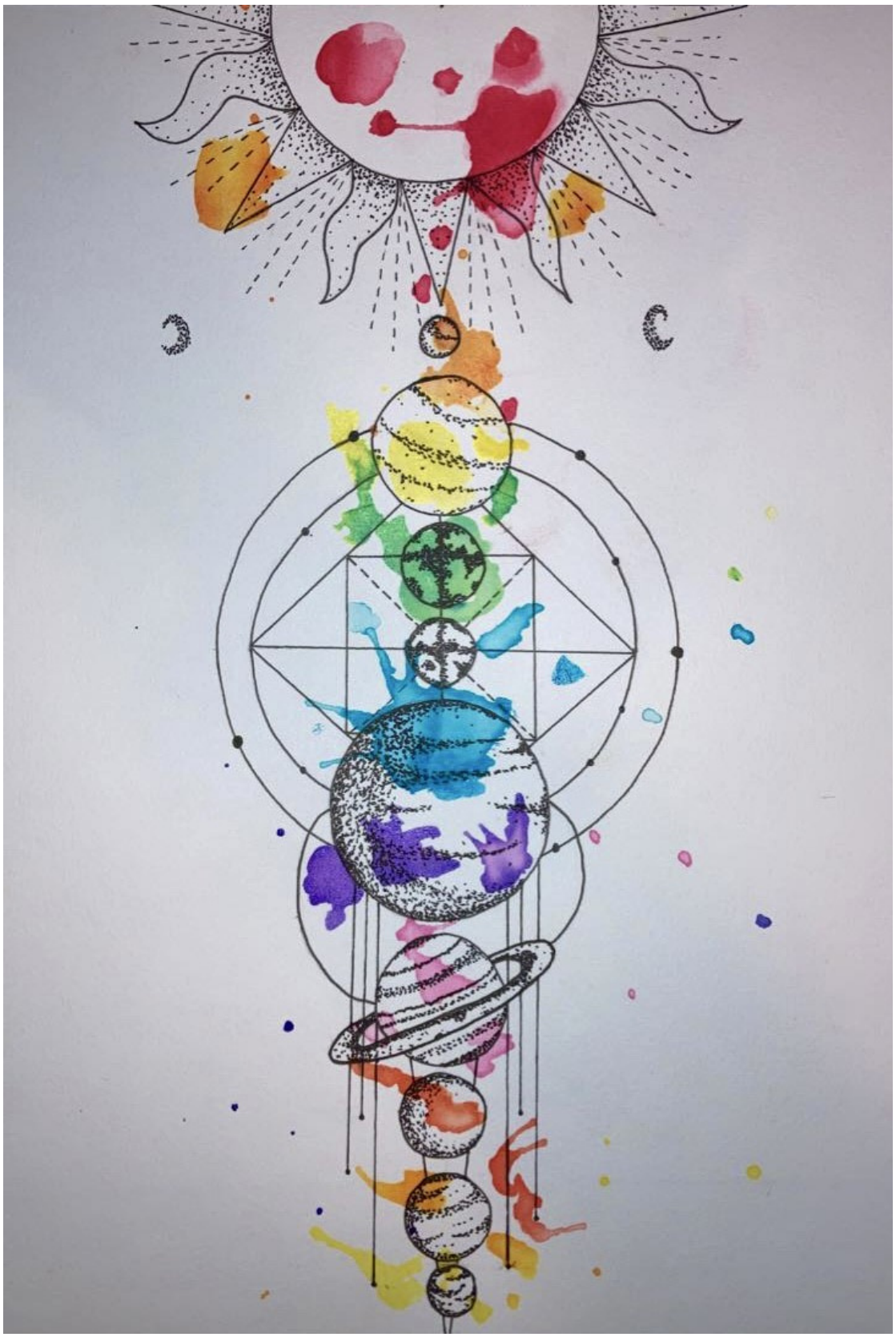
Piecework



Bentley Literary Society 2022

Piecework

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Word from the editors

The past two years have been challenging to say the least. Even as the world reopens, adjusting to the “new normal” can be difficult. But through it all, Bentley students have persevered and exceled in creative ways. When the Literary Society met and looked through the submissions for this year, we noticed many of the pieces featured complex and whimsical world-building that evoked visions of travel and themes of reflection. We felt this perfectly embodied the duality of our current period. Even though many people have begun to travel and experience the world again, there are still moments of isolation when we must turn to our own imagination to create our own worlds.

This year’s Piecework is a testament to the passion and hard work of the students at Bentley. The pandemic has certainly not dulled the ingenuity and spirit of our contributors. We are extremely proud and excited to showcase their work.

Thank you to everyone who participated and all the individuals who made this year’s Piecework happen. Please join us in celebrating the creative endeavors of our fellow students and we wish everyone the best of luck in this finals season.

Best wishes,
Bentley Literary Society

Short Stories

In the Garden of Tantalus

One day John Smith had walked into his class for the first time. He did not remember signing up for the class but it was on his schedule. It did not have a name, it only had a classroom number, JS1.9.

John walked into the room where everyone seemed to be already at work. All of the heads in the class turned towards him as he opened the door. He wondered if he had been late, so he looked at his wrist watch, and then at his schedule. He was not late, in fact he was 10 minutes early.

"Please take your seat Mr. Smith," the Professor said.
John took the seat closest to where he was. Everyone was still looking at him. The professor put down his marker for what he was writing on the board and crossed his arms and looked at John Smith sitting.
"Mr. Smith, is that your seat?"
"What do you mean?"
"Your seat is right here Mr. Smith," as he pointed to an empty desk in the second row.
"I'm sorry sir, I did not know we had assigned seats."
"What do we know?", the Professor said as he turned around and kept writing the formulas on the board.

After sitting through the first class without understanding, when he returned 2 days later he sat down in his seat and asked the girl next to him,
"What is this class?"
"What do you mean?"
"I mean, what is the topic of this class? I don't understand what he is doing."
"Nothing," She turned around and continued to write her notes.

John Smith, obviously very confused, tried to pay attention to what the Professor was doing. The Professor wrote all of these complicated formulas on the board. Greek letters, symbols, variables. All of which he couldn't make any discernible sense of. The Professor would not explain anything either. He would say things like,

"So here we have…"
"It's quite interesting actually…"
"This formula is used to find the variable in this formula…"

What struck him as the most odd was when the Professor turned around and asked, "Does anyone have any questions?" To which none of the class would ask any. As if they understood everything. John began to worry that he was the only one who did not understand. He did not want to be the odd one out either and ask a question. To do so would admit he did not understand. He did not even know what question to ask however. What could he ask?

Each day John arrived to the class 10 minutes early, and yet the class was already in session. The Professor exclaimed to the class one day,
"Next week we will have our first assessment of the class so far. We will have a review day today to talk about the topics we have covered and then you can ask any questions you might have for clarification."

John thought finally he could get a better grasp at the class. He took out his notepad and pen and eagerly awaited the professor to start his review. The Professor started,
"This is what you will need to know," as he pointed to a projector screen with an absurd amount of formulas.

“As you all know these are all interrelated and are quite interesting. Here we can see that this letter describes this entire equation. But this equation encompasses the entire lot of the criteria that this formula here needs to meet in order for the individual equations here, here, and here to be valid given the answer from that equation.”

John Smith had never been more lost in his entire life. He tried writing down all the formulas but by the time he had one down the professor had already changed the slides and continued on with another topic. No one asked a single question that entire period.

Back on his own time John was very worried about the test because he had no idea what he was learning. He had been on scholarship and worked very hard to get the grades he had. He worked hard in high school to get into a very good school like this. He was worried that this class would ruin his grades for the semester. Earning him the disapproval of his peers and parents.

John began frantically searching anything he could about this class. He went to the schools website where he could search for the classes. Yet he couldn't find the class name, and just realized he did not even know his own teacher's name. He went to his grade portal to search for the courses he was enrolled in. He found the class. It was called “Nothing.” That was the name of the course. The Professor's name did not appear either. John found a link that said “Professor’s Publications.” This led him to an array of documents, none of which had the Professor's name associated with them. “The Science of Nothing” was the title of a one thousand page publication. All of the pages flowed with formulas and descriptions that seemed to be more vague and confusing than the Professor's own words in class. John wanted to understand though.

John came to two understandings after a couple days of studying. One, being that the professor's lectures were derived from these publications of his own research. The formulas matched up from the few he wrote down during the review. Two, being that no matter what he did he would not understand. He could sit there for as long as he wanted reading every one of those thousand pages and no information would be retained.

John entered the classroom incredibly early on test day. He did not want to be late; he needed as much time as possible. He ended up falling asleep in his seat. He was awoken by the Professor knocking on his desk. Everyone was already in their seats.

“Listen up everyone. No formula sheet, and no calculator. Not that you will need one. I believe the test is quite straightforward and easy. I will be handing around the test packet. I gave you plenty of space to write out your formulas, I have extra sheets of paper up here if you need them though. Do not turn the packet over until I say it is time to start the test.”
The Professor laid down the packet face down on John’s desk. To John's horror it was thick, and he knew he would fail. The professor gave the go ahead and John flipped over his test to see a name slot on the front page. He then turned to the first page of the exam. Where there was one singular question. “What is?”

John, completely and utterly confused, began searching through the packet to see what else was in the test. The rest of the packet was filled with empty sheets of paper. His mind was completely blank. He rotated all the way around to see everyone else in the class frantically writing. He could not fathom what to write down. John built up the courage to raise his hand to which the Professor nodded and made his way beside John.

“Sir, I am quite confused about what the question means?”
“Mr. Smith, we discussed this very question in class the past couple of weeks.”

“Sir, I don't really know what to do.”
“I'm sorry Mr. Smith I can not give you the answer. You do know it though.”
John Smith sat there in the class not knowing at all what to do. He saw people go up for more paper, and continue their writing frenzy.

The test had ended and he handed in the test completely blank. After a week the test was handed back and to no surprise he received a 0. Thoroughly distraught, John Smith had to do something. This would bring his grades down so much. He began to worry about his scholarship and the perception this would give. John couldn't understand how he was the only one who seemed to not understand. Like raising his hand, he built up the courage to ask for help. He decided to go meet the Professor in his office hours to discuss the test and his grade, how to move forward, and how he can get help. When class was dismissed that week he went to the Professor and asked if he was available to meet to discuss those things. The Professor gladly agreed and told him to come by his office tomorrow JS5.4. Same building, easy enough.

John Smith arrived the next day and made his way through the building and labyrinth of hallways with professors' names on the doors. 5.1, 5.2, 5.3. JS5.4 on the door the name written on the plaque was “Prof. Smith”.
“Hello Mr. Smith, come in.”
“Good afternoon Professor… Smith.”
“I was wondering when you would start calling me by my name. How can I help you?”

“I wanted to talk about the test, could we go over it together?”
“Of course.” he said sternly and opened up a blank test packet.

The Professor then began writing down formulas upon formulas, with the same degree of explanation that he had in class. John could not get a word in, and realized his venture of understanding had been a waste once again and he was going to be a failure as he worried. The Professor went on for a while, and John began to space out in the insignificance. After a while the professor finally said, “And there we have our answer.” John, being distracted, jolted to look down before the professor could see he wasn't paying attention. There on the paper, after countless formulas and equations lied the answer. “JOHN SMITH.”

Professor, I am confused. Is this a joke?”
“What do you mean?”
“I don't understand. That's my name.”
“The answer doesn't mean anything, it's how we got there that matters. I can go over the
equations again if you'd like.”
“Professor, what does it mean?”
“It's all nothing. Welcome to the real world my friend.”

Angelo Amodeo

The Night Voyage

This is the third night of the voyage, due to the failure of the previous exploration, my reputation has been once again defiled, to the point even a rookie could make fun of me. I was passed by a few rookies in the voyage team when I departed the White flower district[1]. I sensed slanting glances and some mumbling. Right after we passed each other, they burst into piercing laughter. I highly suspect that my name was mentioned in those whispers, but now is not the best time to offer a lesson to those unrespectful brats. I firmly believe that I will take back my honor with this voyage. By then, they will be groveling before my feet.

Tonight, is not the best time for the voyage, but I am running out of time. My reputation will not restore itself. But on the other hand, I have absolute confidence in my skills. I have completed several successful voyages that yielded harvests for my community. This includes the discovery of one white flower district, two purple flower districts[2] and safety index confirmation of one swift district[3]. It was a glorious time that I fondly remember. The entire community cherished my discovery and was obsessed with me; my eating habits were mimicked and advertised; departure preparation became a textbook guide; I never bothered to think about my next meal or whose side I would wake up by. They made me a myth, copying every move of mine in an attempt to steal my talent and fortune. And at the same time, they constrain me with reputation, magnifying each move of mine and crushing me with criticism of a tiny flaw. They love to create God but prefer to see one fall from the altar. They cherish the olden times, love past fame, and cry for demised heroes. How pathetic.

1. *While flower district: The district with richest food resources and lowest risk*
2. *Purple flower district: The district with sufficient food resources and low risk*
3. *Swift district: The district with food resources but high risk, usually voyagers have to confirm the risk level in the district before the community can enter.*

But falling off is not a good experience. Those who have stepped on the altar would be trapped by its glory. Fame and praise are like moonlight, warm and benevolent. Once you have basked, it will never be forgotten. It feels as if you are the Savior, the ruler, the flame, synonymous with perfection. I could have accepted darkness if I had never been favored by the light. I long to return to that altar, and this voyage is my last chance.

The moon is hanging high in the sky in an obscure, hazy state. It provides limited assistance for navigation. Water vapor seems a bit heavier than usual, it passes through my limbs like gauze as I sail, creating a burden throughout my exploration. The convective air formed a heavy wind as if consciously shifting the speed each time I hoped to relax my body from the strain of the voyage, making it almost impossible to relax my upper limbs. Which caused a slight ache in my muscle from excessive force. Even though the air support beneath my body is still normal, I can predict that this voyage would cost much more effort than ever before. The significantly reduced on odor labeling from other races has once again increased my concern. For the first time, my firm belief in voyage shook. The endless darkness under the hazy moonlight, the airspace covered by thick foliage, and the death-like silence were all unfriendly invitations to the destination of my journey. I take a deep breath and enter the District 103[4] where I had returned in defeat.

There are two missions for exploration of District 103: Locating the existence of food resources and an unknown terrestrial moon. Benefiting from abundant rainfall, the plant communities in the White Flower District experienced unprecedented growth. The increase in edible crops caused a high birth rate. But the existing crops in the district are not sufficient to support such crazy growth of the next generation. Despite our attempts to avoid this problem, the anxiety over the food shortage swells like a water-filled sponge, swinging on the heart of every pregnant.

4. *District 103: The district that has not yet been confirmed with risk value and food resources.*

Those mothers' bellies swell in a creepy arc with the unborn occasionally squirming in their stomach, pushing up the surface skin to form a weird-looking groove. The unborn use their mothers' wombs like masters, and their slaves plundered everything edible to serve. The scarcity of food deteriorates the mental state of these enslaved females. Finally, the tragedy occurred when Peter, the youngest of the voyagers, disappeared. The search for him was a nightmare. His broken leg was first to be discovered, dark bloodstain congealing on the gray limb. Later was his head, nearly air-dried, hanging on a mother's resting place. His face, distorted by fear at the time of his death, was frozen like an eerie painting. When discovered, the mother was holding the part of his body in an intimate position. half-kneeling beside Peter's open chest, her head rested obediently on the chest as if a loving couple. In the corner of her mouth remained the remnants of body tissue of poor Peter, and her face was covered with the satisfaction of a feast.

This is a precarious sign. Surely the voyage price is heavy. The glorified days of heroism are far gone, no more veterans would be willing to sacrifice their lives to accomplish the living for the next generation. However, the wreckage of Peter is a bloody warning that if no action is taken, the kin will be more perilous than aliens. The elephant in the room was finally brought to the table when we realized that the first being affected by the food shortage are not those newborns, but us.

The choice of the district exploration caused a huge discussion in the community, until experienced old George brings up District 103. Thanks to his good memory. He spent a large portion of his early childhood in a Purple Flower District that is near District 103. He, who did not understand the zoning at the time, entered the District 103 districts unconsciously. He vaguely recalled that there seemed to be many crops but not yet reached maturity when he visited.

According to his memory of the amount and diversity of crops, if matured, the food that could be provided would be very considerable. With our request, old George decided to revisit the old place himself and explore it again. Unfortunately, this revisit did not bring good news. Something frightening seemed to happen, Old George, with the return from the first voyage, had lost a leg and his sanity. At the worst stage, he couldn't even communicate with us in words, He is now being taken care of by a few caregivers. And those kind ladies have provided me with some updates about him. They said in that nonsense, there is a word being mentioned several times. The terrestrial moon.

The fallen of Old George did not put a hold on exploration. The task rightfully fell on my shoulder, the new star of the community at the time.

I gradually get deeper into the district. I adjust my flying altitude to avoid any possible crush from tree branches. The plant coverage in the district is high, besides branches and trunks that impede flight at high altitudes, numerous developing crops grow quietly on the ground. I curiously followed the mark that I have left on the crops from the previous voyage, to confirm the correction of my route. I noticed the mark from a white flora, I land on it to take a short break to regain my strength. The crop covered by a circle of white layers from the outside welcomed my arrival in a reluctant posture. Inside those protective layers grows three slender stems. The top of the stems is covered by a large amount of yellow pollen, which is the fruit of the crop. This crop is one of the most common food in the White Flower district, and although it has an average taste, it is superior for large yield. Once it reaches maturity, the fruit is eligible to support the consumption of three hungry voyagers. However, the white crop in front of me has not yet reached maturity.

The stems are curled in the protective layer, shaking by the evening breeze. Like a restless rhythm. Dense pollen slightly changes direction with the stem, like a compound eye of the insects, silently watching its possible gatherers, which reminds me of the unpleasant sight from those brats in the white flower district.

I could notify the vital signs of those crops, but their stiffness and silence made them look like a bunch of corpses. Sway mindlessly in the wind or suffer in silence as their fruits are being collected. I can't figure out the principle of this life form. Unless their silence and restraint are merely a camouflage to cover their true identity as silent predators. Maybe we have unconsciously become their free labor to perpetuate their community when we indulge in their fruits?

After a short break, I continued my exploration, meanwhile paying extra attention to the Terrestrial moon Old George has mentioned.
Terrestrial moon, the word that old George had muttered as if it was a curse, weirdly attracted the attention of the community. They viewed this nonsense term as a safety threat in District 103, and begged for more information about it. Unfortunately, during my first two voyages, I saw nothing about this terrestrial moon. It's like a ghost from old tales, only approaching me in my nightmare, but not daring to face me in reality. Any light appearing during the night voyage would be outstanding, but for the first two flights, I didn't see a single beam of light in the darkness. My honest answer did not help me solidify my reputation but was questioned by the foolish majority. They ignored my efforts and the fact of an experienced voyager but took the words of a mad old man as dogma. That damn moon, maybe it was all a hoax.

But tonight, if only a little information about this moon can be updated, the name of District 103 may be added to the list for the Purple Flower district, and my tattered reputation will be redeemed. And I will once again return to the altar and receive the worship and adoration.

I had a drink with old George after the second voyage. The fallen star and the mad seniors, neither of us was in a good position anymore. With my reputation tarnished, I needed to get used to thinking about my next meal, while Old George was hiding in a patch of shadows because of a ridiculous moonlight phobia (a disease we hadn't heard of before), looking enviously with cloudy eyes at the male and female dancing in the moonlight. Their thin limbs were intertwined, spinning in the field with the black crowd. I carried some food and came to old George's side. He expressed his gratitude for my charity, gulping like a beggar. His yellow eyes were fulfilled with the joy of food. After a full meal, he opened his mouth before me, "I know what you want to ask, boy." Mockery rolled in his pale orbs, "I have only one word of advice for you, either don't go to District 103 or trust me what I said. the terrestrial moon is real, and if you won't trust it and heed its call, you will pay a terrible price," he gently shook his broken leg. "Trust me, the moon will guide you, so gentle, so bright..." His last few words were like the murmurings of a dream, soon blown away by the wind.

"I didn't even see light at all in the first two voyages." I interrupted him. His was ignited. "That was you! You're too foolish! You're too conceited! She didn't call you! You are all foolish, you cannot hear or see her call!" He struggled to stand on his hunched body with his remaining leg, he screamed wretchedly at the sky, "The moon! The terrestrial moon! MY TERRESTRIAL MOON!" His voice caused a disturbing reverberation in the air.

He drowned in his memories, raving." Haha! So big, so close, the moon on the ground! With it, our community will become stronger than ever! Our territory will spread out to all the places the moonlight touches! "He cried out while jumping like a child, "Come, come along with me and accept the call of the moon, the loving moonlight is calling us! "

My hand was tightly held in his arm, unable to get out. I seemed to face the unknown areas mentioned in his confusing language, a huge moon rising from a dark jungle, like a pale, pupil-less eye. The halo of light reflects a warm yellow glow, enveloping everything around it under its scrutiny.

"Hahahahahahaha! Come on, come on! Raise a glass to my discovery! All! All shall be grateful for my voyage! My exploits will be sung! My name will be remembered forever! The Terrestrial Moon! The yellow moon! The great MOON! The MOON!"

Old George's harsh voice whipped around my ears like an evening gale. I have to adjust my breath to avoid losing myself in the illusion of those recalls and to continue my current flight of exploration. The true horror of his descriptions, the expression of his obsession with moonlight reminds me of the mother who had devoured Peter, which made me sick. Those illusions cause a sudden fear of moonlight in my head. The light that had once blessed me like a mother's gaze was now like an eye of judgment, judging each move of mine, eating away my will and giving me chills of fear around my limbs. I never thought that the darkness would make me feel safer than the light.

In extreme fear, my original route was severely compromised. I slammed headlong into a hard object. The tremendous strike almost knocked my sanity out of my brain. The dizziness brings from memories ringing in my ears: the whispers of the rookie, the crazy laugh of old George, the curse and mocking when I fall from the altar, these sounds mixed and turned over in my mind, interweaving into a weird image.

At the end of the image, I saw my ghastly white face with the deep fear I have never seen before. By my remaining will, I forced myself back into a normal state of exploration and attempted to take a look at the object trapping me in front. It is a transparent, hard square. A vague light seemed to permeate from within. I suddenly realized the incompleteness of the previous explorations. A chill bested up in my heart. This thing doesn't look like a product from nature, how long has it been here? What is the purpose of its existence? Why didn't I fail to notice it during the first two explorations?

The hardness of this transparent object far exceeded my imagination, and I could hardly express it in words; in my past explorations, I had never encountered anything that could compare with the hardness of this substance. I approached it with caution to examine it, its surface is so smooth and unusual that it was almost impossible to stand, and I could only hover to observe it. The surface of it is like water waves, reflecting the objects above it in a blurred shape. Just as I hesitated to continue observing, I suddenly realized the light source inside it seemed to grow stronger. With just one breath, the light source appeared in front of me without any obscuring. The large, yellowish light source shines gently on my face and my body. I am bathed in its light. An irrepressible burst of ecstasy emanated from my chest. The terrestrial moon, my breath trembled, the terrestrial moon.

At this moment, all the questions are left behind. Old George is right, once you feel its call, you will forget all your doubts. Its light is so dazzling, its gaze is so kind. I am its child, its devotee. I shall welcome her, embrace her, I belong to her! I shall dedicate myself to her! In this instant, I understood, the meaning of life, the value of existence, I understand the joy on old George's face, I understood the joy of the mother who devoured Peter, I have touched the origin of life, the truth of the universe, nothing in this world was worthy of the doubt anymore. All that fame, all that irony, what a ridiculous thing. I need to get close to her, I want to touch her, I want to be one

with her! I frantically slapped the hard transparent fence in front of me to get closer to my moon. After several unsuccessful attempts, I started to search for possible gaps. Finally, I found a near-rotten log fixed next to the transparency object. I rush toward the log, with my rejoice, I find a gnawed gap. I surged frantically through the small crack, pushing myself inward. While my sanity was still foolishly inviting me to wait or to examine the unknown area I was about to enter, there was no time, she was calling me, and I had to get to her now!

In the rush, I twisted one of my legs. Strangely enough, I felt no significant pain. It must have been my moon that was blessing me. Passing through the crack, I was finally able to see the moon in its full glory. She looked like a bright yellow pearl, hovering silently on a silver plate. Her light was so dazzling that it was almost impossible to look at it directly. I could feel the tears rolling down my eyes. My eyeballs were gently burned by her light, and perhaps I would never see anything else for the rest of my life. But who cares? Those who have witnessed the miracles of God will not be interested in earthly nothingness. I got closer and closer to this beautiful moon, and the closer I got, the more I was struck by her beauty. Her light was seductive. Close to her, I feel the deadly heat. But that couldn't stop me. My body and her light finally merged into one. Those waves of heat began to spread throughout my body, and I felt a burning sensation, like lightning, like flame, it's the feeling of her love, so aggressive that it almost crushed me. My other leg rolled off like dust with the contact between us, silently detaching itself from my body and falling into the silvery plate below my moon. Fear began to well up in the back of my mind. But it was too late, the ownership of my body was taken over by my beloved moon, my head hit the surface of her heavily before my consciousness commanded. My body began to sink, falling uncontrollably.

I thought I would fall into the hard silver plate and end my last life in pain. But I did not, I landed in a soft, I used my remaining power to turn my head sideways, and found that below my head was a piece of yellow brittle wings, the fake eye pattern on the temptation has been clouded due to the pass of time, it reminds me the eyes of old George, sneering and mock the foolish of me. The wings, more than one piece, layered with scent messages filled with grief, raised at the moment I fell and are now splashing over my body like a drizzle, conveying the last words of every voyager that has fallen here.

In this instant, all my questions were cleared. The unexplored reason for District 103, the madness of old George, and the terrestrial moon... I understood it now, but it was too late. In the last moment of my life, I could only leave my eyes wide open, staring at the blinding moon above me, in this huge, quiet tomb, with the bodies of all the previous explorers, facing my demise in pain, fear, and remorse.

At 8 p.m. the old house welcomed back its owner. The voice of a girl appeared in the house.
"Dad, I told you we need to fix the window cracks. Moths fly in every summer, and it's disgusting! If it happens again next time, I'll never come back here for summer!"
Her father gave a perfunctory response, promising her that he would find someone to fix it tomorrow.
The girl brought a ladder and attempted to look at the brown marks on the lampshade. She is clearly unprepared for the sight she is about to face. In the bright light, piles of moth bodies were frozen in various twisted positions in the silvery lampshade. The wings of one seem still twitching.
A crashing scream escapes from the old house.

Remona Yu

Recollection

Thankfully I have my friends by my side. Marcus, Pete, Jenny, Wallace, Sasha, and me. That was the crew. I can't remember the last time we had all been together. It felt like lifetimes ago. Wallace cracks a joke in a way only he can. Everyone laughs, except for me. I couldn't hear what he said, too captured by the looming sense of doom in my head. We continue our walk.

Dried up leaves crunch under my feet as the brisk air attacks my throat. At least it isn't nighttime, I think to myself. I think Sasha read my mind, as she expressed a similar warning to the group. Pine trees inhabit most of the land we traverse through, with heights so grand they kiss the clouds and sky. They remind me of home. I miss home. I miss safety.

Marcus is the self-proclaimed nature expert, so he takes the point. If he were a military general, he would be a shitty one. I don't know military legends, so I can't make a proper comparison. Oh well. He says the crispy brown leaves that cover the trail we walk along are from oak trees. Fuck your oak trees, pine trees are better. The crew shoots me confused looks. I guess I said that out loud.

The trail and those damn oak leaves envelop me in a shield of safety, however. No matter how paper thin that shield is, I have to admit, without the trail I would be losing my shit. I blame Jenny. She planned the trip and found the lodge we're renting. At least, I think. I've kind of just been a passenger thrust along for the ride. Just like how I've been thrust along for the past twenty some odd years; meeting the demands and expectations of others, for others, while others seem to forget that I have my own wants and needs. I have to take control for once.

Left foot, right foot. Left foot, right foot. Right foot left foot. We can't synchronize our steps. It's pissing me off. Everything pisses me off. That impending danger resurges in my mind. Why can't I pinpoint this sense of omnipresent despair? It's like that feeling when you're a kid and you know it's bedtime, so you try your best to make sure your parents are too distracted to look at the clock. How much longer till we're back? This time my thoughts fail to seep through to reality, the group is too busy telling Jenny we won't have cell phone service until we reach the cabin. Marcus ensures she can check Instagram in roughly seven and a half minutes, given we keep up our current pace. Why not walk a little faster? Maybe put a little more pep in our step? They heard me this time. Captain Marcus yields his authority without uttering a single word and we're off.

It seems like five minutes have past and the crackling of dead leaves has finally subdued. As we journey along the path, the pine trees have progressively gotten shorter, most likely so they can hear the conversations of their friends the maple trees. The symbiosis of nature is rearing its lovely head. Every being has its own task, working in conjunction to survive and better the environment they were born into. Hell, even the path has its own purpose. Oh, mighty forest trail, I look upon thee with great thanks for… Shit. Where's the fucking path? Marcus when did the trail stop where the fuck are we going have you lost your fucking mind I was trying to find some solace in this hellhole I'm fucking cold.
Sorry Marc, I didn't mean it. It's not your fault. It's all our faults.

The group aimlessly bumbles back the way we came. Wallace asks if anyone brought a map. Obviously not, no one our age has ever used a physical map ever. After a stint of frantic walking and incessant ranting by Sasha (I feel you girl), we reach the point in which the path we were following broke off into two separate directions. We have three options: continue backwards on the trail, take a left turn, or take a right turn. We've seen movies before, we know what the deal is. We have to split up.

Wallace is practically shitting his pants; he teams up with Pete to retreat on the path we came from. Jenny rarely gets outside; she follows Commander Marcus' lead to the left. That leaves Sasha and me to investigate the path to the right.

Crunch, crunch, crunch. The crisp noise underfoot is back, sending tingles of relief and anxiety simultaneously up my spine. Sasha has a brilliant idea. Fuck it, let's sprint. Before I have a second to accept her proposition, Sasha darts down the trail, shrinking with every stride. I haven't sprinted since high school. I should've said no, but just like Sasha I'm off to the races.

T-rex arms swing by my side as I try to catch up to my friend. I never knew where to put my arms and hands when I run, I always looked so awkward. But here, in this moment of hysteric bliss, I feel free. The cold air does not deter me, as I cut through its frigidity. The looming presence of danger? I forget all about it. I've never run this fast before in my life. Is this what runners do instead of smoking weed? As I fly down the trail, Sasha grows larger and wider until I realize she has stopped running completely. My focus breaks as I slow down to avoid crashing into my friend. She would've been pissed.

The smooth, welcoming pine planks coalesce into a two storied ligneous sanctuary. General Marcus is tending to a much-needed fire. I am warm. Pete's gentle hands guide a scorching mug of rich hot chocolate into mine. I am calm. Sasha has changed into her red flannel pajamas. I am comfy. Wallace and Jenny take some selfies for Jenny's story. I am thankful for my friends. I am thankful for my parents, thankful for my teachers, my bosses, my family, my pets, anyone who has ever taught me to look at the bright, luminous side of life instead of into the grim, treacherous abyss below.

The night commences with some light drinking. We are responsible adults, right? I really have to pee, but I'm so cozy I can't muster enough strength to separate myself from my blanketed heaven. Colonel Marcus doesn't drink often, so his intoxication is made apparent very quickly. His commanding disposition has evaporated. As we debrief on our adventurous day, Marcus is reminding us of how grateful he is for this group of friends. This is the Marcus I love. The stoic, imperious shell he resides in is a product of his childhood; armor I would die to pierce, as it's so similar to the armor that bound me to self-destructive tendencies in the past. Let's table that for now. The group laughs and laughs, mostly due to Wallace's spot-on Sylvester Stallone impersonation. It's great.

Amidst the cackles and chortles, three knocks ring from the front door. Who could be out here this late? Our former leader quivers in fear in his drunken stupor. The rest of the crew trade glances, hopefully influencing someone other than themselves to answer the door. It is time for me to take control. I rise to my feet and glide over to the front of the cabin. It is time for me to take control.

I quickly throw the door open to find a small blond child standing on the welcome mat. Before I can open my mouth to ask where his parents are, they instantaneously appear from around the corner. The mother and father are blonde as well, the type of families you see on television. The father nervously claims that this was the cabin they rented and that we must be mistaken. I am in control. I tell him that he in fact is mistaken, not I, and that he should find his rightful cabin before it gets too cold. Without a word, the family turns and walks in a single file line off of the front porch and to their car. I won.

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Everything is tranquil. Almost. Marcus has been scared shitless. Jenny is threatening to call the people who rented us the cabin. Pete, Wallace, and I are playing peacekeeper, trying to calm down our friends. Sasha is the only person adamant on having a good time; she's drinking like it's going out of style. Maybe she needs our help too.

Now everything is tranquil. Awesome. After some grade A comforting thanks to our motherly instincts, everyone is in a better mood. Some cheesy disco music blares through Jenny's bluetooth speaker as everyone flails their limbs around. I think they call this dancing. The alcohol is getting to me cause my bladder is arguing with my brain, trying to let it release. I'm strong, I'll hold on. Marcus stumbles over to the speaker and turns the volume down. He raises his drink and prepares to spew a toast about, once again, how grateful he is for us. As soon as he opens his mouth to speak, a surge of wind swings the front door open.

The open door creates a wind tunnel, sucking empty cans out into the world. Are we so drunk we couldn't notice the brewing storm outside? Jenny and Wallace hit the deck, hugging each other for added defense. Sasha wraps herself around a wooden support beam, while Marcus runs to the basement for safety. Pete and I look at each other briefly before he drops to the floor in the fetal position. He looks like he could cry. I realize that I have to close this damn door before further carnage ensues. I hate being in control.

I inch my way to the front door, fighting against this godly wind. Lighting strikes and thunder bangs its transcendental drum, setting me back half a foot. I struggle and struggle until I finally grab a hold of the doorknob. Before I attempt to slam shut the entryway, I peak outside at the tempestuous wasteland to find the blond boy standing alone in front of the cabin. He looks miserable, but the storm doesn't torment him like it does us. I turn to call for someone to help. Everyone has disappeared. I turn to the boy, he has disappeared. What the fuck.

The wind tunnel subdues as I use all my strength to shut the door. Hello? Where'd yall go? I tiptoe back through the living room to find Pete at my feet, still curled up as if he was in the womb. He turns his head to me, realizing the problem has died down. I offer my hand, he grabs it, and I help him to his feet. Pete gives me the dirtiest of looks and says to me

Why the fuck did you invite me? Prick

Pete spits at my feet and stomps his grumpy ass upstairs. I would feel bad, but hey, I think I saved our asses, especially from some property damage fees. Lieutenant Marcus was at the helm all day, maybe the crew followed him downstairs.

These basement steps are creaky as hell. I'm creeping down the stairs, not because I'm scared, because I don't wanna step on a loose nail or some sharp shit. As I creep lower and lower down the staircase a dim light paints the cellar. They could be down here. But if they are, why haven't they answered my screams. I've literally been yelling their names the entire walk down the stairs.

Leaping down the last few steps, I quickly pivot, spinning with gymnast precision to face my friends. No one's there. Damnit. I amble along a few steps to materialize my surroundings. Something feels alive down here. A grandfather clock, not working. A leather couch with plastic covering the cushions. Shelves with books, shelves with tchotchkes, shelves with jarred provisions. But what really holds me is in the corner. A once white toilet, covered with cobwebs and stains of only God knows what. I have to pee again, but that's not it. Something about this loo is drawing me towards it like the prey of the spider that weaved upon it.

Step after step. Step after step. Is this the other presence I feel? Oh decrepit, ominous basement, what have yee in store for my unsettled soul? Ssssssssssssss.

I back away from the toilet, mesmerized by the being before me. A beautiful, slender, orange and black snake presents itself to me out of its temporary den. Or perhaps, the toilet was its humble home. As I step back the snake grows longer and longer, like the seemingly endless handkerchief of a mediocre magician. I am astounded by its height. It must be about 10 feet long by my estimation and look at those yellow eyes good gracious its eyes are marvelous I've never seen anything like it I… Hissssss

Darkness. Instant darkness. All I can feel is the sharp sting of the snake's teeth in my neck. I am all but nothing until a golden tunnel of light opens miles away. At top speeds the golden portal races to my being, closer and closer until it captures me in its luminescence. Flashes of gold and white blind this realm and whatever I am. Finally the gold dissipates, leaving my soul in a veil of white. Hissssss

Thankfully I have my friends by my side. Their blurry faces emerge from the whiteness. My best friends in the entire universe, Marcus, Jenny, Wallace, and Sasha. Their pearly whites beam as they realize I have come to. I missed you guys so much. Where did you go?

It's okay. You're safe now. I got you. My best friends all mouth in unison.

It's okay. I got you. They are not a collection of voices, simply one.

My friends' faces fade into the white before the white retreats to darkness.

Grady Black

Oh How the Songbird Sings

Mr. Forest had just set up his pavilion for the summer. The pavilion was sacred to him. He paid someone to build it a few summers back. Now it stands next to the pool in his backyard, strongly made out of the finest lumber. With a smooth concrete floor it was the perfect place to have guests over to show off his beautiful backyard. He worked diligently to set up the back yard every year. He feverishly forced his sons to come out and do remedial tasks in the scorching sun so that it could look perfect. Mulch this, weed that, oh and don't forget to skim the pool. Week after week he told them specific things to do for the day for him, and on the weekend they would work together. One can't blame him for asking his sons however. He worked everyday, and was getting older, if they wanted to enjoy the backyard too they had to put some sweat in as well.

Soon enough they rolled the carpet out over the concrete floor, they lugged the furniture from the shed and set it about. They went to the basement to grab the pillows they had stored for the winter, and set it up all nicely for him. This was not enough however. The next weekend he takes to power washing the carpet. Then he washed the chairs, the cushions, the ground next to the pool, everything. Every weekend morning his sons would wake up to the sound of the power washer engine blaring as he was cleaning something else. He was fervent, but in the end it all looked great.

Mr. Forest was finally able to throw his feet up on the ottoman, sit under the shade and enjoy a nice glass of whiskey while the sun set down over the trees to the west. As he's sitting though he hears the song of the birds and he is at peace, for another summer is starting.

Waking up the next morning he brews himself a cup of coffee, he walks out barefoot and enjoying the warmth of the morning sun on his feet he stops in his tracks as he approaches the shadow line from the pavilion. There is bird shit on his cushions. He sees the culprits perched up in the rafters and he becomes furious.

“Get the fuck out of there you flying rats!” he screams.

The birds frantically flee at the sound. He sits down and tries to enjoy his coffee. The bird shit is in his field of vision and can’t help but be annoyed still. While sitting silently for a while the birds would come back and fly into the rafters with little sticks in their beaks and sing their song. Mr. Forest would shout “BAH” every time he saw them come in. This would cause them to panic and leave the scene immediately. When he waltzed back inside he made his way to the window in the living room where he could look through. The birds were having a gathering it seemed. All of them are chirping at each other from different panels. They all seemed to be at some point or another making a stop in one of the panels of the ceiling. He finally came out and they scrammed once again. He grabbed a ladder and looked in their little hidey hole. As he came over the crest of the wood he could see a nest of theirs starting to take formation. Nestled right into the corner of one specific panel of the ceiling. They were making a home in his sanctuary. He reached in with his burly hand and grabbed hold of the bundle of brush and threw it at the ground. Their home was properly destroyed for the time being.

Mr. Forest needed these pests to be permanently relocated from his premises however. He could not have bird shit all over his sanctuary, he needed to protect his family and his guests from this pestilence. He knew that they were not dangerous, but he viewed them as a threat because they were threatening his very peace of mind.

The day after, Mr. Forest purchased about 300 feet worth of bird spikes, as well as bird repellent spray. He made sure to make use of his premium membership and get it delivered within 24 hours. He made sure to do this, for this speed would then outmatch the slowness of the bird's efforts to rebuild.

Once he received these items, he spent the good part of 3 days nailing the spikes to the rafters for each panel. He then went to each panel and sprayed a liberal amount of the bird repellent in each panel as well. He sat under the pavilion sweating happily grinning at the work he's done.

The next couple of days Mr. Forest was too busy to notice that the birds had been working tirelessly behind his back. The birds had to adapt to changes as they came. The birds had lived on this planet long before houses started going up. These birds called these woods home before Mr. Forest erected his house right in the middle of it. His pavilion had been made from their home. They had as much right as Mr. Forest to live there for they had belonged there first. Then again birds do not understand property rights, and this was rightfully in the eyes of law Mr. Forest’s land. These laws governed the land for the humans though. The land that they had taken and the laws that they made up. So the lives and well being of these animals were not of concern to them. They were pests now.

The birds could fit through the spikes. This was actually better for them, they now had more protection from predators. They could lay their eggs in a very safe spot. Everyday countless trips to trees grabbing brush, and then back they built their cozy little home.

After a couple of days Mr. Forest went to enjoy the nice evening under his pavilion and noticed the birds flying in and out. They stood on the cross beams looking at him.

"These fucking things never learn.” Mr. Forest muttered under his breath.

He walked inside. In the meanwhile the birds continued to fly back and forth. One bird had a small stick in its beak and he went through the spikes to his cozy little home and placed down the stick in the nest. He hopped his way out back through the spikes and sat there for a moment. Next thing he knew a loud noise erupted and he tried to fly off out of instinct except he realized he couldn't. Mr. Forest sat at the end of the pavilion with his pellet gun. Standing there excited that he got one on the first shot. The pellet shot clean through the bird's chest. No air to enter its lungs anymore. The bird dropped to the ground. All of the other birds were long gone. Too fast for Mr. Forest to get more than one. Mr. Forest walked up to the bird and picked it up with his hand, in the other he carried a hammer and nail. The man went to one of the pavilion's pillars and held the bird up to the pillar while carefully holding the nail to the bird's chest with his thumb and pointer finger. He then drove the nail through the small bird's body and it stuck to the pillar. Little bits of lifeless blood dripped down to the ground. He turned around and left the bird there as an effigy. He then climbed up a ladder to where the bird had been standing before it got shot. He saw the nest in there and reached through the spikes and pulled the nest out with his bare hands and he threw it to the ground. The home they worked on for a week had now been destroyed, their work all for nothing.

It was now Mr. Forest’s turn to work. He went to the hardware store and bought a lot of plywood. Each day for 3 days he pulled out the bird spikes, measured each panel of the roof, and cut out squares of plywood to fit. He drilled these squares to each panel so that way there was no longer a place for the birds to go in the roof, at least he thought. What had once been a sharp angle from inside of the roof to the frame of the pavilion had now been flattened out that there was nowhere these birds could stand underneath the roof, except for the crossbeams.

That was the only place the birds could make their last stand. Mr. Forest thought he was all set. He sat and finally relaxed. He was able to do this for the good part of a month. He would come home at night and enjoy a glass of wine underneath sitting and looking at his beautiful backyard. Meanwhile the nailed bird carcass rotted. Soon enough the entire bird would be gone.

The birds learned though. They worked quietly when Mr. Forest was not home. They built a nest once more in the crossbeams of the pavilion. During this month they had laid their eggs and were waiting for them to hatch so their offspring could enjoy the illustrious world ahead of them.

One day Mr. Forest came home quite earlier than before. It was a beautiful day, he swam in the pool, he tanned under the sun, he enjoyed the sounds of nature with the leaves rustling in the wind. He closed his eyes and fell asleep under the sun. He woke up and found himself burnt. Hurting, he walked under the pavilion to catch some solace from the beating star in the sky. Head back he took a deep breath, while his back felt like flames as he laid back in the chair. He fell asleep once again and woke up to the crimson sun to the west and its rays darting horizontally across the land. As his eyes opened, they began to burn as much as his back from the immense change in brightness. He lifted his feet off the ottoman and out of the corner of his eye noticed a white spot on the ground next to him. He got up and saw that it was bird shit. He looked up and could see the head of one bird peeking from over the crossbeam.

Mr. Forest grabbed his ladder, moved the ottoman, and set the ladder down in the middle of the pavilion. Furious with rage, he stepped up the ladder and came to the top of the crossbeam where he noticed the crossbeam only had 3 sides leaving the top open for them to nestle in, a feat he never knew until now.

A great weakness in his plans to get rid of the birds that he was now feeling the consequences of. There he saw the nest with 4 tan speckled eggs. He clutched part of the nest with his hands, and he threw the entire bundle in his hand and threw it to the ground with all his might. The eggs splattered and out came the lifeless pink bodies of these premature beings. He looked back into the crossbeam and noticed a bit of the nest still left and one egg still there. He grabbed the egg with his thumb and pointer finger and gazed at it for a moment. He climbed down the latter and looked out into his backyard where he saw one of the birds perched on his fence. He stared into the bird's eyes and placed the egg in his mouth and chomped down and down until it was a ground up pulp and drawing in a breath from his nose he swallowed.

He immediately went to the leftover pile of plywood he had and closed off the last portion of all the crossbeams, effectively leaving no place at all for the birds to nest any longer. The birds no longer had any way of remaining so off they went. No longer to be seen under the pavilion. Mr. Forest sat in the coming months finally at peace. The guests came and went. The nail where the bird's lifeless body rested still remained, now empty from any sign there was a bird there at all.

Angelo Amodeo

The Raft

“I almost wish we’d see some sharks,” mumbled Luke, too quietly for Anthony to understand.

“Huh?”

“I almost wish we’d see some sharks,” replied Luke, louder this time.

“Why the fuck would you want to see a shark?”

“Well I don’t want to die from dehydration,” moaned Luke, wincing in pain.

“But you want to get eaten by a shark?”

Luke sat in the raft and thought for a moment. “Better a shark than the sun,” he decided. At least that way it would be over quick. And nothing had been quick since the accident. The boys had been sitting in the pathetic raft for 3 full days and it was taking its toll. Luke’s fair skin had disappeared, the sun leaving behind a deep crimson color. He had taken off his shirt and draped it over his head to protect his face from the sun, but his body had suffered because of that. The constant pain of his chest, the slight headache from dehydration, and the hopelessness of the situation were beginning to drive Luke to the edge. To make matters worse, Anthony seemed to be coping fine. The small ration of water was adequate for him, and his darker skin didn’t seem to be getting burnt. It was almost as if Luke was soaking up all of the sunlight directed at the raft, allowing Anthony to escape the rays.

Anthony looked over at Luke. “Why are you so sure that we’re gonna die? I bet somebody’s out looking for us right now.”

"Why are you so optimistic that somebody's going to find us out here?" Luke replied, spreading his arms to indicate the vastness of the ocean.Anthony was driving him crazy—why did he have to be stuck in a life raft with the most annoyingly positive person on planet Earth?

Their situation had sunk in quickly—a storm was raging the night of the accident, and the wind sped by, carrying their raft in its arms. Who knew how far away they were from where the distress signal was sent out. Who knew if there were even any rescue parties still looking for them. It was hard to believe they had escaped the fire.

"I just have a feeling that they will," replied Anthony.

"Ohhh you have a feeling, why didn't you say that earlier!" said Luke, feigning excitement.

Anthony stuck out his finger. "Fuck you."

Luke turned away from Anthony, and began to rummage through the supply indent in the raft, where they had discovered the inadequate supply of water on the first day. He found what he was looking for, and spun back around, brandishing a long knife, still in its sheath.

"Luke, do not take that knife out," Anthony warned.

"Or else what?"

"I'm serious dude, do not take the knife out."

Luke reached up with his left hand and unclipped the strap that secured the sheath over top of the blade.

If you take that knife out I'm gonna beat your ass," Anthony cautioned.

Luke looked Anthony right in the eyes and slipped the blade free, its sharp blade glinting in the sunlight. He knew what Anthony was worried about—the inflatable raft would be no match for the knife, and he could easily kill them both right now. He wasn't going to, of course, but he liked the idea of giving Anthony a little scare. But Anthony didn't look scared. That wasn't a look of fear, that was a look of… joy?

"Look Luke!" Anthony pointed up at the sky behind Luke.

"Do you think I'm that stu—" Luke was cut off by a chorus of seagulls, piercing the stale air with their squawking. There must have been over a hundred of them! Luke turned back to Anthony with an apologetic look on his face. He sheathed the knife carefully and put it back in the indent. Land was close. And maybe Anthony was right. They might not die out here after all.

Luke never really wanted to go to college. His dad never did, and he turned out fine. Well, fine enough. But Luke had lived with his mom his whole life, and so when she decided his junior year of high school they were going to start looking at colleges, that's what they did. And now he was sitting in his freshman year dorm, waiting to meet his roommate for the first time. The walls were barren, painted a tone of beige that must've been the most boring color in the world. Maybe the color had been selected in the hopes of students getting more rest. Maybe it was just the cheapest color the school could find. His mother had insisted on propping the door open when she left so he could "meet his peers," but soon after she left, the incessant clamoring in the hallway annoyed Luke and he shut the door to get some quiet.

Of course, that hadn't really worked as his walls were as thin as his patience. It didn't matter anyways, because minutes after shutting the door, Luke heard a loud knock coming from the hallway. He got up and opened the door; Anthony was there, holding two duffel bags in each hand.

"Hey man, I think this is my room, are you Luke?"

"Oh yeah, come on in," Luke said, moving out of the way. "You must be Anthony."

Anthony plopped his duffels down on his tiny twin bed. "Yup, pleasure to meet you."

Luke started to respond, but before he could get any words out of his mouth, Anthony had slipped out of their dorm, and was making his way up and down the hall, introducing himself to all of their new floormates. And that's how their relationship went— at least during freshman year. They were always friendly with each other, but Anthony was friendly with everyone, and that kept him out of the room. Anthony's frequent absences were fine by Luke, who loved the privacy that they brought. When the time came to pick roommates for the following year, they both decided to go with other friends, and Luke never really thought about Anthony after that. Until this semester. His last semester at LSU, 12 credits away from earning his degree in Business Operations Management, with a concentration in natural resources.

Anthony just happened to be in one of Luke's classes, and they were randomly paired up by the professor for a project. The project required the tandem to spend a night on an offshore oil rig, somewhere just outside of the Gulf of Mexico. Luke couldn't remember much about the rig, or even the night of the accident, but he definitely remembered the fire. He had woken up in the middle of the night to a siren that seemed too loud to be real. And what he saw didn't seem real either.

“Dude, we’re basically out of water,” said Anthony, as he peered into the canteen.

Luke snapped his gaze from left to right and then looked back at Anthony. Land was still nowhere to be found. “We’re definitely still in the water.”

Anthony rolled his eyes. “Seriously, I need a drink but there’s only like two sips left.”

“Drink away then,” said Luke, reaching out his hand to take his final sip after Anthony.

“We have to be getting close to land,” Anthony said. “Those seagulls must’ve come from somewhere close.”

“Since when are you a seagull expert?” Luke quipped. “For all we know those seagulls have been flying for hundreds of miles.”

“Jesus, you’re such a fucking pessimist.”

“I’m a realist.” Luke laid down in the raft, attempting to hide from the sun. The shadow from the side of the boat slowly crept across Luke’s burnt body as the day went on, and eventually Luke began to drift off to sleep.

Luke never really believed in God, much to the chagrin of his mom. She had taken him to church every Sunday when he was a kid, but neither the pastor nor his Sunday School teacher had gotten to him. Regardless, he found himself on his knees praying. He didn’t know what else to do– or what else he could do. He had stumbled out of his bunk to the main deck of the rig. At least what was left of the main deck.

Massive explosions had torn entire sections apart, depositing them into the ocean below. Was there an ocean below? Luke couldn't tell anymore. The oil had spread across the surface and ignited, so no matter what direction he looked, all he could see were flames. And all he could do was sink down onto his knees, as the heat was growing more and more intense, slowly consuming his body.

Luke felt something shaking him and he jolted upright, knocking Anthony's hands off him. He awoke in a haze, his mind still heavy with the dream.

"Hey man, are you okay?" Anthony asked. "I think you were having a nightmare."

Luke didn't feel okay. His body was covered in sweat, a waste of precious water. He didn't care about that though. It wouldn't matter. The seagulls had passed by hours ago. If they were going to find land they would've already. That was the worst part of the nightmare: he had awoken to another. "Yeah, I'm good."

That wasn't met with a response from Anthony. They sat in silence for a while, listening to the crests of the water lapping up against the side of the raft. Time slipped by, and the sky began to bleed. Slowly at first, the blood unaffected by gravity, leaking upwards as the sun approached the horizon. Luke was mesmerized by the brilliance– the reds perfectly accented by the oranges, the colors somehow flickering higher and higher, like an open flame. He had seen the flame before. When he was on his knees on the rig, he had looked up. He wanted God to see his face one last time. He saw the fire enveloping the sky. His memory was flooding back– an explosion behind him had brought him to his feet. Through the intense smoke, he had seen Anthony standing on the edge of the rig and managed to stumble over to him.

They must've exchanged words, but Luke didn't know what was said. Maybe Anthony had seen a life raft. Maybe just a piece of open water. It didn't matter. Luke knew they were never going to make it. It would have been easier to stay up on the rig. The water below couldn't save them. But as soon as Luke had resigned to stay on the rig, he had felt someone push him from behind. No– nobody could have pushed him that hard. He had lost his breath before he even hit the water. Which direction was up? His lungs were burning. The whole world was on fire.

Luke's mind was brought back to the present by vibrations in the raft. He looked over and saw Anthony staring at the sky, shaking. He was looking up at the fire too.

After a moment of silence, Luke started talking. "My mom used to take me to watch the sun set all the time." Luke felt tears well up in his eyes. "She loved watching the sun light up the sky. She said it reminded her of how close God was to us." Anthony remained silent. Luke felt the tears break free, starting down his face. "I used to like watching them with her as a kid just because of how happy they made her." The tears were streaming down his face now. "I used to always think of those moments when I saw a sunset, but today I can only think about the rig."

Anthony looked over at Luke and Luke saw that tears were sliding down his face as well. "When I was twelve," said Anthony, "my parents took me on vacation to Maine. They loved the outdoors, they loved to hike, and bike, and kayak. All of that stuff. But I was twelve, y'know? I was a pain in their ass. Always complaining. I have a blister, my legs are tired, whatever. One morning we got up really early to hike up some mountain, I can't remember what it was called. I remember I was so angry– I hated my parents for making me wake up to go on another stupid hike. Eventually we made it to the top– right as the sun was rising. It only took a few minutes.

For it to rise. And it was beautiful. But I was a kid. I didn't want to admit that the hike was worth it. I was still mad. I was still complaining the whole walk down. I hate that I was mad that morning. I would kill to get to go on that hike one more time. To watch the sun rise with my parents one more time. I can't believe this is it."

Luke didn't know what to say. "Hey man, this isn't it just yet. Maybe those seagulls came from close by. We could wake up on a beach tomorrow morning." The corners of Anthony's mouth snuck up his cheeks, but he didn't respond. He was soaking in the sunset as if it was his last.
The sun finally disappeared below the horizon, and they sat there, watching the last bit of light die out. Eventually, Luke turned away and he couldn't believe his eyes. The raft was slowly drifting towards a small stretch of land, opposite of the sun that had just hit the water.

"Holy shit!" exclaimed Luke.

Anthony turned. "Holy shit," he echoed. The boys looked at each other and simultaneously reached over opposite lips of the raft, starting to paddle towards the island. Luke had been completely drained moments before, but now he felt alive again– his heart was racing, his veins bursting with adrenaline. As they drew closer and closer, the quiet lapping of the ocean was replaced by the sound of violent waves crashing into the island, crescendoing as the raft got closer. This close to the island, the foam from the waves covered the surface of the water, making it impossible to see where they were going.

"LEFT, GO LEFT!" Anthony screamed at Luke. Luke began to contort his arm to pivot the raft to the left, but it was too late. He felt a jolt as the raft ran into the rocks Anthony must have noticed under the surface moments ago.

“We’re gonna have to swim,” Luke said, as they both felt the raft begin to deflate beneath them. They climbed up on the sides of the raft, and Luke tucked the knife into his waistband.

Anthony looked across at him. “Good luck.”

Luke nodded. “Hopefully we don’t see any sharks.”

Nathan McCracken

Poetry

Impossibility

As I saw the clock hanging from the wall, I started to imagine the minute hand rewind.
Counting back days in my imagination was far easier than getting up and living new days.
Imagining knocks on my bedroom door was far easier than opening the door for my own benefit.
It was far easier to be aching on a bed than to be standing.
The simplicity and virtue of stagnation comes from the convolution and agony of moving on, breathing in, becoming better.
It makes sense like reading a book instead of time traveling makes sense.
It is a necessity brought out by an impossibility.
If I can't rise from this bed.
If I can't open that door.
Then I can imagine a thousand reasons why it is physically impossible for me to do so.
I can become a hypochondriac.
I can become a paralytic.
I can become a mute.
But I can't become my simplest desire: brave.
I can put up temporary walls and tear them down to manifest a heroic notion.
I can hold my breath and put my head under the showerhead to instigate some prehistoric instinct.
I can do many things most people wouldn't try.
I can do them all in the name of feeling better.
But it would not change the fact that the minute hand has moved a thousand times in contradiction to my imagination and that laying here I can better see it move clockwise.

Laura Rodriguez

Stilling Time

If I stand still at the door of the shared apartment I used as a failed scape
Will everything stop?
Will the morning not come?
If I stand still enough, will time stand still with me?
If I will my hands not to reach for the lock
If I will my lungs not to breath in the night air
If I will my body not to react to the mosquitos dancing around my arms and my ears
Will it numb my wit and halt my reasoning?
Will my feelings subside just for as long as time remains quiesced?
If time stands still, I promise I will still everything in me
If I can convince myself not to walk to my room
If I can bribe my body not to lay on my bed
Can you seduce the clock hands into idleness?

Laura Rodriguez

Artwork

At Ease

Cristiana Papadopoulos

Contemplation

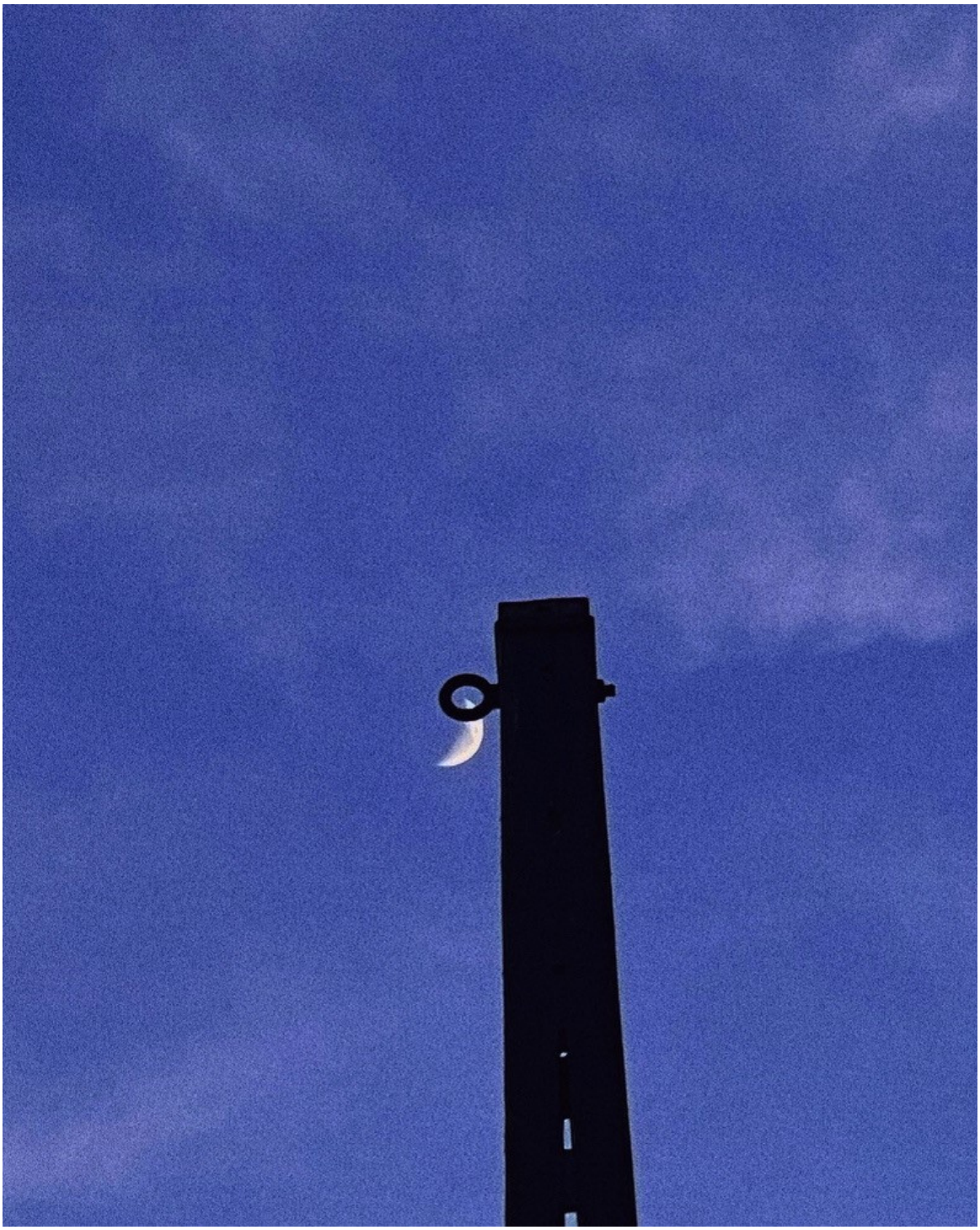
Angie Ortiz

Tranquil

Cristiana Papadopoulos

Photography

Trapping The Moon



Huiyang “Sophie” Hu

At the Port

Huiyang “Sophie” Hu

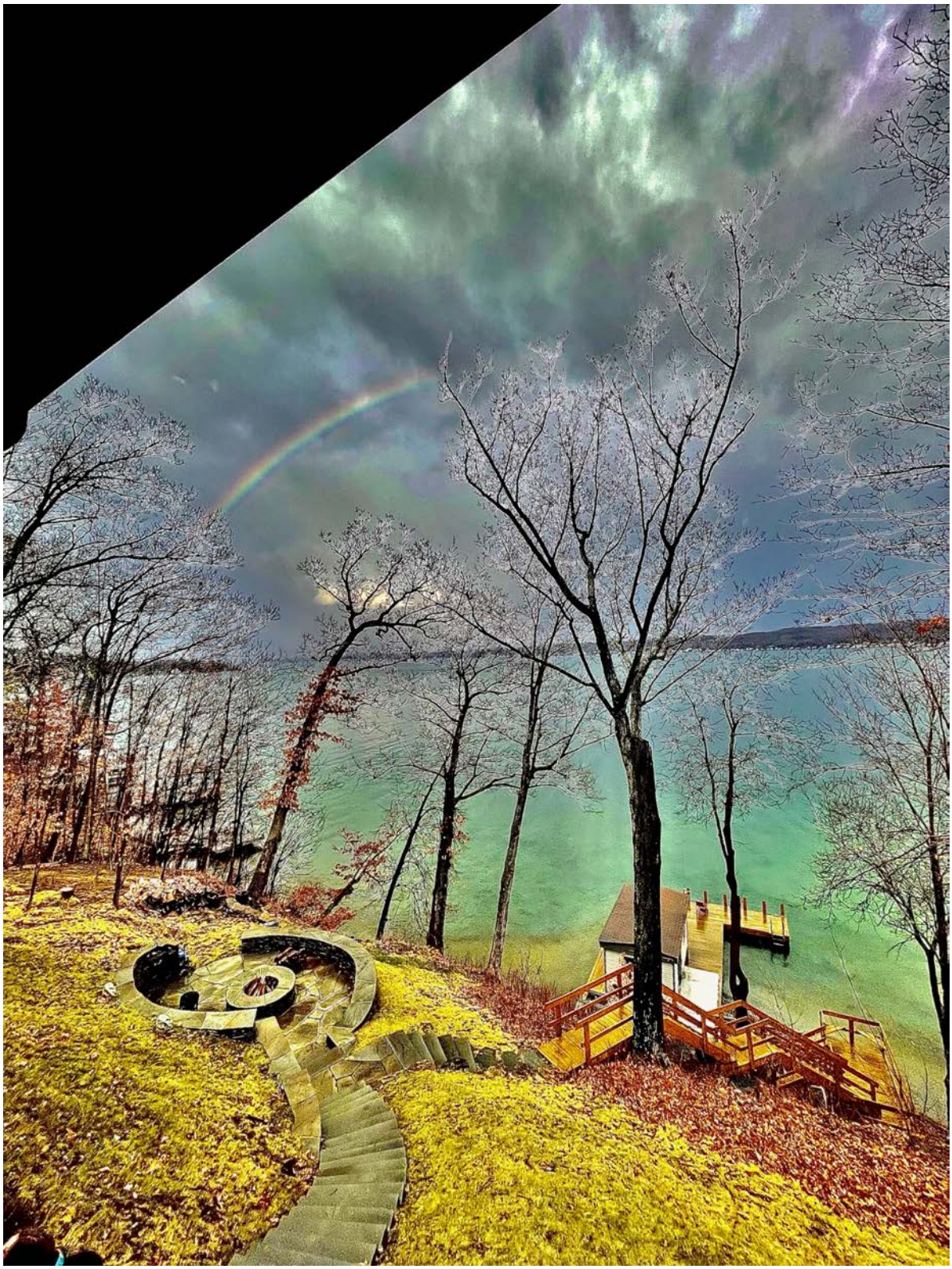
Fuego Volcano Eruption From Acatenago Volcano POV at 6am

Marie Tarot

Guatemalan Textures Highlighted at GT Fashion Week 2020

Marie Tarot

Signs From Beyond

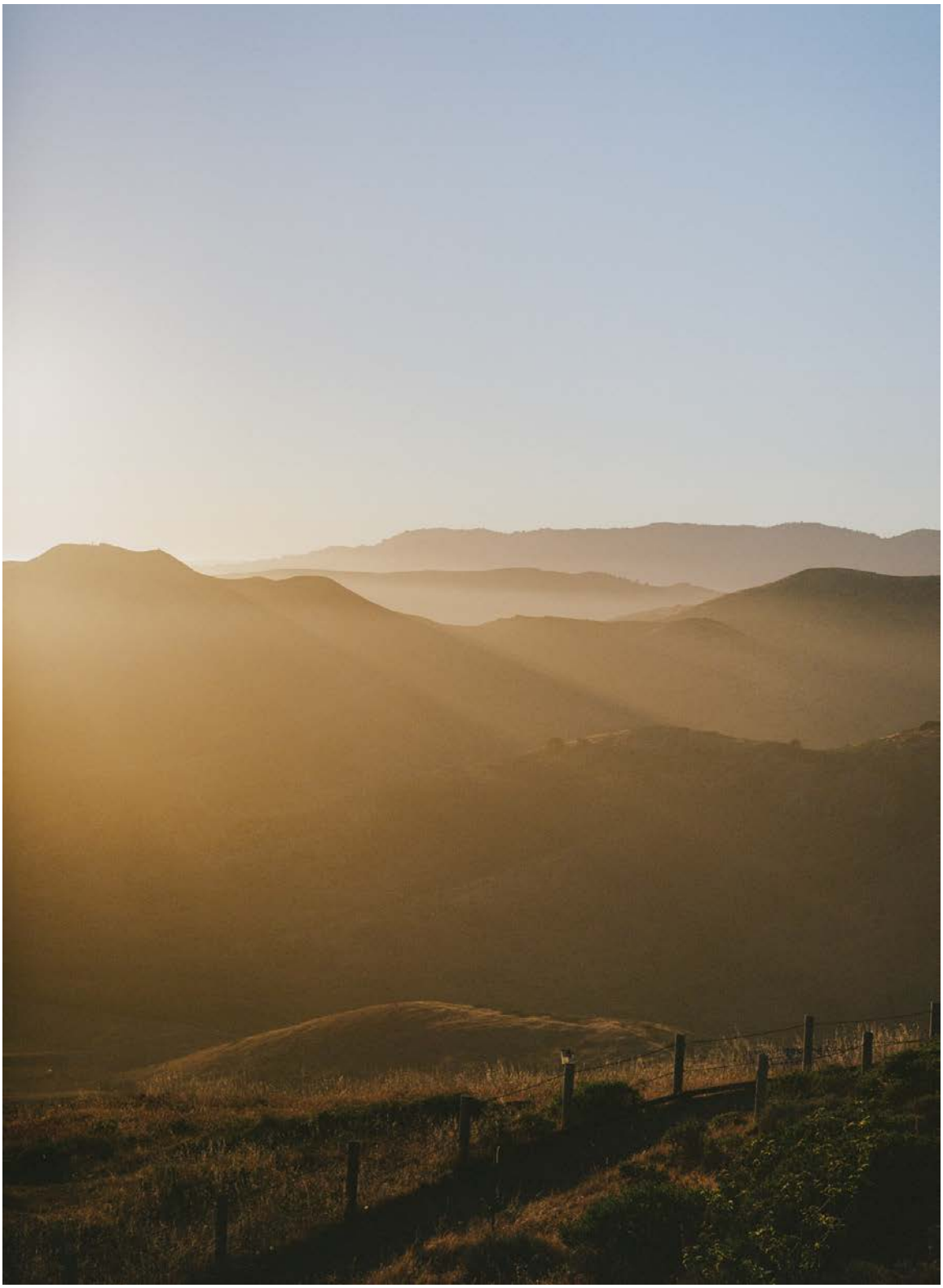


Matt Hofend

The Bay

Fisher LeVasseur

Marin Sunset



Fisher LeVasseur