

THE GRAIL

VOL. XVI

March 5, 2021

ISSUE II

INSIDE

LOCK DOWN

LOCKDOWNIVERSARY

After a year cooped up in his room, Erik B. finally emerges and tells all. Turns out he's still pretty down to earth.

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LIE DOWN

LYING DOWN

Ever wanted to share your problems on the big stage? Albert K. invites us to experience that kind of rocky realness.

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GET DOWN

THE PSYCHIC MOLES

Jules D. invites you to blast some music and take some drugs. Rock out with tripped-out moles!

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FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

Huddled in our rooms for 365 long days, we land on a year in lockdown with our latest issue—Underground.

Reminiscing on the year gone by, Erik B. starts us off by delving into the lows (and a few highs) that are front and center in our minds on this lockdowniversary (1). Next, Allison W. graces us with the third installment of the spooky, gourd-y happenings in the Physical Hauntings and Manifestations Department (3) before we peer through bushes 'n' branches in Calvin B.W.'s mysterious, forested scene (5). After that, prepare to be whisked away from the doldrums of existence right now with Sky's action-packed fantasy world, accompanied by their dreamy watercolor (7). Albert K.'s prose tackles tectonic shifts and rocky relationships (9), while Wani P. unearths the goddess of wisdom's likeness (13). If you're feeling a bit of self-loathing, it's time to go subterranean in Jules D.'s tale of a psychedelic punk rock concert, featuring a band of moles will surely get you out of a funk (14). And finally, since we've had plenty of time

to stop and smell the roses, enjoy more floral wonders, like Sidney F.'s tiny flowers (17) and Bee Y.'s crocuses in the sidewalk cracks (18).

Prepared to be dazzled by light, forms, and nature in our photography contest issue coming out next Friday!

A year is a while. A lockdown year is an eon. With all that time, we hope you enjoy it reading this issue of the Grail.

From the fallout shelter,
Your Spring 2021 Editors

Aislin Lighter Steill, *your local lean, mean, apple butter-downin' machine*

Bahar Tarighi, *who only crawled out of Plato's cave because Aries season is approaching*

Erik Beserra, *Angel of Bread, Patron Saint of Gluten, amazed at how humanity has avoided nuclear war*

Lauren Mondroski, *hoping to bang out her ~spicy~ final thesis chapter this weekend*

Sophie Halpin, *keeper of the Grail rat mascots*

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Front cover illustration: *Geology* by Ross Tidwell

Lockdowniversary

By ERIK BESERRA

A year ago I stared at the numbers rising on the *New York Times* website. Every day I found myself feeling more inept as 10,000 became 20,000 became 40,000 became 80,000. I stared at the numbers like a moth at lights. Inept and discouraged. I still feel inept. I now have a tab with the *New York Times* vaccine distribution map. It is weird staring at this good news. Some part of me doesn't feel hopeful since this is just what needs to be done. We failed and are now picking up the pieces.

I put a mask on for the first time going to the store on March 16th. No one else wore a mask and I even questioned if it was a good idea. It all felt silly. More like I need to show that I was doing the right thing rather than do the right thing. Of course, now it is clear it was the right thing to do, but momentarily I feel stupid for having worried about what others would think of me wearing a mask.

The awkward embrace of Zoom right before spring break made things feel more hopeless than expected. This was my first semester back after a year being away from Reed. I severely needed that year off and enjoyed it thusly. Now, all interactions in the classroom felt stunted and, despite keeping up with my classwork, I questioned whether being at Reed was the right choice. But the semester bumbled along and as Reed goes, piles and piles upon miles and miles of things to do left little time for further introspection. And then the semester was over.

I spent the summer with my pod eating like it was the end of the world, like there was no tomorrow. Three of my roommates had just graduated, tasked with obliging the societal contract of getting a job. I can

only imagine doing that in a pandemic felt like the end of the world. We would lounge all day in the sun reading or doing nothing of any particular sort, then cook through the evening and dine like queens and kings. We moved a large desk under the awning over the porch. We placed a tablecloth down and lit cheap little candles from New Seasons to dine in the open air of a warm evening Portland. Cheese and bread to excite the palate. Pasta, roasts, stews, and curries sufficed for a hearty meal, topped off with galettes and many bottles of wine as we watched the sun fall below Council Crest.

In September, I found myself staring with glazed eyes at my computer screen for most of the day. I found some solace in the lasting warmth until late October and November. The sun drooped lower and I found myself attending class nestled halfway into a sleeping bag. I have little to reflect on from last semester. I don't know why, but it felt like a blink, more so than any other time of my life. I began to work out less. I sat more. I joined *The Grail*, quite nervous to meet people over Zoom, but strangely, as Ian Malcolm says, "life finds a way." Of the many lights I stared at, this one shone warmly. The semester ended before I could ask myself what I was doing.

My parents have somehow found more solace than most. They moved to New Mexico right before the pandemic began to be closer to family. My dad has started teaching high school, bravely learning to do so online. My mom recently administered vaccine shots as she is finishing up nursing school. Over winter break, I visited them at their new home in Corrales, New Mexico, a quaint town just outside of Albuquerque. It

was a pleasant time. I got to cook for them, sharing all the new skills I had learned from last summer, and we walked along the Rio Grande with the two dogs, Rex and Skittles. I almost wanted to stay and do classes at the new home, but I had two in person classes I was excited about.

“What will be normal?” I ask myself again and again. It’s not as if time stopped last March and we are soon to pick up where left off. Our relationships, human to human, have been crammed into tiny glowing boxes but inches from our faces. My concept of self has seemingly drifted. The space in which I operated for eight months was confined to four rooms. I didn’t go out and do things. What does that make me? Of course, the

pandemic is the reason I am stuck here, but trying to comprehend the current socio-political-viral-environmental crisis happening right now with this brain is difficult. Telling myself this feels normal is like trying to explain gravity to a fish.

Reed College semesters don’t move or flow. They just are. You are in it with little time to think about what’s happening or feel the water flow around you. Sink or swim, to continue the metaphor. The pandemic has only exacerbated this issue, but here I am. In it doing things. Trying to find a flow. Getting to move from one class to another for the first time in a year. Wondering when I will get the vaccine. Wondering when we will meet for real.



Persepolis by Bahar Tarighi

It's Not for Everyone Pt. III

By ALLISON WALLACE

Bags in hand, Hollis lumbers out of CTown supermarket into the section of the parking lot in the shade of tall trees and a fence. In the farthest spot, in an effort to be clandestine (but really only boxed in by two SUVs) is his silver Accord. His light navy business attire does nothing for the chilly breeze, and his grey aviators wildly reflect the mild autumn sun.

Kicking open the tailgate, the semi-transparent form of a horse's rump takes up most of his trunk space. "Move over," Hollis says and tries to angle the placement of his bags away from the folded legs. After a few seconds, he gives up and drops the boxes of frozen Salisbury steak and bricks of instant coffee, earning an indignant snort from inside the cabin.

Hollis sinks back in the driver's seat. Next to him, the ghost has both gloved hands hovering beside the dial for the radio, apparently trying to turn the wheel the size of a quarter. It does move, barely enough to change the murmuring radio station into static.

"*No cucurbita pepo*," Hollis says, and restraining himself from gritting his teeth, "or even *C. moschata*." The ghost makes a roof shape with its hands.

"No I don't think that Field Market really had any in the back. That guy was gone for twenty minutes." The ghost throws its hands up and makes a roof again. "Your idea wasn't L.U.R.K.ing. We talked about this. We workshopped about this." It points to the fence before them.

"The neighborhood," Hollis replies with an unsaid question. "We don't have time to graze your horse-thing on immaculate lawns."

He taps the piece of notebook paper taped over the driver's side sun visor. "L.U.R.K: Leadership, Utilizable, Reuseful, Kool. It's all in the chapter of 'Lurking Into Success' I showed you. Did you watch the video?" He pauses, "Can you read?" The ghost does not respond.

Hollis lunges out of the way when the creature tries to nip at his wrinkled green tie. The ghost phases into the dashboard and out onto the pavement. "Hey, wait," Hollis calls, "don't get out you'll be seen," he stage whispers furiously, getting out of the car.

Sawyer relaxes in a black SUV with tinted windows, reading a pamphlet. Emblazoned on the cover is "Sleepy Hollow Historical Society: Colonial biking trails, new and updated with covered bridges." They hear a car door slam and lookup. A man in a ruffled suit, turned away with a hand to one ear, paces between the fence abutting the lot and the parked vehicles, including the one in which they were waiting.

"Look, I'm not going to buy it for you if you're not gonna use it."

Everyone's getting all hopped up from the holidays arriving soon, Sawyer thinks with a rueful smile.

"I don't know if an acorn squash would look proportional to your shoulders. It's your head, you're gonna have to live--er, exist with it."

Sawyer remembers the conversation at the Homeowners Association meeting two weeks ago, mostly about an uptick in Halloween tourists this year. *Some people really get into their costumes.*

The suit turns to pace in the other direction, and he has no phone to his ear, instead running a hand through the greasy hair.

"We'll cover a twenty mile radius of stores instead. Hey," the man says, glaring at the air beyond him, "where—? Fine, fine, walk away. I'll be busy with building solutions *alone*, then." He gets in the car, bats something invisible away from the armrest, flinches and shies away like something had bitten him, then quickly backs up and drives away, hopping a curb. The lime green "ACS Will Coalesce 2013 Conference" bumper sticker did not go unnoticed.

Sawyer sits back and watches a squirrel loot a bird-feeder in one of the fenced-in yards abutting the lot. Behind that, grey and brown roofs piled like cards stretched into the horizon.

The ghost thought it heard chickens chattering when it initially decided to set out, but that had been rodents raiding a hanging box of unattended seeds. Sometimes the spirit passes through a hedge, other times a fence. Each house has its own rectangle of land behind it, the ghost soon found, by striding from patch to patch, around jutting

rocks and trees the denizens apparently did not think to clear, despite the size of their estates. The ghost steps over a small, sputtering creek that only ran within one yard, and it contemplates the likelihood of a horse-blight, or a plow shortage, or an embargo on French gardeners, trained roses, and gravel.

It seems some decided to dig huge, still ponds and short grass instead of vegetable rows, and the sheds had no pigs. The ghost stops to stare into one such pond from afar, its sparkling blue almost painful in the afternoon sun. It moves on towards the back fence and continues into another yard.

Soon the ghost realizes it's too late in its investigation of this neighborhood. There must've been a town-wide rubbish burning day not too long ago. It sees no piles of rotten refuse, but every space has a huge firepit of stone or metal covered in ashes and grease. Passing through a dark fence, the ghost is confronted by a large swath of stone flooring, with wooden benches and cots strewn around a brick oven, all standing in open air.

The ghost skirts the grass along the back fence of that yard, double time into the next one, not looking to encounter any other ghosts in what are obviously the remnants of a house fire. Some moments it could hear a faint jingling of its spurs, even though they spun and jostled with every step. The surroundings would seem totally silent, almost causing the spirit to halt before turning into another fence or hedge at random. It was not Sunday, but possibly a Fair Day. Either way, the houses are empty, the perfect time to find a head from the ground to carve, or a head to steal off some shoulders.

The spirit passes through a short hedge into some bushes, and into the gargle of a tall fountain on another lawn. On the other side of the garden, to the ghost's chagrin, is an



Twilight Market by Calvin Beeman-Weber

unfamiliar forest-lined in orange leaves and quiet oak trees. It considers the house before it. Tall windows peer out, covered in curtains, with no movement on the inside. Tracing the stone path around the garden, all the surrounding beds were leafy shrubs or dead and dormant flowers.

It stops on the stone slab path before the three tiered fountain. Rushing towards the hedge, it examines the yard it had passed through, before the garden, and found it couldn't recall which way it had entered before that. The spirit spins back around, now noticing the shadows that had grown taller, and how the sun now sits closer to the roof of the house. The spirit has an appointment to keep. A light breeze wafts from over the treeline. It crunches against the brittle plastic of the solo cup, folded and secreted away in the ghost's coat. A distant growl, from an engine, the spirit realizes, ricocheting from somewhere beyond the houses, which the ghost follows out the front gate.

Hollis drives onto a quiet street, the map on his phone indicating the most efficient route to the nearest farmer's market with the most turns and switchbacks to lose a tail. Behind Hollis's shoulder the horse snorted, swinging its head. Hollis sees movement to his right emerging from a motionless garden gate. He stops the car and rolls down the passenger side window when he loses sight of the figure. The ghost's torso suddenly appears out of the roof above him instead, lunging down towards the driver's seat, stopping just before the headrest in anticipation.

Hollis leans on the driver's wheel and pulls down his sunglasses, "Welcome back, *quitter.*"

His phone chimes a sharp reminder to get back on the route. "We're going to a farmer's market." The ghost's shoulders slump a bit and Hollis laughs.

"I have a good feeling about this next one," he says and moves to restart his phone again when he glances at the houses ahead of them.

Behind an immaculate set of concrete steps, before some white colonnades around a doorstep and almost hidden by two planters of extremely square topiaries, is the unmistakable domed orange of a pumpkin. Hollis slams on the brakes, sending the horse into the front seats and back again with a sharp screech, and its undead rider torso first into the dashboard. Hollis shudders when the horse's scraggly, clammy mane flew in his face.

"I've been *L.U.R.K.ing*, and look at that," he says and points to the coveted vegetable, "Problem solved." He turns to his passengers.

"Well, go. Take it." The ghost stares at Hollis, and reaches down to plunge its translucent hand straight through the volume button on the dashboard it had been previously attempting to turn, then crosses its arms over its chest. Hollis groans and tightens his tie, pulling it askew. "It's always a crisis with you." He considers the twenty feet of road and traces a path across the fifty feet of lawn that stretch beyond that. "We're not even near a highway." He glances at the line of houses up and down the street. None of the doors or windows within sight stir. The sky is cloudless.

"What if I turn around, and you scare me in the next ten seconds?" he says. The horse shifts in the backseat, tipping the car a little to one side.

"Now look we actually have to be deliberate about this, not throw away the flat tire with our tall boots, as grandfather used to say." He takes a fortifying breath. "Don't draw attention to the car." Hollis sweeps his tie to the side and takes off his blue suit jacket, throwing it to the backseat. He squares his

shoulders and reaches for the door handle. "Wait," he says, "cameras." He turns in his seat and reaches back for the coat, pulling it back off the ground by a sleeve. "I'll have my ACS Junior Associate's card revoked." He shrugs the crinkled coat back on and pops the collar and lapels. His chin is effectively hidden. "Maybe they'll think I'm a AEIL rep," he says and tries to chuckle. "Keep the car running."

Hollis launches himself out of his seat, leaving the door hanging open. He sprints down the sidewalk and skips on the balls of his dull dress shoes up the lawn to the stoop. The pumpkin sits next to the coils of a garden hose and a stack of packages. Hollis gently lifts the gourd from the porch. The pumpkin's lid is perched neatly. Its eyes are the traditional triangles with black sharpie outlining the sides and angles a knife has missed. The mouth is twisted up and down between a sneer and a gulp.

A dog starts barking shrilly from somewhere inside the house and Hollis stumbles backward off the small stoop. "Start the car," Hollis cries. He stomps onto a flower bed beneath a window and trails bits of purple asters halfway across the lawn.

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Dreaming in a Mundane World

By SKY FORD

I wonder what kind of martyr I will be tonight, or who I will rescue from the brink of death.

I am locked up in a cell. The captors are conducting medical experiments on us. They give us metal wires to stick in our necks, which I know instinctively will erase our memories. I only pretend to comply, hide the wire thing in my mouth instead, then back in the cell I act as though I've forgotten who I am all while plotting our prison break. I whisper the plan to my cell mates. The disguises are ready. The people on the outside are contacted. And now we are out and we are running from snarling dogs and laser wires. But I'm fast, too fast for them. We're climbing up electrical towers fast as ants swinging from electrical wires like acrobats, looping through the air high on adrenaline, knowing they will never outsmart us.

I make a banana blackberry smoothie for breakfast. It's gritty, not smooth. But my goal for today was to eat a real nutritious breakfast. So I swallow it all. Put a checkmark next to "breakfast" on my task list. I rinse the cup, wipe off the gritty remains off the rim with my fingers, then stick it in the dishwasher. My housemate is saying something about how Mitch McConnell deserves to rot in prison, or maybe it's one of those other crusty Republican establishment fucks. I'm not really listening. "Mhmmm," I say, waiting for her to leave so I can continue my morning routine undisturbed.

I've infiltrated a secret committee on an island— I am some kind of undercover spy. From our conference hall I watch the storm picking up. It will flood coastal villages in the coming week. All the more reason to complete

my mission. Then I see the kids, probably part of a rebel group, lurking in the doorway. I make a secret hand signal, mouth for them to go away. Too late, the committee has seen them. They take out their taser guns, point them at the kids. "Don't tase the children!" I shout and jump between the flicking tongues of the guns and the children.

Frosted wheats today. With almond milk. Does the sugar cancel out any nutritional value that hunks of wheat may have? No matter, I feel like treating myself. I even make coffee instead of tea. I turn on a morning news podcast as I tune out and flick through Instagram on my phone. Daily death toll from COVID is over four thousand again. I have no feelings about this fact. A notification in my inbox: "Please fill out this when2meet for our presentation planning meeting." I click and make boxes turn from red to green, then I keep scrolling until the podcast is over, not because I'm absorbing any information, but because I wouldn't know what to do with myself otherwise.

The gap between train and platform is unusually wide. I land the jump, but she doesn't, she falls, hangs onto the platform edge by just a few fingers, the tracks have dropped far far below, a deadly abyss. With one harrowing leap, I've caught her and pulled her up to safety. Then, together we're running up a staircase that is melting under our feet.

Toast with a fried egg. Leftover soup from dinner. The rest of a bag of potato chips I left on the floor last night. The days are differentiated from each other only by the date I write on top of my lists. The nights are dizzying escapades, chase scenes, battles against

injustice and life-saving missions which leave me confused, unsettled, reliving my dreams in a loop in my head for hours on end.

I'm called to help an unconscious person on a ski slope. I check their pulse — still breathing. Someone nearby is in panic trying to start CPR, but I am cool and in command. I gesture for everyone to back off, administer the glucose this hypoglycemic diabetic needs for survival... I am a target of the state. I pack my bags, run from school, whisper through the cracks in the bricks of my house to tell my family that I must go. Then I'm dodging through the night, through an abandoned church.... We're ambushed by cops, but we are prepared, with my spiderman powers, they are incapacitated in no time... I'm sprinting backwards dodging bullets in impossible swerving maneuvers that leave me somehow unscathed...

I do not know how to process the multiple existential crises facing humanity. It is perhaps not so much a surging pandemic, climate change, or state violence that is most daunting, but the hunch that I am powerless in the face of it all. I take classes in wilderness medicine and self defense. I do planks on the floor of my room. I join more activist groups than I can actually commit to. But I am a small unimposing human who was raised as a girl and fidgets with their hair too much. Someone once told me I was weak and part of me still believes them. Believes I need to

prove something by saving someone. During the day I cope by eating chocolate for breakfast. Sometimes I am angry but mostly I am numb, and I watch hours on end of Drunk History on Youtube. I congratulate myself for my small successes, for planting lettuce starts, for reconnecting with an old friend, for writing something that flows. I find bits of hair on my head that are out of place and I cut them off, thinking, now, now it will be fixed. At night though, I am a hero.

Last night's dream stands out because the enemy and the persecuted are less clear cut, are perhaps one and the same. And I wonder,



by Sky Ford

which part of myself is the prison guard, the active shooter, the abyss below the train, the little girl with the chainsaw.

Some little girls have gone berserk. They're sawing off their parents' legs. I'm watching from some tall place, maybe a tree. Everyone is in a panic, trying to capture them, incapacitate them. But I know they are just people, scared and confused, have probably been abused. I want to find them before the hordes do, to embrace them...

Lying Down

By ALBERT KERELIS

I don't think we'll ever dig to the center of the Earth. But I think, someday, we might drown there.

Spoon wanted to make *real* art. They wanted a play that felt like real life because it was real life. Spoon wanted to put the audience in the middle of something. Spoon wanted... fuck.

"The more I put this into words, the stupider it fucking sounds."

"No no, keep talking. I wanna know where you're going with this." Celeste was open to this stuff. Celeste was just open in general; everything from quantum mechanics to healing rocks to MK Ultra she believed in it as long as believing in it made her life more interesting. She believed in Spoon and they knew it. They didn't know what to make of that.

"So, it's people talking through real problems on a stage. Their words have real consequences, and they don't know what they'll be. You're not acting, you're literally doing something, making things happen."

"So people get on stage and hash out their family drama? Like Dr. Phil, but for trans beat poets?"

"Not like Dr. Phil." Spoon had thought a lot about this. About whether their idea was commodifying people's fucked-up-ness. On Dr. Phil there's a production — the audience knows what they're getting into. Dr. Phil is a character. This was nothing like that. Right? "No Celeste, Dr. Phil's an act. It might have consequences, but not right there, not on stage. And when it does, that's not what it's about. It's about the spectacle. My thing is about—"

"Wait. Let me guess. Your thing is about *realness*." Celeste sniggered. Spoon slumped dramatically further into their seat.

"I shouldn't have talked to you about this."

"No, sorry, I was just messing with you. It sounds funny when you put it into words, but I think there's something there. I believe in this." "Here we go again," Spoon thought to themselves.

As a kid I used to take pens and bend them back and forth. It was hard the first time. You would have to cantilever them over the edge of a desk, holding them on one side and pushing with your whole weight on the other. When you're seven, a lot of things demand your whole weight. After you bent it once, though, it got easier. Every time you bent it, the opaque colors got paler. I didn't know why it happened — I still don't really get it. I imagine it's something about adding stresses and cracks to the plastic. Little microscopic tears that change the way the light reflects off of its surface.

When you keep bending it back and forth, the plastic starts to warm up. Bending one way, then the other, getting easier each time. The plastic heats up until it's too hot to touch. You keep bending and suddenly the pen comes apart. No crack, no pop, nothing dramatic; you just get two pieces of pen with weird smooshed ends.

"Alex, I just don't understand what this is about." Hearing her call ~~him~~ them that, even through the phone, made Spoon's shoulders tense up.

"Why do you have to call me that, Mom?"

"Because you're not a piece of cutlery." Deep breaths, deeeeeep fucking breaths. "Besides, you know how your father feels about that name. It's all he has left of your grandfather." Spoon had to change the conversation ASAP.

"Look Mom, I don't want to do this right now. Are you interested in participating in it or not?"

"I don't know Alex, I'm not much of a performer..."

"See Mom, that's the thing. It's not a performance... Look, it'll make more sense once you're doing it. Just trust me? This is really important." Spoon had put a lot of fucking money into this thing. They needed *someone* to show up.

"Alright. I'll do it. I want what's best for you, and I don't think that your 'bohemian lifestyle' is it, but I suppose I have to compromise." Alex Spoon hated when she called it that. Their mom was convinced that they were doing art just to feel special. To feel like some *artiste* while working at the restaurant. Their mom wanted them "to do something more with his life," as if they weren't really living right now. She wanted them to "apply himself." "As if I don't work my ass off everyday," Spoon thought. At least she wasn't sending them more listings for soulless desk jobs. "Do I look like I want to be a sales associate for Epson one day?" Spoon scoffed at the idea because it fucking terrified them.

I broke pens partly to watch them change, watch them get white and hot, but mostly it was for the ink inside. Ink is all around you as a kid, but its use is always directed by something else. By a little roller bead at the bottom of your pen, by a little piece of felt at the bottom of your marker, by the little line next to "Name:" at the top of your homework. When you broke the pen in half, the ink didn't just run out right away. You would

tip the end over, waiting for it to rush out, and nothing would happen. Maybe the ink is too thick, so you wait. Nothing. Eventually I learned that if you bent a paperclip into a straight line and stuck your wire inside the pen, you could get a glob of ink out. You could smear it on a page, or try to write with it. It was harder to write with than a pen, but for some reason, I did it anyway.

Once you had stuck the paper clip in once, the ink ran freely. The first time I did this, I ended up with a pool of blue-black shimmering goop in the pencil tray of my desk. I was more careful with them afterwards, but sometimes I let the ink pool out. I would leave the broken pen in the pencil tray and pretend I didn't know what was going to happen. I would lie and tell myself that I forgot that the ink runs freely after you stick it once. I would look away, pretend not to notice it, and only look down later once there was a lake of shining red to ogle. I never did anything with the ink. I could have used it to draw or paint or do something. I always ended up wiping it up with a tissue and throwing it out along with the broken pen. I would do it again some other time to some other pen. I didn't do it to *do anything* with the ink, I just did it for the ink. To know that it wasn't something that only existed on roller balls or felt tips or lines next to "Name:." To know that it could run freely along my pencil tray if someone accidentally let it out.

The stage was tiny. So was the venue. Even still, Spoon was surprised to see it full. They recognized a lot of people in the audience; Celeste had invited a lot of her friends to see the show. The type of people Spoon's mom was scared ~~he~~ they would turn into. They already had been since high school, their mom just didn't know it. Maybe they had been since before that, but if they were, they didn't know it then either. The lights were hot. Spoon thought that was a thing that only

happened on big stages. *Real* stages. These little can lights were so close though, so bright, beaming down on their face. Were they sweating? Maybe you couldn't see from the audience. Spoon really hoped they didn't look gross. At least not to the audience. They sat on a black chair, the cheap kind with a little padding on the seat and back that gave the illusion of comfort. Their mom sat across from them. They each held a microphone with a big fat cord running into the cable squid taped down to the edge of the stage. The room was silent.

The Earth is constantly drowning. In middle school I learned about the convection currents that moved the Earth's tectonic plates. The center of the planet was so hot, it caused magma to rise up from around it, and when the magma got up here, near the crust, it cooled off and sunk back down. As it journeyed up and down in slow, millennia-long loops, it slowly pushed the cool bits around, tearing them apart and crashing them into each other.

Sometimes, when two plates get shoved into each other, they form a subduction boundary where one plate gets slowly pushed under the other, colossal slabs of rock gently melting in the magma and returning to what's below. The roiling center accidentally swallows a continent, and it melts without a word.

"So, you don't like my name."

"Oh my god Alex, right now?"

"Yeah, right now Mom."

"I think you're trying to find a way to be yourself."

"And you don't think I'm doing that right right now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't think that I'm finding myself

how I should be."

"I don't know about that..." She paused for a while. "I think that you wanted a change in your life, and you're doing that now, but you'll see later that this isn't right, and you'll move on with your life. Maybe it'll be better."

"Say my name, Mom."

"Do we have to talk about this right now? In front of all of these people? When I agreed to come, I didn't know it would be like this. What are you trying to do here anyways?"

"I don't know Mom." They didn't. They looked at the ground. They looked at the audience. Nothing but a sea of black and those blinding lights. This must be why actors can turn into someone else on stage. Why they can live out tender moments that don't belong to them for an audience. When the lights are this bright, you might as well be all alone. Spoon liked that. "I don't think you love me Mom."

"What? How could you say that? Do you realize how much I do for you?"

"You do things for Alex. That's not me. That's not who I am. God, I'm so fucked up. And it's because of you two."

"Alex."

"Don't say that." It didn't come out how they wanted it to. It came out like any other sentence and it felt so wrong. They felt like they should've screamed it. Or maybe muttered it. They didn't know what they wanted it to sound like, but they didn't like how they said it.

"What did we do Alex? What should we have done better? We raised you like we thought any kid should be raised. We loved you and listened to you. I tried so hard to get what was right for you. Your father didn't want you to go to that school, but I trusted you. And I trusted you with this. Look what you're doing to yourself Alex, you're throwing it all away. You could be working a good job right now, a *real* job, instead of just washing dishes all day and doing god knows what all night. But here you are, masquerading as something that would come to you in a bus-

ing tray. I love you Alex, but this isn't right. What do you think we did to you? Where did we go wrong?"

Their face was in their hands. They couldn't tell if they were crying. They didn't know what was going on any more. "I don't know..." they muttered. "IdunnoIdunnoIdunnoIdunno." It was one long groan that came out of them.

"What do you want us to do Alex? What is there that we can do for you? Your father says we need to stop helping with your rent, to just let you live, or whatever the fuck you're doing right now. Maybe he's right. Is that what you want? Is that what you need right now?"

"SHUT UP!" Their face was hot and wet. "You don't know anything about how I want to live, or how I have been living. You don't know how living the way you want me to has torn me to pieces. You could never know what this feels like. What it feels like to hate who you are, to try and be something different, something you can love. You can't love me, but I can't love Alex."

They didn't know what they were saying anymore. Was this their art piece? Were they trying to be poetic? Or was this really how they felt? They thought that, maybe, they meant it. The words just came out, all Alex Spoon could do was listen to them. "Dad's never cared about me, he just hates that I'm a faggot. He wants a little mini-me. He wants someone who can make money. He wants a big strong man with a wife and kids. That's NOT ME. HE DOESN'T WANT ME." Spoon didn't know if they were shouting. They didn't know if they were crying.

"I'm not doing this anymore." She got up and walked off stage.

I don't think we'll ever dig to the center of the Earth

But I think, someday, we might drown there
We don't dig down like some do, expecting to find a new gold

We don't hopelessly flail our arms to stay afloat

We don't tread water and look for driftwood

We look down up and see that we have

For longer than we've realized

Stopped swimming

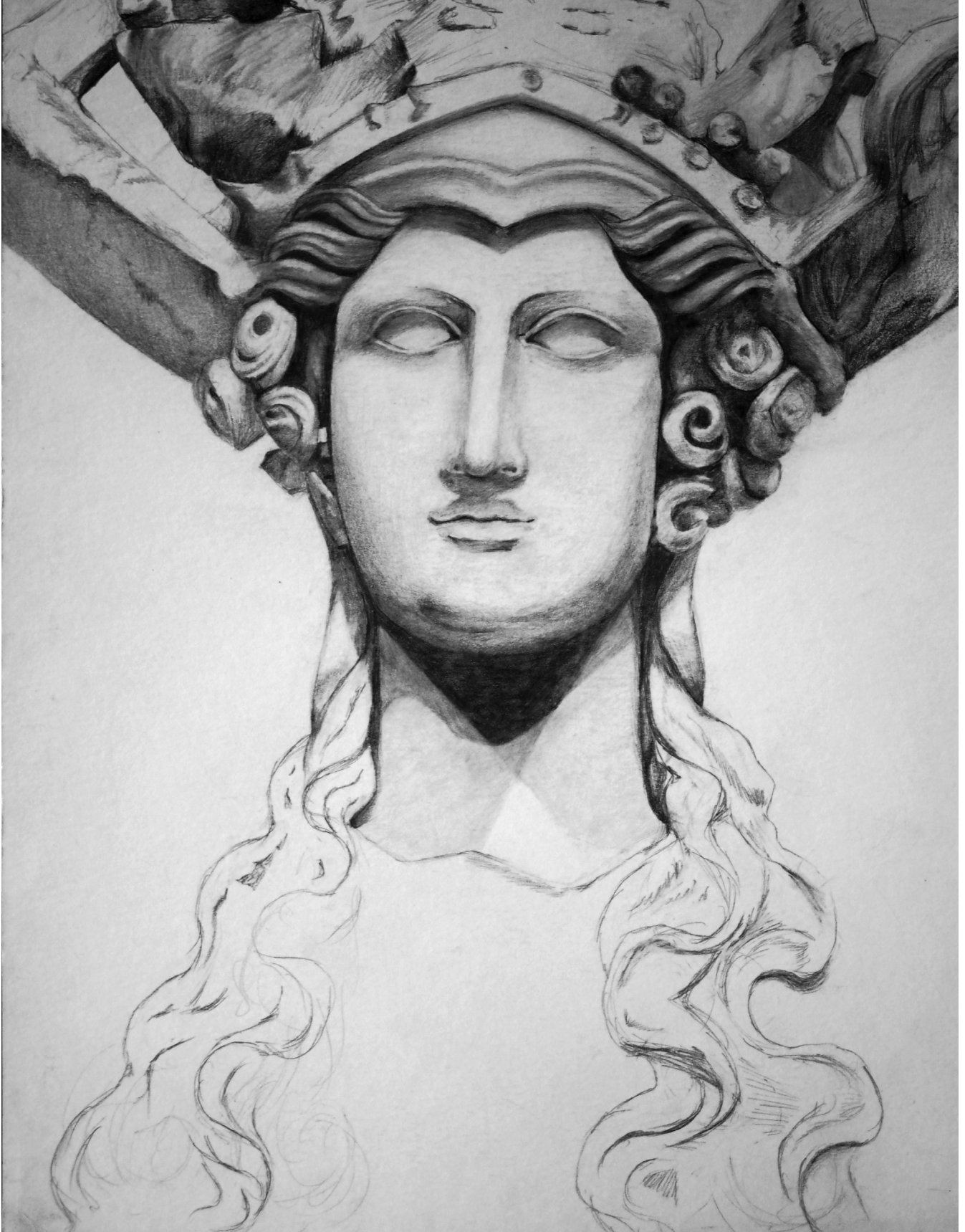
Celeste's couch felt rough against Spoon's face. It was rough and warm and comforting. It smelled a little mildewy, like an old book or a burlap sack. It wasn't the worst place to sleep.

"You know, Spoon? I believed it."

Someday, we'll all lay down and the moss will cover us over.

I don't think we'll hit the bottom and meet a fiery end. I don't think that we'll kill ourselves or each other. I don't even know if we can. I think that everyone who puts up a fight will tire themselves out. Someday they'll take a moment's rest. Some will see it coming, others will close their eyes for only a moment.

But all of them will lay down and let the moss cover them over.



Study of the Statue of Athena of Parthenos by Wani Pandey

The Psychic Moles from Outer Space

By JULES DUBEL

They came from the other side of the street. I was walking down SE Division that night, contemplating my new life as a failure. Everyone had told me college would be easy and I felt like a fraud getting back that physics test with a 50% written shyly on the bottom. I walked aimless and angry, kicking rocks down the hill, humming "Holiday in Cambodia," trapped in my own tumbling shell of self-pity. Everything sucked. It was then that I first noticed them.

They crawled from shallow darkness out of a crack in the sidewalk. They each stood as tall as a man and a half. Their bodies were covered in hazelnut fur and their nose tendrils writhed like skinned octopi. There were three of them, and one of me. I fell backward onto my ass in the street, whimpering and whining, completely expecting to have my brain eaten out backward from my skull like a stew by these terrible, loathsome, horror-inspiring...Psychic Moles from Outer Space!

But they didn't want to nibble on my brain, not even a little. Instead, the big one in the center with the round red sunglasses too small for his face stepped forward and offered a paw.

"Thanks." I mumbled, grabbing their pancake-like appendage. The skin was dry, warm, and cakey, the nails were thick and hard. The big one responded in a voice like a cicada being hit with a rubber band,

"We still use pool floaties because we don't know how to swim. I never really got the point of cream cheese. Fingernails are jelly to all that seek to consume religion compulsively."

Now that I was standing, the urge to run multiplied. I should find my way away from these freaks as soon as possible, but then I noticed what they were wearing. Ripped

denim vests, studded black leather, t-shirts, and patches with names like MDC, Discharge, Gang Green, Bad Religion, and Septic Death. Punk Rock Psychic Moles from Outer Space! The short, bored-looking one on the left flipping a butterfly knife around was even wearing black Docs with blue laces. I told them they seemed like cool dudes and I had mad respect for their lifestyle. I wished I could be so bold and asked if they ever got down to Battalion of Saints. The big one took my hand again and gurgled, "Tropical fish smoothie. We shit porcelain toothpaste every afternoon at 5 o'clock. You can't elope under the rainforest."

Then, they pulled me forward. It was a quick yank, not too forceful, but the ground gave out from under me. The backlit sidewalk slurped open and then we were gone. We were so gone, man. The universe rolled around us in a barrel loop. I was going underground, and the Psychic Moles were sending me there.

We landed in a totally buzzard cavern. Every surface possible was plastered in torn scratchy posters and graphic stickers proclaiming bands, brands, and politics so much so that I couldn't even tell what color the walls were originally. There was a bad recording of some shitty band playing through wrecked speakers but nobody seemed to mind much about how much it sucked. The big one, who I'd taken to calling Infrared in my head, due to their little red sunglasses that glinted like the cherry-violence colored stage lights getting set up on a small battered stage off to the side, continued to drag me along to mingle with their brethren.

The place was packed! Many multitudinous moles mashed amongst the sting of anti-melodious music and raw rubbed hard-core vocals.

I ended up squeezed between so many sweaty, furry bodies before finally getting pushed out into a lacuna by the sidewall. There in that same lacuna with me were the two other moles I had seen before on the sidewalk. They conversed with each other telepathically and held fizzling neon drinks and various colored crystals in their hands that seemed to have been plucked straight from the side of the cavern wall.

I glanced over at the wall to find an area devoid of stickers and instead populated by pockmarks of varying sizes in the soft brown rock that may have once contained the jeweled stones. The butterfly-knife-wielding mole noticed me first and waved me over to them and their friend. As I approached and got a couple colorful crystals shoved into my hand from the jovial mole who'd waved me over, I noticed the third mole, the cop-killer's buddy, wearing a tag on their shirt that said 'Hi, My Name Is: THORIGOR'. After downing their drink and smashing the glass, Thorigor pulled out a thick, giant-mole-hand-sized guitar pick to fidget with, and whatever shock or fear that had been boring through me since getting here, wherever here was, dissolved into an animated excitement.

"Oh man, do you play? I do too! I've been trying to find a decent local band forever. Well...I guess you guys aren't exactly local but-"

Thorigor looked up and glared as I had started speaking but before I could continue to assault them with questions about music, the Cop-Killer mole grabbed both my shoulders with their meaty pancake paws and physically drove my body back into the thick of the crowd shouting, "Vampire orgies in the folds of a blue whale's eyelid! Eczema on the spiritual plane! The devil's testicles are full of tomato juice!"

I was once again put through a tumble cycle of mole hair and sweat, my whole life flashing before my oxygen-deprived eyes. It

was mostly blurry and a little disappointing. I gasped for air upon finally being released yet again from the crowd only to find myself standing by the stage at the other end of the club-cavern. Cop-killer mole, still gripping my shoulders from behind, lifted one of my hands to my mouth. Inside my tightly closed fist was the assortment of small crystals I'd somehow managed to cling to, despite the fact that their rough edges were biting into the soft flesh of my palm. The message was clear: eat them.

I considered for a moment, having no idea what these little rocks would do to me, but ultimately a swell of carpe diem mentality took over and I popped them all in my mouth. They felt like rock candy and tasted like salt. Overall, not a life-changing experience. Cop-killer mole, seeming a bit more satisfied now that I'd taken his weird cave drugs, continued pushing me in one direction, onto the stage.

Those crystals started working fast. I stood for eons, swaying on that empty half-stage as the world turned around me, bathing in the slightly dank, sweaty underground smell of the cavern as the rest of the moles moshed around without care to me. My friends Thorigor, Cop-Killer Butterstyle (as I had taken to calling them), Infrared, plus another mole I'd not yet met wearing a Kikkoman shirt, bustled around my intoxicated frame, moving stuff that looked like silver bones and black soot snakes to my swimming eyes. By the time I could convince myself that color was a perceivable smell (and everything pink smelled like lobster or bread), I could hear them sound checking behind me as the audience began to take notice. Cop-Killer Butterstyle pulled a microphone in front of me and handed me a weird jar. It was pulsating and purple and warm. It smelled like the color of fresh-cut grass. Then, they once again put a hand on my shoulder, but this time, instead of hearing random garbage words, I could see their thoughts perfectly. In their mind,

Cop-Killer said to me, “Wait and do nothing until you are cued. Oh, and you will have to announce our band.” I couldn’t see why not, so I took my purple jar by my hip like a bongo and leaned forward woozily into the microphone. Feedback whined and the audience all turned to look at me.

“Uh...hello? I guess I’m here with these psychic mole people and we’re gonna play some stuff for you.”

The mole audience did not break into irreverent cheers like they were supposed to, instead they kept staring at me, and a quick glance behind showed my improvised bandmates with similar disapproval splashed across their rodentine faces. I’d have to introduce myself better than that.

“So, our band’s got Thorigor on bass, at least I think that’s a bass, Infrared, yeah that dude with the glasses right over there on some cosmic lead guitar, Cop-Killer Butterstyle on rhythm guitar, or wait, maybe I’ve got them switched, but then there’s...Soy Sauce on drums too. And me. I’m...I don’t know...Laser dragon ninja?”

The audience did not budge in their silent stare. Any energy that had been building up in my intro died flat at that last sentence. Hundreds of beady black mole eyes bore into my soul.

“Alright, how about Captain Flame-Bolt?”

The continued deafening disapproval of a room full of psychic rodents. I took a deep breath and realized this was supposed to be the part of the story where I engaged with my weaknesses as a person through self-identification and shared vulnerability with the crowd. Fine, if that’s how this had to be played, I’d bite.

“OK, I’M THE HUMAN FAILURE AND THESE PSYCHIC MOLES AND I ARE GOING TO FUCK YOU UP!”

Cheers erupted and so did the music behind me. It was sublime. Even without the drugs I’m pretty sure it was the fastest, rawest, most hardcore shit I’d ever heard played. It was like getting hit in the face with sound

listening to Thorigor gumming up bass and Soy Sauce having a fit on drums. Infrared even gurgled out lyrics that I thought I could make some sense of— or that could have just been the crystals talking.

“Rosary of razor blades!/funeral for Pac-man!/smoke detector mouthwash/desolate heaven’s trash can!!!”

Ten songs later and it seemed like they were building up to something big. The crowd was in agony, thrashing and writhing in the mosh to our infection of sound, and suddenly, I got a look from Infrared that I didn’t need telepathy or drugs to understand. I took the warm, pulsing purple jar from its place on my hip and I grip it tight around the lid, unscrewing with all my might. Maybe they only needed me in this band for my opposable thumbs?

Suddenly, and in perfect time to the bridge of the song, with the same sort of inner, pressurized pop sound you’d expect to follow an eardrum rupture, the jar was open and waves of purple energy spilled out like liquid mercury across the underground cavern. It rolled in the air and the room became wild insane at the prospect of touching it, with moles clamoring on top of each other in such urgency you’d expect they had the grim reaper on their trail. I, the origin of this all, stood basking in the sunburnt glow of the violet waves that continued to spill from the jar. I’d never felt so happy, so content, so purely invigorated by whatever tentacle of the universe happened to reside within this jar. That is, until the police showed up.

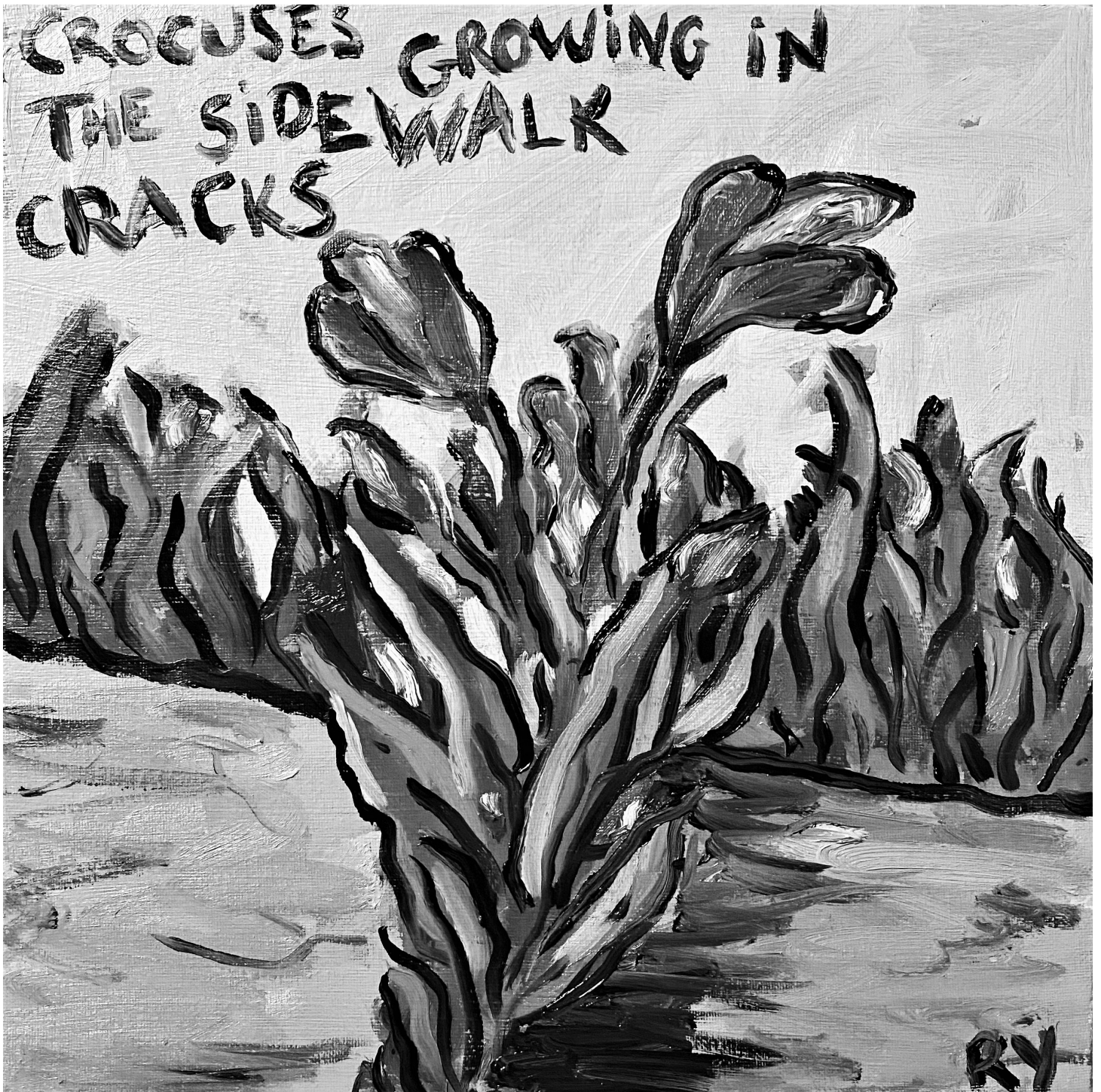
They came on bicycles. Of course they did, ugly fuckers. Each one, all moles as well, wore these pretentious-looking black goggles and had their hats placed just so on their stout, balding heads. They crashed into the cavern from a tunnel I didn’t know existed— maybe they’d dug it with their bikes that had curious drill attachments where the baskets should be. All of a sudden our purple bliss was

drowned in a sea of red and blue, our punk rock fever squashed underfoot from the siren screams. One of the coppers came pointing at me, some sort of intergalactic stun gun waved at the stage and the jar in my hands. I didn't want to find out what that thing did to human flesh, but the alternative, dropping the purple jar and running, seemed so much worse. The jar was my joy, my world, my reason for living as long as it emanated energy. I could close my eyes and float in its jelly-like stream of primordial gooey vibes. This made things so much harder then, when amidst the chaos, Thorigor smacked the jar from my hands and snapped his giant sausage fingers together.

"No!" I cried, but this came too late. The universe was doing a barrel roll around me again, and I could see my friends, the Psychic Moles from Outer Space, disappearing into their intergalactic cop kerfuffle without me. The surface world returned under my feet

and I found myself kneeling on the same sidewalk of SE Division as when I had left. It was so damn quiet, as if nothing had ever happened. Nothing did happen. I ignored the feeling of heavy rocks sitting in my stomach and stood up, taking my time on the walk back, head lifted, ears ringing, watching the inconsolable stars as they hung in lonely cubicles against the heavy midnight.





Untitled Oil Painting *by Bee Yermish*