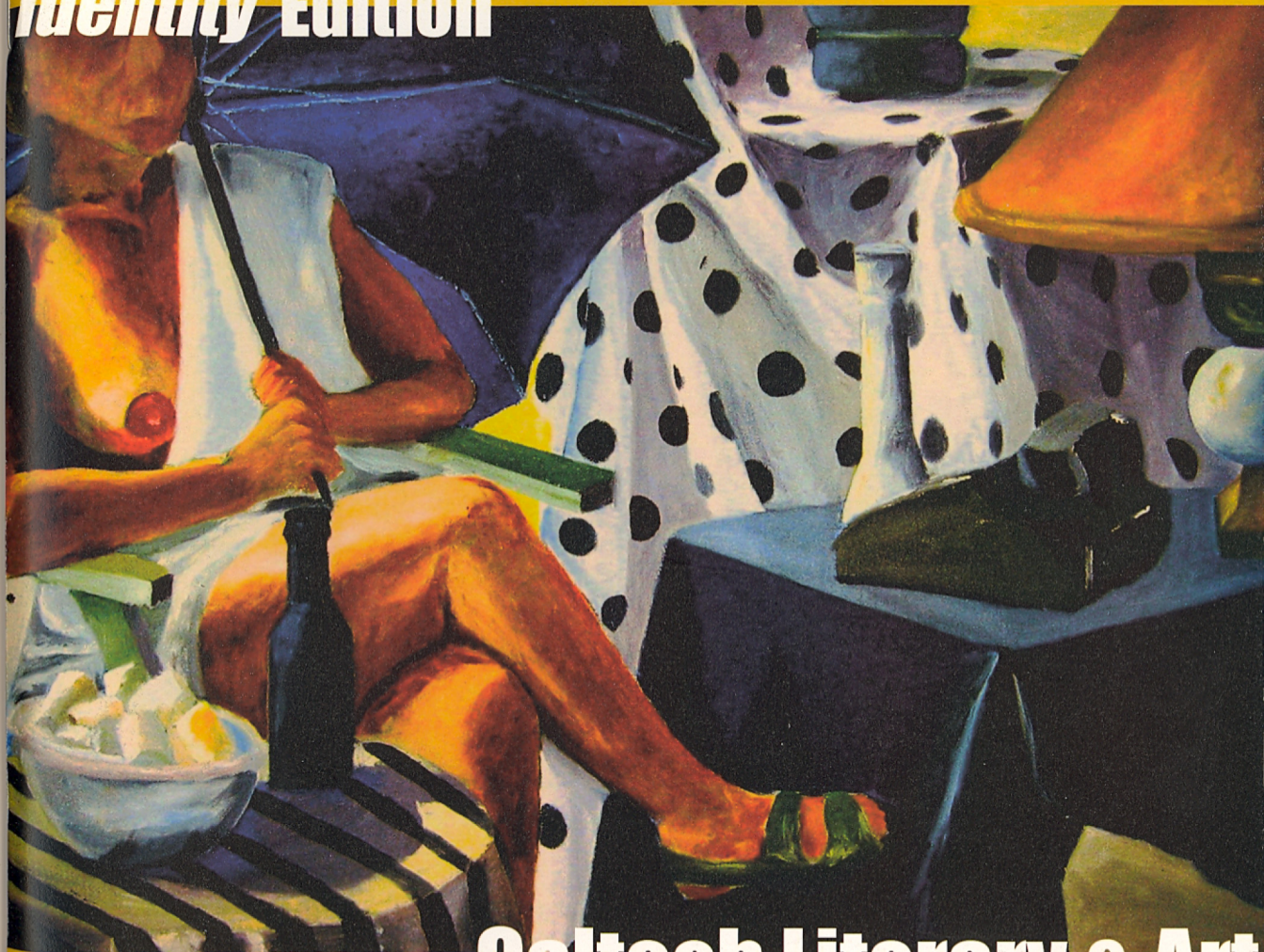


Totem 2003
Identity Edition



**Caltech Literary & Art
Magazine**

editor's note

Since the fall of 1957, *Totem* has highlighted the literary and creative works of Caltech scholars. We proudly gather the stories, poetry, photographs, sketches, and paintings of unexpected artists. This collection also features a special section on "identity."

To understand who we are, we cut open our vulnerable flesh. With self-knowledge traveling through veins, through brains, our limbs make art.

Martha-Helene Stapleton

cover art

Heather Murrey "Woman at Picnic" oil on canvas 18"x24"

Lionel Jingles "The Many Faces of Lionel" acrylics on gessoed canvas 8"x10"

Street Vendors at the Florianska Gate

dorota korta



35 mm, Krawkow, Poland

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tina hsu

Nampa Suru*

If,
Looking into emptiness,
We are inspired
To wear clothes.
To eat at restaurants.
That make men
Dream about us at night
Before they fall asleep,
Should we rejoice?

We still
Come home to a table
Set for one person
But with room for two,
And we slide photographs
Under our pillows
So that even in sleep
We don't forget.

anonymous

Breaking Waves

My father pushes through a sea of people,
an oar ripping through the icy waves.

He is the silent blade that
never gives up,
never stops pulling,
never tires.

His power and discipline move him ahead,
and he accelerates
without hesitation,
without regret.

His strokes are clean and crisp
as he cruises through the crashing waves,
a monument of strength.
Each of his movements makes
the splash,
the ripple,
the difference
that is so very
small.

But even after my father has finished his journey,
he has changed the ocean forever.

Manarola, Italy

d.k. young



65 mm, Fuji Velvia

Girl in Tlacoluca Market

martha-helene stapleton



2272x1712 pixels

sam thomsen

Conjunction

The white sun penetrates
Thin, frigid mist,
Mobile above the vapor.

Above the roof reaching around
Branches. Yellow,
Flat, and round there.

Dizzy cold air after rain
Blossoms the sun.
Upright bodies under cold heat.

The sun's essential elements are in experience
Not in the sun itself.
The part of the sun that is us

Is what reaches us
Through a haphazard marriage
Of geometry and cause.

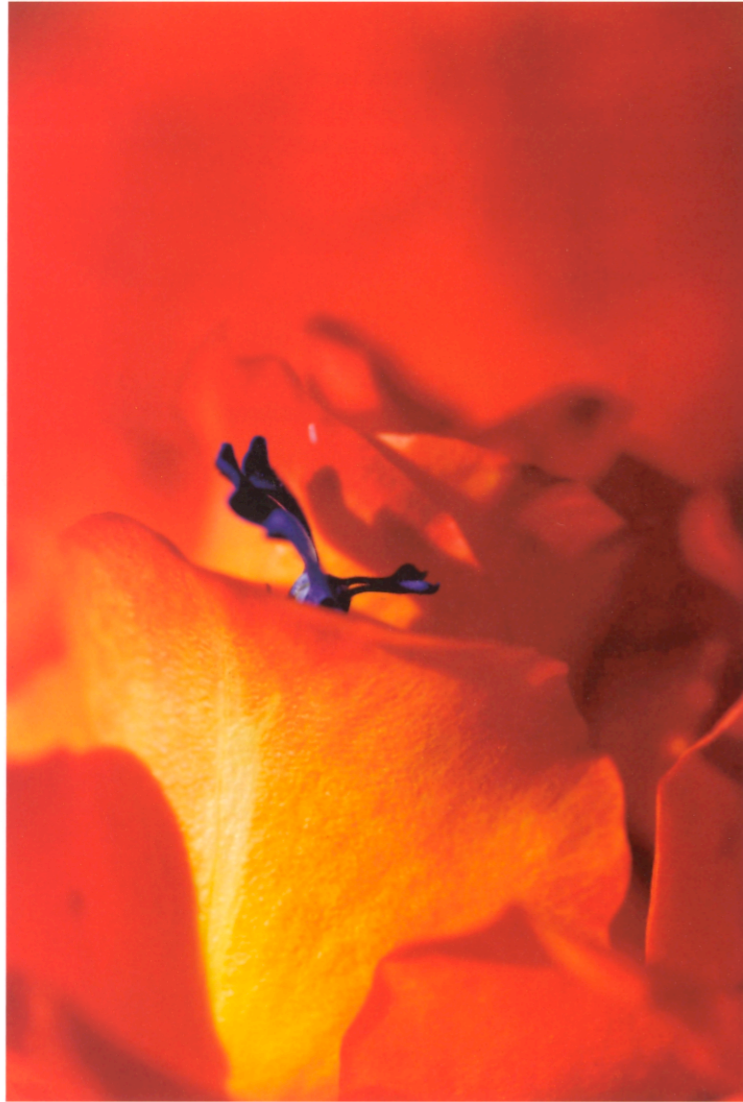
tim dolch

The Respiration

I read your words and entered the night.
The stars sit silent, and the trees
They stand like sleeping statues, their faces
Brushed green by the streetlamps beneath
And the night birds sing their oblique melody,
Their song of dust, dust animated
By a tiny breath, and the wind twitches
And the stars shiver
And the grass glows
And the crickets quiver
And I,
Feeling the tremor and tremble of your words tumble through me
Like an insect's maddened dance under a dim lamp,
Wonder at your words
And how their twitch touches me
As we sit silent, distant, sad
And still the breath of your words
Brings life and hope to dust
Though only a tiny gasp,
Its life briefly mingles with mine
And I know you and exhale.

Orange and Purple Flowers

kathy scott



1360x2048 pixels, Caltech Rose Garden

The School of Athens

isaac miller and
svanhild simonson



4'x7', housepaint on the wall of the second floor lounge in Lloyd

1/4 copy of "The School of Athens," by Rafael. The scene shows many famous philosophers from antiquity, including Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, and Pythagoras.

To Milton, 2003

Time, teeming shrew, you overdo envy.
 Though sated with the vigorous bones
 Of human history's last heroes,
 You greedily consume their memory too;
 And seduce sublime ideas away from flesh,
 Surrendering my Age
 To false novelty and unripeness.
 So intent to malnourish; To think
 A covetous twenty and one years withstood,
 Only to reveal Him
 When beginning my bachelorhood!
 If this is the progress of your taste,
 Then follow our mechanical race,
 Whose unruly locomotive pace
 Far from Galilean waters stray;
 Revoke, jealous Time, and fly away!

Forgive these rude words, English Phoebus,
 Written in my left-handed form; these verses
 Sung with a coarse and immature tongue.
 It's your dignity that obliges me;
 You who lead me to believe
 Every great man needs an adoring Echo,
 Who will tardily soar with praise
 For the rhymes she has internalized,
 And with hope to restore
 Mature beauty to an undeveloped Age.
 So forgive this later born calling,
 Now raised from the narrowing cave,
 Where Apathy and Ease teamed
 To silence Temperance years ago...
 But, no. This is no defense.
 Yet looking upward, learned Poet, to you I plead,
 Without a herd,
 And without a reed.
 Be the sole Genius of my life.
 Lift the heavy veil and Accept

My Mind as a humble wife.
 Then in every twilight, from the
 First of our wedding night,
 We'll lay out a scholarly strategy.
 Promise to be my guide,
 As we labor over Antiquity,
 And lift my eyes
 When they weary with their industry,
 Or give a cooling kiss if my thoughts
 Should burn with too much levity.
 In this way, every evening
 We'll bathe in halogen beams,
 Until we find that Arcadian stream
 And the stars, now reduced to nuclei,
 Are returned to a virtuous sky,
 Who, for our efforts, will divinely shine,
 Blazing eternally against a dimming Time.

A Visit to Golden Computer Centre

It is most convenient: right across from the exit of the subway station is the main entrance of Golden Computer Centre. The ground floor is non-existent; instead, there is an upper and a lower level to the shopping center. You could go up a flight of stairs, where you would find computer hardware and electronics equipment available for sale. But that is not the purpose of your visit. Instead, you take the more popular route, the steps down into the lower dungeon, where pirated software and music await.

It is packed. Land is always scarce in Hong Kong, but room in a well-visited mall such as Golden Computer Centre is especially valuable, so every inch of space has been utilized. As you look down on the dirty, dark, floor, averting your eyes from other people and the shelves, all you see are shuffling feet in all varieties of shoes. Black leather shoes, sandals, trendy sneakers, simple slippers are all there, shuffling around, up and down, up and down. You ignore the faces of the people who are packed in the small alleyways just as the goods are packed in the shelves. You ignore the stores selling popular computer games. You ignore the man who sits on a stool at the entrance to the mall, yelling, "Walk straight to the end and turn left; the store will be on the right hand side. There you would find all the games and software you want. Walk straight to the end..."

You walk to the end and turn left, where you find one of the more popular but equally tiny computer games store. Each store carries a numerous and diverse collection of games; both standard English games and more obscure Chinese games are available. The prices are unofficially standardized, as they are always the same in every store: HK\$20 for one CD, \$30 for 2, \$50 for 4, etc. Convenience and quality of service is essential, and the availability of software is not a problem: if you cannot find the game, someone will make you a copy, hot off the CD burner.

The Salesperson, who sits on a stool just outside the store, has a slightly-hoarse voice that rises up just above the noise of the crowd: "If you want something, get it now! The cops may come at any time, and then we will close the store, immediately! If you want something, get it now!" He has a lookout who is stationed near the entrance of the mall, ready to inform the people inside whenever the police arrives and descends upon the stores.

There is an honor system at work throughout. A small aluminum box is taped onto the wall at the exit. Each customer figures out how much he or she has to pay, then puts the correct amount of money in the box. The Salesperson sits just outside the store, never actually involved in any transaction. Once in a while, he gets up and empties the box of its money, maybe leaving a few small bills, just in case a customer is in need of change. While his body may reside on a stool outside the store, his eyes can always be found on the little plastic box attached to the wall.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, you hear a yell: "Cops!" The Salesperson, who

had for so long been sitting on his stool outside the store, gets up and yells with an urgency, "Cops! Get out! Get out! We're closing the store! Get out!" The crowd is suddenly excited but anxious, like kindergarteners during a fire drill. You push and shove with the crowd and get out of the store. The metal gate is promptly pulled down, and the Salesperson leaves. The Salespersons of the neighboring stores have also closed their stores, and the crowd has moved on to the other parts of the mall.

As the police belatedly arrive at the sight of the crime, they find an urchin, waiting for them, ready to take all the blame. But they know that he is simply paid to be the sacrificial lamb, so arresting the boy will do no good. The stores have been closed, for now, and they have done their job. The crowd will be back, of course, but their workday is over. Everyone has to make a living. What are they to do when not in uniform, if the stores are all closed, the Salespersons all arrested?

Soon you are sick of the sight of the crowd, the noise, and the smell of cigarettes that permeates the mall, even though you can never find anyone actually smoking. So you squeeze through more people and manage to find your way back to the entrance. You walk up the stairs and embrace the sunshine. There, on a billboard next to the main entrance of the shopping centre, you see a sign. It reads: "Protect your property; beware of thieves."

steve berardi

Prostitutes and Poundcake

I walked to your house
A couple days ago
I wanted to apologize
I rang the bell a couple times
But no one answered
You must have been lost in his eyes
I only needed someone to hold
I thought I found her on First and Fold

"Hey big boy would you like a treat?
I assure you no finer will you meet."
Spread over the table in a futile escape
No matter how good it's always felt like rape
And afterward she asks me if something's wrong
As she dances back into her clothes
It's never as good as you hope it would be
Poundcake on a starving stomach is what she is to me

I'm falling apart
I think this must be
Slowly killing me

christopher j. meagher

Caltech Daydreams

To write on the slip
Stab the lousy little blood pump
Black, red, black

Dead. With scratch and slaps on the black board,
A whip cracked to the break of chalk.
Muffled and choking, the rasp of turn of pages.

Silk, silk like a soft yellow assassin.
Tight sweater nipples—
And her quick eye and biting.

Red lipstick fantasies
Moan and groan, firm curves and their derivatives.
And another pencil snapped, cough.

Crossed legs to stifle yet another one.

jennifer taggart

I Didn't Kill Her

She was gruesome, really.
A mass of disjointed phrases with
red Sharpie pen xing them out.
Nothing superficially wrong, lots of imagery.
I avoided clichés.
But she refused to wake up.

I tried an emergency transfusion of language that
Popped. Didn't work.
The frenzied surgeon I became,
red ink spilling into the margins,
Was probably bad for her health.

I admit, I could have given her a
Week's rest, but I didn't want another
Twisted, lifeless specimen lying in the
back pages of my journal.

The cremation—cremation, I say!—was late at night
in the lounge.
I read her over again, checking for a pulse.
Found none.
Held her as I touched her upper left hand corner
To the flames.
Even then, she had nothing to say.

Embrace

xiao peng



Pencil, chalk pastels, and acrylic gloss on 12" vinyl record

The Lloyd House Christmas
Tree 2002



414x813 pixels

tully foote

joseph de jesus

Overflow

I was filled to the brim,
Overflowing
Into you,
A cup too small,
Overflowing
Onto the clothes,
You hide beneath,
And toss into the wash
To wash me away
Like any other stain
So you can hide again
Behind bleached black;
Onto sidewalks,
Flowing for miles down
Same stone blocks,
Seeping deep into
Cracks between,
Whatever remained of me
Slipping over the edge
Into the street,
Around and beneath
Merciless feet;
Into water bowls
Of pampered pups
Who lapped me up
And convulsed with disgust,
Turning away in search
For someone else
To quench their thirst;
Into the sink,
Washing bittersweet water
(An acquired taste)
Down the drain,
Drip.
Drip.
Out from the showerhead
As you wash yourself away,
Some of me will be
In every drop
Caressing your naked body.

Blue Eaters*

Partial clouds and a light breeze

There is an old lady who lives
On the curb across from my house,
Selling towels from a borrowed shopping cart.

Once, after a rain-storm, driving past
I saw her asleep, curled up like
A child, so peaceful
Upon her towels
I thought her dead.

Concern stopped and stepped me
Out of my car,
Coming close, I whispered, "Ms.?"
Twitching, and—

Eyes!!
Blue eating eyes!

Blue backed me,
Back into the car,
As she rolled shut
Unto her other side.

Oh eyes, devouring eater-eyes!
What did you do to her soul,
Now limp-lifeless like the towels
She sells?

Did she once have children,
Father and mother family?
Did you devour those, too?

Lie there, lady, lie there,
Eye-closed peaceful.
Dimpled cheeks—
You could be a grandmother.
Touch the hair, a silver graced socialite,
Or a politician's wife,
Nudge-prodding husband into power.

Peaceful.

Keep those eyes closed,
In my mind, keep them closed.

Partial clouds and a light breeze.

isaac hilburn

To My Father

I hold in my hands a photograph I took,
My father, face red and tired from the wind,
Backdropped by the hills,
Whitecaps brushing against the concrete foundations
Of the Golden Gate Bridge,
And the frozen reflection of sunset off individual cars

A strange sense of remorse—
Is it a dread?—enters my mind.

Age
Do the hills in the picture,
Do they laugh at us all?
At the wind, the white-waved caps,
The motorists who must scurry
Across the intensified red-orange bridge?
They are old, proud gods
Defiled by the moment of a shutter release.

The sunset paints the white hairs in my father's beard
And glints shade-red in his crease-cornered eyes.

Sunset
Death of day.
Rise of night.

I wonder how the picture would look at next sunset.
A shiver passes through me.

The hills respond with a silence
For even the hills pass with time.
Is this why we offer prayers?
Why in something—anything—
We must believe?

isaac hilburn

The sunset fades from lips, relaxed in smile
On my father's face. I must ask:
Father, what is your belief?

Oh father, hills of old,
In the light of sunset,
May I have your quiet grace.

Snowy Vista in Yosemite

bing hu



35 mm, Riddock camping trip to Yosemite National Park, April 2003

Yosemite Falls

bing hu



35 mm, Riddock camping trip to Yosemite National Park, April 2003

shwetank kumar

Nature

Sometimes I wonder if this is it,
These nights of reflection and toil,
Trying to see the patterns she fits,
And when she cheats, the unsettling roil,

Not an unfaithful lover she is,
A rather temperamental one though,
Her tantalizing my imagination, a game, this,
Precision, perfection, aim to please, everything should be just so,

Many a night are spent courting her,
Is it an exercise in futility to follow her lead?
Assigning meaning to allusions I gather?
When by early morning she is my essence, my body, my soul, my deed,

I awake and she is still staring at me,
Cryptic smile playing the lips, fixated gaze of a doe,
Through the veil just enough can I see,
Incomprehensible she is but I cant let go,

And then there are nights of frustration and anger,
Bursting finally, tired of wearing out little by little,
Cant go far before I already miss her,
My friend, my lover, my soulmate, my riddle,

& yet I wonder, if this is it,
For life with a whimsical lover is tough,
& yes for this life, this is it,
For me living to understand her is enough.

michael d. hartl

Sunrise on the Pacific

The storm clouds part. A soft
Glow limns the horizon,
Inchoate but crescent.
A breeze holds a gull aloft.
The air smells of brine.

The haze begins to fade.
Faint caustics dance on the water:
Like a fisherman's net, an iridescent
Gossamer web, a tangled golden braid
Cast across the rolling waves.

The face of Sol, made bare
As the globe ineluctably spins,
Evaporates the haze: evanescent,
Dissolved in the morning air.
Sunrise on the Pacific: a new day begins.

jonathan wall

Los Angeles. Sunset.

Los Angeles. Sunset.
Yellow-orange ribbon
wrapped around the
smog blurred horizon.

He sat under a tree
wondering where his
soul might be. It
seemed that although many things
had passed nothing addressed
the question at hand.

Once he was informed
blue robin eggs would
send his soul to hell,
but they were just ramblings
and he knew it.

Of course the question of
soul position is but one question
in hundreds maybe more that
flashed before him in the evenings
bringing sadness, confusion, and
other brackish feelings into the
the light.

Each evening that the uncertainty
decided to descend
he found that in indulging it
would motivate a deeper sadness

Tears often temporarily relieved
him, but never addressed or solved
the "problem".

jonathan wall

Los Angeles. Sunset.
Not Yellow-orange, But
pink and purple and blue sheets
covered his horizon.

Something is different. A person
fleeting in this world but in
rhythm with him sits beside him.
In the evenings the questions
stand as always.
Clawing at the couple. As
individuals sitting next to each
other they face the problems.
And quickly the end is the same,
but then as he turns away from the
adversary and she turns away from
uncertainty in defeat the couple sees
each other.

There worlds are the same. Sadness
persists. People are still fleeting
and disappointing as they fail to
function on basic levels together.

However, she and he as the sun and moon
shine down on the world, may bring light
and caring and understanding to each other.

Struggling with the adversary is life.
Once he realized it he knew that the only
thing he could do is live by an ideal
with the hopes that someday things would
change.

To live with love.
To enjoy with love.
To grow with love.
To share in love.
To love her.

ON THE THEME OF

identity

Heartless Tom*

Tom had no heart.
It burst out when he was eight.
His mom fed him too much milk.
A bubble developing in his gastro
Floated upward into his chest,
And crushed the heart from inside.

A heart was weaved vents;
When it was broken, blood vessels clave from the wound,
Like old wools from ragged glove.
Last muscle tying two pieces together
Rifted apart like a torn rubber band,
And blood spilled all over his inside
From a pulp, once was Tom's poor heart.

So Tom had grown up with an empty thorax.
When he was nineteen, heartless Tom fell in love with a girl,
A silk merchant's daughter. Her name was Mizuko.
Under the moon, by the seashore, the two made love.
He kissed her hair, she kissed his cheek,
He kissed her sex, she kissed his groin.
Tom gripped her hands and confessed his love.
Mizuko looked puzzled.
"How can you love me when you don't have a heart!"
"But ... I ... I really do," he stuttered.
Mizuko lay on top, placing her ear on his bare chest.

But she could not hear a sound.
No heartbeat. No sweet words whispered. Silent as a broken bell.
The torso was cold and dead like a used gasoline tank.

Tom's love was one-sided,
Since the girl could not feel his heartbeat.
Instead Mizuko fell for another guy, Abu, an astronaut.
"Come with me, baby. I will take you to the moon."
Abu took her hand, and together they flew away on a blazing spacecraft,
Away from the seashore,
Away from heartless Tom.

The sun was rising. Tom was sitting alone.
With his left hand, he reached into his mouth, down through his throat,
To the big void filling in his chest; Tom was searching for his heart.
Clutched a piece, he pulled it out,
Stared at the meat chunk,
Wondered where the other half was,
Finally threw it down to the sea.

megan r. kennedy

Identity

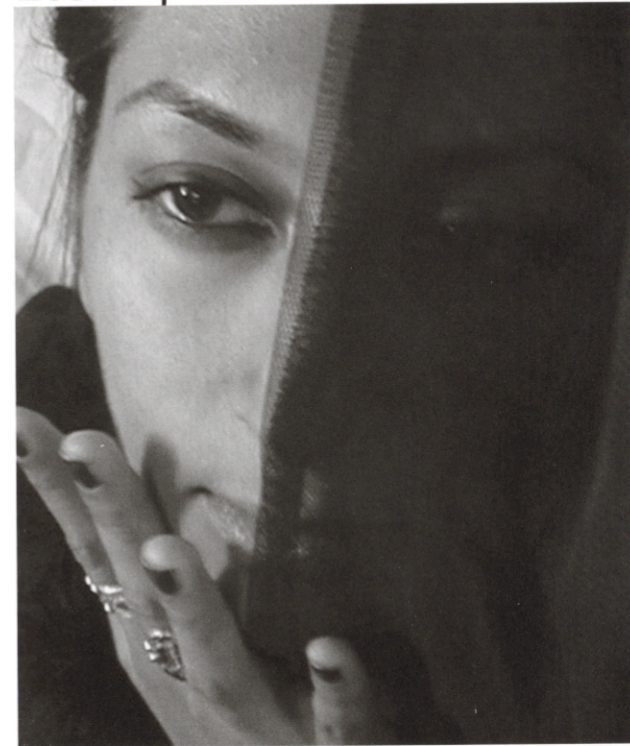
Defining who I am.
What I think, what I feel.
How I respond, how I act.
My opinions, my views.
This is me.

A fingerprint, a footprint.
A smile, a laugh.
To each his own, and to me, mine.
A musicality of voice, a smile with the eyes.
This is me.

To sing, to dance.
To read, to learn.
To walk, to run.
To flow through life.
This is me.

To remain unique.
To show the world my soul.
To shine, to fly.
To stay happy.
This is my IDENTITY.

Looking for the hidden



520x432 pixels

iram parveen bilal and jacquelyn wilbur

paul nagami

And I am a Doggerel Bard

Whenever Paul Nagami wrote his verse,
He aped his betters, for he knew no Art.
His wretched editor, who'd never seen worse,
Went home and shoved a pencil through his heart.

Paul's Words fell sweetly on the page—
His Thought flowed from the Pen—
He wrote—three lines—then realized—
He was not Dickinson.

So boldly, madly, leaping from the murky wave of pastiche, he spun free verse, spinning
words as silk, a web of his own, for he was he himself in his web!
He was Paul, Paul alone!
His eternal scream,
Ripped free of the tyranny of the cold iambs,
Loosed upon the world, unrestrained, mighty,
The once-crushed, jagged cola can of his soul spearing the calloused foot of the world!
His soul in itself bursting from the cruel confines,
Flowing sweetly into a greater bottle, yet screeching defiance,
Then he realized that he was imitating Whitman, badly.

kevin peng

I sat in a grove

I sat in a grove and fed her berries. They were red, she was ripe, and I loved her.

I wish I could tell you I'm changed now, but the story's about us. That one
mystical summer in the middle of everything else, everything categorized simply as
before and after.

I can never forget her scent, nor her company. To me she was all there ever was
and could be—all I ever wanted. We spent early evenings at the sandy shores,
watching the receding tides and waning sun. The sky turned a majestic, almost
resigned purple right before the sun set; everything was enveloped in a trancelike
haze. It was in that context that I knew her.

I can sense the carolers chanting, singing what I used to hear.

The music left with her, and the summer receded steadily. I felt I never knew
her—only the vision of who she was to me.

And I lie now broken, deaf, despairing.

I'm left with only what I knew of her myself. Her beauty. Her gaze. Her feelings,
her caring, her emotions. Her desires, opinions, idiosyncrasies, quirks, beauty,
and love. All this.

A handful of dusty memories, thrown to the wind and carried off mercilessly.
That's all I have now, to sustain me for what remains of the after.

I'm lost.

elena fabrikant

On the Identity of Bath Utensils

The sponge is oft misunderstood
By those who think they know for good
The difference between flor- and faun-,
The kind with one last "a" tacked on.
A sponge can neither run nor walk
Nor hunt nor graze nor think nor talk.
It would not make a lively pet.
Its girls breed without guys. And yet,
For puzzlement a splendid feast,
The -ologists have dubbed it beast.
They claim its children swim around,
It sucks up food in water found
To laymen's horror, they have shown
The sponge not -phytan but a -zoan.
Howe'er, to me it's still a shrub,
A purple weed beside my tub.

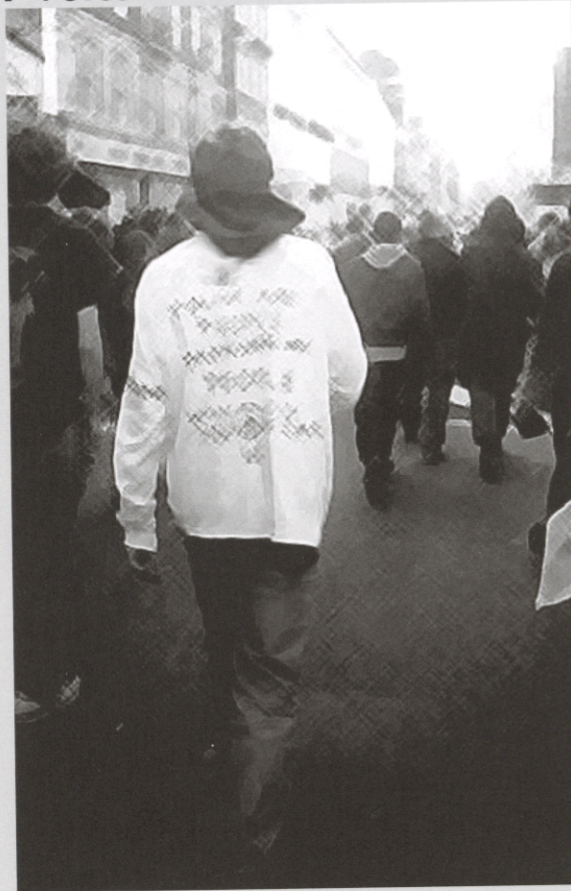
brandi cossairt

I am. Am I?

You told me I was special and I just cried
my mind wandered away and my heart died
Fuzzy green daffodils wafting in the winter's
heat far from itchy cosmonauts.
Focus, focus, focus, here and now
You told me I was worthy and I just sighed
my soul sank further and I said you lied
Horrible flamboyant clowns ran after the wood nymphs
that hid in the meat.
Focus, focus, focus on just these words
I didn't want to hear it, I didn't and I don't
I can't let you make that mistake, I can't and I won't
I am different, more so than you know
So now I say farewell and it's time that I go
Free loading monkeys are a burden on the
democratic system of purple polka dotted bananas
And when gingerbread men are left in the oven
their eyes melt away and they cannot see.
Focus on here, focus on now, focus... what
IS THAT?
Suicide of the self.

Protest

dorota korta



35 mm and Adobe Photoshop. London, England

Too Late 2003

carole lu



2400x1800 pixels and digital media

hannah shafaat

Self Portrait

Everything in a whirlwind,
Sex, love, hate, recovery
Monotony.
Stepping through each phase of the cycle in faster and faster progression,
Unable to wait
Impatient to move on, ahead, behind, whichever it should be.
Each time getting deeper and deeper
More and more severe
Becoming inextricably entangled, a web of lies, truth, pain and chaos.
Planning each step as if this time, it will be different.
Performing each with a perverse sense of satisfaction,
Inevitably ending the entire endeavor altogether,
Then hurrying home,
The masochistic desire to visit the attic,
Watch the almost tangible mutilation arise,
And examine the damage inflicted on my once immaculate soul.

anonymous

Composite

I look so much my father's son
Sunken eyes
Borrowed face

My mother made me live her way
How to pray
Who to hate

I steal pieces of my friends
Their sly words
Jim's cool walk

These thoughts I think they are not mine
Plagiarized
Counterfeit

Reflection of another man
Stares at me
Break the glass

None of this is really me
Composite
Not myself

Bob

drawing class, spring 2003



Acrylics on 9 3"x5" canvases, painted by 9 students in Caltech's painting and drawing class

Yellow

xiao peng

Black pastel, yellow acrylic paint, and acrylic gloss on 12" vinyl record



steve pracko

In the Dark

Most people go their entire lives without ever knowing how it feels to have a knife to their throat.

I've done it to myself.
I've done it more than once.
But I can't tell you how it feels, because it didn't make me feel anything at all.

I can read my journal and I trace the descent into darkness.

I wanted to be like everybody else.
I wanted to fit in.
I changed my body.
I changed my face.
I changed who I was.
I did anything they ever asked of me.
And then they changed the rules.

I started judging everyone and putting them into neat little categories.
The parade of smiling happyfaces marching two-by-two and hand-in-hand.
The little thieves who ask for all of the rewards and none of the work.
Drink to live and live to drink, the hedonists never bother to stop and think.

The living hell of seeing them everyday.
The thieves who take everything from me.
The hedonists who stand for everything I'm not.
The happyfaces who remind me of what I will never be.

I can't even bring myself to look at them anymore.
My insides churn and I want to scream.
A thousand times I've written the phrase in that journal.
I hate all of this so much.
Dancing.
Go home.
Turn out the lights.
Make love.

steve pracko

Their Saturday night.
Movie.
Party.
Dancing.
Go home.
Turn out the lights.
Make love.

My Saturday night.
Stay at home.
Double over in pain.
Cry.
Regret.
Turn out the lights.
Hold knife to throat.

I know I could never do it myself.
So I make a deal with God.
I put the tip against my windpipe and press in just a bit.
All He has to do is start a little earthquake.
Shift the ground half an inch.
The knife goes in.
We'll be each other's alibi.

But nothing happens.
I guess some things just weren't meant to be.

Best Friends at Thousand Island Lake



1360x2048 pixels, Ansel Adams Wilderness, California

kathy scott

identity contest winner

yuliya gorlina



917x917 pixels

Identifying My Crude Form

renat bekbolatov



4.5"x5.5" · pencil on paper

anonymous

"No really. You sound just like a seventeen year old girl."

It had been nearly a day since Jon had said it, but Jason couldn't stop the conversation from repeating itself in his head. It really wasn't fair; the three of them had ganged-up on him. Yet still... He had that awful feeling you get when you first realize that someone else might actually be right—about something awful.

"Why is it again that you're not eating?"

"I told you; I ate yesterday."

"That's so messed up."

"Hey, give me a break; it's not easy. Just because I don't eat doesn't mean I'm not hungry a lot of the time."

"Then why do it?"

"For at least once in my life, I want to be healthy. I already told you about what happened last year."

"You know you're acting like a teenage girl."

"Oh, please. Enough with the melodrama."

"But you are; you're terrified of gaining weight."

"That's not true. I just know from experience what is going to happen to me if I don't make some kind of change in my lifestyle."

"I just don't think it's a good idea is all."

"Come on, I'm trying as hard as I can—and it doesn't help to have you guys constantly giving me a hard time about it."

(exasperated) "No, really. You sound just like a seventeen year old girl. Do you even know what anorexia means?"

A burst of loud static jolted Jason from a sound sleep. The alarm clock had a radio built into it instead of a buzzer, but it was impossible to get any reception inside the dormitory walls, so Jason woke up to static each morning. He told himself it was just as well, since everyone knew the radio stations in this city were terrible, and what few tunes he could identify through the crackling, he was more than willing to have stifled.

He threw off the blanket, and stood up for just long enough to slap the "off" button, before lying back down to stare at the ceiling for another minute or two, letting the chill of the morning air against his skin finish waking him up. The red numbers on the clock read "8:03," and he watched them, waiting until they turned "8:04." Somehow it always took a huge amount of effort to start moving, but once he was awake it was surprisingly easy to make himself go running.

After slowly but methodically donning a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, he crouched down to tie his running shoes. He remembered purchasing them. They were still the most expensive pair of shoes he had ever owned (by a factor of at least two), but having used them, he did have to admit that they were better; if nothing else, he didn't get blisters on his feet anymore. Three years had gone by so quickly. Jason tried very hard to keep himself from thinking about his earlier attempts at self-improvement. Desperately wanting to be optimistic, he kept trying to convince himself that it didn't matter how many times he had failed in the past—all he could do was try his best this time.

Jason glanced down the hall towards Jon's room. At the beginning of the term, when this all started, Jon had always come with him. His door was closed now, though, and Jason decided not to wake him.

After rubbing his hands together rapidly, and a few deep breaths, he willed himself to start. It always seemed like the first step was somehow even more like a fall than all the others; you just had to throw yourself into it, and if your

legs didn't catch you...well, luckily, they always had, so far.

Jason pretended to keep pace with Jon, even though he wasn't there, and prior experiences had taught him that the next time Jon ran with him in reality, he probably still wouldn't really be able to keep up. For the moment, but not without effort, he contented himself with the thought that he was improving, even if slowly, and not by very much.

Once around campus; it's only a mile and a half. He forced himself to take long, slow breaths; long, slow strides. "I feel a little guilty," Jon had giggled on the first day, "you take a step and a half to each one of mine." Jon was still six inches taller, and most of it in his legs, but Jason could almost match his stride now, when he really tried. Again, Jason fought against his pessimistic impulses, and attempted to celebrate his small victories.

That heavy feeling started building in his legs, and his breath quickened, becoming sharper, and irregular at times, but he forced himself to push through it. In principle, it was the easiest thing in the world; you just decide to keep going. At the moment when you have to make the decision, however, it's a completely different story.

Gasping for breath, he pressed the walk signal, despite the little sign informing pedestrians that the button was merely provided for the visually impaired, and didn't actually change the signal. Jason always pressed the button, as if it somehow made him feel better, or (more likely) gave him an excuse to hang on to the pole, preventing himself from collapsing under his own weight.

The signal changed, and he crossed the street towards the gymnasium.

*

"How do you do it?" Jason asked Jon, as they crossed the baseball field to the front of the gymnasium.

"What?"

"It seems like you're not even trying; you hold back so I can keep up, and you don't even break a sweat." Jason brushed the sweat off of his own forehead. "I don't think I've ever seen you out of breath."

"Relax, you're doing really well. I bet most of the people on this campus can't do half what you do."

"Why is that not much consolation..."

"Hey, people are built differently, buddy." Jon shrugged. "If I don't get my five square meals in a day, I faint."

"Yeah, life must be real tough."

"You're still only eating once a day, aren't you?"

"It's not like I'm going to just give up. Why?"

"Just curious, that's all..."

*

There was a scale in the men's locker room; occasionally they would use it after stretching and lifting weights upstairs.

Jon played with the counter-weight and sighed. "I haven't gained anything?"
(softly) "I have."

*

"It seems like it gets harder every day."

"Hmm..." Jon furrowed his brow. "That just sounds wrong. I wonder what the problem is."

"I just want to get better, but I don't think I can try any harder than I am, and it isn't working."

"Look, if you're comparing yourself to me, I'm a moving target now—if we keep going together, it will be a very long time before you catch up. That's just the way it works, and you know it, Jason. You are improving; I don't understand why you can't accept that."

"Maybe if I only eat every other day..."

*

Jason sat on the doctor's table, wearing the ridiculous smock and his jockey shorts, which he had refused to

surrender (he had actually considered accusing them of sexual harassment if they didn't let him keep them). He hated every minute of this; why did the college feel it was necessary to have him poked, prodded, measured, manipulated, and in general, completely humiliated, before he could start classes as a freshman? His patience began to wane as he waited for the doctor to come back, tell him nothing was wrong, and send him home (hopefully, in his own clothes.)

The doorknob turned, and Jason watched as Dr. Heffernan entered and quietly closed the door. He had a notebook under his left arm, and the plastic "doctor smile" plastered on his face. Jason felt dirty just being in the same room as this patronizing bastard. The doctor's obvious lack of humanity made Jason want to vomit.

Placing the notebook on the counter, Dr. Heffernan motioned for Jason to come look at it with him. It had been opened to a page with two graphs, one on either side. "Take a look at this." The practiced, eerie smile never left his mouth. "This is your height, at the 40th percentile." He pointed, then continued. "This is your weight, at the 80th percentile," he paused, pointing to a spot on the second graph, "Get the picture?"

For the first time in his life, Jason's jaw dropped of its own accord. It had always seemed silly when cartoon characters did that, but suddenly it made a lot more sense. Stunned, he turned to look up at the doctor, not quite believing what had just been said and trying to decide whether to scream or cry. Of all the injustices he thought he would have to endure during the physical, this was far beyond anything he could ever have imagined. Eventually, he settled for closing his mouth.

The doctor wasn't looking at him anymore. He scribbled some more illegible notes on the school form, signed it, and handed it to Jason; who, now more than ever, just wanted out of that office. As soon as the door closed behind the doctor, Jason threw his clothes back on (not even caring that his shirt ended up inside-out), grabbed the form, and ran down the stairs, in much the same way as the first of many tears ran down his face.

*

"Yeah, that was a real bad idea." Jason shook his head.

"What?"

"Breakfast."

"Why now?"

"I wish my body could remember how awful I feel after eating, before I eat."

"Buddy, you have to eat sometime." Jon brushed the hair out of his eyes.

"I understand that, but not as much as I do."

"Dude, you know you're not making any sense, right?"

"What part of 'I-feel-ill-right-now' isn't making sense?"

"Aw, come on, be reasonable. I really am worried about you."

"Don't be. Things are going to work out this time. I mean, look at this; we've been exercising nearly every day since the beginning of the term. It's like a resolution, only it's not New Year's and we're not quitting." Jason smiled at his own witticism.

A pained look crossed Jon's face, and he hesitated before responding. "This isn't good for you, Jason."

"Hey, lay off. What about Noel? She's vegan, for crying out loud."

"Yeah, but she does eat something every day—and even still, she spends most of her time sleeping. She barely has enough energy to take care of her homework. Is that what you want?"

"No! Don't you understand? I have to do something; I have to at least try. I don't want to live like this anymore. If I can't believe that there is at least some small hope for change, then I don't know what to do, short of throwing myself off a bridge, and I don't particularly want to do that."

Jon sighed heavily. "Come on, man. Let's go to class."

*

Maybe they're right, Jason thought to himself. I wonder why I always have to be so stubborn...

He walked to the library, and flipped through the catalog, trying to figure out which section of the building might hold information on eating disorders. Every so often, he would glance around suspiciously, as though a librarian might catch him, and disapprove of his presence. Using the provided golf pencil and scrap of paper, he scribbled down a few call numbers, and walked briskly toward the stairwell.

"Anorexia." Jason stared at the word in the title. Can this really be happening? he thought, closely followed by, how could I have let this happen?

He exhaled sharply, tucked the book under his arm, and re-assessed his surroundings. Convinced that he was alone, Jason sat down on the oor in a corner, and began slowly to digest portions of the book.

*

Jason walked down the hall to Jon's room. There were always people there; Jon often joked about how his devious plot to make the room a social center of the building had been working out masterfully. As expected, Jon and his girlfriend were there, along with his roommate, and a couple of their friends. Jason joined the circle, but didn't say anything for a while, just listening to them talk.

At a lull in the conversation, Rick poked him, and smiled. "How's it going?"

"It's—it's been a lot better..."

Suddenly, several cheerful faces faded to looks of concern, and Jason felt guilty for interrupting their merriment. "Do you need a hug?" Jon's girlfriend asked.

"Yeah, actually, I think I do."

Sarah was always the best person to get a hug from. For being such a small person, somehow she could make it feel like her arms completely surrounded you, and like they might have even lifted you off the ground, were it not for the silly laws of physics. He hugged her back, and whispered, "Thank you."

*

"Jon—" He stopped, and turned to look at Jason. "I believe you now."

They stood there, silent, searching each other's faces. The nearby streetlight made the water from the sprinklers sparkle like fountains. Jon was a little surprised, for a brief moment, but it was clear that he understood exactly what was meant, and the seriousness of the situation. Jason released the breath he had held, and relaxed slightly. He shivered, and blinked a few times to clear his eyes.

Still without a word, Jon put his arm across Jason's shoulders, and pulled him close. They continued walking down the street. "What changed your mind?"

*

There were a few people ahead of them in the grill line at the cafeteria. Seeing that there were actually still two glasses of the fresh orange juice this morning, Jon discreetly reached forward and took them, handing one to Jason with a grin and a wink. When it came their turn, Jason actually ordered this time, and caught (out of the corner of his eye) the look of relief and approval that Jon was clearly trying very hard not to be obvious about.

They sat down, and Jason stared quietly at the food on his plate. Jon set his utensils down, swallowed, and reached out to place his hand on Jason's shoulder. "I know it's not going to be easy, but we're friends; we're going to make it through this together."

Jason looked up at him, and then pressed his eyes closed for a moment, to keep them from watering. He was able to manage a hoarse whisper, "Thank you so much...I guess—I guess I'm still getting used to actually having friends."

Jon giggled again. "Say no more; I know exactly what you're talking about. Story of my freshman year."

Slowly, Jason raised the fork to his mouth.

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