

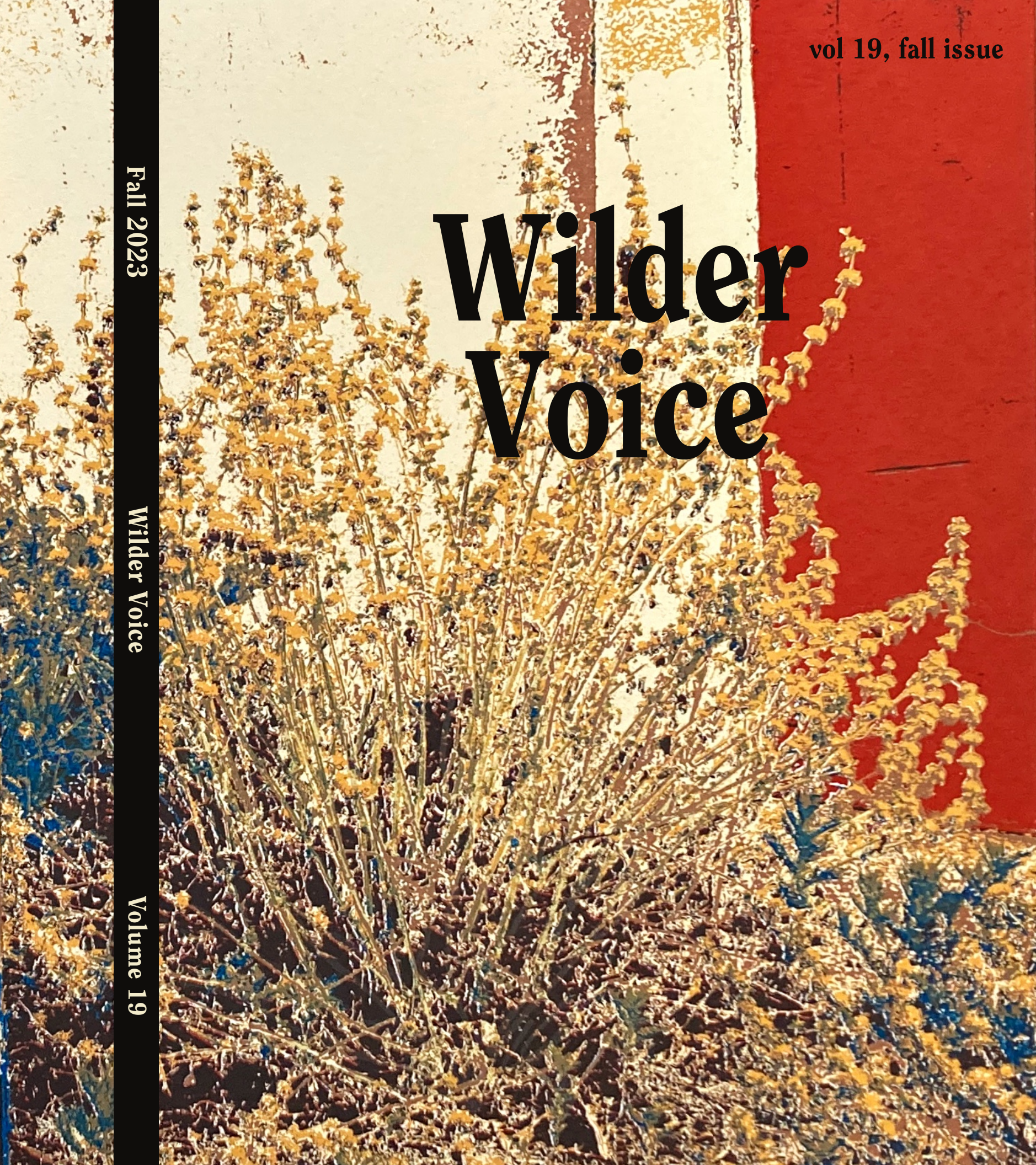
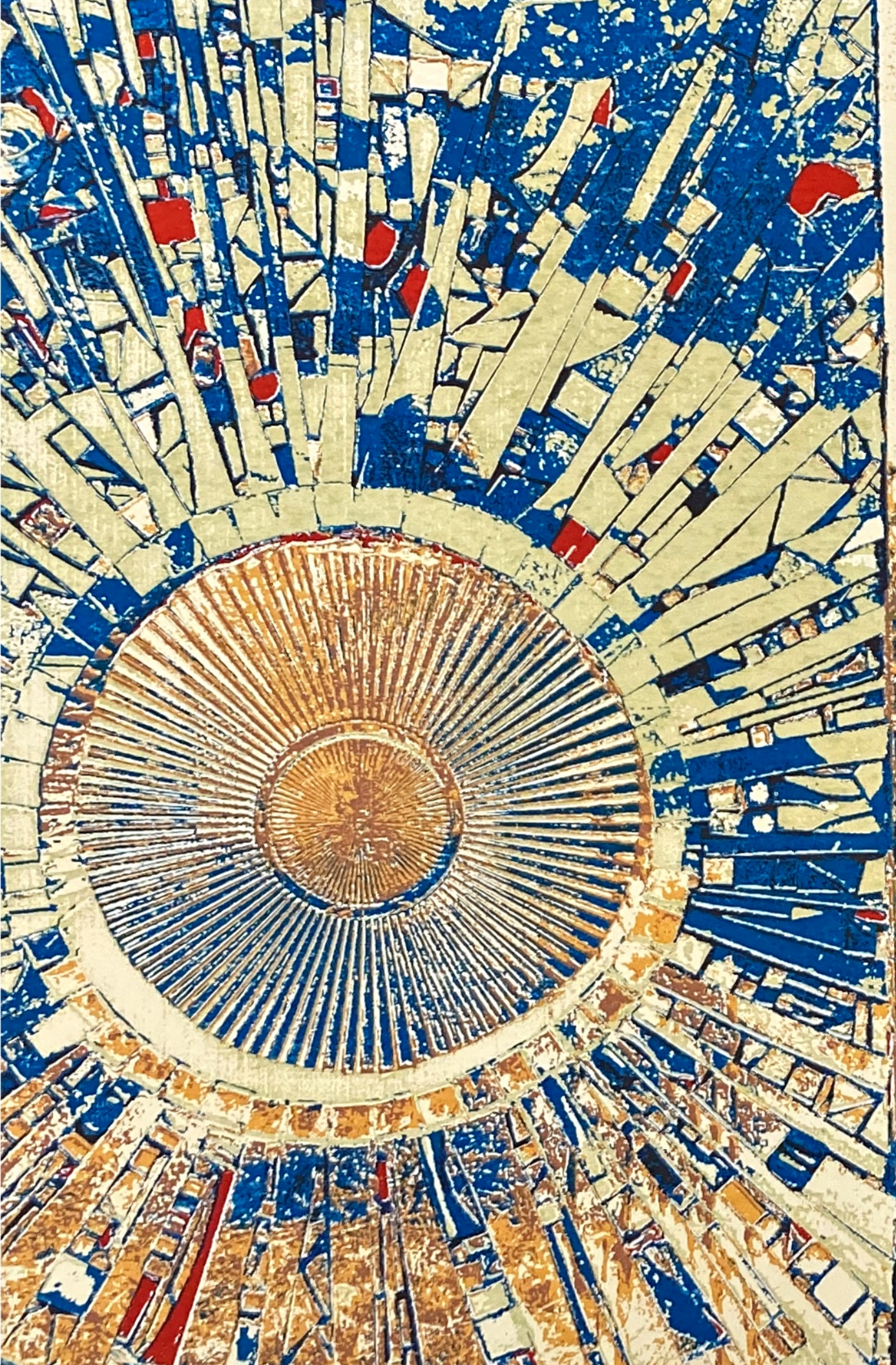
vol 19, fall issue

Wilder Voice

Fall 2023

Wilder Voice

Volume 19





Wilder Voice Magazine

Volume 19: Fall 2023

Staff

Senior Editors:

Reyah Doshi
Erika Scharf
Jane Taylor

Arts and Layout Editor:

Shira Friedman-Parks

General Editors:

Henry Feller
Ari Heff
Yendi Kai Foo
Wiley Martinez

Assistant Editors:

Felix Brem
Micah Gresl-Turner
Ruby McKeever
Junwoo Oh
Owen Spina
Annie Wyner

Founded in 2005, Wilder Voice is Oberlin's publication for creative nonfiction and longform journalism, in addition to art, fiction, and poetry. You can reach us by email at wvoice@oberlin.edu. For more, visit us at wildervoicemag.com.

A decorative border of various ceramic vessels, including vases, bowls, and pots, surrounds the text. The vessels are in shades of green, blue, and tan, with some featuring intricate patterns or textures.

CONTENTS

Despite the Serpent.....6
by Nicolas Stebbins

Dead Girls.....14
by Annie Wyner

Islander.....18
by JP Salazar

Automatic Dial.....26
by Daphne Scroggins

Butterflies.....28
by Hanna Alwine

Vampire in the Attic.....36
by Joseph McClennan

Finding Joy Through Nalbinding.....46
by Nat Howard

Addiction.....55
by Safe Jassani

Bound Backwards.....57
by Chloe Boccara

The Right School & Other Myths....58
by Katie Priscott

Milwaukee.....67
by Sasha Goldman

**Recovery, The Mountain Goats, and
Adjusting to Life After Treatment.....68**
by Ray Davis

Before Spring.....76
by Chloe Carl

Paper Bag Man.....78
by Sean Norton

Twonkle's Big Day.....88
by Darwin LaPollo

CONTRIBUTING ARTISTS

Ryan Beatty.....9, 12, 17

Brock Bierley.....60

Zoe Cox.....58-59

Shira Friedman-Parks.....18-19, 45, 56, 77

Ros Kish-Levine.....2, 14

Olli Krietzman.....26-27, 46-47, 54, 66

Lila Liebeskind.....38-39, 42, 71

Wiley Martinez.....10, 20, 25, 28, 33, 68

Sean Norton.....4-5, 53

Nicolas Stebbins.....6-7

Sophie Winner.....78-79, 84, 87

Richie Yeager.....63, 65, 72



DESPITE THE SERPENT

Let Salem boast her museum, and her witches,
Her statues Newb'ry, Marblehead her riches—
We from them all the shining now will take,
The snake and Glo'ster, Glo'ster and the snake!

— *The Sea Serpent*,
a play by William Crafts, 1819

Gloucester is where I learned to swim. It's where English colonizers established the first fishing port of the "New World," where Wolfgang Petersen filmed *The Perfect Storm*; it's the location of every funeral I've attended, and the last slip of land 10,000 fishermen saw before they drowned at sea. 30 miles northeast of Boston, Gloucester lies on Massachusetts' shoulder. The ultimate aquatic playground, I grew up snorkeling through coves and paddling kayaks. I fished striped bass with my father and lounged on white-sand beaches. The names of these locations often commemorate terrible shipwrecks: Norman's Woe, Folly Cove. As a child, I took no notice. Now, I still feel safe and serene swimming in the Gloucester harbor, but I respect the unpredictability of the sea. In comparison to its power, everything is impermanent.

My great-grandmother Sarah Fraser Robbins moved to Gloucester in 1955. I attended her funeral, I'm told, shortly after my first birthday. Sarah traveled the world with her best friend, Dottie, but the salty allure of Gloucester was enough to convince her to settle down. Hidden in my attic are remnants of her adventures— an unrefined nugget of gold, lapis scarab beetles from Cairo. She abandoned their previous life of hot air balloon flights and elephant rides to pursue their admiration for the sea.

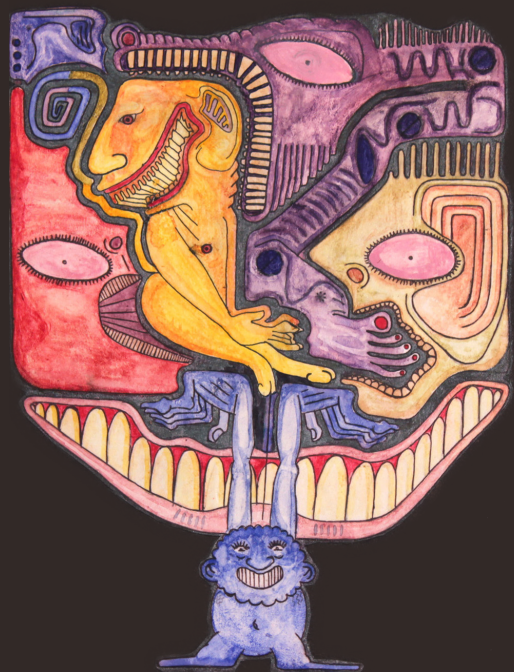
Sarah made a permanent mark on Gloucester. She fostered local museums and raised a family of artists and conservationists. Her husband died before she moved to Gloucester, but she had three daughters: Marian, my father's mother, who died in 1975; Sarah, who had two children; and Jayne, who had three. Sar-



ah could name every bird in the sky and every fish in the sea, but her particular interest was tidepools. The tide leaves puddles in the rocks when it recedes, which host a variety of fish, crabs, sea stars, and anemones. Nothing remains long in these puddles, as everything washes away in the high tide. Then, the receding waves deposit a new trove of ocean critters. Sarah devoted a large section of her nautical guidebook, *The Sea is All About Us*, to identifying the mysteries hidden within tidepools. One Gloucester mystery remains unsolved, and it began with an odd tidepool discovery.

In August of 1817, the Linnaean Society of Boston, a group of scholars and amateur scientists, drafted a report that classified a new genus: the *Scoliophis Atlanticus*, or the Gloucester Sea Serpent. Their conclusion was based on a multitude of serpent sightings in the Gloucester harbor and a three-foot-long black snake found in a tidepool. The Linnaean Society had arrived in Cape Ann

following a *Boston Daily Advertiser* article that described a "prodigious snake" in the Gloucester harbor seen by hundreds of people in the past week. The Society jumped at the opportunity. Recently formed and already labeled a "glorified boy's club," they were eager to prove their scientific mettle by locating and identifying this Gloucester Sea Serpent. Interviews with locals painted a shaky image of the creature. Accounts contested whether it swam parallel to the water, in a side to side motion like a traditional snake or dove above the waves in great arches. Its head, often seen protruding tall from the waves, was flat like a turtle's, larger than a dog's, but smaller than a horse's. Its body length varied between 50-100 feet long. Gorham Norwood, a Gloucester resident, attracted attention when he found and killed a one-meter-long snake with a bumpy, undulating spine similar to descriptions of the serpent. The Linnaean Society purchased the specimen for dissection from a reluctant Norwood. They returned to Boston



Who will dare to put a hook in his nostrils, transfix his sides with a spear, or engage in single combat with Vulcanean arms the monarch of the deep, in his own element?

elated. Not only had they compiled sufficient evidence from trustworthy local sources, they had captured “the progeny of the great serpent.”

I don’t think my great-grandmother ever saw the Gloucester Sea Serpent, although she did have a sea monster of her own: a chocolate lab

named Nessie. They would swim together to the breakwater, a 2,250-foot-long jut of granite blocks stretching from the shore, flanked by two lighthouses, separating the harbor from the untamable Atlantic. Sarah and Nessie’s swims were marred by soaring pollution in the Gloucester harbor. Raw sewage and industrial oils relentlessly culled marine life. Sarah pioneered the “citizen scientist” movement of the 1970s. She inspired others, particularly mothers, to demand greater environmental protection in their local communities. In 1978, Sarah’s second-youngest daughter, also named Sarah, joined her in swimming one-and-a-half miles through the open Gloucester harbor to protest the ongoing pollution. This event, dubbed “The Swim for the Clean Harbor,” became an annual tradition, with more swimmers joining each year. The swim is now an official competition, renamed “Celebrate the Clean Harbor” after conditions improved, with age brackets and a beach full of spectators. My great-aunt Sarah, the daughter of my great-grandmother, still straps on a pink swim hat and participates in the race at 80 years old.

Gloucester Sea Serpent season boomed in 1818. People visited from Boston and Marblehead to line the coast, from Niles Beach to Stage Fort Park, in hopes of viewing the famous sea serpent. They weren’t disappointed. The long, dark form often circled Ten Pound Island before sliding past the breakwater and out to sea. General David Humphreys, a former member of George Washington’s staff and avid fan of 18th century poetry, wasn’t satisfied with the Linnaean Society’s conclusions on the Gloucester Sea Serpent the previous year. He wanted a body. He offered upwards of \$5,000 for a successful killing, the reward notice dripping with his usual romantic flair: “Who will dare to put a hook in his nostrils, transfix his sides with a spear, or engage in single combat with Vulcanean arms the monarch of the deep, in his own element?” Humphreys answered his own question below: “The fishermen and whalers, with which Cape Ann and Marblehead abound, may doubtless be reckoned in the class of the most bold, enterprising, and dexterous mariners in the world.”

I think Gloucester fishermen continue to live up to Humphreys’ exaggerated adulations. I have a friend who works on a Gloucester lobster boat. He wakes up at 4:00 a.m. to haul 300 60-pound traps, remove and band lobsters, and gut bait-fish. A strong sense of balance and an iron gut are mandatory among the boiling waters of the Atlantic. My friend’s life depends on a small knife strapped to his chest, as the threat of a line snagging a limb and dragging him down below the wake of the lobster boat forever is omnipresent. He often returns home with his forearms shredded from needle-sharp spikes on the lobsters’ claws. He says he likes the job because of the constant risk. The intricacies of daily life seem arduous and convoluted in his eyes, and he takes comfort in relinquishing control to the deep. The ocean multiplies our weaknesses, and makes our vulnerabilities visible. In open water, we are defenseless. We are never truly in control of our lives, and the ocean makes this crystal clear.

Gloucester developed into an indispensable fishing port due to its proximity to Georges Bank and other ocean banks bordering the coast of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. These patches of raised seabed, marooned in the deep, offer shelter to cod and halibut—lucrative for those brave enough to venture into the stormy waters. However, the sea demands an exchange of life.

Beyond the spires of churches, the tall ships, and the town hall, on the boulevard that separates the city center from the sea, stands the Gloucester Fisherman’s Memorial. The bronze statue hunches over his steering wheel, gazing at the horizon, face and oilskins oxidized green from the weather. Below him are the words **THEY THAT GO DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS**. The names of thousands of fishermen are inscribed in granite along the base: men who never returned home from 1623 to 1923, two years before the memorial was built. Gloucester fisheries have fed dozens of ships to the ocean’s maw each year. Between 1866 and 1890 alone, almost 400 schooners and 2,500 Gloucester sailors sunk. A single storm in 1873 claimed the lives of 128 fishermen. Tragedies grew so frequent that a

house was built in Gloucester for fisherman’s widows. It had 30 rooms available for \$3 a month. Even today, anxious parents and spouses stand on wooden widow-walks atop old houses or line the boulevard, watching and hoping for their loved ones’ safe return.

In the summer of 1818, Captain Richard Rich, a renowned whaler, decided to catch the Gloucester Sea Serpent. He assembled a crew, selecting from among the surging number of sailors who claimed to have witnessed the serpent. He had seen the creature himself earlier that month, after learning its swimming habits from local reports. He knew that it appeared during calm weather, when the atmospheric pressure grew high. On September 6th, Rich checked his barometer. He nodded to his first mate. While locating the rest of his crew, Rich received news that beachgoers had spied the serpent lurking over a sandbar. Captain Rich’s schooner glided across the glassy sea. They could see for miles. A ridge of ripples appeared on the horizon, led by an angular head. Harpoons in hand, they sailed toward the bobbing curls. Rich asked each person on his ship if the distant creature matched their previous sightings. Everyone concurred: It must be the serpent.

Captain Richard Rich chased the Gloucester Sea Serpent for five days. Each attempt at spearing its slippery head merely pushed it further down the Cape Ann coastline. The creature’s arced coils churned the ocean behind it, stretching impossibly long. On the fifth night, Rich stood alone by the helm, leaning on his harpoon. To starboard, the moonlight glittered on the serpent’s slick scales. Beast and boat drifted closer together. Captain Rich clutched the gunnel. He saw the serpent’s huge eyes rippling below the surface and threw his harpoon. *Splash. Shunk.* The sea turned black with blood as Rich hauled at the thrashing creature. His crew emerged from their cabins, startled by the sudden struggle. Rubbing sleep from their eyes, the men grasped the harpoon line and dragged Rich’s catch onto the deck. “Where’s the tail?” someone asked. Captain Rich securely wrapped the faintly flopping form with a nearby sailcloth.



He forbade anyone from speaking of this event once they reached shore. As the sun rose above the Gloucester coast and Rich's crew shooed seagulls off the mast, the large white mound on the deck slowly bloomed red.

On the night of April 23rd, 2016, I heard my parents speaking in hushed voices. My father had just gotten off the phone.

"It's Tom," my father said. "He's dead." At 26 years old, my cousin Tom was biking home with a friend when an intoxicated driver swerved into his path. I couldn't move. The tearful comfort of my parents was just a room away, but I was frozen. In my mind, I was still with him at a Christmas party, my final memory. I was handing him my carefully selected present: a book I had just finished reading. He was holding my hand as I climbed onto a tightrope, strung between two trees in the yard. We were returning to the house for dinner, coated in grass stains. In 2012, Tom left Gloucester for California to pursue a career in film. I

remember listening to tales of his gap year spent in Peru and watching videos of his latest successful skateboard tricks. When they were younger, he and his twin brother petitioned for a skate park to be built by Gloucester High School, and the graffitied ramps still stand today. I didn't sleep that night. I lay with my eyes open, not crying yet.

Tom's funeral was held in the summer. I remember sand in my dress shoes and sweat leaking through my black suit. As I gazed through the stained glass of the church, I half expected to see the Gloucester Sea Serpent breach the distant harbor. I was still reeling from the suddenness of Tom's death, and nothing would surprise me. I had received my first taste of how unthinkably cruel and chaotic the world could be. I thought I was done crying, but dry eyes are difficult to maintain at a funeral.

When I stepped out of the church, I came face to face with the blank, apathetic eyes of the Gloucester Sea Serpent. The bronze statue stood outside of a nearby

art museum, its slender body writhing in an invisible current. The same current that seems to control our fate, as turbulent as the Atlantic; the same current that claimed my cousin's life, a rogue wave in the volatile cycle of time.

Gloucester inspires sad movies. The most famous cinematic tragedy to come from Gloucester is *The Perfect Storm*. German tourists still ask where the Crow's Nest is, the bar where George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg met before their fateful voyage. Suffering financially from weak catches, Clooney's crew decides to return to the Great Banks of Newfoundland for one last, desperate, late-season hunt. The *Andrea Gail*, which features at the center of three converging hurricanes, was a real swordfishing ship. The families of two actual crew members sued the filmmakers for character defamation and lost. The film grossed \$328 million worldwide. *The Perfect Storm* highlights a desperation felt by some Cape Ann fisherman: Their only hope for survival swims deep below the waves. In the film and in reality, a rescue helicopter saves the inhabitants of a pleasure yacht stuck in the storm, while the *Andrea Gail* sinks. There is no daring recovery for the crew of the *Gail*. They accepted the risk. When Gloucester fishermen go out to sea on ships, their lives are no longer in their own hands. They know that once the waves and winds grow fierce, nothing can save them, except for the grace of the deep Atlantic.

Back on shore, Captain Richard Rich refused to uncover his catch. It lay rotting on his schooner's deck for days. He did not want to shatter the illusion that he had bested the Gloucester Sea Serpent. Eventually, he revealed it to be a 12-foot "horse mackerel," commonly known as an Atlantic bluefin tuna. Captain Rich had confirmed his hunch when he caught the tuna—the segments of the serpent's body he had seen leaping above the water were a school of jumbo fish as he had expected. The Boston Society of Natural History officially debunked the Linnaean Society's *Scoliophis Atlanticus* classification in 1863. Their baby serpent was a common Eastern racer with tumors on its spine. However, the fact remains that hundreds of people saw a serpent in the Gloucester

harbor between the years of 1817 and 1819. I don't think Captain Rich ever believed he could catch the serpent, as most Gloucester fisherman understood. They saw the serpent as the unassailable sea, flaunting its monstrosity in the safe harbor. Beyond the breakwater was its true territory.

How many mothers have looked out to sea for their sons and seen only the serpent? Is it so hard to believe that a community funded by drowning witnessed a sea monster? The Gloucester Sea Serpent appeared early in the 19th century, a harbinger of the deadliest era for Gloucester fishing. Deep-sea fishing vessels sail straight into the serpent's jaws. On shore, mourners watch the serpent play among the moored schooners, inviting them out to sea for it to feast. That night when I heard of Tom's death, I must have seen the serpent. It materialized from the currents of fate to remind me of my insignificance. I felt its presence that night, but it never really went away. Even when the pain diminishes and the serpent disappears, it still lurks beneath the surface. You can tell yourself it doesn't exist, or you can try to chase and kill the monster, but the dark head will always resurface unscathed.

Tom's parents and siblings must know the serpent as well as any Gloucester fisherman. They know the serpent's slippery coils threaten to drown us all, yet continue to visit Gloucester at least once a year. Fishermen still kiss their spouses and children goodbye before stepping aboard floating tombs. My friend and other young people still risk their lives for the ocean's bounty. Filmmakers, painters, and writers are tied to Gloucester by a net of grief. The sea serpent lurks behind every rock and wave, but like my great-aunt Sarah and her mother before her, we still swim.



Dead Girls

BY ANNIE WYNER

We've all heard the podcasts: 30-year-old women gleefully plugging their Patreons (and advertising organic deodorants) before regaling the audience with tales of missing and murdered women, often interspersing the stories with jokes and personal anecdotes. Men with flat, expressionless British accents recounting the grisly ends of young women and girls. Men divulge the details of their brutal mutilation with the same tone one may use to rattle off the items on a grocery list. Deaths and disappearances are discussed alongside videos of people doing their makeup, cutting soap, or decorating cakes. Websites such as Etsy and Redbubble boast t-shirts, stickers, and mugs emblazoned with the faces of serial killers. True crime is everywhere, and its popularity shows little signs of waning.

I was a massive true crime fan in middle school. This is a fact that I'm not particularly proud of; today, I find most true crime media to be off-putting at best, and morally reprehensible at worst.

However, while my consumption of true crime content has stopped almost completely, my fascination with the global phenomenon of true crime has persisted.

What I've noticed about true crime in recent years is what ultimately turned me off to it completely: the portrayal of the victims. In our cultural consciousness, when we imagine a murder victim, there is a certain image that comes to mind for many: young, attractive women who are typically white and middle class. There is a pure, virginal beauty to them, à la *Virgin Suicides*. Think unassuming, girl next door types: their eyes gazing up at the sky, forever unseeing, their bodies waifish and thin.

This archetype is what I have taken to calling the All-American Victim, and she is everywhere, from the shows we watch, to the art we love, to the books we read. We cannot look away. We cannot stop thinking of new ways for her to die. The rise of true crime is only the most recent iteration of a long-standing cultural obsession with wounded women.

When I was deeply involved in the true crime community, I would religiously listen to podcasts before bed. I understood—in the most abstract sense—that these victims were real people. But the more I listened, the more their stories seemed to blend together in my head: the cheerleader in the trash compactor; the debate captain, her limbs scattered across the county; the medical student, exsanguinated and injected with formaldehyde.

There were so many ways I could die, so many reasons to be afraid, and yet night after night, I drifted off listening to millennial women recount the cannibalization of school girls and the mutilation of sorority sisters over glasses of white wine. My fear became empowerment—my stomach for depravity a sign of my resilience. I used these podcasts as a twisted sort of litmus test for my inner strength: a how-to guide for surviving in an impossibly terrifying world.

When I reflect on my true crime obsession, what strikes me the most is how true crime media often distorts the reality of violence in the United States. True crime narratives are incredibly homogenous, overwhelmingly depicting the stories of attractive, middle class white women. This bias holds real-world implications. The perpetuation of the idea that white women are the most likely to be victimized. This often leads to the dismissal of the stories of people of color, LGBT people, and unhoused people, who are statistically the most likely to be victims of violent crime.

The archetype of the “missing white woman” is rooted in white supremacy and misogyny. It promotes the idea that the only victims worth fighting for are the victims who conform to traditional ideas of purity and innocence. Women are reduced to their victimhood, completely denied of their humanity, and stripped of their identities while their deaths are being used for entertainment, their suffering made into a spectacle.

The stories of BIPOC and transgender women are pushed further into the background, even as violent crimes against these demographics are rising.

The thing about dead girls in true crime is that they are hardly girls at all: the minute they die, they are denied their personhood, their death viewed as a purification. Perhaps the reason we love them so much is because they ask nothing of us but their sympathy. The dead girl is less a person and more of an ephemeral concept: she exists, and then she doesn't. She exists purely for display, laid out like a sacrifice on an altar. She is a martyr stripped of everything that made her human.

Our worship of the dead girl is contingent on her lack of humanity. The minute she becomes human, we are forced to reckon with the societal issues that create cycles of violence and brutality. I don't believe that these women's stories should be forgotten, nor do I believe that it is productive to pretend that such violence doesn't happen. Ultimately, I think that it is imperative that we recognize these women as more than just martyrs or symbols of feminine purity: they are our sisters, our mothers, and our friends, and they deserve to be remembered.





ISLANDER

| BY JP SALAZAR





“You don’t talk much, do you?”

“You’re very quiet.”

“You have to speak up more!”

There are several milestones in a child’s development: first smile, first laugh, first crawl, first steps, and first words. That last milestone is one I’ve had to revisit quite a few times as I grew up. Unlike most kids who didn’t even think twice about speaking to others, I thought twice, or thrice, or even four times. During early childhood, I wasn’t able to talk to anyone outside of my immediate family. I didn’t speak to other kids, teachers, or other adults, even relatives. If not for intervention by my parents and psychologists, I would have struggled much longer than I did with the fundamental human trait of (verbal) communication.

Later, by the time I was 16 and graduating high school, I started to think about my childhood experiences in a more

critical way. I began to ask myself a lot of questions. Why did I see the school psychologist every week in first and second grade? Why couldn’t I speak to other people, children or adults? Why did I still often feel like that same little boy who couldn’t say a word?

These questions led to the conclusion that I had selective mutism as a child. Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder where a child can speak in some situations but cannot in others. I, for example, could speak at home, but I struggled to speak at school or in social situations involving people outside of my family.

“Hello, buddy!”

“...”

“How are you today?”

“...”

“Okay... um... I’ll leave you alone then.”

When I say that I can't speak, I don't mean that I am not physically able to speak or that I can't understand or process what other people are saying. It's more of a visceral reaction to a stressful stimulus: that being other, more unfamiliar people talking to me. Whereas the expected response to a question like "How are you today?" is "I'm good" or "Okay," my response was an uneasy silence. When people talk about reaction, a common idea is that there are two reactions: "fight or flight," but another reaction is "freeze." Freezing or a fleeting feeling of paralysis inhabited my body when I was spoken to. Like time had stopped and my hands, my mouth, my diaphragm were all encased in ice. And what I experienced wasn't just shyness or introversion, although many saw it as merely that. Shy or introverted, in truth, would be words I would use to describe myself, but my experience was deeper than just being slow to warm up to people or being hesitant to talk.

A lot of people often assume that children who don't speak at all, who go beyond just the label of shy, may have a developmental disorder, or have experienced trauma, or maybe just don't know how to speak English. Since selective mutism is a rare condition (it is diagnosed in less than one percent of children), most people don't think to factor it in at all. Pinpointing a cause for selective mutism is difficult in general due to its rarity and the relative lack of research and studying on it, and it's just as difficult to pinpoint a cause within the confines of my own life.

Even when I was an infant, I've been told that I've had a quiet disposition, a disposition that has been etched into my identity. Instead of crying and screaming through the night, my mom told me that I spent many nights staring placidly out the window of our little apartment in Los

Angeles. There were no traumatic events or any developmental issues when I was young, no life-defining moment that kept my mouth shut. Being quiet was just intrinsic to who I was from the very beginning of my life, but it wasn't the only cause or factor contributing to my selective mutism.

When I was growing up, I had a very limited social life. A lot of time in my early childhood was spent largely on my own because I felt like there was an ocean separating me from everyone else. I lived with my parents, my maternal grandparents, and my younger brother, but I had little connection outside of the household. I come from a family of islanders, as my parents and grandparents are from the Philippines, but even though my family lived in Cleveland, OH, the heart of the American midwest, they still remained islanders. I felt comfortable

I felt comfortable speaking at home, on my own island.

speaking at home, on my own island. I loved it. I loved that I lived in a house that spoke in both Tagalog and English. I loved the cheesy Filipino soap operas my parents binged almost daily. My parents and grandparents made our home as warm as the tropical islands they left behind in the Philippines, but it made my home feel just as far away from Cleveland as those islands and I struggled to find a place outside of it.

"Do you mean the Potomac? It's pronounced *Puh-tow-mec*."

Especially when I was younger, I found it difficult to identify the things that could connect me with others. I didn't have that much in common with a lot of the people around me. I had an intense fascination with geography as a child, a fascination seldom shared with others around me. And it wasn't just that—there were many disparities between my interests and ex-

periences and theirs. Sure, a lot of my peers liked sports, playing with action figures and dolls, or watching TV shows I've never heard of, but the differences felt more fundamental than just watching different TV channels on a Saturday afternoon. I was one of the few kids who grew up in a bilingual and immigrant household. My parents spoke English with a noticeable accent. I didn't go to family reunions; I only saw my relatives once in a blue moon through Skype. I didn't have the neighborly connections that so many other families in the school had. And since I attended a private Catholic school instead of my city's public school, I didn't even live in the same area as most of my classmates. It's these small things that aren't really given a lot of thought that made the gap between myself and everyone else feel like it stretched for miles.

When I was in first grade, I had a little laminated card inside the storage compartment of my little wooden desk where the top lifts up to reveal a modest but colorful collection of school supplies. The card had a cute clip art image of a toilet and underneath it were the words "I need to use the bathroom." I remember the several occasions where I left my classroom at the end of the day with soggy khaki pants because I didn't feel comfortable asking my teacher to use the bathroom. So the school psychologist recommended that I keep this card with me to prevent any other incidents. The card made me hyperaware, for the first time in my life, that I didn't see things, think about things, or experience the same things as everyone else around me. In spite of my aggressive nearsightedness, I saw in 20/20 vision the great sum of all the seemingly minor differences pool into a giant sea marooning me on my own island. Before my parents naturalized and became American citizens, they held green cards—physical manifestations of the legal fact that they were not from the country they lived in. I had my very own green card, even though I was born on American soil, denoting me

as a foreigner. Maybe not in a literal or legal sense, but a foreigner nonetheless.

"He's a very bright kid. The only part he needs to work on is participation."

Not talking to anyone at school concerned my teachers, and my parents by extension, so I had begun working with the school psychologist in first grade to get me more accustomed to speaking with others. During lunch once a week, the psychologist asked me and another one of my classmates to eat lunch and play a game. We ate our sandwiches and chatted about our day while we moved our silver *Monopoly* pieces around the board so that I could associate an activity that I enjoyed with the action of speaking to another person. Along with the weekly board game, my teacher would ask people to include me in a game of tag or four square on the blacktop during recess. Playing a game during lunch or asking people to include me in activities helped to increase my capacity to talk to others. By the end of second grade I could talk to people, but it was still a challenging task. The anxiety and the corporeal reaction of paralysis and fear was never really erased, they were just slightly easier to overcome with some help.

However, once I reached the capacity to talk, concerns about selective mutism and issues with talking waned among my teachers and parents along with the help to overcome it. I was "fixed," but my social anxiety and fear of talking still lingered. I moved schools after second grade and I didn't see a psychologist anymore because it didn't hinder basic things anymore. I no longer had the little bathroom card in my desk, but that didn't mean I wasn't nervous about asking to go to the bathroom anymore. All the infrastructure built to connect me with everyone else evaporated because I was more normal. I was still stuck on an island, still separated from the world, still alone. The concern for my lack of speech both in and out of the class-

room morphed into an acceptance of the somewhat untrue idea that I was just a smart, quiet, independent and industrious student who just needed to be prodded lightly to speak.

“He needs to speak up more, but he’s very smart.”

“I didn’t know you could talk!”

Even though being quiet always seemed to be an innate part of my identity, it became the defining aspect of my identity for many years along with the label of being the smart Asian kid. Because I had problems externalizing my thoughts and needs due to the anxiety attached to it, I was misconstrued as being independent. I was adept, I should have been able to solve my own problems, I should be able to do it. I should always be able to do it. The feeling of being stuck on an island became less of a matter of distance but a matter of not being able to escape. Not being able to escape the expectation that I don’t need help because I never asked for it. Because I couldn’t ask for it.

Even sitting uneasily in high school desks on the verge of adulthood, I still sensed remnants of the little silent boy from years before. Everytime I wanted to raise my hand to ask a question, express that I was ecstatic and on the highest highs, or express that I was sunken in the lowest lows, that familiar feeling of paralysis lingered. My hands, my mouth, my diaphragm were once again encased in ice. Noticing these behaviors and reactions as a constant in my life had put pressure on me to try and “overcome” them and “grow out” of what I perceived as childish behavior. I was frustrated by the paralysis and helplessness I still felt years removed from elementary school. I wanted to break out of the quiet label and leave the little island I had felt marooned on, but on a physical and emotional level, that was extremely difficult and often mortifying. There was so much internal pressure for me to express myself by trying to thaw and

melt my frozen state, but it instead felt like ice picks piercing straight through me. Maybe the reason it hurt so much was because I was trying to erase such a fundamental part of my identity. I have always been quiet. Talking was a struggle for me due to my selective mutism, but it wasn’t something I should have been ashamed of.

I began to ask myself a new set of questions. Why am I trying to push myself above and beyond unrealistic expectations when I’ve already come so far? Why was I hyper focused on my deficiencies and not my achievements? Yes, in many ways I still am that little boy with selective mutism. I still had that feeling of paralysis and anxiety, but I found ways to get around it. I found spaces that felt safe, like home, and they became extensions of my little island. I was and am quiet, but I’m so much more. I began to strategize socialization to make it easier for me. I sang, danced, and acted on stage in front of hundreds of people. I’ve given plenty of presentations. Were these tasks easy? Absolutely not. But I was able to do it by acknowledging that I was at heart an islander. That’s how I grew up. That’s the world I know, but I’ve made the ocean that has trapped and separated me into a much smaller and much safer obstacle to cross.

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

No, I don’t.

“You’re very quiet.”

Yes, I am.

“You have to speak up more!”

I don’t have to...

But now I know that I can.



Automatic Dial

| BY DAPHNE SCROGGINS

Right next to the stream where you can best hear its sounds,
uphill, grass damp, bugs crawling on your skin
and the lamplight so fluorescent it makes you scowl.
The sky a deep purple before the night peaks,
scrawled with clouds but no stars, circling satellites, falling planes.

Suburban beacon in time, straddling vagrants and vacant lots,
premature: childhood friends, names you long forgot.
Anything that glitters is dead: absent solar system stars drowned in smog, city light.
Don't take the money or the perfume bottles with flowery names.
Chant the patterns as passwords, dull the keys for your claws.

You can't be ready for everything at once.

Butterflies

BY HANNA ALWINE

"Sensational, but true!"

I am in high-school—I no longer remember what age—swaddled in a mound of blankets during a particularly damaging doom scroll, when I come across a post.

"Monarch butterflies remember a mountain in the middle of Lake Superior that hasn't existed in millenia."

Specific details regarding the origins of this post are blurred by the haze of memory—had it been Instagram? Twitter? a screenshot of a Tweet posted to Instagram? (god-forbid) TikTok? Whatever the case may have been, the monstrosity of cross-platform collaboration claimed that the monarch butterfly, on its several thousand mile, multi-generational migration south, takes a sudden turn in its path over Lake Superior. Why the butterflies took this turn was unclear

to scientists (which scientists were never a concern for me—"The Scientists" proved to be enough authority for my blue-light addled brain) until they discovered evidence that pointed towards a mountain that used to exist in the center of the lake. Though the obstacle had since disappeared, the monarchs continued to follow the same path. I accepted the creed at face value: monarchs, tiny winged things I remembered fitting neatly into the palm of my hand, remembered a mountain that hadn't existed in millenia.

Last summer I recounted this tale to my mother—the story of a mountain that had disappeared and the bugs who still remembered. I have since told the story to several others. It is only this year that I began to legitimately question its existence.

The trail starts with a Reddit post: *TIL that monarch butterflies seem to remember an ancient mountain that used to stand where Lake Superior is now, and they still veer around that long-gone obstacle during their migration flight across the lake.*

The source for this claim? An article from a site called Gizmodo linked in the post. The reactions of Reddit users are, unsurprisingly, largely hostile, “*That is a terrible article that has zero science in it,*” “*Judging by the upvotes, OP has so far made at least a couple of hundred people stupider with this post,*” “*Bulllllll-shiiiiittttt.*” Other users attempted to discredit the theory with more tact: “*Perhaps there is a persistent updraft in that area or other moderately consistent weather phenomenon,*” “*Seems more likely to me they are avoiding humidity,*” “*Maybe there is too much wind for a butterfly to handle when flying over a large body of water...*” Still, others seemed excited about seemingly unrelated subjects. “*Minions!*” proffered up an anonymous user who perhaps did not want their name associated with such controversial subject matter.

The Reddit post was accompanied by a slew of articles published around 2014 that seem to confirm the theory, though each pulls heavily from the others. As I waded my way through what began to reveal itself as a vortex of heavily fabricated scientific information, my investigation turned circular, doubling back and looping in an unsatisfying series of dead ends.

A book written by Annie Dillard in 1974, nearly 50 years before the story began to circulate online, seemed to provide a more concrete source. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* claims,

Monarchs are ‘tough and powerful, as butterflies go.’ They fly over Lake Superior without resting; in fact, observers there have discovered a curious thing. Instead of flying directly south, the monarchs crossing high over the water take an inexplicable turn towards the east. Then when they reach an invisible point, they all veer south again. Each successive swarm repeats this mysterious dogleg movement, year after year. Entomologists actually think that the butterflies might be ‘remembering’ the position of a long-gone, looming glacier. In another book I read that geologists think that Lake Superior marks the site of the highest mountain that ever existed on this continent.

Beautifully written, Dillard’s account lines up perfectly with what I’d seen online. But her unidentified “observers,” “entomologists,” and “geologists” weren’t enough evidence to provide an official confirmation of the theory.

I went to the source itself. Annie Dillard was not someone easily contacted. On the contact information page of her website there was a definitive statement, perhaps written by Dillard herself, about the literary manuscripts she would not be reading and the connections to the publishing industry she did not have. In lieu of Dillard’s contact info, the site offered up her publisher’s number. I called it. The publisher took my email and phone number, told me she’d be in touch. She emailed me 20 minutes later—“Annie Dillard isn’t able to respond to requests like this right now.” Another dead end in the name of scientific inquiry.

The next time I attempt to find the butterfly’s mountain, I am on my way home—Ohio to Pennsylvania and back in less than twenty-four hours. I am going to see my 13-year-old sister’s middle school production of *Annie*. I am trying out this new thing where I follow through on what I say, even if what I have promised is a logistical nightmare.

I have already listened to three episodes of RadioLab and two hours of my Spotify *Daylist* when I decide to start my research. Like my technologically challenged father, who insists his fingers are too fat to hit the keyboard buttons on his iPhone, I Google Voice Searched “monarch butterfly experts.”

The first person I call is also driving. Orelly “Chip” Taylor, founder and director of Monarch Watch and Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Kansas, is the first monarch expert to show up in my search. His profile picture shows a man with a shock of white hair, a well-trimmed beard, and a blue canvas button-up I’m pretty sure my mother also owns. He holds a monarch butterfly delicately between his two forefingers. I’m still not sure what the discrepancy is between the number I



dial and the woman’s voice that answers the line. The woman, who is not “Chip” Taylor, is busy and apologizes profusely while reading out the emails of a series of colleagues I should contact. She hangs up, but not before insisting that I call her back if I don’t receive a response to my emails within a couple of days.

The second monarch butterfly expert I call is Karen Suzanne Oberhauser, a professor in the Fisheries, Wildlife and Conservation Biology department at the University of Minnesota. She lets me know that she has 10 minutes between classes so I talk fast. I give her my spiel about the monarchs—their strange crossing of Lake Superior, the assumption that there might have once been a mountain at the center, my Dillard dead end. She is quick to dismiss the claim of the butterfly mountain. It seems that the Reddit scientists might be right. According to Dr. Oberhauser, monarch butterflies don’t generally fly over large bodies of water like the Great Lakes and when they do it’s next to impossible to track their movements, especially to the degree that

would prove the potential existence of a disappeared mountain. I thank her, a bit embarrassed to have succumbed so easily to the claws of sensationalized pop science.

“Of course,” she says and hangs up. Phone call: three minutes, fifty-eight seconds. She still has six minutes before her next engagement.

The monarch butterfly is one of the most recognizable and well-studied butterflies on the planet. It is by no means a niche interest. Ask almost any five year old about their favorite butterfly and it’s likely you’ll receive the monarch in response. Even still, catching sight of their characteristic orange and black in the bowels of the summer months never fails to prompt a flutter of nostalgia notched deep within my chest.

I remember the monarchs of my childhood, their wings thin as paper, their tiny black legs barely the length of my fingernail, their delicate proboscises probing the ridges of my fingerprint in

search of microscopic beads of salt. My mother and I would collect monarch caterpillars in the summer, scanning the patch of milkweed in the back of my old house for their white and yellow stripes hidden away among the greenery. She would praise my sharp eyes. *Perfect for caterpillar spotting*, she'd tell me. Still, it was her thin, practiced fingers that plucked the most caterpillars from the underbelly of the milkweed's leaves.

It's hard to reckon the impossibly delicate nature of a bug I had trouble believing even had a brain with the millions of years of transgenerational knowledge required to remember the flight path across Lake Superior. But I relish the idea that somewhere, hidden away behind compound eyes and beneath an insectoid exoskeleton, there exist memories baked deep into its genetic code.

But genetic memory is still just that, an idea.

The concept gained popularity in the 19th century, but many of today's scientists consider it unlikely. This hasn't stopped other scientists from continuing to investigate these claims.

In a 2013 study conducted by Brian Dias from the Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, a transgenerational fear response was observed in mice. Male mice were conditioned to associate the smell of acetophenone, or cherry blossoms, with an electric shock. The offspring of the conditioned mice were found to exhibit a similar response, though they had never smelled acetophenone. Additionally, the study found that these offspring had more M71 receptors, a quality that enabled these mice to de-

tect the odor at much lower levels—the fear response in the parents of these mice literally altered their chemical makeup. “It suggests there is a very particular, specific, and organized transgenerational transfer of information,” said a researcher from McGill University in response to the study.

However, it's worth noting that the response was not present in all offspring.

Ultimately the study brought to light more questions than it answered—Why did only certain offspring exhibit the fear response? How many generations would this fear response continue to be passed down? And, perhaps the most pivotal, did this study provide the evidence needed to support transgenerational gene transfer in human beings?

“If a particular smell makes you uneasy but you don't know why, perhaps you should ask your grandparents,” begins an article pre-

senting this study. This assumption is what makes the idea of genetic memory simultaneously attractive and unbelievable. Sure, mice can pass on memories of fear, but does that mean we can?

The idea of transgenerational memory has been haunting me more recently. It seems as if, all of a sudden, everyone in my life is aging at a rapid pace. My younger sister has shot up in height. My parents have officially entered their 50s. My grandparents gray hair seems more apparent, the smile lines around their eyes and mouths, evidence of a life well-lived, more pronounced. My grandmother on my mother's side, Nana, was just officially diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Maybe it's me who's

I relish the idea that somewhere, hidden away behind compound eyes and beneath an insectoid exoskeleton, there exist memories baked deep into its genetic code.



growing older and, at the same time, more aware of the changes in others around me.

One summer, not too long ago, Nana and I decided to send a notebook back and forth across the continental United States. Though the small leatherbound chronicle only made the journey from her home on the West Coast to mine on the East a half dozen times, I have fond memories of finding the book in our mailbox and leafing through pages of her former-professor scrawl.

Nana doesn't write as much anymore. Tremors in her hands make the process difficult. Instead of writing out messages, she has started stapling small typed notes on white printer paper inside birthday cards. This autumn we sent a series of emails back and forth—the miles between my home and hers traveled by cyberspace rather than airmail. We are still able to communicate, though the process has shifted. In some ways, things remain the same. But her memory is not what it used to be and, as she begins to forget, the onus of remembrance falls to my hands.

In the past ten years, two of my grandparents have died—my maternal grandfather, Papa Lloyd, a ceramicist (though he preferred the term potter) with his characteristic long gray hair, dancing hands, and jarring laugh, and my paternal grandfather, just Grandpa, with his monk-esque halo of white hair and puffy red vest, who walked with a cane and a pause in his step, a consequence of his adolescent battle with polio.

I was fourteen years old when Grandpa passed away. No, that's not quite right. I was twelve years old when Grandpa passed away. At least, twelve seems right. In truth, I'm not quite sure how old I was. I think he died in 2016—maybe 2017? I could look back at old photos. I could call my parents to confirm the exact year. But, in truth, the exact date doesn't really matter.

I don't remember being twelve when my grandfather died. I do remember that it was summer. I do remember waking up on a Thursday morning in August (or was it July?) to my mother crying in the living room. She'd just gotten off the phone with my grandmother. She didn't say anything, just clutched me to the warm wetness of her chest.

I do remember going to summer camp that day. We were canoeing, boats of middle schoolers winding their way down a bending body of water whose name I can no longer recall. Afterwards, still damp with river water, I went to see his body. Waxen. Not my grandfather anymore, but some doll they'd put in his place.

I don't have solid memories of when Papa Lloyd died. I do remember scattering his ashes in a cornfield in late fall. I remember the shirt I wore, gray, with the shoulders cut out. Later that year, we took a trip down south, where he had lived for much of his life, and let the rest of him go off the end of a pier, into the water as the sun set.

I have very few concrete memories of either of them. I remember Grandpa loved cardinals. I remember Papa Lloyd loved key lime pie. I wish I remembered more about both of them. Every year they grow fainter in my memory, stored in photos and the stories my parents tell. I would like my memory of Nana to be stored in more than these external manifestations. I would like something inside of myself to hold tightly onto.

I do remember Nana in her garden. The kitchen of her house in the Pacific Northwest overlooks the porch which leads out into a wide, green horseshoe of a lawn, ringed by flowers, ornamental grasses, the occasional shrub. When I was still a wild child, holes ripped through the knees of my jeans due to my penchant to run around on all fours, hair a tangled mess—a result of my refusal to let my mother come near me with a

brush—snot-nose shoved deep into the pages of a book, and my grandmother was still my grandmother, neatly coiffed curls, perfect red lipstick outlining her thin smile, a spotless kitchen, and a perfectly manicured lawn, we seemed to share very little on the surface. But we did share a love of Beatrix Potter's anthropomorphic, domestically inclined animals. We shared a love of floral fairies with petal-like wings and rosebud caps.

Every summer when we visited we'd make fairy houses together. The spare bedroom at the top of the stairs would be transformed. Folding tables were pulled out, glue guns plugged in; scraps of wood and acorn caps, strange leaves and bits of moss were collected and parceled out. We would gather in the late afternoon, my grandmother, my mother, my sister, and myself, to make miniature tables out of shorn sticks, acorn-cap bedside vanities, petaled canopies to hang over moss blanketed beds no longer than your forefinger. We'd put these miniature furnishings out hidden behind the rosebush for our imaginary fairies to find. There's something sacred about these memories of the garden, one of the few I have left that I remember with some semblance of clarity.

This fall, as the leaves turn brown and flutter to the ground in great exoduses, as the air shifts from crisp to frigid, I mirror the monarchs as I prepare for my own migration. This fall I will not go south with the butterflies, but west, celebrating Thanksgiving with my mother's side of the family.

As I pack my bags, I find myself thinking of Nana in her garden. I do not want to forget. My memories of childhood are limited, those I do have are spotty at best, full of holes. I am holding these memories of summer close to my chest, etching them over and over in the space at the back of my brain. In recent months, I have found myself grappling with this fear of forgetting—if these moments from the garden would fade

from the archives of my memory, where would those versions of myself and of my grandmother go? If I no longer remember, would those iterations of ourselves cease to exist?

Remembering is ritualistic. When we sit around the dinner table reminiscing about times gone by, when we leaf through photo albums, when a smell pulls us into the perfect memory of a day ten years prior, we play at resurrection. It is when these rituals cease to be enough that I begin to worry. When memories slip through the cracks, when people and places disappear into the folds of time that delineate the past, I feel that old anxiety rise up.

Even if the idea of transgenerational genetic memory might be largely sensationalized pop science, I cling to the idea that memories might exist in my own genetic code, unrecognized, but still there. Even the way memory continues to persist through Annie Dillard's writing on the memory of the butterfly mountain, however unfounded, provides reassurance. It is comforting to think that our memories, even unrecalled, will not cease to be a part of who we are.

As I board my plane to Seattle, I think of the butterflies. As the monarchs make their journey south, lifting off milkweed perches as a single entity composed of many wings, I wonder if they, too, are worried about remembering who they are when they are no longer tethered to the land.

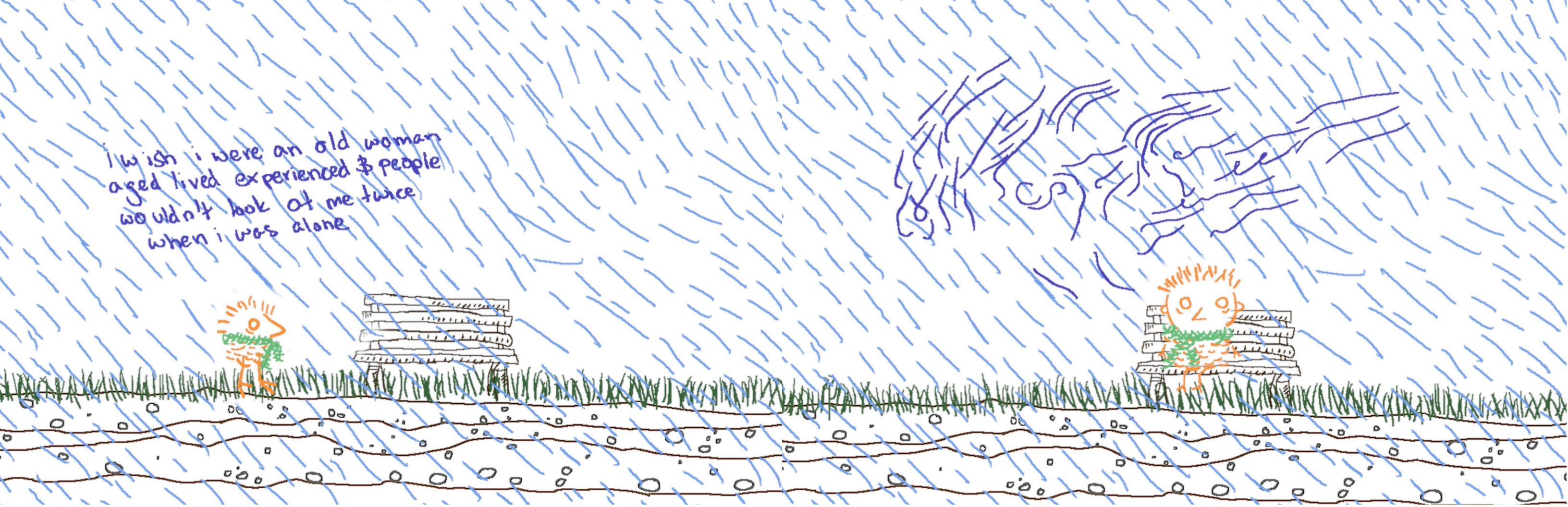


BY JOSEPH MCCLENNAN

There's a vampire in your attic, and it was, to be completely frank, rather annoying. You didn't know about the vampire when you moved in— of course you didn't, otherwise you wouldn't have bought the place. When The Realtor With The Smile That Was Altogether Too Tall, Yet Didn't Stretch Far Enough To Reach His Eyes showed you around the place, he said that it was "Definitely 100% Brand-Spanking New!" and "Absolutely Positively Nothing In Particular's Ancestral Home!" which really should have been the first sign, because the house was old, pretty classy. I mean, you liked that, rather a lot— it was very aesthetically pleasing, and it had very nice wallpaper and predated asbestos so you wouldn't need to get any asbestos sprites cleared out or anything.

The whole place was actually rather nice, despite being older than dirt. It was one of those old Colonial townhouses. Or, like Gothic, maybe? You don't know all that much about architecture, but the point is that it was a refurbished old place with hardwood floors and a lot of slightly tacky wallpaper. It wasn't exactly your scene, per se, but the price was exceptionally good and you haggled with The Realtor With The Smile That Was Altogether Too Tall, Yet Didn't Stretch Far Enough To Reach His Eyes and got it even cheaper.

I mean, naturally, you asked The Realtor With The Smile That Was Altogether Too Tall, Yet Didn't Stretch Far Enough To Reach His Eyes what that racket from up in the ceiling was when you were checking out the Luxuriously Appointed Bedroom (It had a four-poster bed!) but he merely said "I'm Sure It's Nothing Probably Just A Bat Or A Wombat Nest Or Something And This House Doesn't Have An Attic Anyway You Must Be Crazy And We'll Definitely Be Hiring An Exterminator Before We Sell This Place To You Anyway So Are You Ready To Buy?!"



It was an unwise decision, but you really didn't want to move back in with your parents, so you bought the house for dirt cheap. It seemed only logical there would be a vampire in it or something.

You'd actually been there about a week before you finally managed to track down the trapdoor that led to the attic— you were trying to put up part of your hanging succulent collection when you noticed a painted-over trapdoor. You grabbed your back-massaging hook and pulled down the ladder. It smelled like dust and copper— you later looked it up and learned that blood isn't actually supposed to smell like copper unless something is, like, super wrong with it, so you don't actually know what that smell even was.

Regardless of the smell, you grabbed a flashlight and went up into the attic, and that's where you saw the vampire.

She was way less cool than any vampire you'd really ever heard of or read about in books. Sure, she had the whole nine yards: scuttled about on the walls, rotated her head 180 degrees, eyes glowed in the dark like a cat's, big honkin' fangs, vampire stuff. But she wasn't wearing a cape or anything, and she wasn't, like, sexy and mysterious, and she was a terrible conversationalist. All she would say was stuff like "HISSSS!" and "GRAAAHG" and then try to bite you with her fangs. It was pretty disappointing. All the vampires in the books and movies and stuff were really excellent conversationalists. Thees and forsooths and such. At least,

like, they were kind of cool. The vampire in your attic was just scary, and not in the scary-cool way most vampires were in the movies.

She actually did surprise you and bite you the first time you went up there, and she sucked some of your blood and stuff. You were worried you were going to turn into a vampire or something after this, because that would really disrupt your plan to go to the beach with your friends the following weekend. The good news is, though, you actually got the vaccination for vampirism when you were, like, four, so you were going to be fine.

You know, it was actually a little weird that she couldn't figure out how to open the trapdoor. I mean, she *had* fingers, and she obviously wasn't *stupid* or anything, but you just heard her scrabbling at the trapdoor and not, you know, using the handle. You decided to put up with it for a while, but she started screaming and scratching in the night and one time she even cried in a way that was really disturbingly close to how a human would sound if they were having a serious mental breakdown and you still have really terrible nightmares about it, so you decided to call an exterminator.

The exterminator was a bust. He was a short man with a long mustache, and he said that it was beyond his pay grade and that you should call an exorcist. You tried that too. He was a long man with a short mustache, and he said that it was below his pay grade and that he only handled

real dracula-types and that you should call an exterminator. You actually managed to find a guy who listed himself as an Exorsterminatorcist in the phone book, which was weird but probably what you needed for a problem of this caliber. He was a medium man with a medium mustache, and when you gave him the fifty dollars cash that he asked for the job upfront he just grabbed it and ran out the door and down the street, screaming about how he could finally pay off his debt to the phone book company, and you decided that was probably the end of this particular potential solution to your vampire problem.

You were scrolling through Facebook one day when another solution at last presented itself. You saw this article that mentioned that coconut milk is basically the same stuff as blood plasma, and you figured, hey, why not, right? She was probably pretty hungry up there or whatever. So you went to your local Whole Foods, because that was the place you were most likely to be able to buy a whole coconut, even if the money for it would go to Jeff Bezos you figured that it was probably worth it to get the vampire to stop screaming and crying at night and maybe you could use that attic because you saw a crate that looked like it was full of old comics when you poked your head up there and you like old comics.

You'd never tried to buy a whole-ass coconut anywhere before, and even though it was the Whole Foods and people were buying overpriced kale soda and tree bark chewing gum or whatever it was they actually sold there, people still looked at you like a freak for buying a single whole-ass coconut. The cashier, who was a short woman with tired eyes and sparkly mascara, spent about two minutes looking for a barcode on the coconut before she just handed it to you and said "Literally please just get out of here. You are frightening both the customers and me, and I really don't need this kind of coconut-related stress in my life right now. Come back when you can inflict upon me papaya-related stress of some variety." And then you left the Whole Foods because the people were judging you for buying a coconut to try to feed the vampire in your attic, which was a perfectly normal reason to buy a coconut, except that it absolutely was not any such thing.

When you got home you pulled down the trapdoor to your attic again and saw the vampire, who was wearing an old AC/DC T-shirt and a pair of canvas sneakers and lunged at you when she saw you, screaming "REEEAAAGHH!!" in that way she did, but then you held up the coconut in front of her and she sank her fangs into it and started sucking on it. I mean, you're pretty sure she liked it because she started sucking on it and hissed at you to go away and leave her with the coconut when you got close. So you did, I mean, and she was a lot quieter after that for a while. You could hear her rolling the empty coconut shell around on the floor of the attic sometimes, and she would let out a little giggle that was kind of adorable but also a little bit guttural and frightening.

She started screaming and moaning again after a while, and you decided to see if she would accept the offering of another coconut. So you went back to the Whole Foods and bought a couple, but also decided to buy an inordinate amount of papayas, like 200, despite the fact that you didn't really even like papaya all that much, in order to assuage the worries of the cashier with the tired eyes and the sparkly mascara. She was elated when she rang up all of your papayas individually. You were going to have to find another source for the coconuts, because this was really 100% not working for you because you spent like your entire month's grocery budget on raw papayas that you don't even like and coconuts for the vampire in your attic.

For the vampire's part, she actually really seemed to like the coconuts, and stopped trying to attack you when you entered the attic after the third or fourth one. I mean, she still didn't like you up there or anything, but she wasn't trying to bite you or kill you, and you considered this progress. It was still pretty annoying that you had a vampire in your attic, and you didn't exactly like her or anything, but there was a sort of uneasy cohabitation between the two of you you felt you could deal with. The papayas, less so.

You had a rather ingenious solution to that, actually. You decided to hold the next weekly get-together with your friends at your house on a Friday night and have a "Papaya Party." They all thought it was quite droll and Stephen Matthews said that it was a "Truly inspired decision" in that way he does where you can never be quite sure if he's fucking with you or not. Still, he's actually pretty funny and has a membership at the Museum of Science he lets you borrow, so he gets to hang out with you and Philomeen Washburn and Ezekiel Morgan and Fortunata Di Souza. You cooked the shit out of those papayas. You made papaya pancakes, papaya smoothies, papaya juice, papaya pastry, frozen papaya, chocolate-covered papaya, papaya necklaces, papaya garlands— you used all of them. You were the Pinnacle of Papaya Perfection, and the party was great. Later that night, the vampire in your attic was crooning a weird song, and Philomeen Washburn asked you "Hey, what's that noise from your attic? It sounds like something crooning a weird song," and you said "I'm sure it's nothing, probably just a bat or a wombat nest or something— this house doesn't have an attic, you must be crazy— anyway, I'll be hiring an exterminator soon." And they ignored it and you had a good Papaya Party even though you kind of hated papayas more after the Papaya Party.

The next month you bought normal groceries, but you couldn't find any coconuts at the the Food Emporium or the Piggly Wiggly so you were really quite distressed about what to do for the vampire because you were under no circumstances returning to the Whole Foods. When you were last there the other customers were laughing at you behind your back for the Coconut Incident of 2022 and that was a humiliation you were not eager to repeat.



In a moment of true serendipity, you found a solution to your problem when you were on a walk in your new neighborhood, maybe two or three blocks away from home. You had just fed the vampire the last coconut you had in your house, and you heard her using the coconuts like bowling balls upstairs, knocking down some empty Pepsi bottles as the pins. It was a little bit irritating, but at least she was having fun, you figured. You hadn't figured vampires to be fond of bowling, but then again you knew very little of them.

The solution was as elegant as it was unexpected. An old Cajun man in an off-white bolo tie and a straw hat had set up a little stall on the side of the road, right outside of a law firm called Jerky and Sons, which was a pretty terrible name for a law firm. The stall was basically just one of those fold-out tables and a bunch of cardboard boxes near a beat up old winnebago that you assumed belonged to the Cajun man because he grabbed stuff from it, but you never actually did see him drive it or anything.

Anyway, he was shouting at passers-by, promoting his many, many wares. Really, this guy sold basically everything. Burned CDs, scrap metal, old recipe books - he even mentioned that he had a briefcase full of classified

documents he'd found on a train platform one time, but you were pretty sure that was a lie. Most importantly for you, the old Cajun man had a regular supply of coconuts, and he was willing to sell them to you for \$1.50 apiece, which was much better than the seven bucks each that the Whole Foods was charging you.

When you asked him where he got them from, he started talking up a storm "Well you see, I've been going steady with this real sweet lady-friend, Cap'n Wilhemina Higgenbothom Crossbones an' she got out of the piratin' business a few years ago and retired with a lot of her booty and whatnot, which was, as it so happens, made primarily of tropical island nuts, an' she's been tryin' to close out the lease on her pirate ship and so I been helpin' her sell off some of the surplus. No refunds."

You're pretty sure that none of that was true, but you were too desperate for coconuts to inquire further so you gave the old Cajun man twelve bucks and got a bunch of coconuts, then started returning whenever you ran low. He always had them, and typically some new and outlandish story for you as well..

When you came up to the attic with the coconuts you got from the Cajun man for the first time, you finally got a better look at the place. It was pretty spare up here, with the old moldering wood of the slanted roof dripping slightly with something that probably wasn't water but you decided was water because the alternatives were too dreadful to contemplate. The floor, which had a rug on it, had reddish-brown splatters all over it- leftovers, you presumed. It was roughly 90% cardboard box per square foot, and there was an odd pile of crumpled and torn boxes that the vampire seemed to have assembled into some sort of fort or nest in the far corner of the attic. She crawled out of there whenever you came up, grabbing the coconut from your hands and looking you dead in the eyes while she took it before retreating back to her little den. You figured it was best to leave after that.

Things were pretty stable with you and the vampire for a month or two. You gave her coconuts and left her alone and she was pretty quiet most of the time, presumably because she wasn't so hungry, but she started acting up a bit in the winter. You realized your attic was not very insulated, and she was shivering in a corner, probably because she was just wearing a T-shirt and it was like -12 degrees outside. She screamed her horrible inhuman screams and cried her horrible all-too-human cries and you kind of felt bad for her, so you went out and bought her a space heater and a big quilt that the Cajun man said that he had made but it had a "made in China" tag on it so you're pretty sure that was bullshit but the story was funny and weird so you didn't really push him on it.

The vampire was very wary of you when you came in and brought the stuff, because it didn't look like a coconut and she didn't know what you

were doing. She tried to bite the blanket and rip it apart, but she didn't succeed and just kind of got tangled up in it. You're glad she didn't bite the space heater, at least. When you plugged it into the wall and it started heating up the room, she put her taloned hands and face next to it and looked at it with these really big eyes, like cats get when they're very happy, and then she looked at you with those really big eyes and you felt weirdly good about it.

She was a lot more okay with you hanging out in the attic after that. Not for too long, of course, because vampires are very territorial creatures, but in her mind you were the funny human who brought her food and sometimes nice things and you could enter her domain for a little bit she supposed. I mean, you guessed this. It was probably just anthropomorphizing or something.

There, in fact, were a bunch of old comics up there – *Vertigo* ones, which kind of sucked, because you liked *Marvel* more, but they were still cool—you're pretty sure literally every single *Fables* comic is up there, and you really liked *Wolf Among Us*, so that wasn't so bad.

Your cohabitation with the vampire was becoming a lot easier. She wouldn't even try to bite you when you came up to the attic, she'd just look. Even if you didn't have food and just wanted to hang out, she'd allow it. You two would read the old *Vertigo* comics together sometimes, and she'd cry or laugh or "HGURRHGH" at you and give you a weird smile with too many sharp teeth and you'd kind of nod along and say "Yeah, dude, totally."

You caught her sleeping up there during the day once. She had a little place in the corner where she was curled up in her quilt looking at a picture of a smiling girl with stringy black hair and normal teeth and the vampire's face smiling normal smiles with a few other people. This made you sad. You got the vampire an air mattress.





FINDING
JOY
THROUGH
NALBINDING

| BY NAT HOWARD

I have always loved fantasy novels. I first became interested in Norse mythology the summer after my freshman year of high school. As I interacted with online communities of mythology-lovers, I also devoured many books of myths. My favorite culture of mythology was—and still is—Norse mythology. A major reason for my interest in Norse mythology is Loki. I love the character of Loki, both in Norse mythology and the franchises of Marvel comics and their Cinematic Universe, because he is genderfluid and uses magic. My passion for the fantasy genre—and not-so-secret desire to have magic and shapeshifting powers, as Loki does—makes Loki, one of the few magic-using characters in Norse mythology (and Marvel), and thus the most fantasy-adjacent character in the pantheon, a favorite of mine. Also, as a genderfluid person, seeing a character that is genderfluid who uses their shapeshifting powers to change their body as their dysphoria changes is very affirming. I discovered I was nonbinary the summer after seventh grade, but

it took me longer to accept that I was genderfluid. Reading about Loki, a thousand-year old character that takes both male and female forms and acts in both typical male and female gender roles, helped me process my gender dysphoria and euphoria and admit to myself that I am genderfluid.

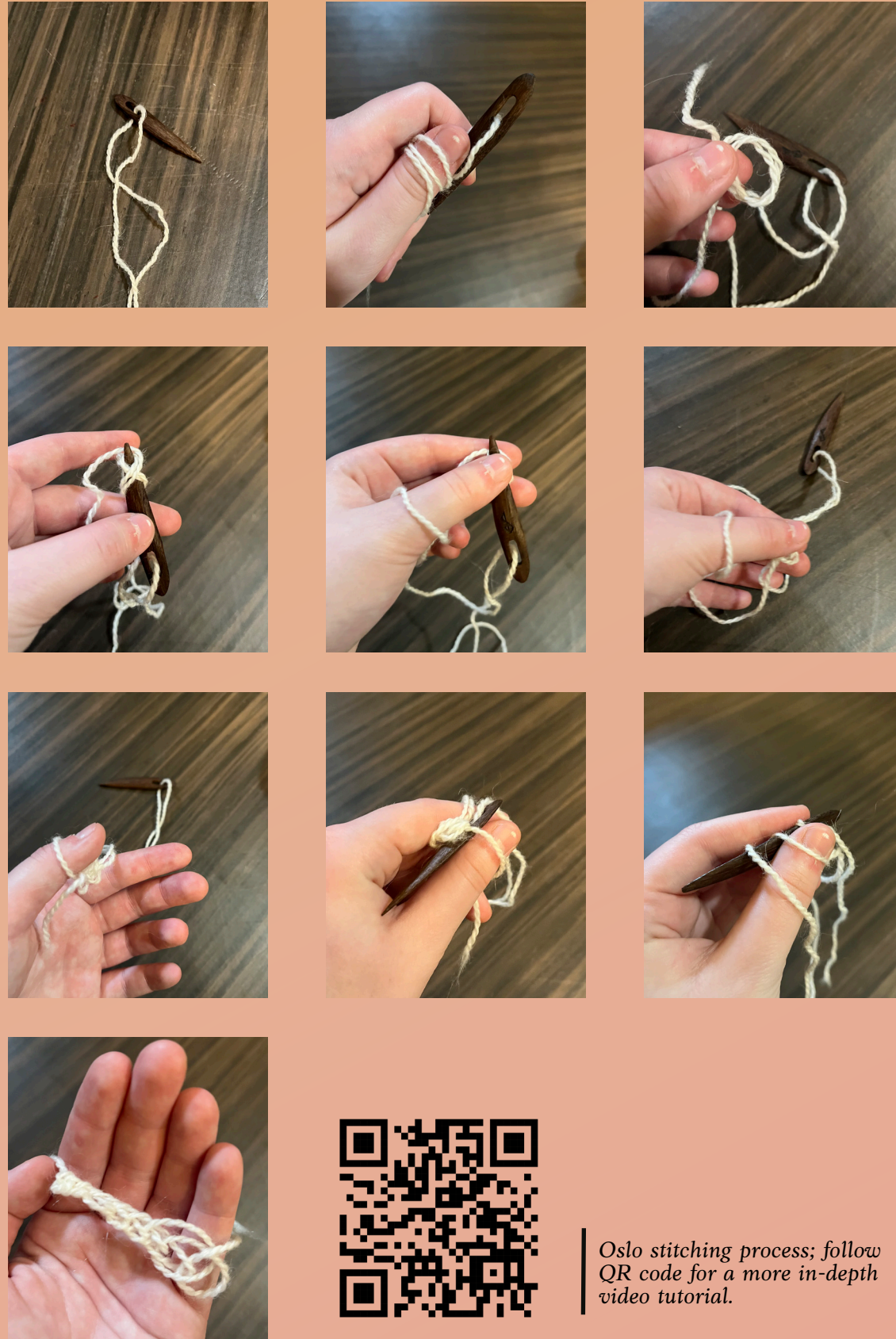
While writing this essay, I discovered something surprising about Norse mythology. Though I had thought that Vikings were the original worshippers of the Old Norse Gods, worship of the Old Norse Gods actually began around 500 BCE and *declined* during the Viking Age, which occurred from the eighth to 11th centuries (1). Over time, most Vikings converted to Christianity due to external pressures and the help it would provide to territorial expansion and trade goals. However, some Vikings added the Christian God to the pantheon of gods they worshiped instead of fully converting to Christianity (2). Viking myths were passed down through oral tradition until the Viking culture was entirely usurped

by Christian converters, who wrote the myths in the unattributed Elder/Poetic Edda and Snorri Sturluson's Christianized Younger/Prose Edda, the two earliest known written compilations of Norse myths, though they were both written after the end of the Viking Age and the cessation of worship of Norse gods. In pop culture, Vikings are commonly believed to be very violent. However, their violence when raiding was not only characteristic of Vikings; it was actually typical of the early-medieval European cultures that existed at the time (3). Vikings raided and traded to gain wealth (4). Because Vikings had better weapons and more manpower than many other nations, raiding and subjugation of foreign lands was initially easy for them. They also may have suffered from overpopulation in Scandinavia, leading to the need to expand their territories. One reason for the end of the Viking Age may be that their opponents developed better military technology and defenses. The Vikings who did not go out to raid were generally farmers who provided food and wool for clothing to the other Vikings. That wool was used for nalbinding.

Nalbinding (or “needle binding”) is the 10,000-year-old predecessor to knitting and crocheting, though the modern version of nalbinding isn't quite as old, and is instead based on Viking age stitches and techniques, rather than the more simple stitches done in the thousands of years preceding the Viking age. It is done with wool yarn, a bit of water (used for “spit splicing,” or felting, pieces of yarn together—historically, people would actually use spit), and a wooden or bone needle. The main difference between nalbinding and knitting/crocheting, besides the 9,000-year gap in invention date, is that nalbinding is made of knots, and so to undo stitches one essentially has to untie each knot individually. I discovered nalbinding during my junior year of high school after becoming interested in historical fashion. At age eight, I taught myself how to crochet from a book, and I have been cro-

cheting since then. I have also learned and practiced many types of fiber arts in my breaks from crocheting. However, when I tried nalbinding, it became my new favorite fiber art. Around the time I started nalbinding, I learned of the joys of TikTok. I found “NalbindingTok,” full of videos of people complaining that you couldn't take out nalbinding stitches if you messed up and instead had to restart (which is definitely not true) and clips of beginner tutorials on techniques I had learned from YouTube. Unlike my experience with crocheting, I felt that nalbinding was best learned from YouTube videos, not books. Nalbinding turned out to be difficult, finicky, and confusing. I spent a lot of time trying, getting frustrated, giving up, taking breaks, then trying again. When I mastered the Oslo stitch, the basic/beginner stitch, and decided to learn Finnish 2+2 F2 (now my favorite stitch), I went through the same cycle of failed projects and frustrations. Luckily, after a lot of practice, I mastered those stitches and was able to make many fun and useful projects. As I learned to nalbind, I also did research into its history.

Fragments of nalbound works have been discovered around the world, the oldest being a 10,000-year-old piece made of plant fibers found in a cave located in what is now Israel (5). Most Stone Age nalbinding discoveries are nets made out of twisted plant fibers using a needle and a simple looping stitch. The second oldest nalbinding discovery, which is the oldest discovered in Scandinavia, is a plant-based net fragment found in Friesack, Germany and is estimated to have been created around 7750 BCE (6). The oldest Scandinavian nalbinding discoveries were likely made by peaceful tribes of herders (7) who nalbanded nets and other functional pieces (6) until they were entirely replaced by a battle axe culture, which many scholars believe spoke Proto-Indo-European (the ancestor language to almost all known European languages) (7). Surprisingly, there continued to be evidence of nalbinding in the area (6). It is possible that the



Oslo stitching process; follow QR code for a more in-depth video tutorial.

Proto-Indo-Europeans absorbed the previous tribes and adopted nalbinding, or that they may have practiced nalbinding before moving to Scandinavia. The Proto-Indo Europeans living in Scandinavia eventually began speaking Old Norse and worshipping the Norse deities. Their culture evolved until they became what we know as Vikings. Most finds from the Medieval era were socks, mittens, and hats from Scandinavia, likely made by people from the Viking culture (6). Scandinavians continued to nalbind, even after the end of the Viking age, but nalbinding started to lose popularity in the 17th century when knitting was discovered to be faster and, thus, easier to sell in the developing mercantile economy. However, people continued to nalbind in remote areas around the world through the 20th and even into the 21st century, and nalbinding is beginning to gain popularity among modern fiber artists (6). The majority of stitches done by modern nalbinders are named after the location where the first archeological discovery of an artifact using that stitch occurred, most of which are Scandinavian pieces made during the Viking age or later, such as the York (York, UK; slipper socks) and Mammen (Mammen, Denmark; grave site textiles) stitches (6). The most popular stitch, the one most people, including me, begin with, is the Oslo stitch. It was named after an 11th century (late Viking age) mitten using that stitch discovered in Oslo, Norway (8). This means that modern nalbinders, though there are few, use stitches that were invented hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago and rediscovered in the last century.

Nalbinding has helped me participate in and become part of an international community of chronically ill fiber artists. Shortly after discovering nalbinding during my junior year, I developed a chronic pain and fatigue condition called AMPS, also known as fibromyalgia. That put everything in my life on pause. I couldn't handwrite or type, I couldn't stand or climb stairs, and worst of all, I couldn't do fiber arts. No crocheting, no nalbinding, no knitting, nothing. Doing fiber arts hurt too much for me to bear. I went to multiple doctors before fi-

nally receiving the AMPS diagnosis, and those doctors sent me to do occupational therapy and physical therapy. Even after dozens of sessions, they didn't work. My pain was no better; actually, it was worse. By the spring of my junior year, my pediatric rheumatologist decided I needed to take drastic steps. I entered an intensive pain program at a hospital an hour from my house. I missed two days a week of school for over a month to go to the program. It seemed that all the strategies they gave me didn't work. They didn't know what to do with me.

I couldn't handwrite or type, I couldn't stand or climb stairs, and worst of all, I couldn't do fiber arts.

Eventually, I tried a strategy they hadn't taught me. I picked up a crochet hook and yarn and told myself, "This will be fun. It won't hurt. And, if it does hurt, that's not a bad thing. It will still be fun." Surprisingly, this worked. Crocheting hurt less than it had previously. Throughout the days that followed, I would crochet for short periods of time, take a break, and crochet some more. Soon, those short periods of crocheting weren't so short anymore. Eventually, I was able to crochet for hours without pain. This opened the door to a drastic increase in my quality of life and decrease in the amount of pain I experienced while doing activities such as typing, biking, and nalbinding. Fiber arts saved me. They healed me when everyone else had given up.

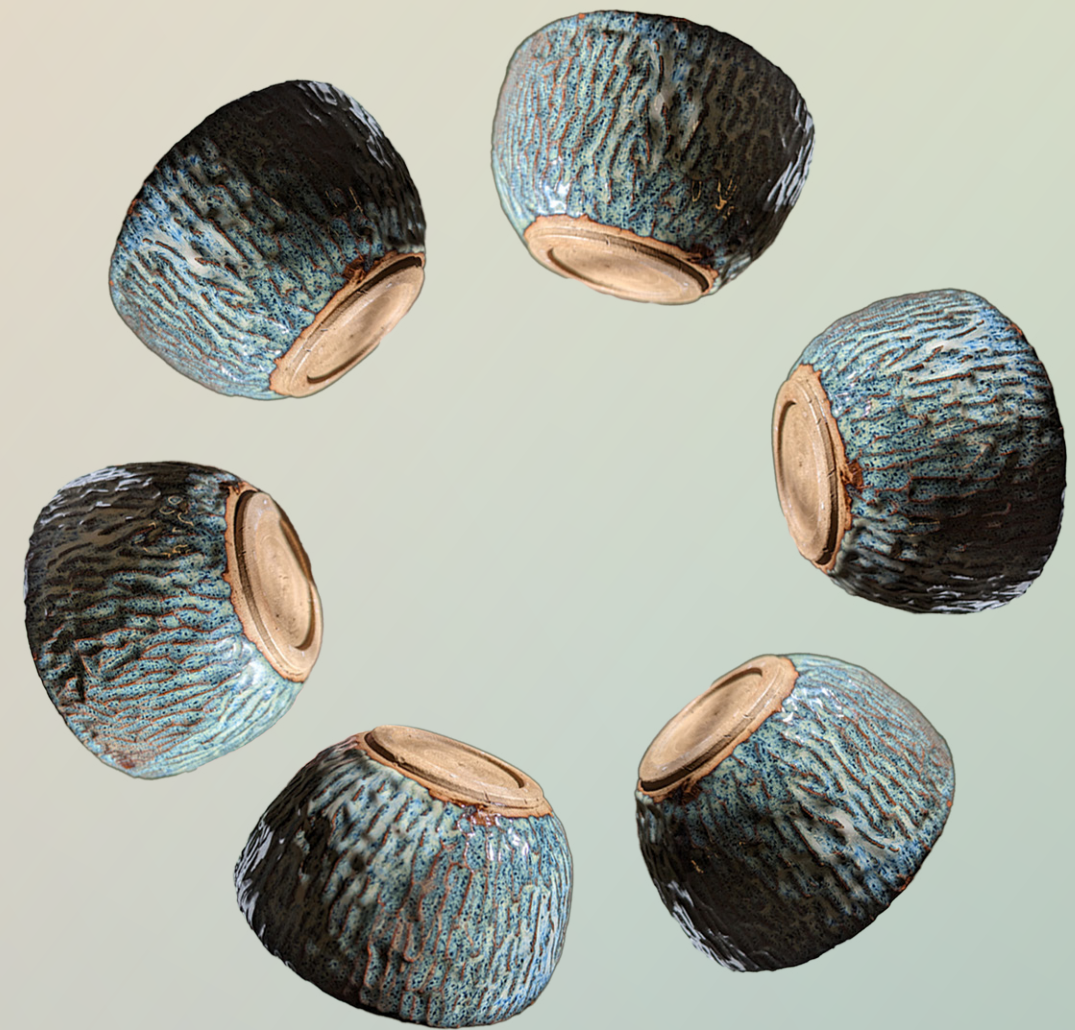
After I had this pivotal experience, I went to the internet to connect with others like me. I made TikTok videos explaining what AMPS is and what treatments worked for me. Now, years later, I continue to receive comments from

parents telling me I helped them understand their child's new diagnoses and teens telling me how much seeing someone like them allowed them to cope and heal. I also made TikToks about my love for fiber arts. Around that time, I discovered that there were other chronically ill fiber artists, people that were similar to me, who made TikToks that sometimes became very popular. Though I didn't discover any other TikTok creators who were fiber artists with AMPS, I learned about other chronic illnesses and how fiber arts helped chronically ill teenagers and young adults survive and thrive, just like fiber arts helped me. It's important to have a community of people like you,

even if you don't know them. It makes you feel less alone. It did for me, at least. Nalbinding gave me a community. It allowed me to feel hope and happiness, lighting up my life after it felt dark for so long. I am part of a 10,000-year-old tradition. Will you be too?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Viking: History, Exploration, Facts, & Maps." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15 Oct 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Viking-people>.
2. National Museum of Denmark. "Christianity Comes to Denmark." *National Museum of Denmark*, <https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/pre-historic-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/religion-magic-death-and-rituals/christianity-comes-to-denmark>. Accessed Oct 15, 2023.
3. Winroth, Anders. "Viking Violence." In *The Cambridge World History of Violence: Volume 2: AD 500–AD 1500*, edited by Harriet Zurndorfer, Matthew S. Gordon and Richard W. Kaeuper, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 100–120.
4. National Museum of Denmark. "The Viking Age." *National Museum of Denmark*, <https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/pre-historic-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age>. Accessed Oct 16, 2023.
5. Hemingway, Penelope. "Nålbinding: A Short History of an Ancient Craft." *Spin Off*, 7 Oct 2023, <https://spinoffmagazine.com/nalbinding-a-short-history-of-an-ancient-craft>.
6. Claßen-Büttner, Ulrike. *Nalbinding - What in the World Is That?: History and Technique of an Almost Forgotten Handicraft*. Books on Demand, 2015.
7. Wikipedia. "Proto-Indo-Europeans." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, 3 Oct 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Proto-Indo-Europeans&oldid=1178405148>.
8. Fjárfelli, Elska á. "Nalbound Hats." *The Æthelmearc Gazette*, 27 April 2023, <https://aethelmearcgazette.com/2018/04/27/nalbound-hats>.





Addiction

| BY SAFE JASSANI

I start a fire, lean in close.
My eyes burn and blisters bubble—
bearing pain for a minute's warmth.

When logs wither I grasp at ash in search of heat.
My hands now dark as the circling night
where colors go to hide.

Another match hits the lumber, sparking flames, stirring pain;
still a shame I've lost my way.
Hope gone and logs exhausted, I drape in dirt and brace for cold.

Long into hibernation my sky erupts.
Oranges and yellows and reds, sights of blaze,
is this the end? Not yet.
The sun welcomes me back to dawn.



Bound Backwards

| BY CHLOE BOCCARA

Breech Baby, Breech Baby!
Doctors shout in bright blue scrubs.

Question-mark shaped toes poke out first,
all pink, all backwards, baby.
Now she only goes backwards:
doesn't-grow, just-shrinks,
talk-before-she-thinks,
backwards baby.

Sings the alphabet starting with Z,
spits before brushing her teeth,
walks not on heels, but on toes,
claps before the end of shows,
sets alarms reminding herself to blink.
Still a backwards baby.

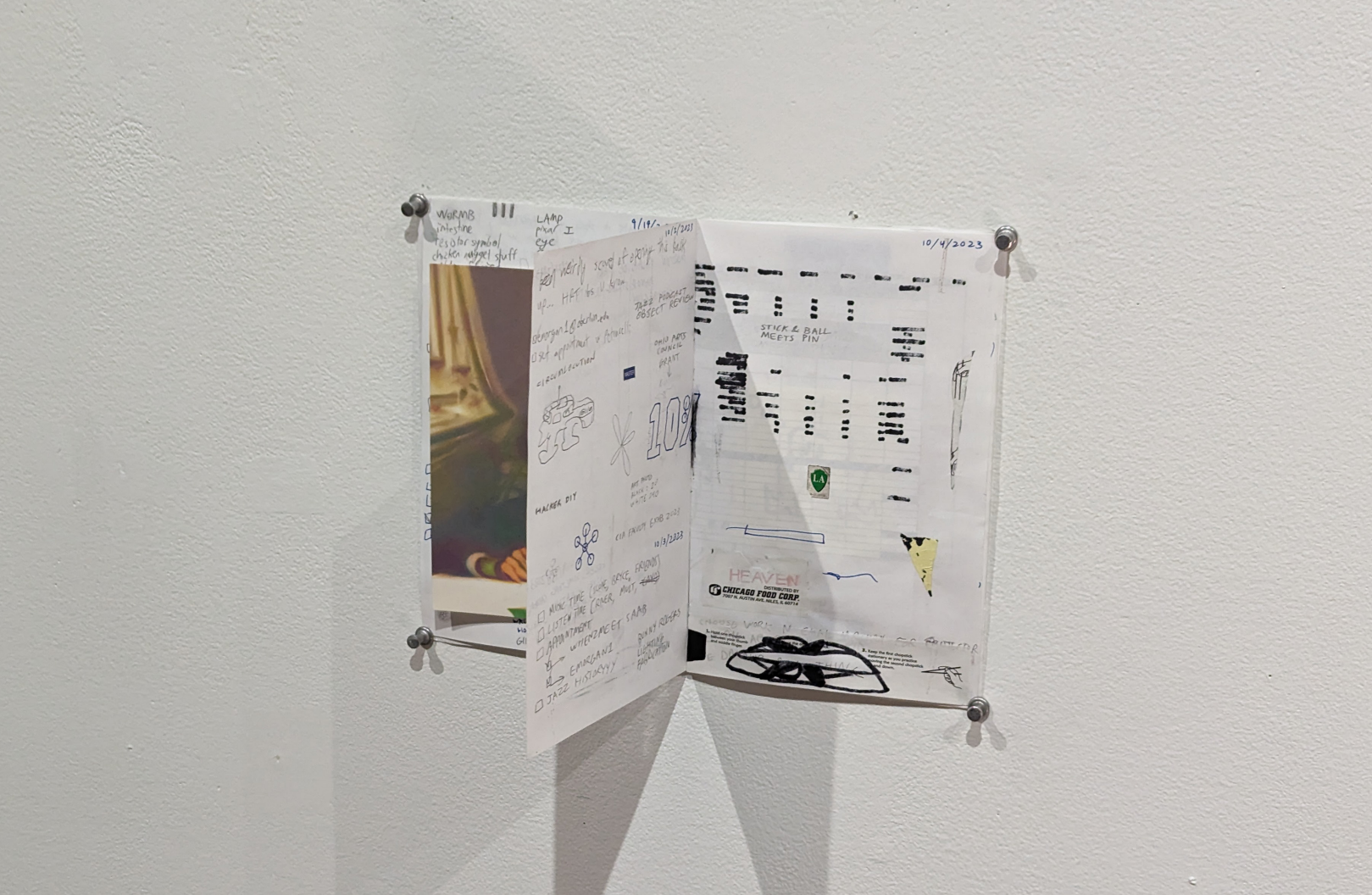
She writes inside-out and upside down
so her writing comes out forwards,
drafts an apology letter to Mother
but can't get past four words.
Too much unused, black ink.
Who cares what she thinks?

I'm Breech, Baby, Breech, Baby!
She shouts with blissful blue eyes.



“The Right School” & Other Myths

| BY KATIE PRISCOTT



“When you get to the right school, you’ll just know.”



I’d heard the sentiment my entire life, from adults regaling their glory days to older kids coming back from their first semester seemingly radically changed. I spent years picturing what my college experience would entail: strolling through a picturesque quad framed with trees, learning about all the things that fascinated me, never having to take a class I wasn’t interested in, and finding my future bridesmaids in my dorm. It would be perfect, and I would be at the “right school.” Right?

Not quite. The strain of the application process on today’s high schoolers and the emphasis on perfection is a conversation for another time, but with each letter opening with “we regret to inform you,” I became convinced that my life was over at the ripe age of 17. I spent spring break visiting schools and weighing my options. After a massive pro-con list, I settled on a journalism program at a massive school, complete with SEC conference football games and sorority life, 17 hours from my comfort zone in Connecticut. The scholarship didn’t hurt,

nor did the shock on people’s faces when I informed them I’d be shipping out to the middle of the country, or the chance to study at a world-renowned journalism school. But more than anything, it felt “right.” I could see my future stretching out in front of me as clearly as I saw my shoes on the pavement; I could grasp it as solidly as the brochures I was collecting like good luck tokens.

The first few weeks of the semester were a rude awakening, one that I observed almost out of my body, like an ecologist giving commentary on National Geographic. “Here, we see Katie’s roommate’s father scan her up and down as if trying to gauge her value. A pack of sorority girls has already formed an impenetrable bubble, ready to pounce on the non-blonde. Katie has made the discovery that her meal plan only covers 12 meals a week, leaving her to fend for herself in the wilds of Missouri. Every time Katie introduces herself and where she’s from, she gets gawked at like a zoo animal. Katie’s advisor has now changed four times. Make that five times.”

I was seemingly doing everything “right.” I got involved in activities, made conversation with my classmates, and did well on my assignments. I can wholeheartedly say I met lifelong friends at my old school, the people who kept me upright when I was perpetually being knocked down, but I still felt deeply alone. Even academically, I felt out of place in all of my journalism core classes, like the writing I really wanted to do was a square peg in a round hole. The scholarship that felt like an award when I received it now felt like a curse, because I hated the idea that my unhappiness made me ungrateful. I returned home for Thanksgiving and couldn’t shake the feeling that I was lying to every well-intentioned person asking if I was having a good time at school.

Re-opening the Common App felt like a sign of weakness, a failure. Clearly, I just couldn’t rise to the occasion.

If my first semester was a nature documentary, my second was a spy film. I was leading a double life of filling out applications again and maintaining my GPA so any transfer school would want me, all while keeping a smile on my face so my friends wouldn’t suspect anything was wrong. Someone would ask me where I was living next year and I’d reply with a shrug, “Not sure yet!” They meant dorm or apartment, not knowing I had been doing recon on new schools entirely.

My mom had pushed me to apply to Oberlin amidst all of the other liberal arts programs I was considering closer to home. I was convinced Ohio was no different than Missouri, but she swayed me as she sent me links to curriculum outlines and Instagram posts of arts opportunities as well as videos of President Ambar flipping tires in CrossFit. We joked that a squirrel mascot sounded perfect for me and I submitted the application. But even then, I was still convinced I would end up back in New England.

The universe had plans of its own. Winter thawed into spring, and I got into Oberlin the week that my humanities course read *Fun Home* by noted Obie Alison Bechdel. Sometimes the universe gives a wink and a nod that you can’t ignore.

I visited on the drive home from campus, my entire year packed in Ikea bags and Tetris-ed into a minivan. We made it to Ohio as the sun sank down into the horizon. On the back road into town, my dad asked the question, “So, do you think this is going to be the right fit?” It was a reasonable enough ask, this was a major life decision. Naturally, I started weeping and he had to ask the follow-up of, “Do we need to pull the car over?” I was truly overjoyed at the opportunity I had been offered, but I had this pit of dread simmering in my stomach. I thought I had made the “right choice” last year, and we had left it in the rearview mirror when we drove off of campus in Missouri that morning. What if I was wrong, again? What if I uprooted myself and altered all of my plans, only to confirm my fear that I was the problem all along?

I spent the campus tour with my stomach in knots; I couldn’t sit still for the remaining seven hours in the car back to home. (Consider this a formal apology to my dad: I was a terrible co-pilot.) For an added level of comedy, I had two days left to make my final decision, because I was having my wisdom teeth removed. The plot had been lost entirely, and we were spiraling into slapstick sitcom territory. The day before my surgery, I sat with my mom at the kitchen counter, the same place I had submitted all my college applications during senior year and I committed to my old school. I clutched her hand and accepted the offer to Oberlin.

A few interesting things happened when I made that decision and changed my Instagram bio. First, among all of my research in my transfer process, I had never actually looked up how many students



go through the same process I did. One of my roommates from last year transferred to a school closer to home, giving our four-person suite alone a 50% transfer rate. Turns out on a national level, it’s about a third of all college students. I spent months agonizing about my “gratitude problem” and “over-sensitivity,” only to find out that about two million people transfer each year. Good to know about six months late?

Second, I found out that everyone had an opinion about my educational choices that they now felt free to share, whether I asked or not. They ranged from the intended-to-be-supportive—“what a better school!” (What was wrong with my school last year?)—to the remorseful—“I had a feeling you wouldn’t like it there, I should have said something (I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do with that)—to the suspicious—“It seemed like you were having a great time on Instagram”

(I wasn’t aware that you were analyzing my social media presence, but thanks, I guess?). But despite the cacophony of noise surrounding my school change, I really was optimistic.

August arrived and we once again Tetris-ed my life into a minivan. I (in vain) attempted to be calm, even as hotel breakfast tasted like cardboard. Even as we arrived at check-in and saw a line of at least a hundred people snaking their way down the sidewalk. Even when I realized that because I was living in an upperclassmen dorm during New Student Orientation, there would be no one to help us move in or to let me back into my room when my key didn’t work. Even as I attended a string of orientation meetings with the addendum of, “Well, this is meant for the first-years.” (That was probably the hardest part. I already felt like an awkward piece of the puzzle shoved in the box at the last minute,

and the transfer orientation felt like a confirmation of that.)

I had a compendium of knowledge from my freshman year, only a fraction of which was transferable. Everything I had learned about navigating the football stadium on gameday or which dining halls to avoid flew clear out the window. I felt cynical and jaded because of the year of college under my belt, while simultaneously no different than the kids fresh out of high school who also needed to look up where buildings were on Google Maps. It was a fresh start in some ways, but in others it felt all too familiar.

Just because something is ultimately better doesn't make it immediately perfect. And a better fit didn't mean an easy one, I still had to do the work. Slowly but surely, the better got *better*. I found routines and shortcuts to class, I found people that felt like they were meant to be in my life who slotted in at just the right time, I found my stomach aching from laughter instead of perpetual anxiety. My life wasn't some genre of movie anymore, it was something of my own, something I could claim. If I were to compartmentalize, it's a coming-of-age film, but one where I actually get a seat in the writer's room.

Sometimes I think about the girl sitting in the Student Center in Missouri writing yet another personal statement, wondering if it would be worth it for her to just stick it out. I think back to the shame I felt in the first place about my transfer, this stigma that I had wasted one of what was supposed to be the best four years of my life. But I know that I learned invaluable lessons at my old school: a crash course in communal laundry, navigating college parties and safety, when to suck it up and say yes versus when 'no' is a complete sentence. I carry those memories with me, so the time was not wasted. That time there finished exactly when it needed to.

I returned home for fall break this year

and for the first time didn't spend the entire week dreading my return to school. The bittersweetness washes over me when I watch the lives of my first college friends in photos and wish them happy birthday over the phone instead of in their new apartments. There's probably an alternate universe where I did stick it out. Maybe things are different in that one. But in this universe, no one was going to give me an award for suffering, my diploma wouldn't be worth more if I was miserable in my quest to achieve it. My old school wasn't where I needed to be in the long term, and that wasn't a moral failing.

Oberlin is a campus crawling with Type A academics and creatives, who I'm sure empathize with the feeling that things need to be just-so, that they need to be *right*. Maybe the "right school" feeling wasn't a myth for them. But the past year has shown me that there isn't a universal, cookie-cutter version of perfect. In this recovering perfectionist's opinion, the true college experience is one of falling flat on my face, brushing myself off, looking around and having a laugh at myself, and moving forward with the skinned knees and scars to prove it and to learn from. The true college experience is commiseration and victory and defeat and card games on dorm room floors. And God-willing, it won't be the best four years of my life, just the best ones so far.

If the last year has taught me one thing, it's that there's no "right." There's just "right now."

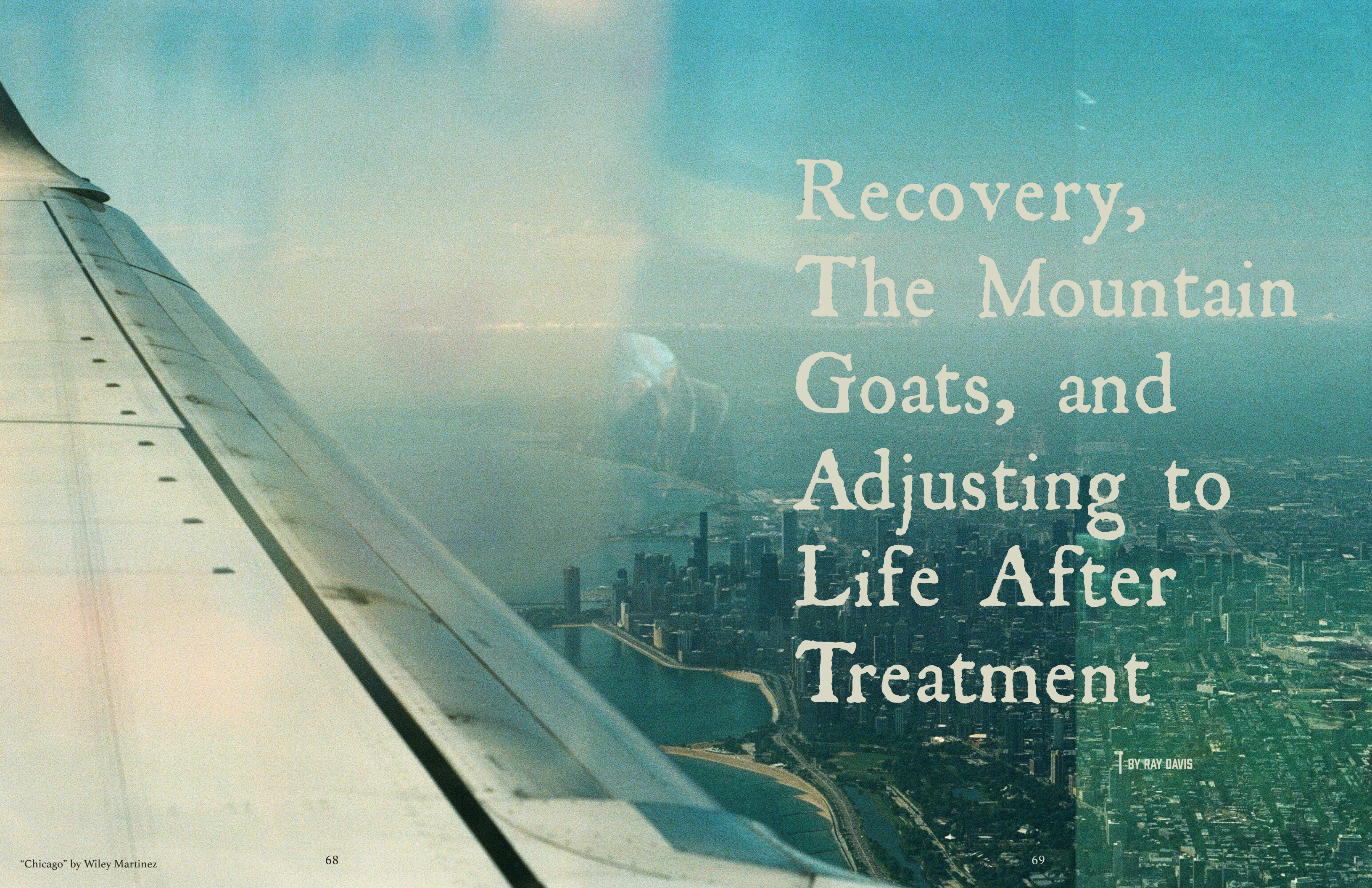




MILWAUKEE

| BY SASHA GOLDMAN

What proof do I have that we once
loved each other permanently?
The program for your Senior Recital
tucked away in my drawer
that is wrapped up in the pair of your underwear
I wore when I flew back to Ohio from Chicago,
or your soft brown long sleeve,
which I wore when I took that greyhound
to Ann Arbor?
I wonder if I ever cross your mind,
as I once crossed those icy Midwestern planes
on my way to Michigan.
I wonder if you know I was just a woman who loved you
long after you stopped loving me.
I wonder,
what do you make of leaving your house
after hours stuck inside, and seeing that while you were away
the world has been covered in snow?
I wonder, do you ever feel sad this time of year?
With all the fading light,
and the smoky air and dying leaves?
Do you know you made me feel small?
Not small as in the tangerines I ate in Paris,
that I peeled in one long piece on my bedroom floor and
which I wanted to offer to you as proof of my longing, but
small as in nothing,
as in your favorite mug,
which your mom accidentally dropped last August,
which you quickly replaced,
and I wonder if you knew how I wanted to see you,
long after you stopped wanting to see me,
when you were in MILWAUKEE,
and I was in Prague,
and I suddenly realized that we had never met,
that you had never really existed at all,
you had left the plane in which I exist,
and had possibly left the Earth, which
is how I would describe my desire,
for you.

An aerial view of Chicago, Illinois, seen from the perspective of someone looking out of an airplane window. The wing of the plane is visible in the foreground, extending from the top left towards the center. Below the wing, the city's skyline is visible, including the Willis Tower. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Recovery, The Mountain Goats, and Adjusting to Life After Treatment

BY RAY DAVIS

Dad drove me to the emergency room. He said things were probably fine, but when you suddenly lose the ability to move half your body... it's best to get it checked out. We listened to the Mountain Goats. He's been into indie rock since the '80s, but he discovered them just that year. Back then, Dad and I didn't agree on much, but the Mountain Goats' lyricism had a way of piercing through any silence between us.

I pressed my forehead against the window. I tried to focus on "Get Famous" instead of my muscles. Signals. Basal ganglia. A knot of diagnoses had tangled my search history over the past few months. It all started after a bad reaction to Zoloft. Doctors never really agreed on exactly what it was. All I wanted was to write a novel or maybe just a really good poem. Be someone noteworthy. The gulf between my brain and body was far less interesting than all the things I couldn't do.

Doctors said it wasn't a stroke, nor anything else defined or devastating. Dad and I listened to "The Great Gold Sheep" on the way back home. *I am going to see*

the wild haunts of this world/ and carve a place out all my own. I wanted to leave for college already. I wanted my hands and mouth to form the words I saw in my mind.

I drank alone for the first time during the last week of junior year. I'd gotten a little drunk before at a block party and smoked weed at friends' houses, but this was the first time it was urgent. Some switch flipped in my head. I swallowed the whiskey and the tremor in my hand went away. The slowness was always the best part. My blood felt dense. Each movement became a game. There's nothing like shutting everything down.

I first truly listened to that line of that song on another long drive with Dad. *I am going to make it through this year if it kills me.* I pointed out the paradox, but I didn't tell him any of what I really meant. I was seventeen and getting drunk daily. No one but my best friend Noah had any idea. I had begun to develop withdrawal symptoms. The liquid that eased my tics and loosened the knots in my neck



had the potential to ruin everything. My senior year loomed impossibly long. I picked my way through Infinite Jest. I listened to The Sunset Tree while walking to school. I drunkenly rewatched *Friends* and *New Girl*. I mostly drank alone. Every couple weeks I tried to quit altogether. The longest it ever lasted was maybe five days.

I got an email from a writing contest I had entered months prior that said I'd been selected as one of the Scholastic National Student Poets. Somehow, everything was okay. I found a smirking comfort in the idea that it could all collapse at any moment. With alcohol in my veins, I didn't twitch or stutter. I took swigs of vodka from my water bottle in the bathroom between classes. I got As and Bs and participated like normal.

In the week or so leading up to the poetry ceremony in DC, I went through withdrawal on my own. I didn't want any vertigo or sweat to cross over into the realm of my writing success. All my hopes for the future felt alive. I talked to Mom about college applications in our hotel room for a few hours. Of course, I drank the night my plane landed back in Chicago. I'm aware of stories and trajectories. Addiction and every other word that feels too solid to say. I started mixing alcohol with moderate doses of DXM cough syrup and my sister's anxiety meds.

It's hard to say exactly why I made the decision to tell people. I wasn't scared for the future, exactly. It was the distance itself, between my reality and everyone else's. I cornered Dad in the driveway

when he got home from work one night and told him everything. I wanted to get ahead of the storm. Even now, I want to control the narrative.

My parents found an outpatient program about a forty-minute drive away. Dad was still mostly working from home post-pandemic, so he drove me to the suburbs every morning. I don't remember much from those weeks. We listened to All Hail West Texas and pointed out the funnier lines. *Hail Satan!* We tried not to talk about the clouds surrounding us. Without noticing exactly when, I had stumbled into a foggy world of disaster. I sat in process groups full of teenagers who had been hospitalized two or three times that year. My therapist there thought I might be bipolar. Despite the program's drug tests and breathalyzers and the new lock on the liquor cabinet at home, I continued to drink anything I could get my hands on.

Addiction can't be separated from the stories we tell about it. There are too many knots to untie. My parents knew on some level that treatment wouldn't be an easy exit. I began to draw a blank when I imagined anything but the next week or so. There's a future where I just got engaged and I'm getting my masters in poetry. There's a future where I'm nearly dead, drinking listerine by some highway. Sometime after leaving the program, I got drunk. I got into a bad argument with Dad about being trans. I drank again. Then again in two weeks. I got college rejections and acceptance emails. Drank again in a few more days. Cough syrup too. Pills. It gets boring to talk about. It got boring to experience.

I tried to kill myself twice that spring. I didn't think about the nothingness of death or any sort of afterlife. It's not like that, or it wasn't for me. I still had these abstract dreams for my future or whatever: a wife and a dog and a poetry collection and all that. Addiction is an animal under your bed growing bigger and hungrier every day. You can never fully see its shape: just a flicker of

claw and an occasional snarl. You hear it breathing when you try to sleep. I stopped seeing past my bedroom doorway. *This Year* was no longer a unit that made sense. I couldn't even swallow five minutes of the wrongness in me.

I went to the psych ward. Twice. Then to a residential treatment center in Idaho. Long-term. For-profit. For ages 18-28. The woman on the intake zoom call told me three months; I was there for eighteen.

For the first month all I felt was trapped. Like hot water, dread rose in my chest. We ate too-small servings of chia pudding for breakfast and joked about how long we might be stuck there. Every week or so, someone new would punch a wall. A couple girls swallowed glass and thumbtacks.

We weren't allowed to have phones. We could call our parents for fifteen minutes once a week, supervised by a staff member. I listened to music on a little red MP3 player. Every week or two, one of the RAs would help me download a new playlist or album and I made my way through more of the Mountain Goats. I began to think about the curse of being classified as mentally ill. I could only ever think of my life as a determined narrative. My insanity became defined and expected. I obsessed over therapy worksheets and lost track of the future. I relapsed ten times that year, drank any liquid that could possibly contain alcohol. Living in extremes had become a routine of its own. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's not like I could've left that place, realistically. Every runaway I knew was now homeless in Seattle. I listened to *Transcendental Youth* on a kayak and in the living room to drown out the vacuum cleaner and yelling. *Days like dominoes/ all in a line.*

Those months are difficult to dissect. I spent most of the first several weeks at the "cabin": a secluded location where we were sent for anything between attempting suicide or selling cigarettes. I filled my days talking to a series of staff members about politics and our favor-



ite TV shows. Grayson was working on a novel. (He eventually moved to New York). Hannah had a daughter and was studying social work. I met with a psychiatrist and therapist often. Diagnosis was a constantly shifting ground. BPD. Bipolar 2. I never could make sense of the definitions.

I kept listening to *Transcendental Youth*. *Some things you do just to see how bad they make you feel*. In the cabin living room and on the deck of the main house, I scribbled five minute abstract drawings with the oil pastels Mom sent me. I wrote any lyrics that fit the situation at the bottom of the page. *Dig my nails into my hands/ hope it leaves a mark*.

I began to claw myself out of the worst of it. I meditated. I read the Bible and books by Thich Nhat Hanh. I scheduled hours in the gym downstairs and journaled religiously. I filled out extra DBT workbooks. This rigid recovery never lasted. Maybe two weeks at most before I punched a wooden beam or tried to drink. To this day, I'm still figuring out how to live in a middle-ground. At least I was self-aware. I had hours-long conversations with Liam and Jules on paddle boards and in the kitchen about all the infinite layers of recovery. Every resident knew exactly how fucked up we all were, and in what ways. We could each describe our problems in a five-page essay beginning in childhood but it would all eventually trail into nothing, ending midway through a sentence or on a question.

The therapists eventually decided to move me on to the next phase. Semi-independent living at the center of town. Maybe this environment had become the driving force: this pressure cooker house filled with stories of thrown fire extinguishers. *I am just a broken machine*. Sometimes this was the only self-knowledge I could muster. Sometimes the destruction was more important than the drunkenness itself. Nothing made sense except a life full of potential endpoints. If I lived to the best of my ability, then I'd have to face the notion of my ability not being enough. This mouth that says the

wrong things in every social situation. These hands that sometimes sputter into nothing.

That winter, I read books and went to support groups and got an internship at a human rights organization and took walks on the trails by the lake. It's all so gradual. I made more playlists than I used to. I tried to make them tell stories from my life. *This song is for the rats/ who hurled themselves into the ocean/ when they saw the explosives in the cargo hold/ were just about to blow*. I see these lines from "Cotton" being more hopeful than anything. I had to choose unlikely recovery over certain suffering. It's the hardest and simplest choice I've ever made.

The program hadn't given me my phone back yet, but I used the desktop in the public library. I began writing a novel in sporadic bursts. I took a world religions class at the community college. I responded to my parents' emails. Some days, I still lay on the carpet and felt consumed by each minute. I had to keep making the decision not to hate myself and the decision to believe in a future and the decision to reach for happiness despite my lack of certainty.

I started making friends with people who had full lives. Old guys in church basements and high school students who volunteered at the human rights organization and a middle-aged cashier at the grocery store with they/them tattooed on their knuckles. I talked to Dad on the phone about college and music again. I asked my mom questions about being a teacher and imagined what I could be like when I am fifty and believe in life. Sobriety couldn't come before hope.

When I listened to the album, *We Shall All Be Healed*, I understood the knot of it all. Chaos fades into desperation. *The things that you've got coming will consume you*. When every day is full of bashed-in walls and kids who jump out of windows, it's a near impossible task to see any other outcome. To this day, most stories I hear about people who discharged from treatment involve

homelessness, overdose, or suicide. I had to take the leap of believing in a different sort of exit.

I moved to the final phase at the beginning of summer. Phone back, no supervision, just one therapy group a week. I thought it would be better. At first I didn't notice the way I jumped every time a door shut or a housemate walked across the floor louder than I expected. I dreaded the smell of the inside of the program van and avoided certain foods that meant "treatment" to me: sunflower seed butter, red delicious apples, berry flavored Propel powder.

They told me I could leave in August. I listened to *All Hail West Texas*. It was the first Mountain Goats album I fell in love with in Dad's car, and after these months of suspension, I finally understood the contradictions about "home" at the album's core. The classic "Riches and Wonders" line: *I want to go home/ but I am home*. I'm lucky. I can finally make a home for myself that really feels like mine. I think about it most weeks, how I got to leave, got to attend my dream college while pretty much everyone else who was discharged that summer went to other therapeutic programs.

If you examine the text on the cover of *All Hail West Texas*, it becomes clear that in the song "The Best Ever Death Metal Band in Denton" Cyrus is sent to some sort of long-term treatment center. I gradually learned to live in accordance with this line: *The best ever death metal band out of Denton/ will in time both outpace and outlive you*.

I think the best form of rebellion is to continue living. Maybe write a book or a song about it all. Try to build a better world. Don't get me wrong, I've considered angry suicide notes and relapsing out of revenge. But doesn't that all just become evidence for their way of classifying me? I saw it firsthand. Anytime an ex-resident commits suicide or overdoses, the therapists cry in their DBT

No one really looks beyond the assumption that this type of treatment is necessary and preventative for anyone living in the extremes.

groups about how they wished they could've done more to save him from himself. No one really looks beyond the assumption that this type of treatment is necessary and preventative for anyone living in the extremes.

It's telling that "The Best Ever Death Metal Band In Denton" is the first song in the album. My story is just beginning. I flew home to Chicago in August, slept in my childhood bed for a couple weeks and started school at Oberlin. I made friends who were weird in the same ways I was and in different ways. I began weekly therapy at a place not too far from campus. It was all refreshingly casual. I still got panic attacks and wanted to drink occasionally. I still had tic attacks at inconvenient times. The move to college was jarring, but gradually *home* has begun to seep in at the corners. It's in writing poems about my childhood and eating dinner outside with friends and calling my parents when I can.

I don't know what the future holds. I don't know if I will someday end up relapsing or if my neurological condition will get more debilitating than before. For now, I'm okay living for the new album, *Jenny From Thebes*. The songs call back to themes and characters in *All Hail West Texas* but have a new musical theater style. Dad ordered the vinyl online. We'll listen to it over the holidays.

Before Spring

| BY CLARA CARL

My hands are chapped and getting red
and out here, snow is falling, slow;
There's blinding white and bitter cold,
and resting bulbs in earthen beds.
I see you parked outside. Your car
is dirty as it always was.
I cross my legs as tight as I can.
The air is cold, but the heat is on,
and I am fogging up the windows.
I know this night will spell disaster
with the shape of my breath. See?
We are talking and suddenly
I am digging up a body
of water behind the woodshed.
Earth has swallowed part of itself
whole; and you are beside me, shrouded
in shadow. The fish are frozen
where they swam in summer, silver
in moonlight. Their scales almost glow, but
they are cold and dead in my hands.

I'm sorry I told you I hated you.
I just wanted to go home.





PAPER BAG MAN

BY SEAN NORTON

Pale light from an overhead fluorescent and the orange glow of something superheated compete for space across Casey Straughan's frame as he stands in the center of a sweltering garage. He takes a pack of cigarettes from his black leather kilt, pulls one out, clamps it in his mouth, and tells me he'll trade spots with me at the furnace. I'm happy to let him. I've been focused on trying to keep a long pipe with something perhaps best described as a primordial cup on the end of it turning smoothly inside an 1800 degree chamber—no easy feat when the pipe is a bit wonky and the cup is a liquid—and the heat is intense. He takes the pipe and pulls it from the fire before proceeding to whirl it in a great circle in front of him. The molten tip traces a glowing ring around his body as the cup anchored to its hot end ponderously stretches with the feeling of pulled taffy. When it's grown from the height of a tumbler to well beyond that of a pint glass, he brings it to a stop in front of his face, leans in and lights his cigarette against its still searing side, and hands it back to me.

I return to my role as human rotisserie and watch as heat soaks back into my now outstretched cup as we continue our conversation about his youthful alter ego, the anti-hero: Paperbag Man.

Picture this:

You stumble up the stairs into a jam-packed concert, already drunk from an evening in the loud, grimy, but charmingly communal basement in which you and 10 other greasy people live illegally. The venue above your makeshift commune is just as communal, with people floating freely between the front and back of the entirely BYOB bar. Above a bar-top strewn with empty cans, bottles and ashtrays hangs a string of ransom-note magazine cutout letters inflated into the third dimension spelling out: Speak In Tongues. You're assailed immediately by power chords the texture of sandpaper on your skin. Someone's laughing like mad into the mic. The crowd is tumultuous, moshing and energetically bouncing around you. As you jump off the balls of your feet to match the oscillations of the

crowd, you look up at the stage to see the Rabid Dyslexic Boy Scouts—tonight's headliner—playing behind a figure covered head to toe in brown paper bags and duct tape. Where his face should be are two jagged eye holes, and below that a gargantuan paper "P" affixed to his chest. You lock eyes with Paperbag Man. He strikes a flexing pose on stage, screams, and then leaps into a thrashing crowd of his minions: the boisterously silver clad Duct-tape Boys.

I first met Casey Straughan as part of a scheme to get someone to teach me to blow glass. When presented with the sudden opportunity to just do something, anything, that I thought would be of value to me for a month during Winter Term, I swung glass blowing off the back burner and set about trying to get someone to let me play with fire. I started my campaign of cold calling with the place where I'd first realized just how delicious hot glass can look: The Corning Museum of Glass. They have world-class studios and a whole university's worth of courses in every format, style and time-span you can imagine...except for three-week intensives between January 25th and February 17th apparently.

So I moved on to calling every glass studio I could find in Cleveland. Most never picked up, or told me they're "not a teaching shop" and wished me the best.

Until, that is, someone at Larchmere Fireworks on the East side of Cleveland returned my call and much to my continued delight drawled, "Sure! We have a 10 week course we could condense into three weeks for ya!"

A couple months later, I drove out to Larchmere Boulevard for the first time, squeezing into a tiny slip of safe curb-harbor between Big Al's Diner and a church with heavily barred windows. I made my way down the driveway of an unremarkable Cleveland home, and under the

flap of a large party-tent that filled the backyard. There, I was greeted by what I later learned to be Casey's most theatrical moment in his role as teacher, a booming, syllable-dragging, "Welcome to Larchmere Fireworks!!!"

This sonic assault came as I was taking stock of both the charmingly-DIY backyard shop, with glowing homemade furnaces welded together from oil drums and steel bed frames, and its charmingly-DIY instructor. Resplendent in his usual kilt and band shirt, he led me through the very first lessons in hot shop glass blowing—namely how to make a clear glass duck—with a practiced rhythm: "Ok keep it turning, keep it turning...now pinch and pull to make his bill!" I felt a little like I was on a theme park ride.

Playing with a material that behaves like honey but gives off its own soft light; getting to feel the intense heat rushing out at you as you stand before a 2500 degree chamber; dipping a red-hot pipe into a vat of something both transparent and so hot that it's impossible to see inside the scorching glow of the furnace and then just...blowing into a tube and watching it stretch and expand into a beautiful transparent bubble before you grab and shape it with nothing but a folded square of the Wall Street Journal between your hand and something hot enough to instantly melt your skin! It was heavenly. I drove home that first day with a shit-eating grin I couldn't turn off, still feeling the warmth on my winter-ruddied cheeks and giggling to myself as I cruised back on 71-South.

As I've learned from teaching art classes myself, once you hit the second session, the script kinda goes out the window. And I had, over the next few months, 15 more sessions in the hot shop. Glassblowing is a sport punctuated by periods of intense activity and periods of just stickin' a hot thing on the end of your blowpipe into something called a Glory Hole (named hundreds of

years before the other kind, they swear). So Casey and I got to talking, in between huffing and puffing into some glass, and in-between his remarkable collection of stories, I began to feel some similarities to my own life. Chief among them were profoundly impactful experiences with alternative education, and along with it, a complete rejection of American industrial education's central values.

Casey grew up in Strongsville, Ohio; a suburb on the east side of Cleveland. He spent much of his time in school in speech classes when he was younger, and what he recalls as LD classes, for learning disability, especially for verbal and written expression. Beyond that, his interests were definitely outside the Strongsville norm: "I know I was, uh, quite the weirdo in this suburban school where everything was, you know, *Spoorts* and *MTV*, right, and this and this and this and I just never ever related." His disinterest in sports and *MTV* and whatever else an 80's high school student was supposed to like, along with his participation in the LD classes, made him a frequent target for abuse from other students. His defense was to, "hook onto anything I thought was cool. I was kind of, I guess you would say a poser, or maybe like an oblivious poser? I wanted to be something but I had no idea *what the hell that thing was.*"

That isolation sent him into a deep downward spiral in high school which culminated in what he described as a "sort of serious, maybe half-assed suicide attempt, but uh, didn't die from it!"

After this experience and some time in the hospital, he convinced his parents to let him transfer to what we'd now describe as a private magnet school in the Cleveland area called the Eleanor Gerson School.

It still operates today, with a focus on helping students whose "emotional, social, and behavioral struggles have im-

pacted their ability to succeed in a public setting." They offer grades 6-12, generally mirroring the academics of conventional schools, but "with an intentional focus on social emotional skills, including self-awareness, regulation and monitoring along with empathy and relationship skills."

"Everyone there had their own issues," Casey told me. "People who were autistic, people who were just punk rockers, people who had weird stuff going around their brains. But some of them could do amazing things, and some of them were just fucked."

I spent seven quite formative years at the Lehman Alternative Community School, a radical, self-governing school in Ithaca, New York. The school had no tests and no grades. Instead, four times a year we would write a narrative self-reflection about how we felt and what we thought about each of our classes and our engagement with them, and then the teachers would write one back. The classes were all intentionally very small, discussion-based, anti-competitive, and focused on depth of subject over breadth. We as students were free to choose our own schedules and come and go from classes as we pleased. I took many of the most memorable, interesting, and useful classes I've ever taken there, from a yearlong course that started with Holocaust studies and transitioned into contemporary Middle Eastern politics, to a senior seminar focused on the school-to-prison nexus, liberation pedagogy, and the theory and practice of small-scale egalitarian self-government.

Central to the values of the organization were small-scale participatory democracy and the creation and maintenance of a rich community in and around the school. All the staff went by their first names, were encouraged to form personal relationships with students, and worked together with the students to run the day-to-day operations democratically.

There was opportunity for community-building baked into our schedules: from everyone serving on committees that helped oversee our daily operations—be it watering the numerous plants, keeping the library in order, or performing building maintenance—to being members of things called family groups (similar to a homeroom but much less formal) that helped you pick your classes and do administrative paperwork, but also hosted potlucks and events in school, and outside of school at the staff leader's house. The whole school took a 2-day retreat to the woods in the Fall, and everyone was required to go on one of a variety of week-long trips with students and faculty members each spring. I went backpacking on the Finger Lakes Trail, rock climbing down in Pennsylvania, and traveled down to New Orleans a number of times to continue providing aid to people affected by Hurricanes, a tradition started by the school in 2005, just after Katrina.

And, the biggest twist, it's a *public* school! Didn't cost anyone a penny. An excellently executed subversion of the state's educational machinery.

It's always an interesting moment, to see aspects of yourself in someone else's experiences, especially when that person isn't exactly a peer. For me, here, it was a positive feeling, it felt like a point of connection between me and someone I looked up to, both as a teacher and as someone who I viewed as having had a somehow more authentically rebellious youth than I seem to be having. Retrospectively, my relationship with Casey has also served as a vessel for exploring the way moments and movements in the past get placed on a rose-colored pedestal in my head. Casey, was an active participant in a variety of late 90s underground music scenes, from

The free flowing connection between countercultural education and having friends in shitty indie bands.

raves in derelict Cleveland factories to thrash shows at questionably licensed establishments, but the one that talking to him about gives me the greatest feelings that I'm missing something today is the DIY punk community. It's a community I was a part of in my hometown, but his experiences with the punks in Cleveland felt somehow more real, with their anarcho-punk squatter collective flair. But, seeking connection and just needing something to fill the air, I told him about one of the DIY shows I attended inside the Dali Lama's former North American seat of power: a big old house turned monastery turned house once again which the monks sold to my friend's bald-as-hell dad 20 years ago when they moved to a hilltop outside of town.

This particular show was a group effort organized by some friends of mine, in a band called Wallace and the Apes, along with another similarly ragtag group of mullet-possessing teenagers who called themselves Vicious Fishes. I remember clearly trying to mosh in the living room of the monastery to the Apes' hit single, "Monkey Fuck," and looking over to see my friend's aforementioned delightfully bald dad standing in front of a pair of 600-pound sacred stone statues, lighting a bowl and nodding his head in time. Much to my eternal dismay, his shiny head was the closest thing I ever saw to a monk at one of those shows.

It's something Casey and I often discussed in our sessions before the furnace: the free flowing connection between coun-



tercultural education and having friends in shitty indie bands. I met my friends in the Apes at LACS and Casey met the Rabid Dyslexic Boy Scouts through one of their Gersonite (which I'm told was the term for an Eleanor Gerson student) members.

As entertaining as it was to mosh under the warm gaze of the stone buddhas, the former Namgyal Monastery was definitely not a full-time venue; unlike the site of many Rabid Dyslexic Boy Scouts shows: Speak In Tongues.

Operating out of a building leased from the Ohio Communist Party for \$800 a month, Speak In Tongues ran from 1994 to 2001 as an anarchistic community space and music venue that on any given night hosted some sort of show, from heavy thrash to free jazz and poetry readings. There was never a bar—because who would ever give them a liquor license—and there was rarely an entrance fee. They survived purely on donations, and of course, by letting a constantly rotating cast of dozens of people live illegally in the basement to offset the rent.

By the late 90's the plumbing in the basement had either broken completely or pulled out of the walls and sold for scrap. The de facto facilities became a hole in the wall by the corner. In 2001, SIT transitioned into a collective, kicked out the squatters, remodeled the basement and turned it into practice spaces. Members paid \$25 a month for all-hours access to practice spaces and the right to throw any kind of event they wanted once a month.

Casey, though never a basement resident himself, earned permanent free admission to all future shows when he helped rip out the valorous Piss Wall and gut its yellow-hued innards.

Sadly, the collective model lasted less than a year, as in late 2001, a new land-

lord acquired the building, and gave Speak In Tongues one week to vacate the space. Their final show was on New Year's eve, 2001.

A great deal of local scholarship, or maybe journalism, or maybe just reflection, has been produced about Speak In Tongues and its magnetic pull, its liberating collective power, its connections to both the Communist Party and the local Mafia, and, ultimately, its tragic demise.

I won't recount its tales here, that'd be a whole other article! Plus you should probably hear it straight from the source: Cleveland historian Eric Sandy, who just published his book, *Speak In Tongues: An Oral History of Cleveland's Infamous DIY Punk Venue*. In scouring some of his writings, a balancing force to a feeling I'd

I had the feeling that I was valorizing my friend who was really just an aging punk rocker.

been having for some time arose.

A few weeks ago, I came across a still-active Facebook account that was an archive of posters, flyers and photos of another late 90s - early 2000s venue Casey was known to frequent, Pit Cleveland. As I was flipping through their photos, I was struck by a strange sort of embarrassment, a moment of self-consciousness, looking at these people in very similar outfits to what people are wearing today (y2k seems unfortunately back in style) talking and drinking and dancing and just generally having a good time in exactly the same way we do now. I had the feeling that I was valorizing my friend who was really just an aging punk

rocker, that I was valorizing an *idea* of a time and place and lifestyle that young folks engaged with in a pretty similar way to how we'd probably engage now. It was a moment of embarrassment, thinking to myself, "this is what you're holding up as so much better than today?"

I've run aground on these sorts of feelings a number of times when I find myself engaging in the long gaze backwards. Of holding aloft the idea of something, of a time and a place, of a scene—whatever that is even—as something both wonderful and desirable, yet, somehow fundamentally unattainable now. Perhaps the core problem is that those ideas of a place and time are only formed through mediated lenses. Either literally—through media produced within the place in question or media produced after the fact that reinforces existing ideas and depictions—or, through stories of direct experience, morphed and changed by decades of retelling. These sources of information must necessarily narrativize their subject and produce, inadvertently or not, the notion of a place in idealized form, in a way that contemporary reality, with all its extraneous detail and space around the main event, will always feel dissonant from.

These feelings certainly come up for me in the moments when I stop and compare my own experiences participating in punk communities to those of someone like Casey—which is perhaps my first mistake. When ya really get down to it, I wasn't doing anything substantively *that* different from those people in the crowd at Pit Cleveland, or the people packing into Speak In Tongues every night—although admittedly I wasn't squatting in a cat-piss filled basement. But in my reflections, I never ascribe the same flavor of "authentic" punkness, or "authentic" countercultural shtheadedness onto myself.

Hearing Casey's testimony of the place and reading the oral accounts of its

members, I was struck by an odd sort of joy that a place like this had existed. A pseudo-anarchist collective space that, in the words of former regulars Viva Caramel and Brian Straw, wasn't afraid to combine the raw, uncooked elements of society; that, "for the majority of its existence...was very unorganized. If you wanted to do something, you just stood up and did it. There was no leader, nobody in charge. So it's not like you can tell somebody, 'No, you can't do that'. Whatever happened happened. There was no form. It's amazing, actually, that it lasted as long as it did."

That sentiment is echoed by many, many people who were entwined with SIT, Casey included. Another SIT regular interviewed by Eric Sandy summed it up well: "The level of personal and artistic freedom that we all had in our lives was pretty much unparalleled since then. It came with a high price: You lived in a filthy basement with six other people and had to try to sleep through emo bands."

Rather than inspire that same introspection the long gaze backwards creates, along with the impulse towards comparison to the present, learning what an amazing place SIT was through Casey and later through Sandy's work has led me to say, "Oh fuck it" towards deep questioning of how we hold up spaces and movements of the past. I'm just gonna go do weird bullshit for its own sake!



Photo by Sophie Winner

LEARN MORE

1. Case Western Reserve. "Speak In Tongues." *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, <https://case.edu/ech/articles/speak-tongues>.
2. Francis, Thomas. "Rat: Rejected by the Mafia, Tony Delmonti joined a less discriminating group: the FBI." *Cleveland Scene*, 8 Oct 2003, <https://www.clevescene.com/news/rat-1484103>.
3. Sandy, Eric. "'Whatever Happened Happened': An Oral History of Speak In Tongues." *Cleveland Scene*, 3 Aug 2016, <https://www.clevescene.com/news/whatever-happened-happened-an-oral-history-of-speak-in-tongues-4944214>.
4. *Speak In Tongues*, speakintongues.com.

To be sent to editor.

Possible Headlines:
Twonkle's Big Day: A Review
Reviewing a Classic Children's Book
Moses Moss's Most Well-Known Work, Reviewed

BY: FRANCIS WOODWORTH

Moses Moss's classic children's book, Twonkle's Big Day, is—in few words—a travesty of the literary world. When first I sat down to experience this cardboard-bound steaming pile of lexical excrement—lexcrement, if you will—I had fairly high expectations; I was not overly familiar with Moss's previous work, but his reputation preceded him. Well, as my aforementioned sentiments suggest, those expectations were in no way met. In fact, I believe that I can, with a reasonable degree of certainty, say that Twonkle's Big Day is the worst book I have ever read.

My name is Francis Woodworth, and it is with utmost solemnity that I guide you through the drudges of the horrid creation known as Twonkle's Big Day. I am an acclaimed author, world-renowned book reviewer, and professor of English at Clownt Community College. I was assigned this book to review by my editor for our new Children's Classics Collection and, needless to say, I will hold this grudge long after I exit this world.

To commence, I will start at the beginning. Actually, I will instead open with a preface to the beginning regarding how this review shall function for the rest of its length: While I can say now that I by no means recommend this book to anyone at all, I will refrain from revealing the entirety of the book's plot—if I dare give it such a distinction. I do this not out of respect for the book or its author, neither of whom would deserve any modicum of it, but out of respect for you, the reader. I firmly believe that I am worse off for knowing the events that occurred in this book. I would feel deeply guilty if I were to bestow that information onto your unwitting soul. It is not something that would ever leave your mind. Additionally, I do not wish to call upon that forever tainted part of my memory any more than I am forced to. Thus, I shall simply provide the bare minimum with regard to what actually takes place within this monstrosity's accursed pages.

Twonkle's Big Day begins innocuously, with the main character—the titular Twonkle—a glum, pessimistic clown who's down on his luck—befitting of his position—getting proverbially stepped upon by what seems like every force of the universe. This is the high point of the book. From this point onward, it is one bad authorial choice after another, each page crudely illustrated seemingly in an attempt to gouge out the reader's eyes, each brushstroke another stab wound.

A clown is a dubious choice as a protagonist, especially for a book aimed at children. They are universally detested and provide no relatability for the reader. Unless you yourself are a clown—in which case you have far greater problems than relating to a children's book's main character—Twonkle is in all ways completely alien to you. Clowns best serve stories in one of two ways: either as irredeemable villains or as nonexistent characters. Twonkle, regrettably, is neither.

Throughout the events of the story—events that, I reiterate, I will refrain from divulging—Twonkle's luck turns around. By the end of the book, Twonkle is happy and optimistic. The moral of the story is simple: Good things can happen to anyone, no matter how utterly undeserving they may be. This unfortunate truth is one that I do not think a young child should hear. Children should grow up reaching for paragon-like ideals of being that, while they may never truly embody, will provide a guideline for how to be. Saying that it's not the virtue of one's soul that determines their fortune is no way to raise a child. Saying, then, that everyone, no matter how far from society's graces they have fallen, can be redeemed and can have good fortune, is a sign of a cynical, jaded, society.

Let me be clear: I have no issue with a story in which a flawed character is redeemed. However, some characters are not merely flawed; they are vile, reprehensible creatures of pure evil. Not the type of person that deserves to be redeemed. Such is the case for clowns. One does not begin their existence as a clown. One does not one day discover that they are a clown, that this is who they are and they have no say over it. Becoming a clown is a very deliberate, conscious choice, a choice that forever condemns you in the eyes of humanity. There comes a day in every person's life when they must pick between two choices, a decision that determines their fate. This choice is universal for all people, regardless of background: To become or not become a clown. The correct answer for all people is the same: to not become a clown. It's as simple as that. If you don't become a clown, then you deserve good things. If you do become a clown, then you deserve only the highest tortures and torments that Hell has to offer. In fact, I bet there's a special section of Hell just for those red-nosed, painted-face bastards. Clowns, cruelly invented in the early 1800s by the closest person humanity has ever gotten to the Devil himself, Joseph Grimaldi, have plagued the world ever since their inception. Why they were created I don't know, but it haunts my very soul to this day. I can't even begin to conjure the words I would require to describe the hate that I and, presumably, the rest of humanity have for this most contemptuous of professions. You know, I've been told that I'm "coulrophobic." As in irrationally afraid of clowns. What an absurdly preposterous proposition. For one thing, any fear, contempt, disgust, or other negative emotion directed toward clowns is completely rational. For another, clowns don't scare me. I don't respect clowns nearly enough to fear them. Clowns are nothing. I wouldn't give so much as a moment's thought to a clown. Clowns don't deserve it. There is nothing less meaningful to me than a clown and the fact that someone would suggest that not only do I care about clowns but that they scare me (irrationally, I might add) is borderline offensive because I would never care about and certainly never be afraid of something so useless and idiotic and life-ruining and evil and terrible and terrifying.

Twonkle's Big Day exemplifies everything wrong with society and it should be taken down from shelves and shunned by the literary community. Every trace of it should be erased from this earth. For the sake of the children, of course.

1/5 stars.

*Rejected.
Human Resources contacted.*

Colophon

The Volume 19 Fall Issue of *Wilder Voice Magazine* was published on January 26, 2023 and was released for distribution at Wilder Hall, 135 West Lorain St, Oberlin, OH 44074. The volume was printed on 8.5” by 11” paper. The typeface used for the body text and page numbers is Anko, a mixed style of Old Style Roman serif manufactured by Eko Bimantara. Bylines feature Prohibition, a vintage sans typeface designed by Mattox Shuler. Artist credits feature Athelas, a serif typeface designed by José Scaglione and Veronika Burian. The cover and front matter use the typeface Clearface, designed by Victor Caruso and Morris Fuller Benton and published by ITC. Inner titles use the following typefaces (in order of appearance): Gaistro, by Maryamtype Studio; Courage, by Neil Summerour; Love, by Jérémy Schneider; Lemosty, by Storytype; Positions, by Arixbored; Cy, by Jürgen Huber; Aliens & Cows, by Francesco Canovaro; Iowan Old Style, by John Downer; Roman Antique, by Dieter Steffmann; Artico, by Hyun-Seung Lee, and PT Mono, by Alexandra Korolkova. Publication of this issue could not have been possible without the help, time, and patience of Erika Scharf, Jane Taylor, Reyah Doshi, Shira Friedman-Parks, Tina Zwaget, Wendy Brill, and the rest of Wilder Voice’s staff and contributors.

Like what you see?

Join Wilder Voice staff or show us your work! Check out our website, wildervoicemag.com, to apply for a staff position.



To submit your art, fiction, poetry, or non-fiction pitches, or to request more information, email us at wvoice@oberlin.edu.

About the Cover

“Better go to sleep, fresh for tomorrow” by Shira Friedman-Parks, screenprint

