What is there to be learned about an object through touch? Is touch merely the tactile experience, or is it a conundrum in and of itself, through the vague and incorporeal, as in “touching hearts” or “in touch”? So often, we lose touch despite being physically present, and feel most strongly for what is not immediately material - and the ironies abound. In this issue of *memoryhouse*, our contributors explore the theme of touch and tackle these questions in a variety of creative nonfiction pieces, transcribing incidents of sensation into the wholly aphysical form of word, lines and color. From the myriad of textures that make up our surrounding world to the volley of emotions that we associate with them, or with a lack thereof, we hope the pieces in this issue enchant you in the most substantially intangible way.
our bodies are war zones where brave kisses fall like
warriors .............................................................................. 8
  geraldine fernandez
in five acts ........................................................................... 11
  emily ehret
hairpin .................................................................................. 14
  jacqueline jules
true story ................................................................................ 17
  jennifer maloney
rivers of dis ........................................................................... 18
  dana sonnenschein
resonance ............................................................................... 24
  lauren scharhag
brain ghosts ........................................................................... 25
  lauren scharhag
letter to my lover .................................................................... 26
  claire holland
five untitled poems .................................................................. 30
  billy waters
you understand the world through pieces ............................ 32
  dina elenbogen
editor-in-chief
vanessa ma

design editor
vanessa ma
photographers / illustrators
meera joshi
grace linhares
brooke nagler
olina ng

editorial board
caroline carter
meera joshi
susie kixmoeller
alice may
abbie reeves
marisol sobek
memoryhouse is a quarterly student-run publication that curates the personal narratives of the uchicago community and beyond through creative writing and visual art. Our performance ensemble, memento, tells stories through spoken word poetry.

To learn about joining memoryhouse or submitting work, please visit chicagomemoryhouse.wordpress.com

founded 2012, alida miranda-wolff
our bodies are war zones where brave kisses fall like warriors

geraldine fernandez

i.

I am hard earth drunk with early October drought secretly eating out my barren chest with imagined erosion;
every duskfall I spring with a wildfire dream to become surrogate mother to vegetation

there is softness here waiting & waiting for you to bury somewhere in eternity after you unearth its language.
do not be in a hurry to speak in tongues remember how silence is once a caterpillar how holy the hand gestures of a new-born sower before the butterflies in our bellies fell for monarchy
ii.

We are illicit
as opium
in the east,
we spark war
where sound minds
easily come off
as unbuckled pants.

Desert-dry,
we are each other’s
promised land
and manna
is nothing more
than a shower
from your manhood.

While people
play pharaohs,
my Moses
stretch forth your rod
and burn,
burn for these legs
that part
like valleys, red
as an Egyptian sea
I.

Picture Day on the school stage was turned into an event in my mind by the strange green cosmetic given to me by my mother the night before. A pimple pressed at my cheek, shaking me from total ignorance of my face. Within a few minutes of worry, I came to know it intimately. My mother, with her drugstore magic, procured some Covergirl, rising from its lipstick bullet, all green, pale waxy crayon green. Green cancels red and the sense that there’s nothing that can be done. Green does not cancel the crusty angry desperate breakup of your skin with itself. I wore a green shirt to match but the photo is red. All future Picture Days are the same.

II.

The Romance begins. Internet advice read in hopefulness and irony does nothing. Fingers trace below the lip, pressing where the blisters press back, pretending to discern the phantom pocks and picks until they are memorized. “Touching your face spreads bacteria.” Never mind, never mind the voice of the earnest beauty blogger. A rhythmic habit as easy as love begins, scratch, pick, pop, all I do. Can’t keep my hands off of you.
III.

Another romance. “I never had acne until we started dating.” My cuddle-blushed cheek flies from your neck where I see a spreading trail of dots red white red white. I was too close to have noticed, but now my cheek is slick with the oils and filth of my lingering adolescence. But don’t you know that we’re all going through second puberty and don’t you know about the collegiate stress and don’t you know how to buy a gentle non-drying cleanser and troll the depths of the ingredient lists of the hypoallergenic non-comedogenic non-irritating moisturizers that are part of the buzz of my very being? I saw you for the first time while the words you held back were still heavy on your tongue.
IV.

Another romance and also the Same. “What’s your favorite texture?” you ask into the comfortable curiosity of our night. “I dunno, I really like wet stone.” “That’s a good one,” you say. “I really like mossy bark. It’s bumpy, and alive. It’s got a lot of living things in it.” That’s familiar, and I give you a mossy full-face smile because it feels a little like you’re talking about me.

V.

This is the part after. I do not know what goes here. For all my self-dramaturgy I cannot imagine what the end of ten teen years feels like with an unspeckled chin and unremarkable swatches of cheek. Here are three ends to the affair. One, it is a pore strip ad, tug and release, nostalgic disgust and satisfaction. Two, it is the thick moisturizer and frothy cleanser, no longer the menacings of pseudo-self-care, smaller without their clutters of cosmetic companions. Three, it is now and I am here and I am looking at myself at the end of the act and wondering where was my makeover scene and what was before and what was after.
My only memory is a hairpin, 
a long loop of metal wire 
with zigzag sides. Not quite four, 
I saw it slip from the gray bun 
of the grandmother who had 
a stroke later that year.

Scooping it off the blue rug 
my little fingers poked 
the blunt brass prongs 
before she grabbed my wrists 
to warn me in harsh tones, 
the danger of touching 
grown-up things.

Gray now myself, I know 
why grandmothers shudder 
at little hands snatching 
scissors from a table 
or coins from a carpet. 
But I do pray 
the sobbing child I held 
till she fell asleep tonight 
will remember me as more than 
a hairpin pried from her tiny hand.
true story

jennifer maloney

If I tell you
the pebble is round
warm as a tea-cup rough sugared
with clear-white crystals
and banded like Saturn pink
and peach
and grey

If I tell you
it fits against my palm
simple, low
(a weight that satisfies) and when I hold it
touch it to my cheek my lips I want
to pop it in my mouth roll it round knock it
against my teeth bathe it
with my tongue taste its dirt its salt
its pink peach bands and yes
its sunbaked heat—
do you believe me?

Is it in your mouth, too?
rivers of dis
dana sonnenschein
1. invisible woman

Wandering the hall of Nirvana relics,
we looked up from scribbled rivers of woe
and lamentation to a pair of angels
like Visible Women looming over us,
their veins and arteries traced out in blue
and red, rainbow-colored organs encased
in plastic skin, feathers battered by touring.
We thought we were beyond biology
as destiny, liberated at birth,
comfortable with naming all our parts,
but shivered as if our younger selves had been
strung up and anatomized. You turned away.

A month after we got home, you found a lump
in your breast. A year later there were seven
inside your skull, the largest pressing down
on your optic nerve until you saw spectrums
rippling like chords across bright surfaces
and then the void beyond everything
inside your head and out. Your body soon
became an object as estranged and cold
as one of those figures with wings, an outline
on x-rays and cat-scans, and there were tubes
draining your lungs, a port set in your hand.

In a room like an empty auditorium,
you slept, dreaming and drugged, until you could
not open your eyes again, and on the shores
of pale blue Acheron, I sat and wept.

Eventually someone clicked the humming
machines off, one by one, and you rose
out of the body’s bruised flesh and bone.
A woman beyond tears. Transparent, unseeing.
2. the river of anger

Stop interrupting me meant Listen because your husband didn’t, even when you made sense, nevermind when you demanded, Stop the voices no one else could hear. Sometimes you commanded, Quiet! Dark! Other times you used sign like a child too young for speech. Once I let you wave three fingers until your mottled face contorted and you slammed the table with a fist, and then I crooned, You have to use your words. You said, Water. So your husband lifted the glass until the straw touched your lip. You sucked and stopped and stared until he set it down. I’d been sipping that water, too, blood-warm and bitter near the surface. You pulled from deeper, where sparks and flares torment the river spilling into a lake of fire forever and nerves burn bright—Near the end, your sister and mother waited on you, hand and swollen foot. It wasn’t you, they said. She had a bunch of crazy bitches in her head. But it was you, dear friend, in a rage, crossing Phlegethon. You knew how angry your husband was. That’s why you feared being alone with him, a man who never hit you but beat his dog into obedience. Your mind wasn’t full of tumor demons. Some were memories of us.
3. crossing lethe

In your bed  
it was Full disclosure  
craniotomy 18 days  
of whole brain radiation  
flashes of this light blue light  
iridescent inside my head  
and your mind went dark,  
clouds of starlight cut  
by the river of forgetfulness  
and its tributaries,  
universe expanding faster  
than you could imagine  
anything so tired  
coming apart as you said,  
Steroids to reduce the swelling  
wearing off giant  
black nap wings looming  
to scoop me away.

In the bath  
you couldn’t tell  
the gates of horn  
from ivory, and your pale,  
ribbed boat slipped  
past the pilings of language,  
nebulous and quarky,  
floating downstream,  
no pilot to Prompt  
you insisted. Write this down  
you need to show  
it’s why you’re here  
they keep interrupting  
searching gray matter  
searching memory  
lost it’s why you’re here  
memory gray I’m lost  
full dis closure.
4. if there’s a river styx

flowing between the living and the dead,
it shimmered, reflected

in your eyes, when you sat up and said,
It wasn’t supposed to be this way. We’d planned

a last hike along the banks of the Bitterroot,
hoping to see blacktail or whitetail,

but spring runoff washed out the trail,
your lung collapsed, you went under

and in the hospital, came back, tubes fixed
beneath your ribs. If there is a Styx,

its current slows as it loops along valleys
where wounded deer and coyotes

come, hoping to curl up in the grass and rest –
The way you do now, breathless,

dreaming of a river glowing sky-blue
as it ripples into silence.
The MRI coaxes, with invisible fingers, my molecules to align, contrast dye illuminating delicate concha, butterfly of my sinus cavities, lobes and fissures, tidepool of organs. I lay still as a sleeper while its echoes fall around me, a tiny sea to its lunar tug, shaped by its lofty verdict.
Migraines come in three stages. The first is the prodrome, in which the sufferer may experience sensory disturbance: floaters, hallucinations, tunnel-vision, excessive yawning.

I smell things that aren't there. It's rarely good things: shift, rotten meat, something burning. Still other times, I smell people, long-absent. My grandmother's perfume. An ex-lover's scent. It's so strong, I turn my head to look for them.

Maybe it's a peace offering from my dysfunctional brain, something to soothe me before the pain hits, the way that neurochemicals conjure images of loved ones to comfort the dying; the people so deeply embedded in our lives and gray matter, they transcend infirmity and even death.

By the time I get to the postdrome, the scents and the people they invoke are gone, but I am no less haunted.
letter to my lover

claire holland
I don’t know if you’ve ever stepped on a snail before; I don’t know how much of a universal experience it is. I don’t know if it’s something that only happens in warm climates, or when it’s wet out, or at night. What’s the geographic range of a snail? I imagine it’s global, but I could of course be entirely wrong. (I’m wrong about a lot of things, I’ve gathered, but for some reason you don’t seem to think so.) So I don’t know if what I’m about to describe is entirely relatable, but it’s something that I remember with a clarity I rarely find in myself these days.

The first thing to do is imagine the scene. It’s night, and I’m walking.

But it’s not just any night - I’m in Southern California where I live, a dry place if nothing else, and the fog has rolled in. But not just any fog - a fog so thick you can only see it swirling around the yellow-orange street lights, and in front of you is a black that isn’t black and a white that isn’t white. You can see your feet, when you’re near a light, but only just, and you can feel it like creepers off a banyan tree curling coolly into your throat.

And the feet you’re looking at - they, too, are unusual for this time of night, or this time of morning (Both would be equally accurate descriptors for the hinge between the two.). They are dark, because it is dark, but they are light, because they stand on an even darker black: the asphalt of a street. A well-paved street, and a smooth one too, as you now know, since you’ve felt it with your bare feet. They must be awfully black on the bottoms, what with the damp from the mist lifting the black from the road onto your pale foot soles, but you can’t see them, so you can only assume.

Walking on a street barefoot in the middle of the night in a thick fog wearing nothing but a nightgown and underwear, not even a bra or your glasses, is different than crossing an intersection during the day, with the sun around you and your eyes seeing around you at the dry sights, distant like a picture. The ground seems curved underneath you, conforming to your soft, naked foot, warmer than the air and solid thanks to the heat it’s absorbed during the day. But it’s not warm, exactly, but just real-feeling. You feel the earth beneath you, even though it’s asphalt, and you sense the soil, real soil, dry in this arid land, deep beneath you and the asphalt that is the world shell protecting you.

Your night gown has gotten heavier as it’s absorbed some fog, not damp but not dry either, sticks
to your fingers when you rub it between them. Your hair hangs, too, heavy against your naked face, both it and the nightgown swinging, brushing against you from side to side as you walk in the dark.

It’s your neighborhood, yes, gated and safe and upperclass, the way you’ve always lived and everyone around you has always lived (You resent it, a bit, because you know it makes you “privileged,” but you also know you are one of the luckiest people in history.).

So you walk in the dark, in the damp, unseeing, barefoot. The ground is smooth and black and unending, and you go up hills and down and turn and always go forward, and you walk and walk until you turn towards home, and you mount the small height of the sidewalk and walk home on it instead. It seems more reasonable, somehow, more civilized to walk home on the walking stone than on the one meant for driving. But you’re still a little unsure, a little lost, so you follow the lights, and you pad pad pad thump thump thump feel your heel hitting the earth-not-earth as you walk and you think and breathe in the damp and you feel a pop! And another two with the other foot, and you stop, and bend down in the dark white dark to look at your feet. There are small black bumps all around it. Stones on the earth in every direction on the narrow, slicker stone. You realize: they’re snails.

And you replay the sensation: curve cool smooth round rock CRACK-like-sugar-glass-eggshell-smooth-pieces-sharp-but-not-cutting-squish-stick. The sensation on your foot now is a dry film, but also the feeling that there are organs, blood on the soles of your feet now. It isn’t your own. You’ve killed tonight, more than one, and even after you walk past your house and around for fifteen more minutes you can’t get it off you. You scrape your feet off in the cold, beaded grass, but it isn’t clean.

So you go home, and you rinse them off in the shower, and as you try to sleep, dry now, you feel the tiny wet souls sticking to where your shadow meets the ground, troubled. But you sleep all the same.
last in line
his son touches
the casket

our failing cat . . .
I pet him with both hands
as time grows short

five

frozen footprints
in dying light . . .
with his fingertips
the tracker traces
the contours
you had me
in the palm of your hand
and didn’t notice . . .
collateral damage
of adolescence

from below the horizon
the sun touches
her high-flying jet . . .
my eyes
touch it too
you understand the world through pieces

dina elenbogen
of earth you dig up in Quebec
or the shores of Great Lakes

where what you search for
is found at low tide

near the lines waves make
tracing the part of day

we have missed Water like land
offers treasures It is you

who gather them
in your small palm call out

to me their names Amethyst Jasper
Granite Agate

You search for crystals inside
the roughest rocks

break them with the hammer my grandfather
used to build

their immigrant lives Digging
towards the bedrock of home

you find slate and limestone
your nails graced with dirt

I listen all day to your pounding
of hammer against stone
Bodies pressed
   apart.
into walls surrounding
   and carefully,
as to not disclose the distance between.
There was nothing ordinary about the gesture of separation. And everything ordinary about the season of birds gone molting, their soft feathers landing on the faces of children.

One wore the scent of the desert sun, each pigment smelling of orange and ochre. The other, of aurora borealis, cool and close to catastrophe.

The pearl that was once caught in the reverence of hand upon hand, and flattened between movements that strained at different altitudes, was now dropped back into its source—a river of the most immediate amnesia.
You hold the dog like you would a towel
along its spine, a symmetry on either side.
A hand clasped around its neck, another
holding its croup. And you wait

as though contemplating your action.
The dog in its own stillness, uninterested
in you or the one filming this. Who is to say
it has not realized your intent?

Soon, it will fly but for a brief instant.
You lift it with extreme care, only to let it go
of your grasp from the terrace of your house.
For a moment the dog remains –
suspended by your decision, balanced by
gravity and your foolishness –
before it begins to grow smaller and smaller,
sucked down by the force of the earth.

A dog is an object displaced of its bloodline
by man. You smile. Thud! A whimper
escapes; two days later, the dog: hurt, but still
wagging its tail, rescued by someone like you.
the side-effect of walk

shriram sivaramakrishnan

1

I found my fingers stowed in the jeans pocket when you walk through a long cold street. for my cappuccino, I found webbing between This was the case with my right hand.

My left one was different the way a boisterous lot huddled into a muzzle crowded around a pornographic video.

pan out every time they meet – hanging loose from the hem inside – till it clogs into a knot.

a lifetime ago; this happens When I rescued them to pay the index and the thumb.

only lefts can be; its fingers made of their tips, like heads I knew how their inside joke prod the solitary thread an act of acute madness –
ing on a cold street

2

The hand that encounters a knot knows not the linearity it once had. A knot happens when a thread is made to loop through itself – like a snake finding its tail – before being flattened at the thread’s anvil when the thread’s two loose ends are pulled out in sync.

3

Latticed by time my grandmother’s hands weave quilt in wormful she then burrows a hope in a solitary thread clatter sewn so deep only her absence could reach.
forming the earth

lydia yousief
In those days, they called me “gorilla” and you’d believe it because they said it, and I thought it would be nice to be a Muslim woman who could cover up, and in those days, we went on our first overnight trip to the Smokies.

A friend—or my best friend then—came and placed her elbow on my shoulder during recess, and we walked towards the parking lot, away from the grassy area and the classrooms, and towards the swings on the other end, having to pass the boys playing basketball where cars should be. There was heat all around, submerging us in its touch. And she said, “What’s up?” She leaned heavily on me, but I didn’t mind: she was my friend. We didn’t have classes together as I was still considered “remedial” by them and she was considered advanced.

I stepped onto the parking lot and could see the swings from the distance. The roughness of the gravel confirmed my footing. Those who had run out the doors had made it to the swings first. I didn’t like the swings—there was something about almost-flying that made me feel like I was jinxing my nature, in a bad sense—so I simply watched others, happy to see their hair play with the wind or their legs pump against the friction.

Her touch finally relaxed, and a burden was lifted from me; I rolled my shoulders and felt the ease of having my body holding only myself.

“I can’t room with you,” she said.

“Why not?” I turned to her, and we stood in the middle of the faded-gray concrete, child voices spitting noises about us, classroom windows reflecting the light of a southern sun across the field.

“My parents think you’re a lesbian.”

I blinked. “What?”

“They told me to test you—to see if you’re a lesbian, and if you are, then I can’t room with…”
My eyelashes, curled and long, fluttered, and I remember seeing her face shattered between the rays as the lashes hovered close to my eyes. And I say, “But I’m not,” but I know it doesn’t matter because what they say is what I am, and who I am is lost outside of me.

She shrugs. “We’ll be up in the mountains all alone, y’know.”

She doesn’t know, so she offers a weak smile; she’ll go on the trip and room with the white girl who called me what the others called me and made me what the others made me to be, and she’ll tell me, “She’s nicer than she seems.” We sit at the table to eat; the white girl opens her mouth, her eyes on me, and I recoil. The white girl touches my arm. “I brought an extra razor, if you want it.” Laughter bubbles about me like heat. I go outside to feel the leaves from the mountains’ autumn shedding; I let my legs swing beneath me as I sit on the wooden porch, and alone, I breathe—free.

In class, we learn about tectonic plates and how their touch forms the earth; unseen, they collide and build mountains from the confrontations they can’t solve, which brings us rain as the glaciers melt and summon new life, or they pull apart, perhaps blind, and lava spits out like pus from a wound the body has sealed but the (wo)man has broken through, which gives us new life somewhere. From every touch, there is a tragedy, a wound, a breaking, and yet from every push or pull, we renew.

It doesn’t matter because what they say is who I am, and who I am is lost outside of me.

It’s Christmas. My mother is decluttering and wants old Christmas cards out. They told me to stay in touch when I enrolled in private school—my grades finding a way to bounce up—so I keep their addresses and phone numbers in a small address book. I look at the soiled white page, dotted with names that in those days made me, and I throw the book away.
All day I waited
breathless—
then in an instant the air

turned coolly pure
as lute music—water
strummed from the sky

sluicing off the roof
in sheets.
My garden is littered

with tissue petals of roses,
petunia bugles
have sucked themselves shut.

Peonies, soaked, lie
with pink jowls
pressed to earth. Now

in that slow-darkening field
beyond garden wall,
rounded baby heads

of cantaloupe nuzzle
the slow curve of the earth
as the world—finally relaxed—

rolls over as I turn,
brush aside the white sheet
to touch the skin of your breast

with my tongue.