

BENEATH THE MASK

Issue Two
December 2023



FOREWORD



Dear Readers,

We're delighted to announce the publication of our second issue!

It has been a busy time for the team as we've been balancing our editorial work and our personal lives. But being able to read our contributor's awkward, weird, and unique works brought us immense joy and motivated us to work to the best of our abilities.

We would like to take this opportunity to give special thanks to our amazing contributors of this issue. The incorporation of both internal and external relationships to reflect the complex emotions permeating our lives, frankly, mesmerized us. There were so many moments where we were left speechless by the intense display of emotions by the voice of each piece.

And lastly, we would like to thank you, our readers. We are constantly reminded of the sheer support that we've received throughout our journey from the beginning to today. We hope you enjoy this issue — we truly think it is something exceptional.

Stay awkward, weird, and unique.

Best.
Beneath the Mask Team

A stylized, cursive signature in black ink.A cursive signature in black ink.A cursive signature in black ink.A cursive signature in black ink.

COVER ARTIST SPOTLIGHT



A note from our cover artist Leena Captain:



“Rare Moments” is a piece that has quite an interesting story; it was originally an acrylic painting created in 2021 before I revisited the piece with oil paint in 2023. As many can relate, relationships between father and daughters are inherently complicated on so many levels, even if some relationships, like mine, were less than picture-perfect. After years of anger over events that happened and frustrations, I’ve come to be able to still appreciate and hold the moments of true connection and love that the relationship provided me at points. It’s a certain maturity of holding space for anger, like the red colors creeping in, but still being able to appreciate the moments, no matter how rare or old they are. The themes of this piece perfectly transition to the themes portrayed in my general work. I love exploring the energy and connection between individuals, whether negative or positive. In addition to this, I get inspiration from a variety of topics, like childhood experiences (universal or personal), pagan and spiritual topics, nature vs. nurture, and mental health as a whole. Thank you so much to the Beneath the Mask team for allowing me to be featured on the cover and for allowing smaller artists to show off pieces we’ve created and love!

About this artist:

Leena Captain is a 20 year old artist from Rochester, NY that's attending school for a BFA in illustration and minor in expressive arts therapy. They love exploring dark and twisted topics through a whimsical lens of color and skewed sense of reality. They've been featured in several galleries and acts as an art editor of their schools student led literary magazine. Leena's end goal is to become an art educator or an art therapist.

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The First A is Sharp

by Adia Reynolds

Derived from the Lines: “Adia I thought that we could make it... And show you
all the beauty you possess.”

- *Adia*, Sarah McLachlan

Adia is never pronounced correctly

I developed a habit of flinching during role call

Thought my parents cursed me as they called out

That name in an early morning hospital room

We listen to the song that inspired my identity

Could the singer sound any more downtrodden?

Make the lyrics sound any more melancholy?

It makes me wonder, what about it compelled my Dad

And moved him so deeply as to name me Adia

Show the whole world

You named your firstborn daughter after a stranger’s grief

All of my days, spent defined as

the stranger’s grief, or the “gift of God” in the more literal translations

Beauty in three brief syllables

You might pronounce it wrong, but I’ve learned to

Possess the name, define these syllables as my own

**Adia I thought that we could make it...And show you all the beauty you
possess.**

The Desert

by Nasrin Abedi

The Desert

I come from the desert
 When I arrived
 The tired leaves by the roads spoke to
 me
 The bells cut us off
 Water laughed and left
 The sun warmed my soul
 The ants got busy
 The shadow put me to sleep
 The almond blossom rained on me
 Hot bread and strained yogurt was my
 lunch
 A crow stole it
 The smell of the grass flipped through
 my memories
 The night stars visited me
 The crickets sang for me
 And in the morning, with the smell of
 the burning wood
 I walked down the dirt road to the city

کویر

من از دیار کویرم
 وقتی رسیدم
 برگ های خسته ی کنار جاده با من سخن
 گفتند
 زنگوله ها حرف مان را قطع کردند
 آب خندید و رفت
 آفتاب دلم را گرم کرد
 مورچه ها به تکاپو افتادند
 سایه مرا خواب کرد
 بادام شکوفه بر سرم ریخت
 نان داغ و ماست کیسه ناهارم شد
 کالغی لقمه نانم را دزدید
 بوی علف خاطراتم را ورق زد
 شب ستاره ها به دیدنم آمدند
 جیرجیرک ها برایم آواز خواندند
 و صبح با بوی هیزم سوخته در جاده ی
 خاکی
 راهی شهر شدم

Carrot fingers

by Milana Berhe

CW: implied self-harm

I heard once that you can bite through your finger easier than a carrot. Your brain prevents you from doing so, but it's difficult for me. The constant urge to insert my finger, dirty fingernails and all, into my mouth and close my teeth around my soft flesh fights to escape for what feels like every waking moment. I want to feel the satisfaction of proving the fact right. I want to feel what they felt when they tried to – the fingerless. I want to feel the feeling of a missing finger. I wonder how I would function without a finger. I think I'll try it on one of my toes first to be sure.

Temple Days

by Shamik Banerjee

"Wake up and bathe. It is already dawn."
My early-waking Ma would softly say.
Obeying her command, I'd quickly don
A saffron flower-printed bright array,
And knowing it would be a humid day,
I'd take a battery-powered fan, put on
My chappals, and by six, we'd drive away
From home towards the mandir, whereupon
Stood Mother Kali. Standing in a queue,
We'd watch the thronging devotees in view.

From local vendors lined along the street,
My Baba would purchase a puja plate,
A wreath of red sorrels, a covering sheet,
And agarwoods to scent the temple's gate.
He'd hurry to the point where we would wait,
Pass on the things to Ma, then rush to meet
Our panda and pay him a handsome rate
To get a saree for the Devi's feet.
With these, we would be in the lengthy line
And keenly wish to worship the Divine.

With growing daylight's time, the sun would be
More rageful to the Bhaktas everywhere
Outside the shaded pillared halls. Though tea
Was served to them, it wouldn't suffice as their
Thirst was for God alone. A cooling air

Would often bring us much tranquility,
 Or dancing langurs on a branch would spare
 Us from fatigue, and this hilarity
 Helped entertain our restless hearts, and soon
 The morning hours would turn into noon.

Advancing slow, at last, we'd gather by
 The front door leading to the Devi's throne—
 A downward-sloping cavern where would lie
 Her bed of ancient rocks where no lights shone.
 Each man would be allowed to go alone
 Inside to pray in deep extolling sigh,
 And touch the silent water that was shown
 To him—it's deemed to be the Devi's eye.
 With mantras for us three (each for a name),
 Like others, we would worship all the same.

Once done, with well-contented hearts, we'd go
 Towards the place's rear walls, where the ground
 Had idols of great Devas, touch them, show
 Our reverence through lamps, and walk around
 The temple three full times: rites for a sound
 And pious life. The pediments would glow
 With their gold-carved designs. Peace would be found
 In each spot as the evening entered slow.
 We'd take our panda's blessing and, at last,
 Sit in a puri shop to break our fast.

About the poem: This poem talks about a particular day in the past when my parents and I used to visit a temple to worship Goddess Kali (a powerful goddess in Hinduism). This poem details the rituals and

the experiences that I gathered from the events.

Few points to be noted:

1. A God or Goddess is offered things like flowers, cloths, sweets etc. In case of a Goddess, a saree (the traditional dress for women in India) is offered.
2. Fasting is observed until all the worship rituals are complete.

Word Meanings:

Ma: Mother

Chappals: Slippers

Mandir: a Temple

Kali: a Goddess in Hinduism.

Baba: Father

Panda: a priest

Puja plate: a plate in which offerings such as lamps, cloths, sweets etc are placed.

Bhakta: a devotee

Langur: a type of Monkey

Devi: a Goddess

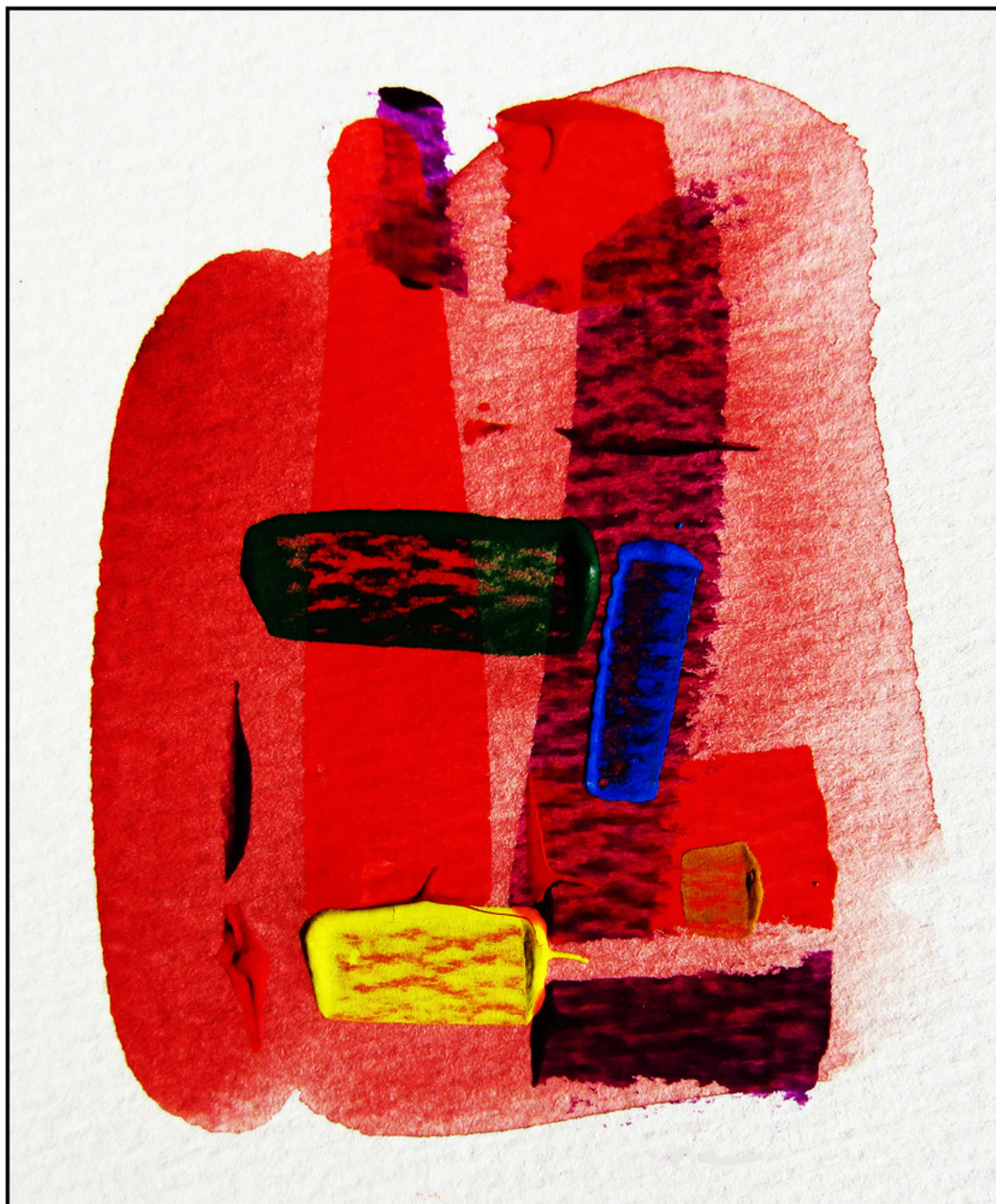
Mantra: a hymn

Deva: a God

Puri: a type of flatbread

Abundant

by Micheal Moreth



After Our Traditional Air-Filtered Sometimes-Masked Indoor Storm

by Gerard Sarnat

Four little first cousins.
 Play, play, play.
 All erev Rosh Hashanah
 Day in what once
 Was their Mommy-Daddy's
 Bunk bedroom, but
 Before the family moved in 40 years ago
 Might have been previous local
 LeClaire teener, evidently hustled pool.

After tidying up Legos, matchbooks and other cars
 Jungle farm as well as dino animals, portable medical
 Office tools, super-hero outfits, musical instruments
 Stray socks, shoes, pirates fighting merchant mariners
 Spaceships, bats 'n balls, train tracks, corner kitchen ware
 Where they bake their tray of sprinkle chocolate mint cookies
 For us adults to munch on — when I've put everything back in
 Place waiting for tomorrow's next inevitable chaotic entropy state.
 There's an unfamiliar, valuable fear: a teary boy is now missing...

...All hands-on-deck text: oh, Ben's sealskin gifted by a friend from
 Greenland!

erev: meaning "night before" in Hebrew



the world lingers of you

by Madison Cossaboom

the carpet is no longer intertwined with your fur,
a gentle white no longer imbued beside a rough gray wool
now it is only the air that skims by my ankles,
caressing the unshaven hair that once brushed beside your whiskers,
as time continues its inevitable prow across the universe
one of us journeys on, clinging to the future's fingertips
whilst the other lays in untouched ash —
a victim claimed to the choke of the past
but you must know, looking down from heaven's crown,
that the sun still awaits to greet you in the early noon
to shine its brilliant rays against your coat of snow
melting you in its embrace as you welcomed it,
the birds still chirp for you, singing your name,
taunting the glass of the window as the cicadas laugh
a harsh buzz that never quite pleased your keen ears,
and the ghosts must know i miss you, the tricksters they can be,
as the supple steps of your paws echo in the stairwell — a sound that is not
your doing,
but even so, the anticipation of your piercing cry towers over my heart
never crashing yet always building, for how can something unreal become
destroyed,
and that's when i think of your kindness,
how you must have spoken the human language so fluently,
scratching on a door as if a knock, a question to bask in the presence of
another
purring as if to say hello, a greeting to a pair of shoes you had never before
smelled

nudging the food bowl as if to share, a meal intended to be split between two
even as warm tears leak down my cheeks, their heat does not compare to
yours

not the warm kiss that mother nature had planted atop your pink nose,
and this world of new, does not compare to the one of old —
a life that now too rests in ash, and all that remains
is whatever dust memories are made of.

Hyacinth - Rachel

by Sofia Navarro

I'm sorry
if you don't like my confession,
Rachel.
It was February 14th
and your make-up was smudged.
How could I not picture us living
a rom-com love story when you held
the Skytrain doors open for me
and asked for my name before bidding
me goodbye at your stop?
Listen, if you want to blame someone
for my erratic trains of thought,
blame Cupid for working on Valentine's Day!
Or capitalism, for advertising their chocolates
made of 75% cacao,
10% YourPartnerWillLoveTheseChocolatesBuyThem,
and 15% You'reSingleEatOurChocolateWhileYouCryYourselfToSleep.
Seriously,
I don't make the rules,
but if I did,
I'd make it possible for me to make
three wishes to the universe.
1. Juno Birch would rule over us
as the empress of a stunning alien empire.
2. Taco Bell would be erased from existence, and never, ever,
be spoken of again.
3. I'd go back to 2:25 p.m. of February 14th of 2021
and ask for your number.

Yes, I chose you
over making my dogs immortal.
That should tell you how special you are.
So, Rachel,
if you're out there
reading this
and you don't remember me,
then we live and die in the snow.
But if you do remember,
and you too pictured me in a wedding gown,
or at least thought I could be mildly attractive
under my mask,
my phone number is [REDACTED]
My address is [REDACTED] Avenue
[REDACTED] BC, Canada
Postal code V3T 0M4
I can't give you my house key,
too personal,
but the passcode to my heart is
[REDACTED]
I hope I'll see you soon.

With Love, Your Love
And Maybe-Future-Wife.

Thymeless

by Odi Welter

A nighttime hunt for
coconut milk (in a can),
green peppers packaged in three,
bread and a bread baking pan,
and popsicles self-prescribed for stress.

They carry carrots now.
Too late, the canned kind is in the stew.
You bounce bubbly down aisles
bursting with new foods
we have seen many times before.

*Why canned coconut milk
when the carton is right here?*
They're definitively different,
don't ask me to define them clear.
It just can't not be a can.

Spices shelved like strangers,
but there isn't any thyme.
What kind of store doesn't have thyme?
*You should write a poem about that;
the shortage of thyme.*

Cumin tickles your middle school funny bone.
The organic shit makes you scoff
at the price and print.
Of one there just isn't enough.
You can't find thyme.

*I'm gonna buy you johnny pops
because you hate them.*

They're the wrong kind, they don't work—
Already gone, still hunting for thyme
we don't even need.

I settle for donut-shaped ice cream bars,
(too many desserts is one)
but can't find bright red hair running rampant.
You're making cumin into puns
or cooing over cute collectibles.

This is the cutest thing I've ever seen,
you hold a gift card sleeve shaped like a paper bag.
Why aren't you impressed?
Because that's in every grocery checkout lane.
The cashier laughs, we made his night.

We're like an old couple.
Only friends, only twenty,
married twenty years in two.
Time turning times ten times three
in the thymeless grocery store.

Congenial

by Micheal Moreth



Pickpocket

by Acadia Phillips

To the red head boy at the thrift shop
Are your locks fake like mine or were they a gift;
an early birthday present from wrinkling mother
to an unwilling child?
Did you mess them up with grubby hands, so that someone, lonely and
entranced,
would want to kiss your cheeks, place their own limbs upon your head? Move
you, mold you,
a muse of blood stained clay- your discarded kindergarten project,
a touch too dry, cracking beneath fingertips

Red head boy did you wear that green tee just for me?
Because it reminds me of our summer
reminds me of the willow tree,
the way your tongue formed the clunking sound of my name short/
inaccurate.
Do you remember freckles down your spine, on your nape, on your temples
sprinkled under the July sun?
Redhead boy, are you your father's son?

Did you take his words to heart when he told you to always pay? I want my
money than boy.
It's thievery(to take past 9 o clock)
the key turned, the glass doors locked, nose squished on window, your blue
and bluer eyes.
Gaze into yourself redhead boy,
tell me who is looking back.

Is it your father?

Your mother?

Me?

Two Homes for a Heart

by Madison Cossaboom

Screams of two souls shrill and batter
Echoing between faint walls of dust
Gore manifests in the scheme of words
Poisoning the children born to hear
They are dissected limb to limb
Their ears filled with searing sludge
Gluing them to the sound of each traded insult
And eyes gorged a crescent fervent red
With scars spanning down their delicate navels
Stretched mercilessly by the outrage between their parents
Tearing their very souls into two
And when gravity meets the gavel
The children pierce in half
As divorce claims a new victim
For they will never find a feeling of entirety
A home never to be made whole
Laid out of reach for their infinitesimal hands
Each week begins anew
Cradled in a different set of arms
As the two souls bicker eternally
For it is now the world that cries out in agony.

Broken Mug

by Claudia Wysocky

It was a cold, clear day in the second week of April.

I remember that it was a Saturday and that I was in the kitchen making coffee for the two of us.

I remember picking up the cup and holding it up to the light to see if it was clean. There was a smear of coffee on the rim, but the coffee inside was still clear.

I remember how the light shone through the coffee and made the liquid glow.

I remember how he stood over me then, and how my heart fluttered like a bird. I froze.

He took the cup from my hand and threw it against the wall.

It shattered into a thousand pieces and I remember watching as they fell to the floor like rain.

I opened my mouth to tell him that it was his fault, that he should have known what he was doing, but then I remembered that it was me who did this to us.

I took the broken pieces of ceramic and put them carefully in the sink in case there might be some use for them later.

I cleaned the place I had thrown my heart at, cleaned the place I had thrown my soul at.

I swept up the pieces of my life, as dull and meaningless as the fragments of ceramic.

I carried them to the garbage and threw them in, along with the fragments of my body.

Au Fait

by Olubunmi Oni

Once, on my ride home with a man,
I glanced above the treeline at the moon.
Her light curled its finger under my chin
And implored my gaze toward her.
And in that moment, with his hand on my thigh,
Palm warm on the inner side, thumb sliding,
I wondered what she meant.
His voice faded into a hum as
his car pattered along the dark road.
She said to me in a hushed tone,
*"You contain nebulae that he cannot touch
And when stars meet your skin,
Men will swear them pearls they found
And offer it to you as chivalry incarnate.
Certain their understanding of you is complete."*

And when he beheld me under the moon's gaze,
Warm breath and begging lips on my neck,
It occurred to me he was a moon.
Simply orbiting down the invisible line
Around my hips and breasts.
The idea of my stomach sewn into him,
Even as the reality of it lay before him,
Fogging his car windows and flushing his face.
He insisted I was perfect, sang me praises
That belonged to men before him,
Not the woman before him, nor the women
He knew before, or the ones who will come after.

He will hold my hand,
His lips finding mine, begging me
To believe that I am pretty,
Not ethereal. That I am clever
And not an ecosystem of experiences.
He will hold me as if I am an asteroid,
And I will not hold my breath from the heat
That pours from my core to his lips
and the burn that ensues from his ignorance.

As Above, So Below

by Leena Captain



Gum

by Milana Berhe

I can't quite remember who I am without you–

what I've done,

what I look like, what I ate.

I only know that I want more.

That I've been chewed up and spit back out more times than gum

and so i feel it in my bones,

the way they screech when I move.

They aren't used to seeing use like this.

They aren't used to being contorted and folded and smashed back together.

They aren't used to being thinned to bubble membrane and popped like lice.

I feel the quiet in places where I've never felt before

because for you, I wanted to be everything.

I wanted to learn to paint–

I wanted you to teach me.

I wanted to be speckled in lipstick stains.

I wanted my room to be lined in books we read together.

I wanted to be

I wanted to be

I wanted to be

because for you, I wanted to be everything.

So I invite you now,

please

please

watch me shrink into my skin until I am bite sized.

I want to be small enough to be devoured
and sweet enough to rot.

I want to decompose in your veins.

I want to pollute and corrode your very existence.

I want to sink to the bottom of your throat,
but tonight, I want it to hurt.

Tonight, I want to rip a hole in your belly and pull out your intestines
so that I can braid them into a crown to rest atop my head.

When I'm done—

when we're done,

please think of me once more,

please call me one more time when
your skin rips itself to shreds.

When you wonder why you're tearing apart,

and I promise there will be a time when your bile will taste sour
because the gum,

well, the gum is simply losing flavor.

Entropy

by Leena Captain

CW: Nudity



What it's about

by Jack Anthony

You get home from work,
from school,
some disappointing appointment—

It doesn't matter.

You sit on the couch, stare into the corner,
head heavy. Thoughts swimming against a current
of TV static
Except for this one, raring it's glaring red head:
"What's it all for?"

*

You're walking home in the rain,
torpedo drops cascade across your umbrella,
creeping with precision into your

worn, cheap shoes.

But your hoodie is warm, if worn,
and comfortable.

Your bag is heavy with fruit and a pint of ice cream,
just for you.

You'll read a sun-kissed book when you get back,
inhale vanilla with the turn of every page,
bawl your eyes out at a particular
turn of phrase

and it will feel *amazing*.

*

You play games with your friends.

You don't see them as often as you'd like and

You can count them

on one hand.

But there's food

Jack Anthony

and love,

kitten-soft and all encompassing in it's tangibility;

and you're laughing—

Snorting, shrieking, throwing your heads back

like children, who know nothing of the

weight
of living.

And that's enough.

the notes we should have left on

by Madison Cossaboom

at the age of five,
you crashed into my ribs
the bus trudging forth beneath your young feet
graciously throwing you into me, tangled in the locks of my hair
as you were a visitor i had not expected in the abode of my seat
yet one i inevitably made space for in the years to come

at the age of seven,
we began to build skyscrapers and towers of silver
crafted merely from the lego blocks discovered in the shadows beneath my
bed
only to topple them down with our delicate, young hands
as we chugged water from our ceramic mugs
pretending it was herbal tea that cascaded down our throats instead

at the age of nine,
we were sisters, founded in spirit not flesh
our families played along in our silly little game
one in which the gods made a mistake: us not born from the same womb
but no matter, they fixed it, thrusting their hands through the air to push you
onto me,
to bind us at the hip, the way they had properly intended

at the age of eleven,
you had your own seat amongst the dinner table,
your own silverware to match your ginger freckles,
your own blanket that rested atop my bed for whenever you would return
and that you would, soon and sure as school released you from its daily

grasp

and like that, we would pick up where we had left off, our adolescence
reigniting

at the age of thirteen,

we floated on pool noodles above chilled waters,

but despite the ice gnawing at our shaven shins,

it was our dreams that absorbed our thoughts, collecting each and every one
as eggs in a basket

planning our futures out like blueprints, carefully aligned with a matching
instruction

the promised days that we would share together, outlined hour by hour

at the age of fifteen,

it was only me you had in your embrace for months

your other friends faded to the background, no more than an extra in a
movie,

and youthfulness filled your lungs, a breath of air once lost to our early
years,

as our sisterhood had returned, a strike of lightning the gods could not miss,
one that seeped into their memories, spilling over all others

at the age of sixteen,

you had new friends, new faces i could only make out from the stories you
told

the one about the blonde, the one about the brunette, both infatuated with
gossip

and alongside the passing breeze, they whispered back a story to me about
you

that a boy had kissed you at a party, sweet and chaste as a bee and a flower
yet i ignored it, blind to the reality that childhood began to drain from your

heart

at the age of seventeen,
your teens had been sapped away from you
the childish giggle and lousy smile ceased to show, hidden behind a veil,
one you would not let me unravel, secrets of yours that my ears would no
longer hear
as the time that was pledged to me by the entanglement of our pinky fingers
was no longer mine
the minutes, hours, and days once held in my palm belonged to another
name written with hearts

and now, at the age of eighteen,
my tongue struggles to say your name
a muscle memory now forgotten with time,
our childhood now threadbare in my mind, everything about you gone,
all except the promises we had once breathed
and the future that i tattooed to the back of my hand

i think of our cat, milo,
who would now be shared between you and someone i will not know,
and our dream of traveling,
one that will not make it out of this country,
and our beautiful, beautiful memories,
that are now never to be made, only to be experienced with another

at the age of seven,
i had not realized that growing up meant growing apart,
but at the age of eighteen,
i curse the gods for not letting me know it sooner.

metallic birds & paper dream catchers

by Anshi Purohit

Niru ran across the asphalt as blood inked her resolute footfalls, her swimming gaze reserved for the metallic bird submerged in her subterranean sky. Dust flew up the back of her skirt, her lanky legs banging into one another as she struggled to keep up with the winged beast. Blood thundered in her head and ran down her knees.

She had to find it. Today, she would soar.

In her sky, a fierce sun blackened the edges of a steel gray plane cutting through the clouds. Niru ran after its sleek body and flawless curvature, daring to push herself harder while abandoning the sidewalk for a wide main road. “It’s a shortcut,” she gasped, the quiet suburbia observing her reckless conquest from behind window slats.

Her reckless conquest came to a sharp end when she stumbled over a stray rock and flew forward in a tangle of limbs, cracking her back against a stray telephone pole, and collapsing onto the dried grass. Niru’s eyes smarted with tears as she watched the plane escape her grasp, too numb to move.

For a while, she baked under the hot sun, sure she would become fossilized in a matter of minutes before a shadow crossed Niru’s vision and a voice spoke over her wilted body. “Hey—you good? I’ve never seen you around before.”

Startled, Niru flung herself upright despite her body’s vehement protests. “I-I’m,” she struggled to speak, dust clogging her throat. A girl stood in front of her, around Niru’s age, with a stocky frame and long dark hair. “There was a plane,” Niru whispered, her voice meek, cheeks reddening.

Niru hadn’t exchanged many words with other girls her age in this unfamiliar town with its brooding population and free-flowing sewage. Her parents often threatened one another with moving across the sea to a different land with money they didn’t have. Wringing her palms, Niru prayed

she wouldn't drive the girl away. *She's pretty*, Niru thought, sweat dampening her arms. She hadn't realized the girl had spoken again until she stamped her foot, staring at Niru with expectant brown eyes.

"Did you know there's a kite festival next week?" the girl said, speaking louder, waving her small hands in front of Niru's ashen face. "It's coming to our town."

After staring for a while, Niru sputtered. "I-I've never flown a kite before." Already, she could imagine the tails of a kite looped through her fingers as she guided the paper dream catcher towards her vessel in the sky. They could race together, the flying ship and its prototype. Niru would become its anchor. Tilting her head upwards into the blue expanse, Niru almost forgot the girl was still standing beside her, mimicking her movements.

"You're bleeding," the girl said, picking at a scab on her pale left elbow. Niru thought the girl's sloping, thin hair looked like sunflower seeds. The girl's hair seemed to dance on her shoulders, curling at its edges as she smiled a gap-toothed grin. She waited for a little longer before speaking again, rolling back and forth on the balls of her feet as if she were anticipating for Niru to faint. "I could teach you how to fly a kite instead and then we could go to the festival together. I'm gonna be flying one of those big birds, so I have to learn everything I can."

Niru's mouth hung open, her knees bleeding into the dirt, a buzz overtaking her body and replacing it with a new daring escapade of flight. "I want to be a pilot, too."

At some point they exchanged names and took one another's hands, leading each other in the same direction for different reasons under the same hot sun. Karys. Niru liked the sound of it on her tongue.

Her town's kite festival transported them into a magical world Niru couldn't describe as anything but destiny. For the first time all year, merchants wiped the dust from storefronts for sugary candies and kite-making workshops and science brochures about flight. As Karys led Niru through the sea of stalls, their hands entwined in a shock of connection, new

sensations and words danced through her mind. *Propulsion. Velocity. Kite flying contest.* Karys talked to Niru for hours, and Niru's muscles ached from grinning.

For the next three years, they continued attending the kite festival, holding hands and grinning with cotton candy between their teeth. They spent their summers catching planes and flying kites in abandoned fields, skirting curfews and sneaking into midnight movie reruns. If they were lucky and the stars were visible through the pollution glaze, Niru and Karys would trade stories about the ancients preserved in their stars.

They spent their autumns, springs, and wet winters sequestered in dank classrooms in their suffocated historic suburb, twirling glitter pencils and sitting together at a lone table near the back of a long dining hall where they traded gossip and overheard rumors from students who wouldn't know their names.

After school—when the weather permitted—they'd sit for hours on the public bus, missing their stops to talk about new designs and adjustments to colorful streamers. *We'll write a book with our designs as the best kite-makers the world has ever seen.* Niru took pride in preserving her youth, in stretching it out until it snapped. She took pride in her resolve to one day burst into the soft plush of the clouds and never return home.

Every year, a new stand at the festival replaced an old favorite and they'd have to cope, recreating swirls and designs unfathomable to any but kite-makers and their mentors. Niru teetered like a beanstalk while Karys remained closer to the sidewalk, her short shadow beaming at the long blue sky. Each year brought the pair closer to a sickening fate; soon, they'd have to reconcile with bigger things than local kite-flying competitions and riverboat races.

"What about your futures?" Niru's parents looked across the sea for answers while their daughter sowed her seeds close to the network of roots tunneling below her town.

Niru's first seed sprouted a week before her sixteenth birthday.

Of course, it glided into her room a week before her birthday, a week

before the Homecoming dance in the putrid, congested gym at her school. Of course, it came in the form of a kite. Karys ran from Niru's home and Niru watched from her ajar bedroom window and the red kite with its glitter-pen message.

"Wait," Niru shattered her lungs with her willpower, but Karys blended into a silhouette.

A revelation shuttered Niru's heart and tightened its drawstrings as she read the message inscribed on the kite. A bird, restless in prison, slowed its heartbeat and locked the windows of its room, sliding the kite under Niru's bed. Niru's door opened with a rough click, and the bird's wings snapped at its sides. A halo of light bloomed into the neon-lit room, traipsing over the bird's privacy as if the idea of secrecy was an illusion.

"Go to sleep," Niru's mother soothed, her parted hair curtaining half of a silhouetted face. "I heard noises."

Bowing her head, Niru toed the loosened strings on her carpet, thinking of the drawings and missing assignments tucked between her textbooks.

"Sorry," she mumbled, thinking of the kite beneath her bed and the collection of forgotten worlds stored in a shoebox. She thought of the stars, and what running through them would feel like. Karys. The syllable felt like glitter melting on her tongue. Niru re-read the message in her head as her mother lingered in the doorway. *Love*.

"School is going alright?" her mother asked, blinking slowly.

"Alright," Niru said. The syllable ricocheted in her throat. She paused mid-reflection to stare at her purple nightlight and sighed. In a month, grades would come out again. Niru knew her father wouldn't bother opening the manilla folder, and her mother would stare at the letters marking up the page until the ink tattooed itself onto her forehead. Niru imagined she would pull at more strands of her carpet, trying not to think of a future beyond her town. She thought of maturity and continued to scorn its existence.

Hugging her knees to her chest, Niru read the message on the kite under the cover of darkness, yearning for the ability to uncloak nostalgia and hold

its body against hers.

Karys didn't bring up the kite and its message until the following week. "Happy birthday, Niru," she choked. Niru bit her lip, fidgeting with her calluses before closing her eyes and reaching under the table for Karys' hand.

After the silence settled, Niru cleared her throat. "What do you like? All of me, or just...parts?" She released her thoughts in a fluid breath.

"Does it matter to you?" Karys asked.

Niru rewatched the kite drifting through her room's ajar window, a familiar thrill pulsating through her body. She remembered the dusted assignments in her room and the day she went to her first kite festival. She remembered longing. In another two years, they would be applying to colleges, attending classes to earn a major they couldn't comprehend. In another year or two, life would get serious.

She made a decision, though, gathering a tangled knot of strings to her heart and pledging a silent vow to the only world she understood. "I love you, Karys." Niru remembered falling into a cloud as if she were dissipating into a dream. She savored the taste of Karys' soft lips until time grew hazy and distorted beneath her feet and Niru began walking on fragile fragments of air.

Life was so unfettered, then--so unpredictable while nobody dared question its overarching authority. Kites soared, people bled over string, and time became a looming inevitability.

* * *

Karys tilted her head and strands of her muddied hair coiled onto Niru's lap. They weren't near the stands, fruit, or people. Niru watched the simple strand of dirty blond keratin coil and uncoil—watched her life burst into invisible waves, the near-invisible particles governing their world suspended for a moment. If they were careful, they could have controlled a pocket of

time. They might have secured a permanent spot on the hill they lay sprawled upon, ingrained as fossilized children playing with their ideal reality, with visions of probable futures.

Niru wasn't careful. Karys didn't understand the concept of time. Instead, they drew closer, Niru's body folding over, her stomach aching. Their world spun as Karys opened her mouth as if to say something, as if to remind someone about gravity's constancy. A ray of sunlight caught her in the eyes, and she was forced to close them like a flower bud.

"Talk to me this time," Niru said as strands of meadowgrass threaded through her hair. For eternity, her sun would remain an opalescent jewel. For eternity, her sky would burst with colors reminiscent of inked tears.

Niru knew she had been one of the luckier ones. The day she was out to her parents just six months before the rumors, her skin was hung out to get flayed, remorseless and raw. She could have controlled a pocket of time if she waited longer, waited for her desires to consume her body before she snapped. They lasted for three hundred meandering days.

"At least your words matter more than my own opinion."

Niru watched the jab fall flat from the moment Karys' words evaporated into the sun. Karys rubbed her upper arms, inhaling sharply before turning onto her stomach. Her pale elbows crispened and sweat stuck to Niru's forehead as they waited for a feat of nature to ease their tension.

"I thought you were bold." Niru fidgeted with her collar. Already, she could picture this moment morphing into a distant memory, a figment of a past life she would pine for.

"I thought you were honest," Karys said. "I was waiting for the day you'd remind me that what we have is impossible." Their timelines foamed at the mouths, eager to outpace them and leave their expectations stranded. In a few months, they would no longer live in the same town. In a few months, Karys could close her eyes and find Niru across the sea in a smaller town where nobody would understand how girls could hold each other with longing.

“Who told you?” Niru said.

“Why does it matter? You weren’t going to tell me.” Karys was floating across the sea already, Niru’s body wrecked from her sprinting, wrecked from her closeted marathons. “If you go to college, you’re gone for the rest of your life.”

The last words they exchanged were stiff goodbyes and frail embraces: the gestures of friends, the gestures of what their plastic town would have applauded. Even so, most places in the world didn’t deviate as much from the human moral code. Niru doubted she could escape anywhere without her shame and Karys’ face disappearing over their small hill, her shoulders locked from silent tears.

At seventeen years old and seven months old, Niru flew on a plane for the first time. Her ears popped after takeoff and she winced at the pain, massaging her lobes and closing her eyes to the whirr of wheels gliding across the runway. She imagined she was waiting for the world to break one of its rules and defy gravity, but she was strapped into a metal chair in a stuffy metal cage.

“Do you want tea?” Her mother asked, her syrupy voice almost docile, slurred. Her father was already asleep. Niru turned her attention to the plane’s small window, watching her home fade out of existence.

A baby cried, and the cart with tea and crackers moved past their row of seats. The world continued defying Niru’s will, leaving her heart stranded on the dusty pavement where she once dared to chase her dreams.

Where They Sat

by Henna Kim



The Recipe for a Long Distance Phone Call

by Acadia Phillips

Instructions

1. Start by fully combining the first seven ingredients in that chipped ceramic bowl you made in high school.
2. Carefully add the eighth and ninth ingredients, watch that your hand doesn't slip.
 - Give the batter a taste after each drop. A little goes a long way.
3. Finish the treat off with a fluffy topping, delicate and sweet.
 - This is the most important part of the process. A desert is only as good as this final step.

Ingredients

Pay attention to each moment of this bake, you never know what might happen!

1. At least seven hours cleared out on your schedule
2. "Rebel, Rebel" playing loudly through a dingy speaker

"How've you been?"

"Oh is that Bowie?"

"Yes it is."

"I loved him, just loved him."

3. A red leather journal opened up to an empty page
4. Seventeen penciled in topics of conversation

"Why do we always talk about the moon? Why don't we mix it up?"

"We could talk about..."

Check your scribbled red leathered list.

"Tomatoes."

"Alright then."

5. Photos of three girls stuck to the wall with tacky tape
6. A vivid memory of blueberry lemonades
7. A half baked understanding of last summer's femme fatale

"Did you see that she's going back to the vineyard?"

"Are you joking with me?"

"No. No, I bumped into her cousin and he said that not only is she going back but she's working at The Dock again, even after everything that happened last summer!" "No!"

8. A witty recollection of your brother's fragmentation
9. A witty response to a similar recollection of someone who is not your brother

"I think both of my parents funneled entirely into him and then when they had me they had none of themselves left to give, not the good, not the mundane habits, not even the bad." "I think that happens to every first child, like my aunt who ran away to Costa Rica." "I guess you're right. Are you the oldest or the youngest?"

"I'm in the middle, remember?"

"Oh. I guess I do."

10. A 7:00 date
11. A foundational belief that goodbyes are detestable

"I've got to go. I said I'd meet him at the gallery by seven."

“We’ll call again next Saturday? Same time as today?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“Have fun tonight okay?”

“I will, I will.”

“I wish¹...”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Bye then.”

“Bye then. Oh! Wait! One more thing!”

12. A canceled date

13. Bleary eyes

Yawn.

“Go to sleep!”

“But I don’t want to say goodbye.”

“It’s alright, you don’t have to say it. I’ll just hang up when you fall asleep.”

“I wish...”

“I know.”

And voila! You’ve baked yourself a delectable long distance phone call--- my favorite sugary treat.

¹ In your language “I wish...” will secretly come to mean “I love you.”

dear j, the summers after you left me

by N.M Figueroa

Dear J,

The summer we spent together came and went as quickly as you did. I remember it vividly: the sun burning our skin, melting us together like wax; the moths dancing around us, perhaps thinking we were as bright as the stars above us; our feet bare above the tall, green grass—well, you get the point. I remember.

I was a shy child back then, with my back bent and eyes glued to the dirty lanes we would travel through. You were shy too, but you knew how to hide it well. You were an expert at faking smiles and spitting venomous sweetness everywhere you went. With your hands racing into the pocket of your jeans, hiding your bitten nails and bloodied knuckles; your green eyes, glinting with loneliness you couldn't seem to get rid of; and those dark boots of yours, always clean and shiny, so unlike your room, always dirty and full of cobwebs.

Do you remember that poem, '*The Tall Tree*', you wrote me? It was just after the first week of meeting you at that 7-Eleven. Well, I still have the poem. It even has that beer stain you left on it after trying to run away from Finny for stealing a six-pack. (Finny is still pretty pissed off about that. He wanted to make that extremely clear. He also requests to be called Finn from now on. I told him it was stupid to change his nickname after so long, as he always would be Finny to me. However, he decided to ignore me. Even then, I still call him Finny in my head, and I encourage you to do the same.)

I don't think I ever told you what my favourite part was, although you seemed to know *exactly* which part it was. To this day, you are the only person who has ever written me a poem, and just so you know, that summer I wrote poetry to you, too. I burned my blue notebook with my mother's lighter the day after you left Francisco Sales without me, though. The flames

consumed the paper quickly and efficiently, leaving no trace of my sweet nothings behind. To this day, I'm weirdly grateful that you never saw all those pages filled with ink and tears. I have no desire to write the poems I still remember and, to tell you the hurt, I would rather you never asked me to write them for you. You know I could never say no to you.

The reason I tell you that, it's because of what you said to me once we were drunk that oddly cold summer night: that writing was your solace, your escape.

I suppose it made sense; your mother was a writer, and her mother before her (the only thing mine gave me was her anger). It is in your blood to express yourself with witty words and holy-like remarks. You've always written from the depths of your soul, as if writing was the only thing keeping your body warm and your stomach full.

You told me writing was the only thing keeping you sane. It was to construct a new reality—*your new reality*. It made sense to me at the time: *what was writing, if not our way out of this nonsensical world?* But the more I think about it, the more I write, the less sense it holds.

Lately, I've learned that writing, for me, is more similar to cannibalism. It is to consume the words that other people have eaten for centuries before me and not feel guilty about it. It is to sink my teeth into their fears, their hopes, and even their sins just to satisfy myself time and time again. To tear their flesh from their bones, let their blood pool in my guts, and become part of my being. Self-destruction and murder at the same time. *Bloodshed*. How do you do it, J? How do you find the strength to pull your heart out of your chest and offer it to the vultures hanging over your head so effortlessly?

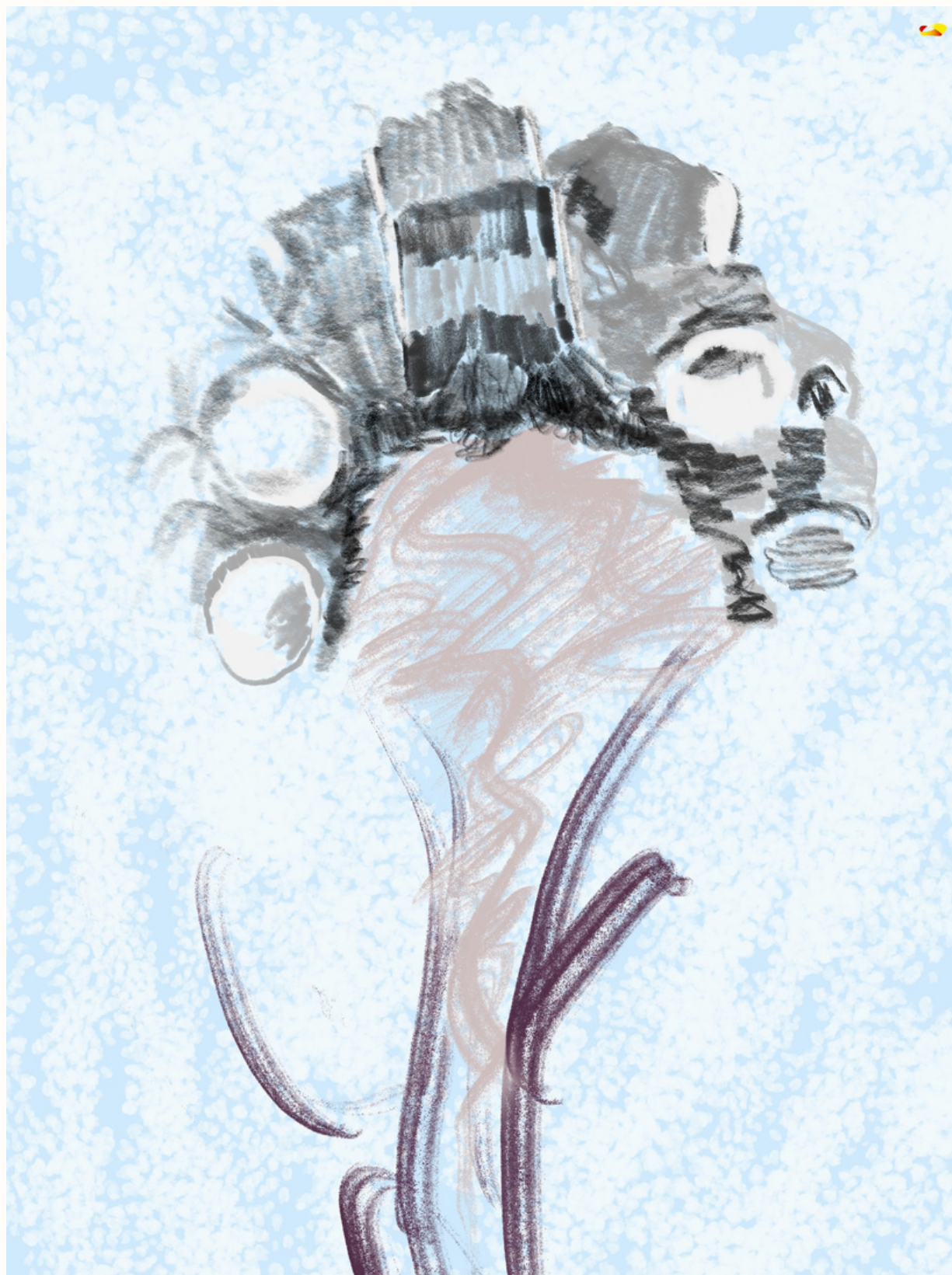
My attempts to cope with that thought this summer have been strikingly unsuccessful. I've grown to think that perhaps I'm not cut out for this. I ought to be enjoying my summer as we did all those years ago, swimming in the hot beaches close to our hometown and cycling with our melted ice cream in hand. Instead, I'm cramped in my study writing a letter to you, J: the boy with bony hands, cracked lips, and a summer warmth-filled heart.

Eternally and achingly yours,

A.

Social Rolls

by Desiree Jung



infinitely infinitesimal

by Terry Jude Miller

*“What if the universe is infinitely large
as well as infinitely small?”* – factmonster.com

the infinite reach of the universe
is easier to envision than an infinity
in the opposite direction

if we say a string is the smallest thing
smaller than protons—electrons—neutrons
tinier than leptons and quarks
along comes the theory of layers
of superstrings—even smaller

to continue to shrink like Scott
in the movie *The Incredible Shrinking Man*
who sailed through a fog and kept
on getting smaller and smaller

wondering if he would ever
become smaller than his soul
finding a universe stretching
through a dimension easily
carried in a pants pocket
or wrapped in a tissue
in a purse—thinking—*ok*
this is it—there isn’t anymore
and poof—suddenly another
tinier universe in the Lifesaver
next to Lincoln’s head on a penny

Lollygagger

by Ben Coppin

The hat wasn't magic, but it might as well have been. Nick couldn't believe it when he saw it just lying there on the side of the road. He stood over it for a full minute, looking left and right to see if anyone might claim it, and then to see if anyone was watching. Finally, he bent, picked the hat up, swung it onto his head, and walked off, trying to look as nonchalant as possible. He breathed again when he reached the end of the road. No one had called after him, no one had shouted "Stop, thief!" The hat was his.

He took it off his head and looked it over. It was one of those old-fashioned caps whose crown puffed up like a blancmange above its visor. It was greyish-greenish brown as if it were designed to blend in against the earth.

He put it carefully back on his head, put his hands in his pockets, and continued on his walk.

"That's a nice hat," said a young boy sitting on a wall.

Nick just smiled. He felt sure it would be a good day. He had nothing particular to do, nowhere particular to be, but with a hat like this, how could the day be anything other than exemplary?

He sauntered down the High Street, keeping an eye out for loose change.

"Sir?" a querulous voice said, somewhere near his elbow. He ignored it. No one called him "sir".

"Sir, excuse me?"

This time, the owner of the voice tugged at his sleeve, so he couldn't ignore her. She was a tiny old woman—he guessed around 100 years old. He stopped walking and looked down at her.

"What's up, missy?" he asked.

"I wonder if you'd help me. I need someone to walk me across the street."

He looked up and down the High Street.

"There are no cars," he told her.

"I know, but still. It frightens me to cross it on my own. And there's no pedestrian crossing. Will you help?"

She was pulling on his elbow now, in the direction of the road.

He laughed.

"Sure," he said. It wasn't like he had anything better to do.

When they reached the other side, he tried to disentangle her arm from his, but her grip was too tight.

"Just a little further," she urged, shuffling forwards. "Into the bank, OK?"

He'd never noticed the bank before. It wasn't the kind of place he frequented.

"All right," he said, "just into the bank, and then I've got to go."

He was starting to find the old lady a little creepy.

Once in the bank, he released the old lady's iron grip from his arm and was about to pull the door towards him when someone said, "Nice hat. Are you here for the job? This way please."

Before he could answer or protest, an attractive lady in a black suit had ushered him to the back of the bank.

"Mister Layman is expecting you; go on in," she told him before heading back to help the old lady.

He was standing in front of an old wooden door, on which a sign read "Mr. Layman, Director." Without much thought, he tapped his fingertips on it.

"Come in," said a strangled voice from behind the door.

He pushed it open and peered in.

"Do come in," said Mr. Layman.

Mr. Layman was a tiny man with almost no hair and enormous square glasses. His face looked like an ugly baby's, and his voice sounded like a cat whose tail had been trodden on.

"Sit down," he said, waving towards a chair.

Nick didn't move from the doorway. What was he doing?

Mr. Layman peered intently at him. "Here for the job? Look, I don't need

to ask you anything. I can tell just by looking at you, you'll fit right in here. Please, have a seat. Let's talk details. A drink for the candidate, please." This last he barked into an ancient intercom device on his desk, which was so far from him that he had to stand up to reach it.

Within seconds, another young woman flew into the office, handed Nick a glass of water, and disappeared again.

"I'm not—" Nick began.

"It's a nice hat," Mr. Layman said. "Is it a Beidecker?"

Nick had no idea what this meant and didn't answer.

"Yes," Mr. Layman said, thoughtfully, "I can tell it is. A lovely one. Yes, like I said, you'll fit right in at the bank. We'll start you on the tills, but I'll bet you'll soon be taking my job!" He laughed a horrifying yawp at this and pushed a sheaf of papers towards Nick.

"Just sign here, and you can get started," he said. Nick wrote something, but was so dazed by the whole experience he couldn't be sure if he'd written his signature or something else.

"We'd normally start you out with training, but for a man of your calibre, that won't be necessary," Mr. Layman said. He pronounced "calibre" as if it were French, with a trilled 'r' at the end. "Why don't you head out to the front and observe for a while. You'll know when you're ready to dive in."

Nick started to wonder if this hat was more trouble than it was worth, but on the other hand, he thought, he could probably do with a job. A week or two of work and he'd earn enough to have a really good rest. And with so many employees, who'd know what he did here anyway? Perhaps he could get away with hiding in the back somewhere and just occasionally coming out for a quick flourish to keep Mr. Layman impressed. Eventually, someone would figure out what he was doing, but by then he'd be off. He couldn't lose, really.

So Nick did as Mr. Layman had asked: he went out into the front of the bank, found a good spot to sit, and watched the business. He found the whole thing mesmerising: people would come in, join the queue, talk to the cashiers and either hand over money or receive money themselves, and then

they'd leave. There was always a queue.

As it began to get dark outside, the staff handled the last customers, locked the front door, and turned down the lights.

They counted up the cash and put it all into a big bag which someone took out through another door next to Mr. Layman's.

"Time to go home now," the pretty cashier who had first greeted him said. "See you tomorrow?"

"Uh, yes," Nick said.

Next morning, he woke up in his bunk in the hostel where he was staying and looked at his watch. Shit. It was ten o'clock. Surely banks opened earlier than that? He splashed some water on his face, put on his hat, and ran out of the door.

Moments after he walked into the bank, Mr. Layman came out of his office.

"Ah!" he said, looking pleased. "Didn't I say? Didn't I tell you you'd fit right in? We did record business yesterday! I don't know how you did it, but you really turned things around here. Before you came, I was wondering whether we might need to take some drastic action, but if today is anything like yesterday..."

He didn't say what would happen if today was anything like yesterday, but Nick could tell it was good.

Nick glanced around, wondering which of the other staff would be the first to inform Mr. Layman that Nick had, in fact, done nothing at all yesterday, that the success was down to them, not him. But no one said anything to Mr. Layman or even seemed to notice that the conversation was happening. They were all busy with customers.

"Well," Mr. Layman said, shaking Nick's hand. "I won't take up any more of your valuable time. I'll leave you to the business of getting this place ticking!"

Nick wasn't a hard worker by nature, but he didn't want to be a cheat, either.

"Can I watch you?" he asked Anita, the pretty cashier.

She smiled. "Of course. When you're ready to serve a customer, just let

me know.”

For the rest of the morning, Nick watched as Anita served two dozen or so customers. Each had a different request, and Anita handled them all with a calm and friendly air. She seemed to know exactly how to handle everything that the streets could throw into the bank.

After his lunch break, Nick asked her if he could take over.

His first customer looked familiar. It took Nick a few seconds to realise that it was the old lady he'd helped across the street the day before. He felt a small surge of gratitude, but quickly damped it down. He didn't want to get too attached to this job.

“How can I help you?” he asked her.

“I got this letter,” she said, waving a sheet of paper at Nick. “It says I have to close my account. I don't want to close my account. I've had an account here for nearly sixty years. Why should I have to close my account?”

“Can I see that?” Nick asked, and took the letter. It did indeed inform the lady, Mrs. Wiltshire, that she would need to close her account as there wasn't enough activity on it.

“Let me see what I can do,” he told her, and turned to Anita.

Anita smiled and leaned in close to whisper.

“She's out,” she said. “She didn't make enough transactions, so we're dumping her. You need to close her account.”

She pulled away, still smiling.

“But—” Nick started, but Anita shook her head and walked away.

“I'm sorry, Mrs. Wiltshire,” he said, turning back to the old lady. “I'm afraid I have no choice but to close your account. I see you have a balance of four pounds in there. I can give you that now if you like.”

But Mrs. Wiltshire was not interested in her four pounds.

“I have three pounds here,” she warbled, holding out three shining coins. “If I deposit these, can I keep my account?”

“I'm afraid not,” Nick said.

The old lady started to cry. Nick looked around, but no one was paying

any attention to him or Mrs. Wiltshire.

“With that hat, I felt sure you’d be more sympathetic,” she said, between sobs.

“I know,” he said. “I’m so sorry, but there’s really nothing I can do. The bank’s letter is final.”

Mrs. Wiltshire held the back of her hand up to her forehead and collapsed in a tiny puddle on the floor. Staff members rushed from all around the bank, lifted her up, put her in a chair, took her bank book, closed her account, gave her the four pounds she was owed, and ushered her out of the bank. It all happened in a whir.

“Was that Mrs. Wiltshire?”

Mr. Layman had come out of his office and caught the tail end of the incident.

“Yes,” Nick said, sinking into his shoes in anticipation of trouble.

“She’s been a customer for such a long time!” Mr. Layman said, and Nick sunk a little further towards the underworld.

“I can’t believe you managed it!” Mr. Layman said and shook Nick’s hand vigorously. “We’ve been trying to get her off our books for years. You show up and the very next day she’s gone. It’s really quite extraordinary. I’ve never seen anyone with your talent for banking. Mr...” He searched Nick’s face as if his name might be written there.

“Nick,” Nick said. “Nick Oberman.”

“Mr. Oberman, of course. A fine name. And a fine hat!”

Nick felt like laughing at the ridiculousness of the whole thing. He could feel the laugh climbing its way up his throat towards his mouth when Mr. Layman decided, “I’ve got just the position for you, Mr. Oberman. Nick. May I call you Nick?” He didn’t wait for a response. “Nick, consider yourself promoted. You’re the cashier team lead. The previous one left suddenly last week and I’ve been looking for someone like you to fill the role. And here you are!”

Anita and one of the other cashiers, a young man, were clearly listening.

“Mr. Layman,” Anita said.

“Anita — isn’t it wonderful? Nick here has agreed to take on the position that Fran left behind. I’m sure you’ll agree he’s wonderfully suited to it.”

Anita’s mouth was open, preparing to speak, but Mr. Layman gave Nick a pat on the back, turned and went back into his office.

Anita looked momentarily dazed, sighed briefly, and returned to her cash desk.

Nick wanted to apologise to Anita, but he didn’t know what to say. He also wanted to ask her, or anyone, what the role of Cashier Team Lead meant. What was expected of him? But that would give away his inexperience, his unsuitability for the role. He only planned to stick with it for a month or two, but he didn’t want to lose the job on the second day. So he kept quiet.

And he kept keeping quiet for the next seven weeks. Each day was more or less the same. He’d arrive at ten—he wasn’t sure what time the bank opened, but it was always open by the time he arrived—and he’d pick a spot to perch or stand and watch the cashiers. He had found a small notebook in the store cupboard and a pencil, and he held these in front of him, occasionally making scribbled marks on the paper so that the cashiers would know he was watching them. At lunch time he’d take himself to one of the nearby pubs and buy himself a large lunch. He’d return to work, pick a new spot, and repeat the morning’s vigil until it was time to close the bank. The staff would count up and store the cash in the safe, and then once Mr. Layman had left, he’d go home, allowing Anita or one of the others to lock up.

Nick wore his hat every day, only taking it off when he was ready for bed in his bunk. He didn’t allow himself to think about it, but he’d formed a superstition: it was just minutes after he’d found the hat that he’d got this job, and to this day people still commented on it favourably. It clearly made a good impression on people, even more than the shiny suit he’d bought with his first wages.

It was really going well, and Nick was starting to think that maybe if he stayed here just a few more months he could afford to move out of the

hostel and into an apartment of his own.

One morning, Mr. Layman called Nick into his office.

“Shut the door, would you, Nick,” he said, a weary whine creeping into his voice. “Sit down. I’ve got something I need to talk to you about. Something only for your ears.”

Nick sat down and raised his eyebrows, to show interest. In reality, his mind was currently preoccupied with thoughts of Anita. Ever since his promotion she’d been cold towards him, but occasionally he’d see chinks of light shining through her armour. Just yesterday she’d poked her tongue out at him and smiled when he pretended to make a note about something she’d done. As Mr. Layman was preparing to talk to him now, Nick was trying to formulate a joke that would make her smile, or even laugh.

“I want you to take it on.” Nick realised, too late, that Mr. Layman had already started talking, and he’d missed what he was saying. Nick blinked.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “could you say that again?”

“Ah yes, I understand. It’s a lot to take in. Take your time to think it over. Let me know tomorrow what you decide.”

For the rest of the day, Anita was particularly distant. It was as if she knew what Mr. Layman had offered him, even if he didn’t. He wanted to try his new joke out on her, but she didn’t give him a chance. Whenever she had to walk past where he was sitting, she kept her eyes on the floor and walked past as quickly as her legs would allow.

That night, in bed in his new apartment, he lay awake, trying to remember anything about what Mr. Layman had said to him. Eventually, as he was falling asleep, he made his decision: whatever it was, he’d accept it. Knowing Mr. Layman, it would be something good. More money. A year or two more at the bank and his fortune would be made. He could retire.

In Mr. Layman’s office the next day, Nick tried hard to keep his expression neutral, to give nothing away. He wasn’t sure what he might give away, but he didn’t want to risk it.

“Well, Nick,” Mr. Layman started. “Have you made a decision?”

“Ah yes, sir. I have. I’d like to accept your offer.”

Mr. Layman clapped his hands and jumped out of his chair.

“Great!” he said, running over to Nick and slapping him on the back.

“You’ll start immediately. I’ll leave it to you to let the rest of the staff know about your new responsibilities.”

No hints, then. He’d have to ask directly.

“So, what exactly will my new responsibilities entail?” he asked, doing his best to sound like this was a perfectly normal question to be asking.

“Aha!” Mr. Layman laughed. “Just the right question to be asking! But of course, I wouldn’t be doing you any justice by answering it, would I?”

He chuckled and returned to his desk.

The next weeks proceeded much as the past weeks had, but at the end of each day, he’d meet Mr. Layman and give him a report. He had no idea what was expected of such a report, but Mr. Layman didn’t seem to find anything amiss in what he said. He told him about anyone who’d been late to work (never acknowledging that he only knew about the people who arrived even later than he did), about any angry or obnoxious customers, and gave a vague but positive update on the financial side of things. Mr. Layman seemed to like this bit the most, so Nick worked on ways to embellish it without risking too much.

“Footfall was up, week on week,” he’d say, “and we’re getting a 4% uplift on customer conversions. The gross margin is looking surprisingly healthy for the time of year and our MRI is trending upwards.”

None of those meant a thing to him, but he’d heard them on a mix of old television shows, and Mr. Layman seemed to lap them up. So he continued with them.

One day, a few months after Nick had received his promotion, there was a hubbub at the bank when he arrived. An ambulance was parked outside and a member of staff was manning the front door, not letting any customers in.

“What’s wrong?” a customer asked him as he pushed his way through the crowd that had gathered outside.

“Is the bank afraid of a run?” another asked.

When he reached the door, he was allowed to slip inside the bank. Anita ran over to him, threw her arms around him, and wept on his chest.

“What happened?” he asked her, prying her face away from his wet shirt.

“It’s Mr. Layman,” she said, in between sobs. “He had a heart attack and died. He was here all night. I—I found him when I came in this morning.”

“Memo for you from headquarters,” someone said, handing a folded piece of paper to Nick. He wriggled out of Anita’s arms, nodded gently towards the memo to excuse himself, and found a quiet corner.

The memo was brief.

“Assume you will take over Layman’s responsibilities post-haste,” it read. “If not, inform us of your proposed successor.”

Nick’s head began to spin. Just nine months ago he walked into this bank without even considering the possibility of working here, or indeed working anywhere. Now he was being asked to run the branch. And he still had no idea how a bank worked, or what anyone in it actually did. He knew people gave the bank their money and came and got it out, bit by bit, but beyond that, it was a mystery.

Still, he’d made it this far, so why shouldn’t he take the next step. Mr. Layman had believed in him, and it seemed the people at headquarters did too.

He called the staff together, and once he had their attention, he addressed them.

“Sorry to talk business at a time like this,” he said, “but we do have a bank to run.” A few heads nodded. Anita looked too shocked to react. “I’ve been asked to take over Mr. Layman’s responsibilities, which of course I’m happy to do. Anita, I’d like you to take on my previous role. Everyone else, take twenty minutes to get yourselves ready, and then we’ll open up. Any questions?”

No one had any questions, at least not then. Anita came into Nick’s new office an hour or so after the branch opened.

She smiled, a familiar smile Nick had not seen in a long while, but

tinged with something new that he didn't recognise.

"I wanted to thank you," she said, "for trusting me with this new responsibility. But I have to admit, I have no idea what you used to do, so I don't know how to step up. Can we spend some time doing a hand-over, maybe?"

Nick laughed and jumped to his feet, doing his best to imitate Mr. Layman.

"Ah, Anita!" he said, rushing around the desk. He didn't pat her on the back because he wasn't sure it would be appropriate. But he stood close to her.

"How like you to ask! I knew I could count on you. You're perfect for this role. Maybe even better than I was! And of course, I'd be doing you a disservice if I were to go into detail about the role. Much better for you to work it out for yourself. I do need a daily report on progress in the bank, but the rest I just know you'll have no trouble figuring out."

He turned his back on Anita and stepped back to his desk. One step. Two steps. He didn't hear her walking away. Three steps. Four steps. She wasn't opening the door. Five steps. Six steps. She was still there, still waiting. For something. He was back at his desk now and he had no alternative but to turn around, face Anita, and sit down.

She raised her hands, a gesture of confusion. "Look, Ni— Mister Oberman," she said, "I'm sorry to be a pain, but I really don't think I can do a job if I don't know what's expected of me."

Nick thought for a moment, and then he saw how he needed to proceed.

"Fair enough," he said, briskly. "I'm disappointed, of course, but I do understand. It's not for everyone. Could you send Charles in?"

Anita looked, for a moment, like she might change her mind, but then she closed her mouth tight and walked out of his office. A moment later, Charles, the new boy, knocked and poked his head around the door.

Charles was wearing a very nice blue tie with shiny flecks. Nick could see how much potential he had.

"Charles," he drawled, "come on in."

Charles came in, his pale thin face looking even paler and thinner than

usual.

“Listen, Charles,” Nick told him, straightening his hat, “I know it’s a tough day, but this bank won’t run itself, right?” He smiled, and waited for Charles to follow suit. “Exactly. So. I need a cashier team lead. We didn’t have one for a while — you might not have noticed it when you arrived but I was actually doing two roles under Mr. Layman. Well, I’m happy to continue doing two jobs, but I can’t do three, right?”

Again, he smiled, and waited for Charles to smile back.

“All right, so: cashier team lead? You can start right away. I knew you’d be perfect for it the moment you stepped into this bank.”

Charles shook his hand enthusiastically. “Thank you, Mister Oberman,” he said. “I promise you won’t regret this.”

When Charles was out of the office and the door was safely shut, Nick breathed a sigh of relief. He did feel bad for Anita. She just didn’t have what it took to get on, clearly. Not in this business.

Satyr Horns

by Hennah Kim



Tempus

by Louis Faber

The clock chimed the hour.
How long had he been here,
inside the works of the great timepiece
marking imagined units that had meaning
only for him, for all, for no one?
He knew his time was limited, all
time would someday be depleted
and then what — that was the question
no one dared ask, everyone
answered. Time was a maze

there was no exit, a spiral
into a singularity he would never reach
naked, offering everything, seeing
only darkness and a billion stars
staring at him as the hands
eked their way around his face.
He could not remember how
it had begun, when it started
or how it would end, for it was
only the voyage that mattered
and the ticking of the clock
or was it his heartbeat that reverberated
into the heart of the cosmos?

Pyrrharctia

by Leena Captain



Growing Pains

by Jack Anthony

I.

I feel like anger was meant for bigger bodies.

There's more space for it to circulate
without clogging everything up.

When you're little, it has nowhere to go.

It expands and congeals,
pushing against the inside of your skin
'til you're red in the face,

It reverberates from clenched, chubby fists,
and the ground-shaking stomps of tiny feet,
perforates the air with caterwauling screams
like sirens before the bombs are dropped.

Then you get older and anger undergoes a kind of mitosis,
dividing and dispersing through the body, hiding in wait.

It sits in the pit of your stomach, and dances in the twitch of your eye,
Glides off the tongue through smiling lips, wraps around your heart
with a clenched fist.

It's quiet, and it's patient, and considerate,
Until it isn't.

II.

When my anger tears through its leash, it takes the whole doghouse with it.

A carefully constructed cage exploding to splintering shards,
shrapnel makes a home amongst muscle and bone,

Burrows deep and spreads.

Splitting the skin like a sausage packed 'til

bursting, insides so cold and rotten
 it'll make you sick.
 Languidly, it leaks out my knuckles,
 becomes graffiti on concrete walls:
 'WITNESS ME'
 It laps at my lungs and I am drowning in it.

I'm 21 years old and 5'1,
 I'm past wondering if I'll ever make room
 to contain it completely.
 Sometimes I don't even try.

III.

When I'm angry, I turn to alchemy
 Transform it into something bigger than me,
 an opportunity to discover
 what it is I need
 I take its vibrant, violent, hue—
 Choleric red, black, meets
 melancholic blue—
 splattering cathartic arcs of shapeless
 paint,
 symbolising an eruption— while containing
 the destruction— of the root of my disfunction:
 What I can't communicate.
 I let the salt and acrylics dry on the page,
 sit back and bask in the catharsis,
 with a heart that's
 absent of rage
 I know that to fix what's in me,
 I need therapy,

not art

But until I get my paycheck

It's a decent place to start.

CONTRIBUTORS



The creatives who made this issue possible.

Acadia Phillips(she/her) is a 17-year-old creative from Tennessee. She has had pieces honored by Scholastic Art and Writing and the Southern Literature Alliance, along with being published in the literary magazine she cofounded, The Empty Inkwell Review, where she serves as the Prose Executive Editor. She is the founder and president of her school's creative writing club and is a recent attendee of Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop. When she isn't writing you can find Acadia volunteering at the art museum or practicing at the rock climbing gym!

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Jack Anthony is an emerging poet and writer living in Meanjin/Brisbane, Australia. He is a recent Writing graduate and his work has been published under a pseudonym in the indie queer poetry anthology Heartfelt. Jack enjoys writing about historical and supernatural themes, and aspects of identity such as neurodivergence and queer/trans experiences. When not writing they can be found with their nose in a book, haunting thrift stores and bothering their cat, Jesper.

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Gerard Sarnat's won prizes and's a multiple Pushcart/Best of Net Award nominee. Gerry's work's widely published including four collections plus by Brooklyn Review, Tokyo Poetry Journal, Gargoyle, Buddhist Review, New York Times; Oberlin, Northwestern, Yale, Pomona, Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, NYU, Brown North Dakota, McMaster, Maine, British Columbia/ Toronto/ Chicago and Virginia university presses. He's a Harvard College/Medical School-trained physician, Stanford professor, and healthcare CEO. Currently he's devoting energy/resources to deal with climate justice serving on Climate Action Now's board. Gerry's married since 1969 and's three kids, six grandsons – and looks forward to future granddaughters. gerardsarnat.com

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Hennah Kim is a high-school student who finds writing equal parts frustrating and mentally stimulating. She enjoys bitter hot cocoa with no sugar, because that's how it should be drunk. You should try it. Also, she has taken a vow of coffee abstinence, in an attempt to prevent herself from developing a caffeine dependency.

Olubunmi Oni is a woman in STEM who fell in love with the body in more ways than one. She is a native Texan and an avid listener of pop, punk, and anything that involves emphatic vocals. Focusing on embodied experiences, she attempts to pin words to sensations and situations that follow her as a black woman with tongue-in-cheek humor, biting wit, and emphatic volume.

Sofia Navarro is a writer, poet, and photographer. Her hobbies include watching her dogs nap, blowing bubbles in the garden, and daydreaming. She has been previously published in The Liar and ROOM Magazine. She is excited about the new projects she'll release in 2024.

