



*Fall 2021*

# AMENDMENT

*literary and art journal*



SOCIAL PROGRESSION  
THROUGH ARTISTIC EXPRESSION



## *About the Cover*

### **BADU BABY**

*Solé Denton*

This piece titled “Badu Baby” was inspired by the queen herself, Ms.Erykah Badu. I was in the creative mood but I wasn’t sure what I wanted to paint. I thought I’d get inspired by some music so I grabbed my phone and hit shuffle. The first song that played was “On & On” by Erykah. This is one of my favorite songs and I then realized that I had to paint her! I looked through Pinterest for some inspiration and came across an old photo of her that I’d never seen before. I decided that that was exactly what I was going to paint. I searched YouTube for an Erykah Badu playlist and got to work.

The next song that played was an unreleased song called “Tyrone.” That song is yet another absolute jam. As I painted on my bedroom floor I harmonized with her as she said “You need to call Tyrooooooone, hold on...but you can’t use my phone.” I sang with the utmost sass and disrespect just as she did. With each beat came another brushstroke and before I knew it, I was done. I ended the painting with a light coat of glitter to make it shimmer and sparkle just as Badu does. Just like that, the painting was complete.

All it took was a 24x36 inch canvas, acrylic paints, paint markers, some gold glitter, and some harmonies by Erykah to create “Badu Baby.”

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## *Mission*

**AMENDMENT** /ə'men(d)mənt/

1. An annual literary and art journal that seeks to promote thoughtful discussion on issues such as equality, class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and identity.
2. A socially progressive student-run organization at Virginia Commonwealth University that advocates for social change through artistic expression, as well as provides a platform for historically marginalized voices in the artistic and literary community.
3. What you're holding in your hands.

## *Acknowledgements*

This book would not be possible without the sustained efforts of a number of wonderful and dedicated people.

To our delightful staff, who commit their Friday afternoons to meetings, where they continually bring the most impactful conversations to the table over juice and cookies.

To the inner staff: Howman Pagola, Multimedia Editor extraordinaire; Zoe Perry, a truly wonderful Social Media Manager; Rachel Poulter-Martinez, the newest addition as our incredible Literary Editor, and, of course, the illustrious Abby Walsh, our Editor-in-Chief and an absolute force of nature.

To the staff of the SMC: Jessica Clary, Dominique Lee, Owen Martin, and Mark Jeffries, as well as our faculty sponsor, Liz Canfield, our designers Gabi Wood and Bailey Wood, and everyone who has kept the SMC building and the Annex in working order. Your efforts are greatly appreciated.

To the artists and writers who trusted us with their work, particularly Solé Denton, who agreed to be featured in this anthology. Without their skills and their generosity, we would have nothing to publish.

And finally, to you, for picking this anthology up, and reading through the results of those efforts. We sincerely hope you will find the works contained in these pages thought-provoking, affirming, and engaging.

## *Letter from the Editor*

I don't have the four-year experience at Amendment that my mentors have spoken about in past issues of our book. I didn't join until my sophomore year, but the pull was there since I first came to VCU. I remember walking through the SOVO fair and grabbing the previous year's copy, the one with St. Sebastian on the cover. The copy is somewhere lost to history, but the name stuck in my mind. So I went back the next year, determined to actually reach out in my second year of college. I grabbed another copy (again, now lost to history and three years of moving in and out of dorms) and wrote my name down on the email list.

Now here I am, three years, three editors, three majors, two minors, one pandemic, and a whole lot of tears and laughs later. I have met some of the best people I'll ever know through this publication. I have developed my love for politics, I've found my voice, and I'm not ready to leave. I am leaving this publication in incredible hands, but I will deeply miss it and everyone who has dedicated their Friday evenings to discuss art and culture and politics.

I would like to thank the three editors-in-chief that came before me: Emily Henderson, Barjaa Brown, and Sonnet Garcia. Emily, you let me try something new as literary editor and watched me take my first steps out of my shell. As I write this letter from the editor, I am referencing what you wrote in past editions. Barjaa, you were there for me at all times, even outside of Amendment. There's going to be a place in my heart for you for the rest of my life. Sonnet, you helped me transition into my leadership role and gave me all the tools I needed to succeed after you graduated. I look up to the three of you and I hope I lived up to your legacies at Amendment.

And you, dear reader. I hope you can feel the sheer volume of love and passion that we have poured into this book. Enjoy.

*- Abigail Walsh  
Editor in Chief*

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## THE FLAG

Rae Martin

*Amendment Literary Award Winner*

When the monsters came, they were carrying torches. At least that's what they told me. I had long heard the stories told to me by those who came before. Creatures of evil that walked among us looked like us but were not us. I read the poetry, watched the movies, and heard the tense conversations that took place behind closed doors. I thought I knew these monsters. I closed my eyes and saw their pallid faces, empty blue eyes, and hair drained of all its color. They were old and decrepit, like the undead rising out of the earth.

As a child, I feared them. My mother would tell me they lived long ago. That brave knights battled the monsters and sent them back to the shadows, never to be seen again. My father told me about the knights' valor. How they sacrificed their lives to save our homeland. How the knights outwitted the monsters through tactics and military might. When I asked about the people the monsters massacred like cattle and why. My parents had no answers. I learned to stop asking questions.

When the monsters came, they were carrying torches, but these were not the monsters I knew. They marched in a line through my home, and I saw their faces illuminated by the flames. They were not ghosts or ghouls or an undead army; their faces were young and alive. They looked like teachers, soldiers, neighbors, presidents—some faces reminded me of friends and loved ones. I don't remember much more from that night, but I remember the boy holding the red flag with the black cross.

I had seen it before in the books and myths of old. Wisemen told me the black cross was once a symbol of good fortune, but the monsters stole it away from its home. They remolded it into something perverse and dark. The Wisemen called it an equilateral cross, with its arms bent in ninety-degree angles. They said it had another name, but it was one we shouldn't say. Perhaps they thought we'd find comfort in geometry, or maybe they were afraid of the power the name might have. The monsters dyed the symbol black and bathed it in red blood. They placed it in a bubble of empty white to make their flag. It looked still and flat on the pages of my books, but the thing in the boy's hand was alive. It smiled and waved, reveling in the warm light of the torches that surrounded it.

I saw the flag consume the boy. It wrapped itself around the boy's head and shimmied its way down his throat. The skin on his body peeled back to reveal the field of red blood. Every scrape, every scratch came together to form the familiar haunting pattern of the black cross. This boy became the monsters' flag. His eyes burned with hatred and rage, but a far-off glimmer of pain twitched underneath the surface. I saw the flag smother the pain and mold it into hate, craft it into a violent rage. I wanted to pity him. He was only a boy, but he had no such empathy

for those who looked like me. He saw brown skin and offered to burn it off. He spat in our faces and called out names I dare not repeat. He celebrated our fear with gleeful laughter. I wanted to pity him, but he welcomed the flag's consumption. He coveted its power. He lusted for the pain it would soon bring.

The next day the monsters marched and murdered. I saw her face on the news first. I heard her name, and how she died so many times, I can still recite it now. They murdered her in the street. They ran her over with no remorse. "An equilateral cross, with its arms bent in ninety-degree angles." It's what her body looked like on the asphalt. I saw her mother weep. I saw my home collapse in pain. The more and more I looked, the more and more I saw the flag. It draped the leaders who pontificated about both sides. It pored out of the mouths of friends with every half-assed "thought and prayer." It leaked out of my father as he blamed the woman with the broken body and defended the boy carrying the red flag with the strange black cross.

After the monsters came, the nation told me not to fear. They told me the monsters escaped the shadows. They told me they would never stand for it again. But I saw them. I saw the red flag with the strange black cross billowing under their alabaster skin. I saw the flag painted on the walls of their hospitals, schools, churches, precincts, prisons. I saw the flag on every monument they so desperately clung to. I saw the words of laws and legislators arrange themselves into the equilateral cross with arms bent at ninety-degree angles. I opened history books, and every page was equilateral cross after god damn equilateral cross. I stared for hours at the folded American flag that hung in my father's office, and through the glass, the red flag with the black cross smiled back at me like it did on that fucking day.

They told me when the monsters came, they were carrying torches, but they seemed to forget the monsters carrying pens. They seemed to forget the monsters carrying pistols and badges. They seemed to forget that the monsters always had fucking been there. They seemed to fucking forget that the red flag with the black cross was on everything they hold so god damn near and dear. They seemed to forget that the monsters' fucking flag was waving under their own skin.

They wrote and whined. They threw us a fucking *concert*. They pretended to care or change, but the red flag with the black cross continued to smile, continued to deport, dehumanize, murder, and rape. It smiled on August 12th, March 13th, May 25th, January 6th, and every day long before, in between, and every day long after. You told me when the monsters came, they were carrying torches. You told me to keep *you* safe. To keep *you* in power. To make *you* feel good and to keep *me* quiet. You. Lied. There were never any monsters. There were never any knights. There is only the red flag with the black cross, and I can see it smiling under your skin. Look in your fucking eyes.





**11:54 AM**  
*Audrey Garrett*



**HOURS**

*Audrey Garrett*



**COME SEE HIM**

*Audrey Garrett*





**CW Physical and Sexual Violence**

**FOR LOT'S NAMELESS WIFE**

*Gillian Moses*

**G**enesis 19:8 *Behold, I have two daughters who have not known any man. Let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please.*

Genesis 19:17 *And as they brought them out, one said, "Escape for your life. Do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley. Escape to the hills, lest you be swept away."*

Genesis 19:26 *But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.* For Lot's Nameless Wife

Sodom is a neighborhood in Greenville, South Carolina:  
trailers and crushed Budweiser cans resting among the bluegrass.  
I think of you, seventeen, stripped of all autonomy,  
your bulging flesh clenched in his calloused hands.  
The coarse hair dotting his knuckles covered your tender face.

He devoured you in his leather boots,  
drove away, a child in a loose cotton nightdress  
grasping a child wrapped in the powder blue linen.  
Motorcycle exhaust caught like a whisper in your throat.

Your mother held you by the shoulders,  
forced a promise from your trembling lips, elucidation.  
Your sons sat in the backseat on the ride to Charlotte,  
a few miles more.

With resolve in your jaw,  
you allowed no glances into the rearview mirror.

I understand what you had to do.

I imagine you visited the ocean one day.  
After your escape, before the girls came,  
and felt the wind in your hair, still long, box red.  
You drove home safely under a blanket of stars,  
relaxed your tense muscles for a moment of freedom.  
No eternity condemned,  
Dead Sea.

You lived decades before  
you sat in the passenger side  
in the parking lot of the funeral home.  
A pastel pink bicycle in the backseat  
for the daughter of your dead son  
who would never learn your name.  
I look into the mirror to find your first apartment.  
Homophily in excess, your eyes the same shade of blue. I would end it,  
if you'd allow it.  
I grasp my mother's hand and pray that you never looked back.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

*Annabelle Starr*

Empathize is an ink drawing made to represent the utter decay one starts to feel when connected with nature itself. It depicts how adverse anthropogenic effects have induced late-stage decay in the ecological environment as well as mankind, with the hope of eliciting pathos out of the many who feel their actions are negligible to the holistic crisis - so that hope may bloom from our hearts, and we can enact change.



## EMPHASIZE

*Annabelle Starr*

**FRUIT OF THE TREE***Gabrielle Nigmond*

Come unto me little children,  
 put your faith upon the cross.  
 As I sit uncomfortably in his lap,  
 my girlhood innocence is lost.  
 They sing of God's great mercies,  
 the everlasting giver of life.  
 God can gladly have mine,  
 his servant stole Paradise.  
 You see his virtuous Shepherd?  
 With Holy hands lifted high?  
 Ask to smell his fingers.  
 Their odor cannot lie.

**AND THE ANGELS WOULDN'T HELP YOU...***Katie Thompson*

I saw roses before I saw red.  
 I blossomed quickly, new and silly in their touch. Beautiful at first, then scary;  
 the petals wouldn't stop falling  
 THE PETALS WOULDN'T STOP  
 like a time-lapse, like  
 a car crash in a silent film.

I watched from outside of my body,  
 mute and desperate in the haze.  
     They had changed all the locks when I wasn't  
         *looking.*

**VIRGINITY***Gabrielle Nigmond*

You're lying on top.  
 I want to share  
 this intimate part of myself.

I grab a towel  
 to catch the blood.  
 Nervous excitement.

Intently staring down,  
 upon completion.  
 There is no red show.

Dry sheets,  
 tell secrets,  
 of that man's desire,  
     When I was eight.





**WETLANDS AND WOMEN**  
*Cas Pierson*

## **CARTWHEELS**

*Neal Friedman*

She cartwheels through the fort,  
 trailed by a gang of virgin boys,  
 kicking up a cloud of dust,  
 probably visible from the village  
 outside the walls on a clear day,  
 so long ago the truth hardly holds together  
 instant ruins, every story:  
 maybe she would've understood that,  
 skipping past the blacksmith,  
 swimming in rusty armor  
 from a forgotten war,  
 the old marsh just a memory,  
 watching the sparks fly  
 each time hammer hits metal,  
 humming an English tune  
 in the seasons before the winning of the forest,  
 the gates kept open,  
 half the colony high on tobacco,  
 the smell of smoked meats  
 the same on both sides;  
 true, she was there,  
 contacting then contracting,  
 but was it a rescue?  
 ...drugged...lost...ambitious,  
 oblivious to the fishing hook on his spirit,  
 unsure of which roles were being played,  
 as vulnerable as a twig on the forest floor,  
 trying to remember his mission  
 against the relentless drums,  
 beat into brief submission,  
 the captain, humming the coming of age tune,  
 grasping to tiny straws of language,  
 warm paint on his face,  
 clinging to the life of the river-  
 centuries of silence  
 broken by one step,  
 setting off a chain,  
 cartwheeling out of control,  
 illuminating a mirror seen only through its cracks.



FEATURED ARTIST

# *Solé Denton*

My name is Solé Denton and I am currently a freshman here at VCU! I am undecided on my major as I love art, but I am also very interested in crime/forensic studies. I have been doing art since I was little, however I just recently got into painting and drawing. I am inspired by the world around me and the controversy that comes with it. I hope my work communicates the idea that we don't need to conform to society and being ourselves is the only way to live. Live unapologetically.



BADU BABY



FEATURED ARTIST

*Solé Denton*



MELLOW YELLOW



FEATURED ARTIST  
*Solé Denton*



TAKE MY HAND



FEATURED ARTIST

*Solé Denton*



**HAD ENOUGH**

“Had Enough” speaks for itself. Black women have had enough. Don’t touch our hair, don’t underestimate us, and most definitely don’t test us. We deserve better and we aren’t afraid to take what we are owed. We’ve had enough.



FEATURED ARTIST

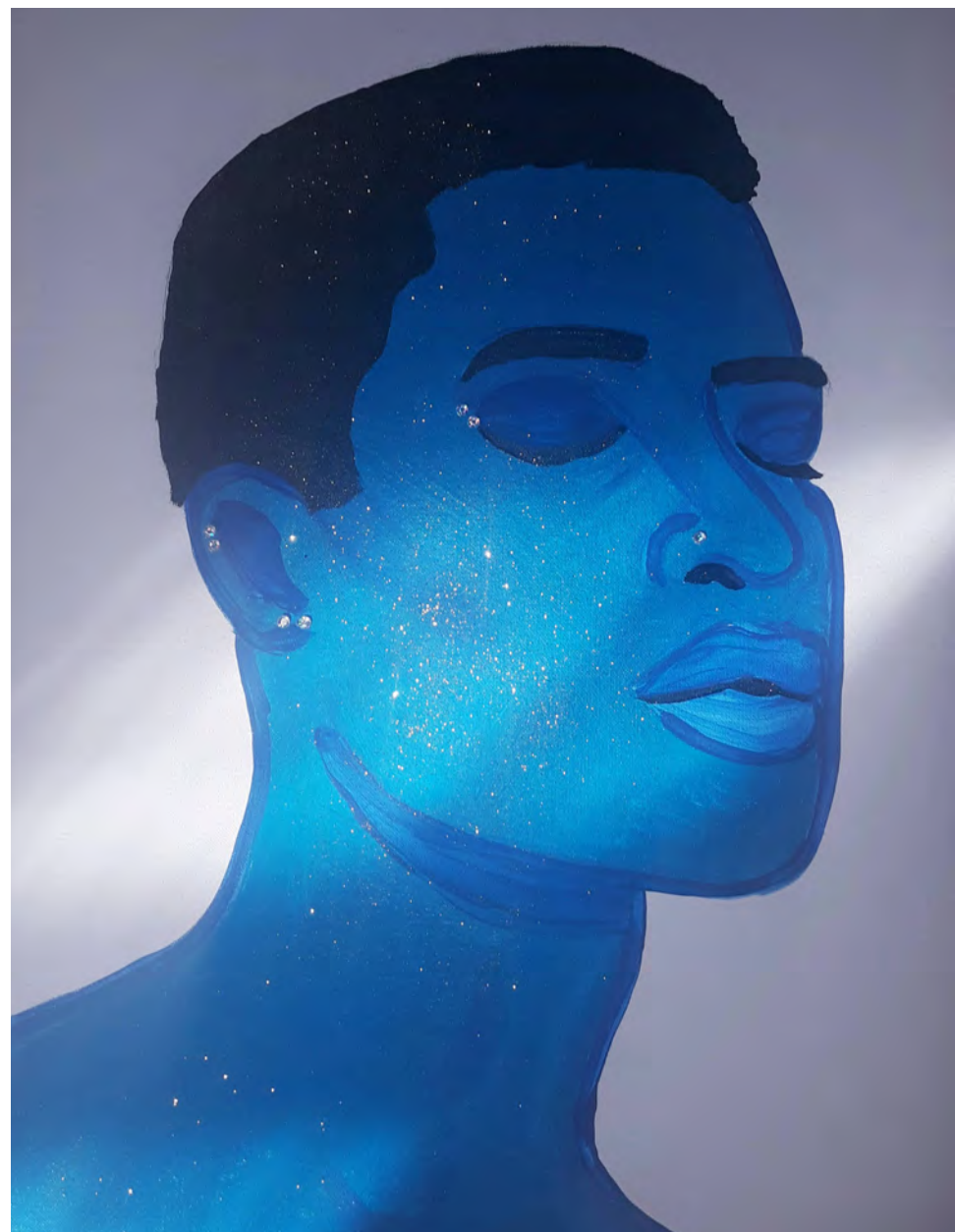
*Solé Denton*



YOU SHOULD SEE ME IN A CROWN



KNOT HAVING IT



THEM





FEATURED ARTIST

*Solé Denton*

#### SUNFLOWER SMILES

“Sunflower Smiles” was inspired by the joys of being a Black woman. It’s about loving every inch of our melanin and shining through the darkness. It’s also about loving every kinky curl on our heads. Whether our hair is type 4b, 4c, or somewhere in between, we should embrace it, love it, treasure it. Fun fact: Sunflowers are one of my favorite flowers, they shine and stand tall just as we do.

## REFLECTIONS

*Lesar Luke*

*A found poem from The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison*

Let me look again  
Now slowly,  
Through the eyes of our peers, our teachers  
We were sinking,  
Into their cultivated ignorance and learned hatred  
We were still in love with ourselves  
But we were lesser  
What was the secret?  
What did we lack?  
Let me look again  
Into a big blue eyed baby doll  
Which all the world had agreed every girl child treasured  
Into shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs  
Where the scale of beauty was absorbed from the silver screen,  
To the Maureen Peals of the world  
Who enchanted the school, adored by all,  
I couldn't join them in their adoration  
To see what all the world said was lovable  
I couldn't find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me.  
Let me look again  
She sat looking in the mirror  
Sugar brown girls  
Sweet and plain  
High cheekbones  
Heavy eyebrows  
Skin glowing like taffeta  
Concealed, veiled, eclipsed  
This is beautiful  
The prettiest I've ever seen.

## THE HAND THAT FEEDS

*Katie Thompson*

### YOU ATE INTO ME

like a carnivorous plant.

i opened my wings, and  
you held me sweetly while i  
corroded.

you fed off me  
again  
and again, and still i wasn't  
enough.

### I ATE UP THE ATTENTION

i devoured it like a dog.

but alone, i hid my canines behind hesitant lips,  
because, of course,  
you were a very good friend,  
and i

was very good.

### IT ATE AT YOU

the silence did,

while your actions sat sour in your stomach.  
a word of advice- don't come to me  
with outstretched palms again.

i will show you the whites of my eyes,  
my dry teeth and curled lip.





**WELCOME TO BEAUTIFUL MARS!**

*Viv Rathfon*

Space exploration, both in media and in reality, has its roots in a colonial, capitalist way of thinking—that any planet we discover is automatically ours to populate and extract resources from. This piece means to invite speculation on what decolonial space habitation could look like or if that is even possible to achieve.



## TWO WINTERS IN

*C.T. Simmons*

Two Winters in,  
I recognized that my early twenties  
Had become an exercise  
In unlearning

The bin leaked cluttered thread  
Into the floors for two years and a third And each rainstorm  
thought our house too fair To ever want to leave

Light fought into my basement room Like knife  
through rotting meat  
And, just like in the other houses,  
I came to understand this as grief

I often walked long walks heading nowhere and Burned strange  
herbs to close the distance Between who I am and who I  
planned on Grievances in my teeth like cracks

Am I not my nation, Leaving folk cold and Molding itself  
to the agenda of despots? Or my human ilk, prospects  
choked; Whole wingspans palsied by expectation?

Lo, I am just your average fool  
Sick with himself for the sake of it  
And grieving that which has still  
Yet to die.

I gasp to illustrate how I  
Bare my mind each Wednesday and  
Deceive the self through grace that simply  
Hasn't learned to stay.

No, I know. The best, the worst,  
And in-between shall pass.  
The fickle hap of this crusade was  
Never meant to last.

Immortalize this dainty page  
For it preserves the truth  
That though I flail and curse the world,  
I aim to crack its tooth.

**FORELSKET**  
*Varsha Vasudevan*



## JUST A TRIM

Frey Hoss

My girlfriend Sam is the resident hairstylist. She doesn't have an actual license, but she is always bringing friends over to our apartment to do their hair in our tiny bathroom that could barely fit a single person. Her "clients" would either sit precariously on the lip of the old porcelain tub while she stood in it, or they'd have to sit on the toilet lid with their knees tucked awkwardly under the sink. The bathroom door had to remain open because otherwise the claustrophobia would kick in.

She does good work but won't accept any money. Instead she just says, "Buy me a Coke and we're even," even though it's not even. Not to me. She's stubborn as an ox like that. Part of me wishes I was an ox, too, with the strength to stand my ground and a pair of horns to ward off anyone who tried to push me.

But I'm not an ox; I'm a chicken. That's why I've never had the courage to ask her to cut my hair. That's why I am here now, sitting on the floor of the kitchen in the middle of the night in a post-panic attack haze. Scared of the buzzing hum of my phone vibrating in my pocket. Hoping it goes away.

I don't even have to look; I already know it's Dad. Already know what he's gonna say if I pick up. Already know what he's gonna text me if I don't. I feel sick. Feel another anxious wave wash over me and I press my freezing cold soda can to my forehead. Hold it there for a second or so. Listen to the carbonation fizz through aluminum. Let the chilled metal ground me. Don't focus on the way my hair is sticking to my damp neck or how it snakes down my back.

*One. Two. Three.*

*Three. Two. One.*

*Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.*

Finally the phone stops buzzing, and after a bit, there's another buzz. Against my better judgement, I pull my phone and look, the brightness of the screen momentarily blinding me in the darkness of the kitchen.

A new voicemail from Dad. That's the fourth one today. I've opened none of them. It's just going to be the same barking and snarling he always does, anyway - ranting and raving about me or about anything he's been angry about lately and wants to blame someone for. Like a mad dog foaming at the mouth. Sam keeps telling me it's better to just delete them all, don't waste your time on him. If only it were that easy.

Another buzz. A message from Sam this time.

[ done with work and on my way home. want anything from store? ]

My fingers shake as I type back, [ no. drive safe please! ]

She sends back three little hearts. I smile and let myself enjoy the warmth it brings me until I notice myself in the reflection of the screen. Notice the way my

hair is draping in front of my face and down my shoulders, all flat and stringy and limp like the already-shed dead skin of a lizard. I feel it weighing down my head and bending my neck forward far enough to ache. Most days I'm forced to put it all up in a bun to rob myself of the urge to rip it out.

Dad liked my hair long. "All good girls keep their hair long and natural, and you are a very, very good girl," he used to say to me when I was a kid, as though he was talking about the weather, something trivial. I never liked how he said that or the smile he wore as he did. All crooked, a jagged crack along his ceramic, unmoving face. It was the same face he made when he sang with the choir at church on Sundays. He never asked me if I liked my hair long.

I always wondered what he thought of Mom's short hair, flipped up like a startled bird trying to make itself look bigger than its predator. Fried it blonde herself every few weeks when Dad was at work and sprayed the bathroom with that horrible perfume of hers to cover up the smell of ammonia. She thought blonde was prettier than brown, even though I thought brown was such a nice color. When my hair started getting darker, she sat me down in front of her big bathroom mirror and bleached my hair until my scalp burned. She said boys would like me more if I was blonde like her. "Your father likes blondes, after all."

Dad came home early that day, and when he saw the bleach, the two of them got into an argument. The next morning, Mom came to my room with her hair down and told me tearily that we shouldn't bleach our hair anymore. Said it made it easier for the Devil to seep in and dye our minds with sinful thoughts. I remember bursting into tears, begging Mom to let me cut all my tainted hair off to start over, that I was a good girl, I was good, I will be good, I promise. But she refused and told me that we both would need to reflect on our sins.

A week later, I told a classmate to stick a wad of chewed gum into my hair, hoping I would have an excuse to get rid of it then. When I asked the teacher to let me go to the nurse to call my mom, she said no, so I cut the last three inches of my hair myself at recess with a pair of sticky safety scissors. I remember being horrified when I saw how little three inches really was. When I got home, Dad screamed as though I was bald while Mom hadn't even noticed until he pointed it out to her.

Then she cried, and Dad yelled even more. "I'm not raising a boy or a lesbian in this house." He didn't actually say 'lesbian', but the thought of the word he had used still chills me to the core.

Remembering that word makes my stomach suddenly lurch. I shoot up from the ground too fast and grab the countertop to steady myself. My vision swirls as those nervous shivers wrack my body the whole way to the bathroom. As I stumble in, I catch myself in the mirror and freeze in place.

My clothes are too loose, too flowery and nice for me. I don't like my shoulders no matter how I stand. I don't care for how my eyebrows or my jaw or my nose or my mouth looks. And I absolutely despise every inch of my long, long hair. I do not feel good. I do not feel natural.



I feel completely and utterly wrong.

I watch in the mirror as strands of my hair begin to coil around my shoulders, slithering and draping over and over themselves. They writhe like thousands of worms and try to burrow into my skin. I start to choke on a lump in my throat and spit into my hand a hairball the size of a nickel.

My eyes sting with tears. I try to grip the strands around my neck, but they begin to tighten like a rope. They twist, and twine and wind over and over again, tighter and tighter, until I am gasping for air. My heart throbs against my ribs. Pounds in my ears. "Wrong, wrong, wrong!", I hear it shout with a booming voice. Every strand of hair joins in, chanting in a shrill, dissonant choir. "Wrong, wrong, wrong!"

One of them sounds like Dad. "You are a very, very bad girl." Another sounds like Mom and asks me about my day. Asks if I was sure I wanted to go to college. Asks if I had everything I needed. Asks why I didn't call back. Asks if it was her. Asks if I think she's a bad mother. Asks if I still believe in God. Asks if I could please come home.

I hear my phone buzz on the counter in the kitchen and I scream. Then my hair screams. Then my heart. Then something far, far deeper joins in. I yank open the plastic storage container to the side of the sink where Sam keeps her tools and frantically grab the first pair of scissors I see. Ripping half of my hair from my throat and pulling it taught, I start cutting with mad fervor.

The scissors' blades are too fine to get all the hair in one go. My hand shakes. My scalp burns from my grip. But I keep sawing through. Hair rains down on the frigid tile floor, and they wriggle around like dying maggots. When I finish, I am holding a fistful of hair like dried straw in my shuddering hand. It looks lifeless, like I was the one who had strangled it first.

I let the hair in my hand fall to the floor along with the rest. Watching the strands flutter to the ground stirs something in me, and I grab the other side of my hair and pull it tight again. It's less hair than the last time and the angle is all wrong. I start cutting all the same. The scissors chop through these fewer strands easier than before, and soon I pull away with yet another clump of hair.

My head sways with the sudden shift in weight. I stare at the person in the mirror. I wonder if they feel as lightheaded as me right now. Then I wonder if they don't like dresses too. I wonder what their name is. I wonder if they are a chicken or an ox. I wonder so many things about them that suddenly I feel faint because for the first time in my life, I want to know the person I see in the mirror. I want to know myself and the rush is intoxicating and terrifying and wonderful and so much more.

On the other side of the apartment, I hear the front door open and Sam's boots creaking against the old wooden floorboards. "I'm home," she calls out into the apartment.

I try to respond back, but my voice cracks loudly and it startles me. I shake my head, try to start again, and I barely recognize myself as I hoarsely croak, "In here. Need help."

Sam finds me huddling over the sink, clutching my last chunk of long disgusting hair, and grabs the scissors from my numb hands. She chucks into the sink, the metal clink-clattering with a sharp noise that reminds me that the world is spinning. Sam stops me from toppling by pulling me in for a hug. I tense like a spring, and then I snap and break. Clutch her closely as I start crying.

Sam doesn't try to pet my head as I sob into her shoulder, and instead rubs my back. "You're okay. We're okay. We're going to be okay, it's alright." Her voice is unsure, but I want to believe her all the same.

When I finally stop crying and pull away, my throat is sore and talking hurts, "Can you cut my hair?"

Sam nods eagerly. Tells me that a Coke isn't necessary this time as she presses two quick kisses to my eyelids. Guides me to sit down on the edge of the tub and picks up the scissors from the sink.

"Was wondering" She laughs an easy laugh, easy enough for me to join her at least. She looks at the hair littering the floor and whistles. Our eyes meet in the mirror. "Damn, you really did a number to yourself, huh?"

"Is it that bad?" I tug on a frayed lock by my ear. Sam gently nudges my hands away and starts tilting my head this way and that, pursing her lips in thought.

"Let's just say you've lost scissor privileges for a while." She gestures with a few odd strands of hair. "So, want me to try even this out, or...?"

I look at the shaggy, uneven mess of brown hair that sat on my head. There was enough to make some kind of short bob hairstyle, if Sam really tried. But even that felt too much. A strand of hair, the one dangling by my left ear, tries to speak and Dad's voice starts to creep into my head. Before I let him say a word, I blurt out, "I want it all gone."

"All gone, it is," Sam hums. "Lift up your head a bit?"

I close my eyes and tilt my chin up slightly. One by one, the din of voices becomes quieter and quieter, and I feel myself fade away into the silence as Sam's scissors gracefully snip, snip, snip away at the last of my hair. At some point, I hear her shuffle around in her toolbox, hear her ask if I wanted it gone gone, and when I say yes, the humming buzz of an electric razor fills the silence.

When Sam tells me to open my eyes, I see the person from before in the mirror. Their hair is short, shorter than just a pixie-cut, shorter than it's ever been in their whole life. Shaved 'til their head resembles a fuzzy peach, they smile at me. I watch them mimic my every move as I raise my hand, rub my head, and shiver at the feeling.

Sam is watching me with a grin that isn't sure if it's supposed to be one yet. "So? How do you feel?"

I stare at the person in the mirror, at me, and smile. "Like an ox."





COWARD  
*Finn Plotkin*



## THEY/THEM/HE/HIM

Gabe Carlson

As odd as it sounds, I've just now started considering myself trans.

I've been grappling with my identity since before I started puberty. I knew I was attracted to girls by the time I was 11. I couldn't exactly keep my mouth shut about it. It was instantaneous, it required no thought, no further introspection. That hasn't changed, not once in the past 8 years.

Not everything can be that easy, though.

I cut my hair when I was in 6th grade.

It was long and thick and it was my defining feature and I chopped it all off because I hated it. The hair was dead anyway, dyed red and faded, strands dry and ends split.

I didn't keep it the way my brother did his, tied in a ponytail and treated with care, stored in an ornate box. Mine fell onto that tile floor and was swept and tossed away. I never regretted it.

The weight of its length was released from my person and for once I felt clarity.

*I looked more like me.*

I started going by a different name the day I started middle school.

It wasn't planned. I hadn't thought about doing it. I just saw an opportunity. I was the first one to class. It was just me and the economics teacher in that empty room.

*"It's a nickname."*

*"-el instead of -elle."*

*"Yes, I know how it's spelled, but it's pronounced this way."*

Easy enough to excuse, not enough to question.

I identified as genderfluid. I used he/she pronouns. It sounded right, sounded like it could be me, sometimes a boy, sometimes a girl. Most people shrugged me off or didn't care.

It was good enough for me then.

*It didn't ever feel quite right.*

I started using they/them pronouns my sophomore year of high school.

I didn't think about that either. It was the first time I was asked what my pronouns were and the words left my mouth before I could even process what I was saying. I was standing in the middle of a parking lot and I smelled like chlorine. My hair was still damp and my body ached.

They/them it is, then.

At that point, I had a better handle of who I was and who I wasn't. "They" felt right. It got me more questions, more confusion, more stares, but this time I was more than ready to answer them. This was me.

I used to think being non-binary meant being androgynous. It's what I strived for, what I wanted more than anything. To blur that line seemed like bliss. It was the easiest to explain; it would make the most sense.

It made me think that being feminine, at all, even in the slightest, even just the tiniest bit, meant sacrificing the masculinity I fought so hard to possess. I forced myself to be nondescript. Loose shirts, big jackets, bringing my shoulders forwards and slouching just so. All of it to keep up appearances.

I stopped wearing makeup like I did when I was younger. I tossed my eyeliner, stowed away my nail polish, shoved skirts and dresses to the back of my closet.

Being masculine was seen as my default. It's what people expected. It was the only way to combat what I couldn't hide.

*I couldn't express myself freely.*

I started dressing the way I wanted to when I got to college. It was a fresh start; no one knew me, and no one had expectations for me. I could present myself as I wanted.

My appearance was just another form of expression. I knew what looked good on me and what didn't; it didn't matter what it was anymore. I could wear what I wanted and no one cared. Most people had no idea who I was and probably never would. My identity didn't matter to them.

*There wasn't a default for me.*

I started using he/him pronouns a few weeks ago.

At some point, I told myself that any pronouns are fine to use. I told myself that even though the words she/her put a bad taste in my mouth. It just seemed like the easiest thing to do back then. They/them still worked. They/them felt good; it felt like me, but sometimes it didn't feel like enough.

My masculinity is still important to me. It's important in a way that my femininity isn't, important in a way that it won't ever be.

I've always preferred "sir" over "ma'am" or "miss." I preferred "he" over "she" when "they" was too much for someone to wrap their head around.

It was more comfortable. It made me happy. I was glad to hear that someone thought of me as masculine. I'd take it over feminine most days.

*I'm not a man, though.*

I just recently started considering myself trans.

I always was, really. I knew I wasn't cis; I knew I couldn't be happy like that. I knew it wasn't me.

I know now that my appearance doesn't sacrifice anything, that expression doesn't equal identity.

I know that I can be myself.





**TRANS**  
*Ollie Hoffmaster*

**I DON'T WANNA BE PRETTY ANYMORE**

*Georgia Leopold*

I don't wanna be pretty anymore because  
My body has been photographed and moved and manipulated  
— All by men —  
I have worn fishnets  
And frilly little dresses and platform shoes  
None were for me.

I have worn lingerie and someone else's t-shirts.

I don't wanna be pretty anymore because I  
Don't want to get cat called while I'm ordering coffee  
Or while I'm in line at Kroger or stopped at a red light  
Or on a walk with my parents.

I don't wanna be pretty anymore because pretty girls in fishnets  
Have bad things happen to them.  
I don't wanna be pretty anymore because pretty girls with pink  
hair In sweatshirts and yoga pants  
Get little white lines slipped in their drinks.

I don't wanna be pretty anymore because every woman I know has a story

I don't wanna be pretty anymore because I have had to sit down with too many  
pretty girls while we discuss things like proof and charges and justice,

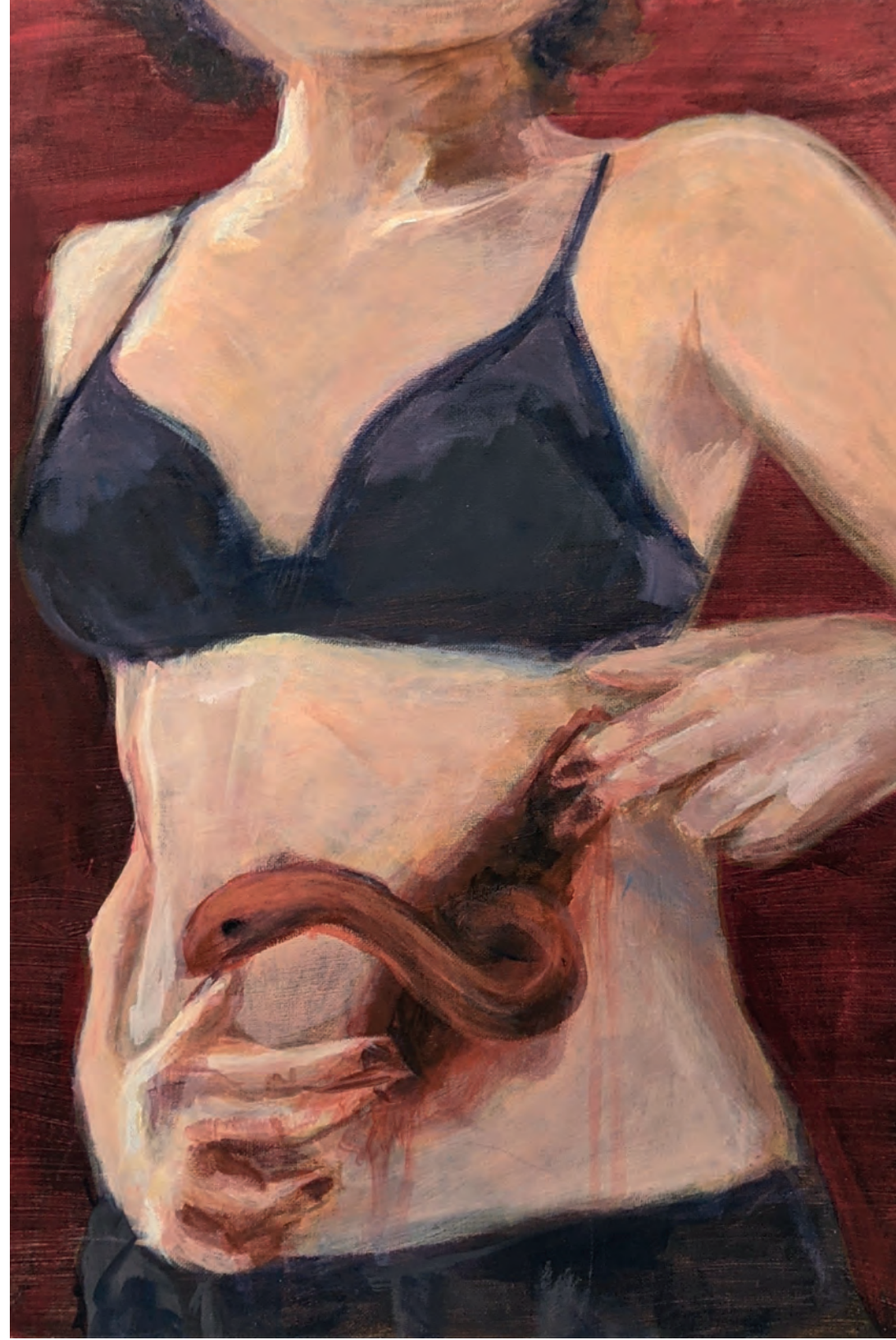
I don't wanna be pretty anymore because I wanted the man that I  
loved So desperately  
To just call me an artist too.  
I begged him to just let me help work on his movie.  
He said only if I took my top off and had no speaking lines or writers line.

I don't wanna be pretty anymore because I want to be good at something other  
than Being pretty.

CW **Gore**

**PICKING SKIN**

*Finn Plotkin*



**A BODY WITHOUT HOLES***Melanie Kiser*

I was six years old, taller and wider than all the other children, and no one knew that it was something they would one day find abnormal.

I was eight years old, breasts already beginning to form, my body curving out and becoming soft. When people began to mark me for being different. When the uncomfortable staring from men old enough to be my father began.

And I was too young to be thinking that I wanted to poke holes in my skin. I wanted to let all my pain out like a leaky pipe, to cry in a way that did not come from my eyes, wanted all the fat on my bones to become liquid and gush out, leaving me small and lithe like every other child I knew, like all of my friends. I wanted to take a steak knife and carve into myself like a piece of meat, shedding the flesh I thought unnecessary.

I was ten years old when my first period began, when I was told that this was what marked a new transition in my body. I was told that I was now a woman. But all I wanted to be was ten years old with scraped palms and skinned knees and an overactive imagination.

And perhaps it would have been different if just once I was picked any number besides last for elementary school dodgeball, because no one wanted the class's resident fat girl on their team. It was taken far too seriously by boys with shaved heads and mohawks, boys who have since forgotten their barbed words towards me. To them, it didn't matter that this was recess, or that they chose others who were just as uncaring about dodgeball, but far slimmer. It mattered that they didn't have me to literally weigh them down.

I dreaded recess, because it meant harassment. It meant playing tag, a game everyone wanted to play because they knew they could outrun me. Because they could sprint away over and over and all I could do was stand, my lungs wheezing. Because they knew I would give up and sit underneath the shade of my favorite tree, picking at the bugs and the clovers that I grew to love so much.

I began to prefer the company of my teachers, who, as flawed as they were, treated me like a regular child instead of the fat commodity. Because I was a child, after all, one who still needed the safety of her mother's arms. Who still does, even now.

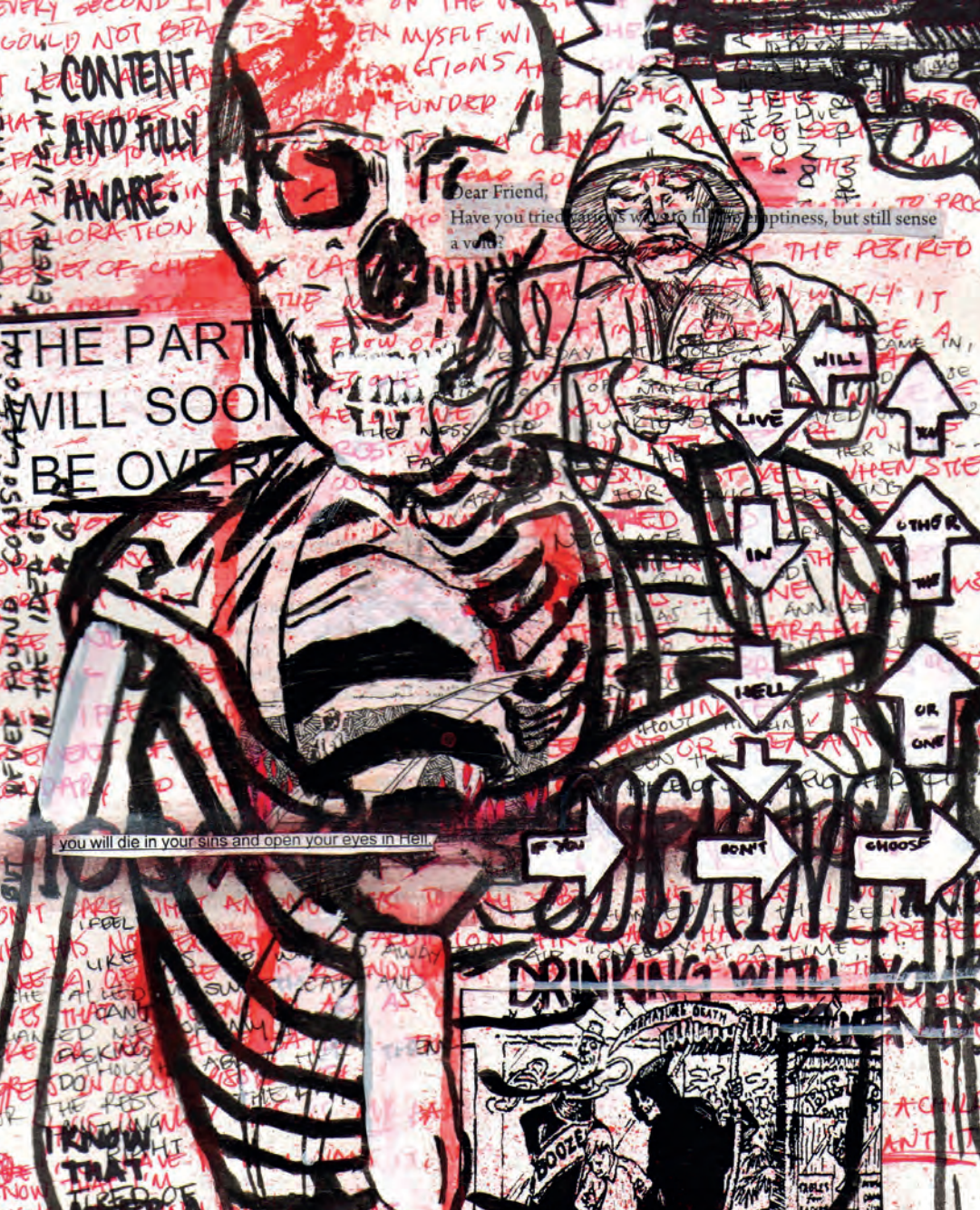
I was twelve years old. And so I grew up wanting to poke holes in my arms so that fat would ooze out and make me slim. Wanted to lose an arm or a leg because it meant losing sixty pounds. Grew up wanting to diet and growing angry when my mother would not allow me to stop eating dinner. Grew up throwing away my lunch and wondering why I wasn't getting any slimmer. Not understanding that it was my body and it was a good body.

And I still did not understand that even at sixteen. Because the whispers always started in the backstage wings or when I went for a costume fitting. Because I wasn't below a size 6, because my thighs rubbed together, because my body had curves before celebrities were augmenting their bodies to get them. And still they spoke of me as I choked down a salad for lunch every day, eating less and less, and wishing more than anything that I had been born differently. It was my body. Is my body. And yet people think they know it so well, more than me, its owner.

A body that carried me through so much pain and scrapes and two separate broken wrists. A body that is strong and healthy, just built differently from anyone else I knew. A body that was made for me by my mother, and still I wanted another.

And I am eighteen, coming at last into the realization that it is a good body, that I know what it needs. Because it is me, and I am it. And it is mine and mine alone.





CW Suicide, Drug Addiction

UNTITLED  
Dominique Chaves

## A LIKENESS OF FRANCIS B.

Gillian Moses

John Wayne swagger, sharply gelled hair,  
the blurred hawklike stare of a forefather  
all rest atop a primitive pedestal, sculpted by the children  
honoring the crucifixion of an old idol.

Francis Bacon's body molders in the grave.  
Skin, once blessed by the sun, now speckled by forest rot.

The remnants of a clementine foster sweetness on Bacon's tongue,  
rivulets of blood mar the side of  
his mouth. His mouth,  
glistening red with sanguine splatter,  
begging for the release of the epidemic body into the bleak cosmos.

Corporeal shadows dance along the edge of the countenance,  
The distance between continents rests in the pockmarks of ceramic carapace.  
Timid questions pushed quietly into the hollowed pupils:

*Where do we go when the time comes?*

At the edge of his cartoonish grimace, Francis holds the secret tightly. "1981,"  
carved into the spoon-rest hollow of his collarbone, filled only by straying fingers,  
cautious touches.

Please be careful never to overstep -

The realm of the body.  
Unsure, tempting, crossing my hands over my leaking chest,  
Over yours.

I am not afraid to die;  
To shift and morph, to bloat with envy and venom.  
Rupture of an eyeball,  
Remnants kissing fragile skull.  
I will rest when my skin yellows  
into lavender,

seafoam,  
dissolution.  
Pregnant  
turquoise  
upon my jaw.

When I know it is right, I will leave  
a list for my lover,  
the supermarket on the edge of decay:  
A tomb of glistening ceramic,  
A tube of lilac paint,  
A can of hair gel and a bottle of amber bourbon. A thank-you note for Francis B.

## CW Sexual Assault

### HE WILL NOT STOP TALKING

*Melanie Kiser*

*it's okay, you can touch me*, he says.  
and i am a girl of fourteen, and he is seventeen, and i want to please him, so i do.  
it is just an embrace, but later it will be something more. (and i wish i had not, because  
now the memory of his skin lingers on mine for the rest of my life)

*it's alright, kiss me*, he says,  
and we are the same ages still, but not for long.  
it is my first kiss, and it is in the sanctuary of my bedroom, and he claims to be experienced  
but it is far too rough for me.  
(not gentle like the first kisses i have been taught about)  
he tastes like my mother's chocolate cake.  
(now i am proud of myself for being able to eat it without gagging)

*leave me alone*, he says.  
it is slightly more than a month later, and this time it is said in anger.  
i am a girl of fifteen, and he is eighteen, technically an adult.  
i do not understand what i have done wrong, and he will not accept my apologies (i don't  
think i did anything wrong)  
i say so many more useless words.  
*i'm sorry*, i say.  
(i will say it so many more times, for no reason at all)

*you sound just like her*, he says,  
and this time he says it on the grayest of march days.  
are you going to hit me like she did?  
(i am a girl of fifteen and have never been in love before)  
what am i supposed to say to that?  
he gets angrier when i say nothing at all.

*let me touch you this time*, he says.  
it is a week later. he acts like i have never done anything to him. like he has never done  
anything to me. (he did so much to me in that week)  
i let him feel my breasts, because he is experienced, and i leave feeling good  
(thinking about it now leaves me sick)

*thank you*, he says.  
he takes the flowers i gave him and throws them in the back of the  
trunk without a second thought.



i wait for a hug or a kiss, and he does nothing  
(he was the one who said he wanted flowers)  
on the drive home it starts to rain.

*what is this?* he says.

I am on the phone with him. he is cleaning out his car.  
it is a print i bought him, handed it to him during a fight.  
*who bought this?*  
(it's just a painting of a sunset over a bridge)  
it gets thrown away with the other trash.

*she's crazy*, he says, but not to me.

*she won't leave me alone.*

they eat up his words, ravenous to find someone to blame for his suffering.  
(if he had told me once to just leave him be, i would have)  
he never said it to my face, and instead hid me like the piece of junk i was making  
himself the victim once again  
(and i let him come back into my arms like the fool i was and am)

*i miss you*, he says after he is gone.

i respond that we should hang out (as friends)  
and we make plans multiple times, but he never once shows.

*i miss what we had*, he says.

it is two years later and i am finally realizing what he did to me. i still have feelings for you.  
i tell him i just want to be friends, and he accepts  
he sends me a picture of his dick a week later.  
(two years later and i was still so naive)

he no longer says anything, because i will never see him again. he has moved from my  
hometown, distanced himself from it in all ways. distanced himself from the girls he  
used, abused, and collected like trading cards. all four of us. maybe there are more. i  
don't think i'll ever know. i have blocked him from my life in every way possible.  
(my therapist tells me i am doing better)

yet he is still here, his voice ever-present  
because i wonder if the people i meet will be just like him  
because he has made me terrified of falling in love.  
because the memory of his touch makes me ill.  
because he turned me inside out and left me to rot.  
because his words, spoken four years ago, still linger.  
and he will not stop talking  
(perhaps he never will)



**MELTING AND MIXING**  
*Vivian Trinh*



**FITTING IN**  
*Farrah Filfil*



**BUT I CAN'T**

*Nour Ahmad*

How do you long for a place you have not been  
Have not smelt or touched or heard  
Only seen through a screen

How do you long for a feeling you haven't felt  
Haven't experienced or confronted or observed  
Only seen through a screen

I long for a home  
For a home in the foothills of the mountains between Nazareth and Acre  
A home where the olive trees tell me my history

I long for a home  
For a home where I can write and sing and do all that I wish  
A home where I am safe and don't have to look behind me while I walk

I want to visit Ramallah and Hebron  
I want to walk the streets of Bethlehem and Haifa

But I can't  
Because I don't belong

My passport says Jordanian, American  
Not Palestinian  
My Passport says born: Israel  
Not Palestine  
My nationality is Jordanian and American  
Not Palestinian

But my blood boils for Palestine  
Inside me I am a storm for Palestine  
I will do anything in the name of Palestine

But I can't  
Because it's not there

How do you sacrifice your life for a place that does not exist?  
How do you put a noose around your neck for a country that is nowhere to be found

Show me Palestine on a map they tell me  
Show me Ramallah on a map they scold

But I can't  
Because It's nowhere to be found

They have promised us many times over 'this time we will take back Palestine'  
Mothers have lost their sons in the name of Palestine

What we don't see is the money  
What we don't see is the bribes

I want to see Palestine  
I want to smell Palestine

But I can't  
Because it doesn't exist





**VCU Student Media Center**

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Richmond, Virginia 23284

Typefaces used: Adobe Caslon, Myriad  
and Garamound Premiere Pro

