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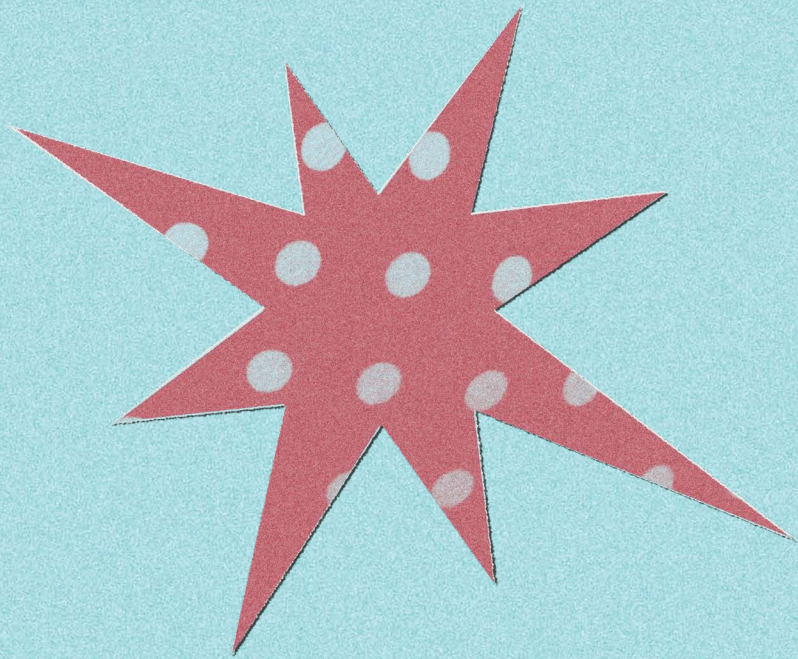
GALLATIN

REVIEW

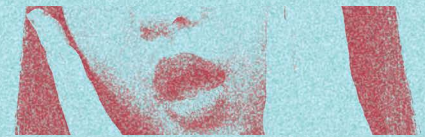


VOLUME

41



THE GALLATIN REVIEW



VOLUME

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WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE PIGEONS HANNI WANG

The citizens who are so tiny
that I almost step on—their feathers
quivering,
letting the wind decide where to go.

In the city we pretend to own
they know how to live in between—
the gutter's thin trickle of rain,
the warm exhaust of a passing bus,
the crumbs that fall like quiet meteors
from someone's careless breakfast toast.

They never plead for mercy from the pavement,
nor hand their passports to the sky.
They master the intervals:
the pause between footsteps,
the hush before a traffic light clicks,
the invisible thread where fear
has loosened into habit—
a habit of listening:
they trust the air
even when it trembles.

BOYS IN MAINE AVA FILAN



BROKEN DAMON WHEELER

Broken? Is that what you see when you look at me?
Just because I'm in a dark place with my head down.
Ironically, I feel safer in here than out there.
At least it's quiet in here.
Shhh! Listen!
I can finally hear myself think.
And him? The little guy . . . Oh, he's been screaming out for help for years.
No child left behind? Y'all definitely dropped the ball with him.
And look . . . This is me taking accountability. Reflecting, remembering
how I allowed myself to be led astray
by you, and others. No blaming. Just saying.
I know you said you was just playing,
I was only seven years old and I knew *that* was inappropriate.
Oops! Did I just allude to the time when you sent your little daughter to trick me?
"You wanna play?" *Sure*. I liked her.
But I can only imagine the trauma and abuse that she experienced
after what I experienced when I entered your home for the first and last time.
Some *playdate*. That joint lasted about thirty seconds before I bolted out the door.
You was on my ass, literally! But I was too muthafuckin' fast!
Lucky for you, I was too ashamed to tell anybody back then.
A part of me was laughing inside because for me, that was a win!
Shit! I was in the wind!
I never saw Shorty again.
I was sad for her. I felt bad for her. I wanted to kill her dad for her.

I was *prey* for you. But now, I just wanna pray for you.
Broken? *Shit!* Broken silence!
Oh, you meant, like, *breaking down? Falling apart? Hopeless? Crushed? Coming undone?*
Or, in spirit?
Nah, the look you see is that of a man with a broken heart,
left unattended and unprotected as a child, at home and in the park.
In the concrete jungle, born swimming like a shark.
Never met my dad. All I know is that his name is Clifford Sparks.
Broken? Nah, this is the look of a man who spent half of his life in prison,
Bad company and a host of bad decisions.
Wrong side of the law, wrong place, wrong time.
Held it down for my cousin, goin' away for a long time.
No snitchin'. No blaming. Just saying.
Broken? Nah, what you see is a look of disappointment.
Broken promises, broken home, separation, bad judgment. No blaming. Just saying.
My intentions were to empower you, upgrade you,
from that tiny ass studio apartment to an estate.
Gave you all my passwords and the keys to the safe.
The game was good to me.
I played the game like I lived my life.
I was married to that bitch, but you was my wife.
No regrets. No blaming. Just saying.
Broken? Nah. Becoming!

THE BONES

MACY YOUNG

The dream of being a ballerina wasn't one I outgrew like shoes or baby teeth. There was my first Nutcracker—an angel in a gold Hula-Hoop skirt—then my first solo part, my first pair of pointe shoes, my first love. Nine, ten, eleven years old—I learned how to be a woman with my left hand on the barre. Eyes up, stand tall, stomach in.

I have not been back to that studio in years, but I couldn't forget it if I tried. I was raised on gray marbled floors—sticky with rosin and sweat, on Tchaikovsky spilling from the ancient black stereo propped in the corner, on French verbs and bloody toes.

It isn't surprising that a violent sort of perfectionism gnaws at a woman raised on ballet. I learned early on that ballet was an art with all the rules already made. There was no movement left to discover, nothing to invent, only the same lines to haunt, the familiar shapes to master. It was an art of mimicry, a lesson in obedience, an addiction to perfection.

I guess the rigid confines of ballet didn't suit New Hampshire's "Live Free or Die" patriotism because I had never met anyone who made it out of our little Rollinsford studio in the old mill. Here, stone ballerinas were

carved from little girls that then crumbled into American dirt. We lived off of breadcrumbs of praise—enough to keep us from collapsing but never enough to quiet groaning stomachs. It was all about lines—the longer and thinner, the better. Long legs, protruding ribs, flat chests. We fought puberty like hell, starving the womanhood from our frames.

It was all about bones and rules, but oh, how it felt to fly. *Tombé-pas de bourrée, glissade-saut de chat*—the low sliding *tombé*, rushing into the triplet preparation, gliding into an illusion of effortlessness, exploding into furious grace.

What they didn't see: the collapse behind the curtain after the final *plié*—grinning, breathless.

Our teacher was hard and French, bent like a cane. I remember wondering if she was so bitter because she had never made it, and now, never would. She was prone to volatile moods and consistent disappointment. To earn just a nod of approval—it kept you at the barre, legs shaking, long after you believed your muscles would fail.

The accent, the fear, the delicious pain. "You are naw-thing." It is her voice that reminds me who I am again and again.

My father asked when I had gotten so thin. I knew that this business with perfection was precarious, but I was so close I could taste it.

2023. My last performance. I danced "The Firebird." Red flames and feathers, the auditorium erupted with applause. It hurts to think about it now.

End of the semester. It is very late, and I am alone in my room. Rain and cigarette butts fill the courtyard beyond the open window. Notebook open on the bed, dirty clothes, The Smiths, and the full moon. I will sit there all through the night. I will pour another glass of white, and in the morning, I will buy a cup of coffee—black—to take with my Advil. I will ask the broad-faced moon: *Do you know what it costs to dream?*

PIANO VALENTINE DANIEL KATZMAN

After Richard Siken's "Dirty Valentine"

There's no better feeling than to see the arch of my hands
racing across the black-and-white keys.

Beethoven's work is exhilarating, his *Moonlight Sonata* giving me goosebumps
as I storm through countless arpeggios.

I can convey so much desire with just the pressure of my fingers,
slowly building a crescendo until the entire weight of my hands
crashes on the C-sharp minor chord.

Seven minutes in, I'm drenched in sweat,
reaching the part where my rhythm switches,
and I'm sight-reading the last thirty bars.

I am now Beethoven, frantically scribbling the last section,
willing so many black-inked sixteenth notes from my left-winged goose quill pen
before going fully deaf.

My eyes lower from the music to the polished keys, unable to look away.

I treat the ivory with the gentleness it demands,
closing the piece with the last five bars, my fingers lingering on the last chord
as they slowly lift off, leaving the room silent save for my slow exhale,
and the faint hum beneath my skin.

SELFISH CHILD EIJI KIM

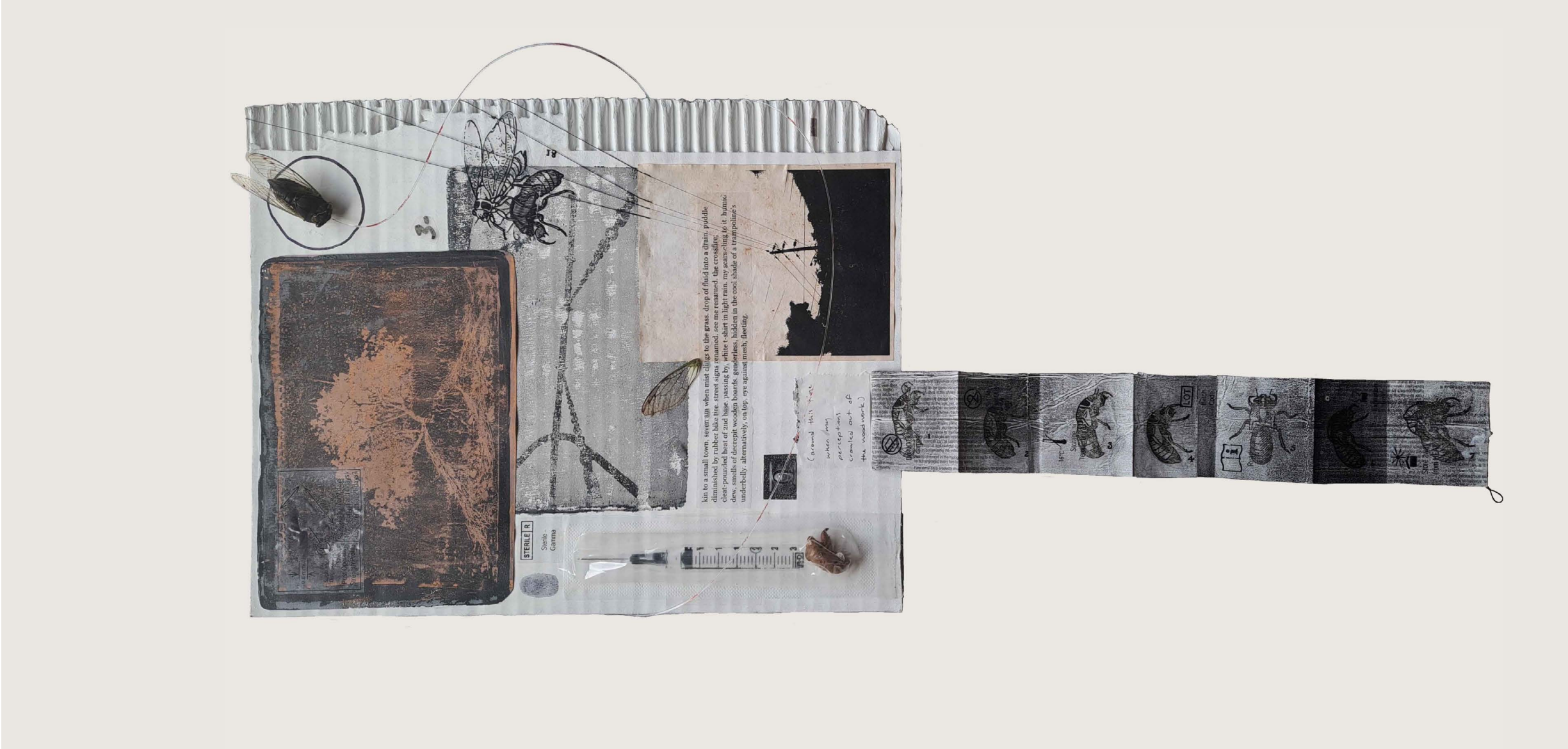
i was a selfish child
on late night drives
when i was too tired to move
but too awake to sleep
when i wanted the gentle touch of my mother
but i knew love couldn't be spared for me
i would close my eyes
relax my breath
and wait and pray that she wouldn't try to
wake me.

i was a selfish child
those late nights
when my mother would carry me to bed
and i could feel the warmth of the love she
held
and the soft touch of lips to my forehead
when i learned that love came easier
the closer you got to death.

i was a selfish child
those late nights
waiting to be carried to bed
my eyes closed tight
but not too tight
and my heart aflutter with hope

as the lights turned off
and the car doors closed
when i opened my eyes to darkness
my seatbelt still fastened
my heart still hopeful
as the cold seeped into the garage
i was left alone
a selfish child

PERCEPTIONS
ROCKY SHULER



SONNET בשניים (IN TWO) LEIGH WOLBERGER MOULLY

strange
how I search for anticipated moments
or memories un- made that cling
like grains of sand in my hair or
between my grinding teeth.

ומה אין לי מילים
בשום שפה להסביר
איך הלב,
עשוי מזהב, הופך
כבד ושקט
כמו אש שהופכת
לכהולה בגובה
סנטימטרים
בלעדיך.

(And what if I have no words
in any language to explain
how the heart
made from gold becomes
heavy and silent
like fire that turns to
blue, a height of
centimeters
without you.)

BLUEPRINT JACK SLOAN

SUMMER

I remember crouching, drenched in the green of the backyard. I found my stance between two pine tree dragons, underneath the late-summer sun. The blades of grass were a roaring crowd (that cheered with his voice), and a buzzing lavender bush was the umpire (that had his voice, too). He turned the wiffleball in his hand, priming for a curveball, and I readied my famous yellow bat. “Three balls, two strikes, two on base,” the loudspeaker boomed, in that same voice. The crowd grew even louder.

My hair stood up straight with the electricity of anticipation, and with one huge wind-up, he launched the ball right toward the plate: a blur of white going a hundred miles an hour. In an instant, I sliced my staff through the air and made solid contact before falling to the ground, dizzy with effort. Splayed on the grass, I watched the baseball soar out past the outfield, past the cheering crowd, and over the fence. Victory was mine. I squealed in celebration before springing up and tackling the pitcher to the ground, managing to give him a black eye. The crowd, umpire, loudspeaker, and pitcher could do nothing but laugh that big, sky-filling laugh.

GRAVITY

In the dim light of the airport parking lot, I saw his legs tense and trip awkwardly over a concrete curb, his hand fumbling with the strap

of his suitcase. He fell to the ground as if pulled down by the earth. The thick concrete walls of the building absorbed a small, sad percussion—then there was his pained exhale and repeated insistence that he was okay. I demanded that I drive, but Grammy wouldn’t let me go any faster than 65 miles per hour, anyways. I gripped the road with my eyes and tried not to look back at him holding bloody napkins to his wrinkled face. I hated him for having those wrinkles. My heart pounded in the way that makes me mad and exhausted; my eyes fluttered and my head bowed as I tried to keep the car straight. I tried to be grateful: gravity is what’s keeping him down here at all.

MAN OF THE HOUSE

We’re downstairs, getting ready to go out through the heavy white door that opens up into the garden. I’m six, or seven, and the tomatoes that Grammy keeps will tower over me and drown me in their perfume. Over the TV, there’s a world map covered in pins—blue for him and Grammy, red for my dad.

I say over and over, “Bapa! I bet you can read my mind! Bapa, what am I thinking of?”

I giggle when he guesses correctly and scoff, shocked and upset, when he does not:

“You’re Bapa, you have to know!”

He asks me, then, if I know that he’s not my real grandpa.

“No, you are!”

He’s wearing thick prescription sunglasses and khakis. He speaks gently and calls me “Jackers.” And still, the word “biological” does nothing to convince me.

I run my fingers along the creases of this blurred memory. The blue, staticky eighties carpet reminds me that my dad’s old room was just down the hall. He was eleven with his Santa Cruz skateboard leaned up against the wall when his dad left for the Rajneeshpuram cult in Oregon. He started delivering the paper on his bike, pedaling furiously through the red brick buildings of Stanford. He asked for a BB gun for his birthday that year, and practiced shooting lined-up cans until the sun set.

A divorced architect and deserted land attorney meet on a job site in what will become Silicon Valley. Her days of smoking reefer in Dolores Park are distant enough that she loves the boring radio programs he plays, and how he walks with his hands behind his back. His days of upstate Mennonite humility are far enough east that he loves her colorful gossip, and how she trespasses with her sons to secret swimming holes on hot days. His compact frame fits spaciouly into the bruised void of a cult-shaped ghost.

Five years after my dad had been made the man of the house, Eric Richert (Bapa) starts coming to Thanksgiving. He’d spend the whole day cooking: a huge turkey wrapped in tin foil blankets, homemade cranberry sauce, and everything else precariously folded into the backseat of the white 1978 Corolla.

He and Grammy lug the heavy food down a long path, to a little timeshare in the

forest. My dad follows behind them, walking crouched, with narrowed eyes and a bow in his hands—the one he got for Christmas. He blows his shaggy hair out of his eyes, and with a quick tug of the string, he releases an arrow that whistles through the woods and sticks into the red bark of a Madrone tree.

CHARCOAL

He unclips his hands from the polite clasp behind his back, and carefully removes two yellowing books from the shelf. *The Teachings of Don Juan* and *Siddhartha*.

“You know, Jackers . . .” I can almost feel the leather mitt on my hand from when I was the baseball-loving little boy he’d never had, just at the drop of that nickname. He continues in a voice loud enough that Grammy will hear, but not so loud that she’ll interject. He tells me that he read these books at my age, that he wants me to have them. He tells me that he didn’t know whether to believe them or not, and that’s why they were so important. In an eastern blizzard, with hair like mine, he lets charcoal lines pour from his hands, spiraling like spiderwebs.

On the plane, I fly wide-eyed through the accounts of Don Juan, nodding off into psychedelic, peyote-filled dreams of the Southwest. On the plane back, I sink and drown in the heavy, soft prose of the young Buddha’s samsaric river. The crazy fractals of these hallucinations bend and pulse in a million ways—none of which seem inclined to lie rigid on a blueprint, or neat on a floorplan.

As I lay in the wide silence of being home again, I gaze up at the two drawings which sit politely in their frames, adorning my

headboard. On the left: a tea-stained, torn-edged notebook sheet is framed by a tidy maple rectangle. On it is a self-portrait comprised of nothing more than a few pencil lines. The strokes are quick and almost rushed, each one necessary. The minimum details needed to construct a pursed-lipped, glasses-wearing middle aged face are there. No signature, no name, no title, no date: there is nothing except a myopic gaze.

On the right: in a sleek, modern, black frame, a geometric world falls into itself. Impossibly meticulous charcoal lines and shading on a thick canvas: all the shapes of a house cut (but not torn) apart and put back together. My bedroom wall instantly becomes a museum gallery with the thoughtful precision and depth of this masterpiece. And in the bottom right, a printed signature, and a date. E Richert. 1975. It’s still hard to believe that’s not my last name.

These are the two that I chose. He never would have given me the self-portrait, had I not asked, and he never would have deemed either drawing worthy of display, had I not insisted he have them framed. It breaks my heart to know that had I not demanded to see these drawings, they would have lain, forever dormant, in the tight bindings of a file folder. Their ineffability would’ve been buried underneath old drafting compasses and rulers—or perhaps held them up?

BLUEPRINT

I can see him now, walking gently through the shade of the overgrown Redwood forest, orange poles in hand. At each bend in his path, he drives a marker into the ground between his

feet, and then waits there for a while, gazing back at the shape of the path before noting it on his clipboard.

His mind is a snowglobe, full of East Coast storms. Or maybe he’s past that by now. Does he like the Giants more than the Mets, yet? Does he still see that one cousin, the one that’s an “odd bird”? Has he already gone to that photo booth with Grammy, the one where they’d left all the photos of them kissing on top of the car and they blew away? Maybe, by then, she hadn’t even changed her name. Does he know he’s going to be only a stepdad, but always a grandpa?

I see myself, young and skinny as a twig, running over those paths in that same forest. Panting and without knowing it, I’m following the same curves, tracing his footsteps. Except the orange poles are gone. The paths are all built, and the pavement runs through the shade like a stream.

ANGLE OF REPOSE

I’m suspended in the echo of a slammed dorm door, but at least I’m out of limbo. When the echo becomes quiet enough to untense my body, I look through the peephole, ashamed—just in case she’s waiting on the other side. But all I see is a fluorescent, undecorated hallway, and I know then that it’s really over. God, do I miss limbo.

My roommates are gone and all I hear is the heater rattling. I climb into my bed with all my dirty city clothes still on and struggle to lift the window up the one permitted inch. Wailing engines and dark sleet. Oily pavement and starless sky. I feel awfully old. And even though my

throat feels all rusted shut from a long night of heavy words, I reach for my phone.

I shoot a flare towards home, and the life-line lands in the water before me with a *Hey Jackers!* I stare at the distant flickering of car lights on the Brooklyn Bridge as we talk. He asks me how I'm doing. I don't want to be a burden—not even to myself—but I tell him that, even though it's been cold for a long time here in New York, I still had hoped it might be warm again soon.

Forty-eight years. That's how long ago he and Annie, his first wife, divorced. *Annie? First wife?* Grammy and Bapa together is a fixture of pure marble in my memory, timeless. "First wife" turns over in my mind like a brick in a washing machine. Does Grammy know about this?

Forty-eight. Years. By this scale, my own long relationship is a date, and what feels like adult gravity becomes so sweetly innocent. He tells me about a book that he read after his divorce. In it, a couple—a frontiersman mine engineer and a writer—go west in the 1870s. They keep finding and losing and finding again their angle of repose.

Angle of repose: the steepest angle at which a sloping surface formed of loose material is stable. He tells me that he, still, keeps finding and losing and finding again his angle of repose. *You're an explorer, Jack!* His gentle voice embraces me through the receiver, and disappears into the dark, leaving me with a glowing ball in my chest.

Suddenly, I'm tearing through the freezing wasteland of SoHo on my heaving Citibike, pressing my calves into the steed's flank and flying at a gallop. I yip as the wind flies through

my hair and the lit-up buildings blur by in the dark. I drift my horse into his stable, and don't miss a step on the dismount. I don't even try to unfreeze my hands as I enter the bright building and follow the signs to the top floor. Crouched on scratched vinyl flooring, I search through the narrow mazes of hardbacks. What feels like hours go by of me learning how many just-not-right last names there are, until finally, I see it. *Angle of Repose* by Wallace Stegner, bound in red.

As fast as I biked there, I slowly walked back, clutching my red treasure. I relished in the cold of his home state as the night turned my ears to ice, and the pain in my fingers took me out of my head. Back in my room, I flicked on my lamp and opened the front cover. I was quickly met with a frustrated narrator, writing a letter to his grandmother:

Before I can say "I am," I was.

But I would like to hear your life as you heard it, coming at you, instead of hearing it as I do . . .

Was the quiet I always felt in you really repose?

If nothing else, on that night, I felt entirely made of loose material at a steep angle. If nothing else, before I am, I was you: my real grandpa. And if I accomplish nothing else in this life, I will have had the honor of walking in your footsteps, even if just for a moment.

I love you, Bapa.

LUCKY CATALINA ADLER



Catalina Adler

Oct 12 24 B.A.T

ARBER AND LUPO
(GARDENERS OF VILLA LA PIETRA)
CHELSEA THORPE



MARCO
(GARDENERS OF VILLA LA PIETRA)
CHELSEA THORPE



L'ARBRE DU MONDE PERFECT SOTO

Birthed on Spring's cuspis
cradled in gusty psalms of April's palms.
Kissed by morning's dew
I unfurled,
a soft verdigris,
the sigh of quietus defied.
Bine,
O' Mother of mine,
lift me towards the sky
our home,
so sunlight may caress my face
as each breeze
plays across me
a lullaby unknown.
In Summer's soul I sough,
dancing beneath a flaxen flame
swaying in time to bees' opus
and lush with sister's lux.
Laughter floods my veins
a chorus of us
wild yet tamed,
knowing not chains nor sight
thus failing to fear Autumn's bite.
But time is cruel
and Father grew distal.

Voices hushed
as all others
turned, fell away, became dust.
I felt crushed,
tasted loneliness.
While shades vanquished days,
abdication came
and
September arrived
so abrupt
just
chilling hearts with her amber eyes.
Then sadness struck.
So, I mourned the Sun.
I mourned the skies.
I mourned my kin
hating that I
was the one who survived,
though not unscathed.
I spied my edges tinged by fire
then stages of sage,
chartreuse
and coppery rust
partnered with a pungent musk.
I bore my fading patches

like badges and battle scars,
 'til bronze braised
 all life from me
preparing for taupe's decay.
Winter spake in silvery tongues,
 hastening
my fall to fate with aching grace,
 displacing me
 to rest upon a frozen face,
 now naught
but a memory in Slumber's Keep
 glace and snow
grays in places blues should be
 and only death can grow.
 Cold.
 Darkness.
 Silence.
 Suddenly,
 a great yawn
 like a lion's roar
beats back Sleep's eternity,
 and I feel the warmth
 of Grandam's arms
wrapped round me lovingly.
 Ascension as she
 pushes gently
 guiding.
A pinprick of white
blossoming invitingly.
 Faith restores

 as hope blooms
with thoughts of thawed boughs,
 but something is different
 and
 truth was made plain
 when I broke ground.
I continued to soar towards the Heavens
kissing cousins with distant clouds.
 I looked down and witnessed
 countless me(s) standing about
 tall and proud.
 Skins no longer green
but a jussive plethora of browns,
 and upon our many limbs
legions of buds beginning to sprout.
 I set my gaze northwest,
 Majestic bark bulging
 power found without bounds.
 “UNCLE BOREAS!”
 I bellowed,
 air warped and willows wept.
“I've gorged upon your hoarfrost
 and dithered
 sheer prey of the inverted year,
now I challenge yon champion winds
 winding from far and near.
For not even your best breath
 possess the breadth
 to press me
 a mere millimeter from here.”

THE GOD OF SMALL FAVORS JUNO TAGORE

He lived out past the switchbacks, where the asphalt turned to gravel and the gravel thinned into dirt. The mailbox was rusted through at the bottom, full of spiders and old magazines, and no one had delivered anything for years.

The man who brought propane swore he saw him once, standing at the edge of the trees in a wool coat two sizes too big, holding a pail. They used to say he worked at the mill before it closed, or maybe it was the quarry. Maybe he was someone's cousin who'd stayed too long. He came into town once a year, usually in spring. Bought flour, batteries, rock salt, and instant coffee. Paid in bills folded down into eighths, and he'd never say hello.

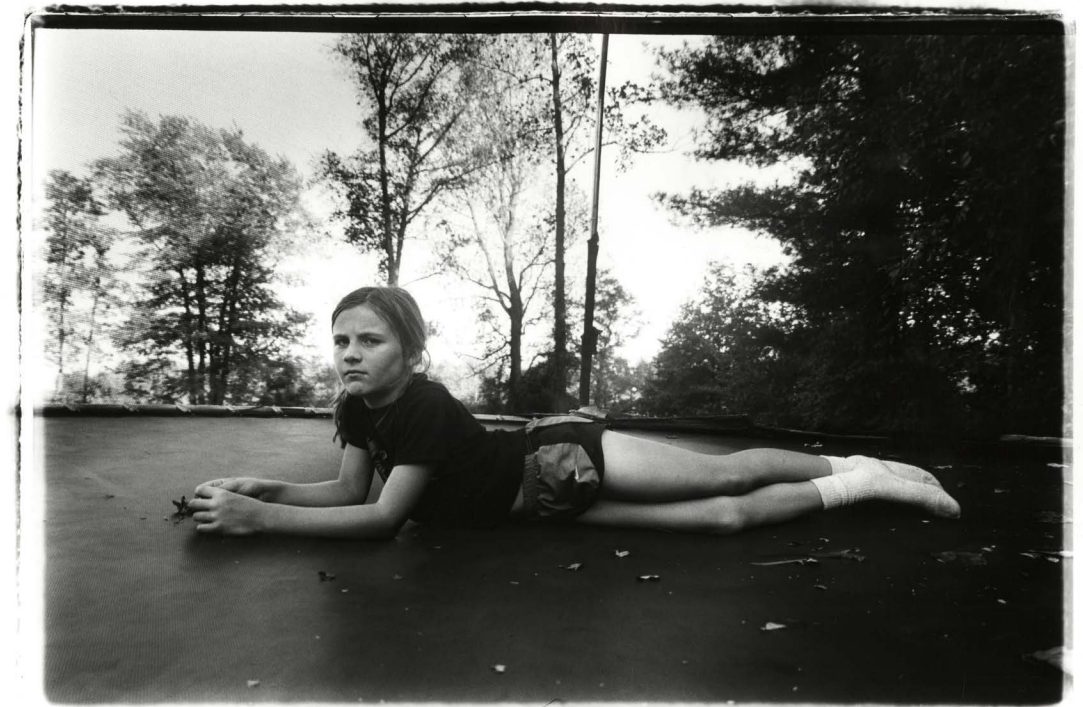
Children called him the god of small favors. They said if you walked the old fence line and left behind a button, he'd keep your brother safe in the winter, or your mother sober

through Sunday, or your toothache down to a whisper. They said he didn't like coins or names spoken too loudly. That if you asked for something selfish, the trees near his house would lean a little closer the next time you passed through.

Someone tried to find the house once. A grad student, or a reporter, or a cousin who wanted land back. They followed directions and parked near the ridge. Climbed past the deadfall and marked their path with red tape. They never came out, and the search party found nothing but their notepad.

Years later, a boy left a matchbox full of baby teeth on the fence line. His sister had been waking up screaming, and he didn't know what else to do. The teeth were gone by morning, and she slept fine after that. No one ever said thank you—it wasn't that kind of favor.

THE KINGDOM WE MADE JO, HUNTINGBURG, INDIANA, 2025 HUNTER MATHEWS



NEPTUNE (BLUE PLANET) PIPER

I

there is a very small scar on my left hand
i know what it means
i have fallen on ice
blue eyes
collisions

II

i am buried in the water
shrouded in plankton
sperm whale
blockheaded
calm
a creased callosity

III

arago
and adams
see you in snell's window

as the light bores holes
in our glacial chests
we are holding back tears
in front of our fathers

IV

meet me at galatea
my one-eyed love
close the dead space

V

i watch you put your shirt on
inside out in front of me
the radiance of ribs
the tragedy of a spine
marked skin
humming a song of demolition

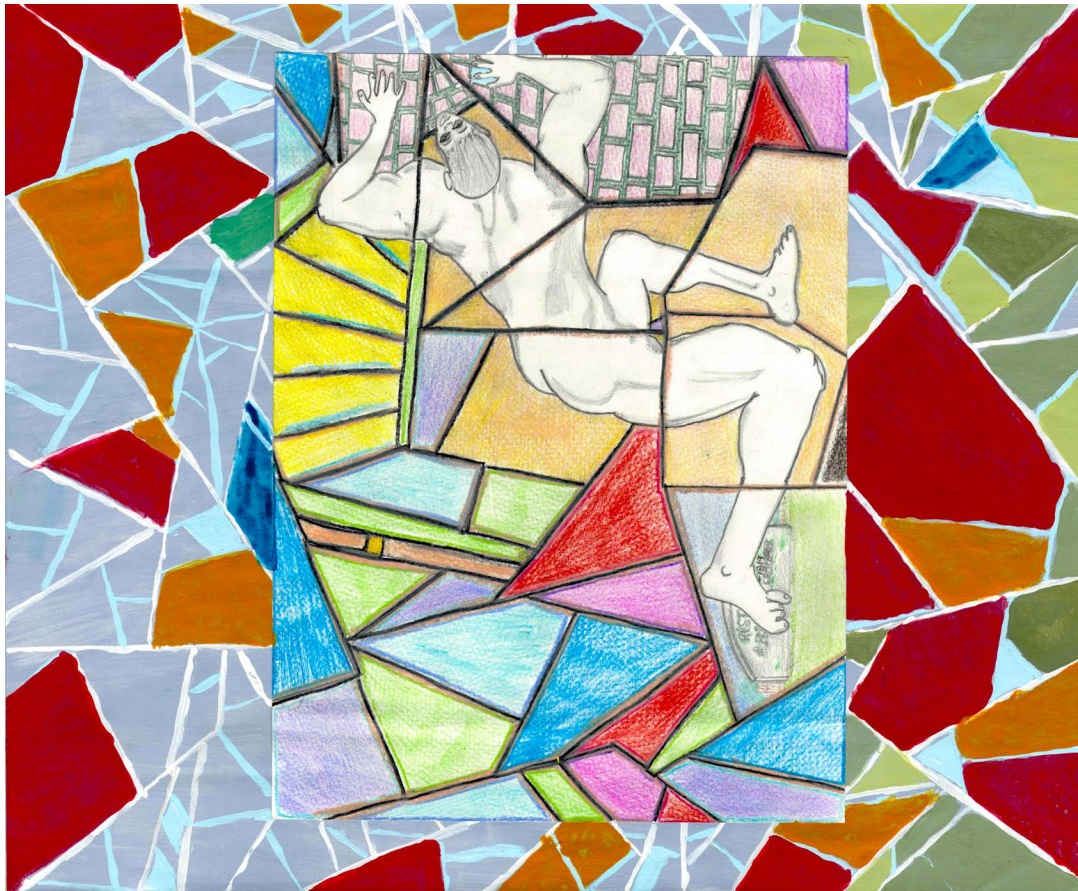
THE MEASURE OF MY MIND

CURTIS MAYS

These steel bars are not the measure of my mind;
They caged the body, but my thoughts take flight.
Each bitter slight, each history unkind, was motivation for a deeper, burning light.
The heartache wasn't silence;
It was sound . . . the loud alarm that woke me up to learn.
The ache of every past cold night:
The ache of racism, and the long years my young life spent in the shadows,
Became the fuel for my steady light.
And I took the stones they threw and built my base.
The sting of every lie,
The heart's fierce wound,
Is not a burden, it's now my pace.
I realized that freedom is found,
And my education rises from the shame,
As I now question chains . . . and learn to cut them loose.
And I turn the crushing weight of their harsh game,
Into the potent, powerful tool I choose.
I drive toward the good, because I know the worst.
I learned truth not from books,
But from within these walls . . .
Where betrayal whispered lies and concrete took my youth.
The echo of violence and the sting of bitter calls,
Tried hard to steal my future and crush my inner truth,
But I refuse to let the darkness be my guide.

They sought to shrink my spirit, but my heart stays vast.
I own my story;
My resilience is my pride.
And I seize the present, letting no good moment pass.
Though shadows cling, I see the light that is still to come.
My mind is free, and my potential undefined.
I am the start, the journey, and the drum of change,
Believing in the good I am set to find.
I question every boundary I have found,
And watch the wheels of my resilience turn.
I took the fear, the anger, and the sting of all the world's oppression,
Harsh and cold, and harnessed them . . .
And the strength they now bring is mine to own.
And the promises, I keep.
I look past steel to where my future stands,
A better man built by his own two hands.

UNTITLED
BRIAN BLACKMAN



DIVINE MERCY
SYDNEY ROUSSEAU

My mom would never let me swim in the ocean off of Cape Cod. She told me it was because I saw Jesus in the waves. Apparently, when I was three years old, playing on the water's edge in Hyannis, I came out of the water and walked up to her, dripping from the salty brine, and said, "Mommy! I'm going to die here." She picked me up and wrapped me in a towel and deposited some sort of version of *Now, why on earth would a child say such a thing?*

"I saw Jesus with his dolphins riding in the waves," three-year-old me said impassively. "He told me I would die here." For my mother, the image of Jesus on a golden Sea Born chariot, pulled along by glistening dolphins and telling her three-year-old child she would meet her demise, was enough of a reason never to let her daughter swim there again, but not enough of a reason to hate Jesus.

I never liked church. Every Sunday morning, my brothers and I would stay in our beds, having intentionally not set our alarms, and pretend we forgot what Sunday mornings implied. My parents never woke me on those mornings. Instead, it was the screams and protests of my brothers echoing down the hall into my room that did. I, of course, pretended not to hear, which meant my turn was next. My mother or father would come into my room, turn on the lights, and attempt to rouse me from my sleep, to which I'd groggily refuse,

feigning slumber. Eventually, they'd get us all out of bed, despite our lamentations and the heavy presence of our tears. This happened every week. Sunday after Sunday, we would go to battle each morning and lose every time. I have to hand it to my mother. It was mostly her—my dad was usually too busy for church, but swears his allegiance to Catholicism like his life depends on it. I suppose he believes it does. Every week, my mother never gave up. She fought in that battle with her three little children and valiantly won each time, as she dragged her tear-soaked kids through the wooden chapel doors.

I remember that, before leaving the car, I would stare intently at the place I had just been sitting, my eyes tracing the stitching of the fabric seat of my mom's minivan. I'd stare and stare, praying to the very God I was supposed to be worshipping for my speedy return. *I can't wait until the next time I'm sitting here; please, oh please let it come quickly.* It never did.

Before Mass, there was CCD. CCD is an acronym for the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, which is just Sunday school for Catholics. Jackie Capote was the director of our Sunday morning classes and would hand out a Tupperware of Pillsbury cookies at the end of each class. The cookies always had designs on them, and the best ones came during Halloween: little ghosts outlined in

purple or highly saturated jack-o-lanterns. The cookies were my favorite part; despite being a straight-A student in school, I had no desire to learn anything at CCD. Once, when assigned to rank the things in our life that were most important to us, this was my list, in order of importance:

One: My dogs. Two: My friends. Three: My stuffed animal, Sandy. Four: My swim team. Five: My family. Six: My house. Seven: My classes at school. Eight: God. My CCD teacher that year was a sweet old man who didn't know what to do with such a list; all I received in response was a tight smile and a nod.

I would always wear a dress to CCD and Church. There was usually some sort of floral pattern on it, and it could usually be described as an oversized, long-sleeved t-shirt. It goes without saying: the dresses were always hideous. One Sunday, I decided to wear a grey one with a sort of buckle design on it. My best friend, Caitlin, told me the colors and design made me look like a mouse. She made fun of me for it once we got back to school and didn't let me forget about it for the rest of the year.

At CCD, we'd prepare ourselves for the day we could finally take communion by practicing the ritual of receiving the Body of Christ with Cheerios. We'd all line up in a procession and walk down the imaginary aisle to receive a piece of cereal before bowing, saying amen, and making the sign of the cross. After numerous repeats, we were finally ready. On a May day at the age of eight, I joined the real procession while wearing a miniature wedding dress and veil. That morning, as I had prepared my American Girl Doll, Julie, in her own white dress, her leg fell off. The

pictures from that day show me standing in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary, holding up the recently amputated Julie and smiling in our matching dresses.

A few years after I received my first communion, the old church was torn down and replaced by a larger, less charming version. In this new, cold, modern building, I was greeted by Jackie handing out pro-life pins to the children, some as young as five, during one Sunday morning's CCD session.

During the inaugural Mass at the new church, the fire alarm went off when the incense was burned. The smoke is supposed to symbolize the burning zeal of faith. My aunt and I struggled to hold in our laughter as the alarm rang for the rest of the ceremony.

I was always told Jesus was everywhere, but I didn't know how to conceptualize this. He was at once God and the Son of God and also the Holy Spirit and how do you imagine the essence of three things being one at such a young age? I couldn't. So I asked questions. How and why and *what?* Nothing made sense. I was told he was in the air, in my bed, in the shower with me. I was scared.

Even though he was everywhere, I didn't know how to reach him. I wrote letters on pieces of paper and stuck them in the trees. I'd always check a few hours later and they were always gone. He must've taken them.

Heaven was supposed to be comforting. *You're free of your bodily form and you have no fears and God is with you!* But I didn't like the idea of being bodiless with a foreboding white-bearded man. *Your soul will be liberated!* But I wasn't sure if I had a soul. How does a child conceptualize a soul? I tried to picture

it and landed on an image from *The Little Mermaid*. I imagined heaven was filled with people with no bodies, just souls that looked like the little shriveled-up merpeople that littered the floor of Ursula's lair. Other times, I imagined clams with little wings and sad eyes.

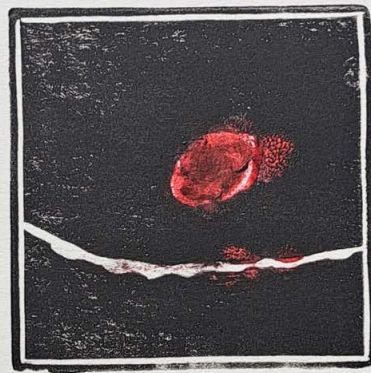
When I was older, after I left the church, Jackie Capote saw my mom in a grocery store. After shaming her for letting her daughter drift from God, she gave her a book on God's undeniable presence in the universe to hand over to me. Little did she know, I was long past the point of drifting.

Before I imagined heaven, before I left the Church, before I questioned God, before I even prophesied dying in the waves off Cape Cod, I stood up on a church pew during Mass and yelled:

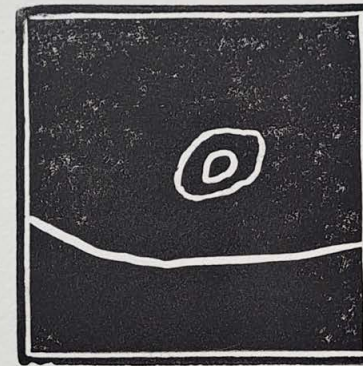
"If God really loved me, he wouldn't want me to be bored!"

I was young. It was cute. Everyone chuckled. The priest resumed Sunday Mass.

AM I SUPPOSED TO FEEL THIS HAPPY?
ROCKY SHULER



"Am I Supposed To Feel This Happy?" 5/6 Rocky Shuler



"Am I Supposed To Feel This Happy?" 6/6 Rocky Shuler

YOUTH
KAAMYA KRISHNAN



LIVING BREATHING CITY
LINDSEY DAHMS-NOLAN

what is a prologue?
a prologue is a beginning
of sorts,
a beginning that precedes the beginning of
what will follow.
 this verse is a prologue
 to the next verse
 and so the next verse is
 a prologue
 and so on . . .
 [etc.]

Prologue is the beginning of a beginning;
sketches of beginning
a taste
 /bite/
 /morsel/
 of beginning
so,
 come
 little bird
to my hands
 and
from my lips
 taste
 /lick/
 /bite/
 /devour/
 the prologue!

ah, but this was the prologue.
 the prologue
 has passed
 is passing
 passes
 pass
 / as in a train /
 / like the one that goes by my apartment /
 / in the early hours of the morning /
 / a prologue to morning /
 / i've passed so many /
 / mornings like that /
 / listening for the train /

ah, but i'm getting
 ahead of
 myself—
 let's just get back to
 our
 beginning, of sorts,
 the
 prologue,
 perhaps,
 it's less of a beginning and
 more of a cosmos
 unto its own
 with its own
 rules,
 as such.

 i'm a stickler for rules.
 i believe that everything
 has
 rules
 and that those rules must be
 followed.

the prologue has rules
 the city has rules
 the art has rules
 the train has
 rules
 and if you think about it they're
 all alike.

for me, the art is,
 / should be /
 like a train,
 repeating
 over and over

 cycling, always
 passing
 but never quite the same;
 always
 moving
 toward a
 destination

 but never quite
 reaching
 always cycling back
 over itself
 tracing itself
 seeking its own
 origins,
 making,
 unmaking,
 itself.

for me the art is

/longs to be/

a city

and city is

/longs to be/

something

like a soul

or a breast,

something

enduring

not quite like an Idea;

something

more like an

impulse.

as in,

as

in,

for instance:

i made you a painting i didn't prime the canvas it's not actually a canvas just
some scrap fabric i found but i don't want you to think of it as scrap
in a way it was my greatest treasure.

FEZ, MOROCCO, 2025 CHELSEA THORPE



MUDPUDDLE

MACY YOUNG

Sylvia Jean Leach—Sybi, they called her, for short. At least until she decided she could no longer stand it. *Sylvia*. How pretentious—not to mention that God-awful nickname, like swallowing your own tongue.

It was over the nice china set that it was decided. Sunday dinner on little pink flowers with gold stems. “Well, if it’s so bad, wouldn’t you rather be called Mudpuddle?” This was my grandmother, age fourteen.

And so it came to be. Mudpuddle—Mud, they called her, for short.

She had our eyes, my grandmother’s, my mother’s, and mine. Brown-eyed girls, my great-grandfather called us. A semi-professional hockey player with a lopsided grin and good hands. Mudpuddle loved him more than just about anything.

“She was just Mom,” said my great uncle. Canned rhubarb and pickled green tomatoes. Quince jam and roast beef with apple jelly. Sent to finishing school and forbidden from going to college, my great-grandmother became *just Mom*. A good woman waiting at the window with wild horses for eyes.

1949. The polio outbreak. They bought two acres of land and moved my grandmother

and her brother to the end of the earth: a secluded peninsula in Orleans, Cape Cod.

My great-grandfather built the old wooden house by hand. One room and no electricity back then. A well with a hand pump and twenty-five-pound blocks of ice hauled from town for the ice box. A fire pit in the sand for cooking—one on each side of the peninsula, chosen according to the wind.

It was Mud who named the house “Whimbrel,” after the long-beaked birds that scoured the salt marshes for fiddler crabs every summer, littering speckled feathers amidst the purple lovegrass and bitter saltwort.

The kids slept in the loft and dug for Quahogs in the soft silt of the Millpond. My grandmother’s footprints still stain the ceiling boards in the main room.

Cooking, canning, pruning, mending. Mudpuddle’s wool crewelwork and tole painted trays still decorate the wooden house. Red petals and golden leaves against black tin. And birds, always birds.

“I can’t say if she was happy.” My grandmother, age 87.

I am reminded of the plucked chickens hanging beneath the lurid yellow lights of the

deli window. Angels in soy sauce. Clipped wings and bitten tongues. Brown-eyed girls, daughters of the sky.

The marshes of the Cape are drowning and we haven’t seen a whimbrel for years now.

But, let me tell you. Sometimes—now—I might startle the mirror with the curve of her brow, the cavity of her chest. I might cross the room in a white dress, hands turning red with August, and know that I am haunting her footsteps.

I might flinch when I see the moon and find her reflection in the puddle at my feet.

Mudpuddle. Just Mud, for short.

BUT I THINK I'D DIE IF YOU'D LET ME **PAIGE NEGRETTE**

What do spiders do: they shoot their web
beautiful, strong, and delicate hoping to wrap me up

in their own scent, suffocate me and save me
for later. We force the hand of déjà vu,

situating ourselves in the same environment,
every time we meet again:

I pour myself a sweet mix of tequila and water
and like a fruit fly sniffing out the nectar,

you float up close and drink me up;
Remember, this is a catch-release relationship.

Let the poor thing go! Then, we tumble
through friends at the bar, waiting to catch

each other again. The future is what I latch onto
when you tell me, "We talk different,"

as if we were the first humans to communicate
through vibrations. Most of our conversations

collect dust in my memory but I keep alive
the warmth of your skin, that's where my brain nests.

Now all I remember are the tangles
and I would like to stay.

PARKER **TESSA BELLE DILLMAN**



THE SPARK OF LIFE (PART TWO)

PERFECT SOTO

I found my life in its reflection,
that tiny glimmering spark,
soundly beating back the world of dark
locked within my father's eyes.
Bound tightly by his trials
miles stretched and marred by
bloody footprints and dried tears,
targeted by wraiths as stars fled in fear.
A son's fear warping the idea of gallows
and donning a cloak of hollow's sleep,
headless and seeking sheep
while abhorring the very concrete that paved me.
I attempted to flee the memory of sanity
the pane laid plain to redeem,
but twilight bough's strange fruit speaks loudly
in spaces where light decays.
I'd hoped to attain peace upon
the tethered-souls' tree,
where sneakers swung high
like a warning sign upon its silent limbs.
Still, upwards I climbed,
as sirens braided themselves into a welcoming lullaby,
but when I glanced up I spied
two ghosts dancing gaily upon the telephone line.

It was the first in a long time
that anyone had been happy to see me.
So, I reached,
and a quiet voice buried deeply in my soul
began to cry.
The inky darkness lied,
beaconed lovingly,
promising me anything,
everything imaginable and even things not.
But that spark ignited,
expanded,
almost enraged
until it was all-consuming and
thoroughly blighted the night.
Blinded by the light's purity
I saw nothing
but felt its warmth enveloping me,
cradling me
a newly born babe
blessed by the heavens.
And when I opened my eyes,
I found myself staring up into my mother's loving face,
life's one true haven.

BEFORE YOU CLAIM YOUR DAUGHTER DEAD

EIJI KIM

Mom,

I'm writing to you because the words backed up in my throat possess no sound. I'm writing to you because these words exist outside of my abilities to speak. I'm writing to you because this language of ink is the only one that's rooted fluently in my brain.

I'm writing to tell you that I'm still me.

You once told me about a conversation you had with a friend whose child was in the midst of transitioning:

"I can't imagine what she's going through. It's like her daughter has died, she told me she mourns her daughter now that she's . . . he's her son."

I remember distinctly the passion that accented these words, the sympathy you had for your friend. I remember, too, my unspoken thoughts after these comments and, although I was far from beginning my own gender-affirming journey, I could not fathom why your sympathy laid more with his mother than with him. And I cannot help but feel your grief as you mourn the loss of your own daughter these many years later.

But Mom, I'm still me. My name has changed but you can still call for me. My voice

has changed but I will still answer. I have changed but I am still your child.

Do not mourn me, for I am here.

Mom, you will never understand. And I will never ask you to. But before you claim your daughter dead, see me as I am. See my pain as I exist in a body too tight, a suit of flesh tailored to my bones and not my soul. Before you claim your daughter dead, feel me as I am. Feel my arms that reach around your own body, content in its form, my arms warm and reaching. Before you claim your daughter dead, hear me as I am. Hear my voice changed by hormones I once possessed too little of, the voice that still says, "I love you."

Mom, you will never understand and I will never ask you to. But I see my people dying. I see my people suffering. Because they have been claimed dead before they have begun to live. I may not be your daughter—not the one you dressed as Dorothy for Halloween, not the one whose hair you braided, but for all that I am not her, she will forever be me.

I may not be your daughter, because I am your son.

Let me be me. Do not rush to mourn me living.

LIGHT AS IT BLEEDS

HASEEB HAIDER

A wide coast of foam,
holds the frogs along
with the tadpoles of
the rivers of the
intertwining sea.

A gilded shoreline,
glittery succor
to the blinder whims
of coming sunset;
watch light as it bleeds.

I tasted sunrise,
bitterness, before
the gentle sweetness
of declining days
flushed my tainted tongue.

Riverpath of light
paves way to the sun,
but frailty fails me,
corporeal flaw
of weight on water.

Tadpoles are now frogs,
croaking as I choke—
head underwater—
held down by light's force
as lungs bleed water.

THE KINGDOM WE MADE
BOONE, HUNTINGBURG, INDIANA, 2025
HUNTER MATHEWS



THE KINGDOM WE MADE
HENRY, HUNTINGBURG, INDIANA, 2025
HUNTER MATHEWS



岛屿城市 ISLAND CITY HANNI WANG

今天台风又要来了。

台风是晚霞的哨兵 —
一半是鸡尾酒杯底的余烬，
一半是海浪锤打的轰鸣。
它守在天边，
忘记自己曾是夏日的微风。

一个烈日当空的午后我在路上碰见她
我把湿热拎起，像晾一杯开水，
烫嘴的心思和无措
全拥堵在嘴里，
稍一心急，
便零零散散地沿唇边掉落，
在地上摔碎成细小的回声，
像白浪里破裂的气泡 —
欲言又止，
被礁石和沙粒反复吞没。

还有天家里送来了一条濒死的石斑鱼。
我太过于熟悉餐盘上的白肉。
第一次俯听，
黏滑的鱼鳞上残碎的起伏仍在喘息。
指尖大小的心脏
打动比这城市古老的暗号。
光线在水面抖动，
像一句没能说出口的话，
脆弱得无法抵达。

头顶的流云对我说：
“夏天要结束了。”

Another typhoon is coming today.

A typhoon is the watchman of sunset—
half embers lingering at the bottom of a cocktail glass,
half the thunderous roar of waves pounding the shore.
It keeps watch at the horizon,
forgetting it was once a summer breeze.

One scorching afternoon, I ran into her on the street.
I lifted the humid heat like a cup of boiling water left out to cool;
the burning thoughts and helplessness
all clogged in my mouth.
The slightest impatience
sent them scattering along my lips,
shattering into tiny echoes
like bubbles bursting in the white tides—
words on the verge,
swallowed again and again by rock and sand.

Another day, a dying grouper was delivered to our home.
I know the white flesh on a served plate too well.
But the first time I listened,
the fragmented undulations still gasped
on its slick, bronze scales.
A heart the size of a fingertip
beat a signal older than this city.
Light trembled on the water's surface,
like a word left unsaid,
too fragile to reach anywhere.

“Summer is ending,”
a drifting cloud above said to me.

LISTENING JACK SLOAN

Rain doesn't make sense in the suburbs—everyone knows that throwing water out to the street drains is just wasteful, especially when we're in a drought. Don't you know, cloud, that water runs from faucets and spouts? And that we have sunny things planned? The trees and the flowers are content with their sprinklers; all you seem to do is drown them. Planes are grounded, people die driving, and mud is tracked in the house, so be gone!

But you demanded to be heard. The percussion of rain and wind on soaked shingles. Heavy eyelids blinking with the hypnotic swish of windshield wipers and the loud, hot breath of the car. Puddles that tripped and fell off of high curbs—always gilded with the kaleidoscope of petroleum. The wild, wistful cacophony of indoor lunch. The snuffles of noses and the zipping and sliding of plastic raincoats. A bruised flash and then a bored, "one Mississippi, two Mississippi," until the rumble of thunder floated over me like someone had cracked the world's biggest glowstick.

When I moved up the hill, only then would I wonder: Where is the storm? Lightning is not merely the bolt, but the flash too, and so a storm does not end at the bounds of its cloud.

And I would hear your voice in the soft drumbeat of deer hooves pushing into dark mollisol, and in the embrace of the motherly shushing of curving streams. Crouched on the road side, I would hear wild lettuce softly break in my palm. Mushrooms jumped silently out of the soil to embrace you, only to squelch under my curious steps. I would push hot, slow air out of my nose like a dragon and watch it vanish into green walls of rustling pine needles as they drank the fog.

I would gorge myself on the polyphonic fruit of the storm tree.

And now, up the hill, I wonder: Where is the storm? Each hiatus feels longer than the last, and the soft footfall into damp loam so quickly becomes the harsh crunch of dried twigs and poison oak leaves. Petricore becomes sharp, acrid air. At the beating of helicopter blades, I'll snap my neck upwards and pray that it's not red. Because the way that the stiff, brown blades of grass shudder in the wind tells me that I should know how to say goodbye fast.

Can't you hear? There are so many seeds under the soil, listening.

BOY FROM MY BLOCK JADA IMMANUEL

Brownstones, brown skin, redbrick,
Pushing waves of heat into the sidewalk,
Pushing extra chalk off hopscotch and
Rustling tassel handles of bicycles that litter the road, wet
With water that bursts from a broken fire hydrant
Silly screams for ice cream reverberate—red
White and blue was his popsicle, every lick progressed
His pink lips to purple. I let my giggle reach the sky and
He laughs. His smile's so wide I lose the block, I know
It's wrong but I won't let this boy go to Jupiter. I tug his white tee,
Begging to be seen as if his eyes weren't so dark I already saw
Myself cartwheel and backflip in their reflection,
But he's distracted by the sing-song truck,
In a way my bobbles can't shake

WITHIN THESE WALLS CURTIS MAYS

The institutional gray is not just a color; it is a weight, a constant oppressive hum against the spirit. Within these walls, I have borne witness to the full spectrum of human brokenness—the swift, blinding violence born of desperation, and the silent, prolonged death of hope, culminating in the unseen tragedy of suicide. I am a man who walked into this life carrying the historical weight of my ancestors, only to have it compounded by the modern machinery of mass incarceration, a system that often feels designed to contain a demographic more than a crime.

But the greatest injustice is not the loss of physical freedom; it is the threat to the soul's capacity for growth. For years, I allowed the environment to dictate my worth. But then, I chose a different path—a reclamation. I began to mine the darkness I had seen and survived, transforming it into a source of light. I traded aggression for introspection, and idle time for

focused study. I began to see the threads that connect my individual pain to the larger, systemic issues of racism and inequality that permeate our society.

My purpose now is to be an active, living contradiction to the narrative that binds us. I speak out, knowing that my current address does not silence my truth. I strive to communicate with an elegance and tact that demands respect, not pity, using my story—the scars, the failures, the hard-won maturity—as a blueprint for change. My voice is for the young man or woman struggling with despair, for the legislator comfortable with the status quo, and for the families waiting at home. My existence here is not an end, but a difficult ongoing chapter dedicated to awareness. I continue to grow, proving that a man can find his voice, his integrity, and his deepest self, even when the world has tried its very worst to bury him.

UNTITLED MILES ELLISOR



UNTITLED
ZENYA BINDRA



WITHIN ME
CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON

Within myself, I find darkness.
I look deep into the empty space of my mind, body, and soul.
Hoping for something to come out better than what used to manifest itself.
Hope is lost, freedom is gone, my mind is breaking down, having crazy thoughts.
Thoughts of ending the misery and pain of losing everything that matters to me.
But something, or someone, has called to me to reconsider taking the easy way out.
Fighting my mental demons, I put all of my insides back into this body of guilt and hurt, after having torn it out from grief and shameless acts.
Acts of violence that have ruined my life and other lives, but how do I fix all the destruction that has caused tears and death?
Falling to my knees, hoping that a higher power can help my transformation from bad to good.
But at the same time, evil acts wait for me to join their annihilation of the human race through crime and violence.
Fighting against these evils, I must stay the course of righteousness and redemption.
I must pick up the pieces of life that were shattered into hurt and sadness, distributed by my hands and actions.
Now hoping for a different outcome in life, eyes and mind open wide, waiting to receive the bounties of glory.
Water of joy falling from one's eyes is the release of my pain and suffering, transcending me into a new form of human being.
Will the outcome be accepted by those who pass judgment on me?
Those who claim they want better for you, but will turn a blind eye to anything you do that is good?
Where does the broken soul go after so much punishment and mental abuse has damn near destroyed you?
Angry, Frustrated, Mad.
Emotionally scarred by a history of abuse and terror.
Feeling less than a man, stolen and brought to a foreign land.
Brought and sold, young and old.
A very harsh trip, behavior controlled at the crack of the whip.
Leaving scars of bloody lines against the black flesh.
Hands held high praying to the sky, asking God, *Why? Why? Why?*

Tears of pain dropping to the earth,
he has been going through this since birth.
Cries and screams of freedom, from the mouth of the mistreated.
Oppression wanting to escape from the bondage of depression.
Psychology comprises our history that affects our daily lives.
Cursed by our black skin, always looked at as the enemy,
why can't you look at the enter me—
a beautiful human being worthy of a life of joy and happiness?
So, what's the confusion within?
Maybe because of the way the world is today, this is a distant illusion.
Smoking mirrors, endless clouds of distant dreams,
knowing that, everything in life is not what it seems,
they are still killing our dreams.
And you ask me why am I angry?
What the hell, can't you tell?
My race is being erased at a slow pace,
but you don't see it and it's right in front of your face.
Shaking my head, not knowing the answers to my own destiny.
Therefore, I keep all my thoughts within myself.
Not knowing how to deal with these questionable acts,
I keep them hidden within . . .

SATURN CITY MACY YOUNG

Sunday, February 2, 1986: “Dreams of Space are Clear Lake’s Reason for Being.” A clipped article from the *Houston Chronicle* in Mom’s high school scrapbook.

Clear Lake. An idyllic picture of southern suburbia with the neat lawns and shiny cars. Except everyone’s dad was an engineer or a scientist, and you shared a Sunday pew with astronauts. Orbital mechanics at the dinner table and American flags on the front porch.

Space City. Saturn City. The Gemini Area. A town built to feed the Johnson Space Center. Running the numbers again and again until they added up to flying men—Clear Lake was a town built to feed the sky.

NASA was second only to God. When the other grade school children would ask, “What are you?” you knew they meant Southern Baptist or Evangelical Protestant; everyone was white anyway.

My grandparents didn’t go to church, of course. And when my mom brought up the issue of the relentless questions of “What are you?”, my Grandpa Bob looked up from his papers, red pen suspended mid-stroke to nudge his aviator eyeglasses further up his nose. “Non-denominational Christian,” was the answer.

He couldn’t suppress his laughter the first time he heard my mom, seven years old at

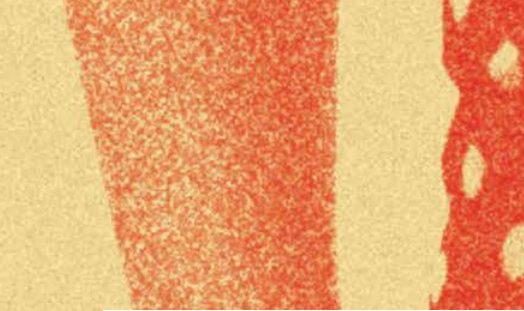
the time, tell someone she was a “non-denim-nation-al” Christian.

My grandma didn’t have the big eighties hair that the other moms did, and she was rarely ever all done up like the rest of them. My grandpa would ride his bike to the University of Houston-Clear Lake every morning, even though they had a car. A chemistry professor on a rusty road bike, with a kid’s seat rigged up on the back to hold his briefcase.

“We always had an old car,” Mom says. First, it was an old VW Wagon, then the 1965 Cadillac with electric windows. Light blue with bench seats so wide they could fit four people across, even in the front. My uncle called it “The Bed.”

Fall 1985. Mom’s senior year at Clear Lake High School on Escuela Way (ironic, since the only time you saw Latinos in Clear Lake was behind the lawnmower or the vacuum.) Fluffy bangs and long hair, feathered on both sides down the front. My mom made the dance team that year. The Clear Lake Flares were on the sidelines of every football game—high kicks and white cowboy boots, red arm cuffs and leather fringe.

They got a new principal that year, too. The old one was scrawny with big glasses, and a baby blue tuxedo that he wore for prom with



a ruffled undershirt. The new guy was big and mean. He wore a cowboy hat and a pistol on his right hip. He had metal detectors installed at the school entrance and brought the drug dogs around to sniff out rich kid cocaine.

That was also the year that Clear Lake made headlines. First, it was the kids. Seven of them in two months, all suicides. Friends of friends of my mom. It was a big school, but not big enough.

There was a fancy *New York Times* reporter and a team of on-site psychologists hired by the deputy superintendent—Mr. “No Comment at This Time.” There were the back-to-back funerals and the back-of-the-closet black dress that hadn’t been worn since the freshman year chorus concert. There were empty hallways and library shrines. Candles and condolences.

The headlines: “Trouble in Paradise.” Clear Lake was the “ideal” town. “Perfect,” they said. Maybe that was just it.

Then, January 28. The Challenger exploded seventy-three seconds after take-off, and the kids were yesterday’s news. My mom watched on live television, next to the children of the astronauts. A big box TV with rabbit-ear antennae, wheeled out on a cart in the middle of the school cafeteria.

Seven crew members, all of them heroes. *A disaster*. A national tragedy. There were caskets draped with American flags and T-38 Talon jets overhead in Missing Man formation. There was the Address to the Nation and the Arlington Cemetery tombstone, international press coverage and the president flown out for the memorial service.

Clear Lake was hit the hardest. Saturn City, smashed out of orbit. Aimless engineers and Frenchies Italian Restaurant empty on a Saturday night. Dreams of space shattered, Clear Lake was without a reason for being, it seemed.

My mom watched Reagan on TV in the living room. Seven polished wooden caskets. “We will never forget them,” he said. The heroes that “slipped the surly bonds of earth” to “touch the face of God.” And for a second, she pictured seven heroes in navy blue graduation gowns.

But it couldn’t be. Clear Lake was already too far gone, of course. Too busy building a sky worth living for.

FLEA JUSTIN DEMMITT

Blue veins hiding their
plumpness, I believe
this is all I’ll ever be:

A boy under his garments,
wearing dirt like a coat.
Brown gums do not get clean;

They relapse to bleed.
Skin crawl upon me.
Slip off my underwear,

Wrung out from chlorine.
I show up underdressed,
so he bites me like a flea.

If only I were a little less facetious,
I grit my teeth at the thought
that he would have married me.

I shove my head into a cigar cutter,
push, and blow off some steam.
I dance through the streets,

I discard my thoughts, I’m hungry
for something else. I could not
germinate these seeds.

PAX VOBISCUM
LUCY ELENA SANCHEZ CRUZ



MY MIRROR IS BROKEN
KATHARINE FRANK

Fumbling hands make
desperate attempt,
claw at fragmented shards
of broken glass
will them to piece together
scream prayers into night.

Please let them align

but I am thinking not of myself,
but rather the image I wish you to see,
so my voice echoes back.

I do not notice my tightening of grasp
but blood seeps from my fingertips,
snakes around my body
tightening
until vision strains
until my focus narrows on
what lays before me:
a warped reflection,
a sliced face,
distorted eyes,
contorted cheeks.

I cannot tell you what it is that I see
but it is much more you
and much less me.

Fumbling hands make
desperate attempt,
claw at fragmented shards
of broken glass
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but I am thinking not of myself,
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I cannot tell you what it is that I see
but it is much more you
and much less me.

STILL I RISE CURTIS MAYS

The razor wire holds the sky, a fractured canvas where the years run dry.
I entered the system young,
A shadow, Black and Bold, a story half-begun,
Forever to be told by cinder blocks and cells, by silence deafening and vast,
Where hope itself is sometimes shattered glass.
I have seen the worst of man . . . the sudden flash of violence,
And the quiet despair that claims a soul alone.
I have felt the acid sting of bias, sharp and cold,
A narrative of self that others dare unfold, defining me by chain, by color, and by cage . . .
Ignoring the turning of the heart's internal page.
The numbers climb, a cruel and tidal flow,
Mass incarceration that makes the spirit slow.
And yet, I, darkness, a single light appeared, a whispered truth my weary spirit feared,
That I could choose to grow beyond these walls, to answer not the hate, but heed a higher call.
My skin carries history, my voice now carries weight,
A vessel forged by fire, escaping a locked fate.
I study the law that once condemned my name, and I learn the language of the justice I reclaim.
I seek the root of sorrow, the fracture and the rift,
And offer empathy, a hard-won, sacred gift.
I am the stone the river tried to wear, now polished smooth by grace, and lifted into the air.
I speak for those whose echoes never reached,
And the quiet ones who yearn for the lessons I teach.
Let my deep-rooted pain become the seed of grace,
A testament to change in this unyielding place.
Look close world . . . and see a man transformed, renewed, a diamond forged by pressure,
A spirit now infused with purpose.
I still grow. I still become.
My freedom is my voice, until the final drum.

MY PROFESSOR WINKS AT ME CHRISTIAN DEBELLIS

and says we make language to make sense
of what we do and do not know natural language

commits syntax i turn my back words pull lines
like silk over my head McKayla knows

that the trees cannot handle the time between Nov–
Dec–Jan–Feb she teaches me about folklore,

old saints and the things that make her mind stronger
pollution slants the mouth with speech

some conclusions must happen after
language and winter eyes rolling

backward for warmth an accidental encounter
the sewing machine pierces through my umbrella

THE BEST FUNERAL I'VE EVER BEEN TO

CECELIA DYSON

In a Baptist church in Southern Virginia,
I heard laughter mixed with the smell
of sweet potatoes
and I watched my aunts sway
their feet to Reggae music,
moving to metal percussion
and Bob Marley harmonies
and “Is this love,
is this love,
is this love—
Is this love that I’m feeling?”

My cousins were making plates
of food for other cousins
and Uncle Rob was singing
to the family’s newest baby
crying in the corner.
The last time I’d been to a funeral
I was eight years old
and I had no idea who had died.
And now I stood at the center
of a celebration
thrown to honor a life
that was half of mine.

I was sitting at a table when
the caterers brought out
a second tray of cornbread
and I saw my brother had his face
buried in Jumaane’s chest.

I looked at apathetic eight-year-old me
and asked her if she knew
what death was,
what it felt like,
what it looked like,
and how to get over it.
When I got no answer
I stood up and walked over
to pile a plate high and refill
my cup with sweet tea.

I’ve heard some people say
that Baptists throw the best funerals.
I don’t know if that’s true,
but I’ve only been to one
and it made me cry the whole way through.

CONTRIBUTORS

CATALINA ADLER is concentrating in Art History and Marketing with a minor in studio art. Additionally, she is pursuing a pre-law track. She is currently studying abroad in Florence in the Gallatin Fashion Program, and is interning as a tour guide at the Basilica of Santa Maria Novella.

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KATHARINE FRANK is majoring in neuroscience and minoring in creative writing. She is a current sophomore and student athlete on the NYU women's cross country and track teams. Katharine enjoys writing poetry and prose, and believes that the connection between the sciences and the arts can help both to be understood at a deeper level.

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ROCKY SHULER is an artist and writer concentrating in Creation: the Arts and the Self, the Art of the Self. He is interested in notions of creativity, sentiment, tangibility, aesthetics, and transition, especially in relation to visual art, graphic design, and music. He is currently passionate about cheap linoleum cutters, cicadas, and collecting cardboard.

JACK SLOAN loves to explore, whether through writing, photography, conversation, or travel. He studies environmental studies, philosophy, and Spanish, often working through the intersection of these fields. He has been published in *Lonely Planet*, NYU's *Baedeker*, and NYU's *Washington Square News*. He also conducts research with NYU's All Animals Initiative as part of the NYC Urban Bird Project.

PERFECT SOTO is on the verge of completing his AA, and is steadily moving towards acquiring his Bachelor's in Applied Psychology. With eyes set upon a PhD, as well as using the written word to chase away the shadows of sadness with the light of love, Perfect seeks to live his life as a lantern, brightening the paths to liberation and happiness by being an example of both.

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