

THE CATALYST

CONTEMPORARY LITERARY ARTS MAGAZINE



ISSUE 14 // SPRING 2018
THE ISLA VISTA ISSUE

EDITOR'S NOTE



Dear Reader(s),

I hope this message reaches you in high hopes and/or good spirits. We've got a really fun issue this quarter, and despite all of the stress, I had a great time making it. As graduation day creeps ever closer, I've been forced to reflect on my journey here at UCSB. Partly because I live in introspection, and partly because last week, I was described as "a naturally calm person." It's a little bit amazing to me how the university & Isla Vista experience changed me, but in particular, how they forced me to grow.

I hated writing when I was a kid. Made me think about myself too much. I didn't write, or draw, or do anything that could be considered "creative" until my friend Kiana (bless her heart) bullied me into joining The Catalyst, for which she was an editor at the time. She'd been one of my biggest sources of support first and second year, and it was my turn to support her and take her class. Bullied is probably too strong a word for how it all went down, but if Kiana wanted you to do something, it got done. I remember being so terrified on the first day. My hands were sweaty, and my heart beat so hard my glasses would rattle a little bit on my face. I'd never even tried writing something creative before, you know? And not only did we have to write things on the spot, we had to read them out loud. In front of strangers. Nerve-wracking, right? But something about being in the room there—being forced to create—changed something in me, and I had no idea how much so. I actually found my old notebook in my closet a few months ago. The writing made me cringe, but isn't it just wonderful to be able to tangibly examine how far you've come?

The Catalyst, for me, became exactly what a catalyst is—something that speeds up the process by which a reaction or a transformation happens. In addition to spurring my stunted creativity into action, it's done wonders for my self-image, too. I no longer tear up after answering questions in class. I don't have to practice my breathing exercises when I'm walking through the grocery store, and my voice doesn't shake when I talk to strangers. Speaking of voices—learning to project when I talk was one of the hardest lessons to learn. I still want to retreat within myself and run away and hide a lot. But fighting that urge has become easier. I haven't grown an inch since I graduated high school, but I like to think that I'm a much bigger person now. I've learned how to be the person I am instead of the person I want to be. I found myself in this city. I found my voice in The Catalyst. And for that, I will always be grateful.

So, reader, it is my final wish as an editor of The Catalyst that you grant yourself the same privilege I've been allowed in The Catalyst. I want for you to learn the joy in exploring your Self, whoever they may be. This may be a bit out of context—I haven't read the full poem in some time, but I'd like to share one of my favorite quotes with you: "listen: there's a hell

of a good universe next door; let's go" —e.e.cummings

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Literarily yours,

Ricky Barajas

There's a knot in your throat. You know the feeling when there's so much left that you had to say, so much fight left in you, but there's no place for it anymore? So, instead, it sits inside of you and festers. The infection spreads through your body, moving from your throat to your chest—your heart begins to pound, slowly but still too hard—from your chest to your hands—god, your palms are sweaty—from your hands down your spine—sweat beads on your back and makes your shirt stick to your skin while chills run laps up and down—from your spine down to your knees—they're pretty shaky right now—from your knees down to your toes—your feet feel like bricks at the end of your leg—they're heavy and cold. There's so much pressure inside of you begging for a release, a soothing of this unbearable tension that for some reason, you don't know how to deal with. You try deep breaths but your lungs never feel full, and you suddenly need to be clean.

You traipse your way into the bathroom and do not flip the light switch. You don't want your eyes to ache any more than they do already and you don't want to see yourself in the light—you no longer want to be known. Both hands on the counter, you look in the mirror. You pull your cheeks, mash them together. Hold your eyelids apart so you can get stare into your own eye. The shadows on your face sink your eyes into your skull; you note with an unsettling sense of satisfaction that you do not recognize yourself.

You walk to the shower and turn the knob for hot water on. You begin to strip. Layers of your clothing drop to the floor, and you eventually stand there, naked and exposed. A draft from the bathroom window pushes the whispers of steam against you. Cool droplets of water form and cling to your skin. You shudder as one slides down the length of your body.

You hope that somewhere in between getting in and getting out, you will begin to feel clean again. The smell of his skin lingers in your mind. Your fingers still remember the trails of his body and the way your fingers tingled as you traced them. You can taste the sickly sweet remnants of tobacco smoke from his kisses on your tongue. You want them to be gone. But you do not want to want. Not from him. Not about him. Not anymore. But you're stuck in a fixed loop, a never-ending cycle, a broken record. You don't have a name for it, but you recognize this feeling. Your thoughts run in circles trying to suppress—to escape each other—but they always end up right back where they started. It's so easy for you to hate yourself. No. Stop. Calm down.

You slowly pull back the curtain. The showerhead is sending water cascading down into the tub, down into the drain. The water spirals before sinking, and something about the sight feels very familiar. Stepping into the shower with your face turned away from the stream, you wince as the water hits your skin; your back contorts in pain, and your feet feel like every square inch of them has been stung and is on fire. But you stand there bearing the brunt of the situation because you can't help but feel like you deserve it. You want to scream, but your throat is still too tight. You can't tell if your face is wet from tears or the spray. *This hurts less than your heart does right now anyway*, you note wryly. Tired of the effort that standing requires, you sit, clutching your knees to your chest and hoping that the burn from too hot water that races down your back would overpower the tingle that his fingers left behind. Wow, does the water hurt, you think; but god, not finding those golden brown eyes waiting for you behind your eyelids for once felt nice.

You grab your washcloth from where it hangs on the shower curtain rod and your soap from the corner of the tub where it sits. After lathering the cloth, you begin to scrub yourself raw, trying to eradicate every cell of skin that yearns for another touch. You can't tell if the washcloth has always felt this rough or if you're just pressing that hard, but either way, the scratching feels good. There's a streetlamp just close enough to the window that one tiny rectangle of light shines into the shower. In the lamplight, you watch the soap melt off of your arm—your skin is revealed once more. You picture his face in the bubbles that slide down your chest. You stand and turn to face the stream. A gasp darts free from your mouth as the water beats down on your heart. The water stings but at least he is gone.

You stand there beneath the shower head trying to feel more than think; you notice you've gotten used to the heat. There's a split-second moment of hesitation before you turn the knob again, raising the temperature of the water. Your craving for the burn is satiated again, and you slowly rotate yourself in the streams when the heat becomes unbearable. Adding more soap to your cloth, you scrub yourself again—gently this time.

The shower has been on for a while now. You hadn't been keeping track of the time. The pitter-patter of the shower stream on your head stirs up a tune—one that you have not sung in some time. Since better times. The knot in your throat has loosened its hold on your voice. Softly, you start crooning the words. Your voice cracks. You continue singing anyway.

The water does not burn so bad anymore. ▲

SOAP SCUM

By Ricky Barajas



THE CATALYST
CONTEMPORARY LITERARY ARTS MAGAZINE