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# (PWA-TEM)

AN ANTHOLOGY OF LITERATURE AND ART



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# (PWA-TEM)

- 1 A fictitious French province created by James Branch Cabell that serves as the setting of several of his fantasy novels.
- 2 Virginia Commonwealth University's anthology of literature and art.



# Masthead

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The staff at Pwatem would like to give a special thanks to the VCU Student Media Center and the Student Media Commission Board.

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VCU Student Media Center  
P.O. Box 842010  
Richmond, VA 23284-2010

Everything in this book was created with the blood, sweat, and tears of VCU students and faculty, and funded by student fees. We accept submissions all year round from VCU students only. All styles are welcome.

To submit your art and literature, and to see our online-only content, visit [pwatem.com](http://pwatem.com).

# Editor's Note

**IN 2019, DURING MY FIRST SEMESTER AT VCU, I REMEMBER HAPPENING**

upon a copy of (pwa-tem) in the Cabell Library, and was immediately impressed by the quality and professionalism of the writing, art, and design of the book. It was a distillation of the best work that VCU's creatives had to offer, and I knew I was right to want to be a part of that community.

Four years, three anthologies, and one pandemic later, and I'm here, writing my Editor's Note for the 2022 Anthology you're holding in your hands right now. I never would have imagined that I'd find myself leading (pwa-tem), I was happy to just contribute in any way I could, learn a few things, and hopefully make new friends in the process. As I begin to step away from university and into the rest of my life, I can happily say I did all of those things and more. My original goal as Editor-in-Chief was to simply keep (pwa-tem) afloat, but I am proud to say both our Rabble chapbook and our main Anthology for this year are of an unmatched quality and energy than any before. (pwa-tem) started this year with three people, unsure what the future of the journal would look like, or if there was one at all. We are ending it with a team of around ten dedicated editorial staff, and I'm confident that we helped build a community of writers and artists that will continue to grow. I am immensely proud of our editors and contributors for their hard work.

None of what we do at (pwa-tem) would be possible without the talents and support of our editorial staff and the staff of the VCU Student Media Center. Thank you to (pwa-tem)'s previous Editors-in-Chief, Ava Blakeslee-Carter and Marlon McKay, for being examples for me to follow on the days where it felt like I had no idea what I was doing. Thank you to all the new members who joined (pwa-tem) this year for consistently showing up and bringing new voices to the publication, and thank you to Julia, Jesse, and Reese for your energy and dedication as you jumped into important staff roles with relatively short notice. I am incredibly proud of you guys, and I'm so excited to see what you bring to (pwa-tem) next year. Thank you to my Assistant Editor Noah for being a steadying presence at meetings, and for taking on extra work during the most hectic periods of our schedule. As always, thank you to the hardworking staff at the Student Media Center office: Mark Jeffries, Dominique Lee, Owen Martin, and Jessica Clary. You guys are absolute champions, and your expertise and caring was invaluable as we figured out what the future of (pwa-tem) looked like. Everything you did to help, big and small, is immensely appreciated.

Finally, thank you to my Art Editor, Kt, for your experience, passion, and advice throughout the year. There were times I felt like I was out of my depth, but the years you've spent with (pwa-tem) bring so much experience and talent to the journal. Your patience and guidance as we navigated this year are so appreciated. You may be graduating this year, but I hope you know what a positive impact you've left on (pwa-tem) during your time here.

I am so grateful for the experiences I've gained over the past three years. I'm excited to see what the future holds, and I can say with confidence that I've left (pwa-tem) better than I found it. Thank you.

*Halden Fraley*

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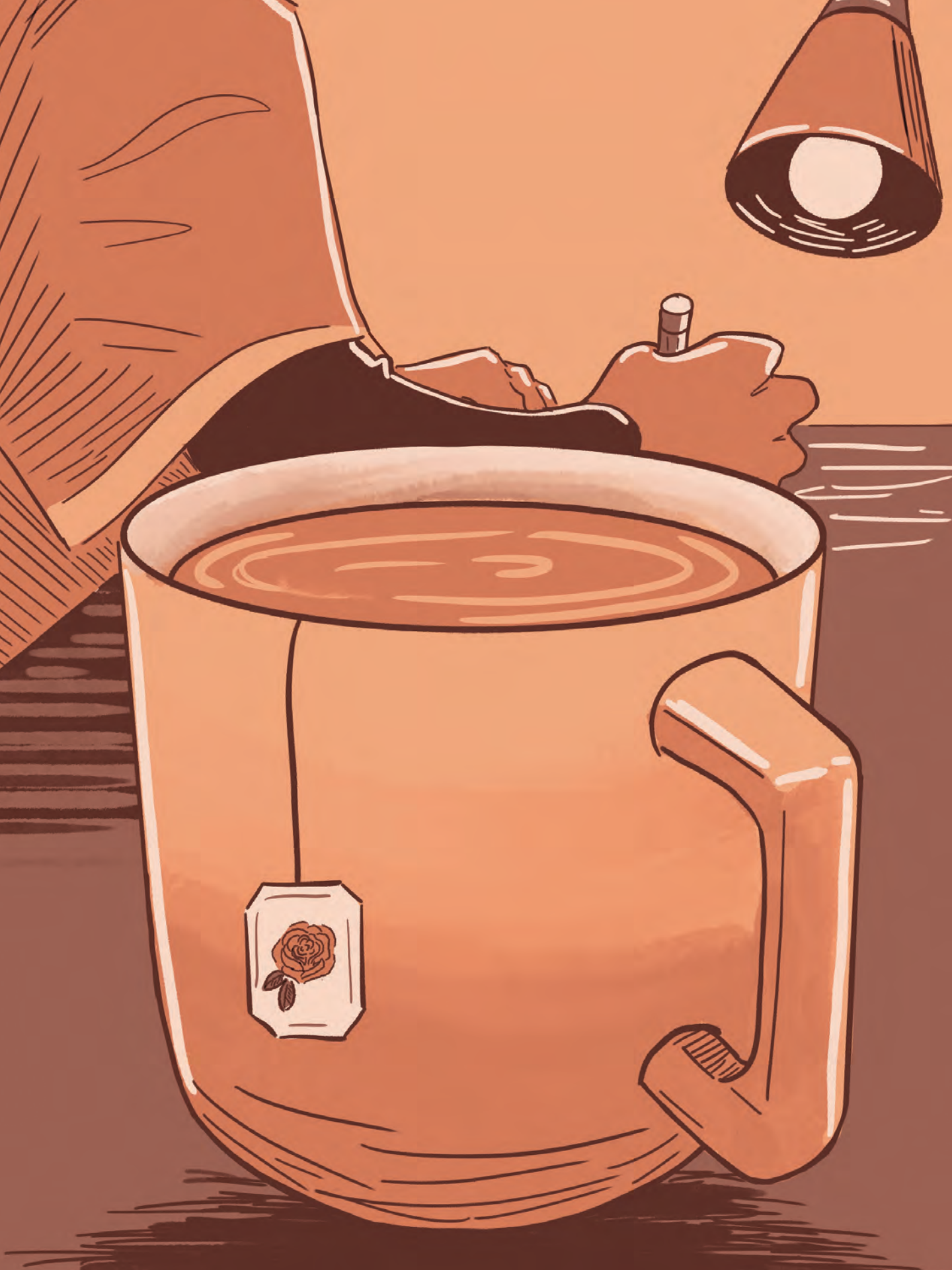
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HALDEN FRALEY





# left to steep

VIV RATHFON

Morning routine brings  
me to you.

Curl your hands around me,  
hold me to the center of your chest.  
Tip me once, twice, then forget

I am here.

I would soothe the ache  
beneath your shivering shoulder blades, quiet the chatter of your breath.  
As I try to reach you,  
heat seeps from my center,  
wasted on empty air and laminate tabletop.

I know I was not meant to be consumed,  
for then I am gone.

So forget me, I am here.

If you must, use the microwave.  
15 seconds, stir, repeat.  
so the milk doesn't sour.

so I may try again,

to lend you warmth:  
comfort that blooms across your frozen skin,  
soaks into your bones and stays there.

I watch you frown, struggle,  
frown your brow.

I can do nothing but wait  
for your icy hands to surround me.

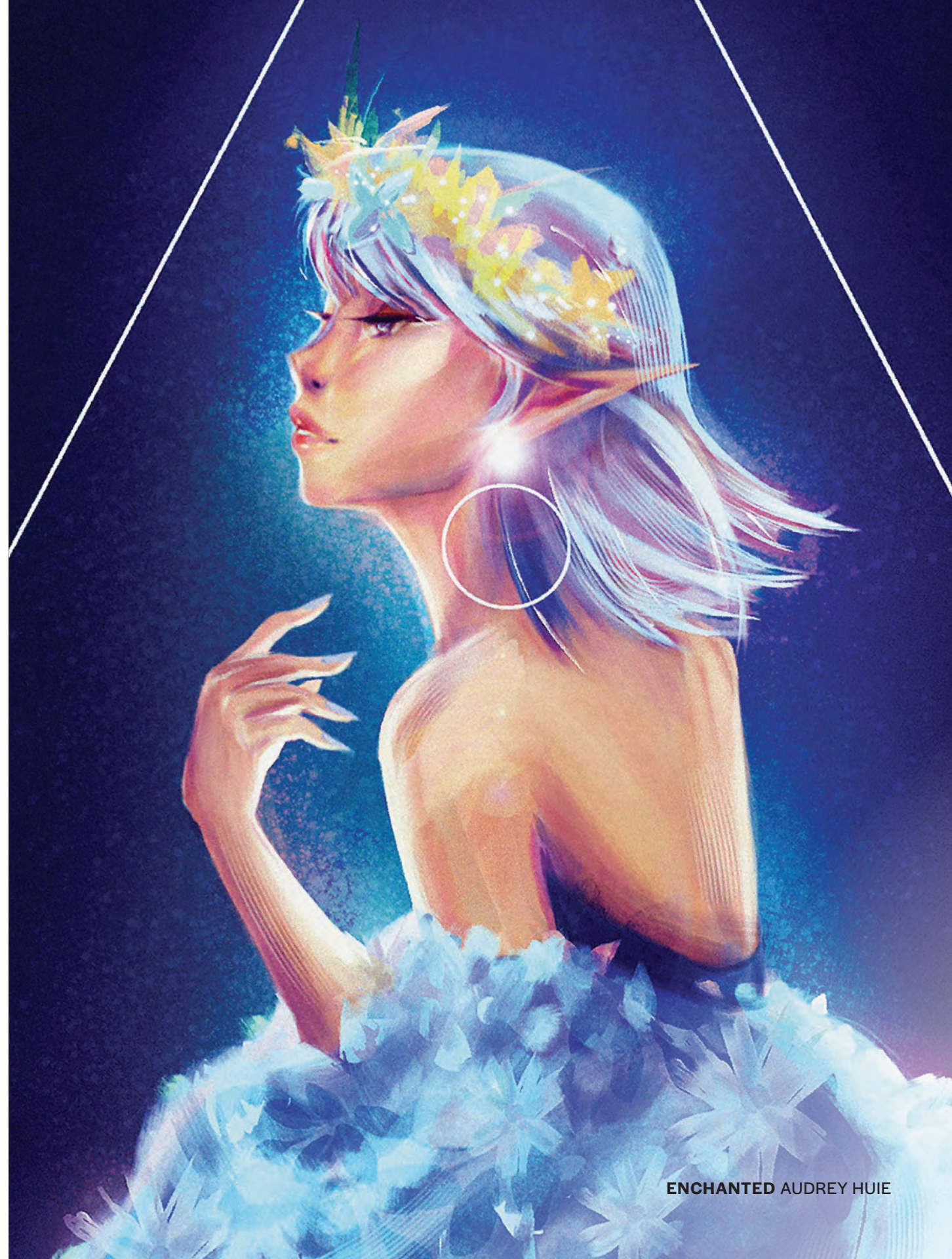


UNDERWATER LOKI BISCHOFF





ASTRAL COLLEEN DIEP



ENCHANTED AUDREY HUIE



# Baby Disaster

ELYSIA LIN

In Appalachian crests & the buzzing heat of waning Virginia summer, they call them dog days. I am marveling at that: how warmth shrouds

the lung, presses wet kisses to my cheek. An endless angry sun bears down & we bear witness to a fraying city, peel away memory

from the mind's rumpled corners. Hum-drum, here & there, collected limbs middling, in the midday of action, in the space between stop & go,

among dry scents of debris & other human discard: country store receipts, broken bottles, cigarette buds, smoke spread too thin for detection. Sticky-sweet aroma

of sweat-damp polyester, my own denim jeans cuffed twice at the ankles—another abbreviated ending. My mother

holds my hand & elsewhere other mothers hold other daughters' hands, fingers firm against disassembly. Our wilted forms are a parody of cranes,

bent-knee in a shuttering field as I watch an old building die for the last time, watch it heave once & then still. Watch it let go: an exhale of dust,

black mirages drawing away. Watch it give into silence, a murmur of open mouths moving without sound at the death of a thing never alive, some directed

destruction. As children we spun small tornadoes in plastic Coke bottles to a million dancing colors, shielded catastrophe between our waiting palms.



ILLUSTRATION FINN PLOTKIN



# Sour Thought

LOKI BISCHOFF

The way she looked at you. Fondly. The way it faded after days of work, the way she stopped looking. Lab tables side by side, but not shared; schedules changing subtly so that you missed her in the morning, even though you still brought two coffees. Hers is cold now and you don't know what to do with it. You drink it in your car because you know she's avoiding you and she wouldn't take it even if you did see her show up; but you don't see her. You've missed her again, because it's raining and you're crying and your shitty car's shitty windshield is fogged up now. So are your glasses. You can't make out anything past the blurry lamps on the street.

You remember the first time you went out for coffee. She'd invited you the morning after, the second time. And you stupidly asked if there was something here, between your hearts, without words aloud and oh my god she laughed. She'd never laughed in front of you before and now you were the punchline, unintended, but you still couldn't help but savor the way it changed her voice into something choppy and lovely. Even though the laugh was out of spite and surprise, and the shame that pooled

inside you was a beast to drown in, you still could not help but look at her smile and her skin and all of her in the soft light of the cafe that she'd mentioned just a few afternoons ago when you talked to her for just the fourth time in the four years you'd worked together and yes you kept count.

It hurt. Couldn't decide if the knife was being driven deeper, or if it had been removed from your body so swiftly and it was its absence that hurt. Was that blood of emotion flowing from the wound? Or was it a serrated edge, scraping against the bones of the soul?

Unsure. You still are.

God, you're never going to get over how beautiful she is.



ILLUSTRATION JESSE BECK

*CW: SELF HARM*

# Daisy Pain

AVERY ECKERT

The bite marks make circlets on my arms  
Overlapping, a venn diagram where the center is pain  
The indents blush like I do  
when my friends tell me they're in love and I'm next  
Then they bruise like I do  
when I go home and remember I am too ugly and brooding to be loved like that

The circlets look like the daisy chains I make in Minnesota  
Tooth to tooth flower to flower.  
And just like daisy chains they fade  
Blooming into blue then green then yellow  
Sinking back into my skin  
Returning back to the warm earth  
Like I never made them at all

# Too Well Loved

VIV RATHFON

I think they were probably camellias I saw,  
sitting by the sidewalk in a marble planter.  
But I passed them too quickly to tell.

Half had soft, pink petals  
blushing, as if flattered  
by the grey evening sky.

The other half were slimy,  
sickly yellow, tendrils of brown  
creeping into the most damaged parts.

As I passed, I wondered how they got to be  
so rotten, when the nearby blooms  
seemed so perfectly unspoiled by dirt.

Wet, clumped masses clung onto their stems,  
oversaturated by the very thing which gave them life.  
Too well loved, or perhaps not enough.

ILLUSTRATION VIV RATHFON







CEMETERY WEATHER RENA BRIDGE



CW: MISOGYNY, RACISM AND VIOLENCE

# Tube Tying

WINSTON

I don't want to be here.  
White hoods with stethoscopes around their necks chase after me.  
When caught, they began scraping and clawing at my essence,  
and turned me inside out, bleeding dry my usefulness.

I don't want to be here.  
White hoods morph into white jackets,  
They tie my tubes around children's neck,  
And make strange fruit on poplar trees.

I don't want to be here anymore.  
I feel the cracking of my pelvic bones,  
I bang my fists on the table, and cry out.  
They carry on with cotton in their ears.

Sazi

Adeyemi











# Cedar Waxwing

EMILY LEARY

The Dollar General on Ox Street has dirty floors and smells like moth balls. The lady behind the cash register just came in from her smoke break—I passed her earlier when I was picking a quarter up from the sidewalk. I saw her crush her cigarette into the asphalt and scuttle back inside, gray hair standing stiffly like a nest. She doesn't look at me now as I walk in.

I stop in front of the canned food aisle to peel a receipt off the bottom of my shoe. Some girl with braided red hair is loudly chewing gum by the peas and corn. She glances up at me and pops a big yellow bubble, sucking it back inside her mouth with a wet noise. I toss the receipt back on the floor and keep walking.

The canned food aisle is right next to the pasta and bread. I jab at a loaf as I stroll by. It sinks and stays that way—a little sad, saggy bag of bread with a permanent poke in it. When I was a kid, Mom used to send me over to get the canned green beans and tuna fish while she picked out the bread. I imagine it's because I would have squished it all up in my chubby hands. I would scour the shelves for cans with no dents in them because they were something perfect and smooth. The little labels were crisp and uncreased, and the metal had all of its ridges still intact. Sometimes I'd find a perfect can, but most of the time I didn't.

I stroll by cheap headbands and elastics and little girl lipgloss. I remember sneaking a Barbie gloss into my pocket when I was eleven or twelve. I stashed it away in the back of my underwear drawer, next to the gray feather and bracelet I once took from a girl in fifth grade. The packaging said the gloss was strawberry scented, but I never broke its seal to check.

Idly, I swipe a chapstick from the cosmetics stand on the way towards the sliding glass doors. It's only after I stuff it into the back pocket of my shorts that I see the red-haired girl watching me from the other end of the store. She looks at me neutrally, still chewing, holding a couple cans of stewed tomatoes. We stare at each other and my breath catches.

After a few seconds, she winks at me. I blink, and her mouth twitches playfully. She turns on her heel and disappears behind the next row of shelves, hips swaying in her overalls.

I meet Halle May for real under the mulberry tree at the corner of Poplar Lane and Middlebrook, by the community college. She's leaving the building with a bag slung over her shoulder. I'm heading to my shift at the Goodwill.

Mom works double shifts at the Tractor Supply down the road and sometimes teaches ceramics classes here. If she wasn't stuck in this town, I think she'd thrive in some place like DC or San Francisco or Boston. Sometimes I can't help but wonder how many of her obstacles were caused by Dad leaving and how many were caused by having me.

When I spot the redheaded girl this time, wearing a yellow dress with gray checks and a pair of dusty blue sneakers, I realize that she's one of the people in this town who I've always been aware of but never really knew. We graduated the same year, I think, but I guess we never had a class together. Not that I would have remembered. I didn't quite register who she was in the Dollar General—probably because the rush of taking was still thrumming through my body.

My pace quickens as I walk by the building, but I guess she still sees me. A voice calls out, "Hey!" I turn, and the redhead is looking at me. She waves like we're good friends.

"I'm Halle May," she says. "You're the girl who stole the chapstick."

I shift back and forth on my feet. "That's me."

"What's your name?"

"June."

"That's nice," she says. She's chewing gum again.

We both pause for a moment. "You wanna hang out?" she asks casually, popping a bubble in my direction. It sticks to her lower lip and my eyes get caught.

I blink. "What?"

She shrugs, adjusting the bag strap across her shoulder. "Wanna hang out? I have weed."

"Um." The no is resting between my teeth, alongside the why are you talking to me and please go away. I look down at her shoes and see that she's doodled all over them in what looks like Sharpie. There are scrapes on both her knees. "Okay, yeah, sure. I get out of work at five."

"Great. We can't go to my house, my dad's an asshole," she says bluntly. "Yours?"

And that's how we end up meeting at five thirty to walk down the gravel path towards the trailer Mom and I share. I take her straight to my bedroom and open both windows while she sits cross-legged on the floor. We smoke for a bit in silence until the setting sun blinks through the woods and the birds start singing their evening songs.

The third time she comes to my house, I show Halle May my collection. Maybe it's because of the way she looks at me when we make eye contact in the yard, when I notice the purple blooming around her eye—maybe it's because I know in that moment that I can bare myself to her, and that I maybe should.

She doesn't say a word when I open the drawer, but she traces over the coins and wind-up toys and pencils with her index finger. A pack of unopened gum, a Hello Kitty figurine, and some miscellaneous stickers are neatly placed side by side in the corner. Her touch lingers on the gray feather, a whisper of nature in a museum of plastic and metal.

"It's beautiful, June," she murmurs.

"You can have that, if you'd like," I say, gesturing towards the feather. She looks up at me quizzically, a small smile on her lips.

"Are you sure?"

I nod, "I'd like to give it to you." My tongue feels like wool.

She slips it into the pocket of her plaid button-up, and something flutters in my throat.

The next time I see Halle May, she's got the feather looped up in some cord around her neck, bordered by a trio of little brown beads. The feather rests just below the dip of her collarbone and seems to float above her skin.

We meet under the mulberry tree on the way to my house one Thursday. There's a rustle of leaves above us, and I look up to see a dozen flutters of gray and yellow. A flock of cedar waxwings descends on the tree like a rush of water. They swoop and soar, calling to each other, plucking ripe, purple mulberries in a swarm. Halle May's eyes dip and rise with the birds, smiling widely. She laughs as one snatches a berry from another's beak, the other bird flitting angrily behind. I can't help but giggle too, watching how giddy she is at the sight. Together, we flop down on the concrete and cast our heads up towards the birds.

There's a gap between us that radiates heat, and as I watch the shaking tree, I can feel my cheeks flush and a drop of sweat slink down my back. The palm of her right hand is pressed firmly on the sidewalk. My left is sticking wetly to my jeans.

We sit there on the edge of the sidewalk for ages, mesmerized, until all but one of the birds flies off. The remaining cedar waxwing continues to swallow berry after berry, hopping from one slight branch to the next. She eventually slows and chirps once, then twice, as if wondering where the rest of her friends have gone.

Halle May and I watch the last little waxwing as she settles onto a tree limb. "She's waiting," Halle May whispers, and I nod, like I can feel the hesitation in the little bird's breaths. The creature's red and gray feathers stand out like stained glass from the foliage. I think of the silver feather I gave to Halle May, the feather that I gifted my dad when I was eight and stole back the night he stormed out the trailer door and didn't return.

Suddenly, there is a chirp from the other side of the tree, and another waxwing emerges. The two titter back and forth for a moment before sailing off of the tree in a burst of summer wind. Halle May and I exchange a glance before peeling ourselves from the sidewalk. The ground beneath our feet is covered in gray feathers and mulberry juice.

When we enter my house, the air is hot and stiff. We close the door and shove my bedroom windows open, white paint flaking onto the carpet. A cloud of pollen floats in on a pitiful breeze. At least it makes the air a little less stifling, and the warm smell of grass is kind of nice.

We take turns blowing smoke out the window. After the room starts feeling hazy, I flop on the bed, and she follows me. We lay together on the quilt, shoulders touching, sweating through our tank tops. The stench of perspiration swirls through the bedroom with the smoke and hot, dry wind. *Don't Worry Baby* coos to us from the speaker of my phone.

After a moment, her head turns towards me, and she smacks her cheek down on the bedspread. The movement gives off little waves of light and color that dance up towards the ceiling. I follow them with my finger until she says my name.

"Hm?"

"You've got a feather in your hair," she giggles, and I twist around like I could somehow see it. "Hold still," she says, and slips her fingers just behind my ear.

At some point I must have turned to look at Halle May. Her face is tinted clementine from the warm light of the afternoon sun. She's got a small smile peeking out from two smudges of strawberry jam, and there's a stray hair caught in the gap between her front teeth. All I can do is stare and listen to the Beach Boys and the buzzing of flies as she pulls a soft gray feather from my head. It rests on the pillow between us as she crests the gap, leaning in to touch her nose to mine.





**BEST ART**  
**THE WITCH EMILY LEARY**





CW: SUICIDE

# empty baja blast

CASEY KENDLE

I can't write poetry. I don't change my oil when it's overdue. I slam my door just a bit too loud when I'm mad and I definitely can't do math. When I was at college I used to stand in the middle of the crosswalk at night. Waiting. Rain pouring down—soaking my skirt I spent too much money on and my hair I spent too much time on, I stood. My mind was filled with too many thoughts for a Thursday evening- I wish I was home, I miss my cats, I want to fix you, I wish I had friends here, I wish I could fix you, I want a drink, I wish I could fix me and be happy and save you from yourself all in one big swoop, I want to fix you.

Standing between the corners of North Laurel and West Franklin I waited for God to whisper to me. To become the next divine prophet and have his holiness share the wisdom of the universe with me, to tell me to move, or get a job, or fix my life, or go home, or go back to your place, to tell me anything. To onlookers I was waiting to get hit. In a way I guess I was. To feel my bones break through skin and muscle tear and rip, blood vessels falling apart at the seams and organs splattering on the wet pavement—I want to be burned and ripped apart and destroyed and I want to be nothing, right?

If I got hit by a car at least I'd feel something, right? If I died and there was a funeral with too little space and too many flowers, you would go, right? I ask these questions and know I won't get an answer, no matter how much I beg and plead; silence will stare me in the eyes as I look on. The night swallowing me whole and enveloping my shrinking form... I think about how I think too much, and I miss my cats, and wish I could fix you, and I wish I had friends here, and I wish you loved me, and I wish I wasn't sober, and, and and andandand—oh fuck. A car's coming.



ILLUSTRATION JESSE BECK







# reporting in on current events

JESSICA SOFFIAN

last year i wrote a comic about a girl named khave who lived in a shtetl in ukraine.  
1906, my ancestors left the shtetl near kyiv for the last time. precipitated by burning villages,  
they also left belarus  
romania  
and poland.  
today i wake up and the world is burning about fifteen different colors. there's a red haze of  
disease  
lingering still overhead but someone in a geometric office  
says *everything's under control*.

the sky is burning. and the earth is burning.  
ukraine is burning.  
khave runs home to find her shtetl aflame.  
*sometimes, she says to the spirit in the well, people who are bigger and stronger than us take things  
things away, and we're too small and afraid to do anything about it.*  
there are still jews in ukraine. the ones who didn't run away.

so i wake up and the world's burning  
about fifteen different colors and it feels like every hour  
another fire is lit. i've been thinking about the artist's  
role in a crisis.  
i'm standing back  
at the length of my pen. everyone's talking  
all at once and spitting at those who stay silent  
and nobody's  
listening.  
three weeks ago my grandmother  
fractured three vertebrae in her neck.  
four days ago a classmate  
talks about their pet who died and it's two years ago  
i'm holding maggie  
as  
she  
cools  
so i have to leave the room. last night  
i dreamt about rabies. last night  
i called my mom. last night  
russia set fire to ukraine  
and somebody somewhere  
died.

i wake up in the morning and there's six different kinds of paint  
under my fingernails. i wake up in the morning and i still have a gpa.  
last week i made a poster about oysters because i didn't know what else to do.  
*how's your week going?* someone asks and i say *it's fine* and i'm not even lying.  
when your apartment smells like smoke  
half the time you learn  
how to be okay when you're not okay  
when no one's okay when the world's  
not okay and there's fire everywhere  
but *it's fine*.  
tomorrow i'll squeeze  
fifteen tubes of paint onto a palette and say that that's art  
and if someone asks if it has a title i'll say that it's called the world.





# Infallible

JESSE BECK

She is the fae and he is the knight who foolishly, thankfully, followed her into the wood

She is the captain of the north sea's finest ship and he is the first mate that fell madly in love while no one was watching

He is the lonely soul and she is the lost traveler who will accompany him on this journey, and his next, and his next, and their next.

It is always love and it is never the same and only every so often can he tell what he needs to be

He gets worried that he is wasting this time round by thinking about it too much, and in thinking of thinking, the poor boy has already thought too much.

He might lose this one.

She is not some incomprehensible feat, but this does not keep him from toiling over if she loves and how she loves him, a time honored tradition of uncertainty and diffidence.

She is mesmerizing, a time capsule of everyone he's ever loved, but this does not keep him from being the most wretched creature known to man, a sin of humanity and a curse upon those who are fated to love him.

Those are his words, and this is his story, and he hates that fact. He wishes he could be someone else, or he wishes he could be the filler in someone else's story, but this is his life and these are his decisions.

This is what happens when existence loves dictionaries and teenagers miss not having to pack their lunch.

This is what happens when you put the bones of a lover into neurotic flesh.







# BURROW

LOKI BISCHOFF

i.  
light light light  
how it fills this room  
a soft comforter to dream under  
to feel safe  
even when alone

empty empty empty  
though every drop of sun was felt  
there's still gaps like  
missing teeth in a  
sweet smile

time time time  
lost and losing  
when does it end?  
when does the realization happen?  
that there is nothing left to chase?

ii.  
there is nothing left  
no words that can be heard  
that make life painless  
it's easier to believe  
in absence

i'd rather choose my familiarity  
with the gaps and the lost  
over going hungry  
and still expecting a warm meal  
that never comes.

iii.  
careful with  
each step  
listen to  
the reflection  
look down  
on mirrored ground  
see the stranger  
switch places  
merge with  
the unknown  
and forget  
what you were.

be grateful.

iv.  
"What is that? Some kind of animal?"  
Looks like it. Hiding, I guess.  
"It hasn't come out. It knows *we* know it's there. It's gotta be  
bored."  
And hungry.  
"The sunlight doesn't even reach there. Though I guess it feels  
warm, underground."  
Its nest is comfortable, yes.  
"Will it just stay there, and starve? Doesn't it know it'll die,  
either way?"  
Yes, it knows.

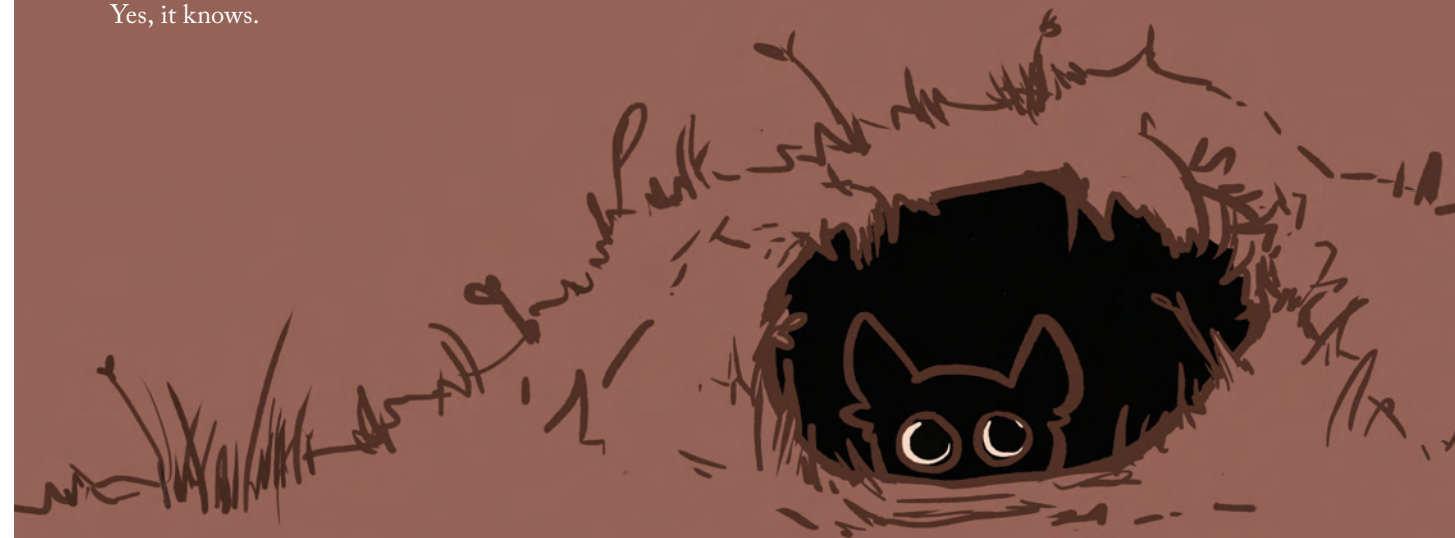


ILLUSTRATION LOKI BISCHOFF







# In The Middle of the Night

GABRIELA DE CAMARGO GONÇALVES

My haven quickly turns from floating clouds to bricks  
When the shadow taunts me with different shades of darkness  
Dancing on the ceiling to the absent music with agony

The silence is deafening  
Pressure in my veins, bursting heart,  
Speedy mind, and swollen eyes  
Piercing needles that burst in reticence

The succinct and deceiving lightness of the time  
Passing by,  
Distracted by...

Nowhere to turn,  
As I lost count of how many times I've tossed and turned  
Losing grip in reality  
Missing the signs  
Doubting my own fires,  
Even my own words.

The sun will rise tomorrow,  
Hungover from the pestilence of the night.



GIVE ME SOME SPACE TO BREATHE, PLEASE TINLAM CHAN





ILLUSTRATION LOKI BISCHOFF

CW: DEATH/MORTALITY

## J. Doe

LOKI BISCHOFF

You are going to die in a car crash at 29. It will be raining. It was an accident. A true one. You were so desperate not to hurt anyone else that you removed yourself completely, and it worked, not that you'll ever know that.

Your answer to "what do you think happens after you die?" was "nothing. I think you stop existing, forever. That's all."

I can't tell you if you changed your mind. In that last second, the last lights your brain registered, the last signals that sparked across neurons of pain and shock, in that last moment, I don't know what you did. I don't know what you wanted.

Maybe in between your last inhale and exhale, you felt fear. Maybe as your sigh disappeared in the noise of metal and of a vehicle's horn and a singular scream, your arms that jerked your wheel to the side hesitated. The consideration of just letting yourself go head first into the truck, the lure of not changing your path was there but oh god there are still others behind you and you have to *get out of their way* you will not be the death of others *again* your mistake will not lead into their ends you swore this —

Your grip tightened and the decision was already made because you were already over the barrier now *and* —

I don't think there was enough time for you to hesitate. I think you already understood what you had wanted to do. And despite never knowing what would come next, you didn't worry about it. You already knew that when you forced the car to swing off the damn road. You already knew that there wasn't another end to this except your own. Maybe you believed you didn't have a choice; maybe you didn't believe in anything.

I can't tell you what happened. Maybe nothing. Maybe you stopped existing, forever. That's all.





(BELOW) OLM: TO NEVER KNOW LOSS KT NOWAK



(LEFT) FATE SHAINA SEMBRIA



# Who Looks for You?

TAYA BOYLES

She rode out the turbulence of conversation with passive resistance.  
Never experiencing the bumps herself, sensationalizing moments  
through the lens of someone else.  
She was a host at heart, not a guest  
not one to participate,  
tucked like a flower in the concrete  
in the back row of the coaster to tend  
to those in the front carts.  
She was there to be needed;  
to scan the area for empty glasses  
and dead air  
to fill,  
to answer the calls of subtle panic  
cleaving the confrontation  
of silence in a crowded room  
by acknowledging the joke  
everyone seemed to miss.  
she never took center stage,  
not fully.  
she always shared her spotlight,  
because she knew what it was like  
when no one looked for her.

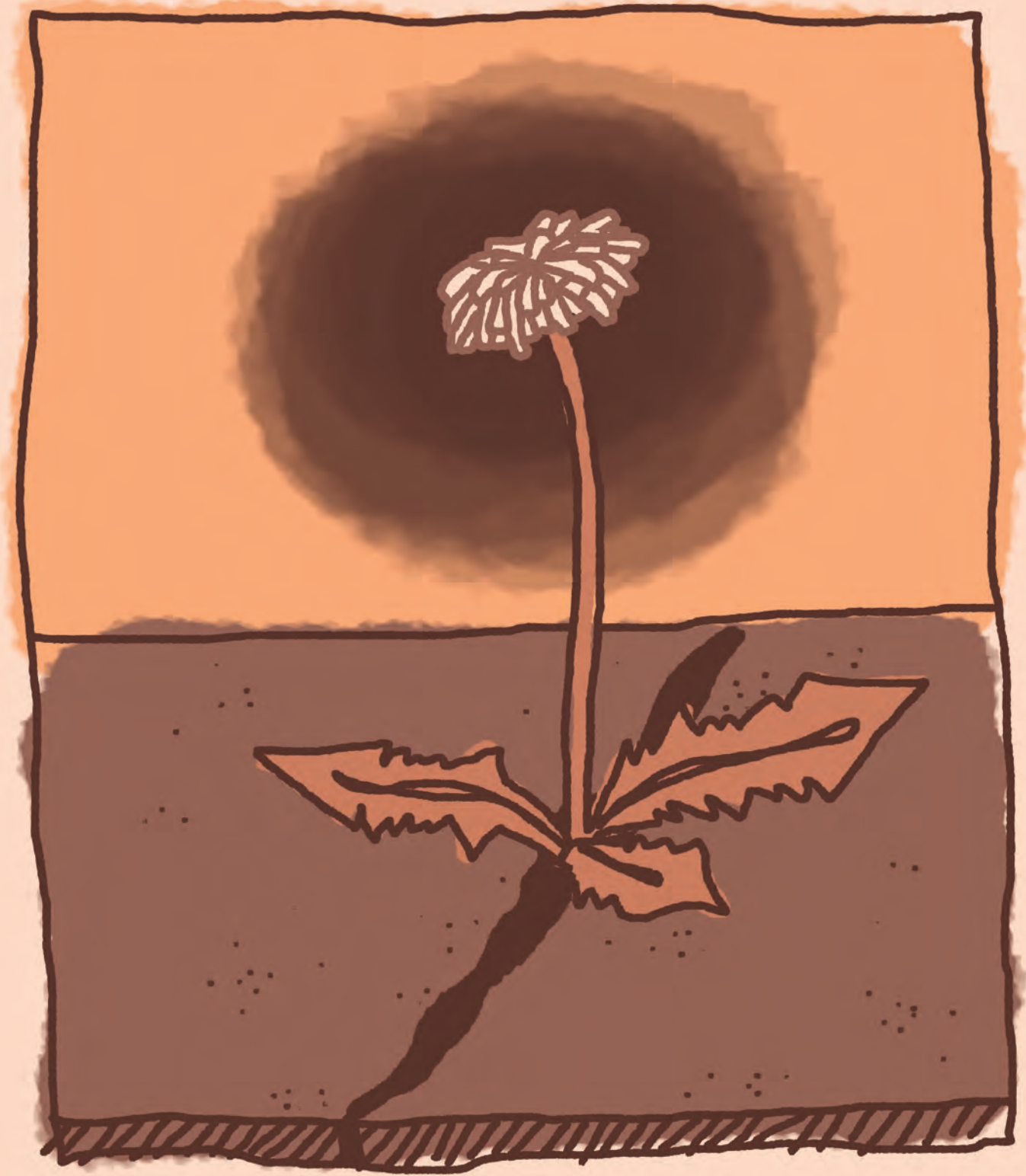


ILLUSTRATION JESSE BECK







# The Cartographer

JESSICA SOFFIAN

The fog did not so much part as pool around the Cartographer as he urged the boat away from the docks. It sat heavy beside him on the little bench and soaked deep into his skin. He inhaled and exhaled thickly and did his best to ignore the simile that flitted through his mind, drawing parallels between air and water filling lungs.

The dock was swallowed by that deafening mist in seconds and the Cartographer found that he was alone, now, trapped between the descending blanket of sky and the reaching arms of the sea as it chased the motion of his oar, splashing up to paint dark splotches on the sleeves of his coat. He shivered and hunched his shoulders and pulled his hat lower over his ears and did not look back. There was nothing to see. He pushed onwards, following no tide or wind or star or compass. He did not need a direction. He was sick of directions. He did not know what he was looking for, but he knew he would know it when he found it.

He rowed for some time through that place that was both sea and sky, until his back started to ache and his arms to tremble beneath the strain of the uncustomary exercise. The Cartographer paused briefly, just to catch his breath, and it was then that he heard it: the song on the wind, high as seagull cries, low as thunder, soft and warm as sun-baked sand and cold and empty as ocean trenches. It was the sound one hears inside of a seashell, and it was the sound one dreams of when they dream of the sea. It was a compulsion and a wonderment. It was an addiction.

The Cartographer was rowing again before he had even consciously decided to do so, the fatigue in his limbs forgotten. He could think only of that song and the way that it filled him, parting the fog, an auditory horizon. This is what he came here for, he realized, the edge of the map, the tomorrow that does not arrive, that nameless desire for something greater than the creeping frost of dissatisfaction. As he rowed, the song grew louder until it became the fog, enshrouding him, welcoming as an embrace. He stopped at the peak of it and leaned over the edge of the boat to peer into the water.

At first there was nothing to see but the spilled inkwell of the ocean and his own faint reflection. Then there was a swelling and a stirring, and part of a wave detached itself into something alabaster-pale, like a fragmentation of moonlight. Spotlight-yellow eyes blinked open in the darkness and there she was: the Siren.

“Ah,” said the Cartographer, fumbling for words and yet still compelled by basic politeness to say something. “Um. Good evening.”

The Siren grinned, revealing a row of shark-like teeth. She pulled herself up to rest her arms on the lip of the boat, far too close, not close enough. You’re a long way from home, she said in a voice both horrible and enchanting. Her lips did not move to form the words and the song continued as she spoke, overlapping and multilayered in a manner that human voices cannot accomplish. Little human, she said, You’re not the usual type who find their way to the heart of my song.

“Oh,” said the Cartographer, befuddled. “No, well, I suppose not. I—well, I suppose you usually see sailors. If you see anyone.”

The Siren’s head rose as a cresting wave in a gesture that might have been called a nod. She rested her barnacled chin on her crossed forearms and looked up at the Cartographer, who was caught already like a fish in a net. Why did you come here? she asked, All alone on this little boat, in this fog? What are you fleeing? What are you chasing?

“I’m not,” said the Cartographer. “Not...as such, anyway. I suppose in a manner of speaking I’m fleeing monotony and chasing...something. The edges of something, or the edges of the map, or...I don’t know, really. I’m a cartographer, you see,” he added as an afterthought, because it felt important, somehow.

Oh? sang the Siren, Do you not enjoy being a Cartographer?



The Cartographer paused, unable to respond, uncertain as to what the answer to that might be. He did not *dislike* cartography—but, then again, he did not particularly *like it*, either. The truth was that he regarded his work in much the same manner as he regarded the rest of his life: with a dull sense of acceptance. Neither repulsion nor delight. The Cartographer—who was not a fool but not particularly clever, who was neither hideous nor lovely in appearance, who apprenticed under the old mapmaker in the first place only because his mother had said he should—found that, when it came down to it, he really felt very little at all about any of it. A mediocresly acceptable little man. A monotonous and acceptable life.

“It’s not so simple,” said the Cartographer for lack of anything better to say, unable to put words to the sense of familiarity the fog carried with it as it sank into his skin and pooled, intimately, confidentially, with the rest of the grey. The Siren’s lighthouse eyes swept over and through him like she knew what he was thinking anyway.

Her smile broadened. Behind her front teeth was another row, and another, and another. Isn’t it? she said. And then, again, What are you seeking? Chasing? Fleeing?

And the Cartographer knew the answer. “The edges,” he found himself repeating, before he had even decided to say it. “I’m looking for the edges.”

The space beyond the map where the vellum meets the wood of the table, where the careful lines of his pen could not trace, beyond the coasts, beyond the waves, beyond the key and the compass and even the illuminations of serpents, of pirates, of sirens. The thing beyond the fog. The seashell’s song. An end to the “I want to see—” he said, “I want to draw—I want to be—”





The Siren's nostrils flared and her throat bobbed in lustful hunger: a fisherman feeling the tug on the line, a shark scenting blood...

"—something new."

Ah, said the Siren, in that voice-that-was-not, slanting along the line of her shark's-tooth grin. She lifted herself further from the water, the kelp of her hair rippling and dripping over the edge of the boat to grow puddles around the Cartographer's boots. She held out a coral hand and reeled in her catch.

I can show you something new, she said.

It was a bad idea, the Cartographer knew. Men who followed sirens did not come back. But he wanted...he wanted...he Wanted. Sirens, by nature, lured in sailors by showing them that thing they most desired. What, then, would the Cartographer see?

He reached out and took her hand. Her skin was soft as sand and rough with barnacles. "Alright," said the Cartographer. "Show me."

The Siren surged close and kissed him. Her lips were cool and smooth as fish scales and tasted of salt brine and ocean mist. Her tongue slid as a tide between his teeth and filled his throat and his lungs with water. Choking on the taste of her, the Cartographer could not pull away, even if he wished too, delighted by the novelty of kissing that which should not be kissed. Insensate, he leaned into it, even as his lungs began to burn and then to convulse, even as the salt filled his nose, as the waves roared in his ears, as the Siren wrapped her riptide arms around his shoulders and dragged him overboard.

For a moment they bobbed there at the surface of the water. Here is something new, promised the Siren, and the Cartographer did not respond because he was too busy drowning. The fog parted, just for a moment, and the Cartographer saw that the moon was more round and more full and more beautiful than it seemed he had ever seen it. He lifted a hand up as if to touch it, reaching and reaching and reaching into the silver air.

Then the Siren pulled him under.



# Staff Bios

**HALDEN FRALEY** is Editor-in-Chief for (pwa-tem). He is a Communication Arts major and a Creative Writing minor. This is his third and final year with (pwa-tem). He hopes to (somehow) professionally self-publish his own comic books after graduating.

**NOAH WILSON** is a fourth-year student graduating this semester with a degree in Communication Arts. He enjoys plants, moths, and tattoos.

**KT NOWAK** is a senior graduating this semester with a BFA in Communication Arts: Scientific Illustration and a BS in Environmental studies. This anthology concludes Kt's fourth year on the (pwa-tem) staff. They are incredibly proud to have been able to contribute to and nurture (pwa-tem) during the uncertainty and turbulence over the last several years.

**JULIA MARTINEZ** is a freshman in the Cinema program. Outside of (pwa-tem), she'll usually watch movies, listen to music, and take pictures around Richmond.

**JESSE BECK** is an avid lover of all types of art, ranging from poetry and illustration to graphic design and filmmaking. He is excited to remain a part of (pwa-tem) throughout his college years and is happy he gets to work with all of the other lovely staffers.

**REESE CILLEY** is a freshman in the Art Foundations program, planning to major in Communication Arts. In their free time they enjoy reading, writing, drawing, and watching cartoons.

**ALLY AWTRY** is a first-year Forensic Science major with a concentration in Biology and a minor in Chemistry. After completing her undergraduate degree, she wants to go to medical school with the goal of becoming a medical examiner.

**LOKI BISCHOFF** is currently a senior in Communication Arts with a minor in Painting and Printmaking. They're exceedingly glad to be a part of (pwa-tem), even for just a short time.

**AVERY ECKERT** is a VCU arts student currently in AFO. They plan on majoring in Communication Arts.

**FINN PLOTKIN** is a VCUarts freshman and rising Art Education major. They enjoy drawing, painting, and long walks on the beach.

**VIV RATHFON** is an illustrator and comic artist, set to graduate with a BFA in Comm Arts in 2023. When they're not drawing gay frogs or D&D characters, they can be found playing colorful video games or playing with their two cats: Maple and Hugh Jackman.

**JESSICA SOFFIAN** is a junior in the CommArts major with a minor in Creative Writing. Her involvement with (pwa-tem) follows an interest and involvement with lit mags dating back to early high school. After graduation, Jessica hopes to pursue their life-long love of storytelling professionally by working as a comic book artist and writer.

**KIRSTEN STURGILL** is from Stafford, Virginia! They love to make art all the time, in all sorts of mediums, including comics. She is currently pursuing a BFA in Communication Arts with a minor in Craft and Material Studies.



Typeset in Halyard Display and Adobe Caslon Pro

Printed on 100 lb. Cougar Opaque Cover white.  
Cover White

Text 80# Husky Opaque Offset Text



