



opus 66



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OPUS

/ˈō-pəs/ (noun)
an artistic composition
built by many

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We would like to thank our administration and the entire Herricks community for their continued support for the publication of OPUS and the promotion of the arts.

This year in particular, we would like to thank Allyson Zebrowski and the Herricks Art Club for their invaluable assistance in helping shape the aesthetic of OPUS 66.

Finally, an acknowledgement of those who submitted but whom we unfortunately could not include in this year's journal. We commend you for your efforts and thank you for supporting our journal.

We hope you will continue to create beauty through language and art.

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EDITORS' NOTES

Where does one begin with a literary journal? The first page, the last page, the middle? Your work, your best friend's work, the work of the senior you admire most? This is the question that Derek Chen, OPUS Editor-in-Chief '19-'20, left me thinking about after I read through an OPUS journal for the first time. I've spent the past four years trying to figure out the answer to this question, rolling it around my mind like how one rolls a jawbreaker around their mouth. I know where I began with this literary journal: in a Google Meet call with Mr. Semerdjian and a handful of other editors. Despite this somewhat lackluster start to my OPUS career, I don't think I would want it any other way.

Despite being a writer and poet myself, I approached this note with hesitance—there is no easy way to say goodbye to this journal that has become such a big part of my high school career, even if I know it's really just a see you later. It's funny what love and dedication can do to a writer—it can allow rivers, full of words of praise, to flow from the page and into your lap, or it can erect a dam and block even a single phrase from spilling out. I want to tell you, dear reader, how meaningful these past four years in Literature Club have been for me, but the words just can't seem to come out the way I want them to.

Four years can have the weight of one thousand eons, but go by in just the blink of an eye. I'm lucky to have spent every Monday afternoon in the basement of the high school (or on a Google Meet) and I'm even luckier to have my name printed both inside of and on the backs of four OPUS journals. Dear reader, do not take these things for granted; sooner or later, you, too, will grow older and graduate and leave all of this—the literary journal, Literature Club, the commenting, your fellow editors, the scent of pizza wafting through the excited air of the basement during a meeting—behind. Hopefully, though, that will not be the end of your literary magazine career. Hopefully, this note is not the end of mine.

This time, I'll leave you with this question: where does a literary journal truly begin? Is it the first page? Or the fiction section? Or perhaps it starts in the basement of a high school, full of students searching for the stone needed to construct a palace of words? Wherever it begins for you, hold it in the palm of your hand. Hold it tight and let it guide you.

Sasha Stern, Editor-in-Chief

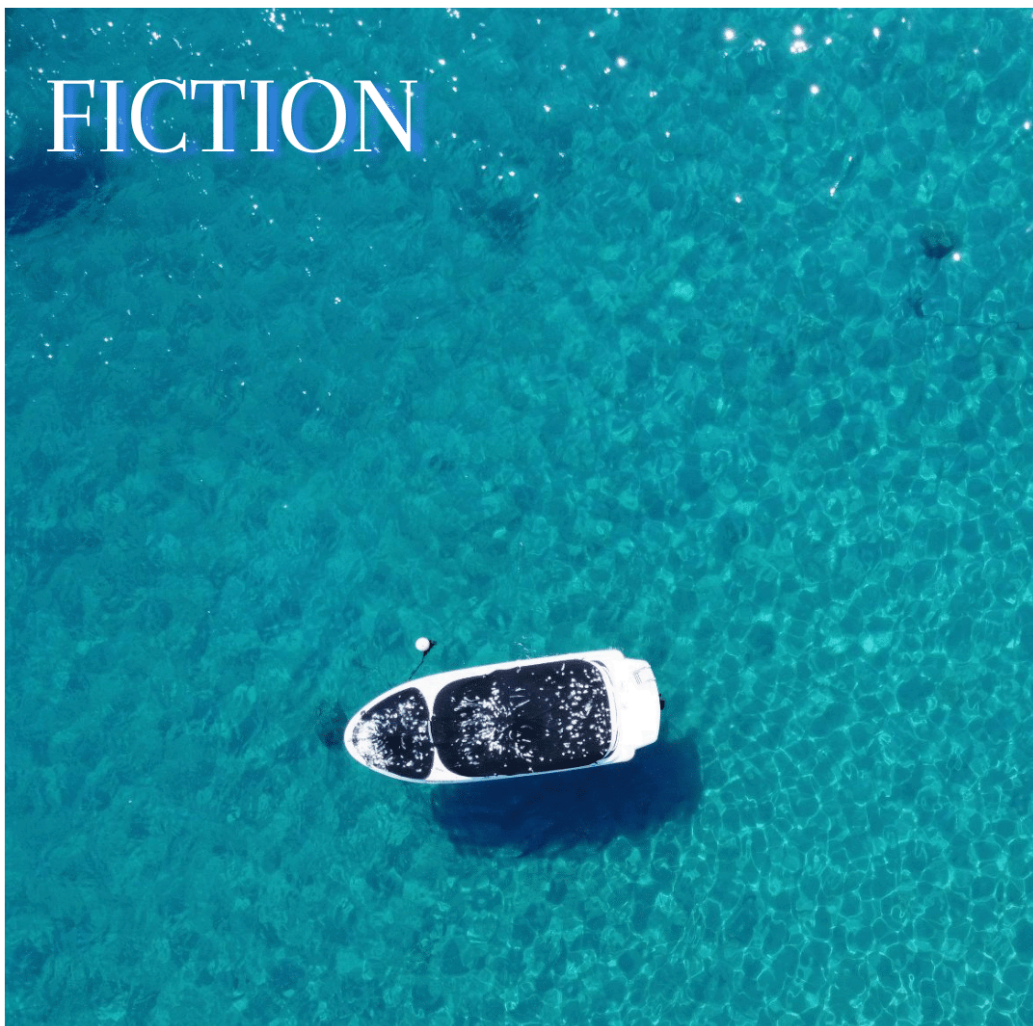
In the creation of this letter, I went through many, many drafts of what I wanted to say to you, our readers. It is so incredibly difficult to put in one letter the culmination of three years at OPUS, but I suppose that it will suffice.

It is impossible to determine where my love for literature begins and devotion to OPUS ends. I joined Literature Club a bit later than most (in my sophomore year), and truth be told, I wasn't even sure that I wanted to be here for the first couple of months. Intimidated and slightly afraid, I questioned whether or not there was a place for me in such a tight-knit community. It is in fact the club's welcoming body, dedication, and love for literature that convinced me to stay — and I am so grateful to report that year after year, the club has only grown in these regards.

Although the process of creating the journal itself is taxing, it is rewarding. Each late night call, extended meeting, and Google Docs comment conversation lends itself to the formation of an extraordinary journal, one that not only holds but also proudly showcases the brilliant voices of our school. I am consistently blown away by the caliber of the students who share their work with us. Each piece in this journal has been selected for its craftsmanship, intention, and, most importantly, heart. As you browse, I urge you to find the pieces that stick with you most and hold them close. Analyze them, savor them, and put them in the deepest parts of your heart where no one can reach. Seek out the people and works that do the same. OPUS is defined by its ability to create community—within the club, its vast audience, and journal itself. My journey as Editor-in-Chief began with finding this community. It is my sincere hope that within these pages, each one of you will find yours.

Prisha Agarwal, Editor-in-Chief

FICTION





Humble Fisherman Vessels
Om Thakur

The Eternal Fruit

Bella Pavlovici

My mother has always told me that a beautiful sunset means that there will be a clear sky tomorrow. And while I'm not quite sure why I found this fact to be so intriguing, each time the sun sets and leaves behind an expansive blend of colors, I wonder if tomorrow's weather will be the aftermath of this sunset—if the sky will be just as beautiful, just as breathtaking and just as remarkable. Without fail, little crystals of doubt coat my thoughts as my mind wanders to the next day, and though I have never known my mother to be wrong about this fact, still, I stare at the horizon in front of me, thinking, this is it. This is the day she is wrong and tomorrow, the clouds and rain and storm will come.

Yet they don't, and my doubts are proven unnecessary time and time again as blue skies blind my vision. And maybe it's the uniquely bright glare or the particularly hot sun, but I find everything to be almost irritating. When have I known anything good to lead to something equally good? In reality, in the presence of a lovely sunset, I usually strain to grab onto every last color because I know what beautiful things are—fleeting. They escape too quickly, are gone before you ever realize what you once had. For the injustice of beauty is that you are not aware of its true nature until it is an ugly thing, and only then do you truly comprehend what was once there.

And still, it is impossible, though so incredibly easy, to blame unknowing people who have beautiful things. Have we not all also had something beautiful and not known of it until it was lost? No, instead we should blame Time—the culprit in this whole mess of thievery. Time is the boundary between typicality and beauty; the one who whispers thoughts of the past into your ears as you obliviously listen to Time remind you of what it stole.

Time is your oldest friend—the one you're not sure why you still hold dear, but cannot imagine a life without. We all allow Time to tell us what is and what isn't—just as how I listen to its warnings as I watch every sunset, allow it to mumble its secrets into my mind. Time reminds me of gorgeous entities and lovely little lives - all so beautiful, they all turned sour, like a fruit plucked off a branch, awaiting its decay and inevitable rot. Time picks out every single delicacy

from the tree of life, ripping them away close to your ears so you can hear the crunch of their fragile skin.

Except this one.

This is the one Time decides to leave on the tree: a sunset. A stunning, idyllic, beautiful sunset, and tomorrow will be unjustly the same.



A Lingering Ghost

Enya Chen

Silent Symphony

Maya Aboutaleb

There is no sound I despise more than dead silence.

One encounters a cacophony of unpleasant noises quite often; a baby throwing a screeching tantrum, a water bottle *clunking* one too many times, or the ever-so-slight yet incessant droning of some doohickey machinery. It all rings and echoes in your ears and your head, unyielding to your mind's capacity to handle it. Some noises you can never avoid. Some you learn to drown out. Some insist on crawling through your limbs and up your back and into your neck even if there's nothing truly tangible about it. The concept is almost intriguing. The feeling is torturous.

Even then, the reverse, to be submerged in a space devoid of any sound, is ten times worse.

Silence is a unique phenomenon. It doesn't behave in the same way as most other sounds you encounter, which I guess makes sense since it's the absence of sound. It doesn't crawl like most noises; it instead slowly seeps through your skin like sap, sinks into your bones, and finally, it reaches your chest and lungs, and fills them with a gaping cavity with too much room for you to handle leaving you to suffocate.

You would've probably expected a silent space to be a haven to me, and I would've thought the same too. But from experience, to hear nothing isn't relief—it's an ever-expansive yet ever-enclosing trap. Silence after everything creates a lot of room for other concepts to fill in. Thoughts. Worries. Inevitabilities. A bit too much of everything at once.

So walking home trapped in this vacuum of nothing is agonizing.

As I step onto the curb marking the start of my "journey" home, my arm lifts and rotates my wrist towards me in a swift automatic motion to check the time.

5:13 now so I'll be home before 6

After walking home from school daily for 3 years straight, you learn to eventually shift into autopilot. Your body carries you and your load of responsibilities on the same path while you can exist outside of the walk itself. You either tune out the passing traffic and shifting trees to be left with a pseudo-silence, or you encounter actual silence as you sit down at the bench by the pond after your bag tugs at your shoulders for a bit too long. Good for light thinking. Bad for the heavier lifting.

Another crossing. Another curb. Another wrist flick. *Off the busy road and 5:27 A third of the way home*

By now it was noticeably quieter. The bustling rush-hour roads are all behind me now once more, with the growl of an approaching car only becoming an occasional occurrence rather than a consistent background radiation. The leaves gave up on holding onto their branches a while ago, and now the trees dance much softer than they did before when a gust of wind ran through them. The pit sprouts and grows more and more with each passing second and each step I advance.

So much to catch up on Should've started walking earlier

A blink later and I've reached the pond. Upon realizing I can possibly sit down, my bag's straps threaten to bring me to the ground by my shoulders, and my legs weren't opposed to the idea, so another break by the pond it is. I drag myself towards the nearest bench to the sidewalk and plop down and exhale, almost melting into the structure. By now the sun has already undergone its daily explosion into colors and left only the faint afterglow of lavender and gold. The breezes have all fully wound down, as the trees stopped dancing a while ago. But the silence had become deafening.

Can't stay long Need to get home soon Need to sit for a bit Not gonna have time to finish my work Get up Stop being lazy goddammit

The air held a chill of eerie stillness. I could feel the cold slowly digging into the back of my neck and my hands, with it the feeling of suffocating nothing slowly sinking through as well. Even though I'm sitting down, the pain in my shoulders and legs grew denser, more imposing. My ears, my head, became an echo

chamber of cacophonous worries, taking up more and more space as the feeling of void tightened its grip on me and shot dull pain from my neck into my heavy limbs. My breaths began escaping me faster. As much as moving pained me, I couldn't handle staying here for a moment longer. But I found myself unable to move. I hate that feeling. I hate everything I'm feeling now. Wish it all could just

Mraaw!

Huh?

I glance down to notice a small black furball nudging against my ankle. It lifts its head and stares back with its green button-like eyes. A kitten.

Mraww!

My leg shifts away instinctively. *It's a stray It's bad luck* But it's no use, as the kitten immediately does a quick trot after it, as if it were its lifeline. A closer look at the furball. *I guess it's fine Nothing odd about it* I slowly relax my leg upon this realization and the kitten settles into a loafing position, still leaning against my ankle. The slight tickles of its whiskers sent a shiver up my skin, aided by the late autumn air. It isn't until the shiver dissipates I can feel the quiet purr of the kitten, still leaning peacefully against my ankle.

At that moment I remembered how to breathe. I draw in as much as I physically can until I nearly burst, and let out the longest breath I've taken in probably months, or years. The air filled up the cavity that opened in the midst of all the nothing. And right then and there I heard everything the silence held. The leaves whispering their secrets to each other, a cricket humming its nightly tune, my own breath leaving my body. And the kitten's warm purrs amidst it all, still rumbling softly. A cacophony turned symphony.

Huh This isn't the worst actually

It was funny to me, how the symphony of this nothing held so much. And it was almost even funnier how I didn't feel creeped out by it all. This normally felt horrible. A minute ago I was caught up in my own head against the silence. But maybe embracing it helped. Maybe taking some time amidst nothing was worth it.

...

I take another deep breath and let everything ease into nothing.

Taxes

Anonymous

The Den: attractive to runners since twenty-eight turned greater society's head away. Big, dirty, and on the outskirts, he could see why they were drawn into the decrepit hotel to hide and as he walked in to collect debt he felt little gazes against his skin, the dust on his tongue, and a slight ringing sound in his ear once he entered those boarded doors. His tinnitus, really annoying but it got better once he thought of it as foreshadowing. As it kinda sounded like a scream, yeah that can work, it was foreshadowing the screams of the deadbeats, for he was here to do the lord's work because only three things were certain in life: death, taxes, and Frank.

Past the front lobby to the right: room seven. A blue-eyed girl, she talked, not argued, talked, talked endlessly. Spoke in circles, *no it wasn't me who took from you but I do need the money that I didn't take*, ran his patience so, so thin. So when she started fighting there was no consideration to be given. No. When he looked into those blue now black, crying, popping eyes, he pressed his hands into her squirming neck until he heard a snap. There she lay still, paralyzed. Frank stepped on her left shoulder and bending down, grabbed her forefinger with a calloused hand. He pulled: pulled and twisted until the tendons tore and bone popped until finally with a quiet rip, her slender finger was in the palm of his hand, a pretty finger, nicely textured, with the nail painted a tasteful dark pink. Admiring his catch he put it in his pocket and then shot her in the forehead. The finger was important, not just a trophy but a substitution for debt: **coin**. Backed by pain, coin was something the girl paid to Frank for a quick death. and for Frank, it was paid to his boss for the bullet he used to grant it. He laughed afterward with her corpse at the cleverness of his analogy, an old habit from college he told her, it was not that complicated, boss just liked records for bullets and fingers were convenient for that. After not getting a response he went on with his work feeling satisfied with his virtue. And as he walked on the ringing came louder

Going up the stairs to the fourth floor, there was the long-haired man in room twenty, to which nothing else was known to Frank except that the boss said coin was worthless to his debt which Frank was angry at as it didn't fit his currency

analogy, he kicked down the door like a damn cartoon character to which I waited with five bullets to his chest.

My brother is a dumbass.

Falling back into the wall and dropping his gun, he simply gasped as the flat bullet debris fell off his chest and rattled on the floor.

“Uh, Marvin.” He pulled out the collar of his coat revealing a black bulletproof vest under. “Take more than that to put me down”

“Hands, against your head... now.” slowly and slyly he did.

“I didn’t expect to be collecting from you. Let me tell you, not your brain’s best work. Come on... you’re smarter than this. You built rockets when we were -”

“Shut up. Walk out the way you came, Frank.”

“I won’t walk away.” with hands up he walked forward into the trashed room and sat on the ripped couch. “Let's talk.”

“There's not much to say.”

“Well... yeah, you ran away with five hundred thousand dollars. Was there a good reason for it?

There is, I am broke, and civil society no longer exists. Is that not enough of a reason to steal from the treasury?

“There is no reason that will satisfy you”

He sighed.

“You ain’t gotta satisfy me. Only the boss, I’ll be easy too. You ran money for him before, right? We’ll just say you got kidnapped with the five hundred and were brought to this place. You get to live.

“...No”

“huh”

“I’m done, I’m done working for the IRS” I exhaled “Just leave where you came, you leave in peace or you leave in pieces, Frank!”

“I can’t do that. Not without you.”

In an instant, his face grew an unbearable grimness. You know those little tables they got next to hotel beds right? The ones with the bibles in them? He grabbed it in a quick motion not dissimilar to a falcon’s swoop and smashed it against my head. I had the gun on him but I didn’t shoot.

I didn’t have the guts for it.

Dazed was a light way of putting it. I couldn’t tell if I was dead or not. There was a sense of impact around the area of my head but that was it. I touched it and felt something soft, something squishy. It was a piece of my brain. I heard a terrible sound scream in my ears and then heard an even more terrible, slight, *click*.

Looking up, I saw the barrel of a gun.

“All this for taxes? For a nation that—”

“You should have run further Marvin,” and with a flash like lightning and the sound of thunder, I was no more.

And with the ringing in his ear, he continued to walk.

Room five. There was a thin junkie, yelling for a little bit but he gave in, coughing up crumpled twenties, still a hundred short. For around two minutes, he beat him to death, and for two more he ripped apart his corpus like a wild dog. Yelled at him, shot him, cut off his fingers. What remained was covered in a moldy blanket. The ringing became unbearable.

Walking out of the room and down the stairs Frank was unsatisfied with today for some reason, he no longer felt *that* inside him from his work. No, the only thing that was in him was his breakfast. It felt as if his work was pointless, and as he

walked out of those broken exit doors he looked to the burning sky and glass earth that was once New York and mourned civilization's corpse. Still as a rock, he didn't even notice the sudden snapping stop of the ring until he felt the force and heat against his flesh.

Though Frank resigned himself to life he still clung to it and as the bomb, no, **my** bomb ripped apart his body, he screamed, he screamed so loud, for that was our requiem and he knew it. And from the fire and smoke came the cold quiet, and the everything that follows in a world free from the shackles of death and taxes.

I weep.

The Home Inside My Head (and Heart)

Jackie Polanski

The day is shining. The bright blue sky and rolling hills surround us from all sides. There's no other place that we would rather be than sitting on this dirty tinkerbell towel covered in snacks, yarn, paint, and whatever else is stuck at the depths of each of our bags. We like to dump everything where we can see it so we don't forget what's there. He always has at least one chapstick on him at all times because of the eczema. I always have to forget one thing when going out, but never the earbuds that I keep in my left pocket. She never leaves the house without some makeup on. I miss her bare face. I remind her that she's pretty anyway.

There's no order to what we do together. We carry the abrupt departure of words and the easy quiet and the ill-planned outings and the unspoken affection. We carry it all in between the hush that comes after bubbling and squeaky laughter. We carry the silence. There's not much to love about it except that it's ours.

We all look like our fathers. There's no denying my buttchin and high cheekbones, or Mio's rounder face and deep black hair, or Axl's downturned nose and lack of acne. We all picked our own names, not satisfied or correctly represented by the ones given to us. But there's no way for any of us to say it out loud to our fathers. There will always be a little girl where we stand in their eyes. No matter how accepting to change a person is, it must be different when it's their own kid. We haven't taken that chance yet.

Like attracts like, I once saw spray painted on a brick wall. I like to look all around me when I'm going places. It makes me feel alive. He likes to listen to music when walking since he always needs something to do. He isn't intentionally late, but that always happens to be the case. When she's focused, she walks with purpose and a blank face. When we are lazy and bored, having nothing serious to do, she likes to have fun. And there's a lot of places to go. New people to meet, places to travel. We all carry the weight of our future, spread out like the carbon dioxide leaving our mouths as we breathe. I wonder if we will still have picnics together.

She recalls dead cats lodged between the rings of the crate. I think of crushed rabbits smudged against the concrete and left to the crows. He knows of dead companions who were too far gone to save. So what's one good memory to save, to hold to our chests when we're miles apart?



Behind the Curtain

Connie Huang

She Waits.

Anonymous

Where is he?

She checked the clock. 3:58. It's awfully late. Could he have run away? "No way," she thought. Maybe she was a little too harsh when telling him to do his homework the previous night. They had ended the night on bad terms and she planned to apologize when he returned home from school the next day. On top of that, she got him bubble tea from his favorite store as an apology.

She waits. And waits. And waits. She expected him to step off bus 25 so enthusiastically while running into his mother's arms. But he didn't. It felt unreal, like everything around her was an illusion and she was just having one of her wild thoughts as always. Maybe all the coffee was doing something to her head.

She was thinking about just driving to the school but right then and there, she gets a call that will change her life forever.

She sits there in denial. She checks the date. May 26. It wasn't the first of April. She denies everything. She goes to pick up her car keys and drives to the school. She arrives to see bodies being carried out and police cars. Then she spots something. Something that drastically changed her life. She sees him. He was being carried into an ambulance.

"WHAT HAPPENED!" She yells out.

"I'm sorry. But..."

It's like the world stopped spinning and the only words she could comprehend were "bullet" and "heart."

Then her world stopped.

Everything froze.

How could they have let this happen?

She fell to her knees.

She didn't care about anything else at that moment.

Not even the police asking everyone to leave the scene. She dragged herself to her car and cried. She didn't care about anyone else watching her like she was a crazy person. They could point and stare all they wanted. Nobody else knew the pain she felt. She just wanted her **son** back.

She drove to see him.

June 3rd.

8 days later.

The Funeral Home.

She waits.

How much longer until she can see him again? Her poor **child**.

Everyday the guilt and regret lives with her. She would do anything to be able to see him again. To feel his soft touch. To get to relive her moments with him. To have fun conversations with him again.

To be able to say “I love you” to him one last time.

She just wished she could apologize for pushing him too hard. She wishes that before she went to sleep that night, she played the bigger person and went to apologize.

She was mad at herself. But she was also mad at everyone involved. How could they have let this happen? Was there really nothing this country could do to stop it?

It hurt so much.

But at least he was up there with the angels. But now, It was his turn. His turn to wait.

Up there. For his loving **mother** to finally join him and reconcile. He didn't care about anything else. He just wants to see her one more time.

He wanted to say “I love you too” back one more time.

Now, he waits.

Next Life

Tiffany Zhou

“Kai Yu, please report to the principal’s office, Kai Yu,” the principal says over the announcements.

“Oooooo, he’s in troubleeee!” people mutter around the class. Whispers can be heard and words are exchanged of whether or not I was in trouble.

But I didn’t do anything. And everyone knows that. Especially from someone like me? Never.

I get up from my seat and make my way down the aisle with classmates’ and friends’ eyes staring at me like I was on display.

“That’s enough! Everyone, back to work,” the teacher, Mr. Bellon exclaims to the class.

“Do I bring my stuff or...?” I trail off.

He looks at me, nods, and goes back to grading the papers that we should have gotten back by now. Despite Mr. Bellon telling everyone to ignore me and continue working, I could still feel stares at the back of my head as I walked out of the class with my stuff.

Whatever this was, I’m glad they excused me from this class. History. The absolute worst class of all time. I don’t care what everyone else says, social studies is the worst. I linger in the halls for a bit longer, contemplating on why I have been called here, before entering the main office.

The lady in the front desk asks for my name and I say, “Kai Yu.”

With a blank expression on her face, she leads me to the principal's office. The main office itself feels strange and unfamiliar to me. There is also as if there is this weird and awkward tension in the room. Throughout my high school days,

I've only come here once. The one time I was late to school because of a doctor's appointment and needed a late pass.

So why have they called me here now...why today?

When the front desk lady opens the door, I see the faces of my mother and my bald principal staring right at me. My mother with her jet black hair and cool skin tone looks at me with a sad smile on her face, while my principal looks... depressed. Just straight up depressed. No other emotions.

"What happened?" I blurt out curiously.

"Why don't you come in and sit down," Mr. Johnkins insists.

I put my stuff down next to my mother and took a seat. I look at my mother and principal's faces closely, trying to make out what they are trying to hint towards.

"Your uhh father," Mr. Johnkins starts, "he is in the hospital."

This wasn't any new news. I knew that he was in the hospital. But as I put pieces together, my stomach drops to the ground as if it weighed too much. My mouth forms an "o" shape and I could feel the back of my throat close as my eyes begin to tear up.

"He isn't dead! He is just, not looking too well," my mother explains quickly.

Even with that piece of information, it doesn't help lift off the anxiety that today might be his last day.

"The doctors believe that this might be his last day," my mother continues.

"Well, can we go see now?" I ask, grabbing my backpack and standing up.

Due to the nerves and stress of hearing this news and from my sudden jolt, my head starts to feel woozy and my vision blinks for a few seconds and my mother grabs my arm to prevent me from toppling over.

“Careful now, we don’t need another one in the hospital,” my principal jokingly says. But as more time passes, the more he realizes he shouldn’t have said that and quickly mutters, “sorry” as my mother officially signs me out for the rest of the school day.

And before I knew it, we were in the car, on our way to the hospital.

The monitor on my right beeps at a steady pace as I lay in my bed, staring at the ceiling. My skin has turned into a pale shade and with each breath I take, I thought that it was my last. Until another one comes. And another.

I hold my son’s hand as tears flow down his face.

“Don’t cry,” I say weakly.

He nods his head but continues to sob. My wife is on the other side of the bed and she was tightly gripping my other hand.

“D-Dad,” Kai sobs.

I slowly turn to face him, my eyelids heavy, and my breaths raspy.

“A-are you h-happy?” he asks quietly.

“Of course... I’m so glad to have spent 16 years with you.” I smile. Slowly, I turn my head to my wife, Fiona, “take care of him, okay?”

She nods as tears of her own fall down her face.

My breathing calms down, the monitor’s beeping begins to increase. This just makes my son and wife cry even more.

“Y-you promised me Dad. P-promised me that you would f-fight through this and be okay.” Kai exclaims in frustration.

“I tried Kai, I really did. But things don’t always go the way you want.” I respond and I can’t help but start to feel tears of my own start to fall down my face.

They won’t spend our last few moments like this.

So, with my last ounce of strength, I say, “Kai, Fiona, don’t cry because it ended. Smile because it happened. I’m so glad to have you... to have you both. I’ll find you guys in... in my next life.”

I feel the whole world slipping away as my eyes start to go out of focus and without knowing, I have taken my final breath.

“Bye Dad,” I hear my son say.

“Goodbye, James,” I hear my wife say.

The tempo of the monitor’s beeping increases and the sound slowly fades to nothing. My whole body relaxes. Until it is just, nothing.



Spirits Soaring
Anna Zou

Slumber Thoughts

Loucas Dong

I stare into the darkness of the ceiling, the moonlight barely shining through the window. The world is silent, each second of every minute passes by without much thought. Strange shapes and patterns appear before me, conjurations of what I see beneath the cover of my eyelid.

I wish to let go.

To fall into the hands of the sleepy maiden, carrying my soul beyond this concrete room, beyond the continents and many seas, to the edges of the stars. But no matter the softness of the sheets nor how I shift, I do not rest. Present in a void of which I can feel. It is something that is quite literally, hard to grasp.

Perhaps it is the sins, the regrets, the shame of it all, creeping up behind my back. Random memories flash before my eyes, blurry and fading, yet each one pierces deep into my heavy heart tonight. Pointing and blaming, lying and abusing, cowardice and narcissism . . .

Why won't they go away?

But alas, things are too fast now. Dreams mix with nightmares as my mind spills open. The voices berate me, twisting images into unorthodox amalgamations. Faces contorted, devoid of any features but a mouth that never stops. On and on and on they go. I smash my head into the pillow and yell. I yell for them to care, for them to contemplate even for a second that my existence isn't futile. I curse, then yell more, then scream. I screamed until my throat withered, my lungs crying for air, screamed till I could not hear anything.

At long last, my ears are free from the perpetual torture. I lay still once more, blissfully gazing into the darkness, this time not out of fear, but of contempt. But as the ashes of my dilemma begin to settle, the truth reveals its dirty head. I try to turn away but to no avail, for all the torment, all those voices, are nothing but my own.

Hidden deep beneath my heart lay the cherished moments. Of days when I was carefree and promising, of days when I could be just myself. But those years are over now. No matter how much it aches, no matter how hard it is to continue simply living on, I must not forget why I gave it all up. Why I gave up on my life, my career, my family. Why I gave up on her.

It's better this way.

Spring Festival Overture

Sasha Stern

For the third day in a row, I woke up to Li Huanzhi's *Spring Festival Overture*. My neighbor above me seems to love Li Huanzhi and frequently plays his music on a record player that's advanced enough to carry the music to the apartment below—my apartment. It's not entirely uncommon for me to hear *Spring Festival Overture*, but my neighbor does prefer *Socialism is Good*. On my bedside table I have a notepad full of tally marks, each line representing one play of *Socialism is Good*.

Still, I've heard *Spring Festival Overture* so many times I've begrudgingly done research into it. Much of the overture—and the suite overall—pulls from Yangko tunes. The main themes are based on northern Shaanxi folk tunes. It's been played in outer space. It's a celebration, but the intended excitement and joy has faded after hearing the piece so many times.

I played it once, back in high school. I played the oboe solo. That solo made me realize how much I wanted to study music in college. So that's what I did: four years of a grueling music performance degree. I practically failed every music theory exam; I could barely conduct or compose. All I could do was play my oboe, and even that seemed to be just above unsuccessful. It's hard to be a bad oboist past the age of 13; Hell, it's impossible to be mediocre, since they weed out any oboist less than good, yet I seem to be at the very bottom of "good enough." The mere thought of it makes me want to destroy my reeds by the handful.

Now I'm living in a tiny apartment as I try to finish my graduate degree. It's not going well, with my professor being uncooperative and sickly. Right now, my future seems to be just giving oboe lessons out of my apartment. I auditioned for a community orchestra and was placed last chair. The principal oboist is 18, freshly out of high school, and commutes from his dorm at a nearby conservatory using the town's public bus.

Due to my lack of motivation to leave my apartment except for classes and rehearsals, I don't talk to my upstairs neighbor, so I don't know the real reason behind their love for Li Huanzhi. I don't know if my neighbor is from Shaanxi or

even China. I'd like to think they're some socialist who moved here against their will, so to torture the non-socialists living around them they play *Socialism is Good* whenever they can; to remind themselves of the musical genius of Li Huanzhi, they play *Spring Festival Overture*.

The oboes trying to fit the mold of the suona was starting to drive me mad. I always found the oboe's sound to be just slightly irritating, a scratching sensation just an inch away from the actual itch. This Li Huanzhi record uses the Chinese percussion with a heavy hand, and the vibrations from the drums and cymbals make their way to my ceiling. *God, how loud does my neighbor have their record player?* Using a broom, I knock twice on my ceiling, trying to get my neighbor's attention and perhaps have them turn down their record player. Instead, my neighbor turns the volume up.

The tempo picks up and the trumpets enter. I pick myself up from my desk and start pacing, my coffee mug in hand. I take agitated sips as the song comes to a familiar close.

A moment of silence; I breathe. Suddenly, the joyous fanfare from the strings begins once more. The crash of cymbals. I throw my coffee mug across my bedroom. I rush to my oboe case, clutching it close to my chest as I bring it to my bathroom. I place the case on my closed toilet lid and open it. I'm in a hurry, yet my actions remain careful even as I dislodge each section of my oboe from my case and put them into the sink and turn the faucets. It makes me feel like a mother shoving her baby into a coin locker or a trash can—it's disgusting, wrong, corrupt.

Then the oboe solo begins. It's gorgeous, as always, with soft pizzicato backing the melody. I take my reeds and smash them into my bathroom mirror at random intervals; there is no musicality nor rhyme behind my destruction.

It would be funny, wouldn't it? I think to myself as I splinter all of my reeds. *To die to trumpet fanfare? It's what every narcissist wants.* After hearing it so much, I know the piece like the back of my own hand. If I timed it right...

I'm not a narcissist. I'm not selfish. I simply want what I deserve: the greatness that's supposed to come after all this studying and hard work. I know I'm not there yet, but my fingertips should just be brushing it by now, right?

There's something I do know I'm good at: making reeds. There was this boy two grades below me back in high school who never learned how to make his own reeds. He was probably a better oboist than me, but he could never make his own reeds. He would pay me good money for my reeds. And he went through his reeds quickly because he'd use just saliva to moisten them and hold the reed between his teeth like a toothpick—eventually, I bundled them, selling four for a discounted price. If I didn't blow through all of my money on coffee, I probably could have paid for all four years of room and board.

My reed-making kit is wildly expensive. I have four different types of reed knives, a ruler, eight spools of thread, razor blades, plaques, a stone sharpener, maybe \$150 worth of reed cane, cane gouger, cane sharpener, and staples. The staples I mostly reuse from old reeds, which brings down the overall cost of my kit but not by much.

I remember that kid from high school. He was just a bit pompous, just a bit full of himself. He would deposit his used staples into my palm alongside varying amounts of twenties and tens with almost the same indifference one would have placing spare change into a parking meter. I was a means to an end—did he ever think of me as a fellow oboist?

Now, four different reed knives? *That* was probably excessive. Who cares, though? These are my knives, and I use them exactly how I want, when I want. Besides, I'm too lazy to sharpen them the second they start going dull. I'd much rather switch my knives around than take the extra effort to sharpen them unless absolutely necessary.

I appreciate multi-purpose. Perhaps it really is better to be a jack-of-all-trades as opposed to a master of one. Maybe there's a point to how spread-out my abilities are, from teaching to reed-making to my general oboe skill. Is it really possible to be the best at anything? Objects have their ideal purpose, something they're the best at. Like my reed knives, for example. I have used reed knives for peeling fruit or opening boxes, and I can use them for making knives or...

Again, I'm not a narcissist. I'm not one to want to go out to trumpet fanfare, covered in blood like a fanatic. There's no need for stories about me to be whispered between musicians at rehearsals or in practice rooms. And there's

certainly no need for legends to develop at my old college, warning I'll appear behind you, blood dripping from my wrists to my hands to my oboe, if you whisper my name three times into the full-body mirror in the practice room.

Because it's not true, it's really not. I'm not obsessive nor am I vengeful. There's no reason for me to continue playing oboe as an otherworldly being nor a reason for me to haunt music performance majors doing better than me. There's no reason for anger; trust me, I'm helping myself to exactly what I deserve.



Nature of My Heart (and Its Faults)

Jackie Polanski

Memories like Melting Snow

Anonymous

As the year began its end, people forgot the meanings of their experiences, the feelings they promised to never lose. The first snowfall of the year often began after Christmas. With each falling snowflake landing on warm windowsills, memories begin to fade into hazy white oblivion. He tries his hardest to remember everything even though deep down he knows it's impossible. The memories are caught in the rapid slipstream of his waning memory, no longer in the prime it once was. He used to be known for his ability to recall even the smallest detail of a situation. That was no longer the case though. The feeling of his touch, the comfort of their hug. It all seemed as if it was a dream, a life that belonged to another. He used to love everything about their life. Though it was just the two of them, there was so much joy in every action that it became ingrained in his mind. The way he felt when they went to the movies. Coffee in the mornings as they woke to the blanket of white outside.

How they fell in love in December.

Every morning he forgets a little more though.

It was the small things at first.

The smell of his cologne or the way their hands used to fit together, rings clinking softly as they walked down their favorite streets. The tiny gestures he took for granted when he was there next to him. And then he began to forget more and more as the months passed. Time became fluid, blending together, night becoming day. What color was his hair? What kind of shampoo did he use? Which scarf hung up in the hallway they used for the snowman in their yard. The feeling of his thoughts being just out of reach became a constant fixture of his life. He began to write down what little of his life he could still remember before all of it was forgotten. Every detail of his face, the way the cheeks dimpled and eyes crinkled when they laughed together. The way their eyes lit up during the winter when the nearby pond froze over thick enough to go skating on. The minute

details of life. He knew with regretful remorse that something was missing. A detail omitted that was too deep in the depths of his head to recall. The things that he could no longer remember as time flit by, months becoming a year. Slowly, notes became pages, and pages a book he kept bound with leather in his nightstand.

“In Memoria.”

It took a long session of ruminating before he settled on the name because he wanted to capture the essence of his writing.

He always thought his memory would never fail him with the things that really mattered. Their names, what they were to each other. So it was never recorded in the book. He wanted them to be close in mind and soul. So close they would become a part of him so even his failures couldn't take them away. Then one day in the middle of July, he awoke with tears streaming down his face. Hands reached for him, comforting and warm, to calm him until eventually he drifted back to sleep. The next morning he wondered why exactly he'd been crying.

He didn't know why.

In December, he decided to give the book away as a gift. He could no longer remember anything else and he had read the book over and over again till his eyes were tired. The pages were worn and torn with the use, but he said he felt that the book was meant to go to this person. When the gift was opened, he could hear a small chuckle as hands ran over the spine that had been replaced twice already. He didn't know why but he began to smile as if the joy had spread to him. He felt a faint tug as if something long asleep had awakened within his head, and began to cry a little. He knew now. Why he had felt that this person was the one who should receive the book he had spent months of work on.

Why?

Because the book was their story. The summary of all the winter nights they had spent together watching Hallmark movies on the couch. The smiles they shared every Christmas as they opened their presents. And every promise made that night to never forget their love. He remembered everything now too. Every little

moment he had forgotten filtered into the recesses left by the accident and he remembered.

His name was Halcyon, meaning fond memories.

And they fell in love in December.

An Analysis of a Particularly Wonderful Word

Kristen Lee

Electrifying.

It's such a powerful word—the kind that resonates with you, you know? It hums in the air long after the word is spoken. Even just letting my mind's voice murmur the syllables sends sparks of energy shooting through my limbs.

And yet, when I try to place my finger on the aspect that makes this word so special out of thousands of others, it doesn't land in one spot. Instead, it's pulled in so many directions, and regardless of where it lands, a shock goes through me, as if I'd touched a staticy blanket. It's admittedly hard to explain, but there are so many things about this word's meaning that remind me of the excitement so important for, well...life.

Perhaps I shall start with this. The way the syllables of this specific word connect kind of remind me of other words that help to collectively describe the true meaning of this word. For example: terrifying. Petrifying. Gratifying. Flying. They all sound similar, but it's also true that their meanings are absolute contrasts of each other so it's *almost* impossible to think that they could even remotely remind you of the same word. Really though, how can something frighten and please someone at the same time? But there's something about *electrifying* that's not quite consistent with other words. The word *electrifying* isn't really extremely positive or negative, nor is it that neutral either. But it just feels so powerful, sending streams of energy that race through your limbs, feeling uncomfortable yet amazing.

Maybe visuals will help explain it better. When I think of the word *electrifying*, I automatically think of an actor stepping onto a stage. Just imagine it: the click of your shoes echoes loudly as you take your place, with the bright glare of the spotlight nearly blinding you. Your palms are damp and if you don't keep your jaw steady enough, your teeth might start clacking. You know that there is a sprawling audience watching you and one small slip-up in a line can haunt you forever. It's plain terrifying. And yet, once you open your mouth and your painstakingly rehearsed lines spill carefully out, you're suddenly living in the

moment. You're suddenly aware this is damn well real. And you're living for it, since this is your job and your life and what you *love*. And you think about when the performance will be over and the cast and crew will be laughing and high-fiving each other, and elation runs warm through your veins, contrasting against the cold sweat you'd been bathed in moments ago. And once your last words finish ringing in the air, you realize your success and just how wonderful it was being on stage for the first time that night. The only word that can describe your emotions right to the point is *electrifying*. Adrenaline and energy have you in a tight hold and you're bouncing for the next scene when you can come back on stage and feel that power surging through you again. It's empowering.

Or maybe you're skydiving for the first time, and you're mad scared because there is definitely a chance you can plummet down to the earth's unforgiving surface and die painfully smashing into the ground. The fear is gripping your chest like a vise, but you have to let go and fall, even though your hands are shaking and your breath feels ragged. But once you've fallen and you're out of that plane, nothing...seems real. You know you're in the sky, falling, *flying*, but somehow you feel like you're in another fold of space in the universe where nothing from your world seems to exist. You can barely see or hear but you can definitely feel the wind pushing against you, and the hollow feeling in your stomach that reminds you that you are in fact somehow in the sky. And it's awesome; it's *electrifying*, the way you feel like you're going to die; but at the same time, you're living the most you've ever lived in your entire life.

And maybe it doesn't really have to do with doing what you really adore, or checking something amazing off your bucket list. It doesn't have to have some sort of positive side. Maybe you're being a rebel for a change, and you've just lied to your parents about the fight you'd gotten yourself into, and it feels so different because you normally never step out of line or even think about stirring trouble. Maybe you even snuck out of the house during the wee hours of the morning to go to your friend's party, when your wonderfully stern caregivers have repeatedly told you you were grounded and are forbidden from doing anything you wanted. You know it's wrong. This isn't you. But the electrifying feeling coursing through your blood feels amazing, your heart slamming against your ribcage and your mouth curled in a smug smile. Because this is new and exciting and feels so *freeing*. You can't help it.

Electrifying doesn't even have to describe something extreme or particularly astonishing. Perhaps you moved from your hometown a few years back, and you haven't visited your childhood neighborhood for a long time. Now, you're finally returning to see your old friends again. Hugs and tearful laughs are exchanged, and the next thing you know, you're pedaling full-speed into the sunset down the same road you all walked down to go to school together, the one you all raced each other down every time because the old doberman sitting outside house 93 would always be snarling at everything that crossed its path. The bikes are creaky and bump against the unpaved road, but the familiar feel of the rubber handles against your palms and the wind in your hair and the sound of such nostalgic laughs beside you just reminds you of how things always used to be. This is your home. And energy surges through you as you can't wait to visit every corner you've ever known once again.

See, this five-syllable word can be applied to a variety of different exhilarating scenarios that all have the same idea nonetheless. The common ground all of them stand on is the excitement and thrill that comes from these events, and how they light your soul on *fire*. The rush of energy that comes from executing these actions is pure bliss, and makes you feel so much more aware than ever before.

I think that's why I've been drawn to the word *electrifying* ever since I first heard it being let loose into the air. This word makes me want to find the energy, the motivation to do things I might be uncomfortable with. I don't want to regret anything or miss any opportunities. I want to take chances, feel the rush of adrenaline like the rush of wind in my hair. I want to feel like nothing is holding me back. And *electrifying* gives me a taste of the energy I need to do those very things. It reminds me of what's possible, of what can be.

As made clear, not everything that can be classified as *electrifying* is totally positive. There are definitely some extreme actions one can take in order to feel this electricity coursing through their limbs. But I think part of living is learning what's right and wrong, what's safe and what's not, all by taking chances and learning, and having the strength to do what you feel will be the right choice. It's up to you to make the decisions you're going to make in life. It's up to you how your life is going to play out.

And I don't know about you, but I think I know how I want to live my life. I want to experience everything I can and every emotion logically possible because only

then will I feel like I've made my life worth it. Overcoming your fears and drawbacks is important 'cause then you'll be able to feel like you're living, really living as you do everything you couldn't do before with that timidity holding you back. The resulting rush of blood coursing fast through your veins and the adrenaline running through your body is what makes you feel so alive, after all.

Remember, life is *meant* to be terrifying. Petrifying. Gratifying.

It's meant to be
electrifying.



dodge
Aymaan Reddy

Nonfiction





quiet springs
lina kim

Downpour

Melina Helgeson

When I was young, I was very sensitive to loud noises. The TV volume would be set in the single digits. I would refuse to go into large crowds and I had to be carried out of school concerts. I wore headphones around my neck so the sounds didn't blast directly into my ears.

Those feelings got worse during dark and stormy nights. Thunderstorms shut me down completely, making me want to run for cover.

I have an early memory of my father, holding me high up in his arms and bouncing me up and down as he stood by our back door, looking out the window. Despite being a frightened five year old, I still remember how he talked to me about how thunderstorms worked, that storms moved. By counting the seconds between the lightning flashes and thunder strikes, he explained, you can determine how far the storm is and how fast it's moving away. I sat up in his arms, and through tears I counted with him until I saw the logic in his method myself. It calmed me down, and eventually I slept through that distant thunderstorm.

Many moments in my life have felt like thunderstorms: deadlines, exams, social gatherings. And because I am no longer a five year old being lifted into my dad's arms, I do the counting myself.

It took a long time for me to understand the premise of anxiety. My mother has always been the more anxious parent, yet had the mentality that everything will be fine if I "just calm down and try to relax." It wasn't for a while that I learned that constantly having a fast heart rate and bouncing my legs under the table was not exactly normal. It took me even longer to express exactly what I was feeling.

I've realized that counting the seconds still helps me relax when I get too nervous about something outside my control. That night over a decade ago was just the first time I ever did a type of breathing exercise to help with what's similar to the panic or anxiety attacks that I experience now that I'm older.

When I describe my anxiety, I think of heavy rain.

Light rain is manageable, like background noise that I can work around and even though it's there in the back of my head, I can get by. I find a little rain is normal at this point, and it's always there.

But those times where there is a lot of heavy, downpouring rain, it's so loud that it makes it nearly impossible to hear my own thoughts. It's coming down so hard that I feel like I'm being pounded into the ground, and as it keeps coming and coming, it feels like it will never end and the feeling I have will never fade as it only gets more intense. Distractions barely help and sometimes I just have to sit there and spiral and listen to that heavy rain. I feel out of breath under all the pressure.

Coming back into that counting exercise from so long ago, I try to breathe. I take my time and count my steady deep breaths to ground myself. I remind myself that I am in no danger, that everything works out in the end, always. The sun will come out after the storm, and the sky will clear up.

That's the thought that reminds me that I can move forward, and through some logical thinking on my end and the support from others, my anxiety can be managed. While it is still there inside me, making some things in my life rather difficult, there is a part of me that knows that it can be dealt with, despite its persistence.

The heavy rain will lighten up, and there is, in fact, light shining through the storm clouds.

Call of the Void

Andrew Muzaka

Sometimes, while I'm driving, I'll fall into the void. I do not mean running into a pothole and connecting my skull with the ceiling of my car, nor do I mean phasing through the ground into an expanse of dark nothingness as if I lived in a simulation. I refer to "falling into the void" as giving in to the phenomenon known as "call of the void:" a sudden, uncharacteristic and inexplicable urge to jump from a high place.

The feeling can hit you unexpectedly, usually during moments of rest. Sitting on a scenic cliff overlooking a green valley, lush rolling forests and bright blue skies dotted with puffy clouds—you are perfectly at peace with the world. The sun is shining, the grass is soft, and the breeze is the right level of cool.

If I were to jump off of this cliff right now, what would it feel like? Would I feel fear on the way down? Would I feel pain on landing? How long would it take for someone to notice that I've been out a little too long?

Would anybody even call?

It's a haunting feeling. The call of the void is inescapable. Everywhere you go, it will stalk you, remaining an apparition just out of reach. It preys on your satiety, turning moments of mindlessness to weakness as you succumb to the dark thoughts, dragging you down to the bottom of the ocean. In a sense, you have already fallen: your mind has taken the plunge straight into the void, and it calls upon your body to do the very same. Perhaps the void is not following you, but perpetually inside of you: the counterpart to the human soul that reveals itself only when we allow our souls to rest.

I used to fear driving. The concept of putting your life (and vehicle) in the hands of others was a concept I couldn't get behind. As my father tried to teach me the rules of the road, every oncoming car was a battle. To both please the other party and preserve my own life in such a short time frame was as difficult as it was confusing. As time went on, I became more comfortable with the road and the others around me... sometimes, too comfortable. The call of the void beckons me

quite often on long and traveled stretches of road. My muscles retain the memory for me, so my mind is allowed to wander. Sometimes, I wonder what would happen if I didn't slow down for the stop sign. If I pressed the gas instead of the break. I wonder what would happen at school: hoping that at least one person would weep. I wonder how big of a news headline I would receive, perhaps garnering me adequate attention for the first time. All of the possibilities just a few inches away from my foot.

Never in my life would I ever consciously consider such questions. The thought of endangering my own life is utterly nonsensical, yet the curiosity of "what could be" forever creeps on, hiding just out of view. There is little value in trying to understand what "call of the void" even means, as the best guesses are merely psychoanalytical: there's no evidence to explain the assumptions made by it. Perhaps it isn't even malicious, instead waking us up from absent-mindedness in the face of potential danger (after all, it does no good to be unaware near a cliff's edge or busy street). At the very least, by acknowledging its existence, we can become a little less prone to its adverse effects. The void calls, but like a songbird's melody, the pattern is always the same.

Stars

Kaitlyn Rams

A mish mosh of blue hues smeared across the ceiling with splotches of white paint hoping to be clouds. That was our sky. I looked at the clock on the wall across from me. I was 7 years old and it was way past my curfew, but my aunt took me to work because my mother was not home. My aunt owned a small supermarket in Queens and deep in the back of the store was a small office. Whenever she took me to work with her, I would spend the day confined in that office, my imagination running rampant. Some days I was a renowned astronaut discovering a new planet. Other days I was the CEO of the biggest company in the world. Sometimes, my aunt would let me accompany her at the cash register. On those days, I would be an intern at Google about to land the biggest job ever. That day, I was an artist painting her biggest work. My aunt surprised me earlier that day with a new paint set before she opened up shop. It was a beautiful metallic case and inside were rows and rows of different vibrant colors. They were all perfectly aligned as if they were waiting for me to mess them up and use them to streak a clean page. To create beauty from nothingness. I grabbed my paintbrush set and immediately began on my painting. My inspiration was Vincent Van Gogh. We had just learned about his obsession with painting skies and I was determined to paint an even better one than he has ever painted. I grabbed all the blues from the case and began squirting them onto a plate, dipped my paint brush and swirled them on the ceiling, my canvas for the day. After the canvas was completely covered with collisions of blue, I added cotton clouds and structures at the bottom to tie it all in. I was inside a small windowless room, but I imagined the outside and created it inside. At the end of the day, after my aunt closed up, she walked into my little space and she gasped at my masterpiece. I could see a wave of emotions flood across her face. She looked at me with a smile.

“It’s beautiful,” she told me, “but it’s missing one thing.” I looked at my creation confused.

“Stars,” she said. I looked up at the ceiling, and understood. Stars, beacons representing light, hope, renewal, and positivity were the final touch. My aunt and I have always had a special understanding of each other which drew us together in a special bond. She always completed my puzzle and I, according to

her, added to hers. We grabbed a paint brush and dipped it into a small mound of mixed yellow and white paint. Our brushes, almost moving in unison, formed dazzling spherical balls above the clouds. After we were done, my aunt surprised me with a tube of gold glitter. Together we took turns outlining each other's special stars until the sky shone with a glittering haze. That day, we were covered in glitter, shimmering just like our stars.

Cancer. Leeching cells. This cell-devouring horde starts as a dot and grows like a seed into a flower. If only it grew into something as beautiful. If only. But no. Cancer does not bloom like a flower. Rather, it spreads like an octopus spreading black ink. This monstrous infestation feeding off a person's body and soul invaded and took away my beautiful aunt. Diagnosed last year. Leukemia, they called it. In layman's terms, blood cancer. In family terms...sickness...death?? When I heard the news, I cried. Screamed. Questioned God. I was scared for her. I was scared for me. Could it happen to me? Grief and anger hit me like a tempestuous storm. Words such as hate, damn, unfair, why?, why?, why? played repeatedly in my head at the sound of the word cancer. I soon realized that my internal anger and external negative vocal output was of no use. I redirected my consternation to research. I exhausted my mind, my eyes and my soul trying to understand this disease that was invading my aunt. I was determined to help save her. But in the end, it was too late. She passed away two months later. When my mom and I went back to the store to pack everything up, I revisited that small office. The sky was still there, albeit peeling at the corners. I saw the stars that my aunt and I painted and could immediately distinguish who drew which ones. For some reason, the stars my aunt painted looked more defined and prettier, brighter even. I remembered being covered in glitter, two stars. Who knew that that day would be the first and last time I would be able to paint with my aunt. Although her presence is not tangible anymore, I know that she is and will always be with me. Through the stars.



Something like Seas and Stars

Anonymous

I·den·ti·ty

Janis Wu

Noun

1. the fact of being who or what a person or thing is.

Identity. Identity. Identity.

Identity is like the complex layers of an onion. After each layer, there is a deeper meaning, but what is identity? What defines it? Is it the way we act, a collection of our traits, our personal morals, our past actions, or the legacy we wish to leave behind? Or is it simply the face we see in the mirror and the name we respond to? I don't fully understand identity, especially my own.

Psychosocial development described by Erik Erikson includes eight stages, each with its own defined age range. I am in the adolescent stage. According to Erikson, the most emphasized conflict during this stage is *identity vs. confusion*. In this stage, an individual would be experimenting with and developing identity roles. The main question is, “*Who am I?*”

Who am I? Who am I? Who am I?

I am a sixteen year old girl who attends Herricks High School. I was born in 中國·南京 or NanJing, China. As a Chinese-American, I can speak two different dialects of Chinese: Shanghainese and Mandarin, along with English. I am a female who's still figuring out her sexual orientation. I would describe myself as reserved, honest, and kind. There are times when my emotions can be overwhelming or even absent. And times when I am extremely impulsive or overly cautious.

Confusion. Confusion. Confusion.

I am a sixteen year old who attends Herricks High School. But am I Janis Wu or 胡嘉花? Am I Chinese or American? Am I extroverted or introverted? Do I socialize or keep to myself? Am I optimistic or pessimistic? Do I look through a lens of positivity or negativity? Am I emotional or unemotional? Do I feel

overwhelmed or an absolute cold nothing? Why do I feel extroverted *and* introverted? Why am I optimistic *and* pessimistic? Why do I feel everything *and* nothing? Why is it all at the same time? Who am I? And *why am I like this??*

What have I done? What have I done? What have I done?

I have failed and given up. I have failed and tried again. I have failed and failed. I have trusted and distrusted. Forgiven and unforgiven. Forgiven and forgotten. Once I was ten years old wanting to fit in with the “popular kids”. Once I was ten years old and slowly losing the person I was before ten. Once I was twelve years old yearning for puppy love. Once I was twelve years old and losing my ten year old self. Once I was fourteen years old pushing others away. Once I was fourteen years old and pulling myself into isolation. Once I was fifteen years old hoping that the trust I put into love was right. Once I was fifteen years old discovering that I was wrong. Once I was sixteen years old, healing. Once I was sixteen years old, wondering who I am, and wondering if all I had done was right because we only have a lifetime.

Identity has many more layers than you’d expect. Each layer piles on more and more confusion. But this confusion is normal, as everyone goes through this conflict. It is okay that you don’t know your *identity* and *who you are*.

What Would You Be?

Tina Pathak

I am an angry woman.

Women are expected to be it all. A daughter. A mother. A sister. A worker. A student. A champion. Oh. I forgot to add a word. *Good*.

Good daughter

Good mother

Good sister

Good worker

Good student

How can one person possibly be good at everything?

Rules for women I have seen in my short and stupid seventeen years:

1. Don't speak too loudly yet stand up for yourself but don't be so *"confrontational."*
2. A man yells. "Don't stoop as low as he does." or "*Be the bigger person.*"
3. You have a problem—"*don't.*"

Jamaica Kincaid tells us in her seminal work, "Girl" that "this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*"; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?" She captures it perfectly. The long set of expectations in what feels like one breath. A rat race of doing, giving, and putting your all into life only to receive a fraction of what is offered to a man.

My grandmother grew up in Guyana. She is hands down the smartest business woman I know. Yet, when I talked to her over red bread, pine tarts, and English tea (all from the Guyanese store) she seemed like she could have been so much more. She got married at sixteen to someone who was eight years older than her. Although she did love him, my grandfather was a difficult man or so I've heard since he passed before I was born. But, my grandma tells me, "Go to school. Do everything I couldn't do." She has the brain. She has the passion even now at 74 years old. But what she didn't have was an equal opportunity in life. She was meant to get married, have kids, move to America, work, harder than anyone I know, sleep 5 hours, wake up, work, work, work, bring her whole family to America, bring my grandfather's family to America, grocery shop, cook, love, provide, cherish her children when she's dead tired, manage her building, family, and money as a newly homeless widow living on her sister's couch. *At 49.* Have grandchildren, love and cherish them, and die.

And get none of the praise my dead grandfather still gets.

When I got called "dumb" at a Model UN conference for asking a question, I regret not correcting the person that said that. When my friends called me "confrontational," I regret not telling them, *no*, that's not confrontational, that's just me asserting what every man does—my opinion.

I will continue to voice my opinions because although I try to be the greatest daughter and want to have a "traditional" life when I grow up with a husband and kids, I can be a woman and have an opinion and recognition and respect. If I can do everything and I can be everything, I can be recognized for it.

Female struggle. Female rage.

I am an angry woman. How can I not be?



behind the looking glass

Christine Chen

Dili Na

Maya Marder

Twenty chairs surround a table of lychee martinis and side dishes of white rice, in which a familiar tune of gibberish greets my ears. Every dinner with my extended family leaves the phrase “Dili na” to echo throughout restaurants and homes. As my little cousins rip the banana leaves covering wooden tables apart or refuse their savory dish served over heaps of white rice—after 14 years—I’ve learned this echoing phrase means “stop now.”

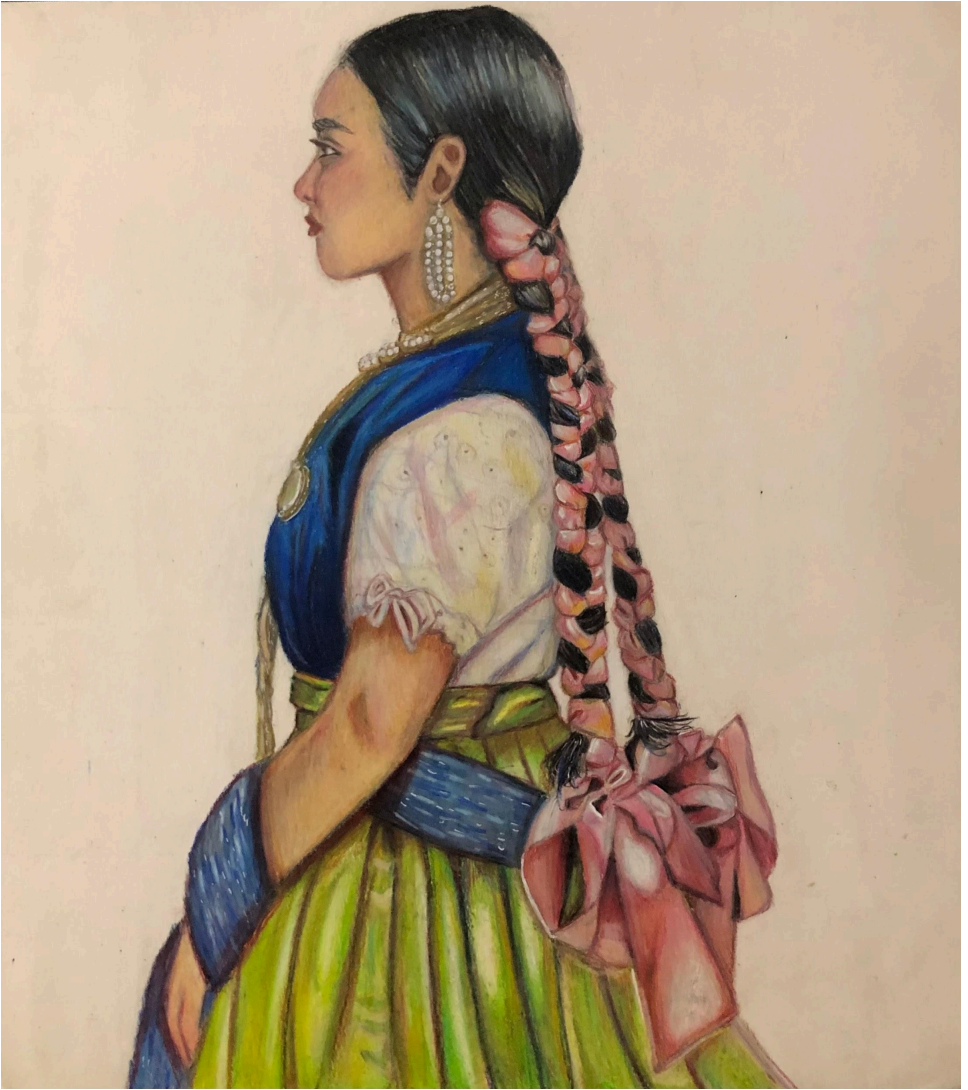
Earlier in the month, my extended family met at our favorite Thai place to celebrate one of the most important events of the year: my grandma’s birthday. Celebrating the women who had raised each person in those twenty shares, my grandmother marveled at each person who shuffled in. Each time the door chimed, I watched how she was greeted: from hugs to “hi ma,” the most important one came from my little cousins: *Bless*. As they took off their jackets and picked their chairs at the table, my grandmother said “Bless na Bless,” holding her hand out for my cousins to hold up to their foreheads—the ultimate symbol of respect for elders.

As a child, I was excused from the cultural traditions expected of my cousins. Excused from blessing my elders, my uncles, aunts, and grandparents skipped over me to move down the rest of the line and greet my other cousins; absent of the labels ‘Tito’ and ‘Tita’ for my aunts and uncles, and ‘Lola’ and ‘Lolo’, for my grandparents; and needing an explanation each time I was met with the array of Filipino dishes my cousins marveled over—explaining the names, making comparisons to American foods, and taking note of my allergies. I always thought I sat at the gap between two cultural identities.

However, as I grew older, I realized my cultural identity is not defined by the cultural traditions I was excused from and expected of others. I don’t have to speak my Bisaya, my family’s dialect of Filipino, despite my desperate attempts at broken sentences full of English. I didn’t have to greet my family with *bless*. I didn’t need to understand every name and recipe for the foods that lay over the banana leaves which everyone marveled over. I still had similarities to my family, who shaped my cultural identities.

As I watch the women that sit around each dinner table over side dishes of white rice and lychee martinis, I take note of the other cultural aspects that have unknowingly rubbed off on me. As my grandmother, mother, and aunts, twist their pearl earrings and rings when they think, I've begun to do the same. Just like them, I like dainty jewelry to hang on my ears, neck, wrists, and fingers, marking mine with a Filipino coin turned into a ring. Just like them, I love the bold, red lip each woman applies for dinners.

Finally, I've found my cultural identity in different aspects. Given the label "Ate [name]"—pronounced ah-teh and meaning "older sister"—by my younger cousins, and learning to adjust my pronunciation of words. Pronouncing my f's as p's like in Bisaya speaks to my cultural identity. Each time someone calls my name, whether it be '[name],' '[name],' or 'Mahal'—meaning love—I've learned to respond with 'uh' instead of 'yeah,' just like my family. I've learned to point with my lips instead of my whole head, just like my Grandma. I've learned to marvel over all of the dishes with a side of white rice. I am still my Filipino culture just as I am the women in my family.



Mujer Centroamericana

Jocelyn Reyes

“Gatsbyesque”

Anonymous

What a pity, to have all the power in the world and hunger for more. Gatsby: a brilliant man enamored with what he could not reach. Had you heard solely of his struggle, you would pity such a hopeless romantic; yet, his wealth and power warps the message to one of love’s blinding qualities.

It’s quite sad, actually. You’d expect a man of such status to simply move on; after all, there are plenty of fish in the sea—but not Gatsby. Gatsby kept his dedication to Daisy to the bitter end. There was only one woman out there for him, and without her he was not, and never would be, complete. What a shame to fall into love’s trap so easily. To many he is a legend, but to love he is a fool.

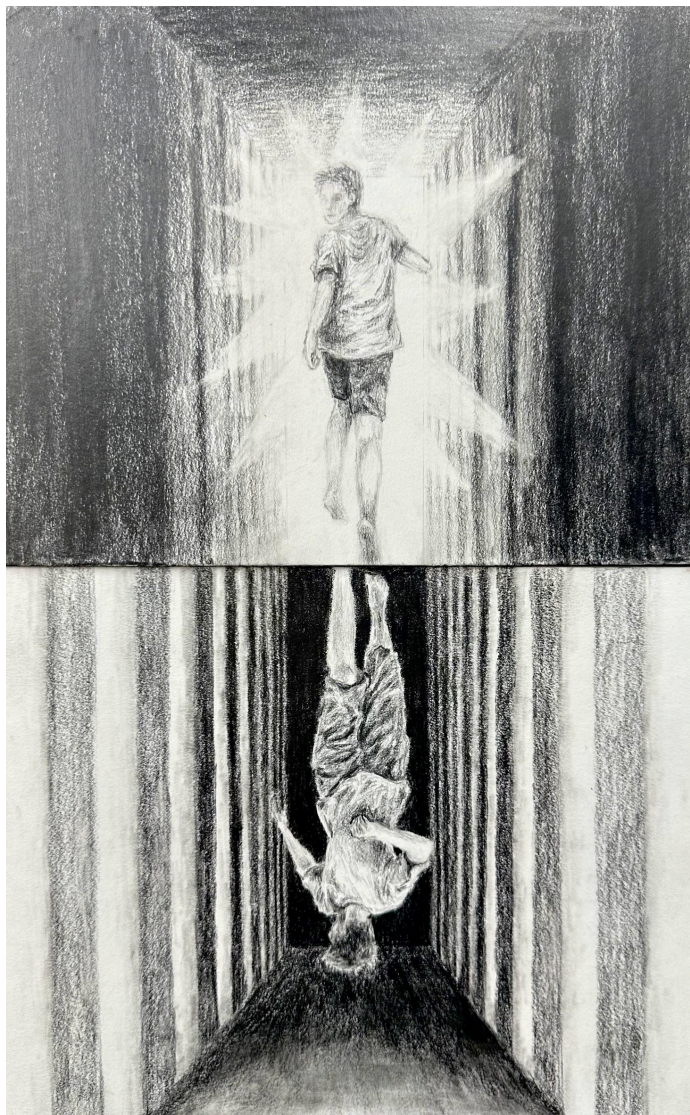
Yet for all the morals it preaches and all the awareness I may possess, I too have fallen victim to the very trap Gatsby had. Leg stuck in the beartrap, I am wholly unable to release myself from its jaws. All of the keys, neatly organized and labeled, are scattered inside the leaf litter rendering me blind to the mere opportunity of release, even though a hasty grope through the brush would set me free. Much like the noble Gatsby had done everything he could to win Daisy over—more than she would ever be worth in return—I find myself in a cycle of pretentious confidence and crushing disappointment, looping restlessly day-by-day. It’s ravaging, yet I can’t pry myself off of it.

It’s a testament to love’s roots: it’s in our biology. Love is ultimately “just human nature,” yet it is human nature which drives us (although, there is little value in even writing this. It is known). Evolution says I choose who to pursue based on genetic health (and I will not deny that at all, the apple of my eye is consequently the smartest person I know), but there seems to be more to the equation than just passing genes. Perhaps it’s her elegance: her quality of remarkability in a crowded room, independent of her need to speak but a single word. Perhaps it’s her mystifying intrigue: amidst a library of people I can learn to read with ample time, she is a diary with no key. Maybe it is just because, okay, she’s really smart and I feel outdone: the only way to win is to have her for myself. My attraction to her is magnetic, far exceeding the pull of my responsibilities and accomplishments, plunging me beyond the stratosphere and into a realm of

divine uncertainty. Maybe I'll be an asteroid, lucky enough to crash into her atmosphere.

Gatsby's greatest folly was his inability to accept the future. Trapped in a world of had-beens, Gatsby did not want to accept that Daisy now lived in her own world, separate and entirely independent of him. Her relationship with Tom was far from desirable, yet its freedom is what she craved. A life of Gatsby is simply not the life she required, yet Gatsby's rigidity prevented him from realizing such a simple fact. His heart belonged to the only one who would not accept it.

While I am well-informed on Gatsby's life and where his quest for love had taken him, I am unable to escape the clutches of that exact same force. The allure of the unattainable is just so mesmerizing: we seek to claim what we do not have. I am swimming in the open ocean, barely keeping my head above the water as the dolphins and sirens attempt to drag me down in an eternal stalemate. True freedom is letting go of possessions, but when it is possessions alone that drive me, am I willing to make that sacrifice? Am I willing to exist in a void of ignorant aimlessness if it means eternal bliss? I don't know if I'm ready for that. Maybe the greatest sense of purpose comes not from reaching the goal, but from participating in the chase.



Get Away
Connie Huang

白花勺子 (White Flower Spoon)

Wayne Sze

I used to never know what people meant when they said they never knew what having grandparents felt like. Either on just one side of their family or on both because they passed when they were young or before they were even born. I used to never imagine what my life would be like without any of my grandparents. I tried not to think about when the day would come. I thought I would never have to imagine a world like that. I never thought I would feel the pain many felt when losing such a connection—an irreplaceable bond.

But I do now. It's all I can think about now. Even in the happiest moments, my mind constantly shifts back to the thought of him. To the thought of the white flower spoon. It was the only one. Unique. One of a kind. And only he used that spoon. Nobody else would. And now it sits among the other pink flower spoons like a bouquet with one stray flower. Even now, nobody ever touches it. Nobody would use it. In some ways, his soul is still connected to the spoon. It's the last thing I'll ever have of him. And the last good memory about him. When we all sat at dinner and talked, my grandma used the white flower spoon to feed my grandpa. But I still remember the day it all went down.

All of a sudden, it seemed life was flipped upside down. My parents became more distant as they needed to focus on treating my grandpa. I was forced to step up and care for my sisters in their absence. But the most heartbreaking was seeing the worried look on my grandma as she held onto my grandpa's hand tightly. I remember the last time I held my grandpa's hand and squeezed and hoped to receive one back. He looked like he was trying with his all, but all he could foster was the lightest pinch. That was the last thing to push me over the edge. And soon, that pinch was no more. And as the seasons turned into winter, just like a flower, he wilted away. Except this flower wouldn't blossom again in the spring.

I still remember when he used to bring us the flowers he grew in the garden. Now, it was us bringing him flowers each spring. Too bad I wouldn't be able to see the smile on his face. The most painful part is that I could never say that I have both grandparents on both sides of my family ever again. I could never go back to a time when I could say that. I wish I could. I was just like that flower.

Innocent. Not exposed to what it was like to lose someone so close. But I guess that's why roses have their thorns. They have to protect themselves. Sadly, this flower was plucked away from its garden too early.

cut different

Andrew Muzaka

To determine its value, a gemstone goes through a rigorous judgment process assessing all of its qualities. The whole is the sum of its parts: size, type, color, luster, cut. People want to see larger sizes, vibrant colors and brighter refractions. People want ornate designs and clear cut edges. People want shining stones with big brand names: diamonds, rubies and pearls.

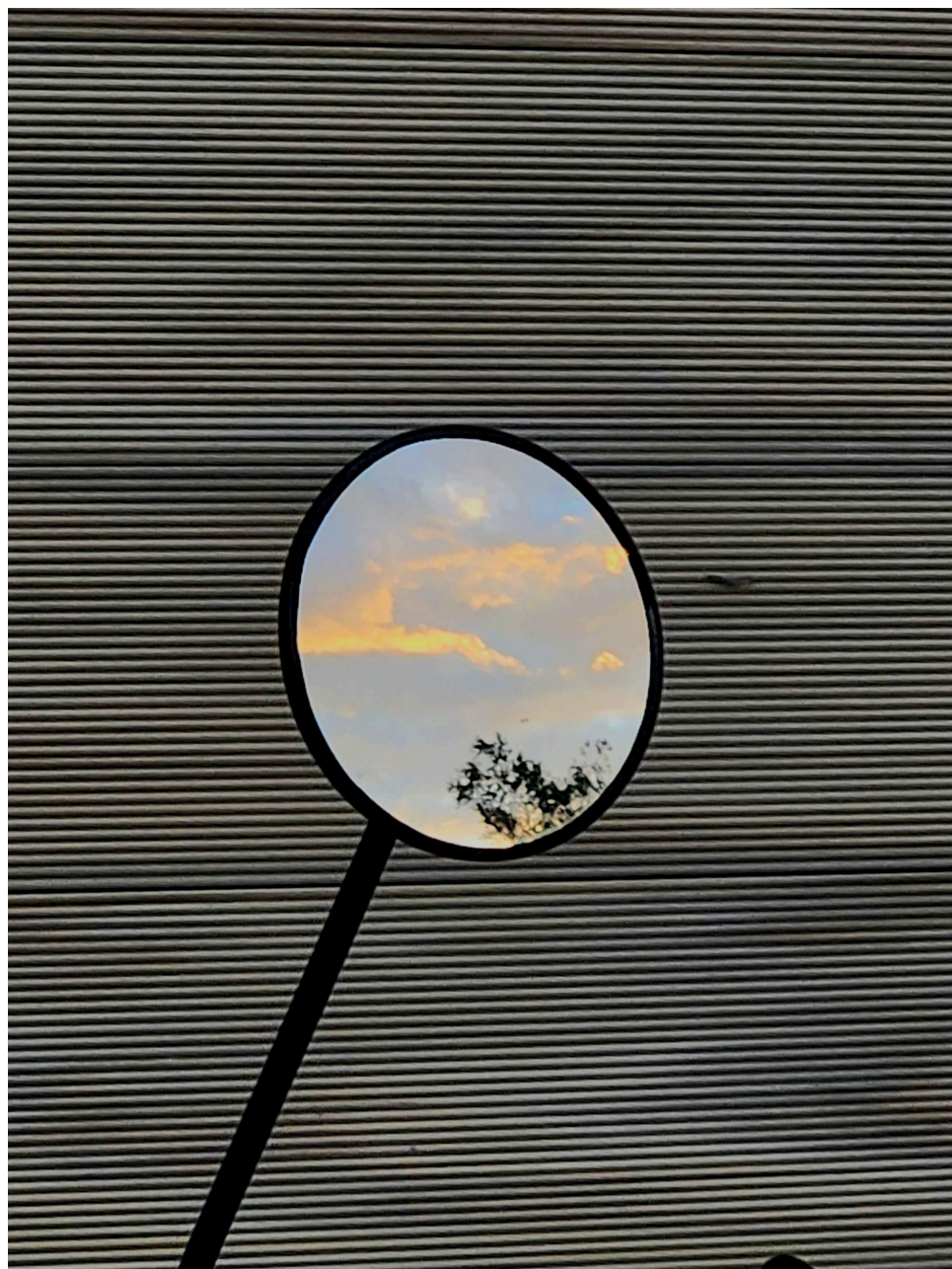
In this realm of thought, gems are not gestalts (“gem-stalts”, if you will). They are the exact sum of their parts, no more, no less. The journey that a diamond takes to get to your ring does not determine its price in the beholder’s eye. A diamond is exactly what it is born as—its color: constant. Its shine: stable. Its race: rigid. A sapphire sparkles like the water’s surface, its clean edges trapping oceanic essence into a shiny droplet clasped in your palm. It is beautiful, it is stunning, but it does not and never will have the burning passion of a ruby’s sanguine glow.

It’s ironic that I see my reflection through a crystal—the very crystals I use for the basis of this passage—yet I can not recognize that I, myself, should not be discouraged by imperfection. I look in the mirror, and I see an image that is the best form of me: A cunning, clever, handsome man capable of challenging the world. The mirror, of course, is a fickle thing. The image which I see is not a reflection, but a refraction of myself. If I am not he who appears in the mirror, then who am I truly? Am I the distorted image in the phone’s camera lens, soul absorbed by the shutter? Am I the stoic bust in the driver’s license, existing merely as proof of my existence on this Earth? Am I but a series of statistics and dates, valued little more than the flesh and blood I possess?

Perhaps I am none of these things. Perhaps, by the egocentric nature of the mind, I simply can’t process what another may think of me? A diamond can not determine its own value. A diamond can not pick itself up, write a note, and take itself to market: not because it may be physically incapable, but because it will never be able to determine its own worth. Yes, the only worth we can assign ourselves is ultimately based upon the scrutiny of others. For example: the worth of a diamond in our markets is judged by the degree to which it conforms to our idea of “the perfect gem.” A pentagonal profile, sharp edges, hypnotizing

dispersion: it's what we've all been taught is "perfect." Contrastingly, the most conforming person isn't often the one who gains power. The value which we assign ourselves is based upon the eccentricity we display. While eccentricity appears bizarre without the context of power, a powerful and bizarre person is capable of changing minds: the minds of millions.

Observing this, it's best to recognize that true worth is not something which others can determine until it becomes the norm. Something that is "trendy" was once outlandish and bizarre and, truth be told, we are the exact same way. There's great value in appreciating something for what it has rather than what it is to something else; after all, a rock may look dull on the outside, but inside it is a crystal geode full of wonderful hues and luster. You may not be the perfect gemstone, and honestly, that's quite alright.



P O E T R Y

If Wordsworth saw himself in the mirror, probably
Jadyn Cheng

when I was six years old and still living in the
cyclic, wretched-hot summers of the southern cityscape,
I lived for nothing more than to be home.
amidst the airborne dust of our paltry, molding
apartment, I would lay on the splintering hardwood floors
in spots where the sunlight hit, melting.

I find that we slip through the cracks in just this
way, tucked into obscurity in gentrified cities
where no one can say our names frictionlessly;
here we are blurred out: water-stained pictures and
the muted yellows of our canines
liquefied

on mornings when the sun shone less red-hot,
my grandpa would sift through lawns on country club exteriors on his
walks, bringing home rich peoples' mud-smeared golf balls. rinse and
shine, chipped ionomer resin beneath
ochre-faded hands seems to shine bright in
comparison. he would give these golf balls to me, the
dimpled spherules glinting with a newly-washed gloss.
soon, I had a drawer-full, the compartment laden with orbs dirt-golden
and clacking in resistance to each other. I
imagine them now corroded with the
bygone midsummer months,
withered and half-thawed into viscous sap [global warming].
they dribble wax and unrealized fantasies

my mom always said it was stealing [and I guess it was, in a way]. I
thought it was rather poetic, really:
my grandpa was always hellbent on inscribing himself
into the lands that wanted him erased,
taking pieces of these towns until he was indelible. he would not be
effaced, his skin scratched out
like a schoolgirl's enemies in her dijon-washed yearbook. *"memory is the*

*shared language of this world” he would tell me: “if we relinquish this
remembrance,
we lose our only connecting tongue”*

eight years later, I still search for bone-white lumps in
the sodded pits of country club exteriors; I kneel in
spindly grass and take them home,
sponge them down in tepid water,
lay them in my desk drawer.

in these moments, I feel not yet aged.

in these moments I still remember

these nights my
head drowns in
teary maudlin sentiment

sticky saccharine flavor
rolls around inside
tongues and crevices

inside my brain
it leaves stale
gray ashy tastes

in the mind
how i wish
i could return

to simple complexities
of succulent summer
take me back

to nights filled
frolicking with moon
late too early

memories hazy but
head crystalline clear
dinners at poolside

and melting pizza

extra salty olives
and we burst

rolling belly laughing

homemade berry seltzer
turning teeth purple

sunny and sanguine
through blue veils
a jeering crowd

stacked inside the
yellow painted coffeehouse
particularly busy nights

chef darting around
bell rings but
god won't answer

sun spitting sweat
on my back
beaming sun brings

money earned hard
twenty dollar tips
straight to donations

afternoon backyard parties
in quaint houses
i didn't own

no one did
tangy fruit tart
biting on lips

two tiny suitcases
held familial weight
to travel across

boundless aqua ocean
quickly diving through
never sinking under

conversations too complicated
sipping zesty mocktails
arguments amongst blood

thrown into blue
cherry pits making
plumped lips fuzzy

succulent blood dribbling
down my chin
volleyed anger play

pushed long hours
didn't tell mom
i'd be late

a whipping breeze
across my face
smell of sea salt

travels my nose
kick my feet
up the boot

of the car
eating fresh apples
moments to remind myself

don't forget this
obscured tethers holding
us all together

summer of us
and kept living
in its marrow

to cry august

to love july
to laugh june

good things come
in grouped threes
you you me

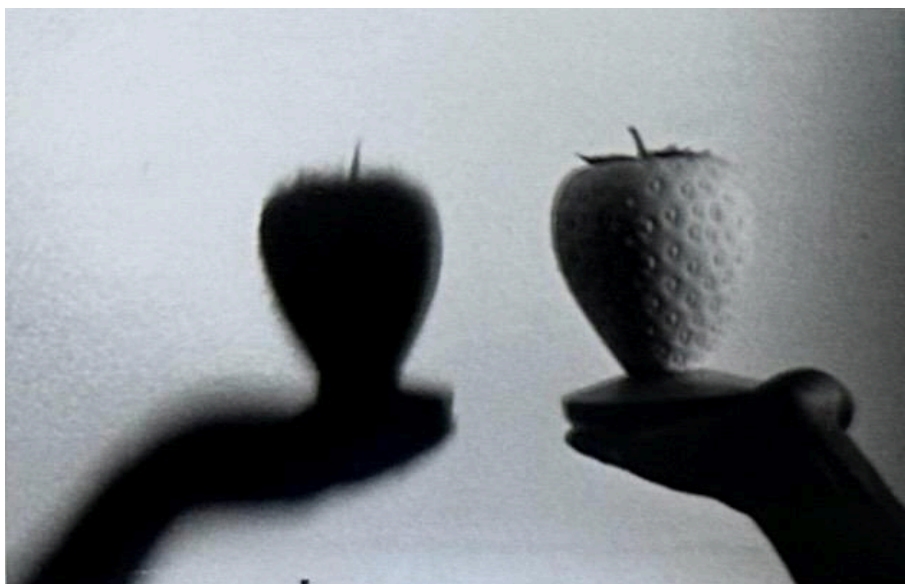
eyes wistful longing
for sweltering bliss
of our summer

softly lamenting bittersweet
death of season

fall sweeps our

luscious heat away
collapse of frail
brown leaves to

be crushed forever
under weight of
my heavy soles.



Berry Shadow

Kendra Thura

Love Me So

Chloe Hui

Love me
So that my heart
 Flutters
Yearning to leap out
Of my shield of
skin
Everytime we cross paths

Love me
So that every tender touch
 Floods my body
 With waves of warm
comfort
Fingers ruffling my hair
Hesitant hands
 Intertwined with
Mine

Love me
So that words pulsing from your lips
Melts me like butter
Softens me with pride
With you always on my mind

Love me
So that your arms
Embrace me
Envelope my body
So small that I become
A part of you

Love me

So that when I look my worst
 You remind me just how
Perfect I am
 To you



Brooklyn Garden

Connor Chang

Hidden Echoes

Anonymous

I hope no one reads between the lines.
Because I'm quite unsure of what they'll find.
I hide and start to subside.
When I look to find my reflection it often leaves dejection.
The way I have to stop looking at the glass.
Glass that's left shattered.
Lacerate each piece from the sight that it reflects.
I constantly find the flaws which seem to project.
No matter how hard I try it's never right.
The paint which covers my face
always one brush stroke,
waiting to find its perfect space.
Somehow always left out of p^L A^E C^E.

Convinced I conceal not just the dark circles under my eyes
but feelings which I keep unoccupied.
My late nights are left defined from all but what are in front of the signs.
Signs keep leading to questions.
Questions pending I can't keep defending.
From between the lines I shield my eyes.
While the chains keep my feelings locked up inside.
Who am I? Where am I meant to be?
Nobody would know,
not even *me*.



Isolated Society

Micah Yiu

daughterhood: the beauties and battles

Samantha McCloskey

I.

my friends tell tales of their serendipitous births,
how they were a blessing of surprise (rather than accident),
blessings amid their senior parents' perceptions.

for three years, my parents sought to conceive.
my mother danced with fate's shadow, trading whispers
with the devils echo.
she swallowed solace in pills,
a symphony of prayers graced her lips.

satan,
the silent guardian of her whispered wishes,
cast a watchful eye upon me throughout
the tapestry of my youth-
sharing custody with my mother
within frequent visits in the dark.

II.

I was no accident, I was a fucking god given gift.
I embodied hope.
a divine bequest,
a manifestation of divine grace,
a figment of faith.

III.

my narrative was devoid of room for error.

the children that came after could make mistakes,
they were products of insatiability.
they will never be satisfied;
they could flash temporary identity,
change their style each coming year,
grease their face in covering paste.

they feed off of the eyes that meet theirs
in both admiration and judgment.

i've found no latitude to explore,

no reminder that my path was one in my creation.

my face; a mosaic of love's preceding years,
prearranged before my own birth.
the children who followed lacked love's trace.
her graceful touch left them with a gaping hunger,
vacant from generations' embrace.

IV.

I tried on my mothers face.
felt rouge streaks wave across my lips,
felt my skin loosen and my eyes widen.
fragility crept through my bones.

this face is not mine.

this face, gradually, ceased to echo
my mothers appearance as well.

these traits were sentiments of her youth,
a time far out of reach for the presents
velocity.

time holds its gaze
for no mother.

V.

mom has watched me slip,
and mom fell with me.

like mother,
like daughter.

VI.

mommy used to hold me, tell me it was okay.
tell me the monsters under my bed
were figments of my own imagination.

now I hover over her in the midst of the night,
wiping the wet beads from her pale face,
tell her the nightmares go away when you demand so.

satan feigns a craving for the darkness,
but feeds when the sun reveals truth.

i fear the monsters that tail her
may be so,
they read her intention in the
light.

they recognize her,
see the promises she has made to bring me to
life.

VII.
mom and I were both diagnosed with depression,
but we aren't wealthy
and only one of us has health insurance.

so she got a prescription
and we split the bottle.

and now, we are both
a little
happier.

VIII.
i begin to discern the similarities in
our plastered smiles.

medicated smiles.

pure white splotches dorn our front
right teeth, our top lips
gracefully curl in shared awkwardness.

facades,
acting as veils,
hiding
every way
In which
we differ.

What I Live For

Vanessa Pan

Everything I know
I desperately grasp onto.
Bells ring periodically throughout my day
a cruel warning in which I ignore.
Where are those waiting for me down the corridor?
a soft whisper tenderly tickles my ear, *We're not going anywhere.*
Empty promises, I fear for change
but my heart pumps, it jumps
embers dipped red, igniting into a passionate flame.
The sky isn't gray today, the grass isn't wet today
but the leaves keep falling, a satisfying crunch underneath the sole
leaving behind a withered past. The sun rises, and the sun sets,
a trail of a warm sunset left in its tracks, high across the sky.
Tomorrow, I long for tomorrow.
Tomorrow, we reset
grudges erased, happiness preserved.
I am at peace, at peace with myself
tomorrow can wait another day because
me today is important as well.
Never look back, look ahead of you.
I forget, I move on.
Mistakes are lessons, but mistakes sting,
tears dry salty and sweet
melting into the squish of my face.
Think of me only
lend me your glove, two souls fused into one,
I want to be by your side forever.
Is fate strong enough to string us together?
Shackle us by the pinky, a fragile finger to break.
Fear takes control
fear pushes me through.
Where to next? I don't want to let go of your hand.
My youth, I cry, my youth.

Zero-hours

Rashmeet Kaur

Zero-hours

Midnight flows and goes.
We used to watch the stars together.
Until I was alone and I ask myself everyday
why did you go?

Some people say everything happens for a reason
but I know this wasn't meant to be.

None of this makes sense.

The city is asleep,
the streets are bare.
And everythings gone.

The infinity bracelet you gave me still rests around my bare wrist.

In my next life, I hope we meet again,
to rekindle the love and complete
our unfinished love story.

I'll search for you in every lifetime
and I know in my heart you'll be mine.

I'll wait for you under the same starry sky,
where we once whispered sweet nothings
with a sigh.



Waited for You

Maria Gamboa

Compass

Chloe Lin

1.

I am partial to the cold,
you, the southern heat
(you enjoy eating brown-sugar
ice under the sun).

We stand back-to-back,
heels glued briefly;
I enjoy the Tropics
you radiate.

Then, we swim;
I tread the Arctic,
you cross the Pacific.
The needle spins,

and we go again,
parting salty waters,
panting, desperately
pulling back time we lost.

2.

My breath is coarse and
dry, granules solidifying
in the back of my throat.
I peer across the horizon

and see the hemisphere—
expansive plane of struggle.
Arguments come in waves,
doors slamming against

my body. Steaming water
evaporates on my arm;

I want to drown
in the promises we made

to be better. I think about
the cold and hot and
latitudes. I don't know
if you are still trying.

3.
The needle points
at me, defeated—
“Why can't you see
that I love you?”

The shore is only
a few feet away.
*Because it took so long
to get here.*

“I have believed in you
since the beginning.
You have grown to be
so independent

and strong.”
And suddenly, we are facing
each other, sand beneath
our toes.

“你是我最珍愛的寶貝。”¹

You don't say the words
I thought you would.
Instead, you walk over
and stand beside me.

¹ You are my most cherished.

We are finally facing
the same direction,
riding a wave
that had been crashing

onto us for years.
The air smells of
sweat and coconut,
fire and lime.

Our simultaneous breaths
linger; they are milky trails,
etching smiles into clouds,
curling into each other.

Our fingers trace ripples,
steeping in the now,
closer than they've ever been.
This moment is brief.

4.
After the sun sets,
when the colors wade
into the caves,
we will drift again,

the friction between
our fingers powerless,
slick as we sink;
but I will keep swimming,

swimming,
swimming,
spinning,
spinning,

spinning.

On Love Poems

Sasha Stern

“Written kisses don’t reach their destination, rather they are drunk on the way by ghosts.”

- Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*

i.

We agree to end this with a handshake. We’re holding hands at the Guggenheim but we’re discussing futures without each other. A French couple laughs at us, jabs at my interest in the Gego manuscripts and the laid-back way this is running. You wouldn’t understand them even if you heard them. You’re taking your time to pick through Gego’s Spanish and piece together her handwriting with a small smile on your face. You tell me you can’t understand a single thing she wrote.

ii.

I do try to write love poems again, but there’s something missing in these poems, making them hard to write. Longing? I think so. I’m not used to writing poems without longing. I try to write poems about being happy with you. Mutual bliss, stargazing, movie dates, and holding hands at art museums: things that are not out of reach, but instead are nestled neatly within our palms.

iii.

I tell you I have been writing you love poems, that they’re all works-in-progress and near completion. I think ghosts have been drinking my writing, less and less on the page each time I check. The words slip down thin throats, their eyeless bodies craving. Pale, see-through hands cover mine when I try to write. Their whispers carry me far away from love poems and closer to you.

iv.

To accomplish writing a love poem to you, I read poems on marriage. A part of me finds this ridiculous, as marriage implies some kind of permanence. We do not plan for permanence, instead opting for a definite end before the autumn

leaves tumble. The rue are about to bloom, and we're already planning for when they die.

v.

In all honesty, I do want to write this love poem. I want to write you hundreds. I want things to last until the next plum blossom bloom. I want to sit on the couch and watch the news idly with you. But these things require time—time we don't have, time that slips away like minnows in a fishing net or reels across a screen. For now, it's easier to blame my loss of words on ghosts.

Little Treasures

Anna Zou

I don't think I've ever been in love.
Love, what a statement to say I've never felt it.
For someone?
Something?

But I mean of course I have loved other things.

I love how the clouds fall
So neatly in the above.
Perfect piles of fluff
adorned by the sunshine, birds, and sky.

I love the smell of fresh bread,
Light and dancing in the air,
The scent like a warm hug
Encompassing all around.

I love a lot of things,
The list goes on and on,
But I don't think I've ever been in love.

They say love feels like
Butterflies in your stomach,
Like you can't breathe.

Like all the time in the world has stopped in that one
moment.

I never quite liked butterflies, they're weird creatures in my
opinion,

or the feeling of not being able to breathe.

And there's a kind of pressure on you
When the world feels like it has stopped.

I want love to feel

Like a mellifluous song
Lingering in my head.

It's sweet melodies stuck like honey
To my fingertips.
It's harmonies ringing in my ears.
Loud and clear.
Never quite able to let go.

I want love to feel like
It's winter's first snow.
Clean and bright and bewitching.

I want love to feel like
It's the crisp autumn mornings.
Warm and cozy, bundled in bed.

I want love to feel like
It's the flowers blooming in spring.
Full of new beginnings.

I want love to feel like
Summer's rainstorms.
Wild and thunderous,
So I can be a stormchaser,
Searching for such.

Love should be sunlit rooms,
Opalescent jewels basked in light,
Vivacious adventures to far
away places, *Electric* feelings
from just a smile across the
room.

To be in love is
Is to find life's little treasures,
And to bask in their
glory and simplicity.

To be a small dot
In a vast beautiful universe,
So complicated and extravagant.

To be remembered
for all the things that I love.
 Not the things that I have,
 Or the things that I hate,

Because you are what you love.



sunflowers and grapes

Christine Chen

Right Outside My Window

Grace Kuriakose

I wait for my father to come home. The summer breeze, the once blue sky turns magenta, and soon the clouds roll over. The sun and the sky turn midnight; the song of the birds- everlasting. Fickle wind and brisk stones make quiet splashes in the lake.

I can't imagine a brilliant, bright day filled with blooming flowers, falling petals, and laughing children. How can they smile and laugh and watch the flowers bloom? How can the birds chirp when one of us is lost? When there's one less person in the cycle of nature?

I wait for him to return, realizing its predictable fate
The sun and the moon work like clockwork, he must come soon.
I time his return, counting the stars until they become morning rays

I see the man on the moon and ask him
If he's seen a heavy coat around, a burning red coat with crisp sleeves
and sewn-up buttons. I keep remembering the final words of my father,
engraved in my memory
My pitiful heart cannot take it anymore.

Right outside my window
I remember us playing together, singing songs
I remember sunny days in the park and
I want to replace the families with you and me.
Take a walk with me.
Right outside the window,
there's a new garden that the neighbors built.
I know you'd love it, being fond of over-ripe tomatoes
you would name each of the plants, their stems, the roots
You noticed the little things some forget.

You would hold me close like I couldn't be dropped. I close my eyes and wonder if I can be held again and look outside my window, hoping to see a vision of you. I soon realized my memory of you would die with me - I should've remembered better

I look to see little girls growing older, their clutch on their father's arm, soon released and loose.

I scream for how lucky they must be that they don't have to try and recall The skin of their father, the outline of his eyes, and the pitch of his voice They don't look out their window and try to find a replacement and ask *Who will be my father today?*

They don't find him in old photographs, and voices, and men who are strong and kind. I listen outside my window to remember my father's voice, his sound, his obsessions so

I don't slowly lose my memory of him in the sky

I should've remembered better.

Right outside the window, you could hear the wind blow and you could somehow hear when a plane was passing by. I'm sure you would love to be here- even as a ghost, a skeleton comes and haunts my bones. I need you here. I need you to clean up the crunched-up leaves in the park. Yell at the sky for cloudy days and to hold me again and bake our favorite pasta together

I need you to be here- even as a ghost, come as a skeleton and haunt my bones.

Right outside my window, I want to see you again
I went against your advice, the door is unlocked, please come through.
I know you're a little late, I don't hate tardy people
I wait for you right outside my window until the midnight collapses



Disorder and Convergence

David Noh

The Blur of Time

Hilary Cheng

Through my eyes,
clocks are always melting.
They drip down the wall,
puddling on the floor in
black and gray and white and
it's all...
I haven't seen one solid clock.
Whether
analog, digital,
the time on my phone
seems to
drip,
melting to the bottom of my
screen.
I can't see the time.
I simply watch as everything passes by,
and I just
take it all in rather than living in
tandem.
Through my eyes,
the sun never descends.
Forever bright,
the day is my eternal life.
I notice, though,
that sometimes I wake
up and it's
dark.
I turn and twist my head, looking for signs of
life, but
all is quiet.
Blink
and it is again day.
Again

the sun burns my skin.

Again I see people
rushing around,

to and fro and

running and jogging

and

walking.

I sit as I contemplate the melting time,

leaning forward just as the clocks

tick,

and finally I

begin to melt.

Finally, I begin to blend with my surroundings and

finally,

the clock in front of me
is solid.

Lines form in at intervals and I can hear

the quiet tick, tick, tick of

the clock in front of me.



Dusk
Jackie Polanski

“attention seeker”

Samantha McCloskey

Take me.
Strip me,
expose my raw flesh
and consider it what it is.
Strip me vulnerable.
Fresh babies breath on a temperate spring night,
Misinterpret the moping for midnight rain.
Lines of personality and past feeling,
The only remnant of eyes glaring back.
High tides wash up single shoes and plastic,
Contemplate which did more harm.
Navigate a sea of my repudiation,
Move hesitantly.
To feel is to spit daggers at the unwilling heart,
Feel my pain.
Watch me move delicately through a graveyard
of hope, laugh at my attempt.
You see how it once was but not how we got here,
Peel back another layer.
The center reveals a *seed?, a heart?, a cavity?*,
It is yet to be perceived.
See how I face the wind instead of walk with it,
moving as one.

Grab my hand.

purpose keeps you alive but worms don't (real)

Daniel Ng

I sink into the underground
a purpose
set alight

lend me
drops of
honeydew
and sleep
between my spite

spit lies
made of earthworms
split heart
strings with a knife
slit gashes
through my silhouette, forget
I am alive

consume my flesh
of parmesan
a little piece
charcuterie
grow fat with heart
I bring another
(eat my love
you're getting thinner)

the surface drifts from memory
burrow ever deeper
feed my blindness
with my blood and
smile through
my gritted teeth

perhaps I'm owed
a gentle kiss
before you
cut me through
again



Final Meal
Emma Ramsarran



you are what you eat

Christine Chen

The Cycle of a Star

Anna Zou

I saw a possum today.
Dead, splayed on the pavement.
So still and peaceful,
Yet so broken and melancholic.

It was hauntingly beautiful, in its own weird sort of way,
Like a serene ending to a somber song.
The wind blows the dandelions nearby side to side.
Even at death the world around her felt so alive.

It was sorrowful too, in a heartbreaking way.
The cars whirred by, and she laid there unnoticed, unseen.
Her being, blown away with the dandelion seeds.
Floating,
Falling,

Falling.

It's like life in a way.
Being so small and insignificant is the big scheme of things.
A speckle of dust floating in the Universe.
Drifting amongst the stars.

It's easy to be lost
in an endless sea of uniformity,
A confusing ocean of broken continuity.
And even though the bright lights
May have blinded our eyes,
There is more to the life of a star.

It's something else entirely.
Maybe we are dandelions

Scattering our stories, our beings, our lives.
Maybe we are the stars,
Bursting and beaming with a kaleidoscope of colors.

A nebula of existence,
A supernova of change.

Maybe our lens of life is covered in dust
And under the soot and rubble.
We can see how we shine.

The possum is gone.
But the new flowers will soon bloom,
The sun will soon beam brighter,
And I'm sure the stars will be shining
Just for you tonight.

Peeled Orange Flowers

Alexis Tsui

Laughter and loud rustling filled the room
The elderly push in and out the pieces of Mahjong
There at that table held shared smiles of enlightenment
Noises spiral and swirl to make a great blend
Having been there for minute then hours
Stuck in one place

One of the elders sat by me.
She did not chatter loud to be heard
She did not play to laugh for her heart to be filled
She did not join the rest to be together with others
Instead she was by me, my side

Her eyes, tiny like a pebble
All dull and gray, thrown and carried
Wrinkles tracing all over her face
With her crooked-teeth beaming a dirty yellow
Showing to me what was a pure smile, an old one

Her worn hands, all shriveled and wrinkled, held a tangerine
One of her fingers stabbing the middle, the core of the fruit
The rest peeling away the skin
Leaving a perfectly naked tangerine
Laying still on her palm
Blossomed with its ripe colors

The skin, I thought, was to be scrapped away in the trash
Like the leftover of a butterflies cocoon

On a window sill, was where she placed the skin
Laid still with it's peeled self
Shaped like a flower, 4 petals all stuck out
Embracing the light that shone from outside of the glass

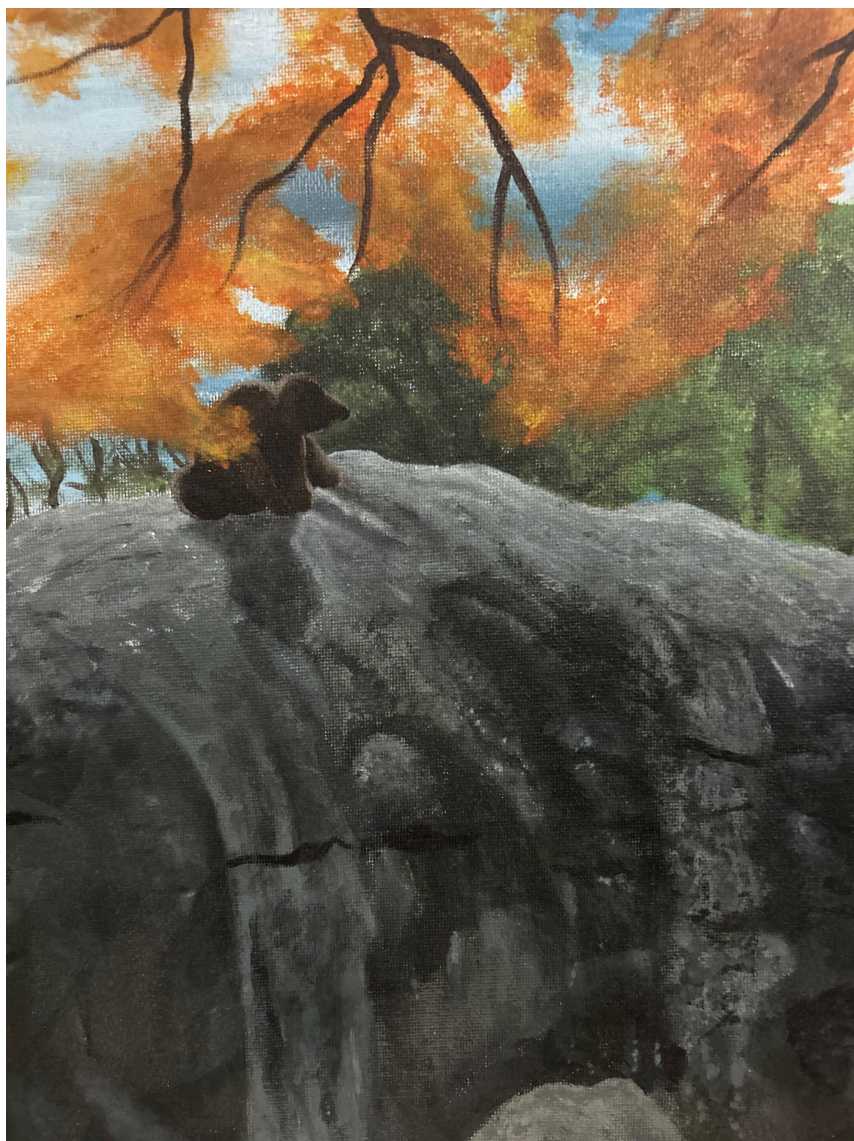
Glowing vibrant with the new founded warmth that was given
How can something so useless have beauty?

But eventually that beauty rots
With the withered ends clinging on
A dull color of orange to brown
Scraps turned into its true form of ugly

A room where the loudness was complementing
Now is loud with emptiness shouting “Go Home”

Lost items craving to be held with the new
Thrown together in many cardboard boxes
Not for storing but for shipping

A new home was to be found
Paving a start of a change
But the remains of the scraps,
Could only call this place their own
As they all wilted away.



Bear in Fall

Diya Jhaveri

the watcher

Samantha McCloskey

- I. safe, simple, / Daisy, / I'm slipping greatly. / you truly are / the most / beautiful thing / on this / lip / of hell
- II. eyes / dust / with starlight i'm grateful / you're alright / but don't you get tired / waking up / at night
- III. I watch the days / go by / I stand / I watch / your every move. / while you're awake / I practice moving like / you too.
- IV. bare / diary, / your / insight, / are you alright / your shadows follow, / I see it in your eyes. / wipe / away / your tears but / the / nightmares / feed in the / daylight
- V. honey blonde / highlights / cured your / appetite / but don't you understand / that / thigh gaps / don't cut our / stare / she tries / she tries, she tries / but only I know she cries / because / she's got what / they want
- VI. watch / the leaves ripple down / the air got / colder / this year / but the temperature / didn't drop. / (*help her*) / dress coded for / uniform / detention for / the / bathroom norm / Daisy, / we're / both losing it lately / take my / sweater / breath my / air / feel my / warmth
- VII. Daisy, / dearest, sweetest, fragile / Daisy / put yourself / on a cloud above us / and watch / us all burn. / protect yourself, darling Daisy, / wealth is beauty / and beauty / is a veil for / the deserving. / small shorts and / brisk snorts / I still see your face / behind all the / blaze.
- VIII. burnt out, bored, / Daisy, / come back to / me / tell me / it's / okay
- IX. I feel the silent journey / a solitary / glistening droplet, / descending upon to a quivering lip / you're finally / caught- / for the / better / for the / worse, / angel Daisy, an / actress / misinterpreted / misunderstood. / blow out the flame / swallow the ash / of coming times / watch us all burn / from / your roar.

Echoes of Emptiness

Dhanya Diya

'How much shame have I brought to my family'

The only sentences that echoed through his mind.

Once a gleaming bright light has turned into a dark

E M P T Y tunnel.

He saw to watch his kids grow up in shame for having less than other families.

"Money doesn't matter in this life, family matters"

Money was the reason why his family were miles and seas apart,

A small little cottage near the Padma with echoes of joy and laughter,

Closet filled with Kurtas that painted the colors of the rainbow that stood over Sylhet,

Koi fish swimming underneath the vast green river,

Freshly baked Rasmali's syrup trickling down his arm

Palms filled with 'taka' and wrapped with gold that symbolizes our 'beauty'

Life that was reality now he can dream about.

We listened as our hands remained empty

We listened as our one bedroom flat was tearing into pieces

We listened to the impending threat of eviction

We listened and we still weren't happy

Princess Pretend

Kristen Lee

Everyday
A mound of jewels weighs down her head
The laces suck in her breath
Velvet binds her knees tight
So she cannot think
So she cannot speak
So she cannot run

Everyday
She descends silently
Back straight, mouth tight
Dress sweeping down the steps
The parties never exciting
Ever meek
Never fun

Everyday
She wakes, temple pounding
Chest heaving, barely breathing
Knees shaking from all the faking
And the cycle continues
Ever real, everyday
On and on, never done

All the time
All her life
Everyday
Always the same

Constellation Confusion

Brianna Gallagher

You drew stars
around my scars,
turning each mark
into its own spark.

Constellations on my arm
formed in an array
Each one unique
in it's own special way

Enough to illuminate
the entire night sky
An accidental picture
engraved in my brain, forever

You're the artist
behind the strokes
Taking something horrible
to something unbelievable

Your masterpiece
left me in awe
For I couldn't have ever thought
quite this far

But now, they're bleeding
The starlight, leaking

Each star burning
through the picture
What was once before beautiful
the image, ruined

No longer able
to light the night sky
but now only dull stars
circle around scars

A persistent reminder
of what once was
Made so much worse
by your work of art



Unwelcome Entrance

Enya Chen

Flow

Rebekah Abram

The Flow
Of tears never ending
Cascading to the floor
My heart aches
And breaks, cracking painfully
Like glass that I gently cradle
Red staining my arms
When I think of never seeing them again.
Of one day
Finding out that they're not there anymore
That they left me?
That they're gone.

So I pray
So often that my throat hurts
The Flow making its way
Out of my mouth
And into the quiet of the night
Where nobody can hear me
Pouring my broken heart out
And it hurts to speak
But I know the Flow
Will never end

The Flow
Of life
Taking me on twists and turns
As I pass by others
Swim or sink?
I'm not quite sure
I do know
That I won't lie limp
As the river

Grabs me
Pushes me
Drowns me

Like a shipwreck in a bottle
As the world shakes
I'll hold on to them *and* the ship
I'll do it
I can't let go, even as fear consumes me
Though the earth quakes
I'll cover them in an embrace
Hold them as tight as I can
For as long as I can
Until
I
Can't.

I'm not sure if I can scream
So I don't!
So I can't?
So I won't.
Instead
I'll try to put it into words
And at first
I'm not sure if I can
The pain, tearing apart my hand
That urges to intertwine with another
But the Flow never ends
Through the words
From my mouth
From my hands
The letter swirl
Not encasing,
But embracing

I'm scared to lose them
I don't want to have to miss them
Look back on the good times

When instead, the good times can keep coming
Why should I have to be so scared
Why wouldn't they talk about it
Why would they never tell me,
When they go?
I try to reassure
To tell them that I'm there
What else can I do
When the flow can stop the scare

Grandfather and I

Shristi Nigam

When i close my eyes and pick up my pen
i get transported to the past
and remember the place where my journey began

i see a red-bricked swing
perched on a green oasis
the oasis filled beautiful
with nature and energy
a safe haven for positivity

the red-bricked swing holds
a little girl with a simple pen
and a lean man
draped in a white kurta

the old man watches with appreciation
as the little girl writes
her first poem
he smiles when he sees
her subtle observations
of the surrounding garden
and beams with honor when
he reads about her adventures with grandfather

he tells the little girl
to never stop writing
to always stay true to herself
because each
poem
word
letter
has the ability to change perspectives
and inspire others to be better

the same way it inspired him
to do better

now when i open my eyes
and place my pen on the paper
thoughts drift out of my mind
personifying themselves into stories of my past
building on experiences in the present

it has been nine years and i am back
in the green oasis
sitting on the red-bricked swing
this time accompanied
only by my simple pen and the sounds of nature

my poems have evolved from life observations to
social issues and systematic changes in society

my words have created platforms
for me to speak my truth
and support the voices of the voiceless

my letters have spelt out my true calling
presenting hope for me to change the world
one poem at a time

writing has created an unbreakable bond
with my grandfather
community
and family

it has allowed me to reach
into the pool of my subconsciousness
and find the meaning behind
who shristi nigam
truly is.

Pink Dress

Risha Kaur

A young child:

Naive, angelic, free.

As she runs into the field of white lilies,

Her giggles echoing loud enough that everyone hears.

Delicate bare feet bouncing off the ground.

Flushed pink cheeks matching her puffy pink dress.

She stood out, her small frame noticeable against the flowers that grazed her.

She is full of happiness, the desire to run coursing through her veins.

She wants to play with the soft clouds she sees everyday, wants to aim for the stars.

She is hopeful.

That is her mistake.

She doesn't understand that the same field of white lilies will wither away, losing its purity,

Her silence will stretch across the field, with no audience to hear.

Rough bare feet will drag along the soil, aching and marked with wounds from her journey.

The pink dress is replaced with baggy black clothes, bringing out her now pale complexion.

She still stood out, yet not even the wind acknowledged her.

She is drained of desires, tired of running.

The soft white clouds will become heavy and dark, the stars far from aim.

The same sky she so desperately wanted to touch will become a burden.

She is no longer naive, angelic, or free.

She is no longer young.

painkillers for perfection

Rachel Ha

the doctor prescribed two pills a day,
but the thrill of overdose made her giddy
without the drug.

the side effect: midnight cravings

it came before every meal or minor mishap
to supplement her shortcomings.

the side
effect: co-dependence

and it was always pills. medicine had a
berry tang that left a bitter aftertaste
of cold resentment and all the things she
knew she wasn't on the tip of her tongue.

the side effect: denial

her routine unraveled in a flawless fallacy:

the side effect: ignorant bliss

morning:
she had bought foundation and painkillers to
conceal the black eye she caused, beating
herself up. she looked for beauty but couldn't
find it when the eyes of the beholder gazed in
the mirror and could make a mockery of every
shade of purple tattooed on her skin.
her imperfections become more glaring.
down another pill

the side effect: soft, radiant skin

afternoon:
in dressing areas, she tried on strapless gowns
and shirts that showed her midriff in the flesh
of an open room. she watched as malibu barbies
with their shiny shells floats by, her polyester
skin feeling frayed and torn with envy. she
knew it was plastic, but somehow that didn't
make her beauty feel more real.

down another pill

the side effect: confidence

evening:

orange bottles and white tablets spill over on her nightstand.

down another pill

blink

and she's

s

p

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r

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n

g

in the bathtub.

thinking about every little thing that

she's scared of losing control of.

the side effect: overthinking

perfectionism, this tumor, the size of a plum,
continued to breed with a perfect pedigree.

...

morning:

the unkempt knots in her hair refused to
come undone.

down another pill

the side effect: knotted hair

she swallowed again,

down another pill

the side effect: knotted hair

perhaps something was wrong with her eyes.

down another pill

the side effect: her vision was all
the same

afternoon:

wrinkles sunk, setting slowly in her
skin, showing the age that eclipsed

beauty she tried to preserve.
down another pill

the side effect: her skin appears
smoother

yet, the closer in the mirror she gazed,
the more she could see the wrinkles
etched within her skin.
down another pill

the side effect: her skin appears
smoother

down another pill
down another pill
down another pill
until she was chugging pills as if they
were candy, by the handfuls and handfuls.

the side effect: confidence, pride, dignity

it might have killed her to be perfect, but
she had everything to feel and nothing to show.

evening:

she swallowed another one, and another one, and Another One, and Another
One, and Another One, AND ANOTHER ONE, AND ANOTHER—

until she took the little white tablet,
plopped it in her mouth and chewed.
sweetness.

they were **SUGAR PILLS.**

...

there is really no remedy
for self-affliction
except a hoax we can swallow down our throat
until the truth becomes numb.
and everything we aren't
becomes the prescription.

the side effect:

Life Lessons

Ifrah Jalil

To fit into the standards of today
I must style my hair in some sort of way...
With a sleek shine
And a body divine
I shall capture the attention of my peers,
And perhaps some sneers
For their jealousy will be great
But I won't let them get a hold of my legacy.

I don't agree with what is popular...

And what my Mama taught me was to
Keep my back straight,
Standing up tall
To never fall
Don't shed a tear
Even if fear might be near

Even though what she told me might be true, I find that
With all that I have been taught
This is what I have caught,
It is ok to cry
For tear drops may fall from your eye
Humans have emotions
But let's not start commotions
Knowing when to stop
Will surely never let you drop

The Aftermath of Grief

Charu Goyal

How are you doing? A question I've heard too many times since she passed. It's not real though, their sympathy, one could even call it pity. The endless calls from family members, the monthly check-ins from people who never cared, and the drawn out stares of pity from strangers. It's like I'm stuck in a glass box, perpetually on display for everyone.

The minute a smile disappears from my face, the interrogation pours in. *Are you ok?* As if I have to constantly be happy to reassure others that I'm fine. And it's always the same answer that I utter. *I'm fine.* I never tell the truth to anyone, even my closest of friends. I can't... Why should they be burdened with my pain?

When does it end?, I question. *When will my life go back to normal?* I desire to once again be ok. Wishful that my future is different.

It doesn't go away. You just live with it, the pain. The answer. But they do not understand what I feel. They do not realize that what they say is painful. Those words mean I have to live in constant grief, endlessly missing the person who was once here.



Now Leasing

Anonymous

Under the Pale Moonlight

John Paralemos

i knew that you loved me under the pale moonlight,

that you would always be there by my side,
that you would heal my scars in the worst of times

promising me while you held me tight,
you used to whisper under the stars so slight

that you would take down all my raging flames,
that you would protect me from my bulging pain

but the moment i felt our breaths collide,
i knew that you saw beyond my eyes

i knew it in the midnight sky,
while i wiped away my silent cries

that you were never really mine.



Moonlight Serenity

Enya Chen

Umma's Ribbon

Yvette Park

distance wounds me
as a string slowly pulled out
from a perfectly constructed ribbon

my umma helped me realize
how effortless it was to undo something
that it was easy to move on

as she became tangled in her own
the string loosened
trapping her in her own world

yet i, a mass of oblivion
chase the string
pull back the distance

i have been taught to let go
of someone who didn't want to be found
before fixable fibers break apart

yet i, a being of hope
have always tried to make work
of what was lost

but i have also grown numb
to the uselessness of attachment and
holding on to a string bound to undo

First Steps

Chloe Lin

We stood around your Windows desktop
to look through my baby pictures.

You found the video of me taking my
first steps, all wobble and whine and

bending down to steady myself. Your hand
reaches past the camera, voice joyous

as if we had discovered aliens.

“你好棒!”²

That voice, so alien, filled
with the light only a new father has,

croons incandescent,
dimming in the infant’s growing shadow—

I want nothing more
than to slow down

the time, reach into the stratosphere,
and pull you back to me.

² “You’re awesome!”



Musée d'Orsay

Maya Martin

the dreams of our stars

Shristi Nigam

The truth is I have been lost at sea
the blue walls in my room start to melt into the ocean
my bedrest turns into the horizon as I smell
the salty feeling of the dark waters

in my mind I am a sailor
stranded on her wooden boat
drifting alongside the brink of existence
my thoughts tell me I am in denial
that in fact I am not lost
just wandering

In honesty
I have a dream
to get to the Northern star
my grandfather said
sailors who make it to the stars
are granted a wish

I wish
to be blessed by the heavens
and the souls who reside within

sailors who have
conquered the wildest seas
sailed the corners of the earth
and have risen from the depths of neglect
all reached their dreams
of touching the stars

my wooden boat still stands
as my eyes search for the one who shines the brightest

I have been lost at sea for ages
yet I happen to forget about the ocean
when the surrounding waters turn into my bedroom walls
the horizon into my bedrest
and my boat into the carved-out wooden necklace
given to me by my late grandfather
when I touch the necklace
and close my eyes
I forget that I have not been on land in some time
that my mind has not felt the peace
of standing still on its own

I remember
how last summer
my grandfather and I spent all day on his boat
looking for the Northern star

I remember how he said
to find him in the Northern star

I did not know what he meant
but he reassured
whenever I feel doubt
loneliness
anger
or confusion
he will smile at me
from right outside my bedroom window

and he reassured
we will meet
once again
at the Northern star.



Ferry on the Hellenic Sea

Vasilios Dallas

Nostalgia and Melancholia

Anna Zou

Twin Sisters Nostalgia and Melancholia are with me always on either side. We plod down the streets and watch the children play.

Nostalgia shows me my past.
Running and racing and dancing and singing.
Her being runs deep through my veins.
She is the sweetness in every dessert and the melody of every song.
The sunlight hitting the windows at just the right time.
The touch of our fingertips against each other.
The scent of the fresh flowers that you bought me, “just because”.
Every song, every poem, every star in the night sky shining just for you.
She runs over to join them.
Calling to me. “Come join us!”

Melancholia holds my hand as I watch and remember.
“It’s okay,” she says.
Crying and numbness, loneliness and leaving.
Melancholia is my heart.
Her touch is the bitterness of burns
and the minor harmonies of a once happy song.
Watching you leave at all the wrong times.
The cries of thunder during a rainstorm.
When my arms no longer know to hold.
The wilting flowers in the broken vase
that I just can’t find myself to throw out, “just because.”
The shards of glass poking at my lonely heart.
Emptiness floods the house that is no longer home.
She hugs me when the tears start coming.

Twin Sisters Nostalgia and Melancholia.
We plod our way home.

Nostalgia’s hand brushes the grass as she hands me a dandelion.
Melancholia holds up the broken vase.

I looked up, whole once more.
My heart and my veins.
My glory and pain.
 The song that rings deep in my soul.
 A chorus of voices singing loud and clear.
 This sweetness is the medicine
 filling that oddly shaped hole in my heart.
Happy and sad.
My mind, the audience of this dazzling performance.
 And you.
 I see you too.

luck's hunter

Avni Sharma

i've searched for a pretty face in fields of clovers
i run through them desperately,
dropping to my weakened knees and hunting until my eyes can't tell the
difference between my pale hands and the viridescent leaves

i use every birthday wish on a better body
rose-colored candles melt until their wicks,
exhausted by my incessant pleading, burn out. i stare at sixteen years of wax
puddled beneath me and decline a slice of cake

i hope for love as i pick pennies off the ground
lincoln's eyes bore into my own,
expecting my needs to waver, but i confine him to my pocket and silence his
judgment

i blow away a fallen lash and desiderate a future of happiness
praying the wind is strong enough to catch it and carry it through my life,
every step i'll ever take glimmering with its blessings

i consume gilded horseshoes for every meal
and chase double rainbows to their weary ends
i take greedy handfuls of shooting stars out of sapphire skies
and break hundreds of wishbones myself

i hunt each corner of my life for flitting ladybugs
and angel numbers and evil eyes
because if you've lived your entire life believing you were born unlucky, you tend
to try harder to find it.

all i see is red

Vivian Huang

a persona poem inspired by the legend of Nian

i.
& sparklers.
 smoke shrouds
 my scaled eyes. it's making
 me cough & stumble into
an old man's arms—
 he cackles from the periphery,
 silencing my roar.
 the irritable glow of
smoking bamboo wards
 me away
 unlike a brown
 moth to a flame.

i try to claw the man
 into fear's realm,
 but i just can't reach
 him.i need to rip
my body inside out— feel the
 splintered scales cut
 into my flesh— if i want
 to stop this tiring,
dizzying madness.

my blood soon puddles
 into maroon;
 with a slash of fire,
 i vanish into the mountain's
jagged cracks. next year,
 i must avoid the village
 that uses their wispy

beards to whip my
cracked scales.

ii.
“年” used to make the village
below me shiver

terror used to make me
god

but now
i am forced into
a crevice
like dust

A Combination Unspoken

Agustya Ravishankar

We can only believe;
that the right set of words;
can stop bullets mid flight;
can heal lands drenched in blood,
and the animals outside the payrolls;
can grow roots that crackle through the old rock;
can restore oceans to their faithful blue hue,
and beaches to their secure staged sanctity;
can open aching eyes,
and twisted minds;
can give meaning to a life,
whatever that may be;
We can only believe.

HA: the first breath we take.

The awakening of life.

The story of emerging from the womb.

The beginning of polynesian cultures.

The birth of a child.

The fire of love passed down through generations,
of hard workers dedicating their happiness
for the harmony
and for ohana,
for our families.

Ha travels through everything.

Hate,
blazes through our veins,
giving birth to hasty conclusions,
ruining the good we have when we are born.

Where does our happy ending await
when the world hallucinates of harrowing harbingers
that brings forth turmoil?
The harvest of the purest halos
creates a hazardous environment
for our future generations.

Hades, god of the underworld,
we hold our hands,
mourning the innocent lives slaughtered,
tainting our dark history,
forgotten in the textbooks.

We hold our hands and pray:

Hail Mary, full of grace.
Deliver us from the war-hawks:
politicians who happily call for blood.
Deliver us from habitat destroyers:
ham-handed ax-wielders.
Deliver us from the harsh-hearted:
those that harm with their ignorance.

Perhaps, if we happen to change our ways...

Maybe there is the possibility
where we can reach the perfect haven
Where nobody has to suffer from
The guilt that haunts us in the afterlife

HA: the first and last breath we take

secrets in droplets

Aieshah Ashfer

My grandmother's backwaters
have never breathed me
in and out, opened
their mouth to me,
consummated my being
like they have done for
both my father and
his. Once pristine
they have held the steady
bones of my father as he
learned to swim in its
pool. And his father who
learned to fly in its depths.
A lineage bound to a
body of water, its softness
washing over a legacy.
Today, the waters have
morphed from the puckered
heat and fishermans'
rafts and malleable
trash. A plastic beach lines
the edge of the waters, its
mouth shriveled to our
familiar bodies. When it
comes time for me to drink
its looseness, I am unable to
even come near its frame.
My feet never touch
its noxious lips. Never glide
its pulses nor learned of the
breath it holds. They say
our ancestors keep
their secrets and truths
for their children.

Are the backwaters not
one of their veracities to give?
My blood lies in the
silk of lineal waters yet
I myself cannot
possess it. Water
has cut me off from
its world. I am unable
to mold and soar in
its unsteady body.
How can water be
essential to life if
I am unable to feel
its pulse washing over me
in beats? I stay praying
for the knowledge of an
ancestral secret, craving for
the understanding of
my thick blood
in the moisture of
familial unfamiliar water.

Inevitable Moments

Anonymous

Time flies like a bird in the sky, soaring
high and passing by.

In the blink of an eye, moments slip away, leaving
memories to cherish and replay.

From dawn to dusk, the hours swiftly race, reminding
us of life's fleeting embrace.

But fear not, my friend, for in every tick and tock, new
adventures await on time's clock.

So let's seize the day, make memories that last, and
embrace the present before it becomes the past.



Hotel Santorini...

Om Thakur

Money Doesn't Grow on Trees

Brianna Gallagher

We mustn't walk
or talk
or think ideas
outside of the box
For we must pay
the price
to learn

We must learn how to think
ideas planted in our heads
growing flowers

Large
Beautiful
and mundane
in all of its glory

We are told we must be unique
and we will change the world someday
all in the same way
We must learn the same ideas
as everyone else
We are supposed to take what we know
and show our take

We can express our opinions
not do what we are told
but that won't get us an education
into the college we had hoped

We must pay
to stand out in the crowd
and forget we're all grown from the same sprout
anyway

living at 28%

Isabella Liao

everyone dies at some point right?
we spend every waking minute
overthinking and over contemplating
the inevitable messes
of what we call life.
we spend 5 out of 7 days
72% of our week
6 miserable hours
in a building being dictated and told
on how to navigate our own futures.
as if one day, we'll achieve this image
of success coated with glory just for the gratification of our own parents.

so when i take a step back,
and look around,
i can't help but ask

is it really worth the tears?

because i see myself on top of this mountain but somehow i lost myself
in the process of getting there.

all of this information
just messes with my brain and jumbles up
into a ball of confusion and loss of

self..

worth.

because sometimes
when i stare into the mirror
i can't recognize who's staring back at me.

we're told to do and be and think
so many things
but how can we really think them
when we're all still here
trying to remember how to

b r e a t h e.

is it wrong of me to say that
my first steps in life were my best?

don't get me wrong
i love my life
i love the people i'm surrounded with everyday,
they make me laugh and feel things
that i'm so grateful to feel.

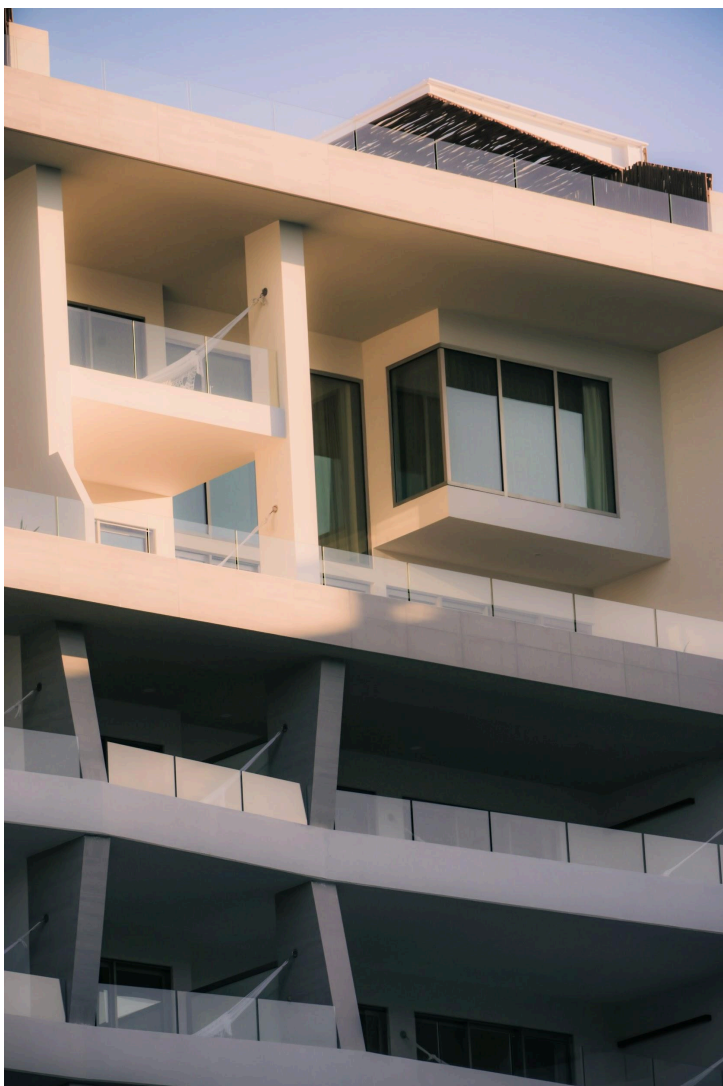
but it's hard to love yourself
when comparing yourself to others is all you can do.

so how can i really live when im only living
28% of the time?

because deep down i feel scared.

*unsure
uncomfortable.*

it's like a race i'm trying to win but
the wind is competing against me.
so what really is the point of trying?



Classic Modern

David Noh



Windows

Aymaan Reddy

Ladybugs and keys

Achintyaa Gupta

If ever a ladybug lands on you, it is said to be good luck
Close your eyes, count to 3
Emerge hopeful
Since a little red creature with tiny black dots
Is merely the key

So you see, some think a key is a piece of metal
Twisted, cut, forged with little notches
Others see a key as an epiphany
A thought that will lead you to more intellectual gold than a safe ever will

In truth, a key is whatever you want it to be
Intellectual gold, or a small role to play in unlocking a bigger worth
But to me, that key is the hope a lady bug gives when it lands on my shoulder

7 black spots, painted ever so lightly on the small insects back
Deliver such a big message

See if it was a bug with 8 spots,
it is a mere cousin of the ladybug, a mere cousin of hope
A bug with 9 or 13, a distant relative
20, it becomes such that of an classroom acquaintance
When you reach an orange back with however many spots, you found yourself a
jealous friend, who tricks everyone into using your success as their own poison

See the 7 spots are so special
not only by what they mean
But how rare it is to see the correct ladybug in a world full of imposters
All 7 dots represents 7 continents
200 countries
5,600 states and provinces
7.8 billion people in the world
And the ladybug chose me

The ladybug is my key to hope
Because out of all of those people
And other ladybug-like insects
The right ladybug chose me
So hopefully
I can be a ladybug one day
And land on the right person for me

is there anything to do?

because without you my hands don't know where to sit,
without you my mind can't go back to sleep,
without you my stomach doesn't know what to use to cover up the hole you dug in
the middle of it.

with my fingers i trace the stars above me in a pattern that spells out your name
the fingers that would move your hair back when it covered your eyes,
the fingers that would fix the position of your lip ring,
the fingers that made you the bracelets you decorated your wrists with the whole
summer.

are they still there?

do they peek out under the rolled-up sleeves of your crewnecks during the
winter?

do you still pick at their tattered ends when you're nervous?

i wonder if you see me in places like i see you.

do you see my reflection in bus windows?

if you saw my name in a book, would my face cross your mind?

if you came across that record i played all summer, would you still hear my
mindless singing coming from the upstairs bathroom while i showered?

are my initials still written in your calendar on February 1st?

if you dreamt of me, would you remember you did when you woke up?

do you remember anything that happened that summer past one in the morning?

do you ever look for that shirt you forgot you gave me?

do you think of me when you see the hole under your lip?

do you miss our arms accidentally rubbing against each other, or my eyelashes
against your cheek?

do you ever sit and think, *is this the way it'll always be?*

because god, how would i ever tell you that i do?



A Dog's Contrast

Kendra Thura

Fighting Against Night

Brianna Gallagher

We've been nearing an end
Watching the sun slow, sink below the sky
Colors morphing from yellow
To reddish orange
To pink

Longing for this
Ecstatic to witness the beauty
Right in front
Watching us

awaiting for the very moment
It passes us by

Or do we

Do we cling onto the image in our heads
Waiting each minute
Expecting it to stay the same
Until the next one
Slowly realizing
The sun is quickly disappearing

About to leave us in absolute darkness

Are we ready to face the night
Explore the constellations ahead of us
Learn new stories
Embedded in the stars

Face the rumors
About how vast our universe is
Consisting of planets

Galaxies

Yet we're lucky if we can see more than a star in the sky
At this time

But it's too late

While being so busy dreading the night
It has arrived

The sun has set
There's no going back
Forcing us ahead
Into what we know to be
One of the scariest places known to man

Say goodbye to the sun
It was a beautiful memory
Giving us time to prepare for the fight we must face

Spending some time living in the dark

Anxiety

Anonymous

I have this *friend*
Her name is anxiety
We get along very well
I didn't want to be her friend at first
But she was very persistent

It's more of a coexistence
Rather than a friendship
But she's the only consistent thing in my life
Everything else comes and goes
But she is always by my side

She has bad timing though
creeping up on me
when I'm having a good time
Putting duct tape
Over my mouth
To silence me
While I'm talking
I know she *probably* means well
But I would like some space
She doesn't like when I have fun
Or try to enjoy myself
We share a bed at night
She sits right on my chest
So I can't breath
Don't get me wrong
~~Sometimes~~ she's **always very** helpful
Without her
I might forget
That one embarrassing thing
I said a year ago
Or I wouldn't show up
To everything
10 minutes early
"Just in case"

She keeps me safe
Makes sure I never
Leave my comfort zone
That could be ~~electrifying~~ **dangerous**
And she just wants the best for me

Sometimes
She can be
A little too overpowering
Tells me I'm dying
When there is nothing to worry about
Gets a little too excited
When she holds my hands
So they're always shaking

She makes sure
I always have room for her in my life
Sometimes ~~forcing~~ **requesting** me
To stop spending time with family and friends
But it's ok
I know she's means well

That's what she tells me at least
Sometimes I wish I could stop,
Stop being friends with her
But whenever I try to ask someone for help
She always tells me better
Or steals my voice
And hides it away
If I gain any courage
She consumes it in seconds

Everyone needs a best friend
Anxiety is mine
And she's a great one
Right?



Sunny-Side Frown

Sabrina Zhang

Seventy-Nine Passengers

Rachel Ha

1986, Age 14: After The Fall of Saigon

Seventy-nine passengers. Five days. One boat. Storm tears the tapestry sky up above. Every celestial gift is plagued by an inky darkness. A claw carves

into the stomach of passengers, inscribing debility so deep into their bones that it can only be articulated by the wretched outcries of their hollow bellies.

Oh, what it would feel like to have the sweet juice of sugarcane slide down their throats. Hunger is the ubiquity that ties their suffering together. The boat

rocks *back and forth* to the metronome of a mercurial sea. They stand shoulder to shoulder, limbs entwined, space, a vacant notion. He measures his days by

the sun and the moon, face growing paler by the morning. He could taste the brackish air fill his lungs, salt coating each fallen word. *What would it take to*

reach the other side? Pirates pillaged onto the boats: men who would take but never slaughter, looting whatever articles that are in the breadth of their arms.

Robbing women of pristine chastity. Children of untainted eyes. Just fourteen years old when he crossed the South China Sea. When he quickly adapted a

spineless disposition to survive. Saw men and women he esteemed sell all that they had to jump onto helicopters and escape. Just fourteen years old when he

left his family and became a political refugee. America, what lyrical persuasion

written on the inflection of his tongue — *my country 'tis of thee* filled him with
the kerosene embedded in his vein when I asked him, “what caused you to leave?”
He says, “A chance for a better opportunity.” Sometimes I forget the taupe scars
that adorn the film reel of his mind, the life he lived to bear mine. An ode to my
father, how he fled the arms of the unforgiving and ran to the home of the brave.

End Times

Sasha Stern

Today, the soldiers turned their weapons into instruments
and paraded around enemy towns playing folk tunes with gunfire.
They bombed the cities people pray at with confetti,
so we all threw away our religions and put on party hats.
If everything is so good here, why need God?

Tomorrow, I'll walk down the aisle as a bride dressed in groomsweat
and have children for the not-enough tax breaks. I'll raise them in a house made
of oil,
money furnished with goods on permanent loan
from countries that only exist on my T.V. screen.
Life would be so much easier, I think,

if we just split disputed territories in half like peanut butter sandwiches
or carved pieces like fowl. If people are still unhappy,
then they don't get dinner—it's how it goes in my house,
and everything works out fine in the end.
These silly men in silly party hats

say the world is ending, that the Messiah is returning,
that I must repent repent repent,
but Gabriel has yet to sound his horn
and I don't think the party is over
just yet.

street urchin unspooled

Wenshu Wang

nanjing 1937

how to gut a fish properly: listen closely, child.

if you can't stomach it, you're better off finding somewhere else to work.

i. a blow to the head

Don't get cheeky, child. Here, a quick mouth will
get you a backhand and nothing more. Hope a customer
hands hold only copper coin and not copper switchblades.
Hold a chipped knife and strike, eel or brute. Do not flinch.
Even the sun weeps when bled dry of thieved dignity.
Early morn, dawn and pillaged.

ii. clean

Stop to watch rats scurry into overpassed alleyways.
Lapsed tongues and emptied riverbeds, grease-blanketed and sputtering
gutters more abundant than untouched earth. Too many dirtied streets,
too many buried under layers of ashes and soil-caked hands.
You almost drowned in the downstream canals near home once upon a time:
now both these are uninhabitable.

iii. remove the fins & scale

Words stripped to commas, stream of consciousness strewn by stray thought.
The hills stopped rolling under crushing cloven hooves.
In another world, we worry of moths greedy on our silk:
in this one we are reduced to our hunger.
Heat-blistered skin looks more appetizing than asphalt.

iv. cut to the neck & remove entrails

Fragment by fragment we lie. It is a strange age to be, young.
Jaundiced under mustard gas, yet not adroit enough to
draw calligraphy on cheap paper or guns
from makeshift holsters. Hands are too shaky.
Listen, hear your sandpaper skin against loose silt.
Listen, child, how it swathes your bare feet.

v. scrape out kidney

Radical belief is no proof of existence.

War-torn grounds on which we hunch, cracked palm to soil,
are our holy sites, others razed to dust.

Pray someday we may fist earth to maw and
do not worry of its crackle.

Whisper *save us* to the sky.

Receive no deliverance.

vi. rinse & clean abdominal cavity

Wist for a full belly. Peel back layers of gravel
and harvest soot-stained weed, gnaw leaf and
bark and syllables between every panhandling word.

You're too old to be acting so young, son:

dreams are for nippons and softer girls split.

Feel, child, how stomach-churned aspirations
scrape you raw.

vii. serve

Savagely we eat. In lands that do not love us,
cardinal sin is our only twisted retribution—
delirium rapacious, stolen carp and chastity
become misconstrued poetic justice.

I look out to tainted waters and imagine salt.



cables

Maria Gamboa

extreme value theorem

Daniel Ng

*If $f(x)$ is continuous
on the closed interval $[a,b]$,
then $f(x)$ must have a maximum
and a minimum on that interval,
lest they drift into a forsaken sea
only to never drown.*

My mountain, broken
by your crawling hands,
my side, gouged
by your lethargic blade,
I screamed once before, but now
I merely bore of such agony.

Pale sunlight falls
across my skin, your crow
digs its claws into my hair
and drinks from the wells
where my eyes ought to be.

Perhaps, we are knotted strings, a necklace—
one charm per timeless tragedy.
Perhaps, Time, you'll speak to me,
perhaps we grow tired
of this spent charade,
perhaps from the start,
we were fated to fall
just shy of impossible,
down to nothing
but vessels for an allegory.

Hope is a precarious cliff,
yet I want you to say something.
Time, I want you to let me go,

to let me know why,
to lend me your watch
so I may shatter it
into a thousand shards of melancholy
that just look like broken glass
upon the pavement.

But the crow is not yet sated—
I doubt she ever will be.
And as she tilts her feathered head,
I can only reply with our familiar silence.

Guava Tree

Shristi Nigam

i remember the feeling that came with watching
my grandmother tend to her guava tree

her hands formed barriers around the rooted dirt
protecting the soil and its ancestry

her hands moved swift
against the crimson cut branches
and reached for the green fruit

plucking away those who looked plump
she called his name repeatedly
she called his name and shut her eyes
to say thanks for this food
to say thanks for this life

the same gesture i remember
performing on the trips to temples

where i would get down on my knees and
pray to a statue
hoping for one
bite out of the guavas my grandmother
kept in her reserved
for special guests only

how i hoped to be a special guest
one day in her eyes

i remember how her hands swept
dirt of this sacred gift
an angelic motion which
mesmerized the eyes of a child

she called it
heaven's blessing for its tingling texture which
could never disappoint
a mouthwatering child

like me

i remember sitting on the steps
of the large garden my grandmother grew
from the palms of her hand
watching
her rinse the fruit in water
and cut it open into slices
i wonder how it feels to
taste the sweetness on my tongue

my fingers tingle from the sudden
coolness of her palms holding mine
her eyes called mine, and with a smile she handed me a slice

“shristi, this is for you”
“the most special guest in my house this summer
after three years”
“My Granddaughter.”



Urban Sketch #21

Aashi Hirani

what was I made for?

Huda Bajwa

When I was 10, I used to mess around with my moms things
The things being the stuff I was told to wait to use until I was older
Makeup, nail polish, big dresses and high heels were all that I wished for

When I was 11, I finally got some of the things that I wished for, but altered by my mother
The makeup being colored chapstick, nail polish being stickers and high heels turned to plastic ones with glitter and colored feathers

When I was 12, I couldn't wait to be a teenager
It was practically all that I could think about due to the fact that 13 was such a lucky number, right?

When I was 13, I wanted to drop out of school
I was fully aware of the college experience and somehow wanted to experience right in the moment

When I was 14, I didn't even know who I was
Starting high school made me think about graduation and the future coming ahead

When I was 15, I started to wish that my biggest problem was wanting a pair of heels
I wanted to be a little kid again with not having to worry about getting a job, more work, being responsible and most of all knowing my future

When I was 16, I started to mess around with my own things
The things being actual makeup, the big dresses sitting in my closet along with the shiniest heels that you think think about

My inner childhood is finally coming into play, but is this really what I had wished for?



Hunger
Sabrina Zhang

Odd, Laughable, and Expensive-Looking Hats

Rebekah Abraham

The sun is high while the clouds blanket it,
But that doesn't dampen the spirit of the streets,
Bustling, lined with proud people who won't stop,
Even if a fire hydrant *exploded* into high-pressure waterfalls

As busy and crowded as the street is
There's someone standing still
Leaning against a brick wall
Through his eyes, the world is **black** and **white**
The monochromatic sky brings no excitement

He sometimes wished he could fly like others
The others who could see beautiful colors
Who wore, odd, laughable, and expensive-looking hats
The ones who were happy with what they achieved
Sometimes, he was jealous

Then, the wind blows
It shoves and swirls around, the leaves creating a tornado
But *something* catches his **gray** eyes
Something so colorful,
so bright,
so *beautiful*

Attracted to the color
He slowly walked closer, the *hat* having fallen to the ground
He made his way through the busy bodies
He took a quick glance around
Nobody else had seen it

He looked back down, but it was gone

In a panic, his breath quickened
he searched around

And there it was
Flying in the sky, the wind having it's fun
He yelled, his legs moving on autopilot
Shoving the innocent bystanders
And he ran after the wind, to the hat
His hat,
Which he would wear like
His future.

Then, he ran into the great antagonist of his story as it pushed against him
The gusts of air hitting him like a brick to the face
He kept running
He never stopped
Even when his lungs were screaming
Even when his legs felt heavy
Even when the world seemed to be against him

The wind never stopped, not until he was almost out of breath
Surprised, and proud, it decided to have mercy on this determined soul
Someone who had worked hard
Someone who earned the ability to *fly*

He ran towards the hat
And the wind
It swirled and blew the hat onto his head

And suddenly
The world blows up,

Into *beautiful* colors
The sky is **deep blue**
The grass is **vibrant green**
And *flowers*,

Which he used to never care about,
Suddenly became the *most* beautiful thing in the world

And he felt like he could fly
He flew up, higher and higher,

And he touched the clouds

Impromptu 09

Zixuan Tong

A dream of form in nights of thought,
Senselessly he became every mere aspect that defines me.
Godspeed to whom we in our madness abandoned the frequency of body and
music,
and worshiped he who had avulsed the void of my art,
If only he knows what he is for me and my soul.

But upon whom is to say what sane is to be?
A candle burned from both ends, or a shattered life one sees.
One could not pay too high a price for another cadence of ecstasy,
what I fancied in my dreams pursued a greater figure of him,
And he may live the pastorate that he and I dare not realize the deeds.

four lessons etched into my inherited skin

Wenshu Wang

—:

on dirt-dragged forenoons where
the lazy heat melts down our flaxen bodies,
my grandmother, olive-tinted and veiled in the comfort of
conversancy, wrenches me out of bed and to the morning market.
cloth bags and dilapidated woven baskets in hand, we cut through the
rain-sodden grass to get to the open road; saffron persimmons and
fragrant roast duck

look, 孩子: underneath the stem, it's yellow – dry.

stained glass windowpanes of sky, slivers of light contiguous with the contours
of my dusted diasporic hands

smell this: pungent, yes? – ripe.

I stitch these into my being, breathe these locutions into my hallowed lungs.
here I learn how to make quick judgment of illusory flesh
(& that I'm allergic to chives),
to pick at the topography of a truncated existence,
discerning truth in ephemeral hues

二:

painted opera skin
calligraphy brushes held to rough faces, vivid magenta [dragonfruit purple]
on fluttering eyelids against pasty white,
wheat skin softened by milky varnish – we are airbrushed,
our mothers erasing from us their immigrated fears
it rots into my being where I am nothing but recessed half-truths.
here I learn van gogh was right:
a beautiful body perishes, but a work of art does not
languidly my blood seeps into the dirt
cradling not just my ancestors bones, but the evocations of a thousand
desperate, gutted girls, daughters, mothers, women [performers]
I'll root my painted fingernails into the skeletage of my ribcage
pull out the grouse in which makes me alloyed underneath the bruised earth
dead & buried & forgotten
this melted makeup will seep out of my open pores and

christen the ground. art does not die like this spoiling esse,
waiting to be picked up & washed onto another chinese girl's skin.
I am nothing if not the girl my mother was
mā, am I
porcelain yet ?

三:

I figure out that I'm not allergic anymore or was I ever? I'm not sure
but as I bite into the savory skin of a welded-shut dumpling, verdant pieces of leaf
spilling out, I almost retch.
here I learn I cannot stomach it the same as I could in
countryside-living // mandarin cogent // monsoon-whirling adolescence.
I've long since outgrown savaging my reticent
heritage in hopes that it will find me, mid-autumn, while I am still
chasing a bitter wisp of a fate already reaching denouement,
tracing creases in my ochre-faded palms underneath the fullest moon of
ambrosial fall.
this one means long life see, this one is traditionalism
look, 孩子: this says that you are homesick for a land you no longer know.

choose quickly: will you abandon the dreams that trickle down into your
fogged kaleidoscope eyes?
trade opalescent buddha effigies, cloying
assimilated phrases in exchange for cracked genesis ribs?
will you clip your wings, barter off your flight—biting mandarin that spews
from my acrid mouth, sharper than my soy-stained teeth—to follow
the rules of the foreigner?

[you are the 老外 in this nation]

I have no words for you in my dwindling mother tongue
the pinyin I try to wrangle from my painted lips are ground
to dust before they're released sichuan pepper flakes and anise under
the mortar and pestle of my stiff, yielding palate
the requiems—vesseling xi'an dialect—running threadlike in my veins
go unsung

四:

I prick my finger on the serrated bones of my foregone youth
balmy summers bequeathed to the jade womb of faceless ancestors

heart of ancient lands, an insatiable thrum , pulsing beneath my chest
the sap that dribbles out is not carmine red blood but viridescent, smoking
incense.

a reminder of how temporary I am: readily burned out,
smothered between the thumb and forefinger
of my birthright; of my nescient deliverance
here I learn I am nothing if not unabridged, pure.

I am my mother again in this moment, before the century
turned: we are wedded like cattle, impulsive men jumping at the idea
of taking what is untethered, unsoiled.

it is motive enough to leave, is why she rode a raft across the sea with me,
fettered to an umbilical cord, her abjure pipe dreams nothing but
unwinded, spiteful psalms.

I find that I have never been unbound by my
splintered roots; my feet have always been soot-kissed
and constrained, martyred to the will of my antecedents.

I unspool into four caches of bone broth & glass noodles // fossils // memories :
carrier, parallel, blessing (or bane ?), prophesied
on the darkest, sunken nights, I invoke my forbearers
absolve me of my lineal duties
absolve me of my acquired fears

girl daughter sino
tapestry woven piece painted
legacy [遗产] buried



Passing By

Jessica Lee

tributes to Woodside, Queens

Aieshah Ashfer

Nod to the chef working the tiny Halal Chinese restaurant,
serving up her soul garnished with slick sesame oil and its plump seeds to match,
coarse black eyebrow decorated with sweat and nested in concentration and
patience, feeding the pumping heart of the World from Greenpoint Avenue.

Nod to the receptionist behind the counter at the sterile doctor's office, flocking
swiftly to her phone-shaped calling bell from her granite counter, staying afloat in
a sea of patients and bearing all sick, all ill, all ailing, looking after the pumping
heart of the World from Roosevelt Avenue.

Nod to the waitress seen behind the ornate walls at La Flore,
in her run, bringing scents of Mexico in the plates she carries,
her work appreciated within smile and the burst of flavors,
serving magic to the pumping heart of the World from 53rd St.

Nod to the pharmacist as she runs between pill-lined shelves,
handing cylindrical treatments to passerby to save lives,
deciphering the tricky handwriting of doctors for the masses,
curing the pumping heart of the World from 50th St.

Nod to the librarian at the Queens Public Library in Woodside,
listening to the click of think pieces as they bury into shelves,
weaving her way through her universe as they dip the youth into their dreams,
teaching the pumping heart of the World from Skillman Avenue.

Nod to the thespian vocalizing her heart inside the downstairs apartment,
morning sounds of jubilee as her voice flows through the thin walls, leaving
rhythms for Broadway, for the ears, for the people,
singing proudly for the pumping heart of the World from 54th St.

Nod to the hairdresser in Kim's Hair Salon,
everyday zipping through the salon's tiny bones filled with clients,
perfecting precious silky strands from hair bulb to shaft,
instilling confidence in the pumping heart of the World from 53rd St.

Nod to the cashier behind the counter at the laundromat,
trading soap for coins to listen to the music of the coins clink,
spinning garments cleanly for a job interview, a baby shower, a wedding,
polishing garments for the pumping heart of the World from 55th St.

Nod to the believer draped in jilbab in the local mosque,
presenting her visions and requests to be understood by God,
sounds to be heard from the stones and ground around her,
praying for the pumping heart of the World from across the Steinmann Triangle.

Nod to the visionary staring outside the snow-encrusted window of her
apartment, humming a lullaby from her mother, a head of the household,
craving for adventure in the World she knew and the *world* she would come to
know, dreaming for the pumping heart of the World tucked inside Queens Blvd.
and Roosevelt Ave.

Nod to the women working for the pumping heart of the World.
The World, my Woodside, my Queens.
7 trains running through it and back like a capillary.
Northern & Queens Blvd spread like a jugular.
The heart of the World dispersed through its bounds.



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