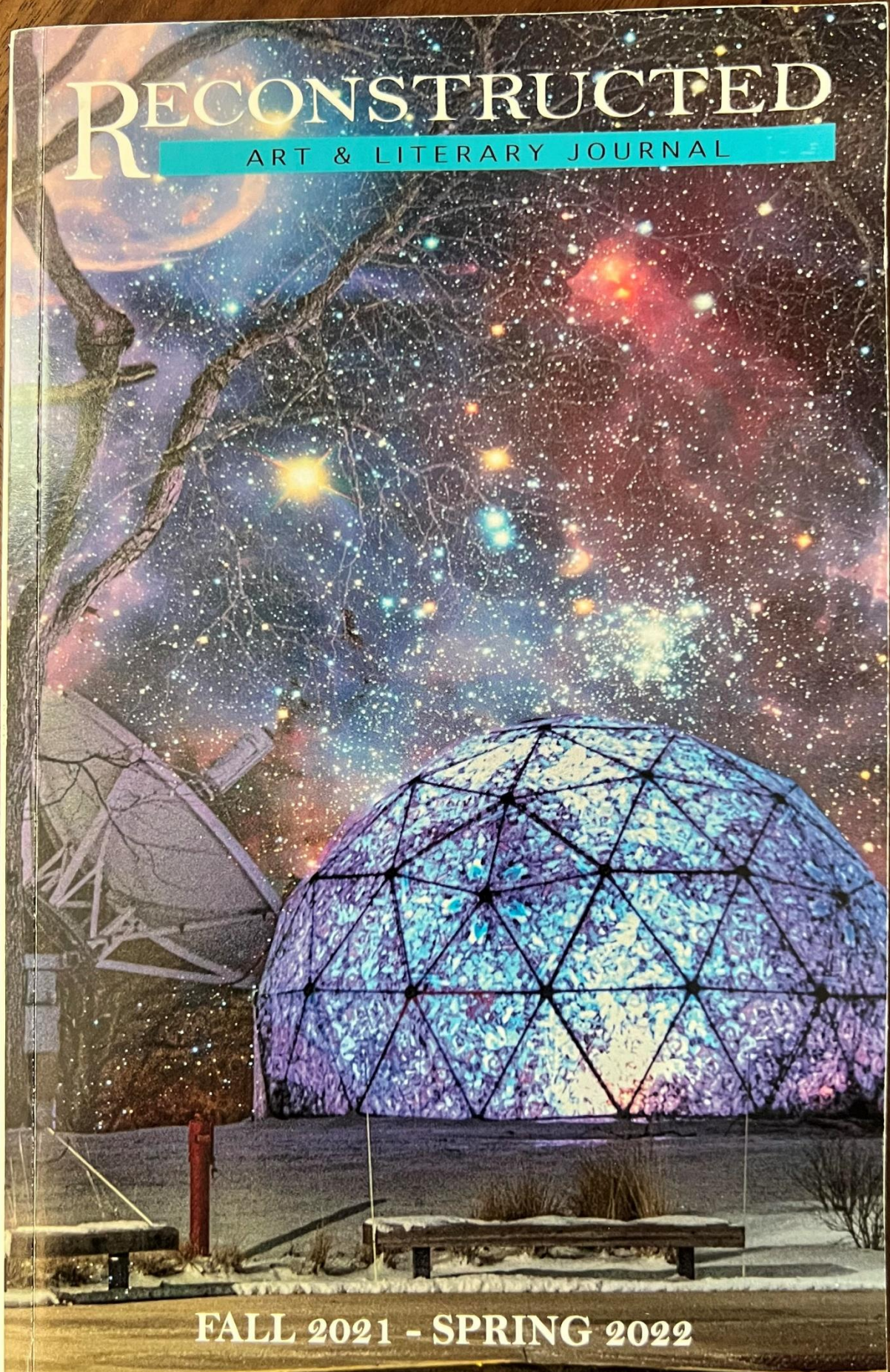


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Love and Linguini

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Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake Waltz no. 2" echoes in the suburban condo as Jay Davis waltzes through the threshold of his immaculate kitchen. The last time he felt this passionate about cooking was with his ex-girlfriend two years ago. Now his bed is cold, and DoorDash is closer to him than his beloved cast-iron skillet.

One fateful afternoon, Jay decided to get back into the dating scene and create a Tinder profile where he matched with a woman named Emily Bird. The two hadn't met in person during the two months they'd been talking because of their drastically different work schedules; Emily held two jobs while Jay was a full-time accountant. Although hesitant at first, Emily agreed to meet Jay for the first time over dinner at his place tonight.

After going all out at Whole Foods, he decides to whip up his infamous linguini to impress Emily. Jay whirls around his kitchen to the melody of "Swan Lake"—grabbing spices from their rack, a pot and pan from the lower cabinet, oil from its resting place, and cooking utensils for his gourmet magic. When dropping fettuccine pasta in a pot of water to boil, his phone vibrating brings him out of his musical trance. He scoops up the device from the kitchen island and unlocks his phone to find a message from Emily. "Jst got off my shift. The evil manager wsn't here 2day, so I'm excited 4 dinr! *Hungry emoji*."

Jay smiles before responding with, "I'm glad you had a good day! I can't wait to see you. *Smiley face*." After pressing send, he returns to his delicious conquest.

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Once the noodles finish boiling, he strains and dumps them in a pot to stir his homemade white sauce. After plating, he grips his phone and swipes to his notes where he reads aloud, "Emily Bird, a waitress at TGIF. An only child with a single mother. Fair-skin with mouse-brown hair, brown eyes, and freckles across her—" Ding! The stove's timer chimes, so Jay shoves his phone in his pocket and goes to place the steamy linguini in the oven to keep warm. Grabbing a knife from its block, Jay hums as he walks to retrieve a sliver of meat from his one-section, reach-in freezer.

The phone vibrates in his pocket again when he turns on the garage light, so Jay pauses to read Emily's message saying she was on her way. "Please drive safely!" he replies before returning his phone to his back pocket.

When Jay opens the freezer, the meat slowly starts sliding out. "Oh no, you don't!" he says briskly and catches the 200-pound human body to force it back into the standing freezer. "I really should've thought this through..." he grunts while holding the body in place. Jay glances at the man's nametag, "TGIF, Mike, Shift Supervisor," before lifting the man's shirt to expose his stomach. Taking the three-inch pro-slicing knife, he jabs it into Mike's gut, cutting through the layers of skin and fatty tissue before reaching the muscle. He cuts off two eight-ounce portions before pushing the man, and his spilling innards, back into the freezer before slamming the door shut.

Holding the unevenly frozen human meat in his bare hands, Jay reminisces on surprising the man in his apartment at 4:30 that morning. Mike was wide awake and watching TV when Jay knocked him unconscious and strangled him to death. The early morning's darkness hid the chaos of Jay clearing out the boot of his car to get Mike's body into the back of his SUV. As Jay bent and rammed Mike into the car, he wondered how this weak man could be so belligerent about common restaurant

issues—especially toward sweet, sweet Emily? As Mozart's "Requiem in D Minor" pulls Jay out of the memory, he shuts down the garage and heads back to the kitchen.

He fills a pot with water and puts his Juul cooking system inside. After adjusting the settings to prepare frozen steak, he pushes "Start" on the device to heat the water. While that's going, Jay takes Mike's abdominal meats and puts each in an individual plastic bag, then adds virgin olive oil and the ingredients he bought from Whole Foods to each bag. He closes the bags and shakes them well to coat the 8oz portions in the mixed seasoning. Jay sets the bags down on the counter to start doing the dishes while waiting to finish preparing dinner. When the Juul chimes, signaling that the pot of water is hot and ready, he drops the plastic bags of human meat into the steaming water and then returns to the dishes.

Time flies by when the sounds of the doorbell and Juul ring together in tempo at the start of Chopin's "Nocturne op. 9 no. 2". Jay cleans his hands, turns down his music, and fixes his hair in the mirror hanging on a wall. He opens the door to see Emily Bird's petite figure standing at his doorstep wearing a little red dress. The two greet each other with an awkward embrace before Jay brings her inside.

Jay dresses the linguini and cooked meat on china plates, then brings it to the table Emily patiently sits at. "I can't believe you made this yourself!" Emily says as Jay sets the plates down and, like a server, places a napkin in her lap before sitting and doing the same with his own. Once seated, he encourages her to take the first bite and watches as her fork and knife delicately slice into the meat. Its juices pour over and mix with the noodle sauce before she brings the bite-sized piece into her mouth. Crooning, Emily says, "This is amazing. I've never had a steak that tasted like this before!" as her fork punctures

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another part of the seared meat to get another taste. Jay thanks her for such kind words as he watches her cheeks circle from chewing and her throat contract to swallow his masterpiece. He cuts himself a bite-sized chunk before pulling the meat off the fork with his teeth and into his mouth. The flavor explodes across his taste buds, making his eyes sting and water from an intimacy he's never had with any delicacy he's made before. "This is good," he says, slowly chewing as he meets her gaze. "Let's have this again sometime. I'll be better prepared."

End.