

VOL 2

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beatnik



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FROM THE EDITORS

Dearest Readers,

Thank you so much for tuning into the second issue of our second volume. It's been a long, long journey to get this far, and we're ecstatic, as always, to have had you along for the ride.

The first poem in this very special issue is entitled *Jack Kerouac Goes to the Beach*. The poet Kerouac and his friends may be long dead, but they weren't the last of the fearless literati we call *beatniks*.

Today, young writers twist, stretch, and pop. They dilate, digest, and throw up. Young writers break rules, males rules, and condemn rules. The mission to portray a dizzying, fracturing, *changing* world lies at the heart of the youth even as the centuries pass.

Thanks in abundance,

The Editors

Paris LeClaire
Thanisha Chowdhury
Jacqueline Xiong

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JACK KEROUAC GOES TO THE BEACH

Louise Kim

one smile (from you) would burst open a seam of seas
burst at the seams
bursting at the seams
a seam of
all the seafoam

purple and orange starfish
star the coastline rocks
dragging itself over shiny algae
slippery seaweed the moral of the story

that constant wave-beating
pummeling the shore
kissing it lovingly
beatnik - beatitude
the veritable holy honey
god made the world and
seagulls too

nature is never silent
and neither is now

MOSS FOREST

Louise Kim

the slanted oaken tree trunks are varnished with a strong light
green
that would perhaps seem to shimmer
if the sun shone at the right angle—
alas, it is always dark
here in the deep rugged forest.
here in the
lichenous garden.
sermon on the mount
and i am the breeze that always listens.

a moss forest, a forest of moss
a moss forest, forest of moss
moss-forest, forest-of-moss
forest-moss, forest-moss.

BRIDGE

Estan Rodriguez

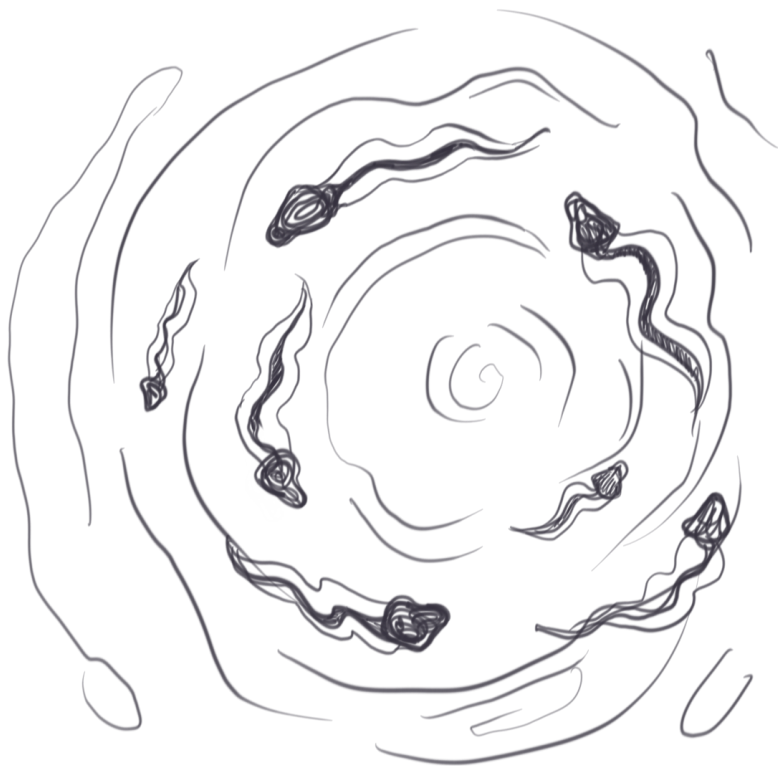
down to the stream my eyes went wandering,
across the underbrush.
in the water tadpoles played
among pulsing projections of the
cracks in the canopy.

to the other stream my feet went walking,
along informal trails.
mindless regards for a spiderweb
danced lightly behind my vision,
blending with the churning forest.

on another day when the clouds were lulling,
atop my lawn i laid.
muscles soothed by tended grass,
sky held my hazy gaze.

a shadow was first, realization followed
that the eclipse was a message from
a heron
slicing northward through the breeze
from one crevice of thought
to another.

you can't be in two places at once
a voice chimed from beyond memory.
hard to disagree, but harder to ignore
the fleeting elegance of the heron who
brought both streams
to this space between horizons,
pulling a thread across the sky
to make the world less alone.



ON EMERGING FROM LYRTLE TUNNEL

Sarah Park

In July, the pool overflows & the tree loses
its limbs. the garden gathering a glut

of dragonflies & freesias. floodwater staining
the asphalt all black. With the summer light fading,

we chase shooting stars in the last
quarter of the highway. the sky burning

shade of tongues running over teeth. the route
winding every way south. Highway winds spin me 'round

in the passenger seat, but I am a marionette
strung by streetlights from home:

this wind of running off mangles
me into a refrigerator-wide knot. A straw

is bitten and soaking in the styrofoam
melting on the cupholder. my legs are sunburnt and

peeling back fresh flesh. I smile in a gradient:
eggshell to asylum white from the boy I

chipped my teeth on. In the flash of dark, we can only
rush to the other end: like your hand on my

lower thigh; mine running races in a circle
on the peach bone of my ankle, shadows

convalescing into us when you're too
tired to drive, staining our skin the perfect

shade of night. Headlight glow swims over reflections
of us on the dash. fingertip tornadoes chasing ripples

down the center of your cup. and your eyes watch the road
black and white: snow on the interstate and tar

licking the other end of your cigarette. you say
the smoking might kill you first, so I equalize this by hanging

my head out the window, with an under
the skirt view of the sky,

undulating shades of blue: reminding me
we're actually spinning as we're speeding

in the interspatial & galactic sense, in the
atomic, minute sense, so it makes

sense for the sky to be choking
this silent. for the stop sign

to be so red. for you to
smile at me so honestly

i forget to look back
at what I'm leaving behind.

CONTRITION FOR MOTHERLAND

Sarah Park

for the Philippines

Mother lies awake in the shallows,
hair of sea foam whispering around her
limbs of islands and thinning streams. The coasts of her figure
grow a glut of green on every mountainside, out of sight
from the capital buried in her
left lung; entombed in the tessellation
of her highway skeleton.

She is withering slowly, like
Palawan blossoms eclipsed in the flood. It is hard
to imagine her furled upon herself, so we rest easy
pretending she is not. The sun tramples the equator. We live
bowed to the crucifix and her skin-
folding heat with a maid who puts a stranger to bed.
Wakes up to make breakfast, backlit
by a vacancy, black wisps matted in beads of salt
-water on her face. She sings the lullabies with her eyes held shut;
locks herself in a coolness that is stinging
in the name of acquiescence. In the name of hope, murderers are just
martyrs mired in politics. *Man of his word*, Rody swore, and
for once, he did not lie. He starts the game
tossing bullets like dice. Pushes someone out of a helicopter.
Massacres the city next door. When the dice rolls to a

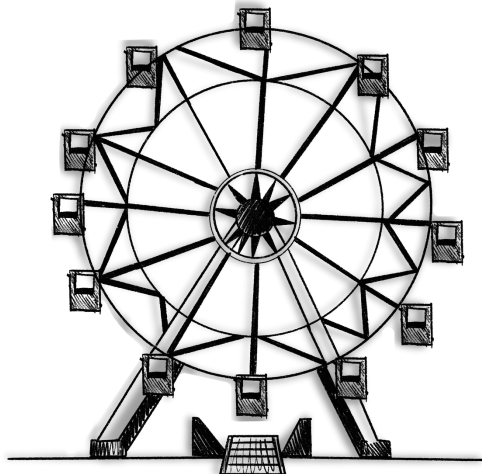
stop, has the storm showered your morning glories
or left a chasm through the roof? Are you the one at the red light
or the child at the window, holding up the petaled garland, begging
for a coin and barefoot on the highway. His hands
are too dirty to take something from; yours are bloodier
than you can bear. It has grown too cold
for bare skin, so you roll down the window when the
light blips to green. With hot
air blowing wasps off the roof, we pry Mother open
searching for warmth

to find her clogged with our gluttony. There is ice afloat in her
belly from drinks at hotel pools, highrise
windows in view of pus rolling down the dome
of sunset bleeding yellow. Now that she is open, we bring her down
like a tapestry tearing
and mangled. We step on someone's back
to swoon over seascape moving in
past the city smog. You and I too busy
blowing bubbles in the flooded pool

CARNIVAL, OR HOW WE TRIED TO ETERNALIZE SUMMER

Laiba Yousuf

carnivals were like recapturing bittersweetness of freshly squeezed lemonade in our summer palate / stuffed unicorn prizes & jelly bracelets packed with pink vanilla hues; nowhere to be found / a zephyr of silent screams escaping soft hearts / we resist the weightlessness sensation as a flock of passengers float through the roller coaster's three-sixty degree loop / mushroom shaped kernels swimming like buttery clouds across cinnamon nostrils / mellow yellows fade into scarlet skies / we could already taste the half-melted cotton candy lingering the warm breeze / the ferris wheel spinning & spinning like humidity twirling in sugar / scattered fireworks flowering mid-sky / trembling fears on a merry-go-round are now dark chocolate; coated with paradox.



IMMORTALITY

Carina Solis

a jellyfish
 suckling
a lover's breast / water-logged
 moon lantern /
jelly-light strands
 in gleam / glowing
blue tentacles / look
they are brainless
 but there is still /
so much to see / look
they are heartless /
 but feel
their necrotic stingers
 puckered on your back
/ they are
 remembered / infinitely



THE MCDONALDS ON GLENFERRIE ROAD

Sharon Zhang

i.

Here is the place where you realised
I had unfinished business to handle,
my back taped against the chequered walls.
Too many minefields. Too much need.
The ends of the fries are cutting light
into the roof of my mouth, but I keep
mashing them inside. You can't fault
me for this. You don't know how
hungry I am.

ii.

Tell me that this is love;
greasy light pouring into the canola
oil. How the skies are soft serve clouds
and that when we kiss, I will be so full,
every pore will soak in Frozen Fanta.
Dipping another nugget into barbeque sauce,
you say *this is the part we're supposed
to enjoy*, and I can't fault you. Not really.

LOVE IS A LEARNED BEHAVIOR

Maya Walker

like the dripping wax of an almost burned out candle, like a reel of film slowly, slowly, slowly passing through time, back when time was early autumns and weighted blankets and love was nothing in my mind except for you, you you, like the first syllable of your name i cannot say without crying. they say love should be easy but they mistake love for loving, loving like that one fateful winter night when i could not stop smiling, when the moon shined just a little bit brighter for my keyboard to say yes, i love you. you made me a poet, but i have not written about you so purposefully since my longest poem, the one i showed him and asked if i was beyond help. they say all people love but i will leave you with one final thought: if all people love then love is a learned behavior, one learned through attachment to early autumns and weighted blankets and winter nights that can convince a girl beyond help that she is healing.

LETTER TO MY MOTHER

Asiye Betül

women are loving—women eat their rage, and keep it in their tummies—
women are loving. mother gave birth to all her anger—mother put
all her anger in a bag of flesh.

 i am her, as she is me—inherited

 may i crawl back to the beginning of it all

may i try again in life—strip off all the guilt *may i be your son*

 we do not have to keep choking

*look at me. we can do it again. hold my hand. let me crawl back into the
beginning. let's go back to the beginning.* the days are bright and long.

 the days are enough for you to wash the dirt off my back.

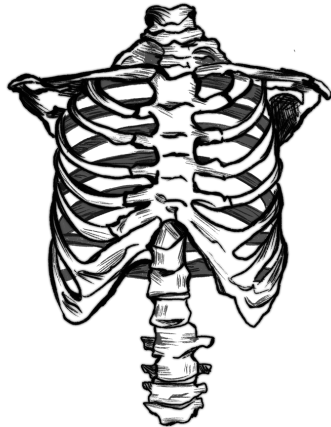
let me wash your hair. count my whites for me. let me kiss
 the black strands of your hair.

 here is my eyes, my liver and the hole in my ribcage,

here's the same mole we have on our foreheads.

look at me, tell me i'm worth it. tell me you'd dig my heart out for me.

 let's build something different, something worth it, something



MISSING PERSON REPORT FOR A MAN OF SOME ESTEEM

Jak Merriman

1. *Cafar* - cockroach - depression

Silly logic of the French. And the analogue rhythm beating—suppose it's
time to wake up

2. I am silent, requesting nothing

Then all at once the featureless worlds deliver themselves into this one /
proving lovers don't just become one in the poems.
And the babies begin to cry: 21 for every minute

3. *On dirait qu'il est dans la lune*

is what the Frenchman says and what a funny
thing to say.

But I'm poor, remember?

I don't know your language

4. Let's move to the country (song I love)

You with your motorhome head
/ chasing ghosts around
the country / as the blood orange ripens
in your glovebox.

At least you'll be in good company when
they find you,
you think. You think until your skin
falls off.

Or was that the Titian blade
readying you for one last hoorah

5. Police tape around your ankles

Clumsy way to treat the dead. And you were always an acrobat. (See the scene, head facing lifeward, bound to be reborn.) Makes me think of that image of the man in the film you loved. Always a cutthroat comedian, you said. Funny how that happens.

CALL MY BODY INTO BLUE LIGHT

Fatihah Quadri Eniola

After Ejiro Elizabeth's "I could be a lover too when I am not a prerequisite"

They said love is the wings of two birds soaring in the radiance of God, the light at dawn that flourishes itself in the depth of dusk, which means there's a soft thing lying on your skin.

Which means love is a home where bodies lean horizontally on the wall of their heart to feel its beats & watch their bodies slump into the abyss of songs.

I don't know the road that leads to love or where exactly the blue light will grab.

I have been sitting for a long time & my wagging tongue is hungry like a puppy awaiting the homecoming of its owner or a kite stuck in the middle of a panel roof yearning for the abundance of wind.

The door bangs roughly of people dragging themselves out of the little room of my life even my friends call me a metaphor for lone things like a girl dashing into the stage of solitude to look for whose face is a garden her hand could touch-open without the gardener saying it is time to close.

My heart is numb the way ground is numb. I do not know the hand warm enough to pat me to sunshine & tell me of angels & the pelicans twittering on the seashore.

Black boy, there is a wag on my tongue, ready to take a bite of the love
lying on your skin, ready to write through your eyes about milk and silk
touches. About perfumed flowers and lochs. About you walking my
body down the aisle of songs.



PREPOSITIONHOOD OF TRUTH

Alaro Basit

Some truths are better not heard from the horse's mouth. I mean, from the nucleus of dog-eared sheaves, an anthology of painted poems & a caricature of white elephants, I've learnt that when a lie deviates its tense to *tell*, a truth is aging to be *told*—a marriage of inconveniences, both ends of the tunnel consumed *before* they can file a divorce. The last being I trusted gifted me a pair of binoculars stringed with a single *before*. In it, I beheld a terrain of unturned stones where lies wore mosses & remain exuberant in fugal attire; where love trees blue souls in autumn *before* losing their leaves to trust. So in this poem, I've come to a conclusion that *before* is the hunted, & *after*, a hunter readily poised to strike it into oblivion

+SIZE

O P Burgess

I am the cursor on a fast-fashion website reeking of edible pollution and the mental traffic of too many girls staring at the same mesomorphy, over and over, time and again, each time acquainting the same lineated legs and jutting collar bone with its pearlesque highlighted artificial glow, and the clothes drape and slack and sway but they are *just right*.

I am the 'filter by size' icon and the greyed out boxes as the final prevailing options dwindle and close, like virtual doors gently slamming shut as one by one the categories fade: bralettes, swimwear, miniskirts, corsets.. each by their own autonomy.

Remaining models stare with glassy eyes, machinised, nailed like a religious leader to their white illusory heaven with all its suggestivity and lack of. Slenderness is a virtue, and

I am the smell of an inferno down the street. The self-esteem bonfire. Come, take a seat.

I am the immediacy of heartbreak for sacred few centimetres of polyester and the skin stains where you pull + pull + tear + toss + tug but every piece of movement is another futile breath. Your veins are turning red and the tears too, they flow syncopating with the walk of shame into the post office murmuring god, *never again*.

The standards won't let you have this and you are finished.

I am shutting the laptop and curling up in bed, thumbs tracing bones tracing
the places I used to love.

Daisy is 180cm and wears a size XS

ODE TO TRYING TO REMEMBER

Elizabeth Crowell

Here's to crumbling cookies on paper plates,
between Christmas and New Year,
to those few months my college roommate
was married to the jolly jerk,
on his best behavior, here in her parents' house.
Here's to her mother, Ethel, flushed in a red turtleneck,
who casually asked what the name was
of that PBS show about colonialism and India.

Here's to our deep, thinking breaths
thrumming memory's engine.
Here's to the wallpaper with humming birds and stripes,
to a bookcase with tree guides and yearbooks,
to the weepy chandelier,
to the curtained windows that looked out on a
Jersey street that went uphill.
Here's to looking around us for a clue,
and that feeling when you quite literally
try to look inside your head and
you see nothing there, not even
who you are or what you know.

Here's to our despair after shouting
the obvious. -- *Jewel in the Crown*.
Here's to our huff and heave,
each time Ethel shook her head
and our collective sighs went deeper.
Then, Ethel began to sway

in a religious manner, thinking she might
pick up the rhythm of the name.

And here's to the arid tunnel of recall
we ran down.

Here's to the lousy husband's last
rattling effort,
the sole defender of a region,
shooting out the title of every PBS show,
like a soldier pulling his gun through
the door of a flimsy hut,
hoping to end this long siege.

Here's to my friend, my dear friend, and I
who laughed in our panicked grief
of the next decades of bad marriage
and forgetful parents.

Here's to tugging at the green tablecloth
as if we were readying a field for a game.

From somewhere, Ethel screamed
The Balkan Trilogy.

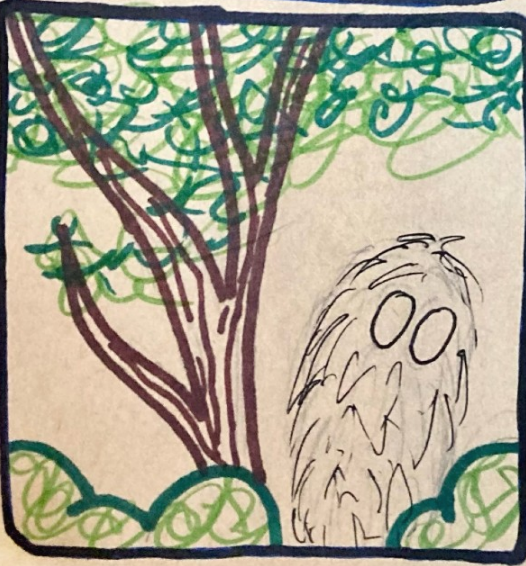
We sighed with such relief,
as she said, "Oh, yes,"
though by now our empty minds
had filled with a world map,
where the Balkans were not close to India.
Yes, she said, *that one*.

Here's to not saying a thing, picking up a cookie,
going on with our whole lives.

Here's to the holiday card I have gotten
from Ethel every year for the three decades since.

Here's to the now long, lost narratives
of those cards, filled with the details
of the year in no particular order,
how much I look forward to them.

Here's to this year's card, which simply said
in the snowy field, in red and shaky script,
I miss my cat.



17

Zoe Adrien Lapa

1. i drove around the neighborhood and a tree caught my mother's van in its low-hanging branches. white-knuckled on the steering wheel i'm learning to drive stick. i'm learning how to love a machine so much i become part of it — foot fuses to pedal. gas or breaks? my instructor keeps a hand on the handbrake, afraid the car and the body transmuted together might transmute into a wreck.

2. my ears are getting pierced today. mommy says no nostrils, no navels. today i follow my mother. today i'm a good son and a good daughter all in one. and in a bit i'll get an angel tattooed over my stitches. holds me together. blesses me. keeps me fed and watered. keeps me alive. i'm one of those creatures that needs to be kept alive. like a fish in a bowl i'm still — but i'm moving on to choppiest waters. mommy says i got a long way to go.

3. in my strawberry era, my lemonade era. my i love everybody because i love you era. i'm trying to take all the love i had shaped to fill her body and scatter it everywhere, so now i'm in love with my rainbow reusable straw. in love with my eye-floaters. with the cashier who said nice hair. i'm trying not to fall in love with just anyone who sends me a playlist, though. love song after love song. i make an iced coffee— with caramel syrup!— and try my damndest to get through the day intact.

4. i'm failing at social science but i'm winning at blogging. i'm winning at Instagram stories. really, i'm winning at life, for a given value of it. spotlight. speakers. god's favorite little toy.

PUDDING CUPS

Levi Simon

I am fat. I have always been fat. It's been a part of me just as my intelligence or wit, or bull-headed devotion. Everyone has their flaws, I used to think. Some are a bit dull or dry, some are antisocial misanthropes, some are thoughtless morons. Me? I'm a chubby klutz. And that's just the way it is, and has been, and will be for the foreseeable future.

My storied history as a fat kid stretches through my entire boyhood. Graphic tees affectionately displaying my status as "Dirt Magnet," or proclaiming "This Guy Loves His Mom," became misshapen and ill-fitted, riding up my round, hairless gut when I raised my hand excitedly to comment on arithmetic or picture books. My pants were even worse. Their supposed crack-concealing function was far from being met. All four of my cherubic cheeks were on display, all day every day. While I was clearly the heavysset standout in my kindergarten, I thought little of my dominance. Peers processed their baby fat in solitude, too busy with fudgesicles and friendship bracelets to pay mind to my extraneous pudge and bulging garments. But, as months passed and weather warmed, the recess games commenced. Whether we were clashing plastic hockey sticks or tossing a coarse foam football substitute, my little legs needed to carry my oversized torso as fast as they could muster, which was consistently a last place foot race finish. Despite my size advantage, I was made the playground laughingstock time and time again. I was smart enough to realize that my graceless, clunking waddles were futile in any bout of tag or kickball, so I resigned myself to managerial roles, cursed as a permanent spectator or referee. One day, though, the team composition for the schoolyard soccer match was imbalanced.

"We don't need a referee," said a snot-nosed boy, "and our team needs another player. You can play defense. Just stand in front of the goal."

“Okay,” I agreed, eager to help.

Mere minutes later, I discovered the difficulties of defending a blazing, netless pavement square from an onslaught of trained Russian strikers. My feet screamed as I pounded all of my body into the thin soles of my extra wide New Balances. Sweat oozed from every pore, and my breath took on a minty, gasping shamble. Still, I blocked shot after shot, and I grew more confident with each ker-thump of the deflated ball against my shins. That is, until my puffy thighs decided that they were no longer up to the task of supporting my lofty ambitions and threw themselves down in protest, singing my knees on the sunbaked asphalt. I didn’t lift myself from my prone position. I cried, as kids do, and lay shaking on the pitch, feeling my displaced sides squish up to my stomach.

I knew that kids snickered behind my back. I knew that even though I was liked, I was treated differently than the rest of my friends. I knew that something changed in kids’s faces when I entered a conversation. The first time I was insulted for my weight was by my closest friend. We sat together on the back of the faded science room rug, while Ms. Seitz blabbered about precipitation. He pointed at the sign next to the door demarcating the maximum capacity of the lab: 250 people.

“250 people, or like, 150 Levis,” he retorted.

I pretended to laugh and looked sheepishly at my feet. He snickered and turned back to the science lesson.

From then on, the snide comments at my expense trickled into earshot. Were I not a gentle giant, perhaps it’d have been different, but once the front fell and my classmates realized I was unwilling to use my mass to beat them to a pulp, they took every possible opportunity to slingshot insults at me. I developed a variety of nonviolent defense mechanisms against my harassers, from timid deflection to comeback insults, all of which eventually eroded, sanded by thousands of granules of

aspersions, and collapsed into self-deprecation. Self-deprecation always worked.

I never used to look in the mirror. It was too jarring, too confrontational, too overwhelming to see my curved edges. I hid under clothing two, three sizes too big. Every few minutes, I would make a cursory check to see whether or not my skin was completely covered by my wardrobe. I was reluctant to give hugs to anyone outside my immediate family, lest they feel the real me. But still, I ate and I ate. Farro and bagels, chicken and broccoli, burritos and curries fueled my trajectory to morbid obesity. I would semi-regularly down an entire family bag of health-conscious baked-not-fried potato straws with a half gallon of skim milk (which I have been drinking since I was three years old, to curb my demise) and still have room for three and a half cups of whole wheat pasta for dinner. Crumbs sprayed and hours passed while calories stacked. I was full a hundred fifty chips ago, but I pressed on, adding layers to myself. Hunger and satiety blurred beyond recognition. I grabbed a bag of pistachios and one of dried cherries and continued my duty.

By seventh grade, my vertical growth reached its tragic conclusion at six foot two. My friends spoke of six packs. "Six pack of pudding cups," they donned me. My residual fourth grade bashfulness was trapped beneath a thick coating of social conditioning, but it stewed and radiated in pudding, and it grew into a desire to fix myself.

The first step of fixing myself, I declared, was to exercise. I downloaded an application that supposedly instructed beginners to shred fat. Ten pounds in a month in only twenty minutes a day! That didn't sound too bad at all. Okay. Day one. Here goes nothing. I triangulated my elbows, I kept my back straight, I hustled; I pumped my legs, I held steady, I luxuriated in the sweat of my thirty second break; I powered through the Russian twists and situps, the heel touches, the burpees and the cobra plank. I brought myself past exhaustion. I felt bile rising, an acrid sting in the back of my throat. No amount of water quenched me. My

heart beat through my chest. I lay on the hardwood floor, staring at the ceiling for what felt like hours, steaming in my own salt, panting and coughing. When I peeled myself from the ground, I ambled into the bathroom and glanced at myself in the mirror. I left my shirt on.

The first week of portion controlled salmon, asparagus, arugula salad and brown rice treated me well, as did the second. For each bite of cookie I surrendered to time, I stepped on the scale once to remind myself of my ever-declining ailments. It started as motivation, but it turned quickly to addiction. My plate saw salmon filets slim, vinaigrette left in its container and formerly historic piles of rice reduced to a few measly grains more than a tablespoon. As much as I missed the sense of satiation, I would sacrifice it for the dopamine hit of numbers going down in a heartbeat. Sometimes, my stomach hurt, or I felt lightheaded. I became more and more irritable, but then ten pounds were gone, and then fifteen, and I did not care yet. Twenty pounds in, I spilled out my insides on the bathroom floor and I felt completely empty. I slumped over my bath mat, staring at the pile of stomach acid and nothing before me, and I did not feel numbers going down. I felt myself slipping away from stability, into manic, fanatic disorder. I cleaned up the mess, went downstairs, and made myself a bowl of ice cream.

Now, it is fifty pounds later, but nothing has changed. I have taken all the right steps. I have a careful balance of macros and I keep a steady count of calories, but I'm never wrought with guilt after a splurge or a binge; I lose one to two pounds a week, and if I skip a week of progress, I keep moving, and I never, ever prevent myself from eating what I want to eat. I'm a poster child for healthy weight loss. But you can never really lose fat. Once you have it, it spreads like a fungus into the folds of your arms and your brain, and it never lets go.

When I stand in front of the mirror, I imagine what I could be. My potential is invisible, cloaked in drapes of back fat, decoratively pocked with cellulite and stretch marks. Every night of lethargy and laziness, every moment of sloth and excess is calcified under my skin, in my

sagging breasts and my ample hips. I stand shirtless, yearning for what I would be if I could get off my ass, if I could get up and do something for once. When I stand in the mirror, I remind myself that I ought to take another nap. I look so tired.

LIFE POISON

Tejal Doshi

*Content Warning: mental illness, implications of suicidal ideation,
medication, panic attack*

I.

That night I creep to the swimming pool of our fenced house and leap fully clothed into the water. It opens its mouth wide—as do I—and sears my throat like molten metal, prising me apart with its steaming fingers. Remember this morning, amid frozen dew, my mother assembled my limbs and set my pieces together like a box? Now I unfold. I flail, kick, gasp.

And then the water surface cools, crystallizing into ice, stinging my flesh, encasing me in its grip. My body lies in a silent shudder as the liquid claws for it, lashing against the layer of solid.

When my mother finds me, she lugs me into the house.

II.

Pale blue room on maximum heating. Childhood nightlight that sends bright stars spinning across the walls. Curtains drawn, hot cocoa on my bedside. I tremble, goosebumps forming on my skin.

The water dripping from my hair pokes the blankets that smother me. My mother wraps them tighter around my shivering form and rubs a rough towel into my face—God, it burns.

Then I am pinned back to my wooden bed and the pills are shoved down my throat.

These are good for you, she tells me. *You know I'm proud of you, sweetie.*

I stare at her, splutter, and cough out whatever remains of the pills in my esophagus. They scatter across the brown blanket, a mass of white powdery pieces clogged in saliva. My eyes prickle with tears.

You're getting much much better. Her lips tremble. She places a hand on my head to prevent me from slipping away. *I'm proud of your progress.*

Shaking my head, I turn to the edge of the bed and puke. The contents of my stomach splatter on her clothes. Sizzle on her skin. She shrinks away. Sweetie.

I lean back. Before my eyes flutter shut, my head bangs against the bed's headboard.

Hours later, when my heart hammers its fists against my ribcage and my brain screams at me to wake up, my bed sheets and blankets are crispy clean. My mother wipes the sweat from my face, giving me a tired smile. She counts my breaths with me—inhale, exhale—until my cyclone of thoughts slows to a breeze and I am grounded again.

The taste of her whispers and my medicine coats my tongue like ash.

You are getting better, sweetie. You'll be okay.

Oh no.

III.

Night slopes into morning and the world twists into four white walls. Beeping sounds drone in my ears, familiar as silence. Blood vessels worm through my arms, infesting me with life—with poison. Medical tubes snake across my skin, tethering me to my body—to good health. I probe my mouth with a tongue that tastes like sandpaper.

This is good for you, my mother tells me. *The doctors' reports say*

there's been some improvement.

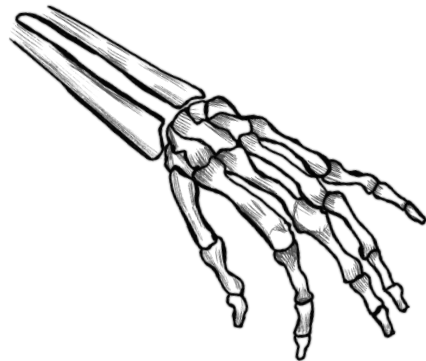
I am aware, Mother. My body is undergoing improvement.

But my mind?

BONES

Ocean Teu

My mother has skeleton keys for eyes, hollow and silver-toothed. My mother says I have too many mouths. My mother once ripped a plum in half with her bare hands, saying, *This is what girlhood does to you*. My mother is a myth more than anything else. She vanishes and leaves me one of her eyes: a silver key that can open any lock. My mother taught me to search, so I slither across the world, key dangling from my neck. I wander across the land, purple and strewn with bodies like uprooted weeds. I walk through cities and suburbs, telephone wires sparking above me. Moths orbit the streetlamps. I use the key to open house doors and find empty rooms, bones buried in backyards. Behind every door is a dead end road, a cul-de-sac, static on a television. A deer lays dead by the side of the road, full of bullets. Beetles crawl over her wounds. I slip the key into one of the bullet holes and turn it. The beetles scatter. There is nothing inside the deer but bones. I find a boy, lopsided and snaggle-toothed, and say to him: *Open*. I slip the key into his mouth, turning it in the cavern of his throat until he screams. There are others too: a girl with beetles for eyes, a person with translucent skin like a newt, a boy missing his left pinky toe. I open all of them and find nothing. I wear the key around my neck until I don't know the difference between other people's bodies and my own, until my shadow drags behind me like a daughter, until my many mouths turn into one. I wear the key until all I can remember is my mother, silver eyes burning, plum juice trickling down her forearms, saying, *This is what girlhood does to you*.



KYLE DION MADE ME REALIZE TOUCH IS THE UNIVERSAL SENSE OF LOVE

Daylon Hall

This, more than anything, is about everything and everyone that doesn't get swallowed up in red lights. For the people who place their fingers over the squares of LED lights and imagine the red is blood underneath their nails. This more than anything, is also about the people who see songs as colors. Who lodged wired headphones into their crush's ear, played Kyle Dion's "Time Heals, Just Not Quick Enough" and said to them, *This is a red song. Like the type of song that plays with red lights on.* And yes, this is about love and colors, how the eyes perceive blonde hair and blue wife-beaters in a dimly lit room, how pupils dilate when they inspect how soft lips can be. But more importantly, it's about the way music swells up inside of us after heartaches and makes a brave attempt to stitch itself back together through falsettos and vibratos.

I have never been fond of the sense of touch. When asked which sense I would rather lose, my answer was always touch. I did not have to touch something to simply know it was there, to love it just the same. Musical artist Kyle Dion would argue with me, saying *touch is the universal sense of love*. He would also argue that sight is a sense of love and I would agree, for we had both experienced love at first sight. His was his own album, a love letter to his alter ego SUGA and his funky RnB journey to stardome. Mine was the way you looked in the mirror, lifted your shirt, pinched your stomach and called yourself too big for anyone to love. In my head what you thought had to be a lie because I loved you.

Months later I would see your stomach again in red lights. The AC in the room that smelt of boys away from home; dirty laundry baskets overflowing and stale corn chips was broken. The desks in the room cluttered with trash that either had been there for months or days—we didn't care—and as boys who saw the way we stared at each other, who felt our touch linger when we hugged, who shared a bed in a room with three other guys because we were scared to be alone, to be left out, we decided to strip our shirts away. While I took off mine, you placed a headphone into my ear and began playing a pop song I didn't know at the time but would secretly add to my playlist later. We laid side by side, playing footsies with one another and I said, *This is a blue song*. You looked at me, asked what a blue song meant and I replied, *I have a song to play that would explain but the lights would have to be red*. You insisted I play it and reached behind the bed to change the lights, your arm extending showing the little muscle you had, a small movement that was enough to satisfy me.

Kyle Dion's "Time Heals, Just Not Quick Enough" flooded into our shared headphones, the sound of drums radiating in your ear and the sound of the guitarist strumming his strings in mine—I listened to the song plenty of times to know the sounds I did not hear. It was your first time listening, and I watched your eyes grow wide and smile as you finally understood what I meant. You pulled me closer when you heard his voice, soft as dandelion seeds hitting the ground, kissed me when the music swelled and told me how pretty I looked in red lights.

Later that night while the others were asleep, you replayed the song, invited me to touch your stomach and guided my hands so I grazed the parts you wanted me to and skipped the parts you weren't ready for me to feel yet, my fingers tracing over a smooth surface attempting to draw our future together using you as the canvas. And for the first time I noticed that the feeling of cold hands over a warm area was sensational. You laughed at times, quickly jerking your body away from mine, apologizing that God made you so ticklish and instead of forgiving you, I pulled you closer to me once again and kissed you this time.

There was another night where it seemed like Kyle Dion influenced us. That night in an endless stream of constant hang out sessions, and action and horror movies that caused your body to shake and jump and caused you to look away, we painted our nails together in gold colored LED lights. It was your go to color to let everyone know that you had a good day. That the night would be so much better. I asked what artist you would want to hear and you screamed Kyle Dion, because every since that night under red lights where our skin and everything else around us became intensified you could never get the song out of your head and everytime you would surprise me with it as we would walk the streets I would smile at you and you would grab my hand and crack it, releasing the oxygen swelling within my knuckles as a sign that we were closer to each other than to most people. Your own little way of telling me that you loved me. This time in the room, I played a new song for you, Kyle Dion's "Your Soul." As the syths progressed and he seduced his listeners with his high pitch voice and the beat kicked in-you always said you preferred a song with a bass in it, as long as it was as simple as a high hat and a snare you would love it-you rocked your head to it and told me to add it to the long list of songs that we had shown each other. Ironically it was right under "Time Heals, Just Not Quick Enough."

The first time I ever had the urge to paint my nails I was staring at a single cover for Kyle Dion's new song "Money" where he sits in a room painted green filled with makeup, nail polish, release dates and pictures of him in a new era of change. His nails were painted a sharp neon green, he looked as if he was simply doing what he loved the most, being himself. Though I knew I would never attempt to sneak nail polish behind my parents back, that night I dreamed of myself with color covering my nails. So when you grabbed my hand as "Your Soul" played, unscrewed the cap to the nail polish, the smell overtaking the stench of the room and began to paint my nails without waiting for my approval, I smiled. You finished when the song was over and as I admired my nails, holding my hand up in the air noticing the gloss over each individual nail, I became aware that it was harder to hide this then to hide the fact that I had completely fallen for you, that it was easier to hide my hands in my pocket and never let the world see my hands again. I took off the paint the next day. I knew it must have hurt to

watch me wipe away the nails that you bestowed upon me.

Some time after that we started to change and Kyle Dion couldn't fix us. You traded his music for pop icons that we had already heard and albums that were considered basic. None ever made it close to what I felt when I listened to him with you and I only wanted to listen to him when I was with you. We had forgotten the voice of our god and when we found it again—through the shuffling of your playlist—and asked whose voice was this and why somehow these songs were erased from our memory, you shrugged your shoulders, listened for ten more seconds and pressed skip. You were tired of him. I wondered if you felt that about me because now months later after constant breakups, tears and arguing, I sit on an empty bed, turn on “Time Heals, Just Not Quick Enough” and imagine your silhouette here. Your warm body heating up my always cold hands. I imagine Kyle Dion would say *though time does indeed not heal quick enough, sooner or later you will be completely healed*, and I would argue back, *what's the use if you're left with scars*. We'll sit in silence for a while, look at the mess that I made, think about that night under red lights where you wrapped my dreads around your fingers, lifted and dropped them back down to the beat of the music. To the night where I secretly counted the freckles on your chest and I'll never admit this to him but he was right, touch is the universal sense of love.

YOU DON'T KNOW THAT I STILL LOOK

Chloe Budakian

CHILDHOOD

4th grade was a whirlwind of bursts of change and long meandering stretches of bliss. 5th grade was sharp shards of new realities and big steps. As my toes spread further into my shoes and my legs began to wobble, those steps became my normal-sized, dragging 6th grade life.

I remember those years as bursts of existence. Each time I feel the September sun spread across my back, I am cast in some concoction of anticipation and apprehension, instantly cold. When wet mittens numb my extremities and send subsequent rushes of hot blood to my sandpaper fingers, the world suddenly feels stable, like routine and new friends bring forth purpose. But when I step outside and proclaim that I smell spring, the ground that I have planted my feet upon feels just out of my grasp.

It was those eyes. The whites reinforced your claims that it wasn't a big deal, but your irises brimmed with something so deeply devastating I chose to focus on the flat monotony of the whites. I think you did too.

Why didn't you tell me? Maybe it was because we were so young, maybe it was because I was still the new kid, maybe it was because we still basked in our youth-induced peace: life rid of complexities and big emotions. And maybe you wanted to preserve all that.

REMEMBERING

It's funny, I can't remember what we used to do together. I don't remember sitting next to each other in class, I don't remember our

shoes smacking against the pavement as crisp sun beat down our backs. I don't remember staring into your Ray-Bans as you asked me to come eat lunch with you, to be your friend. My first friend here. But somewhere shoved in the pit of my gut, I know these memories to be true; like they are a mass so tightly wound and lumpy it teeters across the brink of regurgitation.

I do remember your surprise birthday party. Your old friends and I planned everything with the haphazard meticulousness of 11-year-olds. We conducted 'strategy sessions' recorded with scented pencils and dolphin-shaped erasers, we bought balloons and streamers and candy from the dollar store, we took your endless proclamations of your need for a companion and turned those sentences into your very own betta fish.

Of course, she was the one that really planned the entire affair. She informed our parents of our aquatic purchase—funded by a pool of 5-dollar bills swiped from their wallets—she bought the ice cream cake, she handed us the top-secret invitations to distribute around the class.

So while we crunched our legs together and breathed long silent breaths, you walked in and asked her what that foreign purple sweater was doing in your house. She fabricated some shakey excuse and you believed her. Who wouldn't?

You continued down the hallway and we produced a symphony of high-pitched shrieks and anxiously held the fish two inches from your face. Between big gulps of air and giggles you declared that if it weren't for your mom, the sweater would have ruined the whole surprise.

QUESTIONING

We were going to go see a movie together. Our first car ride-dependant playdate. You canceled because you wanted to go with your parents, and I told you it was okay. But I stared at the pavement as disappointment and confusion and anger swelled so tangibly I needed to reciprocate its presence. I needed to knead it into a tiny ball and

squash it with my palms and shove it in your face. But instead, I felt as my entire body became cast in fetal helplessness. Corporeal but merely palpable. Untouchable.

And then they moved her to the hospital, and then home. You didn't tell me she was sick, Cera did. When you found out, I watched you mold your fists into tight balls and press down upon each finger until it broke down and cracked. One by one.

The hand is definite. The hand is perfect. Each crack and bump and crevice is intentional, is characteristic to its existence. But the hand is not malleable. Though that day, you would have done anything to convince yourself otherwise.

You never got to see that movie.

They moved her home to be more comfortable. Was the hospital not comfortable? There were more nurses and doctors in the hospital. I pressed and I pressed until Cera told me that she went home to die.

The world became foggy and vacuous after that—other-dimensional. Somewhere in that realm she lay shackled to that machine, life dependent on metal and wires. She gave her whispered, hushed goodbyes as she peeled her fingers off the world, her world. Sad swaths of people congregated downstairs, heads swaying back and forth like molasses. Your dad stood in the corner, cheeks flush and eyes sewn shut with reality sharp and ruthless. Before I could get a closer look, your hand clutched my sweater and yanked me away with throbbing, desperate urgency.

You never told me that you had family over that day, you told me it was a playdate. A careless, thoughtless, weightless playdate. You sighed and shrugged your shoulders and proclaimed that this was all expected, eminent, definite. She fought for you, you said. She fought for you for so long. Now it was your turn to fight without her.

KNOWING

Quick heartbeats and impatient huffs prompt my mom to inform me that a wake is not something to be excited to attend. Though I really just wanted to show you my new dress.

You were surrounded by a swarm of cousins and friends. When I arrived, you squealed and sung your new-dress praises. Your cousin exclaimed that the juice was excellent. My eyes stayed glued to your face that night, searching for any abnormality, any indication that you comprehended where we were and what we were doing. But there you stood, confident and at ease. Your chin did not quiver, your words did not falter, your eyes did not dare drift towards the ground.

We danced from room to room, like the world was something beautiful for us to sink our fingers in and never let go, like we were young and boundless. But as my eyes darted to a mass in the near distance, I became a stone pressed into the ground— motionless and unmovable by my own will. It was clouded by outlines of somber bodies and hands balled up into tight fists. It was human but not flush, human but translucent. Gray and green. Clapsed to the ground, I told you I was scared. That it was scary. I watched as my words bled into your being until it was cast in emotion so unsure and blockaded you too sunk your feet into the ground and balled up your fists.

“Do you really think so?”

I stood in silence.

I have yet to understand why childhood comes with this incessant need to understand, to know. Call it human nature, call it praise-worthy, call it our greatest burden. We say that curiosity killed the cat, but if that was true these cats would be long gone.

I could have just closed my eyes and looked away like everyone else. Like you were trying to.

I never saw you falter again until we reached seventh grade. We sat on opposite ends of the room, but I still examined your face periodically. Thighs plastered to my chair as I shifted back and forth on its uneven legs, I stared into your Ray-Bans. Typically pristine lenses were clouded and your face was painted hot and heavy. I dashed over towards you and placed my hand on your back. You were not speaking and I didn't dare ask you what was wrong. We stood there in silence as you heaved and trembled until I felt a hand grab my sweater and yank me away. It was shaking.

FACT

I know you didn't mean to let those feelings leak into your life, into my life. I know you didn't mean to saturate our conversations with thick, weighty, desperate messages and frantic quivering replies. I know I didn't mean to let my parents get their hands on my phone, eyes going wide as your words balled themselves up in their guts. I know that no one meant to sting and gash and slash the way they did, to isolate the isolated. Like I did. I know I didn't mean to leave my sweater in the hallway that day and almost ruin your surprise birthday party. But without her there to intercept the world's missteps, you have to fight all on your own. And I know that that's not fair.

But what I don't know is how anything can be right when everything is so wrong. I don't know when definite words and soothing proclamations bring forth reality, or when they mask reality, when they catalyze the formation of the lump in the gut.

CURIOSITY

We are older now, but I still stare at your dark moon eyes from time to time. Now, there is a distinct glimmer that surfaces in those voids.

You don't know that I still look.

So maybe it is better to hide under words and protect ourselves, or sanity. If I had stayed away like everyone else did, if I had looked away:

from her, from you, from your dad, maybe I would still know you.

Maybe curiosity didn't kill the cat, maybe curiosity changed the cat, hardened the cat. And maybe the cat balled all of that curiosity up into a bulging, dripping hazard.

Many thanks to our ultra-talented art staff! You make us what we are.

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