

A photograph of a bridge walkway, likely the Manhattan Bridge, featuring a complex steel truss structure above and red metal railings on either side. The walkway floor is covered in various graffiti tags in white, blue, and yellow. A person is visible in the distance, walking away from the camera. The sky is overcast.

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

We are honored that you chose to pick up this year's edition of Opus! Can you believe that after fifteen years of publication, Opus is now old enough to be a high school student? This year, our contributors have been particularly thoughtful in their writing and artwork. We take great pride in the superb quality of each piece of writing and visual art our contributors have blessed us with this year, and we hope they will tickle your fancy as well. Each story, poem, and image will provide you with an opportunity to forget your earthly troubles and become absorbed into the ink and paper in your hands. We thank all those who took the time to submit their work to our humble magazine and you, dear readers, for being such a lovely audience.

Happy Reading!

Emily Buckley-Crist and Melanie Weissman
Editors-in-Chief

Our warmest thanks to...

Dr. Thomas Greenfield, for giving advisement and entertainment to the English Club with wit and charm.

Michele Feeley, for the warmth and generosity she exhibits towards us all.

The English Department, for allowing us to broaden our horizons as we explore the intense joys of reading and writing.

SA and AAC for providing the finances necessary to create Opus.

Our layout staff, for painstakingly devoting their time and labor to make this year's edition possible.

And to our beloved contributors, without whom you would not be able to enter the magical realm that is Opus Issue XV!

Table of Contents

Artwork		Prose, Poetry
Melanie Weissman, The Last Summer	5	Tara Brew, The First Night
	6	Juliana Thompson, History Teacher
Rachael Kosinski, Castle Rock	7	
	8	William Antonelli, Traumasclapes
Cindy Castillo, Eye on Canvas	9	Pamela Haas, A Haunting
Cindy Castillo, The Sun and the Earth	10	Thomas Perlee, Untitled
Rachael Kosinski, Stained Glass	11	
	12	Taylor Newsome, A Raddled Cup
Melanie Weissman, Crumble	13	
William Antonelli, Symmetry	14	Melanie Weissman, Grandpa
	15	Meghan Fellows, Man in the Mirror
Melanie Weissman, Somewhere	16	Tara Brew, The Sound of Water
		Krysta Kellner, Child Wonder
William Antonelli, Midnight Abbey	17	David Sabol, Dust
	18	Juliana Thompson, Four Seasons
Virginia Eley, Untitled	19	Pamela Haas, From the Ashes
	20	Amanda Saladino, How to Succeed in Theater Without Really Trying
William Antonelli, Boston Skyline	23	Jasmine Cui, [8]
		Jasmine Cui, [9]
Cindy Castillo, The Man and the Earth	24	Jasmine Cui, [11]
	25	Aileen Mack, Reflections
	27	William Antonelli, Rare Moments

The First Night

Tara Brew

I put on a shirt and jeans. The shirt was red. We drank beers in their room and laughed with the boys. They had stolen a road sign. The first of many, they professed, as their collection would soon grow. He showed me his bedroom and I looked at the pictures. All black and white, taped on crunchy white walls that had never been loved. He asks me which is my favorite. I struggle to locate the one I hate the least. This one? That one? None really. None. But I don't say that of course. Because he is tall and handsome and the door is closed. I spot his books, few and crumbling. Catcher is his favorite. I tell him it's mine too. I speculate it was the last book he read. I sit down with the books, examining their poor condition. Neglected and imprisoned in a house that will never be a home. Catcher is the only one I recognize. He's 21. I'm 17. He's had more time to collect books he'll never read. I lean on the closet, my knees to my chest. He sits next to me. Too close. It's awkward. His face was more handsome when I had to look up at it. The glare of the lightbulbs covered his acne. He puts his arm around me and the door swings open. I laugh as his hand brushes my breast when he struggles to close the door again. I stand up, offer him my hand and we join the others.

The Last Summer

Melanie Weissman



History Teacher

Juliana Izuno Thompson

She always thought New Year's Day should be in autumn,
That was the beginning of time, or at least, the place in time when she made her entrance.
Autumn meant everyone was arriving in the New World, and the citizens always came to her
province just in time to watch it all go down.
They remembered to be kind and rewind at the start of the year, and her centuries only lasted
months as they replayed again and again.
Eating ice cream bars with fans in the windows on hot sunny days would always remind her of
the Cold War.
Whenever snow fell she could almost smell the smoke of the very first factories, they were
cropping up again, like perennial tulips.
Any time, the ceiling could speak, like voices of the gods speaking to her province, and the
carpets on the roadways began to wear thin as the citizens travelled.
The ceiling kept time, but her days weren't really measured in hours. Rather, they were measured
in years.
If she lost track of the seasons she measured her time in false fire alarms.
If she lost track of the fire alarms she measured her time in invasions and flimsy treaties.
All the citizens travelled through her province and stayed for a while.
She was queen while they were there, but it only lasted till they said goodbye.
It was autumn everywhere. When leaves were changing color, it was because the chlorophyll was
leaving as the temperatures grew colder.
And the citizens began to write haikus,
But those things, they were in other provinces, where someone else was queen,
Here, autumn meant discoveries and incursions
She waited for the citizens to arrive each day and watched world wars blow through like colored
pencil pictures on construction paper.
Every day the citizens would present her with what they found along the timelines, when they
were exploring while she was gone.
They presented the papers to her, they were the gifts they gave to the queen.
She'd smile at the revolutions that helped the citizens and queen to love each other more, and
they stumbled once again toward the start of the next century.

1



A Haunting

Pamela Haas

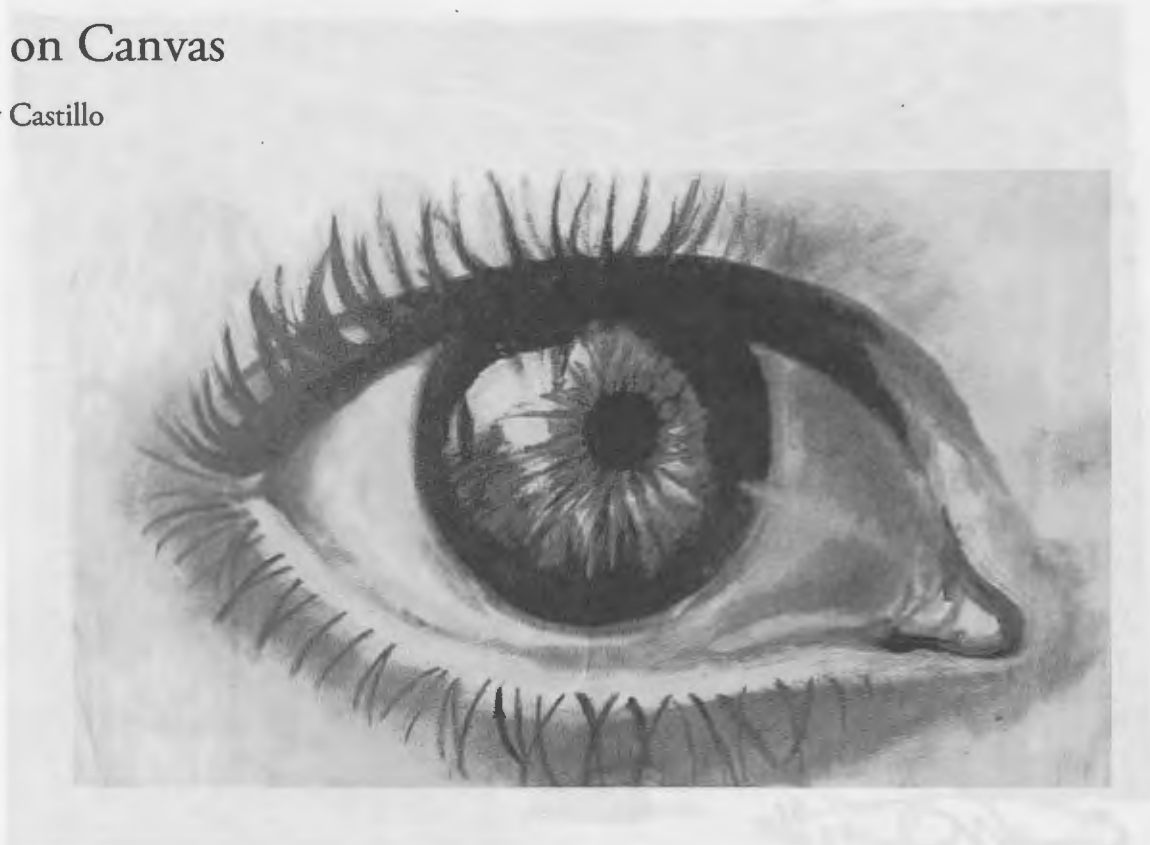
He was the leaves haloing my hair
or else feathers stuck
in impossible places.
He was scratching accents
from a country I never visited or else
my name echoing but not
located. He was there in cityscapes beyond
the elevation falcons dared dreaming
of reaching while sleeping the dark away.

He was mourned twisters flying
sandstorms, the breath commandeered
from the starling
that lost the voice to chirp.

He was gone
to bed early, the thermostat down
too low to feel warm. The night light won't turn on
how do I breathe with all these feathers
stabbing through my pillow?

Eye on Canvas

Cindy Castillo



Untitled

Thomas Perlee

the wind and you
unassuming bodywalker
had, have, will...
touch me
you can't be everything
or swallow me
with the steam i weave hastily.

...

fucked up, i claw your ***** into me
never quick enough
the need for all at once

And as the dirt curls into my skin
you lie or walk among the weeds
becoming your face
every one

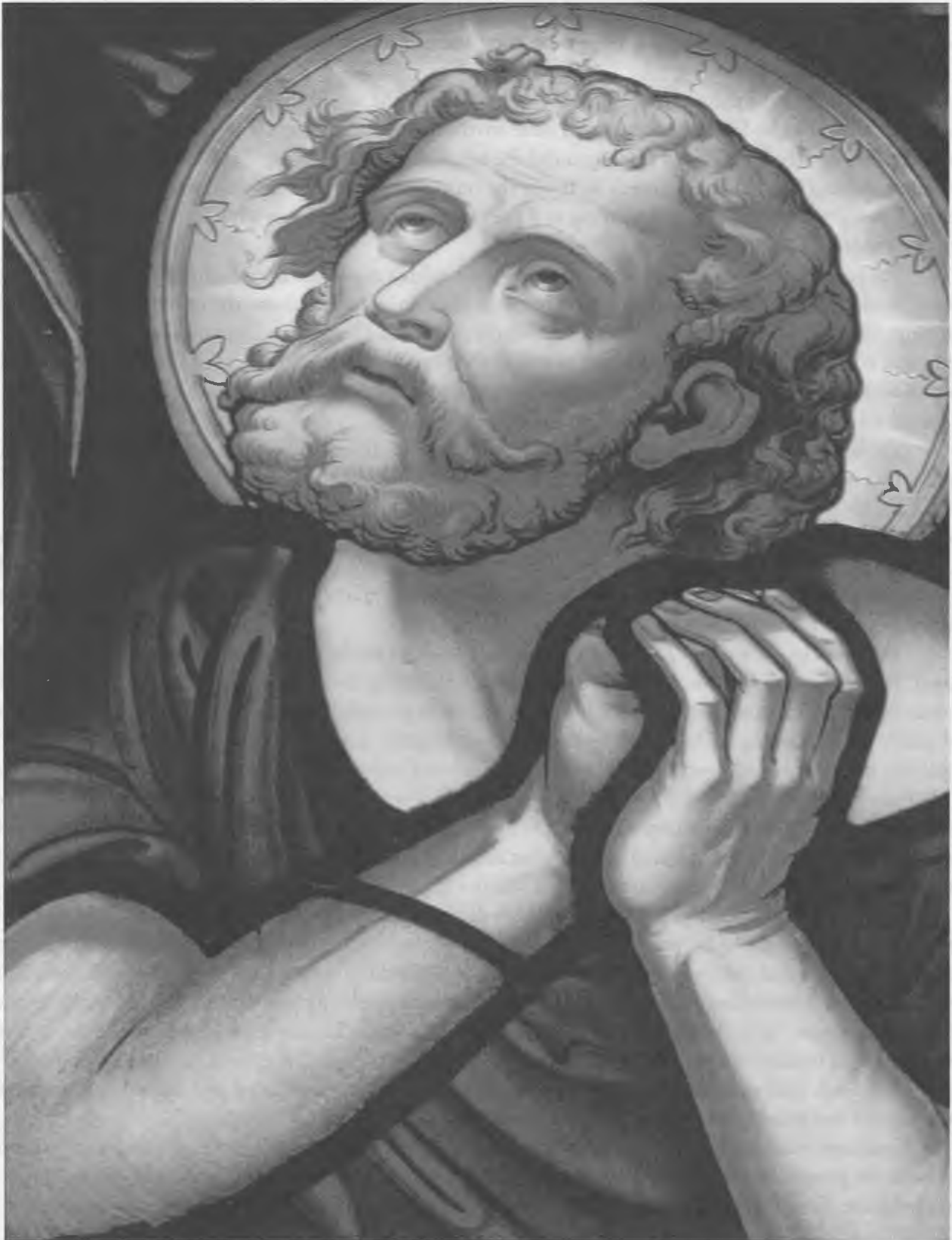
The Sun and the Earth

Cindy Castillo



Stained Glass

Rachael Kosinski



A Raddled Cup

Taylor Newsome

It was as if an entire universe unfolded in that tiny teacup. With each ripple of movement, a new layer of life was created, something at once both complex and simple. He could see the life around him, but he could feel it within the cup.

He sat and looked about him to see if anyone else felt the world shake a little bit. He only heard his stomach rumble, but he felt too unnerved to have anything other than tea. He mindlessly circled the spoon in the cup and watched the liquid ripple around the edges, each one echoing upon another. The repeating pattern enchanted him, unable to break it. It was the only conception of time that made sense to him at the moment; everyone around him was moving as if they were stuck in molasses while others were able to cut through gravity.

The small café in which he sat was very crowded, which made the overwhelming movement of the outside world feel even closer, rubbing off on his skin; the cup in his hand was the only thing he didn't mind touching. There were about fifteen tables in the whole place, but there was a constant bustle of people whirling in and scurrying out, ordering this and that and then moving on with the rest of their day. He would've liked to move on too, but he couldn't break his stare from the circling universes, each tiny one unfolding as he stirred his spoon round and round and round.

There was a lightning storm in the teacup; a flurry of electrical pulses was crossing over each other and lighting up the tips of his fingers with gentle shocks. He could feel the hair on his forearms and the back of his neck stand on edge, reaching out to connect to another source of electric power, straining to find something, but only finding a weak field of energy, one too distant and far away to pull him any closer in. Perhaps it was less a matter of distance and more a matter of not giving in enough. Not letting go and allowing his primal senses, instead of his conscious thoughts, to take over his mind and draw him closer to a greater magnetic force field of life. The ectoplasm of existence.

The more he focused on the teacup, the deeper he went to the recesses of his brain he didn't know existed. Suddenly, with the blink of his eye, he saw himself sitting inside his brain, another type of ectoplasm. He was sitting on the same chair that he'd been sitting on in the café, but instead of the surrounding sights and smells of the bustling café, he was inside the intensely quiet, gooey folds of his brain, each thought a disgusting drip that oozed over him. He liked how quiet and removed from other people it was. There was no overwhelming movement and no need to force himself to stay entranced with the teacup. His mind took the teacup's place. As he sat, he began to feel soft breezes pass over him, each smelling slightly sweet and feeling somewhat warm. They whispered to him what sounded like little pieces of thoughts, but he couldn't hear exactly what was being said. These thoughts felt like the ghost he was.

He'd been feeling strange lately and couldn't decide whether it was a good or bad strange. He felt harassed by things past, like he was walking down a long hallway in the middle of the night and didn't really remember when he had gotten out of bed. Some part of him told him to get up, so he did, and he had the feeling it was for a particular purpose, but the moment he got up the feeling felt as haunting as the spirits he felt breathing down his neck. He went to the café because he wanted to see if the ghosts would show themselves there too, but he couldn't tell the difference between the living and the dead; he wasn't even sure if he was alive or dead. Sitting in the middle of his hollowed-out brain, covered in what he could only describe as brain jelly, he was starting to think it unlikely he was alive.

Someone bumped into his table, causing him to fall out of his chair. The small bump raddled him, and from the ground he watched as his cup swayed in its saucer, tilting back and forth with a sort of destructive grace. Everything happened in slow motion—it took ages for the cup to move from one side to the

other. The spoon slid out of the cup, and the already tea-stained table was about to become more so. With one final slide, the cup fell with a disastrous noise on the table, the tea smoothing itself over the rough table top and sliding off the edge with a sort of willing ease. He watched each separate drip, one after the other.

As the cup settled, the room came to a sudden standstill, as if time had stopped—no one could move and every breath was frozen. It was stunning—like seeing life as frame-by-frame movement. It showed something that he hadn't quite been seen before—all of the little intricacies, weaving in and out of each other. "How many times has this happened before?" he wondered. "Is everyone else seeing what I'm seeing?" With a sudden clatter, everything rolled back into itself again, all seemingly unnoticed. "What the hell?" He looked at his watch—not a second had passed, and yet that time in between had felt so long.

The tea cup settled a bit. With the movement, you could see the same scene happening over and over again, repeating in a fuzzy loop. tea cup seemed more affected by it than anyone else had been; it seemed like a such an insignificant moment to most everyone else, but had that moment not happened, had that person hit any other table, the tea cup would not have moved in such a away and he wouldn't have had such an interesting thought.

Crumble

Melanie Weissman



Grandpa

Melanie Weissman

He was some kind of mythical figure to me, a folk hero like Paul Bunyan, baseball cap shading six feet and two inches of skyscraper bones as his skin graft-scarred arms propelled Mom's Nissan Sentra down the driveway with a single push to the hood. She told me when I was older that it was really just a well-timed stomp on the gas pedal, but sometimes I think hypothetically he could have moved the car for real without her interference.



Symmetry

William Antonelli

Man in the Mirror

Meghan Fellows

The first people to ever glance into something reflective that allowed them to check their hair and coal eyeshadow (probably) were alive in 600 B.C. No paved roads, no official electoral college, just your face looking back at your own face. Mirrors have been making people self-conscious before the great Jesus Christ walked the Earth in his original Birkenstocks.

These mirrored pieces were polished surfaces that reflected light onto the people, places and things in that world. Therefore, these pieces were reflecting beaming faces looking for cracks in their skin and psyche. Bronze and copper mirrors were then introduced, making our reflective images just a little more antique-like as we age. Many mirrors used today were made in the Middle Ages. Talk about looks standing the test of time.

Imagine walking by something that showed how you looked to other people for the first time. Imagine something that was clear and bright, magnifying every pore on your face and hands. It might have been frightening; maybe you thought you looked one way, but really looked totally different. Those moments could have been broken up by the purest of discoveries, though. Watching your reaction when you find out your eyes are the deepest iridescent green with a virgin mirror outlook had to have been a sight to see (literally).

The mirror may seem like a self-indulgent piece of the sun, but the more practical and scientific uses have sent people places deeper than the color of their eyes. Mirrors can be found in cameras, telescopes, lasers, and can be used for electromagnetic radiation. Mirrors can start fires, and carry wavelengths. Those moments reflect the beauty of the world, not just your pale freckled skin.

The cellphone created a mirror in your pocket that could capture and post your face to the whole entire universe. Flipping through the social media worlds, we see eyes and ears and noses and butts and fingers on a daily basis because of the mirror in our pockets. My first profile picture was practiced heavily in my graffitied mirror on my bedroom wall, seeing as how the cell phone camera was a very poor quality when I first started indulging in the selfie game.

Mom would spend hours in the mirror before her work events. Her dresser had a mirror the size of her bedroom wall. Her jewelry and makeup would reflect into the light as she curled her strawberry blonde hair. She worked so meticulously to make sure every curl was perfect. She would then shake out a lot of the curl as she walked out the door in heels.

The real first mirrors used by people came from pools of water. Lakes, pools, puddles, water collected in primitive "glassware." Swimming in deep pools of clear water would reflect on the human body in the most innocent way possible: on accident.

Mirrors made of speculum metal (copper, tin) were only used by the wealthy. Women in rich furs, and husky men who could afford to drink the most luscious of wines in their chalices. The people in castles and mansions could stare at their reflection on a crystal clear surface. The enviable people.

The mirrored image of the person on the surface is that of nakedness. The light reflected back shows your facial structure and the way your legs look in your black dress. To undress the mind and break apart the metaphysical; that's a whole other beautiful anecdote.

V. The Sound of Water

Tara Brew

There is a parking lot, just beyond the most west building. Multilayered like the terraced fields of a Japanese rice plantation. Beth knows that farmers are good people. In between the platforms is a crude flight of stairs—angry, bearing teeth. A word that means without decoration. The cold metal rungs dig into the seat of my pants. I come here for the sewer grate. Late at night one pipe dumps water into another pipe. I wait for the splash to resonate from within the grate, echo, pulsing through the air until it vibrates against my own ear. 1, 2, 3, FWOMP. 1, 2, 3, 4, FWOMP. Almost rhythmic, but not so dependable that it satisfies me. It's the only water I can hear whose flow I can't control. Somehow still, it does not liberate me. I think of the ocean, some million miles away. Wonder if it goes searching for me the way I do for it. Black hills. Stars in the sky snuffed by streetlights. And black hills in them. There is nothing beyond. There is nothing here. I know that if I tried to reach the lights in the hills they would surely have disappeared before I got there. Mirage. They weren't lights at all. Just my own reflection in some sewer water.

Child Wonder

Krysta Kellner

As a little girl I was convinced
I'd get pregnant if a boy touched me

When I feel your fist tear the hair
from the roots
 bruise my skin

I feel it kick _____ and I fear
running away



Somewhere

Melanie Weissman

dust

David Sabol

something is gnawing
a corpse quivering in the freezer

coroner gone home
before i wake.

I remember an attic
liquid heat.

browned polaroids
i'd whisper to

"bis in die" they'd call back

I rolled them
and snuffed the dust

that piled like snowdrifts
against the stillness

in my skin.



Midnight Abbey

William Antonelli

Four Seasons

Juliana Izuno Thompson

Spring: Roses don't mean to prick us because we don't plan to kill them but they don't know that and they didn't know to withdraw their weapons so they left our hands bloody. Cherry blossoms covered the ground ready to have ninety-nine children, though we never knew how many would survive. Rain changed pathways to clay and fields to meadows. The gardens, they ate the rain, they ate the sun, they kissed the bumblebees, and that's how they made their living.

Summer: We tried to eat the bombs but before we were finished they melted and dripped down our arms, leaving us sticky. We could never figure out how pats of butter became fluffy genies because we never seemed to find any that were stuck in between. I still remember your triumphant moment with your eyes closed chasing me in water infused with poisonous gas. I taught you to catch me and I must have taught you well because you did. They shielded me from photons with liquid armor and just a moment later I was building palaces out of crushed rock. Though they'd never stand against the floods we built them beautifully anyway.

Autumn: The trees are now artists—except for the evergreens. When the artists were busy painting with fire the evergreens didn't care. Shreds of paintings were in deluxe piles, and you snuggled into those beds and you breathed in their beautiful scent. We made tea inside a kiddie pool and waited for the water to get to that intermediate state when it became flavorless Jell-O, but all it ever became was a glass roof over a lake. It wasn't long before I carefully chose my new friend out like a college admissions officer and yanked his guts out just so I could make him smile and hope he gave birth to children next to our backyard shed. Thanks to me he has eyes to see with, and I lit him up inside.

Winter: When ice crystals formed around Whovilles we finally got the ground covered in frosting and sugar and glitter. I punched holes in the mountains and they reflected blue light. Finally it was evergreen's chance to be an artist so we covered it in luminescent vines so it wouldn't feel left out and by that time all the other trees were jealous. People and houses are made of the same material so we decorated in sugar and molasses and gelatin once again till it was magical. I loved you lots for two afternoons and then the sun came out and your head fell off. You weren't ready yet, so I know you live on. We had never seen the true value of socks that didn't fit till today and we realized you didn't need a wood burning fireplace to believe in magic but we still wondered what frozen dirt really smelled like. We just feel like ourselves until the Earth tilts away from the Sun and it all begins again. Or till typhoons come in and you're reminded of last year. What really creates memories is the fact that the Earth's axis is crooked. You wouldn't want to fix it.

From the Ashes

Pamela Haas

I woke four times today to ashy light
soft-stripping the grayed
back bedroom wall. The sky: ashen clouds
slowing the pace, denaturing color from clothing, wallpaper,
ashy desk lamp, bedroom not dissimilar to hearth place skeletons
leftover coals
transforming to chalky remains.

Morning light was just potent enough to capture the dust
motes pirouetting,
becoming new life against the ashen backdrop.

Untitled

Virginia Eley



How to Succeed in Theater Without Really Trying

Amanda Saladino

First of all, don't start acting until you're at least twelve. You see those typical theater kids? They've all been going at it since before they could walk. But you're not like them. Letting their mothers drag them onto the stage to play Orphan #12 in *Annie* is taking the easy way out. You're gonna do this the hard way.

(Side note: one required production of *Peter Pan* in kindergarten is acceptable.)

Audition for your first musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, with your mother and younger sister at a run-down local theater. You need to have a passion for theater; be more excited than you've ever been. Land your first role, even if it is just in the children's chorus as the color "Fawn," playing opposite your sister, "Pink." Realize that you got a part at your first audition. You are invincible. You can get any part you want. You're basically famous.

Audition for another play the next summer, only to be thrown into the children's chorus once again. You're devastated. No one else in the children's chorus is over eleven, and you're thirteen. And there are at least five twelve-year-olds in the teen chorus! Deny the role. See your sister in the play a few months later, in the children's chorus. When your family goes to congratulate her, slap yourself in the face repeatedly, wishing you'd accepted it.

Wait until next summer to audition for another play, but find out they're doing *Rocky Horror* and are only casting ages eighteen and up. Horrible discouragement. But what's this? A glee club being directed by the children's director from *Joseph*? She loves you; you'll get in, no problem.

Audition. Receive your first rejection.

Spend the next few months trying to figure out why you didn't get in. Remember that big smile on the director's face as you auditioned for last summer's play, and how it changed when you didn't accept the part.

Audition again for the next glee club. Get in, along with your sister, who's finally old enough to audition.

Go to your first day of rehearsal to see that half the cast of *Joseph* is in it. Run in for a loving reunion. Forget that you haven't seen these people in over two years, and eventually realize that most of them have no idea who you are. But they remember your sister, because apparently they were all in the teen chorus of last summer's production.

Ask your director when the solo auditions will be. She'll tell you she's just going to hand them out to whoever she thinks is right for them. Push your confusion aside; there are more than enough solos available for everyone in the glee club to have one.

To continue with these instructions, it is essential that you get *nothing*. There will be no auditions for you to show off your talent or lack thereof, and several people will get three or four solos, but you must ensure that you don't get any. Failure to do so may cause your self-esteem to rise above your control, and you must keep that in check.

When the time of the show comes, watch from the back as your sister performs her solo. Cry a little on the inside.

Feel your insides burn when she flashes you that smug smile coming offstage.

Repeat process with the next glee club. When the last show comes and the "All You Need is Love" soloist goes to Florida, have the musical director give it to you. Sing those four lines like you've never sung

anything before...actually, sing them like it's no big deal. Because it's not. Get compliments from the entire cast of the glee club, who've never actually heard you sing on your own before and had been convinced that you were probably let in out of pity.

Decide that you've had more than enough glee and join the school drama club in tenth grade. Get your first real parts in two skits in *Voices from the High School*: the unnamed freshman and the accident-prone girl going to prom. Do everything the director tells you, getting him to love you enough to give you a call-back for the musical in the second semester. Right before callbacks, realize you have too many conflicts with the rehearsal schedule and can't do the show. Lose your director's trust and don't get a part in the play or the musical junior year.

Now that you've gotten a school play out of the way, try your hand at local theater again. Sing in a Broadway musical revue and get a small role in *The Wedding Singer*. Talk to a couple of people from glee club and *Joseph*, who may have a vague memory of you this time.

Audition for *Seussical* with your younger sister. Find out when you get there that your glee club and *Joseph* director is in charge again. See the plastered smile once again and try to figure out if it's just for you. Watch her expression change to a real smile for your sister and decide it is. Tell yourself that maybe you won't get the part of Gertrude like you hoped, but maybe you'll at least get the mayor of Whoville's wife. A Who with lines.

Get the part of a Who, the oldest of all the Whos with no lines. Your sister is cast as one of the few Whos with lines. Endure all the compliments and congratulations given to her by your parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles. Wait for one of them to congratulate you or for your sister to mention you're also in the show. Don't be too shocked when neither happens.

Now would be a good time for you to go through the existential crisis of do-I-just-have-no-talent. Wonder if your director just has it out for you, then decide there's no reason to blame her. Remind yourself that someone who seems that nice couldn't possibly hate you when you've done nothing wrong.

Wonder if it's your sister that's keeping you from getting any parts. Throw that idea in the trash. Even though she's been rubbing the fact that she gets better parts than you in your face, remind yourself that she has nothing to do with casting the shows.

Finally admit to yourself that you're just not good enough to have lines. Or maybe, you're just not trying hard enough.

Don't prepare too much differently than you usually do for a first rehearsal. Listen to a couple of songs from the musical, maybe look up some clips online. By "a couple of songs," I mean the whole soundtrack on repeat for two weeks. And by "some clips," I mean watch twenty different productions until you could basically direct the show yourself. You'll know you're ready when people call you short and you respond with "A person's a person, no matter how small." Belt out the songs in rehearsal when no one else even knows the names of them yet. Know that you've got the director's attention when she eyes you one day in rehearsal. Tell yourself that maybe she'll remember this next time you audition for her. Maybe she'll even give you a line.

Get really sick during the third and fourth weeks of rehearsals. Finally come back to learn you've missed all of the staging and could only possibly be in one number, if you're lucky.

See your sister in the play the next month. Cry a little on the outside.

Throw yourself back into the drama club because even though your sister is in high school with you this year, she's decided to stick with outside-of-school productions. Give up on theater for a while when the

school director tells everyone in your senior class they have no talent and doesn't cast any of you in the musical.

When your self-esteem recovers a little bit sometime around March, audition for a local production of *The Miracle Worker*. Read for the role of Anne Sullivan, but know you'll probably end up as the tree stump because—surprise—your *Joseph* director is making another appearance.

(Side note: come to accept that this director is the only director in the universe, and every show you'll ever audition for will magically involve her.)

See two girls a year or two younger than you from glee. Smile and say hi. One of them may recognize you and say hi back. Prepare small talk for this situation.

Get the role of Helen Keller's Aunt Ev. Read the script and see that you're in one scene in each of the three acts. Better than nothing.

Become friends with the cast as the show progresses, but realize that they all knew each other beforehand. Everyone already made their theater friends. But you're not just going to stand there and accept defeat. Wiggle your way into that group. And if that doesn't work, maybe try shoving your way in a little bit. Nothing more than that, unless they still don't accept you. Then wedge yourself in as hard as you can.

Tell your family about the show and invite them to come opening night. Show up and greet your director, who walks past you as if you're not even there and hugs your sister. Tell your family you have to go backstage and get ready. Whatever you do, *don't* accidentally spark the idea in the director's mind to ask your sister to help out backstage.

But you do. Reluctantly lead your sister backstage, where she somehow knows the entire cast and is better friends with them than you'll ever be.

Go away to college. Miss the auditions for the Musical Theater Club because of work. Tell yourself there's always next year. But in the back of your mind, know that by then, you'll already be too late.

[8]

Jasmine Cui

The day my neighbor became American was the day he changed
his name from Seong-Jin to "Steven," tearing down the Korean

flag our landlord stapled to his door—as if to denote exoticism.
Today, Seong from Busan is just Steve

from apartment 26B. Phosphorus tip, match is struck
against my nails. The fingers are tinderbox that inspires

flame. Acrylic flag becomes effigy. Prophetic,
we exorcise the old country.

And I learn how to start fires with nothing
more than skin.

Boston Skyline

William Antonelli



[9]

Jasmine Cui

Carburetor is a word I know before I knew
the word for the thing between my legs. Cunt

is a word that gives me vertigo
because it is not in the Oxford dictionary.

[11]

Jasmine Cui

Apartment 25, Sarah. December,
she is milk and snow skin

teaches me what the dictionary won't.

Obscenities:

bitch, genocide, my skin
unclothed and luminous.

The Man and the Earth

Cindy Castillo



Reflections

Aileen Mack

They put the picture frame on Mary's bedside table as a Mother's Day gift two or three years ago. There were a few dark, shadowy paintings of farm scenes on the walls of the gray bedroom but the picture on the bedside table was the only photograph in the room. It was a picture of the family—Ralph and Mary on each end with the three children in the middle, smiling with wide enthusiasm. It was taken by a stranger at Ralph's 35th birthday party. Every morning Mary would open her eyes and see the picture. The gray morning light was such that the glass in the picture frame reflected a ghostly distortion of Mary's face with her eyes hidden underneath a black shadow from her brow bone. She would stare at those reflected black caves for a minute or so each morning. She was convinced they were getting deeper and deeper everyday.

In high school they called Mary beautiful. It could've been her hair, wild and full and the color of fall grain. It might've also been her smile, two wide rows of white teeth that Mary brushed and flossed every morning and night. But Mary liked to think it was her eyes, almond shaped and green like drying summer grass in a drought. As she stared at the picture frame, Mary was sure that it had been her eyes. She turned her head away from her visage to look at Ralph asleep on the other pillow. He'd never made it through high school—he wasn't a good reader. He didn't know how much they fawned over her—how boys would squeeze her behind the bleachers at homecoming, how girls would squeeze their boyfriend's arms when she bounced past them down the hall. He'd only met her in the makeup aisle at the dollar store her senior year; he bought her a new lipstick and asked her to movies. He looked like a movie star to Mary, all thick arms and wide shoulders. She assumed he did some kind of hard work, something where your hands grew thick callouses and turned your baby fat to stone. He paid for the lipstick with a handful of quarters and lint. She was the first girl in her class with an older guy.

Mary peeled the thin quilt off her white legs. Ralph's snores punctured the silence and peace of Mary's mornings. She'd bought Ralph those strips you can put on your nose when you sleep to open your nasal passages for his birthday one year. Mary was sure they were sitting in the medicine cabinet above the sink, unopened. That morning she took a good look at him, thinking how he had been beautiful in the white haze of the dollar store makeup aisle. Mary knew it was his body that had been really beautiful, etched and sculpted from a youth spent running around the soybean farm. It was strange seeing him now, stretched out on the sweaty mattress with his thick gut and pulsing lungs methodically arching his back like a frightened cat. The morning's dismal light dyed his skin—it looked like the color of blueberry yogurt. She pushed herself off the mattress.

The house was one of those farmhouses built after the barn. Ralph's great-grandfather had built it with his own two hands and, as Mary padded down the unadorned upstairs hall past the closed doors of the children's bedrooms to the stairs, she could hear each nail in each floorboard protest the disturbance. When Ralph was a kid, it was all crisp white paint and sturdy brown wood. The house had dutifully weathered years of children's screams and children's feet pounding it deeper and deeper into the muddy ground. The house had withstood years of rotten farm stink leeching into its wallpaper and floorboards. Now the house was tired. Now the house was whining. Now Mary could slide her hands down the weathered railing on the stairs like she was sliding her hands over a new velvet dress.

Mary scoffed. She hadn't touched fresh velvet in years. As she made her way to the kitchen she stared at her tattered pink slippers rather than look around at the dust-stained wallpaper with blue and gray flowers that was shimmering off the walls more and more. Ralph said he would replace it after the kids were grown up, but until then, he would let it slip closer and closer to the ground. Mary thought it was making the whole house smell like dust, smell like dirt, smell like age.

They got married before Mary knew about the soybean farm and the wallpaper and the smell; she

wore her mother's dress and he wore a rented tux. They were supposed to buy an apartment after the wedding. Mary had picked one out in downtown; a one bedroom, one bathroom apartment with crown moulding and clean, beige carpet in every room except the kitchen—the kitchen had white linoleum. She could walk to work at the TV station and Ralph could take the bus to the plant. Mary fiddled with the radio in the dingy farm kitchen, hoping the friction of the radio waves might rub some of the grease stains out of the yellowing Quaker cabinets that dominated the walls. Mary used to sing jingles at the TV station before the children, sometimes they would play them on the radio if her voice was clear enough or the jingle was catchy. An old high school beau had said she was best on TV when the sound was off. Mary smiled at the memory as she leaned against the countertop, the steam of a fresh cup of coffee smoothing over her skin.

The children's things were scattered on the wide Amish-made table that sat in the center of the kitchen. Torn backpacks and crumpled papers and grimy lunch boxes—things like that. Mary used to make them sandwiches every morning, carefully spreading the peanut butter and grape jelly so that every corner of the bread would be covered. Now she couldn't handle their squealing in the morning—she was convinced all the noise was pulling those bags under her eyes down to hell. As Mary sipped her coffee, she looked at crowded countertop on her right. An opened jar of peanut butter sat next to a sleeve of half-eaten crackers, the knife stuck like a flag of surrender in the center of the jar. Maybe seven was too young to clean up after yourself. Maybe eight was too young, too. But it had been ten years since her first kid had been stomping around, demanding more food, more juice, more hugs before he had finished demanding the first goddamn thing. Ten was old enough to clean up after yourself.

She married because Ralph was strong and strong men made good husbands back then. She had children because children made marriages happy back then. She moved because good husbands and happy children needed farm houses back then. Mary finished her coffee; everyone thought like that back then. She put the mug in the sink, tossing the peanut butter knife next to it for good measure. Mary winced at the clink of metal on metal, catching from the corner of her eye a flash of her white face.

Mary could just barely make out her reflection on the sink's faucet. She leaned closer, twisting and contorting her face so that she could examine every inch of her skin. Sometimes for a quick, gorgeous moment, she thought she was young again in the cold faucet's steely reflection. Checking the distorted faucet mirror had become something of a habit for Mary in recent months. She decided she was going to leave the day she looked normal, the day she looked like herself again. There wasn't any money to leave but Mary didn't really think at all about money. Someone had told her years ago only shallow people think about money.

Today all she could see were the sparse tufts of her mousy hair surrounded her face as they escaped from her hairband. Her teeth grew into long planks in the curves of the faucet. Little water stains on the aging chrome speckled the reflection, staining her visage. Mary searched for her eyes, searched for their color. The faucet showed only gray skin and hollow black caves.

"What are you doing, Mary-Belle?" Ralph said from behind her. Mary gasped and spun around on her heels.

Ralph stood across from Mary, his dingy boxers hidden behind the cluttered kitchen table. His hair hung on his scalp like wet towels. His mouth was disgustingly familiar in its open-mouthed confusion, revealing teeth that were turning the color of a mud puddle from smokes and coffee. She could see his beady eyes welling with concern and she turned back to the faucet.

"You look like shit, Ralph."

Mary leaned in closer, searching for her eyes in the gray metal.

Rare Moments

William Antonelli

A biting wind blows on Christmas Eve, beating against the windows of Kayla's house. In the living room, illuminated only by the pale glow of the television and the fairy lights covering the tree, Kayla and Paige lay on the couch together. Paige's been there for hours, but had to wait until nearly midnight just to touch her girlfriend; according to Kayla's parents, merely holding hands is but the first step on the path to lechery.

The two of them are watching a movie, a documentary on the history of the punk rock scene in London. Kayla picked it, unbelievably. Documentaries aren't usually Paige's cup of tea—she still shudders from the two-hour documentary on the water cycle that Miss Clark made her class watch in freshman bio—but she doesn't protest. After all, she picked what they watched last time, and Kayla had not appreciated the art direction of *Heart Stabbers II*.

And for once, Paige finds herself actually following along, watching the grainy footage in awe, frowning whenever she hears an inaccuracy some old hippie historian is trying to pass off as fact. As the whine of amp feedback slides through her ears, Paige rests her head against the pillow and looks down at the girl in her arms, only to notice that Kayla's eyes are drooping and her head is dipping.

"Let's go to bed," Paige says. "We can watch the rest later."

"Nuh—I'm fine." Kayla shakes her head. "There's not much left. I'm fine."

Paige brings up the TV menu. There's still an hour to go.

"You sure?" Paige asks, motioning to the screen.

Kayla's eyes are closed. "Mhm."

Paige rolls her eyes—this isn't the first time Kayla, the most structured girl on Earth, has tried to compete with Paige's non-existent sleep schedule—but doesn't move. Instead, she grabs the blanket bunched up at their feet and drapes it over Kayla's sleeping form. Kayla wrinkles her nose a bit as the fabric falls across her face, but soon stretches out like a cat and lays her head on Paige's chest. Obviously the comfiest spot in the house.

Scrunched between Kayla and the couch, Paige doesn't need a blanket. She just wraps her arms around Kayla's tiny frame and holds her close. With one careful hand she plucks the glasses off Kayla's nose and tosses them onto the coffee table nearby. Kayla stirs at the clatter, but calms down as soon as Paige presses her face into Kayla's absolute mess of a mane, basking in the silky black forest, savoring the scent of sweat and day-old deodorant.

Sure, this probably isn't ideal. There's no chance that either of them will wake up before Kayla's mom. And there's even less of a chance that Kayla's mom will see them and not think that Paige is corrupting her angelic daughter. Hell, Paige's not disagreeing; Kayla deserves better than a leather-loving misfit like her. But neither of Kayla's parents like Paige, and Paige isn't exactly eager to give them more ammo to snipe at their daughter over dinner.

But it's either make the parents mad or wake Kayla up, and that might be the easiest choice Paige has ever made. She takes a deep breath and lets herself relax. For in the quiet chatter of the TV, and in the smell of stale deodorant, and in the staccato rumble of Kayla's snores, Paige swears she finds peace.

