



albany road

Cover photo by Taylor Wilburn

ALBANY ROAD

DEERFIELD ACADEMY'S LITERARY & ARTS MAGAZINE
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

In sophomore year, the English Department gifted me *The Book* by Mary Ruefle, a curious little collection with a laughably zany title. Yet, unexpectedly, it was in people and poems like these, at first ruminating on pet dogs named Jack and then on a Rankine-bloodshot pink sky, where I was forced to confront the remarkable in the very unremarkable.

Those minutes mingled into the mundane of four years of Deerfield life...those moments of smiles and snowflake in the changing leaves...those uninvited guests who awaken something new and visceral in us. What I mean by listing these things isn't to repeat another didactic philosophy; I genuinely wish we could and will all see more, pay more attention, pause, and perceive with loosened eyes.

Still, what does it mean to learn to see, to confront the remarkable in the very unremarkable, beyond today's cliché of "embrace the boring"? I don't claim to have a complete answer for you, but perhaps your friends in the pages of this *Albany Road* issue will.

I'd also like to offer two quotes I love (because how could I ever just pick one!) that helped me in this endeavor.

Excerpted from "The Translator" by Mary Ruefle:

"What were they saying, out there in the night? To pay such close attention, to hear with every fiber of my being, and remain completely ignorant."

Excerpted from "To Say Nothing But Thank You" by Jeanne Lohmann:

"and with surprising gaiety I am saying thank you as I remember
who I am, a woman learning to praise
something as small as dandelion petals floating on the
steaming surface of this bowl of vegetable soup, my
happy, savoring tongue."

Finally, as with all things, we end with a note of gratitude. To Yong, Jeanne, Haley, our advisor Ms. Theoharides, and the unabashed imaginations of all of you creators and readers of Deerfield, thank you for making us whole.

May these words and pictures linger a little longer than the page for you. May you see a little more. And that should be enough.

Sincerely,

Melody Zhao

Co-Editor-in-Chief, with Ryan Bai and Thijs Wittink

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WINGSPAN

Thijs Wittink



INQUISITIVE

Thijs Wittink



WHERE THE LIGHT BREAKS
Thomas Schwarting

IRIS

Olivia Minn

The iris is a weather system
trapped in a circle.

Color is not decoration.
It is the storm itself—
fractured blues like frozen lightning
rusted gold like autumn thunder
greens like rain-slicked leaves.

The iris does not reflect the world.
It absorbs it,
measures it,
filters it through radial fibers and sphincter muscles
at a rate the body can survive.

You think you are observing.
In truth, you are witnessing
how much the human body
can carry
without collapse.

To meet such an eye
is to hover at the cusp of the hurricane.

A SAM KEE LAUNDRY IMBROGLIO

Melody Zhao

The 1 AM fog is muddying absolutely everything outside. My heart sweats. Sour raindrops plaster to the Sam Kee Hand Laundry.

Mr. Kee, is that really you?

I press my nose into the glass windows. After months, I have finally, courageously slogged back to the doorfront of our now-abandoned-out-of-business laundry shop. My eyes trace through the blurry stacks of box irons and boiling pots and brown butcher's bags and, well, the afterimage of my dead Father. I'm in disbelief. His laconic ghost just wide-eyed goggles at me, arms akimbo, like Father used to whenever I refused to man the wash house and he would snap, Elvin Kee, 我會計到三 [I'm going to count to three]! So, forgive me for crying mawkishly; I thought I scrubbed away those guilt-torn memories - even reconceived Father - but now I see his ghost, wading me down into the week of Father's illness.

We had a steaming, fists-deep-into-the-soap-suds squabble. I suppose I have forgotten why. Water sloshed and churned inside the Sam Kee laundry. Leaky steam pipes hissed. Hot steam enshrouded everything.

"No, Elvin," Father babbled, lethargic, since he had lost so much. "You can't leave this laundry." His words knifed a festering gash into me. I slacked off from my starching duties. I turned away loyal Sam Kee customers. I ate out, leaving the Lap Cheong sausages he had always prepared cold in their plastic dishes.

He was losing me.

Overnight, Father's pallid face scrubbed off even more color. The 10-hour workdays had bleached Father's hair white and creased in wrinkles and rinsed out the rosy, sanguine look on his face.

Father cried for the first time when I drove him to the emergency room. He cried soap suds. He told me he loved me. No, that he really loved me. That I should take care of his brown butcher's bags and eat more Lap Cheong and all that wrenched a guttural hole in my face, looking at Father's face, the laconic ghost's face, drowning in his own dreams that were hanging on its last clothesline facing me, facing him. He cradled my fists, and I choked down tears.

When Father let go, it sent a rip-roaring pain down my nerves, and I so wrongly vowed to squeeze, squeeze, squeeze clean of all tender, guilt-torn memories.

And with no words at all, at 1 AM, this is how the laconic ghost sobers me, vindicating my return home.

Author's Note: This story was inspired by Chinese American hand laundries and the testimonies found in Chinese Laundries: Tickets to Survival on Gold Mountain, by John Jung



TEA TIME

Claire Xia



FLOAT, STARE, SIGH

Adriana Enriquez



UNTITLED

Tucker Sichel



FISHBOWL

Georgia Peruzzi

SELF-PORTRAIT IN MISSED CALLS

Katie Kim

I don't like mess, how it untidies the world.

My brother is prophesying again, this time on the phone with my mom as she stares at my ketchup threatening to drip from my french fries onto my white tee. In vain I search for any trace of grease circling his lips.

Do you know what you are doing in math?

For the second time today, Mom calls from the kitchen to ask. She's slicing watermelon as Dad slurps his earl gray. I can hear hell slip from her mouth. It's still dark, the day still unspooling. We pretend this is breakfast.

Can you pick up kimbap & dumplings from H-Mart?

On my way home from school, I'm holding a perfect score like a bruise sticking to my palm. 102%: loud as a siren. It will blink until 엄마¹ grants it mercy. But I know she won't even see it, only the bags I cradle.

I almost forgot: Please don't forget a receipt.

From one of the bags I carry home for her, the proof of my obedience winds to the pavement below. I stop at the playground bench: resting, the plastic sweating against my leg. The best cooks listen outside the kitchen.

Time Sensitive Reminder: Call mom.

I lie on the bench like it might let me stay. Kids scream down the slide, escaping into the waiting arms of their mothers. I silence my reminders. Somewhere, my mother waits.

Voicemail from 엄마: 8:52 P.M.

I wake alone, the kids and their mothers wound back in to their lives. Beside me, a stranger's milkshake melts into a sticky heart. That's when I see it, her voice softer than I remember. Softening with worry:

Come home, sweetie. I cooked for you. Don't expect too much, though.

¹ Korean for "Mom."

SELF-PORTRAIT AS A FIREFLY

Katie Kim

Mom says, *there are trillions of cells inside you*
and each one loves you. I try to believe her, but I blame myself

each time I bite my fingernails to blood. Each time
the man idles in his neon yellow Prius too long

at the corner, his eyes holding questions I can't silence.
Meanwhile, spring lizards map my antennae, their tongues gone

sticky in summer's moonless dark. She says, even in dark, the body
makes its own light. We are our own moons, peripheral

redness constellating the corners of my sight. Even in downpour, inside
sun-fists thrown like rice into the steam of August. Even then—

my little moon blinks, keeps blinking, keeps lighting
the matchstick of my belly until it softens into sleep.

Even as I sleep, the night owls still watch like mothers.
Last night, when I curled my body into its crescent

of sleep, my mother's words filled my dreamscape's
technicolor clouds: ae-gi-ya¹, *you were never the world's*

favorite girl—but you do know how to glow. Never lose that.

1 *Baby* in Korean



THE LOOOK

Ryan Bai



SUNDOWN
Nicanor Williams

PRAYER

Leelab Vijapur

Prayer

my earnest request
heed me

1. Who are you and whom do you love?
in-between committer of sins.
I want to love hold the fear of doing it
wrong cry blood

answer questions from higher than
I petition

2. Where did you come from/how did you arrive?
apt 3001, apt 230, 8000 miles, carrot, stick

don't put edibles in your gummy vitamins;
cocaine in your baby food!

3. How will you begin?
finished.

4. How will you live now?
never began.

my earnest request

Curves
cuts
bruises

5. What is the shape of your body? bones that
beg for beatings.

plead me

6. Who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?
her mother
her mother

do you remember when we used to just sit around and
bleed?

i remember the smell of burning hair

7. What do you remember about the earth?

remember me/my

head dripping joy

earnest request...childhood seared off

S C R E A M

S C R E A M

8. What are the consequences of silence?
S C R E A M S C R E A M S C R E A M

mine or yours, unsure,

9. Tell me what you know about dismemberment.

I tried...didn't work...bleeding

unknown

Peanut Butter Patties in the summer taste like dog food

10. Describe a morning you woke without fear.

Maybe if i were a dog i could

are we dogs?

are we allowed to scream?

12. And what would you say if you could?

What would you say if you could

rip

the duct tape off of your mouth?

hear me/earnest request

we must be babies, swimming in this filthy pool

mold growing up between our young legs

11. How will you/have you prepare(d) for your death?

I think I might start with a prayer,

followed by a god answering me the f**k back,

followed by a slow and excruciating revisit

of my first

earnest request



ST THERESE BERNINI

Leo Feng

WALT WHITMAN INSPIRED

Holly Bernstein

Why is it cold outside?

I simply don't know why it turns cold and then hot and then cold again.

Why does the world go around in a circle?

Why do we go around in a circle?

I run – I run through the yellowing leaves that crunch beneath my feet with each step and I run

and I run and I don't stop until the ground turns slippery and the brisk air turns my cheeks

pink.

The rolling mountains blanketed in snow race beside me. As I ski I see nothing but white – soon

I see nothing at all. The cold air pulls tears from my eyes and my vision is blurred. Chunks of

ice falls from the sky and melts into the river.

I rub the tears from my eyes to see the rushing water beneath me – I feel the sun beating on

my back and sweat dripping down my face.

The water is so still – so still that

I almost don't see the waves crashing down.

I almost don't hear my mom yelling after me, "don't go too far out."

I almost forgot about the cold.

The Pacific freezes my bones like a wake up call, and the salt burns my eyes and I am suddenly

running.

Running into the cold,

Skiing into the heat,

Rowing into the ocean,

Until the yellow turns white and the white turns green and the green turns blue and the

blue turns yellow and I run.

So why – why does it get cold every year?



STYLING IDEAS

Jessica Luiru



LET YOUR HAIR DOWN

Jessica Luiru

THE ONLY ONE

Zoban Subhash

1.

The sea on my feet, and your breath on my hair, and

everything is the way it's meant to be.

The warmth of your shoulder, the brush of cloth on cloth, is
enough

To last me through the winter.

The sand whirls through my feet, but I will not fall—

Why would I, if only for you

To pick me up again?

I love her as a friend

Right?

She asks.

2.

Your eyes.

Your eyes!

Sculpted exquisitely from marbles, gleaming in the sunrise
sunlight, looking down on me

as kindly as a soul ever could.

Your hair, flying in the wind, your smile, the most beautiful
in the world—

I have known you five minutes,

and my life is incomplete without you.

Does she have a

boyfriend?

He asks.

3.

Your arms slip slowly out of mine, and go you must you
say, for someone or something calls you, you say

More important than me.

A lonely tree stump but I am in the sand

For how can I wake, and how can I walk, and how can I

speak?

Without warmth to keep me alive.

Am I interested in her?

She asks.

4.

You laugh, and you jump, and you smile, and you hug, and
 all I need is that.

To know that you are happy.

You are to me not what I am to you.

You are everything to me.

5.

Am I in love with her?

They ask.

6.

No I'm f**king not.

7.

Not everything in this world is one or the other.



SWAN LAKE

Jennifer Luiru



GOLDEN HOUR REFLECTIONS

Jessica Luiru

MEANINGFUL DEBRIS

Olivia Minn

Before you learn the names of stars,
learn their distance.
Learn that light is not honest about time.
What you observe tonight,
may have departed its star millions of years ago.

Sometimes, what appears bright has already vanished.
Beauty and brilliance can be delayed,
and sometimes they survive well after their source
has disappeared.

This is not a metaphor yet.
This is physics.

The sky is an archive
that refuses to organize its grief—
births, deaths, collisions, endings, beginnings.
All simultaneous,
like a museum with no walls
and no exit signs.

When I was younger,
I thought the universe was quiet.
I imagined space as absence.
But silence, I learned,
is what happens
when you lack the instruments to listen.

Stars scream when they die.
Galaxies collide like weather systems.
Black holes hum—
a tone so deep
it warps the path of planets.

We orbit anyway.

On Earth,
we make smaller catastrophes,
and call them personal.
We lose keys.
We lose time.
We lose people.
And pretend the scale makes it manageable.
But loss obeys no measurement system.
It is infinite wherever it occurs.

Every atom in your body
was convinced
to leave a star.
Iron from explosions.
Carbon from collapse.
You are not borrowed from the universe—
you are a continuation
that learned to speak.

When you gaze upward,
you are not small.
You are specific.
A rare arrangement of matter
capable of asking questions
that have no obligation
to answer back.

The universe will not explain itself.
It will not reassure you.
It will not care
whether you are watching.

And yet—
it continues unfolding.
Relentless.
Unapologetic.
Brilliant without witnesses.

Take notes from that.

Exist extravagantly.

Burn when it is time to burn.
Collapse if you must.
Become meaningful debris.
Let something new
form from you.

This, too, is not a metaphor yet.

But it could be.

PALE GREY

Aaron Han

Among the towering skyscrapers, the veil of smog clung to the streets of Beijing like an old memory that refused to fade. Nobody knew exactly where it came from. Some said it was the natural price of China's industrial triumphs; others claimed it drifted eastward from the coal furnaces of Shanxi. But none of that mattered to the crowds. People, cars, along with their hurried breaths pressed forward interminably, inhaling it, exhaling it, and carrying it deeper into the city's lungs.

From the apartment floor, my eyes strained to piece the fog, perhaps searching for my nursery school, but swallowed by the endless pale grey. Below, two schoolchildren in neat uniforms crossed the street, their bright red neckerchiefs flashing like slashes of paint on a blurred canvas. Their laughter, imagined or real, seemed to slice through the haze and reach me despite the distance. I smiled gently in response. Nearby, middle-aged office workers hunched over the steps of an old restaurant, their faces dulled by habit. One lit a cigarette—exhaled—and the smoke rose upward and vanished into the greater cloud, joining the countless other exhales and sighs the city had already released into the air. Down the road, an elderly vendor pushed a rickety cart of tanghulus. The glossy skewers of hawthorn glimmered even under the half light, though I knew the sugar was cheap, brittle, and oversweet.

Sometimes my father would emerge from his study and scold me for perching on the railings. And each time he repeated the same story of the boy who had slipped and fallen through the window. He would pause beside me, his gaze trailing the city's jagged skyline. From our vantage, the rooftops formed a crooked procession of slopes, arches, and zig-zags. I traced them with my eyes, staring past the smog and imagining a nimble figure leaping from roof to roof. The line would carry me outward, farther and farther, until the city dissolved into the distance, and I was abruptly returned to the apartment floor. Then my father retreated into his study, and I, without hesitation, climbed back up the railings.

And then, every so often, the veil would lift. A wind would sweep through, and for a day—or maybe only an hour at dusk—the smog disappeared. Verdant sunlight broke across the city, pouring through the cracks in the skyline.

The streets burned with color, and the skyscrapers seemed to spill molten gold across the avenues. Even the bicycles, even the faces of strangers, seemed to be touched by something ephemeral but divine. I remember leaning so far out that my face almost pressed against the glass, and my father had to pull me back. Yet the glow never lasted, despite my fervor.

Years later, I returned to the same apartment and stood before the same window again. The smog was gone for good this time; Beijing's campaigns had finally cleared the air. The sky stretched proudly before me, impossibly clear and blue without seam or shadow. I leaned on the railing, older now, tall enough to gaze out without climbing. Below me, the shops were still open, and the people were still moving in their endless rhythm. Yet in that brightness, I found little trace of what I remembered. Perhaps the story my father told me was true after all, that the boy leaning too far had slipped, and when the smog lifted, he was carried off with it. What he left behind now lies within me, a pale grey the sky will never carry again.

WAITING HERE

Rachel Kim

I remember then –
Our roaring teens,
Seeking out love,
under blaring screens

Our screaming twenties,
I asked you again,
A thousand mistakes,
To hold a million pennies?

Do you remember then,
Our bellowing thirties,
We hung our heads limp,
Waited for the promise of the “forties”,

I’m still waiting here,
At murmuring forty two,
Remember the sunset,
When we watched as birds flew?

Will you love me now?
At whispered forty nine,
Have you kept me still,
Are you finally mine?

How about now,
Fifty three?
Have I learned what it takes,
To be finally free?
To live,
To laugh,
To accept all parts of me?
Can we be —

Or I can wait,

Another decade or five,
Wait patiently to intertwine our lives,
Should I bank on sixty?
Another year, still?
I mean, my eyes are still bright –
Seventy's right around the mill,

I'll wait, rain or shine,
I'll stay until I'm ninety - nine,
Eventually you'll come back to me,
We'll meet back at our old oak tree,
And we'll wait together –
Gazing out the window, onto the sea
I'll turn to you and ask,
Do you finally love me?



GOLDFISH

Jonathan Xu



UPROOTED

Thijs Wittink



THROUGH THE MIST

Rowan Muzzy

GRAY, INDIANA

Lucia Kinder

Gary, Indiana.

i have heard your story in pieces,
but never whole:

raised in a small, poor Indiana suburb
in the middle of a cleaned-up trailer park,
the son of a car mechanic, the nephew of another,
soon to be a gas station attendant
on the Christmas eve shifts, always
(they paid double).

out of the trailer park—
church on Sundays, doughnuts after,
the family large and complete and loud
but dancing on the surface, too much left
unspoken. but it was America! and you
played Little League in the afternoons
and elementary school basketball
in the mornings.

fired from your dad's auto shop,
you switched to your uncle's,
and your father hardly spoke when he came home,
except when he yelled. but you bought the Harley
you'd been saving for, and rode to school.

i have heard your story in pieces,
but never from you:

when the only person who'd known you—
your grandmother—died,
you went to her open-casketed funeral
and listened to the sermon, and rode away.
the neighbors sent their Regards,
and flowers, and you thanked them.

when you could finally remember,

you were almost forty-five—the first
in your family to graduate college—
and you had only cried twice
in front of your daughter, who was fourteen.

the first time, after the open-heart surgeon
told you the survival rate the night before.
a coin toss—heads or tails, up or down.
take your pick.

he survived.
now, you do not see your father:
he has mellowed, a type-two diabetic
who always remembers your birthday,
but forgets how to ask questions, and
sends you cash in an envelope like you are still
fifteen.

when i hear him speak, he seems stuck in the
1980s, and he talks about your first car
like it was yesterday. but it was America!
and he tells stories about each aunt,
and the fourth-removed cousins,
half of whose names you've forgotten.
you wish he knew you, and he does too
but neither of you know it.

in pieces:

the second time was after she told you she was done.
and you realized you were him,
and you'd never really left the auto shop, grease-coated
hands on the paint-smearred doorknobs
and you'd just then learned to say "i love you."

and there were too many things to regret.

POEMS FOR ENGLISH

Max Pang

I.
is one we aren't afforded.

Year after year we run
arriving at the sea
but the numbers shrink
rivers rage relentlessly
blades chop us up, water gets dirty.
Our salmon runs continue
as the seasons change.

Aliens!
You control our destiny.
No longer are you
"inextricably linked to the fate of salmon."
No longer are we
"the 'glue' of the treaties"
between you and those who nurtured us.
No longer is there harmony.

Is this the end?
A lineage fifty million years long,
a "journey that has been in a very real sense, timeless,"
snuffed out and uprooted
on the banks where it began?
The waters no longer support us.
"The hemorrhage declines over time but does not fully heal for 30 years."

Diversity destroyed, life history condensed.
There is nothing we can do to escape the dried-up
summer streams, suffocating water temperature and concrete walls.
How are we to "avoid putting all our eggs in one basket?"
To flourish and survive where our brethren failed,
their homes destroyed by alien trees,
their bodies tenderized by rotating blades, their kin
replaced by alien-made homogenous clones.

As my species and I arrive at death's door.
I ask, "What have you to say,
Death, Destroyer of Worlds?"

II.
I'm Sorry.

But I know an apology isn't enough.
It can't right the wrongs of multiple centuries.
Can't bring dead species to life and
certainly won't change anything overnight.

But it can be a place to start.
Where we humans can "plant the seeds for a
future in which salmon may thrive."

"It is too easy to make the problem someone else's when it belongs to everyone."
But instead of ignoring and blaming, we must
go back to what worked.
Back to a time where "the most successful laws and customs
defining relations between humans and salmon were committed to writing."
Only possible if "each of us not only demands salmon recovery,
but also adjust our lives to it."

"Unless we give life to the ghosts of those salmon
life histories that were once present in healthy rivers,"
The salmon restoration effort will be nothing more than a fruitless, fleeting
endeavor.
It begins with realizing that "we do not have the luxury of waiting
for nature to recover these forests."
How can it, when we believe in "the historically ingrained attitude
that nature is an object of conquest?"

"They will live in the Oregon that we make today."
The generations to come, not only humans but also animals.
For you, the death knell may sound, but it won't be the end.
The spirit of salmon will forever live on in our attempts to prevent future
disasters.

"We must protect and nurture the Earth as it has nurtured us."



CONSTRUCTION

Patrick Zhang



DUCKS

Yong Ding

INCOMPLETE

Lucia Kinder

I woke up in the bed across the street today
and I couldn't remember when I had opened—
shut—the door.

The second day at the market the woman with the grapes
was out of sorts, another in her place, wiping the purples
and greens of bruises on her shirt-sleeve.

Sometimes, I feel as though I have forgotten how to walk,
an eternal infancy that seems to strike my knees,
alone.

You have said my name but twice.

Oak-bark of the tree by the porch in Nashville—
you know—and I start to sing, a birdsong—only—
but there are no calls back.

(It is not as though I was expecting anything.)

I hate the wind sometimes, you know? In folk music, it is
everything, weathered greens and browns, painfully
telling.

Listen: I am telling

a story.

I like a lot of things—too many, in fact—but some
more than others: stocked birdhouses, newspapers,
wood-burning fires, and things that speak
in incomplete sentences.

Am I bothering you?

The voice in my head once told me my dreams

were too literal, but I did not know what she meant.
When has anything of mine been literal?

At the market I tried to tell them a different
name, just to see if anyone would call my
bluff.

Will you help me put it out—the fire, that is,
—so I can watch you—more.

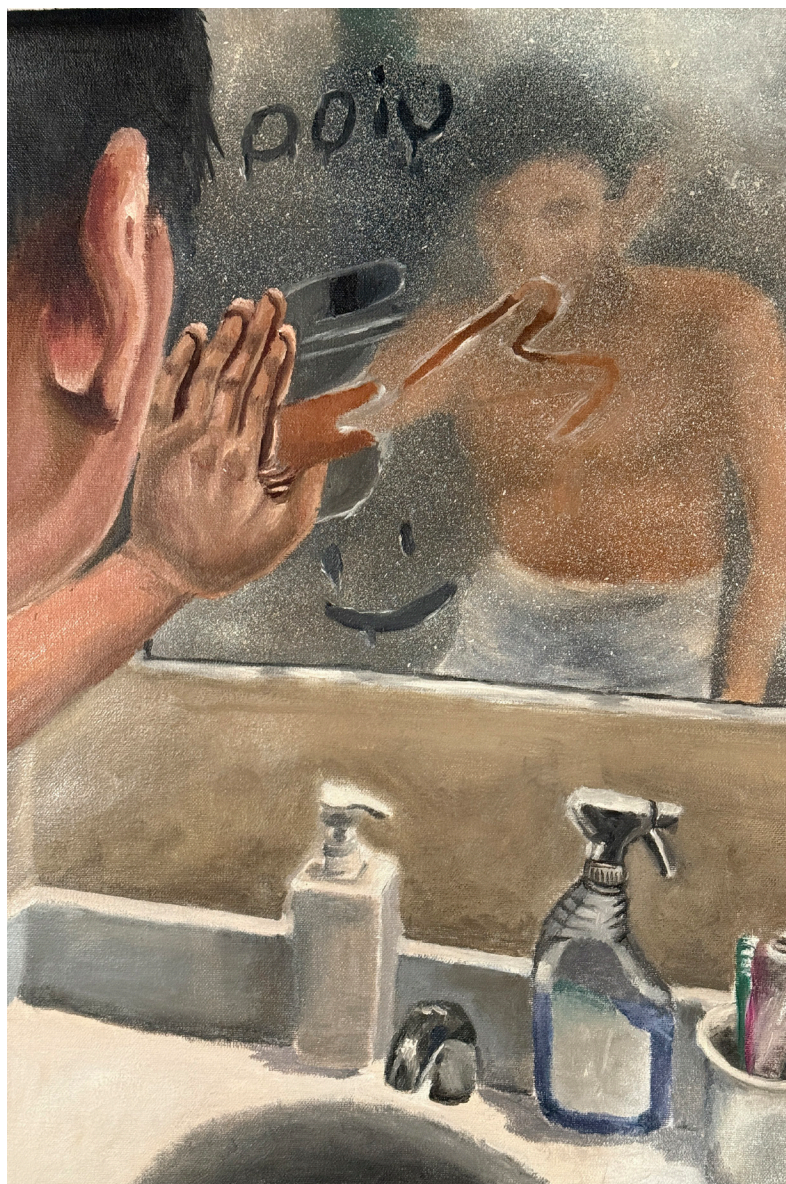
Oh, but: please, do not wake me.
The impossibility of what there is to understand
is overwhelming.

I think that must be why they have Gods?
but I am permanently sure that I could not, because I think
I have come to like being incomplete.



LANTERNS

Leo Feng



热水澡
Yong Ding

MY AMERICA

Minjoo Serbant

The Dawn's Early Light

I buried my small body into our all-consuming couch. My limbs tangled in a knitted green blanket as warmth welcomed itself into my bloodstream. The sound of the commentators and my family's first-down exclamations were the perfect background noise for an afternoon nap. I would rise for halftime nachos or a touchdown celebration, but in those drowsy moments, peace was eternal.

The Rockets' Red Glare

On the Fourth of July, the camp band played Valerie by Amy Winehouse. We shrieked the lyrics, with lips painted pink and mouths stretched wide, our teeth flashing as the taste of barbecue lingered on our tongues. The music collided with my ears as I swayed on my feet. Sparks swam up into the sky as the star spangled blanket erupted. The noise was deafening as the night collapsed into color; fuchsia, crimson, and canary lit up the camp grounds in a booming flurry. A flash of orange scraped my peripheral vision and I looked down, searching for a strayed spark. Instead, I saw a fiery mane weaving through the trees in the nearby woods. I left my friends to follow the fleeing camper, dirt welling up in the groves of my sneakers as I ran. When I reached her she was screaming, her hands clutching her ears as if the sound could break her at any moment. I couldn't understand why she was so afraid until she frantically whispered: "There are bombs here, too?"

What So Proudly We Hail'd

My nose prickled under the cold silhouette of a skyscraper as I traversed the city. Ten more paces and I saw it. Royal blue letters brandished my family's name across a grand glass building. As I stood on the sidewalk, my breath mingled with the smoke from a nearby exhaust vent. The building gleamed like the charming salesman's smile of my uncle. The weight of building a real-estate empire had etched premature wrinkles into his face and rendered his hair silver at 35. His American dream had been won and well fought for. I lingered there, allowing my eyes to drift to a long shadow under a nearby window. I stepped closer, finding a man. A thin grey blanket covered his sleeping form. Even at rest, his body laid rigid against the building, clinging on for warmth and dear life. I

stiffened; only then did my pride falter.

Home of the Brave

My mother's hands flew over her head, intertwining bruised fingers with thick black strands. They were shouting something she couldn't hear. Her spine curved as her stomach curled in on itself, squeezing tight. Wielding rocks from the riverside, they pelted her. A shower of grey and jagged rained down on her small frame. Each blow left marks, her humanity: wounded, fractured. My mother recounted this story after my childish lips had denied American racism. No one had ever spoken about the color of my skin, mangled their eyes into slits, or treated me differently – not in my America.

My America is strong enough to hold me. It's more gentle than I ever have been. The melody of its anthem coils itself around me in a deep embrace, placing a veil over my eyes and shielding my heart. I have never known shame like my mother's skin. I know safety because loud sounds are only fireworks; I know the taste of barbecue is pride; I know the sound of football is peace; I know warmth like it's a right; I know privilege because my body is yellow and untouched. I know my America. But tell me yours.

EXCERPTS ON LOVE

Jeanne Larouche

The cold air nipped at her fur as she padded through the yard. Her nights were normally spent outside however because of the chilling temperatures, her family would no doubt coax her inside for the freezing night. In the ceasing light, her shadow could be seen sitting atop the fence that encased the garden - her tail swishing and sharp long ears twitching. Pausing to lick her paw, she then jumped down and plodded along the cobblestone path behind the house. The light breeze created a ripple of the grass that stood high, as the owners - hoping for next frost and snow soon - held out cutting the lawn. She moved past the koi pond, glancing quickly at her reflection. After entering the line of trees it only took a couple of minutes for her to come to the small clearing. Sitting down, she lifted her head to the sky letting the light from the moon and stars reflect off of her white coat.



In the low light of the street lamps her hands shook. Her knuckles red, she shoved her hands into the pockets of her maroon swing coat. Continuing at a swift pace down the street, she hummed to herself. It had been a long day. Sometimes it felt like she was always chasing and her strength was depleting slowly, always tired. The sharp wind bit at her cheeks and she could just imagine the bright pink color that would look back in the mirror when she got back home. At the end of the street, turning right she descended down the hill. Taking care of the uneven surface, she hurriedly moved towards the open fields. Now, with no light from the street lamps, it was the moon and stars that guided her into the fields. Satisfied with her position and distance from the edge of the forests, she looked up, letting her eyes absorb the show of sparkling sky dwellers.



In the end, no one will remember. Possibly for some, this is their worst nightmare, but maybe, just maybe it is the singular truth that will put us at rest. We try so hard to carve our existence into the minds and hearts of others and into the words of history. There is no one to prove ourselves to, no one that will remember our mistakes or our conquests. Yes, there isn't a second chance, but no matter how much blood, sweat, and tears our

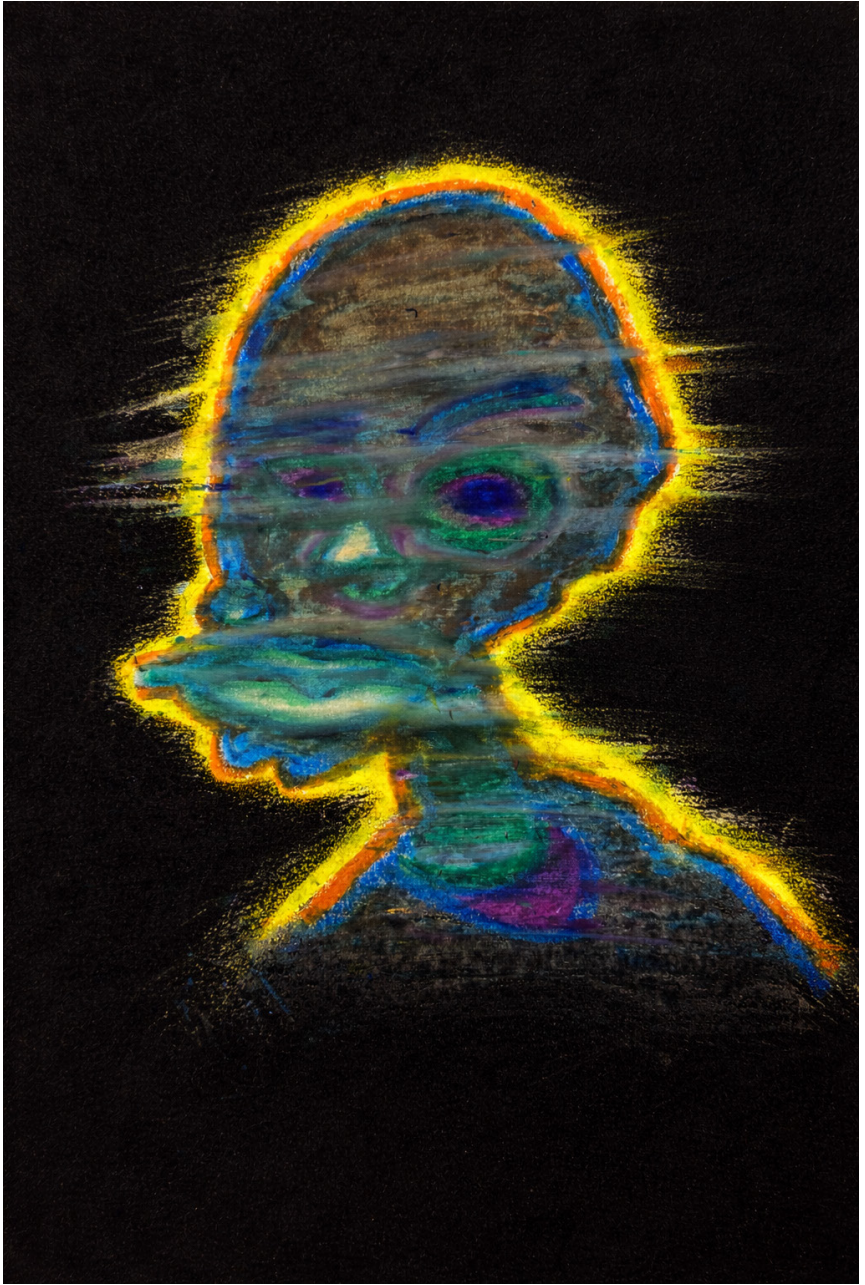
motivations and end will be lost. So, I try to get the most enjoyment out of the chances I am given. Even if it might not have been the right thing, maybe it was the right thing at that moment - and because we aren't seers that is the only thing that mattered.



Love is the way that I try to consider myself while being aware of others. Love is in the calls that you pick up and receive. Love is the worry that we show to the people that we adore. Love is the way that you look up at the sky and are filled with warmth for the chance to live. Love is everywhere if we look hard enough.



PUZZLED
Tyler Christopher Long



STATIC SHOCK

Tyler Christopher Long



UNTITLED
Blaze Etienne-Cummings



BOWLS
Charlie Rolland

THE LAUNDRESS

Iris Zhu

There is a moth trapped in the lights. Only a silhouette, the white wings are sprayed out in drunk ecstasy. Agnes stares up at it, unblinking. The bulbs hum, flicker, dim. She is away from the machines, so she allows herself the brief quiet. She wonders if moths bleed.

Then, voices and footsteps jolt her back to earth. She steps back, pressing against the wall as four nurses run past, wheeling a gurney towards surgery. One of them is yelling.

“Male, age twenty four, 160 pounds, stabbed—”

The man’s stomach is split open. The nurses’ scrubs streak with his blood. Agnes watches them race down the long hallway, past her, then disappear around a corner. She tells herself silently that she will have to wash that later.

In the laundry room, Agnes scrubs at a patient’s gown beneath the running hose. She watches as the soap turns pink in her hands. Usually, she would throw the used gowns into the machine, but someone has left a particularly stubborn stain on this one. She works at it, the water seeping into her rubber gloves and bloating her fingers, until the sour sting of bleach soaks through her blue custodian uniform.

It’s useless. A rinse under the hose reveals the stain once again.

With a grunt, Agnes turns off the water and throws the soaked gown into the trash bin beneath the sink. The room fills again with the steady whirl of the washing machines and the dripping of the faucet. She lets her hands fall to her side, soap slipping off her gloves onto the floor.

She doesn’t know why she hates this job so much. Perhaps it is the constant sound—the tumbling of heavy fabric, the hauling and pushing and wringing of damp cloth. Or maybe it was the hospital itself: the smell of rubbing alcohol; the winding, gray hallways; the constant weariness of the people who walked through

them.

No, it isn't any of that.

She pushes another cart into the laundry room. The bedsheets were wrinkled with fever. The gowns are dyed strangely of yellow, maroon, and vomit. They smell of sweat and piss and spit.

Some of the gowns still have name tags on them—those Agnes rips off and trashes. She never studies the names; they have all become meaningless to her. She never looks up the room numbers. Never checks the floors they stayed on, what was wrong with them, if they had cancer, were pregnant, if they were children or elderly.

She does not want to know if she is washing something someone died in.

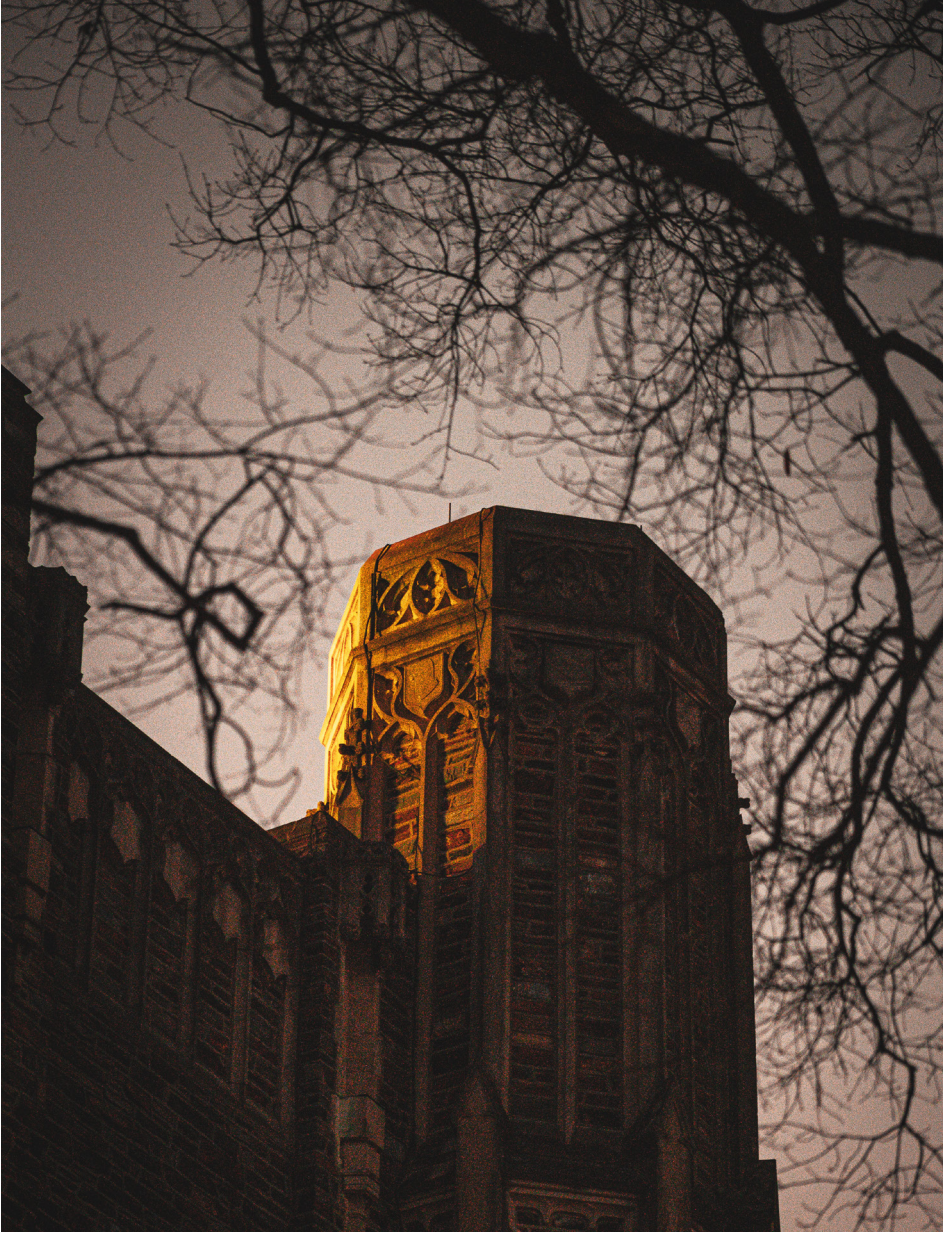
They had other clothes, she supposes. Better ones. Clothes that meant something. That fit properly, that carried perfumes and memory.

These, after all, are only hospital issued gowns. They are loose. They are dehumanizing. They open in the back like a baby's onesie meant for easy changing. They are naked. Uncomfortable. They wrap around bodies in their weakest, most vulnerable, and most temporary states. They witness last exhales, a loved one's kiss, tears that stain the rigid fabric soft.

That means something, doesn't it? Maybe.

But Agnes loads them into the machines and shuts the door. It shakes, hesitates, then begins to turn. Fabric folds into itself, over and over, until it becomes impossible to tell one piece from another, until memory dissolves into detergent, inhaling fever and exhaling steam.

Agnes watches for only a moment. Then, she turns to load the next pile.



ENCROACHMENT

Nicanor Williams



WHAT ARE THEY THINKING?

Nina Chen



///\\

Yong Ding

STRIPES, GRAVITY, AND FRED

Alice Chen

As I pace the cliffs of this ravine
slowly planting one foot in front of the other
On the grainy, sheared surface on which my feet teeter
I release my eyes to wander.
The trees that wave and dance, the leaves that swing from
side to side like a hypnotic pendulum, the stripes of white
of a Bald Eagle that plummets into the gorge
make me think I may fly.
The dusts of rock that burn a path straight down
sharpen my focus on the dull, sheathed possibility of ceding to gravity.
The tips of my clawing fingers have faded white;
my toes toe the edge of the unmarked gravel path
and Bones (of sticks?) litter the depths of the canyon
yet the knots in my shoulders untie,
yet skeletons seem less like Halloween jumpscare
and to be more like the figure
on my biology poster named Fred.

IN LIEU OF RED

Iris Zhu

I hear the last color you see before you die is Red,
but I think green would be more fitting—
I'd like to see the wildflowers, the trees before I go;
Feel the grass green 'round my grave
the vines climbing, settling over stone
long after you've forgotten the color of my eyes

Still, the old guitar with its hollowed out chest
sings out the lonely, travelling song
carrying me back to a porchlight at Christmas long ago,
to the house of oakwood floors and the rooms where
babies wailed and the elderly died

I hope I will not forget the fireworks—
how they reflected in the ocean waves on the 4th of July,
New York at 3 a.m., our legs tangled in the sheets,
and those soft summer stars
that made me gaze up and think
damn we are nothing and a little less

Tonight the neighbors are shouting through the drywall again,
the piano still plays with that one bad key,
and the river that runs from here on down to the sea
runs on and on
'til the words we spoke and everything we did
drown away in the current

But before all that settles into aftermath,
I should like to see again the evergreens—
undressing themselves in the way trees wear winter;
See, as I always have, your face in the marketplace roses
wondering which would look prettiest in your hands

I will paint the entire world golden,
so that you, walking through an ordinary day,
might stop and stare into the brushstrokes of a giant sequoia,

as it reddens the blushing mountains of California—
and wonder why it looks so hauntingly familiar.
Older than ambition, older than both of us,
it will still stand there long after we're both gone.
Trees and their rings are good at that

Down here, so far from their roots,
I've almost forgotten what it's like to breathe

So until Death renders me blind
and the worms consume my eyes,
I will see all of this in lieu of Red—
the rivers and porchlight and your hand full of roses,
and that will be enough

THE PANES OF POWER

Wes Taylor

Anthony woke up early in a haze. The humid air mirroring his tired and tattered state of mind. He got ready, uninterrupted. His alarm finally went off and Rebecca turned it off for him. He repeatedly checked himself in the mirror as he felt that impressions for his new boss still mattered. Rebecca walked in the kitchen where he was already making coffee.

“Well, look at you dressed so nice” She said

“I know, it’s that new job, the driver one for the Fortyn guy all the way in Palacios.”

“Jeez that’s far.”

“But it’s worth it. The dude is loaded and I’m making more money than I ever have just driving this guy around all day.”

“How late will you get back?”

“I won’t. He gave me my hours. I’m gonna have to stay in a motel down there.”

“Okay.”

He grew an odd suspicion towards Rebecca’s acceptance of this fact. She didn’t even question his elision of the time he would finally come back.

I looked at the tarnished mirror standing congruent with the vast windows overlooking Palacios, ready for the working day. I walked out the door and past the large Greek columns down the large steps leading to the road. I took one last glance at my temple and smiled. My driver Anthony parked in his usual spot covering the mailbox and I sat in my usual seat, right behind him in the back.

“Just the office boss?”, Anthony said

“Yeah.”

We drove by the rickety houses as we inched closer to the office. The sky was grey and it matched the murk of the water that demarcated the town. Anthony replaced Leighton and I remembered that I hadn’t given him my monologue yet. I thought today might as well have been the day.

“Let me tell you something. I know this all looks nice, my life. But I had to work for this. I came from nothing but only a brain along with blood, sweat and tears led me here. I saw the opportunities here in Palacios and I took them. Now, I basically run the place. But I just want you to know that I know what it’s like.”

“Okay man,” he said

I saw a man I recognized from the bank and I ducked down, pretending to

tie my shoe. The office stood next to the power plant. When the car came to a stop I handed Anthony ten dollars, this time in fives; I can't remember the last time I didn't have a ten on me. I walked into the building and Emily came up to me.

"I know this is abrupt, but we have a P.E. group looking for a small stake, meetings in five," Emily said.

"Okay," I responded

The men were in suits that matched mine and the see-through glass windows in the meeting room created a clothing divide between us and the rest of Palacios. The white collars and the blue collars. The rich and the poor. Us and everyone else.

One of the men said, "Mr Fortyn, we are sorry for the short notice for this meeting. We've been looking to find our way into the energy sector. We were primarily focused in Houston, but we found your company and we were impressed with what you've built down here."

The meeting carried on, a lull. One of the suited men kept eyeing me and it made me slightly uncomfortable. I fixed my tie. The collar of my shirt felt tight on my neck. The men all seemed to talk in unison, their faces and voices melting into one another. I snapped out of my daze and paid attention again as they continued.

"We only have one concern. It's the spending. You guys would actually have good margins if you didn't spend so ridiculously. I mean, a chandelier for the office? And that's just the tip of the iceberg. I mean, surely you don't spend like this at home?"

I never sweat in meetings, but a stream ran down my back.

That night, Carol, our cook, made Jean and I shrimp scampi. Our forks and knives made the majority of the noise at the table. I stared at Jean's ring and for a brief moment regretted the purchase. I finally noticed Tyler, our only son, was absent.

"Where's the boy?," I asked

"He's having dinner at a friend's house tonight."

"Okay."

"You're gonna have to pick him up from school tomorrow. I'm hosting a fundraiser for the museum in Houston. It's wonderful, we put up so many bids for the auction."

The lump in my throat grew.

After dinner, I asked Jean if it was okay if I headed to the office to get some work done. Rebecca lived twenty minutes away and I knew I could see her tonight. I drove through the marshlands and in the pools of water between them I saw the distorted crescent moon in the ripples. I knocked on her door and she let

me inside like she had done for months. Two hours later when I returned, Jean was already asleep.

I got to the office early the next morning. I didn't exactly know why. I just felt the adrenaline of needing to be there, that I was somehow missing out on something. The way Emily greeted me in her caffeine-enhanced way ticked off my nerves. I went into my office and opened the safe and pulled out her file. The private eye couldn't find much on her, which is what I expected. She was a born and raised Polacious girl and she never showed up late, failed to greet me with a smile or refrained from telling me pressing financial information. In other words, she was the perfect assistant. But with that came a cost, no dirt in the file. It was a shame because the two files between hers, two accountants, were filled with career-ending stuff. Drug deals, affairs, violence, you name it. I was pretty sure I started them to ensure the responsibility of my employees, but it has devolved into entertainment for me. Just then Emily came in with that same twice-as-recommended Folgers smile; and before I could hide it, she glimpsed at a photo of her walking into her home.

"What is that?" she asked

I stuttered, but I trusted Emily enough to tell her the truth.

"Look, I want to take care of my employees, make sure they're doing alright, so I have some files of them. And let me tell you, I can kill anyone's career with these."

"You surveil us?"

"Yeah, what's the problem?"

One of the beneficial parts of being the boss is that people can't really challenge you. I saw the little glimmer in her eye, the realization: her eye darting to the right recounting all her wrongdoings in the past few months. To no surprise, she changed the topic of conversation.

"Jacob, I know it's hard to talk about, but I've been going through the personal stuff and you owe a lot to the bank. How did you even pile all this up?"

"I know," I said

"I just don't really see an angle for you getting it in time."

"I'll figure something out. I'm more worried about the company right now. We should talk about this after work."

"Alright."

She began walking towards the door.

"By the way, one of the P.E. guys said he knew you from summer y'all's families spent in France."

"Maybe, I don't know."

The work day carried on. The clocks ticked. The keyboards clicked. I

packed up and told Emily to sit tight for one moment while I called my son.

“Tyler, I know it’s Friday, you can go stay over at a friend’s house tonight. Mom isn’t even home anyway.”

I then called my butler and Carol to tell them they had the night off. I walked back into the center of the office and I saw Emily there with personal finance papers littered around the central table and she seemed to be reading one of them to pass the time. I knew what they were. Receipts, filings, printer ink painting all my problems on an eight by eleven canvas. I told Emily the office would shut down soon and we needed to work at my house. In the car we sat in near silence save a couple deep breaths. We passed by trailer parks and dark motels and tiny homes where large families lived. I never thought about the power of the driver until then. He could divert, crash, willingly or accidentally end our lives. I tried recalling Anthony’s file but it was not finished and it was coming next week. A car followed behind us in the distance, but it was shielded by the approaching night fog. I remembered that no members of my staff were wealthy, that those files accumulated to nothing for fixing my current problem. The road went on forever, but eventually we went inside.

After Emily left I stood on the balcony and smoked the last Cuban I had. It was my father’s collection. I went downstairs and stood in front of the pool. The water was only a little murky and I made out my reflection looking at me, but I didn’t recognize it. It was a farce. A created-consciousness. An appearance to cope with and personify the perfection I was so far away from, instead sin and debauchery was in the water. He was looking away from the crumbling empire he had built. I thought about what I needed to sell. Maybe the Warhol? Or the marble columns. I thought about the files and how I kept the private eyes in business. I thought about what I had just done to Emily. I got in my car and decided to drive. The winds wildly whipped the marshlands and I began to see trees and forests as I left the town. In my rear view I saw the sand on the beach collect, fly up and shallow down to the ground in a violent whoosh. I kept driving. The road subtly twisted and righted and I jerked the wheel to keep the car from veering off the road. I didn’t know where I was and I decided to turn around. I felt an ensuing headache. I decided to roll down the windows, to get fresh air. The wind pounded me as I got back on the road. It was whipping so hard and I lost my ability to see the road clearly. The only thing I could see was the speedometer rapidly flinging itself to the right. I turned the wheel randomly, attempting to time the twists of the road. I eventually decided to stop and roll the windows back up. I felt dizzy, but I continued on. I estimated I was about twenty minutes from Palacios when I saw the sun creep up over the horizon. The town became familiar. The power lines

juttred and the power plant made thick lines in the emerging light. I got home, threw my keys on the table and instantly fell asleep on the floor. The road may keep going forever but the party certainly ended.

Carol woke me while she made breakfast. I thought once more about everything and I decided it was time. I decided to grab it out of the garage and then I got in my car and drove myself to the office. I felt bad I was leaving Anthony waiting on the street, but I had already done enough bad. I absconded it in my coat as I walked in. The metal felt cold in my palm. Emily greeted me in a way that felt forced and different, but I didn't really pay attention. I went into the bathroom and looked at the Van Gogh imitations painted on the wall by children in the hospital. We let them come to our office a few moons ago and paint as a kind gesture and the donation to their facilities was maybe the only check I still didn't regret. I thought to myself: but I had done such nice things, I had been so charitable. I went into the middle stall. I sat down and opened my jacket. I wondered if there would be nobody there or everyone there to confirm it was true. Van Gogh's red crows flew across the wheat field on the wall and they seemed to fly forever and just like that the marionette was gone.



HARROW BOYS

Patrick Zhang



LADY IN PURPLE

Shelby Acquavella



SHORELINE SUNRISE

Hazel Secker



TREK
JT Gally



CLARINET LESSON

Nina Capello

12:05 AM, JUNE 27TH, VILLAVIDAL, SPAIN

Juliet Lopez

The streetlamps are yellow and the TV is still going. If you went outside around now, and looked up, the stars would fill your eyes and the blood would rush to your head, but the mountain air would keep you from falling, I promise.

There are no screens on the windows; is no one afraid of things falling out and in? Three people live on this street, I think. The ghost of Maria Teresa must live in the house across the street, because the rooster still crows for her.

I sit in the kitchen (startling white light, brass oven— does it even work, abuela?) with a scalding towel pressed against my face. I can smell the coffee I will drink tomorrow. The water traces red lines into my arms and drips off my elbows onto my pajamas. It's cold.

I think this happened before, I can't remember when.

I saw my cousin who I haven't seen for seven years today. We had to be introduced.

My abuela speaks to me in Spanish and I can't remember how I know what she is saying. She is talking about how she had terrible styes when she was younger, and my father too. It runs in the family.

We went to the playground I would play on when I was little, just outside the crumbling dark church, just past the cemetery. My family's name is inscribed on tombs and on the church. The swingset was creaky. The poetry was lost on a five-year old.

My father walks in, speaks in English. The TV is still going. My grandfather is asleep. A speeding car shakes the house.

I saw the paintings and books of a long gone relative today, and I imagined a dreamy young Spaniard staring up at the sun through lemon trees and having the light fill his head as my great (great) aunt takes my hand with hers shaking. You're beautiful, she told me. She has beautiful eyes, but I didn't tell her.

The soaked towel becomes cold, and my abuela drops it into the boiling water. I press it to my face, again.

The dappled golden sun and sweet smell of rotting fruit on the farm nearby and overlapping harmonies of dissonant conversations over the dinner table and red shingles and the orange soda I always order and the relatives who joke and always send you away with chocolate and slipped euros and gilded altars shrouded in incense and the stone fountains that never stop running on the side of every road all fill my head.

I feel as if I have missed a promised lifetime.

I take the dripping towel off my face, and stumble half asleep to bed. I look out the window. Stars fill my head.



HELP ME FIND A DREAM

Julia Horobets

THE GOLDEN YOLK

Jian Yeo

Quiet chirps interrupt the dark silence.

This is 5:30 am at 7 Boyden Lane. See the mirage of colors the Earth emits just before sunrise: the silver ripples gently covering the almost-transparent stars. Maybe you could see a glimpse of the moon. As the sun rises, patches of shadow and light on the trees subtly overlap, creating an emerald shade. A tint of golden-brown light reflects against the morning rays from the right side of my window. The sun stirs life; autumn leaves pirouette down to Earth. Every time the breeze swept through a soft rhythmical entanglement of the leaves, I could smell a rich, sweet fragrance of the maple tree. Birds and squirrels hop along the paths. Sometimes they take a prolonged pause. At moments, the view is overwhelming. But, it is only an ordinary scene from the Lane. My eyes observe these placid sceneries while the hands frantically scribble and type what needs to be done before school.

After this early hour, I pull the blinds down to avoid the awkward interactions with passersby. I feel trapped.

There are times when the sun seeps through the gap between the blinds. If you inhale a pinch of encouragement, you find yourself peeking through that gap. The bloody red sun drips down and when it merges with the daffodil background, it paints a creamy orange. Intimidated to interact with daylight, I frowned my eyes down; the light presses forward anyway. The sun enlivens my ancient room, and I see dust floating inside it like suspended time. I let it rest on my knuckles and the edge of my desk. I appreciate its lukewarm embrace.

“Don’t squint,” Mom said. “Get up.”

She slapped my eyes. I kicked inside the blanket. She took away the blanket—I felt naked. I hated the sun for exposing me. I glared at the sun, only to find myself seeing neon green and violet blotches across the room.

Mom always cooked me sunny-side ups and rice for breakfast. She quickly mixed them with a few drops of soy sauce. And everyday, the sun was glaring back at me while I was frantically munching my breakfast, listening to my mother hurrying me to go to school. I remember eating with my eyes closed, relying on my

tactile system, while the sun engulfed me whole in its yolk.

The yolk stayed with me longer than the taste did. Even after I swallowed my last bite, the sun lingered on the table, clinging to the rim of my empty bowl. A thin string of light bounced off the chair's metal surface, onto my cheeks.

On the walk to school, the sun followed at an angle—never in front of me, never behind. I learned how to tilt my head just enough so the sun would not pierce into my vision. I walked behind Mom a lot to use her shoulders as a blockade. Unfortunately, I never found myself succeeding in walking under shadows because I would step too far out and let the yolk hit my face all at once. I would flinch, blink hard, and watch colors bloom and fade. The world always came back. Other mornings I sat on the floor with my back against the wall, knees pulled to my chest, watching a rectangle of light crawl across the carpet. I told myself to move when it reached my toes. Sometimes I did. Sometimes it passed over me anyway.

“Just stand there for a second,” my friend laughed. “You look funny glowing like that.”

I stood there for her, trying to hide my giggle while she took a dozen photos of me and the sun. There were days I enjoyed the attention. This time, I squinted my eyes open, and I still remember her comment:

“Your eyes look beautiful in the sun,” she said.

I never knew.

I never answered her back. I shifted my weight instead, watching the light slip from my face to the pavement. The moment passed, but I felt uneasy, unresolved. The sun seemed unbothered; it went its own way. My friend scrolled through the photos, already somewhere else. I stood there, pretending to be bothered by something on the path.

The yolk spills without explanation, without asking. Even without Mom's sunny-side, it arrives in my room at 7 Boyden Lane after the early hours. It clings on binder rings, the end of my sleeve, or reflects against the mirror in the far corner. I do not fully step into it. But I let the gap remain between the blinds and the window, just wide enough for the day to recognize me.

BITTERNES

Aaron Han

“The world is a great mirror. It reflects back to you what you are.”

— Thomas Dreier

He arrived seven minutes early and stood in the lobby, staring at the floor as if it had something important to say. Up close, his face was pale and sharp. Perhaps it could even be considered handsome under different circumstances. His eyes were attentive, yet gave the impression of searching for something just beyond the back of his head. His grip was firm but cold, and he smiled with the same practiced earnestness as a waitress at a restaurant.

We began with the standard questions: where he had studied, where he had worked, and what he had been doing recently. He answered every question competently, each word flowing from his thin lips in a natural cadence.

When I asked him what interested him about this job, he hesitated for a moment and said, “I think it aligns well with my skillset,” then added after a brief pause, “and I’m looking for something... stable.” He nodded once after his response, as if confirming the adequacy of the answer to himself. I then asked him to describe a problem he had encountered in the past and how he had overcome it. To this he gave an even longer pause, then looked at me with a jerk of his head. His eyes, meeting mine for the first time, cut in accusatively like I’d just said something I shouldn’t have, but were averted immediately before betraying something shaky, something pathetic.

“I’ve had to adapt quickly in a few situations.”

“Sometimes expectations weren’t clear, and my coworkers were hard to work with.”

I prompted him to be more specific.

He smiled faintly and said, “It’s hard to pick just one...”

We talked for a bit more after that, though I can’t recall the details. As the interview drew to a close, he shook my hand again and thanked me in the same courteous manner as before. I watched him retreat through the glass door of my office, the silhouette of his brown suit slowly dissolving into the employees like a waning sun into the horizon. His name was Sam, I think.

December 18

Mom’s noodles tasted so bitter. They weren’t terrible, but I could only poke at them with my chopsticks.

Mom paused with her chopsticks halfway to her mouth.

"Is something wrong with them?" she asked, concerned.

"No," I answered quickly, and smiled as best I could. "They taste fine. They're good."

"You've been quiet," Mom said, her gaze lingering on my face.

"I'm just tired."

Suddenly, Dad cleared his throat. "Any word from the places you've applied to lately?" It was always that same question, those exact words. He knew it, too.

"I've got an interview coming up," I said.

"You said that last week," Mom said softly.

"This one's real." I forced an even brighter smile.

Dad nodded. "Good. That's good."

Silence crept its way back to the dining room. I looked down at my bowl, the oil glistening on the thinly cut noodles, and the broth made from chicken stock Mom had been preparing since last week.

"I'm going to work on my resume," I said, standing up before anyone could ask anything else.

In my room, I opened my laptop and stared at the job boards for a few minutes before turning away and slumping my head back against the reclining chair. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the old awards I'd gotten in high school. I was really something back then, top of the class and all.

Letting out a sigh, I set my eyes on the screen again. Scrolling, clicking, scouring for a new job near the area.

December 25

I woke up early, though there was no reason to. From downstairs came the sounds of cooking and the clinking of silverware. They sounded sharper than I remembered, colliding into a cacophony until I was reminded of the heavy metal I used to listen to as a teenager.

For a moment, still half-asleep, I imagined the Christmas tree downstairs adorned with ornaments and lights and an email waiting for me right beneath it. My lips curled up involuntarily.

But of course, there was no email. No Christmas tree, either.

Mom made soup, as she always did on Christmas. It tasted even worse than the noodles from last week. Under the initial layer of bitterness was a hint of decay that left a foul taste in my mouth long after I forced each spoonful down my throat. I tried my best to maintain a neutral expression, but Mom noticed anyway, just as she always does.

"How did it go?" Dad asked again carefully.

"They didn't pick me."

"I see."

was a hint of decay that left a foul taste in my mouth long after I forced each spoonful down my throat. I tried my best to maintain a neutral expression, but Mom noticed anyway, just as she always does.

“How did it go?” Dad asked again carefully.

“They didn’t pick me.”

“I see.”

There was a split second where his face did something strange. His features contorted, and for a brief moment, his wrinkles pulled inward on themselves until crimson bits of flesh and muscle crawled out from the ruptures like wriggling worms.

I blinked, and Dad looked the same as he always did, the usual sagging cheeks and tired gaze.

I sat there for a while, trying to decide whether I should be worried.

Whether something had actually happened, or if I was seeing things. But before I could decide, Dad cleared his throat and continued looking down at his spoon.

I felt annoyed then—at how he asked me the same questions every day, how our old conversations about baseball and news scarcely crossed his mind anymore. I rejected the thought and chided myself. He was only asking because he cared—deeply, in fact.

I excused myself shortly, the bitterness from the soup still lingering in my mouth. Maybe I was just tired, and perhaps everything tastes terrible when you’re already disappointed.

Maybe I should get some more sleep.

“So you’re still living at home?” I asked, lifting my glass.

Sam nodded. “Yeah. Still looking for a job.”

“That’s rough,” I replied. “Doesn’t mean anything though, you were always the smart one.”

“Smart enough to be unemployed, apparently,” he laughed dryly.

“You’ll figure something out, I’m sure.”

Sam didn’t reply—didn’t look at me either, his hazy gaze fixed on the table while tracing the ring his glass left behind with his index finger.

“I used to copy your homework every day.” I said, “Remember that?”

“And look where that got me.”

“I’m just saying, sometimes it might be okay to cut yourself some slack—start with something smaller just for now. How does that sound?” I stumbled over my words, and a small drop of spit might have flown from my mouth and landed on the back of his hand.

I saw his eyes drop to it, and immediately, he turned even more pale. Teeth clenched, fists tightened, his gaze dug into my skin with an almost primitive sense of fear and repulsion as though I were some monstrosity that had crawled from the Albany Road|80

I saw his eyes drop to it, and immediately, he turned even more pale. Teeth clenched, fists tightened, his gaze dug into my skin with an almost primitive sense of fear and repulsion as though I were some monstrosity that had crawled from the deepest layer of hell.

“I—sorry,” I said, breaking out of my bar chair.

He blinked a few times and said after a pause, “No, Jim, it’s fine... I’m just a bit tired today.”

We didn’t speak much after that. Sam ordered another drink, and I watched his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as droplets of beer escaped from his mouth and traced down his chin, then neck, eventually engulfed by his unshaven beard.

Not long after that, I told him I had an early morning. He nodded without looking up, and I walked briskly away from the bar.

January 1

My goals for this year: Get a good-paying job, socialize more, stop drinking so much, be kinder.

I hear Mom making dinner downstairs. It smells terrible.

January 19

I slammed my fist against the table when I read the email, but was surprised to find that what I thought was anger remained unvented, or perhaps it had never been there in the first place. At this point, I am fully aware that the remaining sadness has become a veil to hide my indifference from my few remaining scraps of motivation.

There’s little reason to expect success in a world that has already made up its mind. I knew that the interview was a farce before it even started. I also knew that the interviewer was smirking in his mind...that clever fox, hiding it just well enough to pass as civility!

He can’t fool me, though. I can see through it all. When skin becomes translucent and fat and flesh leak through, when faces lose their polish and reveal something swollen and obscene, I am granted a sickening but equally liberating clarity... hell, even my desk is starting to look wrong, its surface softening in places where it should be solid.

Everyone and everything is disgusting on the inside; that much is obvious. I’m just the only one who sees it, while the rest indulge in a blissful ignorance they mistake for decency.

I knocked on his door softly at first, but received no response.

“Sam?” I called, “Are you okay?”

No answer. I knocked again, this time harder. “Sam?”

“What is it?”

“I just wanted to check on you.”

“I’m fine, Mom,” he said, “I’m busy, don’t bother me.”

“Busy with what? It’s already been—”

It’s already been a month since his last interview. Longer, really, if you count the online ones, which he insists were interviews too. I’m not too good with technology, so maybe that’s true. Maybe companies work differently now. Still, I never hear him speaking to anyone. Perhaps some companies really do hire through forms alone.

“I’m working on an application right now,” he snapped, “leave me alone.”

I stood there silently for a moment before gently pushing on the door. It was the same door that used to swing wide open, revealing a younger, happier boy stumbling across the room and into my embrace with a wide smile spreading across his face. Now, his frame was thinner, his face drawn tight and strained, and his eyes slipped past as though looking at me required strenuous effort.

I wanted to touch his shoulder, but for some reason, I couldn’t make myself move.

I should go to the supermarket later this afternoon to buy some apples for Sam. He used to love boiled apple soup when he was little. He would sit at the table and blow on the spoon so impatiently, cheeks puffing out like balloons.

He has been rejecting my food lately, calling it bitter and unappetizing. Maybe apples will be different.

February 16

The sky was red when I walked home. Not the red you see in sunsets or African savannas, but the kind when you fall off a bike and scrape your knee across the pavement, the layers of flesh mixing with dirt and mud.

Turning a corner, I saw something clinging to a telephone pole, something pale and veined, almost like tissue. The faint streetlight fell on the few bits and pieces squirming out of the sewer holes, giving them a wet shine.

I kept walking, trying my best to ignore the putrid scent that emanated from every corner of the street. Earlier, in the bar, even the alcohol had reeked in a way different than usual.

Time passed strangely. When I opened my eyes, the living room looked uncanny, the patterns on the wallpaper swirling in my periphery. I sat there shivering, teeth chattering. I don’t know how long it was until Mom’s footsteps came down the hall. She placed something in front of me.

“Sam,” she said gently, “You look like you might have caught a cold. Drink this.”

I lifted my head slightly, let the steam drift toward me, and remembered

sitting at the table years ago, waiting for the apple soup to cool, blowing carefully across the surface. I wondered, briefly, whether this might help.

But then the smell hit. It didn't smell sweet, nor warm. It was rancid. I glanced at the bowl for a split second before my stomach churned violently.

"I don't want any of your disgusting food," I said flatly.

I stood up abruptly and turned around, only to see a swollen mass of flesh standing before me. Her shape barely held itself together, pus oozing from the folds around what resembled a face. I blinked hard a few times, but it didn't go away. It let out a sound I couldn't distinguish.

The room began to soften, sag, and pulse until the walls resembled the collapsed cavity of something badly butchered, the sofa beneath me slippery and wet. I stumbled to my feet, violently knocking the bowl from its hands. It shattered against the floor, the contents spilling out in a slick, obscene mess.

I screamed until my throat burned, but even my own ravings sounded like a hundred animals being turned inside out. I ran. I didn't look back.

I was walking home after a long day at work, my suit drenched in sweat and my feet aching from the tight shoes. The street was empty and undisturbed until I heard a shriek somewhere in the distance.

A young man came running down the block, as if being chased. He staggered, clawed at the air, sobbing one moment and howling the next.

I stood there for a second, trying to decide whether I should do something. I quickly dismissed the thought—I already had enough to worry about.

Honestly, the younger generation is so useless, always falling apart over nothing.



LAND OF MEMORY

Hazel Secker



THE GIVING TREE

Stella Frankel



NATURE RECLAIMS

Rowan Muzzy



FALLS THROUGH FOLIAGE

Rowan Muzzy



CAPSIZED

Thijs Wittink

HILL.

Zoban Subhash

What gives? All this fluffy banter under the moonshine moonlight with your poetic branches stretching over our heads, so I ask. What gives?

I love you. I always have, and nothing will ever change that. You know this.

Lovers meet on tender boats floating across the Nile, or in the shadowy balcony rows of an opera show, not under a cloudy sky on a musty June night at the root of a shoddy dirt path that seems to lead quite intently towards nowhere in particular. [Beat] Lovers check in on each other regularly, they are involved in each others' lives, and they spend precious time with each other. Lovers don't disappear on a fateful December night and fail to step back in for a long time, leaving each other to fend for themselves only to come back gloriously ... and ...

You told me to leave. You told me I only made things worse. You told me it didn't matter anymore, that I didn't matter anymore, because me trying only meant you hurting.

People sometimes say things they don't mean.

I don't.

[Beat]

How much longer?

We're in the woods. When you're in the woods you breathe in the magic of the woods, feel the greenness of the grass on your toe tips, the moistness of the soil, the sweetness of the air, and become one and the same with the flies around you, and your heart will hop a tiny hop. That is when you know – the only time you know – that you have no enemies in this world. [Beat] We're going somewhere special.

I've never been here before.

No one has. It's my little corner of the world, it's the only place I can call my own because the entire world has collectively decided to not want it anymore, and so it becomes mine, and I take pride in sharing it, sharing it with special people who make me feel special atop my special hill in Bakersville.

in Bakersville.

Special. [Beat] Funny word: special. An object defined by its rarity, an event made unique, but nothing is truly special. You can spend your life mining gold, and the price of gold becomes inflationary. You gift your wife a gold necklace, and she's crying in her sleep. Anything can be made special if you choke it strong enough. So tell me. Special how?

I would do anything for you. I would move mountains for you. Mountains aren't movable. Only a fool would move mountains. I will gladly be a fool for you, and I will wear it proudly on my chest because it would be an honor even to be a fool if it means I can be yours. The beautiful in life isn't the gold or the silks or the cars or the cows or anything that ceases to be special once you're drowning in it. It's the trees and rivers and bunnies and hills and the moon that you never, ever get tired of, and that only brightens your wonder and fills your heart the more and more you allow yourself to be swept in by it. Some things, Julia, remain special forever.

But... *you* left me.

Love is like the warmth of a lamp. We fly in as hordes, and we bask in the light, hypnotized to even notice our skins being burnt to a crisp. It's easy to get lost in love.

I loved you once. I did. I really, really did. [Beat] But you calling my sister after so long – that, that's, that's...

True lovers are like fireflies. Small, tender lamps that flicker on and off, and when one goes on it pulls the other one closer so that it can light up, letting the others take a break and soak the warmth in. [Beat] Until the day when one gives up and they all fade away, falling as ash to the ground that's endlessly far away. [Beat] You wanted me to hate you.

I–

You wanted me to hate you like you hated yourself.

You were asking too much of me. You always did, and now... What gives?

Did you not miss me? Did you not want me back? Did you not do ... anything?

Of course I did. You were the shade that held me close while I reached for the light. You stopped me from burning, and then you just picked up a star and tossed it to me. I couldn't catch, so you kept throwing. Until your sky darkened and darkened, and I didn't see the storm brewing because all that was in front of my eyes were the stars that I kept dropping. I don't pretend to not know why you left. But you could've given me another chance.

Life is fair. Some people get more chances than others. [Beat] Everyone runs out of chances.

Your embrace was the sweetest warmth I've ever known, your smile brought tears to my eyes, and your soft, solemn grimace made me shudder in my dreams. You were my only blessing in a sea of curses and the only reason I perpetually wish I was better is so that you could've had at least a piece of what you deserved. Of course I missed you. [Beat] But you asked too much of me. I was never in love with you. I loved you, yes, but spending the rest of my life with you, that was always unthinkable.

Would you rather have a garden of peacock feathers, flying silks, and raining rose petals, or a shallow rolling meadow with freshly cut grass and clouds that slowly float away to flood the young morning light on your glowing skin, and a river that gushes and ebbs and throbs but is never violent and always beckoning? Would you rather feast on fruits and nuts and lucious jellies all day every day for the rest of your life, or would you like to complement it with fulfilling grains and joyous meats? It's like you said. The question is not what's special; it's what will remain special.

I am married to someone. [Beat] Ten years is a lot of time.

I expected it. I knew you well. Better than a lot of people bothered to. [Beat] Do they treat you well? [Beat] Do they treat you how you deserve to be treated?

No... Yes. [Beat] I can't do this. I can't come with you – I'm sorry.

I waited. I waited and hoped that one day you would learn how to love. And then, all your problems would vanish, and you could live that life that we always dreamed about. I'm–

What about you?

Yes. I'm happy ... but I always have been.

I hope I'm glad for you. [Beat] What gives? Why now?

A dying man has different needs. Living is all about feeding your mind, but a dying man wants to feed his heart, because he knows that's what will stop him long before the brain even knows.

You are dying?

Does it make a difference?

[Beat]

Why? Your life is yours, and mine is mine.

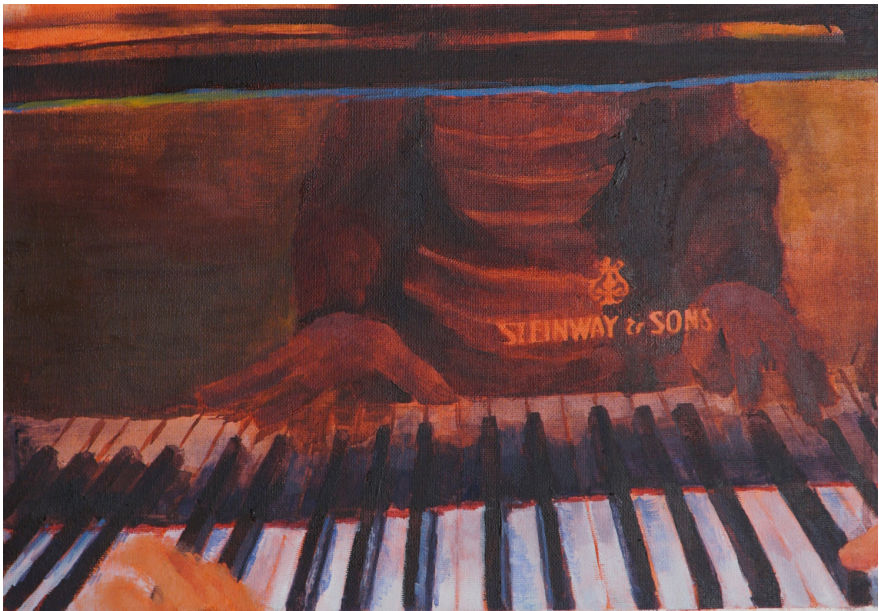
Goodbye.

These hills are yours now. I don't need them anymore. [Beat] Love them if you can.



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*“Love is the way that you look up at the sky and
are filled with warmth for the chance to live.
Love is everywhere if we look hard enough.”*
-Jeanne Larouche, “Excerpts on Love”

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