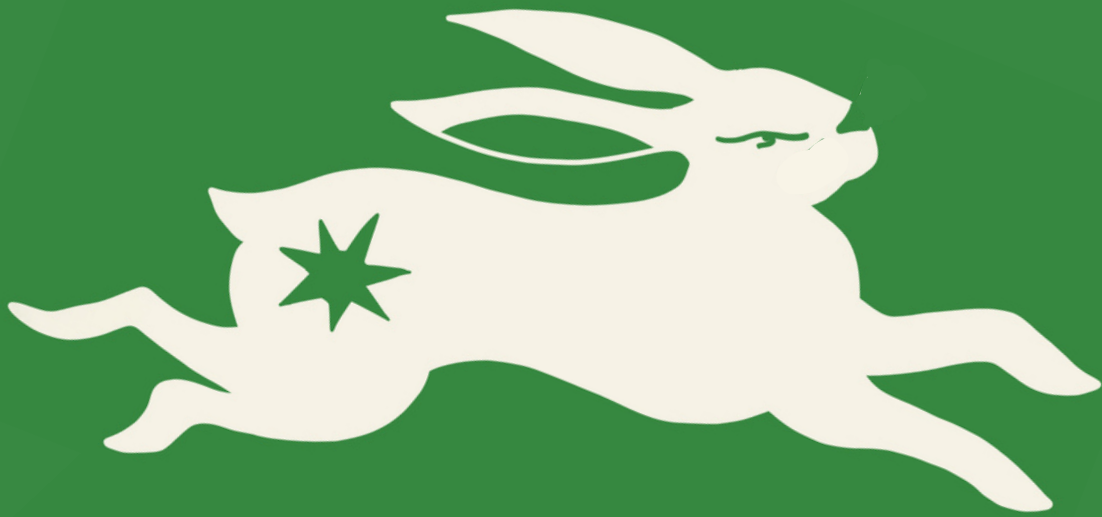


WESTWIND

JOURNAL OF THE ARTS



FALL 2023

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A BETTER FROM THE EDITORS

There is something incredibly unremarkable about publishing an undergraduate literary magazine right now. The crises we face—the resurgence of COVID, the ever-increasing income inequalities and labor precarity of U.S. workers, the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza—demand action, begging the question: What can literature do at a time like this? Here lie perennial anxieties about the “end of the English major” and the “crisis of the humanities”: the flaccidity, in a word, of literature and the arts writ large to enact change in the world. As if we could extricate the books we read from the material and social structures they exist in to begin with.

Who and what is this journal for, then? The poems, stories, and art collected in this issue won’t save us from the violence and deprivation that the U.S. enacts, domestically and abroad. From the chemical attacks unleashed on protestors at Columbia University to the administrative threats that UCLA’s own students and organizations endure, our institutions have failed to protect us—this much we know. What has not yet been determined, though, is how we respond. In a conversation about activism fatigue, I told my friends that the existential condition of the activist is to be dissatisfied, to demand more from our collective political imagination than what we have now. In that regard, perhaps the role of our journal is to bring us together in the first place, as writers and readers, to make each other feel “a little less lonely,” as Ken Chen once said. Only together, with the will to survive, can we imagine that another world is possible. We hope these pieces can offer you that much.

Austin Nguyen and Sabrina Ellis

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POETRY



And Pastures Stretch on, Past the Horizon

Maria Sukhomlinova

Banished to the country with a sack of clean clothes and a toothbrush by mothers long restless to relish the nectar
of off-brand, lavender-scented laundry detergent, feel the freshness radiate
Off spotless sheets hung above the filthy street, free from the burden of their kids—off to where acres of green measure
all progress, and eucalyptus oil would sting their nostrils, not molten concrete.
We breathe in sootless air for the first time in years, braid daisies into our hair, and live in harmony
With lizards making their way across our ivy-sprawling Hall of the Bulls coal-drawings on the brick walls—our treasure,
priceless since the pear trees grew budding branches and cast shadows in the heat.
And, while grandma chops bell-peppers, we drift slowly to sleep, out into a calm sea of mahogany.

After lunch, we ruthlessly decapitate the grape-vines, pleasure of another step on an endless path toward
appeasement of that insatiable ancestral hunger for our remorse.
The setting sun hovers over the gold glow of wild wheat, a wilder creek beside it—a slippery bowl of blood
at the horizon enchants us into a reverie of defeating silence.
From out the silver heavens steps out a memory of great-grandma, a rose-wreath in her untamed curls
Dried petals of dusty crimson like the ones she ripped out of her botany school-book one winter, too preoccupied
with a hopeless search of thorns that may prick through her cold, bony finger so coarse
She withered drawing blood—when milk evaporated with the forsaken harvest—for her little girls.

Holding on to the ropes that ground their memory to earth, our hearts burn as hers with passion for keeping them alive
in thought since their ascension to that distant land of starry constellations
That inspire us to venture out on a clear night, undisturbed by city lamp-light, scratch our pencils on the flip side
of yellowed, tear-stained postcards with addresses crossed out and faded book-pages.
Soft tapping of raindrops on the window-glass builds on the rhythm of our hushed whispering in the dark,
And gilded-edged needles of the blinding bolts of lightning inject an ardent hope into the room, and we revive,
not without energy, old dreams of grandeur, speak of unspeakable richness
While thunder rocks us into sweet exhaustion, anchoring the boats, before they sail the world, at their home-dock.

Alas! We stand in the driveway tracing the outline of that recycled tin can. Specks of peeling red paint reflect
the morning rays of whatever sunshine remains, shaking with desperation
More and more with each inch of the cobblestone path beneath, built by collective forced labor of war criminals left
within borders towards the end of the infamous German occupation.
Last minutes in this familiar land, its history folds out like a map before our teary eyes—
I was never very good with goodbyes—yet time wears on: in an old, forgotten corner of the world, where earth, made
heartlessly barren by force, once starved, and rain-clouds once in part, as distraction,
Drowned, now flocks of geese fly gaily overhead, tropics bound, and pastures stretch on, past the horizon.

Editor: Aiden Glennon

At My Sunday Best

Cuba Jimenez

What if God
Was the friends we made along the way
Potluck I pretend to eat at
Message from the pulpit “FORGIVE YOUR NEIGHBOR”
I forgive them for this soup
Crying babies passed around like
Service pamphlets
Joys and sorrows
Janet still has cancer
We take more soup to her house
We sing off key
I hope she forgives that
Weddings
Funerals
More food
Forgiveness
Picking up trash on the highway
Picking up Tim for a doctor’s appointment
And I traded Sunday freedoms
For what
Forgive myself for doing nothing
I never used to see God
But I saw Tim
And Janet
And maybe that was enough



Editor: Fiona Ruane

Beet Head Express

D.C. Skinner

The bus rumbles up Arapahoe at day's end and I jostle along in bone tired commuter company. Across the aisle, a faux black leather jacket sags dispiritedly on meatless thirty-something shoulders; twigstick legs and untested engineer boots heeled, pulled up against the base of the bus seat prompting a sneer from my lesser brain. If I were still a teen I'd kick his ass right here and now just for looking like such a sorry mess of fake-itude. I'd pluck out his stringy backyard beard hair by hair for spite. But I'm a beet head myself and turn to look outside as Cricket North End Barbers Red Wing Jamba Juice King Soopers melt by, beaming their fluorescent, strip mall promises; the reflection of my own visage glares back at me. His phone rings. He snaps it open and then...softly, gently, sweetly, Hello, mother, how are you... I'm on the bus and will be there soon... You doin' okay? Alright, don't worry, sure, mom, I'll see you in a couple. My disdain vanishes like a thin skin of black ice in the morning sun; I see the price of love loyalty. If I were a neighbor-friend I'd say hey man, I'll watch your old mum for the night—you go out and get some dirt and dust and blood on those boots; get some beer in your belly and some scars on your knuckles! Be Ulysses for a shift, man, cause you gotta before your bawling soul buckles and rots! His spider fingers unfurl, stretch up, pull for his stop. The bus curb-lurches. Eyes on the ground, he stoops his scuff down the steps, disappearing into the wine dark fuck you of evening.

Editor: Miriam Johnson

College Hops

Reese Dahlgren

On seizing the day, I leapt off
The chugging alleyway, into
An unfamiliar zone, bright
With slanted speech and wizard minds
And a slipping fog sense, I am
Forgetting something—Ah, my bags,
My big fat sacks of book stacks; also,
The steep stone steps of tanning steel
Clad sweat, beating sunshine's smile
On loose limbs; the muscled college
Stood on guard, peering down at a
Toad, hopping to and fro, blindly
Tiptoeing through the poet's bog.

Editor: Mia Dowdell



Different Gods

Jim Tilley

The oak, mindful of the need to keep its population thriving in the years to come, has shed its bountiful supply of seeds. The squirrel pauses in his gathering of those acorns for winter to thank his god for the plentiful harvest this year, believing more fervently than ever that the Squirrel God is supreme. The hawk, perched on a high branch of the oak that offers a sweeping view, eyes the distracted squirrel as the meal the Hawk God has lovingly provided to one of His loyal followers. And so the hawk plunges and grasps the squirrel in his talons, a natural act within the kingdom of squirrels and hawks, nothing to do with worshiping different gods. But the oak, having given of itself to both hawk and squirrel, knows that the Tree God is king.

Editor: Glory Parada

Our Last Goodbye / La Verne, CA 2001

Abie Irabor

twisted beige carpet dusty television stand
at the edges indented black leather couches
floors old wooden cabinets empty fridge
the quiet suburban cul de sac lined with tall

half folded clothes on the crowded bed
luggage empty frames shoe boxes filled w/
paste folded socks creased shirts pants
infant our last *goodbye* mixed with

dirty white walls living room table chipped
tick tock golden clock sticky kitchen tile
cemented backyard covered in leaves facing
Desert-willow trees trimmed bushes

wrinkled magenta sheets open
pictures so many pictures tubes of tooth-
your new young wife your blanket wrapped
nervous laughter your loose one armed hug

Editor: Diana Naughton

Psychology Quiz

Cuba Jimenez

1.) You come across a white hare on the road; do you...

- A.) Pick it up and help it cross to the forest while telling it “you’ve never loved me.”
- B.) Scream at the rabbit to get out of the road while sobbing uncontrollably inside your car.
- C.) Hit the rabbit with your car. Twice.

2.) It’s raining outside, what will you wear?

- A.) A pair of rainboots, but they’re too small and your dad should have known that when he bought them.
- B.) Mittens, it’s the wrong season but you like to be prepared in case of unexpected ice storms.
- C.) Just your high school prom dress. It still fits, thank you MyFitnessPal!

3.) You have a ticket in your hand, where will it take you?

- A.) Hopefully somewhere your ex could never afford to visit.
- B.) Your childhood pediatrician clinic that you aged out of and aren’t allowed to schedule with anymore.
- C.) Junior year at University of Washington, that’s where it all went wrong.

Your Results:

The rabbit represents your stepmother. The outfit you chose is your approach to life and category five hurricane warnings. The ticket represents your outlook on your future. 63% of participants chose answer B.

Editor: Piper Bailey



San Francisco, circa Sept. 2022

Kate Green



Sometimes I pause when unlocking my front door.

The key he made me feels different from others on its ring,
Smooth and new, teeth still honed to perfectly punched angles.

I touch the ridges and feel Japanese denim, damp sand a foot underground. Fog burrowing into
my bones by the bridge lookout,
Bruises suck-popping purple my shins and chin.

The weight of a pool stick lies heavy in my hand,
I watch a crisp Giants cap bob through the Dutch tulip garden.
Drones buzz above the neat rows of orange.
Fireworks boom and salsa dancers spin as the tide rolls in.

All I know are hills for miles, tiny corner stores, Grocery Outlet aisles,
And his nightstand, littered with melatonin bottles and piles of speeding tickets.
We need earrings for my sister, a catalytic converter for his car, the windows down
So midnight air can cool steamed glass and Mac Dre can leap out to the sidewalk.
The hour tastes of cupholder candles and coconut bum bum cream on my calves.
Rows of wrenches play pretend glockenspiel,
And damn how's it even cold in Dolores Park?

I shut my eyes, needle bouncing in and out of my thigh,
Gentle as the dance before the caffeine sped and the canned margarita slowed,
Smooth as the arrow straight-edge of the record stand he's sanding.
Foreheads kiss steering wheels, and clouds part over six feet of sweet Alamo Square.
A snowy plover sighs in my coffee cup. Brine drenches the borrowed car carpet.
Wind whips the sand, salt grains were sticking to the mascara footprints down my face.

The delayed click sounds. I step over the threshold,
Slip the keyring into my back pocket.
Sometimes I wish I knew how to love halfway.

Editors: Hero Jay and Jessica Pate

The Water Heater Went Out Again and I Just Want to Be Able to Wash My Hair

Lysette Denielle

My water heater went out while I was looking for God
and I know I am getting bad again.

I think about God, how He is right behind the mirror
and how He could be trapped behind the wall.

Sometimes, He is right underneath the floorboards.

I'd have to tear up the foundations to pull Him out.

He is always where you think He is

but never where you can grasp.

Look inside the tea kettle, the crevice of your couch.

Keep looking, you might find a nickel too.

It always goes like this. We deal in untruths, half absolutes.

Stick your hand inside a pocket and get lint.

Pull the shower curtain quick-

Ah, there He is!

It's a magic trick. Three times the charm.

Check twice; He's not there.

Blink and you miss Him.

It's ritual now, a game

looking for God in the tiny cracks of my home.

If warm baptisms still exist I think maybe,

I could lure Him out.

I just want to be washed clean, born again

in a dingy bathtub

because we are the apple irreversible; nothing more or less than lime stains.

I've grown tired of waiting for the water to fall, but devotion pours over me so hot.

Editor: Samantha Lee

Mario Loprete

Let The Music Play

Oil on Military Canvas.

For this work I used military camouflage tarpaulin as a support. this choice is based on my desire to represent urban style and the drama of urban suburbs. The work is inspired by the figure of Radio Raheem, the gentle giant from Spike Lee's film. There is only one thing that unites men and eliminates geographical and social boundaries and that is Music.





LET
THE
MUSIC
SAY

FICTION



A Post-Torn World I: Star-crossed Coexistence

Sym Silver

I didn't ask for this life. Every day, filled with monotony and longing, I bide my time with the exacting torments of survival. Waiting, waiting, waiting for the stars to align, for our worlds to eclipse. Only then can I see you, clear as day in my mind—even if only as a figment of my imagination. Only then can I be certain that you have not fallen. Memories hurt, the ones of you most of all.

There was a cave. And a waterfall. We were running. Running fast. I was sprinting, and you were following fast. I nearly tripped on a rock, right after we passed the creek. I caught myself, though, and we continued.

Some nights I wake up drained, frightened, displaced. I can feel the sweat crawling down my back, down my calves, seeping into my shoes. There's an emptiness to the cavity of my chest that fills me with a cold yearning, something so far from the fiery, hot passion that once consumed us.

We were fast, and I knew we could make it. Just as we were passing the tall oak with the crooked knot, I thought, we've made it.

On the nights that I'm not pulled aimlessly from a dull slumber, I awake in terror. I reach out, trying to grasp that last cliff, but my hand latches onto nothing. I'm sitting up and there's nothing in my fist, so tight, airtight, that my knuckles are turning red. I look for you, but you aren't here. I grasp the sheets, empty and cold. We made it, I have to remind myself. We made it.

Now, the only thing that keeps me sane is having a routine. I wake up, shower, eat, dress, exercise, clean, cook. It keeps me in my own mind, having this routine. After I scramble the eggs, I set the table for two. I eat first. You're never here, but I wish you were.

After I eat, I clear the table. I know you won't be here, but cooking for you feels like nourishing you, so I leave your plate beside the fire that runs night and day, all the time. It seems to stay ablaze entirely on its own, fueled by something much more persistent than coal and brush. Watching the flames cackle in the pit, it makes my fingers itch. I think about you. It's impossible not to. I know we made it, but I must remind myself constantly of the fact.

Occasionally, I find myself in possession of the hatchet. It sits like a little spirit perched in my palm. I test it—the weight and strength of the handle, of the blade. The curve of the wood holds firm in my grip. The blade, slightly rusted, shines brightly in the morning light. Sometimes I see your reflection in the contour of the steel, only a hazy vision but sharp as the blade's edge in my mind.

I know we promised to put the hatchet behind us, but most days I look down unknowingly and find it in my hand. No rhyme and reason to its patterns, I just await its inevitable materialization. I swear to you, I never summoned the hatchet.

We're racing through wood and stone. I can see the archway in the distance. The hatchet lodged in the anvil. The anvil shrouded in a heavenly mist. I watch you flickering past the trees, weaving in and out of the path. We're fast, so so fast. We're going to make it. The hatchet, it gleams from the gray. Your hands are outstretched, reaching.

The passing days attempt to pull my memories with them, but stubbornly, I hold on to you in my thoughts, all the way back to our cosmic meeting. There was a time, somewhere near the beginning, when I watched you smile by the brook. Hands freshly cleansed in that sparkling water, you took my hand in yours. Skin once smooth now calloused, rough, used. A look of determined utility on your face, something spectacularly inspiring and unfamiliar.

We're going so fast. Time is sprinting with us. They're on our tails, but we're going faster than anyone can imagine. Your hand in mine, eyes locked on a distant object, our feet hitting the ground hard enough to send cracks shooting down the cliff.

I can't tell what's real or not. We're moving too fast. The world splits apart at the seam, an invisible thread no longer strong enough to hold our two realities together. I think the trees are collapsing, but we're moving too fast to tell.

As the weeks go by, I'm ashamed to miss your warmth. I don't believe that you hate me enough to stay away this long. You are trapped. You are hurting. As am I. Your pain is my pain, and mine alone is that of losing you, even for a little bit, if weeks and months and even years can be considered a little bit of eternity. I know you are here somewhere. I sense you in flashes of consciousness. I can feel the weight of your breath, of your being.

I watch you fall. The way you land softly on the stone—it amazes me how bone can break so silently. I watch the bruises bloom: on your cheeks, on your collarbone, on your ribs, under your eyes. The way

your ankles skid across the jagged rock, earth tearing away flesh. Your arms are outstretched. I reach for you—

I grasp nothing. The air is warm and it slides past my fingertips fast. When I awake, jerked from a vivid dream about a cave and a waterfall, I yank the sheets from the corners of my hardwood bedframe. Finding the world harsh and cold and desolate, I return to my routine. Morning passes quickly. I cook and clean in a space wide enough for two, yet inhabited by one. I shower in the brook, dress among the bushes, and before the sun has risen to its midday mark, I am once again beneath the covers of a barren bed.

Even though peace is unattainable, I will take the whispers of you in my head over the blank state my world has become. In dreams, I find you. So I return to sleep.

There exists a separate plane of reality. One in which I catch you. Arms outstretched, I grasp your wrists, then your torso, twisting so that I can take the brunt of your fall. Barely missing the hatchet, barely missing the anvil. The force of your body caving into mine is soul crushing, literally, but I know I am ready for it this time. In this universe, I have accepted the gravity of it all, the velocity and mass of your body, colliding with mine.

I strain to reach the cliff. The crag eludes me one last time. We plunge into darkness. Suddenly, a new weight, familiar as the dream that binds us, finds its way into my hand. I'm backing away at the darkness that threatens to consume us. The hatchet, reeled in from the depths of the seafloor or, perhaps, waiting idly all these years above ground as I suspect it was, slices through time, through history, through the tether binding us to our separate worlds.

I see you slowly, then all at once—a foggy vision becoming clear. Your hand, solid in mine, is something I have never felt so firmly.

When I wake up from a particularly jarring visit—I have ascertained that these jolting nightmares of dreams are brief visits to your world—I expect to feel your weight again, real this time.

Next time, I will have the hatchet. *We will be faster. We will make it. I hope this will be enough.*

Editors: Gwendolyn Lopez, Logan Shobe, & Gia Boisselier

Crave

Julianne Estur

The cut was one inch long. It was a negligible length unless, say, one was measuring the distance left between two mouths that were yet to kiss. Then every second would live and die in that inch until something had to give. The only way to atone for all the time passed would be to close that distance, to neatly annihilate everything that had wasted away in it. However, this inch didn't exist between two people, but along the side of a well-manicured index finger. It welled wine red for only a moment before ceasing without shedding, as if to say it was nothing worth crying over.

The woman flinched, dropping the kitchen knife on the cutting board, next to the half-chopped zucchini — each slice was exactly as thick as both her and her husband enjoyed it. She could eyeball it and just know it was satisfactory, and right now, she knew. She was efficient like that, but something less calculated than a machine. Despite jokes made by her friends, who were the wives of her husband's friends, she was most definitely human and thought of herself as such, in part due to her capacity to love and to feel pain.

The cut burned as a reminder of this, even if it stopped swiftly. After all, it was small enough to almost not exist. It had cut at the minimum depth needed to draw blood, which wasn't deep at all. All she had to do was reach to her right, turn on the kitchen sink, and run her finger under the water for a singular second for it to be over and done with.

But a feeling of nostalgia settled in the pit of her stomach. It was small, like being hungry, but only for a bite of something.

It must've been years since she'd last injured herself in the kitchen. When she was younger but just as romantic (as according to herself), she was rather prone to injury, and she did enjoy telling people this because of how much of a surprise it was to others. She'd work with peppers and then rub at her eyes, or get smattered with hot water after a clumsy maneuver with a pot. She had the most accidents with knives. There were more than she could possibly count on her fingers, which would've been scarred if not for her expansive hand care routine.

And there were admittedly times where she wished she had kept those scars, if only because of how her husband would kiss them while they were fresh. She once even wondered if maybe it was those kisses that formed them, if they were her skin's way of memorializing those tender moments. There

had been more tender moments than she could recall since then, and there would be many more. So now she longed for evidence of their existence because despite herself, she couldn't carry all of them in her mind forever.

The woman's husband was at work right now. She had seen him off at the door that morning like she always did, with a tug on his tie, a kiss, and one last smile from him. His smile used to reach his eyes — past his eyes, even, which shouldn't have been possible. But it was him, so of course it was. Now they were over a decade out from when they were fourteen and she was kissing him goodbye on the porch of his parents' house. The plaid tie of their Baptist school days had been replaced with finer silk, and he walked with more authority and tension in his shoulders. It had never been anybody else.

She couldn't blame him for being short on smiles, or on time, because at least they were never short on money. No, she understood him and felt a constant outpouring of sympathy for him that she tried to make known in any way she could, with little notes slipped into his briefcase and hot baths. He was equally as generous. She kept every piece of jewelry he's ever gifted her on display in their bedroom. She liked them, because it made her more his than she already thought. On the rare occasions where he was able to spirit her away, he'd take her to restaurants she'd never heard of and tell her to get whatever she wanted. So she'd get everything, and he'd let her. Even if that meant they were eating leftovers for the next week, what it really meant was that she could savor the taste of the moment for even longer.

It was the kind of happiness that came so easily you questioned whether or not you deserved it. And she had questioned it, for a while. It was a given since it had never come easily to her, or the rest of her family, before. These were the days when she wondered if it was even possible.

It was. She was the living proof of that.

She was happy, and it was forever ripe-sweet.

This past year of being peckish from the distance had been a small price to pay, but it was worth it for his promotion. For the continuation of a life of comfort that belonged to them.

Still, there were moments like these when she felt just a little sick with sentimentality. The woman wished she could walk into the bedroom right now and tell him, bashful, that she had a little slip-up again and that she needed him to kiss it better. Again. Again? He would chuckle, low and affectionate, again. But he would ruffle her hair and take her willing hand and do it, nonetheless.

Part of her wanted to stand there until he came back. Only then would time move forward once more, and the memory finally would be what she had already made it to be in her head. She held her finger up to her face, transfixed. It would certainly heal as if it were never there to begin with.

And still, there was blood there. There was nothing more to be done but to wash it away. After all, in her memory, the cut would already be clean, as it always was. She knew her husband to be squeamish. He couldn't stand seeing anyone seriously hurt, especially not her. He worried too much. It was another way she felt safe, and indeed, another reason she went to great lengths to be more careful in all that she did.

But she was still human, more human than she was anything else. She was still prone to accidentally cutting herself. She was still prone to distractions, even though on a good day in the kitchen (which included most of her days), she could completely tune out the rest of the world to focus on doing her absolute best.

Perhaps distraction was the wrong word. "Distraction" felt concrete. As if there was a specific person, or place, or thing to put the blame on. Her current state had nothing to do with anything that real, or valid, even. The weather outside was fair, and her clothes fit the same way they had yesterday.

Yet after she had kissed her husband that morning, she was acutely aware of the cold left behind on her lips. She had gone into the bedroom and made the bed, and not one wrinkle had been left behind. The sheets were still as pristine and white as the day they had purchased them. This was what she noticed on most mornings. On this one she pondered how she and her husband must look on the bed from a bird's eye view — if they even took up a considerable amount of space together. She was unsettled by the fact that she definitely didn't on her own. She had the rest of her routine too. She had yoga on the patio and watering the plants. She had refilling the bird feeders and listening to 90s rock while she vacuumed and dusted.

She had all of this today. She will have it tomorrow. But will it be like it is today, tinged with an unshakeable feeling? She didn't have a name for it. Why would she? It wasn't part of her life, the one she was living now. That was why she was so aware of it. She had spent so much time thinking about how right everything had been for the longest time. She could tell what didn't belong right away.

It was only when she exhaled that she realized she was forgetting to breathe. She couldn't stop staring at the cut, at the three beads of blood that sat atop it. She couldn't tear her eyes away from that please-forget-me inch. The zucchini remained only half dismembered. There remained a step between her and the marble countertop. If she could move, she would feel the cool press of the marble against her stomach. It was solid and steadfast and incapable of being cut.

Her mind reoriented itself toward the kitchen sink. It willed her hand towards it, but— It was already at her lips. Her index finger had a soft bend to it. It was close enough to her mouth that she could feel every breath upon it. It was close enough that when she shifted her gaze downwards it blurred a little bit, as if her mind could only comprehend proximity with such clarity until she had it.

The woman leaned forward, mouth parted, finally swallowing the rest of the space. Her lips closed around that inch only and nothing more. She noticed the way the inside of her mouth was warmer than the outside of her. How heat emanated from all the points of contact. Her teeth parted just enough for her tongue to sneak through, scraping lightly against the incisors. The movement was invisible, of course, but she did it as if everyone could see her. Even if she was innocent.

From what, she wasn't quite sure.

Her purpose hadn't been to taste, anyhow. Only to finally rinse the blood off her hand.

This was just as efficient as any other way. It was what the woman was best at.

It only took one swipe of her tongue to clean the wound. The metallic taste that came along with it was simply collateral. The taste existed there, only at the tip, only ever dangling the possibility of being overwhelmed in front of her, like a good tease.

It wasn't as if she had never tasted blood before. Like anyone else, she had absentmindedly licked her cracked lips on winter days, or made her gums bleed after flossing for the first time in a while. It wasn't so much the taste that shocked her as much as it was how quickly it dissolved.

There was a longing that began to creep up on her. It was a newfound awareness of missing something that she didn't know she ever had.

It made her continue to stand there, mouth still pressed to her finger.

It made her teeth part again and close around the skin. Even with gentle and constant pressure, it was enough to be searing, hot, like a brand. It was all that she allowed herself. She could take more, if she wanted to. All she had to do was open her mouth again and invite more of herself in. All she had to do was move her finger in less than an inch before she'd meet the resistance of bone. And if she rotated her finger, she could bite down at the knuckle.

But this was all she allowed herself. She imagined the flesh as a cherry being crushed between her teeth, juices running down her hand, dark and sticky. And when she'd pull away her lips would still blush red.

The woman released her finger from her mouth, unhinging her jaw more than she had to, a bear trap undone.

She held her hand up to her line of sight. In the light, it glistened where it was still slick with saliva. There were three shallow indents above and below the cut. When she held it at a distance to herself, the marks were still visible. However, when she swept her thumb over them, it was as if they weren't there at all. In fact, the action seemed to wipe them away. They were gone as easily as a message written in sand.

Impermanent.

And perhaps, this too, was just a momentary lapse in judgment. It would soon be swallowed by the wondrous memories to come, the ones that already deserved that space in her mind more than this.

Yes. She would finish dinner and have the table set and wine glasses poured by the time her husband came back.

Her hand closed around the handle of the knife. It was a recent gift, a set from him after he realized many of the ones she had been using had gone dull. She found it very thoughtful.

She picked up the knife and used her free hand to hold the zucchini still. The blade cut through it without much effort. It barely made a sound as it tapped against the cutting board. Over and over.

She finished without any further issues. It was the confirmation she needed that this was a normal day born out of a normal morning.

The knife clattered against the white marble. She was done here.

Except—

Except that there was still an odd feeling growing within her. It gnawed away at her and left her feeling empty and wanting.

This morning had been like every morning. Her husband woke up half an hour after her. He trudged into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes, still dragging sleep with his feet. He hadn't slept well. He hadn't slept well because he came back late last night. He didn't tell her where he'd been, and she didn't ask, so it was a night like every other night. Except not really. There were nights before this. Nights that existed in her mind and on her skin as phantom touches. They happened once and could therefore happen again, and her only evidence was herself — that was why she was here. Why she always would be.

This morning her husband opened the door without making a sound. She heard him anyway and was there to see him off. As always. She tugged on his maroon tie — which she had certainly bought for him, she just didn't remember why — and he let himself be kissed. He stood unmoving against her until she let him go. He took a step back, so there was one step of separation between them. Neither of them crossed it. He smiled without teeth and dimples and crinkled eyes.

The woman had told him she loved him.

"I'll see you tonight," he had said.

Then he was gone. She remained there for several moments.

This morning had been like every morning.

Except not really. There were mornings before this. There were certainly already enough of those to outnumber these. There were enough to understand that the past week was only a phase, an awkward transition between seasons like when it was still hot in autumn before the world righted itself again.

She was standing in the kitchen, clearing the cutting board, thinking—

There were certainly already enough extra minutes spent in bed together because he didn't want to leave. There were enough to understand that the past month was only a phase, an awkward transition between childhood and adulthood, when one was on the precipice of truly becoming.

She was standing in the kitchen, her ears drowning in the sound of the running faucet, washing the knife.

There were certainly already enough goodbye kisses that culminated in hands on waists, entangled in hair and clothes. There were enough to understand that the past year was only a phase. An awkward transition. An adjustment period. Any number of terms that signified that this time would pass.

She was in the kitchen. She had one hand around the knife's handle. She had the other on the cutting board.

Up until this very moment, this day had been like every other day. It could stay this way.

When the blade sunk through her, it did so in silence, with little resistance. The piece was only one inch long on the side of her index finger, where the cut was. The blood flowed onto the cutting board, slow and gentle, free of trauma, like the tide rolling in. Her finger burned and didn't stop burning. It was a constant feeling of being touched.

She breathed out, deflating. Her back hunched and shoulders slumped. She had been holding herself up for longer than she noticed. She set the knife down without any noise. She took the piece of flesh between the index finger and thumb of her uninjured hand, quivering. Although this hand was clean, in a matter of seconds, it stained like a bursted pomegranate. She licked a timid stripe up the side of her thumb, holding the piece away from her. And there was the taste of blood again, and the warmth of it. It was clear to her that she was hotter on the inside than she was on the outside.

Now she experienced it more fully. She found herself shivering. A low heat simmered in her belly, aching to be turned all the way up. She pressed her lips to the cavity in her finger, drinking from it like a well. She sucked more firmly, coaxing out every drop she could until it was dizzying.

Eventually, she pulled her finger from her mouth with a satisfied pop.

There was a second where her mouth was empty again, where she believed that she was satiated. But now there existed some newly discovered vacancy needing to be filled. There was no other way she could live. She squeezed the piece of flesh she had been holding all along gently, aware of its reality.

Then there was no longer anything in her hand.

At first, it only sat in her mouth. It couldn't have weighed any significant amount, but it was as if someone was pressing down with all their force where it rested. Salt warmth pooled across her tongue. It hit her, then, that she was holding a part of herself now. She was overwhelmed by the enormity of it, by the revelation that she never had, before. That the particularities of her own sensations were unknown to her.

She turned herself over with her tongue once, twice, three times. Then she started to chew. The piece was soft yet unyielding. She couldn't quite describe the taste of it. The closest she could find was that it vaguely resembled pork, which she often found too distasteful for her palate. Yet here it intrigued her. Every time her teeth minced the piece up further, she found herself edging closer and closer to the epiphany of its flavor.

The woman didn't know she could feel like this.

She couldn't help but think of this one night. This one night, junior year of college, with somebody else, and then never again. She let herself recall parts of it. Bite-sized, digestible chunks. She couldn't help herself. She closed her eyes. As her jaw continued to work, a small whine escaped through her closed lips.

When she finally swallowed, she could feel it slide against her throat all the way down.

Her eyes lowered to the scene in front of her. Her other hand had slipped off the cutting board. The white countertops were sullied with tiny red blooms.

Editors: Nicolette Bond & Alyssa Murray

Tipping Point

Jim Tilley

I arrived on time for my therapy session and she showed me into her office right away. I had barely sat on the couch against the wall before she started in on me.

Let me try to set the tone for this session. Before picking up where we left off last time, I feel that I must ask whether you want to continue therapy. We've been doing this for a few years now and have come to understand each other quite well. Despite that, our conversations still meander. You take them where you want to, not where I think they should go. It makes me question whether this therapy is leading anywhere fruitful for you. I believe there is something you're simply afraid to discuss. You need to reveal that before we can make real progress.

I think that's a bit unfair, but I hear you. I'll try—you know how difficult it is for me. Yes, I want to continue our sessions. I have found them helpful.

Okay then. Last time we met you talked about transparency and opacity, which you preferred to call opaqueness. You gave an example, which I only partly remember. If you don't mind, please run that by me again.

I was telling you about my six little pigs. I said that the first three arrived in my first marriage when a glassblower's feat caught my eye, the largest encasing the medium, in turn encasing the smallest, a nested set, one inside the other, inside the other. The second triplet came into my life during a second marriage—gray porcelain, equal in size, sitting side by side staring into a tiny mirror as if some dark secret might be revealed, even to a pig, by merely looking long and hard enough.

So what is your dark secret?

I'm still not ready to talk about it. Maybe later. What I recall telling you was that it was silly of me because I was more likely made of transparent glass than opaque porcelain. And here I am, now that it's autumn, wondering about the true intentions of summer, the seductive opaqueness of green.

What do you mean?

You know, all the problems piled high, too many leaves limb to limb, tree to tree. But there comes a time, doesn't there, when there seem to be few enough to count, yet the sum of it is beyond the grasp.

You're being deliberately opaque again.

What I'm trying to say is that I can't see clearly through the foliage. My world and the larger world, too, are at a tipping point. And autumn is the metaphor. A tenuous equilibrium between too many and too few. I found the opaqueness of summer comforting in a way. Seductive. Now, on the verge of being able to see through everything, I'm afraid that it will have ceased to mean anything at all.

Here you go again saying life is pointless. Look at all the poems you've written and got published. Sometimes it seems that you use these sessions to spark your creativity. With me as your sounding board. Nothing pointless about that.

Except when I write about how fruitless it all seems. I suppose that's why you're the therapist and I'm sitting on this couch. You can see through things that I can't.

Sometimes. But I can't see through to whatever it is that's especially troubling you today.

Yeah. I've now found myself smack in the middle of a conspiracy.

Do you really think anybody cares enough to pay attention to your situation that they'd conspire against you? Other than your wife perhaps? Or possibly me.

Please leave my wife out of it.

What is this conspiracy?

It's like this: they come out in early fall, right around election time, to remind me that it's still the unsavory who run for office, candidates who try to catch me in their webs of lies and deceit.

What webs of lies?

You know that I start every day with a walk to my favorite thinking spot where I can be alone

sitting on an overturned boat. The pond. Lately, I've spotted thin, almost transparent, tiny webs on the grass, covered with glistening dew, large patches along both sides of the path. Magically gone hours later, only to reappear the next day. They're the work of so-called grass spiders acting in unison, a collusion of kinds.

Okay, hardly collusion, but even if that, certainly not with you as their target. And may I point out from your description, those webs are anything but opaque. What have you done about this supposed conspiracy?

I've messaged my followers to warn them about this burgeoning scourge.

Just can't help yourself, can you? Burgeoning scourge—give me a break. Where did that come from?

The urge to spread the news far and wide. Where else?

Enough of that please. With the time we have left today, let's move beyond this latest deflection of yours. I'm curious about how things are between you and your wife. We spent most of last session talking about how you could have dealt with situations more constructively than you did.

It's still a war. Sometimes I retreat to the bathroom to sit down and think. But then my mind latches onto the sorry state of the world and the strongmen taking control.

Do you wish you were a stronger man?

That's not the point, is it? I wonder what they think about when they do it, their place in history perhaps, how to hang on as they're letting go.

I see—you're concerned about your place in history.

Well, for a time I was, but you keep changing the topic. I was talking about taking a dump on all I find bad. God, the other day, I was sitting there trying to let my mind go, and what did I see on the white marble floor? Gray streaks outlining the distinctive angular face, telltale mustache, absurd crop of hair. Chin and nose. His eyes. I looked away... looked back again. He was still staring at me... You know who—the madman who started World War II.

You weren't even born then. Why were you thinking about him and about that?

Because we are on the threshold of another one now. A great war, East versus West. All starting in the place where the war is not a war, and people can't take a dump in peace.

It seems you can't either.

Too true.

A few weeks ago you said, and I'm quoting from my notes here, that "when the country hangs over the edge of its latest self-imposed cliff, you try to escape." How?

By going outside to water my plantings, revel in this mild autumn weather. I then begin to feel at peace with myself and the world. I am comfortable when things seem suspended in time, like the Yellowtail that lifted off from my Weigela the other day and just hung in the air. Without a care, I flitted randomly between this and that, settling from time to time at a colorful spot before wafting into the bluest of skies.

Is there something special about the bluest of skies?

When there are no clouds, the sky seems vast enough to hold most of the world's troubles. Do you recall that I ended our conversation by noting the greenery and blue outside your window and saying that there would soon come a day when I won't be here?

Do you look forward to that day?

Funny you should ask. My family has asked me to write my own obituary to avoid the trouble I might experience trying to edit it from the grave.

Why would they think you'd try to do that?

Because I'm forever correcting the details in their telling of stories.

Go on.

From my pocket, I pulled out a carefully folded sheet of legal paper, unfolded it and read: Though obviously neuro-diverse, lying somewhere on the spectrum of colorful behavior, he accomplished much in such a short time on earth, leaving it to those he left behind to fill in the particulars.

I don't know that you're really on the spectrum. You've claimed you're mildly autistic. But that's too facile a self-diagnosis. Too many people throw those words around carelessly without understanding what they mean and don't mean. You certainly enjoy miring yourself in detail and you tend to keep coming back to the same things. Still, that's not the issue right now. What bothers me is that your attempt at humor in the obituary sounds like a cop-out.

Well, if it helps, I did add a postscript. Please don't mention the time I was in the attic trying on period dresses when the doorbell rang and I scrambled downstairs to greet my son's best friend.

We all have our fantasies. But we're way off-topic here. Let's come back to your relationship with your current wife. We left off with her wondering how much you still care about her.

That's one way of putting it. There are times when she seems indifferent to keeping the dogs or me, when I think, I guess you'd rather be alone, knowing that's often true for me, too. When speaking about the two of us, you need to understand that there are deep wells, and all I can say about that treacherous territory is that wives and lovers know what you think without your ever having to tell them, maybe even before you can tell yourself.

You've never mentioned a lover.

It was long ago. She and I were a stick snapped in half and tossed into a stream. We found different currents and rocks, no longer one and the same. I met her by chance again years later over drinks. She left without finishing her wine. I took mine to the piano at the bar and let my fingers learn to talk again. When I'd tasted the last drop, I decanted the sunset of our relationship instead.

Always waxing, aren't you? Sounds as if it was a tragic experience. Have you ever felt that way about your wife?

Of course. Every wife starts as a lover, doesn't she?

One would hope.

But it doesn't necessarily end that way. I remember a vacation to the island of Delos in Greece when I had a delightful tour guide shading herself under a floral parasol, accented English words erupting from her mouth and their Greek roots. I was quite taken with her. She described how the owners of the large house whose ruins I stood within had lived, the walls partly gone, no roof, the

atrium's tiles eroded and faded. I said it was a tragedy, and learned that that word comes from a ritual slitting of goats' throats on an altar.

Seems pretty extreme, doesn't it?

Yes, but what a way to go down in history. Even more extreme was her telling characterization of the statue outside the house. It's time to change the marble head on the statue, she said, because passers-by need to know who lives inside. When someone new moves in, they leave the torso in place and change only the head. Strange, I said, for the torso holds the heart.

How did that make you feel?

I asked the tour guide what they did when no one moves in, but someone moves out.

I hope you realize that when escape seems the only way to come to grips with what you can no longer tolerate, you are further gone than you might think. It's not as if forgetting about it for a while solves anything. Just a form of playing ostrich, when not seeing aspires to become not believing. Nothing has gone away. And it's not a tipping point either because you know that things will be just the same on the other side.

Yes, I know that I need to tip things the other way. I don't really care that I can't peer through the opaqueness of green. At least then I can't see what's on the other side. As I said earlier, the lushness of summer is seductively comforting. But how do I experience green again when gravity is pulling everything down? When everything's in free fall.

You begin by recalling something pleasant. Something that made you feel happy. Has anything like that happened to you recently?

Okay. It's just a small thing, but it mattered a lot to me. On my walk through the park a few days ago, there was only a single skateboarder taking in the warm fall weather. I saw that he was moving slowly, deliberately, even somewhat awkwardly, as if this were only his second or third time. He climbed less than halfway up the quarter-pipes and caught only a few inches of air off the jumps. This middle-aged, barefoot man in black jeans and t-shirt, sporting a smartly trimmed graying goatee, looking somewhat like how I'd like to come across, traversed the course several times before he noticed me. Then we nodded and smiled, signaling to each other that we know what it truly means to be alive, more than just breathing.

Wonderful! Is there anything like skateboarding you're looking to take up?

There is. But please let me rewind a bit before getting to that. It was the same day, also at the park. A town worker riding a tractor was raking the infield for that night's ballgame. I climbed to the back row of the bleachers and recalled my father looking down as I sprinted past first after a crack of the bat that should never have been a hit, let alone an inside-the-park home run, used my speed to reach second safely, rounded third at a full sprint, and kicked up dirt on a safe slide into home, the highlight of my career as a Little Leaguer.

That, too, was a pleasant experience. When you were young. What about now?

More my speed these days are the older folk playing pickleball at the park. I stopped to talk with some of them when they took a break. I told them about my tennis background. They asked if I wanted to join their group. I think I might. I know I could hold my own at that game.

Hey, look at the time. As usual, we've run a bit over. I'm afraid we have to stop here, but let's set a goal for next week. You can tell me about your very first time playing pickleball. In all its detail. Poetically, of course, as you always do.

Editors: Olivia Choi, Sydney Gaw, & Andrew Wang

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Mario Loprete, Catanzaro 1968

For Mario, painting for is the first love. An important, pure love. Creating a painting, starting from the spasmodic research of a concept with which he wants to send a message to transmit his message, it's the base of my painting. The sculpture is his lover, his artistic betrayal to the painting. That voluptuous and sensual lover that gives him different emotions, that touches prohibited cords.

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