

***THE OZ MAGAZINE***  
***SPRING 2023***

## The OZ Magazine Spring 2023

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### **Bird • Bones** (Originally published in *Touchstone Magazine*)

*Danae Younge*

You fantasized about fossils as a kid.  
Told me you wanted to get a tattoo  
of a sandpiper's skeleton cradled in the convex nest  
under your eye. Parents said *don't ever get a tattoo*,  
grabbed your hand & scraped the ash  
out from under your nails.

—years like beach rock—

Parents said *if you get a tattoo*,  
*get one that's only seen when you undress for someone.*  
*are undressed for someone.*

Which meant the one, two, five, six-six-sixty  
men downtown when you walked alone,  
dispatched coat of feathers like a forest  
swallowed by its own creator.  
These men, they never touched you—  
their fingers were too busy digging.  
Feigned vulnerability with their naked eyes,

envisioned a striptease in return.

I understand now that you want people  
to see the beauty of death on your skin.  
Still as lake water. Cracker-like skull as a winged promise,  
open beak burned until it forms igneous ink.

The fossilized bird is always singing like a vessel.  
That's why you never do, anymore.

We kissed on top of the lighthouse  
on top of the world & you were wearing  
magma mascara, & the tips of your lashes were like  
glowing embers, cigarette butts.  
(Or was that just the hue of distant wildfires  
carried through the salted wind...)

As if every time you blinked, volcanic gasses  
fell again—rewound—again, quiet videocassette.

The phone has been ringing for weeks, quiet.  
& maybe you are imagining my voice  
like a songbird. This morning I reached back  
& touched my spine the way you had;  
like a marrow toothpick in my palm, my hip bone  
a perfect layer of paint hardened,  
stripped from its wall—

The scent of scorched feathers fledged  
from the room like a dream. Almost as if the bed

was sinking.

## **Red Curtains**

*Eran Karmon*

Everywhere you go there seems to be a red curtain.  
You turn the street on your boring walk to work,  
And there one is, draping from the branch of a tree  
To a park bench. You take the subway, and a woman  
Is holding one in a fist, hanging a bit in the air by  
The armrest next to her, and she looks a bit angry.

Watch the red curtains. See how they sway with the  
Passive wind, see how they fly with the strong ones too.  
Keep a little notebook that tracks the way the folds look,  
Keep another to see if other people look at them too.  
Look at the folds on that one. Marvelous.

Form friendships with the red curtains.  
Watch the one right above you, see it turn as it's pulled away  
— It's being pulled away? —  
And watch it finally fall to the ground.

Think about all that you've seen today, keep track of it.  
Slip by another one, a man carrying it in a laundry basket  
Walking on your street.

To wish for more is rude.  
You've got these curtains, your notebook says you see one everyday.

**Nabil**

Bia Pinho

Nabil woke up one day feeling ill. Nothing too bad, just a sore throat and some hip pain. *I guess I'll take a Tylenol*, he thought to himself, and went back to sleep.

Not an hour had passed and he woke up again, in a slightly worse state. The hip pain had been joined by an unwelcome ache from all over his body and he had developed a cough, which was a menace to his throat.

Begrudgingly, he decided to go to see a doctor. Better safe than sorry.

After a 30-minute walk (Nabil never learned how to drive), he reached the doctor's office. After checking in, his symptoms not getting any better but also not getting any worse, he was told it would be a two hour wait. Not wanting to make the trek home and back, Nabil decided to wait in the waiting room with all the other sick people stuck in the same situation as him. *I guess I don't have anything better to do*, he thought to himself as he took a seat and grabbed a copy of the National Geographic sitting on the table beside him.

A few painful coughing fits and three hours later, Nabil was called into the doctor's office. He took a seat on the chair closest to the doctor's desk and described his symptoms in detail to the balding white man in a lab coat. The nurse ran a few simple tests on him, and stepped outside to discuss Nabil's ailments with the doctor.

*Maybe I'll go to Subway for lunch*, Nabil thought.

Moments later, the doctor came inside the room again with a clipboard in his hand and two nurses at his tail.

"Nabil, we have run some tests and discussed your symptoms with some colleagues. I'm sorry to inform you, but we have to put you down," the doctor said.

They gave Nabil a moment to process the information, and began gathering the documents he needed to sign in order to continue with the procedure.

"I just need you to sign a few things," a nurse said to him in a motherly voice. "This is the Acknowledgement of Death Form, the Funeral Home Disclosure Form, the Letter to Your Relatives form, the Agreement to Pass form...if you could sign here... and here...and then over there in the bottom... in this blue pen for me here that would be great. I still need to print out a few others, so if you could just sit tight for a moment, I'll be right back," she finished, and left Nabil with the

stack of white papers for him to sign.

"Excuse me doctor, I'm not quite sure I understand," Nabil turned to the balding white man and set the papers down on his desk. "Is this standard procedure for patients with these symptoms? I thought they were pretty mild."

The doctor turned to him patiently, with a small smile and an understanding look on his face said, "yes, Nabil. Unfortunately this is a common procedure with patients that come to us with this combination of symptoms. You see, the medication to treat your ailments has become so generic and easily accessible lately, that many have started to find it untrustworthy. Doctors now find it best to silently euthanize those who need it instead of prescribing them this potentially deadly medication. It's really for the best, you see. We just need your signatures to send over to the police department and the post office so you can legally be declared dead and we can proceed, so please sign the documents we gave you as soon as possible."

"Is this... legal?" Nabil asked the doctor with a slight frown.

"Why of course, Nabil, this is not only legal but it's the law!" the doctor pulled out a book by *The National Association of Doctors* titled *Rules and Regulations for the Enhanced Practice of Medicine* and read aloud: "*in the face of Krank Disease, characterized by symptoms of a sore throat, cough, and muscle pain* — which is exactly what you have, if I'm not mistaken — *the patient must be euthanized for his own safety and good. To not adhere to these guidelines can lead to a lifetime of punishment, illness, and torment.*" The doctor closed the book and looked up to Nabil, who was nodding slowly in understanding.

"Well, rules are rules for a reason, so I suppose I'll sign the papers so we can get this going," he said with a frown.

In under 10 minutes Nabil had signed his papers, left his parents a voice message, and was seated in the euthanasia chair. His symptoms had gotten slightly better during that time, but he figured it was too late. *The doctors would have said something*, he thought to himself.

"Do you have any last words Nabil?" the nurse asked. The doctor wasn't present, he had a lunch he had to get to.

"Yes. I would like to thank my mother for raising me, my father for teaching me what is right and wrong, my second-grade teacher for introducing me to Junie B. Jones, my physical therapist for..."

Except no one ever heard what Nabil had to thank his physical therapist for because the ask for last words is only a ploy to

inject him with the poison that would bring him to his death. Soon, Nabil was gone.

The nurses sighed and began cleaning up the room, throwing needles away and collecting Nabil's documents.

"Can you call the morgue, Ms. Small, I have to go visit my mother at 1..."

The end.

### **Mononucleosis**

*Madeline Norris*

Wake up, throat punctured by forgotten glass  
Head pounds, eyes squint, skin tacky, legs shaking  
Move down hallway, slow steps, unsteady mass  
Close door, sit down, hold head, body aching  
Fatigue suffocating, thoughts disordered  
Chills wrack body, movement an opponent  
Feet press against ground, head up, lean forward  
Static plays, thump, world gone in a moment.  
You are curled up on the cold bathroom floor  
No memory of moving across the room  
To stand would be an impossible chore  
So you lay in your temporary tomb  
Head spinning round and round, clearing the mist  
Until you can muster strength to persist.

## Marvin, The Blob of Nothingness: On the Weight of Being and Other Metaphysical Musings

Colter Mason

It was a rather unassuming day that Marvin stirred from a deep metaphysical stupor; that is to say that, thereunto this rustling awakeness, Marvin had simply not existed. Marvin was an expansive blob of nothingness, composed of varying, wavering, and smaller corpuscles of nothingness. It was only a matter of mere happenstance that instigated these fleeting renderings of nothingness to transmute into something, Marvin. Now floating through the capaciousness of eternal nothingness, Marvin considered the blessing that it was to be free from having to exist; such a dreamy reverie to lack the clumsiness of being! It was the reflection upon this very thought that Marvin realized that non-existence may no longer be present. Only something imbued with the sticky proliferation of existence would have such thoughts, or think at all for that matter! Existence is a tricky, fickle thing, thought Marvin as the bemoaning of a newfound state began. Already, Marvin was beginning to assess the encapsulating position. Would a pedantic and menial job be necessary? Afterall, the novelty of Marvin's situation did not lend itself to the development of socially-oriented or utilitarian skills. Perhaps, then, Marvin would attend school? Maybe, Marvin considered, finding a way to avoid commuting and stay in the infinite void could be best. Figuring it would be optimal to get things in order sooner, rather than later, Marvin embarked, foraging through the infinite surrounding in hopes of finding a finite thing. Drearly dredging along, Marvin ruminated on the humble beginnings and unlikely transformation that had occurred. Rather intransigent, Marvin remained in a state of lament. Existence is such a burdensome undertaking, full of difficulties. That which is not latent with strife and obscenity is perfused with a banal regularity. Although Marvin recognized that a morose temper was no aid, such morbidity felt inexorable when faced with the task of having to *be*. Such an issue it is to be, Marvin continually pondered. Without existence, tomorrow would never arrive as the past would never depart; such a transitory suspension is a fine pillow for rest. Yet Marvin, pillowless, was pervaded with the weight of thought and presence and thus, persisted forth in search of something that might occupy the now imminent self. Marvin persisted among this continual muttering and self-despondency and, after a rather extended period of time and a great distance covered, stumbled upon a greatly intriguing artifact. It was a rather small entity, possessing a soft

delicacy that signified its possession of substance. Marvin was intrigued; accustomed to a self and world of nothingness, such materiality provoked novel emotion. This small entity left its impression on the world in the form of a branching of benignity. A small and circular shoot rose into a kaleidoscoping conjuncture of organic growth and color. The shoot, with its branching digits that grasped out into air, amounted into various motes and mites of hues and colors. All these facets of natural composition engendered a great array of emotion for Marvin. What could inspire such unknowing magnificence in a place fraught with endless, cold calamity? Marvin's conscience reeled. No existence shared with such a delicate thing could be cold. No beingness felt could be sad in the presence of such inanimate, tender disposition. In the presence of this odd, little thing, Marvin's horizon expanded. Marvin's previous dismality faltered and wavered as a gush of possibility careened into sight and roared around him in vortices of exaltation. Such a blessing of potentiality, to take on any form! Marvin's ecstasy, in its overwhelming enrapturement, collapsed. Matching the arbitrary serendipity of Marvin's flourishing into existence, the expansive blob of nothingness dissipated. Emancipated from being, the various wavering, small corpuscles of nothing went their own way and Marvin no longer was.

## How to Care

Eran Karmon

I run down the hill,  
My shins close to snapping with each thunk on the pavement.  
Mist stings the bits of soft skin around my eyes,  
The canvas of my bag trashes everywhere,  
Everyone else's hair like the limbs of a thunderstorm tree;  
I have forgotten I know how to walk.

The rain has reminded some of us how little they care for the world.  
Reminded them how much rather they would be once and for all,  
How unpleasant the chill,  
How you let in a draft.  
But not you, because you have forgotten you know how to care at all.

## Crying in Public: A Love Letter

Sheila Pippin

I have been crying for a very long time. And I do a lot of it. I have let anything and everything make me cry. There is no biting comment, no gentle rejection, no depressive episode incapable of inciting a dramatic flood of salty big tears out of my eyes and across my cheeks. I am scared of the ease with which I can cry. How little it takes to make me sob and heave. My sensitivity did not come on suddenly. It was not an unwelcome surprise I encountered in the emotionally tumultuous pubescent years. I have been crying since I was born.

When I was seven, I realized I was crying too much. And everybody knew it. I was on a playdate with a friend and my father had offered to take us on a rowboat from the wooden boat center he volunteered at on the weekends. My friend said yes. I, anxious, said no. When my father had overridden my response and started packing up the car, the breakdown commenced. My bottom lip started to quiver and my breath quickened and my skin felt prickly and cold. My father hadn't noticed yet, but my friend had. I saw her eyes, full of resentment, roll across her line of vision. My cheeks, already red and damp with tears, began to burn. My tears, which came so naturally and flowed with such ease, felt dramatic and pitiful. I tried desperately to stifle my sobs, but my shame only made them louder and more awkward. I could see myself through my friend's eyes. I could see my tears through her eyes. The runoff of all my overly dramatic, emotionally fragile self. I was a crier. An overly emotional little girl with too many tears for even her own liking. I didn't blame her for her anger. I was angry too. How, I wondered, could one cry so much and still feel this much shame?

As I grew past the age of seven, I continued to cry. And my crying continued to mortify me in public. My throat still tightened, and my stomach still flipped, and my body still shook with each heavy weep. I cried at different things now. No longer concerned with fearful trips on rowboats, I began to cry over the big stuff. Whichever boy had rejected me most recently, whatever grade I had gotten on my biology unit exam, whoever had ignored my last text.

By age 18, I had come to accept myself as prone to crying. I saw the lack of surprise in people's faces when the tears began to stream. I had been an overly emotional little girl, but now I was a teenager. I didn't have the same excuse of immaturity and inexperience in the world to excuse my public breakdowns. Now, those around me had three options. Ignore me, judge me, or comfort me. I was unhappy

with all of them. I wanted the attention of all those who pretended I was not sobbing right in front of them. I wanted the approval of the ones who looked down on me and my pool of tears. And I didn't trust the ones who comforted me. Like clockwork, I cried and they cared. I had cashed out on comforting words and now they didn't mean a thing.

So instead, I cried in private. I bought the softest sheets to consume me while I wallowed. I bought *Pride and Prejudice* on Amazon Prime for entertainment while I moped. I built a collection of depressing playlists to give my meltdowns some ambience. I made crying a ritual. A daily, weekly, monthly, moment to myself to indulge in copious amounts of self-pity. These moments made me happy. I felt relief and comfort in my own melancholy company. Alone in my room, I could cry at anything. Issues that felt so cliché to cry over, rejection and body image and television, offered me hours of private crying material. Alone in my room, I couldn't be judged.

In my room, my tears did not burn as they trailed down my face. I didn't have to scan my surroundings for a box of tissues so my concoction of salty tears and snot wouldn't disturb any onlookers. I could let my tears dampen my newly purchased sheets. I could let myself cry just as hard for my failed exam as my estranged father and no one could judge me. No one could tell my tears were being wasted. Wasted on trivial issues I should have stifled and ignored and instead given hours of attention and concern. My tears were my own. And they offered the same relief every time. I may have never left these sacred breakdowns happy. But that was never what I asked of them. I asked for a release. The expulsion of emotion and energy so nothing, no resentment or shame or sadness was left overwhelming my insides. In private, in the comfort of my own company, my tears gave me that.

In public, I felt like prey. I watched others watch me cry and searched their faces for signs of pity and embarrassment on my behalf. I wanted my fears to be validated. I wanted someone to see me cry and never speak to me again because the person they thought I was, respectable, in control, intelligent, was a farce and the real me had been exposed. No one did that. Instead, my friends gave me pats on the back in the lunchroom as I delivered a monologue full of snot and spit on how I was better off alone. The strangers next to me in movie theaters gave me sympathetic smiles when I sat in my seat sobbing after the credits had already finished rolling. My mother sighed and opened her arms in the grocery store parking lot when I turned her attempts to reprimand me into my personal pity parties. In my mind, their faces and their words were falsities. Behind their empty words of comfort were

their true feelings, my true feelings, of disgust and shame for the woman before them. Every time I broke down in public, I was once again reminded that I was a crier. Still, just an overly emotional little girl with too many tears and now too much self-awareness.

But then one day, I made a discovery. I was 19 and I had been crying on the Seattle Metro bus because a midterm I wrote had just received a measly B. I looked around the bus, desperate to see someone else with a forlorn expression or hear muffled sniffles. No one else was crying.

So, with swollen eyes and wet fingers, I pulled out my phone and began to type into Google.

"Crying in public?"

I am still not sure what I was looking to find or why I posed the phrase like a question. Maybe I wanted someone to tell me they were doing it too. Someone else was sitting on a Metro bus far far away crying over their own midterm.

The first result was a link to a website entitled, "cryinginpublic.com." I clicked the words on my screen eagerly. Now covering my screen was a map of New York City covered in emojis. The hot pink banner at the top of the site read, "Crying in Public: An emotional map of New York City, made out of the important things that happen to us outside." I stared at the map, confused. Who had made this? Was this real? Had someone read my mind and made this site?

I began to click on the various emojis covering the map and read the little stories that happened at each place.

Somewhat selfishly, I saw myself in every story I read. In each one, I saw a little girl who was overly emotional and overly self-aware. I could no longer see these traits I had connected to my public breakdowns, sensitivity and femininity and stupidity, but a source of connection. These strangers, the same as the ones watching me cry on the bus, were crying in public just like me. Their tears were probably ugly, their cheeks probably turned red, their throat probably caught when they tried to stifle a sob. And they were probably embarrassed. They were probably ashamed like me. Worried that a stranger like me could be looking at them with pity. Truthfully, there are people who will look with pity. There are people who will judge and grimace and offer a fake smile. But there are also other criers. Other people who have broken down on the same park bench, called their mom outside the same school building, and wiped their eyes on the same restaurant patio. And personally, I take comfort in this knowledge. I take comfort in the Crying in Public emotional map. Because although I may not cry on



these same streets in New York City, I am crying wherever I go. I cry in private, but I also cry in public. I cry just as much as I have my entire life, but now I can do it without shame.

Now, when I cry, I let my tears run free flowing. I sob and I heave, and I let my friends and family hold me. I let people watch me. I see the curiosity in their eyes along with the judgment, sympathy, and disgust. They are my audience. An audience that never agreed to attend my show. An audience that writhes with discomfort or feels a sense of overwhelming empathy in my presence. Every onlooker, whatever their response to me may be, is a reminder. I have problems and feelings and emotions and so does everyone else. I break down and I make scenes and most people don't even bat an eye. The world continues on.

I am not the first woman to cry in public and I certainly will not be the last. Women have been crying since this world began and they will continue to do so until it ends. I cry in public the same way that Margery Kemp and Queen Elizabeth and Serena Williams once cried. Like me, their eyes felt puffy and their cheeks felt hot and their throat shut. Like me, they wondered if anyone was staring down upon their tears with hateful judgment or shameful pity. I hope that some of these women conquered this fear and let their tears run freely. I hope that some of these women had the same realization as me. That crying is not a source of shame. Crying is a source of catharsis. Crying is a release.

The instinct to cry is nothing new. It is human, it is natural, it is a gift. Now when I feel my tears begin to well in my eyes, I think of the women who cried before me and the women who are crying with me and the women who will cry after me. I imagine the women who have cried for the same reasons as me. Maybe we were hurt by the same boy or rejected by the same school. I imagine the women who have cried in the same place as me. Did a relationship ever end at this bench? Did a terrible call ever come in at this intersection? I play out stories in my head of all the others who have sobbed where I sob now. The feelings of heartbreak and anger and joy and shame that may have once been felt in these places. These stories give me comfort. Because when you are crying in public and everyone is looking, it is nice to know that you are not, and never will be, the only one.

## Being

Sebastian Lechner

ἀφρός ; sea foam

Love.

I should have met you in a séance.

Gelid sunlight strewn over nude wooden beams;  
the sunlight of no thought.

Polite experience: ephemerality,  
and the shame of eating alone.

Child soldiers fed false dreams  
while bishops burn amidst the hum of the cicadas.

They were never told, "you can be anything."

I was. I don't know why.

Let it not be me. Let it be you.

Do you have a light?

Cigarettes were meant to be shared.

But let's leave the philosophizing to the philosophers,  
and the infinite number of primes to the mathematicians.

Let our only difference be in touch,  
not cruelly misrecognized,

and let us live sunburnt, sunkissed,  
sprawling.



Film photography by Ella Gonchar

**Welcome to Death** (excerpt from *Wish Touched*)  
Joseph Langley

Nera sucked in a breath. And then another. And another. They surged through her blood, reawakening her heart, filling out the fringes of her fingertips. Breath. Wonderful, glorious breath- her *savior*, breath. But she couldn't savor it. Something resisted it, something blocked it, she was still suffocating, some heavy, present force shoving its way into her chest...

She scrabbled at her cloak, ripping it off, twisting free of her jacket, thrashing in the water to get out of the oppressive, blocking, heaving, soaking furs. She breathed. And breathed. And *breathed*- She was left wearing nothing more than a thin shift. It clung to her like tongues, seeking the bare spots of her flesh to lick dirty, leaving sliminess behind wherever it brushed her. But she could breathe. She sucked in the breaths like a newborn baby, unfamiliar rushing sensation starting from her chest, shooting *up* instead of down. She should be freezing. She should be drowning. She should be dead.

She wasn't. Somehow.

Schools of slippery, scaled orange fish rushed around her, buffeting her with currents. She spun around, eyes wide, throwing her hands out to try and stabilize herself. But the weight ripping at her ankle still pulled her down, and the water had a mind of its own. Darkness started to consume her vision, just as silence consumed her ears, leaving her with nothing but the strange pinpricks of water currents rushing against her torso, arms, back, head, everywhere, all at once, yet staggered and uneven. She blinked, as if that would ward the darkness away, as if her eyes could pierce the perfect blackness of the abyss on their own-

Lights. Out in the endless field of darkness. Like stars in the night sky, brilliant bits of green and blue glow, illuminating patches of the water. They swirled like snowflakes in a pleasant morning breeze, mesmerizing and beautiful. She gazed in awe still far below, at a field of shimmering leafy stalks that stretched upwards from the ocean floor, shifting in the currents much as snow might flit in the breeze above. Her head craned around at glowing neon fish that darted past, alone no larger than the nail on her thumb, but together a mass of dancing colors larger than her eyes could track. Bigger creatures, too, dotted her vision. Creatures bigger than her, long fish-like faces portraying melancholy countenances, meandering at the edges of the light, heedless to the world.

The weight lowered her closer to the shifting, glowing strands of kelp, and as she saw the wholeness of the landscape she found herself in, she forgot that she had just been executed.

An unknowable distance away, a flower bloomed from the ground, cracking the hardened mineral seafloor like stone through ice. Brilliant and pink and semi-translucent, it stood at least three times as tall as Nera. Its petals pulsed with an unheard frequency, impossibly thin membranous material stretching and shrinking with each pulse.

Another unknowable distance away, in the midst of the kelp below her, skittered a massive crab, its claw alone large enough to crush Nera's skull. The clicking of its thin, pointed feet on the seafloor sent shivers up Nera's spine, and halted her desperate breathing. The crab moved through the kelp with intense familiarity, sidestepping back and forth to maneuver around the thick strands without the slightest disturbance.

Thin wisps at the very top of the kelp forest brushed against her feet, wrapping around her toes as she drifted into the mass. Leaves brushed her exposed legs, their surface coarse with vein-like lines that grabbed her skin. She reached out a hand, scrambling for purchase on the thick stalks. She found it, but her grip was tenuous, the stalks slimy. She yanked herself closer to one, wrapping her arms around it, trying to catch her legs in the crooks of the leaves. Her descent slowed. She gripped tighter.

And came to a stop, glancing down in surprise. The weight had caught in the leaves as well, the chain tangled and stuck around a large, oblong, skin-like envelope that stuck from the side of the kelp. Leaving her stranded, yet unmoving, drifting back and forth in the center of a massive, warbling, glowing strand of oceanic leafage. Her eyes trained on the crab, skittering between the stalks down below. She heaved more breaths, turning to scan her surroundings.

The pink far away flower bulged, petals stretching forwards from the stalk, membranous material shifting and flowing free from the grasp of the petals. Nera's mouth fell open, images rearranging themselves in her head as a ballooning creature of some sort launched from the flower, long thin tentacles streaming in the water behind it. She watched as the top half of its domed, translucent body passed out of the light's range, fading into the background of the endless water. Like ice melting in a cup of tea, the creature vanished into darkness.

Her throat went dry, and she shook. She shook, because she should be dead. She shook, because she would be dead soon. She shook, because she had failed. She quivered there, in the clutches of the

massive glowing kelp, in the depths of an unfamiliar landscape, in the midst of creatures she had only ever heard of in stories.

And all she could think of was her mother. The warmth of her embrace, even in the last moments. The look in her brown eyes, of recognition, of love, of care, even as she had tossed Nera over the edge. The stillness of her figure as she had watched Nera fall, and fall, and fall, and then sink. Someone had been inside of that monster. Someone Nera cared about. Someone she loved.

Nera shook for her mother, whom, in that moment, she swore she would live to see again. It wasn't likely. It wasn't rational. But she swore it anyway.

A loud, echoing, esoteric drone tore through the silence of the shifting forest of kelp. She felt it on her skin, felt the strand of kelp she gripped bend away from the noise, water rushing against her face, in her hair. Her eyes darted around, frantic. Nothing. The brightness of the kelp didn't seem so bright anymore.

Another drone, another *roar*. The crab skittered sideways into a thicker clump of kelp, vanishing between the strands. Fish scurried away, schools scattering and reforming, light glinting off of blue and gold scales as they twisted and turned as one. Nera shook into the leaves.

Another drone, louder, closer, all around her. A massive shape, the size of one of her father's ships, blotted out the water above, casting a shimmering green shadow over her, over the kelp. She couldn't make out details, only see the shifting, shimmering seaweed that clung to its back, only cringe at the curving claws that scraped the tops of the kelp. She squeezed her strand tighter, pressing her cheek against a leaf. The smell was oddly pleasant. Earthy, fishy, but comforting. And the leaves, she decided, weren't so coarse. The veiny texture had a friendliness to it.

The shadow above kept moving. Shifting. Growing closer. A head stretched from a neck, wide jaws framing a huge maw, eyes framed by brilliant scales, legs tucked in under its massive, barrel chested body. Nera shook. Her heart pounded. She wanted to hide. To stay still.

But it was coming straight for her.

Clouds above, she'd made it this far.

She heaved herself back, bending the kelp with her, leveraging the weight of the chain around her ankle. It wouldn't budge from the strange sack it had wrapped around, but the weight was enough, and the kelp strand tipped with her lean, bowing, bowing, bowing... She

grabbed another strand, straddling the two of them, kicking at the chain wrapped around the pod. It wouldn't... clouding... come... *off*... She grit her teeth, aiming a kick at the base of the pod. It popped free of the kelp, leaving the weight to drift down again, chain still loose. She released the kelp strand-

It whipped upwards like the arm of a catapult, flinging away from her. *Clouds*. She held her breath, staring up at the shadow still swimming above...

Its head whipped towards the quivering kelp strand. Rows of teeth revealed under curled back, scaled lips as the maw stretched wider, wider, wider...

It let out another roar, *launching* forward at the strand, ripping it in half with one snap of its jaws. The severed end of the kelp released a soft puff of bluish liquid into the water around it. Nera kept her breathing measured, eyes locked on the massive creature as it reared back and gulped down the kelp. She steadied herself.

The weighted chain went taut, yanking her down. Her torso jolted as if to gasp, but no air bubbled from her lips. She had no air to give. Her hands rushed to her ankle by instinct, forcing her to let go of the kelp strand she had transferred to. Her foot still couldn't slip free of that metal band. She dug her nails into the skin, wrenched the metal down towards her foot, contorted her face against the pain...

Nothing. It wouldn't budge. She shot her gaze back up. The creature had moved. It circled now, lowering *into* the forest, body shoving aside stalks of kelp. The ball at the end of the chain hit the seafloor with a soft burst of sand. She stopped sinking. The stupid pouch thing still sat stuck in the chain. Her closer view showed that one end of the sack had a few brown wisps that had gotten looped between chain links, tying them together. She glanced back up. The creature still circled. Closing in, inch by inch, towards her position. It sensed something. Somehow. Given time, it *would* find her.

All Nera thought about was her mother.

She dropped her gaze from the creature, scanning her surroundings, bent double to grip the thick metal of the chain around her leg. Blood seeped from the edges of the metal, staining her fingers, spiraling out into the water. She needed something. Anything.

All she could see around her was more glowing kelp. She bit her lip. It would have to do. She flailed her way towards the nearest stalk, somehow the same width as they had been near the top, yet stable and calm in the rushing currents. Her feet and hands found purchase in the water, giving her momentum-

Her foot caught on the chain. She stretched her fingers out, gritting her teeth, gripping a stray leaf. Her fingertips struggled to find purchase, but she dug in her nails, feeling a strange ooze leak out from between the fibers. She pulled the kelp towards her. It bent, swaying in her direction. She lunged again, gripping the stalk with her other hand. It bent further.

She felt the water shift, and her bones went cold as the shadow stopped circling. It had seen her movement.

Whatever. It would have found her anyway. It wasn't like she could get anywhere to hide.

She grabbed a leaf higher up along the stalk of the kelp, straining her muscles, throwing herself upwards. Her ankle *screamed* as the weight slid up next to her, moved by her desperation. She kept going, climbing the kelp stalk hand over hand over hand over painful hand. She leaned back as she went, her instincts screaming that she would fall, screaming that she had doomed herself to the ocean floor again. But she kept going. And as she did, the stalk bent further and further and further down, compelled by the weight at the end of Nera's chain. As she neared the top of the kelp stalk, she felt her back brush the ocean floor, and saw the weight settle against the ground. As she had hoped, the kelp had bent from her weight, all the way over without snapping.

Her entire leg was on fire. And the shadow descended from above. She breathed. And gripped the stalk, hanging lengthwise underneath it. Let go, and the stalk would catapult up without her like it had before. Hang on, and it stayed down. Her chain was loose now, ball weight resting at her side on the ground. She had a plan. A stupid, impossible, hopeless, useless plan.

All she thought about was her mom.

The shadow descended. Any second now... Any second now... She could see more detailing on its face. Long and thin, scales lining an intimidating snout, teeth baring and curled into a dark maw. Large, slanted eyes curved back along its thin head, leading to a mass of luminescent seaweed that plumed from behind its head. It moved like the sea foam moved over the ice after waves crashed against a shallow glacier. Smooth. Effortless. Inevitable.

*Now.*

She *heaved* herself over the top of the stalk, rolling her body so the loose chain arched over the kelp with her. For the briefest moment, the chain remained loose, and the kelp flung itself upwards, *into* the chain. The kelp, already carrying momentum, pulled the chain taught.

Her breath left her body as her world spun, carried in a wild summersalt. She saw the ground. She saw the creature looming, maw gaping, teeth bared. She saw the kelp, launching itself erect at her side. She saw the ball and chain in the water above. Still latched to her ankle. But flipped into the air by the pent up force of the bent kelp.

Nera brought her legs together, bent herself double as she flung through the air, and kicked her legs out towards the creature. The ball at the end of the chain, flung wildly by the force of the stalk, and directed by Nera's burning ankle, flew straight into the creature's snout with a meaty smack. Its head jerked to the side.

She hung there, for a moment. The weight, its momentum spent, arched towards the ground once more. It would pull her with it. But for half a second, a brief half a second, the chain was still loose. And Nera floated, still, steps from the face of a titan.

It turned towards her. The head alone was bigger than she was. And, as its large, luminous eyes met hers, she didn't care that she was about to die for a second time. Because in that moment, that brief half a second, the awe she felt at gazing upon such a wonderful, mystical, *beautiful* creature outshone anything else she could have ever thought to feel.

Those eyes... so deep, deeper than the ocean at nighttime, reflecting the stars. And the way that the strands of seaweed, more akin to hair, floated around the creature's face in its stillness, fluttering in the soft currents of its breath, casting calm shadows along its pointed, arching scales...

Nera knew what she was looking at. Not just any titan of the depths. A Mrin. The most coveted creature in Dem. A creature that every noble dreamed of slaying, to take its claws, to take its hair, to take its teeth, to take its bones, and scales, and blood, and meat. A creature her father devoured weekly without a second thought. A creature that in this moment, in this fraction of a second before her end, Nera could not imagine slaying. Not if she had all the weapons in the world.

And then her fraction of a second ended. And the chain went taut, yanking her towards the ocean floor. The Mrin opened its jaws, leaning forward. Its breath tickled her exposed skin. She flinched away, shutting her eyes, and shook. Shook, because she had done everything. Shook, because her insignificant presence in the midst of the vastness of the ocean was about to be snuffed out without a second thought.

Shook, and still thought about her mom.

Its jaws closed around the thick shackle on her ankle. She felt the teeth slide along her skin, felt the pressure build as the Mrin

clenched its jaw, ready to rend, ready to tear, ready to score her skin and...

No pain.

The shackle snapped.

The weight vanished.

That vastness of the ocean spun upside down and slammed her mind like a bludgeon. An unknowable giddiness shuddered through her arms, compelling them to spread. The Mrin hovered above her, too large for her eyes to track, and beyond it an ocean, palpably impossible, expanse eluding conception. And yet she smiled, and craned her head up, and believed, for a moment, that the oath she had sworn was not as stupid as she thought.

Because her part in the vastness was just as palpable as its impossibility.

The Mrin snorted, butting its snout against her chest. She smiled a grim smile at it, raising her limbs, *moving*. The way her leg responded, and she could lift it, and watch it catch the graininess of the water, feel it pass through the detritus mixed in with drifting seaweed... Her limbs *burned* with soft shivers that filled out the fringes of her fingertips, and reminded her what her breathing meant.

The Mrin ducked under her, its massive back rising to bump against her, seaweed whipping and twining along her legs. It moved, slipping away...

So she grabbed on, aflame with the vastness of the ocean.

And rode the Mrin.

## Smoking Gun

*Jackson Lewellen*

She likes to wake up for the sunrise, a tiny little black heart in her tea  
 She always wakes up on the wrong side, her itty bitty temper reaches  
 peak  
 I think she's coming for my dead rights, my syntax can't save me now  
 And only when the light dies, your vowels will strike me down

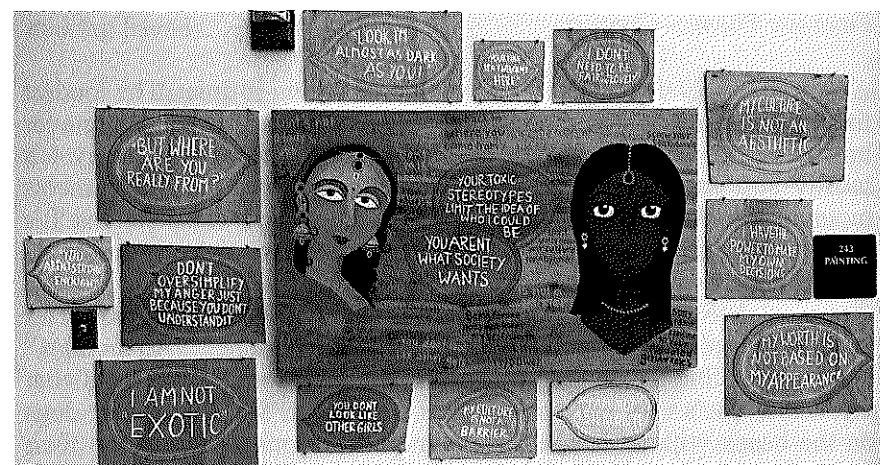
Darling your language is lavish but I catch a faltering under your tone  
And in the vestige of your madness there's something that won't let me  
go  
Your syllables are bullet holes, you hold the smoking gun  
But when your breath is wasted, you'll have nowhere left to run

Six foot one, favorite son, love is a drug and it looks like fun  
Never really thought that he was the one I'll keep him anyway  
Twisted fun, the smoking gun, look both ways for the hit and run  
And when your lips close on your crimson tongue, I'll take it all away

Baby your words are a poison that's slowly been making its way  
through my veins  
You're pushing me down and still I am the one who will beg you to stay  
You stop in time, your .45 is pointed towards the door  
Your velvet finger is on the trigger as I fall to the floor

I know what I need, it's destined to die  
I wanna get clean but it's messy inside  
I don't have control of this world but I'll try  
To slip through the cracks that lead out of your life

It's funny to me, the pain I'll endure  
The cost of your love is a high one for sure  
In all of these battles I'm lost in the war  
So why do I find myself coming for more?



*Above: Tradition, 2019*

*Acrylic paint, and colored pencil on wood*

Below: *सुरीत्व (femininity)*, 2022

*Acrylic paint, oil pastel, chalk pastel, and paint marker paper*

*Both works by Raina Pahade*

## Abalone Beach

Emerson Thomas-Gregory

On the Jalama Beach campsite, everything is quiet. The loudest force is the wind. It stirs sand. It shakes tents. It sends paper flying over brush and into nothingness. The beach is just a 60 second walk away. It's mostly soft sand, right up to the shoreline. There, the water meets mounds of rocks, crystals, shattered shells, empty crab exoskeletons. It's a trove of marine treasures. This wealth of ocean riches attracts an interesting crowd.

Meet Jane. Jane lives just over the hill. She's from Texas. Her husband, Frank, is from Alaska. He's from "the big one." "Anchorage," he specifies. She has long, gray braids. He has a long, white handlebar mustache. She's very expressive. He's very quiet. She walks their dogs on the beach without leashes. He admonishes young campers on their lack of proper campfire materials. They go camping here, at Jalama Beach, often. Their large, boxy camper is glistening. It looks far sturdier, far warmer than the flimsy tent two spots to the right. They don't explain why they're camping all the time. They live just over the hill.

Jane used to be a teacher. Now every day Jane chooses a new treasure from the beach. She makes wind chimes out of abalone. Maybe she'll put a name in this one. Maybe it'll need a quartz. She gives detailed directions to Abalone Cove. She asks to see the treasures that others uncovered there. They're all abalone.

Jane can be quite coy. Maybe coy is too indirect of a word. She teases a group of college students. Just for having a good time the previous night. This might also be a passive aggressive comment. They'll keep it down tonight. Jane dismisses this promise. She offers her "organic Afghan kush" to the group of young campers. They don't take her up on it.

Jane flirts with a boy at least 40 years her junior. "You've got a million dollar smile. I'd never forget it." His girlfriend laughs loudly. She doesn't mind. She likes Jane. She makes jokes about the ratio of boys to girls in one tent together. She gives a wink to the two boys. They blush. They both have girlfriends. Jane asks if the young campers want to jam with her. They have no instruments. She boos loudly at them. Jane has a nice, hearty laugh.

People often discuss the difficulties of aging. What they don't discuss is the loss of friends. They move. They live in nursing homes. They pass away. They forget you. Maybe Jane likes Jalama Beach for the new people, the new friends. Whether they're boulderers from Utah, or

college students from LA. Jane can really draw people in. She's good at making friends.

Jane lives just over the hill, in the opposite direction of Abalone Cove.



**smudged eyeliner (boy music)**

Pierre Cozic

i don't know when we met, all i know  
is that every song reminds me of you  
even the ones that they say are too sad  
or the ones in spanish that i don't yet understand

now you're in my bed and it's nearly midnight  
and my lips are swollen from kissing you  
a hundred too many times

i let you bleed all over my sheets;  
we'll let our bodies be red tonight,  
we'll let winter air stay outside  
and allow ourselves to smile

i'd rather be loved, swimming in dreams  
and no, i don't know how to swim  
but for you i can try, i can try it now

(i don't know how these words escape me;  
maybe they knew you in a past life, or  
maybe we're better off not knowing that history)

i paint a map of los angeles on your chest  
a messy line connecting my heart to yours  
and it's not forever until we want it to be

**Infidelity Against Regality**

Blake Nichols

*There is a time you can remember when you were once  
regarded as the person of grace and dignity. But now you cannot fathom  
the name "Ethel" being detached from vulgarities of speech that revile  
and defame the once regal Duchess of Exeter. You can still see your  
mother's quivering look of disappointment when she stared down at you  
from ethical miles beyond your reputation's reach.*

**Echoes of footsteps in the doorway trailed back to your  
vigilant ears, prompting you to only spring up in time to be inches  
away from the stableman. As though that would say to your  
relatives and husband, "Oh no! Since thou did not witness a cyssan,  
it did not happen! I merely fell." Unaware of the commotion, his  
hand remained firmly planted on your waist, while his neck  
extended for another sinful embrace of your interlocking lips.  
Perhaps he did hear you, and his lowly position as a stableman  
taught him to carelessly continue in the face of society's judgment.  
Nonetheless, you knew seconds before he did, that they had caught  
you in the reprehensible act. But in your moment of humiliating  
infidelity, the once coy and obedient wife of Exeter's finest Duke  
was transformed into the international tramp of Western Europe.**

Ethel stood up immediately and pleaded to her husband that it  
was not what he thought. But he remained as stoic as she did when the  
rest of her family walked into the room. Her stock-still expression of  
embarrassment told it all and became eternally etched into his  
unforgiving memory the moment he walked in the door.

The duke soon enough realized what Ethel's actions meant for  
him. When people heard his name, they would associate it with an  
unfaithful marriage. His name would be dragged through the mud as a  
failed husband. Indeed, there were things he could have done to prevent  
this. He should have lifted her chin and gazed deeply into her eyes  
when she leaned coquettishly against a wall after having a bit too much  
wine. He should have extended his hand across the dining room table  
and rubbed her hands when they dined at supper. He should have had  
attentive ears when she opened her mouth to speak and voice an  
opinion. He should have told her not to do this to him, as she surely  
could not know any better.

The duke felt the sympathetic touch on his shoulder from  
Ethel's father. The Duchess's father walked closer to his once pure,  
delicate angel, and drew a deep breath. **He closed his eyes, and you**



heard that dramatic exhale you always heard as a child when you did something bad. You heard it when you pecked your friend Tom on the lips when you were five and were playing the game of “mother and father.” You heard it when you were twelve years old and went out for tea, but you wore a scarlet-colored dress instead of a white one. You heard it when you were sixteen and danced a bit too romantically with your boyfriend at the annual ball. And you heard it now. But there was something different this time. He truly believed this was intentional this time. That you meant to be the woman of infidelity who dilapidated his castle built to be a spectacle for society’s judgment. You knew that you crumbled this royal castle into the peasantry status of the stableman. Your impurity was now your family’s impurity. Your father shed a tear and disingenuously mewled, “This is my fault.” You let go of any responsibility and agreed. However, your agreement was not enough to save you or your family.

**Arachnophobia** (Originally published in *Rabbit Poetry Journal*)  
*Danae Younge*

This house is sticky, silk is royal. // \ The Stockholm Syndrome of a dragon // \ fly in a hammock— maybe // \ enveloped, straitjacket in a crib. // \ Beneath me, lines of spider mums crawl only // \ into summer’s tomb while fringed shadows breathe, // \ the opposite of sticky on the flaking bark. // \ Ill-intentioned sap // \ for which I would be grateful, // \ or at least I should. // \ I fear the black widow // \ who carries a lover in her stomach, // \ the unrelenting hourglass of red salt in skin. // \ I fear lumps of linen using my wire spine as a bridge; // \ folded vision of a woman on fire // \ I cemented shut in a matchbox. // \ Eight-legged, four-faced, swelling bites // \ I can’t reach far back enough // \ to know past a presence. // \ In the midst of this betrayal, // \ I count diamonds on their rigid string // \ like the river stars that stuck to my ancestors’ shins, // \ knowing shadows have always // \ dissolved into themselves, // \ crannies allege life, // \ its reflective dependency a card palace, // \ and tomorrow, I may be devoured.

## Anxious Virgin

### Sheila Pippin

I never received sex ed. Instead, I read *The Phantom Tollbooth* three times. On a Monday in the April of sixth grade, my class was sent to Mrs. Halley's religion class while I was sent to a plastic chair in the hallway two doors down. There, I followed Milo three times through the Kingdom of Wisdom. In the other room, my friends followed a middle-aged man from the 80s through an animated fallopian tube.

I was not out of the class due to misbehavior or disinterest. It was simply an issue of politics. According to the Archdiocese of Seattle, gay people were a sore subject and abortion was deplorable. To avoid such lessons, my mother gave the school notice that I would not be participating in sex ed. Along with lessons on sexuality and birth control, I missed all knowledge of relationships, anatomy, and the act of sex itself.

I suppose the moment of my sexual education could instead be pointed to a lunch period in freshman year of high school. Over peanut butter sandwiches and whole wheat crackers, a boy informed me that there was more than one type of sex. Despite my repetitive nods of agreement, my blazing cheeks revealed my embarrassment and surprise. I texted the boy that night to ask more questions.

"Did you not have sex ed in Catholic school?" he asked.

"No, I read *The Phantom Tollbooth*." I texted back. He didn't care for an explanation and we never talked much after that.

With my questions left unanswered, I proceeded through high school oblivious. Like swimmers, my friends waded in and out of hookups and boyfriends while I watched patiently, safely at the shore. Reflecting on their early romantic escapades, my friends count me lucky for dodging the disappointment of sex with a sixteen-year-old boy or the heartbreak one feels on the Monday after a weekend breakup. Together over winter break from college, my friends reminded each other of all the romance youth should be made of. Glancing at their lips to say you want to be kissed. Laughing at more jokes than you'll ever get the chance to tell. Developing calculations so your texts are never sent a second too soon. Wearing your hair down.

With each comment and waves of nods in agreement, I learned all that I had missed. From afar, teenage love looked beautiful. I wanted

the awkward limbs unfit for sex in a twin bed. I wanted to only watch half a film because my curfew was eleven. I wanted to leave the library because my ex had walked in. I wanted to look back on high school relationships that taught me how to love and how to be loved. But sitting in the basement of my friend's home, holding a lukewarm beer I had not touched, I could only remember feeling lonely.

Although they never said a word, I knew my friends thought I was behind. A late bloomer, still in a plastic chair with her copy of *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Since then, I could never keep up. Every benchmark felt behind. In my mind, romance lost its shine when high school ended. From then, love was dull, practical, and stable. Teenage love was a treasure you only possessed for a short time. And, God forbid, you miss it, then it is gone forever.

I never received sex ed. Instead, I waited. I had my first kiss at 17, my first time at 19, I have never been on a real date. I've been lonely and I've been embarrassed. But I've never rushed it. I read novels and I watched movies and I heard my friends tell stories, but I never had teenage love. I could have missed something, but I don't think I did. I think love will feel just as nice when I am 30, 60, and 100 years old. So for now I will just wait.

**Him**

*Emerson Thomas-Gregory*

I'm reading from a children's book, and I hear myself slipping into  
enunciations, stresses,  
intonations  
He tied to each word. I can hear the hymn of his voice  
and then it's gone.

I walk my friend down a shrinking hospital hallway, pressing my face  
into his shoulder and  
catch a whiff of sterilization  
Of plastic, of sickness on him, but it's not his smell, it's a moment of  
remembering—  
and it's gone.

Bending over backwards to get a glimpse at enlightenment  
In the fluorescent-lit room of a college gym, catching the echo of his  
eyes in mine  
and it's gone.

The skin around my mouth ruches as I tie my lips closed  
But my eyes betray me and brim with prickly tears. I'll take a deep  
breath and the feeling  
it's gone.

I'm nine-years-old wearing all black, quick to throw myself in front of  
punches and off of trees  
At twenty-one it's not as cute to be so grim, but no, the inclination  
it hasn't gone.

My mother once told me, "You have to be more careful," because I  
make  
Decisions on a whim. "We have to stick together." Her anger is real but  
I hold her  
and it's gone.

Sometimes I look to the night sky, searching for your North Star before  
I close my eyes.  
I ask you what it's like when it all goes dim. I shake my head to expel  
the thought:

it's gone.

We must pay our respects where they are due, for all art comes from the  
art before it.  
And the author's author, Tim, one day he's here, and the next,  
he's gone.

## Self Reflection

Joseph Langley

You are sitting on a rock.

It's a peaceful life, upon this rock. Your eyes are closed. You sit, and sometimes sit a little bit different, the bones of your back pressing back against the akimbo stone, your hands sometimes dry where they pry against your forlorn handholds. It's a nice rock. You are safe upon this rock. You aren't going to fall off this rock. You don't want to leave this rock. You start to worry if the rock is really there. You squeeze your fingers into the rock. It feels like it's there.

You can't take it anymore. You open your eyes and look down at your rock.

You are sitting on a rock, and there are waves crashing against your rock.

They roar and spray, kicking up their quickened cusps to brush against your face. The cool touch is welcome, sparking you with little shivers of reality. You brush the drops aside. You lean forward. You are careful not to let your handholds slip. You like your rock too much to fall. But you really want to see beyond your legs, to peer down at the cascading waves as they—

A wall of water. Bigger than the rest. It slams into you, throwing you, soaking you, chilling you. Your head is whipped, your hands slick where they grip your perfect little rock but you're rolling from the impact and your handholds are slipping...

You hold on. Hunched, bent over backwards, form splayed across the lip of your rock, legs dangling over the back, head dangling over the front. You are soaked from head to toe. You are freezing.

But you hold on.

And now you can see them. You can see the waves that hit your rock, just feet beneath your nose. You watch them tear and rip and rend. You see the water bleed. You see the water's blood fly up to greet your face. The water's blood is talking to you. The water's blood says the waves are coming for you. It says the waves are coming for your rock. You blink. The waves are crashing against your rock. The waves are eroding your rock. The waves are coming for you. The waves are coming for your rock.

You can't take it anymore. You scramble back up away from the waves. You look at the horizon.

You are sitting on a rock, and there are waves crashing against your rock, and there are no other rocks.

Your rock is but a piece of the sea. Just wide enough for you to sit, just deep enough for you to drop your legs over the side and kick them in the open air and feel the sprays of the brilliant ocean tickle between your toes. You are but flesh upon a rock. You are the only bit of flesh upon the only rock. You kick your legs some more, and grip your placid handholds, and smile.

But there is a breeze. It plays in your hair, flicking into all the hidden untouched segments of your barren self. The breeze makes it hard to smile, because the breeze is grabbing the frigid drops that still cling to your face and drip down your back and it's making them colder and *burning* them into your skin, into the flesh of your upturned smile, and its using those points of burning to grab you and yank you and pull you from your rock—

The breeze is trying to kill you.

A gust rushes through you, throwing you forward. *Your handholds are slipping.* Your legs don't have ground to stand on, there is no other rock beneath them, because of course there is no other rock, and all you have is your handholds slick with water from the wave that hit you and now the breeze has caught you and what can you do because you've been caught off guard and *your handholds are slipping—*

You fall into open air, carried by the breeze. For a moment all you can see is the ocean beneath you, the waves crashing up to greet you. They have come for you. They have come for your rock. You scream, throwing your hands up, slamming them over the rock, grinding your fingers into any crevice you can find. Your elbows jar, wrenching against their sockets. Your body slams against the side of your rock, and your chin knocks against stone, and your eyes are full of stars, but not the good kind, because you feel your vision leaving, betraying you just as the waves did, just as the breeze did—

You pull. You scabble your legs against the rock's slick flank. You pull. You roll yourself up, falling over the rock, laying on your back, limbs splayed around you to grip the rock in whatever way you can. You've made it back atop your rock. But the waves are still coming for you, and the breeze is still trying to kill you, and you are still soaked, and you are still freezing, and your head is pounding, and your vision is spotty...

You can't take it anymore. Your vision clears, and you look up.

You are sitting on a rock, and there are waves crashing against your rock, and there are no other rocks, and you are at the bottom of the world.

You stare up into infinity. Everything is up there. Everyone is

up there. Your parents are up there. Your lack of parents are up there.  
Your childhood house is up there. Your lack of a childhood house is up  
there. Your partner is up there. Your lack of a partner is up there. Your  
apartment is up there. Your lack of an apartment is up there. Your best  
friend is up there. Your lack of a best friend is up there. Your favorite  
memories are up there. Your lack of favorite memories are up there.

Your past is up there. Your lack of your past is up there. Your  
rock is not up there. You are not up there. Your future is not up there.  
You... you can't take it anymore.

You jump off your rock.

You crash into the waves.

You sink.

Your head is below the waves.

You close your eyes.

The water isn't that deep.

Your eyes are closed.

The water isn't that deep.

You can feel the ocean floor, but your eyes are closed.

The water isn't that deep.

You can stand up.

You do stand up.

You open your eyes.

You look around.

You are not sitting on a rock.

You are buffeted by the waves.

You don't need any rocks.

You are at the bottom of the world.

And you are standing.

## Reckoner

Ben Cohn

The deer carcass is tough,  
But you cut through it with a pocket knife  
gifted to you by your father  
from the jacket of a Nazi.

When the knife hits the pelvic bone, a *crrrrk* crunch  
Echoes through the forest, almost oppressive  
Ly green, except for me, bunked inside our cottage,  
Safe at home, only at home.

Under plum waste, pits stacked  
like the hearts of game animals,  
I tell myself that I no longer miss you  
And count the seconds with stone fruit.

I want to accuse you of being a narcissist,  
But even I can't help but think of you constantly,  
As I lean over the sink, chin drenched  
in peach juice like cum, doe-eyed to your lies.

Through the window, I look up to see  
another whitetail, slender and brown-haired, as I  
try to save it. A shout in German and a furious dash—  
you've got him before the whisper can leave my lips.

With that buck, you made a: condom  
out of the skin, fruit bowls out of the bones, jerky  
from the venison, and with the antlers, a marriage bed.  
How can I leave you when you're so resourceful?

**heartwood**

*Pierre Cozic*

Sitting back to back in a hollowed out tree,  
you carve our names deep into dark oak.  
(The tree is me. You are the carpenter.)

I imagine: what if our roles were reversed?  
With walls adorned with cobweb picture frames,  
you do nothing but cry at the sight of sunrise,  
a dagger held close and firm to your chest.

We accept that there are things we cannot have.  
An alarm clock reminds us that we are not alone,  
though maybe it's just me, and you're already gone.

Children race past each other on the horizon,  
clattering down the hills on rickety rusty bicycles.  
The screeching of metal against metal echoes  
until I nearly forget the sound of your voice.

Scattered pine needles erupt into a trail of flame,  
the last cigarette burning out in your shivering hand.  
I dig a hollow grave in the earth. Is it yours or mine?

The center of a tree yields the hardest timber.  
What, then, is a cavity? A vacancy, or a void?  
An aperture should fill with echoing resound,  
but you love me in silence, rather than song.

I make a living by combing leaves from your hair,  
swatting bugs from your eyes and pinning them to cork boards.  
A butterfly regresses to chrysalis, hoping to make itself right.

**Blue Cats and Butterflies**

Gabriela Pinto

I move through holes like you hold your weapons. Without a care for what's in front of me. I slither through the night in the light of the heavy moon and yet nothing seems to weigh more than your words down my throat. My mind is only blue cats and butterflies and the leaves that you once held in your hand. Yet, what it is in my mind is only a reminder of what I am not. I am not mystical, I am not wondrous, I am not beautiful, I am not yours. Why can't you think of me like your blue cats? Why can you not see in me a tail and wide eyes and soft blue fur that reflects that heavy moonlight? I am tired from the wandering. Could it have been I that made you feel more unfavorable than a rare creature? It was not I that made you stay and yet it is I that wishes you here. How can that be? How can I crave a soul that doesn't want me, who doesn't believe me great? I used to be great, you know, a medieval tower in which men with bows and arrows shot at intruders and never let them in. I held moats around my heart and only the fiercest could cross and yet, somehow you did... or because of that, you did. You took my men's arrows and pierced me like Eros would and like a cruel handler of fate you left me alone with my heart-aching love, woundedly enamoured and destroyed. I do not wish you would have stayed but I do not wish you would have gone. Maybe it would've been better if you died, then it would not have been your choice. The arrows would be in me and my organs would be held in. Now I cannot stop the bleeding. The blood runs and runs until it can't get far enough away from me.

...I remember the day you touched me...

I can feel it. I feel it deep in my stomach. I feel it so much I want to cry. When he touches me, my mind races. Everything feels so intense and I just want to sigh of relief or pain or freedom or joy.

I want to touch his eyeballs, to physically feel that look, but the closest I can get is looking back into them and I can somehow feel it, like this blanket coming over me just from his gaze. I don't understand it. I don't think I'm ever meant to.

His touch is exhilarating. It is like his being pulled the strings of my muscles and twisted them into his. I feel the twisting in my stomach. It is so tight almost to the point of being uncomfortable, but it isn't. It's a

bearable pain. A pain I want. Suddenly, I'm a masochist and he is my only release.

I have never felt something like this, something so beautiful that you're at its mercy. Speechless. Majestic. Regal. Makes you want to get on your knees and bow down to it, show it reverence. I give myself, my mind, my body, my soul, my feeling, my everything to you.

... You...

I loved. I know I loved.  
meant to end?

Was this how it was

I used to have a face  
and a name

Does it feel good? To have taken it away?

I hate you.  
you

I see  
everywhere

And I run away like you have the plague

Look what you did to me.

Does it feel good?

I miss you.

Do you even think about me anymore?

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN YOU  
SEE ME?

When you look at me

I know you look at me

Does it feel good?  
DOES IT FEEL GOOD?

Does  
It  
Feel  
Good  
?

## Happy Birthday, Steve!

Bia Pinho

July 14th, finally! Bartholomew had been counting the days until this moment, until Steve's birthday. Steve hated celebrating his birthday but Bartholomew insisted:

"21 Steve, you're turning 21!"

He had a very specific celebration in mind, one that involved the college tradition of throwing one in the fountain at the turn of the clock on their day of birth. Bartholomew knew Steve would be opposed, but he also knew he'd regret it if they didn't do anything special. Everyone likes to be celebrated, he thought, and convinced himself Steve would secretly love his grand birthday party plan.

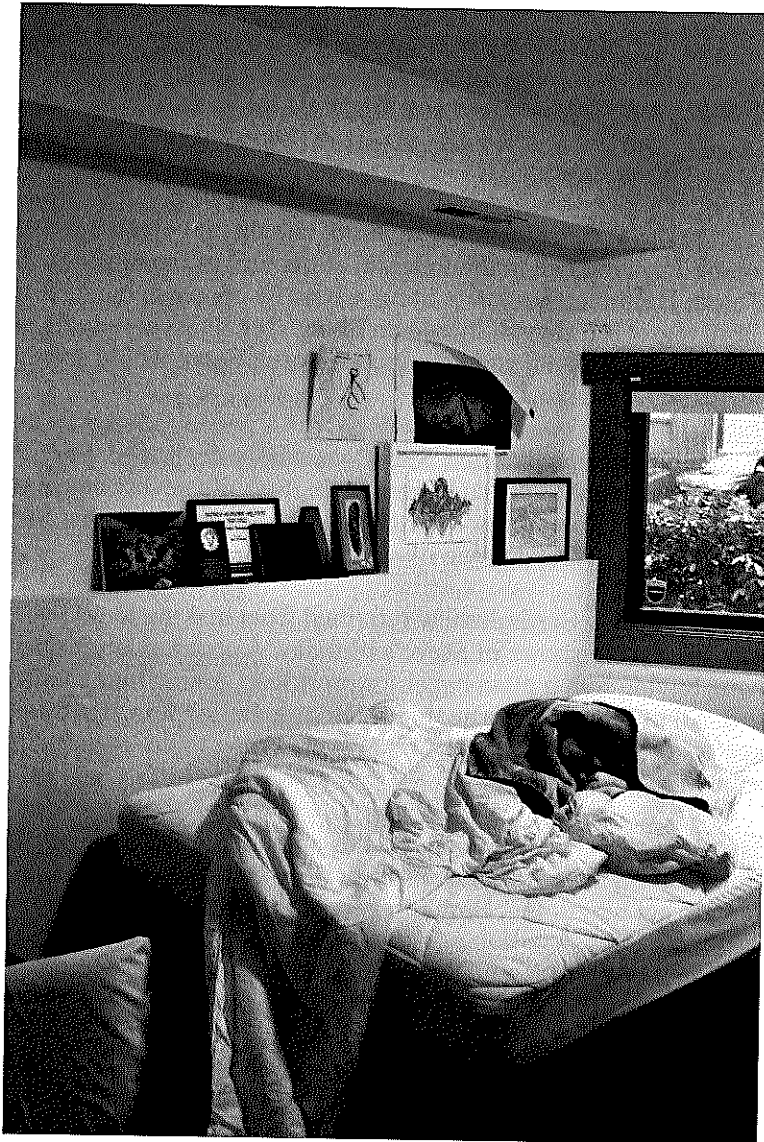
Steve hated his birthday because Steve was wildly depressed. For someone who wanted to die so badly, celebrating life never came easy. However, being his best friend, Bartholomew knew exactly what Steve needed to have a perfect coming of age...

Throughout the day, Bartholomew refrained from making large mentions or any big shows of Steve's birthday. A congratulations here and there, buying him a plain bagel for breakfast, getting him a target gift card. All of Steve's favorite things. He was lulling him into thinking that was going to be it, that was all they were going to do — until, of course, it wasn't.

The day came to a close, and both friends agreed to drinking beer closer to midnight to celebrate not Steve's birth date, but the end of it. Anything to get him going, Bartholomew thought.

Eventually: "Let's go for a walk" Bartholomew threw his hands in the air once he thought Steve was sufficiently drunk enough to not throw a complaint.

The two of them went for a walk. They wandered around, joked, reminisced. 21 years of age and neither had much to say, frankly, but they pretended they did for the sake of themselves and those who raised them.



*Film photography by Ella Gonchar*

They reached the fountain.

Immediately, Bartholomew, who was twice the size of Steve and significantly less drunk, picked his friend up and charged towards the gushing water sounds. Once he realized what was happening, Steve started screaming in protest, but there was only so much the tiny and feeble now 21-year-old could do.

Soon enough he was in the fountain, submerged by water and... Bartholomew? Bartholomew had jumped in after Steve and seemed to be sitting on him. Very funny, it's my 21st birthday and this reject wants to kill me. He lay pressed between the bottom of the fountain and his friend's large butt for a few seconds, enjoying the pressure while he still had breath to spare. It was strangely peaceful for a little bit.

Naturally, after a few moments, Steve felt an urge to come up for air. He hit against Bartholomew's back, indicating that it was time for him to get off. Bartholomew didn't move. I see how it is, he wants me to fight for it. Steve began thrashing around, trying to break free of Bartholomew and his stupid game. Bartholomew seemed to be taking it too seriously, however, and wouldn't let Steve move. Does he think I have the lungs of a whale??? Steve thought to himself, starting to panic. He squirmed around some more trying to break free, he even peed his pants (the sound of the water flowing in the fountain was really getting to him, even underwater). What the fuck!? I'm going to die! He thought to himself, moments before he lost consciousness in the water.

Bartholomew dragged his friend out of the fountain. He had been sitting on him for 10 minutes now.

"Happy birthday, Steve!" He sighed to the corpse with a small smile on his face.

"I hope you had a good day."



## A Love Letter to a Misunderstood City

Grace Mundy

I recently went on a bike ride along the LA River with a friend. It was after a storm, and the river was freely flowing with water, as it rarely does. The weather was beautiful and there were countless pedestrians and fellow cyclists outside. We crossed through 20 miles of the city, seeing different neighborhoods, stores, and freeways.

I could not help but feel overwhelmed with joy and love at that moment. Maybe it was just the endorphins from exercising. But I choose to believe that it was the power of this city.

I'm from LA. It's a fact I gleefully share about myself in social situations, so much so that my friends make fun of my need to let everyone know my hometown. I have immeasurable pride and love for my city, despite the ever-too common idea that LA is a miserable hellscape reserved solely for the rich and famous. Despite this, I am neither rich nor famous, and I enjoy my time in this city.

To tell someone you are from LA, and even worse that you love it, is to be met with the assertion that LA is a horrible place with no merits.

Now, I certainly do not think of LA as perfect. My writing is not to dismiss the many problems of this city. As any place does, LA has a whole host of issues, most of which are rooted in systemic inequality and prejudice. I actively criticize my city and the ways in which it divides its members along demographic lines such as race or class.

However, some of the criticism against LA is simply unwarranted. It's become cool to hate LA and its slew of Erewhons, influencers, and unnecessary gluten-free diets. But to myself, and many other residents, this is not what LA looks like.

The Los Angeles depicted in Hollywood films or the Instagram feeds of influencers is really only LA to a small minority. The majority of the city, and the LA I am familiar with, the LA I love, is a much more interesting and complex representation of a city trying its best.

To me, LA is a place filled to the brim with opportunities and experiences. Though for some people, this may mean production company internships or celebrity sightings, the LA I know consists of trips to the Tar Pits and walks down Ventura Boulevard. If I'm in the mood for something more touristy, I may try Grand Central Market or a picnic at Griffith Observatory. I've never set foot in an Erewhon.

I don't mean for this to sound like some contest about who or

what is the most accurate representation of a city. What I mean is to redefine the common understanding of Los Angeles, to highlight the often underrepresented beauty and joy found in the diverse communities and varied geography throughout the city.

Some of my fondest memories revolve around this city. Hikes on the weekend through canyons or rocky landscapes. Discovering a new mural along the river and walking the half mile to see it all. Going to my favorite deli with my grandparents. Strolling through Union Station with my brother and my stomach full of tacos.

Despite my joyful memories, when I do criticize this city, it is because I know that it has the capability to be a much better place for everyone. Much like a group of students banding together to complain about a teacher they all despise, the LA residents I know are the first to criticize their city, yet are also the first to pursue change. To simply hate a city is to complain, but to love a city is to recognize problems, and subsequently try your best to improve them.

As I watch the city change, with businesses closing or people I love moving, I am reminded that LA is not immune to the push and pull of residents that so many other cities are facing. But, rather than give up, I take my time to mourn, and eventually I am ultimately encouraged by how special and truly beautiful this place is. I hold on to the hope that despite the losses, positive change and care will make LA the best it can be.

I love LA. I don't know if I'll be here forever. But, I do know that this city has made me the person I am, for better or for worse. It has shown me its flaws and its beauty. Its history, good and bad, is permanently etched in my brain. This city is its own force, too big and powerful for me to assert that it loves me back.

Driving through this massive place, the traffic on the freeway forces me to physically slow down. I am moved in both negative and positive ways by the green and gray mountains obstructed by haze. The first time I left LA, I was shocked to find that the sky in other places is almost always a rich and bright blue. I am angry at the smog that I can feel in my lungs while I run or swim in the uncompromising heat of the summer.

I feel the value of this city too. I admire the art deco and Spanish revival architecture found throughout the city, affected by its simple beauty. I share meals with friends and family, enjoying cuisine from places I have not had the opportunity to visit. I watch the sun's descent over houses dotted on the hills.

I know I am not special, as almost everyone has some sort of

complicated relationship to the place they are from. I do know that LA, in all its paradoxical glory, is special. It is a city of contrasts which somehow manages to create the most frustrating and caring relationship with its residents. It is a city simultaneously riddled with change and stagnant systems. It is a geographical and cultural wonder. It is home.

### **Hypnotized**

*Jackson Lewellen*

Does he ever stop to wonder, where the light went in your head?  
Or instead he dreams of slithering in your bed  
And the autumn leaves turned silver, as the world became so small  
And a little smile was all it took to start the fall

Hold your hand, don't patronize  
Pleased to meet you sir have a good night, but I'm sorry this one's mine  
And your eyes are well acquainted, to the scene that plays again  
The curtain rise, to no applause, but you'll stay watching till the end

Tear your claws against the wall  
And I know, that reaching arms pull as you fall  
No surprise, that your already hypnotized

He has no inhibition, he needs no other truth  
To caramelize the coat of sugar on all the words he says to you  
And your skin has grown numb, to all the things that made it crawl  
And torn apart, he's back for more, until there's nothing there at all

In something, so quiet, you'll find your piece of violence  
Falling out of the sky, can you remember what's right?  
Of poison, or flowers, you'll scream at awful hours  
Wondering if you're hypnotized

**The Tax on my Body is But a Small Fee**

*Emerson Thomas-Gregory*

I raise a toast to the gods, all they do  
Because in you they've given me my muse.  
I reveal tales of life secret to you,  
Write spine-held love letters in shades of blues,  
Rest head on chest, hope my hums—elation—  
Sink into you. Your body is church: in  
Your skin I find scripture, revelation.  
Catch your reflection in juniper gin  
I tell you I speak with the moon, light dame,  
Tell her, the night sky, of you as I draw  
New constellations, and give them your name.  
I will rename the stars, write my hands raw,  
For what is the artist without the art?  
And what is the body without its heart?

**Emulsion**

*Chris Boeke*

I wish I could write you a poem.  
That made you smile and break.  
That made you swirl in the words  
Of my love. A vortex of syllables  
Dripping onto the sheets of your  
Sand dusted skin.

You remind me of the sun  
At dawn.  
A gleaming loom of bright  
You immutable effervescence

I drown in your envelop.  
Jasmine wind embalms.  
Forests shiver in your wake.  
Emulsions of honey  
And Love.

*Note from the editor: Three and a half years after falling into the role of Editor-in-Chief of what was once Feast and is now The OZ, I'm saying goodbye to the literary magazine and to Oxy. I'm so proud of the issue this group put together – the passion and drive of the editors is what made this all possible. What was once a one-man-operation became a true group effort – and I mean that, everyone in the masthead contributed greatly. The writing and art here is loving, fierce, and funny. I hope you love it as much as I do.*

– Ben Cohn



*Raina Pahade - Impossible Desires, 2021*

*Acrylic paint on canvas*

*Back cover photo by Ella Gonchar*