

The Messenger



r o o t s

Spring 2023

Acknowledgements

The Messenger staff would like to thank Dr. David Stevens for his continued support and guidance as our faculty sponsor. We are also grateful for the University of Richmond English and Visual and Media Arts Practice departments, who continually encourage students to create and submit their works, and the authors and artists who never fail to amaze us with their talent. Finally, we would like to thank our readers for their interest in our magazine. Without you all, we wouldn't have this publication.

A Letter From the Editors

This year's edition of *The Messenger* explores the undeniable grip our past has on our present, and how that sets the stage for our future. We carry our stories with us, and our stories are uniquely our own. They guide us through our lives, our relationships, our experiences, and our expressions. This year, we publish 7 prose pieces, 24 pieces of art, and 25 poems that each come from a sacred and inimitable perspective.

Carrying on from our last edition, “Reaching In,” we look deeper, now, into what both separates and unites us as artists. Our histories—how we interpret them and what we create from them—exist as crucial parts of our identities. Yet we can become empathetic of others' histories through their art. We've titled the 2023 edition of *The Messenger* “roots” because our roots help define us as artists and as people. Expressing one's roots is an essential part of art, and sharing in this expression opens the door for compassion.

While at times delving into isolation, our magazine ends on an uplifting note, to remind our readers that artistic expression and appreciation may be shared between all of us. Your art is something only you could create, but we may all enjoy it, learn from it, be inspired by it. From us and from all *The Messenger* staff, we hope you experience the same from this year's magazine.

Award Winners

The Margaret Haley Carpenter Award for Poetry

This award is presented to a student who has had an outstanding poem submitted for publication in *The Messenger*. The winner is chosen by a panel of English faculty members.

“woman-sac zoo (or: what’s in your purse? a bridal shower game playing card)*” by Evelyn Zelmer

Evelyn Zelmer is a sophomore from Ohio majoring in Geography and Anthropology and minoring in Creative Writing. They wrote this poem in a workshop held by poet Evie Shockley while attending the 2023 Juniper Summer Writing Institute. They are extremely grateful for this recognition, and they hope that their poem will inspire others to attempt a “prisoner’s constraint” for themselves!

The Margaret Owen Finck Award for Creative Writing

This award is presented to a student who has had an outstanding creative work submitted for publication in *The Messenger*. The winner is chosen by a panel of English faculty members.

“Blunder at the Snake Warehouse” by Thomas King

Thomas McCarthy King is a senior from Berwyn Pennsylvania majoring in business administration with a concentration in marketing and a minor in creative writing. I attribute this award to Professor David Stevens, the best teacher I’ve ever had. To my best friends, who heard about the prize money and decided I will buy them dinner. And most importantly, to my grandfather, who told me to keep writing. I’m going to be famous, so keep this magazine in good condition and it could be worth something someday.

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Claire Silverman

paint creek

Maddie Olvey

interstate eclipses into backwoods
choked with home-grown shadow
creeping wooly and wild up trees to drink
from moonlight and high beams
which curve along the hairpin turns
keeping your pulse a mothlike flutter
in your throat as you stare ahead into a thicket
so dark it's slowly pressed flat against your vision
into a painting of a forest that's no longer
real because when the black nothingness has
mass
how can you trust the weight of your own body

the wood breaks open to a road trailing home
where warm yellow light awaits
to fall on you differently
to call you stranger



Paris: March 8, 2023

Claire Silverman

river town

Mary Margaret Clouse

i could not tell you why i was afraid of the green night light
its fluorescent dragonfly shape slicing through the warmth of my butter
yellow bedroom
that was the year i realized people could die and that was something that
couldn't be fixed
in girl scouts abby told me she tried to drown herself once
that it only takes a tablespoon of water

i wish i was six years old
when my grandfather was still a voice on the other side of the
phone
whether i understood him or not
i am afraid to remember the last time i saw him
that is just one of the things we do not talk about

i was born just after midnight one morning in april
ten years before the boston marathon was bombed
ninety-one after the titanic sank
sixteen before notre dame burned
too early and too late all at once

i am trying to understand that not everything becomes the oppo-
site of what it was before
but if that is true
how will i ever be brave?
i cannot stop myself from trying to rebel against something
but there is nothing to fight

i wanted to look pretty when the man painted my picture
when it was finished i thought it looked too pale and too perfect
no one told me that self-determination only goes so far
in the gallery, i saw my mother's face in soft, thick brushstrokes
glowing warm against the blue wall

i remember that day in november
somewhere there is a video of the door slowly opening
the little black puppy sat panting on the porch
while i cried out of joy and shock and the fear of loving something
that will not outlive me
this is the only story i am not tired of telling

i watch children and dragonflies chase each other across the pool
all glistening silvery in the july heat
since seventeen it has been my job to make sure no one drowns
i come home dry most days
driving under the green lights as they cut through the dark

Virginia

Maggie Crowe

according to the magazine
everything before 2003
is vintage
but that just makes me sound old

i planned to be in midtown
not on the highway driving south
when august came around
i didn't want to go

inland virginia
the birds sing through the night
it's mundane and still beautiful
everything turned out alright

at the funeral i felt too old
to walk back alone
but you waited
outside the diner

you carry me in your pocket
let me live inside your closet
berry stained
like a colored glass choir

inland virginia
the birds sing through the night
it's mundane and still beautiful
everything turned out alright



i run my fingers through the front lawn
it overgrew while you were gone
when you're here
it makes sense again

wake up for breakfast
what do you need? won't you say less
dancing
for all of our friends

inland virginia
the birds sing through the night
it's mundane and still beautiful
everything turned out alright

**Richmond at
Dusk**

Bella Stevens

Dover

Claire Silverman

The path along the cliffs
narrows as we ascend,
ducking our heads from
the branches and sharp shrubs.
We emerge to high flatness.
Our path ends. We must go back
or go up. I mountain-goat my way
to the higher path, the next path.
These boots were not made for this.
Further on, we stop again, our feet
now covered in the white chalk dust.
My companions converse as I reach
my left arm to steady myself, the drop
to my right too close for my liking.
A loose piece of chalk comes away
in my hand. I tuck it in some napkins,
then place it in my pocket. Only when
I unwrap it later that night, back in
the bustle of London, do I notice
the shape of my chalk rock.
When set down a certain way, it mimics
the crest of the cliffs I took it from,
my own small bluff.

The Paper Mill

Riley Fletcher

I.

It started in the conveyor system. A 250-foot long tunnel, no wider than a gopher hole. Blockage, backup. You saw the smoke first and the fire later. The tunnel was inaccessible except from the inside—the shaft opened into a space roughly the size of a small house's entryway. There was no other way, they said and said again. Jimmie Weiss had run backwards, boots against the burning belt, pressing until he couldn't fit more than his head through, then aimed the hose into nothing while around him was only the roar of the machine, still on, still trying to drive the blazing chips.

When it was over the smoke blew to the right and dissolved over the town, falling and spreading like a black morning mist. School was almost out; recess had been canceled. The news urged folks to wear masks outside, but few people in East Ridge were watching. They had not yet identified the deceased, though one was known.

Bob Weiss was out on the back porch, alone but for his respirator and a pack of Camels. He had nothing to do and the ashtray was piling. Jenny was on her walk and Jimmie's shift ended late; in his age he was finding greater pleasure in loneliness. It was still early enough in the spring that he could see the water through the trees behind the house—in the summer the leaves blocked the view. The sun was warm but the air retained traces of winter. He mistook the smoke for storm clouds.

II.

The boat was hardly rocking on the glassy bay. To their left the water expanded to fill the horizon and mirrored a beam from the late afternoon sun. The summer sky was a hazy yellow-white blur. To their right the land chiseled the water into a creek, the bridges connected East and West Ridge, and the billowing steam from the paper mill was gradually releasing the only clouds in the sky.

“They ain’t biting,” said Jimmie.

“Cast again,” said Larry.

Larry was sixteen now, their father had said, and that’s damn sure old enough to take the boat out alone. But what about Jimmie, their mother had said. For god sakes, he’s been fishing a hundred times, and Larry’ll watch him. Jimmie watched Larry from across the boat—he’d taken those pills that made him sleepy again. Plus he was smoking those funny cigarettes he didn’t let Jimmie touch or talk about.

They were about ready to turn back when Jimmie felt the tug.

“Larry, Larry, I got it!”

He tugged and thrashed his shoulders as the bending rod flew back and forth over the edge of the boat. He felt his brother’s hands overtake his own, heaving at the reel, and he relaxed slightly. Off balance and swaying, Larry worked at the line, arms wrapped around Jimmie like he was reaching around a tree trunk. Jimmie took his hands off the rod, melting out of Larry’s grasp.

“Out of the way,” said Larry, slurring his words in the rush. The light from the sun was overbearing; blindly stumbling, fighting the fish, Larry heard the splash only faintly. He kept pulling.

“Larry!”

Tangled in the line, kicking and swinging and sputtering, Jimmie shouted for his brother. They’d left the lifejackets under the deck; Jimmie didn’t like how they chafed his armpits. His shoes and clothes stuck to his body and tugged down on him. He rose and fell under the waves from the swaying boat, choking and gasping. At last his brother’s voice reached him from the deck, a rumble above the slapping water, muted from his submerged ears.

Something hit the water in front of Jimmie; he grabbed it and pulled it to his chest. He found the rope tied to it and clung, pulling himself up onto the life preserver. Larry was sitting with his legs splayed on the deck, eyes wide and jaw clenched, reeling in his brother slowly. Above him the smokestacks continued suffocating the sky, steadily whiting out the horizon.

III.

He's driving over the bridge now. The mill comes into view—it's dark but the steam is clear as day. It's lit by the halogens beneath and glows grey like an overnight snowstorm. It reaches out in uniform segments carrying over the city; in the day they'd leave streaking shadows that cast a tiger print over the narrow streets. Grey metal beams extend from the factory at every angle. Lights glow along them like sparrows on a powerline. And something he's never noticed: small square openings in the towers, just big enough to crawl into, yet fifty feet off the ground. Nothing comes in or out; it just sits like a glassless window. He sees himself inside—standing in a pit of wood chips, pouring in processed from the belts, looking up from a pile at the only natural light patched in from the empty square. He thinks of the burning pulp, the smoking tunnels. He thinks of his father. He breathes a little heavier.

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. His parents hadn't seen him since he first left for school. He can't imagine Larry will make it but deep down he's been praying and holding on to the slightest hopeful straws he can grasp. That Larry loved football, that fall was his favorite season. That his father no longer would care if he smoked, in or out of the house. That his parents were getting older and less healthy by the day and before long someone would have to be there for them. That their father could no longer work and the fabric store was barely afloat. Or simply that it had been three years since he'd seen any of them.

He sits at East Ridge's only stoplight; the house is a block and a half away, the mill is on his right. And the smell. It hangs, invisibly, perpetually, over the town's uniform aluminum shingles. Reduced sulfides

and ammonias are blasted through the stacks, floating down streets and crawling into windows, up staircases, and into bedrooms. A nuisance but not a health concern, they say. He used to wonder if he was imagining the weight in his lungs. Now he feels it tugging as the adjacent stoplight turns the color of sulfur.

When his light turns green he pulls forward, makes a right, hooks into the driveway. The asphalt is cracked in several places and moss grows in the gaps, snaking like a river. Only the front window is lit; he knows his father is in the blue couch, reclined, smoking, while his mother sleeps. He only smokes while she sleeps. She's been sleeping a lot more lately.

IV.

His nametag read "Robert Wise." He'd never asked to get it fixed, and even if he had, he was sure they wouldn't fix it. It may as well have simply read "Forklift Operator," or even "Guy in the Reflective Vest #112." He had friends, but they were everybody's friends. They weren't rude, but they were cordial rather than friendly. He could hide in anonymity the way East Ridge hid beneath the shadow of the mill.

There weren't many like him anymore—those who could remember the town before the mill. It had always been what they'd call "historical," but now they'd refer to it simply as "history." There seemed only the mill to blame. His pre-industrialized childhood, summers on boats and winters on bikes, the small-town utopian dream of escape was now layered in his mind with nostalgia. He'd shared the dream with his friends, none of whom remained once the mill arrived. He alone fell victim to the machine, and for the last ten years he'd worked inside it while the dream still broiled faintly inside him.

Today seemed brighter in the factory—Bob had gotten cleared to leave two hours early. It was Jimmie's third birthday, perhaps the first he'd remember, and they were taking the evening to celebrate. Even Larry had agreed to help Jenny cook dinner. Bob had driven all the way to Rockport and bought a pristine model fire truck, handmade in Virginia, that he couldn't wait for Jimmie to unwrap. He knew they could make this the first

birthday Jimmie remembered—the prospect gave him a little thrill with every lever he pulled, every button he pushed.

Around mid-day (he could only tell by how long he'd been working, never by the natural light, since there wasn't any), driving several boxes of pulp to the processor, one of the managers waved for him to stop the forklift and step out. The manager led him to the end of the open space and down several hallways he'd never seen before. When they reached the end, the hall opened up and dozens of men stood, pressed as tightly as the wood chips, in the blank room. A beam of light shone from a single square window near the top of the ceiling, thirty feet in the air.

Amid the confusion Bob saw his boss, Mr. Fischer, talking to several police officers in the corner. When they stopped talking, they turned to the crowd and Fischer spoke.

“Gentlemen,” he said, solemnly, “I called you here because something terrible has happened. One of our own crane operators, Carter Moses, was involved in a tragic accident this morning. We're not entirely sure what has happened yet, but the stability of one of our cranes was compromised and Carter's body was removed from the wreckage.”

The air was growing thin, as though it were limited and being drained quickly by the crowd. Bob looked around at the men whose faces seemed generically miserable, as though Carter were just as much a stranger to them as he was to Bob. None of them met the eyes of Fischer, who continued speaking words that didn't reach Bob's ears. Something about notifying OSHA, a police investigation, safety of the workspace.

Bob started to cough. It was only a vague scratch in his throat, but when he searched for air he couldn't find any. The coughs continued, harsher and more frequent. He felt himself breaking down. He put his hands on his knees. Someone put their hand on his shoulder. They were all looking at him now. Bob couldn't hear anyone anymore, just rumbles, distinguished only by their distance from him. At some point he fell to his knees, head bowed with his chin in his chest. His knees were spread with enough space for a small package—suddenly he imagined himself as Jimmie with the wrapped firetruck before him, looking up with joy at his parents and brother. Fine lines of smoke carried from the birthday candles. Soon he'd unwrap the firetruck and they'd eat the cake together,

smiles and laughs and a night they'd all remember.

V.

Beside the stream, pressed between what was the Weiss property line and the placid waters, the eternal reeds bend sideways, leaning into the summer sunset. The orange horizon blends into the darkening navy above, the first stars poke through the skin of dusk, and the tower's emissions glow a toxic purple above. The place they called East Ridge is now one with West, North and South, stretched beyond separation in constant flux with the river. A gentle wind whistles through gaps in the stiff and barren branches, a pleasing melody to absent ears.

In the Traffic

Jeff Tsai



Check-In

by Evelyn Zelmer

my closet is all/ hand-me-downs that/ shrunk like brains/ to fit me my
hair is all /shagged and sea-hagged like the lip/ of a rusty kettle my mom
keeps forgetting/ to be wrong and so the house caught on fire/ and the
ash is black mold and/ grief is all/ the riotous self/ needs/ and the hole
opening/ for said/ grief/ is my bed is a landfill all/ the dressings of death
are stacked/ in mountains/ in my absence/ I am forgetting to be missed/
and the hole I left is home office home garbage disposal home/ storage
of things that don't fit/ us don't/ make us feel good/ I'll go home and be
in the wrong place but / I will end/ up/ remembering.



Virginia Beach *by Bella Stevens*

The Amistad

by Ryan Doherty

metal poisoned into our palms &
we've killed the days of
the early horizon of a distance
lost & we rise at dawn & search
for the hope in a crack of light
from above & those who fight
will become judged by the sharks
beneath

& those who place chains will
be immortal above the eyes of
millions & this skeleton of who
we are is guided by pale fingers
& ancestral calls pressed to flesh
& kerosene breath forever & no
longer

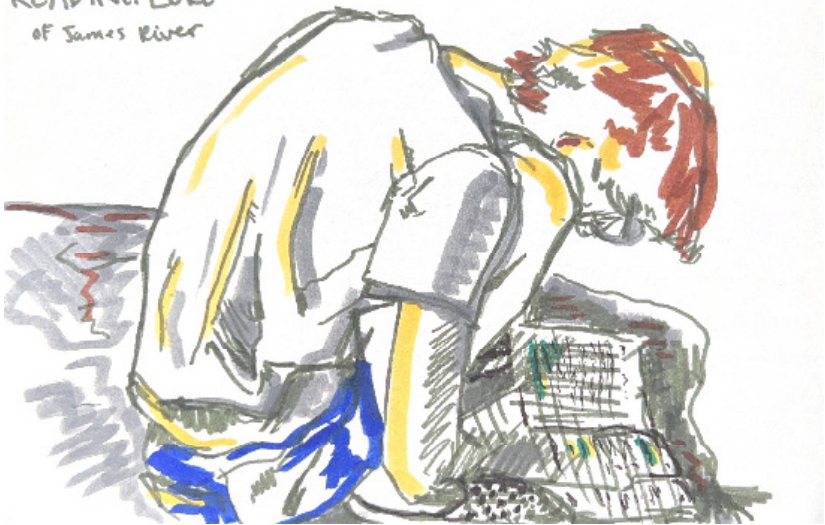
hoping the heart beats
& the phantoms above will be
laughing always to the unknown
launching our prayers
towards the end of this ocean
we will be moved
& hopefully

destiny can be reversed

& hopefully
we will be moved
towards the end of this ocean
launching our prayers
laughing always to the unknown
& the phantoms above will be
hoping the heart beats
forever & no longer

pressed to flesh & kerosene breath
guided by pale fingers & ancestral
calls & this skeleton of who we are
is immortal above the eyes of mil-
lions & those who place chains will
be judged by the sharks beneath
& those who fight will become
the hope in a crack of light from
above & we rise at dawn & search
for the early horizon of a distance
lost & we've killed the days of
metal poisoned into our palms.

READING LUKE
of James River





Luke study by *Georgia Leaky*

a moment, cut in half

by *Maddie Olvey*

golden shovel after Stephen L. Peck's A Short Stay in Hell

two halves of an orange—a moment cut,

somehow the slices are equally sweet.

filled by another. i am brimming

and slow in the afternoon.

should love that.

floating, the water quiet,

last long, we beautiful things,

you say everything glitters

see it in your cornflower eyes,

there, a smudge who has one sliver

everything, i will follow

sunset, chasing our smallness.

before and after,

i have never been this

with your clover breath, singing long

you say there is never enough time and that i

you say time is only ripples in a pond, and now i am

your hands in mine. we know we will not

we citrus fruits eaten before going bitter.

in the twilight of an end. and i

how you revel in being barely

of a star-breath to feel

your shape in the wind at

rejecting the universal all.

Blunder at the Snake Warehouse

by Thomas King

Otter itched the eczema scab on his neck. It was crusty. He multi-tasked; one eye glued on his computer monitor—a tangle of wires connected it to a conveyor belt in front of him. Cardboard tubes filled with a variety of snake paraphernalia passed along: drain snakes, trouser snakes, snake oil. Each package was labeled for Pete’s Snakes Inc. Last month, a runaway steamroller had flattened the former packaging systems manager and Otter was promoted two levels to fill the position. His new office had air-conditioning and a leather desk chair. A consequence of this luxury was the dry air from the AC, which exacerbated Otter’s skin condition. He extended a snake themed telescoping back scratcher (Courtesy of Pete’s) to hit the spot. Distracted, Otter’s elbow pressed the large red SNAKE SWAP button, switching the contents of two packages.

Jesse ushered her coworkers away from the box. As head herpetologist at the Philadelphia Zoo, she spearheaded the expansion of Reptile World with a brand-new venomous snake exhibit. She knew the dangers of handling these cold-blooded ophidians. Safety never takes a holiday, and neither does a snake. Her protective equipment was top of the line. She even brought an extra can of Pete’s Snake Spray. Her coworker who cleaned up the gorilla shit commented on the snake’s silence. Jesse admitted that the lack of hissing was unusual, but this behavior had been observed in the field by snake researchers. The *Serpent’s Gazette* referred to it as “playing possum.” She aimed her Snake Spray in one hand while the other carefully opened the parcel. Three neon orange plastic snakes sprang out.

Seymour flipped his phone shut. Bitter, salty tears welled in his eyes. He didn’t get the part. No *Oliver Twist*. No big break. Mrs. Satriale asked him to come inside and start the show. He bit his quivering lip and started getting into character. His magic act emphasized style over substance. The audience didn’t know any better. Some basic card tricks, then making coins disappear, then pulling a rabbit out of his hat. The crowd was like putty in the palm of his hand. Midway through the act, a younger

crowd was like putty in the palm of his hand. Midway through the act, a younger attendee knocked a cup off his highchair. This forced a brief intermission as Mrs. Satriale fought against the devastating grape juice spill. She was too late. There was no saving the white throw rug, but Seymour knew the show must go on. He rifled through his bag of novelties, finally settling on the can of fake snakes that had arrived from Pete's the night before. With a smile, he handed the tube to the birthday boy. Fake snakes were always a hit.

A Child, A Girl, and A Ghost

by Julia Abzug

It is eleven o'clock.
I will be yet another year older in an hour.
I stay awake waiting, staring at my ceiling in the dark.
I think back to my beginning.
I am flooded by memories of my younger self.
Her, being held by her father.
Her, reaching up to hold her mother's hand.

She was so small then.

I think of other nights I've spent like this:
Staring, thinking, remembering.
I never liked thinking of my younger self back then;
I mourned her. In becoming who I was, I murdered her.
I spent nights burying her in six feet of bitterness and regret.

I was so small then.

I think of myself now.
I slip out of bed and stand in front of the mirror in the dark.
Even now, she stands next to my reflection.
I watch as she quietly examines who I am, who I've become.
She meets my eyes and smiles, soft and reassuring.

I'm so much taller than her now.

Green numbers read twelve o'clock.
Another year older.
I look back at my reflection, and I'm standing alone.
It's only me.
I think of a child being held by her father, holding her mother's hand.
I think of a girl staying awake at night, desperately burying a casket.
I think of a ghost, smiling at me in a dark reflection.

I think of me, taller than them all.

I quietly get back into bed and close my eyes.

I dream of a child, a girl, and a ghost

Lying in the grass, watching the sun travel across the sky.



obi dog by *Georgia Leaky*

April 7th

by Claire Silverman

1.

The rustling of leaves, and birdsong
There is rain.
Soft,
a man is sleeping next to him
eyes are still shut.
his eyes — gentle, wise.
The only difference is
an envelope.
warmth, a pocket.
Fires are stoked
against the Priesthood.
A handkerchief with
ham and bread.
The world above has disappeared
in the snow
hiding any sins there may be
underneath.

2.

half-light
a simmering sense of photographs.
hushed shadows
Alive as far as I know.
the map hesitates,
cuts its way across the paper.
The tide is wrong.
After dawn,
a parting gift:
An envelope
(hides his shock in time.)
Two small packs of biscuits,
daylight,

3.

Daylight. Breathing heavy, braziers
have been lit. They slow down.
A sudden smothering silence.
He pushes aside,
on the verge of tears.
He steals glances at him, concerned.
The two men remember,
his body, his voice.
A fire is lit.
A small bed.
His face shines queerly,
a miracle, this holy laugh.

4.

The whole world is lunar.
The only sound is his breathing,
both men are still.
One arm outstretched, a heavy breath.
They move.
He looks to him,
Fuck me.

5.

A photograph.
The two men are frozen,
a flash of blinding light.
Dust swirls in the room,
Lips, wide open,
arm grasping on.
Trust.
Don't let go of me.

6.

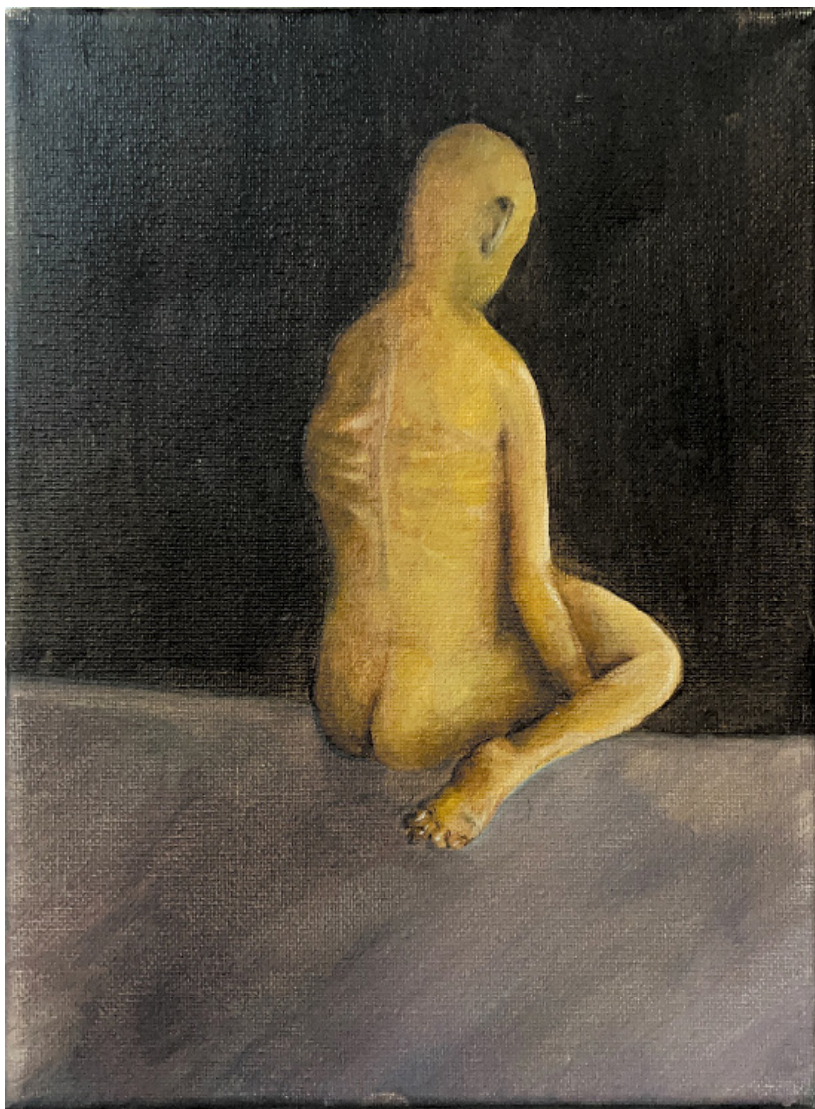
Why in God's name did you
choose me?

7.

He was moaning, sweet.
The middle of the night,
couldn't get enough of him.
Pleased,
a bottle of wine.
He looks at him, chokes up.

8.

Beautiful.
He gently cradles him,
wraps one arm around his back.
There is blood on his lips,
profound sadness follows the shock.
He holds his hand.
Death is close,
already in his eyes.
He is no longer breathing.
Nothing is heavier than
the body of someone you loved.



Uneasy, Thinking Back *by Georgia Leaky*

Anti-Elegy

Evelyn Zelmer

no disaster is natural, and
nobody knows what to die of,
so nobody dies.

my people are Easter people. those who come back,
who rise, who say their goodbyes for 3 midwestern hours and then
knock right back again to pick up their tupperware. we are experts
in saving. in putting life back into what is left. over
and over we melt we harden
we melt again and
we act as if we have always been this soft.

my burden is a bellwether. I lend
myself to my neighbors,
my exponential neighbors,
and I shake my jingling fist into the endless night forever. for the arc
of our industry is long and bends towards wind,
for my chickens have laid more eggs than I know what to do with,
for there is such a thing as abundance.

my brother has no job, but
he has never killed a bug. he wrestles
my dad away from the crawdad bucket
and he punches him on behalf of those who were boiled alive.
he does not get along with adults.
he does not work.
he has no money.
he has the grandest fish tank you have ever seen.
little infinities swimming across the concrete wall of our dank
basement.

my future is not elsewhere and I am still a success story.
I am slick and evil but I wend towards a new reality and I am always caring
for my sick.

always waiting outside the Super 8 motel.
always a glob of vaseline in the cracked palms of my parents.
I write the world.
I slick the streets and I slide home.

my loss is a cavernous pockmark, a hole in my face
I smooth over with plaster.
my backyard too is filled with buried things and their craters,
and I sit criss-crossed on the
remembered suspension of their phantom grass.
a shady spruce rains on my head:
syrups,
needles,
critters,
it is okay here.
and if we're gonna live long,
if we're gonna mythologize the struggle,
then we must imagine Sisyphus happy.
we must imagine the rock crystal clear.
if we're gonna create a beginning,
if we're gonna name the monster, hold it
by the scruff of its black black market,
then we must slash its O like G-d,
and herein never cry.

we must hold gratitude,

hold grief,

be stretched
wide.



edimburgo

Tereza Hernandez

Grey Monday

Riley Fletcher

He found the girl on the riverbank with her red boots sticking out of the snow. She'd been dumped there overnight, he figured. She was resting atop the couple inches that had fallen the day prior, but her face was powdered by the morning's dusting. He'd followed the tracks to the river and they led him right to her, stopping at the waterline. Sloppy job.

The man walked the cold mile back to his cabin and picked up the landline. Martha was frying up bacon in the kitchen. The heat from the fireplace and the stove turned his face pink.

"911, what's your emergency?" said Cleo over at the police station.

"This is Ern Hammond, I'm at 24 Hillside Drive in Scottswood."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Well hey Ern, how can I help you?"

“I found a girl this morning by my creek. About a mile from my house. She’s dead.”

“Ern? Who are you talking to?” called Martha.

“Are you sure she’s dead? No pulse or anything?” Cleo sipped her coffee and tapped on her desk. This was her first call of the day. Early mornings were for the crackpots.

“No pulse. It seems she’s been here all night. Probably got left here some time yesterday.”

“Can you describe her for me?” She pulled a notebook and pen from her desk. Young, uh huh, black coat, blonde hair. Her eyes were closed. Red boots he noticed above the snowbank. She felt Larry to her right staring at her over the divider, eyeing her scribbles. She shoed him away with her non-writing hand. Then she patched in the sheriff.

“Is there anything else you need? I got breakfast going cold,” said Ern.

“Please stay on the line, Sheriff Fiers will be over there but I need to keep you until he gets there.”

“But they’re coming?”

“Yes, they’re on their way. How did—” The line went dead. Cleo sighed and leaned back in her chair.

Nothing says January blues like a Sunday-to-Monday blizzard. And nothing bleaches the mind like the station’s buzzing over a TV-static snowfall. Minutes climbed on minutes while Cleo picked at her nails. Larry had answered his own call, a wreck just off the interstate. Big eighteen-wheeler swerves, hits a sedan, sedan spins out, pileup.

The lobby, always some shade of yellow, today took on a mustard-brown. Probably the greyness outside. The sheriff was filling up his coffee when Cleo walked over. He had his coat on.

“Ern Hammond, eh?” he said.

“Do you know him?”

“Yeah, he’s alright. Lived here forever. He’s got a wife and a boy, they’re probably both at home now.”

“He hung up on me.”

Fiers chuckled. “He’s not one to give you any more of his time than he thinks you deserve. I’m surprised he called at all. I’d bet on his innocence just for that.”

He stepped out of the way to let Cleo fill up her cup and said

goodbye before he went out the door. They'd salted the lot the night before but a good two inches had accumulated since he pulled into work that morning. Peters was already standing at the passenger door, waiting for him to unlock the car.

Peters had come from the southwest—the fry-an-egg-on-the-hood-of-your-car part of Arizona. He clung to his seatbelt as the old Ford plowed through the snow, turned sludge by salt and road grime. It was his fourth week on the job and he seemed, to Fiers, more put off by the weather than the body they were about to see.

“You ever seen snow before?” asked the Sheriff.

“Yeah. It's been a while.”

“I reckon you've seen more bodies than snowy roads in your time.”

He hesitated. “Yeah. I suppose.”

They drove into miles of silence. If the guy left any tracks, thought Fiers, they'd likely be gone by now. What they see on the girl is what they'd have to work with. She'd yet to be identified—he played over Hammond's descriptors in his mind, cycling through all possible matches. He did this mostly with fugitives, less so with dead girls. Dimples or no dimples, big or small lips, was she doe-eyed, was her hair short, how was she positioned in the snow when Ern found her? No age, no cause of death, no ID, just a dead girl. The deputy had loosened up as the roads got saltier. They cruised onto the interstate.

The traffic was a wall and they hit it hard. Fiers slammed the brakes and Peters clutched up again. It piled on for miles as far as they could see. Incandescent red against the grey morning, the greyer road sludge. Exhaust pouring from the cars darkened the greyness. “God damn it,” muttered Fiers. “Will you hand me the radio?”

Cleo heard the sheriff's voice and hustled back to her desk. She'd let herself get stuck by the coffee pot chatting to Larry. “Ronnie, everything alright?”

“All good, Cleo, we just met a bit of traffic, would you mind calling over to the Hammonds to let them know we'll be a little later than expected?”

“Sure thing,” she said. That'll give Ern Hammond a little more time to clean up his mess. Maybe Ronnie knew him a little better than she did, and she wasn't going to speak over him, but she'd spoken to

guilty men before. She'd heard men report a crime they'd committed and been too chickenshit to confess. When you know it's the right thing to call but you still hold out hope you may get away with it. Mumbling equals evasion. Throw in vagueness and you've got yourself a story full of holes and a man full of secrets.

"Hi, Ern? This is Cleo with the Scottswood Police, we spoke this morning," she said. "Sheriff Fiers wanted me to let you know he's on his way, he's just stuck in a little traffic at the moment."

"Yeah," he said, gruff and quiet, "I see it on TV. The whole highway is blocked."

"Yep, we've got people figuring that out as you and I speak," said Cleo. A swarm of officers had rushed from the station after Larry's call, headlong into the storm. "Maybe you could tell me a little more about the girl you found."

"Sure. She was probably a teenager, wearing some kind of blue eye makeup." He trailed off. Martha was listening. She looked up from her newspaper, sternly, eyes wide. "Um, one moment," said Ern. He put the receiver to his chest. "What is it?" he asked Martha.

"You're gonna incriminate yourself! Don't tell her too much!"

"But I didn't do it."

"They'll twist it however they want to!"

Ern put the phone back to his ear. "I didn't look too closely. I didn't touch her or anything."

A couple more minutes and Cleo let him hang up. Fiers and the deputy Peters would be there before too long, she'd said. As soon as the call ended Martha let him hear all the ways they'd flip the story around to pin the girl on them. Ern figured he might have had this coming, walking in and calling the cops before speaking to her. But confrontation was inevitable, better not to wait on calling. She snatched a dish from him and started scrubbing furiously, pushing him away from the sink. "Go wake up Harry," she said.

Ern walked upstairs and pushed open the bedroom door. The blackout curtains were still down and the lump was still beneath the sheets. "It's eleven AM," said Ern. The lump didn't budge. Ern was surprised it didn't rise in response to bacon, but a snow day is a snow day. At least the computer was off. He'd heard shuffling around 2 or 3 and assumed it had been a long night of screening. The game console power

button glowed orange, which meant it went to sleep on its own after hours of inactivity. As was customary for those long nights. “I’m leaving the door open,” said Ern. Then he walked back downstairs.

Snow outside fell like ash. Powder turned to wet, heavy flakes—it was getting warmer. This snow would squeak under your boots and pile twice as fast. Ern had gotten halfway down the driveway when Harry came out to help shovel. They’d nearly finished when the beams from Sheriff Fiers’ Ford appeared over the hill. It was nearly 3 in the afternoon.

They parked along the street. “Give me ten more minutes and you can pull right up,” said Ern. He and Harry leaned against their shovels.

“No worries,” said Fiers, “This is Deputy Peters.” The man beside Fiers gave Ern a nod. His lips were blue. Ern nodded back. “Do you mind showing us where you found that girl?”

Hammond and Fiers trudged side-by-side, Peters trailing. Ern’s tracks from the morning walk were still visible, faintly, beneath the freshly fallen wet snow. Peters hated snow and hated wetness. His socks were wet and his pants were caked in snow. It clung to him in clumps and weighed him down around the ankles. Some kind of promotion this was.

The scene at the riverbank was just as Ern had described, except now only the toes of the girl’s red boots were visible. Her face had been buried. Fiers brushed the snow away and they finally got a look at her face. The right side of her head had been steadily leaking blood and stained the snow beside her.

“Did you close her eyes?” asked Fiers.

“They were like that this morning,” said Ern.

“Whoever did this must’ve done it.” He touched her hair and rotated her head to the side, exposing the wound to the open air. “I’m guessing an ice pick. Something pointed but dull. Blindsided.”

“But it looks like it happened right here,” said Peters. “The blood being fresh on the snow and all.”

Fiers nodded and smiled up at him. Peters didn’t appreciate the condescension.

“How long before you think she...” said Ern. He didn’t finish the sentence.

“Can’t really say,” said Fiers. “With these things there’s never much consciousness after the initial blow. But it looks like she only got hit once. So it could have been a while. Half an hour, maybe.” Peters, after only a month, knew when Ronnie was bullshitting. This was one of those times. “Ready to head back up and call it in?”

“Aren’t you gonna look a little closer?” asked Ern.

Fiers looked at Peters, then back at Ern. “We’ll let our forensics guys take a closer look. But we’ll have to call them. Mind if we use your phone?”

It was already getting dark when they got back to the Hammond house. Fiers led the whole way back, retracing his faded footsteps with purpose. Peters felt his face going numb and stiff, just like the girl’s. Ern realized she was still nameless. She was young, but they hadn’t even searched her pockets for ID. She seemed about Harry’s age.

Martha had the roast going, and the smell hit them as they opened the door. Up the stairs, Ern could hear the computer sounds spilling over from Harry’s room.

“Sure smells great in here, Mrs. Hammond,” said Fiers.

“Mm-hmm,” said Martha, with a slight smile. She hoped he and his partner would take that as a sign that they were not invited to stay.

The Sheriff picked up the landline and started speaking to someone named Cleo. Peters stood by the door with his hands in his pockets. Ern brought him a mug and set another in front of Fiers. The snow blanketing the house seemed to stifle the air inside—an anxious silence hung with the Sheriff’s inflexible instructions in the background.

“Dinner’s almost ready, Ern,” said Martha. “Will you get Harry?”

Ern walked back upstairs. Fiers, after putting down the receiver, straightened himself up and looked politely at Martha. “We’ll get out of y’all’s way for dinner, while we wait for our guys to get here.” He gestured to Peters. Martha smiled curtly at them. “We’ll be in the car if you need anything,” he said.

It was dark. The lights on the porch came on, and the heavy flakes glowed against a deep navy backdrop. When the remaining police cars pulled in, rather than coming in, Fiers and Peters led the new officers straight back to the riverbed. The Hammond family sat silent around the dinner table. Harry and Ern had finished and Martha was

catching up, her own roast going cold.

“You get your work done for tomorrow?” Ern asked.

“There’s not gonna be school tomorrow, Dad,” said Harry.

“That’s no excuse to get behind,” said Martha, not looking up.

“What are you gonna do when the snow melts and you have a week of work to do in a night?”

Harry shrugged weakly. “Can I be excused,” he muttered.

Martha nodded. “Put your plate in the dishwasher,” she said. The boy did as he was told and walked up to his room without saying another word. Ern stayed seated across from her, watching the falling snow. She didn’t know what to say to him. She thought about the officers and that poor girl. Still, nobody knew her name. Martha didn’t even know what she looked like. Everything that day had happened around her; Ern didn’t say anything except to the cops. Not right to speak about such things to a woman, he’d say. Right, better to keep things hidden, she’d say back.

But then there’s what she wouldn’t tell him, wouldn’t tell anybody. She could tell Ern didn’t know, since he hadn’t said anything. Or maybe he did know, he just didn’t want to say it out loud. Didn’t want to legitimize what she knew. Waking up to her back aching and hearing what she heard. When it was just the door, she thought she might be hearing things, maybe still a little bit asleep. But then there were those footsteps up the stairs that could have been no one else’s but Harry’s (how strange that you can come to recognize the sound of somebody’s footsteps). If she wasn’t already awake, she wouldn’t have heard a thing.

Tomorrow the cops would know her name. They’d know how she died and what she was doing before and why she was on Hammond property when it happened. It was far from over. They’d talk to her and Ern and then they’d talk to Harry. Martha wondered what they would learn.

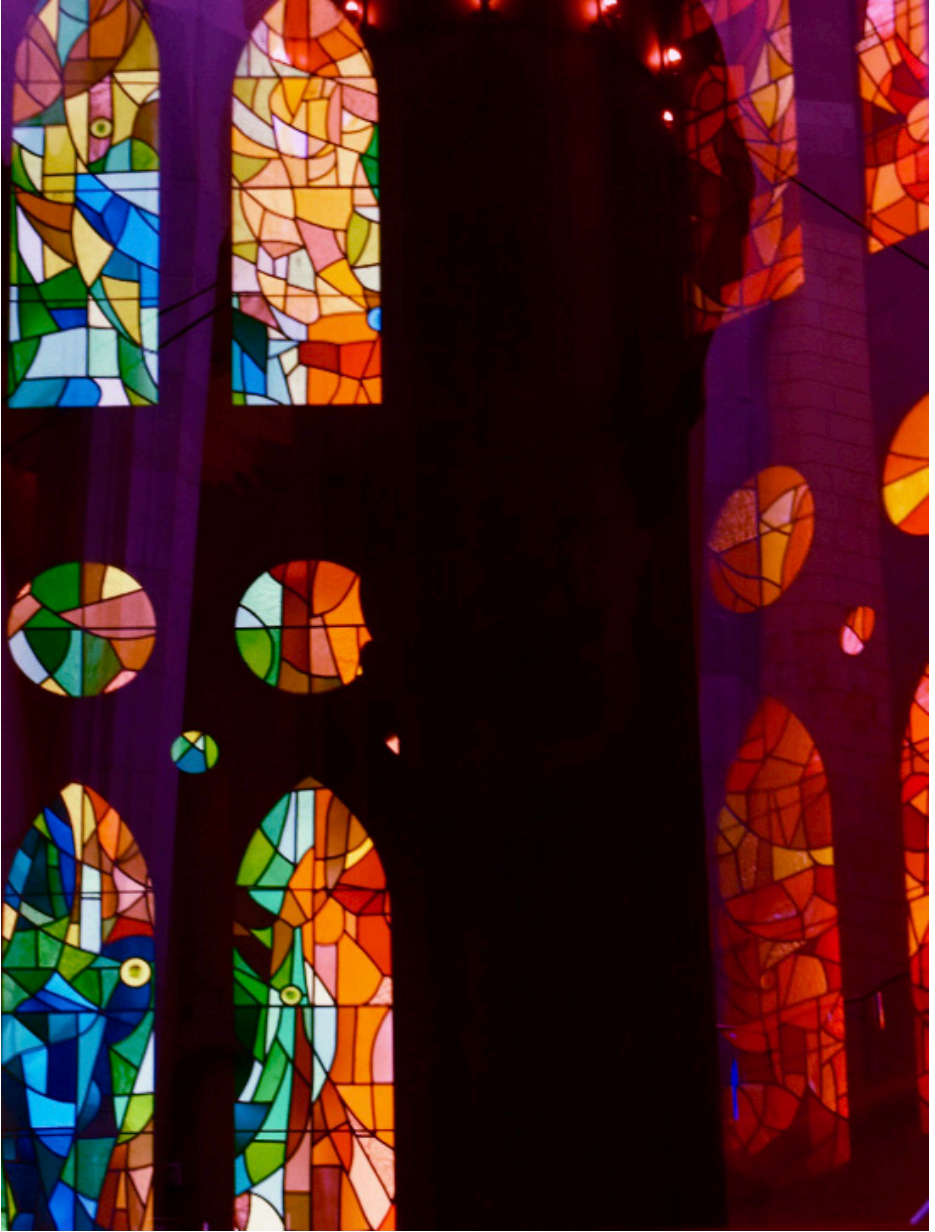
The Sunken Place

Bella Stevens

In the sunken place, all is
quiet. I hear, from above,
the echoes of an itching pair of safety
scissors waiting to unwrap the flesh
that binds my gift
of a soul and a mind.

I uncover you
as you rise from the ground,
stepping out of a blackness,
drenching your waist to your feet,
emerging from the envelopment of
Sylvia Plath's wet dream.
So familiar, sensing a oneness
within me, yet, you are
entirely different,
in a vintage coating that makes you
nearly unrecognizable.
That smile, undoubtedly,
has played a part.

The sparkling sun on man-made
ripples, exhales from the sea,
give life to your fantasy.
Your muted eyes tell more than
your pained smile, painted on
the delicate cheeks that, once,
thought for themselves and
had dreams as deep as your
dimples and as real as your
emerging breath. The fall and
swell leaves me wondering when
you will meet your end.



kaleidoscope

Catherine Leeder

For He Shall Be Like a Tree

by Sean Doolan

I see her in everything. The bathroom mirror, the bottles in the liquor cabinet, the windows of the front door – everywhere I look, I see her glaring back at me, her image inescapable. Having lain awake restless for most of the night, I am confounded as I wonder what He is trying to tell me. At first I was hopeful, thinking that it may be a hint at answers, perhaps finally an inkling of truth to provide solace. I ultimately conclude that this is unlikely; even if any answers are present within the horror, they are far too masked by the suffering they provoke to discern from them any meaning. Resigning to the draw of insomnia, I don a winter jacket over my worn out Cubs t-shirt and quietly open the front door, slipping out into the bitter Midwestern night.

I switch on the defroster with a numb index finger and shift into drive, taking a left out of the driveway. The Subaru Outback's headlights only pierce several feet of the dense snowscape, doing little to alleviate the poor visibility. The uniformly spaced street lights reflect off flurries of snow to produce a haze that divorces the tranquil inner-car space from the lively outside world, almost suspending it like a bubble in time as the vehicle slowly rolls along Cordelia Street. I turn on the radio in an attempt to drown out my thoughts. The Christmas music station is still on from the other day – “I'll Be Home For Christmas” (the Sinatra version) is playing.

The regret binds me and overwhelms me, producing an all too familiar pit deep within my stomach and only tightening its grasp when I try to confront its essence. I run through my thoughts in an attempt to make sense of it. I land upon the day the suffering began, a day that, despite only being several months ago, now feels worlds away. I remember sitting in the doctors' office, almost too overwhelmed by the shock of the news to muster the courage that might be expected of a father in such a position, the doctors calmly explaining that her condition was treatable with the right protocol. The thing about receiving news of that nature is you never really know how you're going to react to it until it actually happens; it's almost like your brain reverts to its most primordial state, prepared to do whatever necessary to avoid further agony. So, still too engulfed by parental distress to consider any alternative, I

nodded my head in agreement with them, clinging to the source of cosmic authority that made itself most available to my tailspinning psyche at that moment.

The gravity of that head nod was only brought to my attention after the meeting was over, when her mother, who had sat beside me quietly during our conversation with the doctors (this was only peculiar in retrospect), soberly informed me that my trust in the doctors was indicative of a “frightening lack of faith.” This ignited a several day argumentative saga, and with it, the genesis of even more shame upon my conscience, although notably of lesser potency than that from the primary source. At first I attempted to plead with her, scrambling to explain that maybe it was His will for her to receive medical treatment, that maybe we ought to consider His ability to reveal His love in unexpected places. Later on, I got desperate, begging her to find it in herself to put our own daughter’s life over unsubstantiated faith and to consider her ethical priorities. This triggered a prompt phone call to Pastor James, who invited us to meet him at the church after the next morning’s service.

Needless to say, our little argument was abruptly extinguished by the Pastor that morning. Still almost too incredulous to articulate a coherent opposition, I sat beside her mother in the church basement for nearly an hour, passively listening as the Pastor pontificated on the importance of appeasing His anger not through secular means and the power of deepening one’s relationship with Him and the virtue of maintaining faith through adversity and all the rest. I’ll admit that after hearing enough to discern his opinion on the issue, I hardly listened to the words he spoke; it was a sermon that I had heard many times by that point, and I knew well enough that my wisest option was to keep silent on the issue.

Sinatra’s soothing croon is abruptly replaced by the unwelcome zest of Mariah Carey, compelling me to switch the radio off. The rhythmic squeaking of the windshield wipers over the hum of the car’s engine reignites my rumination. It’s remarkable, I remember thinking, how so many Christians don’t consider the true implications of theology unless their personal lives hinge on it. For years, I had idly accepted the truth of the Pastor’s ideology, standing by in complacent agreement as I

watched him give nearly identical advice to dozens of fellow parishioners. It wasn't until this particular moment that I had an uncontrollable impulse to reject everything he was saying, overcome by an intense fury that could only be stirred within a father by a threat to the life of his daughter. This realization only served to compound the pain of my current conundrum, leading me (before our meeting with the Pastor was even through) to conclude that until now, my faith in His love had been weak, merely a product of dogma and habit. In the midst of this philosophical stupor, the possibility dawned on me that the hesitance in my faith may in fact be the agent driving this whole atrocity. Instead of trusting in His plan, I constantly questioned it, clinging to the secular impulses that the world outside of the church tempted me with. Could my half-baked faith truly have been such a grave sin as to warrant such punishment? This notion hadn't crossed my mind before that moment, and its presence introduced an unpleasant new dimension to the whole situation.

With this enlightenment came enough self loathing to practically incapacitate me for the remainder of that weekend, much less continue an argument with her mother. I know being in a state of psychosis or whatever may not appear to be an adequate excuse for not standing up to your spouse, but, even if I was to dig in my heels, it would have hardly been wise. She was obviously firm in her stance, and I recognized my duty as a husband to promote marital unity in the face of hardship. Plus, on some level I figured that rebellion against the church's instruction wouldn't help my guilt about the whole lukewarm faith thing. All of this is to say that by the time of our next appointment to see the doctors, we had come to a consensus, agreeing to inform them of our choice to forgo the treatment plan they had recommended. This appointment was succeeded by a string of sleepless nights, laying in bed with a conscience plagued by uncertainty and guilt, careful to keep my tears silent so as to not wake up her mother beside me.

I think it's safe to assume that Pastor James sensed my frustration about the whole situation, because after the next week's service he pulled me and her mother aside and offered to lead a weekly prayer group in our daughter's honor. He told me that ailments like hers had been cured before through prayer, reminding me of how one of my

parents' friends had once cured their cancer or something through "a strengthening of her faith." Without missing a beat, her mother pounced on the opportunity, praising the Pastor for his wisdom and generosity. So for the next three months or so, every Monday evening after dinner, dozens of faithful friends and family would gather in the church basement as we raised our hands over her body and prayed, willing Him to enter her and restore her good health. For a while, I convinced myself that I could feel His strength as it grew inside of her, expelling the bad things and renewing her with His love. This is not to say I enjoyed those groups; the process of greeting the attendees each week was dreadful enough to make me want to slip back into a state of psychosis. Their sympathetic smiles and warm handshakes cut like blades into my conscience, many of them praising all three of us for things like our "bravery" and "abundance of faith." I innately detested the idea of promoting my own status within the church through the means of something like this, let alone doing so in light of my already-concerning deficiency in faith. And as things got worse for her, people weren't very good at hiding their skepticism about the effectiveness of the prayer. Each week, their pleasantries grew increasingly more distant and less authentic, until they practically morphed into thinly veiled judgments of me and her mother, as if quietly sneering at our moral character or parental fitness or general intelligence or something of the sort.

People continued to visit her in the hospital on Monday evenings when she was eventually moved into hospice. However, with each subsequent week fewer and fewer people came, until it was just her mother, Pastor James, and I. By that point, it had been several weeks since I exchanged anything more than pleasantries with the Pastor, something that I don't really think I can be blamed for given the circumstances. The irony of seeing the same man who was allegedly integral to the conception of my family virtually condemn my own daughter to death was not lost on me. It's difficult to explain why I was so much more frustrated with him than I was with her mother – admittedly, I still struggle to completely rationalize it. Perhaps it had something to do with the way I saw him growing up: an infallible source of moral authority to be obeyed by any self-respecting Christian in our community. I never blamed her mother for her stance on the issue; I even came to envy it to

an extent. Her devotion to the faith was something I had always admired in her, and I knew for certain that her faith was entirely sincere, if slightly naive. Pastor James, on the other hand, always seemed logical about faith in a way that almost gave him an intrinsic aura of compassion and righteousness, as if he could be blindly trusted to know moral truths. I couldn't reason if his actions here represented more of a betrayal of this idea of him or an intentional belligerence towards me and my family. Or maybe I was just upset at his ability to have a say when he didn't really have a stake in the issue, at least not in the same capacity as her mother and I.

I'm still shivering as my cotton sweatpants, saturated with melted snow, press against the car's cold leather seat. Out of the neighborhood, I make a right onto Route 6. The two lane commuter road usually riddled with early morning traffic at this hour is uncharacteristically serene. I figure I'm about three minutes away. My mind jumps again, this time to the hospital earlier this morning, the moment we all knew was coming but dreaded no less. Imprinted in my memory is the look in her eyes as she and we exchanged a drawn out wordless glance several moments before they closed, her breathing slowing but her mind still cognizant of her surroundings. I will never know what the exchange meant to her, but the prospect of its various potential meanings only serve to further the agony. Even at her age, I could tell that she inherited her faith from her mother. Through all of the prayer groups and doctors appointments and hospitalizations she remained steadfast in her confidence that He would intervene, her belief only propelled by weekly church service and her mother's frequent dinner table homilies. Could it have been that in her final moments this stoic devotion had lapsed when she recognized the turmoil within me, pleading for some kind of intervention from the one person in her life tasked with protecting it at all costs? I cursed Pastor James, I cursed her mother, and I cursed Him as I cried in the hospital bathroom that afternoon, overcome with disgust for myself and everything around me.

Ironically, it was only after blaspheming Him, coupled with a good amount of emotional purging, that it finally dawned on me. Like Job's epiphany, it felt as if the lurking clouds of torment had at once been pulled back to reveal a glimpse of His grace, subtle to my own

eyes yet no less awesome in its unbridled truth: He too once loved. And not only that, but He loved as a father, just as I do, forced to watch His son glare up and accuse Him of forsaking him as he suffered an entirely preventable death. I wonder if He felt that same agony that I feel, if He was forced to perform the same horrific calculus, weighing the worth of His son's life against a sense of secular duty. At last, I recognize His struggle in all of its Goodness and am able to look upon my own in the same light. Acknowledging His gift, I pray to thank Him as I approach my destination.

I delicately pump the brakes in anticipation of the familiar right turn into the church's parking lot. Gone are the street lights of the neighborhood and with it the hypnotic effect they had on the flurries of snow. As I drive through the grove of trees into the small lot, the church itself is hardly visible through the intensifying blizzard, only a steepled silhouette against a dynamic white background. As I get closer, more detail begins to come into view: first the reflection of moonlight off of the stained glass windows, then the white marble steps leading up to the entrance. It isn't until I park in front of the steps and brace myself to face the frigid wind that I notice the unmistakable bouncing of tree branches in place of the usual entryway. I force open the car door and bound up the iced-over steps, keeping a hand on the railing so as to not slip. As I arrive at the top and prepare to reach for the door, I am met with only stray bricks and broken branches. The tree having sliced like a knife through nearly a quarter of the building, the church's interior is barely visible through the gaping hole carved by the trunk. I can only make out several snow covered pews as I stand quivering in the freezing wind, unsure of when I will inevitably resolve to return home.

a gospel on foreign relations

by Mary Margaret Clouse

the plane takes off while i listen to robert smith sing pictures of you
i wish i could always feel like everything is in front of me and nothing is
behind

i tell my mom there's a priest on my flight and i'll see her in a week
i could make this about being trapped between some ohioan and the win-
dow

because calling it grief would give you too much credit

my roommate called my sensitivity a gift (but i cannot stop shooting it in
the mouth)

i was reading about war while my grandmother was in the hospital and i
was thinking about you

how is it that you place yourself next to the worst things in life and what
does that say about me?

i trace stigmata in my palms, pressing phantom holy wounds like brakes in
the passenger seat

i know you are tired of the way i try to make everything stop

you can pretend that loving me isn't a chore and i will forget what it is
supposed to be

two hundred years ago, emerson wrote poetry comes nearer to vital truth
than history

you and your textbooks would hate that

the same way you hate me for giving everything meaning

then ask for my help finding the right words

i draw red lines through the treaty (but my arteries are running out of ink)

unhappy that i am, i cannot heave my heart into my mouth

said king lear's only honest daughter

each time it rains, shakespeare tries to teach me a lesson about loyalty

but i'll still swallow the grenade instead of asking for more

Paris 22

by Tereza Hernandez



Oh indulge me

by Tereza Hernandez

Sweet cranberry paint
That drips down as she holds the spear
Once the rain settles
The tears shrivel
She tastes that tarte wine on her fingertips
To calm her worries
Oh the tranquility it brings to hold power over herself
But lest anybody see her
For it is a sin to give way to detrimental acts
She is at war with her body
Swords and spears emerge at every threat
Her battle ground
Her canvas her body is
Engulfed
In sweet cranberry paint
She will indulge
Till she has ridden herself to death

Red Shorts

by Tereza Hernandez

There is something morbid about reminiscing on
The days you can't seem to remember
My ear is placed against a rock and no matter how much I tap gently with
my wrist and try to imagine
You
I do not hear a sound
But, my other ear that is pointed to the sky catches echoes of laughter
Like tulips that hold my tears, I water them gently
They like when it rains.

I pause when I get a whiff of the pine trees
The same ones in your brother's backyard
I'd look at them from balcony that creaked after every step you took
The wood cried under your weight
I think they wanted me to save them before you broke them too
But, I haven't heard from them since.

There is something so morbid about seeing a picture you are in but not
remembering a single moment
before, during, or after it
For years to come,
Until one day
The cloud moves a little bit,
Only enough to wake you
And make you notice how long you've been gone?

I don't know where those red shorts are. Dead probably. It's not like they
would fit me anymore. I like to imagine that they play around in our old
home
The last place they ever saw you,
Dancing around trying to find you
And, I fear for them. I do.
They'll get so tired. Of dancing
Of trying
Because I still haven't found you either
And when I die those red shorts will still be dancing.

Underground

by Lucy Yeomans

I stare at white walls;

I want to spill words on them:

Fill them with unreasonable truth.

I want them to bleed with ink and asbestos

Spelling the death of this clean world,

The consumption of darkness,

The drowning in words that can't be written.

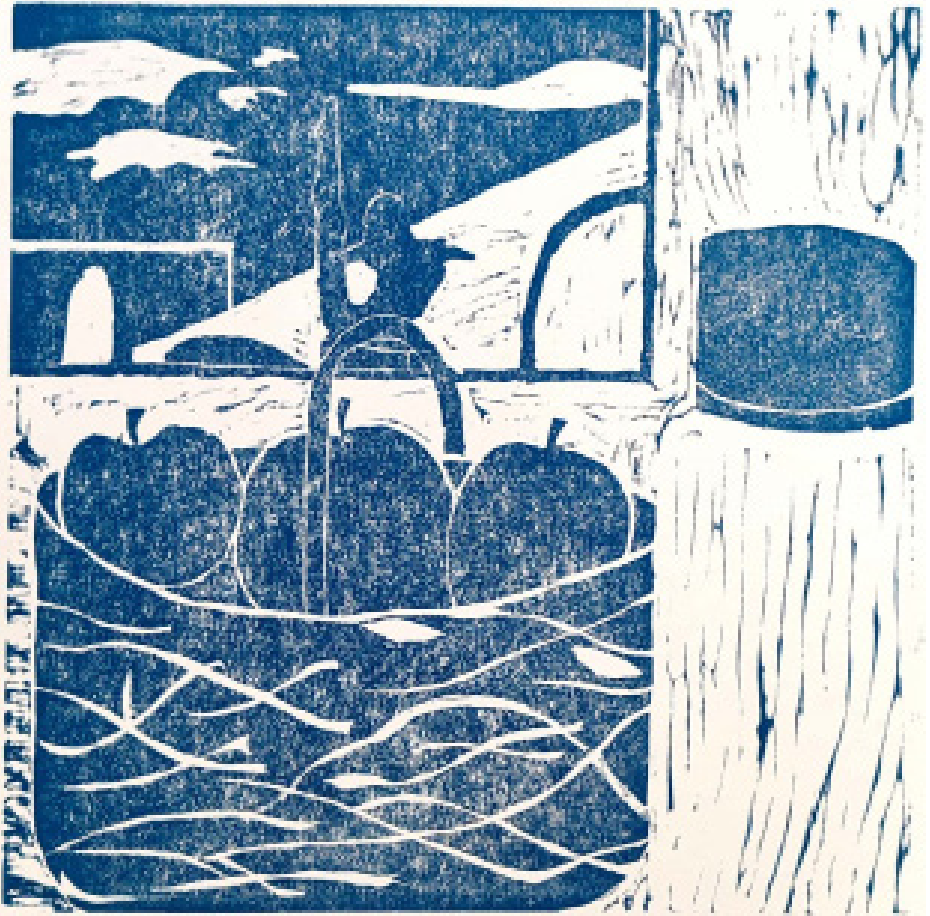
Wordless wraiths loom out of white walls,

They are clothed in the ink of unwritten words

While the blank walls stare, austere.

Postcard from the Cascade

by Jeff Tsai



Communion between Emmett Till, Hector Pieterston, and Tamir Rice

by Simone Reid

after Tariq Tompson, "On our Birthday, Malcolm x & I Discuss the Means"

one starts out, spurning words out
of blotted skin, broken knuckles.
in the curve of mangled cheekbones,
i see a reason for bitterness.
he the reason for poetry, tragedy
penned into the depths of literature.
his voice trails out of broken vocal chords,
unexpected, bittersweet—they
can change the surface but you
can't clean out the rot / it follows
bitterly, says hector, splayed
out for all eternity. hector, made
spectacled, like you. we are image
burned into the mind, a symbol
buried deep. what it is to be
invoked, says tamir, we know all
too well—young, already storied,
already two feet in the grave.

A Fleeting Infinity

Helene Leichter

It's said that the cells
In our bodies
Regenerate every
Seven years.
Seven years.

Seven years
Until his hands
Have never touched me.
Seven years
Until my skin
Forgets him—
The silver sting
Of his ice-cold hands
Wrapped around my neck,
The rough edges of his teeth
On my ear,
The portrait he drew
Along my spine
From loose hair and blood.

Seven years
Until violence
Is a stranger.
I can wait
Seven years.
Remember for
Seven years.
Survive for
Seven long years.
What choice do I have
But to wait
Those seven torturous years?

With every second that passes,
Four babies are born.
Four babies
Painted in their mother's blood,
Collages of fingers and toes and
Wandering eyes like
Spinning globes.
Each baby a clock,
An anxious tick and a

Tock like a hair pin trigger.

Zero to seven

Seven to fourteen

Fourteen to twenty-one.

Life is a waiting game,

An infinite stopwatch,

An ocean with no floor.

I wade in the ocean for

Seven years.

Tread water with

Shallow breath

And aching knees.

After five or six, I begin to worry.

Worry that the ocean might

Turn on me,

Restart the clock with its waves

Of colossal apathy,

Wrestle me with

Violent disdain,

Swallow my limbs in

Stoic ripples. I wait

Seven more years

With my head under water.

Shut my eyes.

Let salt crystals nest in my t-shirt

And seaweed wrap around my ankles.

Let schools of fish feast on open

wounds,

Abuse my pruning skin and call it lunch.

Seven dying years

Until I gasp for air,

Until I feel condensation

On my purple lips,

Empty hot pools from

Deep inside my ear drums.

Seven years

Until my next

Chance to swim.

In school,

They teach us about space.

Stars and galaxies and asteroids.

The space between you and me.

“Personal space.”

A flood gate.

The borders of our bodies.

Our elbows sharp, like barbed wire

The soles of our feet

Turned a gun-powdered black.

The barbarity of intrusion.

The open waters

That exist between parted lips,

Made crisp and cruel,

Icy waves sloshing between

Our separate shores.

Seven years

Mean nothing to

The waves,

Whose righteous independence

Feeds their infinite belly.

Our space flows like the water.

Back and forth,

Giving and taking,

Sharing and withholding.

It holds molecules and cells

In its gentle palms,

Smooths barbed-wire elbows

And dusts gunpowder from our feet.

Our space parses

Letter by letter

Through the bottled messages

We send off to sea.

Through letters,

We unfold.

We untangle.

We uncross.

Flowers bloom

From our open palms

And naked chests.

Sunlight drips like melted butter

From your balmy lips,

My rosy cheeks.

Our borders bleed

Like ink in rain.

One becoming another.

We find each other
In the shadows.
Two magnets
Searching through space
For hips and thighs and hair
With infantile curiosity.
Your fingers curl at my waist
Like a question mark.
I respond with dropped shoulders
And a tipped-back head.
I float atop your tender waves.
Our seven years,
A fleeting infinity.

Pond

Tereza Hernandez

And when the dust settles on the mirror shards
Singed into the ground
I will bend over and stare at the face I've tried so hard to forget
Her eyes are empty and dull even with the sun's reflection
And the dust plays along the curves of her iris, for a while
The lines on her face are deeper than the ocean she never went back to
see
There is something evil about not recognizing your own presence

And when the dust settles on the mirror shards and the other in her eyes
And there is no more wind no more pain no more
She will know that she is finally free of herself



Painter on Film

Tereza Hernandez

I Swore I Heard December Angels

Bella Stevens

Indigo skies scream silence
As the Earth stands still,
If only for a moment.

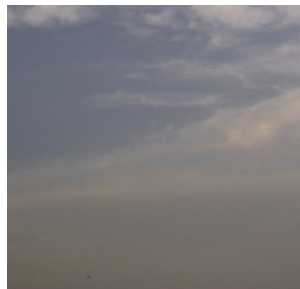
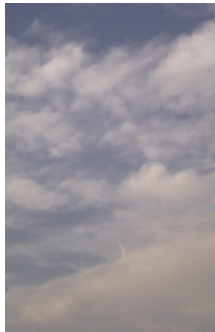
Violet haze above me, a newfound
Stasis in darkness,
A prayer for night to pass away.

Her guiding breath
Crosses my carmine cheeks,
Making dew of my eyes.

All the world around is
Dead, but the crocus blooms
In my heart still.

On the brink of inexistence,
Her healing hands hold me,
Tightly to her breast.

Divine color, restoration;
Ward off my paleness and
Feed me, winter white.





Untitled #2

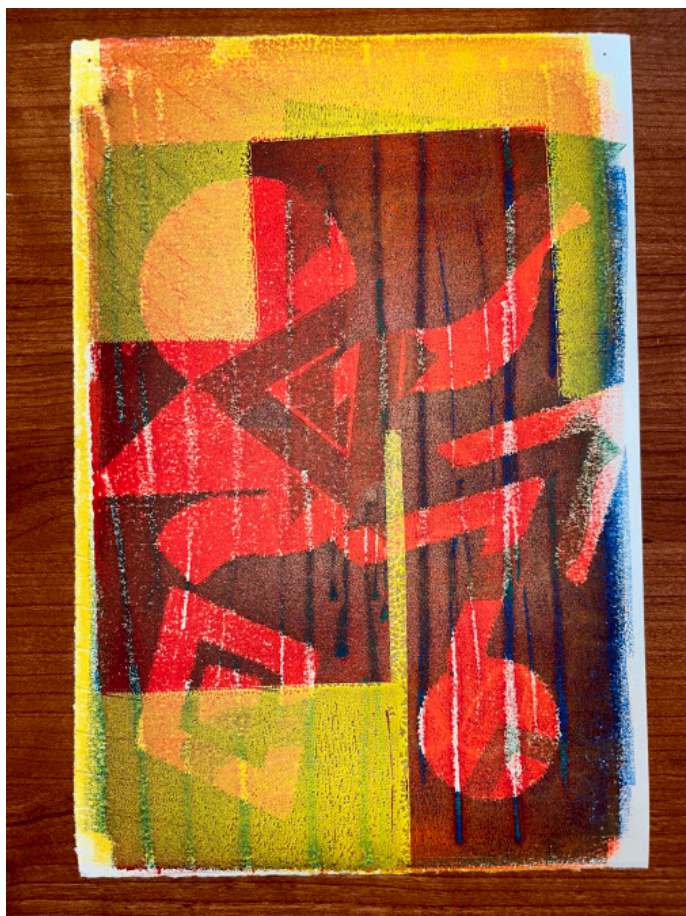
Bella Stevens

An Experiment of Translation

Claire Silverman

It is hard to put into language what is felt in
the body. It is deep in the cavern, the chest,
inward and tugging, crawling, lurking.
Slow down. Inside the bones in the feet,
implosions, bone marrow molten.
Fatigue travels down from the top of the legs,
swirling iron down the veins,
cotton wads stuffed inside an ankle,
an empty chamber opened,
oblivion contained in bone.
Pinpricks of ice behind the stuck kneecap,
heavy weights drag at the other.
But the curtain goes up,
the lights are blinding, white orange blue.
Icehot electricity replacing steel and gravity
is of no consequence now.
Weightlessness coursing through all limbs,
strain on hips and thigh gone, bubbles
float up, heart reaching
sky sky sky
but no
not quite
that is a mistranslation
what I mean is:

Dancing Shapes



Violet Jetton

At Night



Helen Mei

Apeirophobia

Bella Stevens

A synthetic choir delivers me:
voices I'd only ever imagined,
interactions that reside in my
mind, now released before
my eyes.

Static speech rings in my ears
as my eyes become dew, so
sickly sweet and unforgiving;
I swallow my pill-shaped pride
once more.

A frozen brain, processing systems
delayed for days, weeks, until I
forget what I waited for and pray
that someone close to me will
recount it all.

Behind the whiteness of the walls
lies my comeuppance, for I know
that solitude is my destiny; she is
enamored with the sullen wasteland
of my mind.

glittergirl

Maddie Olvey

i see you, shimmershock-girl,

you're one of those neon glowstain glamour-girls,

one of those bar-hopping bunny-girls, with a latex

bounce that keeps you bubble-popping all night long.

i see you, bangle-jangle tease,

i know you're laced-up, laced-in for me,

won't you lace-out for me?

i know you're fuchsia-flushed for me,

won't you fishnet-dazzle me?

and i can tell you're a nice girl, one of those

high-fructose feather-girls,

a puffed-up powdery pearl-girl,

a strawberry sugarfloss sweetmeat-girl,

and you know i'll eat you up, girl.

relax, babe,

i know you're

a silky-slick

laid-back girl,

a doe-eyed

bedroom-girl

who's always

a yes-girl,

but never

an easy-girl,

oh, aren't you a *challenge*, girl.

running away when

i know you wanna

be chased, girl.

i'll follow you into
the strobe-glaze,
until i'm so close
i smell the sweetberry
on you,
until you feel my breath
across your neck
and my hands gliding
down your back
towards the hem
of your dress—

you're losing your spangle now, girl,

you were prettier when you smiled.

i should've seen you're just another

glittersick slut, you should know

you're begging me with that dress.

just remember that

you asked for it, bitch.

woman-sac zoo

(or: what's in your purse? a bridal shower game playing card)*

by Evelyn Zelmer

i own mascara. (or conserve me as a woman. so see me via arcane means.
via aracne's numerous irises. so see i am a weaver.)

i own scissors. (so i am curious. or i remain a voracious maw. never a
creaser.)

i own six or seven coins. (minor mini monies. i.e. screw me. so)

i own a can o xanax. (or i own a souvenir. or a maraca. so i own a music
or an issue or so i scare mom.)

i own a •. (so an aura arouses ursula. so i wince as an omen. so i can ooze
ovarian cancer. so i care in concurrence or care a mouse's ass. so i so we
consume in a commune. or)

i own a menses-eraser. (so i am a mere woman-mirror. or so i am cain. a
canine swarm. vicarious wiener-user. someone's assassin.)

i own a razor. (so i mar me. so i raze. so i remain convex in areas unseen.
no wax so no sore.)

i own a z-name. (so sessions commence. occur. cease. someone unsum-
mons me via omission. so i remain a winner.)

i own a cervix. (so sex carves a cavern. summa cum semen sewer. so i am
concave. or so i crave cocoa. or i rise avec ease. or so even in me
is a renaissance.)

i own no swimwear. (mom: i swam in our sea. come care. come coo. come
rescue. i scream come save me.)

i own sin. (mamaw: i mimic our memories as an excuse. we amaze me. i
rue our sameness.)

i own seers. (woe is me. i see our son is runnin a race unwon. icarus's
insane ascension. never was crazier news on our screen.)

i own american mores. (across a cairn. a ruin. a rune. virus immune. so our
savior is as our savior was. amen.)

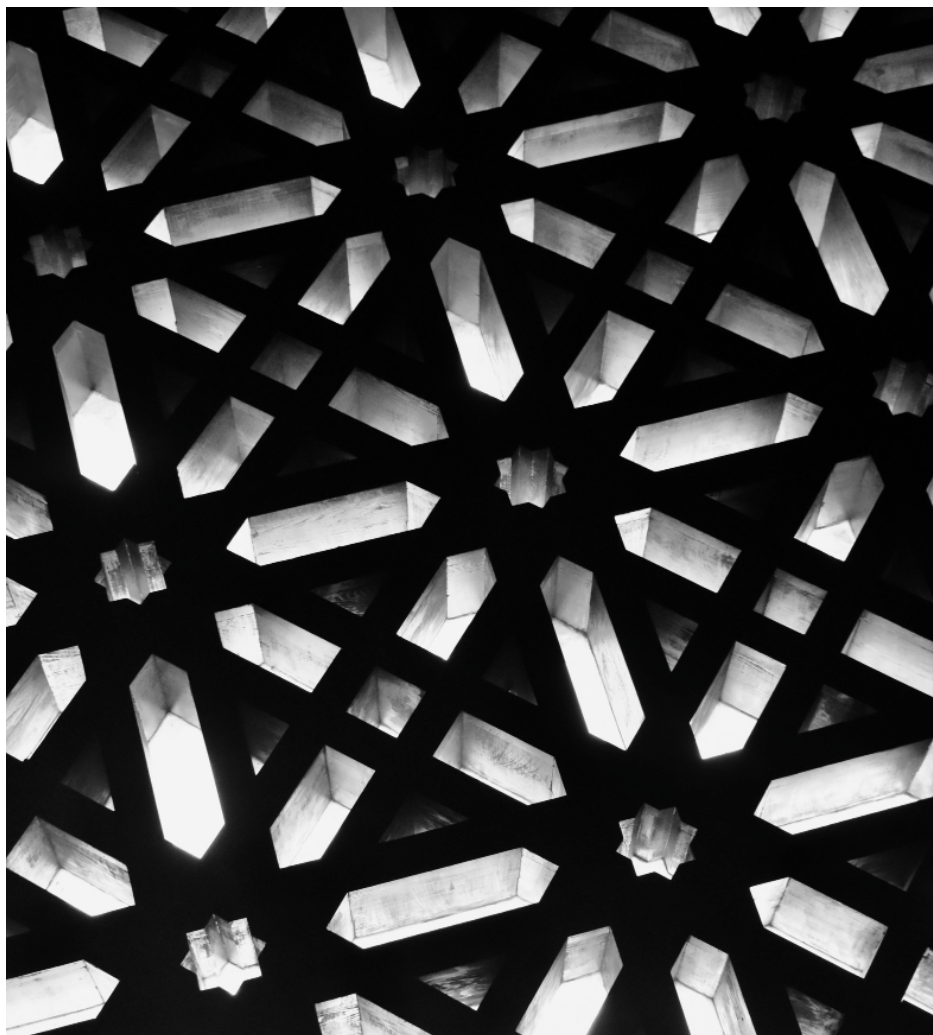
i own no woman no man no someone. (cause no someone owns me.)

i own us on our own (cause we are messianic: mom. mamaw: we can sun
our sin on some ore. miss anna: i assure u: our sacs are on our insurance
evermore so we can ram in we can cram)

in our sacs we annex receive secure our acne cream. our rosacea
serum. some services. a cow. some cum-aroma acorns. some za. summer
sunscreen. some rare causes. a coors can. a source. a sumerian summa.
some ex-man's crown. some career. a scone.

(cause our cases on our arms on our own: we own.)

*This poem is a prisoner's constraint, so it is written without any letters
which descend below the line (q, y, p, g, j) or ascend above the line (t, d, f,
h, k, l, b).



eight

by Catherine Leeder

Caviar

by Thomas King

Dark foam lapped at the jagged rocks. Isaac saw a spiny dorsal fin break the surface of the water. He bit his tongue and squinted, fitting his eye snug against the brass eyepiece of the telescope. With his right hand, he signaled to a group waiting on the beach. They had solemn faces.

The previous night, a freighter had broken up in the shallows, spilling its innards to the sea. The coast was decorated with orange life preservers. A section of the hull was visible just below the surface. It looked like a crushed aluminum can.

The group on shore unmoored the caravel. They were six strong, the best rowers from the village. They worked silently, grimly aware of the danger ahead of them. This was not a rescue mission. There were no rescues in the Trade Ocean. Sodium harvesting had stripped the sea of valuable salt centuries ago and the dark water was no longer buoyant enough to float in. Falling overboard meant drowning unless the freezing temperatures or sea monsters got you first.

Nearly half of the marine species on Protus-55b went extinct when the oceans were desalinated. Only the hardest survived. They were merciless and keenly adapted to an unforgiving world. The vibrations

of a freighter breaking up on the rocks attracted them like a dinner bell. Within hours, a consortium of man-eating isopods swarmed the wreck, gorging on the bloated corpses trapped inside. They resembled giant white pill bugs and had evolved a two-inch thick armored exoskeleton. While the bottom feeders had their fill, an Arthrodira shark stalked them in the distance. The electroreceptor organs along its spines twitched. They were extremely sensitive to electrical fields, alerting the apex predator to the feeding frenzy from miles away.

The villagers struggled against the tide. The water was rough, each swell strong enough to throw them all overboard. Navigating past the jagged rocks required a lifetime of experience. Their ship was a caravel, a small vessel designed for maneuverability and speed. The bow was equipped with a powerful electromagnet that masked the electrical signal of the sailors' heartbeats. There was no margin for error hunting an Arthrodira shark. Fully grown females could reach sixty feet in length, more than capable of swallowing a caravel whole.

Their village was poor, even by colony standards. Its population had dipped below a hundred. Anyone with money left for the capitol city long ago. The folk that remained led a simple, agrarian way of life. Most were subsistence farmers, nourishing their families with grey algae harvested from vats underground. It was stringy and bitter.

To the villagers, an ovulating Arthrodira shark was a winning lottery ticket. The aristocracy treasured the unfertilized roe. Each egg was about the size of your eye, soft, and translucent orange. This exotic delicacy was the main driver of tourism to Protus-55b. The eggs had a mild buttery taste. They were eaten raw with luxury spices. Successfully harvesting

eggs meant life-changing money for everyone involved, but the hunt was a suicide mission. Countless fortune seekers had made the one-way journey. The Trade Ocean did not give up its dead.

Normally the villagers' instincts of self-preservation kept them far away from Arthrodira sharks. Their current circumstance necessitated a hunt. The village healer was dying of malnutrition. Isaac's mother. She was terribly weak and needed expensive supplements and vitamins from the capitol. Her condition was rapidly deteriorating, and it was clear that she didn't have much time. Isaac was the first to volunteer for a hunt, but his skinny frame was not built for rowing in the Trade Ocean. The six most capable agreed to take his place. He would be the eyes, keeping watch from an inland survey tower.

Isaac scoured the water for movement. He signaled to the caravel below that he had lost sight of the beast. One of the rowers peered over the taffrail. She was a stocky woman covered in indigenous tattoos. The water was dark but clear, and she watched an isopod crawl out of the wreckage. It had a human arm between its mandibles. Suddenly, the caravel heaved up out of the water. The Arthrodira passed directly under them. It was an encouraging sign: it meant the electromagnet was working. That didn't make it any less terrifying. This was the largest Isaac had ever seen.

The Arthrodira dive bombed into a cluster of the man-eaters. It had unbelievable speed for a creature so massive. Two sharp, bony plates formed a beak-like structure at the front of its mouth. Its face was like a giant snapping turtle. The lack of conventional teeth allowed the Arthrodira a devastating bite force. The crew watched it crush an isopod between its bony jaws then swim away with the kill. Vibrant cerulean blood clouded

the water. A twitching limb sank to the sea floor where it was cannibalized by ravenous crustaceans.

Shortly, the *Arthrodira* returned for more. Isaac held his breath as the team took aim with pneumatic harpoon guns. Red dots from laser sights appeared across the shark like chicken pox. They had to wait for the perfect shot. The thick, bony armor was nearly impenetrable, but thin around the gills and underbelly. The shark grabbed another isopod in a flash, hiding its vital areas with deliberate intent. Soon, it would be full, and make the journey back to deeper waters. Time was running out.

On the third pass, the *Arthrodira* briefly exposed its underbelly. Six long, barbed harpoons darted through the water. One missed entirely, burying deep into the sea floor. Four others haplessly skittered off the bony plates that protected the thorax. The final harpoon found its home, burrowing deep into the *Arthrodira*'s pale underbelly and skewering its swim bladder. The massive beast thrashed as dark red blood poured from the wound. The harpoons inflated in a deafening explosion. Compressed nitrogen gas instantly filled six massive balloons that followed behind the tridents. Five of them floated into view, while the *Arthrodira* fought to keep the sixth underwater. Isaac put aside the telescope and hurried out of the tower.

The shark resisted against the immense drag upwards. It was a ferocious effort. There was severe damage to the creature's internal organs. It grew exhausted, each exertion becoming weaker as it pulled closer and closer to the surface. Ten minutes had passed, and the *Arthrodira* exsanguinated, succumbing to its fate. The balloon towed its limp body to the surface while Isopods gobbled up the scraps of viscera that had torn free

in the struggle.

Isaac was waiting for them on the beach. The carcass dragged behind the caravel making the rowing even more difficult. Still, the boat crew pushed on. They finally passed through the shallows, beaching the caravel. The six rowers collapsed in the wet sand surrounded by orange life vests. They were spent. Isaac clambered onto the boat and retrieved a filleting knife. He moved the deflating balloon to the side and inspected the beast. The harpoon was still sticking out. Isaac slipped the knife into the Arthrodira's underbelly at the base of its anal fin. A thin film of mucus coated the treasure trove of roe inside. He delicately retrieved an egg and rinsed it off with his canteen. He chewed it slowly, savoring every second. The aristocrats were right. It was the best thing he ever ate.



Alone in a Neon Jungle

by Reid Koutras

The Voyager

by Reid Koutras

I.

The Voyager wanders the endless abyss. It has traveled far in these recent decades, more so than any object built before or since. It is leaving all that is known and comfortable, diving into the unknown and the dark without thought or emotion.

It has seen much before this day, the Voyager.

Years ago, the Voyager ventured away from all known life to begin its journey into the expanse. It left from a blue jewel before briefly passing near a greyish created world. And then, there was nothing but darkness for this time. The great glowing sphere at the system's center gradually shrank as the cycles went by. That was how The Voyager knew it was on track. Its time in the abyss grew long, absence encompassing all.

And then, from the abyss, came a presence. A world with raging storms and swirling vortexes. It is a colossus, this world, with storms that last for centuries. White and orange bands criss and cross the planet's atmosphere. A bloodshot eye disrupts the bands, peering into the abyss. The Voyager gazes back, gathering invaluable data about how this alien realm functions. Analyzing the bands. Taking photographs. It streams the data back, towards that blue jewel that was all too small now. There were many moons orbiting this behemoth, little worlds onto their own. One had a smooth yellow surface. It trembled with activity. Its icy volcanoes spewed material in the form of blue plumes. One of these plumes was in the middle of growing, kicking back ice and rock as it extended kilometers into the void. The Voyager got a photograph, snapshotting this wondrous moment for posterity. The next world was white as pearl, but it was cracked with blood red scars that resembled freshly cut veins. Material from deep below oozed onto the surface like blood. The giant is squeezing this moon dry. There are countless moons orbiting the giant. So many tiny worlds maligned with craters. Dead and lifeless, no signs of activity save for the scars leftover from a heavy bombardment. The Voyager is compelled to record them all. Gather as much data as it could. It isn't going to be here forever, after all. The Voyager is going far too fast to stop. It escapes the

giant's pull, returning to the expanse.

For a while, there was nothing but that crushing darkness. The bright star at the system's center grew smaller still. Then the Voyager reached another world. Smaller than the last one, yet just as grand with a ring system that shined like a diamond. The rings were made out of numerous particles, and the Voyager discovered tiny shepherds keeping these rings in place. Indeed, this world had as many moons as the previous. Another icy world, not as cracked as the previous, yet shooting out plumes of water through various geysers. Could there be an ocean beneath the sheets of ice, locking primitive life into its own private domain? Perhaps. But such a question was not for the Voyager to decipher. It had another mission. There was another world orbiting this system. A special world covered by a thickened haze. That haze made this a world of secrets, and the truth could only be uncovered by getting close. Beneath the haze was an exotic world with lakes and rivers of liquid methane. Mountains and valleys of ice carved out over millions of years as the exotic substance rained from above. Such a wondrous place, yet the Voyager would never know this. Its cameras could not pierce the haze. The secrets were locked. The Voyager would leave this blessed diamond, not with a triumphant discovery, but with disappointment.

The Voyager continued onwards into the dark. The worlds it visited receded into nothingness. Even the star at the system's center shrank, becoming no less special than the hundreds in the sky. The Voyager would never pass another world. It would travel alone, such was its fate. But this was not the end of its mission. Years later, the Voyager would receive a final command. It turned its cameras back the way it came. Over the next few days, it would compile photograph after photograph. It would end up

with a collage, showcasing six distinct points of light. Some of these were worlds the Voyager had passed. Some were worlds the Voyager would never know.

One of these, a pale blue dot, was that world the Voyager originated from. It was so small now that it had barely even registered on the Voyager's cameras. If the photograph had been taken even a few days later, then the dot may not have even been there at all. That was the last command. The Voyager flew on into the void, still sending data back but receiving no commands in return. The data lessened as the years drew on as The Voyager's systems became inert. It shut off its camera to conserve its other instruments, so that it could still be of some use. The Voyager had no idea why this data was so wanted, but it sent it out regardless.

The Voyager has journeyed into interstellar space. It has journeyed far from its homeland. Most of its instruments have been shut off. Yet its legacy remains intact. On the side of the Voyager is a small golden plate. Inside the plate is a record. A record containing sights and sounds from a world the Voyager will never see again. It is a gift. A gift for any who might come across the probe as it journeys through the expanse. One can't help but question the reasoning behind this. Is shouting into the void really the right move in this darkened jungle? The implications of this are unknown. Who even knows what will have become of the pale blue dot by the time the Voyager is rediscovered? Only one thing is certain. The Voyager is that world's scout, the furthest out on the final frontier. It holds the sights, sounds, and feeling of a world despite the astronomical distance.

Thousands of years from now, The Voyager will officially leave its solar system to cross the abyss in perpetuity. Perhaps it will come across

others. Perhaps it will be their answer. Or perhaps that will never come to pass, and the Voyager is cursed to a lonely fate. Either way, the Voyager chugs along as the legacy of a world is fated to never meet again.

II.

When I walk out at night, alone under an inky sky, my mind turns to Voyager. When I question myself, am huddled up in fear, my mind turns to the stars. There are many out there intimidated by these distances. In a universe of countless stars, made of mostly abyss, what good is our contribution? These people ask the wrong question. Our universe is one of innate beauty, with varied worlds nestled both close and far. There is so much to explore, so much to see between the vast distances. We are part of a larger framework. A universe of wonder surrounds us, and we are all a part of it. Voyager shows us just how insignificant we really are.

I, for one, think that is liberating. Our insignificance frees us to form our own values. In a world with no clear answers, we can forge the answers for ourselves. The universe raises big questions. No matter the answers, at the end of the day, the path ahead is still our own.

the cycle

Ryan Doberty

i.

in the beginning, it was needles;
my cells impaled, forced & filled
nutrients, nameless, my body
shapeless, forming a network
of blood, my life: a warning

ii.

there is skin emerging around what
i am supposed to call a body
while i sleep suspended in water
& blue eyes with white coats
scratch & scribble into their notes
at each of my heartbeats

iii.

they said that i was complete
though i couldn't tell, my skin still gray
& the world around me so empty
i dreamt of the needles & my cells
wanting to be constructed again
but always kept unfinished

iv.

i finally learned how to walk
with a smile on my face, i explored
through the white, endless halls
pretending the floor was laughing with me
& when i looked closer, i could see my reflection
but it didn't blink

v.

they told me to go inside a room
fluorescent lights above humming
an unknown tune & when i sat on
the chair, they brought something to me
on a tin tray & on top, one candle
i bit into it & it was sweet

nothing like i've ever had, bringing me
memories i didn't think were mine,
of a mother that i could not recognize
of skies where i could pretend to fly

vi.

they said that i was complete
but this time, they actually meant it
no, they *actually* meant it, bringing a
mirror to prove that they were right
grabbing my head & showing me
my brown skin & curls with deep
green eyes that they said anyone would buy

vii.

could i have pretended it was the sun
a bright white light shining down on my face
while i lay on a table & next to me: a razor blade

viii.

my fingernails my tongue my toes
my stomach my lungs my veins my throat
my chin my shoulder my mouth my knees
my nose my neck my hand my kidneys
my heart my arm my marrow my thighs
& finally: my eyes

ix.

they left me a liquid
a red puddle reflecting white light
a stain to wash out of their coats
maybe i thought it was hope
maybe i could've evaporated
or seeped into the floor
or washed into the sink
or become what i was before
but again
i was in the tube
blue eyes, white lab coats,
notepads, cold water
& always: the needles.



reach

Catherine Leeder

The Pacific

Nicole Llacza Morazzani

rocky beaches and cold water, its waves look at me, defiantly
i walk among seaweed, rocks, sea urchins
my feet move swiftly, they know the terrain
as this place was made to bite
the seaweed itches, the rocks draw blood, the sea urchins sting
the pacific never gives, it takes
but still, we venture in, alone

when waves break, you have to plant your feet on the sand
when you meet the crest, you dive in or jump
easy steps, easier said than done
a young girl challenged the sea late at night
the pacific got a taste and swallowed her
she was only seventeen, now they are one

we shared nothing more than bloodline
yet grandma used her as example for me not to venture far
to stay near the shore

grandma never swam in the sea
the wind would shut her eyes, as she breathed in the sea-salt air
and yet her last breath was far from the shore
in a crowded room, a machine beeping
she said her grandparents sailed across the ocean
they murdered their past and ventured somewhere new

leaving was easy,
living was a challenge,
and staying, an impossibility
so i sailed back home

i am now afraid of the pacific
i will remain at the shore
and jump each breaking wave
this is a fair compromise
to honor all the memories lived, the lifetimes unlived
and to cease the killing, since i have drowned many
they were too heavy for my sailboat

i mutter their names for each crashing wave
i see their eyes in the stars that guide me home
the ocean breeze carries their voices
i am not speaking of ghosts

if i venture far, i venture alone
the sea is not keen on my taste
the current drags me in, then spits me out
undigested, unscathed, hollow
nobody could tame the pacific
its beauty lies in its merciless nature
it was made to seize, not to give
it took everything from me,
discarded me, as if i were unworthy

the waves thrust me back to the shore,
i roll in the sand,
seaweed wrapped around my limbs,
scratches all over my skin,
spines in the soles of my feet
i face up to a bleeding sky, a moon on the rise
i breathe in the sea-salt air

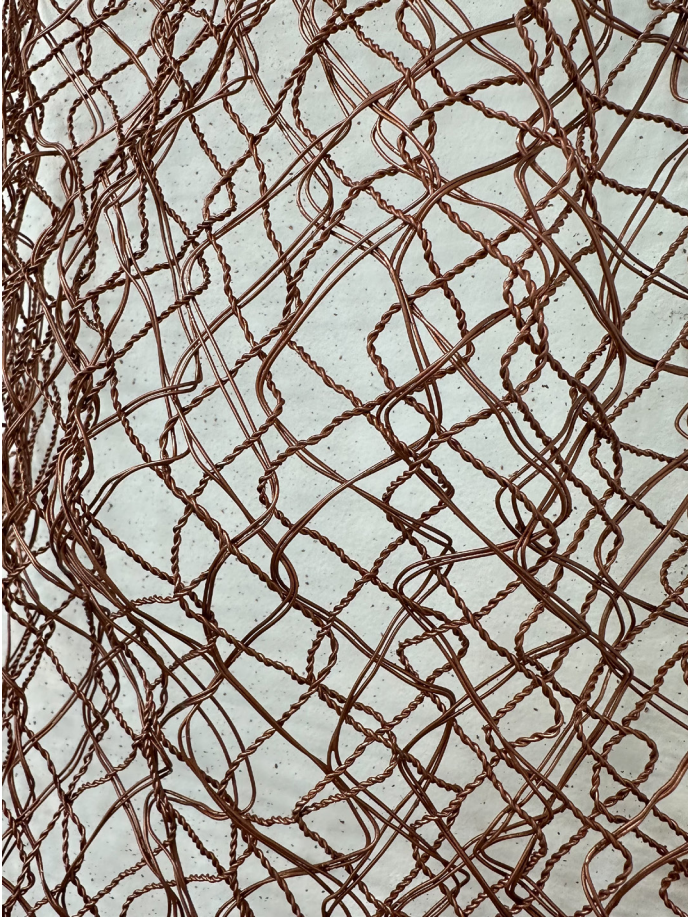


Cordillera

María Zambrano Davila

Cordillera brings attention to the connections between María's ancestors, her homeland, and the memories she left there. The interlaced wire represents the Cordillera de los Andes. This South American mountain range emerges in the Venezuelan Andes, where María's mother is from, all the way to Santiago de Chile, where María moved due to the Venezuelan refugee crisis. The mountains serve as a symbolic bridge between María's current home and identity and the lands where her family was raised and loved.





Portrait of the Passions

Simone Reid

Infatuation

is like falling into a pool during the day time, boiling together in a pot on the stove, resting softly on your face like a beam of sunlight. The plants are infatuated with growing, they pull their hips forward just for a chance to feel the heat, feel the burn. They're two strangers meeting on the dance floor, they found eyes from across the room & now they're spinning, two plant stem wrapping around, twisting at the root. The notes are infatuated with making melody, the sounds twirl together, and swell, bind, and burst, they are kissing in the rain, folding into a rhythm, the notes send melody a love letter and seal the envelope with a chord. The music reaches up your mouth, your throat is infatuated with singing along. I am infatuated with you, so I sing along too.

Yearning

pulls me to being. My want for you spreads hot through my chest, my arms. A nervous system brings feeling to bones, turns weighty meat to working flesh. It's how we distinguish from lukewarm to freezing, rageful to joyous. My mind yearns to be peaceful, the feet yearn to walk. I sleep the wrong way and my hand falls asleep at the base of my wrist. It tingles, burns, yearns to feel again, my hand wants to find love again, until suddenly it begins to bud in the form of subtle glances, stolen touches, like pieces of a star wrapping around the galaxy, shooting rocks into orbit from nebulas. My body yearns to be back in the sky, to learn to fly and hopefully plant a kiss on the fullness of your cheek, to be in minerals with you, for you to be positives, me to be negatives, pulled together, pulled to being.

Pleasure

is a building. Call it an ivory tower—a spindly, white wooden mess of columns that plume into the sky, shining in beads of sweat that turn silver in the moonlight, where around corners our breath billows out of the left-most chimney, and in the darkness you're scattering kisses all around me.

Pleasure is a building, a collection, a bursting of sorts, it inches upward from your feet and leaks out of your eyes, falls out of your mouth. That's the pleasure of creation—it's about crafting something within you, architectural corners, arches, and walls, eliciting a response in the viewer, the reader, the recipient. It makes you forget yourself in favor of erecting brick after brick, painting wall after wall, building tower after tower.

Anger

touches down to earth like a midwestern tornado, ravishing land and dust. It's about how it springs forth, some weird mixing of hot air funneling into a superpower. We all spin at times, under the right amount of pressure gale force winds rip through the islands, a tsunami clobbers the coastline, and I pen my frustrations into a journal. My letter L's curve and loop into another spin against you. This feeling pours, bursts, implodes. Anger is an overtaker. I picture you with her and I settle into another storm. The cicadas rumble, the birds flee. I am a lightning bolt, charging, leaving a ring of singed darkness at your feet. All storms spend a day on earth before retracting back to the ocean.

Healing

burns slow. It roasts in time, browning and crumpling the edges, hardening to protect a soft center. There's something gentle about the process of warming and rewarming, melting chocolate, sitting in a glow by the fire. I spin and twist myself to the light—I too must be heated. Only a flame can set a braid, a link between one strand must always lead to another strand. Healing is about finding the balance of fire, between destruction and mercy. It's the knowing, the bettering, the acceptance of your lesson. I harness the parts of me still healing from you, I fan their flames just enough to sustain me, just enough to keep me from burning.



Infatuation

Claire Silverman



THE
ESSENGER