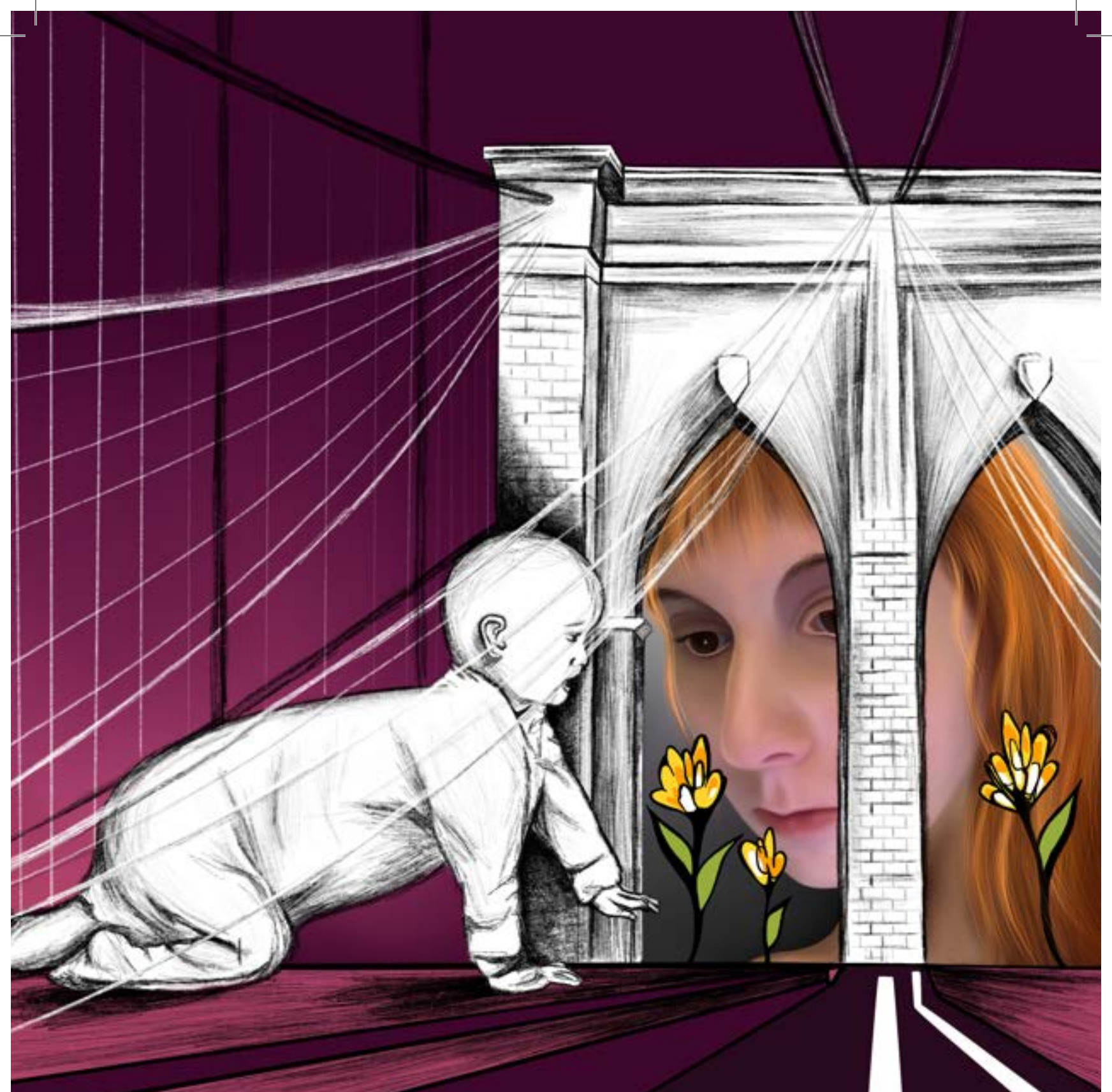




CROSSINGS

Sole Magazine, Vol. 2

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LETTER FROM *THE EDITORS*

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the second print edition of Sole Magazine, Brown University's home for creative-nonfiction. Our publication is a place where insightful readers, talented writers, diligent editors, and brilliant illustrators come together to tell true stories in a fun way. We are so proud to introduce you to "Crossings," an exploration of the intersections, causeways, and liminal spaces that permeate our life experiences.

Our pieces wrestle with what it means to reach a crossing: Do you walk forwards? Look backwards? Or dwell on the junction, split between nostalgia and uncertainty? How many events had to intersect with one another to lead us to the here and now, and how can we justify either fate or coincidence? The answers are tricky, and our writers grapple with these and more within the following pages.

So whether it is "A Love Letter on Losing Yourself" and the notion that relationships end but never let us fully withdraw from their impact, "Aflac. Aflac. AFLAAAAAC!"—Sole's first comic!—and the comings and goings of a child's stuffed animal, or our staff collection piece "Bridges" with anecdotes about everything from noses to San Francisco, this issue is proud to encapsulate the feeling of standing at the crossroads. For crossing is vulnerable. We've reached a fork — which way do we turn?

We invite you to delve into 17 pieces of lyrical work and hope that you not only contemplate the crossings in your own world, but that with our words, we have created crossings into ours.

With love,

Managing Editors

Deeya, Desi, and Kate

CONTENTS TABLE OF			
			
	ON FRIENDSHIP AND FORGETTING		4
	NOTES FROM A KOREAN GIRL WHO CAN'T LOOK IN THE MIRROR FOR TOO LONG		5
	THE GOLD THAT STAYS		8
	FEVERED		10
	MARIA PRINCIPESSA: UN SOGNO		12
	AMTRAK AND FOOTBALL		13
	AFLAC. AFLAC. AFLAAAAAC!		15
	BRIDGES: A SOLE COLLECTION		16
	7B2 NORTHAMPTON AIRPORT		21
	NOTES ON TRANSLATION		22
	IN BLACK AND WHITE		24
	SIMULACRUM		25
	A LOVE LETTER ON LOSING YOURSELF		29
	GAYBASH: A REVIEW		30
	ANATOMY		32
	TRUE BLUE		34
	INHERITANCE		36

On Friendship and Forgetting

*By Elsa Eastwood
Illustrated by Kat Warren*

SHE WAS THE best friend of my dreams. The guaranteed birthday party invite, the future bridesmaid and godparent to imaginary children. We wore unicorn shirts on every Twin Day. We played a duet at every piano recital and ran barefoot between our neighboring houses every summer, whispering about the boys in our class that we loved and intended to marry. I never doubted that it was forever. Our magnetic friendship necklaces deemed that inevitable.

She transferred to the girls' school far away; I went to public school. A uniform replaced her Justice leggings, and she didn't want to be silly anymore. We still saw each other, but stories grew littered with irrelevant names, and the minimal overlap between our interests and circles made it hard to keep things the way I wanted them to be. Her talk of parties and mine of marching band competitions drew only blank stares between us. By the end of high school, we could not have been more different—a fact that made the over-brunch realization that we had committed to the same college even more shocking.

We visited for a weekend together. We met for a few meals and introduced our reluctant roommates. Yet somehow, courseloads and travel and changing seasons accompanied the further fading of our friendship, and in a world of 3,000 people, I still ask myself how we became strangers, how a longstanding bond could be reduced to a smile in passing.

I think the true tragedy lies in how our evolved relationship blinds us



from what it once was. My lens is perpetually clouded. I look for clues in recital footage and our covers of early 2000s pop songs, wondering whether relics of the past can reveal what I seem to have missed, whether we reconstruct the memories of friendships once they're lost. I try to recognize us in old photos, histories preserved on glossy paper. Had the loose thread been there all along, hiding behind these small faces? Can

retrospection ever help explain a dissolution?

Perhaps she holds the answer I'm looking for. The mysterious moment in which we lost all ability to relate, a sentence or a sense of self that escapes my recollection. Perhaps her memory is the other half-heart necklace whose absence renders my phrase incomplete.

Her boyfriend walks by me now. I don't know what she sees in him.

Notes From a Korean Girl Who Can't Look in the Mirror for Too Long

By Sia Han

Illustrated by Autumn Tilley

i. I WAS A pretty child. The type of pretty that ensured that for every street of Seoul my mom would push me down in a stroller, there'd be a passerby who'd look over and begin to coo.

“너무 예쁘다!” // “She’s so pretty!”

“인형처럼 생겼어요!” // “She looks like a doll!”

“남편이 외국사람이에요?” // “Is your husband a foreigner,” they’d ask my mom, excitement visible in their eyes. They were sure, after seeing my pale skin, light brown hair, and big, round eyes, that I was not fully Korean. Something different. Something exotic.

Soon enough, my mom was offered a child modeling gig which she immediately declined. Her mother-in-law, though, quickly decided I was destined for greatness. Her plan for me was:

1. Gain moderate success as a child model
2. Go on to become Miss Korea
3. Become a news anchor (as do most Miss Koreas because to be a female news anchor in Korea, you must foremost be pretty)
4. Marry either a billionaire or actor
5. Have 3 equally good-looking (grand)children

I no longer live in Korea, speak Korean well, nor do I meet the height requirement to even enter Miss Korea. My hair and skin have dark-

ened, my chin has jutted down and outwards, and my eyes have thinned like someone grabbed them by their edges and pulled. I like to think it’s my body trying to make up for lost time; That after years apart from my motherland, spent resenting my features and yearning for the

“AT 14, MY BIGGEST WISH IN LIFE WAS FOR THE SNIPPING TOOL FROM MICROSOFT TO EXIST IN REAL LIFE.”

cas-blond hair and blue eyes I saw on TV, it decided to take matters into its own hands. Nobody in America asks me if I’m a foreigner—they know.

When I was younger, I used to have a nightmare. A nightmare that upon reuniting with her in Korea, my

grandmother would hold me by the shoulders, look me up and down, and grimace. She’d shake her head, unable to mask the disappointment and pity in her eyes, and wonder where the future pageant queen she’d once held in her arms went.

Now, I have a different nightmare. In it, I walk up to her in a busy airport and tap her on the shoulder. She turns around and smiles, it doesn’t reach her eyes. She opens her mouth.

“아, 죄송한데 제가 아는 분인가요?” // “Sorry, do I know you?”

ii. When I was 13, after carefully examining my face, my dad lovingly rubbed my shoulder and said he would pay for any plastic surgery I wanted after high school. It’s a common tradition in Korea for parents to give their children cosmetic surgery upon graduation. To grant their child the gift of beauty and thus hope for a better job, marriage, kids, and life.

At 14, my biggest wish in life was for the snipping tool from Microsoft to exist in real life. Within the comforts of my room, I’d trace my finger around the innards of my face and imagine the excess skin and bones outside the small, delicate outline I’d drawn, completely melting off. I’d bring both index fingers up to my face and starting from right below my



ears, drag them downwards till they met at a perfectly pointed V.

Instead, I simply settled on waiting for my 18th birthday.

I spent hours standing in the mirror—poking, prodding, and pulling back skin, trying to envision what my new face would look like. I had a checklist of all the operations I was planning on undergoing. Ones that would rid me of my giant forehead, monolids, slightly crooked nose, and sticky-outy ears (which earned me the affectionate accolade of “Dumbo” from my parents).

But the one I anticipated the most was the one that would fix my long and “manly” chin. It was the one my dad anticipated the most, too.

We were lying next to each other when I turned to him to ask what we’d eat for dinner, and he lightly caressed my jaw. With a sad smile reserved for funerals of distant relatives or whenever I cried, he looked at me and wistfully said, “You’d be *perfect* if it weren’t for that chin.”

When I brought it up to my mom a few days later, she told me it was because he felt bad. That

he felt guilty for passing on his chin to me. "The surgery, it's- it's his way of apologizing. Of making amends."

My dad was also a pretty child. Pale, round-eyed, and rosy-cheeked, he had been adored by everyone around him. By the time he'd entered high school, his hair and skin had darkened, his chin jutted down and outwards, and pimples littered his face (I often poked my fingers inside the small, lasting dents they'd left on his cheeks). His face had morphed into one unrecognizable from his past but eerily similar to mine.

With my head in her lap, I pushed down a bubbling wave of guilt in my stomach and looked up at her.

"What if I turn out like... *him*?"

I felt her fingers scour my scalp, looking for new gray hairs to pull out. "You won't. Everyone is ugly in middle school. They're ugly as teens and become pretty in college."

"You don't know that!"

"I do. And it's different for girls anyways."

"But what if it doesn't get better? What if I'm..." I swallowed down a wave of horrible discomfort and near nausea.

"Then you learn how to do makeup. You learn how to style your hair."

"But I don't want to do that. I want to naturally, like *really* be—"

"Then get surgery." I fell silent at the agitation in her voice. I yelped as she pulled out another hair.

She sighed. "Why do you have so many? It's because you're stressed. Don't stress about this. You'll be pretty in college, that's what happens to girls. Remember, beauty is pain."

iii. I always imagined that once I turned 18, something *big* would happen. The kind of movie make-over metamorphosis that nerdy girls in chick flicks from the early 2000s always underwent was the stuff of dreams. The idea that I had had some special, transformative beauty inside me all along, waiting to be unlocked and revealed to the world, had been what had kept me going all those years.

I've grown a little taller and no longer look (as much) like a child trying to wear an adult's skin, but to be honest, I don't think much has changed.

One of my better life realizations is that trends are

1. Cyclical
2. Complete bullshit.

As of late, complaints about my giant forehead have been met with a stream of scandalized Korean.

"What? You know how many people would *kill* to have a forehead like yours?"

"Yea! People pay *thousands* of dollars for a forehead like that and you got it for free! You have no idea how lucky you are."

I wish I had something to say back to them. I wish the idea of having something "people would kill" for, didn't make me feel giddy. I wish that a good or bad hair day wasn't enough to make or break my whole week.

Last night, my mom apologized. She said it was her and my dad's fault for obsessing so much over my appearance when I was young. She compared me to a war general, yearning for the glory-filled days of his past and struggling to accept the invisibility of mundane life. "You wouldn't care

this much if you'd just been ugly."

I insisted that she was wrong, that my lifelong fear of becoming the reverse ugly duckling would've been there anyways, was always there.

She shook her head and brushed strands of hair out of my face. "Someone who's never had *it*, won't care. But with you, it's like... it's like you fell in. You fell in and you've been trapped ever since."

If there's one thing those chick flicks got right, it's that insecurity never really goes away. Except now, instead of a constant, merciless barrage of waves, it's ripples in a pond. They're easier to ignore but they linger. All it takes is one small rock, a bad selfie or a glance in the mirror that lasts a little too long, to set the whole pond in motion.

I had a dream, a new one this time. I stand in a white room brimming with emptiness. A man who radiates the feeling of being the only person in the room *in* on a joke stands behind me. He casts no reflection in the mirror. He hands me a scalpel and nudges me forward.

As I step closer, I think to myself that I have no idea what I actually look like.

My left eye is lower than my right.

This is my face.

My hairline is shaped like the East Coast. This is the face I was born with.

My chin is too long. This is the face I will die with.

I close my eyes and tenderly clutch the scalpel's handle with both hands. I press the flat side of its blade against my cheek. It's warm.

The Gold That Stays

By Annabelle Stableford

Illustrated by Ina Ma

WHEN I WAS eight years old, my dad shot a deer. I lay on its body when we reached it, sucking on the black licorice stick that had incentivized me to go hunting as tears streamed down my face.

My dad taught me to touch the deer's eye to make sure it doesn't blink, to make sure it is dead.

I touched the deer's eye and it did not blink.

*Nature's first green is gold,
her hardest hue to hold.*

When we got home, I ate raw meat from the deer's body, so fresh it was still warm. It was strange consuming an animal I was still mourning, but there was a sense of purity in the direct connection between our lives that allowed me to do it. It seemed like a natural cycle of life to me then, and the meat made sense in my mouth. I widened my eyes at my dad and bounced up and down next to the kitchen table to express how good the deer tasted. But the image of the animal's unblinking eye as it lay on the ground stuck with me. I saw the deer running; I saw the deer dead. The two irreconcilable thoughts stuck together in my mind like magnets.

As my dad gathered the rest of the meat from the deer's body in the garage, I somehow got hold of one of its hooves and for several weeks after that night I carried it with me. My mom quickly banned me from bringing it inside, so I wrapped it in a paper towel and brought it into the backyard. As soon as I got home from school each day I went to check on it. I sat there with it, stroking the black hoof and the bit of hair above because it was the only part of the deer I could still care for.

I don't remember how it happened, but slowly the hoof disintegrated. Maybe I lost interest in it and it turned

to dirt in the backyard, or more likely another animal took it in the night. Either way, one day the hoof was gone.

Nothing gold can stay.

* * *

I had a lot of worries when I was young. At night they swarmed around me and I couldn't sleep.

"One more question," I called down to my parents night after night after they had tucked me into bed. "Why do bees like pollen?"

I would ask anything to keep them near me, to keep them talking. I wasn't so worried when I wasn't alone.

In middle school I got a small



patchwork bag filled with worry dolls on a camping trip in Joshua Tree. I'd already tried a hundred ways to soften my fears at night—therapy, an energy healer, crystals, visualisations, meditations. They all helped, but I didn't latch on to any of them the way I did to my worry dolls. They were small, about half the size of my pinkie, maybe eight in total. Each of their wire bodies were covered in small pieces of bright fabric that looked like skirts and shawls, and tiny eyes and mouths were drawn onto their paper faces. At

night I took them all out of the bag and whispered a worry to each one before putting them back inside.

"I'm worried I will never find my favorite necklace that I lost."

"I'm worried that I'll throw up."

"I'm worried that Mama will die in a car crash."

"I'm worried we shouldn't have killed the deer."

Once they were all back in the bag I pulled the string tight and tucked it under my pillow. I felt so much lighter. Night after night of whispering my worries to the dolls, I came to know each of them well. I felt safe knowing they would hold my fears at night so I could sleep.

One day, the patchwork bag ended up in the washing machine with my pillowcases, and all the little worry dolls fell apart.

*Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.*

I felt torn apart with them, cleaved in two. I held the broken figures in my hand and pressed myself under the drying rack in the laundry room, trying to cry hard enough that I would escape the pain. But no matter how hard I cried or how small I curled up I could not escape.

Nothing gold can stay.

* * *

In high school I sat on a bench in the park on New Year's Eve. The line between us where my body pressed against his, the side of my thigh, my arm from the elbow up, my shoulder, was electric, even under my down coat. There were so many stars above, shatteringly clear in the crystal cold night. He saw a meteor and looked at me with wide eyes, but I had been looking at him and missed it. We stared at the sky again. I saw a meteor

and nudged him, but he had been looking at me. This time we swore to stare at the sky until we saw a meteor together. We watched for a while, inching closer and closer because it was cold, and also because we had never been so near to someone like that. I could smell his shampoo: apple scented.

Suddenly, from the crest of the sky, a meteor broke loose from between the stars. This one was bigger than any I had seen before. It had a thick, fat tail that glowed brilliantly orange. It dove down in a long, smooth arc until it vanished near the horizon, like a stone dropping into dark water.

Neither of us moved; we had both seen it.

After a while, he put his arm around me. I had never felt that way before—burning, falling. My heart dove toward him, dropping inside his darkness like a meteor into sky or a stone into water.

That night I came back with frostbite, dark purple kneecaps and blotches on my hips. I rubbed at them in the shower, holding my breath, holding my breath, until the purple faded to red. I took deep breaths.

I knew the meteor was a sign of something magical, something no one would believe if I tried to tell them about it. Orange like a fiery tail burned behind my eyelids as I fell asleep, my smile lingering on the scent of his apple shampoo and the weight of his arm around my shoulder.

There were more nights cold enough to break if you breathed in too fast, too cold to hold hands so we took turns sharing our pockets. For months we met only after dark, only outside, in a starry world that never quite felt real. By the time the stars started blinking out I was so used to the dark that I didn't notice.

*Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief.*

I hadn't yearned for my worry dolls in years, sometimes I even wondered if my swarm of fears had found a dif-

ferent queen, but by summer I spent most nights falling asleep shaking with the effort of keeping my pillow dry and no one to tell. It took me until fall to admit to myself I was wrong. The meteor wasn't a sign, the frostbite was, teasing me like sparks but blooming into bruises that I couldn't see.

Nothing gold can stay.

* * *

I only have one poem memorized, a short eight lines by Robert Frost called "Nothing Gold Can Stay" that my dad recited to me over and over when I was young. The lines occur to me randomly sometimes, when I finish a book or walk home at dusk, or when I think about how much my dad loves Robert Frost.

*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day,
Nothing gold can stay.*

"Stay gold, Ponyboy," Johnny Cade says in the *The Outsiders* as the fire that burned him, extinguished now but still roiling across his skin, steals his final heartbeats. Stay gold, I say, stay gold. But nothing gold can stay.

* * *

When I learned about fireweed this semester it fit like a puzzle piece between the contradictions of those lines. Like its name suggests, fireweed is one of the first plants to grow after a wildfire. It takes to the blackened ground like a phantom, sucking life out of the ashes. It blooms across meadows and mountainsides almost as fast as fire itself, leaping in arcing colors across scorched land, touching all the places that died and igniting them in a magenta-tinged remembrance. As it spreads, though, it slows down, then stops. Instead of taking

over mountainsides and charred forests and holding them forever captive with its blossoms, fireweed, in the end, chokes itself out. The purple miracle flower falls back to the earth, not sentenced there by fire like the trees and shrubs on the land before it, but sentenced there by its own overpopulation, its own drowning.

So dawn goes down to day.

But then, from the fertile remains, new sprouts emerge. Not only short-term flowers and brush, but the trees that will make forests that could stand for centuries.

* * *

Maybe that is the answer. We do things that die. Sometimes we have to do them so that they will die, like killing a deer, telling worry dolls your darkest fears, loving someone who will stop loving you. Burn the forest, flower the ashes, grow the trees.

The finality of the deer's unblinking eye was splintering, and I've recognized that same splintering ever since—the washed bodies of my worry dolls, the slow curve of the meteor in the sky as it broke apart. But even when the deer's heart stopped beating, she kept existing outside of that moment, as a figurative presence in my heart when I touched her eye and she did not blink and as a literal presence in my body after I ate her meat. What's dead is gone, but it depends on where you look. The worry dolls taught me to make sense of my fears, to put them into words so that when it mattered, when I was losing him, when I was suffering anything, I knew how to face it. Maybe those two weren't related, but even if they weren't consequential ripples they collided, like the deer's heart and mine, like flowers and ash building a forest.

Then leaf subsides to leaf. So Eden sank to grief. So dawn goes down to day.

Somehow, there is a gold that stays.

Fevered

By Sarah Crawford

Illustrated by Maison Texiera

FOR ONCE, THIS wasn't a cry because I felt so much, too much—these tears came from a body that earned it, so wrung out by pain it left room for nothing else.

In the days approaching this moment, I'd had no power over the persistent ache in my limbs, finding myself involuntarily shivering as a piercing cold enveloped my blotched skin. I now picture striking a match to the corner of a field in a controlled burn, the fire evolving slowly and burning vegetation down to ashes. This ache trumped all its predecessors. A God I don't believe in played a cruel joke on me, my skin shedding sheets of sweat like some kind of twisted baptism exercise.

Seated in a gray plastic chair, I'm poked for blood in a fashion I would quickly become numb to. After processing the sample, the nurses lock eyes across the room, a foreign tongue filling the air. Their lips move behind masks, forming phonemes novel to my ears, but my suspicions about my body don't often betray me. I knew the very moment I began to sweat. Something in my body was deeply wrong. Turning their gaze

toward me, the nurses use fragmented English to confirm what I already sensed. No chance I was leaving the island. A mosquito virus had taken refuge in my bloodstream.

A lazy Susan of rotating medical staff enter and exit, checking my blood pressure, platelets, teeth, gums, temperature, stool, muscle mass. They hardly register because I'm just so exhausted.

The routine took on a dream-like rhythm. I'd like to say this was comforting to me, as routine often is. But predicting the very encounters with people who'd enter and the very things they'd ask and the disappointing updates they'd inevitably offer was only a sting.

My body is home but my body is changed. Phantom parts survive in the Crest-white halls of a hospital off of a bypass in Denpasar.

My abdomen remains, checked twice a day for firmness by the doctor I've been assigned. His name is Gide and he wears a Harley Davidson shirt most days. I don't know if he knows anything about that brand, but he's cool and he admires me because I'm American.



My gums remain, painfully inflamed by a weakening immune system. A trained dentist advises me that they are sore because my wisdom teeth are trying to push through. I tell her my wisdom teeth were removed years ago.

My arms remain, weaker than ever before. Three IVs per forearm flood my system with medical-grade virus-resistant vitamins as my body works around the clock to multiply my white blood cell count. It leaves no residual energy to stay awake, much less to lift my arms.

My blood remains, pulsing through my veins and twice spurting out of the IV, sending me into a panic and requiring nurses to respond to the emergency button next to my bed. I don't like seeing how easily my blood flow can be diverted from its intended path.

My racing mind remains, disoriented, overwhelmed, infected, contagious, building on tendencies I work so hard to overcome. Do people at home know how seriously to take this? Do you think they even care? Would I have made it if I got on the plane home? Would I have died if? What if I

“A GOD I DON'T BELIEVE IN
PLAYED A CRUEL JOKE ON ME,
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OF SWEAT LIKE SOME KIND OF
TWISTED BAPTISM EXERCISE.”

didn't insist on seeing a doctor at the airport My head won't stop pounding I need to eat I've lost weight and that's so unsettling When will I get to go home I feel so worn and my arms are so weathered like tarnished metal I physically cannot consume another bottle of Pocari Sweat I'm so scared

My thoughts hiss and crackle until I can't hear anything else. I have a bad habit of biting the inside of my cheek. And I'm so ready to let it go. But the four hospital walls, the uncertainty, and the weight of this pain served only as a catalyst. Now when I press my tongue against the inside of my cheek, I feel scars.

The heavy and cold parts of my body feel suspended there, but what moves with me now in each step I take is a clear and sharp image of tenderness. My mother's body cramped on a bed right by my side, laying each night on a three-foot long couch. The dim vision of her asking the doctors questions to understand what was happening while I rest and sweat. Encouragement to eat when I've lost all appetite. Holding my torso while I grip my walker draped in IV drip bags, providing some sense of stability for seconds at a time in an otherwise hazy fog of weakness. But I can't walk to the bathroom without falling. And I can't do so much. She showers me gently. No words need to be spoken. I look like a helpless baby deer, crying in the headlights.

I'm not married to my body, I realize. It's here with me now, slowly regaining color. But it's in some far away place, too. I catch myself resisting the overwhelming terror of not being able to predict, the fragility of my body deceiving me at any point. Sometimes I crave the formula of a day in there, each moment stretching far ahead of me with clear certainty. Now my teeth search for the grooves inside my cheeks, and I let out a sigh as they settle into familiar paths.



Designed by Desi Silverman-Joseph

Maria Principessa: *Un Sogno*

By Luca Raffa

Illustrated by Autumn Tilley

I.

IN CAMPO, THE ancient olive groves seemed to stumble up the mountains, as if they dreamt of touching the sky. Their canopies were thin. Their crooked trunks bent forward. Their thick, calloused feet sunk through the dirt. They sighed with the eastern breeze that carried whispers of the sea. A little girl wanted to disappear under these olive groves. While her brothers and sisters went to school to learn math, or grammar, or history, she learned how to sew. Her hands and disposition became rough. Life was not fair.

II.

Pepe Carino was a tall and handsome-looking man. His soul was big. His laugh was charming. His words were just. All of the ladies wanted him, but he only wanted her. He saw her one day in the *piazza*, knowing very well what to do. His cleverness brought her to him, and his passion kept her there. He cut her hair. They kissed once when he was sick.

III.

After boarding the ship which had waited for her at the port, after eleven days of floating in the ocean, after marveling at white flakes which

danced in the winter sky, after getting married, after working in the factories, after buying a house, life became working in the basement on the sewing machine. It was cooking pasta



for Joe when he called home from the barbershop. Plucking pears from her backyard in the summertime. Christmas and New Year's celebrations. Family, food, sweets, cards, smoking, laughter. Taking care of her son Salvatore and her daughter Cora. Taking care of her grandchildren. Watching them grow.

IV.

In the mornings my grandmother wakes up from her dreams against the railing of her queen-sized bed, the other side empty, cold. She

crawls, one foot forth, her cane like a scepter, regally guiding her to the bathroom. After showering, she wraps herself in warm clothes and an elegant scarf, spritzing herself with the fine floral scents of her perfume, combing her white hair softly. She peers outside: the sky is blue. She sits in her chair at the table, a cushion on her back. Her morning coffee is too bitter again, and so she sprinkles in spoonfuls of sugar, making a face of disgust when it is still not sweet enough. Someone might call if they remember her, but she cannot remember their name. Her name is Maria Principato, but her words do not flutter out like they used to, before. Her lips stick together, sealed. Sitting down on her throne that faces the television, she spends hours in a spiral of thought. When she eats dinner, her chewing is loud, loathsome—it breaks the silence of ghosts that haunt her little bungalow. When the dark creeps in through the windows, she is ready for sleep. She puts on a white nightgown and crawls towards the edge of the bed. I can only imagine what this *principessa* may be dreaming.

Amtrak and Football

By Mayrav Estrin

Illustrated by Keira Yañez

I HAD A lot of trouble relaxing on the Amtrak home to New York on the last Saturday of September. I was wearing low-rise flare jeans from a Depop in Kentucky. They are great jeans for standing and for sitting very upright, which was the last thing I wanted to do. Unbuttoning them was not an option; it would make me feel like I was getting fat and being impolite. So I sucked it up and in since the train ride was only going to be a few hours.

“I KEPT TELLING MYSELF TO LOOK AT THE HOUSES NEXT TO THE TRAIN TRACKS AND IMAGINE THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THEM, BUT MY EYES KEPT FOCUSING ON THE DIRT RESIDUE ON THE PLEXIGLASS WINDOWS INSTEAD.”

I got tired of scrolling on Instagram, seeing all the posts of people I know at the football game. They all posted slightly different versions of “yay school spirit” and “we love college.” I had to leave the game early to make my train, and I missed Brown’s first win against Harvard in 14 years—at least, I think it was 14. I don’t really care about football.

It was a cloudy afternoon, and Connecticut was looking especially unimpressive. I had Fiona Apple and Lana Del Rey blasting in my AirPods because I decided, for no reason, that I wanted to be melancholy and contemplative today. I kept telling myself to look at the houses next to the train

tracks and imagine the people who live in them, but my eyes kept focusing on the dirt residue on the plexiglass windows instead.

About an hour in, a man in his sixties sat next to me. He arrived with another man in his sixties, his friend, and they both sported worn-out flannel shirts. But the one sitting beside me wasn’t wearing a bucket hat.

I was in no mood for a stranger to sit next to me. I had already decided that I wanted to be melancholy and

contemplative, and a stranger sitting next to me would most definitely impede on this plan of mine. But the train was crowded. And he seemed nice enough.

I started to wonder if the man next to me knew I

came straight from the white-out-themed Harvard vs. Brown football game, and that’s why I was wearing a white tank top and blue jeans. He definitely didn’t. But I like to make up stories about people in my head.

I decided that he probably wouldn’t have liked that I left a little before halftime. And if he asked why I did that, I would have to explain that I was getting overstimulated by all the people, that my phone had no service, that the humidity and wind were turning my freshly blown-out hair crunchy, that someone who was stressing me out was most definitely nearby, and that leaving the game early with my friend was really the

most logical option.

I put on a different, more upbeat playlist and reminded myself of how bizarre it was to create such a false narrative. If I said all this to him, his reply would probably be nice enough. But maybe he would secretly judge me and think I’m superficial and lack school spirit—because that’s probably how my story sounds.

Anyway, none of this happened. And I had just wasted twenty minutes of my precious youth making up a self-indulgent narrative about what a stranger thinks of me that benefited me in no real way at all. All he’d seen me do was shuffle some songs on Spotify, fix my lip-liner in a tiny rose-gold hand-held mirror, and eat vegan butter-flavored popcorn. He probably hadn’t thought about me at all. I yelled at myself in my head to stop acting like a weirdo in ten different ways. I just wanted to snap out of it. Was this social anxiety, or was I just an egomaniac? Maybe I shouldn’t have had a Black Cherry White Claw for breakfast.

He fell asleep for a good portion of the train ride, and I was happy about that because the reflective but reductive attitude I adopted was growing rather self-conscious and negative. If he was asleep, he couldn’t perceive me anymore.

I felt bad when I had to wake the stranger up to use the bathroom. He wasn’t asleep asleep. It was more of an “I’m just resting my eyes” asleep. He got up quickly and I walked down the train aisle even quicker.

When I looked at myself in the mirror of the tiny bathroom that smelled like piss and pine-scented cleaning products, I thought about how my hair still looked crunchy, how I paid too much for a ticket on this shithole,

and how I used too much brain capacity to imagine all the ways that a stranger would disapprove of me. I didn't even have one thought about his life, I realized. I didn't think about who he was, where he was coming from, or where he was going. I didn't think about why he kept checking an interactive weather map on his phone. Nothing. He was busy being his own person while I was busy preparing for his judgment. I was literally just projecting because I was insecure. I didn't really know about what, either. And if you had asked me at that moment, I probably would have said, "Everything. And my hair looks horrible. It was probably something deeper than my hair looking crunchy from hairspray. But can I even call it projecting if I didn't say a single word out loud?"

When I got back to my seat, the man was back to looking at interactive maps on his phone. I have a bad habit of staring at other people's phone screens, and he noticed me looking.

"I'm tracking my boat," he said.

But "American Whore" by Lana Del Rey was playing a little too loud for me to understand. In milliseconds, I felt anxiety wash over my body. I had just constructed a fake interaction with this man, and now I was about to have a real one. I took out my AirPods quickly.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said, I'm tracking my boat. On my phone. It's amazing what phones can do now, right?"

"Yeah. It is really amazing."

We chatted for about 20 minutes about his boat going from Connecticut to New Jersey, about his New Jersey upbringing, and about his favorite restaurant that was also in New Jersey. He was nice. He did not have a Jersey accent—in fact he sounded like he was from California. He loved that I



asked about the name of his boat. Her name was Ophelia.

"She's not named after anyone or anything like that. I just love that name."

I liked that name, too. I like that boats always have girls' names. I told him that if I had a boat, I would name her Athena or Aphrodite. I don't know if I still agree with that. I feel like it's really corny now. He said those names were beautiful.

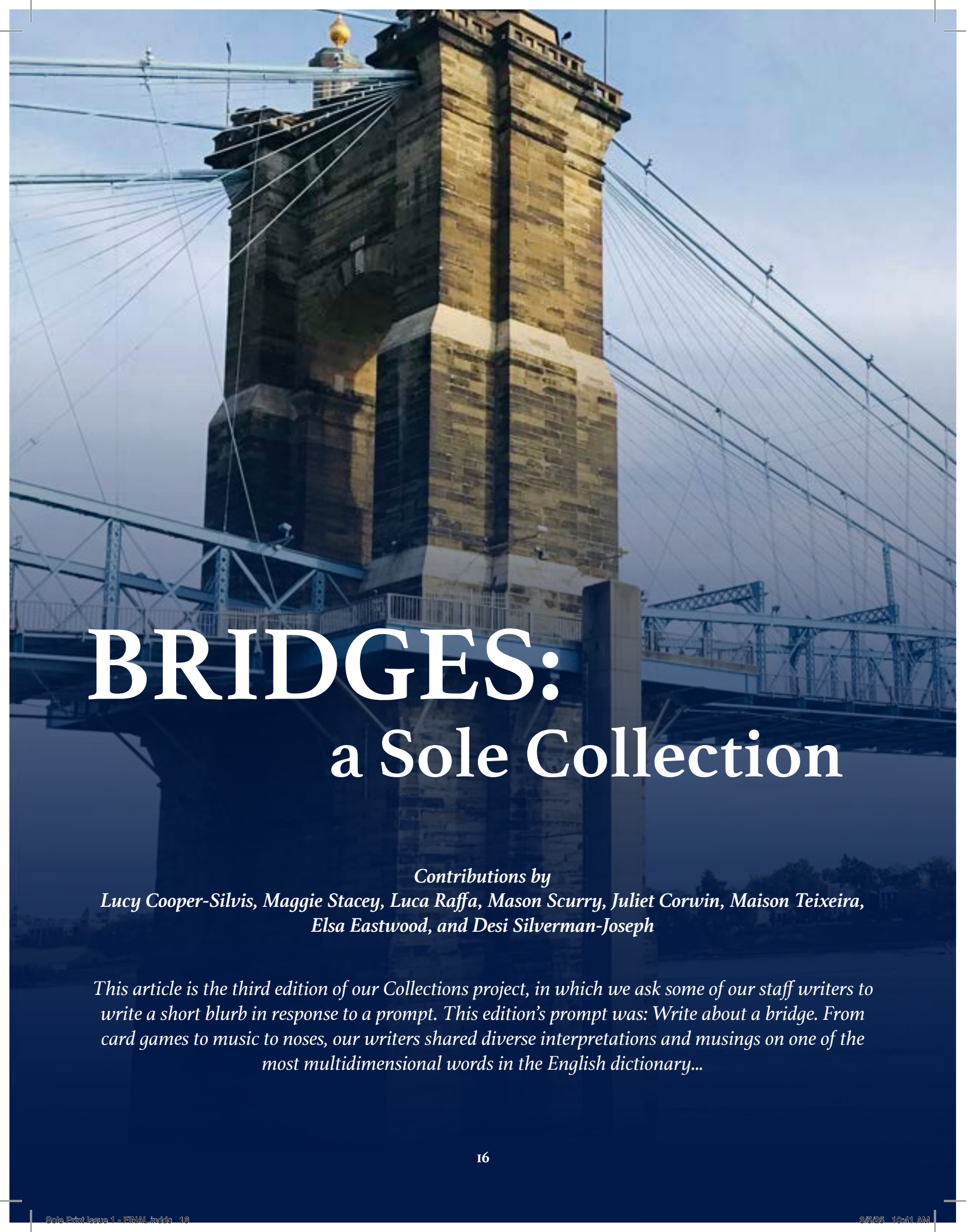
When it was time for me to get off the train, he helped me get my suitcase down from above the seats and told me to have fun at my mom's

art opening. He had asked what I was doing while I was in New York for the weekend. The real reason was that I needed more Adderall (I am prescribed, but still—), and I didn't want to tell him all that. And anyway, I really was heading straight to the gallery where she was showing her work. As I walked my turquoise suitcase with one broken wheel down twenty Manhattan blocks, I didn't put my AirPods back in. I looked at all the people I passed. I didn't know anything about any of them. And they didn't know anything about me. And that felt good.

Aflac. Aflac. AFLAAAAAC!

By Maison Teixeira





BRIDGES: a Sole Collection

Contributions by

*Lucy Cooper-Silvis, Maggie Stacey, Luca Raffa, Mason Scurry, Juliet Corwin, Maison Teixeira,
Elsa Eastwood, and Desi Silverman-Joseph*

This article is the third edition of our Collections project, in which we ask some of our staff writers to write a short blurb in response to a prompt. This edition's prompt was: Write about a bridge. From card games to music to noses, our writers shared diverse interpretations and musings on one of the most multidimensional words in the English dictionary...

Off Seekonk River

By Lucy Cooper-Silvis

Give me those folded bridges like calves tucked against thighs. Give me bridges gone to rust that would splinter like old bones if we lowered them again. Bridges a skyscraper devoid of offices. Bridges a ladder to nowhere. Bridges the world's tallest trellis for kudzu, ferocious, devouring, and ugly blotches on the horizon.

Fuck the Golden Gate, the London, the Roberto Clemente. Bridges neat and bow-tied and beautiful, bustling with neat and bow-tied and beautiful traffic. Bridges framed by rows of trees, fire-red in autumn, everything marching like order, order, order, good, good, good. Bridges so ready to ferry you—yes ma'am, no problem—from Point A to Point B. Bridges that don't complain. Bridges built over inept bridges. Bridges forgetting the brokenness that came before.

Give me those bridges more trou-

ble than they're worth. Bridges we'd rather not have. Bridges that put the fear of God in us. Bridges that groan, You fucked up. Bridges saying, I'm not needed, and only now I'm beautiful. Bridges that weep rust, like, Stay. Stay. Stay.



Edwin's Bridge

By Maggie Stacey

My 90-year-old friend built a bridge. It's red, suspended between boulders, across a stream enveloped in thick dark trees folding into each other.

The last time I crossed Edwin's bridge, I was running through mud-soaked trails with my dog whose tail was tucked between her legs through

the lullaby of the intensifying storm. Though the cold had broken through to my bones and my notebook was surrendering its pages to the caress of rain's touch, I stopped to stand still in the middle of the bridge. I felt each raindrop land on my skin and I felt my heart pounding against the breath of the thickening air against my chest. I couldn't remember why I'd been running.

I ran into Edwin earlier that morning at the cafe in town. His face beamed with that Edwin-type warmth - the type that comes from a boundless passion for the world that makes one eagerly await every opportunity to spill discoveries of its beauty into another's heart. I brought my tea to sit with him at his table and he told me the history of the French Revolution and then of France. My first tea turned into another until he said goodbye, he had to make his way home.

Edwin's my best friend's grandfa-

ther, my mom's best friend's stepfather, my mom's mom's best friend's husband, and my friend.

On Edwin's bridge time slows down, stops, and comes alive. Time holds my hand and we look together at the stream. Time is my past and my future and my mother's best friend's grandfather's past and everyone's future and no one's future all happening together at once. Time stands over me and embraces me with the world's song. Time sings the song of the leaves rustling, the creek rushing past rocks, the sticks falling off a tree branch. Time is here for sounds to become songs, for words to become stories, and for those stories to become mine to carry on.



The Whee Bridge

By Luca Raffa

From the highway bridge, I could see the cool shores of Lake Ontario, even makeout the great Toronto skyline with my little eyes. The size of a teddy bear, I would close my eyes, shake my head loose, the wind lifting my soul, the tickle of childhood making me smile. Laughing at fear, I would throw my hands in the air, and from deep inside my tummy I would roar: wheeee! A miracle awaited me ahead: an ocean raging, shattering into an enchanting mist that rose up into an arc of a million colors. America was just on the other side.

Since moving to Boston from Canada, my family would drive up to Toronto to visit my grandmother for Christmas every year. But crossing the Whee Bridge, I would keep my hands in my lap and tuck my voice into my throat. Stiff, I would nod at my memories in silence like strangers I used to know. The wind would hit

my face from the window and beckon me forward. I was a ghost, entering a world of the past. It was a world that I had grown apart from, a world that had grown apart from me. But from over the bridge, I could still see the cool shores of Lake Ontario, could make out the distant Toronto skyline. In the bleakness of December, I would break a smile, rouge on my cheek, a crinkle in my nose, a tickle in my heart, knowing very well what this magic was all about.



A Bridge to Paradise (Valley)

By Mason Scurry

I grew up in Montana, the northern heartland, the dusty soul of North America. I am wind-whipped wheat fields, a single-spiked mountain range (and then infinitely more), Lodgepoles stretching skyward. Under big skies, freedom is in no short supply. Neither is loneliness.

There's a bridge that runs over the Yellowstone River, parallel to I-90, between the Absarokas and the Crazyes. It's black, shiny metal, painted aluminum poles that criss-cross to form a tube around a train track like some steampunk rib cage. Mountainous, transcendentalist views extend infinitely through triangular gaps in the bridge.

I know this because I've walked the bridge myself, jumping from rung to rung with the water roaring beneath me, proud I'd mastered my once-debilitating fear of heights. I was brave

then, and because I was brave I was foolish, and because I was foolish I was free.

And that's what this story is really about, a bridge that's free because it's meaningless, free because it remains in Paradise Valley, but altogether lonely because its free.



Gaps

By Juliet Corwin

i. may i make you water under the bridge? may i draw the flesh from your bones and pull the fluid from your spine? may i curve you under the crook of your knee and watch as you lap along the shore? about sixty percent of our bodies are water. may we rise and fall in our tides together? will you show me each wave and ripple?

ii. meet me across the bridge of your nose. step lightly from nostril to nostril. land at the cupid's bow of your lips. bring me into your skin. let me dive from pore to lovely pore. let me

huddle with your breath on my face. make me yours, please, i'm pretty sure i'm

“**HOW MANY STONES DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE A BRIDGE? ONLY ONE, IF YOU LEAP FAR ENOUGH, MAYBE.**”

Juliet Corwin, “Gaps”

ready for you to be mine.

iii. is each pair of ribs a broken bridge? bone winding around trying to touch the other only to be forever reaching out.

iv. my grandma used to play bridge every once in a while. my grandpa played bridge and poker. now that my grandpa has died, my grandma plays bridge every week with a group of

widowed women. their hands shuffle the cards, wrinkled and skilled from age, wedding rings still on, shining weights.

v. how do i tell you that my feelings jumped off the bridge and you didn't catch them before they hit the water? how do i tell you of the salty splash without re-enacting it with tears? will they fall from my eyes? will they pool in yours? who will catch the drops?

vi. question: why did my mom cross the bridge? answer: because she can't swim

vii. in gymnastics, there is a pose called "bridge." with your index fingers and thumbs creating a triangle, press your palms into the ground. push your body towards the sky and straighten your knees as far as possible. it may be uncomfortable to breathe.

viii. we made bridges with our bodies, ached for our hands to cross every inch. we didn't worry about what might be on the other side. whether it was sweet or prickly.

ix. i used to walk down to the bridge between st paul and minneapolis. the lights on the other side reminded me that somewhere, people were dancing.

x. the songs play bridges, croon across lyrics and notes. sometimes i don't know how far the distance is, how many steps they count, but their words reach me anyway.

xi. a bridge collapsed in maryland. and west virginia. and missouri. new york, indiana, mississippi, rhode island, illinois, ohio, iowa, new jersey, massachusetts, kentucky, pennsylvania, colorado, michigan, oklahoma, washington, wisconsin, south carolina, louisiana, kansas, georgia, virginia, florida, connecticut, tennessee, california, arkansas, alabama, new hampshire, north carolina, texas, minnesota, hawaii, montana, maine. thirty-seven out of fifty (seventy-four percent).

xii. how many stones does it take to make a bridge? only one, if you leap far enough, maybe.

xiii. our interlaced fingers bridge the distance between our beating hearts, and for a moment i imagine that we may feel the same thing. then your hand strays along the curve of my hip and i crumble.



Track 12

By Maison Teixeira

I press play.

l>

The sound of a hand, frozen in time as it strums a guitar before I was born, plays in my ears. The guitar repeats the same two chords, four times each, over and over again.

I leave my dorm room, descend the stairs, and make my way through the garden in front of my dorm. As I watch a squirrel scuttle across the grass, a soft, deep voice sings: "Underneath the bridge... tarp has sprung a leak... and the animals I've trapped... have all become my pets..."

His melancholic words, sung from somewhere beyond this life, carry me through the busy streets. There is a distinct loneliness to his song, as if his voice is on the verge of breakdown.

“THE PASSING CONVERSATIONS, THE BIRDS TWEETING AND CHATTERING, AND THE CARS..., ALL DISSAPPEAR TO THE BRIDGE, THE BEST PART OF THE SONG”

Maison Teixeira, "Track 12"

The world outside my headphones falls away, replaced with the sound of his voice and his guitar. The passing conversations, the birds tweeting and chattering, and the cars, whose drivers angrily mutter under their breath

as I cross the road without looking both ways, all disappear to the bridge, the best part of the song, where the drums, bass, and the cello finally kick in.

I make it to the other side of the street and turn a corner, but the road is closed, and

there's...

"Something in the way...something in the way...yeah..." I look to the other side of the street. My best friend is walking in the opposite direction.

ll

We smile at each other as I take off my headphones and cross the street, suddenly thankful that there was... something in the way.



Crossing Over

By Elsa Eastwood

I read and reread Paper Towns the summer of our final visit to San Francisco. It was full of John Green's characteristically cynical aphorisms, but one particular line lodged itself in my mind—one I couldn't yet understand that was waiting for its moment.

My family went to San Francisco every year. My parents grew up there, and they passed the city on to us like an

heirloom. I remember the unfathomable magic of Fairyland in years when it was socially acceptable to sport striped pajamas in the daytime. Sneaking out just after dawn with my mother for focaccia at the bakery in North Beach, the old men hunched

over cappuccinos and newspapers. Searching for pirates with my father in the dense fog.

By the time my younger brothers were old enough to spell their names, we had done almost everything there

was
to do
there.
We

met all
of our
North-
ern
Cali-

fornia relatives. We watched fourth-of-July fireworks from Aquatic Park and the wrestling seals in residence at Pier 39. We muscled our way through the entire Ghirardelli menu. Yet, one unturned stone loomed at the back of my mind.

I remember seeing it for the first time—stretched across the horizon, cables fragmenting a cloudless sky. The grandeur of the muted steel, the romantic history. I sat long past my bedtime in the window of the rental house, gazing in dreamlike reverence at the millions of artificial stars that illuminated its sweeping limbs. How fitting its name was. How big and beautiful the world seemed.

By that summer, the emblem of ingenuity had become to me a reminder of the one San Francisco milestone I had yet to conquer. It was time: I would walk the Golden Gate Bridge.

The day came. Cars barrelled past. Every noise was thunderous. The five of us clung desperately to the red handrail, eyes darting between signs that warned, “The Consequences to Jumping are Fatal and Tragic”, “Emergency Phone and Crisis Counseling”, and “There is Hope! Make the Call!”

My hair whipped my face until it stung. I pulled it aside just in time to see my middle brother wedge his body between two of the bars to catch a glimpse of the bay 200 feet below.

“Donovan! Away from the edge!” my mother cried, her voice swallowed

by the wind as she lunged to grab his arm. We watched as a particularly wild gust sent my father’s baseball cap cartwheeling through the air into traffic. A wail from my youngest brother pierced the chaos.

I tight-
roped
the line
between
speeding
cars and
fatal fall
in silence.
I felt

betrayed by my vision, thrust violently into the truth like a toddler into a glassy pool. The bridge’s seismic hum made waves beneath my feet as I inched forward.

I never thought I would succumb to negativity; the world had always been kind to me, my imagination always unchallenged by experience. But as I stood there, facing a 40-minute walk and the grim reality of my postcard fantasy, I understood:

Everything’s uglier up close.



The Plunge

By Desi Silverman-Joseph

Jumping off the bridge was the coolest thing you could do when we were little. Addie was the first of us boys to do it. When he landed in the water, I saw my uncle’s face light up with pride. He pumped his arms triumphantly—as if to say, That’s my son! He’s not scared of no bridge. I still have the scrapbook photo commemorating the event.

We stared, dumbstruck, as Addie climbed out of the water. My brothers and cousin offered congratulatory remarks, but I felt a pang. I sought that same approval—that stamp of manhood that can only be achieved

by falling twelve feet off the side of a railing and into salty waters below.

On top of the bridge, cars raced by, not aware of the feat of courage that was to be committed in their midst. I clasped my dad’s hand tightly and peeked over the railing. My insides sunk three feet.

“Uncle Danny will be in the water to meet you,” my dad reassured me. He helped me climb up the two craggy wooden slats guarding the bridge. I stood on top of the railing, capped by a flat plank of wood so thin its width matched the length of my little feet. I witnessed the vastness of the ocean before me, blossoming out from my chest. My dad held my hand for stability. “You got this!” Uncle Danny shouted from below.

My eyes welled with tears. “I can’t do it, Dad,” I choked up. I turned back toward the road, unable to look my dad in the eyes. I walked my wimpy legs back down to the seashore in shame and hoped that next year I would be brave enough. The cars still sped by overhead.



Designed by Deeya Prakash

7B2 (Northampton Airport, MA)

By Juliet Corwin
Illustrated by Ina Ma

WE MUST HAVE seemed crazy. We lay on the warm tarmac pavement, looking up at the orange and pink clouds. I still had tear-streaked cheeks and a hoarse voice from the screaming I'd allowed myself in the car. She hadn't told me where we were going. When we got here she didn't say why she'd driven us to this spot.

When my high-school boyfriend breaks up with me and leaves me alone at the bottom of a hill, I don't know yet what a blessing this is. As I climb, I cry the tears I held back in front of him. I call my friend who hasn't always been reliable and tell her the news. This time, she shows up, and it's enough. She picks me up in her car, unknowingly drives towards his house, and I redirect her with a choked voice. She lets me yell out of the open window, lets me cry and laugh and ask why and say every thought that travels through my mind. I am exhausted when she pulls over and parks on an unfamiliar dirt road.

When everything feels too big, go somewhere that reminds you that the world is bigger. Go to a place that you are certainly not supposed to be. Let yourself forget the rules. Inhale and watch whatever finds its way in front of you. It is okay if your breathing isn't easy. Just watch the sky and float in it all.

When you're sick of trying to run away, lie on a small airport tarmac,

and don't think about how stupid this is. Just watch the white lines on the dark tar, mirrored with the streaks of clouds above you, and the little lights glowing in the sunset. Tilt your head back to see as much of the sky as possible. Your breath will catch in your lungs and then release in a bubble of laughter and awe. For a moment, you will forget to be hurting. The pavement on your back is warm and it holds you. The sky is a dome protecting you, and eventually you'll

feel as though the world is embracing you. Hug it back. When you feel the ground shaking, sit up and roll away. Remember to send up a kiss to the clouds as you leave.

In a few days I begin to realize that I feel a sense of relief.

In a few months I meet someone who treats me in a

way that confuses me because my ex never asked me these questions, never cared to learn about me beyond how much my body he could touch, despite being in a relationship for a year. Half a year later I begin to understand that the things he did were things he never should have done, things that other people don't always get away with. In spite of myself, I



feel jealous of the simplicity of my other friends' breakups—the pints of ice cream, the crying at rom-coms, the missing until they miss them a little less, until the days stop hurting so much. Instead, my reckoning is long—years—filled with anger and confusion, night terrors and vomit, PTSD and a family that I don't know how to tell about him. My high school does nothing when I report, and I lie awake at night wondering how many others he will hurt. I apologize for not being able to forget, for my body's constant fear, for forgetting how to breathe deeply.

As we walk back to the car, I thank my friend for introducing me to this new place. Neither of us know that in a year, I will live a plane ride away from this town, from our childhood.

Designed by Deeya Prakash



Notes on Translation

By Razan Haweizy
Illustrated by Yujin Kim

“Agricolae servōs labōrāre in agīs iubent.”¹

IN SILENCE, THE words rose monumentally on the page, bearing the weight of centuries. Sixteen sentences stood in formation as if awaiting understanding. My cursor wandered as my finger moved it to the top right corner of the screen, revealing the hour: 1:00 AM. Blended dialogues and translations pounded my ears and the glow of the screen contracted my pupils. I abandoned the Latin, defying reason, to an elusive muse, nameless.

“Servi in agros ierunt.”²

A lone bench beckoned me and the leaves cracked under my shoes, retaliating against the rough embrace of my soles. As I sat, nature’s whis-

pers graced my ears – the scampering of a lone bunny, the distant wails of an ambulance rushing through the streets, the laughter of two friends under the impression that they were alone. They could’ve been childhood friends catching up or maybe they bonded over the shared struggles of keeping up with the relentless demands of existence. Maybe they weren’t friends at all and just happened to bump into each other. I could hardly find ‘silence’ in its true form.

“Cum laborabant, formicae viderunt.”³

On the handle of my chair I spotted an ant. Miniscule and insignificant. Traveling to the very edge of my armrest. A particular evil I have carried within me is my almost natural instinct to kill. To kill ants. Usually “ants,” but this one seemed lonely. I can’t quite

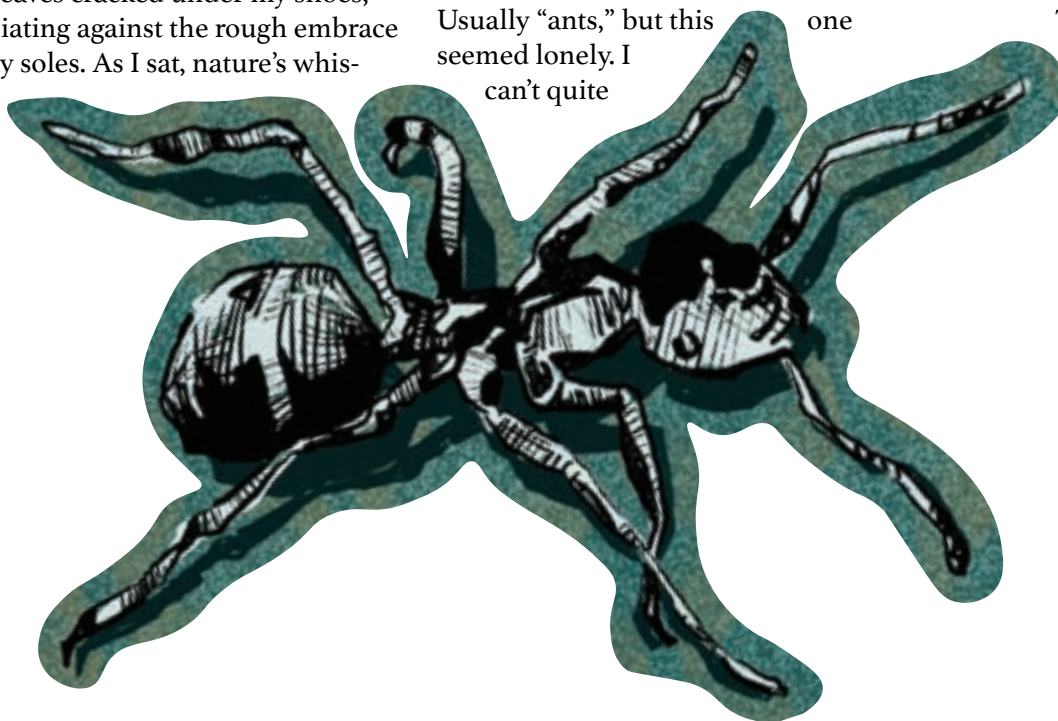
pinpoint when this habit developed, but it now feels weird.

Ants are a family of insects belonging to “Formicidae,” and ants are further categorized into groups that each serve a function within the family. Latin is commonly used to classify organisms, mostly because it is a dead language, so it cannot change. Stillness. The ultimate human desire. And this desire to never change may have been my greatest source of agony.

Their tiny legs scurry them along, looking for food. They lay little eggs, and smaller ants emerge. They dig and dig and dig little holes that only they can fit into. They pace, armed, in front of their colony.

Entitlement. A legal right or just claim to do, receive, or possess something. Is a person ever entitled to another? Was I ever entitled to killing those ants? I’m not so sure anymore.

They knew they weren’t entitled to me, harbored no claim, but sometimes





I wonder if they didn't. Belief is too ambiguous, I knew they didn't.

Yet as the ant made its way across the armrest, I started contemplating not killing it. The automated act of murder was replaced by something that resembled sympathy. At that moment, sitting alone on that bench with my legs raised to my chest, I felt the weight of being small. Maybe the ant didn't realize its vulnerability. It didn't realize that all it took was a single flick, a whisper of pressure. It didn't realize its fragility. No one does.

Fragilitas. The quality of being fragile or easily broken; hence, liability to be damaged or destroyed, weakness, delicacy.

I believe I am not fragile until I catch a whiff of the vanilla scented reed diffuser.

I was small. I was lost. I was just a girl. I could not survive on my own. I was a girl with opinions. Opinions were wrong. I was a girl who pursued too much. Also wrong. I was a girl who didn't understand. I was a

girl who was naive. I was a girl who knew nothing about anything. I was stubborn. I was complicating my life for no good reason. I was a girl. And I remember realizing that things were going to be different.

"Formicas quidem miserae erant." ⁴

Different. In the way they spoke to me, as though we were no longer bound by the definition of "Filia," "Mater," "Pater," the words fading into obscurity. Different. In the way I felt the judgemental eyes that watched over me my whole life, almost protectively, start to shut. The eyes that were not mine before, that were theirs, that depicted me as weird, strange, helpless, disobedient, unnatural, unlovable, inappropriate. Those eyes that one day became mine through which I watched myself.

"Servi formicae in agro necaverunt." ⁵

As the wind intensifies, and the night grows colder, I start to accept the ant. It was never waiting for me, yet I imposed so much on it. It might die soon enough, and I'll forget about it. Its family has probably already forgotten about it. And although its classification might never change, and neither will the human desire to kill ants, I feel like I can mold out of myself.

Footnotes

- 1 The farmers order the slaves to work in the fields.
- 2 The slaves went into the fields.
- 3 When they were working, they saw the ants.
- 4 The ants were indeed miserable.
- 5 The slaves killed the ants in the field.



In Black and White

I.

I'VE SPENT THE past few months chasing for feelings. Something stronger than vodka in my throat and the scent of that American Eagle perfume I sprayed all over that one snowy night in the Rock. Something stronger than *Tell me about yourself in under three minutes* and *Keep trying, you'll get there*.

I've found that maybe there is a place between the hunt and this armchair in my hometown café where the flat white on my tongue feels just right: not too much milk, not too much espresso. Where his tears feel salty not just to my taste buds but to my arteries, where my heart pumps red blood just as mom told me it does on that dining table eight years ago.

I'm learning that there is only a sheet of paper that is sandwiched between freedom and sadness, but I cannot read the words I once could, its scribbles not illegible but rather foreign. I'm looking for the future and the past as an escape from the present, but they exist only in myself, a place inaccessible to me.

I think I'm starting to spot themes beyond my English lectures. How summer falls into autumn slowly, and then all at once. How day is light and night heavy, and how the devil doesn't play so well in my idle hands. How the books I've read recently are points in a connect-the-dots game, constellating a projection that I've underlined and highlighted, but I've still yet to understand. I'm grasping at these fickle lines, but it's as far and made-up as the Saturn I saw in that telescope 10 Decembers back.

By Mizuki Kai

2.

When I started college, I began looking for something I didn't know I lost. I searched for it everywhere: in the third floor room that only you and I know about, in Saturday mornings, in eavesdropped conversations in the Blue Room and in every black pupil I've stared into.

I realize now what I was looking for was left somewhere on I-10 between Houston and San Antonio and I was reaching for something that melted right as it hit the asphalt. Up in Providence, snow sticks and stays until it's gray, so I've since learned there's no such thing as black and white.

Here, spring is pink and autumn orange, but there is nothing more monochrome than my desire to make angels from what falls. I've learned that after dusk always comes dawn, and so I'll leave bite marks in the moonlight until my teeth break.

Providence thinks I'm pretty, and I think it's pretty, too.

3.

I was told not to over-explain myself but I don't know how to exist without justification. My mom always said that I had a loud presence, so I'm just hoping she was right.

Simulacrum

By Anna Zulueta
Illustrated by Maison Teixeira

THE YEAR IS 1925. The war is over. The depression is yet to come. Cauliflower and broccoli are aboard a ship to America, like two hopeful lovers. My grandma is nine years old with golden hair. She's living in Wisconsin with Uncle Doc, Auntie Dee, Aunt Patty, Oma Olga, and Opa Raymond. My father's family is in the Philippines, where the country is still under American rule.

In Wisconsin, it is important to have bread and butter at every meal. Homemade, of course. It is dairy country, and my grandpa wakes up at 5 a.m. to milk the cows before he goes to school. My grandma lives in town, so this is not one of her chores.

In the Philippines, it is important to have rice at every meal. My dad is the youngest of eight, and has to eat quickly, or else there will be no rice left for him.

Heart disease runs on both sides of my family: my Opa passed from leukemia when I was a baby, and there is diabetes and high blood pressure on my dad's side. Enter: cauliflower.

Cauliflower is lower in carbohydrates than rice, and, critically, it can be sliced into small cubes to resemble the staple. It's also pretty bland and absorbs flavor well, just like white rice. This method of preparing cauli-

flower is called "ricing," and the dish itself is "riced cauliflower." Because it looks and, to some extent, tastes like rice.

I think my mom was the first to find it, in the frozen vegetable section of the grocery store nestled next to the broccoli (looks like they stayed together after all these years). Five minutes in the microwave, and out comes a low-calorie, low-carb rice substitute. This is what I would eat

“**SIMULACRUM: TO BE THE SAME BUT NOT THE SAME. TO WANT TO BE THE SAME? TO BE FORCED TO BE THE SAME?**”

growing up, and now when I go home: not rice from a pot-bellied rice cooker, but riced cauliflower. Actual rice is reserved for special occasions: holidays, restaurants, particularly strong cravings. For when my dad makes vegetable pancit and chicken adobo. For birthdays, and maybe Easter or Christmas.

I was talking about this with a good friend of mine, who, like me, is Asian and white. She asked me, "Why not eat brown rice?" I was stumped at first, because we did eat brown rice sometimes, just not as often as riced cauliflower. And I think the answer is the calorie count: brown rice may be higher in fiber, but cauliflower is lower in calories. And then there is the quality of simulacrum.

Simulacrum: to be the same but not the same. And that is where riced cauliflower's strength turns into its weakness. It is not rice, it only looks that way.

I, of course, do not have the advantage of cauliflower: I do not look Asian. Neither do I look particularly German. I did not inherit my grandmother's blonde hair and sky-blue eyes. This is something that my sister, who is adopted, and I have in common: neither of us looks like our parents.

So I've searched over the years, starting in my own body, looking for something to tell me who I am. It's the same search that drives people to take genealogy tests, and those companies know it—they lean into the rhetoric to suck people in. *Those percentages won't tell you who you are*, I think. But still I examine my hands.

See those wrinkles? I get them from my mom's side. Look at the width of my fingers. They're narrow like my dad's.

My hair is something of a conundrum: for years I thought I got my waves from my dad's side. Its color is like that of my skin—somewhere between my parents'. But the waves, where are they from?

My dad, whose hair is straight and black, claimed that he had wavy hair as a child. But visiting my Tita Aida, my dad's oldest sister, a few summers ago proved otherwise: rare baby pictures show him with straight hair. My mom usually straightens her strawberry blonde hair, but one day after she let it air dry, I realized that her wave pattern is the same as mine.

I've become more at peace with it over the years. But there are still things that nag me: When the first

question people ask me after I tell them I'm Filipino is whether I've been to the Philippines. When their next question is whether I speak Tagalog (like this is the only language in the

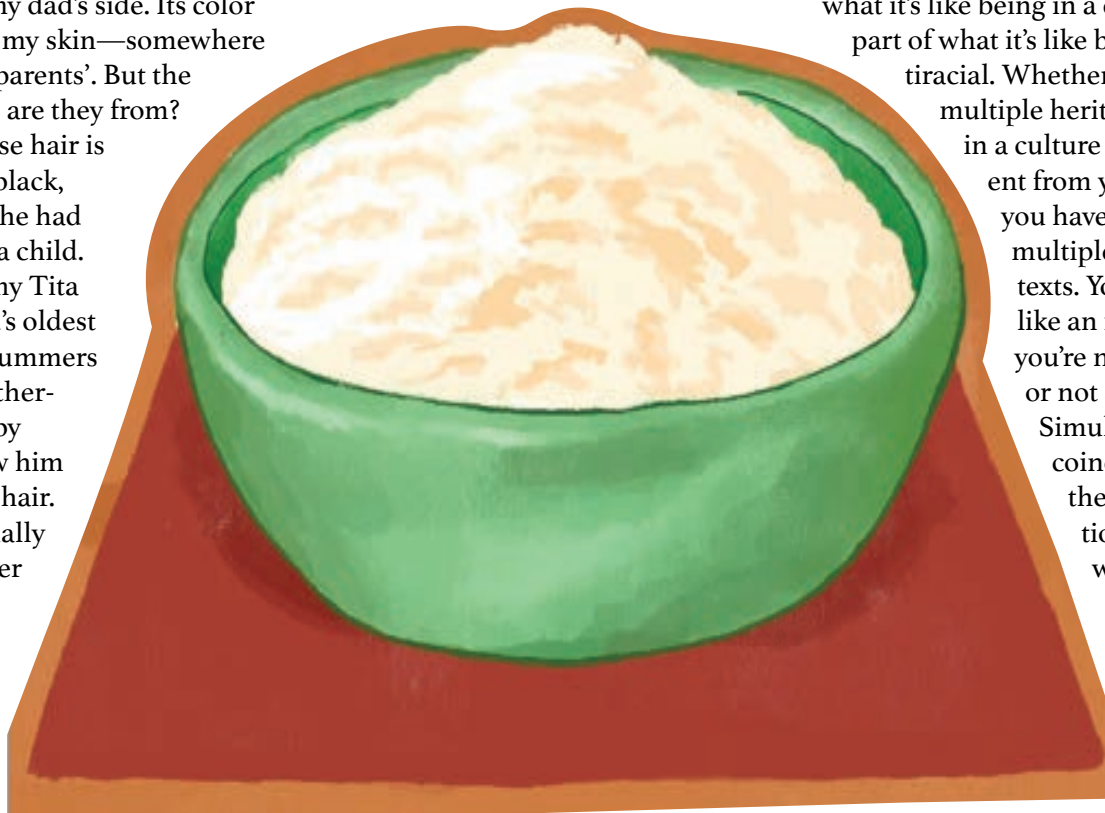
explanation from me of my German heritage, followed by a slightly colorist remark from them complimenting my complexion.

Feeling like a simulacrum is part of what it's like being in a diaspora and part of what it's like being multiracial. Whether you claim multiple heritages or live in a culture that's different from your family's, you have to navigate multiple cultural contexts. You might feel like an impostor, like you're not enough, or not authentic.

Simulacrum. Is it a coincidence that the friend I mentioned earlier, who is white and Japanese American, was the only one who didn't bat an eyelash when I mentioned

riced cauliflower? That when I told her about this essay in her apartment kitchen, she just said, "Oh yeah, I eat that, too"?

Philippines). Or when their reaction is "Well, you don't look Filipino." This last comment usually comes from other, older Filipinos, followed by an



Perhaps it is just that: coincidence. She did, after all, have a rice cooker chugging merrily away on the countertop.

* * *

Simulacrum: to be the same but not the same. To want to be the same? To be forced to be the same?

Simulacrum carries notes of assimilation, too obvious not to mention. The classic lunchbox example: immigrant children begging their parents not to make “ethnic” lunches because they are “too smelly.” Because it will make them stand out. Because America can accept your money but not your identity.

During the days of FDR, accessing social welfare programs required one to be American, that is to say, to show that they have mastered white American culture. Societal messages exhorted Asian Americans to join the melting pot by erasing their heritage. Throw in your sisig, your balut, your Bratwurst, and out comes the perfect American chicken noodle soup. Affirmative action programs opened public schools to minorities, where students were taught to be American in a certain way, a white way. And not just any white, but a specific

American white: in those days after the World Wars, my mother’s family started hiding their German language for fear of being taken as the enemy. This is one type of assimilation.

Yet just forty years later, Reagan tax cuts discouraged this melting pot kind of assimilation: the state wouldn’t care for you anyway, so no need to perform. People kept their

“**IN TODAY’S WORLD, I FEEL THAT THERE IS PRESSURE TO SHOW YOUR HERITAGE, PROVE YOUR MEMBERSHIP. LET ME SEE YOU EAT RICE.**”

culture now because they could. The distinction between assimilation under Roosevelt and Reagan is not my idea; I came across it when I was reading Anna Tsing’s book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, which describes the journey of the matsutake mushroom, from forest to plate. Tsing shows how coercive assimilation (FDR) and neoliberal multiculturalism (Reagan) shape the

Asian American experience, explaining the difference in culture between Japanese American Nisei and Southeast Asian American mushroom pickers. The Nisei belonged to the older generation of FDR assimilation, and their lifestyle was similar to what Tsing herself grew up with: striving towards the “model minority” myth. The Mien mushroom camps, however, were full of more recent immigrants and reminded Tsing of China and Borneo rather than Asian America—the food and languages recreated home rather than recreating a “poster” America.

Seeing Tsing’s explanation of something I had long wondered about—how the Asian American experience is different for different generations—helped me understand some phenomena in my own life. For example, why so many of my Chinese American friends went to Chinese school, and why there was a Japanese school that used my high school over the weekends. But it didn’t quite explain why there was no Filipino school. That has another history: American colonization.

America doesn’t like to admit that it is an empire. Not only is it on stolen lands, but it also has overseas imperial holdings. While the Philippines

received its independence in 1946, Guam and Puerto Rico, the other islands the U.S. took after the Spanish-American War, remain territories today. In the 1940s, when my mother's family was hiding their German under FDR, my father's family was learning English under American rule. This, too, affects my cultural upbringing.

In today's world, I feel that there is pressure to show your heritage, prove your membership. *Let me see you eat rice.* I am not entirely sure where this comes from. Many places, I suspect, but likely the racial reckoning of the last few years plays a key role. Is this something people are using to avoid facing their guilt? Some flavor of "If I am a minority, I cannot be racist." Then there is moral policing of another kind: *If you assimilated, you are bad, you gave in to your oppressors.* Other voices say: *Don't you know that was how we had to survive?* Or: *Don't you know that was my choice?*

Why do only some people have the luxury of choosing when they make their personal political?

Let it be known: these barely scratch the surface of assimilation stories.

* * *

I eat more rice now than I ever have before. I still don't eat a lot, just more than I have in the past. In part, this is because it is easy for me to acquire East and South Asian food through Brown's meal plan. In part, this is because my partner is Chinese. If we continue building our lives together, I suppose rice will take on new meaning through our cultural fusion.

I spent the summer of 2022 traveling around the U.S. visiting family. After losing my Oma and great aunt the previous fall, I realized how important family was and how you never know how long you have with someone. Concurrently, I realized how little I was connected to my Filipino side compared to my German side. While I don't blame my parents, these facts were results of how they chose to engage with their families, heritages, and their children. Parenting is hard. Part of growing up is realizing

how you are different from your parents. And also how you are similar.

During my first semester at Brown, I felt like I was floating, untethered. A first-year college student away from home with no living grandparents, my feet barely scraping the ground. It's a hard feeling to describe, but it was as if everyone had been airlifted from their previous life and dropped onto Brown's campus, like the rest of the world didn't exist. As the semesters went on, I started to feel my new life becoming more integrated with my past. College is a crucible of identity formation, and just because many people go through it doesn't mean it isn't hard.

Simulacrum: to be the same but not the same. Isn't this just how life works? As each moment passes, you are the same but not the same. You are a tiny bit older. You are a tiny bit changed. We are all ships of Theseus, sailing the seas of our lives. We can't eat the same cauliflower twice.

Maybe, then, we are all simulacra.



A Love Letter on Losing Yourself

*By Mason Scurry
Illustrated by Joyce Li*

YOUR BIRTHDAY PASSED a couple of weeks ago.

I noticed.

I did think about you.

I didn't text (but I debated) mostly because you hadn't texted me for mine (two weeks before). I sent you a note. Did you get it? If not, it said I unblocked you.

It's hard to believe you happened, that we happened. We happened over a year ago. That summer, our time together, feels too big to fit into the bounds of a start and end date. But we did have a clear start date—a golden waterfall shrouded in fog, a kiss you started, a lit billboard on the side of the highway.

We also had a clear end date—a night at one of our old places (this time there was snow on the ground), hours of tears because I was too late, calcified love, distance.

You feel so far away now. I understand the connection between space and time, but not the distinction. I suppose that's the point.

Sometimes I wonder if we ever happened at all. More often, I wonder if we ever ceased to happen. I've been dreaming since our goodbye, I've been half-conscious, stone-faced and sharp-edged. The essence of me is still with the essence of you, still in Montana in your bed without a top sheet, still tangled on the couch and kissing your forehead, still holding the bouquet of wildflowers you collected, still walking hand in hand through my neighborhood at dusk.

This year, my summer felt quick and small. Linear. Simple.

Our summer was lumbering, gentle and limitless. I remember it all—a second date sitting on a stump by the old Story Mill when we were still new to each other, the tunnel under the interstate when I learned what it

meant to be yours, 22 beaded bracelets (I still have them), chapters of handwritten love stories (I'm scared to search for them), how it felt to have my hands on the back of your neck.

Part of me is there. It's yours. It spans space and time, it defies all known laws of physics and biology and humanity, and it's there. Still loving you. Still needing you. Still merged with you.

Maybe this is how love, the worth-



while kind, works. When you fall in love you are briefly, gorgeously complete, when you fall in love you crack some and flow into another soul to become something you were not before.

When that love is lost, that merged and mixed and altogether beautiful part of you snaps off and spirals away. It leaves a void, black and furious, one we smother in vodka shots and toxic self-affirmations and false denial, one we fill with bodies and shame and guilt.

It ruins our lives for a while until we learn to adjust. Then, the void

starts to shrink. We grow back into it. It heals over, we relearn how to exist, we think of ourselves in new, healthier ways, and eventually, we're a 'new person' bursting with 'self-love' and emotional byproducts and the love that was once our entire world becomes insignificant.

We marvel at how much has changed and how far we've come. We gawk at who we fell in love with. We look forward, and dream of someone better.

And it stays that way for a while. Then, something starts to glitter through the fog of our carefully constructed explanations. We're reminded of that first kiss. We realize we've kept some trinkets and letters we probably shouldn't have anymore. We start sensing that somewhere, sometime, that same love we'd cast aside still exists in a very tangible way, and we are still engaged in it, affected by it, in a blurry sort of way. We know this because we can feel its presence. Its soft pull.

We're aware that part of us is missing and always will be. We're left with a nostalgic peace, a gentle appreciation, sweet memories, and keepsakes. That is what's left over, whether we'd like it or not. Part of us is permanently missing, because we once belonged to another person.

Once, we opened our rib cages and let our hearts run free.

Once, we had the courage to give it all up and throw it all in.

Once, we fell in love, and that's not something you can take back.

And that's the consequence of a life well-loved, that's the consequence of a love well-lived, that's the paradox of loving—when you give yourself to someone, you don't quite ever get it all back.

Designed by Chloe Costa Baker

Gaybash: A Review

*By Desi Silverman-Joseph
Illustrated by Keira Yañez*

THE INVITATION ARRIVED as a Google Calendar notice via email:

GAYBASH: Sat Nov. 9, 10 pm - 1am.

“A party by gay guys, for gay guys” the subheading read. “Bring whoever fits the bill.”

My heart leapt as I read the invitation and forwarded it to three friends. This was the party of my high school fantasies, the kind of thing I prayed would await me in college after four years of celibacy, when the jocks who ruled the party scene refused an invitation to any boy outside their varsity-playing, Creatine-crazed circles. The result: Friday nights at home watching TV with my mother and a whole lot of pent-up sexual curiosity.

This feeling of desperation, I realize, is a common one for many gay guys who come flocking to Brown from not-so-cosmopolitan high schools, desiring shared experiences, romantic connection, and (let’s just say it) sex. And unlike at their high schools, gay guys at Brown may come to occupy the upper echelon of society, forming friend groups with formidable influence and social capital.

My friends and I call such high-status homosexuals “Sirens.” In pop culture, the word denotes a female temptress who leads men on only to squash their hearts in the end. Among my friends, however, the word has come to describe a very particular kind of gay man at Brown. Your average Siren is beautiful, fashionable, and mean. In the summer, he wears baggy jorts and covers his perfectly-proportioned upper body with a scant white wife-beater. In the

winter, he wears cargo pants with a knit sweater and a delicate scarf that could have only come from your voguish aunt’s wardrobe. His ears are pierced, his friends are hot, and he makes sure you know he reads in his free time. If you are not on his level, do not try to talk to him—he won’t give you the time of day.

When I arrived at the address listed in the invitation at 11 PM that fateful Saturday night, I was disappointed to find practically no Sirens in attendance. The party was filled almost entirely with nerds making awkward conversation and vague attempts at flirtation with people they knew from class. They swayed their bodies back and forth uncomfortably to house music, but few actually danced. I fluttered about looking for an interaction I could enter without worrying about how quickly it would turn stale.

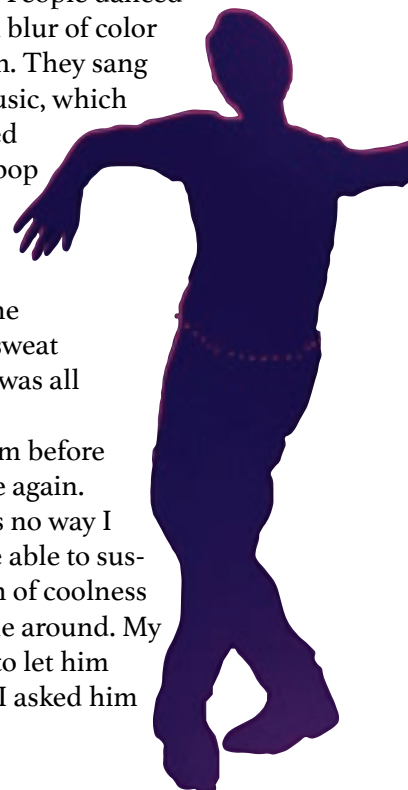
At 11:30, the Sirens arrived at once. Everyone seemed relieved; Gaybash was not some lame gathering we had been tricked into attending but a real party with Sirens and all. They stood among us, and this was our chance to associate, to integrate ourselves among their ranks. One Siren whom I had met briefly at a campus event approached me. He grabbed my hand and offered a warm, Sireny hug. I blushed and tried to sustain a conversation without losing composure. Exhausted by the effort, I pretended to get distracted by a friend in the crowd. I bounded away, satisfied that I had been the one to kill the interaction. It’s a good feeling when you make a Siren yearn.

It turns out I wasn’t the only one feeling conscious about a perceived

divide between the high-status and the humdrum homosexuals. One stranger introduced himself by asking if I was a “scary gay.” It was his intention, he told me, to meet all the scary gays at Brown that night. I laughed and told him that I wasn’t scary—eager to disprove his assumption through warmth and relatability. Secretly, though, I was a bit flattered. I had indeed elevated my self-presentation with the hopes of intimidating the crowd: I had put on my softest, most tight-fitting shirt, my thrifted gold-beaded choker, and my most expensive, gender-neutral scent from Le Labo.

Maybe it was something about the influx of Sirens, or the increasingly claustrophobic conditions of the party, or the sight of my ex-boyfriend yukking it up with some friends in the corner, but I began to feel sick to my stomach. People danced around me in a blur of color and commotion. They sang along to the music, which had transitioned from house to pop classics that I embarrassingly didn’t know the lyrics to. The room stank of sweat and alcohol. It was all too much.

The Siren from before approached me again. Shit. There was no way I was going to be able to sustain my illusion of coolness this second time around. My best hope was to let him do the talking. I asked him





questions. He flirted aggressively. Oh god, he was really hitting on me. I should've been happy. This guy was hot shit. I dreamed of befriending guys like him all through freshman year. But the whole thing left me feeling nauseated. I could feel the acid piling up in my throat. My heart was throbbing. I was surely going to puke.

"I'm sorry—I think I have to go. I'm not feeling so good," I panted, making a beeline for the door and bolting out before he could respond.

That sucked. But I was relieved to have some fresh air. It felt good to be out of there and in the familiar world of heterosexuality again—where people dressed badly and did not know all the words to Lana del Rey. Here, I could be plain and uninteresting and it wouldn't matter. After ten minutes of walking around the neighborhood, I felt better and returned to face the gays.

Not long after stepping back through the door, I was shuttled out again. It wasn't just me—every last person at the party had to leave. Word was that the police had arrived. People lined up along the narrow staircase and funnelled through the front door. The crowd was irked that the festivities had been cut short. "If this were a frat, there's no way the police would have shut this down," someone yelled out. "Yeah—fuck the police," someone else responded. "Wow, this is sooo homophobic," another boy chimed in. I couldn't totally tell whether people were joking or in earnest.

Outside, the officers seemed

amused by the sight of us. "Looks like a bunch of RISD kids," I heard one say, picking up on the alternative, femme aesthetics that everyone was sporting, that perfect nexus between streetwear and sophistication which is sure to boost your rank. A hundred boys gathered outside the house in mixed-up huddles of scary gays and soft gays and nerdy gays and diva gays—all refusing to leave the premises and all united in a sort of performative indignation.

"Disperse, disperse," the police yelled. The crowd stayed put. Everyone seemed bent on goading the police into violent confrontation, as if Gaybash were the next Stonewall. Two boys ran out into the middle of the road and began to perform ballet, spinning and twirling and leaping provocatively on the asphalt in front of the all-male police squad dressed in navy blue and standing with their feet wide apart. "Go home, disperse!" the police yelled again through a megaphone. When there was no movement, they blared their sirens at a deafening volume (as if there weren't already enough loud sirens around), and everyone walked off into the darkness.

In the end, I had more fun debriefing Gaybash with my mother on the phone than I did attending the party itself. As a highschooler, I anticipated feeling liberated at a function like this—free to dress as I please, talk as I please, flirt as I please. In

actuality, though, I felt no less uneasy at Gaybash than I did at the parties I attended in high school. But the quality of the anxiety felt fundamentally different. In high school, popularity was unthinkable, and I often felt on the outs. At Gaybash, what I think unnerved me most was the lure of status, the fact that I, too, could slip into the quicksand and become cool and beautiful and scary.



Anatomy

By Stella Kleinman
Illustrated by Joyce Li

IN MEDICAL SCHOOL, my father had to memorize every part of the body and its development process. Each time my mother was pregnant, he knew of every turn a developing bone could take, every lapse that could cause a blood cell to rupture. He knows of the ways an organ can fail, including the ones that don't announce themselves before it is too late.

He was the one to tell me that the first functional organ to develop in the human embryo is the heart. He simulated its development with his hands, twisting his palms into tubes and chambers before locking them into a teardrop shape. His fingers each formed a vein or artery, pumping imaginary blood into the living room.

Back when we lived at the old house, the one with the sloping yard and crabapple tree, my mother used to come home with boxes of seeds. Some of them grew, like the sunflowers. Some of them didn't, and now I don't remember their names. One afternoon in early fall, she brought back a mesh bag of what looked like wild onions, oblate spheroids with pointed ends. The familiar teardrop shape, packed with life. Their light brown skin crinkled along the top, formed ridges down the sides, and peeled off at the base, exposing smooth, white flesh. My mother called them bulbs and planted them in the thin plot in the backyard, against the wooden fence.

In the kitchen, we had a window overlooking the plot, usually opaque with heat from the oven. I used to glare through the panes, willing something to happen in that little patch of soil, thinking maybe I could coax out a stem or something. I stared

at the earth so hard I could have sworn I saw it pulse at least once.

My mother told me that the bulbs were making roots, growing away from us. Nutrients from the soil were circulating through the thin, white strands. During the winter, the bulbs quietly rested under frost.

My mother knew they might not grow but still checked on them, even before their due dates. That spring, thin green leaves pushed out of the soil and flowered soon after. We had a full row of tulips, pastel pinks and sunset oranges and reds that matched the cardinals who nested in the shed. Petals folded out, like palms open-

“ I THINK ABOUT OBJECTS I KNOW ARE SOLID AND REAL, FORMS THAT HAVE LASTED FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS. ”

ing up to catch a drop of sun. As my mother and I stood together in front of the plot, I could feel the blood pour out of my heart and stream into the capillaries behind my cheeks. Maybe this was what it felt like to bloom, to contract and swell.

* * *

When I went to ballet class, the studio was always cold. The other girls and I would gather on the floor to tie our satin slippers, shivering at the contact between our tights and the wooden floor panels. Our instructor led us in stretches, telling us to lay our knees open like butterfly wings

and point our toes to form a crescent moon. “Imagine a string is tied to your spine, and someone is pulling upwards on it,” she would say. I think of her words every time I notice myself slouching.

According to my father, the spinal cord sends commands from the brain to the body, and vice versa. The spine enacts every pirouette and leap; it carries the pain of every fall.

Some nights, when I am thinking about how easily the human body can be created and destroyed and questioning whether I am a whole person, I press my fingers to the ridges of my spine. I think about objects I know are solid and real, forms that have lasted for thousands of years. I feel entire landscapes along my back—summits and valleys of bone, lakes of spinal fluid, stalks of nerves ripe for harvest. If people try to see through me, they will have to crane their necks around my vertebrae.

In elementary school, I learned about deciduous and evergreen trees. Deciduous trees lose their leaves in the fall, and my brothers and I used to compete over who could rake the biggest pile. Evergreens keep their needles year-round, providing shelter for deer, squirrels, and migrating birds. There is a giant pine tree outside my bedroom window, and I used to think it touched the stars. In the warmer months, I open my window and sleep in its scent. In the colder months, I watch snow lay safely on its branches, looking back up at the moon.

I like the way pine needles jut out into the air like static hairs on end, forcing people to see them even when the tree becomes a silhouette. While the needles burn quickly in a forest fire, the trees themselves are insulated with thick bark. When every-

thing else leaves, pine trees remain, feeling every motion and impulse of the night. I close the blinds thinking I might actually know something about strength, about pulling myself upwards—not by a thread but with my own nerves and tendons.

I used to stand outside when it rained, boots shuffling against the unpaved part of the driveway. I would stand there in a downpour with my hands face-up, waiting for a droplet to splash straight into the center of my palm. When one would hit in exactly the right spot, I could feel it trickle into my bloodstream.

There is a bird sanctuary a few miles from my house with a collection of hiking trails and ponds. My family has gone every fall since I can remember, timing it in accordance to college breaks and paid holiday leave. We would forget to bring birdseed almost every time, and finally my mother threw a bag of it into the glove compartment of our car, where it stayed for the other 364 days of the year. Last year, we crept through the trail, holding birdseed out in our palms, looking up at the chickadees. Fluffy and plump, they surveyed us from their perches before fluttering down onto our fingers. I kept my hand as still as I could when one landed and bravely reached its beak out to eat. The creases in my palms, designed for collapsing and entrapping, stayed outstretched for as long as the bird wanted to peck. I wondered if maybe my hands were not as heavy and hard as I always thought they were. If I could be

a resting place for fragile things, just for a moment.

My mother still loves plants, and I think they've started to love her back. She craves a challenge, grabbing the succulents off of sickbay at Lowe's and somehow nursing them back to health. My favorite of her plants is the orange tree in the office, a gift from my father. Every time I see it, I think of her reaction when he brought it home, the sunshine under her skin. It has since grown from a tiny stem into a lush, flowering tangle of branches and fruits and shiny leaves. My mother handles the tree with a gentle yet protective touch, perhaps the same care with which she held my infant self during a time I can't remember.

The leaves stretch toward her, waiting for her fingertips to flutter down and land on their surfaces. Creases streak across the green, as familiar to my mother as her own

palms. They help her plants hold their shapes and carry nutrients for photosynthesis. As the leaves turn their faces upward, they absorb golden rays through the window and release oxygen into our home.

I think we do this too, this absorption and processing of light. If I were to interlace my fingers with yours, I would feel the light you have collected seep into me, through my skin, down my spine, and right back into my heart, where it all began.



True Blue

By Riley Stevenson

I AM SO in love.

I thought it loudly, letting the words play through my fingers as they danced in the icy wind streaming through my window, numbing my hands, chilling my teeth, cooling my body until I felt immersed, like in cold water, sinking deeper into this feeling, these words, this moment.

Friday evening, 8:30pm, I-95 heading South just to turn North again. Driving for the exact length of “Not Strong Enough” before hitting an exit and turning around. After talking about the state of the world, head in hands on Brown Street, parked car, lights not yet clicked off, sitting in the afterglow of ice cream and a long drive, considering the balance of things, shaking our heads, letting it lie in that easy silence we’ve cultivated in the last year and a half.

And it feels good to be known so well.

“We’re like siblings now... like I love you guys but I’m also like grrrr,” E said from the backseat while I licked ice cream off the back of my hand, A DJ-ing next to me. I think of this line often when I’m with them, how good and raw it feels to have two people who know me better than maybe anyone ever.

I remember turning to them at the concert a few months ago, always anticipating the next line, turning with emphasis, “Now, now, this one, it’s us!!!” and grabbing their shoulders, swaying on the concrete steps, avoiding the cold, sticky metal bench beneath us. Always too soon, always trying to force the point, to

make sure everyone knows that the metaphor is there and that what we have is special. I can never just let it hang in the warm silence, the post-ice cream car ride, the way I know what they’re thinking before they even say anything. I always have to force it anyway.

I can’t hide from you like I hide from myself.

I think I love boygenius so much because they’re singing about friendship. Who else does that these days? They’re singing about love, too, in a way that’s gut-punching and heart-wrenching, but they’re also singing about what it means to be known so well, to be driving so fast you think you might explode in a hurricane of love and wind and desert air.

On one of our drives, we recently considered the authenticity of boygenius, how real they really are or if it’s just an act, given that their brand is their friendship, their unabashed authenticity and love and gratitude for one another. When we saw them live, the eve of Julien’s birthday, they ended the show by smashing cake into each other’s faces, flinging it on the audience. Covering us all in the sticky sweet frosting of their platonic love. Not letting us leave the stadium without the knowledge that everything we see is real.

And telling us that it’s easy, see? Opening up the soft, warm parts of yourself to another person or two. It just takes a little trust. A little willingness to be your unabashed self, to fuck around and find out. You can do it, too. Do you hear it? Do you feel it?

I like to think that boygenius is just like me and my friends, but much better at writing it down. Their songs feel like the creations of late-night musings, the same kind of conversations we’re having about love and lust, belonging, fear, abandonment. The same things we muse about on dorm room floors and fire escapes, in parked cars and over late-night drunken grilled cheeses. Even when singing about their individual selves, about failed romance and mistakes, boygenius has the unmistakable tenor of kinship, of the type of tight-knit female friendship every young woman aspires to have. Their music video for “Not Strong Enough,” a montage of a perfect-seeming day interspersed with goofy faces, heel-clicking, weird zooming, and enough personality to keep fans from afar satiated, feels real. It doesn’t feel like an act, because it’s not.

I remember who I am when I’m with you.

I’ve never thought about being in love with my friends, in an utterly non-romantic but nearly-codependent way. I want to take back the idea that we can only love one person at a time and in such a specific way. I love my friends, and I love to tell them that, always have, but this feels different. When I look back at this time in my life, I believe it will be marked by how infatuated, how adoring I feel about the two people I spend the most time with. It feels like being in love, that tickle in your throat, that pounding in your chest, the passion, the fierceness. It feels like loving the jagged edges, loving

completely, without expectation or aspiration. I used to fear the idea that you only get to fall in love so many times, what it means to have one partner to love forever. I didn't know about this kind of love, I didn't know I had enough to share outside a clenched fist.

It feels like that stereotypical old-person kind of love—the next day, after the car ride, E said, “It feels like we’re old and married.” It feels like knowing someone so well you know what will happen next, and also know that it doesn’t matter what does. It feels like loving without fear of being ostracized or being

in the wrong. It feels like knowing how to say I’m sorry. How to say I know. How to say I don’t know. How to say I love you. Maybe it just feels like growing up.

Who won the fight? I don't know / We're not keeping score.

Often we say I love you through music. Through the hollering into the cold night on the highway, screaming our biggest fears as we pass beneath billboards and street lights. I tell my parents I’m glad to have my car at school because I can go home, but really it’s for nights

like this. We love boygenius the most, the three of us taking on their personalities as an electrifying Halloween costume. Our friendship was born into a “\$20” landscape, and those chords never fail to kick us all into glorious cavorting. boygenius makes music for driving fast in unfamiliar places. When I can’t fathom doing a minute more of schoolwork, this is what we do—drop everything to get in the car and drive to the beach, skinny dip in the chilled Rhode Island water, the words to the songs we love the most and drive fast fast fast on the highway. I find myself daydreaming about taking off, heading west, until

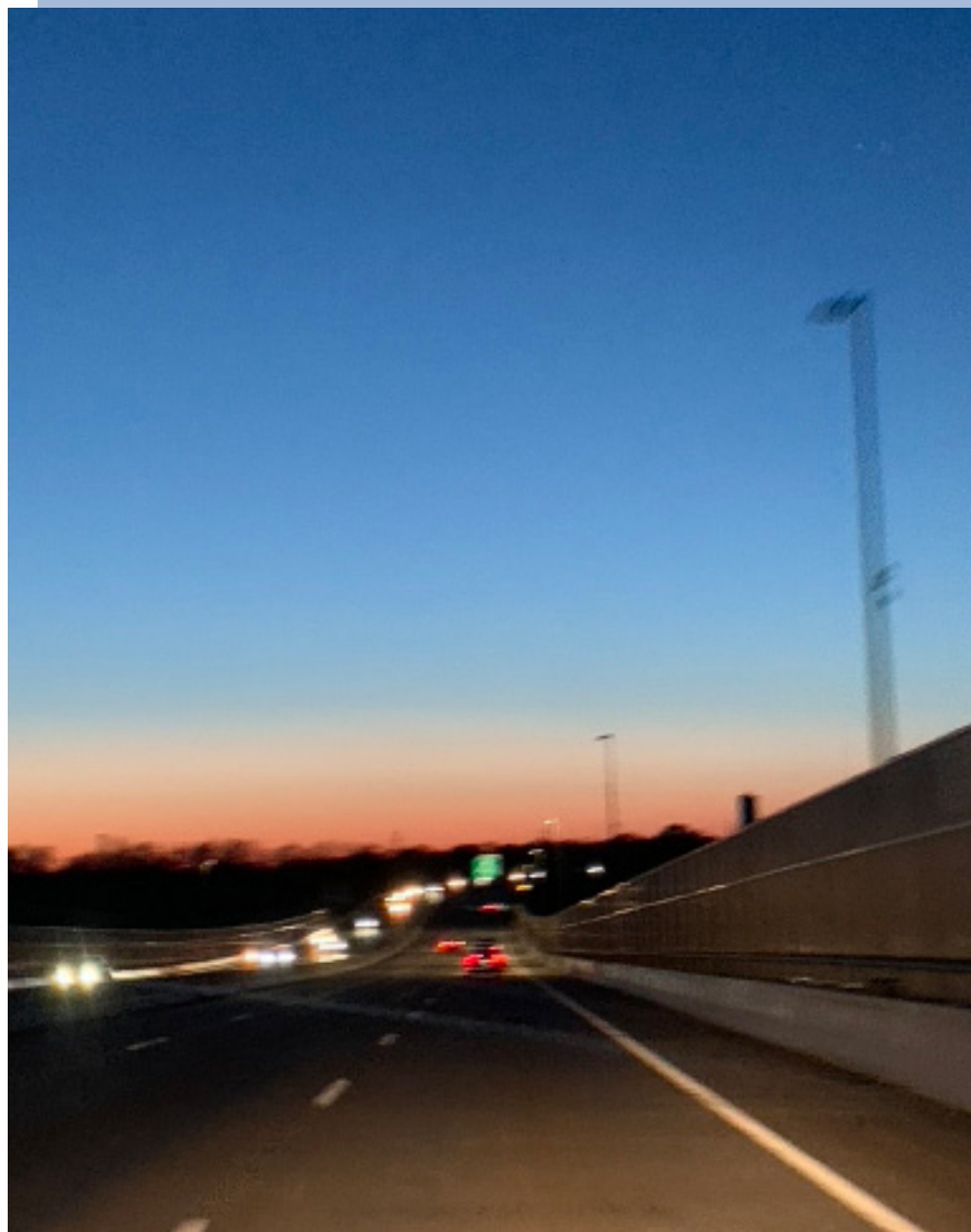
we hit those wide open roads Phoebe and Lucy and Julien promise us, the high canyon walls holding us close, like an orange-hued pinky promise.

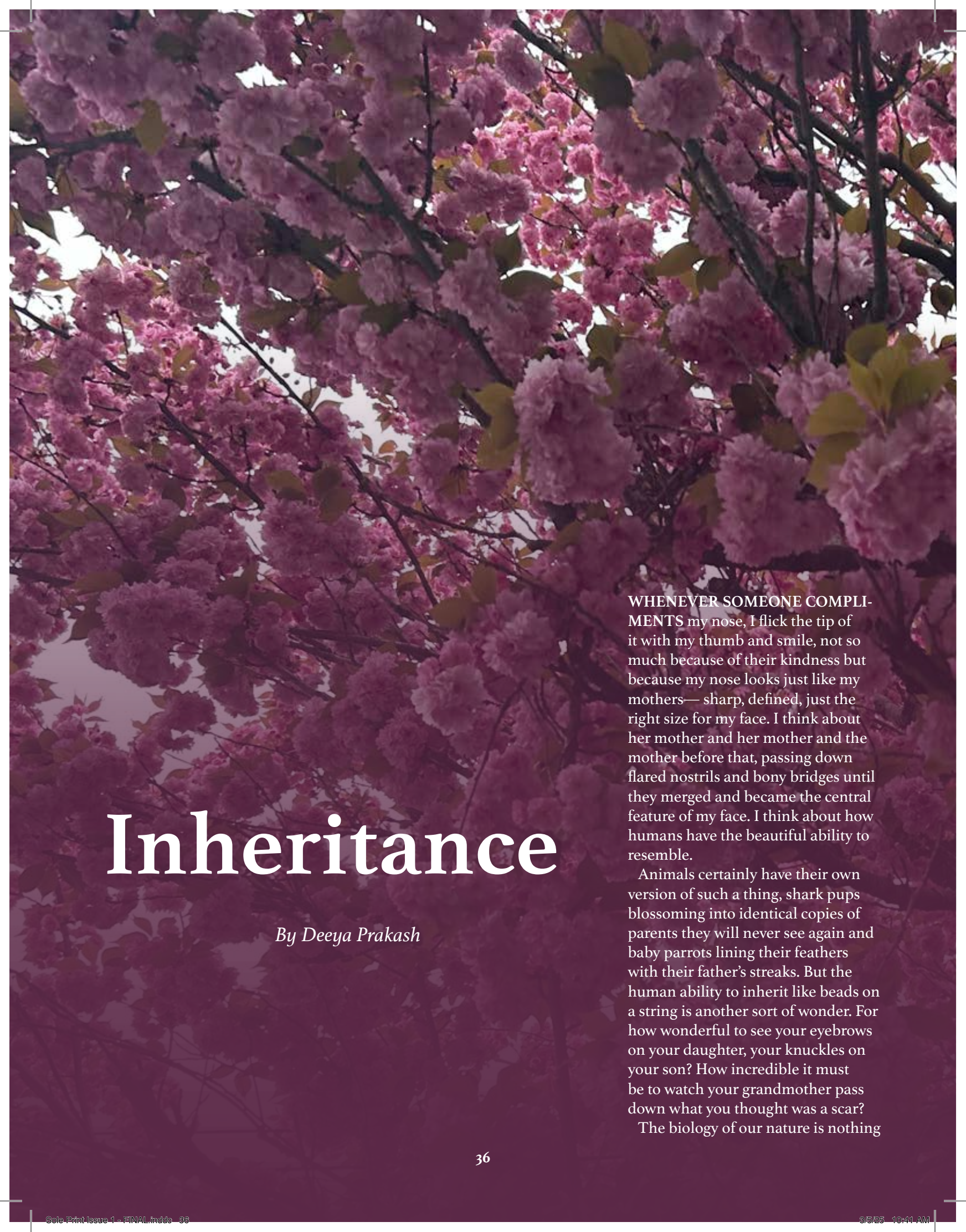
Most of all, I fear when these moments end. I fear returning to campus. Parking the car. Taking a hot shower to melt off the salt and sweat and erase the chill that’s starting to steep. I fear moving out of my last dorm room, our first and last shared apartment, when we all head off to our own stages, a constellation across this country or maybe hemisphere. What about the beach? The car? What about the music? What about this love?

Maybe we’ll skip the exit to our old street and go home. Or maybe this is the moment, singular and alive, breathing in us long after we leave. Hold onto it, but don’t force it.

Your love is tough / Your love is tried and true blue.

Note: Lyrics from “True Blue” by boygenius.





Inheritance

By Deeya Prakash

WHENEVER SOMEONE COMPLIMENTS my nose, I flick the tip of it with my thumb and smile, not so much because of their kindness but because my nose looks just like my mothers— sharp, defined, just the right size for my face. I think about her mother and her mother and the mother before that, passing down flared nostrils and bony bridges until they merged and became the central feature of my face. I think about how humans have the beautiful ability to resemble.

Animals certainly have their own version of such a thing, shark pups blossoming into identical copies of parents they will never see again and baby parrots lining their feathers with their father's streaks. But the human ability to inherit like beads on a string is another sort of wonder. For how wonderful to see your eyebrows on your daughter, your knuckles on your son? How incredible it must be to watch your grandmother pass down what you thought was a scar?

The biology of our nature is nothing



if not incessant, and yet it passes me by like the morning news. One day I am flipping through old albums and I catch a glimpse of my mother, wrapped in a sari and kissing my father on the cheek. I'm struck by her beauty— the arch of her cheek, the swell of her chin. I look in the mirror and pause, fingers on my face as I trace her features on my skin. How wonderful, to sit here and worry about the future when there is assurance that I will live on.

My mother loves flowers. She points out the hydrangeas and the chrysanthemums and those little yellow ones that bark like dogs, picking them off the stem and placing them in my palms. When I am young, she pulls

them apart and shows me their parts, running her fingers over their pistils, their ovaries, the style. We both marvel that something so small can do exactly the same things that we can: make themselves all over again.

“ HOW WONDERFUL, TO SIT HERE AND WORRY ABOUT THE FUTURE WHEN THERE IS ASSURANCE THAT I WILL LIVE ON. ”

My mother may love flowers but the mother before her lived for them, sketching them in her leather bound notebook with a magnifying glass in her pocket and charcoal on the pads of her thumbs. My grandmother pressed daisies and grew alstroemer-

ia, raising her daughters with petals in their hair and pollen in their lungs. She taught botany at the school down the street and I bet she was good at it too, her walls always displaying her meticulous drawings of the

begonia and the marigold and smelling of the rosewater in her tea. As such, my mother's DNA spun with daffodils and marigolds, and she inherited the love for botany like it was the crease in her brow. I listen to her tell

us about my grandmother and the notebook and the carnations, and how they last the longest when cut and bloom bright in a vase. We walk on the trails of Cincinnati, Ohio, and she plucks the leaves of the borages and stuffs them in her mouth, telling

me that if I wanted to, I could too.

I do not know much about plants, despite the women in my life who grew alongside them, and there is a certain sadness associated with the idea that I cannot inherit everything from the wonders that came before me. My mother worships the Icelandic poppies like my grandmother would with fresh jasmine, and instead I walk to the local corner store, buying my mother discounted carnations for her birthday and hoping I've remembered right. I pray my daughter likes flowers, or maybe her daughter after that.

* * *

The first time that biology stops me in my tracks is when I read about DNA replication. Sitting at the dining table and splaying out my work, there's a picture in my textbook that catches my eye, wildly colorful and speckled in shine. Forty minutes later I have learned all there is to know about the complex procedure happening millions of times per minute within nearly every cell in my body. I am aghast as my eyes fly across the page, conceptualizing the DNA Helicase that takes me apart and the Ligase that puts me back together, all before dinnertime. I stare, focusing my eyes to my hands on the pages as if I could somehow watch this play out in front of me. The nucleotides rush together in a swarm and hold hands like old friends and it is then

I realize that my mother is snapping her fingers in front of my face like I've just gone off and not told her where. The movement of her fingers transfixes me, I think they are the same ones that were just placed upon my textbook, tracing the words on the page. My DNA may be replicating, but half of it is hers, reflecting in the veins of her hands and the lines on her palm.

There is DNA that just passes maternally; within the mitochondria lies genetic material, exclusively passed through kisses on foreheads, tuck-ins at night. I like to think that all the best of me is from those swirls of traits, nestled between harsh advice and that face she makes when I'm wearing something far too casual for the occasion. When I learn about this, I want to split myself open and look at how much she has truly given me. I'd imagine I'd see my grandmother there, too, and the mother before that and the one before that, curled up at the center of my chest and breathing me whole.

* * *

It's the night of my senior prom and I walk into my parent's bedroom, giving my mother a little spin. She takes one look at me and breaks into a grin, the kind of grin that we know to mean that I've done something right. She places her palm on my shoulder and it goes up to my cheek. I lean into

her, and she tells me I look beautiful. I smile, gesturing to the last piece of my getup: her diamond pendant. She unclasps it from her throat and drapes it across my collarbone, the two of us watching it glimmer. I tell her I'm glad I have a piece of her tonight. She strokes my cheek and says I always do, right here.

* * *

There are flowers blooming on the green today and I wish I could tell you what they were. They curl in the breeze and splay in the sun and I'm reminded of my grandmother, her scrawl peppered over the drawings in my bedroom and outlining the anatomy of the purple iris she drew for me all those years ago. I wonder where she got it from, this reverence. I think of how she used to pray not just for my mother and me, but also for the trees in our lawn and the plants on the sill. I think of the carnations on our dining room table and the soft smile of my mother that means that she's happy.

There are fields of women who have been growing a secret garden in my veins and as I smell the flowers on the green, I cut my nose on a thorn. My mother's nose, or maybe the mother before that, or maybe her mother or the one that came first. I bleed red with their love.

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