

iris:



1 • a flat, colored, ring-shaped membrane behind the cornea of the eye, with an adjustable circular opening (pupil) in the center.

2 • a plant with sword-shaped leaves and showy flowers, typically purple, yellow, or white.

3 • the goddess of the rainbow and the messenger of the Olympian gods.

4 • a literary magazine publishing student work at James Madison University

welcome

Let

Dear Reader,

As thrilled as I was to introduce the first issue of Iris last semester, I'm even more excited to bring you the second. Everything improves with practice, and that's certainly the case for us. I wish I could keep participating in the evolution of Iris, but I'll be graduating in May and leaving this magazine in the highly capable hands of Grace Keeler, my incredible Assistant Editor and soon-to-be Editor in Chief. I'll happily watch from afar as Grace and the rest of the team continue to grow Iris with each issue.

I've loved every part of putting this magazine together — getting to read wildly interesting submissions from a diverse student body, discussions with the team about our favorite pieces, watching the magazine evolve from a loose combination of words and images to a brilliantly designed work of art. But what I have loved the most is building a community of people at JMU who love art and literature. That's what I'm the most proud of in my time at Iris, and I hope you all know that every time someone picks up a magazine, asks how to be involved, or attends an Iris event, my heart swells knowing that we are bringing creative people together. I thank all of you for making that happen.

Best,
Haley Huchler

Dear Reader,

The issue of Iris Literature and Arts magazine that you hold in your hands, each beautiful word and striking image, came to be because of the incredible creativity of James Madison University's undergraduate students. Talent within the literary and visual arts here at JMU is limitless, and it has been my pleasure to be a part of the team getting that creative work out into the world for others to read and see. As a reader, writer, and editor, nothing has left me as creatively fulfilled as working on Iris has. If your work is published in this issue of Iris, thank you. I relish seeing that grin spread across your face when you realize that really is your name printed on that page.

Thank you to Editor in Chief Haley Huchler and faculty advisor Erica Cavanagh for their guidance and kindness these past two semesters, it has meant the world and more. Thank you to our design team and our editorial team; your knowledge, skill, and feedback are the reason this bundle of paper ever made it to print. To the students of JMU who may have snagged this copy on their way through Keezell, Harrison, or Carrier; I know growing up is hard. Discovering your passions and plans is harder still. Emily Dickinson, an absolutely killer 19th-century poet, once wrote, "I am out with lanterns looking for myself." If that resonates with you, turn the page. Iris may be exactly where you find yourself.

Best,
Grace Keeler

ters

is



roots - achilles vasquez (soft pastel)

we are the **next successor** in the long line of JMU's literature and arts magazines. you may have once known us as Gardy Loo or Temper. after a short hiatus, we decided to bring the magazine back — with a **new name** and a **new staff**, but the **same mission** as always:

**to promote and
celebrate the creative
works of JMU students.**



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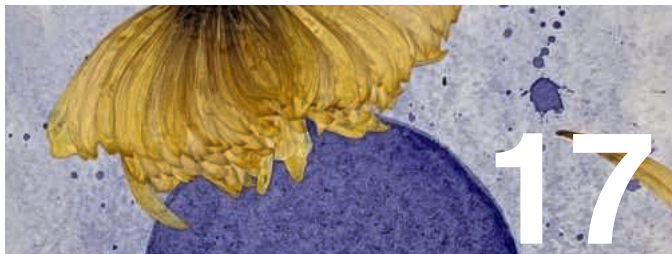
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women of roses

- emily rose allen

Did she know?

She knew how to wield her words, but rest assured, these words were not wielded as weapons. She traded in words built like tools. Some sharp, swordlike, but to sculpt and not stab, for idioms aside, she knew which was mightier. Her voice shook the earth and her pen moved mountains, and if she were here, she would tell me to use better metaphors, because the power of words comes when they are your own. We'd argue if I needed a comma, and I'd say no. I like the run on.

She knew that words have power, but did she know what hers could do?

Her words were a trowel, unearthing loose thoughts and dropping seeds where they shouldn't have flourished. She planted roots that ran deep, finding life in desolation and holding her sprouts steady in the wind.

Her words were velvet on her tongue, blossoms that masked thorns bursting through raw calluses. She knew that her words would weather the storm.

But did she know?

Did she know that she planted a garden? Her words were roots, weaving through a plot of earth that spanned years and continents, sprouting women of words and roses. Did she know that her words helped us burst through packed peat, growing thorns of our own, so that no matter who tried, we'd never be plucked from our place on this planet? And her words gave us blossoms, too, unapologetic rosebuds spreading in the sunlight. *Keep your head held high.*

When her thorns cut too deeply and her words grew softer, did she know?

Because her legacy is women with thorns for teeth and hearts blooming, a legacy grown by words strewn in soil she didn't know could hear. Her words were a garden, and now our words stretch into the sunlight.

2025



- kate funk (mixed media)

The lump in your throat when you get upset is really a pomegranate—
you're gagging and choking on the semi-sweet seeds as they hook
their roots in your lungs, they entangle and intertwine in your
intestines and make you sick to your stomach with joy—joy,
the same joy a barren woman feels at the news of
another birth that isn't hers and now you're heaving
and crying but the pomegranate never leaves
your throat not once it remains stuck in
your esophagus and you can't push it
down and you can't force it up and
you wish your belly wasn't empty
or maybe that everyone else's
was. But what kind of person
does that make you, it
makes you selfish it
makes you greedy
but all you really
want is to get
this damn
pomegranate
out of your throat.

the lump in your throat

- liz shanks

three of



- misha rodriguez (linocut print)

sworols



an ode to gloomy weather

You plucked my harpstring
ribs, their melodic wave
sent shivers down my
spine and moved every vertebrae
to pieces.

Would you have even thought
to play my piano heart if it
weren't raining outside?

It's funny how clammy-handed
thunder and storms of lightning
and hail can bring out
the best in music and the worst
in monsters.

You always knew how to twist
the knife just right, plated at
the base of my back to paralyze
me with your harmonic words as
they melted into sinister crime.

Crimson never looked so pretty
as when it pooled at my feet and
the climax of your sonata rang through
my body—collapsing to the sound
of soft rain.

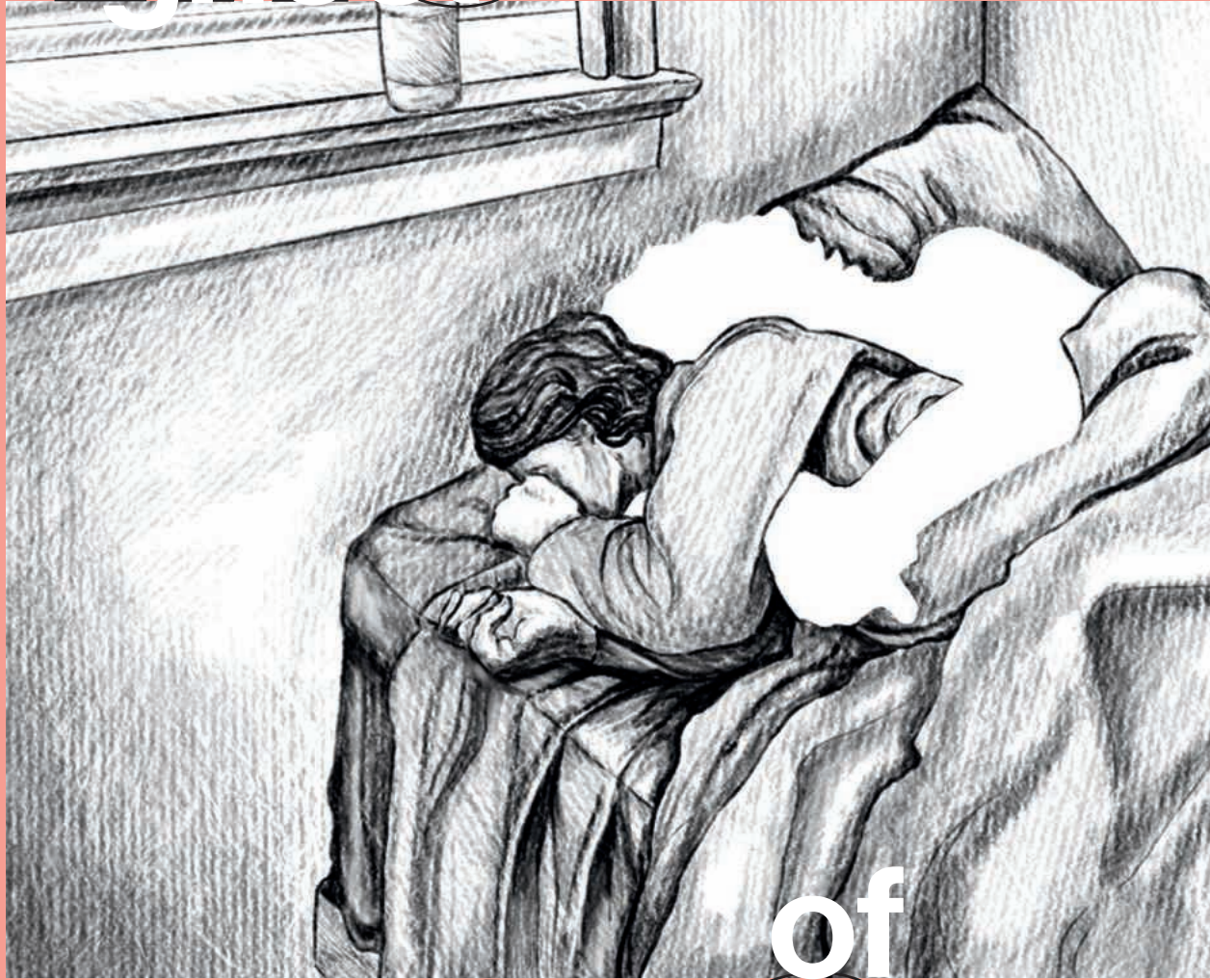
- *liz shanks*

Falling petals

- kate funk (mixed media)



the
ghost



- misha rodriguez (digital media)

of
you

how to make a ghost



Strip me of biological parts and
sift through what remains:
a hollow in huddled sheets;
warmth like sunlight on wood;
a lingering sense of discontent.
A ghost is a mattress dented by a
body that refuses to move.

Lock your fingers between mine and count
the digits. Imagine the delicate bones in
motion – clutching, crushing, striking – and
remember how you never touched them when
I lived, never clasped nerve to nerve. A ghost
is a pair of hands that ache for something to hold.

Untwist my heart. Separate arteries from
where they have tangled with veins;
pinch valves open and peer into ventricles;
call into atriums and listen for the echo.
A ghost is the shadow of old motion.

Place my body in water and measure its volume by
liquid displaced – the truest proof of life being evidence that
cells burgeoned and stretched into the shape of a creature.
A ghost is an empire whose lights expired overnight.

Stride out into the dark as if it would part like water before you,
as if no bodies ever broke and scattered across hard stones,
as if no ghosts churned like bloody bubbles beneath the world's skin.

Push me from you – shelter behind comfort and name yourself blameless;
clutch the pillow and claim that “a ghost is only a memory yet to fade away”
forgetting that I am here with you even though you killed me in a dozen ways.

- *benjamin turner*

same last name



- misha rodriguez (charcoal)

no heartbeat necessary

Six steps down to the *Six Feet Under*, home to freaks and fantasies. A pulsing heartbeat sweeps me into the club and I ride the wave to slide out of my skin, leaving it in a crumpled heap. Flashing lights paint my bare bones rainbow. Off-white ribs glow red and blue and yellow.

I bump butts with an angel as I click-clack my way across the dance floor, rattling bones keeping time. His halo has slipped off-the-shoulder and threatens to fall farther. Annoyed, he flicks a feather at my face so I flip him a few phalanges and skirt between a scaled woman and a moth-faced man.

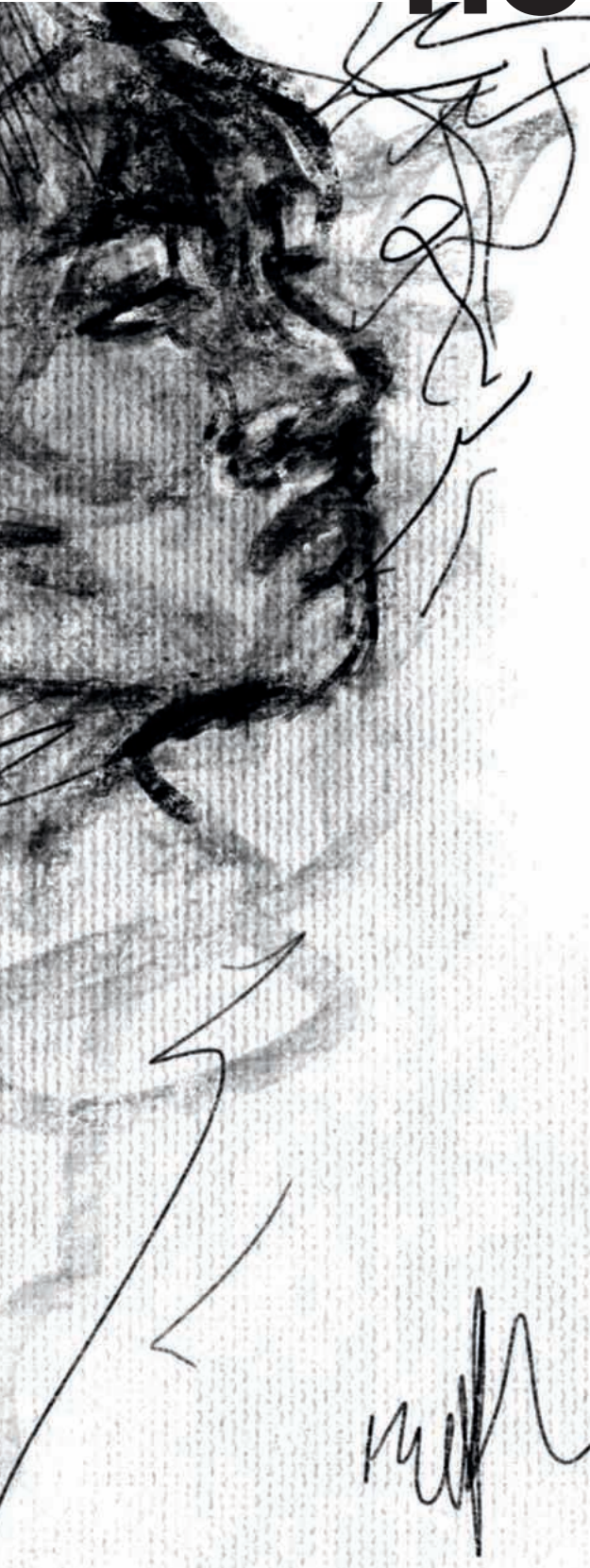
Death looms and glooms behind the bar, his own skull pale as a new corpse. I tell him I'd have a drink but they go right through me. My jaw drops to the floor at my own joke, and once I reattach it I see he's grinning. You could say he's all teeth. My legs walk themselves right over the bar, and

the rest of me follows. We've had our history, he and I – he threatens to throw me out just for sidling over. But I know the spots no one else can reach: just between the second and third vertebrae, to be exact. We know each other as only skeletons can. From boning, as they call it. But I'm aiming too high,

so I hit the floor. A man with rows and rows of perfect teeth dances by himself. I head over – I love a man who watches his calcium – and see he's my angel nemesis, jaws fully unhinged, tears in his many, many eyes. I throw an arm around his shoulder from ten feet away, and he turns with a consummate

grimace. He offers a cigarette, but I don't have the lungs for it. Instead, I rest his head on my shoulder and take us around in slow, steady circles. His heart beats echoes into my empty ribcage. I waltz with him as the faint human-shaped shadows on the walls dance with us, and the echo takes root.

- benjamin turner





growth

- achilles vasquez (soft pastel)

iris lit & art magazine

- sophie uy

Ode to 祖媽

After Tina Carlson, Stella Reed, & Katherine Dibella Seluja

Dear body, understand that before
祖媽 was great-grand-

mother, she was other.

& I'd tell you that the only thing you have is poetry but before Manila 祖媽 was

so afraid that all she had was a question (*God, are you listening?*) & the sibilance of waves incessant like a run-on sentence look I can't tell you if

she shrank/didn't shrink into herself like a comma after Fujian (the border of her world) faded from sight but I can

tell you that the most important road she traveled could only run through oceans —

Dear body, I know you're

fragile — a vessel more malleable than God might have intended — but maybe 祖媽 & 祖公 wanted to be good

for God in Quezon City because their country believed piety was a one-way street.



melody



-liz shanks (mixed media)

minors

Something's in the room with me.
The sun's last dregs
trickle down the walls,
seeping and weeping.
White muddies into gray
as light curdles and dries.

Something's in the room with me.
Hungry stars lurk beyond
one gasping streak of red.
Crisp air slinks through
an open window and
delivers tepid shadows.
Not cold. Not yet.

I longed for lazy golden days,
sunlight drizzled on warm skin – but
slow softness stifles. Escaping to
calm is not escape but abandonment;
warmth turns staid and stagnant.

Something's in the room with me
but it ebbs just as autumn wanes,
receding beyond reach.
Softness turns to rot.
I march to mundane oblivion.

- *benjamin turner*



iride -

- jordan whitehead (digital photography)



science

the siren's song

Sailor on the sea
Hears a woman singing free
Wondering who this voice could be
The sailor follows the perilous sound
Til' at last he has found
The object of his desires wound

She sings to him

"Tell me your secrets,
Tell me your regrets
I won't tell you mine
Tell me yours, and I'll keep you alive."

Soft as a whisper she croons
"That's a lie."

Sailor on the sea
Must secure his desirous eyes upon she
The center of his dreams
The sailor wonders, are they fantasy or nightmare?
The only way to discover is to dare
Eyes, golden like the raging sun, lock in his stare

She sings to him

"Tell me your secrets.
Tell me your regrets
I won't tell you mine
Tell me yours, and I won't let you die."

Soft as a whisper she croons
"That's a lie."

Sailor on the sea
He thinks, the water isn't so deep
Wondering if she'll accept his scavenged water lily
The sailor moves in closer
Thanking his lucky stars for this incarnate clover
Desperately trying to keep his composure

She sings to him

"Tell me your secrets,
Tell me your regrets
I won't tell you mine
Tell me yours, and love you will find."

Soft as a whisper she croons
"That's a lie."

Sailor on the sea
Savoring her kiss tastes salty
The moment, oh so dizzying
The sailor doesn't feel the cold
As the siren pulls him into her iron-shackled hold
Finally he hears what she had foretold

As she sings to him

"Tell me your secrets,
Tell me your regrets
I won't tell you mine
Tell me yours, and you'll feel warmth like red wine."

Soft as a whisper she croons
"That's a lie."

The sailor on the sea
Is no longer hard of hearing
What was once whispering now sounds like screaming
But how can the sailor damn the siren?
She tried and tried and tried to warn him
To him nothing is sweeter than the seas never-ending silence

But for the chorus she sings to him

"Tell me your secrets,
Tell me your regrets
I won't tell you mine
Tell me yours, and never again will you pine."

Soft as a whisper she croons
"That's a lie."

Because the siren and the sailor will never be apart
She took and buried like treasure, his baffled broken heart
Though he would not want it any other way
He spends eternity chained to her gaze
Under the forbidden waves
Hoping no other sailor will follow him this fateful way.

- erica kukanich

ocean truths:

sea turtles and plastic

- rojeana rofougar (painting)



Rojeana
1/1/12



“Ma’am, there’s a waiting list. And besides, that booth can only hold four people. I don’t think your party of seven can fit there.”

The server overhears the conversation, rolling his eyes as he turns the corner into the large room. The uproar of the crowd catches his attention. He stops, eyeing the table before him and yells out.

“Fajitas Texasas with no grilled onions!?” The server’s voice tries to break through the crowd before him— no answer. “Fajitas Texasas with no grilled onions!?” This time he gets the attention of the table. They stare at him, all with confused and concerned expressions on their faces. “Fajitas Texasas with no grilled onions!?” They all look around, until an older gentleman raises his hand.

“I think I ordered that,” he answers as the server makes his way to the gentleman and places the fajitas down before him.

“Fajitas Texasas. Chicken, steak, shrimp, with bell peppers and no onion, right?” the server asks.

“Yes, yes, that’s right!” the gentleman excitedly responds.

“Enjoy.” The server steps away from the table and into the narrow hallway that slowly becomes packed with people. They all stare at him, hoping to be seated. “What was my last table, Khalia?” Khalia, the hostess, looks down at the chart.

“84. You’re not next, though.”

“Okay, thanks,” he says, eyeing the busboy walking to the newly dirty table.

“You alright? You seem off.”

“Yeah...yeah. I just want to go home.”

He backs away, leaving her behind and entering the small back room near the kitchen once again.

“Val, 76. Jenny, 76,” the hostess yells.

“Is there any charge for adding extra cheese to the fajitas?” a waiter asks the manager while looking down at his book.

“Can I get a grande margarita on the rocks and a Fuzzy Navel? Also, a Tequila Sunrise?” The voices all blend. The phone rings. Once. Twice.

“El Paso Mexican Grill, how can I help?” a young waitress picks up, her voice shaky. The bell dings and sizzling fajitas appear on the counter.

“¿D’nde van?” a voice from within the crowd asks, getting the attention of the head chef.

“Table 21. Fajitas Texasas with no grilled onions,” the head chef responds, his voice loud enough to cut through the chaos of the small kitchen. The air is filled with the scent of grease and grilled steak, chicken, and shrimp. Grabbing the fajitas, the server rushes out to run it to the table, leaving everyone behind and entering the roar of tables impatiently waiting to get their food.

“But, how come you sat them before us?!” a customer yells at the hostess.

The sound of the bell continues to echo in his ears. The phone rings, each chime bouncing into his consciousness and reminding him what he left behind. One. Two. Three.

"Y cuando te vas?"

"In two weeks. Some guy is supposed to pick me up and take me up to the city."

"¿Estás seguro?"

"Yes," he responded. The simple one word response choked him. His mother sat at the small kitchen table, the wrinkles on her face carved into her skin. The walls of the kitchen bled red, and the yellow light barely illuminated the room. The stove housed a small, old kettle that steamed with the herb tea she was making. She sighed, getting up from the chair and walking to the small fridge that was covered from top to bottom with pictures. He looked at her, trying to figure out what she was doing.

She reached onto the very top of the fridge and pulled out a small box. Her frail body just barely made her way back to him. Taking out a small envelope, she handed it to him and forcefully tried to smile.

"What is this?" he asked, opening it. "Mom, I can't."

He tried to give her back the envelope.

"Tomalo. Lo necesitas para tu viaje."

"No. I can't take thi—"

She stopped him, covering her hands over his and pushing the envelope back into his hands.

"Todo lo que he trabajado, es para ti mijo. Tómallo por favor."

"No, Mama. I can't take it."

"Por favor. Este dinero, yo lo guardé para ti. Todo el trabajo que yo hice, que hizo tu papá...Sabía que un día me ibas a dejar. Que te ibas a ir, a empezar tu vida."

The sound of the kettle interrupted her, its screech echoing through the room. The steam reached the ceiling, dancing in the air, the scent of herbs kissing his mom's skin. A smile slowly appeared on her face, her wrinkles expanding.

"Sergio, you have 43."

Sergio hears Khalia's voice break through, bringing him back into reality.

"Already?" he asks.

"Yeah, Obed cleared out a lot of tables just now and that opened up a lot of room," she answers, leaving the room and going back to the front. Sergio steps forward, making his way to the computer and looking through all his tables' orders to make sure they're all correct.

"Everything okay?" Sergio hears his manager.

"Yeah, yeah. Just making sure all my orders are okay."

"Okay. If you need anything, just get me, okay?" His manager steps away, looking over at Owen. "Owen, did you ever charge for the extra cheese?" Sergio sees his manager walking away and making his way over to Owen, who's pouring beer.

He takes a small moment to collect himself, taking in the rush of the busboy, the sound of the chefs yelling at one another, and the faint music that whispers throughout the restaurant. Then, he closes his eyes for a moment, and steps out. One step, two, three, and just as he steps away, he hears it. Amidst the noise of the restaurant, the phone's ringing stays with him.

"Good evening, my name is Sergio and I'll be taking care of you all tonight. What can I start you off with?"

He hands out the straws and takes out his book, distancing himself from the ringing. One after another,

the customers order, all wanting a variety of drinks: two strawberry daiquiris, a grande margarita on the rocks, two Cokes, and water. He forces a smile and tells them he'll be right back.

Sergio rushes back into the drink station and prepares the drinks. Once done he trays them up, ready to leave the comfort of the back and step into the abyss. The phone continues to ring. One. Two. Three. Four.

“¿Tienes todo?” Her voice snapped him out of his foggy mind and back to reality. It's early in the morning and his breath has joined the fog that crept around him and his mother. He placed his last bag on top of the suitcase and put on his backpack.

“Yeah, I think so.”

Sergio felt her inching closer to him. Every pore of his face opened and he was warmed by his heart, which beat faster and faster with each minute.

“Te voy a extrañar.” She let out a cough. The cough got worse until it finally stopped and the silence settled back in. Sergio looked forward, not wanting to look at her.

“I'm going to miss you, too,” he finally replied. He felt a head rest on his shoulder and a hand holding his. He gripped it tightly, his breath being held soundly by his lungs. He felt the tears run down his face, and his lips tasted their salty and miserable flavor.

“¿Mijito, te acuerdas cuando te enseñé a andar en bicicleta? Llegó tu papá ese día con tu bici, y estabas bien feliz.” She tried to distract him as the two stood in place, waiting for the inevitable.

“Yeah, my red bike. I remember. You held onto the back of my seat and told me to pedal.”

“Y te fuiste bien rápido,” she continued, her voice breaking. “Te fuiste, y fuiste hasta que te deje. No me lo podía imaginar hasta que te deje ir.”

“I can't believe it, either,” he said. He closed his eyes, trying to remember back to that day.

“Me recuerdas mucho a tu papá.”

Her voice barely escaped a cough.

“I know. I look just like him.”

“Y tu carácter. Todo igual como el,” she said, pushing his hair back and smiling at him. The sound of the streets and buildings slowly came back to life. Each window turned on their lights.

“I'm going to miss this place,” Sergio said, looking at the apartments before him.

“Lo sé,” she replied. They both heard it at the same time, saw a car in the distance pull up to them. No words, other than the sound of the car honking. One. Two. Three. Four.

“Do you want some dressing with that salad?” Sergio

asks the older lady before him. His mind had drifted away for just a moment.

“What do you recommend?” the lady asks. The smile on her face exposed wrinkles that reminded Sergio of his mother.

“We have a chipotle sauce that goes well with that salad.”

“Is it spicy?” she asks. He thinks for a minute before responding.

“Depends on your taste. Don't worry, the dressing comes on the side. So, if you want, you can just taste it then decide if you want to pour the dressing all over it.”

“Sounds good to me,” she smiles at him. He writes the order down and steps away, looking back at the old lady and her family. A table of six: a small family of four and their grandparents. He wonders what it would have been to enjoy a dinner like this. A dinner with his parents, with a wife and kids. A moment of peace. Then the phone rings. One. Two. Three. Four. Five...

...Six. Seven. The phone rang. The door swung open and Sergio entered his small apartment. An apartment with a bed, kitchen, and a bathroom on the corner. The blinds on the window leaked a green hue from the trafficlights right outside. The light turned red just as the phone stopped.

He sat down on his small chair, taking off his shirt. His eyes winced with every movement. Sergio grabbed a red hoodie and zipped it up, feeling the comfort of the material relax his muscles. His head leaned back and he sighed as he looked up at the ceiling, his mind empty and void. A small knock startled him. One. Two. Three. The sound of voices bounced off of the walls. He peeked through the blinds to see children walking about, wearing costumes. The knock continued. He made his way to the door, seeing the walls of his apartment turn green once again from the traffic light.

He peered through the peephole. A small figure, wearing a costume, stood on the other side: it wore a suit and tie, and had the head of a rabbit. It knocked again, yelling, "Trick-treat!"

The voice was muffled. Sergio looked around and grabbed a bowl of candy he had placed near a counter from the night before. Just as he began to turn the doorknob, the phone rang. He opened the door, seeing the figure reach for the bowl. Its whole body turned red from the change of the traffic light. The phone rang. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Sergio stared back at the phone ringing. "Pick up," a low voice said, forcing Sergio to turn his attention back to the strange kid and his costume. He was gone. One. Two. Three. Four...

"Five minutes till' close." Sergio heard his manager yell out. The night had ended quickly, as Sergio allowed himself to do his job blindly; no thoughts, just the memory of that night, getting that phone call.

"Sergio, can you come here?"

He hears his manager ask him. Sergio walks up to him, watching the rest of his coworkers begin their side work for the night. "I'm going to let you go early tonight," his

manager says. Sergio's eyebrows rise. "I'm sure you're exhausted from working so much lately," he says.

"How'd you know?"

"I can tell," he says. "Can I ask, why are you working so much?" The question sinks deep into Sergio's chest. His heart stops for a moment. The phone rings. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

"How many days?"

"Ay mijito, no tengo mucho tiempo," he heard from the other side. The sound of coughing interrupted. His throat tightened and he placed his hand over his eyes.

"I tried, mama. I really did. I thought coming here, getting a job to help..."

"Lunita...te llamé para decirte que te amo. Para que pudieras escuchar mi voz una vez más. Que recuerdes todos mis sacrificios. Todo mi dolor. Todo el amor que he tenido para ti y tus hermanos. Todo..." Sergio felt the tears coming down his face. He lifted one of his hands and covered his eyes, shielding the glow from the traffic lights and immersing himself in darkness.

"I'm sorry..." was all Sergio could make out. "Solamente te quería ver feliz...ver saludable. But I left you..."

"Because I need to," Sergio answers. The sharpness in his chest strikes as the phone finally stops. "My mother always said that the fruit of my labor will flourish into something big."

"And what might that be?"

A silence settles in.

"Peace."



The ORANGE SHOP
CITRA FL





THE EASTWOOD

10 / 12

CITRA

Smaller Dreams & Softer Realities

- corinne martin

One day, she wanted to be a tree. He misunderstood, her Ellis, the first time she told him this. A down feather from their cheap duvet floated through a streak of lightning shining from under the curtains. He reached his hand out to her through the darkness, through the lightning, past the feather. They were so young then. In the summer, after long days working for his father in the Georgia sun, thick clouds would coil through the air. In the night, he'd reach out his hand to her, and shudder with each breaking thunder. He'd be fragile for once as he settled his dark curls against her chest, her arms encircled around him. Delilah held him through every storm, commiserated in his fear of them, and kept quiet her own secret affection for them.

And she talked to him. She whispered the sweetest of nothings in his ears to pull him worlds away from the storm outside. She indulged his vulnerability, if only for another reason to hold him tightly. One night she whispered to him, "When I die, I want to be a tree." She'd never told anyone else, and hadn't quite realized her desire until she spoke it.

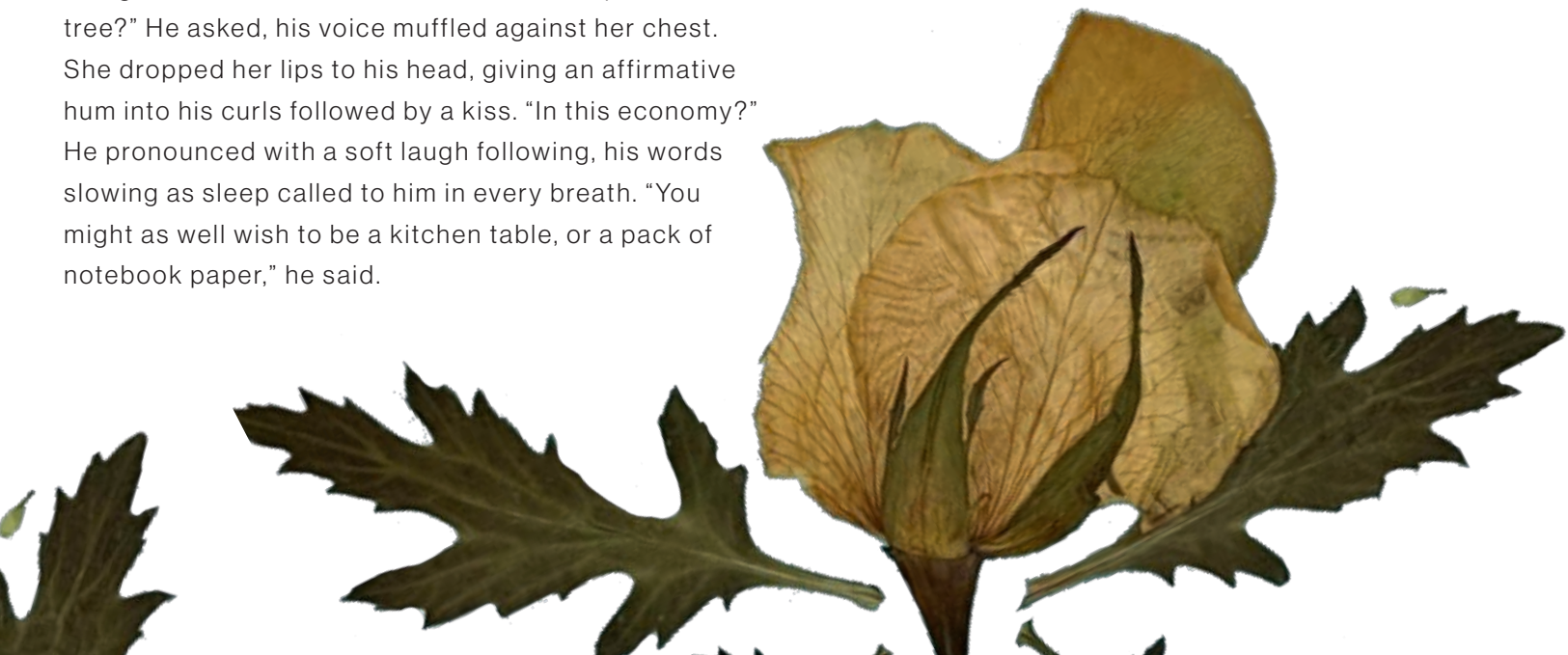
He was growing tired now, placing lazy feather kisses along her collarbone as he listened to her speak. "A tree?" He asked, his voice muffled against her chest. She dropped her lips to his head, giving an affirmative hum into his curls followed by a kiss. "In this economy?" He pronounced with a soft laugh following, his words slowing as sleep called to him in every breath. "You might as well wish to be a kitchen table, or a pack of notebook paper," he said.

"I will be a tree," Delilah said. She traced small swirling circles along the expanse of his back with her fingertips, occasionally losing rhythm when her nails caught in his shirt. His guttural snoring soon vibrated against her chest, a pesky habit she'd yet to learn to love in their year of marriage. She continued to whisper in his ears until sleep found her too.

The early years of their marriage were strung together by these sleepless nights, until the bed grew crowded with two smaller creatures who also sought comfort in the night. Then their near-dream conversations were mullied ever so quietly so as not to wake the girls. But Ellis always kept his hand out to her when thunder found the sky.

Delilah wakes up with her hand outstretched across an empty bed, and the shrill annoyance of her phone ringing across the room. She walks across the cold floor, each step cracking some joint in her body she didn't know she had. Sloane's face lights up the phone, the picture a grinning glimpse of a moment from her college graduation. Delilah accepts the call.

"Mom?" Sloane asks immediately.



"I'm here." She responds as she crosses the room and pulls the curtains open, letting the faded sunlight of a gloomy day filter in. Sloane is worried, as she usually is. Her children's jubilee shrieks echo in the background of her voice. She is eager to know if her mother will be coming to the baby shower for Charlotte, Delilah's younger daughter, that evening. Her voice is sharp when she emphasizes that it is Charlotte's *first* baby shower, her *parents* have to be there.

Delilah hums in agreement as she smooths the mess of salt and pepper fluff her hair has become in the mirror above her dresser. "You know I'll be there," she says, licking her thumb before smoothing it across a flyaway. Then the conversation hovers, lulls in a silence, and Delilah knows without seeing her that Sloane is holding her arm against herself in nervous anticipation.

"How is he?" Delilah concedes.

"He misses you," Sloane answers without missing a beat. "Don't you think this is all a bit silly, Mom?" Delilah knows Sloane's nervous hold on her arm has progressed to an incessant tapping thrum of her fingers against any hard surface she can find.

"I made Charlie a onesie for the baby—You know, how I did for you? I found her old baby blanket and repurposed it." Delilah leans against the edge of her bed, running her hands over the scraps of fabric left on the bed from last night's project.

"He's been here for a month, and you still won't tell me what—"

"Do you think Charlie will like it? I want it to be—"

"You've been married for thirty-five years," Sloane says. She's been more and more impatient everyday with Delilah, and Ellis she'd imagine too. Her continued questioning suggested that Ellis hadn't opened the conversation either. He'd always been stubborn.

One day, five years into their marriage, Delilah and Ellis had both come home with surprises. She'd left on the table a shoebox wrapped in dainty wrapping

paper, sprinkled here and there with roses and chrysanthemums. He'd been eager to tell her something as soon as his toes had crossed the threshold, running his fingers through his hair until it was wilder than usual. They'd toppled their surprises out of their lips simultaneously, fumbling them clumsily in a nonsensical chatter on top of each other.

"I've decided..."

"I found out..."

"... that I'm going..."

"...today at the doctor..."

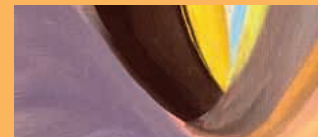
"...to be a writer."

"...I'm pregnant."

Then silence. Then an argument, with red hot faces and clenched fists. Ellis couldn't be a writer. Not now, not when the number of hungry stomachs in the home would soon increase. They had made plans; he was going to take over his father's business. But Ellis didn't want that. Writing was his passion. Delilah had read his writing, poured over it at the kitchen table with him, if only to understand the madness in his mind. They'd had a plan.

But he was stubborn. He knew what he wanted. Sloane spent the first year of her life in cloth diapers as Ellis worked as a high school English teacher. It paid less than his father's work had, but he was able to write in between classes, sometimes during if his mind was restless. They made it work. Delilah started working as a seamstress from their house, making blouses and flouncy dresses for the girls in the neighborhood. She nurtured his dream like the blinking of a firefly clasped in her hand. They made it work.

"Mom? Are you still there?" Sloane asks, her voice muffled. The phone had drifted from Delilah's hands onto the soft cover of the bed. She raised the phone back to her ear.



"I'm here and... And I will see you tonight," Delilah pressed a firm thumb against the end button and dropped her phone back to the bed.

Delilah considered their life beyond that moment five years into their marriage, imagining the forgotten crossroads they could've taken. It's funny looking back at your life and recognizing that you're in the future you once imagined and anxiously anticipated. Or at least some version of that future. That young couple huddled together through a thunderstorm had imagined different things. They'd imagined adventures overseas; topless sunbathing in France, eating cocoa beans in South America, and pointing shivering fingers up in awe at the Northern Lights.

They'd lived a much softer life than that, building a family, vacationing only every few years to Delilah's distant cousin's lake house three hours west of Cincinnati. Delilah loved her family, loved the heartbeat of affection that ran between them no matter what distance. She loved the life she'd built with Ellis, no matter how small. But maybe it hadn't been enough.

She'd asked him as much once, bluntly presenting the question during their twentieth-anniversary dinner. They'd gone to Le'Crucio's, a vaguely Italian restaurant where they'd once shared their first date together. When she'd come home from work that night, he was dressed in his best suit, though it fit more tightly than it had in years past. He placed an aromatic bouquet of multi-colored peonies in her arms and told her to put on her best dress.

"Let's be young again." He whispered this in her ears as he kissed her neck until her cheeks flushed. She'd shivered the whole night through until they sat at the table, and then that persistent question pestered her mind. *Is this enough for you?*

He thought she was talking about his food and told her there was plenty. She stopped him then, placed her hand on his where he clasped his fork.

"We're no longer young and shiny beings, and I can't help but always wonder, is this enough for you?" Delilah persisted.

She could see from the furrow of his brow that his response was buffering in his head, crafting the most promising string of words to answer her question. The waiter refilled their waters in the silence, the ice cubes from the carafe plopping unpleasantly in their glasses.

"I have dreams, I always have, but you're who I choose to seek those dreams with. Seeking our dreams together, that is enough for me," Ellis said carefully. They let the conversation die there, but Delilah felt in her mind a lingering bitterness she couldn't quite shake. They'd spent so many years seeking his dreams, she'd never considered having a dream of her own.

This bitterness followed Delilah as she arrived at Charlie's new home, situated in a dream-like crevice between a mountain side and a lake. The house was beautiful, decorated with all the soft, pastel decorations that are meant to celebrate a new life. She watched Ellis across the backyard as the sun dropped lower and lower in the sky until the world was golden. She watched his laughter, his brow furrowed in conversation, and his somehow maintained curls stirring in the lake winds. She missed the swelling feeling she'd always felt while taking him in.

She resented the churning of her stomach that now followed her awe for him. A distasteful reminder of the distance sprawling between them, the pride she was unable to release to tell him she forgave him.

It had been a month ago. She ran her thumb along the book page as she turned it, swift enough to tease the threat of a paper cut. Upon reading the last page of Ellis' book, all color had drained from her face. He'd been working on this book for years, spending most nights bent over disorganized pages of scribbled writing in his study, yet he'd never let her read a page. He'd told her to wait, to wait until it was in hardcover. He was confident this would be the one to be published, and he'd been right.

Staring now at the last chapter, the words inscribed finally in print, years of resentment boiled to the surface.

"Do you like it?" He asked her, expectant.

"Is this true?"

"What? I- It's fiction, obviously, but what do you think?" He asked, immediately flustered by her lack of response.

"The man in your story... he hates his family," Delilah said, her face growing hotter with each second. The story she'd read, it told the story of a man who'd never reached his dreams. A man bound by a responsibility towards his family. He asked her to keep reading, but she'd shoved the book back into his hands, she asked him to leave



She refused to even talk about it. Refused his calls from Sloane's home. She'd spent the last month in silence, and now there he was in the glow of golden hour.

Delilah set her plastic punch cup down on the table. She walked towards the lake, some unnamed emotion rising like steam up her chest and out her ears. She kept going until she found herself at the base of a tree with an old wooden swing tied to its branches. It overlooked the lake in its quiet tranquility. She bent over, placing her hands on the tree and gasping for air.

"Want me to push you?" Ellis' voice spoke from behind her. She stood up quickly and ran her hands down the wrinkles on the front of her dress.

"Excuse me?" She asked him, pursing her lips sourly.

"On the swing," he says, the most tentative of smiles on his lips.

She looked between him and the swing, flustered by the absurdity of the question. "Me? No. I'm far too old for that," she says, crossing her arms tightly

"Humor me?" He asks.

Delilah shifts her feet in the damp earth, feeling her blocky heels slip into it. Without speaking she sits on the swing, yelping to herself as she sinks lower than intended. She wraps her hands tightly around the coarse fiber rope holding up the swing. She kicks her heels off, one foot at a time.

Soon she feels his hands splayed sturdily across the expanse of her back as he gently pushes her. A giddy slip of laughter escapes her mouth, the swing careens towards the lake. The wind brushed against her cheeks and she let Ellis continue to push her. It was a brief desperate moment of only air, followed by his steady presence pushing her forward again.

"I figured it out," he said.

"What?" She asked, unable to turn to look at him.

"How you're going to become a tree."

Delilah suddenly dropped her feet to the ground, clumsily seeking footing until the swing had stopped. But she didn't turn around, she stayed there, frozen.



"There's a service, where you can turn your body into soil. Then, they plant a tree in it, you nurse the tree to life, and in a way, you become the tree itself," he says.

Delilah stood and turned to face him, looking at him between the swing's rope as she held her hands onto it. "You remembered," she said

"And I can be a tree too—if that's what you want," he says.

Before she could speak, he pulled a familiar green cover from his jacket pocket. He outstretched it to her; she felt the smoothness of the shiny book cover against the palm of her hand as she accepted it. The last page, that's all he wanted from her. To read the last page. She opened it, scanned her eyes along it until the very last line. And there, inked out in infinity. *Smaller dreams and softer realities can still leave us full.*

They'd gotten married at a lake much like that one, on a frigid November day. When the ceremony ended, they took each other's hands and plunged off the dock into the lake below. They were a mess of fabric and blue lips, but Ellis held her face in his hands and placed a kiss on her lips to last a lifetime. She remembered then what he'd told her—this will be the greatest adventure of my life.

blind of huroeriooio



- achilles vasquez (collage)

I.

That night was frost on a window pane, hazy and chilly and distorted;
the radio spit up warped static warnings from its shelf above the refrigerator.
The boys had ushered us out of the furnace of that house
as soon as the sleet splattered in a dirty slush on the porch.
The snow fell in fat clumps from the gray of the night,
and I was shivering,
freckled, skin-raised bumps peppering my skin,
wearing nothing but a plum velvet dress
and a quiet terror, which I kept in a silver locket around my neck.

II.

That feeling sloshed in my stomach like a heavy tar,
the sky swallowed up the moon as it blinked its last light out through the clouds.
I was unable to rid myself of its chalk-gray omen.
The ice stretched over the asphalt and curled up under tires,
licked at the brake-pad and fell asleep behind the wheel.

You stood like a ghost in your nightgown, hair in curlers,
and begged her to stay, cold hands gripped like a vice on her wrist,
your disquiet a symphony of crashing cymbals and glass shattering against guardrails.
She did not listen, slipped off into the blizzard, snowfall sliding off her shoulders in teardrops.

III.

Four miles up the road, a girl stood like a burning saint at an intersection
outlined in white, a street lamp flickering like a single star above her.
The sterile shimmering snow glistened atop everything like rows and rows of white teeth.
Still she stood, sure she could survive anything, that hubris a black gash of soot across her face.

Out of the quiet of the night, a vehicle came flying toward her like a blade,
spun out of control, slid and slipped and lay siege to the street corner—
a saint's body dovetailed with the silver of the passenger's side door.
Struck down, a soul hemorrhaged from her veins in an instant.

She would be found in the morning under the white funeral pall,
fingertips plum-purple, eyes closed in peaceful slumber. But tonight,
the snow pounded the abandoned street, unrelenting, the wind moaned its sorrow,
and the sky said nothing as it swallowed up its silver sacrifice.

frostbitten saints

- *nicole quynh huggins*

roses



- valerie chenault (digital photography)

When I was young
my father crushed underfoot
an adolescent mouse in the field
behind the barn, in the tall grass. I was
sure that man did not know what nurture was:
to hold things real tender
to teach the kids to drive stick in the old truck
to keep the light on in the kitchen late into the night
to put out milk for the stray cat under the porch
to be proud, and strong and present
I wish he'd known
he wanted to be a father before he was holding a baby in
his arms
I wish he'd known
to be proud, and strong and present
to put out milk for the stray cat under the porch
to keep the light on in the kitchen late into the night
to teach the kids to drive stick in the old truck
to hold things real tender.
Sure, that man did not know what nurture was.
Behind the barn, in the tall grass, I was
an adolescent mouse in the eld
my father crushed underfoot
when I was young.

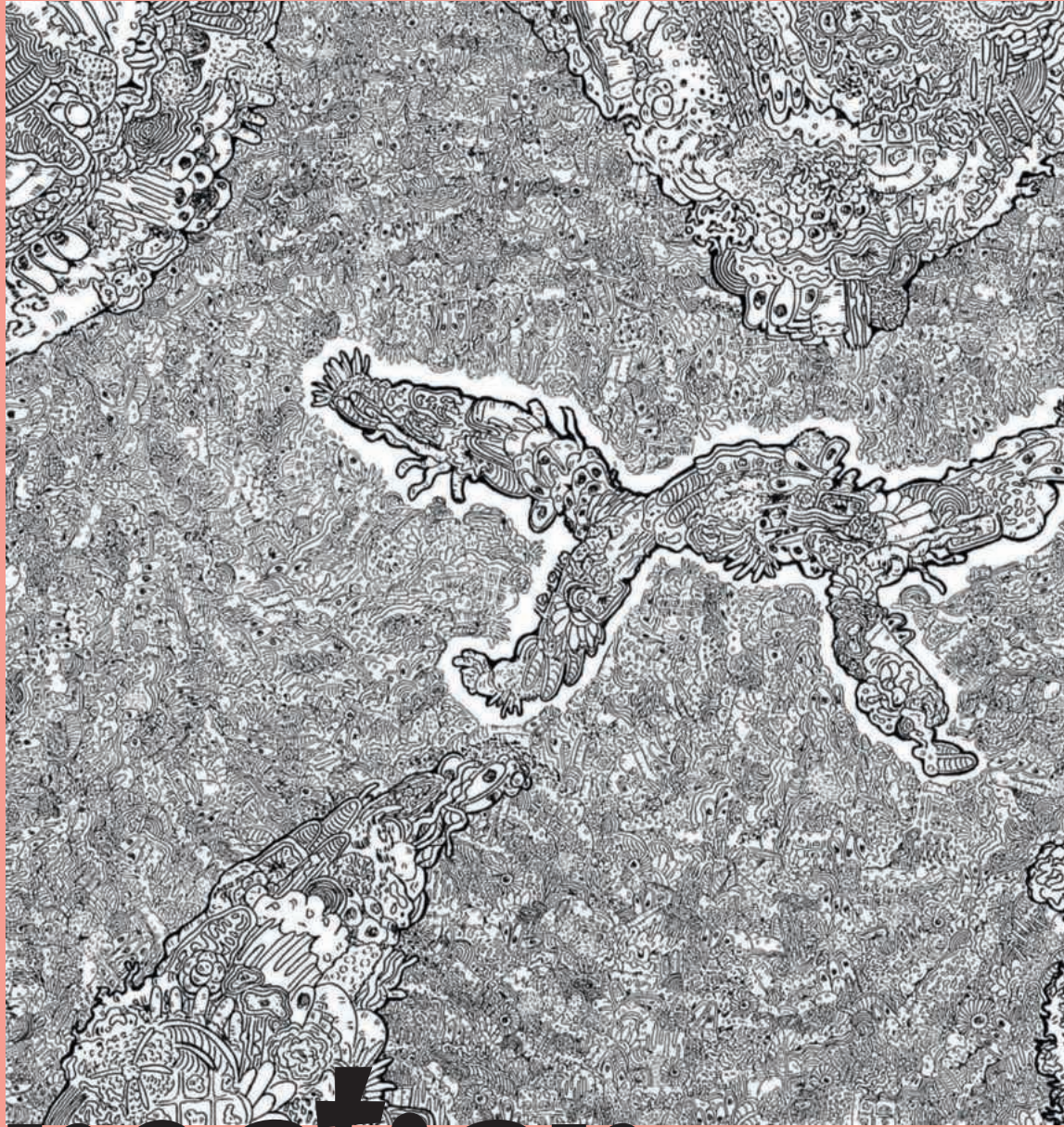
- *nicole quynh huggins*

the
intricacies

of
the

human

connection



- achilles vasquez (micron pen)



something

more

than

human

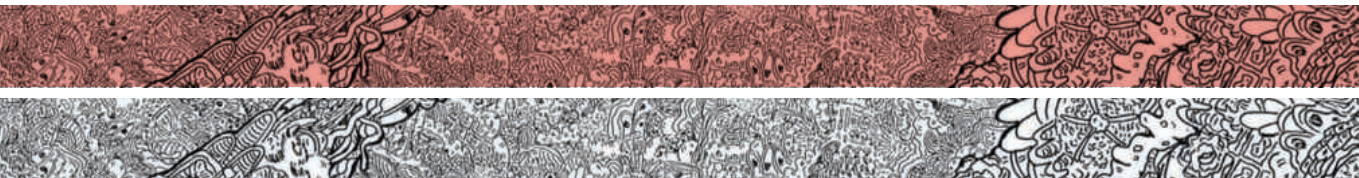
- starlight fields

I am a creature dreamed.
how long ago, i do not fully know,
but i was a thing of thought eons before,
being rooted in the depths of the earth
and grown into a soul.

this is the reckoning of my origin story,
like those before me i am haunted,
caught somewhere in this state,
of being, only
half alive.

the ceaseless cavern, the void that exists,
somewhere inside of my flesh,
echoes violently. each syllable,
taunting me, increasing in clarity.
making within me a symphony.

how long must i be here,
bound to this forsaken place,
which looks like everything,
i have ever come to know,
and nothing that i will one day be.



leaky faucet - jesse case

My mother left me like water
dripping from a leaky faucet.
I got so used to the sound of her going,
I began to ignore it.

Now the sink overflowed,
flooded the kitchen with a plinck,
plinck,
plinck
that I left unattended.

Hi, honey. I don't know how I'm supposed to get you money. I'm at work. Love you, bye.

I lie face-down in the muck
that remains, nose pressed into rotting tile wood. Inhaling.
I look at pictures.
I read her handwriting.
I listen to voicemails.
I watch ads for TV shows that stopped airing years ago.

Hey, J---, the person coming in after me has a child that just went into the hospital. There's a fair chance I will be home very late. I'll keep you posted, I love ya. Buh-bye, sweetie.

My last photo of her before the drought:

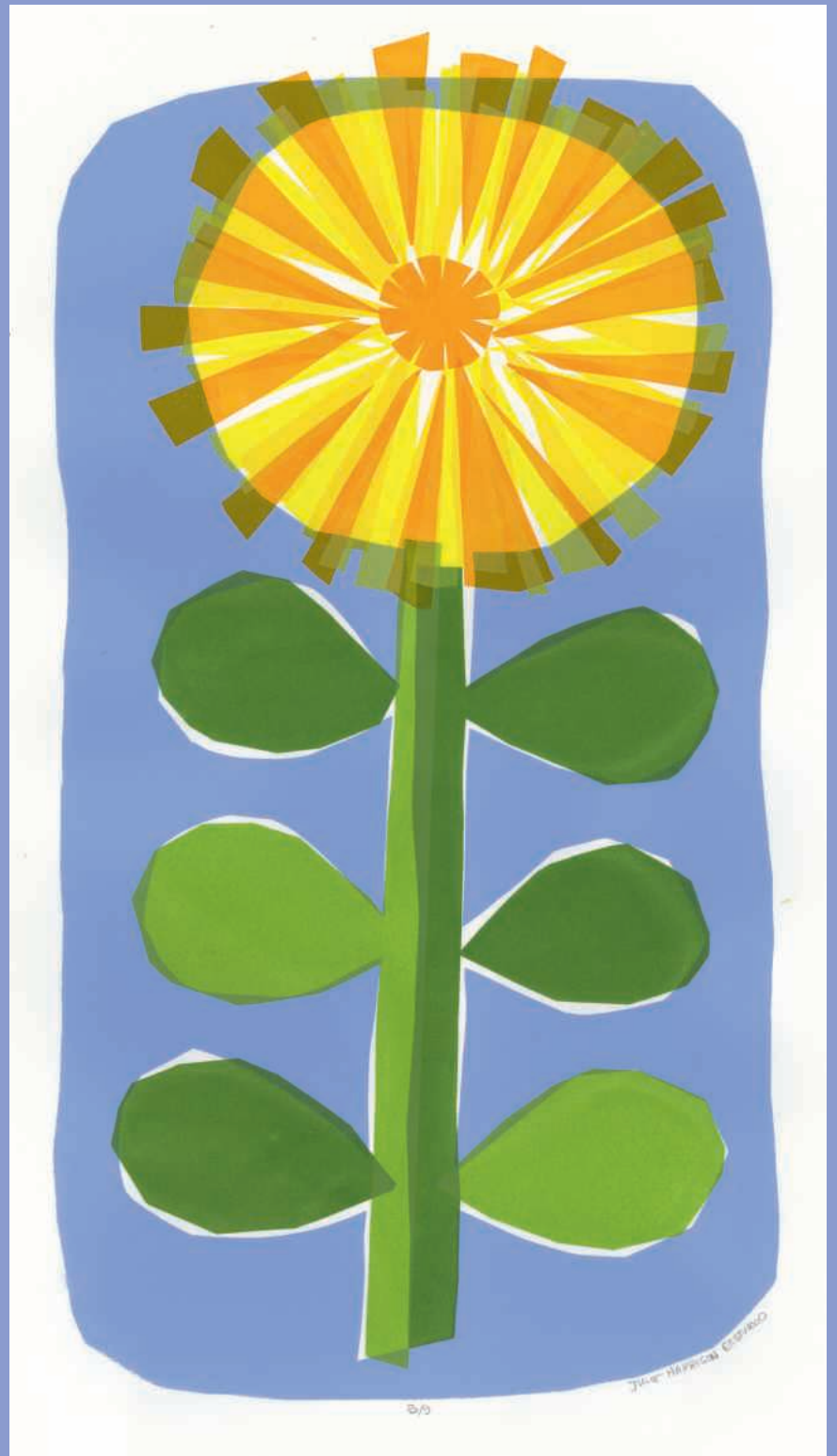
she's wearing one shirt of a half-dozen
that she owned, stained with all kinds of
mess, two sizes too big for starved, spilled-
out bodies, work pants black khakis made
kites the way they hung flat, her legs twigs
pacing in circles from work to home to work.

Hey hon, I'm sorr-- I'm trying-- I-- I don't know what to do. I can't get money to you. I'm at work.

When did she have her first secret stroke?
Did she come home from a shift one night,
half of her smile dripping away?


mary's Flower

- julie eastwood (screenprint)





both sides



beauty.
clear waters flowing peacefully
freshwater fish
and crawdads thriving
colliding into rocks
water droplets being tossed into the air
while glistening
driftwood lands ashore
helping the beavers build their homes
profit over planet
we are a capitalist society

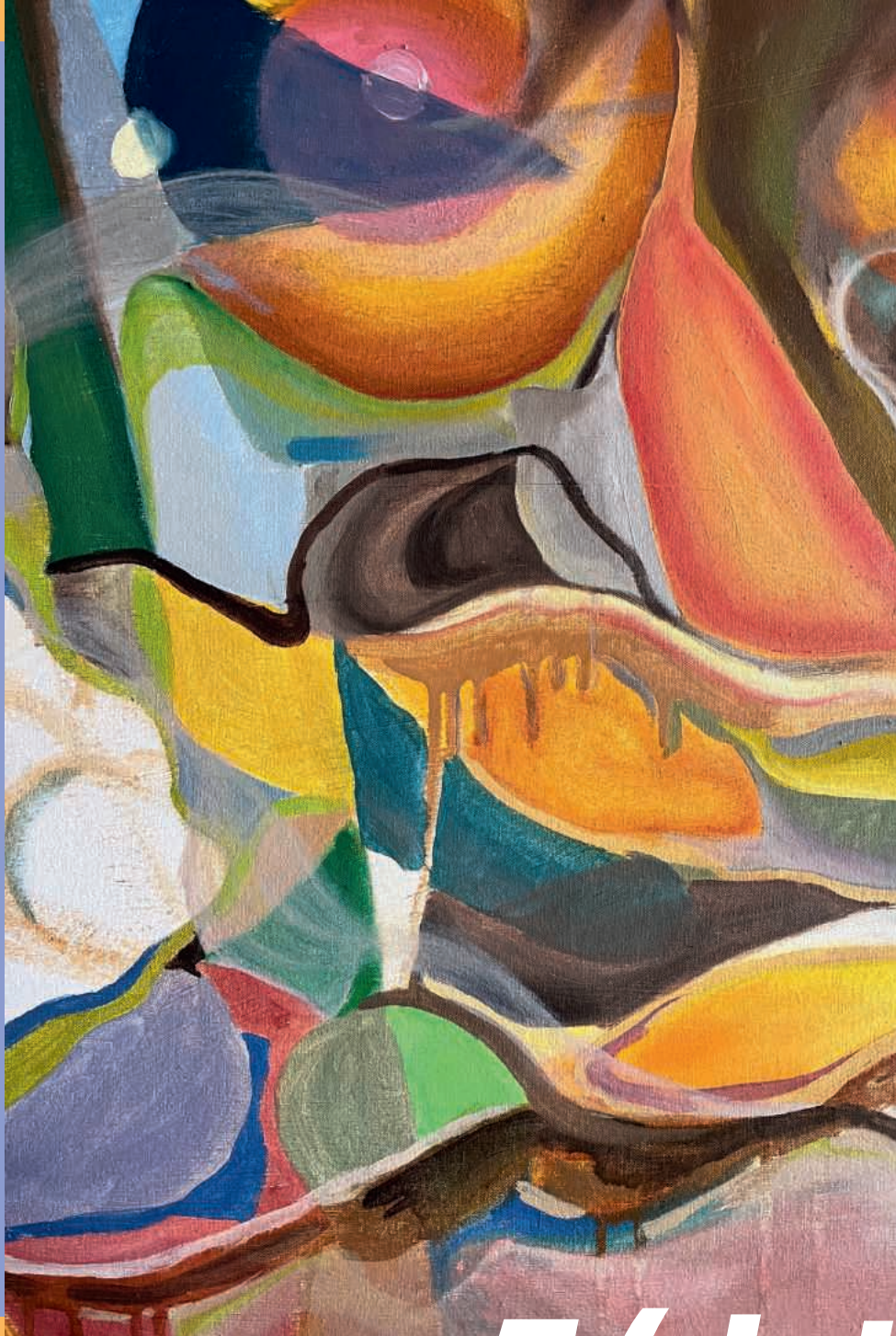
destruction.
murky waters with pollution
microplastics
they lie with their greenwashing
and plastic bottles
leaving behind hope
with dirt
preparing for the drought
while destroying the minnow's air
we have no planet b
ruining environmental strategies

- camden gillespie



of the river

untitled



-grace little (oil on canvas)

no. 5 (detail)

last summer in artesia, california

-sophie uy

I slept two doors down from a dead man's
room it's nothing personal someone died

I couldn't walk down the hallway leading
to that bedroom on the left it would be

intrusive to take up a dead man's space
a dead man used to live in that bedroom

& left empty/furnished space after him like
a used book with half-erased annotations

I wasn't keen on sweeping the bedroom
floors kasi then I'd have to accept that

a man was alive & also died & he had walked
every room of the house I was staying in

kasi a house is also a body that people imprint
upon just by walking inside it like a breath

& toeing off their shoes on the welcome mat
& the old house & its roof of colonized

bones still holds traces of a man that was dying
inside & needs to be purged daily of unholy

fluids & debris maybe that's why Nanay
insisted I clean the floors & use the broom

behind the Choco Crunchies-stocked pantry
to sweep away the breaths he left etched into

hardwood floors smelling of day-old sunlight
encased in a glass frame smudged by stubby

fingerprints no hands can hold him now only his
nothingness Tito how did I become so afraid of

opening doors I never thought about opening
until I forgot to shut the black iron gates on my

way out unless you mean to tell me the body is a
door that leads anywhere or some bullshit like

that kasi really bodies like ours are corpses AP
U.S. History books won't print last summer

I learned you died & I still don't know how to
miss you or if I should maybe I'm a monster

who should've swept the breath of your footprints
& emptied it in the basura instead of pretending

I was good enough at writing around your dying
& thinking a poem could fix any of my bad habits

like forgetting to clean my dishes & not putting
Choco Crunchies back in the freezer before they

melt & vacuuming my bedroom floor more than
once every six weeks kasi frankly I neglect the

nervous system of my house too much to
have been any good at being your breath's caretaker



interlude II (peace)



- grace little (oil on canvas)

tea



- julie eastwood (lithograph)



- corinne martin

ode to cave drawings

Rough is the way you go, in life and death.
Yet your treasure is cherished in name of the effort you endured,
To make yourself known.

My pen can flow with ease, inscribing frivolous thoughts,
Across a page, a scrap receipt, a well-weighted journal,
Or even ink-bled into my palm if desperate measures should call.

You fought for your existence.
It was survival, the way you forged into unforgiving rigidity.
Letting stone-dust pollute the wetness of your seeking eyes,
And the inner cells of your lungs.
Straining muscles fighting against the core of the earth itself,
To manifest meaning and messages,
Where none had ever been.
You carved the sacred mundanities of life before it was even aware of itself.
You showed us the love and pain that lines a life,
in careful lines misidentified now as simple.
You gave us your world,
We feel the texture of your being in the coarse grip of rock,
Grasping at our fingertips, shouting,
We were here.

You are named pre-historic, pre-cognizance,
Because your history had not yet found a pen nor a page.
But I refuse to believe your eternity was made in ignorance.

Oh, how can I consider myself to be a poet?
When you wiped your sweating brow, and made poetry in its purest form,
a desire to be known.



- *grace little (film photography)*

chris

maid of honor speech:

first draft

- corinne martin

The clock has run out, hydrangeas and roses and baby's breath
Already held in your palms.

And I am a coward.

I knew I had loved you, after our first homecoming dance.

We'd laid on your trampoline, our tulle caressing each other.

I didn't know the stars, I knew only you.

Your fingertips wrapped my wrist like a lightning strike,

Around the corsage Jared from Chemistry had given me.

You led me to every star, whispered their names in my ear,

I knew then I was a goner.

You are that galaxy, and he has not even a clue.

I have memorized your heart,

The crinkle cut creases of a smile around your eyes,

Your dreams spiraling wider than the world itself,

And that you always buy shoes a size too small.

He will know none of these things,

He will not know to give you a house with a tower,

And to paint you murals in every room.

He will not shudder every time your legs brush under covers,

He will not feel your presence like a prayer,

He will not savor your every word like a hard candy puckering your lips,

He will not do any one of the things, and he will not love you,

As I have dreamed of loving you,

In every aching moment,

Of our friendship.

But I will say none of this, on your special day.

So perhaps I will keep it short,

Congratulations to the happy couple,

I hope he treats you as you deserve.



- achilles vasquez (soft pastel)

that *everything*

Star-marked skies sigh above me into something which is all soul,

They reach their rays to me and my fingertips ache in open air,

I feel it then, that *everything*.

Crooning tunes of adolescence cradle my mind through headphones,

I hide my phone light under covers and wonder what it is to be known,

I feel it then, that *everything*.

Spiraling sprints where the wind tries to catch me, my legs pump beneath,

The world has no more air left for me to breathe, I crash on a soft place to land,

I feel it then, that *everything*.

I cannot give it any meaningful name, the way in these moments I find my chest is swept,

with meaning, with something, with *everything*.

I feel it in the night before the first day of school, in worms stranded on the pavement after a storm, in cat noses pressed against glass waiting for adoption, in middle school best friends picking up right where we left off, in movie theaters with two lonely patrons in the back row, in wind whipping my hair like an escaped laugh, in pricking my finger while bea ing, in blowing out my birthday candles, in watching rain droplets race each other down a car window, in squeezing a balloon until it pops, in silent night echoing at christmas eve service, in pumping gas at midnight, in holding my breath to float, in laughing with my sisters, in a penny heads up, in empty shopping malls, in lost pet signs, in braiding hair, in smeared ink, in calling dad, in driving home, in homecoming weekend, in-

Each and every moment I've shared with *you*,

I feel it then, that *everything*.

- corinne martin

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