

the pen



winter edition

staff

editor-in-chief

Kamtoya Okeke

creative director

Camille Galvani

editorial staff

Oluwamayowa Akinsanya

Sam Broquard

Colette Gregg

Clementine Kovacs

Crystel Mangaoil

Jessie Moss

Jemima Ndjeulo-Mbiengom

Izzy Oh

Nebe Okeke

Ruthie Pournelle

Jaymie Ramirez-Cruz

Jillian Sanders

Chioma Ukaobasi

Grace Whitsell

Penelope Widmer

advisor

Shakir Ghazi

cover

“Cityscape”

Ellis Olander

contents

The Pears Will Rot Forever Jessie Moss	6
Kearvaig Bothy Petra Debelack	7
Solitarius Crystel Mangaoil	8
The Last Train Stop Sofí Sarmiento	9
The Bricklayer's Dilemma Alex Horowitz	9
Apparition Beckett McDonald	12
Walls Joseph Burwell	13
Bits and Pieces (Series) Penelope Widmer	14
Yeah, Alright, Mhm, Uh-Huh Anonymous	16
Artist's Room Ellis Olander	17
M1micry Ruth Pournelle	18
jittens and moey Joey Trail	20

Escapism	21
Nare Harutyunyan	
Stamp	21
Ellis Olander	
Heart of Green	22
Asher Thornton	
Celebration of Youth	23
Anonymous	
Kackie and Pops	24
Ellis Olander	
Birch Trees	25
Simone Meltzer	
beautidul world	25
Bailey McFadden	
Martine	26
Jessie Moss	
Goofy Tree Birds	28
Khai Matsudaira	
Forest Fire	29
Chioma Ukaobasi	
Silk Purses from Sows' Ears (Series)	32
Anonymous	
An Ode to Poetry	34
Amirah Bunn	
Smithsonian Arts and Industry Building	35
Petra Debelack	

Untitled Niamh O'Donovan	34
Milk Anonymous	35
Vita et Mors Violetta Rohr	36
Prologue Matthew Weitzner	37
A Planet of Red White and Blue Anonymous	39
Orcas Clementine Kovacs	40
Miracle Hugo Bonelli	41
Reborn Sofí Sarmiento	41
Excerpt from Rich as Red Ruth Pournelle	42
Home and the Outside World Crystel Mangaoil	45
There is Art All Around Me Anonymous	46
Line Portrait Petra Debelack	47
A Demiurge's Lament Kamtoya Okeke	48

the pears will rot forever
jessie moss

Winner of The Pen's Winter Competition for Writing.

The hospital is a nice enough place. The walls are cool, my bed sheets are crisp. Nurses bring me little pudding cups with gaudy pink and neon green plastic spoons. It isn't a new space for me and I'm no longer so bothered by the sterility of the bright white walls and lights, though they make it hard to decorate the space. Last Wednesday, Flo brought me this little still life, it's exquisite: a chinoiserie bowl sits in a dusty room. It's very bleak, the whole painting. Done in the custom of Rembrandt, it uses sepulchral tones emphasizing at once a sense of gloom. The pears in the bowl are plump and jubilant and juicy, but upon closer examination, they're tainted, ever so slightly, by the nebulous shadow of rot (a pock-mark here, a bluish spot there) which feasts on these fruits, paradoxically immortalized by the artist. Death is not so far, it says. It's hard not to see it as a self-portrait. Flo hung the painting for me (I once could do such menial tasks without her help). It looked out of place. Unlike the rest of my surroundings, the painting isn't frigid, nor does it foster optimism. I would rather enjoy it in a place which didn't smell of bleach.

I wish I liked lollipops more; I receive many of them. My parents' friends send baskets filled to the brim with store bought cookies shoved into home containers, with dethorned, docile roses, with pharmacy greeting cards bearing messages like "Get well soon!" (I won't) and "You're a fighter" (I'm exhausted).

Flo comes Wednesdays. She packs indulgent feasts in her L.L. Bean backpack. Sometimes we enjoy Southern dishes like oyster casserole and peach cobbler. Other days, she brings me pasta with white truffle oil, foie gras with Trader Joe's crackers, or osso buco which hasn't traveled well. She is eighty-six. Often, her memory escapes her. She recently purchased a cane which makes

a click-clack sound when she walks. She does not pity me, for she is dying too.

In the summertime, we take merry walks around the complex. Steel apartment buildings rear their nasty heads high above us. Taxi cabs honk in rhythmic hypnosis and the world runs circles around us. When it cools, we turn on Harold and Maude. Flo knits with spools of pink and green and silver. I watch, transfixed by the vivacity in her eyes. My life is not extraordinary. It is ugly and repugnant. I'm happy.

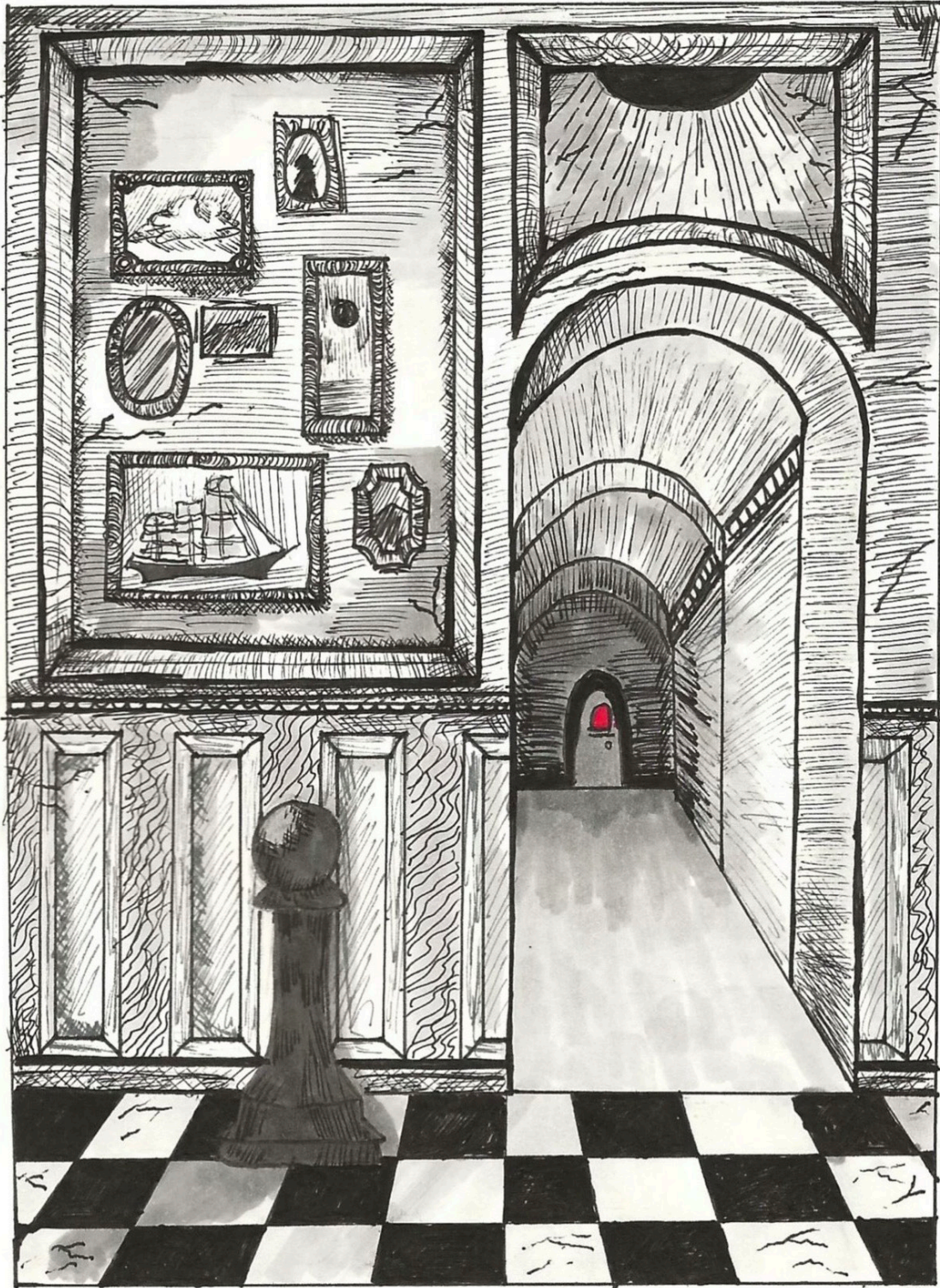
kearvaig bothy

petra debelack



Winner of The Pen's Winter Competition for Art.

solitarius
crystel mangaoil



the last train stop

sofi sarmiento

Let's make it quick,
a quick trip back home.
We'll follow the cherry blossoms
and fold the paper cranes
that lie beneath your feet.

Then, can we walk back
and take the train once more?
Or can we go through the tracks
that we painted green
when we were thirteen?

the bricklayer's dilemma

alex horowitz

It was sweltering out. The Sun was like a magnet rending sweat from men's pores, trying to pull muddied droplets into the clouds and far, far away. Laborers who weren't already slick to the touch still seemed to glisten in the light. Lumber parapets trapped serfs on all sides. While his comrades slaved away, a bricklayer dug his gout-stricken heel into the earth. Veins in his ankle threatened to burst. His eyes glared past a sea of workmen's heads bobbing lazily in the afternoon warmth. They gleamed with startling anticipation, staring hungrily at the tight barrier of logs that held the whole lot of them in that hellish camp.

He was wearing beige tattered cargo pants. His shirt, a white hand-me-down from a former prisoner, clung tight around his emaciated waist. If he had worn it by choice, it would've been just small enough to call a crop top. Here it was just another man's clothes. He broke his suspicious staring contest with the wooden gates slowly and deliberately, careful not to make quick, shocked

movements that would draw him any attention. A woven sack made from sea grass and reeds lay still at his feet. It held some twenty or thirty brown clay bricks. They were the only things in the camp that smelled like nothing.

In his right hand was a metal trowel, clean and sharp enough to show a reflection of the Warden's barracks clear as day. You were never, under any worldly circumstances, to look at the Warden. The bricklayer held his spade tight enough to mold prints of his fingers into its oak grip. Feigning diligent labor, he pulled a brick out of the woven bag and dropped the blade of his tool deep into a stone clay pot bubbling with mortar. On its way back out, a chunk of paste slid effortlessly off the smooth edge of the trowel. It fell loosely, breaking apart on its descent before discoloring a square inch of another prisoner's dirt caked foot. They didn't offer a word of complaint. They bent their head upwards from their hunched position leaning over exquisitely molded bricks. The hunchback released a creak-

ing, inhuman groan, almost quivering from the release of what was, for them, an unbelievable amount of excess energy.

The bricklayer broke off from the nearly naked, barely living husk crying up at him from his right. He smeared half hearted strokes of mortar across the underbelly of what was perhaps the most perfectly shaped brick ever made by human hands. The hunchback broke off his moan, wincing, and returned to his careful labors. The mason slammed down hard with his left hand, fixing the adhesive side of the clay slab to a two-foot tall wall he'd been working on for the better part of the afternoon. He delicately shaved both sides of the wall around the brick with his blade, effortlessly shearing away splatterings of wet mortar that oozed out from cracks beneath the new brick.

"It's not your problem," he thought, minding the hunchback. "If the stories are true he was set for execution the moment you made up your mind. It's not him or you. It's you or the Sun. It's him and you and the Sun, and you're going to win, damn it." The words shone clearly in his head as if he was reading them straight off a page. Each letter had a shape and power he'd never given them before. "It's him or you, then?" His right arm stretched up and over his left shoulder and sliced back down with a crosswise swing. Bits of paste flew off the spade every which way, staining deep into the fabrics of his shirt.

The tool, now back to offering a spotless chrome glimmer, turned a few degrees down and several inches forward, once again displaying a reflection of the Warden's rustic cabin. The Warden himself was perched comfortably on a swinging bench hung over his patio, reading a book. His legs pulled on the fence lining his porch, rocking the seat back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. The mason stalked him with the trowel. He looked over the Warden's coat, carefully noting a handkerchief in the left breast pocket of a sharp gray linen uniform. He saw the Warden chewing down chunks of watery pineapple with his mouth wide open, spitting yellow flecks

onto the leg of a beautiful woman standing attentively next to him with a silver platter of fruits. The bricklayer could just barely make out the title of the Warden's book, but he couldn't quite catch the name of the author. Why an author's name would be on his mind at a time like this was absurd enough, but he was making notes on every detail. His eyes sparkled with the ravenous brilliance of a murderous predator, scanning the camp up and down.

Tilting his face and struggling to look beyond mobs of laborers, he noticed all but one of the guards mindlessly smoking cigarettes and practically throwing away weekly portions of poker money and chocolates. This incorruptible lone ranger had perched himself on a plateaued gravel hill overlooking the prison. He looked disdainfully at the prisoners and watchmen alike. The ranger's attentive duty-filled eyes met the mason's. The bricklayer shook himself and looked away, shivering with fear and anticipation. The ranger made a sneer so powerful it seemed to have a sound to it. The mason kept cowering for a minute, even after the guard pushed his animosity back onto the whole colony.

A dozen feet behind the ranger was the site of yesterday morning's "incident." One of the worker's had lost his mind, rushed to the edge of the camp and tried to pry apart the tree trunk ramparts that held him captive with his bare hands. His on-the-spot execution at the hands of the watchmen was so severe that the sheer amount of bullets fired at him likewise melted away the section of wall behind him under a storm of lead. According to the bricklayer's memory, the runner was a few inches shorter and around twenty pounds lighter than he was. In a way, the madman's wish was dutifully fulfilled by his captors, who obliged him by opening a three-by-two foot hole in the otherwise impenetrable ramparts of the fortress. There would never be another chance like this. Only the bricklayer and the ranger were awake enough to see it. He would run today. He could run today. There was just one thing keeping his heels clamped to the ground.

Rumor had it that the last time anyone managed to escape, every inmate in the facility, healthy or ill, was brought out into the main courtyard where the mason and his gang now worked on their brick contraption. They were formed up into a single file line. They were given the opportunity to say exactly one word each before they were brought to their knees, all seventy-four of them, and sent up to the Sun with a single farewell from the Warden's weapon. "Rumor" in this case was the explicit warning the Warden had buried within his first speech to the new population of the outpost. The mason remembered it vividly. The Warden had brandished a pistol, and as he spoke he walked up and down his new shipment of laborers. As he spoke he let the gun fall delicately on the nose of every one of the sixty-eight green prisoners, each shivering from the long trek to the camp through unforgiving jungle. The clearest experience the bricklayer could remember from the day was the tickling chill of the .45's barrel on his perspiring face. He also remembered the sacrifice of the worker who stood next to him. That man had served as a lesson on why you never looked the Warden in the eye.

Remembering the Warden's vacant, playful grin as he stubbornly promised to turn his own home into a slaughterhouse at the slightest murmur of conspiracy turned the mason's blood cold and his face hot with fury. Barely conscious of his own movements, he found himself again hunched over the reed sack, grasping at a fresh brick. His spade dipped again into the stone pot, and as he greased the back of the flawless brick with tar he looked up into the sky and whispered a series of words that were, quite frankly, imperceptible even to him. The half-naked hunchback on his right was praying as well, grasping at the bricklayer's crop top with greedy eyes and begging that the Sun would take him.

A commotion arose on the other side of the rising structure in the middle of the courtyard. The ranger's sharp, attentive stare rapidly locked onto a delirious old man moaning the word "water." He was covering his torso with soft clay and

piling warm mortar liberally atop the makeshift plaster mold over his body. Then, to the awe of not a few bystanders, he bent down his face so his nose met his chest and snorted in the noxious fumes of the paste. He began squeezing his fingernails one by one, as if afraid they would fly away if he didn't retake control soon. The bricklayer beamed with violent opportunism. His head turned on a swivel to the man on his left, who was offering a pitying defeated glance to the clay-covered martyr for maybe a second too long.

"You know," urged the mason, careful not to give the hunchback an opportunity to listen in, "I don't think any of us ourselves have actually seen a man die here quite yet. I wonder what they're going to do with his rations." The worker's eyes lit up with a spark of sinful hope. A game of telephone began to creep its way from a rumbling undertone to a roar. The intoxicated martyr wailed in agony, falling to his knees and throwing his blackened hands atop his thighs. The ranger had seen enough. He climbed down off his gravel precipice, slamming the butt end of his smoothbore rifle into the jaw of the kneeling old man. The laborers nearest the violence on the bricklayer's left smelled blood in the water. The other watchmen flitted their lazy eyes across a growing mob chanting for the sacrifice of their martyr. The ranger alone pounded away at the ominous wave rolling towards him from the riot. Everyone seemed to be in on it. The mason curbed his smile into a focused grimace and took a step to his right. Then another. He strode off around the right side of the construction site, furthest from the Warden and his servant. The hunchback was too confused and drained to stop him.

The bricklayer's pace quickened. His feet met the Earth silently and deliberately. A walk turned to a crouching jog. A few moments later he found himself in front of the ranger's abandoned nest of gravel. Just beyond was the bullet-lined gaping cavity in the wall. All eyes looked pensively to the growing riot met only by the orderly strikes of the ranger's weapon. This was his chance.

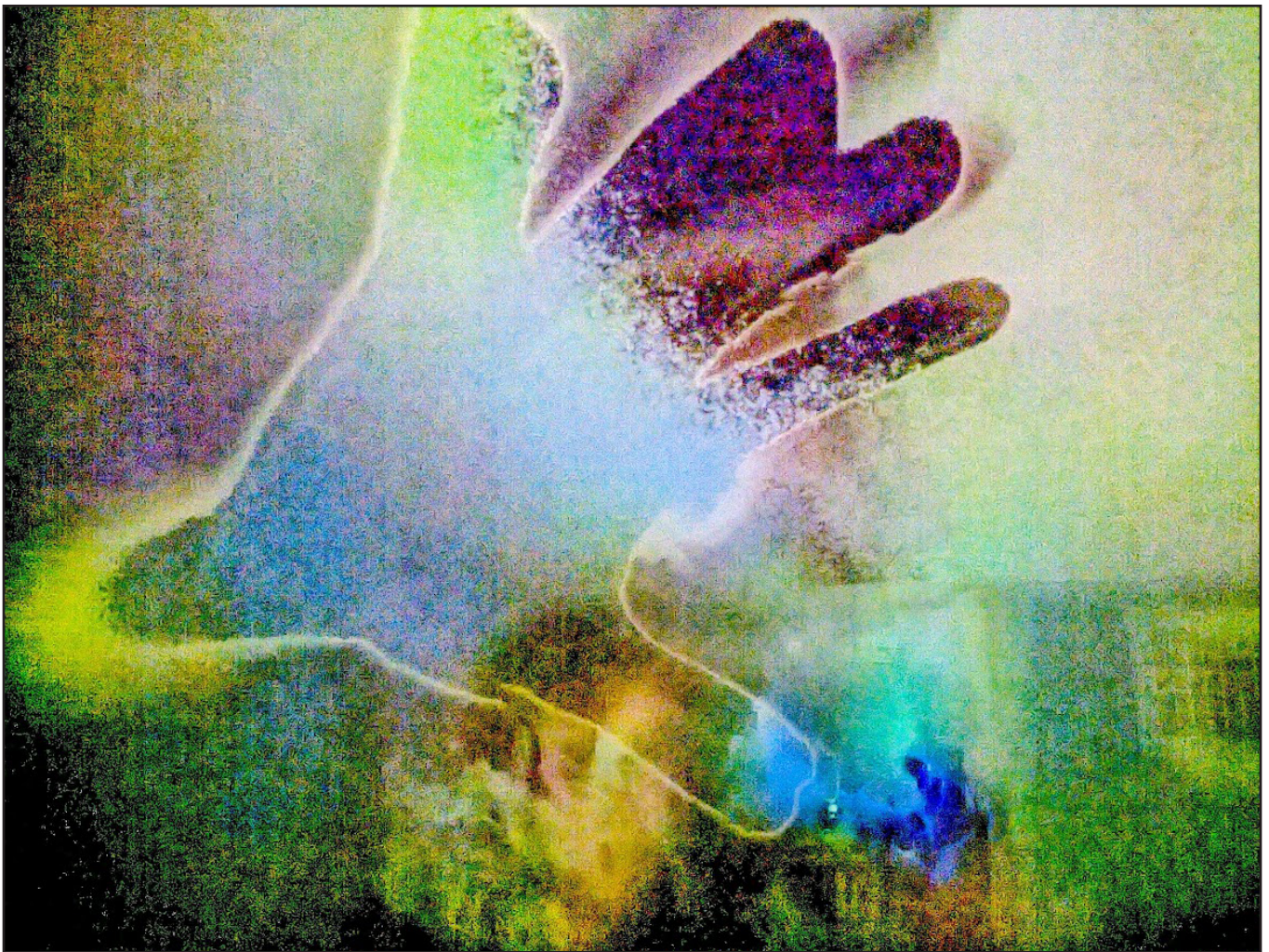
His eyes darted back to the poorly covered

hole. He let his heel sink into the muck. This time he finally let it push off. He bolted. Necks craned. Guards howled. The virulent gossip of conspiracy rushed through the camp as the mason beat away with his tool at the shoddily-made barrier of underbrush meant to plug the gap. It gave. He kept running. He heard a thundering shout. Then a

shot. Then three more in quick succession. He kept running, going God knows where, laughing maniacally at every shrub or tree root that dared threaten to break his pace. He dared the Sun to punish him. Ecstasy infected every crevice of his being. An hour after the bricklayer's escape, he was too far away to hear what happened next.

apparition

beckett mcdonald



walls

joseph burwell

Their whole purpose is to separate
Without them, supposedly we communicate

But walls exist on the inside
Shown by sectioned social settings we hide

But how do you break the unreal?
Something never to see but to feel?

Does it start by talking or friendly looks?
Does it start by singing, dancing, reading books?

Does it start with hello and a gentle smile?
Does it start with a hey, once in a while?

Does it start by projects to work together?
Does it start by talking about the weather?

Does it start in the class in which we sit?
Does it start in choir or AP Lit?

What if it's none of the above?
How do we build that bridge of love?

Doesn't it start with isolation?
Hasn't everyone had that situation?

That chill deep down in your bone
Of spending every single day alone?

Does not this vicious bout
Inspire you to reach out?

Maybe some people like to roam
But don't all want a place to call home?

Isn't this enough common ground
To settle someone moving around?

Why do we act like it's a crime
To say you can join at any time?

They say fortune favors the bold
But I see the unfortunate waiting to be told

Homeless lives wait for invite
Completely invisible in plain sight

I think an idea requires correction
Ending isolation is not building connection

Ending is just saying "hey"
Building is "do you want to play?"

Ending is "can I sit here?"
Building is "you can" AND lending an ear

Ending is awkward nods in the halls
Building is texting and sending calls

Ending is only the everyday
Building is going out of your way

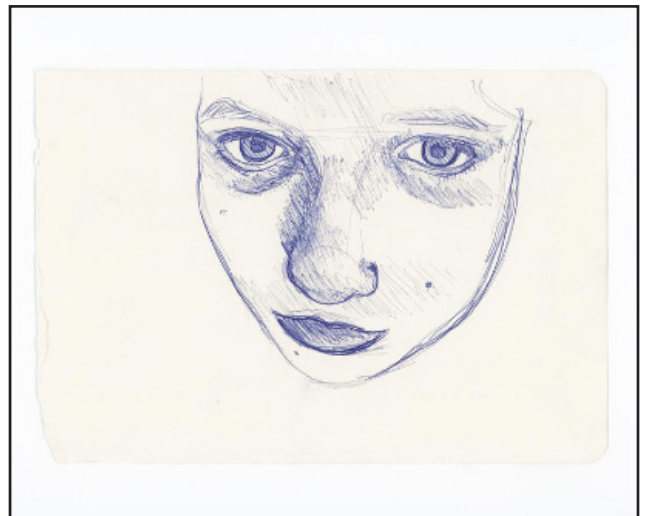
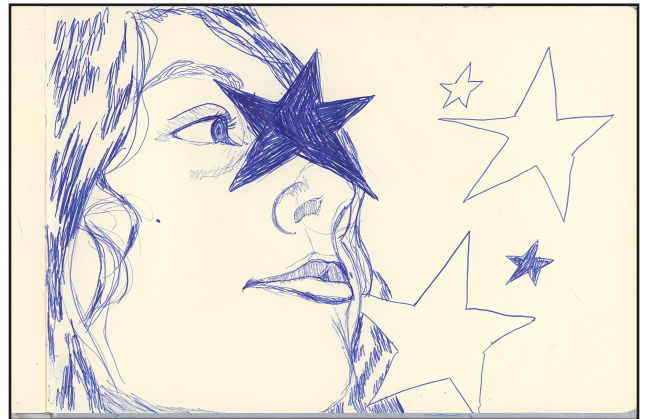
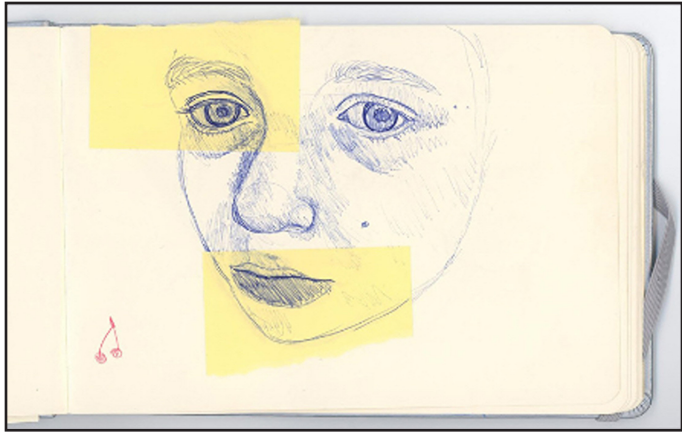
To say we all belong is true
But what is it we all belong to?

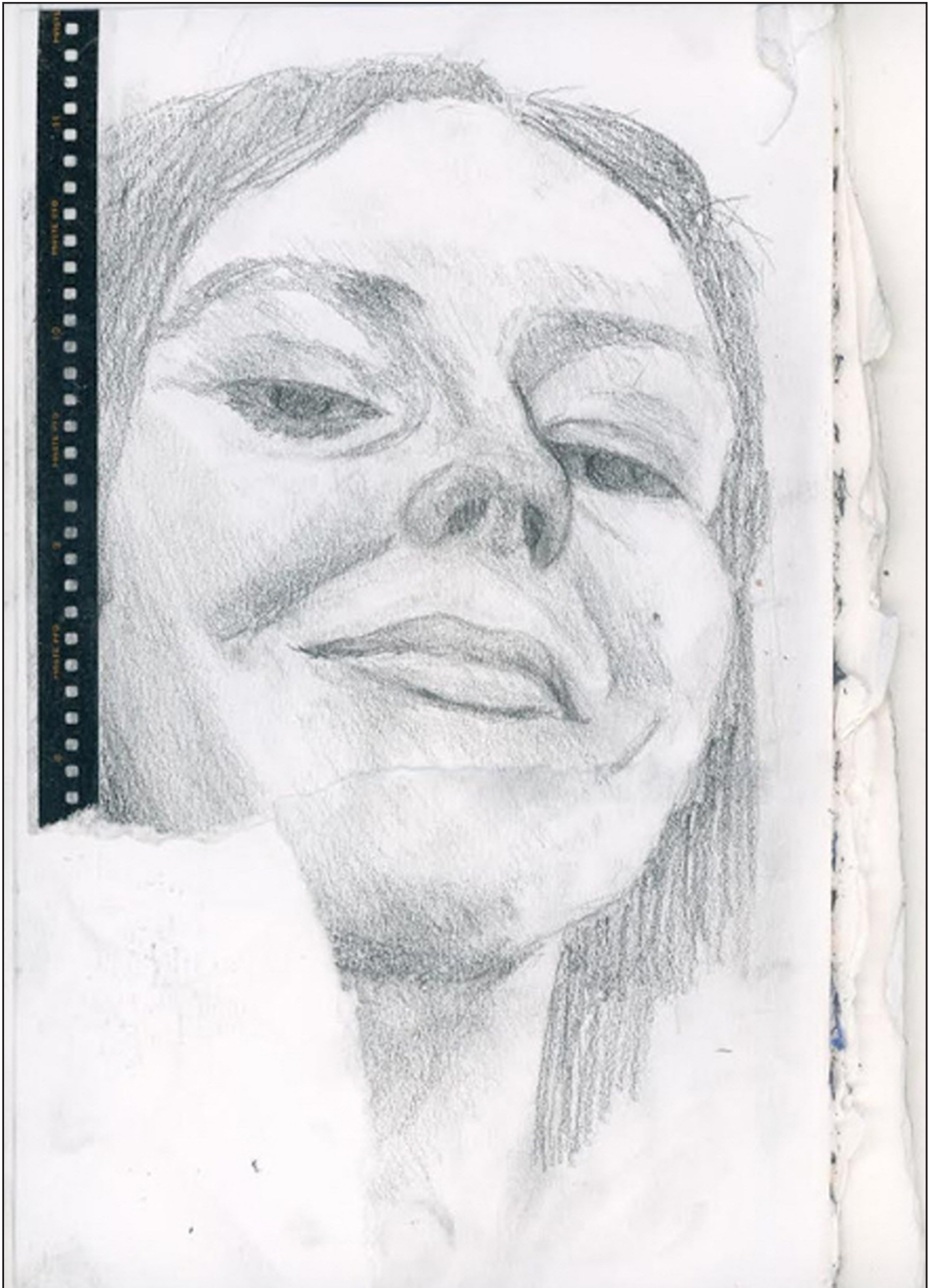
To self preservation
Of ending isolation
Or altruistic affection
Of building connection?

To the termination of isolation
Or to the resurrection of better connection

The time is now
Now take your pick
The question is how
How will we brick by brick
Build a better community for all?
Or will we continue ending behind our wall?

bits and pieces
penelope widmer





yeah, alright, mhm, uh-huh
anonymous

What, in fact, is semi-permanence?

I let the declaration take the swooping curlicues
Of your name that makes me laugh—your name that makes my fingers fuse
Your name—I have to pay it, without tax, tariff, nor dues
No cop and still no sheriff. No shirt and still no shoes.

I'm in the store and I'm paying for a pack of gum
And you crook your thumb. And I call you dumb.

But that second line is stored in my mind
And it's stored in a clock and a rhyme about time
And about how your iris lights up from the sunshine from the side
From a me and to a you and from a time and to a time.

And then I'm in the shower, thinking about how I knew this before
(How I stored a little slip of paper in an empty drawer)
And it's unclear if I like you, but I'm tethered to the shore.
Moored to your attention, affectionately bored.

How is something permanent— but only by a half?
(It reminds me of that poem, of that young two-headed calf)
I curl my hair quite nicely, see myself inside the glass
And I wonder what it feels like to own a vintage telegraph.

Oh yes, I'm looking in the mirror, and I'm counting the directions
And I look once more behind me, see the vision of the Spectre.

And I wake up and I see her, standing tall, a tree of yew
And I know I'd like to be her, I know who she is to you
And I get a little lazy, but I'm polished, burnished blue
Burning hazy and afraid she's much too honest, much too true.

Temporarily, I see the Spectre, and I'm polite and so I greet her
And again she speaks in tongues, in her idyllic sacred meter
And for a moment I might kill her, might go crazy— drain and bleed her
Hieroglyphic hypomania— but I love and I believe her.

And again I'm here in bed and I read but think of- well,
How you feel when you're asleep, and I'm feeling so compelled
By that image, but I hear the creeping bell, resounding knell
Inside my chest. And it is infinite, that ever-swelling yell.

Or, maybe not— I guess that soon, I'll be clean, safe, and warm
And this stupid semi-permanence, this temporary storm
This tinged red audacity, of ever varied form
Will dissipate, but much too late— right now I'm over swarmed.

Yeah, alright, okay, I get it, yeah, alright, mhm, uh huh-
I resow it, I reseed it, I repeat it, a mantra
I don't need you, I don't need it, I concede it, I say duh
It is very hard to rhyme this- yeah, alright, mhm, uh huh.

artist's room

ellis clander



m1micry

ruth pournelle

Tap tap. The glass felt cool against Miles' finger. He glanced over to Blanca. She stood over him, confidently calm, in a way that most people would think of as intimidating, but he knew she was just proud. "Is it real?"

She rolled her eyes. "What do you think?" He turned his focus back to the robot in front of him. Miniature tiles, dark and smooth and barely perceptible, locked together to form a featureless humanoid mass. There were no harsh lines to it, no details, as if it were wearing ten layers of clothing. For now, the M1mic was a completely blank slate.

"Say, B, if you make another one of these, are you gonna call it an M2mic?"

"How about we shelve that idea."

Miles turned to her and flashed a wicked grin. "What are you waiting for? Turn it on!"

Blanca made a face. "I don't know. We've only done a few tests of the mirroring technology, and the nano-tiles take up a lot of energy."

He tilted his head at her and stood up. "Come on. You brought me all this way."

"Is this not enough?" she said with a scowl.

"No! No, that's not what I meant." He took her hand and squeezed it, looking deep in her eyes. "I just want to see the fruit of your efforts. It's the first project they've let you lead."

She pressed her lips together wryly. "Do you mean that? Or do you just want to see the robot move?"

"I mean it! And... well, it *is* a robot, but that's just a cool bonus."

Blanca crossed her arms and savored the idea, before snapping into what Miles thought of as engineer mode. "Fine. I guess I'll just log it as another test. Go sit down in front of it, like you were before." He listened, returning to the chair opposite it. "Stop slouching! That will mess up the copying process. Make sure you are directly

centered with the M1mic." She walked behind the desk and hunched over the computer screen, typing hurriedly. "Okay, everything is set. The tests are normal. Miles! Back straight! What did I say about slouching?" He grinned sheepishly, making a show of straightening his posture. She sighed. "Try not to move while it mirrors, please." Her fingers hovered over the button to activate it, connected to the bot by a long chord, before she pressed down.

A loud whirring filled the room. For a few seconds, the M1mic was static, unchanging. But then its surface shimmered. The tiles on it began to shift, changing color and moving positions. The head turned a dark brown, the same shade as his skin. A nose began to form, protruding from the face. Eye sockets deepened and were filled by white tiles. Lips spread into a full smile, then a wide gape as Miles' mouth opened.

"Wow," he breathed, and the M1mic's mouth moved too.

"Hey!" Blanca chastised and he shut his mouth, slackening his features. He stayed still for the rest of the mirroring, until a beep sounded and Blanca announced, "Alright! You can move now. But be *very* careful touching it."

He exhaled, but the robot no longer moved with him. Staring back at him with the same dark eyes was Miles' own face and body, wearing his clothes. The precision was uncanny, from the wooly texture of his short hair to the small scar on his chin, courtesy of an unfortunate waterslide accident during his teen years. He reached out a finger and tapped it, so sure that when he made contact with his—its—cheek it would feel like skin. *Tap tap.* Instead it was just as hard as before, albeit warmer. Miles let out a disbelieving laugh. "This is amazing, Blanca!"

She turned away, but he could see the blush spreading across her freckled face. "Well, it's still

just a prototype.”

“Stop underselling yourself. It looks just like me!” Suddenly, the robot tilted its head. Miles flinched back. “Ah! It moved on its own!”

“That *is* the point. The AI studies and learns your movements.”

“You mean there will be two Miles’?” He grinned and turned back to the M1mic. “The world is going to be a lot more fun now!” It grinned back. It is then, peering at the robot’s face, that he noticed the imperfections. The robot looked almost grainy, like he was seeing himself through a low quality camera. The tiles weren’t quite tiny enough to get everything right, and its eyes didn’t change with the light, so they looked vacant and beady.

“That,” he murmured. “Is a little bit creepy, actually. Will it be stuck as my face forever?”

Blanca let out a grateful exhale. “No, thank god, no. I think I’d go crazy if I had to deal with more than one of you.”

He clapped a hand to his heart. “Aw, babe, you’re too sweet.”

“It will be saved as a file, though.”

“So I might dazzle an unsuspecting intern someday? Cool.” The M1mic nodded, mouthing ‘cool’. “Can it talk?”

“Not yet. We’re still working on the voice-box technology.” Blanca checked the computer screen. “Shoot. It’s almost 4:30. We’ll have to be quick if we want to make it to the restaurant. Say goodbye to M1mic, Miles, you and I have a date.”

He pouted. “Are you sure he can’t go? I’m starting to like this guy. He thinks like me!” The robot mouthed ‘awesome’ and put its hand up. Miles obliged, pressing his palm against it lightly enough to avoid Blanca’s wrath. “High five!”

He heard Blanca try to smother a laugh before saying, “Seriously, though, wrap it up.”

“Fine.” He looked back just as the M1mic’s face turned curious. It brought its other hand up, and tapped his cheek twice. “Hey—stop that.” It did it again. A beep sounded. Blanca must have turned it off. There was a sudden stop in its movements. The whirring started again and the

robot returned to its starting position, its posture uncomfortably straight. The surface shimmered again as the nano-tiles started to move. The color returned to a flat, stormy gray and its features sunk back into the smooth surface. The room went silent, and, once more, the M1mic was a blank slate.

“It’s off. Time to go, Miles.” Blanca slung her tote bag back on her shoulder.

He stood and walked over to her, planting a kiss on her cheek. “Again, B, that is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen. I’m really proud of you.”

“Proud enough to pay for dinner?” she asked as they walked out of the lab and he barked a laugh.

“Okay, maybe not that proud.” Blanca scoffed, pausing to lock the door securely, and he slung his arm over her shoulders. “Come on, this is gonna make you rich soon, B. Tell you what, I will pay today, but in return, you’re going to spoil me when you become a billionaire. I’m talking almond butter and jelly sandwiches—*for every meal.*”

“*That’s* your idea of spoiling?”

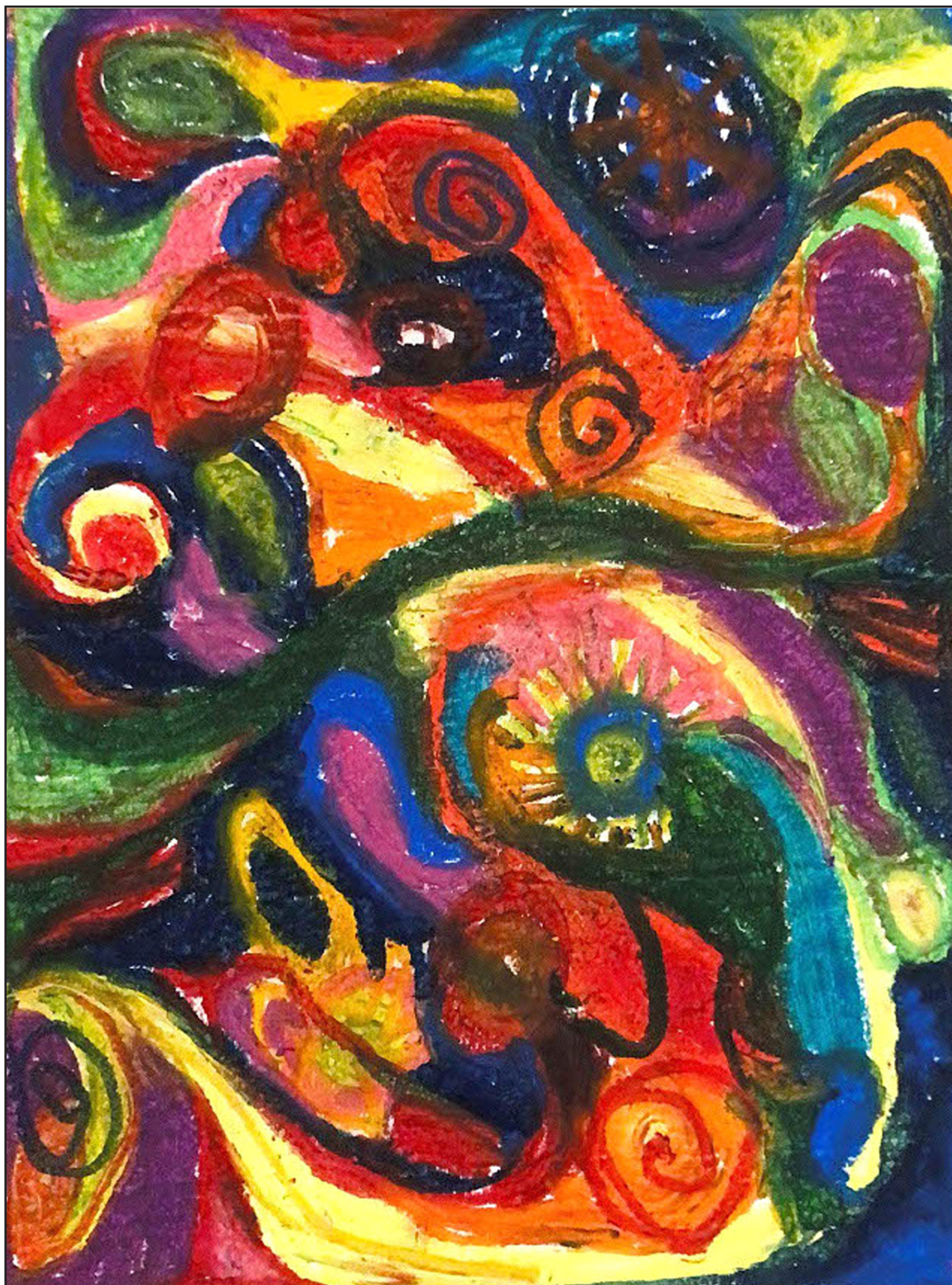
“What? I’m a simple man with a peanut allergy! You know this. It’s why you love me.”

An uncharacteristically giddy smile spread across Blanca’s face that she tried to hide with her hand. “I do love you.”

Miles grinned back and leaned in to kiss her. As he cupped her face in his hands, he could have sworn that he heard a sound echo through the empty lab behind them.

Tap tap.

jittens and moey
joey trail



escapism

nare harutyunyan

I want to go on an adventure,
Explore the wide and unknown world.
To see miracles and curses,
Rivers of tears and mountains of gold.

I want to go on an adventure,
Defeat evils unheard of.
To be a hero or a sidekick,
And spread hope and tons of love.

I want to go on an adventure,
And see how the story unfolds.
I wish to fantasize about the future,
Oblivious of what it holds.

I want to go on an adventure,
I dreadfully write on my screen.
Sitting at my work desk,
Assignments due at 9:15.

Someday, I'll go on an adventure,
Set sail to lands far away.
I'll go to magical places,
And meet new pals along the way.

I know not what the future holds,
And I do not have a plan,
But life doesn't end in boring ways,
And it barely just began.

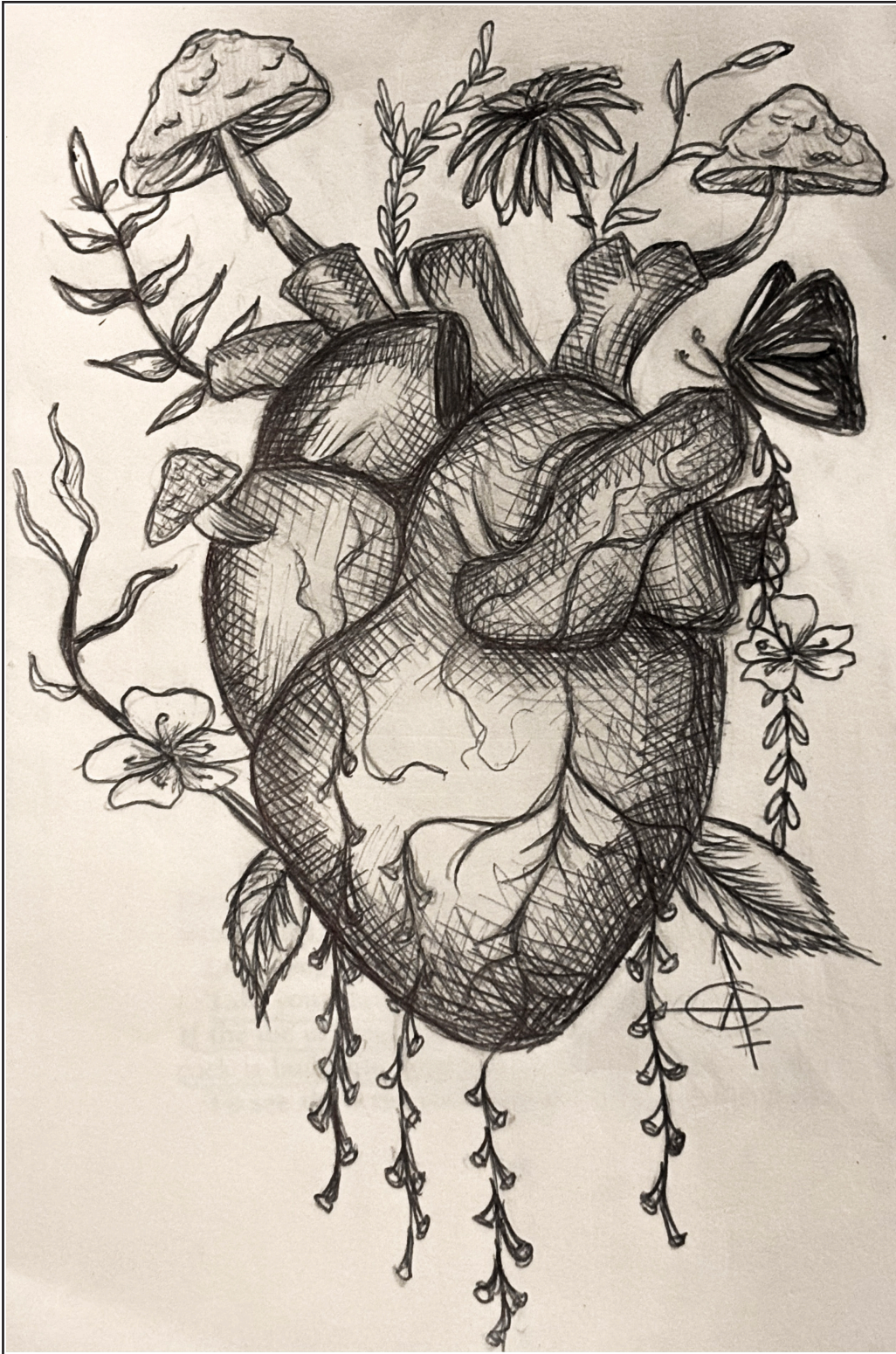
stamp

ellis clander



heart of green

asher thornton



celebration of youth

anonymous

Content warning: eating disorder.

Upon my first month of high school, I was secretly living with severe anorexia. The emotions accompanying it were not the same rewarding sentiments as before, but guilt and dwindling self-esteem.

Eleven months ago, I encountered a social media post titled “What I Eat in a Day as a High School Girl “. The presumably unique diet consisted of one meal a day and comments posted read: “I wish I were this skinny” or “I just don’t eat at all”. Just imagine how my especially impressionable adolescent mind reacted after viewing this post and the comments from other girls my age. I always assumed high school would be a pivotal point in my adolescence. However, this year I realized that the biggest threat of change would be how untrustworthy my own brain would be in these moments of maturation. Consequently, a situation in my life that has assisted me in learning to accept, value, and respect who I really am this year was coping, surviving, and recovering from a life-threatening eating disorder that changed my future self permanently.

After eighth grade, the summer lay ahead to determine the high school version of myself. I was visiting my dad across the country, scrolling through social media and avoiding the usual anxiety I felt when visiting my father. He moved out when I began middle school after my parents divorced. Throughout the past year, my life had felt increasingly out of control as I went in between my two parents’ houses. I was also desperately looking for ways to cope with my diagnosis of “Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.” Additionally, I was spending hours on the platforms that intentionally instituted algorithms targeting vulnerable girls just trying to fit in. I developed a coping mechanism to avoid anxiety and increasingly

constant self-critique; I began loosely dieting and restricting my meals. To this day, I use that term “loosely” in all health check-ups because I started this lifestyle completely oblivious to the harm my body would face. Although I was still fighting with my dad frequently and worrying about starting high school, I felt like I was winning at something every day by abstaining from my meals. By the end of the summer, I returned home and was immediately confronted with my mom’s concern because I had lost a tremendous amount of weight. Even in the face of her concern, I still felt proud; thus, my obliviousness to danger was consistently fueled.

A week before school started, I attended orientation and in doing so made some new friends, which was comforting. Unfortunately, I still had to face the unavoidable truth, the habit I developed was unhealthy and often led to deadly consequences. I assumed positive exposure to high school and distance from my father could restore my usual eating habits. Another obstacle I discovered was once you develop an eating disorder, it is impossible to quit abruptly. Daily, I examined my body in the mirror with rage at how I was distortedly growing in underweight areas. Upon my first month of high school, I was secretly living with severe anorexia. The emotions accompanying it were not the same rewarding sentiments as before, but guilt and dwindling self-esteem. Undoubtedly, mental health issues surfaced, including suicidal thoughts. In November, an incident forced me to seek outside help. Following an exam, I hurried to the restroom, fell onto a bench, and fainted; I was unconscious for nearly thirty minutes.

It has been five months since I sought professional help, and I am undergoing one of the

most self-reflecting points in my life. After the health scare, my mom immediately notified my therapist who recommended a psychiatrist. Fortunately, I finally relieved the pain of anxiety, depression, and OCD with medication. A nutritionist has met with me once a week since November. When the severity of my eating disorder indicated a need to be admitted to a clinic for a month during the school year, we worked together to avoid the worst-case scenario, with my commitment being the most influential factor. Subsequently, I discovered that the support I needed from others around me was an open and

non-judgemental space to articulate my anxieties and receive constructive care. I learned that the support I required from myself was simply forgiveness. I had to forgive myself for blocking excessive contact with my dad, for avoiding pro-anorexia algorithms, and for eating to provide my body the peace I have finally been able to experience. Ultimately, I accept that I will never return to the person I was before last summer; however, I am learning to respect the strong-willed person I have become since prioritizing my health over control and discovering alternative strategies to cope.

kackie and pops

ellis olander



birch trees

simone meltzer



beautiful world

bailey mcFadden

I never knew joy like when I found out the streetlights were bright enough to read by
That even at the darkest time of night the city still beckoned me to escape under its sky

And today the wind roared so loud it felt like a thunderstorm
That same promise of danger
That same rush of adrenaline
I laughed as it rushed over me and sang into a wind that drowned my voice out

I composed this poem stretched out on the floor
I could hear the windchimes bang against their poles

All the characters in the stories I've read rattle around my head like old friends
And the music in my soul could fill a cathedral

And I've hated so many pictures of myself
But I kept them anyway

So what if my innocence was stolen? So what if this world is broken?
Look at the neon shining through the light pollution!
Isn't it beautiful?

Oh, what a wonderful world!

martine

jessie moss

It is noon and I remain in bed. I have remained in bed for the past three days. Aubin tells me I must get up and get out—the daylight, he says, will do me good. He tells me returning to Lyon was foolish, for here I am surrounded by our old life. His encouragement feels entirely listless. Before, I attributed this to a deep exhaustion, though now I am not so sure. There are moments when I glimpse in Aubin a rawness and anger, always unexpected and equally fleeting, so afterwards I am not so certain of what I've seen.

On the whole, he is unaffected and occasionally cruel to me. Grief twists the mind, I know, but interacting with Aubin has become jabbing and I do not understand why he says what he says, why he does what he does.

When Johannes called, it was not I who answered the phone as it should have been. I'd woken up early that morning and walked with Maureen to the farmer's market on 23rd. It had been a smidge cooler than crisp and I left her to flirt with the produce vendor under the pretense

of my cold. I did not so much mind carrying the bags of tomatoes and cheese through the blustery blocks back home. Normally I was not so enthusiastic about Des Moines—I found the landscape dull and unsurprising, unlike the rolling hills and zealous rivers of France. That day, however, carried the comforting scent of autumn—very fresh and rich, and so was I awakened to the loveliness of being alive.

Make no mistake, our apartment was ratty; it did not agree with me. I had done my best to decorate the cookie cutter rooms—I threw colorful knits on the couch and hung my collection of artwork, but even my Cassatt seemed tasteless there. Resultantly, we lived in perpetual dejection, Aubin and I, and I took any opportunity to leave the apartment.

When I returned that morning, it was not only the regular lethargy which hit me like napalm as soon as I entered. Rather, the space seemed tangibly consumed by silence. Aubin was awaiting me at the dining table, still in his robe despite the climbing sun, before him an untouched black coffee.

“Johannes has called,” he said, and that was all he said but it was enough. Aubin never was fond of Johannes (he thought him generic, and our Martine extraordinary), but now he refuses to see him.

After that, we spent a few months in Iowa before returning to Lyon. The days hardly passed at all. It felt so slow, yet in the monotony I can hardly recall a single day, more a continuous despondency. Initially, I stuffed myself with sleeping pills, yet I kept waking up in the morning. Besides, Aubin noticed and took them away from me. Still, I managed. Maureen would come by around nine everyday, wake me, dress me, feed me, cry for me when she thought I wasn’t looking. Every Sunday we marched to the farmer’s market. Every Thursday we played bridge.

Aubin was no help. Our meals together were agonizing, us both sitting in silence, me deciding based on the twitch of an eyebrow or a momentary pursing of his lips if he was a stoic or a mon-

ster.

I wanted to shout, “If I were to die tomorrow, would you weep? Do you love Martine? Is her dying what made you stop, because I will never stop!”

Perhaps I did, I do not know, but I may as well have held my peace for he did not seem to hear me.

Aubin is too meek, and I am too controlling. He obeyed my wish to return to Lyon after Martine—he has no backbone—but spoiled it with complaints of costs. He afforded me a single carry on and bought us seats at the very back of the plane by the bathroom.

As it happens, I have not changed into any of the dresses which I carefully selected for our visit. My nightgown is wrinkly, like a finger soaking in the tub for too long, and my unwashed hair clings to my scalp in greasy tangles. I am undeserving of happiness. I did not provide for my beloved Martine. Wracked with confusion, I revisit and replay every scene, but no answers appear in blooming cursive letters. I packed her lunches and ironed her blouses. When she was little, I would braid her hair, and when she grew up I would help her curl it. We went shopping together. (Should I have told her that blue dress looked prettier? It is silly to obsess over the little things, I know, but I fear I made her resent me. I couldn’t have known. How could I have known? I should have, though, for it is a mother’s duty to protect her children and I have failed in the first degree.)

Martine never liked me much—she was a capricious girl, a silly girl. When Aubin was out on work trips she would sleep in the bed with me and snuggle against my side. Other times, she would look at me so spitefully my blood froze in its tracks. I know she did not feel she could tell me things—the baby, for instance. It was never born: she didn’t have it. She was nineteen. I found the test in the trash. When I spoke to her about it she flew into a violent rage. Shortly after, she moved in with the boy.

Johannes was alright. Martine never would have stayed with him were it not for Aubin’s dis-

like of him—she reveled in disobeying us. At least Johannes loved that girl. Aubin told me Johannes was wrecked. “Over something so preventable,” he had said. I do not care about the pills, I do not care about how, I do not care I don’t care I don’t care. I want her back.

We had not spoken to Martine since she left home. Occasionally, she sent a letter; I didn’t reply. She was a disgrace, running away, abandoning her parents who dedicated their lives to her. Who cares about the abortion when she did not bother to tell me? Eventually, Aubin would talk me into writing her back. When she responded, it was brief. Why did I not try harder?

I suffocated Martine, made her into an appendage of myself. It is natural, then, that she should have wanted to tear herself away. Why did I not tell her the blue dress was pretty? I thought honesty was the greatest virtue, now I’m not sure of anything.

I feel frail and stupid, for those that I care about walk on eggshells around my slippered feet. My grief they treat as radical. A part of me has died, it has begun a chain reaction, and I am deteriorating. I hate her for doing this to me.

Aubin is unavailable, emotionless, unkind; I saw him in Martine. Bastard. Elie Wiesel once advised that hate is not the opposite of love—they are both faces passion wears. He says the opposite of hate is indifference.

I am afraid that I cannot bear this. I do not want to rationalize my emotions or speak calmly, for I am not calm and this is not rational: Martine ought to be here. The sun is hot, it blinds me. I indulge in alcohol, neurosis numbs me. I am vaguely aware that Aubin watches me, perhaps with sadness, perhaps remorse, or disgust. At some point he leaves. I cannot sleep, but I cannot be awake like this. I may be dead. Nothing is real.

goofy tree birds

khai matsudaira



forest fire

chioma ukaobasi

I live next to a forest.
Actually, my family has lived
near this forest for generations.
I never really thought about exploring that place.
Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night
in a coughing fit
or see grainy specks of the unknown quietly flit through the air
when I choose to study on my porch.
I asked my mom why this is happening.
“There’s nothing to worry about.
People keep saying this place has many
forest fires, but I promise
it’s not that terrible.”
Today I took a walk inside this forest,
and felt my chest grow tighter,
and my vision cloud with gray snow.
Despite these strange occurrences,
I still felt like I needed to know all the
sneaky and protruding things this site was doing.
As I walked deeper into this close but foreign place,
I came across a group of naked trees.
It was the summer.
I looked down to the ground
and saw lone leaves
disintegrating.
Shouldn’t there be something
to worry about?

silk purses from sows’ ears

(following)

anonymous

I BELIEVE IN MANICURES. I BELIEVE IN OVERDRESSING.
I BELIEVE IN PRIMING AT LEISURE AND WEARING LIPSTICK.

New Food Discovery Cuts Meat Costs

THE MOST TRUSTED ADVICE

MEAT TENDERIZER

TENDERIZER

Cuts Meat Costs

BY TENDERIZING MEAT COSTS

New Food Discovery Cuts Meat Costs

THE MOST TRUSTED ADVICE

TENDERIZER

Cuts Meat Costs



I BELIEVE THAT
HAPPY GIRLS ARE THE
PRETTIEST GIRLS.

WHO KNOWS NOT CIRCE, THE DAUGHTER OF THE SUN, WHOSE CHARMED CUP
WHOEVER TASTED, LOST HIS UPRIGHT SHAPE, AND DOWNWARD FELL
INTO A GROVELING SWINE?

New Food Discovery Cuts Meat Costs

THE MEAT TENDERIZER

THE MEAT TENDERIZER

MEAT TENDERIZER

TENDERIZER

Cuts Meat Costs

ME TENDERIZER

New Food Discovery Cuts Meat Costs

THE MEAT TENDERIZER

TENDERIZER

Cuts Meat Costs



YOU CAN PUT
LIPSTICK ON A PIG,
BUT IT'S STILL A PIG

an ode to poetry

amirah bunn

"Poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings." – W. H. Auden

I often wonder what society would look like if we all showed up as we did when no one's watching. If we all decided to live, but also analyze the intimacy of moments and take them in. Recently, I've realized how detested the art of poetry is.

"It's hard." "Boring." "Too much thinking."

But really, poetry challenges your thoughts and way of thinking. It has the ability to send you down so many paths that you could never imagine crossing beforehand. It amplifies our failures and successes as humans. It deeply observes the unobserved while peeling back layers the regular human is hesitant to touch. There are many reasons why one could loathe poetry just like one can think that school or participating in sports is distasteful.

What I'm trying to say is poetry isn't everyone's cup of tea. But it's mine.

As humans, we show up in forms of art, in a watered-down masked version of ourselves or what some may call bad habits and coping mechanisms. Poetry is my unwatered version.

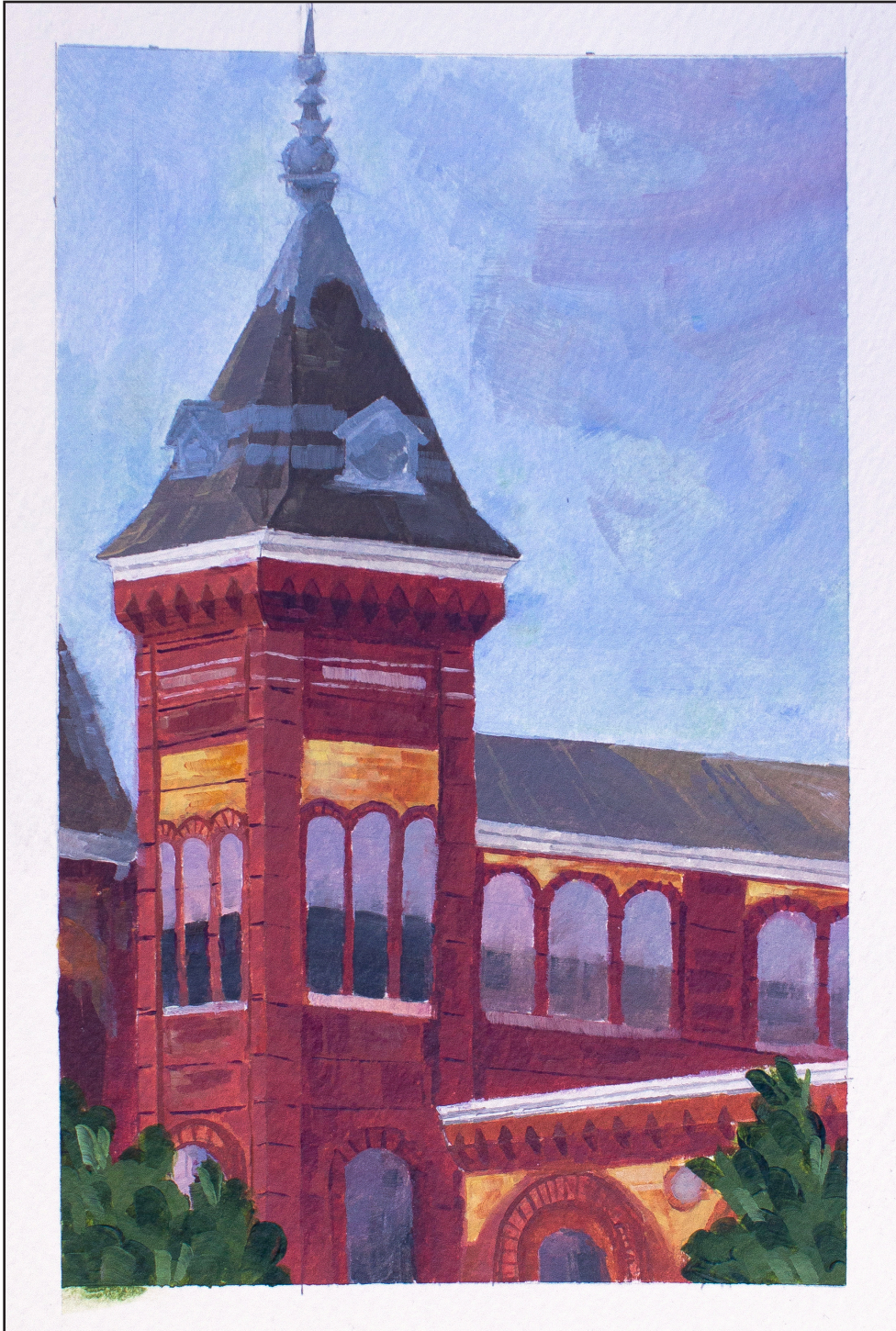
Poetry. Something you constantly think about after that first session. You think about the intensive listening, reading, and comprehension it takes for one to really understand what you are talking about. Poetry. The agonizing feeling of being unable to complete the incomplete because of writing blocks. When your creativity runs low, when those vulnerable thoughts stop popping up with lines to add to each stanza. Some may say this way of showing the past is being left behind, and with it, something so dear to my heart that I have grown to adore and envy. I am incapable of letting this happen. I will not anymore, not when there is so much beauty in this world to write about, even when you have to add hints of the

bad to display the truth.

Fear. Not feeling full enough to share these sacred moments with the world. Showing the way you unscramble your head in hopes that other people can find something as fulfilling as you did. Now you are full. Full enough to be poured into and to pour into others. Turn your negativity into positivity. Turn your fear into bravery. Flip the normal, unaccepted vulnerability and change it to poetry something to carry with you as a reminder that you can unscramble your head. Whether you talk it out via video, write it down, or dance it away. Take back control so you can show up as the purest authentic version of yourself because this version will not only prosper but will glow. She will get you through the times that you aren't always this version of yourself. Put time and hard work into yourself: as much as you put it into your dreams and aspirations, and as much as you put into others. Because that is when it will count the most.

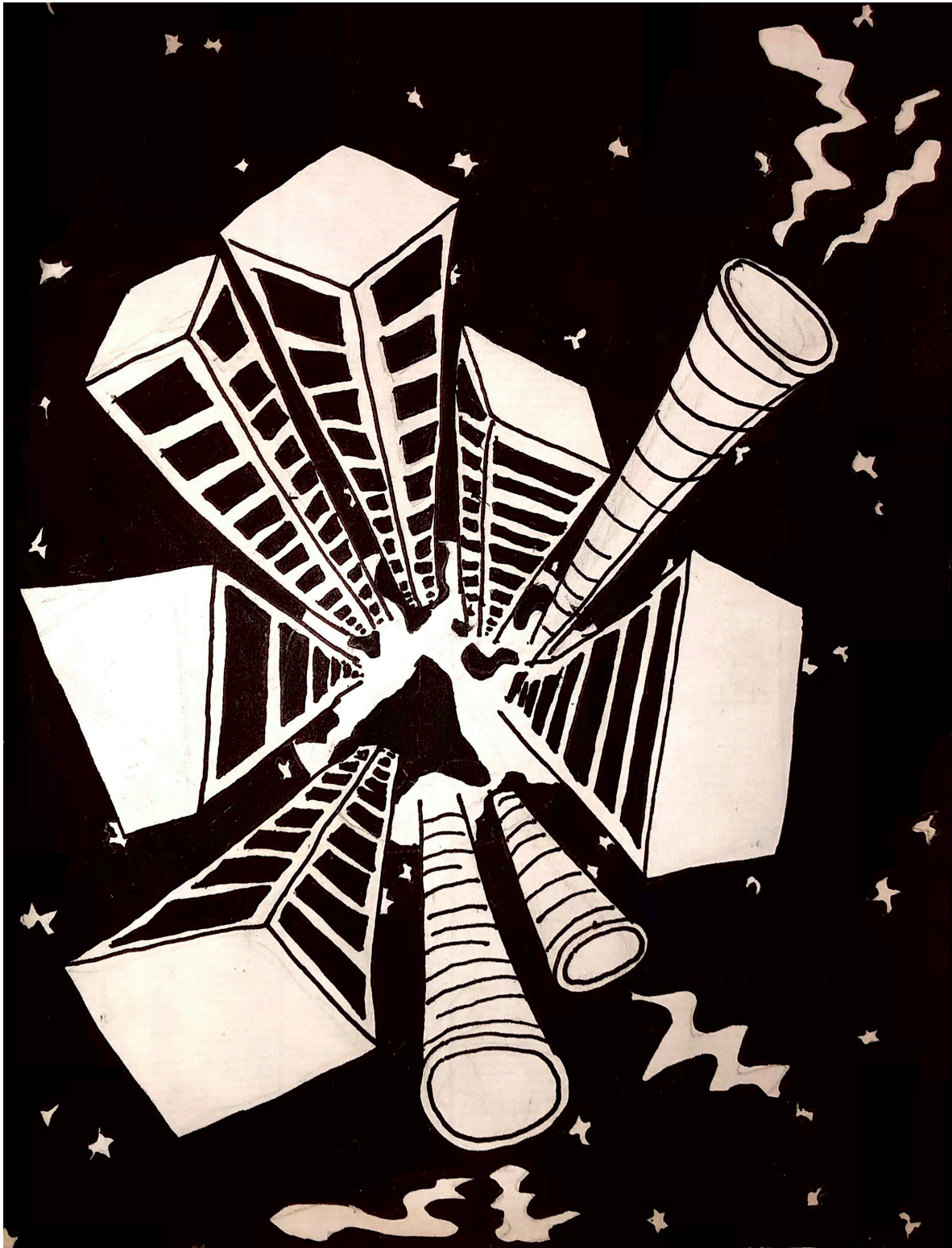
*smithsonian arts and industry
building*

petra debelack



untitled

niamh o'donovan



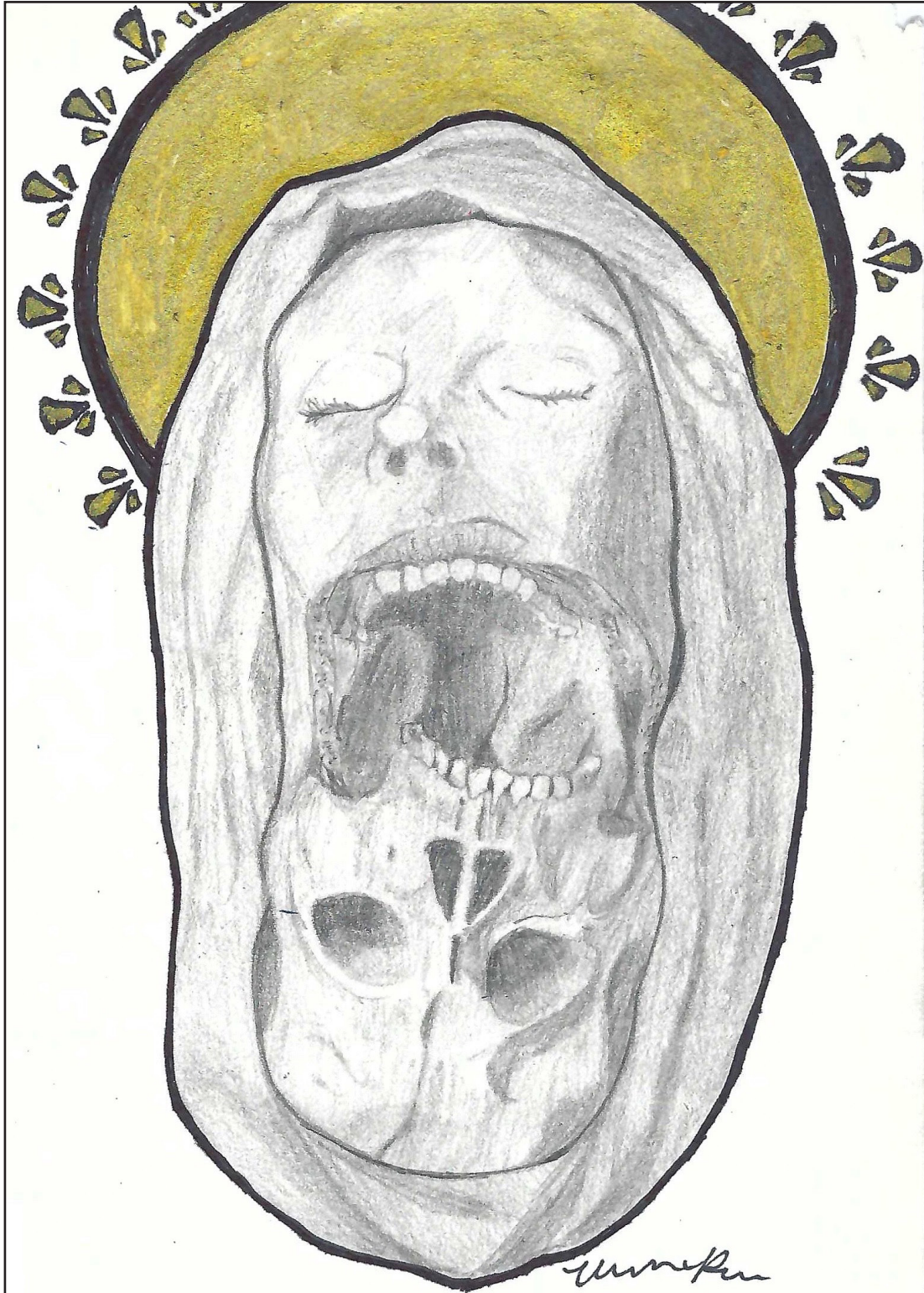
milk

anonymous

It will only take two seconds.
You got this.
Just pick it up and wash it off in the sink.
How could I have let this happen?
I mean, anyone knows not to leave
A cup of milk on the counter for three weeks.
The smell is terrorizing the whole house.
Did I walk by every day and ignore it?
Did I ignore my ignoring of it?
Sometimes it's hard to think about things.
Just thinking of picking it up makes me wonder
If I left my keys in my jean pocket.
Shit, I should go look for those, do I have my phone on me?
I haven't talked to my mom in a while,
I hope that she's okay. I need to call her.
The last time we talked was a little weird.
Not as weird as that pile of raw shrimp I saw on the train earlier.
What could possess someone to leave raw meat
In a public space? Maybe they had it in their
Bag and dropped it and they forgot to pick it up.
Maybe they're blind and couldn't see that they dropped it.
Maybe they got mad at someone and threw
The bag of raw shrimp at them, before storming off
Onto the tracks of Gallery Place, who kno-
Ew.
What is that smell?
Oh, goddamn it.

vita et mors

violetta rohr



prologue

matthew weitzner

A short, middle-aged man drives up to a barbed wire gate in his dusty silver Toyota Prius with a “GOARMY” bumper sticker on the back. In the guard post, a tired woman with long acrylic nails looks at the man’s identification card. “You know the drill.”

Dr. Thiersch places his hand on the fingerprint scanner. It flashes green. The woman nods and then presses the button for the gate to open and let him in. This gate is state-of-the-art. Smooth, metallic, electrified. Its magnetic lock unlatches, and the gate fluidly slides open, allowing him to drive through. It then closes, and the magnet locks.

The sun has barely risen when Dr. Thiersch makes it to his parking spot—his own, personal parking spot, he remembers with the closest he can get to glee this early in the morning—and it had been almost midnight when he last slept. He could really go for a coffee right now.

Laboriously, Dr. Thiersch opens his door and climbs out of the car. His muscles just don’t move like they used to, and this Army man has never been a soldier. He closes the door and walks over to his trunk, insomnia clear in his red-rimmed eyelids. He opens the trunk and pulls out his duffel bag. He then carries it into the building.

The building is sleek and modern, though nothing important is visible through its exterior windows. Large metal letters above the entryway read, “U.S. ARMY MEDICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR INFECTIOUS DISEASES.” Inside, Dr. Thiersch is surrounded by sleek flatscreen displays. On them, dozens of logos and slogans sent through a thousand pieces of animation software boast that this institute is “THE CUTTING EDGE OF AMERICAN MEDICAL RESEARCH.” The doctor smirks at that one. If only they knew how cutting-edge it really was.

Dr. Thiersch walks down the hall to the sec-

ond door on the left, nondescript except for the number 731. He opens it and walks into a gray hallway. The big modern windows and screens are gone. A lone steel door stands at the end. A man in military fatigues stands guard outside it, rifle slung around his shoulder. He nods. “Dr. Thiersch.”

“Corporal.”

Dr. Thiersch scans his ID, then his fingerprint, and then his retina before he is allowed into the outer section of his lab. There, he takes off his brown business suit and pants, his pink tie and his blue button-down shirt. In a small sink, he washes his hands, his face. Then he replaces his day clothes with a bright blue PPE suit. He checks and re-checks the gloves, the mask, the tape, making sure there is not a single opening. His goggles are cloudy and his mask uncomfortable, but he is used to it. At least he remembered to wear contacts this morning. Putting on the full suit takes him half an hour. Finally, he opens the door into the next room, where an assistant, already wearing a PPE, checks if Dr. Thiersch has made any mistakes. He has not.

Finally, he enters the main lab room. A gust of air goes with him. The lab room has been depressurized to ensure nothing airborne can escape. The door is closed. It seals magnetically, the latest in medical technology.

Here is the cutting edge of American—no, global—medical research. Scientists and assistants are already at lab stations working. In all his years working for USAMRIID, as they call it, he has never gotten used to the hours. His newfound position of prestige, though, lets him sleep in a little bit more. He could really use a coffee right now, but with all the lab gear on, it’s too late. At least he remembered to drink water before putting on the suit.

His promotion is the result of a certain project

he pioneered. A project that, today, would come to fruition.

He had created a new type of pathogen, one capable of combining the infectiousness of lyssavirus with the deadliness of prions. As a byproduct of its replication, the pathogen formed prions that could corrupt the proteins of the brain in a chain reaction. By studying this pathogen, they could create better defenses against prions, and be ready for the next great public health catastrophe.

At least, that's how it was explained to the bleeding hearts with security clearance.

In reality, of course, it was a disruptive force. A weapon perhaps more insidious than any developed before. Deployed over enemy territory it would create chaos, and, more importantly, fear. The horror that was the virus's nature, the terrors that the stories of the infection would bring, could entirely demoralize a populace. The infection itself would leave an enemy panicking, diverting crucial resources from the front. It would transmit at close range, over land, meaning it posed no real threat to the American populace. And a vaccine would be ready in the next few years, before the weapon would have to be deployed. The weapon was perfect. Now it was time for human trials.

The subjects had been selected carefully. A hundred men of all ages (except children, Dr. Thiersch drew the line there), taken from prisons across the nation. Fifty were from Guantanamo Bay. Dr. Thiersch would be happy to see those terrorists go. The rest, he tells himself, are necessary. For science. Next to him scurry the infected mice in their cages. Dr. Thiersch shivers looking at them. There is something so wrong about them. It was right to develop this, of course. Better to use it on an enemy than to have it used on you. But the eyes, he can't get over the eyes.

His senior lab assistant, Dr. Connelly, brings him back into the present. "Frank, we need you to approve the removal of the vials."

Dr. Thiersch sighs and walks over to the freezer where they are being kept. He inspects each one meticulously for signs of damage or tamper

and finds none. "Approved."

Dr. Connelly and her assistants begin removing the vials.

"Are any of the subjects misbehaving?"

"Ten of them were, all usuals, but they seem to have calmed down. I figured that 41 would start to act up, so I had his breakfast increased."

"You thought of everything." It'll be a sad day, Dr. Thiersch muses, when the higher-ups realize that Dr. Connelly was perfectly capable of running the lab by herself. Sad for him, that is.

The subjects believe themselves to be part of a vaccine trial. After the trial, the American subjects are to receive a reduction in their sentences, or so they were told. The foreign terrorists are to be spared enhanced interrogation.

Each prisoner is held in his own room, sealed by a state-of-the-art magnetic lock. They are opened one at a time, and a soldier and a scientist walk into the room. The prisoner is told to sit down. The scientist takes out an alcohol wipe and sterilizes his upper arm. Left or right, his preference. Then the syringe is inserted into the vial and the substance removed. On the vial, it says "Vaccine Version A". The subject is told to relax. Slowly and deliberately, the scientist moves the needle toward the injection point. The soldier keeps careful watch. His hand is not on his gun, that would draw too much suspicion. But he is ready. The scientist puts the needle into the subject's arm. One of them cries out. Most flinch. Many are perfectly still. The scientist presses the plunger, and a clear liquid enters the bloodstream of the subject. The needle is removed, the subject thanked and bandaged. The scientist and soldier leave the room, sealing the magnetic door behind them. The subject is told that he will soon be informed of further procedures. He will not.

In a perfect world, this happens a hundred times without a hiccup. In a perfect world, though, there is no need for bioweapons. Dr. Connelly was right in identifying Subject 41 as the problem. It is poor Dr. Wang and Corporal Ngai who discover how much of a problem he is. Everything goes well until Dr. Wang is about to insert the needle into

Subject 41's left arm. Suddenly, Faisal bin Mansur, the man numbered 41, swings his right arm, hitting the needle. It penetrates Dr. Wang's glove and pierces his index finger. Corporal Ngai moves quickly, drawing his gun and putting a bullet into Subject 41's chest. He then backs away from Dr. Wang, who stares at the drop of blood on his finger in disbelief. The plunger wasn't pressed far. He has no way of knowing if it was enough, but he is nevertheless paralyzed with fear. Corporal Ngai calls for help. Dr. Thiersch and Dr. Connelly come running in, along with several soldiers.

Frantically, Corporal Ngai explains what happened. Dr. Thiersch and Dr. Connelly look at each

other. "Back out of the room," Dr. Thiersch tells the soldiers. Dr. Wang begins to move. "Not you." Dr. Wang begins to shake his head. "No. No, no, no, no, no. Please. Please," he begs.

"Please."

Dr. Thiersch turns away. Dr. Wang attempts to run out, but the soldiers throw him back into the cell, and he falls to the ground.

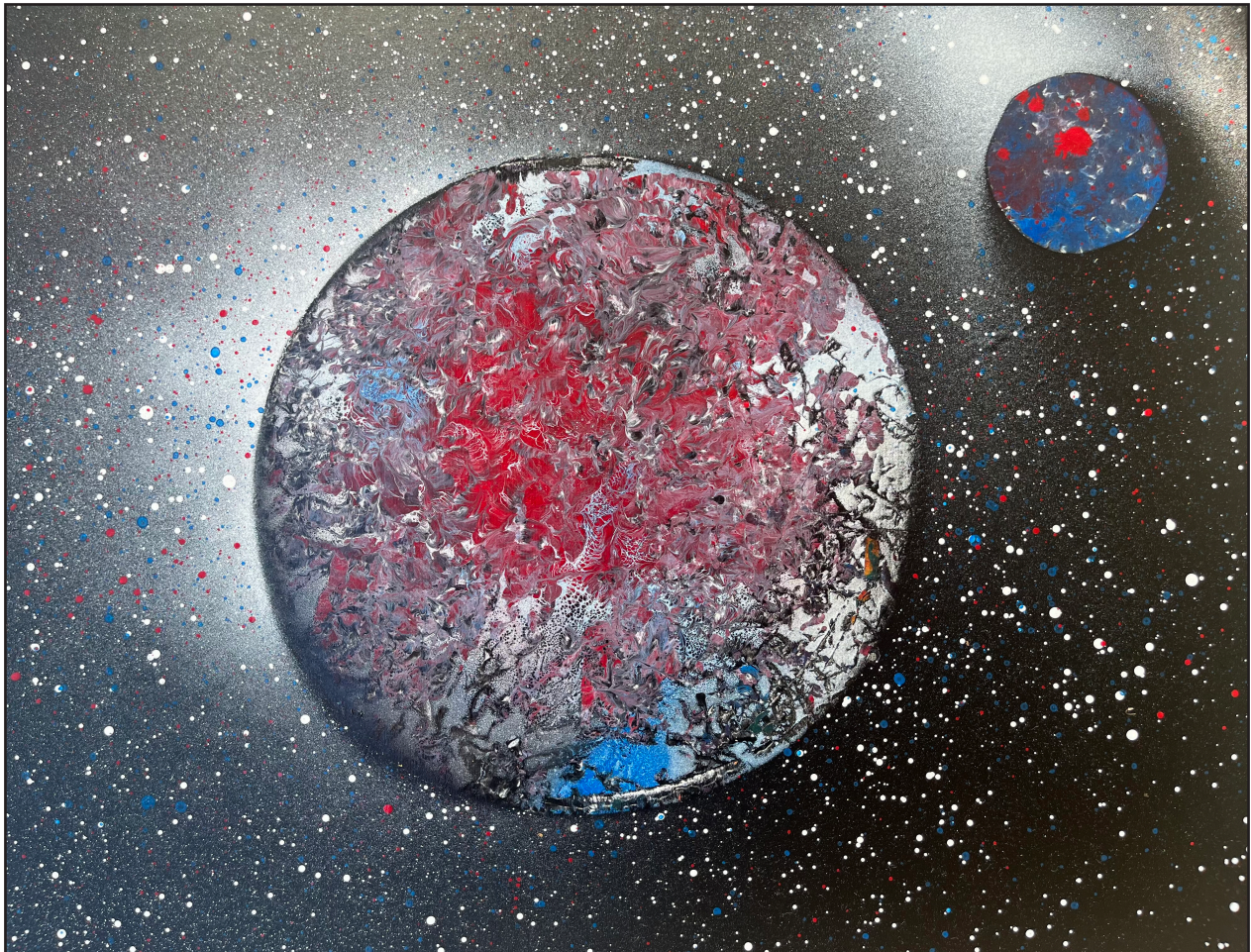
The door closes, and Dr. Wang is locked inside.

A strange part of his brain curls away into observation, reporting as if he were a scientist on the outside of the cage and not a man within.

Subject 42: Fingers have begun to twitch.

a planet of red white and blue

anonymous



orcas

clementine kovacs



miracle

hugo bonelli

At the brink of dusk,
running out of time.
At the end of the line
of a string of defeats.
I see a glint
as the darkness envelops.

There is nothing left in the dusk,
except for the dim glow
of a miracle.
A spawn of desperation,
impossible as the day is long.
And yet it captivates me,
for I am blind to reason.

Because it feels hard sometimes
to pick myself up again,
to push ahead of the best,
to look down to the paper,
instead of up to the sky.
Hard to catch up to others,
to conquer fears,
and to keep fighting.

Because it's too easy
to take a break,
to back down from a challenge,
to put my pencil down,
and stare at the stars.
Easy to submit to fear,
to scoff at reason,
and to dream rather than fight.

And so steamboats charge
down life's turbulent waters,
while I run aground far behind.
Because it's too easy
to take my hands off the wheel,
and lift my eyes to the stars
thinking of what could have been
if I'd had a miracle.

reborn

sofi sarmiento

Reborn into another soul;
doesn't mean
the suffering from *then*
won't be brought with it.

Although the body is tiny,
the intuition of the *then*
will forever be held
between the tiny limbs
of a strong soul.

They fight for years
before they're able to come back
and face the world
that caused such suffering *then*.

Looking at it now,
could it have been
way too soon for that?
But for now,
the sensations from the *then*
will never leave you.

excerpt from rich as red

ruth pournelle

It was so easy, that first time. It was almost frustrating how little it took for me to take it, how simple the heist was. A few days of planning, a talented ally, and some well-placed smiles—such a small price to pay for her life.

It all started in my sweltering little room three years ago, in the summer of 2100. I was sprawled across the bed, watching a news broadcast, and helplessly fanning myself with my fingers in some pathetic attempt to escape the heat. Stress and fear weighed me down, multiplying the existing heat by a thousand. My limbs were aflame, my cheeks flushed, my eyes swollen from crying. I was melting, slowly breaking apart at the seams. All I could do was focus on the news broadcast. It spewed all the same stuff: new building developments, festival announcements, reports of the broken climate control system and how it was leaving the city to roast. The screen showed the same blur of too-white teeth, synthetic hair, chipper voices, and chemically enhanced colored eyes. It was always the same.

Only this time, it stung whenever they smiled. How could they smile at a time like this? None of the figures on screen could so much as fathom what was going to happen, who I was going to lose. I let out a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. But just as I was about to snap, just as my fuse started to spark, something new came on screen. Famed designer Ashdell Levute and his shock of neon hair broke me out of the heat induced trance. I sat up and dabbed at my eyes with my shirt, unable to tell whether the water staining my face was sweat or tears.

“Gooooood evening, everyone!” he exclaimed in his cheery tone, his hands spread in an appealing manner as the camera zoomed into his unnaturally smooth skin. “In just one week, it will

be the 324th anniversary of our great nation. Not only that, but it will also be the first Independence Day in this new century! Such a holiday only comes once in a lifetime, so the celebration must be just as memorable!”

I scoffed.

“At five pm, on July fourth, join me in front of Sihton Plaza for a spectacle you’ll never want to end! It is there that I will reveal my newest project.”

I blinked, torn between intrigue and disappointment. I hadn’t heard about this from any tabloids.

He continued after a suspenseful pause. “I have worked tirelessly to create a garment that truly encapsulates the American spirit.”

My interest piqued, I leaned forward. The talk of patriotism bored me, but fashion was another story. My splintering mind welcomed the distraction. It was easier to ignore misery. The old screen I was watching the program on flickered as Levute spread his arms, grinning. His image flashed away.

And there it was.

Draped across a mannequin was an elaborate hooded cape, the most beautiful I’d ever seen. Lace details snaked up the edge, growing more elaborate around the jeweled metal clasp. The fabric’s richness was apparent from a glance. Though the cape was the color of fresh blood, when it caught the light, it shimmered silver. Levute’s voice drifted from the screen, explaining his design process while the mannequin slowly spun. I was entranced.

A cape was an obvious choice, he explained. America had been obsessed with them for the better part of a decade. The fashion craze had sparked, of course, in Duchess Row, beginning with a revival of eighteenth-century European

styles. People would wear full gowns, with corsets, petticoats, wigs, and all. It had captivated the upper-class, taking nearly a whole year for the trend to dwindle out. Capes should have died out with it, but instead they became a staple. Levute had chosen scarlet, the color of the blood shed to protect the country, as well as the color of passion, of anger, of a bunch of other stuff I can't remember, because the next thing he'd said sent chills of fascination down my spine.

"But above all else, what I wanted to capture was our unbreakability, our tenacity. That is why I spent countless hours working with chemists and cloth producers alike. Using revolutionary technology, we were able to weave a mixture of synthetic material into top-quality red silk. Because though the fabric may be soft and flowy, it is also bulletproof."

His speech continued, but I tuned it out. My gaze was stuck on the crimson cloak, but my thoughts moved at the speed of light. They spun and twisted and warped until an idea unfolded, one so surreal yet so possible that it took my breath away. One stemming from faded dreams and fueled by sheer desperation and hope. But also, one that could solve everything, one that could save the person I loved most in the world.

That single, half-baked idea is how it all began. Some thieves start by stealing jewels, ancient relics, or information. Some criminals start by swindling away national secrets, vulnerable celebrities, or so-called priceless artifacts. Some will just start with money, cash, coins, online currency. But that's not me.

I started with a hood.

But that wasn't the moment it became real. No, there were countless little moments that set me onto this path. Hundreds of little conversations and confirmations this is the right path. Without my allies, the heist would have been impossible, and without Luce it would have been unthinkable. I knew from the moment the idea seized me that he was the one I needed. He still is, the technical chainlink holding it all together,

and the only one I trust to do so. But I didn't know that for sure until two days after that miserable, sweltering moment that sparked it all.

I'd been sitting at a park table in some long-disregarded corner of the Mid level of the city, deserted in the middle of a Wednesday. My stomach churned with nerves, but I was careful not to show it. I'd shoved the sour taste of fear down into the deepest recesses of my stomach. My face was placid, but vacantly so, and I hadn't covered up the red rimming my eyes with make-up. I looked devastated, hopeless, like a tragic character in a movie. I didn't want to admit to myself how little of it was a facade.

Luce settled himself in the chair across from me with all the cautiousness of a friend who cared but didn't quite know how to respond. I despised the pity so obviously etched into his face, but I held my tongue, thinking it too valuable a tool to lose. His hazel eyes settled on mine.

"Hey. Are you doing all right?" he asked, his voice dancing the line between hesitation and tenderness. I'd known him for so long that his every thought is obvious to me. I could read him like a children's book I wrote myself. It was five long seconds before he continued, talking just to fill the silence. "It is okay to not be. I remember how hard it was when I lost my mother."

I bristled. "She's not lost yet." My shoulders stiffened instinctively, and I had to force myself to relax them. I took a deep breath, fighting to regain composure. It felt like a dam was slowly breaking in my mind and all I could do was watch. It was torture to contort my face back into the calmly tragic expression. "She's not lost yet," I repeated in a level tone. "I just need to get the treatment money by Sunday."

Luce's face twisted with guilt. "Eleanor, I'm sorry. You know I would if I could, but my father—"

"Luce, it's fine. I... I have a different plan. But I need your help." I paused, trying to make sense of what to say next. I had vastly underestimated how hard this would be for me. My head was out of control, dam cracks further creeping, my

thoughts desperately chanting this has to work, this has to work, over and over. I'd latched onto it as my only hope, and everything weighed on his agreement. "Did you hear about the bulletproof cloak Levute designed for Independence Day?" It spilled out of my mouth before I could fully regain focus.

He nodded encouragingly. "Yes. It was plastered everywhere. Even I heard about it." He was relieved to change the subject and eager to distract me.

"You're right. It is everywhere. I heard it was worth almost two million dollars." I studied his reaction, noting the way his eyebrows pinched slightly, like he was starting to piece it together and not liking what he found. I was terrified, but I continued, a hint of anxiety slipping into my voice. "There's a lot of public information about it, too. Like where it's held. And there's not an overwhelming amount of security—"

A disbelieving laugh escaped his lips. I knew what I did wrong instantly. A wave of emotion threatened to break through my facade. I revealed my cards too early, I lost control of the pitch of my voice and got too frantic, I hadn't timed anything properly.

Luce's voice sounded far away. "What are you saying now? You can't be serious. You want to, what, steal it? Sell it? We're not criminals, Eleanor. It'll turn out all right, okay?"

Tears pricked at my eyes, threatening to fall. Everything was muffled, taking second stage for my racing mind. I felt so helpless, watching the cracks race up the dam walls, feeling the stream of emotions dripping through. He should be right. I should agree with him. This should be crazy.

I bit my tongue until I tasted blood. Everything snapped into focus. Digging my nails into my palms, the ringing faded from my ears. I knew I was drowning, but this idea was my raft, and I would cobble it together from sticks if I have to.

So I leveled my gaze once more. Luce's eyes darted about, a sure sign he was stressed. His best friend just suggested they steal a million-dollar cloak, and he doesn't know what to do. My voice

was steady when I said, "Luce, please hear this out." His eyes flitted to me, flitted away. "This can solve everything for me. I have it all planned out." I kept my voice confidently reasonable, cutting the tragedy from my tone. "I researched it all. I know where it is, I know how to get there, I know how to sell it. I just need your help with the tech."

"You're serious about this? You're serious!" He exhaled hard, tearing a hand through his light brown hair. "And if we get caught? It's a crime! We'll be arrested—"

"I'll be the one retrieving it. You won't be in any direct danger."

"And if you get caught? Then what? You don't have the money for a lawyer. What will happen to your grandmother?"

"At least I'll have tried." I leaned forward, pressing my palms into the table. "I need to save her. I need your help. Trust me." Luce was silent. He didn't even look at me. His eyes were glued to the table, his posture stiff and anxious. But the battle was not over yet. "Your father has shares in Sihton Plaza, you know." His eyes widened with hastily concealed surprise. "In fact, one of his men personally oversaw the installation of their security system. If— when we pull this off, his reputation will take a hit." He frowned, eyebrows knit in concentration. "You'll get a share of the money, your own money. We will both benefit from this; I swear to you. We'll both win. Just help me."

I wait. The tension in his body slowly began to dissipate. His eyes flicked up to mine, but this time they lingered as he savored the idea. "You planned all of this out?" Luce hesitated. His voice was reluctant at best, almost guilty, but I knew I got him. "This is crazy," he muttered, gaze resuming its hummingbird pattern.

But I knew I won.

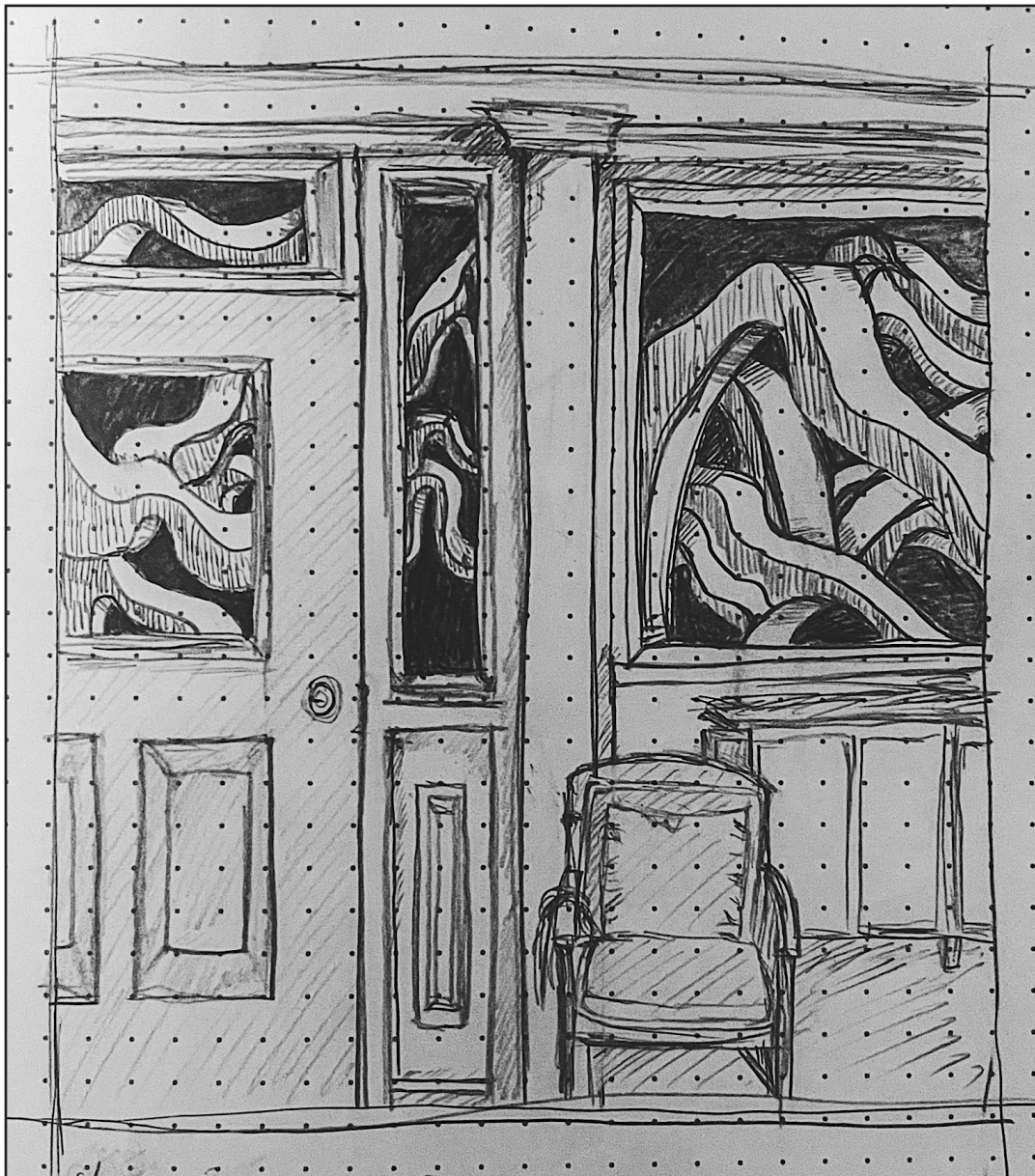
He had been right. It was crazy. It was the summer after high school graduation, and I was planning a robbery. My whole world was going up in flames at the ripe age of eighteen; truly crazy. And it was selfish, the entire exchange, the final

agreement, and we both knew it down the core of our beings. Not to mention childish, down to the real reason I fixated on the hood. And foolish, and whatever else it can be called.

And that is why it tasted all the more sweet when it worked.

home and the outside world

crystal mangaoil



there is art all around me

anonymous

As the days go by
I have learned
That there is art all around me
In the people that surround me
Light or dark skinned and all the shades in between
There is so much beauty to be seen

It's not just their gorgeous eyes, glossy lips, and perfect nose
It's their clothes, actions, and pose
The way their curvy handwriting fills the lines of their notebooks with their prose

The way they pull out a book on the train, oblivious to the world around them
The way their music seems to transport them, carrying them away to a world of their own
The way their pretty eyes are lined in black kohl

The way their words manage to never bore
And so so much more

They don't each have "their own kind of beauty"
They just are that pretty
The kind that stops me in the street
Or scrolling back just to see their alluring eyes again and again

There is so much beauty all around me
Each person
A work of art begging to be seen
And when I look
More than a glimpse
I fall a little bit in love
And that hasn't changed since

line portrait

petra debelack



a demiurge's lament

kamtoya okeke

The apocalypse, when it came, was quiet. Not the eerie silence of foreshadowing, nor the leering undertone of violins, just—quiet. Still. Peaceful.

It was a slow hush that brought all of their fine hairs to a standing ovation and sent them shivering. That should have been a hint. They should have known to start running, to hide themselves in their cupboards, to use the instincts evolution and time had given them, but they had grown complacent. It should have been an indication to hoard what little items they had left, to kill their children and then themselves. What use was generational knowledge if this simple thing could not be foreseen?

What use was technology? What use was sentience?

A glorious parasite, a swarming hoard, the homo sapiens. The apex predator to end all predators. Do they ever wonder what happened to their brethren? The poor neanderthal: legs too short, skull too thick, only one sapiens off from survival. Losers of natural selection, the shortest straw of life. If only they had won, they too could have gotten plastic surgery and nice teeth. Isn't that what anyone would ask for? Have pity for the single-named creature. The poor neanderthal.

The homo sapiens sapiens, superfluously doubled and plural in its singularity. A species like any other, they could be brought to their knees with anything beyond their comprehension. For all their brains, all their tools, all their machines, they still remained a lowly beast of an animal. What use was any of it?

They should have known, when the future was still stretched out in front of them, to look back and not take it for granted. They should have known, then, to turn away from fire, that fiendish gift, turn away from science, turn away from religion, and fall to nothing. See where all

of this has gotten them. They should have known to give up and collapse into quiet obscurity. See how vainly they try to make meaning out of everything.

Take, for example, a dictionary. Take, for example, math. Take, for example, God. How easily they could be negated, these creations of theirs, when they saw how malleable reality really was, when the laws of the universe were only a coincidence. And the apocalypse, it was just another planet ending, as they all did, with silence. Stillness, peace. Emptiness.

They held the expanse of space held between synapses and wrote out entire worlds on notecards, in textbooks, on music sheets. Each of them a god in their own right, destined for nothing at all. They should have known, the first time they encountered death, to turn away from it. To run from it. They should have known, the first time they saw life, to embrace it. But what use is reminiscing?

Surely, humanity does not remember being small, floating around, eyes closed, protected by their collective lack of sight. How they would have screamed, if they could see, if they had unveiled their eyes to darkness. And when they finally opened their eyes to light, bright and burning, how they screamed then. Fear of darkness, fear of light, fear of the unknown. That never goes away, does it, even when one draws comfort from the earth spinning from west to east, and the sun from east to west, and magnets from north to south, following all these funny little rules.

Imagine the fear if the world had turned, end over end, like a marble. If weary, the sun went on sabbatical, and the lights once more went out. If only they had remembered that the moment of their birth was bathed in blood and neither light nor dark was safe. They would no longer recognize the comfort of quiet, not when leaving

the womb was a moment bathed in blood. The illusion of safety grows with age. This they do remember: first kiss, second, third, first love, no love, first loss, second, first job, again, endless; everything in relation to the previous and the next. They spend much of their lives asleep, wasting away. They remember their dreams. They do not remember their deaths.

Be glad for that small mercy. For even when they are old, when they have accepted what they do and do not know, they can scream. Shamelessly, they will scream, loudly, loudly, they scream, until they cannot.

Like this: the tip-toe creeping of the end, of a vignette montage, closing in. It is the end of the world.

Here, queue the shaking whisper of violin, queue the quavering choir, queue the end of the world. What comes next? What comes after the apocalypse? Only applause, a vacant theater, the custodian. In triplicate: the homo sapiens sapiens sapiens. Does it ever end? What use would it be if it did not?

Do humans fear time? Yes, they fear age. They fear loss. But do they fear time? That fleeting, endless thing. Always in the past tense and in the future, but not in the now, because by the time they get around to thinking about it, it has gone. The grand and wondrous thing that makes ants of them all, that makes them think of God, in equal amounts fear and awe. But not while they are asleep, no.

Time is change. Is unchanging.

Do they fear the unknown?

The poor living.

The lucky dead.

They should have known to screw their eyes shut and clamp clammy hands over their ears, to yell incoherently and run in circles, to fall over, to trip, to scream bloody murder at nothing at all. At themselves. They should have known better than to exist. Fools, the lot of them, poor fools. Still—quiet and peace.

They were alive. Did they fear life? Did they

fear time? Did they fear God? Did they fear the apocalypse, before it came? And when it did, did they release their hold on life, or did they fight? Does it matter? Do they fear me?

And like that: the apocalypse came.

They stirred but did not wake, bound to dreams of graveyards and stars and mirrors. They slept on, like guileless infants, like a specimen under a microscope.

And like this: the apocalypse went.

In a final echoing silence, the chamber stilled. They slept.

acknowledgements

The Pen believes in the importance of creative expression through various media. Thank you Walls students for your incredible art and writing submissions!

Special congratulations to the winners of the Winter 2023 Competition: Jessie Moss' "The Pears Will Rot Forever" (writing), Petra Debelack's "Kearvaig Bothy" (art), and Ellis Olander's "Cityscape" (cover). Congratulations to the runners-up: "Bits and Pieces" by Penelope Widmer and "A Demiurge's Lament" by Kamtoya Okeke.

The Editorial Team would like to thank our advisor, Mr. Ghazi, the Home and School Association, and our generous donors Yemi Akinsanya, Tundey Akinsanya, Alice and Brian Powers, Funmi Balogun, Jill Crawford, Dennis Crawford, Eileen Crawford, Michael Crawford, Keri DeAngelis, Kelly Dunham, Marina Galvani, Nora Leccese, Joanne Levine, Jucinth Mangaoil, Enuma Okeke, Erich Parker, Danica Petroschius, Christina Powers, Alison Powers, Laura Reilly, Helen Zughaib, and two other anonymous donors.

This issue wouldn't be possible without your support!

We encourage any and all students to submit to the literary magazine at swwthepen@gmail.com.

Submissions are accepted year-round.

Instagram: @swwlitmag
Website: thepenlitmag.com

the pen literary magazine

issue VII