ABSYNTHE

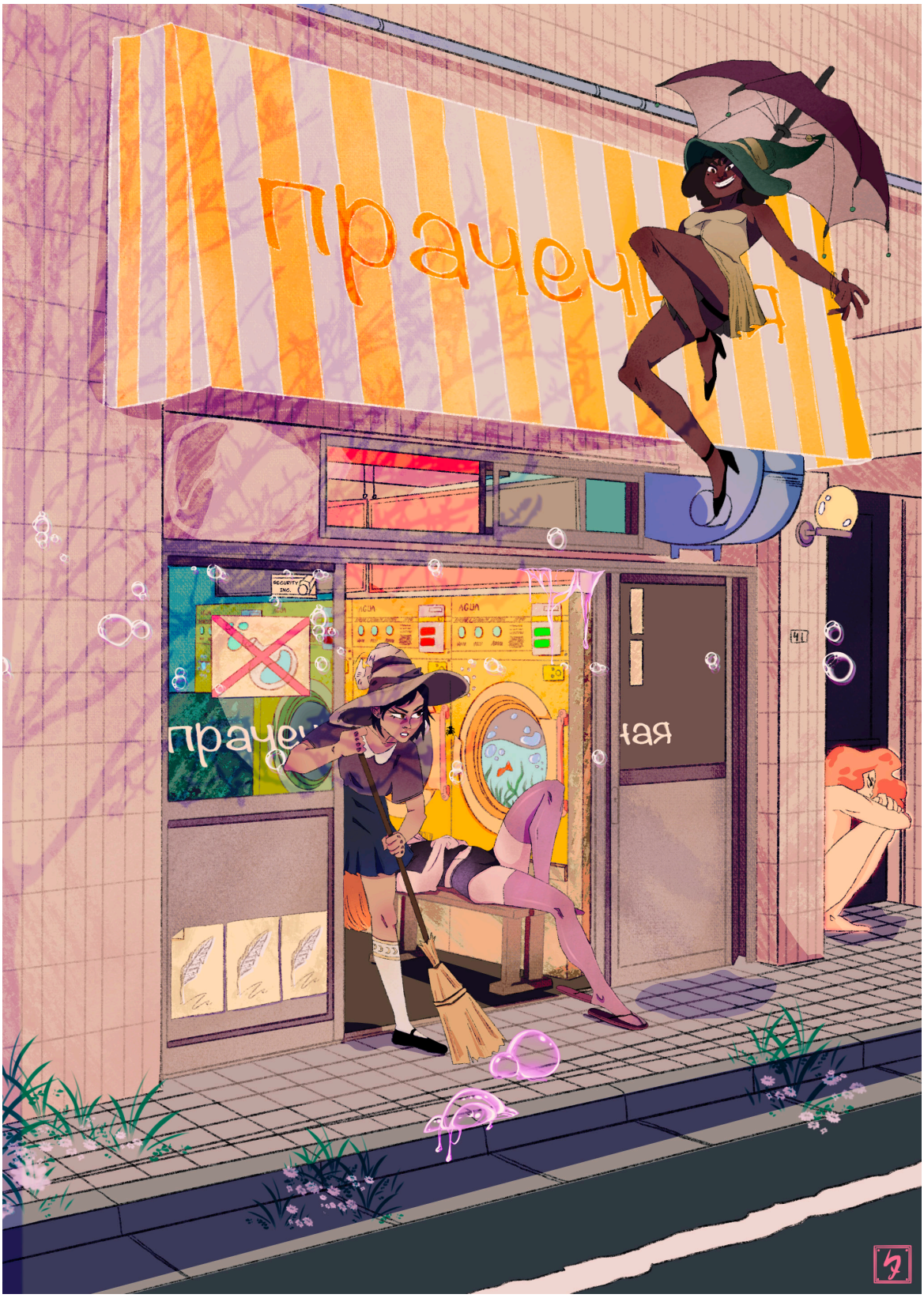
Absynthe Magazine

Trent's Alternative Press

- Alite Artifices -

Spring 2023

Contents



untitled - Sofia Benchafi

Fish on the Shore

Sarah Waldner

Last week, a procession of flies.
When something dies, everyone comes to eat.

Today those ribs are an empty parking lot,
the bones, bare and hard.

"Climate Crisis Slogans with a Punch"

Katherine Opitz

I know the sweat
on my hands
is the seawater
I've swallowed
that is still trying
to seep out.

There are shells too,
sometimes, when I
uncurl my fists.
Shards of seafoam sage
and pine, my irises.

--

I plucked the moon
out of the sky
and pressed it
in my journal.

It should be dried
out by next week.

--

I want a glass of wine.
I want blackberries
stitched from obsidian
in my palms. I want
them to stain my
skin like acrylic paints,
skyscraper garbage.

--

There's an ostrich in my
closet. I ignore it
every morning, but
it's getting harder.

Its beak has started to stick,
boldly, further out from behind
my sweaters. I can't tell
if my socks are covered
in its hair or my own.

What do ostriches eat?
Should I name it?

Gardening with Dad

Vivian Krissilas

His fingers, twisted tree branches hurling towards my face,
leaving indents like the bark on the tree's trunk and
ghastly red sap
leaking from my skin,
dropping onto the well-fed grass
like the dressing on a tossed salad bowl,
ingredients that lay limp on a plate.
But I won't be swallowed
by a man with polka-dot scruff and a mind full of
strong-built solicitors,
free-willed executioners,
and an all-powerful judge with pores that ooze tsipouro and wine.
My chest harbours a fluttering hummingbird,
my eyes are clouds dripping salty droplets,
and my body is an earthquake,
tremoring until the rocks move back into place
and I'm alone in my room,
a sewing machine that braids its own hair and shapes its own smile
with a broken voice box
and wavering cognition.

My Father Went Down To The River

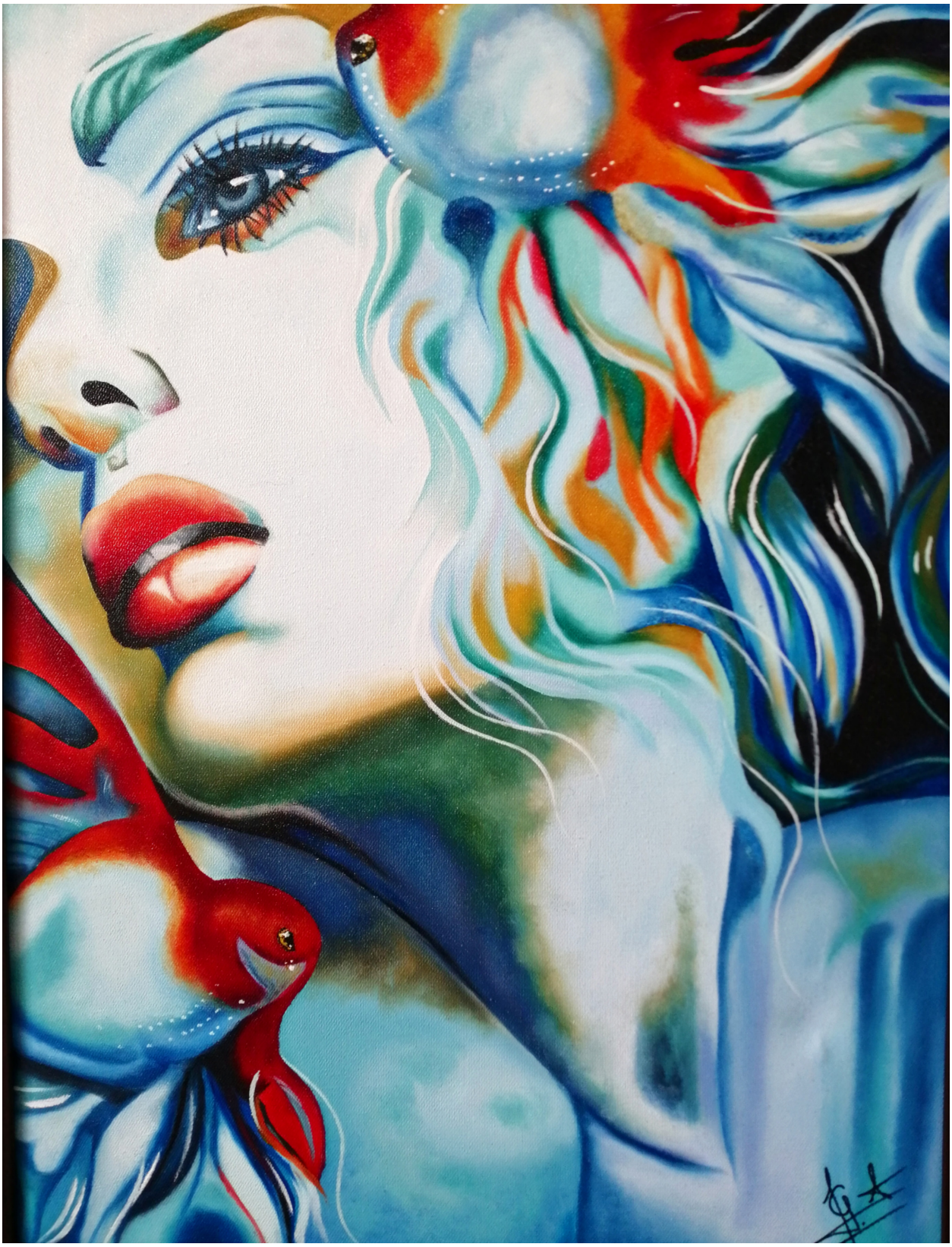
Abbigale Kernya

My father went down to the river and asked,
River, why does no one love me anymore?
The river was quiet as it passed through his legs.
My father asked again,
River, why does no one love me anymore?
And again, he only heard the soft ripples trickle across his feet.

My brother went down to the river and asked,
River, do you ever feel alone?
And he sent down a plastic boat.
Thank you, said the river.
And the river whispered its secrets to the boy.

My mother went down to the river and asked,
River, am I doing enough?
The river sent the plastic boat towards her.
Yes, it said.
And my mother whispered her secrets to the river.

I went down to the river and asked,
River, why does my father not love us anymore?
The river answered quietly as it passed through my legs,
He does not know how to give.
Can I show him how? I asked.
And the river retreated up the hill,
rocks and sand covering my feet.



Mü Piscium - Adrian Guaman Vargas

Alice - Rosanne Katarina Fortin

Doghouse

Abbigale Kernya

Sterilize the parts where the glass pierces your palms.
Find a way to start over without leaving a scar.
Please, God. Please pretend to hear me.
Is this bravery or insanity?
How does one taste the difference between hunger and compulsion?
A bloodied bitten tongue,
I'm sorry it drips on your shoes, I cannot make it stop.
You are every piece of me I pried out and gave away,
With stained teeth, I whisper to the ground and repent:
Make me whole again, make me forget I desire.

Smelly Boot

Graham Wylie

I was going to the corner store for a blue slushie. It was cold outside but I didn't care. I wanted a blue slushie.

I took the shortcut through the woods behind my apartment. The rain from yesterday hadn't fully frozen, and I stepped on a sheet of ice covering a ditch. It cracked. My left boot sank through. Instantly my foot was cold and wet. Damn, I said, and took it out. I no longer wanted a blue slushie. All I wanted was to go home and put on a new sock.

The walk home was terrible. I didn't notice any scenery.

Back inside I checked the label on the wet boot. Waterproof, it said. Right, I thought. What a joke. I dried my foot and put a new sock on. I thought about the blue slushie I didn't have. I drank a glass of water, but it wasn't the same.

Later, when Burl came home, he said, "What's that smell?"

"I don't know," I said.

"It's the best thing I've ever smelled."

"I made Kraft Dinner two hours ago."

"It's not that."

I heard him sniffing the air. I was on the couch, watching something. I didn't like him sniffing the air like that. Then I heard his knees hit the floor and he sniffed again.

"It's your boot," he said.

"My boot?"

"Oh my god," he said.

"What?"

"Your boot smells amazing."

"Don't fuck with me," I said. "I've had a bad day."

"No, seriously," he said. "Come here."

He kept sniffing. I sat there for ten seconds listening to him sniff my boot. All I could think about was the blue slushie. I was planning on trying the blue one today. I had only ever had the red one. Deciding to try the blue one had taken a lot of nerve.

I got up from the couch. My knees cracked.

"Smell it," Burl said.

I smelled it. "It smells like shit," I said.

"No it doesn't."

"I can't do this right now," I said.

I went to the kitchen and ran my fingers through my hair. Burl made a call.

"You gotta come over," he said. Then, a moment later, "It'll be worth it. I promise."

Twenty minutes later Robbie came over. I hated Robbie.

"What is it?" Robbie said.

"Smell this boot," Burl said.

"Why would I do that?"

"Just do it."

"Fine."

Robbie sniffed my boot.

"Holy shit," he said.

"I know, right?"

"What is it?"

"I don't know."

They took turns sniffing my boot. It went back and forth like a joint. I couldn't watch. I went back to the couch and turned up the volume till it was louder than their sniffing. But it was no good. I knew they were behind me, sniffing my boot.

Okay, I thought, sniff my boot. But leave me out of it.

Burl sniffed my boot all night. I fell asleep listening to it. I had a nightmare. I was lost in a shoe store, and everyone kept sniffing the shoes instead of trying them on.

The next day Robbie came back. Burl was out.

"I need to smell that boot," he said.

"Fuck off," I said, but he didn't care. He came in anyway.

"Oh god," he said after sniffing it. "Oh god, it's so good." His nose was right in there. I couldn't even see his face.

"Get out of my apartment," I said. "I'll call the police."

"Do it," he said. "They should know about this."

"What the hell," I said, and went back to the couch.

I looked online for new boots. Two hundred bucks. I didn't have that much money. I barely had enough for groceries. If I could just have a blue slushie, I thought, everything would be okay.

Robbie stayed in my apartment all day. I couldn't make him leave.

When Burl came home, he had a reporter and a camera guy with him, and five or six other people.

"It's right there," Burl said, pointing at Robbie and the boot. I was in the kitchen, eating peanut butter with a spoon. I didn't like them seeing me like that.

"Smell it, all of you," Burl said.

The people took turns sniffing the boot. They were skeptical at first,

but they all loved it. The camera guy was filming, the reporter was reporting. Apparently there was a story.

They took turns sniffing it. You could see how impatient they were. They'd pass the boot, then stand there, bouncing on their feet or twisting their fingers till it came back around.

"Seriously, what the hell's going on here," I said.

Nothing.

I thought about the price of new boots. Then I thought about how this smelly boot belonged to me. Not them. Me. Then I had an idea. What if I charged them to sniff it?

"Give me that boot," I said. "It's mine."

"In a sec," said a guy I'd never seen before.

"Now," I said, and went for it. He didn't let go. I ripped it away from him and he growled. "If you wanna sniff this boot," I said, "you gotta give me five bucks. Five bucks for five sniffs."

Everyone took out their wallets.

"But not me," Burl said, "right?"

"You especially," I said. "You started this crap."

"Give me a discount, at least."

"No."

"Damn."

They lined up, and a few minutes later I had forty bucks. Those who had more cash immediately joined the back of the line. Suddenly I had seventy bucks.

"Can I give you twenty bucks for twenty-five sniffs?" said Robbie.

"Sure," I said, and counted out loud. I wasn't about to give Robbie anything for free.

They ran out of money pretty quick and left depressed. I had enough for a new pair of boots.

When I went to sleep, I put the boot under the covers, in a plastic bag.

In the middle of the night Burl tried to sneak in, but I was awake.

"No," I said.

"Damn," he said.

The next day, all those people came back, plus twenty more. They all wanted the boot. I moved my business outside. I couldn't have all those people stepping on my floor.

I let people sniff it, but there were two rules. I had to hold it, and if they took more sniffs than they had paid for, they were banned for life.

People kept showing up. By noon I had a thousand bucks.

I needed a break. While they waited outside, shivering, I went inside and ate two bananas. Then I made a sign listing the prices. The more you paid, the better deal you got. That's how business works.

At the end of the day I'd made four thousand bucks. I'd never had more than a thousand to my name.

That night I ordered new boots. Waterproof with fur lining.

After that, things escalated quickly. The whole town found out about the boot. Everyone thought the same thing. "There's no way some guy's boot smells good." But they were curious, and after they sniffed it, they were hooked. People waited all day for a sniff. I raised my prices. Five sniffs for twenty bucks. I hired private security. People tried to replicate my product, but couldn't. It was just my boot that smelled good.

In a few days I was making more than a lawyer. Five sniffs for fifty bucks.

Robbie ended up getting arrested, trying to steal the boot. Good, I thought.

Burl spent all his money on the boot. Had to move back in with his parents. But I didn't care. I had a lot going on.

Two weeks later I had a prime location downtown. Right on the corner.

Elon Musk showed up one afternoon. He skipped the whole line and said, "I'd like to offer you one billion dollars for your boot."

It caught me off guard. I'd had many offers, but never a billion dollars.

I looked around at my security team, who relied on me to support their families, and I said, "Okay, but they go where the boot goes."

"Deal," said Elon Musk, and we shook hands.

I signed some papers. I was a billionaire.

I walked out with a big smile on my face. I passed all my loyal customers. They were confused. I was wearing my new fur-lined boots.

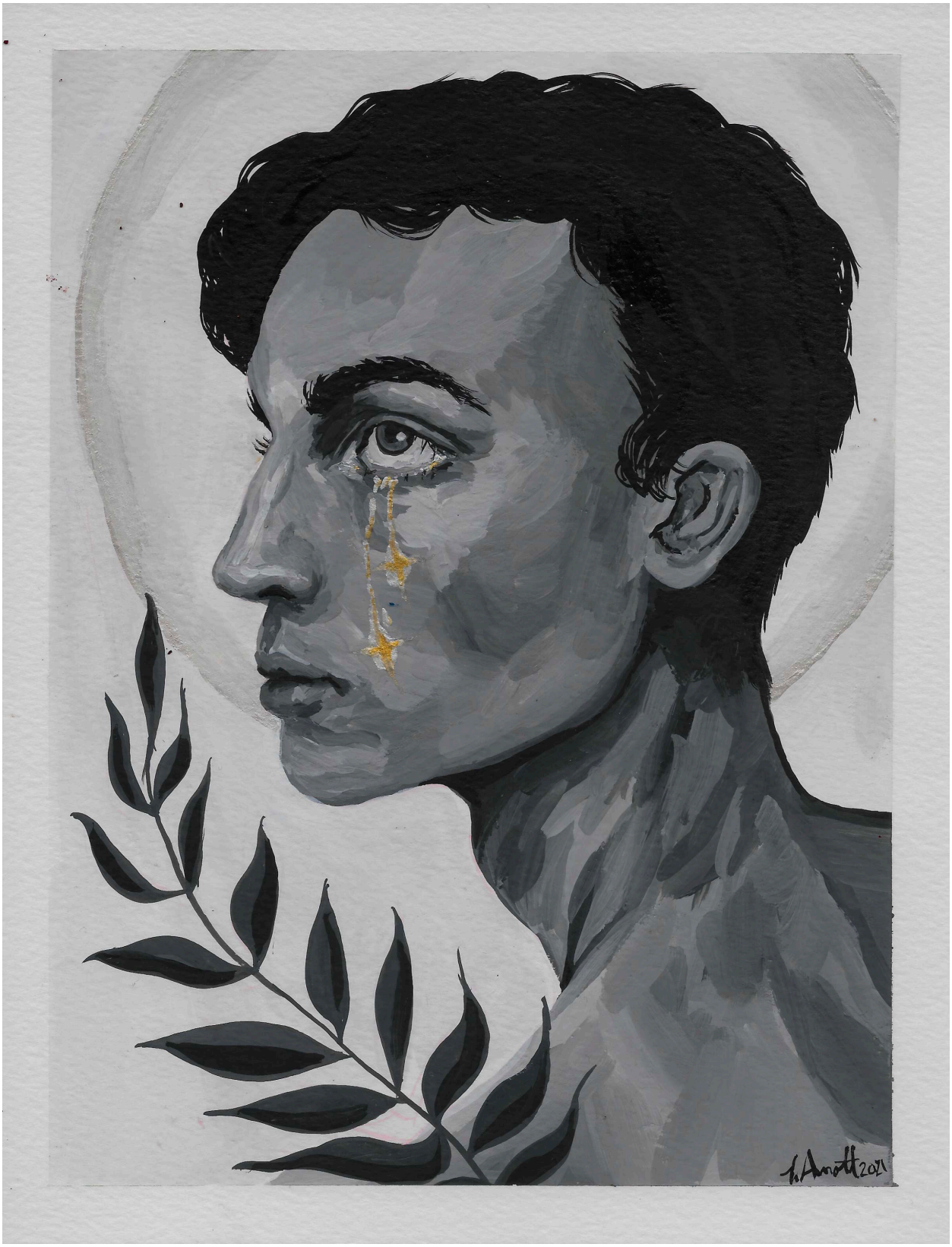
I walked back to my apartment, but didn't go inside. Instead, I went to the corner store, taking the shortcut, and stepped in the same ditch, but this time my foot stayed warm and dry.

I noticed the trees, the birds, the snow. It was lovely.

I bought a blue slushie. I'd been so busy that I hadn't had time for one.

The blue slushie wasn't very good. Actually, it was bad. But I was happy that I'd tried it. And because I was a billionaire, I threw it away and bought a red one.

My future was limitless.



Perseids (the tears of St. Lawrence) - Teagan Arnott

The Denny's on Route 71

Claire Macaulay

If you were ever to visit the old Denny's just off the highway from Cincinnati to Columbus, about midway down Route 71, you might notice how the lights behind the sign seem to flicker incessantly. You might also notice that if you were to remove the front panel of the sign to change the lights, the Denny's sign is not supposed to light up at all. The front of the sign still flickers, of course, and rumour has it it will continue to flicker until someone plucks up the courage to ask it not to. You may also notice the sinking feeling in your gut, the recognizable pull of dread worming its way from your stomach to your throat like bile that overcomes you the second you pull into the parking lot. Your car may never work again after you remove your key from the ignition, though you likely won't even remember parking, as there don't appear to be any spots in the first place. It doesn't really matter though, whether your car starts again or not.

The alluring pull of artificial warmth emanating from the front door will appeal to your curiosity, and you will soon find yourself sitting alone at a four-person booth. Around you, other diners talk back and forth unenthusiastically as they cut into their pancakes, though they never seem to eat them. You may feel like you recognize some of the people seated at the surrounding tables. Perhaps from the news reports, or perhaps from the 'Missing Person' posters carelessly taped to the windows outside, constantly threatening to blow away into the strong wind, never to be seen again. Sometimes a server will appear at your table, seemingly out of nowhere, and take your order. No matter what you decide you want to eat, you will always order the Grand Slam platter. It just so happens to be the only thing on the menu, not that you received a menu to begin with. Sometimes there will not be a server to take your order, because sometimes there are no servers at all. In this case, one of the kitchen staff will bring you a Grand Slam platter within moments of your sitting down. Just like those around you, you will not eat it, no matter how hungry you think you are.

If you are lucky enough to be served by an actual staff member, you may notice that you are unable to look them in the eye. You will take passing glances at their face, as most patrons do, yet you will never be able to remember what they look like, or if they even look like anything at all. While you wait for the bill, you may find yourself engaging in conversation with the other diners. Some of them will speak back to you fondly, as if reconnecting with an old friend. Others will just stare blankly at you while you talk, unfazed by their surroundings, noticing you and not noticing you simultaneously. Regardless, you will find yourself continuing to talk, paying no mind to their responses, or lack thereof.

When at last you receive your bill, you will notice that they have charged your credit card directly, though you will not remember having ever given the Denny's franchise your banking information. Your bill will be delivered to your table by the chef himself, and you would notice, were you to check the other tables, that the prices are inconsistent and vary depending on the customer. This might confuse you, considering there is only one option on the menu as far as you're concerned, and you will find yourself questioning the chef before your brain can even fully process the thought. It's okay, he will reassure you, they are not you. The worry will leave your mind as you listen to the dulcet tone of his voice, and you will not ask any more questions. It would not be in your best interest to do so.

In the case that you had not already noticed the man sitting across from you, wearing a trench coat and a pair of square-rimmed sunglasses, he will clear his throat once the chef has disappeared back into the kitchen. You will look him in the eye and smile, though you will not ask where he came from. However, you might ask how he is doing, or his opinion on the recent weather to feel more acquainted with him. The man in the trench coat will place a briefcase on the table. As he does so, he will inform you that this was his wife's idea, and that he had not originally intended to make you this offer. You may ask how his wife is doing, as he speaks of her with such respect, and you may notice how his expression hardens. His wife died eight years ago, he will tell you begrudgingly, and he will ask how you knew he even had a wife at all.

Upon sensing your obvious embarrassment at the question, he will change the subject. He will not open the briefcase. Instead, he will look at you expectantly, as if you should already know what he is about to tell you to do.

"Open it," he will say, in a voice that does not belong to him.

"No," you will try to say, but the second you open your mouth to speak, the words will die on your lips and all that will come out is a dry croak.

"Open it," he will repeat, in a different voice this time, and you will not be able to choose your next word as it spills from your lips without warning.

"Okay." And you will open it. He will smile at you. You will not notice him leave, yet somehow, you will know that he is gone.

You will find yourself back in your car, driving on the highway from Cincinnati to Columbus, and yet you will not remember ever getting into the driver's seat. Glancing uneasily at the clock on your dashboard, you will notice that you are late to work, and you will thank your lucky stars you decided not to visit the Denny's midway down Route 71.

Content Warning: Suicide

Orson's Shanty

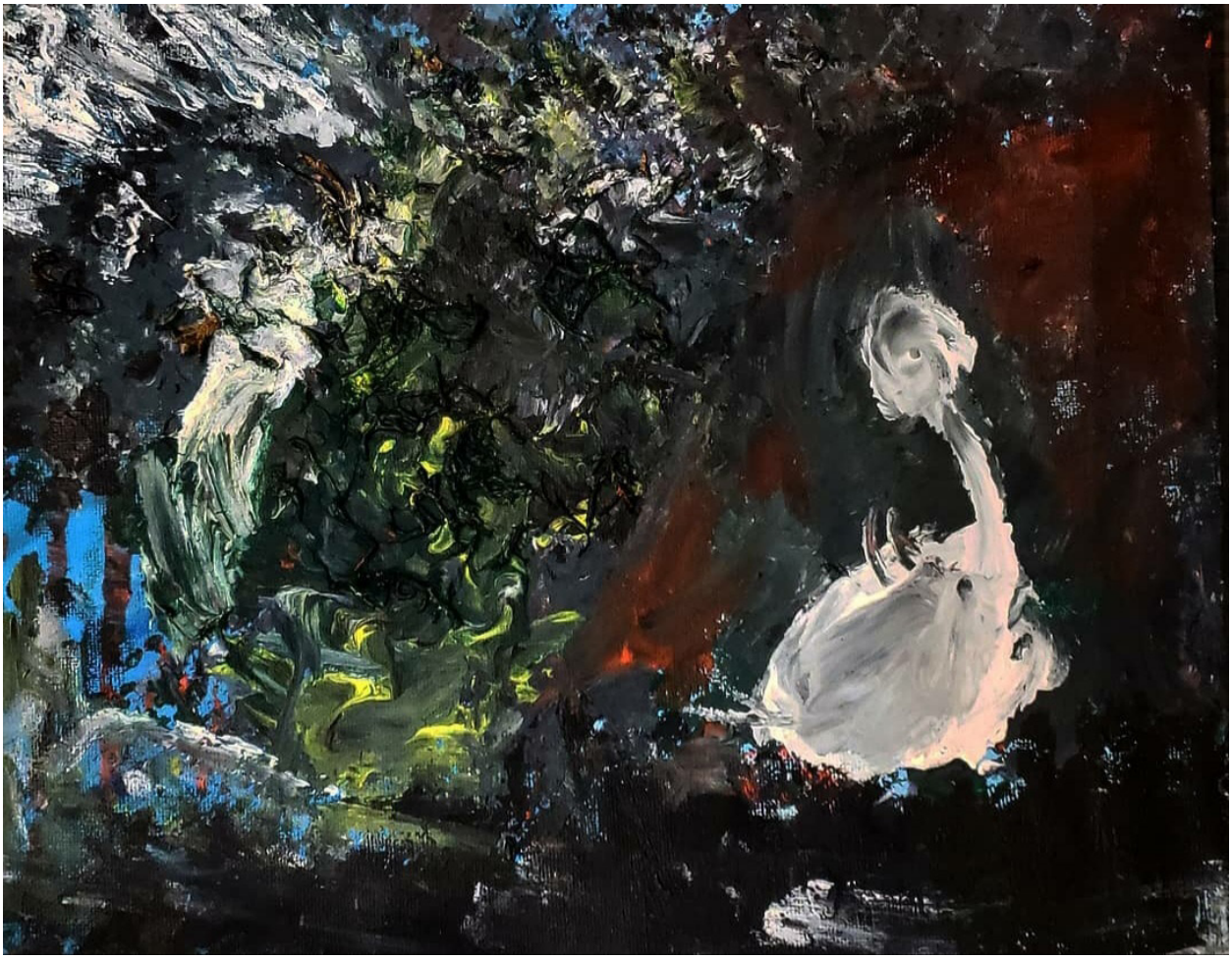
Mikayla Bronté

Teddy Orson's hands were black with filth making the lines in the skin of his palms oddly visible, like white trails on a road map. Sometimes he would study them, hoping that maybe if he stared long enough, an arrow might appear there, and this arrow would tell him exactly where to go. Teddy spent most of his lunch hours this way, sitting on the edge of his pick-up and observing the industrial plant from the furthest lot. He liked to park far so he could watch his life from further away. Up close, the plant made him feel like some kind of insect. From the lot, he could hold up his thumb and pointer finger to his eye, and close them until the plant was flattened between them.

Even from far away, the plant still smelled of chemicals. Teddy could feel these chemicals sticking to his lungs and sometimes he had to go to the bathroom to cough blood into a sink. One day in particular he'd been leaning over the ivory bowl, watching the red swirl down the drain when a man at the urinal next to him chuckled, "best not to swallow it, leaves your mouth tasting like pennies that ya just can't get rid of" he'd said. Teddy didn't answer, and on his drive home that night, he thought about how many of the other men's mouths tasted like copper.

Teddy's father had often complained about that taste and so had his father's father. As a kid he'd always seen red spotting the rim of the bathroom sink and sometimes when Teddy woke up at night, he would swear on his father's grave that he could see those red dots all over the walls and on the floor and sometimes they were on his hands too. When this happened, he'd go out to the woodshed in the backyard and spend the late hours of the night building the rest of the unfinished shanty. It had been his father's and his grandfather's. Neither of the men could ever finish it. As a boy Teddy had seen his dad in that shanty, banging at the walls into the late hours of the night. No matter how many planks of wood he nailed down, the shanty never looked finished.

Sometimes Teddy would sit in the shanty and close his eyes. It smelled like his father, wood shavings and cedar planks. But then Teddy would taste the pennies in his mouth again and the familiar wood smell would drift away. The next morning he would wake up on the floor of the shed, the red dots would be gone and he'd go off to work. Teddy's days were spent at the plant and his nights in the woodshed. This was what his father had done, and his father's father. It was on the night that Teddy Orson finally finished the shanty that he hung himself. He didn't get a call from the plant that day, or the day after that. Eventually, they must have noticed the absence of his punch-ins on the clock, but by then Teddy had forgotten all about the plant and it didn't really matter.



untitled - poormargo

The Beerobber

Suhaa Sheikh

Caffeine makes my body shake and my tongue makes the words in my mouth criss-cross into new language. I didn't say the word right, I didn't make any sense. The bees knock around the inside of my skull and my jaw is locked with honey and wax.

I like coffee, and I shouldn't. My heart races, and my hands can't keep still, and I rock back and forth, and my feet tap, and my knees jitter. My therapist says it's to do with self-stimulation, but I forgot what the rest of what she said was. I feel bad about it—I would like to retain everything without it slipping from my mind, like how a beerobber falls dead from a hive. My thoughts get stung too much.

The words not coming out right, the slur-together of concepts and mispronunciations, that's not really the caffeine, I think that's just me.

For a while I switched to tea, because at home we only have instant coffee, no nice coffee machines, just bitter instant granules that I could swallow down a spoonful of and spend 10 minutes gagging on the taste after, like I used to when I was 12 and really stupid. Maybe that's why I'm so short. My mom says that's why I'm so short. I started drinking coffee as a 12-year-old because I liked it. That disrupted my sleep and I didn't grow any taller. Maybe. She thinks.

I mean, maybe, but she also doesn't know I'd sleep 3 hours a night because I spent most of the night reading fanfiction.

Hazelnut latte. Six dollars for a Starbucks drink. Ten dollars cumulative for Tim Hortons' coffee over three days. 12 for all the campus coffee I get. I don't *like* the campus coffee but I like the feeling of having a cup of coffee. I drink it when it gets too cold and I don't like it. Some Muslims advise against drinking coffee, but only, like, the really strict ones, and besides, my dad smokes cigarettes anyway and that's worse than caffeine, right?

--

Buzz buzz. Anxiety hums in the back of my throat. Buzz buzz, look at me, and my fingers shake when I look at them, why won't my crochet hook go through the loop of yarn?

or

Why won't the keyboard understand the knocking of my fingertips? Why is the screen gibberish?

or

Why can't I breathe? Why is my chest collapsing? Why is my diaphragm forcing bees up my throat?

or

Buzz buzz.

Put cold water on my arms. My therapist says that can help. Sensory. Cold, on the inside of my arms, where the blue veins are hot with hive cells. The vibrating in my skin is supposed to calm down. I can use ice. Splash cold water on my face. Sit outside in the snow.

Sensory, sensory, sensory.

--

Caffeine is bad for my anxiety. Okay. So tea has less caffeine.

No, doesn't work. I put two teabags in each tea and I have two cups a day now.

Black tea is the best, because it reminds me of being little and my mom giving me black-tea-two-sugars-half-milk and letting me dip ParleG biscuits or cake rusk in it. Little kids shouldn't have tea but this is family tradition. Lipton Yellow Label. Tapal Danedar. Twinings English Breakfast. Kenyan Tinderet.

Two sugar, two milk. Sub maple syrup for sugar. No dairy or sweetener, only lemon. Sugar cube in the teeth and lemon in the tea, take a sip. Baking soda on green tea, hot red tea, milk to make it pink. Spiced—clove, cardamom, cinnamon, black pepper. Green tea straight. Matcha. Almond milk, coconut milk, soy milk, oat milk—no, oat milk makes my entire mouth tingle unpleasantly, not good. Brown sugar or white sugar. Tea. Thé. Chai. Cha. *Camellia sinensis.*

How much caffeine is in a teacup? Depends on the tea. So I drink enough.

--

The Beerobber - Suhaa Sheikh

Have you heard of the death's head hawkmoth?

Acherontia styx look like deathbringers because they have a spot on them that looks like a skull. And they were used in promotional material for *Silence of the Lambs*. So that probably helps with the image.

No, they don't sting, they're not poisonous, and they don't have spines. They like to eat honey.

Acherontia styx, also known as beerobbers—they crawl into the hives of bees, emitting pheromones that are meant to replicate that of a bee's. They gouge on sweet honey. They blend into the hives—bees use pheromones more than sight, after all. Look at this big bee with wing deformations! A unique part of the hive.

Well, sometimes, if all goes well for the beerobber.

If not, they risk death by countless stinging.

And then they fall out of the hive.

--

Anxiety doesn't make me busy. I see deadlines and I stare and I don't function. And I don't function, and I don't function, and the caffeine doesn't help.

I don't clean up my room for days. My clothes lay on the bed. My desk is cluttered with dead bugs and identification keys. My laptop is on my bed. My bookshelf is stuffed full of half-read books and half-complete yarn projects. Stuffed animals knocked over on their sides. I don't function. My deadlines are in the grave.

I don't know if this is executive dysfunction, but I do know the caffeine doesn't help. Now I shake, jitter, freeze up. Now I don't sleep because I say I'm going to work. I don't work. I freeze up. I don't work.

Bees are busy, that's what we're told. Bees are busy, except they take numerous naps throughout their twelve-hour work day. Bees are busy, except for when their drones don't do much except mate and die. Bees are busy, except when local solitary bees only forage for a few weeks at a time. But hive bees—Western honeybees, they're industrious, they work, they work, they work, no matter the breaks and no matter the resting periods of the night and winter. They forage for nectar and scatter pollen and puke up honey. Productivity. Never stopping. No rest.

I'm not very productive, for a swarm of bees nestled in skin and marrow.

It's laying in bed for hours, curled up around a stuffie stolen from my little sister.

or

It's staring at a blank document and not adding anything to it for days, while my thoughts crescendo. Loud, loud, loud.

or

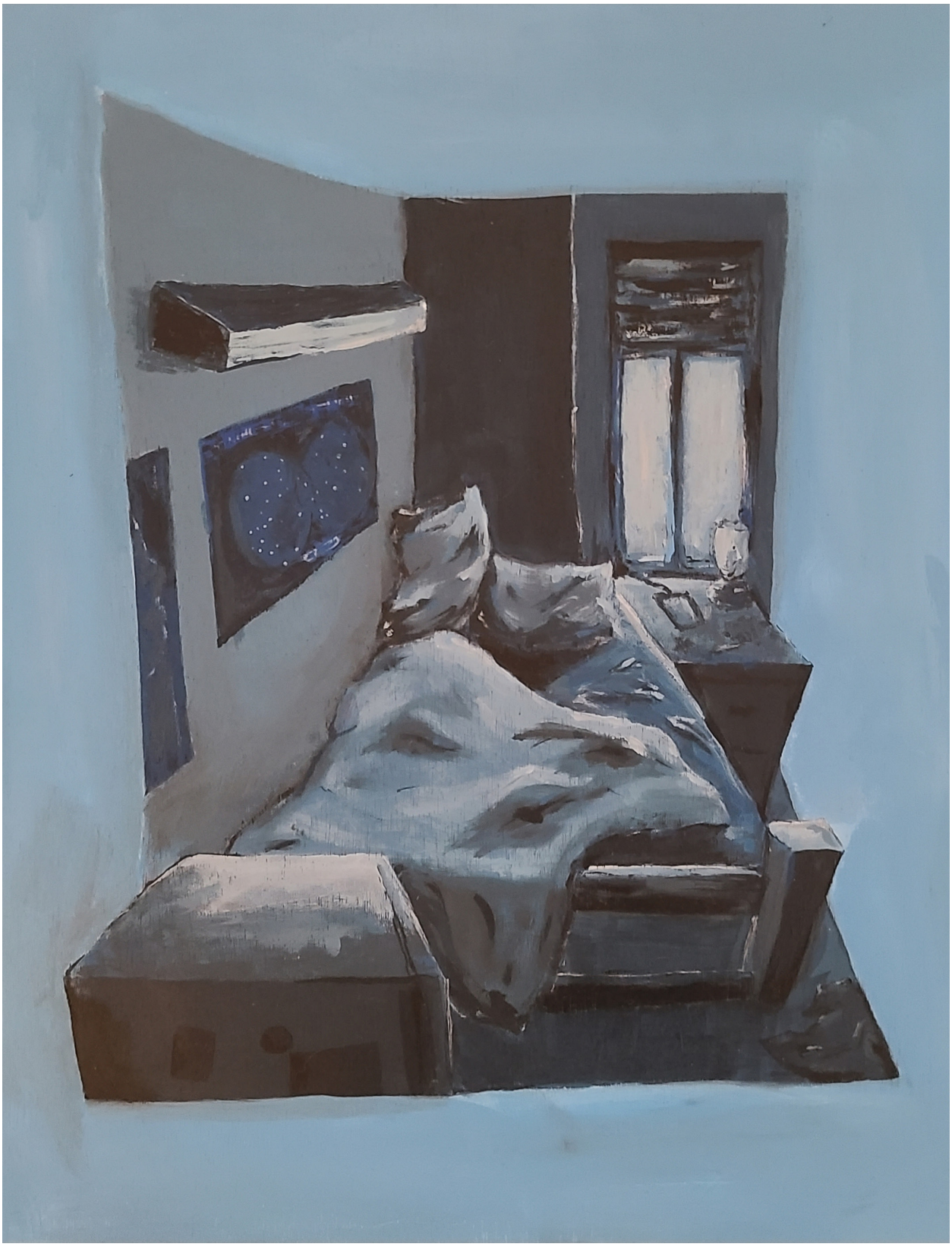
It's scratching the insides of my arms, the soft skin, to get the jitters out, bleeding and scabs.

or

It's none of that. It might not look anything like this.

The hive-cells in my ribs squirm with larvae, maybe, and the buzzing in my throat is anxieties falling out. Moth corpses tumbling to the floor. The fear ignites and doubt stings new ideas to death.

The caffeine doesn't help. The caffeine makes me tremble-shake-jitter, but I like the taste. The taste makes me happy. The foamed milk, the warmth, the cinnamon, the sugar. That makes me happy, but I don't use the energy to work. Instead it builds in my body until my body collapses, an apiary shoved over. The panic attack lasts hours or days or minutes. But it ends, eventually, and the beerobber approaches the hive once again.



nowiknowinpart - Aimee Anctil

Expulsion

Christopher Cameron

I am unsettled this morning. It didn't help my mood to hear on CBC about the discovery of a man's naked body floating in the harbour. So far the police aren't saying how he got there – whether it was foul play or misadventure. Or perhaps I read it in the Globe and Mail; I do know about it from somewhere. If only my head would clear, I could make more sense of things.

Maybe the man simply went out for a private little swim and got carried off by the undertow. This happens to people often, at least to those foolish enough to think they can outsmart a Great Lake. There's never any benefit in acting too big for your britches, *even if you aren't wearing any, ha ha*. Now his so-called private little swim in the altogether is a news item for everyone to read about. What an embarrassing way to end up.

In our younger years my husband liked to swim without a suit – at least until I put a stop to it. I told him I didn't want to be shamed by anyone seeing a husband of mine skinny dipping, and we did not speak of it again. In fact, as time passed, we spoke less and less of anything at all, which itself is a bit of a shame. It's amazing, isn't it, how insignificant things can initiate the unravelling of a life together; like a breath of wind pushing a ball of wool off the top step and sending it bouncing down the stairs.

Or maybe someone held the man's head under the water. A disgruntled lover or a jealous husband. I'll bet it's a surprisingly easy thing to do from behind: The victim would have little power to resist; you'd just have to hold him down until his thrashing grew weaker and weaker and eventually stopped. The vividness of the image makes me shiver.

Imagine the man floating out there, the water scouring him clean while the waves buffet his body and move his limp limbs in every direction, as if he were conducting an undersea orchestra.

Today has been a fuzzy one. I have little memory of waking up or getting dressed, but I must have done both because here I am, in the kitchen and fully clothed. I would certainly never walk around this house in any other state. Still, my clothes feel rough and unfamiliar this morning. Have I ever worn this outfit before? All over my skin there is a sense of physical detachment, as if my body has undergone a change overnight and no longer belongs to me. As if I were standing somewhere other than in my very own house with a cup of tea that is trying in vain to warm my fingers. I feel chilled and damp and the sleeves of my blouse are wet; maybe I slopped some water when I was filling the teakettle.

Expulsion - Christopher Cameron

The mail pushes itself through my front door and I jump as the metal flap snaps shut. While I am standing in the entrance hall holding a bunch of flyers, the light in the ceiling fixture silently goes out. Now I'll have to find someone to climb the step ladder and replace the bulb. In the dim light, the wooden panels of the walls that stretch up to the high ceiling are leaning over me like dominoes about to fall.

As I walk back down the hall my vision dims, as if someone has draped a layer of dark gauze over my face. I used to be able to see more clearly; will I ever again? In the kitchen, questionable sunlight makes smudges on the floor and cold quiet coats the walls. The floor feels spongy under my feet. I look downward for some kind of assurance, but trying to get my eyes to focus on the labile lines of the tiles makes me dizzy.

Why is the world so topsy-turvy today? It's as if I've plunged into some kind of tunnel and come out the other side to find everything skewed. My head swirls with sludgy new thoughts that chase out all the older, sharper ones.

The trilling of the phone against the silence startles me. By the time I stir myself to answer, the sound has stopped, but the call display says Ace Gardens, and I remember with some relief that a man is coming today to install a system of hoses on timers so my garden will be watered automatically. Finally, something that makes sense, something concrete. The name on the call display is comforting. A connection to the rest of the world, with which I seem to have lost touch this morning.

I can look forward to the man's visit; any face-to-face contact with someone from the outside would be more than I've had in as long as I can remember (which isn't long, if I'm honest). If he turns out to be a nice fellow who chats pleasantly, I can offer him refreshments.

I replace the useless phone in its cradle and the silence in the kitchen grows more intense than ever. I know what it is: I can't hear any of the birds that usually sing in my garden. No sounds at all are making it in through the kitchen windows. I push on the back door to open it but quickly remember it has been stuck shut for a while, probably because of the humidity; yet another thing I'll have to get someone to fix for me.

My tiny garden has always been my favourite spot, my dominion, my refuge. I love tending it so that everything stays fresh and blooming and there for me to enjoy – the Japanese maples, the rhododendrons, and the robust Rose of Sharon (which I always had to remember to cut back before it got out of control); the usual lilies and iris, plus an unusual columbine, bursting peonies,

coral bells of assorted colours, and endless varieties of variegated hostas. The clever arrangement of the shrubbery that makes it look like it's stretching away into eternity.

My garden was both a private getaway and a social joy. I have hazy memories of tea parties with elegant ladies who floated about in flowing robes. I know that I was happy there, although truth to tell I can't remember the last time anyone actually visited for luncheon or tea. I am sure there were once more people in my life – there must have been; no one lives completely alone, do they? – but I can't recall where everyone has gone. A few disjointed memories drift into my mind and then dissipate before I can seize them, like steam from a just-boiled teakettle.

I lift my hand to touch the panes of glass that separate me from the garden; they feel thick and impenetrable. It's all so near, and yet … like someone swimming far from shore, still in sight but out of reach.

A shaft of sunlight is piercing the thick foliage like a sword. Looking closer, I can see faint mists of spray drifting through the air and rainbowing over the plants and shrubs. The leaves are enamelled clean and shiny wet, the blooms are brighter than they have ever been. My eyes catch sight of some small black plastic things stuck into the soil that are shooting umbrellas of water everywhere; they are attached to little hoses that coil through the undergrowth like snakes. So. The watering system has already been installed. The garden man isn't coming today after all; he has already been.

I check the phone again and look at the caller list. Yes, I see now: it doesn't say Ace Gardens at all; it's just a string of ten numbers. Although if I squint at the digits, they could be mistaken for letters: the 4's like A's, the 6's like G's. From now on the flowers will be watered without me.

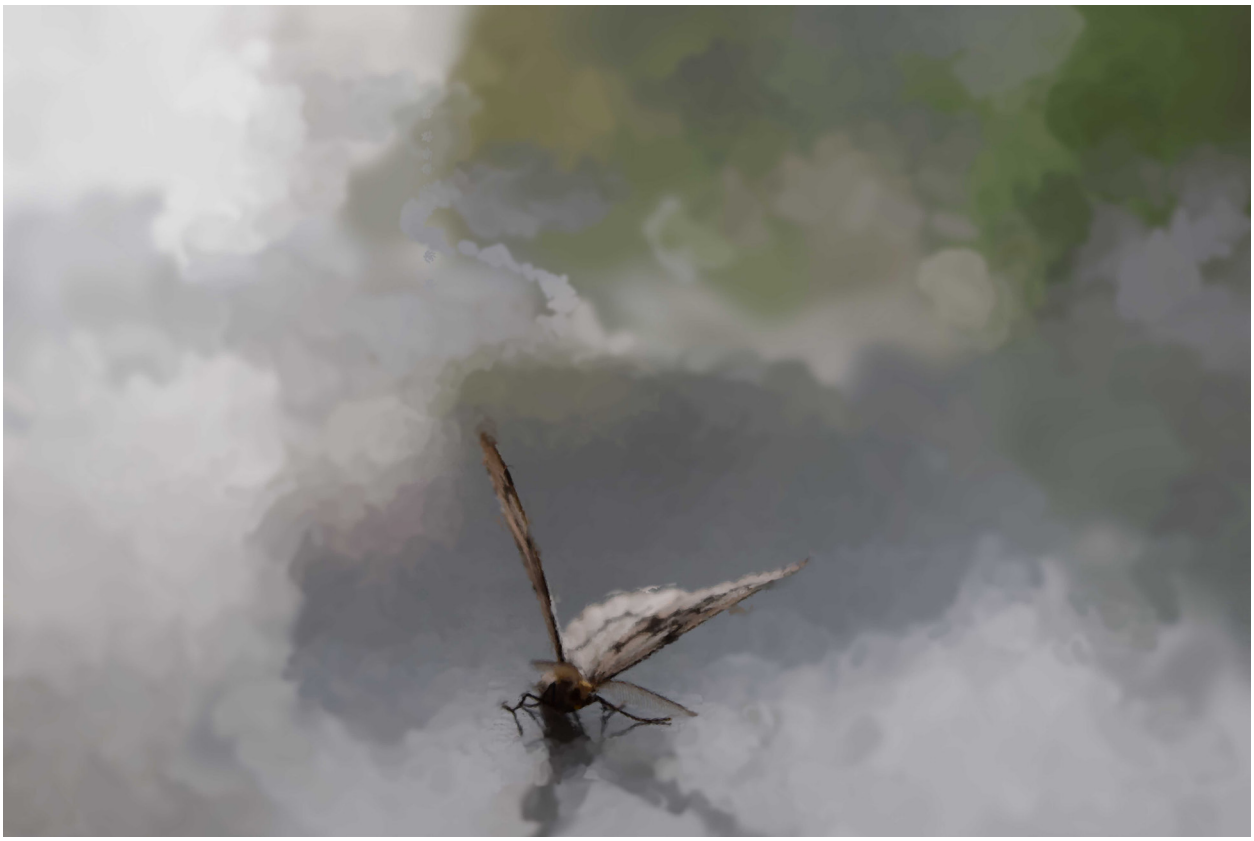
I take a final look out the window at the garden and then turn away. I don't want to leave, I truly don't, but something is drawing me upward, like water through a tree's capillaries. Suddenly my whole body is focused on the importance of getting upstairs.

Climbing the dark, narrow staircase, I become sure that this is where I will die someday – falling down these dreadful stairs. I can picture a misstep at the very top; a useless grab for the newel post followed by an instant of terror; my limbs flailing in every direction as I tumble, a piece of my life knocked out of me every time I hit a step. I can feel the nose of each tread slamming into different parts of me as I cry out in frustration . I can see myself splayed on the floor, lying all alone in some humiliating pose for God knows how long before

anyone finds me.

At the last step up onto the top landing, I make a sharp turn and walk down the long hall in the near-darkness. A grey pool of light is falling out of the bathroom door at the far end. The door, trimmed in old wood, is slightly ajar.

Passing under the thick lintel, I am trying to remember why I am here. I want to go inside, and I don't want to. Black and white chess boards of tile come into focus, spreading across the floor and rising to the ceiling, echoing my footsteps as I walk toward a huge claw-footed bathtub. And there it is: a person lying face down in the water, flaccid and still. The skin is the colour of blue cheese; the tap is dripping in cadence onto a mostly submerged head. My first instinct is to get a towel to cover up my husband's nakedness.



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