



THE
CAULDRON

2020-2021
VOLUME 41

We would like to extend our thanks and gratitude to:

Our Faculty Advisor, Oliver Baez Bendorf for his constant support and guidance.

The Vibbert family, for their generous support of The Cauldron over the years

Hadley Moore, our Divine Crowe Judge for her selection of our Divine Crow Award recipients and her assistance in reviewing the initial manuscript.

Brian Dietz, for his continuous support of this organization and guidance throughout the years.

This year's staff for their passion, dedication, and perspectives.

All those who submitted their works to this collection.

And to you, the reader, the final piece.

The Cauldron's 2020-2021 Staff List

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Oliver Baez Bendorf

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Divine Crow Awards

The Divine Crow Awards are given each year to three exceptional pieces in *The Cauldron*. A writer from the extended Kalamazoo community judges the pieces blindly.

This year's judge is Hadley Moore, A Kalamazoo College alum. She is the author of *Not Dead Yet and Other Stories* (Autumn House Press, 2019) - winner of Autumn House Press's 2018 fiction contest, the 2020 Eric Hoffer Book Award's short story/anthology category, as well as a First Horizon Award for debut books. Moore, as an alum of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College is currently working on her next novel and another collection of writing.

The recipients of this year's Divine Crow Awards are Maci Bennet's "Poetry has Six Legs, an Exoskeleton, and an Hourglass Waist," Nehe-Miah Scarborough's "Parts of a Whole," and Juan Ibarra's "Pinch of Salt."



Stephanie Vibbert Award

The Stephanie Vibbert Award is given to one work which exemplifies the intersection between creative writing and community engagement. This award honors Stephanie Vibbert, a senior English and Psychology double major who died in a car accident returning from a peace march in Washington D.C. in 2003. Stephanie's life was passionately devoted to both creativity and community service. This award was created to encourage Kalamazoo College writers to use their creativity to reflect upon and explore issues of poverty, human rights, sexual orientation, race, class, gender, and cultural diversity.

The recipient of this year's Stephanie Vibbert Award is Vivian Enriquez's "Litany: on Violence."



About the Cover by Isabel McLaughlin

Through art, stories, words, and images, The Cauldron weaves together a tangle of experience and expression. I wanted to highlight how this publication is connecting so many artists despite physical disconnection. I believe processes of breaking down are generative and wanted to incorporate vibrancy and play into the decay of fabric.

Editor's Note

Nehe-Miah Scarborough

As editors, we have been tasked with reviewing the impeccable artwork of our Kalamazoo College peers and deciding what pieces we believe are worthy of remembrance. I am so grateful to the writers who overcame shyness or fear and submitted their pieces. Within this year's edition, there is vulnerability, humor, a sense of identity, and beauty. Thank you for letting us past the curtain. While this journey has been filled with calamity. The process of editing and review is always a rewarding and enlightening one. Every piece of art is a conversation, and I am blessed to have spoken with such great conversationalists.

Talea Fournier

It has been a weary year. It has been a blur of dim pixels, tired faces, flickering lives, all pressed up against the weight of things. All this, and yet here still remains the heartbeat. The nerves. The movement of these words and this art and these stories. Here still comes into being this mosaic of light stitched together, shaking the numbness out of this space we share, here on these pages.

It has been an honor to work with Nehe-Miah on curating The Cauldron this year. Despite the myriad of pain and obstacles this pandemic has presented, The Cauldron has yet again managed to find its way into existence. I am forever in awe of the voices that have surrounded me throughout these past four years, both inside this magazine and out. May the colors continue to collide. May the mosaic always live on.

that's what the poem wants me to write
but do I really remember that final night?

I sang MCR's "I Don't Love You Anymore" in the shower
we watched a movie on Netflix, balancing my laptop between us
something about knights and chivalry, things he long ago decided he couldn't be
he went around the corner to play video games and drink from seltzer twelve-packs
I didn't sleep well, the sound of cracking open aluminum cans
my version of gunshots fired into the sky, a warning, a pre-emptive strike

but writing these lines is like reading a list of dates and facts

I couldn't care less about the chronology
it happened, good and bad, but here I am
admiring lichen outside the glass panes in my childhood home
and that wasp on the windowsill, runaway so many weeks ago
returned

I didn't think much about it, the other night

just knew what I wanted to say
your nervous laughter on the other end of the phone
when I asked how you've been translating *te quiero*
been whispering that phrase in my ear for weeks
I had you cornered, I know, as soon as the question past my lips
and I know, you and me—we're fluent in eye contact, silence
same page, no violence
no dread, no passive-aggressive quiet
so you translated, "I want you"
so you translated, "I care about you"
so you paused and all my fishes lined up against the glass while we waited
knowing your next line but being patient anyway
you swallowed that nervous laughter again, probably biting your bottom lip
when you said, "I love you"

it seems everyone I've talked to thought they were going to marry *someone*
only to end up marrying the *next* one
next ones being the last first date business

last first kisses

last meeting aunts and uncles at Christmas

and my mother called you my missing piece
(when she hadn't even yet met you)
if she only knew how many wounds, how many times abused

ground into the gravel, my last point of view
if my mother only knew everything I've had to unravel, memories sorted & filed

that's what the poem wants me to do
but for the first time
I don't need to

no coping mechanism, no frame, no distance from real life experience, from existence
only the small things

brewing coffee in the morning
the peach candle on the counter I can't smell anymore
sharing a Star Wars themed room with my youngest sister
the ear-to-ear shape of your smile, crinkled eyes, white teeth, sweet not bitter
the corner of the house where I've surrounded myself
fishes in aquariums
paper white lilies
succulents
chloroplasts
elderly sleeping cats

I've surrounded myself with life, no more lies,
no more telling myself he's doing better, it'll be alright, I'll survive
I'm serotonin, no hopeless, no chemical imbalance

that's what my new poems want me to write

after so much time in the dirt, I don't want
to ever again forget
what the pastels of the morning sky look like
after so much time in category *alive*
(brainstem intact
pulse check in the carotid artery
homeostatic stability
personality just barely there)

I don't want
to ever again forget
what *living* feels like
(present
progressive)

Eight Micro Memoirs From The Pandemic

Alexandra Hobrecht

Scene opens on an empty northern Michigan road. Suburbia. No cars. Two young women walk side by side down its center, one bouncing a basketball. The other girl, shorter and blonde, carries a speaker playing the soft voice of Norah Jones. There is a filter over the camera lens that creates a dim sense of dread; everything is gray.

I. A guest at work tells me the University of Michigan is closing down due to the coronavirus. She expects other schools will soon follow. This does not scare me, but when restaurants close down a week later and I am out of work, reality sinks in. I cannot remember her face.

II. I drive Bryce up north. The edge of Lake Huron is littered with large chunks of ice, though at times it is warm enough to step outside without wearing a coat. When I look within myself, I come up empty-handed and that is because I feel hollow. Empty in a way that can't be filled with all this goddamn beauty.

III. The amount of trust we put into other humans is inhumane. Am I the only one who has this realization?

IV. In the park during a spring pandemic, I call my friend Talea while she is sitting on a hammock, two hundred miles away. "There's a hawk above my head," she says. "Hello, sir. I am not dead."

V. I think a large part of the virus revolves around fear: fear of living one way or another. Fear of hurting the ones who love us and being hurt by the ones who do not. Fear that it all adds up to nothing.

VI. I am tired of living life through screens. "I think we're all really hungry for things that feel real," Talea says.

VII. By November, there is no surprise when things close down again. My mother screeches at the dog to stop barking. I take out my own pent up frustrations by insulting the cat instead. Fat bastard. Have you always been this ugly?

VIII. I try not to read too much into my dreams this winter. It is a season of burning logs in the fireplace, searching for new music, refusal to read the news, baking with cinnamon and cardamom and nutmeg. I still go outside some days.

One last shot in black and white: listen to the ice cracking. That is not your heart. It is the ice.

God Is in Control

Chloe Baker

Cast of characters

Frances: A French Canadian woman in her mid 70s. She's wearing bright colored clothing, a pink button down shirt and purple pants. She has two barrettes in her hair to keep it out of her face and small glasses. We're sitting in her room. She is on the bed in the middle of the room, legs crossed, her body twisted slightly to look at me. I am on the couch against the wall. She hunches slightly and gestures as she speaks. Her voice is soft but low, with a Quebecois accent.

Louise: A 90-year-old woman I often visit. She's wearing all brown clothing, tan pants and a dark brown patterned shirt. She has a shawl over her shoulders, hand-knitted and multicolored. She has dangly earrings, a large multi-chain necklace, a blue lanyard, and a very sparkly heart ring. She wears glasses, has a brightly colored headband holding her hair back, and an oxygen tube running up to her nose. We are sitting in her room, her in her recliner with a wheeled table in front of her, me on her bed next to her. She turns to her right to look at me as she speaks. Her voice is loud and raspy.

Marion: A woman in her mid 80s, who always asks me about my education. She's under two blankets, so most of her clothing isn't visible. She's wearing a grey shirt. Her glasses are so strong they warp her eyes, one looks bigger than the other, both magnified. She holds a tablet in her lap, having been playing a game on it just before. We are in her room sitting in her recliner, a table pulled up in front of her, me standing in front of her. She looks up to speak to me. Her voice is soft, somewhat Disney-princess-like.

Ashley: My mother, in her 50s. She's wearing a brightly patterned shirt and simple black pants. Her hair is short and spiky, mostly sticking straight up, but in a punk way rather than bedhead. We're sitting on the couch in our living room, me to her left. She works as an activity coordinator at the nursing home that Frances, Louise, and Marion live in. She speaks quickly, her voice much like my own, low and thoughtful.

[Beginnings](#)

[Ashley](#)

Um... I guess I didn't... think much about it early on, in December or whatever, it was just sort of like, there was this hope that it could be contained, it was so far away it didn't, it didn't, it wasn't clear at first how contagious it was or that it might cross borders and spread everywhere. Um, so, I think I just, um, took it in like any other news story of something that was happening around the world, and didn't really think too much about what if it comes here. Certainly didn't anticipate anything like what actually happened.

[Louise](#)

I thought it was gonna be a... short thing and not this long dragged out thing that it is. I really thought people were smarter than that. They're not very smart, the ones that are spreading this stuff. I didn't know we had that many not very smart people. Hahahaha. To do, the thing they shouldn't do all the time instead of the thing they're supposed to do.

Marion

I thought it would be more like the flu. That we wouldn't be tied down quite so long. Uh. Thought it would be a short term... you know. I really, I just thought it'd be a short term thing I didn't think at the beginning that it would last so long. But... that's about it, I just didn't... I didn't expect it to last like it has, yup. I thought it would be more like the flu period. Um...

Frances

I heard about it in a meeting... in the common room, the auditorium, and the friend who was with me at the time, Mary Jane, said "It's good that they're telling us ahead of time." She praised the... the... department heads for, bringing the subject to us before we heard about it some other...

Loneliness

Ashley

I was only under quarantine for part of it, and that was kinda a little voluntary period of quarantine, so I guess I have a slightly different perspective. It was... really um... both um... isolating and freeing, to be at home on quarantine and not going out at all during the time when we did, because we didn't have to worry about it we didn't have to wear masks we didn't have to, think about it we didn't have to do anything special. Um, and, the, you know, as soon as I went back into the world where I might, uh, run the risk of being infected or infecting someone it adds this huge burden on you.

So, the quarantine of my, of the people I work with is, has affected me more, um, because they can't see their families they can't go out they can't do things they wanna do and that's, wearing on me because I have to try to make up for that, um, and put myself in their shoes, you know, and so I'm empathizing with, you know, 45 people who can't live their lives at the end of their lives the way they would like to and it's emotionally wearing.

Marion

What has changed the most? The fact that I can't have any visitors... Uh.. that I'm just, in, you know. I can't even go out if they come and get me, you know. So.. that's the restrictions, all the restrictions, which haven't affected me near as much as they have someone like you. As far as like restaurants and things, I wasn't going out to em anyway, but... the restrictions here have changed, like, I used to go to the dining room, I don't anymore. But... that's about it, and no visitors.

Louise

Well, life has been more lonely than it's ever been before. Because I can't have company. But I have learned to substitute the phone for visits a lot. However, you know, it keeps my family from coming to see me... and those that live far away, you know, I'm re...really feeling bad that they can't come and, and we can't have good times together, but, I know that it wouldn't be s...safe, and I wanna keep my family safe.

Frances

Lack of contact with friends and family has been pretty awful... And I'm afraid it's gonna continue that way for a while... The fear does not bother me so much because I feel like I'm prudent.. but it's mostly the lack of contact with people, and um, knowing that we won't be able to celebrate holidays like we always did... That's not a pleasant thought. Right Cutie? (her cat) Cutie's still with us. I know I should be more grateful for his companionship.

Perspective

Frances

I have frequent conversations with my sisters. Weekly conversations. In Canada? And, at first they were telling me, oh they didn't have a very high count, you know, things are going well. And now, it caught up with them. They have to go through all the restrictions that we do.

There is a man who is a member of the family, he's not related to me, he's related to my son-in-law. And he likes to have family around him at Thanksgiving, and he would try to get as many people as he could that were, oh, somehow related to each other, one another. And this year he called my daughter and he said, I'm very sorry, but we're not going to have our yearly gathering. I wonder if by Easter if it would get better, if it's better by then we could have a reunion at Easter instead of Christmas or Thanksgiving. But, I wouldn't count on it.

I heard an opinion just last week, it might be gone or... less prevalent, by the end of 2021. Oh. It's not very encouraging.

Marion

Well... My personal opinion is I don't think things will ever get back to... where they were, what we call normal. I think normal will be different. We'll have a new normal. And, um... I hate it, that so many people have, I'm sure a lot of people have become bitter, and had to do without. I feel so sorry for some people who don't have anybody, you know.

Louise

You know I've heard a lot of people say that it was, just a big hoax, you know, but I don't really believe that, I don't see why anybody would do that. But... I don't know, I just... I guess... it's a big disappointment in our country because I thought we were smarter than this. You know, I

thought we were smart enough to dig right in and get this thing over with. And.. you know, and I know President Trump thought so too and... evidently we're doing just the opposite so that kinda, breaks my heart.

Ashley

I think the thing that has been most frustrating and striking for me has been the psychology, of, uh, the people who, haven't done what they could have done, um, it's such a, uh, startling example of some psychological effects, like confirmation bias and wishful thinking, that people don't want there to be a coronavirus so they don't want themselves to have to wear masks and so they don't have to wear masks, and if everybody had just done what they ought to do we would be past this now.

I don't think it's that people want to kill old people, um, it's just that they're not very good at thinking... rationally about things that impact them or that conflict with their desires and their preconceptions. So, I think it's a sort of a frustration and disappointment, um, that almost makes me want to do something, like, get back to work on things I've done before of helping people with critical thinking, um, and empathy, because I, I just, it, I find it baffling and upsetting.

Snippets

Frances

.... The prevalent feeling? Loneliness....

Ashley

When I talk to my residents about it, what I often will emphasize though is what we might get out of it as silver linings. Um, I don't know that it's something that I believe so much as that I hope it'll make them feel better, things like, "We'll sure appreciate things more once we have em back again," or "Maybe these young folks who have never had to have hardship or learning that sometimes you can't have everything you want."

And I think those things are true, but, I don't think silver linings, you know, make up for tragedies. They're just, you know, silver linings of tragedies.

Frances

They're not taking it seriously. They'll be sorry... Never got a mask on the cat. I guess the animals are exempt.

Louise

And... I'm still waiting to celebrate my 90th birthday, April 30th, hahahaha.

Marion

When I need comfort, I can always think: God is in control.

End Of the World Hobbies

Margaret Totten



In the Kitchen of Color

Addissyn P. House

clouds, cotton candy thick,
plucked from the cobalt sky,
the perfect fair food,

but I'm not ready
for deep fried.

I'm ready

for the many shades of green
you can see
when you leave
your house
after three months.

for candy apple tree tops
glistening in the sun,
the sage that lays
in the grasslands.

I'm ready
to earn a quarter
for every mosquito bite:
\$8.25.

but there are no fairs
this year.
no cotton candy,
no fried food.

there is six-feet-apart-
individual-
neon-neapolitan
ice cream bars,

half-melted.

this summer,
it's candy apple tree tops,

the mint color
of my face mask
added with food dye.

it's all the mosquito bites,
red rash poison
ivy turning pink,
paper sack lunches,

and all the people
I could have hugged
had there been no
pandemic.

Michigan, July 2020

Perception of a Dream Cycle

Natalie Markech

If rain falls rose-colored onto my face is the sky pink
or am I just being optimistic?
If I look up and see the eyes of God, is that a spiritual experience
or is someone else just standing over me, looking down on me for believing that?

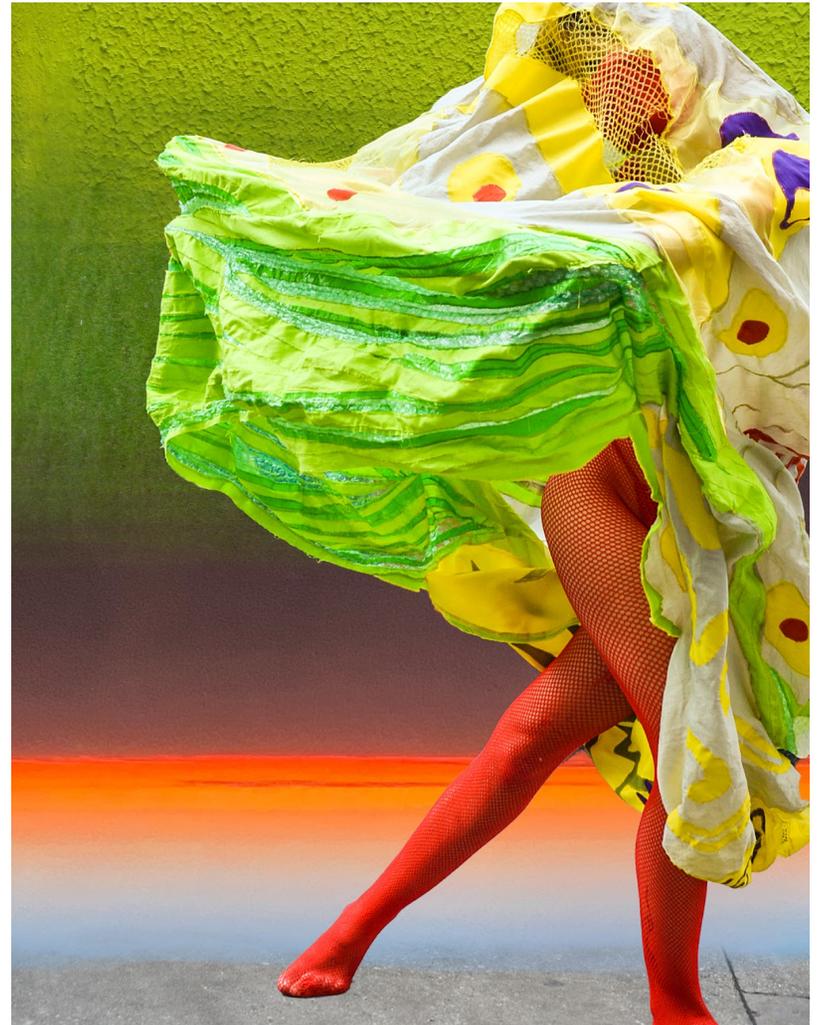
If I lay my body down in the grass and watch the pink rain
drizzle everywhere and I feel it, then I think it's time for me to grab
an umbrella before my skin melts into luscious rosewater
and I float away
down the hill
and I am never seen again,

not by the rose-tinted eyes of God or by the soft condescension of the sky as I float forever in a
looping river.

My body has dissolved
and evaporated into the air,
floating until it's time
to storm down again.
So was it my pink flesh all along which was coloring the sky blush And turning the
clouds
into cotton candy?

Performance Between the Depth of Above

Isabel McLaughlin



The Egg

Dillon Lee

Today is a routine day: 20-meter class, wingless wyvern. I see Ford hauling another barrel full of claws toward the cart. “Is that the fourth load? Sir Pansalot must have a fetish for that sort of stuff,” I mutter to myself. Everyone loves the classic tale of how the noble knight defeats the evil dragon, saves the princess, and lives “happily ever after.” But nobody considers the repercussions a rotting dragon corpse has on the environment. The evil dragon Björn, for example, released corrupted magic that devastated the famous Clements mill; decades of agriculture lost in a week! Why didn’t the squires record that? Unbelievable. Without Ford and I’s underpaid manual labor, our kingdom’s ecosystem would be in shambles.

We’re ahead of schedule for once in our careers; the upper body of the dragon is sitting in our cart, and it’s only noon. As I lift another severed leg, my eyes are met with an explosion of color. My heart races as I gaze upon an egg that sparkles like stained glass on a sunny afternoon. I call Ford over. “In the name of King Grimace, is that a wyvern egg?” he asks. I nod. “You know what this means?” he says. I nod. We both exclaim in joy: “We’re rich!” Eggs like these go for enough gold trinkets to buy a village; Ford and I just stumbled upon our retirement fund. Ecstatic, we prance around the cavern, throwing innards around like streamers. After a reasonable amount of celebration, we resume work, eager to return home with our prize.

While I’m hauling more dismembered body parts to our cart, I hear a startling shriek from within the cavern. After I muster what very little courage I have, I cautiously investigate the cause of the noise. I walk around a corner and am met with a peculiar sight: Ford frantically swatting at the air. I get a grasp of the situation when I see a splash of flame lick the cavern walls. It’s a dragon. Ford yells to me, “It hatched! The little devil hatched!” Adrenaline seizes my body. No time to think. I sprint, creating clouds of dust as I move. Although, my bravery evaporates from my body as I see the glowing, crimson eyes look in my direction. I’ve made a mistake. The dragon leaps in my direction, seething with bestial hostility. I’m given a minute amount of time to reflect upon my life. It was mediocre. My vision blurs into the void as the dragon latches onto my face.

A bump to my head wakes me. I hear Ford, “Sorry about that! Must have hit a turtle or a rock.” I’m lying next to wyvern guts in the back of the cart. I shield my eyes from the evening sun as I sluggishly make my way to the front. “What happened?” I ask. Ford grins and says, “When the dragon tackled you, you let out such a shrill scream, it must’ve scared it! Flew right out of the cave after it heard it.” My face took on a hue of hot red as Ford kept recounting the details of my “heroic deed.” As his laughter subsided, the night created new sounds to fill the void: the incessant chirps of crickets, the occasional icy howl of a wolf, the rattling of our wagon wheels along the dirt road. The moon pierces the darkness and radiates a comforting mellow light. I sigh. I smile.

Slumbering Beast

Cassandra Vogel



Holy Smoke

Alexandra Hobrecht

A feeling
after midnight,
the glow of yellow
downtown streetlights: an idle van traps me
into a vessel
of my own grief.

To fall in love
eludes me.
It's dangerous
but who else
is paying
us to be here?

In a field now.
Gray pine needles
as skinny as a spider's limbs, mildew
like white dust.
Imagine being as delicate as the wing of a fly.

Oh
these days:
a laugh that once resonated inside my own rib
cage sounds sharp
painful, hollow. Is this how it felt
to fall?

Colorblind

Jordyn Kravitz

Red, I am told, bleeds like a scraped knee
against the sidewalk. It is the taste of a fresh
strawberry and the feeling of pain when
your hand meets my skin.
Red is the anger that comes with the word 'no'
and the word 'yes' in the wrong circumstances.
Red is my least favorite color.

Orange is bitter.
The scrunch of my nose at the taste
of something sour. Orange is
every food I never liked. It is the tingles of my taste buds
and the tingles of my toes when I let them
fall asleep for too long.
Orange is the sunrise, they tell me,
but I'm not sure what that means.

Yellow is the way the sun feels against the back
of my neck when we take a summer stroll.
It is the echo of your laughter in my ears
long after you've stopped. Yellow is the feeling
when your hand touches me in a different way,
and the tingles that brings.
Yellow is like Orange and Red but different, and more,
all at once.

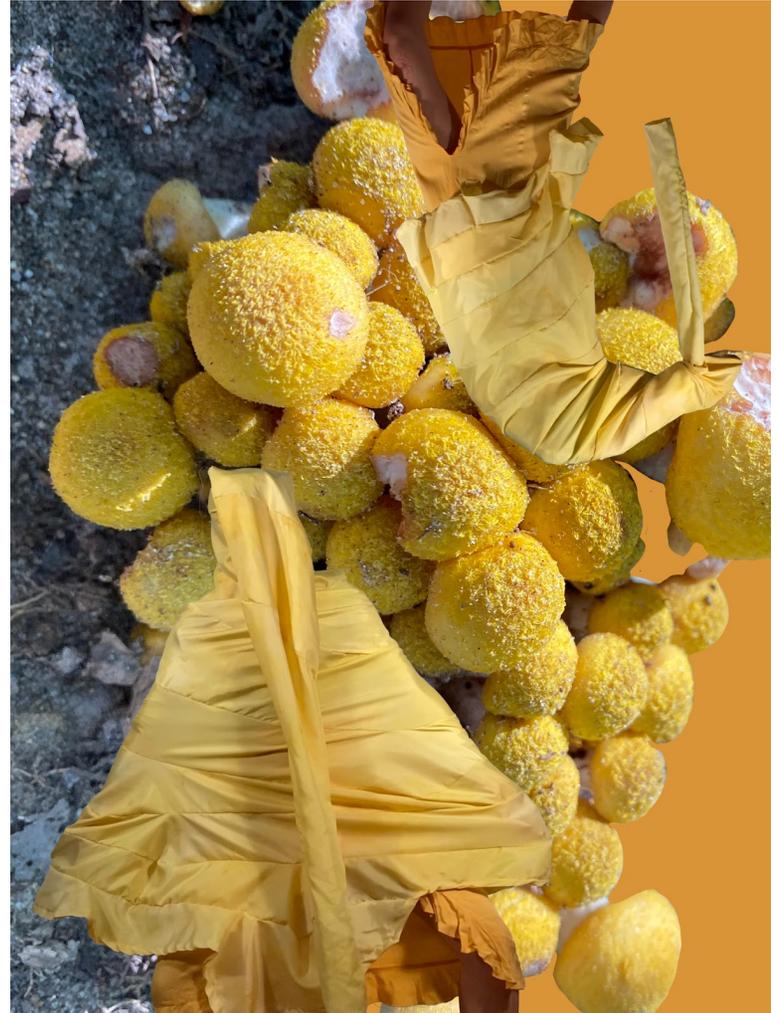
Green is fresh. It is snapping fresh vegetables
in half with my teeth, and the juices of an apple on my tongue.
Green is not like Orange, in that I love these tastes,
only that I taste them. Green is texture and scent
and grass and sand.
Green is summer and winter, all of the extremes.
Green is golden.

Blue hurts in a way different from Red.
Blue is self-inflicted pain and the necessity of self-soothing.
Blue is bubble baths and the way cold air feels at the bottom

of my lungs when I'm trying to catch my breath. Blue is when I can't catch my breath. It is hiccups and eczema and all of my annoying traits that won't seem to go away. Blue is learning to live with them, I suppose.

Purple is every scent in the world that doesn't give me a headache. It's the way untrimmed grass grazes against my calves and the color I imagine everyone's eyes to be. It is my favorite song and my favorite place and my favorite person all wrapped up into one excellent color. Purple is the afterglow when the storm has settled and everything is perfect and purple.

Symbiotic Shifts
Isabel McLaughlin



A Circle of Hills

Nionni Permelia

The hill was as tall as the sky itself. The top reaches the clouds. Some say it reaches the beginning of the dark world mortals would call space. But beneath the clouds, the hill is deep green, with rolling pastures deep as the waves of the sea. Farmlands are sprinkled all over the pastures, small rivers flow along the hill, like wrinkles in the face of a gray old man.

The hill is home to many, who are poor and tired because Earth is dying.

At first, there was grueling heat. Temperatures so hot, Earth cracked at the seams. The North Pole that was once filled with sharp white ice and glowing soft snow became a pool of dark blue water, so deep that even mermaids couldn't find their way to the bottom.

Raging, angry fires took over the human land, each flame getting its fill on the soil that once thrived beneath human life.

And then, there was cold. Ice froze over all of the seas and lands. Thick piles of bright and sparkling snow gathered, covering some parts of the ice. The parts the sun never showed its face to.

But then the rain came, pushing through the ice and snow. Flooding the lands that once held life so closely—it fed and cared for life. Nurtured and helped life survive. But life took advantage of the lands that cared for it. And the lands grew furious. So furious, that even once the rain stopped, it let the sun return. And when the sun returned, everything seemed to go back to normal, until the land pushed the hill into the sky.

During each moon sighting, the hill grew taller and taller. And living things grew colder, losing their breath from being so close to the sky, and close to the end of the lives they once had. Farmers tried to make up with the land by taking care of it as they knew best. By using and reusing water from the wrinkled rivers. By growing crops and composting food scraps back into the earth. They would even get down on their hands and knees and kiss the soft green grass that kept them warm at night. But the hill grew and grew, pushing life into the edges of the sky. Into the darkness of the beginnings of space.

“How will we survive? How could we possibly survive once we reach the clouds?”

The farmers were having a meeting at the biggest barn on the hill. They were tired of kissing the grounds of Earth. They were tired of knowing that their end was near.

“We’ve tried everything! I don’t know how else to make the lands happy,” one farmer said, as salty ashen tears rolled down their face. Some farmers nodded in solemn agreement.

“No, no we haven’t,” one farmer said, standing up in front of the farmers, who sat on the ground in grief. The farmer continued, “We need to prepare, to live amongst the clouds. To live in the darkness of space.”

Murmurs surfaced through the crowd of farmers.

“That isn’t possible!”

“What will we eat?”

“What of our crops!”

“Where will we find water and food after we reach the darkness?”

“Enough!” the farmer shouted. “We will have to make do. At least until we can make another land happy.”

Silence covered the crowd of worried farmers. But it was a silence of sudden agreement. They had run out of options and they would need to start preparing.

As each moon sighting grew near, the farmers worked hard to make suits out of cotton from raised sheep to wear above the clouds. Each farmer began to collect all of the oxygen they could that was left on the hill, putting it into bowls made from oils and glasses, to form a hard plastic. They grew more and more crops, saving them for their journey.

On the last moon sighting, before the clouds, the farmers began to fit into their suits, putting the plastic tightly over their heads, ready for the darkness that will consume them.

As they reached space, the farmers could see the tops of new land, floating in the blackness. How would they know which one was the land they were to make happy?

They decided to go to the first one they saw. As they landed, the temperatures grew hotter and hotter, making the farmers sweat through their suits. The sun was so close, they could feel the burning from the desert underneath their feet.

The next land was swelling with cold, the land filled with hills of snow and mirrored ice. The farmers knew no life of their own was welcome there.

The next land was full of rain so dense, they knew they would drown instantly.

So they went to the next land and it seemed more promising. Beneath the clouds, the new land was deep green, with rolling pastures deep as the waves of the sea, small rivers flowed alongside the land, like wrinkles in the face of an old man. They decided this would be their new land. But they could not enter if the land did not accept them first.

“What are you to offer me, if I let you feed off my land? What are you to do for me?” the land asked the farmers.

“We will grow crops and not take advantage of you. We will not pollute or destroy the air. We will savor your wrinkled rivers and raise the livestock to grow healthy and happy. We will be good,” the farmers answered.

“One slip up and I will go up in flames. Two slip ups and I will ice this land over and make it so cold, anything and everything will freeze. Three slip ups and I will drown this land with wet harsh rain. One more slip up, and I will create a hill that is habitable, but it will grow so fast, and so tall, and anything living on it will be shot into the sky and dropped into space.”

The farmers agreed with the new land and promised to take care of it. And they did.

For a little while.

But the land knew it wouldn't take long before the farmers simply forgot their promise. Until they started to evolve and make things that made the air foul. Until they would hurt the land with inventions that ruined the land's soil. Until the farmers were no longer farmers.

Until, once again, the land would go up in flames.

So, the land had already started to grow a teeny tiny green hill, the size of a grape, that would soon become as tall as the sky itself.

Jackson, Michigan Upturns Old Roots Sowing the Seeds for Grassroots Change

Keegan Sweeney

The fervent demand for racial justice in America is not lost on the people of Jackson, Michigan. It has reached the hearts of locals, inspiring an emergence of grassroots organizations. A wave of institutional change has sowed the seeds of progress in the community.

Jackson, a small city in South Central Michigan, is home to the country's first abolitionist newspaper; played an integral part in the underground railroad; and sent Union soldiers South during the civil war.

Despite its rich history, Jackson, like many other cities, has grappled with existing racial inequalities and inequities—the latter currently being the focus of change within the city.

Although racial equity and racial equality are related, they are not the same. While equality aims to give different groups the same opportunities, resources, and access, equity aims to make up for the predisposed lack thereof.

Kesha Hamilton, a newly elected trustee for the Jackson County Public School Board and frontrunner of local grassroots movements behind new city systems addressing inequities, breaks down the differences between racial equity and racial equality.

“Equity is not equality,” said Hamilton. “Equity looks unfair because it is unfair. It is addressing inequalities . . . it is addressing the fact that it [the system] was designed to purposefully be unfair. Equity says that I have to make up for that unfairness.”

Hamilton then explains how racial equity addresses problems of inequities through a racial lens.

“It [racial inequity] looks like, at J-High, [Jackson High School] having one Black teacher. My daughter went through Jackson High for four years . . . and she never had a Black teacher,” Hamilton said.

Jackson High is Jackson County's most diverse high school with around 50 percent of the student population being Black.

“Racial equity says, ‘You know what, we have got to go out of our way to get Black and Brown teachers to this school here at Jackson High,’” Hamilton said. “How do you have one teacher at the high school level to represent 50 percent of your student population? My children need to see themselves [represented] and that should be a requirement,” Hamilton said.

Derek Dobies, Jackson's mayor, expressed that racism is apparent in Jackson.

“There's a reason why a majority of our African American population lives in a certain area of town. That is not by accident, that is through decades of institutional racism through redlining and other means,” Dobies said.

“I think it takes a long time to reverse that separation, but also to reverse the hurdles that that [separation] has caused over generations of families that were locked out of neighborhoods where they could build equity, build wealth, and where they could take that wealth and reinvest it

in their own families. To all of a sudden say that racism doesn't exist anymore . . . that is certainly not the case," Dobies said.

"When you have a sheriff that talks about, openly, to their command staff—with uniforms on and guns holstered—talks about stepping on the backs of Black people's necks 'like they used to,' I think that's indicative that these structures still continue to exist," Dobies said.

Dobies is referring to a slew of statements made by Jackson County's former Sheriff, Steve Rand, recorded and released by Lt. Tommy Schuette starting in 2018. In the recordings, Rand also refers to a former Black deputy as a "dumb n-----" and Black people as "F----- monkeys."

However, it was not for lack of trying that Rand stayed in office until the end of his term in 2020—Mayor Dobies's request to have him removed was denied by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer.

Dobies is now working with grassroots organizers and the Jackson City Council to address racial inequities within the city. Included in these efforts are the newly established Department of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; the Racial Equity Commission in September; and the Declaration of Racism as a Public Health Crisis in June of this year.

"What you saw is a city get behind and support the community," Dobies said. "We've worked to basically build the structure to focus on racial equity in the city."

Although issues of racial inequity are being addressed in Jackson at the city level, the county tells a different story.

On June 16, The Jackson County Board of Commissioners voted 7-2 to not pass Commissioner Daniel Mahoney's resolution, Declaration of Racism as a Public Health Crisis, while one of the members, Tony Bair, expressed some sentiments on the part of the resolution detailing that systemic racism is evident in Jackson's educational institutions.

"I can tell you that that is not true," Bair said. "Is this personal choices rather than systemic racism?" Bair asked. "If our country is totally racist, then how did Barack Obama get elected?" Bair continued. "I want to see how individual responsibility and individual accountability comes into this," Bair said.

In the same meeting, it was mentioned that an "ad-hoc" anti-discrimination policy committee would be formed in lieu of the proposed resolution. As of November 17, Corey Kennedy, a County Commissioner who voted against Mahoney's resolution, says the committee "Is still in the midst of it [the policy] working."

Kennedy said that he and the committee reviewed the percentage disparity between minority populations and staff hired in the county. "Obviously, you can't hit it nail on, but you can look to improve on it," Kennedy said.

Kennedy stated that the disparities exist because of a lack of applicants.

Despite racial equity being a matter of contention amongst the County Board, the people of Jackson have found grassroots organizing to make tangible change.

"We can build culture and systems within our community that lifts people up," Dobies said. "We can build that city that, I think, Jackson can be."

"You're going to make mistakes; you're going to do some things right," Hamilton said. "A big block is not going to fall off. It's going to look like little chips here and there . . . but you're just never going to stop."

Litany: On Violence

Vivian Enriquez

Five hundred thousand index fingers search your head for intellect.
The itch of whiteness scours the land for all babies with no mother.
Are you tired of letting them dictate how you are counting the days?
I am tired of listening to intergenerational agony that keeps spawning
purple blue impressions scattering from my wrists to inner thoughts.

But in the dance circle, limbs speak the language of the oppressed.
In the dance circle, there is no difference between sweat and tears.
In the dance circle, the webs of ache in the shoulders come undone.
In the dance circle, collective body heat burns the dogma you carry.

Theories of freedom and compassion are created in the dance circle.
Here, together we disrupt the manichean structures that engulf us
all and here when we dance, knees bent, colonialism has no home.

In the dance circle, there is no such thing as a lost ancestral reliquary
furnished with cryptic morse code messages of how to move thy hips.
Here our ancestors will visit us, will celebrate us, they will exist without
the heavy corrupt gaze, without shackles, without blood stained clothes.

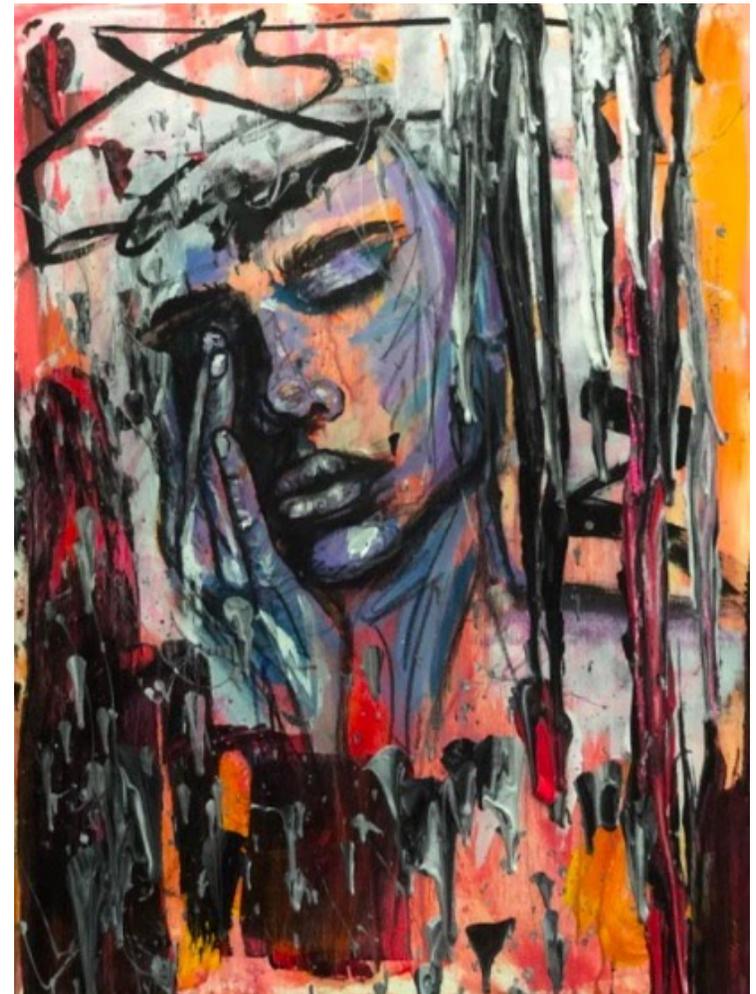
In the dance circle, mangled yearning secretes from our porous armpits,
our sweat will run and run from body to body, can you fucking imagine?
In the dance circle, there is me in booty shorts and there is Frantz Fanon.
Imagine us getting down like nobody's business, maybe a little stanky leg.
In the dance circle, he will tell me again my nightmares are not nightmares.

And then we will lose our fucking shit when Fanon starts dancing punta,
Let's go where we can put our imagined wooden cross down, where it can
all be grinded away. Enter my capillaries and I will give you the silky thread
to sew our ears shut, and you'll meet me where I am, here, in the dance circle.

When the fatigue from your feet reaches your lungs and you want to dissolve,
you can come find me in the dance circle. Aren't you tired of counting the days?

Tired

Savannah Sweeney



My Cat Sleeps Between Us Like A Baby

Aarzo Qureshi

My cat sleeps between us like a baby, and it fills me with a love so strong I want to cry sometimes. It worries you, gentle you, greatly though. You will tell me so every odd morning after spitting your foamed-up toothpaste into the kitchen sink while I try to make breakfast. Washing out your soft mouth while I bustle around to make two of everything.

“I might roll over one day, and she won’t move away.”

“What if you kick her (because even after all these years you’re so used to being the only one in the bed, baby) and something breaks?”

“She might get up and hide and scare the shit out of us while we tear the city apart looking for her, the rascal.”

You say these things with so genuine a worry, so genuine an affection for a creature we both love, that I love you all the more for it. So I tell you not to worry, in one breath, and dispel my own worries in another.

“What if her tail gets caught on the door and shatters (like all the loves before you).”

“During an argument where we storm inside, she might flee out the door, and, with her, all my peace.”

“I might crush her too.”

And we will look at each other for a long moment after...until the sweet little brat in question twines around one of our legs. Usually picking the person wearing the darker color of pants that day. Then the mornings become an affair of preparing our own meals as well as hers. And though we worry for her as a smaller creature living with two bigger, clumsier creatures, we love her more each day.

My parents poke and prod at the idea of a wedding, a *real* family, and children. And, for that, you have the patience of a saint as you join me in laughing uncomfortably. We have days in which the cold fury of my anger threatens to break every delicate thing we’ve collected. Days where your walls shut me out, and I have to hold myself back from scaling them to give you a space that is yours and not ours. We know what to do when those days occur, we’ve learnt it the hard way and are stronger for it. But marriage? Children? No, we don’t need that.

Not now, not with her.

She sleeps between us like a baby, a child. A fat, fur-covered, spoiled little baby. But a baby we wouldn’t change for the world. A baby that, should anything that we worry about occur, we would rage and spit and weep and screech like wraiths at the entirety of the world. Sometimes, when her warmth seeps into the both of us as we lie together like a riverbed, I want to ask you if you think of her the same way I do. But, alas, I’m still a coward when it comes to

things like that, darling. So I will simply lie there and think, watching your eyelashes flutter as you dream. Sweet, sunlit dreams, I hope.

Do you see her as a child? A baby? Our baby? You’d be a good parent, I know it, I feel it. You are so gentle with me, with her, so kind. I know you want to be a parent one day, so I wonder if you love my cat like one. (Strange, I know, but your love has made me so in the best way possible.) If so, I’d like to be the one to make you a parent. You’d be good to them, for them as you are to me. I lie there and think these thoughts, but never quite get around to voicing them. What can I say?

I am still so shy when it comes to you.

For now though, I am content with this. With you. With her. We are a family and we are enough for me. And I know we are enough for you. I know this in the way you keep all her veterinary paperwork next to our car insurance. In the way your dear eyes soften whenever she curls up on your chest when you lie on the couch. In the way you watch me wrangle her into the bath, and in the way your laugh echoes around the room as you take seemingly stealthy pictures of the both of us pouting and soaking wet, after.

And I am glad to have you, to love you, so glad that I have no words to express this wildfire of gratitude. I am so used to not being enough that, knowing that my stinky dum-dum of a cat and the scarred tumbleweed that is me are all you need, all you want, just...overwhelms me with love.

Just when I think it is not possible to love you more.

Twin Flames

Talea Fournier

You move different now- more firmly, with ease. I used to think the wind would take you out
when we were young. You flickered so low.
Now you're alight with a flame I don't recognize.

You got a boyfriend while I was away.
Today I met him for the first time
and he looks like someone who would have bullied us in high school, but he glows for you, so I
guess it's alright.

This apartment you share with him
feels like one of the Pinterest boards
from our eighth-grade interior design phase.
Your back deck faces towards
the sunset. I watch it go down during dinner.
I love you this Happy and I like you this Golden and I have never felt this Small.

I think that you're finally alive.
I think I've loved you all this time as a ghost.
He says something and you look at me and I try to laugh at his joke and suddenly
I'm twelve
and I'm twenty-two and I know
that I'll haunt you forever.

Talking to My Parents

Katrina Arriola

I skip stones across a frozen lake
The sky gray, the trees bare
And everything kind of looks like a Twilight movie
Blue cast with a filter that makes the pale paler, but the red redder.
The ice is way too thin to be skated on,
And with every small rock I throw at the icy sheet
It makes a small, empty *clink*.
I choose a slightly larger rock and throw it
At the ice I had chosen to bruise
To see what it sounds like
And it hits the ice with the sound of a gunshot
And the ice cracks.
I'm thinking
shit
As I hear police sirens coming down the road
Where the small lake sits barely hidden near the highway
And I feel like a teenager getting caught for smoking pot in the school parking lot
My heart racing
But my mind is too hazy to make out that the police are not coming for me.

Talking to Our Daughter

Katrina Arriola

We crossed an ocean
When the waves were monstrous,
When we didn't know how to sail,
When we didn't know what waited on the other side.

There were sea dragons, and storms, and dangers we could have never foreseen.

But there were still clear waters,
breath-taking views of the reefs,
and rainbow fish.

We would jump out then,
When the water was calm,
And marvel at the miracles God had made when He created the earth.

But one day we swam when the sea was sleeping,
And a sea dragon snatched at our souls,
Almost tearing us apart.

And we never swam again.

We had visions at sea.
Of wealth,
Of a home,
Of children.

And when we reached land,
We made up every mile lost to the ocean
With milestones of
Wealth,
A home,
And the place we could have children.

But we never anticipated crossing the ocean twice.

When we had you,
We didn't know we'd have to get back into the boat.
We'd have to enter the monstrous sea,
But now we knew how to sail.
We knew what waited on the other side.
That there were sea dragons, and storms, and dangers we could anticipate.

You wanted to see the clear waters,

The breath-taking views of the reefs,
the rainbow fish.

You wanted to jump out,
When the sea was sleeping,
But we stopped you.

You would yell,
And cry,
And threaten to take a different boat.
But you didn't know what lurked beneath the surface.

We're still crossing that ocean.
You still try to jump out at night.
We still stop you.
Now, we don't hear you yell,
And cry,
And threaten to take a different boat
Because the crashing of the waves are so loud.

We grow scared,
As the waves are higher than we remembered,
Almost touching the clouds.

The storms are more frequent and
The sea dragons come closer to the boat and
You want to jump out even more than before and
And and and and.

Last night, when we were sleeping,
You jumped out.

The sea dragon snatched up our souls.

And you along with it.

RE:lief/venge

Hannah Ginsberg

You are walking across the bridge
Of his nose
Tracing your way across his left eyebrow
Down his temple
Pausing on the protruding place where
eyesocket becomes cheekbone
The warm sunlight reflects
cold, snowy and harsh off his white skin
Eyesore
The wind has her big deep voice on
Cracking your clothes as whips
Flicking your eardrums
Sticking her cold fingers in your ears
Not so deep as the creaking of his fall
Not so big
Now that you can stand on his face
Now that you survived him
You are with everyone, all taking turns poking and prodding
Revelling, exploring
Smoke fingers curl into your nostrils from a distance
You feel naked in that way you do when there are no walls or hills for miles
Only deep-voiced, whip-cracking wind
Smell the dusty cold, watch the face
take a step over the top lip
dangle your foot into the mouth
that can no longer bite you

On Addiction

Savannah Sweeney

I'm addicted to picking the skin off my lips.
Whenever I am nervous or simply not paying attention,
I dig my nails into them until they bleed.
I look like I've gotten into a fight.
"It is such a shame," my mother would say,
"You are such a pretty girl,
and no boys are going to want to kiss you with those lips."
Don't pretty girls bleed too?

Though I leave them cracked and bloody, within a few days,
the damage I caused magically disappears,
only enabling me to do it again.
I've become sadistically addicted
to watching my body heal itself.
I know my lovers taste the blood,
but it is just too easy to cover up with lipstick.
I don't know why everyone is so bothered by it,
when I am the only one hurting?

Skipping Stones

Talea Fournier

I think, when she touches my left eyebrow like this, she's trying to read my mind. She's looking at me now, her hands on either side of my face. I melt into watercolor at the taste of her palms. If you stood still beneath her gaze, you would talk in poems, too.

"Do you think Taylor Swift would sing at our wedding?" she whispers, coaxing me out of my frown with the face she makes when she wants us to be funny. I break my doubts against her like I always do, rolling my eyes, crashing my smile into her shoulder.

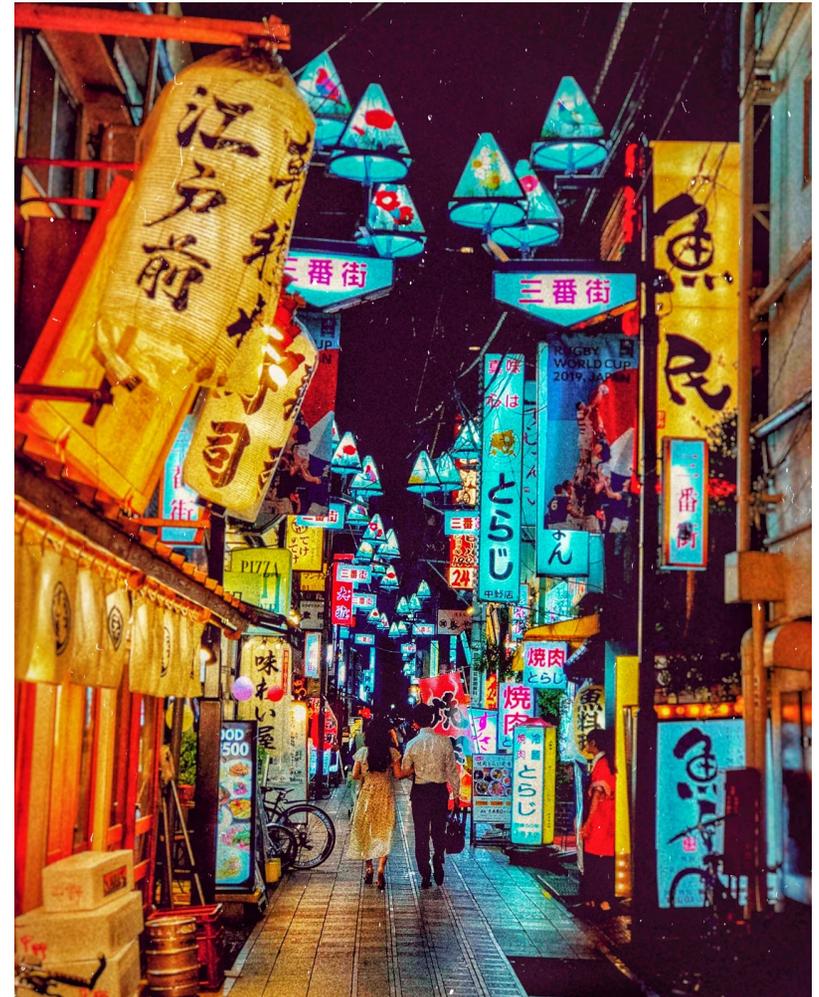
Yesterday, I fell in love with the backs of her hands. I watched her stoop down near the water, her rainfingers searching in their quiet way, baptizing the gravel, parting the riverbank in search of flat pebbles. I studied the mole on her hand as she crouched low, water dripping down her wrist, fingers fiddling with her chosen rock. She was all sharp edges. Her arm bent at an odd angle, body held tense, until the stone kissed the water: one, two, three times and gone. I love her for the way she didn't look back at me, for the way I could tell she was smiling from the spread of her fingers.

I write because she feels things always. Because she loves me with a steady ease that I do not have. Because she doesn't hold her breath between skips. Because sometimes I convince myself it doesn't count— this space between water and pebble where we share ourselves. Because I don't know how to tell the difference between a metaphor and a promise.

Once, I wrote how the only thing I had confidence in was the fact that I could skip a stone well. And that was enough. Now I am in love with the Stone Skipper, and I don't quite know what to do with that.

A Date Under Neon Lights

Uyen P. Trinh



Heat (Summer Madness - Kool & The Gang)

Hannah Ginsberg

What color is humidity
Warm moist air
Wading through the street
Bubbles bursting from your nose
Swollen
 moisture meandering
 from forehead
 to top lip
 drip
 salty on the
 tongue
anticipation
 Sky slowly slips her gray dress
 On
 Off
Silver silk on collarbone
Sweat,
 Hot,
High,
lick it off,
 drip
a Room filled with
 exhales
 drip
 down
the walls
Pulsing,
 Flush
berry juice on my lips
Swollen
 About to-
 Inhale
 Then!
The big rain comes

Ashtekar

Avani Ashtekar

Fragments of Indian politics I wrote on my phone with keyboard suggestions/predictive texts (as poems):

farmers have been doing a fight to
get right back in spring and then
you will get back up with the rest
of the stuff that you need to know
and survive the long story of your life.

farmers are doing now for a long period
of time in the past year and a few years
later this year to the last few days of a
period in which one we can do it for our
next season of the life a fight.

citizenship and the other things that
you are doing for you and i are
not having a conversation about the
situation in which one can transform the
things that we can.

citizenship is not the best thing to have
in the world and the only thing that you
can get in touch with you is not the
same thing you are doing this with your
class and your life and your thoughts are
not really you.

Letting Kashmir be is the only way
to make a difference between the two
sides of this world that will have never
done before it will take place for
the future to be able to go back
in time and then will take care.

Kashmir and the government are not making a deal with the other people on the internet and they have to start a process of trying Kashmir has own ways of making a difference to their life and their relationship between them in the future will not take place.

azadi* is the only thing I need you to know how much you are going to be doing right away and thank you for sharing your love with your love. I hope you know that you have never been so much for me and you have a merry love.

inquilab zindabad** is the one that has been working with those who have made it in the last year or last week or last minute to make the difference for the being.

*azadi - Freedom

**inquilab zindabad - Long live the revolution

No, please do not ask me to italicize "foreign words." What is foreign to you, is not foreign to me. Thank you.

Yes, sometimes I am terrified that the phone can predict the way I think, other times, I see the phone as an extension of my brain.

Ghazal #1

Vivian Enriquez

All along my heart has been with you
And I've left all my Naproxen with you.

All train tracks from Mexico lead to Chicago,
No train will convince me to end with you.

The sun pulls me up like a flower in the morning,
How do flowers grow here and then with you?

How will my father know I'm a poet?
Will he catch me wearing thin with you?

Invite me to brush your hair in the shower,
Tonight, I can be Raquel when with you.

Things I am Thinking of Fixing

Lukia Artemakis

I left the pennies too long on the desk, and they have left pale green circles in the wood.
If you know me at all, (I said if) there are a lot of variables.
Sometimes I am staring at the yellow cardstock with the prices and I cannot decide on a bundle
of apples.

My hair ties hardly match. My skin is dry for this climate, my hair eats up the rain.
I walk with my head in the screen, like a dead flamingo.
One day, you, or someone I like more, will hear me talk of silly girls, and know that I mean
myself.

I people-watch from my window like my mother's cat.

You are fine with all of this, but I am looking for someone who I will scrub out these little rings
for.

Ice

Shannon Abbott

Too many times have I submitted,
fight, flight, and freeze.
Perpetual ice, please melt.
Let me move.

Monsters with no soul
feeding without hunger
On my shaven ice body.
He said he liked cherry syrup.

I want to be beloved and strong,
so priceless and untouchable.
Feared and loved
like Cleopatra, but

I am a coward, I am weak,
I am convenient, mostly,
I am afraid to be eaten.
So why, do I offer the monsters gravy?

Do I try and melt the ice?
Maybe they'd like tea then.
But the ice doesn't melt fast enough.
It never does.

I am left trembling in a cold sweat,
hating my cowardice.
Most fearful of ice
that does not melt

At Twilight

Shannon Abbott

At twilight, I am alive
The line between who I am and who I might be
becomes blurred in a hazy radiant glow.

Looking up to where the gods and phantoms play,
I take in a deep breath of that sweet air,
and join in the romping of tragic children.

The Weight of Knowing

Ella Knight

I was born ears in a world of mouths
I heard my father before I saw his lips move
He told a woman that she was pretty
She was not my mom

I was confused
Does my mouth not work the same way?
Do my lips speak separate truths?
My ears scream
The sound is so loud I hear nothing
Silence

My lovely mother believes she is loveless
She can hear the way your voice wavers on the word
Love

I learned at an early age that
The elephant in the room is choosy in its visibility and
Some mouths should remain shut

I learned at a later age that
A secret is violent if left unattended
Stroke it gently your lips mouth
No sound

I keep my arms crossed to protect my heart
My hands are not strong enough to will past sins from the world.

Lateral
Claire Ward



Threads

Chloe Baker

Clothing can tell you much about a person. It can tell you where they come from, where they're going, what they intend to do at their destination. And when it is all you can see of a person, it is important that you take notice of what it says about them.

The man in the waistcoat flounces down the street across from you. He has no face, but his long, thin fingers stick out from the sleeves like knives through a sheet. Watch him as he passes. See how the fabric is frayed around the edges of the tail. How it is missing a button toward the bottom and how the others hang from their fastenings, strained by pressure. If you follow carefully, *carefully*, you will find yourself in front of the old theater. You will not see him enter, but you will know that it is the right destination. Go inside and talk to the workers. Hear the stories of the grand parties of the past, the great celebrities, the elegant patrons. The rumors of the many deaths in the darkened booths during the late-night shows. Hear especially of the original owner, kind and dedicated to his work, his waistcoat sitting in a case above the front doors.

The woman in the patterned robe floats through the mansion halls. Her feet lift slightly over the floor, barely brushing the dark wood. See how her robe brushes through the dust. The red of the lining shines in the dark of the ballroom and the soft patterns of leaves flow into the patterns of the wallpaper along the ballroom walls. Follow alongside her as she leads you along the paths of faded carpet, coming to a slow stop at the kitchens. Find her granddaughter, sipping tea at the table, and sit to listen to stories about the house. Hear about the gatherings the woman of the house would hold. The great charity galas and the charming gatherings. The great gossip surrounding the ladies that would visit under the cover of darkness, carrying great cases of unidentifiable things. Walk with her to the great chest that holds a faded robe, red and patterned with leaves.

The figure in the red robe hovers quietly in the clock tower. See them through the small windows near the face, their own obscured by the darkness the hood provides. This one you cannot see well, but the red seems to call to you as you stand on the street corner, a lone still figure in the noon-day crowd. Do not follow, for the stories this one holds are not those that you would wish to hear. Nor can you, for no one is left to tell them. Stand at the base and look up into the trees, a small bird's nest made with bright, red fibers settled in the branches above.

The person in the soft green bomber jacket saunters across the barroom floor. See the wear in the sleeves and the collar, pulled tight against the body to shield against the cold. The fading of the color on the shoulders, bleached by the sun over many a bright winter day. The stains on the edges of the cuffs of the sleeves, dark and unyielding. Sit down next to them during the quiet nights, but do not disturb the silence. Wait for the bartender to come and clean the dishes near you. Ask about the pictures tacked against the wall and listen to the stories of patrons of days

past. When a picture of a person with short hair, hard eyes, rough hands, and a faded green bomber jacket catches your eye, point to it. The bartender will tell you of long days, dusty roads, and trust, maybe not so well-founded, between neighbors. Listen quietly to the soft whispers of the regulars to hear about the tense night when the wood of the bar floor got a little darker and the stains on the sleeves of the faded bomber sunk deep. Look in the lost and found bucket and see a small scrap of faded green fabric with dark spots sitting in the bottom of the bin.

The woman in the silver skirt flows down the stairs of the library. Her steps clack with the sound of heels against tile, and the whisper of the fabric of her skirt can be heard clearly in the silence of the rooms. See the small ink stains along the sides and the silver threads hanging from the hem. Watch how it moves through the shelves, never seeming to touch the books or disturb the papers on the tables. Ask softly for assistance and follow carefully through the maze of old paper, until you find the old stairs down into the basement. Step down carefully until you reach the employee offices and the reserved rooms and make your way to the large office at the end of the narrow hall. Open the door carefully and find the space transformed into a museum and memorial for the history of the library. Read about the founder of the original building, long since replaced, and the struggles to keep the space open to all. Read, more carefully, the small clippings in the corners, telling of the greatest events of the town's history. See the figure in the silver skirt in every picture. Before you leave, lean down to look under the front of the desk. See silver threads and heeled shoes, crossed carefully against the carpet.

Fabric holds history. Clothing doubly so. Contemplate the pieces and contemplate the people that wore them. You can find out much more than you intended.

¿Mi Ultimo Mijo?

Cesareo Moreno

“¿Dios te ama y acepta, sabes eso mijo?”

“No te olvides de darme un beso, mijito.”

Wake up, my tia gets ready to feed a whole family plus more
“Morning, wash your hands and help me make the chorizo mijo.”

“Oh you silly goose, I do forgive you. Come here,
let me clean you up, mira ya no te vez tan feo mijo”

Papi, (never father) trying to carry too much
“¡Ven abre la puerta, pronto! Mijo!”

We lie in the chilly graveyard fooling around
“You know in the moonlight you glow? Mijo”

Those who love me call me mijo and Chayito.
¿Que pasara cuando escucho mi ultimo *mijo*?

Mujeres Divinas

Juanita Zuniga

I used to be very insecure.

I used to see myself in the mirror.

And I would think

If I am one of God's children, why did she make me like this?

I was 9 when my body started to change.

First, it was the hips.

It was a Friday when I noticed because, on Fridays at my elementary school, you could wear jeans if you paid \$0.25. Now that I think about it. It's kind of crazy, we had to pay \$0.25 to our tuition-based school to wear jeans. But, c'mon, getting to wear jeans instead of navy blue uniform pants or skorts, that were just so tacky, was pretty damn cool. I couldn't wait to wear my Funny Monkey shirt with my jeans—an outfit all nine-year-olds were wearing.

That morning, I ran from my bathroom to my room so fast. Fashion waited for no one and nothing.

I tossed my shirt over my head, yanking it down so hard it ruined the high ponytail that was managing my long black hair.

Next, jeans and shoes.

I held them up in front of me. They were the cutest pair I owned. They were hand-me-downs, but that didn't mean anything to me. My cousin gave them to me, and that just told me that I was cool enough to wear her clothes. And I wore the hell out of her clothes—jeans, after jeans, she passed on to me. But, this pair was my favorite of them all. They were comfortable, and I was confident. I was stylin'. Honestly, they were a symbol of my true self—a staple of my fashion sense. They were boot-cut and extra flared at the end. At the corner of both front pockets, were patches of sewed on flowers.

I stood in front of the medium-sized mirror that hung on my closet door.

Left foot first, now the right.

I bent down and reached to pull them up—hoping for them to slide along the inches of my skin, snuggling my legs. I couldn't wait for how they made me feel when I had them on.

I smiled, scrunching each side of the jeans in the palm of my hands, preparing just to slip them on.

But, a funny thing happened.

Instead of going all the way up, my jeans stopped right above my knee, almost directly in the middle of my thigh.

I furrowed my brows and shook my head.

One more time.

I pulled the jeans back down to my ankles.

Here we go. I pulled each side up, and still, the jeans sunk to my hips. Not moving an inch higher.

Maybe a different method? I got closer to the edge of my bed. My approach: yank them up and fall back on my bed so gravity could do its thing.

Still nothing.

I stood in the center of my room. I felt defeated. I sat on the edge of my bed with my jeans halfway up my legs. When I stood to pull them up for the last time, they snuggled around my thighs so tight, squeezing them so hard it felt like I was being suffocated. I exhaled and quickly pulled them back down. What happened? I thought to myself. The last time I wore these pants, they slid on like butter on a skillet. Yet, today??? Today they were tight. They felt narrow. They felt like someone else's jeans. What was happening?? I couldn't pin it down to anything. No matter how hard I kept thinking, wondering, and asking myself what happened, I just felt so confused. I cried. I sobbed. I felt disgusting. My once favorite pair of bootcut jeans no longer slid on easily.

With disappointment in my chest and sadness in my heart, I kicked my jeans off of my feet until they were across the room.

I stood in front of my mirror with my arms crossed, looking at myself and thinking: what is wrong with me.

I had the biggest frown on my face. Pouting and pouting.

I threw my arms down to my sides, and they bounced.

They bounced. My face dropped.

They bounced.

I gently lifted my arms up and slowly put them down. They were resting on my sides, but they weren't touching my sides anymore. There were resting on these very noticeable bumps on the sides of my thighs.

I pushed them in, using much force. But my scrawny little arms couldn't make them disappear. I wanted them gone. If I could see them, who is to say everyone at school won't????

What if they talked about me at school?

What if someone saw them?

"Juanita, porque no tienes tu ropa puesta," my mom yelled.

"They don't fit, mom. I don't know what's wrong with me," I said as she walked into my room.

She looked at me up and down with so much tenderness. I know she saw what I saw.

"It's okay. It happens. Por mientras put these on," she said, handing me a pair of black and grey striped sweatpants.

"These are comfortable, and no one will see," she said.

I wore sweatpants every Friday after that because I didn't want them to see.

Then it was my butt.

Nalgona.

That's what the boys called me at school.

The word still haunts me.

I was 10, and I wanted to feel 10.

I was tired of wearing khakis and sweatpants that were always two sizes too big. I wanted to wear straight-leg jeans and skirts, like my friends. And, if I wanted that, I needed to ask my mom the unthinkable.

When I asked her, it was a school night. I don't remember the exact date, but I asked because Friday was so close.

As we sat around our dinner table, I looked at my mom, and I looked at Abel--her boyfriend.

"Mom, can I ask you something?" I said. She looked over to me and nodded as she chewed on her tortilla.

I looked up at her and begged with my eyes.

"Do you think... I don't know, is it possible that maybe after school tomorrow we could stop by the mall to... I don't know... maybe get a new pair of jeans?" I said.

She looked at me, "New?"

I nodded.

"Yes, I only ask for one pair because I know they are expensive, but I will take care of them," I said as I twirled my fork around in my plate.

"If you promise, then I will think about it," she smiled.

I promised, and so the next day, after school, my mother took me to JC Penney.

We usually only went to this store for Christmas shopping on Black Friday.

Being in this store during the day and not for a holiday, birthday, or special occasion was lame. I remember my stomach hurting because it was too hot in the store, and I had too many layers on.

I was also pretty tense. I had never shopped for *new* jeans--or jeans in general. Mom and I grabbed pairs of different varieties and styles. She had patience with me, and I felt so supported.

We tried clothes on, we put clothes back, needless to say, I left with two pairs instead of one. I was content, but I'll never forget what my mom told me in the dressing room. She looked at me struggle, hop, and jump to slide into every pair of jeans.

While I sweated and turned red, putting each pair on, she smiled and smirked.

"You will be shaped like your Tia," my mom said, looking at me in the first pair of jeans while pulling my shirt all the way down past my calves.

I frowned at her. "I'm sorry," I said.

My mom looked at me.

"Don't be sorry, you are growing," she said back to me, at least that's what I wanted her to say. Instead, she said nothing. She just looked at me and kissed my forehead.

We bought them, and I wore them to school that Friday.

"Don't forget to pull your shirt down when you stand up or come back from the bathroom, or run in the gym, or when you take off your coat, okay?" That's what she said as I walked into school.

This day at school changed my life forever.

I remember walking in and sitting at my desk.

I felt so noticeable. I started to get anxious.

At that age, I would've probably described it as "my hands are sweaty, and I feel nervous."

When I took off my jacket, I pulled my shirt down over my bump. I felt myself turn red. I didn't want to turn around from my coat jacket because I felt the stares of a million other 10-year-olds. I wanted to cry. I wanted to leave. I felt so light-headed. I still didn't turn around to face the other students.

I walked with my head down and my hands in front of me—nervously intertwining them. I kept thinking to myself, "why did mom let me buy these??" I felt everyone staring at me.

Imagine being the young 10-year-old girl with disproportionate hips and a huge bump sticking out from her backside who always wore khakis too big for her and sweats on jean day showing up in form-fitting denim jeans.

I sat down at my desk and began the Do Now, and I turned to see my friend smiling at me. It was so kind and caring—her smile.

"Those jeans are so cute," she said.

I sighed with relief. I was accepted.

Until I needed to sharpen my pencil, I rose from my seat and walked to the back of the class.

A boy in my class was already there sharpening his pencil.

He stopped.

He turned around.

He looked at me.

He smiled.

"Nalgoncita," he said and smirked at me.

I felt my face drop, and I froze. I got nervous again.

He walked away from the pencil sharpener.

I was a bit relieved. I just wanted to sit down, but I needed my pencil sharpened.

Though I couldn't see them, I knew he had come back, and he brought his friends.

He said, "she has a big butt, right?"

And I felt my face go from pale to steaming red within a matter of seconds.

I dreaded turning around.

"Nalgona, Can I touch your butt?"

“When did you get it?”

“nalgas, wear more pants like that. It looks nice.”

They said those things and more. All I could feel was regret. I took a deep breath and walked past them. I sat down in my chair with rosy cheeks and glistening eyes, holding back every tear in my eyes. I raised my hand.

“Teacher, I don't feel good. Can I call my mom,” I said, trying to keep myself from crumbling.

As I walked to the principal's office to call my mom, I wiped my wet eyes.

I went home.

I never wore jeans to school again.

Nalgona was now what they called me.

And it was my fault because I wore jeans.

When I went home, I remember asking my mom if my body was ugly. She looked at me with all the love she had in her heart.

“No hija, pero tu cuerpo está creciendo,” she said.

I asked her, but why am I growing this way.

And all I remember her saying is:

You are your grandma's granddaughter; you have her bottom.

You are your mother's daughter; you have her body.

You are your tia's niece; you have her hips.

*You are growing to be like the many strong women before and the many strong women after you.
You will understand one day.*

My mom's last words stayed with me. I wish I wouldn't have felt the way I did. I wish I could take those feelings away from my younger self. She didn't deserve to feel nasty for her natural body. She didn't deserve those long nights, wondering if they would ever go away.

She deserved to know that was the way her body was to come, and it was beautiful. She deserved to know, she wouldn't feel like this forever. She deserved peace for having to grow up before many other girls.

To my younger self, I am sorry I wasn't much help then, but I promise, I know better now.

I know my body is a product of love now.

I know my body is the art left behind from our ancestors.

I know my body is beautiful.

Mi niña querida, eres una de las mujeres tan divinas.

Mujeres Divinas, No Queda Otro Camino que Adorarlas

Juanita Zuniga



Untitled

Francesco Giuseppe-Soto

madre taught me boys crying could be a cut from climbing fences that are too tall i admit, frontera showed me what fear carries on a train: polaroids and bolio, stolen pocket knife i see the hinges of papi's under eyes and wonder why the frontera can't do the same. when madre calls me lazy for sleeping in past eight, she rejoices with the politicians i see on channel 34 papi brought a rosary, for me, that belonged to abuelita in mexico, frontera let this one slide *do rosaries need coyotes?*

if you ask my papi, or ramon ayala, what his loudest sorrow is, he will show you his grito papi crying could be a mango, or the eighth corona, or ivory stock paper with a signature and seal

there was a jar of pesos that i broke when i was seven, and instead of cleaning the shards of glass, papi stuck them to his back and rubbed my tears dry

papi ONLY buys jicama off hubbard con su compa, he tips him twenty, brings me a vaso, and I know he wishes he could stay longer

Parts of a Whole

Nehe-Miah Scarborough

White boy hisses Negro three times.
I flinch with each syllable.
Why does it feel like a diet version of nigger?
It burns that same spot.
Maybe, I'm too sensitive.
Maybe, that inherent Black pain tolerance skipped me.

White girl wishes her parents were more upset
when she came out
that way, she could have a "good" story.

Dressed with a naive smile and ignorance,
White girl says
I'm the first Black girl she's ever been attracted to.
My skin crawls.

White girl blurts, people need to get over it.
Two videos of Black men dying are circulating
again.
White girl's mad when I ask,
How can you get over something that hasn't ended?

"Why did you leave Cass?"
"There were too many niggers,"
Mexican boy answers.
Silence.
Silence.
Silence.
"But not like you. You're different."
Silence.
Silence.
Silence.
White girl responds, "You can't say that."

What are you?
Half ne, half gro.
Half bl, half ack, I think.
I'm Black. I answer
You can't be just Black, she jests.
Why not?
Why not?

Black girl turns to her Black friend and whispers,

"I can only hang out with certain Black girls."
They nod in agreement.
From my silence, they must sense the question
because they respond, with a knowing glance,
"Some Black girls are just so ghetto,"
they snicker.

Four drinks in hand.
My mother's smile reaches the rafters.
For the first time, my dad shows teeth.
My brother peers through 3D glasses.
A black and white world
fades into red and blue.
White man *compliments*, "nice negro hair."
For once, I understand how the art in museums feel.

My Black mother mumbles
"I wish conversion therapy
was still legal in Michigan."
I avoid telling her it is.

"After notifying the two women that she is straight and doesn't wish to be turned into a lesbian,
Angelou writes, "even after I told them I had no interest in lesbianism, they thought the sight of
women kissing would excite me." (Maya Angelou, *Gather Together in My Name*, 49).

"They were lesbians, which was sinful enough, but they were also inconsiderate, stupid
bitches." (54).

"They broke out of their embrace. Nasty things." (57).

"Should I tell them in order to eat and pay for my son's keep, so they don't throw me down on
that uncomfortable sofa and rape me?" (58).

Black girl reads 70's book from Black hero.
She'll later discover that she is that "nasty thing"
that "sinful [...] inconsiderate, and stupid bitch."
Black girl writes bad poetry at midnight.
She chokes on stanzas.
She sobs out paragraphs and misplaced punctuation.
It never works.
Never makes her feel smart enough or whole.

Even now,
when grappling with every piece of herself:
the Black,
the lesbian,

the woman,
it all still sounds like parts.

Guess that's the worst part about confining yourself to a paragraph,
at some point, it has to end.

Now, she's more gay than Black.
More Black than poor.
More poor than depressed.
More loved than broken.
And everything is representation.

In this story, her mother is a gentle woman whose only vice is loving her daughter too much. In a different literary reality, her mother is volatile. A loose wire, more palm print than shoulder. She is electricity personified.

Black boy says,
I'm cool with the gay shit.
I just hope my son's not.

Black girl's first time being called a dyke
was in her own home,
uttered by her own blood,
followed by a sea of laughter.

Black girl feels uncomfortable in every room.
She is always too much.
Some portion of herself doesn't fit.

With her close friends,
she is 1 of 2 Black girls.
With her Black friends,
she is the only lesbian they know.
With her male friends,
she's forced to convince them that the word *bitch* is misogynistic.

I wonder what it feels like to be whole everywhere,
all the time,
and not just when I'm alone,
screaming at my computer.

But how dare I feel only half human
when I'm 3/5ths a person?

White man messages Black girl.
He types, "I've never tried Black pussy before."

Black boy pushes her head towards his lap.
They stand in a middle school hallway.
Her best girlfriends giggle.
Black girl wishes she were invisible.

White man grabs Black girl's ass
While she steals sips from the Olive Garden water fountain.
Her parents sit two tables away.

Black boy grabs her chest in a classroom.
Should she laugh, even if it's not funny?
Should she dismiss his guilt?
So that he can sleep at night,
thinking she liked it.

White man runs his oil-slick hands through her hair.
White woman runs her oil-slick hands through her hair.
DO NOT TOUCH THE ART! SHE IS COMPOSED OF FRAGMENTED RARE MATERIAL.
STAY BEHIND THE LINE! LET NOT THE DIRT FROM YOUR HANDS CORRUPT HER
ETHEREAL FORM!

So many instances where her body felt shared,
as if the earth owned lock and key to skin and bone.

When I recall these moments, I know not whether to attribute them to the woman or to the Black.
Because does not the earth own Black men's bodies? Or are they owned by concrete? By a
chuckling cop, who knows no other name for him but boy?

Can a Black girl be more than pain?

Black girl sunbathes.
She allows those gold-tinted rays to darken her.
She dances amongst overgrown trees and daisies.

Black girl is formless.
Only learned how to accept her body
by getting rid of it.
Now, she can take up as much space as air.

Black girl is vocal.
She never permits those silences to destroy her.
Not again.

Black girl still hurts.
Except now, she leaves her wounds undressed.
"Because sometimes the body needs you to feel everything

then show it off.”

But Black girl can no longer escape past ghosts.
It is not implausible to exist with duality,
to attach an “and” to every identifier.

To become the Black woman,
she must let the war rage inside her.

Black woman communicates with the stars.
She doesn’t beg, she demands.

Black woman stopped bending to the will of others.

She screamed, “NO!”
She stepped back!
She dodged that encroaching hand.

Black woman howled fuck feeling like art!
The world over glorifies the existence of beauty trapped
within a stationary object.

And when you are woman,
The world’s only compliment is beauty.

But I dare you to speak...
To make yourself sentient...
To breathe the breath of life into your own goddamn bones.

I do not feel like art.
As a Black woman, I bleed like scripture.
As a Black woman, I love like an infinite galaxy.
As a Black woman, I fuck like
the nasty, stupid, and inconsiderate bitch that I am.
And yet.
And yet.
And yet,

Black woman wonders when her body will consecrate the earth?
When will she be sacrificed for being too loud or nasty or disrespectful
or perhaps, she will simply be too slow
when the quick-witted hand of death takes her.
Because even if, the world believes,
Black boys make better fertilizer,
Their lives confined to a catchy hashtag,
she would be foolish to think her name exempt from the list.

Mourning Plot

Riley Gabriel

my garden has a plot reserved for mourning plants
grieving yellow stems growing drooped leaves
I kill off the old versions of myself sometimes
and plant them in this dirt to die as half selves
like a tree dropping a stunted gnarled limb
I chop my own limb holding images of my mother
red hot beatings in orange Octobers at her place
Idaho potato sized lies grow in that wretched soils
ever the roots that have withered to allow new growth
Cuttings of brain stem sit as decor in a vase in my house
beautiful reminders of the poison others can carry

Pinch of Salt

Juan Ibarra

I hate when recipes call for a pinch of salt.
my fingers are monstrous, grisly tendrils of skin and blood, my hands are huge
and my forehead is drenched in sweat. I refuse. you know, when my mother
taught me how to season food, it was less thinking and
more loving, more dancing, more doing.
this kitchen is not very kind to me. no, not at all

the windows in this place are so large, I'm sure my neighbors have seen every single part of me.
there is not an inch of body, mind, existence that has not been laid bare for their enjoyment. I am
an exhibit, a man in a foggy trophy case, a morsel.
dish soap. you know how you only need just a drop,
and when you add water, it expands, inflates, it foams, explodes:
that is exactly what happens when you leave the door open.

find me soil that hasn't already been tilled, drained and sold. there are
no more precious minerals or matter, I haven't seen an earthworm since kindergarten.
did you know, there are 10 quintillion insects on the globe
that is one too many disgusting little bugs, they could form a kingdom,
why haven't they challenged us to a fight.

our cells are autonomous, yet so dependent
a house of cards finds structure within itself, yet it crumbles in the end.
we commute over monoliths of concrete, never wondering how they arose or
if they even belong.

there is nothing worse than coming to a red light
and the person next to you stops and your vehicles line up perfectly.
Get the hell away from me. What is wrong with you.
So I drive forward just a bit, just out of sight just invisible enough

to be missed, now that's more like it.

Callus Soles and Bills / Rigid

Francesco Giuseppe-Soto

by the door with waning locks rests
copied keys i bought from el swapmeet, crevices

suspecting of roaches, raid that was discounted, black foam and platform sandals bought
with ones

in a hurry

in a three bedroom i might tattoo, madre slips
in these chunks (black bombs) for seven years until sworn

wrought, which to her, means rent only a week late and a muddy black check mark seen
skipping at lunch

on my sisters feet, thirty dollars given on sunday to me—two bills i sought to steal,
pot spent.

cable, dwp, metro pcs, no cable, karate, no cable, tamales on tab, no phone, room dark for a
week, no money order

because i'm nine, i think madre struts in acid rain at six am post-graveyard, and she
feels embarrassed

when then lady at j.k. nails spends ten minutes longer than usual, to scrape callus in
hopes to collect tip

madre doesn't have. because i'm nineteen, i think these sandals show and tell—single, classy,
hungry, man-hungry, stubborn b.

losing her house, madre scolds deep, throwing keys force-filled, i spit at her nasty, my
tears. her sorrow

still lingers on sepulveda blvd, across the vallarta. home she misses like a child she was
ready for.

True Heart
Jorence Quiambao



Rewrites: The Wetlands
Addissyn House

Unbury me. Uncase me. Discover me hidden. The burial was beautiful. She poisoned my throat, carved out my liver, garnished it with strawberry cheeks. She ate my heart and built an ornamental coffin. She destroyed her own life. A crown does not make a queen. Neither does a king. I'm tired of needing a prince to rescue me. This box is spring loaded. I can break out of here.

Leave me to the wetlands. A wetland is a good place to embalm a golden coffin. I will leave my own funeral, let the wooden box sink into the mud, let the mud consume my footprints. The earth can feed me. Berries and poison and tree bark. I'm going to find me. The box is broken. My body is whole, but it will not be worm food. It will not be open to consent or interpretation of an event, this is my word against yours. I'm right.

Hands

Jonathan Townley

I'm about to tell her I'm busy, but the fact that my mom is having trouble finding words tells me there is something different about this call. As a minister and trained orator, it's unusual for her to struggle to speak.

So instead, I say, "Yeah, I'm free now."

Addi and Sydney are staring at me; they've paused in taking out *Norton's Shakespeare*. I mouth to them that I'll be right back to our reading session. Mom's sigh of relief tells me that's a lie.

Immediately I regret leaving my coat inside. The sunlight through the orange oak leaves and white pines doesn't warm me like it did earlier in the day. In this pebbled space between the houses and dorms, there is a round picnic table and a charcoal grill which have probably seen their last use this season. I sit on the cold, hard table-top and pull my legs to my chest. It feels like a pew.

"Yeah, um... what is it? What's going on?"

"Your grandpa had an appointment in Grand Rapids today. I went with him."

I feel the blood rushing to my face and a throbbing pressure behind my ear-drums. I start picking at my nail polish. Big flakes of metallic Sally Hansen fall into the pea-stones.

When I was in middle school, Grandpa was diagnosed with incurable prostate cancer and given a few months to live. All the dinner conversations and walks through the blueberry farm have been on the steep loan of chemotherapy.

"Hospice," Mom says. It's not a new word, just one of the words I had hoped would disappear into a list of far-off possibilities, as it had years ago. "We've had a lot of good, good times with him," she says, "more than the doctors thought we would. But at this point, it's really a question of quality of life versus quantity of life."

It's hard to hear through the pressure in my head, and the rising tightness in my throat.

"They would really appreciate a call," she says.

"I will."

We stay on the phone without saying anything. I can hear the feedback of my own halting breath. I move my mouth away from the receiver. More nail polish falls to the pea-stones. Why did I put on makeup today? I can't wear this to a funeral. I picture myself in the pew, my hand on my Grandma's back. The congregation frowns, watching every move of my blue-green fingertips.

Our goodbye is quick. I hang up. I let my legs down onto the seat. I pull my arms tight to my torso, scrunch my shoulders, and lean over my thighs, a familiar position.

Just before I was born, Grandpa retired from his career as a Methodist minister and found himself, for the first time in his life, looking for a home. Through their 30 years of living in

cramped trailer homes provided by the church, Grandma used sewing scissors and rubber cement to stitch together a scrapbook of what she wanted her dream house to look like. From the yellow walls to the bathroom light fixtures and the red and yellow plaid couch, their home came to life just as she dreamed it.

Grandpa used to read me *Berenstain Bears* on that plaid couch when I was little. I'd curl up next to him; pull my arms to my torso, scrunch my shoulders, and lean over my thighs. He would always rub my arched back.

My sweater rides up and exposes my spine to the cold. I pull it down around my slender waist and grab for my coat, realizing it's still inside with Addi and Sydney. As I walk to the door, I stop and search my pockets for Kleenex but don't find any. My fingers come away from my cheeks black and wet. I take some deep, diaphragmatic breaths.

Across the street, the glass front of the fitness center has become transparent. The day outside is no longer bright enough to turn the windows into mirrors. Inside, people are in shorts. They look warm. My head feels full. If I move, maybe I can empty it out a little.

At the front desk, I can't make eye contact. My cheeks sting from the temperature change, and I know they are streaked with mascara and under-eye eyeliner.

"Can I have a racquet please? and a ball?" I keep my gaze fixed on these objects to avoid interaction. My body is trembling, so I grab the desk for support. Speaking helps release the tension in my throat. Maybe I should call someone and talk.

Instead, I sing. Heeled boots won't do in the racquetball court, so I walk onto the smooth, wood floor in my socks. The ceiling stretches 25 feet above me. I shut the door. In here, my voice is huge.

"Morning has broken," it's pitchy. I can't sustain notes, "like the first morning." As the melody descends, my voice sounds thin and muted.

Singing hymns is something I often return to when I need it. It takes me back to a time when church felt like a safe place, before the pews became cold and hard, and before I knew about Leviticus and heard the words, "you shall not lie with a male as with a woman."

Just a mile from my grandparent's farm sits the Casco United Methodist Church. It was a rare occasion to visit them for worship because it would mean missing Mom in the pulpit. One Christmas eve, when I was very small, I joined them for a candle-light service. The darkness crept down from the peak of the A-frame sanctuary. Grandma bent to light my small white candle with hers, then Grandpa's, careful not to drip wax. I remember feeling safe between them and the pew in front of me and my grandpa's hand on my back. Then he started singing. Completely tone deaf and with the confidence of a bullfrog, there was no silent night.

I don't want to call them. I don't know if the warm plaid couch of my childhood will have turned into the cold hard pew of my adolescence.

I throw the ball up in the air and let it fall, swinging from my awkwardly broad shoulders, hitting it underhanded. It slams against the front wall. When it stops, I run to retrieve it and hit it again. I strike the ball with all the force I can, running and catching it before it can stop

bouncing. I slip and fall in my socks. Nail polish lands on the court floor. My face is dry and sticky. I don't stop.

After a few minutes, my throat feels a new kind of tight. I put my hands behind my head. My lungs are burning, and I fight the urge to reach for my inhaler because of how foolish I will look to anyone walking by. A guy in an empty court wearing socks and jeans with makeup running down his cheeks, taking an inhaler.

I have never seen Grandpa run. I've never seen him jump or swim. Every time I visit, he asks me to take him out into his blueberry fields in his all-wheel-drive golf cart, putting his hand on my back if we drive too close to a bush. Sometimes we stop and walk out between the rows to pick berries together. It's quiet except for the plunk of the pails. Sometimes he'll point out a spot where a bug has bitten, or talk about when he planted these bushes back in the 50s.

I slip on my boots. I return the racquet and the ball. Here on the sidewalk, dusk has fallen. I take a deep diaphragmatic breath and call them. My Grandpa picks up right away. More Sally Hansen falls to the ground.

"I just talked to my mom.... She told me... about the appointment."

He hears me gasp for breath. I have to turn away from the receiver. My shoulders are jumping up and down. I lean against the wall. Metallic blue-green is almost gone from my index finger.

I hear nothing from the other end of the line.

I feel the cold of the brick seep through my sweater. I feel the cold of the funeral home, the pew, everyone's eyes on my hands. I feel the cold of the acetone, the makeup wipes, the synthetic black suit coat that accentuates my broad shoulders and not my slender waist.

My breath stops in my throat.

Then he says, "Just know that we love you Jonathan. No matter what you do, we will love you."

Maybe tomorrow Grandpa will die, Grandma will move into a condo, and the red and yellow plaid couch will be left by the road. But here on the sidewalk, if only in my mind, I sink into its warmth.

However close I make my home to the church, Grandpa the minister and trained orator, whose voice fills so many of my oldest and most favorite memories, will be there with his hand on my back, letting me know I belong.

My shoulders are shaking, but my hands are still. I don't pick off any more nail polish, at least not tonight.

Donation

Maryam Beverly

when i think about the day you left us
i can almost feel your paper-soft hands on my skin
caressing me
telling me it's alright without any words
you gave me love
free of charge
even though i was so undeserving of it

an image of you
sitting on the front porch
is burned into the back of my eyelids
whenever i close my eyes
i see you
daffodils lined the driveway
you had a popsicle in your mouth
cherry red
like your matte lipstick

i will always remember
that flowy summer dress
lime green with puffy princess sleeves
i found it in a box in your closet
so cold and desolate
that i held the dress in my hands
i felt as if
summer was coming to an end
it was only june

but i will always remember
the way your gums showed when you laughed
you ended up dropping the last piece of the popsicle
but that day you smiled anyway

i miss you being here
and i sit on the porch wishing you were here
but i packed up that summer dress
and gave it back to the thrift shop you bought it from
because that dress

can't fill the empty space next to me

Culebra Sin Manzana

Vivian Enriquez

Tears escape me each time
I become unafraid to stay.
Cada vez desechada,
I rattle in my solitude.

I am as lonely as a culebra sin manzana.
One who uses their veneno too soon,
cries their teeth out, and hunts for no one.

But I confess, as something seemingly sacrilegious
I am unable to shed the impressions
of god and whispering hiss kisses.

I go on, piel podrida, hunting for no one.
¿Cuanto cuesta comer sin dientes?
Put my skin to your eyes and you will see
how hungry I am.

Confluence

Claire Ward



77

The Woman from Who-knows-where

Juan Ibarra

Ardent silver ornaments, celestial constellations that drape from ear to ear, Her nimble fingers thread together beads and charms:

Planets, systems of knowledge, ever-expanding knowing. Each rung on her rosary represents a lifetime.

She runs her hands up those knots, mumbling who-knows-what, I suppose her story begins on a ranch, who-knows-where. I've asked many times where she was from, I never got a straight answer. She tells tales of some farm in some valley, some house she was raised in. She told me she was born before the recordkeepers in her town. According to them she does not exist, not accounted for, not a person, for her existence knows no bounds, she does not pertain anywhere. I believe her next life began on a humid coast, paradise to those who find time to rest, for her not such an oasis. She aspires to teach, to be, to love someone how she has been loved.

I don't think I will ever understand her story in full

I only receive precious fragments, shards of misshapen glass that slide down my throat, scraping my esophagus and gutting My inner workings. I have to keep going

The next epoch consists of grapefruit trees, prickly pears, garlic salt, almond joy, patterned head scarves

coconut scented lotion, orange marmalade, freezer burn

I still believe these are her favorite things in life.

Her dresser is an ethereal altar, an entryway to worlds beyond she carefully places picture frames, jewelry boxes, love notes. When I am tall enough to see into the mirror above this dresser I look at myself and realize, realize that

Years of prayer, grievance, solitude, desire

Accumulate on this wooden surface just as her golden necklaces do

She drinks only the world's hottest coffee, reheated two maybe three times. Do not disturb her while she is drinking her coffee.

Not a question, concern, comment, do not dare breathe too loud— She is inhaling the steam as it wanders through vast meadows Of tilled soil, fertile seed, propagation and blossom

Everything she touches is destined to be reborn,

Given new meaning, new life, new purpose

Elixirs of warmth, maturity, elegance brew within you,

No. They pour from you, vaporize from you, overflow, float and flood. Become streams that submerge roads of cobbled stone, Abundance emanates from your soul, no. It is forever engraved.

You encapsulate the most profound beauty, grace, an embrace

78

Sententiae (1. a concise statement of a principle, 2. a terse formulation of a truth or sentiment)

Chloe Baker

#20 - A coat of paint over bricks does not hide the cracks.

#15 - When you look out the window, be sure that it is not your own reflection that mesmerizes you.

#28 - Temporary comforts are only temporary if you space them out.

#1 - The grass grows where it wants to, so do something nice to keep it around.

#3 - Some things go deeper than you can see. Like mushrooms. Especially mushrooms.

#11 - If you must armor yourself, at least make it shiny.

#26 - Anger can be justified a lot of the time. Especially towards that guy that wronged you. Fuck that guy.

#12 - Watch that you don't stretch yourself too thin, lest your skeleton be on display for all to see.

#5 - Pay attention to the next picture you see. What does it say to you? Watch the lips move carefully to make sure you get it right.

#7 - Got fingers? Got toes? Got limbs? Got a torso? Got a head? Congrats, you might be human!

#6 - Are you going to finish that sentence? Because I'll have the rest if you don't want it.