

The language barrier between us
By Sofia D.-P.

they say
actions speak louder than words.
well then it makes sense that
i, someone who tells stories in the car,
who texts enthusiastically,
who uses flowery language
and reads odd books
can't communicate well with
my Mother,
who prefers me cooking with her,
and chores done
and rooms cleaned
and birthday cards made
and promises kept
and hugs given
and effort
over "happy birthday, im sorry, i love you"
sometimes the language barrier
comes between us, and it hurts.

She berates me, stopping the car,
i am trapped in her anguish.

She takes the words i so carefully wish to use
from my mouth, and sends them back, transformed.

in these moments,
i cannot speak. i sit still,

there is no word or action i can take
to help calm us down.

She uses, Her words now,
to tell me to act.

i am silent, a statue, half-blank
half-surrenduring look upon my face.

i listen, skin like porcelain chipping away,
Her mouth shaping familiar frustrations, and i ask myself

am i the one who did something wrong today?
or will it have been life?

“Won’t you say something? Anything?”
She asks, begging for comfort.

but i cannot,
because i know, She will not take my words,

as they are not the currency
that She understands.

and i know, that any action i take
will feel hollow,
because i would not be doing it for us
i would be doing it for Her.
it means the world to my Mother
when i take action.
when i cook with Her
and the chores are done
and my room is cleaned
and birthday cards are made
and promises are kept
and hugs are given
and effort is put in
and i hope,
that my few contributions
outweigh my numerous failures.
Because I cry when She tells me
that one day
i will reach my hand out to Her
and She will be too far away to reach it.

But for now,
i fold dough between my palms
talking passionately with my *mamá* in our cramped kitchen
making *arepas* for us
to eat together.

Home on a Train’s Window
By Max C.

I step off the plane
The air smells
Weird and cold
It doesn’t smell like home

All the signs have loopy letters
Like someone painted them with a brush
Sitting next to the loopy letters is the yelling word:
BAGGAGE CLAIM

The taxi guy's English sounds wobbly
I don't think his dad taught him how to say the r's
But its good he speaks any at all
Because my mom says I only speak English
Apparently pig-latin doesn't count

He talks about golf and the city
While buildings as big as godzilla
Zoom past
Like rocketships in the wind

The hotel has a spa
They call it an *Onsen*
My mom says they go in naked
No way
I don't do naked
Even if Onsens are old and special

So instead,
I shop

We went to this place where the moving stairs go,
Up and up and up
There's a whole floor for umbrellas
Polka dots, rainbow stripes
So many ways to keep the rain off your head
And a floor for suitcases
And one for phone cases
And one for pillow cases
I guess here,
They like their cases

There are lines everywhere
Twisty turny lines that
Surround real Samurai temples
And there are dragons
With big red noses and teeth like my shark toys
That sit still forever
Like they're frozen mid-RAWR
In each line
People stand front to back

Straighter than the chopsticks
Dad said he bought as a joke

I want to like it here,
I really really do

But the old ramen shop
With the old lady
And the super old broth
Wasn't as good as Ichiran,
The chain I ate from hours before
My brother says,
"At least we're supporting local businesses"
I say,
Tomorrow it's McDonalds for dinner

They say the trains here are fast
But the Seattle light rail is free for kids like me
And this station map,
Looks like a rainbow exploded
Blues greens pinks yellows and reds
All the colors make my brain dizzy

It feels like the people here,
Know exactly where to go
Like they were born knowing how to,
Catch a train to Otsuki
To them,
It's easy as
ABC

We finally get onto a train
And I sit between two grown ups
Who don't smile
Or move
Or even blink
One of them wears a suit
To ride a train
I'm in a ketchup stained hoodie

I stand on the seat
To peek out the window
But all I see is my reflection
Floating over trees and streetlights

I press my forehead to the window

And breathe a foggy circle into the glass
Then, I draw a big square for the house
A triangle on top for the roof
A rectangle for the door
Four stick figures
And a dog

I look back to my mom,
She's fumbling around with my chopstick trainer
I look back to my dad,
He's holding the rainbow map upside down
I look back to the window
Press my pointy finger to the glass
And I finish drawing my home
On a train
In
Japan

The Sixth Point

By Michelle S.

My right hand rests on my heart. I wear a star at my throat; it warms my skin. I count its six points against the flag's five. I will always know the difference—one faith stitched, the other made to support my neck. I've learned the language of both, and I sing the different anthems with different accents, to defend the sixth point, the faith passed down from my mother, the one that steadies me when nothing else does —my Constitution. We light candles in the kitchen and watch the wax gather like stars: small promises of laws we keep without needing to name them, born of habit not decree.

When we entered the embassy, the air was thick with waiting, our hands already United through sweat and hope. The same hope we saw when the States spread like constellations of our 50 stars beneath the plane window, a map of bright intentions. We thought: *this is America*, a place where borders blur, where stars multiply. So we raised our hands, not for surrender or help; We didn't need to be saved, believe me. We speak our oath, hands to hearts, eyes past the flag— toward our own God.

Chasing Ends
By Flynn Y.

We sit in circles
Pretend it means to return
To who we were.

But life doesn't spin back
It stretches
pulling me forward
away from the boy I once was
toward the end of childhood
toward the memories I can't relive.

Freshman year feels like a dream
my voice was higher
my spirit unbothered
walking hallways without the weight of endings
thinking that the days would stack forever.

Now,
Every "remember when"
is a bye in disguise.

Goodbye,
to the cracked voices
nervous smiles
sweaty mosh pits beneath the museum lights
trembling laughter when the music cuts out.

Then we'd laugh louder
thinking we had all the time in the world
chasing the future instead of the moment.

We chose late nights with friends over dinners at home
told ourselves there would always be more
But now each one is a last –
Moving up to alumni, senior field day
the final homecoming, prom night
ski bus rides, the last first day.

All taken for granted
not knowing what we'd

Lose.

Our innocence is fleeting

I spend time
chasing my ends.
But life never reaches
a full circle.

All I can do is watch
the line stretch t h i n n e r
waving goodbye to the boy I once was
The boy with a backpack too big for his shoulders
who believed forever was real
who never noticed how quickly
the world was changing

A boy I'll never reach

again.

Andrew
By Rowan S.

Each day takes his place in a cheap plastic chair.
On his sun-faded porch,
he is a constant shadow, lingering
over the entrance to the smallest
oldest house on 14th Avenue.

He silently oversees the neighborhood,
watching the children as they pass along cracked sidewalks.
The children who have long since learned not
to wave in his direction — they would receive nothing
but a piercing glare in return from the man
who sits on the front porch of his childhood home.

Once a year, at the parting of October,
the front porch is deserted. Even the chair is gone.
His house sits darker than ever. For once,
the whole neighborhood stands on their porches,
watching the children go in and out of sight.
The same kids scatter halfway up his walkway,
only to realize they would yet again receive nothing
from the man who sits on the porch of his childhood home.

By now, the children have adapted to floating by the perfectly trimmed yard of 8236, like a falling leaf from the largest tree on the block. A birch tree that just so happens to be anchored in Andrew's lawn, just a bit too much to the right from the middle of the porch, its off-center placement being the yard's only imperfection.

It's unclear what has been rooted in place longer: Andrew, or that birch.

The Fallen Cap
After Frank Ocean
By Chancellor A.

You stand at the cracked 7-ELEVEN curb.
You are waiting for her to save you, even though
it's the start of nothing.

Laughter shatters the dry air when she comes.
You sit on the curb, sharing stories.
You toast bottles and swallow the freedom.
laughing
 crying
 loving
 hating
while the cap of her Coca-Cola falls to the ground.

It's the start of nothing,
but it sure didn't feel like it then,
so you stoop low and pocket her bottle cap before
the cracked curb can steal it.

Your eyes tear open.
Somehow the popcorn ceiling is darker
than the blackness of your empty mind.
You're not sure if it hurts more as a memory
or as a dream.

Only one thing is certain:
We'll never be those kids again

You pull the lamp string.
Warm light dances around your room.
You feel the chipped corner of your nightstand.

Underneath the worn photo, you feel a familiar shape.
The raised lettering and the sharp edges,
the fallen cap and you.

Hand

By Harlan W.

My thumb stands at attention,
Ridgid, rough, and raw.
The blistered backbone of my beliefs:
My grit, my integrity.
Chalk exfoliates from the creases in my skin,
What led me to unimaginable victories.
Dirt under my nails hides the aches and pains,
Of every trial along the way.
Even when it's exhausted,
It anchors every motion, steadies my grip.

My index finger points the way,
Toward the trail, the next adventure,
The first move, guiding my actions.
My internal compass.
Despite my many wrong turns,
It remains pointing forward.

My middle finger rises, defiant.
The pillar of my hatred:
The false, the cruel,
To the ones who say *I can't*.
It reminds me of where not to stand.

My ring finger glows, a reminder of what I love:
The crackle of a campfire,
The silent serenity of the mountains,
The hum of music through an open window.
A remembrance of things worth fighting for,
What keeps me whole.

My pinky trembles, my weaknesses,
the fragile truths I dare not utter.
It cowers beneath my other fingers,
But even trembling, it belongs.
Without its vulnerability,
How would I grow?
My palm cradles each finger.

A quiet field where every path begins,
Tendons branch in every direction,
Binding my strengths and weaknesses,
My timeless passions and burning hatred.
No finger works alone,
The hand is one.

Meaning, Purpose
After Sofia D.-P.

People
walking
rushing. Never
changing. Always
moving
forward.
To nothing.

A man hurries from his apartment,
racing through rush hour traffic,
the plane ticket with yesterday's date
left forgotten on the marble countertop.
He leaves his car parked outside the station,
frantically scans the Departures board.
Hurrying to the platform, he
shoves through the crowd.
He needs to get on *that*
train.

A woman walks
through the rolling hills
The sunset and the
birdsong and the
scent of the pines
useless against the light streaming from her phone.

A man grips a slip of paper tightly in his fist while his wife gazes sadly onward,
Hearing the television host reading number,
after number
after number
Maybe this time.

A child cries,
Furious over not being allowed to stay up.

I can't wait till I'm older
He thinks
Till I'm free
to live.

All look forward.
The lights in their eyes blind them
to the world around.

Always forward.
Always rushing.
Always waiting.

A young woman sits
on a green plastic bench on the train platform,
staring at the doors of trains
opening and closing and
opening again.
She watches as a man in a suit pushes past a family of four,
shoving a child out of the way to get the last spot in a train car.
She watches a woman talking on the phone ignore the crying child,
darting around him to get to her platform.
The young woman stands before turning to leave, turning and
walking
towards the moonlight pouring in through the station doors.
She steps out,
walking
across the bustling street
to the grassy field on the other side.
A smile traces her face
as easy and free
as the breeze rustling the grass
and the bluejay's melody whispering gently in her ear.
The stars shine brightly overhead.
Billions and billions of years
their light has shined on this spot.
And they will shine for billions more

The Future Isn't AI
By Markus K.

They tell us the future is AI.
It learns quicker than we can dream,
Remembers everything we forget,
And can scan through history in an instant.

Still, you prove them wrong without a word.

Through the three squeezes in your gentle hand
Spelling out the unspoken "I love you."
No formula can measure
The way your skin warms mine.

No code can recreate
The endless hours you spent sculpting
The "Bunnies & Strawberries" chess set.
I love the knights, bunnies that ride small strawberries,
How their eyes are perfectly crooked,
How the bishop's tail is perfectly backwards.

A machine would fix it:
Straighten the eyes,
Flip the tail.
And in doing so,
It would lose everything that made it ours.

A machine may hum forever
But its buzz holds no sorrow.
It won't know the salt of shared tears
From words sharper than we meant,
Scattered like broken glass we step around.

The future isn't AI,
It's the box beneath my bed.
Filled with folded letters and photos,
Breathing the notes of your rose perfume.
Your handwriting presses into the paper,
A print too human for any
Machine to understand.

In Circles
By August R.

I have swum too far,
But I'll be damned if I turn back now.
What if I don't touch the buoy?
What will happen?

An intrusive voice gnaws at my brain: "You'll lose all your opportunities and your house will get broken into and

your parents will die and you won't be okay, and
and
and
And my thoughts are deceiving me — I know they are.
Yet here I am.
Trapped, with endless vastness surrounding my pruned body.
The voice has always been stronger than my will.

So I push forward, gulping down the brine.
With each stroke I get closer to the buoy,
With each stroke I get closer to succumbing to my disease –
To death.

My arms and legs make circles,
Slower and slower,
Until they stop.

I can't believe I'm about to let it kill me.

Deer Crossing
By Shay M.

The disfigured corpse of a deer lies
Cold.
 Still.
 Lifeless.
On the dry grass on the side of the road.

The deer sits against a backdrop of crimson
As it lies in a puddle of its own blood,
Staining the silky white fur of its belly dark red.

The meat is ripped apart and feasted upon by
Coyotes.
 Vultures.
 Foxes.
Who take the torn, bloody flesh to satisfy their appetite.

The carcass sits half eaten on the hard ground,
Its ribs exposed and insides hollowed out
As the skin drapes limply around the deer's bony form.

The body now lies untouched, any remaining meat is now
Decayed.
 Putrefied.

Infested.
As maggots and flies plague the rancid, rotten meat.

The bones fall from their structure,
No more skin or flesh to hold them together,
So they sit scattered on the ground.

The skull lies piled atop the broken bones
Pathetic.

Alone.

Ignored.

A sorry excuse of a memorial for a creature as majestic as a deer.

On Broadway & Madison **By Rose H.**

I always thought I hated the city
Turns out I hate being an ant
Among the giants of towers and men,
It's so easy to feel so
Small
Among the screeches of tires and the pounding of drills,
It's so easy to feel so
Lost

And alone

From the 33rd floor,
I watch
Like a hawk
As the ants go marching

One by one

I watch as
An old lady pushes a
Bright pink stroller with
A poodle in it
I watch as
A bunch of twenty somethings
Do kick flips outside the Catholic Church
As they breathe smoke and whiskey into the night air

I watch as

A man sets up a drum kit outside the old Bartels,
Now covered up with posters
Advertising basement shows and drag brunches

From the 33rd floor,
I hear the laughs of

Kids playing on the roof deck park

Of another apartment
They run and chase each other
Until the little one stops
 To tie his shoe

 One by one
 I watch them
Lining up for dumplings
At the farmers market on Sunday
 I watch them
Try and bring vinyl back from the dead
So they can feel alive
 I watch them
Find beauty in brick walls
Finding murals that haven't been painted yet
 I watch them
Find love in their hole-in-wall coffee shop
That's always out of pastries
 I watch them
Find hope
In the discount bin at a second hand store
 From the 33rd floor
 I watch
It's strange
To think
I always thought that I hated it here

Whales
After "Waves" by Robin Robertson
By Sonya C.

Moving out to sea,
I swim the only way I know how
with a heavy body and waterlogged eyes.
I dip below the surface,
then pull myself up again,
over and over and over.
I take a sharp inhale each time
I rise above the surface,
and I use everything I have
to find the depth of the sea
to get away from the screeching boats
to get away from the prying eyes.
In every direction I feel the gentle pulse of the water

and I bob up and down rhythmically.
The sea is especially vacant right now,
quiet and empty of the sounds of other whales.
This quiet is not the kind
that soothes you to sleep.
This quiet is eerie.
My flippers grow tired and my breath deepens.
I shakily inhale and
dip below the surface
one last time.

Goodbye

Seven letters that form a word.
A word that means nothing...
until it does.
Until I'm parked at a red light,
hands gripping the steering wheel,
wishing I could hear your voice again,
see your warm smile shining like headlights in the blur of passing cars.

I remember your laughter
the kind that spilled into every corner and settled my nerves.
The way you found joy in small things:
morning sunlight pooling on the counter as you stirred your pungent chamomile tea,
the old radio humming low while you sang along under your breath,
and even the quiet of the house felt safe when you were near.
Goodbye isn't just a word, it's everything that's missing.

It's the empty chair at family dinner,
the echo of your voice stretching down the green wallpapered hallway,
the faint scent of your floral perfume lingering on your sweaters.
It's the calendar you never flipped to the next month,
the photograph on the fridge curling at the edges,
the hush that follows someone saying your name,
the spaces that feel too empty now.

I wish it didn't have to be this way.
That I can't hear your voice when the kitchen is quiet after breakfast,
or share the little joke that always made you chuckle.
Grief drifts around me like smoke from your favorite candle, soft, curling, lingering.
Still, in the ache, you're here somehow,
woven into the way I fold laundry like you did, the quiet humming of songs you loved,
living on in the small, gentle ways you shaped my days.

Goodbye isn't forever.
it's the way your laughter lingers in the corners of the family room,
the soft scratch of your pen on worn recipe cards,
proof that the warmth you gave doesn't fade.
Even if I can't sit beside you again while you teach me to play piano,
I'll carry you,
in my thoughts, my heartbeat, and every step forward.

I let the words escape to you,
voice trembling, finding steadiness.
Goodbye, grandma...
until, I find you in every quiet moment.

Sore Thumb
By Maiya D.

Nobody is perfect,
but my hands almost were.

After I was born,
the nurse told my mom
I was going to be a pianist—
my fingers,
long and slender,
were made for the smooth rhythm
of the sleek black and white keys.

Perhaps the nurse saw
a glimpse of the future
concealed in the lines etched across my palms.
Because when I was four,
I began playing the piano,
allowing my agile fingers
to leap and twirl
through the notes.
Each movement clean,
measured,
so perfect, the music became hollow.

As I grew older,
I noticed that my right thumb
literally stood out
like a "sore thumb."
It was as if whoever had sculpted my fingers
had left one stubby,

while they stretched the other nine
long and skinny.

I joked about my thumb
in passing,
as if laughing at it first
would make its presence look rehearsed—
a note that fit
by accident.

But when I play,
truth hums in the music
as that stubborn thumb catches
on the edge of each note.
A stutter between chords.
A stretch a little too far
to reach the next key.

Maybe the nurse was half-right,
or half-wrong—
my hands found the keys
but the song finds its heartbeat
when the melody sounds a little warped.

The Dock That Swam Away
After Robin Robertson
By Marin G.

I leap into the water
Eager to feel the bite of the cold heat.
I swim out.
My goal:
The dock that I can almost touch.

So I swim
Until the hung weight of my legs
Drags me down.

It's as if the dock has grown legs
And swam away from me.
It's as fast as a motorboat
Leaving only a v-shaped wake behind.

My legs fight numbness
While I

Bob,
Up
And
Down.

A wave of darkness crashes over me,
Hitting me like a punch in the face.

I shove my way to the surface
And see,
The light of the sky
Then the dark, murky water.

My thoughts flood.
I almost shout.
Questioning it all,
Asking:

God,
Why is this happening?
Did I fail you?
What is wrong with me?
How can I change?

Answerless
My eyes close.
The energy is snatched from my open palm.
The darkness encroaches on my light.

The bulb shatters.
A numbness spreads.
The last of my feelings
Call out to the light.

There's no response
As my body sinks.

Now I wonder if escape is possible
Or if I will be underwater
Forever,

Trapped in an enveloping silence,
With only little nibbles from fish
Giving feeling to my cold, hard, limbs.