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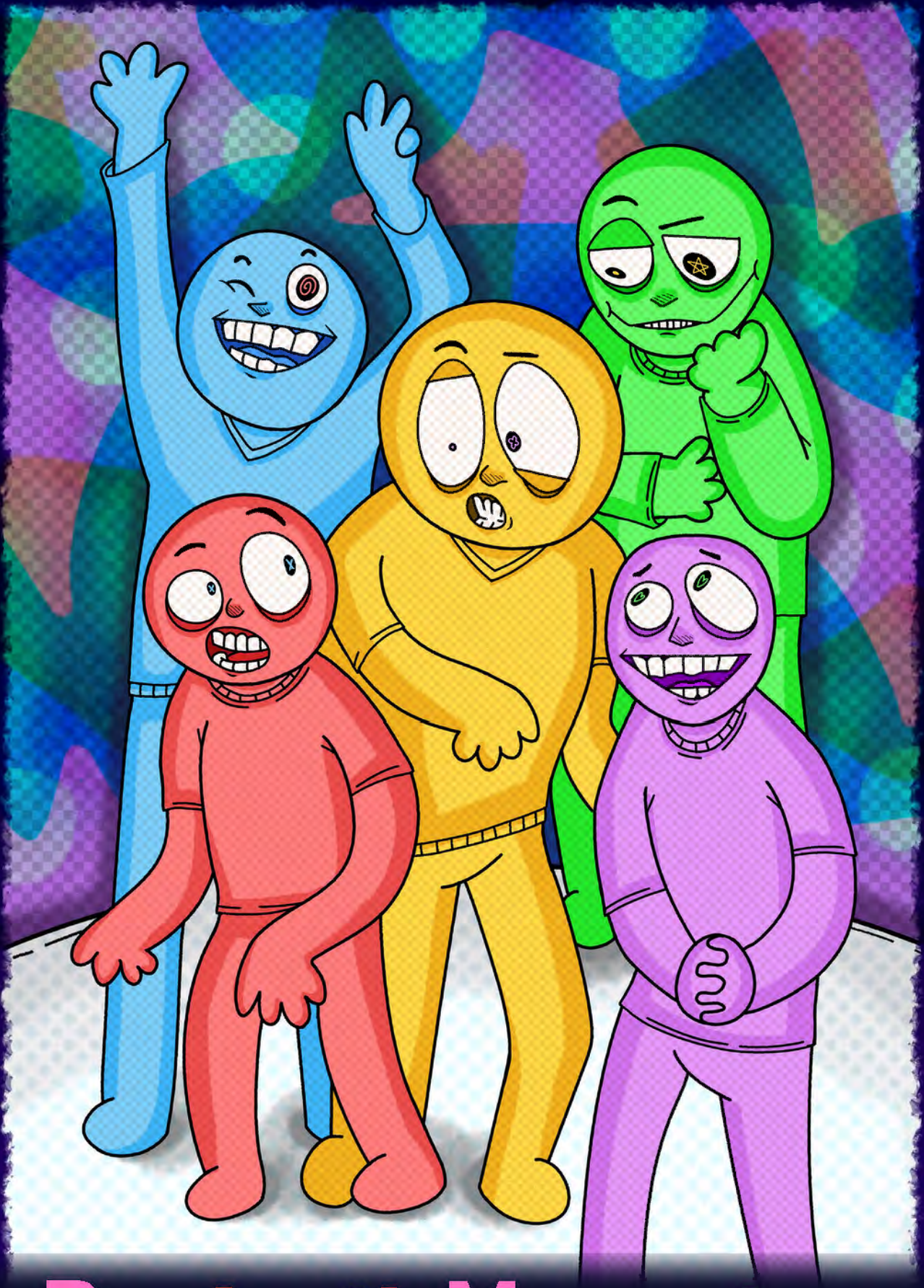
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Portrait Magazine

Fall 2023

Magazine Staff 2023

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(Cover art by Aubs Marohn)

Pale Blue Dot

by Mads Katz

Pale blue eyes

I barely remember

Dark chestnut hair

No, rich black

Am I imagining

the laughs we shared? Nights we had?

Blue black sky

without a star

Did I miss one word? Should I have heard?

Voice pale, rail thin

Blue, who? You?

Blue, blue, blue as her skin

That permanent spot

buried and gone

No, burned

How could I forget

the tears in your eyes,

or a sparkle, I thought

when we spoke of our

Pale Blue Dot

Nothing matters, right?

Is that what you thought?

That we wouldn't care?

No, I still can't bare.

You left us

Lost, left to remember

On this cold

Blue dot



Hannah Kwasniewski

Love thy Logger

by Mads Katz

Definitely free

Not trapped

Not me, no way

I chose this world

I love it this way

Lead skies

Acid rain

Think of the loggers

The oil barons

Poor politicians

They're people too

The hum of a highway

Idling in traffic

Working overtime

One day I'll buy

A house in the desert

With a blood green lawn

Burn books with my kids

Tell them that lions

Thrive at the zoo

Droughts are natural

The floods aren't near

Our wonderful world

I love it here



Running at water level

Jacob Petkovsky

The Roadrunner

by Edward Murphy

During my travels, I had come to a place where the land did not meet the sky so much as the heavens had thrust themselves upon the land. My stomach was in the process of digesting itself while my feet were still kind enough to pull me forward. In this dissociative state, I had unknowingly passed the only thing that wasn't road or sky for miles.

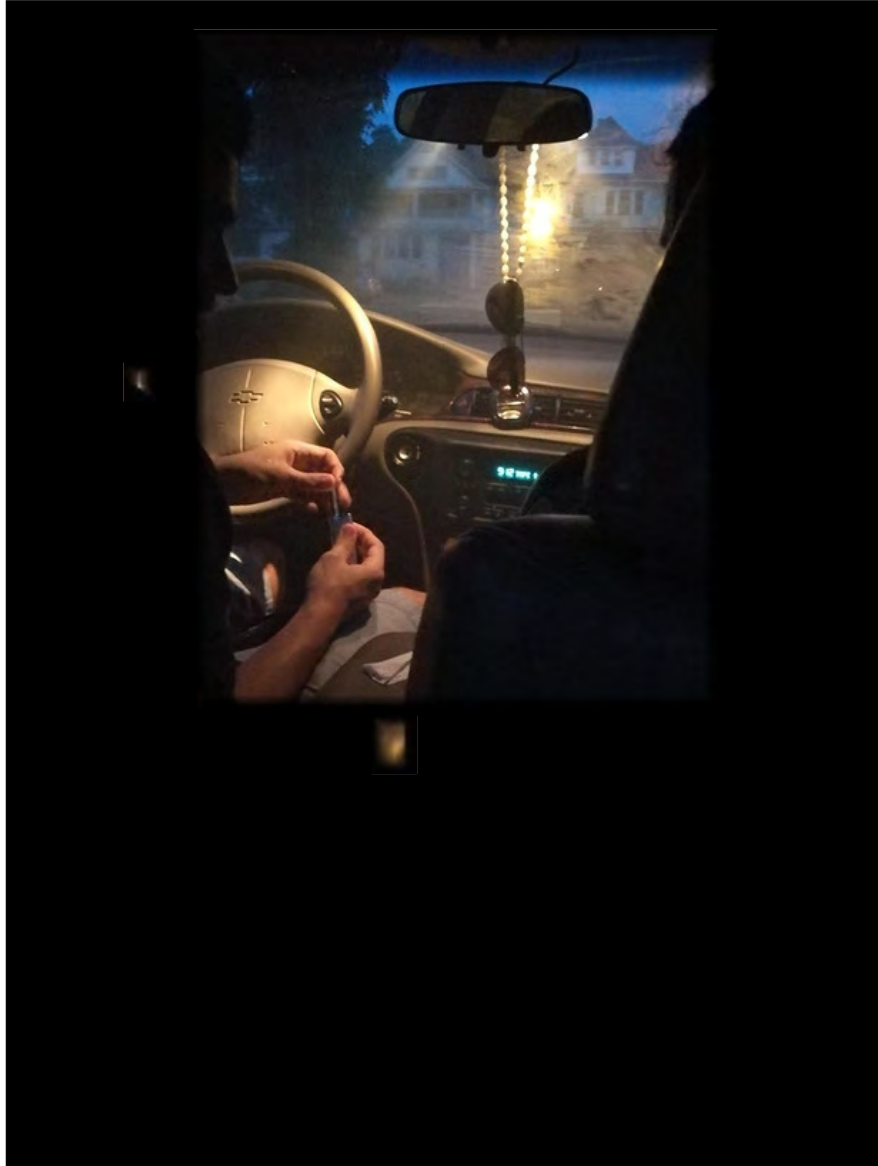
"Get over here," a voice called. It was deep and raspy, as if coated in years of cigarette tar. Laying in the center of the road was a roadrunner. His guts poured along the path. He lifted his head up and gazed at me before speaking again. I turned towards him and slowly stepped forward. "Could you move me across the road?" With these words, I saw his exposed lungs expand and decompress, yet it didn't seem to cause pain.

"Certainly." I regretted the words as soon as I had said them. Not because I didn't desire to help the bird but because I felt I made the decision without thinking. However, not one to go back on my word, I bent down and grasped the roadrunner. My fingers sifted through his feathers and his blood dripped onto my hands.

At this moment, I felt a seed grow inside my stomach. Why should this bird be granted the peace I had not? I quickly moved the bird and promptly dropped him across the dirt, sounding in a wet splat.

"Thank you." The roadrunner laid his head back down on the dirt and life immediately was pulled from his eyes. Turning back to my path, I looked at my blood-soaked hands and felt an uneasiness grow within me. On instinct, I brought my hand up to my mouth and sucked the foul juice off each finger. My stomach felt relief at the introduction of something other than its lining.

Upon that relief, I turned back and ate the bird, leaving no waste. I thanked him for his kindness and then headed on my way again, this time with a newfound enthusiasm.



Zachary Ogren

Tic Toc Croc

by David DuBois

Motionless he floats, suspended, hung between dark and light, air and liquid, life and death, as the fear of being alone consumes him. The reptile, void of his own senses, barely breathes. Only his black eyes feed an awareness of life as they stare at the cloudless blue, blades of green, banks of yellow umber - speckled with orange blossoms, then white as an egret crosses his horizons - perhaps, his next meal. *Glunk*, a frog's splash resonates in his open ears.

It is deep here, he doesn't know he's floating, he knows he is floating. He doesn't know. He has let go of himself. He is touched everywhere, but feels nothing, absorbed in absorbing. From below his lizardous silhouette cuts a yellow glow surrounded by specks of floating debris. His blood does not warm, yet he is not cold. The greatness of his tail's heavy desire pulls on him, as if to drown, if he would only let it. It wants to move, but where has his past not taken him; he wonders what is yet to be seen. His breath slows, stops, begins again.

Before this fear of being alone was his fear of being eaten. A fear left real by the half-amputated claw at the end of his right foreleg. He doesn't miss it, the web that dangles there between that which remains, keeps him company. His arching legs reach out to this and his other three fully capable claws, webbed and open, anchoring him. Floating still, alone.

Wide, his black eyes see, yet they know not his own image. Only when the murk ripples will his jaw sense and respond, letting him know he has a face, but without a smile. The movement - subtle or violent, is always brief. If only that, if only he were hungry, hungry for something that might distract him from this loneliness and fill his throat. His full belly will last for weeks while the marrow of his last meal becomes the marrow of his own. That will pass, and when it does be replenished again and again.

His fear of being eaten, long gone with his unmissed digits, leaves him alone to digest the hours, the day that passes when the black vise of the evening squeezes the yellow from the blue and spreads it wide across the horizon as the sky's black bleeds into the water's. Enveloped in the darkness, he feels it has come to hold him and takes comfort in that. His silhouette disappears with his tail, legs, jaw, and belly along with the remaining echoes of light. The murk snuggles

him. His eyes and barely-breathing nose remain the last detail to the whites lit of the moon until a water beetle scatters it to slashed fragments. With this, the remaining silence is removed by the first buzz of the cicada followed by the ribbit of the waking frog. Feeling robbed, he closes his eyes, leaving these sounds to consume themselves.

He rests in peace, breathing.

It is just the memory of his claw that will twitch when the darkness splits opening a slice wide and thin with its bleeding red, then orange, before a shallow beam of violet touches the top of the grasses turning the drops of dew into life's rainbow. The quiet takes advantage of this transition from dark to light as dawn's beam struggles to enlighten. But too soon, the bird's twitter challenges the crickets chirp, the fish's splash, and our reptile's peace. Fear is victorious. He feels the depth, the distances, the coldness within him, alongside his void. He thinks to move, but to think... before the whirl of a dragon flies in circles of everything he sees. Wide at first, remaining focused he doesn't move, watching as the prism wings turn light into his living dream. Whirring closer, the circle tightens, then without slowing it touches the blackness of his eye, stopped. His breath - he olds, his vision - he beholds, until the rainbow, at the twitch of his finger, disappears. Aloneness swells inside him. If crocodiles could cry, he would.

Another day consumed, absorbed, if I could only get out of bed.



McKenna Davis

I cannot remember what happened yesterday unless you have a picture of it

Retaliation, romantic fixations

Had I ever known what my hand would draw

All over your story

I think I would've cut it off

Reminiscing, bad premonition

Everlasting ivory in my daydreams

But that's all over now

I think it's been a few years since

I lost the picture from the frame

Hyper fixations, grand reanimations

Of what I smelled in the air yesterday

Did I ever love?

Did I truly know that if I leave I can't come back?

Polarized in my Polaroids

No, I'm not real anymore

Scraped in my scrapbook

It's a wonder how I'm still here

The paranoid paradox I raised in my mind

No, it's a phantom's love

I just wonder

Did I ever live?

Huddled yearnings, matches start burning

I'm not meant to remember this kiss

Tormented mornings, buds start forming

Picking up the pieces

Of a shattered little picture in a frame

I lost that picture from the frame

The glass is all that remains

Rolling, remnants of the pageant scheme

Once upon a time and the next day and furthermore
and in addition and grand fixations, moments in
melancholy plastic dreams, and bad premonitions,
and happily ever after and to conclude,

In conclusion,

If my hand won't stop drawing the demons in the
picture frames

I guess I will have to remember yesterday.

by Isabella Lamberty



Anna Logan

by Dan Spiller

The Corner

I would like to be the embodiment of March
in both life and art.

carrying the air one forgets each year

return memories then disappear

like a ghost revealing what you already know.

Still you'll find me under an empty bottle,

Soaked into sponges, at the bottom of a portfolio.

Oils and paints tucked away in a suitcase,

In some dark corner

on the edge of some place.

There's Magic in Our Blood

by Zachary Ogren

When I am dead
use my body
to fertilize
an apple tree.

My loved ones will bring me to
my freshly dug hobbit hole and
they will first lower me before
shoveling my blanket down in
cascading crumbs of Mother
Earth's soothing swaddling
whispers

"Welcome back my child— I
have missed you
for so long, even if
you have been so
very close."

As she envelops me
in a calm summer day
or a crisp autumn morning,

"I'm so proud of you—
you did your best.

You loved your siblings. And
you loved me
as you drank from me devoured
both my children, flora and
fauna,
and stomped all over me. Was it
not so much fun?"
I reach to hug her back
and say
I just hope
that I played nice—
and I never left a scar
to which they smile Knowingly.

And on days
far too many later
to count:
the youth
of the future come
to eat these apples
that might be bruised
might be cut
but God damn it
if there isn't magic dripping
from this juice.

38°

Frost burns over the bare mud between us

a void always staring, always wary

a mirror

waiting

either side of this playing field

for our nightmares to keep growing.

The steam of my breath caresses my hands.

My clenched toes are envious

of their rubbing.

wither planted against the frozen earth,

sentineled stone

by Dan Spiller

A Time After The Bombs Fell

by Dean V. DiLuizio

10/10/2

3

His eyes scanned the horizon. He took in all that the land had to offer, his hair was damp with sweat. Beneath him, a soft creaking sound became background noise while the rocking chair was being utilized in a very gentle fashion. Eyes searching for nothing, only taking in the beauty the area had to offer. He looked apathetic to anyone who would gaze upon his visage at this moment in time, but this assumption of the man's feelings in relation to the world around him couldn't be far from the truth.

Pride, the old man felt pride. This land was what he had gained, it was his reward. It was his retirement package, it was his livelihood. It nourished him spiritually and literally. Not a word was spoken, the old man was rarely visited. This was much to his liking. The sun was settling now, his routine had remained consistent for a long while now. He would wake, he would work, he would rest in his rocker and watch the sun go down. When the sun was down, he would remain in his rocker. Sometimes he fell asleep in this cheaply constructed wooden throne, sometimes the old man would sleep in a modest bed.

Sometimes when gazing out into the world, ones mind could wander, the old man pulled off his hat for a brief second to wipe at his forehead, sweat had

Always been a major problem for any sectorial security officer, the earlier radiation resistant crowd control suits provided due to budgetary cuts lacked decent internal temperature control. Some of the newer outfits other departments had issued were even fitted with some elaborate sensors which detect things in the area like heat.

Taking in this data, the suits would react appropriately in providing air conditioning or heat so the user would be able to remain comfortable on the job. The man was accustomed to the pitfalls of bureaucracy and budgetary cuts, but he was quiet on all matters concerning this. When the other units would gather to discuss ways of properly unionizing and bargaining with those in charge of the precinct, he declined any invitations or considerations of improving the situation at hand. There was no point, he clocked in and clocked out. Sometimes he collared a perp or two and sometimes he

Was growing tired now, it was dark out. His rocking was growing quieter and slower. The old man was winding down for the night. With the sun now fully gone, he had decided to get to his feet. Some nights he would sleep in the chair. Tonight was not one of those nights. Settling down into his bed, he closed his eyes

And refused to turn them away from the corpse on the ground. A gun was in his hand, some bullets nearby. Excessive force, he was going to catch an earful for this. Sirens blared as his colleagues responded to the shots fired report dispatch had issued. His ass was

Parked at the breakfast table chair, eating. He looked out towards the property that was his, every morning the old man would do this. There was one thing he enjoyed and it was routine. Getting dressed, he was prepared to go out and walk through the door, when it opened he

Walked into the room to look at the face of the Stability Chief in the chair.

You fucked up.

I know.

Our internal affairs panel reviewed your case, your use of force was unnecessary. You will be relocated to the ruins of Las Vegas to oversee reclamation efforts. The way I hear it, they will have the city habitable in twenty years.

Don't worry, you aren't going to have to break your back much, you're just pulling guard duty. I did all I could for you here, but you really shat the bed-
Save it, when am I shipping out?

The Stability Chief answered. The man was to ship out in three days. When it was the date of his reassignment, he went with a stoic expression glued to his usually disaffected face. There would be no qualms about the matter on his part. City life was growing tiresome. All of the pollution, the crowded ration lines, the traffic, the hostility men showed to one and other, perhaps the reprimand was a blessing in disguise. He got on the bus and before he knew it he was working

In the fields, the terraformation kit had worked as advertised. It was time now for a small break, he returned to his home to search for something to eat for lunch. When the old man went to seat himself at his table, a loose floorboard caught his gaze. He averted his eyes, and instead turned them out to the window to take in the landscape. It was the afternoon

And the prisoners were doing their various tasks. The man was stationed in a guard tower, he would be relocated to the south tower in a few hours once the sun went down. Fortunately, there were few bandits to be seen, but their absence made him weary. Something was not right. The landscape was where found himself looking often. With the endless waste, it was hard to imagine the world looking any other way. It put him at ease, it was an improvement from the city. Sometimes a prisoner or two would slip out, but he pretended not to notice. It was this way for about a year, and one day the man found himself no longer looking at the distant hill but standing on the edge of it, his uniform off. He wore nothing but his boots, a sleeveless white shirt, and his gun belt. He'd stolen a jug of water from the provision cart. The man set out into the desert, beholden to no one but himself. His future was yet to be written in stone, but he would be the author, no one else would have this role. This was what he assured himself on every step of his journey.

Twenty days out in the wilderness, the mans skin was now very tan. His hair had grown a bit wilder. On the twentieth day he crossed paths with a party of traders, he was approached with apprehension but he had canned goods to exchange for a small bottle of purified water. During their exchange, a hellish cry filled the air. The trader of him was pounced upon by a wild green beast, a mess of writhing flesh and tendrils. It clawed and beat his form until he stopped moving. It spat out commands in a tongue the man could not replicate even if he desired to do so.

By the time he went for his gun, more of the monstrosities appeared in his line of sight. He was not conscious of the slaughter of the other traders, one of the mutants was very diligent in clawing the man across the back of his head, the pain from this assault sent him face first into the sand.

When he had come to, he was within a cave, bars in front of his face. They had imposed their will on him, this would not do. He was held behind the cage, in the well lit section of this den, boots and other various articles of clothing lay stacked on one and other in an obscene pile. Beyond this pile he could make out glowing red eyes, occasional flashes of green, and the slime slick bodies of the twisted masses of unrelenting rage as they worked over meat. They feasted, and as they feasted the man felt an intense fear. The awful wet suckling noise they made as they consumed the flesh of the traders was what sent him over the edge. That fear morphed into anger. They had imposed their will on him. He had done this to many a man and chimera, but his own hypocrisy was of no concern to him. Looking at the pile of clothes, he eyed the handle of his service weapon which

Had been secured properly beneath the floorboard with his wallet, every so often he would open this board up to take from his wallet sentimental photos which he could watch when the landscape proved too heavy a burden for his eyes to capture. Memories, they came to him every so often, but the most painful ones of all were those of before the bombs went off.



Zachary Ogren

In foreign land, solitary leaf adrift on unfamiliar waters.

The air alien but sunsets painted in a familiar canvas.

A misplaced note in a symphony, a journey into a labyrinth of disconnection. Stumbled into a nightmare where the world wore a mask of indifference.

Every step yearned to return to the woods it once knew, to the melodies it once sang.

An exile in foreign realm, an intruder in a landscape that refuses to embrace.

A star falling from its celestial home to an uncharted void of unfamiliar tapestry. How do I get back home?

by Madison Lloyd



Jennifer Lewis



By Hannah Kwasniewski

Venomous Glen

by Logan Misseldine

Thin, spindly, mean looking pine trees stood as far from each other as they could. Each of them noxious, their bark sloughed off of the trunks, the rot and sap oozed and bubbled like puss.

They leered down towards the forest below, their knots and scars like heavy lidded scowls of discontent. Exasperated, the trees were grouped together because nothing could grow from the poisoned earth between them.

The farmer, emaciated and stumbling, pulled his ax behind him like a stubborn puppy. It's pingy bark called out each time it bounced off rocks and fallen logs. His pale face reflected the sun as though it were glass. The trees groaned and murmured as he walked towards them.

One season in this land, and the ground refused to yield to his soft hands. Now, wood was needed to sell.

"I'll be cold, but I'll have money." His blood had been spilled for less, so the farmer trudged into the venomous glen.

He shivered as he walked out from the forest, the pines let the wind blow into him unobstructed. He'd convinced himself this tree was dead, already seasoned and full of sap that would burn easily.

Its blood pouring freely from the ax's teeth, the tree screamed, snapping itself off at the waist, its open eyes meeting the farmer's before embedding them both into the rotten loam.



Zachary Ogren

Mugwort and Cottonwoods

by Logan Misseldine

I follow the line of the trail as it has been cut out of the growing spring grass. The shavings cling to his paws like iron filings to a magnet, but he doesn't seem to mind.

Him being my dog, Red. Like the color of his gums in the heat.

His paws will be dry and the clippings will be gone by the time we get home, unlike my boots, which I'll have to spend a few minutes huffing and puffing while wiping them off before bringing them into the apartment building.

I left the dry, summer hot pavement of the bike path looking for little red clover blooms, but it's beginning to look like I'm a few weeks early. White and purple flowers that I don't know the name of wave at me instead.

I debate making a bouquet for my wife but my hands are already full of aromatic mugwort to be dried and stuffed into mason jars, so I simply wave back with my bundle and walk back onto the pavement.

I didn't pay attention to when the birds returned this year, the birds didn't work the graveyard shift like I do.

Except the robins, they came after the geese that made beds out of the trash filled puddles, calling out at the streetlamps like a premature dawn.

Birds fly in and out of the maze of leaves, Red and I turn our heads as we watch a grackle glide in front of us.

"Good boy." I tell him, slapping his dusty rump.

He pretends he didn't hear me.

Childish words of affirmation carved out in colored chalk splatter the pavement. They've already begun to fade, too impatient to wait for the rain to come and absolve their embarrassment.

I cross the street, the small rickety homes recede behind an industrial lot of some kind on one side and cottonwood lined brush on the other.

Years ago someone, or a group of people, used spray paint to etch vaguely vulgar logos and epithets into the asphalt. The city's attempts to spray coal black patches across them has soaked past the point, the sky blue paint sits on top of the pavement while the patches sink into the ground, framing each emblem perfectly.

Unlike the censure free chalk behind me, the paint will remain legible for years longer than if they had remained untouched.

On this stretch of the path the cottonwood trees are the only trees you notice. I try to pick out the others but it's as if the cottonwoods have pulled them back, forcing them to kneel behind them. They only let in enough light so that the other trees and brush can cover their woodpecker scars that dot their bark like braille.

On the way home I notice the honeysuckle, at least I think it's honeysuckle. Red pulls the leash tight as I slow down to investigate, anxious to get home. Some bushes have orange and white flowers, others are studded purple. I fill my nose with air trying to see if they shed their scent like lilacs, but the shit smelling white flowers behind them is the only thing I can smell.

No matter how close I get.



Illiagnie Montero

I Call Myself a Poet

by Zachary Ogren

“I’m a poet.”

Please tell me,

do you like my blood,

drip dropped onto this page

and brought to the stage

through ceaseless exercise

in thrusting my shattered head against

the bedrock wall between my soul

and the English Language?

“I’m a poet”

So I think if I can fingerprint

in blood, maybe I can leave you

with something only these

accursed hands

can print—

and maybe then—

my name might mean something.

I call myself a poet,

but I can’t find

a meaningful way

to make my sickness

Beautiful.

I can’t render

a single one of my years

in the mind-numbing torture room

I’m supposed to love

Into words that might

make my suffering

mean something.

God,

Can I ever make art

if I don’t suffer

and make it mean something?

“I’m a poet”

but will I ever

say anything

worth reading?

I think the only thing

making me a poet

is my obsession,

the itch in my head

to write everywhere

about everything.

Could that ever

be enough?

I call myself a poet

and I hope that’s true,

but more than that, I think,

I want to be read

as a living poem.

I want to be someone worthy

of having poems written about him.

Can anyone ever love a man

that deeply?

Or are we a series of stained glass

burnt and broken,

too shattered and indecipherable for

any sun to shine through, painting

pictures

that can dance across the world?

Please.

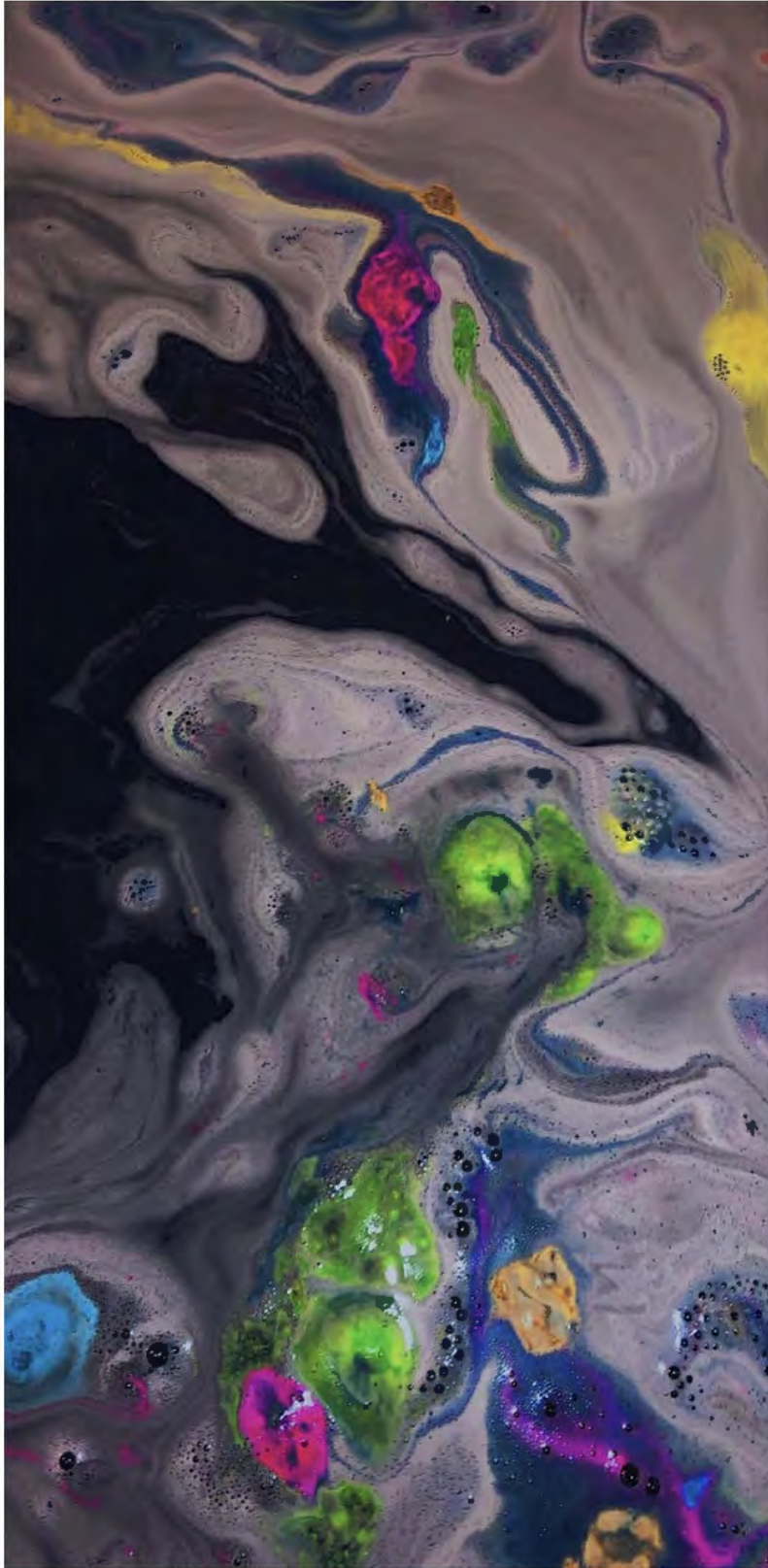
Witness me.

And sing about me.

I hope that someday

just one person

will think that I’m worth it.



Hannah Kwasniewski

Poetic Response to Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish"

by Logan Misseldine

You'd think it's strange, so many fish passing
through my net untouched by knives
The water is cleaner now, but to taste it is to
ingest something acrid
Our fish don't swell as large anymore, the
largest bellies are lined with mercury
Most of our years, we escape the sight of our
mistakes, until the algae blooms
But still we fight
Most of all, at least for those who see, we hope

Connected by means you couldn't fathom, we
watch each other's actions and hope
We stare with unseen glances as fire, steel, and
chemicals pull at the land like a jagged knife With
pens, with words, with other's bodies, other's
minds, and other's actions, we fight
The deer, turkey, and even geese have returned
to fill the fields like rats, but our tongues still taste
something acrid
We thought we did right, not letting the fires
bloom
The thermometers pulse and dive, despite no
longer being filled with mercury

We cannot see it, cannot taste it, but our fishes'
scales drip small drops of mercury
It will leach out someday, we try to hope
For now we watch as our sterile lake floors fill
up with biting algae that floats in the summer
and blooms
Those that did, or still eat from the water wonder
what other metals slick their knives
The smokestacks still stand, still fill our noses with
acidity
Yet there are still so many fish left to bite your
hook, remind us why we should fight

In places we stand shoulder to shoulder, letting
the salmon decide which line to fight
We've done well, since your time, in removing the
mercury
We took our time, removing from both the water
and our thoughts, what has left us acrid
Instead we chose to hope
We still find the places to use our knives
So many still wish to watch the world bloom

Most of us on the land weren't here when the
world forgot to bloom
Most of us on the water weren't there to see how
things were before we fought
Yet we've found that the net does not need to
always lead to the knife
I watch a guideboat lift a net full of bait, the lucky
ones hit the sun-drenched water, splashing like
streams of mercury
Year after year, boat after boat, hook after hook,
we all look at the lake and hope
That the water will wash away all that made it
taste acrid

Somedays I feel the nets my children will fill
will be free of water acrid
Yet there are also days that I can't see where the
land has bloomed
Days I can't find the hope
On the days I don't feel like fighting
I watch as the water pouring off my hand clings
to me like mercury
Wondering what it was like, in the time of the
knife

Then I remember it isn't my hope for why we
fight
That the flowers that bloom were planted by
who refused to leave the soil acrid
We put down our knives only long enough until
no one remembers the taste of mercury



Hannah Kwasniewski

Why is life heavy?

by Angie Chelpinski

Why is life a heavy burden?
Always sucking my soul
Making marks on my skin Senselessly
beating my brain

Why is life heavy on my heart? Dreams
never fulfilled
Only by nightmares
In the twisted darkness

Why is life heavy on my shoulders?
Where I am the most weak
Close to my breakable neck
Add the cherry on top

Why is life heavy on my mind?
It says I hurt
But I can't find the cause
Invisible inside out

Why is life heavy?
Difficult to live or understand
Never enough or too much
Never understood, lonely
But annoyed with what the world And I
want in an ending



WillaWang

tequila talk

i think if i let the tequila talk
it would tell you that
i love you,
then i would have to pray
through the night that you
can't decipher a drunk
tongues
sober thoughts.

by Krista Regan



McKenna Davis

A Stone's Kiss

by Mads Katz

I stand among the women sobbing and pressing their hands to the Wall and watch as others walk backwards after pushing sacred notes between the scroll-stuffed cracks. Sweat drips down my neck and I clumsily walk forward in a floor length skirt. I press my lips to the rolled-up paper that had grown damp in my palm and take yet another step forward, my heart beating as loud as the prayers escaping the grey-haired woman's lips as she sways inches from my side. Stones larger than my head, I close the gap between us. I search for a free inch in the papered cracks and my hands shake as I slide my note into place. My fingertips graze the cool stone and I shiver. I look to my right, a sea of women shoulder to shoulder, some crying, some praying, some silently contemplating, others departing for their reversed return to daily life. To my left, over the heads of more women, I see the men with space to daven with their whole bodies and not scour the Wall for space for their own notes. My chest heaves and I tremble as I lean forward and close my eyes. My lips touch dusty, cold stone; my stomach drops as if I was in an elevator and it broke, and I stumble backward.

Spirited laughter and idle chatter make my eyes shoot open and I spin around, forgetting about the taboo I have just committed. But I am not alone in this sacrilege: hundreds of people mill about in a sprawling courtyard, with their hands full of baskets and fabric and pristine lambs and children's hands that pull and struggle to be released. The smell of fresh bread clouds my eyes and the sound of flowing red wine fills my mouth. Their ancient draping robes are pressed and devoid of a speck of sand, their clean and washed faces dawning smiles and sneers and seriousness and eyes of love and boredom and mundanity and excitement all swirl around, lips opening and twirling words of a language that I should have known. My modest dress is suddenly nudity next to the layers of clothing on every person in front of me, many of whom are idly swaying to music emanating from some unseen, interior portion of the Temple. I spin around again, still inches from the Wall, and the grand stones show no signs of deterioration and not a single shred of paper is in the mortar. This is just a wall among all its neighbors. I turn again to witness the crowd of my people before we were mourners, but flames overwhelm me and my hands shield my face from the scorching heat as I am forced to my knees. Smoke consumes the courtyard and silence reigns as the stench clogs my throat.

I open my eyes. The old woman next to me stares as I clutch the base of the stone Wall, as tears stream down both of our faces.

Bloody Mess

In the off the record house I passed by when the sun closed and I parked with my heart empty and my head so full, I decided I can't cry about the soul being gone and to look at the bigger portrait, the monster is gone.

*

With the help of a defender and emptiness in a room is when he made the expiration date of his life, it was over for now and forever, the lifeless body was gone and all that was left was the deep, dark red blood all over the floor in big blotchy forms.

*

As in love as I am with the dark empty nights of reminisce, I was able to speak without language and the house that used to be fat was now skinny but now I feel free and the birds are jealous.

by Donia Jebara

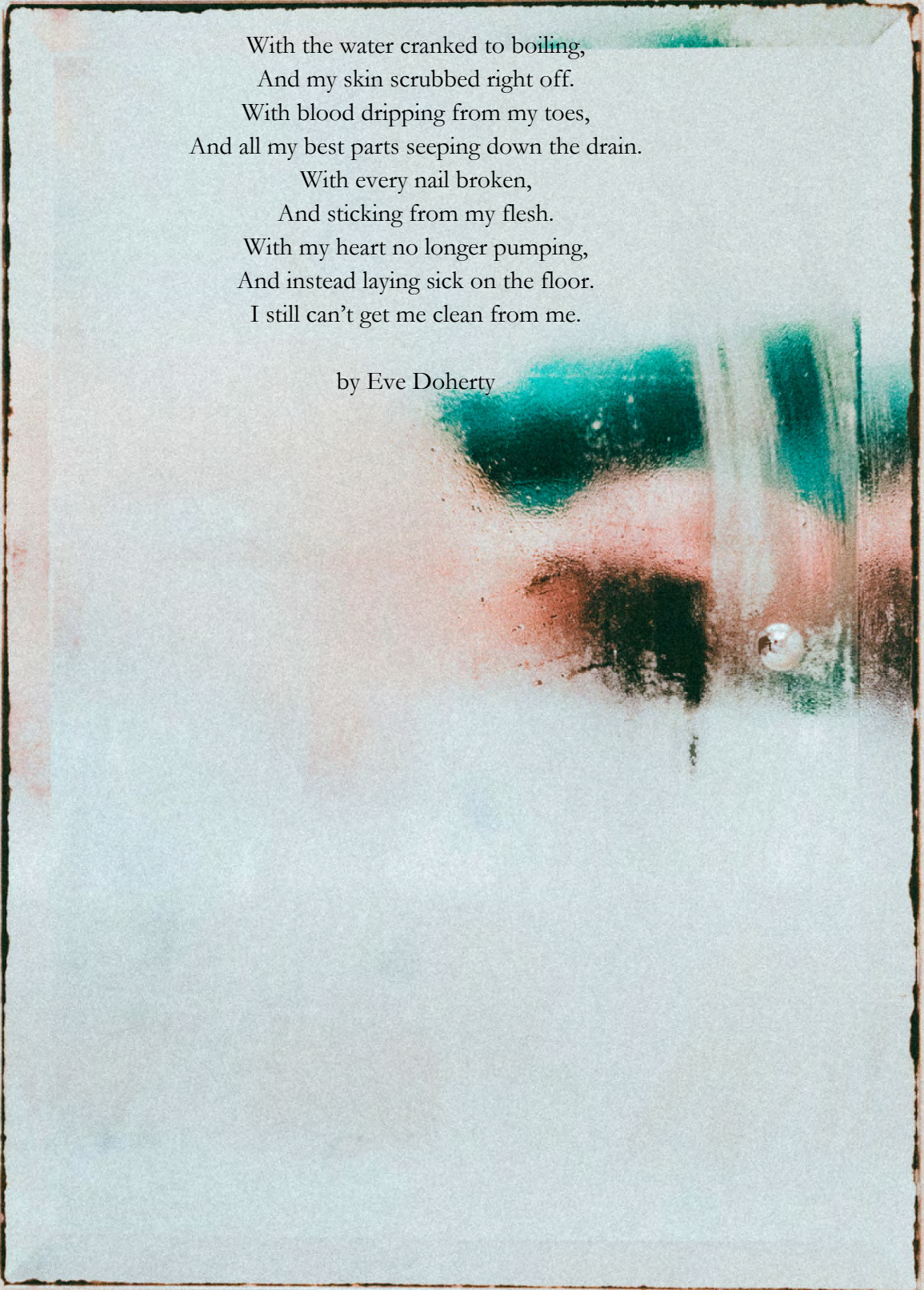


Nina Miles

Hot in Here

With the water cranked to boiling,
And my skin scrubbed right off.
With blood dripping from my toes,
And all my best parts seeping down the drain.
With every nail broken,
And sticking from my flesh.
With my heart no longer pumping,
And instead laying sick on the floor.
I still can't get me clean from me.

by Eve Doherty





LeeAnne Dutkiewicz

The Assistants Blunder

by Logan Misseldine

Roaring like the Niagara River, the press marches on. The film stretches tight across a maze of stuttering wheel-like rollers, the print's steady pattern ripples as it runs through the press.

"Hey! Pay attention!" The Operator says, throwing rags into the bin.

His words dribble over his bottom lip, cankerous and leaking from the ball of dip that has been lodged under his teeth since Bush Sr. was President. Piled up dust from rust starts to rattle down from the press, a high pitched whining pulls the Operator away, swearing.

The Assistant watches, bored eyes skimming over the room. The pulsing throb of the press pulls his lids further down, drool bubbling along the seam of his mouth.

Acrid drops of... something... begin to fall into the press. Yellow and thick, it wipes away the print, boring holes into its perfect green pattern. Thin cirri wriggle down from the heaters, spiraling down the tarnished paint, barbed and hissing. The Assistant sleeps while they wrap around his ankles, his chest.

The press jolts to a stop, The Assistant's body twitches between the rollers, the tendrils recede behind the heaters as The Operator hobbles over, smiling.

"I told you to pay attention."

Head Held High at Noon

by Dean V. DiLuzio

10/10/23

Deputy Jim looked like a reborn man the second the news broke; his eyes expanded to the size of generous saucers. It appeared all the worrying was for nothing, there would be no thrilling battle at high noon to decide the fate of his jurisdiction. The only thing that would be heard at that time would be the chime of the saloon clock.

Confusion had swept the settlement following the most recent troubling development on the frontier. The fate of a rugged outlaw was on the lips of every man and woman in the county. In the preceding weeks, a good deal of people were raising concerns about a band of highwaymen, the ring leader being a man by the name of Luke Partridge. Partridge was a mean son of a bitch. His reputation was not for kindness, that was for certain.

Apparently the Sheriff had perished after being sent days prior to investigate an overturned wagon. This left all legal responsibilities in the lap of Deputy Jim. The young man was ill equipped for these tasks thrust upon him by fate. Rumors were spreading of the Sheriff falling victim to Partridge in a bloody confrontation, the details which made the Deputy's hairs stand on end. Unfortunately for Jim, the townspeople expected retribution for their slain Sheriff. There was preparation that soon to be marked as a joyous day that Luke Partridge was due to come to town.

A courier came down main street proclaiming to see Partridge dead in some shootout gone awry. A failed ambush on an army ranger convoy. Relief shot through Deputy Jim upon this discovery. There would be no shootout now. His duties were complete, the position of Sheriff was thrust upon him without him even having spilled a drop of blood.

Deputy Jim rushed into the saloon, eager to shed his title. The townsfolk swarmed the saloon, eagerly bumping elbows with the man of new authority, sharing in his revelry. In the saloon mirror window, Jim could see his own beaming face. The admiration visible on each patron of the place was enough to humble any man into a vow of eternal silence. That was what would happen moments later, Deputy Jim saw one set of eyes in that entire crowd that did not share in the good will.

Those were the eyes of Luke Partridge, preparing a gun at the back of the Deputy. All that talk of Partridge being dead in a ranger ambush simply proved to be baseless gossip, that much became clear as the bullet plunged into the back of the ill fated young man. His eyes snapped shut, blood spattering against the reflective surface. He wasn't alive long enough to hear the chime of high noon or the screams.

chasm

the yawning chasm
in which i have lost my heart
is much too dark for me
to find peace.
it is too far and too large,
stretched out beyond measure,
too cold for me to remember
where to go.
i fear i may never find
home again— i fear
love will be lost on me,
an empty cavity of what
could have been if
the chasm had closed its mouth.

by Krista Regan



Zachary Ogren

TENSION SPAN

by Cayley Behringer

The car's black tires crumpled against the progress,
the point halfway, the fusing of solid ground and liquid air.

A framework of steel stalagmites and fortified vipers creep, high
above, a canopy of matte teeth all gray and cream. Smiling with a
sense of safety. The bright Bronco veers,
eyes fixed ahead, where mellow metal rigs the ground,
the sides are braced, hardware spinning outward, an iron hug, a
maiden blush of cloud obscured, a mangled frame clings like my
striped green muscles, in my waiting mouth. The car arcs, the
flippant hue chastised by smokey fume.

It swoops like an air conditioner out of a third-story window:
Looking for a head to land on — hidden depths — confused water
rages softly, concealing corpses and clinging lips.



Daniel J. Spiller

First by *Franklin Rayeski*

Not long after my husband left for work, I was in the kitchen rinsing out sippy cups when I heard a few thuds from upstairs. I stopped what I was doing and ran out of the room, past the dining table with the remnants of breakfast still in its place. I sprinted up the steps and searched every room with adrenaline pumping through my veins. I ran to the last room at the end of the hall, whipped open the barely closed door and froze. The first thing I saw was blood, and that alone caused my mind to unfurl into a crazed panic—but it was not my baby’s blood that I saw. A small, contorted mess of flesh and fur lay in the center of the room, and my toddler was sitting a few inches away from it with his eyes looking up at me and his lips curled into a smile.

I didn’t know how to process the scene. In a weird way, I had a bit of relief flush over me when I realized my baby wasn’t hurt. Yet, knowing that the thing beside my baby was once the living kitten we had brought home only a week before, I was not at ease. I came to a lot of strange conclusions in that second. Maybe the cat had jumped from the dresser and died from the landing? I thought to myself, Maybe the kitten had eaten something it shouldn’t have and a strange chemical reaction caused it to die? Maybe it had somehow done this to itself? But all those thoughts were just trying to stall me from reaching the unavoidable truth: my child killed our pet. I then faced another layer of questions. I wondered to myself if it was just an accident or if the kitten had provoked him somehow. I stood there and thought while he was just sitting in the room, looking at me, unashamed, with blood drooling from his fingers. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what to do and, as I tried to force myself to do anything, I was distracted by the sound of the kitchen tap still running downstairs.

I grabbed my baby and brought him down with me. He left red stains all over my clothes as I turned off the running water and took him into the bathroom. Overwhelmed by the smell of rust, I cleaned him up as quick as I could. As I did, I observed him, focusing on his facial features and trying to understand what was going on inside that little head of his. Despite his age, he could only speak in unintelligible words. Part of me wished I could’ve talked with him, and another part of me was glad that I couldn’t. Strange streams of thoughts like that formed in my

head as I kept on trying to figure out the best course of action. I finished washing him and rubbed a towel into his skin, wiping the blood off of his hands.

I knew what his father would say. He had been insisting that something was wrong with our child for months, but I always defended my baby. Being his mother, that was my most important job: to speak up for someone who can't even speak for themselves. I knew what my husband would do. He'd take our baby to some shrink and that shrink would pump our kid full of pills to try to fix him. Then that same shrink would blame us for raising him wrong and then my husband would blame me for it and then everyone, for the rest of my baby's life, would treat him like a monster in the making. I knew my baby wasn't a monster. I knew that there was good in him. I didn't know why he did what he did, but I knew that it wasn't his fault.

I knew what I had to do. I gave my child a stern warning and then went upstairs. I took care of the mess; I buried the remains in our backyard. I threw away my dirty clothes along with everything else that was covered in blood. After that, I finished cleaning the dishes from this morning. When my husband came home, I told him that the cat had slipped past me when I opened the door to get the mail. "I tried to chase after him," I said, "but I didn't want to leave our baby all by himself." He went out to look for the cat. While he was gone, I deleted the pediatric psychiatrist number—the one he had asked our doctor for—from his phone. He came back, he grieved and I comforted him by telling him that our baby boy hadn't gotten into any trouble all day.

I don't regret what I did, not even for a second. I did it because I know my baby wasn't the problem. It was probably the cat's fault; maybe we just won't get any more pets and then everything will be fine. I'm his mother; I know my baby better than anyone else. I know he's not a monster. I know he's healthy and normal and good. He could never do something like that again. I know he would never do something like that again.