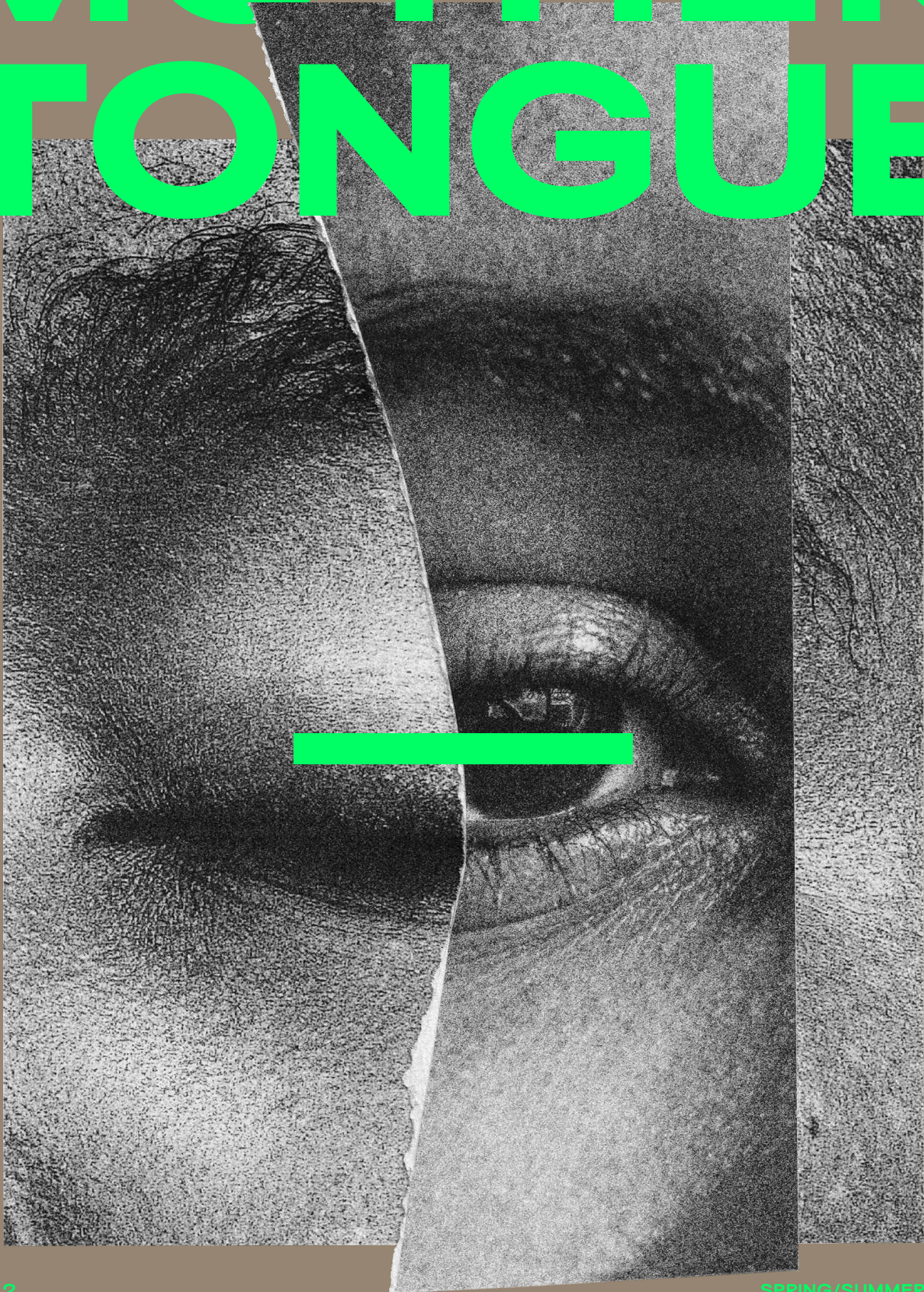


MOTHER TONGUE



ISSUE 2

SPRING/SUMMER 2022

IN A SOCIETY THAT
PRIZES CONSTANT
PRODUCTIVITY, CAN WE
LEARN TO STOP STRIVING
AND SAVE OURSELVES

BEFORE WE CRASH?

WORDS BY
GILA LYONS

ART BY
VANESSA SABA

A RESTED DEVELOPMENT



I'D BEEN RIDING a broken bike for years. Most of the gears stopped shifting a while back, but I could manage on two out of 15, standing up on the pedals to throw my weight behind my work uphill. When the wheel frame bent and my inner tube kept popping, I learned how to patch the places where the metal rubbed the tire bare. Someone stole the fake yellow flowers and sparkly twine from the front handlebars, but I kept the remaining bits of yellow ribbon, thinking someday I'd replace them. When the gear chain rusted, the neighborhood shop lubed it up with WD-40 and told me I could get another couple of years out of it. I lugged around the extra weight of the heavy frame, and mastered balancing on my tiptoes at stop signs and crosswalks because, I realized sometime last year, the bike was actually a size too big for me, having been passed down to me from my dad.

A few weeks ago, I swung my leg over the high seat to go for a ride with my husband and our toddler in our neighborhood near Cambridge, Massachusetts. Coursing down the driveway I felt that familiar sense of freedom, relieved to be out of our two-bedroom apartment where we've been cooped up for the better part of two years, when I realized I couldn't stop. The brake line was gone; it had snapped. I finally had to put the bike away, stowing it in the garage to be salvaged for parts. For too long, I'd been hobbling along on a broken system that took too much effort, and wasn't even safe.

Anxiety and depression have plagued me most of my life. As with the bike, I'd learned to white knuckle through: panic attacks at the grocery store, behind the wheel of the car, while dropping my son off at daycare. But the pandemic was my brake line snapping. Two years of fear and isolation while becoming a mother sent me into freefall.

The pandemic pushed a lot of us to the edge, especially working parents. Whatever fumes we were running on simply ran out in a terrifying last gasp. Our already broken medical and mental health care systems buckled under the weight of it all, and many have been confronted by a reality that others already knew: The modern American way of life is not sustainable, particularly for parents.

In episode 28 of her podcast, *We Can Do Hard Things*, author and activist Glennon Doyle recounts a conversation with writer Elizabeth Gilbert, who postulated that the real revolution won't be a wild, unbridled woman screaming her mission from every rooftop and living her passions hard and ceaselessly; the real revolution will be a rested, relaxed woman, and, as Gilbert put it, "a world that has finally structured itself in a way that allows a woman to rest."

We need a radical restructuring of our capitalist, bottom-line, isolationist, race-to-the-top, trample-those-on-bottom culture. We need guaranteed, paid maternity and family leave. Easy and safe access to abortions. Gun control. Food security. Housing security. Equal access to quality childcare and education. But

failing all that, at least for now—in the aftermath of the unnamable #45 and his administration's terrifying assault on women's rights and denial of climate disaster, coupled with pandemic terror, racial injustice, and an alarming rise in discriminatory violence—we need a goddamn nap.

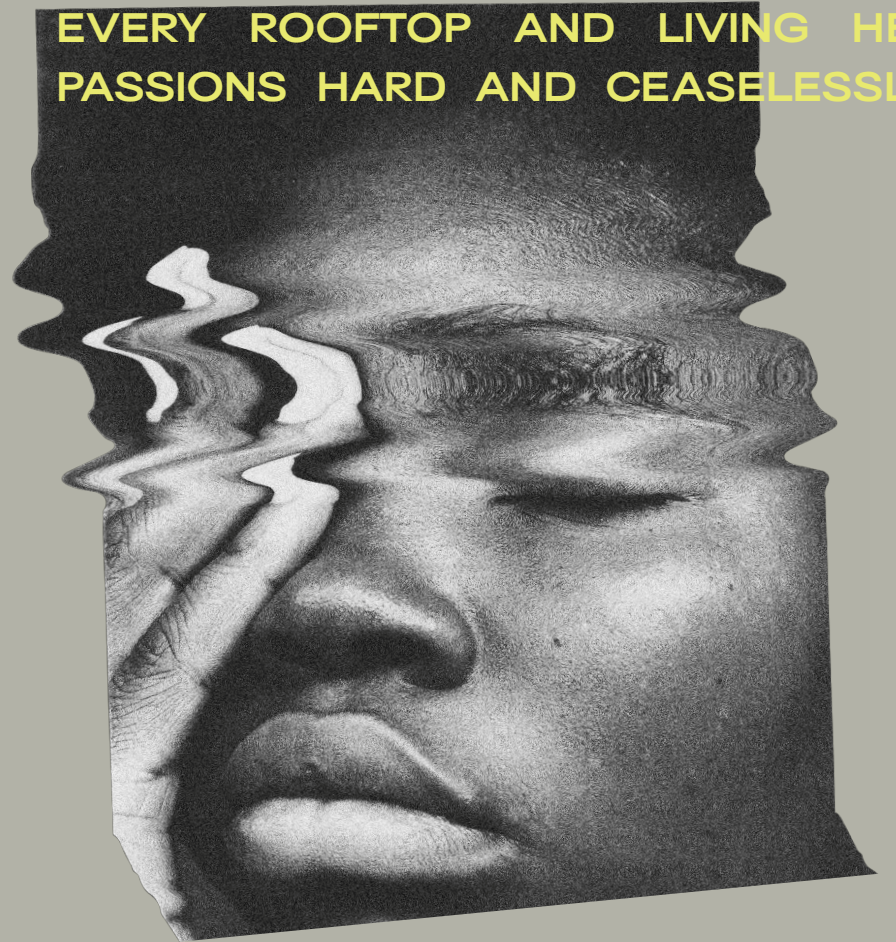
I've been thinking about what it means to actually rest, and I've noticed the call for revolutionary rest is intersecting race, class, and religion—as writers, athletes, celebrities, ancient Jewish tradition, and Black Liberation theologians are all urging us to take a step back and stop our cycle of ceaseless production and aspiration.

Black women are leading the way toward radical rest by example. Simone Biles chose not to compete in the women's gymnastics team final at the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics (which actually took place in July 2021) in order to protect her mental health; Naomi Osaka (who identifies as Haitian Japanese) withdrew from the 2021 French Open, citing a need to recover from debilitating anxiety and depression. In Michaela Coel's 2021 Emmy acceptance speech for *I May Destroy You*, a television series she wrote, co-directed, executive produced, and starred in, she implored us: "I dare you. In a world that entices us to browse through the lives of others to help us better determine how we feel about ourselves, and to in turn feel the need to be constantly visible, for visibility these days seems to somehow equate to success—do not be afraid to disappear. From it. From us. For a while. And see what comes to you in the silence."

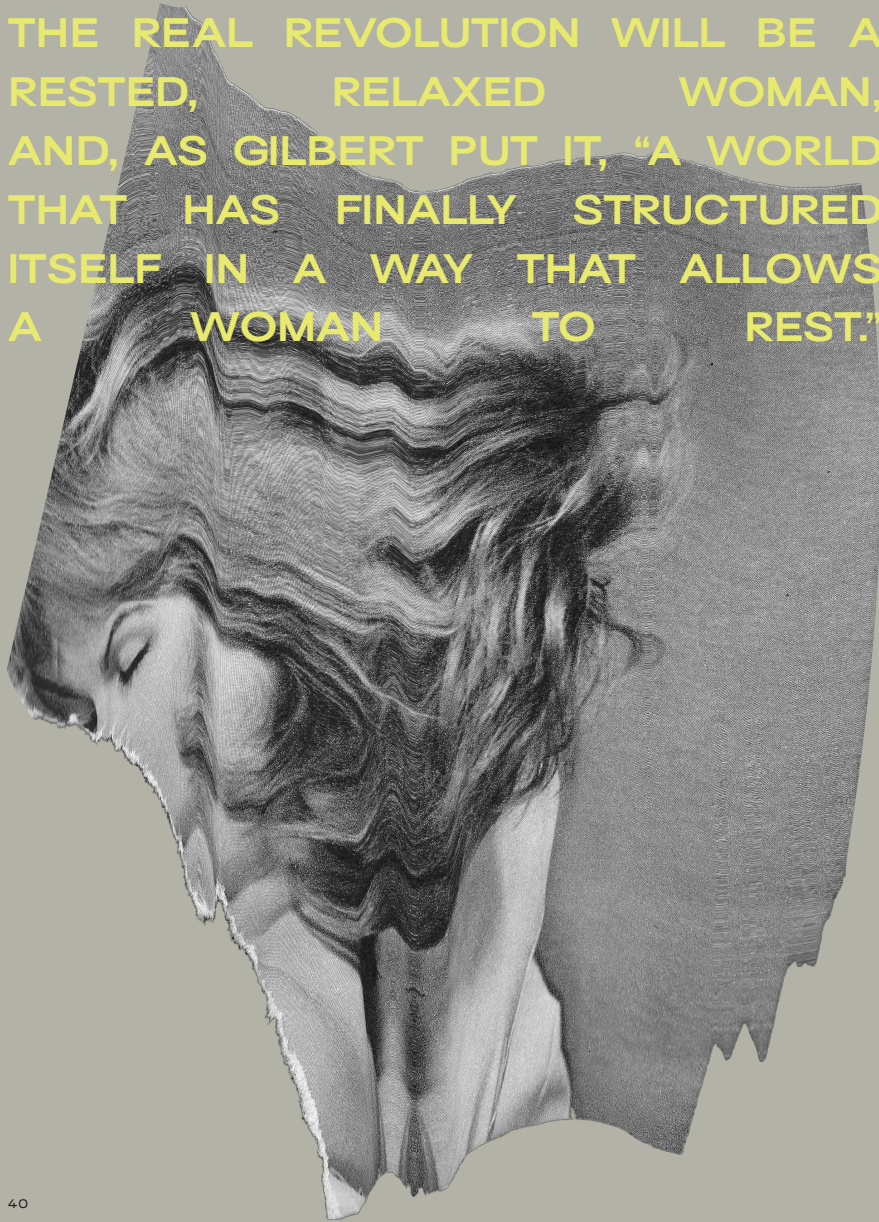
Choosing not to compete, stepping back, signing off, are all forms of rest. The Nap Ministry, an organization founded in 2016 by Tricia Hersey, calls for "a disruption of white supremacy and capitalism via rest"—it preaches that sleep deprivation is a racial and social justice issue. The ministry runs a nap hotline (1-833-LUV-NAPS), public napping art installations, a resourceful blog and website, and an Instagram account with half-a-million followers. As part of her mission, Hersey says that "rest is not a privilege or luxury but a divine and human right." And around the time of the 2020 Olympics, she tweeted: "My response about Simone, Naomi, and any Black person saying, 'Fuck these systems, I'm gonna rest and care for me,' will always remain the same Refuse to donate your body to these violent systems. Rest. Now. Resist!"

I wanted to ask Hersey: In this complex moment, how can rest offer a new way forward? A way of implementing less extractive relationships with land, each other, and ourselves? And how can this be practiced by working parents of young children who, more often than not, are stretched so thin physically, emotionally, mentally, and often financially, with the relentlessness of rent and mortgages and daycare tuition and career and the unyielding lure of productivity and ambition and attempts at retaining some semblance of a creative, social, fulfilling life?

...THE REAL REVOLUTION WON'T BE
A WILD, UNBRIDLED WOMAN
SCREAMING HER MISSION FROM
EVERY ROOFTOP AND LIVING HER
PASSIONS HARD AND CEASELESSLY;



THE REAL REVOLUTION WILL BE A
RESTED, RELAXED WOMAN,
AND, AS GILBERT PUT IT, "A WORLD
THAT HAS FINALLY STRUCTURED
ITSELF IN A WAY THAT ALLOWS
A WOMAN TO REST."



But when I went to contact her through her Instagram, I was greeted by an image of her face amid the clouds, with the words, "Sabbath Time. No Labor. No Media. No Requests." Her caption read: "Help honor my Sabbath by chilling and breathing and staying outta my emails and inboxes. Nothing is urgent. Everything is in divine alignment. We Will Rest!" She practices what she preaches.

Hersey's invocation of the Old Testament Sabbath in her post called out to me—Judaism and spiritual tradition have always provided balm for my anxious mind and soul, especially the weekly Sabbath—24 hours dedicated to calming down. And there's a historic synergy between Judaism and Black Christianity. Jewish and Black leaders have worked hard together for civil rights and against anti-Semitism, like the bond between the rabbi and Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King Jr.

"I'm not surprised that the face of radical rest is Black women because of the exhaustion of injustice," says Rabbi Tiferet Berenbaum, director of congregational learning at Temple Beth Zion in Brookline, Massachusetts, and a Black Jew. "Shabbat (Hebrew for Sabbath) also came out of intense injustice. In the Torah, it's the first thing we learn after being freed from Egypt: Now that you're no longer enslaved, let's talk about rest," she says. "I think the connection between Black and Jewish communities is so rich because oppression is in the souls of Black folks and in the souls of Jewish folks. It's in our DNA."

I felt the connection between these two communities from an early age: I grew up attending Black Baptist church services with my grandfather's reform Jewish congregation in Los Angeles. So I was deeply intrigued when I learned that this Jewish year (which began September 18, 2021), a year in which Black women are leading the call for rest, also happens to be a *shmitah* year. It occurs every seven years, when Jewish law dictates that the land must lay fallow and unharvested so that anyone can eat from anyone's fields, debts are forgiven and enslaved people are made free. It's an ancient environmental and societal resetting that centralizes rest and freedom from capitalism and social hierarchies. In Hebrew, the word *shmitah* means release, as people and land are released from their bounds to productivity.

"A lot of the science done on rest is actually directly correlated with how much more productive you can be, which is just so ironic," says Deepika Chopra, PsyD, a psychologist based in Santa Monica, California, who has gained a devoted following on Instagram (as the Optimism Doctor) for her emphasis on evidence-based techniques to help people cultivate happiness. "That's how you get buy-in from most people: *I promise you, you'll actually be more productive if you invest in more rest.* That's how to cater to our society," she adds. Of course, with *shmitah*, the idea is not to rest to

return to where you were—you surrender to rest in order to reframe and reset.

My good friend, Berkeley, California-based Rabbi Adina Allen, explains *shmitah* as a "practice that is meant to support regeneration—the ongoing cycle of life. To 'produce' is to cause a certain result to come about. This *shmitah* year makes space for us to ask: What is it, really, that we are trying to bring about? Food? Sustenance? Profit? Power? This is a year to get honest about the effects of our actions, clear in our intentions, and unbounded in our imagination."

Everyone will determine what rest can and will look like for them, because, in America, we aren't all starting from equal footing. Yet, for each person, the question is the same: How can we change the grind to be less damaging to our lives—to our joy?

My rest, so far, is letting go of a manuscript that's done the rounds. Letting go of grasping at prestige and progress and just doing what needs to be done: Therapy. Laundry. Feeding myself and my family. Trying to savor small moments: sunlight on the wooden floor, singing my son to sleep, the quiet of a still house when everything is in its place and settled. Rest is not enough to cure my mental health challenges, but I also know that I won't get better without it. I'm trying to embody some of the principles of the *shmitah* release, of not getting everything right: in parenting, in caring for myself, in my career.

Taking out the compost has become a highlight of my day. Rabbits scatter as I walk to the back of the garden—a surprisingly intact swath of nature in this densely populated suburb—with my bucket in hand. Turning the heavy, loaded bin requires my entire body's involvement, such that my head quiets for a split second, and in that moment I'm a timeless woman: untethered from piling bills and deadlines and insurance companies—a working body, turning waste back into fuel for next summer's lettuce, caring for my family and myself. This daily ritual offers a moment of mental rest.

Today in the compost pile I noticed something behind the rotten orange and imploding, slimy pepper—something had started sprouting from the pumpkin guts, or squash seeds, or cucumber mush. Three spindly green stems, each topped with two perfect new leaves, emerged from the dank muck. The purpose of rest isn't production, but rest can be a way for new growth, or a new way to grow. Releasing what was never ours. Discarding our skins and pits and seeds. Now look! Something new is possible. ■