DEELIA SHERMAN**, an undergraduate at CU Boulder, enjoys writing, reading, and creating. Deelia hopes to continue expressing herself through the art of writing no matter where life takes her and is excited for whatever the future holds.

**JONATHAN SLINGER** grew up in Boulder and competed in alpine ski racing before dabbling in other sports, including big wall climbing and ski mountaineering. He currently volunteers as an adaptive ski instructor with the National Sports Center for the Disabled at Winter Park, Colorado.

**TASHA SMITH** loves local art and music, reading, and spending time outside. Tasha attends CU Boulder as a senior.

**LIV TIERNEY** studies Art with a minor in Sociology as a junior at CU Boulder. Liv has spent many years exploring and growing their artistic skills and passions. Liv hopes to continue their passion for creativity post-graduation and find a highly creative career.

**COLIN TURNER**, born and raised in Denver, CO, now lives in Boulder. An artist in his free time, Colin's favorite mediums include film photography, drawing, and mixed media. Colin is a certified CNC machinist, completing a degree in Computer-aided Design.

**SOPHIE WAYMAN** felt overwhelmed encountering 30,000 new faces as an out-of-state undergraduate student at CU Boulder, 1,000 miles away from home and family. Sophie finally felt grounded and at home in Boulder after discovering her passion for expressing creativity through words. In the future, Sophie hopes to continue improving her writing.

**CHARLOTTE WHITNEY** loves words, in all their various forms. Charlotte attends CU Boulder as a third-year English Literature major with minors in German Studies and Political Science. In addition to poetry, Charlotte enjoys writing analytical pieces that set literature and radical politics in conversation with one another and hopes to continue this work beyond her undergraduate years at CU. Previous Editor-in-Chief of Hindsight, her work underwent a blind review to get published in this volume.

**DANIEL WORKMAN**, obtained his AAS from the Isaacson School for Professional Photography and graduated from CU Boulder. Daniel focuses his artistic energy into mediums such as writing, photography, filmmaking, and songwriting. With an interest in culture, anthropology strongly influences the work he creates. Daniel's accomplishments include work with Pulitzer Prize winning photographers at the Eddie Adams Workshop in New York.

## TEN YEARS ON

In 2013, JOURNAL TWENTY TWENTY began out of a single classroom. Inspired by the incredible writing from the students of WRTG 2020, off launched a spectacular annual print project that would go on to produce eight original volumes of writing and art. Rebranding to HINDSIGHT in the year 2020, we asked—where do we go from here? The definitive, pointed answer to that question we have yet to discover. However, with three volumes of HINDSIGHT under our belt and no end in sight, we know at least *an* answer: we go on.

A lot has happened in a decade. We've expanded, attending several conferences for the Association for Writers and Writing Programs, experimenting with online publication and audio/visual work, as well as extending our printing ambitions by beginning an entirely new title, CHANGING SKIES, focused on exploring climate change through creative nonfiction. In that time, we've opened up our submissions internationally, bringing a whole new world of incredible writing and art to our pages. With each passing year, as is the nature of a student-run journal, old faces move on and new faces emerge. In rotating the guard each semester, the journal is allowed to exist in flux, evolving with its new fingerprint while staying true to the principles that formed it to begin with. After a decade, this remains true.

Here's to another volume, another amazing staff, and another ten years. ☀