



# Thread Magazine

VOLUME XVII



”

The beautiful is always bizarre.

- Charles Baudelaire translating Edgar  
Allan Poe paraphrasing Francis Bacon

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# Table of Contents

florida is the most beautiful flat chested lady i've ever seen   Madison Blair   Poetry	6
Transparency   Olivia Nolan   Photography	7
Cơm Nha   Hạnh Quyên Trần Đình   Creative Nonfiction	8
Snowflakes   Isabella Rodriguez   Music	10
Teacher's Observation   Ethan Dabbs   Poetry	11
Dreams   Adrianna Marsiello   Poetry	11
Rough Road Ahead   Olivia Nolan   Photography	12
Salvation   Ivelina Kirilova   Poetry	13
Freytag's Pyramid for Undergrads   Ariana Matondo   Poetry	14
Colombian Beauty   Daniel Vallejo   Art	15
Restaurant Hidden in the Mountains   Daniel Vallejo   Art	16
Death by Bustelo   Ethan Dabbs   Poetry	18
Six Spotted Tiger Beetle   Iker Aranguren   Photography	18
The Hole   Marcelene Pilcher   Fiction	19
Harlow's Garmonbozia   Parker Guevarra   Art	24
Structure on the Verge of Collapse, Thorough Inspection Advised   Kyra Kalodimos   Poetry	26
Turmoil   Alejandra McGehee   Art	27
Pressure   Mya Beauvais   Photography	28

Mom's Lotion   Joanne Neston   Fiction	29
Eastern Lubber Grasshopper   Iker Aranguren   Photography	32
Ever the Gentleman   Jessi Eady   Poetry	34
Oregon   Jessi Eady   Poetry	35
Tomie   Sophia Montejo   Photography	36
yellow tiles   Carolina Gutfreund   Poetry	37
Contract Broken, Truths Now Spoken   Kyra Kalodimos   Poetry	38
Southern Black Racer   Jordan DePante   Photography	39
A Beautiful Day for the Pool   Sandra Little   Fiction	40
Idealized   Mya Beauvais   Photography	43
OPEN YOUR EYES   Victoria Mercado-Lues   Art	44
sucking on the old toothbrush you forgot to pack   Lars Murphy   Poetry	45
A is for Airforce   Lara Ulstad   Poetry	46
Painted Souls   Taylor Arnold   Fiction	47
God Told Me All Your Secrets   Victoria Mercado-Lues   Art	49
why I won't go to therapy   Jo Souvannarath   Creative Nonfiction	50
Give me a Call   Paloma Telfort   Music	53
Natural   Olivia Nolan   Photography	54
there's healing in the lonely   Madison Blair   Poetry	55

# florida is the most beautiful flat chested lady i've ever seen

Poetry by Madison Blair

she swirls citrus in a champagne  
glass, puts it to her bottom lip.  
she never lets the taste  
touch her tongue.

opening her arms to rainclouds, she  
lets lightning kiss the  
hinge of her forearm  
and rubs  
orange blossoms  
on her wrists  
as perfume;  
she calls it an invitation.

she holds our toes in soil, keeps us grounded  
in the roots of orange groves.

ankles deep in the sand,  
head under water to hide  
our scalps as her waves drift us like  
seaweed through saltwater. heat refracting,  
sun spots on our nose, arms, shoulder blades-

florida is the most beautiful flat chested lady  
i've ever seen. she drinks, and takes what she can.  
we should do the same.



# Transparency

Photography by Olivia Nolan

# Cơm nhà

Creative Nonfiction by Hạnh Quyên Trần Đình

I still remember the ambience and flavors, in each and every one of them.

Vivid, as if it all happened just yesterday.

1.

I was seven, just a kid. It was a summer day. In the kitchen, grandpa was cooking: ramen noodles it was. The kind that was salty, spicy, tangy and sweet, all at once. Not good for your health, but cooked in a minute; so good for a hungry stomach. Grandpa cracked an egg, sprinkled some sliced tomatoes and spring onions-- and a bowl of delicious, springy egg noodles came to life. He was trying to eat, but could not ignore me tiptoeing near the kitchen. Before I grew up and really got to know him, Grandpa was a scary tiger in my eyes. But even a scary tiger could not shy me away from the smell of instant ramen. The rich salty goodness -- heaven to a kid whose parents allowed only *cơm nhà*, for health reasons.

“Want a bite?” tiger grandpa asked. Not even a minute passed before the rabbit stole the chopsticks, stole a bite, stole the creamy shiny egg yolk, and a sip of broth. The rabbit was sent to heaven in just a minute, but remembered to come back a few more times to steal a few more bites from tiger grandpa.

2.

I was eleven, still a kid. It was a fall day. In the kitchen, daddy was cooking up a meal. It was an unfamiliar sight, he was never in the kitchen that much. A chef he was forced to become after mommy fell ill yesterday, and my friend came over to study. He re-heated mommy’s leftover spare ribs, the heavenly kind with the sticky, peppery caramel sauce, stir-fried day-old rice with garlic, and made a potato and chicken soup. It was quick, everything was simple, not exactly enough in variety to be considered standard *cơm nhà*, but close.

I scooped up some garlic fried rice and poured the sticky sauce over it. After not one, not two, but three bowls of rice, I drank up the delicious chicken soup. I did not forget to proudly glance at my friend, who was also having a wonderful meal. My eyes were saying, “Isn’t my dad a great cook?”

3.

I was sixteen, still a kid. It was a chilly winter day. In the kitchen, grandma was cooking up a storm of food. Crispy fried fish, garlic-fried morning glory, golden-looking braised chicken and steamy potato and carrot soup. More than enough for *cơm nhà*. “Eat lots, or you won’t have the energy to study well. You’ve been looking a bit too thin these days. Are you eating enough?”

All this wonderful food was sent down the stomach with a bed of soft, freshly cooked rice. The meal tasted even better in the cozy kitchen with uncle and aunt, niece and nephew. Not just *cơm*, but also *nhà*.

4.

I was seventeen, almost an adult. It was a nice and warm spring day. Brother left home for college, and finally came back after a while. Mommy was cooking up a feast. She is second-to-none in terms of *cơm nhà*. She is a great cook, but even when she is not, how can you not love the taste of home food you ate every day for eighteen years? She was also a speed lover. Not the type chasing down the streets in a Volkswagen, but the type chasing the time to juggle full-time work and two starving kids. Steamed pork, fried duck eggs, crispy tofu, fresh cucumbers and a warm veggie soup.

Mommy, daddy, brother, and I, all at the same table after a few longer-than-a-century months. This combination alone makes for the best *cơm*, because the whole *nhà* was present.

5.

I am nineteen, not an adult, but not a kid anymore. It is a nice summer day. I was just in the kitchen, cooking up some *cơm nhà* for myself. It is a make-shift, broke college student kind of meal. Cheap Walmart rice, fried eggs and a spinach soup, all Vietnamese style. My go-to when I miss home.

The food is cheap, and of course, cannot rival mommy's, grandma's or daddy's cooking. But I have learned to embrace this new reality of *cơm nhà* in America without family by my side. Sometimes I feel lonely, but just closing my eyes for a second brings back the warmth of *cơm nhà*, with the love and peace-infused ambience with my loved ones in Vietnam, and all my sadness is gone.

*Cơm nhà* was, and always will be, precious memories of pure happiness.



# Snowflakes

Music by Isabella Rodriguez

1

7

13

20

27

# Teacher's Observation

Poetry by Ethan Dabbs

Mirage of autumn fools  
children with crisp winds at dawn,  
shedding coats by noon

## Dreams

Poetry by Adrianna Marsiello

you are growing old  
my love,

once-black fur now snowcapped like mountains, moons  
of your eyes hidden  
behind clouds

and you sleep

ten

twelve

fourteen

hours

I hope when you dream it is  
of the most peaceful things.





## Rough Road Ahead

Photography by Olivia Nolan

# Salvation

Poetry by Ivelina Kirilova

Liliana told me as she dressed my hair  
that she learned to cut in Moldova.  
In the salon, at capacity with the  
languid “Ls” of some Slavics and  
crisp “Rs” of others, were women  
who wore my nose, bearing that sort of  
copper-gold on their necks and on rings,  
and those skirted frilly things I’ve seen in  
the salon’s Russian magazines. Red nails  
sweeping through strands and sweeping  
with brooms. “23 years,” Liliana mused.  
“I spent 23 years cutting hair in Moldova.”  
And when I spoke with the accents of  
my mother’s tongue, she closed her eyes.  
“A long time,” she said.  
The severed wisps of hair floating down  
by the bunches, leaving strands weightless.  
  
The Demographic Immigration Crisis of a head.  
  
But they had to go. Neither the climate nor  
conditions were suitable to house them.  
But if they were all to be snipped away?  
Like hairdressers in split-end nations.  
To Liliana then, my head would turn to  
for salvation.

# Freytag's Pyramid for Undergrads

Poetry by Ariana Matondo

Change is pain that brings good promises,  
or at least that's what they tell me,  
but as I lean against the linoleum floor  
cheek pressed against cold tile

Change is bleak and consequential.

Change is heartbreak that cannot be consoled  
or at least that's what it feels like.  
palms going weeks without holding another,  
the heart growing colder, and harder, and distant

Change is terrifying for the sedentary and isolated.

Change is grief, a death for someone still alive  
or at least versions of them passing, collapsing in the night.  
cells multiplying, bone synthesizing  
innocence shifting around like an itchy sweater, 'til none is left—

Change is holding a funeral for everyone I have ever met.

Change is mystery that takes time to appreciate,  
or at least to uncover, to discern, to interrogate,  
a new skin to fuse muscle and veins to the soul  
gauze and honey, filling gaps in a crescent shaped hole,

Change is necessary beauty.





## Colombian Beauty

Art by Daniel Vallejo



# Restaurant Hidden in the Mountains

Art by Daniel Vallejo









# Death by Bustelo

Poetry by Ethan Dabbs

My coffee cups are  
the number one choice for gnats  
to join Valhalla

Six Spotted Tiger Beetle  
Photography by Iker Aranguren



# The Hole

Fiction by Marcelene Pilcher

Murphy Berry was often sweaty, especially during Midway's hot asphalt summers. He was red-faced, short and lean, perched on the hot curb outside of Thirsty's bodega. He was watching Clam's (so-called for his distinct smell) wide back strain as he attempted to yank the long dry hose from the faded gas pump, which squeaked and groaned with each tug. His disheveled brown hair was matted with sweat like a damp dog.

Metal doorbells twinkled behind Murph. A stout boy emerged with a wave of crisp air conditioning following behind him. His t-shirt bore parallel stripes that belted his round belly.

"You got 'em, Ben?" Murph asked once the sliding doors had closed.

His friend nodded, his pink sausage fingers digging into the lower pockets of his torn-up cargo shorts. He revealed the stolen contraband: three hugs, barrel-shaped juices, neon and sweet in a plasticine, chemical way. Murph grinned, bearing yellow teeth and nodding.

"Whaddya say we drink 'em at The Hole?"

"Works for me." Ben responded, "Hey, Clam! We're goin' to The Hole!"

The Hole was Midway's neighborhood anomaly. It was exactly as described, a large hole in the dirt just outside their tattered neighborhood, about the size of a swimming pool and with no perceivable bottom. Older kids had told them about all the things they'd thrown down, how it was endless, and no one knew where it went.

Ben had once asked his mother, who had lived in Midway her whole life, how the hole had come to be there.

"Came with the place," she responded between drags of a Kool cigarette.

"Betcha it's a big snake hole. I seen 'em all the time, my dad used to show them to me. Betcha there's a giant snake down there hibernatin'." Ben said on the walk there.

Clam was visibly shaken at this. "Snakes can't get that big, can they, Murph?"

"Who knows," Murph said, wiping his sweaty palms on his white tank top.

The boys ducked deftly from backyards, over fences, and through tall grass. They came to a wire fence, one corner of which was peeled back long ago by boys long past. They crawled through on their knees, with Murph having to hold it back particularly far to accommodate Clam's freckled shoulders.



The clearing where the hole was contained was devoid of life, or even fertile soil. It was the only place in the inland town of Midway where you could find such a large breadth of sand. Murph and Ben approached the precipice of The Hole, staring into the face of the darkness, transfixed. Their gaze was broken by a stone flying between their heads and into the void.

They turned to see Clam staring into his shirt, which had become a basket for the rocks he'd picked from the ground. He stared for a moment with his uneven, deep-set eyes. He decidedly plucked another stone before rearing back his great big arm. The other two boys ducked as the rock hurtled past them.

"Dammit, Clam! Fuckin' stop!" Ben squealed.

"I'm aimin' at him!" Clam responded, pointing a heavy finger.

The two turn to look across the hole to see a boy they hadn't noticed before. He was small, the same size as Murph, with a shaved head that was too big for his body and roughly the shape of a dented golf ball. He looked up at them through his glasses, as if also noticing them for the first time.

"That's Ms. Kay's kid," Ben says.

Ms. Kay was the front desk lady at Midway Middle, where the boys attended. Ms. Kay had a particularly rough spot for Murph, since she'd caught him standing on top of his backpack to blow cigarette smoke out of the window in the boy's bathroom. Since then, he'd become the target of her random backpack checks and deadly glares from the office front desk.

Murph turned to Ben, mumbling in his ear, "Hey, watch this."

He turned on his heels to draw Clam out of his rock-picking.

"Hey Clam," he said in a staged whisper tone, "that kid over there told me sum'n I think you should hear."

Clam looked at him curiously, "What'd he say?"

Murph looked up at him with his best embodiment of innocence. "He called your mama a crackhead. Said he saw her hitting the pipe at the park."

Clam's eyes seemed to bug out of his head then, as they always would whenever someone mentioned his mother. Sure, his mom drank and smoked, and partied like she was still young. She liked to hang out in the biker bars, carrying on with truckers and the men who'd breeze through the town. People in Midway said she'd had Clam too young, and that's what made him the way he was. But Clam hated any mention of his mama, good or bad.

He locked eyes on Ms. Kay's son across the hole and moved at him like an animal, long stocky limbs barreling

in instinctual unison toward him. The smaller boy didn't seem to notice, occupying himself drawing shapes in the sand. Murph ran to get ahead of Clam and catch the show. Ben scurried behind.

"Hey, you! What's your name?!" Murph called out at the boy, who looked behind him, startled at the behemoth coming his way.

"J-James!" he called back.

"Well, this here's Clam," Murph said, up close to him now. "And you got him real riled up. I think you owe him an apology."

Clam shoved Murph out of the way, throwing one of his huge fists down at James, who dodged it with a yelp. This turned Clam's face bright red, and he took the boy in his great hands by an arm and a leg, hoisting him up over his head. James screamed, attempting to squirm out of the giant's vice grip.

Murph and Ben were stock-still as Clam began carrying the boy toward The Hole.

"Clam, no! Stop!" Ben cried.

"That's enough!" Murph screamed, chasing after him.

Clam reared back, swinging, and threw the younger boy like a discus. James flailed through the air, screaming with terror as he looked down and saw only the darkness of The Hole beneath him. His screams carried on for minutes, slowly fading out. There was never a thud.

Ben approached the edge of the hole and peered into the darkness. He and Murph looked at each other. Murph shoved his hands into his pockets to try to hide their shaking.

"I needa go home." He managed through a dry throat.

"But it's not even dark yet--"

"You needa go home too, Clam." Murph snapped. "And don't tell nobody what happened here. Or you'll be in big trouble." He turned to Ben. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," Ben mumbled, turning for home.

They both left and hurried to try and forget about the entire affair. Clam stayed behind, looking for more rocks.

Murph hardly spoke for the rest of the day. He didn't even touch the canned spaghetti his mother had prepared for him at the dinner table.

"What is it, Murphy? Not hungry?" she asked from their tiny linoleum kitchen.

“Guess not,” he responded half-heartedly, retreating to his bedroom.

He tried hopelessly to sleep but just rolled around in bed. He felt a sort of hollowness that scared him. That, and fear of going to jail like his father. He imagined himself on the other side of the table during their visits, his mother behind plexiglass, he in an orange jumpsuit.

Murphy achieved moments of rest that night, but nothing satisfying. He was already awake when his mother knocked on his door to get ready for school. He slid on some clean clothes and headed out to the school bus, not bothering to grab breakfast. He felt nauseous anyway.

Ben was waiting for him at the bus stop, standing separate from the other kids. He was obviously shaken, wringing his pudgy little hands. The moment he saw Murph he hurried up to him.

“Clam is missing,” Ben said.

“What?”

“He never went home last night. His mama was calling my house asking if I’d seen him.”

“What did you say?”

“I told her no.”

“Damn,” Murph mumbled.

“And another thing-” Ben said, pointing a shaky finger to the group of children waiting for the bus. Murphy looked over to see the back of someone’s bulbous head, roughly the shape of a dented golf ball. All the blood drained from Murphy’s face.

When the bus pulled up, Murphy got on directly behind James, following him all the way to the back of the bus to sit down next to him. Ben sat in the seat in front of them, turning around to peer over at Murph.

“What happened?” Murph whispered.

James turned to look at him and it sent a chill down Murphy’s spine. His eyes had dark rings beneath them and were completely devoid of any emotion or life.

“Nothing.” He responded in a hollow monotone.

“What’s in The Hole?” Ben asked, unable to help himself.

James turned to him, his wet eyes glassy and shallow, his pupils impossibly black. He said nothing. His silence

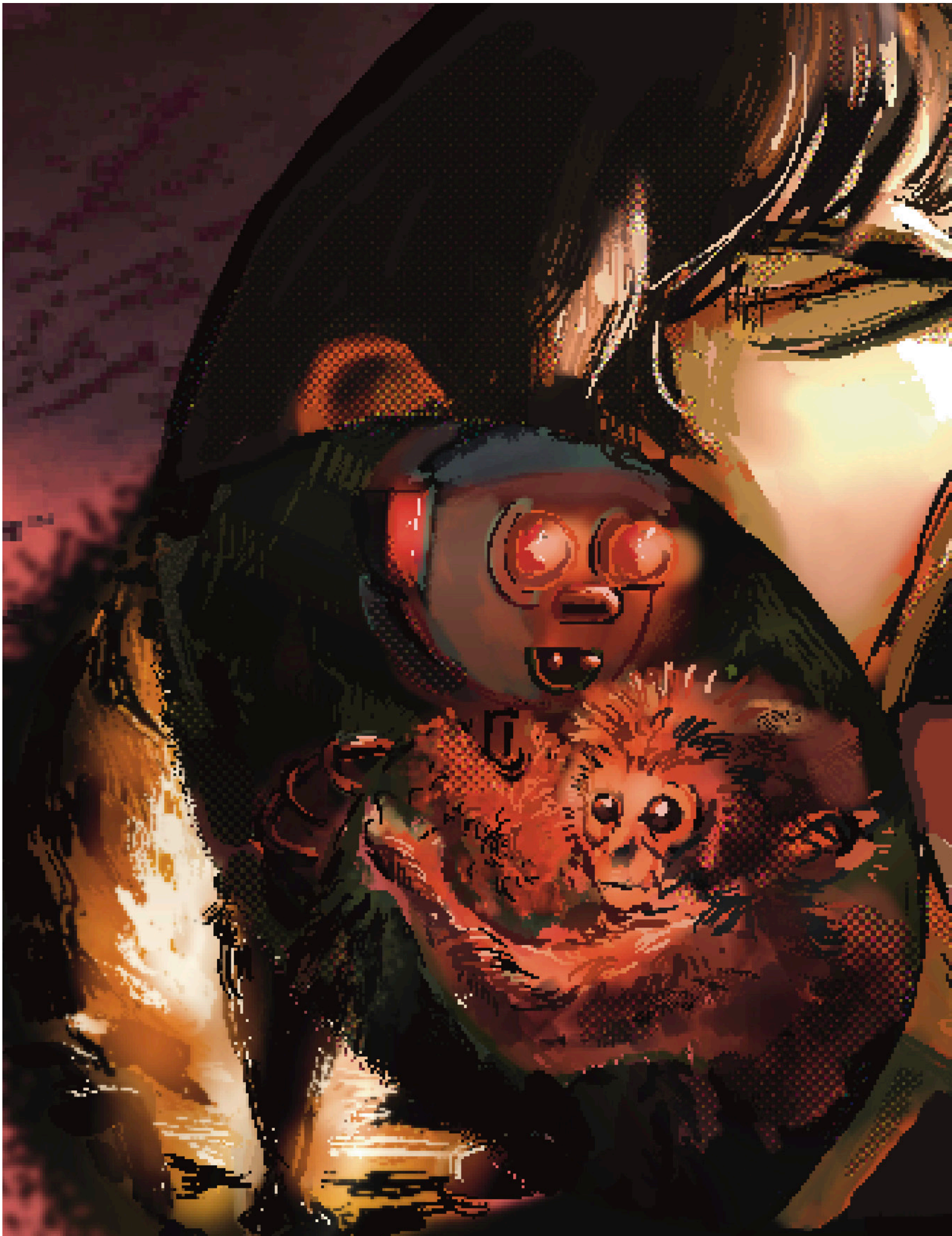
was its own answer: nothing. There was nothing down there. James fell for years in complete darkness. He went blind from it. James felt his limbs grow long and the hair grow back on his head. He had become a man.

After living a lifetime falling, mercilessly kept alive despite not eating or drinking, James was spat back up to the edge of the hole as if no time had passed at all. He heard Ben and Murph scrambling away from the fence, and as Clam bent down to pick up another stone, James pushed him in.

If James had ever spoken again, he would have said that he swore that as Clam's long, writhing limbs disappeared into the darkness, The Hole grew a few inches across.

Tired of James' dead stare, Murph slumped back in the bus seat, the plastic leather sticking to his skin. He felt dizzy. He felt like vomiting. He pressed his forehead to the seat in front of him and tried to go to sleep.







# Harlow's Garmonbozia

Art by Parker Guevarra



# Structure on the Verge of Collapse, Thorough Inspection Advised

Poetry by Kyra Kalodimos

The bones are swaddled within wraps of flesh; the body gives off heat.

Wafts of snickerdoodle batter crisping increase salivation.

The frame is fortified, formidable; the body can withstand a blow.

Landing the discus in the far distance increases esteem in oneself.

A mindless comment from the cousin at dinner, now. Cease intake, now.

As easy as that.

The bones swell and splinter; the body heaves up bile.

A grandmother bringing breakfast to the bedroom increases guilt.

Vertebrae decalcify; the body relinquishes its malleability to mental fervor.

Notices from family and insistence from friends increase vexation.

A scale, now. Worth dictated by numbers, now.

As easy as that.

The bones, Parthenon pillars, chip under macabre resolve; the body risks weightlessness.

Fuzz atop the skin, a film of frost, preserves the meat left, barely increasing longevity.

Angular innards poke outward, prodding flimsy tissue; the body cannot retain an ounce.

Black dots peppering perception cloak reality's actualities.

Waste, now. Dwindle, now.

Lose, now—win, then.

Arduous as it is to asphyxiate the instinctive plead for presence.

The bones are near depletion of marrow; the body rejects the discontented soul residing within.

A haggard heart skips, leaps, then thuds, increasing awareness of this mistake made daily.

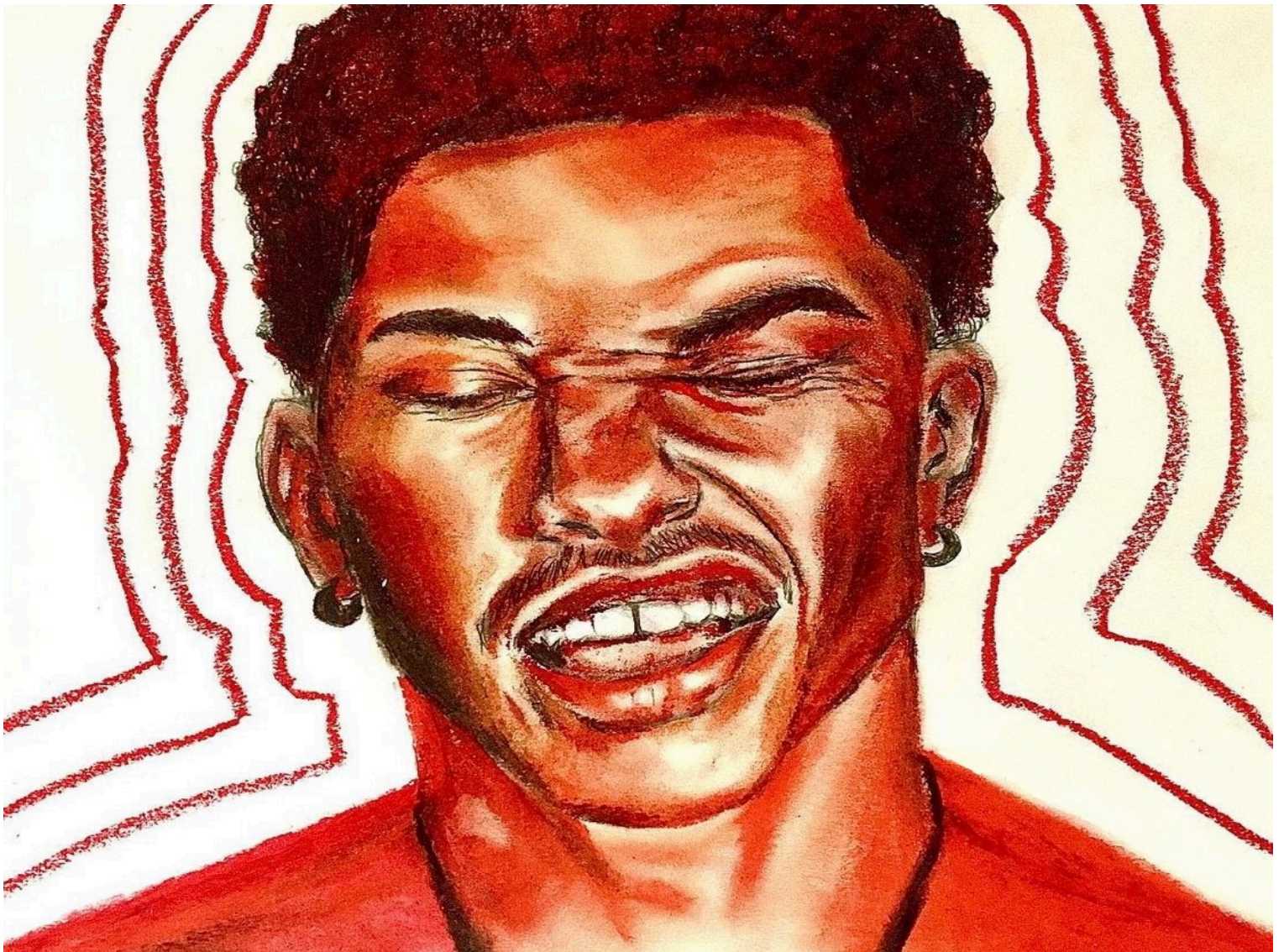
The bones shriek with a frigid shrillness; the body emits a low, passive groan.

I dissipate. I am responsible for dissolution. *Decline! Decrease! Cease to be—*

Please see, now. Please see the truth, now.



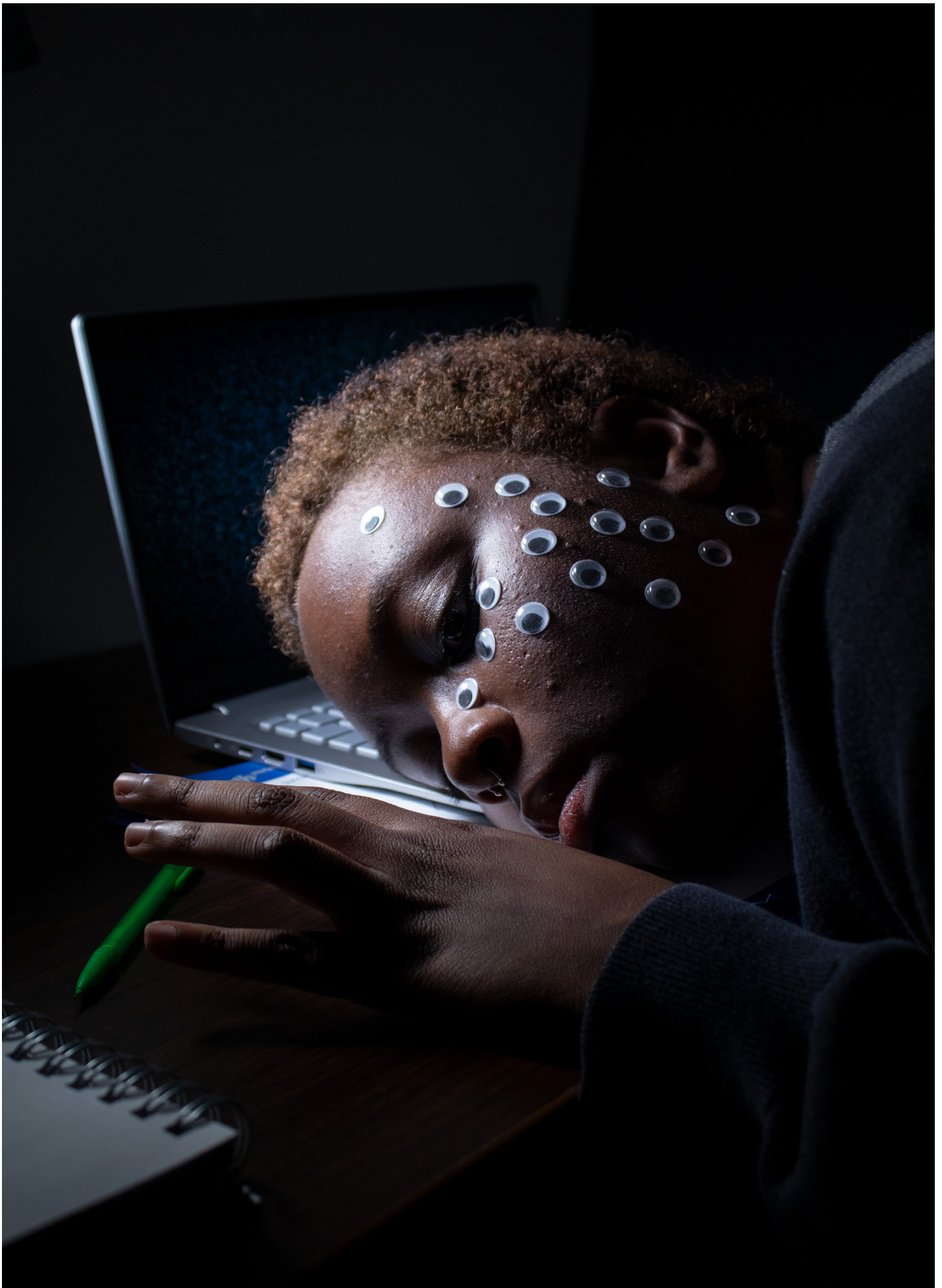
Please see the anguish in your grandmother's wept eyes and mouth ajar  
as you take off your tarp of a blouse in front of the mirror,  
per her instruction.  
Now, do you see?  
“What do, how do, when will you see,  
my little *mia*, that you are absolutely everything to me?”



## Turmoil

Art by Alejandra McGehee





# Pressure

Photography by Mya Beauvais

# Mom's Lotion

Fiction by Joanne Neston

There is nothing in the world that my mom loves more than lotion. Do you know how most people never forget their phones and always have it with them? Well for my mom— that's lotion. It doesn't really matter what type of lotion it is, but she does prefer the Vaseline Intensive Care- Cocoa Radiant. When I was younger, she would carry the big bottle despite my protests that it was embarrassing. One day, in the checkout line, I quickly switched out the big bottle for the little one at a time when she was particularly busy fishing out her credit card to pay for the groceries. The next day, I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that she was still carrying the travel-size lotion bottle.

I once asked my mother what she treasures most in life— what brings her the most joy? My face fell when I saw her hesitation and quick glance at the lotion bottle before she said, "You, my child. Of course!" Of course.

One day, I make a huge mistake. All three of us— my mom, the lotion bottle, and I are in the car driving to the new mall two towns over. My mom has finished the latest episode of the *Lotions to Maintain Moisture for You* podcast, so I take this rare silence as an opportunity to say something that has been on my mind for months.

"Mom, what was it like when you had me?" I ask.

"Child, you think I remember that?"

"You don't remember your own daughter's birth?"

"Huh? What's with all these questions? Oh, look! They just dropped a new scented lotion!" she says, showing me the Bath & Body Works notification she just received on her phone.

"Mom, you're driving!" I shriek, just as she swerves our car from drifting into the wrong lane.

She squeals, ignoring me. "This is the first stop we're making when we get to the mall."

I thought the first stop was the lingerie store to get me a new bra. I've been wearing the same one every day for the past two years despite telling her I needed a new one.

I glare at the lotion bottle that sits between us on the console. I wonder why this thing has such a hold on my mom. And without a second thought, I snatch the bottle and uncap it, and squirt a raindrop onto my hand. My mom lets out a blood-curdling scream and swerves into the nearest parking lot. Her crazed eyes were wide, and her mouth

twisted in disgust. I scramble out of the car, my entire body trembling uncontrollably. I slam the door shut and her screams turn into muffles as if I'm underwater. She puts the car in drive and speeds off, leaving me phoneless in this unfamiliar town, which was at least a half-hour drive from home.

I stand there, staring at the empty car lot. I wait for the car to reappear and for her to say, "Sorry honey, I would never leave you." We'd throw out the lotion bottle and laugh about it. We'd say, "That stupid ol' thing will never come between us again." I snap back into reality when a police car pulls up in front of me.

"Hey, you alright there? You look lost," he says. My mouth stays glued shut. He looks at my black graphic t-shirt and my ripped jeans and says,

"You was out partying, huh." I look down to hide my annoyance, but he mistakes it for shame. He steps forward.

"Let me guess, your so-called friend left you stranded and now you need a ride home." Another beat of silence.

"You're going to have to speak up, girl."

"3945 Terrace Lane," I say. We look at each other in surprise, both taken aback by the strength and clarity of my voice.

Despite his haste judgments, he is nice enough to allow me to ride in the front. Though, I soon realize that he wants to make sure I hear every word of his lecture.

We stop at a red light, and I see a lizard tramping up a light post without a care in the world. My skin crawls when the cold-blooded reptile stops and stares at me with her beady eyes. Her lungs bop in and out under her stiff, bumpy skin. I want to look away, but my eyes are glued on her every move. It occurs to me just how close we are to one another and how she could easily jump in through my cracked open window if she dares. My index finger hastily reaches over to press the switch to pull the window up shut. When the light turns green, I exhale a breath I don't realize I'm holding.

That lizard is all I can think about for the rest of the way home. I read articles that said lizards dig holes to bury their eggs and abandon them forever. Almost half of them don't survive. I think about how before she was even born, her mother left her. Leaving her to fend for herself.

Before I know it, we arrive at my mom's apartment. All I want to do is lie in my bed, inside my cozy room where I can breathe.

The police officer knocks on the door and my mom swings it open. She's in her pajamas and bathrobe with the

remote control and a big bottle of lotion poking out of her pockets. Her eyes widen at the sight of his uniform, and she looks at me as if saying *What did you do?* I blink.

“Ma’am. Do not be alarmed. Your daughter is not in any trouble, though I am sure she has learned her lesson.” He explains to her how I went to a party, but my friends left me, and I got lost. I watch my mom’s face distort into confusion, but she quickly recovers as she thanks the officer for bringing me back. Before he leaves, he makes me apologize to her, and she plasters on a fake smile and awkwardly squeezes me, forcing my nose into her collarbone.

She waves goodbye as we watch his car drive away, then she drops her mask and marches inside, with me following closely behind her. As she goes into the kitchen, I take the opportunity to scurry to my room. Just as I open my door, she yells out.

“I needed your bed to store my babies, but I’ve fixed some blankets on the floor for you to sleep on.”

My jaw drops at the horror scene in front of me. My entire room is piled with boxes of lotions bottles. My desk, my bed, and half of my floor are buried by them. There is a narrow pathway from the door to the center of the room, where a blanket and pillow lie.

“Yeah, I had to get more,” she says, now standing at the doorway. “Especially after *you* finished my last one.”

“Did you at least get me a new bra?” She looks at me as if I have two heads.

“A what?” She laughs tauntingly and she doesn’t stop as she walks away, turning off all the hallway lights, leaving me alone in the dark with a room full of lotion.

I settle under my blanket and stare at the ceiling, trying to avoid looking at the boxes that tower over me in every direction. As I rub my face, I catch a whiff of something on my hand. It’s the nauseating sweet smell of the raindrop of lotion from earlier. My mom’s manic laughter surrounds me, mocks me, and screams into my ears, and for a split-second, I envy that lizard whose mother was at least merciful enough to have abandoned her. I imagine what it’d be like to have autonomy and be the leading character of your own world. Surely, that was better than being subordinate to lotion bottles.



# Eastern Lubber Grasshopper

Photography by Iker Aranguren







# Ever the Gentleman

Poetry by Jessi Eady

I was supposed to house-sit a friend's dog during  
Christmas. He spends it in New York and his  
bungalow is a three-block walk to  
a lake snowed-in with  
birds. and I promised my family's house  
keeper I'd feed her kitten. Even though I  
bailed, she still gave me a \$25 Amazon gift card. For  
your loss, she said. I ordered a back brace  
in the wrong size but the seller  
declined to refund Gloria's money.  
They also kept the brace.

For our family's Christmas  
gathering I chose a sophisticated wrap-dress  
made of linen;  
I felt like a housewife as I opened the door to  
our older brother's store manager who was simply  
being cautious by performing a "routine" wellness check — in Matt's nine years at Publix he'd  
never no-called-  
no-showed. The six of us split  
up. Mom made calls, Dad took  
the twins to Holloway Park, my younger brother and I fled  
to Carter Road. Matt's disc golf  
buddies tagged some Facebook groups and  
got to him first.  
I trudged past packs of  
disc golfers in dainty sandals. Steel  
rang as frisbees found their way  
home. I found him chipping cheap  
shots towards the next tee as if we hadn't  
phoned the hospitals looking  
for a body.  
A few of my high school years were spent smoking  
apples by the sand dunes opposite a skinny  
eyelash of trees. Dad used to  
take Matt and I there  
as kids.

Matt apologized "for  
all the trouble". Twenty-eight years-old and still  
a virgin - ever the gentleman. He wouldn't go home with me. Said,  
little brother should turn around  
if I wanted to make it back. And I didn't  
want to upset him.

Dad blamed me, at first. Showing up empty-handed — But  
he didn't drive into the night either. Instead, all of us  
waited  
another twelve hours.  
I forgave myself when we found the receipt from the gun store.  
They made him wait two weeks to pick it up.

# Oregon

Poetry by Jessi Eady

Every spring,  
a pair of small brown birds  
nest in the mailbox beside my family's  
front door. My mother's delight  
hinges upon each fresh rung of  
rib-bone and my own upon letters that break  
open the tufted titmouse's spotted eggshells.

The sun returns to its roost  
above the Gulf coast, gilding our  
frosted eyelids and the hollowed gourd  
stems of September.

A hurricane kisses our palms amidst an algae  
bloom. Lee County's culverts are exhumed  
along sabal ruins. A chilled breeze blows  
upon the sickle moon's horn.

Old Carpenters songs  
my dad once spun in a Cracker Barrel parking lot  
visit for a spell, inside  
a whiskey glass, offered by my ex-lover.

My brother's ghost returns  
amid fir trees on the wallpapered background of our mother's iPhone.  
He's smiling at her. Apple icons obstruct his eyes.  
Next year,  
I plan to visit the Oregonian cliffs, the last coast he was seen  
laughing. An expired social media account requests my date of birth. I  
give his instead. For the first time we are the same age.  
Every year, I will grow older than him.





# Tomie

Photography by Sophia Montejo

# yellow tiles\*

Poetry by Carolina Gutfreund

staring into the yellow tiles on the shower wall. i let the steaming water cool against my skin. i need to wash these feelings off me. I am not a little girl anymore. i am not being exploited. i feel dirty, though i've done worse things. i need to scrub harder, drawing blood may be the only way to cleanse what i'm feeling inside. the hard water stings against the scratches that have begun to appear along my naked body. my naked body. it's just a body. i feel ugly. i feel disgusting. there is dirt beneath my skin and no matter how hard i scrub, i. cant. reach. it. back to the yellow tile. there are six of them. the steam has begun to collect on the walls and spill down as condensation. i am better than this. like i said. i am not a little girl anymore. i am not a child. i am not being exploited. so why do i feel so utterly helpless. used. like that little girl in those photos. the stupid child in me that sold her naked body for male attention. that stupid child. stupid. stupid. stupid fucking child. who became a victim of child porn. there are six yellow tiles. it's been five years. he was four states away. its been it's been it's been. two men. and one me. one idiot adult-child staring at the steam collect on the bathroom walls. scrubbing until her blood pools down the drain. i did it again. i sold myself for male attention. and i'm back where i started all those years ago standing in a shower wishing to wash my sins away. i might take up prayer. get on my knees for the right reasons. and beg to be saved. beg him to not let me suffer. i don't know how much more suffering i can take. i state to the yellow tiles and count. one. two. three. four. five. six. i am six rock bottoms too deep. i am five sexual assaults too deep. i am four years too late to save my inner child. i am three men too late. i am two religions behind. i am one. on my knees. staring at the yellow tiles. scrubbing until i bleed.

\*trigger warning: sexual assault and abuse

# Contract Broken, Truths Now Spoken

Poetry by Kyra Kalodimos

There are fingerprints laden with oil, sweat, and wiped tear  
upon the letter that aimed to finish you  
as its proclamation came to a close.

Lead's load has since lifted off the trembling ticks slashed  
above sentiments devoid, blatantly raw, skinned,  
meant to be sent with the assurance of no return.

This coffin of an envelope,  
bolted shut with dried saliva and stitches of staples,  
is filed away now in the desolation of a rusting dumpster.

I was at a low point in my life.

When you had signed at rock-bottom  
that will of relinquishment, that testimony of unworth,  
did you believe your resolved signature affirmed its truth?

I know, I know all too well  
that disillusionment is not remediated  
by rash condemnation.

We both signed leases on | properties | bodies | minds |  
without the offer of a walkthrough,  
detained now by their dilapidation.

But, tell me—could you look unperturbed  
into the unlit pupil pits  
drilled through blanched, unwavering eyes  
severed after a fifteen-year run  
through this present vision of yours, awashed  
in that desperate elation of being?

| I | You | You, too, perhaps | look at life  
through glass blown by near death.

Friend, is our renewed appreciation—  
this semblance of felicitousness—

a daily act of flailing?  
The breath I wished to still into stagnancy  
funneled back into me, hastened,  
when I learned of your own demise's desire.  
How teaching of an instant it is  
that when someone makes amends  
to articulately dislodge their conscious,  
we display no vacillation  
in scrapping up the remains  
of our own pulverized, flurried filaments  
and pleading for their continuance.



Southern Black Racer

Photography by Jordan DePante

# A Beautiful Day for the Pool

Fiction by Sandra Little

Bring your swimsuits!

Let the movers move while you relax into your new life!

Come to the welcoming pool party!

Barbecue! Games! Drinks!

Fun for everyone!

This was the card that greeted the newcomers of the neighborhood that morning.

The neighbors could hardly refuse. Who could say no to a barbecue at the pool? Let's go to the pool! The pool is a nice place, they said aloud. It was such a nice day out today and nice days only come around every so often. It would be a shame to miss out on such a nice day. They could always unpack later.

They folded their blue and white striped towels and their floral magentas and limes and their wide brimmed hats and their wide rimmed sunglasses and their sunblock and their tanning oil and their swimming shoes and their books and snacks just in case they got hungry.

Then the trek to the pool. Schools of tropical fish in families of five and couples of two swarmed in towards the beautiful blue waters and perfect umbrellas with delicious lounge chairs for getting delicious tans.

The neighbors walked into the inviting entrance greeted with smiles and teeth and friendly gestures. The rich smells were curling through the filtered summer's day in snakes of aromatic tendrils dangling tantalizingly on the wind. Their stomachs were clawing at them, and their eyes were peeled eagerly for the delicious meat that was whispering to their noses.

The teeth told them that they were sorry but the barbecue wasn't ready just yet. But that was okay because they could wait for a bit by the beautiful pool deck and have fun in the water. After all, it was such a beautiful day for the pool.

What a wonderful idea! The pool was sparkling in clear chlorinated blue. The shade of blue held hostage in old timey cards of the past brought back to life, like a postcard from a sunny dream when colors were vibrant in turquoise and hot pinks.

Teal and aqua shadows lapping in distorted shadows in the pool and the glistening, glittering surface seemed to ensnare and pull at the hoards that were melting further into the pool deck. It was impossible not to want to dive deep into cool water.

Towels were unpacked, decorating the deck with bright flowers and stark stripes. Floaties were strapped on and sunscreen slid across faces and arms in slippery streaks. Umbrellas opened as the pool water broke under a bombardment of tiny bodies and big bodies and so many bodies piling into the delightful blue.

The pool staff turned the meat on the grill. The grease was popping and mouths were watering. The staff were smiling and their teeth glistened brighter than the pots of pulled meat red with glistening sauce and juices that smelled so inviting.

The bodies were thick in the water, faces laughing and smiling into the growing warmth of the day. Shrieks and chattering buzzed cheerfully, all the while tinged with the invisible parasite of waiting.

The neighbors were euphoric when the barbecue was ready. It was a gravitational event. Arms and legs scrambling back to the lounge chairs. Flesh quivering in excitement in anticipation in hunger, waiting for the feast to start.

Then the start of it all. The first neighbors were getting in line and soon they were all cattle lined up to feed. Plates moving and filling and hands grabbing and picking and hurrying back to the chairs warming in the sun.

Then the eating.

Fingers and wrists slick with grease that was dripping also from their lips and cheeks and running down their chin. The meat was so good and tender and juicy and the neighbors were sucking and ripping at the bones and at the forks and plastic spoons that made it so easy to shovel it in their mouths. Greasy fingers gripping greasy burgers with red juices running and glistening. A feast to behold.

But the sun was particularly hot that day and the pool deck was an oven. Families were stretching out, hot skin pressed into hotter chairs and the even hotter sun was broiling them into little red lobsters.

But the pool was just so nice. It would be a shame to leave on such a nice, warm, hot, broiling day.



Heat breeds drowsiness and cultures the lotus eaters. And like the lotus eaters, they simply didn't feel like leaving. They were laughingly languishing, drugged on the summer sun and comfortability the pool offered. The teeth smiled wider and flesh was getting redder and their skin was shining and breaking and bubbling and melting and searing.

But it was such a nice day and the pool was so beautiful and it was hard to open their eyes. But they could still smell the barbecue, and even the ghost of the aroma was inviting.

The sun was setting when the pool staff reemerged. The smell of cooked meat was ripe on the gentle breeze that was slowly sifting through the pool deck. A few towels ruffled slightly in the breeze, blue and white stripes marking that which once was.

The pool staff had their tools with them and went about their work of cleaning the old barbecue and preparing the new. Silver spatulas were jammed to help unpeel the charred flesh on the chairs, and wheelbarrows were quickly loaded up, tables laid out, knives sharpened, fingers ready.

Preparing the meat was always the most enjoyable aspect, so the pool staff thought. There was nothing so tender as fresh meat.

Yet there was also nothing quite as bloody and juicy, even though most had been thoroughly cooked, quite a few were rare. But as eyes looked up at the clouds quickly drawing in, they knew rinsing would not be a necessity. The rain was their friend.

The meat was shaped and ground and flesh was molded and mashed until the busy hands held plump patties and bulging sausages and spools of fresh ground meat laid out in a raw feast.

It was all packed safely away when the first drops of rain made their landfall.

The rain would only fall for a few hours that night, just long enough for its purpose, but not too long as to hinder the coming of the next beautiful day or hinder the grand opening of the neighborhood event planned for tomorrow's afternoon.

It would be a beautiful day tomorrow.

A beautiful day for the pool.



# Idealized

Photography by Mya Beauvais





# OPEN YOUR EYES

Art by Victoria Mercado-Lues

# sucking on the old toothbrush that you forgot to pack

Poetry by Lars Murphy

vulgar compulsions— stale mint staining throat.  
bitter bristles bite against hungry tongue; swirling,  
    salivating,  
    savoring mouths memories I  
    gnaw on the plastic  
maw a gaping, lewd orifice of consensual cavities  
as i push past molars like crooked soldiers and  
let crusted Colgate permeate.

soon i wretch, having ventured too deep, and  
wipe your wet remnants from flush lips with a  
    wavering palm—sin erased.  
would you turn to such depravity to remember my taste?

# A is for Airforce

Poetry by Lara Ulstad

As an afterthought  
birds  
can't  
die  
even if  
falling—they had freedom of flight anyway.  
Great men ghost  
haunted hills of  
islands, but indeed have to  
join hands and  
kill closely.  
Like this war took  
my dad, uncles, and grandpas—it will not take my brother.  
No. Birds get to fly, left to right,  
only when desired, not ordered.  
Patience keeps pausing the moment,  
quietly I curse the quail, how it holds  
rough winds, rising into my brother's right brain runway.  
Still, support comes suddenly.  
Trees have tired nests and broken parachutes  
unlike sky, unbridled, unlimited, unyielding to boys jumping, parachutes intact, wings in flight.  
Visionaries of violent  
war, that's who take him. That's who—the  
xenophobes, afraid to fly, defining cultures as  
wild—no smiles—  
zoos, sending my brother out to aim American freedom.



# Painted Souls

Fiction by Taylor Arnold

When my sister was born, my parents immediately knew they would name her Iris, the Greek word for rainbow. With flaming red hair and eyes somehow green and blue and gold all at once, she certainly was a bundle of vibrant colors. And it wasn't just her looks—her personality was as brilliant and ever-changing as her namesake. One day she was a hurricane of rage and despair—the next, she'd be singing in the gardens, helping my mother cook and kissing us all before bed.

At age seven she asked for paint supplies for Christmas. My father picked up some extra shifts and provided her with a set of paintbrushes, about a dozen flimsy canvases, and somewhat-decent acrylic paints. Thrilled, she spent all day painting, her little hands splashing colors onto a blank canvas until they were caked with layers of acrylic, and she had created a mess of cobalt, magenta, and highlighter yellow with sporadic smears of crimson.

She kept practicing and kept growing; her vivid hair softened to a gentle auburn, her features sharpened, and she became more beautiful every day. Boys took notice, of course, but she never cared. The older she got, the more she focused on one thing and one thing only: her art. Scribbles and splashes became shapes, and shapes became people and landscapes and objects until her paintings turned into masterpieces. Despite her talent, she refused to sell or share her art, even when our parents pushed her to find a job and move out.

It wasn't until she was eighteen that I noticed something was...strange about her work. The faces she painted were too lifelike. They seemed to move, to lean out of their frames. Their eyes followed me around the room. I told her as much and she just laughed. "Of course they move, James. They're alive. That's why I have to paint them."

Her bedroom became her studio, with barely any space for her bed. Each painting was more startlingly realistic than the last, and sometimes, when I walked past her room, I could hear her speaking to them. Even worse, sometimes I thought I heard a response.

The more she painted, the more she spoke of the world she believed existed through her art. She swore on her life that she walked amongst her paintings when no one was looking and that they beckoned to her deep in the night. It was as if with every piece she created, she gave up another fracture of her sanity.

The most unnerving painting was a portrait of a woman covered in fire. She was screaming, or so it seemed, but the strokes of the flames smothered her features so that it was hard to tell anything but the shape of a woman and the sense of agony shrieking from the canvas.

She had painted it when she was 23, after a drunk driver ran a red light and side-swiped our parents on a busy road, killing everyone involved. My mother died on impact and my father remained unconscious in the hospital for three days before dying from his injuries. Our family home was endowed to me and Iris, but I had just settled into a new house with a pregnant wife, so my sister took the home herself. It wasn't long before her art filled the narrow hallways, the kitchen, the living room. That terrible painting of the woman on fire remained hanging over the dining room table, at the very heart of the house.

Iris claimed that now that she lived alone, her paintings came out to play—that her pastel ballerinas practiced in the garden and her watercolor fairies flew overhead. She said that a woman in white was always weeping in the corner and ghosts were fiddling with the TV and a girl was always drowning in the bathtub. Snakes slithered under the doors, vines and flowers draped from the ceilings, and pirate ships battled the raging sea and storm in the backyard.

Two years later, the house caught fire and burned to the ground, taking Iris and all her paintings down with it. Fire investigators said there was no clear cause, that Iris must have started the fire herself—it was the only plausible explanation. The entire town talked about it for months—the crazy woman on Cedar Street finally snapped, they said.

But I always pictured the horrible painting over the dining table and wondered if maybe Iris was not the cause of the fire at all.



# God Told Me All Your Secrets

Art by Victoria Mercado-Lues



# why i won't go to therapy

Creative Nonfiction by Jo Souvannarath

That's the easiest answer, right? When you're a child and your mother asks why you're refusing to wear your hand-me-down *Sinh* you just reply with "I don't want to." She'll make you wear it anyway, but that doesn't make the experience any less painful. She won't ask why you don't want to wear it. She'll just say "You have to. You have to wear your skirt," but will never tell you what that skirt is called so you have to learn its name for the first time when you're 21. You're sitting at your hand-me-down PC frantically Googling "Laotian woman traditional skirt" to grasp on to your otherwise obsolete culture for an essay you don't even want to write. But you do it anyway. You do it because you don't want to. No one else cares that you don't want to. It's just something you *have* to do.

~

When I was sixteen I didn't get my driver's license because my father was scared that I'd get into a car crash and die. He was scared that I wouldn't be able to focus on the road, that I wasn't mature enough to make my own split-second decisions. I thought it had to do with my age, but he was perfectly fine with my best friend, who was only a year older than me, driving me around. A small part of me was happy that I couldn't drive then because I didn't want to. I didn't care that my friends were able to go to parties on fancy boats, or go on dates with the boys that were just looking for entertainment. I never wanted to grow up or mature, but I was so adamant to my father that I *was* mature, he just never saw it.

He never saw the way I de-escalated fights between my friends, or how a girl I was in love with would come to me for advice because I was the only one she could trust. He never saw the way I defended my friends from horrible teachers who would talk down to us because we sat in this limbo between "privileged" and "oppressed" due to our unapologetic "Asianess." He never saw how I fought to protect my secret boyfriend from his mental health spirals because he felt like a failure. We were uncomfortably aware that there were sides of ourselves that we could never put out in the open. I'll never forget the way my father walked into my room and said "I don't care what you're going through but you need to tell me what's going on. I don't care if you put it in a letter," and walked out as if he never said anything at all.

I didn't want to write that letter but it was something I *had* to do, so I thought I could wait as long as possible until he forgot about it. I ended up never writing that letter though, because a year later my dad passed away from a heart attack, leaving me with a hollow "I love you".

~~

When you grow up in such a sheltered home, you're kind of thrown to the wolves the moment you see your mom's little portrait on Life360 move further from you than you could have ever expected. The night my family moved me into that tiny, yellow dorm room I was alone. That night I ate a shitty cup of ramen and said to myself, "I'm so happy now. I can do whatever I want." I remember putting my decorations on the walls and setting up my massive laptop, ready to end the night with a few rounds of League of Legends, but those games never came. Instead, I realized that I was alone in a place where no one could guide me, no matter how many times my RA offered to. I was truly on my own for the next year and it hit me incredibly fast. So, I did the one thing I had been wanting the freedom to do; I sat on the bed that was supposed to be mine and I cried. I cried for hours. I cried remembering that my dad had just died weeks before my 18th birthday. I cried remembering that my boyfriend, who once promised to marry me, no longer cared for my well-being. I cried remembering that my closest friend was now four hours away from me at the school of her choice. I cried so much that I fell asleep.

The next morning, I woke up to puffy eyes and a roommate apologizing for not being there the night before. I smiled and told her that I didn't mind and she immediately pushed for us to be friends. I didn't want to be alone anymore so I did what I thought I had to do.

~~

The next two years of my life put me through so much; losing my scholarship and almost hurting the person I loved due to poor mental health, and having to relive the same grief that I felt when my father died. So many well-intentioned people told me the same thing: "You need to get therapy." I don't blame them of course, because they were right, there are some things that K-Pop performances and Valorant games can't solve. To this day I am grateful for the people who tried to help me. Contrary to the title of this essay, I have tried therapy before. It rarely went well and there was always some obstacle that made continuing therapy impossible for me.

I thought about it a bit though and realized something that I don't think others would be willing to admit. My

relationships, my friendships, even professional relationships have all fallen apart because I went in trying to be this person that wasn't me. I tried to make up for the things I couldn't say to my father by leading this normal, happy life, but I'm not ready for that yet. I've gone into therapy because others have told me to, not because I chose to on my own. I did it to look *good* but refused to do any of it "right." Every negative thing that has happened to me can't fit into this essay, but my inability to be "good" or "right" were never the cause of those things. I didn't want to believe that I didn't have control.

I'll go to therapy again, when it's something I want and when I think I'm ready to try again. I know I *have* to go eventually but I'm not going to force myself to fit someone else's timeline.

For now, though, I think I'll be alright.



# Give me a Call

Music by Paloma Telfort



you're up at four a.m.  
doing absolutely nothing  
but you're writing down feelings  
just to feel like you have meaning  
and my back's against the wall  
I feel the treble through it all  
be nice to know  
that you miss it when I called

tell me I'm pretty  
so I can walk away grinning  
I don't know if I miss you  
or if I even care at all  
it would be nice to hear  
a voice give me a call  
sometimes

your face always tells me everything you need to say  
I know that you'll hate me  
I know that you want blood  
I know that you want flesh  
I'm trying to save face  
I'm trying to leave with grace  
  
so just...

tell me I'm pretty  
so I can walk away grinning  
I don't know if I miss you  
or if I even care at all  
it would be nice to hear  
a voice give me a call  
sometimes



# Natural

Photography by Olivia Nolan

# there's healing in the lonely

Poetry by Madison Blair

i place a cigarette in the gap between my teeth.  
it is unlit but helps my fixations more than gum or  
sunflower seeds. i use my tongue to press  
the butt into my gums, tapping my fingers against  
the cold metal of the stairs. i watch as a man comes out  
of the liquor store below, unaware of my presence above him.

i realize this is the first time i've been above a man. i feel  
uncomfortable then, peeling the cigarette from my dry lips  
before dropping it onto the ground. aiming for the top of his head,  
it grazes the heel of his shoe. he picks it up and looks directly  
to the sky, as if it has fallen from heaven: a gift from god.

i can't let him walk away believing god provided him with tobacco.  
there is something wrong about it.  
i cough to grab his attention. he looks up at me, above him,  
squinting through the darkness.

he does a subtle nod, like he understands  
but he doesn't. he takes the cigarette, twiddles it between his  
middle and index fingers while he stares at me, face  
lit by the red liquor sign flashing every few moments. i want  
to remind him he has somewhere to be, no one  
rushes out of a liquor store unless they have somewhere to be.  
i say nothing.

there's something about keeping him below me,  
keeping him from knowing my voice, that makes me feel more okay.  
his eyes are peaceful, and i can tell he shaved yesterday  
or maybe the day before, with a razor.

he's still spinning the cigarette. i think to yell just  
smoke it already, but i say nothing, keep staring.  
he places it in between his lips,  
winks, and walks away.



