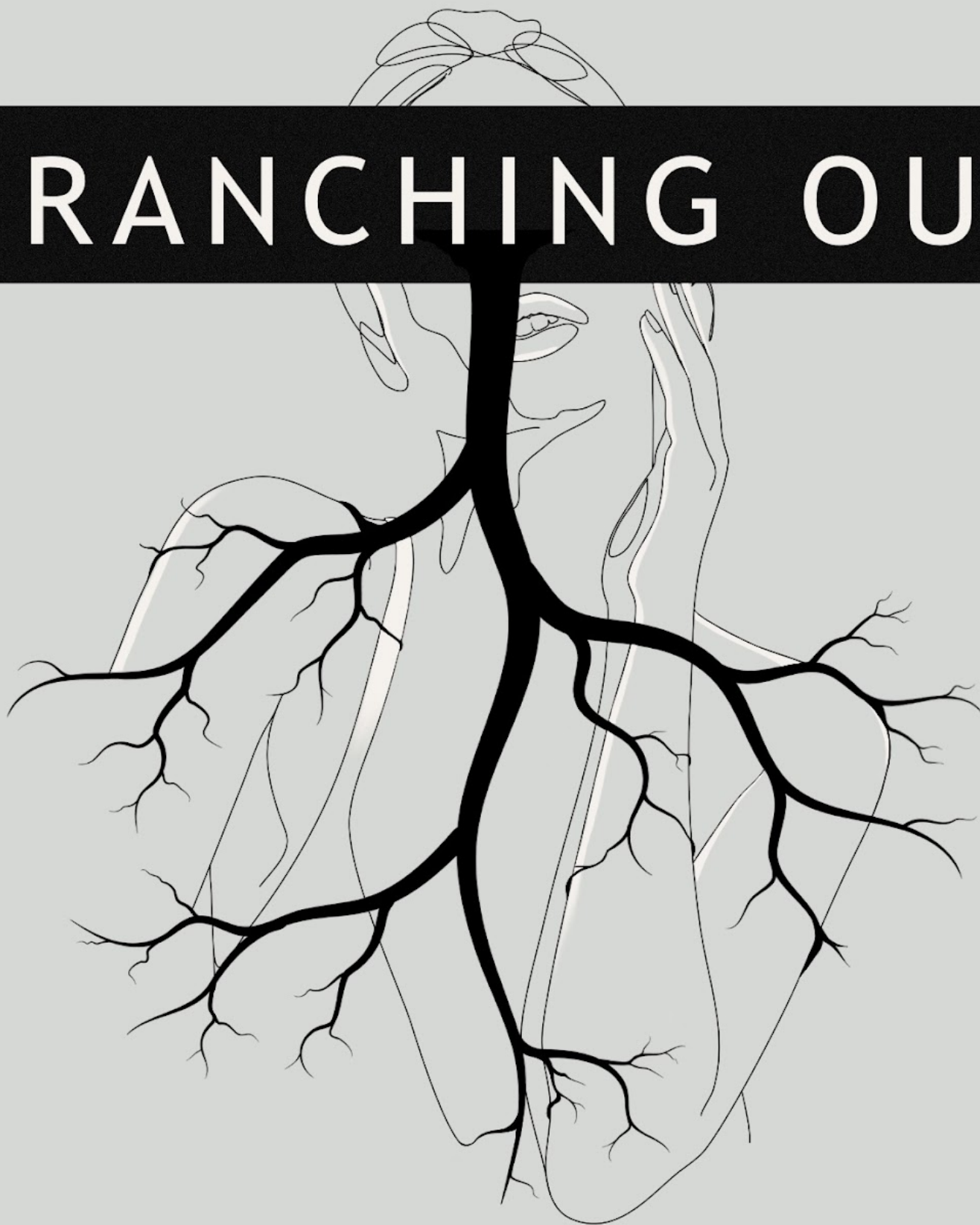


DEAL JAM MAGAZINE

BRANCHING OUT



ISSUE 2

MAR. 2024

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MARCH 2024

DEAL JAM LITERARY MAGAZINE #2
MARCH 2024

Front cover by Eriana Ktistakis
“Branching Out, 2024”

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In that night I felt expansion, as if the world was branching out in shoots and growing faster than the eye could see. I felt smallness, how the earth divided into bits and kept dividing. I felt stars.

– Louise Erdrich

MARCH 2024

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Last time we spoke, I told you not to fear failure. I told you to cast your aspirations far enough to fail and said that anything worth doing is worth failing at. That was our very first edition and, in creating this second one, I had to take my own advice.

I am so proud to publish the second edition of Deal Jam Magazine, “Branching Out.” At the risk of being too on the nose, branching out is exactly what we were doing with this edition. Deal Jam started as a writing group that met at coffee shops to delve into random prompts and share the joys and miseries that come with being writers and artists. In our first edition, we compiled pieces of ours that we stood by, despite them being rejected by other literary magazines, and put them out in the world on our own. For this second edition, we welcomed writers and artists from around the globe.

I remember speaking with Devin Reeves, one of our editors and one of my closest friends, right when we had first announced that we were open for submissions. I remember her asking me how many submissions I'd realistically expect to receive. *I'd be happy with 5-10*, I said. Needless to say, my expectations were entirely shattered. In this edition, we have compiled a gorgeous variety of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry pieces to share with you. These works will have you on the edge of your seat—terrified, heartbroken, questioning, laughing, and comforted. And, of course, these fantastic pieces are interspersed with photographs, paintings, drawings, and lino pieces that you could lose yourself in for hours.

So to everyone who contributed to this edition, thank you for trusting us with your work. And to all our wonderful readers, please, enjoy the newest edition of Deal Jam Magazine. Don't be afraid to branch out. You never know what might happen.

Eriana Ktistakis, EIC

March 2024

FICTION

A FINGER OF IVY

by

William Steffen

Saturdays were for pulling.

On Tuesdays, Mrs. Mansell would go shopping. Strawberries, granola, Sauvignon Blanc. Sometimes, she would buy pork kidneys for Earl by mistake. Sometimes, she would even fry them in butter and put them on a plate next to a spinach salad and start to call his name before she would remember he was gone. Then she would scrape them into the garbage can. Along with the salad.

Wednesdays were for pickleball. Penny and June also had husbands who were dead. Paul was a widower; he wanted to sleep with all of them. But he was on his third hip already, and Mrs. Mansell thought his backhand was pathetic. He was also rubbish at doubles.

On Fridays, there was her book club. Marsha, Jo, Barb, and Joy had all been English majors in college, just like she had been, though they were all in their fifties and had children.

It was Marsha who told her that having a routine helped after her Ronnie passed.

Mrs. Mansell liked it when they read books with titles she had heard of before—*To The Lighthouse* and *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* and *O Pioneers!* When it was her turn to pick, she always chose a murder mystery. But ever since Barb invited Kendra, they had been reading such controversial titles. *Beloved* was one of those. And then Kendra had invited Quinn, and now she didn't know if she even wanted to go anymore.

But even Quinn had reached out and touched her hand when she told them that Earl had left her.

Sundays were for church in the morning and movies in the evening. When Earl disappeared, the entire congregation came to her house despite her protests. She made a speech. She even put a candle in the second-floor study at the back of the house where the neighbors could see it and told everyone that it was for Earl. So that he would be able to find his way back to her. Wherever he was.

“I’ll drink to that,” Pastor Thomas said, raising his glass of wine. “And to Marjorie. May you never be lonely.”

Mrs. Mansell received so many casseroles from the congregation she had to label them so she would remember where to return the dishes. She thought she should probably return them with a casserole of her own inside, to be polite. She might have frozen them, but she would have had to empty her freezer, which meant letting the booze get warm.

She ended up throwing most of the casseroles away.

When the guests finally departed, Mrs. Mansell realized that she had the house to herself for the first time in her life.

Sometimes she would go to the movies with friends. Earl used to go along and say nothing, even when the movie was so good she would cry. Earl just sat there. Once, after Earl died, she had gone with Paul. She tried to tell herself it wasn’t a date, but she knew that he thought it was. He talked about his dead wife all evening long.

“We’re not getting any younger,” he told her after pulling into her driveway and putting it into park.

“Goodnight, Paul,” she said instead of slapping him.

Mondays were for answering letters and knitting. Sometimes she would go for walks. Now and then, she even pulled out her bicycle and tried to remember what it felt like to be sixteen. She liked feeling as though her life was moving forward, however slowly. But she didn't care for the rollerbladers and the other riders on the bicycle path, who came up behind her without warning and raced off into the distance, shaking their heads at her like she had done something wrong.

Saturdays were for pulling. The April that she had turned seventy-five—the same April when Earl disappeared—she had planted tulips, daffodils, and zinnias in the garden abutting the rear of the house. The woodbine that grew from the back of the garden and up the brick back wall was quickly becoming the bane of her existence. For three days, there would be no sign of it. And then, without warning, it would be six feet up the wall and climbing.

“Would you care to borrow some weed killer?” Mrs. Thompson once asked her from her back yard, which started beyond the waist-high fence only a few paces from where she knelt on her arthritic knees.

“Already tried it, I'm afraid,” Mrs. Mansell said. She had tried every weed killer on the market. Gallons of it had gone into her garden. The soil at the base of her house had turned an unnatural grey. Still, the ivy grew.

“It's tenacious,” Mrs. Thompson commented. “Just like you.” Mrs. Thompson glanced up at the study on the second floor. The candle was still burning in her window.

“I know he'll come home,” Mrs. Thompson said. “You'll see.”

Mrs. Mansell nodded politely, then went back to her work. She pulled as much of the ivy from the wall as she could. Often, it tore out large clumps of mortar, and left deepening furrows in the brick façade. By noon she was finished. Her bones ached.

She was half-way through a glass of Sauvignon Blanc and a quarter of the way through a sweater when she heard the knock at her door. The man wore pants and a blue collared shirt with sleeves that were rolled up to his elbows. He told her his name and showed her his badge, but she didn't hear that part. She only heard that he was a detective, and that he was investigating her husband's disappearance.

She invited him inside. "I've got the air conditioning on," she told him.

He refused.

"I'm fine just where I am. Besides, I only have a few questions. Do you mind?" He pulled a small notebook and a pencil from his breast pocket.

"Not at all," Mrs. Mansell said with a smile.

He asked her if her husband had any enemies.

"Not that I can think of," Mrs. Mansell said. "Everybody at the office loved Earl."

"Your husband was in..."

"Insurance. Katko and Briney Insurance. The downtown office."

He asked her if he had any outstanding debts.

"We filed our taxes jointly for every one of the fifty-one years we were married," Mrs. Mansell said. "If my husband had a secret, I'd find out about it sooner or later. He couldn't keep a secret from me to save his life. Hell, I knew he was going to ask me to marry him two weeks before he did!"

The detective scribbled into his pad. Then he asked her if Earl was having an affair.

Mrs. Mansell blushed and then burst out laughing. "I'm sorry, detective," she guffawed. "I know this isn't funny, but—well, the idea of Earl making a woman jealous. Now *that's* a good one!"

When he finally stepped off her porch, the detective handed Mrs. Mansell his card and asked her to call him if she thought of anything else that could help with the investigation.

When she went back inside, Mrs. Mansell polished off her glass of wine, then poured herself another. She put his card down somewhere in her immaculately clean house, and never found it again. She played the questions back over in her head. Had she answered them too quickly? Not quickly enough? Was her laughter too much?

How much did the detective know?

The next day, she went shopping and bought six bottles of wine. It was only after she got home and tried to put them away that she realized she had six bottles in the refrigerator already.

On Wednesday, she missed pickleball. But so did June, so Paul ended up playing alone with Penny. She let him go all the way when he offered to drive her home in his Mercedes.

On Thursday, Mrs. Mansell drank the six bottles of wine in her refrigerator. She broke two more when she tripped over the grocery bags she had left on the kitchen floor.

Thursdays were for drinking.

On Friday, Mrs. Mansell woke up early, showered, put on her make-up, and drove to church, where she finally realized it wasn't Sunday. Instead of going to book club, she drank the remaining four bottles of Sauvignon Blanc and watched re-runs of *M.A.S.H.*

On Saturday, Mrs. Mansell was pretty sure it was Thursday, so she went shopping for wine and drank it all in front of the television. She didn't hear the phone ring, and she didn't answer the door when Marsha came by to check on her.

That night, a finger of ivy finally crept under the open window in the study and pushed over the candle she kept burning for Earl.

They never found Mrs. Mansell. But after the fire had torn the house down below its brick foundation, the fire inspector found Earl.

He was in the garden. Right where Mrs. Mansell left him.



WHEN THE DEAD SHIVER

by

Ben Sidorenko

Addison always prefers winter until it engulfs her home in a white shroud. She wakes one morning in mid-January to pale skies and the skeletal forest outside her cabin half-painted in white snow, and suddenly she's aching for spring flowers and autumn leaves. The pile of firewood has dwindled away at the worst time, of course, so she can't even mope from the comfort of her fire.

She wraps herself in suffocating layers, laces her boots too tight, and steps out onto the inch of snow that has been blown onto her porch. The thermometer hanging at the top of the steps is half frozen, with its red alcohol solution hovering right below zero. It is deadly, finally silent. The only movement comes from a few black crows flitting around the bird feeder hanging over the porch railing.

Her driveway meets her at the bottom of the porch stairs and trails off into the woods, curving out of sight. Her seclusion here is a false one. If she walked for ten minutes, Addison would find cornfields and see a road that would take her to town. But the forest swallows all of that. The sounds of cars, the lights of the city, the closeness of people. None of that reaches her here.

She trudges through her yard and takes the wood axe from inside the cobwebbed shed. Her steps crunch and crack beneath her, her breath fogs in the air ahead of her. The stack of

uncut wood sits at the edge of the forest beside a scarred stump. She marches toward it, trying to find satisfaction in the routine but only feeling colder and lonelier than she has in a long time.

The axe is a chipped and aged old thing that she remembers her parents using to do this very same thing. They're gone now, along with everyone else. So she cuts the wood alone, setting a mid-size log vertically on the stump and splitting it with a single, practiced swing. The halves tumble to either side, and she picks another log.

A twig snaps in the woods, and she lowers the axe to her side. There's a figure in the trees. A man wearing a patched suit, so gaunt that he could be one of the trees. His skin is the color of gray slush, his eyes sunken and sightless. Yet he stares at her, unswaying in the wind that whistles through the bare forest.

Addison raises her axe and splits another log. The sound draws more figures to watch her from the trees. They wear what they were buried in, their Sunday best, even as time has rotted it away to tatters. She feels very, very small beneath their gaze. There's a pleading quality to the procession. They don't shiver or shake or say anything, but she knows that they're cold in a way that she can scarcely imagine.

A half dozen becomes a dozen. Two dozen. They are utterly still, only appearing when she looks down at her work. There is a cemetery nearby, between her cabin and town, but she never hears anything in the news about disturbed graves or missing cadavers. Addison does what she can, leaving flowers and cleaning gravestones. She donates to the tiny, chilly local church and prays kneeling in front of the stained glass images of saints and Christ.

But they always come back.

I can't help you, she wants to scream as she loads the cut firewood into a bag. *I don't know how to help you.*

Addison turns and hurries back toward her cabin. The dead make no noise, yet she knows that they follow her across the yard. *I'm sorry*, she begs internally. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

The interior of her cabin is dark and cold. She shuts the door behind her and locks it. When she turns back around, dead eyes stare back at her from her windows. She wants to retch and cry, but she's so, so cold.

She loads the furnace with shaking hands, places a bundle of kindling inside, and lights it all with a match. At the immediate glow of the fire, the dead begin to rap their hands against the sides of her house. It's a quiet, persistent cacophony that she would think was rain if she didn't know better.

Addison lays on her side beside the fire and curls around herself. The heat from the furnace is a distant comfort, one that she never enjoys anymore. The dead continue to knock. Desperately asking to be let inside to warm up beside the fire. She covers her ears and shakes her head. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

SEVEN OF WANDS

by

Faith Harris

†

My first sight is blood. His, pouring from his side, opened up, down to the bone, one less than he started with. A gift I never asked for, ripped from the son of Eden's torso. Our Father, hallowed be thy name, running a red hand over my brother's? lover's? master's? side. My first sight is blood, but I am still.

I did not eat the apple. That just sounds better than what truly happened.

He tells me, no one will love you like I do.

He tells me, You were made for me. You were made *of* me. Of my flesh and of my bone.

You belong to me.

Hours, days, years, eternities float by us, in this Garden of Eden. His hands grow eager from impatience and uncertainty. Our Father hasn't been here in ages. Does he still watch, from high above, our every move?

His words grow sour from irritation and unbridled anger. *Where are you, O Father of mine?* Does he still listen, from up in the heavens, to our every word?

His fists grow bloody from my skin and the trees and the clay figure, a woman (I thought I was the first?), that sits, hidden in the alcove of his favorite tree. He thinks I have never seen it. Who was she, my darling? *Where* is she, my dear?

I long since stopped asking Father where he has gone. I have begun watching, watching the Woman with the Horns I have seen, deep, deep in the forest. Her soul calls for mine and who am I to resist?

We have a job for you, she says. I feel her voice deep in my stomach, caressing my insides until I am following her, deep, deep into the forest.

I have never seen this tree before, have I? How have I not? Why, it has to be the largest tree I have seen in all my days? months? years? of life. The branches slither against my arm, Her mossy smell coating my mouth and sinking deep into my brain.

Mother Nature reaches into my bones, Her breath filling my lungs, and whispers *stay*.

The Woman with the Horns tells me to finish what she started oh so long ago. Her hands trace my sides, slowly covering my bare body in earth. You asked for me, she says, And I have delivered. I am here, darling. I always have been. Now, go.

I stumble back to our Garden, our Garden of Eden, and his anger can be felt in each step I take.

Where have you gone? he demands. Where have you been, where have you gone, *what did you do? Your skin feels different now.*

His hand burns on my arm, but he is right. My skin does feel different now, clothed in the mud and the leaves and the wrath She fitted me with.

He surrounds me, caging me in. This will teach you, he tells me. Tearing at the trees, leaves falling helplessly to the ground as he collects the wooden bars of my prison, he has become something new. Something new, something prideful, his bare skin glowing with indignation. Branch after branch, limb after limb, he builds and he sweats and he says words I

thought we were not even supposed to know, that He told us we were not supposed to know. Do I know them? Where is the Father? It has been so, so long and I am getting cold.

He sleeps against my cage that night, his chest rising with each unburdened breath. The Woman with the Horns watches me, eyes gleaming through the leaves, her voice reverberating deep in my throat. *Go*, says she, and I am something new. Something new, something wicked, something scored. *Blessed be my soul for, Father, I am but finishing a job that was begun long before you ripped me from his body.* Tree limbs snap and I am no longer at home in this earthly flesh. A scream ripples through the air (his or mine?) as his breathing stops, throat ripped from the son of Eden.

My last sight, in this body, is blood. His, pouring from his side, opened up, down to the bone, one more than he had moments ago. Wooden, pointed and broken, the bar of my cage replacing the gift I never asked for. I, hallowed be my name, stare down at my brother's? lover's? captor's side, once again whole. My last sight is blood, but I am alive.

The bone has been replaced. My debt is paid.

The Woman with the Horns wipes the red from my face, nails scraping gently over my forehead. Well done, my dear lamb, her voice bouncing around my skull. You poor thing, my sweet flower, let us go. She awaits.

Mother towers over us, hand in hand, soul in soul, and sighs. She takes me in Her arms, bark scraping the skin of my cheek.

You will never be alone again, my child, she whispers.

†



BIRDS AND WORMS

by

Haarith Ahmed

The midday sun glistens in the eye of a falcon as it lazily hangs in the clear, undisturbed sky. Held upright by warm loving winds, its wings stretch out almost as if to embrace the horizon. Its eyes are sharp as they scan back and forth, analyzing the earth's bounty. A sea of honey brown with motley islands of green shrubs and trees marked by a slow moving blue stroke that cuts across the canvas. Home to titanic hippos and leathery crocodiles. The water holds back an endless wave of wildebeest, each afraid to be the first to test their courage. Lions rest haphazardly in tree shade, giraffes tower over the landscape, wild dogs and hyena slink underneath the tall grass, herds of zebra and antelope intermix grazing away, troops of baboons, solitary leopards, stoic elephants all roam. The falcon notices a collection of acacia trees shading a waterhole and glides down to perch, taking note of a pair of ostriches.

In the distance an out of place SUV trudges along kicking up dust and rocks as it passes. Two men stand through the open top, dark faced and hard, rifles ready, eyes vigilant. Another darker man navigates through the grass, one hand on the steering wheel, another resting on his sweat marked forehead. Beside the driver the darkest man details the landscape with a toothy uninterested grin to the most out of place people. A porcelain couple, with wide brim hats and unusual clothing, wide smiles and starstruck faces.

"Hey did you hear those tour guides?" she asked, her head tilted slightly to the side.
"They just called us *the world's largest flightless bird*. Right now, right as they passed." She

paused, shaking her head letting out a tiny squawk. "Raving on about our wings being small and legs too long, about how our keel bones are missing."

"What?" he asked, puzzled, shifting his feet ever so slightly.

"They didn't even mention how fast we run or our great long legs," she continued, frustration in her voice. "Why do they always bring up that we can't fly? Lions can't fly, whales can't fly. Why do we get singled out? What really is the difference between our ineffectual wings and the flippers of a dolphin? No one describes dolphins as flightless."

"Man, you really lost it," he said, raising an eyebrow as he lowered his head to continue pecking at shrubbery surrounding them. "We are birds; dolphins are not. No wonder people mention we can't fly—other birds can."

"So what? I refuse that classification," she retorted, her voice determined. "What does bird even mean, honestly. Is it because we are bipedal? Men are bipedal; we don't get those comparisons. Is it the eggs? Snakes lay them too?" She followed behind him, eyeing the bush he just ate from. "This categorization only serves to limit us; I reject it wholeheartedly. I'll accept that we both have wings and feathers." She instead kicks away some dirt and selects a large worm from the refuse. "What's the relevance, does it matter? Dinosaurs had feathers, no one calls them birds and at the end of the day what is the difference between a wing and a flipper?"

Fundamentally, it's the same bones."

"Are you concussed?" he asked, half joking, half concerned. Returning to his foraging.

"Think about it, really think about it," she let out in between bites of her second worm. "We are born without any ability to fly; we were never meant to. This descriptor is completely useless, as important as saying ants do not breathe fire. Peacocks and chickens, animals who

could if they wanted, now they are the flightless ones. No, we are something else. Something different."

"Even if that's true, what makes you care so much?" his eyes examining the horizon.

"I don't know," she admitted, head down once again kicking at the dirt.. "It always bothers me hearing that word from them. On what ground do they have the right to constantly mention flight? They could have just stuck with '*the world's largest bird.*' Now that would be something to be proud of, something to puff up my feathers at."

"I think I wanna go over to this next bush," he said, changing the subject.

"I know, I know," she said while careening her neck, taking notice of the dust clouds left by the safari cars. "You think pride is a word for lions. I just think we ought to stand up for ourselves, especially from hairless bipeds, folks with no wings, no claws, not even feathers, just soft, defenseless skin and weak legs."

"Come on, man, you know what they're capable of," he warned. "You've seen those poachers take down elephants. Hardly the weak and defenseless bunch you make them out to be. You think you could take the tusks off a 2-ton matriarch?"

"No, no, no," she responded, pecking at the ground again. "It's a choice. You can't fault me for my peaceful ways. My pacifism is a virtue. I lack the barbarism necessary to attack such a friendly animal."

"Hmm, let's be honest." He walked away from the bush, keeping his focus on the movement in the treeline, the sun to his back. "If you wanted to, even with your life on the line, you could never harm an elephant. There is no situation in which you have the capacity to ever bring hurt to anything that much bigger than you."

"Bold of you to assume that," she said proudly, fluffing her feathers.

"Hey, man, stop the act," he chuckled, shaking his head when he looked up from the termite mound they most recently made the victim of their grazing. "I bet you're a real ostrich Gandhi, and you're just saving us mere mortals from your wrath. But your choice in the matter of whether or not you attack an elephant does not make you more or less anti-violent. If your choice has no real consequence."

"No, no, no, you're wrong there; choice matters," she insisted. "You can't overlook intent in this equation."

"Imagine a worm." Noticing again a different worm held in her beak, head down as he took his pick of termites. "Blind and immobile. A worm that would sit in agony and do nothing as you picked apart all of their loved ones one by one, a worm that would only be able to watch if you decided to take a talon and dissect them to the cell. Would this worm be considered a pacifist? If they merely made the choice not to act."

"Why, yes, exactly," she replied.

"Yeah, you've lost the plot," he said. "How can they abstain from something they could never do in the first place? That worm's non-violent ideals are as important as a eunuch's oath of celibacy."

"No, you misunderstand—" she began.

"You really live in a fairy tale world." He interrupted, squawking, stomping his feet, flailing his wings "Look at me everyone, I am choosing not to split the sky and sink the sun into the ocean. I am your benevolent bird lord." As he narrows his eyes to see through the dust he summoned. "Doesn't that sound just ridiculous?"

"Now, if I could only continue my explanation. with my own metaphor," she persisted, turning to face him among the settled debris. "Imagine, firstly, a person who treats everyone they encounter with true, genuine kindness, naturally as a first instinct."

"I could only imagine," he said, sarcastically.

"Every interaction this person has is pleasant," she continued passionately, maintaining eye contact as she strutted to the top of the termite nest.. "People love being around them. When they exit a conversation or a room, everyone around them immediately notices their absence. A true beacon of positivity and warmth. Any form of cruelty or antagonism is completely foreign to them; they could never imagine acting intentionally with animosity towards anyone."

"Sounds like a great guy," he remarked. "You know anyone like that?"

"Now, contrast them with a nasty evil creature who wants to be cruel and unusual to anything they meet," Her shadow completely enveloping him now. "Almost like an evil tiny demon lives in their mind and pollutes their thoughts. Nothing, however innocent, is spared. They hate happiness, anything that sparkles, and any sort of general glee."

"They seem pretty night and day," he quipped.

"But this is the important part, pay attention," she urged. "They try their hardest to ignore the voice. They know the urges they have are wrong, and they fight them as much as they can. They strive every day to do what seems so unnatural to them for the sake of those around them."

"How virtuous," he mused. "But what difference does it make? Their turmoil doesn't excuse anything."

"I am not asking for an excuse," she clarified. "I'm asking you to consider that devil and the saint and ultimately, after the sum of their actions, ask yourself, is their kindness equal?"

"More kind, less kind?" he asked, perplexed. "What a weird thing to get hung up on. More importantly, why or how would you even quantify that?"

"Don't get hung up on that, man," she said. "Just focus on the intent part."

"Is this all about the worm?" he asked.

"Yeah, exactly," she replied.

As he took a moment to ponder her words, she exploded abruptly leaping past him leaving behind bits of dirt and termite mound. The sudden movement combined with her absence now exposing the previously shrouded sun rays momentarily left him stunned, unable to process what was going on, much less move. In that moment, as his senses returned to him and he saw something that was a shadow stop becoming a shadow, he wanted nothing more than his wings not to be too small, his legs too long and his keel bones missing. Days later, after hyenas, vultures and all kinds of carrion eaters have taken their fill and only maggots and flesh freckled bones remain. Worms emerge from the disturbed soil, silent, to do their work.

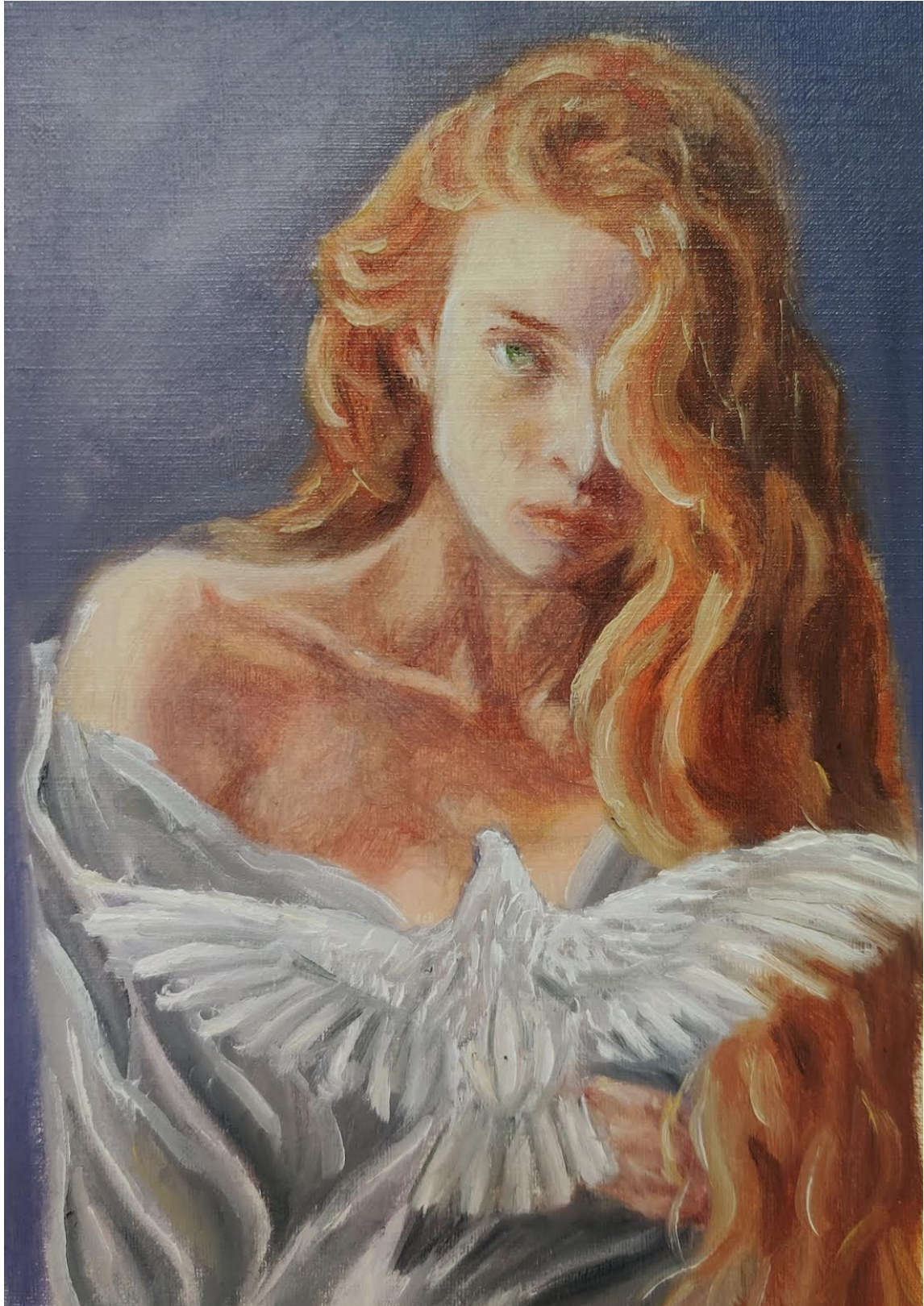
SATURDAYS AT 4 PM

by

Milla Reed

I work at a flower shop and sometimes Mary lets me take flowers home if they're dying. Unsellable. People look at you differently when you're holding flowers; it's how they might look at someone holding a leash or a child's hand. Flowers are evidence of loving and being loved. I usually put them in my tote but there's not always room and I worry about crushing them. Mary laughs at how long it takes me to wrap bouquets or put buckets in the cooler. She throws them around with the confidence that comes with ownership of oneself and one's actions. I think it's good to hold care for certain things though, delicate things like this that you can afford to. So, I hold them in my hands as I walk home. I shift them from one to the other every few minutes to put the empty one in my pocket. Cold hands. Somehow it is December. It takes thirty minutes to get home so there's plenty of time for seeing and being seen. I think that what you think about when you see someone holding flowers on the sidewalk says a lot about you. I try to become different people sometimes. Maybe my boyfriend brought these to me for our three-year anniversary. Maybe to apologize for cheating. Maybe I'm a delivery person—a placeholder for a more lovable person. Maybe someone died or was born. The flowers form a wall between me and the people in cars and at the opposite ends of crosswalks. Only I know what's true and it's easier to know for certain that everyone's perception of you is false than for the possibility to linger that they might see you. I smile sometimes to think of how they might think about the last time they received flowers from someone. A first love! Sticky June nights near a lake or a

shoreline and some peach ranunculus. Maybe a last one—twelve white peonies in a silk ribbon and your mother's teardrop earrings. I like to hope that maybe seeing me holding green stems in one hand will inspire them to get flowers for someone they love. Maybe they'll cry when they get home because they've never received any. I hope that one's not real. The more I work with flowers the more I think about death. Mainly my own and how there's no way to stop it from happening but also how I really wouldn't want to even if I could. We're all dying so fast! I am nearly 23 and I still feel like a child. It's so sweet and heady for a while though. I try not to crush them. There's something beautiful about holding impermanence between your fingers. I smile back at the people who smile at me. I can be who they need me to be for a while.



NON-FICTION

A GLIMPSE INTO THE MIND PALACE

by

Lexi Salsbury

My best friend has often told me that I live inside my Mind Palace too much.

She's right, of course, as she so often is, and I know the comment is rooted in her concern that I spend so much time renovating the Mind Palace that I forget about life outside of it, but I'm too fond of my Mind Palace to entirely heed her warnings.

"Mind Palace" is one of the synonyms for the "Method of Loci" which is a phrase first coined by the ancient Romans. It's a mnemonic device used when one would like to memorize a list of items. Essentially, a person chooses a place they know well, carves out a route, and associates items from the list they're trying to memorize with things they would see when actually physically traveling through the space. The idea is that then when they "walk" through the place in their mind, they'll be able to recall what they were trying to memorize when they "see" the thing they associated the list item with. All of this just to say that this is not what I mean when I use the term "Mind Palace".

I hope Cicero doesn't mind too much that we have co-opted the phrase. When I'm paying more attention to what's going on inside my head than outside, then I'm visiting the Mind Palace.

To stay true to the original definition, there are some rooms within the Mind Palace that are places I know well. I've laid in the center of the floor of my childhood bedroom, pondering the bright pink of the walls and the Disney Princess stickers pasted on them. The classroom

Mom has taught in since 2005, with its too bright fluorescents, sea of beige desks, and white board swirled with her almost-cursive, makes frequent appearances. The Mind Palace is not able to do true justice to the slippery nature of the break wall in the middle of the Lake we used to climb. The family room in Mom's house, however, is where I go to visit you.

You insisted upon the distinction between the family room, the room at the back of the house that we spent the most time in, and the living room, the front room by the door that we used only when we had lots of company. The difference was important to you, yet you always referred to the family room as the den.

The den is where I picture you, not the family room Mom has redone in more recent years. No, I see you sitting in the rich brown recliner with the OSU and Browns arm cushions on each side. The world's ugliest love seat (why did you guys buy that?) separates your recliner from Mom's matching one. Bruce Springsteen croons at me from the old silver sound system in the corner of the room, drowning out the sound of Alex Trebek doling out points to the lucky *Jeopardy* contestant on the TV. Your secret snack stash of Planter's Peanuts and other underwhelming sweets are nestled away on the bottom of the oak end tables with the glass tops. *The Lost Symbol* by Dan Brown is partly covered by the bottom of the chair. I don't know if you ever read it, but I know it sat there long enough to collect dust.

There are also things in the room that, consciously, I'm aware never occupied that space, but they remind me of you, so they stay. There's a cherry tomato plant growing up the side of the fireplace. You grew them for me every year because you knew I'd eat them like candy. The ones I buy at the grocery store now are so much less vibrant than yours that I hesitate to even call them both red.

A jar of beach glass sits on the shelves in front of the DVDs, mixed in with Mom's family photos and tchotchkes. I was never any good at finding it, but you scoured the beaches on the days I wasn't with you, so I could admire it when I next saw you. Every piece of jewelry you bought me contained beach glass in one way or another. Most of them are ugly as sin, so I don't often wear them (sorry, it's my vanity, I suppose), but I keep them with me always.

My progress reports and report cards are stacked up near your ever-present yellow legal pad and newspaper crossword puzzle on top of the tray table that might as well have been glued to your recliner for as often as it was put away. The older I got, the more you had to harass the school to send you a copy of them, but you were insistent. I could always rely on your call, telling me you were proud, during interim and report card season.

You wear the same thing every time I visit: your well-worn dark blue slippers, the thickest jeans you could find, and a gray t-shirt with a faded Triumph Motorcycles logo on it. On your fingers are the skull ring and the gladiator helmet ring. Just for you, I've removed that budding bald spot from the back of your head. In the Mind Palace, you have the same nearly shoulder-length waves that I remember from childhood. I suppose I could've been exceedingly generous and given you the color back too, but we both know the black hair was gone long before I came along. Old Spice invades my nose in a way that would bother me on anyone else other than you when I lean down to hug you, and your beard tickles my cheek.

The Mind Palace is where I go to be your daughter again.

We talk for hours when I come to visit. I like to catch you up on everything you've missed. I'm not sure you'd care about every mundane detail I sometimes feel inclined to tell you, but it's my Mind Palace, so we can just pretend.

The conversations start the way they always have. You say, "Hi, hun. How are ya?"

And I answer. I never contemplate for as long as I should, so it's usually some iteration of, "I'm good! How are you?"

"Better than a sharp stick in the eye."

When I came to tell you that I had decided to come to OSU, I imagined you laughing. Between Cal and I, we managed to cover both universities that contributed to your undergrad degree. I visited again shortly thereafter, so I could read you the speech I gave at graduation.

You cried when you heard you were going to be a grandpa again. I know I should've let Megan tell you, but this room in the Mind Palace is just for you and me, so I think we can make an exception. You would've adored her. I bring you pictures when I can. By the time she's old enough to understand the stories we tell about you, you'll have probably achieved a sort of legendary status in her mind.

They're not all so dramatic. Sometimes, I come just to tell you about someone new I've met. I don't like the idea that anyone who meets me now meets the me who doesn't have you, so I try to keep you in the loop as much as possible.

It's harder to imagine what advice you would give me. Regrettably, I don't have the wisdom of your years or your uncanny nature to say something that no one else would. That's usually when I exit the Mind Palace and go call Mom. I hope you don't mind.

Other times, I leave you when I've already expended all of my forgiveness, and I have to enter the rooms in the Mind Palace where I leave my rose-colored glasses at the door. I'm not a good enough person to absolve you of all your sins because I needed a father, and you couldn't always be that. But in this room, on this flattened gray carpeting, I sit and listen to you tell me the same jokes and stories you always did, and we're both on our best behavior. Our relationship

isn't bogged down by all the hurt we've caused each other here. You're the kind of infallible figure that only young children are capable of imagining their parents as being, and I adore you.

I am gentle with you in the den of the Mind Palace.

Sometimes, in silly ways, like giving you your hair back or laughing perhaps a little harder at your jokes than I used to. Other things are more serious, like never broaching the subjects (i.e., Crazy Susan) that were sure to set you off.

I made you gentle, too. This version of the den will never know the sound of your anger, how I shrink when you yell. There are no empty bottles with the signature yellow Canada Dry tonic water logo. I'm never going to uncover what you're trying to hide from me on the stench of your breath, and I don't worry about you taking blood pressure medication. The weight of your silence is one this room will never carry.

The Mind Palace showed me how much of you I carry with me.

In the morning, I sip my coffee (a much lighter color than yours ever was, but I think this still counts as Mom hates coffee, so who else could this come from?) while I do the crossword. I go to get dressed, and I notice your skull ring sitting in the dish where I keep my own supply of rings. Your beloved Triumph t-shirt (along with a few of your other favorites) is nestled in my t-shirt drawer.

Often, I open my mouth, and you fly out, like when someone scares me, and, almost reflexively, I say, "Don't sneak up on my gun hand like that!"

Mom's least favorite is when she tells me goodnight and that she'll see me in the morning, and I respond, "If you're lucky." Though she never liked it when you said that either, so I suppose that checks out.

My least favorite is how buried I keep my stash of alcohol. If I want to drink, then I have to root around under my bed for the correct container, drag it out, remove the lid, and upheave several layers of sweatshirts to do so. Just enough steps so that I have to really consider what I'm doing. And I never, ever drink alone.

I do watch Mel Brooks's movies and *Monty Python* alone though because God knows those have only gotten cheesier with age, and I would rather no one else bear witness to our shared terrible taste. Classic rock from the sixties, seventies, and eighties has managed to infiltrate every single one of my playlists. My laugh comes from my belly, and I talk about Lake Erie with a fondness that it probably doesn't deserve. I am my father's daughter.

I don't think I'll ever stop coming to visit you in the Mind Palace, but it's comforting to know that, in some ways, you still exist outside of there, too.





SHAPED BY SHAME

by

Audrey T. Carroll

No one actually believes that we're born male and female.

If they did, we wouldn't need so much conditioning.

We wouldn't correct four-year-olds when they transgress the boundaries of interests.

There's an asterisk on the 90s Girl Power *Girls can be anything they want to be!*¹ kind of attitude.

Ladies don't burp, my daughter was told at three months old.

But the biggest proof in the pudding? To me?

We wouldn't need to craft our bodies to fit *feminine* and *masculine* if gender were as real and natural as it supposedly is.

We pluck and wax and shave and starve our way into categories.

I used to read *Seventeen* from the moment I became a teenager. It was where I learned how to be a girl, a pretty pink addition to the closet full of voices already telling me I needed to be skinny (no, skinnier) (no, *skinnier*), that I had to play house, that I needed to dress feminine but also modest (dresses, stockings, flowers, lace). I stored its expectations next to a closet full of toy cleaning supplies, glitter body spray, and Barbies who secretly live in women-only communes.

¹ No, not like that.

On November 30, 2023, headlines available on *Seventeen*'s website include:

“13 Best Tinted Moisturizers to Achieve a Natural Glow, According to Experts”

“17 Best Pore Minimizers That Actually Work”

“13 Hottest One-Piece Bathing Suits Under \$100”

Even Gender Reveal Parties—have you ever seen one where a parent is disappointed? Like they somehow already know *A Boy Child Will Be This Way* or *A Girl Child Will Be This Way*. Sometimes they cry or curse or throw a temper tantrum.

Genitalia becomes fate before our birth; parents make decisions for us, for how and who we will be. If gendering weren't a normalized act, we would think it was really strange—all of us, collectively—to declare at a public party that the child in our womb has a penis or vagina.²

Side note: people get angry with you if you won't tell them about your fetus-child's still-in-utero genitalia. They'll mostly default to passive aggressive, to trying to trick you into revealing it, to assure you that the secret is safe with them, but they need to know because what if—*the horror!*—they accidentally get your son something pink or your daughter something with a truck on it? They're just trying to help, to welcome the child into the world, to help mold them into something palatable for society.³

² No one, it seems, ever entertains the nuances. The Child™ will never be trans / can never be trans / is never trans; The Child™ will never be intersex / can never be intersex / is never intersex. We plant a flag in one-or-other, male-or-female, as though we are saving our children, as though it is as (more?) natural than vaccines protecting them from the mumps, as (more?) natural than a priest blessing them so that they do not spend an eternity in purgatory.

³ They leave out the part where they think you'll turn your kid gay or trans if you have yellow or green in their nursery instead of a gender-approved palate. Gender and sexuality are so fragile that bows and toy cars can send them spiraling in the wrong direction. The conditioning is only natural, only encouraging them at every angle to be who they really are, unless they cross the line into something from the wrong toy aisle, and then that's not natural anymore. Then they must have been brainwashed by the Gender Industrial Complex.

When I was halfway through pregnancy, a woman who worked at the same university as me—a woman I barely knew—declared that it must be a boy⁴ because I ‘looked good.’ I only heard later about the old wives’ tale—girls steal your beauty, apparently. Gender roles run so deep, we know who’s to blame before they’ve even come into the world.

Gender boxes don’t make themselves, is what I’m getting at.

We sculpt them, and we tell others how they should sculpt them, and we answer with anger and pity and petty when anyone deviates.

In the early months of the pandemic, I told a woman twice my age about how my beauty regimen changed. I didn’t wear makeup around the apartment anymore—only if we went outside. I didn’t shave my legs regularly anymore—only every so often. And by this point I’d already mostly stopped painting my nails.⁵

She explained that she did the same when her kids were young, but that I’d get back to *normal* before too long. I don’t know if she used the word *normal*, exactly, but that was the implication, at the very least.

It has been years. I have not looked back.

⁴ I knew, at that point, the sex was female.

⁵ Within another year or so, I’d stop putting in earrings that caused swelling and pain in my cartilage, letting them eventually close back over even though I’d still have little dents that remained. I’d only not gotten them pierced as a baby because I was too wild (not behaved like other girls / not calm like other girls / not a doll like other girls), because there were concerns that I’d pull them out, potentially even eat them. Otherwise I’m sure they would have chosen pairs to match the ribbons and lace. When I was nine, I decided to get them pierced at my pediatrician’s, and had to get special permission to wear them during softball games because they weren’t supposed to be worn with helmets. I guess they assumed we were one or the other—Pierced Ears for a Long Time Girly, or No Earrings for Me Thanks Tomboy, but I was somewhere in between, and the rules didn’t account for me.

I was in my early 20s when I discovered I liked punk music—The Ramones, Bad Religion, Bikini Kill, Pennywise. I still had a pleather jacket back then, which I wore until it started coming apart in pieces; I still wear the same style of combat boots. But genderpunk wouldn't come, not yet. I didn't even realize it was an option.

It was after the pandemic started. I started letting the pieces of conditioning fall away. I wasn't plucking and waxing and shaving and starving myself into categories anymore. I would just think, at random, about how gender was a mindfuck. Then a few more months, and the thought would return. This happened again and again. I gaslit myself, the same way I did in the days before I realized I was bi.⁶

I'd been using bi and queer for myself for a long time.

What I hadn't realized was the way my relationship with my body had changed.

I'd been disabled and ill for over five years. It never occurred to me the way gender and body were wrapped up—in nail painting and body hair, sure, but in disability, too.

What does it mean when you're meant to be desirable object (woman), but you're also an undesirable object (disabled)⁷? How does your illness make your experience of the world unique? (How does your illness make your gender unique?) Gender is a mindfuck.

Gender is a mindfuck.

Gender is a mindfuck.

There is no gender but the gender we make.⁸

⁶ *Everyone has these thoughts. This is perfectly natural. It doesn't actually mean anything.*

⁷ Exception: fetishization of disabled femme bodies

⁸ I don't mean that trans people aren't trans, just to be clear. But gender has so much to do with embracing/hiding your authentic self. Society only wants you to show the parts that make other people comfortable.

The only comfort that should matter when it comes to gender is your own.

11 A.M. IN CAMDEN

By

Sarah Butkovic

11 a.m. in Camden, Maine was bouncing in the back of my cousin's best friend's pickup that was far too abrasive for him to be driving. Expletives were unapologetically roaring from the radio and dissolving in the tepid air, the windows fully down to make sure everyone around us knew we weren't afraid to say fuck. As the rap songs wore on, the juxtaposition of someone as callow-looking as Judah singing about banging hookers and smoking pot became more and more amusing. It reminded me of the way kids would echo curse words like new school vocabulary — and I had to fight the urge to giggle all the way there.

When we arrived at the creek, we were dried out and dirt-speckled from the droplets of gravel that hit us during our drive. As advertised, a small creek snaked through a garden of birches before emptying out into a tiny lake. Two wizened oaks guarded the mouth of the water, stout and solid like the Royal guardsmen. A couple toddlers splashed around in rain boots and threw clumps of confetti into the air.

“So this is really it?” I asked dubiously. “This is where you guys hang out?”

“More or less,” My cousin Owen said. “It's where we kill time before the *real* fun starts.”

There was an eclipse of madness behind his face as he spoke, mouth pulled into a crooked smirk. From that description alone I imagined the creek to transform into some harlequin horrorland the moment the sun went down — bare branches would turn into spears, spiders would hang from their leaves like acrobats, and the boys would take their brambled

thrones on innocent tree stumps. With a couple war wounds and mud masks, they could be the protagonists of *Where The Wild Things Are*.

“What should we do first?”

“You wanna climb Old Haggard?”

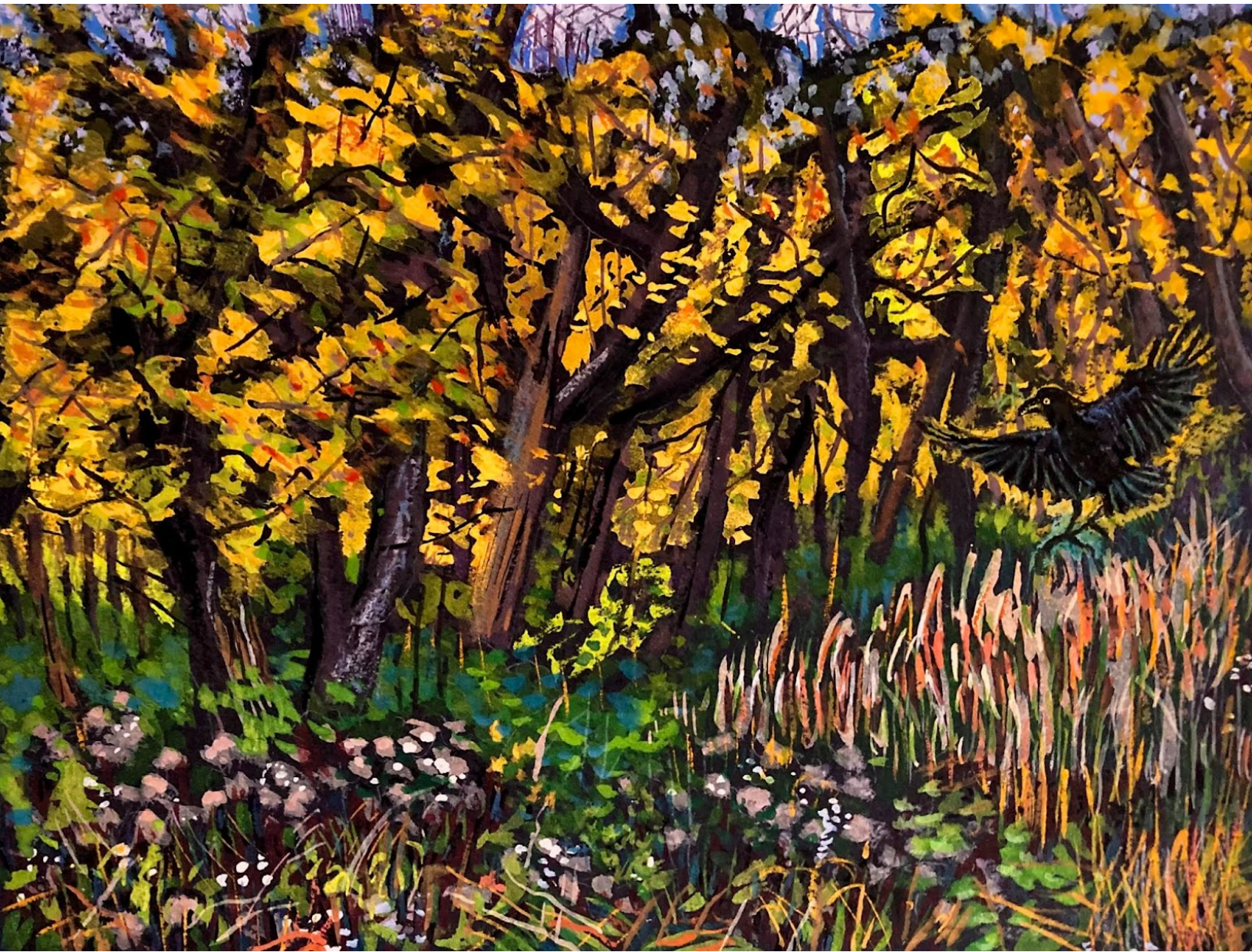
Owen threw his hands in the air at the mention of that.

“Beam me up, Scotty!” He cried.

The three of us scaled a menacing pitchfork at the bend of the creek and settled in the highest crooks that could hold our weight. Owen, being the competitive spirit that he was, felt it obligatory to climb one extra rung, just to rule the world. As the boys bickered over who could climb the fastest, I closed my eyes and became one with nature.

Without anything visual to focus on, I found myself thinking about how good the wind felt sluicing through the leaves and the way my feet could sway so freely. It had been a good ten years since I’d climbed a tree, at the very least. So many childhood hobbies are quickly killed by adolescence.

Being around Owen and Judah again (for the first time since starting my senior year) was so magnetic that being alone felt horribly empty, but perhaps that was just the curse of nostalgia. Even so, all I wanted to do was skip rocks and rock bars and bar authority all summer long.



S M I L E S

by

Haarith Ahmed

For much of our history, our expression was so limited. Before a press of a button could relay a text or a call across continents, we relied on much more primitive methods to connect us. There was a time before words existed on pages, and the mastery of animals allowed us to overcome the limits of our own bodies. In this world a message could only be carried as far as memory could piece it together and feet could keep it on track.

This was a world where we had yet to take our place at the apex of the food chain. Where children huddled in fear from tales of nightly terrors and formless beasts, where fire was still God's greatest gift.

Amongst meter high reeds a child barely visible tip toes, as they navigate a mosaic of puddles, plants and pebbles, they clutch closely to their chest a prize, holding the gift softly against pelts that adorn them. One hand to conceal, another to protect, their breath ragged as tiptoes turn into leaps from one island to another amongst the unbeaten path. They can hear their mothers voice over the run of the river, she sings for each of her children, her husband, the sun, moon and stars, of blessed hunts and good harvest. They both pause for a moment distracted by a pair of songbirds enveloped in dance, their colors flashing as they dart and spin in the air. The child notices their mothers lapse of attention, and takes the opportunity to continue behind her, anticipation and excitement

building. The mother sits by the water sorting berries and the like, her baskets rest beside her, she pretends not to notice the shuffling of the shrubbery in her periphery, and the barely suppressed giggles. A small voice yells out and unfolds dirt covered hands to reveal a sundrop yellow surrounded by petals white like whispers of moonlight. The mother turns almost like an instinct, her face beaming with ...

We shook off the shackles of tribalism, we coalesced, organized ourselves and shared our resources. We carried words between villages on the backs of infrequent travelers. We settled and gave birth to culture, an arena of innovation where mankind could flourish.

A tribe stood together, huddled near the crest of a small hill. Surrounded by an emerald sea, wives and mothers, younger sons and babes too small to leave behind. The old stayed in the comfort of the village, explaining to the worried faces that standing vigil did nothing to make arrows fly true and blades find their marks. The men argued into the night and left before the sun. The onlookers followed shortly after. The children pushed and shoved, tumbling in the dirt, they played with sticks and shouted among themselves of honor and glory, actors in a play they did not yet understand, on a stage too big for them. Other small voices made prayers and small offerings, pleading to ancestors, the spirits of the trees and the gods of sky. They all face east, where in the darkness the strength of the trees dwindle slightly, where a small cluster of hills begins before the land erupts into the mountains that dominate the horizon. Bated breaths wait, a hundred eyes see the signal, one plume of smoke rises. Still they wait, amongst some tears begin to swell, of the children some mistakenly cheer while others sense the tension as it hangs in

the air. Then a second column rises up, reaching upwards defiant as it challenges the sky. A wave of collective relief, tears melt into laughs and love one turn and embrace one another with each face marked by ...

All of this changed with the advent of written language, when scratches in stone began to bear meaning we no longer had to rely on recollection alone. Then again with expansion of animal husbandry, we put words on wings, and horseback and allowed our voices to blaze on new frontiers.

She heard the clamor of horseshoes on gravel, a familiar sound, and forced herself to maintain her composure. Her mother always preached decorum. A gentle breeze found itself weaving between her and the other girls as they did their work. Her hands plodded away idly, as her mind wandered. Neither the usual gossip or droning lessons keep her engaged. Her mind is focused on one thing and one thing only, a pastel postage stamp, a crisp envelope and a letter written under candlelight over many restless nights. She felt as though she had taken her own heart and unstitched it vein by vein and packaged it amongst those words, and these weeks without a response left her a shade, missing half its soul. While the girl to her left, a blonde a few years her junior, voiced their objections to holding the session outdoors she noticed the manservant making small talk with the postman. She settled herself as he walked away from the gate and towards the front of the estate. Each one of his steps thundering in her ears, she prepared for disappointment and steeled her emotions. The servant called out

“A correspondence for the most honorable young Lady”

Yet she still did not allow herself excitement. Only when she held the envelope in her hand and her eyes fell upon a familiar script, did her reservation finally dissolve and she began to form ...

Even then we were not satisfied, we conquered sound itself. Hammering waves into signals that we forced into wires, transfixing them across continents and oceans, to gleam meager meanings from what remained of them.

He reclined into his usual position, exhaustion overcoming him. A thousand thoughts swarmed his mind and he tried to calm himself, he took a deep breath and exhaled, checking the clock on the wall. Four minutes until it was time. His hands went back and forth over the circular arms of the chair as he fell deeper into its grasp. He wondered about his work, if it was enough, was it really the best use of his time? Could he actually support his family with his tinkering. He looked over to the device to his right, the newest model fresh from English laboratories, the bronze colored metallic arm jutting forth from the wooden base facing him. Electromagnets, coils of reading tape, screws and bolts the whole machine a monstrosity out of place in his simple living room. His eyelids drooped, sleep a distant memory, months ago it was the anxiety of the whole process, now it's the midnight cries. He wishes there was a manual he could read, a guidebook to provide him all the answers he desperately needs. Something to tell him which cries were hunger, which were illness or discomfort, what to tell his wife when her eyes seemed to go to that distant place away from him, tell him if that shade of pink was normal, or even that type of brown, to tell him he was good enough and that it would all work out. The clock hand

ticked and the telegraph rose from its slumber, its arm moving downward, he leaned over taking his pen and notebook. Translating the message as the morse code came through.

“Test Test Test this is a message from broadcast location 3 ...”

His focus wavered, his thoughts drifted back to weeks prior , a night filled with echoing screams and a never ending torrent of crimson and and then, in the morning's light, jubilation. The man looks over realizing the message he is transcribing is taking longer than usual.

“Dear friend, well wishes and congratulations on the birth of your first child, we heard that it was a boy. I hope only the best for you my brother, I know these early days will be difficult, trust that the fear you feel is universal. I tell you only this, stand by your wife and

His trances broken, his face softening and the corners of his lips turning upwards the beginning of

Again and again our insatiable appetite for more connectivity could not be contained, we needed more, to be closer. So we broadcasted our voices, turned signals across the air, and made conversation possible beyond hemispheres. Wove our lives so tightly together that only fingertips measured the farthest distance between any of us.

A man rolls over after a restless night of sleep, of constant tossing and turning and of impossible to describe dreams. He fights in his bed for mere seconds more of REM, holding his eyes shut and trying to force sleep back in, like trying to coax wisps of smoke to return into a fire. Light creeps its way into his room as dawn continues its ever forward

march across the sky. He concedes, wakefulness is declared the victor and he halfheartedly accepts his day must begin. He opens his eyes and immediately deadlines pour into his awareness. Exams, interviews, applications, projects, appointments they drone on in decreasing importance. He asks himself regretfully every morning *why don't you ever write anything down*, and tries to remember what he is inevitably forgetting. As the registry spirals, he looks to his left for a comfortable distraction, he picks up a crimson red phone and hides his face from its sudden assault of light. As his eyes adjust his fingers fall into routine making the necessary movements. He focus rests on a notification accentuated with a musical note, seeing a message from his youngest brother he opens the app and a video of monkey with a hat breaks his stupor and he welcomes the day with ...

Across a thousand generations a reaction so uniquely human, known across cultures and history as a universal symbol, something almost encoded in our dna. A signal that begins deep in our brain's hypothalamus, as armies of ions stand at attention locked in stalemate. Gradients shift, and charge flows into neurons cascading one after another, signals going from brain area to brain area, flooding the cheeks with dopamine as facial muscles pull our mouths into a smile.



POETRY

**OUR CAT REFUSES OUR SUGGESTION OF A BAR MITZVAH
FOR HIM NEXT YEAR**

by

Liam Strong

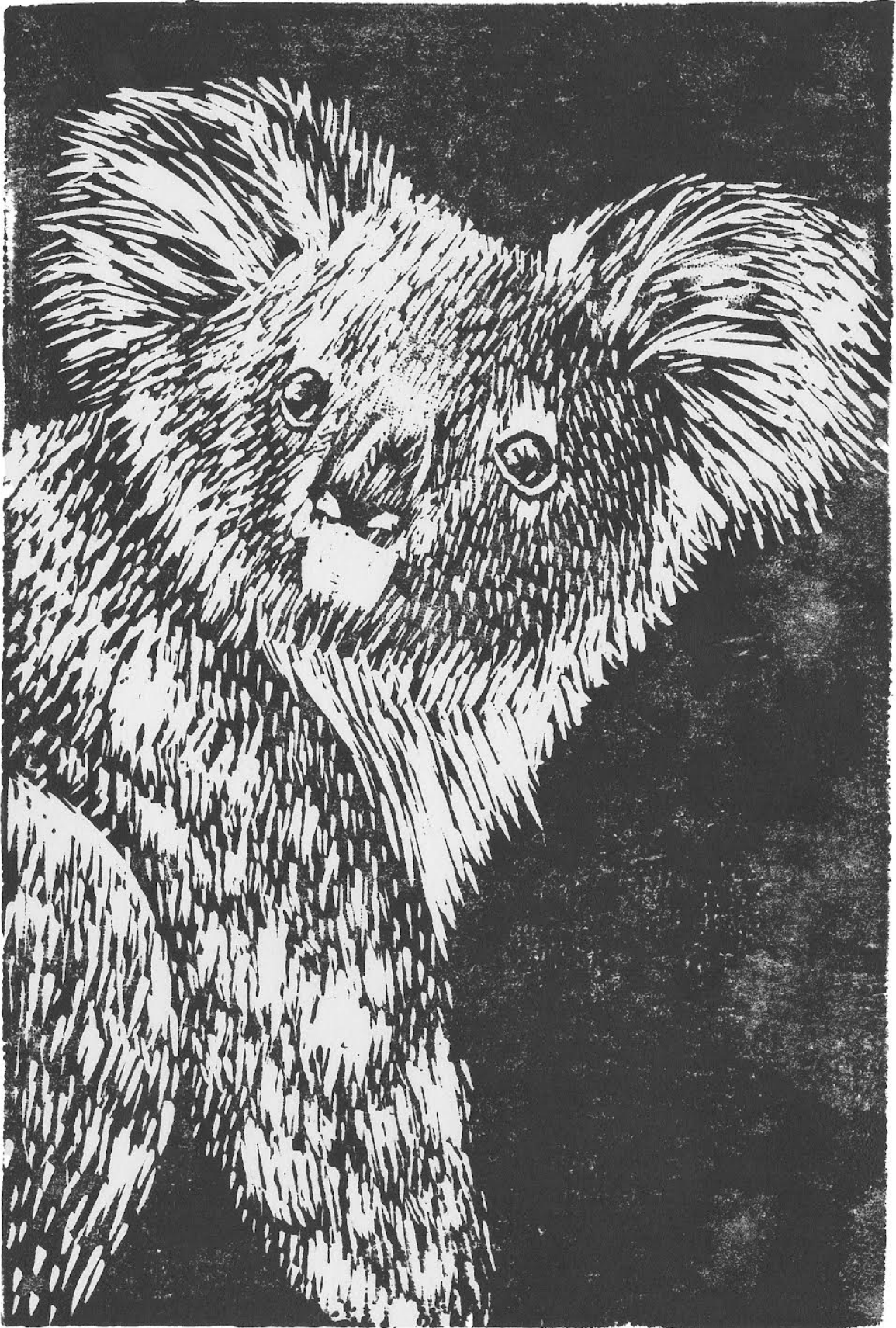
he tends to bathe in utterly yellow light, sometimes orange like the imitation of fire, his belly on fire. his white clavicle, obscured when he gallops toward your jeans, yellow, his hand extendable, utterly departing from the socket. his body too small for his body. it's when you leave that he also vamooses, visible until not, an unsewn patch from the living room rug, fizzy pop incense dying behind you. Hobbes can't stop saying "smock" in the Sunday strip, and for good reason. there are things he sees & hears that we can't. but it's between us, understanding, i mean, the tidbit i think i grasp. i watch him a lot when he doesn't really need to be watched. he runs away, possibly because he can't contain himself, or that running can't contain him.

INTRUSION

by

John Muro

The house is sleepwalking
again and we can hear it,
wooded by the moon, softly
wailing in the attic, primitive
planks and joists creaking,
and its head striking the collar
beam, moments before its
slow shuffle down the stairwell
where it gathers and warms
itself by the barrel stove before
continuing on down the narrow
hallways to contemplate the
ritual of living, knowing it
will outlive us, and awaits
our reimagined sleep. Then,
as night draws on, it alights
in slippered feet upon our
window-seat and, wanting
for beauty, whistles a mournful
tune that I can recall from
childhood followed by its
eerie endsay to the stars
and the dying wilderness.



AIRPLANE STARTER PACK

by

Devin Reeves

1. Your carry on. Roll your clothes inside. Don't fold them. Thank me later.
2. Your personal item. This is basically a second carry on, so feel free to pack anything extra that didn't fit in the first one. Just make sure it fits under the seat in front of you.
3. One of those neck pillows. Does it help you sleep? Probably not, but you might as well have one.
4. Some asshole in the middle seat sticking his elbows past both armrests. If you are in the middle seat and are not already this asshole, stay vigilant! You are at an elevated risk of becoming this asshole. If for any reason you are unable to perform the duties of this asshole, please see a flight attendant to arrange a seating change.
5. Crying baby. Every airplane needs a crying baby, so that it can cry during takeoff and cry after landing and cry in the between and so that you can realize, suddenly, that you left home and your mother left home and your father left home in the opposite direction and now you have no idea where they'd bury you if you died.
6. It makes you sad, the idea that one parent or another would have to get on a plane just to visit your body in the ground. Then again, they have to get on one to see you up top, too. It's not so different. Nothing's so different. Everything is only as different as you make it.
7. Headphones. Block out the noise of the engines roaring, and the two sales reps on their way to a conference trading industry secrets a few seats up.
8. "Last quarter was rough for everyone, but we're on the up and up now." "The up and up, yeah. We really needed that round of layoffs last year." "Right. The labor numbers just weren't working, but now that we've—"
9. An eye mask. Take the window seat but sleep through the bright press of the sky all around you. Nothing should be that blue, anyway, and you should never see a city from

above. It gets you thinking about how small you really are, and how unnatural it is that we ever learned to fly at all, and how much fossil fuel this plane is burning.

10. The earth isn't dying, necessarily, but it is changing, and that's a kind of death. It's a kind of birth, too, and it's probably painful. That's why you need the baby crying, really. To remind you of pain, and change, and fear, and birth. To remind you of the ground waiting below.
11. A text from Mom. *Fly safe. Love you.* You send back, *it's so lonely up here*, and it doesn't go through. No service in heaven. No service on airplane mode.

LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW AT OHIO'S FALLING SNOW

by

Eriana Ktistakis

I remember the morning
the sky shed petals
along my skin and
into the curls of my hair,
the white butterflies that
beat their wings around the ripening
tomatoes and pale flowers.
Oh, I'd like to see July,
when the daffodils and dahlias
would grow towards me and
not the sun,
but somehow it is February and
the snowdrops are blooming and
maybe that can be good. or filling. or enough.
I have enjoyed so little of my life.

MOURNING DEW

by

Hope Duffy

She emerges
from the tree line
with dew-stained cheeks,
frantically searching
for piles of mossy rocks.
The cairns that mark
the graves
of her sisters lie
cracked
and toppled
before her.
She grabs a pebble
from each
– all that she can carry –
and quickly disappears
across the clearing.

The shells of trees
she left behind
begin to crackle,
their half-dead leaves
quickly becoming engulfed
as their hollow bodies

fill with flame.

The blades of grass

in her wake

drip with tears,

but it won't be enough

to slow the blaze.

Resigned,

she places

what's left of her sisters

in a circle

and lies

in the center

on a bed

of yellow grass.



suspecting there would never be enough yellow to feed everyone
she seized what she could from that distance and stashed it
in a room inside a photograph where grey waited idle silent and hungry

**I PROMISE, ANNA, HAGFISH ARE CUTE, TRUST ME,
JUST A LITTLE**

by

Liam Strong

non-hoax cheesecloth, ghosts of maggots who forget their pasts
as easy as rain
over the Pacific. your Pacific. we're fish tape thread
through Laura
Palmer's brain. we're chordate, nothing gets to us, we're shit
out of luck
because who needs it. the weeping
pines, canvas
jackets wrapped tight like vertebrae or chain. i guess
chains are often
loose, our skulls are dark inside because the sun
would burn
what's within, & not every
-one will
call us darling. at the bottom of the ocean, someone has got
to be a top.
i'm not kidding. but who's kidding, really, besides me—there's
less light
to work with than we'd usually need. churches don't stay
open late
anymore, after all, so there's better places to go, finally, i can't feed
on dead
end paths forever, & you're read to be an un

-tangled mess. which
isn't a mess at all, something communal, Marxist, ichor from the
broken
jaw of what we're too scared to say out loud, to see each
other's reactions, blood
-less vermin eating what too should be called vermin, but
aren't, us also
at the bottom. we have more at our disposal when air
& sight
are out of the equation. you can tie the overhand knot for the both of
us. it's a long
way down, or up, or whatever direction we want
to call
it, because i can't hold my breath patiently, i have one
throat, &
i'm tired of not keeping it
open.

ODYSSEY

by

John Muro

On such days as this there's
a deeper sense of something
arriving and leaving as the
slow sweep of wind unveils
the bruised beauty of every
leaf transforming them from
a tangle of weathered green
into a flourish of feathered gold,
russet-orange and star-burst
yellow, and though each burns
brightly and, for all my years
upon this earth, still stops
and haunts the heart, I know
the fate of such divine splendor,
harboring a deciduous darkness
that masses between their
contorted branches and braided
roots where autumn light falters
in saline sparkle and tendrils
of frost glaze the leaf scatter
that's soon lifted and dispersed
like tiny skiffs that delicately
spiral, crest then diminish with
distance before gliding into a
pile of wind-spun ruin.

THE FLEET AT AULIS

by

Thomas R. Keith

1.

penned by wind and wave
Agamemnon who lords it over
curse-blotted Mycenae
paces furrows in his camp
by day while at night he dreams
of the thief Paris laughing or
perfumed naked Helen in odalisque
on purple bedsheets

the oarsmen long for home
their chatter pricks his ears
but what do they know of honor
nameless rabble reckoned only
by their headcount like cattle

to be a king is to be
a bull marked out from the rest
by broad back strong shoulders
and the polished horns of command
as also by a heavy yoke
of public reputation

promised glory withers
worms eat holes in the ships
and the shorebirds repeat
your daughter's life for fair weather
your daughter's life for fair weather
until maddened he yields

2.

how lovely in her saffron cloak
is Iphigenia when she comes
a bride without stain for Death
how readily her throat accepts
the honed blade as if
she had been born just for this

the westerly wind that rises
as she falls gently touching
her veiled face brings
a cheer to every throat
masts are stepped hawsers loosed
Agamemnon enters his flagship
with the gait and grace of a god

in her stone halls waking the servants
Clytemnestra screams



CONTRIBUTORS

Haarith Ahmed is a recent graduate from the Ohio state University, completing a degree in Information Systems Management with a minor in Neuroscience. Their passions include literature, history, chemistry and a myriad of other subjects. This diverse background informs their writing greatly!

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Faith Harris (she/her) is a third year English Creative Writing and psychology major at The Ohio State University. Her personality is a combination of every fictional character she's ever loved and her writing is inspired by the (too) many horror movies that she's ever seen. Her love of reading and writing has persisted throughout her whole life, as has her love for any form of storytelling and her pets. She mostly writes short fiction, usually in the horror and literary fiction genres, with a first novel currently in the works.

Jade Josie is studying English and Spanish at Ohio State University with an expected graduation of spring 2024. She is a student editor for OSU's Translingual: The Journal of International Voices. Jade has a short story published in the online journal Coffin Bell. She is more of a novelist but finds horror or extremely tense short stories to be irresistibly fun. When Jade isn't reading or writing, she's with her friends, gaming, or binging YouTube.

Jasmine Kasper is a multimedia artist and writer who focuses on nature, environmental stewardship, and health. Her goal is to make learning about the world around us a fun, positive experience. You can often find her outdoors, creating art, or frantically researching something interesting to share with others. Visit her portfolio website jasminekasper.com or get in touch over email at officialjasminekasper@gmail.com!

Thomas R. Keith currently resides in his hometown of Austin, TX. A classicist by training, he has a deep interest in mythological themes in contemporary poetry. His work has appeared in *Packingtown Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, and *Poetry Salzburg Review*, among other journals.

Eriana Ktistakis grew up in Athens, Greece. She is currently obtaining her BA in English Creative Writing at The Ohio State University, where she serves as a reader for The Journal. She loves writing fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry, and is currently drafting her first novel. Her work can be found in *Rising Action Review*.

Peter Malone is a painter, critic, and retired assistant professor at CUNY. Holds a BFA from the School of Visual Arts and an MA from Teachers College, Columbia University. His work is in the permanent collections of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Museum of Art in Utica, NY; the Elizabeth deC Wilson Museum in Manchester, Vermont; the Coupelouzous Museum in Athens Greece; and in corporate and private collections in the USA, Europe and the Middle East. He was awarded a Pollock-Krasner grant in 2014. His writing appears in *Hyperallergic*, *Artcritical*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, the *New Criterion* (Dispatches), and *Two Coats of Paint*.

Richard Metz is a 64 year old artist, writer, father, environmental activist, former art teacher who lives in Philadelphia, PA. His recent work focuses specifically on how corvids interact with nature, humanity, and specific natural areas northwest of the city. His environmental work has included land preservation, plastic bag bans,

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John Muro is a resident of Connecticut and a lover of all things chocolate. He has authored two volumes of poems – *In the Lilac Hour* and *Pastoral Suite* – in 2020 and 2022, respectively. He is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, a Best of the Net nominee and a 2023 recipient of a Grantchester Award. John's work has appeared in such literary journals as *Acumen*, *Barnstorm*, *Delmarva*, *Moria*, *River Heron*, *Sky Island* and the *Valparaiso Review*.

Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, and illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. Her first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology. In 2005, she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, drawing on anti-war topics.

Hannah Eve Osinoff is a Hamilton College Alum who majored in Art History and Digital Arts and has an immense passion for photography. She has practiced many different types of photography, but her favorite is street photography.

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Devin Reeves (she/her) is a product of every horror movie she's ever seen and every bad pun she's ever heard. She lives in Columbus, Ohio, writing fiction and poetry and doing her best to soak in the magic and gore of everyday existence. Her work has been featured in *Broken Antler Magazine* and *Short Vine Literary Journal*.

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