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Forces 2021

Scott Yarbrough

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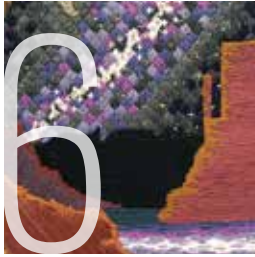
At the bottom of this page is a painting of my best friend's left dress shoe which I painted in honor of his passing; this has not been an easy year for anyone. I painted his shoe because he was *cremated* before I had a chance to experience the proverbial funeral grieving and burial. I chewed over what to do, and remembered my father's wonderful adage, "Funerals are for the living; the dead are elsewhere." So, with Rudy's ashes gone and no "place" to go to grieve, I felt I had to create something to memorialize his passing – for me – to have a tangible place or thing. My wife suggested I paint a portrait of him; he was a good friend, but I didn't necessarily want him eerily peering over my shoulder all day and night like a postage stamp stuck to the right corner of my life, so I asked *his* wife if I could have his best, left dress shoe, to sketch then paint. I knew the colors, black and polished, would be interesting since I paint using nail polish. I mean, he can't wear it anymore, and I reasoned, if I only paint one, it's like he's sort of walking with me with just one shoe; thus, he'll have to sort of walk a bit awkwardly in this journey forward, like we all are. The visual of him with just one shoe made me smile, too. A sort of defiance of death in that Rudy still has a few things to do; he's not quite finished, yet. That's why there is a nail-polish black shoe in the corner of this page. Like I said, it's been an awkward year, a drunken discovery of the human condition when we are all suddenly thrust onto one path with only one shoe on a long mysterious journey forward. We are bound to step on a few rocks, but perhaps walk a few beaches, too.

As always, thank you to Dr. Neil Matkin and the Board of Trustees, Digital Commons Manager Mindy Tomlin-Paulson, Dean Dr. Meredith Wang, Dr. Kelly Andrews and Public Relations Staff Marlene Miller, Donna Kinder, Keli Fink, and Heather Darrow, the student editors - Starlit Taie, Bridget-Scott Shupe, M. J. Scott, Phoebe Cave, and Austyne S. Chetwood – and the ultimate *Forces* team, Rachel Walker, Deborah Hall, and Susan Matthews.

Forces Editor – R. Scott Yarbrough

Rudy's Shoe • R. Scott Yarbrough





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Pontiac • Kayla Osborn



Embroidery Farmland Rivers
Embroidery Canyon Night
Embroidery Farmland

Bridgett Scott-Shupe

5118

(Fifty-one Eighteen)

Anna Boling

Carefully tearing the wings
 The house where I dream of all things

White mailbox on

51 18

Bradford pear in spring

Sitting on the fence

Pink journal in my hands

The lines of the wood

Making creases in thighs as I

Sweat and watch the cars go by

Sweet days in summer.

Jump by the power lines on the trampoline

Hackberry trees I could touch when I swing

Jumping from the highest point

Cicada shells and droning

Landing on hands and knees

In the Saint Augustine

In the house I grew up in

Rose of Sharon in late Summer

Bike ride to Donut Palace in December

With my best friend

Always telling myself

I'll remember this when I am older

This feeling I'll always remember.



El proyecto de la miel • The Holiday Project • April M. Taylor

Always telling myself
I'll remember this when I am older
This feeling I'll always remember.



En Ruff • Daphne Babcock

Sparrow Fields

Michelle Baker

I was winged, among the sparrow fields
Inconspicuous in the brush
The little friends thought nothing of me,
My custom.

Small as I was made to feel
Absent of the shame,
I was one of them.
Voices no louder than a whistle
Not asking for fear,
Only meant for song.



Shift Over • Debra St. John

Anthill Dance

Eric Dula

The colony moves in dance
A jig, a waltz, a ballet,
Not known by any ant
But perfect as a whole

First like rain, then like snow
They search then settle
Dancing all along the way
Burrows go deep, tall, and wide

The work is fast, the work is fatal
But never lonely, never boring
In perfect unison they step the dance
As sweat goes down chitin backs

They attend picnics uninvited
To feed their hungry larvae
New halls dug this way and that
To house the sleepy ants

Even as the sun completes its own dance
The dance continues as it yawns
Rest is just the slowest tempo
But slips by fastest all the same

Tomorrow it will go once more
They will kiss their wives goodbye
Off to step the same motions again
Each task a step in the great dance



Cataclysm • Brianna Watkins

Godless Dollars

Austyne S. Chetwood

With mile-long crosses on doors,
The plague proved the reality of pestilence.

Through mercy and grace,
Through farce faith,
Without hesitation,
Sanctimonious sinners stockpiled surplus supplies,
Basic commodities became gambling chips,
Feeding off the fortune of peril
As the rest sang death's carol.

And yet, in this time of prayer I sing,
Thanks be, for the deed of his will.
As earth mimics heaven,
Where the good goes to hell.

Voyagers

Susan R. Mardele

My life has been about dropping the mask,
being more authentically myself,
Coming out from behind the curtain ...
like Oz.

And now, a mask is required.
COVID so dictates.

That all-important smile hidden
behind paper or cheery fabrics.

Often times it seems people think eye contact
can spread the virus.

In the grocery store, on the walking trail,
the street.

But a smile shows beyond the mouth
to the eyes, the tone of voice.

Eye contact, a kind word, a nod
that we're all in this together,

Is a way to come out from behind the mask ...
even with a mask on.

And be human.

Another voyager along with the rest ...

Just trying to navigate these uncertain waters.



Pasture Ride • Debra St. John

Vulnerability

MaryGrace Biggs

“It won’t harm us,” we said
But it is the first lie,
for the city that rarely feels its vulnerability

“It won’t come to us,” we said
But it is the second plague,
for the city that rarely feels its vulnerability

“The economy will be fine,” we said
But it is the third recession,
for the city that rarely feels its vulnerability

“It’ll blow over fast,” we said
But it is the fourth month,
for the city that rarely feels its vulnerability

“Symptoms will show fast,” we said
But it is a long five days,
for the city that rarely feels its vulnerability

“We can still meet,” we said
But it is six-feet apart,
for the city that rarely feels its vulnerability

“We’ll stay productive,” we said
But it is the seven deadly sins,
for the city that rarely feels its vulnerability

“Hand sanitizer isn’t that valuable,” we said
But it is the new eight-ball,
for the city that rarely feels its vulnerability

“We will stay positive,” we said
But it is nine nooses,
for the city that rarely feels its vulnerability

“Work at home will be fun,” we said
But it is ten days of insanity,
for the city that rarely feels its vulnerability

“We will get through,” we now say
But it is an unknown number
for the city that is vulnerable



See Spots • A.J. Sanchez



Smoke • Melody Black

Deadly Natures

Hannah Hansen

My childhood ended on a spring field
maiden of duality, daughter of deity's
till you came in the clearing and bought me a drink.

Drawing me in with delicate wordplay, and a dark dance
with your fingerprints on my throat.
this is the scene of the crime: of a girl held captive.

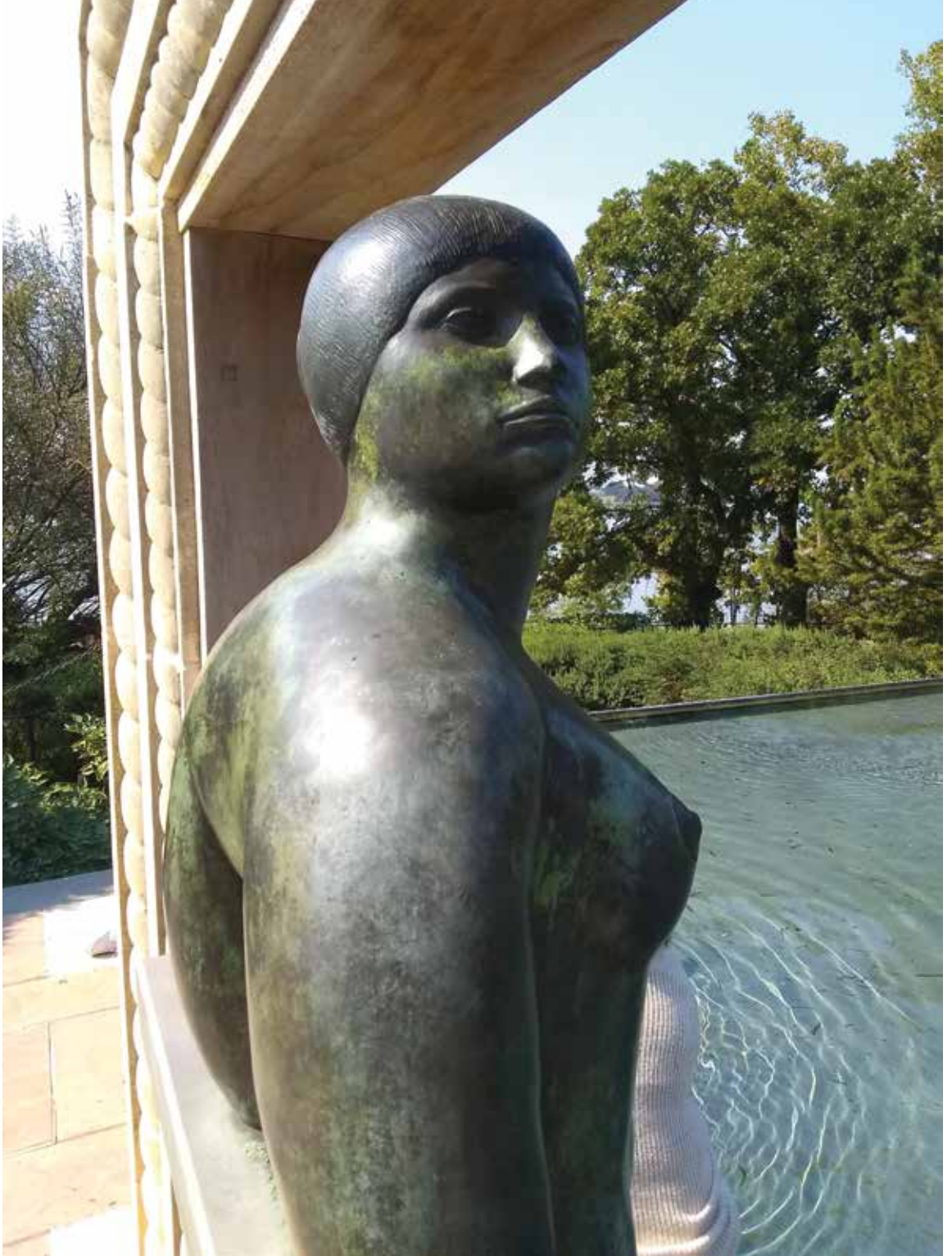
My mouth covered by a hand that smelled of copper
I fell through the earth into infernal arms
crashing into his second location.

In this asylum for the dead away from home
the lesson I learned from night one was
“we must all endure deadly natures.”

it took ten years in hell to realize
I am a delicate flame with the touch of absence.
My rage is alive and it serves women well.

people don't like in-between things
and the cost of my story.
They don't like dainty girls to have scars

but I am the queen of the underworld
with spring on my fingertips, and hell beneath them.



Stoic • Melody Black

Tears In Rotation

M.J. Scott

(Inspired by Amy Winehouse's "Back To Black")

in the waking moment of a fractured heart
'tis to the hiss of a goodbye forever kiss
the pulse of a fragile structure sets a rhythm
doom ... gloom ... da doom ... doom
the mass of a broken woman tingles like absent limbs
wrapped within her own arms in a world for one
an emptiness sings her to sleep in the key of silence
like bells of a seaside chapel ringing out to dying tides in the distance
behind her eyes now are the darkest of prophetic dreams
with visions of loaded coffins and malefic cabarets
this fearsome object becomes the scent of spent cigarettes
with the piquancy of black licorice and prunus cerasus
carrying a voice like an unkind wind whipping wet silk on a wavering line
singing a tune written of love without loyalty
and the reverberating echo of unforgettable scorn

the mass of a broken woman
tingles like absent limbs
wrapped within her own arms
in a world for one

Iron

Susan R. Mardele

The elastic and metal shape my body
the way it's supposed to look.

Narrow waist, flared bottom,
rounded bosom.

The shoes, four-inch stilettos,
shape my calves to attractive proportions.



Frozen • Anna Fritzel

The bell skirt shows off my gentle glide
across the floor.

My face, painted to beauty,
has all the right features ...

Arched brows, wide eyes, long lashes,
rosy cheeks.

The iron bars of convention tell me
what to look like to be a woman

I turn the key one day
and let my breath out.

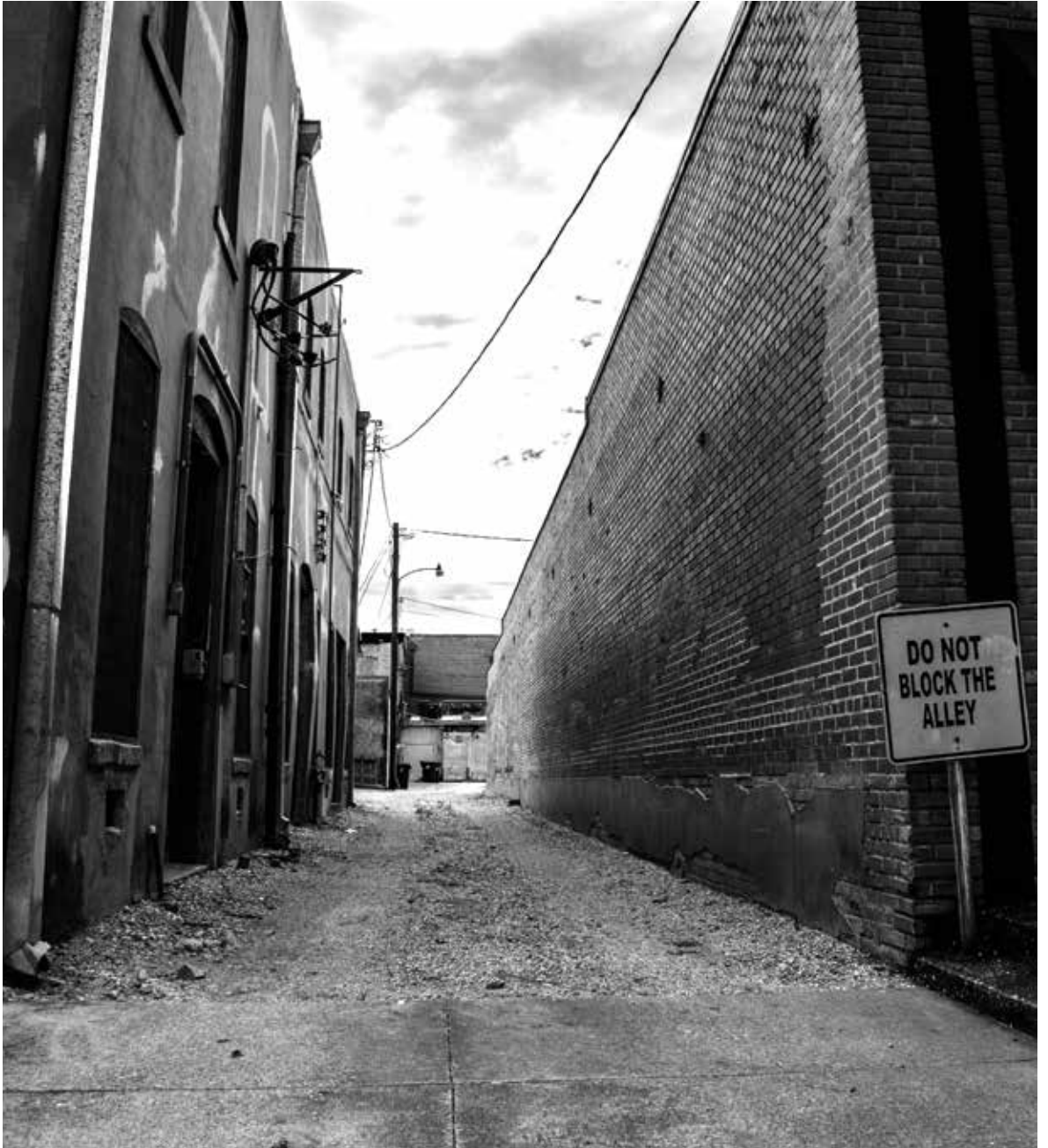
Halt the measured effort to glide
and stride out with a clean face.

I wear a dress handwoven in many colors,
lopsided and flowing.

And greet the world,
a real woman at last.



Sweet Nectar • Melody Black



Shortcut • A.J. Sanchez

Where He Fell

Susan R. Mardele

This morning I walked by the place
where he fell.

There is no longer any sign
of what happened in that place.

No bloodstain, no plastic or metal shards.
I know because I searched ...

For an indication that something
catastrophic happened ... where he fell.

The car that struck him drove off,
leaving him curled on his side in the street.

Snoring. I thought, oh, he's ok.
He's just knocked out.

Until the blood pooled behind his head,
staining the asphalt where he fell.

I was retained to talk to the police,
and he was flown to Parkland.

I'd never been through this before,
so I didn't realize the little room

I was ushered into meant something.
The young chaplain, the three doctors.

The words, "unrecoverable brain injury,"
return to haunt me ... where he fell.

It has been more than eight years,
yet the images are fresh in my memory.

It was such a huge thing in my life,
losing Steve.

It seems odd that there isn't
something marking the place where he fell.

At first, I relived the trauma
every time I passed the place.

It's only three blocks from my house.
I pass nearly every day.

I acknowledged the dark anniversaries.
First a week, then a month, then a year.

Now nearly a decade.

The long-stemmed roses disappeared,
so I left petals; they're harder to pick up.

Dropped like pools of blood,
affirming love and memory where he fell.

After a time,
I no longer left flowers.

Now I most often think with great gratitude
of the person I had in my life for a time.

But this morning, walking by,
I still searched for something other than memories ...

That remains ...
where he fell.

Beauty from the Father
Madison Mouser



Creator of Comfort
Madison Mouser



If Love Could Talk

Lauren Ariana Gonzalez

Sometimes I'll come crashing through. Other times I'll make sure
to knock before coming in.

Our relationship will never be easy.

There will be moments when you hate me.

And others when you embrace me.

You'll drown me with questions about why you're always getting
hurt.

You'll scream, why is it so hard for me?

And I'll say,

Because I'm here to make you strong. Yet vulnerable.

Be obsessed with finding me in you before searching for me in
someone else.

And if the person you're trying to get to doesn't reach for me
while looking for you,

They're not the one.

Because
I'm here to
make you strong.
Yet vulnerable.

We had
everything
and a
little more,
I kept you
there.

Everything, Etc.

Michelle Baker

Do you remember when I opened my store
Called "Everything Etc.?"

We had everything and a little more,
I built the shelves in my mind and led you into the corners.
I kept you there, kicking up dust, stealing the little more,
I kept you there, ordering what I would not sell, stocking my shelves.
I kept you there, working, counting the cost, balancing my tills.
The others visited and took advantage of my sales,
I kept them from the corners, they left the little more.
I kept you there.



Self Portrait • Jacey Glenn

In The Scissors

M.J. Scott

As I cut images out of yesterday's paper I see nothing special is happening in a world on fire.

/closed minds are common to the struggles they will never understand

The collage I'm preparing is compounded with the same headlines, but different dates.

/and golden rules seem to exist only for those holding the chisels.

And the black and white pictures are buried under full color depictions of history repeating.

/while the fabric of our flag bares three bold complexions that never bleed into each other

These sufferings sell at an ungodly rate for under a dollar, and on Sundays they sell for triple.

/the colors wave in unison over a population that has yet to find resolve in unity.

This morning, graffiti on the newspaper stand says "BLACK LIVES MATTER," but it's empty.

/our efforts to reach the grey has found no momentum on the over-trodden paths

Maybe the paper didn't run today or maybe the burning world isn't interesting anymore.

/but new trails of embers have revealed glimpses of a potential identity.



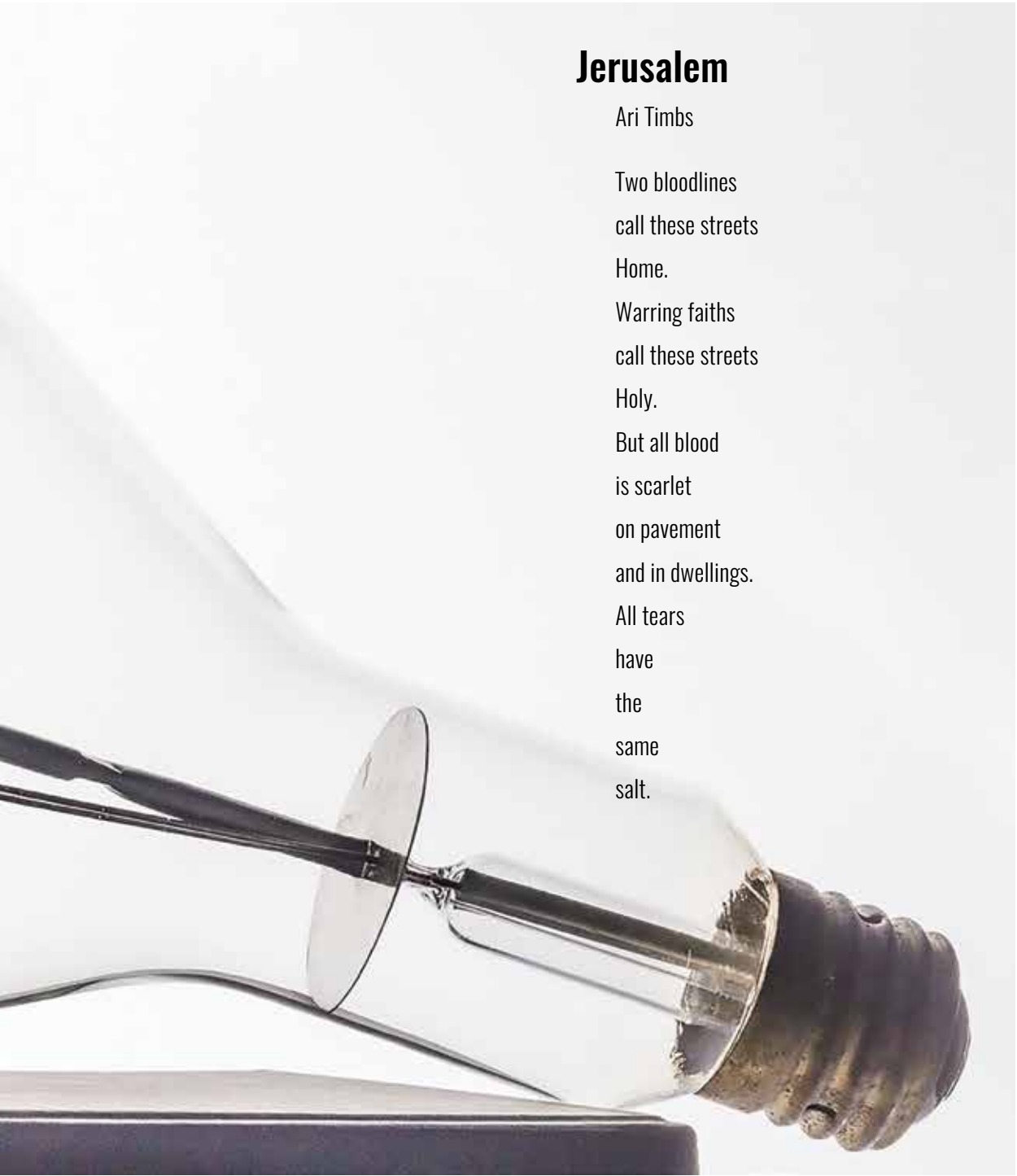
And the black and white pictures
are buried under full color
depictions of history repeating.



Some Things Change • Patricia P. Coble



Bright Idea • Patricia P. Coble



Jerusalem

Ari Timbs

Two bloodlines
call these streets
Home.

Warring faiths
call these streets
Holy.

But all blood
is scarlet
on pavement
and in dwellings.

All tears
have
the
same
salt.



I Found a Boot • Dewayne S. Hensley

Mud Is Home

M.J. Scott

My last quarter was spent dialing the wrong number to the old town electric company

/the burdens of debt, the ground opened at my ankles and I felt the dirt was wet

There was no time to fall apart in that phone booth so I head back to a home cold as February

/the deeds of waste, the illusions of wealth have blinded my eyes before they've run gray

Anything I owned that was worth keeping I just burned because it still wasn't worth giving away

/the pains of regret, my dying at the speed of life was living at the speed of death

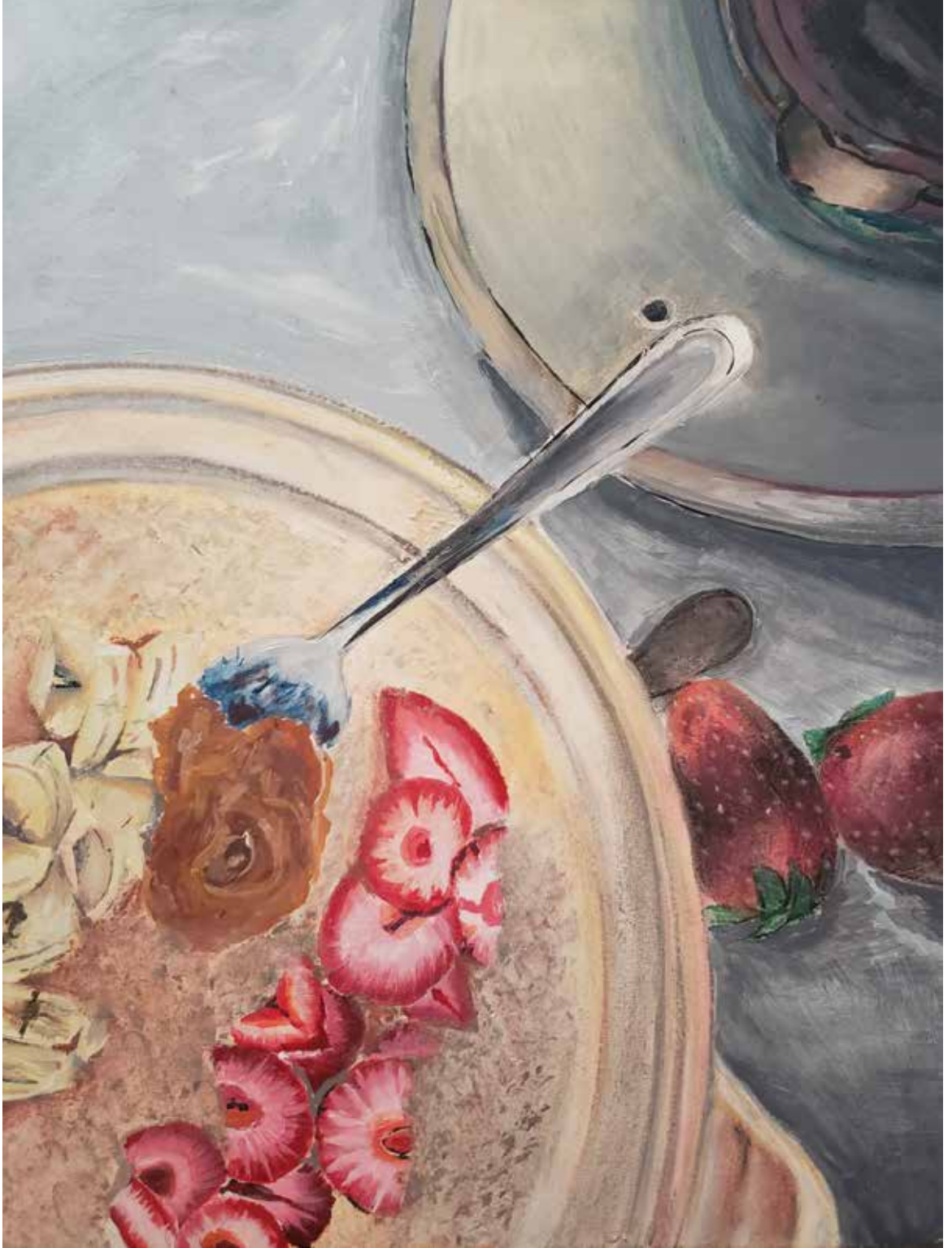
I'll miss the smell of Sunday mornings in that old kitchen where mother made family dinners

/the loss of good days, what is gone forever is bound forever to a memory that remains

I don't know where I'll grow old now, but I should have been too poor to give a damn anyway

/the fears of unknown, though I've died inside I'll never be buried in a garden I've sown

I don't know where
I'll grow old now,
but I should have been
too poor to give a damn
anyway



Covid Groundhog Day Breakfast 1 • Nga Tran



Covid Groundhog Day Breakfast 2 · Nga Tran

November Blue Moon

Starlit D.S. Taie

The winter black is pierced
By hand-chosen colors
With glitter or without

Hazy fluorescence
A mirrored luminescence
Weighs its body on its reflection

An idle satellite
Hangs blue
Judging time.





Andy's at Night • Josh Brown

Invisible Enemy

Hannah Hansen

and the people stayed home.
voices frantic with soft complaints of indignation.
some prayed, while others danced to a forgotten lullaby.

While I stared out a window all day,

there is fear in isolation,
that pulses beneath the terrible.
but we must bear humanity and close all doors.

there was a bare impersonal hush in my mind.

the volume of silence,
this shapes the mortal alarm of grief.
Alone in an outcast state and eyes as thick as wood

I am stuck in the cycle of solitude,

where tattered memories have no exit.
I used to think loneliness was just hearing your own thoughts,
but oh no, loneliness is hearing everyone else's voices on repeat.

This is my imprisonment of circumstance.



On My Sister

Shannon Robinson

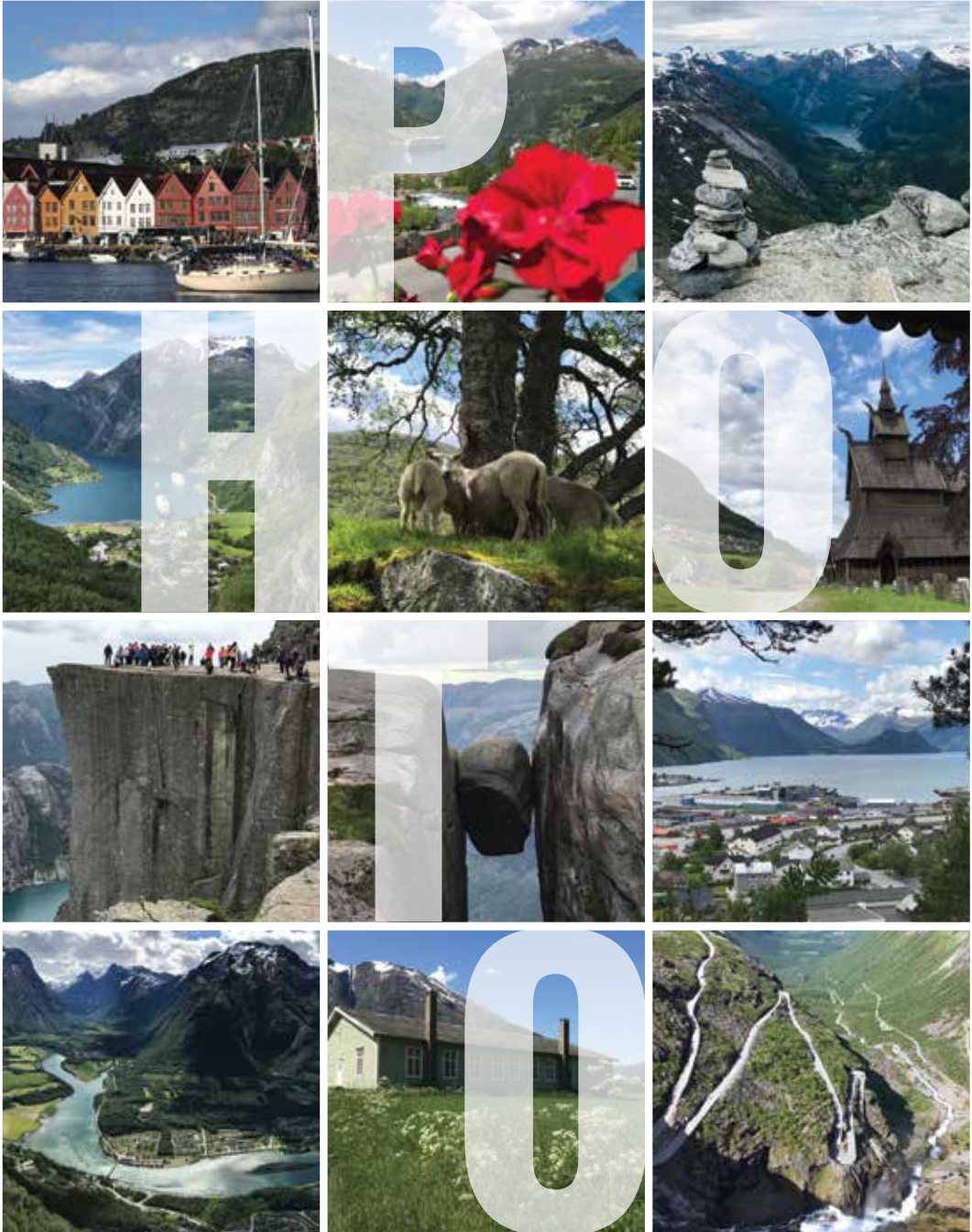
It was another rehearsal
Of a tired, tragic production.

A worn out shoe with a
Fresh layer of duct tape
On her sole, ready to march on
Through the battered refrain
Of love too quick,

Loss too apparent,
And my shoulder, wet again,
From the puddle she keeps
Stepping in.



A World Between • Jacey Glenn



Travel Photos • Dorothy Ho



Sun Shower

MaryGrace Biggs

It's the sunlight, that bleeds through the clouds,
to the raindrops that strike the pavement.
It's the blinding reflection that leaps up
and soars into the sky's embrace.

The sun sheds tears for humanity and gives us a reason to live.
The prediction was: cloudy and wet
but the beauty starts when the assumption is broken.
In the forbidden thunderstorm—it's golden.

It's the vain rainbow that stretches its back and sighs deeply in color,
to the double bow which hovers shyly above in modesty.
It's the rare blue sky, that peeps from behind the cloud,
squinting down at the drenched earth.

It's the fresh clean air, the kind I greedily breathe in,
to the soil that engulfs my shoes with every step.
It's the slight shiver of goosebumps,
where droplets tickle my skin.

The golden sunlight
The double bow
The blue sky
The air

That's how I explain it to them, with an uncontrollable grin.
"Can't believe you didn't get a picture," they say.
I shake my head, smile evaporating,
it's always the photo, never the moment.



Lemon • Shea Ameen

Peeling an Orange

Beth T. Ayers

I watched you peel an orange this morning,
observed the way you sliced into it with a knife,
just deep enough to get it started, then
you dug fingertips between the peel and the
juice-filled pulp, pressing with just enough pressure to
separate the two. You pulled away a piece of
the bright orange protection to reveal a glimpse of
sweet fruit. My mouth watered in anticipation.
I knew you would share.

We share everything: greatest joys, deepest sorrows,
fears (founded and unfounded fears).

We share our hope for tomorrows and appreciation
for today, and as I wait to reach my hand across the table
to meet yours, to lightly brush your sticky fingers with mine
when I accept the freshly peeled, dripping slice of
sweetness, I have gratitude knowing we share this
moment of seclusion from a viral, now virtual, world and
if that microscopic enemy breaches our defenses,
we'll be together. We share everything.



Cherries • Shea Ameen

We share
everything:
greatest joys,
deepest sorrows, fears
(founded and unfounded fears).

Reasons Why

P.J. McGuire

From A to e-minor my hands no longer care
They only react as I stammer and stare
Past the crowd and into the chorus
cigarette in the neck burning so glorious

These lights and cameras and empty bottles
Decorate the night like Christmas cocktails
camouflage to this pain I wear
unspoken like mother's love affair

Remembering cotton that grew past my waist
The smell of gun powder from dove hunting days
The stones we skipped across the mighty buffalo
And how two kids felt bound to never let go

Daddy opened the mercury hood
Momma cried and my sister just stood
As the ambulance left the scene of the day
We held hands and prayed it would all be ok.

Now another night and another crowd
I get to the bridge and sing it loud
For a second feeling like a child again
An Arkansas farmer at a fresh fruit stand

But I can't be satisfied
I know it's selfish, there's no reason to lie
If I only knew the reasons why
The White-throated sparrow always cries



Gas Station • Anna Boling



Como Motel • Anna Boling



Oceanside in Ghana • Karen Stepherson

Secrets

Bridget Scott-Shupe

Secrets don't stay secrets unless you take them to the grave.
 They're not just little children you can yell at to "behave."
 This filthy tiny monster you can primp and preen and grow,
 Is just a bloody body that you're dragging through the snow.

You can shove them in a box and hide it in your head
 But they'll all creep out at night and attack you in your bed.
 Every time you talk, they'll thrash and writhe and scream,
 And claw their way on out with their beady eyes agleam.

You decide to tell your friend, you think surely one is fine,
 But that secret's not a secret now because it's yours *and* mine.
 As whispers swirl around you, though you thought you took the lead
 That little secret spreads with surprising grace and speed.

That monster's now a mountain that you cannot hope to climb;
 A jagged scar, a memory, that's shrieking out your crime.
 So lock that box down tight inside your grieving heart bereft
 And hug those little secrets 'cus they're all that you have left.

Sea Sick

Kaitlin FitzRandolph

I never thought much of cruises.
Fear of sea sickness, I think.
The ship is so expansive, I hear,
that you feel like you're on steady ground
But meanwhile the waves are undulating underneath,
a hidden uncertainty
that rocks the boat in the subtlest way,
making the passengers
silently and suddenly succumb
to its effects.

And so you are—
the pretense of stability,
hiding the depths of the ocean beneath you
Subtly rocking, rocking, rocking
until the passengers of your life
silently, suddenly
long for solid land.



Sailing the Sunset • Lacey Smith

Teddy Eddie

Siyu Yao

I am a teddy bear

My name is Eddie

I am a stuffed toy during daytime

I am a warrior at night

Darkness, ghosts, and nightmares

I am fighting them by moonlight

When the sun comes up

When the moon goes down

I go back under your arm

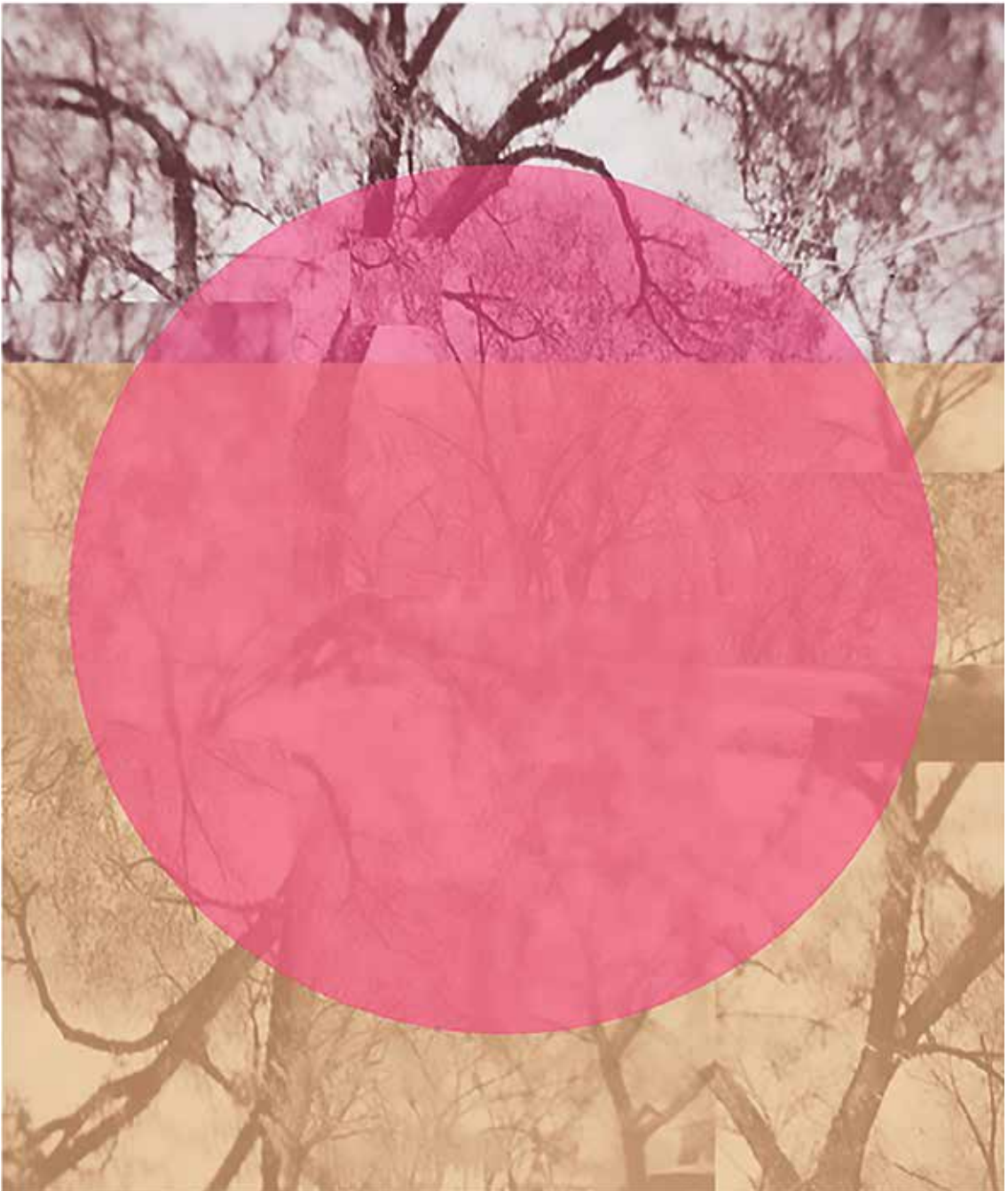
Recover my energy for the next fight

No matter daytime or night

Teddy Eddie never let you cry



A Fallow Deer • Claire McDaniel



Treesdrip • Brianna Burnett

Waking Season

Starlit D.S. Taie

Nighttime

A heavy winter blanket

Desperately weighing

On the bare striations

Of a proper cut tree

A whispered hint

Runs over naked dormancy

Disturbing the once stagnant

White

Unpreventable overlay

That frames winter

With labored tears

Cutting canyons into powder

It turns transparent

Fading

Until it resigns

To silent history

A murky blue

Wakes a distant horizon

Green droplets

Paint over a soaked crust

Beckoning for the first chirrup

Of beings left

For their second homes

Brittle strands

Browned

Battered

Crunched

Flush emerald

Under a creeping warmth

Winding through nestled chill

The silent march

Of a diligent army

Weave hidden patterns

To future treasures

A world wakes

As the first silk petals

Unfurl into a diffused glow

Awaiting their comrades

In the morning of spring





Law School Blues • Bridget Scott-Shupe



Bulbs • A.J. Sanchez



The Sweetest

Bianca A. Villanueva

Speechless,
I stay speechless,
dilation and retraction –
an inexplicable attraction.

Unable to drift apart,
my blood runs hot,
a fever that can't be cooled,
you're a different kind of food.

Hungry for your embrace,
there's nothing more to say.
An inevitable goodbye and
water pooling beneath muddy eyes,
brightened only by the dance.

The gentle sway of wind,
an alluring rustle of leaves,
and I feel closer than ever.
You keep me on my toes
better than no other thing has.

From the crisp crunch of leaves
to the vibrant hues of green,
my favorite part of the day
is today and everyday
because of you, my beautiful tree.

What Looks Like Spring

Karen Stepherson

Magnolia trees sway in diffused sunlight

While I sit at a green picnic bench

Observing yellow, purple and red flowers

Tulips no daisies no begonias

Golf cart sputters along sidewalk

Passes sign "*Evacuation Assembly Area #4*"

Deep in thought I awaken

Brown grass crunching beneath my feet

Giving way to peeps of green blades

Wind sways towers ...

Radio Cell phone Light

I sit wind blows

Cool wind diffused sunlight

I smile





Tranquility • Shea Ameen



Riding the Sunset • Hanna Faith Sizemore

They were the last two scientists.
The last man and woman.
The last of the first evolvers.

THE DEVOLVERS

M.J. Scott

It was just past noon when Steve took a bite into his microwavable burrito. It would be the final time he would suffer the disappointment of a zapped lunch. The edges of the tortilla were, as usual, hard and nearly impossible to chew through. “Damn, I let it sit too long after heating,” he said. Ginger had hardly eaten any of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich; she just sat quietly and examined the tiny holes in the surface of the bread. “Do you find it strange that the technology of a microwave is fairly new but the process of making bread has been around since before the pyramids?” she asked.

“No, but I do find it strange that the pyramids are more than five thousand years old, and we were never able to definitively determine how they were built,” Steve replied.

“Seriously, Steve? Water was the key to construction. Much of the region was flooded during that period, and the Egyptians designed pulley systems to use the weight and distribution of water. Do I really need to explain this again?” she snapped in reply.

Tension had been mounting for weeks leading up to this day. They were the last two scientists. The last man and woman. The last of the first evolvers. The meals they were eating would be their last as modern humans. Soon they would take the last of the De-Codex pills, and life as they understood it would become no longer understood. Just as the rest of the human race had already descended back into the earliest version of bipedalism, so too would Steve and Ginger.

“I’m sorry. That was rude of me,” she said.

"It's okay. Honestly, that is the most rational and logical answer. I'm just glad the last debate of mankind was settled by a woman," said Steve. Ginger chuckled. "It doesn't really count if there's no record of it," she said.

"I had a feeling you'd say that," said Steve with a playful grin. He grabbed his burrito and charged back over to the microwave and threw it in. There was a loud thud, a definitive slam, and four beeps. Steve had set the timer for thirty minutes. Ginger sat confused, but intrigued. This was the most spontaneity she had witnessed since the devolution process began. Steve pointed over at her sandwich. "Are you done with that?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good, follow me. I've got a surprise for you," he said. They left the laboratory and headed for the cart garage. Ginger was almost disappointed that he didn't perform an act of aggression on her sandwich, but her mind had wondered on to what the surprise may be. Fireworks, she thought. This was a celebration of sorts after all; the last surprise of modern man. But, it was mid-day, and fireworks are far less exciting in the daytime, she thought. Reality began to dampen her excitement because there were no other people to come flying out of nowhere with gifts or cheers. He probably learned to tap dance and sing, she

thought. Suddenly the excitement dissipated. The truth was, Steve could have trained a pink poodle to howl Streisand's *The Way We Were* and it would have done little to offset the feeling of despair that Ginger was feeling.

They took a cart ride through an underground tunnel that Ginger had never been given clearance for in twenty years as a scientist for De-Codex Labs. It was apparent that Steve knew his way around. He pointed down to the other existing tunnels that branched from the main breezeway and gave reference to classified information.

"Down there is where we successfully zombified a sloth. It was part of a back-up plan if the devolution code couldn't be figured out," he said.

"Why a sloth?" she asked.

"Safety precaution," he said.

At the end of the corridor was an iron door that opened vertically. Light spilled in through the bottom and heavy floral scents bellowed in with it. "It smells like an arboretum," said Ginger. The door opened completely to a grand garden that was green and speckled with every color imaginable. Trees, plants, and flowers from every exotic corner of the planet seemed to be within sight. Insects of all kinds buzzed, swarmed, and fluttered in the midday sun. Ginger was in awe, but the garden wasn't the surprise. Steve drove

through a short winding trail and explained that the garden was the key to success of De-Codex Labs, and that it had to remain in pristine condition. Only necessary personnel were allowed; until today. The trail came to a massive sandstone boulder with an inscription. It read, "THE WOMAN IS ALWAYS RIGHT." Ginger stood from the cart and laughed at the gesture.

"I chiseled it in this morning. I figure at some point humankind will re-evolve and this should be the message they find," he said.

"Steve, that is the sweetest thing. It really gives me hope for the future," she said.

"I just thought that if we are going to take these pills and revert back to the stone age then I could at least lighten the mood first," he said.

From his lab coat Steve pulled out a vial containing two red pills and handed one to Ginger. Her eyes welled up with tears. This was the last time they would see each other in this way. She had been trained to contain her emotions in this moment, but the moment was too real and overwhelming. Steve took the pill without hesitating. Waiting, he thought, was pointless.

"Ginger, you won't be alone. We'll be different, but we'll be here together," he said. The words gave Ginger some comfort as she closed her eyes and swallowed the pill. The two

Fireworks,
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This was
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of sorts after all;
the last surprise
of modern man.



The Dumbbell Nebula • Bill Ponder

embraced and she began to cry on his shoulder, but the moment was cut short with disbelief.

First it was the sound of a cart horn and laughter echoing from the tunnel. Then there was the sound of dirt and gravel under turning tires closing in on their location. Two men with sparkling gold wavy hair and matching eyebrows, and wearing olive green jumpsuits, were driving towards Steve and Ginger in a De-Codex Labs cart. The driver held a sledgehammer in his free hand, and the passenger held a contraption that looked a lot like binoculars.

“There they are, Malcom,” said the passenger.

“We made it just in time, Marcus,” said the driver.

The cart came to a halt and the men stepped out and began to walk toward them. Steve and Ginger stood without speaking. The strangeness of the two men was almost too much to process. They wore neon blue boots that lit up with each step they took. Their eyes were solid black pearls—like there was nothing but void in their sockets. Their skin was milky white and flawless.

“Steve and Ginger, I presume?” asked Malcom.

“We are the Oron brothers from the year 80 Z 5,” said Marcus.

Steve and Ginger were paralyzed with confusion. The brothers looked at each other with concern over their dormancy. Malcom placed the head of his sledge hammer on the ground with the handle at his hip and then snapped his fingers at Steve and Ginger. “Do you understand?” he asked. Ginger snapped from her blankness and replied. “Yes, but ...” she started.

“Don’t concern yourself with the buts and whys. We have no time to explain everything. Just know that we are here from the fourth re-evolution age. You—the first evolvers that is, set in motion the events that would define and then redefine humanity over. We come from the ninth planet of Elitist, also known as Elitist 9. Devolution has proven to be effective in separating the elite from the undesirable. For that, we are grateful,” said Marcus.

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“Ninth planet? Are you telling me that eight other planets have been discovered as habitable?” asked Ginger.

“Yes, but the previous eight have been depleted of the resources for sustaining life. Including this one. Only the elite inhabit the ninth. Hence the name Elitist 9,” said Malcom.

Ginger felt her face muscles tense, and her forehead began throbbing. She felt like falling into Steve’s arms, but his arms were limp and he was standing in a slump. His forehead and brows had already begun to protrude and shade his cheeks from the sun. Ginger had begun to involuntarily slump in the same way as Steve. She tried to speak one last time, but all she could muster was a grunt. Marcus giggled fiendishly and mocked the apish expressions that now dawned on Steve and Ginger.

“Let’s hurry Malcom. I want to get a selfie with the last two idiots on earth while they still look half-human,” said Marcus.

“Fine, but make it quick. I want to shatter this boulder before the idiots start mating,” said Malcom.

“Remember now, we agreed on taking turns in breaking this monument into rubble,” said Marcus.

After posing next to modern Earth’s last scientists with expressions of disgust the Oron brothers hammered away in turn with the sledgehammer and broke away, letter by letter, Steve’s last gift to Ginger. It would be now as if it never existed.

“That was a long time coming, brother,” said Marcus.

“That will teach mother to dress us how she sees fit,” said Malcom.

“Indeed—this will change everything,” said Marcus.



Drive End • Debra St. John