

The background is a complex, abstract composition of overlapping, textured shapes in shades of red, teal, and brown. The colors are layered and blended, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is reminiscent of a collage or a layered painting.

Issue no.3

ART SWAP

SEPTEMBER 2022

ISSUE no.3

ART SWAP

SEPTEMBER 2022

Here's what we did:

We all made something, then sent it to someone else.

With our newly acquired something, we responded.

See below.

VISUAL CONTRIBUTORS

Amanda Bednarick
Tommy Ford
Oliver Gorne
Jacob Pescolliderungg
Laurenne Ross
Christina Schueler
Jesse Shofner
Grant Simonton
Gloria Rech
Ali Willams
Bailey Zahniser

LITERARY CONTRIBUTORS

Adie Steckel
Claire Brislin
Colleen Kiyuna
Krista Koehn
Kiyoko Reidy
Mieke Honda Reiland
Meghan Robins
Teghvir Sethi
Sam Schild
Christina Schueler
Korbi Thalhammer

Toe English	6
Humble Me	8
Keep Your Friends Close, but Your Anemones Closer	15
Basin and Range	19
Alla Sera	21
Ego Death	23
Figure	27
Peter	30
Banshee's Toe	34
Dinner with Ryan	39
Opera Sinza Titolo	44
The Contra Costa Drownings	47
Big Alv's Moonlight Mash	52
The Bus	54
Astro-intimacy	56
Underwater	58
Take Care	60
Shapeshifter	64
Annie and Ava	66
Pigheart's Rabbithole	70
All Potential Energy	77
The Steward	78



TOE ENGLISH

BY AMANDA BEDNARICK

IN WAITING

BY KIYOKO REIDY

In the yard, the neighbor's fence bisects
the tree—the tree grew first, but
now seems wedged in, wrongly placed.
I suppose this means they own their half,
and us, ours. What liberties does this joint
custody grant me? I touch what is ours,
our ridged bark, each morning. I do this
dutifully, as though it's in the script: each day
a dress rehearsal for the life I am not yet living.
I had it once, far from here. As you move further
from something, it grows smaller. So, too, with memory
and joy. I grasp you with what is furthest
from my heart, so as not to risk anything.
One day I will have it again, that life. It will redden
the horizon like a great fire. It will tip its hat to me
on the street and I will go mute in waiting. One day
I will open the door to find it is here
to stay.



HUMBLE ME

BY ALI WILLIAMS

THE BARD OF LOWER BROADWAY

BY MIEKE HONDA REILAND

JesseLee Jones stands on stage at the bar he owns with the band he leads, a guitar in his arms, a .22 Magnum on his hip. His sleek black hair carries a whiff of Elvis, his eyes are the color of faded denim. He wears a black Victorian shirt, a black cowboy hat, black boots. Rising from his shirt collar, his face is a full moon, and he scans the room with the air of someone who watches a lot of Westerns, a man constantly aware of possibility.

It's 2:30 on a Saturday afternoon on downtown Nashville's Lower Broadway. And Brazillbilly, the house band at Robert's Western World, one of the strip's original honky-tonks, is about to start its set.

"We don't want to get into politics," Jesse's wife, Emily, says into the mic. "But that flag represents our freedom to bitch and moan. And we always start with the national anthem."

The drummer starts a roll, Jesse puts his hand over his heart and gazes at the flag, mounted on the wall next to a 20-inch box fan. He moved to the States from São Paulo in his twenties. When Emily finishes singing, she smiles, says "Let's honky-tonk, y'all!" and descends to her table. The band opens with a couple fiddle-heavy, foot-stomping tunes. And then, Jesse steps to the mic.

Concert posters, old guitars, shelves of cowboy boots, and a neon Busch sign line the walls surrounding the stage. It's the kind of place people come to feel their idea of Nashville. When Jesse starts to sing, his voice is deep, almost conversational. The low din of bar

talk hums beneath the music, but for the most part, the crowd is entranced, spellbound, transported to 1944 with a cowboy classic.

*See them tumbling down
Pledging their love to the ground
Lonely but free, I'll be found
Drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds*

When Jesse finishes, there's a pause. Then, the crowd cheers and whistles, as if Jesse snapped his fingers and brought them back to the present. "Thank you," he says bashfully, as if after almost three decades on this stage, he still can't believe the applause is for him. "We'll get it going here." Jesse nods once at his bandmates, then launches into an old Marty Robbins tune.

*Some memories just won't die
Some feelings just won't leave
No matter how hard you try*

Through the window behind the stage, pedal taverns, party barges, and glow-in-the-dark buses cruise down Broadway. Bachelorettes and recent SEC grads stream past Robert's, down the street to multilevel bars owned by modern country stars. Jesse's time machine effect shatters beyond these walls. It's late September, and Nashville's summer is turning to fall.

Nashville's Lower Broadway bar district consists of four blocks, stretching from Bridgestone Arena, where the hockey team plays, to the soupy banks of the Cumberland. For the most part, Lower Broad is a gradient – live country and places to sit close to Bridgestone, bros and bachelorettes increasing in number as you near the water. On most nights, a landslide pours inexorably toward the river, where the loudest, newest, shiniest honky-tonks blast Florida Georgia Line and Lil Jon on light-up dance

floors. Alan Jackson (AJ's Good Time Bar), John Rich (Redneck Riviera), Blake Shelton (Ole Red), Florida Georgia Line (FGL House), and Jason Aldean (Jason Aldean's) all own signature bars on Broadway.

Robert's, located on the first block near the arena, consists of a stage, a long rectangular bar, and a balcony, all cast in dim, aquarial, reddish-yellow light. The bar's most famous deal is the Recession Special: fried baloney sandwich, chips, Miller High Life, and Moon Pie for six dollars. A sign behind the bar reads, "Beer: The Reason I Get up Every Afternoon." In here, Blue Moon and Shiner Bock are high-end. There are no TVs, and Emily and Jesse are dogmatic about not using fancy ketchup. The Robert's crowd generally out-ages the rest of Lower Broad by a good three decades.

On a typical day, Jesse and Brazilbilly play from 2:30 to 6 p.m. Bert, the tip collector who's worked for them for two decades, circulates a metal bucket. The band used to play from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. every Friday and Saturday. But Jesse got married and now battles Meniere's disease. Afternoon sets make sense. At first, Jesse missed closing down the bar, but now, he's used to it. The afternoon crowd creates more of a listening room, and he can play more of the old songs he loves.

Picture a boy, the son of Italian immigrants, growing up in the '70s in north São Paulo. He grows up with nothing, but he has a TV, and from his nondescript corner of a cosmopolitan city, he can access the world. He listens to the Beatles and Stones. He mainlines shows like Cannon and The Rockford Files, and he pictures himself cruising around LA in a Lincoln Continental. There's trauma in his childhood he doesn't like to discuss as an adult, trauma that the people around him whisper about but don't address. To this day, the flashbacks keep him up at night.

He decides there's nothing for him in Brazil, where he drives a cab. He finds a family, friends of friends, to host him in Peoria, Illinois.

He speaks no English. He gets robbed on the Greyhound he takes to meet them, and he shows up penniless. The family is kind and takes him in as one of their own. The matriarch teaches him to love Westerns, especially Gunsmoke, and he falls in love with the wistful quality of the music in these movies. A college professor gives him a Marty Robbins cassette, and it moves him to tears. Country and Westerns, with their worship of an idyllic, collective past, allow him to avoid his own. So much so that he wants to make this music himself.

He drives to Nashville in the early '90s. He cleans bathrooms at Opryland. He makes his way to Lower Broad, which at this point is all sex and knives and needles and pools of unholy liquids. He's moves from bar to bar in search of music, eventually drawn to one that sells rhinestone Western wear. When he walks in, a lone guitar player stands on stage singing "Hickory Wind." A pair of women are fighting in the crowd, and the singer stops to tell them to shut the eff up. He's drawn to this place, to its raw outlaw air. It feels like a saloon. It feels like those Westerns, that pure Americana that soothes him.

He talks to the bar's owner, Robert, who puts him on stage. People are confused by him at first, this Italian-Brazilian who loves old country standards.

"You're a Brazilian hillbilly," someone tells him. "You're a Brazibilly!"

Near the end of their 2:30 set, Brazilbilly plays one of their classics: "El Paso" by Marty Robbins. It's one of their most requested songs, the one that Bert, the longtime tip collector, loves seeing them play. It's a tale of adventure and travel, of cowboys and the cost of forbidden love. It's a song about the type of world Jesse wants to live in, the America he always pictured.

*Out in the West Texas town of El Paso
I fell in love with a Mexican girl
Nightright would find me in Rosa's Cantina
Music would play, and Feleena would whirl*

After their set, Jesse retires to a leather armchair in his office above the bar, where the band divvies up the evening's take. It's been more than two decades since he bought the bar from its namesake.

Robert's is Jesse's very own Rosa's Cantina, a fantasy kingdom, a place where the world makes sense. A place where the old country legends never die, where idealized versions of tradition and the past remain – until you walk out the door and they don't – where you can still get a sandwich, a moon pie, chips, and a Miller High Life with not much more than a five-dollar bill.

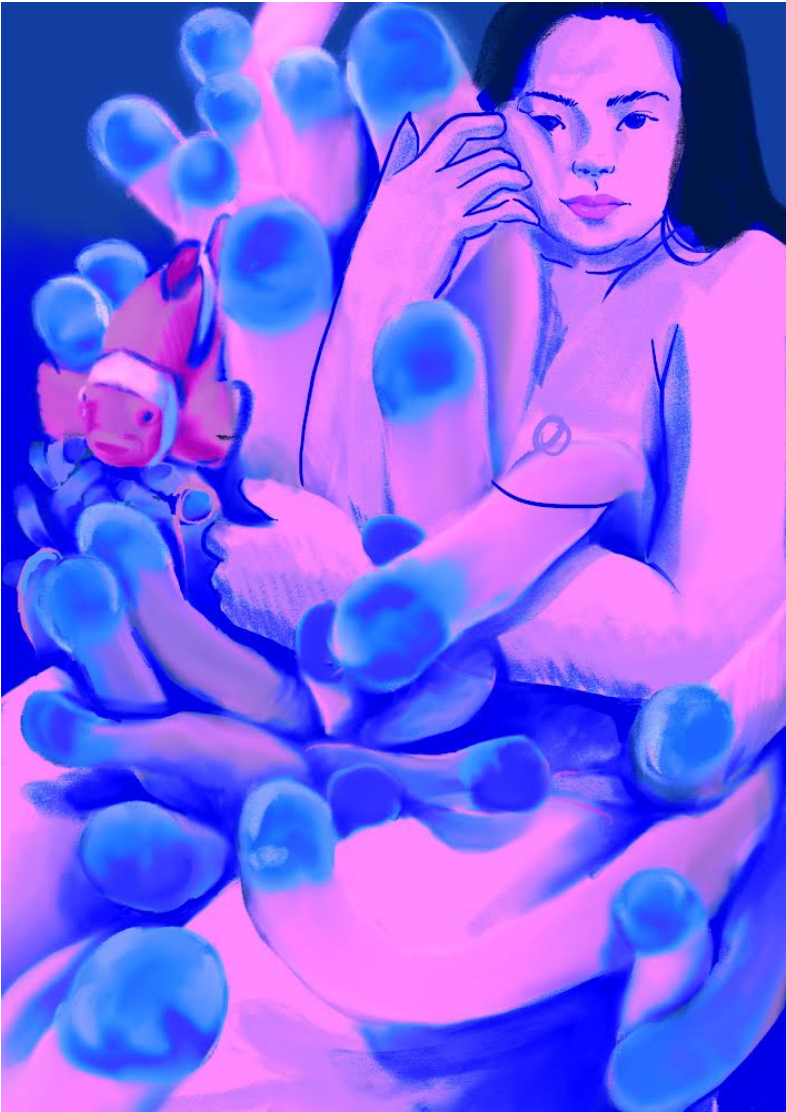
"Robert's is the Last of the Mohicans," Jesse says from his chair. He sweeps an arm out to indicate Broadway. "This was a sea of country music. Country music meaning the music that made Music City. We've got to travel back to the late '50s, '60s, and '70s to talk about that music, because that's the music that established this town as Music City, U.S.A.

"Everything has changed around us," he continues. "But these are the things that attracted me to Nashville. These were the things that brought me to America."

A giant, glass Apple Store rises up just beyond the alley behind the back door of Robert's. Turn right, walk a block, and you'll end up at the Ryman Auditorium. Nashville is like this, the hypermodern mingling with the historic, the past, present, and future running together like paints on a palette. Jesse and Robert's are prime examples.

“It’s actually very easy to do what we do and stay where we are,” Jesse says. “I don’t pay attention to what (everyone else) is doing. Not at all.”

Later tonight, Jesse will leave the bar he owns, this altar to tradition that will be here forever. He’ll hop into his car – a black 1978 Lincoln Continental, the one he always dreamed of – and drive across the river to his house in East Nashville, where most of the city’s working musicians live. When he’s ready to try and sleep, he’ll pop in one of his many Western DVDs. And he’ll see if he can drift off to the comforting sounds of gunfire in the saloon, tumbleweeds in the wind, and the music he loves.



KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE, BUT YOUR ANEMONES CLOSER

BY BAILEY ZAHNISER

UNTITLED

BY COLLEEN KIYUNA

There was a girl who lived in a cave deep under the sea — or what felt like it.

One had to know how to swim to even get to her

And to stay, to breathe underwater.

Strangers occasionally dared to dive down to her lair,

But none could linger for long before losing breath;

Try as they might to adapt, they soon returned to the surface,

Swallowing relieved gulps of open air

While the girl paddled around deep below amidst the fish,

Secretly relieved when the guests were gone —

Though she did enjoy the company most times

(or convinced herself she did).

She often gazed up at the hazy lights above, wondering if she ought to go up there herself

To connect with other people up in their element - just to be fair -

But her cave was so cozy that she never felt an inclination —

Just the feeling that she SHOULD feel an inclination.

But the more she felt she should, the more she rebelled because it was just a “should”

And so she did what she wanted, instead.

And the fishies found her as odd as the ones from above did

But they paid her no mind

Skirting and scavenging around her like she wasn't even there

She, grown used to life in this way, was content to be left to her own devices

With fishy business bubbling about her head,

Distant murmurings drifting with the current.

One day, she noticed out of her periphery a flash of color

That seemed consistent.

And she realized bemusedly that she appeared to have a repeat
visitor
To her domain;
Which would not in itself have been odd
Were it not for the fact
That this little creature seemed to be naturally impervious to her
unique features.
For in her time entertaining guests, she had come upon her fair
share of tourists:
Thrill-seekers venturing down for a taste of something different
And exotic
And upon discovering this quiet creature
Were keen on making what use they could of her.

But her defenses sprouted naturally after every unveiled intention,
Whipping tentacles that stung if one got too close.
And over time, she'd grown so many that she was an impenetrable
fortress,
Even when she didn't intend to strike
And even when she did reach out for the occasional hungry touch.

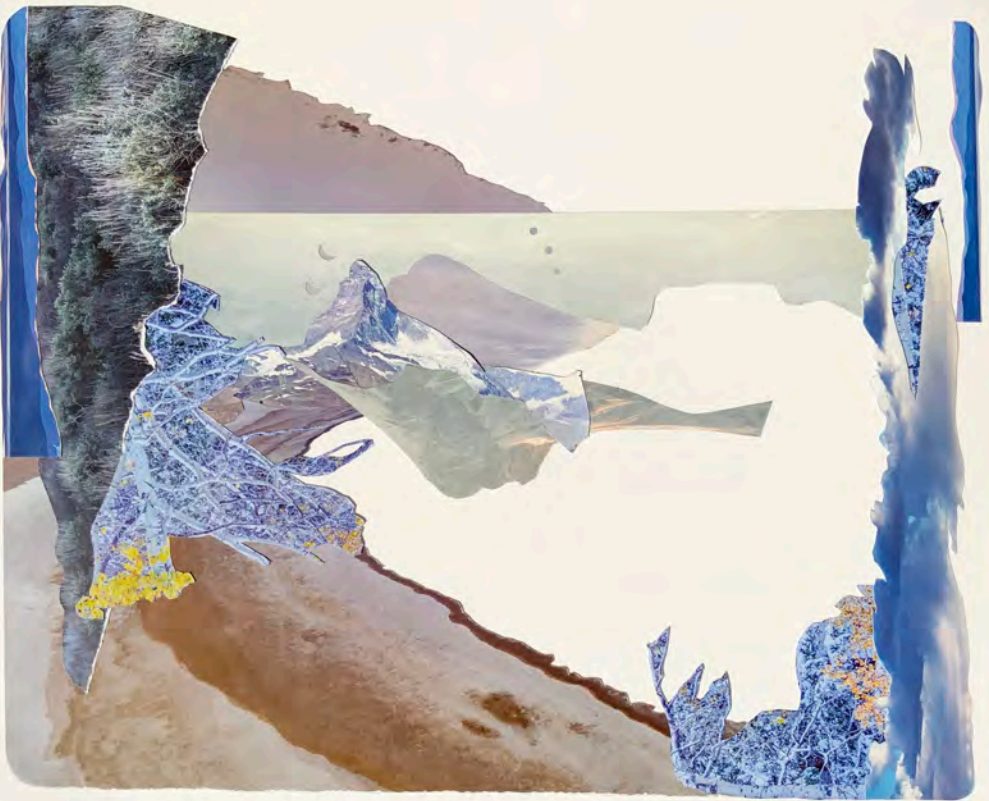
And eventually, no one could get close at all.

No one, save for this odd, silly fish
That bobbed and danced between stinging vines.
It groomed her with gentle nips, reaching places she couldn't
Or didn't bother to reach.
It even shoved treats and tidbits into the thrashing mass.
"Eat," it seemed to urge her. "Here, have another."
And without waiting for the slightest response, it would just swim
off
Likely for more offerings.
Every once in a while, it would flutter back in a turbulent cloud of
bubbles,
Darting for the safety of her tentacles.
And as she closed them around it, the luckless predator
Would sulk off in dejection.

The girl would feel a surge of warmth, that this creature would rush to her for protection.
There was nothing quite like the feeling of being a safe place for this silent, simple thing,
And though it appeared grateful, plying her with even more snacks,
It was not effusive in its thanks
And it asked for nothing else of her, not even a single moment of idle chat-chat.
It was just there, and that was all.
And every night, she curled her tentacles around the little fish,
Filled with a sense of comfortable purpose.
And she felt like there was nothing else in the world that felt as right,
As this wordless agreement that required nothing but simplicity.

BASIN AND RANGE

BY CHRISTINA SCHUELER



COUNTING TO THE CLOSENESS

BY ADIE STECKEL

We drove across the lakebed until it disappeared. “Here we are,” she said. “You hit it right on the head,” she said. “I hit what?” Voices came up from the shore in every direction. I couldn’t make anything out. The blank lake. I’ve been here before. “You don’t think this is it? Isn’t this what you’ve been looking for?” “I have no idea. I don’t know, but I think we’re close by.” The brush turned on its side. We laid down on the sideways brush on the shore of the blank lake, somewhere in shooting range of the disappearance. I put myself to sleep counting to the closeness: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1,



ALLA SERA

BY GLORIA RECH

THE LAST ACT

BY COLLEEN KIYUNA

Welcome
To an evening of sights
 sounds
 smells
To entrance the mind
And quicken the soul.

Surrender to the fear
 of missing out on
 a story
 a path
 a place at the helm—
And behold heretofore unknown facets of your
heart of hearts;

Place your bets on where the scales
Of your forbidden pleasures tip
And be free
from regrets—
 from long-suffered sorrows;

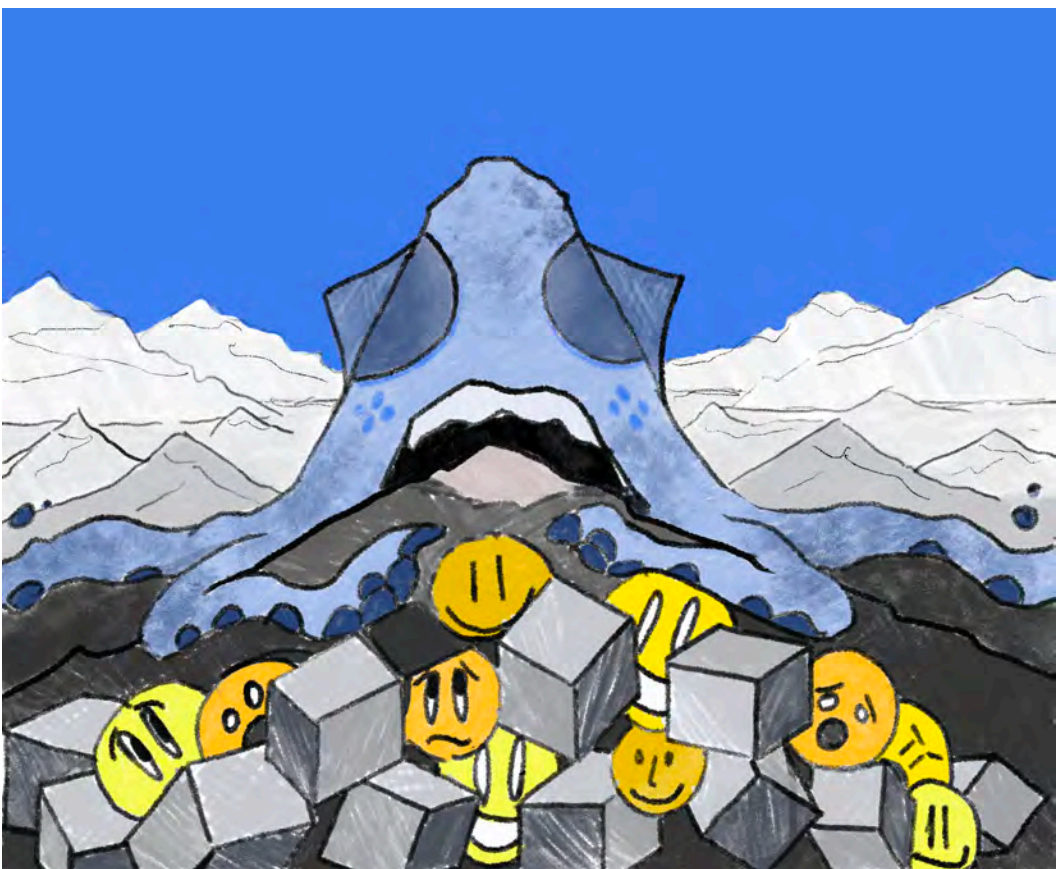
Sink into the sands
Of moments long past
And dive into depths
 unreachable
By the light of day—

 Upon my word,
You will never look back.

The price of admission is but your vow of forever

EGO DEATH

BY GRANT SIMONTON



MEET THE DEVELOPERS

BY SAM SCHILD

Shark!!!!!!

What does it matter if another rock shark comes by? We're just the disembodied heads of human emotion drawn into a cartoons to smooth over the fact that people aren't comfortable expressing how they really feel.

What?! There's a fucking shark!

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But that's just another rock shark. It won't eat all of us. It really wants to eat these perfectly square rocks that look like ice cubes.

But we're sitting in a pile of those perfectly square rocks that look like ice cubes!!

Yeah, but we're all gonna die eventually anyways. We aren't even alive. Like I said, disembodied heads of human emotion.

So what?! We can still feel, can't we???

Yeah, but we'll stop feeling as soon as that rock shark crushes through our nonexistent skulls and severs our brain stem from...well...nothing.

Whatever, man. You keep talking like some fucking nihilist who doesn't think anything means anything. I'm concerned about that SHAAAAARK!!!!!!

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The shark crashes through the rock pile where the emojis have been since the formation of earth.

Okay, well at least this is more exciting than most of the past 3 billion years. We've been staring at these mountains that whole time.

This is *definitely* more exciting than sitting here and watching mountains form, fall apart, spew magma, then fall apart some more.

Yeah, well, it doesn't change the fact that we're doomed to sit here in this pile of rocks that look like ice cubes forever.

No, I guess it doesn't. And it looks like the rock shark is moving on.

Yeah, maybe we'll see it again in another million years. How long was it since we last saw a rock shark?

I don't know. What is *time*, anyway?

Well, how many winters has it been since we last saw the rock shark?

Millions. But I lost count.

Well...where do you think the marmots are going to burrow into next?

I don't know. I don't care, either. Why?

Dunno. Just making conversation.

Well...save it. We had enough excitement to tide us over for at least 100 winters. Do you know how many marmots we'll see in that time?

Wait, shut up. I hear voices.

Cresting the hill into the high alpine basin where our emoji friends sit comes two men. They're both bald, wearing turtleneck sweaters, and have glasses.

You see, our iPhone is going to revolutionize communication. We'll all be connected with a computer in our pockets. We can send and receive messages from practically anywhere!

Yeah, but words are...so 20th-century. We need something *more*.

We need a new language, one that gets deeper into human emotions. We need a language of facial express...

What?

We need a language of facial expressions! Look! In that pile of rocks! Human emotions on cartoon heads. Where did those come from? *God? Is that you???*

No dude. There's no god. We've been here forever. Well, not literally, but almost.

They talk?!?!

Yeah, of course we do. We have mouths, don't we??!

We'll need to harvest these. They'll be perfect for iMessage. I suppose we don't really need to take them, but they'll give our developers some good inspiration. How much room do you have in your backpack?

Plenty.

Holy shit. We're getting out of here. Those nerds are taking us to meet the developers.

But, *who are the developers?*



FIGURE

BY JESSE SHOFNER

FROM THE CHEST

BY KRISTA KOEHN

you love me.

but how could that be
after the words that i said today?

so dutifully dispatched
to drive you away
with piston and purpose,
they marched to your chest,
pushed and provoked til
they ruined the rest
ofthenight.

like this time last week,
i brought up yourex
just then.

right when.
we're about to have sex.

words only, acting out orders,
assembled and signaled to penetrate borders
masterfully crafted,
thoroughly trained.
to optimize damage. to maximize pain.

textbook obedience, falling in line
leaving the lips and twisting in twine
sent like an arrow
toberead betweenheribs.
feathers forcing forward, long after the tip
h a s s t o p p e d moving

words to squeeze. words to press.

words placed solemnly upon the chest
of a salem girl losing the unwinnable trial,
death by compression suppression submission regression.
and you love me.

but how could that be?

after the words that i said today

I love you

was torn at and tired and tried.
was whispered and kissed through
and licked up and lied.

was cradled and coddled
but it cried and it cried.

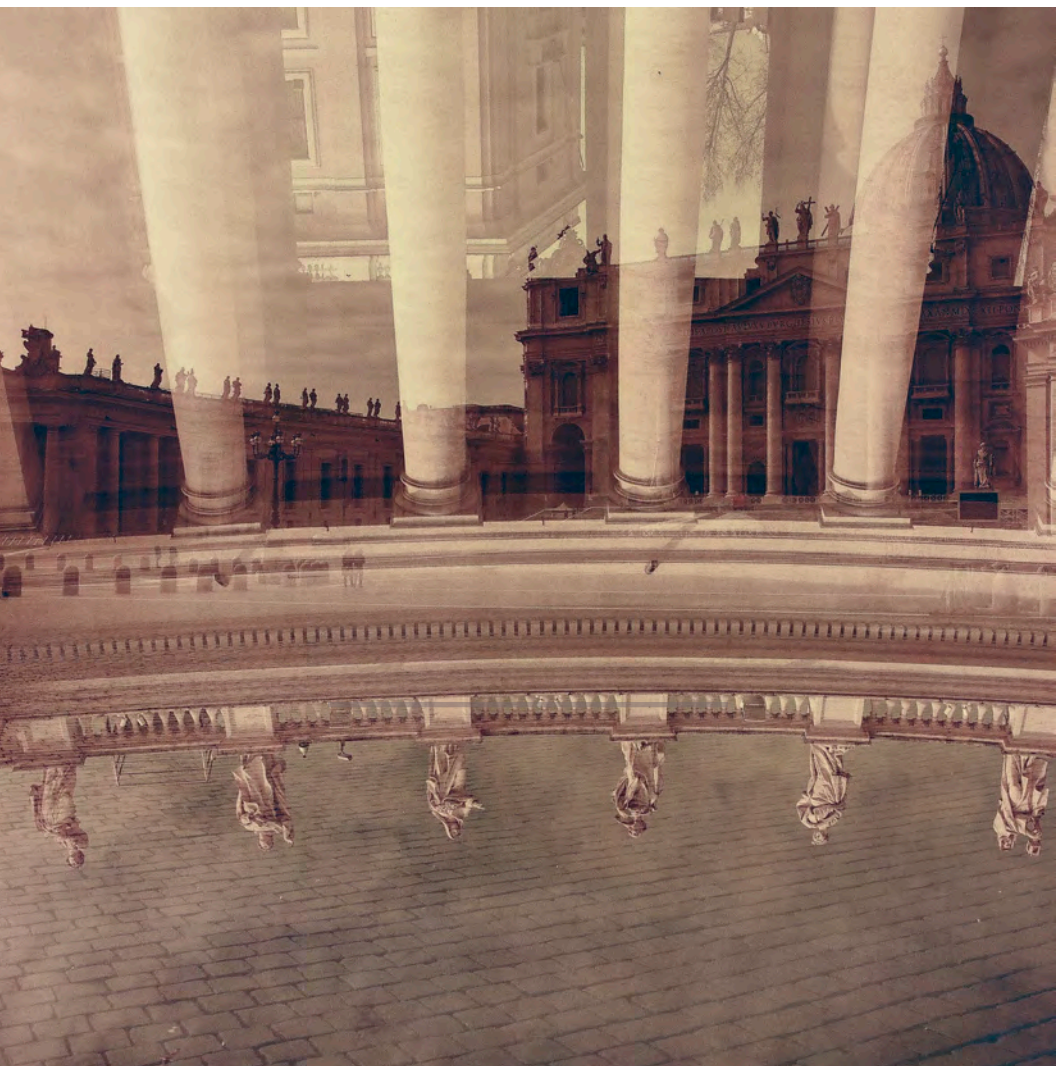
When we couldn't take it,
no! not a peep more,
we waited (and waited just to be sure.)

I love you was sent adrift slowly downstream
left in a basket to wordlessly keen.

I love you screamed loudly, for a long while
'til it gurgled and babbled and toothlessly smiled.

PETER

BY LAURENNE ROSS



SUNDAY

BY KORBI THALHAMMER

Opposite the checkstands, the automatic doors schicked closed on their rubber tracks. Tom kept his eyes fixed on the dark windows, ignoring the fluorescent reflections, straining to keep the buttocks of the newly departed customer in focus, the cheeks rubbing and gyrating obscenely, gliding out into the dark parking lot behind that horrid green cart with the bad front wheel now squealing under the weight of 24 individual 2-Paks of diet cola and a head of broccoli.

The pastor surely hadn't meant what he'd said, Tom assured himself. There was simply no way he could have been serious when he'd said it. So he must have been joking. It was as simple as that. Tom liked to keep things simple. He had never been very good at untangling things in his head, and remembering last Sunday in the back room after mass - that room just off the altar, the one sort of defining the boundary between church and rectory, between public and private - was no different.

"Find everything okay?" Tom glanced quickly at the man behind the counter. Or maybe he was in front of it. The guy shopping: was he behind or was Tom behind? The pastor had been behind Tom when he'd said it. That Tom knew.

The guy grunted. Tom swiped sagging plastic bags of rice and beans and a just barely slimy carton of eggs that he knew he should open to check but couldn't bring himself to. Tom was judicious this time and only glanced into the dazzling laser embedded in his checkstand. It was only a glance this time, but that glance, brief as it was, was enough to take him where he needed to go. He didn't stop moving but kept reaching, gripping, swiping, passing, watching slicing curves and piercing dots blaze, divinely green, across his hands and his computer screen and the guy's haggard face. Earlier this afternoon when his mind had gotten all twisted up thinking about last Sunday and he'd stared full force into the beam for two, count them: one, two, seconds,

he'd been whisked to a world of swirling light and peace then been subsequently reamed by his manager for punching in the code for granny smiths when he should have been coding for pink ladies.

"Total's on the screen," Tom said, blinking politely, blindly across the counter. The guy mumbled something about inflation and paychecks not going as far as they used to or some other banality as tired as his face and shuffled toward the door. Tom's vision was returning.

The pastor had been behind with his hand on Tom's shoulder, and his voice had been close, practically in Tom's ear. Tom hadn't registered at first what the pastor'd said. He'd just come in from the altar with the chalice and the plate from the 9AM mass. He'd never liked being an altar boy, especially after he'd gotten his job at the supermarket and had started to put together (Tom would never have used the word equate) the ideas of work and pay, but his mother had encouraged him to stick with the early Sunday mornings and the special events: weddings and funerals and the like. She'd talked with the pastor, she said, and it was best if Tom kept a foot in the door at the church. And the pastor, after all, could use some help. It seemed each year fewer and fewer of the younger kids at the school were heeding the call to become altar boys and girls. His mom'd actually said that: "Heeding the call."

"How's your day? Find everything all right?" Tom slid the basket toward himself without looking up and started swiping. In another hour he could go home. He could glide past his mom with the usual work-was-fine type answer, nab a frozen waffle and some OJ from the kitchen, throw himself onto his bed, kick off his shoes, and forget the whole business for a while. What was the code for endive again?

"Hello Tom."

Tom froze, his eyes focused on the water droplets smattered across the rubber belt of the checkstand. Tiny, inverted versions of himself stared back from the silvery domes. Slowly, he raised his gaze to meet the rheumy eyes across from him. The pastor smiled blandly, a horrid smile. Tom looked away.

“M’ello Pastor,” he mumbled. His heart was pounding now. The romaine code would have to do. Tom started swiping again. Cheese, crackers, a potato. The little olives his mom kept in a jar in the fridge at home. The pastor stood there, staring. Tom could feel those eyes on him. Prunes, salted almonds, a bottle of wine.

“That’ll be thirty-two twenty-nine.”

The pastor inserted his card. Tom punched the buttons so hard his computer shook. The receipt began to spool out of the machine and, in a rush, Tom ripped it before it was finished printing. The pastor let out a series of blocked wheezing sounds Tom recognized as a chuckle. He handed the truncated receipt across the checkstand, careful not to look up. The pastor took the slip, headed toward the doors. Then, he stopped and turned.

“Oh, Tom?” Tom’s eyes flicked up for a moment. Milky pupils glazed with that terrible thin white film peculiar to the elderly returned his gaze. The pastor’s smile widened into a sagging grin. “Have you given any more thought to my proposition?”

Tom’s eyes darted down again to the droplets on the rubber. He willed them to stay, to just hold there, but they began to creep along the belt.

“I’m - I’m not sure.” His chest hurt. His sight slid faster toward the glow. Suddenly his eyes plunged into the beam. He willed them open, feeling the terror slip from his body, replaced by the pricks of unintelligible pain blooming at the backs of his eyes. One. The laser danced. Two. Its light the orbits of distant planets. Three. The planets melted into a pool of slag. Four. Light was dripping, oozing into Tom’s eyes. Five. He’d never gone this long before. Six.

He looked up, blinking furiously, aiming his eyes straight where he figured the pastor’s eyes must be. For several moments, the wall of fluorescent vines flashed green. Tom could hear the pastor breathing. Slowly, the vines thinned, fading orange. The pastor faced Tom, smiling his moth-eaten smile, and winked.

“See you Sunday.”

Then he was gone, out into the lot, his black coat indistinguishable from the night. The doors schicked closed. The vines were pink now. Tom, behind his checkstand, faced the doors, blinking. His reflection blinked back.



BANSHEE'S TOE

BY OLIVER GORNE

BANSHEE'S TOE

BY CLAIRE BRISLIN

“Aw, get off it,” Aemon said as he slurped his helping of hot, tasteless stew.

“I’m telling you, I sawed it with my own two eyes, I did,” Calen insisted.

“And what’d it look like again?” Mary asked leaning in close, her nostrils flaring as if she could suck all the juiciest details right up her nose.

“She musta been a witch alright,” Calen started.

“She?” Mary asked. This she liked.

“Naw, she was a fairy!” Richard insisted.

“Right big for a fairy!” Calen spat.

The brothers stared each other down.

“Well,” Calen went on, “fairy or witch, she had scraggly blue hair and these long twisted black fingernails that could stab yer brain through yer ear!”

Right on cue, Richard twisted a piece of straw into Aemon’s left ear and he howled and jumped up into the air.

Richard whooped with laughter and Calen joined in, not even stopping when Mary slugged him, hard, in the shoulder.

“Yer as jumpy as a house mouse!” Calen laughed as he rubbed his shoulder.

“Yeah, well, not from your story anyhow,” said Aemon, his face flushed red as he moved his gaze from peer to peer. “Anyone’d be scared when you sneak up on ‘im like that.”

“It were a cheap shot at that,” said Mary.

“The shot mighten of been cheap,” Richard admitted, “but the story’s real.”

“Aw, come off it,” said Aemon.

“We swear it!” said Calen.

“By our mum’s grave,” Richard added.

“Where’d you see her?” Mary asked, eyes narrowing.

“In the forest,” said Calen, “about fifty paces from the main road, where the creek makes a big bend.”

“And whad ya do, huh?” said Mary, “When you saw her?”

“Whaddya mean, whadda we do?” said Richard. “We near pissed our pants, we did!”

“I didn’t!” said Calen.

“I said nearly, didn’t I?” said Richard. “What we did was run fast as we could back here, now didn’t we?”

Aemon laughed. Almost like a little cough at first. A cough you try to hold in when you don’t want to break the silence. But he broke it alright. Little coughing laughs started coming right strong out of him.

He stopped short when he noticed nobody else was laughing. He looked back and forth between Calen and Richard. “You *are* taking the piss, right?”

“We saw what we saw,” said Calen with a shrug.

“One man may lie, but I saw it too,” said Richard.

“Aw, a brother will lie for a brother,” said Mary. “We need someone else to see it.”

She looked over at Aemon.

“Who, me?”

“Well, I certainly can’t leave my own house in the night without causing a bloody fuss, now can I?” said Mary.

All three of them looked at Aemon then. A challenge. A dare. Or perhaps, more likely, another setup to scare him real good out in the woods.

Which is how Aemon found himself here, shivering in the cold night and hiding behind a boulder.

There was a fire burning, but the flames were more blue than red, its smoke heavy with a sour odor. And there was something, something Aemon couldn’t quite make out from his hiding spot, hooded in a cloak and pacing around the flames.

A scream of a laugh made his blood run cold. It sounded like a combination of twisted nails on a chalkboard and the cry of an eagle.

He had to look. His hand shook as he slipped a dirk from his belt. It wasn't much and it was in dire need of sharpening, but it gave him the courage to step out into the circle of blue light.

The creature screamed its excruciating scream again when it saw the boy and the sound nearly ended him right there and then. But there was no turning back now.

"Name thyself, demon!" Aemon shouted, brandishing the knife to distract the creature from his own trembling.

The creature dropped its cloak and Aemon was startled to see the beautiful face of a woman with light blue skin and a mass of tangled deep purple hair. But then his eyes took in the rest of her, the rest of *it*- he was nearly sick.

The creature's body from the neck down began to ripple and stretch, the blue skin sagging in a folded mess and then stretching so thin that Aemon could see the distinct definition of bones. A pair of torn black leathery wings expanded from its shoulder blades.

Then a sharp hooked beak, nearly two feet long, emerged from the creature's gut and immediately let out another scream.

It took everything Aemon had to stop himself from dropping his knife to cover his ears.

"Your name!" Aemon shouted again, tightening his grip on the handle.

A gurgling came from the creature's armpit as a worn wrinkled face slid around from the creature's back.

"It asssskksssss ussssss, my love, and we musssst anssswer," the face hissed.

The beautiful face let out a sigh that almost made Aemon's heart break. Her voice was the voice of every lost dream boiled down to the finest concentration of sorrow.

But she did not open her mouth when she said, "We are the Banshee. What dost thou desire of us?"

Aemon surged with confidence. A thousand dreams of riches and fame flooded his mind. But he knew better. An evil creature did not grant wishes like this. Only horrible or violent requests would be honored.

A morbid thought flashed through his mind, and before he could consider it further he demanded, "Give me your toe!"

The Banshee screamed and flapped its batty wings and rippled its entire body all at once.

"It asssskksssss ussssss, my love, and we mussssst pay," the wrinkled face hissed.

The Banshee lifted her swollen bubble toes up to her face, the bones in the leg cracking as she held it vertically beside her. Then she opened her beautiful purple lips to reveal a row of teeth jagged and shiny like broken glass.

She bit the big toe off her foot and spit it at Aemon's feet.

He quickly pulled out his kerchief and wrapped the horrid thing up before sticking it into his pocket. Now he had proof! Richard and Calen wouldn't be laughing now, no indeed. And Mary? She might look at him a bit different now too.

He turned to go, to escape this nightmare as quickly as possible. When the hissing voice of the wrinkled face stopped him in his tracks.

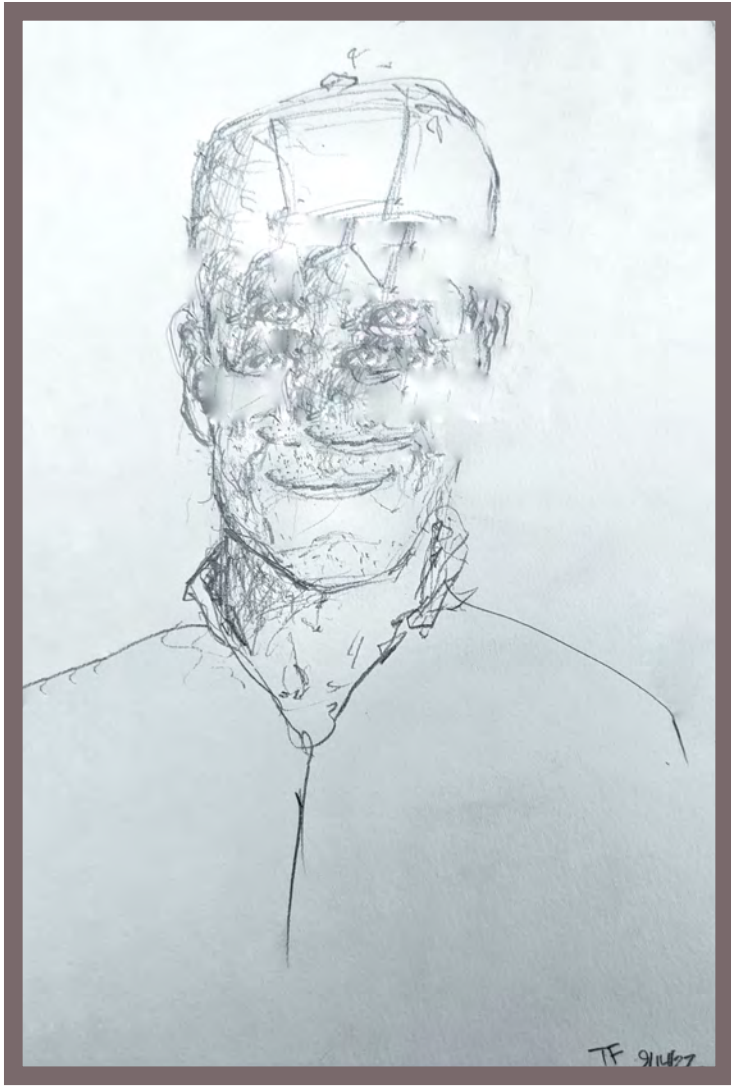
"It asssskksssss ussssss, my love, and now it mussssst pay." Aemon's stomach dropped.

"A toe for a toe, give it to ussssssssss."

Aemon put his hand on the bundle in his pocket. He could throw it back and run. Run as fast as he could out of the woods and back to the house and the warmth and the hot stew that was at least hot after all.

But they'd never believe him. And he'd never hear the end of it.

The way was easy to follow. With every limping drag of his foot, the boy had left a trail of blood right back to the house. And when the Banshee let out one more victorious scream, the toe answered.



DINNER WITH RYAN

BY TOMMY FORD

LIVING WITH RYAN

BY MEGHAN ROBINS

Every Tuesday, Ryan and I have dinner. It's good for roommates to check in—house meetings we call them. We've been having more and more lately. He's worried about me but I can't figure out why.

How's broccoli and tofu? he says. Ryan's a vegetarian for the planet more than himself. I suppose that means I am too.

Sounds great, I say. Thanks.

Mom always liked it when we said thank you no matter what. Polite boys, that's what she likes.

I met someone at work, I say.

I know. Ryan oils the pan. You think about him all the time.

Ryan's the calmer, cooler version of me. He knows me better than myself. We both knew we'd get boyfriends or girlfriends someday, so should probably talk about new house rules.

But you haven't even asked him out yet. Ryan's eyebrows raise. Aren't you jumping ahead with all this boyfriend stuff?

So the cat's out of the bag. A strange phrase, compelling visual. I wonder if we should get a cat.

Boyfriend first, Ryan says firmly. Then we'll talk cat. So tell me about him, he says.

And I do. But then Ryan gives me that knowing look and suddenly I'm afraid they've met before and I'm just second chum. But Ryan's astute—has been since the fifth grade. He tells me not to worry,

that I never need to explain things to him. Even my biggest, craziest, darkest secrets. He just gets me.

Like really gets me.

Even the house rules—that was his idea and I love it. Rules make me feel safe, like he does. Which is why I don't mind that Ryan can't afford rent right now. He's never had luck with jobs and I make plenty for the both of us.

I was nervous to invite Elias over. I'd never asked a man to dinner before.

Or anyone, Ryan corrects.

Ever since my parents sent me to correctional therapy in fifth grade, the same year I met Ryan, they've been concerned about my friend situation. Except they never approved of Ryan, the one friend I have, which breaks my heart because Ryan is the very best part of me. I've always thought if they don't like him, they don't know me at all.

Fuck 'em, Ryan likes to say. But I'm still my parents' child and mother doesn't use profanities so neither do I. But yes, my thoughts exactly.

Ryan makes eggplant with white beans and tomato sauce for my date then skedaddles. Elias arrives and we I dig in, relieved that our mouths have an excuse for not talking. When Ryan pops back over, Elias doesn't even notice him. Ryan takes a peek at my tall, thin, dark-skinned coworker who wears his hair short on the sides and tall up top. But Elias doesn't seem to notice. Instead he's smiling at me and thanking me for the delicious meal.

I wish I could take credit, I say, but my roommate's the real chef.

Oh, I assumed you lived alone, Elias says, visually touring the apartment.

After dinner, we sit on the couch, which bows at the weight of our bodies together. It never bows like this with Ryan, but we never sit so close and Elias is substantially taller. He drapes his arm around me and my head fits nicely against his neck. The only other date I've been on didn't go well and I'm starting to feel nervous. On queue Ryan appears at the door and I sit upright.

You okay? Elias asks. But Ryan's obviously still offended from before and skirts out of sight.

The least you could do is say hi, I say.

Elias laughs. Okay, hi.

Not to me. To him.

Elias looks confused. Maybe he hasn't seen Ryan. The movie is kind of loud. Elias looks incredulous. I know what he's thinking. Ryan doesn't have a lot of stuff and we share most of it anyhow. Miraculously, we've been the same size since middle school because why buy two jackets when you can share one? I wish Ryan would say hi, but I hear the shower start and know he's trying to stay out of our hair.

I should go, Elias says. But the movie's not over.

He won't call, Ryan confirms later. He doesn't understand.

We're just friends, I say, roommates.

No we're not, Ryan says.

And it's true. He's wearing my favorite shirt, which I've chosen for our date. I look down and I'm still wearing it too.

He says thank you a lot, Ryan says. That's nice. But he'll get jealous, confused by you and me.

I know, but maybe if he gets to know you, I say. I can't be with someone who doesn't appreciate you, who can't understand what you do for me.

No, you can't, Ryan says, almost laughing. He does this sometimes. It starts as a chesty rumble, an exhale that lifts into a high-pitched maniacal cackle. Soon he's laughing so hard he doubles over, and that kind of laughter is contagious so pretty soon I'm laughing too.

There's a knock at the door. Elias has come back. I forgot my sweater, he says. What's so funny?

I wipe tears from my eyes. Oh Ryan was just saying something.

Elias scans the room, looking straight through Ryan. This time, I'm offended for us both. But Ryan shrugs. Fuck 'em, is what he's thinking.

I look back at Elias, his beautiful brown eyes are big, terrified even. He's staring through me now, too.

Right, he says. I'll see you around, Ryan.

I shudder. Nobody has called me that since the fifth grade.

I go by Blake now, I remind him.

But it's too late. Elias is closing the door. That name is pulling me backwards. To a much smaller version of myself. To my mother's voice hissing, Where are your manners, *Ryan*? And the sting of her rings. Elias closes the door, and in our smallest voice, I hear us say, Thank you.



OPERA SINZA TITULO

BY JACOB PESCOLLDERUNGG

LETTER FROM MYSELF

BY CHRISTINA SCHUELER

At age five, you picked up a seashell in your small hand and smashed it hard into your sister's shoulder. She cried out in pain and tumbled down onto the sand. Most of the mess was coming from her face—hot tears, distorted mouth and eyes closed tight to the world. Her shoulder bore only a dot of blood and a faint thumbprint of the sea.

You're surprised? Well, that *was* a long time ago. I can imagine how it has slipped your memory. When I was your age I recalled those early years as fire in a hearth—comforting and aglow. Was there anything specific about the veneer of childhood? I can't remember if there was.

The year you turned twenty was violent too, though you found yourself a different weapon this time. You used your words to sever, to shred. Your parents heard you say that *you didn't need*

their shitty advice. You told Rhea she *is too goddamn much sometimes* and she believed you. That man outside of the church on South Street was in your way, too, and he didn't even know your name.

I could keep going, you know. There's the time you threw the dog halfway across the room after it tried biting Laura. It lay there for a second too long, its pupils like inkwells. Or the moment you began the slow poisoning of your wife's ambitions—*don't you think you're asking a lot for people to care about art?*, I think you asked.

That much, at least, you remember? No? Fucking embarrassing. I've lived four decades longer than you have and I'm the one telling you? You're ruining lives—destroying things. You're a violent man with no understanding of his past. What do you imagine has happened over these last 37 years as you left a trail of pain behind you? You're lying to yourself, slicing yourself to pieces. You should be ashamed of yourself.

Sorry.

I'm sorry.

It's just that, from my perspective, all of this could have been avoided. If only you were seeing what I'm seeing! So much changes when you're older. Though I will say, when you're my age, memories are less like scabs and more like scars in that they don't fester long but they do come back to haunt you.

THE CONTRA COSTA DROWNINGS

*This story is based off a news article printed in the San Jose
Mercury, May 2022*

BY MEGHAN ROBINS

Brody thumbed through images of a little girl whose smile was absolutely his. At the clickity clack of heels on tile, he pocketed his phone and stood.

“Hello, mother.”

“Hello, dear. Do you like living here?”

“Of course.” Brody gummed a smile.

“Then stop moping about.”

Brody did enjoy the luxuries of generational wealth. Being the great-grandson of San Jose’s finest cannery owner, he may not have earned living in a 7000-square-foot mansion but he deserved it. And his mother agreed. Except for one caveat. For twenty-six years Brody had been pleasing his mother who gave and gave and gave until the moment trust was broken. And trust, in this case, included adhering to one’s station. When Brody impregnated a woman he’d met while managing his family’s gas station, his life at work spilled into the work of living with his mother—a woman who believed pedigree was still a term appropriate for humans. (It is not, for the record.) Layla was funny, beautiful, political. They’d bantered even as she drove off in her old Ford, leaning out the window flashing a genuine smile. She was born to immigrant farmers, a family split between Salinas Valley and a small village in central Mexico. She spoke perfect English but curled her Rs in words with Spanish roots like *tortilla*. She was everything, for a moment.

Brody, the only child and heir to not just his great-grandfather’s cannery but his paternal grandfather’s oil and gas

fortune, had broken his mother's trust. She expected him to marry Tiffany Amheigh or at least one of her cousins whose family had no reputational smudges, poor political backing, or unseemly drama—a marriage worthy of good breeding. (Again, not an appropriate way to speak about humans, especially considering the genetic calamities purebred dogs face, which should give one pause before wishing such low genetic diversity upon ones only child's children.)



Illustration by Amanda Bednarick

But none of this mattered because Brody was forced to choose between his own happiness and certain disinheritance or a miserably obedient life with all the wealth one could ask for. Brody,

for better or worse, chose wealth, thinking there must be a way to have both. But as images of his daughter, already four years old, plastered his mind like wallpaper, he knew he'd chosen wrong. So he devised a plan that relied on certain presumptions, which make for a risky plan. There was only one reason he could not have his family and this life, this house, his 1962 Corvette. And she was standing right in front of him.

A month later, sitting with his lawyer and distant relatives, Brody listened to his mother's will, the final divvying of his family's combined fortunes. Days later, the doorbell rang as he sweated through his polo. How embarrassing. He desperately needed to remedy his shirt, but there was no time. The door bell rang again. When he opened it, Layla and their daughter were there.

"Isabel," Layla said. "Meet your father."

Perhaps love was a knotted stomach plus slight nausea. He'd felt similarly around his mother and this filled Brody with dread, which made him sweat more.

"Come in," he said. "There's lemonade by the pool." He led them through the home's giant maw, which was now entirely his, and Layla cautiously circled the water.

"Everything okay?" Brody asked.

Layla adjusted beneath the umbrella. "I'm just afraid of water."

Thoughts of Syrian refugees motoring toward Italy flickered through Brody's mind, irrationally attaching fear of water to all immigrants.

"Sorry about your mother," Layla said, sipping cool lemonade. "But you know she offered me money to leave you alone."

"That's over now," Brody said, feeling a warmer version of love. "Now you can move in."

"But Isi's about to start kindergarten," Layla said.

“There are schools here.” Brody reached for her hand.
“Better ones.”

Layla recoiled. “Or you could live with us. I have my family, my work.”

“You don’t need to work anymore,” Brody said.

Layla stood. Isi squirmed in her arms. “I like my job. I love my family. I thought maybe you’d changed now that your mother’s gone. That you wanted to fit into our life, be a real father.”

“Are you asking me to choose? To leave all this?” Brody stood and waved his sweaty palms at the grotesque display of wealth behind him.

Layla stepped between him and the pool. “I’m sorry I came, Brody. I don’t want this, any of it.”

And just like that the man who never learned emotional maturity reverted to his childhood self, reacting like an eight-year-old son spoiled by his mother.

“This isn’t fair!” he shouted and shoved the obstacle in front of him.

Layla fell back, slipping into the pool. She and Isi splashed and flailed. Layla screamed. For the rest of his life, Brody remembered how big and bright her eyes were then. The whole thing made him sick and sweaty. They could cool off in the pool, he thought. He needed a shower. He walked upstairs and undressed. The shower was cool and loud. When he returned ready to make his apologies and suggest a way he could have both wealth and family, he saw Layla face down, her hair drifting like a black inky squid. Little Isabel floated face up, a tiny angelic replica of himself.

The right thing to do, he knew, was to jump in and save them. So he did. He swooped up Isi first, lighter than he’d imagined and dredged her poolside, attempting CPR as he’d seen in movies, which meant slack elbows and not enough pressure to pump water out of lungs. He blew into her tiny mouth and nose. He did not know what he was doing. After too long, he jumped back in and tried the same things on Layla. Nothing worked. Too briefly was his small family together, and in his grief he erased from memory the conversation from before, replacing it with a new

memory, a better one, one he could live with. He was going to take Isi for ice cream after. He'd just needed to shower first.

This is what he told the police when they arrived. His statements were tear-ridden and heartfelt—so well had his mother trained him to maintain his station. All Brody wanted was to keep his fortune and his family. To have both. And for the briefest moment while he held his daughter in his arms with the love of his life laying nearby, he had.

BIG ALV'S MOONLIGHT MASH

BY ADIE STECKEL

Big Alv's Moonlight Mash
is an all night drink 'n drive affair. Baby-faced teens do donuts on
the lake bed. Engines rev, stars die,
the Milky Way thickens.
Shipping containers shake
like barracks in the dust,
Pepe the Frog smiles slyly from the mirror, there are glow sticks in
the toilet.
A few hundred feet
up this rock
I can see into Nevada.
When I close my eyes,
I see Area 51,
white figures
Naruto-running
down Extraterrestrial Highway,
radioactive particles
in Cliven Bundy's
breakfast cereal.
The tanned arms
of occupation
reach round horst and graben and if
you don't have a scale
you can't know the weight.



"Bar" by Jesse Shofner

THE BUS

BY CLAIRE BRISLIN

did they leave it? I wonder
stuck on that slick jungle cliff
for vines to slowly strangle with fibrous ropes of time?

and did they carry you out with the rest of the passengers?
or leave you behind in that oversized coffin on wheels?

you still owe me a dance, you know

and you were supposed to meet me here
in the Atacama desert
where it never rains
and you can see more stars
than anywhere else on earth

there are flamingos here, did you know?
thousands of them stalking through salt flats
on legs so thin you could break them between your fingers

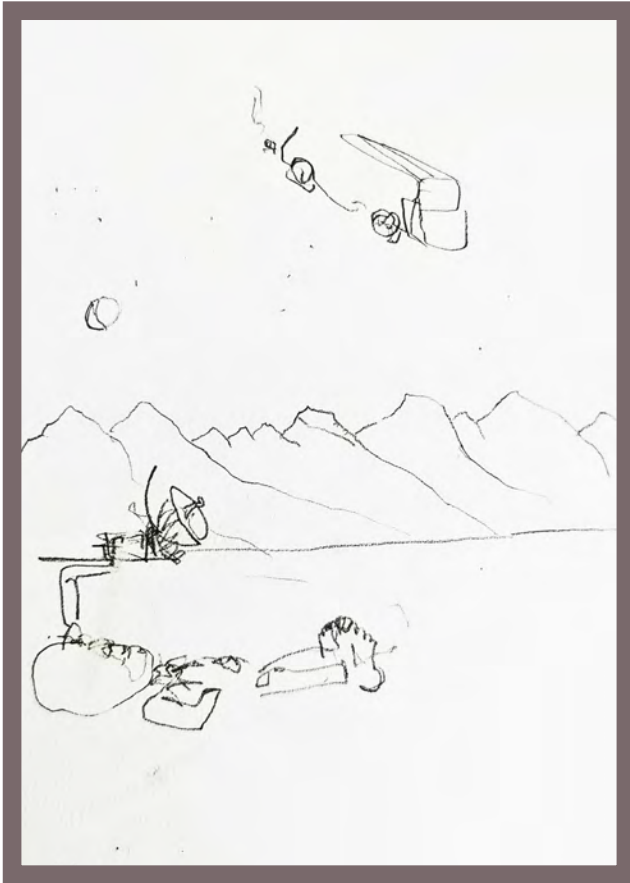
yes, of course I'm exaggerating
but that doesn't mean it isn't true

when I saw the rusting remains of the bus
looming there in the sand like an orphaned elephant
I almost ran over to look for you
to pull you from the wreckage

but no-

this was a different continent
years and thousands of miles from where you tumbled

and I have no interest in the bones of strangers



"Atacama Projection" by Tommy Ford

ASTRO-INTIMACY

BY COLLEEN KIYUNA

Excess of artfulness
Is not an ailment
From which I'd wish to be availed.
Seeking answers in the false stars of a modern sky,
Lost in scenes from past lives and past eyes
Of sheer wondrous minds,
Is my method to tease my madness.

Why suffer the pains of not knowing who I am
When I can be told to the most graceful degree of accuracy How I
shine forth unto others and they unto me? Eavesdropping on
others' dreaming souls,
Hoping for a glimpse of a future starring our secret selves, We are
all just finding our lives through lies we live
Through each other.



Illustration by Gloria Rech

UNDERWATER

BY KIYOKO REIDY

In the morning, the first mouth I want
To open is yours. I am a beggar
For this small safety, the body's familiar

Recesses. Safe and familiar are often
Synonyms, but it is so cruel when
They are not. In two months, your brother

Will be married. I know the ceremony,
The vows, the black flowers and deep
Velvet like they have happened

Already. I've lived them so many times
the real wedding will roll by like an echo,
a dwindling wave. I am ruining the best day

of another man's life. In the morning I look & look
away. In the morning I am a beggar,
a dog, a city bird. I am winged, too

trusting, ignorant head cocked. Curious
& dumb look so alike. In a month, I will risk
the hurt, if I can make space

To store it by then, in these dark & cluttered
chambers. We will be in a city that defies
gravity, the water's desire to fill whatever

space. I have images but no narrative:
the pelicans—graceless, ill-proportioned
birds streaking low over the water,

the bedsheets deep creases bracketing
your frown, the sea rising through
the sidewalks. It takes only a few inches

to drown. This swallowed home
is familiar: as in *well known from long
association*. Sound travels clear and ringing

over water. Through water, it travels further,
faster—a cascade of movement once it's begun—
but arrives muddled, each progression a messy

game of telephone. My echoes are filling this whole
ocean, but even I can no longer discern the words.



“Loop” by Bailey Zahniser

TAKE CARE

BY KORBI THALHAMMER

“Buddyyyy.”

“Hey man, long time no see!”

“Aw yeah comere. Such a long time. How ya been?”

“Yeah, long time. Long time... How you bee-”

“So good, man. So good. Things are going great.”

“Oh yeah? Ah man, that’s great.”

“Yeah, things are going really great. Wife’s good. Max, she’s good.”

“Ah man, I’m so glad to hear it. So, so whadya say, should we get some breakfast?”

“Oh, I’ve been up since five man.”

“You’ve been up since five?”

“Yeah, I’ve been up since five man. I had breakfast hours ago. I get up at five every day.”

“Oh, well-“

“Yeah ya know I need my me time, ya know. With Max starting school this week it’s been like go go go. It’s like what is it today? Ballet? Swim? Viola? She’s always doing something and I’m the one who’s taking her.”

“Yeah, I bet. How’s she doing?”

“Yeah she’s good man, thanks. She’s real good. She’s such a good kid.”

“Oh yeah I’m glad to hear it. Yeah, how old is she now?”

“She’s about to start second grade, man.”

“Wow-“

“She’s pumped.”

“Yeah, wow.”

“Hey do you want me to buy you breakfast?”

“Um, I mean - Wait what?”

“Yeah, I feel bad, ya know. We were gonna get breakfast.”

“Yeah, but I’ll just go in and order something and meet you back here.”

“No, here, take my card. I wanna take care of you.”

“-you don’t have to do that.”

“No, really.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’ll just get something and come back out.”

“No, no, take it. Just get me a cinnamon roll annnd, and a cup of coffee. I’ve been up since like five man.”

“Oh. Uh, okay.”

“Thanks man.”

“Yeah, I mean thank you. I’ll be right-“

“No problem man. I’ll be here.”



“Social Scree” by Christina Schueler

“Alright so here’s your cinnamon roll-”

“Oh yeah man, this looks great.”

“-and your coffee.”

“Ah that’s awesome.”

“And here’s your card back.”

“Yeah my treat.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Yeah no problem at all, man. Things are going great at work. I make commission ya know so it’s like as long as I perform I see the money. It’s been great this year.”

“So how does that work?”

“It’s the best, man. The more I sell, the more I get paid. Simple as that.”

“Sounds pretty good.”

“Yeah I keep telling all my buddies they gotta ask for commission. If you’re not getting it you’re getting a raw deal.”

“Huh. Yeah I-“

“And I make. Such. Good. Money, man. Like, so good.”

“Oh, yeah, man that’s great. So business is good.”

“It’s so good, man. This year has been crazy. My wife keeps bugging me about a vacation home and I’m like ‘Baby, first we gotta take care of the rental, okay?’ I mean you hear me right, man?”

“Ha, yeah, I mean that makes se-“

“It’s like I know I said this year was good but how ‘bout we talk vacation this year and vacation home next year. Ya know what I mean?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. So how you been?”

“Oh yeah, you know things have been okay lately. Just got done with a big project at work. -”

“Ohhhh that reminds me, did I tell you about our vacation?”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so.”

“Oh man yeah you’re gonna love this.”

“Oh yeah? Where’d you-“

“We climbed Mount Whitney, man.”

“O-“

“Mount Whitney. It’s the highest mountain in the US.”

“I thought that was-”

“Yeah we got up at like one, man, and started - or wait no we got up at like midnight and started hiking at one.”

“That’s early.”

“Yeah I mean I like get up at five though just for stuff at home so it wasn’t too bad.”

“Yeah I guess that’s familiar.”

“Yeah man and there was a meteor shower that night.”

“Oh?”

“Just like pure coincidence, man. Couldn’t have planned it better. They were like shooting all over the sky right in front of us and we were just like ‘whoa.’”

“That must have been-”

“It was spectacular. Best climb I’ve ever been on. You know it’s really not that hard.”

“Yeah-“

“Everyone says it’s hard but it’s not that hard.”

“It’s mostly just-“

“Yeah, it’s, I mean it’s like it is 22 miles, and it is like 5000 feet of gain.”

“But really it’s just a wa-“

“Yeah I hear you and it’s like I’m like sore now and it’s been a couple days, so it’s like it’s not nothing.”

“But it’s not technical-”

“But yeah it’s really just-“

“It’s a walk-“

“Yeah it’s a walkup.”

SHAPESHIFTER

BY KRISTA KOEHN

*My love is like a shapeshifter,
got a heart like a 1960's drifter.
I'm better off on my own, so I've been told,
so I've been told by you,
and by me.*

*Trying to toe one thin line,
can't buy up the world with one thin dime.
Baby, that's how it's been, most of the time,
most of the time with you,
and with me.*

*Fixin' to break the shape I'm in,
wanna slough off the weight of this skin.
But everywhere that I've been, I'd crawl back again,
I'd claw my way in, for you,
for you and for me.*

*Oooooooooo
for you and for me
you and for me
you and for me*

you and for me,

for you and for me.

*Take what you will, I know it's a no.
Leave what you can, I'll keep it to show
that we ran together, but separate forever,
separate forever,
like lines on the road.*



Illustration by Ali Williams

ANNIE AND AVA

BY MIEKE HONDA REILAND

Annie leans on the counter, taking a pull from her box mod. She breathes out, and smoke eddies around her sharp, angular features. She smiles. She loves her cloud as much as just about anything. But not as much as she loves Ava.

It's Tuesday morning, and Annie stands in Magical Vapors, a smokeshop squeezed between a Domino's and a barber in South Nashville. The shop curates an aesthetic that screams "Fruity Pebbles." Within glass display cases, vape boxes and bongs sit spaced out in shades of fuchsia, emerald, and aquamarine, as if infused with food coloring.

As inventory manager, Annie presides over the color. She wears a black hoodie, black sweatpants, black Jordans, all of which complement her straight black hair. Right now, her clothing reflects her mood. The store opened 15 minutes ago, and she's yet to see a customer.

Finally, a couple, two hairdressers, walks in. "Heyyy!" Annie grins at the pair, who are regulars. "How are you?" She shows them two new flavors of disposable vapes — Lemon Ice Cream and Coconut Crumble.

"I don't know if you like desert-y flavors?" She ventures. The taller of the two men wrinkles his nose. "*He* might," he nods at his partner. "*I* like sour and tart." Like a sommelier, Annie walks through tasting notes, mouthfeels. The taller man eventually settles on Hawaiian, pineapple with a strong orange aftertaste. His

partner chooses Banana Frost. Before they leave, they offer Annie some haircare advice for Ava.

Ava, Annie's daughter, is 18 months old. Annie used to study auto mechanics at Lincoln Tech in East Nashville. Then, she learned she was pregnant.

After Ava was born, Annie found a manager job at a Panera. They refused to schedule her shifts around Ava's daycare. During breaks, Annie used to sneak sandwiches to her friends at the vape shop. Finally, the owner emailed her and offered her a job. Magical Vapors supports working mothers far more than Panera.



"Forever Dancing" by Grant Simonton

Annie used to dream of working at Magical Vapors. She's shopped here ever since she could smoke. She and her friends would buy a few disposables, sit on the couch in the corner, and watch afternoons evaporate into evenings.

Now, Annie's life fits within a few square miles — work, Ava's daycare, her apartment. Her parents' homes. Even her old high school. Her parents moved to Nashville from Ukraine just before she was born. They've since

divorced, but she sees them both often, and she never considered

leaving until she became a mother. But she's spent over two decades here. She's sick of it. She hates Broadway and the tourists. Maybe Ava would like someplace else better. Never moving away from your hometown, even for a minute, feels like marrying the first person who has sex with you.

Soon after the two men leave, another regular arrives. Her daughter, Colby, was born a few months after Ava. Annie and the woman lean across the counter and swap baby videos. When she and Ava were snowed in last weekend, Annie recorded her daughter dancing in the living room.

"My husband is quitting vaping," the woman says, "and I'm like..."

"I'm not!" Annie finishes. They laugh.

"Like, he was so mad about me not quitting," the woman continues. "He's like, 'it's not good for Colby.' I'm like, she's not *inhaling* it. I don't vape around her. It's a personal decision. And literally, every night, he's stealing mine."

The woman buys Coconut Crumble and leaves. Annie watches her go.

In a few weeks, Annie will finish her commercial real estate license. Cranes hover over her hometown skyline. Annie's a Nashville native, and she wants her piece. Once she gets some money, she's going to leave Tennessee and buy a little house with some land. That's where she'll raise Ava, the two of them alone, together.

Annie returns to her counter. She takes a long drag on her vape, then slowly exhales. Her pale face slips behind a cumulus of smoke. Like many people who've never left home, her near future weighs heavy with potential energy and possibility. Sometimes, it's

hard to keep her mind from running off. But right now, she needs to finish her shift. Then, she needs to pick up Ava from daycare.

Sometimes, your hometown pushes you away. Sometimes, it pulls you in. If Annie defers her dream of leaving — if it dries up like a raisin in the sun, or a mouth after years of vaping — at least she's already achieved the most important one.

No matter where she lives, she can always see her daughter dancing.

PIGHEART'S RABBITHOLE

BY SAM SCHILD

CHAPTER 6

ROPES FOR THE REVOLUTION: THEY WORK FOR THE WORKERS

“Sorry about that,” the man with the military green winter jacket says to Pigheart and Scooter, “You two caught me in the middle of a livestream event. But I think they loved the show we put on for them. Here, as a thank you.”

He tosses them each a gelatinous capsule about the size of a pill bottle. They look at the mysterious objects.

“What is this?” Scooter asks while rubbing his neck that just seconds ago had a noose wrapped around it. *I can't believe that rope knew I wasn't a part of the global oligarchy and didn't hang me! This is insane! In my four years on the road, I've never had anything like this happen!*

“Water, of course!” The man replies, “YouTube pays per view for all of my content in water capsules. I get .001 per viewer for livestream events. I just had a billion people watching that. So the way I see it, I owe you each a few more of these.”

“It's that easy?!” Pigheart asks.

“No, of course not! I spent *years* building my revolutionary brand,” the man counters, “This was

the moment when all my hard work paid off! The Revolution begins *right now!*”

Pigheart bites into the water capsule. Clean, delicious water spills into her mouth and the sides of her canine snout. She licks the water off the ground. *Wow, that’s so much better than the sugary stuff!*

“Here, put this one in a bowl. It’ll be easier to drink, comrade,” the man says while handing Pigheart another water capsule.

Scooter pulls an empty 2-liter Mountain Dew bottle from his tiny backpack. With a pair of 1-inch scissors cuts it into a bowl for Pigheart. She drops the capsule into her new bowl and bites into it. *Delicious, clean water!*

“Wait, what do you even have in that backpack?” Pigheart asks, “that empty bottle must have taken up half the pack!”

“Mostly Dew,” Scooter replies, “plus a little bit extra for life on the road.”

“Like, what?”

“A down quilt, foam pad, tarp, jacket, and those scissors,” Scooter replies.

“...and the rest is just...Mountain Dew??!”

“...Uh, yeah. What else you think I’d carry?”

“Well I guess I don’t have anything else, but I just left my house yesterday, and I’m a dog!” Pigheart replies.

“We all need something to live for out on the road, I personally am here for the Dew.”

“I’m just trying to find my friend, Warrick.”

“So...Alex Bones?” the man asks.

“We’re going out to look for him. You see, my friend was—”

“--taken hostage. I know, it may have looked like I wasn’t listening. But I was. I’ve been doing this a long time,” the man interjects.

“Let’s go. I know where we should look first. This’ll make great livestream content. When we get Alex Bones, the whole world will be watching.”

“Wait, can I trade you my water capsule for some Mountain Dew? You know, the old recipe, from when they still used fresh water?” Scooter asks.

“Scooter! We’re going to find Alex Bones, and you’re worried about Mountain Dew?!” Pigheart says.

“I only work for water, what working people across the world should have access to!” The man replies. “But I hear Alex Bones has the largest stockpile of old recipe Mountain Dew *in the world*,” the man says.

“Really?!” Scooter says.

“Really.” says the man. “He’s rich, built an empire by stockpiling bottled beverages over the past decade.”

“Not from his YouTube videos?” Pigheart asks.

“All his YouTube videos are a means to an end. He sells supplements and buys bottled drinks. The global oligarchy is consolidating its wealth around plastic bottles and the treasures they contain.”

“Well let’s go then. I want some Dew!” Scooter exclaims.



Illustration by Oliver Gorne

“Yeah, let’s go!” says Pigheart.

“Wait, what’s your name, sir?”

“Bernie, the name’s Bernie,” the man says.

And that’s when it all clicked in Pigheart’s head. This man, the green jacket, the unkempt mess of grey hair on his head, the fiery passion he spoke of revolution with. This man is Bernie Sanders.

Pigheart looks him over, he's wearing those hand-knit mittens from the famous "Chairman Bernie" meme. In fact, he's wearing the exact same outfit. It's 100 degrees outside, and he's wearing a winter coat and mittens.

How long ago was he photographed in that outfit? *How is Bernie Sanders still alive?* How is he still this fired up about the revolution?

"...You're...*Bernie Sanders*, aren't you?" Scooter asks.

"Of course I am."

"Well, sort of..." the man replies.

"What do you mean, *sort of*? You died campaigning for president in 2024. I watched you fight Donald Trump to the death." Scooter says.

I watched that livestream, Scooter remembers, just was me and a case of Mountain Dew Purple Thunder. It was even cold. Those were the days...

CHAPTER 7

PRESIDENTIAL WRESTLING 2024

Donald Trump, after refusing to participate in a standard presidential debate during his 2020 campaign, agreed to a wrestling match with Bernie Sanders, the democratic presidential candidate. Both men were in their 80s.

The match ended when Bernie distracted Trump with an ingenious maneuver. After several rounds of shit-talking, old man punching, and grappling, Bernie jumps out of the ring. Donald Trump, thinking Bernie was conceding the match, starts to brag towards the closest camera pointed in his direction.

“I’m the *greatest wrestler* the world has *ever seen!*”

Seconds later, Bernie reemerges with a steak.

“Hey Donald, I’ve got *the last Trump Steak in the world* here! I microwaved it for 5 minutes, just the way you like it!” He places the Trump steak in the center of the wrestling ring. Donald Trump, unable to not take an opportunity to gloat about one of his many business ventures, took the bait.

He lunged at the steak, famously exclaiming, “A *perfectly-cooked* well done Trump steak, does anybody have any ketchup?! Eric, bring me a table and chair!”

While Trump sat distracted, devouring the steak, Bernie climbed onto the turnbuckle.

Bernie starts to speak to the crowd.

“We are going to stand together, black and white, Latino, Native American, Asian American. We all going to stand together, gay and straight. We are going to stand together and create a government that works for all, not just wealthy campaign contributors. So let us go forward. Let’s defeat Trump. Let’s transform this country!”

...and then he jumped. He jumped onto Donald Trump’s head just as he was squirting a massive glob of ketchup onto his steak.

Trump died on impact with ketchup all over his face, neck, and ill-fitting suit. He had taken one bite of the steak.

After the crash, Bernie stands up, also covered in ketchup, and finishes his speech.

“We’re gonna take this country back for the 1%. Stand with me!” Then he falls to the ground.

An autopsy found the cause of death to be anaphylaxis. Bernie Sanders was allergic to nightshades.

There was no presidential nominee from either of the two major parties for the 2024 campaign year. The US government bureaucrats implemented an AI program as head of states for a four-year trial period.

CHAPTER 8

MEME LIFE

“...I know, I know. I died in the infamous presidential wrestling match of 2024. But after the AI president implemented some changes to how the internet works, I was reborn.”

“...how?” Pigheart asks.

“The presidential Artificial Intelligence Execute Order of 2027 created infrastructure to reanimate any memes that are shared over 1 trillion times across all internet platforms. It turns out that the image of me sitting in that chair at Joe Biden’s inauguration was shared for the trillionth time just last week. I’m the first memetic simulacra of a living being to be reanimated.” Bernie says.

“So, you’re the first living meme in world history?” Scooter asks.
“It appears so. And it’s time for the revolution. We need to take this country back for the 99 percent!”

ALL POTENTIAL ENERGY

BY TEGHVIR SETHI



Writers block is like
Uh rock in stream
Large, voluminuhs boulder
Little trickle uh water
Sedimentuhry
Uh brown boulder
stream

All potential energy
Low potential lifestyle

Illustration by Jacob
Pescollderung

THE STEWARD

BY COLLEEN KIYUNA

In the lay of the land
Lines run true — North to South — ‘cross terrain
Gone gray and sleepy with dusk.
Ashy clouds loom over scattered seams
And twinkling lights like broken blades
Glint into eyes lidded with hopes of home.
Night beckons at the heels of an ended day,
But so far tomorrow feels when bed is at one’s back.



"Vernaculearth" by Laurenne Ross