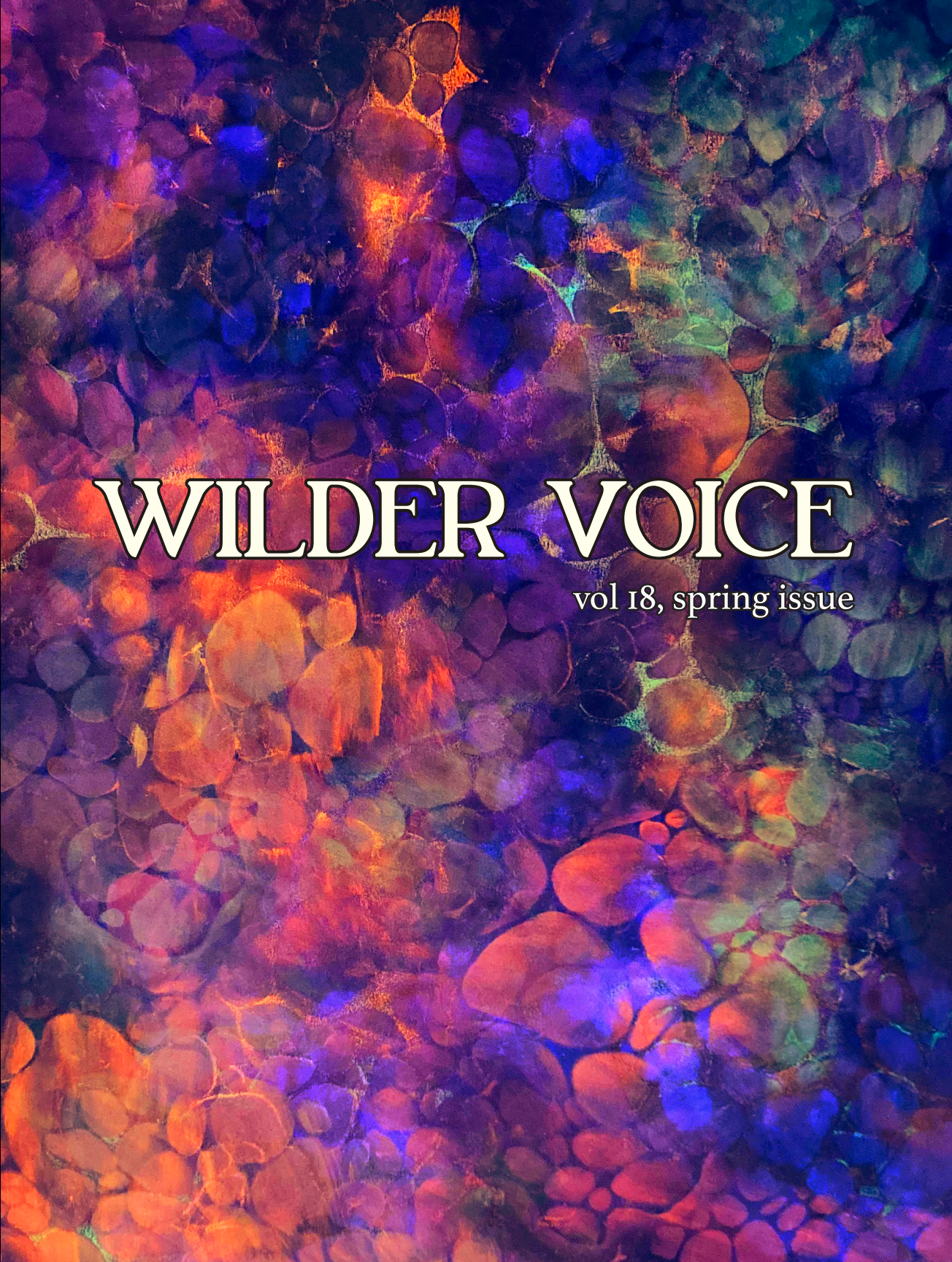


Spring 2023

Wilder Voice

Volume 18



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Past, Abigail Harris Crowne

WILDER VOICE

VOLUME 18: SPRING 2023

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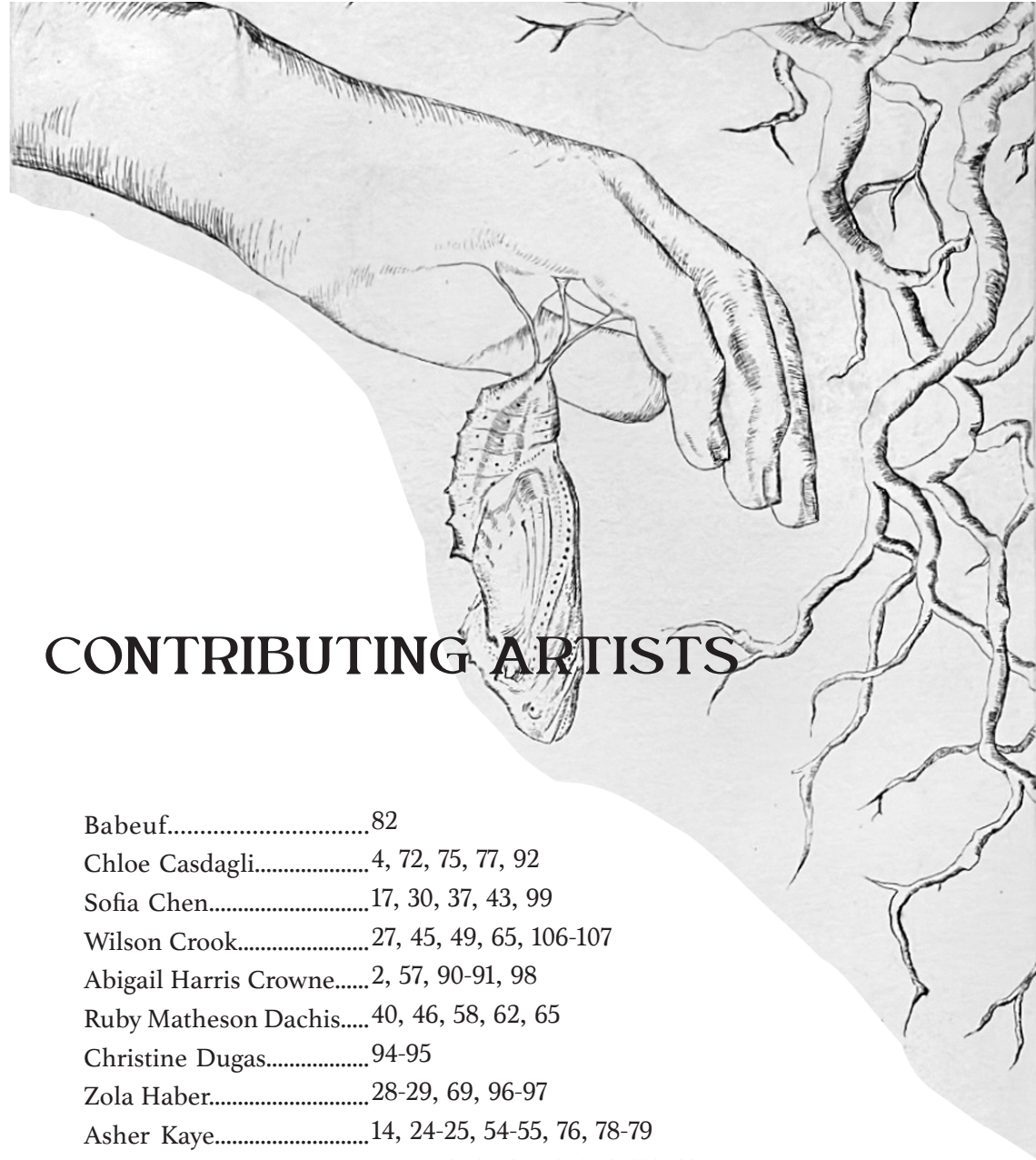
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Valentine's Vendetta

By Emery Haze



Valentine's Day. We all know it. It's a day slathered in red, pink, some white, and occasionally purple. It's a day stuffed full of expensive chocolate boxes that only have three good flavors in them, chalky candy hearts that people either adore or despise, and pretty much every sugar-dusted food you can get your hands on. It's a day of pressure: the right gift, the right date, the right moment. It's a day that companies make bank on, because who doesn't love love and there's a million ways to merchandise it. It's a day that stresses cis-hetero, allosexual-alloromantic relationships, shaming you for not having a date and for not being the beautiful man and woman sharing a romantic dinner before having passionate sex. It's a day that's cultivated an annual nod on many TV shows. You can't avoid it.

And I, like many others, have cause for a vendetta with that day.

I'm on the spectrum (the spectrum encompassing all asexual and aromantic identities). To me, sex is physically and emotionally messy and even destructive, and the benefits are just as easily achieved with masturbation; in terms of labels, I'm a sex-repulsed or sex-averse ace. I value my friends, family, passions, and personal time and space over having a romantic relationship. So, like many others on the ace spectrum, I struggle against allonormativity—the assumption that all humans are allosexual, meaning that they experience sexual attraction to other

humans—and amatonormativity—the assumption that all humans pursue love or romance, especially by means of a monogamous long-term relationship. You see couples and sex all over the place, and it is the expectation that you'll get a partner and a sex life. Society is structured to benefit married couples (housing, taxes, adoption, etc.) and if you're not having sex, you're presumed inexperienced, a prude, sexually oppressed, or disordered. In media, very rarely do you see aspec representation, or at least a main character—especially a woman main character—who doesn't have a love story and is happy to be single. And there's a general assumption that asexual (ace) and aromatic (aro) are the same thing and have set definitions.

In reality, they're a sexuality and a romantic orientation respectively, and they're broad, fluid, and adaptable identities. There's almost no limit to how nuanced an aspec identity label can be, and while the nuance can make you feel more comfortable and seen, it makes it harder to explain your identity to others and find a compatible partner (if you want one). Sex and/or romance are so core to so many relationships, the thought of not having it, or having it in a non-standard form, just isn't something most people are comfortable with. Which is totally fine! It just makes them incompatible with many aspec people, and that's something we have to deal with.

Even worse than these general assumptions and challenges is the

outright aphobia. You've got people who think the 'A' in 'LGBTQAI+' stands for 'ally', not 'ace' and 'aro'. You've got people, in and out of the LGBTQ+ community, who think aspec identities are fake, that we're broken, that aromantic people are incapable of all love instead of just not experiencing romantic attraction. We hear stuff like "you'll find the right person," "it's just your meds," and "but sex and romance are what make us human." Sure, maybe we will find a person we'll want to date and/or sleep with, and maybe our meds or trauma are playing a role in our lack of desire, but we sure as hell don't wanna hear it from you. Trust me: we wrestle with all that in coming to terms with our identities.

Aspec identities aren't a phase or an illness; they're beautiful, natural parts of humanity, sexuality, romanticism, and identity, and the labels give clarity to the confused. Yet because they're also not the norm, they are dramatically misunderstood and responsible for a unique set of challenges in pursuing romantic and/or sexual relationships. Valentine's Day certainly doesn't help with normalizing or understanding these intricate identities, or encouraging us to celebrate relationships and attractions that suit us. How are we to see ourselves as natural and beautiful, when one of the most global holidays inherently denies our existence?

But Valentine's Day's impact is dependent on how people react to the holiday. For me, coming to love

Valentine's Day was a joint effort between myself and my parents. I've had some pretty shitty experiences with Valentine's Day, especially in middle and high school. Once valentines stopped being mandatory, I stopped getting them. Candygrams and carnations were sold for a dollar in middle and high school, and even when I bought some for my friends, I never received one. My sophomore year of high school, I was the only one in my homeroom of thirty-plus kids to not receive at least one carnation. My desk had never felt so vast.



I stacked it full of books and binders and forced back tears. I felt unloved and singled out, and I caught more than one not-so-subtle glance at my carnation-less desk. What must people be thinking of me, the one person who didn't get a single carnation? And I only felt worse when I went into the halls and saw boyfriends proudly, publicly pronouncing their love for their girlfriends and giving them expensive chocolates, at least a dozen roses, and those massive four-foot teddy bears.

Why didn't anyone love me enough—either romantically or platonically—to get me a carnation, never mind one of those stupid bears? And why did I even want one so much? I think carnations are ugly, and those teddy bears are pure performative brags that you've no idea what to do with once Valentine's Day is over. I wanted to rip the stuffing out of those bears and bite the heads off the carnations. Looking back, I only ever wanted one because it felt like everyone else was getting them: if I didn't have one, it meant I wasn't loved. I came to terms with my asexuality (and I'm probably also aromantic) during



the pandemic, so back then, I felt the pressure. I wanted a date not because I wanted a relationship, but because I didn't want to be judged. After all, Valentine's Day is a Day of Judgement more foreboding than the Second Coming of Christ.

What made the pressure manageable, and what makes Valentine's Day an enjoyable holiday now, are the traditions my parents created.

Ima (Hebrew for 'mother') had experienced the same annoyance and loneliness I did at seeing the happy girlfriends touting their bouquets and giant teddy bears, and felt the same pressure to get a date. She couldn't protect me from society, but she could influence how she treated the holiday, and try to heal the pain of the day. It was no secret that I wasn't getting valentines. I would come home in a low mood with empty arms and, after a cry session, I'd tell them what happened. So, what did they do? They bought me (and my brother) candy. They bought me tiny teddy bears. They bought me little gift cards. They bought me roses and even carnations, those loathsome little shit-flowers. Every year, it mattered a little less that I wasn't getting attention at school. I was getting attention at home, from people who loved me unconditionally.

Dad knew I missed the valentines more than I craved the candy and flowers. Every year since sixth grade, he's bought a box of little kid valentines, numbered them, addressed them to me with various nicknames, and hidden them around my room and belongings. Every year, they were different: several years of One Direction, *Secret Life of Pets*, and so on. Some valentines were in obvious places: underneath my glasses, taped to my phone, slid into my binder, perched in the heart-shaped valentines bag Ima made to hang on my door, tossed in my box of Cheerios. I have every valentine I've ever found, in little boxes and baggies. The best part? I've

never once found a complete set, and I keep finding valentines from years past. I opened a book I hadn't read in years, and found a valentine wedged on a random page. I came to Oberlin, finally in a place cold enough for my fluffy robe, and found a valentine in its pocket. I was setting out a pair of boots to donate, and found a valentine in each. Dad and I keep saying that when I move out, we'll find some—but not all—of the missing valentines.

The final tradition is completely unrelated to my not receiving Valentine's Day treats at school. Back in 2012, Ima once again made use of her phenomenal baking skills and made two chocolate-frosted, heart-shaped cakes for my brother and I. My brother, being a playful little boy back then, decided to smash his face in his cake. When he looked up, a wad of chocolate cake frostinged to his face and completely blocking his eyes and nose, the entire family burst out laughing. While Ima helped my brother clean up, Dad decided I needed cake in my face too. I refused to let my head go down, so he grabbed a chunk of cake and smeared it on my face. From that day forward, Ima baking cakes for my brother and I to smash our faces in was the highlight of Valentine's Day. I was hesitant at first, but I got into it, and now I'm the only one who still does it. I don't smash my own face, though; Dad does it for me. My brother stopped a few years back, citing maturity. I have no such hang-ups. I proudly get cake and frosting in my nose, eyes, and hair every year. I have wonderful

memories of inviting friends over and having them smash my face in the cake for me. I love being able to share the laughter, and we always record it so I can send it out to friends and extended family for further amusement. There's just so much joy in the nonsense. It's completely worth having chocolate boogers for a few days afterwards.



And just like so many dark chocolates, things are bittersweet now. I'm in my second year at Oberlin, well on my way to leaving home, and the Valentine's traditions are some of the many things being left behind. My first year, I was able to go home around Valentine's Day to do the traditions a few days late. This year, I have to wait until late March to go home (I'm writing this in late February). Dad says he's hidden a box of valentines for me to find when I come home, and Ima sent me a Valentine's care package, but it's not the same. On the actual Valentine's Day, there were no valentines in my things, no roses waiting for me after a long day of school, no cake to smash my face in. I'm getting closer and closer to the year the traditions won't happen at all. I won't know what year it'll be till it comes, so I can't even tell myself, "This is the last one, so make it count".

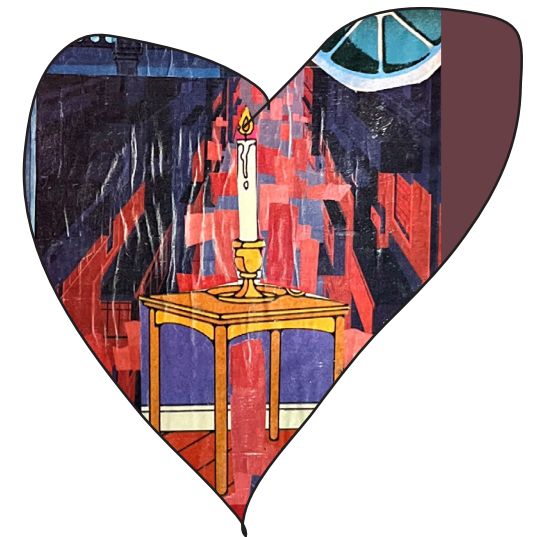
I love the traditions so much. They brought love and light and sweetness when I needed it the most. They made exploring my aspect identities more manageable. I don't want to let them go. Without them, I fear I'll get lost in a blizzard of expectations and assumptions without reassurances to keep me warm.

But I have to be realistic. I'm not a child anymore. I'm leaving home, and that means leaving my beloved traditions in my childhood, where they did so much good.

Leaving traditions behind doesn't mean you can't create new ones.

For Valentine's Day 2023, I bought a box of cartoon octopus-themed valentines and gave them out to my friends. It didn't matter that they were just bits of paper and plastic; it was a symbol that I cared. I was making amends to myself, and to others, for the hurt Valentine's Day has done, and I was creating a new tradition.

I don't care how juvenile or silly people think my traditions are. I'm determined to keep Valentine's Day a day I can enjoy, rather than letting it once again become one I feel bad about. If it's truly a day of love, then I'm going to do what my mother taught me and make it a day for all kinds of love. Romance and sex aren't the limit of human connection. I'm going to make sure everyone I love knows I love them.





Encomium to the Wildfire

by Cole Mirman



When stagnation reigns

When the forest is too crowded for growth

When its natural beauty is choked by dry twigs and dead leaves

It's time for the harshest necessity of Mother Earth:

The purging flame

Lightning smashes through the quiet night

Igniting the tallest tree it can find

A symphony of crackling wood

And the smell of smoke fill the once-fresh air

Now sick with feverous heat

The fire is a ravenous predator

Eating its way across the woodland

It bites, chews, swallows, digests

Savoring the taste of baking bark on its many flickering tongues

Spraying the woods with the spittle of sparks as it feasts

It plays with its food—dancing, laughing, singing as it goes

The fire is an ocean of light

Trunks become torches

Their branches kindling

Conifers go off like firecrackers

Their roots are fuses

The fire is a tapestry of color
Brown boughs weave with black smoke
Redwoods are licked by orange flames
Green brush burns treasure-gold

The fire is a work of art
Nay, a genre of art
Nay, an art movement
Spreading from entity to entity
Ever changing, ever growing, never stationary
A vibrant, transgressive force, which sweeps away deadweight
Nothing it touches is ever the same again

The clouds rumble in mourning
Tear rain pours down, quenching the thirst of the blazing bark
The flames shrink, then sputter, then die

The sun rises amidst the clearing smoke
Only a few trees still stand
The once-verdant forest is a smoldering patchwork of black stumps
New sprouts rise from the ash, like green phoenixes
Nature's spring cleaning





A Story About Studying Abroad You Probably Haven't Heard Before

By Katherine Pender

CW: Emotional Abuse

It's difficult to fully understand abuse. You can give a dictionary definition and you can listen to others' stories to try to comprehend and sympathize, but you will never fully understand unless you have to experience it yourself.

It's even more difficult to fully understand emotional abuse. I remember reading Carmen Maria Machado's memoir, *In the Dreamhouse*, where she details an abusive relationship with a previous girlfriend in which she says, "I wished that I had a police report, or a black eye," in reference to the way that emotional abuse is often hard to identify and document.

When domestic violence victims or sexual assault survivors come forward and tell their stories, our culture pressures their response into an argument. *Why didn't you leave? Why didn't you speak up sooner?*

In emotionally abusive situations, there are wounds and scars, but no one can tell just from looking at you. And when you try to explain your story, people can be dismissive and interrogative. *Are you sure you're not being too dramatic? I don't think it's as bad as you're claiming it to be. If it was so bad, then why did you stay?*

Although my experience with emotional abuse lasted only three weeks, I found myself at the end of these questions. *That's such a short time to live with someone. Why didn't you switch homes? And, of course: If it were me, I would've left right away.*

I studied abroad in France for three weeks. Although my time there was overall amazing, my host mother was emotionally abusive, something I myself didn't fully understand until nearly the end of my trip. Telling someone that your host mother was emotionally abusive is the truth, but it doesn't encompass all the complexities surrounding my situation. Which is why when people say, *Why didn't you leave?* The answer is hard to explain and sometimes harder to understand.

Abusers are able to get away with hurting people because of manipulation. The first thing to understand is that they don't always berate you or harm you—oftentimes, they shower you with love, allowing you to think they truly care about you. For me, my abuser would refer to me as her granddaughter; she would make my favorite meals; she bought white wine because it's my favorite; and she would praise my intellect for reading *The Stranger* by Albert Camus. However,



those moments were small and sparse. They were overshadowed by screaming over a language misunderstanding, berating me for eating too fast or too slow, and by constantly emphasizing, “You don’t understand anything.”

The second thing to understand about abusers is that they make everything feel like it is your fault. In my experience, she weaponized my language barrier against me. One night, she told me, “Tomorrow, I will clean the house. Tonight, I will do the laundry.” I nodded, said okay, and we spoke about something else for a minute. I confirmed, maybe three minutes later, “Okay, tomorrow, you clean the house, tonight you do the laundry.” Her face melted into disgust and fury and she threw her arms up and screamed at me. “You don’t understand anything I say!”

she yelled. “Well, since you can’t understand, why don’t I show you and make you understand.” She grabbed my arm and dragged me to the bathroom where the washing machine was and pointed to it as if I were a toddler. “TONIGHT!” she said in English. “Tonight!” I was stunned by what was happening. Did I misunderstand the words for tonight and tomorrow? It’s not like they are similar words I would’ve misunderstood. I’ve known French for six years, surely I understood it fine. Was my accent hard to understand? No, I was just complimented the other day on my French accent, so it can’t have been that. What did I do wrong? It was not until after the experience living with her had ended when I realized what had happened: I understood her perfectly fine. She, though, for whatever reason, used the language difference as an opportunity to

Beaux Watwood, *Fountain of Youth*, Woodcut Reduction



make me feel small and humiliated.

Abusers will also make you feel insecure. One day, she asked me what I ate with my friends for lunch the day before, and when I told her, she became cocky and scoffed, “If you keep eating like that, you’re going to get fat.” I was so humiliated and didn’t know what to say. She asked what I ate for dinner the night before. That was another wrong response. She then looked at the lunch I had prepared for myself, gestured to it and said, “and there you go again.”

Why wouldn’t you just leave?

I have never traveled abroad before this experience, let alone lived with someone in a different culture. I wanted to adapt to the way of life. I figured, the first week, that I just needed more time to adjust and understand. It wasn’t

like I did anything egregious—I was clean, quiet, polite—but it didn’t matter. Every day, there was something wrong about me. Eventually, I started to think to myself, I wish I could get through one day without doing something wrong.

It was hard for me to pinpoint that this was abuse because she wasn’t mean all the time. She would talk to me about things we both had in common—books, travel, music. She would ask questions about my family and explain French politics to me. I thought that when she was being nice to me, it was how she normally was, and that when she was being mean to me, it was because I was doing something wrong. I was the foreigner. I was new. I had to adapt. I thought, If she’s so nice to me some days, then she can’t be all bad.

But some situations proved that whatever small amounts of kindness she had in her were dominated by the need to hurt someone. “Why do you hold the fork that way?” she asked me one night. I realized what I was doing—simply holding the fork in an awkward way while trying to use the other hand to cut fish—in response, I switched how I was holding it so it looked more natural. “I don’t know,” I replied, trying to laugh it off.

“Do you always hold the fork like that at home, in the United States? Surely, it doesn’t look very easy to hold the fork that way. It looks uncomfortable and weird. Why do you do that?” I started to try to explain—simply that I didn’t notice what I was doing, no I do not usually eat like that, I am sorry I was doing that—but she kept cutting me off. “I mean, it’s just weird to watch you hold a fork like that. Why do you hold the fork like that?” I was trying to form a way to respond that would make her stop. I didn’t know why my answers hadn’t been sufficient, nor why the immediate change in my behavior wouldn’t make her stop. I didn’t answer quickly enough, and she said, in a condescending, disgusted tone, “Mama and Papa never taught you how to hold a fork at home?”

I felt tears brimming, but I didn’t want to seem weak and even more humiliated than I

already was. But she kept going. “I can’t imagine Mama and Papa would teach you how to hold a fork like this at dinner.” Then she dramatically demonstrated how I held the fork and looked at me as if I was a barnyard animal she needed to train. I focused my attention on not crying and ignored her until she eventually stopped.

The next morning, she said that she hadn’t meant that interaction to come across as mean, and that she wanted me to still think of her as a kind grandmother. My naiveté was convinced.

Yet she brought it up again a week and a half later, when we went out to dinner with her friends. I could see and hear her telling the story about the fork incident to all of them, laughing at how ridiculous I was. Then, she turned to me, all smiles, after having loudly just humiliated me at the beginning of dinner, and said, “Are you mad? You look upset.”

Why didn’t you speak up sooner?

It may seem strange, but I can’t pinpoint what exactly triggered me to tell the director of the French school. Throughout the first week, I was blinded by my desire to see her as the kind grandmother she advertised herself to be. Yet, when I told stories of what she was saying to me to my friends, they all would tell me that

none of their host families behaved that way. Even as the abuse began to reveal itself the second week, I wanted to believe she wasn’t hurting me as much as she actually was.

Throughout the trip I called my mom, and as the days progressed and the behavior worsened, she too started to recognize the behavior for what it was. Having experienced this type of behavior herself, she started giving me advice and support on the phone on how to proceed.

Something happened at the end of the second week—maybe it was my host mother’s continuous comments on my eating habits; maybe it was her analyzing my medication and criticizing my use of birth control; maybe it was the fact that my friends, concerned about my well-being, ended up telling our Oberlin professor what was happening—but something made me speak up to one of the teachers at the French school.

By the time I spoke up, I was nearing the end of my trip, only four days away from my flight home. When I told the director of the school, as well as some other employees there, they were upset. I said I thought it was a cultural thing, and they were mortified. At one point, one of the workers at the school said to me, “We’re not all fuckers here.”

The school offered to switch me to a different home, but since it was the last week, I told them I was afraid of her retaliating against me if I left after two and a half weeks. At the time, I felt that I had gained a good understanding of how to deal with her moods, and figured if I could try to keep her on my good side, then I could make it until my flight home. The director of the school was understanding.

Coincidentally, that night all the host families had a meeting at the school. When my host mother came back and we had dinner together, I casually asked how the meeting went.

“Fine,” she said dismissively. Then, “Did you talk to the director about me?”

I felt flames on my ears and neck. “No, why?”

“Oh, no reason,” she said. “It’s just that when I was there, I got the impression that they don’t think I’m being very nice to you.”

“That’s weird,” I said. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t say something to anyone about me?”

I certainly wasn’t going to admit what I actually told them, but I was confused. Did the school say something to tip her off? Was she just being paranoid? Was she trying to scare me?

“The only thing I told the school was that you refused to take me to the airport on Saturday.”

“Why would you say that to them?” Her jaw clenched and she snarled at me.

She was never physically violent with me, but I certainly felt that she could be. As much as I felt I could predict her triggers, I didn’t know how far she could go when she was really upset. Would she hit me? Would she steal my stuff? Would she kick me out?

“In our contract, it says that you are supposed to take me to the airport for my flight. That’s part of the payment. So, if you refuse to take me, I need them to pay for my taxi, because I’m not paying for one when I paid you to take me.”

“I never saw that in my contract! I was never told I had to take you to the airport! Why would you tell them that? This is fucking stupid!”

“The only reason I told the school was because you refused to take me, and I need to get to the airport.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” she groaned. “I never said I couldn’t take you.”

She did, in fact, say that she couldn’t take me.

“I said I maybe couldn’t

take you.” I was the idiot, again, for misunderstanding.

My heart was racing really fast, but I kept telling myself to not give up or give in. “Look, I need to go to the airport somehow. Either you take me, or the school gets me a taxi. I don’t really care, but you need to decide.”

She left the room, cursing at me under her breath.



The American Robin, Asher Kaye

The next morning, three days before my flight, she greeted me warmly. “Good morning! Did you have sweet dreams?” I nodded politely. She smiled affectionately and said, “Saturday, we’ll leave around quarter to ten since your

flight is at noon.”

Are you sure you’re not being too dramatic?

It was such a short trip—less than a month I had to live with her—and everything besides my living situation was wonderful. I had simultaneously the best and worst experience of my life. However, I think it’s important to note what her treatment of me did.

It wasn’t real. It was due to lack of sleep. Still, my body was reacting to what it thought it saw. I had consistent nightmares for weeks after the incident surrounding the abuse that I experienced at the house.

On top of the emotional abuse she inflicted on me, I realized near the end of the trip that she was also trying to scam me out of money.



Face Off, Asher Kaye

On the flight home, on my layover in Detroit, after having not slept for 30 hours, I hallucinated seeing her on the plane as the flight attendant. My body physically froze in place and I felt my chest close. I knew, logically, that it was a hallucination.

One night, she told me she hadn’t been paid by the French school yet. She claimed they said they didn’t have her on record as my host mother and that they couldn’t pay her. I became really upset, thinking it was unacceptable. “Don’t be so

dramatic,” she said, annoyed at my outrage. “I’m sure it’s just an error. But, I am eventually going to need my money. I mean, all this food I spend on you, and the housing.” I kept trying to talk to her about it practically. Why wouldn’t the school have me on record as your exchange student? Should I tell my professor? “You’re being really dramatic,” she said. “I’m sure it’s fine.” Then she turned to leave and said, “You know, if they don’t pay me, you’re going to pay me before you leave.” When I eventually filed my report, the school said they had no records of her ever calling. She had been paid at the beginning like every other host family.

How many other foreign exchange students did she take advantage of? It wasn’t like she needed the money. She lived in a chic, rich neighborhood, and her apartment clearly showed that she had wealth. Scamming foreigners by weaponizing the language barrier for, in all reality, a small amount of money that you don’t even need, is disgusting and evil.

I don’t blame Oberlin. I don’t even blame the French school. If her previous host students were too scared to come forward, or, like me, didn’t recognize the treatment for what it was, how could they ever know what was going on in that house?

When I returned home, I

simultaneously felt the urge to both say what happened to everyone who walked by and also never speak about it again. Having it fester inside me made me unhappy, like I was carrying a sickness within me. But telling people your host mother was emotionally abusive is a complex thing to understand, and it became harder and harder to tell the story when people were dismissive and interrogative.

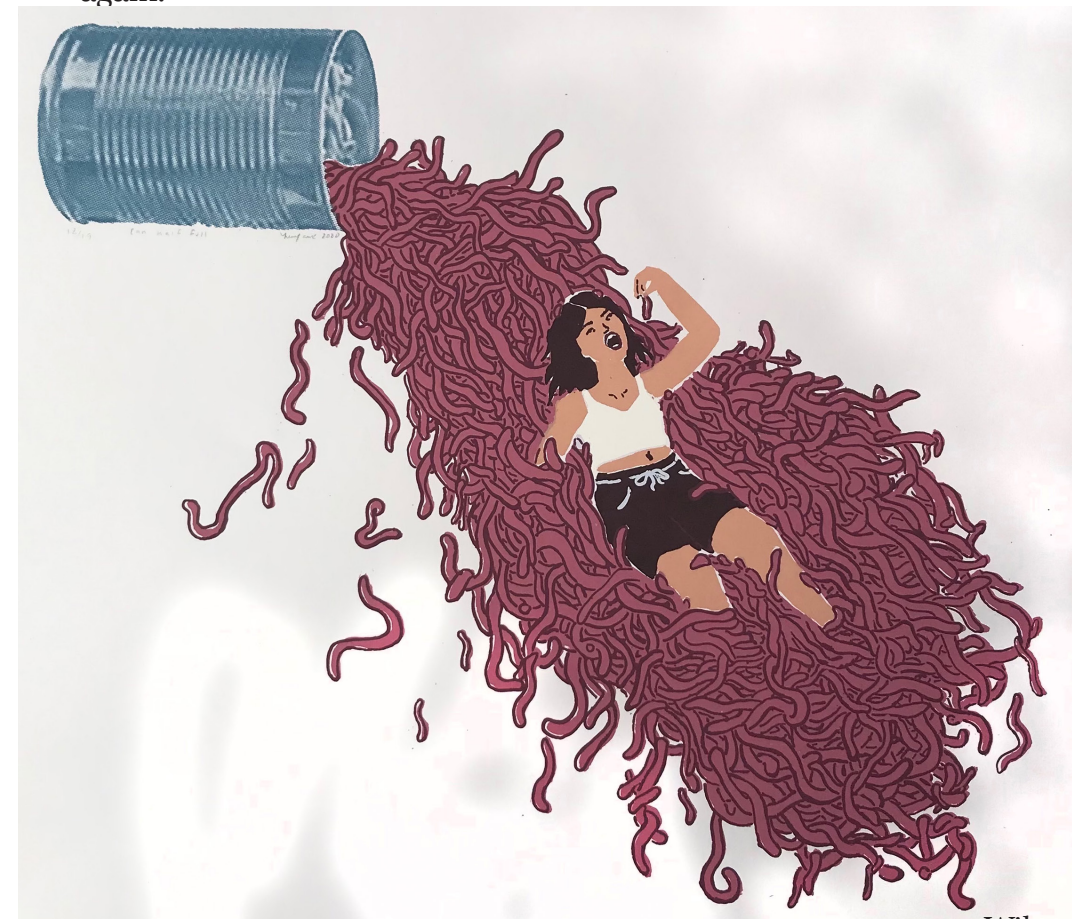
I told my family and some of my friends; a lot of them were supportive—yet some of them were dismissive. *I know of people who had horror story host families too, it’s not just you. Are you sure that’s not just an old French woman thing? I mean, I believe you, but it just seems like a lot of host families are weird like that.* I started to think, was I being too dramatic?

No. And the reason I know I am not being dramatic is because my body reacted to what happened to me. I used to get strong stomachaches on the bus ride home, and at the time, I was in denial about why. Even in my bedroom there, my body was stiff, always anticipating her coming in and saying something else to me. You can try and trick your mind, but the body will always tell the truth.

Either way, I don’t need anyone to validate what happened to me. I know what I experienced.

I know what I felt. I know what she said to me. I know the truth.

Although it was a harrowing living situation, I don’t regret going abroad, nor do I regret not leaving her. Because I feel like the experience of living with her gave me a powerful insight into what an abuser is and how they behave. I used to be on the end of the questions, saying, “if that were me, I would just leave.” Now I understand it’s not that simple. And I know now what abusive behavior looks like, and to never tolerate that type of treatment from anyone ever again.





Hallowed

By Wiley Martinez

QUR
FATHER
WHO ART
HALLOWED BE THY NAME

Bay

@BaSsO

e))))

O GIVE US THIS OUR DAILY BREAD

THY KINGDOM

COME THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN

Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo santificado
sea tu nombre Venya tv reino Hágare to
voluntad en la tierra como en el cielo
Donos hay nuestro pm & cada dia Perdana
muestras ofensas, como tombien nosotros
perdonshas a los que nos ofensen. No nos
dejes crev en tenacron y libuanos de mot.
Amen

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WAJK'UBTA

L ey

GIVE US TUS OUR
DAILY BREAD



YOU CAN BE BORN TO DEBUT YOU'LL NEVER BE PREPARED:
A LUMINATION WITH FEW BREATHS LEFT TO TAKE.

Kiley Flynn

beep

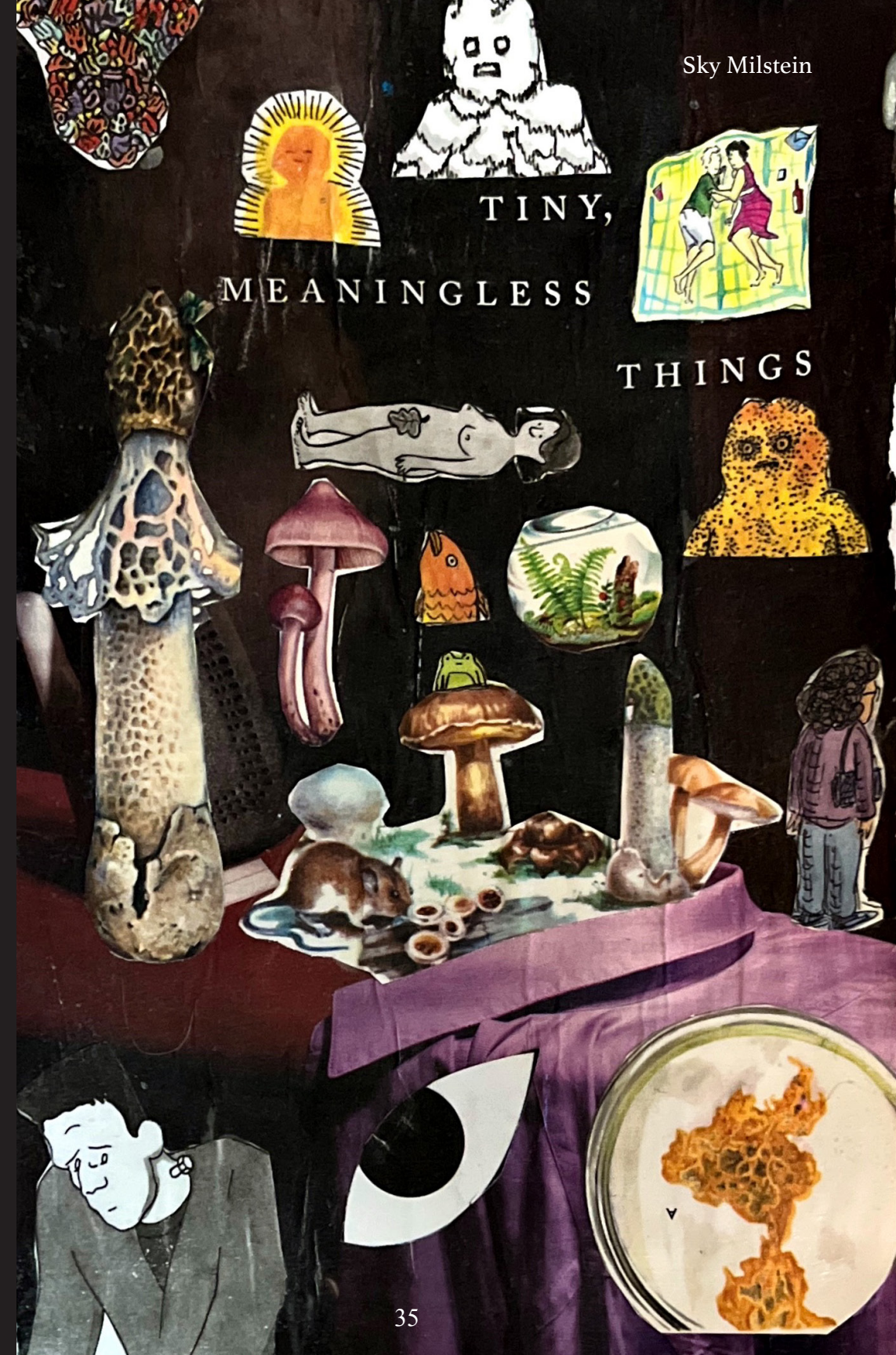
I haven't slept in weeks. When I do sleep, I don't lie down to rest. My body decides enough is enough and performs a forced shutdown, a control+alt+delete, an alt+F4. I collapse in place with little control over where I land—it's a miracle I haven't cracked my skull open. Maybe next time will be my lucky day.

beep

War. It's always existed before we even understood the nature of rocks and resorted instead to helpless wrestling with the occasional well-timed, unintentional punch. War has only worsened as we learned to fight, craft weapons, and toy with the psyche. Now, war—its start and end—is immediate. Parents have no chance to shield their children, soldiers have no time to fight for honor, and the barbary of nuclear devastation takes life before we can even process it's being taken away. The privilege of battle has been revoked and replaced by spontaneous genocide to cater to the demand for instant gratification in the modern world.

beep

And now I'm here, all these ways to die, so painful that they become painless simply from how quickly they're over, yet I'm here. The IV slithers up my arm, painkillers dripping into the cephalic vein, burning my memories away as all I can focus on is the pain of painkillers. Ironic, isn't it? Humanity evolves to such grand technology, I avoid death that could kill in a split second, yet the painkillers hurt. I can only see a little out the window, enough to see the little orange dots marking nuclear explosions, pyroclastic explosions, and just plain explosions marring the crust of the Earth. My Earth, now blown apart by the very creatures She created. All I get to do is watch. My family is dying.



Sky Milstein

beep

My friends, loved ones, coworkers, delivery drivers, doormen, diner waitresses, firefighters, book club leaders, embalmers, underpaid teenage babysitters, forklift operators, pediatric orthopedic surgeons, vet techs, volunteer school nurses, telesales representatives, small-town farmers, clergymen, midwives, drug dealers, flight attendants, real estate agents, car salesmen, physicists, psychics, sous-chefs, coal miners, data analysts, seedy bartenders, magicians, news anchors, lifeguards, costume designers, jazz freestylers, customs officers, and everyone else between and apart.

beep

Like me.

beep

Or whatever I am.

beep

Dead. Dying as the last surviving miracle of the human race. I survived the greatest war yet, escaped into the void of space in a single-vacancy starship, and have nowhere to go but the same place I could've gone five minutes ago: wherever life after death is.

beep

It's only a matter of time.

beep

Until this heartbeat stops beeping.

beep

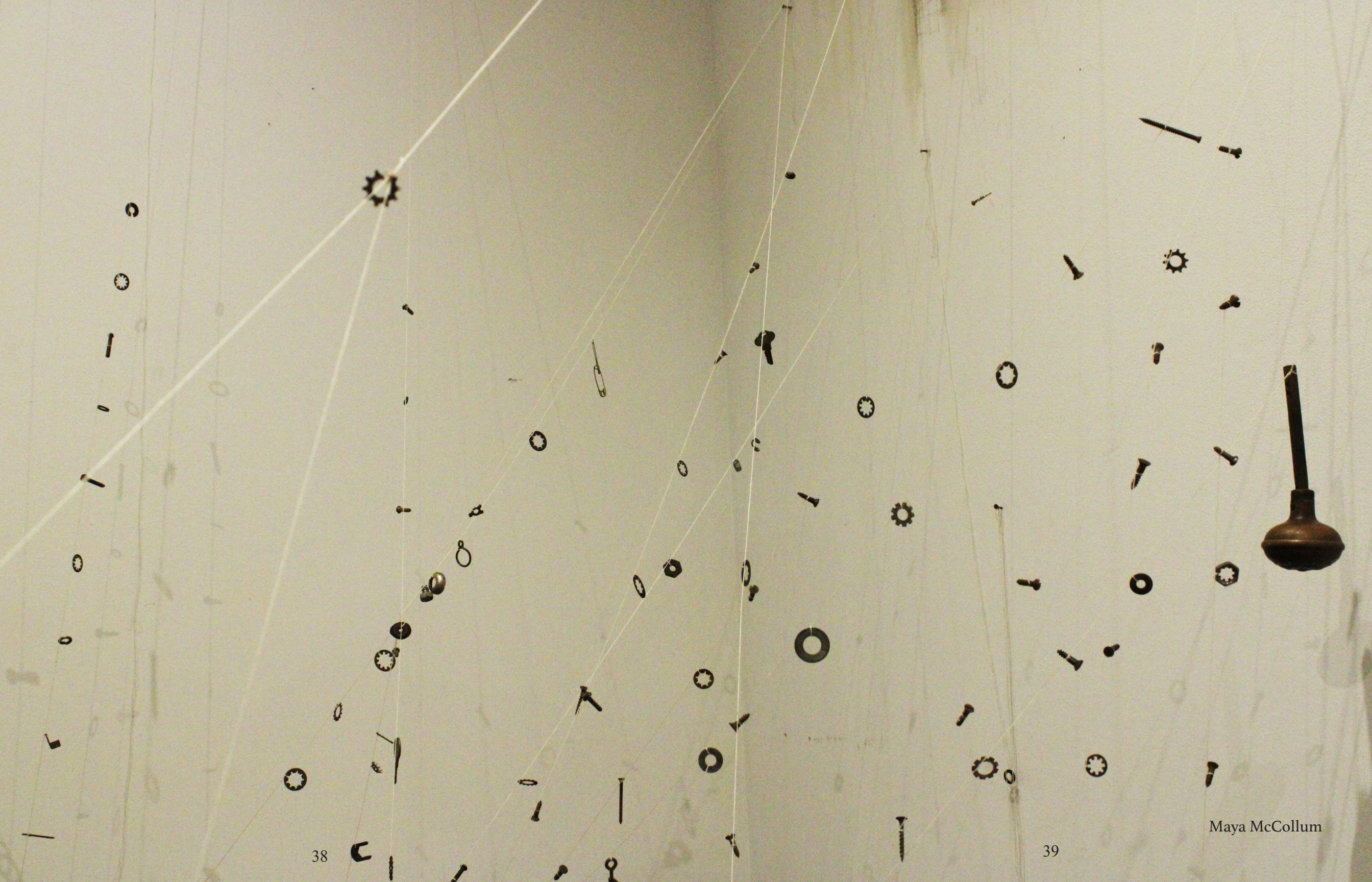
When will it stop beeping?

beep

I wish it would stop beeping.

beep







Breaks in Flow:

A History of the Oberlin College Flaming Blades During COVID-19

By Desmond Hearne Morrey

When it is good this is how it goes: your right arm no longer branches into a hand, but instead attenuates into 90 centimeters of thin steel past a bell guard, terminating with a spring-compressed button. The blade is clipped to a wire running through your arm, then wrapped up in a reel behind you and kept tense, pulling back as you move backward toward it, and releasing more wire as you move forward and away from it. This is connected to an identical apparatus directly across from you, which constitutes your opponent. You two, together, now compose a sort of integrated machine. Their face is veiled behind a mask, and they appear as a pale alien figure with one large black compound eye, and one long and pointed arm. You are both moving back and forth; something inside each of your heads taking in the other's patterns, forward motion to backward, where the hand likes to go, how quickly they move, or how slowly. Your attention is diffused across their whole topology; you cannot afford to give exclusive attention to the right hand, or the foot, or the direction of the eyes; you must take it in all at once. You must understand how your role in the machine changes the role of your opponent, how a slip of your foot precipitates a mirror slip of theirs, and vice versa. When they are going to make an attack, their movement changes just so, becomes quiet, or suddenly loud. When the patterns become clearly visible, it is as though the future and present are

simultaneous. The outcome of the next few seconds are predetermined. Despite the flurries of motion, probing actions, double checking, everything is very calm. You have stopped thinking in words. The moments do not pass, they already have passed. You have prompted the opponent to make an attack by feigning a pattern of advance, the opponent has attacked in the high line, to which you have responded properly by checking back, parrying, and reposting. The stillness is punctuated by a high note. You start again. When it is good, this is how it goes.

For me it wasn't that good for a long time.

I joined the Oberlin College Flaming Blades (or OCFB, named, sometime around the turn of the century, after a disastrous fire in the armory) in the fall of 2019. I was looking for a fencing group at the Club Sports Fair, and I found them at a table covered with a colorful fabric banner and some fencing gear, staffed by two friendly third years. When they asked if I had any fencing experience, I told them about my two years with a small local group in high school, where we had been practicing classical French fencing, a much older style than current competitive styles. The third years were a little baffled—they had never heard of classical fencing. But they told me to come to practice, and so I came.

What followed was an immersion in a completely new style of fencing for me, and a semester of rethinking every lesson that I had been taught over the course of the last two years. Where my classical mentors told me to hold my ground as I parried, my new teammates told me to retreat so that I had more time to defend myself. My classical mentors told me to maintain blade contact to keep tactile tabs on where my opponent's weapon was, while my sport mentors pointed out how this made my blade available for actions like beats, which, according to "right of way" rules I had never encountered before, gave me a disadvantage. I became accustomed to the complex process of outfitting myself with electronic scoring equipment. These stumbling blocks made it difficult to achieve any sense of smoothness, or pattern immersion. My fencing was too aggressive, and felt simultaneously frantic and sluggish.

As I was relearning how to fence, I was also learning how to have a social life as a college student. All the parties I experienced in those first few weeks were overwhelming, packed wall to wall with people, and noise. At these parties my movements felt awkward; I didn't know what to do with my arms, or who to talk to, or what to say. Every moment standing by the wall felt like a missed opportunity, and yet I had no idea how to stop standing by the wall. Everyone else seemed to move cohesively in a way

I was unable to integrate myself into, like they were playing a game to which I didn't know the rules. However, early that September, I got an invitation to a fencing party. When I arrived, people were lounging around playing *Super Smash Bros.*, drinking, and chatting. There was lots of space, and people seemed to want to talk to me. We knew each other, had some sense of each other's patterns already, and so moving through the social space of the party felt easy. Connection felt smooth instead of halting, the present flowed into the next present. A conversation became a clearly visible pattern which extended into both the past and future. While I could glimpse a potential future where I found flow on the fencing strip, in the social machine of the fencing team the flow was already there. The night went by quickly. Afterwards I remember feeling like I had something special and secret, a sense of security in an organization which met regularly and could support me. It felt like the ground you push off of to fly.

At the end of September, we went to our first tournament at Ohio State University. We drove together for two hours in college vans, checked into a hotel, and then had dinner as a team at Dewey's Pizza. I spent all of the next day getting my ass handed to me by fencers I had never met, using styles that I had never seen before. The grammar of the bouts was incomprehensible to me, I felt like I was stumbling through them. My



opponents knew more about what my own movements meant than I did. But afterward, me and the other fencers on my team would talk, and the sense of flow that I couldn't find in the bouts became suddenly visible on the horizon. Something that I could work towards, and figure out. And, as we became pleasantly worn out, a sense of flow and social cohesion permeated the team. The fact of our attendance at the tournament felt like a victory. We collapsed into our college-rented vans together, and enjoyed the journey back to Oberlin.

An interruption to flow can look a lot of ways. When fencing, it can be productive to develop a sense of flow with your opponent, each of you finding predictability in the other's footwork, such that time compresses and you always know the next stage in a pattern of movement. Once this sense of mutual flow is established, and you recognize it, you can break it to your advantage. Alternatively, one can make it perpetually difficult for your opponent to identify a pattern, meaning they can't attack confidently. Much of fencing can be paying attention to the patterns developed between you and your opponent's movements, and taking advantage of those patterns' break before they can. In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic would be an intimidating fencer. As reports started trickling onto campus during the spring, primarily about how difficult it was to understand exactly what the

virus was going to do next, it became difficult to map our next moves as well. This occurred on an individual level, a team level, and a wider institutional level—all we knew about the pandemic was how much we didn't know. We left campus, making vague plans to keep in touch. We made a Discord server. Everyone disappeared from each other's view, and we spent a long spring and summer navigating a changed world on our own.

This broader interruption to flow lasted throughout the 2020-2021 school year. We moved carefully. Any social interaction carried the threat of potential contagion, movements that were normally benign or life-sustaining instead became jagged, and suspect. Breathing was reconsidered. We spent class by ourselves with our computers, and sometimes our professors would freeze mid-sentence. Over Zoom it is impossible to achieve a sense of flow. You must manually turn on and off your voice.

The COVID-19 pandemic should be considered proof that a life in which one operates every bodily function and movement consciously and with intentionality would be awful. It should be a reminder to be thankful for the parts of ourselves that we move without meaning to, the parts of ourselves that could even be considered something else. The self we are conscious of is only a small part of the machine.

Taking care of the fencing team during the pandemic mirrored the difficulties of taking care of oneself. Just as breathing, the rhythmic diffusion and collection of oxygen, is life sustaining to a person, regularized practice, the rhythmic diffusion and collection of team members, is life sustaining for a student organization.

And just as breathing became an object of concern during COVID-19, fencing practice did as well. It took a long time to convince the college that it was safe to meet inside during a pandemic, so practice started late in the semester, and the ExCo drilled footwork on the tennis courts instead of bladework in Hales Gym, our



Wilson Crook

normal practice location and the location of our heavy equipment such as reels, lightboxes, and armory tools. When practice did start, turnout was low, both because the campus had less than three fourths of its normal population, and because the act of

coming to practice suddenly felt empty. There were no tournaments to prepare for. Other team bonding activities, like having dinner together, and parties, abruptly halted. When we did get the gym back, it felt large and hollow, a space that encouraged



Ruby Matheson Dachis

anxious silence rather than connection. The only people present on campus who had any experience being on the team were me and one other second year, and so it fell to us to lead both regular practice and the ExCo. The team suddenly seemed like less like a ground to push off of, and more like a friend who had suffered a grievous wound. We operated as a life support system, and the team flickered in and out of consciousness.

During the spring of 2021 many of the more experienced fencers returned to campus. I imagine that the third and fourth years who led practices felt a pressure to preserve a fencing culture from before COVID-19, but the tools to do that had disappeared. Instead of familiar team members and traditions, attendance consisted of mostly new fencers: many of whom had arrived at Oberlin during the pandemic, and had joined the fencing team looking to connect on an isolated campus. At the same time the college decided to move COVID-19 testing to Hales Gym in the spring, meaning that the fencing team was displaced again. In the space of a year, the team had become something entirely new. It stumbled on new legs like a phoenix chick, which is reborn out of disaster and must begin its new life on its own. Repeated displacement would become a theme of 2021; we shuttled back and forth between Hales and Phillips Gym, carrying our equipment or putting it in our cars' trunks, throughout the spring and summer of that year, even being stuck in Phil-

lips, for some of 2022. As a result, our practice times changed haphazardly, making it difficult to maintain a steady group, as practice moved to times they were unavailable. It was impossible to fall into any sort of organizational routine. We were stuck, perpetually, in rebirth. The problems of displacement, and the problems of only having a partial student population on campus, persisted steadily until the fall of 2021, the first almost normal year since COVID-19 appeared. This was the year we had the ability to begin to rebuild, instead of just treading water.

During the fall of 2021, the fencing team's breathing relaxed into a steady collection and diffusion, with Hales Gym its great vaulted lung. Many treasured and experienced teammates had graduated, and others had stopped showing up as their college careers got busier, but during the first practices of the semester we still had the most people that I had ever seen attend, many of whom had taken the ExCo during COVID-19. Most of us didn't know what we were doing. We tentatively began to attend tournaments again. We also had a full ExCo, which would set us up to continue recruitment throughout the year. And after about a month of wrangling, we had access to Hales Gym, although that would change later in the spring. I have fond memories of that year, even as the team was only just getting on its feet, and it was deeply stressful to keep it there. I remember playing

games of zombie tag on North Fields when we couldn't have practice in Hales. I remember putting hours into making emails funny and something the team would want to read. I remember bringing toy ninja swords and pineapples to Case Western University to serve as prizes for our independently-organized tournament. I remember sitting down to cry in a basement bathroom, overwhelmed by the stress of organizing. I have many pictures of victorious fencers holding prizes: little 3D printed *Among Us* figurines, pineapples, and cardboard antlers.

At the end of the spring of 2022, the Hales basement flooded, destroying all of the fencing gear stored below the one foot mark of the armory. Another catastrophe: the plague, then the flood. Another interruption in breathing, another rebirth. Fencing practice stopped. We cataloged all the destroyed equipment, and began the process of asking the college to replace it. The bottom foot of the armory was left disgusting, and then, after the long process of repair and cleaning, pristine. We began the new academic year with new gear purchased for us by the college, clean floors, and access to space.

A sense of flow can also be a sense of looping, a pattern of positive feedback. Looping and pattern creates predictability, which compresses time, which lapses into flow. Once there is a critical mass of something, it begins to exert gravity, which attracts more

mass, which strengthens its gravity. Organizationally, the fencing club ought to work like a positive feedback loop. It began doing this as we found stable footing; during the year of 2022-23 access to space stabilized, as did team attendance. We started going to official tournaments and having parties again. Some fencing traditions re-emerged. After almost every practice now, the fencing team collects to have dinner together. The team reached a critical mass, falling into a loop, strengthening its gravity.

One evening early during the fall semester, we have what is perhaps the first proper fencing party in a year. Someone has offered their space to gather. Someone else brings a tv, and another someone else brings a Nintendo Switch, for which someone else has paid them to buy *Nidhogg*, a fencing game. Someone else brings an HDMI cord. Others bring board games. The team rejuvenates itself, it collapses inward, creating a density which is not the big sardine body packing of open varsity sports parties, but a smallness, a concentration of affect. People become closer friends, which, as the semester progresses, means they want to see each other, which means they come to practice regularly. Patterns of conversation and connection become visible, the sense of social flow creeps back. The fencing team becomes a stable organism. It breathes. This is how you build something.



Wilson Crook

Over the course of a four year college career, the fencing team behaves somewhat like the Ship of Theseus, and its ontological status is similar. Its parts are replaced, and through that it changes and grows into something that is both still the fencing team and no longer the fencing team. It dies, and through its death it survives and is reborn. It is battered by *weather*, the unpredictable climatic conditions of human attractions and repulsions, epidemics, and catastrophes. It loses parts, and, sometimes, it seems that it is going to sink. These times it is hollow, the wooden ribs showing, breaks in the caulking. Perhaps one day it will. The fencing club isn't what it was when I joined it in 2019. There are fewer fencers who are interested in competitive fencing, and fewer with a depth of experience from outside of Oberlin. We don't really know what we're doing. Most of the club's administration now consists of former ExCo students, who joined the club together, and formed friendships in the context of COVID-19, when connection was difficult to come by. These students hold fast to each other. Currents of quiet affection run deeply through this new fencing club, and there is the sense that, together, we are flourishing, even in the aftermath of catastrophe. There is the sense that we have built something, and it is precious to us.

This is how you build a relationship with a person too. For

a while you just enjoy each other's company, but when something goes wrong one day, you support each other, and your relationship deepens. Neither of you are the ground. If you want to fly, you have to hold each other up. Flourishings enforce each other, the opposite of a zero sum system. I know that I am beginning to talk about the fencing team as a person; I know that it is not.

But it *is* an entity, even as it is made up of other entities, people; just as we are made up of a collective of beings unimaginable to us, many of which we don't even share DNA with. The philosopher Timothy Morton calls this *subscendence*, when the sum of the parts is greater than the whole, or beyond the whole, the reverse of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Imagine all of the parts that make up your body: not only the organs, bones, cells, but also the bacteria that don't share your DNA, the larger cultures you're a part of, the air you breathe. They transcend you in a way, they are greater than you. Bacteria and cells are *subscendent* to the person they compose. Fencers are *subscendent* to the fencing team.

It's funny because a fencing bout *is* a zero sum system. When you step onto the strip, and integrate into the machine with your opponent, you enter a zero sum system. But your position in the system is not zero sum. You and your opponent are *subscendent* to a zero sum machine,

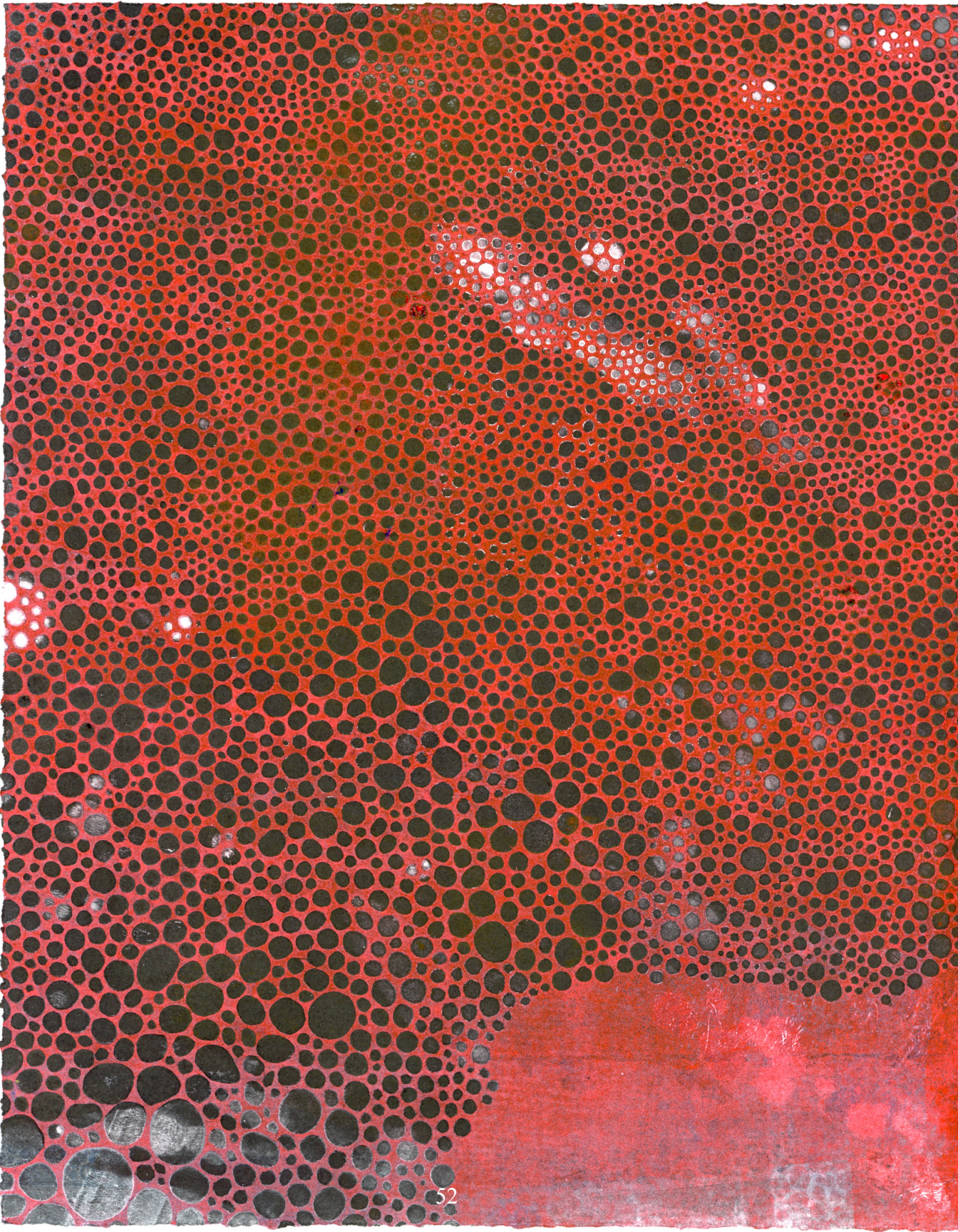
but the experience of fencing is not zero sum, and your relationship with your opponent is not zero sum, even as its existence is codependent with the zero-sum existence of the machine. This is a blueprint. Fencing practice more broadly is almost the same. There is only so much time, there are boundaries between sections of practice, what we do when, who fences who. Fencers are *subscendent* to the fencing team, but the relationships we build there can *transcend* the fencing team. We see and adapt to both the patterns of each individual part, and of the whole, and enter relation with each of them, beginning to find the flow of our roles in the machine. The larger organizational flow mirrors the smaller scale flow of a fencing bout. Our harmonies bounce off each other, and interweave into a machine which is at a higher scale than any single part, or person, but which feeds fulfillment back into those lower notes. We enter into symbiosis through competition, fluid connection through the rigid boundaries of a game. Relationships coalesce through mutual support, a feedback loop of growing gravity and attraction. Joy. When it's good, this is how it goes.

Next year the fencing team will still be here, and I will not. I will be like one of the planks of the Ship of Theseus, which is torn off, both catastrophically and routinely, in a storm. I could think about this like

part of each of us, me and the fencing team, dying, as though I was losing the fencing team, or it was losing me. But it is not like dying, for me or for the fencing team. It is like being born. The great joy of being so deeply intertwined with an organization like this, is watching it, and its new members, begin to find their legs, and therefore watching the organization grow. Me and other experienced teammates talk about how excited we are to watch newer members enter into leadership positions. Connections start to form, patterns of movement, which is also flow. People begin to reach toward each other, like budding trees.



Maya McCollum



Fall Towards Dark
For autumn 2019

We don't remember
that night will

fall,

not when early-autumn sunlight
strains through a canopy
of gold red green
honey rust

the remnants of summer

clinging.

Not when there are flower crowns
to weave,

soft yellow spears
of goldenrod, delicate
pink globes of clover,
purple-spiked haloes
of wild asters,

twisted,

tangled,

and tickling our ears
with fresh-picked leaves.

Not when our stomachs ache
with quick-catching laughter,

not when we sprawl

with warm grass
against our backs

and it seems the world
will never turn

towards shadow,

that we will always be
here,

as feverish fall unrolls
its bright carpet,

the warmth of the sun
and our young bodies



Horsehead and Flame Nebula, Asher Kaye

enough to ward off

dark
winter.

On the desk, three years later:

a single dried clover,
preserved behind plastic
falling to

sweet dust,

still retaining the scent of
that autumn afternoon. Oh,

how little we knew— not that
spring can bring its own

terrible darkness, not of the
shadowed summer and

fearful fall to come, not how
I can wish

I'd laughed harder,
held them all closer,

but never

that I would know
towards what terrible

season the world was
already spinning.

-Rose Rasor

Comparative literature in 5 easy steps

Wiley Martinez

Lost in translation

interpretation variance

examining fidelity

assimilation, culturally

neological clarity

assuming an equivalence

intratextual unconscious

in the lexicon & the voice

revealing & unraveling

metaphorical traveling

whenever you make a font **choice**

les belles infidèles

might send the reader abroad

but don't call it "lost"



THIS ARTICLE USES HE/ THEY PRONOUNS

By Zach Terrillion

No Room to Swing/ Sweeten the Kitty, Ruby Matheson Dachis

Jesus Christ used he/they pronouns. So does C-3PO. Don't forget Clippy, the Microsoft paperclip! Tis' the truth. These world-shifting facts were revealed in April 2022. The sci-fi hall of Oberlin College was engaging in a ritual. The biannual presentation night. The common room was lined with shelves of Magic: The Gathering card decks and vintage trade paperbacks of Scottish-themed erotica. Students assorted in shades of dyed hair and thrifted cosplay were prepared to give informed slideshows on niche topics. It felt like history was in the making. A Continental Congress for nerds. The first presentation covered the fascinating connections between Godzilla and Satan. The second graded the impracticality of various female superhero costumes. The third was mine. It consisted of a list of fictional characters who, I believe, used he/they pronouns—a Russian roulette of fruity identity that ran the spectrum from celebrity to blasphemy.

You must be contemplating the cultural milieu of he/they pronouns! Still, a more important question you may ask is: what the fuck are he/they pronouns? Also known as “rolling pronouns”, someone with he/they pronouns goes by both he/him and they/them rather than picking between the two. Likewise, a she/they uses both she/her and they/them. They can use the two options interchangeably. They can even be rotated within the same sentences and paragraphs. HE is writing this sentence to clarify rolling pronouns for THEIR largely straight audience. Some may prefer one pronoun

over another. Of course, the most important thing to remember about he/they pronouns is that they are the ones I like to use.

My slideshow began with some content warnings. For one, I personally would define he/they pronouns as “male-aligned androgyny.” The use of “he” implied masculinity, while the addition of “they” indicated gender fluidity. No, I hadn't done any research on this. The assortment of characters that followed was diverse. Bill Cipher from *Gravity Falls*. A variety of anime boys. Little Critter. The faun from *Pan's Labyrinth*. The presentation was met with grand applause. Everyone got it, with “so true” the most common compliment. That night, all our bizarre opinions were validated. Yes, these characters were he/theys. Yes, Godzilla is related to Satan. Yes, our identities were real and valued. No, the outside world isn't like this sci-fi hall.

In 2019, cartoonist Maia Kobabe released a graphic memoir titled *Gender Queer*. Kobabe uses neopronouns (e/em/eir), which are pronouns that are complete originals. E doesn't switch between pre-existing pronouns but adopts a new way of identifying. *Gender Queer* chronicles eir journey to discover this new way. It begins with discomfort over eir hairstyle. E doesn't want it to look “too grown up,” aka “not too feminine.” E wants it to be “kind of boyish,” aka “kind of gay.” These were not absolute decisions but liminal options. Trying to choose the perfect way to present oneself is like rolling multiple pronouns in the same sentence, trying

to find one that fits. It's a journey not without struggle.

In 2021, The American Library Association listed *Gender Queer* as the most banned book in America. Politicians from Florida to Virginia have touted the memoir as a work of pornography on account of some drawn nudity. However, there's more to it than just a sketch of a bare nipple. Kobabe is particular about eir struggle with eir non-binary gender identity. Much like my presentation, e references specific personas like David Bowie and Johnny Weir and then connects those personas to eir gender. These connections are off-kilter and out-of-pocket. To reinforce the status quo, reactionary governments created the ban. They probably wouldn't like my presentation much, either. If they hated some mild nudity, what would they think of he/they Jesus?

My PowerPoint topped the cake of a long-running joke among my friend group. A collective obsession with rolling pronouns. We were like a bunch of gay anthropologists, claiming that the most random characters and even objects showed he/they or she/they energy. Despite our memeing, we never really discussed our reasoning. What truly made the corporate mascot of a water bottle brand a he/they? I realized I didn't have a complete answer. It was just an instinct. A click of my brain. I realized my ignorance when a friend slid into my DMs and asked what he/they vibes were. I just sent them my rancidly-organized slideshow, hoping that would cover the topic. I was distraught. I felt like a fraud making baseless claims. Fake

news, indeed.

From there, I embarked on a quest, much like Kobabe. One to put a D&D dungeon master to shame. To qualify rolling pronoun energy. What, in the vibes and culture, makes someone a he/they or she/they? We know what rolling pronouns are, but what do they mean? I needed to restore my honor in the eyes of my fellow Queers; to provide a definitive definition—a document that future scholars would cite. A study to change conservative minds, making them take us seriously and not ban our art (ok, that may be too optimistic).

Of course, there was something else as well. After all, there is always something else. Kobabe had a hard time identifying eir neopronouns. They were the culmination of dozens of snapshots—slides and stories of tears and anxiety. A pretty fucked PowerPoint. E couldn't stand posing for photographs, handing control of their identity to a camera's lens. Romance was a no-no. Nothing would be worse for em than being referred to as a "girlfriend."

These experiences hit. In reading the book and trying to figure out what made it so controversial, the only word that came to my mind was "mood." I became less invested in researching the article you have before you, instead going down increasingly concerning online rabbit holes.

It was November 1st, 2021 when I began to use he/they pronouns. A resolution for the month. My exact reasons for this choice of pronouns were murky. I never officially came



Dresden Collage, Becky Trigo



out or made a tidy summary of my identity. A snappy edit of my Instagram bio was the end of it. My other Queer friends were immediately accepting, somehow grasping the inconstant truth that bubbled in my soul's twisted caverns. Couldn't be me! In reading Kobabe's work, some answers began to slip through for me. I needed to find more. To provide a rationale for my presentation, my pronouns, and, ultimately, for myself.

Rolling pronouns are on the rise in today's world, at least within worlds like my tiny liberal arts college. Students are encouraged to share their pronouns at the beginning of every class or club meeting. The number of he/theys, she/theys, and he/she/theys has soared to the point of becoming the default. People who identify as non-binary (or "enby," as many users say) have grown. Non-binary people don't adhere to the two doors of male or female. They inhabit neither or perhaps a bit of both. Cisgender (or just "cis") is the default. Cis people are comfortable with who they are, adhering to the door they were assigned at birth. However, in my dorm orientation at the beginning of the semester, I couldn't count a single cis-person who used just "he/him" or "she/her." I'm mildly surprised whenever someone says they just use one pronoun. It's becoming a novelty. Enby-ism is the new cis-dom.

The rolling pronoun phenomenon also plays out in greater Queer culture. According to the Trevor Project, about 26% of Queer people aged 13-24 identify as non-

binary, with an extra 20% questioning. Nearly half of Queer youth may live outside the cis he/him and she/her dichotomy. By God, Queer folk might just be Queering themselves further. Celebrity rolling pronoun users include Eliot Page (he/they), Jonathan Van Ness of *Queer Eye* (she/they/he), and Gerard Way of *My Chemical Romance* (he/they).

Still, among all this trivia, a question remains. Why? Why the sudden surge in pronouns that roll? In late 2021, around the same time I changed my pronouns, journalist Alex V. Green (she/they) conducted an investigation into the he/they phenomenon. A major thread they found is that many men, cisgender and trans alike, hope to adopt a liminal state between masculinity and fluidity. They identify as male but a different kind of male from the mainstream. They're #notlikeotherboys. To be a he/they is to be a compromise between being non-binary and respecting your masculinity. He/him meets they/them.

One of my foundational Queer experiences came in the summer after my first year of high school. It was at a reading and writing-themed camp, where I learned something very important about myself. I was scared of straight, cis men. They were like a foreign species that I was making contact with for the first time. I understood more Spanish from middle school than the average bit of "guy talk." I came out as Queer that week to show I was #notlikeotherboys. I still tried to mimic masculinity, however. I wore oversized basketball

shorts, and I don't play basketball, as you can tell by my earlier pop culture references.

My 99% comfort level as a male slipped because I began to realize what being a man really meant. Men were loud. Men liked sports. Men wore basketball shorts. Even the word "men" sounded solid. Hard even. When non-men come together to say "MEN," rolling their eyes, you know what they mean. Cisgender he/hims are an overbearing institution. He/they, in my case, may have been a way to cool the temp on he/him and introduce more options. A way of escaping from my male experience without rejecting it entirely. Like my presentation declared, to show some "male-aligned androgyny."

Rolling pronouns imply two or more options in terms of identifying. By the internet's logic, these ways of identifying apply beyond a single person and contaminate the realm of fiction. A popular Twitter account, @emonormie, with over 30K followers, posts a "he/they of the day." Example characters include Marcel the Shell, the Babadook, and Count von Count. These characters, most of whom identify as masculine from their various media works, have a shared "essence." An essence most of the commenters endorse. They can't describe it, but they all seem to agree on it, often accompanied by digital shouts of "GENDER" and "GENDER ENVY." These shouts imply the commenters don't just "get" the gender of the character, but they

want to adopt it as their own, like an aesthetic. Gender goes from becoming a noun to an adjective. This isn't men or women we're talking about, but things. Qualities. Ideas.

As these Twitter threads show, rolling pronouns are also common subjects of "headcanons." Headcanons are fandom-speak for non-canonical ideas fans have about their favorite pieces of media and characters. J.K. Rowling may not have meant for Sirius Black and Remus Lupin to be dating (knowing her, she probably didn't), but the fandom will say they are. My presentation is another example of assigning labels to characters that the authors likely wouldn't endorse. Headcanons are extremely common within the online-blogging app Tumblr, arguably the nexus of digital Queer culture.

Despite Tumblr's tumbling of media canons, real representation is limited. In society, there is a triangle of he/him, she/her, and they/them, and to move between these spaces is not really accepted, as the banning of Kobabe's book shows. These limits linger within the Queer community. Their voices and expressions are always at risk of removal from non-Tumblr narratives. A Ron DeSantis-shaped Grim Reaper is knocking on the door of every presentation night and Twitter thread he can hit.

Whatever culture emerges from rolling pronouns must lie in a narrow field. Just a group of people with shared experiences, like those seated in a dingy dorm for a lecture



Ruby Matheson Dachis



Wilson Crook

on *Godzilla*. Queer friend groups are iconic because there is a level of comfort and affection that comes from not existing along the poles of a binary. This comfort coexists alongside a sense of urgency. A will to survive and thrive.

This fall, Wade (he/they), a student at Skidmore College, was attending the local farmer's market with their partner. There were the usual vendors, but something stood out. Cradled in a man's arms was a tiny labrador retriever with the cutest button nose. The dog's name was Eleanor, and according to Wade, it would use she/they pronouns. As to why, they say, "You simply had to be there. She was radiating she/they energy."

Wade is a connoisseur in non-binary culture and one of my best friends since third grade. In our zoom interview, he dons a Spirit Halloween t-shirt befitting the spooky season. I ask them what defines the so-called "she/they" energy. How can a baby canine that has never read a page of Queer theory even be a "she/they?" Wade finds that the whole point of she/they energy is that it can't be pinned down. "Someone's essence cannot be articulated. It's very frustrating, but it's also very beautiful." That's fair enough, I suppose.

When I ask Wade why they use "he/they" pronouns, they promptly reply with "so true." They like the idea of being a "gender fuck," to confuse people with a fusion of masculinity and "non-binaryity." There isn't a specific piece of media that inspired

Wade to identify the way they do. Instead, it's bits and pieces taken from all over, coming together to form the enby I saw on my laptop screen: Gritty, Terence from *Tinker Bell*, and, of course, the "big-titted goat mascot of the Satanic Temple."

One thing that ties these characters together is just how different they are. Of course, a second thing is that none of them are Queer, at least canonically. The Philadelphia Flyers have yet to confirm that Gritty is trans, but the community embraces him nonetheless. He's a headcanon, but this headcanon forms the core of the identity of someone like Wade. He says he plans to start an account dedicated to picking pronouns for people's pets, just like Eleanor from the Farmer's Market. They smile with the utmost satisfaction: "it will be my empire."

Grove Muth (they/he) recognizes that the world, Queer and non-Queer alike, has much to learn about what rolling pronouns mean. He is Zooming in from Amsterdam, where he is currently abroad living with a host family. During their first weeks in Dutch land, they got lost, as they usually do. His host father gave him some words of support. Once "you fully transition [Grove identifies as transmasculine], you'll be a better navigator because men are better navigators." Rarely can a comment be so affirming yet so sexist at the same time. The host father also assumed that boys, including transmasc people like Grove, don't play "princesses" as a kid. Grove, in fact, did. They and his

brother played "princesses" and also a game called "men," where they would go into their dad's bathroom and pretend to shave. Rolling pronouns. Rolling interests. To be both "men" and "princesses".

Grove, in their mind, uses rolling pronouns to imply they are not a whole man. "I keep it in the order of they/he because I feel he/they is too masculine for my identity." For them calling oneself a man or a woman, a he/him or she/her, is too concrete. Words like "boy" and "girl" feel a little more non-binary. A man or woman means you've grown up, and being non-binary is something you leave behind. Grove's choice of "they/he" versus "he/they" emphasizes the enby part of themselves. They're still exploring. Growing. Wade would likely agree with this idea, calling themselves "a boy not yet a man."

For Grove's definition of a he/they, he lists two main qualifiers. "Soft boy energy" and for the person "to feel written by a woman." Andrew Garfield better start switching his Instagram bio. He/theys also come off as very affectionate, wearing soft sweaters and sipping lovely tea. No basketball shorts in sight. They are "soft boys" rather than "hard men."

One such soft boy is Val Kelner, an attendee of that fateful presentation night and author of the slideshow connecting *Godzilla* to Satan. They use any and all pronouns. He. She. They. E. Any. We sat down in a campus quad. We needed to wrap up the profile quickly as clouds

showed signs of a downpour. In the rush, they mentioned that "in some ways, it doesn't matter how I define it." For them, what defines a he/they or she/they varies per the he/they and she/they in question. They use all pronouns because, like Kobabe, their gender I.D. depends on how they feel on a given day. Still, "no matter what, it will always come second to me. I'm me before I'm any gender." But for their rolling pronoun influences, they cite the cartoon *Steven Universe*, the anime *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure*, and Janelle Monae (she/they).

Val began attending a LARP camp in late middle school. Here, bunches of kids would dress up in elaborate costumes and battle one another with swords. Think of it as D&D but without all the random algebra. At this camp, Val first met people who used rolling pronouns. These identities went hand-in-hand with campers acting in massive costumed battles. "It makes sense that there would be a lot of Queer campers," he remarks, "you get the chance to play something other than yourself."

In 1990, philosopher Judith Butler (a scholarly she/they) published *Gender Trouble*, completely flipping the table on Women's Studies by founding what colleges today call Gender Studies. I was introduced to the text by a friend and interviewee, Ale Jorge (he/any). I asked him if there were texts that he'd recommend I read for this article. He then promptly sent me a YouTube meme via Discord. It features old-time TV Detective

Columbo. Much like myself, the title character is investigating “#gender.” Upon reading Butler’s text, he concludes the “whole cockamamie thing is made up.”

Butler claims that gender is not inherent to humans but instead is something that people themselves create or that society creates for those people. It is a performance or a “stylized repetition of acts.” It’s not unlike fighting on the field during a LARP camp or going on Twitter to call a random cartoon character “gender.” Gender is a “kind of becoming.” A boy kinda becomes a man. A boy kinda becomes a girl. A boy kinda becomes themselves. We present the he/they, ladies and enbies. Maybe?

Rolling pronouns hold rolling definitions. All four interviewees prefaced their comments with assertions that their experiences don’t reflect every genderqueer person. There may not be one true definition of a rolling pronoun. That was all well and good, but what about the article? My dear future document that scholars could cite? The definition to validate my identity and my slideshow. To provide a framework for an identity marginalized by those like the random politicians in Florida. Why are Queer people always so subjective all the time? I then stumbled across something stirring. A fictional character who CANONICALLY uses he/they pronouns (aka, not a headcanon in sight).

The Owl House is a fascinating cartoon. First premiering on Disney Channel in 2020, it has earned plenty

of praise for its Queer representation and themes. The female protagonist, Luz Noceda, is bisexual and in a same-sex relationship. There are canonical trans and non-binary folks. This show’s central conflict deals with embracing the more unusual parts of oneself and opposing the more constraining aspects of society (Judith Butler should check it out). It’s filled with hypothetical rolling pronoun users. Ale Jorge recounted a headcanon that they heard saying Luz is a she/they. “I’m not inclined to disagree. I’ve never seen someone wear both a tuxedo and a tutu in real-life.”

The season two finale of the show, which aired last June, introduces a new central character in *The Collector*. He is a cosmic entity, destroying the fabric of the show’s fantasy world and throwing our cast into the deepest possible psychological trauma. Show creator Dana Terrace confirmed that the character uses rolling pronouns, he/they, specifically. Ale provided his own reasoning for the newly-canonized headcanon. “It’s a combination of a relatively masculine presentation and the idea of godly omnipotence. *The Collector* is an omnipotent child here to have fun and play and destroy the world.” In response to Terrace’s confirmation, a Twitter meme claimed *Collector* was “proof that a he/they can destroy the universe.”

Thus, can a rolling pronoun user be defined by their ability to destroy universes? To tear them down and build anew, like a child coming of age still playing with their toys? Butler



does say that “gender is a construction that regularly conceals its Genesis.” It emerges when we least expect it, but when gender does come out, it’s biblical in scale. Do you get what I mean now by he/they Jesus?

I asked Ale how he defined his gender identity. “I, Ale, am 70 to 80 percent a man.” After a pause, he adds that it’s actually 85 percent. After that 85, an additional 25 percent is between something feminine and non-binary. 85 + 25 doesn’t add to 100, but that’s the point. “I feel like I have way more to express consciously that I can even express physically or understand,” they claim. The world might be too small for rolling pronouns. People and politicians are feeble and can crumble under their weight. Perhaps that’s why they are afraid and why we question. 110 is bigger than 100.

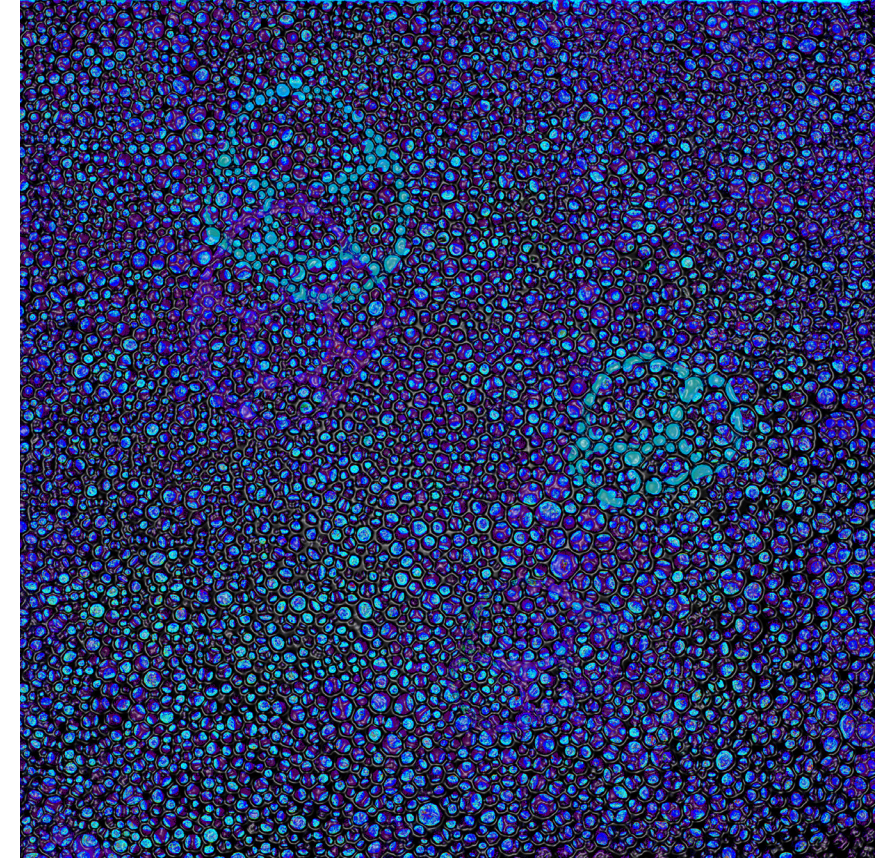
In eir memoir, Kobabe refuses to define gender as a scale that moves from male to female with some non-binarity in the middle. Instead, it’s a landscape. Many resources nowadays limit gender and pronouns to something you recognize and categorize. “They and them mean this and that.” “These are the specific number of people who consider themselves fruits.” Queerness inherently means to be different. To Queer something is to change it. Thus, can gender and pronouns be something more? A space full of adjectives rather than statistics?

To conclude my interviews, I asked how the subject would define their gender. Wade’s gender is a “lesbian twink.” Ale’s is, again,

85% male, 25% other. Grove’s is a “woodland sprite” (hence their name). Val’s gender is “open.” To call something “gender” is to capture its essence. In Butler’s view, it would be how someone presents themselves. It’s not so much about the sex as who someone wants to be.

Val particularly liked the idea of a landscape to describe gender. For them, “it means you can explore.” To go on a quest, much like one I was taking with this article, and one it seems may never end. I still don’t know what a he/they truly MEANS. Who am I? What do I mean by a he/they? Society likely needs an answer, as it seems book bannings by those penned by innocent enbies like Kobabe will continue to increase. More closeted Queer folk will be forced to wear basketball shorts, forced to become men rather than omnipotent boys who like playing with world-destroying toys.

I begin to think more and more about why I did it. I switched my pronouns because I didn’t know where I was in this landscape. I was uncertain where my gender lay, and perhaps that was an answer. Rolling pronouns are inherently indecisive. A he/him is one possibility. He/they implies at least two. On each slide of that presentation were many possibilities. Forty-four to be exact. Forty-four trees planted in my own landscape of headcanons. Perhaps we can destroy the universe to plant a new one. So, what defines a he/they? My answer, for now: the fuck if I know.



Dasha Klein



ode to the butterfly that never
loved me

For the butterfly

(Anon)

Act of Violence 2, Chloe Casdagli

Sometimes she strung along melodies that wove in people
bound to her by the same addiction
she was to her guitar strings

when the bottom of a flask couldn't console her.
Breath-thick with the scent of sadness and self-medication
she pours out her thoughts over the instrument.

Briefly, she becomes something more than her
Body to wandering eyes preying all over her
skin. A soft lullaby escapes her lips and quivers in the air:

small yet present and powerful
as the gentle wind of butterfly wings fluttering, nurturing vortexes
Fragmenting cities—oceans away in unforgiving hurricanes.

The lyrics alone drown an audience in a sea of tears:
drench their faces and quiet the voices in her head telling
her—she was never enough. The melody was stifling
like the pregnant air of a foreboding stormy night—
choking people into homes, swallowing blooming fields,
and devouring the life of the day. It took her

far, far away: above the clouds, weaving her into the stars,
brightening the night sky. And you hated that song because it stole her—
further and further away from you.

And six feet apart may as well have been six feet
under because you'll never be closer—and she was a world apart.
And you hated seeing her like that because you know

that this peace is fleeting and once this stanza ends
she will never be this free and her voice
and presence and attention will be hers and everyone else's

but yours.

And you'll never be her
and you'll never be loved by her
the way she adores that quiet, captivating, sickening melody.



Equinox/Infatuation

Daphne Scroggins



Comet C/2022 E3, Asher Kaye

I am moon drunk in your car,
rounding the bend of time where I care about
everything and nothing.

It's your favorite pastime: telling me stories,
painting mythology on the sky.



Soft Blaze, Chloe Casdagli

You love silent, but palpably,
more flesh and blood than anything I could conjure in my head.
I'm not one for simple,
but you could domesticate me.

I find I am often unlucky with men
the same way I am unlucky with numbers & time.

Sometimes my love is so terrible & true
it could swallow me whole.

Pleiades Star Cluster, Asher Kaye



Becky Trigo

I like to surprise people by mentioning offhand that I used to be a DJ. It's a piece of information that sticks out from the rest of my personality, a stray puzzle piece that found its way into the wrong box, refusing to line up with the total image. I have never known what to do with it besides boil it down to a sentence-long fun fact, relegating its messier context to the depths of my memory. Recently, though, that context has been coming to the forefront of my mind in unexpected flashes: children's birthdays, block parties. I see my 15-year-old self standing unassumingly behind the MIDI pad, showering middle schoolers and their parents with hours upon hours of stale top 40 hits. I see Evan, my teenage boss, working the crowd with the confidence of someone much older and taller than himself. I see a little boy trotting up to me and requesting that I play the *Thomas the Tank Engine* theme song, and a crowd of kids asking me to like their Instagram photos. I remember how easy it was to forget that we were only a couple of years older than the attendees of our events. How hard we tried to convince the world that we knew what we were doing, and how badly we wanted to believe that we actually did.

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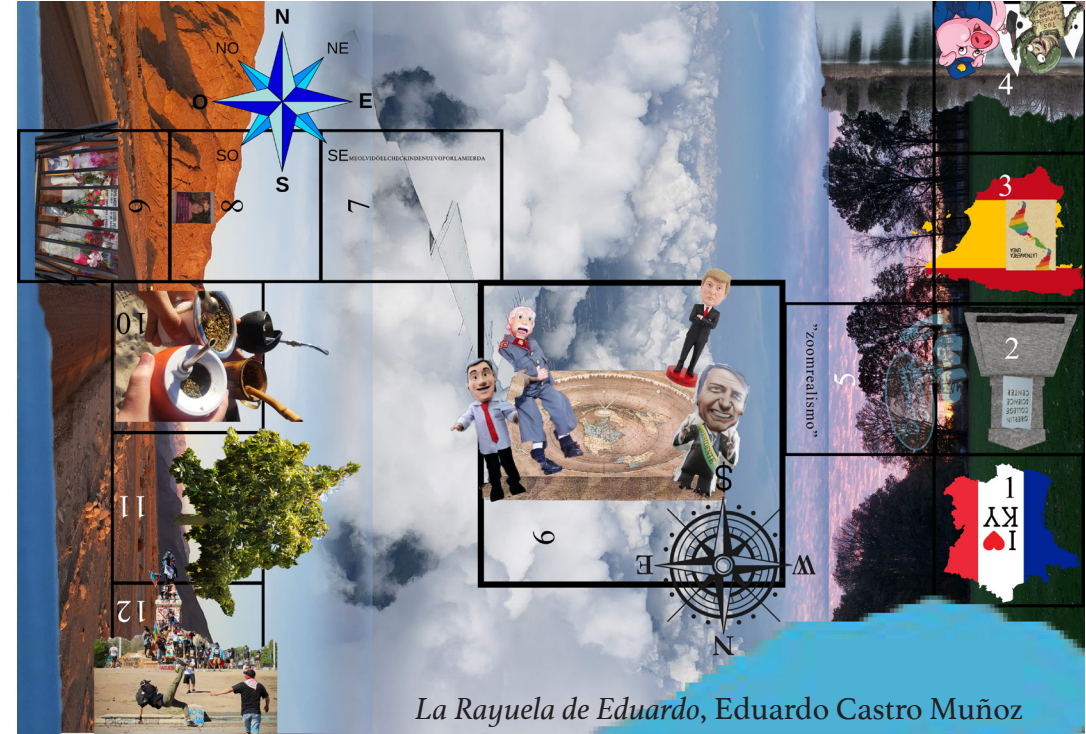
Aside from our age, just about the only thing Evan and I had in common was that we both

liked to spend our time pretending to be things that we were not. We'd originally met as fourteen year olds in acting class, and reunited months later as the only two kids in the cast of a regional theater production. I was intimidated by Evan because he was a *professional* actor, the kind whose parents pulled him out of school to send him on auditions procured by his agent. I did not have an agent—the only credits on my resume were from children's theater. For me, this regional play was one of the biggest deals of my life, while Evan played it off like it was just another gig. He projected the confidence of someone who had never truly been denied anything, never really heard the word *no*, despite my knowledge that, as an actor, he must have faced rejection on a weekly basis. The only thing that perplexed me more than Evan's confidence was his ambition. Acting wasn't even his only professional pursuit: at age 13, Evan had started a teenager-run event company, which mostly provided entertainment for children's parties. Whenever he discussed his business, I felt so young and immature (even though, as I reminded myself often, I was a few months older than him). I could not even begin to understand how a person my age could own a business, let alone fathom the details of what owning a business might actually look like.

Months after our play ended, I had almost forgotten about Evan entirely when he called me out of



Paintscape I, Babeuf



La Rayuela de Eduardo, Eduardo Castro Muñoz

the blue. I was in an Urban Outfitters changing room.

“I have called literally every single other person in my contacts and nobody else can help me.” This is the kind of thing I love to hear when someone reaches out to me. “I have an event this weekend and my DJ called out. Could you do it? I can teach you how to work the setup. It’s so easy, you basically just press a bunch of buttons.”

I was raised with the theater kid mentality to never say no to an opportunity.

The next day my mom dropped me off in front of Evan’s massive house. He answered the door and led me into a spacious living room littered with intimidating sound equipment.

“I promise you it’s easier than it looks,” he reassured me. I was skeptical. But it turned out that there was a big difference between being a *good* DJ and just being a DJ. We were aiming for the latter. All I really needed to do was stand behind the setup and press a couple of buttons every few minutes. Evan showed me how to queue, change, and fade songs. The fancier stuff could wait—it didn’t make a difference to the kids at Evan’s parties anyway.

That first event quickly spiraled into a part-time job. Surprisingly, Evan kept calling and asking me to DJ again. Eventually, a photo of me, wearing my headset and looking serious, appeared on the company’s website. The job title listed underneath my name was *Chief Event Specialist*. This was not something that

Evan and I had ever discussed. We rarely discussed anything—I was so intimidated by him that it even took me a while to ask him how I would be paid.

“I want my employees to know that I value their work, so I ask you all to set your own hourly rate,” he told me. “You can choose based on what you think you deserve.”

“How much... are your other employees typically paid?” I asked.

“Usually somewhere between \$10 and \$15,” he said.

I went with \$13 because it was just barely on the upper end of that range. It was the most I would make from a job for another six years.

Weeks went by, then months.

I worked at a handful of children’s birthday parties, many bar and bat mitzvahs, and one couple’s anniversary party at a venue with a bar that supplied me with bottomless Shirley Temples on the house. Twice, I spent full days DJing inside of a local Lord & Taylor department store, though I can’t remember why. As time went on, I began to realize the barely-hidden truth behind Evan’s business: it was a mess. Most of his employees were too young to work legally—his General Manager was in the eighth grade—and almost all of his clients were family friends or neighbors from his notoriously wealthy town. It made sense. Who else would be willing to pay standard market prices to have a bunch of underqualified teenagers run their event?



What its like to dance when you're 20, Becky Trigo

It simultaneously became clear that Evan was not the self-made entrepreneur he believed himself to be. Once, he casually mentioned that he had founded his company with a generous birthday gift of 100,000 dollars from his father. "I'm going to pay him back eventually," he said, "once we really get off the ground." But after working for Evan for a while, it was hard to imagine the business ever really getting off the ground. If anything, it lifted itself up in brief, unsuccessful spurts of low flight like an overconfident bird with clipped wings. These short-lived signifiers of progress were always purchased: Evan would parade around a brand new piece of expensive equipment, saying, "Now we're *really* going to be able to improve event quality!" Evidently, the business would only go as far as Evan's money could take it. Once it was up to talent or quality, we were screwed. But Evan wore his overconfidence like blinders, rendering him unable to recognize shortcomings or foresee possible complications. Once, at a block party, I had been standing in direct sunlight behind the DJ equipment for hours when the system overheated and stopped working. The Katy Perry song I was playing came to a sudden stop, and upset children and confused parents turned to me with disgruntled expressions. I cowered behind the malfunctioning setup, turning to Evan for guidance.

"This has never happened before," he said, shrugging. It was an understandable response until, at an outdoor birthday party a few weeks later, it happened again.

"I didn't actually think we'd have to deal with this again," Evan sighed, fiddling with the overheated equipment. "We can try to put a tarp over it, but someone would have to go buy one. Or we could move somewhere else, but that would take even longer. I say we just wait it out." I listened and nodded, but inside, I was horrified. Just wait it out? Music was the most important part of Evan's event service, and he had no action plan for getting it back up and running. He hardly even seemed fazed by the technical difficulties. Not that I had any clue how to run a business, but the whole thing seemed pretty unprofessional to me. Even worse, it reflected poorly upon me, the person whose only job was to play the music.

Through all of this, Evan clung steadfastly to his facade of successful entrepreneurship, even as I came to suspect that his business was actually losing money. He seemed more concerned with maintaining his extravagant lifestyle than he was with ensuring the quality of his services. For the company's second anniversary, Evan organized an elaborate celebration. A limo picked us up from his house and drove us into the nearby city. During

the ride, Evan shared a PowerPoint presentation about the company's recent milestones and his plans for the future. Most of these "news" items were aspirational at best, delusional at worst: plans to shift focus from children's parties to weddings; unrealistic timetables for anticipated business expansion; potential celebrity connections. Towards the end of the presentation, Evan's demeanor turned uncharacteristically grave.

"Someone, and I won't name names, recently used their company card to purchase a chef's hat, an apron, and several lobster dinners," Evan said, gesturing towards a PowerPoint slide featuring a stock photo of a lobster crossed out by a large red X. "Unfortunately, we had to let that employee go." Everyone knew that it was the eighth grader. I didn't have a company card—I didn't even know we *had* company cards—but for some reason, the middle schooler had one. He was re-hired a few months later. Evan always had believed in second chances.

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Three days before my 16th birthday, Evan invited me to attend a wedding expo far away from home. I went because I liked the idea of being on a *business trip* for the weekend, and because I'd get to stay overnight in a hotel like an adult with a real job. I had worn my most professional-

looking blouse, but Evan made me change into a t-shirt that bore the company's logo. After a full day of hopeless attempts to schmooze with brides who clearly did not want a bunch of teenagers running their weddings, I was suddenly hit with the truth of my situation like a child inexplicably wanting to go home mid-sleepover: I didn't want to be an adult with a real job anymore. I was stuck, stranded. I stepped away from our booth to text my parents, frantically begging them to pick me up. They advised me to stick it out and see how I felt in the morning. When I returned to our station, I realized that the venue's equipment had been taken away and broken down, and my cute, professional blouse had somehow gone with it. On the verge of tears, I asked Evan if there was any way we could track down the equipment, but he was doubtful. He offered to reimburse me for the blouse.

"I think I need to go home," I practically sobbed. "Is there any way I can get home tonight?"

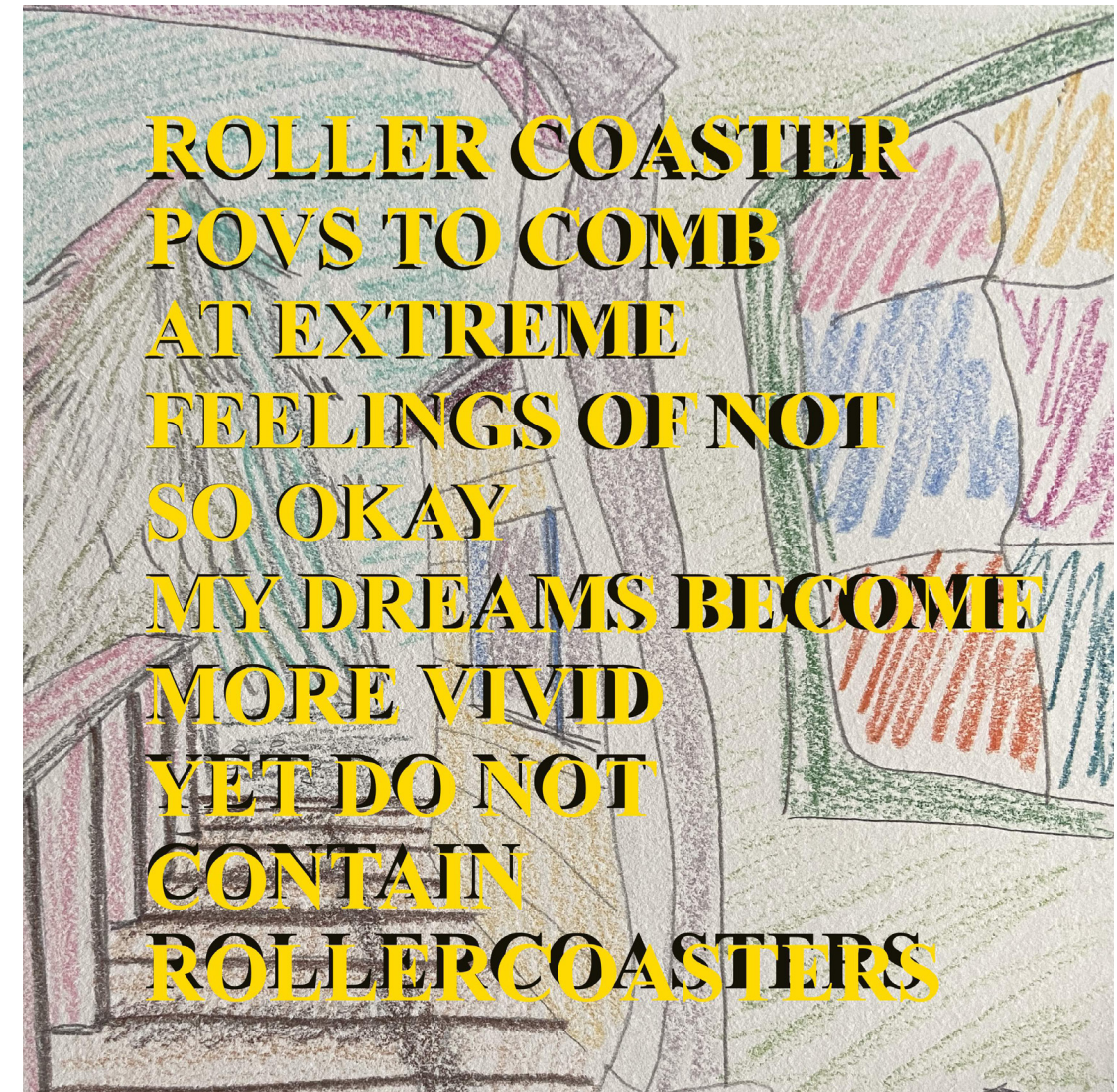
Evan, likely freaked out by my breakdown, sent me back home with one of his tech guys. After a long, awkward car ride, I arrived at my house and immediately collapsed into tears. It was the melancholy I often felt around birthdays—realizing that another year of my life had gone by—compounded by the stress of having just spent so many hours in a place that had made a mockery of

my youth. It was the fear of entering a new part of my life feeling like I understood even less about the world than I did before. It was the pain of finally growing up and then realizing I wasn't sure I wanted to. The maturity I thought Evan had—the maturity I envied—was not real. He was just an actor who had found a

really expensive way to play pretend.

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I was never officially fired from Evan's company, but instead experienced something that I can only describe as being professionally ghosted. Months went by, I declined gigs increasingly often, and Evan



Poetry about Rollercoaster POV, Becky Trigo

called me less and less. In the spring of my junior year of high school, while I was on bedrest after undergoing pretty invasive scoliosis surgery, Evan's general manager (former eighth grader, amateur embezzler, and lobster enjoyer) texted me.

Hey. Can you work an event this weekend?

I actually can't because I'm recovering from spinal surgery for the next few weeks. Sorry!

That must've scared him away, because I never heard from either of them again. After a few months, my name disappeared from the website. But I'm still fascinated by Evan all these years later, and I've kept tabs on his career. He goes to film school now, though based on his Instagram feed, it seems like he's never actually there. A few years ago, he took one of his employees on vacation to Aruba. Inexplicably, he's also developed a professional relationship with one member of the *Impractical Jokers*. I struggle to understand what's going on with him most of the time, so that hasn't changed. Sometimes I briefly regret burning the bridge between us, or letting it crumble, or whatever it was I did. I wonder whether his business has improved. Is the whole operation more legitimate now that he's an adult, or was his youth the only unique and endearing aspect of his business to begin with? Once you get too old to chalk your failures up to learning experiences, what are you left

with besides plain old failures?

I used to think that Evan's persistent confidence was something borrowed from someone much older than himself. Now I think it was something that could only be afforded to a child, or an extremely privileged and delusional adult—that kind of blind, ever-forgiving belief that any fuck-up can be unfucked. It's the kind of childlike faith that can only exist in the absence of real experience, sheltered from the world's truths.

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Sometimes I think I see someone I used to know—my high school principal, one of my old coworkers, my brother's childhood friend—walk into the lobby of the hotel where I work now, and it takes me a split second to locate myself in time and space. There's always a brief moment of mistaken recognition before I realize that the person is only a stranger, while the person I thought they were is hundreds of miles and several years away from me now. It's easy to momentarily forget that I'm not 15 anymore, and there are few relics from my life seven years ago that remain in my daily life today. There's a certain comfort in realizing that moments I once found so monumental turned out to be inconsequential in the long run—I will not be forever haunted by a bad DJ set or a bride-to-be at a wedding expo. In another sense, it terrifies me how little I remember of those moments and feelings that once seemed so huge.

"I'm not thrilled about the whole thing," I say to my friend while we're sitting in a coffee shop. "I mean, there are definitely some positives, but I just don't know how I feel overall."

"About what?" he asks. "Growing up?"

"Yeah."

"Well, at least now we get to be nostalgic."

"I've always been nostalgic."

It's true—I've been nostalgic ever since I first began to consciously reflect on the events of my life. Always had one eye on the rearview, narrativizing. I often view this as a negative quality, something that prevents me from fully appreciating the present. My reluctance to let even the smallest, most insignificant memory go. My fear that I will inevitably let so many moments slip into the void. Where will it all go if I stop remembering?

"That's good," my friend says. "It's so much better than the real thing—like, actually living it."

But if that's the appeal of nostalgia, then why am I usually drawn to revisit the most painfully uncomfortable parts of my past? I'm certainly not writing about my first job because I want to go back and relive it. You couldn't pay me to relive my life from seven years ago, DJing a five-year-old's party and then heading to math class the next morning. (Not being forced to do math is one of the

few definitively positive aspects of adulthood that I've discovered so far.) But something about that fear and confusion, the sense of being right at the beginning of it all, seems so elemental to my experience of life that I sometimes miss it. Something essential about me was cemented at that time and has followed me through every day of my life since. In each new endeavor, I feel a little bit like that confused, unqualified teenage girl. And though things do get easier and less scary with experience, I doubt that feeling will ever fully leave me. Where will I be seven more years down the line? I fear that I'm nearing the point in life when my youth stops being marketable, when it's no longer cute or endearing to be lost. I fear that because so much of my identity for so long was wrapped up in being a teenager, I don't know how to be a real adult and also be myself.

For now, I approach my new hotel job more or less the same way I approached my brief DJ career. After all, both jobs mostly involve standing and pressing buttons. When things go wrong, I remember the sound equipment overheating, and I remind myself: *In seven years, none of this will matter. Hey, you might not even remember this.* But knowing myself, I'll probably remember it. In seven years, I will be 29. I don't need to hide how much that fact scares me. It's alright. In seven years, none of this will matter unless I want it to.



Les Trois Jeans de Temps et de Deuil, Abigail Harris Crowne



CAN'T HELP BUT FIND GOD IN THE LITTLE THINGS



Soft Death 3, Chloe Casdagli

BY SOLARA STACEY

CW: Self Harm

Can't help but pull the skin of my lips through my teeth like lions pull meat through zebra bones, can't help but sing Amy Winehouse in the shower and hope she might hear, can't help but ring your words through my washing board brain

until the fibers come apart. I used to be so gentle with stuffed animals just in case they might feel it, all flower petal touches and whisper kisses. Used to cut imaginary lines into my body, fingers as scalpels, to do away with the parts I didn't fancy. In later years,

I tried planting smooches on my arms, little seeds of love I prayed would grow into a lover, an Eve. I prayed she'd visit me in dreams to exchange intoxicating words and love me gently the way I had always loved. These days, your shriveled old sentences

from the year of friend break-ups come knocking instead, determined as mormon missionaries. Can't help but answer the door, can't help but invite them for lemonade in the garden, can't get rid of them once they come. Today, I hear a quiet-at-first

melody. I peer past the lilac bushes to see a symphony of cells, the plucking of heart string cellos, blood thumping to the beat of a love song. My body sings of soft hands to hold friends, diaphragms full of laughter, of teeth and limbs and toenails.

The only god I ever pray to is Amy and I'm pretty sure she doesn't hear it when I sing to her. I'm pretty sure the stuffed animals never felt a thing There was no magic in my kisses but god, when this body o' mine sings...

I can't help but sing back.

By: Wayleen Arrieta Ariza

Luna roja

Red Moon

Translated by: Dorothy Levine
Reyah Doshi
and Wayleen Arrieta Ariza

Noche de Halloween
Ahora eres mi fantasma
No hay rojo
No hay pasión

Te deslizas entre las sábanas
Te trepas en mí
Tu sombra sobrepasa la ventana
luego cae

Veo las gotas resbalar en tu ventana
Tu gato negro sueña en mis pies
“Duermes”
Rojo, rojo, todo es rojo

Naranja otoño
Solo me dueles
Solo me oyes
Ya no hay naranja
Ya no hay hojas
Ya no...

Rojo pasión
ahora eres luz tenue
Te paseas con el azul de tus ojos
Tus colores se mezclan
Sigues doliendo



Copenhagen Oranges, Christine Dugas

Night of Halloween
You are my ghost
There is no red now
There is no passion

You slip between the sheets
You climb on me
Your shadow passes by the window
then falls

I see the drops sliding down your window
Your black cat dreams at my feet
You “sleep”
Red, red, all is red

Orange autumn
You only hurt me
You only hear me
You don't listen
There is no orange
There are no leaves
Not anymore...

Red passion
you are now dim light
You walk with the blue of your eyes
Your colors mix
You keep hurting

No hablas
No me miras
No nos podemos escuchar

Vienes a mí
Nos abrazamos una vez más
Duermes a mi lado
Lejanía
Blanco silencio
todo es blanco

¿Acaso no ves cómo estoy temblando?
Estás al lado mío
Si todo es mentira eres maldito
Si es verdad eres cobarde

-Sí, te veo temblar
-¿Por qué no haces algo?
Lo siento, dices
Ahora tu gato enloquece

Cambiaste a amarillo,
ojos azules
Ya no me hablas
no hay rojo

Ahora es amarillo
Amarillo con azul
Lágrimas azules
Y tú
sigues siendo fantasma



Winter and Spring Holding Hands, Zola Haber

You don't talk
You don't look at me
We can't hear each other

You come to me
We hug one more time
You sleep next to me
Distantly
White silence
all is white

Can't you see how I'm trembling?
You are next to me
If it was all a lie you are a cunt
If it was true you are a coward

'Yes, I see you tremble'
Why don't you do something?
I'm sorry, you say
Your cat goes crazy

You changed to yellow,
blue eyes
Now you don't talk to me
there is no red

Now it is yellow
Yellow with blue
Tears blue
And you
still a ghost



Columpio, una parada: Organ Pump

El latido recorre nuestros cuerpos

No vemos colores

Solo hay sonidos

Un beso

Manos entrelazadas

Tu cama

Explosión de colores

Tu auto

Mi habitación

El fin

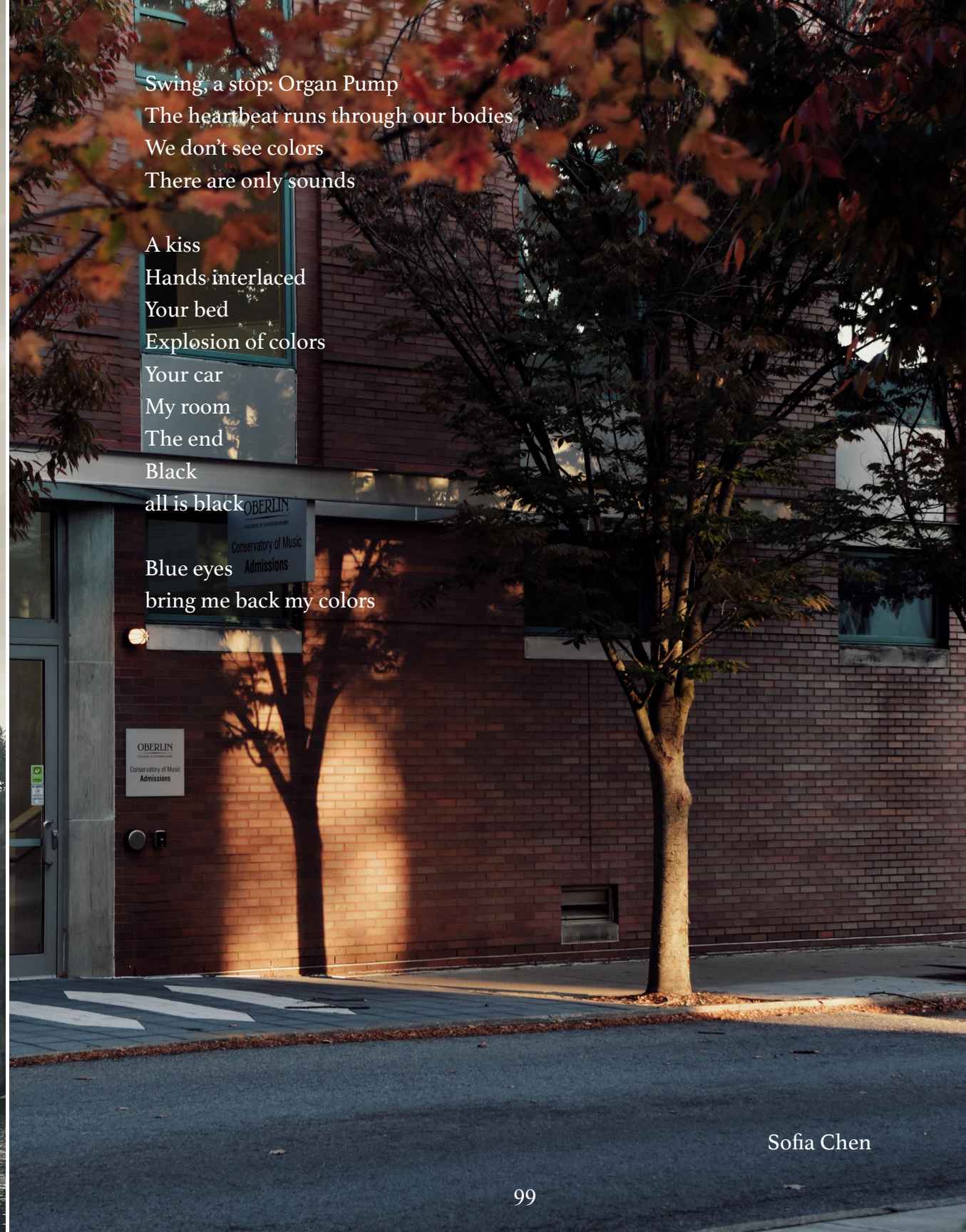
Negro

todo es negro

Ojos azules

devuélveme los colores

Future, Abigail Harris Crowne



Swing, a stop: Organ Pump

The heartbeat runs through our bodies

We don't see colors

There are only sounds

A kiss

Hands interlaced

Your bed

Explosion of colors

Your car

My room

The end

Black

all is black

Blue eyes

bring me back my colors

Sofia Chen

Fourteen

by Avery Russell



Maya McCollum

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CW: This content includes a description of sexual harassment and reference to the transatlantic slave trade.

There's a story my babysitter tells everyone she meets.

When I was three, I came up to her hysterical. She was immediately concerned, wondering if I was sick or got injured. She hugged my small frame and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Ed, am I beautiful?" I asked through tears.

Whenever she tells it, she makes sure to put emphasis on my inability to pronounce the *eau* part of beautiful so it comes out as 'beutiful.' People often laugh at this story, especially those who know me closely; it perfectly embodies my dramatic and emotional personality. But sometimes, as I look at myself in the mirror applying concealer and feeling insecure about my uneven skin tone or the sliver of fat on my stomach, I wonder how I could, at three, not even know how to pronounce the word beautiful but already know the value of a woman's beauty?

*

A part of the importance I put on beauty was given to me by my objectively beautiful mother.

She is skinny. She has perfectly clear skin, pink lips, blond wavy hair, and—most distinct from me—she is white. I have always envied the way she has been perceived.

Since my mother is white, I grew up around mostly white circles and I attended predominantly white institutions since I was three. From the moment I could speak, people would ask me, "Where are you from?" or "Are you adopted?"

One of the most amusing comments I had ever received was, "You're so lucky to be mixed." I never quite knew how to respond to this.

Am I supposed to smile and thank them?

Do I explain my complex African American, Jewish, and Caribbean ancestry?

I was only a small child. I didn't yet know America's complex racial hierarchy that made others want to place me into a distinct racial category. But over time, I learned the

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answers others wanted me to say.

I hid discomfort when people said I was “cute” or when they commented on how pretty my skin tone was.

I never shivered when my classmates pulled on my curls—no matter how much I hated it.

I told myself to think of them as compliments.

I thought I knew the racial landscape I occupied, but at 14, I found myself in completely new water, desperately wanting to climb out of my brown body.

When I think about 14, I feel like that’s the year my life really happened. In my mind, I woke up one day with two breasts, heavier thighs and a butt. But the truth is my body changing isn’t really what *happened*—it was that I went from being a cute, ethnically ambiguous girl to a Black woman: even if I myself didn’t know what womanhood meant.

*

In eighth grade, I was with my best friend, her boyfriend, and his friends hanging out—no different from most days. At some point, I dropped my wallet on the floor and went to pick it up.

“You love your tits out Avery, don’t you?” her boyfriend said with a chuckle.

I had known him since kindergarten. We had countless childhood memories together. He knew some of the biggest hurts in my life. But at that moment, I felt like he was a stranger. Heat rose to my cheeks. I was utterly ashamed and quickly adjusted my V-neck t-shirt. I was aware of my changing body and already feeling complicated about it. But suddenly, my body felt like this separate grotesque entity I had no control over.

A part of me was angered, at myself and my body. I also didn’t understand why my friend would comment on my breasts. But everyone in the group laughed, convincing me this was normal, and that I was overreacting. This was the first of many instances of my body becoming a topic for others to discuss and decipher.

The list is too long to count: a camp counselor asking me to change my bathing suit because it was “too revealing,” a male friend calling me “low-key thick,” a guy following me across the park, a male friend groping over my breasts during a hug, even men sending me unsolicited dick pics.

A part of me knew these things were wrong and far from okay, but no one ever said anything. So I convinced myself that this was normal and a part of growing up as

a woman. I even told myself to take it as a compliment—that my body could be valued and so I should feel empowered. But in truth, I had no agency over the comments made about my body, and they made me feel dirty, and lose my sense of self. Still, I never allowed these emotions to show. Instead, I became skilled at laughing things off and de-escalating situations.

*

In high school everything only got worse. I made the large mistake of sleeping with a boy. We were both mutually interested in each other, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was that I slept with a boy. He told all his friends. The comments over me began to include not only my body, but the intimate details of my sex life, many of which were false. The discussions held a harsher quality, one of disgust and revulsion. Yet there was still a rotten desire attached to it. Often people would come up to me and ask if I had in fact hooked up with _____ person. One of the comments that stuck with me the most was a male friend of mine saying I was “asking to be raped.”

I began to hate walking down the halls because I knew they were judging the details they heard about me, what I was wearing, and my

body. While I was in no way the only girl at my school to be slut-shamed or sexualized, it felt like there was a specific racial element to my sexualization. I was one of the only Black girls in my school, and while I am by no means “curvy,” I had larger breasts than most of the girls in my class.

The comments surrounding me had a specific relation with sex that felt different; there was a dirtiness attached to me and I became incredibly isolated. Not to mention part of the racialization of my experience has to do with the history of Black women being viewed as sexual commodities.

Still, I forced my rage to quiet. I never replied to a cat call or allowed people to see how much it hurt when people made casual jokes about my body. I pretended to not care or notice, at least for a few years.

*

In my senior year of high school I took an advanced history course on the transatlantic slave trade. In the class we discussed the trial of Captain John Kimber.

Captain John Kimber commanded the ship *Recovery*, which traded enslaved people from the coast of West Africa to the West Indies. In 1792 he was charged with

the murder of “two negro slaves” who were aboard the *Recovery*, making him the one of the only captains in the recorded history of the transatlantic slave trade to ever be charged with the murder of an enslaved person.

The case has been dissected and analyzed by many scholars and professors of Africana Studies. But there is a key perspective missing from this narrative: the enslaved young girls referenced in this case, who were both labeled as Venus during the court proceedings.

Saidiya Hartman, a writer and scholar of the trans-atlantic slave trade, wrote about the lack of agency of “Venus” and millions of Black enslaved women in her essay “Venus in Two Acts.”

“There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes.” (Hartman 2008, 2).

I was haunted by Venus’s story in high school and Hartman’s quote. I was terrified that I had no control over the narratives surrounding myself and body—that I was simply a statistic, one of the many Black women who would experience unfair

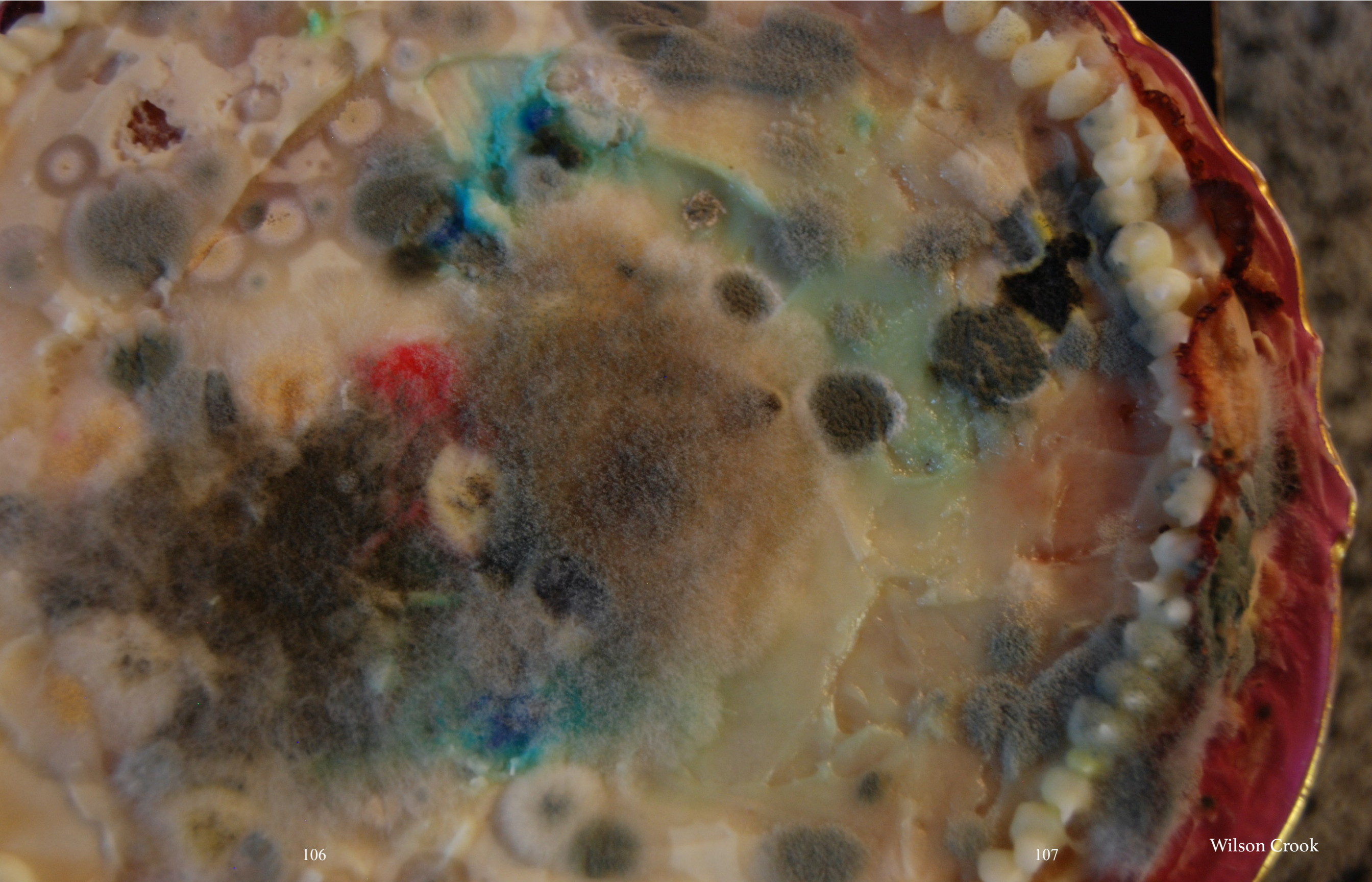
sexual harassment and derogation. I felt this incredible intimacy towards “Venus.” While the situations of Venus and I are incredibly different as I have far more privileges, luxury, and agency than she did, I too feel as if my body is simply a display for other’s to project their beliefs onto. After reading about her story, I felt as if my story was un-special, and that I was defined by the history of abuse enacted on Black women.

This enraged me.

I decided I no longer wanted to accept the vicious treatment of myself and my body, no matter how normalized it was. I began writing about my experiences in the form of poetry and essays. I would call a friend out if I heard them say something degrading about me or anybody’s sexuality.

Yet while I feel much more empowered than I did at 14, I still struggle with obsessing over my beauty. I am constantly scared that the value people place on me is based upon my body, and that people already have false perceptions of me. It can be exhausting and debilitating. My experience, though, has allowed me to have a better understanding of race and gender. In addition, I have found control over my narrative through writing, standing up for myself, and advocacy.





Good Use



Loren Carter

CW: Sexual Violence

I had my first kiss when I was twelve. Open mouthed, chin wet as he missed my lips completely. When he went to leave my house, he told me that I looked beautiful.

I CRIED



Maya McCollum

There was a power I held in the kisses we shared; but, these alone would not satisfy him for long. He would remind me of the things that the other girls would do for him, willingly and unprompted. We stopped kissing. Instead, I would drag his hand across my midriff, and under my t-shirt. He would be the first person to see me bare. As he stared down at my cold body, he told me that he cherished the time we spent together.

I CRIED

Countless nights were spent wondering what I had done to lose him; How I could have done better. It had been childish of me to cry. I confided in a friend. As his palm grazed over my knee and touched my inner thigh, he told me that I was worth more than that other boy had ever had to offer.

I CRIED

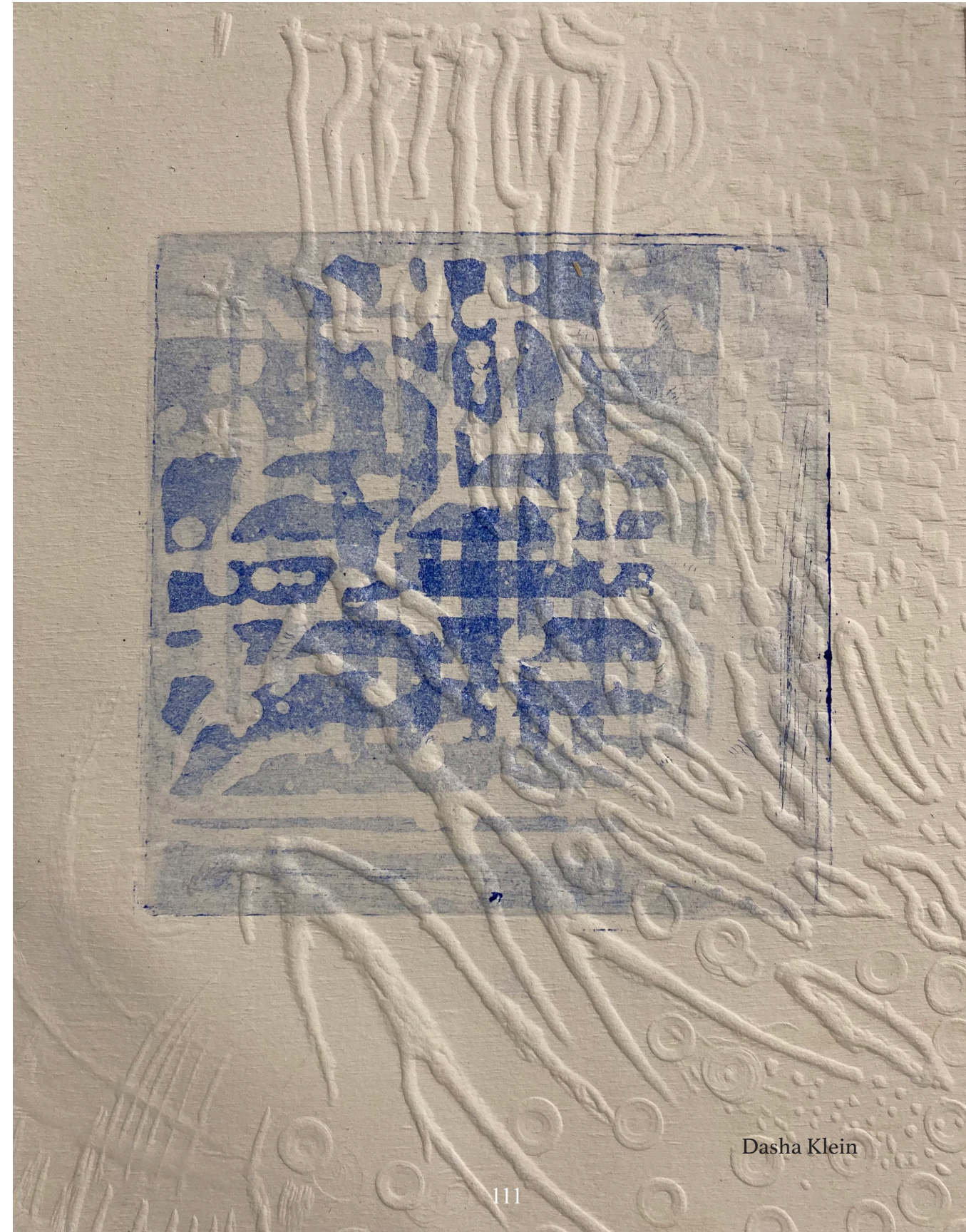
I had my next kiss soon after: it started off soft, innocent. For a while I felt light, his lips sending signals to my brain in a way I had yet to experience. It did not take long for him to climb on top of me, pushing my hand down to the hem of his shorts. Afterwards, he said that I was the kind of girl that his mother would adore.

I CRIED

This boy would not stay with me, I suppose he had found a more-fitting girl for his mother to love. Years later, I would find him and I in my car together, shirtless. We shared more kisses in the dark lamplight of the dead-end that we were parked in. I asked him what had happened between us those years before, and he told me that it was all too much for him. That *I* was all too much for him. To make me feel less dejected, he grabbed my chin from where it sat on his thigh, and said that I had grown into myself nicely over the years.

I CRIED

Replacing him had proven to be easy. I had never liked the way that those boys had spoken to me, so I found myself alone in the bedroom of someone much quieter. He passed his pipe to me, beckoning for me to take my hit. I did as directed. For the first



time in a while, I felt my shoulders release the tensions that they had held for so long.

I took a deep breath, but on the exhale I was met with lips on my own. The tension reemerged. I did not pull away, for it felt like my body knew what was supposed to happen; what *I* was supposed to do. As I lay naked on his bed, he braided my hair for me.

I CRIED.

By this point, the boys around me had heard stories of me: I was easy, alone, and soft. My promises to see them were empty, but one boy treated me in a way I had yet to experience. He told me he liked the shade of my hair and the way my laugh sounded. We saw each other for a few days a week, no kisses. When I finally felt comfortable, I told him I had a surprise awaiting for him. As I stood there in his room, undressed, he kissed me. His lips were chapped, but I did not mind. Holding my hand, he walked me over to his bed. While inside of me, he said that he loved me.

I CRIED.

Later, he would tell his friends that I was not worth the wait; That he had worked hard for me, yet he had only found disappointment in my performance. He told me that once I had gained more experience, he thought I would be worth all of the time and effort in the world.

I CRIED.

Maybe something was wrong with me, I muttered into her shirt. She stroked my hair in a way that reminded me of how my mother used to. My hands trembled as I picked at the skin on my fingers. She asked me to look at her, and, after all, I was known

for doing what I was told. I noticed the way that she had begun to inch slowly towards me. Waiting for her lips to meet mine, I closed my eyes. After what had felt like an eternity, her lips touched my forehead. She laid back down, drawing stars with her fingers over where she had kissed me. She said she had something that she had been meaning to tell me for a while.

I CRIED.



Dasha Klein

Colophon

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