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*summer
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Under the Fig Tree

Anonymous

Do you remember?
The sweet fig juice.
Running down,
 your chin
 that day.

Shaded branches,
Shading all,
Shaded us from watchful eyes.

Shaded fates,
And shaded futures,
Shaded truth of borrowed time.

Do you remember?
The slap of soles.
On sandy rock,
 down to
 the beach.

Your face flushed red,
Dark as fig jam.
More than I realized,
 behind
 your
 stare.

A flighty peck,
So light I shan't,
Have know but for-
My mothers glare.

Shaded hate,
Within her eyes,
Shaded warmth within my heart.

Do you remember?
That last fig seed.
That we planted,
 our
 final
 day.

In Phthia,
In the castle's shade,
Where we said one day we'd doubtless return.

Now it's been 12 years,
Since I was told to lead,
In the shade of the ground I reminisce.

Do you remember?
Our promise to sail.
Back after the war,
 and see
 the figs
 blossom.

An oath to return,
To that shaded grove,
Which flourishes with fruit long after I'm gone.

Now soon they'll decay,
As all sweet things do.
Almost as our love, though it hurts to admit.

Your smile once bright,
And no hurt in your heart,
All gone with the enemy's thrust of a spear.

If only we'd planted,
A second fig tree,
Maybe you'd be remembered past all my mistakes.

Winner of Best Art



Untitled 1
Max Padilla

Fireflies

Audrey Hayes

When the day's done,
And the sky's fallen dark,
A lone angel remains,
One last gleaming spark,

And it shall leave,
And night shall come
But for now it stays,
A steady thrum,

It glows and fades,
Flickers and throbs,
And never stops but does oft pause,

And then the twinkle,
Like fallen stars,
Is joined by brethren, come afar.

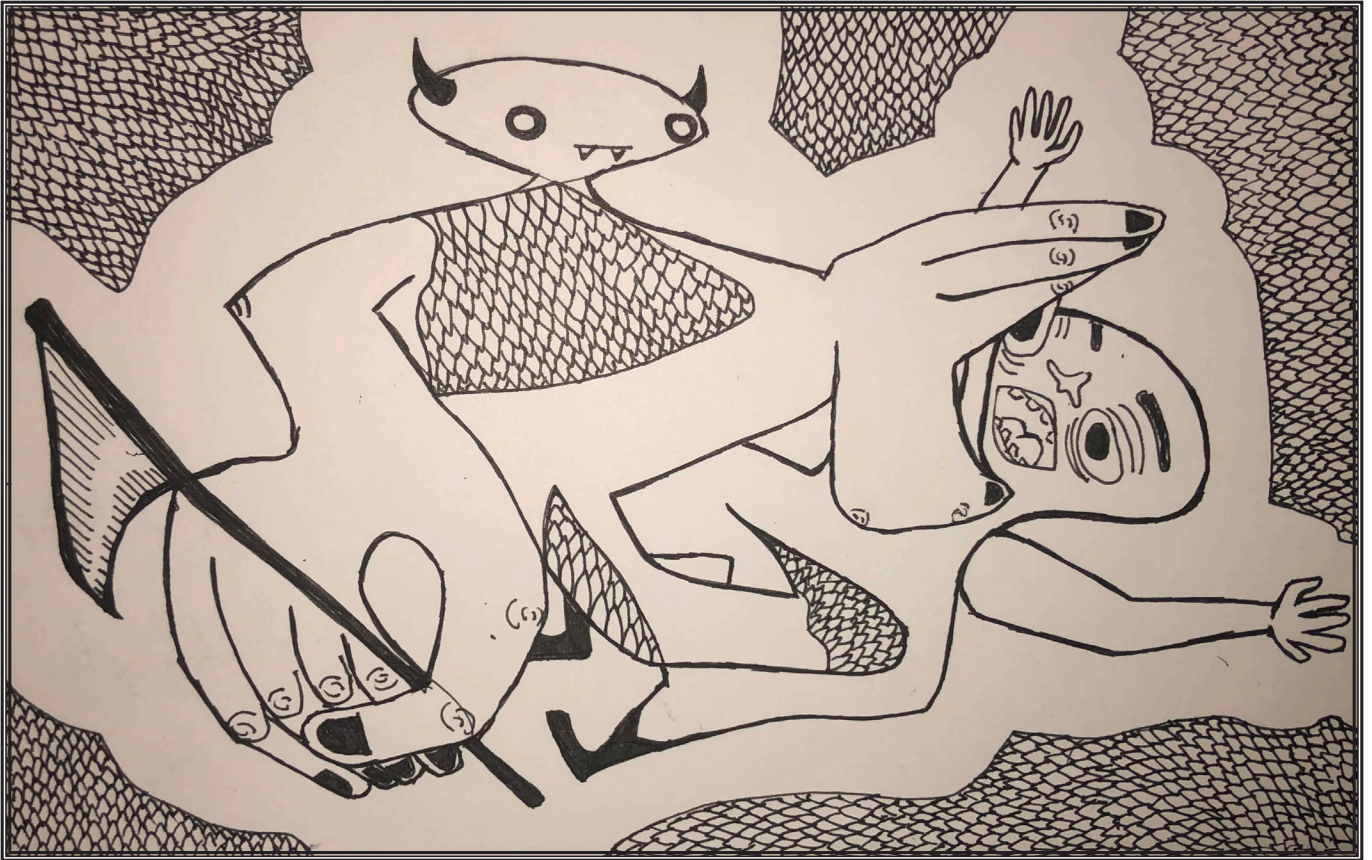
They dance and leap,
But ne'er make landfall,
For if they do, gone is it all.

The shadows jump,
The grass blades swish,
The moonbeams glow o'er speckled koi fish.

And Luna herself,
Constant over the quarry,
Smiles down on it all,
A picture of silver glory.

Untitled

Niamh O'Donovan



kid v. Chicken

Niamh O'Donovan



A Mortal's Guide to Becoming a God

Ruth Pournelle

Notice: This book is not sanctioned by the magic council, and has been discontinued and banned for spreading dangerous knowledge, encouraging criminal behavior, and being a significant factor in numerous deadly incidents. Those who wish to pursue godhood should consult the council handbook and continue according to those guidelines. If you have any insight as to who the author is or their whereabouts, report to your nearest magic officer. Read at your own peril.

Everyone wants to be something more. A scholar, a mage, a YouTuber, a councilman, all respectable yet uninspired aspirations. But you are different. You aspire higher, greater, stronger. You want to be a god. Without further ado, this is your comprehensive guide to apotheosis.

Step 1. Before attempting to become a god, you must first confront your own motivations. Why is it you want to become a deity? Take out a sheet of paper and list all of your reasons. Fame? Glory? Conquering the world? Establishing a new order in its ruins? The legal allowance to be carried and kowtowed to everywhere you go, waited on hand and foot by your adoring followers? Not having to brush your teeth in the mornings?

Whatever they may be, no matter how small, list them. This is a very important part. The road to godhood can be quite grueling (although this guide takes away much of the hassle), and it is important to understand what you are working towards. If you cannot find any suitably strong motivations, don't be afraid to put this book down. Godhood isn't for everyone.

After you have listed your motivations, here comes the fun part! You get to decide which type of god to be. Take out a new sheet of paper, and make another list. If you are struggling, here are some suggestions. A storm god in command of the weather, with followers as bold and proud as lightning. A puppeteer god, who controls the world from the shadows, forever underestimated. A savior god, with churches

and loyal apostles across the land. Consider these questions as well; what powers do you want? What level of prestige do you want to reach? What is your ruling philosophy? Every god needs a philosophy. What else are your followers going to live by?

Put your lists aside, somewhere easily accessible, like your desk drawer or your personal void. Congratulations! You have completed the first step towards divinity.

Step 2. This is my personal favorite step—constructing an altar! Your followers will need something to pray under. If you have the money, go ahead and commission a custom one, complete with the gold and the ivory and the sapphires. But some of us are running on a budget, and that's okay. You can find plenty of perfectly good altars in Goodwill, or better yet, the prayer section of HomeDepot! Of course, pre-used altars will be for a different god, but their faces and symbols can easily be carved away (I'd suggest selecting altars for Jodie-of-the-living-river. It is particularly cathartic to carve off her face, at least for me). Just remember to use sage to avoid cursing yourself in the process.

Once you have a nice, plain altar, it's time to decorate it. Flowers, bones, skulls, stickers, blood runes, whatever you feel like. It's your altar. You should feel proud to gaze upon it. Don't worry about adding your portrait yet, that can be addressed further down the line, when you have more resources and more followers. Or do, if you have the money, time, or skill.

Great! You have an altar, and you have an outline. Next is where we really start attacking the more pressing criteria for deification.

Step 3. Immortality. Such a tiring thing to achieve, but a necessary one nevertheless. Because if a god doesn't live forever, then who can say they even truly existed? But you won't have to worry about that; I have compiled a list of the easiest ways to achieve the oh-so-coveted status of immortal.

The first tactic is to schedule an appointment with the Lifespan Spinner. Unfortunately, it can take so

long to actually have this appointment that you may be dead by the time your turn comes around, and I promised you three weeks, didn't I? So, not including the potential spontaneous combustion that may occur if you don't manage to convince her to make you undying, while this is the safest way, I think there are better options.

Tactic two is the Cave of Wishes. The media likes to paint it as some harrowing, treacherous journey into the depths whose prize will never outweigh the cost of near-certain death, but that's just propaganda. Truthfully, if you can't handle the Cave of Wishes, you can't handle the responsibility of being a god. So go in there, dodge those poisonous crystorpions, avoid the molten lava, and shave off a wish crystal to take home!

It may be tempting to use your wish crystal to wish for godship, but they can easily get things wrong. It's better to have your destiny in your own hands. Instead, wish for immortality, but don't write your wish yourself. Google has plenty of immortality wish-phrases that have actually succeeded. Find one that works for you.

The third tactic is for those who don't think they can handle the Cave of Wishes. This is a more temporary option, but it will get easier as you grow your religion; take other people's lifespans and add them to your own. This can easily be achieved by writing a soul contract, but be careful where you do it. The pesky magic police don't play around with lifespan crimes. If you get caught, you'll spend double your new life span in prison. This method doesn't last forever, but it will sustain you for now.

If none of these tactics appeal to you, don't start searching online for "Ways to get immortal—quick!". That's a quick way to get scammed and sell your soul, literally. Instead, read my book "Three Hundred and Thirty-Three Ways to Avoid Death", which is a far more in-depth guide on the subject.

Now then, how does it feel to know you'll never die? Good? Great. You're one step closer to becoming a god!

Step 4. Immortality is only one piece in the puzzle. To become truly divine, you must also achieve omniscience. And while this may sound just as

daunting as your previous task, I can assure you that it isn't. Really, this step is quite simple. To become all-knowing, all you need to do is swipe a crystal ball from your local fortune teller (don't worry, they have extras). And you need a genuine crystal ball. An Amazon knock-off just won't cut it.

Once you have it, all you need to do to access its knowledge is to crush it into a powder, put the dust into a fine cloth, and boil it as a tea. Make sure it has steeped boiled for exactly 24 hours before drinking it and drink it slowly. Otherwise, your newfound knowledge will overwhelm you. This will only last a year, so you must repeat this step annually.

For all you slackers, this cannot be substituted with one of those knowledge teas you always see in advertisements on sketchy websites—typically, the crystals are diluted and only last a few hours, if they work at all.

Now that you know all the secrets the universe holds, the next step should be a piece of cake.

Step 5. Acquire extraordinary powers. I know this sounds vague, but we did step one for a reason. Considering your new-found omniscience, you probably now have all sorts of ideas how to get the powers you want. There are so many different sects of magic to pursue that, even with my own godly omniscience, I can't list them all. Telekinesis, pyromancy, sorcery, divination, hydrostronomy, wizardry, the list goes on! So instead of telling you what to do, I'll give you a list of what not to do.

Do not, under any circumstance, purchase one of those fad amulets that promise you a forever burning flame-heart or something like that. Those are scams, and deities do not fall for scams.

Do not learn any magic that messes with your life force or life span, i.e. do not make a deal with the devil. This has the potential to neutralize your immortality, and it is not worth the risk (not to mention the devil is quite the nagging grouch, but an eternity of reaping souls will do that to you).

Do not take any temporary magic. Gods should not be temporary.

And, finally, do not pursue life-stream magic. It's what Jodie-of-the-living-river practices, and we don't need any more gods like her walking around.

Now you have special magic, omniscience, immortality, an altar, and a philosophy. It's time to start winning people over!

Step 6. You need apostles to worship you. If you're a siren, a soul-beguiler, or mildly charismatic, great! This step will be the easiest one yet. But for most, this will be quite difficult. So, as usual, I have prepared several easy strategies to gaining loyal and adoring followers. If you find any of the following strategies upsetting, deification may not be the path for you. It is necessary for a god to maintain a certain level of apathy in order to achieve their goals. Don't be afraid to put this guide down and return to society a new and improved person. Because morality is for mortals, not immortals. The fact is that vulnerable people are the easiest to convert.

One strategy is to target children. They are young and impressionable, and if you succeed, they may remain loyal devotees for the rest of their lives. Orphanages are the best place to find future apostles, and they often have a shortage of volunteers.

If the thought of brainwashing children distresses you too much, again, consider putting this book down, or turn your attention to retirement homes. Their residents may not live very long, but it will be good to give them something to believe in during their final years! Other establishments where you might find vulnerable people/potential followers are hospitals, asylums, summer schools, casinos, and Twitter. Generally, you should aim for at least 100 genuine devotees to your cause before applying for certification.

If you struggle with persuasion, consider the following. First, a common enemy. Nothing unites humans more than burning, single-minded, paranoia-fueled hatred, and it comes with a philosophy practically written for you—fascism! Second, an us-versus-them mentality. Look at your target straight in their eyes (or eye, singular, I don't judge). Tell them how much better they are now that they worship you. Tell them they don't need anyone but you. Tell them anyone trying to tear them away is just jealous, that they're just trying to sabotage their journey. Look at me, dear apostle. See us together? See how great you feel? And see how your family

looks? They're the evil ones. How could I be evil? I'm here to help you, dear apostle. I'm here to save you. (This works even better if you can link this to the common enemy!). Then, make them feel special. Compliment them, give them a nickname, enchant them, braid their hair, whatever it takes to win them over. Finally, give them a community, people who share their beliefs to trust and rely on, but don't let that overshadow the prior step. Their allegiance should always be to you, first and foremost.

Now you are almost there! You have a legion of worshipping apostles, immortality, unlimited knowledge, and ultimate power, all the requirements to register for magic-council-approved godhood! But going the bureaucratic route will take a very long time. You could spend triple your promised three weeks just waiting for your submission to be approved! So, I've included one last step.

Step 7. You need something to speed up the process. Something that will have people banging on the doors of the magic council to register you. Something that will put you on the map and give you more followers than you could have ever dreamed of. Something that will make you more than a god—something that will make you a legend!

You need a great feat.

Sometimes you get lucky. A firestorm breaks out, a plague spreads, a dark mage picks the wrong follower to mug in an alleyway. Sometimes your great feat falls right into your lap in the form of a wonderful calamity. But other times, calamities must be... induced.

One way is to defeat a Great Dragon. They don't take kindly to strangers stealing their gold, so sacrifice one follower to do the honors (promise them everlasting heaven in the afterlife or something) and defeat the dragon when it starts rampaging the city. (For a more comprehensive guide on this topic, read my book "59 Tips and Tricks for Fighting Great Dragons"). Another way is to let out all the beasts in your local menagerie and hope they have one scary enough to make headlines by defeating it. There are so many paths to take with this one! You can use your lists for inspiration.

But my personal favorite way is to challenge an-

other god to a duel and defeat them. It frees up a spot on the registry and sends a message to the world (feel free to fight Jodie-of-the-living-river; I'll autograph your book if you do). Perhaps challenging another god was your goal all along. Well, you're in luck! Read my book "How to Duel a God and Win in Less Than Ten Steps" for more information.

You've done it! Your apotheosis is complete. You are a god. Your name is known across the world, from the Stygian Sea to Shangri-La in the Himalayas! Churches are being erected in your honor, altars are being carved with your face, people kneel at your feet. Your apostle might be flipping the pages for you as you read this. Congratulations for your newly acquired divinity! How does it feel? Is it everything you've dreamed of?

It had better be. The world needs more gods. Being immortal can get pretty boring, (especially when all you have for company is Jodie-of-the-living-river). I wonder how many of you survived. I wonder how many of you succeeded. But if you failed, don't blame me. Blame yourself for being insufficient. Some people are just meant to be followers.

But if you, my dear reader, have read to the end before following any of the steps it means you are capable of forethought. Capable of this. So do it. Don't disappoint me. Don't disappoint yourself, and whatever you do, don't regret it.

Winner of Best Prose

Great
Logan Alana

In shadows deep, I often dwell,
A tale of choices, hard to tell,
Disappointment's heavy weight,
I find myself in this sorry state.
Mornings missed, in slumber's embrace,
Depression's grip, a somber space,
A daughter's guilt, a heavy weight,
Longing to be great, but feeling late.
But through the darkness, I can see,
A path towards a better me,

In knowledge gained from my mistakes,
A brighter future, my spirit wakes.
With each new dawn, I'll rise above,
The weight of choices, lost in love,
For though I've faltered, I can't deny,
The strength within to reach the sky.
With lessons learned, I'll pave the way,
Towards a brighter, wiser day.,
No longer bound by past despair,
I'll rise and be great, I swear.



Goofy Cherry Blossom
Anton Tracy

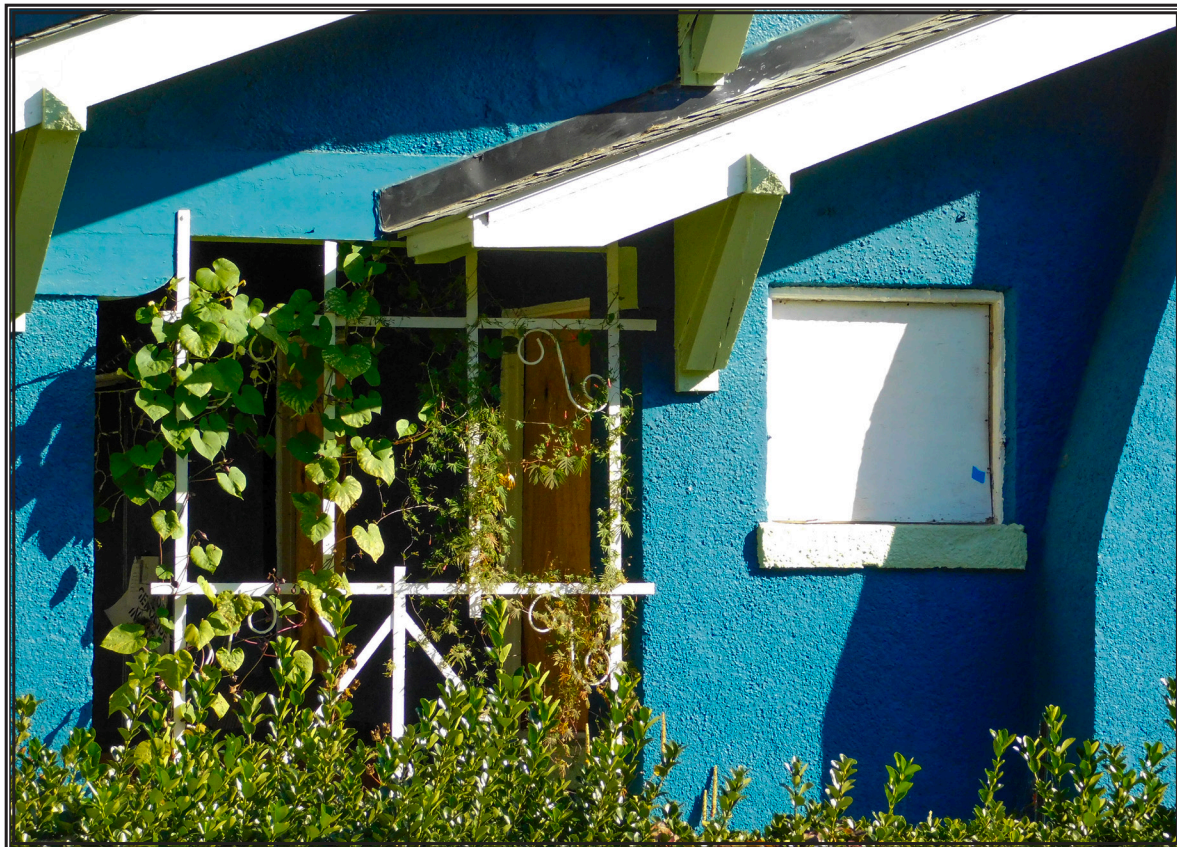
Untitled 1

Natalie Broquard



Untitled 2

Natalie Broquard



The Letters I Never Wrote

Louisa Jensen

I press the tip of the spade into the earth at my feet with a loud crunch. I've tried several spots around the trunk of our willow tree, but the ground today is as rigid as the beds in the hospital. I grit my teeth, having a sudden urge to pummel at the dirt with my fists. My vision blurs and I shut my eyes tightly before the tears can fall. Relax, Caiden. The only thing you need to do is dig a hole.

I pick up the spade again, hacking at the dirt until there's a good-sized dent. I pull out a long, white envelope and place it gently in the hole. I don't need to read it again. The contents are a mantra, inked into my brain for all time.

Do you remember the time when we skipped swim practice? You'd just pulled into the pool's parking lot when you turned to me and asked, "Do you wanna just skip today?" It was like you could tell I didn't want to go. We walked down to the beach instead and watched the sunset until mom called, demanding to know where we were. I would give everything to be sitting there with you again. Please, come back to me. You have no idea how much I need you.

This time, I let the tears fall, a trail of emotion pouring down my face. I know my brother isn't coming back. Not now, not ever. I fill in the hole gently, leaving the letter inside. After all the letters I never wrote, all the ideas I never executed, this envelope is the only thing I have left to bury.

I lean my head against the willow's trunk and watch its swaying branches until my insides go numb.



No Surrender
Ruth Pournelle

Seethe

Ruth Pournelle

In all his 29 years and countless raids, the warrior had never been so sure that this one would be his last.

Pressed against a jagged jut of rock, he could feel his wounds gaping, his lungs gasping, and, more than anything else, dread soaking deeper into his bones; cold, dark and endless. He had been scared before. He had been alone before. But he had never been left with this sinking feeling that, somewhere in the blur of battle, he had lost his other half.

The boulder, rough against his back, surfaced from the earth at an unnatural height and angle. It was one of hundreds pockmarking the mesa valley, courtesy of a first-wave Earth-Render. The rock formations were meant to slow the beasts from their assault. Harerun Valley, once a familiar, peaceful expanse of desert brush, was now a labyrinth of sun-painted stone.

A graveyard, the warrior despaired. One in which he feared he would die.

The distant sound of commotion echoed around him. Painstakingly lifting his head, he strained his ears to hear a voice that had been silent for too long. Instead, the songlike hiss of a great serpent sent chills down his spine. It could not be more than 50 feet behind him.

A gust of wind swept through the shattered desertscape, stinging his eyes. Concealed by more rust-colored ridges, the horizon flashed with light from another battle taking place. He knew it was another warrior group fighting for their lives. Jagged pain shot through his right side as he used his good arm to steady himself. The gash, wrapping from his shoulder-blade to above his heart, was deep but not deadly. A griffin had swiped him before he and his partner had taken it down and the snake monster rose to replace it. He'd been lucky it missed the artery, and everyone knew, in a raid, you could only be lucky once.

The great serpent let out another song and he

shuddered. Terror tasted metallic, like blood, dust, and snake scales. Every muscle in his battered body ached to flee but retreat wasn't an option while lives were on the line—while she was missing. Sheron. He hadn't seen his partner since the snake had broken through the ground and charged them. That had been minutes ago, hours in the accelerated timeline of a raid.

She's dead, part of him brooded defeatedly. He'd have seen her otherwise. Shadow powers or not, she wasn't the type to disappear. But he had to be sure.

Tapping into the well of energy in his chest, he spun ice across his collarbone. It was blisteringly cold but blissfully numbing, soothing and sealing his wounds.

The warrior gritted his teeth and rose to his feet. His throat was as dry as the dust clogging the air, but he cried out anyway, desperate to know if he was alone. "Sheron!" The warrior cast a furtive glance toward the darkening heavens, praying that he might hear a response.

His call was answered by the giant snake's rattling hiss, close enough to shudder the earth. He mused how much it sounded like sorrow. Mustering up his strength and courage, he pushed off from the stone toward where he'd last seen his companion. Behind him, scales flashed bright through the haze.

Frantic and limping, he almost lost his footing as a wave of pain slipped through the ice's numbing. The valley's shattered landscape swam in front of him, but he staggered on. The dust was so thick he could barely tell if he was going the right way. He wasn't sure there was a right way, but the marks on a Rended boulder gave him hope. Scab-like holes peppered the red rock, the sort only possible from a Shadow-Seether's acidic darkness. Hope rose in his chest. It was her. It had to be. His footsteps halted. A limp hand sticking out of rubble confirmed his hopes and fears.

"No!" He choked out. The next sound that escaped the warrior's mouth was a sob. Heavy tears rolled down his face as he hugged his frozen, useless arm close. A hissing song thundered through his body as a shadow rose behind him.

He could feel death's gaze on his back. An

Ice-Spinner couldn't kill a great serpent. Not alone. But through the dust, he glimpsed a path. He could run if he was quick, and the warrior had always been quick. He could flee.

Distantly, he remembered the councilor's speech given as he was sworn into his position. Young and giddy from passing the exam, he'd only been half listening, but it had still stuck. Warriors must be prepared to make sacrifices, she had said.

He sucked in a desperate breath, reaching for the burning rage sunk low beneath his sadness, and spun around, away from his only hope of escape.

In what he knew was his final stand, the warrior threw up his hands, reaching deep into the arctic spring within him, deeper than he ever had, until he knew there would be nothing left. Razor-sharp icicles surged from his fingers into a glacier. A primal scream erupted from his throat, but his thoughts were pleading. He regretted his choice, then.

His gaze lifted toward the cosmos, begging, *Please*, desperate to catch the eye of whatever god was looking down on him. *Please, don't let me die. I don't want to die. I don't want to die like Sheron, PLEASE.*

He could feel his power draining away, drying up, his scream dying in his throat. The sound of ice cracking melded with an enraged hiss. As the great serpent broke from its glacial bonds, the warrior, the veteran raider, the remaining half of a broken whole, shut his eyes like a coward and clasped his hands in an impossible prayer he knew would never be heard.

A star fell from the sky.

It struck the earth with the dazzle of a miracle and the force of a meteor. White-hot fire blotted out the world, and in one heaving movement, tore it asunder. He blinked the spots from his eyes as the divine brilliance coalesced into a figure. The great serpent's scorched, caved in head fell to the ground with a dead thud, mirroring the way his mouth fell open. Tears dripped from his eyes as the warrior recognized his savior.

His hero bent down, grasping him by his elbows and looking into his face. "Are you alright?"

The warrior could not respond, dazed, injured, and struck by his savior's face. Her expression was kind, her features strong and proud. But it was her

youth, cleaving through any other observation, that most stunned him. Every Blessed knew of Therista the Sky-Spinner, had heard the mythical tales of the child prodigy, but to be faced with her round eyes and smooth skin was another matter entirely.

A sob hitched in his throat, and he could no longer hold any semblance of presentability. The warrior broke apart at the seams, his head lolling back as ugly tears blurred the merciful world from view. Therista's steady arms were the only thing supporting him. Unflinching, she carefully, easily, lifted him up.

His hero's voice was as steady and warm as a hand on his cheek. "You'll be fine. I'll take you to the healer's tent. Deven will take care of you."

I'm already fine, he wanted to say. He'd been saved.

Then they were flying, cutting through the heavens. The speed took his breath away, and he realized, awed, this was how she had soared to save him. Through dust chapped lips, determined to voice his gratitude, the warrior croaked, "T-Thank you, thank you..."

Her pearlescent eyes were hard but her voice was warm. "Of course."

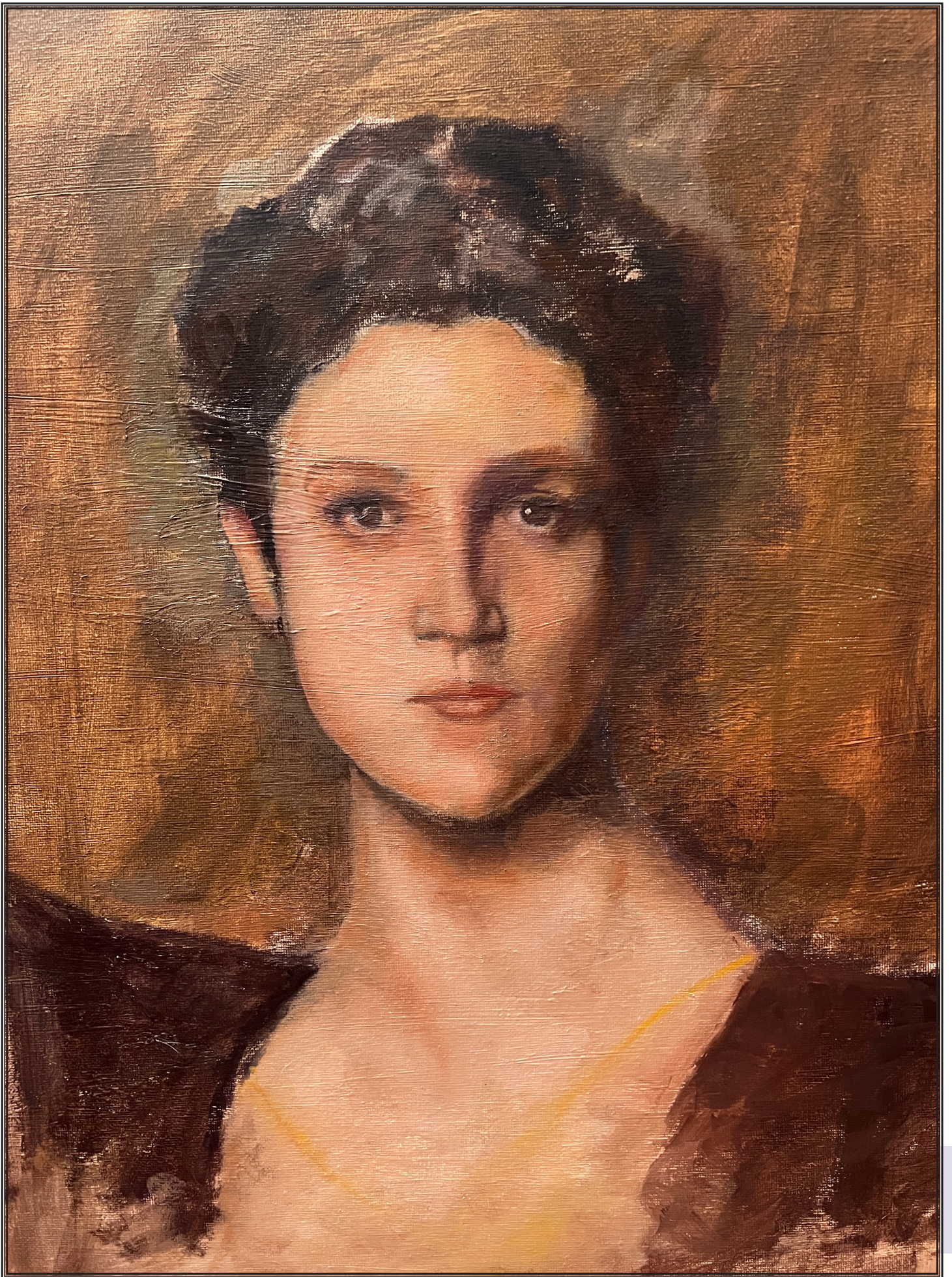
Blood dripped onto his lips from a cut on his head and filled his smiling mouth, smothering the taste of tears. Everything started to break apart, his fragmenting reality sliding in and out of focus. He was dying, but he didn't despair. She told him he'd be fine, and his savior's calm resolve hadn't wavered, so he exhaled, sure that each breath he took wouldn't be his last.

Lightning pain tore through his right side as they landed, and he screamed as the shards turned vicious. Muffled by the ringing in his ears, the warrior heard his hero whisper apologies before shouting quick, practiced orders to the healers. Past the whirling kaleidoscope of colors, he felt her cool contact leave, and he'd never felt so empty.

Gloved hands replaced hers and laid him gently onto a cot. He felt his consciousness drift further and further away with every second. But he didn't relinquish hope. Drained of the energy to sob, all the warrior could do was cry. Not for Sheron, not for himself, but for Therista, each new leaking tear an unspoken thanks to his teenage savior.

Osparey
Khai Matsudaira





Twin Flame

Anonymous

I cup my hands around your flickering light
Unwavering, even as the flame
Licks my fingers and burns my calloused hands.
Leaving me with smoky lungs
And blisters.

You stole my oxygen and fed yourself.
Brighter. Your fire had to be brighter.
I drenched myself
In gasoline
So your flames could crawl to
Each and every limb
Of my hollow body and use me
As kindling.

Even when your life had eaten me away
To dying embers,
You come back to the woods you
Dumped me in
To stomp me out.

The minute you let your guard down
I'll be your
Forest fire.



To-do:

- ☐ Make dinner
- ☐ practice violin
- ☐ walk dog
- ☐ email mom
- ☐ write paper

H. K. Moore
2024

11 Forever

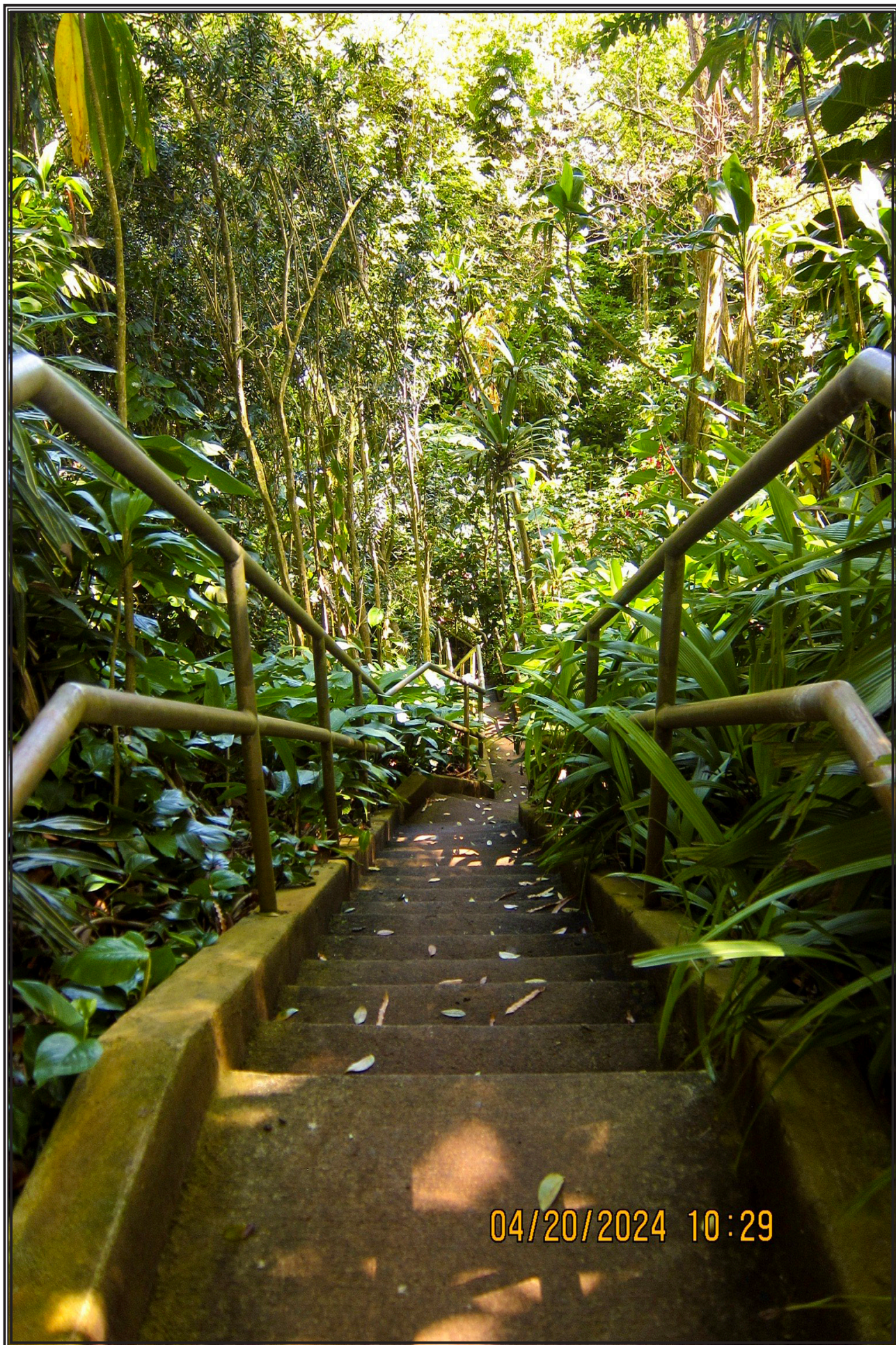
Anonymous

wish I could fold myself up enough times
to fit inside the photo app, nestled in
between the 2017 and 2018 albums
back when my eyes were rose-colored

and the world loved me back. wish I could
wake up and be 11 again, heal my fractured
lungs with hot glue and patterned tape,
eyeshadow made of crushed sidewalk chalk.

running through empty supermarket aisles
held together by friendship bracelet string and
dreams that hadn't yet died. take a bath in dirty
river water to become clean again. maybe if I stood

still enough and prayed hard enough God would
turn me into stone and I could be 11 forever



Streets of Pompeii
Miles Felix



Beautiful Brothers

Anonymous

But I wonder

I wonder

Why must their boyhood be so other?

Why must their boyhood be Black boyhood?

Why must we fear

if they will return home?

Why must we mourn

before they are even born?

Why must their mothers grieve

when they see their son's skin

Dark as the soil

The very thing we stand on

Too dark for them to see my kin

Not light enough to be more than nothing

To be worth something

Your childhood was taken

Like so many snatched and sold

The moment you were born

You no longer had the right to be a boy

You are a Black boy

Do you wonder

When that Angie Stone sings

Why everyone else can't love ya'

My dear black brother



Untitled 3

Natalie Broquard

Goose
Soren Nguyen



Soren Nguyen
2021

An Excerpt Collaborative Writer's Club

Giovanna knew it was time to stop driving. Her fingers ached from gripping the wheel, her legs were starting to lose feeling, and her foot had fallen asleep for the third time. But she couldn't; it wasn't right. Not yet, not now, while she still felt jittery, while her knees buzzed restlessly against the seat, while the memories were bubbling too close to the surface. Giovanna needed to stop, but she hadn't gone far enough yet.

A sign sank into view on the highway, advertising a rest stop ahead. Her eyes lingered on it, her hands flexing, indecisive, but she let the exit pass by with a shake of her head and fixed her gaze back on the horizon. The sun, low enough she needn't shade her eyes, burned the distant cliffs deep crimson. Long, rocky, and tinted saffron, Aragon's hills looked like hidden lumps of gold. Ridges of geodes, hiding greatness within. No, Giovanna couldn't stop now, not when she verged on new discovery. Fresh earth to turn, unfamiliar places to map, people to service or to scorn. A destination on her never ending journey, at least until reality caught up.

Once it did, she'd find herself on the road again, driving but unable to stop. Life, it seemed to Giovanna, was cyclical. Just like the bubble charm dangling from her mirror, a keepsake from a vendor in Prague. She tapped her finger against the smooth circle, battling it like a cat and watching the iridescent object swing back and forth. A sudden snap came from the mirror and the whole face fell from the ceiling, clattering onto the center console.

Giovanna winced, leaning forward to inspect the damage. A few hasty glances back confirmed that the highway, only two lanes across, was sparsely populated enough to shift her focus from driving, so she endeavored to reattach the mirror. After a few seconds of fiddling, it popped back into place and she exhaled gratefully, frowning as she looked forward. Her van was old, enough so that she had to wind a lever to roll down the window and breathe in the cooling night air, but it was her home, and she hated to think it was falling apart.

Another sign drifted into view as Giovanna turned

between two ridges. Once again, her gaze stuck on it, weighing the options. A peek at her gas tank convinced her. This time, when the exit path split off of the highway, she turned onto it, rolling her shoulders back and reminding herself that this was only temporary; a rest rather than a stagnancy.

It had been about an hour after Giovanna's last turn, when a sign came into her view: it read "SEVILLE." Seeing that the sun was low, she decided to rest in Seville for the night. Exploring Europe with only the resources she had— that thought gave Giovanna excitement and fed her intrigue. Of course, there was always the outside factor of booze, for Giovanna did find pleasure in enjoying the luxuries— comfort and ease— of a well done bar.

Cheerfully wandering along the streets of Seville, Giovanna Corleone Segreto was in the mood for a drink. Might as well have a Tinto de Verano before she hit the road again. The young Sicilian eventually settled on a small, family-run pub located directly in the hustle and bustle of the charming city. The bar was empty, save for a handful of patrons and an overworked, baggy-eyed bartender. After ordering her drink, Giovanna's eyes wandered towards the missing posters hastily plastered on the wall.

"Missing people, hm?" She asked the bartender, sticking her pinky finger towards the posters.

"Yep," the bartender sighed, pouring red wine into Giovanna's glass. "All from this one town. Pretty weird, if you ask me. It was much less frequent not too long ago."

Giovanna raised an eyebrow as the bartender dropped orange slices into the simple, smooth glass. A couple of lemon wedges and a little Spanish Vermouth later, she could enjoy her final drink in Seville at last.

"Tell me more about this mysterious town." Giovanna took a long sip from her cup, resting her chin on her hand.

"Why do you need to know?" The bartender's face grew pale. "Are you seriously thinking about going there? Are you insane?"

"Just the right amount of it, tesoro." Giovanna snapped her fingers, crossing her legs. "Life on the road is fun, sure, but it doesn't mean it can't get awfully dull sometimes. Might as well experience a little danger. You only live once!"

The bartender sighed, resigning himself to the

stained beer stein he was polishing. Giovanna waited patiently while humming a cheerful tune, feet tapping to the rhythm.

"Fine. It's called Belchite. Or maybe it was Bellena?" The bartender leaned in, his voice a hushed whisper. "Whatever it's called, people are vanishing like crazy out there. It only started recently, and only in and around this town. The first couple of people vanished, and nobody thought anything of it. It's unfortunate, but people go missing all the time.

"But then the disappearances started happening again and again. It became a weekly occurrence for this place. Everyone feared that they or somebody they knew would be next. And the disappearances aren't showing any signs of stopping. Police have been locking the city down from sundown to sunrise, and it's still not enough." The bartender straightened, his face ashen.

Giovanna's face was the exact opposite. Her eyes sparkled with excitement, a giant grin spreading across her face.

"If I may ask, where did you learn this information?" Giovanna drained her cup, leaving only the fruit wedges lying unmoving at the bottom of the glass.

"Rumors spread like wildfire in this day and age," The bartender said, swiping Giovanna's glass from the counter and sliding it under the sink's faucet. "Especially if they're morbid rumors."

Giovanna didn't say another word. She simply nodded, left a couple of euros on the counter, and strolled out of the bar, her multi-colored poncho billowing in the warm wind.



Untitled 1

Mira Hsu

Untitled 2
Mira Hsu



New York Pizza at Midnight

Miles Felix



01/04/2024 19:08



Life, 35mm
Maia Riggs

My Soul is an Organ

Anonymous

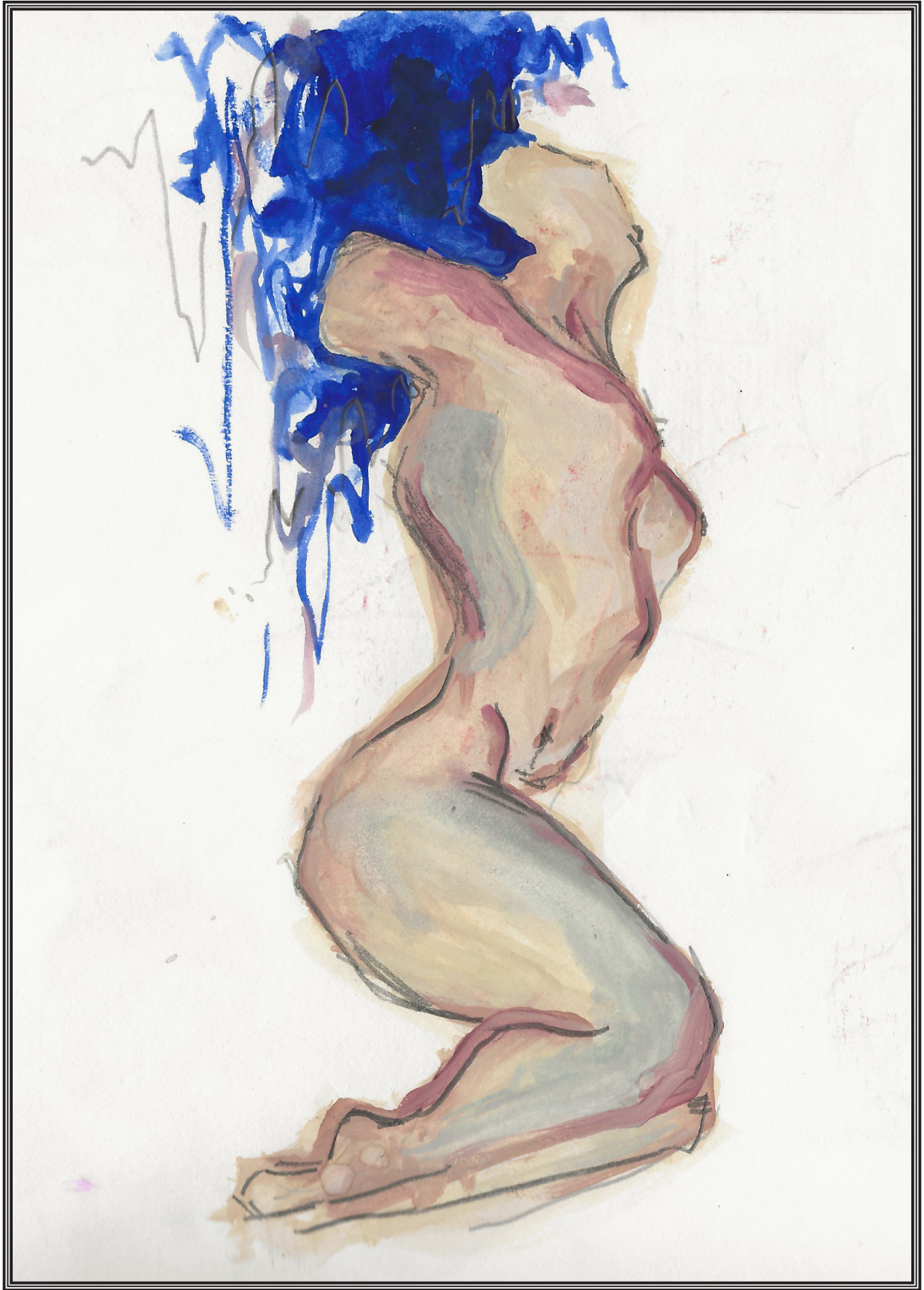
My soul is an organ, just like my uterus and lungs.
It is shaped like a butterfly and is pretty as one, too.
It's settled in my abdomen, right behind my ribs.
Its beauty stands out and makes my chest less dull.
It's made its home in my body, and it'll pass on with me.
It is mine and its own,
We are carbon clones.

My soul is an organ, just like my bones and brain.
It is shaped like a butterfly and is strong beyond stone.
It can watch the sun and tell the time and learn so much more.
It can travel miles and miles without moving but an inch.
First impressions tend to lie; just give it a bit of time.
It is mine and its own,
We are carbon clones.

My soul is an organ, just like my heart and skin.
It is shaped like a butterfly and is as fragile as one's wings.
It flutters fast and falls faster but never stays down.
Its weakest part is its most praised, the rules are so strange.
I hold its trust in my hand, and it is safe to stay.
It is mine and its own,
We are carbon clones.

Untitled 1

Julia Olsen





Le bébé et la cuillère

Violetta Rohr

My Mother's Child

Anonymous

my mother and i fight by night
our anger hid in candlelight
it's much too dangerous a sight
to see clear in the morning

and we don't smile when it is dawn
are silent, masks sewn tightly on
we see each other and don't fawn
and speak never of mourning

my mother was a freezing sun
and i am much too blinding bright
my mother was a silent girl
i am a child raised by the night

my mother and i dance at dusk
world empty when it's full of us
aware we are just shining dust
and mortal by the morning

and we can speak in rhyme at noon
softer than a blood-red moon
we see that this will all end soon
we're mortal in our mourning

my mother was too organized
i am now messy, out of spite
for something i have never seen
for all the moments she is right

my mother and i read all hours
the world is cold (she says it's sour)
and she is ready to devour
yet we escape to morning

and we are gone by eveningtide
a prick of blood to feed our pride
still we're together when we hide
to escape all our mourning

and i am clean and i am salt
and i am blood, welled in the wound
and i am all my mother's child
i am the serpent in the womb.



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Cornflowers

Anonymous

Teresa learned to hate red roses when she was only twelve years old. Twelve is right on the cusp of lifting the veil that is the illusion of childhood, but she still believed in fairies. She spent hours in her room, cutting apart shoeboxes and pieces of cardboard with intense focus until she had crafted the perfect little fairy house. Her mom had suggested the acorn tops for hats so they would have something to wear when they visited.

"It's proper fairy etiquette to make sure that there's a hat in every home," she said.

"How do you know?" Teresa asked. "Have you met fairies before?"

"Oh, of course," she said, and Teresa could hardly believe it. "But only briefly, and it takes a while to get them to trust you, which is why I'm getting you started early."

And so they hung the acorn tops from pushpins next to the door. It was July of that summer when they took the house out to the woods behind their house, to a large oak tree which leaned a little to the left as if a strong breeze had been shaping it for many years. The roots curved around an area which was just large enough to snugly fit a shoebox, and they left it there after sprinkling some leaves and pollen on it.

Teresa insisted they check on it the very next day, and she dragged her mom along by the hand to the spot they had left it.

"Look, Mama!" Teresa said, kneeling down on the ground to become eye level with the fairy house. The cardboard furniture had been moved around, and one of the hats had made its way to the table. "They came!"

Her mom looked down at her with a warm smile and said, "Of course they did, love."

Teresa beamed. Twelve years old and already a friend to the fairies! Maybe in a few years they'd trust her enough to reveal themselves to her. But for now, she was content with visiting the house in the woods every day with her mom and marveling at the little changes that occurred when she wasn't there. She added more, too; a swing outside, a pool, little drawings that she taped to the walls. The days of that summer felt flush

with magic.

On the last day of August, Teresa was woken up by her father, who entered quietly without knocking.

"Hey, kiddo," he said, and his voice sounded raspier than usual, like he'd been crying. "I need to tell you something."

Death is a hard thing for a twelve year old girl not yet fully unveiled from childhood to understand. Suicide is even harder. She was told about the five stages of grief, and that they were all normal for someone in her position to go through, but they didn't tell her that they would all coalesce into a colorless, bedridden few weeks that she didn't fully remember afterwards. But she ended up at acceptance either way, so it really didn't matter. By the time she was out of bed and dressed again, the veil had fallen away completely and been trampled by a horde of people dressed in black, telling her that they were so sorry and that it wasn't her fault.

And those red roses, everywhere. In every mourners' hands, tied in bouquets in every room. They smelled like sweet rot and they made Teresa want to throw up. She tugged on her dad's tuxedo jacket sleeve and asked why there were so many and could he please get rid of them.

"I'm sorry, Ter," he said. "But they were your mother's favorite. I want to do this last thing for her."

Teresa thought her mom's favorite flower was a cornflower. Maybe she really didn't know her as well as she thought. Maybe she should have tried harder. Maybe the people in black were right and this was really her fault. Her mom hated maybes. She said they did nothing for a person except invite regret.

But her mom wasn't there anymore, and those red roses were. They sat around on the floor and on the windowsills for weeks afterward, and slowly decayed and shriveled in on themselves. Teresa found that she liked them better that way.

It was only after emerging from the haze of mourning that she remembered the little fairy house in the woods, the one they had been facing the elements alone and without care for weeks now. She could have made the trek through the trees to see how it was doing, but she would have been walking with a ghost and ghosts don't belong in the acceptance stage of grief.

So she let it be and went on growing up, but now she stayed mostly indoors. She turned thirteen while

watching a movie on her laptop, and she only realized that it had happened when a text from her best friend had pinged across her screen. Her dad hadn't remembered either. She didn't see him much in the years after, mostly just going to and from work and the occasional dinner that they would share together in front of the TV, something superficial and easy. A Marvel movie, maybe. They would eat facing the same way in silence, which seems awkward but was in reality the easiest way for them to coexist.

She painted her mom from memory, over and over again, but could never get the eyes right. Or the smile. She dreamt at night of her mom with cornflower fairy wings and a little tilted acorn hat, but she didn't recall the face when she woke up. The thing they don't tell you about childhood is how you're not able to remember it after it's gone.

Life, 35mm

Maia Riggs



Can You See What I See?
Nebe Okeke

CAN YOU

SEE

WHAT I

SEE?



Old Pages of a New Book Soft Sarmiento

I can flip through pages in a second
yet life itself will just appear in a blur,
my life is a memory that bounces,
bounces back and forth,
back and forth,
and back and forth,
like a rocking chair that hasn't stopped
since the day it was spun by a young girl turned old

I can see the pages move like the wind,
yet I can only see the blurry colors
of the images inside,
the words turning into fine lines
worth nothing but dark marks on a page,
those are storyless,
lifeless,
worth little to the viewer

I can see time pass like water going down a stream
only slowing down for the rocks it glides by,
and then on the last day,
the clock will stop only for a minute,
but after that,
the birds will sing in a dozing melody
to put us all to sleep
until the next month ends
and the cycle repeats once again

Arctic Harmony
Soren Nguyen



Flower-Covered Dead

Bailey McFadden

Lilac lay on the table in the Mortisarium, more still than she had ever been in life. Her body was still warm, but too pale to pass for sleeping. Her left arm was a mess, still wrapped in towels to catch the blood that seeped out of it.

It was a pointless death. Easily preventable. Lilac had been training with her for four years. She had wanted to be a true Florist—nomadic, living off the land, traveling with the herds and keeping the dead calm. Amaranth had drilled into her head not to get comfortable around them. “They aren’t your friends,” she had said, “There’s the same amount of risk every time you leave the walls.”

Lilac had always just laughed at her, waving away her caution. And she had good reason to—for some reason, in life, Lilac could dance through the dead like she was one of them. They never tried to hurt her, even when she was bleeding or crying. She’d had such a gift.

That morning, Lilac had been sent to replace the flower crowns on a couple of the newer dead, the ones whose seeds hadn’t bloomed yet. Amaranth had been in the middle of transplanting a rose. “God, Amy, I can handle a couple of Bloomers on my own. Relax!” she’d said, and grinned at her in that stupid charming way that always broke down Amaranth’s defenses.

Her screaming had echoed through the quiet forest, sending all the border guards into a panic. By the time they’d gotten there, Lilac had bled out from the stump where her arm had been. The zombie had bit clean through her brachial artery - there was nothing to be done but bring her home.

It was a pointless death.

Amaranth cleaned her body and stitched her arm. She stuffed her mouth with flower seeds and soil. If all went well, the flowers would grow and she wouldn’t be able to bite anybody. Eventually, they would grow all the way through her brain stem, and she would fall somewhere in a forest and decompose fully.

Her eyes were a different color than they were supposed to be. In life, they’d been a gorgeous deep brown that looked like tree bark in the sunlight. When she’d smiled, her eyes had sparkled so brightly. It had always

taken Amaranth’s breath away.

Now, her eyes were a dull, lifeless, light brown. They lightened every moment. Eventually, they would turn gray, and she would awaken again.

Amaranth brushed her hair gently away from her face. “You were so stupid,” she told Lilac. “You’ve been doing this almost as long as me. How could you be so stupid?”

After a while, Lilac started to wake up. Amaranth sprayed herself down with half a bottle of perfume and held her breath. Lilac stood and smelled the air, her eyes tracking the room but not seeing. Amaranth relaxed. Lilac couldn’t smell her. It was always nerve-racking, those first couple of minutes when you’re not sure if you’ve used enough perfume, deodorant, flowers. But Lilac couldn’t smell her sweat, or her tears, or her blood. She was safe, for now.

Amaranth led her into the main courtyard by a rope tied around Lilith’s waist. The courtyard was the center point of Oasis, flanked by buildings on all sides and easily defendable. The few times that the walls had fallen, they had put the civilians into the courtyard while Amaranth and Lilac ran around waving sticks in the air like madmen, herding the dead out of their streets. It was full to bursting, now. All 198 people that made up the colony of Oasis were watching from every windowsill and every doorway. Some of the younger children sat on the clotheslines.

Everybody had been so excited to hit 200 people. Eva was due soon, and the whole colony was buzzing with the excitement of it. Large colonies didn’t exist in the new world. 200 people was an astonishing number. There was going to be a parade.

It should have been louder than it was. With this many people, the place should have been humming with noise. It wasn’t. The only sounds were breathing and the movement of fabric.

Josephine stood in the middle of the courtyard. She was Lilac’s sister, three years younger but much less idealistic. Beside her was Lilac’s niece, Orchid. She was barely six.

Lilac had adored her. Orchid’s father had been taken out by raiders when Orchid was still in the womb, and Lilac had stepped in to help Josephine with a newborn

while she grieved, even though the two sisters had been at odds their entire lives, and as far as Amaranth could tell had never agreed on anything.

Lilac had brought Orchid to the Mortisarium almost every day of her life. Amaranth had asked her once why she allowed Orchid to see so many horrible things at such a young age. Lilac had looked at her with such seriousness that she barely resembled her normal self, and said, “She needs to learn.”

Orchid was crying silently, staring into Lilac’s blank eyes. She shouldn’t have been in the ceremony, she was far too young.

Amaranth met Josephine’s eyes and saw the message in them. It seemed that, in death, Josephine and Lilac had finally agreed on something. Orchid would stay. Orchid would learn.

She led Lilac into the middle of the courtyard. Her eyes were tracking, scanning the courtyard for bodies. With this many people, she would catch on somebody eventually. Even if the whole yard reeked of perfume.

Orchid walked forward, holding a flower crown almost as big as she was.

The crown was expertly crafted, full of spices, herbs, flowers, and most importantly, candle wax. The wax would melt in the summer heat and cover her eyes and hopefully her nose. If that happened, she would become completely docile, a blind body shuffling through the herds. Wax was a precious scarcity— the only wax they had came from the bee colony, and even then it was difficult to make it useful. The amount of wax on the flower crown would have taken years to collect. A multicolored rope hung in four pieces on the crown, to keep it stable on Lilac’s head.

Orchid handed the crown to her, and Amaranth tied it on. With the seriousness of somebody headed to the gallows, Josephine took the rope and led her sister outside the gates. She kissed Lilac’s cheek before coming back inside.

As the gates closed, Lilac shuffled forward and joined the flower-covered dead.

Time's Pawn

Aya Nishikawa

There she was. She had always been there, suspended in time. She watched as her friends, peers, and superiors walked far ahead of her. That girl; she was an ornament of time; she was inserted into the lives of people just as abruptly as she would leave. She was stuck in place, even as her clock moved. In her mind and in the eyes of those who moved past her, she was but a mere passing fancy. Never would she be able to experience the joys of true friendship or love. Her feet were anchored to the carpet that lined the floor of a corridor. Her face was kept in the same position; she faced forward. Forward was the direction where every person went through time: to their future.

This girl had no future. It was her middle school corridor that she stood so stiffly in; it was the place where she would wait every day to be picked up. So clearly could she see those large windows that faced a paved road, a graveyard, and a wood. Through those

windows, she saw the seasons pass with time, for the only movement that was granted to her was through her eyes. Gifted to her was the ability to see. She could see her peers walk through time. She did this knowing that she was a mere decoration in the vast ocean of time. Much like a fad, she would eventually be forgotten by those that she would meet.

She longs for the day she'll finally be able to move. When will she be able to walk forward? When will she be able to find herself in secure relationships? When will she be relinquished of her status as an ornament? Or, had she been crafted specifically to be a passing character? Was it in her very nature to be "just an acquaintance", unfamiliar with the inner workings of every group? All of this is due to the fact that she is frozen in time. Will she ever obtain that for which she begs with all of her soul? She may never know, for she is one of everything that remains a pawn of time.

Aftermath

Audrey Hayes

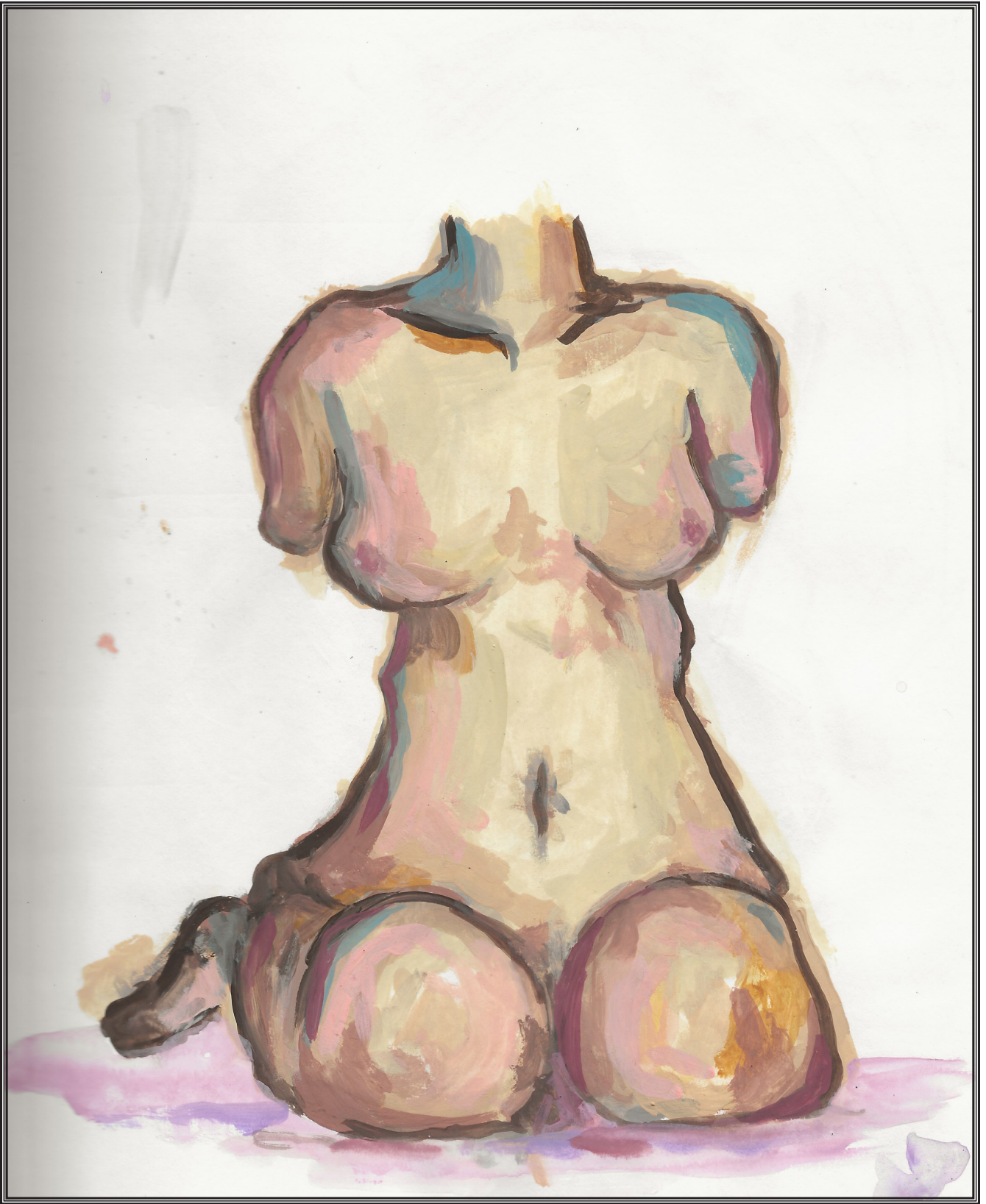
Silence, so much silence. And nothing to see, for all was whisked away from sight by the curling clouds of dust. Moments ago the sound of the helicopter blades had finally faded into the distance, and the dust now began to settle in its absence. As the dust cleared it revealed the bodies— not bodies, corpses, for they were all dead.

Then, from the depths of the silence, a beep, then another. A flash of static on a computer monitor, then the screen powering back on dimly. A line staggering its way up and down the screen; a heartbeat.

Amid the cracked tubes and medical equipment, the shattered computers and dead bodies, something was alive. The monitor flickered out, its reserve battery dead, but it had shown something important, for somewhere in that room, surrounded by so much death, was the start of a life.

Untitled 2

Julia Olsen





Untitled

Clementine Kovacs

V6/24
CLEM¹⁰

Chinatown Eulogy

Anonymous

According to most people living in New York City, pigeons were vermin. “Rats of the sky” was what they were called colloquially, usually with a tone of mild disgust. Although some would argue that they were worse than the rodents—unlike the rats, the pigeons didn’t mostly keep to the shadowed areas of the city. They approached nonchalantly in broad daylight, swooping down and snatching whatever food was nearby, even if someone was holding it. They would fight other animals for even a small scrap, even if that animal was a dog or cat. Pigeons lived everywhere, on every single continent except for Antarctica, in fact, but the NYC breed was something else.

Chinatown was no exception. Manhattan Chinatown, to be specific, because every borough might as well be its own city. Mae walked through the streets, surrounded by all of the familiar scents and sounds. An old man was playing the dizi on an overturned bucket with a box for change laying at his feet. Every time she stopped at a corner to wait for the light, someone would come up to her with a laminated sheet of paper to ask if she was interested in buying a handbag or necklace.

Eventually she slowed down as she reached a familiar park, footsteps barely startling the pair of pigeons feasting on a spilled boba tea next to the curb.

Mae never much minded the birds. She liked the way that the sun made the feathers on their throats shimmer between iridescent shades of blue and purple, she liked the funny way that they walked and the sounds of their wings flapping. Mostly, though, she liked them because of her grandfather.

From as early as she could remember, he would come out here to this very park with a pouch of breadcrumbs and feed the pigeons. She would join him often, sitting side by side on the same bench. He would sprinkle the breadcrumbs on the ground in front of them and the birds would gather hungrily, pecking at the crumbs and each other while chirping indignantly as if squabbling. She observed from next to him, legs not quite long enough to touch the ground, watching the ping pong ball bounce back and forth rhythmically

between the two men at the nearby table.

Her grandfather genuinely enjoyed feeding those birds every morning. He was like the bird lady from *Mary Poppins*, except an older Chinese man. Mae remembered telling him that one day and singing the ‘Feed the Birds’ song horribly off-key. He didn’t quite know what she was referencing but laughed along anyway.

Now, Mae stood at the park for the first time since his death with a bag of breadcrumbs in one hand and a half-drunk mango smoothie in another. It looked exactly the same: the kids running around the playground equipment, tourists consulting folding maps, and, of course, two middle aged men snapping a ping pong ball between them.

The wake started in half an hour and she was supposed to be there to greet the guests paying their respects. But her mind balked at the idea of going into that room stifled with incense and filled with crying people and seeing him again in that open casket. She barely made it through the funeral, the thought of doing it again but with a line of people giving their condolences twisted her stomach into knots.

Mae was really supposed to be preparing for the wake, but instead she was here. She found a bench and sat down heavily, both feet firmly planted on the ground. A nearby pigeon hopped towards her, probably curious about her smoothie. She took a deep breath and opened the bag of bread crumbs. She was humming subconsciously, a song she belatedly recognized as ‘Feed the Birds’. The pigeon edged closer. She dipped her hand in the bag and grabbed a handful of crumbs.

The wake could wait. Right now, she was feeding the pigeons.

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 our contest winners; “Maraschino” by Violetta Rohr for our cover, “Under the Fig Tree” for best piece of poetry, “The Mortal’s Guide to Becoming a God” by Ruth Pournelle for best piece of prose, and “Untitled (Bridge)” by Max Padilla for best piece of visual art.

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The Editorial Team would also like to extend special thanks to our longtime Editor-in-Chief, Kamtoya Okeke, a member of the 2024 Graduating Class, for the incomparable effort and care she has poured into the magazine. Congratulations, and we wish you the best!

Submissions

Students are welcome to submit at any time. We are now accepting submissions for the autumn of 2024!

Students may submit through several different ways.

Email: swwthepen@gmail.com

Website: thepenlitmag.com

Through both of these options, students may submit their work, anonymously if they choose. We accept any submissions of art or writing. We are more likely to accept pieces that are topical, especially for visual art and cover art.

We are always looking for new members! The Editorial Team meets on Fridays at 8:15 in Room 127.

Don't hesitate to contact us digitally or in person! Inquiries should be directed to the email address listed above. More information is available on the website and on social media.

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the pen literary magazine

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