

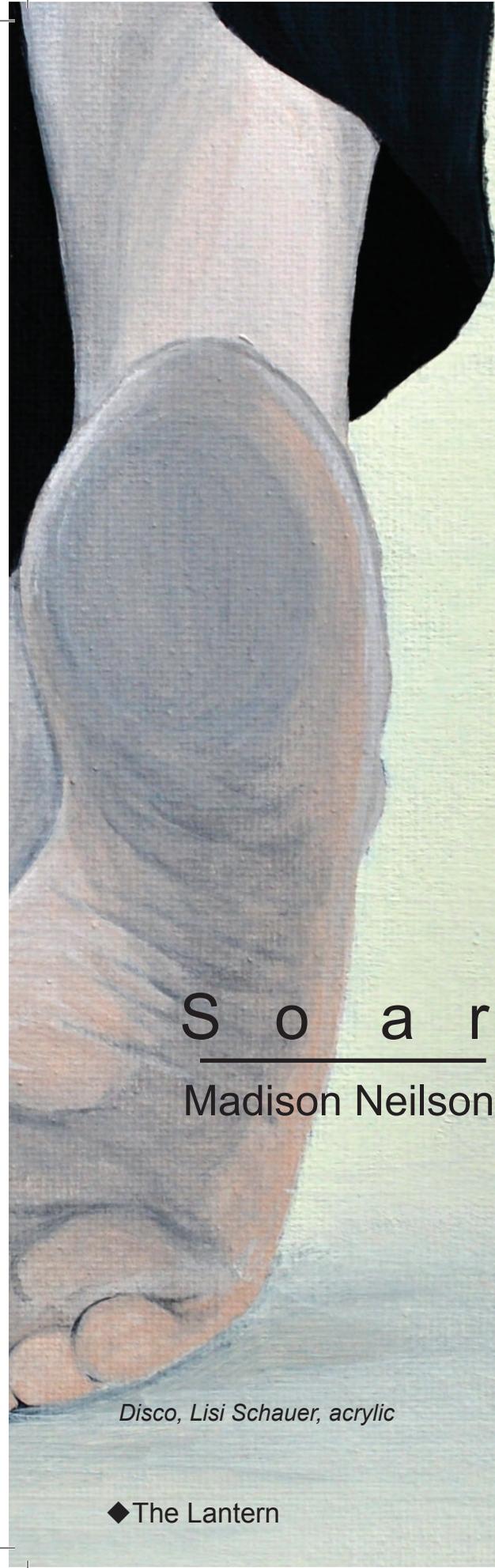
Ida McNamara was perfect. Standing at five-seven, her lean legs and slender waist were almost sickeningly proportional; Barbie-like in every way. Long, blond hair streamlined down her back in a smooth blend of platinum and gold. She was the envy of every girl in her grade. She was surrounded by friends and straight A's and a streak of broken track records. Her most stressful trials were bad breakups and choosing which dress to wear at her inevitable college graduation.

And with my luck, this perfect girl became my best friend in our junior year of high school.

The comparisons between us were immediate and harsh. She was an elegant swan and I was a pigeon with crows cawing behind my eyes. But her sweet words and warm hands made the daggers of her friends and my mother feel like pinpricks. It was worth staying with her because she was teaching me how to be perfect.

At first it was a rigorous workout routine that took up three hours that I should've been sleeping every night. Ida said it burned holes through all the ugly things I was putting in my body and making me pretty and pink and empty and strong inside. She told me to stop drinking milk with dinner and that anything but fruit for lunch was a sin; that staring at my half-digested dinner as rain fell down my face would make me float, my shoulder blades doubling as wings. This was tenth-eleventh-



An acrylic painting of a foot, showing the sole and toes. The colors are muted, with shades of grey, blue, and brown. The texture is visible, suggesting brushstrokes. The foot is positioned on the left side of the page, with the heel and toes pointing downwards.

# S o a r

Madison Neilson

*Disco, Lisi Schauer, acrylic*

twelfth grade Ida who had vodka in her closet and shadows swimming in her ribcage; I would've followed her into oblivion without looking back. We'd go out to lunch and nibble on our rabbit salads and drink black coffee and dream up fantasies of bright city lights and rugged college boys in leather jackets. We'd go shopping and boast our skeletal frames beneath the fluorescent lights of our shared changing room, a silent competition to see who would collapse first. Neither of us wanted to lose the race and neither of us would dare to give in.

My stomach rumbled and my fingernails turned blue but Ida said I had to be strong. "You're doing so well, my little chickadee," her snowfall eyes had never told a lie. She made what we were doing make sense and held my hair when I puked in her parents' basement on her birthday our senior year. It was January and I was 89 pounds. Ida was 92 and jealous.

We kept a pretty pink notebook full of our secrets. It had all the numbers that my mom would cry over and that her dad would send her away for. We dotted all our i's with hearts and pretended like we didn't feel our chests burn late at night when we scribbled every calorie down. It would all be okay though, because Ida was always right and Ida was perfect. I read one of her entries in her private section of the notebook after she went to sleep one

sleepover. Then I made two lines on my hipbone with my mom's Exacto knife so we would match.

I was 88, 87, 86. Down, down, down the numbers kept dropping, and I was soaring. Ida's friends liked me more and more and I broke her record for the hundred meter run at states. I went an entire week with nothing but hot tea and diuretics passing my lips. Ida stopped writing in the notebook and started writing on her thighs, her stomach, her wrists; angry red lines that sometimes ended with her crying in the locker room begging me to eat more like she was. She ate salad for lunch; she told me that was a sin. She drank milk in the morning and the daylight between her thighs closed.

The shadows swimming in her ribcage filled with pasta and eggs and peanut butter. She made new friends and left me in the dust. I was stranded in the middle of the desert surrounded by water but too afraid to take a drink.

Ida wrote me a note in physics the week before graduation after not speaking to me for three months. "I'm sorry I made you sick. I didn't mean to," she said when she handed it to me. The blue hands that were no longer mine took it from her, the lips that had to be someone else's smiled politely. I didn't want to take it out of its bubblegum pink envelope but her summer eyes were watching, waiting.

I crumpled it and shoved it into

*Kimmy,*

*I'm so sorry. I love you and I'm sorry. I was really sick when I met you and I didn't realize how much of an influence my illness had on the both of us. When you started hurting yourself I knew I had to get better because I had pulled you down with me. After New Year's, I went to a dietician and got a really solid meal plan and therapy. I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to feel like I had abandoned you, I don't know, it was stupid. I gained a lot of weight and it was hard, but they would've pulled me out of track and put me in inpatient if I didn't. I'm in group therapy and it's super helpful, you'd get a lot out of it, I think, and I hope you take my advice. You are really sick; more sick than I ever was. Please take care of yourself because you are going to die if you don't get help soon. I'm sorry I told you that starving yourself was a good idea. I'm sorry.*

*I love you,*

*Ida*



my backpack. It smelled like her expensive cashmere-vanilla perfume and it made me gag. I floated out of the room and ignored the squawking of my angry physics teacher. Her shoulder blade wings were too small for her to take flight so she couldn't follow me. Down the hall to the right, third stall on the left. That was the puking toilet that Ida and I reserved every day after lunch. The burn of stomach acid and fairy dust on my tongue made her letter disappear. It made everything disappear, black spots in the shape of snowflakes flashing against the industrial white of the bathroom. The burning was hotter than normal, the base of my

throat screaming. Dark red ink that only ever came from the tip of my mom's Exacto knife poured down my chin and filled the emptiness behind my ribcage. This was wrong. I was 81. Nothing bad happened at 81. I was supposed to soar. But I was falling fast with no parachute to slow me down, nothing to give me time to fix myself. My shoulder blade wings were tucked at my sides, my feather arms wrapped around my ribcage to keep them from collapsing.

But it was in vain because I lost. I lost and Ida won, because I collapsed first. ◆