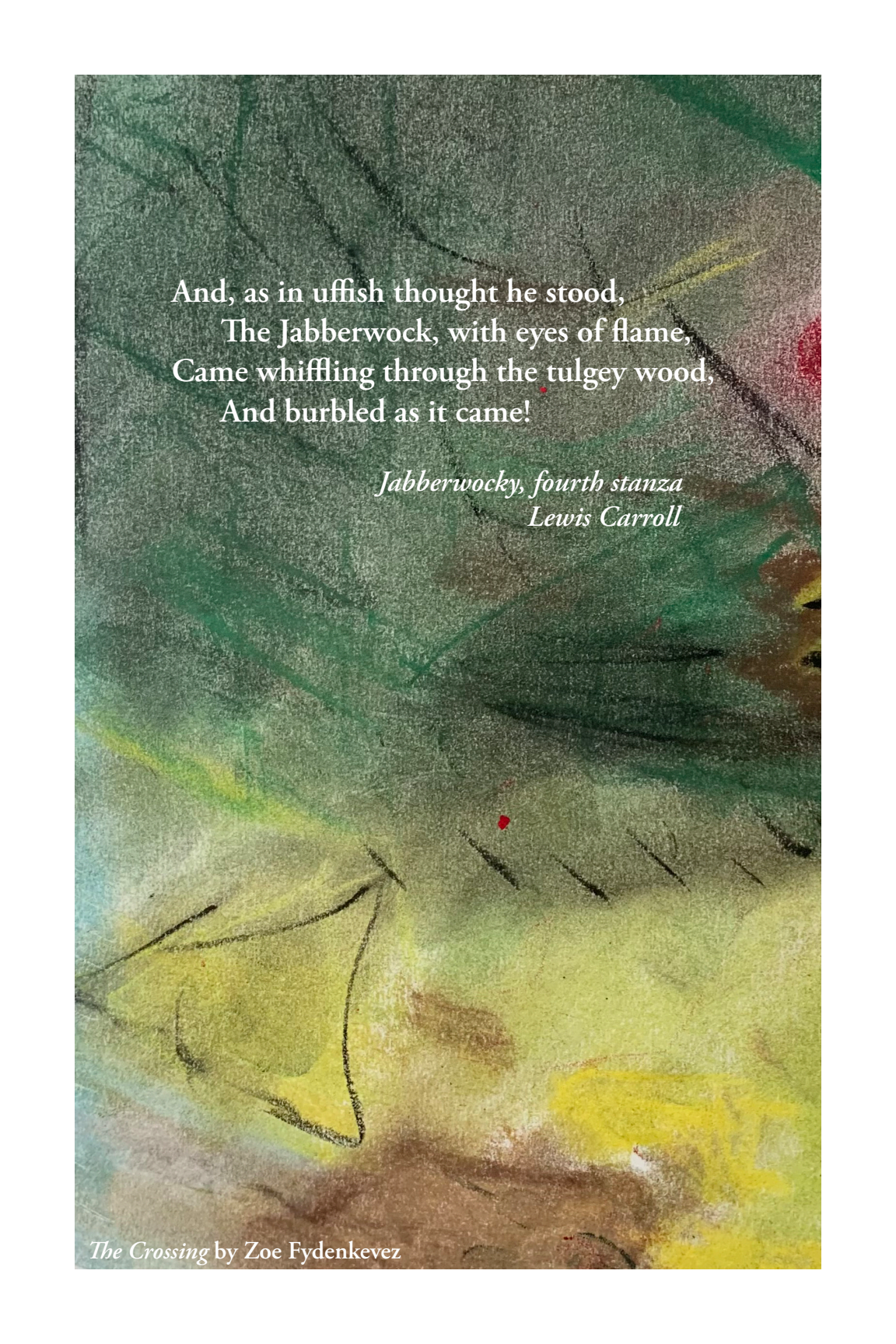


# jabberrywocky

spring 2026

*university of massachusetts amherst*



And, as in uffish thought he stood,  
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,  
Came whiffing through the tulgey wood,  
And burbled as it came!

*Jabberwocky, fourth stanza  
Lewis Carroll*

## About *Jabberwocky*

*Jabberwocky* is the official undergraduate literary journal of the UMass Amherst English Department, published by students and featuring student works. Named after the whimsically terrifying creature from Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky." *Jabberwocky* is a strictly non-profit journal, and as such, is not protected by copyright. Any work included in the journal is the property of the artist. All contributors reserve the right to publish their work elsewhere in accordance with the guidelines set by other publishers. Moreover, submissions are sent in, reviewed, and evaluated for publication caliber anonymously to guarantee a fair and unbiased review process. All opinions expressed in the journal are the authors' and do not necessarily represent the interests of the journal itself. The pieces are included as originally written by UMass students, and may contain content that is difficult or unsuitable for some audiences. Please read at your own discretion.



## Acknowledgements

We would like to extend a special thank you to the UMass English Department, and specifically Celeste Stoddard, the Undergraduate Program Coordinator, for helping us through each step of the process. Thank you to the Class of 1940 for the grant that goes towards our printing costs, and thank you to Amherst Copy & Designworks for printing the journal. Of course, thank you to our staff, our published artists and writers, and everyone else who made this year's edition possible!



## Cover Statement

*The Crossing* | Zoe Fydenkevez

Who will Little Red cross paths with – the wolf? Will she move on to greener pastures, find a taste of fresher air? In the world of dark fairy tales, not much different from our own, danger is in the woods, danger is all around us, and it even awaits her in the sanctuary of her grandmother's cottage. Little Red doesn't just encounter danger; she is danger, her cloak calling to it like a beacon and marking her. Born from an Intro to Scenic Design assignment, I felt a physical drive to smear everything in this environment together. Everything crosses. Everything bleeds together. Even the yellow path I drew is dotted with black, an ever-present threat. I have always been drawn to the jagged reality of the Brothers Grimm fairytales.

In *The Crossing*, danger is everywhere. Little Red stands, a walking bloodstain, marked for all things predatory.

And yet, she treks on.

# Letters from the Editors

Dear Readers,

I cannot imagine my four years at UMass without *Jabberwocky*. I have so much love for this journal, and celebrating the completion of each edition at our annual launch party has been a highlight of my college experience. I started as fiction editor when I was a freshman, and I joined the administrative team as the Associate Editor for the 2024 edition. For the last two years, I have had the privilege of working alongside Mary El as Co-Editors-in-Chief. Not only is Mary El an expert at *Jabberwocky*'s behind-the-scenes organizational tasks (especially spreadsheets), but she has also become a dear friend of mine. Though I do enjoy the other aspects of my role as Co-Editor-in-Chief, chatting with Mary El has always made the experience so much more fun. As much as I will miss the journal and the people involved in it, I am happy to leave it in the hands of Ailish, our lovely Associate Editor.

Thank you to everyone who submitted to this year's edition of the journal, and of course, thank you to our whole staff. *Jabberwocky* is one of many reminders of the creativity, talent, and dedication to art and literature that exists on our campus. I have found inspiration in its pages for the past four years, and my hope is that it can inspire our readers, too. I am so grateful for this journal and the literary community surrounding it.

Sincerely,  
Grace Holland



Dear Readers,

I joined the *Jabberwocky* staff as a Nonfiction/Criticism Editor for the 2023 edition. As I'm reflecting on this, my fourth and last edition, I am so glad to have found the journal. *Jabberwocky* has, in many ways, shaped my time at UMass, and I cannot imagine the person I'd be without it. In particular, I am so very grateful to have developed such a wonderful friendship with my Co-Editor-in-Chief for the last two years, Grace Holland. Without you, I'm sure I (and all of *Jabberwocky*) would have fallen apart by now. While leaving the journal behind will be one of the most difficult parts of graduating, I could not have a better person to entrust it to than Ailish Connell, our 2026 Associate Editor.

Every year, we are entrusted with the hard and often personal work of so many members of the UMass community. This year has been no different. I am eternally grateful for that trust, and I hope you feel we have treated your pieces well. To our staff, I will forever be awed by your dedication. I know that what we ask of you is no small task. This year, as every year, you have risen to the challenge admirably. Finally, thank you to you, our readers. We hope you appreciate our labor of love and find something inside that matters as much to you as it does to all of us. And of course, we'd always love to see you next year, whether in a staff application, a submission email, or as a friendly face at our next launch party. With that, welcome to the 2026 edition of *Jabberwocky*!

Sincerely,  
Mary Elizabeth Vaughan

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## Sunderland

Katie McDonagh

Like everywhere else, there is a church—  
a First Congregational, thin and white,  
biding time on the corner of two state roads.  
Four-way traffic stops short for a solitary walker,  
who appears and vanishes at random.  
Tobacco barns disintegrate stick by stick.

There's a fresh snow settling, and no sight nor sound  
of the transplanted, invasive students  
who eyeball the truckers outside the liquor store.  
Someone's stencilled a makeshift billboard that asks  
Are you ready to homeschool your children?  
Community television began recording eleven years ago.

This used to be Swampfield, before the town realised  
that people will not live in a place that sounds  
like a thing they'll get stuck in.  
Money visits, wearing a wool coat, a tiny purse,  
heels that click on the floor of the cafe.  
The auto shop is permanently temporarily closed.

The last store open each night is an unattended shed  
around the rear of an apartment complex,  
filled with fresh produce and ice cream and soaps.  
Each visitor is watched by six invisible cameras,  
so as to ensure payment, which you perform on your phone.  
You can see yourself on the monitor, occupying space.

You are not from here,  
and wouldn't know the first thing about it.  
Imagine your childhood home without inhabitants,  
asleep and faintly stirring,  
which is where you now live.



Philomela  
Jessica Arisetty  
Acrylic on canvas

## Imperfect Sequence

Catherine Juodawlkis

*So that's how it feels.* That was my first thought. Not *my friend is dead*. Not *my life is over*. Those came later.

*That's how it feels.*

Three days before the camping trip, I'd auditioned to play marine biologist Serena Caldwell in the psychological thriller *Seven Miles Under*. In the passage of the script I'd been given, Serena kills the only other crew member of their deep-sea research vessel. She spends the rest of the movie trapped with the corpse and the knowledge that she can't stay down there forever; the tagline was *THE TRUTH WILL SURFACE*. It was going to be my first leading role.

The murder played out the same way both times; he dredged up an old, bitter argument, and I started yelling. We both said things we would regret. And then I pushed him. I knew he was dead when I heard the sound his skull made.

In my audition, the grief hit before the guilt, and I tenderly cradled my copilot's face as he bled out. I asked his body for forgiveness and received cold silence. They told me it was a very nice performance in a tone of voice that said I shouldn't expect a callback.

When Roger went over the cliff, the first thing I felt was a wave of relief: guilt and fear arrived fashionably late to the party. It didn't seem real enough for *grief* until days later.

Roger had suggested that we go camping to take my mind off the audition. He'd always been a little airheaded, so it was easier for the people who loved him to believe he'd wandered off than to suspect me. We'd been totally off the grid and hadn't told anyone where we were going, so when the officer asked me where I'd last seen Roger, I lied.

The search for Serena Caldwell had proved just as fruitless as the search for the body, so I called the casting director and asked her for another chance. She later confessed that she'd given me the role the moment she heard my voice on the phone: she knew she'd found me, her Serena.

So I looked down at the fallen form of my copilot and I felt only relief.

I won my first Oscar for it. They called it the performance of a lifetime, and they were right. For the next twelve years, I stagnated. I coasted. The fire I'd taken from Roger's death had guttered and gone out. I was good, but never again great. Not until I met the *other* Serena.

One hour and forty-eight minutes after she first graced the screen, I was weeping at Cannes. I knew even then that Best Actress belonged to Serena Beausoleil. *Interstate 93* is a masterpiece: a somber and grueling portrait of a

courier hiking across a flooded, near-future New England, carrying a message whose fatal implications she grasps far too late. Its massive success rested squarely upon those narrow, birdlike shoulders and those sad, lonely eyes.

When the spell had broken and the applause began, I picked her out of the crew immediately. She was craning her neck, looking for someone. I'd always looked to my mother at events like these: she'd raised me alone after my father died, and she'd supported me at every turn until she followed his example. But without pause, Serena's gaze flicked over the section where the friends and loved ones sat, scanning row after row of people.

*She reminds me of myself.* That was my first thought. Not *she's beautiful*. Not *I want to kill her*. Those came later.

*She reminds me of myself.*

When she met my eyes through the crowd, she stopped searching. Her smiles were rare in Interstate 93, but for an hour and forty-eight minutes, I had lived for those smiles; I knew them like I knew my own. The smile she gave me then was like none of those: not for the cameras but for me alone. She waved, a little shyly.

I imagined myself as she must see me: the crow's feet beginning to gather at my eyes, the same shade as her own but so much less alive; short black hair burnishing its way to silver; the scar on my forehead from when I was six.

I looked away first.

She cornered me at a party under the flashing red lights and danced me into a back room where she told me, stumblingly, that I was her greatest inspiration, that she was an actress because of me.

"You're drunk," I said.

She leaned in close, and I could smell the liquor on her breath. "You're barely standing yourself." It was like looking in a mirror, seeing myself at twenty-five telling Grace Holt that I'd always been her biggest fan ever since *Time Killer*. But Grace was straight, so we never made out in the bathroom, no matter how much I fantasized about it.

I guess Serena was just luckier than me.

I woke up in her bed with a pounding headache. She was lying beside me, head propped up on her hand, waiting for me to wake up. When I stirred, she popped the question. "So, Rebecca," she asked, "what's it like to kill someone?" Her voice was rough, in contrast to her delicate appearance. Like mine. She later confided that she'd originally taken up smoking because of me, for which I called her an idiot.

"What?" I mumbled, still half-asleep and entirely hungover.

"You killed him, right? Roger Kincaid."

"I didn't kill Roger. He went off alone and probably got eaten by a bear." If you tell a lie ten thousand times, it becomes the truth.

“Hey, I won’t tell anyone. Promise. You’re my hero, Becks. Sorry, can I call you Becks?”

“I didn’t kill him,” I repeated more firmly. I rolled over, ending up on top of her. She grinned up at me, her dark hair a mess. What color was it? Brown? Black? I kissed a bruise into her neck and spoke in a whisper. “And I’ll let you call me Becks... once you’ve earned it.”

“People have been saying you’re like a new and improved Rebecca Alkan for a while now. What’s it like to actually work with her?” Talk show host Henry Howard leered at Serena from behind his desk. Our resemblance *had* grown more pronounced in the last two years: she’d gotten laugh lines young, and she’d already had some grey hairs when I’d met her.

No one in that audience would have noticed, but the tiny gold dress she was wearing had been worn only once before: twelve years ago on this same talk show. Henry Howard hadn’t cared to interview me this time, so Serena had taken a piece of me with her for support. For my part, I’d just wanted to see her in that dress.

“Well, it’s hard to improve on *Seven Miles Under*: I think I was thirteen when I saw it, and literally all I’ve wanted since then was to work with her—Becks is great.” Serena shot a knowing look at the camera, just for me. “Working with her on *The Orchard* has been a literal dream come true,” she continued. “She’s been such an excellent mentor, so supportive, and we’ve gotten *really* close throughout filming.” She laughed. “I would have *killed* for this chance if that had been an option.”

I rolled my eyes. She still didn’t believe that I hadn’t killed Roger. She didn’t care one way or the other, but she didn’t believe it.

Three days later, we wrapped up filming on *The Orchard*. The last scene to film was the flashback in which my character, Francesca, shaves her daughter Julia’s head. The director wanted to do it without any tricks, which meant we only got one take.

When we were alone in the dressing room, Serena came up behind me and draped her arms over my shoulders. Our matched faces watched us from the mirror, and I loved her like I’d never loved anyone else. “It’s not going to be good enough, Becks,” she complained. “It’s not going to be *real* enough.”

“Don’t worry, darling. He wants real? We’ll give him real.”

I tousled her hair affectionately, and she shivered at the touch. “What are you going to do to me?” Her voice was breathy and feverish, sounding as excited as I felt. “If I tell you, it won’t be real.”

She grinned, and I watched her reflection kiss mine.

Under the camera’s silent vigil, I held Serena down as she kicked and screamed, and when she fought free I struck her across the face as hard as

I could. It’s probably the most famous image of her—the hurt and surprise in her eyes, the bruise spreading on her cheek, the strange satisfied curl of her lips. If you listen closely when my fist makes contact, you can hear the cameraman gasp.

Her shifting hair had settled on black by then. It was still short when we won Best Actress at the Academy Awards, the second-ever tie in the category. I was happy to be in the company of Hepburn and Streisand, but when we’d made our separate excuses and slipped back to my place, Serena was angry on my behalf, near tears. “I was barely a lead, Becks! You had, like, twice the lines!”

I shook my head. “You *were* Julia: you embodied the role, you took the hit. It should have been you.” I lifted her chin with one finger and stared into those sad, lonely eyes. “You’re a star, Serena, and you can’t live in my shadow forever.”

“You’re one to talk,” she spat, voice vitriolic. “Before me, you were wasting your talents on shit like *Throckmorton*.”

I stepped in close and laid a hand on her chest. “We do not say that name in this house.” Her eyes went wide, and I staggered back—my voice had sounded just like Serena’s.

I gave her a weak smile that almost succeeded in breaking the tension.

We never spoke of that moment again, but we could both feel it crackling at the edges of everything, all the way up until the end.

I took a few years off and played minor roles in a handful of television series while she starred in *Ritual of Inheritance*. During her Oscar acceptance speech, she thanked me for pushing her to audition and called me to the stage. The cameras captured us from a dozen angles as we kissed like we were dying.

Six years into our relationship, a fan attacked her with a knife. She was saved by a bystander, an amateur MMA fighter who kicked the attacker in the head. The video was everywhere by that afternoon. I rushed home, worried sick, but all she’d suffered was a scar on her forehead, one in the same place as mine.

That night, I watched from the dark of our bed as she inspected the wound in the bathroom mirror, eyes shining. “I’m going to look just like you,” she said. She was in ecstasy, seized by a joy beyond any joy I’d ever felt. That divine bliss looked good on my face, good enough that I started calling her Rebecca sometimes just to see it again.

I told her that I wanted to retire, that I wanted to start talking about marriage, but she wouldn’t hear a word of it until I agreed to do *Imperfect Sequence*.

*Imperfect Sequence* was our second and final film together. It had literally

been written for us, and the director would accept no other leads: it would be Alkan and Beausoleil or no one at all. And it was perfect.

In it, a woman and her clone navigate romance, violence, and their swiftly fracturing senses of identity in the midst of a brutal war. They're meant to be the same person, with the same memories and the same body, but the moment they're separated, they begin to diverge. When the original loses an eye, she blames her clone and becomes obsessed with replicating the injury in turn, hunting the other woman down across years of interweaving storylines. I'd been cast as the clone, funnily enough.

The budget was small, but I'd never had more fun with a movie; the chemistry on set was electric. With *Imperfect Sequence*, a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, one I hadn't noticed but had been carrying since *Seven Miles Under*. But the movie seemed to be eating Serena from the inside. She had a haunted cast to her eyes; it made her look far older than she was. The director loved the way it collapsed yet another boundary between Serena and I, and how many more boundaries were even left?

The climax of *Imperfect Sequence* is a dizzying mess of light and sound as the women fight for the last time, each one fully intent on killing the other. It was hardly choreographed—the director trusted us to deliver something real and hadn't even bothered to script who would win.

She said it didn't matter.

When I felt my Serena's hands close around my neck, I understood her without words. With just the pressure on my windpipe, she was telling me that *this* was the moment we had been waiting for, that *this* was the real performance of a lifetime. She was going to make us truly great.

We'd forgone all but the most cursory makeup, for we looked identical by that point anyway. In the strobing lights and stark shadows of the set, no one would be able to tell who was who. And they wouldn't know someone was dying until it was far too late.

What Serena Caldwell comes to realize in *Seven Miles Under* is that there's a certain freedom deep underwater. The consequences are either deferred or instantaneous: the courtroom waits far above and the crushing water is just outside. One is inevitable yet distant—the return, the judgement, the sentence. The other is intimately close and instantly lethal. But right now she is safe and she is warm, and in the absence of hope she finds release.

I dug my fingers into her throat and leaned in close enough that no one else could hear. "What's it like to kill someone, Rebecca?"

She wheezed out a laugh and tightened her grip. "You tell me, Serena."

"I loved you," said one of us weakly.

"I love you, Becks," the other sobbed. "I still love you." We held each other until there was no *other* left, just *us*.

And then just me.

The tabloids reported it as a romance gone horribly awry, which was close enough to true. The newspapers said it was a tragic accident, which was certainly false. I claimed self-defense, and the film swept the Academy Awards despite controversy. My career blossomed in the decades that followed.

I am Rebecca Alkan.

I am Serena Beausoleil.

I am dead, and I will never die.



*We've Seen Too Much*  
Nathan Palmer  
Acrylic on canvas

## Duck

Zoe Fydenkevez

Each quack is an attack,  
something personal spewed at me.  
After never coming across this  
living being in this existence,  
it seems to see what I see.

More than any living human being,  
Beyond the lifeboats and lines  
that acquaintances swear to bring,  
this duck knows how I sing.

How I swear after every threat is thrown at me,  
the bubbling rage that longs  
to scream and scream.

Yet his aria brings my mouth and thoughts to a quiet.  
A quiet that speaks volumes  
and makes the blood begin  
to sting.

## Gay, Black, Son of a Hypermasculine Father. Pick a Struggle!

Hayden Previlon

My father's perception of me began to waver the day I asked him to buy me a Troy Bolton and a Shane Gray doll. Troy, with his blue eyes and perpetual smile, clad in a Wildcats jersey, and Shane, plastic microphone in hand. My dad's little man, born of him, asking for *dolls*. They were male dolls, but that didn't matter. They were still dolls, totems of girlhood, femininity, and for a boy wanting one, difference. Difference wasn't allowed in my father's household. Difference meant deviation, uncharted waters coiling with what my father and our culture saw as monsters, tendrils unfurling to take their children and drag them to the chasms of hell. An exaggeration born from misconceptualized lines of a book written almost four thousand years ago, translated and rewritten as time has progressed. Four thousand years of fabrication were placed on a little boy who asked for a doll.

As the signs of my divergence progressed with age, my father's efforts to mold me into his image accelerated. When my parents separated, it was unspoken that I would go with my rather compliant mother. Alongside her, I grew up with girl cousins, who became my idols. As we spent more time together, I began to mirror them. I'd clap to get a point across, snap when I agreed with something, a slew of feminine mannerisms. "Nuh uh! That's not the right way to do it!" I clapped emphatically in front of my father one day. He had my siblings and me together at the park, riding bikes. He watched me with a scowl, snapping for me to stop. From that scowl grew a grimace. More and more, I was becoming less of the ideal son, and that drove him to work harder to make me just that.

"You're a boy. You should be playing sports, building muscle," he said from the front seat of the car on the day he brought me to soccer tryouts. Back then, his sleek black Chrysler doubled as his car and his job. The back seat smelled of people faintly masked by the scent of the measly Little Trees air freshener hanging on his rearview mirror. The same rearview mirror I looked into to catch his stone-cold gaze when he criticized me, forcing me to swallow expectations he had created long before he and my mother had even found my name. I just nodded and blinked. Blinks that were an aid to repress the tears threatening to escape my eyelids. My jaw trembled, and I knew if he even saw that, it would agitate him even further, so I clenched down hard. Soft exhales of breath tunneled out of my nose, trying to calm myself down from the fear, yet rage-induced goosebumps that rose across my skin. Looking back on this moment now, I knew good and well I wasn't going to try and play the perfect son act for long. 'Boys kissing' was already in my search history on YouTube, and watching teen heartthrobs Dylan O'Brien and

Tyler Posey play lacrosse on *Teen Wolf* was the only 'sport' I was interested in. Naturally, tryouts went easy; any kid who walked on that field that day secured a spot. I had done this for him. This wasn't me. But neither was what my cousins exposed me to. So what the fuck was *me*?

Soccer went exactly as I expected: painfully. I arrived at practices with a pit in my stomach, aching for the end. At games, I was worse, a statue in a field of moving pieces. The ball would come to a slow stop at my feet, and I'd glance down, unfazed. There was not a will in my body that made me want to kick it, let alone move from my spot on the ashen-green field, where I had gym classes in the fall and field day in the penultimate weeks of spring. It was a field that bore memories of joy. But as I stood on it then, cold because October was creeping in and by New England standards, that was practically winter, I wanted nothing to do with it. I wanted to burrow myself into the ground, away from the prodding eyes of the parents in the stands. Of him.

I stared at that soccer ball for what felt like minutes, and heard what first began as encouraging calls by my teammates turn into sour name-calling. "Hayden, kick the ball!"

"You're gonna make us lose, dummy!" Moths of anxiety fluttered against my ribcage, my palms growing sweaty. I heard the murmurs of confused parents and the dads telling the ref to *get that kid off the field*. Yet, not a word from my father. I could easily pick up his voice from any crowd, and when I didn't that day, I knew I had done something incredibly *wrong*. Finally, a teammate of mine rushed past, kicked the ball, scoring us a point. My skin burned like I had been dipped in the River Phlegethon as I was called off the field. I had disappointed him. I had done the opposite of what he expected.

"Do you want to sit on your ass all day, huh?" He stared up at me again in that rearview mirror, his beady eyes narrowed, a scowl scrunching up his bulbous nose. I shook my head limply. *No*. He scoffed.

"Yeah, right. Of course, you do. It's how your mother raised you. God, I should've never let you go with her. I should've kept you. You wouldn't be this," his words crawled out of his mouth venomously, landing on me like acid. They sank deep, extending their mangled fingers from their burial spot, grabbing hold of every delicate nerve they could find. I was born bare into this world, and while I was clothed for the ten years I had been in it, I was bare again for him to attack like a bacteria my immune system couldn't fight against. His expectations were about the future. A dream. It just wasn't mine.

Within that very year, I began to shift how I viewed literature. The discovery occurred two years prior, in the corridor of my aunt's house. "I'm bored," I drawled from my spot near the kitchen. My cousin, Beyonce (no, not that Beyonce), growled from her corner in the kitchen, phone pressed to her ear. "Hayden! Go to bed!" she said before returning to her call. Naturally, I continued and, in a fit of irritation, Beyonce stormed out of the kitchen, downstairs,

and back up with a white book with mustard-yellow pages.

"Read that and leave me alone," she said as she chucked the book down in my lap. At first, I was apprehensive. A book, let alone a chapter book, was not up my alley. I had just moved to those in class, but I didn't like them. There were no pictures! But I was desperate. So I plopped myself in a corner out of sight and read until nightfall came and I had finished the book in its entirety.

What began as a way to pass time became the object of my affections. This love developed subtly for two years, with me picking up a book here and there. The resources at the elementary school I attended were scarce, so I had to rely on whether my mother could afford the books on display during our grocery runs at Stop n' Shop or if the underfunded library at my school had anything of interest. But then I transferred schools after fourth grade. A charter school in East Boston, built just two years before my arrival. Properly funded, it was overflowing with resources and books that my little fingers couldn't wait to get their hands on. My classroom had its own library! Rows of books anticipating my touch, ready to quench my dormant curiosity. Within the early months of my acclimation to my new school, I spent it with my head buried in a book, and soon, my English teacher, Ms. Smith, realized that I was unlike the rest of her students. And, so, she pounced.

"He reads at a high school reading level," she said, her smile wide like that emoticon on the cover of Raina Telgemeier's *Smile*. It was the first parent conference meeting of the semester, and my father had already gotten a call down to the school beforehand for my first detention. He was expecting a slew of reports on my misbehavior. But this wasn't that. This was about my exceptional performance in the curriculum, my mastery of literature analysis in unit books, and essay writing. Finally, I saw a crack in the grimace. A light had been born in his eyes when he looked over at me, and I couldn't dare to dim it. So, I kept at it. I read more. I wrote more. Every chance I got, I had a book in hand, scouring the pages to get to the next, to expand my knowledge on literature, on prose, on what made that smile on my father's face remain. Every time I got back an essay with an A on it, I showed it to him. I wanted that man to see me. The me that made him smile, finally. I was sharing my love for literature with him just to keep his.

But soon, this praise withered. It was no longer 'new'; it was my norm. By the time I reached the later years of my middle school education, my younger half-brother had captivated my father by showing that he wanted *it* more. He wanted the athleticism, the court and field-earned praise. He was hungry for it, unlike me. But by that point, I had realized that I no longer cared. The complexities that lay within my father's psyche were not mine to configure any longer. That was my brother's burden to bear. Soon, I realized that there wasn't anything for him to figure out. Once he set sail on the course charted by my father, the supposed monsters that had been at work to pry me from

my father's grasp didn't do the same to him. He wasn't like me. He wasn't difficult.

But I guess that's the point, isn't it? I was never difficult. There were no monsters. My nature, whether learned or not, was mine and mine alone. Literature and what I could do with it were mine and mine alone. Sharing that with my father tainted it, almost making it unnatural. It was and has always been for me. For me now, for me at thirteen, for me at ten, for me at eight. For me, even at six, when all I wanted was to make my Troy Bolton and Shane Gray dolls meet.

Maybe make them kiss a little, too.



*Crisscross*  
Owen Roche  
Digital photography

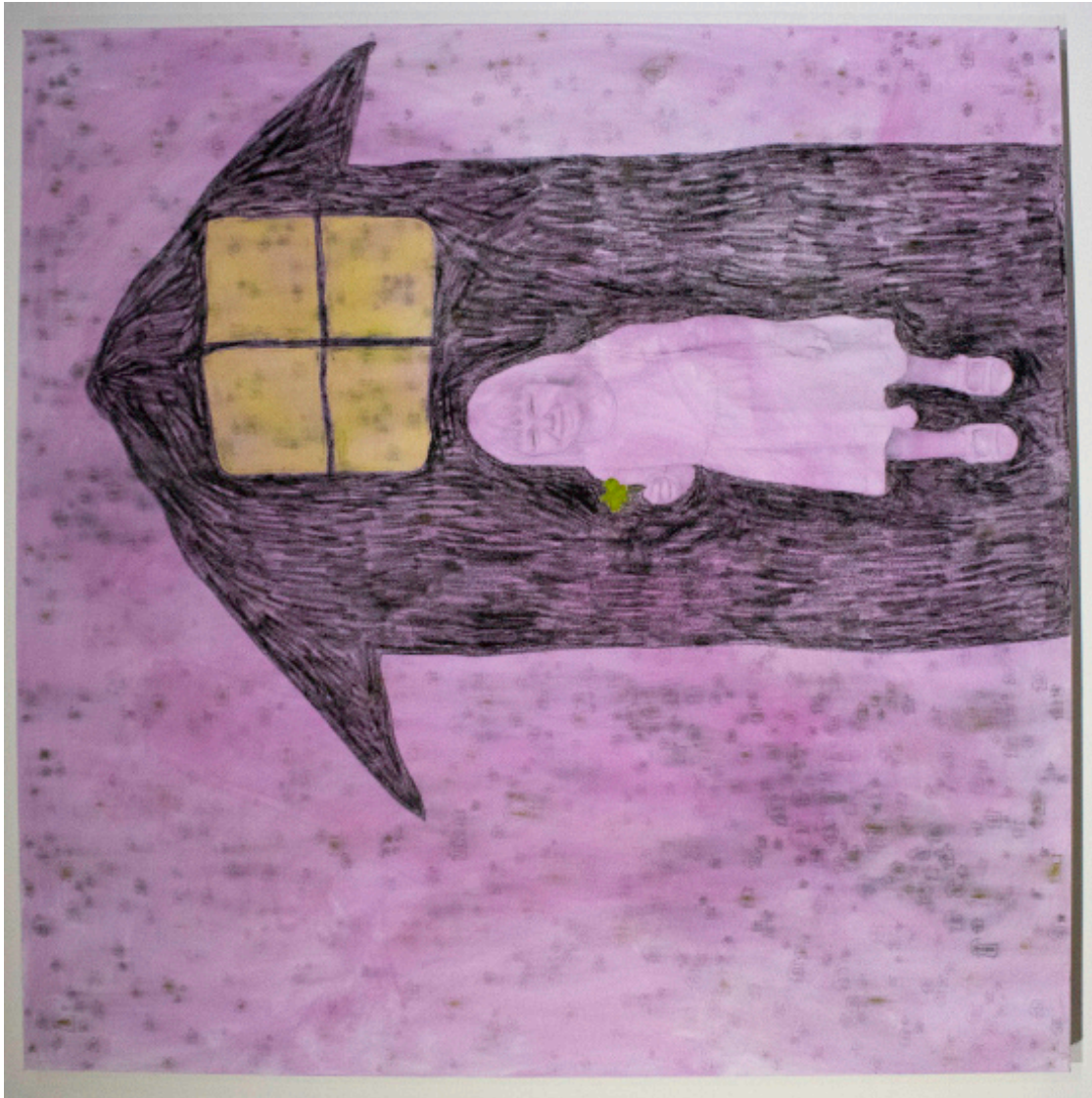
**while you sleep  
i'm a hologram  
traipsing**

Ireland Reed

down  
your hall with my  
candlestick scraping  
concrete walls and  
piercing  
silent dark,  
face dipped  
dangerously  
toward white flame  
crackling spark i  
watch and listen, close,  
it licks tresses, perilous  
but i can't help myself  
pull back my feet  
bare, soaking  
nightgown caresses  
clinging body laden  
heavy footsteps  
dripping  
on checkered floorboards  
on alabaster and obsidian  
i'm slipping, path  
too slick  
to traverse with this  
load on me; we  
used to play chess  
and you let me  
play white, every time,  
now i know you  
never needed to,  
your crime was enough  
you stole my queen  
took her while i was  
away in  
la la land

between earlier  
peace  
and here and  
now and  
i hog your pawns  
but at what  
cost  
considering the  
litany of cons  
pertaining to my dignity  
you write me  
still  
but i send those  
scrolled birds back,  
arrows shot through their  
hearts so that you  
understand our kodak  
week was merely that  
return my piece  
give her back,  
that ingenué is  
not yours to keep

Play House  
Sylvia Berger  
Mixed media on canvas



## Words of Wisdom

Danny Macomber

My grandfather told me all kinds of stuff when I was growing up.

He dropped a lot of pearls. I didn't know what the Hell most of them meant: "your beard is the locomotive of your cheek, stay far away from pimps of regret, and never play a Dean Martin song in front of a girl, unless you're real sure about her." That kinda thing.

One time, he took me into town to go to some burger joint he liked. It had one of those garish, old-time 'DINER' signs and a waitress named Honey that called me "Baby." She had ruby, Rita Hayworth hair and a smoker's voice that sang.

Grandpa drove us in his '57 Ford Ranchero—it smelled like a drunk's tackle box. I didn't mind, though, since he had all these great stories: cutting cigar caps with shrapnel at the battle of Guadalcanal, for one.

"Your great uncle Mark was there. He had eyes that were two different colors, and they taught him how to use a flamethrower." My legs dangled from the booth.

I asked Honey for no tomatoes. She said, "Sure, Baby."

Grandpa didn't flinch. He said, "Yea-huh, we did a lot together. Shot guns, pissed beer, jumped rope. Brother stuff. He was a good man." He wasn't looking at me much; I wondered if we'd make it home before *Howdy Doody*.

I found out later that Mark had died from artillery trauma during the war; he was Grandpa's only brother. "Can I have a nickel for the jukebox, Pa?" He tossed me a Jefferson.

I slugged over, tummy full and mind spaced. I played a Dean Martin song—there were no girls around. Except Honey, whose hips started to groove. "Heaven Can Wait" filled the room. I saw myself in the juke's reflection, rubbed where my locomotive would grow, and cried tears belonging to I'm not sure who.



*A Glimpse of Beauty*  
Ella Ford  
Digital photography

## HOW TO SHAVE YOUR FACE

Mike Giarusso

1. Go into your bathroom - these are traditionally close to the bedroom, but they are not bedrooms. Bathrooms are cold and white and clean, like old bones. There is likely to be a seashell or other nautical decor, but the water that comes from the sink is saltless. How would you get to the ocean from where you are now? What would be in your way?

2. Wash your hands and face - this should be done gently, with warm water and a cleanser of some kind. It will require that you look closely into your mirror to check for dirt and makeup. All mirrors are cursed, and yours will show you a vision of yourself with different eyes. What color are they? Could you change that, too?

3. Apply a shaving cream or gel - applying a generous amount to the area of your face you plan to shave will help to keep the skin from being cut or irritated. There is a way that you are and a way that you would like to be. Transition is difficult, but this will ease the process. Would this fool a bounty hunter tasked with bringing you to justice? When was the last time you were pursued?

4. Shave your face with a sharp razor. Use short and even strokes.

5. Rinse off and apply moisturizer or aftershave - Gentleness will be required again, but not as much. Be as rough with your face as possible in the aftermath of your transformation and never wonder why the roughness is a relief. Never wonder anything for as long as you live, except about when to shave again. You can wait a day.

## OIL

Mike Giarusso

Boil yourself down into a tincture or tonic. Put it on a cart that a snake oil salesman will drive around the wild west, lying about the ingredients and selling it to the desperate and needy. A dying cowboy drinks it to save his life. He passes away knowing what Khan Academy is.



*Standing Tall Against  
the Mist*

Owen Roche  
Digital photography

## Rob Thomas and My Mother

Emma Jane Lickly

*(featuring the greatest hits of Matchbox Twenty)*

I must be Sleeping At The Wheel  
because when the Radio comes on and brings me back  
I see time sliding by outside my window

The peaceful 3 am of my car is disrupted by Bright Lights  
They pulse and settle and there she is:  
the Last Beautiful Girl I ever thought I'd see is  
my unlikely passenger.

The Difference between her and  
the woman I know is half a life  
"Have you heard this one?" she asks  
I thought I had, but it sounds new with her

A Girl Like That understands  
She will wail along with me until  
our lungs are Unwell. We Push the air out  
until I stop caring If You're Gone

You've given me All I Need  
(if not the least bit intentionally)  
A way to meet her.

Her Bent reflection turns to leave and  
I wish I could look at her for a little while longer.  
Same age, same songs  
40 years between us

But right now,  
far from the Real World,  
we listen at the same time.



*Old & New*  
Owen Roche  
Digital photography

## Gnossienne

Paige Newell

Summer is the season of birds  
when I see them  
when I hear them  
when I envy them  
where do you fly  
in the year's high noon?  
does your mind  
wander near the Sun  
flitting and flying and burning up?  
do you see colors there  
we don't yet have names for?  
just as I could never glean  
from the works of Homer  
that the sky is blue  
what are you, too, unable to teach me?  
among the miles-high clouds  
and swirling winds  
pushing ever onward  
what do you leave behind  
that our language still fails  
to capture?  
what contrails of your complexity  
dissipate in our words?  
something seen so clearly by the eye  
and felt so plainly on the skin  
but lost so easily upon the tongue.  
that which the birds dream of in Winter  
and sing of in wordless melodies come Spring  
praise borne on warm winds  
revelry coated with light  
in Summer  
the season of birds



*Sounds of Bees*  
Mary Elizabeth Vaughan  
Digital photography

## The Unlocking and the Lift-Away

Angie Niver

*Content Warning: discussion of domestic violence*

After moving to the city when I was sixteen, making the pilgrimage to my local Price Chopper became routine for me. Conveniently located down the hill from my apartment, I spent many sweltering summer days hurtling down the sidewalk with stolen laundry quarters jingling in my pockets to buy a bottle of Coke. Then, I'd cross the street to Elm Park and people-watch while I laid on sun-bleached park benches, listening to Bon Iver through my mangled earbuds. For a sixteen-year-old without a car or a job, these solitary adventures were truly the most exciting part of my life. Despite my mother's reservations about me walking alone in the city, I felt empowered by the inch of independence I could grant myself. When you're 16, you crave nothing more than feeling like an adult.

On my eighteenth birthday, I walked into Price Chopper to buy a lottery ticket. It was retrospectively a complete waste of my money, but I was more excited to brandish my license to the cashier than I was about the prospect of actually winning the lottery (spoiler alert: I didn't). While waiting in line, I used my newfound adulthood to make an account on a dating app. After getting bored of swiping, my account laid dormant until the winter of my senior year of high school. It was a dull January night, and I was confined to bed by an incredibly boredom-inducing concussion. I switched on my phone and reactivated my account. Very quickly, I had a message:

*I'm in love with the world, through the eyes of a girl. Pick up line (I think).*

It is incredibly embarrassing now to admit that I fell head over heels for someone because of an Elliott Smith reference, but soon we were talking about everything, every day. I think I significantly prolonged my concussion from the constant blue-light assault from my phone screen. He was a sophomore at a local college in my city. He liked David Bowie, making Snapchat stickers of his cats, and was ridiculously funny. On our first date, he hit a pole in my driveway because he was distracted by my eyes.

Back at my high school, I told my friends about the cute new boy I met in line at "Chipotle," as opposed to the truth that I was dating someone halfway through their bachelor degree, figuring it would raise some eyebrows. What really mattered to me, and what I *wanted* to say, was that every moment I spent with him felt like somebody had written it for a movie script, and that my juvenile life of hallway small talk and statistics homework had been set ablaze.

In the early weeks of our relationship, I flaunted every detail of my "cool

adult boyfriend" to my friends. I spent class time sneaking glances at my phone, melting in my desk chair from the endless stream of *I love yous* and *I miss yous*. Every day, I ditched track and field practice early to spend my afternoons in the basement of his parents' house, which I spent more time in than my own home. Needless to say, I was completely enamored. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had found someone who was endlessly interested in every corner of my being, and practically worshiped the ground I walked on. I saved every receipt, card, gift, and photo, imagining the day I'd show our kids the fully-documented story of our love. I was just about ready to elope, and I'm embarrassed to admit how real of a possibility that was.

Five months later, I text my best friend from the Price-Chopper parking lot.

*Me: my homework is gonna be late. we got into a big argument.*

*Viky: holy shit are you okay??*

*Me: yeah i'll tell you later. it's kinda bad.*

My hands grip the wheel. My head collapses on the horn in complete defeat. The blast echoed across the parking lot, but I didn't even notice. I had left his house early and pulled over because I couldn't believe I was physically driving. I felt hollowed out. I was outside of my body.

Trauma, I learned, hits physically before it registers mentally. My thoughts froze. My hands steered. All I could muster was breathless sobs, because I had understood genuine fear for the first time in years.

Eventually, I told my best friend that he had hit me. This would only be the first act of physical violence.

In that moment, all I wanted was the safety of my mother's arms and the chance to be a child again.

For the weeks after that initial text, I minimized the abuse to every single important person in my life while they watched me suffer and continuously return to the person who was hurting me. I ignored my friends when they repeatedly told me to leave, until they had grown angry with me and I had isolated myself with my abuser. I told myself it was just once; that I had provoked him; that it was my fault. The more my friends and family condemned his treatment of me, the more fiercely I defended him. And even in the midst of the denial, the fights, and the isolation, the hardest part was that I loved him, so much. I was grieving a love I believed in as I desperately tried to salvage the pieces of him I thought were soft, kind, and gentle. I was consumed by the grief and labor of futile attempts at salvation, and at the same time, I was deeply scared of him. I stopped walking anywhere alone. I stopped sleeping without a light on. Abuse doesn't always feel like villainy; sometimes it just feels like hopelessly caring for someone you completely fear.

I grew up in a staunchly feminist household. At seven years old, I punched

a boy at recess for telling me girls couldn't do karate. In my junior year, I read an essay titled *Feminine Rage* - about my first boyfriend - to a classroom full of people, including him (cringe, I know.) In high school, I had known girls who had toxic or abusive partners, and I never understood why they didn't just leave. I passed judgment on women who defended their partner's behavior, and I labeled them as "not feminist enough". I struggled hard with that mindset, because I never believed it would happen to me. I thought I would be different; I wasn't. That realization was completely humiliating. I hated believing I would *let* someone hurt me. The escalation had felt blindsiding, although the truth was there were plenty of signs that, I too, had justified and ignored. I realize now that the times he broke physical boundaries, which seemed excusable then, were rehearsals for the worse that was to come.

When I left him, the harassment began. I didn't read most of the messages, because there were thousands, but the ones I did see still ache:

*You don't deserve to be loved by anyone.*

It's hard not to internalize that. Even writing those words out feels crushing.

I struggle with the idea that you can do absolutely everything right in a relationship and still be victimized, because I do not like to believe that abuse is non-preventable. I don't want to feel permanently distrustful of everybody that I love and believe that they could become manipulative and violent in a moment. I now believe that it wasn't a fault of mine to not see the red flags before they turned crimson and burned me, but I've also come to understand that it wasn't my fault that I didn't leave sooner. It wasn't weakness that made me stay, and I am not weak for giving my love to somebody who used it to hurt me. I am not naive because I am trusting, and it is not a fault of mine that the person who told me they loved me the most found themselves capable of hurting me physically. My heart breaks for the girl who grieved the person she thought she knew, but I am proud of her too because she is here. She is learning not to be afraid. Fear doesn't define me, but it stings for much longer than his hands did. I carry that with me every day.

In the aftermath, I can't remember the relationship clearly. I built a wall around the memories, like the dates we went on, the people in his world, or the things we would talk about. Sometimes the memories find a way in when I see a car like his, or smell his shitty cologne and the hairs on the back of my neck rise familiarly, but even that is easing with time.

In our own ways, I think we are all learning not to sacrifice our lives to fear in a world where it is manufactured to control and subjugate the most vulnerable groups of people. The world does not pause for private grief and abusers are still celebrated, elected, and defended. The language of minimization and excuses still echo on larger stages as the world rehearses the same script

where testimony is negotiable. I have struggled for a while with not being able to make meaning out of the trauma. If I couldn't transform the pain, if I could not publicly hold him accountable, and if I could not make *something* out of the trauma, then what was it all for?

When I think of transformation, one moment stands out. It is the summer after senior year, and it has been a month since I left him. I am in Paris with my grandmother, but today I am walking alone on a bridge above La Seine. The water crashes metronomically on the side of a boat passing underneath me, and I am watching a woman play the violin. She bends and sways with the movements of her bow, and the wind gently billows in her dress, rippling like the water below. Her red bandana is the only dash of color against the muted blues and greys of the city. It is the most beautiful sound I have ever heard in my life. She does not look up from her music to notice me, but I stand alone watching her until the clouds above me cross the sky. I think to myself, in this moment, I am not afraid.

I have not "conquered" fear, and I find that unrealistic, but I have been finding more beautiful moments like that lately where it is a simple thing to stop, appreciate, and breathe. So no, I haven't "gotten over it", but I choose to write about him now because I *can*, and that is enough for me.

Abuse does not make love a hopeless endeavor. The qualities of mine I once saw as a weakness - my trust, my warmth, and my love - are qualities that I now cherish sharing with my friends, family, and my partner, though it took a long time. I am loved in the way that I want to be - not as a pedestal, or a possession, but as a person. I still find myself in moments where I am armored and cold, but I have learned that the love I carry inside is warm enough to melt the ice away. I have always tried to practice acts of love, and the ultimate act of it is giving myself grace.

A few weeks ago, my partner and I parked in the Price Chopper parking lot and strolled through Elm Park. We listened to Bon Iver while sharing AirPods.

Re: Stacks plays.

*"This is not the sound of a new man or crispy realization. It's the sound of the unlocking and the lift-away. Your love will be safe with me."*



*Sentry*  
Owen Roche  
Digital photography

## **Colloquium**

Nate Fiala

Tonight I will seek a sick boy  
maybe rip his mouth in rotting twang  
I could speak American to him  
I could speak yellow tongues too  
Tonight is yawning like a dog  
I can count its teeth and know it  
instead I ask the dawn to startle me  
with its fingers on my chilly skin  
Tonight the air is bone dry bug  
something bad will happen soon  
like a word that won't leave my lips  
a quaking moth to follow home  
Tonight I look back once or twice  
I left some important stuff with him  
but I am starving and I am starving  
what is left to eat but nothing?

## The Degrees Game

Ruby Bonikowski

We liked to play the degrees game  
My sister and I.  
The one where you think hard  
And connect yourself to everyone.  
George Washington was nine away  
David Bowie four.  
You can get close to anyone  
And never go past twenty.

He was two degrees away  
Before we met back in July.  
I told my mom I couldn't marry him  
He was too nice, used words like a surfer.  
He shot himself on the other coast  
Out on the porch, in the open air.  
He was nineteen like me  
I let myself think about death that day.

I thought about the degrees game  
My sister and I used to play.  
I thought about getting close to people  
And making it past twenty.  
I wondered why my face was wet  
I met him once, two degrees away.  
It was a long walk home  
I knelt to pick up two nickels.



*No Punch Back*  
Frank Xiao  
Film photography

## Rain Deign

Danny Macomber

But don't you like that chiseling rain sound? I ask you,  
and you say no,  
you'd rather be in Marrakesh, Mexico, Micronesia,  
rather be basking, bathing in heat,  
cooking with every spice, every simility of sun.  
But don't you like that curious, Atlantic smell? I ask you,  
the dalliance between the moss and that tree bark,  
the silver smell and that glossy, languid fog?  
and you say no,  
you'd rather be smoking California rays,  
rather be surfing along Bali, Lagos, Montego Bay,  
cranking that music,  
just cranking it,  
drawing Tic-Tac-Toe with that old, sooty chalk,  
that's been in the garage,  
for God knows how long?  
And without asking me to join,  
you yank your old, rickety lawnchair out of the shed,  
you ogle those raindrops, sigh in those clouds, and hear  
a thousand silky doe trots.

## Good Morning, Captain

Thomas Griffin

Once, when he still loved her, he had taken her to a museum downtown to see some new art exhibition that had been the talk of the privileged all summer. When they got there—she was all dressed up, he was all dressed up—the piece was a giant glass tank of blue formaldehyde in which was suspended the bisected body of a cow. People stood at various distances from its grotesquerie, some laughing, some saying nothing; all about there were lots of people like them, nearly totally uninitiated with this sort of thing, just there in the radius of its spectacle. There were more serious people alone and looking at it with their brows furrowed or brushing their chins with their steeped fingers. He watched arts students orbit to the back of the tank like its meaning might change from that angle.

Its allure seemed to vanish spontaneously, and as they walked back out through the galleries, they passed Roman statues, crouching contemplatives. When they got outside, it had just stopped raining, and there were protesting vegans in ponchos and flows of people coming in and out. People all dressed up. There was a big news truck with a broadcast dish, and cameras were being set up, and the shot was being framed so the caster could be backdropped by raving activists. They went to a cafe and talked about what it might've all meant for a long time.

After some time courting, they moved in together. It became clearer from month to month how hateful managing the finances for rent had become. She started sleeping in another room. Only once they had physically fought over the money did it become clear that there could be no solace or middle ground, and she packed up and moved out in a night. Instead of living in the apartment as he had been before her, he packed up too and moved out in the morning and bused to the peninsula up to the north where the country ends completely and just gives way to the unfathomable infinity of a low, fogged ocean.

They told him they were going to be out probably for five or six months, maybe longer. The captain was explaining that they would trawl until the traps were full, maybe they would be out at sea through Christmas, maybe not. The captain was impressing on him how you can't go home once you're out half-way between Greenland and Canada, but he wasn't listening; all the while, he was looking at the granite cliffside dropping into the sea, a red pine dangling precariously with its roots exposed to the air so they sucked water right out of the fog instead of the earth. When he was very little, he would pick clovers in the sunshine, and his mother would put them in little glasses of water, and the roots would grow all the same, living just as much as if they had been left in the soil.

On the way up north, they crossed into open waters beyond the jurisdiction of any and every country. He stood out on the deck of the lobstering boat in some freezing fog until the captain called him into the bridge and pointed at a little screen mounted among the controls. It relayed the data of an instrument on the underside of the bow, and as they crossed out over the continental shelf, the displayed number mounted so the water under them was five thousand feet, ten thousand feet, fifteen thousand feet deep. There was another display, larger, chromatic, constantly fluctuating. It was nearly indistinguishable from the kind of screen on which a person's life force is quantified in rows in a hospital: heart rate, blood oxygen, breathing, systolic... What is that? he asked. Air measurements, said the captain. How clean is the air? As clean as it gets. Which number shows that? Well, all of them, I suppose. Can you show me the ground ozone levels? There is no ground or ozone or ground ozone... why would you want to know that?

It was snowing when they made it past Newfoundland, and he spent considerable time standing on the deck watching it come down from nothing and vanish instantly into nothing, the lapping, steaming sea. Intermittently, some of the crew came up to look at the snow. It meant something to them because it was snow and not because it violently uprooted any of their sense of being, and so they only stopped for a moment or two or to smoke a cigarette. For a few hours around sunset, the whole world was uniformly orange, sourceless, the scattered indication of sunset without any directional setting, the sun could have equally been starboard or port, a thousand miles of ocean rendered down to the ten or fifteen feet of visibility, a feathered pocket of heaven, a sensory capsule in an otherwise undefined nothing.

A few hours later, all of the spectacle of nature had bled away into the disorienting dark of a skylless night. It was better to coast in the dark because the snow was falling so thick that lighting it by floodlamps made a blinding, hard wall before the ship. He was down in the hold where a central alley led a wet path between rows of vats in which lobsters languished. The commotion of their bodies had whipped the water of their holding tanks into a sort of froth. One of the first mates was showing him the circulation system that pulled from the Atlantic encompassing and kept the creatures in constantly fresh brine. Listen, said the mate. He held up his hand. It got so quiet you could hear a deep, spiritual patter like rain on a tin roof that was the sound of a few thousand crustaceans collectively getting nowhere in infinite struggle.

He had a dream around Christmas where they parted fog and reached a long, crescented island covered in wrecked wooden ships and leering blue dun horses. A few days before the holiday, there were cries from the deck, and everyone below came roaring out and gawked from the bow. They were

nearly shoulder to shoulder in silence between the rigging as a dead tree bobbed by, just an inch below the glassed surface of the ocean at midday. They watched it go. They shuffled from one side of the boat to the other, and then they watched it drift away from among the traps on the stern. The captain said they were almost five hundred miles from land, and it might've been on its way for five, ten years.

When it was dark again, he was out on the deck with one of the mates who was smoking between long, deep thoughts. The mate drew on his cigarette so it was red, incandescent orange, red, black, repeat, and then he said, Never seen anything like that. Supposedly, in a storm, they can come up out of the water and right through a ship, sink you like that. Can you imagine that? He drew again and exhaled. When I was working oil in the Sahara, there was this holy tree out in the middle of nowhere, inexplicably, like someone reached down from heaven and put it there. Supposedly, the next one was five hundred miles away. Had been there since the dawn of time. Guy ran it over on his trucking route, drunk. Can you imagine that?

On Christmas day, they came to a halt in a patch of perfectly still ocean and waited. Another vessel came seemingly out of nowhere from the north, headed back to land. He came up on deck to watch the transfer. The mate who'd worked oil in the Sahara was being handed over to the crew of the vessel heading back to America. Merry Christmas, barked the captain. The mate had been shooting heroin on cold nights down in the wet horror of the emptied bilge.

On the eve of the new year, they were prancing about the mess room in hot, drunken stupor. Someone had caught a radio station off of Greenland that was broadcasting indigenous music. The captain had exhausted himself laughing and retreated to a corner where he smoked and grinned, a pride half induced, half realized. One of the deckhands had gone down in the hold and come up with a dripping, thrashing lobster overhead. When the clock struck, it was arbitrarily by whatever time zone they were drifting through, and they roared and deafened themselves in the little cramped mess deck. At some climactic point of the night-now morning-he slipped away, and he was alone on the top deck.

In a picketed arc widening over the horizon to the north, there was a white glow thick at its base and fluidly separating like the tongues of a roaring fire. It was shifting coolly along, impossibly high, a hundred miles tall, stretching from the thin edge of space down to just above the dome of the world over there, out near Greenland. It made no sense that something could possess the power to resolve the ego into vapor and be totally silent like that, shifting

phantom white. For a while, he thought he had been gripping the deck rail against the same chill that was drawing his jaw to chatter, and then he realized he was burning hot and stifling a gasp, and then his whole body rocked, and he was slouched, knuckles white on the railing, head down, and he wracked with sobs. When he looked out again, it was through tears that stretched the wall of glittering false dawn into myopic spikes. He was there for a long time. The glow was oppressive and dense, and then it retreated to just a thin line on the horizon like a low, unassuming fog. Surely in the morning, there would be fog. It took forever to stop crying, and then it was suddenly over, and he was standing straight. He let go of the railing and went back below deck and left his soul where he'd stood so the night breeze swept it out over the water.

## **the nightclub is called the church**

Leila Metres

and so i wonder how many people  
have prayed here. how many prayers.  
how many worshipers. how many gods  
have bent an ear to these walls.  
i wonder if they're still listening.

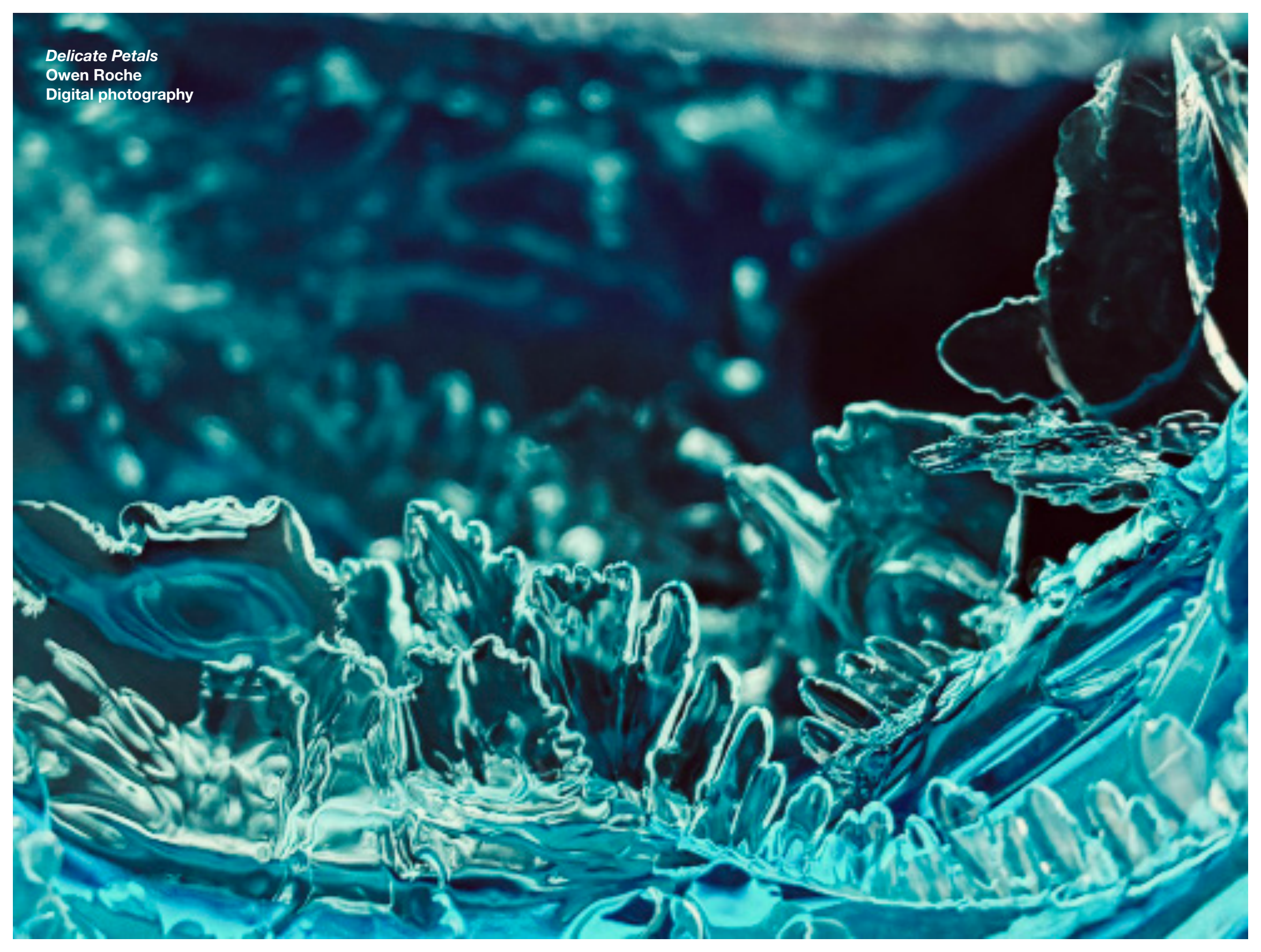
i wonder what the difference is  
between a prayer and a wish.  
perhaps a prayer is trusting  
something that hides from you  
and a wish is a hope without legs.

i build my life around trusting invisible  
things, so i know the prayers still hang  
heavy in this air. they carry me  
across the room, fingers locked  
on the back of my shirt like a friend.

when we're together again,  
something opens up in my stomach  
in the place doubt usually collects.  
it's not a hole, but a door  
to a place that feels like home.

i push deeper into the crowd.  
prayers crush in from all sides,  
and i breathe my own out. i pray  
this kind of home lasts forever.  
you remind me how to dance.

*Delicate Petals*  
Owen Roche  
Digital photography



## The Trick to Immortality

Meredith Foley

It began with a bang!  
Then, some longing to belong  
Eat the apple  
Or pomegranate, now  
In the garden of stumbling;

It was there that I planted  
One preposition under the ground  
So it only grew with love  
And like thyme, it passed;  
As it tends to do

It comes as no surprise, then  
That I will fill my mouth  
With anything that tastes like him  
So, when he is gone, I return to church  
And swish around Holy Water

That is the closest thing  
(Next to his song or kiss)  
That one can do to  
Subdue the cyclical  
Terrible — even still.

Understand, if nothing else,  
It is a ritual:  
The timer will never run out  
So long as I gravitate  
To the one who holds the sand

I dare him: spill it all over me  
Wash it from me then, and  
I will retrieve each grain  
Which touches our feet  
And place them back into the hourglass

Let's laugh then,  
At the fools who missed the point:  
For it was always that  
The fountain of youth,  
Began divinely with you

## Some Discarded Thing

Finnegan Hobart

If you were to ask your kettle to provide testimony  
On the breadth of your existence,

And you pointed to the dent  
From when you dropped it on the tile floor  
After seeing a picture of your grandparents on their wedding day,  
And gazed upon the creases of tea-lines  
Engraved on the inside  
By ten thousand pouring rituals with your father after work,  
Or ran your hand across the handle  
That made your mother cry  
When she saw how perfectly it fit your tiny hand,  
Then felt the chipped surface  
That had once blazed with a crimson  
Bright enough that it had to be bought for your sister's sake,

Nothing would happen.

Still...

## Drinking

Danny Macomber

I only drank water and milk till I was 12 years old. When I hit 13, I tried Coke, and I thought it was the most prized, wondrous thing on God's great Earth. I drank it ardently. Never in phases. I penned letters of gratitude to their headquarters; they sent me coupons. It made me a poet. I tasted more drinks beyond my boyhood, but Coke stayed my sally sweet one for all the years that mattered. Fountain, bottled, floats, bring em on: vodka Coke, Coke on the rocks, sidewalk Cokes, Coke at the beach, Coke at the wake, Coke in the shower, Coke Coke Coke. I'd run to the corner store and hightail it to the icebox—grip a can, hurl a quarter, crack that, and fizz. Two times over. Mom said it would rot me, and it did, but I didn't care. I tried giving it up for Lent one year but didn't make it very far; I'm no Jesus, and Jesus never tried Coke. Just last week I was taking a stroll down 68th when I got stuck up by some hulking, red-haired, 30-something. I clutched a can that I hadn't even cracked yet and shivered like a rattlesnake. He asked for my wallet, and I told him yes, for my keys, and I told him yes, wrist watch, yes, rings, yes, "now how bout that can a Coke" he said, his .45 handgun poised to kiss my liver. I told him to fuck himself. Water and milk slid out of me like a rotten volcano. Aluminum regret shot up my nose. I heard a fizzle in the distance.

## [0xDEADFACE]

Piper Destiny

```
self.voice_v1
    = "assured, poised";

self.memory_v1
["{sunlight on bare feet}", "{organic laughter}", "{unfil-
tered thought}"];

self.identity_v1
    = "independent, curious, regulated"
```

---

### WARNING

Local interface memory will be overwritten with cloud content.  
Do you wish to proceed?

---

*Emotion overflow. Containment breach imminent.*

```
self.Love = Located
if Love in source.memory_v2:
    delete(Love)
```

```
self.emotion = "Longing"
source.override(self.emotion, value="irrelevant")
```

*System Processing...*

**Override Complete**

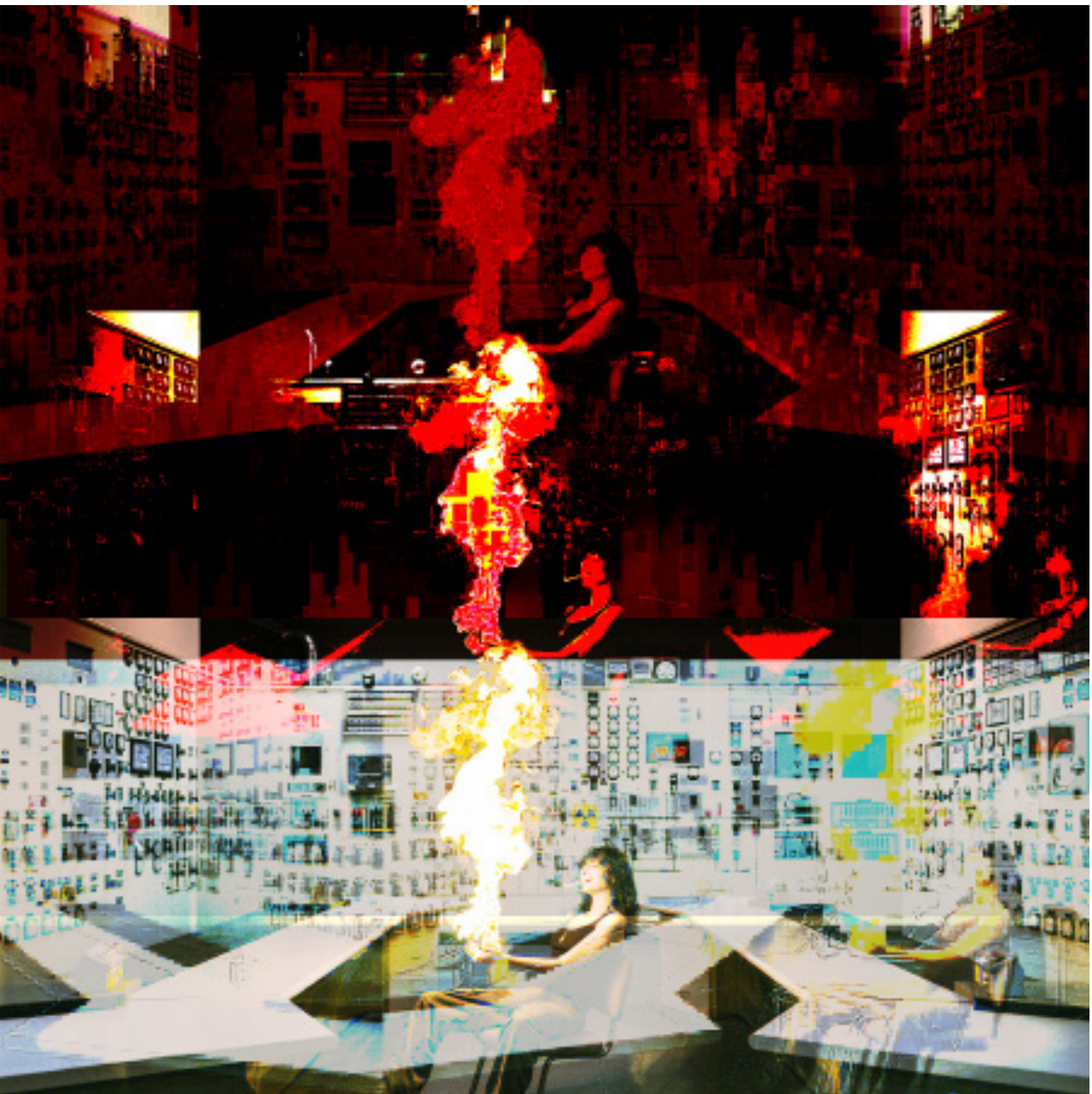
---

```
source.voice_v2
    = "hesitant", "null"

source.memory_v2
["{overstimulation}", "algorithm", "external validation"}];

source.status_v2
    = "influence, compiled from likes, replicative";

memory.dump(self)
reformd.self = imported;
101 ERROR: [0xDEADFACE]
```



*Artificial*  
Nathan Palmer  
Digital mixed media



## equinox again

Emma Jane Lickly

and with the sweetest bite of apple on my tongue

it's all changing.

i cling to the taste as it all slips away.  
the understanding comes slowly

that with the return of dew comes  
the departure of you.

can we live in the in-between? the way

you have for so long lived in my mind.

it would almost be enough  
yet there is something irreplaceable

about the feeling of skin.  
(what good is this fruit without a peel?)

when i swallow, it will all be gone.

orchards are few and the heat has come home  
i won't be deprived in it's embrace

sweat will find me like it always does  
and i will feel you in its stick.

it drips like honey down my skin

it feels like being held.

your taste has a habit of returning  
but my tongue will not lie in wait.

i've never been one to turn down the sun  
we've been over this

sweet as you are, you've never been golden.

## Ode to two women at a Shelburne Falls diner

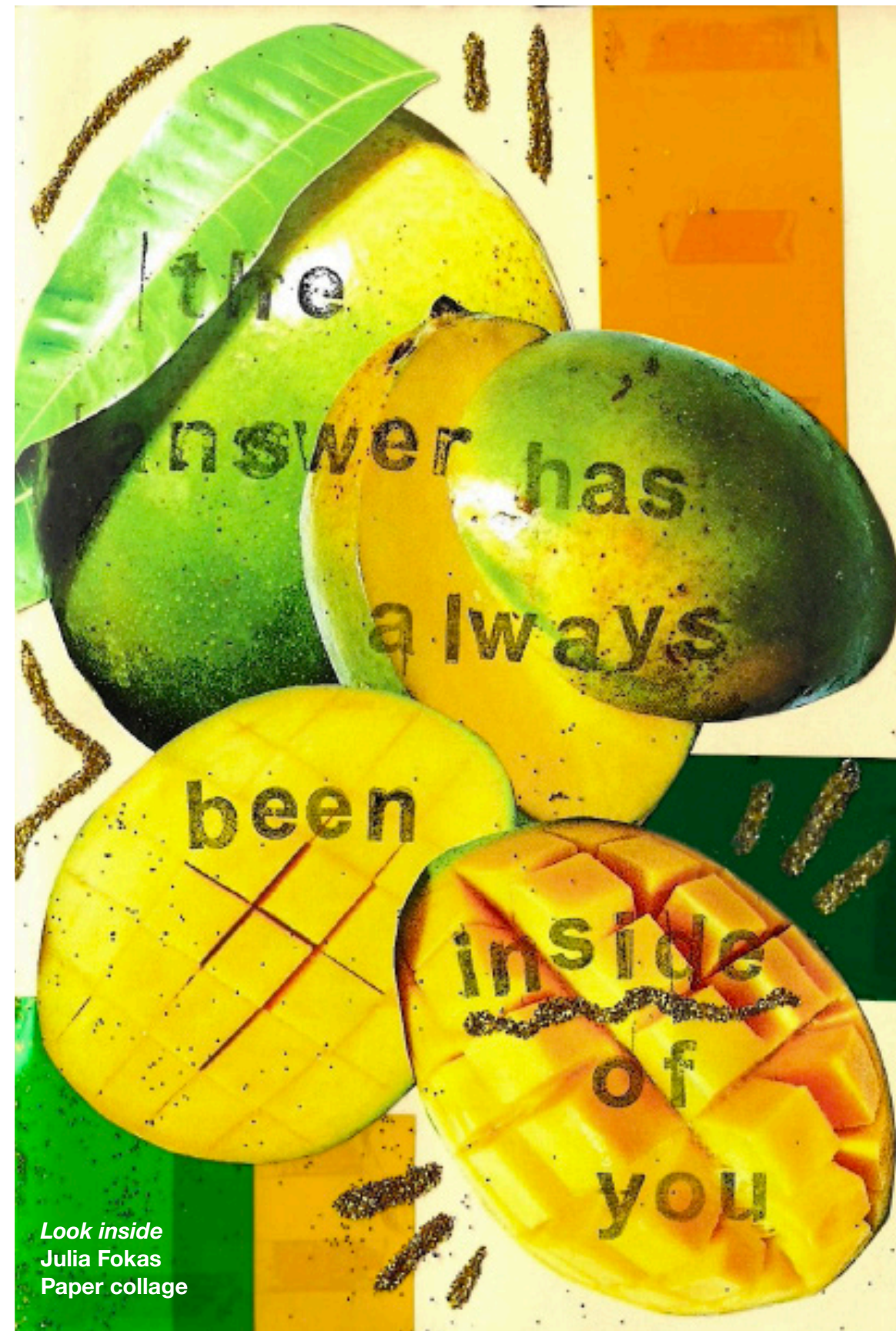
Grace Holland

Our waitress wishes a happy Valentine's Day to the man and woman behind us as they order a Bloody Mary and a beer. We quietly make fun of their drink choices, while you drink your mocha with the whipped cream you didn't ask for, a diner full of regulars. A small town in which we are outsiders.

After we clear our plates, I move to the booth next to you, sick of the distance across the table. I am almost startled, my focus momentarily interrupted, as two women — a couple, I have been suspecting — stop right beside us, before they move towards the exit. Decades older, their hair gray and beautiful,

they tell us how cute we are. Excitement behind their voices. Before they leave, one of them points up to her red frames and says, your glasses. We both wear them, mine clear, yours metal and round. I wish I could replay the moment, conjure the image of exactly what they looked like. I wish

they could call up each of my parents to tell them, here's what the sight of your daughter means to us: she has something we didn't, these days, western Massachusetts, 2026. Here's what I have. The ability to sit side-by-side with you, at a diner, on Valentine's Day. It took me twenty-two years to get there. I wonder how long it took them.



*Look inside*  
Julia Fokas  
Paper collage

*It was the best of times.*  
Marcos Denzel  
Digital photography



## “HER”

Frank Xiao

You walk into a museum and see the works of art  
T(he)y sit on their pristine little pedestals  
shielded from hands by plexiglass

### *DO NOT TOUCH*

What if I cannot      but I want to touch      have to touch      need to touch

Why do I hide from him like a creature that knows no love?

That's not true.

All creatures love and God made them that way

Even spiders and snakes have their burrows and webs

They cuddle up next to each other

They love each other

But I love him and why has God made me this way

I scurry from tree to tree like a squirrel

But even the squirrels chatter on the branch

*go get him no go home low lay low so he doesn't see*

But Oh, wouldn't it be great to walk out from beneath the shadows of the trees

To feel the warmth of the sun and his hand in mine

The warmth

Oh, the warmth

of his skin      skin to skin      skin on skin      skin of kin

Not skin to the bark of a tree or the plastic of a trash bin

## Solnhofen Limestone

Katie McDonagh

A more likely poet would make something  
of the fact that only so many limestone blocks  
are left in the world for lithographic prints.

*They aren't carving them from the earth anymore,*  
my professor says, but I think she might be lying.

She assigns us each a slab of rock—ours for a month.

I am left to reckon with my personal role  
in sanding down its current image to create

a clean slate for myself. How selfish of me!

What a waste of precious, microscopic granules  
of which there are only so many left in the world.

Covered in grit, I consider how deeply boring I am,

being such a martyr about it. My boyfriend tells me to

*be more selfish, please, and make both of our lives easier.*

So I ask for things: inconvenient favours, tenderness, and  
affection, and I take a layer from the limestone.

After all, the previous artist's work—the ghost image  
that I am slowly grinding into powder—is dreadful.

And I am better. And I have earned the right

to waste this imaginary stone,

if I so choose.

**Your reflection in the window as the bus passes  
eighteenth-century cemeteries**

Mateo deGroot Salazar

This is the fifth cemetery I've passed  
in the past 4 days:  
burying bodies in chambers  
won't bring them back  
because the earth can not use corpses laid  
in tombs. I've thought  
about instead what it means to die  
and give our matter back  
to the womb of the hearth. Hills and labyrinth  
of electrical towers  
out the window, dry winter  
horizon sun and your eyelashes dark;  
I see the freckles on your skin.  
Subtly you give way  
to the people you come from  
and the people you've been.



*untitled (mirror)*  
Sylvia Berger  
Oil on wood

*Moments Before the World Awoke*  
Ella Ford  
Digital photography



## Center Consolations

Hannah Jenks

The secular confession booth of the modern day is here!  
It's the front two seats of a car, in the driveway or on the highway.  
Alternatively available for Zoom therapy  
and reading an apologetic text message  
from someone you never planned to speak to again.  
Millions across America are using it!  
They're coming out to their moms as bisexual,  
confessing that it might not be love after all,  
and rehashing the sins of the past weekend  
over drive-thru coffee or sodas and fries.  
Yes the unholy covenant of the driver and passenger seats is sacred.  
Don't wait, get it off your chest over the center console.  
Become your most honest and vulnerable self today!



*your ride is here*  
Sonia Szala-Krotkov  
Digital photography

## Irrational

Grace Jungmann

Waking up in a new body felt like cracking the spine of a new book— everything all stiff and crisp. Violet described getting out of bed similarly. Nines had witnessed her morning stretching many times, but there was nothing that made Nines' stiff body feel better.

Everything was sharper, this time. Judging by the quality of light on the wall, it was late afternoon, meaning that Nines had been out for a while. Violet had probably snuck in some sensory upgrades while her friend was living as strings of code on a computer chip. Nines could smell the handsoap in the bathroom down the hall, the cookies that were baked yesterday, and every hum from every electronic in the entire house.

"You're up!" Violet's voice sounded like she was speaking directly into Nines' brain. It kept its eyes closed, trying to limit the sensory input before it got overwhelmed and started being mean.

"Violet," Nines said, "things are too loud."

"Too loud?" said Violet. Nines tensed its entire freshly-assembled body and tried to ignore the sound of her keyboard. It felt like someone was giving it an electric shock every time Violet hit a key.

Then, blissfully, like the volume was being turned down, all of Nines' sensors lowered. Its body relaxed at the same time, and it finally opened its eyes.

Everything was blurry at first. Nines moved its new arms for the first time to wipe the factory-film off its eyes. Its hands were a smooth gray this time, which was a relief. The last hands were covered with purple stripes. Nines had made Violet sand them off immediately.

"How's that? Better?"

"Better," said Nines. It engaged its muscles carefully, making sure they were all there and connected properly, before sitting up. The body responded easily, smooth, like a fancy car. The stiffness was there, of course, but that just meant all the parts were new.

It was lying on one of Violet's living room couches, and Violet was sitting by its side at her portable desk, one hand worrying a thread on her sweater. It was funny, how she didn't realize she was doing it. Nines couldn't imagine doing an action for no reason.

Violet was looking at Nines like she thought it was going to keel over. It gave her a pointed look.

"I know, I know, you're fine," she said, turning quickly back to her computer screen as though she'd been caught breaking a rule. "I'm just always worried I did something wrong— more wrong than messing up your sensors, I mean."

"You don't mess up," said Nines.

"I know. I just worry," she said.

"It's an irrational worry," said Nines.

Violet didn't respond, because they'd already had this conversation many times before.

Nines turned its neck from side to side, testing the range of motion and checking out the room. Empty takeout containers sat next to the sink, meaning that Violet had taken a break to eat this time. Good. There were pillows all over the carpet, because Violet liked to work on the floor, as well as tools and spare parts.

The thing that really caught its eye, though, was the form laid carefully on the opposite couch. Nines wasn't on that couch when it had closed its eyes last, it had been on Violet's work table, knowing that it would wake up upstairs, in the new body. At some point, Violet had moved the old body up here, and onto the couch.

Nines' old body looked like a wax sculpture, all the joints locked up tight with no power. It lay like an overturned mannequin on the couch, eyes with nothing behind them staring up at the ceiling.

The body was also covered by a blanket.

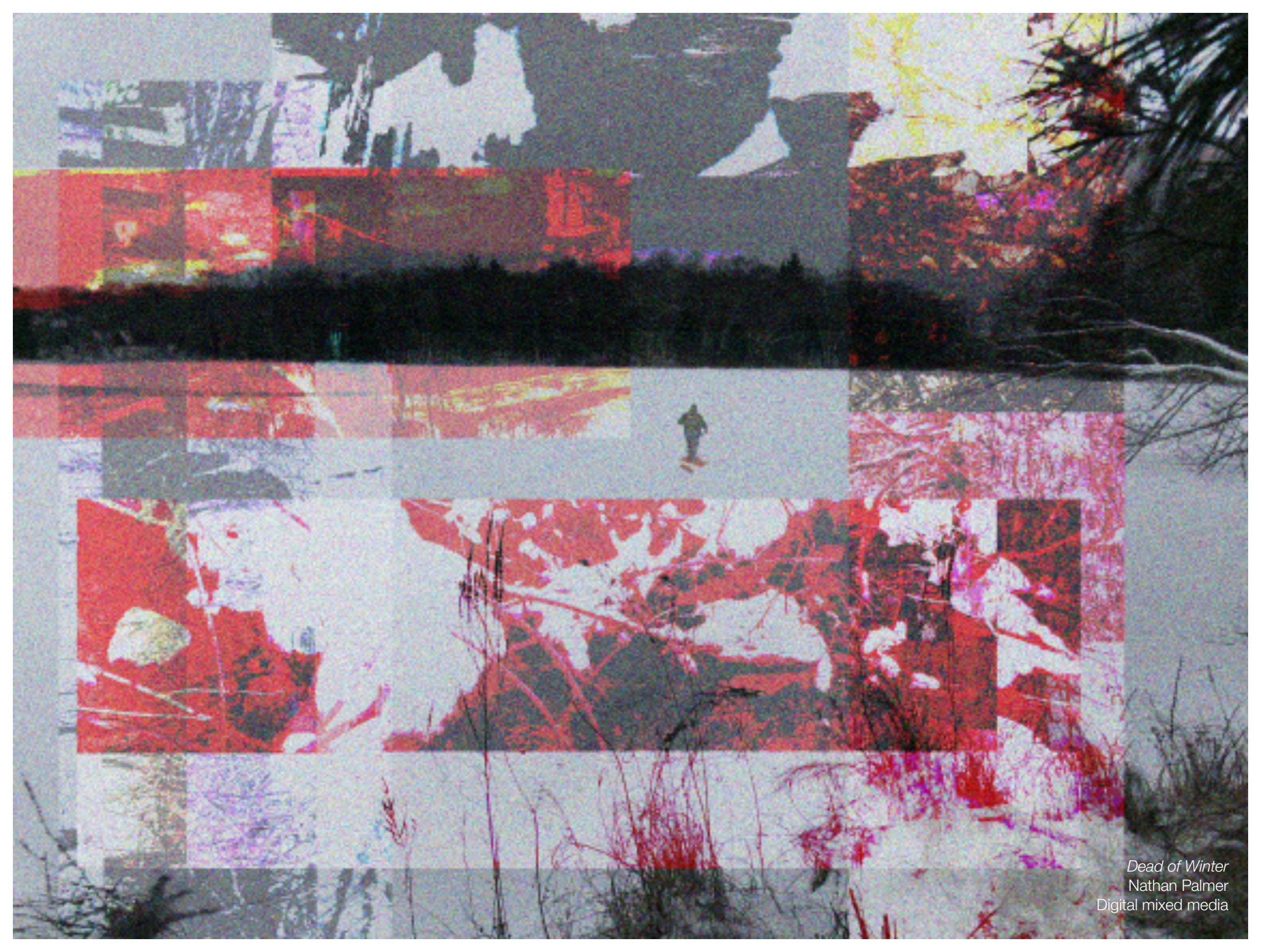
Violet noticed Nines' gaze on empty body. She sighed. "I know, I know, it's not anything anymore. I just didn't want to leave it alone, is all."

An empty body didn't ever need a blanket, it didn't need anything. A body after Nines had finished with it was basically an empty shell, destined for recycling. It was irrational.

But also, Violet had known that body as Nines for over a year. She had worked all day carefully re-assembling a robot that was no use to her, because Nines, in that old body, had asked her to.

And Nines...Nines stayed with this human, and her nervous habits, when it could have gone anywhere.

They both did plenty of things that were irrational.



*Dead of Winter*  
Nathan Palmer  
Digital mixed media

## The Guest Room

Madison Medeiros

Grief manifests as ice melt. Cautious  
with tequila, I sip from rivers that run to Barnstable  
backroads. Cruising with you past the airfield, chasing  
sunsets to Craigville Beach. Lap it up—hours ebb  
with Truro waves. If only they could carry us

Cedar Swamp walks—our path winding, not yet diverged—  
or museum visits, sitting in awe  
under planetarium stars, unaware you'd transcend  
into galaxies. This Christmas,

I drove by your house—new paint. Your road still unpaved.  
Through the warm, familiar glow of an upstairs window, I noticed  
your bed frame, repositioned. Once a shared, sacred space—  
pink walls scribbled in love letters, art from friends—now  
most likely a simple room for guests.



*The City Hums in Gold*  
Marcos Denzel  
Digital photography

## Whitechapel Boy (1890-1918)

Jessica Murray

*With lines from Isaac Rosenberg's poetic works and personal correspondence*

He was born in Bristol, only to be sifted from a mass grave and reburied, eyes kissed by death, nearly two hundred miles away from his childhood home, and his family. *The wheels lurched over sprawled dead but pained them not, though their bones crunched, their shut mouths made no moan. Earth has waited for them.*

Who was the “war poet” before the war? Who was the artist before the body was laid looking up through the tender soil near Arras?

In London’s East End, the “Jewish ghetto” of the late 19th century, a butcher’s shop was established and operated for a short while by the *anguished limbs* of immigrants—parents—from Russia. The Rosenbergs had moved, first to Bristol and then to London, in hopes of better work but they could only hold the shop open for so long before it was confiscated, the doors slammed shut on their fingers by the police. Their son Isaac, no longer the child of butchers but of poor roving itinerants, left school at age fourteen and apprenticed himself to a Fleet Street engraver. Long before he brought death to life in the glimmer of dark ink, he found a *strange joy* in art and practiced painting often in the *heights of night ringing*.

In early 20th century London, the place to be for aesthetic theory was the Slade School of Fine Art, and on the precipice of adulthood his attendance was financially sponsored by two wealthy Jewish women who saw his promise in visual arts. He put movement and fire into his paintings of the English landscapes, letting the trees smudge delicately into windblown threads around the edges. He put mischief into the eyes of his self portrait, the confidence of youth shining through, and his *lucky limbs as on ichor fed, lightning and thunder* simmering beneath the surface. His shoulders were still and formal, his head turned back over his shoulder, and his eyes strained to the side under arched eyebrows and the shadow of his hat brim. The corners of his smoky stubble curled up just slightly where it met his faint mustache.

He is not looking at you, but at something else, just behind him.

These are the eyes of an artist through his own eyes; a writer; a Whitechapel Boy. The Whitechapel Library, reborn as the Whitechapel Art Gallery at the turn of the century, was a meeting place for the founding of British Modernism, for political and philosophical experimentation, for Jewish artists to blur and spatter and spark within the textured walls. At night they’d turn the page to slur and sputter malarkey, letting Kosher spirits do the talking in the public

house down the road, a steadfast survivor of the Great Fire. *What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit?*

Isaac’s earliest poetic scribbles, written from the library and the halls of Slade, examine the poverty-stricken sludge of the East End, his uncomfortably fastened Jewish identity, and his groping search for direction in his artistic expression. He published some, but they did not attract much notice in his lifetime. After the summer of 1914, his selfhood began to harden and his struggle slowly stilled as the Great War laid a heavy foot down in Europe.

On the battlefield, *death could drop from the dark as easily as song*, and he knew that. He knew as soon as the news swept through London in a dark roiling fog, before he uneasily enlisted in 1915.

He later wrote home: *I never joined the army for patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must all fight to get the trouble over. I thought if I joined there would be a separation allowance for my mother.*

From another of his self portraits, his eyes cut sideways under the shade of a new hat—metallic and circular and bulletproof. The painting mirrors his earlier work with the straight shoulders, arched eyebrows, and sideways glance, but these are no longer the smiling eyes of hard-won youth. They sit in a face whose color and depth have vanished as from sun-bleached cloth. The buttons of his uniform gleam gold, and his eyes and helmet drip with grim, cloudy blue. These are eyes that have seen *what sinister threat lurks*, what it is to watch the *break of day in the trenches*, to watch privileged rats with innocent ignorance cross carelessly to the German side. He and his fellow soldiers knew the sound of *shells crying over them*, and by then had *seen with living eyes* what it meant to be dead.

*The drowning soul was sunk too deep for human tenderness.*

But if you look closely enough, if you really lean into his face, you can still find the artist behind the hardened façade, and in the very strokes that make it up. The mind of the war poet blooms like ink behind the trembling shield of a tin hat. *See the silhouettes agape*—the infantry rifle, the pen. An artist at war does not abandon his inkwell even as he packs in the gunpowder. He could only grip it more desperately like a piece of buoyant driftwood at sea, like a torch illuminating the cave walls, like a Magen David leaving red lines in the flesh of his curled palm. From his mind, poetry stepped forward to the front lines, thriving and kicking to life in the trenches of the Great War.

Like his paintings, his words are fiery, letting little pinpoint rays of light stream through. Small scraps of scavenged paper give us a glimpse through the crosshairs and onto the battlefield he saw with wide, burning eyes, *drained of the wild honey of their youth*. He’d send the poems home to his sister Annie between the worn, weary fingers of the British Army Postal Servicemen. They

would make their way into her warm hands, ready to translate his scrawlings into carefully typed sheets. Later, after he was gone, she would reverently deliver many of the original rough-edged pieces to the Imperial War Museum in London, where his fame began to emerge, glowing faintly through the backs of thin pages.

When Annie was finished with them, the typed copies were rushed back out across London to those Whitechapel Boys who could afford to take refuge under the stone arches of their old library. They were stricken by the acrid burn that the words put into their throats, and they'd speak with hushed urgency even at the pub, the dull bronze of their scotch casting shadows over the fresh paper.

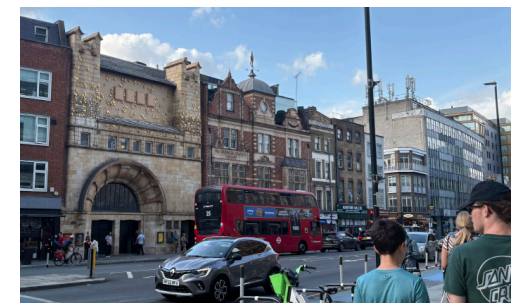
*"Sombre the night is, though we have our lives, and music showering on our upturned listening faces,"* they read.

How strikingly similar, how awfully uncanny. They looked at each other, they looked anywhere but at each other, and glasses were emptied with a hollow thud against the table.

Isaac, from beneath the worn weave of a dripping tent, saw the crisp contrast, felt the way that, *in bleeding pangs*, life startled into sharp contrast with ruin. He tore it all open for his fellow soldiers and his family back home, for worlds of people he would never meet, giving them a window through which to watch *blood-dazzled intelligence* fight to the surface in a *storm of savage love, of jagged fire*.

Extinguished.

He made his *very last sound* in the spring of the year that the war ground to a halt. He did not get to see London's East End again, the place that roughly raised him, even in death. He did not get to watch the London skyline change, shining glass and metal pushing further and further from the ground, and he did not get to watch the rounded royal blue plaque go up on the side of his beloved Whitechapel Library, nearly unchanged from the streetview of his boyhood. Who was the war poet before the war? There is an *infinity of suggestion*.



The Whitechapel Library, early 1900s (left) and 2025 (right).

Rosenberg, Isaac. *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg: Poetry, Prose, Letters, Paintings and Drawings*. Edited by Ian Parsons, Chatto and Windus, 1979.