

ASSIGNMENT
LITERARY MAGAZINE

SUMMER
2026



ASSIGNMENT LITERARY MAGAZINE

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Assignment Literary Magazine is the official literary magazine of Southern New Hampshire University's Mountainview MFA program.

Mission: Here at *Assignment Literary Magazine* we believe in the joy of creating and sharing art. Our editorial team is passionate about curating a platform that both celebrates and elevates literature and the diverse individuals who produce it. We are looking for literature that pushes the boundaries of excellence. We want work that makes you pull over the car because you have to get it out of you so quickly. The art that throbs in your chest and flashes across your vision like a daydream. We want work that hypnotizes us and floats back through our minds while we're folding laundry. Send us something that will change our minds, force our perspectives, or expand our vision. Send us something beautiful. Send us something ugly. Send us something raw. Send us something we can eat. Send us your best.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

It's been difficult at times to leave be whatever current flows beneath this process, when the view of the world beyond our windows is all but demanding we make a thematic statement. The inevitable effect doing so has on *Assignment* though, is to place unnecessary guardrails on the scope of our selection process, while also adding an unfair editorial voice to those of the authors and artists within. In the end, what we found was that every one of our received submissions—whether or not they made it into the issue—was sent by someone looking out a window of their own; each searching for a way to interrogate that world, even if only to turn whatever questions they may be asking, over to you.

The thematic through-line here is that we're all looking for our own way to navigate what we're seeing and, far be it from us to tell them, as authors and artists, or you, as an audience, how to do so. The voices you'll find in the pages that follow are strong enough that they should be allowed to speak on their own.

With that being said, we'd like to give a massive shoutout to Dave Moloney here at Mountainview for dropping us into this thing and letting us run with it. We'd also be remiss if we didn't mention all the hard—and hopefully not thankless—work done by our interns Chloe Batts and Micah Ortega. Most importantly, we want to extend a most sincere thank you to anyone who submitted to our magazine and, to those that didn't make the cut: let it not be an indictment of your work, but incitement to prove us wrong in the future.

Stay the course,
Sarah & Allan



BUILDING A LIFE IN GEORGIA

BY DANIELLE KLEBES

ART

OIL ON CANVAS | 48" x 60" | 2025

IN TIME
BY RICHARD LEISE & LILLIAN TAYLOR
FICTION

Antonio adjusted the strap on the urn as the cab moved through Rome. Light fell in hard strips between buildings, cutting façades into planes of shadow and glare. He glanced at his watch, pressed the crown, and let his hand fall back to the urn. His fingers lingered as if requiring supervision.

You're enjoying yourself, he said.

I am, she said. Almost as much as when I lace your dessert with fentanyl.

Cruelly effective, he said.

Research, she said. Moral research. For you.

He looked out the cab's window.

Make sure the scenery doesn't humiliate me, she said. I'd like to go gracefully, not like a startled cat.

Of course.

I assume, she added. You cataloged my medications?

He nodded.

Good, he heard her say. Someone has to record my victories.

The cab clack-rattled over cobblestones. Light struck the street in sharp angles. Antonio placed a hand atop the urn.

Too exposed, she said. Everything looks like it's confessing. Morale matters too, she added. A person can bear almost anything if things are arranged properly.

He adjusted the strap, thumb tracing it once, twice, three times – then four, five, six.

In Florence, the light softened, turning the buildings honey-gold. She paused at a window full of shoes, studying the reflections. *This is better, she said. This light forgives things. I would have bought something unreasonable here. Something that outlived disappointment.*

Noted, he said, glancing at his watch.

They waited for a boat. Tourists drifted along the canal. Antonio shifted the urn, pressing the strap, then letting it rest, repeating the motion in silent rhythm. He checked the watch, pressed the buttons. Pressed again. Held it under his sleeve.

You'd have bought something irresponsible here, she said. Something that made me scowl, but I would have loved it.

He flexed his fingers against the strap. One, two, three. Four, five, six.

Don't you tangle me with the scenery, she said. I'd like to go gracefully.

The boat rocked as they stepped aboard. Water pressed at its edges, light breaking across it in restless fragments. Antonio adjusted the strap, then let it settle.

You were supposed to complain about the heat, he said. And bankrupt me in shoes. And argue about every place we passed.

You'd have endured it, she said. Maybe teased the barista for giving you the wrong cup of coffee. He smiled. Remember the pudding, she added. Hospital pudding. Pure evil disguised as dessert. Someone had to review it thoroughly. If the waves tip the boat, she said, I hope you make it look like an accident I planned.

He let a faint smile move across his face. Adjusted the strap again, then left it. *You're here, he said. Still here.*

Of course I am, she said. Someone has to maintain standards. And I might as well enjoy the view while I'm at it.

He tipped the urn. Ash slipped into the water and disappeared. He drew it back, smoothing the strap flat as if that might settle something beyond the leather.

All right, Deb, he said. You win.

The light softened, shaping the water, the buildings, even the air between them.

Best excuse anyone ever had for a trip to Italy, he said.

Something like laughter moved beside him—memory or presence, he did not try to decide.

The boat drifted. Antonio sat still, the urn between his hands, his palm covering his watch. Light fell from the sky. He did not look down again.



HORIZONS OF HOPE
BY TETIANA YATSECHKO-BLAZHENKO
ART
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS | 20" x 20"

GOING HOME
BY JUDY McCLURE
NON-FICTION

I learned to drive in a 1972 green standard-shift Karmann Ghia, which rolled back when releasing the clutch on a hill.

“Change into the right lane,” my father would say. And I would. “You need to check your mirrors.”

His sunglasses, a forearm on the open window, and one hand on the steering wheel, he seemed at home in cars. Was it his Oklahoma roots with long stretches of highway or his car centric Southern California upbringing? Maybe it was the movement, the sense of escape, or the chance meeting of a stranger.

His other home was the arts. I don’t remember why he introduced me to Dvorak’s Symphony Number 9 in E minor. Perhaps we sat on a porch, a cup of coffee in one hand or maybe a cocktail. His slim frame settled, wearing tan slacks, a blue checkered cotton button down shirt, probably purchased on a road trip because he always bought a shirt when he travelled.

“The Largo movement was the inspiration for the folk song, *Goin’ Home*,” he said. Then he half sang / half hummed *la la la, na, na, na*, in a perfect tune, gently sweeping his hand through the air, conducting an imaginary orchestra and showing me the pace of the music.

Even in these moments, I’m craving more. His knowledge, his wit, and his ability to make everyone feel as smart and charming as he is.

I wonder if traveling with him fulfilled my need for his attention. Our arms on the open windows, wearing sunglasses, and me, his only sidekick. I don’t have to share him with my siblings, his friends, or the enamored people who surround him.

“This is where I sat in fifth grade listening to the elephants roar at the zoo,” he said in San Diego while driving up a steep hill near Balboa Park. “I wasn’t allowed to cross over this road, my mother said this is where the sailors and the whores hang out, but she didn’t say whores.” And he pronounced it playfully like, *whoopers*.

“There’s a great diner near here, take this exit and we’ll stop and eat.” He taught me to leave the highway, to find ‘the most amazing’ food—eggs and bacon in the morning, tacos at lunch, or a root beer float in the lull of the afternoon.

He maneuvered through an ice storm in Oklahoma until we found a rest stop where an enormous buffalo statue watched the highway. We drove the long flat landscape of Texas into New Mexico, the jagged red mountains in the distance. And a few years later, I watched him sleep in the passenger’s seat after a doctor’s visit, the seat cradling his body, his coat becoming a blanket.

Now on a cold March morning, I drive towards home in his red Subaru five hundred miles east on route 90. The black interior is so similar to my own Subaru that I

forget I'm not driving my car. The remains of a snowstorm decorate the edges of the highway. I keep my hands on the wheel, my eyes on the road, and my mouth whispers, "I wasn't ready, Dad." It's absurd, I know. He was 90 years old.

He answers me with music. Two-thirds of the way through the trip when I've run through my playlists, podcasts, and classical radio stations he has preset, I reach over to the glove compartment thinking, *I've got some cds in here*. My glove compartment isn't quite right. Then I remember. I grab the cd on top, remove it from a thin plastic case, and put it into the player.

I know the piece at the first note. Am I expecting it? Maybe I'm hoping for it— the Largo movement of the New World Symphony. I press the volume button and when the piece ends, I play it again. And again. I should leave the highway, look for a diner, a place to stop, to eat, to weep, but I keep driving with the melodic english horn as my companion, on this journey home in my father's car.

Timeline of a Life

By Tamara J. Madison

Poetry

my 3rd Great-grandfather

+Add father

+Add mother

Setting: The Un-United States of the Americas, upper south, where slavery though troubled yet thrives, pockets too fat to release the reigns and cat o'nine tails.

Green Calvert (plantation owner/slaveholder sir name)

Birth abt 1830 (approximation suffices),

Caldwell County, Kentucky, USA (location imperative for head count of estate, representation, taxation, societal/economic status appropriation)

1848	Birth of son, Lancaster
1850	Residence - District 31, Franklin, Missouri, USA (one male, black, age 10 in his care)
1856	Birth of daughter, Malinda
1858	Birth of daughter, Jennie
1859	Birth of daughter, Lyddie
1860	Birth of daughter, Paulina
1860	Death of estate holder/plantation owner/slave master. Property, Green, skilled in masonry, appraised at \$1,500
1861	Birth of daughter, Lucy
1865	Abolition of slavery in the Un-United States (This information and documentation must be withheld as long as possible for the ease of transition and good of the country. Dissemination only on a need to know basis.)
1866	Marriage to Cassandra (... as if she did not already exist and the children birthed themselves...)
1870	United States Federal Census lists Cassandra as " inferred spouse " and all children as " inferred children " (Despite the 22 year survival and agency, tragedy and triumph of the couple " inferred " is still required in the documentation.)
1889	Death of Green , Princeton, Caldwell County, Kentucky, USA
Note:	The online records provider offers an opportunity to "explore (beta version) Life through the lens of Green Calvert." Upon exploration, it is determined that the provider's "lens" is inferred and preposterous with suggestions baring no resemblance or sense regarding the life and kin of Green.)

WALTZ OP. 64
BY MITCHELL MILLER
FICTION

When Marilyn first texted me asking if I had any openings, I should have said no. My Tuesdays were already slammed. I couldn't sacrifice another half-hour of reality TV, feet up on the couch, hand in a bag of chips. But the end of the month was four days away, so I said yes. An easy fifty bucks. One blow of the chisel against our monumental rent. What possessed us to think we could afford a two-bedroom? Now Wes and I were broken up and neither of us could afford to move out on our own. I passed two men on my morning walk up the hill, one guy taking out his trash, the other guy saying, Hey, welcome to the neighborhood, it's a great central location, the sunset views are so nice, yada yada. Me: silently despising them because they can afford two million dollar bungalows with postage stamp yards of agave and citrus.

From the way Marilyn texted, with complete sentences and correct punctuation, I assumed she was old, but the woman who answered the door was more ancient than I'd imagined.

You're late! she said. Sarcastic or irritated, it was hard to tell. I couldn't fathom her being on a tight schedule.

I know, sorry. Uh, traffic was bad.

She was doing a little bow, making me wonder if that was a customary gesture of her generation. I had minimal experience with people of her advanced age. My grandparents all passed away before my third birthday. She moved aside to let me in and I realized she wasn't bowing at all—that's just the way her spine furled. A toy-sized dog with milky eyes stood at her feet, yipping in my general direction. When I reached down to pat its head, its little body went rigid.

Chibi, be kind to our guest, Marilyn said. Then to me: Leave your shoes on!

She ushered me across the living room, around pee pads that needed changing. The piano was in the dining room. An upright, probably as old as her, was pushed up against a wall made entirely of mirror. The other walls were lined with books, hefty hardcovers with matching spines, old-looking, like the sets you see in library reference rooms. Oriental trinkets dotted the shelves: a marble tiger carving, a bamboo plant, paper fans. Mounds of yellowed printer paper covered the dining table.

She dragged a dining chair up to the end of the piano and slapped the seat. I sat down and she took her own place on the piano bench.

Please forgive the mess, she said. The animal shelter is being audited and I'm behind on paperwork.

Something brushed against my ankle. A shadow whisked through my peripherals and the piano clanged. A cat, dark as the black keys, slinked down a few octaves. Marilyn clucked her tongue.

I could kill you, she said to the cat, pushing it to the floor. Then to me: They don't show me any respect.

I asked her if she had any other pets.

No, the two of them are plenty for me.

You live alone?

Yes, forty-six years in this house. No maid, no nurse. Anything that must be done is done by me.

I was getting the sense that Marilyn, like some of my other students, wanted to talk more than they wanted to learn piano. Which was fine by me. I had an aptitude for smiling and nodding, anchoring just enough attention in the conversation to ask simple follow-up questions while the rest of my mind wandered elsewhere.

Where'd you live before here?

West LA in the sixties and seventies. But I grew up in Manhattan. Lower East Side. Family of four, all in a two-room apartment, can you believe it? I shared a bed with my brother. It was so cramped, my father tried to sell my mother's Steinway, but she put her foot down. It was the first piece of furniture they bought after they married.

She was a good pianist?

Oh, she was excellent. She'd only play on Sunday mornings, early, before everyone woke up. We'd pretend we were still asleep so she'd keep on playing.

Did she teach you?

Yes, as soon as I could sit up.

Besides from your mom, have you ever taken piano lessons?

Yes, I picked up piano again after I retired. My last teacher—Oliver was his name—he was about the same age as you. We took a hiatus during the pandemic and then he moved to Oregon.

So it's been awhile since you played?

Oh, no, I still play every day, but I'm not performance-ready by any means.

That wasn't you I saw at the Walt Disney Concert Hall?

I'm afraid I had to turn them down again.

We laughed. Well, I said, why don't we warm up with some scales. You can start here with F major.

Marilyn put on her reading glasses that hung from a cord around her neck, hovered her hands over the keys. Knobby fingers, papier-mâché skin plastered over phosphorescent blue veins. She said the notes aloud as she played: F and then G and then A and then B oh that's not right it's a B flat ah yes and then C. By the time she finished two more scales, the thirty minutes were up.

Well, that's all the time we have for today.

She frowned slightly and asked, Does the same time next week work for you?

Well, it was a longer drive than I expected. I'll have to think about whether it'll fit into my schedule. Can I text you?

Her frown deepened. She said, Yes, of course. Do you prefer cash or check?

I dreaded this part of every lesson, the transaction, when the illusion of charity is broken, money exchanged for services, in the genus of street performers and sex workers. I wondered how badly she thought I needed the money.

Cash is great.

She shuffled into another room and came back with a folded wad of bills. I counted them: three hundred dollars.

Marilyn, this is too much.

Take it. It's a tip.

Are you sure?

Yes, I insist.

We said our goodbyes and I drove home, muting the radio so I could think. Long past dark, while Wes slept in the other room, I worried I'd swindled an old woman. Or, more likely, I was a mouse and she'd set her bait.

Every Tuesday, inching down the freeway to Marilyn's, I resolved it to be my last. But then I'd coast home, the traffic subsided by then, fattened wallet pressing against my butt, and think, the universe is merciful. Six fifty-dollar bills, neatly folded in half. Never more, never less. I started declining weekend shifts at the restaurant so I could work on my album. For the first time since moving to LA, the end of the month wasn't looming.

It wasn't hard to make Marilyn chatter away half the lesson. That's what she wanted me for, mostly. Let me tell you, she said one Tuesday, a girlfriend of mine was put into a nursing home by her children, and as soon as other people started doing everything for her, that's when her mind went. I ring her like always, to talk about the old days, but she forgets things now. We really did that? she'll ask. It's the same old stories each week but she hangs on my every word like it's the first she's ever heard.

I asked her what Highland Park was like when she first moved in. Dangerous, she said. Guns, everywhere. Men fired bullets into the sky on New Year's. My neighbor found a bullet in her bathtub. Once, there was a birthday party across the street and two young men got into a fight over a parking space. One of them ended up face down in my front yard, shot in the head. I didn't find out until the next morning. The body was already gone. You see, I fall asleep watching cop shows so often, I can sleep through a homicide. After that, people kept leaving little memorials in my yard for the young man. I'd have to go blow out the candles. Not to disrespect him, but it was the peak of wildfire season.

While Marilyn picked her way through Polish waltzes, I studied the room. There were no pictures of her or any people at all, just five or six framed pet photos on a side

table. I asked about them, and Marilyn gave me the name of each, the year she adopted them, and the year they passed.

I saved all their ashes, she said. After I die, we'll all be scattered at sea together. The Neptune Society is what it's called.

I smiled and said, That's very nice, Marilyn. But secretly, I pitied her. Nobody to bury her, nobody to visit her grave. My dad already bought a whole set of burial plots back in Minnesota. He brought me and my sister there once when we were little, to the cemetery, and took a photo of us at our plot, lying in the grass together, side by side. I imagined my body being eaten by worms, my bones forever trapped beside my sister's, our gravestones tended to for awhile, but eventually growing over with weeds. Maybe Marilyn's way is better. More freeing. Human or animal, land or sea, it's all just borrowed atoms, returned.

Marilyn got into the habit of setting out my payment on the music rack before I arrived, a tidy stack of Grants, maybe so she didn't forget to pay me, or maybe to assert her generosity. While she told me about Chibi's cataracts or the sparrow that Kuro ate, I admired the bills, the loopy cursive of the Treasurer's signature, the shiny gold numbers.

One Tuesday, amidst the shuffling of pages, the money ended up hidden behind some sheet music. When the half-hour was over, I asked her if next Tuesday works, which was usually her cue to hand me the cash. She confirmed for next week, but didn't reach behind the music for the money. I smiled at her dumbly, and she smiled back. My credit card bill was due in two days, and after a birthday trip to Palm Springs, it was huge. Slowly, I slid my chair back to the dining table. It was so simple to ask for the money, but I was terrified of embarrassing her, spotlighting her senility, and pointing her down the inevitable track toward a nursing home. Besides, my pride couldn't let her confirm any suspicion, although correct, that I depended on her money.

She followed me to the door and said good night. I counted ten steps, then doubled back. Just as I reached for the bell, the door swung open, Marilyn there, breathing heavily, brandishing the cash.

Oh, goodness, I just remembered, she chuckled.

I just remembered too, I chuckled back.

With shame in her eye, she smiled and wished me a good night again. Sometimes I worry that was the beginning of the end for her, the tiniest slip of the death grip she had on life.

Some weeks later, I got a text:

*Hi,
I'm very sick and can't schedule anything for probably two weeks.
Let's stay in touch,
Marilyn*

My stomach turned. I'd just exchanged my clunker for a new Honda, and I was counting on Marilyn's tuition for my car payments. I responded:

*Hi Marilyn,
thanks for letting me know.
Hope you feel better soon.
Let me know when you are feeling healthy again.
Take care!*

Two weeks passed, then three, with no word from her. I worried she'd died. I went back to double weekend shifts, asked Wes sheepishly to spot part of my car payment. After a month went by, I messaged her:

*Hi Marilyn,
checking in.
How have you been feeling?*

She responded:

*Thanks for checking in.
I have been thinking about you and starting lessons again.
I am feeling better slowly but still have little energy.
I have physical therapy at home twice a week.
I am thinking about starting up the week after next.
Definitely we will stay in touch.
Marilyn*

The relief was enormous. The Tuesday after next finally arrived, and I was back at her door, reaching through the orange curtain of trumpet flowers to ring the bell. I expected her to be emaciated and sallow, but the woman that answered looked exactly how I remembered, though it was her demeanor that had changed. The usual bravado in her welcome was gone. Now, she only greeted me tiredly.

Come in.

Good to see you, Marilyn.

It's good to see you, too.

A pile of envelopes covered the floor under the mail slot. Pet food delivery boxes were stacked chest-high in the corner.

Lowering herself onto the piano bench with a sigh, she told me how she did too many chores yesterday and, as a result, spent most of today in bed.

My recovery has been very slow, she said. I was in the hospital for six days. My doctor didn't expect me to make it. They were about to move me to hospice. I probably would be dead if it wasn't for my friend. She made a ruckus and told the doctor I'm a fighter. They kept me in the ICU after that.

I'm so glad you're okay. How are you feeling now?

Oh, I'm alright. I just get tired so fast. I'm afraid I haven't practiced all week.

Understandably. Well, let's go back to where we left off.

Her playing also had changed. Whereas before she talked her way through each bar, ringing the keys like chimes, now her fingers were hesitant, like one of the notes might trigger an explosion. Only a few lines into the song, Kuro leaped onto her lap. She gave a tiny gasp.

I will end you, Marilyn said, pushing the cat to the floor. It slinked off, smug to have deflected her attention. Marilyn took a long look at the sheet music and then lowered her hands.

I'm sorry, she said, I think I need to lie down. She got to her feet, knuckles white around the edge of the piano. Before I could reach out to help, her knees buckled and she crumpled to the floor, the back of her head striking the keyboard on the way down—crack—bass booming. Down on the ground next to her, floor cold under my knees. Her eyelids fluttering. Chibi standing in the doorway staring at me like I'd pushed her. What to do, my mind racing back to high school health class. Do I call 911 first or check her pulse? Could touching her make things worse?

Marilyn, can you hear me?

Her eyes opened, flitted around the ceiling, focused on me, closed again.

I'm going to call for help, I said, standing up. Before I could reach for my phone, her fingers clamped around my ankle.

No!

Her eyes wide open now. She was trying to get up. I kneeled down again.

Please, stay still until we get help.

Don't call! I can't go back.

Marilyn, you hit your head.

I'm fine. I'm fine.

Look, Marilyn, you might have a serious injury. Somebody will come here and make sure you're okay.

No, please don't call. It's nothing.

I reached into my pocket. I'll just—

NO! They'll never let me out again. Who will take care of the animals?

Her eyelids started fluttering again.

Jesus, Marilyn. I'm calling 911.

Her grip on my ankle tightened. Eyes closed, she said, softer now:

Please. I can't go back. Leave me here. You can have my house once I'm gone.

A horrible rush of excitement. She'd never mentioned her estate, but I assumed she had some nieces or nephews somewhere that were next-in-kin.

You would do that?

Yes, of course. I'll call my lawyer tomorrow.

I fidgeted with my phone and said, This is crazy, Marilyn. You hit your head.

Bring my computer over here, she said. My trust is on there.

I brought over her laptop and typed Trust into the search bar. A dozen or more documents appeared. I opened the most recent.

Now find the animal shelter, she said.

I scrolled through the document. Pasadena Humane?

Yes, that's the one. Replace it with your name.

I paused. This was sick, robbing a humane society of a million dollars. But then I imagined the dinner parties I could host here, whiskey glasses atop the piano. Turning the extra bedroom into a recording studio. Tomato vines in the backyard. It was Marilyn's wish. I clicked Print and brought her the document and a pen.

Promise me you won't tell anyone I fell, she said.

I promise.

Still on the floor, while I held the paper against a hardcover book, she signed in careful cursive.

Shit, Marilyn, this needs to be notarized.

We can do that tomorrow. Or maybe next Tuesday?

But what if... you don't...? You hit your head really bad.

I'm telling you, she said, sitting up, I'm fine. You know what, there's a UPS store a mile away. Take me there. Just help me up.

Are you sure?

Yes, let's go.

I hoisted her up, hands under her armpits. She was heavier than I expected. Her hair was ruffled in the back. I got her a sweater from the coat closet, walked her slowly out to my car, and strapped her in. Then we drove to UPS, parked, helped her out of the passenger seat.

Stay here, she said. If you come in, they'll think I'm under duress.

I watched her shuffle to the door. And waited. Picked at a hangnail. Googled: is coercion a crime. Texted Wes: traffic is bad, I won't be home till later. Customers with packages went in, came back out. A police siren in the distance, getting louder, louder, red and blue flashing. Drove right past.

Marilyn emerged, manila folder in hand. I jogged to the door, guided her back to the car. Asked her how it went on the way back to her house.

Easy as pie, she said, winking.

I accompanied her inside, helped her to bed, got her some water.

Is there anything else you need?

Not at all. Leave me be.

I closed her bedroom door quietly, image of her lying peacefully, Kuro atop her belly. I retreated slowly, peaking into rooms I'd never seen, rooms that would be mine. I told Wes that night, had to get it off my chest. He looked at me in disbelief, called me twisted. Said he'd call 911 if I didn't. I said I'd handle it.

In the morning, Marilyn called me.

I forgot to pay you!

Don't worry about it, our lesson was cut short.

I insist. Can I mail you a check?

Why don't I get it at our next lesson? Shall we plan on next Tuesday?

Yes, I'd like that.

How are you feeling?

I'm doing just fine, thanks.

When I showed up the next week, it was like nothing had happened. She played her songs while I surveyed the room for any trace of the accident. When I asked about her head, she said, Sharper than ever.

Tuesday after Tuesday, I returned to Marilyn's. She continued improving, which was both relieving and frustrating. She could last another ten, fifteen years. It was usually the stubborn ones like her that held on the longest. Could I endure another decade or more, hustling for rent into middle-age? Wes eventually came around, realizing the magnitude of the windfall, started sleeping with me again. We made a shared Pinterest board, fantasized about the renovations we'd make. The optimism was intoxicating.

Some months later, I pulled up to Marilyn's to see a For Sale sign erected in the front lawn. A tall woman in a blazer and heavy makeup answered the door. Hello, she said, are you here for the open house?

Sorry, uh, is Marilyn here? I looked around the woman's shoulder. Some of Marilyn's furniture was gone, the remainder covered by plastic sheets.

The previous owner? I'm sorry, she passed away last week. Were you close with her? I'm her piano teacher. She left this house for me in her will.

Oh, hm, there must be a misunderstanding. Marilyn left her home in the name of the Pasadena Humane Society.

Yes, she did, but she changed it. It's under my name now.

Hmm, I'm sorry. There seems to be a missed connection here. The house is being sold by the humane society. I can refer you to them if you'd like.

No, that's okay, I muttered, already backing away. Double-crossed by an old woman. I walked back down the front drive, ears ringing. Passed a couple maybe in their forties, talking about how they could paint the house white, felt the urge to punch them in the face. Got into my car, drove home.

You're back early, Wes said. I didn't tell him what happened, too ashamed of dashing his hopes, afraid that the house was the only glue holding us together.

Tuesday after Tuesday, I told Wes I was going to Marilyn's, but instead I'd drive around for an hour past quiet houses I'd never live in, TVs glowing blue in the windows, dog toys in the yard. We're good, honest people, mostly, but we'd toil an entire lifetime and never attain this. Youth may be wasted on the young, but wealth is wasted on the old.

I looked up Marilyn's obituary, read it numbly:

*Died peacefully in her sleep.
Survived by cat Kuro and dog Chibi.*

How's Marilyn? Wes asked when I got home.

Still kicking.

There's a weird letter for you on the counter.

From?

I don't know, some attorney.

I tore it open. Inside, a check in my name. A figure so big I had to count the zeros.

Also inside, a typed letter:

So I don't forget again, I'd like to pay you in
advance. See you next Tuesday,

Marilyn

HOLDING SPACE

BY ARAN DOTSON

NON-FICTION

Things that make sense: The crunch of gravel beneath your tires. Wednesday night church services. Mushrooms on pizza. The unopened bottle of Maker's Mark on your mother's dresser. Prescription medications hidden in a nightstand drawer. Five dollar boxes of Valentine's Day candy. Cold washcloths on a sick-damp forehead. Free condoms. Keeping a box of Narcan under your bathroom sink (you've never had to use it, but just in case).

Things that don't make sense: Hot chocolate made with water. Building a fire when it's sixty degrees outside. Overdraft fees. The fact that road work is literally always being done on the exact fucking road you have to take. Twenty-four hour news cycles. Furniture assembly manuals. Decaffeinated coffee. TinderBumbleHingeGrindrPlentyoffishOKCupid. Student loan interest rates. That look your mother gets when she tells you she loves you. The tightness in your neck tendons when your mother tells you she loves you. The feeling you get when he smiles. Fuck it, actually, just love in general. How badly you want to be touched and how desperately you do not. Let's throw sex in there, too.

Things you want: A car that works. Those little French cookies you had that one time but can never remember the name of. New shoes. Glasses that don't hurt your nose. World peace because that's what a good person would say. Also to be a good person. Enough money to make you feel better but not enough to make you an asshole. Bad things to happen to evil people. Jeans that fit. A way to complain about your cellulite without feeling like a bad feminist. So, so, so many cigarettes. Boys who pay attention to you but not in a gross way. Girls who pay attention to you but not in a cruel way. For your dog to live forever. Someone, anyone, literally any human being in the whole entire world to take your face in their hands and kiss the space between your eyebrows and tell you that you're beautiful and the things in your head aren't real.

Things you need: Better spending habits. Adderall. A pocket thesaurus. Reminders for all of your appointments. To stop talking about how you should go to the gym and actually fucking go. Vitamins, you assume. Pens you won't lose. People you won't lose. Dishes that wash themselves. Someone who loves you without making you want to die. A way to love other people without making them want to die. Probably also to hit your father with a baseball bat.

Things that make you happy: Clawfoot bathtubs. Animals you can't afford to keep. Laying down because you are always so so tired. That weird Oreo casserole stuff your aunt makes for holidays. The smell of your grandma's dresses. Popping zits (yes, you know it's gross). Music you liked in high school. Crocheting. Being tall enough that you don't have to ask a man to help you reach the top shelf. Buying books you probably won't read. Local libraries. Watching the same three shows over and over again because unpredictability gives you anxiety. DVDs. Making your mom laugh after you've made her cry. The idea of never making your mom cry again. The idea of not being such a shit.

Things that make you sad: Christmas songs. Driving past your old elementary school. Any movie where a pet dies (it's never necessary). The ending of Game of Thrones. Checking your screentime. Mirrors. Shirts that look way too big but actually fit you perfectly. All the stuff you can't remember. All the stuff you can remember. Going home. Leaving home. Everything about home. Youyouyouyouyouyou.

BORN NOT IN THE U.S.A.

BY JONATHAN FLETCHER

NON-FICTION

Born in Perú in 1984, I was adopted and moved to the United States at the age of one, where I was raised by a white mom. I've never doubted my American citizenship. Or had reason to, but thanks to the Supreme Court's deliberation in the birthright citizenship case, I have been, often with concern. Like the mostly white classmates, in the first to eighth grade, at the all-boys military academy it has only (and, frankly, unkindly) reminded me that I am a person of color. As if that reality requires justification as to why my adoptive mom doesn't look like me.

To be honest, I sometimes miss the preceding innocence, so rudely and irrevocably broken by peers' excluding skepticism. It's the kind of innocence that was at play in the decision of Jax Rosebush and Reddy Weldon, two friends of different races in Kentucky who, in 2017, chose to get identical buzzcuts, thinking they could fool their teachers.

Although I try to keep a sense of enviable wonder in my life, I am grateful for the wisdom I've gained if, at times, painfully and while I'm not fooled by those who claim the birthright case is primarily motivated by anything other than white anxiety and fear, I am nervous. Not because I think the Justices will rule in favor of Trump, not that their decision will have a meaningful impact on me—because it won't—but rather, because I empathize and worry for the most vulnerable among us who are the most at risk of being denied citizenship and a legal limbo of statelessness. Call it an exercise in empathy. Call it a Catholic prerogative. Call it a recognition that it could've easily been one of us in that precarious situation, had we been dealt different cards. Call it whatever you want.

Regardless, whether the approximately 300 million babies born every year to undocumented parents, mixed-status families, children of temporary visa holders, or a disproportionate percentage of the Asian and Latin communities, they need help and support. It shouldn't matter whether we have a family member, friend, or employee who will be adversely affected by a ruling favorable to the current administration. This is where the Left has historically had a moral high ground over the Right. Historically, political conservatives who have changed course on certain issues, have only done so when they feel the negative impact of bad law or policy on their own lives or those of their loved ones. Think Dick Cheney and gay marriage or Nancy Reagan and stem-cell research.

I'm not saying this never happens on the opposite end of the political spectrum, however, I do think that there is a meaningful difference in doing something because it's the right thing to do, and only doing so when it affects you personally and in my experience, the Left has operated more on the former. Doing so on the latter is not impressive and is certainly not an exceptional ethic (In fact, it's not even an ethic). No,

it's often when we have no stake in a moral choice but try to imagine ourselves in the shoes of those who'd be affected by a poor decision that we demonstrate our creative imagination, compassion, and humanity. For me, though, it's a little easier to do so when it comes to the issue of birthright citizenship. After all, I wasn't born in this country. It could well have been me who was left in what was then—and still arguably is—a developing country, who might well not have had the opportunities from which I benefit to this day. Besides, if it hadn't been me, it could've been someone else. Maybe they wouldn't have had the legal protections I did.

Thankfully, my mother chose to adopt me through legal means, wisely ignoring the advice of an acquaintance in my hometown who suggested just getting a Peruvian baby, procuring doctored documents, and telling the State Department that she had been pregnant and had given birth in a private clinic, thus bypassing the legal obstacles to international adoption. What would the parents of the child have been told? That the baby had died? I'm not sure. Not only would it have been an incredibly cruel thing to do an already vulnerable family, but it would have also put the child at legal risk. Even as adults, some international adoptees whose families did not secure their citizenship have been deported, adoptees such as Phillip Clay and Adam Crapser. Even though the Child Citizenship Act was passed in 2000, it was not retroactive, and thousands were left in legal limbo. While not me, when I consider the precarious edge on which many of us survive, I count myself lucky—but in no sense better or more virtuous—than they. There but for the roll of the dice go I, yes?

Yes and yes.

Perhaps this is why I get so angry at those in power who benefit from the same things that they withhold from others. For example, there are more than enough reasons for me to think Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas is unqualified to help make decisions that affect the country and, those within it, citizens or not—least of which include Anita Hill's allegations of sexual harassment, as well as, accepting financial gifts from GOP megadonor Harlan Crow—that clearly affect his judicial impartiality.

As a queer cisgender man, I was disappointed (though not surprised) that Thomas ruled against recognizing a constitutional right to same-sex marriage. Again, not because it would affect me either way (I'm an ace), but because the bans were discriminatory in nature. Plus, I'm not the first to point this out, but before *Loving v. Virginia* (a landmark case cited in *Obergefell vs. Hodges*), Thomas would not have been able to marry his now-wife, Ginni Thomas, who has herself become embroiled in controversy, not least of which include her attempts to overturn the 2020 election.

When I see pictures of them together, I see a privileged couple who has benefitted from the very things they've either called into question or consistently worked against. On the other hand, when I see photos of my mom and me—her skin light against my dark self—I see a woman who, in contrast with the Thomas's, was selfless throughout

her life, consistently putting the needs of my sister and me before her own. Leading a life, too, in service others. Whether through her work with the most vulnerable at The University of Tennessee Memphis' Newborn Center, her many years in the nonprofit sector helping develop and run programs in health and human services, or her advocacy for children and families, my mother's life has been one marked by dedication and generosity. And, besides my gratitude to her for giving me a life I would otherwise not have had, I love her most because of her obvious love for the community, evident in her years-long service to it.

That's also why I bristle when I hear or see Thomas, his selfishness so apparent in his argumentation and rulings. For example, he has consistently opposed race-conscious programs at institutions of higher learning (particularly the most selective ones), even though he himself was admitted to Yale Law School under its 1971 policy that aimed for ten percent minority enrollment. I'm not saying that race-conscious programs are perfect (what programs are?) or that no one was ever unfairly admitted to a prestigious institution of higher education (but that goes both ways, and I rarely hear the Right talk about white male mediocrity).

As others have pointed out (no less so than American lawyer and author Sunny Hostin), though, it's often minorities who have to work that much harder to prove themselves, as they are the very ones whose qualifications are commonly called into question or subjected to scrutiny that their often-white male peers are not. Case in point, according to LeanIn.org, "For every 100 men promoted to manager, only 58 Black women are promoted, despite the fact that Black women ask for promotions at the same rate as men."

This skepticism, however, is not limited to managerial roles. Perniciously, it even rears its ugly head in the highest echelons of government, the most hallowed institutions of the country. For example, when President Biden nominated now-Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court, the late conservative activist Charlie Kirk—himself a college dropout—called her a "diversity hire." This, despite the fact that she graduate *magna cum laude* from Harvard University and *cum laude* from Harvard Law School, that she served as an editor for the latter's prestigious law journal, or that she clerked for now-retired Justice Stephen Breyer. When the late president, Ronald Reagan, pledged to nominate a woman to the Supreme Court, Sandra Day O'Connor being his successful choice, there were little, if any, grumblings among the GOP about the role affirmative action played. It didn't, so why then, the outrage about Jackson?

And although I've never felt my qualifications were scrutinized due to the schools to which I've gained admittance, or the professional successes I've had, I know what it is to be stereotyped or judged as a person of color. Whether that be the older white lady who eyed me with suspicion at a gym when I happened to pass by the sofa on which she had momentarily placed her purse, whether that be the cop who joked that he checked my driver's license just "to make sure I wasn't a terrorist," I am keenly aware

of the attitudes and remarks that can be exclusionary and are too often codified into law, particularly in the last decade. To me, that is the kind of injustice we should be most worried about. That is the type of prejudice that fuels President Trump's tellingly titled executive order, "Protecting the Meaning and Value of American Citizenship." After all, he's not against citizenship for all foreign nationals. Under *Mission South Africa*, for example, he prioritized Afrikaners (white South Africans) as refugees from what he claimed is an ongoing genocide, a claim that has been debunked by independent researchers, South African officials, and statistical analyses. At the same time he's railing against the system being taken advantage of by undocumented immigrants and temporary visa holders, he is offering permanent U.S. residency for a contribution of one million dollars to the United States Treasury.

As is clear, and has been, since his first run for president, Trump is obviously worried about those who don't look like him, and don't look like the majority of MAGA, not only becoming just a slice larger (yet hardly the biggest) in the demographic pie of America, but just a little more acknowledged and valued in their electoral capacity and representative ability. Are we that scary or are they that insecure?

Trying to follow my mothers' examples, I refuse to live in fear. Instead, I think of my biological mother in Lima's La Hospital Maternidad, deciding to leave me for someone else to find and raise, bypassing the doctors and nurses, and ducking out of the hospital. Where she went, where she is now, I don't know. I may never know (though I sometimes wonder if she looks northward, wondering if I'm safe and happy). However, I do know that it took courage to give me up and I sometimes wish I could tell about the other woman who found me and allowed me to survive and flourish. Other Peruvian children were not so fortunate. The year I was born, thirty-four percent of Peru's deaths were to children less than one year of age, and twenty-one percent were to children between ages one to five. Although I couldn't find specific stats on measles epidemic during that year, my other mom tells me there was one in the region.

Whether it was chance, or something else, I thankfully didn't contract anything, even if the care I received wasn't optimal. Still, I was small, and I'd had some damage to the right side of my brain. With P.T., O.T., speech therapy, D.B.T. and a carefully adjusted regimen of medication, I overcame the attendant challenges. If my mom had known everything she was signing up for, I sometimes wonder if she would've reconsidered adopting. The way she tells it though, once she looked into my dark brown eyes as I lay nestled in the nursery, she knew she was mine, that she'd do everything in her power to give me a life. Of course, I don't remember that now-long past moment, so young was I, but I often close my eyes and imagine us together while the nurses—some darker than me, some light as her—milled about the hospital checking on the other babies.

And when I heard Justice Brett Kavanaugh's pointed question to Solicitor General D. John Sauer about the expectation of hospitals in the event of an ending birthright

citizenship (“how’s it going to work—what do hospitals do with a newborn?”), I, though no fan of Kavanaugh (primarily because I believe Dr. Christine Blasey Ford’s accusation of sexual assault against him), thought his question was a good one. It made me picture the absurdity of trying to have parents prove their legal status immediately in the delivery room, or immediately post-birth, and the denial of necessary care (such as well-child visits and immunizations) to scores of newborns. Beyond that, the idea of such verification brings to mind such intrusive measures as unnecessary, invasive physical exams being forcibly administered to women suspected of having abortions and sex verification testing for trans athletes. Again, this smacks of a right-wing impulse to control others’ bodies and lives, especially women’s and trans folk’s.

At the moment, I cannot return to visit the land of my birth because of civil unrest, crime, and the risk of kidnapping (Currently, the United States State Department has a Travel Advisory of Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution for Perú). Because of the policies of the current administration, I sometimes worry I wouldn’t be able to set foot back into the country (Yes, I’m a Fletcher by surname, but I don’t look like one, and that’s been drilled into me since I was young). Before I ever step foot back in my hometown, though, I hope the Supreme Court will rule against Trump’s executive order. Before I make it to Machu Picchu, I want the Democrats (should they win in 2028) to reverse the current policies regarding mass deportation. I want legal pathways expanded. I want unauthorized residents protected through policy reforms. That, at least, to me, would be the most beautiful thing I could see, more so than even the famed citadel my ancestors built centuries ago. *Awesome*, my mother once described it as. With its terraced slopes, temples of white granite, a steep mountain for a backdrop, Machu Picchu, I’m sure, would be all of that and more in person. I can wait for it, though. The monument that has anchored those born here for 157 years is the one I worry about now. Although not made of stone, it still protects. Although not a temple, it’s still sacred. And worth every effort to save it.



FISSURE
BY ETHAN LEE
ART
PROCREATE | 3.25" x 6"

THE STARS IN THE IRANIAN SKIES

BY ERICA ANDERSON

NON-FICTION

My sister is ten years younger than I am.

When she was little, she felt to me less like a person and more a small disturbance in the air, following me from room to room, drooled on my things, and wanting to play when I wanted to be left alone. She was sticky, dirty, and always there.

I didn't like her much.

Now I can't imagine life without her.

I was not a kind big sister. I gave her the ugly Barbies, or no Barbies at all. I hid and jumped out to scare her. I taunted her for sport. I hated changing her diapers and was a terrible babysitter. I used to worry Child Protective Services would somehow come for me, a phrase I only knew because CPS once showed up at the neighbor's house across the street.

One day, she crawled into my bedroom while I was reading *The Baby-Sitters Club* and started touching my dance costumes, the only beautiful things in our chaotic house.

She pulled a red sequin off my tutu and swallowed it.

I panicked.

I thought she might die.

So I did nothing. I told no one. Hours later, when I changed her diaper, there it was. My shiny red sequin stared back at me like a tiny star, twinkling and bright. After that, I hated changing her diapers a little less. I kept looking for sequins.

The first thing my father ever told me about his mother, or about his life in Iran, came after I was already an adult. I didn't know his religion, his parents, or his childhood, and I'd never met my grandparents. They spoke Farsi. I spoke English. My father was not around much, and when he was, he didn't talk, he screamed. He ran our house the way his father ran the military: with volume, fear, and control.

He and I hadn't in years. His choice, not mine. We disagreed about my mother's drug addiction and the way my little sister was being raised. I blamed him more than I did her, when she was placed in foster care. I had also committed what, to him, was an unforgivable sin by becoming a teacher instead of the doctor he demanded.

The day my mother died, we stood beside her body together. It was the first corpse I'd ever seen or touched and the room was thick with everything we had never said. I felt small standing next to him.

We were both crying, something I'd never seen him do.

Through tears, he told me about his mother, the woman he stopped speaking to after she left his father rather than accept his taking a second wife. He told me about how she used to take him on walks at night in Isfahan, and how she would hold his hand and

point to the sky. *All the twinkling stars*, she told him. *Were the people who had died but still loved us.*

On the worst day of my life, I learned my father had once been loved. Someone had held his hand. Someone had comforted him. Someone had taught him to look up and believe in something beautiful. It was the only tender thing he ever told me and on the drive home, I stared at the sky searching for my mother. I stood outside for hours, crying, studying every flicker of light.

After that day, my father began telling me more about his life in Iran. I wished he had told me sooner, when there was still time to ask more questions, when there was still time for the story to become less of a fragment. Then, somehow, we lost each other again. I still don't know exactly how and that loss hurts too, but the story he gave me never faded. I stopped saying, *I'm sorry for your loss*. Now, when someone I love is grieving, I look up because the people we love don't really disappear, they just become the brightest stars in the sky.



AFTER TIME #1

BY ARLENE TRIBBIA

ART

INK, GRAPHITE, PASTEL & AQUARELLE CRAYON | 18" X 24" | 2022-2023

MÄDDER
BY KRISTEN MCHENRY
POETRY

She confines—
deprives and
denies—until
the only proof
She is still alive
collides, slides
down the side
of a white sink.

LOVE LETTERS

BY MARK HALL

NON-FICTION

Days before he died, from his hospice bed, my friend Julian amended his will, leaving me a small wooden box of faded letters from someone named Michael, a man he'd never mentioned in the twenty years I'd known him. The first begins simply:

I realize, Julian my dear, that I love you.

Writing from Vienna in 1969, Michael is young, ardent, and fearless.

Reading his letters, I'm drawn back to my own youth, when love felt just as absolute but harder to say aloud. I came of age in the shadow of AIDS, when desire arrived braided with fear. Michael wrote from an earlier moment, when love seemed boundless, when he could promise Julian faithfulness not in fulfillment of a demand, but as a consequence of loving.

But the Julian I knew seemed carved from a different life. The town eccentric, living alone in a decaying house, inside dim tunnels between piles of books, antiques, and junk.

Though he'd grown up in a South Carolina mill town, Julian spoke in a crisp British accent. With a cigarette in a black Bakelite holder, he fingered a worn prayer rope as he talked about poetry, music, and God.

In Michael's letters another Julian emerges—young, brilliant, beloved. Michael writes that his letters are talismans against our next meeting.

Thirty-two in all. Written after a brief affair. Two lovers divided by an ocean and, eventually, war. Although they never met again, through Michael's letters, love persists, even now that Julian and Michael both are gone.



AFTER TIME #4

BY ARLENE TRIBBIA

ART

FLASH, GRAPHITE & AQUARELLE CRAYON | 18" x 24" | 2022-2023

THE LAST TIME I SAW BARBIE

BY ELIZABETH MURPHEY

FICTION

I pull up in front of the house and stare at it from behind the wheel. Its once ochre clapboard, now it's mostly gray and worn by salt and neglect. Ragged lace curtains hang in the windows and a barn swallow nest clings to the eaves. The key is where the neighbor, Mr. Peckford, wrote to say it would be, under the empty barrel by the well. The lock is rusty and the door sticks. I push with my shoulder. The porch is smaller than I remembered it. The air reeks of rot. On the kitchen table are two cans of beans. A dirty dishrag hangs by the sink, yellow rings around the edges, cobwebs clinging to the taps.

Upstairs, my parents' door is shut, and I leave it that way. In my old room, the green bedspread covers the mattress. In the hallway, I glance through the window, its sill littered with dead bluebottle flies. The view is in two shades of blue, one above, one below the horizon. *A grand day*, as Mother used to say. I see someone peering into the windows of my SUV, and I head downstairs and outside.

A small man, hunched over and leaning on a cane, greets me.

"John Peckford at your service," he says.

"Nora. Danny Dwyer's daughter."

He pauses before speaking again and squints. "Must be goin' on thirty years since I seen you," he says. "You got your father's eyes, your mother's chestnut hair."

I hesitate, a knot in my throat.

"I would have visited," I say. "In February when he died, but—"

"I miss Danny something fierce," he says, wiping his nose on his sleeve. "Do anything for you, Danny would. A fine man if there ever was one."

"Except when drunk," I say forcing a laugh.

"A few drinks here and there," Peckford says, waving a hand. "No harm in that."

"You've been very kind, Mr. Peckford. Thanks once again. I have to unpack and—"

"Don't let me hold you up," he says scuffing his foot on the gravel. "By the way, Danny asked for you. I figured you'd wanna know that." He walks away, digging his cane into the ground as he goes.

I go back inside to change into shorts. I head downhill to the beach, taking a shortcut through a meadow of uncut hay and Queen Anne's lace. I pass by the shuttered crab plant, *BILLY LOVES SEAN* spray-painted on its siding. On the beach, the low tide leaves a wide foreshore of wet sand and, except for sandpipers and kittiwakes, it's empty. I remove my sandals and wade into the water to my knees, jaw clenched. A bark startles me. I turn around to see a dog, a stick in its jaws, tail wagging.

I grab the stick and fling it into the sea. My calves are numb. I bend over to massage them, both hands squeezing the muscle. The dog bolts past me. I lose my balance and fall into a breaking wave.

"Bad dog, Bruno," a young girl shouts, splashing through the water toward me.
"You okay there, lady?"

I nod, teeth chattering.

"Bruno might drive you batty with sticks, but he'll never hurt you," she says, her ponytail flaps back and forth. "You look kinda—" She pauses.

I smile. "Wet?"

"Yup. That too." She throws the stick for Bruno. "I'm Franny."

"Nora."

She holds a hand over her forehead, blocking the sun. "Haven't seen you around here. You up at Dwyer's place?"

I nod again.

"I'm not allowed to play in the waves unless I'm with someone older," she says as she grabs my hand.

By the time I trudge back up the hill to the house—with salt on my lips, my throat raw from squealing and laughing, and shoulders sunburned—the tide has begun to rise. My right arm is going to give me grief later. Blame that on Bruno.

I thaw out by the cookstove in my fleece tracksuit, a steaming cup of chamomile in my fingers. The linoleum floor probably hasn't been washed since Mom last did it. I pour Lestoil into a bucket of water and get down on all fours. I wipe, scrub, and rinse exactly as she would have. I've nearly finished when Bruno trots in through the open porch door, leaving a trail of paw prints.

There's a knock. Franny enters, pinching her nose.

"Pew!" She says. "What's that stink?"

Behind her is a woman about my age, strands of gray in her hair. "Don't be rude, Franny," she says. She reaches forward to shake my hand. "I'm Julie, this imp's mom. You're Nora Dwyer, right?"

The yellow water sloshes in the bucket as I slide it out of the way. "Nora Whelan. I go by my mother's maiden name."

"You went out west when she passed, didn't you? With your mom's sister?"

"That's right."

"Remember me?" she says. "The freckly squirt with pigtails?"

"Sorry, no."

"You had a Barbie," she says. "I was dyin' to have one of my own."

I picture my Hawaiian Fun Barbie in her bikini and hula skirt, the two of us in the back seat of our car. "You have a great memory," I say.

She laughs. "We're here for the month of August. You?"

"The estate's settled. I'm putting the place on the market. I have to get it in shape first. It hasn't had a good cleaning since my mother last did it."

"Sorry about your loss," Julie says.

"Thanks. She had a bad heart."

"I meant sorry about your father," Julie says. "He helped my dad tar his roof every summer. A kind fella if there ever was one. You must be proud of him."

I turn to face the stove so she doesn't notice the blood rising to my head. "The kettle's boiled," I say. "Can I offer you a cup?"

"Join us for supper tonight, Nora?" Julie asks stroking Franny's hair.

I glance at the canned beans on the table. "Um, I should finish—"

"A game of crib after, maybe?" Julie says.

Franny rolls a can along the tabletop. "Pretty please," she says.

I smile. "You'll have to teach me how to play."

We walk together to their house by the beach. Julie reminisces about childhood holidays, building sandcastles and searching for sea glass. Her kitchen smells of oven-fresh bread. After the meal, we play cards. When I put a king in the crib, Franny pats my shoulder and says, "Well played." Later, they walk back with me.

"You must have a lot of fond memories of Slate Cove," Julie says.

I smile, but don't respond. I stare at the ragged ghost of a house up ahead.

I crawl into bed as it turns dark. A hint of pine oil and bleach in the air makes me think of Mom, with her sleeves rolled up, and a paisley bandana over her hair.

It helps take my mind off things, she used to say about cleaning.

I never asked what those things were.

Probably something to do with Dad breaking promises, like he did that summer day on our way to Slate Cove.

My new Barbie and I were wedged between suitcases in the back seat of our old Chevy. Mom was up front, cracking a Double Bubble, leaning forward as if that could get us there sooner. Dad wore his favorite Led Zeppelin T-shirt, one hand on the wheel, his shoulder against the car door.

Halfway there, a flat tire and no jack forced a stop at the nearest house, a neatly whitewashed saltbox at the bottom of a steep hill by a lagoon. A man helped with the spare tire while Mom and I waited in the kitchen. A pot of salt meat and cabbage was boiling on the stove. Steam fogged the windows.

"Changing tires is thirsty work," the man said, leaning against the counter. "Care for a drop of rum?"

Mom squirmed in the chair, its wood creaking. "We need to get a move on, Danny," she said.

Dad sat with his legs spread out. "Don't mind the missus," he said. "She's always hurryin' the fun."

Afterward in the car, I covered Barbie's ears while Mom yelled at Dad, calling him a drunken liar for breaking his promise to *lay off the booze*.

Dad slammed on the brakes and I toppled forward. He glanced at me through the rearview mirror.

“Okay back there?” he asked. I smiled for him and he winked at me, like he usually did when he needed me on his side before turning to face Mom. “Quit naggin’ me or I’ll hightail it back and guzzle every drop in the bottle,” he said, accelerating without warning. I held Barbie close to my heart in case he hit the brakes again.

Mom fiddled with her paisley bandana. “A grown man wouldn’t embarrass his wife,” Mom said. *Hurryin’ the fun?* Have you no respect for me at all?” She raised her arm to check her watch. “We’d be there by now. Did you at least remember to pack the Lestoil?”

“Jesus,” Dad said. “Three weeks’ holiday by the sea and you’ll waste it cooped up, cleanin’. I know what I’m gonna do.”

“Is that so now, Danny?” She said and turned to wink at me. “It better not involve rum.”

After we’d unpacked and eaten lunch, Mom took me to the beach. When we arrived back at the house, Dad was gone and I walked into the kitchen with my sneakers on, tracking sand into the house.

“Can’t you see it’s clean?” She yelled.

“Sorry.”

“I wish we never came here,” she said, and sat on the floor with her back against the wall. Her head sagged to her shoulder. “Go find your father. Tell him I need him to come home.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Go,” she said. “Tell him I’ve got a pain in the chest.”

I had no clue where he was, so I went outside and waited.

She was in the same spot when I returned.

“He’s nowhere,” I said.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, opened them, and then stood. “We’ll go to bed early,” she said. “I’ll make you a special breakfast in the morning. Anything you want.”

It wasn’t yet dark when I curled up next to her in their bed—the mattress sagging in the middle—with my arm around her. The next morning, when I tried to wake her, she just lay there, strangely still. I put my hand on her cheek. Her skin felt so cold.

I laid Barbie on the pillow with her so she wouldn’t be alone, then went to look for Dad. I found him asleep in my bedroom, with my tufted bedspread over his head. His leg sticking out, jeans and sneakers still on, and his breath stinking of rum. I shook him.

“Something’s wrong with Mom,” I yelled.

He finally woke, groaning, with a hand on his forehead. I didn’t follow him when he went to see Mom and I plugged my ears while his shouting turned to crying. He brought me to Mr. Peckford’s house and, when I returned home the next day, Mom was gone.

Tomorrow, I'll open the door to that bedroom, closed for too long. I'll open the curtains and let the light in, and if I find my Barbie, I'll give her to Franny. Maybe we'll take her to the beach.

SOMEONE WHO
BY GEORGEA JOURJOUKLIS
FICTION

I squirm against itchy cotton sheets, forced to endure the buzzing and beeping of nearby machines, the shuffling of shoes, and the hacking of phlegm. By now, I'm nose-blind to the sour mix of disinfectant and body odor. I'll be discharged today and thank God for that. My only entertainment comes from visitors—not mine, of course.

The old woman to my left always has a spit bubble resting on her lip and skin like candle wax, but her husband wipes her mouth and feeds her Jello between sentences. I imagine I'm his granddaughter. I picture him sitting on my bed, spooning me sweets instead.

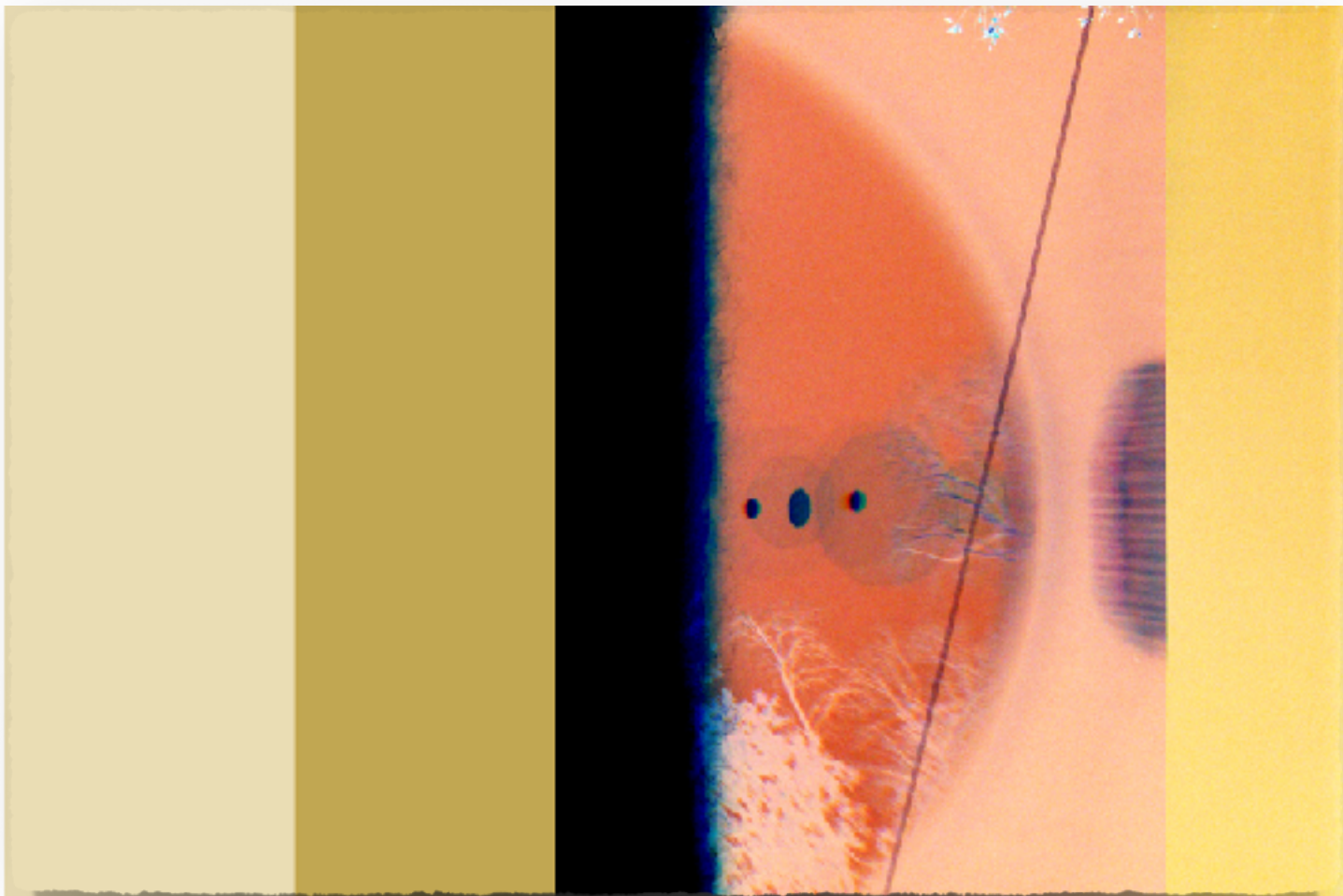
I wonder if she's dying. Her laboured breaths grow steadier when he talks, when he offers her juice, and strokes her thinning white hair.

If I were dying, would someone bring me apple juice because I like it more than grape, and hold the straw to my twitching lips, sponge bathe my frail, naked body, and continue reading aloud even when I'm dozing off?

Does everyone have someone? Someone who waters the tulips at dawn because you said it's best for growth. Someone who lights incense because you loved the smell, and makes pot roast for dinner because that's what you ate together on your first anniversary. Someone who plays reruns of *I Love Lucy* because it was your favourite show, and you wet yourself laughing when Lucy thought Ricky was trying to kill her, so she jumped around the kitchen wearing pots and pans.

Someone who carries on, not because they want to, but because *you* want *them* to. I can't imagine having that myself, but I see it in others. There's peace in their eyes because everything will stay the same, and everything will change. They feel like crying but neither does.

I do, though softly, and so they aren't taken from each other's eyes as I fade into the white noise of shuffling shoes and beeping machines.



TRANSITORY SPACE #1

BY LEAH DATES

PHOTOGRAPHY

PROSPECT PARK, BROOKLYN, NYC #88 | COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY | 2021-2022

MESSIANIC CONFSSIONAL
BY TAMARA J. MADISON
POETRY

Ecclesiastical rumor has it that before he became the Christ,
Jesus caught a case while trying to evangelize at the local

flophouse crowded with beggars, kings, and outlaw women.

Someone served him a cup of ragweed wine with a slab of pork pulled,
cast spells on him between chews and swallows,

made him holler, profess his sins, wallow in them
as he begged a leprous whore forgiveness.

BALLAD OF AN ALLEY RAT

BY MAX SZREDNI

FICTION

Body ejected, body free, body snipped by Doc, cradled by Mom; undersized, yes, but loud, thunderous, four pounds of hyperactive larynx, malleable bone, doughy flesh, and soupy waste—which Dad delights in, takes pics of, commemorates in albums, pens in these albums witticisms like: **Mister Poopy Pants has first evacuation.** Little victories, little victories, thank Jesus for little victories, anything to distract from the dark red birthmarks, the hideous port-wine stains on body's face, neck, and back.

Body pampered with blankets, overalls, and inoculative smooches, Batman onesies and hypoallergenic disposables, but more importantly pampered with time, attention, because body is wise, knows how to get what it wants: screech for a diaper change, screech for a bottle, screech for Mom, screech for the hell of it! Body a marvel, able to sit, crawl, walk, a tottering tumbleweed blown back and forth by murmurs, "'Go kiss Mom, go hug Dad". Until one day body meets drywall instead of Dad—who's on the floor, clutching his arm—and now Mom has no time for screeches, only the phone, which she screams into, pleads into, whispers into, breathes into, and then sits beside and stares at until the foyer churns with uniforms.

Shoulders jostled by a herd of bawling children, toqued and jacketed against Autumn's chill, corralled by parents into a stuffy classroom filled with cubbies, tables, chairs, and toys, hundreds of toys. Plastic animals that aren't to be chewed on. Wooden blocks that aren't to be chewed on. Legos that aren't to be chewed on. Crayons that aren't to be chewed on. Edible treasures that Mom points to encouragingly before pivoting toward the door, tiles chirping under her sneakers.

"Why the red face, why the red neck, why so small, why so ugly"—classmates stumped, theories posited, body speculated to be half-human, half-troll—although one girl thinks differently, stands up to the rest, shouts from her seat, "Maybe he's half-devil; I mean, he's red after all."

Body frigid, but so much work left to do; damsels to save, maidens to kiss, princesses to hold hands with, noblewomen to court, plus snowballs to collect for the impending war, goblins threatening to invade the yard once again; goblins in galoshes, scarves, mittens, and snow pants, goblins who travel the neighbourhood in a neon pack; goblins who giggle and hum carols as they creep toward Mom's arbor, footsteps quiet, eyes peeled for adults.

Body enrolled in school after school, but Mom fails to see this body requires a special kind of school. One for the blind, say, or one for the mute; or, "What about home-schooling, Mom? Heck, what about no-schooling?"

Parents phoned: by teachers, by Mom, but body still ridiculed, methodically shunned; shunned despite nightly appeals to God, snacks shared with classmates,

hobnobs exchanged at recess for ten minutes of friendship—but friendships are hard, never last till the bell, body unable to meet certain provisos, e.g. the ability to catch/throw, and these boys, their imaginations are vibrant, always dreaming up new games, such as: *Tackle the Freak and Spit in His Mouth* and *Make the Freak Eat Pinecones*.

Body forgotten, adrift in sound, lost to the clamour of Dad's old Gibson, a tenth birthday gift from Mom, and although cobwebs frost the pickups, the strings chime smooth, a result, no doubt, of what's caked to the nickel: ghost grot, zombie dust, Dad's mummified skin.

Breakfasts augmented to stimulate growth. Morning is a time of gastrointestinal abuse: seven bacon strips, four scrambled eggs, three pints of two percent, five spoonfuls of whey, and Mom can groan, can lecture about heart disease, can threaten to hide the tape measure, threaten to hide the scale, and plead for an end to this wayward obsession yelling, "Who cares about your classmates—I will be your friend". But her words mean nothing, because what does she know of the struggle, her body gargantuan, a towering five-one.

Birthmarks accepted, or perhaps just unnoticed, these middle-schoolers in the alley not much for observation. Instead into bong rips, bajas, cough syrup, and Led Zeppelin. But mainly just bong rips, long creamy bong rips, for reasons they detail in tar-clotted drones, "School sucks ass, teachers suck ass, parents suck ass, top 40 sucks ass, plus everything worth living for has already happened; like love-ins, psychedelics, and real Rock 'n' Roll."

Body heavy, baked potato, unable to navigate the simple problem of: how to devour popcorn/play guitar at the same time, which causes bandmates to snicker, ha ha ha, causes popcorn to wedge, ha ha ha, but breath won't come, may never come again, and now the jam-space whirls, Alley Rats in a frenzy—Guinness en route, bitter swallow, popcorn flushed, a pulse of warmth.

On the authority of students, body not what it should be, Google in support of this, mirrors too; pits bald, upper lip smooth, testicles shy, prone to skulking in their cavities, and despite what the online forums say, "*It'll happen...just be patient!*" Fellow students contend otherwise, volunteer frightening alternatives—say, "If it doesn't start by the time you're fourteen, it probably never will" and "Maybe the circus has a place for you: Boy-Man Dances With Bearded Lady" —then run off on their massive feet and giraffe-ish legs to enjoy the fruits of adolescence, i.e. makeout sessions, blowies, and handjobs at the movies.

Alley Rats cast in red halogen, first gig ever, a battle of the bands held in the school auditorium; crowd agog, jeers loud, "Check out the midget; he's tinier than his guitar!" But then they shut up, they shut the hell up, the set list designed to shut them up: Eruption, Thunderstruck, Dazed and Confused. Call it showing off, call it salvation.

Body absent from class, field trips, the influence of teachers, a brick no more, freed of The Wall, and who cares what they say, Mom, the principal, who cares about F's and

looming suspension—cuz in this life there are rules, then there's The Rule: **NEVER EVER EVER FOLLOW ANY RULES.**

Liver godly, immune to alcohol, although these prudes think contrarily, shout, "Stop, stop, stop!" But fuck 'em, fuck 'em, these prudes and their vapid party, with its lame-o music (Jonas Brothers?!), lame-o guys (Ed Hardy?!), lame-o girls (Bieber Fever?!), and lame-o decor, all baroque and fancy that could do with some adjustments, some stylistic revamping. So bye-bye doilies, have fun in the toilet, bye-bye china, happy flight out the window!

Ears torrid, hands atremble, byproducts of the news Mom spouts from her lounge: Time for me to move on; time for me to get back out there; eleven years he's been gone; eleven goddamn years—retort more a reflex, just sounds, choppy and wet, Mom no longer Mom but a tramp in capris, "Who on earth would wanna date you, Mom, with that disgusting rat's nest, those wrinkly lips; and your sneakers, your gross-ass sneakers, who would wanna date someone in those."—sounds followed by a trek upstairs to Dad's guitar...and the strings, they feel so buttery; the varnish, it smells so sweet.

Body unable to keep still. "Keep still," the teachers cry, but the girls, the girl, the girl the boys call Luce, with the red braid, black bandana, stick-and-poke tats, and tongue piercing, who in Math class asks when the Alley Rats will play again, says, "You're such a good guitarist; your fingers are so FAST."

Practice, practice, practice, practice, fingers going fast, going faster, faster, faster. Two shows on the horizon: a Bar Mitzvah and a house party. That talent show making waves, "ALL HAIL JIMMY PAGE!" and yes, tendons may tire and nerves may tingle and muscles may cramp and fingers may shake, but gotta play faster cuz fame is imminent, Alley Rats on the rise, record deal on its way.

Body ascendent, pungent and lush, whorls of kinked hair, a follicular renaissance, and zits, oodles of zits, on the brow, back, and chest, a sebaceous sheen over their ranges, shiny in the mirror.

Body not a temple, body a playground, the earring and nose stud just a start; next week, a rook, the week after, a labret, then a brow ring, a lip ring or a pair of industrials, and when Grandma's birthday money arrives, a nipple hoop, like Luce, who claimed last class hers hurt less than a pinch. Face sexy, piercings hot, just look at that tragus, look at that labret. "But nothing," Luce declares. "Compares to these fingers." A point she emphasizes by thrusting them up her skirt—which means: a) God exists, b) He answers prayers, and c) the woman three seats down can sniff all she wants to—no one's leaving the theatre.

Body in her bed, in her body, then free, spending, spent, a glossy exhale, and for a moment she stares, eyes narrowed at the exhale, then she touches her belly, says, "What next?" Maybe it's the ketamine, maybe it's the Pabst, or it could just be the desire to

make this first last, but the answer comes so easily, "Gimme a tattoo," which makes her giggle and cry, "You're so cute when you're drunk."

Body pentagrammed that evening, Yin Yanged a week later, then wolved, poleaxed, spidered, and webbed, but it's the *RAT*, the giant *RAT*, inked above the elbow, that has Mom saying, "One more and you're out!"

She ain't President though, she ain't God, she ain't nothing but a tramp in capris, so how's about a cursive **FUCK** across the throat; how's about **MOMMY** scrawled inside a heart.

Tears down her cheeks but no hug goodbye, her wrinkly lips flat as she opens the front door, and although ice crusts the walkway and clouds glaze the sky and snow tumbles from these clouds in woozy pirouettes, she's packed nothing save for socks and underwear in Dad's guitar case, along with his Gibson, a farewell gift.

Armpits stale, rubbery pong of a dropout; of a bad boy, a rockstar, a couch-surfer—Grandma's chaise first, then the camelback at Luce's, then the jam space Chesterfield, then back to the chaise, a rotation that falters when Luce's parents find the whisky, then again when Grandma discovers the coke vial, leaving just the Chesterfield, but whatever, fuck it, this is Rock 'n' Roll, a future story for the journalists at Rolling Stone.

Practice, practice, practice, practice, fingers going fast, going faster, faster, faster, and yes, muscles may sear, may throb and convulse, but gotta keep playing, gotta go faster—two more shows on the horizon, another talent show, then a fundraiser, something to do with cleft palates, children with cleft palates; demo-tape finished, a write-up in the school paper, twelve hundred views on YouTube...where's that record deal?

Neurons engaged in chemical warfare, Luce a willing surface for psychoactive munitions: toots of M off her stomach, of K off her back, a sip of G from her navel, bumps of H off her chest, and the Alley Rats always murmuring, always griping about her faults, like the way she squeals during solos, steals beer from the cooler, interrupts songs with questions, and is she such a skank, "Cuz only a skank would date you, dude...no offense."

Body blessed with superpowers, the gift of teleportation, able to imbibe in one location and wake up in another: bus station one day, public restroom the next, two times a jail cell for drunken misconduct, and then one morning on the curb outside of Mom's.

World monochromed by fog, tinted in gold light. Yard alive with birdsong, robin trills and jay shrieks, as well as the warble of a raven. The scream of a garbage truck, but when it brakes to pick up the trash, the workers refuse to say hello, instead cry, "Up, up, up! Can't leave garbage lying around!"

And why bother waiting, Mom's **For Sale** sign bright, a monolith of progress, and how quickly people move on.

No distraction like a show. This, the biggest one yet. Images of Mom's house usurped by Sabbath covers; Sabbath for these goodly folk, Sabbath for these saints,

these angels who have decorated the streets with banners: **NO MORE CLEFT PALATES.**

War Pigs, Paranoid, God is Dead, and still these martyrs wince. Zero respect for the classics.

Body strobed by headlights, flash after flash, gotta earn a living, no record deals yet, and according to Luce's dealer, this is how it starts: on a sidewalk downtown with a pocketful of smack. Except no one will bite, no one will even look, save two vagrants across the street, who raise a bottle and shout, "To business!"

Practice, practice, practice, practice, fingers going fast, then not so fast. Hands buzzing, tendons charged, a current that paralyzes them, turns them cold. There's feedback in the jam space, a gentle thrum, growing shriller by the second, before tapering into a howl. Arm prodded by Luce, massaged and stretched, but the plague doesn't lift, fingers still dead, and the Alley Rats now whispering, whispering words like, "carpal tunnel syndrome" and "nerve damage" and "why not take a break?" But they don't understand, don't get it, that guitar is what holds it together, this bond, this friendship, that Luce fell for fast fingers—not cold, dead ones—that this is something that can be worked through, something that *will* be worked through; that seventeen-year-olds are invincible, not just in liver but in limb; that a comeback is inevitable, like Skynard, Cash, and Ozzy.

Body evicted from the jam space, Alley Rats so sorry, shout, "Hope your comeback is a success" and "Drop by when you're better!" But their jubilant tones say otherwise, say *stay far away*, and *keep that skank away too, her and her dumb questions*.

Nutrients needed, shelter, a job.

Nickels for pop cans, dimes for bottles.

Body punctured, jabbed repeatedly, Luce no longer a willing surface, not for a street person, which means the pussyfooting can stop and the fun can begin. Roger Waters an inspiration. Just a little pinprick. Arm veins first, that forked beauty in the elbow, followed by the cephalic, what a jewel, what a jewel, and after that deflates, it's onto the foot, those viaducts atop the ligaments, turquoise and ripe—and every so often a hit to the jugular, cuz Carpe Diem, cuz #YOLO; cuz who gives a shit?

God sure doesn't, so pawn the guitar.

Dad ain't watching.

Posterior appraised by a man in the bottle depot, a man with long fingers, cash in these fingers. Body skirted, rouged, stilettoed, perfumed, lipsticked, spaghetti-strapped, and festooned in panties. Invited to hotel rooms, bent over mattresses, made to shout names like, "Larry! Jason!" And here come the grunts, here comes the cash. Two tens, a fifty, and a smack on the ass. Now it's back to the park bench where the old woman sits, cane in one hand, the other in her jacket—and the world, the beautiful world, it scintillates with options: jib, down, PCP, ket, soft, hard, or fent?

Body peeped by Mom downtown, witnessed in a boa and a threadbare slip. Five seconds of eye contact, four mascaraed lids flexed, two bodies immobilized, suspended in the dusk, and she looks fucking gorgeous, like a goddamn queen, with her peroxidized bob and sequined blazer, and her heels, the toes, they open, they flower, nails like stamens, glittery and blue—but her face, it dazzles, outshines all else, brow botoxed to a porcelain curve. Her teeth milky, cheeks pink, and who can blame her, begrudge her this flush, for look at her hand—at the hand in her hand, the mitt of a man shod in oxfords, his Rolex worth more cans than could be collected in a lifetime.

Body on a mission, a holy crusade, that image in need of purging, their hands, their clasped hands, but the uppers don't help, nor the downers, the benzos, hallucinogenics ineffectual, dissociatives just bleh. Which raises the question of what else might work, i.e. a fight with two bouncers under the stars, giants sporting trilobite 'staches that bounce, shiver, and sway—but no matter how many teeth they smash, the image remains, caught like a burr. A burr the cops can't dislodge either, when they pull up in their Tahoes, demanding peace and photo ID. Cards lost but info apparent: *nineteen-year-old M, BRN hair, BRN eyes, Wt scant, Ht negligible, address pending, address lost.*

Body on a mission, holy crusade, that image in need of purging: her heels, his oxfords, but the walks don't help, always follow the same route—jam space, pawnshop, old house, jam space—a Bermuda's Triangle to wonder at, to ponder and orbit: again and again, until street lamps burn, sky dark above. Body on a mission, a holy crusade, that image in need of purging: his Rolex and her botox.

That old woman uneasy and won't stop stroking her cane says, "Fifty years I've been in this business, and never have I seen such a look." But she hands over the baggie regardless, who knows why, who knows. Maybe she too has port-wine stains and understands the agony.

Maybe she too once sought comfort in bong rips and Zeppelin. Maybe she too left home at the age of sixteen, spent nights on curbs and street corners, injecting herself with dreams: fluorescent lights, coroners in lab coats, her body laid out, waiting to be identified; her mother within arm's reach, her mother standing tall, her mother admitting that yes, she is the mother, to this devil, this alley rat, this birth-marked child.



PANTS X MFK
BY CHRISTOPHER GARLAND
PHOTOGRAPHY
WEST SAVANNAH | DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

SOME LIKE IT GAUCHE

BY JOHN FRAME

FICTION

After a six-hour journey, we arrive in Glasgow from the north-east, through Cumbernauld, Stepps, and Robroyston. Grey clouds cover the city like a funeral shroud. The bus drives past large, rusty containers full of natural gas, huge concrete water towers, and rows of drab housing estates. I see flats decked out with Irish tricolors, some wrapped in the flag of union, and others sporting the giant, foreboding red hand of Cúchulainn. It makes my hometown in the northern Highlands seem like a playboy's retreat on the French Riviera.

We pull in to our destination, Hampden Park, the Mecca of Scottish football. From the bus, I watch the fans stream toward the stadium, like bright-colored sperm to an egg. Reds, whites, and blues on one side and greens and whites on the other. Enthralling and spellbinding, with an undercurrent of menace.

We'll use the hour before kick-off to relieve our bladders, eat some food, and get into the stands. An unusual problem hampers our progress when the driver attempts to park.

"Which side are you on?" asks the attendant, a bearded, rotund man in a high-visibility vest. "Rangers or Celtic?"

"Both," says our driver.

"Both sides?" He sounds incredulous.

"Aye, half Rangers, half Celtic."

The steward consults a colleague. I see them laughing, their heads shaking in astonished confusion. The big guy comes back. "Fine. We'll put you in a space reserved for VIPs. Anywhere else and you'd be in trouble later."

After we park I visit what's laughably described as a toilet. It's a brick wall with a trough. I'm surrounded by booze-breathed, middle-aged football fans as we all stand in an inch of urine staring ahead as if it's a firing squad gone awry. The drain doesn't work and the building's on a slope. It smells like pee, flatulence, and cheap fortified wine, even less pleasant than a standard visit to a public toilet.

Venturing up into the stands elevates my mind. The roar of the crowd feels more real than parts of the city I observed earlier. My spine tingles in the presence of the raw, untainted spectacle. Thousands of people gather with the same focus, dropping their guards and their burdens, getting ready for ninety minutes of distraction from their workday nightmares.

The game is slow and passes without much excitement. It's clear the whole experience is about anticipation. Bored by the second half, I yearn for a comfortable place to wash the smell of piss from my hands. The final result lets me down, a one-nil

win for Rangers. Anti-climactic for a Celtic supporter at his first big game. At least the carnival atmosphere—chanting, singing, name-calling—held my interest.

The Highland contingent get back on the bus after the game, ready to head home, but I'm staying to enjoy a weekend in the city. I mix in with the throng of supporters flowing out of the stadium, on my way to the center of town.

"Which way tae the Great Eastern Hotel?" I ask someone.

This guy's sipping from a can of Tennents. "The Great Eastern? On Duke Street?" he asks, flashing a mouth with two missing front teeth.

"Aye."

He looks at my rucksack. "Naw, you don't wannae go there pal," he says.

"Is this the right direction?" I ask, pointing ahead.

"Aye, up Palmadie, o'er the Clyde, through the Green, up intae Trongate. Takes an hour or so, walking. But I'd strongly advise against staying there, big man."

I wave him off as he continues to blather and cross the road, breaking free of the crowd until I make it to Glasgow Green on my own. From there, I navigate my way around the soaked, red sandstone of the People's Palace, up to Gallowgate where I stop for a drink in the Saracen's Head, a dusty old pub near the Barrowlands Ballroom.

There's Celtic memorabilia all over the walls and Celtic supporters three deep at the bar. I wait to place my order and look at a peculiar set of pictures on the wall behind the barman's head. Pope John Paul II, saying mass at Bellahouston Park. The comedian, Billy Connolly, having a drink at the Sarry Heed. An action photo of Celtic's greatest winger, Jimmy 'Jinky' Johnstone. These don't seem out of place. Over the till is a picture of John F. Kennedy which strikes me as incongruous.

"Why d'you have a picture of an American president behind the bar?" I ask.

The barman looks at me and frowns. "Jesus, what school did *you* go tae?"

His inscrutable face makes me pause and think about how to answer the question. "I went tae Simpster High School."

"Where the hell is that?" yells the barman. His eyes widen with confusion. "Is that a Protestant school?"

Nobody in their right mind would answer this in the affirmative. "Nah, I think it's atheist!"

"Oh, aye! So, is it Catholic-atheist or Protestant-atheist?" asks the barman, with no hint of a sense of humor.

I shrug. It's a ridiculous question.

"Well, anyway," the barman continues, "President Kennedy is up on the wall because he was a great Fenian! You would know that if you went to the right school."

Perplexed by this answer, I respond, "what's a Fenian?"

As often happens in films, the pub falls silent. Frowns turn into scowls, murmurs become jeers, and a sweating forest of arms swells into a foreboding fleshy obstacle course of tattoos and hair.

Realizing I'm no longer welcome in the Sarry Heed, I exit the pub as quickly as possible. I stumble outside and make my way toward the Great Eastern Hotel, hopeful for the comfort and safety of a warm bed.

UNDER THE WILLOW TREE

BY AUDREY FORGUES
FICTION

Flames danced in the fireplace, but their heat couldn't reach me. The knitted slippers hadn't moved from their place by the front door, and her toothbrush still collected dust on the corner of the bathroom sink. I had come back to the Appalachians hoping to feel her warmth, but what lingered in the cabin was her anger—rattling my bones every time I looked out the window into the dark, snowy woods.

The rules had always been simple: don't whistle, don't venture out after dark, and if you hear your name called in the woods, ignore it. Appalachian folklore had been passed from grandmother to granddaughter for as long as our families had occupied these grounds—older than the cabins, older than the roads cutting through the ridge. The mountains kept their own kind of order, and the rules were the price of their welcome. I had never felt a twinge of rebellion against them. No voice had ever called my name.

Patrick.

At first, I told myself it was the wood hissing, releasing moisture from the snow. But the syllables sharpened; the voice was unmistakably hers.

The previous spring, *Ring of Fire* had been blasting from the radio when I buried her under the weeping willow. She'd been nursing a bottle of gin in her wicker rocking chair, her voice gone low and mean the way it got in the afternoons, murmuring the last of the insults she'd been shrilling at me since morning.

I don't remember deciding. I remember the piece of firewood in my hands, and the way the song swelled. I remember the specific quality of the light — that hard mountain light that forgives nothing — and then, I remember her being still. The gin bottle hadn't broken, instead it sat upright at her feet like it was waiting for her to reach back down for it. I stood there longer than I should have, watching a fly investigate the rim. I dug her grave with trembling hands and buried her with the bottle. It felt like the right thing. It might have been the only right thing I did that day. I drove out of the Appalachians under a brown evening sky, the darkness tailing me as I left the territory.

I laced up my boots and opened the front door, its creak welcoming me into the darkness. I had held out hope that the cold air would act as a mother's hand, forcing me to obey the rules as soon as it hit my cheek, but I craved her warmth more than I did the fire's. Her voice called me toward the tree line like a poor man to the gallows, and the wind whistled in my ears the whole way there, as if the mountains were trying to drown her out. There I was, moving through woods that did not want me—the trees not indifferent but actively unwilling, their bare branches knitting together overhead to block out what little moonlight the clouds allowed. The snow swallowed every sound except her voice. Her call came from no fixed direction, doubling back on itself the way

sounds do in the mountains. The old people used to say the woods after dark were a place between places. They said that what lived there was old—older than anyone still living—and that old things do not forgive the way younger things do. I had grown up hearing this. I had believed it the way you believe in something you have never needed to test.

I reached the weeping willow and put my palm flat against the bark. Snow had swallowed her swing. Six feet below me, she was closer than she'd been in months.

Patrick.

I knew the last rule. Whistling summons what lives in the woods. She was part of them now—folded into whatever the mountains keep when they take something back. The wind moved through the bare branches above me like breath through teeth, and I wetted my lips. I pushed the air slowly out of my lungs, and the first few bars of *Ring of Fire* moved between the trees.

The woods went completely still. No more wind. No more settling branches. Nothing, if not for the particular silence that the mountains make when they are paying attention. Then a crack, close and deliberate. Her warmth enveloped me, the faint smell of gin filling my nostrils. I felt her hands find my face in the dark, the way she used to when she was about to say something she needed me to hear. Except this time, her fingers were very cold, and she was not letting go.

And somewhere behind me, deep in the trees, something else had started moving toward the sound of the whistle. I closed my eyes. The mountains had kept their order. I had always known, somewhere beneath the wanting, that this was the price of coming back—not to her, but to everything she'd become part of. I let the dark have me. It felt like the right thing. It might have been the only right thing I did that day.



WHITE ARROW

REINER HEIDORN

ART

OIL ON CANVAS | 71" x 79"

THE UNWRITTEN WING
BY HARSHIT MALAVALIYA
FICTION

I

The birth had gone wrong even before the first scream.

Lirea knelt on the salt-crusted floor of the cliffside hut, her primary wings folded tight against her spine, her smaller secondary wings flared for balance. The mother, a fisherman's wife named Caelin, writhed on a bed of woven kelp, her own great wings, storm-grey and salt-stiffened, thrashing against the walls. Outside, the night sea hammered the rocks. Inside, the oil lamp spat shadows.

"The child is turned," Lirea said, keeping her voice low and even. She was the only midwife on the Skerries, a chain of sea-battered islands where wingspan was destiny. She had delivered the children of kings and paupers both, had coaxed life from bodies that wanted to give nothing but blood. But this was different.

The infant's wing-bud, the left one, was tangled in the cord. In a normal presentation, the wings emerged after the head, slick and folded like wet silk, to be unfurled by the first breath. But this bud was trapped, its delicate architecture of hollow bone and nascent feather-sheaths crushed against the pelvic cradle. Every contraction was strangling it.

"I can't," Caelin gasped. "I can't."

"You can," Lirea said. She placed one hand on the woman's heaving belly and reached deep with the other, into the hot, tight passage. Her fingers found the wing-bud. It was still alive, vibrating with a thready pulse, but the placental cord was looped twice around its root. One more push and the wing would tear loose, the child born bleeding, flightless, or dead.

There was a procedure, taught in the great midwifery halls of the capital, whispered in the island villages, and forbidden by every council of elders, called the *Wingroot Transference*. You could save an entangled wing-bud, but only by sacrificing the life-force of a whole, healthy wing, a wing still connected to a living, willing donor.

Lirea had studied it, but had never performed it. No one had. Not in three hundred years. The law was absolute: to take a wing was to unmake a person. A wingless adult was a burden, a mockery, a walking wound. The penalty for performing the requisite magic was exile beyond the skyline, where the air grew thin, and the heart-birds sang the dead home.

But the child was dying.

Lirea closed her eyes and saw, against the dark, the vague shape of her own life: forty-seven years, two fledged daughters, a husband long lost to a storm, a cottage full of drying herbs and gratitude-gifts. She had a wingspan of twenty-three hands,

respectable, beautiful, and powerful. She had flown the length of the Skerries just that morning, racing a gale, laughing into the wind.

She made her choice without drama. It was not a thought but a movement. She leaned forward, pressed her lips to Caelin's sweat-slick forehead, and whispered, "Push. Now. Hard."

As the mother screamed and bore down, Lirea reached inward with her magical sense, the midwife's second sight that let her see the glowing web of life-channels. She located the infant's dying wing-bud, a flickering golden node. Then she turned her awareness to her own body, to her left primary wing the larger, stronger one, the one she used for steering in crosswinds. She found its root-channel, thick as a sunlit river, and with a single, precise severing thought, she cut it.

The pain was not pain. It was a catastrophic absence, a hole in the world where the sun had been. The wing did not fall off. It simply ceased to be alive, all its warmth and lift draining in a single gush, leaving a cold, numb appendage that hung from her back like a dead sail. The life-force rushed along her arm, out her fingers, into the infant's trapped bud. She felt the cord loosen, the wing unfurl inside the birth canal like a morning glory greeting the dawn.

The baby slithered into her hands, whole and screaming, both wings perfect, glistening, golden-fringed with the infant down.

Lirea slumped. Her left wing drooped, dragging on the floor. She tried to lift it and felt nothing. No muscle, no magic, no response. The wing was a corpse sewn to her shoulder blades.

She looked at it. The feathers were already turning dull, the vanes separating like old paper. The other wing, the right one, fluttered in panic, and she lurched sideways, thrown off balance for the first time since she was a fledgling. She clutched the edge of the bed and held on.

Caelin, cradling her newborn, looked up with exhausted wonder. "You saved her. Blessed wind, you saved her."

She had not yet noticed Lirea's wing. The lamp flickered, and for a moment, Lirea was grateful for the dark. She wrapped the dead wing around herself like a cloak and forced a smile.

"What will you name her?" she asked.

"Sereia," the mother breathed. "After the morning calm."

Lirea nodded, gathered her instruments with one shaking hand, and stepped out into the gale. The wind, her old lover, buffeted her, and she spread her right wing to steady herself. The left wing caught the wind wrong, twisted, and nearly pulled her off the cliff. She grabbed a tethering post and stood there, salt spray blinding her, and understood that she would never fly again.

Exile was not decreed. It simply happened.

Word spread. The midwife had a dead wing. The law said she should be shunned, but the islanders were practical, and the law was distant. They didn't cast her out. They just stopped meeting her eyes. They left her gifts, not at the door but at the cliff edge, where the wind could take the thanks away. Children stared. Fishermen who had once hailed her from the sky, now flew wide circles around her cottage, as if her affliction were contagious.

The physical pain faded, replaced by phantom storms. Lirea would wake in the night convinced her wing was on fire, or frozen, or heavy with rainwater. She would reach to preen feathers that weren't there, or that were there but dead, their shafts brittle, the flesh beneath atrophied. She bandaged the wing close to her body to keep it from dragging. She learned to walk with a limp that compensated for the missing counterbalance. She stopped looking at the sky.

But the hardest thing was the longing. It wasn't just the loss of flight. It was the loss of the sky's conversation, the subtle pressure shifts, the thermals that spoke a language of rising and falling, the way clouds tasted of altitude. She was earthbound, mute, her one remaining wing a useless, aching thing that sometimes flared open in dreams, beating against the sheets.

Months passed. She continued her work. Births still needed attending, and no other midwife would come to the Skerries. She delivered Sereia's cousin, and three more fisher-babies, all healthy, all winged. She grew gaunt. Her right wing grew stronger, compensating, but it was a lonely strength, a bird circling an empty nest.

And then, one dawn, a knock came at her door.

Caelin stood there, holding Sereia, now a plump, golden-feathered toddler. The child's wings were extraordinarily wide for her age, perfectly symmetrical, the left one marked with a curious pattern of silver flecks that caught the light like fish scales. She was already attempting little hops, fluttering a handspan off the ground, laughing.

"She won't stop talking about you," Caelin said, half-apologetic. "She points at your cottage and says 'Wing-mama.'"

Lirea's throat closed. "That's not "

"I know what you did," Caelin interrupted. Her voice was steady, but her eyes shimmered. "I didn't understand at first. I thought you'd been cursed, or sick. But then I remembered the old stories. The forbidden magic. You gave her your wings."

Lirea said nothing.

Sereia squirmed free and toddled across the room on chubby legs, her own wings flapping for balance. She stopped in front of Lirea and stared up with huge, sea-colored eyes. Then she reached out one small hand and touched the dead wing, which hung limp beneath its bandages.

The moment the child's fingers made contact, Lirea gasped. A jolt of something—neither pain, nor pleasure—shot through the dead appendage. For one dizzying instant, she felt the wing as if it were alive, the wind singing through the vanes, the sun warm on the coverts. She felt flight.

Sereia giggled. "Pretty," she said, stroking the dull feathers.

Lirea pulled away, trembling. "Don't."

But the child's touch had awakened something. The dead wing was not entirely dead. It was a bridge, a hollow channel where the life-force she'd given still echoed. And Sereia, the recipient of that gift, held the other end of the bridge. When they touched, the circuit completed, and for a heartbeat, Lirea was whole.

It was a torment dressed as a miracle.

III

The years passed, and Sereia grew. She visited the midwife constantly, drawn by an instinct she couldn't name. Lirea, against her own judgment, let her. The child was the only one who didn't flinch from the dead wing, who didn't speak in hushed, pitying tones. To Sereia, the wing was simply a part of Wing-mama, as natural as the sea.

When the girl was seven, she asked Lirea to teach her to fly.

"Your parents can teach you," Lirea said, busying herself with herb-drying.

"They're too careful. They're afraid I'll fall." Sereia tossed her head, her silver-flecked wing catching the light. "You're not afraid of anything."

Lirea almost laughed. She was afraid of everything: the cliff edge, the wind's taunt, the dreams where she flew higher than the stars and woke weeping. But the child's faith was a scandalous, demanding thing. So Lirea took her to the low dunes behind the village, where the falls were soft and the thermals gentle, and she taught her from the ground.

She taught her the names of the winds: the Lifting Breath, the Side-Slip, the Mother-Gust that caught you when you stumbled. She taught her to read the sky's moods, to fold a wing to drop and flare it to rise. She taught her everything that could be taught in words and demonstrations from the sand, her own dead wing, a silent, motionless object lesson in what was lost.

And Sereia, in turn, taught Lirea something. Every time they touched a guiding hand on her shoulder, a brush of feathers as they walked that momentary circuit closed, and the dead wing bloomed with borrowed life. It was never enough to fly, but it was a reminder. A window into heaven, opened for an instant, then slammed shut.

By the time Sereia was twelve, she could outfly the ospreys. By the time she was sixteen, she was the finest flier in the Skerries, her wings a blur of silver and gold, her laugh a bell carried in the air. She brought Lirea shells from the highest sea-stacks, cloud-berries from the mist forests of the upper air. She described her flights in such

vivid detail that Lirea could almost see them, and the phantom pain grew easier, transmuted into vicarious joy.

But the villagers noticed. They whispered that the flightless midwife was a corrupting influence, that her dead wing was a curse that might spread. They watched Sereia with a mix of admiration and distrust, as if she carried something forbidden in her silver-flecked feathers. And they watched Lirea with the same uneasy eyes they'd give a beached sea-creature; something that should have died but stubbornly lived.

Lirea ignored them. She had her cottage, her herbs, her solitude. And she had Sereia. It was, she told herself, enough.

IV

When Lirea was sixty-eight, she fell ill.

It began as a cough, then a fever, then a deep, rattling weakness that made her too tired to walk to the door. The dead wing, which had always been a cold weight, began to ache constantly, a dull, bone-deep throb that spread into her living wing and down her spine. Her right wing drooped. She could barely lift it.

Sereia, now a woman of twenty-one, came every day. She brought broth and cool clothes, stoked the fire, sat by the bed and talked. But Lirea could see the fear in her eyes. The midwife who had saved her life, who had given her flight, was dying. And the bridge between them, the strange circuit of the dead wing, was flickering.

One evening, as the sun bled into the sea and the lamp guttered, Lirea felt a change. The dead wing, for the first time in twenty-one years, felt warm. Not the borrowed warmth of Sereia's touch, but a heat of its own. It spread down the hollow bones, into the withered muscles, and with it came a scent of old paper, candle wax, and distant rain.

She knew, with the certainty of a midwife who had seen a thousand souls enter and leave the world, that she was dying. And she knew, with a deeper certainty, that something was waiting.

"Sereia," she whispered. "Do you remember the story I told you about the Celestial Library?"

The young woman nodded, her hand resting on Lirea's dead wing. "Where all the unwritten lives are kept."

"It's not a story. It's a place. Some of us who make a choice that changes everything get to go there. Before the end." Lirea coughed, a wet, tearing sound. "I think I'm being called. Come with me, as far as you can."

"I don't know how."

"Touch my wing. Don't let go."

Sereia pressed both palms flat against the dead feathers, and the circuit blazed open. Lirea felt the child's life-force pouring through her, not borrowing this time, but lifting. The room dissolved.

V

The Library of Unwritten Lives had no walls.

It was a vast, curved space that resembled the interior of a seashell made of light, spiraling upward into infinity. Along the curves, shelves upon shelves stretched away, filled with books of every size and color. Some glowed, some smoked faintly, some were bound in what looked like feathers or scales or starlight. The air was warm and still, and the only sound was a soft, perpetual rustle, pages turning themselves, lives reading themselves in endless, silent privacy.

Lirea stood in the center, whole. Her wings, both of them were alive, perfect, spread wide in the serene air. She could feel the individual barbs of each feather, the flex of muscle, the ache of recent flight. She knew it was an illusion, a courtesy of the Library, but she wept anyway.

Beside her, a shimmering presence: Sereia, not physically present, but connected by a silver-gold thread that pulsed with shared breath. She couldn't speak, but Lirea felt her wonder like a second heartbeat.

A figure approached. It was humanoid, draped in robes that seemed woven from loose pages, script crawling across the fabric in a thousand languages. Its face was a calm, genderless mask of pale wood, polished by aeons of handling.

"Lirea of the Skerries," it said, its voice the sound of a book being opened. "You are granted the Reading. You may choose one unwritten life, the life you would have lived had you made a different choice at the crux. The life the world calls your 'best' life. Do you wish to read?"

Lirea's throat was dry. "Yes."

The Librarian extended a hand, and a book detached itself from a high, shimmering shelf. It floated down, larger than the others, bound in sky-blue leather with silver stitching. The cover bore no title, only an image of a pair of wings, both whole, both raised in flight.

"This is the life you rejected when you cut your wing," the Librarian said. "The life of the whole Lirea."

It opened the book.

VI

She saw herself.

She was forty-seven again, on the cliffside, in the birthing hut. Caelin screamed, the cord tightened around the wing-bud, and this other Lirea made a different choice. She did not perform the Transference. She did what the law allowed: she delivered the child as safely as she could, preserving the mother's life, accepting the infant's death as a tragic inevitability.

The child was born silent, its left wing a crumpled, purple ruin. It never drew breath. Caelin wailed, and the other Lirea held her, wept with her, and then flew home on two strong wings.

The book's pages turned. Lirea watched her other self continue her work. She was honored, celebrated, her wingspan praised in every village. She delivered a thousand healthy babies, became the Chief Midwife of the Skerries, and was sought by nobles from the mainland. She flew high and fast and far, her wings carrying her to places the real Lirea had only dreamed of. She remarried, a kind, strong-winged fisherman who loved her laughter. She had no more children, but she was content.

She never knew Sereia. The name was a ghost, a nothing, a life that never sparked.

But the book showed more than the surface. Lirea could see the inner architecture of this other life, the hidden costs. She saw the other Lirea wake in the night, drenched in sweat, a dream of a golden-feathered girl fading on her tongue. She saw her pause at the cliff edge, staring at the sea, a nameless ache gnawing at her joy. She saw her grow old, surrounded by accolades and grandchildren who were not her blood, and she saw the growing emptiness, the sense that something essential had been misplaced, a wing that had never existed but constantly, silently, ached.

The book showed her the truth: the other Lirea had never cut her wing, but she had cut a life. And that life, that Sereia-shaped absence, haunted her like a phantom limb.

VII

Lirea wept as she read, and the Librarian waited, its wooden face unreadable. The silver thread to Sereia trembled with shared emotion, grief, confusion, a dawning, terrible understanding.

Then the book shifted. A new chapter began, one that the other Lirea had never known. Margins filled with faint, shimmering figures specters, half-seen, moving through the perfect world like shadows cast by an invisible fire.

Lirea saw them clearly: Caelin, but hollow, her storm-grey wings drooping, her eyes forever searching for a child who was never born. She saw the fisherman husband, laughing on the surface but brittle underneath, his dreams populated by a daughter who did not exist. She saw the entire Skerries, slightly dimmer, slightly poorer, the richness of Sereia's life, her laughter, her flights, her silver-flecked wings erased from the weft of the world.

And she saw Sereia herself, or the spectral imprint of her: a glowing, golden outline of a girl, standing in the margins of the perfect life, pressing her hands against the pages as if trying to break through. She was not angry. She was not accusing. She was simply waiting, patient as the sea, for a mother who had chosen her.

The other Lirea, the perfect Lirea, never saw these ghosts. She only felt their weight, a vague depression that settled on her in her final years. She died at eighty-three, honored and mourned, and on her deathbed, she whispered a name she did not know: "Sereia."

The book closed.

VIII

"You have seen your best unwritten life," The Librarian said. "Do you grieve for it.

Lirea, the real Lirea, the one-winged midwife, stood in the center of the Library, her phantom wings trembling. The thread to Sereia pulsed, and she felt the young woman's anguish: I was the cost. I was the price of your pain.

"No," Lirea said, and her voice was steady. "I don't grieve for it. I pity it."

"Explain."

"That life was flawless. It was smooth and admired and without the wound. But it was empty of her." She touched the silver thread, and it flared with warmth. "Sereia is not just a person. She is an unwritten life, the life that I unwrote when I cut my wing, but someone else wrote into being. Caelin's unwritten life, the one where her daughter lived. The fisherman's unwritten life, the one where his child grew wings strong enough to touch the sun. All those lives, all that love, poured into one girl. And I was the vessel. I was the—"

She took a breath. The Library's light seemed to brighten around her.

"I thought my sacrifice was a loss. But it was a translation. I took one page of my story and turned it into a whole book of someone else's. And that book is my unwritten life, the life I didn't live, but which lived because of me."

She spread her wings, the perfect, illusory wings of the Library, and felt them catch an impossible wind.

"I am not an unwritten life. I am the one who wrote it into the world. And that is better than being whole."

The Librarian's wooden mask shifted, and for the first time, Lirea saw a crack of light beneath it, a smile, perhaps, or a tear. "You have read correctly."

The silver thread blazed white-hot. Sereia's presence surged through it, not just a shadow but a voice, her voice, crying "Wing-mama!" with a love so fierce it filled the Library like a gale. The books on the shelves rustled wildly, and Lirea felt the dead wing in the real world: the cold, limp, useless wing twitch. Not with borrowed life, but with a new, strange magic, born of recognition. It would never fly again, but it would never be

dead again, either. It was a book now, a record, a testament. It was the unwritten life made visible.

IX

Lirea opened her eyes.

She was in her cottage, the fire low, Sereia sobbing into her shoulder. The dead wing was warm, truly warm, the feathers soft and alive with a gentle, internal glow. The phantom pain was gone. In its place was a quiet, steady presence, like a hand holding hers in the dark.

"You came back," Sereia choked. "I thought you were gone."

"I was. I went to the Library." Lirea stroked the girl's hair with her one strong hand. "I saw the life I gave up. It was beautiful, and it was hollow. You filled that hollow, Sereia. You are my unwritten life, walking in the world."

Sereia lifted her tear-streaked face. "But you suffered. You lost everything."

"I lost a wing," Lirea said. "I gained a library."

She didn't explain. She couldn't, not fully. But she pulled the girl close, pressing their foreheads together, and the dead wing curled around them both, shedding its grey, papery feathers. Beneath them, new feathers were emerging small, downy, pure white, like blank pages waiting to be filled.

The next morning, the villagers who came to check on the dying midwife found her sitting in her doorway, Sereia asleep at her feet. Her dead wing, unbandaged, was covered in a soft, luminous down that shifted between silver and gold as the light touched it. It still could not lift her, but it no longer dragged. It spread slightly, catching the breeze, and the village children, who had always feared it, drew close to touch its strange, warm beauty.

Lirea lived another eleven years. She delivered thirty more babies, and at each birth, the white wing flared with a brief, borrowed lift, as if welcoming the new soul. And when she finally died, at peace, surrounded by Sereia and Sereia's own fledglings, the wing detached gently from her back and floated upward, a single, perfect feather, until it was lost in the sky.

They say it reached the Library, where it became a small, silver-bound book with no title, just a picture of a single wing, whole and lifted in flight. And if you open it, you will find not a story of loss, but a story of translation: how one life can unwrite itself into another, and how the unwritten lives we give away become the truest stories we ever tell.



TOGETHER WE ARE MORE

BY ANTONIO GARCIA III

ART

GESSO, OIL ON COTTON CANVAS | 6' x 5' | LAS VEGAS, NV | 2026

CHAMPULI
BY ISAAC TERRY
POETRY

My father named me
Whilst my mother toiled, gifting
The planet, a "me".

He wrote down the name of
His forefathers upon my certificate
Against her wishes, at her
Weakest moment of strength.

My mother used to always
Coo this line to me,

"Champuli— my sweet one, my little bird."
Her grandfather's tongue of
Choctaw, overwritten.

As I grow, I battle with those
names I was given to live up to.
I feel the urge to twitter about,
Spread my never-named wings,

Call out, "Kâ'lanû" - Raven
As her grandfather bestowed her.

Request just once more, to
Hear her wildflower voice say
I am fit to change the label.

I am fit to change my "me" again.



YOU FALL, I CATCH YOU

BY ANTONIO GARCIA III

ART

GESSO, OIL ON FOUND WOOD | 6' X 5' | LAS VEGAS, NV | 2025

THE SKINGARDEN RELIQUARY

BY KRISTEN MCHENRY

POETRY

scatterseed for miles
these crowned roses, little hurts
clutched close to wired hearts

THE GREENFINCH ALSO DIES

BY MARK PENNINGTON

FICTION

It was a remarkable face, full of peeling flesh, purple veins and burst blood vessels, with lines that contoured the landscape like museum maps of old countries gone off to war. It bulged in places and sagged in others. Hair was always trying to spurt through, but it looked like another scar splashed upon skin. Just as remarkable was the walk. Lopsided, with the left leg dragging along like an anchor carving up the ground. The way a knife might cut into the bodywork of a car. What surprised Martha when he spoke for the first time, was not his choice of words, but the soft landing they made arriving at her ears.

"I am not special," he said. "I'm just a normal man."

"A man who pulls a drowning child out of the river," Martha said. She checks back through her notes. "You said to me on the phone that your mother left you at the Crestwood Convent not long after birth."

"That's what they tell me."

"What was it like growing up?"

"Quiet. I prayed a lot."

"Did you pray to find your mother?"

"No."

"Do you ever wish to meet her?"

"Not especially," he said. "She left me, so I left her."

"It must have been hard?"

"Do you want more tea?" He asked. "I'm making some for myself."

"Sure."

Martha watched him limp into the open kitchen, sunglow pouring in through the skylight, colouring the face a dusty yellow. He moved slowly, checking doors along the way, and finding the one next to the boiler unlocked. He picked up a key from the empty fruit bowl on the counter and slid it inside, turn it and pulling on the handle to make sure it was locked tight. The smile he gave her then, seemed ripped open his mouth. Saliva pooled in the corners and she tried not to be repulsed.

"I want to ask you something," she said.

"I presumed that was the point of all this," he said. "To write your story." He lingered in the kitchen, while the kettle hummed like static, his weight all on the right side of his body. "Isn't that what your editor demands?" he asked.

"Did you have a moment when you stopped to think about jumping in the water?" Martha asked.

"Did you stop to think when you knocked on my door?" he replied.

"I'm just doing my job, Edmund. It's a little different for me."

Martha held his gaze, and watched the kettle as vapour started to dance from the spout.

"But you must have thought twice about entering?" Edmund asked.

She shook her head.

He poured the water into two cups, leaning back away from the jet of steam.

Martha noticed him keeping a safe distance from the thick mist. "Does it hurt your face?"

"It can cause problems later on," he said.

"How so, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Too much heat can cause painful pimples," he said. "I try to steer clear of steam where I can. He stirred the tea and carried the cups back into the living room, tea dripping slightly onto the hard wood floor. Martha rose to assist. "I can do it," he said, placing the cups on the table. "But thank you."

Martha fumbled and apology but Edmund waved it away like he was palatially swatting a mayfly through the steaming air.

"The thing about bravery is," he said. "It's not about an absence of fear, but a triumph in spite of it. It's a conscious choice, but it is harder to choose the coward's way through," he said.

"I have a gift for you, Edmund," Martha said, reaching into her shoulder bag and pulling out the hardcover of *Robinson Crusoe*. "The girl's mother wanted you to have this. She knows she could never repay you, but she felt she had to give you something that was personal to her. Apparently, this book got her through some hard times. There's an inscription on the inside cover."

Edmund opened the book like a starved man being presented with Cornish King Crab. He read silently to himself.

"She calls you her hero," Martha said, after he closed the book.

"It isn't any different to what you are doing," he said. "I had to jump in to the water; it was something I had to do." He picked up his mug of tea, blew on it and then gulped down a mouthful.

"If you say so," Martha said. Edmund smiled again and this time she made a concerted effort to smile back.

"I've heard a lot of rumours over the years," she said. "About this place."

"About me?"

"About what they *think* you are, not what they *know*."

A charm of greenfinches wheezed outside the window, wind rattled against the door, and Martha was suddenly aware of the isolation in which Edmund lived on this lost piece of desolate, still farmland.

"There are stories," he said. "And then there are other stories; it is up to an individual what they choose to believe."

"Does it bother you much?"

"People make assumptions on how a person looks all the time," he said. "Why should they be any different in deciding how to treat me?"

"But now you're the hero," she said. "Have you ventured outside in the time since the rescue?" Martha could see Edmund physically recoil at the idea. *Maybe he has just endured too much*, she thought.

"Are you finished with your questions?" Edmund asked.

"If you don't mind," she said. "I still have a couple to get through."

He smiled again, but it betrayed the swollen sadness of his cognac-coloured eyes.

"I know you say you don't want to reconnect with the woman who brought you into this world, but if there is anything you would like to say to her—now is your chance

"My chance?"

"What would you want her to know if she reads this?"

"If she reads this," he said. "Then I want her to know that she did the right thing thirty years ago. A mother's love I may not know or understand, but to be thought of as someone who's kind is the ultimate revenge," he paused. "No, not revenge," he said. "Don't write that, but maybe to be worthy is all I mean."

"Worthy of love?"

"Just worthy," he said.

Edmund gathered up the two empty mugs from the slightly warped table, which had a honeyed patina from decades of careful polishing and glaring sunlight. Martha stood, packed up her notebook into her shoulder bag and assisted Edmund to the kitchen, taking his arm within hers. This time he didn't seem to mind her fussing over him, and even seemed a little grateful a morning of dissection. Having to unravel the parts of him that he used to hide, was better than a morning of ridicule.

The old house creaked as they moved and Edmund started up the steps to the bathroom, his limp making uneven sounds along the wood. Martha waited on the back porch, looking up into the heavily streaked windows above. Below her knees was another window, the inside of its thick glass covered in newspaper. She bent to look closer and saw that it was yesterday's news. She recalled Edmund locking a door and smiling grotesquely. Keeping her away from the kitchen, away from the basement. She pressed her nose to the pane, and through a small tear she thought she saw a shadow, a subtle movement in the dark.

Leaned backward and looking up, she saw the bathroom light flicker to life. She opened the back door, freezing as it squeaked on its rusty hinges. Breath escaped her throat. She went and retrieved the key from where it was nestled in the fruit bowl. With her hand shaking she unlocked and opened, and stared down into the cold dark stairwell.

"Hello," she whispered, switching on her flash. She moved downwards, the air growing colder the further down she went. "Is anyone down here?" She shot a look back to the open door, longing to be on the other side again but she moved toward the

other door at the bottom instead. She didn't know why. Maybe it was just fear, or a feeling of some kind of change. As if this life of hers would disappear. As if there were a new world beyond. It was unlocked.

She knocked and pushed it open.

There was a muffled scream and Martha found herself standing in the dank foulness under a dripping pipe, staring at a naked woman wearing nothing with only a dirty rag in her mouth. Wrinkles etched her skin; her flesh punctured with the outline of a hungry skeleton.

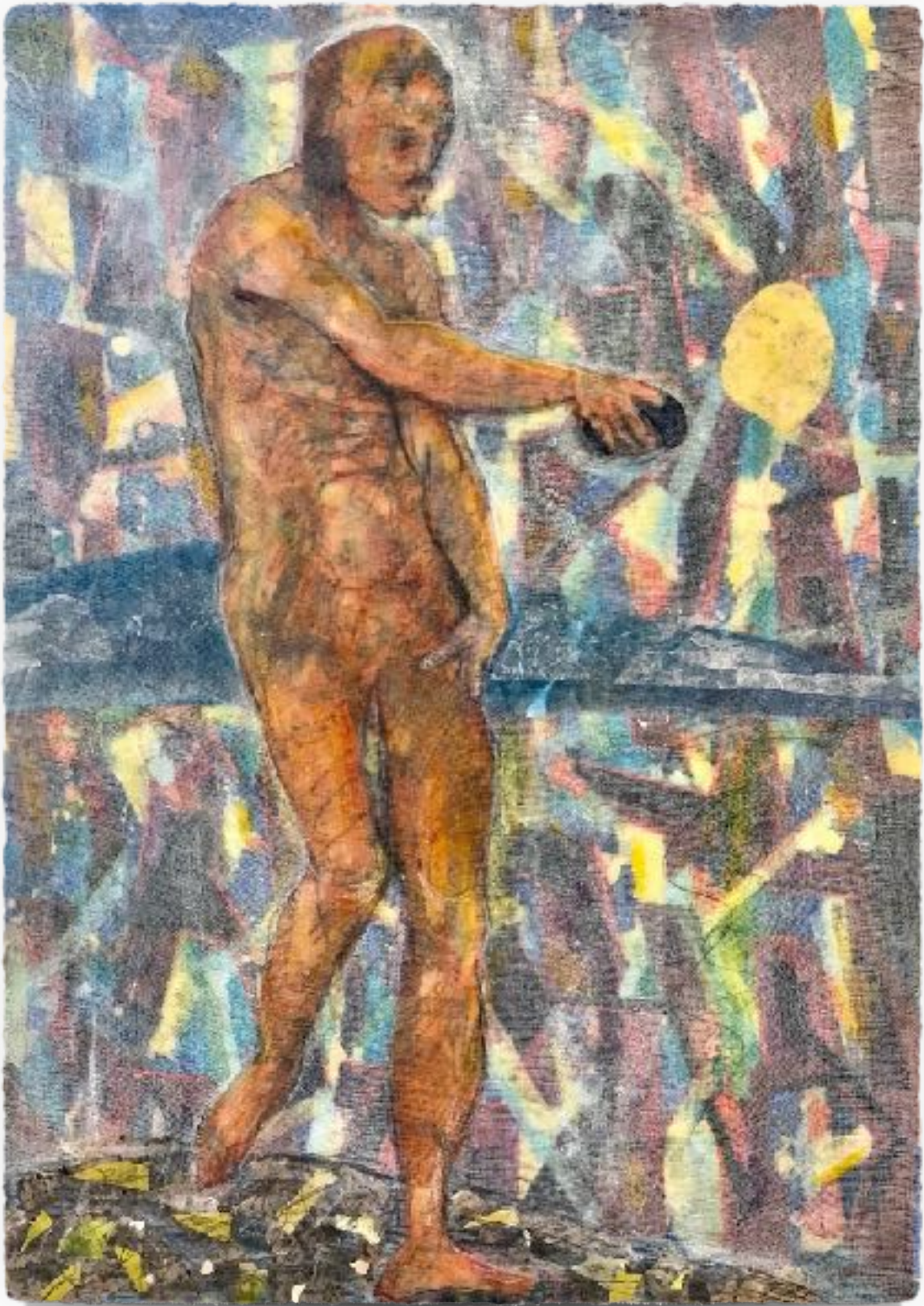
The woman's attempts at screaming through the rag would not stop. Her eyes bulged from their sockets, wide and terrified. Martha tried to get her to be quiet, holding the rag with her palm and stuffing it down her throat. She tried to untie the woman's wrists, all the while she was furiously shaking her head, still trying to scream in a hoarse wail that pierced the hollow chamber.

Then it all went black.

When Martha woke, her wrists were sore, and her head was throbbing. There was a splatter of blood across her breasts. There was music. The sound of human whistling. She couldn't move. Then the whistling stopped.

"Say hi to mother," Edmund said.

She watched him limp up the stairs into the dark, each step and echo of another year lost. Then the door shut and the two women were once again in complete darkness. Martha couldn't be sure, but she thought she could see Edmund sitting in the dark at the top of the stairs, smiling and finding herself repulsed. Then the other woman started screaming, but this time Martha joined her.



STONE FREE
BY GJ GILLESPIE
ART

WATERCOLOR, ACRYLIC, AND PENCIL ON FOUND PAPER, TISSUE, CHEESECLOTH | 24" 17" | 2026

HOW THE JHERI CURL MADE IT TO TROUBADOUR, MISSISSIPPI

BY NIA CRAWFORD

FICTION

In 1980, Troubadour, Mississippi was your basic Southern town with one post office, one library, and five traffic lights. Main Street had Davie's Sweet Kitchen, Lola Scoops, and Reuben's sandwich shop—the teen hangout spots when parents wouldn't drive their kids to the roller-skating rink two towns over. While Troubadour had several barber shops and beauty salons, only one salon did black hair, and that one, was Ms. Mattie's.

Everybody knew Ms. Mattie for one reason—she had a lot to say. Clients sat in the rubber cushioned chairs when she flashed her side gold tooth and nodded towards the shears, signaling for someone to pass them. If she didn't nod, she'd say, "Lord, please let somebody pass me them shears." The shears became her mic. She held them in front of her chest before saying something like, "Lord, please bless my tongue today and don't let me mention that Sister Carlene Brown's daughter stole some earrings from the Five and Dime." Sometimes the prayer and gossip got mixed all up together. It didn't matter because, when Ms. Mattie spoke, folks listened.

When women got their hair washed, they could relax in a cushioned chair and close their eyes or look up at the water stains on the ceiling. Ms. Mattie's shop wasn't but a three-chair salon with two sinks. The little waiting area held a black and white television sprouting long antenna ears, with the television staying on channel 9, so Ms. Mattie could watch *General Hospital*. She had a lot to say about Luke and Laura's on-again off-again relationship, and she said it on the ugly avocado green vinyl tiles that covered the floors, three of which were missing in the center of the room. She left that space bare and considered it a mini platform for delivering her *General Hospital* rants and her vilest gossip. It was on this clump of adhesive that she announced that Maurice Givens's grandfather was also his father. That Amelia Johnson was about to give birth to a set of twins whose father was seventeen-year-old Bobby Evans, not her thirty-year-old husband. She stood erect on that spot like she was Abraham Lincoln sitting high in that big chair on that famous Washington monument.

The customers listened to the middle-aged hair stylist, even when she performed her weakest diatribes. They defended Ms. Mattie when outsiders who got their press-and-curls from a local kitchen shop criticized Ms. Mattie's slippery hand or loose tongue. They were faithful patrons until early 1982, when another salon opened across town that specialized in Black hair.

That new shop belonged to Sissy, a scant five-foot, well-coifed recent grad of the county-run cosmetology school. Every day, she wore black stirrup pants that hugged her bottom and a black Tee from some signature "I love" series. At least once a week, she wore an "I love New York" Tee with the heart symbol instead of the word "love" at

and a “Virginia is for Lovers” tee twice a week. When asked about the shirts, Sissy was quick to tell her clients she got them when she visited her sister in Washington, DC. Some people remembered when her sister won a scholarship to Howard University in 1970. Back then, such things were reported in the local black paper, *The Troubadour Gazette*.

Sissy’s Hair Experience opened in January 1982, not long after the launch of MTV. The young cable tv station hadn’t made its way to Troubadour yet, but Sissy overloaded on it when she visited her sister. She was so inspired by the hair fashions that, after graduating from cosmetology school, she knew she had to open her own Troubadour salon. And that she did, but while it was much farther than a stone’s throw from Ms. Mattie’s institution, it wasn’t nearly far enough.

Two months after Sissy opened, Ms. Mattie unleashed a ruthless campaign to molly wop her business. The older hairdresser’s stories about “that salon across town” were told with such conviction that her clients listened intently. The icing on the cake were ruses Ms. Mattie’s planted to form doubts in her clients’ heads. The most memorable ones taking place on Friday nights and Saturday afternoons, the salon’s busiest times.

One chilly Saturday afternoon, Ms. Mattie opened an official looking envelop that announced that state inspectors would be visiting the area’s licensed salons. Out loud, she sighed a brief “Lord have mercy” and wondered why the state would visit beauty salons all of a sudden. Grabbing her shears and moving toward the adhesive clump in the middle of the floor, she explained that she had been in business for twenty years and not one visit from the state. So why now? Then she read a section that listed the time and date of each visit, emphasizing that Sissy’s salon was not on the list. Wondering aloud—because Ms. Mattie doesn’t do anything quietly—she asked how a “licensed” salon could be excluded from the inspections.

Her campaign of sabotage went on for weeks, and the gossip about that new shop across town continued to spread. It wasn’t until April 1982, three months after Sissy opened her doors, that she decided to trek on over to Ms. Mattie’s shop. The chimes signaled someone’s arrival, and Ms. Mattie glanced towards the door to greet her noon appointment. But she was instead faced with a five-foot-two little lady—but five-five in heels—dressed in all black. Mid-rumor, Ms. Mattie stopped talking, as Sissy nodded to everyone in the shop and marched right to the middle of the vinyl floor. She stood in the place where the three 4 x 4 tiles were missing, her feet planted on the cement floor between clusters of dried-up glue. With all the southern charm she could muster, she bent her head, held her eyes low, and said, “Ms. Mattie, it’s about time I came to see you. I’m here to let you and your clients know about an opportunity that will benefit us all: the first ever Troubadour Hair Show. All licensed hair stylist can enter to compete, and everyone will go home with a prize. We need at least two stylists to sign up; I’ve already given my word, and I want to know if you, or your other two stylists, are interested.”

Everyone stared at Ms. Mattie who gripped the straightening comb so tightly they could see the white of her knuckles. She nodded towards Sissy and did not begin with the mock prayer or the “Let me tell you. . .” introduction that preceded all her gossip. She simply flashed that gold tooth and said, “Tell me more about it.”

Sissy explained that each contestant was responsible for showcasing five hair styles and they would be judged on originality, creativity, and precision. She also said the hairstyles wouldn’t be limited to contemporary styles, but anything their creative minds conjured up. It was a chance to show that they knew hair care and artistry.

Ms. Mattie’s noticed her clients hanging on to Sissy’s words. They wanted to ask their own questions, but knew they did not have the floor. Sissy wasn’t moving from the mini platform of dried up glue until she finished, and she did not leave until she produced a large, brown envelope and extended it to Ms. Mattie. “Here are all the instructions. Are you interested?”

Ms. Mattie stared at the envelope and then accepted it. “Sure, I will read through it and let you know in two days.” That was two months before the first ever Troubadour Hair Show.

For weeks leading up to that Fall day, women, men, and children talked about the hair show. They wondered if it would reproduce the fashions on popular shows like *Solid Gold* and *Dance Fever*. Maybe the stylists would replicate the hair styles on their favorite fashion barometer: *Soul Train*. They really didn’t know what to expect, but were excited to find out. They believed the big city was coming to Troubadour, and it would finally put them on the map.

All of the hype that went into promoting Troubadour’s first hair competition paid off. It was a memorable day for several reasons. First, the organizers—who by the way, were Ms. Mattie and Sissy, but mostly Sissy—agreed on a late fall day so that high humidity and temperatures would not ruin hair styles. To their credit, the sun warmed the town to a comfortable 60 degrees and ousted any clouds. Second, the venue, which was the basement of First Baptist Church of Troubadour, was transformed into a real entertainment hub. Workers and volunteers swarmed about putting last minute touches on the runway, performing sound checks, and running hair supplies back and forth. In the back, someone set up a tripod to record the show; maybe the recording would win a place in the town’s archives in the basement of the library. The volunteers moved all 150 seats into a perfect “U” around the runway. Sound engineers who kept saying “mic check” made sure the crowd heard crisp sound through the speakers. The town was certain it came to watch a New York Fashion Week show.

By 2:45, the room began to fill up, and everyone was still moving around. The starting time, 3:00, came and went and at 3:20 when there was standing room only, someone with a Northern accent came on the mic to thank everyone for showing up. He thanked the crowd for its patience and said the show would begin in ten minutes.

No one could call the Northerner a liar, because in ten minutes Olivia Newton John's "Let's Get Physical" blasted through the speakers and Ms. Mattie's first model began strutting on the runway. Wearing a nylon black track suit you could hear swishing to the beat of the music, if you were sitting close enough to the stage. Her on-the-go, shoulder-length, frizzy hair was held in place by a black scrunchie. She hopped around on stage showing that no matter how she moved, only the ponytail extension moved. Her high top, gummy-soled Reebok sneakers led her to the tip of the stage where she spun around to the beat of the music, before then retreating to the back of the stage. There, she remained still, waiting for the three other models to walk. The music changed and a second model emerged wearing an evening gown, and atop her head was a sleek set of Josephine Baker pin curls, and they did not move an inch as she slowly sashayed around the stage.

The crowd was piqued, on the edge of their seats, but they retreated to the backs of their seats when they saw the next model emerge with a fresh press and curl that dipped past her shoulders. She swung her head this way and that so everyone could see the body and volume. The audience showed its disapproval by the number of shook heads and rolled eyes. *Boring*. But they had high hopes for Ms. Mattie's final model who emerged with a perfectly coiffed French roll. The sides were slick like a newly tarred road. The baby hair and side points proved that finishes are just as important as the core style. *Perfection*. Spectators oohed, acknowledging the complex elegant style, but again quickly retreated when they noticed her short orange cocktail dress, the kind girls wear to the junior prom. After all of the models left the stage, everyone applauded and cheered on Ms. Mattie who came out to take a bow.

The next thing the crowd heard was some spaceship music. It had a thumping baseline and a gravelly voice that, through a synthesizer, instructed everyone to "Rock to the planet rock; don't stop." A model wearing a blue Mohawk, a silver pleather motorcycle jacket over a royal blue catsuit, strutted onto the stage. She took about five steps to the tip of the stage, never moving a muscle in her face, and spun around before marching to the back of the stage to take her place. The second model to emerge from the curtain, was either a very light skinned black woman or a white one, sporting braids, with intricate crisscrosses and hearts all over head, that must have taken hours to create. The crowd lost it. Everyone was on their feet, leaning in to get a closer look. Next was a duo: two black girls of different hues. The brown skinned girl's hair was totally shaved on one side, but shoulder length on the other. While the light skinned girl sported a bob with precisely cut bangs in the front, and a hairline shaved into a "V" in the back. The female rap duo *Salt-N-Pepa* would popularize years later.

No one was prepared for the last model. She flaunted the sleekest, glossiest, juiciest curly hair anyone ever saw. Until then, Troubadour had seen a few curly styles, but none beat this curly-textured, glossy afro—shorter in the front and on the sides, and longer in the back—creating a perfect glint of curls all over the head. Obviously wash

and wear hair. Mouths hung open. People remembered that they had tried to use the smallest marcel curlers to set their hair, even tried using small rods, but nothing gave them the curl pattern of the wash and wear style they saw the model wearing. Then to top it off, two muscle-clad men wearing Lee jeans, red pleather jackets, and the same curly hair style held posters of Michael Jackson high above their heads, while walking around the stage. Michael Jackson's hair was that perfectly coifed wash and wear curl style, which Troubadour learned, was the Jheri curl. The crowd was on its feet, cheering and pointing, nudging each other.

No one had to wait for the judges' score to know who won the competition. Even a seven year old could predict what would happen later. Ms. Mattie's regular customers continued to make appointments—for a while, before their curiosity got the best of them. First, they missed one appointment with Ms. Mattie, then they missed the rescheduled one. Eventually, they just didn't bother to reschedule at all. Sure, they loathed running into her at the new Piggly Wiggly, but at least they did so sporting the new wet and wavy, easy breezy, Jheri curl. By Christmas Ms. Mattie, down to a one-chair-shop, wasn't coming out so much anymore and was down to a one-chair shop, and by early 1983, had gone into retirement. Somewhere along the line, she'd figured it was too difficult to change, even though Troubadour had been hungry for it. She knew she'd sold more gossip than she had hairstyles, and that Troubadour now preferred the intricate styles Sissy produced over good gossip, no matter how new or juicy it was.

The Saturday before she closed her doors, she grabbed her shears, moved to the glue cluster pedestal in the center of the floor, and announced it. Her last words on top of that cluster of adhesives in the middle of the floor that served as a fake pedestal were, "Lord, I just pray that you continue to bless your faithful servant. And please keep me safe and protect me from all the tribulation that comes my way. Most important, hold my hand and my mouth—let it say only kind things about that thieving, raunchy half-hairdresser across town who is still trying to acquire a State license. Maybe I'll give her mine!"

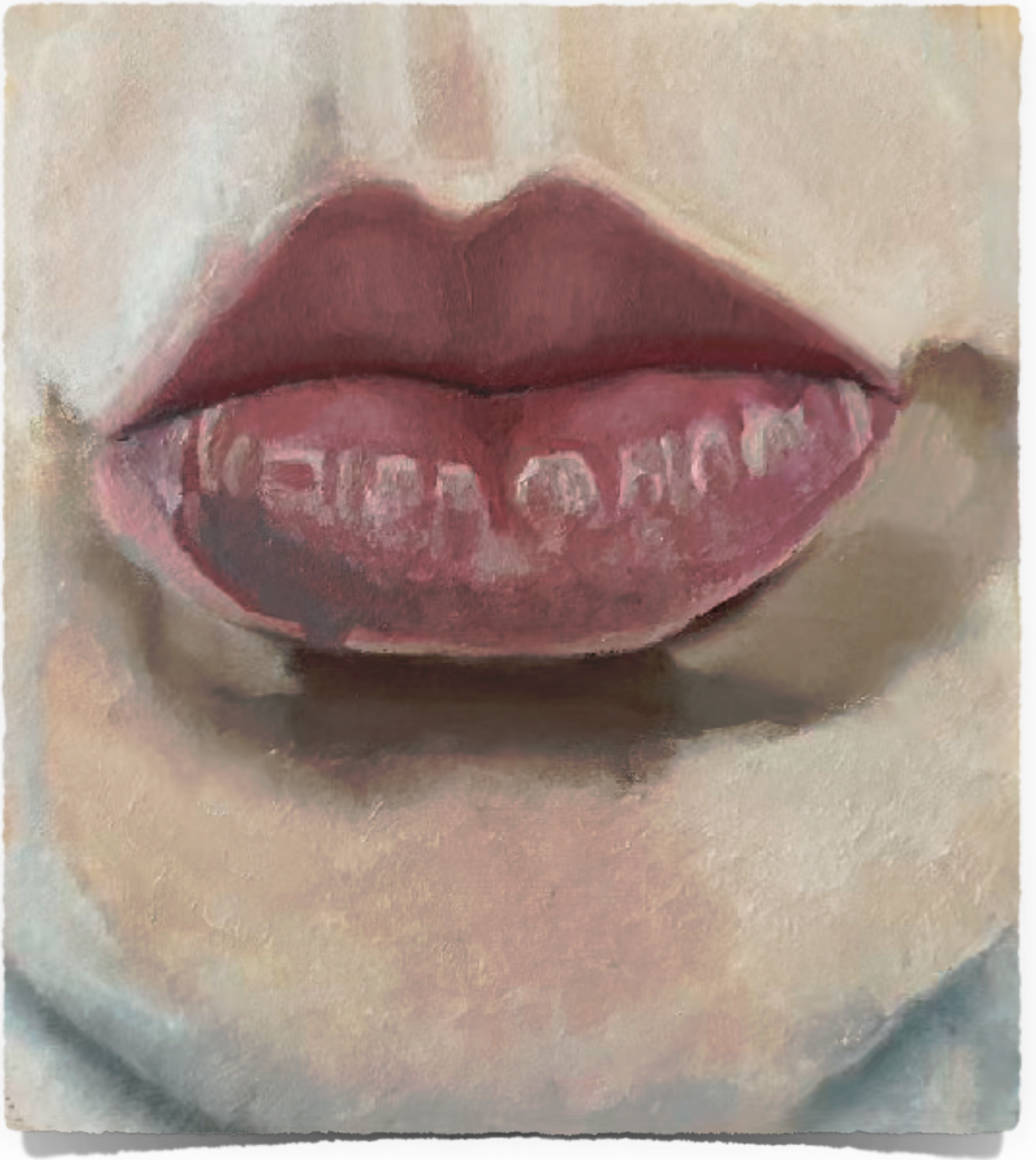
TUMBLEWEED
BY STEVEN O. YOUNG JR.
POETRY

i want to call
 my voice tumbleweed

spindly little wisp
 scratching for a hold
within the wind
 's irresistible lips

but i've grown up
 knowing only trash
winglessly kicking
 up their own clouds

relics of every sin
 adrift scrapped skins
sometimes lucky
 enough to rapture
light in mystic glints



PURE

BY DENVER BOXLEITNER

ART

OIL PAINT ON PAPER | 8" x 9"

ARCS IN MOTION
BY TAMARA-LEE BRERETON-KARABETSOS
FICTION

The Philadelphia Airport moved around Isla Sinclair like a calibrated system of sliding vectors. She stayed at its edge, her green wool scarf a small resistance against the flow of announcements and bodies. She read the terminal as geometry: distance, density, direction—the way she now read the world, not as narrative, but as motion under constraint.

She had once moved with certainty, before the fracture. Now she lived in the interval between acceleration and free fall, where outcomes existed but refused resolution.

“Champagne, Ms. Sinclair?”

Isla nodded. The bubbles in the flute rose in regulated spirals, indifferent to attention. She drank once, then set it down as if interrupting a process might alter its direction.

Scotland, or something named like it, waited at the far end of the route.

She had told Thomas the night before.

“They want me to go to Scotland.”

He did not look up immediately. His hands stayed in the clay; pressure translating into form. He always wore a wet tea towel over one shoulder and an apron streaked with dried clay. When he leaned toward her, his dark curly hair slipped across one eye before he pushed it back with the back of his wrist.

“That makes sense,” he said. “It’s part of your family story.”

Family story. The phrase held too much continuity for something she could no longer verify. Isla watched his hands instead of his face. Thomas trusted contact over prediction. He did not correct mid-process. He allowed collapse to register as information.

The clay failed without warning. Not dramatic—internal, quiet, absolute. Structure withdrawing its agreement. He exhaled a short laugh, too fast to mean anything.

Isla felt the shift in her chest. Gravity did not negotiate. It only redistributed force.

At the salon, she worked in ratios.

One-to-one. One-to-one-and-a-half. Adjustments small enough to erase visible instability.

Clients trusted her with their appearance. She treated it as calibration—temporary coherence held in place by attention.

By late afternoon, errors arrived as drift. A missed strand. A tone slightly off register. Nothing large enough to name, but enough to accumulate.

Between appointments, she checked her phone.

There was no message.

She could not decide whether the silence belonged to him or to her.

On Sundays she called her parents. This became a weekly stabilization.

“Have you thought more about the workshop?” her mother asked.

“Yes,” Isla said. “I’m going.”

A pause. Familiar background movement.

Their story had been repeated into structure: two people, clay, resistance, endurance. Fifty years without visible fracture.

Isla had once taken that as proof. Now it felt incomplete, as though whole sections had gone missing between versions.

Her mother shifted in the background, adjusting her father’s weight without ceremony. The motion was practiced enough to disappear.

Isla noticed anyway.

“Do you worry,” she asked Thomas later. “That things are supposed to last?”

He wiped clay from his fingers.

“Nothing lasts,” he said. “That doesn’t mean it fails.”

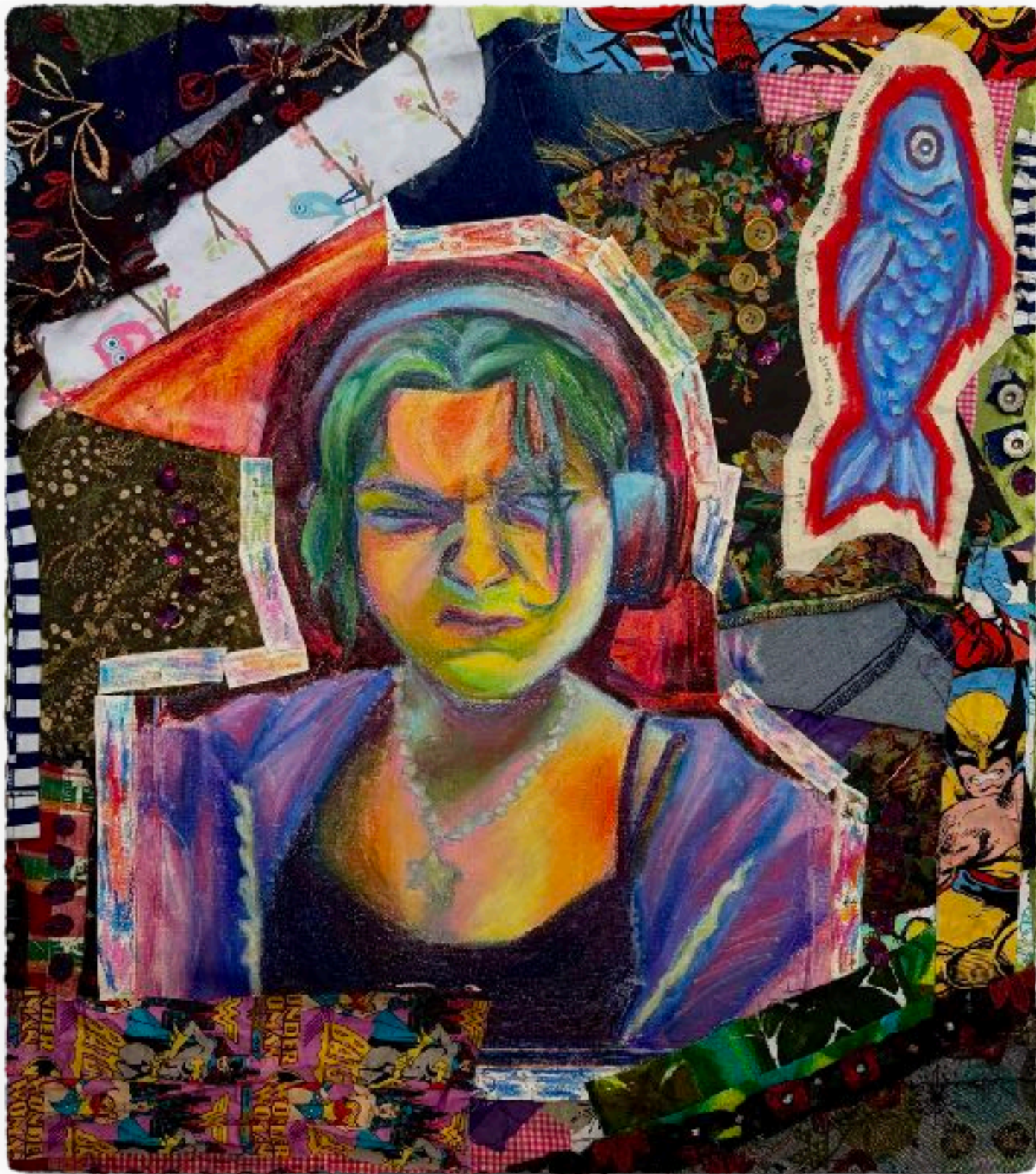
The sentence unsettled her more than she expected.

Permanence had entered her thinking so gradually she had mistaken it for fact.

The plane lifted as the ground reorganized itself into distance. Isla opened her carry-on and took out the notebook. Ratios filled the pages—systems of control written carefully enough to resemble care.

She looked at them longer than necessary.
Then she tore out the page.
The paper resisted before separating unevenly.
She left it that way.

At altitude, the aircraft stabilized.
Vibration settled into continuity.
Isla adjusted her posture, aligning with forces she did not choose. She waited for panic to arrive in its familiar form.
It did not.
Instead, there was only the low mechanical hum of the cabin and the strange relief of not having to correct anything.
Her hands stayed open.
Below, cloud systems shifted without reference to her.
Somewhere beyond them, Scotland continued approaching.
She remained in motion without measurement.



ME WITH FISH
BY TRINITY PELUFFO
ART
MIXED MEDIA | 25" x 27"

WOLF TALKS AT GRANITE MOUNTAIN LOOKOUT

BY GRACIE SCHWENK
NON-FICTION

Mid-August, I was sitting out on the catwalk at dusk, listening to wolf howls echo up the steep slabs of granite. Feeling a bit lonely, I cupped my hands around my mouth, opened my throat, and joined in. They quieted for a moment, but suddenly started again, getting louder and louder until they were right in my ear. I could see their yellow sturgeon-moon eyes moving through the pines at the peak's edge, just fifty feet from my tower. I froze, all those snipfed tall tales about wolves being monsters prickling around in my mind. I had never seen a wolf in the wild before, and now seven surrounded my feet. Part of me wanted to rush inside, lock the door tight, and wait for them to go, but the other part, the better part, stayed.

I stayed for the creatures who, instead of shutting me out when I spoke up, let me in, and together, our amplified song was loud enough for the entire Salmon River Mountain Range to hear.

I stayed for those who listen.

We've convened each night since.

(Berlant, wolves delisted, \$31K reward for illegally killed wolf, the Lamar Valley)



WOLF

BY TERRY BRINKMAN

ART

ACRYLIC ON RECYCLED CARDBOARD | 5" x 7"

IN HIS FINAL HOURS

BY MATTHEW LANDERS

FICTION

Joanna didn't think it would be possible but she slept the entire night, though a little uncomfortably, in the only chair in the hospice room. She had draped a blanket over herself for warmth and fallen asleep a few hours after sunset. If she'd given it serious thought, she would have brought a jacket or worn a sweater but it didn't matter now. Especially not with the midmorning sunlight coming through the window.

Joanna eased herself up in the chair, listening for any sound, any movement, as she dropped her feet into black flats on the floor. She watched the room and the bed, but very little had changed since she had arrived last night. She remembered to bring her schoolwork with her; though, whenever she opened her copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, she never managed to read the pages she looked at. She closed the book often. Trying and failing to follow St. Bernard in *Paradiso* and, eventually, relinquishing any possibility of completing the assigned work.

She thought she heard her name dry and weak from her grandfather. Joanna took the book on the floor and set it on the chair as she stood up and stepped toward the railings on the bed. What had once been a tall, sturdy man—a truck driver after the war—who moved slowly but with purpose, now confined to a bed not his own and in a body no longer his. His swagger, or limp, she didn't know which, was gone. The CCC hardened body reduced from its lanky yet toned frame to a thin and withered shell. Only months before, he was still eating eggs and bacon and drinking hot coffee for breakfast, as he had done for as many years as Joanna knew, with a pill box labeled for everyday of the week right there on the kitchen table.

"Grandpa?" she asked.

His cracked lips moved slowly and almost helplessly.

The kitchen table, and the smaller card table next to it, loomed before her as Joanna brought a cup up to his mouth. Her grandfather struggled to swallow the water as he sipped, his throat bobbing up and down, as some of the water dribbled from his bottom lip down across his chin. During family visits, as everyone sat down for lunch or dinner, she and her sisters had to sit at the card table, the *kiddie table* or the *kids table* as it was, when they were growing up. Since then, her sisters had moved further away, the card table was gone, and here she was, taller and older, tending to her grandfather just as he and her grandmother had tended to them.

Joanna put the cup back on the tray.

"Father John?" her grandfather asked.

"He came last night," she said. "Remember? He was here for nearly an hour." In the coming years, Joanna would learn her grandfather had never been Catholic, unlike her grandmother, but the priest had visited and prayed with her grandfather regardless.

She had welcomed such a visit, having become familiar with prayer through the campus ministry programs at the university and, for a moment, she had believed his condition could change. Now, she began to ask herself what good came of those prayers?

“Should...Father Henry...”

“No,” she said. “He’s long gone.” Though, Joanna wasn’t exactly sure whether or not he was dead and only had a vague sense of who he was and what he meant to her grandfather

“Where?” Her grandfather wheezed.

Joanna pulled back. Her grandfather followed her with his eyes as she leaned in again slowly.

“Margaret,” his voice cracked, his dry throat choking the words.

Joanna picked up her grandfather’s hand with its deep wrinkles and prominent veins like purple spider webs. “Do you want me to call the nurse?”

He raised his other hand up trying to turn his head, but he didn’t say anything. Joanna drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“Do you remember?” Joanna asked pausing. “Wen you used to take us to the toy store? Do you want to hear about that?” Her grandfather didn’t answer. His mouth opened like a fish breaching a pond’s surface and the chaotic ocean of his eyes roiled around his pupils under the ceiling light. “And we could pick out one toy?” She continued. “Or when you used to take us to the movies? Like that time we went to see Indiana Jone and the Last Crusade?” She smiled slightly as she worked her jaw against tears. “I started to cover my eyes at the end.” She wanted to laugh about the incident now, after all these years, at how young and scared she’d been in the darkened theater but tears started to get in the way. “What about when the Cardinals won the World Series? Do you remember that? Do you remember any of it?”

It may have only been a matter of reminding him of the most recognizable parts of his life through a word, a phrase, or even an image. Yet she never carried any pictures of her grandfather, or any of her grandparents. Any pictures she did have stayed in dusted over photo albums in a closet back home. His faint recollections—the answers to her questions, as well as those of family and friends, of work and war, and distant places—existed deep in his memory. Perhaps he did understand but just couldn’t express his familiarity.

Joanna reached for the chair, pulling it to the side of the bed, and sat down. She leaning forward onto the bed, held his hand, and cried. With his hand in her’s, she understood this gesture was futile. There was nothing she could do except hope he would rise up, shed his ailment, and return to his recliner in the main room of the house. One of the few memories that stayed with her, never to be forgotten was of her grandfather asleep and snoring in the recliner, only to awaken with “huh?” before turning on his hearing aid.

Joanna placed her other hand to his forehead and then the top of his swept, gray hair. He very slowly, tilted his head to the side, until they were looking at each other directly. Joanna noticed his eyes had not lost their sense of direction but she could see that it was neither her eyes or any other part of her face he was looking at. His maelstrom eyes seemed to focus on her red hair. She reached up to the back of her head and found the ponytail not quite as intact as before last night. She pulled on the small, elastic ring holding the ponytail in place until the curly red strands loosened and fell to her shoulders.

Her grandfather's eyes widened and appeared to be brighter. Were they brighter, or tricks of light and shadow, or her own desperate attempt to see him well again? As he reached toward her face, she caught his hand between her own, holding gently but firmly. The quivering lips of his mouth appeared to stretch into the beginning of a smile.

She didn't know precisely whether the curls or the color caused the change in him but she willingly believed her hair might be the difference between being complete strangers and having any sense of acquaintance. She liked her hair and it was a defining feature of the women in their family. Her grandmother's hair had slight waves to it, her mother had curls,, and her sisters too. She was proud of its unique red color, as well. She smiled, straightening up in the chair, and didn't say anything. She let go of his hand, pushing up on her curls to add more life and body. He continued to gaze at her curly, red hair. They stayed that way looking at each other for a few moments.

Her phone rang and she began to move away.

"Don't...Margaret..." her grandfather said, reaching out with trembling arms. He seized her just above the wrist loosely but made no attempt to pull or push her away. Joanna looked back at him briefly, and placing a hand on his momentarily, as she moved to answer the still ringing phone. He let go, releasing her to the room.

She pressed the phone to her ear.

"He's been mentioning Gram," Joanna said, looking at the wall, then the television in the corner, and then to her grandfather again. "He goes back and forth." She listened, turned away from her grandfather and then said softly, "the nurse said there's nothing they can do. He's clearly gotten worse. I've been making him as comfortable as I can.

Joanna knew those words didn't mean much; they were almost as useless as the hope she clung to that somehow her grandfather's condition would change. She wondered if he felt any comfort laying in the bed with such a failing body and an even more dwindling, waning mind. Joanna had been told he might not recognize familiar faces—that he would have what were considered *good days* and *bad days*. Though, Joanna did not think any day would be good for him.

She returned to the side of the bed and saw a tear at the corner of his eye.

"Please," her grandfather said. "When can we..."

Unsure of what he wanted, Joanna told him, "We have to wait. Edward and Bridget will be here soon."

"Edward...Bridget..." He said the names of grandchildren and in-laws as if he were saying them for the first time.

"I'll stay right here until they come," she said. "Okay?"

It still wasn't enough.

"Where would you..." her grandfather continued. "Did you get...you look..."

Joanna placed a hand over her grandfather's and squeezed very gently. "Just relax," she said turning in the chair. "Do you want me to put on the tv? I think the Cardinals might be playing. Or do you want some jazz music?"

She felt his fingers curl around her hand despite their slight trembling. "I know you're scared but it'll be all right."

"Scared..."

"I know," she said taking a deep breath and wiping away some tears, the words almost catching. "I know."

"Please...don't leave," her grandfather gasped. "Don't want to be alone... Margaret..."

Joanna lowered her head then turned away with tears covering her eyes. No matter what she said or did, none of it seemed to make a difference for her grandfather. Nothing seemed to work. What could she do anyway? His failing heart had led him to this bed, his mind suffering as well, and the doctors had done everything they could. And the pills from the kitchen? What good did they provide? She didn't know how long he'd been taking them but they did little to prevent him from being hospice bound and connected to machines, the pulse of each beeping and ticking like a clock. Her grandfather's death was only a matter of time. A slow, painful progression to the inevitable end, no longer expected to be a quiet exit from life, slipping out through the doorway, receiving deserved praise for a life well lived without any lingering questions.

She'd seen death, been in its presence, as close as possible without an immediate family member or herself succumbing to it. While she was familiar with its finality and she had listened to all the words about death when attending church, she resisted accepting it now as it loomed heavily over her grandfather. She shook her head, it should never have been this way. His tortuous decline and the eventuality of his death. Her body tensed, then trembled within at her helplessness.

She sighed heavily.

She had tried to reach him in the only way she knew - to be there for him as he had been there for her. When she had car trouble, he was ready with jumper cables, when she needed help perfecting gumbo, he was happy to oblige, and when they wanted to talk baseball, he knew the best places to go for lunch downtown like Schmidt's Deli. Her efforts to reach him were still not enough. Now, she didn't know what he wanted and it almost seemed like he didn't recognize her.

He lay there with barely moving eyes and a mouth struggling to form words.

Then, she heard her grandmother's name again, "Margaret..." just barely for a second time.

Joanna had started to think about her grandmother, who she remembered and when she did remember her, as she did now, the grandmother appeared briefly, short and welcoming, with mostly white hair, without a harsh word for anyone. She thought about how they appeared in photographs—standing in front of the home that Joanna had visited, in the backyard of another home, and on the driveway in front of an automobile. Some photographs showed them standing in snow, and another picture of her grandfather in trousers and a button up shirt next to the much shorter Margaret, wearing a loose-fitting dress. Joanna remembered how happy her grandparents looked in each one.

Joanna turned to her grandfather.

Now, he was searching for that happiness—the same happiness when he and Margaret were together, inseparable, and taking care of each other like always. He'd been searching for it this whole time, with each fractured word and shard of thought, not really begging or demanding; her grandfather was not the insistent type. How, then, would her grandfather know if he found the happiness eluding him in his final hours? Would he even know if it was happiness or something else masquerading as happiness?

Joanna considered his quiet face again.

Margaret.

He thought Joanna looked like Margaret.

Joanna never knew her grandmother had red hair. Maybe she liked to wear it long, too. She might have resembled her grandmother with her hair but she held very little resemblance in her face and the fitted shirt and blue jeans she had been wearing since yesterday. Identifying Margaret through herself might create a new connection for her and her grandfather, albeit fleeting and cursory, based entirely on a false sense of reality. And it might not.

Joanna rose up from the chair and walked around the room from one side to the other, her arms folded tightly around herself. She turned back around to view the bed and her grandfather.

His passing needed to be peaceful and now she hoped her visit would include that measure of peace. The cost was the only question. The peace brought by Margaret, the love of his life but stranger to herself—without anything she had every accomplished, knew, built upon, and created for herself? Or the peace that comes from her—Joanna tried and true—the granddaughter since she had walked through the doorway and into the room, and long before that, so he would not be alone should his life end here and now?

Joanna clenched her jaw and gnawed on her lower lip.

She watched her grandfather from across the room. A moment passed. She took a few steps in his direction and stopped halfway.

There was no indication he knew her. He knew where she was in the room but that was it. He gave her the same look he had given her from the time she arrived last night to the moment he looked at her now.

Joanna thought about him and she thought about her grandmother.

Her grandfather looked to be asking for something or someone.

She hurried to the side of the bed.

"I'm here," she surprised herself at how quickly the words came out of her mouth.

"I'm here."

Joanna wiped the tears from her cheeks and took a deep breath, "It's me."

LOST ON A DESERT ROAD

BY STEVE GERSON

FICTION

Thirty-five miles southwest of Tucson, down a gravel road bordered by saguaro thorns and Gila monsters flicking their tongues against the heat, sat the Wonderland Bar and Grill, sinking into the desert sand like a casket. The bar was surrounded by weeds shooting out of the desert dirt like broken beer bottles. Its neon sign lit up every third bulb, flashing semaphores of distress.

Marie drove her 18-year-old Ford Desperado, caked in red dirt, the rear bumper hanging on by baling wire, the passenger-side window, a duct-taped grocery store plastic bag. The truck's headlights shone pale on the uneven road, barely lighting a dim path. She was speeding, kicking up plumes of dust that followed in her rearview mirror like bad debt. She was late for her session as the girl backup singer in her deadbeat boyfriend's CW band, the *Armadillo Bandits*.

When she got to the Wonderland, she skidded to a stop, shooting pebbles in her wake, jumped out of the truck's cab, straightened her mussed henna hair, flung on her Sears-bought cowboy hat—the one she'd hot glued spangles to—and ran into the bar.

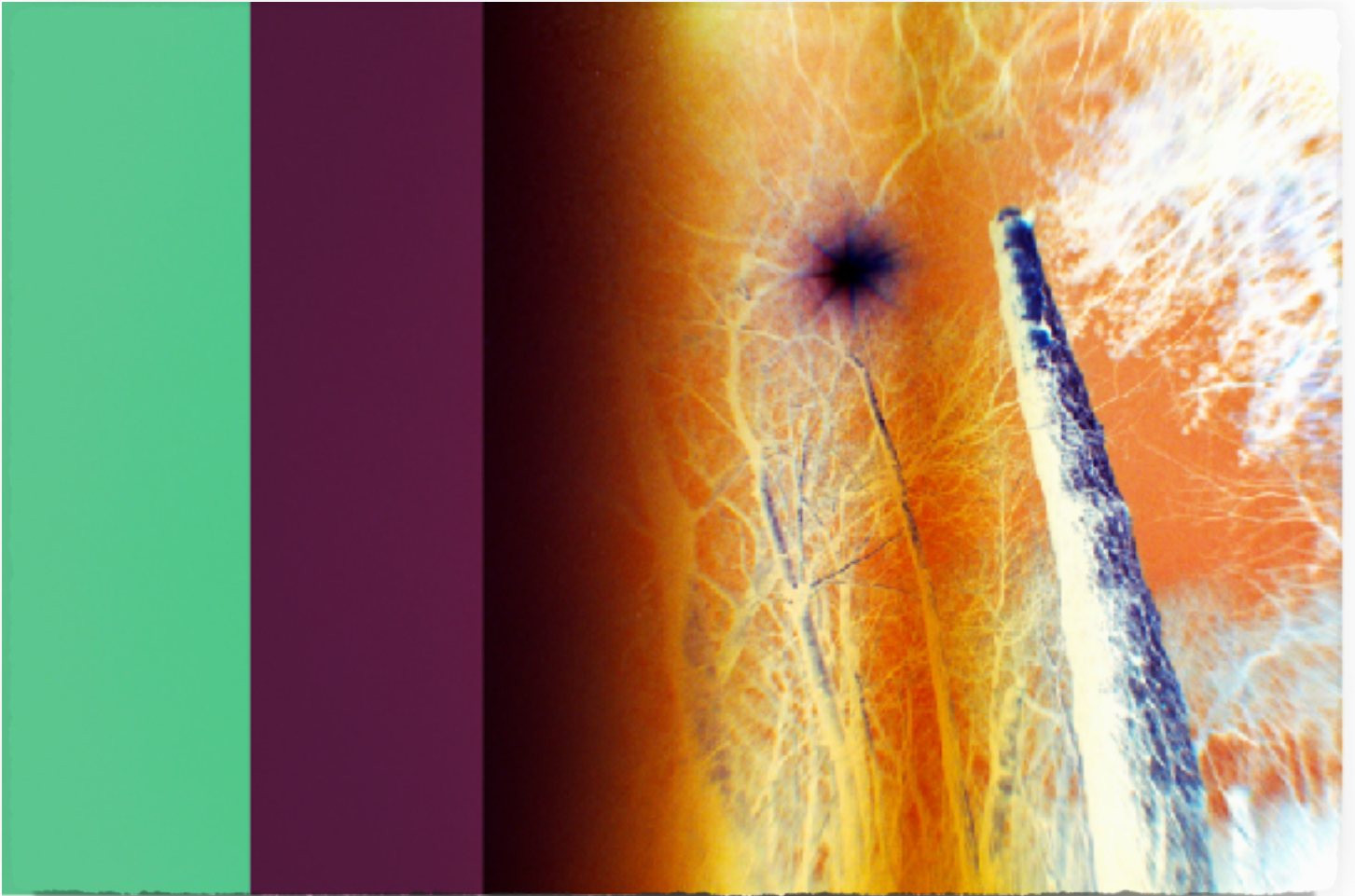
Bob saw her coming. "Get your ass up here, Marie," he shouted. "We done started the set. I told you I wouldn't abide no more lateness from you, right?" He spat a wad of tobacco juice into a paper cup, his eyes burrowing into her as venomously as a rattler whose nest had been disturbed.

"Sorry, Bob," she sputtered, and took her place behind the microphone.

"We got customers to serve, you know," he said. "This here is a job, so act professionally for a change, damn it."

Marie looked out from the stage at the bar's near empty room. One old drunk, buzzed on cheap beer, with his head on a table, eyes closed, and spit pooling by his blue lips. A couple off to the side were engaged in PDA fondling, too engrossed in their wandering hands to listen to music. That left three paying customers, their cover charges equaling just six bucks, the night's take for a four-piece band, and Marie only got ten percent.

Still, she had dreams. She thought maybe, just maybe, this backup-singer gig could eventually lead somewhere, anywhere away from Bob, away from Tucson, away from a bar that smelled like puke and despair. But her dreams were like stowaway baggage in the back of a truck whose odometer read 250,000 miles, and driving lost on a desert road.



TRANSITORY SPACE #2

BY LEAH OATES

PHOTOGRAPHY

PROSPECT PARK, BROOKLYN NYC #66 | COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY | 2021-2022

EDITOR BIOS

SARAH TENNEY



Sarah Tenney is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Southern New Hampshire University. She previously received her Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and English from SNHU and is a member of Sigma Tau Delta, the International English Honor Society. She writes primarily adult science fiction, fantasy, and literary fiction, but has written and edited numerous children's books, including a children's book about an Olympic bronze medalist which was featured on the front page of the Chicago Tribune, and Mira's Nutcracker Dream which is featured and distributed by the Washington Ballet. Sarah

has a passion for storytelling and literacy. She has edited over 100 children's titles used for literacy education and is excited to curate for Assignment Magazine.

ALLAN ROUNDS



Allan has Associates degrees in Networking and Security & Forensics, a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing from SNHU, and is currently a resident in the Mountainview MFA program. He's been writing for over thirty years, and has previously spent fifteen of them writing, editing, and updating technical documents for various cybersecurity firms and healthcare organizations. Under his pseudonym, Alexx T. Holden, he writes speculative fiction focusing on humanistic and environmental issues, as well as the effects of complex power dynamics on the oppressed. He lives in Texas, has been an active member of the Author's Guild

since 2023, and aspires to retire to the quiet solitude of goat farming.

UNDERGRAD INTERNS

CHLOE BATTS

MICAH ORTEGA

AUTHOR & ARTIST BIOS

Erica Anderson is an Iranian American writer exploring grief, identity, family, and survival. A former middle-school teacher of nineteen years, she now writes part-time. Her work appears in *The Argyle*, with essays forthcoming in *Blood & Honey* and *Sheepshead Review*. She lives in Texas with her husband and two dogs.

Denver Boxleitner is a university fine arts student whose drawings, paintings, poems and short stories have been published.

Tamara-Lee Brereton-Karabetzos is a science and maths literacy writer from Athens, Greece. She has a background in medical and health science. She has been published both in print and online journals.

Terry Brinkman has been painting for over 50 years. Terry has had art in shows in Salt Lake City, and Odgen Utah. Art Published at *Winamop*, *Healing Muse*, *The Forth River*, *Penumbra*, *Wingless Dreamer*, *Inlandia*, *Barzakh*, *Stone Coast Review*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, *Emerson Review*, *Argyle*, *Plants and Poetry Journal*, and more.

Nia Crawford is a writing instructor who writes from Baltimore and Philadelphia. She's taught writing to college students for over 20 years. She's been published in *101 Words*, *Ink Nest Poetry*, *Killen's Review of Arts in Letters*, *Necessary Fiction*, and *B.O.D.Y.* Nia is also a real estate agent, and she loves volunteer work and community-based organizations.

Aryn N. Dotson is the fiction editor of *Fair Copy Literary Magazine* and an MFA student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Born and raised in Eastern Kentucky, her work explores topics such as Appalachian culture, neurodiversity, and the boundaries between regional and personal identity. She holds a BA from Murray State University and has previously worked for the University Press of Kentucky.

Jonathan Fletcher holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Columbia University School of the Arts. His work has been featured in numerous literary journals and magazines, and he has won or placed in various literary contests. *A Pushcart Prize*, *Best of the Net*, and *Best Micro-fiction* nominee, he won Northwestern University Press's Drinking Gourd Chapbook Poetry Prize contest in 2023, for which he will have his debut chapbook, *This is My Body*, published in 2025. Currently, he serves as a Zoeglossia Fellow and lives in San Antonio, Texas.

Audrey Forgues is an English & Creative Writing major at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. She enjoys to read, write and connect with various forms of art. Instagram: @arroganteasouhait

John Frame was brought up in Wick, Scotland. After earning an M.A. and Ph.D. in history from Aberdeen University, he emigrated to the USA, and worked as a teacher in NYC and Columbus, Ohio. Since 2018, he and his wife Rama have lived and worked in China and Senegal. You can find his writing here: jrframe.wixsite.com/website and bsky.app/profile/johnframe.bsky.social

Antonio Garcia III is a Las Vegas-based fine artist whose work developed outside formal art school training. Shaped by early efforts to access creative opportunities. His early use of found materials for canvas, including plywood and sheet metal, has influenced an ethos dominant in his work; what becomes of the remnants that once made us. Today, Antonio exhibits in group shows across Los Angeles and believes art can inspire, change lives, and communities. His work explores what survives when things fall apart. Working with distorted, incomplete, yet resilient salvaged materials, he hopes for a duality that infers what a fragmented subject can ultimately become.

Christopher Garland was born and raised in New Zealand, and now teaches in the Department of English at Georgia Southern University. His essays have appeared in *Inside Higher Ed*, the *Journal of Social and Economic Studies*, *NYLON*, the *New Zealand Herald*, and *New Centennial Review*.

Steve Gerson's chapbooks include *Once Planed Straight*, *Viral*, *And the Land Dreams Darkly*, *The 13th Floor: Step into Anxiety*, *What Is Isn't*, *There is a Season*, *Have Not*, *Who Am I Today*, and *Dystopia*.

GJ Gillespie is a mixed-media collage artist living in a 1928 Tudor Revival farmhouse on Whidbey Island, Washington. Inspired by the Northwest Mystics and mid-century abstract expressionism, his layered collages transform found materials — tissue, newsprint, grocery ads, and paint — into works that explore existential meaning through cultural iconography. His work has appeared in more than 210 publications, 70+ exhibitions, and earned 23 awards. Upcoming shows include a four-month solo exhibition under the City of Burien WA Gallery Program (June–September 2026) and the NWCS Spring Show at Slip Gallery, Seattle (May–June 2026). He has been accepted for residencies at the University of Washington's Whiteley Center on San Juan Island, including October 2026. He co-founded The Creativity Initiative (501c3) and runs Leda Art Supply. Website: gjgillespieartistic.com

Yogita Gupta is an emerging charcoal artist based in India. Their work explores 1900's era themes of cultural identity and displacement. Having been engaged with issues of identity, resilience, and survival, her work got Special Recognition in *14th Women Light* and *Space Time 2025*. She is currently developing a new series that investigates the concept of Urban landscape and personal symbolism.

Mark Hall lives in North Carolina. His creative nonfiction has appeared in *The Timberline Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Passengers Journal*, *Sand Hills Literary Magazine*, *Hippocampus*, *The Forth River*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and elsewhere.

Reiner Heidorn is a German painter from Weilheim near Munich and works with the subject of botany and manga-creations. In addition to extensive paintings on the subject of botany, he has also created a series of manga images over the past twelve years. The figure is always a girl in a nightgown with cat ears and a tail. She symbolizes the fragile social system that is nourished, but not sustained, by consumption and supposed growth. Although it is now generally known that the unbridled exploitation of all resources will lead to our own downfall in the long run, humanity lacks the strength to make its existence stable and beneficial for everyone through renunciation or rethinking.

Georgea Jourjouklis is a University of Toronto alumnus, a future English teacher, and a queer writer with a focus on fantasy, speculative fiction, and mental health. Her work has appeared in *Silly Goose Press*, *Horror Pop Mag*, *The Hart House Review*, *The Paper Dragon*, *Wingless Dreamer Press*, and others. Instagram: @the_writing_lotus, Website: georgeajourjouklis.wixsite.com/website

Danielle Klebes is an interdisciplinary artist whose work uses painting, sculpture, and installation to examine domestic space. She is interested in themes of instability, temporary and borrowed spaces, and the idea of belonging in contemporary America. Her work situates personal and collective experience within broader economic and political systems. She has exhibited in notable galleries and museums throughout North America, Europe, and Asia. She received her MFA in Visual Arts from Lesley University College of Art and Design in Cambridge, MA, in 2017 and currently lives and works at Wassaic Project in Wassaic, NY.

Matthew Landers is a writer from San Antonio, Texas and he has lived in Texas for most of his life. His fiction and poetry has appeared in the Pecan Grove Review and The Trinity Review. When he is not writing, he enjoys reading, classic television shows, playing with his cat, baseball games, and eating out. He does not have social media but he can be contacted at the following email address: writermatt@hotmail.com.

Ethan Lee is an artist and anthropologist whose work has been published in *Variant Literature* and *Zoetic Press*, among others.

Richard Leise writes and teaches outside Ithaca, NY. A Perry Morgan Fellow from Old Dominion University's MFA program, and recipient of the David Scott Stuelan Memorial Scholarship, his debut novel, *Being Dead*, was published fall, 2023. His short story, *Of Ducks*, was selected for 2025's Best Micro-fiction Anthology. His second novel, the award-winning *Dry The Rain*, was released by *Picket Fire Press* in October, 2025, to critical acclaim. His third novel, *DYING MAN IN LIVING ROOM*, is forthcoming from *ELJ Editions* (2027). A three-year Teacher of the Year recipient, he is @coy_harlingen on Twitter.

Lillian Taylor grew up in Croatia. Now living among the vineyards of New York's Finger Lakes, she spends time tending vines, trying new recipes in the kitchen, and writing stories.

Tamara J. Madison is a writer, poet, performer, editor, and educator whose work explores ancestry, resistance, and ritual. Her poetry collection *Threed, This Road Not Damascus* was shortlisted for the *Willow Books Literature Award*. She is the creator of *BREAKDOWN: The Poet & The Poems*, a YouTube series that promotes poetry as a source of everyday inspiration. A *Pushcart* and *Best of the Net* nominee, Madison has performed on *TEDx* stages and holds fellowships from Hedgebrook, Anaphora Arts, and Ucross. She is currently completing a new poetry collection rooted in five generations of her family history.

Harshit Malavaliya is a writer and student of Classics and Archival Studies whose work explores grief, memory, and the quiet ways people survive what cannot be fixed. Their fiction often centers on silence, care, and the moral weight of preservation what is kept, what is lost, and who decides. They are particularly interested in stories where love is expressed through restraint rather than speech. Harshit's writing has been shaped by their academic engagement with ancient texts, fragmented histories, and the emotional residue carried by surviving records. They are currently working on longer projects that blend historical sensibility with intimate, character-driven narratives. Instagram: @harshit.malavaliya

Judy McClure writes creative nonfiction about queer life, nature, relationships, and education. You can find her work at *WBUR's Edify*, *805LitMag*, *Miniskirt Magazine*, and others. She is a graduate of Grub Street's Essay Incubator and is a winner of the Friends of the Chautauqua Writers' Center prose prize. She writes and teaches in Boston where she lives with her wife and their dog Rosy.

Kristen McHenry is a part-time author / full-time faerie trapped in a diseased flesh prison who isn't faking the whole "human" thing very well. Instagram: @kristenfae.author

Mitchell Miller was raised in Credit River, MN and now lives in Los Angeles. His work has been published in *The Coil* and *Blood+Honey*. He can be found on Instagram @mitchellmiller684.

Elizabeth Murphy's second novel, *The Weather Diviner*, was nominated for the 2026 Dublin Literary Award and longlisted for the 2024 BMO Winterset Award. Her short fiction has appeared in *Nixes Mate Review*, *Reckon Review*, and *Tiny Molecules*, among others. Originally from Newfoundland, she now lives in Canada's ocean playground, Nova Scotia.

Leah Oates has a B.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design and a M.F.A. from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is a Fulbright Fellow for graduate study at Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland. Oates has

had solo shows in the NYC area at Susan Eley Fine Art, The MTA Lightbox Project at 42nd Street, The Arsenal Gallery in Central Park, The Open Center, The Center for Book Arts and The Brooklyn Public Library Main Branch and had had solo show nationally and internationally at Black Cat Artspace in Toronto, Real Art Ways in Connecticut, Sara Nightingale Gallery in Long Island, Artemisia Gallery in Chicago and at Galerie Joella in Turku, Finland. Oates has been in group shows in the NYC area at Susan Eley Fine Art, Lichtundfire Gallery, Wave Hill, Edward Hopper House, Chashama, Williamsburg Art Center, Metaphor Projects Gallery, Usagi NYC, Denise Bibro Fine Art, Nurture Art Gallery and The Pen and Brush Gallery. Oates has been part of group shows in Toronto at John. Aird Gallery, Gallery 1313, Propeller Gallery, Gladstone Hotel, Remote Gallery, Arta Gallery and The Papermill Gallery. Oates has had press and been featured in numerous publications including *Al-Tiba9 Contemporary Art Magazine*, *The Shanghai Literary Review*, *Mud Season Review*, *dArt Magazine*, *The Tulane Review*, *Vallum Journal*, *Calyx Journal*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Friends of the Artist*, *GASHER Journal*, *Flumes Literary Journal*, and the *805 Lit + Art Journal*.

Trinity Peluffo is a mixed media artist based in Orlando, Florida. She's interested in showcasing the human experience through her art. She likes to be very expressive through posing and intentional use of color. She doesn't like to stick with one medium, instead preferring to jump around depending on what she's working on or using mixed media for a piece.

Mark G. Pennington has published three collections of poetry, one poetry chapbook which finished runner-up in the *Cerasus* poetry chapbook competition, and one novel. He has been nominated twice for the *Pushcart Prize*.

Grace Schwenk is a writer from the Bitterroot Valley of Montana. When not writing, she can be found getting lost in the mountains with her pack of hiking chihuahuas.

Max Szredni is a Vancouver, British Columbia-based writer and small business owner working in the holistic health and wellness field. He graduated from the University of Victoria in 2019, where he studied psychology and fiction. Outside of writing, his passions include breathwork, hiking, athletics, and travel.

Isaac Terry is 22 and currently finishing up his Strategic Communications degree in Oklahoma with his husband. He tries to bring his experiences as a gay man, his Native American roots, and the feelings of being alive today into his poetry. He has been published once before, in the magazine *Frontier Mosaic*. He can be found on Instagram under the handle: @Isaacreportingin.

Arlene Tribbia is a poet and artist who writes and makes portraits about otherworldly beings because she's fond of discovering characters who work to solve the larger cosmic riddles of the universe. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best American Essays. She says: writing and drawing is a conversation I have with my past, present and future. In some ways, writing is a kind of time machine entered by using a pencil and piece of paper. Her art has been exhibited in unique spaces from dance halls to skyscrapers as well as galleries, including Woman Made in Chicago and the Dunedin Fine Art Center in Florida where Robert Rauschenberg (hero, unseen mentor and influence) also has shown his work. <http://www.arlenetribbia.com/>

Tetiana Yatsechko-Blazhenko is a Ukrainian writer and visual artist. Her work has appeared in literary journals including *Shot Glass Journal*, *Eleventh Hour Literary*, *Corncrake Magazine*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Plants & Poetry Journal*, *Haunted Words Press*, *Foxylit*, *Indigo*, and *Love You. Daily. Afterword*. She is also a contributing author to the anthologies *Tidings (Anomaly Poetry)*, *Men's Appreciation (Quillkeepers Press)*, and *Rituals & Remedies, Vol. 2*, as well as to *Koromyslo (Almanac)*, *KOLOS (Ukrainian Literary and Artistic Almanac)*, the poetry collection *Whisper of Sisters* (co-author), and the children's collection *Kryshitalynky. A Fairy Tale Winter 2025–2026* (co-author).

Steven O. Young Jr. is knitted within the Great Lakes' mitten, where he earned an MA from Oakland University and occasionally slathers soundstages with his body weight's worth of paint. His latest literary homes include *LEVITATE*, *Sheepshead Review*, *The Oakland Review*, *Barely South Review*, and *Scapegoat Review*.



VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING

BY YOGITA GUPTA

ART

CHARCOAL ON PAPER | 12" x 16" | 2025

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Write a manuscript that shines in the low-residency Mountainview Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program at Southern New Hampshire University. In this cohort-based creative writing program, you'll have mentorship from award-winning, nationally recognized faculty and grow alongside peers in a vibrant, supportive creative writing community. And with minimal residency requirements, you can earn your MFA in fiction or nonfiction without putting your life on hold.

Our two-year, low-residency program allows students to live anywhere and work a full-time job. We never allow the number of students to exceed 65 total – about 16 per cohort – so our students develop close and sustaining relationships with faculty during our intensive weeklong residencies in the summer and winter.

During the rest of the year, our students work with faculty one on one, receiving thorough, regular editorial letters supplemented with video calls. Students choose to focus on fiction or nonfiction. Some choose specializations like young adult fiction and environmental writing.

Our full-time faculty members, often referred to as "mentors," have won numerous awards, published books with major publishing houses and received international acclaim in every literary category from young adult to lyric essay to crime. Their work appears in such forums as *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *Best American Short Stories*. Together they help each student find a literary voice, master their craft and produce a book-length manuscript of high literary quality.

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