

Through Noise

Through Noise

with jason vu

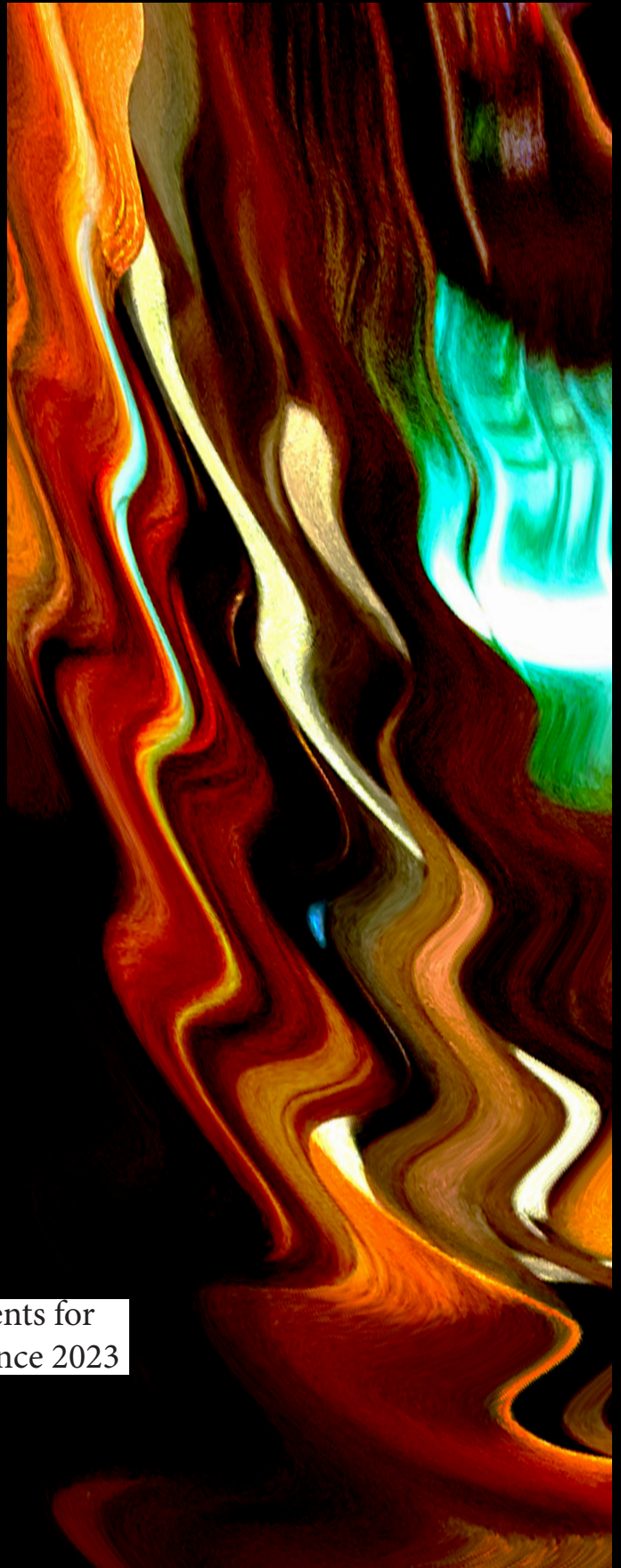
thinking partner: jenn nugent

thinking partner: Paul Matteson

thinking partner: Jimena Paz

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Fine Arts, Dance 2023

The University of the Arts





Contents

I. Remembering

i. intermission

II. Listening

III. Emerging





My artistic practice engages sensory attention as a strategy for cultivating caring relationships and expanding embodied consciousness. I am a dance artist that loves the expressive possibilities of the body. I like to think of body as a verb. Body as recurring potentiality. I body. I am bodying.

I will never fully know what a body can do, and I am in the evolving search for its possibility. I don't mean how physically virtuosic I can be; I mean that I want to know what my body (perhaps: queer and Vietnamese-American in Philadelphia) can do in the matrices of time-space right here, right now. I cannot know, but I can wonder through performance.

I search for choreographies of sensorial experience as a means to decentralize and destabilize ideas of separation and individuation. The senses are always in the in-between, always a reaching towards. Sensing is co-constitutive. I feel touch touching me. I make touch and it makes me. I hear sound hearing me. I make sound and sound makes me. I make you and you make me. The sensorial experience is the connective tissue between you and me, where I can question the forces of relation that create bodies that are racialized, gendered, marginalized, and disenfranchised. It is also in practicing and designing sensorial experiences that I generate alternative strategies to care for difference, to nurture an ecology, and to honor our interdependent nature.

My work revolves heavily around the details and coordinates of my corporeal identity. I am queer, a child of Vietnamese refugees to America, that has a particular body with certain abilities and appearances. I have also migrated throughout California and the Northeast, living in New York, Rhode Island, and now Philadelphia. I am embedded in a fabric of people, ancestors, land, and all kinds of living beings in and through layers and loops of time-space. As a performance artist, I seek out ways to articulate the connecting vectors of my relational being through movement, touch, sound, and visual design. Representation, however, is not my orientation. I am interested in the excess of corporeal processes, the thing-ness that is unexplainable, that disarticulates and destabilizes what it might mean to be in my body—or to have a body a general! It's the texture of a feeling in the air. These days, that excess feels like love and it feels like grief.











a child of refugees
unfathomable future
untouchable horizon





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I am angry with _____

I am angry at _____

I am angry at all the _____

I am angry with the way _____

I am angry at how _____

I am angry at whoever _____













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I hear the sound of children playing at the park on 11th and Lombard.
The person selling marijuana in Rittenhouse Square.
The birds chirp.
The cars zoom.
The streets scream.
The bikes rev.
My neighbor moans.
The tuba groans.
The foot stomps.
My ass gets smacked.
The gospel singers do their runs.
The cashier in the Vietnamese market speaks to me in English.
The funeral chants.
My lover cries.
My first original song.
The first time a friend says, "I love you".
The words "thank you" from the mouth of somebody you love.
My mom sings and my dad worries.
All the noisy bodies ache.

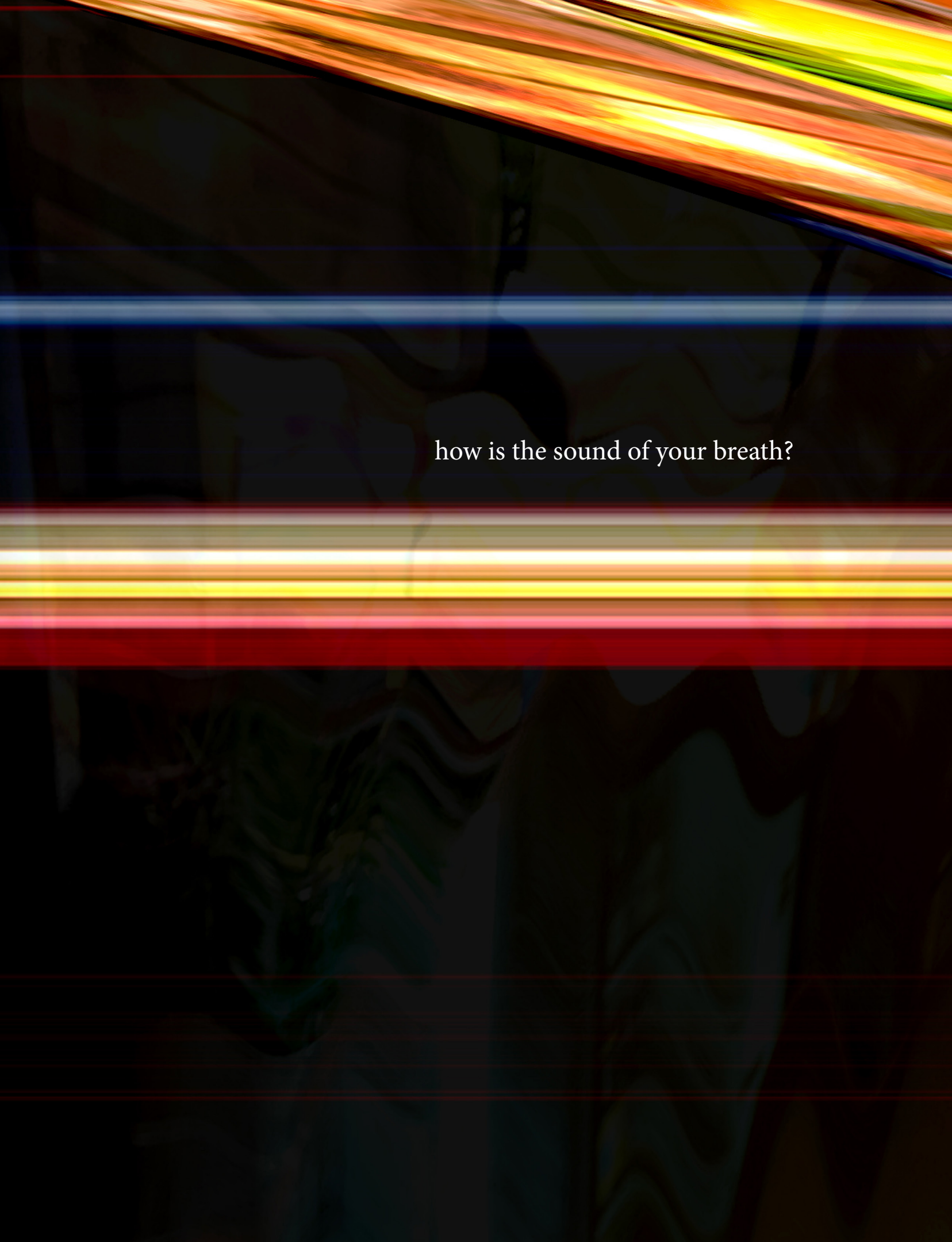
What about palettes of sensation
A small change is a
something passing through me



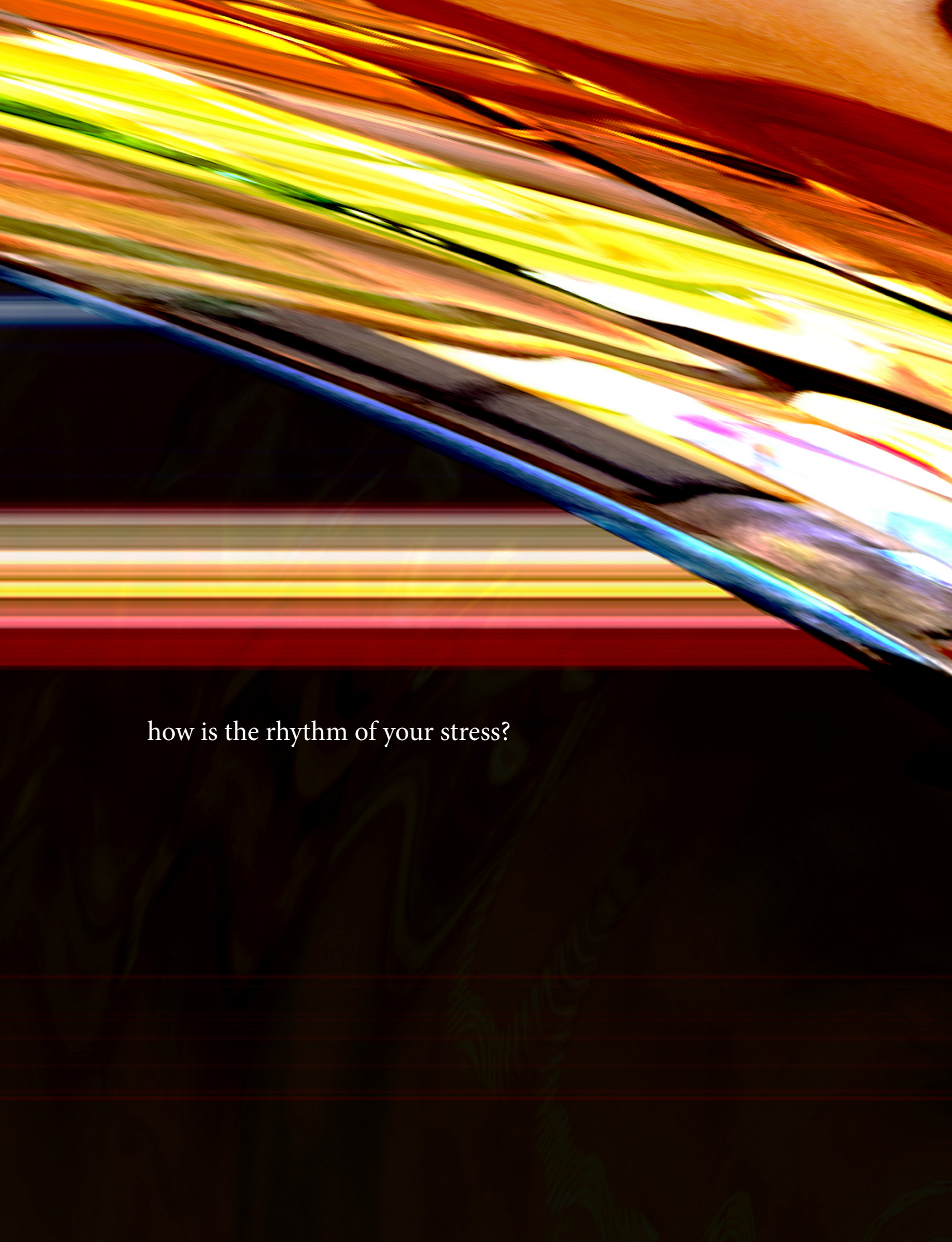






The background is a dark, textured surface with a faint, repeating pattern of stylized plant leaves or feathers. Overlaid on this are several horizontal streaks of light. A prominent streak of orange and yellow light runs diagonally from the top right towards the center. Another streak of blue and white light runs horizontally across the middle. A third streak of yellow and orange light runs horizontally across the lower middle. A solid red band is visible at the bottom.

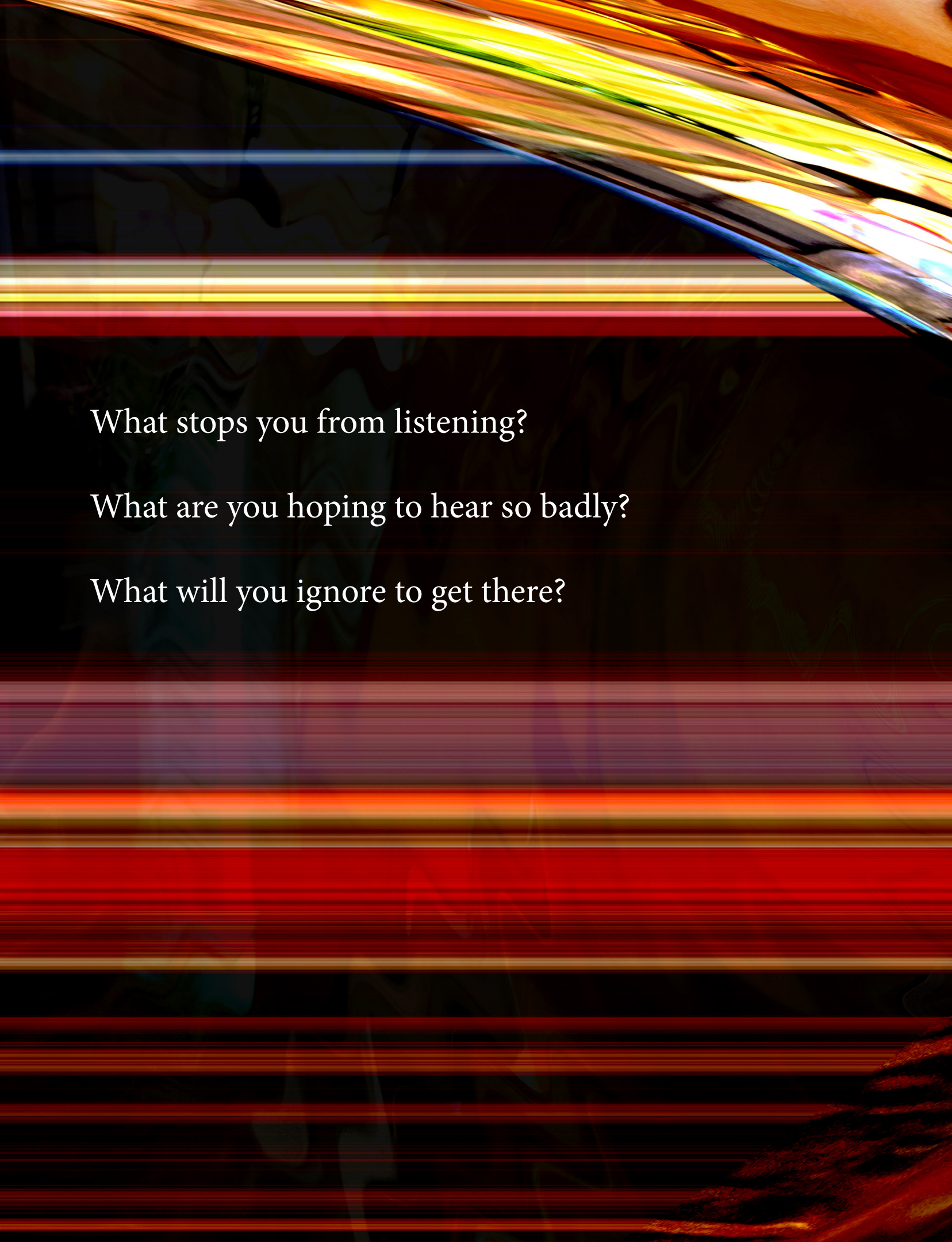
how is the sound of your breath?



how is the rhythm of your stress?



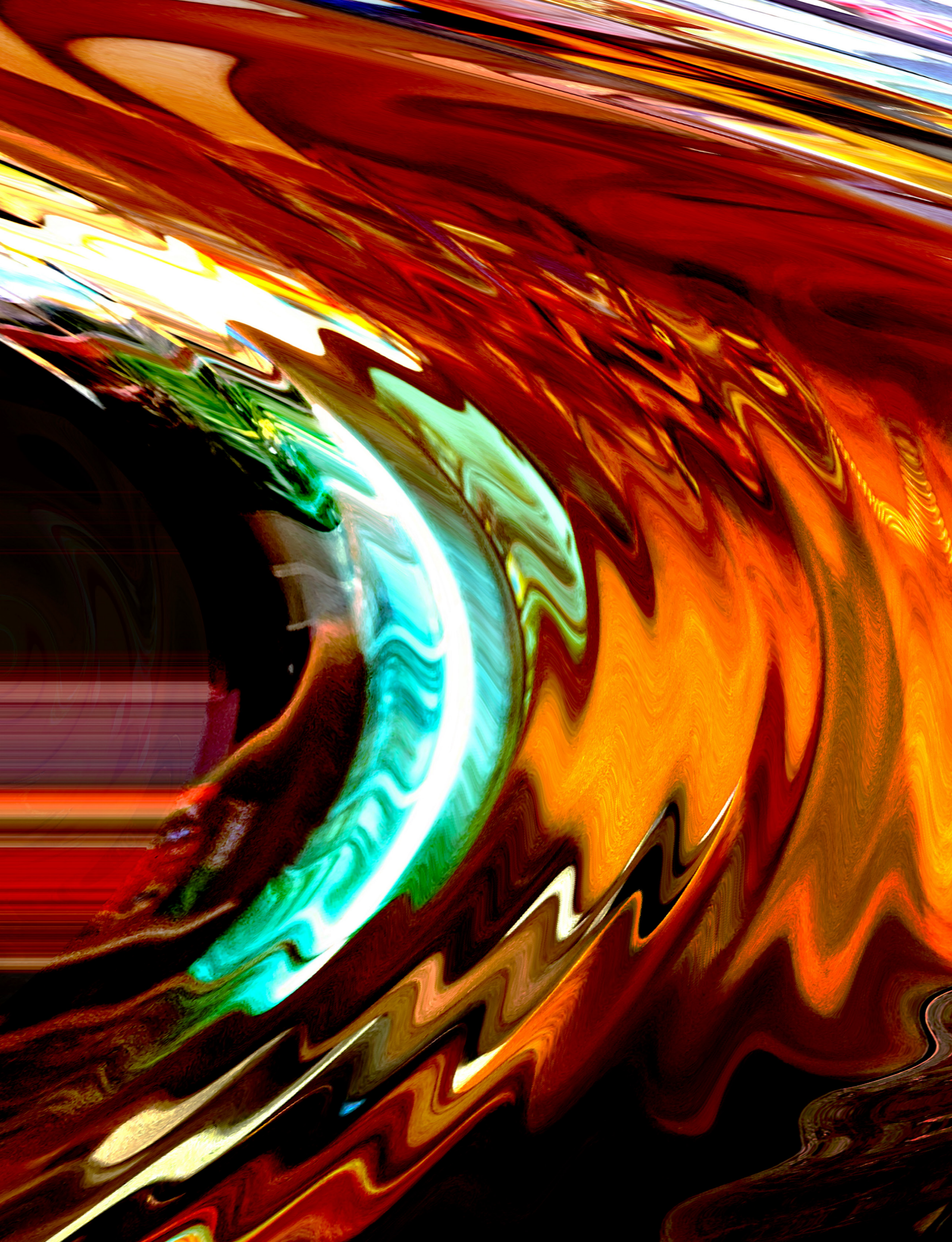



The background is a dark, abstract composition. It features several bright, diagonal streaks of light in shades of yellow, orange, and blue, suggesting motion or energy. A faint, dark silhouette of a person is visible in the center, appearing to be in a contemplative or listening pose. The overall mood is mysterious and introspective.

What stops you from listening?

What are you hoping to hear so badly?

What will you ignore to get there?





if you microphone your _____ how would they sound
rhythm? their expression? their emotions?

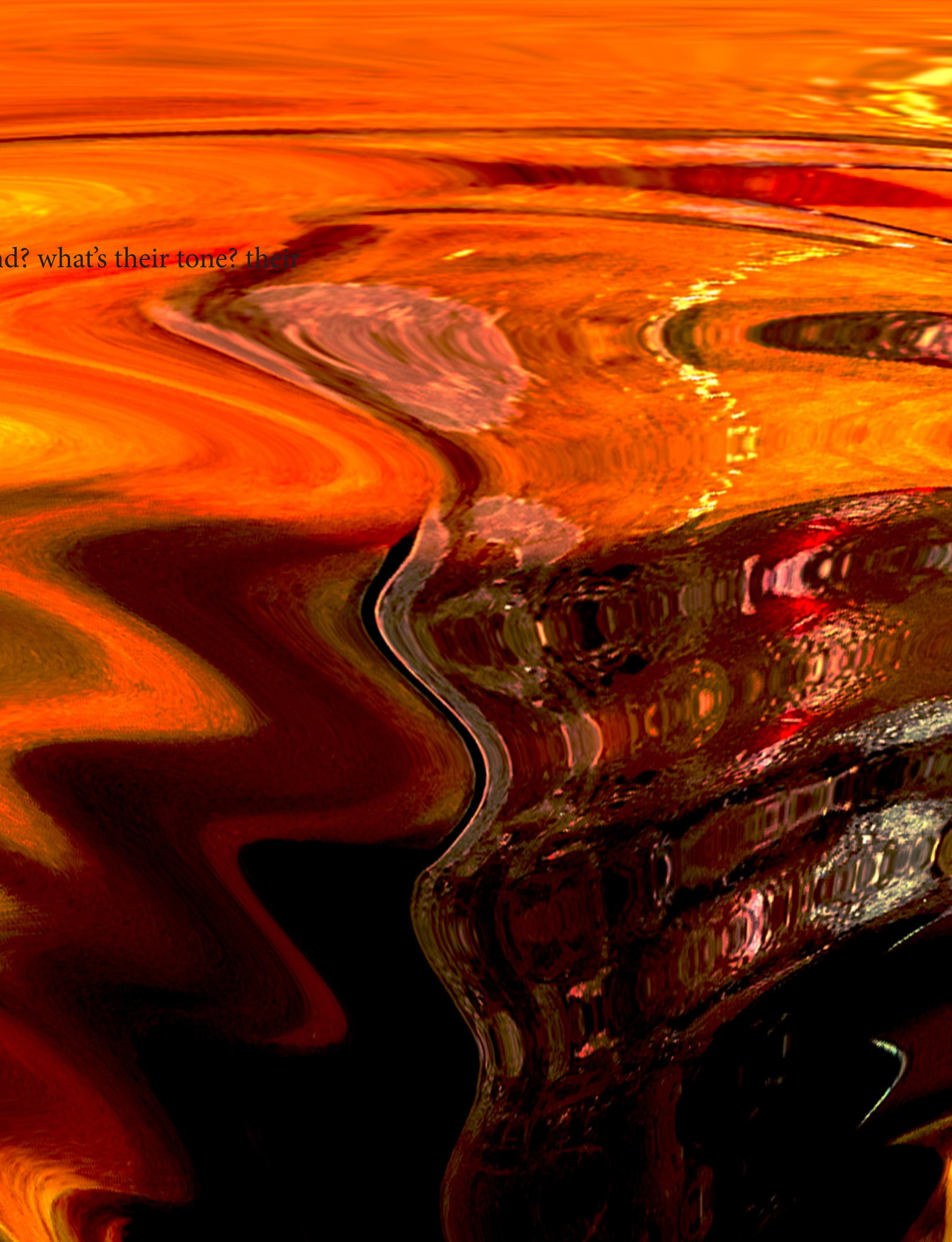
and if you microphone your [[[[[[?

your (((((?

your } } } } } }?

your / / / / / ?

and? what's their tone? their



I begin just like a question

Sweaty judgment and breathless shame
Silk and garbage baggy skin.
My feelings make feelings go away

Thank you, relief

Tonight I will lay down
Calves dripping themselves
I will say I am proud
While feeling so guilty with greed

All the noisy bodies
Achy back and ugly desire
Running from and for pain

Ignore the monster be the monster train the monster
Under the light
Love it and see it everywhere



Through Noise Recording Sessions (2023)

In search of creating a soundscape that would support my movement research, I walked to Huong Vuong market on Washington Ave. to pick up Vietnamese groceries that I thought had exciting percussive and textural potential. I bought as much as my backpack could hold. I had the idea of entering an hour-long recording session with these objects. How would my body shape itself to the process of listening closely? What emotional and compositional logics would emerge as I negotiated a new relationship with these foods? I felt silly and frivolous, stepping on dried noodles, throwing peanuts around, and wetting rice paper with no intention of eating it. Feelings for my family and my ancestors emerged (as expected) because I know exactly how to cook these noodles and what dishes they are used in. In this recording session, however, there were new meanings to create. The sound that spilled out of my questions with these cultural markers were simultaneously specific to my identity and abstracted. I'm invested in this abstraction as a way to look at the formations of my Vietnamese identity at all angles. This is akin to minimalism, formalism, and musique concrete in an effort to listen to the sound just as it is. I find this extraordinarily intimate, when I'm no longer listening to something (or someone) with preconceived notions about its identity and I engage myself to be close, to be curious, and to be caring for it as its voice comes out.



It arrives in time,
the question and the answer


Be wandered

Keep breathing









It was all in the direction of desire.
SaGa Frontier, the little sprites of ambiguous characters.
You remember that video game

You chose to be a girl
or that green haired animal human hybrid.
You could be anything.

This was before you felt the obligation to form
It was all in the direction of desire.
I like that.









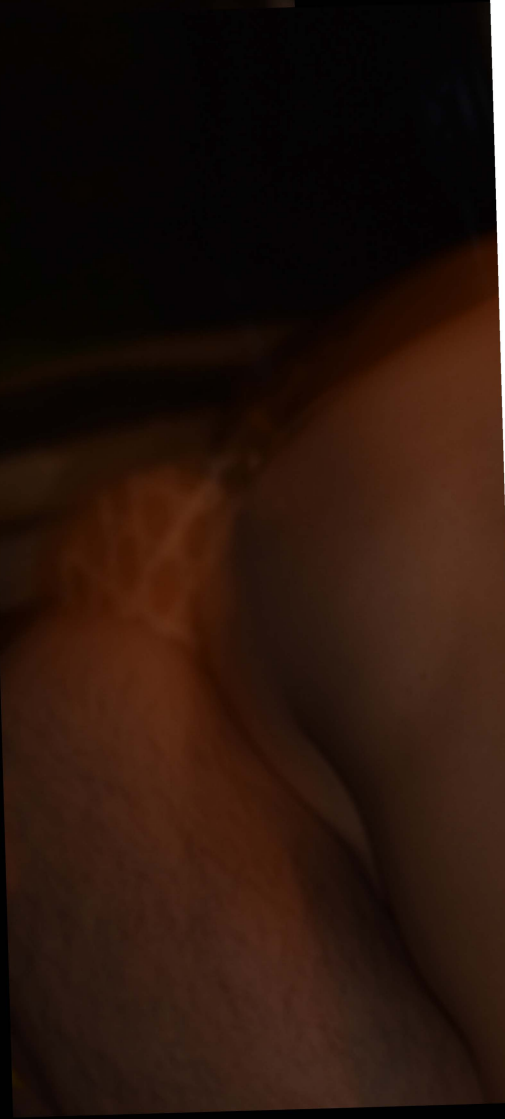


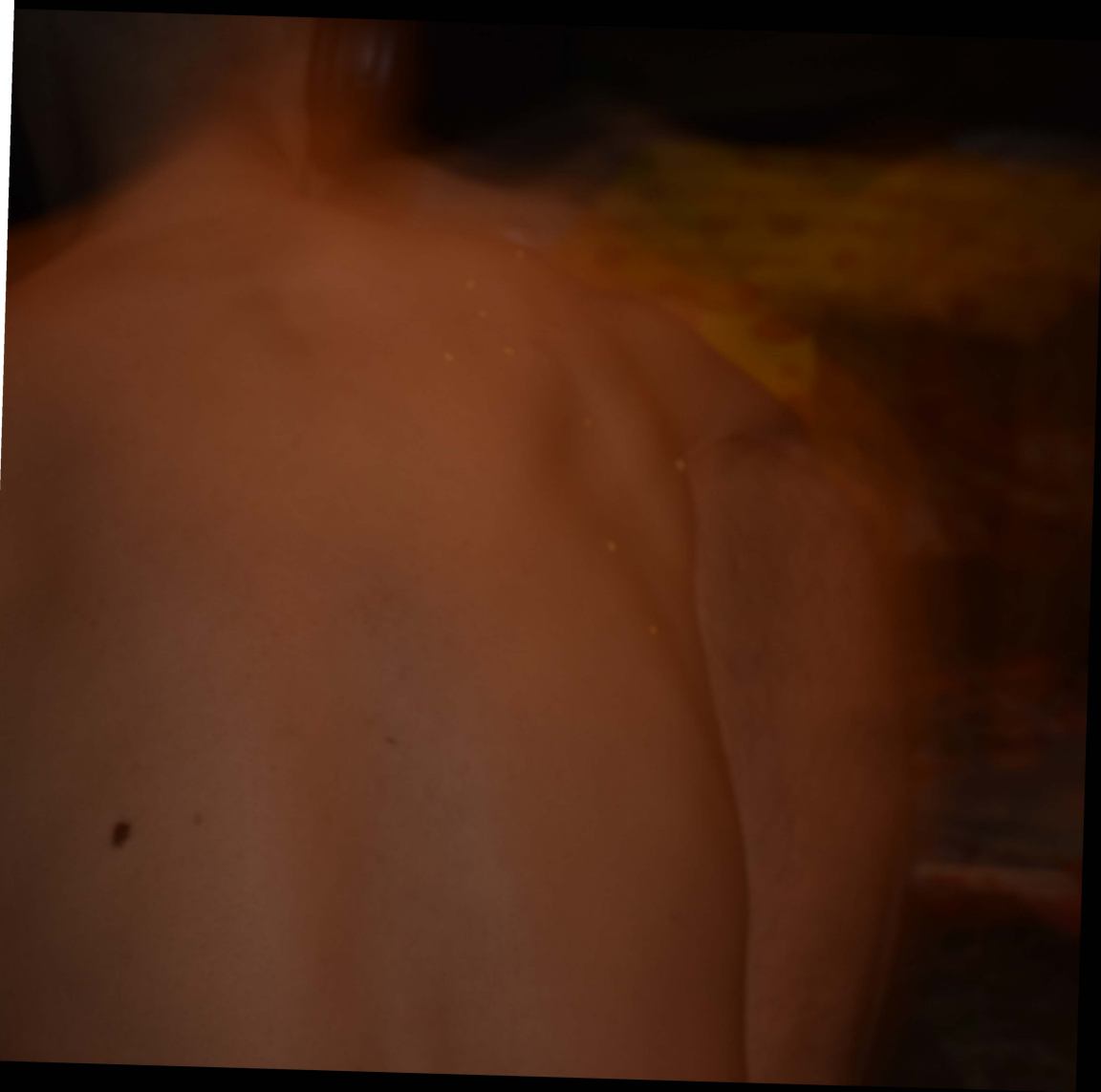


When do you feel most desired?

The desire that touches me deeply is the kind that celebrates all parts of me and even the possibilities of myself I haven't become. I am always in movement and emergence. I feel most desired and loved by someone when they are attracted to the way I move through questions, ergo, move through life. Yes, I love when someone is attracted to particularities of my expressions (the way I dress, how I groom myself, how I dance in the club, etc.) but I know I'm always changing. It's quite a task to want someone to desire me long-term. The way I articulate myself through dance, language, sound, and design and the relationships I wish to form always feel urgent to the 'now' of each day. As I think about desire, I think there's a surface that meets the current questions of my life at the time. This is important, and it's helped me form mutually fulfilling relationships with friends and ex-lovers. But as I look back on my life and I look forward to the emergence of my new works, I'm seeing the unequivocal flux of my being. These days, I wonder about a kind of companionship that wholeheartedly desires the me that moves and changes, not the part of me that stays still.













acceptance as texture









Through Noise (May 2023)

In November of 2022, the Asian Arts Initiative (thanks to Dominique Chua) reached out and commissioned me to create an evening-length work in their spring 2023 exhibition season. This became an orientation point in my research, to create a live performance that would extend my questions to the communities in Philadelphia. This was my first evening-length solo and my first commissioned work. I felt proud to be presented by an organization devoted to supporting and gathering artists of color. These photos are from *Through Noise*'s premiere at the Asian Arts Initiative. This is the public description of the work:

Through Noise investigates the emerging concept of 'a body' not as a fixed entity, but as an event of sensorial collisions. This mixed-media and dance performance engages the movements of sounding and listening to consider the choreographies that (re/de)form identity, relationality, and meaning. Jason moves in and through questions around ancestral grief in the Vietnamese diaspora, the conditions of home in an expanding Asian-American consciousness, and their entanglements with queer desire, love, and possibility.





A lot of my work engages with feelings of grief, longing, and loneliness. I attribute this to my family's aftermath of war, immigration, and a fierce battle with poverty and safety. Like many Vietnamese immigrants, re-engaging with traumatic memories is deemed counterproductive to surviving in a capitalist country like America. Vietnamese families learn to withstand the pressures of this country by adopting a culture of silence. But unspoken grief is still undeniably felt. Because words are used sparingly and barely ever reveal the shadows of the emotional world, I've learned to hear and feel the choreographies that circumvent communication. I sense bodies: the minutiae of facial expression, fluctuations of rhythm, tone, and pitch in voices, and the silences between voices and bodies. I make work because I find beauty in embodied expression, where texture and movement of feeling can become the focal point of connection.



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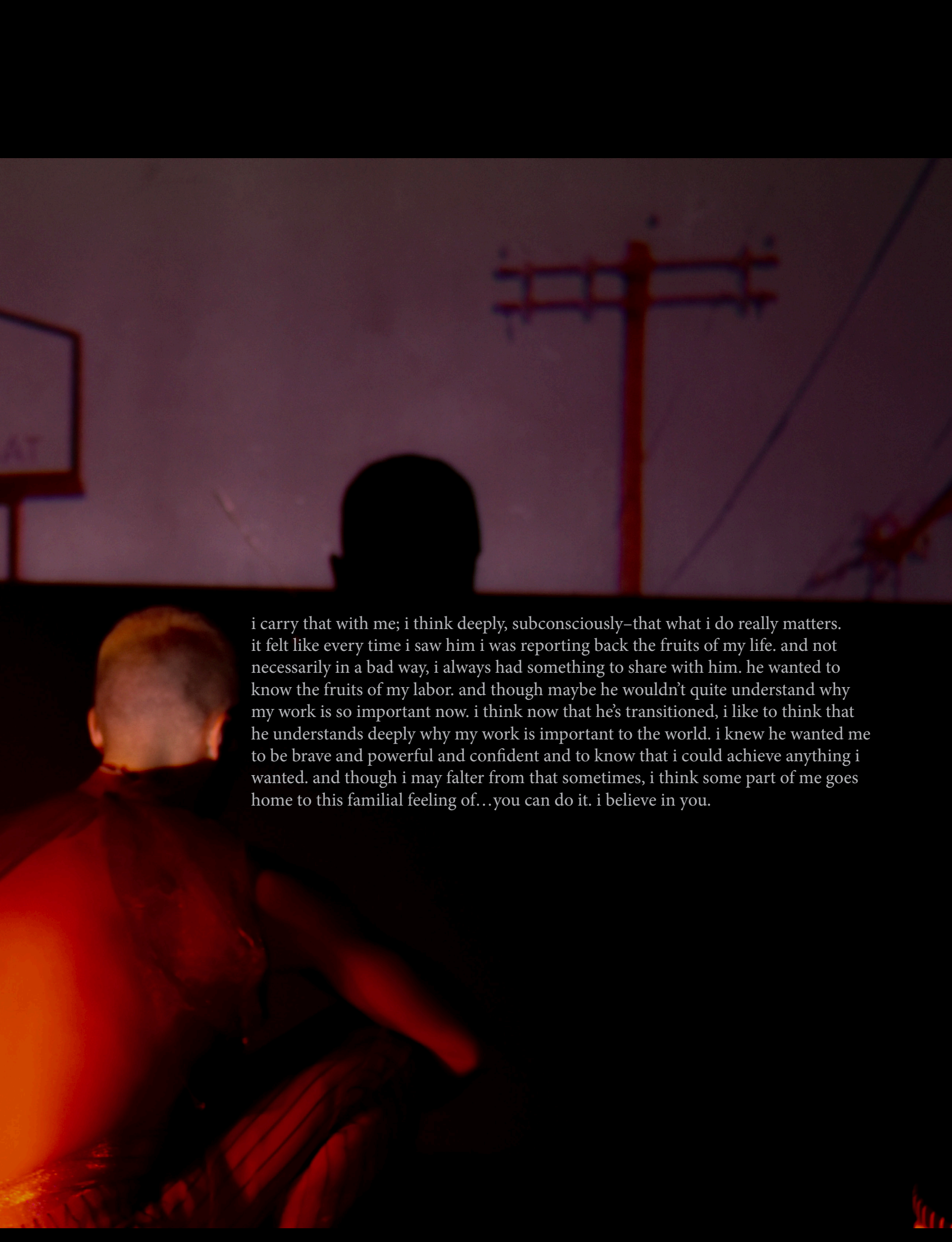
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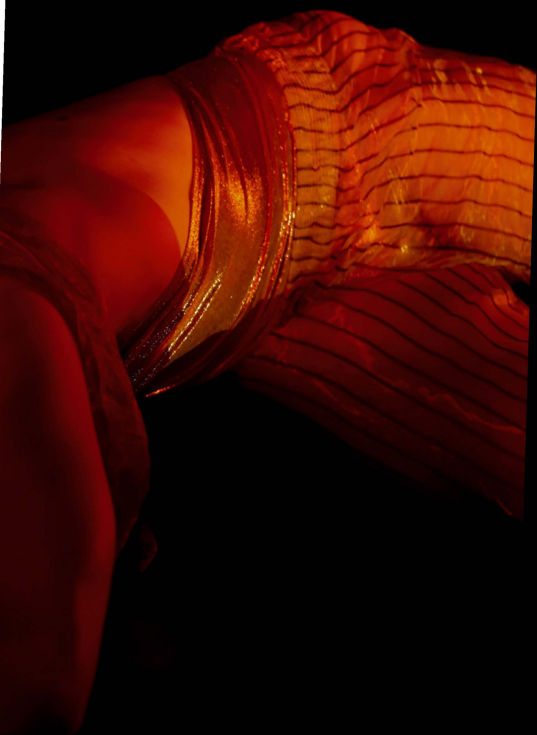
A person wearing a red wetsuit is seen from the back, sitting in front of a large screen. The screen displays a silhouette of a person's head and shoulders against a light background. To the right of the silhouette is a tall utility pole with cross-arms. The scene is dimly lit, with a strong red light source on the left creating a glow on the person's wetsuit and the screen. The text is overlaid on the right side of the screen.

i carry that with me; i think deeply, subconsciously—that what i do really matters. it felt like every time i saw him i was reporting back the fruits of my life. and not necessarily in a bad way, i always had something to share with him. he wanted to know the fruits of my labor. and though maybe he wouldn't quite understand why my work is so important now. i think now that he's transitioned, i like to think that he understands deeply why my work is important to the world. i knew he wanted me to be brave and powerful and confident and to know that i could achieve anything i wanted. and though i may falter from that sometimes, i think some part of me goes home to this familial feeling of...you can do it. i believe in you.





The first message
My son gets stuck here
The gospel singers do their own
The cadence of the Vietnamese
The funeral chants
My home town
My first original song
The first time a friend says I love
The words "thank you" from the
My mom sings and my dad says
All the noisy bodies ache




feel the act of paying attention
to experience mattering
what can a body do?

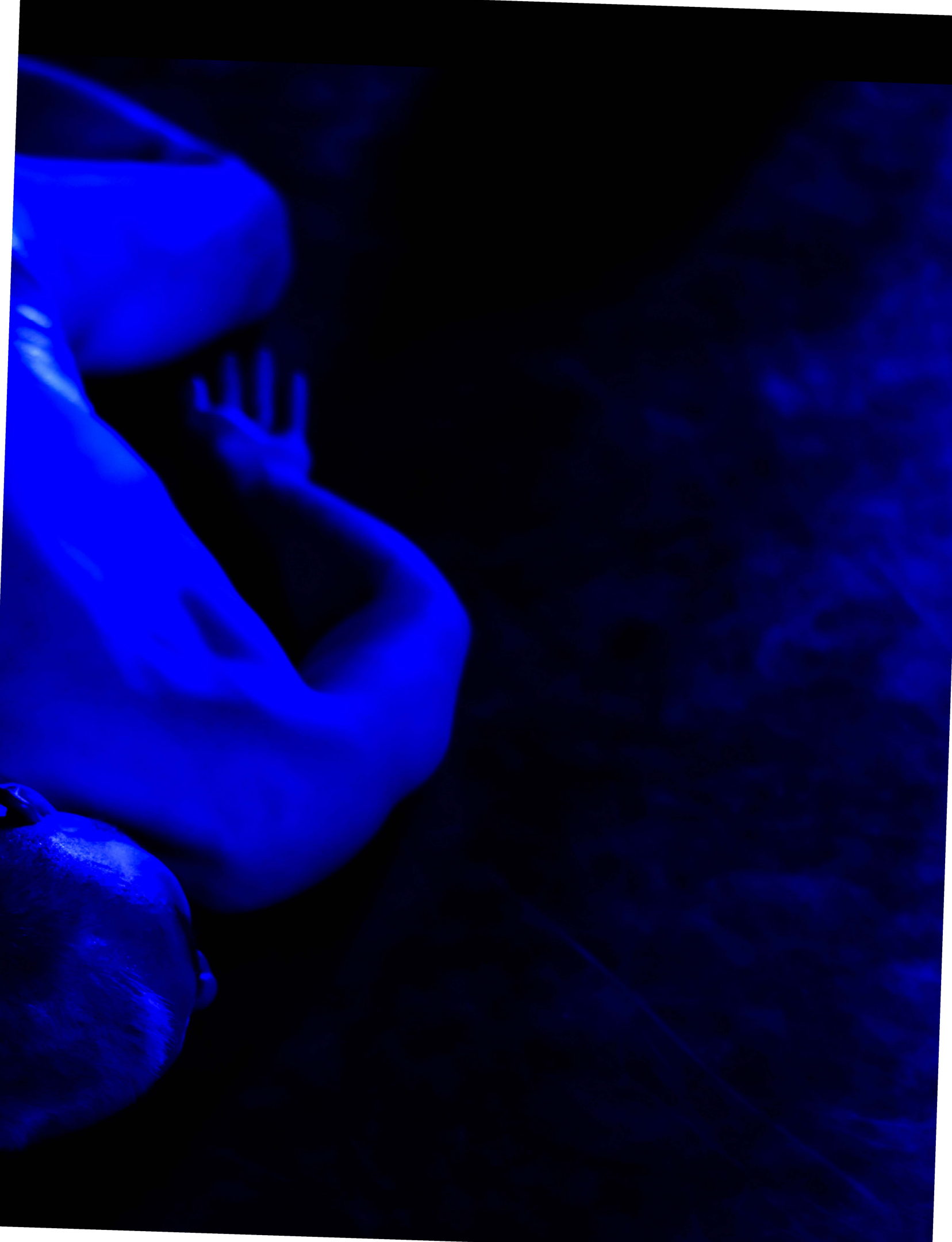
a device for heightening sense

? how to not feel so lonely
? how to not fear for my safety





Almost all of my artistic research is an expression of my desire for love and intimacy. For me, the emotional texture of yearning in my family is analogous to that of my queer romantic relationships. I think about the inherent failure and invention of queerness – how we fail to conform to cis-hetero norms and have to invent new ways of being. Grief can be generative in this way. In order to survive and be queer, you have to live at the horizon of hope and future, where maybe there's a 'something else' that can support us. There's a similar plight in my family. Even if we swim in grief that can feel too thick, we still somehow invent ways to love, to depend on each other, and to survive through war.



Saturday, July 1st, 2023 - 12:48 am - greeting death

We could not belong to each other. We could not possess the other.

I could only find relief in deindividuating-ego death. There was no longer me, in pain. (I couldn't be me, alone). I had to remember that I was space and air and matter.

I stared at the corner of the upper corner of my bedroom, recalling I was also there. No longer just me, but heartbreak redistributed into the field.

I could see the me, the ego, the desire for him to turn towards me. I could see the purple and red.

Saturday, July 1st, 2023 - 1:50 am - breathing purple and red

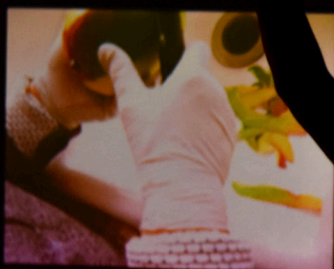


Donna Faye Burchfield: I think he needs you too.

Jason: Really? Why do you think?

DFB: I don't know... maybe because that's how need works?



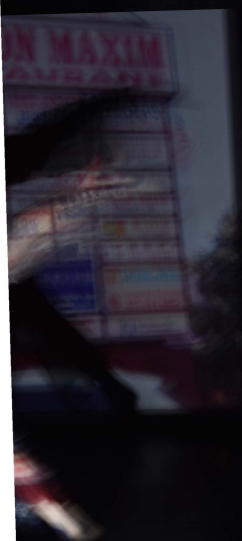


tell me
what did you expect me
to do
for you



a glacial empathy
is all i trust





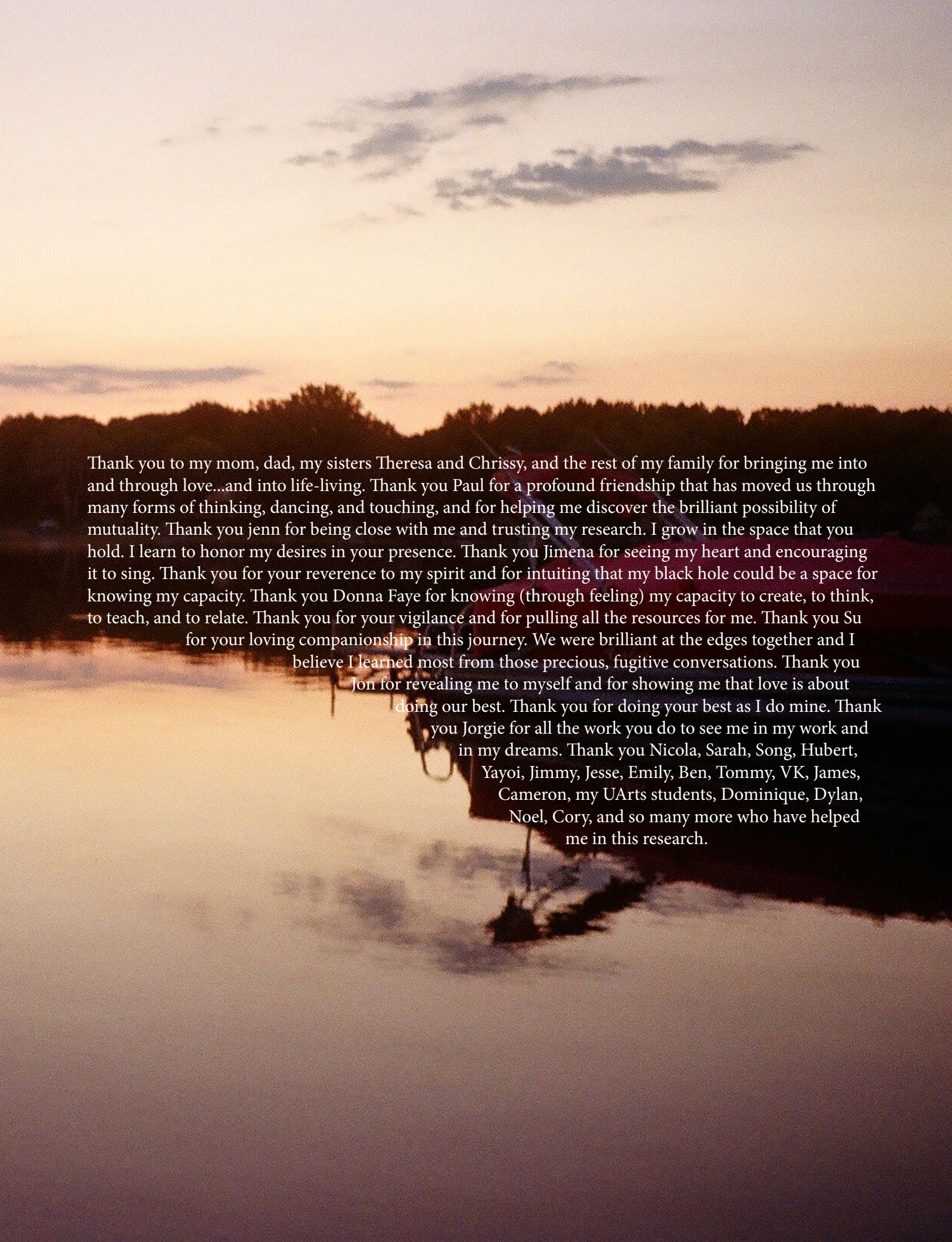





i am
with time
i am
with acceptance
i am air
there is no other side
this is it







Thank you to my mom, dad, my sisters Theresa and Chrissy, and the rest of my family for bringing me into and through love...and into life-living. Thank you Paul for a profound friendship that has moved us through many forms of thinking, dancing, and touching, and for helping me discover the brilliant possibility of mutuality. Thank you jenn for being close with me and trusting my research. I grow in the space that you hold. I learn to honor my desires in your presence. Thank you Jimena for seeing my heart and encouraging it to sing. Thank you for your reverence to my spirit and for intuiting that my black hole could be a space for knowing my capacity. Thank you Donna Faye for knowing (through feeling) my capacity to create, to think, to teach, and to relate. Thank you for your vigilance and for pulling all the resources for me. Thank you Su for your loving companionship in this journey. We were brilliant at the edges together and I believe I learned most from those precious, fugitive conversations. Thank you Jon for revealing me to myself and for showing me that love is about doing our best. Thank you for doing your best as I do mine. Thank you Jorgie for all the work you do to see me in my work and in my dreams. Thank you Nicola, Sarah, Song, Hubert, Yayoi, Jimmy, Jesse, Emily, Ben, Tommy, VK, James, Cameron, my UArts students, Dominique, Dylan, Noel, Cory, and so many more who have helped me in this research.



cover. *Through Noise* May 2023 documentation, image by jorgie ingram
figure 1. november 2022 research as action performance, image by jorgie ingram
figure 2. distorted image by jason vu (jv)
figure 3-4. image by jorgie ingram
figure 5. november 22 research as action performance, image by jorgie ingram
figure 6. Dzung Vu (my father), image by jv
figure 7. family portrait, author unknown
figure 8. Nga Vu's hand (my mother), image by jv
figure 9. UArts Studio at 1401 Walnut, image by jv
figure 10. First Oriental Market, image by jv
figure 11. housefront in Philadelphia, image by jv
figure 12. Nga's hand, image by jv
figure 13. housefront in Philadelphia, image by jv
figure 14. jason, author unknown
figure 15. Huong Vuong market, image by jv
figure 16. Ocean Harbor in Philadelphia, image by jv
figure 17. jason, author unknown
figure 17. fish sauce at Huong Vuong, image by jv
figure 18. Theresa Vu (my sister) peeling crab, image by jv
figure 19. Wing Phat plaza sign in Philadelphia, image by jv
figure 20. Vietnamese import store, image by jv
figure 20. New World Plaza sign in Philadelphia, image by jv
figure 21. Ba Le Bakery in Philadelphia, image by jv
figure 22. Vietnamese import store, image by jv
figure 23-27. distorted image by jv
figure 27-44. jv in recording process, images by jorgie ingram
figure 45. Import store in Philadelphia Chinatown, image by jv
figure 46. Rittenhouse trees, image by jv
figure 47. Nga swimming in her backyard, image by jv
figure 47-66. *Through Noise* May 2023 documentation, images by jorgie ingram
figure 67. lake in Pinckney, Michigan, image by jv
figure 68. Arch street in Philadelphia, image by jv
figure 69. countertop in my parent's home, image by jv



