

ISSUE 5 | MAY 2021

ang(st)

the feminist body zine



THEME: HANDS

angst: anxiety/ frustration

ang (अंग): body/ part/ member

A Note from the Editors

As we moved and continue to move into unprecedented times across the world, we chose the theme of 'HANDS' for its quiet strength, for the possibility of touch, connection and creation that it symbolizes and offers. In this issue, we present 21 powerful pieces that explore the remarkable variety of meanings that hands hold: from intimate relationships shared through and between hands to social customs and physical disease. Some pieces explore the traumatic memories associated with hands. Others provide a tender glimpse into personal triumphs and efforts to (re)create something new.

So, we offer you hands: as memory, as image, as metaphor, as fact, engaged in creating and destroying, extending and enduring, holding and letting go.

TW/CW: This issue contains themes of and references to illness, disease, physical / medical conditions, surgery, cancer, sexual assault and death. Please let us know if we need to add anything more to this list.

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The first hello

NOREEN OCAMPO

is a rotation of an indigo ring. The second:

a passing thought that you would fit in my corduroy jacket
if you don't mind cold knuckles.

We blink at each other & the third is a palm-to-mouth smile.

One of us asks to trade mispronunciations of our names— I'm not sure who is
who yet, but I am surely the one to later question why you allow
such a butchering. My favorite rhymes with the gentlest French word.

The fourth hello is a hint & invitation, though at this point, we could only
imagine kissing in English. We sing in your car.

You wear my jacket & become a soft tree.

We compare the way our fingers cave & use black polish as an excuse
to stare at each other's hands & lose count.

Syndactyly affects one in 2500 babies and God chose me

DAVID SALAZAR

CW: physical conditions, surgery

I. His hands come out of the womb like an angel. In the Bible they're this, blinding everyone at the sight: his parents wail like it's a stillbirth, like it's a miscarriage. You can't tell where one finger begins and the other ends. His mother tells his father he can leave if he feels like he can't deal with this. The child sits against her breast, suckling. Half-hand grabbing at a nipple, fingers curled and fused together. His father comes back at night, staring, looking. A creature feature plays in the cinema a few squares away from the clinic.

II. The first surgery he can recall is this: gauze, bloodied hands, sleeplessness. Bones molded anew so they look a bit less different, bones molded anew so he doesn't get asked what's wrong with his hands by every classmate, a cycle repetitive. New kid on the block, new kid at Catholic school, new kid with a wrongness to him, new kid with *oh, I was born with that*. During the postoperative care the doctor removes a strip of gauze every week. He screams like he's being pulled apart at the seams, blinding light in the edges of his vision. He plays Pokémon Stadium on his cousins' Nintendo 64 the days beforehand and he swears they eat candy to make fun of him when he fasts for the big day. The anesthesia smells like wet paint and he manages to get down from ten to seven before everything goes black.

III. No one notices unless he points it out. This is the benefit of surgery—there is still scar tissue but no one is staring at his hands. The fact is that it doesn't affect his life that much. Small hands and struggling pinkies means he can't play guitar and can't reach the last opening of a flute but he's not one for music after trying to be one for music. Small hands mean that when he realizes he's a boy he won't like them, a dead giveaway to all going on inside him—but people don't stare at his hands. Or so he'd like to hope.

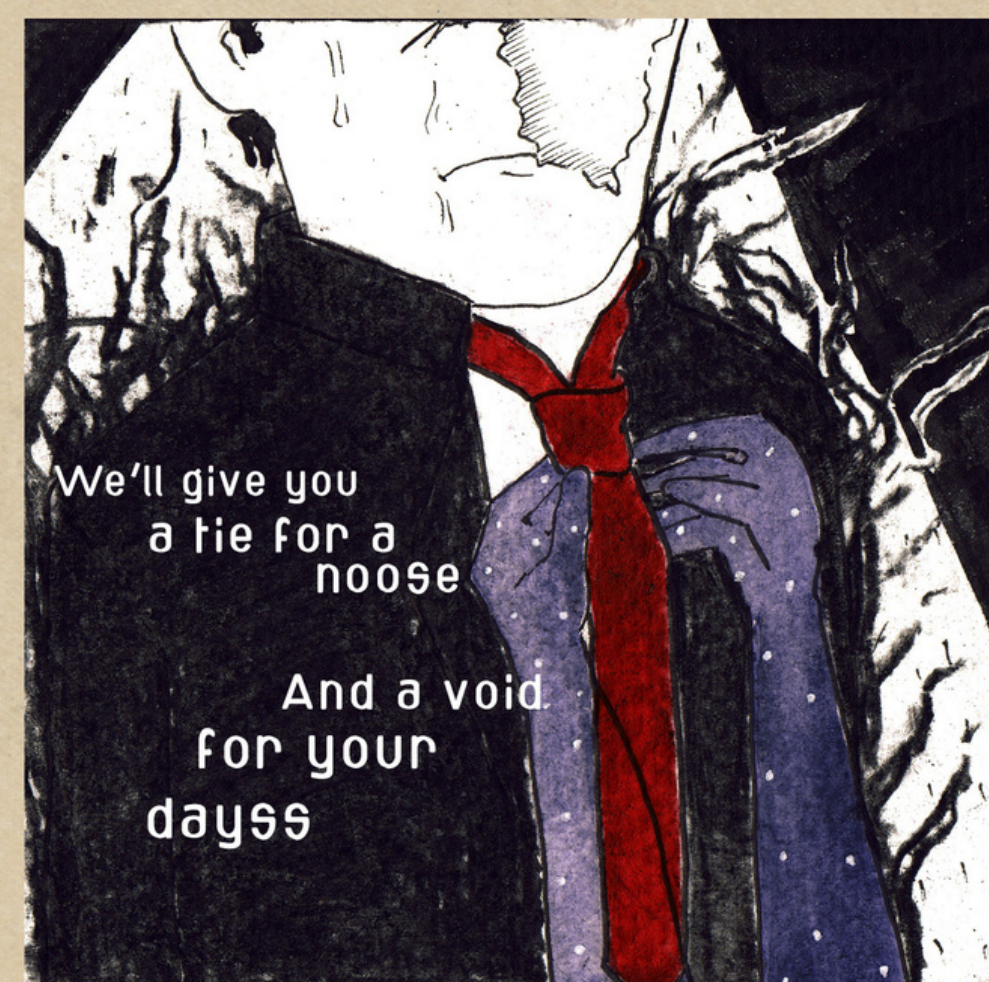
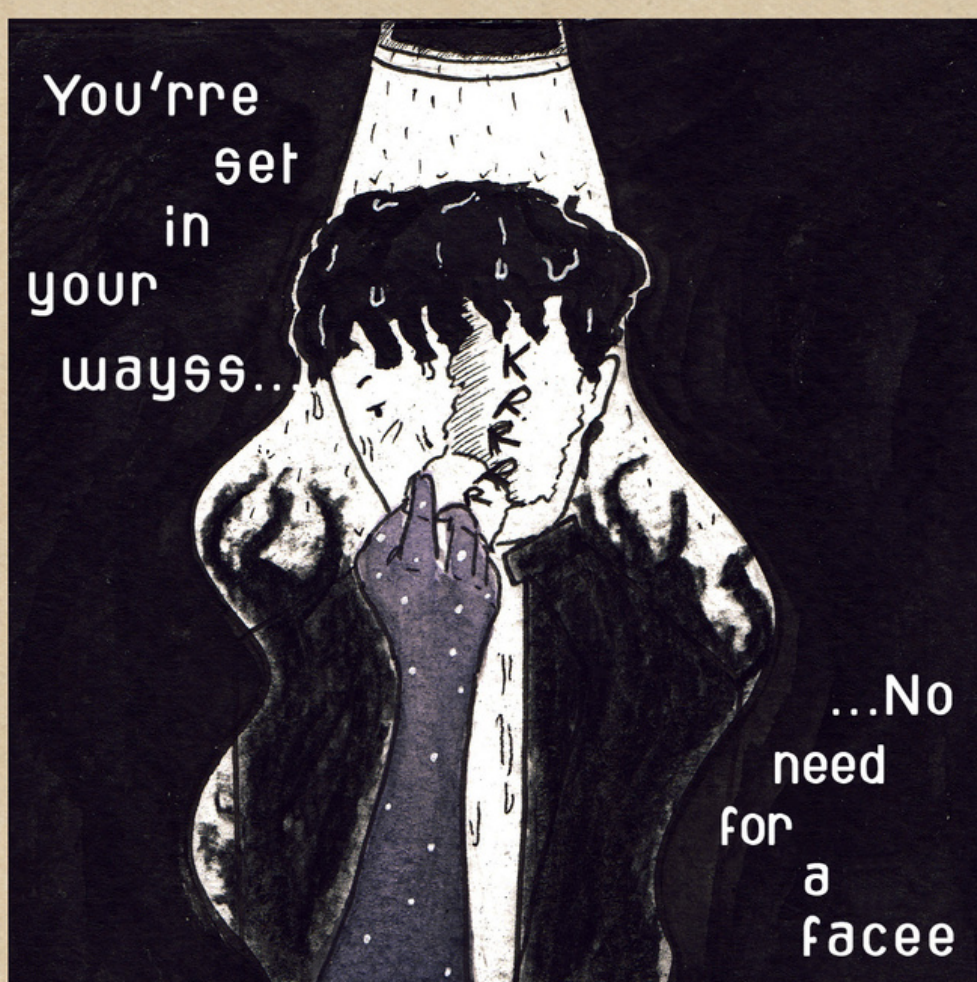
Sink Demon

KARO

SINK DEMON (OR THE CONFORMIST'S CALL)

BY KARO

IG: @LASTSHANTY





The Gospel According to the CT Scan

DT MCCREA

CW: illness, cancer, death, death of a parent

For God so loved the world
she gave her one and only son
the world. She molded it from clay.
Turned it over in her hands again
and again until it was a perfect sphere.
When she started coughing, she
put the world down on her desk
and held a rag to her mouth.
The answering machine in the
corner of her office was blinking red
but she already knew what it
said: cancer, metastasized, weeks, at best.

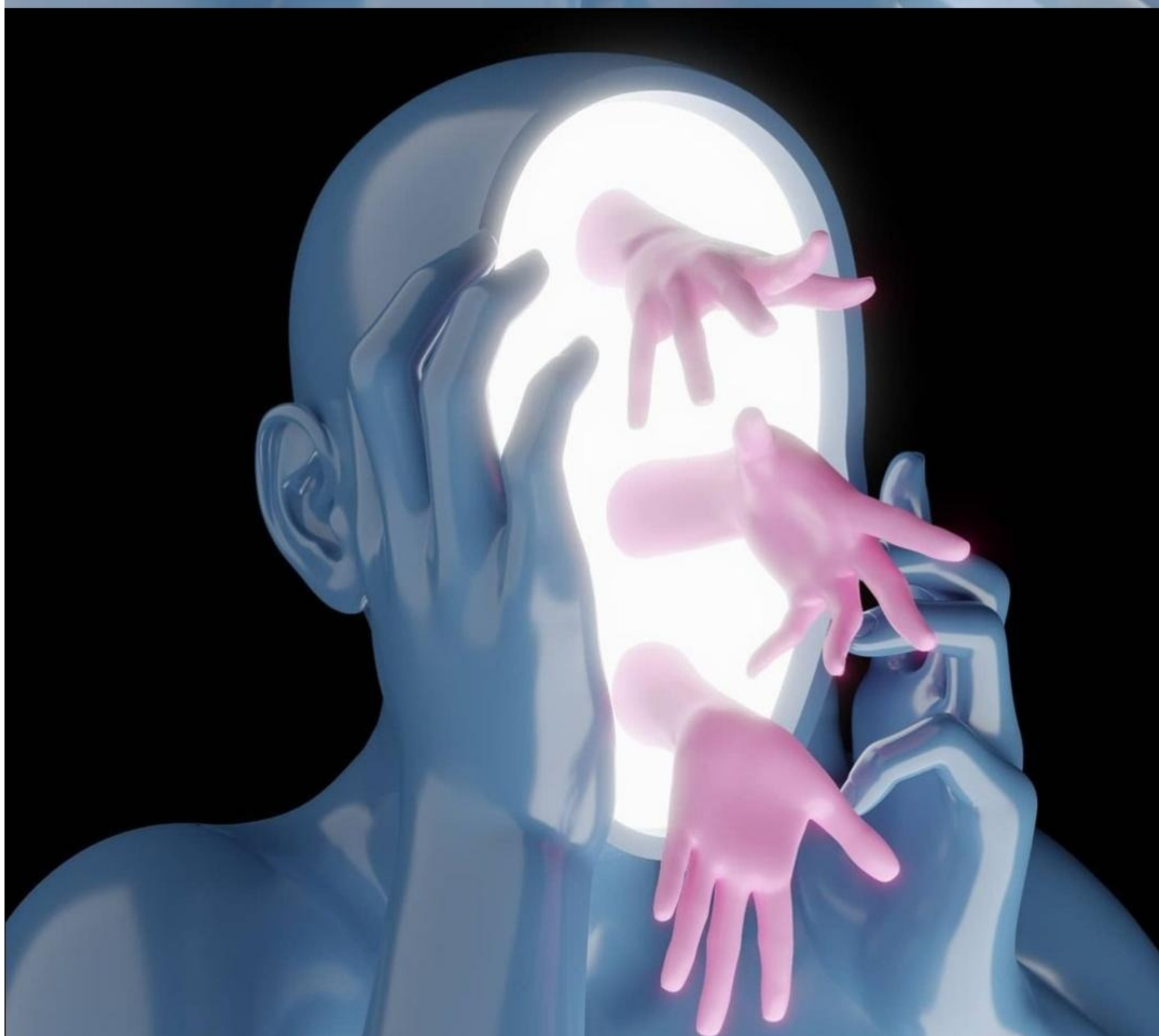
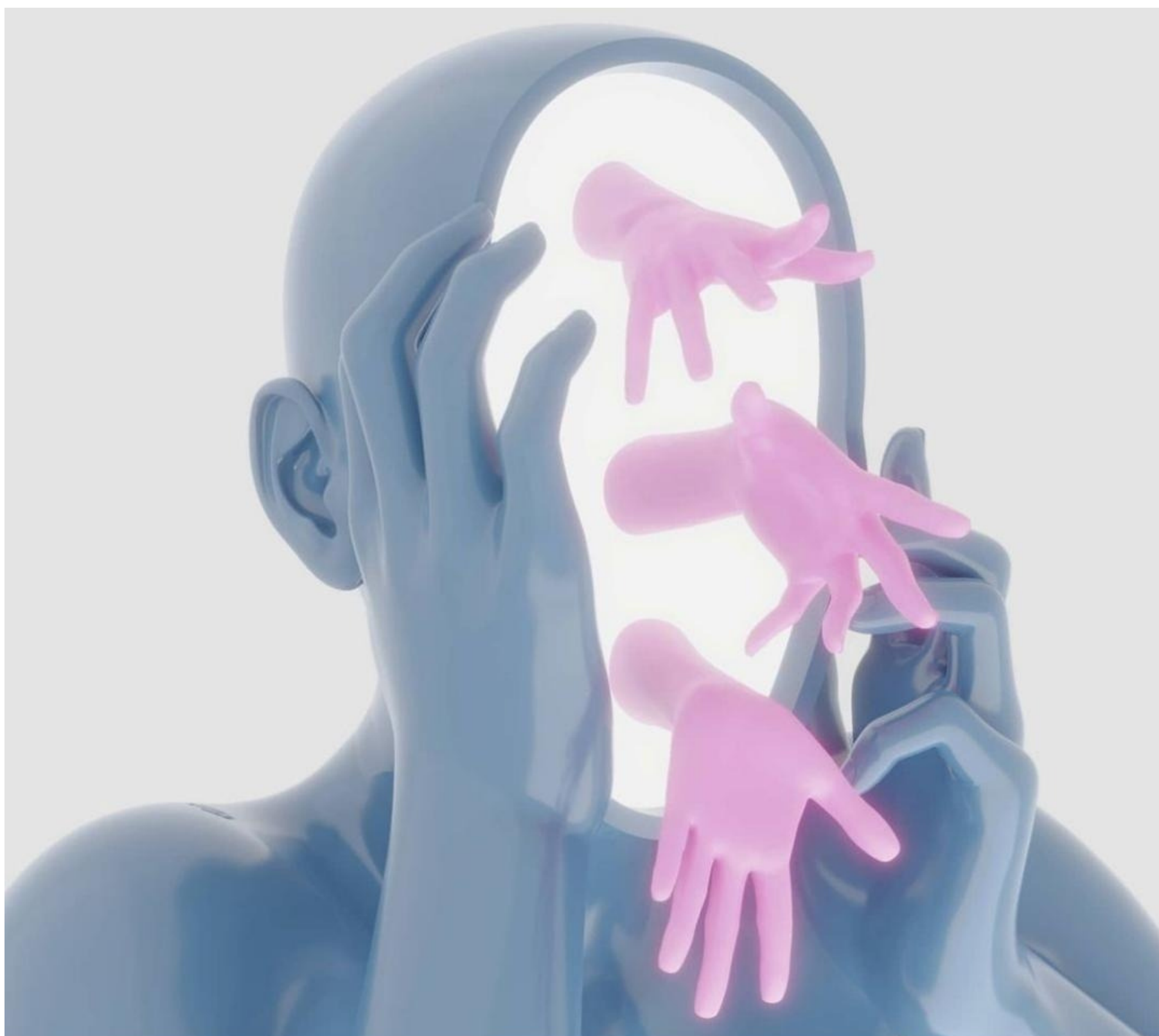
When her son got home from school
she told him she had something for him,
but he had to stay out of her office
because it was a surprise. He asked
if her cough was any better and she
hugged him and told him to go play.
Then she painted the world
his favorite colors. She kissed it, breathed
what life she had left into it
After dinner she told him
to close his eyes. When he opened them
he saw her holding the blue green globe
against her chest. ***This is my heart
I call it the world.*** Then she reached out
and pressed the sphere gently to his chest
Now it's your heart too. While he held the world
she started coughing again, coughing and
coughing and doubling over to her knees.
He ran to her side ***Mom! Mom! Are you okay?
I'm afraid my cough isn't getting better
Little One. I may have to go soon.
But I don't want you to go!
I know Little One, but I'll always
be here.*** She gently pressed
the world to his chest again.

That night they slept in the same bed
like they hadn't in a few years
and their sleep was interrupted by
another coughing fit that wouldn't stop.
Through the hail of coughs, he
could tell she wanted him to call
911 so he did. The whole ride
there and in the waiting room
he clutched the world so tightly
that his hands hurt. After a while,
the doctor spoke to him about a place
called hospice that wasn't a hospital
but a place where they helped
people get ready to go. He said she
couldn't go, that he needed her to stay.
And the doctor said God would always be with him
and he got mad and said *Then why is she leaving!*
He turned and threw the world as
hard as he could.

As it bounced
off the hospital's brick wall
he saw blue and green paint
chips fly through the air. The world
rolled back to his feet. He fell
to his knees, picked it up,
clutched it to his chest
and wept.

Pink

HANA GHOSH



My Marvel Movie Tattoo

JENNIFER FURNER

CW: illness, cancer

My pointer finger presses my pin number onto the keypad of the card reader. As my ring finger stretches, the dark lines of a tattoo are obvious. Under the knuckle: a circle with a vertical line running through it and some horizontal lines creating wings.

“Oh, cool tattoo on your finger,” the barista says.

I look up from the screen. “Thanks.”

“What is that, like, a Chinese symbol or something?”

“No.” I pause, unsure what to say next.

People always ask what it is or what it means, and I can easily give an uncomplicated summary. For example, I’ll say it’s a symbol for courage although that’s not really what it is but they never try to place its origin.

“It’s kind of...made-up Nordic.”

He looks at me blankly. I could have stopped there. I could have pulled my card out of the reader, put it back in my wallet, moved to the end of the counter, and let him stand there scratching his head. But I’m a Midwesterner, so politeness is in my genes, and I continue to answer his question.

“Did you see the third Thor movie?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s the symbol of the Valkyrie.”

More blank stares. I fulfilled my polite duty. I move to the end of the counter, and he turns around to start frothing the milk.

Yes, it’s true. I have a symbol from a Marvel movie on my finger.

When my brother was in high school, his girlfriend got a tattoo of Mickey Mouse on her ankle. I had no tattoos myself yet, and I silently judged her. That Mickey Mouse is going to be there forever, like, when you’re 80 years old, I thought. If you’re going to permanently etch a design onto your skin, it should at least have some long-lasting meaning.

I never asked her about that tattoo. I don’t know what significance it held for her.

I have four tattoos. With the exception of my finger tattoo, they are all recognizable: a bird on my back, a space shuttle on my arm, and “Veritas” embedded in my ankle—the Italian word for “truth.”

People are naturally interested in tattoos and often comment on them when they can see them. I, too, am interested in others’ tattoos, but I rarely ask for an explanation. I know whatever explanation I get won’t be the truth. Not the whole truth.

What I tell people is that the bird represents my grandmother, the shuttle represents journeys into the unknown, and “Veritas” is rather self-explanatory.

What I don’t tell people is that the bird represents my early understanding of death, the shuttle represents a miscarriage, and the reminder of truth represents times I was misled.

No one wants to hear that.

When I was 33, I did not survive cancer. I escaped cancer.

Rather, I escaped the kind of cancer that infiltrates organs and kills a person slowly and painfully.

My cancer was a large tumor that needed to be removed. So, it was removed. And now I'm fine.

I'm fine like the way I was fine after my grandmother died. I'm fine like the way I was fine when I started bleeding after a positive pregnancy test. I'm fine like how I was fine when my ex-boyfriend was hauled out of his workplace in handcuffs.

In other words, I'm fine but I'm not fine.

The experience warranted a tattoo.

When I was five, and we buried my grandmother in the soft dirt, my mother explained to me that she wasn't really gone. She was up in the sky looking down on us.

I wasn't entirely sure what she meant. I looked up into the sky and saw a bird flying by. Maybe she was a bird now, flying free through the air. That sounded nice. So, whenever I saw a bird, I thought of my grandmother.

When I was 19, I was in a tumultuous relationship; it ran hot and then cold and then hot again. To smooth things over, he would often buy me things. One time he bought me a trip to Hawaii. It was not until two years later that I learned the money he used for these extravagant gifts came from the cash drawer of his retail job: imaginary items returned, bills pulled from their dividers and slipped into his pants pockets.

I needed a new perspective on love and life and trust. I applied for a study abroad program and spent the following summer in Italy. I found a new love: a love of Italian culture, landscape, and, most of all, its language.

When I was 27, my husband and I witnessed Atlantis launching its last time to space. Four years later, the decommissioned space shuttle had a designated exhibit at Kennedy Space Center, and we couldn't wait to see it. My husband and I were at the airport waiting to fly to Florida, and I went to use the restroom before we boarded. I had just taken my first pregnancy test five days earlier, and it had been positive. But in the stall, the white toilet paper turned red as I wiped.

When we saw the exhibit, we remembered the magic, the energy of that launch. At the time, we mourned that we would never get to see it again. Now, as we gazed at Atlantis, we mourned the loss of something else.

For months I toiled with designs for my "cancer tattoo," as I playfully called it. I knew I wanted it on my finger so it could be an everyday reminder. Maybe the tattoo of a ribbon tied around my finger, so I wouldn't forget? Too generic. Maybe a sprig of thyme, symbolizing courage? Too plain. Maybe I'd bite the bullet and get a tattoo of a cancer ribbon? Too obvious.

My husband and I were watching Thor: Ragnarok one night. It had been a rough week for both of us and we needed some laughs. In the movie, Scrapper 142 orders a drink at the bar, and as she takes a sip from a bottle, Thor notices the tattoo on her inner wrist: circle, a vertical line cutting it in half and some horizontal lines giving it wings.

"My God, you're a Valkyrie!" he declares. And she looks at him with disdain; the same emotion I feel when people call me a cancer survivor.

Eventually, though, Scrapper 142 stops denying who she is. She dons the armor of a Valkyrie and helps Thor and his people defeat the goddess of death. I realized, isn't that what we're all trying to do, defeat death? And I did this one time. It was time I stopped denying who I was.

That's a cool-looking tattoo, I thought to myself. Maybe that should be my next tattoo.

I'm a grown-ass woman. I cannot get a tattoo from a Marvel movie.

Why couldn't I?

Since my diagnosis, I found I cared less and less of what people thought of me. I got lucky this round. Life is short, but mine could have been significantly shorter. I should do what I want.

I collect my coffee from the end of the counter silently. It's clear the barista is finished with our conversation. He is back at the register helping the next patron.

I'm not offended or hurt. I'm not even embarrassed. This isn't the first time someone has asked, and it won't be the last. And when they ask, I'll tell them truth. It's a symbol from a Marvel movie.

But I don't tell the whole truth.

Trauma

ARACELY MEDINA

CW: sexual assault, trauma

I am waiting for a time where it doesn't hurt me.
Where his hands don't feel alive on my neck,
each fingertip, the spiral of a snake,
in that dark room,
where my voice
never echoes back to find me.
Words chain-link an anchor down my throat.
A sound lost and heavy, sinking down
into deep ocean water.

I try to convince myself
that words mean something when you say them.
Especially when you say "no,"
so many times,
it doesn't sound like a word anymore,
but the cry of a seagull as it flies on by.
Especially when I crumpled my body up like a
fist, —not knowing what I was holding onto,
only that I had to hold onto it.

Burnt Toast

FRAN FERNÁNDEZ ARCE

What we see in perpetuity is your hand touching mine holding yours feeling mine being ours. In this crowded cradle of touch and comfort, the tips of your fingers fuse into my open palms like glossy butter-ripples on burnt toast. We crackle, frizzle, splutter with the oils of our skins, the rich lacing of the cells that make me into you into me, a singularity of heat, the uncontrollable persistence of binding two selves.

Comic Gesture

SARAH PECK



These Hands Is God

DEVONAE MANDERSON

These hands
hold blood
and water
and fever dreams of my mother
anointing me
pressing me
into thin air
until I am nothing
and everything
clasped in prayerful palms
asking god —
my mother —
to heal me
clasped in prayerful palms
asking god —
my mother —
to keep me

These hands
black as God
clean
and often forgotten
treated like soiled things
like they have only ever been
buried beneath this earth
cupping
and carrying dirt
beneath worn fingernails
like they have only ever held
pain
never joy
never love
never magic

These hands
are sacred things
and unforsaken things
my body reminds me
whenever I forget
must recollect
memories of my mother's hands
how they heal
and hold
and massage love
back into my tired bones

These hands
teach me
my mother's word
written in stone:

These hands is God
these hands is holy
these hands is reverent
is magic
is kind
is olive oil anointing
and prayers
that fall
from lips
to fingertips
onto my soft, black body

In Nana's Bedroom

SOPHIE SCOLNIK-BROWER

CW: genitals, illness

Two weeks ago was when I saw
my grandmother's vagina. Her thighs
were open, unashamed, her jaw
unhinged. I didn't think my eyes
would dart there, would track
the long tube snaking up. I saw it
eye to eye, that fistful of gray bag
so open to the world. Just a pink
pink piece of skin like anything. I knew
it would be right there. Then her hand felt
around down where the catheter grew,
fingered the folds and crinkled belt
of flesh and hairs, barely grasping
what it is to be a body: breathing.

Still My Hands

WENDY KENNAR

CW: disease, illness

“There’s no way I’d walk around with my hands looking like that,” my younger sister said as she pointed to my hands.

She was a sophomore in high school; I was a freshman in college, working part-time in a local flower shop.

Our shop sold a lot of roses. And roses are not friendly to florists’ hands.

My hands were cut and scraped and looked like a cat with long claws had attacked me. My fingers had swollen to the point where my rings temporarily didn’t fit.

The flower shop was my first paycheck job. Up until then, I had been paid in cash as a babysitter, a tutor, and even a secretary assistant for a lawyer who worked out of her home.

This job was mine. Not because of my grades. Or because one of my teachers had recommended me for it. But simply because of my hard work. So, if my hands got scratched up and didn’t look as pretty as the dozen long-stem red roses I arranged in a vase, that was okay with me.

After college, I became an elementary school teacher. For twelve years, my hands reflected that job.

I no longer have teacher hands. There are no traces of paint or glue on my fingertips. No stray green ink marks from my correcting pen (no red pen to correct my precious students’ work) on the side of my hand.

My hands will never again staple and design a bulletin board display. My hands will never write-out desk name tags or “happy birthday” certificates. My hands will no longer grade weekly spelling tests. Those days are memories of another time of my life, another identity.

My autoimmune disease, Undifferentiated Connective Tissue Disease, manifests itself as pain, fatigue, and weakness in my left leg. It was because of this chronic illness, and its resulting chronic pain, that I retired from my elementary school teaching career.

Because of the inflammation and pain in my leg, my hands now perform different tasks. Each day, my hands pick up my prescription bottles, twist the cap, and shake out medication, different pills at different times of the day.

Now my hands snip the ends off of flower stems I buy at our local Trader Joe’s before placing them in a red vase on our dining table.

My hands cook my teenage son’s favorite pasta and toast his waffle for breakfast. These hands help him calculate the unit rate for his math homework.

And certain jobs, certain tasks, remain constant regardless of how old my son becomes or how much my leg hurts. Writing out my daily to-do lists. Writing our weekly dinner menus in my planning calendar. Writing letters to my pen pal in Japan, a friendship going on twenty-eight years. Holding my husband’s hand on neighborhood walks, at night as we fall asleep, and waiting in doctors’ offices.

My hands now teach in new ways. Through writing and typing personal essays published on my blog, on websites, and in anthologies. Through writing, revising, and re-writing essays for my memoir-in-progress. Essays that examine different aspects of my life, as a parent, as a wife, as a woman, living with an invisible disability.

Because of my legs, my hands are not doing what I thought they would be doing for at least thirty years, instead of the twelve years I did have in the classroom as Mrs. Kennar.

And while my hands may no longer be cut and scraped and subjected to ruthless thorns, they still may not look like other people's hands. But that's by choice.

I wear rings on eight of my ten fingers. Silver rings that I am proud to own and proud to wear. My rings are a reflection of me, my story, my experiences. The ring I bought myself for my first Mother's Day. The ring my mom bought me on a day trip to the beach. A ring engraved with my son's name and birthdate.

And after more than twenty years of marriage, my husband still likes holding my hand.

"Your hands are soft," he said to me the other day as we walked, slowly, in our neighborhood.

"You have elegant hands. Definitely no sausage fingers," he said to me the other night as we held hands at bedtime.

The muscle in my leg may twitch, contract, and cramp up. I may limp and hobble from time to time.

But my hands are still my hands.

Holding

SARAH HILTON

your hands, they have flown
out to me.

I have
known their softness, held them before

they passed under

skies, under stars.
They landed in the base of
my throat, those hands that brush

my cheek, my chest—
wings the colour of

dust. They open me, speckled
egg in pale spring. You are
holding—

hands cupped
below—an offering, a landing.

Nest
above the pines, they
lift me

onwards, over
mountains, over moons.

Offering

SAMANTHA K MOSCA



Dead Souls

AMY LEE LILLARD

CW: body-related imagery, violent language around the body

I knew the sounds a body made. When my hands pushed and kneaded a trapezius, or a quadricep, or a gluteus, and that movement crossed the line between pain and pleasure, back and forth, when the body yielded, or when the frame resisted, there were gradients of sighs, degrees of breathing. A code that the best of us learned, and responded to with a bit more pressure, or a bit less precision.

Because I knew these things, because I made money with my knowledge of bodies, most men expected magic when we had sex that first time. We were a rarity when I started in 1979, and for much of the next decade. Spas belonged to the warm deserts of Ojai and Phoenix, not this cold tundra of Minneapolis. They were resort perks for the fabulously wealthy and health-conscious, not an odd option at a downtown Twin Cities hotel.

When I explained my job, the men imagined fingers that could work spells, muscles that could squeeze in all places they wanted, joints and limbs so supple and loose they'd contort into all their fantasized-about positions. The polite and the pushy assumed I was a slut. I was the kind of girl that put out without a ring, a women's libber, a punk, a freak. So they were lazy in bed, watching and waiting for me to do my work.

Maybe that's why Graham was different. He knew what I needed, knew I wanted someone else to do the work for once.

"Let me move you," he said our first time. We'd met at a bar, and went home to his apartment, and played Joy Division. He laid me on my back, rubbed his thin soft fingers over my skin and breasts, rolled his black-haired knuckles over my tongue and lips. Eased my legs and hips into place. In his bed, which became our bed, my body found my own sounds.

*

You, though. You were different too. Your ash blond hair, long on your head, curled at the ends, thick across your chest. Your tongue, that curled over and around English words and accented the wrong syllables. Your name, that sounded like a whisper, a breath. A command. *Ilias*.

*

We were the brainchild of a California transplant, who brought the spa to his four-star hotel and added waterfalls in the entry, receptionists in suits, hot herbal tea and dark chocolate. Most guests were Midwesterners, chapped by cold and suspicious of joy. When I had a client on the table, I had to narrate what I was doing—the experience as foreign as if the guests were visiting Stockholm or Minsk. I divided the body into parts, each with a ticking clock and an announcement. Fifteen minutes for the back, from neck to sacrum. Ten minutes for the backs of the legs; five for the right, five for the left. Turn them over, hiding their nakedness. Ten minutes for the fronts of the legs; five right, five left. Ten minutes for the arms. Ten for the feet and hands. Fifteen for the neck and shoulders.

I knew what to expect with each body, but I also knew I would be surprised. I touched the scar from a combine's blade across a thick thigh and pictured blood and corn. I stared at a gathering of moles forming a dog's face on a black back as I spread oil and pressure.

With each breath I heard release, at least for a little while, from money disappearing into college funds and debt, cutthroat competition for work titles, dying parents in spare bedrooms, spouses sleeping on couches. When I told them *let me move you*, told them not to resist, told them to fight their instincts and let me do my work, they did. Even the men, trained to hear women's commands as vapor, their resistance as banter.

It was satisfying, seeing and hearing what my hands did. That's what I told Graham in those first months, and years, when he presented me with pride to his friends and parents. I was his witchy, gypsy girlfriend that could touch you and heal you for money. I was both the harbinger of the future, and a throwback to ancient times.

He turned deposits into pensions and retirement funds. I turned knots of muscle into supple tissue and release. "We're marking the world, you know." In this way, he said, we'd be known. We wouldn't disappear upon death.

I loved him for that. I loved him for respecting me. Other men humored me until I proved my skill, then wanted to own me. I loved Graham for the image he had of us, the one he gave me.

*

You, though. You understood intimately what we did.

You joined the spa on my fifth anniversary with Graham. You were a genuine Swede, the owner said proudly, as if that fact would give us, this place, legitimacy. A few weeks in, you told me about the open sore you found on a man's foot. I told you about the dead toe belonging to a trust-fund kid.

You had something you said, then, in your first language, harsh consonants and soft sighs, that translated loosely to money lacking beauty.

Months of this, our schedules syncing and our ease with each other growing. I started cataloging each body, looking for the stories I could tell you later. That look on your face as I'd describe the farting matron or the acne-covered back. Your thick eyebrows raising, your lips carving a smile in your blond beard, your pale cheeks sprouting red flashes. I held my breath waiting for that smile.

*

In those first years with Graham, it was easy. We fit. He knew what I needed, knew I needed someone to love. I was terrified of having children, afraid I'd bury little bodies under my love. Like my mother had. Graham carried my weight, let me love him without limit.

"Loving someone means we matter," he said once, as we ate greasy steak tacos after a night of drinking. The grease absorbed the vodka. His words mingled with the cream, tasting salty and sweet at once.

He ate fast, almost angry. Crunching and huffing. Resenting the need for food, like he resented the need for sleep. He could do so much more with that time, he said. He could finally create the photographs he always talked about, write the book he always talked about. "I could be everything I wanted without sleep," he said, laughing, his grin nearing a grimace. I loved that. I loved that someone with dreams and drive loved me.

One night, playing pool at a dive bar, we learned his high school best friend and his wife were pregnant. After the announcement, I'd gone to the bathroom and changed my soaked tampon. In the toilet bowl my blood seeped into the water, creating ribbons of red. I watched it with relief.

We didn't need kids, Graham said at the taco stand. "We'll be each other's family," he said. Then he slipped a ring on my finger.

He was the thin that came from parents who worried about their small-town reputation. We weighed about the same, and his mother joined my mother and all mothers in that crooked half smile of warning when I accepted the extra portions she pushed. Graham and I stood about the same height, and the mothers laughed that I couldn't wear heels with him.

But when we hugged that night, making promises, we were both on level ground. When we kissed, we were equals. That night he held my weight, all of the muscle and fat and blood and breath. He held my purpose, my future. He stayed firm and strong.

*

You, though.

I was a little taller than you. Just an inch or two. But my chin had to dip a bit to my chest when I looked at you. I told my clients to do that sometimes at home to relieve tight shoulders. Dip your chin. Stretch your neck. Feel the release and relief. Maybe that's why I felt relieved when I saw you.

Your arms and legs were bigger than Graham's. In our spa-supplied T-shirts and pants, I saw the way your biceps curved like a scimitar, how your chest dipped over the right kinds of divots, how your thighs and calves stretched the fabric. I wondered what your hands, short with small knuckles, felt like. I wondered what you would feel like under my hands.

We released people from the rigor of their bodies. You said it was like letting a soul run free, even if only for a little while. The last I'd thought of souls was back in church as a child. I'd long put those teachings aside. But when you talked about souls, I wanted to believe. Maybe souls had their mates. Maybe that explained this connection we had, growing, taking up more space, filling in the gaps Graham had left behind.

*

Graham held my weight for five years. Then, his own weight changed.

When Graham used to look at me, there was heat and intent. It was sexy in his twenties, to fuck a woman as much as he wanted without any fear of being trapped, a woman that would have an abortion without even bothering him for the co-pay. Now, in his mid-thirties, he helped rich white men retire, and they paid him more money and gave him new titles. But he hadn't created the photos he wanted, or the book. He hadn't done the things that he thought would make him known. After our courthouse wedding, that look became more guarded. Suspicious. His black eyebrows, now spotted with gray, now a bit more unruly than the hair on his head, the hair that was receding, curled inward instead of up. Disapproval instead of delight.

"My dad's life is so small," he said, over more greasy steak tacos after another night of drinking. "If he didn't have me, who'd remember him after he dies?" I thought about our friends, the ones who'd married in elaborate Catholic weddings with open bars, the ones who moved out to three-story new-construction homes in the suburbs, who had little boys and girls that looked like them.

Over tacos, I reminded Graham of our refrains. Love made us eternal, love made us family, love made us live after death. I told him we would find life's purpose together. The lyrics were becoming worn with use, like the surf songs of our high school times now playing on radio stations as "classics."

He ate, chomping at his steak and lettuce as he did, fast and angry. "I wonder if our daughter would look like you," he said.

At home, I hugged him. He felt smaller. I was afraid to squeeze him, or lean on him. I was afraid to breathe. We were in the 1980s, and politicians were battling for the nation's souls. Battling against women like me, women who would not allow their bodies to be bred. Dead inside, us women. Refusing men their natural birthright.

At some point, Graham stopped hugging me.

*

But you hugged me, and I felt supported again.

Then we went home, exhausted, grimy, full of the breath of other people. We went home, to my husband and your wife.

That night Graham invited you, all our co-workers, to a party at our apartment. You and I found ourselves out on my patio smoking a cigarette, and we watched cars below us, a stream heading west, towards the suburbs, where your parents watched your six-month old baby. You and I watched the cars and the city lights and sat still and silent and alone and breathed each other's air, and we thought about bodies and breath, souls, lives lived differently, and I felt content for a moment, a moment I lived in for the coming weeks.

*

I trained myself to stay still in the bed Graham and I shared. He said I twitched, kicked, even slapped. He laughed in the mornings, chronicling his bruises. "Your body knows something you don't," he said.

So I slept carefully, woke often to ensure my position on my side of the queen bed. I laid next to the cold brick wall that faced west, pushed against it. I woke in the morning with my teeth clenched shut, my neck rigid, my legs aching and bloodless.

In those final years, when Graham's friends would come in from the suburbs and we'd celebrate, they ordered outrageously-priced Merlots for the table, and extravagant appetizers of duck and veal. I ordered stingy portions of salads and pastas, the lowest prices on the menu. The astronomical bill split equally instead of by person. All of them made the kind of money Graham did, all of them gifted schooling from wealthy parents, all of their necks and shoulders buoyant and loose without the weight of debt. I stewed and shook, and spit out frustration later in our bed. Graham chided me. "It's just money," he said with the naive shock of someone who's never had a lack of it.

"It's just a phase," he repeated, again and again, when he talked more about children, and I still knew that I would be a terrible mother. He pointed more and more to the suburban friends, to their children that would carry their names and genes and memories forward. He pointed to them, and said they had meaning in their lives. What did we have?

I thought of those friends, how many gin and tonics they had when they snuck away to the city for the night, how much they sniped at each other across bar stools and poker tables on those nights, how their bodies deflated when it was time to go home.

But his breath turned into panting, as he worked himself into a rage that would span days.

I shut down and shut up, curled my hands around my knees, looked down at the floor, knowing anything I said would be classified as wrong. Finally I'd apologize, for anything and everything, for nothing.

I shrank in size, kept myself in check. My body rigid, my soul stuck.

I hated the people on my massage table then. I hated the sounds they made, so animal and raw. I hated the smells, sweat and dirt and decay. I hated that I had to touch them, and by touching them, by releasing all the fury and frustration of their small and hollow lives, I was infected by them. I absorbed what they let go.

*

That's how I explained you. You understood that hatred. But more than that: you liked me large and unstuck and raw. I could take up space with you. I could remember the shape of me.

You were stuck too. That's what I told myself. Your wife had changed, your life had changed, and what you'd believed to be true had shifted and morphed under your feet.

We laughed, you and me. There was no censoring ourselves. No rage to dodge, no tears to duck. We laughed in the empty, austere common room, over packed lunches of chicken and rice, or bologna sandwiches. We laughed at the staff meetings, laughed over coffee under halogen light.

We laughed at the kinesiology convention in November, the one in San Antonio, the one that was two days of workshops and product fairs, and one night free. You wanted to sit outside on the Riverwalk that night, in the dry breeze, so different from the Minnesota wind that was already brittle back home. You ordered a whiskey and a burger, and I didn't want to make any decisions, so I followed your lead. When you ordered more whisky, I did too.

You suggested we walk, and we left the Riverwalk and cut down side streets, looking in house windows for warm-weather layouts and real Texans, tracing lines of graffiti on shop walls.

Outside the hotel, I brushed aside cigarette butts with my foot and sat on the sidewalk and lit my own. You took a picture of me with your Polaroid. When you shook it out and showed it to me, I saw someone else. I wanted to step into that picture, slip into that woman's easy smile, shrug on the freedom in her limbs. That woman would do what she wanted.

Inside, you hugged me again. I smelled my cigarette in your hair, and felt the whiskey in your cheek. My arms shook a little as they curled around your neck. I leaned on you, and you leaned back.

We turned our heads, and you kissed me, or I kissed you, and we were kissing. Then we were running. My boots and your sneakers pounding the stairs to the second floor, laughing, shaking, hiccupping, holding sweaty hands. I didn't think of Graham, and you didn't think of your wife, and we ran faster, down the second floor, to your room, so that would be true.

You turned the hall light on. You backed me up against the wall. You put your hands under my shirt, and then lifted it off. You kissed me, and peeled me, piece by piece.

There was no music. No need to set a mood.

I surprised you then. Surprised myself too. I pushed you, towards the bed. I peeled you layer, by layer, then looked at you.

You spoke. Finally.

I nodded, even as I thought about the word. Final. The final thing, the final step. The final act. The final end. I pictured a hole in the ground, a mixed ash heap.

I looked at the shape of you. A man like so many others, your bony tusks of shoulders and solid-wood chest.

You breathed, a heavy breath humid with want.

I traced your shape with my fingers. I felt your muscle and tissue, identified each of the quadrants. I pressed down to your bones underneath. I pressed hard and you gasped.

Let me move you, you said as you grabbed for my hips.

I wondered if I'd gotten lost somehow, if you were Graham, and I was back home, having our weekly sex, where I dreamed of anonymous cocks and slick cunts, made the sounds that he knew and expected, so we could have a moment that felt true. I wondered if I was dreaming, or dead, or broken.

So I climbed on top of you, pushed you inside me.

You felt like any other man, all the other men. You felt like men I loved, and those I didn't. I shifted to let all of you in, to feel something new. To feel your soul, perhaps, matching with mine. You smiled, and I looked away, down, at where we joined. I watched our bodies move, up and down, in and out. What every animal did to live. I wondered if we were just animals in heat, rutting to stay sane and alive. I wondered if that was love. All the fuss, the fantasies, the foreplay, the flirting, all the things we told ourselves meant something; maybe it was all nothing.

With you inside me, I wanted to see inside you. Open you up and see all there was of you. Why did I want you? Why you? Was it you, or could it be anyone? I wanted to split you open, crack you along the spine, examine you. Find your soul that had to be my match. I wanted to tear back skin and bone, find what I loved and needed, and crawl inside next to it. Get stapled in and never leave.

As we got to the end, I wanted you to break me. Rip me to shreds so Graham wouldn't recognize me. Tear me in two from sacrum to skull, ensure no child could live inside me.

But more than that, I wanted to break you. Punch my hand straight through your skin, snap the rib cage, slap aside the lungs and heart and spleen, grip your thoracic as a rein, ride you to finally. I wanted to destroy you, so this moment, this breaking, this desperate act, would be erased.

I breathed, and you breathed. I squeezed my legs around your hips. So that no matter where I really was, who you really were, I could try to meld my shape to yours. Transform into a body with a soul.

*

It snowed 23 inches the day of the last fight. The airport shut down. Cars were stranded on I-35, the snow so fast and hard, the December dark so deep by 4:45, it paralyzed the evening flight home from San Antonio.

In our apartment, that night, Graham paced. From my spot on the floor, back against the brick wall, arms cinched around my legs, I counted off the complaints as they came. I was selfish, I was broken, I was a child, I was a drunk.

*

After you fell asleep that night in the hotel, I closed my eyes and opened them, over and over. The shapes and shadows behind my lids were the same as those in the room. I thought I remembered a king bed with a cushioned head rest, a brittle, starched wingback chair, a severe square desk, a hutch with TV eye. Paintings of daffodils and fox hunts.

*

“Lucky,” Graham said. Feet pacing. Eyes rolling. Hands clenching. He said I was lucky. Because what would I do otherwise? What would happen if we split up?

*

You stood in the hall, next to the bathroom, and your breath rattled and hitched. Sinuses, I wondered. Or allergies. Things I didn’t know about your body. You shushed yourself, and your breath marked the edges of sobs.

My lids went up and down. I knew where I was, surrounded by austere furnishings and amateur paintings. But I also knew I was home, next to cold brick and cold disdain. And I knew I was somewhere between, not awake or asleep, not in the real world or this one.

I was just a body. So were you. If we had souls, they weren’t here.

*

Graham waited, his breath fast, his mouth curling into a cry and a smile, back and forth.

“What would you do,” he asked. “Without me?”

*

In the hotel bed, I touched my breasts, my neck. My still-damp pubic hair, my hips.

You panicked in the hall.

I touched the pieces of me. The parts of flesh that added up to named shapes: shoulders, knees, elbows, chin. They were all here, unbroken and whole.

You probably thought about your family, the thing you complained about but needed, the thing that defined you, more than your job and your body and your dreams. You thought about temporary fixes, ejaculation as vacation. Expiration dates.

You already needed to be free of me. You already feared me, and what I might do.

I was afraid of me too.

*

I stood up then. Graham saw something on my face, in the loosening of my shoulders.

He apologized, and I knew he understood me. He said he took it back, said he wasn’t serious. Said breaking up wasn’t a serious thought. It wasn’t what a serious couple did.

I moved around the apartment, nodding, quiet. He followed me, pleading. Taking it back. Taking everything back.

“If I’ve broken this,” he said, “what has my life been for?”

*

You and I slept in our own hotel rooms.

We nodded to one another the next morning, and boarded our flight, and went home to our spouses.

I listened to Joy Division in my car, outside my apartment building. I could find my way back to Graham. I had to. Souls didn’t have a match; if they did, mine was Graham. It had to be.

*

But after that last fight, I knew there were no souls. It was only my body that had fit with another, and it was only my body that kept me in a relationship of pain. So I left Graham. That morning after our last fight. The 23 inches covering the ground and freezing. Some of the stacks of snow were still packed and unmelted in April.

*

I left the spa, joined the competing hotel, where you didn't haunt the halls. After a few months at my new job, another therapist, a tiny woman with strong knuckles and wisps of black hair on her lip and chin, pointed at my shoulders. She said I needed to break those up.

I don't know how long it had been since I laid on a table. My body was rounder, my skin dull and flaky. The places where my joints connected bones creaked and cracked. I turned the lights in the room down further before slipping naked under the sheet.

I expected the typical time cut, the normal portioning of the body. But she went straight for my neck, kneading with those knuckles. She found a big nodule along the right side, and when she touched it I pictured the gnarled knot of a tree trunk. Something without give.

She used two knuckles, and wasn't gentle. The knot burst. I laughed, a giant horsey laugh. Then I cried, a meaty, snotty cry. My body made its sounds and took up the space. And if it existed, my soul rose up into the air and ran free.

Pillow Talk

CARLY SILVA

It started with *you're really pretty* a week later he asked *you coming over tonight?* that night he said *glad to see you* then it was *let's watch a movie* which became *sit closer to me* then *we should go to my room* he put his hands on me and said *I wasn't even watching the movie* and then *we should get under the covers* he said *you should take this off* weeks later he kept telling me to *come on* which turned into *what are you waiting for?* eventually he said *just do it* then *don't be a prude, what else did you expect?* the next guy started with *you're so hot* and at the end of the night he said *let's get out of here* then *let me take this off* then he said *my bad I thought you wanted me* then it was *you came onto me first, you were flirting back* eventually it was *it's not my fault, you totally led me on* then he told me *you're being kind of crazy* the guy after that started with *you look sexy* and then it was *bend over* he started saying things like *you should pull your hair back* he would ask *that's what you're wearing?* which turned into *don't be a slut, cover up* he laughed at me *don't be such a tease* but the one after that started with *you have pretty eyes* then he said *I like your smile* then *I like your laugh* then he asked me *do you want to go on a date?* he laughed *you're funny I like talking to you* then he said *I really care about you* and then when it got dark he said *there's no pressure whenever you're ready* then it was *I'll call you tomorrow* weeks later he said *are you sure?* he whispered *is this okay?* then he told me *I'm here for you* months went by and he said *I'm so in love with you* this morning he rolled over and kissed me and said *you look so beautiful.*

Hands and Flowers

RAE



The Chair

EMMALINE BRISTOW

Each stroke of the saw's teeth
against wood grain blew dust
in my eyes, cloudy and dry,
as my grandfather kept working,
hand jerking forward then back,
forward then back, down
the wood. Each push smelled
like productivity, like hand
made houses with sanded furniture.
He let me swing the hammer,
complimented my strength.

*Money makes a good servant
but a terrible master*
my grandfather said,
handing me a Wilcoxson's fudge bar
from his giant game freezer in the garage.
I ate with dusty hands,
chocolate dripping down forearms
smeared across cheeks, round and grinning.

Money to me was the sound of coins clinking
high up into a jar on our fridge, my parents
emptying their pockets at the end of the month.
We lived in a double-wide, the floor by the door
creaky and the porch unfinished, nothing but a field
for a yard. The sound of coins was like ice
tinkling against the walls of a water glass.
I drew faces in the shiny glass's sweat,
licked it clean, watched sweat build again.

That day with my grandfather was sweaty work.
He'd pitted out his button-up and I my t-shirt,
but we kept working, measuring boards,
sawing, nailing pieces together. The finished
product was a chair was so strong, an elephant
could sit on it, so I told myself, bouncing
down on its un-sanded seat, cotton shorts catching
on splinters. *That should do* he said,
slipped off his work gloves and swigged
from his sweaty water bottle.

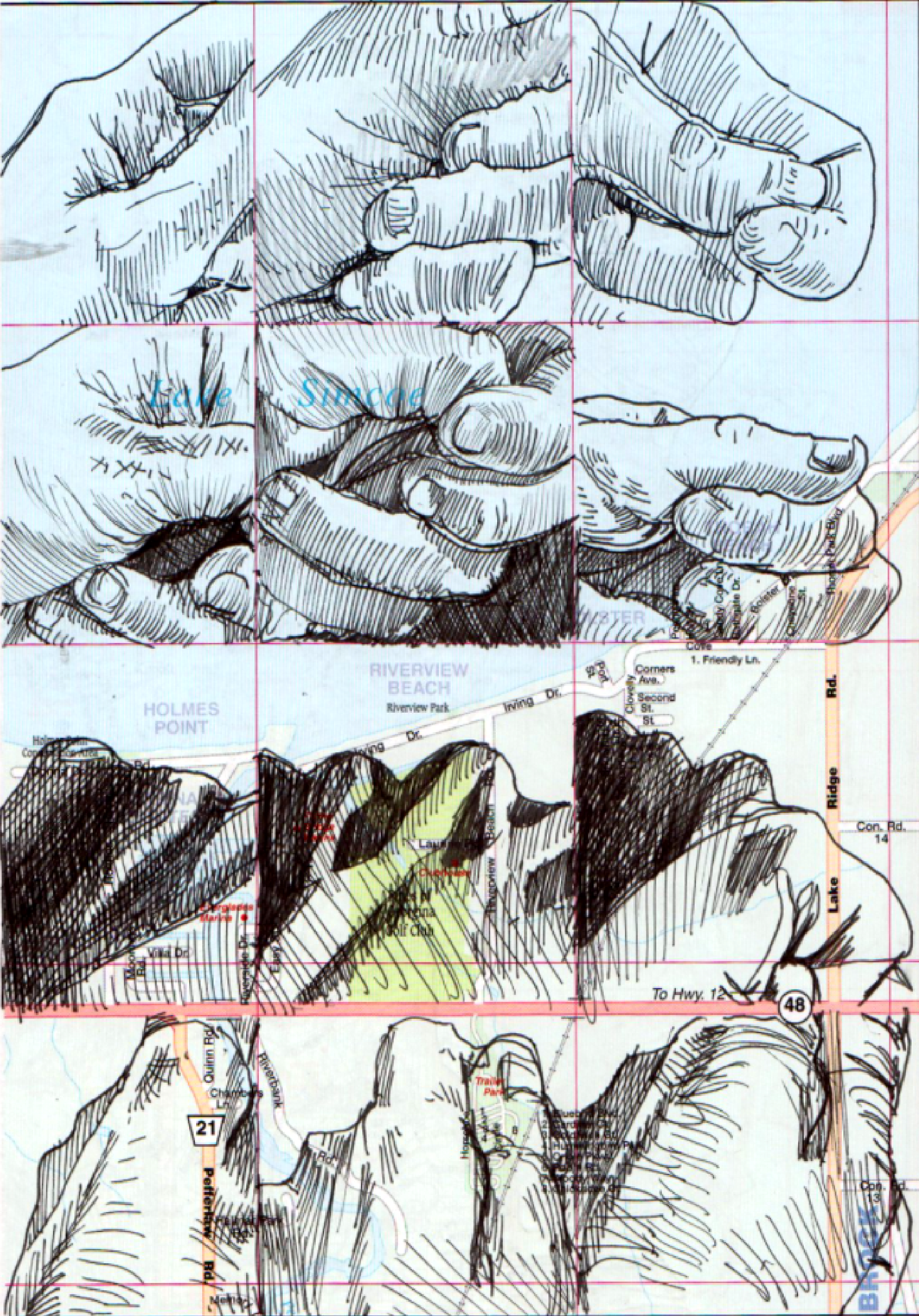
We kept that chair in a small fort
my cousins and I built,
the seat lasting longer than store-bought
chairs that couldn't withstand
heavy winters and dry summers.
Their brittle plastic legs bowed under weight
or tattered cushions blew in wind,
catching against fences.

The chair we built stands there today,
un-sanded on the bottom,
solid to the core.

Contours of Land & Hand

NICOLE LITTLE





october elegy

AUDREY GIDMAN

for Echo

CW: death

when they told me / you had gone / I walked / until the moon / was behind me /
sun setting deep & dipping flame / a smudge of white / -capped mountains
ahead & / I felt you / bright & still & near me / laughing / like water does / like
water against stone / your hand / almost on my shoulder I meant / to ask you /
where you got them I meant / to ask you / where you got your hands I meant /
to say you were my favorite / person to cry / with I meant / to say I always /
knew what it / was / when we carried / the water in our hands

The Mehndi Ritual

MARIYA KHAN

The night before Eid,
before the melody of tinkling bangles parade in the air
and beads on my purple shalwar kameez
glisten with gold embroidery,
Mama tells me to get out the mehndi.
I rush to the fridge, find the cold, golden cone
nestled behind the spicy potato samosas
and rosewater for tomorrow's party,
and show her pictures of suggested designs.
She spends hours squeezing the crinkly cone
on my lemon-soaked hands,
sometimes pausing to sip her chai.
I breathe in the cardamom and cinnamon
mixed with the stinky, sharp combination of grass and dye.
But I don't mind as the cool, muddy liquid slivers
because I know that when it has set,
the pretty pattern will compliment my olive skin
and I will feel beautiful.

Although the spicy substance itches,
I never want to remove it.
I let the liquid harden
and crack into black flakes
so I can brush it off in the sink,
dabbing the pattern with Vicks and
encasing my hand in plastic wrap
to preserve its dark brown color.
Tomorrow I'll unwrap my sweaty hand
and show it off to family and friends.
But during the next few weeks,
the mehndi will slowly fade into a light orange,
the curves and flowers breaking and dissolving
into my olive skin
and becoming part of me
as the design and my beauty disappear
into oblivion.

Contributors

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Noreen Ocampo (she/her) is a Filipina American writer and poet based in metro Atlanta. Her work appears or is forthcoming in Taco Bell Quarterly, Hobart, and HAD, among others, and her debut micro chapbook TEASPOONS is forthcoming fall 2021 with The Daily Drunk Mag. Say hello on Twitter @maybenoreen!

David Salazar

David Salazar (he/xe/she) is a queer teenage writer from Chile. He has been published or is forthcoming in The Daily Drunk, The Hearth, Ogma Magazine, among others. You can find her on Twitter at @smalllredboy or on her website, <https://davidvsalazar.weebly.com/>.

Karo

Karo (he/him) is an ex-salaryperson who has only quit their job last year to become a storytelling pirate. He creates comic book stories, carefully written and illustrated with love, to bottle and throw into the vast seas of the internet, all while sailing these scary uncharted waters of being an artist. You can find him on Instagram @lastshanty.

DT McCrea

DT McCrea (they/she) is a trans-anarchist poet, a reader for Flypaper Lit, and Pushcart Prize nominee. They love the NBA and know the lyrics to every Saints Seneca song. Her work can be found in Indianapolis Review, Gordon Square Review, Honey & Lime, mutiny!, Stone of Madness Press and others. Follow them on twitter @dt_mccrea.

Hana Ghosh

Hana (of the bog) is a nonbinary queer artist who goes by they/them/she pronouns and adores frogs and butterflies. Their art usually has dreamy scenes with undertones to queerness and transness or straight up cottage core fairy fantasy vibes. They also make music! You can find them on Instagram @hanaofthebog.

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Jennifer Furner (she/her) has essays in the anthologies of Art in the Time of Covid-19 and A Teenager's Guide to Feminism. She has been published in HuffPost Personal, Motherwell, Sammiches and Psych Meds, and multiple Medium publications. She lives in Grand Rapids, MI, with her husband and daughter. For more of her writing, visit her website jenniferfurner.com or follow her on Twitter @JenniferFurner.

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Aracely Medina was born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida. She has been published in Élan, Black Fox, The Freshwater Review, and The Talon Review. In her spare time, she enjoys reading and writing poetry and science fiction. She currently attends the University of North Florida, where she is pursuing a BA in English with a minor in Creative Writing.

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Fran Fernández Arce (she/her) is a Chilean poet currently living in Suffolk, England. She has recently started sharing her poetry to the outside world and has been published in Pollux Journal. She has been living in England for more than a year now but she is still scared of all the apparently harmless house spiders crawling around the ceiling of her bedroom. You can find her talking about poetry as @dylanblue3 on Twitter.

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Sarah Peck is a painter and illustrator living in Rockledge, FL. She earned her BFA in Animation/Illustration from SUNY Fredonia and attended residencies at Chautauqua Institution's School of Art and The Yards Collaborative Art Space in Rochester, NY. You can find more of her work on Instagram @silverlynstudio and on her website www.sarahpeckpaints.com.

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Devonae J. Manderson (she/her) is a queer, Jamaican poet and storyteller. Her work explores themes of black womanhood, sexuality, spirituality, and culture as well as her experiences with meeting herself as the many different women she is. Find her on Twitter @soulandmelanin or blogging at soulandmelanin.wordpress.com.

Sophie Scolnik-Brower

Sophie Scolnik-Brower is a professional pianist in the Boston area with a longtime passion for writing poetry and creative nonfiction. An active participant in writing workshops throughout the city, she is drawn to prose that sounds like music. Her work has been published with Willowdown Books and in Sky Island Journal.

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Sarah Hilton (she/her) is a queer poet from Scarborough, Ontario and a Master of Information student at the University of Toronto. Her work is currently featured or forthcoming at Contemporary Verse 2, Off Menu Press, Ithaca Lit, and elsewhere. You can find her on Twitter @hilton_sarah_ and on Instagram @sar_ahhil.

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Samantha K Mosca is a jack of many trades: actress, writer, academic, photographer, and editor. She is a bi-femme, immigrant, activist and a mum who spends her days chasing her wee toddler and her nights chasing her art. You can find her on Twitter @xsyrinex and on Instagram @syrine_barathrum.

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Amy Lee Lillard is the author of Dig Me Out, a short story collection forthcoming from Atelier26 Books. She was shortlisted for the 2017 Berlin Writing Prize and named one of Epiphany's Breakout 8 Writers in 2018. Her writing appears in Barrelhouse, Foglifter, Off Assignment, Gertrude, and other publications. Lillard is one of the broads behind Broads and Books, the funny and feminist book podcast. Find her work at www.amyleelillard.com, and connect on Instagram (@alillard77) or Twitter (@amyleelillard).

Rae

Rae (she/her) is a queer artist in her 20s who uses her work to explore the relationship between herself and the world around her. She works both traditionally and digitally and has always been fascinated with light and the human body. You can find her on Twitter @DriveNii or on Instagram @i.drive.a.nii.san.

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Carly (she/her/hers) lives in Boston, MA, where she is pursuing an undergraduate degree in Writing and Communications. She writes both poetry and prose, and particularly enjoys exploring topics including femininity, mental health, and love in her pieces. When she isn't writing, you can find her reading, playing guitar, or hanging out with her dog. Find her on Instagram @carlysilva23.

Emmaline Bristow

Emmaline Bristow (she/her) grew up in Helena, Montana, and obtained her BA in English literature and creative writing at the University of Montana, then her MFA in poetry from Drew University. She currently lives in Missoula, Montana where she works in communications for her local government.

Nicole Little

Nicole Little is the grown-up edition of that queer kid with ADHD who was always drawing. She has a deep love for picking up and reimagining discarded and unvalued things. She posts free, monthly pocket zines on her website: <https://littleneocreative.com/zines/> and hangs out appreciating art & poetry as @littleneocreative on Instagram.

Audrey Gidman

Audrey Gidman is a queer poet living in central Maine. Her poems can be found or are forthcoming in SWWIM, The West Review, époque press, FEED, Anti-Heroine Chic, and elsewhere. She received her BFA from the University of Maine Farmington and her chapbook, body psalms, winner of the Elyse Wolf Prize, is forthcoming from Slate Roof Press. You can find her on Twitter @audreygidman.

Mariya Khan

Mariya Khan (she/her) is a South Asian and Muslim American writer from Maryland. She is a graduate of the International Writing Program's Summer Institute in Iowa City. When Mariya isn't writing, she's trying new recipes and watching crime dramas. You can find more of her work at <https://mariyaskhan.wixsite.com/portfolio>.

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