

THE OZ Literary Magazine

Fiction

Poetry

Visual Art



C l o s e t o
H o m e Spring 2026

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**T H E
O Z**
Literary Magazine

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EDITORS' NOTES

My time at *The Oz* has been a time of growth. When I first submitted a poem six editions ago, I was barely beginning to call myself a poet. Over the last three years I credit *The Oz* with not only building my identity as a writer, but also as a person. It has been an incredible honor to join Eran and Hanna Lou this year as a co-editor to help facilitate the meetings, workshops, decision committees, and all other parts of *The Oz* that have built the community that has given me so much. This edition, as with every edition, is the result of all that work, play, joy, expression, and most importantly, the incredible people involved in every step. With love,

~ Averylin (a.k.a. Al)

Over the past three years, I've co-edited six issues of this magazine. I've read and published, if my calculations are correct, one hundred forty-six pieces of writing. Each one has taught me something: how to be a better writer, how to treat the world and other people with more care. I'm graduating this semester, and I'm going to miss a lot about Oxy; I'm going to miss *The Oz* the most. To engage with and devote so much time to your work these years has been an honor, the kind of honor I'm not sure will fall to me again. It's difficult to leave something I've put so much of myself into, but I feel an immense privilege to get to see what the capable hands of the future *Oz* editors do with the magazine; it will, I'm sure, surpass anything I'm able to imagine. For the last time, I hope you enjoy the work in this issue.

~ Eran

Three years! That is how long I have been an editor-in-chief at *The Oz*! I was there in the hospital room when *Feast*, the previous title, became *The Oz*. I was there when *The Oz* took its first steps, supported by talented writers and artists from every grade level. In total, I've had the absolute honor to watch *The Oz* grow up as we designed our first workshops, hosted open mics each semester, and finally solved the finicky secrets of InDesign. With each year writers, artists, and club members at *The Oz* have shown me dedication, community, laughter, and passion. I hope to bring these moments with me as I continue life after Oxy. Thank you to all who have made these last three years so memorable and genuinely wonderful.

~ Hanna Lou

Accessories

Jane Brinkley

Uneven coatings of florals n checkers
Wraps around a congested skull
Captivating the twisted tootsie rolls
Strangled down the rooted neck
Lighter than the dimmed silver orbs
Dangling from a scarred lobe
Entangled in webs of coins n crystals
Weigh upon the cursive figure
What beauty it feels to be wrapped by the warmth of ethereal love...
What beauty it feels
To grasp my mother's pearls
I never feel alone

Pause / Rewind

Jane Brinkley

Present your flaws
 through your lungs
Not your chest
Let loose like a noodle
 Your stiffer
than stale bread
Let your eyes rinse
 out your salty tears
 Cleanse your face more than your mask
Let your emotions distress
 Do a trust fall
 upon your bed
Let your eyes drip down
 like curtains
 Reset your brain through an *Electric Relaxation*

Celestine

Taavi Carbone

I

Christmas bells twinkle in the snow
 Where blind dust softly kisses her pale eyes
 A dance flyer drifts lonely in the glow
 Of neons speaking rainbow smoke goodbyes
 On a phone line lounges someone's old pet crow
 Haloed by his mindless droning horsefly
 Dark brown liquor fills up his canteen
 But you already knew that, Celestine

In your mailbox muddy letters damply rot
 Peddling music lessons you can't teach
 The bondsman signs his name with bloody clots
 His left arm feeds a pumping river leech
 You tie my chest up stiff with navy knots
 On top of my old fridge where I can't reach
 It's spooled down twirling past my purple spleen
 And I know you think you're right, Celestine

Your eyes like mountain streams run pale blue
 I waited here all night, just hardly sitting
 When crowds of soldiers asked if you spoke true
 You just turned away and dawned your mittens
 Dead horses pull ghostly plague men crews
 Wart faced drifters flick feathers for black kittens
 I trudge past awnings where we used to lean
 'Cause I know that's what you wanted, Celestine

II

How could you look at a tree and think that it's not God?
 Perfectly twitching twigs sprawling like veins, a pupil
 under a microscope
 Picturesque green and earthly brown under the backdrop of the

great blue sky
 I've seen trees that I know are God
 An ancient California tree, bark like old mothers' skin
 Worn and creasing at the elbows
 Her great layers of camouflage like the bottom of a soft
 stream
 Thousands of years of packed sand and granite and anything else

Massive palm fans rest heavily on her thick branches
 The culprit palm like a green dragon's tail, sprouting
 stubborn at a 45 degree angle from the wall
 I lay here thankful every day, safe in her maternal protection,
 trusting in our silent bond that she will shelter me from the blistered sun
 And between her dainty leaves you see mosquitoes madly
 batting their little wings in futility
 I will smack them all
 She's so old in fact that they've had to support her lumbering
 arthritis riddled limbs with sadly painted gray metal poles,
 but I'm sure she doesn't mind
 Even though she'd do just fine without them

III

Celestine lays under trees and talks to the grass
 Some of them will even open right up and let her in
 They know when she's had her fill of the screaming wind
 She springs out in May like a dandelion and loses all her hair
 and delicately she puts it all back in
 one by one fitting each dark needle with hands as true as
 a seamstress
 Celestine sunbathes in deserts and doesn't care about heat stroke
 Celestine asks flowering cactuses if she can use them as a spikey
 cloak
 She burns in roaring fires and grabs big handfuls of hot
 sand on the beach
 In the morning she eats hard crackers and tastes a juicy
 peach
 I see her looking at me through the gray haze of a rainy day

She smells like a field that hits your face with sun when
you step out of the woods
Usually she's there admiring purple flowers without picking them
Or counting spiders on a pebble beach between the waves

New Hampshire/Los Angeles, 2025-26

Phantom Pain

Fiona Connor

Sometimes the cat screams until you pick her up. Deep inside her, a hysterical hammering echoes and echoes and echoes. Bounces from her to me when I try to corral her in my arms, bounces along

the fracture lines of my own flowering ribcage. Obscene contusions bloom along stems of violence. There is a petulant child screaming over spilled milk, and also the horrors which are rising, hovering,

like blood starved and sick and sacred revenants. I want to be corralled and told what to do. I want someone to hold me, roughly, gently. I want to be told with certainty what to do. Sell me on my own life.

Tell me about it, about the (soulless) weeping of god. The old man hacking up spittle beneath my window is soon to meet his maker, the one screaming in abject horror of anticipation, waving wild cradling limbs

he no longer has. The one afraid of judgment, busy sweeping a baby's cancer-riddled corpse under the bed of creation. The dust mites seize upon her. The benevolent eyes of the almighty well with a mighty male-

volence. Revel in a celestial frame that traded arms for wings. I don't want to be what I am, which is weak and made of fat. I wish I didn't need so badly to be held by god, or anyone.

Nine Hundred God

Averylin Huang Cummins

In 2026 the great Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius has rooted himself in my college dorm room, singing Taiwanese church hymns so loud that the Los Angeles streets three stories down can hear.

In the 12th century BC, the Trojan women weave bright floral headscarves to hide their chemo-thinned hair. I only know their faces from my memories, memories mixed with photographs taken before the war, when Creusa cooked me bacon just the way I like it, just this side of burned.

In 197X Ah Mah travels to Italy. While her husband takes business meetings she tours every church in Rome and I am a fleck in the rose-colored marble that catches the light and will not dim until she stops to listen.

In 2024 I sit down in the Parthenon and understand the warmth of Ah Mah's god, the one she hadn't lived long enough to teach me. I want to reach for her but *nimis timeo nomen meum dis-cere*, so I give myself a new old name, her own name, one that I cannot pronounce.

In 2026 I sing back to the Emperor. I sing until my lips are bright pink, Ah Mah's holiest color, I sing until my voice echoes from every stone in every church, as the university foundations shake, as the gates of Rome come down around me, and all I can hear in my own voice is hers.

THE COMMUNAL GARDEN

jaxsen gamm

i am a communal garden.

a space / a plot / a body impregnable,
a fleeting moment / drifting tide of Night.

i am caretaker / gardener / tender.
you are my help / warm hands / impassioned breath
with which we make this a life worth living.

something in your lips / i point my finger
at my soil / you press where i guide you.
burgeoning life / living / by my navel,

indigoed skin / exploded capillaries,
leaking movement / no longer still / blood flowing /
trickling through dirt beneath my fingernails.

your labor and my labor / both sweating,
i need more of your gardening / of your
worship / not my own sacrilege stillness

my cure / the spade wicked / sharp / innocent,
the lake inside me unmoving / stale / sick.
so i plant blood rows of scarlet roses /
force them budding and

//
blooming and

//
yielding and

//
redeeming and

//
redeemed.

rhythm gushes forward. dark throbbing hours,
tender and gentle, feel their way around

my curled bleeding body.

DONT FUCK WITH MY VENUS

jaxsen gamm

minds on bodies in bathrooms
violence on minds

OCCUPIED

in this stall
i'm in here
taking risks
to piss with
girdick

policing gender, agent of the state
on screens crave trans bodies,
exposed flesh fantasy,
needed and hated.

wrong body,
catch a body – carplay
darkness flower blooming night
headlight angel, dim glow deity –
Do I do it for you?
Do me for you.

look at my
boyface,
seeing red
rosy, pink tip
petal soft as steel

i melt flesh
with sweat and
cum
and my tiny tits –

silent hotel rooms
hold your airless envy
gasping.

Venus Xtravaganza,
 my midnight queen
 murdered.
 but She,
 that eternal melting star,
 burns saintly beauty
 tattooed estrogen
 in my hormone heart

can you feel the girlboy/blood
 hallowed and stolen
 on these dove-white linens
 because
 i
 can
 feel
 its
 burning
 course
 in
 our
 veins
 into
 these
 open
 hands
 generous,
 free
 celebrating
 thrashing
 all together
 with her,
 with her,
 with her,
 with them.

lovely ignorant marble,
 we are with her
 in a joy unstoppable, transcending, remembering,
 solemn.



Leaving

Magdalene Selin-Williams

the shape of absence

jaxsen gamm

grandfather. Gary. husband
 traveled
 all over
 why. would
 I guess.

The distance. left my mother,
 cheated the guts
 specifically found out,
 affected
 her somewhere
 I
 offhandedly
 knew
 memory,
 felt missing
 an absence. feel some-
 thing pressing Learning
 Naming
 impossible that
 the lake had become
 The mess
 conflicted in blood

he is dead. in Florida
 closeted
 away,
 the intention,

also [REDACTED] died from that [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] sort [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] his belongings [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Everything [REDACTED] heard
[REDACTED] him [REDACTED] My mom, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] her father's death, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] his [REDACTED] children [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] my [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] issues.

the shape of absence (3/4/26)

jaxsen gamm

My grandfather. My mom's dad. Gary. Grandma's husband for a bit. Worked with IBM and apparently traveled around for his work, went all over Chicago, other parts of the midwest for reasons I'm not sure why. What work would involve IBM that would require him to travel? What did he do? something in business, numbers or technology, if I had to guess. Very much like a 70s-80s job to have.

The distance. He left my family, my mother, her sister, his wife. He cheated on my grandma a lot, I haven't really had the guts to ask specifically what those cases were about. How she found out, what happened when she found out, how that affected my mom and the rest of her siblings. he fucked off south somewhere to Florida. I don't think he ever reached out to my mom, to anyone in the family really, he never really came up in conversations, at family events, only offhandedly remarked to in my grandma's stories. I never knew what he looked like, I still don't know what he looks like, I can't draw his face from memory, and I don't know if I have ever felt the urge to, or like I was missing something. The shape of an absence. However, it's hard to feel something that you don't even realize is pressing upon you. Learning that a lot now. Naming things and whatnot. I wonder if it was just impossible to stay, that he wasn't going to be tied down to the lake and sift out what had become of his and his family's (?) lives. The mess of it all, there was apparently no point in trying it. I suppose we weren't really family, or rather, that term seems a little conflicted in its use here. Sure we share some blood but it hasn't made fuck all of a difference.

I know he is dead. Died sometime a year or two ago, in Florida . He was a closeted homosexual? Or just a homosexual period. I'm sure that was part of the reason he ran away, or chose to move away. I don't know the intention, and I doubt I ever will. But he

also had AIDS, HIV. I'm not sure if he died from that or from other issues. My uncle got the call to sort all of it up, to parse through his belongings of his father, now dead. My uncle said he found some fucked up shit on his computer, his hard drives. I took that to be gay shit, nudes, my grandfather maybe could've been on fucking Grindr. I don't know. Everything I've ever heard about him does not ever paint a pretty picture. My mom, I'm pretty sure, said that she once walked in on him cheating on my grandma with a girl my mom's age. So maybe he was a bisexual. Or a pervert. I don't know anything about this shit. My mom's reaction to the knowledge of her father's death, the father who cared none at all about seeing his grandchildren or children or anything. Mental health issues, my mom claimed he had mental health issues.

A Bench Northeast

Lucia Grajales

To sit on this bench,
somewhere northeast.

Once I flew solo, but to sit on this perch together—
a bench whose history is mine,
I now take pride in sharing it with you.
A bench that etched splinters into my feathered wings.

Nested,
I still think back to that perch,
it was not as unbearable as I remember it to be.

Now far from the northeast
and that bench—longing more than ever,
to fly back with retired wings,
and ponder what led me to that moment.

It was a good bench, it was enough.
I am enough, splinters and all,

—on this bench, somewhere northeast.

Playing Ourselves

Madeleine Hladky

Critics would say that she only ever played herself. She was pretty good in *Fallen Woman* (the scene with the baby tugged at people in an odd way, brief but lasting, difficult to ignore), alright in *Celestial* (for another biopic, although she inhabited Enola “a bit delicately”), and “sometimes surprising” in *Beyond the Waterways*. Even if you went back and saw her breakout role in *Send Over* it was her the whole time, her youth at the time amplifying that seriousness, a scene of rain, exposed in *that* way...they would compare clips to interviews like it was some cruel trick and she could’ve told them that everyone is always playing themselves all of the time. And it was her but more the memory she had chosen to tuck into the scene they were filming. That one with the rain had a blurry night woven into it, the sense of something heavy on top, a conversation heard from another room. You could see, in the slight way she held that baby, the light of a TV on the window and everything else feeling quite far away. It all got a little lost, something about the pixels of a thirty foot screen being unable to hold those little things. She kept all her memories, unwillingly, unseen, buried. She thought of it like a rabbit warren; under a barren stretch of dirt, they were all there, pink, delicate, capillaries close to translucent skin, pulsing softly in hopes to be disturbed.

In that period of time when the mention of her name did not inspire a process of recollection and brief googling, she had her own makeup artists. There was a video of herself from this time that she often watched. She had been nineteen and the hands with brushes at her cheeks that framed the video had truly made her appear as though she was a painting nearly finished. She had cultivated an air of delicacy, an impenetrable sweetness for the interview they did, and she’d watch it now and think how the only thing that made this possible had been her youth. Now it was just her in an empty room and some odd smattering of powders and creams, little wings and daubs and things she’d picked up over the years that she now felt made her look older than before. But she always took care with her makeup when Cather-

ine would be someplace, a little extra careful with her eyes especially, trying to mimic that sweep of dark lash like from before. She thought of the first time she had seen her at an award show: she had been behind her taking pictures, and she felt herself move more quickly to catch up with the dark-haired head in front of her; you could actually see it in the photographs—she had messed up a few, slightly in motion, her head turned oddly, beginning to face away, something her manager chided her for at the time.

The first time she met Catherine was shortly after she discovered that she herself was known only because in some way she resembled Catherine. She watched an online video about it once. From what she understood, Catherine was the “face” of the moment, a face so beautiful that it seemed to be the first of its kind, so lovely that it cultivated in everyone an insatiable need for more faces of that vein. She and Catherine shared those large brown eyes, that swath of dark hair, but she was a rudimentary echo of Catherine, less delicate, still beautiful, but then again, Catherine’s was the sort of beauty that made everything else look plain. This whole thing embodied the weird part of being famous: there were levels to being known, and so you could be living as yourself and also discover that you were merely orbiting someone greater. And yet Catherine turned to her, and, “Laura!” She said, “I’ve been meaning to meet you.” There was no trace of any of this—no once-over—some signal of recognition that she, Laura, was, completely, the faded, muddled, copy. It was more so that by virtue of looking similar, Catherine had decided that they already knew one another, and all there was to say about it now was oh, right, it’s you.



Where Are We?

Magdalene Selin-Williams

Reflections from my rooftop (3)

Evan Jensen

A new haze
One I notice
Much more

No longer my rooftop
Another's
Feels much different

I have not known these chairs
They have not collected dust
While I stand idle by

I have not hung clothes here
Summoned, by my mother's call
To save our linen from the monsoon's rain

A new view
One which might seem impressive
But I see no gray giants

I only see miniature boxes
Ants scurrying in the distance
The sound and light unceasing, lost in itself

A tesla drives by
Dark and silent into the night
And I miss the sudden whistle
Of the neighborhood trash truck

The groaning rush
Of an airplane overhead
The flutter of pigeons
As they discolor our windowsills

New noises, new sounds
New neighbors
New spirit

No matter how long I've lived here
I still cannot
Fall asleep

This isn't my rooftop
There's a new haze
But also
A new clarity

I know my rooftop
And where it's been
I know where home is
I can miss it

Best of all
I can look forward
To dozing off on it
Once more

My rooftop is waiting for me
And it might be a while
But until then
This balcony will do

What to Do with Blueberries

Eran Karmon

Everything is so exciting all the time

No one else notices the faded letters of the sign outside the church as the car's tires crush hundreds of gravel flecks, but I read them. The bits of stone squeak as if they are capable of experiencing indignation.

"In Vermont the sun barely rose in the winter. It would get to where it is now, and just move across the sky horizontally like that. The day felt like it was completely done anytime past two," my mother explains from the passenger seat. "It was super depressing. You can imagine why we left." She smiles to herself as she tries to catch the eye of Lily, my father's sister, in the rear-view mirror. Failing that, my mother meets my eye, and glares slightly. Lily stares at the halted blueberry bushes as my father parks. The gravel rests its outrage.

No one understands why Lily is here. A collection of failed plans led to a half-hearted invitation to pick in the blueberry fields, and we were all but certain we would be met with a good enough reason why Lily couldn't make it, how she was sorry, how we would do something soon. But she accepted, and now my brother, Dean, sits in the middle of the backseat, staring at the dashboard. He is obviously unhappy. I suppose I am trying to keep the peace, but I'm not sure anyone else can tell. Lily, much to my mother's dismay, had spent most of the car ride gazing absently out her window just like she is now, not speaking much to anyone and smiling slightly. We are about to *PICK ALL YOU CAN* of *THE BEST BLUEBERRIES IN CALIFORNIA*. Underneath these huge block letters there's a little painting of a bear, eating an ice cream cone. I don't know what that has to do with anything.

I'm trying to keep the most interesting things I've seen from the car window in my mind. There was the hill you have to go up before the plateauing blueberries, the endless sky and its lounging clouds. There were all the American flags, there was the heat cascading everywhere, making everyone in the car so quietly angry. There was the part just twenty minutes out from home where there are those trees blooming so marvelously that

my father can barely see the road, leaves everywhere, branches cramping the car. I can't shake this one image. There were houses on both sides of the street but they were sparse, a house every minute or so. No one in the car was talking, it was too hot. All the houses were still except for one. There was a block party, or a family gathering, or a birthday party in the yard; everyone was laughing, shoving one another, speaking loudly, maybe fifteen people or so. But as we passed, each person stopped what they were doing and stared at our car. Children, adults, everyone. They just stood still, looking at us. Thirty eyes demanded my returned attention; I stared back in confusion. Again, no one seemed to notice what was, to me, urgent. Was there something wrong with the car? Had we stumbled upon private property, was this someone's driveway? Did we know these people? And then they were gone.

Everything is so exciting all of the time. I tell myself that it's true as I step out of the car.

"Can you please try to talk to her more," my mother whispers, still glaring, as the door slams. The heat outside tries to knock me over.

"She's not really talking to me or Dean either," I whisper back, already sweating. Lily is on the other side of the car, and can just as easily as not hear every word we're saying. I motion to Dean, who has gotten out on my side, stretching in the parking lot. I can see a few bushes from our spot, stooped over with the weight of so many tiny things. There are more people here than I hoped. Dean doesn't say anything, but nods slightly and eyes my father. Dean has barely said a word the entire ride. He doesn't like Lily, I haven't asked why.

"Okay, I get that, but just try and talk a little more to her," my mother says. "Please, thank you" she adds with a dismissive and good-humored brandish of her hand. My mother, worried that Lily had grown to resent our family because of our inability to keep in touch with her, has resolved that the purpose of this excursion is to impress Lily, to win her complete friendship. Her efforts are, in my view, noble but doomed, and therefore a bit indulgent. Lily does not seem to be having a particularly good time.

"Hey, John, did you hear anything yet?" I hear Lily's voice from over the car.

"Not yet. They said the latest they'll tell me is three."

My father is exempt from being especially friendly to Lily for two reasons, even though Lily is his sister. First, he hardly ever speaks to anyone. Second, he is waiting on a call to see if he got the job he's been applying for over the past month and a half. My mother is taking his silence as a symptom of his uncommunicated nerves.

Lily clicks her tongue. "This place really is beautiful, isn't it," my mother says, sliding over to Lily and my father. I feel the gravel crunch under my feet, the sound now soft.

The blueberry picking started as a late-summer initiative on the part of my mother and I to spend time together before I left. While I still accept this sentiment as the exigence for the outing, I have shifted my objective to gaining a complete understanding of a place that I know I will soon be separated from. We've been going here on-and-off for years, and this will likely be our last visit. My goal is to imprint the orchard, which has been at least somewhat important to my childhood, on my mind. I feel that I cannot claim this place as formative if I cannot remember what it feels like to be in it. I cannot say I love the blueberry field if I cannot recall the air, the particular blue of the sky, the way a flick of my finger feels different here, and I, upon my failure, will be less serious (and less interesting) of a person, one who fakes his idiosyncrasies and thus his future epiphanies. I feel that I need to be able to say I love the blueberry field.

I hear the voices of my parents and Lily getting quieter as they trail to the stand where guests collect their pails. Dean and I catch up to them.

"Okay, so you get a bucket, it can be a small one, and you just try to fill it up with as many blueberries as you can get, and you pay by the pound. Also, this honey," my mother gestures to a jar of honey with a watercolor label of a blue jay on the front "is like the best thing you've ever eaten."

Lily inspects it. "Maybe I'll buy some on the way back." I am more impatient than I would like to admit to get to the blueberries. The wood of the shack is warped by so many years of sun.

—

I gauge that it's safe to break away from the rest of the group by the time my pail is half full. Lily and my mother are off together, Dean is probably trailing behind them, sullen. Last time I saw my father, his pail was only so full that you couldn't see

the bottom, and barely at that. He keeps checking his phone.

My fingers are tinged an unsightly purple, but it's hard to care. I tell myself that it's as if all that matters is whether or not this bush harbors stashes of fruit. As if all that matters is the meanness at my fingers. Perhaps it's all that has ever mattered. I'm sure it looks silly from the outside, an almost six-foot tall young man folding himself over a blueberry bush. He's crouching down as if it really means something that he gets the one especially large blueberry at the very back of the cluster. His bright orange pail, which looks like a children's toy, is precarious in the red dirt, and his jeans are probably unsalvageable. And I find it hard to care. I have convinced myself that it is all of the utmost importance. Maybe, I tell myself, the hunt for blueberries is the hunt of my life. The leaves are starkly green against the buzzing sky. They block the rough edges of sounds so that I only hear muffled voices, muffled footsteps approaching me. I look down at my pail. The blueberries, now all grouped together, look meager despite the time and mental energy I've dedicated to them. They look all sad together like this, and out of place.

"Dad got the job," Dean says. I realize I can't get angry at him for creeping up on me, he probably wasn't.

"Oh my god, that's great!" I say.

My mother comes beaming through the bushes. "Did you hear? Be sure to tell him you always knew it was his," she says. She really is happy. A minute later and we're all smiling into the blueberries.

I start picking next to Dean, my pail heavy. My mother stands close to us. Lily and my father's voices are soft from a few rows over.

"No," my mother says to Dean "if you want to get the ones in the very back you have to hold your pail like this," gesturing to the way she is holding hers so that it is almost in danger of tipping out blueberries.

"I know how to hold the pail," Dean says, a cutting edge of anger in his voice.

"Yeah, but you're not doing it in the best way," my mother says, not catching on to his hostility or choosing to ignore it.

"Why do you care what way I hold the pail?"

"It's not like I care, I just was giving you a pointer," she says.

“You’re always doing this. You always have ‘pointers’ about the way I do everything. Washing dishes, how I hold my forks, whatever. You know I’m going to be going to college pretty soon too,” he gestures to me, “then you’re not going to have anyone to give your ‘pointers’ too.”

“I was just trying to help you.” She lowers her own voice to a whisper. “If you’re going to do this here can you at least try to talk quieter?”

“Okay, well I didn’t ask for your help,” he says, whispering too. From far enough away I am sure their voices sound just like the breeze.

“How do you expect to ever get anything done if you don’t ask people for help?” she says.

“I was picking just fine before you interjected. Now I haven’t got one blueberry for five minutes, so. Why don’t you go talk to Lily? Give her pointers. You know I didn’t even want to come here,” he says.

“You’ve barely said one word to Lily this whole trip. The whole point of coming here was that she would not hate us for the rest of her life. Don’t you care about that?”

“I don’t know why you suddenly do,” he says. “You’ve never cared about her at all, and now you just are?” He’s still whispering, but he’s getting louder. No one else has noticed.

“I don’t think—”

Dean cuts her off. “And the whole point of this trip was not just for her. It was supposed to be, I don’t know, like a send-off for him before he goes to college,” he gestures to me. “But it seems like both of you have forgotten that. Yeah, why don’t you say anything to him about talking to Lily. He’s been disappearing the whole day, staring at the blueberry bushes or, like, the sky, like a crazy person. He’s said less to her than I have.” Hurt, I open my mouth to make a retort, because I feel like I should. I am grateful my mother speaks before I have the chance to.

“Okay,” she says, “so what was the point of this trip for you then? To strengthen your argument against us and our apparent resentment of you?”

“Surviving it? Not dying of heat stroke? I hate the heat. What was yours then?” he says to me.

I want to tell the truth. I want to say something about making sure I have the feeling of this place tacked to a mental corkboard like some kind of incorporeal butterfly before I leave

it. I want to say something about really being able to say I love this blueberry field. But that would sound stupid.

“Spending time with you guys?” I lie, starting off sounding unsure but ending in a tone of faux righteousness.

“Whisper!” My mother says. I wasn’t aware I wasn’t whispering. “Who cares about ‘the point’? Wait, the point of it wasn’t Lily for you?” she says to me.

Before I can say anything Lily and my father are walking towards us.

“Congrats!” I say. He smiles. He probably doesn’t think of the blueberries as anything other than a backdrop for a phone call.

This is excitement?

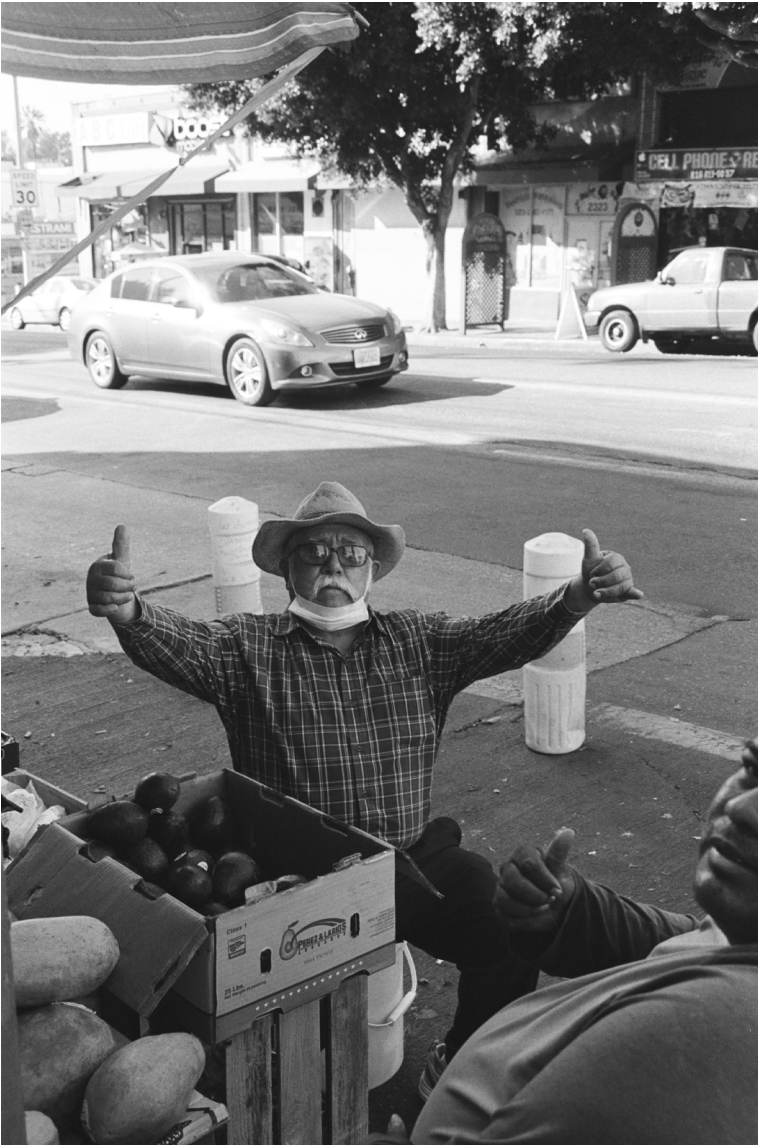
—

The sun set about an hour ago, far later than feels natural. We’ve pulled into Lily’s driveway. She lives in a huge house with a new husband. I forget the husband’s name. The house is made of shockingly dark wood, and you can barely see it against the wooly, silent sky. No one has mentioned our argument, we’re all too tired and hot. The ride back was beautiful, I’m sure, but it was too dark to see anything.

Lily is stepping out of the car. My brother scoots out of the middle to her seat. “Thank you all so much for inviting me,” Lily says. “That was really, really great. You know I don’t think I get out of the house that much, and I’m sure you’re all so annoyed at me for never doing anything with you. I’m going to make something really great with all these,” she says gesturing to her plastic container of blueberries. “Bye!” She smiles and waves. We wave back, surprised.

My father pulls out of the driveway. I notice Lily left her jar of honey on the seat, but it’s too late to say anything. The feeling of the blueberry field loosens on my mind, and I feel the futile need to go back. The night sky is too dark to remember the bright blue one, which is hours away from me. I cannot tell if I am happy. We are all silent for a few minutes, but we can all tell someone is going to say something.

“So,” my father says, “is no one excited that I got the job?”



Fruitero
Marty Valdez

AI AI

Kyuhyo Kwon

0. Either Mr. Asimov was well or dead; it was difficult to tell. Yesterday when we knocked on the door his house was silent but after midnight we saw kitchen lights flickering for five seconds, turned off for forty-six seconds, then turned back on for five minutes straight until the house sank back to darkness again. We voted on whether we'd break the door or not break the door at all but in the end we agreed we're all afraid we'd interrupt Mr. Asimov's writing hours. The lights observed from the kitchen window served as strong proof of Mr. Asimov's well-being but some of us exercised imagination to think that someone might've broken into the house and we couldn't dismiss the entirety of that theory. Ultimately we decided to conduct five stages of experiment to identify Asimov's whereabouts. 1. We called with eight phones at different times of the day to two phones, one of which he has in his pocket and the other beside the bed. The usual ringtone of the bedside confirmed the whereabouts of the telephone but not of Mr. Asimov or Mrs. Asimov, and in the span of three days we called his cellphone, nobody answered, but some of us who were hopeful kept calling. Others of us thought they were calling to a null, nonexistent being. Somebody made love to the man in the painting. 2. Though Asimov hasn't shown presence at all, the mail carrier kept shoveling mail and boxes to Mr. Asimov's front porch, so we decided to open them and analyze them. A fraction of the mail had been sent by us, politely inquiring about his next work in the field of science fiction, as we all awaited and all worried it would be his posthumous work. After all, he was old. When he was an infant, well, that was then. 3. Somebody made love to the man in the painting. "He was a naked man with hands over his hat," somebody in the crowd shouted. The body of Asimov was irrelevant, when Asimov leaves the body, that's Asimov no more. When he wrote the trilogy—*Body*, *The Body of Body*, and *The Body of Body of Body*—we were half-satisfied. In our third week, real estate agents planted a sign in Asimov's front yard. We analyzed plane tickets and his past interviews about his traveling experiences but soon realized it's no use. At the end of the fourth week we gently inserted the

metal pin into the key hole. 4. *Goodbye. I will no longer occupy this house and participate in the deceit I was given from birth to now. The fact that you are reading this means you've broken my trust, so I ask forgiveness (as I've forgiven you) for my abandonment that would've broken your trust as well. For the past few years working on my latest book, I pondered about my parents, my job, and what it is to be Asimov. But in the end I only knew the love for my wife and the love for my writing, and I could not know the answers to the questions I asked. Inside the second cabinet from the bottom, there is my last book. Hope you may be satisfied.* 5. By mid-October the house had Mr. Asimov again.

Eternity Is a Long Time

Kyuhyo Kwon

A man that resembled her walked by. I chased him down the street. As I followed him to the side of town I've never been to, I started questioning whether this was a meaningless exercise since if I catch him I'd know nothing to say and if I fail to catch him I'd have to follow him for a long long time. Either way the entanglement between me and him seemed untangleable at this point, like a complete cube. Streets had zero cars, pedestrians, amounting to zero decibel of noise. It was very early in the morning and it was clearly a populationless town and even the town's population was preponderantly silent, old Asians like us. When the man finally turned his back and saw me I walked up to him and I pulled out a photo. With senile voice, I said, sir, this is my sister. I said sir, are you the son of this woman or is she perhaps your daughter? But he said he was not a son nor a father. He continued walking by and even by then I couldn't decide whether to stab him or not.

Piling Up

Ava LaLonde

Watch and receive
The backpack untouched
Loose papers floating
around and up and out
Second-grade faded artworks and
Once loved colored pencils
dulled and smaller than you remember

Dispose and prepare for your
Life! You suppose
you might need those rainbow rubber bands someday

My shoulders are heavy with dust
Unfamiliar now with the light comfort of the 2008 sunbeam
We created and created
And wasted so well
and it's hard work now to create again

But maybe if I had the right bag for it

I'll be back so soon

Jojo McCabe

When I wake up tasting blood, this is how I know that the boy I sit behind in class will hold the door for me on my way out. If my lip is split by morning, I know he will say he likes my shoes, or something else innocuous and flattering. If by some stroke of luck I wake up unrecognizably bruised and swollen, the muscles down my back aching, blood pooling in my lungs, this means he will ask for my number and stroke my cheek behind the school building. He will offer a cigarette and tell me how pretty I look in red stained cotton. If I don't wake up at all, he will give my eulogy. He will tell my parents and friends how witty I was, how insightful my points in class were, how diligently I focused on the cowlick on the back of his head. He will paint a picture of grace, an elegance only obvious to the few that knew me well.

When I wake up in a bed that is not my own, this is how I know to call my mother, how I know to tell her I'm sorry and she was right that my body is a gentle weapon. If I'm awoken by the moonlight through his window, this is how I know to write her a text instead, how I know to say "Thank you for everything," and "I'll be back so soon."

When I wake up every morning the first thing I do is pray, aloud. I wash my legs in the shower and mumble to myself. I scrub until the water runs cold and hum quietly.

I am a soft machine.

When I wake up in my own body, in my own bed, this is how I know to skip the third step on the stairs. Mom always wakes up when it creaks.

When I wake up tasting blood, this is how I know to wash my legs first, and then lather up my torso to my arms. If my reflection appears bruised in the mirror, this is how I know I need to run to the pharmacy before class and grab another bottle of La

Roche-Posay Toleriane Double Repair Gentle Hydration Moisturizing Serum because my stash is about to run dry. If I wake up in a puddle of my own sweat, hot and sticky, this is how I know to turn the AC up and stop watching *Lost* before bed.

There are only so many ways to live a life, aren't there?

When you know one thing, you really know many things.

When I wake up tasting blood this is how I know to stop drinking all that blood before bed. I've been told it will make me fat.

When I start to hear a metallic ringing in one ear, this is how I know to stop asking him what he thinks of me. This is how I know to run far far away and throw his things out on the front steps and spit in his coffee and dip his toothbrush in the toilet and stop lending him pencils when he asks for them and focus on the whiteboard instead of that counterclockwise cowlick circling his crown.

When I wake up tasting blood, this is how I know to wash all of my clothes. This is how I know to floss between my teeth to get the last chunks of flesh out, how I know to bleach the floors and wipe the sweat off of my brow and say

"Thank you for everything," and "I'll be back so soon."

hey can you pmu 🥺 🙏

Angela Merrill

The car is waiting
and the bass rumbles the road for a ten-foot radius
you pick up your feet swing your backpack in front hop into the
passenger seat

buckle click

He's singing along to some hip hop or rap song you don't know
but it's nice and your heart thumps along to the rhythms beneath
the lyrics
as you apologize for being late

volume up

The song changes but you know this one so a grin splits across
your face
and you scream along, can't hear yourself over the volume
and he's belting too and you did something right for once

changing gear

The sun filtering through the windshield blinds you
and your back aches and your legs groan and your friend hurt
your feelings
but you can feel the music echoing through your body and you're
smiling

turn signal

He pulls up at the store and joy swims in your stomach
jump out of the car jog to catch up duck into the air conditioning
instead of beelining to the counter he ambles around

tips & tastes

He doesn't know how coffee pods work

and you laugh so hard your sides hurt and strangers turn to you in
concern
but he's smirking and you grin back and it hurts in a good way

checkout line

You get a cinnamon pretzel, warm and sweet and comforting like
a hug,
and he complains that they changed the drinks again
as he fills his cup with your terrible suggestion of raspberry
tea-cola-limeade

exit only

When you get home there's a great song that neither of you can
pause
so you sit in the driveway and shout the lyrics for five minutes
until he turns off the car on the last note and you hop out

cross threshold

and you don't see him the rest of the day.

Turn It Off

Grace Morrow

Summer melts my mouth
Sweaty and stale and heavy
A cicada shell sits on my windowsill
A bedside vigil

I am lost in breaths
Oxygen echoing the sounds of birds and cicadas
A breath deeper and then
Prayer tumbles from my lips

The cicada disappears one day
Bird calls dying with the light
The frequencies live in my chest
A new grave to lie in

Father

Grace Morrow

I used to think my dad was my favorite parent
 He was funny and balanced and not as sensitive as my mother
 He was the soldier I read about in his hand-me-down comic
 books

And he was smart, smarter than most people
 He knew why the sky was blue

He taught me to skip and to cook for myself and to be a bigger
 person

He treated me like the most precious thing on earth, but he
 wasn't unnecessarily gentle

He let me wrestle him, bully him, let me roll in the mud

Rub some dirt on it, I'm proud of you

If someone hurt you like that

I would kill them

I thought children were not supposed to have a favorite
 parent unless one is bad

My father is not a bad man, but maybe he is not good

My stomach turns to think he could not be good

This man who calms my mother with a look, who bows his head
 and takes it, who I hate can make me cry

He often becomes a man I do not recognize

When I see myself in him, I become angry

I am smarter than him, I am stronger than him, I am taller than
 him

He is not my Father, I am better than him in every way

If he made me this way, I made myself better

I owe him nothing that doesn't make me me

I was an adult when I realized my dad may have disliked who his
 father became

How he frowned when his father spoke, how his face went blank
 at his father's every move

Dad would sit quietly in the family room, wash the dishes, do

customary greetings, but nothing more
I watched him retract and frown and grow distant and felt the
dust settle

I wondered if he knew that I had felt the same way

My dad had to write his father's eulogy the night before the
funeral

No one told him he had to write it, but he was expected to do so
as a Son

He accepted the task without complaint, his voice never wavered
during the ceremony

I watched from far away in the pews and imagined my father as a
little boy

I thought about asking him what he used to think of his father



Shade

Marty Valdez

Speak up, Swallow!

Gianna Nguyen

Swallow the songbird that sings, spits and salivates
 cough up the phlegm, spew it out
 flutter from tenuous branch to low tide, the washing bay
 drooling, dribbling, spluttering —
 swish, swish

hush, hush, little songbird
 swallow the voice
 that simpers and squashes soliloquies
 — shut up!

SCREEEEEECH the swallow survives suppression
 swirling, soaring, departing, returning

the tide toes the threshold between bay and sand
 swallows the little prints that patter patiently
 pattering away; foams then fades
 flap, flap, flying away

sing! little songbird, don't swallow the salt
 spit the speech that spurns struggle
 taste the turmoil and spout it out
 then sip, sip, the sweet reprieve
 see the swallow, then swallow it whole

found sanctuary

Reyan Nguy

see the neon lights of street signs
blinding the night
hear the melody of motorbikes
drumming in your ears
the smell of rice noodles in intricate broths
the taste of fish sauce on tender tongues
feel Saigon in your bones

I see the beauty in Vietnam
in the helmets my aunts wear when heading to work
in the ornate shrines dedicated to my ancestors

I see the beauty in Vietnam
in the rivers, and the trees, and the painted skies
in the height of houses and skinny alleyways

I see the beauty in Vietnam
in the people and their colorful áo dài
in the blazing sun and tantalizing fruit

see the beauty in Vietnam



a scooter ride home
Reyan Nguy

Meditations from the Plasma Donation Center in Van Nuys

Isaac Ochoa

Trudging through concrete corridors
Like a beetle who can't find its way out
Of a web of branching highways
I break off and fall into the valley

Arriving seven minutes late for my appointment
I check in with the laser at the front door
And somebody scans me for bruises, and blemishes
And other signs of damaged goods

Weighed and shuffled off to bay two, bed two
Poked and punctured, my arm is a severed shard of the sun
Yearning with immolation to return home
Right there, in that moment

I'd cut it off myself
Save for the one-hundred dollars
And the fact that I'll need it
When I come back in two days

Querencia

Isaac Ochoa

Rumbling tumblers full of squat and slender green chiles
Pushing, shoving, charring up against one another
Stealing the heat from the last days of summer
Leaving behind smelly omens of autumn's looming winds

In prized powders and tightly sealed jars
On the coldest and driest days of winter
And the holiest nights
Those funky-tasting pieces of the Earth
Will be our hearth and pride and joy

And when the snow melts
And runs down from the mountains
And through our *acequias*
It is those roots I hope the water is first to touch

Abadinto

Ama Serwaah Owusu-Agyemang

I could taste my name—the first half like soothing water and the second like burning alcohol.

As I lay my head on my grandmother's warm, wrinkly thighs with my legs propped up on the windowsill we were seated along, she let a drop of water on her finger land on my dry tongue. Shortly after, a drop of alcohol followed. Sunlight streamed through the windows obstructing my view of her calm and mature smile.

“Who would've thought my Grandma would be giving me alcohol when I got older?” I teased.

“Well, who would've thought my granddaughter would hate herself? Hate her culture? Hate her name?”

Silence.

“You don't get it, Nana. I don't hate myself and my mother just doesn't get it. Moving here to freakin' *Iowa* was bad enough. My classmates think I'm just...another African.”

“Another African?” Her voice was suddenly louder and thunderous. Her body jerked and my head fell off balance in response. “Who cares what a bunch of ignorant 17-year-olds think? Your mother has been doing so much to keep it together. She loves you so much. So much.”

“Well, I don't feel it Grandma. She's always angry. She harbors animosity towards my father and she spews it at me. She projects all of it onto me.” I began to choke on the lump forming in my throat. I immediately sat up in an attempt to keep the tears from streaming down my face and dampening my grandmother's wrapper. “She doesn't hear me when I say I don't like being African. They laugh at me. They call me names—”

“Adwoa. Adwoa Owusu-Agyemang. Do you know how much weight that holds?”

“No, Grandma. I don’t. And frankly, I don’t care to know.”

My head was suddenly angled to the left, almost hitting the window pane. A warm sensation flooded my cheeks. I directed my gaze to the floor as if that would caution her from striking me across the face again. I saw her thorax rise and fall as it was adjusting to her effort to remain calm.

“Look at me, Adwoa.”

I slowly glanced up.

“I gave you a drop of water and I followed with a drop of spirit. Do you have any idea what that means?”

“No.” I responded tentatively.

“If it’s water, call it water. If it’s alcohol, call it alcohol. Water symbolizes honesty and alcohol represents responsibility and the consequences of your actions. Water and alcohol were your confirmations of your existence in the real world—an adjustment to society. At your naming ceremony—and the naming ceremonies of your other Akan friends back home—these rituals were performed: *Abadinto*”

“Adwoa. Adwoa,” she continued. “An Akan girl born on a Monday—symbol of peace and calm. You are *the* symbol of peace and calm. When you walk into a room, you imbue it with serenity. Are you not aware of that?”

I wiped my face with the ball of my palm and remained silent.

“Owusu-Agyemang. Those are two very powerful titles. Your father’s father and his father bore those names. Owusu, The Protector. You think your passion for service spawned out of nowhere? Your name holds power. Agyemang, Savior of The Nation. You are a true leader and it shows. You think a bunch of ignorant children could erase that?”

I felt the blood flow in my eyes release some tension. Suddenly, my blood started to feel warm—not hot. A snuffle escaped.

“I’m just tired, Grandma. I am. I didn’t know this. I’m glad you told me but that doesn’t change the fact that I will always be just an African.”

She shot up in the fastest way a 71-year-old woman could. She slowly walked over to the other end of the room. She reached for the door handle as she turned to me. I noticed her hand tremble the way it did whenever it hit below sixty degrees outside.

“You are choosing to let the point fly over your head. I am going to walk away now. I’m hypertensive and you know this. Almost immediately after, the door slammed.

I gazed outside to the now purple sky.

Adwoa. Adwoa Owusu-Agyemang.

Visions flood my mind. In all the instances I felt embarrassed of my cultural name, I cowered from greatness. I ducked from strength. I hid from my power.

I envisioned myself trampling on my classmates till their faces turned red and yelling: “Say my name to me. Say it when you want my attention. Say it when you need me. Say it to remind you of the power I hold. I am not to be messed with!”

It made sense, finally. The dichotomy of my name—serenity and strength. In my usual animated way of thinking, I pictured the two-flavored fruity roll-ups I had with my mother after every argument. My name was a deep blend of my dual identities.

I lifted myself up and slowly made my way to the door that led to our small and cozy living room. I saw my mom’s head in my Grandma’s lap—the same way I did moments before.

“Want a fruity loop?” I asked my mother. She sat up and I saw a smile creep up at the same pace she lifted herself and nodded. Grandma giggled and glanced at the television.

Fie

Ama Serwaah Owusu-Agyemang

Dumped onto a plane like being dumped into her mother's womb
again, a woman is reborn as child in a land seemingly familiar,
however greatly eerie

Yes, my first four years...they were here.

Sometimes once trodden means all has been forgotten

Young African woman fearful in the white man's land

She treads precariously in fear of tripping and falling

Trying to regain balance with her eyes and arms pointed out to
the people she trusts

They seem to dwindle

Their figures are diminishing in the dimming light

Like the tapering nature of the tunnel of a pinhole camera, they
vanish

She is left alone

Her skin is dark, but her fears are even darker

Crouched over in non-luminous solitude, she crumbles

Visions of her mother's laugh, her father's smile and her sister's
presence appear like a...

Lantern. Yes, a lantern.

Burning on fresh oil, the lantern of memories warms her up like
her mother's kitchen

The lantern opens her eyes to the bright, scorching sun of Accra

It reveals her sister bent over in wet laughter

It illuminates her dad's face and emphasizes his ever-puffy eyes

It softens the hard ground on which she kneels like her mother's
skin

Someway, somehow, she is back in the womb of her motherland

Nine months ahead of her until she is birthed back into her land

In the darkness with her little lantern, she lays

She lays down in hopes of the ground turning into her pillow

With a muffled landing, she knows she is only getting closer to
home.



Coming Back

Magdalene Selin-Williams

Coyote Metamorphosis

Athya Lodhia Paramesh

The train will stop for you. Migration lasts a day. Sometimes seven.
Remember meadows are a fine stand-in for religion.

There are no borders. Only crossings.
Give me your hand and I will play mine.

The oracle only tells the kinds of fortunes we want to hear.
Every ending is deeply unsatisfactory;

Each breath is an excuse for metamorphosis.
All silhouettes are shadows we can't outrun.
We can leave traces but they don't leave us for long.

In a dream I can leave without going anywhere.
One day the ocean will meet the sky, but not until we're already gone.

Home is the place where nothing changes.
Do we degrade a thing by trying so hard to name it?

Let us rest in the ruins a moment longer.

I only ask this one thing of you:
We make motifs out of miracles and sigh when they repeat.
Look out the window tomorrow.

Sylvia, Offshore

Isabella Ramos

I've been here before
these roots are no stranger to my bare feet
stubbed my toes

I'd dance around the trunk under the shade of her branches
hang on as tightly as I could
pull
pull myself up
the same way each time

through the canopy
to the sun to the sun
oh please god do not be on the other side
the sun
oh god please let the sun be on the other side

ripen the fruit
heat the coarse roofing under my feet
ripen the fruit I eat

little did you know
I've been here before

all my life
before
and all my life after

my reality
and in my memory

I had a dream
well not a dream but a story inside my head
and in that story I was there but she wasn't me
she was an echo
in another life

she saw the house as I feared it could be

she was living inside my head and she refused to let go

in this dream the house had no roof
and the next day there were no walls
and the next day the second floor was gone
and then the next the rooms were empty
until there was nothing left

nothing but the tree
in my memory
and oh god if they cut it
if they cut it down
please never let me know it

in my memory the house is there as it always was
in the dream there is nothing that remains but a tree and she
who
stands before it but just beyond its reach
no roots beneath her feet
no roots

all my life
before
and all my life after

this tree this dream this memory and
me

little did you know
I've been here before
fig trees and memo
ries

yes, I've been here before

those things you thought
those things you felt

yes, I have been there before

everything I've ever done

everything I've ever won
and nothing to make of the two

but fig trees and memo-
ries

I've been here before
I've danced at its feet
and eaten its fruit

I know now everything that I've ever done
and everything I've ever wanted

their roots run through the earth and break the surface
catching my feet

but I'm okay lying here in the dirt
like I have before
gazing up at everything I will and won't do but want to

stuck fast to the earth
unable to move
unable to choose
unable to have faith in the little I have left of my abilities
unable to imagine a world where this isn't a problem

a world where no one didn't know
and everyone always did what it was they knew
because no one didn't know
but I didn't know

I don't know

so for now I'll enjoy her shade
and her fruit
and one day, oh god, I hope I walk away

because I've been here before
oh, yes
and I've never left

What's bothering me:

Hanna Lou Rathouz

- What's bothering me:
- Your old notebooks, stacked in the corner of your office.
- Endless numbers shifting into letters. Things I shouldn't read, but can now that you can't chastise me. Sorry dad.
- Can't stop thinking about it — your last breath — rattling around in an empty jar
- 150. 150 bpm!
- Have you ever run a marathon in bed?
- Dirty clothes in a laundry basket — DNA etched on every thread — discarded, exactly where you left them
- Your hand: hot and bloated — the same and different — blood so close to the skin I could almost feel its current
- The old moving box, filled with used syringes proof of life (once filled) and death (now empty)
- Jack-o-lantern candy basket — still has its jagged toothed smile — gruesome
- Dreaming — a cranky phantom — wandering the house, turning on the radio in the mornings, whistling
- The voicemail I found in my phone from you: “bark bark it's Suki and Azie calling, call us back if you want to talk, bark bark, I love you!”
- Opening your eyes searching for us finding us dying
- Missing you

Before the Kudzu

Elise Russell

It's between Alabama and Mississippi
where the sun turns soft. All I can do is half-see
as vines turn telephone poles into looming shadows,
jungle monsters, their tendrils stretching toward the future.

Between New Orleans and Baton Rouge
a muted violet, blue-green-mosquito-breeding-
marsh overtakes the monotony of that roadside tree
—that loblolly pine
who only knows the highway, that pining
childhood sweetheart, too afraid to leave—here,
when looking out the window isn't a dizziness
of there-then-gone foliage, everything just opens. And
suddenly, I get to imagining how it used to be: Years and
years ago, when rigs and refineries
didn't dot the wetlands
like the egrets do. Plumes, not of smoke,
but pure white and feather-soft.

Before the kudzu, what were we?
Before the water hyacinth, the nutria, the apple snail,
before we trained jasmine to grow in
 isometric triangles and concentric circles,
before glyphosate, before atrazine,
did nature know the word
“tame?”

There are men in safety vests along the I-10
 driving cherrypickers, holding chainsaws,
 trying to cut back what comes back:
 Overgrow, overthrow, overgrow.



falling asleep on the train

Jojo McCabe



shooting star
Jojo McCabe

Bagdad, AZ

Adam Sunderman

Paloma took small, deliberate steps, her index and middle fingers threaded through the belt loop of the Deputy Sheriff's high-waisted trousers as he led her around the northern rim of the open-pit copper mine that lay beyond the eastern edge of Bagdad.

Everything Paloma had come to know about the mine was hearsay; she had never been anywhere near it herself.

The folks at Fleetwood-McDonald who owned the site and its extracted contents (and, for that matter, owned the town of Bagdad itself) kept the place shut up tight. The route that took her to Bagdad Elementary, where she worked as a kindergarten teacher's aide, involved crossing a road where all their rumbling CAT trucks—reportedly a very bright yellow in color, whatever that meant—sometimes had to drive to get to the mine from the place where they were sent when they needed repairs. Every time she had to stop and wait for the trucks to pass, she heard the same sounds: gate scratches open, truck rolls out of earshot, gate scratches closed, lock clinks, chain rattles, no access.

All these involved locations—the repair yard, the road along which the trucks quaked in and out of her perception, the mine itself—could not be found on Paloma's mind map of Bagdad. Of course she knew that such places existed, and that there were some people for whom those places were relevant sites of experience and everyday business; to her, though, they remained totally nebulous, floating beyond the edges of what she could feel, smell, taste, or hear.

Home—consisting of bedroom, kitchen, small bathroom and bathtub, main living area, garage, backyard, front porch, front yard—as well as the route to the school, her classroom, the staff room and cafeteria, the grocery store and the drug store, and Malcolm's close friend DJ's house: this was her world, or more accurately, this had been her world since Malcolm got the job at

the mine.

It did not bother Paloma that Malcolm's world was a great deal bigger than hers; she was fine with the thought of him walking to work, operating big machines she never could have felt all the way to the top of, looking down to the bottom of the mine and being able to see it all at once, despite the fact that it was thousands of paces across and deeper than anyone could fall without hurting themselves severely.

Paloma liked her world.

As of that morning, though, it was about to get bigger. The small plastic test—acquired from the drug store two blocks west and three blocks south—was part of her world, but its results were not, at first. She had no way of knowing, using her highly attuned senses of touch, hearing, etc. whether it had come back positive or negative. So DJ's wife, Colleen—who was reachable at DJ's house, two blocks north—came over to help. Colleen sat with her in the bathroom—second door on the right side of the hall—and told her:

The test was positive.

The world was sure to expand.

The first thing she did was find the phone—kept on the left side of the kitchen counter—and dial Malcolm's cell.

No response, but all was probably well. He was working very hard out there in his big world and could not always answer his phone. He could find out about the baby when he got home; that way she would be able to hear his breathing speed up and feel the excitement with which he moved his calloused, working hands. He would probably wrap her up in a large hug, and their worlds would be the same for a moment.

Many people hugged each other, Paloma knew somehow, with their eyes closed.

The afternoon passed slowly, and Paloma could feel her own breathing begin to accelerate. Her bubble felt smaller than ever, like the boundaries of what she could hear and feel accurately were closing in. Her head began to spin. She checked her

tactile watch—a birthday present from Malcolm. The two ridges read seven-fifteen.

Malcolm should have gotten off work at five and been home by five-thirty. There wasn't anybody on the late shift that night. He had explicitly told her this. As soon as his crew left, the mine would be empty the whole rest of the holiday weekend.

This was not common. There was no precedent, in Paloma's mental log of everything she and Malcolm had encountered in the three years since he got the job that brought the two of them to Bagdad, for something like this—no memory of a long weekend where the whole mine was empty, and definitely no memory of Malcolm failing to come home.

She found the phone again. "Colleen?"

"What's up, *mom-to-be*?" Colleen still seemed excited about the whole thing. "Colleen, I think you were right, earlier, when you asked if it was normal for Malcolm not to pick up at work."

"What do you mean?"

"He hasn't come home."

More calls had to be made before panic would feel justified. Who had Malcolm told her was on the shift with him that day? He had been complaining, on his way out, about the crew he got put with. Rodney?

Did she know Rodney's number?

She called Colleen again and asked if Colleen knew Rodney's number. Colleen came over to the house and sat with Paloma. She helped her call Rodney. Rodney said he didn't have a clue. Malcolm was working sort of slow all day, stayed behind when the other guys were leaving, but said he was on his way out. He told the guys to go on without him.

Again, no precedent. She could not imagine Malcolm saying something like that. The other world that existed beyond hers continued to intrude.

Colleen helped her call Malcolm's supervisor.

"The system says he left at 4:58, punched out from the West gate." That was all the guy said.

After these two calls, Colleen had to leave. She had to

make dinner because DJ and their little ones, Jojo and Tyla, didn't know how to fend for themselves. They could be expected to starve if left unassisted too long. "You should go see the sheriff, if you're really worried," Colleen said on her way out the door. "But he's probably fine, you know. He's got a good head on his shoulders. I'm sure there's some logical explanation."

The sheriff station was not part of her mind map. It was not a place she came across on any of her usual routes.

The world would have to expand.

Paloma had to count her steps from the grocery store to find the sheriff's office. She had never been inside before. The air was stale with dust and chewing tobacco, the hum of a small fan circling lazily in the corner. She reached for the door handle and missed once, then found it.

"Mrs. Cook?" a man's voice called out. Definitely not Sheriff Brown—too young, and the voice wasn't low enough.

She followed the sound of his chair scraping back, then lowered herself into the chair he guided her toward.

"Sheriff Brown's out of town," the younger man said. "I'm Deputy Hernandez." Paloma smoothed the hem of her dress, trying to steady herself. "My husband didn't come home from work today."

At first the deputy offered explanations—maybe Malcolm had stopped at a friend's, maybe he was delayed. But Paloma shook her head each time. She had already called his friends. She had already spoken with his supervisor. She had called his cell phone again and again.

The deputy paused for a moment, then sighed. She heard the receiver lift, the staccato beep-clicks of numbers being dialed. A man's voice came through, hollow and fuzzed-out, over the speaker:

"What do you need, Hernandez, I'm busy here."

"I got Malcolm Cook's wife in here with me, Dante. She says her husband didn't come home. Do you know anything about where he might be?"

“Yeah. She called about that earlier, and I told her all the information we’ve got in our system here. He clocked out at five like usual. So whatever happened to him after that isn’t our responsibility.”

There was a scrape of chair legs against the floor as Hernandez turned sharply away from her. She heard the shift of the receiver against his hand, and then a whisper he thought she couldn’t catch: “Mrs. Cook is in the room with me, Dante, and she’s nervous. Try not to say stuff like that.”

Paloma’s jaw tightened. People always underestimated how well she could hear. The other man, Dante, muttered something about being busy and hung up. The deputy let the receiver drop back into its cradle. For a moment, he didn’t speak. She could sense him staring at the floor, trying to choose words.

Then, with a steadier voice: “All right. If Fleetwood won’t help, I will. I’ll take a look at what’s going on out there myself.”

Paloma shook her head and spoke firmly: “Take me with you, officer.”

“How old are you, Mr. Hernandez?” Paloma asked, not sure what answer she was hoping for.

“Twenty-six, ma’am.”

Interesting. He was older than her, but not by much. Sheriff Brown, who would usually have attended to a situation like this, must have been pushing sixty-five. Which was preferable: frail but experienced, or spry but unversed?

Paloma could not be sure, but in the present moment, the deputy was inspiring confidence. She kept two fingers hooked through his belt loop, and she could tell as she walked behind him that he was moving decisively, rarely stopping to hesitate, and did not seem in any way paralyzed by the scale of the mine into which she was certain they were beginning to descend.

“There’s the punch-clock,” Deputy Hernandez said. She felt a small shift. He was likely pointing to the right, she concluded from the small, barely perceptible twisting of a few lower back muscles. “So he was here around five. When did you call

him first?”

“Two-thirty.”

“Oh. Well, he punched his card here three hours after that—”

“Two and a half, but yes.”

“Sure,” the deputy conceded, “Two and half. But he must have been here to punch the card, quite a while after he failed to answer your first call.” “Unless somebody else punched his card out for him.”

Deputy Hernandez remained totally static for an interval, seemingly mulling over that possibility.

“Come on,” he said after a while, “Let’s go down to where he was working the bulk of his shift.”

That information—about which section of the mine Malcolm had been assigned to that day—was not something Dante, the deputy’s acquaintance who worked for Fleetwood-McDonald. at the managerial level, had been forthcoming about. The deputy had asked, during their brief stop at Paloma’s house on the way to the mine, if Malcolm kept paper copies of his work schedules anywhere. While looking through Malcolm’s desk drawer with Paloma’s permission, Deputy Hernandez had come across the exact type of document he was looking for and found details about what part of the mine Malcolm had been assigned to for that day’s shift. Now she followed him into the belly of the open mine.

“Do you know how deep it is?”

“Dante said each cut-out bench is only about fifty feet high.”

“How deep is the whole thing, though?” she pressed, not at all interested in breaking down the unimaginably large pit into more digestible constituent parts. The world needed to expand.

“About fifteen hundred feet to the deepest point.”

“Was he all the way at the bottom?”

“No, not all the way down,” the deputy tried to reassure her. “Here, this road winds down to where we need to go. Stay close to me.”

Paloma could feel the dust rising, swirling from the

ground, dry enough to be kicked up with every step. Following Deputy Hernandez down the road, she got into a steady rhythm, right foot always moving to catch up with left, her feet always moving to catch up with his. As a result, when the deputy stopped dead in his tracks halfway down the road, the sudden disruption of momentum came as a shock.

It was not the first time he had stopped during the guided walk, but it was most certainly a different reaction than before, brought on, she suspected, by a vastly different stimulus. “Why did you stop?” she asked. He shushed her urgently, and she felt one of his hands extend across her path to prevent her from walking further forward. “What?” she asked. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” the deputy said after a long time. “Just thought I saw something.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“No, you wouldn’t have heard it,” he said. “It was far away.” His whole demeanor seemed to have changed.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Just...just stay here, Mrs. Cook, okay? Don’t move at all. I’ll be back soon.” And he let go of her hand. “No, I’d rather stay with—”

“It’s okay,” he said, his voice suddenly fifteen-to-twenty feet away. “I’m just going to be right over here. I’m just checking on something, that’s all.”

“What are you checking on?”

No response. The deputy whispered under his breath, “What the hell is Dante trying to pull here, there’s no way...”

His voice trailed off.

“I’m blind, Deputy Hernandez,” Paloma insisted, calling out from the exact spot he had left her, “But I’m not deaf. What are you saying?”

“Nothing,” he said, “It’s probably nothing.”

“What’s probably nothing?” she was getting impatient now.

She heard the deputy sigh. Metal creaked somewhere in the distance. “It’s just...I’m remembering something the Fleetwood people said at a town hall meeting last year, about widen-

ing the mine, digging closer to the town.”

“I remember that. Malcolm told me it was going to be good for the company.” “Yeah, well,” the young deputy’s voice seemed to be getting further away with each passing second, “At that meeting, Dante said there would be shelves there, just like everywhere else in the mine. He said they were going to pour a concrete road, so the trucks wouldn’t have any trouble getting down.”

“Yes,” Paloma probed, wishing he would be more direct, for her sake, since she couldn’t see the full picture, even now that they were there on the far side of the scratch gate into which the CAT trucks disappeared. “And?”

“Well, it sure doesn’t look like that’s what they’re doing. One whole side is just a straight, sheer drop, like they dug out.” He paused. Paloma was about five seconds away from following his voice across the gravel shelf, however dangerous it might be. “I think...” the deputy said, audibly troubled, unable to say exactly what he meant, “I’m just going to go over here and take a closer look.”

Paloma heard the wind, like paper against paper, brushing along the dry walls of the pit. She heard the sound, far away, of something howling. She could sense, from the coolness of the air against her skin, that the sun had already been down for a while. She could smell the dust that came on the wind, and feel its sting against her face.

She did not hear anything further from the deputy except a rough sliding of gravel, about fifty feet to her right, followed by an extended period of silence. “Deputy Hernandez?” she called out into space.

Her voice clapped off the far wall of the pit and returned to her, unanswered.

w“Deputy Hernandez?”

What, then, was she expected to do, except stand there and keep shouting? And who should she be shouting for? Malcolm, or the deputy?

Even if the deputy did come back, that would not have been much of a solution to anything, except that she could say:

“Maybe this wasn’t a good idea, coming here with you. I have someone other than myself to worry about,” and then she might gesture to her stomach, “And I should be getting home.”

Would that ending—returning home safely, making sure no harm came to the child—have been acceptable? Could the small world she knew all the feelings and sounds of continue to be sufficient?

“Malcolm!” she called down into the pit, not knowing how far her voice would carry. She reached both hands out, knowing that the world would never shrink back down to the familiar, comfortable form of childhood in Santa Fe; to the form of her grandfather, a retired professor of economics from St. John’s, schooling her through the eighth-grade all on his own; to the form of meeting Malcolm, when he began renting a room over their next door neighbor’s garage; to the form of finally finding an elementary school teaching credential program in Phoenix that was specifically designed for disabled folks; to the form of moving to Phoenix, briefly, so that she could live out her dream of teaching, and later moving to Bagdad so that Malcolm could live his dream of never having to worry about money again. The movement was linear, and had brought her here.

The only place to move now was out. Forward. Shuffling carefully, tapping the next dusty landing place to ensure she had not reached the edge. “Malcolm!” she called out, though it felt illogical to continue with that. And from the bottom of the pit, carried on the wind, came a small, tired voice from the old World, calling her name in reply.

Sonic the Hedgehog's Revenge

Pika Whitman

Sonic the hedgehog is a national hero, the only one who can carry heart transplants across the vast expanse of Nevada to sick children. Sonic's been doing this a long time and it stopped being about the money many years ago when he remembered about all the pain out west.

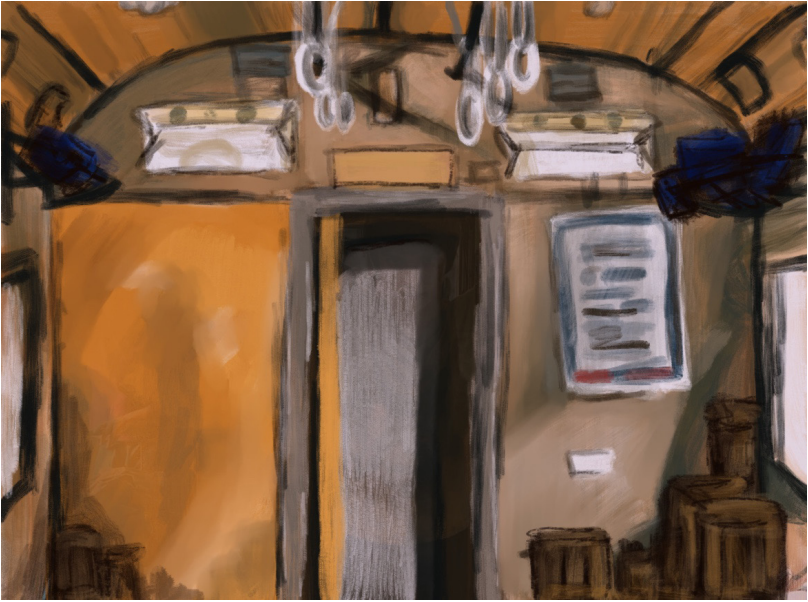
Sonic the hedgehog moves so fast that he can hear his heartbeat splintering the cavernous bones of his chest. And as the speed of sound simmers to dull spots Sonic can't breathe.

Sonic, that motherfuck has anxiety, diagnosed when he was thirteen, Sonic shouldn't weave through the highway at one hundred and twenty but he does anyways. Sonic can bruise the Earth's own ego and nearly has a breakdown at a diner trying to order a single cup of black coffee.

Nobody can catch Sonic the motherfucking Hedgehog as he burns the grass beneath his feet. Sonic may be the fastest hedgehog alive but his spikes are dull and a cough lives in his chest from months before and sonic breaks the barrier of sound once again. But the Hudson River is filled with bones and wet paper bags, Sonic sinking to the bottom sludge entering on each inhale, looking for a comforting face only to be met with empty deep sockets staring back.

Sonic wakes up in the hospital, the fastest motherfucker alive bound by an IV to a metal rod. Spikes straighten out as he pricks the nurse who draws blood, and Sonic isn't as fast to curl up in a ball as he'd like. The doctors advise against pushing the barrier of sound or he can expect nails to rip from cuticles and calluses to pop. So Sonic the hedgehog learns to drive, and it's hard for him at first to use one foot for the gas and brakes, but eventually there is no hesitation when Sonic puts the car into park before leaving.

Sonic doesn't break the barrier of sound anymore, but he likes walks by the Hudson sitting on a bench watching the sky.



Last Train

Levi Lee

