

shoutte

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COVER ART
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A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

As summer turns to fall, everything is in flux. The temperature is dropping, the leaves are browning, and the days are getting shorter. But always: there is art. We are happy to present the second issue of *chouette*, filled with fantastic pieces by writers hailing from Canada's diverse literary landscape. Thank you to our contributors and, as always, our readers, for bringing this issue to life.

Now, let yourself get lost in the pages ahead, and find yourself renewed on the other side.

Love,



SPARROW

A bird appeared inside a coffee shop

black and brown

Its body small, dancing

A sparrow

It flew into a window

(was it a thud or a bang?)

and fell to the ground

Stunned, panting

beak wide open

I heard it whisper

How the hell did

I even get here

MICHELLE BÉLAND

In His Room



LINA ZÜCHNER

After a rainstorm, we went walking

In the queer offbeat silence

Of two AM, our socked feet

Shuffle sideways to the edge of

The rained-on sidewalk.

You hold out a hand for me

In the reedy wind,

Percussion of tin cans rattle

In trash bags. All smells wet and

New again.

We walk around the block,

Damn our shoes and the unlocked door,

Pavement dark as death, headed

To uncover an unknown corner

Of our slow gray neighbourhood.

The still-aware birds sing a sly song to us

Which tells us to stay close,

Warm and together.

In the cool steel of evening,

Our clattering teeth are song

Enough to break the silence.

NORA BARTRAM-FORBES

Butterfly Sanctuary

by Eileen Grant

When I was ten I thought my grandmother should be a priest. I had never met anyone else who went to church every morning willingly, without complaining. Once a week my mom drove us—me, two older brothers, one baby sister, and sometimes dad if he woke up at the right time—to mass, where we had to practice quiet reverence for a full hour, which meant I felt I should take the car ride as an opportunity to pelt her with questions surrounding our beliefs. Later, I would learn that this relentless curiosity denoted a disgraceful lack of faith, as if I should have been able to intuit that rosaries are not to be worn as necklaces even though they are necklace-shaped, or that Grandma obviously cannot be a priest because she is a woman.

“When women are religious like Grandma, they can become nuns.” My mother spoke with warm condescension while her eyes nonchalantly scanned the road.

“But nuns don’t get to stand at the front of mass and talk to everyone.” I meant to keep arguing but forgot my sense of urgency, noticing scowls from siblings who preferred not to challenge God’s will. I had been a disturbance. *Girls should be demure*, I thought, which was a word I had heard or read at church and which I liked the sound of. *Demure*. It didn’t draw too much attention to itself.

Upon arriving at Grandma’s church, not our usual church, I nearly tripped getting out of the car. The reddening of my face after this predictable stumble came not as a result of shame, but anger.

I carefully trudged inside, stewing in simultaneous resentment of my mother's dress sense and my own unyielding clumsiness.

That morning I had waited by the door with pride, having been the first of the family to get dressed. I had even put on the fancy shoes I hated to wear just to prove my punctuality. My mother called them "Mary Janes," which I thought was far too sweet a name for what they were. The name Mary Jane conjured in my mind images of a tea party hostess with a soft smile that doesn't show too many teeth. I thought she might serve petite pastries meant to be eaten slowly between sips from cups held with pinkies up. I imagined Mary Jane existing only in sunlit rooms with pale, elegant furniture, then looked down to see unassuming, black, round things that were not tall like Mom's shoes or soft like her clothing. I thought my Mary Jane would never wear such cloddish clogs, but whenever I tried picturing her lower half it was hidden behind a delicate chantilly tablecloth.

The rubbery squelches emanating from my feet while I impatiently rocked back and forth made me almost as uncomfortable as the little buckles which were always too tight and left imprints on my feet through my socks. My least favourite part of the wretched Mary Janes was the blisters they left behind without exception every time I wore them, even for just an hour. I recognized those bulging red pustules as an unconscious rejection of propriety. An ugly bodily yearning for a break from tradition. Disappointing proof of my innate incompatibility with Mary Jane and her taciturn tea time.

It was easier to neglect this compressing pain on mornings when I beat everyone else to the front door.

I felt it implied piety, nevermind the fact that in truth I was more excited for the car ride than the Sunday service. That morning when I left the house I fell over my feet. To preserve my dignity I loudly blamed this accident on my squeaky shoes which seemed to me exceedingly ill-suited to such playful activities as skipping and therefore should not be worn by little girls.

Grandma's church was always oppressively warm. I walked inside faster than the rest of my family that morning, shame-faced yet eager for mass, where everyone's focus would be on Jesus and God and not me and Mary Jane. Scanning the entryway of the exciting, mundane setting, the dress code sign caught my attention as it usually did here. It showed three female silhouettes you might see on the door of a public restroom, but with red circles and arrows and crosses over their bodies which informed the reader that short skirts and tank tops and low-cut dresses that show your boobs are not appropriate church attire.

Whenever I came across this sign I studied it dutifully, as if I might somehow realize that what I had been wearing was sacrilegious and I would have to spend the next hour atoning for my unwittingly sinful behaviour. The church my family typically attended had no such signage. Then again, ours was never balmy enough to cause you to consider wearing a cropped shirt that might show your belly button. Your belly button! I was still utterly naïve, convinced babies came out through their mommy's belly. How disrespectful, to show that in public! That morning, I peered extra close at the sign to examine whether or not they gave the woman-shape a belly button (which they did, to my horrified delight) and to briefly glance at the little line drawn in the middle of her chest to indicate breasts—which I envied.

My mother walked in then with two silent boys and a sleeping baby. Hands folded below her belly, she shot me a covert glare which meant my stubby fingers dropped into the same position. “Where’s Grandma?” I asked, and Mom led all of us to a pew where we found a slight figure hidden under a veil, hunched in prayer. I had ascertained from a previous car ride that my grandmother wore a black veil in church because her husband died and it was a way of letting others know without saying it out loud. It was quite pretty, I thought. Quite *demure*.

As soon as I sat down I attempted to recall everyone and everything Mom told me to pray for that week. Concentrating on praying was a great effort at that age. It was not a refuge for me. It was a chore I did for my mother’s sake, especially on days when Dad couldn’t make it to mass.

I knew I should have kept my head bowed but peeking around the room was dangerously tempting during moments when Mom was so enveloped in prayer she couldn’t see my greedy eyes taking in the unfamiliar familiar scenery. Father Pat stood garbed in a bright white robe atop an altar with pristine stairs I had been warned years ago not to climb. I tore my eyes away from his luminous attire to examine the windows framing his holy perch. The stained glass shone so vibrantly with the morning sun that I wondered furiously how Mom kept her eyes shut as she mouthed Our Fathers and Hail Marys one after the other, over and over again.

“Please stand.” Father Pat raised his arms, summoning the congregation to its feet. I revelled in the freedom I now had to stare at the multi-coloured windows without potentially attracting attention.

They must be saints, I thought, because none of the figures within the glimmering glass looked like Jesus. One man had his hands outstretched as if waiting for a gift, or perhaps an act of charity judging from the air of suffering in his unearthly blue eyes. I looked deep into his eyes, but he did not see me. He was looking up, his melancholia offered toward heaven, and I remember believing it must have been the reflection of paradise which provided his blue gaze with such inexplicable glory that I felt myself momentarily unable to see any other colour. Sunlight sifted through the blue so stunningly that I thought the shards of glass might gently bend in half and flutter away. Immersed in images of loveliness, I smiled softly to myself. Even as his eyes stunned mine, they were not the most gorgeous things I had ever seen. Days earlier my family and I bore witness to what I considered the most indelible beauty nature had to offer. We went to a butterfly sanctuary. I had had trouble thinking about anything else since.

Our guide was a man named Josh who might have been in his twenties or forties—grown-ups were relatively ageless from my perspective. He was clothed in various unremarkable shades of green. Innumerable fluttering insects held all of my attention while Josh spoke. I politely, painfully waited for him to finish his welcoming sentiments before darting to the monarch that caught my eye. She was glowing, perched among humble greenery which seemed to exist only to serve her majesty. She was so bright that I firmly believed if I touched her she would feel warm. Envisioning my entire body sharing the light held in my eyes at that moment, I reached out a pudgy hand and she left me. My clumsy desire had spoiled her magnificence. Invasive species. I grew cold.

Turning my head to watch her go, I found I had been observed by Josh. He glinted at me wordlessly until we made direct eye contact which I quickly ended by looking back at the now queenless shrubbery. I couldn't see him then but I heard him walking over to me, every step. I counted six before he placed his hand on my right shoulder, forcing my gaze upward to listen to him say, "They don't like it when you touch them." While he spoke he smiled, but not happily. His teeth did not glisten lustily like his eyes, their dullness recalling the hideous clothes he wore. "They're sensitive." He winked, his hand pressing on my shoulder as though he feared I might float away. I remained still as his grip slithered downward and met my hand, which had begun to sweat. "C'mon, I'll teach you something."

At church, I tried desperately to understand Father Pat's homily, but my focus gradually drifted from his words to his brilliant robe. I believed it was absorbing all of the light in the room, then glanced in front of me to discover a man's bald head shining. The glaring gleam unsettled me so greatly that I began scheming methods of shrouding his beacon-like dome, lest it attract attention away from Father. I thought I might persuade Grandma to lend him her veil because she had lovely foggy hair which light wouldn't affect. I leaned towards her but froze when a word from Father broke through my all-consuming wrath. Sanctuary. It rang through my head like a chiming bell. During our drive to the butterflies, I had asked my mother the meaning of the word.

"Sanctuary is a place you go to feel safe."

Josh led me by the hand to invertebrates of glorious colours. We stopped by a blue one while he explained their bodies to me. Without touching, I learned words like thorax and exoskeleton. I shivered, imagining my bones on the outside of my body.

“Butterflies even have hair on their bodies, like me and you!” He stroked my forearm, which was covered with dark, fine hairs made embarrassingly visible by my pale skin. They bristled at his touch. If I had wings, I thought, they would not be pale. Although, I could never be a monarch. I would love to be blue. Visualizing myself with soft wings in place of hairy limbs brought me a brief serenity until I recollected Josh’s twinkling stare, and feared how he might look at me if I were actually beautiful.

It was so miserably warm in Grandma’s church that the bald man whose head I could not tear my eyes from was fanning himself with a Sunday missal. I tried not to think about the blisters forming on my feet. Father Pat said, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God,” and we responded, “It is right and just.” I peeked over at my baby sister sleeping soundly in her brother’s arms like a cute, hairless sloth, and pondered why she was allowed to wear a dress that showed her knees. My mother had emphasized to me countless times the rules of propriety, yet garbed her infant in a defiance of God’s will. How old will she be when her dresses become longer? I thought about how whenever Mom introduced us to strangers, she referred to all of us as “my children.” We were both children, me and the baby. Except I could never show the Lord my knees.

Father Pat told us to kneel and we did, but he never said to bow our heads so I kept mine up and aware, searching for something to fixate on. On the wall above Father was Jesus, nailed to the cross, blood dripping from His graceful hands and His thin feet. Bare legs folded slightly, delicately. His long brown hair—adorned with a pointy crown—fell effortlessly around His shoulders and framed His face so beautifully that I forgot for a moment why He should look so forlorn. His empty stomach and concave chest revealed a shockingly discernible ribcage which I inspected from afar, counting each rib—one, two, three, four—until I burst with a question that I forgot to save for the car.

“Did Jesus have an exoskeleton?” I whispered, but my whole family heard. My brothers snickered in disbelief. My mother snapped her head in my direction, the fury on her face barely masking overwhelming shame as my grandmother stirred from her prayer.

“You are just a glutton for punishment, aren’t you?” The question did not require an answer. I wanted to escape, to run to the bathroom, but I knew she wouldn’t let me until after the Eucharist when everyone was out of their seats. And so I waited, only able to guess how red my face must have been from the embarrassment and heat, and when it was finally time to receive Christ’s body I folded my hands below my belly button and hung my head so all I could see was the floor. Father Pat said, “The body of Christ,” and I said, “Amen,” fighting tears, attempting not to make a scene as I fled to the bathroom.

I washed my chubby hands and red face with freezing cold water, moving quickly in an effort to return to my seat in time to atone for my sinful question.

I rushed out of the restroom, my shoes squeaking loudly as I hurried down the hall, and the bald man walked toward me. He smiled at me, his head glinting, and I tripped over my feet. I fell forward with such velocity that my dress swept up behind me, exposing my legs as I laid on the floor. I didn't know if he saw but I didn't check. I scampered up and flew back to my seat. Head bowed, eyes closed, I prayed.

EILEEN GRANT

Untitled



JONATHAN LARKIN

A Dream of July

If I dream of the July I shall not have,
it is the one in which you linger—
in my Irish sweater, or in semi-sleep
where your mouth has relearned nothing but sighs,
coaxed by my palms on your stomach.

It is the one in which the earth does not bruise
as oceans, yellowing into sand.

It is the one in which we swim in the river—
it is July, and finally sunlight has tamed the water.

When I dream, it is a dream of sweat
that June will not realize.

It is the sunburns we wear above our suit collars
in the orchestra hall. Wildflowers beside the church.
There are many mountainsides we will not wake to.

I'll never be a hand model

by Madeleine Wiseman

You innocently gave me your hand, and because I was holding it I had the courage to submerge myself. But don't try to understand me, just keep me company. I know your hand would drop me, if it knew.

-Clarice Lispector from *The Passion According to G.H*

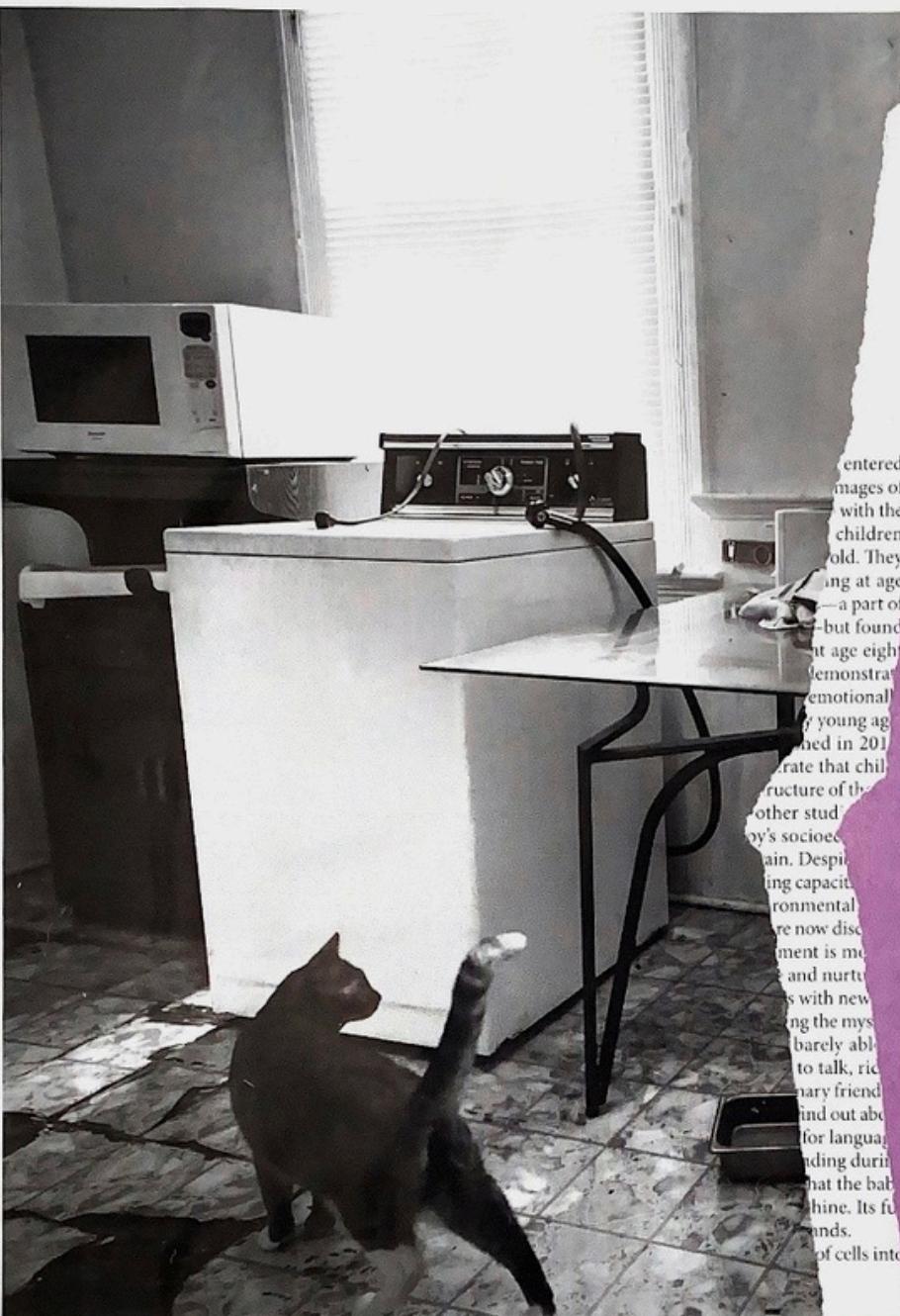
When I run out of nail to bite I go for the skin. I find a nice tab of broken skin on my index finger, nestled against my stump of a nail. I grip it tightly between my front teeth and pull until I can see the raw part underneath. After I'm done, I fan my hands out in front of me to assess the damage. Blood pools in the crevice of my nail bed and I instinctively put my finger in my mouth to get rid of it. When the metal hits my tongue and jolts me from the nail-biters haze I think about how it's really such a drag that I take all my frustrations out on my hands because now I'll never be a hand model. When I was younger my grandma liked to tell me I had vintage hands because they were modest and dainty and could fit into all her old gloves from the chest in the attic that smelled like moth balls and Chanel No. 5. When I was even younger she used to say with a knowing nod that I had piano playing hands because my fingers were going to grow to be long and narrow. In the end they weren't long at all but kind of stocky and although more slender than most, the potential for elegance was negated by the stockiness. I even had to quit piano lessons because I could never make my fingers stretch far enough to get the chords right.

So now I don't have piano playing hands or vintage hands but nails bitten down past the white part and these mysterious bumps that are really just calluses—partly from never learning to hold a pencil right, principally from how I grind the fingers on my left hand against my back molars when I get anxious. Freud would call this an oral fixation and against my better judgment I'm inclined to take his word for it; that way I can say it's all my mother's fault for neglecting my thumb-sucking habit when I was a toddler. Except that's not even true because she really cared a great deal. She cared so much that she bought me special anti-nail-biting polish that tasted evil and bitter when it dried. She cared so much that she took the nail polish away from me because she couldn't stand to watch me gag and cry when I continued to put my fingers in my mouth. Maybe if she had let my suffering go on just a little longer it would have achieved that Pavlovian effect. I guess she must not have known much about psychology, being the one who got me into this oral fixation mess and all. Soon, instead of being given special nail polish, I was told to stop worrying because everyone grows out of this eventually. But now I'm an adult and I'm beginning to fear I am well past the threshold for growing out of things. I'm not even sure where this threshold begins. Why don't people tell me I'll grow out of it anymore? Is it because being an adult by principle means that I'm already fully grown? What happens to all the bad habits now? Are they going to fester instead of fade away? What if I'm not ready to stop yet? What if I am ready but don't know where to begin? After all this thinking I decided that there could only be one course of action: I would stop thinking so much. This wouldn't be a challenge because without my mother's concern I'm hardly even conscious of it. When

nail meets tooth, my mind goes blank in an instinctual way that is almost blissful if I don't interrogate it too deeply. Then, like it was nothing, he snuck into my life and ruined everything. He told me that he loved my hands. It didn't make sense to me at first; don't you know I'll never be a hand model? He said they were perfect because they were so small and that meant his hands could feel bigger and stronger when they were interlaced with mine. He said that he always had this irrational fear that his hands were smaller than they should be. So I stopped hating my hands because I liked how they felt in his and I liked thinking that maybe it all meant we completed each other in some strange, perfect way. I began to think perhaps there was a relief to bad habits that wasn't time. But this was my mistake, becoming indifferent to time. Because when time did rear its cruel head, it took everything away. Had I got it all wrong? Had it been something we shared? Or something I fabricated for my own sake? And so, I became convinced that my thing about our hands had never been perfect, but moreso stupid in that pathetic sort of way. And maybe it was stupid, but I know now that was never the part that mattered; what mattered was that I found someone who took away the unique pain of a squandered hand modeling career and, truthfully, I can't think of anything more worthwhile.

MADELEINE WISEMAN

Pasta



I V E

B E E N

L O S T

F O R

A

W H I L E



CHRISTINE SEATON

Rooting

A Transmission of voltage and culture
Exit West in heated moments of despair
as rapturous rule makers fail to recognize
Life Is Not Useful – and leisure is indeed purposeful.

In Invisible Cities perhaps, we come to realize
Klara and the Sun never actually die,
and it's a kind of a Geek Love that we channelize,
synergically in the margins of this satellite.

Running in the Family of our ancestors and descendants,
we locate ourselves in this intertemporal journey of A Strangeness
in My Mind – and in our ties of humankind and beyond; a Palace Walk
within the sacred zones of The City & the City exist the faraway lands.

Furious and corrotptious – a Cockroach
approaches, rightfully so, he's been made an outcast so ostentatious,
denied even the Half of a Yellow Sun, self-depraved
from afar, he watches his beloved Madonna in a Fur Coat, deeply dazed.

Asking: Where is hope? Where are the rest of my beloved's rays?
I've crawled for more than just human gaze. Starstruck for the strays.

SAADET SERRA

she and i exist in dreams

i got myself a green girlfriend

sprouted from cold concrete and ever blossoming

made of whatever grows underneath fractured stone

and a face like the snow

a face like the few days of frost made only for lovers and lonely people

to keep us warm there is a light that always stays on inside her home

shines onto marble skin and frail linoleum bones

and with a yearning it reaches out for you like the hand that feeds

because that light is a protector a caring keeper with two sets of keys

holder of secrets spoken aloud during quiet mornings alone

and once every single day time comes to a rest

there appears a space in between the fabrics of today and tomorrow

in it we choose to sleep. for some moments i exist solely in a world of her arms

but atop familiar sheets i don't lie, i float

for she and i exist in dreams

she and i exist in dreams

ymk

Opulence



MICHELLE BÉLAND

Razor Sharp

by Caroline Little

CW: Self-harm

When I was twelve, I started dating my first and only boyfriend. I chose him because he was taller than me. This rubric, now flawed but then perfectly sensible, was ripped straight from the beliefs of my best friend. We would sit on the lurid pink and green shag rug of her small bedroom with our backs against her white IKEA bed, feet outstretched and eyes meeting in her narrow mirror, and she would tell me everything I needed to know about boys. The boys she described were always tall, always blonde, always blue-eyed. The boy I chose wasn't blonde or blue-eyed, but he was taller than me, so I figured he would do.

We dated for two weeks. The final straw was when he put his arm around me in the dull cold of our school's parking lot. I broke up with him over text a day later. At the time I wasn't sure why I broke up with him. He was nice enough. But my best friend didn't like him all that much, so I figured it was for the best.

I barely remember what that boy looked like. All that exists in my memory of him is a blur of dark hair and large hands that made me uncomfortable. I can't even remember his last name. My best friend, however, I remember in stunning technicolour. I remember the tight curls of her thin brown hair, and I remember the cleft of her chin and the deep divots of her dimples. I remember the thick hair on her arms and above her lip that she detested, I remember the floral scent of her deodorant that we had just learned to use.

I remember her feet stopping short against my calves when we sat next to each other on her terrible pink and green shag rug. I remember that I wanted to put my arm around her.

It wasn't too difficult to figure out I was a lesbian, in the end.

That same year, all the girls at my school decided it was time to become women, my best friend included. Suddenly her face was caked in layers of concealer and foundation, her eyelashes coated in cheap, thick mascara. When I told my mother about my best friend's new, pastier face, she drove me to Shoppers Drug Mart and bought me enough makeup to give me a new face too. I remember standing in the harsh fluorescent light of the makeup aisle struggling to hold all the tan tubes of liquid my mother was dropping into my hands, and trying to understand why she thought I needed it. I was never asked if I wanted to try makeup, only told that I was going to. The same thing had happened a year earlier when the hair under my arms grew long and dark, and suddenly a razor sat next to my coconut scented shampoo in the shower. I left the drug store that evening with new makeup I had no idea what to do with, and a fresh pack of disposable razors.

I wouldn't stop regularly cutting into my skin with thin blades carefully pulled from those disposable razors—pulled with the same tweezers I used to pull hair from between my eyebrows—until a year after that. I wouldn't stop altogether for even longer. I sometimes wonder why razors were kept in my home after my mother found out, why a lack of body hair was prioritized. I don't have an answer for myself. I don't think my mom does either.

My best friend and I tried very hard to figure out makeup.

I sat cross-legged across from her as she fingerpainted beige onto my face that didn't quite match the colour of the skin it covered. Eyeliner was the worst of her experiments—she wanted to try tracing inky black into the waterline of her eyes but didn't want to risk hurting herself. I proved a more than willing test subject, delighted to have her so close to my face and the tip of her pencil even closer to my cornea. Any effect the cheap eyeliner might have had was washed away by the watering of my eyes under her clumsy hand.

The only kind of makeup I own now is black eyeliner. I stand alone in my poorly lit bathroom, with its cracked white tiles and leaky ceiling, smudging night around my eyes and coating my waterline in obsidian with steady, practiced hands. The eyeliner isn't feminine, and it isn't pretty. More than anything, it makes me look like the frontmen of the pop-punk bands my best friend used to drool over. My eyes don't water anymore—I've gotten used to the sting.

About six months after I broke up with my first and only boyfriend, I started dating my first girlfriend. She had, incidentally, also dated my first and only boyfriend. To this day, I can't tell for whom that twist of fate was the cruellest. She and I dated on and off for nearly a year and a half, in a torrid emotional affair of which only two thirteen-year-olds are capable. She would break up with me, we would be apart for a month or two, I would ask her out again. A terrible cycle. I don't know how my best friend felt about ***. By this point in middle school, we weren't best friends anymore. We were barely even friends.

I think the final straw was her move from our once-shared street to one farther away, a building in the catchment area of her desired high school. A high school different from mine. The last hours we spent

together were in her new apartment, a sleepover after we went to see one of those pop-punk bands she loved so much in concert. Her bedroom was completely different; the narrow mirror and white IKEA bed were long gone, and so was the godawful rug. All signs of childhood had been erased in favour of chic black and white furnishings, and there were no more photos of me. In the year that followed, those photos were replaced by ones with her new friends, ones I thought she had picked because they were cooler and girlier than I was. I thought that she was changing too much, outgrowing me too fast, but never stopped to think that I might be changing too. I didn't look like the little girl in those photographs anymore—my hair, once dripping long past my shoulders, was cut short to curl around my ears and tickle the base of my neck. My mother disapproved of the more masculine cut, but I loved it. It was a very literal burden lifted off of my shoulders, a burden replaced by the freeing air of knowing who you are. But at thirteen, it never occurred to me that my best friend had spent hours braiding that hair, never occurred to me that our matching haircuts were the reason we were so often mistaken for sisters. As I was finally starting to see myself in photographs and mirrors, my best friend was recognizing the girl she knew less and less.

I haven't had a best friend since. I've had close friendships, sure, but always in groups and never in pairs. I don't have my name spoken in the same breath as someone else's anymore, as if they were one call sign instead of two. She is now a stranger to me, just like those razor blades. I pulled her out, cut myself on her sharp edge, and let her go. I'm sure I would be a stranger to her, too—the distance between me and the preteen girl she knew is even greater now. These days, I'm

hardly even a girl. But every time I walk by her old apartment building at the end of my street, or hear a bad pop-punk song, memories cut through me. I think of her. I wonder if we would be friends if we met now instead of then, sculpted adults instead of primordial preteens. I want to know if she'd approve of my current girlfriend, if she watched the finale of our favourite show, if her mom is doing well. I want to know if she'd recognize me now, but the idea of reaching out feels the same as reaching for a razor.

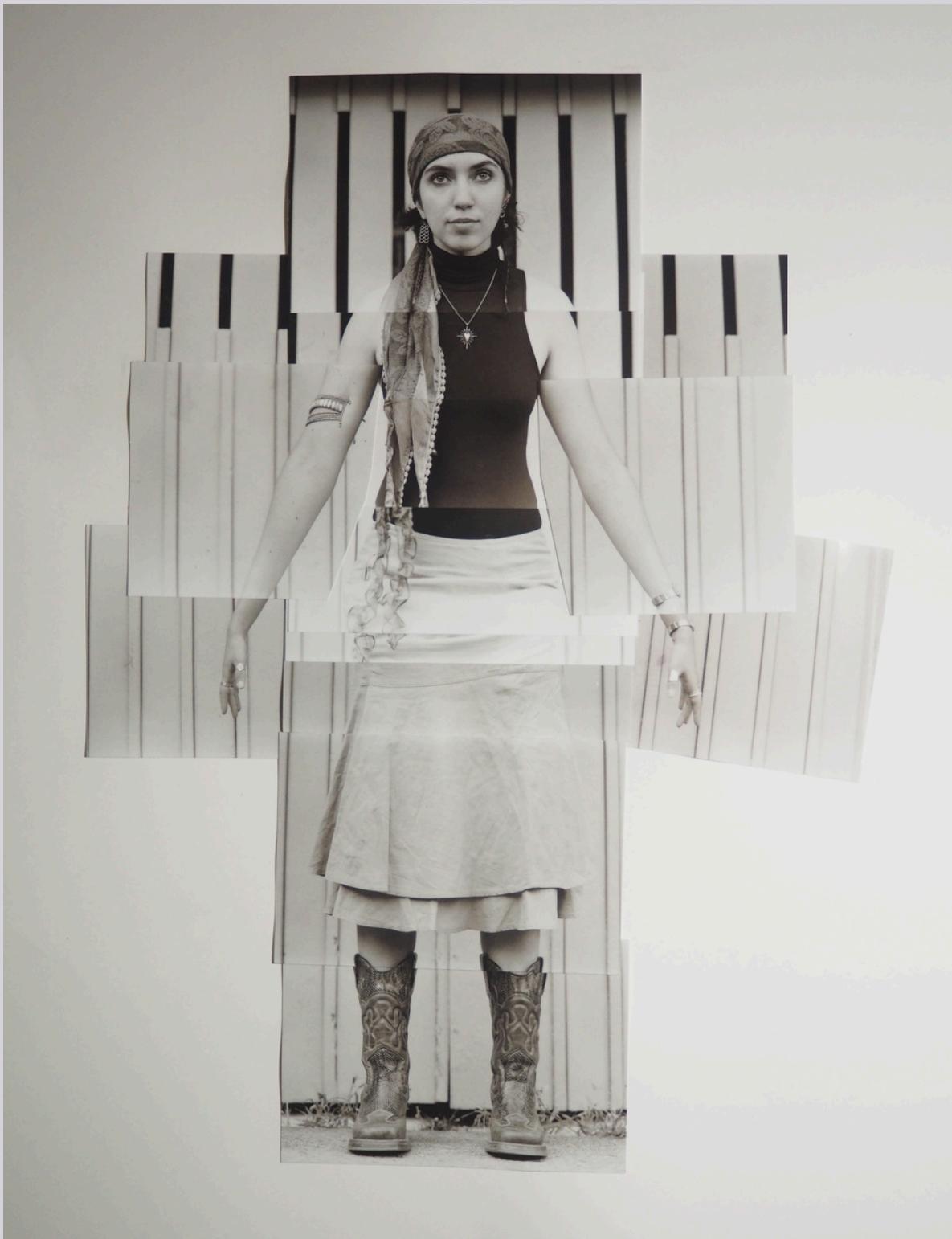
The very last time I saw her was years after that night in her new bedroom, well into high school. My family was going to see a movie at our local theatre, two blocks away from where my best friend now lived. As we were getting our tickets, my name cut through the sour smell of old popcorn. I turned to locate the source of the sound, and saw my best friend working at the concessions stand. She waved at me. We'd passed by each other a handful of times since we graduated middle school, but each time we'd ignored each other, our steely gazes fixed firmly on the horizon. I wasn't sure why our silent status quo had been broken, but I waved back at her anyway. My mother asked who I was waving to, and asked how my best friend was when I replied. I answered truthfully that I didn't know, but in her eyes I thought I saw recognition of who I was becoming. I wasn't cutting myself with razors anymore, settling into my skin more than I was cutting it, but I had started shaving my arms.

Five years forward in time, I don't shave anymore. I let the hair on my body grow long, even in the summer. I still own a pack of cheap disposable razors. The temptation to hurt myself is long gone, but the

temptation to rid myself of both hair and queer looks from strangers still remains. Sometimes the razor that sits in my medicine cabinet calls out to me in a siren song that sounds a lot like my mother's voice, or perhaps like my best friend's. Sometimes I listen to it. Most of the time, I don't.

CAROLINE LITTLE

Vagabond



JONATHAN LARKIN

i like you when

the bar is bare so
they hear us say
let's do it! just for fun
i never laugh as loud
as when we buy bad food
complaining after paying
snorting while you lick the dish clean
conversation seldom halts, remember
that man who said he loved our curly hair?
we asked could we be siblings and
he told us yes, but my eyes were lighter
i guess because i smiled so big when
you tossed your locks behind your back
we stifled ugly cackles ripe to burst until
the night became our own again
helplessly meandering to its end
i like you when

EILEEN GRANT

Funeral

Black-clad kin mount the pall
moulted laments like, so they say,

auntie shed her clothes
for oxy (bless her soul)

(bless her soul). Hepatic blood,
disease derived from sin,

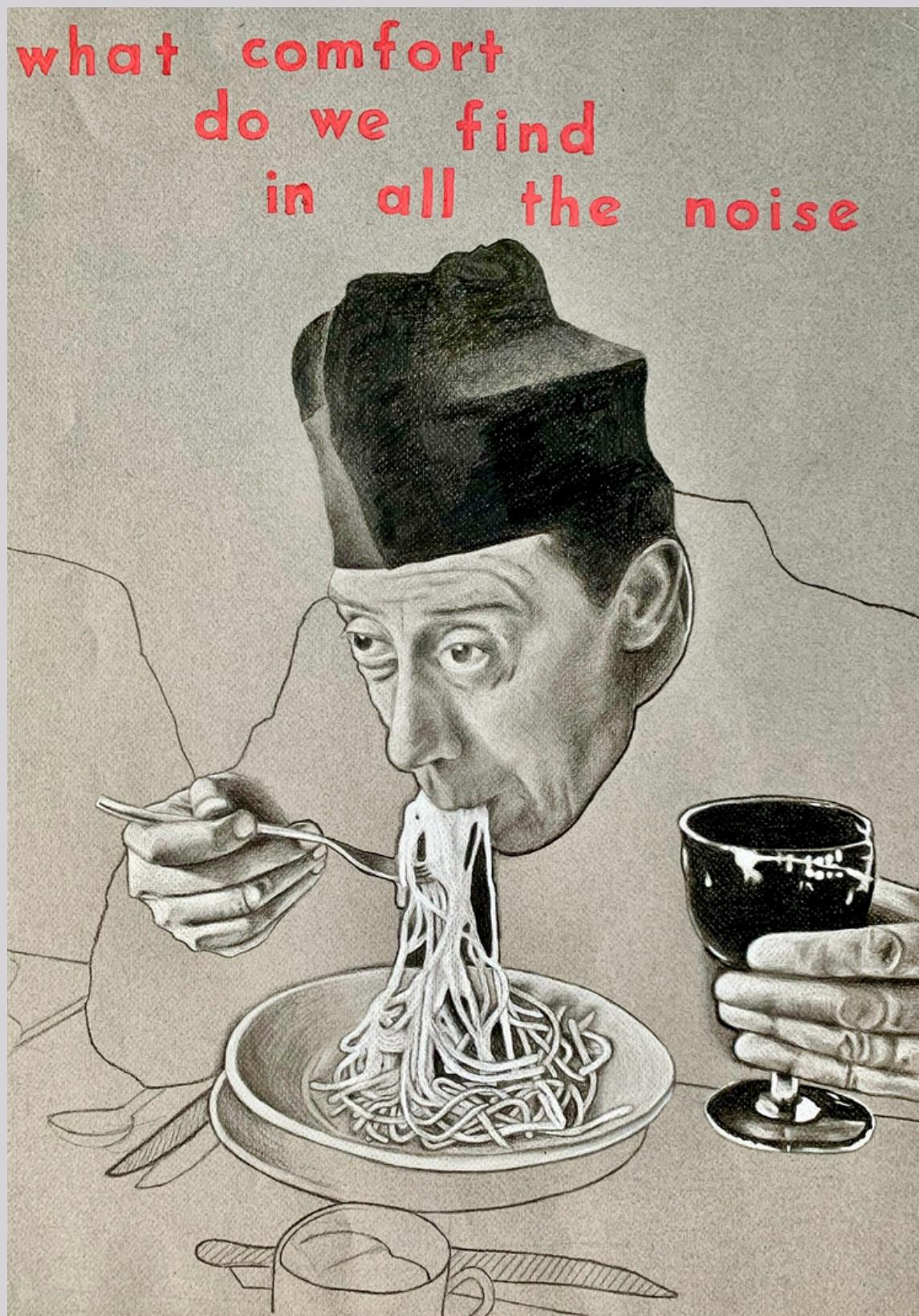
conjures myrrh-smoke
in the temple's apse.

The white-robed priest
swings his thurible.

Hatchet strokes send
crows in the copse aloft.

J.T. WICKHAM

Ich habe Hunger, aber worauf?



LINA ZÜCHNER

A Chemical Imbalance

by Eileen Grant

“Do you think it was just, like, a chemical imbalance?”

I laughed without thinking. A quiet, panicked laugh. I hoped she couldn't detect the soft shock on my face as I began to picture the monstrous machine that had been thrumming inside my head for years, its previously pristine pistons rusty from overuse. Of course, an operator had never been appointed for this unwieldy contraption; in my imagination it took on the appearance of a pitiful science experiment, carelessly dismantled or perhaps assembled improperly years ago. When I blinked I could hear engines sputtering to a slow death, and test tubes shattering. I could feel the various liquids spilling, spreading, oozing, and I knew it was my fault. I had never been aware of the maintenance required in my brain until she had suggested it right now. I dabbed at my right ear to check for a leak. When I found it was dry I hastily crossed my arms and tried to smile, remembering.

Pictures or diagrams or models of brains had always looked grotesque to me, like a bunch of worms clustered together, wrapped too tightly around each other to achieve any semblance of comfort or propriety. When I turned fourteen and my head began to hurt I thought the worms must have been temporarily rearranging their slimy bodies for my benefit, wriggling into a new position that might ease my pain. I would have thanked them for their kindness if they had, but after a month or so I observed that the hurt was still there. I surmised it

could not possibly take the worms this long to reorganize their disgusting cluster and I grew to resent them for their selfishness. Their irresponsibility had resulted in my embarrassment on numerous occasions, like the time I helplessly sobbed in front of my whole class when that boy asked to go to the dance with me and could not even manage to get out the words *No, thank you* as a result of the overwhelming pressure exerted by the invertebrates hiding behind my waterlogged eyes. I always blamed them for the outbursts I did not understand, like when I broke down crying for no discernible reason while watching TV with my father, and when I told him *I'm sorry I'm sad all the time* he responded by saying *You're not sad all the time!* which made me feel infinitely worse. How could he not see it?

Eventually, I resolved to avoid my reflection at all costs as I became convinced that the worms were attempting to get out, and the incessant aching was a result of their slow but steady escape mission. On days when my hair felt greasy, I figured that the microscopically tiny baby worms were making their way out of my skull through my hair follicles, mistaking my dirt-coloured locks for a soft retreat from the rain. I had reasoned that it must have been storming in my head. The excess rain had overflowed through my eye sockets. All I knew for certain was that I really could not show anyone my face. I could not imagine how foul I must have looked. When I closed my eyes and envisioned myself all I saw was a restless clump of pale pink, plump, putrid pests raging against the unforgiving precipitation terrorizing their natural habitat. I knew if I paused to examine my reflection, if I stared for long enough, I would find them trying to poke out through my dirt-coloured eyes and

they would be awful and the storm would only increase in intensity.

It seemed impossible to me that none of the worms had died after so many months of existing in such a small space. My next solution to the problem was to starve myself, therefore starving them, and I felt confident that this would not only reduce the torrent of torment in my head but also result in a better, more feminine external appearance. This did not work and seemed to anger the colony to the point that I could not focus during English class, which was usually a moment of reprieve, singular in its effectiveness at distracting me from the throbbing issue I constantly sought to solve. I worked endlessly to appease the worms before and after realizing I could not kill them, but in all of my endeavours I was never able to discover any reason why they would want to harm me when I did not do anything to them in the first place.

The first time I got drunk the sensation I found most pleasant was the numbing of my head. I did not care for the taste of the beverages I consumed but nonetheless gulped them quickly in an effort to quiet the storm and the worms too. Attempting to sleep that night was torturous. I had never felt so heavy in my life. I guessed the worms had passed out, and perhaps fallen into my stomach which began to scream in agony, evidently unfamiliar with that unbearable temperament which was usually reserved for upstairs. It was never heaviness before, I thought, it used to be constant leakage. I glared at the ceiling for hours that night, willing it to crack down the middle and crumble and fall right on top of me so I might have a clear explanation for my inability

to move. I never told anyone why I was the last one out of bed that morning, and they never asked. I only realized it did not actually matter when she called me crying later that day and told me what had happened to her after I said I'm going to bed.

She made it all so trivial, then and now. A chemical imbalance. The science experiment that had failed. Machinery, so much heavier than silly pink slimy things. I decided I would never tell her about my struggle against the worms.

“Yeah, you’re right. That must have been it.”

EILEEN GRANT

prey complex

i wish i was like a
rabbit moving faster and faster
wiry body taking the force of the blows
of the up-down-up-down,
everything in stride.

i am always moving and you will never catch me.

teeth sink into my neck and I'm bleeding
and I want it to end I'm tired my body is
going numb I'm wet wet flesh

red

soaked

heavy & slack
rock-weighted

rabbit means running from your shouts like barbed thorns
catching in my

feet, fuzzy flesh-flanks
hopping, leaping, frenzied
can't lash, bite, claw out.

lodged in the gristle of my bone
i wish i could pull them out, liberate,
but i am a rabbit.
i have no thumbs.

i cannot hold
i can only keep
ahead.

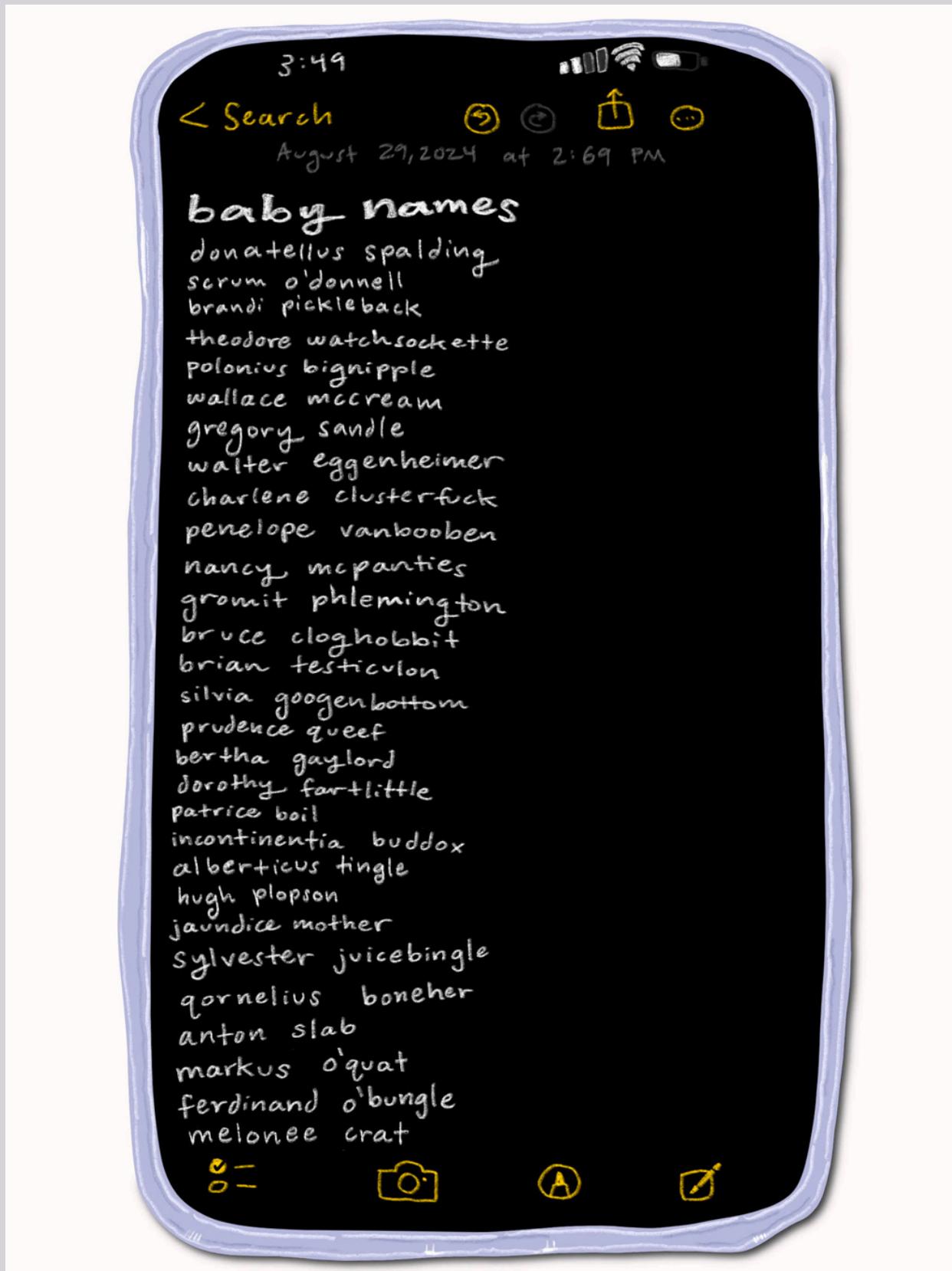
as flesh tears
feet slam up-down-up-down

you catch me
by the ears.
split my neck.
twigs in the grass, under boot.
i can smell my skin, crusting and oozing over flame.
i am a tasty morsel.

i didn't have to wish.

CAIUS CARTMILL-MCCREA

Baby Names



LINA ZÜCHNER

Venusians

by Colin Dobson

MARCEL drives his taxi slowly down Main Street. It's a Saturday night, around 10pm; the temperature outside has cooled off since the day, drawing people out of their apartments. He watches the street life through the rolled down window and waits for somebody to hail him. It's a real antique, his taxi: a maroon Lincoln Town Car with ashtrays built into the armrests, halogen headlights, and a red leather interior. Marcel himself is like an extension of his car. Another antique. He keeps cigars in the glove compartment, wears a white goatee and coke-bottle glasses and a leather jacket. He wouldn't change a thing — about himself or the car — except maybe the leather. In this weather, which is the only weather, it simply gets too sticky.

Up ahead, a man and woman are standing at the curb, flagging him down. He pulls over. The door opens and they climb into the backseat. He asks them Where to? though he can pretty well guess where they are going, judging by how they are dressed. All corduroy and silk, plaid and paisley prints, dagger collars, scarfs, bell bottom trousers and high-heeled boots. They are going to the discotheque.

He eyes his passengers through the rearview mirror. They are in their early twenties, maybe a couple but it's hard to tell. There is a certain emotional distance between them, emphasized by the empty space in the middle seat, and neither of them are speaking. Marcel wonders what kind of young lovers' quarrel preceded him picking them up. They seem awfully sad to be dressed so colourfully and going out dancing on a Saturday night. But no matter. He turns the radio on.

Bossa Nova begins playing at an agreeable volume. He lets the station run for a couple blocks, but it's not quite right. He fiddles with the dial. "Hottest summer on record," a commentator's voice says. He changes the frequency. "Severe weather warning," says another. He changes it again. "Massive tropical storm moving up the coast." Again. "Stay chill this summer." Finally he lands on the station he was looking for. A steady four-on-the-floor disco rhythm begins pulsating through the speakers.

"Those hurricanes seem to be getting further and further North all the time," Marcel says. "Now it seems like there's one every year. I hope you two don't plan on staying out too late."

He stops talking. Complaining about the weather isn't going to cheer his passengers up. He tries a different tack.

"It's funny how trends come around, and things become popular again," he says. "Disco was all the rage when my grandfather was your age, for chrissakes. Of course, when I was in my twenties (oh that was about fifty years ago now), it was all about E.D.M. — Electronic dance music, that is. And now all these years later we're back to disco. The cycle simply astounds me. My grandfather used to tell me, 'Marcel, we danced because we were afraid.' Afraid! Afraid of what? 'Of nuclear bombs, Marcel. Of AIDS, Marcel.' That's really what he said. So what are you so afraid of, hm? It's all right, if you don't want to talk..."

He turns the volume up. The disco song is repeating the same lyric over and over again. "You are sizzling hot," the singer insists in an androgynous falsetto.

"I've got a couple kids about your age," Marcel goes on, loudly, over the music. "They won't give me grandchildren though, no matter

how much I prod them. They're afraid, all right..."

He stops the taxi next to the discotheque. There is a crowd in the street and the red neon sign above the door says VENUS. His passengers pay the fare and get out, and as he drives away Marcel can't help but feel a vague sense of embarrassment, that he has acted unprofessionally and overshared. That is quite unlike himself. But young people going nightclubbing are rarely so funereal. Maybe they'll lighten up, after a few drinks.

When PAULO sees his regulars enter through the door, he detaches himself from his conversation and goes over to greet them. He is glad to get away. For the last thirty minutes this particular group has talked about nothing but the weather. The weather! "Look around you," Paulo wants to shout at them. "We can't seriously be here to talk about the weather." Even if gale force winds are blowing outside, or acid rain is falling from the sky, or mega droughts are drying up the city's water supply, Paulo doesn't want to hear about it. As long as he is bartending, weather speculation will hold no quarter.

Paulo cannot remember the names of these regulars, though he certainly remembers their faces. They are hard to forget, this good-looking and superbly dressed young couple. Before they have even reached the counter Paulo has produced two cups of sparkling fruit punch and set them on the bar. But they make no move to drink it.

"Aw jeez," he says. "Everybody's so morose."

"Sorry Paulo," the boy says. "I'm drinking alone tonight. Flo isn't feeling well."

So that's her name, Paulo thinks. Flo. Must be short for Florence. She is indeed looking a bit pale and preoccupied tonight. He does his miming routine to cheer her up, pulling his newsboy cap down over his head, puffing his cheeks and sticking out his tongue. He tugs on his suspenders then snaps them back against his chest. He wipes his hands on his armpits and flicks droplets of his own sweat into the glass of punch.

"To your health," he says, suddenly grave. He raises the glass that was meant for Flo and taps it against the boy's. They both throw back the punch in one shot.

ROXY stands behind the DJ booth, which is mounted on a stage overlooking the dance floor. She is leaning over the side of the booth, with her ear inclined toward yet another discotheque patron asking her to play their song.

"For the last time," she says. "I don't do special requests. Now buzz off."

"Please. Just one song. It's my birthday."

"Sure," says Roxy. "It's my birthday too. It's everybody's birthday. Playing the music is my job. Your job is to dance."

Roxy considers herself a good DJ. She is good, for instance, at dealing with the people — it's actually only the men who do this — who think they can do her job better than she can. She knows how to read the room and coordinate song-popularity and BPM with drink sales (play too many hits and people won't leave the dance floor). Breaking up the night with deep cuts and subtle fluctuations in tempo

keeps people spending at the bar). But most of all, Roxy's got good taste. She knows what makes good disco. Good disco is urgent, charged, propulsive, maybe even a little bit nightmarish. It should sound like it's the last song you're ever going to hear, because at this very moment there is a nuclear bomb barreling towards Earth, so there is nothing left to do but dance. She knows that apocalypse and disco are deeply intertwined: Gloria Gaynor will survive, the Bee Gees are staying alive, and when Barry Gibb sings "You Should be Dancing," it is not a suggestion but a threat. Good disco anticipates the eventual heat death of the universe. The mirrorball is itself an exploding star. Hot stuff: that's what Mick Jagger sings on one of those late Seventies Stones records. What stuff? The night fever. The disco inferno, burn baby burn.

Disco relies on syncopation. That's the thing that makes you dance. It toys with the part of your brain that detects patterns but gets bored and loses interest once it's familiar with the pattern. Syncopation regularly disrupts the rhythm, then reinstates it, so you never quite get settled. The cycle is constantly being created and destroyed and created and destroyed. You remain in a state of anticipation, always on edge. And you keep dancing.

Roxy watches the young couple carve a path through the crowd, toward the centre of the discotheque. That young couple, masters of the dance floor. She beat-matches the end of one song with the beginning of the next, gives a few extra pumps to the fog machine, and angles the laser lights toward the mirrorball. Back at the soundboard, Roxy slides the high-pass filter all the way up, cutting the treble. A distant, omnipotent voice intones over the sound system: "Everybody

at the disco knows / how to get down / down as hell (hell).”

Finally Roxy releases the high-pass filter and lets the four-on-the-floor drop like a bag of bricks.

The young couple start to dance, but something is off with the girl tonight. She has lost the beat. The music drags her along and she always seems to arrive a fraction of a second too late. The stresses on the downbeat seem to descend upon her like falling china which she scrambles to catch before they shatter on the grimy hardwood. Roxy sees her pull the boy in close and whisper something in his ear. They weave their way out of the crowd, toward the door leading to the smoker’s pit outside.

“Excuse me.” Another person has materialized next to her DJ booth. They have a look in their eyes that is somehow both violent and pleading. “It’s my boyfriend’s birthday. I was wondering if you could play their song.”

“Get lost.”

HORACE plays the clarinet for the smokers. His instrument case is splayed open on the ground, the fur-lined interior dotted with coins and crumbled up bills. He plays slow, simple ballads — “Lazy Moon,” “As Time Goes By,” “Lullaby in Ragtime” — while the patrons of Venus get some air. He showed up one day and stuck around and has now become an integral fixture of the scenery. He has a novel appearance, which you could even call his panhandler’s gimmick: lanky, gaunt, and emaciated, his ribs protruding beneath the skin of his bare torso, his baggy pants held up by a belt with extra holes gouged in

the leather; he writhes his body like a snake charmer while he plays his clarinet.

Once per night, in exchange for a generous donation, Horace will lay his instrument aside and tell a story. Many millions of years ago, he begins, Venus was an Earth-like planet inhabited by a humanoid race that worshipped the Goddess of Love. It was a lush, verdant paradise, and its people were genteel, ethereal, and beautiful. But over generations of unchecked greed and consumption Venus slowly began to change. Runaway greenhouse effects evaporated its oceans, rivers, and lakes. Rising temperatures drove its flora to extinction. The Venusians were forced to abandon their former paradise and colonize other planets. They came to Earth, and now their old home remains but a speck of light in the night sky, its atmosphere a haze of carbon dioxide, its surface ravaged by methane windstorms.

“Where will we go once we have destroyed Earth?” Horace says.
“When will the pattern be broken?”

Horace looks at the faces gathered before him and is met with the familiar glassy-eyed stares and slack jaws of the discotheque patrons who have drank too much fruit punch. But one girl stands alone in the crowd. Horace can tell that, like him, she has not drank the punch. She is sobbing quietly, her hand covering her mouth.

“You,” Horace says. He points a bony finger at her. “There is life in you.” Suddenly unable to hold back her tears, the girl turns away and runs back into the discotheque.

FLO runs to the bathroom. The door shuts behind her, and the music

outside is suddenly muffled, as if she were underwater. The bathroom is empty, except for two guys quietly making love by the automatic hand dryer. She glides past them and shuts herself in a stall.

She sits on the toilet. Around her the walls are covered top to bottom with graffiti, posters, and stickers. Above the toilet paper dispenser someone has written in black sharpie, WHY WON'T IT END?

Why won't it end, she repeats to herself. Why does the cycle — of trends, of apocalypse anxiety, of people — repeat itself? She asked her mother if she thought it was rational or ethical to have children while being capable of imagining the future. She did not give a definitive answer. She only said that when she was Flo's age she asked her own mother, Flo's grandmother, the same question.

She wants to find her partner, Ed, and tell him that she has made her mind up. As she walks to the door the two guys standing by the automatic hand dryer look up at her and smile. Their teeth are stained red by the fruit punch.

She finds ED standing alone in the middle of the dance floor. There is movement all around him, but he is standing still, looking straight up, transfixed by the mirrorball. There is a glass of fruit punch in his hand, but he has forgotten that it's there. The punch is Paulo's secret concoction. Whoever drinks it ceases temporarily to think about the future. After one glass you can't imagine tomorrow. After two glasses every possibility beyond roughly eight hours is inconceivable. After five glasses every impression only lasts for about five seconds. That's where Ed is at as he looks at the mirrorball. In this state lights become brighter, sounds become louder, everything is either hilarious

or touching, and every human interaction is its own complete, unique package.

Ed feels somebody grab his arm. Flo is standing in front of him. Ed could swear that Flo has never looked so precious or so determined, and that he has never been so much in love with her, as in this very moment. Five seconds later he feels the same way all over again.

At about three o'clock in the morning MARCEL idles in his taxi outside discotheque Venus. The nightclub has just closed and people are spilling out into the street. The storm has arrived, as he predicted it would. He strokes his goatee and listens to the rain pelt against the windshield, looks out the window at the people huddling together under umbrellas.

In the light of the red neon sign, obscured by thick sheets of rain, Marcel can see a man and woman approaching his taxi. They wave to him and he gestures for them to get inside.

As they sit in the backseat Marcel notices that it is the same young couple he picked up at the beginning of the night. They do not seem to remember him, or they are simply too preoccupied with each other. They squeeze together in the middle seat; the space between them is obliterated.

"You do this every weekend?" Marcel asks.

Yes, they reply. Every weekend.

COLIN DOBSON

Swing Dance



CHRISTINE SEATON

A dying season

July mornings beat on, damp & hot already.

I swallow mosquitoes and my words,

Dirty fingernails comb through outgrown hair.

I close my eyes against what reminds me of you,

The dying flowers, pollen clouding the windshield &

Frogs clamouring at the shore.

The cicadas hum and I play sad songs in the drive-through line.

So many things now I tell no one,

How I slept and how I woke and how the moss

Caught the yellowing afternoon light.

It's a dying season.

The sun screeches all day &

Nothing stays green but the algal blooms.

I search for your face in the still-lake surface,

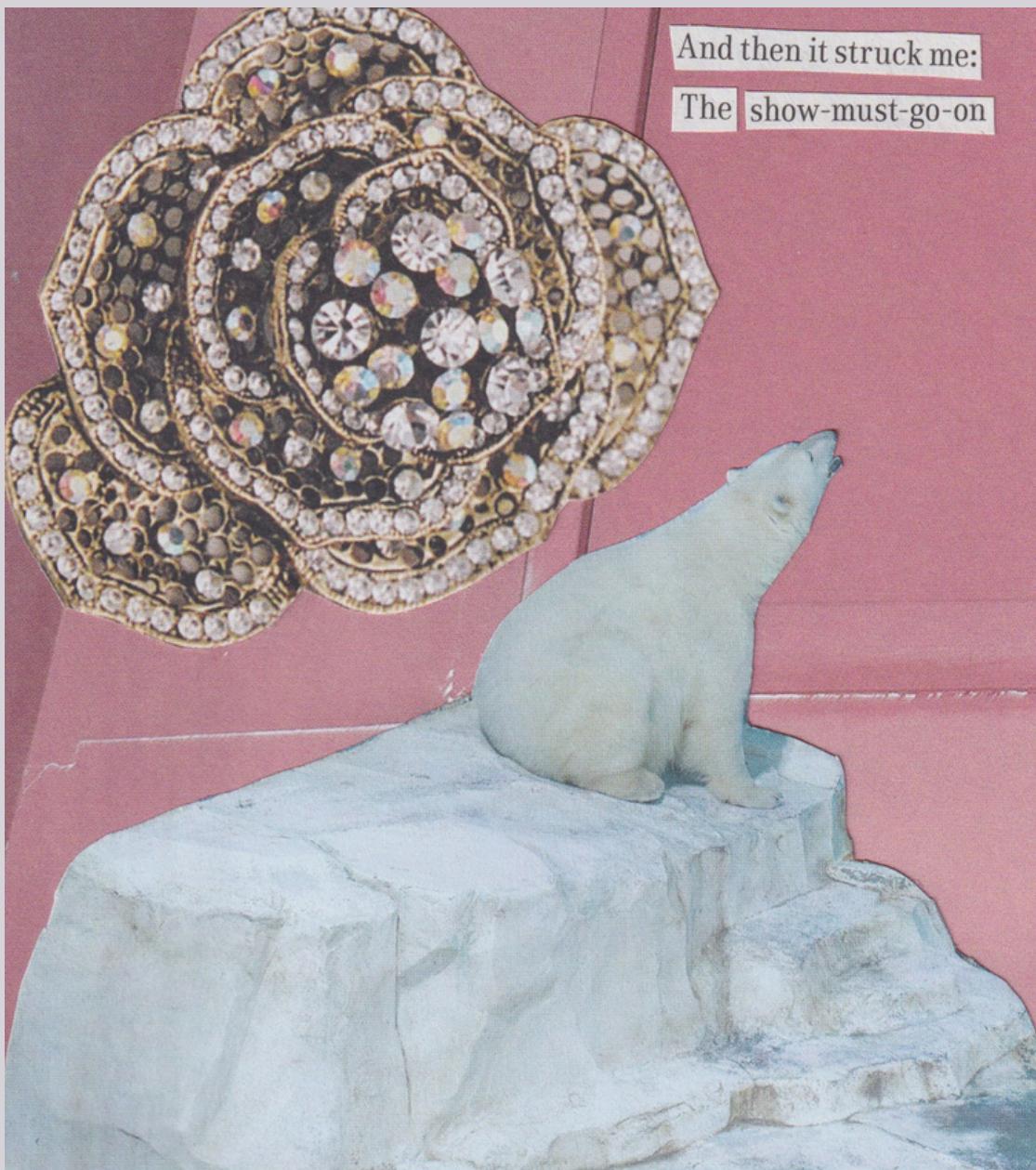
Gone from where it used to hide

In the corners of my reflection.

July evenings sing low and smoulder out,
Hissing of time I still have left to lose.

NORA BARTRAM-FORBES

The Show Must Go On



MICHELLE BÉLAND

CONTRIBUTORS

Nora Bartram-Forbes is a poet and aspiring scientist living in Montreal.

Michelle Béland is a Canadian writer and artist living in Montreal. Her humor essays have appeared in The Globe and Mail and MotherMag. She's interested in exploring and understanding the Self through obsessions. Her newsletter, OBSESSED, explores her evolving passions and fixations, from TV characters to birds and collage poetry. You can read her work at michellebeland.substack.com.

Caius Cartmill-McCrea is currently studying English lit at Concordia University. If he isn't reading or writing, he's probably memorizing useless pop culture minutiae. In his work, he seems to centre intersecting experiences of queerness, isolation and the absurd.

Colin Dobson is a writer based in Montreal. His work can be found in Dalhousie University's creative writing journal, Fathom, and in the Summer 2024 issue of Ahoy.

Eileen Grant likes to write. She also likes sad, silly music and peanut butter sandwiches. She wants more friends, please DM her @eileenmgrant on Instagram.

Jonathan Larkin is a recent graduate of honours Math & Physics at McGill University. In his photography practice, he looks for symmetry, and the alternate representations of life as it appears on film. In exploring the passage of time in photography, he hopes to convey the exact points in time and space, as they are ever-changing.

Caroline Little is a fourth-year McGill student, majoring in Cultural Studies. Originally from Toronto, she enjoys getting hyper-invested in bad television, a heavy use of anaphora, and long walks on the beach.

Kat Mulligan is a Virginia-born, Montreal-based writer.

Christine Seaton is a multimedia artist focusing in 35mm film photography and collage. In terms of her photography, Christine is interested in light and the way it can shape a photograph. She's drawn to film's cinematic qualities and the unexpected results that come from it. On the other hand, collage is a form of catharsis for Christine, and she mostly uses it to capture the emotional release of music. The medium's meticulous nature forces the artist to spend time with herself, a feature that Christine very much enjoys.

Serra is interested in reading and writing about family, mobility, solarpunk, and radical imaginaries of the future. As a turkish migrant and non-native English speaker, she initially started experimenting with poetry to improve her literacy skills. Soon after, literary arts turned into a passion, allowing her to transcend many restrictions of English grammar and find alternative ways of storytelling. Her poetry can be found on Instagram @mayhos.monologues.

J.T. Wickham is a poet born in B.C. and based in Montreal. He is the communications officer of the Quebec Writers' Federation, where he has worked since 2022, and is the web designer for Quist, a literary journal for Quebec youth. Prior to his career in the arts, he was a lecturer in history and English literature in the UK. He is currently working on his first poetry chapbook.

Madeleine Wiseman is a Montreal-based student and amateur blogger. She writes memoir style essays under the moniker Miss World. Miss World is a self proclaimed expert self-mythologizer who enjoys elevating commonplace emotions and experiences through writing.

ymk is a queer black writer from montreal going by a set of passed-down initials in an effort not to forget how they got there. they are scared of the dark. using art as a means to escape the night, they create work about love and loss and all the people who have ever walked alongside them.

Lina Züchner is a Montreal-based artist and writer with a passion for all things quirked-up, whimsical, and bizarre. Through her work she invites viewers into her mind palace, often blending styles and mediums to create vibrant, playful pieces and silly characters inspired by childhood, humor, and daily life. She is thrilled to fill her days with art in all of its forms after having finished her history and sociology degree at McGill this April. More of Lina's work can be found @thumblyfe on Instagram.