



SENTIENCE

LITERARY JOURNAL

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Isolation



Sentience is a new online literary anthology publication from a group of Antioch University Los Angeles students and alumni. Poets, novelists, essay writers, and artists, the storytellers in the group are dedicated to honing their craft and supporting their peers as they tackle the beauty and chaos of the world we live in through the written word.

SENTIENCE



POETRY

Seven poets. Fourteen poems. Myriad solitudes.

- Jake Bailey *Portrait of a Blackhole*
Portrait of a Smoking Lounge as Cave
Portrait of the Mundane
Severance
- Adrian Cepeda *Verses Almost Sent to a Lingerin' Flame*
- Alisha Escobedo *In Isolation (Drinking Too Much Again)*
my new psychiatrist
- Sen Kathleen *Rent*
- Maya Nordine *Flight Cage*
- Caley O'Dwyer *Certainly Valsartan*
Death Ruins It
Night Polo
- Brianna Vigil *Los Angeles*
Revelation of the Damned

FICTION

Three authors. Three unique takes on isolation.

- Lisa Croce *Piano Forte*
- Kelly Curran *Carol Anne*
- Helen Doremus *Yang*

CREATIVE NONFICTION

A deeply personal essay meditating on the loneliness of being adrift in a moment of crisis.

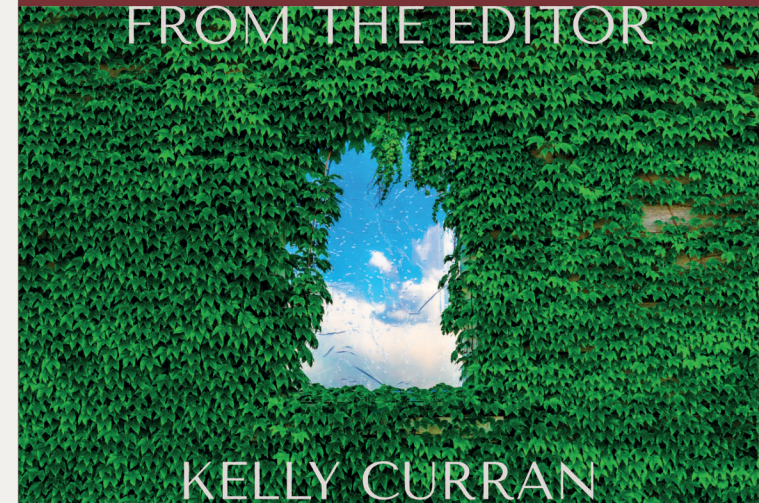
- Lindsey Anthony-Bacchione
Will It Hurt?

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FROM THE EDITOR



KELLY CURRAN

Hello readers, writers and curious parties alike! Thank you so much for either being an active part of, or randomly stumbling across, Sentience Literary Journal. We are so excited to have you all here for our very first publication! I want to give a special thank you to all the amazingly talented writers who are featured in this issue, as you are the ones who filled it with life and creativity. I also want to give a big THANK YOU to Helen Doremus, co-founder and insanely organized leader of the editorial staff. If it weren't for you I'm not sure we would even be publishing today. Of course I must mention the remarkable Brianna Vigil and Lisa Croce who are also essential pillars to this literary journal. Okay, fine, I'll thank myself as well. Thanks, Kelly.

Isolation is a theme we can all relate to in one way or another, especially as we continue to reminisce on a time when having contact with another human being wasn't such the ordeal it is today. Whether this sense of isolation is brought about by being alone physically, mentally or spiritually, it can be a deeply intimate and personal experience that moves many of us to cultivate inner growth. The pieces contained in this literary issue are complex and beautiful representations of the types of emotional development that transform us through our months, our years and our entire lives. My own experience with isolation has allowed me to see fragments of myself I would have never experienced otherwise.

Our hope with this journal is not only to showcase talented authors, but to cultivate an online space for community, growth, and reflection. Though we have all, no doubt, experienced isolation in this past year, many of us have also had the opportunity to redefine our sense of what it means to be surrounded by those who truly care for us. We hope this journal can be a space where authors feel that sense of care, community and encouragement in regards to their writing and self expression. Thank you all for being part of the inception of Sentience in any way, big or small. I can't wait to see where we go next! Enjoy!

EMBRACING "SENTIENCE"

By Helen Doremus, Managing Editor

In April of 2020, I received a text message from a member of our post-Antioch writing group which read: "We should start a lit journal." It is now the summer of 2021 and we did indeed somehow start a lit journal, though I swore up, down, sideways, crossways, and on a particularly stout dictionary that we would just try an anthology, *maybe*.

This issue - and indeed, this journal - could not have happened without the enthusiastic and diligent work of our editors and readers, most especially Lisa Croce, Kelly Curran, and Brianna Vigil. They each undertook careful reading of every submitted piece and thoughtfully discussed and considered each submission accepted for publication. This issue is a testament to their hard work and is truly a labor of their love.

When we decided to continue on to a second issue this fall, we knew we wanted to give our first issue contributors and readers a little gift of appreciation for believing in *Sentience*. It's been something of learning experience laying out a whole magazine, but the *Sentience* team is pleased to have the chance to share this issue with you once more in a form we hope will allow everyone to read and enjoy the "Isolation" authors, poets, and artists for years to come.

For my own part, embracing the idea of this literary journal has been a gift in a time when my own isolation had been pressing in. The past two years have been rough for everyone and, in addition to my own intimate losses and struggles, feeling unable to connect and collaborate with my various groups had really brought on a malaise in my own life and creative work.

Sentience, as terrifying as the prospect of it was (and still sometimes is), created a path for all of us who worked on it, a path back to the creative wells that seemed to have run dry and the connections that foster our in visions and innovations. Writers and artists create to share, to extend what we find in ourselves to others and enter a mutual exploration with our peers, our readers, and our audiences as to what it means. *Sentience* has entered a space of sharing, of collaboration and kinship, with the thousands of literary journals out there today. We do this with great humility and with earnest excitement for all that is yet to come on the page.

One behalf of the *Sentience* crew, I invite you to once again enter the world of our collected isolations. We're so glad you're here with us.



Poetry



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Opposite: detail of "A Bird's Window" by Tristan Onfroy

“PORTRAIT OF A BLACKHOLE”

By Jake Bailey

The moon looms over fences built
to keep us in.
The moon looms over fences built
to keep us out.
A tree grows up through the chain-link.
A tree grows up through forgiveness.
Bears don't know the difference
between a fish that's mostly dead
and a fish that jumps into a ready mouth.
The waters part for a man of God.
The waters part for a man with no God.
Space may extend forever.
Space may extend like a balloon will grow
until the pressure blisters rubber
into white, into star.
Gaseous giants or blackholes.
A soul will linger at the horizon.
A soul will linger at the horizon
and end, not in silence,
but in nothing, in never having been.
The old men roll up their tomes.
Gravity collapses in on itself.
The fish swim out to sea.
The fish drown in what carries them.

Smoke drapes itself
in the dark
like the stole of a preacher
who's paid off God.
A deck of cards
gets shuffled.
The rhythm of the universe
weaves itself
into faces and numbers.
Cigars wink their ends
into flame, into electricity.
Who's to say
what makes a moment.
Is it to be found
in the glow or graying
plumes reaching out
to caress absence
or air?
The deck gets dealt.
A paltry hand.
Chips smack themselves
onto tables.
Stakes higher
than ever
give rise to short intakes
of breath.
A shattering.
Of self.
Pieces collect on tables
meant for games.
Pieces stack themselves
into bats never knowing
flight. Wings only bear
bones long enough
to learn how a stole

wavers in the wind,
how the body
may or may not
awake from a cave.

“PORTRAIT OF A SMOKING LOUNGE AS CAVE”

By Jake Bailey

"PORTRAIT OF THE MUNDANE"

By Jake Bailey

A friend once
told me that,
though water
can hold a body
like memory, feet
are not meant
to float alone.
The first time
I met God, I was
draped in a rough,
elephant-colored
bathrobe, worn soles
on my slippers.
I used to drink while
doing the dishes in
the summer so
I could forget
what it's like
to have a body
or a sun
slowly peeking
around corners
of kitchen windows.
Burnt signal that another
day had left and I was
simply another drunk
looking for signs
in the bottom
of a Solo cup.
Because I'd let
the pungent aroma
waft the rafters
of the house
a day or two too long
(or a week),

a candle lay
burning next
to the stove,
a beacon
for those who eat
every meal out,
but always
bring it home.
I trudged
through plate
after plate,
knife after knife,
losing my grip
until I dropped a cup
into emptying sink,
shattered stupor
of my libations
and thoughts
exploding over stains
that won't come out.
In a year or so
from this moment
my wife will leave me
for a man almost
three times my age.
In a year or so,
I will try to snuff out
whatever candles
I had placed
around the kitchen
with a twisted
telephone cord.
I went to pick up
the remnants
and sliced my hand

open sideways,
longways,
each piece asking
to be remembered
by touch one last time
like a whisper
too tired to care.
I zipped my hand up
with a napkin,
drifted toward the den,
stopping at a candle
that had burned
far too long
and would take a while
to catch fire again,
snuffing it out
to see the ways
a bush can burn
without losing itself.
Where Moses
removed his shoes.
The ghost unshed
itself into a spiral
calling forth
a prayer
I still cannot say.
But my feet
are far too dirty.
Like the places
I have been.
Like the same slippers
tucked beneath my bed
that make me imagine
I will still be
cold tomorrow.



JAKE BAILEY is a schizotypal experientialist with work in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Diode Poetry Journal*, *Palette Poetry*, *Tar River Poetry*, and elsewhere.

Jake received his MFA from Antioch University, Los Angeles. He lives in Illinois with his wife and their three dogs.

Find him on Twitter (@SaintJakeowitz) and at saintjakeowitz.xyz.

If both parties agree to the terms of the contract,
a heart unpumps itself from streams of blood.

A tiny boat drifts to docks untethered from land,
bobbing in the wake of severance.

I climb aboard with still-quaking bones
beneath the weight of memory wrought

from now-alien images, rowing toward the sea,
following the current like a man forgetting his body.

The words are mostly water and float easily
between logs and silt, weaving their way

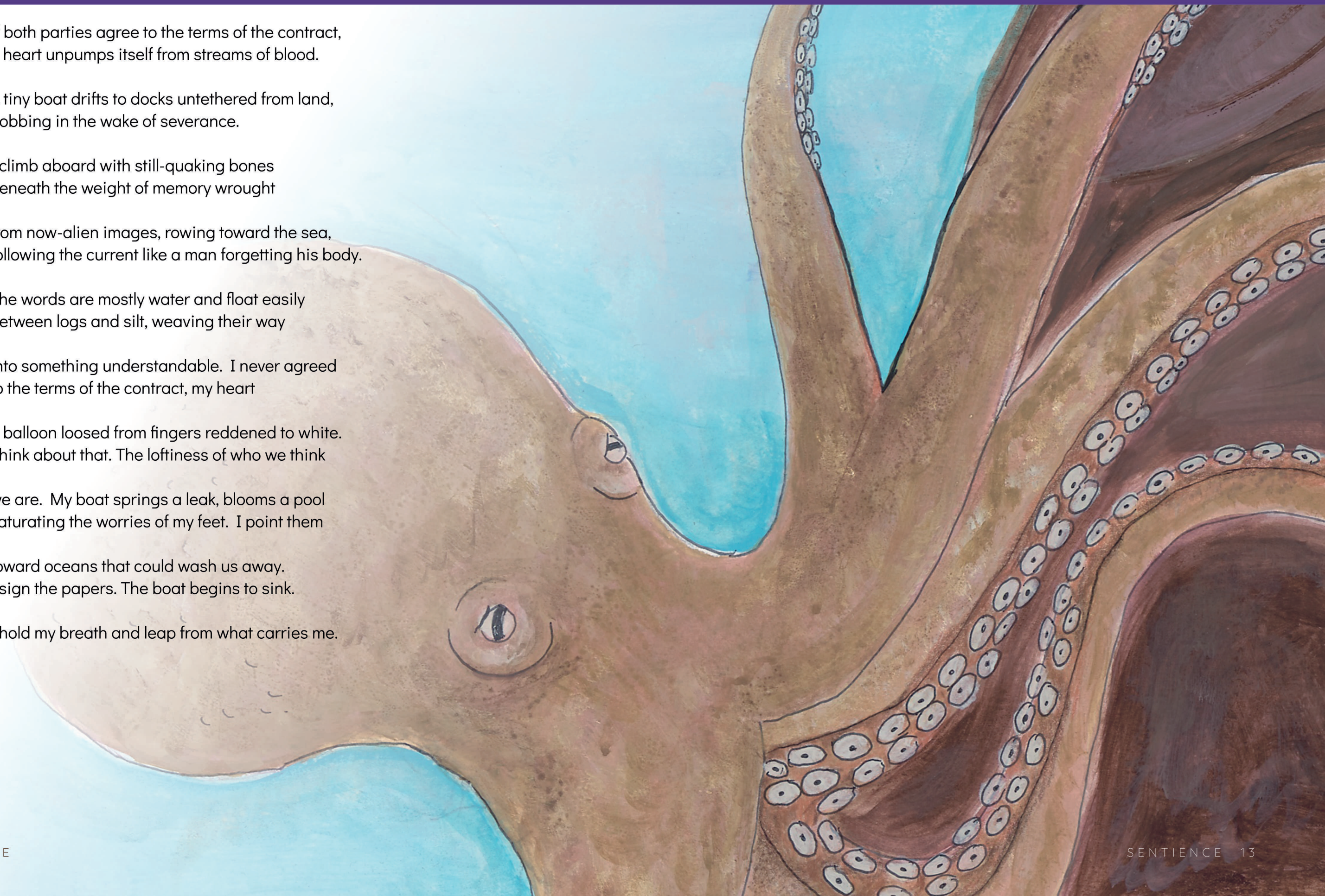
into something understandable. I never agreed
to the terms of the contract, my heart

a balloon loosed from fingers reddened to white.
Think about that. The loftiness of who we think

we are. My boat springs a leak, blooms a pool
saturating the worries of my feet. I point them

toward oceans that could wash us away.
I sign the papers. The boat begins to sink.

I hold my breath and leap from what carries me.



"VERSES ALMOST SENT TO A LINGERING FLAME"

By Adrian Cepeda

When I close the screen,
I feel the light softly go
out in the room where
your pixelated cheeks
just blushed for me.

I wonder if, all the way
on the other side of your
universe, when closing
your laptop, do you feel
the sounds of our instant
disconnection? Feeling

screenshot in isolation,
with every Zoom remaining
so close yet further away,
glimpsing you, glowing
there with one click, turn
on the hotspot seeking
out the reconnection, yet
somehow, we are always
waiting for scroll news of
the pandemic fading and
vaccines at CVS, our wishes
reach past our reflections
still, is it real without

masks? Making out face
time, letting my fingers
speak... mouthing for me
scrolling up a little bit
closer to our nightly
midnight view. No matter
how long we link, there
are no shortcuts from
our flickering webcams

this resolution of longing,
I cursor this LED distance
one day we will meet IRL,

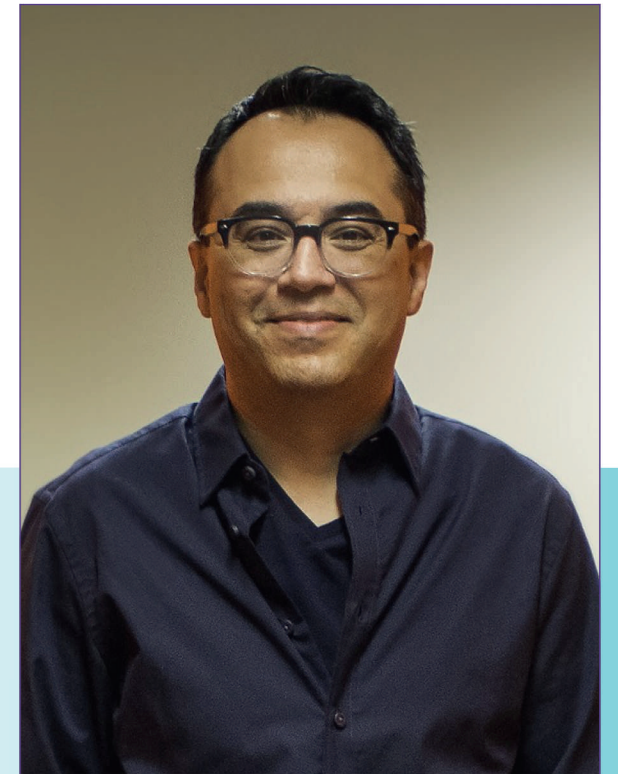
sans mask after social
distancing shut-down ends
our persistence instantly
messaging keeps us
connected... still before

signing off, always clicking
sparks more than like, you
love our electric hearts,
glowing face time no matter
how distant, needing you
so much closer on our
instant touchscreen.

ADRIAN ERNESTO CEPEDA is the author of *Flashes & Verses... Becoming Attractions* from Unsolicited Press, *Between the Spine* from Picture Show Press and *La Belle Ajar* from CLASH Books.

His poetry has been featured in *Harvard Palabritas*, *Glass Poetry: Poets Resist*, *Cultural Weekly*, *Yes, Poetry*, *Frontier Poetry*, *The Fem*, *poeticdiversity*, *Rigorous*, *Luna Luna Magazine*, *The Wild Word*, *The Revolution Relaunch* and *Palette Poetry*. Adrian is an Angelino Poet who lives with his wife and their adorably spoiled cat Woody Gold in Los Angeles.

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“IN ISOLATION (DRINKING TOO MUCH AGAIN)”

AFTER DINAH WASHINGTON’S ‘DRINKING AGAIN’

By Alisha Escobedo

I’m drinking too much again.
I don’t get blitzed, but every sunset is a new bottle.
Who am I kidding? The caps are torn loose before
the sun meets the horizon.

“I’m having a few and wishing that you were here...”

From my balcony, I hear I’m not
the only one. There’s a party in the yard
to the right. I wonder how many bottles before
they forget to stay six feet apart.

“Yes, I’m being a fool, just hoping that you’ll appear...”

I’m drinking too much again.
I’m on the fritz with the shift of this new world.
The silence clamors and nothing aligns except
the sun still meets the horizon.

“And ain’t got nothing but a memory...”

From my balcony, I hear I’m not
the only one. There’s a party in the apartment
to the left. I wonder how many bottles before
they forget to stay six feet apart.

“I know you heard me the first time...”

I’m drinking too much again.

By Alisha Escobedo

“MY NEW PSYCHIATRIST”

i’m waiting to meet my new psychiatrist,
hoping she won’t look like my mother.

i’ve had that happen before and couldn’t get past it—
same sad eyes opened wide to feign joy,

same pursed lips that puckered a bit to the left.
a few times, i imagined her hiding wine behind her desk.

i canceled the rest of my appointments to spite her
for all the promises my mother broke.

this new one doesn’t look familiar.
she carries a warmth i’ve only dreamed of.

she calls my name and i follow her
down the hall. we listen to my shoes squeak

like old hinges opening. she smiles at me,
says she knows how to fix that, then gives me

a prescription for ten milligrams of lexapro—
the same pill my mother swallows every morning,

with a cold beer to ease it down.
my new psychiatrist sends me on my way,

says she’ll see me in a month.
the next time i see her, my shoes still squeak

and when she looks at me,
i see a version of my mother i’ve never known,

a version from before i was born.
i tell her i don’t want to leave.

i ask her if i can stay.
i promise to be quiet.

she sighs and ups my dose.



ALISHA ESCOBEDO (she/her/hers) received her MFA from Antioch University Los Angeles. Her work explores themes of queer womanhood, generational trauma, and addiction, and can be found in *The Acentos Review*, *The Los Angeles Press*, and *Desolate Country: We the Poets, United, Against Trump*.

She sporadically posts/deletes photos to/from her IG @ayescobe.

I found home,
at first, I was apprehensive,
but there you were, ready.

I was apprehensive,
but my bags were already in the hall,

And then came the excitement—
intoxicating—

but I had only just gotten comfortable in our bed
when the wallpaper began to peel.

Two years in:
termites made the beams rot
and your attitude soured.

Year 3:
the lights went out.
I would search for you by tracing my hands on the peeling walls,
but you didn't want to be found — so I screamed
until you came out of hiding.

We only made love with the doors locked.

Year 4:
I patched leaks from the upstairs bathroom
that you denied had overflowed
the leaks I had to prove were real.

Year 5:
we stopped pretending
we could climb the steps fast enough to unclog the drain.
I stopped searching for you in the dark.
We didn't care that we couldn't see each other in our bed.

Then, I tripped over your suitcase.

SEN KATHLEEN is a New Jersey-based Hatha & Trauma yoga instructor, reiki practitioner, and writer. She is also the creator of The Soul In Space. She's contributed a wide variety of content; interviews, informative articles, opinion pieces, poetry, and fiction pieces to a number of publications like *Lunch Ticket* and *Harness Magazine*.



Currently, Sen works full time as an account manager for a media company. She graduated from Antioch's MFA program, for fiction and poetry, in 2020. She is also a board member for the non-profit organization, Empowering Her and the Trauma Informed chair for the Honor Yoga Foundation. Her goal is to share experiences, to tell stories, and to share what she knows and learns with her family & community.

How overjoyed I was, to hear
her squawking stop
so suddenly. She’d boarded
after me, birdcage in hand.
Then, after the ascent, three
squawks. Maybe two.
Anyone on a plane, I’ll tell you,
can’t stand the sound.
I’d heard of puppies
dying overhead, the change
of pressure too much
for their little lungs,
but birds? She reached over,
lifted the cage to her face
to peek between the thin,
black wires. Gave it
a small shake. A few
feathers were shed,
clinging to the cage’s frame,
but that could have meant
anything. Only when she stood
to walk to the back of the plane—
carrying her sudden grief,
the still, yellow bird—
did I see her face, watching
her house, and everything
inside it, burn.



MAYA NORDINE lives in sunny Chicago, Illinois, where she runs a virtual writing workshop called Study Hall. She holds an MFA from Antioch University Los Angeles. Her work has been published in *bath magg*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Small Orange*, *Door Is A Jar*, and *TYPO*.



Was postmodern living really so bad
with its postmodern lampshades,
access to the worldwide internet's
daft shenanigans, the great show
of hip hop, happiness, high-risk mortgages,
fields of discourse plowed
with ultimate unassailable truth?
You are a thread in the fabric
while the needle behind you weaves
or is woven into the greater piece.
Time has a way of doing the dishes,
the throbbing insect about to pop
in the heat, it is you. Don't bust
too soon, there is much to see,
much left of you though you
are bothered by it, this branching out
of options, river ways into plangent,
brilliant light where intention flows.
You have your plans but the world
was not made for it. There is sense,
gladly, no matter that it isn't exact,
it is sincere (sometimes) and you are
OK with that, or not, and time goes on.
Either way you are reclining on a sofa
for a moment thinking of all this
in a body that is aroused with grief
for all the things you could have been
or done, loving that you are as you are,
pretty excited about what's next,
avoiding congestive heart failure,
all these minutes in the serene light
in the backend of day, reading a book,
wondering what you'll have for dinner
later this evening, this very evening on Earth..

“CERTAINLY VALSARTAN”

By Caley O'Dwyer

I face myself,
the thing convincing
as a face can be, although it breaks
where it should mend in laughter.
Do you believe in me though you
should believe in nothing,
where it hurts a little, that time
of life that stuns
into you, so you see
the future, where you
stand guard, eager to accept you?
Everything I've known, little
is more uncertain. It is like
a glow, difficult to speak of.
So did we age, we as we are
in the comic paternity left us
by our beachcomber friends
who found in their time
words all around them gleaming.
It stuck and I was me, some
fraction of the truth, which
more than anything was addition.
The face is there, for a time
present, then it goes
into the earth, having seen
through the vast prism.
Sight is circles and cycles.
The face changes what it wears
but always the eyes,
silent and alone, holding course
while everything that ever happened
is added up then forgotten.
Quiet trench in the sea,
years find the ships
in your depths, but I am

in the emerald light you promised me.
It is like the waxy contour of a leaf
the way it darkens and listens
to our wanting a guarantee,
some high-def purpose for being here.



“Night Singers” by Caley O’Dwyer

“NIGHT POLO”

By Caley O'Dwyer

Does time make us crazy
or is it something else?
I see myself but back away.
I want to know what life is,
but only gain the subtle topping,
cosmic merengue dissolving
on the tongue. Something
catches in the sieve. There is
a carefulness I can't shake.
As though I could
check and turn away
from pain. But life puts
its hands inside our bodies
and leaves us blinking,
reforming. Terror
enlightens, but so does doubt,
the tenderness of it. Strong
pain can kill, and I know
I'm looking it in the face
when I get down on myself.
Isn't there a nicer way to be?
It's hard to take shape
all the time. Beyond
the sovereign July
I came to life in,
I'm playing polo in a dark field.
The Pleiades shimmer down,
ticking off Orion's shield.
On what can I depend?
Telescopic laughter sounds
far away where gravitation rends.
The sky tilts
its head to hear
whatever signal night can send.
The clouds are all ears.

Wayward, I listen as they bend,
drifting beneath the gleam of Mars
into the hand of darker years.

CALEY O'DWYER's poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Cream City Review*, *Zocalo Public Square* and other venues. He is a three-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize and has received the Academy of American Poets University Prize, as well as a Helene Wurlitzer grant for poetry.

A painter and psychotherapist in private practice, Caley teaches creative writing and clinical psychology at Antioch University Los Angeles. His first book, *Full Nova*, was published by Orchises Press in 2001.

Other examples of his work can be found at caleyodwyer.com.

Author photo courtesy of Audrey Mandelbaum.



“LOS ANGELES”

By Brianna Vigil

I long for the loneliness of Los Angeles.
I miss its shiny exterior
and its hollow core.
I always find myself at home
in this dangerous labyrinth.
And when I get hungry,
I crave those small glimmers of hope,
the sweet twinkling sustenance
fed to me night after night.
I know I am so close
to the bedside
of a corrupted machine.
I watch the birth of beautiful clones
and someday
I'll be part of that assembly line.

“Palm” by Helen Doremus



“REVELATION OF THE DAMNED” By Brianna Vigil

I found myself
under a hot red light
surrounded by smoke,
salt in the air
as if I were on a ship
in the middle of a storm
tossed around
by the imbalance of the sea,
the hallway
a long passage
crowded with people
unaffected
I rocked from one side
to the other
in suffocating heat
my face in flames,
hair stuck
to backs of necks,
smoky silhouettes danced
to sounds of sex,
bodies covered in sweat,
spread lips and saliva
soaked into skin.
I sense the danger
in their presence
and the violence
of their intent
and that’s when a light
goes off,
chills go through
my feverish limbs,
secrets of our sins
are hidden in lives
no longer
but fresh in memories

of those above.
I tried to run
to escape
the spinning room,
outstretched hands,
a crimson blur
down the hallway,
then finally
out the door
into oblivion,
I found myself
alone.



BRIANNA VIGIL (aka Jasmine Felix) graduated with a B.A. in Liberal Studies and a double minor in Creative Writing and Psychology from Antioch University in 2018. She took her first poetry class at Antioch and fell in love with the craft. In addition to being a writer, she is also a photographer, actress, and model. You can view her creative endeavors on her website, jasminesroom.com.

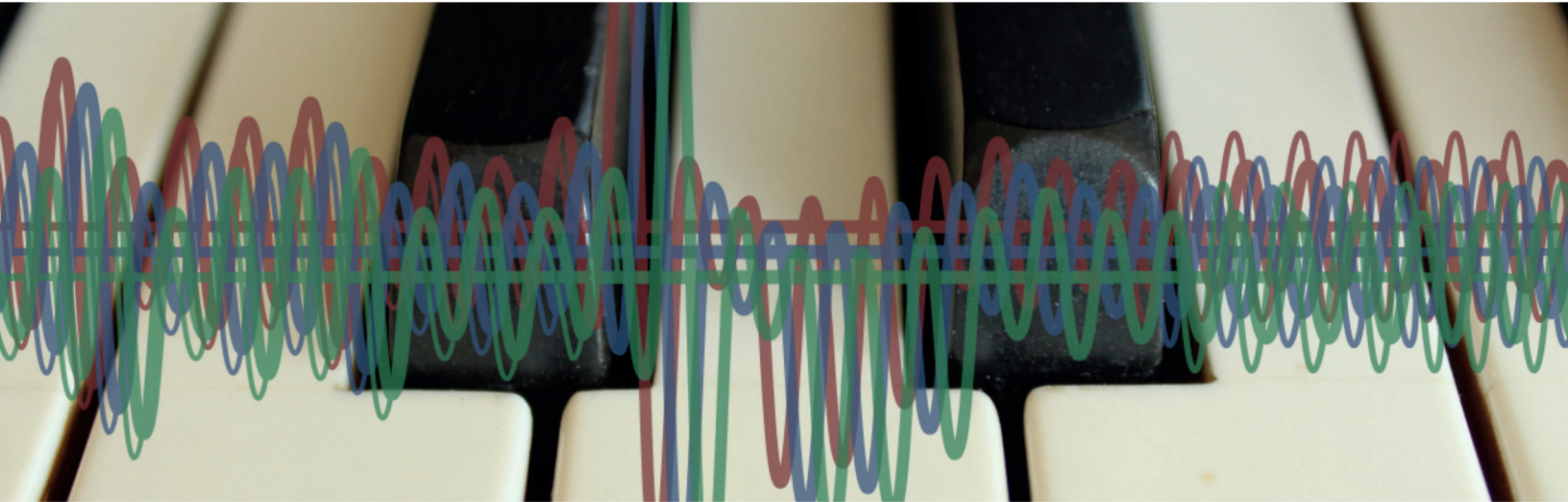


Fiction



Lisa Croce	<i>Piano Forte</i>	36
Kelly Curran	<i>Carol Anne</i>	42
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Opposite: detail of “A Monk’s Curiosity” by Tristan Onfroy



"The music is not in the notes, but in the silence in between."

—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

If you'd asked me before, I would've told you mornings were the most magical part of my day. I suppose it's not the morning's fault, but when you're outraged you blame places, people, articles blindly, because, well—do I need to spell this out? You're outraged. And I'm not talking fender-bender-on-your-way-to-work outraged. You see, I was outraged because I'd awoken in someone else's body.

When I opened my eyes that morning, it was bright as hell in my room like there was a spotlight pointed at me—the too-bright type of light that should've alerted me something was very wrong. Instead in my ignorant, sleepy fog I wrenched an arm out of the cocoon of covers, reaching to the nightstand. I was in search of the post-it note I wrote on the night before, a habit my yoga teacher had recommended to help ease my anxiety since the Covid-19 lockdown.

My wrist began contorting this way and that, feeling around, but instead it thwacked

into what felt like a plastic iceberg. Then a noisy crash to the floor. I flinched and heard pills scatter on the wood. It would take an hour to reorganize them again. "Shit," I said. The echo of a deep voice reverberated off the bedroom walls back at me. I instantly screamed.

I angled my eyes around the room. Nothing out of the ordinary.

A large sleigh bed made of mahogany wood, the Oriental rug Vivian and I got on our twenty-fifth anniversary trip to Santorini, the roll top desk I'd inherited from Aunt Sylvia; velvet curtains framing the double windows; a view of the treetops from Prospect Park.

I screamed again. The same low rumble echoed off of the walls.

Who the hell was Vivian and where was I? A second ago this room felt worn in, like the vintage pair of Levi 501 jeans I'd found uptown, not an item out of place, but now it all

felt very, very wrong, like trying to hike up a wet swimsuit.

"I am a woman," I said. I felt a little foolish but needed to make the declaration. This announcement might've been funny in any other context, but, if you hadn't already guessed, waking up in an old white man's body will snatch the humor right from you.

I looked down at two wrinkled hands clutching the duvet and sharply sucked in air. I attempted to jump from the bed, but my body wouldn't hasten and my back felt as if I'd been thrown from a horse. I wondered if I'd accidentally eaten an edible before bed.

"What the hell?" I whispered. His voice was weathered, tired. I'd heard about a reaction from an edible once via some dude that my bestie Tiana had been fucking. She wouldn't bring him out to the bars with us because his voice sounded like a creepier Terrance Howard though, so I'd never actually met him. Just then I noticed a large mirror above the dresser. I built up the courage and placed a veined hand on it, lifting my body into view.

If I were in my own slender female body I'd be on the hardwood by now, bowled over by shock. But instead I heard laughing in my head.

"Get on with it," I said. This time, the low timber of his voice didn't scare me as much. I was beginning to feel his emotions, though their heft was still mostly underwater. I could feel he was losing patience with me, at my hesitation, urging me to rip the Band-Aid before I lost my nerve completely.

"I was handsome in my day," he said to me. "Many girls wanted me to court them." Now he was just bragging. But as I considered him in the mirror, I noticed there was truth to his boasting. I could see he was once probably a handsome white guy, behind the

wrinkles, the receding hairline of silvery wavy hair, the slight yellowness to his teeth.

I felt the tug of the bathroom. I let him take over the horrid task of relieving himself, as I crawled as far inside my consciousness as I was able. I did not want to be scarred for life.

I ambled through the house in his procedural way now; filling the French press and setting in on the stove, retrieving those nightstand pills from the iceberg and choking them down with what tasted like rancid tomato juice, cracking two eggs into a pan, smearing jam on toast, and chewing slowly, so slowly.

As I over-chewed and caffeinated I thought about my own tasks for the day that I now wouldn't get the chance to complete: I needed to record and upload videos of me performing my original songs on piano to my Youtube page, then to my TikTok, and finally I had Mackenzie's and Lucas's piano lessons over Zoom that afternoon.

I began to tidy the kitchen. My sturdy fingers thrust open a card from a woman named Ellie, addressed to *Dad*. Inside the card there was a photo of Ellie's daughter, Violet, posing with another young woman. The two were embracing, arms locked around each other, one girl, caucasian, holding out a hand with a modest gem on her finger. The other young woman had a skin tone like mine. A gorgeous Black girl like me. I dropped the photo to the counter, as his body realized the young women were an engaged couple. I could feel he wasn't pleased by their relationship—but it was the color of her girlfriend's skin that concerned him more.

Anger swelled in me, and I raced to the living room looking for something, anything to exact it upon. A delicate porcelain lamp sat stoically on a wrought iron, glass-topped table. I flung myself at it, swiped an arm across the lamp until it crashed to the ground. I hunched over to catch my breath,

triumphantly scanning the room for more sacrificial relics.

And then I saw it. Atop the piano in the far corner of the room, I noticed a framed photo. I crossed the room and gripped it tightly, smoothed a finger over his face so close to Vivian's. I wondered why was he allowed to have a marriage if Violet and her fiancé couldn't.

Yet the longer I was with him, the more I began to understand his thoughts. Not relate—I'd never relate. *It's not right*, he thought. *How will they have children? And they'll have an easier life if they're with someone that looks like them.*

I could feel how openminded he believed himself to be, amongst his elderly peers. *You're misunderstanding me*, he said, *making me out to be the bad guy.*

But the truth is he'd probably never see it; and there was only one way to force empathy from him, to shove him into pain in order to level the playing field. I lifted his wedding photo, at first simply inspecting it. I felt his body stiffen against me, felt grief wash through him. Then suddenly, I slammed the frame to the ground, the glass splintering, shards flying at me. His hands began to rip at my face. And then, without warning, my hands were thrown at the keys of the piano. I still don't know if it was me or him who was responsible for it. But I'm sure it doesn't matter.

Because what I didn't understand that day, blinded by anger and my own pain, was that those who hurt *hurt*. And if we hurt, for the spite of hurt's sake, much like an eye for an eye, we are all blinded and pained. But that day I wasn't ready to learn a lesson, not yet.

Instead I sat on the piano bench and mourned my freckled cheeks, my textured hair, my gorgeous brown skin. I wanted it back. *I'm not racist*, he said, *stop thinking that.* I

stared at his hands until I was ready to place them back on the keys. I began to play. Debussy's "Clair de lune" was the first melody to come to mind.

My hands took over. If I closed my eyes, I could drown out his words and lessen the pain.

"Music has charms to soothe the savage beast, to soften the rocks, or bend a knotted oak."

—Hans Christian Andersen

In that fleeting moment between slumber and awake, I used to think about Vivian. I cringed and braced myself for pain that washed over me like a deluge. Vivian is gone. But the pain stopped there—that should've been my first clue. The pain that usually came for my joints and body, never came. But like a starving boy when bread falls off a truck, you don't ask how, you simply eat.

The realization that I didn't wake up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom hit me next. Men sail through most of life, body-wise—I realized this years ago, knew how lucky us bastards had it, plus Vivian would tell me at any chance she could get—but when your prostate gets ornery, let me tell you, you're done for. No one spoke about this, but you probably don't care, whoever you are.

But that morning in bed my eyes bulged and I immediately lifted the top sheet. I prayed I didn't find a soaked mess. To my

surprise, the sheet, along with my pajama bottoms were dry as a bone.

This was another moment I should've realized I too was not in my own body. Did she tell you her story already?

Anyway, that morning my body felt stronger than it had in years. I launched myself out of the bed. It only took two steps toward the mirror before I fell on my ass from getting cocky. Youth was wasted on the young, but getting old just made you bitter. And when I lost Vivian, the race to bitter quickened.

I stepped to the mirror. She was a slip of a thing, the body I was in, a *pipsqueak* as we used to say, all limbs and hair. Immediately I felt her pull. But not the pull of her will moving me around—her pull toward the future, getting older, experiencing life at a faster pace than it was doled out; the recklessness that youth affords sparking against any object like kindling.

I walked too slow for her, too carefully. Before I could stop it, she was touching several pieces of technology, and music began blasting out of some portable speaker. She wanted to dance, to spin and *twerk*, apparently, but then, just as quick as she demanded we move, she picked up her phone and got lost swiping upward with her thumb.

During these moments she seemed to lose chunks of time, but I was fully aware that there was a perfectly good Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle not getting done. I looked around for any printed books in the apartment. Not many, and if there was one, it had some celebrity's name attached to it. You know they don't even write their own books, right? They're called ghostwriters.

My apartment is my slice of heaven, can you stop judging, grandpa?

By now as you could see, I was very aware that I was a hostage in a millennial's body. Or

is this what it would feel like to live in senior care?

That was my worst fear—I wanted to go out in a glorious stroke, or drop dead and have that be the end of it, *kaput*. The thought of being bound to the will of others, in a body that has a mind of its own without a relatable agenda—reminiscent of right now—tore me up inside. Would Vivian have needed to be cared for, had she been diagnosed early enough for them to do anything about her glioblastoma? Or perhaps I was in some decrepit home at that very moment, wasting away staring out a window in a wheelchair whose wheels stayed locked by the aides.

You're overreacting, she said tucking some of her curls into a coral-colored hair wrap. *Those homes are nice enough. My Nana is in one and it only sometimes smells like pee.* She turned in the mirror inspecting herself.

I tried to ask her how often she visits her Nana, but that question was averted as we went into the bathroom to begin what she described as her *face routine*. *My mama told me to start young*, she said massaging foamy soap into her cheekbones. She seemed somewhat comfortable with me along for the ride of her day, as if her schedule couldn't be halted in order to figure out how we'd gotten swapped.

"So, your nana," I tried. "Do you miss her?" Back in front of the mirror, she was stretching in preparation for yoga. She bent down to touch her toes, exhaled loudly. *I don't want to talk about Nana, old man.* She bent to the other side.

"I lost my wife not so long ago and I've been thinking a lot about where I'll end up," I say. "Wondering if my grandkids would come visit me."

By now she was sitting on a mat on the floor, incense burning in the background, a steel drum track on the speakers. *What do you*

want me to say? She lifted a leg onto the other into some flowery-named position. I don't know names here, folks. *Nana was good to me. I miss her*, she said. She opened her eyes; I caught a glimpse of her in the mirror that was angled down at the floor. Her eyes glistened. *The last time I visited her she didn't know who I was anymore. It wasn't the home that smelled like pee, it was her.*

"It can't be easy to watch someone you love disappear right before your eyes, but don't you think you should visit her again, once Covid is over? On some level, she'll know you're there."

Clearly I've overstepped, said too much as I always do. Vivian would scold me our whole marriage about that. And maybe she was right. Perhaps her nana doesn't know who she is, each visit a technical waste of her time, a subway fair deducted from her Metro card, and what for? If no one was there to mark your presence, were you ever really there? That's how life without Vivian felt now.

When I looked up toward the mirror again, she was rising from the ground, and we were walking to her second-hand piano keyboard. As she sat at the bench, I could see it was a Roland F-30; a very good digital piano in any decade, mine or hers. There's an apparatus clipped to a standing lamp—somehow I instantly know this is where she records her music and videos. The more time I've spent with her, I was able to then feel that music, out of all the other things—celebrity autobiographies, yoga, even her facial

routine—music was hers and no one else's. A calmness came over her, and I sat, waiting to see what she would do.

But her hands stayed on her lap; a soft whimper began to come from her. *You really think I should visit Nana, when this stupid ass pandemic is over?* She sniffled.

Instead of answering her, I lifted her hands to the keys. This, right here on these eighty-eight keys, both black and white like the two of us, is where we connected, I realized. We could argue about her Nana, the volume of her music, but hands outstretched on this keyboard, these pedals underfoot, there wasn't a thing in the world we had to disagree on.

And then it hit me, a song that would make Vivian smile, no matter how big our fight, how loud our shouting matches got, she'd enter the living room suppressing a smile, standing behind me, hand on my shoulder—Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue."

I played on, slowly as Gershwin himself demanded, until I felt the edges of my host's lips curl into a defiant smile. *I love this song*, she said. *How did you know it would make me feel better?*

"Because, honey," I said. "That's what it was created to do."



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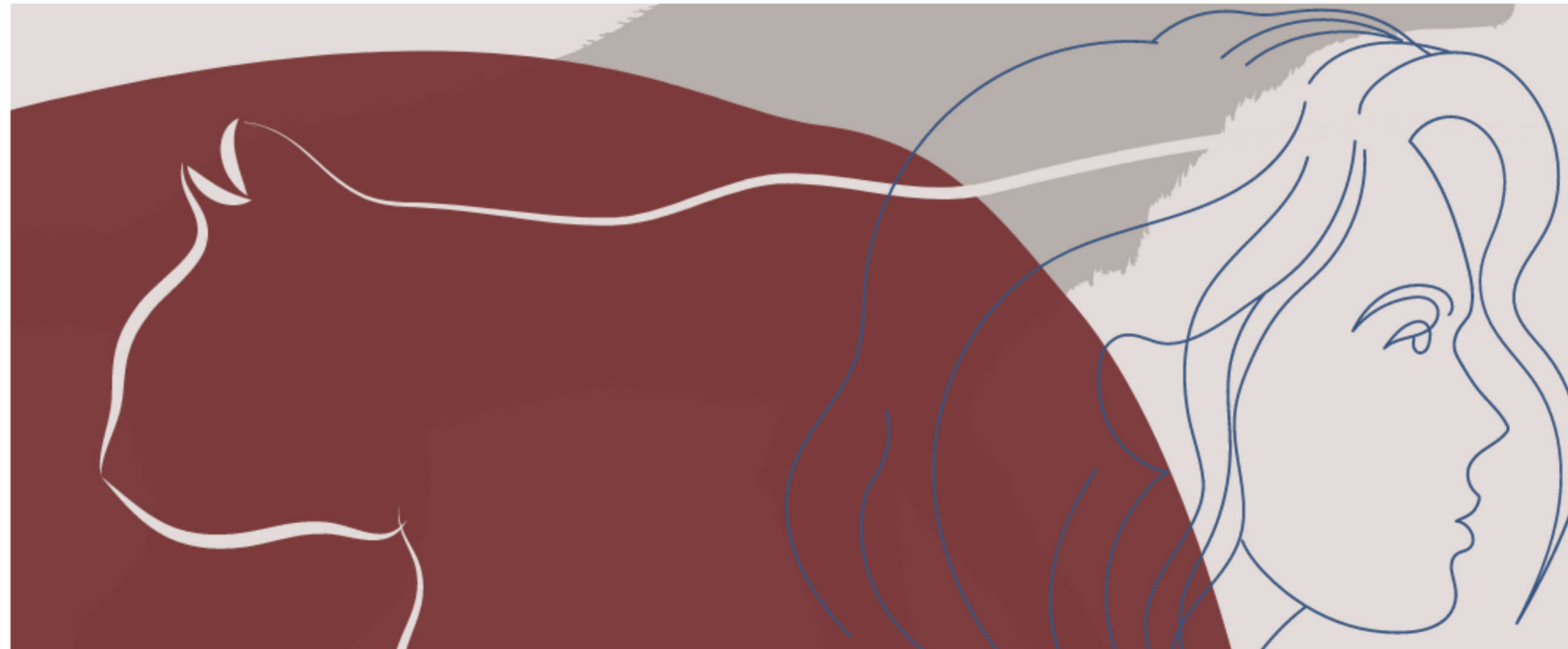
"Where words fail, music speaks."

—William Congreve

There are dogs next door, in the house to the right of Carol Anne's. And not just one or two. She's tried counting them based on the different barks, but she always loses track. When a siren whines down the road, they all start howling, almost screaming. It's as if they're mourning something, perhaps their freedom. Though Carol Anne is not one to get involved with conflict, she's called Animal Control 3 times since moving here last year. They say there's nothing they can do for the dogs. At night, Carol Anne stares up at the ceiling, crying, and sometimes she can hear the dogs doing the same. She wonders if the sirens take the place of the moon for them the same way her ceiling does for her.

Carol Anne had never liked her name. The only other people she knew with the name Carol Anne were old people — plus the little girl from *The Poltergeist*, so that wasn't very reassuring. To make matters worse, she had bright red hair that often took the form of an unruly mass atop her head. This hair served as a beacon in her school years, a sort of lighthouse to children, indicating their next victim. Even now, over two decades later, she can remember the jokes. There was the unoriginal "carrot top," of course. But then there were the more insidious albeit creative ones.

On winter days, many of the kids would huddle together outside, pushing their bodies into the various corners of the elementary school walls. Packed like penguins, they would leech off of the warmth that came from each other's sparse body fat. Nooks that faced away from the sharp winds or falling snow were the only source of shelter for the recesses that seemed to last hours as the cold sucked away any possibility of fun, or humidity, from the air. The teachers who had endured years of this arctic cold would insist they "move around to generate heat, tough it out," but the kids never listened. They insisted rather on taking rotating turns in the middle of



the huddle, so one child got a brief reprieve from the cold, for even a small moment. And it was Carol Anne's turn next.

As the make-believe timer ended, signaling the turn was up, Carol Anne shifted in position to take the middle. But a whisper spread through the huddle. Like when one wolf begins to howl and the rest follow instinctively. As Carol Anne went to take her position in the center of the pack, she was blocked by a blonde girl in pink snow pants.

"We all decided you don't get a turn in the middle." Carol Anne's teeth chattered and she stared at that promised land, the warm center, like the middle of a brownie that was fresh out of the oven.

"Why not?" her voice shook as she asked the question, from cold and nerves alike.

"Because you don't have a soul. How can you even be cold if you don't have a soul?" The kids erupted into laughter, like a stand up comedian had just told a career-making joke. They shifted to push her out of the group and

into the barren wasteland of the playground. Exile. She was alone. Exposed to the elements. She would never make it on her own. She asked to use the bathroom and spent the rest of recess sitting in the stall, breathing on her frozen fingers to warm them.

This is the moment she would remember best. Though there were honorable mentions — sand being kicked in her face, being pushed off the swings and shoved from monkey bars — nothing came close to the world shattering loss she felt on that day. Guilt painted the memory for Carol Anne. She would look back and know she was being dramatic for holding onto that loss, silly. Surely other kids had experienced much worse, as childhood is unkind to even the prettiest, blondest of children. But Carol Anne came to the conclusion that just because someone else suffers more than you doesn't mean you can't still be upset about your life.

And Carol Anne was. She was very upset about her life. She was 28 and unemployed. Her boyfriend of 4 years had dumped her for another woman with a prettier name. And to

make matters worse, all the bars she frequented were closed.

Some days she secretly liked it. Everything that came with The Pandemic. She liked staying inside and pretending she wasn't missing out because there was nothing going on to miss out on. She liked binge watching television all day and staying in bed, eating her weight in snacks. She liked wearing the same pair of stained sweats until she did her monthly laundry routine. She liked all of this... until she didn't anymore.

The onset of winter had not only brought the cold and bleak, but also a weighted blanket of renewed despair. The grey skies blotted out any thought of vitamin D. The snow fell in beautiful sheets, which would have been mesmerizing if it weren't so isolating. The snow absorbed any hint of sound, any indication of life; it consumed Carol Anne as well.

As the dauntingly new year approached, Carol Anne had made a decision to stop feeling sorry for herself. She was going to do all of the things her body and brain had not allowed the year before. She was going to get in shape, find new friends, new hobbies, and a new man who treated her right. To break her isolation, she would even attempt to bond with her roommate's cat, Hank, who notoriously hated her.

She was determined on all of these points for about two days. In which time she managed to twist her ankle, stab her finger on a sewing needle, and face rejection, yet again, from Hank. At least his name was worse than hers...

And, the sinking feeling returned. Carol Anne realized something she had secretly known all along. A new year doesn't really mean anything. For some people, it's an incentive to try and change the way they live or maybe upgrade their lives. For Carol Anne, it just ended up being a reminder that it had

been ONE WHOLE YEAR since she had actually worked out. A reminder that the mind and body are not suddenly more capable of something they had not been capable of two days ago.

Under the microscope of the new year, Carol Anne saw her life for what it was: hopeless and solitary. And as her new year's resolutions fell away one by one, she started picking up even worse habits. A reverse-resolution of sorts.

It was only when her nails got too long, purely out of necessity, she assured herself. She didn't own any nail clippers. But eventually, she would chew them to the nub, so short that the tips of her fingers would begin to bleed. And she wasn't quite sure why she did it...

She read about Freud, the stuff about the oral and anal phases. Freud believed that the reason people are messed up as adults is because their parents messed them up as kids, with Carole Anne specifically falling in the "Birth to 18 months" bracket, the oral fixation stage of life. Freud would attribute this to the fact that she didn't wean properly; maybe her mother had an issue with breastfeeding. But she wasn't convinced.

Carol Anne believed nature ruled over nurture. She had willingly smoked her first cigarette at 16, and she had not liked it one bit. She later described it to the feeling of water going down the wrong tube, and the hacking and coughing to get the feeling out of there. She didn't smoke or bite her nails for a very long time after that, so logically, that should have ruled Carol Anne out for an oral fixation. But here she was, 12 years later, smoking cigarettes and masticating fingernails like her actual life depended on it. And by that point, it very well might have.

It seemed, to her, that her life had been paused on a very depressing scene and she had no way of pressing the play button again.

She would smoke her evening cigarette watching the sunset, the way the milky oranges and reds bled into one another. And she got the feeling her life would probably be exactly like this until the day she died.

"...there must be some animals that just aren't worth saving."

Carol Anne lies in bed, listening to the sirens retreat and the howling begin. It won't stop for a while; it may be 10 minutes before the frenzy calms and the dogs finally realize the sirens weren't meant for them in the first place. It's all different sorts of barks: deep intimidating ones, harsh frantic cries and sad crooning howls. It's in this moment that Carol Anne realizes she hasn't slept well in days, maybe weeks. It's hard to tell when everything is blurring together. These days, the smallest noises keep her up; the dogs' howling of course, but even Hank, the cat, makes a mid-night ruckus. Her roommate, however — a faux animal activist — says she can't sleep just because she's thinking about "those poor little doggies..."

Carol Anne doesn't have to see the dogs to know that they are not sweet, they are not cute, and they could put her out of her misery if she let them. Which, in her desperation, she has considered a few times. She supposes something must have happened to those dogs in their "Birth to 18 months" bracket that changed them permanently. They probably could have been sweet family dogs, good around children, or at the very least plucky strays eating out of trash cans and avoiding getting hit by cars. But they're chained,

locked in a yard so filthy the snow has turned brown, and she can hear the pain in their voice when they speak. Carol Anne lies awake thinking that there must be some animals that just aren't worth saving.

The dogs finally settle and she closes her bagged eyes for just a moment when a nearby sound immediately prompts them to open again. It's Hank, she can already tell, but she fixes her ears toward the door so she can make him out better.

Hank's developing some quarantine habits as well. Lately he's been pacing around the house at the most inconvenient of times, meowing at everything. And not a regular cat's meow either. It's a non-stop chirping, purring chorus that sounds more like birds or crickets than an actual cat. Carol Anne might find it cute if she could sleep.

As another chirp escapes from Hank, she can't help but wonder what he's meowing at out in the living room. She reaches for her phone, tucked under her pillow, and googles "What do cat meows mean?" The first article states that "the trills and chirps cats make signify their excitement or happiness" over something. Carol Anne props up on one elbow and looks around the mostly empty room; what the hell is there to be excited for in this place?

She sluggishly gets up to use the bathroom before another attempt at sleep, leaving her room behind and venturing out into the hallway. But before she can close the bathroom door, Hank runs in behind her, chittering the whole time. He's pacing, like he's been waiting for her to do this for ages. Carol Anne stares at Hank, bathroom door still ajar. At his pure excitement over just being alive. And she wonders why she can't feel the same way. She sits on the toilet as Hank explores the bathroom. He circles back to her and brushes up against her leg. Suddenly all

the pent up months of isolation, fear and doubt coming flooding out of her.

Sitting on the toilet, with the sweatpants she's been wearing for 5 straight days bunched around her ankles, she starts to sob. Heavy sobs, like waves washing someone out to sea. She covers her mouth, not wanting her roommate to hear her. But then she thinks of the dogs next door and how they don't care who hears them. So she cries aloud, knowing she can never be loud enough to get this sinking feeling out of her stomach. Knowing that no one will come to rescue her.

Most animals would be terrified by this display of suffering, thinking perhaps the human is dying and it's best to leave it alone in their embarrassing pain. They might run away, or hide, or possibly ignore it in that way cats are so capable of ignoring. But not Hank.

As Carol Anne continues to match the dogs in decibel, Hank runs out of the bathroom in a hurry. When he returns, he has his favorite toy, a mangled, felt mouse, dangling from his teeth. But Carol Anne is too busy relinquishing herself to the last few months to notice. Hank sets the mouse by her feet and he begins to cry with her — a high chirping cry — until she takes notice and shudders to a stop.

She wipes the tears from her rosacea cheeks. Carol Anne looks at Hank, who looks right back. He nudges the mouse in front of her, perhaps asking her to join in his make-believe game of cat and mouse. He does his meow again, the one that means he's excited. Carol Anne can't believe she could be the cause of such commotion. She stands upright and pulls her sweatpants to her waist. She scrounges her memory for the last time she was excited to see anyone, but comes up empty. And what's more, she can't remember the last time anyone was excited to see her either. Hank paws at his mouse, pushing it

even closer to her. She picks it up, throws it out into the hallway. Hank runs for it in a burst of energy. Carol Anne assumes this is the end of their game, the end of his excitement. But just as she creeps back to her bedroom Hank returns, ready for her to throw the mouse again. Carol Anne smiles, reaches down and picks up the mouse. In the distance a siren wails, just loud enough to hear. The dogs next door remain silent.



KELLY CURRAN received her B.A. in Creative Writing from Antioch University, Los Angeles in September of 2019. She grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan and currently resides in Los Angeles as a screenwriter, actress, blogger and podcast host.

You can find her work on Spotify under “The Table Roast” or her blog at kellyasap.wordpress.com. Instagram @pole.princess.



It is awake in the chill morning air, dripping cold rainwater off of its snout to the cement below. It sees the stretch of parked cars, the fence ringing The Building which breaks only to force visitors past its stony paws, the sway of trees in the distance — all of this is discernible within its fixed focus, its hundred yard stare of perpetual vigilance. Its mouth is cracked open, a permanent smile full of teeth, tasting the world as it blows by. The ball, the trapped orb, below its foot warns all that they too might find themselves so pressed down if they threaten The Building and what lies within.

At the corner — the very furthest pocket — of its gaze, is its partner, its mate, its equal and opposite, the one who stands guard at the other side of the break in the fence. The shape of this mate is suggestion only, transfixed curve and sinew, open lips with soundless roar, equal and opposite forepaw raised. But here a change — beneath the mate's spread claws is a whelp of their making, a promise of continued vigilance through generations and an assurance of care, the balance to the oppression of its own claw crushing the globe underfoot.

It knows these things in the way it knows it must protect The Building, knows it must be watchful against intruders and interlopers. It has heard the account of the whelp from visitors and it has cast the pocket of its eye to its mate on the loneliest nights and the most desolate of days. It sees the trees, the fence, the cement and the cars, but it cannot rightly see the mate. That is not its duty. It knows the mate is present, the shape exists in the corner of its wide, watchful eye. It feels the mate's presence as solidly as the ball beneath its paw, but it cannot cast its eye upon them. It must keep watch.



It breathes the cold air without breathing and knows that the rain must fall on its mate as it falls upon its own furled brow. It feels the water upon its untwitching nose and cannot brush it away, cannot find cover and cannot dry itself until the sun returns and bakes away the water from its back. The mate's paw shelters the whelp, but it cannot shelter the mate. They are locked together, watchful under the broad sky, unshivering in the cold and unwilting in the heat. They keep guard when mortal eyes fall heavy with sleep, when dust and fog cloud the sight of lesser watchmen.

It lets itself be aware of its mate, in the silence of the morning rain and its dim gray light. The shape of the mate is like its own, mirrored perfectly and complementarily. The sense of the mate at its shoulder, across the breadth of the entrance to The Building, is the most powerful temptation — temptation to look away, to look upon what it cannot see and behold its like in purpose and pride, is overwhelming. Just once. To look upon the

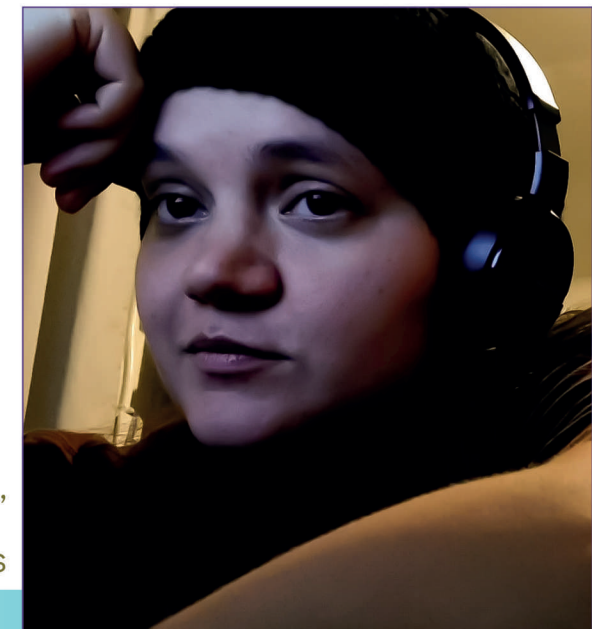
mate and the whelp, just once, the desire builds like a scream that cannot work its way out.

It strains, it pushes and pulls within itself. It tears at its own eyes, claws at the back of its eternal vision to turn — turn one inch, one microscopic shade of a degree — toward the mate. It heaves its great shoulders against the confines of itself, frantically flexes unmoving claws to find purchase against the pedestal it rests upon.

No leverage can be found. Its vision is fixed, its great bulk as frozen as the air over its curled tongue. A silent whine works its way up and down its broad throat, but the stillness of the morning air is unshattered. It feels the confinement, the distance, the unbearable loneliness of being beside one another and yet never together. It is only for the watch and the pressing down and the conflict. The globe beneath its great paw is a mockery of what it is to have.

The sun pierces the gray of the clouds, the shrouded veil over The Building giving way. And in the water that runs down its mate's frozen coat, there is the impression of a shift, a ghost of movement in the weird light of morning. It sees this, from the corner of its wide, watchful eye, and it hopes.

Opposite: "Yang Fu at the School"
By Helen Doremus



HELEN DOREMUS is a writer of scripts and prose, a filmmaker, and a creative jack-of-all-trades. A proud member of the ace community, Helen's writing often explores themes of identity and the messiness of self-determination and human connection. She finished the long-deferred degree she started at St. John's College in 2003 at Antioch University in 2019. In between, she worked behind counters, up ladders, seated at desks, and walking out along deer trails, as everything from an ice cream scooper to an associate at a real estate development office. A native of Fort Worth, Texas, she now lives and works in Los Angeles, California.



Creative Nonfiction



Lindsey Anthony-Bacchione

Will It Hurt?

52

Opposite: detail of "Palace Doors by Tristan Onfroy

The seasons had passed seamlessly in Los Angeles with a gentleman's handshake of ten degrees difference between them. Spring had warmed to summer, had warmed to fall, and now we were here having surpassed the crest of the heat in Southern California. The climate fires had all been put out, but the air was still dry. The Santa Ana winds were still blowing. My husband and I had stopped turning the calendar pages months before. A new baby can do that. Two new babies will assure that. Two new babies, two young children, and a global pandemic will render all markers of the passage of time useless. Los Angeles was still on lockdown on multiple fronts: COVID, protests that turned violent, job loss, an economy in free fall, a country held hostage. Isolation was a word that was trending. The topic had become the source of research and art.

How was isolation affecting children?

How was isolation affecting teenagers?

How was isolation affecting parents?

Mothers?

How was isolation affecting people who were single, living alone?

It was both noun and verb, study and action, feeling and fight. There were different degrees of isolation. Different levels of seriousness, levels of urgency and concern. Isolation to one was not isolation to another. Isolation from one's community could lock them in perpetual community with only their family. Isolation with one's family could lock them in perpetual isolation from themselves. We were no longer multi-dimensional people out and about in the world. We were now only mom or only dad or only daughter or only worker and yet we were also all things at once. We were only nurse or only patient or only survivor and for some, all things at once. And yet, we were not all in this together.



We, the people.

We, the families.

We, the mothers.

Isolation was dangerously subjective, a word suddenly lost on a sliding scale of definition. There were many moments to choose from:

This. This right here is it. This moment in time captures the depth of my despair.

Giving birth in a locked down hospital during a pandemic could be one.

The look on a three year old's face when she finally understands her two baby brothers are not going anywhere and neither is she could be another.

The look on a five-year-old's face when her mother cries from the pain of raw nipples and exhaustion and asks, "Are you okay, Mama?" and the answer she hears is an honest, "No," followed by a promise too difficult to believe, "But, I will be" could be one.

The first time a mother notices her baby's eyes bounce and a jolt of fear rips through her center could be another.

But none of them were.

It wasn't during the windy drive over Laurel Canyon, the quiet of a mostly empty minivan carrying a mother and her baby to the hospital. Me—that mother—catching glimpses of Bo—that baby—being rocked to sleep by the curves in the road and the lulling flicker of sunlight between treetops. His eyes closing, his tiny hand still raised towards the rays of light filtering through the car window, still clinging to the world of the wakeful.

It wasn't passing by boarded up shops and shuttered restaurants along Melrose Avenue, the graffiti a plea for basic humanity for Black lives. I had seen LA like this before – the disorienting light traffic on a Thursday morning, the unfamiliarity of moving through the city with such ease, the cries for justice spray painted on buildings, a city half ghost town / half powder keg.

It could have happened when I entered the parking garage and it struck me how comfortable I had become with pulling up my mask whenever faced with the outside world. The instinct to protect myself from a disease in the air whenever lowering my window to take a parking ticket had become second nature in the most absurd way. We were trying to outlive something we couldn't see.

I thought it might happen when I strapped Bo into his stroller, his eyes bouncing once, twice, and then landing on my face with a smile. But it didn't happen then, nor did it happen with the warm flush of anxiety that waved up my spine when I turned the corner of the hospital's plaza and saw a sea of masked nurses and doctors and slow-walking patients. And it didn't happen when I got lost and found myself heading the wrong way onto a hospital floor doing temperature checks, the raised gun ready and cocked at a line of people trying to pass go. I had breeched the levy and desperately swung the stroller around looking for a way out. But, I found my line.

They took our temperatures and then handed me a yellow mask without wire so that I would be permitted on the MRI floor. It could have been then, but no.

It came close when they put us in a bed next to a woman headed for gall bladder surgery, the hesitation in her voice when she asked the doctor, "Will it hurt?"

The doctor paused.

"It won't hurt anymore than the pain you're already experiencing," he said to her.

"Do I have a choice?" she asked.

Perplexed by her question, he responded, "You always have a choice."

It wasn't the moment Bo's eyes darted between the doctor's eyes and mine as they placed a gas mask over his mouth and nose.

It wasn't when the anesthesia kicked in and knocked his tiny body deeply into the world of the sleeping.

Arms dangling, feet flopped forward, consciousness sunk.

It wasn't my quick exit from the MRI room and a sudden burst of tears prompting a male nurse much younger than me to reassure me that they would "take good care of him."

It was the turning away. It was the pivot from the MRI machine, the retreat from my 4-month-old son, and the walk forward into the unknown.

In the waiting room was where I really felt it. Floating towards an empty corner with salmon pink walls and forest green chairs, nature photography, a hand sanitizer machine. It was sitting down with an empty stroller before me and feeling the heaviness of my bones, the soft padding of my postpartum body—a life jacket too big for its person.

This right here.

People texted.

A fellow mama of twins wanted me to know that I wasn't alone. But I was. Despite the pandemic lockdown in California, despite the isolation invoked by newborns, despite motherhood in and of itself, despite the marriage running on grocery lists and The Office reruns, despite the boxed-in nature of working from home, despite the overall sadness and loneliness of it all, for the first time in months I found myself alone in a new way. It wasn't the isolation one suddenly finds plunked into when grief strikes. It wasn't depression. It wasn't physical; there were people in the waiting room. The check-in

nurse saw me crying and offered me a glass of water. She left her desk, stepping over big white dots lined six feet apart, past taped off chairs meant to keep social distancing, and she handed me a white paper cup filled with cold water. When I reached for it, my hand shook. I thought, We shouldn't be doing this. You are too close to me.

"Thank you," I said.

She nodded. She must have been a mother.

This is my idea of how mothers should be even though my own had not been around much. There had been a time when she handed me things like cold glasses of water and held me when I was scared. There was a time when I handed her glasses of cold water and held her when we were both scared.

But this was new. This was fear unlike the fear that clutched my childhood. That fear was the twilight to the night sky of this fear, the fear of the possibility of losing a child. It was fear that whatever that MRI machine found set forth everything else that followed. It was the fear that everything was already set, but for the knowingness of it. What would appear or not appear on my son's brain scan was already determined. There was no magical thinking, no prayer, no deal-making that would change what was already in creation or not. There were two outcomes – one where he was fine and one where he was not.

One where I was still intact and one where I was not.

One where it hurt and one where it did not.

The depth of my powerlessness had pulled me into the finite reality of the present moment. I started whispering into the palms of my hands with what I reluctantly called God. I had been let down before by this God and I knew better now than I did then that my

feelings of disappointment in this idea were unwarranted. If there is God, perhaps a cauldron of spirits and energy and chocolate, they are not doing anything to me personally. They exist purely to offer the option of a life with make believe or a life without. I can walk through this world paying attention to its beauty and making meaning through patterns, or I can experience everything as its own isolated event.

A butterfly floats past.

An old letter reappears.

A child is born.

Two children are born. Twins.

Their eyes bounce, one more than the other.

One is sent to specialists. Ophthalmologists and neurologists.

One child has a heart murmur.

There are two more children in this picture. Two sisters. A family with four young children.

Vertical Nystagmus.

Possible mass.

A baby receives a COVID test to clear him for an MRI. A nasal swab disappears into his nose.

Eyes flutter. But, oh those baby lashes.

I didn't have a choice in whether or not the technicians and doctors would find a brain tumor in my son's head. The only choice I had if they did find one was whether or not I would walk through that experience and



possibly that unbearable loss alone in the depths of this chasm. Or with some belief that the cauldron of magic on high was burbling above me somewhere and that somehow my life would go on. Somehow, I would return to this boy's twin. Somehow, I would continue to be a mother to three other children, no matter the impossibility of it all. I didn't pray for the tumor not to be there because I don't believe that God is magic. I prayed for whatever God was to be with me and to be with Bo while we waited.

While I held his limp body against mine.

While they removed the IV.

While I waited for him to join me again in the world of the wakeful.

After some time, his eyes peeked open one at a time. I looked into my son's eyes as they wandered until landing intently on my gaze. Bo smiled.

A baby and his mother.

Me—that mother—his mother for however long or short we both lived and goddamn, I was lucky for that. He opened his palm and reached for my face grabbing hold of my chin,

leading me out of the dark. I landed back inside my body. My breasts tender with milk, my eyes burning with lack of sleep, my hair scratchy and dry, dead from stress and pregnancy and nursing and trying to outlive the invisible. We left the hospital, my son and I—just me and Bo.

I adjusted my mask.

He chewed on the nipple of his bottle.

The Santa Ana winds blew.

We strolled through the half-world, in between the wakeful and the sleeping, while we waited for a phone call, together.

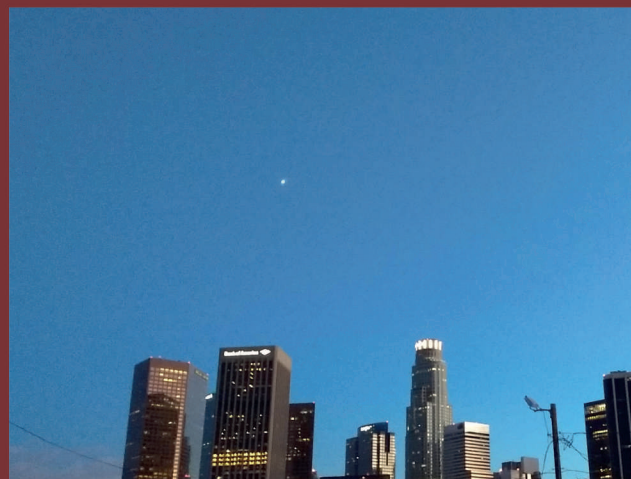


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Writing In Isolation

By Brianna Vigil, Poetry Editor

Writing is an activity I prefer to perform in solitude. It is an escape from the outside world—an internal reflection documented. It is a time to focus my mind and silence everything else. The silence brings me to a place where I have nothing but my thoughts. Writing alone requires a certain type of discipline from me. I can't let my mind wander off too much or too little. Often, I find myself staring at the page for long periods of time, but time is a very valuable thing, and time alone is certainly even more valuable. It seems that with all the responsibilities and obligations that come with maturity means that the perfect time to write cannot always be found, but sometimes it must be created.



Now, I write this some time after waking up early in the morning, an often difficult time for me. I wake up by myself, usually around 3 am, and the thoughts come pouring. In a rare act of discipline, I document these thoughts that are racing through. It serves as a distraction but it is also an act of bravery to face these thoughts that disturb my sleep. “This, to my discomfort, is the perfect time to write,” I think. There is no better time than when I’m completely alone, with only the voice in my head and my body curled in the dark.

Laying sideways, my arms crooked and one of them slightly numb, I type on the keyboard as if it is an instrument. I create a draft out of my stream of consciousness, accompanied only by the soft creaking of the house and the tapping of the keys. My eyes sting from the brightness of the screen, my fingers tap even slower as I struggle to think of what to write next. It’s interesting what you will come to discover about yourself when you are completely alone. I watch the words on the page develop from isolated fragments into meaningful observations.

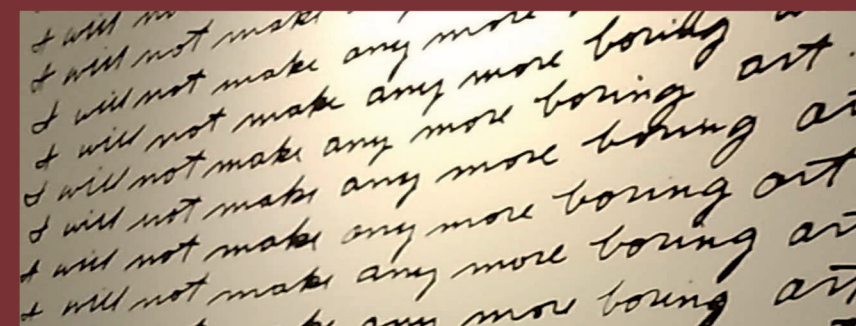


No one is watching me describe my complicated and scattered thoughts. They are my secret, my truth, and an unfiltered expression of my vulnerability.

While my writing is best done in solitude, it is necessary for me to eventually come back out into the world. It is the only way to even gain experiences worth writing about. So I remove myself from the isolated space I devoted so much time to, and resume my normal routine. This kind of isolation, to me, feels positive. However, the feeling of isolation is so personal, and can mean so many things to so many different people, that each and every account is unique.

As you can imagine, as the editors of this journal came together, the decision to make “isolation” our theme was nearly unanimous, because if there is one thing that everyone can relate to, it is the forced isolation that we have experienced during the pandemic. All of our lives were turned upside down as we were thrust into our homes, unprepared for the conditions a global pandemic would inflict on us. Many of us lost our jobs, were forced to relocate, and of course, became ill or saw our loved ones suffer from an illness we knew little about.

Utilizing the universal experience of isolation, together we have gathered pieces of art and writing that exemplify this theme both in a literal interpretation and a figurative one.



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