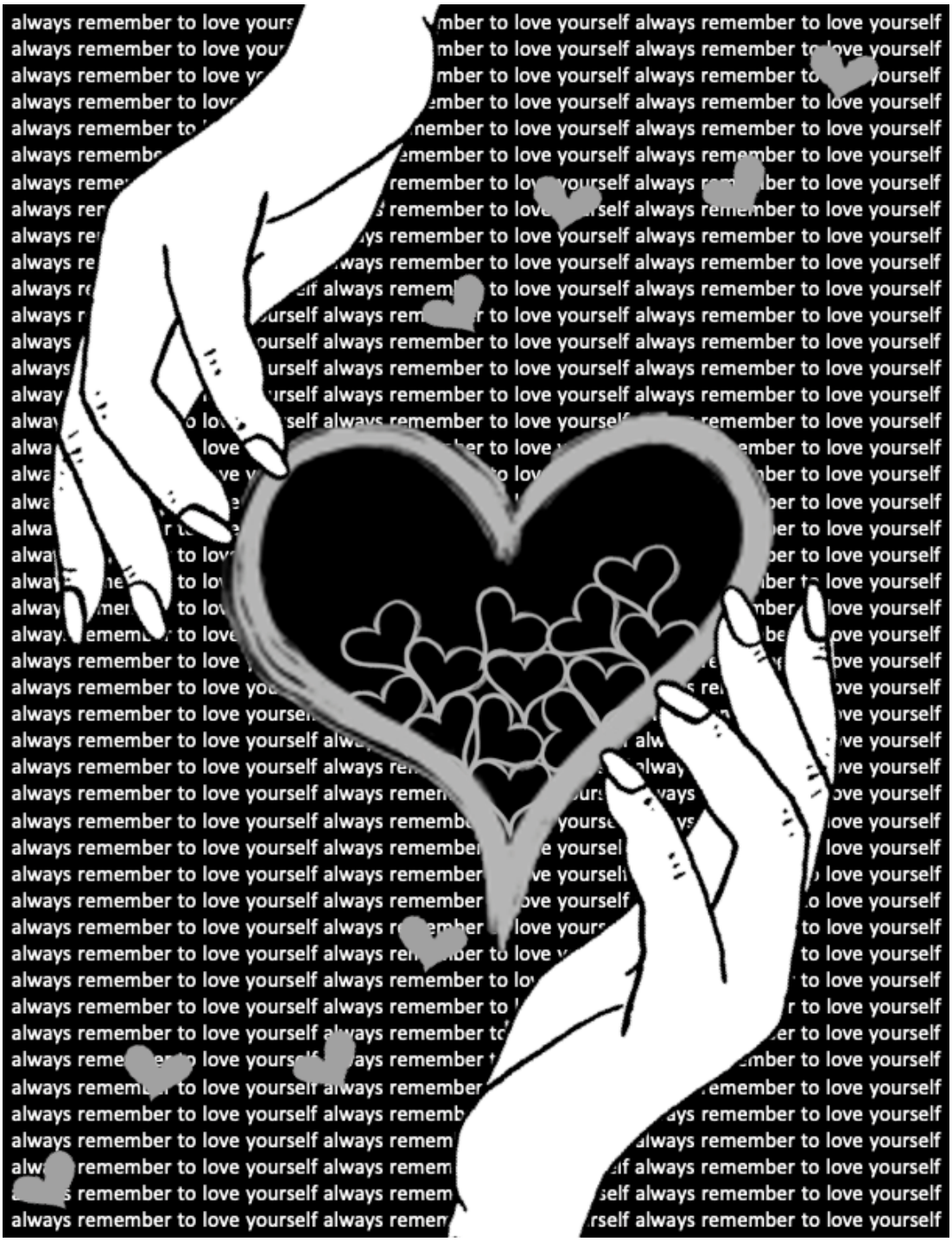
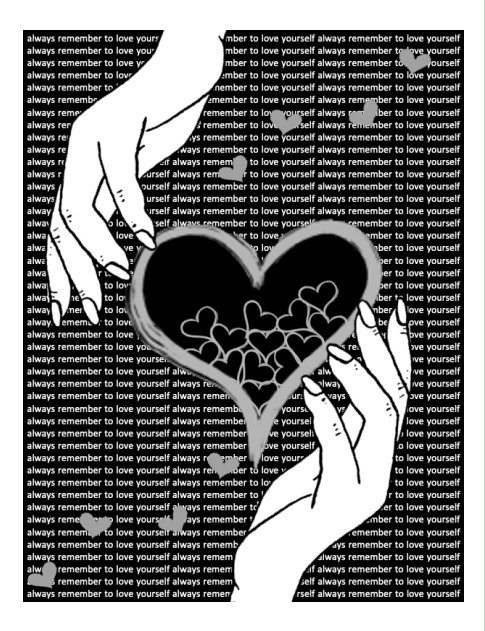
*Let Your Scars Shine Through Your Art*

# RAW LIT




*Issue 1 - Spring 2023*

# SELF-LOVE




Artwork by **Sonia Charales**

“Self-love is the ability to hold your own heart and remember you are worthy of goodness. Times might feel dark or light or even gray yet we must hold on to who we are to get through our challenges."

# Dear reader,

Please be advised that published work may contain triggering and difficult topics. Therefore, each written piece will have **content warnings** for reference.

While *Raw Lit* aims to offer a safe place for its contributors and readers, we do not claim to be health professionals. The content published is for **informational purposes** only.

All work published with *Raw Lit* is the **copyright and personal property** of the creators. No writing or artwork in this publication may be copied and distributed in any way or form without permission from the creator.

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# NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Pain surrounds us, yet it leaves many isolated and estranged.
When faced with it, it scars our souls by its touch, but when it affects others, how relatable can it be as we glimpse stifling sadness or when it hides behind a smile?

Our contributors—and everyone who submitted their work—sent us their darkest thoughts and stories.
By sharing their art and words, they open the door to understanding and compassion.

*Delphine*

The views expressed in this publication are the opinions and perspectives of the respective authors/artists and do not necessarily represent those of the editor of Raw Lit.

# BANDAGED HEART

Poetry by **Diana Kurniawan**

**CW: Mental Health & Violence**

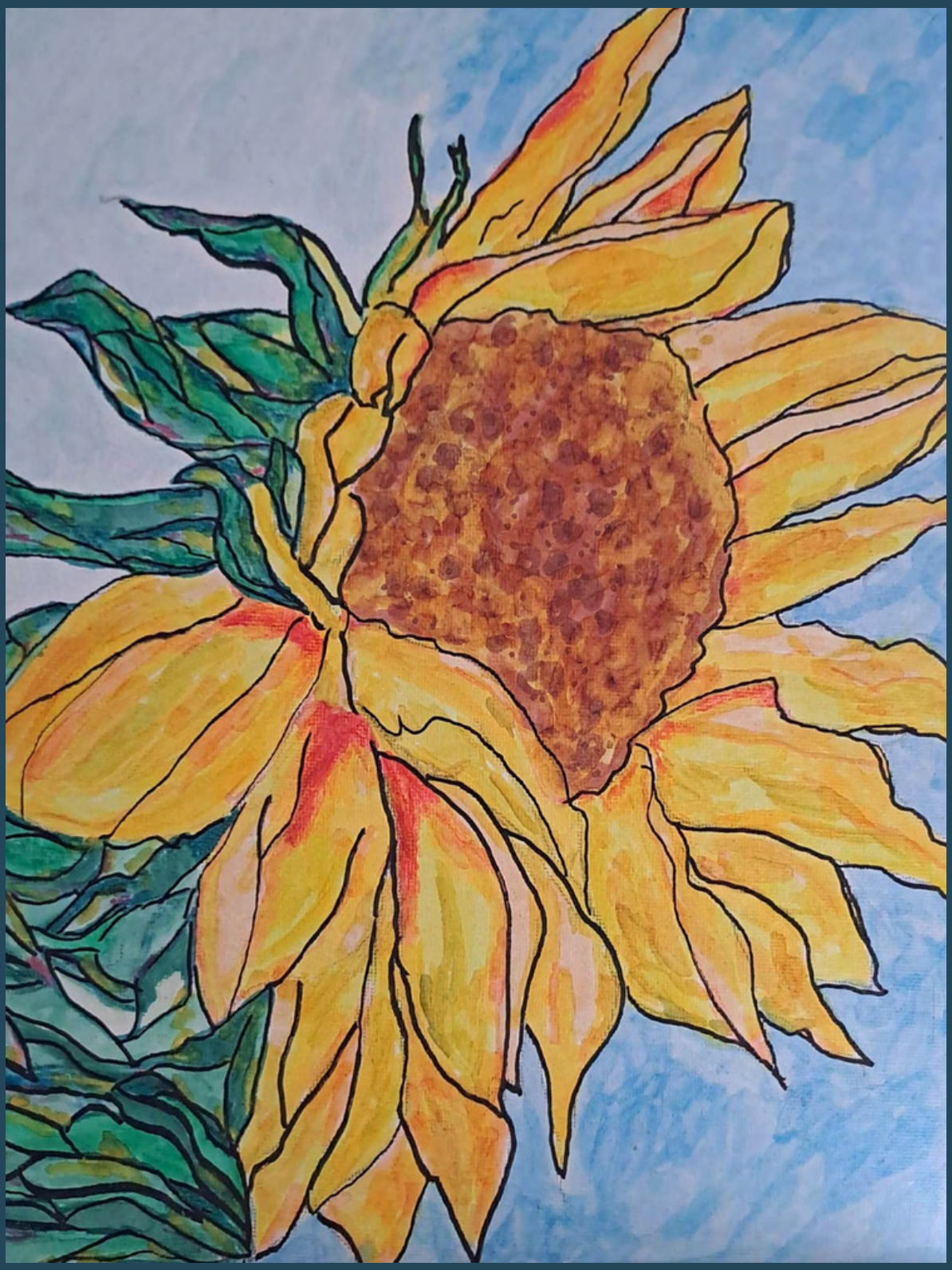
A life less loved
Never needs to be a tragedy
One finds it in the inconspicuous
The budding roses, the sweet hug,
The sunflowers and the forgiveness
Of the open skies

A life destroyed
Never needs to stay damaged
It mends in the peculiars
The spoken words, gratitude,
the thank you, the smile, and
in the knowledge that I can go on

A heart shattered of violence
Should never give up
On love and on breathing life
There are two ventricles evident
Showing one heart is complete
Everyone deserves second chances

A heart scarred of wounds
Bleeds vulnerability deserving of
Mercy, grace, in faithful embrace
Of the vessels that won't cease to pump
Into our minds, because it is
Infinite towards the universe

# SUNFLOWER FROM THE ÎLE DE SEIN



Artwork by **Patrick Gauthier**

# BY THE NUMBERS

Non-fiction by **Melissa Flores Anderson**

**CW: Sociopolitical, Disturbing Content (Women's Health/Reproductive Issues), Sex & Death**

15 — age at which my cousin got pregnant and I, 5 years old, did not understand how it was possible because my limited awareness of how babies arrived was that grownups who loved each other very much kissed and promised to have a baby together. I don't know how I came to this assumption, but it would be several years before someone corrected it.
10 — age at which I got my first period at the end of 5th grade. I cried, ashamed and embarrassed that my body had betrayed me by maturing too early, not in junior high or high school like all the health classes led me to believe.
15 — age at which a boy kissed me for the first time outside my house after dark, and my mom opened the door and told me to get inside, and then yelled at me that she didn't want me making out with some boy in the parking lot like the girl next door.
18 — age when I met a sophomore boy during freshman year of college who became my first real boyfriend.
8-12 — number of condoms taped to the RA's door in the dorm, accessible all hours of the day and night, discreetly, without having to ask.
15 — times my boyfriend begged to skip the condom he pulled off the door.
1 — times I gave in to his pleas and made him promise to stop in time.
2 — number of morning-after pills when I panicked after that one time, taken while sitting on the curb outside the campus health clinic. My boyfriend speculated about how a baby with our mix of DNA might look, a girl with dark, curly ringlets and dark eyes, his button nose, my smile. Part Hispanic, part white, part Black, with my intelligence, and perhaps, his sadness. My boyfriend said if I didn't want to take the pill and if I did end up pregnant, he would drop out of school to support us. But even then, I knew he was not the one.

4 — number of classes said boyfriend failed at the end of the second semester we were together, for which he blamed me/number of months until he broke up with me after I took those pills.
4,838 — number of birth control pills taken over the course of a lifetime.
6 — number of times my best friend lectured me over instant messenger about the evils of birth control and its poisonous chemicals while touting the rhythm method.
7:02 — a.m. time when said best friend texted me that she needed to talk. When I called her on a break from work, she told me she was pregnant, maybe six weeks and she couldn't *be* pregnant.
277 — miles away she lived when I offered to go with her to a clinic. She said she didn't need me; she had a friend who would go. I never knew if it was the man who had impregnated her or someone else who drove her.
1 — number of times in graduate school a male professor warned me not to have sex in South Africa because of HIV/AIDS before I left for a summer internship there. He did not give that same warning to the men in my class.
25 — age at which my ob-gyn told me to start taking folic acid "just in case" even though I was single at the time with no intention of getting pregnant.
50 — the percentage of pregnancies my ob-gyn said were unplanned, even amongst married couples.
435 — dollars, the cost of a full STD panel *with* my company health insurance after a fling with a guy who said he was clean, but whom I later discovered had a girlfriend when we'd hooked up so I couldn't really trust him.
0 — number of positive results from said panel.
400 — dollars, amount my sister and I loaned to a cousin for an abortion when she got pregnant at 38 just after losing a job and breaking up with a guy. She never paid us back.
30 — age at which my biological clock kicked into high gear and I desperately wanted a baby.

35 — age by which I vowed to adopt a baby alone if I were still single.
2 — blind dates I agreed to go on the year I turned 30 because of aforementioned clock.
31 — age at which I connected to an old crush on Facebook.
32 — age at which said crush DM'ed me and we made plans to hang out.
2 — number of dates before I told crush that I wasn't interested in a short-term thing because I needed to have a baby by the age of 35.
60 — second pause before crush responded back that he was also looking for something serious.
4 — months before crush said he loved me.
II — cervical dysplasia level diagnosed by a colposcopy after an abnormal pap smear result, followed by a biopsy, followed by a loop electrosurgical excision procedure (which sounds as awful as it is).
6 — months before follow up pap smear determined all dysplasia was gone and months of extreme fear over my health, future fertility and cost of treatment subsided.
3 — doses of HPV vaccine that could have prevented it all if it had been available when I was a teen.
14 — months of dating before crush proposed.
15 — months of engagement before our wedding date.
4 — average number of children families had that were featured in a rhythm method video we had to watch to get married in the Catholic Church.
-3 — months before the wedding when aunts pressured me to go off the pill and start trying to get pregnant because I wasn't getting any younger and I wouldn't be showing at the wedding if I was still early in the pregnancy. I did not oblige.
6 — pregnancy tests in the first half year of marriage as we tried to get pregnant.
1 — diagnosis of chronic illness with recommendation to go back on the pill before getting pregnant.

16 — nights in Ireland to stave off disappointment about putting off a pregnancy.
32 — age at which an acquaintance who worked as a human rights advocate, a fellow USC grad (a lawyer in the making, who campaigned for President Obama) was diagnosed with Stage IV cervical cancer. She did not survive the year.
1 — onesie purchased for my sister's baby-to-be upon her receiving a positive pregnancy test.
4 — nights my sister spent in the hospital due to an ectopic pregnancy after the medicine given to end the pregnancy failed and she ended up with a burst fallopian tube that required emergency surgery.
0 — times my sister tried to get pregnant again.
4 — number of family members and close friends who suffered miscarriages and stillbirths while my husband and I waited for the green light to try to get pregnant.
1 — appointments with a perinatologist to discuss getting pregnant at a geriatric age with preexisting conditions.
5 — dollars, cost of perinatology appointment with new, better employer health insurance.
5 — ovulation test kits purchased when my husband and I decided we were ready to try again.
3 — months of trying with negative pregnancy tests.
3 — number of times I cried.
2 — sunflowers a coworker left on my desk after the last negative test.
1 — trip to Germany for a summer conference during which I purchased a tiny wooden cradle Christmas tree ornament as a good luck charm.
1 — lunch with my husband in which we discussed the limits of which we were willing to go to have a child. No IUI, no IVF, no adoption.
6 — months we gave ourselves to try to get pregnant before we agreed to accept it wasn't in the cards for us.

98.9 — basal body temperature on the first day I started tracking.
5 — number of wineries visited for my sister-in-law's bachelorette party at which I offered to be designated driver because we were in the waiting window to test again.
19 — number of times I had to pee that day.
7:30 — p.m., time I went to bed at a hotel in Lodi because I was exhausted.
4 — days I waited to take a pregnancy test after the trip.
2 — minutes it took for the pregnancy test to register a positive result.
38 — age at conception.
2-3 — weeks the digital pregnancy test estimated for how far along I was.
6 — stress tests to monitor baby's heart rate in the last weeks of pregnancy.
4 — methods of induction used — misopropol, pitocin, a Foley balloon and manual breaking of the water.
58 — hours of labor in the hospital from induction to a resident suggesting a c-section.
5 — cm dilated at which labor stopped progressing.
20 — minutes, length of c-section surgery.
5 — number of days in the hospital after delivery due to baby's jaundice and my elevated blood pressure.
10 — bonus days with baby before due date.
0 — cost of eight days in the hospital, c-section delivery and treatment of baby in bililights crib with exceptional employer health insurance.
39 — age at which an ob-gyn first recommended an IUD, after I had my first child, allowing me to stop thinking about birth control daily.
> — the opportunities I had to get an education and build a career, by having a child on my own timeline with the partner of my choice.
∞ — the cost to my niece, who is eleven months old, because she has been born into a world where conservative politicians and judges, who have all the power and privilege, will do everything they can to erode women's rights.

# BEAUTY IN ADVERSITY

Photography by **Clarissa Cervantes**

"The lotus flower whose roots are often buried in the mud, represents the powerful psychological resistance to transform adversity into beauty as well as to bloom full potential, despite the circumstances around it."

# NO ONE IS COMING TO SAVE ME

Fiction by **Rachel Laverdiere**

**CW: Abuse, Sex, Death (of a child)**

Pummeled by rain and panic, wind screaming above the ticking engine, above the searing throb of mangled limbs pinned between the quad and the bog—I am trapped

*beneath the granary, shirt snagged on a nail*
*in a subway headed to god-knows-where in a country where I do not know how to speak*
*by the crush of a man whose beery breath suffocates until I succumb*
*searching and searching for my car in a parking lot that triples and triples in size until I am a speck—an ant wavering between grains of sand—and just before I disappear, my baby girl cries and reaches for me, but I cannot hold on to her, so she falls and falls and vanishes into the darkness...*

I wake. Spit rain and mud from my mouth.

This was a dream.

She never cried when she was born.
I remember her skin, soft as crushed petunias,
how they placed her on my breast so I could say goodbye.
She never suffered, but I will never stop.
This pain will never end.

Rain becomes drizzle, and wind congregates with treetops.

Everywhere, the murmur of things forgotten:
the damp of dew between bare toes,
the ozone smell of thunderstorms in June,
an old lover's hot breath quickening against my ear,
the tang of a margarita, the crunch of its salted rim,
fresh beignets for breakfast
my grandmother's wheeze after her laughing spells
the wisp of my daughter's hair against my chin,
how I placed a snippet in the locket around my neck so we'd never have to part.

# SISTERS

Artwork by **Dylan James**

Inspired by Edvard Munch's "Vampire"

# AN ENDING

Non-fiction by **Angie Brady**

**CW: Risky Behavior & Mental Health**

*A high-pitched shriek pierces the air. The shriek is quickly followed by a giggle as a little blonde girl pumps her legs and runs - runs for the safety of the tree that is also first base. She feels the wind in her face and imagines the amazing speed at which she travels. But of course, her little legs are not very fast, so the tall man with little hair on his head smiles indulgently, shortening his steps. She beats him to first base, and he ruffles her hair before returning to the middle of the yard. He throws the ball gently toward home base again, and a second girl runs and kicks with all her might.*

*The game is called Home Run Derby, and the trio plays the game loudly, with abandon. The man would say it's a tradition to play the game with his daughters on a sunny Saturday afternoon. But the girls would just say they were spending time with their dadda.*

I can't stop my feet from faltering as I walk in the door. But there's really no choice, so I chat and smile with the nurse at the front desk. She points down the hall. "The first door on the right, dear." And when I walk over the next threshold, my steps don't falter. The first thing I see is his familiar bald head, facing away from me. I can't help but let out a breath. He's just resting, and with only his head peeping out from the covers, I can almost imagine that nothing is wrong.

*"Don't step on my dress," the bride says, giving the man next to her a side-long look. The man is quick to look at his feet - there's a good chance he's more nervous than she is, and she regrets the warning that will only make him more anxious. But when he looks down at her a minute later, there are tears in his eyes, and the bride forgets to worry about his feet or her dress or the long walk down the aisle. "I'm so happy for you," he whispers, and then the music starts and they begin their slow walk. Step-together. Step. Step-together.*

Not wanting to wake him, I slowly move around the end of his bed to get to the chair. My leg catches the blankets, and they pull away from the bottom of the bed. All I can think as I look at his size 14 feet nestled on top of each other is "alien." His feet are so large, but even his feet have lost every ounce of fat. Every bone is visible. The skin sags. And this must surely be an alien in the bed - not my father.

*The two girls don't need to hold hands to show their solidarity. Their skinny bodies are pressed against each other - hip to hip, shoulder to shoulder, knee to knee. They fit perfectly in the adult-sized recliner. But the adult in the room isn't in the chair, he's on the couch. And he's waking up. The snores stutter to a halt and the girls don't know what to do besides look at him. Watch him groggily sit up on the couch, run his hands down his face. He squints at the two girls and tries to smile. "Lest play outside," he says, almost hiding the slur.*

*Almost.*

*The girls nod solemnly, automatically putting on their jackets. But when they look back to the man they pause. He can't hide the shakes in his hands as well as he can the slurring. "Can I - let me zip that, Dad," the little girl whispers, stepping in front of her sister who is wiping away a tear.*

The chair they have next to his bed is comfortable - meant for people to sit in for hours. Hours and hours as they visit their family. God, I just hope I can last half an hour. From here I can see his face, and his hands are pressed together and tucked under his head. He's like a child, cushioning his head on his still hands. Maybe he's praying, too.

*The trio is bundled up, the two women in scarves and boots, purses secured across their bodies. The tall man follows close behind them, hat and gloves prominent as he cranes his head around. The girls walk with an ease that came from familiarity. But the man - the man's eyes are wide with the wonder of a child. The lights, the sound, the overwhelming clamor is not something he is accustomed to. And then the girls grin back at him and turn a corner. The man follows them, trusting their guidance in this chaos. They pause to let him look, and while he looks up at the tree, the tree bigger than a house and lit more brightly than a stadium, they instead look at him. And they see the hundreds of lights reflected in his eyes. The man doesn't so much as blink as he looks at the tree and reaches out to lay a hand on each girl's shoulder.*

*The three take a moment to stare at the tree, letting the man's eyes drink in the wonder of the Christmas lights. And if any of them notice the slight tension in the girls' shoulders, none of them say anything.*

I check the time on my phone again, wondering selfishly how long is long enough to stay and sit beside this alien. But this time when I look up, his eyes are open. And staring. I force a smile and sit forward, my stomach dropping out and words catching in my throat. But maybe I don't need to say anything, because his eyes don't see me. Not really.

They are wide, staring right at me. But there's no light behind them, little recognition. Like looking at a baby who knows enough to look at your face, but not enough to know if they've seen you before. I know I should reach forward and put my hand on his shoulder, or say soothing words, or even cry for Christ's sake. Instead, I blink at him, and he blinks back.

*"Shotgun!" The girl says loudly, racing ahead of her sister. The two bound off the steps, across the yard, and into the waiting car. Their softball bag lands heavily in the back seat, meticulously packed for a practice session. Their dad was always better at batting practice than their mom, so they are glad they get to visit with him this morning. The car is rolling down the road, their seatbelts clicked in place, before they realize something is not quite right. Maybe it was the silence, or the way the car wasn't quite going the speed limit, or the smell that pervaded the car. It was probably the smell.*

*The girls freeze in their seats. Past a lump the size of a softball in her throat, the girl in the front asks to go back home, she forgot something. Please. Her sister echoes her request. "You didn't forget anything," the man says unsteadily. But the girls see that he is making a loop back around to the house. A slow loop. Tortuously slow, and their breath barely passes from their lungs as they wait for their house to come into view. His slurred apology is not acknowledged as they stumble from the car and race back into the house.*

I open my mouth, knowing there are things I should be saying while I still can. Justifications for letting him be in this place. Consoling words to remind him of pleasanter times past. But instead, all I can think of are the words he should be saying to me -

“I’m sorry for driving drunk with you in the car. I don’t think you ever trusted me again after that.”

“Do you remember that time we went to the city? I was so happy you girls had forgiven me, even if you shouldn’t have.”

“I remember the first time you saw me drunk. You were too young for that - I’m sorry you had to see me like that.”

“I was so proud to walk you down the aisle. I didn’t deserve that.”

“I wanted to stick around long enough to play Home Run Derby with your kids. We were happy then. I was happy.”

“I’m sorry for being an alcoholic.”

“I’m sorry for choosing alcohol.”

“I’m sorry for your memories.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So sorry.”

I close my mouth and watch as his eyes close again, knowing I’ll likely never hear his voice again, let alone hear those words. I quietly get up, letting him sleep in whatever peace he’s found. But before I walk out, I take a breath, ready to let it go. Ready to break the silence of the room and tell him it’s okay, that all is forgiven.

But my words won’t come either, and even my feet don’t make a noise as they carry me out of the room.

# SOUND OF EMOTION

Artwork by **Erwann Gauthier**

"Sounds and emotions cross borders
to materialize as their own territories."

# INSOMNIA AT 4:! I AM

Fiction by **VRZ**

**CW: Mental Health & Disturbing Content (Disturbing Imagery)**

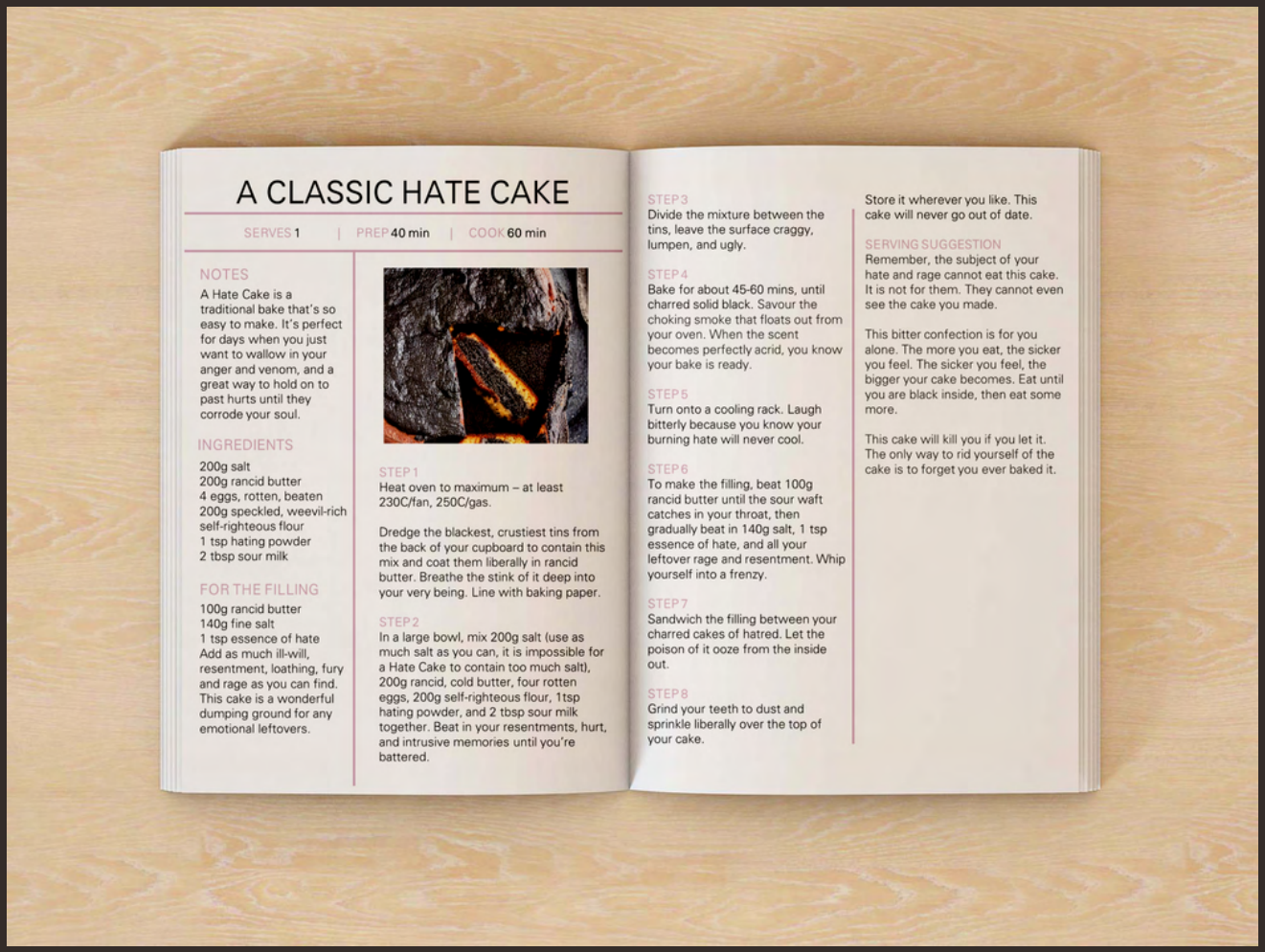
I can feel his heartbeat through the threadbare, dark blue polyester sheet stretched across his old coil mattress that we play house upon in university. The rhythmic pulses keep me up at night as they skitter across the space between us, searching for something to consume. Each one dives into my chest and reverberates through me. I spend hours wishing the pulsing would stop but desperately hoping it won't. I would not recover from waking to him dead beside me. My teeth chatter.

I wonder why my heartbeat isn't as boisterous as his. Maybe mine is trying to concentrate on merging with his, as though it's learning a new dance routine. I like to dance. 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 1... though maybe it's more sinister than that. What if his heartbeat overpowers mine and forces it into a new rhythm determined by his? I won't know how to live without him keeping me alive. He sleeps peacefully, unaware of the predator in his pulse. I lie in stillness trying to feel my heartbeat bounce back at me through the coils but it has escaped to a dark corner in the cavern of my ribcage and is evading capture to keep us alive. I thought I was stronger than this.

I stare at the pulsing of his jugular as it pushes against his thin pale skin. It suddenly slips free, grabbing at the sheet as it pulls itself across the bed, each beat creating a pulsing ripple that grows and forms unending waves across the surface of the mattress. My face is wet. My body smacked all over by the force of the beats. My blood moves like a tsunami through my body, across my skin, through my organs and around my bones. I can feel it rising, trapped inside my skin and I get seasick. Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream if you see a crocodile don't forget to scream.

I sometimes open my mouth wide as though I am screaming and let my body shake as though I am full of rage. Maybe I'm actually gasping for air and trembling with fear, I don't know. They feel the same. I will sit upon the raft of my skeleton and drift atop the polyester sheet, safe from the pulsing and pulling beneath me until I have it figured out, or just until the morning when the birds drown out the thrumming of his heartbeat. I will pretend that I'm ok as he reaches for an embrace and I feel his fingertips reaching through my ribs and poke at my heart.

# BAKE YOUR HATE INTO A CAKE



## A CLASSIC HATE CAKE

SERVES 1 | PREP 40 min | COOK 60 min

### NOTES

A Hate Cake is a traditional bake that's so easy to make. It's perfect for days when you just want to wallow in your anger and venom, and a great way to hold on to past hurts until they corrode your soul.

### INGREDIENTS

200g salt
200g rancid butter
4 eggs, rotten, beaten
200g speckled, weevil-rich self-righteous flour
1 tsp hating powder
2 tbsp sour milk

### FOR THE FILLING

100g rancid butter
140g fine salt
1 tsp essence of hate
Add as much ill-will, resentment, loathing, fury and rage as you can find. This cake is a wonderful dumping ground for any emotional leftovers.



STEP 1
Heat oven to maximum – at least 230C/fan, 250C/gas.

Dredge the blackest, crustiest tins from the back of your cupboard to contain this mix and coat them liberally in rancid butter. Breathe the stink of it deep into your very being. Line with baking paper.

STEP 2
In a large bowl, mix 200g salt (use as much salt as you can, it is impossible for a Hate Cake to contain too much salt), 200g rancid, cold butter, four rotten eggs, 200g self-righteous flour, 1tsp hating powder, and 2 tbsp sour milk together. Beat in your resentments, hurt, and intrusive memories until you're battered.

STEP 3
Divide the mixture between the tins, leave the surface craggy, lumpen, and ugly.

STEP 4
Bake for about 45-60 mins, until charred solid black. Savour the choking smoke that floats out from your oven. When the scent becomes perfectly acrid, you know your bake is ready.

STEP 5
Turn onto a cooling rack. Laugh bitterly because you know your burning hate will never cool.

STEP 6
To make the filling, beat 100g rancid butter until the sour waft catches in your throat, then gradually beat in 140g salt, 1 tsp essence of hate, and all your leftover rage and resentment. Whip yourself into a frenzy.

STEP 7
Sandwich the filling between your charred cakes of hatred. Let the poison of it ooze from the inside out.

STEP 8
Grind your teeth to dust and sprinkle liberally over the top of your cake.

Store it wherever you like. This cake will never go out of date.

SERVING SUGGESTION
Remember, the subject of your hate and rage cannot eat this cake. It is not for them. They cannot even see the cake you made.

This bitter confection is for you alone. The more you eat, the sicker you feel. The sicker you feel, the bigger your cake becomes. Eat until you are black inside, then eat some more.

This cake will kill you if you let it. The only way to rid yourself of the cake is to forget you ever baked it.

Hybrid Fiction by **Mathew Gostelow**

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# DEFIANCE

Photography by **Michael Anthony**

# WHAT WOULD I SAY TO MY DEPRESSION?

Poetry by **R S Kendle**

**CW: Mental Health**

Clawing into me, grasping tight.
Melting into me.

I recall hearing about that fish,
The one where the male fuses into the female to mate.

I am a host.
A walking sack of flesh and blood and bones.
Fuel.

A pair of legs
For this otherwise immobile stranger.

It is a terrible parasite.

It doesn't seem to realise that if I stop
It too will stop.

It cannot leap
Body to body
Flea-like.

To suck out the life of another.

If I crumple and wither
It too, will perish.

I would speak to it,
If I could.

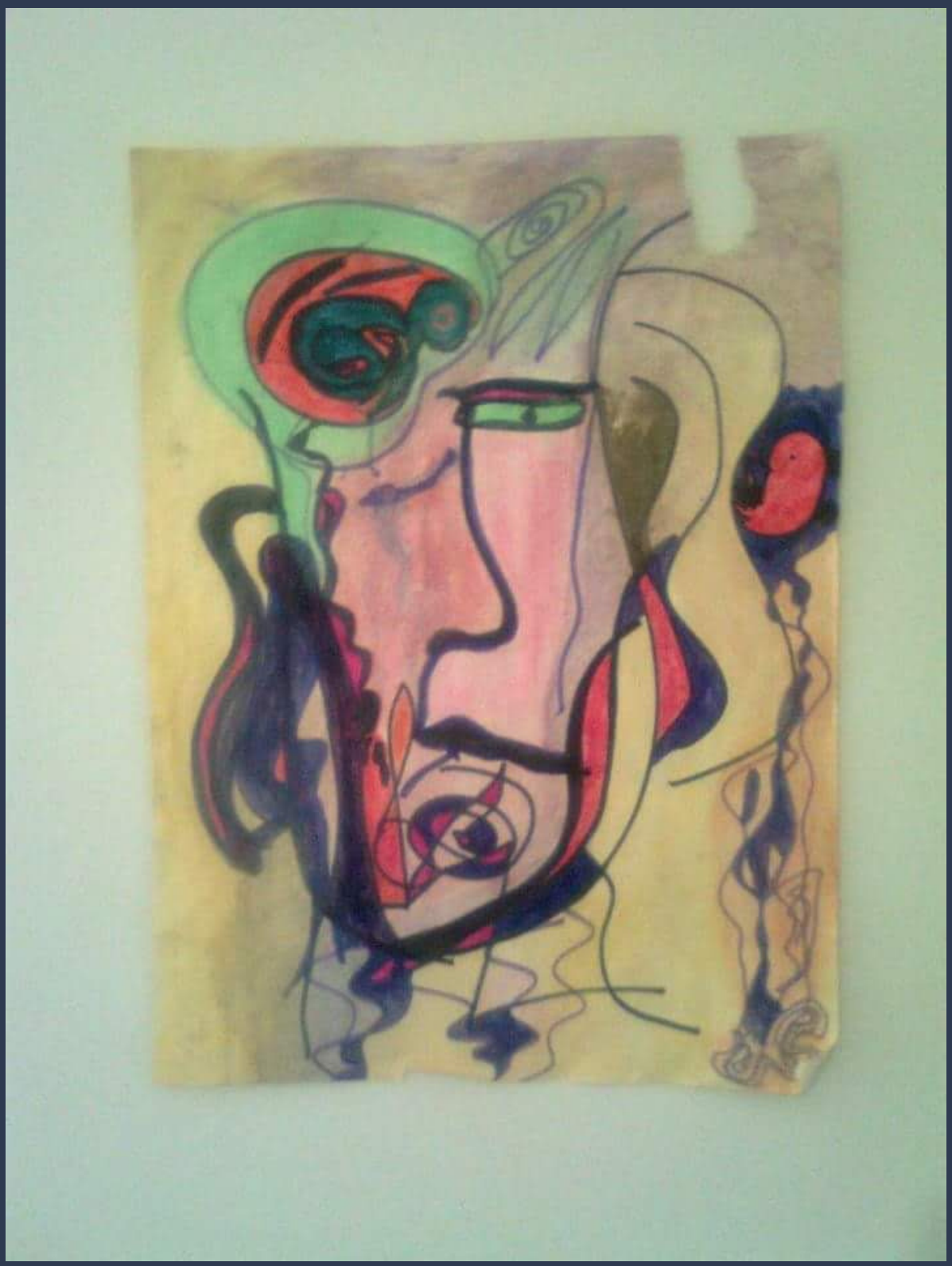
Reply to that ceaseless drone
That reminds me how worthless I am,
Every waking minute.

But it has no ears.

It cannot hear my wails
Pierce the silence of night
The crinkling of my pill-packet.

My heart is blistered.
Worn out from beating for two.

# DAEMON RUNNING



Artwork by **Mimi Bordeaux**

# WE CAN'T EVEN SEE THE STAIRCASE, LET ALONE START CLIMBING

Fiction By **Jay McKenzie**

**CW: Language, Violence, Risky Behaviour, Mental Health, Disturbing Content.**

It's raining when I arrive.

Mum is jittery. Dad's avoiding my eyes. They hug me, but it's a muted homecoming. I live on the other side of the planet, and it's been almost two years, yet nobody asks me a single question.

"So, what are the birthday plans?" I ask.

"Well, we're having a joint thing. Cassie and Joe are going to celebrate their wedding, since they eloped and all."

"Right. And she has to do that at your birthday party, does she?"

I picture slapping my sister, really hard.

"She could have done something else," I moan to my best friend Lisa.

"Gatecrashing Dad's party."

At the party, my sister arrives in her wedding dress and does a triumphal sweep of the room like the Queen.

"She's half-pissed," Aunty Aye mutters.

#

Mum pours tea.

"So, do you ever miss home?" Aunty Aye says.

I kiss my niece Poppy's little head. "Sometimes."

Dad's on the phone, nodding gravely. "No worries, Joe." He hangs up and beckons for me to follow him.

"That was Joe." He glances upstairs. "She's been calling him at work, being abusive. He's scared he'll get fired if she carries on."

"What does he want us to do?"

"Take her phone off her."

*Like taking food from Cereberus.*

"She's asleep, apparently."

She is. She is sprawled across Mum and Dad's bed, slack jawed, a wet, guttural snore rattling in her throat. The covers are damp, stained, and a puddle of bile dries on the carpet.

Dad plucks the phone from her limp hand and we head back downstairs, on a relieved collective sigh.

"And do you like your job?" Aunty Aye asks.

I'm about to answer when the door swings, hinges squealing, smashing into the dresser.

"Give me my phone!"

"No."

"I said, give me my phone, you fucking cunt."

Aunty Aye drops her teacup. "Now hey..."

"Fuck off!"

Dad is on his feet. He looks calm, but there's a tremor in his fingers. He's shrinking, and she looms over him.

"Give me my fucking phone, now!" She shoves him, hard, two hands to the chest. He stands firm, but she pulls back, lining up her shoulder to butt him. I race around the table and wrap my arms around hers from behind.

"I'll kill you, you sanctimonious bitch," she screams.

"Great to be home!" I joke, but I'm shaking.

She rams me back against the wall and breaks free, tearing into the kitchen. Poppy is crying, burying her face into Aunty Aye's collarbone.

In the kitchen, Dad and Cass are locked still like a sculpture from classical mythology. Cass holds a bread knife above her head with two hands, Dad gripping her wrists with both of his.

*What the actual fuck is happening here?*

Her grip is vice-like, but I peel her fingers apart and take the knife.

"I'm going to kill myself then you," she screams.

Despite everything, I laugh.

"How are you going to kill me when you're dead, you idiot?"

Dad says, "This is why we keep the knives blunt."

#

We go out for dinner the night before Dad's birthday.

She's passed out in Mum and Dad's bed, exhaustion and debilitating inebriation carrying her off after the knife debacle.

Dad and I poured all of the wine we could find down the sink. We hid the knives in a cupboard. We locked the front door.

The food is good, but we're just so tense. Still, we linger over dessert, then coffee: anything to delay going home.

She calls Dad's phone from the landline.

"You fucking bastards went without me! I hate you all. You locked me in. I'm going to kill myself."

"Okay," Dad says. "We'll see you later."

They've kept a lot from me, but I didn't realise how much.

"She threatened Mum with a knife."

"She pushed Dad down the stairs. I thought he was dead."

I fire off a message to Joe. "Do something," I write. "Your daughter needs you."

When the waiters start checking their watches and the rest of the patrons have left, we draw reluctantly to our feet.

"Do you want to take your balloon, sir?"

We look at the sad, deflating foil 70 swaying above our table.

"No, thanks."

#

I'm certain that Dad didn't expect to spend his seventieth birthday shivering in a car parked under a coppery streetlamp. Sadly, he is unsurprised by the fact that this is exactly what we are doing.

He checks his watch.

"Give it five more minutes," I say.

Beside me, Poppy's lashes rest on her cheeks. Her hair has whipped itself into a fluffy halo, and I can't resist stroking her little cheek with a finger.

"I'll go now," Dad says.

"Be careful." I tap my phone. "Message when you're in."

When he closes the door gently, Mum starts to cry. I wrap my arms around her, press my face into her hair.

"If she hurts him again, I'll kill her."

*How fucking dare she? How dare she make refugees of my parents from their own home.*

I want to storm in there, shake her awake, throw her into the street and yell *grow the fuck up*. But I quietly hold my mum, try not to wake my sleeping niece and wait for Dad's text that it is safe to go home.

#

"She's asleep. Safe to come back."

I read the message to Mum.

"Just a few more minutes," she says.

She stares ahead at the deserted park where she used to take us as kids. The Victorian bandstand is still there, the one the newspaper photographer used as a backdrop to us in tutus surrounded by trophies. It's the park I used to walk our Labrador-Collie cross too many times a day to escape the house.

"This is abuse, Mum. You do know that, don't you?"

"Sometimes, I hate her," she says. "Am I horrible?"

It's quiet when Mum and I edge back into the house. I've got Poppy in my arms and she is dozing on my shoulder.

"She's passed out in our bed," Dad tells Mum. "I'll sleep down here."

"Can Poppy and I come in with you?"

We manage to strip Poppy back to just a nappy and settle her into bed, taking up a position either side of her.

"How long's it been this bad, Mum?"

We're whispering in the dark.

"A few years."

"Are you scared of her?"

Mum hesitates. "Terrified."

#

"Give me my fucking phone!"

I'm dragged from sleep by the yell and vinegary breath. She's silhouetted by the light outside the door, her fists balled, ready for a fight.

"Shut up," I hiss. "Your daughter's asleep."

Mum says, "Go back to bed. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"Like fuck we will," she screams. "Give me my baby."

Cass grasps the sleeping toddler by the arms. Her long fingernails press into the baby rolls on Poppy's arm.

Poppy wails and reaches for me, but I'm not fast enough. Cass streaks from the bedroom and downstairs, bawling infant in arms.

"Give me my phone you cunt."

She's standing over Dad slapping him, Poppy on the floor wailing at her feet. I grab my sister's arm.

"Stop it! You're hitting a pensioner. It's deranged."

Cass turns on me, eyes blazing. "Well, we can't all be as perfect as you, you smug bitch." Then her hands are round my throat, squeezing. I manage to get a finger between my neck and her palm, but it's not enough.

I'm gasping by the time Dad prises her hands apart, neck throbbing.

"You're psychotic," I tell her.

She slumps onto a chair.

"I'd rather be a psychotic than a barren cunt. I can get pregnant whenever I want, you stupid bitch. I'm better than you with your shit, withered uterus."

It's so deeply insane and hurtful and bizarre that I laugh.

"Go to bed," I tell her.

And weirdly, she does.

#

"She seems fine now," the police officer says. "She says she's sorry, it just got a bit out of hand."

"Have you seen my neck?"

Purple bruises sprout like a cruel mockery of a love bite chain all around my throat.

"Yes," the officer sighs. "That does look sore. But she's your sister."

"So if a stranger had done this, you'd have arrested them?"

She shrugs.

"You live on the other side of the world. You can't really press charges because you'd have to go to court. They probably wouldn't bother."

"I want a restraining order so that she can't come near my parents."

She sighs again. "Yeah, can't really do that either."

"Disgraceful."

#

My cousin Dan bundles Cass into the car to take her away. None of us ask where.

"Don't bring her back here," we instruct.

Poppy snuggles into Mum as the car pulls away.

I've got eight hours until my flight leaves, and no idea when I'll next be back. I hug Dad tightly to me, trying to line up our heartbeats.

"Happy birthday, Dad."

# DYSTOPIAN SUNRISE

Photography by **Michael Anthony**

# THE HAUNTING OF THE FUNFAIR

Fiction by **Seán McNicholl**

**CW: Death (of a child)**

I see the ghost of her hiding amongst the hobby horses. The flash of her smile whirs past me on the swing chairs and vanishes before I can turn to see. Her squeal rings out as the wheels of the Big Dipper thunder by and drown out every other sound.

How I long to see her. To hold her.

My God, she loved the funfair.

Elbows and shoulders push by me, yet I feel alone here. Surrounded on all sides and yet alone. Without her. Stranded on my island of grief in a sea of happiness, whose waters are churning and frightening. I cannot leave my island even if I wanted to. And I don't.

I feel closest to her in my grief.

I dreaded returning here, worried that I would feel her absence more acutely, more painfully. But I do not. Her absence is no greater here than anywhere else. She simply isn't anywhere. And I miss her. God, I miss her.

But this place is a painful reminder of those carefree days when my new life, the horror in which I am now stuck, seemed unimaginable.

The lights; the noise; the smells; all that once was so vibrant and alive is now shown for the gimmick it is, the gimmick it always was. Nothing more than cold steel rowed by iridescent coloured glass. A sick parody of the ruse of life.

The Haunted House can hold no horrors greater than our home where her untouched bedroom lies empty. Her bed... God, her bed shall no more rest her head and her dreams shall never be woken. All whilst I live in this nightmare.

Damn this waltzer mocking me, swinging its children round and round. I cannot bear it.

Oh, what I would give to lift her in my arms and swing her once more, just once.

My mouth is dry like the torture of candy floss but void of the sickly sweetness it brings. Instead, a sour taste perfumes around me. I swallow. Swallowing is difficult.

I can see the joy of the other children as they run wild and free, unshackled from their parents. It torments me. I can see it but I cannot touch it or be privy to it. And I don't want to. They move past me in shoals, like herrings behind the glass. They can stay there.

The roar of the Big Dipper assaults me and I see that final moment once more. The bumper knocked her clear.

I see her face before me, permanently painted with a poppy bruise upon her temple.

The violent knell of the Hammer Game throws me back to the church bells when they lowered her into the grave.

A four-foot box. Five years old. Six foot deep.

She is dead.

And I am standing here alone, a ghost of myself, hiding amongst the hobby horses.

# OPEN DOOR

Artwork by **Amanda Young**

"This image represents punching holes and rage, the desperation and feelings of 'I can't take this anymore'. The open door just about still hanging on its hinges represents the acceptance of opening up to hope for the future."

# SPINNING

Fiction by **Marie-Louise McGuinness**

**CW: Abuse**

The air was heavy with anger and bitter, raised voices that scratched at my ears. I tried to tune them out, my teeth clenching, grinding to powdered chalk.

I ran to my red plastic bag, the one dotted with garish yellow flowers I was gifted as a baby. This bag was the one constant in my life. It was my haven and my friend.

I grabbed the snow-white polyester rope that served as both handle and clasp, and began to spin. The weight of the thick rope cut deliciously into my palms, and, with increasing speed, the red and yellow and light and dark mingled together in one muddy soup. Deafened by my buzzing blood, and cocooned in this cacophony of light and sound, I was happy and protected.

But, as always, they needed me to adjudicate and I was dragged from my bag to be judge and jury in the kitchen.

How did I choose whose side to take? I was only eight, yet the expectation fell hard upon my shoulders and my small back bucked under the weight of responsibility.

How could I say that I loved them both but they hurt me like they hurt each other?

I wanted them to be happy but knew that they were not, I wanted them to be apart but they wouldn't slice the cord in the mistaken belief this situation was better for me.

So, I smiled and took both of their large hands into my small ones and reminded them that I was late for school.

# PAPILLON

Artwork by **Patrick Gauthier**

# THE ROOT OF THINGS

Poetry by **Erin Mullens**

**CW: Mental Health & Disturbing Content (Disturbing Imagery)**

With a knife sharpened by years of crying alone
I reach inside the belly of myself. I rip it open
And see all of my intestines splayed on the floor.
Look, there are all the parasites inside of me
The ones that I buried deep inside of my body
Because I was scared if they saw the light of day
They would grow so strong they'd destroy me.

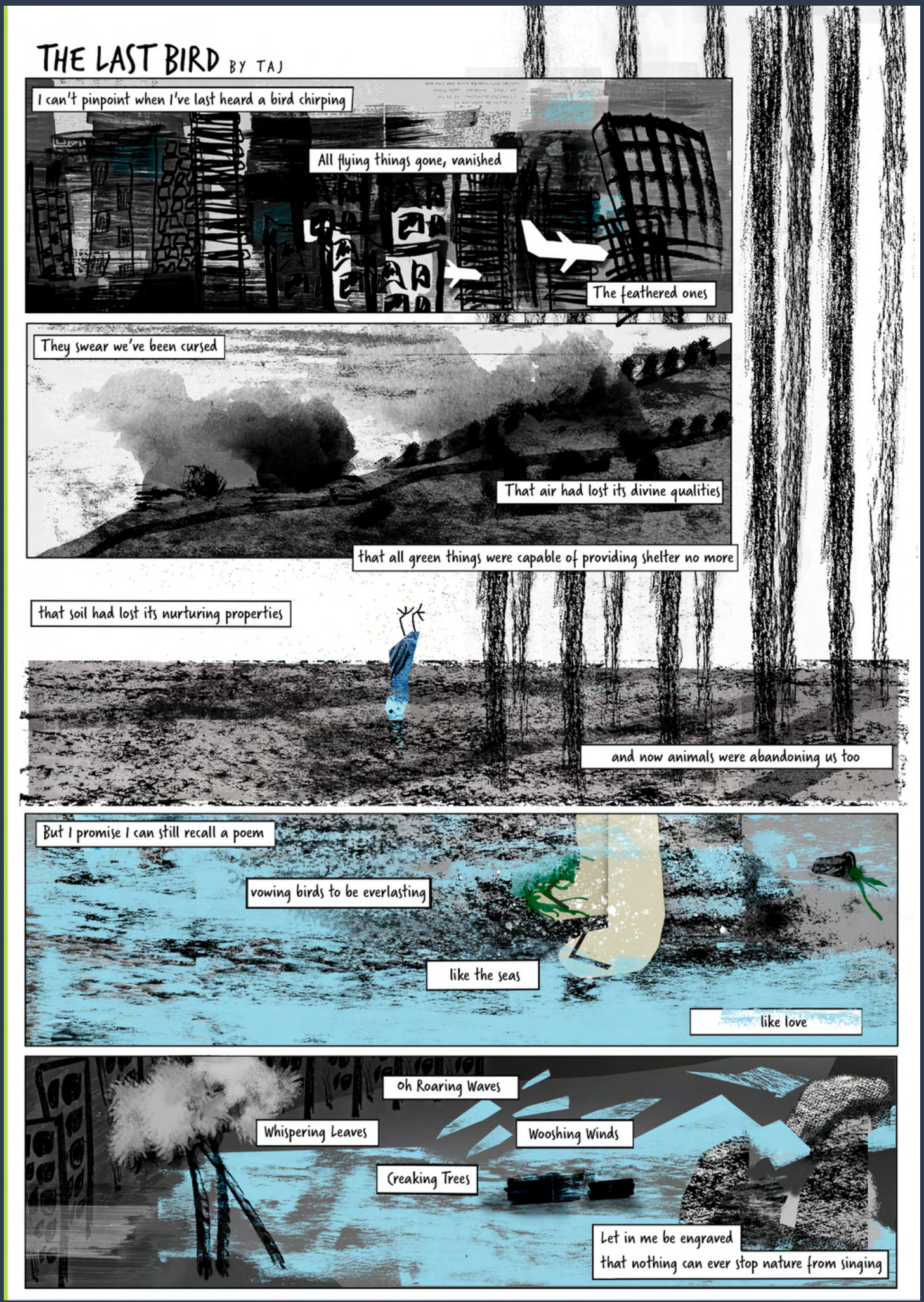
I reach out a shaking finger. I touch the darkness.
It shapes around me, cold and wet and slimy
And I feel bile rising inside of my throat.
There is Anger, a fire with heat that makes one wince
Standing resolutely, he refuses to back down.
There is Fear, like a chasing tunnel wind
He leaves one shaken and shivering, cold and empty.
There is Disappointment. He has a face like mine.
He asks me if I have made the best of my life
Or maybe, if I could do it over again, would it be better?

I fix my eyes upon the plaintive Disappointment.
My eyes start to sting, as if touched by lemon juice
And my heart beat starts to crescendo
But I do not look away. I am tired of running.
Anger dances around my shoulders
Singeing the skin, leaving red rawness in the flesh.
Fear touches the bruises, mutilates the skin
I know I will come away looking different.

Eventually they tire of the standoff.
They get antsy, start walking around
Start crawling peacefully over my body.
I get to witness every inch of them
Every nook and cranny, every variation
As they shift in and out of a million forms.
Tentatively, I explore the feelings
That run through my veins like a string
Pulling me in this direction or that
I start to move with the darkness
Closing my eyes, reaching out my hands
I dance with the sadness inside of me.

I open my eyes, and I see bursts of smoke
As every single feeling turns to ash.
I touch their remains, in wonder, watching them
Lose all their power over me.
Then a burst of soft wind blows through
And the ash reforms in the shape of a butterfly.

Three sparkling little butterflies
Perched on the edge of my fingers
Love, hope, and happiness.
They were always inside of me
But when I buried the darkness
I condemned them to a cold grave.
Only once I had cut myself open
And let the bloody darkness swirl
Could I finally see the light in me.




Artwork by **Tajla Medeiros**

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# THANK YOU

Without our contributors, this issue of *Raw Lit* would not have been possible.

If you enjoyed the magazine, please, support the creators featured by sharing their work on social media.

**THANK YOU FOR TRUSTING US WITH YOUR RAW.**

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