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MAG

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COVER ART:

Desmond Tompkins
Metamorphosis
2024
Digital Collage

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pulp MAG aims to be a safe, inclusive space for emerging artists of all types. We want to give a platform to unique voices with important stories to tell, no matter the medium. We believe in the importance of artist recognition, exposure, paying our creative talent, and in building a strong community to hold the work.

VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THIS MAGAZINE ARE NOT NECESSARILY SHARED BY THE EDITORS
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Saskatoon Berries

SARAH GAWTHROP

i discovered something:
there are saskatoon berries
growing at the dog park.
we never noticed all these years—
a missed opportunity,
something we know all about.

we squandered our years;
love became a chore.
you can only choose it for so long—
if the other person stops,
you risk your soul.
something i know all about.

humans can only take so much;
stone shoulders break heart & bone.
leaving empowers you,
now, a re-envisioned life
of stone-smooth solitude.

on today's dog park walk,
i indulge in a few saskatoons,
perfectly ripe and a little tart.
this past year i've been lonely,
i've been full of love;

life is like a saskatoon berry—
a blend of joy and sorrow.



Ladner Barn Road Field
2024
Oil on Wood
9 x 12 inches

i examine the architecture of my existence

MOHINI TAKHAR

i examine the architecture of my existence
leave people in resounding surprise
society eyes me in dismay disguised as wonder
for this body always has the shock factor

what do you expect

my body has never lived up to society's standards

i've always lived by a certain expectation
still, my existence remains a contradiction
claims like i'm always too loud
too much yet never enough
that i occupy more space than others
echo in my brain
wash thoughts like these down the drain
six wheels strapped to my body at all times
sitting upright, hand curved around joystick
except for when my eyes are shuttered
lisp echo as a whisper at the back of people's brains

i earn questionable looks from strangers
they say *so sorry*, express sympathy
when they realize they're in my way

in safe spaces
i own my stutter on stage
like it's the most sacred thing about me
spit lines like i know them
backwards and forwards
stumble over sounds
like i'll get there sometime soon

i black out all the shattered
parts of me in my brain
i hide my pain
and shame around your disdain
capture the crowd's curiosity

i wish to simply remain numb
to the world around me,
simple and sombre
allow my body to lay still,
skin stays desensitized and stagnant

my body has never
lived up to society's standards

do you respect my wish
to exist as a living eulogy?

i waltz through life restlessly
i see my body as a morgue
all the happy parts of me live
in black and white

these bones are hollow and tough

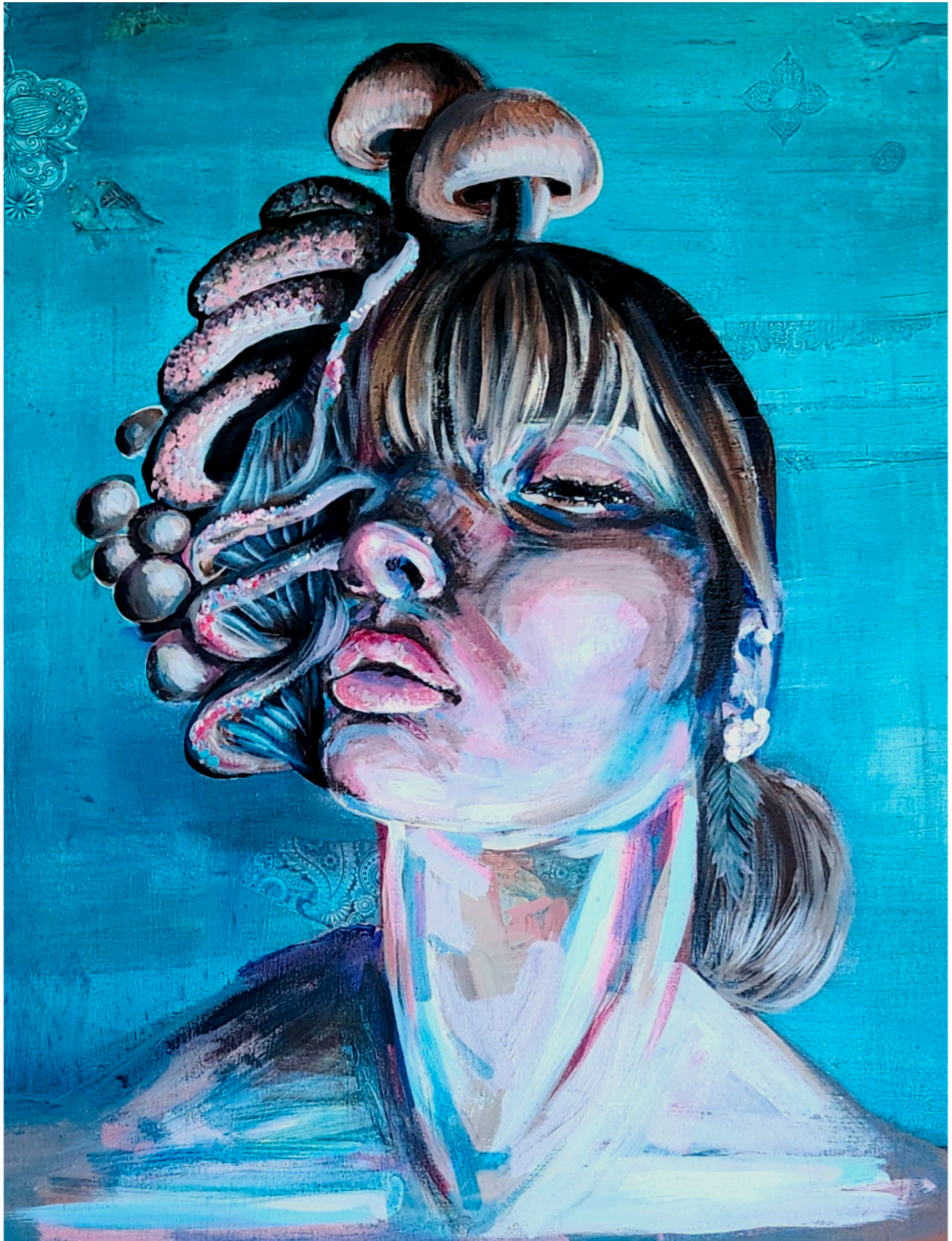
dig deep graves for this skeleton to lay in

breathing? sure. alive? questionable.

do you know how easy it is for society
to forgo a body with the snap of a finger?

i examine the architecture of a body
that was never mine





Regrowth
2023

Acrylic Paint, Glue, & Water Colour on Found Paper
38 x 48 inches

Dread Robin

MIKE THORN

*"I dreaded that first Robin, so,
But He is mastered, now,
I'm some accustomed to Him grown,
He hurts a little, though—"*

- Emily Dickinson, "I Dreaded That First Robin, So"

Claude viewed his Scribe-subjects as characters, not victims.

If they were victims, then Claude could not be held responsible for their victimization: he was neither their captor nor the spectator of their deaths. He was simply writing fiction—of a kind.

Pale evening sunlight warmed his face as he typed his latest character's end. He felt a pang of something he briefly misinterpreted as remorse before determining he was merely thirsty. He sated himself with Cabernet as he reread his work.

Hugh Ashcroft monkeyed into the vestibule, loping flatfooted with dangling arms before whamming his head against the glass door, swooshing his offline brain inside his skull.

Claude's manager, Suzette, sometimes accused him of writing purple prose. Claude preferred describing his style as deliciously plum. Whatever the case, he was Hatchets' wealthiest and most oft-requested Scribe.

Somewhere out there, observers gleaned expensive pleasure from Hugh Ashcroft's death, immortalized as snuff literature—two months' worth of healthy salary for a lifetime of ghoulish entertainment.

Claude wasn't even *really* the author. He was more like a ghostwriter, transcribing his characters' mortal coil expeditions according to clients' specifications.

He was bored with the irresolvable question: *does life imitate art or vice versa?* Doubtlessly, Claude trafficked in the currency of evil—whatever that meant—

but his work relieved the fanged collective unconscious. Each meticulously written sacrifice offered catharsis to hundreds of subscribers.

And the sacrifices were *characters*, not victims.

#

The company called Hatchets, updated from the formerly less gender-inclusive Hatchet Men, was as old as it was secret, which is to say extremely, but its tactics had advanced with time. Where its clients had once risked prison or worse to watch their hired Scribes' morbid work unfold in the flesh, they could now view from the comforts of whatever domestic furniture best suited live-streamed snuff entertainment. Hatchets' tech reconnaissance was robust: they rigged their targets' doom sites with "so many hidden cameras it would make Ridley Scott gape in awe" (actual quote by current Hatchets president Sofia Kaufman).

Hugh's influences might've evolved some since he completed his Hatchets entry interview form two decades ago—the first question was *who are your favourite Scribes?*—but his ethos remained the same: language was ornamentation, paint, clay, the stuff of art, and it should always be made plainly visible—none of the minimalist wankery perpetually flooding the commercial market, thank you very much. Nobody had ever out Hemingwayed Hemingway, and everybody should've stopped trying long ago.

Claude's pervading influences included but were not limited to the likes of Laurence Sterne, Samuel Beckett, and Vladimir Nabokov.

He had standards.

#

The next morning, Claude lapped espresso crema while reading a preposterous new email request.

From: demo_literario@hexhatchets.iii.00.io.

Subject: *I want to see him disintegrate with infernitesamal slowness* [sic].

Nothing unusual about that subject line in Claude's racket, but the body of the email was another story:

dear mr hexer killer,

theres this wurm ruining my life. his name is peter graham (hereafter referred to as "the wurm") and hes the lowliest shittiest wurm youve ever seen.

i live in a very exclusive nyc condominium building, the kind inhabited by superstars & corporate bigshots & celebs—suffice to say i am one or more of these things.

okay, so little wyrmy wurm moves into building recently and this is how it starts:

first just annoying stuff like for example playing his stupid “music” which is not actually music and is more like a spit in the eye of the likes of wagner and beethoven so as to shake my bedroom and impede my ability to sleep or even just simply relax. when i ask the wurm very calmly & very politely to turn the stuff down the wurm tells me to “get a life.” at the time i thought “get a life? ha! im going to get your death, wurm” which i thought was rather funny since i was already quite aware of your company hatchets at the time.

the wurm also imbibes every night—grass, pot, laughing lettuce, what have you—and the stinky skunky aromas of said imbibing fill the entire apartment hallway so as to make me crinkle my nose whenever i cross to the elevator or simply exit my unit. in addition, this wurm makes noisy nightly coitus with multiple partners in disconcertingly brief timespans so as to increase the odds of spreading his wyrmy sex diseases. my sleep is disturbed by the cacophony of his sexmates’ pornographic coital sounds, such as “ooh baby” & “yes yes” & “spank me pappy” & so on and so forth.

i neednt continue with all these wyrmy grotesqueries because i assume you will have surmised by now that i want this wurm called peter graham dead and here’s what im envisioning. i understand that due to your company’s intake form i must provide my preferences as non-narrative jot notes so as not to impede your creative process. and so heres what i would like to see:

wurm in room, isolated, some abandoned warehouse or shed or whatever your organization can obtain. whatever it is, just make it DANK.

wurm losing one part of body per day, in verrrrrry tiny increments, like wakes up on wednesday and thinks oh no where has my left big toe gone and then wakes up on thursday and realizes to his utmost horror that he has now lost same toe on right foot. i would like this process of inexplicable somatic disintegration to occur over a minimum of lets say three to four weeks. i want it gradual and slow like a

papercut that seems to last forever. i want his agony to be of biblical proportions & you will be paid in kind.

you come most highly recommended by your higher-ups, mr claudé johnston, & if you can imagine some additional creative flourishes for this annihilation then rest assured i will bestow upon you a soaring monetary reward.

i look forward to seeing this request come to fruition.

regards,

wurm smasher

Claude had certain rules: for instance, he refused requests involving torture of any kind, and he didn't puppeteer killers, only victims. His specialty was writing targets' spontaneous demises without the involvement of visible third parties. Third: he didn't kill women, children, or nonhuman animals. Those rules aside, he was happy to obey orders.

Hatchets housed plenty of employees without such restrictions.

He sent Wurm Smasher a concise but polite rejection email, then crossed his spacious loft and sank into his hearthside leather armchair, where he planned to spend several hours with a Henry James novel.

#

"Yes."

"Hello?" Claude said, squinting at the blob swirling across his video call screen. "I'm afraid I can't see you."

"Yes."

"Hello?" Claude repeated.

He'd been lost in his James book when he'd received an urgent email from Hatchets demanding he attend a consultation with a "dissatisfied high-paying client." He was unsurprised to discover the dissenter was Wurm Smasher. Weirdos were the norm in Claude's line of work, but most were predictable in their eccentricities. Wurm Smasher was an exception, a chaos-bringer—Claude knew one when he saw one.

"Hello?" Claude said again. His temple twinged. "I can't see you."

The pixelated form shifted. Something glittered red. A shapeless tuft swung in and out of the frame.

“Yes.” The feminine voice was faintly Southern in a demure *I do declare* sort of way. Almost sultry. “I’ve been having some issues with my computer camera. I do apologize.” (*A-pol-a-jazz*).

“That’s alright. With whom am I speaking?” Claude said, craving another double espresso.

“Yes.” A flash of what appeared to be scabbed skin. “Am I speaking with a Mister Claude Johnston?”

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Yes,” Claude said, splitting the difference between passive aggression and dumb humour. “I am indeed Claude Johnston. How may I help you?”

“Yes.” A noise like a stressed farm hen. “I believe you declined my request earlier this morning.”

“Uh huh,” Claude said. “It was outside my scope. I don’t like tormenting my characters unduly.”

“Your characters?” The blob wobbled. “Nice name for wurms, redbreast.”

“Pardon me?”

“Better than calling you yellowbelly, wouldn’t you say?”

“I don’t follow.”

“Redbreast, as in robin.”

Horror clenched Claude’s attention like a brain freeze. Of all the birds she could’ve mentioned...

He remembered moonlit blood on shattered glass, the crooked twitch of feathers on hardwood. Did this freak know—?

Impossible. Claude had never told anyone.

“No,” he said. He cleared his throat and asked, “Are you calling me a red-breasted robin?”

“Yes,” the caller said. “I’d like you to disintegrate my worm in the manner I’ve requested, little robin. I really must insist you carry out this assignment. I’ve promised your supervisor I’ll reward your services with a bodacious financial bonus.”

“Might I suggest Kate Beckett or Rex August?” Claude replied. “They’re Hatchets’ most ruthless Scribes. Either of them is bound to give you your money’s worth.”

“Yes. No.”

“What was that?”

“No. Yes.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I’m not understanding.”

“*You’re* my robin. I want you to beak up that wurm and dangle him over the void while I watch him squirm.”

“And I’m afraid I must decline your request,” Claude said.

Some assignments were a no-go, simple as that. It was fully within Claude’s rights as a Hatchets Scribe to decline—so why had his manager arranged this call?

“I’m afraid I must decline your decline,” (*de-clan yo de-clan*) said the onscreen spectre, showing a flash of something yellow.

“I’ve nothing else to say on the matter. Goodbye,” Claude said.

He ended the call.

A shape (*a glitch? a migraine symptom?*) like a silhouetted maw arose where his caller had been mere moments ago.

Dread’s icy fingers climbed his spine. Nauseous, he stumbled to his pristine kitchen, pressing his palms to his aching temples, thinking of nothing but espresso and Relpax. He didn’t even register his phone dinging an incoming text message, didn’t glance at the screen until after an hour’s rest in the cocoon of bookshelves that was his bedroom, waiting for the eletriptan to take effect. Once the medicine staved off the migraine’s cruellest symptoms, he only needed to see the screen for a moment to realize Wurm Smasher hadn’t given up yet.

#

The next morning, a technicolor-blue jalopy purred on the road beside Claude as he waited for the crosswalk light to change. Claude was en route to the corner store, distracted by long-dormant trauma unceremoniously resurrected.

The way they twitched. The gleam of their blood.

Mired in gruesome reminiscence, it took him a moment to register the old jukebox classic blasting from inside the vehicle: Bobby Day’s “Rockin’ Robin.” Claude snatched a glimpse of something inhuman behind the wheel, a pointy face with eyes like black marbles, but before he could fully identify the driver the jalopy sped off, flashing sunlight into his eyes.

He fugue-flitted through his milk-purchasing errand. Walking home, he felt vaguely warmer than he had before entering the store. Gravity reasserted itself when his phone buzzed.

The incoming text from an unknown sender: *Do your job.*

He blocked the number, hustled up the stairs to his condo unit, and returned to Henry James.

#

It was half past three and Claude still hadn't slept. The flashback had reassembled with intensifying detail throughout the day, until it played on a loop across his hectic mind.

You were so young when the suburban kamikaze rattled your boyish dreams of boyish things. It was a stormy night, but the clamour coming from downstairs was louder than thunder.

Blanket-shrouded and tremulous, you called out to Mommy and Daddy. When they didn't respond, you slipped out from under your sheets and traversed the hall to investigate. The bouncy shag carpet smooshed beneath your feet like fairytale moss, and you felt like an intrepid knight sneaking up on an encampment of snoozing goblins; you were always a fantasist, a dreamer, a writer. You heard wet crunches below as you neared the banister, your fear only slightly outsized by sinister curiosity (every storyteller's fatal flaw).

You looked down. Lightning illuminated the scene: the shattered living room window sprayed across the hardwood, shards intermingled with uselessly fluttering destroyers—a collage of death spasms and brokenness lit like a scene from one of those rainy old nighttime movies Daddy liked, the kinds where men in hats uttered terse threats out the sides of their mouths while voluptuous women with bad intentions slinked through angular shadows.

Under the hypnosis of morbid intrigue, you descended to survey the scene. There were at least ten of them—dead and dying robins, breasts red and blood redder—and you realized they must've torpedoed through the window, riddling themselves with broken glass. You opened your mouth, hoping to call Mommy and Daddy again, and that's when it happened, the worst part

(no don't think about it don't let it come back you almost forgot)

but you can't forget the vivid sight of that destabilized robin pinwheeling across the living room, thudding against the walls and ceiling, spritzing rain and gore, a lone survivor whose eyes were mirrors to starlight, windows to insanity as it hurtled toward you

(your mouth was still open why didn't you close it)

and it looked the size of a kitten as it dove straight into your mouth, tasting wild and filthy, beak poking your uvula and feathers scraping your tongue, and instinctive terror was all-consuming as you bit down and

Claude sprang out of bed, trembling with the inconsolable sobs of a child facing (tasting) life's random horror for the very first time.

Outside, the sky was black.

#

Another email landed in Claude's inbox at 4:57 am. Subject line: *Fly, birdy*. He blocked the address without reading the message.

When he answered an anonymous phone call at a quarter past noon, a voice like a computer virus spilled into his ear: *Batman and Robin*, it said, *Robin Hood*, *Robin Redbreast*, *The Swiss Family Robin-son*, *Robin-son Crusoe*.

He smashed *End call*.

He rang his local Hatchets office immediately. An automated recording told him they were very sorry they were unable to take his call at this time, please try again later. He tried again later and got the same automated recording.

He emailed his manager begging for support and protection from this unhinged stalker.

He forced down a Chinese takeout dinner, considering with sober terror that maybe he was beginning to suffer the beginnings of late-onset paranoid schizophrenia.

He checked his emails before bed and was aghast to see his plea had gone unanswered.

Very well. He'd just have to voice his concern more loudly.

#

At precisely 9:14 the next morning, Claude plunged through a spinning door into the many-windowed high-rise that housed Hatchets under the front of a

“consultation firm.” He ignored the security guard’s greeting nod, clopped across the expansive lobby to the elevator and jabbed the up button.

He disembarked at the twenty-first floor, where a desk assistant asked through prettily bared teeth how she could help him today. Claude demanded to speak to a supervisor, no it couldn’t wait, yes he had identification, okay sure fine he wouldn’t mind holding on for a moment but how long would it take, and then his supervisor, Suzette, strode out wearing an expression nobody on Earth could mistake for welcoming.

She ushered Claude into her office, a brutalist space furnished only with a metal desk and matching chair, empty steel shelves jutting from walls bereft of art.

“What’s the problem?” Suzette asked, tersely. “I’ve got a meeting in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, thank you Suzette. This won’t take long,” Claude said, fighting for a smile but instead breaking into a wiggly half-sneer. “I sent an email regarding this matter yesterday, but—”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Yes, of course. This won’t take long. It’s just that there’s a client who won’t get off my back. She’s beginning to concern me. I’m being spammed with emails, phone calls, subliminal messages—”

Suzette squinted at him like he was an optical illusion. “Subliminal messages.”

“It’s a little difficult to explain. Could you please just send this woman a cease and desist? She’s making me uneasy. Better safe than sorry, you know?”

Suzette shifted her gaze from Claude to her computer screen, scrolled on her touchpad and hummed tunelessly. “Who is she?” she asked.

“I have her contact info right here,” Claude said, flashing her the email on his phone screen.

“May I?” Suzette asked.

“By all means.”

She took his phone. She read and scrolled. She started humming again.

Restless, Claude surveyed the office. It took him a moment to identify the bird painted on Suzette’s wall clock: a red-breasted robin. He shifted his gaze back to Suzette like she might perceive his discomfort, but she was still engrossed in Wurm

Smasher's deranged epistle.

Claude looked down and saw that the carpet under Suzette's desk was patterned with dancing red-breasted robins whose singing beaks dangled worms. He cried out in involuntary shock.

"Are you fucking with me?" he said, quaking.

"Pardon me?" Suzette said, her face inscrutable.

"The clock," Claude said, pointing a jittery finger. "The rug." From his standing position, he could now see her computer screen. "The robin's nest photo you're using as a *screensaver*," he added in terrified disbelief.

Suzette raised an eyebrow in a manner that might've seemed flirtatious under different circumstances. "What, are you ornithophobic or something?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're getting on my nerves. Leave."

Heat flushed Claude's face. "I won't fill this sicko's request," he said. "*I won't*."

"Out. Before I call security."

"This is outrageous," Claude said, hating how he sounded, like some blustery villain from a fifties melodrama.

Suzette opened her desk drawer, retrieved something, and chucked it at him. It clacked against his forehead and landed on the floor. He glanced down and identified the missile.

A novelty pencil topped by a red bird eraser. Of *course*.

He bolted for the elevator, his heart thudding like it wanted out.

#

He started seeing robins everywhere: in recommended videos on YouTube and Facebook, tweeting from branches whenever he stepped out for errands, and on more than one occasion flying so near his office that their wings beat audibly against the window. An old college friend sent him an e-card adorned with the pesky avians, their crimson chests searing Claude's eyes like graphic medical images.

He gave up on the James book, irritated by its dense prose, unable to focus longer than a minute at a time. He tried reading something lighter, an airport paperback thriller, but even that was too much for his frantic mind to digest.

An email notification informed him he'd received a Zoom call invitation.

He didn't need access to his inner Sherlock Holmes to guess who'd sent it. At first, he recoiled, goosepimpled top to bottom—no way was he going to play into this nutjob's power games.

But as he prepared to walk around the block to ease his taut nerves, his brain told him with all-too-convincing severity that robins would plunge down and peck his eyes into jelly the moment he stepped outside. He placed a hand against the wall, worried he might crumple without its support.

After an interminable stretch of mindful recentering, an unexpected emotion crept whisky-hot into his body. Rage. That was the feeling, *rage*, and it gobbled his fear with the efficiency of a bird catching a worm.

He stomped to his computer and opened the call invitation before the anger could dissipate. His computer told him the host would arrive soon.

He shook and waited. And waited.

Claude thought he might have to restart his computer. He thumped the touchpad and swore.

And then the host arrived. Every particle of Claude's home seemed to calcify.

The image occupying his screen was so hideous it snuffed his ability to respond. The grayish blob had reconstituted. With terrible clarity, he finally understood what the red-breasted robin symbolized.

What it portended.

The storm had arrived.

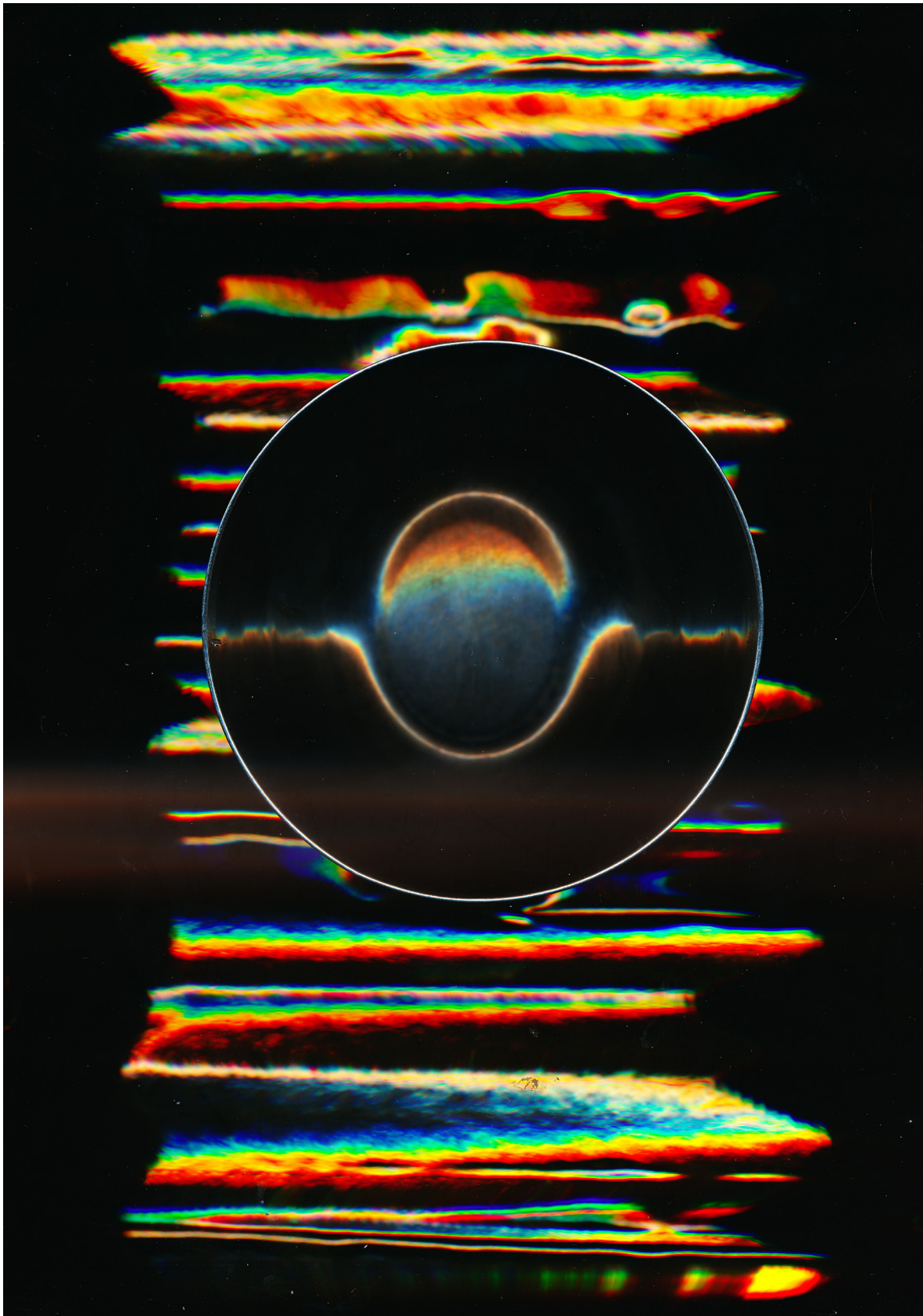
Taste-memory assailed him—the acrid tang of bird blood, feather, and glass.

Claude atrophied in his chair and wobbled back, his rictus mouth distending froglike as he beheld incognizable horrors. He raised gnarled hands to claw his eyes, anything to expel that cursed vision, some feeble effort to snatch a branch on his irrevocable plummet into madness.

The robin-thing onscreen screeched.

His heart pumped its final squirt of blood and then petrified, as red and unmoving as a cherry pit, and Claude was by all medical definitions deceased by the time his rigid body landed on the floor.

And yes, I must admit that his surreal and unexplainable death amuses me, not least because I know I'll be amply compensated for my grisly plum prose.



Sunset i
2023
Scanner Photography
21 x 29 centimetres

Metacarcinus

DIA MORI

Hashed impressions in the sand reminiscent of a little crab skittering back to shore were wiped away by my dragging footsteps. I've visited beaches where the sands not continually washed by the ebb of tide were dry enough to hold the warmth of the sun. Here, no matter how far out the tide was or wasn't, the sands held their heat only at the height of summer, a few short weeks per year. More oft than not, I knew sand to be damp, to be greyed and packed heavy like grainy soil.

Despite their many tracks, the closest thing I saw to a crab this fine morning was a half-carcass, ripped open and de-gutted long ago, legs and claws carried off by the waves, perhaps. I've been told the best time to see marine life and other beach dwellers was in the early morning, just as dawn settled in. I'd come then if I wasn't so keen on catching that last shred of dream-haze.

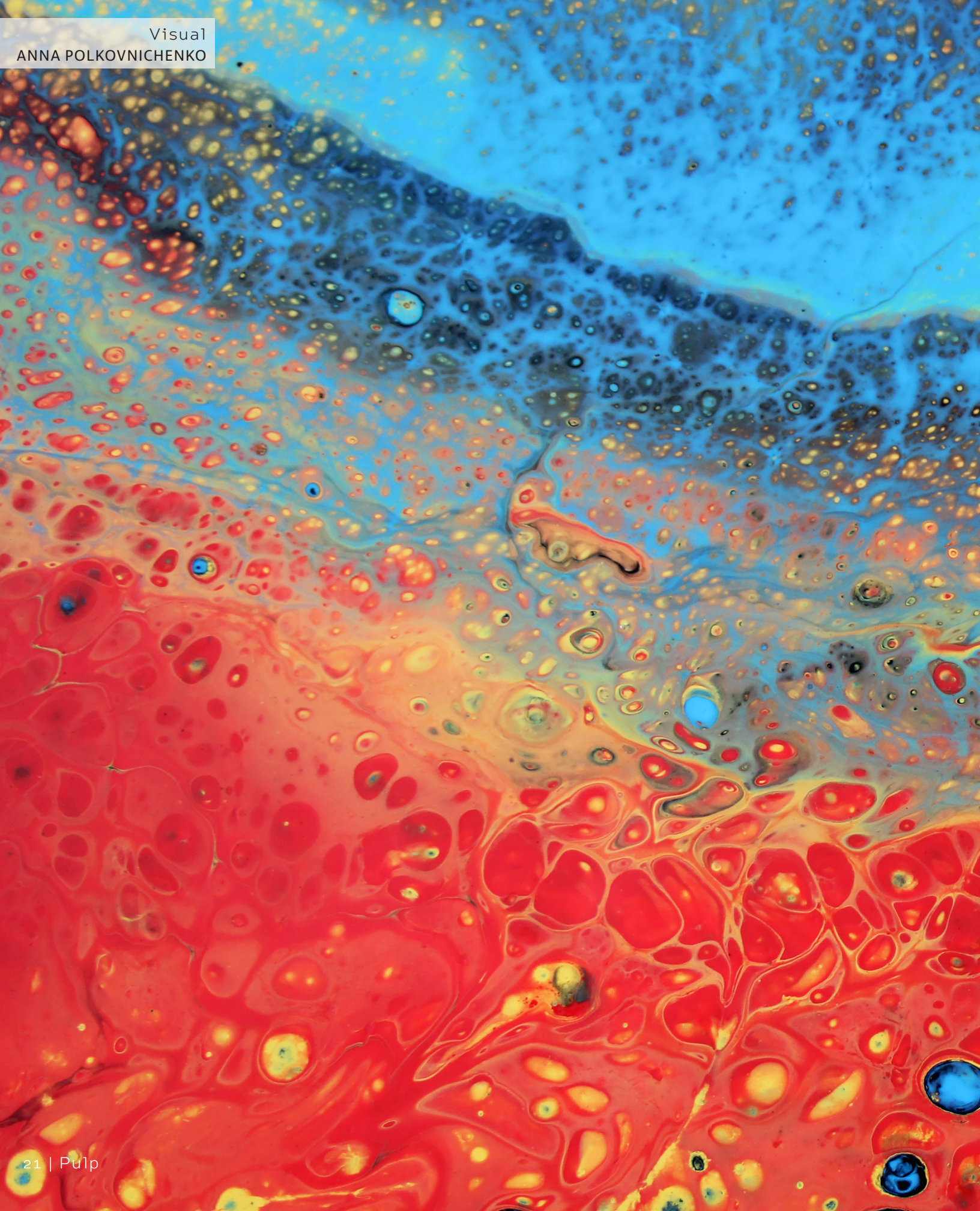
I ought to be content enough with the wildlife I can afford to see without trying any harder: the gulls and crows, the tiny flies hardly bigger than a pin prick that buzz about in swarms by the grasses or by scraps of rotting sea-flesh left behind to become one with the water again, and the occasional starfish if I'm in the right place at the right time. I ought to be content with all manner of things, but instead I find myself terribly ungrateful.

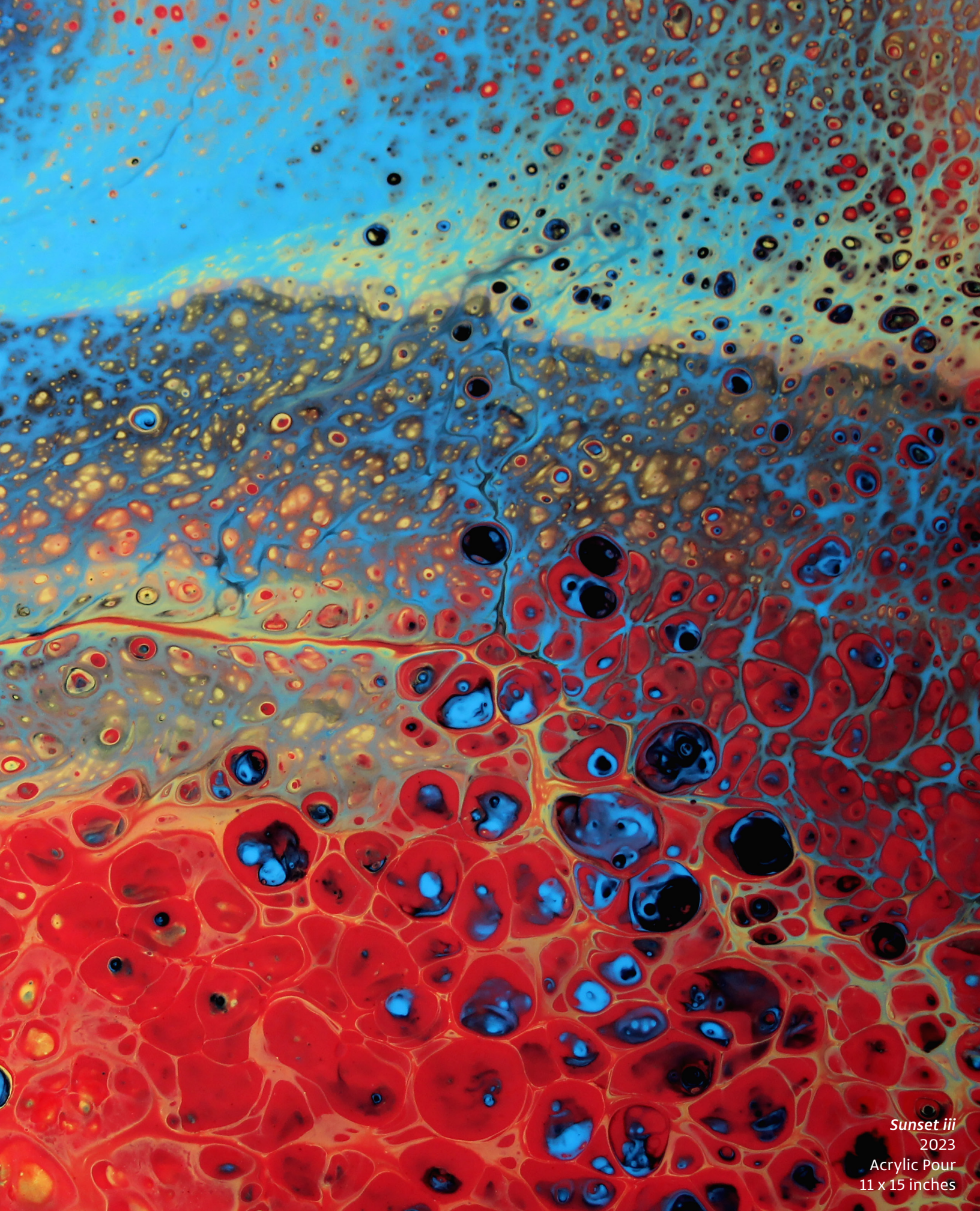
Where don't I see gulls badgering tourists for a mere morsel, where don't I see crows? Who cares for flies or the recently departed? What good are starfish, tentacled bottom feeders that can survive being hewed in half but don't at all resemble night sky glitter? Every time I feel hewed-in-half, I do not grow again as two new wholes; instead, I stitch myself back up together and ignore the way things don't seem to sit right inside anymore.

I've heard surgeons don't always put their patient's organs back in their designated places. The body can take care of that by itself. I've heard of surgeons who accidentally leave behind their tools inside people's bodies, and I wonder if any of them replaced an organ when doing so. There's a scalpel in lieu of my heart. It was I who put it there, I suppose.

If something softer grew in my chest, I'd be more appreciative of the sea. I'd consider the tide as more than the endless ticking of Earth's clock as we march onward to cold, dark nothingness. I'd understand the nuance of wet, grey sand enough to laud this beach over every other shore.

Damp and yellow-forsaken, it's not worthy enough to spend eternity immortalized inside an hourglass, trapped in the futile waterfall-rush of measured time. The fate of the sand here is only to hold dear lingering footsteps for but brief moments before we are all carried away by wave after wave after wave.





Sunset iii
2023
Acrylic Pour
11 x 15 inches

Dirt Bitter

ISAAC WANG

My mouth is a hole in the tundra
Painting a fog in the mirror,
My rage is a snake in the water
Foaming and foaming and near.

My tongue is coiled into spirals,
Hot wax down river-stairs.
I long for deeper valleys,
But wanting is unfair.

I found myself beneath myself,
Sweet ashes soaked in milk,
My teeth of bronze and ivory
Gnash, laughing, in my throat.

Lair of smiles, be dear to hear:
My lips woke up again!
Faultlines slip like brick-red bone,
'Gainst burning tide—
We freely chose!

Planet of the Homeless Angels

MIKE SLUCHINSKI



Baby Only

NAREKA NICKERA BROWN

Bright baby blue silk
made up good.
A welcomed pillow
for a tired soul,
not an old one.
Granma say,
is no time to lay down.

Up and down
the yard.
He moves one goat,
two goat.
Renk and stinky, umpteen goat too many.
Breadfruit leaves rake up
in one heap, ready to burn.
Porridge, yellow-sweet bubbly
hardo bread cut thick, covered
soft and buttery.

Shiny soft
vaseline on a cut
baby oil on the face.
Forbidden ocean
of warmth and safety.
A bed,
the bed she made.
Out of reach,
'cause, you anno baby.

Mek mi baby again Lord,
mek mi baby again.



Ladner Harbour

2024

Oil Painting

11 x 14 inches

The Wife

S Siou

The dazzling chimes of mid-century glamour silver through the television set speaker. The greyscale screen shifts to channel bumper, informing the audience they're about to watch a brand-new episode of the latest all-American classic sitcom everybody already knows and loves: *Living Merrilly*. This is going to be episode two, airing for the first time across the nation. A week ago, the pilot introduced Americans to a vision from their dreams—the perfect family. The husband is Harold Merrill, then there's the wife, and their two children: Timothy and Georgina. The ideal nuclear unit. However, it's not as polished as it seems, and this is the real appeal: Harold is a widower who remarried; the children were adopted from overseas, orphans from the war; and the wife, Margaret Rose, who absolutely everyone—in the show and outside of it—calls “Maggie” because she's just so sweet and darling, is the perfect wife for everything except her infertility. Every good American wishes they were this family, and the flaws they all have beneath the surface make that idea even more attainable for them. They're just like everyone else. Everyone can be them. Everyone is them.

One last cadence blares and the screen blacks out, like a sleepy child losing the war against bedtime. A moment of crackling silence hisses on the air. It takes a moment longer than expected. The soft static anticipation is unsettling. Families huddled around black-and-white screens ask each other if they think something went wrong. Husbands get up and tweak the antennae. Children bob and whine. Wives sit alone on the couch, watching the black screen. Hearing the static. Wondering what it means.

Then it starts. A harp glimmers into strings. Black lightens to grey, then silver, then a daytime sky floating above a beautiful suburban home. The camera floats closer to the home's front façade. *Living Merrilly*, the screen says in white cursive. The title curves wonderfully. Each letter is perfect. They fade away as the music slows. Credits garland the frame as the camera moves closer to the house, right to

the window, until it phases through the glass. A chill runs down the spine of the nation, and the final pieces of text neatly, humbly, fill the screen: “The Wife.” This episode, then, focuses on Maggie Merrill. How lovely this will be, the audience thinks in their blue and white houses. She’s such a lovely woman, after all.

The letters fade away, and there she is: the lovely Mrs. Merrill, on her hands and knees at the fireplace. Her curled hair is up in a scarf; her pale hands are hidden away in sooty gloves; even in her house dress, she looks beautiful. She’s cleaning the fireplace like she does every morning—like a proper wife does every morning. She’s doing it with a smile, a soft smile, like she’s tasting something delicious behind her painted lips—strawberries, blue clouds, or a white picket fence. Her eyes look free of thoughts, free of ideas. All there is to worry about is soot. The hearth is as familiar as her bed, a place dark and warm, a place her husband puts her to make and unmake and squirm in—the worry is a joy. She’s thinking of nothing. Husbands across America adore her for it. They look at their own wives.

A creak sounds through the floor above Maggie. She looks up. Worry creases her brow. Another creak—more of a thud—reverberates. Soot is loosened from the flue, dusting the wife’s little nose so precisely that she instantly stands back, heaving to sneeze. She heaves, and heaves, until finally, the tiniest “a-choo!” anyone in the audience has ever heard issues from her. A laugh track pursues it as she rubs her nose with the back of her glove, smudging her face further.

Before she realizes, and as the laughter dies away, Mr. Merrill comes down the stairs. Maggie is surprised. Her face flushes. She attempts to brush her house dress, only putting more soot on it. “Harold! Why, what are you doing up so early?” she says, stifling another sneeze. The audience titters.

Mr. Merrill, smiling, rubs a smudge from Maggie’s face. “Oh darling, didn’t I tell you? I’ve got an early meeting.” He moves past her as easily as anything. “Where’s my coffee?”

Maggie is caught off guard but springs into action. She takes these things in stride. Apologizing, she kisses his cheek, and, dotingly, she twirls into the kitch-

en. She waltzes toward the coffee pot, into the fridge, and between cabinets, until she is dancing around breakfast. Everything would be a perfect picture of womanly service if she wasn't still covered in soot. With each pivot, the pervasive dust settles—on the coffee pot, in the fridge, between the cabinets—as a heavy, disgusting film. She stains the screen black.

Mr. Merrill doesn't notice; his nose is in the newspaper, and his mouth is soon busy with bacon, eggs, and toast. Maggie puts his coffee next to him. He takes one sip, then puts his newspaper down; he's already on his way out. Laughter rises as Maggie, confused, takes the coffee away again. "I'm off, my dear," he says. "Wish me luck!" He ducks out of the door. A second later, he looks back in. "And Maggie?"

"Yes, Harold?" She looks out of the kitchen, across the dining and living rooms, toward the front door. She is as expectant as the rising strings, smiling romantically. *I love you*, floats in the melody.

"You really gotta get some better coffee, honey. Why, it tasted like a mouthful of soot!" He leaves for good. A drum kills the strings, squashing them like a boulder. A laugh track responds to the Looney Tunes spectacle of sound.

Maggie is mortified; she looks at her gloves, realizing the filth that had tainted the coffee darker than anyone could tolerate. Her eyes shift from the soot to the unfinished fireplace, and then around her at the filthy kitchen. She gasps and removes her gloves, immediately beginning to wipe every surface.

The show fades away as she frantically cleans. *Living Merrilly* will be right back after commercials. Americans lean back on their couches. They sigh at the little annoying interruptions of television: advertisements and women who get things wrong. They wait through the commercials because they like it all, really. They're eager for more; more sugary cereals and Chevrolets and toiling women. They like to watch them. Dream about consuming them.

Soon enough, the harp and strings come back. The house fades into view, the window is passed, and the lovely Mrs. Merrill has finally finished cleaning the

soot from the kitchen. The moment she steps back to begin washing dishes, though, the children come tumbling down the stairs. Their clothes are in a bit of disarray, but their smiles and dimples say, “Morning, mommy!”

“Oh, my darlings!” Maggie is fretting anew; her eyes show it, and her hands reach toward their small bodies to demonstrate it. She fixes their clothes—tucks in Timothy’s shirt, and straightens Georgina’s bows. “Oh, I hardly had time to dress you two! Oh dear... well, that’ll do. Here, let’s have some breakfast.” The children jump into their cushioned seats at the breakfast nook. Maggie joins them, orange juice and all-American breakfast in hand. They chat about the children’s school, their experiences with mean jokesters, and distant friends. Maggie can’t remember any of their schoolmates’ names. She’s such a silly woman. The children say so. Maggie laughs along with audiences across the nation who think the same of their mothers.

The children finish eating. No sooner has Mrs. Merrill taken their plates and let the sink run iridescently soapy water than the time on the wall clock catches her eye. She jumps, frazzled again; the children will be late if they don’t start walking. She abandons the running sink, taking Timothy and Georgina by their little hands, lacing their shoes, and rushing with them out of the door. The children are practically being dragged; Maggie is in such a world of her own that she doesn’t hear their protests, or the water still flowing from the faucet inside the set.

The audience notices though, and so does the camera. Another laugh track plays as the sink fills higher and higher, lumps of foam burgeoning like clusters of white mould. The laughter wears on. The camera seems stuck on the sink as the water reaches the porcelain lip and begins to burble out of it and onto the tile floor. The beat is too long, the laughter too loud. Husbands chuckle awkwardly; children are watching intently, wondering what’s so funny; wives’ eyes dart around the room, through archways, towards kitchen sinks. It’s then that those women realize the laughter is repeating, looping like a broken record. Another technical difficulty? But then how is the footage still going on? The scene has lasted a full minute. What is going on?

Finally, the laughter ends. The sound of a door swinging open cuts past it, followed by a sharp gasp. “Oh, my word!” Maggie yells as she darts into the kitchen. Her short heels splash in a thin sheen of soapy water. She spins around, water surrounding her, bubbles groping at her ankles from every side. Her eyes are wide and panicked. Everyone across the country can practically hear her thoughts—it discomforts them that they can, or that she has them at all. *What do I do? What have I done?*

Her hands flail over the countertops, across the hard cabinet doors. She splashes to the faucet and, knuckles bulging white beneath her pale grey skin, wrings her hands around the tap as if strangling a killer animal. It gurgles, hisses, then sputters, and finally dies.

Her house dress, blackened and heavy with suds and dishwater, does not twirl anymore, but she doesn’t stop for a moment. She teeters around the corner, emerging a moment later with a mop and bucket. The permanently soiled tendrils of the tool splatter all over the floor when Maggie slaps it down into the soapy flood. Her back arches beneath her shirt. Shoulder blades jut on each pull back, flatten with every push forward. It is a desperate tide, flexing and retreating, each movement mocked by the subsequent ripple of foam that emanates from her efforts. But she doesn’t stop. The camera begins to fade to black, but she doesn’t stop.

When the lights come up again a moment later, the kitchen is restored and sparkling. Maggie is exhausted and dishevelled, but smiling through the soot and stains. The mop is gone; the floors have been salvaged; Maggie is setting the last breakfast dish out to dry next to the sink.

She stands back and sighs, surveying the room. That’s when she sees the time on the wall again: the children’s lunchtime. They’ll be home on lunch break any moment, and they’ll be hungry. She has nothing ready. She has nothing for them.

Mrs. Merrill’s eyes are swimming. Her breath is thundering past her lips in

heavy pants. She stumbles, her gaze the only fixed thing about her posture—fixed on the clock. Her heels clomp backward on the checkered tile, backward past the stove, the sink, towards the fridge. Her hand extends for the appliance's handle, maybe to steady herself, maybe to throw it open and begin preparing something. Neither is accomplished: instead, her hand collides with the racks of drying dishes by the sink. A crash like the explosion of a bomb rattles Maggie; she covers her ears, shuts her eyes in shock, but when she opens them is when the greatest terror yet confronts her: every single dish is ruined.

A sob claws out of her throat. Her legs wobble underneath her until she collapses. Shattered porcelain and scattered silverware impale her knees before her sooty, soap-saturated house dress falls around her, a translucent shroud for the agony beneath. Her head is in her hands, but she suddenly jumps at a horrific sound: laughter. The laugh track. All-American viewers across the country stare at their black-and-white screens as she slowly turns to stare back at them. Through the camera, through the screens, back at them. The laughter swells; applause, whistles, exclamations. It's so loud. Maggie clutches her ears against the sound, falling lower and lower to the floor. The wife is a lump, a grey lump, sobbing against the kitchen floor as her world laughs at her—laughs at her sobs.

Then it all stops; the laughter, the applause, everything is cut off by the creak of the front door. In come Timothy and Georgina, followed by Mr. Merrill, back from his meeting just in time for lunch. "Honey?" he calls, hanging his coat as the children bounce around him into the living room. He peers down the hallway into the kitchen.

Maggie looks up at him. "Harold! I'm so sorry—oh, this mess—I'm so, so sorry. God! It's all my fault!" Tears run with mascara down her flushed cheeks. She sobs again.

The camera fills with Mr. Merrill's face. The mild concern set on it twists into adoring laughter. "Oh, my darling," he says, "why are you crying? If lunch isn't quite ready yet, don't worry a thing! Everything's alright."

Maggie sniffles. “But—the dishes—the kitchen—the fireplace—”

“Whatever are you talking about, my love? Looks wonderful to me. Sure, the fireplace isn’t quite done, but you’ll finish that up.”

The woman starts and looks around herself. The floor is devoid of debris. Her dress is perfectly clean. She stands, trembling. “My God, what has happened?”

Mr. Merrill laughs again, as if she has just told some joke that no one at home heard. “My dearest Mrs. Merrill,” he chuckles, “you truly are the perfect wife.”

Maggie stares, speechless. She doesn’t know what to do. America doesn’t know what to do either.

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Spring 2025 Contributors

Listed in Order of Appearance

DESMOND TOMPKINS

Desmond Tompkins is a visual artist and third-year English student at KPU. He strives to make the world a better place by addressing identity and social issues in his creative practice. Desmond's mixed media work combines old photographs, ephemera, and cultural materials, creating new perspectives by distorting these materials. He has been featured in exhibitions throughout the Lower Mainland, including at the Turnbull Gallery and the Surrey Art Gallery.

SARAH GAWTHROP

Sarah Gawthrop writes from the unceded territories of the Semiahmoo First Nation and the broader territory of the Coast Salish People in so-called Canada. She is a poet, an editor, a BFA writing student (KPU), and sits on the boards of The Wee Sparrow Poetry Press and *ROOM* magazine. Sarah's work has appeared in print publications by Sunday Mornings at the River, *Gypsophila* magazine, and *Humana Obscura*, among others. Because of an irresistible obsession with forests, nature seeps into most of Sarah's writing.

ALLEN FORREST

Allen Forrest is a painter and cartoonist, and winner of the Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State University's *Reed Magazine*. His Bel Red landscape paintings are in the Bellevue College Foundation's art collection. He lives in Vancouver, BC, Canada.

MOHINI TAKHAR

Mohini Takhar is a third-year Creative Writing student at KPU. She has performed spoken word on various stages such as the Verses Festival of Words, Canadian Individual Poetry Slam, Vancouver Poetry Slam, and Voices of Today. Her essay "I'm Different; You Know It, I Know It. Let's Talk About It" was published in *Pearls 40: An Anthology of Work* by Douglas College Creative Writing students. In 2021, her self-published debut poetry chapbook, *Pieces of Me*, was released. Her work has been exhibited at the Roundhouse Community Centre and has been published in *pulp MAG*, *The Mighty*, and *Goat's Milk Magazine*.

EMMA FRANCIS

Emma Francis is currently studying at KPU for her BFA. She enjoys spending time outdoors and connecting with nature. Her hobbies include paddle boarding, hiking, and travelling. She is studying to become an art therapist in order to help people with the healing power of art. Emma Francis is interested in contributing to the community and spreading awareness about different causes through her artwork.

MIKE THORN

Mike Thorn is a fiction writer and film critic. He is the author of *Shelter for the Damned*, *Darkest Hours*, and *Peel Back and See*. His stories have appeared in anthologies, magazines, and podcasts, including *Vastarien* and *NoSleep*. His film criticism has been published in *American Twilight: The Cinema of Tobe Hooper*, *MUBI Notebook*, *The Film Stage*, and elsewhere. He is a SSHRC-funded doctoral candidate in the Department of English (Creative Writing) at the University of New Brunswick. He co-hosts the *Craftwork* podcast with Miriam Richer. Connect with him on Twitter (@MikeThornWrites) and visit his website: <https://mikethornwrites.com/>

ANNA POLKOVNICHENKO

Anna Polkovnichenko is a third-year KPU student in fine arts, philosophy, and music.

DIA MORI

Dia Mori is a Canadian writer of Caribbean descent. She is pursuing a degree in English and Philosophy at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. She primarily writes short stories and poetry, and has recently been venturing into their in-between. When not writing, she dabbles in a variety of art forms, including but not limited to painting, photography, and ceramics.

ISAAC WANG

Isaac Wang is a first-year General Studies student at KPU. He has not accumulated enough achievements to warrant speaking of himself in third-person, but he respects the convention. He likes playing the victim, doesn't know what he's doing, and does a "music thing" with his brother: <https://nizeheitepopo.bandcamp.com/music>. He doesn't dare plug his AO3 account, and in his opinion, he should be cancelled by the "joke mob" because he is not actually that funny.

MIKE SLUCHINSKI

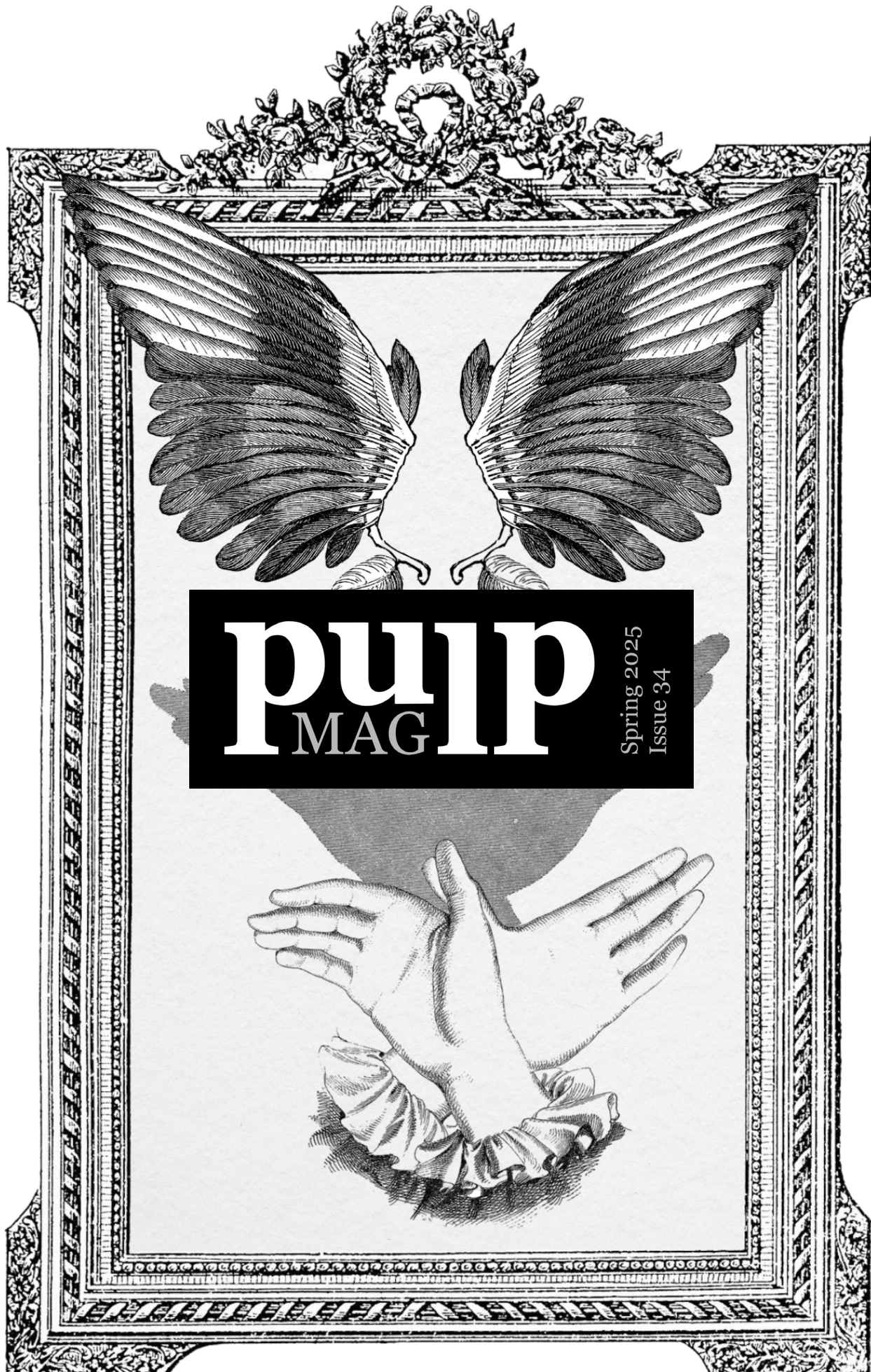
Mike Sluchinski studies Shyriiwook, is a former and current dancer, and an aspiring athlete. He gratefully acknowledges the Freefall Lit. Society and Cheryl and Henry Kloppenburg Foundation for their support of the arts. Very gratefully published or 'soon come' by *pulp MAG*, *Welter*, *Inlandia*, *Proud To Be* (Vol.13), *The Coachella Review*, *Poemeleon*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *MMPP* (Meow Meow Pow Pow), *Kelp Journal*, 'the fib review,' *Eternal Haunted Summer*, *Syncopation Lit. Journal*, *South Florida Poetry Journal* (SOFLOPOJO), *Freefall*.

NAREKA NICKERA BROWN

Nareka Nickera Brown is a Jamaican-Canadian Creative Writing and English student at KPU. Her poetry and short stories explore the complex relationship she has with both formal English and Jamaican Patois. She lives in BC with her family and aloe vera plant named Burstinatrix.

S SIOU

S Siou is a short fiction author and novelist who likes to write about why life is worth living and death is worth dying. Through the lens of their queer, mixed identity and with a dash of existential curiosity, they have created countless darkly wonderful worlds and made lots of people worry about their mental health because of it. They are an artist, crime enthusiast, classic literature lover/hater, and frequently find themselves in morgues (yes, really). They are currently in their second year at Kwantlen Polytechnic University and intend to Major in Creative Writing and Minor in English.



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