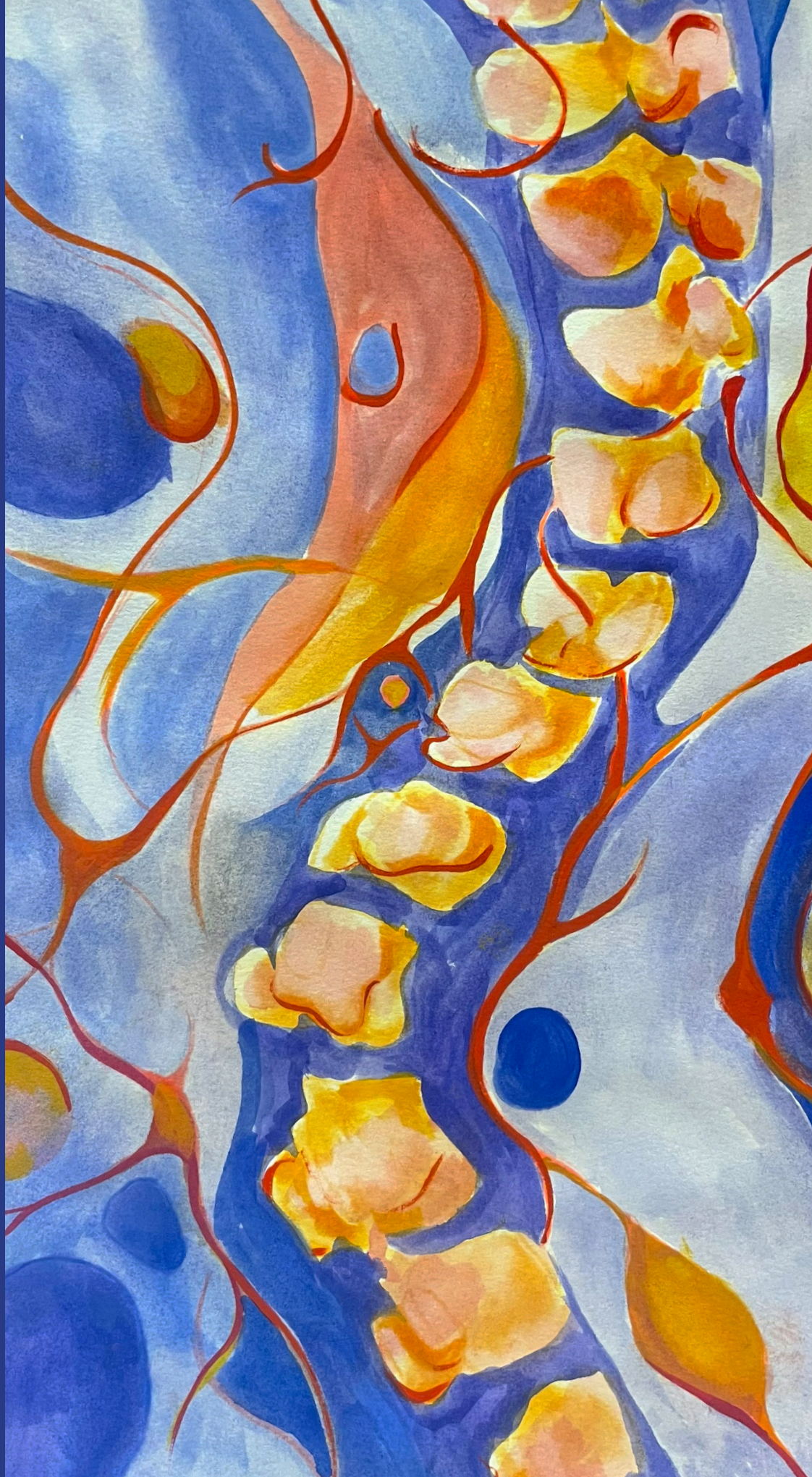
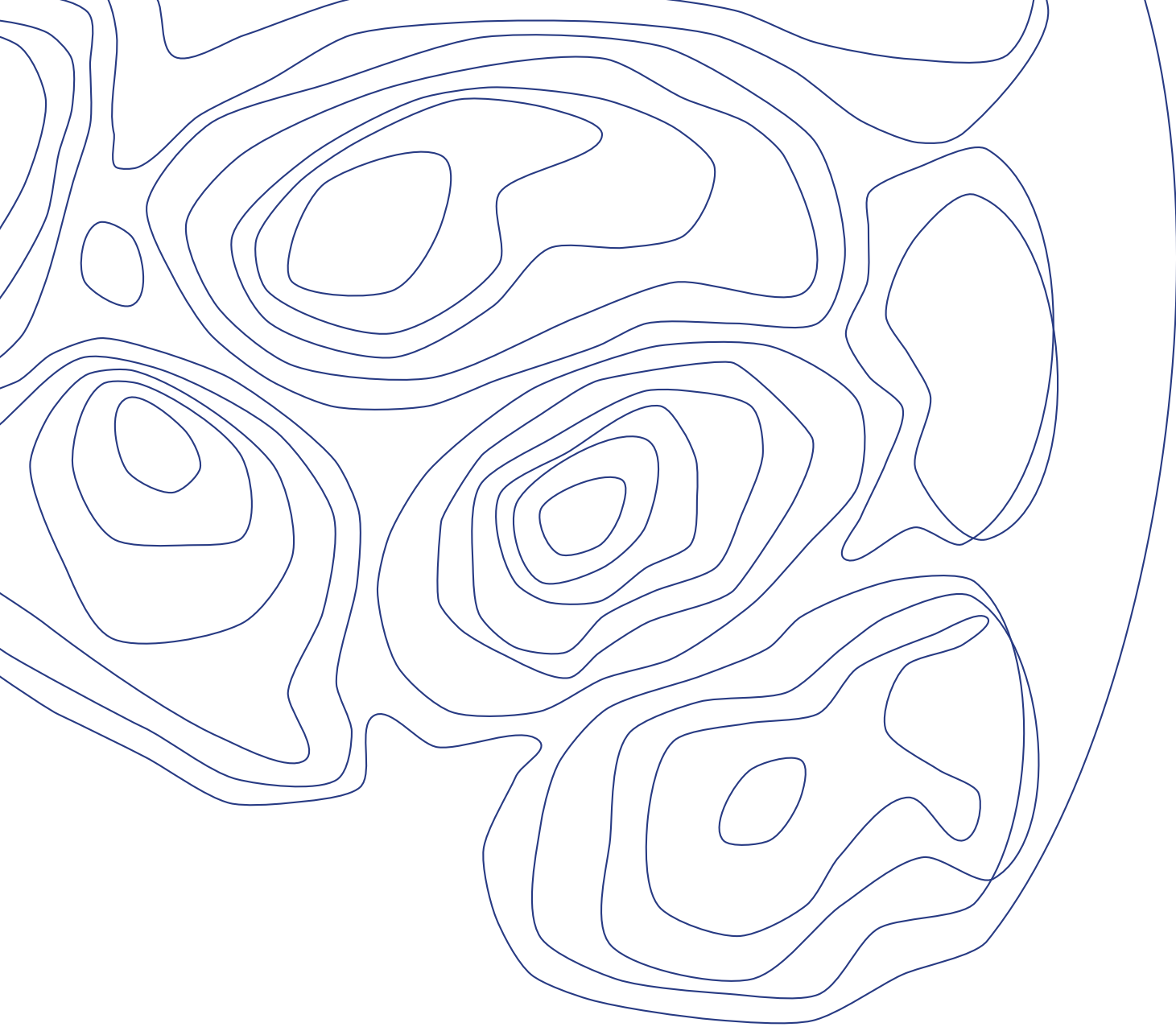


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2026

FLUX





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PHOENIX

2026: FLUX

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June 2026



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Letter from the Editor

Perhaps H. G. Wells foreshadowed the fate of this magazine when he named it *Phoenix*. Despite fading sometimes to ash, and no matter how long its dormancy, it always finds a way back into print. Still, at its core, *Phoenix* remains the same magazine: a space for creative expression within the confines of a STEM(B) university – a place self-defined, often proudly, by its technical focus.

This issue's theme, *Flux*, is therefore rather fitting. As a community of scientists, we encounter flux often: we meet it in vector fields, electrical currents, and the metabolic pathways of a cell.

Few forces embody flux more clearly today than artificial intelligence; it would be remiss to write an editorial in 2026 without acknowledging its surge and ubiquity. AI is certainly altering our outer world, but more significantly, it is altering us. At a moment when creativity feels increasingly easy to outsource, the choice to create matters all the more.

For *Phoenix*, we asked contributors to contort the concept beyond laboratory convention and turn it inward; to make sense of change, and to share it. What follows is a current of its own. It runs through water into pop culture, both real and imagined, back into nature – a recurring backdrop against our shifting identities – before drifting home to the scientific curiosity that grounds our perspectives on life.

As you move through these pages, we invite you to become attuned to the changes around and within you: stillness, motion, the pulls of your inner flux. Like *Phoenix*, we are constantly remaking ourselves. Transformation is difficult, but it is not inherently tied to loss – especially when it leaves behind art.

Aditi Mehta



Eleni Psaromatis
Where Mornings Start, 2026

Acrylic on canvas



Last summer I visited Margate, a small seaside town in Kent, with my mum. She grew up there and I had never been before (plus that day I had impressively woken up before noon), so on a whim we decided to commit to a trip. We ended up spending the day touring a town that was ultimately unknown to both of us. Every weathered stone corner we turned she would rattle off an anecdote of how “there used to be an ice cream spot there” or “your grandad once took me to an awful restaurant here”. No evidence of these places but her memory remained; the restaurants having long ago changed hands and looks to keep up with a town lost in its purpose.


Historically Margate was a fishing town, but as modern demand for such towns fell, it transformed into a tourism hotspot, leaving its boats washed up on the candescent gravel basin around the harbour. The day of our visit was seemingly the height of tourist season, indicated by the many people on the beachfront partaking in the yearly British tradition of forgetting about sunscreen. As we passed a bright red man eating a slightly less red strawberry ice cream, my mum noted that at least some things were the same as 30 years ago.

In my short trip I did notice something modish about the town: pockets of construction for housing, a new university set to open, and a slew of one-of-a-kind museums popping up such as the Crab Museum (which prides itself on a full display of crabs dressed as union strikers). A second life was coming to the town, filled with art, novelty, and palpable interest amongst its residents.

In Margate flux doesn't just mean what's happened over the last 30 years, but an excitement to grow into a better future. A cleverer person than I would call this painting something like *A New Tide for an Old Boat*. But I'm against being astute, so I'll probably just call it *Margate Shore*.

Matthew Wordsworth
Margate Shore, 2026

Watercolour on cotton canvas



Ocean today, lake tomorrow

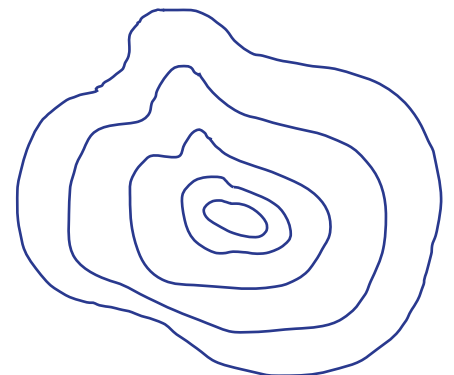
Rehmat Singh Chawla

An ocean today, a lake tomorrow
Amazing, how dampen the guilt and the sorrow
How pain becomes bearable, memories defaced
It all seems so small, nought but bitter taste
It's self-preservation: you move on, this way

A lake today, but it rains tomorrow
You'll sight a reflection that floods your borders
A photo, a message, a whiff from the past
The page in your notebook you can't bear to trash
Recollections murky but the grief is still sharp

You wait in vain as nights turn to morrows
The paling stain still stark on the white shirt
It drains and it rains and no change the lake shows
So regale all with tales, and drink for your parched throat
The lake will be pond will be puddle, ere you note

Yet in you a murmur would justify lakes
Play lawyer for grief and healing 'twould shame
Quiet it. You are not made wiser by blame
It is not a betrayal to get over the pain



Long Island City, Here I Come

Yohaán Master

I. NEW YORK IN MEMORIAM

*You were there the day the music died,
I'll be there the day it dies again.*

Jane Coltrane died in 2036 and broadly speaking things went downhill from there. It's hard to pinpoint why the specific catalysing ability of her death was so much more distinct than any of the other tragedies that befell the city that year, but nevertheless it was undeniable. Of course, the city was by no means a stranger to change; tragic or fortunate - if anything it thrived on it. The lifeblood of creatives and tyrants alike throbbled through the arterial streets, moulding and shifting the underlying industrial heart. But some cuts are too deep to staunch the bleeding.

It bears clarifying that my work is not implicitly biographical in nature. Documenting the fall of a civilisation typically calls for broad, impasto strokes of causality laid down on a literary canvas: futile attempts to reconcile acute shifts in the cultural zeitgeist and metronomic movements of war machines. Yet Jane lingers constantly in the back of my mind (and at the top of my research file). I spread the same newspaper clippings and journal articles in front of me for what feels like the millionth time:

I pick up the second article, skimming through it for quotes. Even across continents and centuries, her words hold me in a vice-like grip, still drawing me back time and time again however far my writing meanders over the course of my research. She was an activist in every sense; fighting the good fight and spreading the good word. A famous story (perhaps apocryphal) describes her organising an impromptu concert midway through a week-long hunger strike, screaming out the names of every life claimed by the riot police over scraping, dissonant strings. While she was still alive, there was even a set of rights named after her; ruling it illegal to force-feed or otherwise deter protestors in the course of their activism. She had personally helped fight for the ruling, briefly calling upon her former life as a certified public defender, in one of the most widely televised court hearings of the decade. Years after her passing, they were quietly renamed to the "Harlan Rights" after the presiding chief justice at the hearing, before eventually being overturned altogether under President Weiss.

From the start, her musical output was said to be imbued with that spirit of activism, equal parts haunting and galvanising. She began her career under the name "Hazy Jane and the IPAs", flitting between bar gigs with a rotating cast of instrumentalists (mostly her law school friends). Coltrane was herself a vocalist and infrequent cellist, a talent she initially claimed was completely self-taught, before admitting in later interviews that her ex-girlfriend had shown her the basics. Dissatisfied with the band's mediocre success, Coltrane separated on good terms to focus on her solo work. The IPAs solidified their core and continued to play, even securing opening spots for

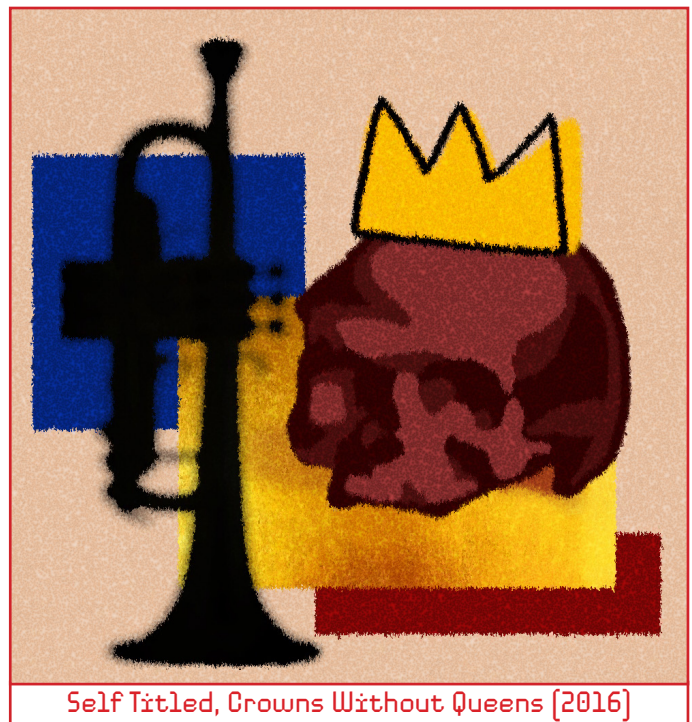
Nu-Hyperjazz Legend Killed by Anti-Trans Hate Group TERFWAR in fifth lynching of the year
Who was Coltrane? A retrospective on the pianist and cultural icon || 20th Gen Google AI signs US Military
Far-Right Independent Petra Weiss Polls at 60% || Eyes Open Investors! This Spots
ays The President || US Literacy Rate Falls to Historic Lows Alongside Large-Scale Education Sector Cuts
Hindsight is 2060: Former mayor Weiss's presidential bid succeeds in historical win || Fully Autonomous FL
Assassination of UN general secretary is to 'set an example', per latest Weiss press release

other local musicians and solo acts. However, they never quite managed to break into the commercial mainstream on their own merit, and less than a decade after Jane left the group, they disbanded.

Coltrane, however, experienced a marked rise in popularity upon this separation. 2013 marked the release of her debut solo EP, the rather wordily-titled *Winter Equinox Unrisen Upon The Spring Solstice* under the alias “Crowns Without Queens”. She would continue with this moniker for a full decade before rebranding to her legal name, potentially an indicator of her general shift in focus at the time towards serious sociopolitical efforts alongside her music. Though she was still firmly rooted in the underground at the time of the project’s release, *Winter Equinox* would retroactively become something of a cult classic; with its sharp, distorted lyricism and high-tempo analog instrumentation later coming to be seen as defining features of a genre Coltrane coined “Nu-Hyperjazz”.

Three years later, the release of a self-titled sophomore record accompanied the beginnings of commercial success; with the single “Judeath and Holo-Fernes” even briefly making it onto one of Spotify’s daily charts. While Spotify is now mostly remembered for its monopolistic control over the arts in Weiss’s propaganda machine, at the time it was solely a music streaming platform (albeit the largest in the world) and played an undeniable role in helping propel Coltrane to the place she eventually held in the country’s musical ecosystem. *Crowns Without Queens* also drew considerable critical acclaim for its refinement of the Nu-Hyperjazz sound, and by the time the third album, *No Smoking Here*, was released, Coltrane had started to taste the success that she had been chasing.

Despite my position as arguably the preeminent modern scholar of Coltrane’s work, that sophomore record was the only one I was able to listen to, and any investigation of her remaining output is regrettably based on secondhand research. It is the only album that survived the combination of widespread digitisation of music and film, induced obsolescence and subsequent near-complete loss of physical records, and Weiss’s late-century purge of retroactively “anti-state” media. However, I would like to think that even if I did have access to Coltrane’s entire catalogue, it would still be my favourite. There is a raw, unabashed spirit driving the winding cello melodies and sparse vocals across the *Crowns Without Queens*; a spirit that contemporary critics said was largely tempered by her building maturity in later work. Selfishly, I am glad that I got to listen to Coltrane’s music before pain infused her notes and before weariness wormed its way into her chords. I want her to be remembered in death as she was in life: as a fighter.



Self Titled, Crowns Without Queens (2016)

II. WEISS'S WALTZ

*He said, "A masterpiece belongs to the dead
There are microphones under your bed
And there's footage that will prove us both wrong"*

The first world war had the fairly common epithet “The Chemist’s War”, and historians were rather eager to dub the second as “The Physicist’s War” in turn. However, this title did not have nearly as much staying power, and as such journalists were reluctant to give a quippy title to the conflict that consumed the theatre of war at the end of the 21st century. In fact, nowadays it’s contested whether it could even be considered a “World War” at all, considering that most of the world did nothing more than helplessly watch as the Big 5 traded nuclear warheads back and forth for the better half of a decade. As far as I’m concerned, however, if a tenth of the world’s population getting wiped out doesn’t qualify for world war status, then I sincerely hope nothing ever does. Regardless, I will leave the debates on hypernyms for other historians.

What isn’t contentious, however, is the pivotal role Petra Weiss played in both the instigation and ensuing escalation of the conflict. Not since Ronald Reagan or Esha Tripathi had a presidential voice

swayed the course of American politics to such a far-reaching extent. After a brief, yet immensely popular stint as New York City's mayor, Weiss pivoted from their position as a somewhat moderate voice to instead become an outspoken leader of the far right, taking their fanbase with them all the way to the White House. Equal measures tactical and ruthless, it wasn't long before they had a near-absolute chokehold over every public institution, and eventually, nearly all private ones too. During their first term, "Weissonomics" was internationally hailed as a success story, and any US citizen who complained about the constant pursuit of autarky was quickly silenced.

In a morbid way, it is simultaneously comedic and tragic that the United Nations grew a spine only when it was too late. When Weiss began their reign over American politics, the UN was a mostly vestigial entity; a symbol of pan-nationalism which the world had become considerably disillusioned with. Desperate for relevancy in the face of this ennui, the general assembly elected Park Kyung-Won to the position of general secretary, and at only 35, she was the youngest incumbent of that position by nearly a decade.

Park was an outspoken idealist, a fierce proponent of human rights at a time when they were treated more like suggestions; often outbid by greed in the auction of capitalism. Even in the 2060s, when artificial intelligence was nothing more than a rudimentary genie-in-a-bottle, Park had the foresight to (fruitlessly) attempt to spearhead the passage of binding resolutions governing AI and prohibiting its usage in warzones. Historians of the time pointed to that specific effort as the one which tipped Weiss over the edge; though in the light of dialogues that were eventually uncovered from within the presidential cabinet, our modern understanding is that Park's fate was already doomed quite some time earlier.

Park was said to be a skillful orator, though her death was soon followed by a purge of any recordings that could possibly substantiate that claim. By the time of Weiss's appointment, Spotify had cemented itself as the ultimate media conglomerate, having first acquired YouTube Music and then YouTube as a whole after the government followed through on its threats to break up Google. The significance of this change – at its core just a handover from one monopoly to another – wasn't immediately apparent to the average US consumer. However, it became clear upon Weiss's seizure of state news outlets. Unlike their predecessors, Weiss was not threatened by the existence of technological monopoly but rather recognised its potential. They handed over all livestream rights (and whatever few vestiges of relevancy television still clung onto at this point) to

the Spotify board, while simultaneously tightening the government's control over all the company's decisions.

It isn't clear whether citizens of other countries caught on to this takeover, but we do know that thanks to a rapidly developing firewall against foreign influence, US locals remained unwittingly entrenched in Weiss's newly formed vehicle of state propaganda. Even Coltrane couldn't escape the far reach of the ensuing "Petra Purges". The *Crowns Without Queens* record itself only survived due to its Goldilocks position as Coltrane's first album to be popular enough for widespread media distribution, without being released too late that it was not sold on physical media. Even then, it is a miracle that anything survived both the bombings and the inexorable passage of time. The copy I own was originally sent overseas as a Christmas gift and wound up unopened for a century in an attic, before a discerning eye eventually recognised its importance. I had to enlist the help of a group of technological archaeologists to piece together old manuals and scavenge dig sites so we could build something that could even play it; an undertaking made only possible via a generous grant from the Ministry of Culture and dedication of eight years of my life.

Unlike Coltrane, we will never hear Park's words in her own voice. However, many of her more famous speeches have survived the test of time; snippets of them codified in the few corners of the internet that stayed independent and shielded. I have a favourite, which I've compiled and copied down myself by hand in my notes. It is hard to pin down why exactly this speech calls out to me so much. Maybe it is because it was one of the last ones Park delivered before her life was so brutally cut short. Or perhaps it is because of the speech's almost prescient nature, a foretelling of the future that would soon come to pass. Regardless of what exactly draws me to it, Park's thoughts in that speech guide my own work in much the same way that Coltrane's does; and while I am by no means nearly as well versed in her life and legacy as I am with Jane's, I can still recite the words of the Churchshore Address with the same ease with which I breathe...

*Weiss pivoted...
taking their
fanbase with
them all the
way to the
White House*

III. THE CHURCHSHORE ADDRESS

Reproduced from transcripts of
Park Kyung-Won (2066)

For decades now, there has been a force of change and renewal passing through the broader cultural plane of the world, glacial both in its pace and sheer magnitude. And it is that very same sociokinetic flux that has driven me all these years, yet simultaneously allowed for the resurgence of fascism worldwide.

We watched with dismay as France chose to vote a warmonger and convicted pedophile¹ back into office, the indoctrinated populace feebly pointing towards "concerns over sovereignty". We watched in fear as swathes of South America and Eastern were chopped up and redistributed to foreign powers in what can only be described as a modern resurgence of colonialism. And now, we stand to watch^{as} Patra Weiss tightens their grip over America.

1. Echoing Park's own death, Léon Poincaré would later be assassinated by Weiss after escalating threats between their respective nations, an event that would become one of the main instigators of the third World War.

Yet, that is all that the left seems to be doing: watching. Where is our righteous impetus? When did we acquiesce to only playing fair; meekly falling in line with their rules and only dissenting within the lines they draw for us? It's so easy to blame the malleability of the masses, and the blind eye of the privileged, but we are no less at fault for what has been allowed to take place. And if we don't shed our passivity soon, then we will similarly be culpable for what happens next.

For I now fear that we are rapidly approaching an event horizon. The success of China, India and now America's nationwide firewalls and intranets have started to pique the attention of countries that were hitherto open and collaborative. The consumption and dissemination of media too has become more regulated, state-governed, and frankly xenophobic. And I for one am terrified of this new international shift towards quasi-sehoku² policies; towards a renormalisation and hyper-isolation after centuries of working together to innovate and build. Every step forward for the dictators and capitalists is ten steps back for humanity.

2. The exact transcription of this word is contested, however this version is what I am most inclined to believe.

And in the same breath that I mourn the loss of future innovation, I am distinctly wary of the abuse of emergent technology. When the LLM servers all went down a decade ago, it didn't take an oracle to predict that they would eventually return; faster, cheaper, and out of the hands of the public. And now they have in fact come back as tools for the world's militarists, devoid of their prior facsimile of a "personality" - finally comfortable to reveal their cold, tokenized interior. I suffer no delusions of a sci-fi takeover of humanity from these digital djinns. Rather, I fear the all-too-real threat of those already in power, who can now give orders to subordinates who will never turn down a command or even hesitate.

In these apocalyptic times, I often think of a line from a song by Jane Coltrane. It was in one of her earlier works, *older than me even*³, and it goes ~~back~~ something like this: "Tear me rough, no passive room / So I know I've ripped you right back / Rather unclear than pristine." The same glacial forces that drive me have torn me too, and so too has it torn Weiss, and Poincaré, and Coltrane, and everyone else in the world. And the fascists certainly haven't let it tear clean; letting the scars manifest in the pain they inflict and the power they crave.

3. Miraculously, the song she is referencing is on the Crowns Without Queens self-titled record.

But we must be left rough too.

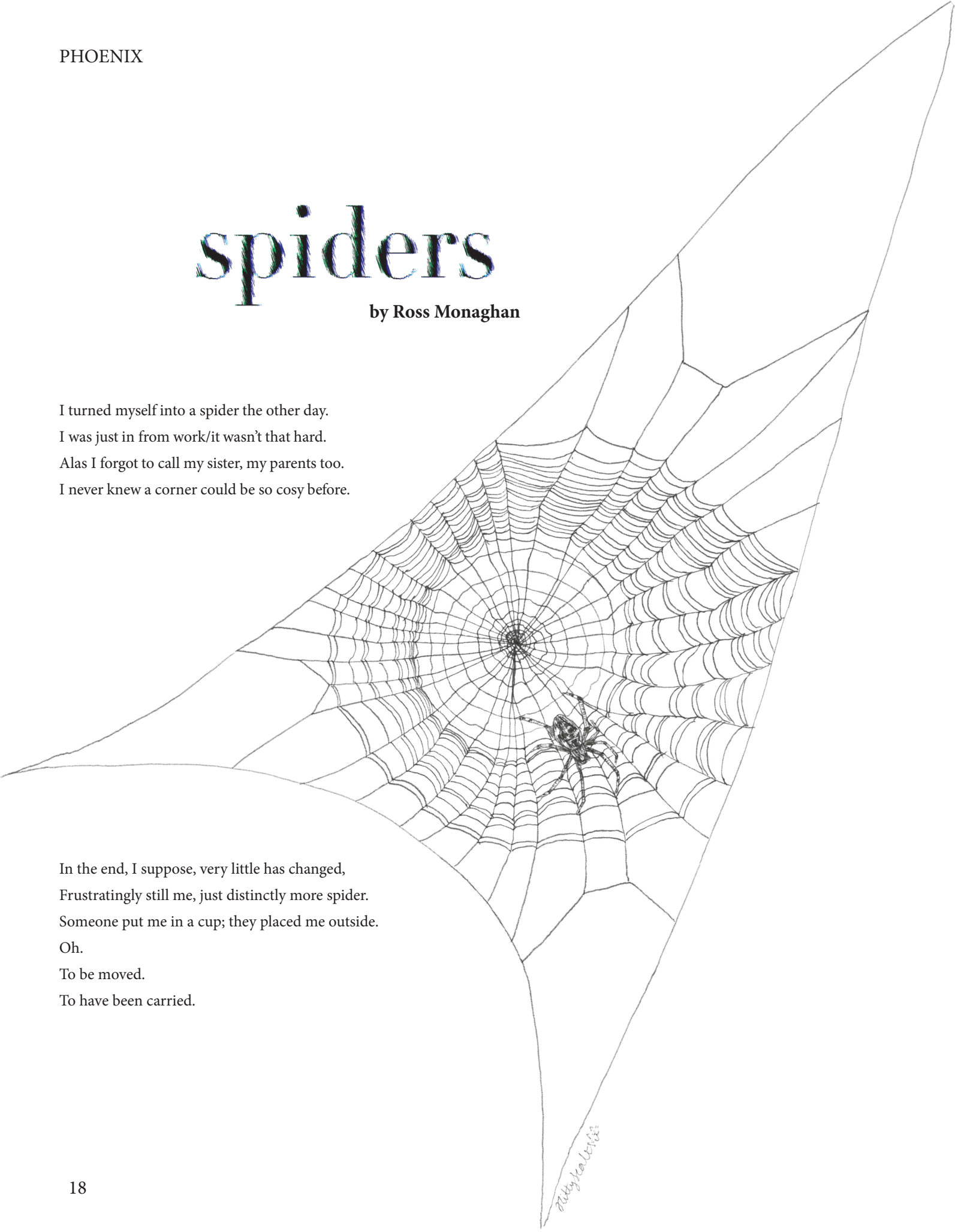
There is no moral grandstanding in pristineness, in going gentle into that good night. We must rip back, stand against what is wrong, and let ourselves be marked. And if one day we are reduced to nothing but debris, I hope the future uncovers our bodies and traces the lines of struggle, knowing that there were those who resisted; from the singers to the cities.

spiders

by Ross Monaghan

I turned myself into a spider the other day.
I was just in from work/it wasn't that hard.
Alas I forgot to call my sister, my parents too.
I never knew a corner could be so cosy before.

In the end, I suppose, very little has changed,
Frustratingly still me, just distinctly more spider.
Someone put me in a cup; they placed me outside.
Oh.
To be moved.
To have been carried.



Robyn/10/12/12



Rarely are generations so far apart seen sharing the passage of time, and with it, change. One stands at the very beginning of life, tongue out, unaware of what lies ahead. The other stands in quiet admiration, carrying the knowledge of how much has already passed. They are strangers, connected only by a brief moment before everything shifts. Time brings a kind of change that cannot be stopped. The image captures a moment where time is neither past nor future, but briefly shared.

Utkarsh Jetly
Time, Briefly, 2026

busy being born

On 11th December 2025, Cameron Winter sat at a black Steinway in Carnegie Hall’s Isaac Stern Auditorium and played a sold-out room. The detail that changed how the event reads: Paul Thomas Anderson, assisted by Benny Safdie, filmed the performance but remained visible enough that the filming became part of the story rather than a hidden production note. The first thing to understand about this night: it’s more than just a concert but a test of the artist, of the audience, of New York’s appetite, and of a culture that increasingly wants to crown people before they’ve had time to become anything at all. Winter arrived carrying the momentum of his late-2024 solo debut, *Heavy Metal*, alongside the broader rise of his band, Geese, and their 2025 album, *Getting Killed*. But as its forebears have shown before, Carnegie Hall demands more than just momentum.

Carnegie Hall acts as a sorting mechanism for cultural memory. It has long functioned as a tribunal of legacy, where New York negotiates between what passes through and what has permanence. For an artist emerging from the art-rock and poetic counterculture lineage, playing this room is all about institutional validation. It is the moment where the “underground” is invited into this permanent museum. New York has always done this, it metabolises art into verdicts, turning nights into lore and building mythology around certain rooms, certain publications, certain crowds and it needs to do that –

being a culture-defining city is part of what it sells and part of what it is.

The Carnegie Hall ritual follows a specific template. To understand Winter’s night, one must look at the ghost of Carnegie past; 26th October 1963 – the night a 22-year-old Bob Dylan made his Carnegie Hall debut. The archives describe a “seemingly stunned audience” and an intense “shushing silence”. Dylan delivered a 19-song set including “Blowin’ In the Wind” and “A

Hard Rains A-Gonna Fall”. The *New York Times* clipping of the event captures the mood perfectly. The headline reads: “Folk Songs Draw Carnegie Cheers” and the strapline declares: “Bob Dylan appears as an ‘Angry Young Recitalist’”. This is the old Carnegie alchemy: the moment when a young musician becomes a cultural event. Dylan, historically did more than earn that framing. He detonated the mundane assumptions of popular songwriting, turning songs into a medium for poetry, surrealism, moral argument and personal drama at a scale unseen in mainstream music. When the Swedish Academy awarded him the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature,

it did so “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.” Formalising what listeners had felt for decades: Dylan had moved songwriting into the literary and cultural centre by force. More importantly, he survived what followed the coronation by refusing to live inside it forever.

Winter’s night heralded a deluge of opinions – almost immediately social media was flooded with



Cameron Winter 2024,
Lygonstreet CC BY-SA 4.0

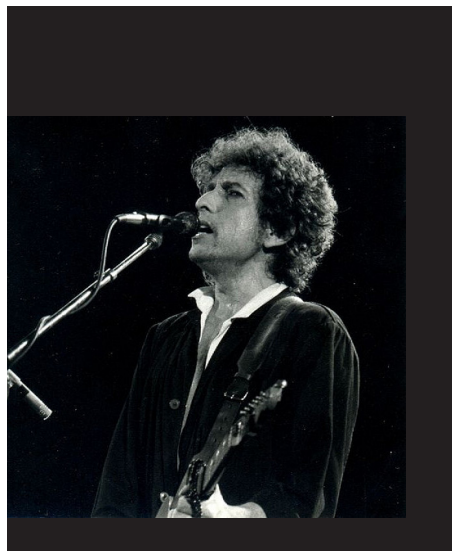
or busy dying

Amol Chauhan

footage of the night or rather the anti-footage of it – accompanied by an outpouring of Dylan comparisons all arriving at once. The images were stark with Winter alone on stage, without elaborate stage choreography. The specific posture, the turned back, the refusal to play the classic intimacy game ignited the comparison more than any chord change. It didn't feel like the hollow cosplay of artists like Jesse Welles, who adopt the curly hair and harmonica but lack the internal engine. It felt closer to an ethos, recalling the Dylan of 2025 trapped behind a gaping hood and grand piano: both are there to play music, not pose for pictures. Winter stripped his material barebones until little remained beyond the piano and howling voice, he refused to offer stable footing playing new and unique arrangements, with naked vocals echoing Dylan's. The comparison works even when the sound is not the same because their stances are both recognisably anti-spectacle.

I came to Cameron Winter sideways, before the Hall made him a public figure. I first came across a YouTube video in 2023 when he covered Nick Drake's "Place to Be" in a New York corner store tied to a suicide-hotline awareness fundraiser. I liked his voice immediately. I have always been partial towards nasally voices, and the song gripped me the way the original had always done. I had heard Geese's 2023 album, *3D Country*, and at the time, thought nothing much of it. Their next release pulled me

back into their landscape, however. Even though the newest album hasn't fully gripped me, it dragged me back into revisiting *3D Country* and Cameron's solo project *Heavy Metal*. Since then, I've been unable to shake the feeling of for once, being present while music that feels genuinely alive is being made and why this deserves the rigour it's being given.



Bob Dylan 1991,
Xavier Badosa CC BY-SA 3.0

There is no single Bob. Winter himself understands this, which complicates the comparison. Dylan is uniquely elusive and as Winter put it plainly, Dylan has "been several dudes". That matters because it kills the fantasy that one can stand in for all the others. We all think that if we met him, we would already know him, or at least some version of him. Dylan makes you want to know him and you think you do until suddenly you don't. Some call that genius, but others such as Joni Mitchell frame it as a critique; "inauthentic", "a plagiarist" and a "deception". This split in interpretations has followed Dylan for decades as he keeps refusing to stay in any

readable form. Personally, every Dylan song I listen to feels different because I've heard him perform songs live in two, three, four, nine different ways (much akin to Winter), and every time it feels like meeting an idol. The single most enduring thing for me is that Dylan seems to have wilfully painted out his soul across his lyrics; exposing divorce, children, melancholy, old age, youth, rebellion, sex, murder,

and love. His entire catalogue is a testimony of one man's life under constant revision.

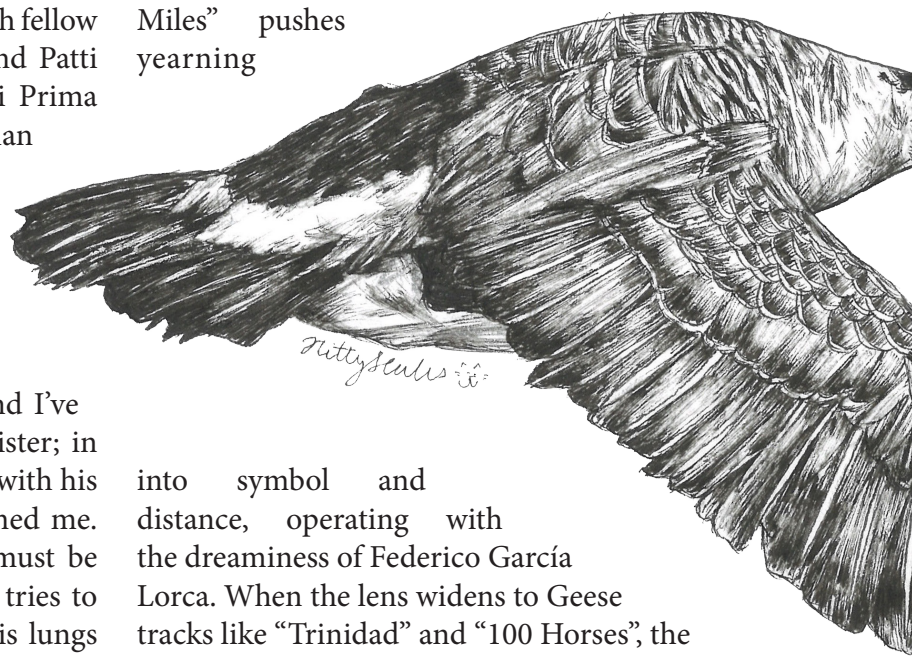
Most monumental is Dylan's commitment to movement. Winter says Dylan lives by the logic that "an album is an album, and you are who you are when you are". There is no static brand or fixed self, and he refuses to stop changing. He keeps moving, era after era, even across the fourth decade of what people call the "Never Ending Tour". Add to that the feral charisma in Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home*, the humanity of his writing through the 80s and 90s, the defiance of an aged man still roaring in the present day and you arrive somewhere most artists never take you – being handed someone's whole life. So the point is not lost, if we want to compare Dylan and Winter: we must be able to be honest enough to wait and see where Winter goes. Right now, there is a comparison to be made, especially to that young, pale-faced, hillbilly Dylan who also stood at Carnegie Hall under impossible projection. Dylan is the gold standard here; we should make the comparison not to flatten Winter but push the artist and his peers towards the highest mountains.

Winter's voice is textured, unique, and dividing – I can hear Dylan in it. "Nina + Field of Cops" threw me back into the 1960s, art-deco-adjacent stream of consciousness tradition, a line running through fellow Carnegie Hall figures like Allen Ginsberg and Patti Smith, through Frank O'Hara and Diane di Prima and inevitably toward the writing mode Dylan exemplified. I'd place it in the atmospheric realm of "Desolation Row". It is image rich, unstable, surreal, and emotionally exacting through disorientation. The music is always rich in colour and emotion. I've often struggled to enter an emotional contract with many musicians, and I've found myself leaning on the male vocal register; in Winter's case, that emotional pull, combined with his exceptional musical education is what charmed me. *Heavy Metal* has been in deep rotation. It must be said Winter can be soppy, something Dylan tries to avoid, but he balances it by howling from his lungs with Geese. Winter's own Carnegie reports describe him similarly to Dylan "covering himself," reshaping meter and phrasing live. Winter's interpretation of

song is a moving target, animated by Dylan's ethic of self-revision. Whether that is enough to build a body of work rather than a live mythology remains open.

Dylan's great move was to make songs behave like poems in active argument with older texts, high literature, scripture, Symbolism, Modernism, Beat writing, without giving up the velocity of popular music. You can hear that method plainly: in "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go" Dylan names Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud directly, collapsing French Symbolist scandal and modern love-song vulnerability into one line. In "Desolation Row" he stages a modernist crowd-scene where Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot are literal characters fighting in the captain's tower, turning the song into a collage-city of literary fragments and cultural debris. That collage ethic is exactly what critics have long identified in Dylan as taking past voices and shaping them into his own device.

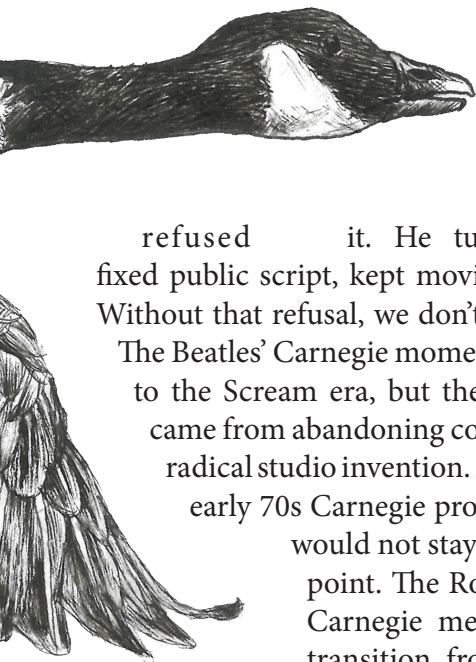
Cameron Winter's writing stops looking like 2024 eccentricity and more like apprenticeship in a serious tradition when you dignify the comparison. "The Rolling Stones" carries a Rimbaldian self-mythology, and "Drinking Age" works closer to the urban lyricism of O'Hara, where vulnerability is spoken. "Love Takes Miles" pushes yearning



into symbol and distance, operating with the dreaminess of Federico García Lorca. When the lens widens to Geese tracks like "Trinidad" and "100 Horses", the texture turns apocalyptic and satirical at once, echoing the Dylan lesson that prophetic language can be both deadly serious and comic. Maybe Winter

sounds like Dylan, but it is true both artists treat songs as places where older poets keep speaking in the present. But mastery in a tradition is very different to apprenticeship, and Winter has so far given just one album and he must sustain it.

As Dylan's beloved T. S. Eliot said, "mature poets steal" and the creative scene is inherently a long line of thieves. Dylan was a master of this craft, a borrower of ballads, blues, and radio. The sources run from ancient India to Dante, to Anton Chekhov, to Rimbaud, to The Terminator and even, in recent years, to things as contemporary and unexpected as Machine Gun Kelly freestyling on radio. Winter's rise reflects a similar drive to be a student of sound where his influences are his tools. He pairs his Dylan obsession with deep dives into Albert Ayler's free jazz, Sonny Sharrock's aggression and Ornette Coleman's legacy. Winter understands the landscape of esoteric sound, from Lubomyr Melnyk's continuous music to the abrasive textures of black metal. This rejects the vain "New Dylan" cosplay energy we've seen. You see the toil of a musician trying to pull unfamiliar, often abrasive energies into the familiar form of song. The result is tension rather than comfort and Winter's own reaction, "I like that tension", reads like an artist recognising his own method.



Dylan was raised into the role of "next big thing", then "the voice of a generation", and then critically, he

refused it. He turned away from the fixed public script, kept moving and kept changing. Without that refusal, we don't get the full Dylan arc. The Beatles' Carnegie moment in early 1964 belongs to the Scream era, but their long-term greatness came from abandoning comfort and pushing into radical studio invention. Likewise, David Bowie's early 70s Carnegie profile sits near a phase he would not stay in; reinvention was the point. The Rolling Stones, too, sit in Carnegie memory as part of their transition from youthful flash into harder, darker, larger forms. It seems we have decided what Cameron Winter is

and yet he has barely even begun.

We are quicker and quicker to crown someone before the work has time to harden. If we are to anoint anyone sincerely, the terms must be serious: durability, reinvention, risk, and the ability to evolve when the applause softens. That is why the "saviours of rock" mutterings are too cheap for this moment. Cameron Winter may genuinely have the appetite and the education to build something that lasts but then again Carnegie Hall has seen plenty of arrivals that went nowhere. Nonetheless, the most prudent response is not acceleration. America and namely New York has a recurring urge to manufacture prodigies, because prodigies reassure us that the cultural engine still works; that the dream still produces new faces to carry old myths. We can see the pattern everywhere, including the current film cycle: *Marty Supreme*, led by the very same actor who portrayed Dylan on screen twelve months prior, is a portrait of American ambition mythology: the dream, the hustle, the arrival. The casting alone tells you something about how the culture recycles its hunger for prodigies. So, when people crown Winter as a generational saviour, it isn't about Winter at all but rather a broader cultural need: we want the future to have a face, and preferably a young one.

"Saviour" is flattening artists into symbols, and it does so at the wrong moments. In a world where AI-generated music floods platforms at 60,000 uploads a day, the idiosyncratic, manual risk of an artist like Winter is a rare form of dignity. We are so desperate to participate and bear witness to the moment that the retelling begins before the night even ends. (And they ask why Dylan has banned phones from his concerts.)

But beyond the noise and the cameras, the 11th December event served a simpler purpose. By the end of the night, the image that remains is simple: Winter at the Steinway, back turned, in a room that sounded less like applause than deliberation. Carnegie held its breath, cameras kept rolling, and "Nina + Field of Cops" sat in the air like evidence, unresolved, abrasive and alive. The encore was a threshold rather than a coronation – proof that the case is worth hearing. Whether Cameron Winter is "busy being born or busy dying" wasn't answered at Carnegie Hall. It is a question that he will have to answer every time he steps on stage. There is dignity in the pursuit.

Henry Linton
Untitled (2025)

Oil on canvas



Australian in London

in London

and not in Australia

Ross Monaghan

sitting by the sea, we saw a grey shrikethrush
and you sang me their songs, to show me how
a red robin there could be friends with a flycatcher here
now separated by a distance, if i squint, i suppose yes
the curves of each coastline *do* look the same
but where do i sit to mimic a grey shrikethrush?

now with time, have i forgotten that i crossed an ocean?
to ward off this cold i remember the times
of passing strangers that smell of you
i allow these waves to crash over me
stretching out in the spray
i wait for the migrating tern from across the sea



BLACK KNIGHT

Konrad Holubinski

I

watched the waves lap along the sea from the comfort of a distant bench. The faint reflection of the moon against the water, which rippled nervously as one wave after another slammed into the coast. It looked oddly perfect, like I was walking around a gallery and this was merely another painting hanging on the wall. Like I could buy this moment and carry it around with me forever, so if I ever felt the world slipping away from me, I could take it out of my bag and cry into it like a towel.

The mere fact that I could see the moon, the water, could feel the sand greyed out by the night, was proof I was still alive. That I'd made it back to Flutemouth safely. That if I somehow died, someone could prop my corpse up on the sand, prove that death could be defeated. If I, the humble servant to the king, could be slain by sword and yet walk back to Flutemouth without shedding blood, then anyone could.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I was here alone, being hugged by nature, as I'd always wanted. All I'd ever wanted was to wake up in some cabin in the middle of the woods, stare through the window, and be greeted by layers of snow. So much snow, you couldn't see the roots of the trees penetrating the soil. You'd just trudge through the ice, fall on the ground,

feel yourself sink through all the layers. And I would feel strangely alive, taking in every last drop of snow that melted around me. Could almost hear my inner child laughing with joy when I thought of that.

Instead, I was in Flutemouth. The king had sent me here with one mission – to go down the abandoned well every evening, and wipe out any pests nearby. It was a task, the king claimed, that only the most iron-hearted warrior could take on, and yet he chose me. He saw something in me, something I'm sure would terrify me if it sprang out of my heart and stood beside me. And all I did was meekly nod, bow before him, and promise that yes, I'd round up all the pests that live in the well, and rid you of your enemies.

Truth is, no one had ever heard of any enemies in Flutemouth. It's a very typical town, coast aside, even the well seemed pretty standard when I first saw it. Truth be told, my first reaction was scorn. I didn't show it, I was far too focused on keeping my face straight and my eyes stern to speak out against him. The large crowd of guards behind him, dotted around his throne, also made me hesitant to say anything other than "of course, Your Greatness".

He handed me my sword, told me he'd heard great things about my time as an assassin in long-forgotten lands, and promised this was an opportunity I'd never forget. I'd become a hero not just to the locals, but also to their children, and any future generations. My name would be the first in history books, and I'd become a god worshipped by the masses.

I once believed that becoming an assassin, serving abroad in far-flung countries, could one day bring me some recognition. That I'd have statues built

in my name, and people would sing folk songs about my legend. But I'd never managed to scale those heights. Alright, I wasn't some high-profile shooter, not that you'd want to be one. People never hired me for a quick job – they appointed me. Those who knew what I did for a living would be all cheerful if I managed to bury their problems without a single bloodstain, but I knew they'd end up spitting on my grave if I managed to outlive them. Then again, when your employers vary from petty drug lords who want you to bring a traitor to the ground, all the way to smiling politicians who couldn't let a scandal embroil them anytime soon, you gain a new perspective on everyone around you.

Everyone blurs into one massive smear, the kind that forms on the front of a bus window on a cool day. Eventually, you start to forget names and faces, and instead remember them by legend. That's the guy who wanted to keep a sex scandal under wraps. That's the jealous lover who just couldn't let go, and needed someone to take down their partner. And as you age, you only ever remember the important ones at the end of the day.

To almost everyone else, of course, I was the friendly delivery driver. A job I carried out at most twice a week, but hardly anyone cares who delivers the post, so long as it's there. And I was well disguised when an assassin – I've been too paranoid my whole life to not be. I could blend in with the walls, go in, shoot, frame the death as a suicide, then walk out unharmed.

To those who truly knew me, I was the Black Knight, because they claimed my acts were noble, though ultimately easy to forget, like how you always expect a blackened sky at night. I knew they were

two-faced – I mean, obviously, they were – but I grew to love this nickname. If I ever pass away, on my tombstone, I'd be the Black Knight; anything written otherwise would be a total lie.

I'm not sure anyone outside of the utterly depraved knows I'm the Black Knight, sword in hand, staring into the cold sea. My paranoia usually gets the better of me in the daytime, and I force myself to remain inside, only peeking through the curtains at the locals walking around the streets of Flutemouth. I am certain the king wouldn't let me be unmasked by a stranger who was once in the wrong circles, at least if he respects me so much. But I'm also aware of the murders he's committed before, too. We're very alike in that regard, with the key exception that I'm aware of it. I don't look into the mirror, proud that I once shot someone because I couldn't leave any witnesses. I can't take any satisfaction from throwing bodies into the sea, watching them bob up and down before slowly drifting to the bottom. When I look at myself, completely unmasked, all I see is a look-alike, a tragic reflection of what could have been.

Yet now I'm merely a humble servant. Humble enough not to tell the king that, no, you can't send me down a well with just a sword and a flimsy torch. But it was either put up with his commands or end up executed. He was well aware I could finish him off if we were one-on-one. He knew I was the Black Knight, that I'd likely shot some of his friends before. In fact, he may have even hired me before, but I could barely remember; it was ages ago.

It's also arguably true that, considering the life I'd led, I



should be more than capable of going down the well and piercing any pests that came my way. It would be insulting if I fought them with armour or a shotgun – only a sword or a shotgun – only a sword would do for me. And besides, the king comically believed the enemy needed to be disposed of humanely. So I took all I was given, bowed before him, and prepared to go down the well for my first mission.

It was so dark you could see the stars poking their way through the abyss. It was a full moon, perfect for guiding myself back into the real world. I caught one last look at Flutemouth, with its sleepy high street and broken clocktower, and descended down a rope into the well. I wrapped my legs tightly around the rope, one hand holding the torch, the other clutching to the fraying knots. My knuckles whitened as I descended, and my fingers were starting to burn. I needed to keep my cool, blend in as well as possible, even if the torch was distracting. I could hear my breathing against the damp walls of the well, soft echoes rebounding into my ears.

Seconds turned into hours, but soon my feet touched stone-cold ground, and I gently let go. I collapsed onto the ground almost immediately, my legs weak from the descent, and I nearly lost my sword. Luckily, it was laid out next to me, though dangerously close to my stomach. I got up, put it away, and carried on. There were two shafts, one to the left, another to the right, so I opted to head right, just because it was closest. The king never bothered to give me a map, though maybe he wasn't aware just how complex the entire site apparently was.

Still breathing heavily, staring into nothing.

Sometimes I thought I could see light, as if I was ascending into heaven, but then I blinked and realised I was being tricked. I'd shrug and carry on, sword in my hand, blade pointing outwards, making me larger as my soul burrowed deeper into my heart. Certain something was around the corner, maybe had a shotgun, or could outwit me with ease. Neither appealed to me – I could feel myself sweating, my breath grew ever shallower, I began to crouch as I walked through the ever-growing tunnel. Occasionally, I'd hear a loud thud of gravel plummet behind me, but I'd look behind with my torch and fail to notice a clump of rock. And even the torchlight began to shrink in fear, until it completely died out.

I'm not sure what happened next, but I awoke on the bench overlooking the sea, at night. The last thing I remember was a sudden flash of light, and even though I tried to step aside, it caught me off-guard; I tripped, sank to the ground, and cried out in pain. Even on the bench, I tried pinching myself a few times to see if I was asleep, but I was still as conscious as always. Even stranger, there was no pain or even bruises, yet I could remember the past and embrace the future. I'd avoided death, even if I didn't deserve to. Despite my failure, I'd clearly been allowed to pursue the enemy again – I could still live a life to be remembered for.

Just then, I heard footsteps towards me, muffled by the sand, but easy to pick out. I recoiled suddenly, then cocked my head towards the sound. A figure soon emerged from the night, became clear in the faint glow of my sword. A wrinkled man, walking with a cane by his side, arching back, and he

sat down beside me on the bench.

"Well," he began. "We've finally met."

I turned to look at him. His face was all covered up, aside from his mourning eyes.

"Excuse me?"

"I know who you are..."

He sighed, as if trying to retrieve a memory long hidden in his mind, but it kept slipping away from him.

"You killed my family."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know very well," he said, looking out into the sea. "It was many years ago. I have no idea what they did to deserve it, and I wish I knew before I go."

"I was there. We lived comfortable lives. The only crime we ever committed was living near the crossfire...but even so...they never...never...deserved what you did to them."

He turned, jabbed a finger at me.

"Your face...I recognise it so clearly. The exact same scars..."

His words began breaking up, and I almost felt like tearing up just then. So weak, defenceless, especially next to my sword.

"Look, sir, I hear you. I'm sorry for your loss, and I wish I could help. But you're mistaken – I've never killed anyone, and even if I did...what good would it do now you've found me?"

"What good...easy for you to say. You lived off of murder. I swore I'd track down whoever killed my family, whoever gained joy from it, and...well, luckily you're not as smart as you thought you were."

He dug his cane into the sand when he said this. He wouldn't keep me alone in the cool breeze. I held up my hands, gave him what he wanted.

"Alright, yes, I admit. I'm the Black Knight. I killed them. Are you happy now? Does that cheer you up?"

He turned around in shock, his eyes pale.

"But...but the Black Knight...that's legend. Besides, the Black Knight always fought for good."

"No, no, no...you don't understand."

"Actually, I do. I used to read my grandchildren stories about the Black Knight – the one who served his whole life to bring about justice. Wiping out the sinners to save the vulnerable. Oh, they loved those stories...they really did..."

"Why won't you believe I'm the Black Knight?"

"Because you're the total opposite of what they stood for. You're anything but honest to yourself if you pretend otherwise."

I sighed, watching the waves in the distance. They now sounded weaker, merely ripples in a pond.

"You know...I've devoted my life to being the – well, acting like the Black Knight. In fact, when I was growing up, I also heard legends about them. And I always wanted to be like them."

"Did you? As a murderer?"

"I'm not a murderer. The world is full of evil – sometimes it needs to be removed."

"But my family...they weren't evil..."

"They weren't. They sound like wonderful people, all of them. There, there."

I watched the moon glint in the sea for a while. The wind whistled in my ear, the waves slowly grew more erratic. The sky felt more hollow, and I looked up. Indeed, the moon was as sharp as a knife, digging the stars into their graves.

"You know..." I began.

"Yes?"

"I'll gladly help you take on the murderer. The one who's really responsible for their deaths. I know where he is."

"Do you?"

"Yes. He once hired me for a job. He's far from here, at least a bus ride away, but I'd be glad to help you. Anything for you to feel safe again."

Yet to this, he seemed almost taken aback. He got up, stared into my eyes:

"I'd never let you finish the job. You wouldn't know justice if it slapped you in your face. Fighting alongside you, I may as well have wished I died at your hand the first time we met."

And with that, he walked away, leaving me alone on the bench. The moon's reflection now looked more druggy, spaced out in sections along the shore.

Staring up at the crescent once more, how incomplete it looked, I couldn't help but think about the old man. He too felt something within him vanish completely, maybe at my hand – if I had, I long pushed it out of my mind. And with it, a large chunk of his soul disappeared.

And now that I was alive again, I too felt incomplete. I had been given a second chance, and yet I didn't feel worthy to fulfil it.

Island Years

Sara Tiwari

She is me, and I am her
She counts seashells to pass the hours
Another one of me heaves the boat to have
Another one mend the holes and
Another one of me makeshifts a log as a shovel
She walks, her feet sift through sand
In hopes of finding the X that marks the spot
Not leading to treasure but to some other land
And another one of me shortens her hair with her hands
To be who she'd be in a world where she was never stranded

And the moon has grown tired, waning and waxing and waving at my reflection in the water
The sun grows less harsh with the days; she, too, knows the wait is torture

But the wait for what, and a longing for nothing more than what I am
But the rest of me, she wants to leave
They all want to leave what they've been through, what they've done
I just wish I could see what makes them want the storm of the sea
More than the pieces of this boat and the accompanying beach





Mele Gadzama

IN
NEW ECHOTA

BY
LORCAN ADDISON

In New Echota a treaty was signed.

Signed. Agreed. Acceded to. Stroke of a pen, right on there. It's done; President Jackson will be pleased. Major Ridge. And Mr. Elias Boudinot. Others of the Treaty Party. But Principal Chief Ross didn't need to know about this, no, it's the best for our people. It's best for the *Aniyvwiya*.

There's nothing like signing a treaty when the leader of your tribe's miles away in D.C. Nothing like federal agents and the Commissioner for Indian Affairs hurriedly selecting the most sympathetic of the bunch to sign on the dotted line. Only a few of the *Aniyvwiya* knew what is best for the *Aniyvwiya*. Oh, the Georgians, the settlers. They'll ransack your home. A couple of them came in and took even the Chief himself! All this, for what? The gold. The cotton. The fruits of our home. And they had banned our Council from meeting to discuss the matter.

Henceforth up to 500 men made it to sleepy, quiet New Echota, and more still would've made it if not for the damned snowstorms. Commissioner Schermerhorn was with them for the United States. One of President Jackson's men, truly, a foregone conclusion of a man. A week of intense "negotiating" — not that the signatories had much choice in the matter — whizzed by and the treaty made it from the Council building to the Oval Office with all due speed and then some. And Jackson would not stay his hand once the Senate had proceeded through the proper channels, no, not that slender little tyrant. Architect of the Indian Removal Act. Why would he hesitate?

So leave. Leave now, and your homes will watch you as you go. It's all in writing, we have millions, *millions* of dollars now. We have land in the West. Why stay? Sentimentality? Go.



I

We didn't go. *They would not take us from here*, I thought. It is our home. Ancestral homelands millions of fathers had died on. And *Unetlanvhi* had guarded us in this space for many years. Our creator. *They cannot remove us*. Not by the terms of that fraudulent scrap of paper.

Enter President van Buren, even more fanatic than his predecessor. Needed the space. Too many people, too little time, too little money. And so we were woken on May 17 by the clang and clatter of seven thousand U. S. Army regulation boots. General Winfield Scott at the head of them, although overweight as he was the sound might as well have been just him stomping. A kind man on paper. "Every possible kindness" must "be shown by the troops", he said. Ordered, even.

But his men spread throughout the land like a plague. The thousands of us that had stayed, taken in the night at gunpoint. Smuggled shamefully out. And so my own home was entered and we — me, my wife, two children — were shipped off in a jiffy.

And whilst we were marched down the familiar paths we had crossed for years under the supervision of the steel barrel of guns, I saw our friends, neighbours, similarly displaced, similarly threatened. Every kindness, every kindness. And I glimpsed one child — one particularly mischievous boy who would regularly incur my anger for one reason or another — running beyond the trees, no soldiers in tow, free. Running from "kindness". His sister had made it to the mountains in the east the day before. I was not smart enough to read the writing on the wall.

Now familiar surroundings scrolled past and made way for new ones as our captors instructed us to continue the walk. And walk we did.

II

The stockade camp was some days away by any normal man's measure, but we made it in just two. It first appeared in the distance as a squeamish, brown blob. *Strange*, I thought. Then as we approached, it grew and grew until it towered in interminable finality.

Great numbers of logs had been felled and assembled into some kind of rudimentary enclosure. Logs cut uniformly and with precision, save for a precious few which rose higher to form the base for what I gathered

were rifle towers. The landscape was desolate and barely green for about a mile beyond the walls. The deer would watch dutifully but with reproach as we drew closer.

But as we approached so too did the noise rise in kind. Cacophony from within! *Families?* Louder and louder. Unbearably. *Hundreds?* We were forced inside. Door shut. Goodbye. And then we saw. *Thousands.* Thousands of our tribe sitting together forlornly, under blankets, working, exercising, not moving, sick, dying. Dead from dysentery. Shot. Every kindness, every kindness, rounded up like pigs.

Those who were sick and knew that they would die would gather beneath covers in the corners of our enclosure, separating themselves from the sea of families still alive and kicking in the centre. United only by desperation and by tribe. And around that time a spate of measles had begun to spread, so it was just as well.

Sanitation was nothing to speak of. We were collected like a zoo. Implacable. And any incipient notions of revolution were quickly dispelled by our friends on the rifle towers. Stay there and die, every kindness, every kindness. So my daughter Adsila died of dysentery in the stockade camp, and I couldn't even hear her die. She passed in the night and my wife cried, but we moved her to the corner with the other dead, as was the way of things.

III

The time came for us to leave the camp and be on our merry way. Again under the dutiful watch of federal authorities, we were now taken to riverside embarkment points in Chattanooga. Another place and another place and another place. The steamers were ready to take us down the river just like the others who had gone earlier in the day.

"Stop!"

A shout, behind, *whose?* Gruff General Scott hobbling along. Veritably Mr. Kindness. And it was revealed to the soldiers that the water levels had teetered dangerously low, lower even than our morale. A drought in the summer. And they had had a time of it, said General Scott, dozens of men deserted or dead due to hazardous river obstacles (Federal men, mind you, we weren't counted.)

They lingered for a moment.

"Back to the stockade."

So we walked back an hour the way we had come in the blazing sun that had stultified our travels, and remained at that stockade for months through the heady days of



summertime. But we could not leave our pen, despite the rising heat and rising tension.

My wife boarded the last steamer before the crossings stopped. Routine. Bye, wife — Kamama, her name, *god*, how could I have forgotten her name, translates to butterfly, beautiful butterfly — see you on the other side, kiss, safe travels. So it was me and my boy alone, and the thousands of others withal.

IV

Word came that General Scott had given up. But we could not go back, of course. Not after this, and insipid van Buren's appetite needed to be whetted. So we hastily convened together a Council and persuaded him to allow our own tribe to handle the removal. All eleven thousand of us still left. *Eleven thousand*. Each and every man, woman and child. The alive ones anyhow.

Principal Chief Ross now had surfaced once more, having stayed behind. His opponents, of course, had fled willingly months before. He arranged for wagons to take us on our trip. Physicians. We could travel alone with the wind at our backs, but we *must* travel. Every kindness, now, that he could provide he *did* provide.

But no man and no thing short of Unetlanvhi can travel two thousand two hundred miles in a day. For mortals it takes our months, *four months*, of walking. After many more of waiting.

There was a hope about the affair. Weeks of standing still, momentum arrested by the packed-in bodies of others and log walls. And now we substituted in place a measure of freedom: logs of trees. My son, Wohali, and I joined a wagon consisting mainly of fit, younger men; we moved faster than most. Setting off. Miles a day. Ten more miles. Another ten. Eat. Sleep. Ten miles. Forage. Kill and eat, kill and eat.

I spoke about going back often, and I spoke of my wife. We could only speak for entertainment. And so I spoke of her, and how she is waiting for me, waiting for me in Oklahoma. But the young men were too young to know what I was talking about, they knew but they didn't *know*, except for the leader of the group, a tall man of forty or fifty who spoke of his own wife often. But he broke his leg climbing a steep cliff halfway through Illinois and asked to be shot. I planted a flower where he died and the proper rites were observed, no doubt, studiously to the letter of the law. One of the four thousand dead.

My son and I and the rest of us travelled that trail to the end. Interminably. Diseases had passed through our ranks and passed out of us with great vomiting and aplomb. Certainly animals had been disturbed on their way and had lashed out with great force. Evaded. We came to Oklahoma and as we entered I saw the boy I had seen running to the Great Smoky Mountains in the east months before, older and moustachioed. A flash of recognition on his face as we settled in.

And this place was our home for ever.

* * *

Years later I read and reread my writings during that time. Wohali takes care of me now; I am too frail even to walk. I will be with my ancestors soon, and I am not afraid. But when I glance at the sky and the animals furtively hiding amongst the trees, I see Adsila and the man I travelled the trail with. Wohali thinks I knew his name and have forgotten it; but I think I never even asked it. And when I look at the ground and the seedlings there, I see Kamama watching me and waiting. When I water them, I see the tears of New Echota.





Accompaniment

A short story *told from two parallel universes.*

Accompaniment

Sophie Reck Pointon

The sun gleams on the floor, puddling into shy chestnut and glowing brown-gold, streaming up the kitchen island, licking the edge of the sofa. You've just woken up.

•

Sticky alcohol rings, the flaking edge of the island, the pathetic veneer of the laminate floor, the funk of unwashed plates. You've just woken up.

•

A guy in a retro jumper appears in the kitchen, coffee mug in hand. Ben, one of your flatmates.

"The dryer's broken again," he says, not commenting on the fact you've spent the night on the sofa rather than in your bed, and this almost makes you laugh.

"I'll get Jay to look at it," you say instead. Jay is your girlfriend, and her dad is a successful handyman.

You cajole Ben into making extra eggs for you and eat breakfast while bickering about the fallibilities of dryers, the current geopolitical situation, and Ben's cat (which has just had kittens).

"I like your dressing-gown," Ben says as he leaves.

"Thanks," you call after him. He was teasing you, but you don't mind.

Outside, a blackbird warbles, and you drink in the song like medicine.

•

One of your flatmates bustles into the kitchen, talking about the dryer, and it takes all you can not to draw yourself into a ball and wait for them to go away. To chase this impulse away, you stand up and start tidying; anything to look upbeat. In the reflection of the sink, you see you're wearing your crappy old dressing-gown which makes you look nine years old. You cringe and

hurry out of the kitchen, desperate to get changed. A stomach-ache is brewing.

The door to the flat slams shut – your flatmate has left just on the right side of late. The clock propped up on your desk ticks doggedly on, and you wish it would stop.

A flash of black through the window catches your eye. You stare at a blackbird that has just landed on the windowsill. It opens its beak and sings, but you can't hear it.

•

Your phone rings. It's Jay, her voice bursting into your head.

"Will you come round tonight?" she asks. "I have half a bottle of red and a traybake that really needs eating. Can you help?"

She expects you to say yes, and you open your mouth, but what comes out instead is this: "I can't."

"You can't?"

"I can't."

And it's true, you can't. You feel too untrammelled, a rollercoaster without any brakes, ready to soar into the sky.

"Whyever not?"

"Because..." You remember the blackbird. "Because of a blackbird."

What really you want to say is that you feel too free to beholden yourself to anyone else right now, not even someone you love. Again, you get the urge to fly.

Her gaze, which you can't see but can feel, becomes one of possessive admiration, and she sighs.

"I can never understand you when you're like this. It's like talking to someone completely different."

On another day, this would sting, and today the fact that you two probably aren't the right ones for each other becomes a little clearer. This jolts you off course for a moment, tilting into a melancholy, and you find yourself remembering the time the two of



you snuck into a rooftop party in Covent Garden with faux confidence for an invitation.

The both of you got thrown out and kissed on the corner by the careworn Italian restaurant on the corner, impossible emerald jewel engraving “Open” on the glass, deliciously promising, muffled light and chatter spilling around you. That was the most recent time you felt completely, utterly in love with Jay. You realise you can hold the memory in your mind, watch it spin, and feel that emotion unconnected to anything else. It’s as though you’ve been hit in the face; you begin to realise sometimes endings can be felt but not seen, in the same way there are corners of streets where tube trains can be felt gently rumbling underneath the pavement.

But your story, it can almost be touched, stretching off down the busy street like a golden thread. Maybe Jay’s thread plaits around yours all the way to the end. Maybe it doesn’t. Either way, it’s fucking gorgeous.

•

When Jay asks you to come round, you say yes, because you need to feel not alone.

The stomach-ache lessens slightly.

•

It happens mid-sentence while you’re at lunch with a friend. It’s no one’s fault. It just happens, the same way water falls or tourists clog the street. Inevitably.

The sky is an infinite true blue, and somewhere not too far away, a busker is playing. Everyone is sitting on the grass or sprawled on benches, pollen dusting the air, when you realise you don’t care about what you’re talking about.

“...and next week we’ll be in Holland—”

“It’s not called *Holland*,” you hear yourself say, “It’s the Netherlands. Holland is just one part.”

You feel a sweet sting of victory for correcting them, and revel in the short beat that follows. Then it’s over, and they keep talking. As you listen, you get more and more irritated with them. You’re not hungry anymore, and wrap up the remains of your lunch, wondering if you should throw it away and compound the growing sense of uselessness around you.

You don’t know it yet, but you’ve stopped hearing the birdsong.

•

In the darkest hours of the morning, there is light on the edges of your forearms, your ears, your palms, a light only the two of you can see.

After, you look down at Jay’s sleeping form, cobalt and mauve in the choked light from the street outside. Watching the perfect rise and fall of her silhouette, you know you aren’t going to be able to sleep tonight, and you would rather spend the looming hours alone, so you get out of bed as quietly as you can and get dressed.

Jay stirs, animal-like as she stretches and sighs, eyes half-opening, mumbling and asking, “What do you think you’re doing, leaving in the middle of the night?”

You almost say it then. But you don’t. *Let’s break up.*

For an instant, you imagine what it would be like. The disbelief jerking you both to full wakefulness. The way Jay would tell the story, weeks later, to friends, her hand around a homemade mojito, sitting on the floor.

The room tilts, so strong is the flood of emotion that sweeps through you as you imagine all this. It’s almost as good as the sex.

The flat feels abandoned as you disentangle yourself from the narrow corridor and stairs and all their shadows.

You take one of Jay’s jackets just before you leave, shoving it over your coat, the straight-jacket-feel of it both comforting and inconvenient. It gives you an excuse to see her again tomorrow.

There is no cold quite like the cold that waits on the platforms at Earl’s Court at four in the morning. A wind honed by railway tracks catches your bare skin at your wrists, neck and face. Hyper-aware of the two other people on the platform with you (one squinting into the neon orange of the arrivals board and the other, further down the platform, swaying back and forth slightly on their feet, a violin case in their hand), you fish out a half-finished cigarette from the box in a pocket of Jay’s jacket and light it, instantly becoming more worldly and threatening.

A train pulls into another platform, wheels shrieking. The lights inside are so thickly yellow it looks like soup.

“Can I borrow your lighter?”

Someone has approached you without your noticing. Silently, you curse your lack of survival instincts. But since you’re still holding the lighter and smoke is curling in the air between you, you can hardly say no, and you hand it over.

In the soup-like light, you see that his eyes are a spectacular tawny colour. He’s looking at you.

For some reason you don’t quite understand, you’re attractive. Beauty has never phased you; you

like your face and body through sheer repetition. So, you're familiar with strangers approaching you under all sorts of pretexts and you brace yourself under the layers of the coat and jacket and skin. But nothing happens.

This guy, he genuinely needed a light. This, above all else, relaxes you.

Well, maybe he also wanted to talk, because he's asking you something. You answer, out of habit, forgetting where you are and what time it is.

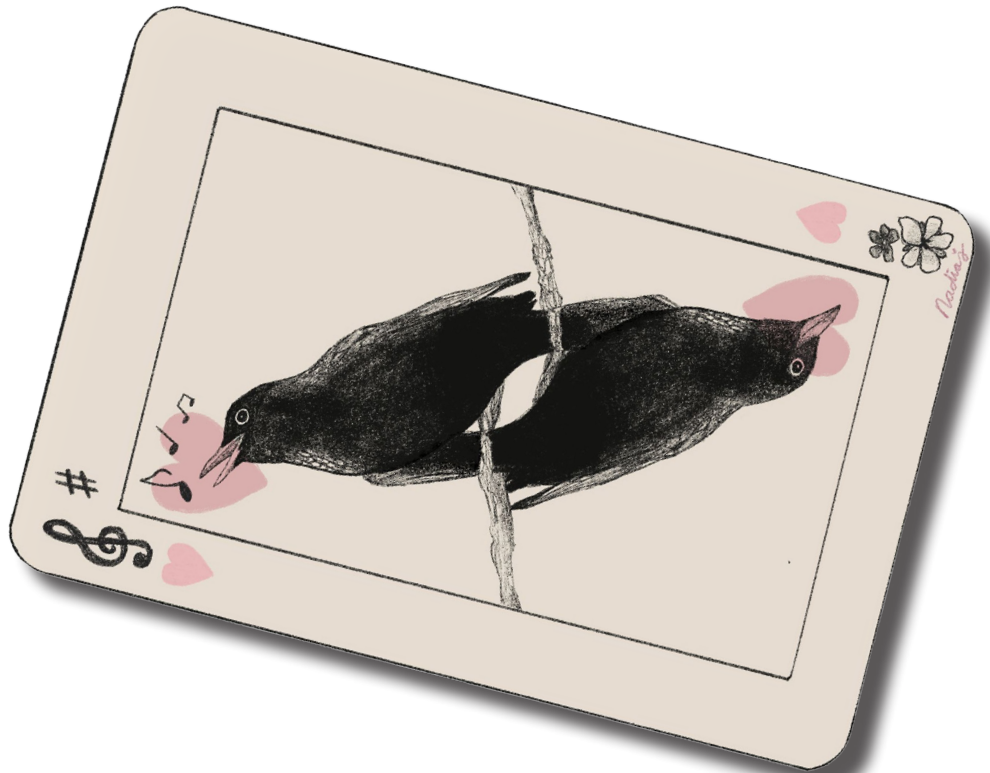
shakes his head slightly. "I'm on the next one." He almost looks sad about it.

"What's your name?" you ask.

"Conan," he says.

A name from the Fianna, an ancient band of Irish heroes. It evokes lush green hills and rivers. You smile, reflexively. He chose well: it suits him. You like someone to be well-named.

The train doors slide shut, and you walk a little way up the carriage to make the parting less awkward,



Then, somehow, both of you are cautiously sharing the shapes of your lives. In a moment, you feel like you're standing next to an old friend.

He leans in conspiratorially, his eyes flashing with mirth, and whispers something. You throw back your head and laugh. How has he done that? Now he's laughing at your response. You've almost forgotten how it feels, to be like this.

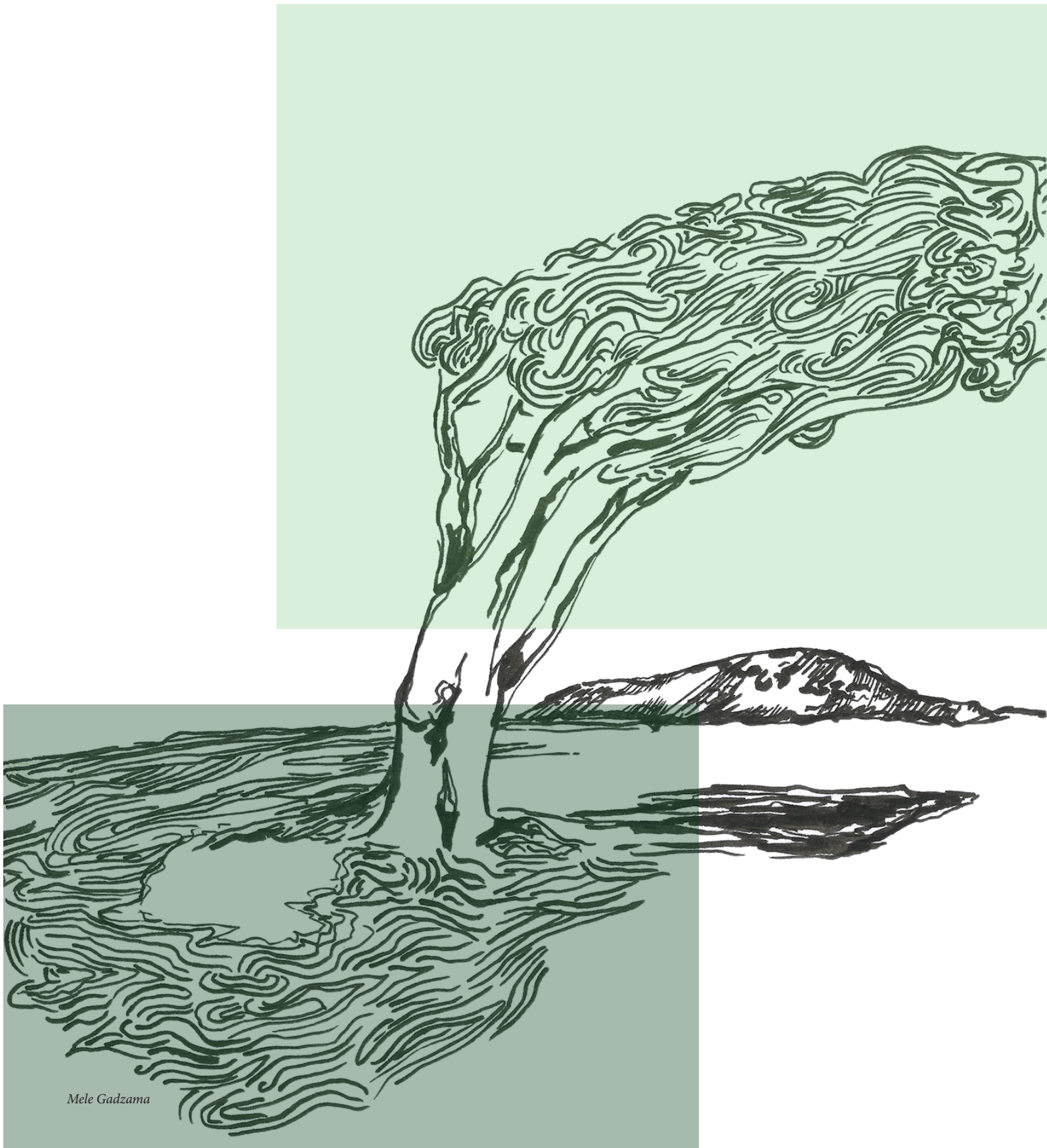
The train, with its glaring white eyes, pulls to a stop a few feet away. You glance from it to him. He

wishing you had your headphones.

Conan stays where he is, smoke haloing his hair, the blue light from his phone making his skin glow. He glances up as the train begins to move and smiles at you one last time. Then he's gone, and the bittersweetness of it all crashes down on you like a cool shower after a long, hot day.

It takes you until mid-afternoon the next day to realise what feels different.

You can hear the blackbird singing again.



Mele Gadzama

The Trees I Grew With

Anonymous

When I was a child,
The backyard had a lemon tree,
I encountered the world for the first time,
And it grew freely in a corner.
I learned about relationships,
It befriended the rain and the sun.
I grew, my circle expanding,
And it grew with me.
And so, when it died,
Scorched by the intensity of the sun,
I moved away.

When I was in middle school,
The house out front had a barren tree,
I learned to see the beauty in things,
And it grew leaves.
I worked and played and dreamed,
It sprouted flowers in the spring.
I learned to voice my thoughts,
And it filled its branches with flowers.
And so, when it died,
Cut down for its timber,
I moved away.

When I was a teenager,
The window was covered by the gulmohar,
I wrote and experimented and sang,
And it blossomed red.
I tried and failed and tried again,
And it shed its leaves.
I found my niche and my path,
And it flourished greener and brighter.
And although it lived,
And flowered every season,
I still moved away.

Now I'm at university,
My morning walk has a blue fir tree,
I gain new perspectives,
And it shines in the sunlight.
I explore and ideate and innovate,
And it grows a little taller.
I grow and laugh and learn,
And its needles rustle in the wind.
And so it is for now,
But whether it grows or falls,
Would I move away again?

The MODERN RURAL

*A reflection on contemporary rural
England and why our perception
of it matters*

BEN SALLYBANKS

During my crowded commutes on the Jubilee line, I find myself recalling the comparative tranquillity of my mornings back home in rural Hertfordshire. This has led me to consider the similarities and differences between urban and rural life in contemporary England.

What does rural mean in the 21st century? Cities are often viewed as symbols of the modern, as dynamic and changing in contrast to a static and provincial countryside. I suspect that if asked to imagine rural England, a plurality of the public would envisage some form of agricultural scene. Whilst agricultural environments are predominant in England, to limit our imaginings of rural life to just these scenes is to paint a broad sweep of the country with the same romanticising brush. In reality, rural England is just as dynamic and changing as its urban areas – it is our collective idea of the rural that remains static and provincial. Around 9.7 million people are estimated to live in rural England, yet only 280,000 people are employed in agriculture. Therefore to restrict our conception of the rural to the agricultural is to misunderstand the realities of life for nearly a fifth of the country.

To truly comprehend the modern rural, our conception of the rural needs to change.

In what follows, I aim to trace this seemingly widespread conflation of the rural with the agricultural to a notion of rural identity based on livelihood, rather than locality. I then seek to problematise this conflation by indicating how it centres agriculture within our idea of the rural and so obscures the distinct relations between other rural inhabitants and their environment. To truly comprehend the modern rural, our conception of the rural needs to change.

A rural reality check

The Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs maintains the *Statistical Digest of Rural England*, which provides socio-economic data comparing rural and urban areas.¹ The *Digest* defines rural areas as places outside of settlements exceeding 10,000 residents, with the remaining areas classified as urban. When comparing these areas in broad statistical terms it is important to stress that neither is monolithic – there are wide variations amongst both urban and rural areas. However, the broad trends identified in the *Digest* suffice to form a picture of the rural as opposed to the urban. From these trends, it is apparent that in many ways the distinction between these areas is less stark than an agricultural conception

of the rural – embodying a notion of rural identity based on agricultural livelihoods – might suggest.

The rural population is estimated to be around 17% of the English population. However, the geographical distribution of this population is not as remote as one might expect – around two thirds of rural residents live within a thirty-minute drive of an urban area with at least 75,000 residents. Regarding the economy, the five largest sources of employment in rural areas are: education, health, and social work; retail; manufacturing; accommodation and food services; and professional services. If manufacturing is replaced with administrative services, then these are also the five largest sources of employment in urban areas, indicating a broad similarity in the variety of available employment in rural and urban areas. Employment rates in rural areas are consistently higher than in urban areas, albeit only by around 3 percentage points, while jobs in rural areas pay less on average, especially in less populated areas. Despite this, the average income of rural households is broadly similar to urban households, as commuters who live in rural areas but work in urban areas offset the lower average rural wages. Alongside commuters, home workers – defined as those who work from their residence at least half the time – also increase the average rural income, as these individuals may not be employed in the rural area in which they reside.

The *Digest's* reality check thus appears to indicate that the economic life of rural areas is broadly comparable to urban areas. The exception is agriculture, which is near non-existent in urban areas, but provides 8% of employment in rural areas – although in less populated rural areas this can rise to 10% of employment and 20% of registered businesses. Yet even in these areas, agriculture contributes to only a minority of rural employment, indicating that an idea of the rural centred on agriculture is an incomplete image of rural England. Since livelihoods alone provide little indication of whether one resides in the rural or the urban, all that remains to characterise rural identity is locality: someone is rural simply if they reside in a rural area. But if agricultural livelihoods do not form a basis for rural identity and only represent a minority of rural livelihoods, then this raises the question of why agricultural conceptions of the rural occupy such a dominant position in our collective idea of the rural. The following presents one possible explanation.

Ubiquitous agriculture

Despite comprising only 8% of the rural workforce, agriculture appears to dominate the popular conception of the rural. Whilst agriculture





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Mother Nature's View of Sustainable Development on Land, 2025

employed more individuals in the past (*Agriculture: Historical statistics*), I think it unlikely that this alone contributes to its predominance in the popular imagination, as non-agricultural rural employment has always existed alongside it. Instead, I believe this dominance arises from the very fact that agriculture is unique to rural areas. However, a problem occurs when the economic and geographic uniqueness of agriculture leads to its overrepresentation in the media, compared to other aspects of rural life, which may encourage the idea that all there is to the rural is agriculture.

Agriculture is both a unique and highly visible aspect of rural life.

Economically, agriculture is effectively non-existent in urban areas, in contrast to rural areas, providing just 0.2% of employment. Beyond this distinction, agriculture is geographically a highly visible practice, occupying around 63% of all the land in England, and as much as 85% of the land in heavily agricultural areas (*Land use in England*). For comparison, all the (non-agricultural) buildings and transport routes in the country occupy only 8.7% of the land (Land use in England). Thus, agriculture is both a unique and highly visible aspect of rural life. These attributes likely distinguish agriculture as a representation of the rural, leading to a media environment in which comparatively novel agriculture attracts far more attention than other, less unique aspects of rural England. In turn, this exacerbates tendencies to conflate the rural with the agricultural.

To illustrate the preponderance of agriculture in the media, consider *Clarkson's Farm*, a popular 'reality' programme which chronicles a former motoring journalist running his farm. Whilst this programme has likely raised the profile of both the lifestyle and the challenges associated with agriculture, were it the only touchstone of rural life that someone had then they might mistakenly get the impression that rural England revolves solely around agriculture and its associated activities. Given that the programme regularly achieves UK viewing ratings in the millions, it is arguably one of the most popular (broadly) non-fictional programmes associated with rural England. Whilst it is not problematic in itself for a programme to have an exclusively agricultural outlook, I maintain that the popularity of such programmes and the lack of any equivalent alternative presenting other aspects of rural life uphold the eliding of the agricultural and the rural in the popular imagination.

A land for all

A notion of rural identity based on locality, rather than livelihood, would promote a more accurate understanding of contemporary rural England by reincluding the majority of rural residents who are uninvolved in agriculture. However, if rural identity depends on residence within rural areas, then we ought to have a clear framework for understanding the various groups that inhabit these areas and so satisfy this condition. By distinguishing these groups based on how they relate to the rural landscape itself, the issue of conflating the rural and the agricultural can then be more explicitly problematised.

One division of the inhabitants of rural areas would create three groups, differentiated by their relations with the land. First, 'agricultural households', comprising rural residents whose agricultural livelihoods depend directly on the land, along with any livestock they might own. Second, 'rural households', comprising those rural residents whose livelihoods do not depend directly on the land. Finally, to consider all the inhabitants of rural areas, a third group – 'wildlife' – must be included, comprising the non-agricultural plants, animals, and other lifeforms that rely on the rural landscape as a habitat.

Reframing our thinking could result in a more balanced rural environment that works for all its inhabitants.

This framework may sound quite abstract, but a misguided image of the rural can have real impacts on how these areas are conceived and governed. Agricultural households occupy a majority of the land in rural areas, so if the public's conception of the countryside also adopts an agricultural perspective, then the opportunities for other rural groups to promote the use of the land in non-agricultural ways are diminished. Reframing our thinking could result in a more balanced rural environment that works for all its inhabitants.

Wildlife needs support, as the 2023 *State of Nature England* report, produced via the collaboration of over 60 UK conservation organisations, claims that England is one of the most nature-deprived countries on the planet. Whilst some people may consider the countryside to be a 'natural' environment, the agricultural landscape that dominates rural England is very much human-made, and biodiversity is suffering as a result. On average, for any terrestrial or freshwater species in England, the absolute number

of that species existing today will be only two-thirds the number that existed in 1970. Further, at least 13% of species in England are threatened with extinction. The report identifies the primary driver of this decline as the intensive management and exploitation of agricultural land, such as through the use of fertilisers and pesticides resulting in nitrogen and phosphorus pollution. For example, the abundance of farmland birds has decreased by 59% from 1970 levels. Evidently, wildlife depends on the land directly, however an image of the rural that centres on the needs of intensive agriculture can override calls to support English wildlife.

Rural households need greater access to the land. In England access to rural areas is widely restricted, limiting the extent to which rural households can relate to their environment. As with wildlife, their rural surroundings constitute a habitat which supports valuable activities and with which they can form meaningful attachments, often despite a lack of direct land ownership. Whilst an extensive network of public footpaths exists, these paths cover only around 0.3% of the land and effectively act as corridors of access, outside of which one is trespassing (*Access reform for England*). Beyond footpaths, around 8% of England is covered by a 'freedom to roam', granting broader land access, however, these areas are unevenly distributed (*Access reform for England*). On a personal note, I find the lack of access to farmland – the majority of land in England – to be particularly restricting. Unless a public footpath happens to cross a field or pasture then one will be trespassing, and even if such a path exists, they can often be poorly maintained or trace illogical routes. Increasing access to the land would benefit rural households, yet an image of the rural centred on agricultural households' perspectives can obscure the pervasiveness of the issue.

Despite these problems, I believe it is possible to rebalance rural land uses so as to better respect the ways in which all three groups of rural inhabitants relate to the land. Crucially, these changes need not be oppositional to agricultural households' dependence on the land. For example, agricultural policies to support the adoption of nature-friendly farming practices, such as setting aside land for habitat restoration, could help stem biodiversity loss by providing space for wildlife (*State of Nature*). Likewise, a change of legislation to grant a right to roam in England could dramatically increase access to rural areas for both rural and urban households. Such legislation already exists in Scotland and explicitly permits access to the margins of agricultural land (*Scottish Outdoor Access Code*). This could greatly increase access even in particularly agricultural areas of England without significantly affecting agricultural households' livelihoods.

The conflation of the rural and the agricultural obscures the distinctions between these groups, which does a disservice to the majority of rural inhabitants who are uninvolved in agriculture.

However, these possibilities rely on political will, and so on public support. This support can only be possible if the public's conception of rural England corresponds to the reality, in which there exist various groups each with their own relationship with the land. The conflation of the rural and the agricultural obscures the distinctions between these groups, which does a disservice to the majority of rural inhabitants who are uninvolved in agriculture. Therefore, if we want to bring about change and find a balance in which all the inhabitants of the rural can thrive, then we must start by promoting a more accurate idea of the modern rural.

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Kitty Seales **Contemplating the Future, 2025**

I took this photo of a golden-headed lion tamarin in Autumn 2025 at the London Zoo. These beautiful monkeys are endangered, as are most primates, and it made me think about how biodiversity is always in flux, with species currently disappearing at an alarming rate. Only 11% of the original Brazilian habitat of these monkeys remains, and humans are driving them to extinction.

StarChaser

Julien Cheung

The bridge rumbles as another truck passes above, sending gravel, dust, and asphalt raining down on us. The lamp in my hands, a relic of the past, flickers dangerously, causing shadows to dance on fading graffiti, and a cold draft blows behind the three of us.

A gesture from my hand and my two companions quicken their pace, providing me the respite I need to point the lamp downwards for a split second. Again, there is not even a tinge of green in the concrete-gravel, and again, I am disappointed.

I pick the lamp back up, and the soft crunch of the stones beneath me is only barely audible.

Squinting at my cheap plastic watch, I have to hold the lamp to my face to read through the scratches on its surface. With another withdrawal in place by our occupiers, I've finally decided it's time to see one of those fancy sunrise shows at the port waterfront. I also plan to show them some of the places I loved growing up, no matter how much they've changed in recent times.

A quick glimpse tells me we're three hours early to the drone show, the only one I'm afforded before my lamp flickers for its final time. Sighing, I let it clatter to the ground while my eyes adjust the best they can to the near-pitch darkness.

"Rex, look!" One of the two, Mira, shouts at me, and I scramble above a mound of rubble to see.

Ignoring the dying throes of the lamp, now cracked on the rubble, I too am enthralled by that dancing,

fleeting pinprick of light.

"The place you said you'd take us to - we're close, right?"

"We are. Stay behind me. Haven't been here a while."

They fall behind me as I head into the bend where the underpass narrows, and in no time, my eyes are already struggling to adjust. I so desperately want to remain in the dark, to stop the bulging feeling in my eyes that has now spread across me, yet I cannot, for the sake of my two apprentices.

Placing my hand on my forehead, it is obvious that we have emerged onto what seems to be one of the main streets of the city, where a great river of salarymen and women jostle, bump, and sometimes crash onto the pavement like the

world's
greatest
particle
simulation that
moves forward as
one giant mass. Wafts of
biodiesel and rotting food fill
the air, and vehicles mingle with the
bumbling crowd as it shuffles awkwardly
in all directions.

Someone slams into me, then my companions,
and offers a litany of curses to apologise.
This, however, is commonplace even in the
'suburban' satellite cities and is not what
interests my companions or me.

It is not the brilliant, garish
billboards ornamenting the buildings
flanking us, nor the interweaving sports
cars and dark sedans forming a tributary
to the river of man, but the sky above me
that is the city's mirror, with the slight
tinge of matte grey heralding the return of
the spring rains.

It is enough to elicit my own litany of
curses, aimed at the city, the sky, and no
one in particular.

Having caught the end of the rush
hour, we join the crowd, corralled
through a small checkpoint where
a few masked soldiers and their
vehicles stand guard with those
ugly, box-like rifles of theirs.
The other two cling to me as
the crowd seems to grow denser
with each adjoining road, and
soon, we find ourselves in
the middle of a slowly, but
surely, advancing lattice
of glowing handheld
screens. The sheer
number of bespectacled
men and women in chic
suits now coated
in the sweat of
the unbearable
heat makes it
difficult to
even catch my
breath. It is
easy to stay

calm and continue forward when
I look back at my companions, both
now quivering slightly in fear. Being
their Guardian in these times means more
responsibilities, but what more can a man
of the Old expect from their new overlords?

The low, sloping houses give way to the
towers of the New Central District, and it
is here that the crowd finally begins to
disperse, onto the myriad footbridges that
crisscross above the dusty road and the
revolving doors of office buildings.

I half-expect the déjà-vu of familiarity
to settle over me, but it never does. It
makes it difficult to find my way through
these streets, and where once there were
flat plains or forests, there is now a
sprawling mess of freshly minted concrete.

Thankfully, it is at the next four-way
junction, as we weave through another row
of illegally-parked cars, that my faith in
my memory is restored. At the very least,
our conquerors have been benevolent enough
to keep the old Banyan tree in its square.

It is surrounded by concrete now, a
plaza for all of those in this maze to
find some respite from the bustle of life.
Where once was a fountain is now a large,
imposing statue of a golden pig, complete
with "OCCUPIER" and "NEOCOLONISER" written
on its side in black spray paint.

A crisscrossing fence of red and yellow
tape, complete with the black uniforms
of soldiers, now encircles the tree and
statue.

In front of this wedge-shaped concrete
plaza is a monolithic tower, revolving
spotlights marking it the entrance to a
villain's lair. We learn from some fellow
pedestrians that it is the entrance to the
"Tourist District" and the tallest building
in the city.

A spire at its very top punctures the
layer of low clouds above us, replacing
the grey with the reds and greens of its
navigation lights.

"Alright, first checkpoint. Mira, Jay,"
- I wave my hand in front of Jay's face,
and he returns to me - "sorry for getting
us into that... mess. The city has come far
since I was last here."

No response from the two, both of them
still frazzled from their time in the crowd.
I don the best smile I can, hoping to hide
my crushing disappointment.

"You know, this place was a park just ten years ago. Funny how time flies, huh?"

"I don't see it, Rex." Mira pipes up with a low mumble, fidgeting with both hands.

Right. I always forget this generation, only just having come of age, was thrust into the bowels of gruelling conflict and military. When the war started, both would've been barely old enough to know their times tables by heart.

Watching her fidget with her hands makes me look down at my own: my right hand, a metal carcass, a crude recreation of its former self. I look at the central spire with a blank expression, hoping my two companions ignore my moment of weakness. The reds and greens seem to fade into the clouds for a fleeting moment.

"Anyways, let's continue. Mira, you did say you were interested in my past, didn't you?"

She doesn't respond, but expectant eyes from both my companions are enough for me to keep going.

"You know, that - what's it called - that building, The Spire?" I point toward it. "It wasn't always that tall, you know. It used to be like that corner store down the road, and it had the friendliest old man behind it. BEST corn dogs for miles."

"Corn dogs. What are they?"

"Never mind."

Looking back at the two, Mira is staring at me with her telltale blank expression, still waiting for me to answer her. Jay is looking up at the sky, his attention seemingly caught by something. It is unlike him to be so enraptured by one point in space, so I give him a tap on his shoulder.

"Looking forward to the Sunrise Show, Jay?"

"No. What's... that?"

It is equally jarring for both Mira and me to hear the otherwise quiet Jay speak, but that gives way to curiosity as the two of us crane our necks to where he's pointing. A small break in the clouds has unveiled the spire of the building, with the whole gray slate

of the clouds seemingly swirling around The Spire.

Above that spire is a fleeting, flickering pinprick of bright, white light, outshining the sky-blue afterglow puncturing through the clouds. My breath catches, and almost immediately, a long-suppressed elation threatens to overcome me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see some soldiers disembark from a vehicle and head our way, and I wipe as much of that happiness from my face as possible. My sheepish face returns as I wave at them, and they wave back with drilled precision.

"Fine day today, isn't it?" One of the soldiers holds up their hand, and the other comes forward. "He doesn't look like he's from these parts, does he?"

"They sure don't," the second soldier responds, a sneer's outline visible beneath the mask. "Say, what... business do you have in these parts?"

"Nothing at all. It's these two's first time here, that's all." Jay's hand grips mine tighter.

"Small city?"

They look puzzled at my vigorous nodding, if only for a fleeting moment, before both of them burst into laughter.

"You must be from the satellite towns! We've been trying to get more of you people here for ages. Was the ads, the-"

"Yes, the ads, yes." I cut them off as quickly as I can, and they leave, chattering amongst themselves about the 'suburbanites' they just met.

"Um, Rex, where's Mira?"

It's the one thing any Guardian doesn't want to hear. Just as things seem to be going my way, just as I've found what I've come here for, my heart is sent crashing down to the dusty, parched earth.

Eyes wide with fear, I do not say anything as I grasp Jay by the arm and begin sprinting down the road. She can't have gotten far.

"Let's follow that light. It's what I would've done," Jay offers, and I agree.

That brilliant light guides us

forward as we weasel our way through the thinning crowds on the main streets, dodging in and out of cars with parking tickets piled high on their windshields, and averting our gazes from the scantily clad pop stars on those humongous billboards.

Muscling our way through another crowd, we finally reach a street where we can breathe, and I reach into my pocket for my phone. Mira doesn't answer.

Astronomical dawn is making it increasingly difficult to see that light, and we must now squint just to keep track of it. Being so focused on following the light, I ram face-first into another passerby, though this time, a sad, resigned face is all that greets me as I rush to apologise.

A cramp in my good leg reduces me to a limp by the time the waterfront is in view, where a small crowd is beginning to gather in preparation for the drone show.

I catch a glimpse of Mira at the centre of this crowd, her wide eyes frozen as she's carried away by the pedestrian tide. Energy surges through me, and a tap on the back sends her whipping backwards, startled and confused.

"Hey... You're not an alien..." She squints her eyes at me before donning an expression that betrays her disappointment and guilt.

I can only imagine how I look right now, as I can see Jay offer a weak smile to her out of the corner of my eye.

"Mira! Why on this godforsaken Earth did you, even when I told you multiple times not to stray away from me, go flying away on those two wings of yours to GOD knows where?" I yell.

"But, Rex, think about it! If we find the aliens, we'll be rich! Rich! I'll get that penthouse, we'll be out of the shack..."

That is enough to defeat me, and it is a while before the crushing sorrow overtakes me. To my side, Jay seems to be lost in his own thoughts again, no doubt equally shaken by what he's just heard.

"Mira, listen. Now isn't the time to meet those green men, alright?"

"Aw, Rex, but why? Do they not want to meet us?"

"I-" I wrack my brain for something

that can explain it. "One day. But for now, you've got to stick with me. Don't want you away when they do arrive."

She nods, the disappointment having at least partially drained from her face, and a nod from Jay has her trailing behind me again.

Behind me, insect-like whirrs herald the start of the drone show, and we jostle our way to the front of the crowd so the two of them get the best view.

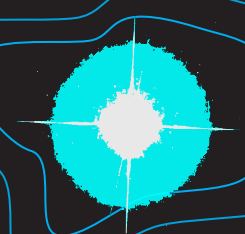
Behind the myriad drones now dancing in entrancing patterns, the freshly risen sun is a blood-red orb, shrouded in its personal veil of smog as it dispels the thick clouds once above us. The westbound sunlight tries to bathe us in its weak glow, only to be beaten back by the sheer brilliance of the waterfront billboards.

The twilight moon begins its slow retreat below the water's surface, sandwiched between the golden sheaths of two skyscrapers. Scaffolding litters the opposing waterfront, and cranes scrape the rims of the dusty haze settling over us.

Still, my own head is arched upwards, scanning the skies for that special light. For a moment, I swear I see it together among the dancing stars of the drones, flickering weakly as it fights the billboards, but the drones are too mesmerising, too hypnotising, and it is gone by the time I remember it.

I want so badly to find it again, to grasp the fleeting possibility of another world high up in the clouds, and to have lost it all so fast... I have to resist crying out onto the open water.

Star or planet, it's gone
hidden somewhere
between the warm sunlight
and the City of Lights.



The Antagonist

Natalia Cantu

“He speaks to me of Narcissism, I reply to him that this is my life.” - Antonin Artaud

My environment has been replaced and so has my temperament.
I have transformed into a version of myself that I have not yet learned to appreciate.
London is amusing, yes, but who do I confide in?
No one is as intrinsic as myself.

Even so, time continues to pass.
An incessant stream; the Thames then the Danube.
Cathedrals towering and paintings crumbling.
Overpriced tea and prepossessing prospects.
While orchids that resemble moths, bloom.

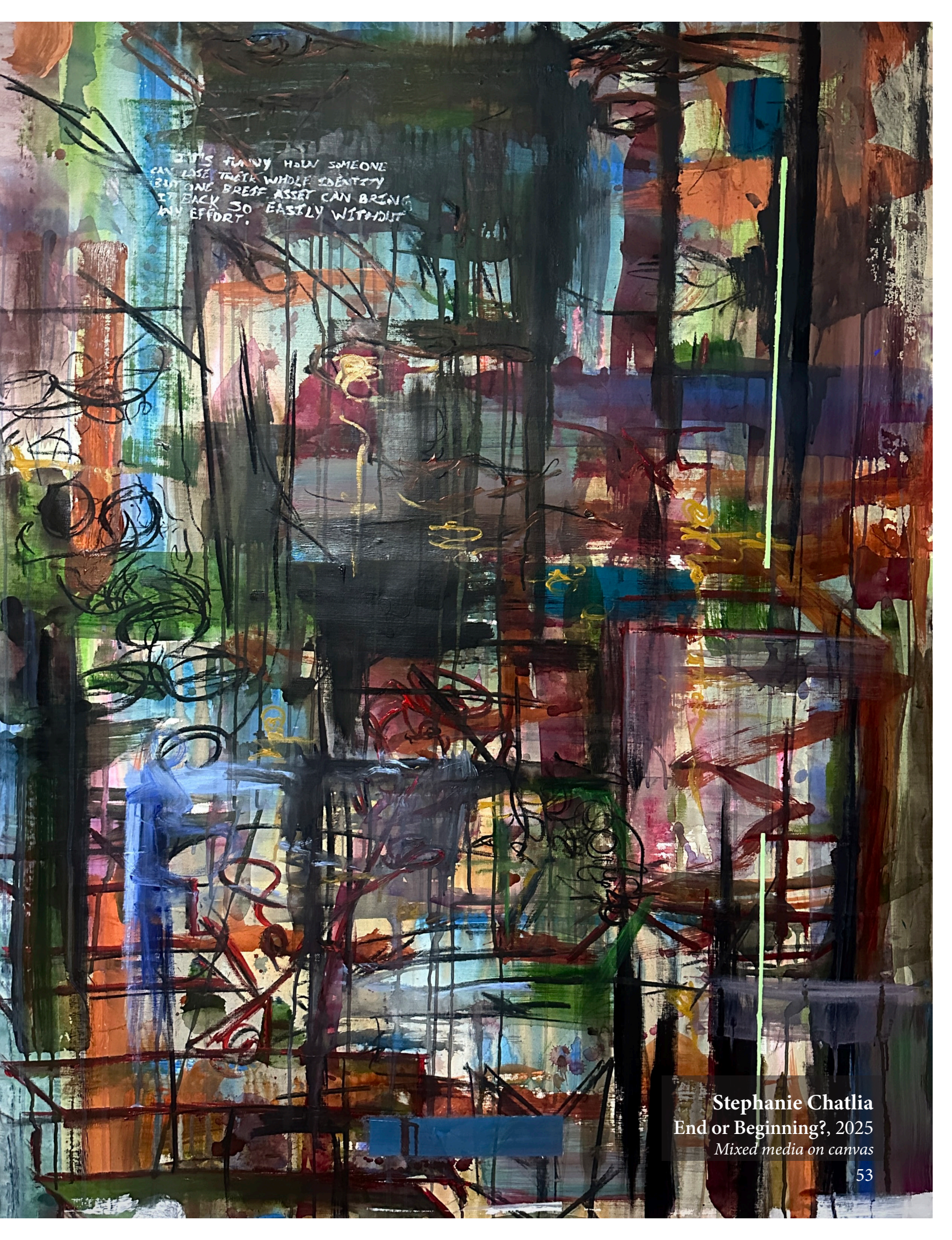
It is not wrong, I think, to want to leave this place.
While at the same time, longing for a neverending Spring.
What is to come from this year?
There is nothing I can tangibly hold here.

And maybe after all this time I just wanted to tell someone.
I wanted someone to see my torment and to take charge,
someone to confess to—to talk things through.

But no one was there. Not my sister, not my brother, not even my own mother.
It was then I realized that everyone has their own life,
one equally as frustrating and infuriating as my own.

Have I ever been there for them?

My biggest fear has come true: not knowing my own character.
I really am as selfish and unkind as I imagined others to be. And the worst part of it all:
I don't know how to behave as anything else.

An abstract mixed media artwork on canvas. The composition is dominated by dense, layered brushstrokes in a wide range of colors including dark blues, purples, reds, oranges, greens, and blacks. The strokes vary in thickness and direction, creating a complex, textured surface. In the upper left quadrant, there is a block of white text with a slightly distressed, hand-painted appearance. The overall effect is one of intense energy and chaotic beauty.

IT'S FUNNY HOW SOMEONE
CAN LOSE THEIR WHOLE IDENTITY
BUT ONE BREF ASSET CAN BRING
IT BACK SO EASILY WITHOUT
ANY EFFORT.

Stephanie Chatlia
End or Beginning?, 2025
Mixed media on canvas



Stephanie Chatlia
Sister (Identity Formation Series), 2025
Mixed media on canvas

I miss home and wish I could go back to how it used to be.
When I do go back, it is never the same.
And I am left wondering if I ever actually miss the town I grew up in or the house I lived in.

A town established upon lackluster nature and brimming with repetitive houses.
Quite truly, a river does flow through the city carving a path for goodness, although it is not likely to occur.
Likewise, my home of bright red brick contrasted with brown roofing, giving a barn-like demeanor.
Throughout the formidable, there does exist a certain charm.

Maybe I miss the people who used to inhabit these spaces, indistinguishable and content in their sameness.
Do I still belong amongst them?
It is becoming quite difficult to decipher amongst the boasts and vanity, a hidden truth that I belong to the same flock.

As I age, I grow farther away from my childhood bedroom.
The posters on the wall bring me less joy. The bed sheets feel foreign.
The entire environment is thrown off when I step into the room.
As if the room does not recognize me.

I am not the same person I was when I last organized this bookshelf.
The way the spines rest ordered by color annoys me,
and I cannot recall why I would ever choose to do that.

Is this what growing older is? A journey to the sea,
a move abroad,
learning how to say goodbye then hello again.
A distinct separation from past selves.
A transformation to which there is no return, only forward, until you cannot go further anymore.

A Distinct Separation

Natalia Cantu

h glow

lyrics and music contributed anonymously

Lying in the dark
Trudging through the mud
The world can't be this big
You could hardly think that far

Crying on the floor
Pick yourself up once more
In the mirror, see it clearer
There's something going on

There is still time for you to realise
You already know this down inside
Where do you want to go?
Can you let it show?

You already know
You already know

Lights shaking, smeared
Turning green
The feelings sit, heavy
Entering the screen

On the road, trees lining the sides
A new beginning, no one in sight
It's opening up
Another paradigm

There is still time for you to realise
You already know this down inside
Where do you want to go?
Will you let it show?

You already know
You already know

There is still
There is still
There is, there is

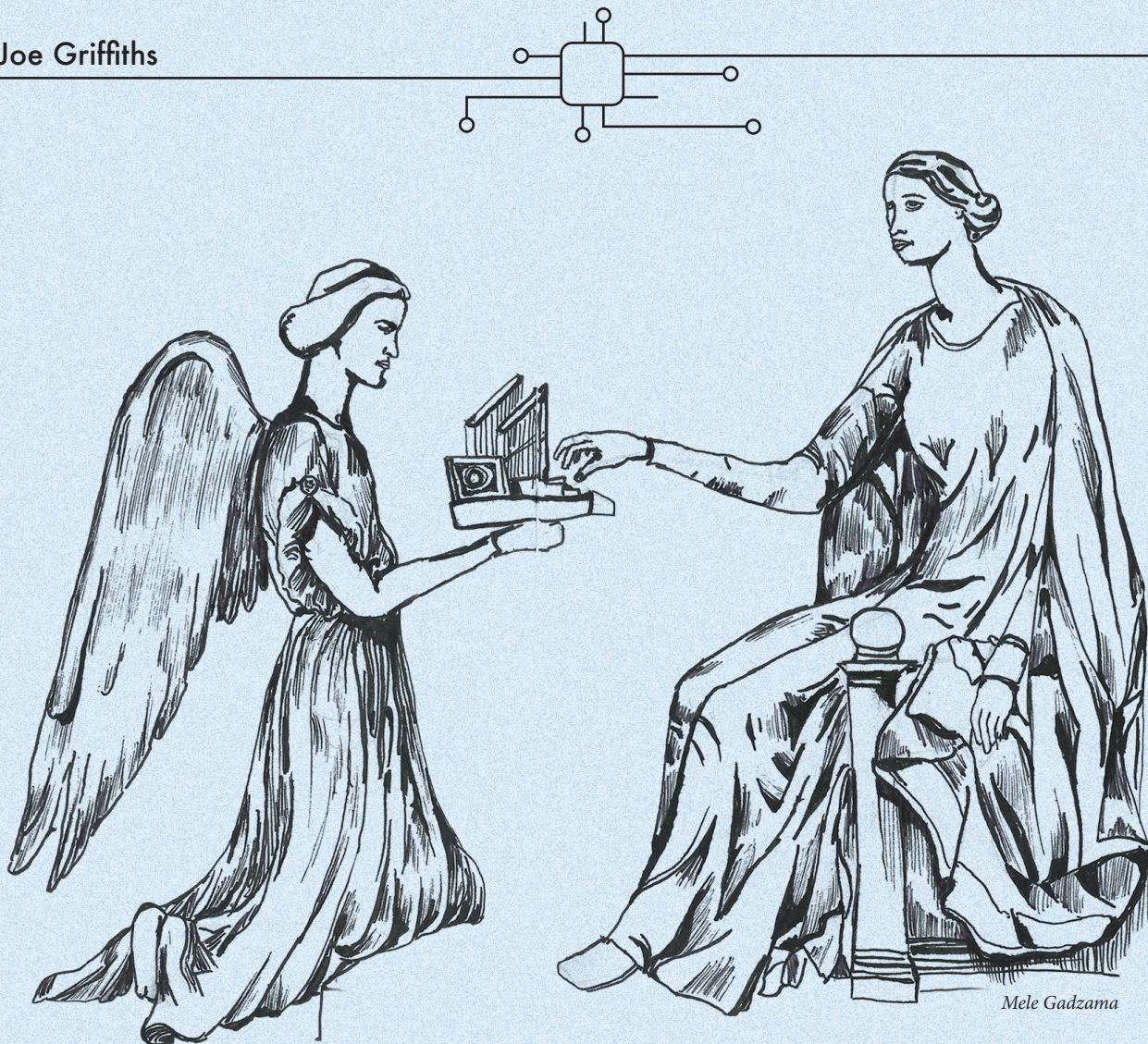


There is still time for you to realise
You already know this down inside
Where do you want to go?
Can I be there for you?

You already know
You already know

MARIANA IN THE DEPTHS

Joe Griffiths



Mele Gadzama

The air in the Archive was always still, metallic-tasting, and damp. Marin sat within it like a part of the collection, her pale, slender hands inspecting a data chip – a fragment of the overgrown, half-drowned world. Her crown braid held her muted, golden hair back from her face, revealing the focus that cemented others’ belief that she was a cold recluse.

Her fingers traced the faint ridges along the surface. Each container, each chip, was a fragment of the past, a miniature world preserved. Her gaze held on the etched symbol, misted by her breath, as responsibility pressed like a shroud. This chip carried more than knowledge – it contained private histories, lives once lived; a sliver of the old world that sparked a fierce devotion. Leaning in, she

whispered the name that steadied her in the work, the one she never spoke aloud. “Mariana.” It anchored her, even if she knew the persona she’d built around it was not real. It simply helped her hold the past still.

Her thoughts slipped, as they often did, to the man who had taught her everything. Her mentor had lived as secluded a life as she did now, though he had never been unkind. His sombre voice echoed in her memory, each word clipped and exact, pressing against her conscience the weight of authority.

“This work requires distance, Marin. Don’t indulge in sloppy human emotion; it will compromise your responsibilities. You must be a ghost among ghosts.”

He had not barked the words. He had spoken them as

simple fact, just as he had taught her to catalogue or seal a case. He had done his best to shape her into someone the Archive could rely on. He had shaped her into someone who scarcely knew how to step outside it.

Her palms remained on the casing, brushing away an errant fleck of dust before moving to smooth the strands of her braid. She drew a slow breath as the chill of the room pressed against her skin, and for a moment, she felt anchored.

A low mechanical groan trembled through the walls, vibrating beneath her feet. It grew from a drone into the heavy, urgent whirring of the winch ferrying her visitor from the settlement to her moated grange. Her mentor's voice came to her mind again, etched into the bones of her memory.

"Solitude, Marin. It is as essential as air."

The heavy whirring cut out, leaving silence absolute in its wake. She knew who it would be; the only person who visited unannounced. Isera. Marin closed the chip's case with care, though her pulse betrayed her, quickening in ways she would never admit aloud. Irritation rose first, sharp and instinctive at the thought of her solitude being pierced. Yet another feeling threaded through it, softer and far more troublesome, making her shoulders loosen despite herself. She tried to ignore it, but the awareness persisted, refusing to be dismissed.

Isera's presence reached the doorway before her, her composure arriving with her first step. When she stepped inside, she drew the dim light toward herself. Her dark hair was swept back into a braid that had clearly been plaited by small, impatient hands – uneven in places, tugged too tight in others – a mark of her work among the settlement's children. Loose strands clung stubbornly to her temples. There was an alertness in the way she held herself, the kind carried by someone balancing far too many responsibilities without complaint.

"Marin." Her tone was even, though a note of concern lay beneath, worry she tried and failed to mask. It was an intrusion, yet not one Marin could dismiss, not entirely.

As Isera's boots fell soft against the metal floor, Marin felt the shift in the air. It unsettled her every time, the way Isera drew her attention without effort.

"You always choose the exact moment I am working." Marin tried to make it an accusation, but her tone betrayed uncertainty.

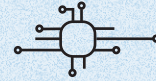
"You're always working. But when you are, you're more... you."

The words hit too close to something she had never dared examine. Her hands trembled as she repositioned the chip case in front of her.

"You shouldn't say things like that," Marin said, the room tightening around her. "Stop reading me."

"Maybe not," Isera replied. "But you are alone too often. I only wish I could visit more."

Marin could not decide whether the words irritated her or steadied her, and the uncertainty was the most unsettling thing of all.



Isera allowed herself a moment, taking in the room as Marin worked, the clutter of cases and containers, the faint trail of dust covering areas Marin was too short to reach. She noted the slight tension in Marin's shoulders – the way her hand drifted to the braid at the nape of her neck, the subtle tightening around the chip case – and wondered briefly if she was overstepping.

Every movement was precise, a declaration of control, and Isera felt a familiar tug of admiration, tempered by the awareness of how exhausting this discipline must be. She had watched Marin operate this way countless times, yet the intensity never dulled.

Stepping closer, Isera allowed herself to notice the little details Marin usually ignored in herself: the way her hair caught the light, the rise and fall of her chest as she paused in concentration. Isera understood the ritual, the grounding it gave, but she also understood the fragility beneath it, a tension she knew she could never fully ease.

Marin's gaze lifted, meeting Isera's own with an almost imperceptible hesitation. Isera smiled – not a timid smile, but one she chose carefully, a shield as much as a signal. She didn't break the rhythm of the room. She simply existed within it, a deliberate contrast to Marin's meticulous isolation.

Isera's eyes flicked to the chip Marin held, noting how her fingers brushed along the casing with painstaking care, then back to her face.

"That look... what story is keeping you company today?" she asked, her voice light but probing.

Marin did not answer. Inside, she knew what she wanted to say, but the words lodged somewhere between thought and voice. It's a fragment detailing the daily routine of countless people from the old world. Every habit, every gesture recorded in painstaking detail. I've absorbed them all. That's where Mariana exists.

"You've been studying that chip for days now, haven't you?" Isera continued, stepping closer. "Reading the traces left behind, even those not meant to be seen."

Marin's jaw tightened. "I have a responsibility to know every detail." She closed the case sharply, the tiny click echoing the distance she wished to place between

them. “It is critical to understanding the Decline. You wouldn’t understand the precision required.”

Isera stepped closer, slow and deliberate, her gaze not leaving Marin’s. The weight of her presence seemed to press against the careful order Marin maintained.

“You don’t have to hide here, you know,” she said softly, a reminder to herself as much as to Marin.

Marin’s grip tightened on the chip case, the faintest tremor betraying her calm exterior. Yet the awareness of Isera so close, the scent of her hair faint in the air, the warmth radiating in a space Marin had claimed as hers alone – it was disarming.

“All this work, all this distance... does it make you feel safer, or smaller?”

Marin’s lips parted, searching for a reply, but nothing came. Her throat tightened, a flush creeping into her cheeks, though she refused to meet Isera’s eyes fully. The silence between them carried more meaning than words ever could.

Isera let her hand hover near the edge of the table, not invading, but close enough that Marin could sense it. The gesture, almost intimate, almost daring, left Marin acutely aware of the space between them, and the unspoken way she wished it could change.

A sharp, brittle sound escaped her lips before she could stop it. “Why do you keep coming here?” Marin snapped, the words harsher than she intended. It made her wince. She hated herself immediately for breaking the fragile calm, for allowing a flicker of frustration to betray the depth of her dependence.

Isera did not falter. Her dark eyes remained focused. She kept her expression steady, a subtle stillness meeting Marin’s outburst, as if the room had paused to let the tension settle.

“Because I care,” she said softly, like it was a fact. The words struck Marin, more potent than any reprimand could have ever been.

Marin’s chest tightened, the ache of shame pressing down on her. The blush creeping over her was more than embarrassment. Her lashing out had been a shield; now it only revealed the truth she had spent so long suppressing. Isera’s care was important, vital even, and Marin had not been ready to admit it.

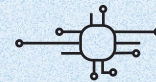
The silence stretched between them, loaded but not oppressive. Isera closed the gap, her movements cautious, aware she was crossing the invisible line Marin’s outburst had drawn. Isera’s clear, unjudging comprehension pierced the armour Marin had built around herself.

Marin had thrown her only defence at Isera, and it had shattered, revealing the quickening pulse she fought so hard to conceal. The chilling voice of her mentor made its final, desperate plea: “Do not indulge in sloppy human

emotion.” But the command was hollow now, its authority thin.

Isera did not move further, she was close enough to reach across the desk. Her fingers did not touch Marin but came to rest gently on the cold surface of the chip case, barely apart from Marin’s own clenched hand.

Marin’s body screamed conflicting instructions. Retreat. Stay. Pull the case away. Accept this terrifying closeness. Marin finally lifted her eyes from the desk to meet Isera’s gaze. Her gaze, usually steady, wavered for the briefest moment, a subtle unease passing across her features before she forced it back into composure. With a gentle exhale, she unlocked her fingers and released the chip case.



Isera felt the difference immediately – that tiny, decisive unclenching that spoke of something far heavier. She did not move at first. She simply watched, the faint rise and fall of her own chest syncing with the charged quiet between them. Marin’s hands, usually so guarded, lay open on the desk. Isera’s eyes caught the slight lingering tension in the fingertips, a trace of control still clinging.

This was the moment Isera had waited two years to witness. She did not smile; she simply held the stillness of her own body, letting the shift in the room be Marin’s alone. Presence, that was why she was there. She saw the lines of control around Marin’s mouth soften, and the light in her eyes, though still protective, was less fierce.

Marin swallowed, the air suddenly too thin. Isera’s question – safer or smaller – hung between them. She tried to look away, but her gaze snagged on Isera’s hand resting on her precious chip.

“I..” The word scraped out, barely formed. She hated how unprepared she sounded. “When you come here, it disrupts my work.”

“I know.”

“It shouldn’t.” Marin’s hand lay open. “I’ve trained for years to maintain focus. To keep distance. To be –” She stopped, the mentor’s voice rising unbidden in her mind, whispering a warning she almost voiced aloud.

Isera did not push. She did not fill the silence.

“He told me I had to be a ghost,” Marin whispered. Her gaze stayed on her open palms, fingers trembling slightly. “That the work was the only thing that could be solid. But when you’re here... the room feels too heavy. I feel too heavy.”

“Heavy isn’t a bad thing, Marin,” Isera said softly. “It

means you're here, with me, instead of drifting somewhere in the Decline."

Isera reached out then, not to take Marin's hand, but to gently slide the chip case several inches to the side. The name she had whispered to earlier, Mariana, hung in the quiet, and for a moment, the precise, guarded persona faltered.

Marin looked up. For the first time, she did not see Isera as an intrusion but as something she could reach. Her hands still trembled, but the motion had changed; no longer a trapped vibration, it felt like a door being nudged open, letting in air she hadn't realised she'd been holding out.

"I don't know how to be anything else," Marin admitted, her voice cracking.

"You don't have to know," Isera replied, her face softened. "You just have to acknowledge the feeling."

For a long moment, neither of them moved.

The Archive did not demand her attention. The room simply existed, cool and dim and heavy with its preserved histories. Marin became aware of her breathing first, shallow then deeper, the air scraping less as it reached her lungs. Her hands still rested open on the desk, palms faintly aching from how long they had been clenched. She did not correct the posture. She let the sensation remain.

The weight she had spoken of did not vanish. If anything, it settled more fully into her body. But it was different now. No longer a pressure she needed to brace against.

Across from her, Isera shifted at last, not towards Marin, but away. She leaned back against a cabinet, folding her arms loosely, her gaze drifting without purpose across the stacked cases and labelled shelves. The movement was small, deliberate, a clear relinquishing of tension.

She glanced at the chip where it lay, no longer centred, no longer shielded. The instinct to restore it rose automatically – align the casing, secure the latch, return it to its place. The ritual waited patiently, as it always had. Marin acknowledged the pull, then let it pass. For the first time, the Archive did not feel endangered by her hesitation.

The lights hummed softly overhead. Somewhere below, water shifted against the building's supports, a slow, rhythmic sound she had tuned out years ago. Now it reached her, steady and unthreatening, a reminder that the world continued whether she catalogued it or not.

"I should log the fragment," Marin said at last. Her voice was quiet, unsteady, but no longer brittle. "Later."

Isera did not respond immediately. When she did, it was only a slow nod.

She drew a stool back with her foot and sat. The metal was cold beneath her, grounding. Isera mirrored the action a moment later, lowering herself onto the edge of a crate opposite her. The distance between them remained, but it was no longer defensive. It simply was.

The Archive felt different with them both still.

Marin's gaze drifted to the high shelves she could never quite reach without assistance. Dust traced the edges of objects she had long decided were acceptable to leave untouched. She had always told herself it was efficiency. Now she wondered if it had been something else – a quiet acknowledgment of her own limits.

"I don't think he was wrong," Marin said suddenly, surprising herself. "About the work."

Isera tilted her head, attentive.

"It does require distance," Marin continued. "Just not... all the time." She paused, choosing her words with care. "I think I mistook absence for discipline."

The admission lingered between them, unchallenged.

Outside, the machinery began its slow reset, the faint grind of gears signalling the return journey of the winch. Isera glanced towards the sound, then back to Marin.

"I should go," she said evenly, already shifting her weight as the machinery turned.

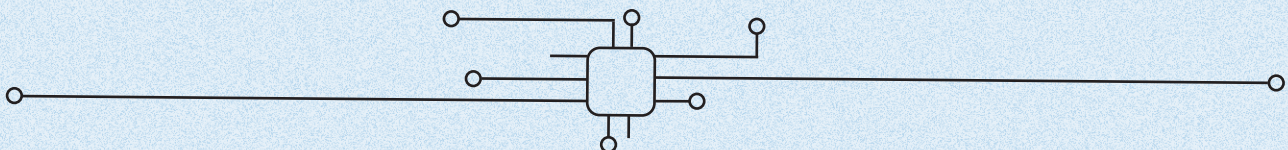
Marin felt the familiar flicker of resistance – the urge to close in, to brace herself for the silence that would follow. It did not take hold. Instead, she nodded.

"Yes," she said. After a moment, she added, "Come back tomorrow."

Isera smiled – small, restrained, unmistakably proud. "I will."

Marin exhaled again, longer this time. The breath carried with it a strange sense of continuity – not the preservation she was accustomed to, but something unfolding. Her eyes drifted across the quiet Archive, and for the first time in years, she sat without moving, without checking a case, without cataloguing.

The room settled into quiet again. This time, it did not feel empty.



ENTRO

People have been categorising food for as long as they have been selling it. It is therefore a shame that there is no universal method of grouping dishes together. While earlier, less rigorous models categorised food by culture or flavour, I have discovered an ideal solution to this problem that leaves no room for interpretation, with roots firmly based in science.

There are three states of matter (discounting plasma) that are taught to students early in their scientific education: solids, liquids, and gases. These refer to varying amounts of energy held by the atoms — entropy, if you will. The same can be applied to the grouping of foodstuffs.

The solids are well-structured dishes, formed of multiple ingredients and given a specific shape. The liquid state of matter corresponds to solid foods in which the “atoms” remain bound to one another, but are no longer held in a rigid structure. Finally, we have the gases. In food terms it would be the liquids that flow freely in their container — a slightly confusing comparison at first. These categories have been named, respectively, hot dogs, salads, and soups.

The word hot dog has been chosen very carefully, due to its versatility in shape; the bun can be folded around the sausage, or bent outward, and still be recognisable as a hot dog, bearing the same shape as a sandwich, or pizza. In its core essence, a hot dog is any

carefully crafted dish. Foods such as samosas and jacket potatoes are immediately recognisable as belonging to the hot dog class, though it is not unique to starch-based foods. A meatloaf or an omelette can be classified as a hot dog, due to their intentional structure.

"The clearest way to understand the class is by reverting to the entropic viewpoint."

Salads are tossed collections of various solid and semi-solid foods. Pastas, meat platters, risotto, seafood, are all salads in one way or another, as the disarray of each component strays from the



OPY:

composition of the hot dog class.

Lastly, soups. These make up a broad class, but are often also considered quite self-explanatory. Anything beyond a set wetness and viscosity is classified as a soup, and every solid piece of food in it is also part of the soup, provided the wetness makes up the majority of the dish. Stews, curries, and beverages all fall cleanly into the soup category. However, more solid dishes can also be considered soups. The clearest way to understand the class is by reverting to the entropic viewpoint. Mashed potato has a total dissolution of structure and intention, and therefore the most entropy, bringing it to the soup category. Carefully layering it with other ingredients into a shepherd's pie would lower the dish entropy

and give us, quite naturally, a hot dog.

"Discomfort with its implications should not be confused with a failure of the system itself."

This leads us to the topic of state changes. It sometimes doesn't take much to dramatically change the entropy in a dish, leaving it in a state of entropic flux, and so there are boundaries between categories that have to be painted. Some of these are more difficult to define than others: What level of viscosity separates a soup from its counterparts? How much must an ice cream sandwich melt to become a sweet creamy soup with

large croutons? And how many ravioli does it take to go from a group of hot dogs to a salad? All of these questions must be studied, and ideally numerical entropic values calculated, but an answer is there, waiting to be discovered.

Of course, edge cases exist, as with any serious classification system, but these do little to undermine the broader utility of the model. On the contrary, they merely highlight the need for further refinement. With a total absence of comparably effective frameworks, this remains a sufficient — if not optimal — lens through which to understand food in a culinary landscape already defined by flux. Discomfort with its implications should not be confused with a failure of the system itself.

On Classifying Food

Camillo de Gregorio

A Fleeting River

Jai Robinson

Part I

In recent months, I have repeatedly stumbled over a particular conundrum pertaining to the taboo, one whose ugly head reared itself in the reticulated ogees of the many examples of Gothic architecture that one finds in the northwest of London. It speaks from fountained basins – long hollow – unheard by all but the most attuned to natural, unadulterated oscillations that ring out from the city’s nutrition: namely, rivers. But we focus not on the more famous Thames, Lee, or even Roding; instead, we turn our attention to the more obscure subterranean river Fleet, which lends its name to a number of London streets (for instance, Fleet Street of the city and Fleet Road of Hampstead) and of which there is a significant, unexpected property. The poem below, attributed only to Xavier, encapsulates this buried notion – its prophecy mirrors the findings of our recent study.

*“Storie eye’d, focused tide–
Fever’d comes the blue
Stem the cye, feed the blind–
In ripeness they come to roost
Plump the swine, aid the sty
The manger yet shall bloom
And when the dirt has leave to lie
Through the fleet runs only truth.”*

The Fleet is just one element in the set of subterranean rivers in London, many of which lend their name to corresponding neighbourhoods – for instance, the Muswell Brook lends its name to Muswell Hill, and the river Ching (though not completely subterranean) gives rise to Chingford. The nomenclature is not especially interesting in our case – the name derives from the Anglo-Saxon *fleot*, literally meaning “tidal inlet”. In the current day, the Fleet rises on the Hampstead Heath, and runs underneath, and unbeknownst to, the residents of Kentish Town, Camden Town, and Mornington Crescent, before flowing through the less residential areas of King’s Cross and Farringdon, marking the eastern boundary of the ward of Holborn, whose name, coming from the Middle English *hol* and *bourne*, i.e. “hollow brook”, makes direct reference to the river, before joining the Thames underneath Blackfriar’s Bridge. One may directly observe the river at either end; its mouth appears underneath the bridge’s north end as a drainage outlet, while its sources can be found within the Hampstead Heath – one on the east, in Highgate swimming ponds, and one on the west, in the quaintly named “Vale of the Heath”.

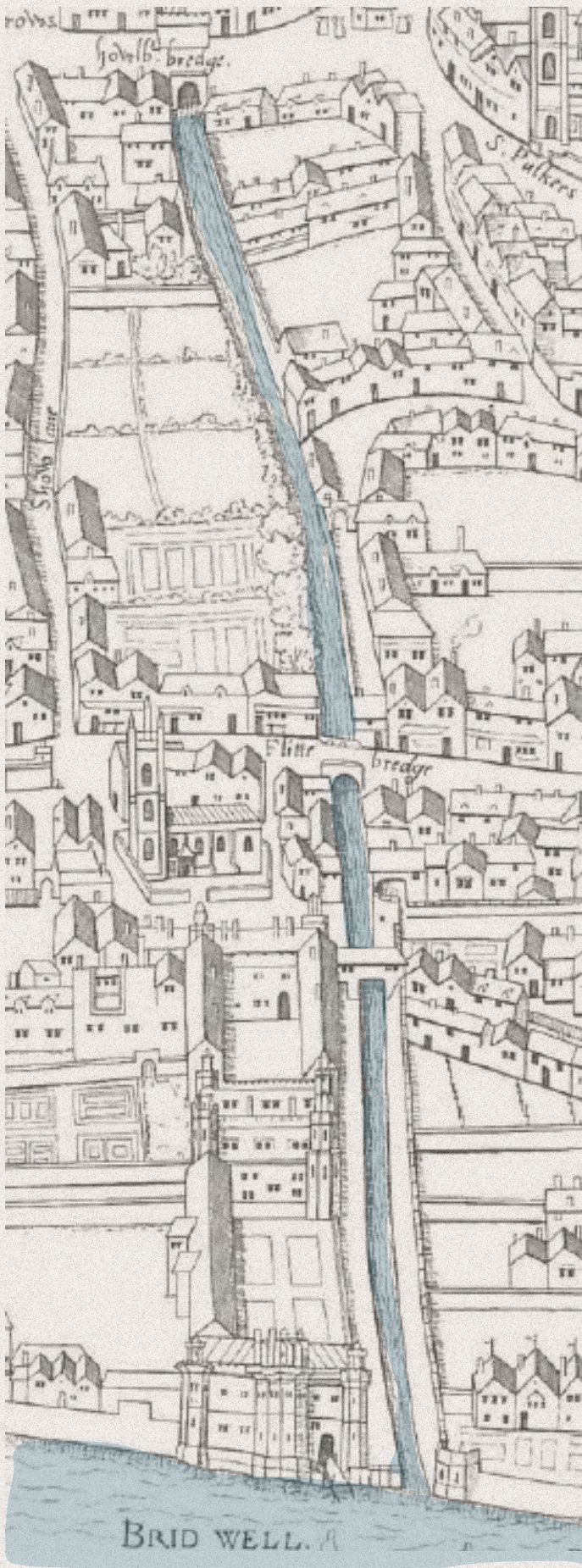
Our interest in the Fleet stems from the underlying concept of *hum*, whose definition and investigation will be our primary focus.

We begin with a brief example to motivate. Consider the many sacred sites across the world which are, in some sense, protected; for example, Mount Athos in Greece, the main building of the Corvinus University in Budapest, or the Maikphiz Cathedral in Russia. While all are protected by UNESCO, the legal concept underpinning the protection of such sites is not unique to UNESCO sites. In general, these laws are known as *verloren* laws – laws which protect against the loss of sites of major importance and lore. These laws do not protect people but rather meaning itself. Are these laws derived from a site’s inherent value, universal value, or rather only the value that we, as a society, have prescribed it? Is Macchu Picchu’s value obtained from something intrinsic, or merely from what one is willing to pay for or to see it?

The *hum* of a site *S* is the inherent frequency, or flux, of a site. The notion is similar to that of resonant frequency: for each closed room, there is a frequency which is amplified by the room’s structural properties, and the hum of the place can be seen as an extension of this in conjunction with the underlying lifeforce present in the universe. This has, for decades, been ridiculed as a pseudoscience, akin to astrology or scientific racism. Despite this, there exists a device, namely the *picophone*, which was developed to record this hum, which can then be converted into an audio format for further analysis.

The picophone has attracted significant controversy due to the wildly incomprehensible recordings it produces, of which many say have no merit at all. Despite this, it is a remarkable fact that a site’s UNESCO world heritage status is an extraordinary predictor of the hum: it has been shown that the device is able to determine a site’s heritage status with astonishing accuracy, with both false positive and negative rates not exceeding 5%. It is worth noting, however, that the final frequency reading for a given site is subject to high variation over time, with no apparent trend or periodicity. Many then argue, as a corollary, that the UNESCO result holds very little weight – a pattern in the noise.

From here arises the thorn in my side that has led me to venture so far into the realm of what others may call charlatanism; for it seemed, despite the *verloren* laws, which laid the lore on the bare ground, that there was a stern contradiction at heart. That is, the hum of the River Fleet does not exhibit *any*



variation – in fact, the recordings of the picophone are clear, unadulterated and unwavering. The result, if true, could single-handedly prove the effectiveness of the device. It is especially fascinating that the Fleet’s hum places it in the small category of sites which lie in the infamous UNESCO range but are not themselves classified as a world heritage site.

The initial measures taken to investigate the river’s physical properties were devised after consulting a select group dubbed the “river people” (who are, despite their collective alias, in fact just as porous as you or I) at my institution, who were stowed away in the most desolate and dilapidated building situated on the northeastern-most point of campus; their floor was labelled a mezzanine, a curious descriptor given it was several stories up, and the floor rose to meet any passerby with squeals, frailty and a green, surgent gradient. A hallway lay in front of the lift doors and it was lit up like a hospital with those great bright lights which hum and flicker occasionally preventing any sort of restful function. The researchers themselves were very pleasant, and it is rather distressing to see how they were swept aside and cast as enough to give an office but not much more.

Their research did not pertain explicitly to the Fleet, but I was given a notion of the initial steps required to perform an exploratory analysis. Of course, the river was not unknown to them: in fact, they had much to say of its pollution, and other ignominious facts about its history. It is also an unfortunate fact they were not in possession of a picophone – so great was the doubt ascribed to it.

The procedure was to be conducted at a manhole in the King’s Cross area. The location was chosen for a variety of reasons; first, and most importantly, there were no verloren laws preventing any sort of tampering, as was the case in the Heath and more historic locations closer to the square mile. King’s Cross had a rich history, one of warehouses and child labour camps, of which no verloren laws were willing to protect. Next, it must be noted that I have a personal connection with the area. In fact, in my undergraduate days, it is precisely the location that I was first introduced to the river, as my friend had truncated such a quantity of prison wine that he had decided, with full ration, that it would be to everyone’s delight, to which his thesis was most prophetic, to open a manhole and climb down, right there in the middle of Euston Road, the side heading east, laying right in front of the station, King’s Cross that is, until at last he felt the flowing waters of the Fleet. Old Stew would climb in and out of the hole, pulling funny faces as we all watched and howled into the empty streets of London under the restful watch of St Pancras’ clock tower. The roads were desolate, that is until a double decker N73 bus came along on a routine stop, its modern Routemaster engine humming, its headlights glaring directly at Old Stew, at which point we started shouting, our drunken stupor rapidly turning into sober concern. Old Stew was unabated, his decadence unwavering, his little head jeering at the multi-tonne monster pummelling towards him at an admittedly tepid 20mph – though I implore you, the reader, to do the momentum calculation yourself – threatening a swift trip back to whence he came. And as the bus drove straight over him, we shrieked like girls and ran onto the Euston Road only to find him giggling at us from below, his wiry frame safe in the cusp of

the faecal muddled waters
of the Fleet.

yet yields an unremarkable hum reading. Given the thesis at hand and unimpressive results yielded by the initial scientific investigation, the report has reached a fork in the road. Two options are available. First, the scientific route – the status quo, the default – the one able to give the picophone its final push out the realms of pseudoscience; and the other, the metaphysical way, into the realm of abstraction and further away from public acceptance, but perhaps closer to the truth, which is what we value above all.

My own personal interest in rivers began as a child, upon learning the grotto, an old ruin of arches,

Part II

Ideologues, the Lot. The type to side with a likeminded stranger over a lifelong friend, the type to tut at jaywalking, the type to unfollow but not block, the type to treat disagreement with condescension, the type to push past on an escalator, the type to grimace at a Samsung, the type to insist we were all born blank slates, the type to never swear, the type to swear too much, the type to self-diagnose, the type to whom truth plays second fiddle... The Lot are those who conflate value and beauty: they seek only the top percentile, while tossing the bottom percentile aside, ignoring the fact that both are equally rare. They think discretely: every action, every artwork, every principle, every idea – all have positive weight. That something can exist with measure zero is a foreign idea to them. There are sites that are world heritage, there are those that are not. There is science, then there is pseudoscience. The law of excluded middle always holds. If the top percentile carries all the praise, the bottom-percentile should carry negative praise; life is a zero-sum game after all. And it is the Lot which contains a part of all of us, and to whom we owe so much to; indeed, it is the Lot which lead us into line, out of Sodom and into the modern world.

I first met Old Stew at a friend of a friend's gathering. We were playing Diplomacy, not a simple game, and one I still don't understand. We bonded over niche fruits and tunes. Air ducts and the like. Later that night, during an extended break from Diplomacy, induced primarily by boredom, we played chess, taking shots with every capture. He played a better game, but I had better tolerance. Passed out listening to Schlagenheim. Forever I compared myself to him: I, more scientific, more logical, more rational; he, more truthful, more daring, more spontaneous. It is now that I realise that the Diplomacy game was still yet to end; that was what we were there for – the chess match was a mere aside.

The exploratory investigation of the river yielded no meaningful results (Appendix A); none of the measures taken were unique to the river. The Chicago River has a similarly high conductivity, and equal viscosity. Cheonggyecheon in South Korea also exhibits low clarity and high turbidity. The River Fitzjibbon in Spain is another urban, partially subterranean river with high nutrient load and moderate flow velocities

almost a fort, laying on the strand of the man-made ponds of the Wanstead Park, was once a shipping dock, carrying trade to and from the Thames. The Roding, the river connecting these ponds and the Thames, is evidently a shell of its former glory, since I recall wading into the centre and passing time there as a child, sending in fleets of paper ships and running up onto the nearby, now closed, wooden triangular bridge to see them sent on their way, through Ilford and Barking to, hopefully, make their way into the Thames, and beyond that, through the estuary and into the great abyss that is the North Sea. I used to believe some other boy in the Netherlands would go out one day and see my ship sailing toward him. As a child, I never considered the possibility of my paper ships floating upstream. Always one direction, always heading south. Downhill. Away from the mouth. No exertion needed. Natural, given the lack of motor, or anything to repel the current. Just going with the flow, floating along, like a sine wave, constantly moving, constantly changing, but always predictably. Sometimes, I meet people that still share this same belief; people who believe they have no motor.

The Fleet, in comparison, has a story which goes beyond any individual's personal interest, one deeply intertwined with the city, and plays a role far more significant than its current state may suggest. In London's infancy, it was a major river possibly containing the oldest tidal mill in the world, but it is not for this the River Fleet is famous. As London's population grew, the river's flow weakened, for it had become polluted with human and industrial waste. As it was not yet underground, the river became infamous for the putrid smell it

produced, influencing poems such as the following, attributed to Jonathan Swift (author of *Gulliver's Travels*):

*"Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts and blood,
Stinking sprats, all drenched in mud,
Dead cats and turnip-tops come tumbling down the flood."*

So terrible was the reek that the surrounding land, which is nowadays prime real estate, fell into destitution; prisons and slums became commonplace, including the notorious Newgate prison, with cholera and other disease rampant, inspiring the likes of Charles Dickens, who chose the area as the location of Fagin's Den in *Oliver Twist*, and describing the area as the place "where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in the filth". The river eventually ceased to be, becoming a ditch, filled with silt. The stench was eventually dealt with, which is the reason the river is now subterranean, and it now operates as part of London's sewer network.

A history of how beauty and innovation were polluted by our waste and neglect, eventually buried and entirely unknown to the general lot. It is with this that we return to our motivating question: why is the Fleet's hum so unambiguous? What does this glorified sewer have that could place it in the band with the likes of Machu Picchu and the pyramids, of which the Lot have so convinced us of their value? The answer is this: the Fleet's value is derived from what it is, what it was,

and what it could have been. The river tells as much of the human condition as any great monument. Its flow introduced energy and progress – it also introduced disease and poverty.

Both extremes are characteristic and essential to our species, and it is for this reason it resonates so strongly: not for its conductivity, or oxygen content, but rather for its humanity – its

h u m
does not
contradict
its filth but
arises from it.

Nowadays, the river is content in its retirement, but there was a time the whole city was reliant on it, and there were times when there was no city at all. Yet when our bodies have been granted leave to lie, the Fleet's flow will continue, its hum eternal, dragging along paper ships borne of the children of Hampstead, through sewage and filth, out into the Thames and from there into the open sea.

Appendix A

Date of investigation.....	06/10/2025
Width.....	2.7 m (main culvert span)
Depth.....	1.8 m (measured centre depth)
Hum.....	4.67 Hz (+/-10 ^{-∞})
Flow velocity.....	1.3 m/s (moderate turbulent flow)
Surface roughness (Manning's n).....	0.018
Reynolds number.....	~2.3 x 10 ⁶ (fully turbulent regime)
Flow energy density.....	~1,000 J/m ³ (1/2ρv ²)
Dynamic pressure.....	~800 Pa
Water temperature.....	14.2 °C (urban-heated runoff)
Density (ρ).....	999.1 kg/m ³ (slightly below pure water)
Dynamic viscosity (μ).....	1.15 x 10 ⁻⁶ Pa·s
Kinematic viscosity (ν).....	1.15 x 10 ⁻⁶ m ² /s
pH.....	7.3 (neutral to slightly alkaline)
Dissolved oxygen.....	3.2 mg/L
Electrical conductivity.....	1,120 μS/cm (ion-rich urban water)
Total dissolved solids (TDS).....	700 mg/L
Faecal content.....	450 mg/L
Salinity.....	0.05 ppt (trace salts from road runoff)
Ammonia (NH ₃).....	0.6 mg/L
Nitrates (NO ₃).....	3.4 mg/L
Phosphates (PO ₄ ³⁻).....	1.1 mg/L
Odour.....	Slightly sulfurous / organic
Clarity.....	Opaque brown-grey

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PHOENIX



photos by abira prasad

impermanence

abira prasad

to turn to dust, return to air
to be absolved of the appearance of time
 haunt the memory
 a sickle and a chain
 a field with no name
this is what loss was projected as
on polyvinyl cabinets with perfect appliances
 a window without Tudor dressing
 a dream without a history
 pinned to a self-cannibalistic appetite
 everything eats and is eaten
but film pictures in paper albums decay like skin
absorb eclipses and meteors melting and the ceaseless slicing of the moon
moths mating and powder scraping and birds screaming
 tape unsticking and wood gnarling
 erosion kisses the ink with a feathery fervour
 a wrinkle printed from page to cheek
the moisture of a tear nestling under 24/11/1859
 forwards beckons rebound



Rotate your field

Emilie Jacobi

I recently graduated and started my first full-time job in a new town with new flatmates – a transition in life. With transition comes change; with change, growth. Lately, I have been in a constant state of growth, shaped by the highs and lows of starting over in a new place. Hence, when I heard about *Phoenix's* call for pieces on *Flux*, I felt that my recent transition might provide a few ideas on how one could apply flux to life.

A short background on how I interpret flux: it is the sum of a field of something across an area. If the field is constant across the area, the larger the area, the larger the flux. If the field is non-uniform, it becomes difficult to say how the area influences the total flux. In this piece, let me define that *something* as energy – not measured in joules or calories, but in what Gen Z would call vibes; area as one's worldview; and a non-uniform field of energy, which can be positive or negative.


In an ideal world, we have a consistent flow of positive energy within the bounds of our world – perfect grades, perfect jobs, perfect weather, perfect health, and constant laughter – which results in a very high positive flux. On the tail-end is a consistent flow of negative energy: war, pain, illness, stress, and hunger.

Day-to-day, we all have our own means and distribution of energy. For example, I draw positive energy from the thirty-minute walk to work, home-made coffee, and conversations with people I love. My negative energy arises from unwanted comments at work, a foggy head, or daily news cycle. This distribution varies throughout the day, but over time, it converges to some mean value. The

mean value differs between people. Some people you may see as really positive but others less so. A small variation of their mean is often negligible.

Within the area that defines my world, I have a non-uniform distribution of energy. And with time, one's area grows. As a child, you know your family, your friends, and perhaps your kindergarten. The rest of the world is not included. Although I lived through the 2008 financial crisis, I did not know of it – hence it fell outside my world. With time, I saw more of the earth, met more people, experienced milestones – graduation, my first relationship, losing grandparents, a first job – and my world, as well as the area that defined my flux, grew together. My world no longer consisted of just family, friends, and kindergarten. As this worldview grew, events seemed smaller. As a child, reading a few pages of a book was a big achievement in the span of my day, it created massive positive flux. Now it is routine, not worth mentioning; the same event, but a smaller fraction of my world. The same applies to negative energy. My first encounter with eating disorders occupied my mind enormously, but now, after having spoken to many women about their experiences at a young age – and having lived through it myself – I carry less worry. That solace came through the experience built by expanding my worldview. Sources of energy, whether positive or negative, had a larger impact when the area was small. As the area grew and other events brought their own energy, the impact of any single moment shrank.

And so, as one's worldview increases, the significance of repeated events – positive or negative – diminishes. That is what builds tolerance. But there is another aspect of flux I haven't mentioned: the angle between the *something* and the area. In physics, flux is maximal when a field strikes a surface head-on, and zero when it runs parallel. Facing every problem head-on means a lot of negative energy flows



straight
through your
day. Wisdom comes
through understanding
which encounters to face and
which to let pass. Your master's thesis
code has failed – that is a problem you must
face head-on; it demands your full attention. The
sexist comment a stranger made at an event – that can fly
right past you, parallel to your world. Letting negative events
pass is an excellent way to keep your world undisturbed. But
the inverse logic applies to positive energy: do not let it fly
past you. Face it head-on.

Positive energy tends to flow outward from a person, while negative energy is often associated with an inflow. We tend to absorb more negative news, comments, and energy every day – social media is saturated with it. The more negative we are as individuals, the less positive energy we exude. But this isn't always true; those who deal with a great deal of negative energy can still radiate positivity. Here, I think of mothers and fathers. Bridging the gap between positive and negative requires a tremendous amount of internal energy: energy that comes from one's own aspirations, inspirations, and motivations. Energy that does not depend on the environment.

The larger the area, the more diverse your energy field can be. Events become smaller and more negligible the larger your world – extended by experience, learning, and curiosity – may grow. Tolerance is the art of diminishing negative energy by rotating the plane around it: avoiding unnecessary negativity and facing the positive moments squarely.

Your energy is defined by how much space you give to events, how you respond to energy, and how you rotate your field.

You define your field. →

