
Temptations
Zine 001
featuring:
OPHELIE
CIERRA C. CREA
MACRAE DUDMAN
ALEXANDRA CLEAR
ISABELLA CHUEROS
SUSANA CORREA
DELANEY TEEHAN
KAIT MORRIS
CLOE WOOD

Letter From the Editor

I can't pinpoint when the original idea for The Temptations emerged— I've always had a yearning for a dedicated space for artists to come together & share their work. It admittedly came out of my sort of romantic temperament, one that adores and idolizes the bohemians and free thinkers of the past. At some point I learned about salons— gatherings in 18th-century France for artists, writers, philosophers, and the like, hosted by wealthy women called salonnieres. While there was an obvious atmosphere of elitism, I loved the concept of parties to celebrate and discuss the arts. The first time I pitched it was my freshman year of college when I proposed it to the campus coffee shop. Unfortunately, they turned me down, but eventually, I would host my first salon almost 7 years later.

The name ultimately comes from what I understand to be the human drive to create and consume art. From pre-agricultural societies and cave paintings to modern tech bros who want to create without effort (more on that another day), the urge for artistic expression is essential and inherent to humanity— we are highly social creatures and the way we communicate empathy is through works of literature, paintings, plays, movies, all things that tell stories of lives lived, loves lost, futures imagined. Art is not only essential, it is in our human nature.

This zine arose out of the same desire for artists to gather. Weeks before I was set to host my first event in New York I lost my job & had to move to Phoenix, away from my friends, away from my community, away from my life. Bestowed with ample free time and embittered that I would not be able to see my vision come to fruition, I looked for other avenues so I could continue my project in some form, even if I wasn't in my home base, giving rise to this zine. Iwould eventually meet artists in Phoenix and host my first salon just a month later, albeit on the other side of the country. Still, the zine had started to take root.My team of editors is composed of friends and former strangers— after asking friends to help me out I impulsively put out a call for editors on Instagram and found so many people who believed in my vision—our staff is full of people who I feel understand our mission the best and I applaud all of their hard work. I had a great time reviewing their pieces for this issue and I hope y'all enjoy it too. Special thanks to Cloe Wood, our graphic designer, for her work on this beautiful zine— it would not have been possible without her. Release it, feed it, indulge the temptation

Peyton Kullander

Ophelie

This collection of Shakespeare-inspired soliloquies, paired with the short story "Aoibhneas," represents a weaving of past insights into the fabric of present dilemmas. It's about revisiting the profound themes of Shakespeare—those universal reflections on human nature—and seeing how they resonate in the subtle complexities of modern life.

The work here is a dialogue with time, a blend of the Bard's age-old wisdom with the immediacy of contemporary narratives. Through the structured rhythms of the soliloquies and the unfolding realities in "Aoibhneas," I explore themes of identity, justice, and human connection, reflecting on how these concepts have evolved and still impact us today.

Creating this collection has been a journey of introspection, an attempt to bridge literary analysis with personal reflection. It's an exploration of how the texts that have shaped me intersect with my views on life and society. Each piece, whether echoing Shakespeare's words or crafting new stories, serves as a testament to the enduring power of literature to reflect and reshape our understanding of ourselves and our world.

As you delve into these reflections, I hope they offer a new perspective on the timeless and the immediate, encouraging a deeper contemplation of the narratives we live by and the ones we create.

Alexandra Clear




Alexandra Clear
Ideals

Not far from the soft, winding shores of the River Boyne, nestled between the quiet towns of Navan and Trim, lies a hidden, tranquil clearing. At its heart stands a small cabin. To the untrained eye, it may seem unremarkable—no grand architecture, no towering spires—but for those who take the time to notice, it is a place where the world slows.

The cabin's exterior is clad in weathered wood, its surface whispering stories of years gone by. The roof, sagging slightly with age, is veiled in ivy, creeping like the forest itself across the eaves. Sturdy wooden beams frame its few windows, where red café curtains, faded but cheerful, sway lightly, their floral patterns a contrast to the earthy tones of the surrounding woods. It is as though the cabin wears its welcoming nature like a quiet smile.

On the small porch, just outside the door, a well-worn rocking chair creaks with the rhythm of the seasons. A plush yellow cushion, sun-faded but soft, rests upon it. Beside it, a small stool holds a simple water basin and cup, both worn yet enduring, as if they have borne witness to countless moments of stillness. Beneath the porch, stacks of firewood are neatly arranged, waiting for the cool evenings when firelight will fill the air with warmth and the scent of burning pine.

The door, made from the same wood as the beams, blends seamlessly with the cabin, as though it has always belonged to the forest. Above it, a bird feeder sways in the breeze, its wooden frame smooth with time. The birds, unbothered by the solitude, flit about in search of a meal, their small wings stirring the hush of the clearing. It is here, in this quiet pocket of the world, that life moves at its own unhurried pace.

To one side of the cabin, a small garden thrives, a tangle of green, red, and blue. The plants grow in wild abandon, their leaves and petals weaving a vibrant patchwork, the air rich with their fragrance. It is both cultivated and untamed, nurtured by careful hands yet left to flourish on its own. Flowers and vegetables mix freely, as though the earth itself has chosen to reward the care it receives.

A wooden ladder leans against the cabin, its rungs worn smooth from years of use. Resting just beneath one of the smaller windows, it leads up to the sloped roof above. The ladder seems to beckon, inviting one to climb, to take in the quiet sanctuary from above, where the world outside fades into the endless stretch of forest.

Everything about the cabin—its sturdy frame, its cheerful curtains, the constant hum of the trees—feels as though it belongs to the earth itself. In this quiet, forgotten corner of the world, time drifts unhurried. The forest watches over it like a guardian, and the small cabin, with its simple beauty and solitude, remains a place where one can truly listen to the whispers of the wind.

The walls blend seamlessly with the surrounding trees, vines creeping up the sides as though nature itself has reclaimed the structure, wrapping it in a soft, green embrace. There is a quiet simplicity here—a peaceful solitude that offers refuge from the noise of the world. No hurry, no rush. Only the rustling leaves, the occasional call of a bird, and the murmur of a hidden stream. This is where Ursula retreats into herself, her thoughts as untamed as the landscape around her.

Wildflowers scatter across the clearing, splashes of color breaking through the green. Some stand tall, resilient and unshaken. Others are small, their petals no wider than a thumbprint, but their vibrant purples, yellows, and soft pinks brighten the expanse. The boldest of them, with long, slender stems, sway in the breeze like dancers lost in the rhythm of the wind.

Moss and clovers weave through the clearing, deepening the green. The moss, rich and thick, breathes with the pulse of the earth, carpeting stones, fallen logs, and twisted roots. In the shadows, where the sunlight barely reaches, it flourishes, draping the landscape in a living tapestry.

Ursula perched in the middle of the roof, her legs straddling the warm, weathered shingles. The cabin, small and nestled in the clearing, felt far removed from the world below—her own quiet sanctuary. Her long brown hair was swept into a messy ponytail, loose strands catching the breeze. She wore what had become a kind of uniform: a faded sweatshirt tied loosely around her waist, a baggy tank top tucked into well-worn mom-style jean shorts. Her New Balance sneakers, once bright white, had faded to dusty gray—scuffed and creased from endless wandering through the woods and fields, tracing the edges of her little world.

Under the wide, endless sky, she sketched the clearing, her hands moving with practiced ease as her pencil hovered over the paper, capturing the patterns of wildflowers scattered below. They swayed in the breeze, vibrant against the stillness of the world around them. Long ago, Ursula had abandoned her glasses when sketching or painting landscapes. The softened edges of her vision made the world feel more captivating—its colors richer, its shapes more

mysterious. Even in their blurred forms, the flowers held a kind of enchantment, their details imagined rather than strictly seen.

The day stretched on, the sun climbing higher as her focus remained unbroken. Time blurred; each moment folded into the next as warmth bathed her skin and the sketch took shape. Her cheeks flushed under the heat, but she hardly noticed, lost in the sway of the flowers, the whisper of the trees, and the rustling grass.

By the time the sun reached its zenith, casting golden light across the clearing, Ursula's sketchbook was filled with sweeping lines, the flowers now captured on paper, mirroring the dance she had seen below. She leaned back slightly, stretching her legs beneath her, feeling the roof shift gently under her weight. From above, the cabin seemed so small—like a forgotten piece of the earth, humble yet full of life.

With a quiet sigh, she stood and made her way down the ladder, moving with practiced ease. The climb was effortless, a fluid motion, as though the ladder had become an extension of herself. Her feet landed softly, and she stepped inside the cabin, seeking refuge from the afternoon heat. The small, cozy interior was a welcome contrast to the vastness of the sky above. She closed the door behind her, the world outside softening as she settled into the stillness of her little world.

The faint scent of wood smoke lingered from the stove, the cabin's cool interior offering a soothing reprieve from the sun-warmed roof. Ursula let out a slow breath, her mind still tangled in the sway of flowers, the heat of the day, and the quiet rhythm of her life in this hidden, timeless place.

The cabin felt like a secret—a retreat from the world, where every corner carried the weight of quiet moments. The walls, worn and weathered, creaked gently with the passage of time, as though they had grown together to shelter someone in need of solitude.

Two doors divided the space: one leading back into the embrace of the forest, the other opening to a tiny bathroom, so compact it felt like an afterthought, barely enough room to turn. The heart of the cabin was the main room—a space that was everything at once. Kitchen, dining room, studio, bedroom. And yet, it never felt cramped, only intimate, as though the room had been made for a life lived honestly, without excess.

At its center, a small wood-burning stove sat between the makeshift “bedroom” and “studio” corners, its warmth anchoring the space. The room, though simple, felt alive—its every detail a quiet testament to the person who called it home. A bed rested against the far wall, its blankets soft and worn, inviting sleep. Across from it, a canvas leaned against an easel. Above the stove, a window framed by a faded red floral curtain filtered the light, cheerful even after years of sun.

Next to the sink, an open shelf held a neat stack of bowls, plates, mugs, and glasses, each piece placed with care. The ceramics, chipped and imperfect, told the stories of meals shared, days spent painting, and quiet moments of solitude. The wooden shelves, though slightly tilted, stood sturdy, their presence an unspoken reassurance.

Here, time moved slowly. The spaces between moments felt rich with the quiet magic of simplicity.

Ursula reached for a cup, the ceramic cool against her fingers. She filled it with orange juice from the old GE refrigerator, the hum of the appliance as familiar to her as the rhythm of the trees outside. The fridge wasn’t much to look at - its pale, chipped metal a reflection of the years gone by - but it kept things cold enough, though never quite as cold as it should be. The juice was always a little too warm, but that didn’t matter. It was part of the charm of this place - the quiet imperfections that made it feel like home.

She opened one of the deep drawers in the counter, her hand reaching for the loaf of bread tucked inside, its brown crust rustic and slightly cracked from the journey it had made from Tress’s shop. Her knife, dull from years of use, scraped gently against the surface of the loaf, not quite cutting cleanly. She didn’t care for perfect slices.

The stove was a cast iron relic, nearly as old as the refrigerator. It came to life with a soft click, its gas flame flickering briefly before settling into a steady blue. Ursula placed a pan on the stove, the heavy metal groaning slightly in protest. A dollop of butter landed with a soft plop, sizzling as it spread across the pan. The smell of butter began to fill the air, mingling with the earthy scent of bread as she threw the slices into the pan with a carefree motion. The bread crackled and popped, the butter sizzling in its embrace. The sound was like music - simple, rhythmic, the kind of quiet song that played in the background of everyday life.
She downed the last of the orange juice in a single gulp, her eyes watching as the bread toasted, the edges turning a perfect gold brown.

She ripped open the cling wrap from two slices of cheese. Yellow and square. She didn't rush, despite the bubbling of butter and the impatience of toast. There was a slow, deliberate nature to the way she placed the slices of cheese, almost as though it were a small, secret ritual. The first slice went carefully onto the edge of the bread, leaving a little corner of the toast exposed, golden and crisp. The second slice was broken - just a little, a third of it, tucked under the first piece, hiding away the last golden spot of the toast. Ursula slid the remains of the second slice on top, making sure it was just so, before slipping the second piece of toast over it.

The pan cover - too large for the cast iron, too large for any of the pans or pots - was placed with a soft clink, and the sandwich was left to its work.

She opened the top window panel over the sink. Little dust particles come to life as the sunlight hits them. The conversations of birds in the woods mingle with the sounds coming from the stove. For a moment she stands leaning slightly into the window, a soft breeze kisses her cheek. The sunlight brings out her freckles, some deep and permanent even in the winter months, some visiting for the warmer season. A burning smell breaks her meditation and she removes the grilled cheese when it is still within the edible range of burnt.

The dining area was tucked into a quiet corner, the front door—weathered and creaking with age—serving as a natural divider between the kitchen and the table. The table was small, round, and worn, its edges softened by time. Years of frequent opening and closing had left their mark on the door—dings and scratches scattered across its surface, small reminders of moments passed. The table was just the right size for one, though there was space for two if ever needed.

Above the table, the only window facing the front of the house framed a view of the world moving at its own unhurried pace. Outside, the day was calm. A light breeze stirred the leaves of the tree, and two birds—regular visitors—pecked at the scattered seeds. From where she sat, Ursula could see them clearly, their feathers ruffled slightly by the wind as they picked at the crumbs. Their small, rhythmic movements felt almost companionable. Eating with them, in this quiet, shared moment, felt like dining with friends. Each bite of her grilled cheese mirrored their motions—crumbs falling from their beaks just as they tumbled from hers.

The bread was drier than she expected, its crust leaving her mouth parched. She realized she had forgotten to refill her juice and shrugged. A small thing, not worth the disruption. She let the dryness linger, unwilling to move, afraid that any shift might send the birds into flight.

The silence of the cabin was soothing—the soft hum of wood settling into itself, the occasional flutter of wings as the birds briefly took to the air, only to return to their perch. In that stillness, Ursula found a quiet peace. The simple act of eating and watching the world unfold beyond the window felt like its own story—one without a beginning or end, just a continuation of small, beautiful moments.

She finished the last bite of her meal, a soft sigh of satisfaction settling into the stillness. Leaving the plate in the sink, she crossed the room in twelve slow steps, her feet sinking into the worn carpet, muffling her movements. Beneath it, the wooden floors creaked gently, as though exhaling with her.

Her “studio” was a small corner—a space of quiet creative chaos. Sketch pads, acrylic paints, brushes, and pencils lay strewn together in a charming disarray. Moving with practiced ease, she gathered her folding easel and portable stool. She didn’t need much. The simple act of creating, of losing herself in the work, was enough. She found her Walkman next, its familiar weight settling in her palm like an old friend, and clipped her headphones around her neck.

Everything went into the old burlap sack her father had given her when she was still in school—rugged and worn, its fabric carrying stories of its own. She flung it over her shoulder with a swift motion, the headphones peeking from the top as if reminding her of the world she was about to step into. The Pogues cassette Michael had given her filled her ears, the raucous energy of folk-punk spilling into the air around her. It was a sound she carried with her, a restless soundtrack to the still moments of her life.

Her bike stood waiting under the window, its frame faded but sturdy, leaning patiently against the house. She set the canvas down with a soft thud, then mounted the bike, gripping it with one hand as she pushed off, her legs moving at a steady rhythm. The burlap bag swung against her side as she pedaled down the pebbled drive, each jolt a reminder of the road beneath her.

Soon, the pebbles gave way to smooth pavement, and she released the handlebars, letting the wind catch her hair and the edges of her thoughts. The canvas tapped against her leg with each pedal, a quiet companion. Her free hand moved through the air, fingers grazing the cool breeze

as the world around her slipped into a gentle rhythm. The Pogues still played in her ears, but the wind, the rustling trees, and the distant hum of the earth beneath her were just as loud in her heart.

Her ride took her to Trim Castle, where stone walls and ancient towers stood as if holding their own quiet histories. She set up far from the tourists, where the low murmur of passing groups wouldn't reach her. Here, the open sky stretched above her, the whisper of grass at her feet. She turned off the Walkman, slipping it into the empty bag, and the world around her sharpened, more vivid in its silence. When she worked, she liked to listen to the earth breathe—the birds, the wind, the rustle of leaves—a quiet symphony of life in its purest form.

The hours passed unnoticed. Clouds rolled in, casting the world in soft shades of grey. But through the cracks in the sky, the sun still fought to be seen—slivers of pinks, purples, and oranges breaking through, spilling their colors onto the landscape like brushstrokes. Ursula paused, looking up at the sky, the quiet beauty of it settling in her chest like a soft, warm breath.

As dusk fell, she packed her things, placing the canvas carefully on the grass to dry in the cooling air. With no house to lean it against, she balanced it against her body as she mounted her bike. The ride home was slower now, the weight of the painting pressing against her like a familiar presence. She pedaled through the fading light, the road stretching before her like an open invitation home.

Halfway home, the memory of the bike's lights flickered into her mind, as it always did. With a chuckle, she stopped, the cool evening air brushing against her skin as she switched them on—one of those small tasks she always forgot but somehow loved to remember at just the right moment. The lights flickered to life, casting small pools of yellow onto the road ahead, a quiet glow guiding her home.

The cabin was wrapped in twilight's soft embrace, its dimly lit corners flickering with the glow of two humble lamps. One perched atop the fridge, casting warm, gentle light and long shadows on the walls. The other, beside her bed, filled the space with a quiet radiance, like a small, steady flame in the dark. It was spring, but winter's chill still clung to the night, unwilling to let go. Ursula felt it in the tips of her cold toes as she padded barefoot across the rug, the silence broken only by the soft sputter of the wood-burning stove as it flickered to life.

She fed the stove small pieces of wood, stacking them with careful precision, coaxing the flames to rise higher. The stove groaned softly, as if waking from a long slumber, then caught, the fire licking eagerly at the logs. Soon, the cabin filled with the comforting scent of burning pine, the smoke curling through the air like an old song.

Ursula ladled bean soup into a bowl, steam rising in delicate swirls, its scent earthy and warm. Carrying it to the stove, she settled onto the rug in front of the fire, its flickering light drawing her in. Reds and yellows clashed and blended in hypnotic motion, their crackling rhythm filling the room with a quiet language of its own—one that needed no words to be understood.

The flames were wild, unpredictable, yet here they were, tamed within the iron belly of the stove, their chaos contained behind the shimmering glass. There was something beautiful in the paradox—the raw, consuming force of fire held in place, transformed into something gentle, something to be admired. The glass was both a barrier and a window, a threshold between destruction and warmth, a world where fire could be watched without fear. A small, quiet magic, visible only to those who took the time to notice.

Ursula curled her fingers around the warm bowl, bringing it to her lips. The soup was rich and hearty, a simple comfort against the cool spring night. When she finished, she set the empty bowl on the floor beside her, leaning back with a soft sigh. Stretching her legs, she felt the day's weight ease from her muscles. With arms outstretched, she reached for her knapsack, resting just within reach.

The evening felt endless in its stillness, a perfect pause in the rhythm of time. Her fingers brushed over the fabric of the bag, pulling out her Walkman, its weight grounding in her hands. The soft click of the cassette player filled the space as she swapped out the old tape for a new one—a small ritual, but one that marked the transition between moments.

She retrieved a cassette from her bedside table, the worn label of *Japan* visible in the dim light. Folk-punk had carried her through the last hours of the day, but now, as the night deepened, she craved something different. The sharp, new wave sounds of *Japan* felt like a natural progression, a shift into another landscape, another energy. The music began—soft at first, then building—its cool, electronic pulse a stark contrast to the warmth of the fire crackling before her.

As the music filled the room, the flames seemed to move in time, the space alive with the interplay of firelight and sound. The night stretched on, the fire flickering gently in the stove, the

music swirling through the cabin. Ursula, content in the small world she had created, settled deeper into the quiet rhythm of the evening.

She stretched out on the only rug in the cabin, its thick fabric worn soft by time. Once vibrant, its colors had faded, but the familiar pattern remained. A cream and orange border framed the intricate floral design, twisting branches and delicate leaves reminiscent of a medieval tapestry, their shapes whispering stories of another time.

Her fingers traced the fibers as she lay back, sinking into its familiar texture. The memory of it wrapped around her like a warm blanket. As a child, she had spent hours sprawled across this very rug, her small face pressed to the cool floor, gazing up at the old box television. Her eyes would drift from a yellow flower to muted green leaves, the colors as vivid then as they were now. She would follow the orange tendrils curling toward the center, her gaze resting there, watching as the world spun around her from the safe perch of childhood.

Her father sat not far from her, one leg thrown over the coffee table, his feet resting there as he flipped through channels, endlessly searching for something to hold his attention. The rhythmic clink of a teacup settling into its saucer punctuated the quiet whenever her mother took a sip, the rustling of magazine pages turning too quickly—always in a hurry, even when there was nowhere to be.

Her father's deep voice, grumbling over the latest news of the Troubles, mingled with the crackling cheer of Gaelic football matches. The television flickered with images of distant places, yet the living room remained its own small, cozy world.

Her mother had always been proud of that rug. *A Persian area rug*, she would tell the neighbors, and they would nod, speculating on its origins, as if it carried some grand history. For a time, it had been the talk of the street, its presence lending a quiet prestige to the home. Over the years, though, it had collected the marks of a lived-in life—stains from spilled drinks, dropped food, the occasional scuff from hurried footsteps—its history no longer about where it had come from, but about the moments lived upon it.

Now, it lay in Ursula's cabin, at the foot of her bed, one corner nestled against the frame, another hidden beneath a folded towel to mask its imperfections. Just a step away from the worn dining table, it remained a place of quiet rituals, far from the laughter and chaos of the past.

Her eyes drifted back to the design, tracing the flowers and vines she had memorized long ago. The same patterns, unchanged, a quiet tether to everything she had carried with her.

The music in her ears—the haunting, electric pulse of *Ghost*—bled into the firelight flickering in the stove, shadows stretching and shifting along the walls. The warmth crept up her legs, tendrils of heat unwinding through her toes and curling around her body in a quiet embrace. The world outside felt distant, muted by the rhythmic crackling of the fire and the soft hum of the music. Wrapped in stillness, the cabin became its own cocoon of warmth and peace.

Her eyes drifted to the canvas she had started that day. It rested on the floor beside her, its skeletal frame taking shape, faint outlines hinting at what was to come. But Ursula already saw the finished piece in her mind, as if it had existed long before the first brushstroke. The image was clear—bright, sharp, alive—filling her chest with quiet excitement, a knowing that only time and patience would bring it into being.

The fire's warmth moved up her body, reaching the top of her head, pulling her into a gentle, half-dreaming state. Her eyelids fluttered shut as she sank deeper into the rug, the familiar patterns beneath her fingertips a quiet lullaby. The music—a pulse in the background—faded as she drifted, her thoughts slipping like soft shadows into the night.

"1, 2, 3, up," she whispered to herself.

She forced herself to her feet, the weight of the evening tugging at her bones. The floor had become too much—too hard, too still—and she couldn't bear to sleep there again. With a lazy sigh, she left the soup bowl resting where it was, its remnants cooling in the quiet room. She crawled into bed, the soft quilted comforter waiting for her, its fabric aged to a perfect softness, worn by time into something that felt like an embrace.

Her hair hung loose, still damp from her shower, cool against her shoulders as she settled in. The room was a cocoon of warmth and shadows. She wore only an oversized t-shirt—Michael's t-shirt, the one he had left here months ago, now faded and stretched. She always wore it when she craved the quiet comfort of something familiar, but she always tucked it away when he visited, as if the fabric itself carried memories she wasn't ready to share.

She let out another slow sigh—the kind that comes in the last moments of a long day—before reaching for the lamp beside her bed. Her fingers brushed the switch, and the warm light flickered out, leaving only the fire's glow. The orange embers pulsed gently in the dark, casting a

soothing light that mingled with the faint yellow glow from the kitchen lamp she had left on—a quiet contrast against the night's deep blackness.

For a moment, the room held its breath. The fire's warmth hummed through the space, a quiet heartbeat in the stillness. The shadows deepened at the edges, while the dim kitchen light glowed like a lantern, guiding her through the softness of the night. She sank deeper into the comforter, the weight of the day slipping away, warmth from the fire and quilt wrapping around her like a protective cocoon.

The quiet rhythm of the night wrapped around her—the fire crackling, the distant hum of the world outside, the soft flicker of the kitchen light. In that moment, she felt both small and content, the simple comfort of the room filling her with peace. Her thoughts drifted with the fire's warmth as sleep slowly claimed her.

Her week unfolded in the same gentle rhythm, a quiet ebb and flow that might seem mundane to someone accustomed to a more hurried life. But for Ursula, there was solace in the stillness, in the way the days passed like a slow-moving stream. Loneliness never lingered for more than a flicker, always chased away by the cheerful sounds of birdsong or the blur of a rabbit darting through the garden.

On the porch, she sat in the old rocking chair, its wood creaking with familiar motion, her eyes half-lidded as she watched the world move around her. A squirrel, cheeky and persistent, scurried up to the bird feeder, little paws stretching to secure a morsel. She smiled quietly, letting the peace of the moment settle into her bones.

Every Friday, Michael's little blue car wound up the pebbled drive. By now, it was an unspoken understanding—an expectation, almost—that he would stay the weekend. A duffle bag hung over his shoulder, its fabric worn soft with age. It had belonged to his father, a patch sewn over the name *Thomas*, with Michael's name embroidered in delicate, faded thread.

"I like knowing his name is under mine," he had once told her. "It's like a secret only me, my granny, and Pops know about."

"And me," she had added, smiling softly.

"Yes," he said with a grin, "and you."

She never had a phone. The timing of his visits was always a little mystery, his arrivals staggered in a rhythm she had come to accept. Sometimes he showed up early, when the world was still hushed and cool; other times, it was late, when the sun and moon briefly shared the sky in their quiet dance. It didn't matter. He had long since learned the location of the spare key.

Some Fridays, she would ride her bike back up the drive to find him already waiting on the porch, one of her books open in his hands, two cups of tea beside him, steam rising lazily into the air—as if he had known the exact moment she would return.

And then the ritual would begin. She pulled out the old portable CD player from beneath her bed, dusting it off as she selected a CD. Michael, without needing to be asked, moved the furniture and canvases to the edges of the room, giving her space. It was a familiar choreography, a small, unspoken agreement between them. On this particular evening, she chose the Ornella Vanoni album—*Un Gioco Senza Età*—one her father had picked up in Italy in the late '70s. When she and her sister were small, their parents would dance to this record in the kitchen after the girls had been tucked into bed.

She pressed play and skipped ahead to *Domani È Un Altro Giorno*, the music filling the room with its smoky, romantic swirl. Neither of them spoke Italian, and that was part of the charm—the lyrics were a mystery, like a secret world they weren't meant to understand, yet one that held them together, tied to something both familiar and distant.

Outside, the night had settled, and the room was bathed in the golden glow of the firelight from the stove and the small lamp in the kitchen. A light breeze filtered in through the open door, carrying the scent of damp earth and fresh grass. It was nice.

The air thrummed with a quiet pulse as Michael moved closer to her. His hand rested on her back, just below her shoulder blades, a grounding presence that made the space between them feel impossibly intimate. The warmth of his touch seeped through her shirt, and she felt the soft brush of their bodies as they swayed together in time with the music.

There was barely any space between them—just enough for her to feel the gentle pressure of him, but not enough to break the small, careful world they had created in the center of the room. His eyes held hers, the dim light casting shadows across his face, but his gaze anchored her there—steady, unmoving. It was the kind of silence that spoke louder than words, a quiet language they had learned long ago.

Her fingers rested lightly on his shoulder, close enough to feel the steady rhythm of his movements. Even after all these years, her heart still fluttered in his presence. His touch, so familiar, still made her unsteady.

They moved slowly, the space around them fading away as if the world had shrunk to the room, to the music, to the warmth of the fire. It was just the two of them now, swaying in the golden light, their bodies moving together in a quiet, unspoken dance, their movements mirroring each other without a word. The room seemed to hold its breath, the music swirling around them like a soft, gentle wind.

And for those moments, it was enough—just the two of them, in the quiet glow of the cabin, caught in the timeless rhythm of something small and perfect.

Monday mornings always held a certain stillness, as if the earth itself was caught between the fading night and the promise of the day. The sky lingered in a soft, bluish-purple hue, the last remnants of darkness clinging to the cool air. Michael would be ready to leave by dawn, his movements steady and deliberate, as if the quiet of the world around him was part of the rhythm of their goodbye.

Ursula, on the other hand, was a picture of disarray, still half-drowned in sleep. She wore an oversized shirt that swallowed her frame, the kind that slipped too far over her shoulders, and a pair of football shorts that would inevitably slide to the floor the moment she stepped inside again. Her hair, wild from sleeping with it damp, framed her face in chaotic curls—a small rebellion against the morning's precision.

He tossed his duffle bag into the trunk, its worn fabric a constant in their goodbyes. Then, with care, he placed her canisters on top, their familiar weight a quiet comfort. She always leaned against the door of his car, her back resting against the cool metal as he wrapped his arms over her shoulders, pulling her close.

For a moment, they stood there, the soft hum of morning filling the space between them. She listened to the steady thump of his heartbeat through the fabric of his shirt, the warmth of his chest grounding her. She tilted her head up slightly, their eyes meeting—wordlessly, they shared a conversation of glances, one that needed no words, no explanations. It was a language older than speech, something known only to them, an understanding that lingered in the quiet.

His fingers brushed her cheek, light against her cool skin. His touch was warm. For a moment, time slowed, the world retreating into the background. She felt the heat of his breath, the faint trace of mint on his lips. They stayed like that for a heartbeat, suspended in the quiet beauty of the moment.

Then, slowly, his lips found hers.

It wasn't rushed. It wasn't grand, but rather, a simple, careful gesture—a quiet offering. Their kiss was slow, tender, carrying the weight of a thousand unspoken words, the mingling of relief and longing, an echo of something neither had dared to say out loud. It wasn't perfect, but it was real. Something that lived between them, fragile and soft, like a promise written in the silence of the morning.

She pulled away first, her lips brushing his once more in a soft peck before stepping back. The world seemed to sigh as she opened the car door, the creak of the hinges carrying through the air. He gave her one last kiss on the cheek, gentle, like a whisper, before sliding into the driver's seat. She watched him through the window as he started the engine, the low rumble of the car a quiet signal that the moment was ending.

The tires crunched over gravel as he reversed down the pebbled drive. She stood for a moment, watching him go, her heart heavy with an ache that never fully faded.

And then, with a sigh, she turned, returning to the warmth of her bed, her bare feet cold against the wooden floor. The sheets welcomed her back, the lingering warmth of the bed wrapping around her as she pulled the comforter close. It was always like this—the quiet ache of goodbyes—but it was part of the rhythm they had created. And even in the silence that followed, the world outside felt fuller somehow—tender and waiting, like a promise that wasn't spoken, but understood.

A few hours later, Ursula sat quietly on her porch, the golden light of late morning stretching lazily across the cabin. A soft breeze stirred the pages of her book, as if the world itself was flipping through them, savoring the stillness. The wind carried the scent of pine and earth, the fresh promise of spring. Beside her, steam curled from a cup of tea, dissipating like the last remnants of a dream.

Her hair, still a little wild from sleep, was tucked behind her ears, and her thick-framed glasses—usually forgotten—rested on her nose. She wore oversized overalls and a loose white

shirt, her bare feet curled up on the edge of the porch, toes brushing the wooden slats. In this quiet moment, she seemed to belong to the landscape itself, wrapped in the forest's embrace.

Then, from down the pebbled drive, came a familiar clatter—tiny wheels spinning, the air filled with eager pedaling. A small figure appeared in the distance, silhouetted against the rising sun, growing larger with every turn of the bike's wheels.

Kiki was a newly minted teenager now, her hair chopped short, a wild mess poking out from beneath her half-fastened helmet. She rode with careless joy, head tilted slightly, her ever-present headphones hanging around her neck like a loose necklace. Her denim jacket, far too large for her frame, billowed around her like a sailor's coat. Her new shoes were already untied—Ursula knew they'd soon match her own, dirt-splattered and worn.

In the wicker basket at the front of Kiki's bike, curled up comfortably, was Jiji. His sleek black fur gleamed in the morning light, his eyes half-closed as if this was the only way he ever intended to travel—tucked in warmth, carried by the steady rhythm of Kiki's life.

Kiki skidded to an abrupt stop, her tires crunching against the pebbles where the driveway met the clover. The kickstand clicked into place, a soft, satisfying sound. Jiji, ever the willing passenger, draped himself lazily over her shoulders, his tail flicking idly in the breeze.

"URSULA!" Kiki's voice rang out, breaking the stillness like a bell. She hopped off the bike in one fluid motion, landing gracefully on the porch steps, her energy spilling into the space like sunlight through the trees. She pressed a quick, affectionate kiss to Ursula's cheek, her eyes alight with joy.

"How's the book?" she asked, her voice filled with that quiet eagerness Ursula always found endearing.

"Good," Ursula smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling. "Would you like a cuppa?"

Without waiting for an answer, she set her book aside and moved toward the kitchen, her steps unhurried, practiced with the rhythm of solitude. The door creaked as it swung open, and behind her, she could hear Kiki's soft voice—low, murmuring to Jiji as if the cat understood every word.

Ursula's smile deepened. Kiki had a way of making the world feel smaller, as though they shared a secret, something only they and the woods could understand.

When Ursula returned, Kiki had already flopped onto her back, legs dangling off the edge of the porch in a carefree sprawl. Jiji sat contentedly on her chest, curled into a tight ball, purring softly. Ursula placed the cup of tea beside Kiki's head, the warm ceramic pressing against the cool morning air. Next to it, she set a small saucer of milk, knowing Jiji would appreciate the gesture.

Ursula stretched out beside her, mirroring Kiki's relaxed pose, arms tucked behind her head, legs stretched toward the clearing. She glanced over at the wildflowers swaying in the breeze, their soft colors scattered across the open space.

"Why aren't you at school today?" Ursula asked, her voice low and amused.

Kiki, dunking her tea bag in and out of the water as if stirring the very essence of the morning, answered easily, as though telling Ursula her secrets was the most natural thing in the world.

"Bomb threat," Kiki muttered with a shrug. "Tress figured I was safer in the woods with the local hermit than at the bakery."

Ursula's lips twitched. "So that's what Tress thinks of me?"

Kiki grinned, mischief flickering in her eyes. "Tress is right. You *are* a hermit."

Ursula chuckled. "True enough," she admitted. "But someone's got to keep the critters and flowers in check, right?"

They gazed out at the sweeping expanse of wildflowers, the land untamed, humming with life. Kiki's eyes, full of quiet wonder, roamed across the clearing, piecing together the world in the way only the young do—seeing it as both infinite and fleeting.

"You're going to be overrun by all these flowers one day," Kiki observed, her tone somewhere between serious and playful.

"I can only hope," Ursula laughed. "But the birds and critters do their part—nature's little gardeners."

A breeze rustled through the flowers, filling the air with the scent of earth and green things. For a moment, they sat in silence, lost in thought. Kiki's youthful curiosity made Ursula see the place with fresh eyes, noticing details she had long stopped appreciating. The clearing felt timeless, the forest stretching around them like an ancient protector, watching with quiet patience.

Witches would have danced here, Ursula thought. *Moved with the rhythm of the flowers, breathed in pine and earth, spun with the lazy winds whispering through the trees.*

“This is an ancient place,” Kiki murmured, as if speaking a secret to the land itself.

“It is, isn’t it?” Ursula replied, her voice soft with the weight of truth.

Kiki’s gaze turned inward, a quiet reverence in her young eyes. “I always feel like I exist outside of time when I come here.”

Sunlight filtered through the canopy, casting shifting patterns across them. The world faded into the background, the murmur of a distant stream weaving through the air—a melody Ursula had almost forgotten, but now seemed as much a part of the clearing as the trees themselves.

“What would you like to do today?” Ursula asked, breaking the silence, her voice soft and warm.

“Just talk, if that’s okay,” Kiki replied, her gaze still lost in the swaying wildflowers.

“Of course,” Ursula said with a smile. Then, with a quiet hum, she added, “I do need to finish up something, though. Is that okay?”

Kiki’s eyes brightened. She nodded eagerly, then grabbed her cup and saucer, the gentle clink of porcelain echoing in the stillness. Ursula stretched before settling back down, eyes closing to the dappled sunlight warming her skin. She listened as Kiki moved inside—the clink of dishes in the sink, the soft creak of the floorboards beneath her steps.

Fondness swelled in Ursula’s chest. Kiki, still at that stage of life where everything was uncertain yet full of possibility, carried none of the pretenses others her age sometimes wore. There was no effort to be anything other than what she was—a girl carving her own path, vulnerable and eager, yet unshaken in her belief that something, somewhere, would reveal itself in time.

Ursula, in turn, watched her with quiet affection, seeing a younger version of herself—lost, searching, but certain that moving forward would eventually lead her where she needed to go.

“Are you working out here or inside?” Kiki’s voice carried from the cabin, pulling Ursula from her thoughts.

She sat up slowly, glancing at the sky. The soft blue had deepened to gray, clouds gathering at the edges. “I think it’s going to rain,” she said, stretching her arms. “I’ll grab some wood and get the stove going.”

Before she could move, Kiki was already off the porch, her shoes tapping lightly on the ground as she ran toward the woodpile. Jiji, ever her shadow, followed, tail flicking in the breeze.

Ursula gathered her things and stepped inside, carefully avoiding the cat, who had his eyes fixed on Kiki with quiet devotion.

The day, it seemed, was just beginning.

The window beside the bed was open, the rain whispering against the world outside. At first, it was barely noticeable, like the quietest sighs from the sky. It fell in hesitant droplets, tracing shimmering trails along the leaves. The soft patter blended with the rustling trees, as if they were sharing secrets. The air thickened, carrying the scent of wet earth and pine—fresh and new, as though the rain was washing away the dust of the day, leaving everything clean again.

Kiki sat where the rug met the bed, leaning against the frame, legs crossed. She watched as Ursula worked quietly at her easel, the brush in her hand moving fluidly, capturing something she had seen days before.

After a long silence, Kiki spoke, her voice soft but clear. “Ursula, do you ever feel like you’re just not… doing enough? Like even when you’re creating, it doesn’t feel like what you’re supposed to be doing?”

Ursula didn’t pause. A faint smile tugged at her lips.

“All the time,” she said with a quiet laugh. “It’s the curse of being an artist, I think. You’re always searching for something deeper, something that captures the truth of things. And no matter how much you create, it never quite feels like enough.” She dipped her brush into the paint, flicking a small stroke onto the canvas with practiced ease. “But that’s the beauty of it too. The meaning is in the search, in the trying—even when you don’t know where you’re going.”

Kiki bit her lip, sitting with Ursula’s words for a moment.

“But what if you don’t even know where to start?” she murmured. “Some days, I can’t even make sense of what I’m supposed to do. I feel like I should be… more. Like I’m stuck.” Her voice trailed off, the weight of her doubt settling between them.

Ursula set her brush down and sat beside her, half on the rug, half off.

“I know what you mean,” she said. “When I started, I thought I had to have everything figured out. That if I could draw the perfect tree or paint the perfect landscape, everything would make sense. But art—life—isn’t about perfection. It’s about finding meaning in the mess, in the process. You’ll never have all the answers, Kiki. But that’s what makes it worth doing. If everything were easy or clear, we’d stop looking. We’d stop creating.”

Kiki curled into a ball, arms wrapped around her knees, chin resting on her forearms. She was quiet, fingers tapping absently against her leg.

“I don’t think I understand how you can just… trust the process,” Kiki said slowly. “I try, but sometimes it feels like I’m just spinning in circles. Like I’ll never be good enough.”

Ursula smiled gently, her eyes soft. “Trust doesn’t mean you never doubt. It just means you don’t let the doubt stop you. You keep moving, even when you don’t know where you’re going. Life’s like that, don’t you think? You’ve got your heart—you just have to follow it. I wish there were more to it, but that’s the truth. You have to listen to yourself. You’ll face hundreds of crossroads, you’ll stumble, you’ll hesitate, but you have to endure to get where you’re meant to be.” She looked up at her canvas, then back at Kiki.

Kiki let out a soft sigh, gazing at the painting while absently petting Jiji, who was fast asleep beside her. “I think… I think I’m starting to understand.”

Ursula ruffled Kiki’s wild hair before pushing off the floor. She settled back on the ladder as the wind shifted outside. The rain now fell in light, playful bursts, twirling leaves through the air before letting them drift to the damp earth. For a heartbeat, the world outside became a watercolor painting—soft, blended, fluid. The trees bent with the breeze, swaying in slow conversation.

Ursula’s brush moved with purpose, sweeping across the canvas with a rhythm balanced between focus and intuition. Though her gaze remained fixed on her work, she felt Kiki watching her, studying each movement.

What struck Ursula most about Kiki was her heart. There was a fire in her, a passion that burned fiercely, even when she doubted it herself. She was the type to throw herself into something without hesitation, an admirable trait—both a strength and a challenge.

She also recognized Kiki's loneliness, the quiet ache in her eyes when she thought no one was looking. There was a fragility in her, a vulnerability that made Ursula protective in a way she hadn't expected. Kiki had potential to become something remarkable—if she could learn to trust herself, to see that her worth wasn't tied to the approval of others or to always succeeding. She needed to let herself fall sometimes, to feel the sting of failure and realize she could stand back up.

"I think it's safe to go home now," Kiki said, glancing out the window.

The evening light dimmed as the rain softened into a drizzle. The pitter-patter had faded, leaving behind a hush, like the earth sighing after a long breath. Kiki stood, tucking a drowsy Jiji inside her jacket before wrapping her arms around Ursula from behind and pressing a quick kiss to her cheek.

Then she was off, stepping into the damp dusk.

Ursula followed her to the door, leaning against the frame as Kiki lazily plopped her wet helmet onto her head, leaving it unfastened.

"I'll be back the next time school gets a bomb threat!" she called over the fading drizzle, turning her bike onto the pebbled road.

Birds flitted among the branches, their feathers sleek with rain. Flowers, heavy with droplets, bowed slightly but remained vibrant. A soft mist curled up from the earth, draping the clearing in an almost mystical veil.

Kiki wobbled as she reached the smooth road, glancing anxiously from side to side before steadying herself.

Ursula watched until Kiki finally made her turn and disappeared down the road. Then, with a small, knowing smile, she pushed off the doorframe and returned to her stool.

She didn't need to worry too much.

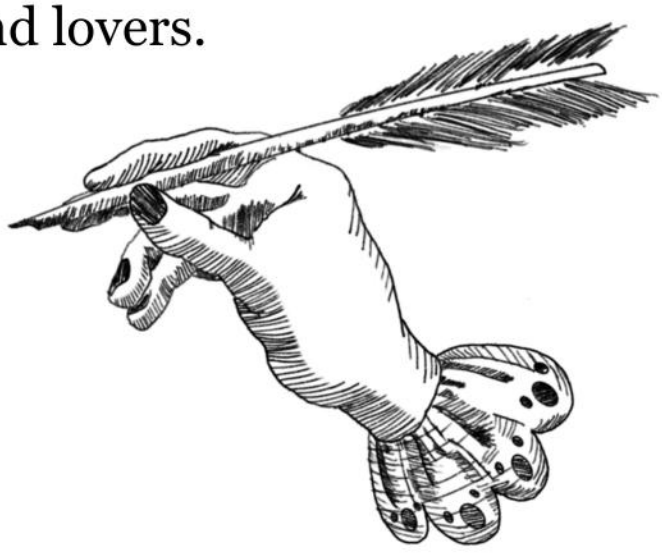
Kiki had a quiet strength, one that would reveal itself in time. Ursula had faith in that, in her curiosity, her determination, her ability to make a mess and keep going.

There was beauty in that, too.

This collection of work is both old and new. Some of pieces, like "Don't Build Your Bones out of Bottles," have lived in my vault for a long time, while others I wrote specifically for the zine— I wanted to explore art and voyeurism in "Looking Through Windows." "Taboo" is also very current. I've never feared being personal on the page, but always through a filter, through metaphor, through symbolism. This is what pushed me to use a pen name— while my work is related to me, it is not me. There are countless plotlines I have added, details I have changed in my work. I'm able to write about unsavory things if I'm afforded a degree of separation. I think this is natural and something all new writers should keep in mind. I hope you'll find that my work is tragic, humorous, eclectic, and strange. It ultimately displays my taste as an editor, forever drawn to stories about outcasts, survivors, strangers, and lovers.

I hope you enjoy,

Ophelie




Looking in
windows
Ophelie

I didn’t mean to start the habit. I couldn’t resist it— the window looking into the psych ward.

I’d debated sending an email, calling, telling the staff that you can see directly into one of the bedrooms from the apartments across the street, but I hadn’t gotten around to it. I figured that if no one else had bothered to, I couldn't be considered a bad person.

It really was simple curiosity at the beginning. I couldn’t look away, it was like a car crash, but the car might explode at any moment. Well it was like a series of car crashes, one after the other, randomly bursting into flames.

I still remember the first patient I had the pleasure of watching- I decided to call her Mary. It seemed fitting, because from what I could gather she had religious psychosis. I could see her praying for hours each night at the side of her bed, holding a rosary or something that looked like it (I’d thought about binoculars but I figured that that was going too far). After that came Harry- the man with the circular glasses who paced around the room and fought off invisible ghosts, shadow boxing for his unknown audience.

The paintings came later. I’d run out of ideas and subjects, no more girls in cityscapes and proud portraits– I found myself allured to the characters behind those barred walls. The first one I made was of Mary, holding a rosary of pearls while in blue hospital scrubs. I remember my hand shaking as I first lifted my brush to the canvas as I made the first outlines of her shame, shoulders tense and skin electric, expecting someone to pop out behind me at any moment. It never fully went away but it sort of got better.

The next painting was of Harry, fighting the air. Then came Susan, with her thick auburn hair and screaming fits. I painted her fighting off the male guards. The pieces were so good that they’d gotten me into a MFA program starting that fall, but now I didn’t know what I was going to paint without my magic window.

I sighed and stood up from my armchair with the fraying fabric on the arm and spring peaking through the cushion at the bottom. I’d been meaning to replace it but there never seemed to be

money left over after rent, food, bills, the works. I was paying an exorbitant amount for this apartment, wanting to live downtown with the artists' history, and it showed. I barely had money to do anything with my friends and they were always asking why I didn't just move to Bushwick, but I told them that the crowd was too young for me. I just couldn't give up my view.

My friend Bailey was coming over later that afternoon since I couldn't afford to go to the movies or go out to dinner. I figured I should start tidying the place up.

It was a small studio apartment, with the armchair and my easel next to the window— my bed pushed up against the left wall and my green couch further closer to the entry door. It was small, but it worked for me. I'd thought about renting an artist's studio to get out of my apartment more but I figured I liked the space enough so why would I abandon it.

The room was just slightly messy, at least to me. I chalked it up to my artistic temperament, figuring that I was just more right brained or whatever it was. Beer cans laid on the coffee table, old newspapers that I used to protect the wood from paint were spread across the floor. My duvet was in a ball on top of the unwashed, yellowing sheets.

As soon as I finished putting the last cup into the sink I heard a knock on the door.

"Coming!" I yelled, turning away from the sink. I sauntered over to the door, proud of my half done cleaning job. I opened it to find that it wasn't Bailey.

"I'm sorry to sneak up on you like this, but I wanted to do this in person," Scarlet said, pushing past me, towards the couch. She started to sit, then looked at it and bounced up, like something had bit her. "See look-this is what I'm talking about, you don't know how to take care of yourself." She quickly exclaimed.

"What?" I asked.

“I’m sorry, I should probably start from the beginning.” She took a deep breath. “I don’t think this is working.” I waited for her to say more.

When she didn’t I said, “Okay.” She started to cry.

“Why are you crying? You’re breaking up with me!” I yelled, my heart rate finally increasing.

“I really like you, but I think we’re just at different points in our life.” She said after sighing. “Like this,” she said, waving her arms around, “like this, you can’t keep yourself clean. And you’re so fucking secretive! You’re so picky about everything! I can’t even touch your curtain without you freaking out! You’ve shut me out!”

“That’s not fair, you just walked into the middle of me cleaning! I was just doing the dishes!” I didn’t really care that much, except for the window. I couldn’t let her see that I was painting actual mental patients. I had a feeling she’d freak out, even though it was ultimately harmless—it wasn’t like they’d ever see them. Aside from that, we were barely seeing each other at that point anyway, but something in me pushed me to move, to try to get her to stay even though I felt a hollow, bitter indifference in my chest. “I promise I can change.”

“It’s too late,” she said, looking down, “I just can’t do this any more.”

“Do what anymore? We barely see each other?”

“Exactly? What’s the point? I don’t want to fight. I should get going.” I debated making more of a scene, getting on my knees but ultimately I let her, figuring there was nothing else to be gained by begging. I stared at the antique credenza by the door as she walked out, analyzing the carvings and curves. I’d inherited it from my mother, who’d inherited it from my grandmother. It was beautiful, really, and felt out of shape in this apartment. I wanted to smash it.

After the door shut behind her I took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. My chest felt empty, but not in a sad way, rather in a bored on vacation way, a Paris syndrome way. I didn't know what to make of it. I decided to go into my body, sense all of my sensations, something an art professor had advised me to do, but I felt my heart beating as normal, my skin was room temperature. Someone knocked at the door again.

"It's open," I said, too tired to move. I stared at the credenza again.

"Hey, hey, hey," Bailey said, walking in and shimmying. "What's crackalackin'?"

"Just got dumped," I said, my legs felt stiff, like two glass rods.

"Oh my god," Bailey started to move towards me. "I'm so sorry, how are you feeling?"

"I don't know, I don't really want to talk about it," I said, turning away. My chest burned and I couldn't stand to look at her. She seemed weak, seemed stupid. I wanted her out of my presence.

"That's fine. Want to just play some video games?"

We settled on Mario Kart to keep my mind off of it and it was working, a little too well. I fell into the rhythm of driving, as if I was in a real car, ignoring the powers and obstacles and losing every round. I didn't care though, it was a stupid game.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?" Bailey eventually asked. "You seem oddly normal. I don't want you to snap." She laughed.

"No, I'm fine— just need to process." She then looked into my eyes, trying to find something. I put up a cold wall, shutting her out. "I actually want some alone time."

"I don't know man, you're acting strange, not gonna lie."

My chest burned. “The fuck do you mean?”

“I just mean.” She looked in my eyes again, then looked down. “Don’t worry, I get it. Take your time.” She set her controller down and started to walk towards the door after grabbing her things.

“Thanks, it really means a lot,” I said, my voice tense as she opened the metal door.

She paused and turned around, facing me. “I mean it. Feel better bud.” She closed the door with a clang. I sat in the silence— I had to move. It was 5 pm on a Saturday. Well fuck if I was going to let my Saturday be defined by getting dumped. I walked towards my closet and flipped through my button downs, finding something to wear. I was going to go out that night, find a hookup, find a rebound. Something was pushing me to move. I wanted something to jumpstart my bones again.

Once I finished changing I put on some cologne, adding an extra spritz for good luck. I looked at myself in the mirror, analyzing my features. I was moderately handsome, I figured, with light brown shaggy hair, brown eyes, somewhat lean build, and somewhat good taste in fashion, at least in my opinion. I took all of these parts together and decided that the sum was ready to go. I grabbed my wallet and keys and headed out onto the street.

It was a nice temperature outside, somewhere in the mid 70s, a perfect June night. The streets were already teeming with people, and I weaved through them towards my favorite bar, one just down the street, St. Paul’s.

The inside was dark and dingy, the booths had cracked, aging, brown linoleum and one of the pool tables had a tear right down the middle. It was cheap, so it fit into my budget. I took a seat at the counter.

“What will you be having?” The bartender asked me.

“Just a Miller High Life,” I replied, wanting to keep my tab down. I looked up and down the bar. It was still early so it wasn’t packed yet. There were two men my age that I passed over quickly, two girls that looked to be underage, a woman sitting alone reading a book. I grabbed my beer and headed over there.

I sat at the stool next to hers. “Whatcha reading?” I asked.

She put the book down with a smile. “*A Very Nice Girl,”* she said, showing me the cover. It was a simple blue background with a pink line art drawing of a naked woman.

“What’s it about?” I asked, staring right at her.

“It’s about this opera singer who falls into a love affair with a wealthy older guy. It’s really good, a lot smarter than it sounds,” she said, giggling.

“Oh really,” I said with a smirk. “Sounds pretty sexy to me.” She blushed.

“It’s not that type of book!” She lightly slapped my arm. “I wouldn’t read that in public!”

“Oh so just not in public?”

“You know what I mean!” She was full on laughing at this point.

I asked her what she does. She was a travel nurse, only in town for the rest of the week. I told her that I was an artist and she got a sparkle in her eyes. “Really? I’ve always wanted to know an artist.”

“You don’t know any artists? I feel like there are a lot of us.”

“Well not at least where I’m from.”

“And where’s that?” I questioned.

“South Dakota. Middle of nowhere.” She shrugged.

“Wow that’s far,” I said. “Would you ever move to the big city?” I asked, laughing.

“Honestly, maybe. I’m liking it a lot more than I thought I would.” She took another sip, finishing her glass.

“What were you drinking?” I asked. “I’ll get you another one.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” She responded, looking down. She must not be used to the attention.

“Oh come on, here look I’ll do it for you.” The bartender walked towards us. “Can she get another of whatever she was having?” She was still looking down, giggling softly to herself. I wondered if this was the first time someone’s bought her a drink.

The bartender set down her drink. It was bright pink. “What is that?” I asked.

“Vodka cran,” she said, innocently sipping through her straw. I wondered if she was younger than I thought.

“Ah, nice. I’m more of a beer guy myself.” I said, holding the bottle out to cheers. She clinked her glass back and seemed to settle into the moment, her shoulders relaxing.

I ended up figuring out that she was 23 and named Lynn, which was good because then she wasn’t an unacceptable amount of years younger than me. I told her I’d been meaning to compliment her hair, that it was stunning. I was trying to woo her but it really was, it fell into brown curls down her back. It had to have been natural, how perfect it was. You could always

tell with girls who tried too hard, there was always a fatal flaw, a hair out of place, a smudge of lipstick on a tooth. Only girls with perfect, honesty beauty could maintain it all the time. It was how nature intended it.

“You know, you’re not like other girls,” I said, winking.

“I bet you say that all the time.” She smiled. My breathing hitched for a moment and I froze.

“I’m just joking,” she said. I laughed.

“Yeah, I’m a real player.”

We continued to talk about her job. I was letting her talk all about herself. It was nice for the girls, they were unused to it and welcoming towards the change. She liked the fact that she got to help people but hated the blood and the fact that she had to invade people’s privacy. I said that I admired her for it, and it was kind of true– God knows I would not have the patience or altruism to do something like that. I was perfectly fine living in my apartment, budgeting what money I had left of my inheritance to float me by until I made it big.

We sat at that bar talking for hours– I wanted to make her feel like she was the only girl in the world. She certainly looked like it. I stared deep into her eyes the entire time. I’d read something online that said that sustained eye contact forces a connection, so I kept that connection strong, burning between us until I felt certain that she would go home with me that night.

I ended up having to pay for about 3 drinks of hers. It would be fine in the end, but I hated spending extra money. I’d subtly pushed Scarlet to pay for her half of things by bringing up application fees and the dwindling money. It didn’t take long for her to pick up that I didn’t want to keep paying for things and I was grateful that I didn’t have to say something outright. But this was a new girl, I’d expected a bit of an investment.

She tumbled over her heels out on the street and I had to catch her, quickly grabbing her arm. “Ouch!” She yelped, pulling back her arm once she got her footing.

“Sorry, I was just trying to help you.” But I could tell something had changed. She crossed her arms and a pout emerged on her face. “I’m sorry if I hurt you,” I eventually said.

“It's fine,” she said, still looking forward. I looked at her, then faced forward.

“Nice night,” I said.

“Yup,” she replied curtly. I looked back at her then settled on the silence.

Eventually we found ourselves outside of my apartment building. It was red brick and had a black metal door on the street, with a loud buzzer that reverberated through the air after it finished ringing. I took her up to the third floor.

“Sorry that it’s not the biggest place. I’m really here for the location,” I said, opening the door. I held the door open for her as she walked in, taking in the room. I flicked on the lights.

“I like it,” she said, with a stifled tone. “I like the green.” She walked further into the apartment, towards the window. She began to look at my current painting.

It was halfway finished and of a new patient I called Phil because he looked like he could work in accounting. I figured that he probably did. Phil was of the more neurotic type, pacing around the room in the middle of the night. The painting was of him with his hands together, feet in motion. “Oh, is this what you’re working on?” She asked, leaning her head in closer.

“Yeah. I call it Phil.”

“Is that what you’ve named this guy?” She was still looking at the painting.

“Yeah.” I shrugged. I didn’t want her to look up, to look out the window, where Phil was now pacing at that moment.

“It’s really good,” she said. “Very haunting.”

I had only told some of my other friends about the inspiration of the paintings. I told it to the ones that wouldn’t care, but I did change it for my artist’s statement for my grad school applications. I said that they were representations of the different parts of my psyche, manifestations of all of my neurosis. I guess it worked well enough. But still, I didn’t want Lynn to see. I felt that her being a nurse, she would find it morbid, she would be disgusted. I just had to keep her eyes off the window. “Where do you get your inspiration from?”

I took a deep breath, getting ready to go into my rehearsed elevator pitch. “It’s a representation of different maladjusted parts of the psyche through stereotypical psychiatric patients. It’s an exploration of how we pathologize different normal human feelings,” I said.

“Ah, that’s really interesting.” She started to stand up. “I’m guessing that this one is anxiety?” Her head started to turn towards the window. I moved towards the couch.

“Say, why don’t you sit down with me. Take a breather.” I said, patting the spot next to me. She looked at me, her eyes quizzical.

“Um, sure.” She walked towards the couch and gingerly sat down next to me. I patted her shoulder, trying to get her to relax. Honestly I was doing a good thing by painting the patients—I was helping raise awareness or decrease the stigma or something. Maybe she’d understand.

“Want me to turn on a movie?” I asked. But it still looked bad, they had no say in it. I might as well have been stalking them. I reached for the remote

“What do you have in mind?” She started to look around the room. When her face started to turn towards mine, towards the shining light through the window I grabbed her chin and kissed her. She pulled away. “What are you doing?” She yelled.

I quickly thought. “Sorry, I was just so overcome with your beauty.” She looked straight at me, then right through me. I could see in her eyes that she saw it. That she saw him. Her breathing hitched and she froze.

“Is that him?” She said, her hand over her mouth. She looked at the painting, then back to the window. “Is that the fucking guy from your painting?” She stood up slowly, then something snapped. She stomped towards the window. She yanked the curtain back, almost tearing it off the rod.

It was undeniable. Phil was pacing in the same exact way expressed in my painting. I searched my brain for solutions. “Look, I can explain.”

“There’s nothing you need to explain,” she said, pushing past me. “You’re a fucking creep. I’m leaving.” Heat pumped through my veins to my cheeks and needles prickled my skin, burning. I wanted to disappear and forget everything.

“No, I promise!” I yelled, following after her, reaching my arm out to her. “It’s not what it looks like!”

“It’s exactly what it looks like!” She yelled, stopping to face me. “You’re a fucking freak pervert that looks at mental patients through windows.” Tears threatened in my eyes.

“I really didn’t mean to, I couldn’t help it.” I said, my voice cracking.

“Oh great, so this is some compulsion. I’m not doing this, I’m out of here.” She walked toward the door.

“It’s not like I’m hurting them! I’m just looking at them!” I didn’t see any change in her face. “Please!” I screamed as she slammed the door. I staggered backwards, my knees felt weak. I leaned against the wall before sliding down it, the sounds of my cries the only thing breaking through the sinful silence. I cried and convulsed, my throat constricting. I stomped towards the window, the fire building in my veins. I couldn’t be a bad person, I couldn’t be.

What did a random girl’s opinion matter anyways? I wasn’t doing any harm and yet she painted me as a villain. “Fuck you!” I yelled at the window, but it was dark now. “Fuck you!” I opened the window. They pushed me to do this, they pushed me. I grabbed the painting of him and threw it out onto the street below. The window reflected a familiar stranger, an angry face with brown hair and brown eyes. I stared at the hideous portrait. The light flickered back on and there was Phil, pacing back and forth.

Isabella Chuecos

is a writer and editor based in New York City. The following pieces explore the animalistic qualities we often ignore in ourselves, once through fiction in “Foghead” and another the personal essay “Animal.” By day, she works in tech marketing and copywriting, championing the importance of punchy sentences and taking a lunch breaks. By night, she writes non-fiction and fiction, continuing the work she began in undergrad as a member of multiple newspapers, literary magazines, and honors creative writing cohorts. Her work can be found in Open Ceilings Magazine, City Lifestyle Catalina Foothills, and more, hopefully, if you’ll have her.





Foghead

Isabella Cheuros

I'm peeling a clementine in my white-tiled shower and listening to my new roommate have sex through the white-tiled wall. The fruit unravels easily. The steam softens it. Makes it give. I pop one of the sweet, orange crescents in. I brace myself for a bump or moan. I chew. Pleasure wears many faces.

I should have told her to be quiet. I should've told her to be quiet because it's hard to eat your fruits and wash your hair with the crash-bang-booms of that hungry, instinctual endeavor in your ears. I didn't know that I didn't want to know the sound of my friends in heat. It's like watching people eat chicken wings for too long. They become animals.

For what it's worth, I haven't been sexually satisfied since my former roommate and best friend hid a camera in my room and watched me peel clementines in the shower and sleep at night. And now he's gone, and I don't know him anymore. Since not knowing him, I've taken two yoga classes, one single mile run, three bottles of nail polish from the beauty supply store, six oxycontin, and a tiny lime green ceramic flower pot from a garbage dump.

The shower's off now and I'm wrapping my wet hair up in the towel that I brought from my last place: a faded white thing with mysterious black stains streaked along the edges. And for some horrible, shake-my-fist-at-the-universe reason, the towel is wet too. I've got my wet hair in a wet towel because some things just don't want to do their jobs.

The shower doesn't drain either, at least not at a normal shower's rate. There's a big tangle of hair in the drain and I don't want to clean it out because there's multiple types of hair in there. I don't feel the urge to stick my hands in things I don't belong in. And it's too hard to get into it all, anyway. Instead, I stand here with my hair wrapped up. The soapy water creeps down past my ankles. It's bearably slow.

He put the camera, his iPhone, high up in there in the closet. Between my sweaters. I found it butt-naked while deciding between the cute panties with holes or the boring, intact ones. When he confessed what he did to me, from the other side of the door I had barricaded against him,

he kept making this throaty groaning sound. Like a wounded cat. Like he was in pain. Like he wanted the truth to stop coming out.

It couldn't. The truth does that.

The cops came when I called and told me that I should have him arrested. They also told me that he put the camera in a bunch of spots all around my room, and that he took a bunch of videos to get just the right angle. So, despite all the things I read online about police, I let my best friend get handcuffed and led away and put in the back of a siren song singing car to somewhere I'll never be.

That was the last time I saw him. Eight months ago.

Back before all that, my best friend and I would sit in front of our brick-colored coffee table with white beans, turkey sandwiches, and shots of vodka and scream at the Alex Trebek episodes of *Jeopardy!* When they'd cycle through the different categories at the beginning of each episode, we'd either cheer or groan depending on whether we'd be good at them. He was an expert on African wildlife. I always nailed World War II and celebrity stage names. We came up with nicknames for contestants when they'd stick around a while.

My best friend was something worse than a creature of habit. He studied every day, all day long, in the same chair at the free dining table we picked up off the side of the road when we moved into our first apartment. He ate the same food. Wore clothes to bed and rose the next morning and wore those same clothes all day long. A navy-blue Hawaiian shirt. Plaid sweatpants. A wool beanie with a pompom on top, indoors. A pair of thick socks, knitted to look like two gray cats with pink noses and white whiskers. He kept himself inside and away from the world. He only really knew me. I consider it his undoing.

My new roommate and her friend are finishing together and I'm letting the shower flood. She won't stop laughing. They're animals now. Hyenas. I imagine there could be a few dry shrubs

or stray rocks in that wild room. Maybe there is a setting sun, or a violent flurry of sand picked up by a hot wind. They've come undone. It is, in the end, all instinct.

The laughter reminds me of that one time my best friend and I drank so much pink vodka that we laid together on the floor in my old room on this rug my mom got me from Home Goods. Jacks, aces, and spades were scattered around our heads and hair. We'd just finished playing a card game that only the two of us knew. We rolled around cursing the pink vodka that sat, drained of color, on my nightstand. The next morning, we both missed our classes and spent the day together, too.

The old rug from the old room is under my new bed in my new room. I think about that one time often and how it's my fault he's gone.

Her bedroom door is opening and they're pitter-pattering around down the hallway now. Off to the bathroom. She's got to empty herself out and he's got to come along for chivalry's sake.

And now I'm remembering it's time for me to brush my teeth, and I have to do it right now because if I don't, then I'll never do it. These days, I forget about it all the time. The dentist told me that I have a baby cavity and prescribed me a milk protein paste to smear on my teeth every night before I go to bed.

More laughing, coming from her bathroom now. Electric toothbrushes abuzz. Screwdriver to the back of my throat. I'm driving this toothbrush into my mouth because I have to, but I don't want to.

The superior court in my county sent me six separate copies of the ten-page restraining order I got against my best friend. That gives me sixty pages, all added up. Just in case I forget. Each of them have "OFFICIAL COPY" stamped in fat, red, sans-serif font right at the top. They stuck a pale yellow Post-It note on the copy inside, telling me that I had to find someone to deliver it, and that all ten-pages of the restraining order against my best friend belonged to me. In case I forgot.

I'm spitting minty bubbles in the sink and they're bunching up right around the edge of the drain. They refuse to go down.

I keep wondering what my best friend is doing right now.

My mirror and my reflection are fogged. I like a hot shower on cold days, and I'm living in the dead of winter. I wipe the mirror with my hand and it fogs right back up. It really doesn't matter if I use my hand, or the designated mirror rag that I keep by the sink, or how long or how hard I wipe. And as much as it would be convenient, I am not interested in getting a fogless mirror. I am no longer romanced by the myth of rectification.

I have learned to let it fog.

The following works of non fiction display introspective themes of identity politics, immigration and moral philosophies to invite readers into microcosms of human life. Number Nine dissects the author's relationship to societal standards of perfection while Chicles, Chocolates reflects more intimately on the latine diaspora in New York City, honing in on one particular Columbian cafe owner.

Susana Correa





Susana Correa

The number nine is my favorite number. It is the day I was born, but that's not why I've loved it. I have always thought the number nine had an aspect of disorderliness. Nobody likes odd numbers. Or at least the people I grew up around. Nine seems deformed, it seems like it leaves people wanting, reaching for the comfort of eight or ten and in some ways I can understand that feeling. The desire for two perfect halves. Evenness. I was born, it seems, on a day that becomes me. I've grown up feeling disorderly. Like no matter how hard I try I can't escape myself. I can't escape the child that will trip over herself that will break in their shoes too quickly and pick up their feet too late and wake up tousled and unfurled. As I become more myself I've begun to accept that I *am* all those things. I am what I was afraid of, wide hipped and chubby and large and lumpy and strong and bumpy-kneed and coarse (in more ways than one) and blunt and sometimes unaware. These are inescapable constructions that bear so many negative consequences or…they used to. I realize I'm still punishing myself for all these things, the very fabric of me, which I pick at, try to unravel so that I might put it back together correctly this time. Put it back together in a way that is smoother and…even. But I can't change some things. I can change how often I hit a brick wall or scream or throw a tantrum or sob or eat too much or speak out of turn but I can't erase my bones, reconstruct them to suit me, or even really can I change my height or my stomach and its proclivities. That would be too much of me. I try and try and wonder why I hate myself in the moment and look back in admiration at the person I was. I watch all my friends growing in size and I always want to be smaller. To lose the chub that I've carried around. To grow. I'm afraid to be discovered in my ruse and in my lie and in the fact that I loathe this body (just a little) when it cannot look the part and I work and wonder and change my mindset and it always returns with a fury. The self-hatred. I don't even know where I learned it. Was I always this way? Will I always hate myself for not loving me more? I think again that I was born on an odd day, a day with a deformed number, a number that isn't supposed to represent anything good or tasteful and I make it my favorite. I make nine my favorite number because I decide I like all the things that aren't uniform, the things that nobody likes. I make my mission to truly absolve myself of any guilt of being born by loving all the odd and discarded objects. The things nobody likes. The imperfect objects. The ugliest. The color that is no one's favorite, something like yellow, too bright or brown or dull. It takes me some time to believe it because people always change the things they like. People are

fickle. I wonder if I'm shifting too much so I decide to enjoy some pretty things too, lace and the color purple and nice smelling objects (that I cannot change, the nose has a pallet of its own). I try to enjoy the popular pleasures, the most listened to songs, the shirt everyone so desires, the must have pair of shoes. It all seems so unnatural to think in this way. I start to realize how ridiculous it is to maintain popularity, to follow it's winding and shifting path. I veer off, realizing how tired it makes me to chase perfection and return to the undiscovered or outskirted nine's of life. This whole concept of moral objectivity is null in relating to subjective pleasures. This idea that a number could be hated for its shape, for its position amongst the others seems ridiculous. I laugh. Suddenly I realize how frivolous *all* this is, shifting and changing based on uncontrollable and completely ridiculous variables. The color yellow in a flower, the color purple in the sky, the smell of jasmine flowers under a full moon, new boots everyone is buying, a fresh croissant at a well liked bakery, the shape of the crumpled can on the floor, the fresh tamales on the sidewalk, the wrinkles on a leather bag or in a human smile. I like those things. I realize there's nothing objectively disorderly or disturbing about the number nine and even if everyone likes it or nobody does, it's still my favorite. Number nine is my favorite number.

Coming from a background in academic writing, I have always used criticism and comparative analysis as principal methods to survey my surroundings. Learning the nuances present in rhetorical strategies, then understanding how to harness those tools and create meaning through language have been the most empowering experiences of my life. It is through command of those rhetorical tools that I have found meaning in the works of art I engage with, whether it be literature, film, or fine art—creative mediums with their own unique sets of particulars. The curiosity that naturally stems from a desire to understand creative works at a granular, incisive level led me to Brady Corbett's The Brutalist, while I was simultaneously reading Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. The two texts have little in common superficially but prompted interesting questions when I started considering them in tandem: how does a marriage between creatives function? Where does one partner's vision supersede the other? Is it possible for two creatives to share in an equal partnership? I hope this essay prompts the reader to consider the commonalities and divergences that exist between these two works, and come to recognize the merits of comparing disparate works for the undeniable universal truths one discovers at their intersection.

Delaney Teehan





Love and Marriage

Delanzy Teehan

In a recent article for *The New Yorker,* one of my favorite novelists, Elif Batuman, wrote about the formation of her perspective as both a writer and an individual around *Anna Karenina*. As someone who also shaped their perspective around media, I was intrigued. Batuman writes "How had I based so much of my world view on 'Anna Karenina,;' a book about a woman who has to die because she's in love with a guy who isn't as smart as she is?" This line in the article struck me as incredibly profound and I felt compelled to read the novel. The guy who isn't as smart as Anna turns out to be a cavalry officer in the Imperial Russian military named Alexei Vronksy. Midway through the novel a fellow officer named Serpuhovskoy advises Vronsky on the affair, saying "Women are the chief stumbling block in a man's career. It's hard to love a woman and do anything. There's only one way of having love conveniently without its being a hindrance —that's marriage." This line stood out to me as a key argument presented by the novel, and reminded me of so many contemporary projects addressing marriage.

In the last ten years, movies and television series like 2019's *Marriage Story*, 2021's remake of *Scenes from a Marriage*, and 2021's *Together* have centered the brutality of monogamy. *The Brutalist*, Brady Corbet's film about the immigration and rise to international prominence of fictional architect László Tóth, shares elements with these canonical films. While László's design work and his collaboration with American industrialist Harrison Lee Van Buren are the focus of the movie, his relationship with his wife Erzsébet brought to mind Serpuhovskoy's claim in *Anna Karenina*. Erzsébet's entrance into the film and re-entrance into László's life after years of separation acts as a major turn in the structure of the story and indicate the metaphysical role spouses play in the lives of creative people.

The Brutalist is director Brady Corbet's third feature following 2018's *Vox Lux* and 2015's *Childhood of a Leader*, co-written by his wife and fellow filmmaker Mona Fastvold. It has been widely praised by critics for its technical and creative innovation, as well as its notable use of VistaVision, a film format that has not been broadly used since the 1960's. It tells the story of László Tóth (played by Adrien Brody), a Bauhaus-educated Hungarian architect and Holocaust survivor who, at the film's outset, has immigrated to America while his wife Erzsébet and niece Zsófia are still internet in Europe. László is taken in by his assimilated cousin Attila (Alessandro Nivola), a furniture maker in Philadelphia, and the two are commissioned by Harry (Joe Alwyn), the son of industrialist Harrison Lee Van Buren (Guy Pearce), to transform his father's study into a library, which László designs meticulously in his brutalist architectural style. Harrison is so taken by László's work that he commissions him to design a community center to commemorate his late mother. As a token of his appreciation, Harrison connects László with a lawyer who helps expedite his wife and niece's emigration from Hungary, and the two arrive at the beginning of the movie's second act.

Erzsébet and Zsófia's entrance irreparably alters the pace of *The Brutalist*, and many reviewers have criticized of this shift. In his review for *The Ringer,* critic Adam Nayman writes "Laszlo's

wife, Erzsébet, [is] a frail concentration camp survivor who's more effective (and affecting) as a structuring absence than as embodied by a game but disastrously miscast Felicity Jones, whose arrival sends the action spinning off its axis." Independent of Jones' performance as Erzsébet, from a structural standpoint, the momentum Corbet has spent the first hundred minutes of the movie crafting halts when László must to reconcile not only with his responsibilities as a husband and uncle in the midst of his consuming creative project, but the history they must address collectively.

When László first sees Erzsébet after years of separation, she is being pushed by Zsófia through Philadelphia's 30th Street Station in a wheelchair, and reveals to her husband that the malnutrition she was subjected to in Dachau resulted in osteoporosis. Her disability physically renders the horrors of their imprisonment, reminding the couple that despite their integration into Harrison's social sphere, the palimpsest of this embodied trauma demands attention. After meeting his family at the train station, László brings them to the Van Buren estate where Harrison and his children bombard László, Erzsébet, and Zsófia with questions ranging from their lives in Hungary and the pronunciation of their names, to their wartime experiences and their comprehension of the English language. Prior to Erzsébet and Zsófia's arrival, László subsumes himself into the American industrial machine with relative ease. His ties to his country of origin become flagrantly obvious in their presence. Erzsébet and Zsófia introduce logistical complications to his creative work. Here I began to think of Serpuhovskoy's argument: the attention and intimacy marriage demands of László actually impede on his ability to "do anything," in large part because his wife has her own professional ambitions and perspective on his creative work. During the planning period for the community center, another architect is brought on by Harrison to offer cost-cutting solutions, and this architect recommends László cut three feet of height from the structure to save on material expenses. László rejects this architect's suggestion, saying he will forgo his design fee and pay for the additional three feet of vertical space himself. Later, he must confess his choice to surrender his fee to Erzsébet. Rather than scolding him for making this choice without her consultation, Erzsébet, an Oxford-educated journalist, determines she will find a job writing for an American publication to supplement their income. As the building project continues and logistical complications ensue, Erzsébet confronts László, recognizing that the continuation of this project means years of László commuting to Pennsylvania from New York where she has found a job as a columnist for a women's magazine, and implores him to consider the impact this will have on their family. He decides to step away from the project and finds a job as a draftsperson for an architectural firm in New York where he has significantly less creative autonomy.

In a conversation between *Ringer* contributor Sean Fennesy and Adam Nayman on the outlet's *Big Picture* podcast, the two discuss the destabilizing moment women represent in *The Brutalist* for the driving energy present in the collaboration between László and Harrison. They compare the film to movies where women are markedly absent like "*There Will be Blood*…—a

movie where women are a structuring absence and that really gets at the… ‘there's how boys are’ stuff. Both in terms of the aggression of it and the homoeroticism.” In their article “Homosociality: In Between Power and Intimacy,” gender and sexuality researchers Nils Hammarén and Thomas Johansson argue that the term has become overused and its meaning diluted, saying it has become a catch-all to describe “how men tend to bond, build closed teams, and defend their privileges and positions.” They refine the definition and distinguish homosociality into two unique categories: “vertical/hierarchical” and “horizontal” homosociality. Vertical homosociality acts as “a means of strengthening power” for two people of the same sex—the shorthand that exists between men, their common experiences, and, significantly, their isolation from members of the opposite sex, facilitate bonds between more successful individuals and less successful individuals which that lead to social, sexual, and professional success for the pair. Nowhere is the presence of homosociality felt more immediately than a scene in the first half of *The Brutalist* where Harrison describes his personal philosophy and László describes his creative philosophy. To express his appreciation for the work on the library, Harrison invites László to a dinner party where he describes an encounter he had with his estranged grandparents who disowned his mother after she had a child out of wedlock. Having achieved professional and financial success, Harrison visits his mother’s parents, feeling an obligation to show them generosity since they are his only known relatives. He writes them a cheque for $25,000, and after he turns to leave, his grandparents run after him to let him know he forgot his signature. He explains to them that he was not suitably impressed with their response to his generosity, and decides to give them a separate cheque for only $500 on the condition they never speak to his mother again. After sharing his story, he asks what brought László to the field of architecture, which László defines succinctly saying “is there a better description of a cube than that of its own construction?” This intimate exchange can only transpire through Harrison’s invitation, not only to his home and his social circle, but to vulnerability and sentimentality elicited by his personal story. The technical construction of the scene reinforces this forced intimacy—the shots of each man are claustrophobically close, with other members of the party partially visible in the background but cut off from the camera’s focus. Corbett makes the audience feel cornered by Harrison in this exchange. Harrison’s manipulation of their social stratification—him wealthy, powerful, and American, and László an impoverished recent immigrant and refugee—fulfills a set of personal ambitions: the desire to be involved in the creation of art, to seem both cultured and altruistic, and chiefly to control László. Patronising in both its literal and colloquial definitions.

When Erzsébet resumes her place as László’s closest creative confidant, Harrison’s access to László becomes compromised. The scene in the second half of the movie when Erzsébet and Zsófia first arrive at the Van Buren estate mirrors the dinner party scene from the first half of the movie. While the two families become acquainted over dinner, Harrison lets slip his jealousy of Erzsébet saying “isn’t it fascinating to meet the significant others of great artists and thinkers?... I have always thought that it is our duty to nurture the defining talents of our epoch.

I possess no such talent whatsoever! Truth be told, I am terribly emulous of individuals like him." "Father is digging for compliments. Don't indulge him," Harrison's son retorts. Harrison makes an effort to expel Erzsébet from László's life so he can once again be the sole focus of his attention by offering to find her a job in publishing in New York. Years after progress on the community project is paused and László moves to New York with Erzsébet, Harrison is finally able to reassert himself in László's life by demanding he fly with him to Carrara to source a slab of marble for the centerpiece of the community center. During their trip, László and Harrison attend a party in the Carrara marble mines where Harrison isolates László and rapes him. This choice by Corbett has been criticized by reviewers as an overly simplistic demonstration of the desire by the wealthy to enter into the perspective of artists through the act of patronage. However, Corbett's choice prompts a fascinating question: does *The Brutalist* call into question the reality of homosociality by presenting its principle homosocial characters as assailant and victim? Is homosociality always a pretext to overt erotic desire from at least one party? And if so, what does that imply for the relationship between László and Erzsébet?

The film ends with an epilogue set twenty years after the end of Part Two. László, now diminished by age and using a wheelchair, is pushed through Venice by Zsófia and her daughter. Erzsébet has passed away in the intervening years. The three of them are attending a retrospective on László's career as part of the first Architecture Biennale. At the retrospective, László, Zsófia, and her daughter take the stage and, due to his age and infirmity, Zsófia speaks on László's behalf, recounting his decades of groundbreaking work. She talks specifically about the design of the community center, claiming it was designed to replicate the exact dimensions of the two concentration camps in which László and Erzsébet were interned during the war (him in Buchenwald, her in Dachau), as a means of forever uniting them. László never speaks about his artistic motives in the design of the community center in the film—it is only Zsófia who offers this final interpretation. As audience members, we wonder if this interpretation is motivated by Zsófia's desire to attribute some lasting creative connection between her surrogate parents László and Erzsébet. We also learn in the second half of the movie that after László and Erzsébet move to New York, Zsófia and her husband decide to make Aliyah and emigrate to Israel. Could her desire to frame László's design of the community center around this memorial of his suffering during the Holocaust connect to the mission of the Israeli state? Ultimately, the film demonstrates that an artist's creative impulses are often not theirs to memorialize. Their work becomes subject to others' interpretation. But interestingly, oftentimes that interpretation surrounds the artist's relationship to their spouse. In that same episode of *The Big Picture*, Sean Fennessy interviews Brady Corbett and asks him about the process of collaborating with his wife Mona Fastvold on the script for *The Brutalist*. A huge amount of the press surrounding *The Brutalist* has centered on Corbett's ability to retain "final cut" on the project—meaning he as the director retained final say over the editing choices and packaging of the movie without surrendering creative control to studio executives. With something like "final cut" and artistic control being so present both in the film and in the critical

conversation surrounding it, one cannot help but ask what it means for the film to be the product of two writers, especially two married writers. Where does one person's vision supersede the other? Is it possible for two creative people to have an equal partnership, or like László and Erzsébet, is one person's work always destined to be presented in a career retrospective while the other is relegated to work below their skill level that pays the bills?

An interesting countertext to *The Brutalist* is Justine Triet's 2023 film *Anatomy of a Fall*. It features similar character dynamics, also centering an artist and their tumultuous relationship with their spouse. In the film, Sandra Voyter (played by Sandra Hüller), a prolific German novelist, is accused of killing her husband Samuel (played by Samuel Theis), an unsuccessful French novelist, after he fatally falls from the top floor of their mountain chalet in Grenoble without witnesses present. The film centers on Sandra's trial, in which her novels are dissected as veiled retellings of her life and evidence of her embittered relationship with her late husband. In the film's climax, the prosecutor presents a tape of an argument between Sandra and Samuel which he secretly recorded as material for his own writing. In the argument, Samuel accuses Sandra of pushing domestic responsibilities onto him (the refurbishment of their home, the care of their visually impaired adolescent son Daniel, etc.) while she prioritizes time in isolation to write. He excavates what is clearly a core point of contention for the two of them: early in their relationship, Samuel abandoned a partially written novel and Sandra, captivated by the central idea of his book, rewrote the text with the same central idea. Her novel went on to garner widespread acclaim. The couple debate who should retain ownership of the story: the person who originated the idea or the person who artistically rendered it.

Like *The Brutalist*, *Anatomy of a Fall* was written by the film's director, Triet, and her partner, fellow filmmaker Arthur Harari. Questions of creative ownership and responsibility between couples present themselves throughout the film. During her trial preparation with her attorney Vincent (played by Swann Arlaud), Sandra describes how Daniel acquired his disability. "Samuel was supposed to pick him up from school. But he was on a roll writing his book, so he called a babysitter at the last minute. The babysitter showed up late. As they were crossing the street, a motorcycle hit Daniel. His optic nerve was permanently damaged." In this instance, who is responsible for Daniel's blindness? Samuel for passing his responsibility onto the negligent babysitter, or Sandra for tasking Samuel with the primary care of their son in the first place? *Anatomy of a Fall*, compared to *The Brutalist*, indicts the creatively successful partner. While László Tóth's designs are lauded as monumental creative achievements and indications of his enduring love for his wife during the career retrospective at the end of *The Brutalist,* throughout *Anatomy of a Fall*, Sandra Voyter's novels are presented as evidence of her egoism, her disregard for her family, and motivating evidence for her suspected murder of her husband. In comparing these two films, it is difficult not to see László's praise and Sandra's indictment as evidence of sexism. In her 2019 essay collection *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*, Jia Tolentino describes her anxiety surrounding marriage citing a study showing that "married men

report better mental health and live longer than single men; in contrast, married women report worse mental health, and die earlier, than single women." The burden of upkeep in a heterosexual marriage, both physical or emotional, tends to fall on women. This dynamic was present in Tolstoy's forty-eight year marriage to Sophia Tolstaya. Throughout their marriage, Tolstoy was granted the space and freedom to write while Tolstaya ran their estate and raised their children (eight of thirteen survived to adulthood). Along with her domestic responsibilities, according to Cathy Porter's edition of *The Diaries of Sofia Tolstoy,* Tolstaya served as her husband's copyist for *War and Peace,* editing the transcript by candlelight after her children had gone to sleep. Frederick Wiseman's 2022 short film *A Couple* condenses the personal writings of Leo Tolstoy and Sophia Tolstaya. Nathalie Boutefeu, playing Toltsaya says during the film "I work without respite. I suffer from the impossibility of achieving what I want to do."

This trope of the brilliant, long-suffering wife of a prolific creative man, displaced from her own professional success by the confines of gender, abounds in contemporary media. Another entry to the marriage portrait cinematic canon, 2017's *The Wife,* centers the relationship between Joseph Castleman (Jonathan Pryce), a fictional Nobel Laureate in Literature, and his wife Joan (Glenn Close). It is revealed through a series of flashbacks that Joan wrote and edited huge sections, if not the entirety, of Joseph's novels, and throughout their marriage he has manipulated her into hiding her identity as a writer, arguing that as a woman she would never be taken seriously. This film borrows from the legacy of Sophia Tolstaya and other obscured brilliant women: sculptor Camille Claudel (mistress of Auguste Rodin), chemist Rosalind Franklin (collaborator of Nobel Laureates James Watson and Francis Crick), musician Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton (whose origination of the song "Hound Dog" is typically credited to Elvis Presley), etc. Tolstoy is widely believed to have written a surrogate of himself in *Anna Karenina* through the character of Konstantin Levin, who through the course of the novel marries the young, beautiful princess Kitty Shcherbatskaya. After they are married, Levin brings Kitty to his country estate and describes his surprise at her fastidiousness in homemaking. "He forgot that she too would want work. And he was surprised that she, his poetic, exquisite Kitty, could, not merely in the first weeks, but even in the first days of their married life, think, remember, and busy herself about tablecloths, and furniture, about mattresses for visitors, about a tray, about the cook, and the dinner, and so on… the arranging of her house had an irresistible attraction for her." Tolstoy acknowledges that it is necessary for wives to have some occupation—that they cannot simply "be beloved, and nothing more"—but the consideration present in his encouragement of Kitty and her domestic contentment, when we know from Sophia Tolstaya's journals how stifled she felt in the domestic sphere, reveals a troubling revisionism. To quote Triet and Harari, "your generosity conceals something dirtier and meaner."

In *Anatomy of a Fall*, Sandra categorically rejects social expectations of domestic labor. During their taped argument, when Samuel accuses her of leaving him no time for his own creative

work, Sandra responds saying “DO IT. I don’t know a single writer who’s not writing just because he’s got a son and a house and groceries to buy. Stop whining about your scheduling bullshit. Drop this logic which comes down to casting blame on me for what you did or didn’t do.” While watching this scene I thought again of the centuries of female artists tasked with the upkeep of the home, and marveled at their ability to write despite those circumstances. In a review of R.W. Chapman’s edition of the Jane Austen’s novels for *The New Republic*, Virginia Woolf argues that Austen was “the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness,” referencing a long-standing mythos of Austen writing her novels in spare slips of time in the corners of drawings rooms amidst her domestic obligations. While Erzsébet is relegated to write columns for a women’s magazine below her stature so her family can maintain an income in *The Brutalist*, Sandra rejects the expectation that just because she is a wife and a mother she must surrender her creative ambitions. She is villainized for this choice.

At the end of *Anna Karenina*, in the midst of her descent into deep insecurity and despair, Anna confronts her lover Vronsky and accuses him of infidelity. When he rejects her accusations, imploring her to respect his behavior towards her, she responds “Respect was invented to cover the empty place where love should be.” After reading this line, it’s easy to understand why Batuman is so perplexed by Anna’s devotion of Vronsky. *The Brutalist* and *Anatomy of a Fall* both test the limits of Serpuhovskoy’s argument about marriage as a container for both love and professional success by reflecting this sentiment from Anna; not necessarily that “love” in its contemporary colloquial meaning is antithetical to respect, but that strong emotion and passion are not inherently “respectful.” On the first night Erzsébet and László are reunited in *The Brutalist*, they lie in bed at Harrison’s guest house and argue in Hungarian and English about the state of their relationship after years of separation. Erzsébet accuses László of losing his attraction to her due to her age and disability. László requests they argue in English, referring to Harrison’s criticism of his English earlier in the evening. The argument gives way to sex, Erzsébet touching László, describing how she thought of him every night during her imprisonment, while László weeps silently. In *Anatomy of a Fall*, the passion between Sandra and Samuel’s relationship manifests in their arguing—over their son, their domestic responsibilities, their careers as writers, their collaboration as parents, creatives, and lovers. Halina Reijn’s 2024 film *Babygirl*, another contemporary portrait of marriage, presents the story of Romy, a sexually repressed CEO (played by Nicole Kidman), who enters into a dominant/submissive sexual relationship with an intern at her company named Samuel (played by Harris Dickinson). In a scene where Romy tells her husband (played by Antonio Banderas) about her affair, she describes her conflicting shame and desire to be sexually dominated saying “since I was very little, since I can remember even, I’ve always had these specific thoughts… thoughts of—violence. Revolting thoughts. Embarrassing. Of being—forced and hurt, and humiliated… And with us—I sometimes—tried to—but you never seem to be... into it.” Tolstoy uses Anna’s relationship with her husband Karenin—a pious, logical, dry, and yes, respectful, man—to prefigure the circumstances of her affair with Vronsky. Anna is also embarrassed, hurt, and

humiliated by her relationship with Vronsky, but their connection is so propellant that she cannot bring herself to end it. We as humans are not by nature drawn to respectability; the emotional and sexual extremes portrayed in *Anna Karenina*, *The Brutalist*, *Anatomy of a Fall,* and *Babygirl* resonate because of their portrayal of the universal draw of passion. In an interview with Sean Fennesy for *The Big Picture*, Halina Reijn says she wrote *Babygirl* to address the question "can you love yourself completely[?]… not just the parts of yourself that you like to show to the outside world, but also the things that you are embarrassed about." The inspiration behind Tolstoy's character Anna Karenina is widely considered to be a woman named Anna Stepanova. She was a housekeeper for one of Tolstoy's neighbors who, consumed with jealousy over her husband's flirtations with their governesses, ended her life by throwing herself in front of a train. Tolstoy's wife Sophia wrote to a friend that he was "terribly shaken" by Anna Stepanova's death, and his mission in writing *Anna Karenina* became to tell the story of a "fallen woman" without moralizing judgement. Whether or not the characters in these works ultimately "love" themselves, the filmmakers and writers who craft these stories suffuse them with empathy, and their tenderness towards their circumstances demonstrate how their suffering lies at the core of the human condition. It is this passion present in each of these stories, both emotional and creative passion, that explicates the connection between these individuals, the instability of passion, and ultimately the falsity Serpuhovskoy's claim.

All of my current work is reflective of a period of massive change in my life that I've experienced since becoming diagnosed with and starting treatment for Borderline Personality Disorder. Structure is a very important part of treating B.P.D., and I've enjoyed playing with form as a poet to mimic that. In my poetry I also like to evoke strong imagery to create unique pictures that express relatable struggles. The pieces I've included here touch on feelings of not being feminine enough as a queer cis woman, not being a strong enough writer, or how it feels to be in a healthy relationship when you are still struggling mentally. Please enjoy, as it brings me great joy to be able to share my art.

Cierra C. Crea



I WANTED TO BE A WILDFLOWER

Cierra C. Crea

I wanted to be a wildflower,
but I am a barrel cactus.

I wanted to have soft petals–
ones that came in bright pinks and yellows,
ones that begged to be stared at
when someone would lay in the grass on the hillside

but I am prickly and sharp
a muted green mound
growing in packed dirt and rocks
along a hiking trail where I am only a hazard
daring you
to come closer

I dreamed of being thin–
for my body to sway in the wind
baby leaves like arms waving.
I could be strong enough to hold my own
but still delicate enough to be picked
by child's hands
to then be joined with like-bodies
in a lovely bouquet of dainty stems

I am instead bulbous
I am full bodied in the way I burst from the ground
and round into a shape I am not proud of
I am strong and hard to pluck,
thickened
by self-preservation.

I thought I could fit in–
for my visage to find its home
among fields of other flowers
along the side of the road.
I wanted to welcome curious onlookers
to walk through our shared beauty
and remark how something so fragile
can grow
in spite of the heat.
Show them how we all grow soft,
even through adversity.

But I stand alone
my skin is hardened by the severe weather.
I do not remain graceful and fine,
I show each hardship on my face.
Each wrinkle and blemish a reminder
that I cannot let the breeze flow around me
without consequence.

I wanted to be a wildflower,
something more gentle and feminine
than a barrel cactus.

Yes, I know my flowers bloom too,
but that has never been enough for me.

I am not alone in this,
the way I've grown into my own version of woman, even
when I didn't want to.

I learned it from my mother, the saguaro,
whose beautiful crown of flowers
can never be taken from her head.
Her body outstretched to hold the Arizona sunsets in the
crook of her arms.

I learned it from my sisters, the prickly pears,
who grow fast and change faster.
Bearing fruit and nopales,
every piece of their body is for others.

I learned it from my grandmother, the eucalyptus tree, a
towering reminder of what it feels like to be home. Her
teardrop leaves falling in patterns
against her sturdy trunk,
to shade our family and give us respite
from the overbearing sunrays.

I'd be lying if I said I was raised to think
that being a wildflower
was the only way to be a woman in this desert climate.

It doesn't change what I wanted for myself,
but I know femininity can grow
like vines or flowers,
trees or cacti,
and that my body may never grow the way I wanted,
but that doesn't make it any less mine
or any less woman.

I have been a writer in public, as a journalist, but for the most part, I have only been an artist in private. Growing up, my poems were one of the few things I kept as I moved from house to house, to apartment, to motel, each time in a panicked chaos that I never fully understood. I think I liked that a poem let me say something without really saying it. The following pieces reflect new and old passions, private and shared truths, reality and fantasy, retrospection and fear of the future.

Kait





arnations

Kait Morris

We were drinking gin martinis at Lamonte in Brooklyn when I got a call with news that my grandma was in the hospital. While my friends sucked oysters from their shells, I paced half-drunk in the narrow, monochrome bathroom. I said, I'm sorry, I can't hear you, to which my aunt replied that she might not make it. What? I'm at a bar right now, I said, but I heard her that time, I just needed to be sure. Maybe the sleep deprivation, or the gin had started to creep in, but a haze came over me. The muffled voices from outside the door were now mute. I stood in front of the sink, stared right in the mirror and could see nothing at all.

We had only been in the city for about twelve hours, having arrived late that night, or early that morning. It was a friend's birthday and when we made it to his apartment in Bushwick at around 4:30, we proceeded to take several shots of mezcal before we jumped on the L train and walked around looking for the nearest 24-hour diner. At that moment, I didn't know whether or not I should hold my tongue to not spoil my friend's birthday, but my face should have certainly given it away. The bistro was bustling by then, and everyone was distracted with shrimp cocktails and lively conversation, which, despite the volume, I could no longer hear.

Back at our table, I said part of the truth, brushing off the part about the sepsis that had already begun to take over her body. I quietly finished my drink and left the olive in its glass. I considered ordering another, but didn't. The next morning, I was back at the airport to catch my flight home, where I didn't bother to unpack because I would be immediately leaving for California. When I went through security, the agent made me tap my insulin pump and wait while they swabbed my hands to check for traces of explosives. In any normal scenario, I'd still have little patience for the additional inspection, but I felt time slipping away. Waiting made me sick. Waiting on the airplane, in the car, in a motel in Weed for the night. I had not been back to Chico in three years, and late spring felt like a heat wave. I never meant to disappear and forget to call her. It crossed my mind whenever I was car sick, or collected seashells, or drove through a tunnel.

I wanted to bring carnations, my grandma's favorite flower, to her room, but I couldn't because the bouquet would have lived longer than she did. She was staying in the ICU and the staff had to buzz me in. I didn't recognize her at all when I saw her, except for her bright red, box-dyed hair and grey roots that she used to have me touch up. They had grown out so long. She always said that she would never go grey, in fact, she was going to die with red hair. I thought about whether the nurse would touch it up for her. I used to cut my grandma's hair too, before I started beauty school, and now it depresses me that I'll never be able to give her a proper haircut.

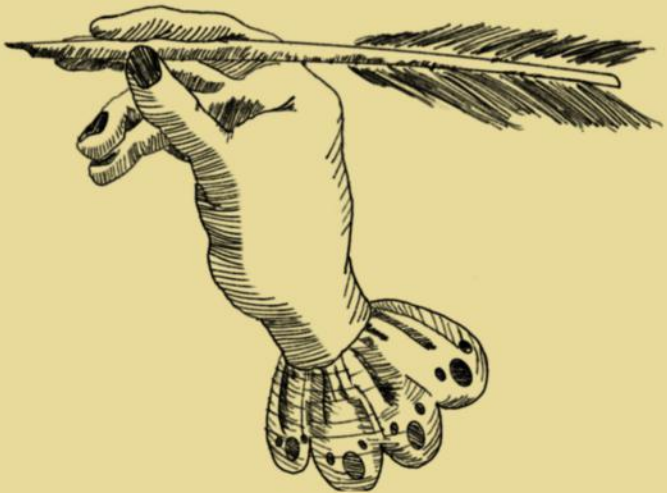
I wrote a letter while sitting by her hospital bed. I rewrote it over and over, ripping the pages out and crumpling them, tossing them into the sterile bin beside the biohazard sign. My tears had made the red ink bleed all over the page, blurring the words in blotchy, pink pools. I couldn't make myself read it out loud, so I folded the piece of paper and tucked it under the plastic water pitcher, that lifeless, greyish-pink color that I always associated with hospitals.

I thought about the first time that I stayed in a hospital at age ten when I was told that I had diabetes, and my mom had left to go to work, or that's what she said, but my grandma had slept on the vinyl covered cot next to my bed all night. The fluorescent lights and endless beeping from machines surely kept her half-awake, but she said she wouldn't actually have slept much anyway. It was probably true, she was always awake, ever since I stopped living with my mom at thirteen, and moved into her tiny one-bedroom, she never slept. It was probably because she had given the bedroom to me, and so her bedroom was the couch and the single lamp by which she read her crime novels. I hated that everything in this room would survive except for her. I gently laid my head down on her cot and didn't cry.

But on the drive back from California, silent tears fell behind my sunglasses, knowing or feeling that this was the last time we would be together. The day after I made it home, my grandma died and in that letter I wrote that I would be back, I knew that I wouldn't, but I couldn't say goodbye either. I almost sent the carnations to her room, but by the time they would arrive she would already be gone.

Living, Reading, painting, writing, talking, it’s all just living. For me, though, it’s like catching fireflies. The moment you see one it's like butterflies in your stomach and you want to keep that feeling forever. You just can’t get too distracted to get the damn thing in the jar, which is easy to do when you are enchanted by what's going on. That’s what these pieces are- little fireflies of life that I managed to get in a jar. They are like secrets- unbelievable moments that stand apart from the rest of your life. They are moments we spend time waiting for. I approach my work, every single day trying to capture a firefly. It only happens sometimes but we have to try every day right? All of these works took absurdly long to complete, not because I didn’t work hard but because the most important thing to them is the life that happened around them. Every night sleeping alone and cold or drinking wine with friends or arguing or working, of falling in love or not falling in love or missing family or cooking a fire dinner- whatever. The work really seeps all that stuff in. They are like kids- little spiritual sponges that will process and repeat what they see so you have to be careful how you treat them. Intentional, I suppose. That’s what gives it weight- the subject is insignificant. It's the weight of what the work means, and how they carry that message that counts. I could tell you what I thought each of the meanings are for my drawings and paintings, but that’s no fun. I'm sure you have something in mind already.

-M





tres

The Department of Labor characterizes an internship as an opportunity meant to “provide training that would be similar to that which would be given in an educational environment, including the clinical and other hands-on training provided by educational institutions,” which should “complement, rather than displace, the work of paid employees while providing significant educational benefits to the intern.” In recent history, the reality of an internship as a learning opportunity has been the subject of public debate. This essay attempts to recount what was learned over the course of a particular summer internship, and exists as part of a larger project recounting a range of internship experiences and what characterizes the participants’ “education.” The logistics of those internships, including the number of hours worked per week, the rate of pay (if the opportunity was paid), and the duration of the contract will be explicitly stated as context for each opportunity.



AN EDUCATION

Part I

Length of Internship: **8 Weeks**

Hours Per Week: **60-84**

Rate of Pay: **Stipend ($200/week)**

The U.S. Department of Labor provides distinct criteria for what an internship experience is meant to provide its participants. Among those criteria, it is stipulated that an internship should "provide training that would be similar to that which would be given in an educational environment, including the clinical and other hands-on training provided by educational institutions," and "complement, rather than displace, the work of paid employees while providing significant educational benefits to the intern." An internship is in short meant to be a learning opportunity. This essay recounts what was learned from a particular internship experience.

Alice spent the summer after her freshman year of college interning for a theatre company doing a production of "Mamma Mia" at South Coast Rep in Southern California. A classmate of hers named Colleen had applied to and been accepted for the same internship; they were going to be Assistant Stage Managers together. Alice grew up in Southern California, but the theatre was several hours away from her parents house in Santa Clarita, so she told the company's producer she could stay with her aunt and uncle for the summer since they had a house nearby. Their house in Temecula was actually over an hour away from the theatre, but she wasn't sure of the likelihood of finding another internship so she kept the details of her house's location vague and decided the commute would be manageable. She offered her aunt and uncle's house to Colleen for the summer too.

Colleen and Alice drove from Temecula to Irvine for the first day of rehearsal. They met their boss, the Production Stage Manager—a woman in late-twenties named Caroline. She wore Dickies jumpsuits and had American traditional-style tattoos of pin-up girls. Together, the three of them met the play's director, a woman named Karen Peterson Perry (she introduced herself to everyone on the creative team using all three names). The cast was made up of a dozen

incredibly fit and attractive college students and six standoffish middle-aged actors. Alice's first assignment from Caroline was to take photographs of each performer so they could make a "Face Sheet" for the creative team. She timidly went up to each of the performers as they mingled and discussed their housing setups for the summer and directed them to a blank wall where she would take their picture. Years later, she still had these ~20 strangers' photos in her phone, and occasionally Google Photos will create an automated slideshow featuring a selection of photos of these actors against that white wall, and she challenges herself to remember their names and any pertinent information about them. Marybeth recently had a baby and left acting to become a real estate agent. Andy was cast in a cruise ship production of *West Side Story.* Ashley was a sales associate at a Chicago bridal store.

Colleen and Alice would alternate who drove two and from the theatre, and whoever wasn't driving got to pick the music. They exhausted their mutual interests relatively quickly, so Alice started playing things she assumed Colleen wouldn't like but she found interesting. One day Colleen was driving them home and Alice put on a New Wave song called "Echo Beach" by Martha and the Muffins. It had a frenetic, talky energy that she knew Colleen would find both schmaltzy and unnerving before she even put it on. As an act of revenge, the next day while Alice drove them to the theatre, Colleen played a song off *Miley Cyrus and Her Dead Pets* called "Dooo It!" with lyrics that read "Yeah, I smoke pot (smoke pot) / Yeah, I love peace (love peace) / But I don't give a fuck (give a fuck) / I ain't no hippy (fuck)." It was one of the worst songs Alice had ever heard. They made fun of both of these songs for the rest of the summer and tended to keep their music picks in a mutually agreed upon cache moving forward.

In rehearsal, the cast would learn music in the morning with the music director, then they would stage the songs and accompanying scenes in the afternoon. Caroline, Colleen, and Alice would record the blocking (the actor's actions in each scene), write down any notes the director had for the designers, and follow along in the script in case any of the actors forgot their lines. Sometimes, one of the actors in a scene we were staging would be needed elsewhere for a costume fitting or a makeup consultation, so Alice or Colleen would stand in for them and read the scene with the other actors. In one of the scenes, Sophie, the main character, asks a former boyfriend of her mother's if he may be her biological father. The actor playing the former boyfriend was in a fitting when they staged the scene, so Alice filled in for him. She stood

across from the young woman playing Sophie—she was short, blonde, tan, fit and beautiful to the point of seeming physically impossible. She sang a song to Alice, her potential father, imploring her to speculate whether she might be her daughter, and looked at Alice with an earnestness and pleading that was paralyzing. Alice tried to maintain a balance of the blasé objectivity expected of theatre technicians when dealing with actors and genuine encouragement for the amount of energy she was bringing to this performance with a reluctant and uncomfortable scene partner. It was one of the most intimate and humiliating moments of her life.

The next day they staged the song “Our Last Summer,” where the main character’s mother and a gay man she dated in her twenties reflect on their time as a couple in Paris. In the song, the characters take turns reminiscing. The mother remembers “Paris restaurants…” her former boyfriend remembers “morning croissants…” Joseph, the actor playing the former boyfriend, interrupted rehearsal to ask “When we get to that line, could there be a croissant on stage I could point to?” The director said justifying the presence of a croissant in that scene would be too confusing for the audience, since the scene takes place in the mother’s bedroom and at night. The next day, Joseph, who worked part time as a Starbucks barista, brought in a croissant in a white paper sleeve. He asked if they could try his blocking idea using this croissant. The director said that while she appreciated the idea, the croissant would go bad before the show opened. Joseph suggested they dip the croissant in melted transparent plastic to keep it intact for the duration of the run. The director compromised and said they could look for a nonedible croissant to try his idea. The stage managers wrote the props supervisor an email asking for some nonedible croissant options. Several days later, he brought three choices from a chain Japanese home goods retailer in Carlsbad. One was plastic and hard, one was plush, and one was foam and came in a plastic wrapper. He explained the foam croissant was kept in plastic because it was engineered to smell like a real croissant when you unwrapped it. Alice unwrapped it; it smelled like butter and wet rubber. Alice, Colleen, and Caroline put the croissant on a plate and glued it to the vanity in the mother’s bedroom set. The director justified its presence in the scene saying the mother “picked up the croissant at breakfast and brought it to her room to save for later.”

They finished rehearsing the show within a couple of weeks and started technical rehearsals on stage with all of the scenery, lighting, sound, and costumes elements. When they started tech, two new people joined the stage management team: Production Assistants Lauren and Courtney. Colleen and Alice were responsible for running all of the scene changes backstage, and Lauren and Courtney helped execute the transitions and any additional moves they couldn't do by themselves. Towards the end of tech, Karen Peterson Perry decided she wanted to punctuate the finale of the show with a balloon drop. Alice grew up with parents who loved MSNBC, and the only other time she had ever seen a balloon drop was at the end of the Democratic National Convention, so to her balloon drops had covert political implications. The producer explained to Karen that installing a pre-rigged net over the audience to drop the balloons (as was the conventional methodology) was not feasible given the timeline and cost. Karen was insistent that the balloons would make the difference between a passable show and a truly great one. The producer determined that Lauren and Courtney would go up to the catwalk above the audience for the final number with trash bags full of balloons and throw the balloons down manually. Lauren and Courtney decided to include one blown up condom in their trash bags each night and aim it at an audience member they disliked.

The show opened after several weeks of rehearsal and tech, and a bulk of the summer was spent running the show. As stage managers, Caroline, Colleen, and Alice were charged with maintaining the look and spirit of the show in the director's absence after opening. In one scene, Joseph was supposed to dance in slow-motion behind the actor playing Sophie and Stephen, the actor playing another potential father. As performances continued, the dancing upstage became more and more elaborate, stealing focus from the scene happening downstage. One night, at intermission, Stephen confronted Joseph, saying his dancing was impinging on the emotional resonance meant to be evoked by his conversation with Sophie. Joseph was humiliated. He refused to come out on stage when the fifteen minute intermission was over. The audience stirred uncomfortably in front of the drawn curtain, confused why the intermission was going on for so long. Colleen and Alice went to Joseph's dressing room to persuade him to come out of the dressing room. "Think about why Stephen is upset," Colleen argued, through the door. "Your performance was so strong the audience couldn't look away!" Joseph wept on the other side of the door, sputtering in exhilaration. It was unnerving to hear a

grown man cry. Alice was considerably less charismatic and worse at talking to actors than Colleen. Alice implored “There’s only another hour left of the show, do you think we can finish this performance then you and Stephen can have a longer conversation about that scene?” Joseph was enraged. “I have never been treated so disrespectfully by a fellow actor. I can’t spend the next hour on stage with Stephen after that.” Alice felt ashamed at her suggestion. She thought about Joseph’s earnestness during the rehearsal process with the croissant. Even if he was ungenerously drawing attention away from Stephen with his dancing, he possessed such sincerity and even in his despair, he genuinely seemed to be upset at the implication he was not committed to performing the best possible version of *Mamma Mia!*. Caroline came backstage from the lighting booth where she called cues during the show. They had been at intermission for twenty-five minutes. She asked Colleen and Alice if they had made any headway with Joseph. When they said no, Caroline impatiently knocked on the door, and in a stern voice said to Joseph “We’ve been at intermission for nearly thirty minutes, Joseph. I’ve spoken to Stephen. He has apologized for springing his frustrations on you during the show and ensured it won’t happen again. For the benefit of your fellow cast members, could you please take your place for the top of Act 2?” Joseph inhaled sharply through the door and collected himself. He assured he would come out momentarily and continue with the second act. Alice was awed by Caroline’s composure. She embodied the gruff, practical steadfastness that made her want to become a stage manager in the first place—the sentiment behind the Etsy “Keep Calm and Call Your Stage Manager” t-shirts Alice struggled to recognize a substantial market for.

Colleen and Alice got the rhythm of the backstage tracks down in the first week of performances, and were able to spend a bulk of their time backstage reading. Colleen worked through *Girl, Interrupted*, *The God of Small Things*, *The Valley of the Dolls,* and *The Stranger* over the course of the summer, while Alice read Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Marriage Plot*, and re-read *The Confessions of St. Augustine, Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Last September.* It felt more important to Alice to make the stagnant time backstage productive by reading than to note the operation of the show and see where they might improve their tracks. One night during a performance while Alice was reading, there was an earthquake. Onstage, the male ensemble members were doing turns in second wearing scuba flippers and singing ABBA’s “Lay All Your

Love On Me" and several audience members started yelling and running up the aisles. Caroline shouted over headset to Alice and Colleen "Bring in the house curtain!" which Alice did, narrowly avoiding the panic-stricken dancers in swimwear. Colleen checked in with the cast who were worried about the possibility of an aftershock, and Alice checked on the overstage lighting instruments to make sure nothing was shaken loose by the earthquake. The audience members stirred in the house, some annoyed and simply waiting for the performance to resume, others gathering their things to escape to safety. Caroline came on the God Mic after enough time had passed that an aftershock did not seem imminent, the technical elements had been secured, and the cast had settled to resume the performance. Alice flew out the house curtain and "Lay All Your Love on Me" started over from the top. She looked unsettled at her copy of *Anna Karenina*, convinced that in some metaphysical way, her distraction must have resulted in this earthquake.

The members of the company of *Mamma Mia!* were cautioned at the beginning of the summer not to park behind the theatre, where parking was reserved for the seasonal tableau vivant performance company that operated in the park next to South Coast Rep. Colleen and Alice were habitually late to the theatre so they ignored this directive and parked behind the theatre anyway. One day in between the matinee and evening performances, Alice was reading *Pride and Prejudice* at the Taverna tables onstage when a tall, thin, clearly distressed woman she had never seen before charged onstage from the house. She asked Alice if she drove an orange Subaru Outback, which she did. The tall woman, overwhelmed by Alice's apparent incredulousness, accosted her for parking behind the theatre, saying she had received complaints from the tableau vivant troupe and South Coast Rep would "need to revisit her contract" on *Mamma Mia!* for this clear violation of company policy. Alice was baffled—she did not anticipate her and Colleen's parking violation could serve as grounds to have her contract terminated. She and Colleen were each paid $200 dollars a week as a fee for their work on *Mamma Mia!* During rehearsals, where their hours were 9:00am to 7:00pm six days a week, this broke down to $3.33 an hour. During tech, where the hours increased to 9:00a to 11:00p six days a week, the rate of pay went down to $2.38 an hour. Alice and Colleen got free housing through Alice's aunt and uncle, but gas cost an average of $4.59 a gallon that summer in Southern California, and they had to drive for ninety minutes to and from the theatre every day.

Even if they brought lunch and cooked dinner at home, they still had to pay for groceries. They were both losing money on this show—they took this job for the professional development and educational opportunity it presented. None of this was at the forefront of Alice's mind when the theatre administrator was scolding her. She apologized profusely and promised not to park in the prohibited area in the future. Later, she informed Colleen and Caroline about the conversation with this administrator. Caroline spoke to the producers and the theatre management team, informing them both that Alice and Colleen were integral to the running of the show and that if they were to be terminated, it would not be possible to continue performances.

Alice and Colleen started leaving their house earlier each morning and parking in a residential area further from the theatre. After the show each night, all the stage managers would walk to their cars and pass the troupe performing tableau vivant vignettes for an audience all over the age of seventy. Alice looked back at the troupe—that night they were posed in a recreation of Goya's "The Third May of 1808," with a blond, middle aged man in blousy white top posed with his hands raised as the Spanish resistor to the Napoleonic firing squad. He was wearing a teal FitBit.

After six weeks of performances, the show set its closing. For the last time, the stage managers walked to their cars, saying goodbye to each other and congratulating each other on their work. Alice went to put her backpack in the trunk and when she got back to the driver's seat she found something sitting in the cup holder of the center console: Colleen had stolen the foam croissant. It felt disrespectful to Joseph to throw it away so they put it in the car's glove box when they left California for the summer. A couple weeks later Alice's sister was hit while driving the car home from a school dance; she and the other driver were both fine but the car was totaled. They blamed the croissant.


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&
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Cloe Wood

Temptations