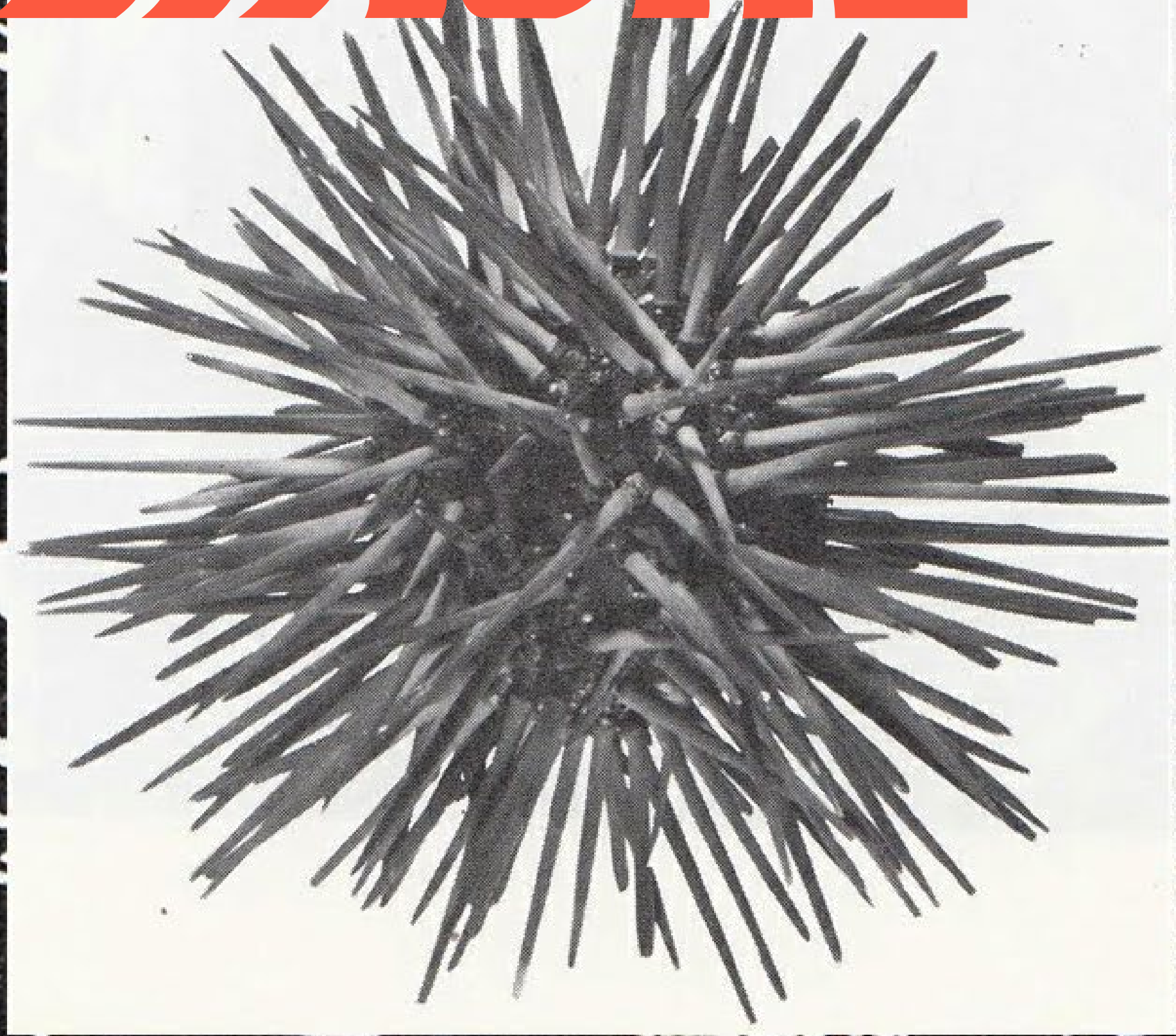


BELLYACHE

A Piecemeal
Magazine



COVER ART: "VIRUS" BY
MARY MULDERY MACISAAC

A LITTLE OVER A YEAR AGO I WAS LET GO FROM MY JOB. AT THE TIME I WAS WORKING AS A BARTENDER AT A RESTAURANT IN MONTREAL AND WRITING A MONTHLY COLUMN ON FOOD FOR A LOCAL PUBLICATION. IT WAS MID-MARCH AND RESTAURANTS, OUT OF AN ABUNDANCE OF PRE-CAUTION, WERE AMONG THE FIRST BUSINESSES TO CLOSE DUE TO COVID-19.

During the first two weeks I spent at home, I revisited a favourite cookbook, *Honey From a Weed* by Patience Gray. If you've not heard of this book, I can't recommend it more highly. While functionally labelled as a cookbook, it is more accurately an anthropological journal about the quotidian life of villages along the Mediterranean. The subtitle of the book reads, "Fasting and Feasting in Tuscany, Catalonia, the Cyclades and Apulia."

In a chapter entitled *Fasting on Naxos*, I read about the practices of the island residents during Lent — a period of fasting near the end of winter that ends with the arrival of

Easter. In that chapter, Gray writes, "As the diet of island Greeks was already restricted, one marvelled at their ability to deprive themselves still further." And marvel I did. I mean, shit, for the people of Naxos scarcity is a part of everyday life and yet they willfully choose to restrict themselves further. It seemed masochistic to me. Here I was heading into what promised to be very tough times and I couldn't help but think how woefully unprepared I was and how entirely prepared these island Greeks had been for generations.

As those two weeks turned into a month I kept thinking about the people of Naxos. I

started thinking about that chapter as an allegory; artists and creatives who supported their work with day jobs were like people of Naxos. Scarcity for a creative is commonplace too; freelancing, they say, is feast and famine. When the pandemic took away the day jobs, that was Lent — that's fasting season. What struck me most about the way these Greeks fasted wasn't that they were able to endure, no, it was their resiliency, the way they turned to the weeds and beans that remained and not only endured but carried on with relative happiness. That moved me. What could I do with what remained?

I started thinking of *Bellyache* like a potluck dinner, asking people in my community, artists, designers, writers and photographers if they could bring something to our communal table, so to speak. To my delight (and surprise, frankly) everyone obliged. Some had work that had no home, others had time and a willingness to create. It was through that process that I came to realize that community for us, as it was for those Greeks, was the true source of resiliency. We could endure, or better yet, we could find happiness, despite adversity, by supporting each other.

Later on in that same chapter, Gray reflects on the fast noting, "Fasting is therefore in the nature of things and feasting punctuates it with a joyful excess." And while times remain lean, thanks to the work of the people who made this magazine possible, our table, as it were, is set with a plentiful feast. I'm honoured to have had the chance to work with all of the wonderful people who contributed what they could to this project and I'm elated to be able to share that work with you.

*Welcome to Bellyache
Episode O: Lean Times.*

Clay Sandhu
Editor
April 30, 2021

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ELEMENTS of HAPPINESS

STORY AND COLLAGE BY

Mary Mulderry MacIsaac



BEFORE EVERYTHING I WAS ALREADY FEELING A LITTLE DARK AND DOWN...

My general inclination was to turn inward and conserve energy for some reason unknown to me. I had an urge to go pretty quiet and keep to myself — the opposite of the outstretched hands, offering and receiving.

Around the same time death loomed heavy around me. My new partner's mother was nearing the end of her life, and it wasn't easy. Her time in the hospital meant we were wearing masks and goggles months before it became universal. All my energy went into being as strong as possible. I rushed in to pollute the pain. I buckled up, carried the weight, held the hurt and mediated these cycles of life and death that were playing out.

I had started my "hope vase" series in January 2020, placing material in cut out silhouettes of delicate glassware media I had laying around, removing and replacing the most beautiful part while maintaining the original shape. Everything felt so fragile, all I

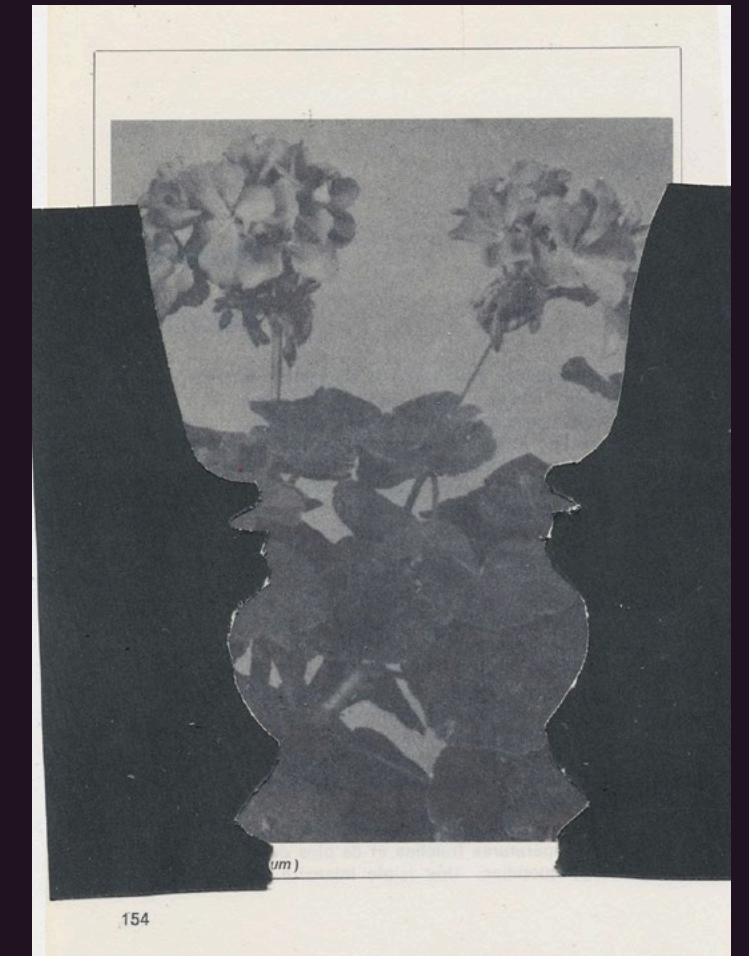
wanted to do was contain a special sentiment inside the graceful lines of all sorts of chalices and containers, and call them "hope vases". I was reframing and re-thinking what I hold on to. The "hope" part wasn't meant to wish death or pain or conflict away. It was just meant to sort of safeguard optimism during seasons of seemingly endless change and pain. To "hold hands a little longer", to believe in the good — the good in a person, the good in the world, or the goodness in you.

Seasons later, in summer, enough uprising was happening externally and internally that everything broke up, opened up, reached a head, exploded. There was a massive surrender taking place within and without.

The foggy weight of mayhem left me without enough energy to maintain multiple status quos. I took the negative space left from another vase cut-out and broke it in half, making *The Growth of Breaking Open*. Even with a broken, simple black shadow falling away to the sides, what breaks out are two flowers, outgrowing a container



CAPABLE OF EMBODIMENT



GROWTH OF BREAKING OPEN



TENIR LE FEU

too small to hold them. Hope isn't lost in the breaking apart. It's developing. We're growing.

A collision of past, present and future seemed to happen

*Hope isn't lost in
the breaking apart.
It's developing.
We're growing.*

daily. I still felt burdened and bruised by nothing but bad memories and tediously panicked realities. The breaking up, the breaking out, the urgent buzz of everything hung densely in the air. Nightmares caused illusions and delusions, nightmares were bringing brokenness back together. I bumped my head on the side of the car and forgot about it.

I was often told "tenir le feu". Hold it, keep it, guard it, keep the flame, keep the fire. In a shallow sea of exhausted tenderness, I held the fire. Wading out in pressure and hurt, I held the fire. Little paper scraps cover the torch-holders, so that I could more easily project myself into the blank position, without getting burned, without having to take on a new personality. To remain myself was the biggest test and biggest reward. All of these waves of understanding and anxiety washed over me, amplified as if on steroids in the confines of a pandémie city summer.

In the midst of inner and outer conflict, a change of location and living on the go allowed some sort of chaotic but forward flow to unfold. Often I felt like language held

me hostage as my only line of understanding and expression, but it also appeared like the source of all confusion.

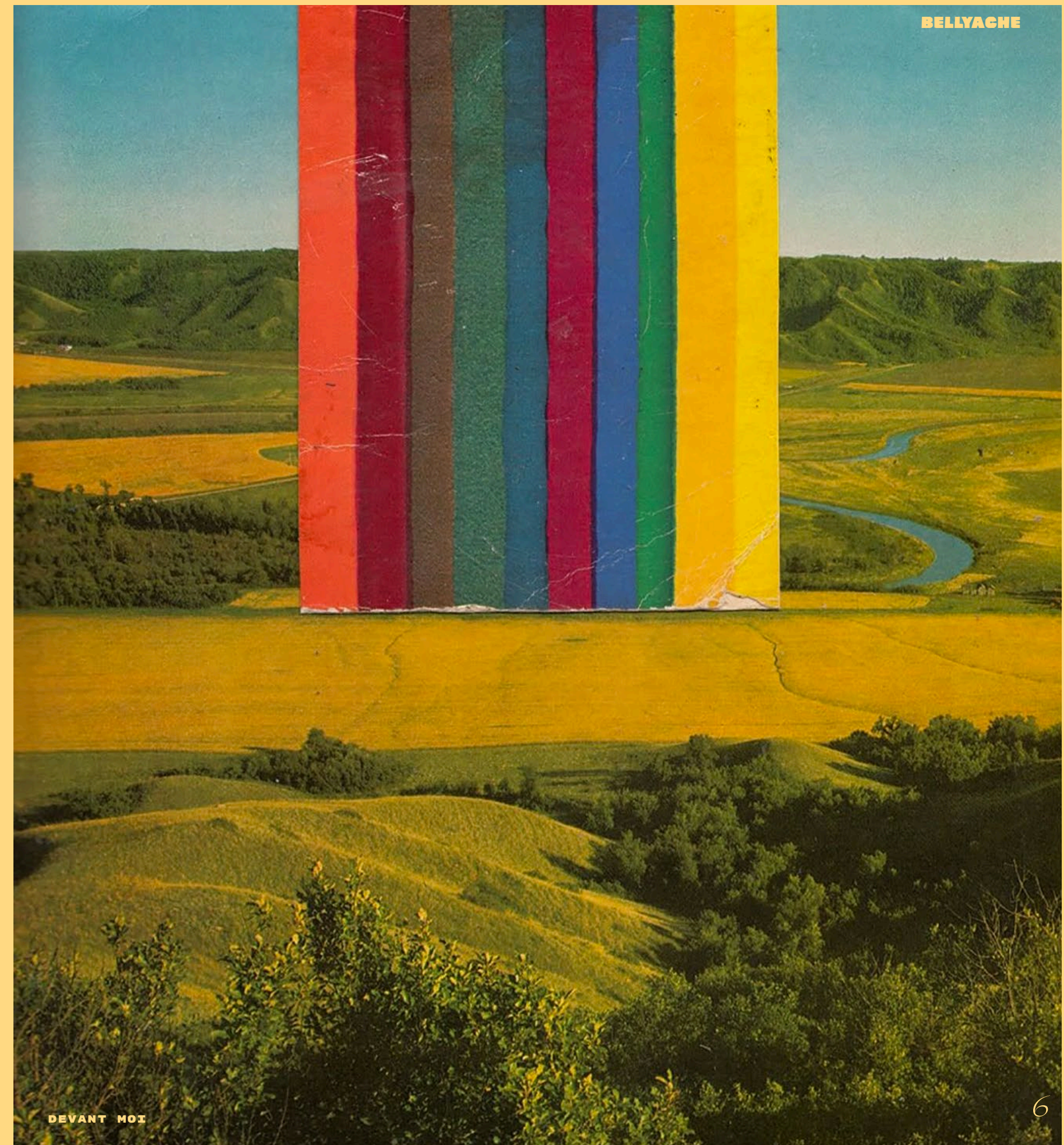
To reach out and touch nature, breathe more deeply, come at the disorder of life from a new place — that was enough of a reason to escape the city. I felt like despite the intensity of life, pathways did actually exist — full colour pathways — leading straight out into space and sky and time and stars. Possibility, potential and creativity was not only in front of me, it was in my lap, in my hands. Divinity can feel rigid and cruel and against you, and it can also feel like your brain and heart are growing smarter and stronger.

"Elements of Happiness" was not made, in reality, about sunshine and rainbows. I made it at a time when what I can only call "new personal values" were emerging and demanding attention.

Each preconceived limit had been reached, breached and tampered with. I had been pushed beyond comfort zones or previously half-held standards.

As an intense shuffling and shifting continued on in the world and in my life, what became clear was what wasn't serving me. In a meat grinder of a summer, in the middle of the year of all years, in the petri-dish that is a partnership during a pandemic, some sort of cognitive pressure was polishing a roughness I had deep down.

And then, gradually, a ballast of forgiveness formed inside me. It had never known a home before. And it stayed there, making itself comfortable. It taught me to free myself from being found and lean in to being lost. All while keeping an eye on time and space. And because of that, an unfamiliar relief arrived in the shape of uncontrollable laughter—it erupted without warning as I packed every element of happiness tightly up against each of my essential needs.

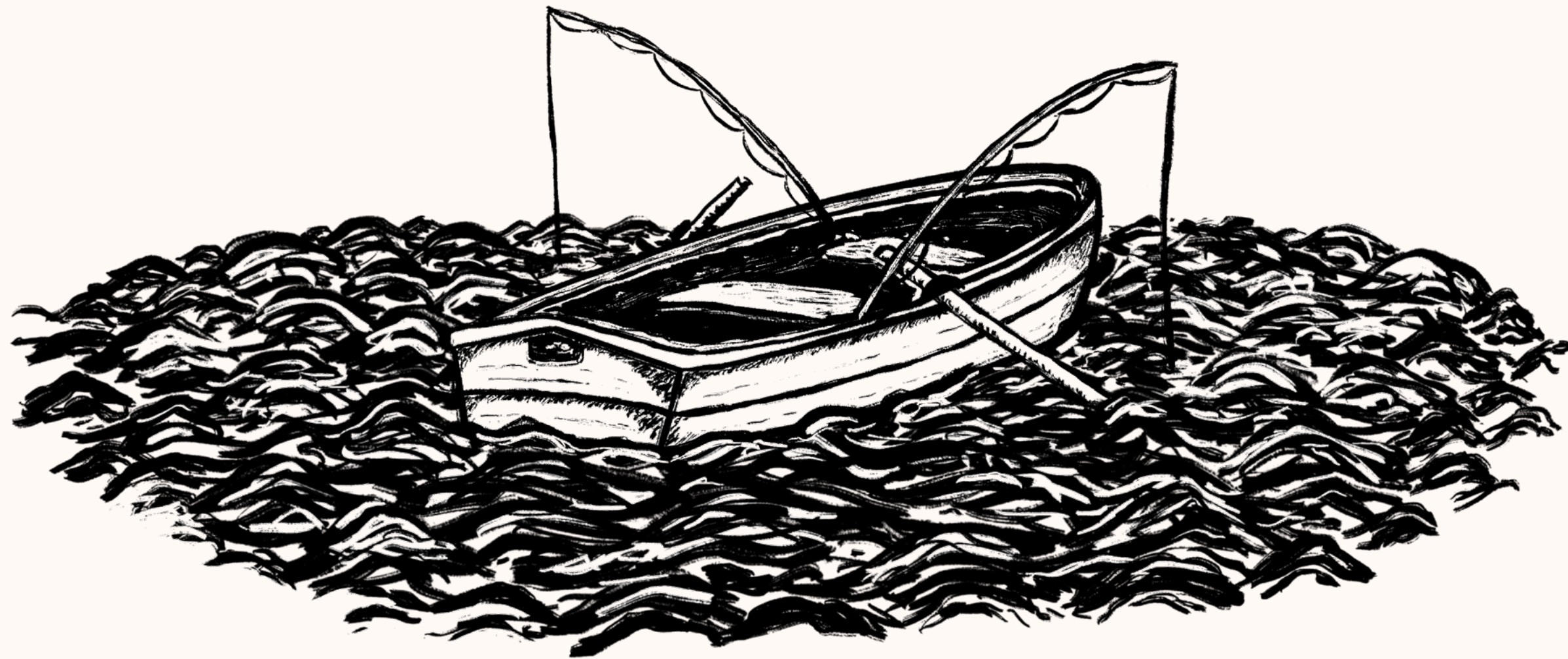


Oil On Troubled Waters

A conversation between
Will Weston and Fred Morin

Photos by Matthew Perrin Illustration by Joel Malkin

When I was getting ready to sit down with the revered Fred Morin, I didn't exactly know what I was going to do — or better yet — what I was in for. What was initially conceptualized as an interview on the hardships of the current COVID pandemic and its effect on creativity, soon turned into a deeply personal conversation about flaws, loss, grief, and ultimately the breathtaking beauty that can sometimes be attained on the other side. Fred is obviously known world-over for his culinary prowess and expertise, but what I've always admired about my former boss, is his ability to connect with the people who need him most. Fred wasn't only an irreplaceable mentor in the kitchen, but a mentor for how to truly approach personal growth with positivity and self-awareness. For many, he is one of two pillars of the now almost mythical Joe Beef, but to me, he'll always be: my friend Fred.



Will: When we talk about lean times we tend to immediately think of struggle. Do you think struggling is necessary for greatness?

Fred: I think people try to define themselves by so many things, but that observation only fits if you consider that you're not part of the struggle. It's like, fuck — I'd like to blame somebody for it, but happiness isn't constant exhilaration and sadness is not like somebody cutting your hand, raw. Struggles are struggles, you know? I don't think they're necessary, but I don't think they're avoidable.

I think struggle has a lot to do with the pursuit of perfection. Has your idea of perfection changed over the years?

Oh yeah! It's the process, man. Depression is caused by an obsession with the end goal and a complete dislike and fear of the process. Work is very spiritual, like that. Millions of neurological impulses make your brain come to conclusions. You process memories, ambitions, techniques — you give order to your hands. It's a very contemplative place. Perfection, people say, is like finding God. If there is a God, if there is perfection, it's not a dot that you find in an infinite amount of noise. Perfection is all the noise — it's everywhere.

It's almost like finding zen in the mundane. You're not even thinking about anything else, you're just focused on the task.

You can bring that to another level and use it on what you're living. Grieving can be an act of the present. I'm

going to walk slow — I'm not going to burden myself, I'm just going to have memories, I'm going to cry, I'm going to be now. That's very important. I found that in my 40's — it's that whole bullshit of instant gratification. Every chemical, every product you add to your brain, if you add cocaine, if you add heroin, it creates a state of elevation that's never Valhalla — you never get there.

I'm turning 30 in about 3 weeks now. I told myself at 30 that I'd take myself for a full physical. Do the whole thing.

30's fine. If you hit 30 sober, without any substance issues, you're already very good. At 40, you carry the burden.

I'm definitely not hitting 30 sober. With everything that's been happening lately, I'm definitely a self-medicator.

Yeah. The one thing (getting sober) made me realize was — and the barometer for me has always been the passing of a close person — it's like doing push-ups. Every day I'm sober it's like I'm getting stronger for dealing with that shit.

For me, booze is definitely a crutch. You know, you never really know how you're going to react — even to something you've been waiting for your entire life — until it happens. My dad has been dying since I was 3 years old.

For real?

He actually keeled-over in a chair in a Chinese restaurant the day after my 4th birthday. He had had

a massive seizure. They took him to the hospital and found that he had a golf ball-sized tumour in his brain. He had eight craniotomies in my lifetime — the first surgery took out a quarter of his brain.

But if they didn't — that's scary, you know?

If he didn't get sick I was supposed to grow up in Boston. He had a deal at Harvard. They were going to give him a lab and a bunch of medical students.

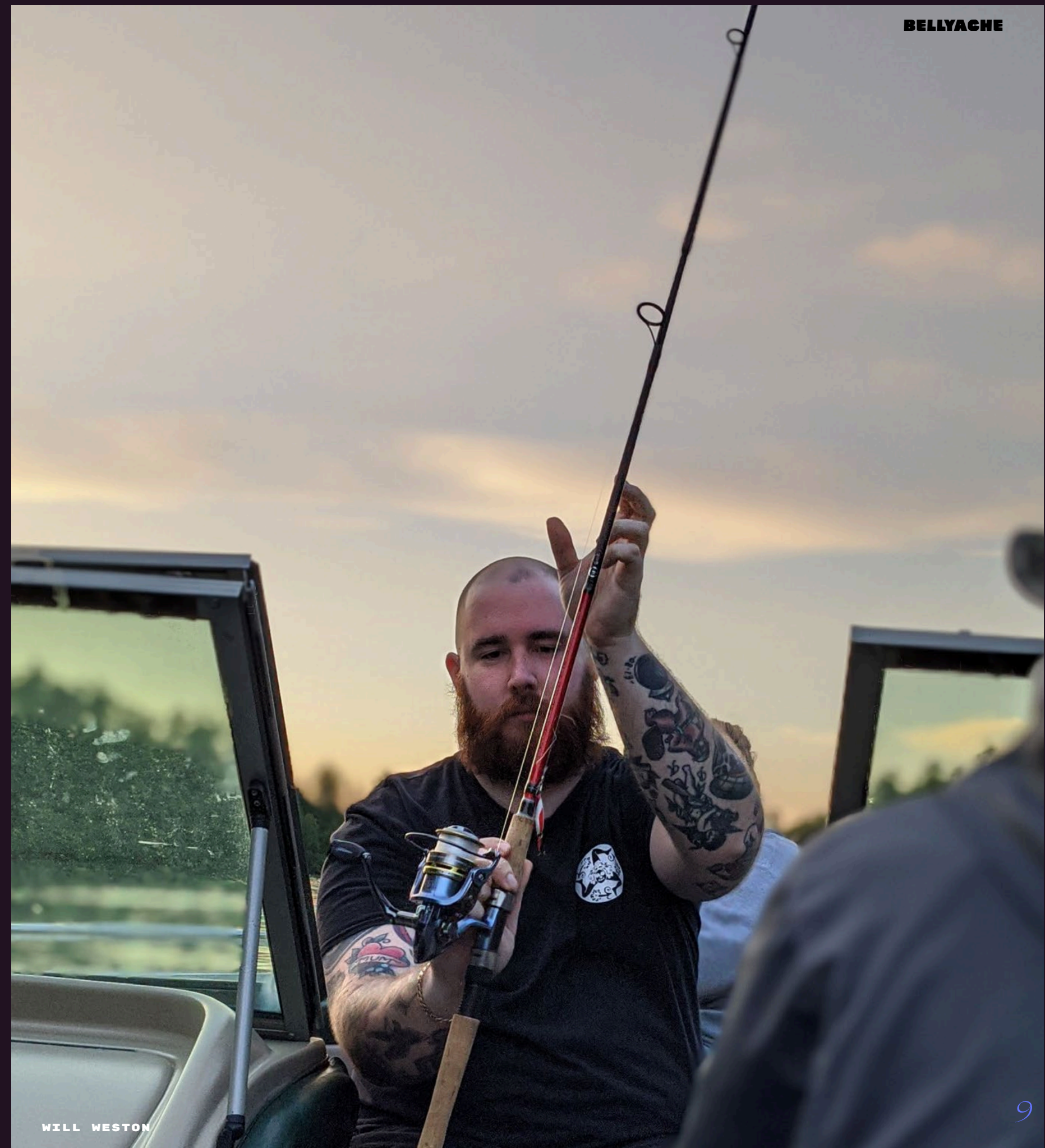
That thing you say, "I was supposed to" — man, we're not supposed to. We're supposed to be one of the sperm that gets dumped in the toilet after sex. There's a lot of things that happen, right or wrong, for you to grow into a person, you know? All the kids used to say, "have you been to Disney World?" I was like, "No. I was supposed to go." There's no alternate universe where you go in one and you don't in the other.

It's all about adaptability.

People don't quit. At every level of hardship that people face they come up with renewed strength or surprising resources to come out of it. I wrote something yesterday to a friend, "The cusp of madness is a moveable concept." Shit is layered and layered upon you — you should be relapsing or quitting or killing yourself and you're not. It's moveable, it's a fluid concept.

I'm a very pessimistic person but in my mind, you can be very flawed and still put out great work.

(Laughs) You must be Eastern European. With morosity or perceived sadness comes self-medication and its



impact on vitality or vigour. Painting in your studio, it's harder when you're drunk, you know? Every artist that paints drunk is sloppy. To be in touch with your work, whatever it is, there's a matching of vibration between your hands and your mind. There's no mood in that. I heard this thing in an A.A. meeting in New Orleans, "Alcoholics: if you give us a rut, we'll furnish it." That was very me.

Would you say that your sobriety has given you clarity?

Yeah! It's a very blanket statement, but yes. We're in the business of selling extravagance. I mean, look at the Bourdain stuff — the little ice-shack with the dinner and the Chartreuse. Sobriety did give me clarity but it's the thoughts I have now — if I untangle a mess in my mind now, I can work on it tomorrow and I'm not back three steps. Same with an idea. I'm not like, "Oh we should do this! We should do that!" I have an idea and I can come back to it. It's not all splattered — so in that way there's clarity.

You and I are both people who deal with depression. You wrote a story after Tony (Bourdain) passed that was a really apt description of what we go through.

The one regret I had about that story was not to include a part. I think about it often. There's been a lot of coming-clean stories and most of them, if not all of them, are deresponsibilizing. There's a certain mea culpa to make — I was self-indulgent. My mind made me believe I was worth the success. It's important to admit that part of it was me. I was using the job to drink. A lot of people say, "the job made me drink"

— it's not true. The kitchen is a safe harbour for a lot of people but it's also a chosen line of work for people who like to inebriate at night.

Is painting an outlet to deal with some of those regrets?

It's painting, it's tinkering, it's whatever. Painting is silent — I can listen to old Tom Clancy books on tape — I like that. I find that the beauty of painting is the craft, which is putting on Gesso, the engineering of the boards and the panels — the stretchers and stuff. That's one thing. Then there's the story. Some people do that with poems, some people do that with dance—but the beauty is you can walk the steps of places you cried, places you loved, places you swore you would never go back to. Places in your mind — memories. You can isolate that one good family day, you can isolate that one good time and paint it. Fuck man, it's a ladder out of your rut.

What's the key to making it through lean times?

Community. Support. Tangible, actual community — the people and place where you live needs you and you need it, that's the key to lean times.



PAINTERLY

WORDS & IMAGES BY MATTHEW PERRIN

You've applied the finishing touch, and admiring your own handiwork, you bathe in the smug afterglow of a job well done. Up until this moment, it had been eroding your sanity, stalking you at inopportune times, and making you shudder inwardly with pangs of guilt. Time to put this one to bed, you say, as you begin to gather your tools.

Due to the repetitive nature of the task, however, you've absentmindedly taken another brushful of pigment, and now stand frozen in place, your attention shifting rapidly from your hands to the wall and back again.

You're in a bit of a pickle, because to waste this paint, nay this brush, would be a crime against the same dutiful sense of economy that led you alone to tackle this job, rather than hiring someone else to do it. You shrink at the thought of allowing some stranger to see how long you've been willing to tolerate such a clear and present eyesore.

IF YOU'RE BEING HONEST, IT'S NOT BEEN MONTHS, BUT YEARS OF NEGLECT. TODAY IS THE DAY YOU TRIUMPH OVER SHAME.

No, a reapplication of paint over your even-handed and judicious brushstrokes (which have now begun to dry and undergo a chemical reaction/change of state that you do not entirely understand, but are reticent to fuck with) would be leaving the door open to the devil.

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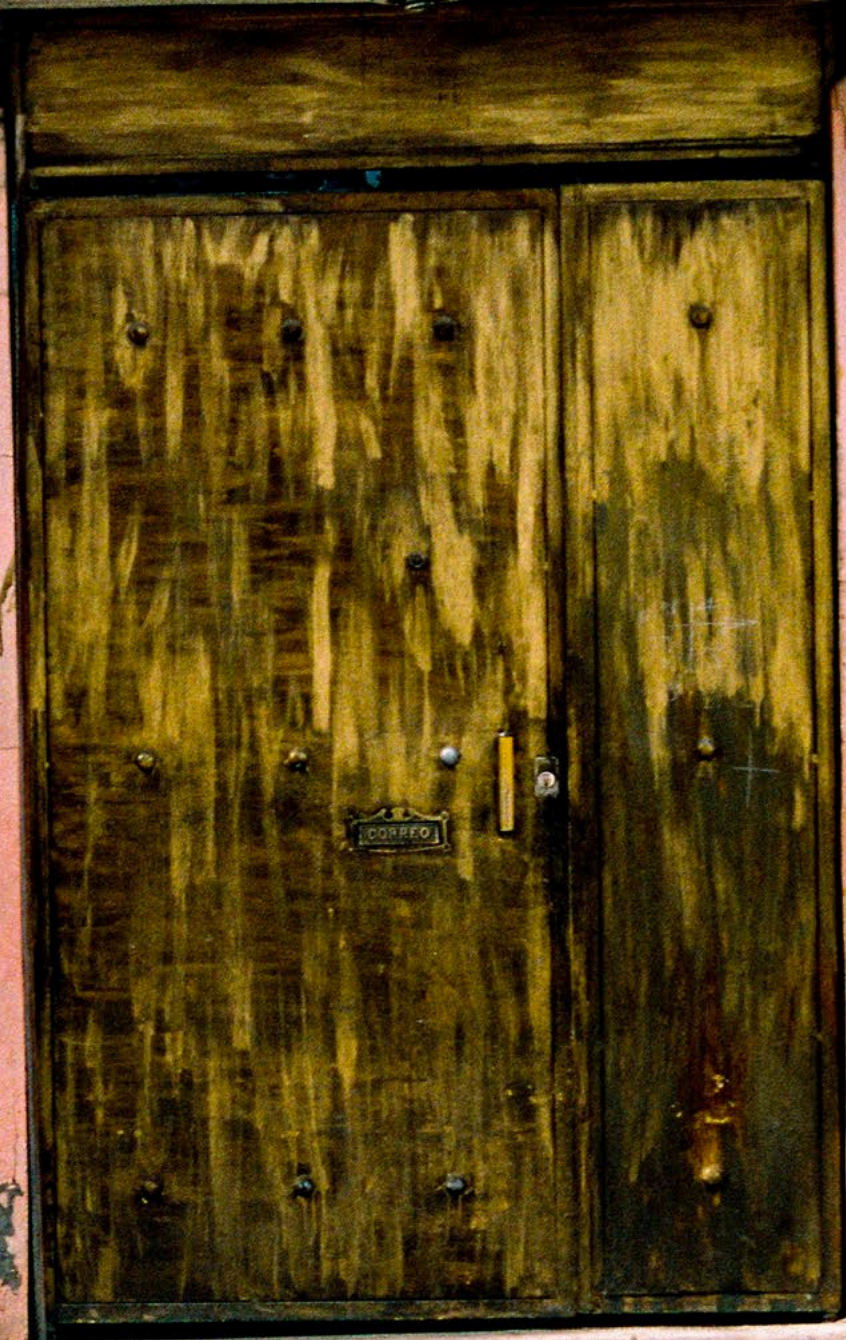


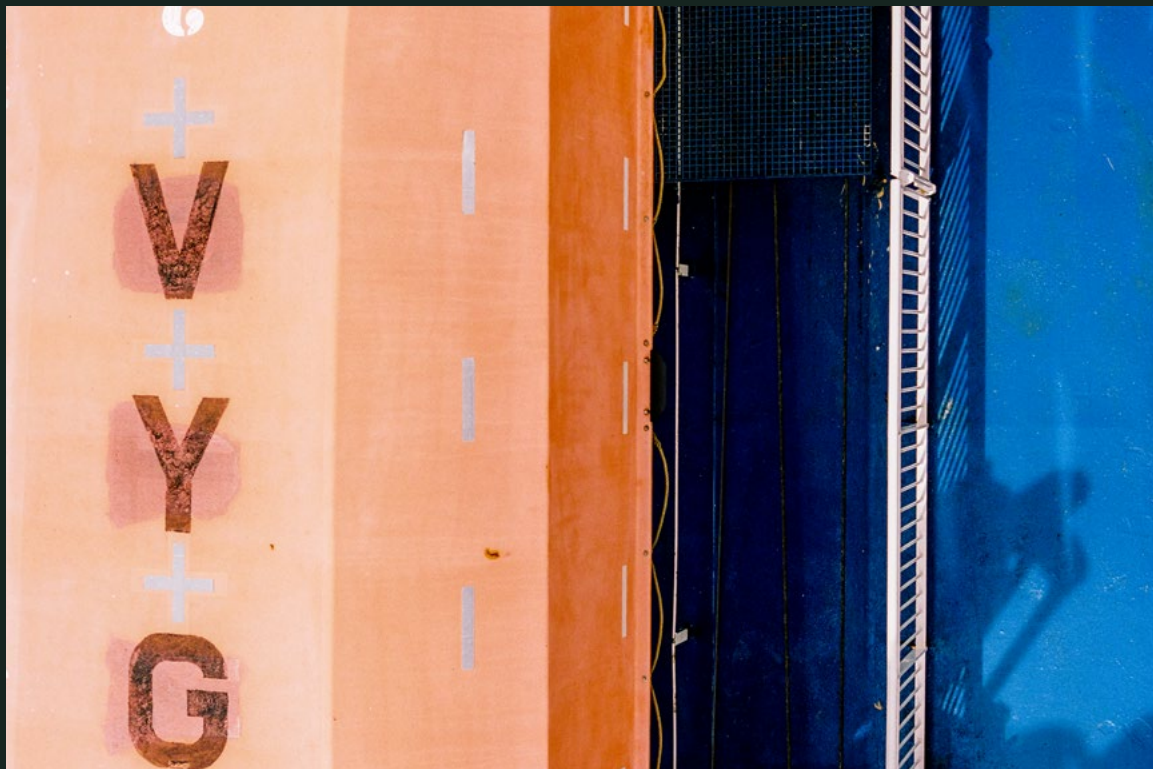
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GRUPPO



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WEAR





Such a wanton move could undo all of the goodwill you've amassed to this point, and chase away this fleeting moment of accomplishment and self-satisfaction.

You're now dealing with some serious brain-stem kind-of-shit. Your gaze slides to an adjacent area, just outside of your current workspace, yet within arm's reach.

IT'S ANOTHER UNSIGHTLY SCAR, SMALLER REALLY, AND BEYOND THE SCOPE OF YOUR ORIGINAL TASK, BUT NONETHELESS DESERVING OF YOUR ATTENTION. SURELY THERE'S NO HARM IN GETTING THE BALL ROLLING HERE, TOO.

Your hand moves like a marionette's, manipulated by the accumulated trauma of generations before you, and you discharge the pigment left in your brush into the secondary scar, swiping quickly and repeatedly, until only trace amounts of colour are being left



behind. It's a bit of primer, you tell yourself, and a leg up. Paint's been put to good use and you've saved the brush in the meantime. The bristles are basically



dry now, and won't require solvent. Just a quick rinse with water, wrap it up in cellophane, and call it a day. You're thrifty and efficient, just like your grandparents.

Sun's hanging low now, washing your workspace with warm, Turner-esque light.

This was no simple whitewash, more of a fresco, really, and is looking sharp as a tack, that is, except for the little area just to the left, where you see the evidence of a pattern of behaviour that extends not only beyond the confines of your own menial task, but outside borders of your own home, your country, and your historical moment.

Whether travelling abroad or through the alleys of my own neighbourhood, I'm constantly on the lookout for similar scenes. They are prime examples of behaviours which indicate the common, almost instinctual thought processes we all experience. For me personally, they are a kind of salve, and serve to alleviate the sting from the small guilt trips we inflict upon ourselves.





Once a week, I'll root through my fridge, pulling scraps, wiping down sticky shelves, mentally composing lists for the week. There are always a few puzzles to solve, usually a result of bad or lazy decisions I made the day before. What to do with this nub of cheese I left out overnight after a little too much wine? The carton of heavy cream I accidentally froze? This greying chocolate that bloomed in the cold air?

I made this tart — really a classic gratin, stacked and pressed into flaky dough — after a particularly cathartic refrigerator deep clean. I lined up the wrinkly vegetables and stared at them critically.

A fresh canvas of pie dough can make any ho-hum ingredient feel special and a little decadent. Ditto, cheese scraps and butter. Heavy cream soaks the root vegetables with a plush, velvety softness. A smear of mustard adds a touch of heat. The whole thing is pressed until the layers compact and meld. A divine harmony of starches, flour, fat, and thrift; and my refrigerator, left a bit lighter.

Celeriac Gratin

Makes one 12" tart; serves 8.

Ingredients

- * 250g pie dough
- * 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- * 1 celeriac
- * 1 Japanese sweet potato
- * 2 small Yukon gold potatoes
- * 100mL heavy cream
- * 100g caciocavallo cheese
- * 50g unsalted butter
- * 5g chardonnay vinegar
- * 15g extra virgin olive oil
- * 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
- * 1/4 teaspoon black pepper

Process

Prep the tart pan.

Lightly coat an 8" tart mold with non-stick spray. Let the pie dough temper slightly, then roll out on a piece of floured parchment paper to a circle 12" across. Gently lift the pie dough and flip onto the greased tart form. Pick up the edges of the dough and tuck into the edges of the tart pan. Pinch off excess tart dough overhang with your fingertips. Set the tart base aside and chill while you prep the rest of your ingredients.

Process your ingredients.

Peel the fibrous outer layer of the celeriac with a small paring knife or vegetable peeler. Cut the celeriac in half and run through a mandolin to make 1/4 cm-thick slices. Repeat with the Japanese sweet potato and the Yukon gold potatoes.

Fill the tart shell.

Spread the mustard with the back of a spoon on the pie dough. Arrange the sliced vegetables into a tight grid, fitting in as many pieces as you can into each layer. After each

layer, sprinkle with salt and pepper, and dot with torn pieces of caciocavallo and butter. Drizzle with two tablespoons cream for each layer.

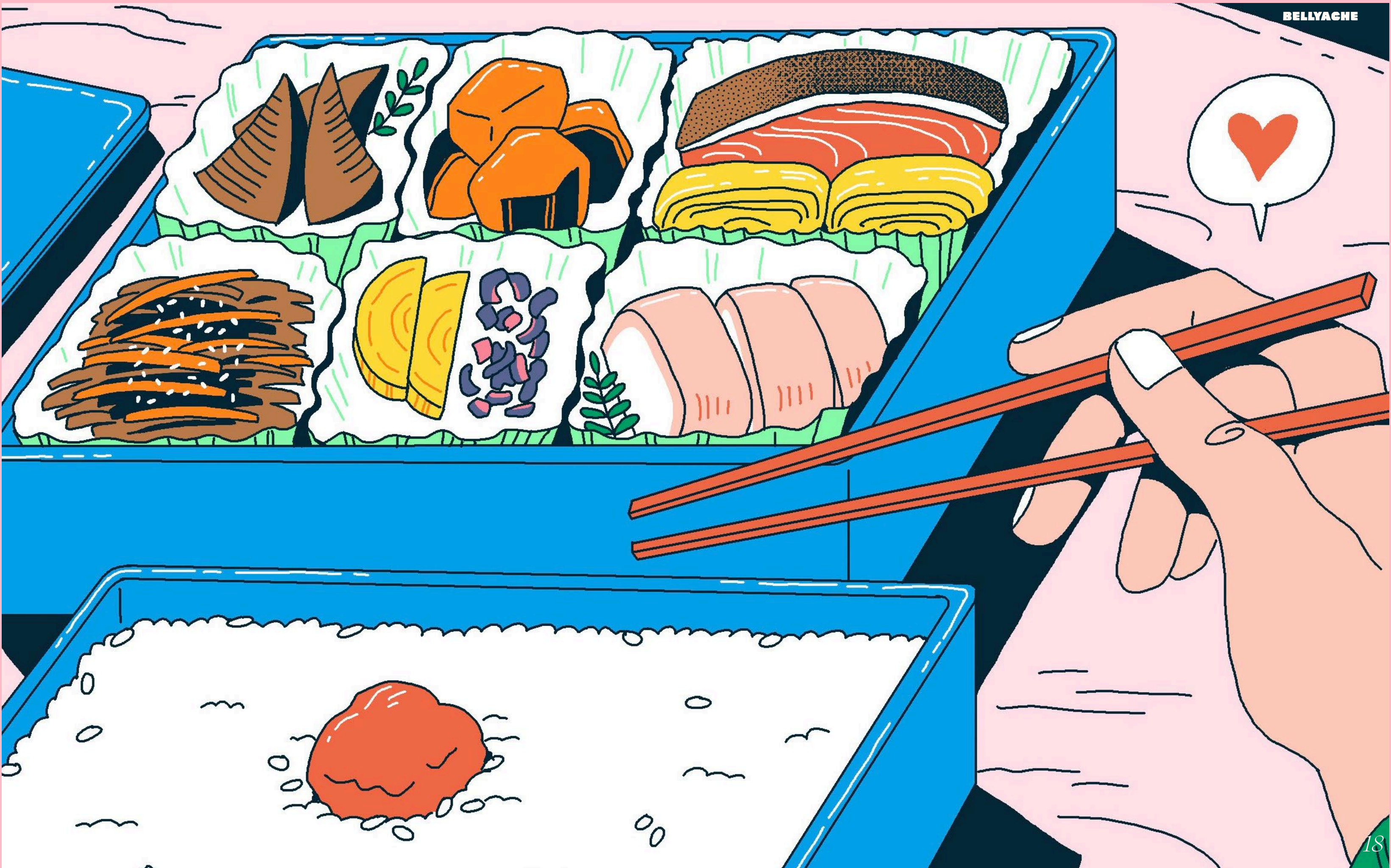
Press the tart.

Cover the surface of the tart with foil. Place something heavy on top (like a Dutch oven with a heavy book inside) and let it rest, weighted, at least 30 minutes before baking. (The tart can also be frozen at this point, and baked off at a later date).

Bake the tart.

When you're ready to bake, preheat the oven to 375°F. Bake for 20 minutes. Remove foil and let bake uncovered until the tart edges are deeply golden and the filling is bubbling, about 30 minutes longer. Sprinkle with flaky sea salt and drizzle with olive oil and vinegar. Let cool slightly then cut into slices and serve with a big crunchy salad dressed in lots of vinegar.





JOY TOO SOON

Words by **Maya Hey**

Illustration by **Pearl Law**

JOY TOO SOON

**I HEAR MY PHONE DING IN RAPID SUCCESSION,
I KNOW IT'S MY MOTHER. SHE'S THE ONLY ONE
WHO WRITES ME THIS WAY.**

Since our respective lockdowns, my mother and I have been sharing food photos with each other over LINE. She uses her iPad to document what she eats. Void of any sort of styling, they are straight up aerial shots of whatever was on the table that day: rice, fish, pickles, soup. “Her plates” sit next to what she prepares for my father, usually of a different palate with pasta, gravy, pickles, cheese. A giant salad bridges the divide, mounted with textures of green that I can only dream of, now that I live in a country where winter lasts eight months.

These photos were a long time coming. I moved out of my parents' home 18 years ago and had kept our default ethos of ‘no

news is good news.’ It wasn’t until I started my Instagram account with my first ever smartphone that I wanted to share pretty pictures, and I started tinkering with the different filters to a fault.

I would send them each of my posts as an email attachment, like a digital postcard, but with seldom reactions or engagement. Sending my parents photos that were over-saturated, over-exposed, and way too artificially granular for my (at the time) 3.some megapixel phone-camera was an earnest gesture, a “mommy, daddy, look what I made!” that I never really had in my childhood. So when my mother mentioned off-hand that she’d started a ‘food journal’ to

help her keep track of how the days come to pass during lockdown, I immediately and genuinely asked her to send them to me.

And when she does, they’re photos of the past three meals sent at once:
DING, DING, DING.

Sometimes the photographs are self-explanatory, as I recognize my mother’s burdock kinpira, twice-cooked pork, shrimp and broccoli—all of which get muddled in translation as ‘stir-fry.’

**THESE DISHES DIG DEEP INTO MY
NOSTALGIA AND I FIND MYSELF
RIFFING ON HER RECIPES WITH
WHATEVER I HAVE ON HAND.**

When I ask her about substitutions, she shares with me an ounce of empathy, tapping back to her own misery when she had to navigate ‘home’ cooking with foreign ingredients after moving to the US decades ago.

Sometimes the photographs show outdoor barbecues with family friends, seated at separate tables, lifting burgers with what are clearly smiles behind each mask. And, as even Northern California cools down

at this time of year, I see fewer grills and more hotpots. But they’re still outdoors, using the portable ‘cassette’ stoves with the miniature cans of butane. Though I never see the next-day’s porridge that uses the leftover broth from the hotpot, I know it’s happening. It always does.

Sometimes the photos document the citrus trees—the yuzu, the oro blanco, the meyer lemons—which is my father’s domain of backyard garden maintenance.

I see pride on their faces, beaming smiles as they hold up fruit from their very own trees, trees that I can recall being newly planted when I was still a child: look what we grew! Over autumn, I was receiving updates on squirrel-gate, as they’d been feasting on the persimmons. Over summer, it was the figs. I wonder what dispatches I’ll receive in the Spring.

Sometimes I receive photos that have zero context but, from our chat history, seems out of place.

I use the ‘Reply’ function on LINE to reference the photo and inquire: “What are those bags of?” I recognize the hallway

that connects the kitchen to the dining room, the area closest to the fridge. It is lined with eight or so shopping bags, some with store names I recognize, filled and bulging with what, I don't know yet.

"Today's shopping" she reports, pithy and vague.

Another time, I see a disposable tray of identical brown nubs, hidden amidst other photos of grilled fish and jajangmyeon. They look deep fried, and I reply with "What are these? Donuts?"

"Kiyo's curry-bread, 100 of them." "!!! Whyyyyyy?!?!???"

"Kiyo now needs money.... and so I asked some friends to buy her curry-bread. Next Monday she is going to make another 100."

Another time I see ornate and identical arrangements. Three in a row.

Stewed bamboo in the top left corner, next to stewed pumpkin, a rolled-up omelette in the top right corner with grilled salmon, the bottom half a combination of burdock kinpira, pickles, and steamed fish cakes,

each separated by paper muffin-tin liners. Again, I zero-in on the bento boxes.

I asked who made them, but I should've known better.

"Sayuri-san had knee-replacement surgery and so I made one for the family."

One helluva gift you made. In my attempts to gather clues from these photo exchanges, I finally see the bigger picture: my mother figured it out, a post-capitalist care economy.

At any given time, she is part of a much more intricate web of exchanges and barter, but it's one that never borders on the sinister realm of keeping tabs or keeping up social graces.

IT IS AN ECONOMY BUILT ON ABUNDANCE AND COMMUNITY, KEEPING EACH OTHER TETHERED, GRACIOUS, AND WELL-CONSIDERED.

It is a marketplace of seeking and supporting, a place of knowing that only good can happen when delights are shared, especially when they come as a surprise.

The Johnsons next door are the recipients of the porridge made with the hotpot-broth because one of them is immunocompromised, and this after years of neighborly requests to check the mail or roll out the trash bins while my parents were abroad.

The Kims receive semi-weekly bento boxes in exchange for waived fees at a golf club my mother cannot access otherwise. The elderly Tanakas receive meals twice a week. The Shirvanis receive meals after the mother undergoes chemotherapy: one vegan, one gluten free, plus two more to complete the fam. Consequently, family friends share their bounty with my mother: red bean paste sweets to accompany tea time, gallon-bags of homemade kimchi without the garlic to which my mother is allergic, smiles and thank yous by virtual chat.

When I called her out on it, my mother listed all of the connections and cackled over the phone. She admits that she cooks for about a dozen folks every week. But she likes it, she says. It gives her joy. And everybody else enjoys too.

"I'm going to die well! Don't you think?" she grins.

We both laugh over the LINE video call. More like a cackle, with both our heads cocked back in unrestrained glee. And there's a part of me that thinks: too soon, mother. Too soon. But I'll take it. I'll take this joy too soon over no-joy any day.

UTOPIA

is a soft, declarative wind that is warm, like a lark singing sweet hymns in the summer. i think of being on the shores of athens, alongside the narrow seas, watching the blues turn into greens, and the water swamp over all the lush coral that sits at the shallow surface of the bank. swaying with the music, the rhymes of the earth. like crystallized chlorophyll, the water is a dank emerald in the sun, a shimmery weed. i feel the patterns of happiness wash over me, i am risen, i am awakened, i'm alive, under the sun. my skin gelatinous, so brown i smell of crisp tobacco. i am peeling through the layers, awash like an onion in bloom, smell fresh, a blue lagoon.

utopia is a realm of incandescence, where all are glimmering pearls, an entire world dipped in shine. with the stank rosewater, a kinder surprise wafts through the pilgrimage on site. where everybody is beautiful and every body is beautiful, loved and held; without any pain in sight. no existential trauma or rough, rough epigenetics. no crying in great, languid waves. no film of skin that sits on your bruises, a keloid that's formed, where nothing can get out. or burst through. or heal this infection. no - none of that. utopia is alive, it's the thirst that keeps us going, a starburst feeling, candy in the mouth spritzing the taste buds, lulling us into a somber respite.

in utopia, we're all free.

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Natasha Pickowicz is an NYC-based pastry chef, writer, and activist. Most recently, she ran the pastry programs at NYC restaurants Altro Paradiso, Flora Bar, and Flora Coffee. Natasha was a Finalist for the 2020 James Beard Foundation Awards for Outstanding Pastry Chef, her third year being nominated in that category. Much of her pastry work explores the relationship between baking and social justice. Natasha co-founded The Bake Sale Project (TBSP), an online resource that aims to explore and share bake sale strategies for home bakers and professionals alike, as well as In Good Taste, an online fundraising initiative that seeks to support local communities and organizations

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deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the summer of 2020, Natasha has created her own pastry pop-up called Never Ending Taste, which celebrates the relationship between local farming, social justice, and community bake sales.

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Pearl Law is an illustrator and zine maker based in Hong Kong. She loves to play around with visual wit and exploring the best narrative possible through problem-solving, solid line work and nice bold colours. Much of her work takes inspiration from humour, literature, history, and behavioural observations.

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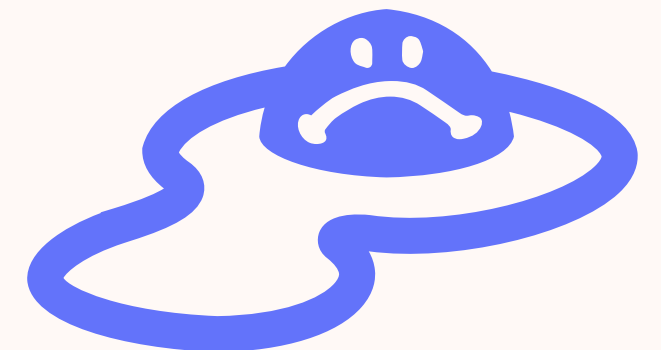
Fariha Róisín is a multidisciplinary artist, born in Ontario, Canada. She was raised in Sydney, Australia, and is based in Brooklyn, New York. Róisín's work exists at the intersections of her identity as a queer, Muslim, South Asian woman interested in spirituality, race and pop culture. Her writing has been featured in The New York Times, Al Jazeera, The Guardian, and Allure. She has also pioneered a refreshing and renewed conversation about wellness, contemporary Islam and queer identities. She is the author of the poetry collection How To Cure A Ghost (2019), as well as the novel Like A Bird (2020). Her upcoming work is a book of non-fiction entitled, Who Is Wellness For?

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