





It's A Girl!

Patrick Quinn

I couldn't even look at her. I wanted to make her suffer as much as she had made me. She deserved to climb to the gates of heaven, glimmering golden with promised joy, just to be thrown back down its stairs like I had been. It was supposed to all be worth it, the sickness, the pain, the gore, but she was no gentle angel. Nothing could make her happy, after all I'd done.

She cried as I unswaddled her; I cried because she was nothing like me. I tied the strings around her like a shard of meat, crossing them in a tight tangle just in case she tried to escape. I knew it wasn't likely, but as you can see, it turned out there was a lot I thought I knew about life, and didn't really. I tied her pudgy arms behind her back, her little legs together. I wanted to put a ball in her mouth to shut her up, but the only one I could find small enough to stuff in there was still in the packaging, and would be returned.

The strings were taught, paling her flesh, the helium of their heads pulling her from my arms. As I walked toward the door, a few popped in the throat of the hallway behind me, though none of the ones I'd picked out special that said *It's A Girl!* in flowery font. I carried her outside, the balloons bobbing behind us like foiled dogs, and there, from the back porch, I loosened my cradle and watched her float away until she was shrunk back down to the size of a single cell, a complete reversal of our time together. She wailed the entire flight, sirening the sky, then I never had to think about her again. Until you came along asking how the little bundle of joy was.



Heart, Skip, and A Beat

Rebecca Agauas

I feel like Dr. Grant in Jurassic Park as he lays on the triceratops, its chest
moving up and down.

In your bed, I lay on your chest.

I listen to the sweet sounds of your heart beating.

It's like a symphony in there.

These notes are music to my ears, sending vibrations throughout my entire
body.

I listen to your breathing.

Inhaling, exhaling.

Oxygen in, carbon dioxide out.

This is the heart that loves me wholeheartedly.

These are the valves that pump love into my soul.

Is there a sound more beautiful than your mothers heartbeat?

No, not for me.



OZZY

Theodore Wallbanger

Following an anticipated wood chipper operator error incident, Phred’s one armed cousin, Tang Tinker wasted zero sleeps in filing suit against Epic Records in winter of ’91.

A statute of limitations debacle incinerated any hope of restitution from Chuey’s Chompers & Rototillers for Tang Tinker’s beef jerkied left arm stick.

T.T., although still mirroring the body of a smashed salamander, felt slightly targeted by emotional duress storms gang clouding her days all due to the haunting toxic leach pissing from global airwaves every moment “Mr. Tinker Train” careened across analog radio tracks.

Quadruple ranch release tip dipping allowed Tang “THE SPINNER” to exclusively initiate under the table monetized live sex streaming of her glossy skin tart for XRATEDLIPSTICKSANDWICHES.

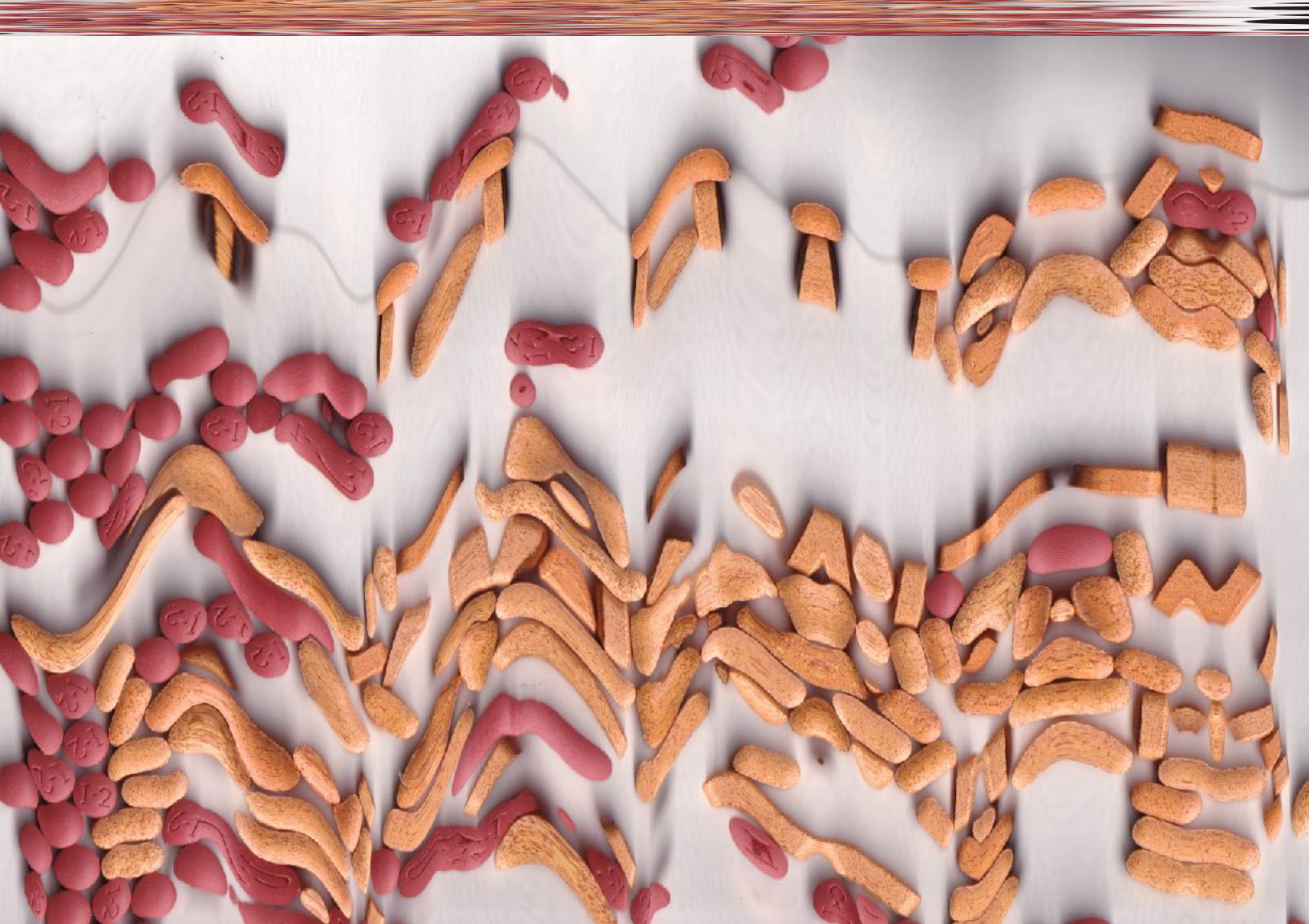
Tang went all in, mildly strong arming Ozzy and company with a massive loss of consortium balloon affixed to an impenetrable umbrella claim.

In Phreddy's warped reality, their mostly consensual meat sessions were side perk action dumps, almost like a lubricated high-five validating all unspoken contractual DNA obligations whilst beckoning demon spunk dust bunnies for sacred incense blessings across the hairless backs of their raw dog performance tragedies.

Incestual maneuvers rode unholy dark dingleberry rails with Tang Tinker train, garnering Phreddy some familial meatstick grind practice shots while also unclogging his personal coagulated drip tank sputter lines.

NDA's were candle wax dripped upon then witnessed by Ozzy's agents. Wax elements were clutch due to microscopic agreement clauses specifically demanding a minimum of three organic compounds enhancing Ozzy's "Prince of Darkness" persona.

Press hyenas sprinkled some language in the trades alluding to lifetime passes to all of Oz's future shows in addition to monthly visitation with one of the Osbourne's cherished family furless pets, Jacko.

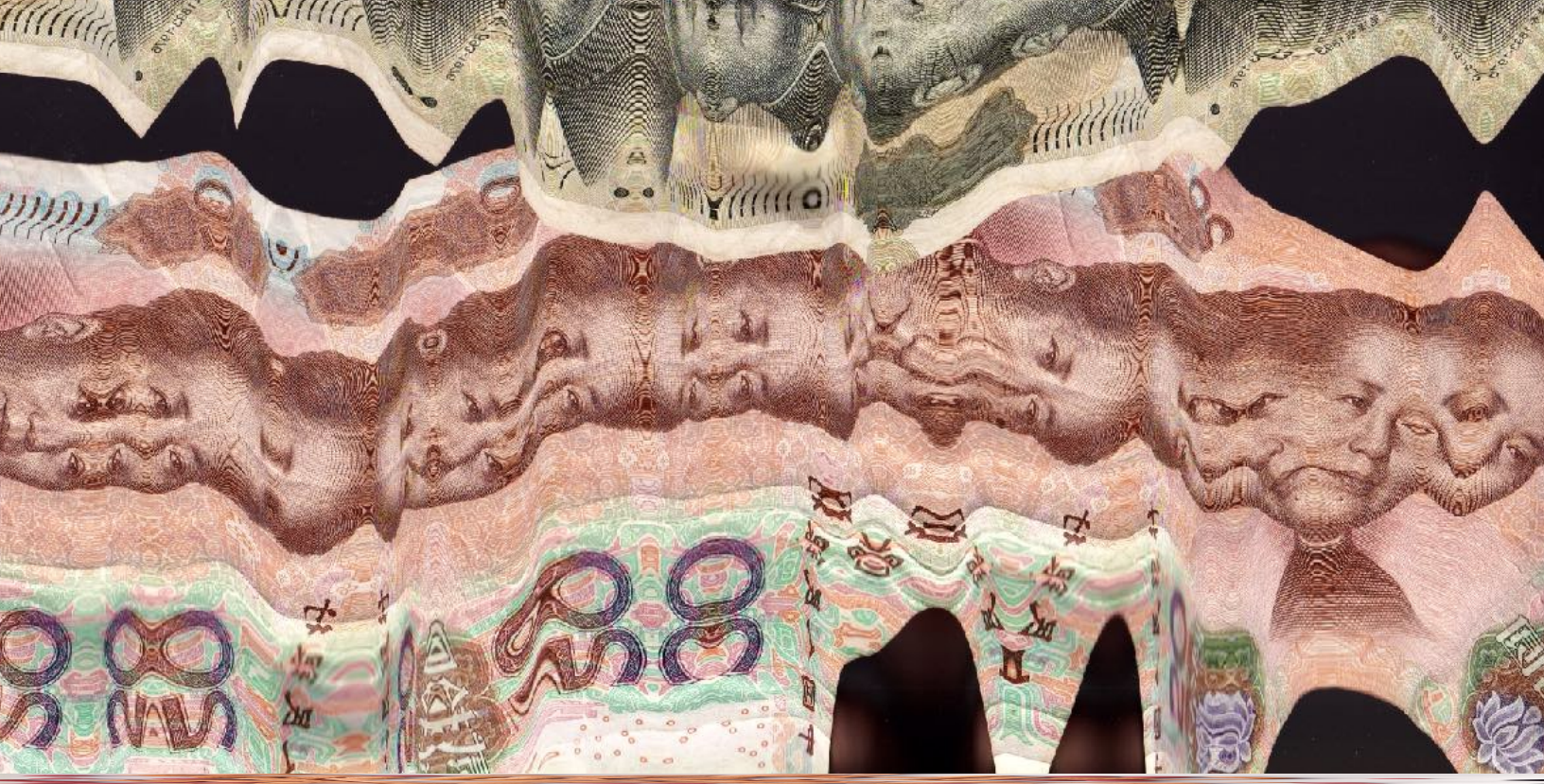




Coffee Stains

Rebecca Agauas

She's the one I call when I'm in trouble and in need of help. When they tell me I only have one phone call, it is her I ring. Got a cold? She's the one I ask for homemade chicken noodle soup and camomile tea with honey. When my brain is on fire, she's in the next room, ready to stand on the front line and go to battle with me. But when we battle against one another, the next room feels like a planet away. Mars never seemed so cold and lonely. Neither of us wanting to extend an olive branch, stubborn to the core. But that's nothing a hot cup of coffee and a buttery croissant can't fix. She'll wipe the crumbs from my mouth and I'll brush them off her shirt. Who else is going to love me and all my coffee stains?



Legend of the Mamaluks

Jonathan Vidgop

Translated by Leo Shtutin

Yusuf ibn Ayyub, a Kurd from Tikrit known by the infidels as Saladin, rose to prominence at the court of the Egyptian caliph, seized power, routed the Crusaders, captured Yerushalayim, and met his end, though not before establishing the Ayyubid dynasty; after the mysterious death of As-Salih, that bloody dynasty's last sultan, the rootless Aybak, first of the Mamaluks, compelled As-Salih's widow into matrimony, and thereupon became undisputed Ruler.

For almost three centuries, the rootless slaves that were the Mamaluks ruled over a vast empire. These slaves morphed into masters. They crushed the Crusaders, halted the Horde, and their Ottoman-serving descendants forced Bonaparte to retreat. Not one of them remembered their progenitors, their tribe, their tongue.

This story begins long ago, when the first of them, Aybak, was not yet born. Throughout the Great Steppe, across the Caucasus, in penurious chivalric Europe, in Nubia and Benin, they were purchased by the hundreds alongside horses stolen or seized in battle. Still unproficient in their own tongues, they had not the skill to stay mounted and understood nothing of what was happening. They were no more than five years of age. Slave traders would buy up children. Boys. Cumans, Nubians, Georgians, Cathayans, Slavs, Franks, Saxons, Danes. They were

dispatched via endless caravan routes to the Egyptian desert. Hundreds of them did not survive the journey. They died in agony. Cold and heat, disease and hunger claimed their lives. The most resilient survived, their thirst for life carrying them through. A thousand of them gathered in Egypt. A thousand boys, speaking every conceivable tongue and failing to understand one another. The great caliph amassed an all-tribe, all-child army. Every few years, a fresh thousand would be brought to Egypt.

How sudden was the birth of this idea in his mind? No one knows. Perhaps his scribes had told him tales of distant ancient Sparta. But his vision was more grandiose than any Sparta. Assemble a thousand five-year-olds, and in a year's time they would forget their tongues. In two, their parents. In three, they would be horsemen. In five, masters of weaponry. In ten, warriors. In fifteen, the survivors among them would become commanders. And all the while they would remain outsiders. White ones, black ones, yellow ones.

Moris Simashko, blessed be his memory, told us a legend about the Mamaluks. They grew up on the drill ground. Fighting was all they knew in childhood; they had weapons for playthings, and their native realm was scorching sunlight. There was nothing in the drill ground but sand that would clog fallen boys' mouths. And then the caliph ordered the planting of a tree. A tree that would haunt the Mamaluks' dreams for generations. They now had something to die for. It would be their one love amidst hatred and death, a lone tree on the drill ground.

They became commanders. They seized power. They established an unparalleled dynasty, one where the throne was passed down not to offspring but to former Mamaluk slaves. They morphed from warriors into monarchs, from paupers into masters of empire. Their greatness endured for three centuries and more. They were invincible. They dreamed of the tree.

One of these bloated rulers had the tree cut down. He had no use for it now. There were orchards full of trees at his disposal. The new generation of Mamaluks began dreaming different dreams. They dreamed of weaponry, the snorting of horses, the enemy's crimson blood. No longer did they dream of the tree.

To the north, the Ottomans were gaining in strength. They routed the Persians and Anatolia. Sultan Selim toppled the Mamaluks. Those who survived entered the service of the Turks. The Mamaluk empire, the empire of slave-kings, crumbled forever. The Mamaluks vanished. Vanished almost as abruptly as they entered the scene. The army of children sank into oblivion.

What would have become of them if a well-fed fool hadn't cut down their tree?..



what we keep to ourselves

rachael vaughan clemmons

The waking was sudden.

I gasped for breath as my eyes fluttered open, lids so heavy they threatened to collapse on themselves. The rhythm behind my rib cage was fast, erratic. I wondered, for a split second, whether I was dying or not.

Suspended, as I was then, in the goo between deep sleep and the cusp of waking, on the edge of id and ego, I tried to fall asleep again, to cloak one piece of myself away from all the others, to give myself the briefest reprieve from all the thinking, the ceaseless, perpetual thinking. The harder I tried, the sharper the pain became, the more plentiful: a murder of beaks pecking endlessly at my sternum.

Fuck it then, I thought. I'll just be awake.

I had fallen asleep while retwisting my hair, and as I accepted my unfortunate fate of being increasingly conscious, I noticed that my left hand was clasping a nearly-empty can of soju spritzer and my right was stuck in a jar of hair wax. A K-Drama played soundlessly on the TV—good coats, as always.

I smeared as much wax as I could back in the jar, the green goo sticking on the inside of the container, unbudgeable. Using my other hand, I dug the crusts out of the quarry of my eyes and cracked the door, the muscle in my middle still pounding. I peeked around the corners and beyond the stairs, my retinas slowly, barely adjusting to the darkness. I realized, after a beat, I had been holding my breath.

Coast, clear.

With a deep breath, I plodded to the bathroom down the hall—that's the only word for it, my steps heavy and drowsy—and washed the rest of the wax off of my hands. I glanced up into the mirror: a sight. Half of my hair twisted, the other half matted, coiling, slithering around my throat. I took a few deep breaths to quiet the thunder in my chest and considered myself blankly: the shallow pools of my eyes, the deep creases underneath, the marshmallow-like puffiness, the dramatic, meditative breaths. I thought of my sister casually mentioning, a couple of days ago, that it looked like the light had left my eyes.

I started retwisting my hair again, careful not to meet my own eyes in the reflection. I wouldn't make that mistake again. I couldn't stand seeing myself as I truly was: a small, pitiful thing.

After a while, I decided it might be a good idea to finish my soju as I went. I opened the door slowly, again peering around for any surprises, and took a single step over the threshold. A creak, and the tinny sound of bangles. I looked up and instinctively jumped back, only just suppressing a shrill. My mother had been standing outside of the door, perched on the steps. Waiting for me in the dark, in the umbra of my dreams.

"Good morning!" She said it cheerily. As if it weren't three in the morning. As if she hadn't said what she said. Did what she did.

I stuttered a hello, my heart racing again, slamming itself against my paper-thin resolve, wrestling itself loose to better float, aimlessly among the viscera. If I looked down, I would be able to see it, my veins and ventricles pounding, kicking against me, trying to break free.

"I was wondering what you were doing up so early."

She didn't give me a chance to respond. I considered that it hadn't been a question to begin with.

“By the way,” she continued. Her face was unreadable. She lifted her arm slowly, and jabbed her finger in my general direction, her arm of bracelets jangling. “You can’t talk to me like that. Ever again.” She started down the stairs, casually. After a few steps, she spun around, jabbing her finger, again and again. I could feel the static rolling off of her knuckles, a flash of lightning.

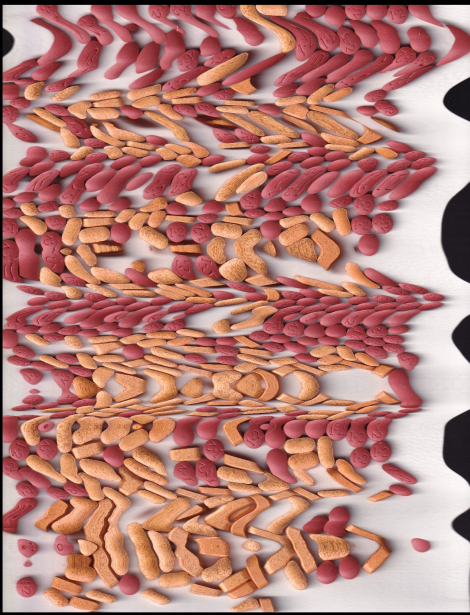
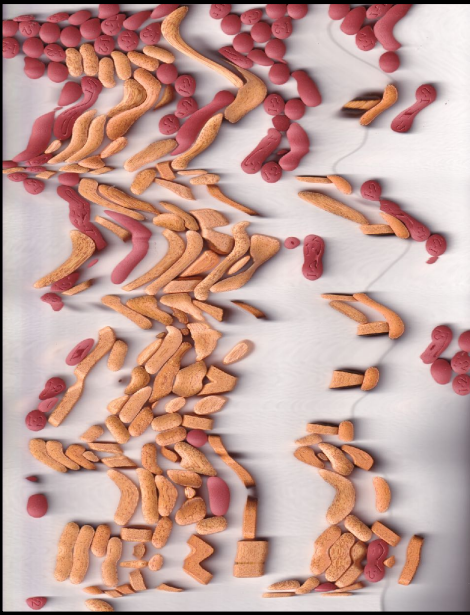
“And I know we don’t have a good relationship. But you didn’t need to say that to my face.” She whipped around, her steps still unhurried, and marched down the stairs, the silvers still rapping against each other. Once I heard her descend into the basement, I let out a long breath.

Something had started to fester inside of me since I had moved back in with my mother. A wet rot creeping from the present to the past: a rapid, insurmountable spread.

Yesterday, cornered, I had bared my teeth, torn open that top layer of flesh, exposing only the smallest morsel of my resentment, my frustration, my love—misshapen and malformed though it was.

Today, browbeaten, I remember my teenage mantra: In the eternal battle between fight and flight, I’ll always choose the latter.

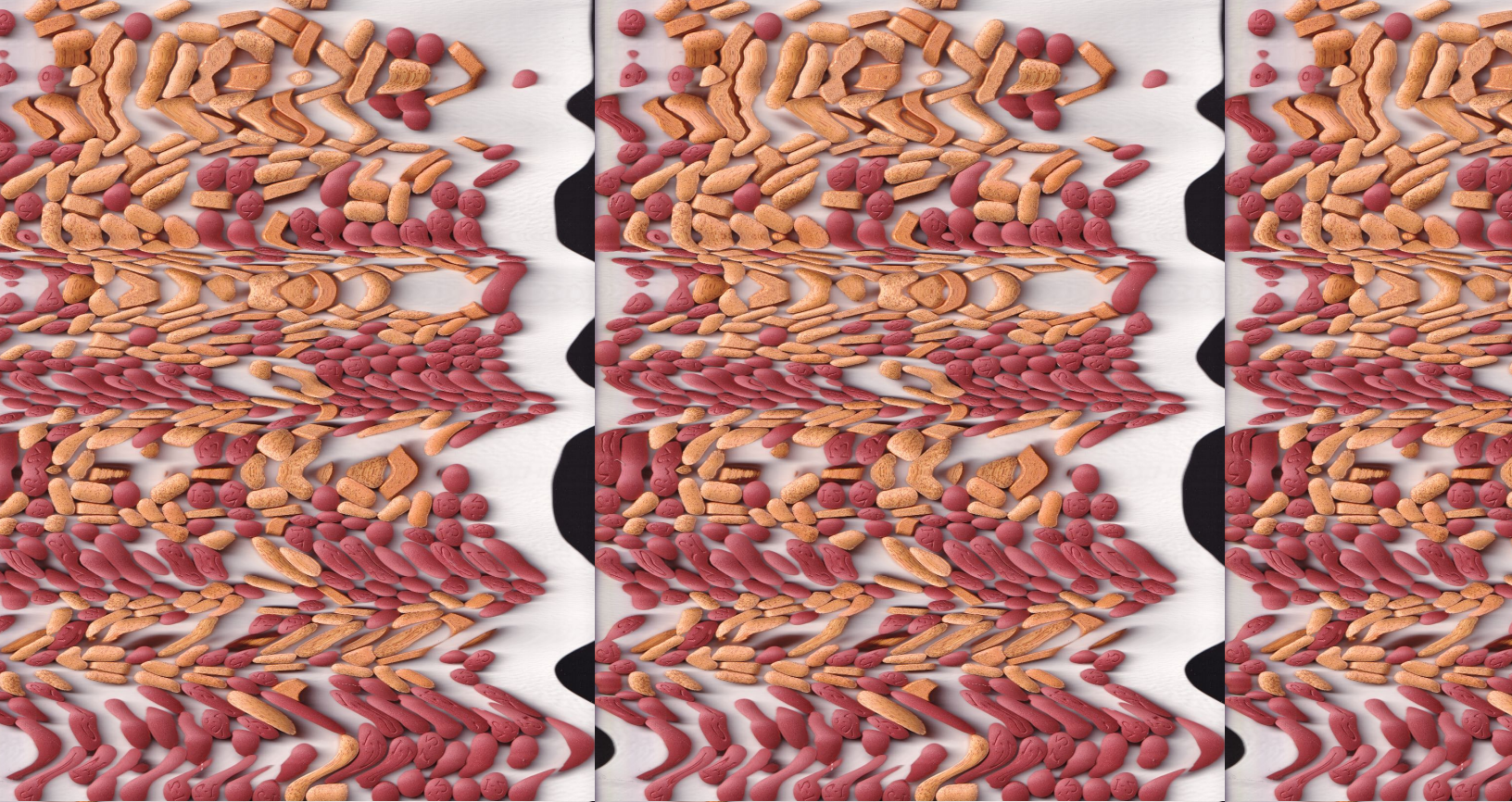




just enough

Theodore Wallbanger

a Hallmark
Father of the Decade performance was
just enough
for the young son to
almost believe
he was eternally loved
until the day arrived
elder son would
spit secrets
purging hate love
from fake love
in front of a toxic juicy family
hemorrhaging posturing porridge
across charlatan stages suppressing jubilee



Scrambled Eggs and Mac N' Cheese

Yakel Reynoso-Vargas

Cigarettes are really bad and gross. I learned that in school! They turn your lungs black, and you can't breathe. You can even get cancer if your lungs get too black! That's really bad. My teacher gave all of us papers to give to people we know who smoke. It was a paper that made people promise to quit smoking if they signed it. I took three; two for each person I knew and one extra one in case I found someone else. This has to be enough to stop someone from turning their lungs black.

On one of my brother's usual visits, he swung by me with his big bear hug, just like he always did. It was one of the things I looked forward to the most whenever I heard he was coming over. I felt his arms wrap around me, pulling me close, but along with that warmth, there was always that stinky cigarette smell. It was like a reminder, you know? Like, "Hey, I'm still here, and there's nothing that is going to make me go away." But this time, something clicked in my head. I bolted to my room, grabbed the paper I had stashed away in my dresser, and shoved it in his face. I told him I needed him to sign it, to promise me he would quit smoking and stop smelling like an ashtray. And he did, with a grin and a pen scratch. But deep down, I had a feeling it wasn't going to be that easy, but it was worth a shot. Quitting a habit isn't like

flicking a switch, no matter how hard you try to do it for the person you love.

The next time he showed up, it was like *déjà vu*, but I wasn't complaining. Same old hug, same old smell. I tried not to let it get to me, but disappointment still crept in. I guess I was too young to get why he couldn't just stop. That's what my parents always said when I asked about stuff that bothered me. They would always tell me that it'll be something that can be explained to me when I'm older. I was always curious about everything, so this never failed to frustrate me. So instead of dwelling on the smoking, I figured I'd ask for something else, something more tangible.

I had my eye on a pair of Jordans for ages. You know, those cool shoes that everyone at school had, even my own cousins who would rub it in my face! So, I thought, 'why not?' He's an adult, he's got money, right? Plus, he hadn't gotten me anything for my birthday, so it seemed fair. When I asked him, surprisingly, he didn't shoot me down. Instead, he promised he'd get them for me, just not right then. Said he'd do it once he had enough cash. I didn't fret. I knew how tough money could be for some adults. Some of them don't have money all the time, so I was willing to be patient.

That night, I went to bed with so much excitement that I couldn't sleep. I could already picture myself walking down the halls, heads turning, jaws dropping at the sight of my fresh new Jordans. But as days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, those Jordans never showed up. No birthday surprise, no shoe shopping spree. Just another letdown in a string of them.

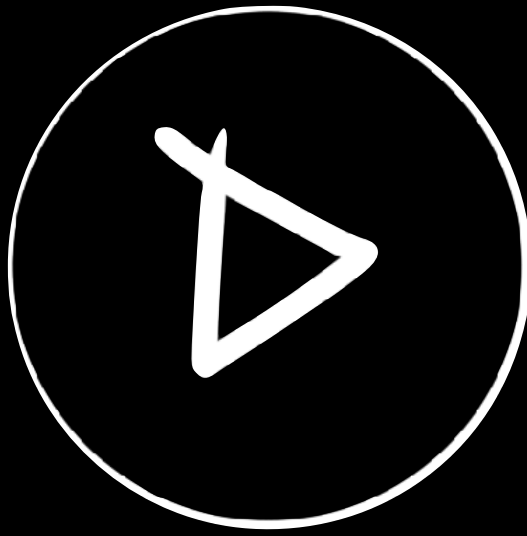
It's funny how promises can fade away like smoke in the wind. You hold onto them, hoping they'll materialize into something real, but sometimes they just vanish into thin air. And you're left wondering if it was ever real to begin with.

So yeah, maybe I was too young to understand why my brother couldn't quit smoking or why he couldn't keep his promise about those Jordans. But one thing I did understand was disappointment. It's a feeling that sticks around, just like that cigarette smell, a constant reminder of what could've been.

Ten years later, the fragments of memory of my brother's presence persist. Scrambled eggs sizzle in the skillet, a shared breakfast ritual. His famous mac and cheese, a culinary masterpiece, a taste of home. His secret ingredient? Extra cheese. Footballs flew through the air, laughter

echoing as they soared. A fractured femur, a demonstration of resilience in the face of misfortune. Opioids whispered their seductive lies, ensnaring him in their grasp on this pain. Crutches became a temporary companion, aiding his journey to recovery. His comic books adorned our shelves, portals to worlds beyond reality. And always, the scent of cigarettes, a lingering reminder of promises made and broken. In this collage of memories, the threads intertwine, forming a portrait of a life lived and promises unfulfilled.





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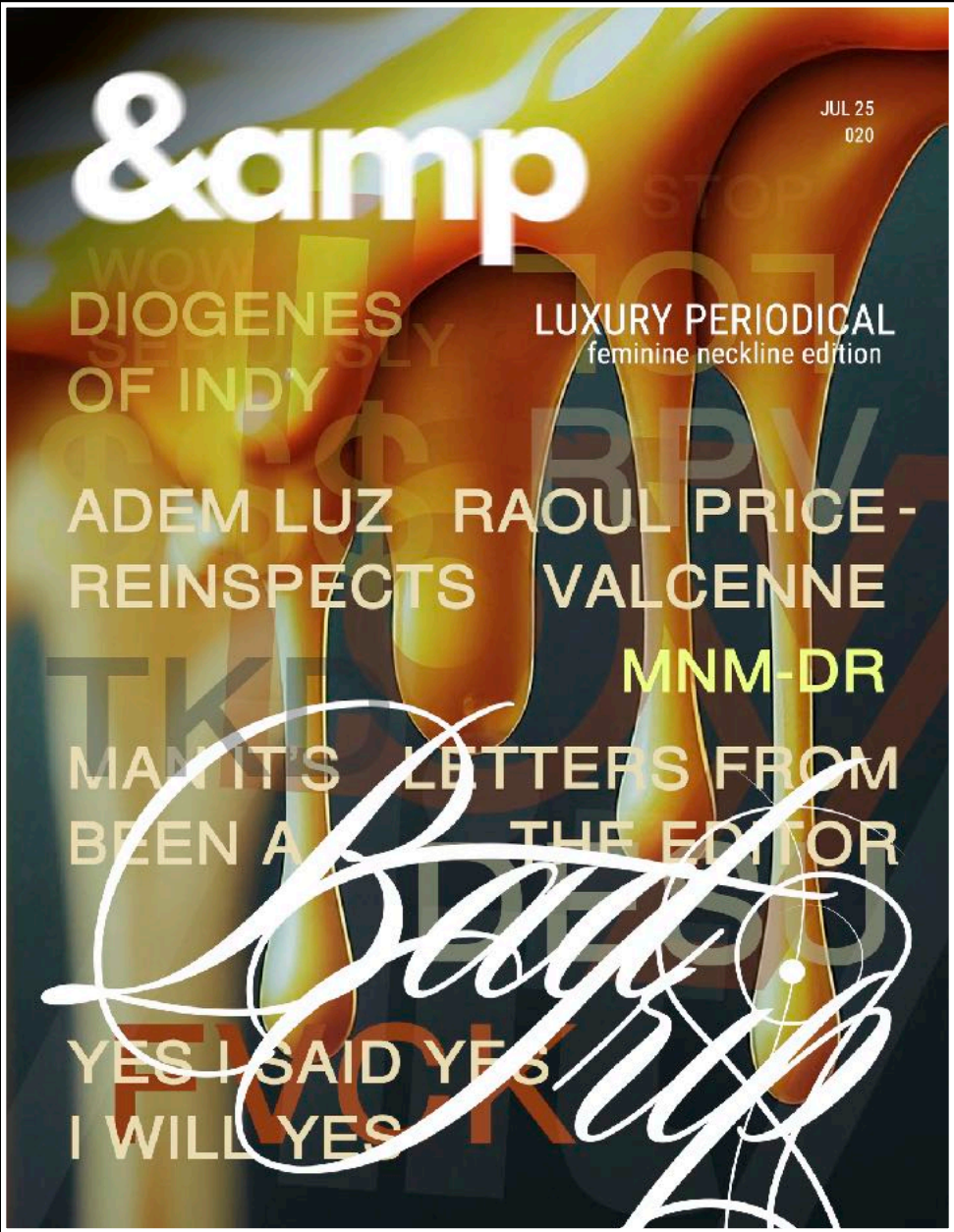
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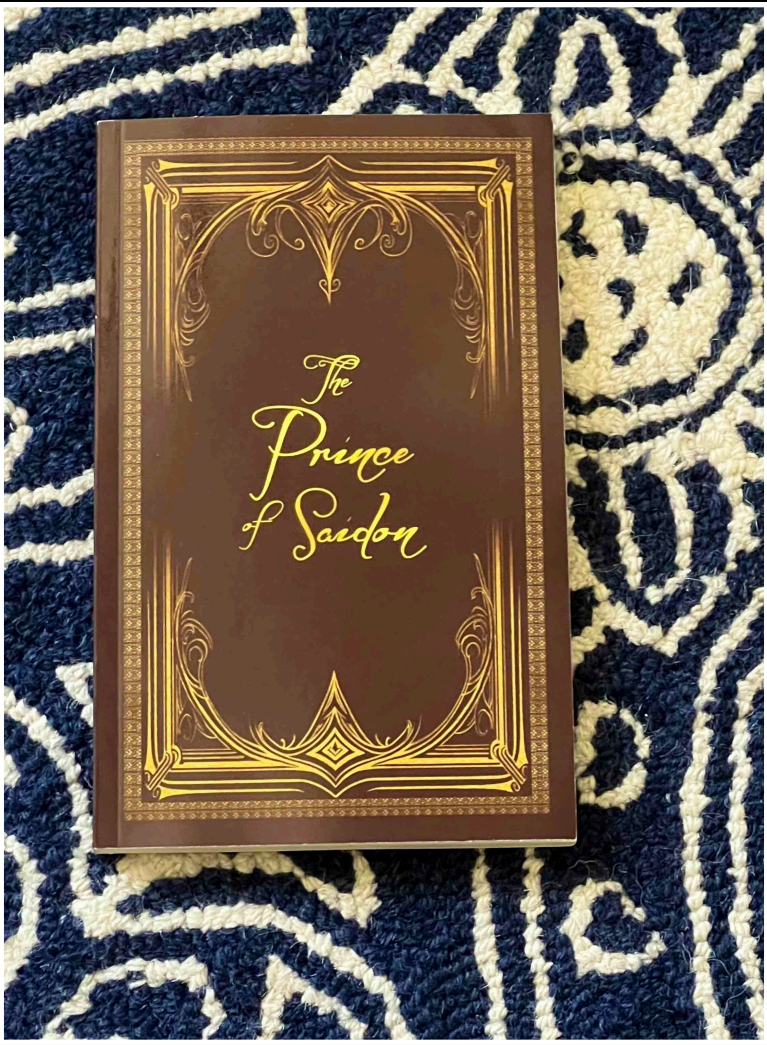
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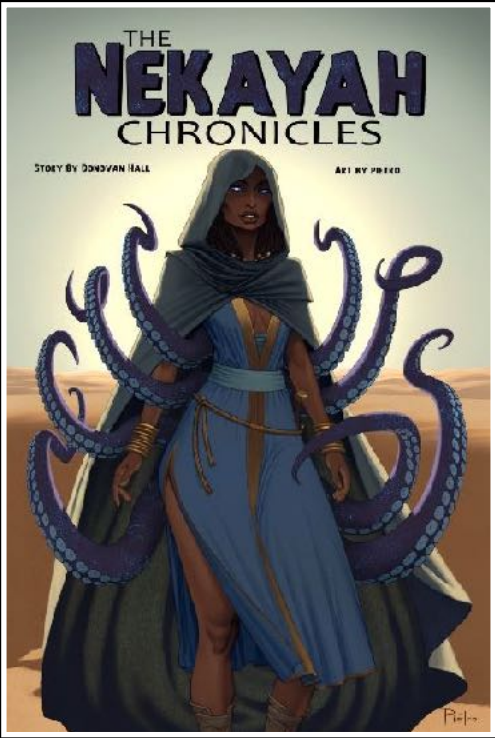
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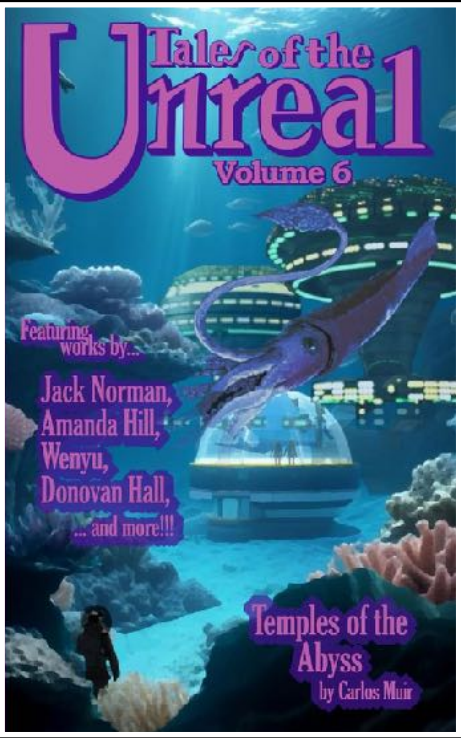
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