

Literary and Art Journal | 2022

AMENDMENT

SOCIAL PROGRESSION
THROUGH ARTISTIC EXPRESSION





About the Cover

The River

Hyunji da Silva

Every person of color living in America has been asked where they're really from at one point in their life, emphasizing their "exotic" features, their Otherness. Those born in the U.S. feel this to an extreme level, wondering what about themselves is not American enough. Paintings like "The River" are about the re-emergence of a cultural identity after a lifetime of not belonging. The main figure is dead, but the flowers and plants around them are blooming again, symbols of their re-emerging identity. It also references famous Western art around the character of Ophelia in the play "Hamlet." A person with an Ophelia complex has no identity, no sense of self or soul. The figure in the painting is in that stage, but will soon blossom into a new life, a rebirth.

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Mission

amendment /ə'men(d)mənt/

- 1.** An annual publication of radical student-made visual and literary storytelling. We foreground works of hope, joy, healing, resistance, hard truths, imagination, lived experience, and ideas about how we change this world for the better.
- 2.** A student-run creative collective fighting for change at the intersection of art, writing, and accessible knowledge.
- 3.** What you're holding in your hands.

Acknowledgements

Amendment would not be possible without the passion and dedication of countless people across VCU.

To our staff: each of you brings a unique, compassionate perspective to this publication that strengthens our mission and fills our Friday afternoons with joy and thought-provoking discussions.

To our Editors: Gracie Trice, Social Media Manager, you fearlessly dove into the deep end this semester and we value your work. Viv Rathfon, Art Editor, you lead with patience and an artist's eye. Your skill as an artist and an editor is awe-inspiring. To Syd Lewin, Editor in Chief, you have guided this group to be the best version of itself and drive us to fight for the better world we advocate for in the pages of this book. You are strong, kind, brilliant, and fierce.

To the SMC Staff: Jessica Clary, Mark Jeffries, and Owen Martin, your tireless efforts and guidance allows a room full of artists, activists, and authors to create something incredible, like this book.

To our designers: Madison Tran and Tess Wladar, you made this book as beautiful as it is with your time and skill.

To our contributors: we would not have a book without your work and your trust. It is the greatest honor to offer a home for your voice and your perspective.

To you, the reader: thank you for picking up this book. We hope you find something in these pages that challenges you, excites you, makes you feel seen, or just makes you smile.

Rachel Poulter-Martinez

Literary Editor

Letter from the Editor

Literary journals, like all things, evolve. I have been here for four of Amendment's 18 years, which is simultaneously a very long time and a very short one.

If you've read our books before, you might have noticed our mission statement has changed some. This was one of my first proposals when I ran for Editor in Chief, because it hadn't been updated since 2010 and a lot of other things have changed since then.

It's also, frankly, because it didn't feel like *our* statement—sure, we could go through and check off all the things mentioned in it, and they were objectively good ones: providing a platform, advocating for social change, promoting discussion. And yet, it felt lukewarm. Our Art Editor, Viv, described it as having a hollowness to it—"not enough love."

And really, that's what's kept me around for four years. Love, care, excitement, messy discussions, dissenting opinions, the whole oft-cited shebang. (I know that our Literary Editor, Rachel, is handling the acknowledgments, but it wouldn't be right not to include my own intense gratitude for everyone here.)

So we met up and brainstormed, collaborated, agreed, disagreed, and finally rewrote the statement.

We talked a lot about being understandable. A lot of theories of social change are just that—theoretical. And while it's certainly important to read and learn, that can be a daunting first task. So we are basing our work in lived experience, and growing from there. Come as you are, learn as you go.

There was also a lot of talk about the personal and the political. The work of publishing these stories is more than simply sharing a personal narrative—it's about how personal narrative shows us that experiences of oppression are not an individual problem. They are a collective problem, and therefore, have a collective solution. Not one of climbing some ladder, but breaking down both the ladder itself and the idea that we ever needed a ladder in the first place.

This is my hope for Amendment, then. That we will publish work reminding us all that power is found in solidarity across our lived experiences. I want work that is angry, work that is joyful, work that is messy, work that makes us ask if we can even publish it. Most of all, I want work that pushes us to look at the world around us and imagine that things could be different.

Syd Lewin
Editor-in-Chief

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Amendment Literature Award Winner

The Cookout shawn

i miss the days we spent sitting in the backyard, ice teas in hand while the adults held beer cans, and wine coolers, and the kids would run and splash around in the pool while the uncles in their friday night best, broken in sandals, jean shorts and all, would fire up the grill with sausage, burgers, and ribs, cause the grill was where the men would show who was the alpha in the art of cooking, and the aunties would sit and gossip about who brought what while grandma tries to get the kids to eat their collard greens, mac and cheese, and sweet potatoes cause they won't eat coleslaw or potato salad since they was too excited to sit still cause the music made them wanna get up and bust a move and all the adults would laugh and join in as the sun went down on the block and families would share their feast with those who couldn't make it or were working too late, lord knows the man like to make folks miss a good meal.

i miss the days we spent dancing in the backyard.

Amendment Art Award Winner

Where Flowers Now Wilt
LIGHTPAINTERR







Amendment Art Award Winner



Where Flowers Now Wilt
LIGHTPAINTERR



Mother

Teairrah Green

My Life Matters Too
Alexzane Taylor



Red

Iyana Graham



My Power, Your DesireJ.C. Hill

You desire me.
You detest me, but you desire me.
Every feature that adorns me you despise.
Every trait that distinguishes me you abhor.
Every piece that forms me you revile.
Still you desire them and you desire me.

Why do you desire me?
Because you know my power
And you desperately want to control it.
You want to shape me into your tool
Until I am no longer usable.
You want to shrink me into your fool
Until I am no longer diminishable.
By doing so I will no longer be powerful.
And then I will be disposable.

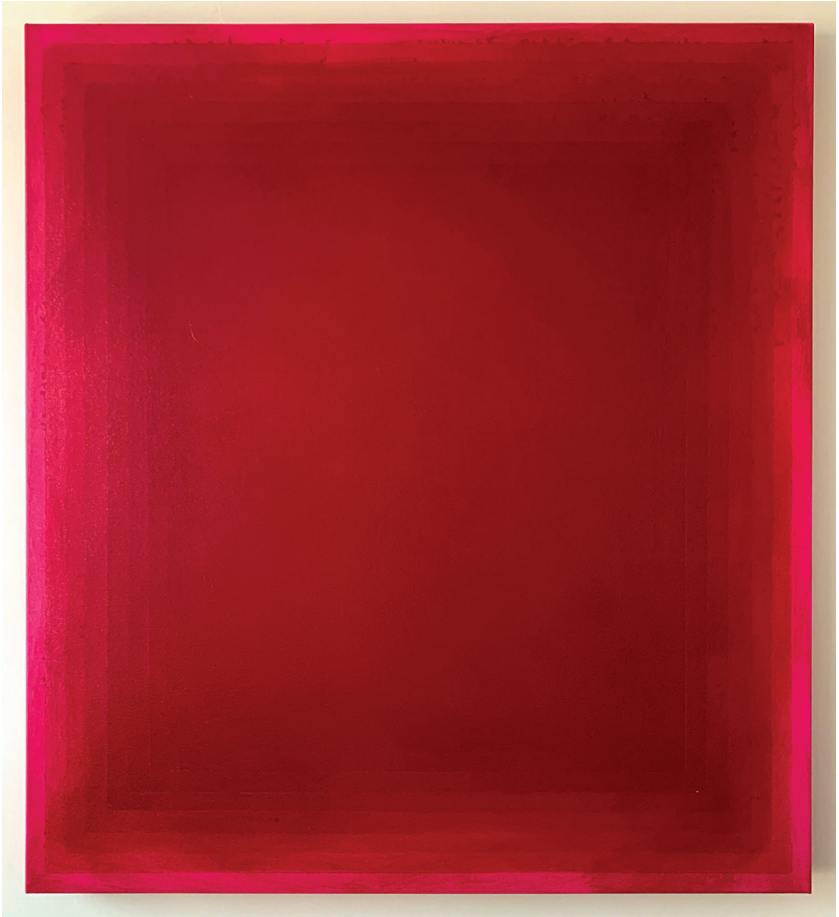
I know you desire me.
I know you desire the power I hold.
The power that is:
All the features you despise,
All the traits you abhor,
All the pieces you revile.
I know you detest me.

Why do you detest me?
Because you can't contain me.





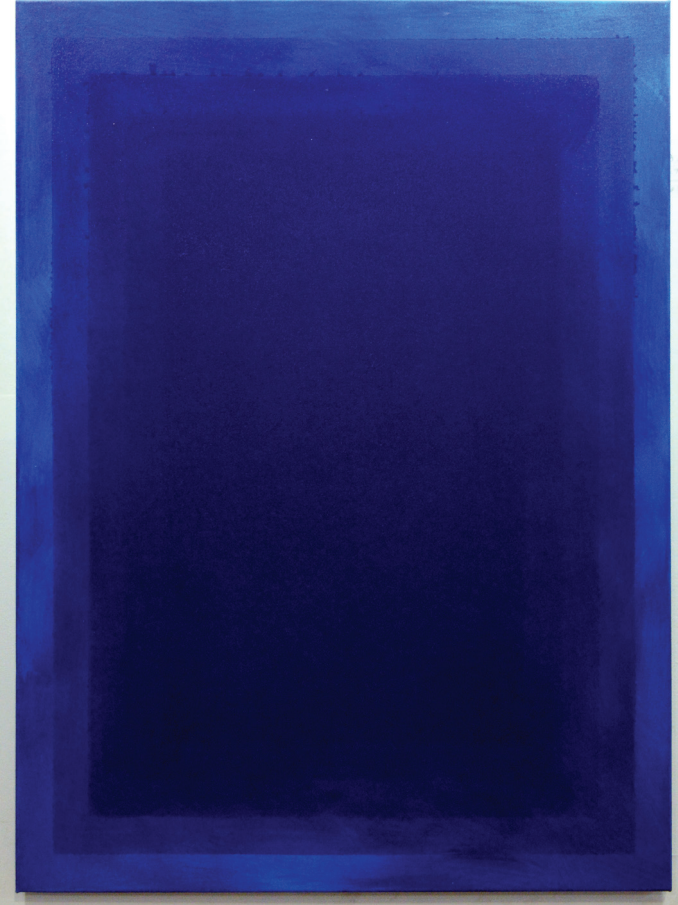
Bodily Autonomy
Sirena Pearl



Wanda in Her Ermine Furs

Andy Mazzella

Wanda in her Ermine Furs, is taken from the novella, “Venus in Furs,” by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, which denotes themes of sadomasochism. This is emulated in the layered magenta which imitates Wanda’s sexual dominance over Severin.



Stephanie

Andy Mazzella

To contrast, Stephanie's layers of phthalo blue are inspired by "Stephanie Says" by Lou Reed. The poem takes the audience through Stephanie's inner melancholia as she reflects on her past experiences with the people in her life. In both pieces, the abstraction of color pulls from these characters and their personalities, while the layering process helps to channel their emotional space.

CW Suicidal Ideation, Mental Health**Reflections** Anonymous

Memory bleeds through the pages of the present. I am not the person I once was, but I see remnants of her in every reflection I allow myself to look at. Mostly I see who I have worked to become; driven, kind, assured, content, but deep in the recesses of my eyes, I see her. I see the bruises on her body; I see her tremble with fear and pain.

She is not a phantom or a shadow but a memory. A memory I do not like. A memory that I cannot seem to forget. I was her, and she will be me. Sometimes I allow myself time to step through the reflection and relive the past. I step into the person I once was, and the pain nearly drowns me. I hear the endless cacophony of cruelty in the voices of those I love. Words like failure, fake, selfish, crack like a whip against the fragile boundaries of my mind. I feel the desperation for anyone around me to see me, know me, love me. My mind drifts from memory to memory, some fuzzy, some clear. I see a man I loved with a lighter on his arm, begging me to stop the pain. I see the people I wanted to call friends calling me too broken to repair.. I see my father close the door after telling me he won't stay.

The pain pulls me in every direction until I am numb and dizzy. I feel my body move almost of its own accord as if I am merely a passenger in this body that used to be mine. My body turns itself so I can see them all too familiar stairs behind me. I scream to be liberated from this memory, to leave the mirror and lock the past away from view. The old body does not listen and climbs the stairs. I thrash against my mental prison, begging this body to stop. Don't climb the steps. Go home. Pet your dog. Anything but this. The all too familiar sight comes into view out of the darkness. In front of me, I see a roof, and I hear my voice whisper into a phone; the words were jumbled and unintelligible. It looks just like it did that night. It was cool, and I could hear the faint sounds of merriment from a far-off party. I could see the mountains and several stories down, the car I sold so long ago. I didn't want to relive this. I knew what came next, and I didn't want it. I felt the body sob as she turned off the phone. Her toes shifted to the edge, and her eyes looked down. One foot and then the other, the body teetered. It loses its nerve and steps off the edge—collapsing in a symphony of pain and self-hatred. How could I do this? How could I let it get this far? Emptiness consumed me, and everything faded to black.

I was wrenched back to the present, pulled through the mirror into my body. My eyes filled with tears, I tried to control the pain. The girl I once was stared back at me through the mirror. I want to shatter my reflection, grind the glass into sand, but I hear the faintest whisper reverberate behind the mirror.

“When does it stop?”

Regret washes over me. I remember asking that every day. I remember just wanting the pain to be over. I remember. I want to tell her in an hour, a day, a year, but the truth is far more complicated than that. I offer the memory my hand and show her premonitions of what's to come. She watches as the space around us shifts. She sees a lost version of herself return home, afraid to sleep in her own bed. She sees our body shaking on the living room carpet, unable to speak or move. She sees our mother lift us onto the couch and stroke our hair as we weep. She closes her eyes and winces in pain, but I urge her to breathe and keep watching.

She sees us sitting on a couch talking to a gentleman with patient eyes and a black notebook. He listens as we unravel our twisted tale, telling stories of pain, rejection, and loss. We write and paint to occupy our time. We learn to sew. We walk our dog in the sunshine. We laugh with our family. We sing. We dance. We stretch our bodies and our mind. What starts as fleeting moments of joy becomes something deeper. The man with the patient eyes encourages us to stay with that, to be present, to be accurate. We learn to breathe between the pain. We learn to believe ourselves. And then she watches as the careful tower of protection crumbles around us.

She sees the friends that once held us up betray us. She sees us descend once again into the pain we strived so hard to lift ourselves out of. She sees us once again consider the familiar stairs. She sees pain, she sees rejection, she sees suffering. She is crestfallen, but I ask her to keep watching. She watches. We think about the stairs again and again but never go. We say it's for our family, for our dog, for anyone other than ourselves. The gentleman with the patient eyes looks at us kindly, without pretense; he tells us it's us. We are keeping us safe. We have always kept us safe. We stepped off the ledge. We woke up every day and lived. Even when it was hard. Even when it was scary. Even when we couldn't see the light. We lived.

She watches as we rebuilt our tower of protection, but this time it wasn't a tower. It was a city. Complicated and challenging, but vibrant and alive. We watch as the small pleasures became contentment. We watch as we struggle with pain and fear but persist. We watch as we fail time and time again but continued to try. We get it right. We get it wrong. But we keep trying. I turn to her and smile. She smiles back at me. I want to say something profound or deep to show her how far we've come.

I want to hold her close. I want to tell her she is loved. The spell is broken before I have the chance.

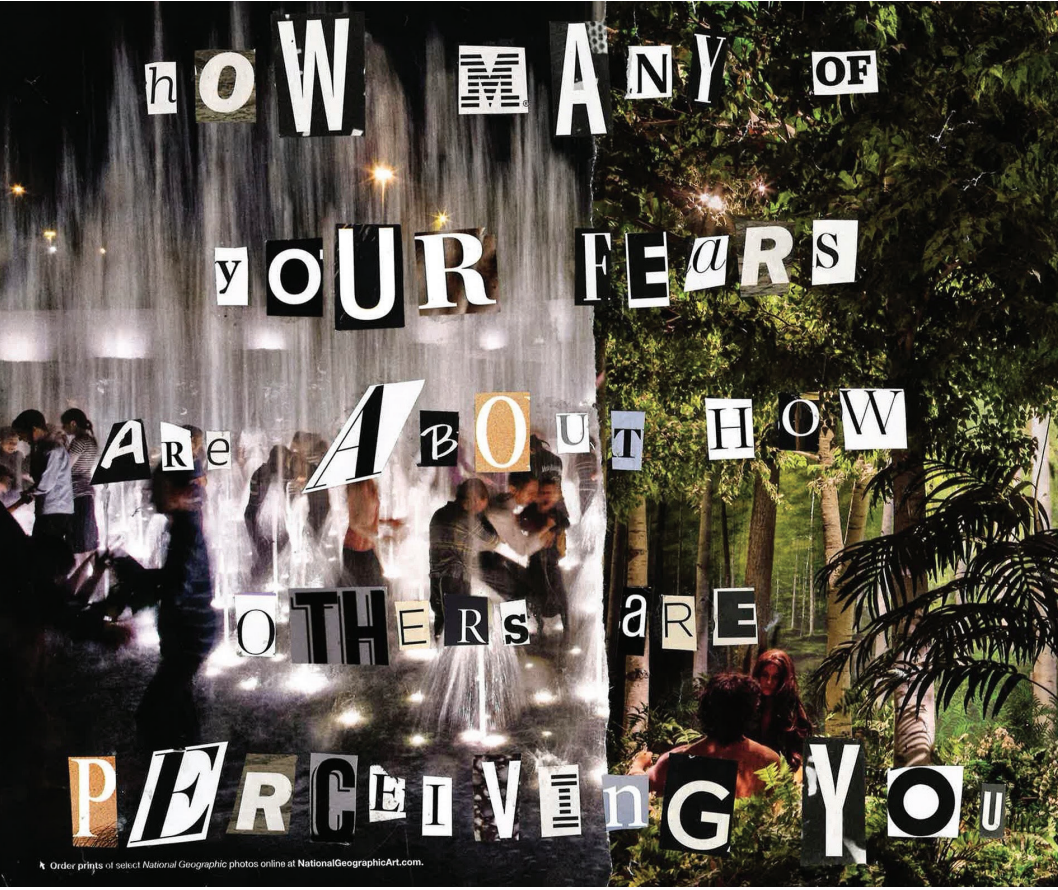
The visage of my past self gives way to my face now. It is fuller with lines etched by joy, stress, and pain. The mirror is just a mirror once again as memory returns to the chapters of the past. I look in my eyes and see her tucked away in the periphery of my mind. I place a hand on the cold glass and whisper the only words of comfort I can summon.

“Soon.”

Fears



Haley Salmen



Order prints of select National Geographic photos online at NationalGeographicArt.com.

CW Anxiety, Self Poisoning**Ant Farm** Madeline Wade

There's an ant farm inside my chest.
Just below my heart

I can feel it when I'm still.

Buzzing, writhing,
Just enough to keep me moving.
Just enough to make me sick.

I clutch my knees to my chest in my kitchen chair as all the color drains from my
body and I match the pale gray cabinets.

I haven't breathed out in 5 years.
I haven't rested my head in 20.

I grip my legs uncomfortably tight to my chest,
My legs, they can feel the buzzing, held
So tight, during dinner, to be sure all of me is there-
Everything, protected, each part intact still.

I was born here.

On the edge of my seat.
Eyes forced wide,
Ears alert,
Mind racing-

I'm sick to my stomach so often these days,
Wishing I could purge myself of this way that I live.
Wishing I could exhale and not sound so shaky.

I think the little ants gnawed out a spot somewhere in my brain.
I see them casting shadows on the visions behind my eyes.
and, I know they don't belong, but I like the little tingle of their feet
on my skin as they crawl in and out of my ears.

I loosen my grip so my feet fall to the floor, leaving exposed my hollowed form, my gray hands now resting on the table, palms towards the low ceiling, shaking slightly.

When I was five my mother found me in our garage sucking down ant poison like soda. I smiled at her big, and told her it tasted like strawberries.

Featured Contributor:

Elysia Lin



I am currently a fourth-year student pursuing interdisciplinary studies, with minors in medical humanities and creative writing. I was born and raised in the Roanoke Valley. Beyond writing, I also engage in women's health research, peer health education, and some teaching and instruction. I love spending time outdoors, baking bread, and crafts.

Growing up, I took writing and literature a little bit for granted. I was very much a "STEM kid" and had always nurtured that love for science over all else. Early in college, I had an English professor who was the first to really push me to explore writing as an avenue to both deepen a fascination with science and natural systems, but also develop my own voice and understanding of everything else around me—and that intersection was the best of both worlds.

Much of my writing to date likely comes from my lived experiences as a person of color—a daughter of immigrants—growing up in a mostly-white, semi-rural community. There is a lot of individual wrestling with dual identity and belongingness and selfhood that emerges from that, while still recognizing my immense privilege as an Asian American, cis-gender woman raised in a two-parent household with relative financial security. Some of my writing is coming-of-age, in a way, in moving away from home for the first time and seeing that, wow, the world is so much larger, more complicated, and diverse than I had ever imagined. And some of it comes from the tension between reconciling my own formative experiences of girlhood in my small corner of the Virginia—a time that I reflect on with fondness and nostalgia—with the understanding that, for many others, and for myself at times, these same experiences/ places/systems in our country are spaces that produce anger, resistance, and interrogation.



As Necessary Beings

Elysia Lin

Man is a little world.
—Proclus

We believed we could not have failed
to exist, if only temporarily.
On long days we stood in a flooded delta
after summer rain, sweetness
still lingering, wrists plunged into
dark basins. Our hands cupped
loosely the lacquered underbellies of snakes,
scales like small mirrors
tessellating sky. In our fists, we held a rioting
light. After death, the philosophers said,
our fleeting beings become luciform:
vital breath released, glory undone,
untethered from the material flesh.

On the river's face, we skipped flat stones
over collected human debris: fence wire,
two pincushions, a wreath of wedding flowers,
washed now from some disassembled homes. Imagine
the temporal soul held in the palm,
impressed gently in the skin
like a signet ring into sun-warmed wax.

In the flow, we saw our faces,
composite image of a mother,
fingers quiet to the soft meridian
of a newborn's skull. Imagine
a story of bones, rifted and loomed together,
a good thing converging into another
sacred whole, the body an atlas
after all our open wounds have closed.

Motherland, 20 Years Postpartum

Elysia Lin

They name it ontogeny, as in
 birth of one whole being. Every body
 emerges from the same dark

places. Every body once
 a single-chamber heart blooming iron.
 Innocent machine, wrestling

soft earth, the flood's deluge.
 From the fishes: bright water
 in the lung, caught in paper gills,

lantern mouths a yawning river.
 Language caught
 in the sparrow's bloodied beak,

ready passage to the pliant wetness
 of worms and migratory things,
 my orphaned tongue a clumsy division

of worlds. *Obstare*, Latin root
to be present, to be here.
 Some wonder

of mothers, of generations within,
 bearing the heaving weight
 of it all. Every body

from all places—
 how much movement
 one heart can withstand.

The speaker in this poem grapples with the continual struggle for self-recognition in language, heritage, and expressions of self that compete with the new cultural identities and landscapes of the United States that many must navigate. Though the language refers to both the bodily and cultural conceptions of “mother,” the mother here is representative of something broader and ungendered; rather, it is a return to safety. This poem was written prior to the Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, and in its aftermath may remind us of the sanctioned violence against reproductive rights in our country. The concerns named in this poem are of a different origin, though I think they speak to the same crisis of acknowledged humanity, acknowledged place, and the question of who exactly has value in this world.

CW Infant Death, Medical Racism

Protocol: Meditations on Care

 Elysia Lin

All visitors must be greeted with a smile. Most smile back, unless experiencing a stroke event, when they only smile with half a curved lip, half wrenched flat in an awkward, sorry line. Most visitors are not having strokes, though it is *better to be safe than dead*, Clerk says. Other tell-tale signs: an imbalanced portrait of two hands raised, words sliding into the next. Clerks' scrubs are green, printed with purple monkeys. When she waves her arm, monkeys dance in synchrony, limbs twisting in a single ripple. When she arches forward, they bend and touch their toes.

All visitors must wash their hands. On a Sunday, I recite to a woman in her forties a series of steps on proper handwashing technique, pretend I did not spend nights at the sink, scrubbing to the count of music until my hands rawed. I fold her hands in mine, lather soap between her palms until they are glazed milk-white. We rinse the skin on our forearms up to our knobbed elbows. Her brow drips sweat upon our clean hands.

No visitors more than two unless the baby is about to expire. Clerk says *expire* and means Died Expectedly of something like promptness. Usually the doctor's predictions are right and babies expire when they are due. Clerk says it makes formula orders less of a hassle, when the babies expire on time. That day, I walk to the corner grocery store to buy milk. Secret shoppers are being filmed for a show nobody sees because it airs in the extended nothingness of daytime cable. Someone has left a crate of milk on a shelf in the oriental aisle, tucked among the Asian sauces—Ponzu, Sambal, Hoisin—curdled contents thick and clinging.

Visitors must wear security bands at all times. Red and white, sheen of an old scar healed over. In the well-baby nursery all newborns wear security bands wound tight around their tiny wrists, barely the diameter of a bottle cap. After orientation, we are taken to the other nursery, where babies still too fragile to hold are kept. I watch Baby M turn in restless sleep, accordion of her chest folding in tune to her

ventilator beeping. Here, babies do not wear candy-stripe bracelets. No one wants to steal *a sick baby*, Clerk says. I want her to take it back, confess this untruth. There is only the hum of machines.

In the case of an abduction, sound alarm for Doctor Pink. A duress button is hidden under the table on the wall with great glass windows overlooking Marshall Street and the man at the Salvadorian food cart, wearing the same peeling pair of running shoes. I listen to a lecture on the East Marshall Street Well, follow a journey of Ancestral Remains from the Smithsonian archives to Richmond, first and final resting place. Clerk says, *something awful*, those wanted bodies of men and women thieved from their graves, bodies of babies turned to wax and brine under lantern light: molar here, pelvic bone there, vertebrae constellated across a nation, and no record of names, only dislocated parts.

This is a prose poem written towards occurrences during my placement on the NICU ward at VCU Health during the height of the COVID pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement. Among all of this disruption and strangeness, I was working in an environment with one deeply vulnerable group—newborns—in a period when very few leaders in our country seemed to care for the well-being of people, but especially people of color. At the same time, Richmond and its medical institutions were facing a reckoning of sorts, a fraught historical legacy that concluded with the return of the Ancestral Remains—yet another instance of lack of care for people, neighbors, and families. Writing this poem became a way to reimagine and confront anger about these injustices, using standard hospital protocol as an entranceway into that conversation.

changeling childrenC. Pierson

I was dirt-stained and scraped, brimming with the potential of a child raised without religion. Thin as a breeze and timid like a doe, but inside-- the rotted eye of a tree, the swirling madness and confusion of a child wronged by the world. Everything was something to learn, everything was wild and dancing and bright. I memorized the names and traits of speckled beasts from other continents and longed for their claws.

Cigarette ash singed my hair but now I drink the smoke in whenever it passes me on the street, relishing the nostalgia of slow death by addiction. I picked at thorn-cuts so that they'd leave scars. I shoved my hands in mud and watched the skin fade until there was nothing but earth. I got close enough to rabbits that I could count their eyelashes, and at the second that I'd thought I'd touch it, a flurry of motion and it was gone, leaving me with nothing but the directionless energy of primal instinct and hands that are still soft with childhood.

I imagined my fingers like claws when I raced boys on the playground. Over and over I imagined the arcane curve of horns, the unblinking eyes of gods, the clay-covered hands of potters and the life in my veins. The trembling, unfurling of leaves, the howls of mythological creatures in the night. So much life in the world and I had no idea how to taste it. No idea how to let the energy inside out, how to keep it from burning me up-- but too late, my bones grew and stretched and my memories piled up and now I'm nothing but a smoking match, all burned up and struck.

Once, a gifted child, a beautiful child. Now, a shapeshifter, a changeling swapped in the cradle, an imposter. Still feeling the weight of antlers on my skull and the points of my spine like daggers, I choke on this energy that comes with being trapped in a body I didn't ask for, and when I'm just a hollowed out trunk echoing with the cries of the child that was, someone will look down inside and they will see all of these words inscribed on the dead wood walls, like gibberish in a madman's cell.

Drought

→

Abby Bressette



A Future

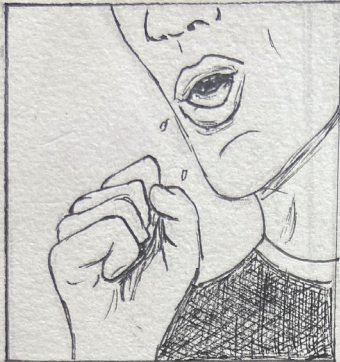


River Maja Olsson

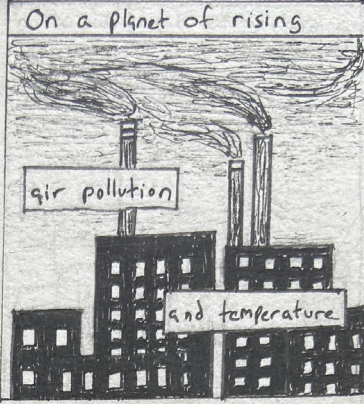
Black Carbon

Sirena Pearl





As Covid yearly weakened our lungs



Only the rich got to be old

Except for the oldest person



She lived

in the last forest

Vanilla Extract

Maddie Martin

When tempted by chemicals...

UNLUCKIES
are always
kind to your
body

Reach
for an
UNLUCKY
instead of
Processed Food

“It’s natural”

No Poison - No Additives



A Portrait of Irony

Madeline Bitzer

inadequate. uncommunicative. unseen. unheard of. unavailable. absent physical and emotional. glassy screen. moving pictures. electricity. a golden haze surrounding the dull gray box. ideally scripted dialogues. shiny and feign actors. tiny pixels that make up a portrait. a portrait of a life not led by you.

yourself an Outsider.

know the meaning

fake laughter,

misogynistic men,

in front of the

advertisements

Brave New World

not having the

passions you

to sympathize.

you do dictate

or godly in your

Prejudiced opinion.

mendacious truths

deliberately and

how ironic. you label literature as pointless, yet you refuse to see the error of your ways. when i needed a father, where were you? when i needed guidance, where were you? when you couldn't be there for me: Capote and Cummings were. Austen wrote me a better ending. Vuong held me tight. Shakespeare read prose and verse to me in the light as i feared for more than just the dark. Hemingway led me on stormy and wild adventures: full of marlins and bulls, that felt more than just imaginative. & Faulkner gave me ambition and compassion: two things you have never felt. so in the dull room, full of past memories of a family dwindling from heart, with the starlet light burning intensely at first, but steadily fading with time, remember my sickly figure in the background: a pale ghost, and think fondly of the times you mislabeled me, for being narrow-minded & ungrateful: everything you are. like when you depicted my ideology as being persuadable. for "going along with the crowd." or, when you saw me gathering towards more healthy and loving relationships, you decided i was a "ghastly and egotistical daughter." why don't you think about how you slacked as a father and tell me who is at fault? think about me yearningly as you see me finally leave. think about how a television life is more valuable than your own. how you thought this until you finally saw the tiny pixels of your steady life desert you, and think about how your life will always be those fast-moving, two-faced stars, rehearsed pictures: nothing but...fake.

you consider
you don't even
of that word.
stuck-up jokes,
As I Lay Dying
lit up screen.
for places in this
you will deny
courage to see.
cannot bear
virtues & vices
whether sinful
Prideful and
what deceitful &
you speak of so
In Cold Blood.

CW Child Abuse and Abandonment

Untitled Artist: Judith Glantzman
Madeline Bitzer

I had kept those blood-stained shoes from that memorable day. Over the years they had started to look like an artifact: a lost story. I pulled them out for the first time since that notable event - days before my flight took off. They were the deciding factor to visit my hometown: to question the questionable.

The touch of the scratchy, cheap lace on my callused hands and the smell of the stale and rank dried blood made me reminisce on all that I had lost without a choice. It all came back to me in that slit of a moment...

I remember it like a soft dream. The edges hazed over to create curved lines and blurred details. My neck started to ache with whiplash. My breath shortened. My eyes grew wide. The sound of rain splattering outside on the cavernous ceiling. Echoing through my ears. Throat dry. My shoes and heels bloody. This wasn't a nightmare. This was real. I wanted to go back. To that morning. To the day before. Anything. Anything was better than this.

The sound of clinking glasses brings me back to that moment - to that day. The hefty steam of hot tea - not hot enough to burn you, but hot enough to swarm through your gut, invade your insides and warm you so that you're nice and cozy - was once a condolence and now makes me sick to my stomach.

That's how that day started: our regulated morning tea. The classical music swelled from the other room; in addition, to the sweet tonal sounds of Frank Sinatra, the music came from an old, worn victrola my mother had inherited from her great-grandmother - who had long since been deceased. The scratch of the metal tip on the vinyl added to the aesthetic of the smooth sounds of Sinatra's voice floating through our china-filled, lace-decorated, and rain splattered Seattle apartment.

On the wall - adjacent from where I was facing - hung the calendar that defined our everyday lives. Every morning I would check the little boxes, filled with the scribble of my mothers cursive handwriting. On that particular morning, I remember looking up and seeing blank boxes where her handwriting should have been, but instead was absent: nothing planned. I remember being confused by that. If my mother was anything, she was punctual.

We sipped on our English breakfast tea; the light slurp and the ring of porcelain on porcelain were the only other sounds added to the melodic tones relaying from the speaker. We didn't speak. We never did.

I felt like we lived in an exemplary dollhouse. Everything so shiny and plastic. Everything was so neat, so perfect, that I was afraid to touch anything. I was a doll: and my mother was playing with me.

On that haunting morning, she had dressed me in my finest clothes. We weren't much church-goers, but we each had one special occasion outfit. We would wear these outfits on Christmas Eve - though we had no family to visit - and again on Easter when we went Easter egg hunting at the park around the corner from my school.

I remember her buttoning up my dress, the stale fabric still fresh on my memory. The ivory-colored fabric with a pink, satin waistband that tied into a large bow in the back, making it impossible to pee without aid from my mother, was zipped onto me. She then added the matching bow into my dirty-blond hair, tying it tight around my skull, as to avoid it falling out mid-day and her having to bother with fixing it. Her hand lingered longer than normal on the back of my head. Her fingertips brushed down through my hair - touching the softness of my freshly conditioned locks. She dropped her hand and went on with her duties.

I then sat with my back straight on the edge of her unmade bed; moreover, I was only sitting straight because the dress was starting to get tight on me. My mother had bought me this dress when I was seven, being eight at that time, I was a little too tall, and a little too big, but I didn't dare tell her.

As I sat with my ribs pressed against the small waist of the cream-colored dress, I watched in awe of my mother dressing.

She was so flawless, so smooth, and so delicate.

She was like a fallen leaf. The golden hues and burnt-caramel shades make it impeccable to look at, yet the very notion of the leaf fallen means that it is near the end; soon to break down and dissolve into the muddy and grassy ground. Soon to disappear.

She untied her silk robe, which was the color of the night sky in the mountains: Navy blue with the tiniest of white pearls decorated along the edges. The moon and the stars. She slipped into her special occasion dress: a similar ivory-colored dress with lace on the outside and a stormy purple, the color of a dark bruise, waistband clenching around her middle. The whiff of old fabric blew through the air in front of where I sat as her dress flapped around as she tugged it on. She didn't have a matching bow in her hair; however, she had two thin clips that she used to push back her mocha-colored hair on either side of her face. She was so beautiful: so young. As she looked in her golden vanity mirror doing her makeup, she saw me studying her in the reflection. She winked at me with her faux eyelashes already

on - surrounding her hazel eyes, which she shared with me - and her dark maroon lipstick being applied. That wink was a spark for me. That wink had held a mysterious undertone to it. The message she was conveying in her eyes was monstrous and diminutive.

The air was crisp that day when we exited the lobby of our apartment. The door blew open in the autumn wind and we had to push it closed with our bodies to avoid the heat from the lobby and the cold, fall air from mixing together to create a luke-warm and gray in between.

The memory of my mother walking ahead of me down the steps and onto the sidewalk below is ironed onto my consciousness. I think back to that image many endless nights and lonely mornings.

The leaves swelled around us in a mystic haze: I felt magical. I felt like I was on a stage and the leaves around me were the spotlight illuminating my qualities.

My mother grasped my hand tightly as we hobbled our way through the busy streets towards the Frye Art Museum. My mother rarely took me out, especially to a museum. I felt that morning, when I woke up, that something was wrong. I felt it in the pit of my stomach. There was an ache there that I couldn't name. I should have been suspicious when my mother took me to my first art museum. I should have been suspicious about the calendar and the dresses. I should have known.

The sky began to cry down upon us. The pit of my stomach dropped as the rain poured. Little droplets of chilled water began to trickle onto our dry hair, my mother's makeupeg face, and our fancy dresses.

plop

plop

plop

Her handy umbrella, which she always carried with her since rain in Seattle was as unpredictable as her, was opened with a singular slide of the hand and whip of the fabric on metal being pushed open.

Her umbrella, the color of burnt coffee, was our only protection from the harm in the sky: our only shield.

We made it to the protection of the entryway of the museums' doors. The architecture being the larger umbrella in the play of things.

My mother paid at the front and then we steadily walked through to the exhibits. We steered clear of anything historical or European. My mother led me straight to the contemporary art as though she had decided to go there specifically for that.

We weaved between people along the way; tourists, couples holding hands, art

critics standing puzzled in front of newly displayed pieces, security guards keeping watch, and slow walkers who never stopped to stare - but instead kept at a certain pace throughout the entire museum - a trolley that never came to a pause, but instead you had to plan your leap off of it in perfect timing. These people weren't willing to take that leap of faith off the bumpy ride.

My mother's grasp on my hand grew tighter as we went deeper into the forest of modern art. Her palm was dry and cold, whereas mine was sweaty with the connection of hers. I stumbled over my shoes, realizing how tight they felt on my growing feet. Blisters had started on the back of my heels. I remember looking down as I was pulled forward by my mother, blood had started to drip down onto my clean, egg-shell white shoes. Mother was not going to be happy once she found out.

I looked ahead and saw what my mother was being pulled toward. It was at the end of the exhibit hallway, the last painting to be showcased. The corner was dingy and gloomy; the only light was a singular bulb that casted it's luminous glow on the picture. The wall the artwork hung on was blood-red, the type of blood that has been sitting out for days: dried and sun-baked.

I remember feeling enclosed in the room. Suffocated. The air was stuffy with the faint smell of decay, probably from the rotting canvases some of the older paintings had been completed on. I looked forward and up at the piece of art my mother was so captivated by.

I felt her breathe in sharply as her breath was taken away with the sight of the piece. It was hand drawn - or at least it looked that way - on a pale rosé paper background. The lines were blurred and frenzy; as though the drawing was done in a hurry with the artist's eyes closed. But within all the contradicting lines, there was a picture in the between. If you looked closely, you could just make out the image of a person - a small girl it looked like - with large, round eyes that looked amiable. The girl's hands were placed below her chin and she was resting on them as though she was listening to something pleasant, perhaps some music on a victrola similar to what I had listened to that very morning.

My mother was frozen in place, her eyes were not blinking. Just below the drawing was the description. I remember leaning in closely to read the small Calibri font. The plaque read "Untitled. Artist: Judith Glantzman. Date: 2002. Medium: Pencil on Paper. Object Dimensions: 11 x 8 ½ in. Credit Line: Gift of the Artist." I felt the weight of my mother's hand on my back. I stood up straight and her hand moved to my shoulder.

She pulled me in close and whispered into my ear, "What do you see?"

"I see a drawing."

She tilted her head to the side, as to get a new point of view: a new perspective. "Yes, it's a drawing. But what do you see in the eyes?"

"They're big." I reported back to her.

That clearly wasn't the response my mother had wanted. She sighed with disap-

pointment and took a half step away from me.

“Name the emotion.” Impatience was rising in her voice and I worried a breakout would occur.

“I think she looks happy.” I murmured out, hoping that answer would suffice. “I think she looks lonely.” She wasn’t looking at me, but instead was staring intently at the drawing. The tone she used sounded to me as though she wasn’t telling me that the girl looked lonely, but instead was telling herself. Her lips were two straight lines, both a sense of sadness and nostalgia crossed over her face.

The more I remembered looking at the picture, the more entranced I became. The lines looked at first to be mistakes, but I soon realized that none of them were mistakes; they were all purposeful and fulfilling to the meaning of the piece. She looked satisfied. She looked reserved. She looked content.

But my mother must not have felt the same way.

Somewhere throughout the time she questioned me about the emotions of the little girl in the drawing and the time I spent contemplating the artistic ability of this Judith Glantzmann, her hand had fallen off of my shoulder; her grasp had let loose - like little droplets of water falling from the sky or tears streaming down and staining whatever they let loose on.

I didn’t notice it at first, but eventually the air next to and behind me became cold, like the wind had picked up and the temperature turned chilly.

I remember breaking free from the spell the picture had entailed on me, my eyesight cut loose from it and I turned to see nothing behind me.

I was alone. No mother.

I remember feeling odd at first. Odd as in the sense when you get *deja vu*, or when you’re trying to fall asleep but instead of going unconscious, you are stuck in that in between sense where your body and senses are asleep but your consciousness is not quite yet.

So there I stood: lost and forsaken. The day started with an unhappy mother and an addled daughter: together from the start. Now, the day was ending with a desolated daughter and a liberated mother: separated on purpose.

The sky was downpouring upon me. I walked the streets of Seattle alone with only my dull, concrete-gray umbrella to protect me from the flood above me.

This was the first time in twenty years that I was visiting my hometown, after years of foster care and orphanages. I came here for one reason and one reason only.

The Frye Art Museum lingered above me in the opalescent sky. The incessant sprinkle of rain and overlay of clouds was a rude awakening compared to the sweet zephyr from the blithe Georgian skies, where I now lived.

The stark stone of the outside walls of the museum blended in with the surrounding environment: monotonous and bleak.

As soon as I walked inside, a hush fell over me. The subdued lighting and the smell of musty wood and putrid canvas brought me back to that day again. The details swarmed to my memory and it took all my strength to not double over in agony.

I pushed forward to that crimson corner with the somber lighting.

I didn't need a map, nor a guide to show me the way. My feet led me straight to it, as if it was only yesterday I had been dragged there by my mother instead of twenty years ago.

As I got closer to the enclosed corner, my heart started to beat out of my chest. My head began to get woozy and my thoughts went back and forth from the past to the present to the past to the present...

And then suddenly: there it was.

Just how I remembered it.

The salmon colored paper was the same shade, the sketched lines were not faded, but just as dominant as I remembered them. The havoc of the pencil was just as intricate. And the face was just as dictating.

But the eyes. The eyes were just as augmented.

I ignored the rest of the drawing and instead looked straight into the girl's eyes. The charm those eyes placed on me was valiant, and the emotions behind those eyes was just as potent.

"What do you see?" my mother's voice rang clear in my head. The echo of her voice made it sound like a dream: or a nightmare. The impression of her wafted in my memory. I felt the burdensome weight of her hand on my shoulder just like I did many years before. I swear I could even smell her lilac and daisy scented perfume wafting through the air around me, and singing little mocking tunes of her abandoning and my ignorance.

I stopped to think; this time intending on giving her imaginary figure my real answer, not the one I said two decades ago because that was as profound of an insight I could get as an eight-years-old.

I studied the eyes. I saw the sadness behind the facade. I saw the dirt surrounding the innocence: too wholesome for the troubled face it sat on. I saw not a trickling stream but a muggy swamp conveyed in those slits. And the more I looked into the eyes, the more decay I saw in them. They didn't look like the gratified and pleased eyes I stared into as a child. They didn't look virginial or guiltless like I assumed. They looked speckled with scum. They looked tinted with the unmorals of greed and corruption. They looked full of secrets, waiting to be told at the worst times. It looked like a thunder storm was brewing in those eyes and any second now, the rain would start to pour down and stain the community.

They looked like defeat.

And as I stared at that face that was once unblemished, the memory of my mother still stark all around me both physically and mentally, I heard footsteps echoing across the capacious hall, heading towards the dingy corner with the drawing of the girl.

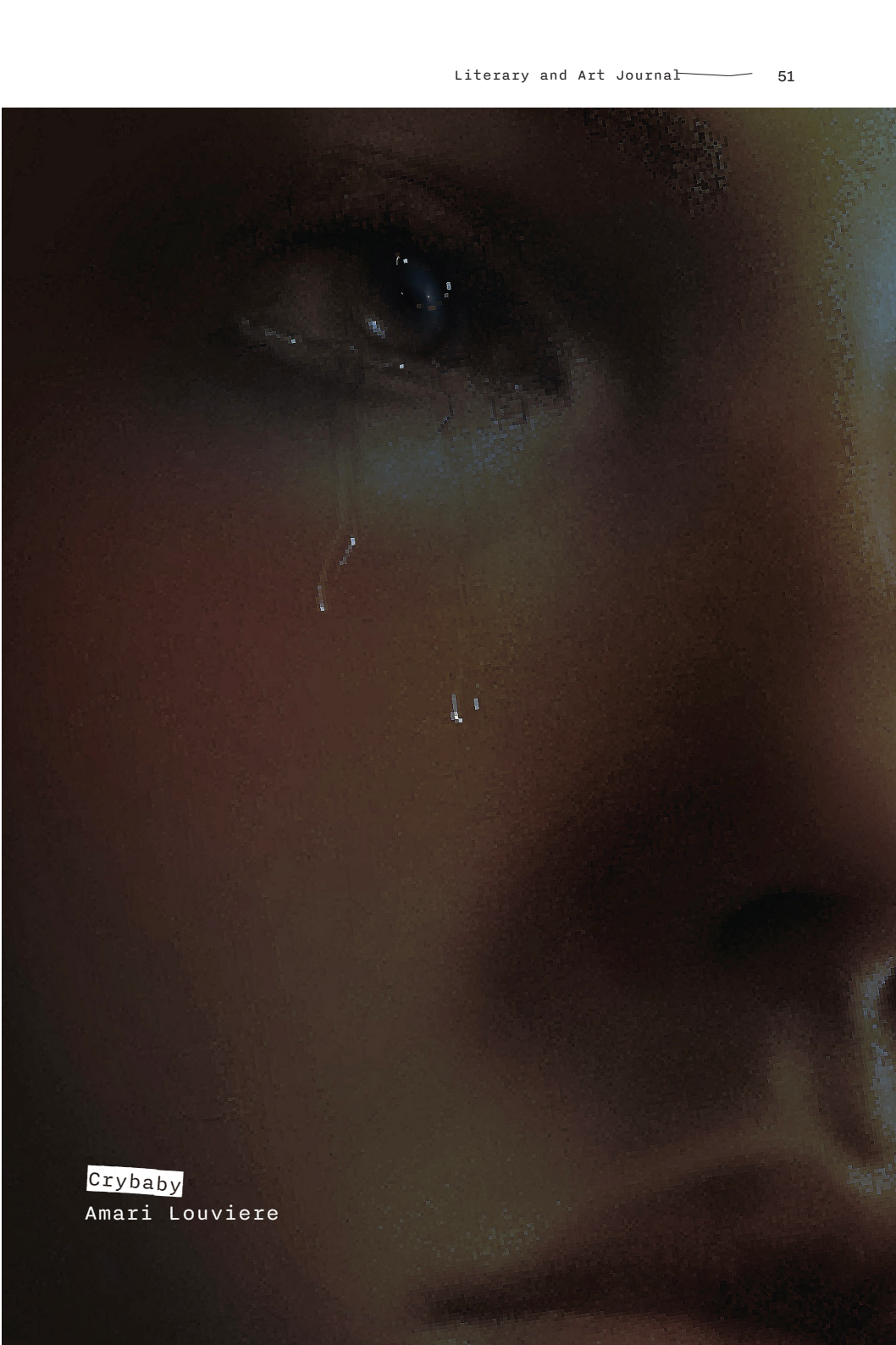
I broke free from the sight of those eyes and instead placed my sight on a pair of people. It was a mother and daughter, meandering hand in hand, slowly towards where I was standing. They stopped next to me and I saw in my peripheral vision, the mother's arms around the girl's shoulders. "What do you think?" I heard the mother whisper to the daughter.

"I think this one is my favorite so far." She responded to the question posed. "I think so too." The mother's voice was at ease and as she spoke, her hug around her daughter tightened and they turned to walk off together.

As their healthy and pure mark stained my consciousness, the remembrance of my mother was pushed to the side. The fog her cruelty had possessed over me was slowly cascading off of me and the love this mother and daughter felt for each other was slowly healing and replacing the abuse my mother had bruised upon me.

I turned around to see them amble off to the next exhibit. The space between them was limited as the mother was whispering again into the daughter's ear. A giggle escaped from the daughter and I heard the mother give a sharp, "shhh," before laughing out loud herself.

Their chuckles and snickers wafted into the absence of their presence as they disappeared around a corner: together. A content mother and an admired daughter. Both loved and neither deserted.



Crybaby

Amari Louviere

CW Child Abuse

always drowning in flames Madeline Bitzer

the pronunciation you clawed my
conscious with was
jagged little
slits of spit

they clung to my innocence
and abandoned my freedom

how can children be
born so naive
when the harshness
within the world will
continue to jab the dagger
further in their back

i didn't know when you gifted
me a tiffany and co bracelet
it meant a loan that
increases interest each
time i hiss back

i didn't know that turning
eighteen
meant a leash was taut
tightly around my swollen neck

i didn't know that fighting
for myself meant
drowning in a losing fire

i didn't know i could write an
entire
childhood on this page

i could turn my head and
feed the flames my enemy
but the blood is still drying on my hands

i could cry the fire away
but i am dried up like a
widow

i didn't know that a
gunshot echoed through
the skull
like the words chimed by
a christmas choir

i didn't know in a poorly
wrapped gift
you saw pleasure in
drawing sympathy
and praise like a
sword out of a rock

i didn't know you thought 'brave' was staying
while i thought brave was leaving

i didn't know that when the lights went out,
the monster wasn't under my bed,
but in the living room
on his eleventh hour of television
while i
barely eight at the time
put myself to bed

i didn't know in my
blonde curly locks
you saw the rope to
lasso my heart with

i didn't know you saw
in a child
another spark of happiness
you could steal like
the way the wind steals a flame

why the need for the birthday girl
to blow out the candles
when her father can do it
for her

i didn't know in each milestone
you saw the cage around my growing body
gain height and length as i shrunk away
dimming

i didn't know i was a failed attempt at gloat.

why raise a child
when they didn't harmonize
with your shrill notes of
demand and attention
from the public
pleasing

i didn't know you cried fake tears to
drown me drilled in the same spot

i didn't know you saw
me
as a mess-up

a failure
 a mistake
 towards the end

i didn't know that a single note
 with three sentences on it
 could end a lifeline

i saw the fierce flames burning at the
 end
 of the tunnel and i
 ran

while you stood with the gasoline
 in one hand
 and a drink in the other
 watching as the flames
 cried out
 slurs and fits of anger
 all while throwing a fit
 stomping her feet as she blazes my fragile skin
 howling yowling wailing
 for me to burn like i deserve
 completing the dangerous show
 with one slice of heat and i
 crumple
 to
 the
 ground

then the fire whooshes away alongside the man with the gasoline and
 drink and they get drunk off the power

someone was always drowning in flames.

CW Child Abuse**inspiration is a jealousy** Madeline Bitzer

sometimes i wonder
 what my old room
 in chicago looks like.
 my bed,
 once slept in
 and wept in,
 now sunken within
 and decayed,
 add a thin layer
 of dust dirtied with
 tears of anger
 and mistreatment
 settled deep in their roots.
 my childhood
 floats up around
 the room,
 swells and digresses
 in time,
 like the shadow
 of a ghost:
 haunting
 -what could have been
 the dresser, once cream,
 now covered in
 sticker residue
 from when i was
 four and indestructible.
 inside each cabinet lay

discarded
items, from when i was
in a rush to run away
and couldn't give those
items a second thought
for fear of being caught and captured. i
wonder how those items feel after being
abandoned?
probably similar to how i'm
feeling.
-what could have been
years of holiday visits,
sleepovers,
movie nights,
my graduation,
my 18th birthday,
19th birthday,
27th birthday...
instead:
the words
"you are the reason he cries himself to sleep every night,
you are such a bitch, such an egotistical daughter, you are so selfish"
circle around the sun stale room.
the countless times i looked
out the window,
admiring all the children
playing outside in the summer breeze,
while i was locked inside,

forced to deep clean the house
top to bottom
at the age of seven.
and in a couple of hours,
i would hear the familiar
rumble of his car tires
as he arrives home,
his clunky boots
as he clambers
up the back porch,
the hiss of the lock
and the door creak as he enters the house
and his stern inspection
of every corner of the house,
looking under chairs,
in cabinets,
behind the tv,
as he grades my work a D minus
and tells me to fix my mistakes.
then he whips off his muddy boots
admiring the track of dirt he has left
on my freshly mopped floors,
lays his wood cutting and grass sweaty
body onto my freshly vacuumed couch
and eats chips and drinks soda while i continue what i have been doing all day.
but as the chatter and fake laughter on the tv thug on,
and the munch of chips and crumbs falling through the cracks of the couch, and
children's laughter and the sound of bikes being rolled past the front window,

moan on,
all i can hear is my pressured heartbeat that has painstakingly been beating since i
first heard those tires on the driveway.
my eyes are tearing with alarm,
my face is red with anger and resentment,
my tongue tightens with complaints,
instead, i hold back the wave rolling through my body
and get to work.
my hands shake from exhaustion and fear,
but it's better than being beat on with words of spite.
so i clean
and clean
and clean.
i go to bed in my dust-infected bed
and wake up the next morning
to the slam of the back door,
the crushing sound of his overweighted tires,
and the reckless tv noise with the news still on.
i clamber out of bed,
awaken with the idea that for the next six hours i am free,
only to find the house in disarray.
red solo cups scattered everywhere from the party he hosted till two in the morn-
ing, the strange teenage boys he invited into our house as i tried to sleep and dream
of a world unlike my own. my bedroom door freshly ajar from when the teenage
boys snuck into my room to have a look at me, the front and back doors are both
unlocked even though i am seven years old and home alone, the gallon of milk and
dozen of eggs left out on the counter to spoil,
the stove still lit, cooking a shriveled-up hot dog from the night before,

the mail of unpaid bills from the last several months stacked up tall on the dining
room table, tools and screws and nuts and bolts sprayed along the floor for my bare
feet to tiptoe over or else be amputated,
and the list of chores to do that day scribbled on a piece of paper with a warning of
“OR ELSE.”
i get to work,
and i clean,
and clean,
and clean.

The Imagined Grave of a Gay Granddaughter
Madeline Wade

Time melts and pools under summer sun
I change my shirt twice in one day.

Alone, my harried reflection
Caught in the bedroom mirror
I think of them, this final call
Tightening my brow.

They will sit close in those
heavy, wooden chairs,
Frozen as they listen—
The granddaughter they love, dead.
They'll let the news sit in their throats,
Pool in their eyes.

A gentle breeze blows off the lake
She shares the blanket with me.
Her gentle fingertip
Tracing each knuckle.
I lean in, breathe deep.

I fear when I call
the tears will leak through the phone
Soaking my shirt, Frizzing my hair.

That soundless summer rain will drip
through the holes In my sneakers.
My skin bristles, fighting

a quiet that wants to break my bones.

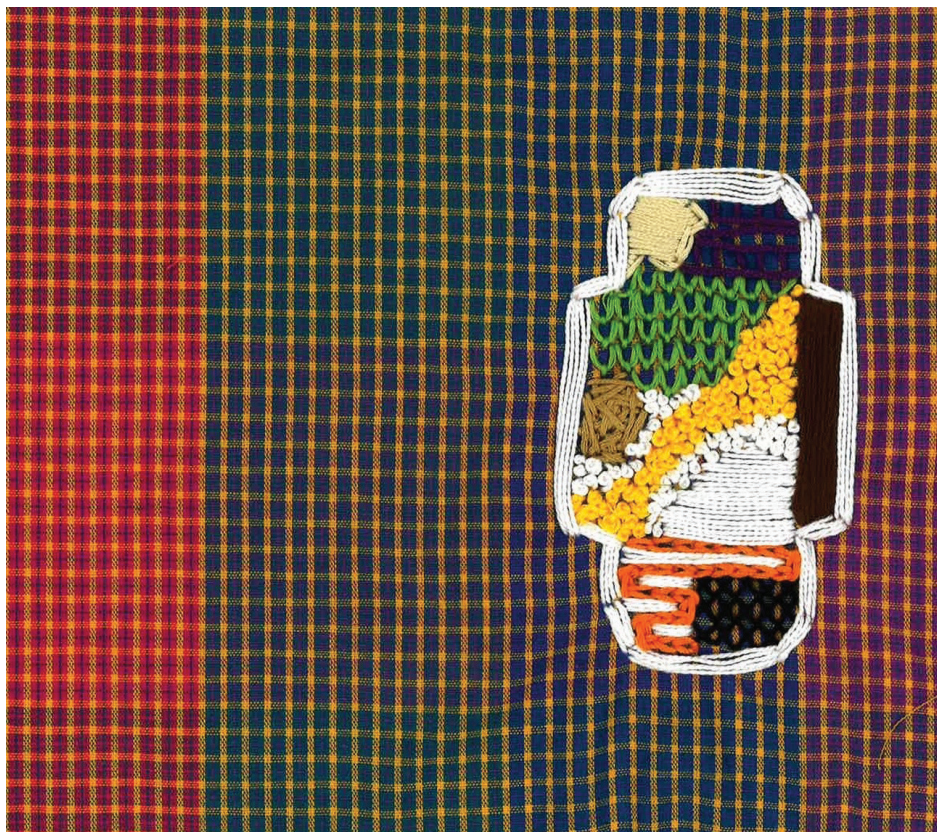




Spot the Difference



Jesse Beck





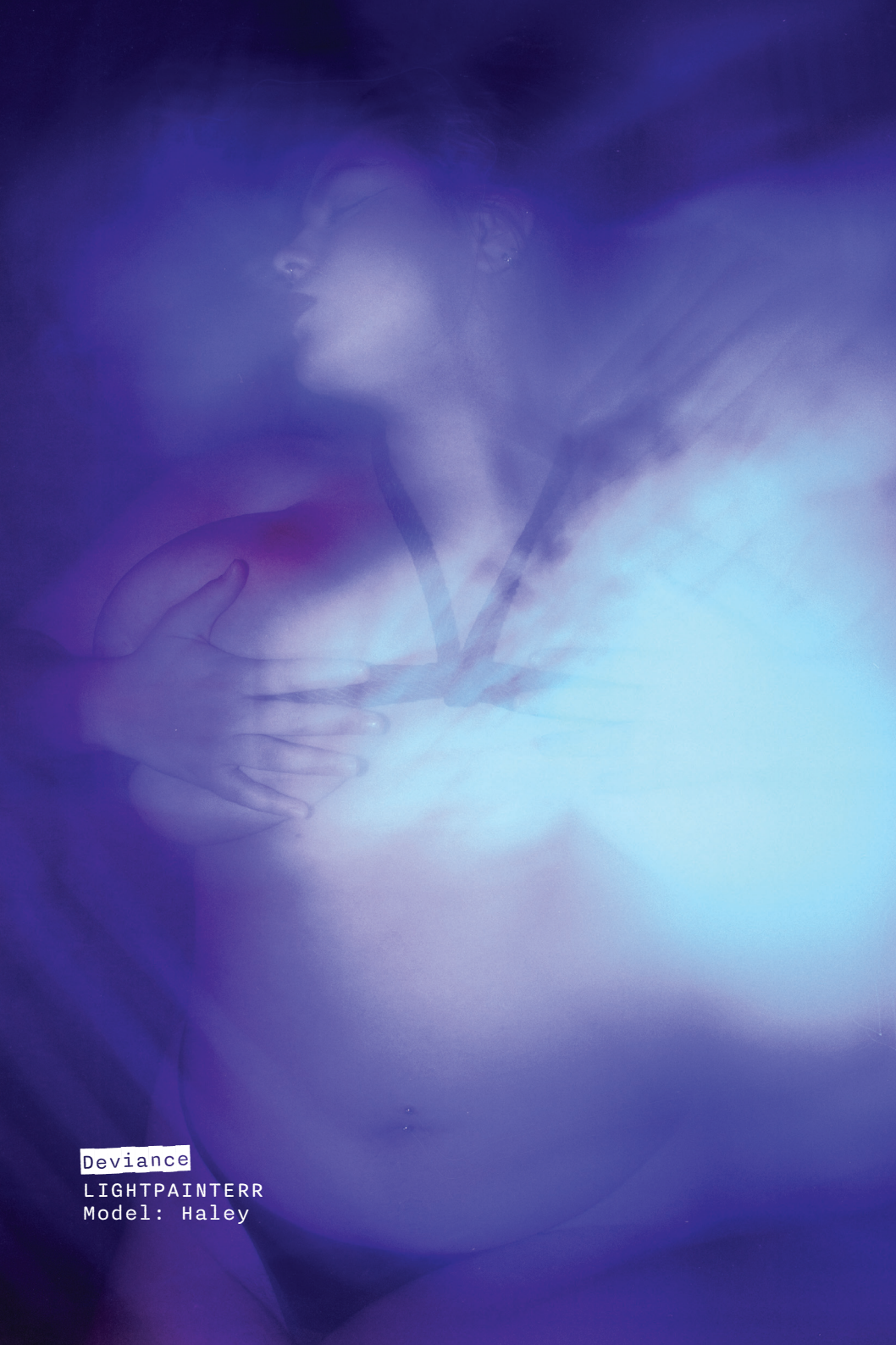
Haley Salmen

For many people, feelings around their periods can vary from dysphoric, painful, refreshing, neutral or even mixed feelings. This piece highlights how people go through different experiences with their period, especially in the context of queer and trans people. I grew up struggling with a period. Monthly, I would struggle to get out of bed and do anything but sleep and often was invalidated. These experiences inspired me to make this piece.

Mary

Solveig Reda

I told myself I would stop writing poetry for you
but that was before you told me you loved me
and frankly,
if that was your takeaway from the last poem I wrote,
I must not be much of a poet.
This time I will say what I mean.
Once, in gym class,
you took an elbow to the face,
and I watched the blood gush over your mouth,
my favorite color sticking in your teeth,
and I have never wanted to kiss you more.
When I was a child
I turned the shower heat as high as it would go
and stood until my skin burned pink,
because I was already convinced I was going to
hell and I thought I should practice.
This is what you feel like:
my hand on the handle
coaxing the heat higher still.
I keep a polaroid photo of you in my desk drawer
tucked beneath a memory of you laughing and calling me a dyke.
What do I do with the memory of your mouth on mine?
The difference between us is this:
you think this is romantic.
I'm sorry I didn't lick the red from your teeth
if only to take it from you.



Deviance

LIGHTPAINTERR
Model: Haley

Pride (A Change is Gonna Come)

shawn

Part I: Change

Change. A whirlwind. A sudden shift. Change. Gradual. Evolving with time. Change. To make or become different. Change. The act of becoming different. How have I changed? Have I changed? Will this change how people see me? Now there's fear. I can't keep it inside forever. Do I hit send? I'm tired of hiding. Doubt creeps in. A nervous hand. A shaky breath. A sweaty brow. But it's necessary. I must, it's time. I've held off long enough. Change. No more fear. No holding back. I am who I am and nothing will change that. I'll ask again. Have I changed? This time I think yes. Emerge. Free. I'm still the same me. You just know more. Alright. Here it goes.

Change.

The dictionary says that change is when we choose to become different and the process we endure to get there, wherever "there" is, that place on the other side that's better and more satisfying than the present moment, an awakening, a revelation, a realisation, an epiphany I didn't realize I had until the days of pep rallies, football games, and class field trips—high school, the burning question of my sexuality ringing through the ears of my classmates, a part of my coming of age story, but still I was in a cocoon detached from everyone and too afraid to be my true self until I burst, spread my wings and prepared to fly, for I had become a butterfly, a beautiful queer butterfly.

Embracing femininity was something I welcomed. When I get ready I need all the essentials: Big hoop earrings, blush on my cheeks, glossy lips that shine, a purse to compliment each outfit (who knew how great purses were!) Perfume that made me smell of vanilla and sweet dreams, scrunchies on my wrists (even though I don't have hair), dainty necklaces, and painted nails. Realizing clothes don't have a gender, how I presented myself was a performance, an artform, an expression of my own creativity and imagination. All of this culminated in bigger self-confidence, being unapologetic of what I liked and what I believed to be beautiful. A change did happen, a change of how I presented myself yet it was always there, just hidden away. Loud, colorful, feminine, whatever label you choose, who cares what others would say. But was that necessarily true?

Being out is exhausting.

Being out is refreshing.

The backlash is too much.

The acceptance is overwhelming.

I hear things like:

I hear things like:

“I don’t agree with that lifestyle,”

“I love how happy you are now”

“I want nothing to do with him.”

“Wanna go out sometime?”

I can’t stand all eyes on me.

I love the attention.

Leave me alone.

Take a picture, it lasts longer.

I should just go back into denying.

I’ll never go back to hiding who I am

I’m still the same old me

I’m the same old me, but better

“Are you gay?”

“Are you gay?”

No

No, but I do like boys

When I hear the phrase, “you’ve changed,” I stop and think, have I changed or has your perception of me, the idea of me that lives in your head (rent free), formulated by chance encounters and social media posts, has that changed—yes and no, more so but less so at the same time, different, but still the same just more confident, more bold, more happy because I am able to walk down the street with my head held high regardless if I’m wearing baggy clothes or a crop top with some makeup on and it’s the best damn feeling in the world and it’s because of that that I am now free, so yes, maybe I have changed, but I’ve changed for the better because now I have pride.

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Part II: Pride

So what is Pride? It seems I always have questions. Some I can answer. Some I can’t. I’ll try my best to answer this one. Pride makes me feel like I belong. To belong, to have Pride is almost euphoric. A change. Always there, but hidden. Finally. Erupting with Pride, on display for the world to see and relish. Think “Firework” by Katy Perry. “You’re gonna leave ‘em all in awe, awe, awe.” On repeat. The testimony of a glorious outcome. An anthem of Pride. Pride in my accomplishments. Oh how far I’ve come. A testament to the change I have undergone. The dignity I feel. The equality I fight for. The visibility I so deserve. Pride! Pride! Pride! Scream and shout to achieve it. I have to say it to believe it. And boy do I believe it.

Pride is meant to be a celebration, a parade, a festival, a joyous event that acknowledges the struggles and hardships it takes to get to this place, this place of belonging and acceptance that feels like an eternity to achieve, but the results are ever rewarding and it takes me back, back to my first Pride, a day that I will cherish for the rest of my days, an everlasting whirlwind of emotions, all good mind you just so much it seemed to me like a sensory overload.

A sensory overload that brought back a memory, one so distinct I couldn’t forget it

if I tried, when I used to go over to my friend's house and play with her dolls, dolls of all shapes, colors, and sizes, never judged because dolls are "for girls"—how I was so excited, that childish excitement that was lost for so many years, finally coming back to the light, an exciting thrill and the pure joy I felt, how we all feel joy when we get to participate in the fun, to be children, in a sense we never leave the doll-house, that sense of Pride, happiness, joy is still there.

Makeup, check. Gems, check. Bracelets, check. Fan, check. I was there to show the world, or at least part of it, who I was, what I am, and how I feel.

Now look in the mirror. Who looks back?

A doll, pretty as a Barbie with the attitude of a Brat

Gender is only a performance.

The human body is a canvas.

On display, vulnerable, but powerful.

Change leads to Pride.

I'm ready.

The "Virginia is for Lovers" sign redecorated with the colors of the rainbow to show that Virginia was and is for all lovers. Beautiful Southern Pride. The music of Whitney Houston and Lady Gaga blasting from the speakers as it shook the park, people, young and old, dancing and singing. The families, children with their parents, parents with their children. The drag queens who grace us with their presence. What makes a queen? Their regal adornment, elegant status, compassionate atmosphere, offering comfort, and compliments to all their subjects. What makes a queen? The tent labeled "free mom hugs" and one mom offering to hug me, an adult but still someone's child too. A mother's hug is like a blanket, a safe space away from the harsh cruel realities of the real world, but a hug can also be reassuring as with every hug, we must let go, but the tenderness and protection is still there. Away from our mothers, our homes—we make our homes wherever we can with whoever we choose, our chosen family, not by blood, not by name, not by dreams or goals, but by connections and the deep emotions we feel for one another.

Camaraderie.

The acceptance that came to me was something so natural and loving that I could

only wish the same onto others. To my friends and chosen family, both blood and otherwise, we became intertwined in being loud and proud, a pack of lions willing to protect each other and those like us in our Pride. I am an advocate for every Black child who thinks they might be different, for every brother, sister, and sibling who chooses to live their life openly and free, to have Pride in their being, their sexuality. We form tight bonds that refuse to bend or snap with those along our journey of acceptance and self love. That's what I'm most proud of. How I was, am, and continue to share myself with those who will listen, who love me for me. To be vulnerable in a way that allows you to take back control. Vulnerability in the ability to share the best parts of yourself with others.

So yes, that's what Pride means to me, a product of the change I've gone through, years of being trapped and now I'm free. My youth and inner child are shining through into adulthood. Change is a metamorphosis we go through based on our experiences. The monarch caterpillar stays in its cocoon for eight to twelve days. The drag queens get ready for the show, the audience cheering in anticipation.

Waiting

The monarch erupts and flies. The Queens take the stage. They've transformed. I've transformed. I've changed.

That girl is proud as hell, and she sure is coming out today.

Wildfire RebirthKylie Love Gatchalian

I.

the strike of a match
signals change.
flames sweep through the forest
a deer bounds by, fur burnt,
looking for a way out.
meanwhile, i stand feet planted,
longing to burn

could fire rejuvenate the forest?
stuck in the midst of a blazing wildfire,
hoping that destruction will snuff out
my yearning for rebirth

the flames grip me and turn me into ashes

II.

the land, now barren, is covered with dust.
my toes dig into the dry soil
i meander through what remains:
charred branches, thick smoky air,
and the tired earth

i kneel and kiss the ground, wishing for rain

III.

a delicate indication of spring—
a rabbit hops by, button-nosed,
sniffing the fresh greenery
next comes a violent but marvelous outgrowth:
wildflowers blossom around me
soft and wild, tiny tufts of lupine
sprout their way through what was once
cold hardened ground.
i kneel close to the soil,
laughing as blades of grass
softly tickle my fingertips

i bloom with the forest's resilience





The River



Hyunji da Silva

Fire on Fire on Fire

Jenn Bui

I am sweating and hot and as I walk down the city streets, heat radiating from the asphalt, I think about how my parents love the summer temperatures. I never did, in fact, I love the coolness and colors of fall and maybe I'd even go as far to say that I like the snow. Of course I do, because like all other Virginian children I would join the neighborhood kids in those winter white moments, laid in the snow tracing angels, and topped off each no-school day with a cup of hot chocolate.

When my aunt came to America, she was 32 and I was 16, and we were home together when she came up to my room to excitedly tell me it was snowing - this was her first ever snow.

My mother would complain every time the annual blizzard came around. Something about the tropical sun of Nha Trang. I never really knew how she preferred the heavy, wet air, not until I reached back into the depths of my memory and feel the hug of the Vietnam heat and maybe I still don't necessarily get it but I get why. I only ever visited once when I was 7. My dad lived there until 20, when my grandpa had no choice but to move their family to America post-war. My mom came over when she was also 20, when she married my dad and shortly had me.

Do you ever think about how your parents have only known you for a fraction of their lives but you've known them for your entire life? Sometimes I think about how I have known America my entire life when it is only a fraction of theirs. Sometimes I wonder if this is the choice they would have made were their home country not poisoned in memory. Lately, my mom has forbidden me from talking to her about the news because it has become too depressing for her. Lately, we have been talking about how the American dream has failed her.

At first, I decided against performing this piece. My favorite poem I've ever written is about our cosmic insignificance in an infinite universe and somehow my family's story felt too big to carry into these studios and dump into your arms. I used to love performing my writing, I used to compete in speech competitions and for some reason now the words that real life wrote were just too much.

Then, I decided to maybe print it as a piece in 6pt font so the words didn't feel as loud - used a Comic Sans-esque type and changed the color from black to make it feel a little friendlier. I added decorations to the pages and even though I originally decided to print it on 11x17, 8x11 was the biggest I could bear looking at that story in.

Clearly, I didn't decide to present it that way. I saw my best friend for the first time in months this weekend and we reminisced about the fire on fire on fire that was our friendships with people in high school. We used to share pain the same way laughter is shared and not that we didn't have our happy moments but when two, three fires feed off of each other eventually everything becomes engulfed. And we're not like that anymore but maybe sometimes, for me, it still feels good to ignite parts of me into that anger at the world.

I wrote a second ending to this piece not because the first ending wasn't real - it was all too real, it was all these intense words and metaphors and more just to say that things are hard and America sucks, all things that everyone knows.

What I need to know, what I need to tell myself is what I am writing into this new ending. It is what I am now reading rather than printing because I want all of these words in their total sadness and happiness to have an impermanence that that printed piece would have immortalized, a fleetingness in the way that emotions come and go. The world always seems to be on a steady march towards the bad and the ugly and my cynicism observes this but the cynic fails to remember the joys of the world that is to be celebrated.

So this is me doing that in these words - this is me laying that short story in your arms of how disenchanting my mother's become with the country that took us in and I'd be lying to say it doesn't continue to be hard, but now this is me assuring you that last summer, I brought a barn kitten home as a surprise for my sister and even though my mom was mad at me, we named her Miso and she reminds her of the pets she had running around her family's farm when she was 17. This is me telling you that even though the first part of this writing was edging towards a melancholy, there is so much that has gotten better that stands outside of our experience of Western institutions - and that's the hope isn't it? It's that the fire inside of me diminishes at the breath of a boy I met two years ago and the flames around all of us are not burning so much that we are suffocating because we can still see over the embers and like all humans who came before us, **we will learn to harness the fire.**

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