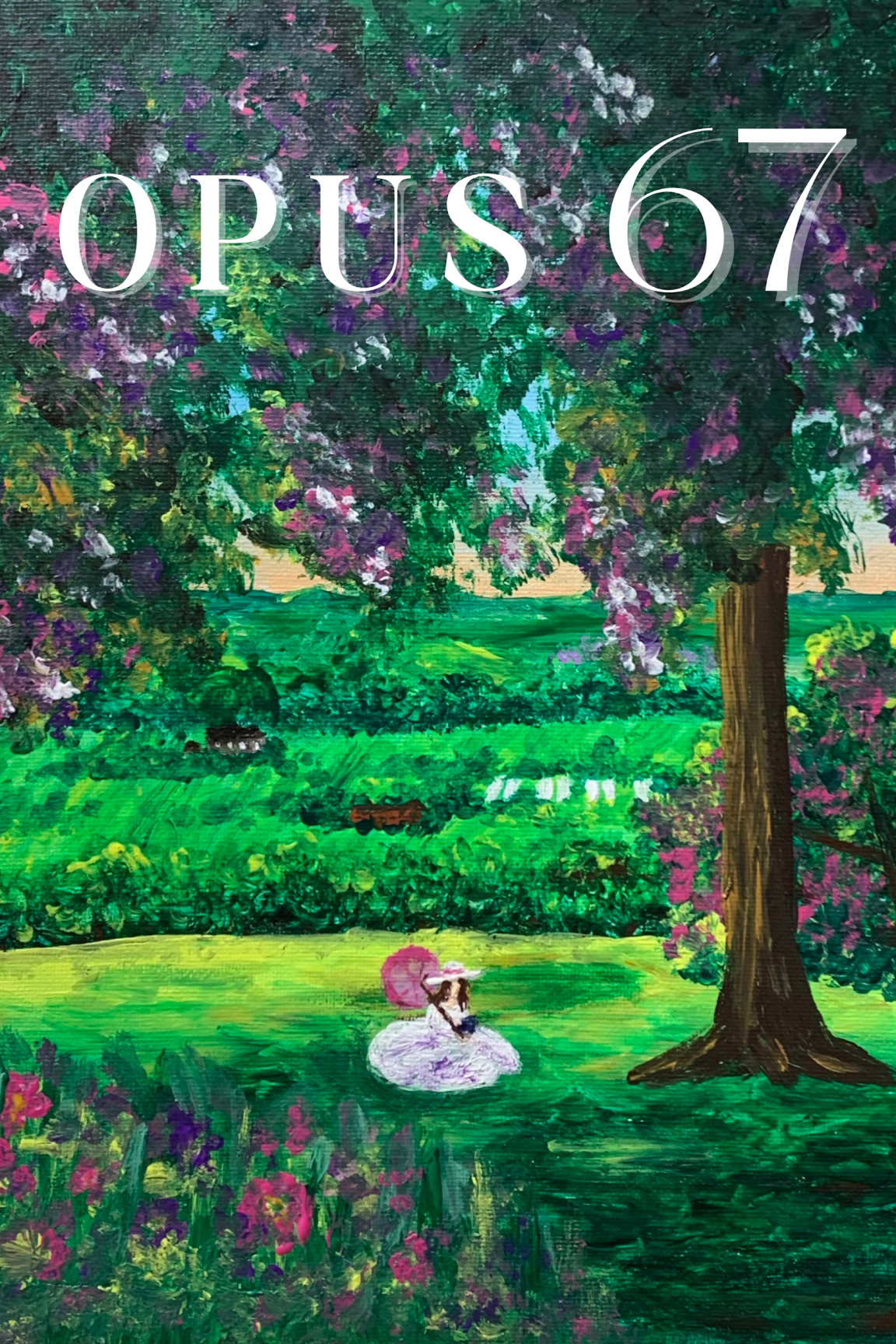
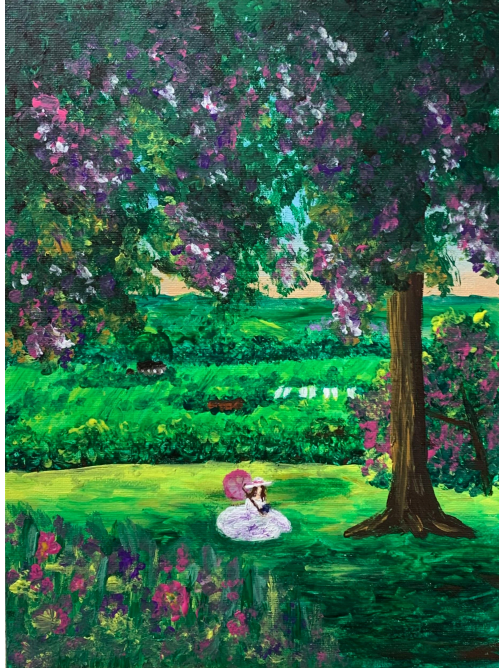


OPUS 67





Cover: **Viridescent Impressions** by Kristen Lee
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Back Cover: **The Hills are Alive** by Madison Kooblall
Design courtesy of Maya Aboutaleb

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 of the publication of OPUS and the promotion of the arts.

This year we would like to thank Allyson Zebrowski and the Herricks Art Club again for their invaluable assistance in helping shape the aesthetic of OPUS 67.

Finally, we'd like to acknowledge 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

A labor of love: the essence and burls that hold OPUS together. Our editors have spent hours tirelessly poring over every page, word, and space in this volume. In the 67th edition of OPUS, our writers will enchant you with their expertise in conveying the euphoric and onerous moments of youth. Each story reflects the exuberant memories and agonizing adolescence found in everyone's impressionable high school years. As a writer myself, I am consistently awed by the high caliber of submissions OPUS receives each year. These past years were well spent parsing through soulful monologues and musical poems on Google Docs.

It is not easy saying goodbye to such a vital part of my high school experience. But like the inevitable waves of an ocean, one must gradually let go to be washed ashore at a later date. OPUS has gifted me the dual beauty of a tight-knit community and a haven away from the competitive Herricks environment. I will never forget the weekly routine of commenting on poems and the annual celebratory pizza party in the musty basement. I will never forget how I found solace in conversations with fellow writers on characterization, expanding metaphor, and creating tension. Like most students, writing allows me to bare my soul to the world— my veins drip with ink that dances across the page, forming narratives of my own.

Lastly, I would like to thank the most influential figures in OPUS and high school. To my writing mentors: my mom, Mrs. Barnard, and Mr. Semerdjian. Thank you for your immensely helpful guidance and feedback these past four years. To my fellow board members, thank you for your endless hard work and dedication. Without all of your efforts, the culmination of this journal would not have been possible.

To all current and future members of OPUS, I beg you to continue finding spaces in your life to write and share your stories. Although it is tempting to pursue lucrative activities in high school alone, it is important to make

time for activities that heal your mind. In a world where science and mathematics dominate, satiate your humanity and balance your creativity through artistry and storytelling. Writing is a bridge between one's psyche and the human experience—with time, you will inevitably become enamored with words and their insinuations.

Vivian Huang, Editor-in-Chief

In my final letter of my high school career, I would like to share a few words regarding my journey in OPUS. The power of the pen prevails all. The words we write shape history as we know it. Conveying our ideas through pen and paper is the strongest way to push for change, preservation, and growth. However, many people do not acknowledge the immense power they hold. The art of writing, unfortunately, is not appreciated enough and is often overlooked. Some may even refer to it as a dying art, but I do not believe that is fully the truth. Writing will always be with us—it just needs to be harnessed properly.

We all have the potential as writers, readers, and editors in our work. I ask us to continue writing and stick with it so that it becomes a strength. The power of the pen is like a phoenix. You must be patient for the light to reignite again, but when it does, the flame will burn bright and powerful. I ask you to try and use that flame to guide you on your journey as a writer, and you will be transported to another world. The pen can truly do amazing things—some even beyond our comprehension.

OPUS was a place for these amazing things to happen. I joined Literature Club in the ninth grade, and since then I have seen the people around me fall in love with the process of creating this journal. Each page you flip through holds the thoughts and feelings of many students. Each piece reflects a story hidden within ourselves—one we might not have even known existed until it was written down.

But this beautiful journal comes from the hard work from behind the scenes. Hours spent editing, formatting, rereading, discussing, and questioning lead to the finalized product you all hold in your hands. Creating OPUS is not just about selecting strong pieces of writing; it's about nurturing voices, uplifting perspectives, and creating a space where creativity can thrive. It is an effort that takes patience, attention to detail, and above all, passion.

I am incredibly proud of everyone who has contributed to this journal—not just the writers, but also the club members, the board,

artists, and everyone else who has helped shape it into what it is today. I am happy and grateful beyond words for the opportunity to work alongside such talented and thoughtful individuals. You have all taught me so much, and I am honored to have been part of this journey with you.

And now, it's time to pass the torch. To the next generation of writers, editors, and artists: keep the flame alive. This is your space now, so nurture it, protect it, and let it challenge you. Let OPUS shape you just as it has shaped me. And when the time comes, hold the flame to your heart and let it burn even brighter.

Thank you, OPUS, for everything.

Shristi Nigam, Editor-in-Chief

Fiction





A Glimpse Into a Cultural Sanctuary
Connor Chang

Pending (Waiting for Death)

Rebekah Abraham

“It’s pretty cold in here,” I said, nudging the guy sitting next to me. The atmosphere was kind of bleak, to say the least. Everyone’s faces were dressed in a grimace, itching to get out of the cart but too tired to move. He grumbled, looking at me annoyed, and shifting slightly away from me.

Damn, okay. I’ve been here for a while too but you won’t see me acting rude.

No one said anything after that. The only noise being the clock ticking, and the sound of the gray haired man’s ticket puncher. Even next to me, it’s like they weren’t breathing. The air was cold and stale, the air from outside filtering into the train from the open doors.

Outside was completely different from inside. The interior of the train was filled with warm colors, the wooly red seats and the brown wood floors, it created a false sense of warmth, especially now that the cold from outside was getting in. I shivered, pulling my jacket tighter around me. From what I could see through the open doors, the station was the same as my old one, the same white walls, snow and water somehow falling everywhere, and the same sight of people scattered across the ground. I read the sign in the far back

Station 1024– no, Station 1027.

I turned to the older woman on my right. She looked...not too good, her body hunching into itself as her head slowly lolled to the side, only to snap back up again. Clearly, she was tired, but it was kind of funny to watch her as I held my ticket out, waiting for the gray haired man to slowly make his way to me.

The train car was pretty big, which makes sense considering it’s the last passenger car. You’re only allowed to enter the train through here. To advance to the next cart, you’d have to get your ticket approved, which only happened rarely.

The grayish-red carpet covering the floor of the train had become dark from people tracking in some snow from outside. The inside of the train and the

outside were polar opposites. The train had a warmer feeling (it was still kind of cold but we don't talk about that), the lights were a dim yellow color and the walls were made of mahogany wood. The seats were set with red fabric and the cushions were slightly worn. Outside it was dark, the only lights being the illuminated moon covered by clouds, and the lone street lamp shining an uncomfortable white light. The station was covered in white, both the color of the walls and the snow falling through the open and torn ceiling.

I was just glad I'd died with a jacket on. Some people didn't get that luck, if you couldn't tell from their frozen bodies at the station. I almost felt kind of bad, their bodies were probably in extreme agony, almost dying, *but never quite getting there*.

"Nexttttt....," a voice drawled out, cutting through the silence, not tired, but bored. The atmosphere changed in the snap of a finger. Everyone rushed out of their seats, pushing and shoving. I watched the old woman who sat next to me get shoved to the ground as she tried to cut a man in line. The silence of the room had shattered, everyone screaming, pleading for the man at the desk to give them his attention. They waved their tickets around, shoving them in his face, to which he threatened to close back up his booth at the front of the car.

Everyone quieted down after that. I didn't bother getting up. My ticket hadn't been punched yet.

The man, clearly fed up (who could blame him?), took a key from his vest pocket, and opened up a door on the side of his booth. The door burst open as multiple people in dark clothing rushed out. Don't ask me how they all fit, I wouldn't be able to tell you, but the afterlife is *literally* a train station so I guess anything is possible.

These people seemed to be security of some sort, immediately getting to work at crowd control, choosing to silently move people in a more tame line. The process swiftly ended, and the door to the next cart closed as quickly as it had opened. The cart, now only hosting half of its previous population, was much more breathable.

The seats were comfortable enough, and I liked the fact that I could feel the texture of stitching as I ran my hand across the now empty seat next to me. Though, I do miss the added warmth of us having to huddle together, there's no

heater on the train, and the doors are still wide open in case any poor soul were to make it in time. It's just adding to their hopelessness, not even being able to get into the train, while the doors are wide open.

Oh well, whatever. Not really *my* problem.

"The train will be leaving the station soon, please make sure you have all of your luggage with you. We are not liable for any damaged or lost items. We hope you enjoy your time on le morte," a loud, automated voice announced from the speakers.

As the train doors closed, I turned my head to the window, and waved goodbye to the eyes trailing after us as we went further and further away.

They'll get another chance in about a hundred years or so, give or take.



Explosive Energy

Alexander Chen

red carnations

Aarini Chakraborty

“Wow, Baba, look at those pretty birds!”

It’s a Tuesday afternoon, around 2:00 PM, so there’s almost no one at the park. Rowen glances at the little girl who yelled at the birds, which effectively scared them away. His friend, Val, walks next to him and giggles—albeit softly—at the child. The child’s face folds into a small pout at the birds abandoning her, until her dad scoops her up into his arms and carries her away. He and Val follow the pair with their eyes, until they’re nothing but a speck of dust on the horizon.

It really gets you thinking, doesn’t it? That everyone is just a speck of dust on the horizon if you don’t know them? Rowen mulls over that—like some mad philosopher, his sister would say—until Val leads him over to sit on a bench. It was a shockingly pretty bench, a magenta color with red carnations beginning to blossom around the legs of it.

Red carnations blooming around the pair.

Just the two of them, with no one else around, Rowen notes, his fingers anxiously drumming on the armrest. It’s silent, the only noise being heard is the faraway bustle of the city, but that doesn’t rid the awkwardness that slowly overcame them. He suddenly forgets every single talking point occurred to man, and internally groans.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he feels Val’s eyes glance at him but quickly look away. He briefly misses the warmth of her gaze.

C’mon, get it together!

He finally looks at her, and sees her mouth opening, hopefully to say something. Thank God.

“So, do you wanna hear about the cute guy in my physics class?” Val says, mouth tilting into a grin. Unfortunately for Rowen, he does *not* want to hear

about this cute guy. His heart plummeted into the deep depths of his stomach, where his morning bagel was probably residing now.

Instead, he just weakly smiles and nods.

He met Val in his chemistry class a year ago, when the professor had made them partners for one of the longest projects he's ever had to do in his life. As much as he had complained to Val about the sheer workload, he secretly enjoyed it. His heart skipped beats like he had arrhythmia any time she leaned close to fix or add something on their poster. The longer the project took, the more time he had to talk with her. The two got close, and she's become a staple of his life.

Rowen doesn't know if Val feels *he's* a staple in *her* life, but he'll take what he can get.

Val has always been the talker among the two, so whenever she chatters about, well, anything really, he always admires her. The way her bangs fall into her eyes, how her eyes crinkle when she *really* smiles, and the way she looks at him when she talks. It's like she really wants him to listen and care, and doesn't think of him as just a brick wall to rant her thoughts out to.

This time, the spring air leaves her hair the slightest bit frizzy, but it gives it more volume, more bounce. Her eyelashes have never seemed longer until the sun's rays glimmered and gave them shine. She goes on and on about how wonderful this guy is. How he's so perfect and wonderful and amazing and dazzling and... he's not going to continue. It's the same thing over and over again, anyways. Why bother?

The whole thing is so hopelessly unrequited. He's a man in the sweltering heat of the desert, desperately hoping for a drop of rain from the heavens.

Ugh, whatever.

Sometimes, in the late hours of the night when Rowen just can't fall asleep, and he's staring up at the dusty ceiling, he allows himself to dream of the possibilities. What if one day, Val pulls her head out of the water and realizes she

likes him too? That it's not as unrequited as he once thought? Maybe then, he'd finally get the courage to tell her that he likes her too.

But then he just feels guilty. It feels invasive, to come up with scenarios where she does what he wants, where she confesses to him. Almost predatory, somehow. So he just keeps it all to himself, when all he wants to do is just *tell her*.

“-hello? Rowen? You okay?”

He snaps out of his thoughts, and focuses on Val just to see her looking so gorgeous he could die. She has her lips parted the slightest bit, her head tilted a touch to the right. He can't stop staring. He's always hated Cupid.

“You zoned out. Is my guy talk boring you?” She says, slightly concerned. How he wishes he could just tell her that it's not just boring, but soul-crushing. But then that would be over a year of friendship down the drain.

“Nothing you say is ever boring, Val,” he confesses instead. And maybe he's imagining it, but her ears go slightly pink. Is there really something there between them? No, no, he's overanalyzing it. Again.

He smiles at her, which she easily returns. They both face away from each other and stare into the horizon instead. Like a stupid coming-of-age movie.

“This feels like something out of a stupid coming-of-age movie,” Val remarks. Rowen snorts, and Val glances at him confusedly. “What? Did I say something?”

He shakes his head, and keeps his gaze focused on the horizon ahead of them, outlined by the wisps of clouds and the rays of the sun. The gentle breeze pulls off a red petal from the carnations surrounding them and swirls around in the corner of his eye.

Red carnations, huh? The flowers of yearning and desiring someone's heart?

Oh, how he wishes he could tell her how much he cares for her. Maybe one day. Not today, someday.

One day, he'll confess. Just like the sun always rises in the east, his love will continue to remain unwavering and cast its rays upon her. She'll either reciprocate or turn away, but his love will still be there; always shining its light.

And maybe after, those red carnations will burst into golden flames from his sun into a resilient dahlia: a long-lasting love and an everlasting bond.

they; the others

Aarini Chakraborty

A clump of flesh dangled from the wooden beams. The clump of flesh dangled, once a thing, nay, a person significant to many. But it was a grotesque sight, they had uttered. Her posterior thigh had been skinned; skinned alive, forensics had reported. The hand that was deemed necessary for many of the world's most useful tasks was gone. Brutally ripped apart, the whispers had hummed. Her torso had been touched, *grazed* with acid. It was rumored that it had left spots speckled across her upper body. Not freckles, but battle scars.

(Although battle scars are for the ones who had survived.)

They say she had it coming. She had wandered to places that others wouldn't dare to extend their fingers into. She had exhaled in areas where others would rather meet their demise from respiratory arrest than to allow themselves to simply breathe. She had laughed in locations where others would prefer to meticulously stitch a permanent frown on their lips. She had simply existed where others wanted her to perish, to meet her own end.

What reasons might have granted her this much hatred, this much... *distaste*? They murmured that it was because she had done things that others wouldn't dream of. But they had left out it was all because the others wouldn't dare to try and fix what was corrupted, unlike her.

Her satchel was one of the few things that had made it out; the reason being that it was hastily torn off before she was forced to enter that area, that location, that horrid place that they had whispered about, where everyone knew she would meet her end (except she herself).

Within her satchel had contained mementos of the others who she was significant to, who were significant to her.

A pair of wired headphones. Twisted and tangled up, worn out by the sheer number of times it had been used. One bud in her ear, the other bud in her friend's. A replacement for her old ones was offered from them. Sound waves

traveling from ear to ear, a gentle tune in the air between them. An arm around her shoulder, grounding her. Loud and hearty laughs clash against the gentle sound waves, but neither of them seem to care. But that arm was no longer of any use, the sound waves having been dissipated.

She was a friend. Their best friend.

A letter in a small envelope. The most loving of words scrawled onto the wrinkled, yellowed paper. A three-year anniversary, long stares across the candlelit table, her navy gown and his navy tie. Tender smiles exchanged, featherlight kisses leaving burns on each other's skin. The red string of fate entangles them both as one, but neither of them notice. They simply know that they will be together forever. But that letter was crumpled up completely, that candlelit dinner's flame blown out. That red string of fate strangles her where those kiss marks were burnt, but he can't wrap his head around *why*.

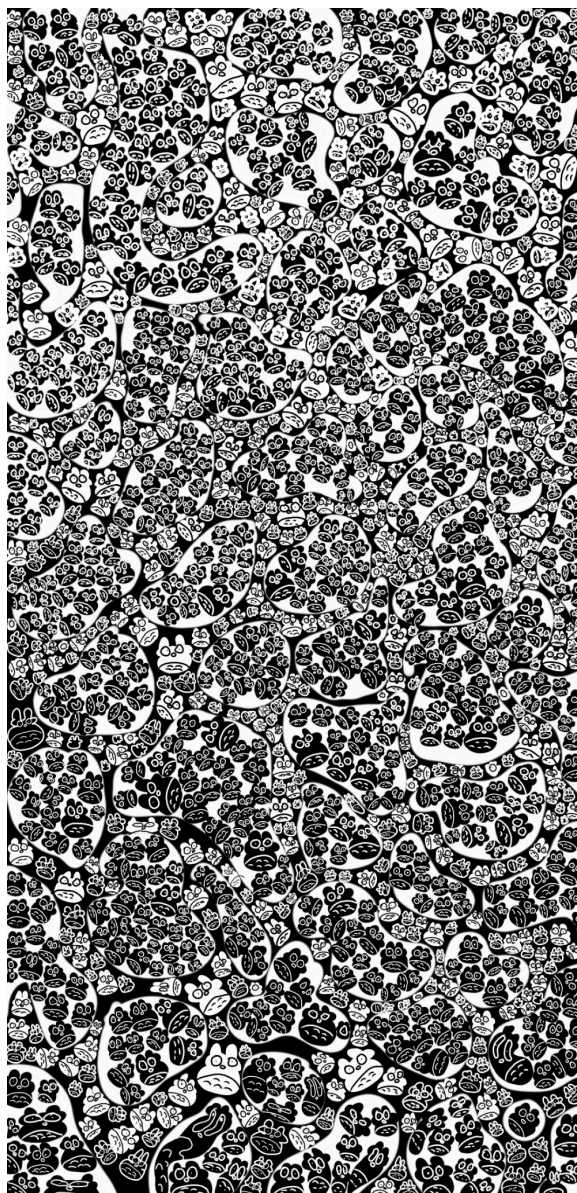
She was a lover. His significant other.

A rusted locket. Etched intricately, each ridge and bump carved with delicacy. Gifted at her party where she reached double digits, softly wrapped in shiny kraft paper. Tearing it open, unclasping the trinket; four warm and inviting faces stare back up at her. One of them is her own. A smaller pair of arms clasp her lower leg, the squeaky voice questioning if she liked it. A grin, an embrace, and a plate of comforting mutton biryani awaits her. But that locket was shattered, the mutton biryani gone rotten, and that pair of arms slamming the dirt, supporting them as their body collapses in on itself.

She was a sister, a daughter. Their family.

She was all three of those things, those *roles*, yet she was more. She smiled and grinned, and sometimes those others would feel a light in their hearts. They would see the shine reflected back onto them, and they couldn't help but reciprocate. She kneeled down, and lifted someone up, and sometimes those others would help. They would notice the hero in her and assist. She complimented and sometimes those others would get a lightness in their step. They would transfer her energy onto some.

This clump of flesh, it was more than just blood and skin and bone. She was a person, her *own* person. They tried to silence her, the others. But yet, that was *her* flesh, *her* blood and skin and bone.



Blasphemy
Alexander Chen

Anomaly

Laynie Clark

I'll stare at the blood-stained walls, and the dull overworn carpet, but nothing makes me writhe in agony more than when I look at her.

It's past midnight, there's not even a bird to chirp or a star to gaze at, this city has become a shell of its own self, a big ball of nothing. We said- no promised that tonight would be different, a mark into the start of our new lives. Our future, laid in the bloodied hands of the mystery we still have yet to unravel. After everything we've been through, and after everything I have done for her, this is the way things have turned out to be.

I remember the old days, the annual quarantine. I remember how hard it was, staring at the light gray walls and sitting on the tiles so cold I'd always shiver, knowing that I'd rather listen to nails on a chalkboard than sit through the unbearably thick silence. An unexplained phenomenon to sit through for 24 hours- I'm sick of it. Trees that can never stay alive, and shops that cannot help but look like the rest, it'd feel wrong to say that anybody was meant to be here. It really makes me wonder how a town can be filled with so many things and people, but can feel as if it has nothing, as if it's artificial. I'm not sure what I can trust anymore.

I've become sick of being told "don't do this," "don't do that," and just obeying, mindlessly. Rules and traditions get adopted without question, it's funny how blindly people can follow without concern. To be born with a predestined "purpose", that'll never be true to the identity I'll never have. Every aspect of life feels intangible, because of an ideal we as a society will never live up to. I want to live knowing that I was meant for more than this colorless world.

Now, being able to see the world in its true light, can I finally see what I've always wanted. I look back at her, Jules, and I can't help but admire her true beauty. Her hair no longer frail and black, but now short and brown. Tan skin littered with freckles. They'd say she was imperfect by all standards, that her features stood out rather than being "proper," to maintain that dreaded sense of order and control. But it's what made her human. It's the one thing she had that

would always be out of reach. As the sun rises, I see it shine into the cracked building with broken furniture scattered across, onto Jules and her emerald eyes, showing the life I will leave behind. Now knowing what I know, I'd do anything to go back, and swallow that sick feeling, because it's the best thing I'll ever have.

But now it's too late for any of that now. Jules' lies limp, sitting in the corner near the apartment's front door, head barely staying on her shoulders. I've always reassured her we were in this fight together, but when push came to shove, It was me who broke our promise. My guilt will forever eat away at me for what I've done, but words cannot change a thing. I try staring back into her now sullen eyes, and I start to see that light dim once more. I question if it was even there to begin with. And the worst part is...

She was beautiful.

Remains

Loucas Dong

I stare down the lists of engraved names, hollow letters etched out across the array of countless tall pillars. My eyes flow past each one without a second thought, endlessly scanning stories that will never be told. Entire generations of boys forgotten in the storm. I reach out and caress the cold hard metal. Strangely, I feel empty, as if time has stopped. My mind fails to feel, fails to grasp what I am reading, what I am breathing, what I am touching, what I **am**. Funny.

I catch a glimpse of my reflection on the shiny metallic surface. I look no different than a child, flimsy arms and legs sprouting like branches, with a head too big for its body and pointless tiny fingers that tremble with each passing moment. But there is no child left. The person that stands in front of me is just a shadow.

The anger that used to burn in that boy is all but gone. Shattered when the world showed him how cruel it could really be. Besides, what could he do? He was just one boat in a raging sea, swept into a new sphere of chaos he had no control over. The hatred of officers and the jealousy of those promoted vanished too.

The sadness is gone as well, faded until it was nothing more than a reminder of buried memories and pain. Perhaps the burden of it all killed my heart. Perhaps it's the insanity creeping up my back, eating away at me slowly but surely. Even fear is foreign after marching towards hell enough times. It's hard to fear death when it breathes down on my shoulder, mocking me for still being alive. How I wish to turn and just let go, to leave and forget everything. But everytime I muster the strength to end it all, he disappears and leaves me alone once more. I have learned that the black dog likes to toy with its food.

Walking mindlessly, I take out my father's last gift. A simple pocket watch so I could remember home, where I slept listening to the tinkering of gadgets. Its once golden color is now painted anew with mud and blood. The hands of time inside stopped long ago, a memento of the days I have lost. All that is left of value is the photo of us together one last time.

I feel the crevices and cracks on the pocket watch, turning and turning it over and over as it dances on my fingers before finally letting my legs crumple to the ground. I collapse against one of the tombstones and stare upwards at the

distant clouds that float onwards towards the horizon, letting everything fall into me as I wait.

I waited for the soft northern winds to finally take me home, when the gentle buzzing in the air came not from bombs flying through the air but from roaming bees landing on vibrant fields of poppies, entrenched not on the bodies of the fallen but on gentle earthen soil. I long to feel the first touch of grass again on the rolling hills of the countryside, free from the numbness that surrounds me now. I wish to feel the crisp clear water of streams, to sleep under the stars, to cherish my life once again. Just once again.

I know I am lucky to still breathe the autumn air again, but deep down beneath it all, I am grateful for those that rest now. For only the dead have seen the end of war.



Flourishing Iridescence

Chloe Hui

Perfect

Charu Goyal

They share one house, but sleep in separate rooms. She's got a drawer full of books, romance novels. He's got one full of pens and paperwork. Her closet is full of colorful clothes, each with their own personality. He's got black, blue, and gray business suits. All dull. They live in a glass house, tinted glass. On the outside it looks perfectly complete, but on the inside it's shattered.

They don't have kids, she's infertile and he doesn't want them. Yet there's a room with a crib and stock photos of a happy family hanging off the walls. The room has never been walked in, it's inherently empty.

Their bathroom is kept pristine, there isn't a stain in sight. As if it's never been used.

The kitchen island is barren of food stains and crumbs. The plates and bowls are kept apart. The utensils are untouched.

The pictures in every frame are like stock photos. They are of the people in the house, but hold no emotion, ingenuine.

This is a house, not a home. It's alive, but has not been lived in. It has people, but holds no memories. It used to beg for love, but now it is numb. It's internally broken, but externally whole.



Walking on a Rainbow

Madison Kooblall

Midnight Masquerade

Jun Guan

This year, the masquerade is held in the courtyard.

Fresh snow litters the ground as more flutter down from the sky, painting blurry white dots against the rich, deep purple of twilight, each brush stroke evident in the picture that is their world.

The doors around them, four pairs to each cardinal direction, are swung wide open as the orchestra on the balcony of the second floor start playing a haunting tune. Long bow strokes and trilling high notes, casting a careful atmosphere to the space.

People start pouring in. Ball gowns and suits of all colors and levels of grandeur twirl in, shoes clacking against the stone tiles of the floor. The young snow melts underneath the trample of so many bodies, their beauty short-lived.

The fountain in the center of the courtyard remains untouched.

Servants wearing masks, their existence a mere bygone of tonight, maneuver their way around the floor, offering desserts and drinks to anyone who is willing. They hold their plates high, forbidden from speaking, nothing more than pawns in tonight.

Laughter bubbles up from couples arm-in-arm, old friends hugging it out, strangers bonding over a shared experience. Everyone has on a mask, each one hand-made and unique. All the guests wear similar white gloves and don a ring on their ring finger. That is the only dress code for this dance; everything else is up to individual choice.

It is five minutes before midnight of the winter solstice.

Every year, without fail, Lady Jiaren throws the most extravagant and exquisite of parties on the evening of the winter solstice. To be invited to her parties is to be given the highest honor; yet, her pattern of sending invitations is random. There have been nobles who have been left out one year after being consistently invited to several in a row; there have been peasants from the countryside given the once-in-a-lifetime, all expenses covered trip to the secluded estate. Lady Jiaren herself, however, is a most

mysterious individual. No one has seen her physical body. She is never seen out in the capital, feasting among the other nobles of her class, and all of her servants are sworn to secrecy for life. In exchange for their service, they work in her remote estate in the depths of the Siwu Forest until the age of fifty, when they are provided with a large sum of money to take care of themselves.

None of the retired servants, who are some of the most skilled housekeepers and chefs, have spoken a word about the identity of the esteemed Lady Jiaren. There have been rumors that she is not a woman, or a person, at all. Maybe she is a witch. Maybe she's a spirit of the ancient woods. Maybe she is not one individual, that there are multiple "Lady Jiaren"s carrying on her legacy. Maybe she is this Dorian Gray-esque figure, gifted/cursed with a forever-youthful face. It is unsure where Lady Jiaren's wealth comes from, whether she is wed or not, if she has any children, her family, anything of the sort. Yet, no authority dares to come to her estate and threaten her with arrest.

It is four minutes before midnight of the winter solstice.

No one dares question it. Not when they are being stuffed full of delicious delicacies from the kitchens of the estate itself, each bite a savoring flavor; not when each sip of a cocktail or a refreshing beverage introduces a world which you have never seen; not when this can very well be the best night of your entire life.

Snow flutters to the ground, landing on fancy ball gowns, extended lashes, exposed skin, food left unattended, the fountain.

But something about this year is different.

This year is the first time, in the forty years that Lady Jiaren has thrown her parties, that it is held outside.

The cold is comforting. The snow is pure. The darkness of the night sky is blissful. The orchestra moves onto a faster, more romantic song. Some people get up from the tables set up on the four corners of the room and take a partner's hand, leading them to the center of the courtyard to dance. Flushed faces, nervous giggles, relaxed laughs are a constant throughout the entire ball.

It is three minutes before midnight of the winter solstice.

In the dark halls of the estate, a lantern is lit. Its holder lifts the light, trudging along the wooden floorboards of the second floor. The moon shines in from the window to the right, and the soft noise from the courtyard's ball dance can be heard, even from here. To the left hangs a triptych painting of the surrounding forest.

A hand grazes along the acrylic painting, fingertips feeling every individual brush stroke of the long-since-dried work, until it lands on a fallen, brown leaf atop the water surface of a puddle. The forest floor appears damp, the illusionary effect only achieved through years of skill and expertise with the medium, and dead leaves litter the forest's grounds.

The brown leaf sinks into the painting, rumbling into the stone walls. The center canvas of the triptych folds in to reveal a passageway, a gust of cold air blowing through. The lantern rumbles and rattles as the holder steps through. The lantern chute is opened, and the flame inside licks at the wick of a dried scone. The scone bursts into beautiful flames, sending a similar chain reaction down the previously-unlit passageway.

Like the fizzes in a champagne class, the chamber exhales, the triptych returning to normal.

It is two minutes before midnight of the winter solstice.

The ball dance is in full effect. More desserts are brought in from the kitchen. Some people are rosy cheeked, speech slurred, from the endless alcohol and delicacies available. Secrets are exchanged, heart strings strung, friendships kindled, business transactions made. It's truly a night of festivities.

It is one minute before midnight of the winter solstice.

The pawns are placed, the board set, a game in swing. If all goes well, this will be the most exhilarating of dances; the most intriguing of chess matches, the most corrupt of nights. A sharp knife is passed into the hands of a woman from a masked servant. She understands what she must do. With trembling hands, she accepts the dance of an unsuspecting lady, and she leads her to the center of the room. The lady is pressed against the marble rim of the fountain, and the woman's hand snake around her neck.

They lean in for a kiss. That will not be the first kiss of the dance, nor will it be the last. But it is the first kiss on the dance floor, upon the clock striking midnight. It is midnight of the winter solstice.

The woman pulls away, her knife now relinquished in the chest of the naive, oblivious lady. A scream erupts from her. Crimson spurts out of the wound, onto the face and pretty ball gown of the woman.

The crowd gasps and clears away from the fountain. The lady's scream stops, and she slumps backwards onto the fountain, her hair splayed on the icy surface beneath her. Blood streams down her chest and onto the

snow, dying it fresh crimson.

The woman reaches forward. She takes off the mask, a young lamb, and slips the ring into her own hands. Raises both of them up.

The servants clap. One pawn down.

There is a crazed glint to the woman's hands. She tilts her head back and laughs, both arms now reaching for the night sky. The snow comes down harder, white freckles dotting her face and hair. She turns to the audience.

"Don't you get it?" she screams at them, hands now clasped around her. Is she mad? Did Lady Jiaren offer out invitations to absolute lunatics? What is she talking about? "Haven't you heard?"

A fervent expression of disgust and disdain, yet also confusion and fear and panic, passes through the crowd like a wave.

A servant steps up. Holds the woman's arm up in the air.

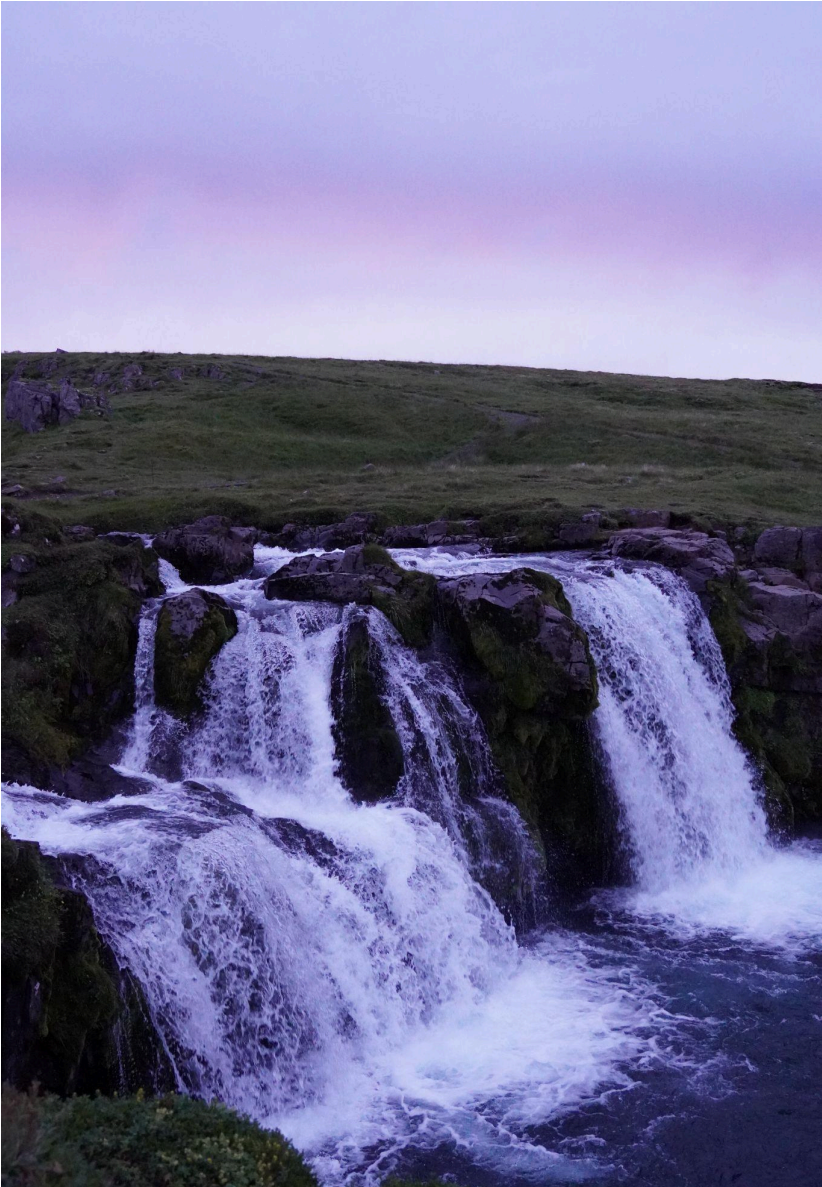
"Congratulations to Lady Xiansha of the House of Huli for the first ring of the day. To all of our esteemed guests: to celebrate the winter solstice, and Lady Jiaren's decision to pass down all of her assets and secrets, she is hosting a very special game. Whoever successfully gathers the most rings and presents them to her by the end of tomorrow will inherit everything to her name.

"There will be announcements periodically made throughout the two days. Since you came here, you are obliged to participate. The surrounding mile around the estate is open game. Servants are unable to provide information out of the blue, so please do not go after them. Lady Jiaren holds her servants to be of the highest importance. The only rule is —"

Another scream erupts. A man crumples to the floor, and his ring is presented high up in the sky.

"— to think carefully."

Let the true ball dance begin, my dear guests.



Under the Purple Lights

Madison Kooblall

False Color

Kristen Lee

Back when the universe was just a breath younger, I'd spend my sunlit hours catching joyrides on shock waves from sapphire supernovas. I would thunder over the clear-cut terrains of magnificent crimson spheres and play tag with the flaming horizon. Close my eyes and fill my lungs, dive through a spiraling copper sea until I reached the amber core of a breath-stealing galaxy—a galaxy I knew inside and out, all the crevices explored, every secret known.

After all, this was home. Time and space bended to my will. When I was tired of blazing through the swirls of fuschia and violet spanning from one planet to the next, plush blankets of rose-tainted periwinkle enveloped me instead. This was a world I understood. In it, my needs were always fulfilled, and I was always happy.

In my mind, I was one of those astronauts I saw drawn in my moonlit storybooks. I'd conquered the cosmos and would gain more. I always wished for more.

More.

More.

Though it had already given me everything I could have ever wanted, the universe was simply too big and I wanted *all of it*. Every last wish a star had to offer. Each silent whisper uttered by the asteroids before they made their final mark. I wanted a chasm in the ocean of dark matter to split open and reveal another fold of exhilaration in which I could continue living my years.

And since I knew all the universe's secrets, I knew how to get it to do so. I needed to wait very patiently. Until I was older. Wiser. And as a reward for my forbearance, the never-ending dreams painted behind my eyelids would manifest before me.

Instead.

I once woke to a seemingly nondescript day, the sunlight a familiar embrace, though its celestial source was a bit older than before. With its aging came advancing technology that, in my storybooks, were supposed to bring glowing spaceships that would take me deeper through the stars. But instead they brought brighter and brighter white screens that burned my eyes—screens that were now a part of my every day and replaced the books I used to cuddle. On

them, the entire world was at my fingertips, but not just the beautiful parts that I'd been so used to. The sky could no longer be its endless azure, the refracting rainbow sunlight now rendered limited. How could they be their innocent selves? None of those colors should exist.

As it turns out, the cameras NASA uses to take the universe's photos only capture in black and white. All the beauty I'd thought was real was only edited in by analysts who thought the artificial colors would make the photos easier to comprehend, because in space, certain colors exist that the human eye cannot detect. That a human cannot understand.

This artificial coloring is known as false color.

Shaking with betrayal, of pain that attacked as a result of being lied to for a decade of my life, I tumbled into an abyss that had ruptured open in space—one I had never intended to open, and could never climb out of.

All those pictures painting the web in grandeur. Painting the pages of children's books, the ones I'd devoured. They were faux.

It was with this knowledge that the stars around me shook from their positions and smashed to the ground, exploding in monochrome. That the planets spun out of their orbit and became smaller and smaller pinpricks of nothing in the distance.

I thought that I knew everything about this world I lived in, and that it had been made for me. I was under the impression that—wired into the loops of my brain—there were instructions and maps detailing how exactly I could make the most of the life I would spend here.

But I didn't know how to make the most of this. I don't know anything. What I thought I always knew was just a fantasy, made-up vision of what I'd been brought up to believe in. I couldn't understand the colors of the true universe, so I was fed bright, neon images that had been thought to ease my mind.

For a while, it was fine. But now, it is anything but.

The real world suddenly seemed so gargantuan and ghastly. No matter how ugly it gets, how loud my screams, it doesn't get better; there was never more, space had already burned the brightestest that it ever would. The viridescence I imagined to follow the grand exit of a star is now just a sickening green taste on my tongue.

Now, the horizon and I play a different kind of game. A game of tug of war, in which I try to pull back the sun, turn back time to the innocent years, but nothing bends to my will and I am left helpless, kneeling in the barren dirt landscape of the planet I am forever bound to.

I used to be able to open and close my eyes and see the same earnestly-woven constellation of dreams before me no matter what. Now, though, both behind closed eyelids and through them is just a static beige. The true color of the universe.

...

Once every while, I clean out my room, dumping things like old school papers and torn sweaters into a black hole, where they disappear forever.

Sometimes, I come across pictures from a while ago. From a time when my clothes were bright and new, not yet sunbleached. My eyes reflected the shine of what I thought the universe looked like, and my smile held laughter only the thrill of a supernova launching could pull forth.

When I see this girl I think of what she used to know. I dig up the books she used to read, with their rainbow planets and astronauts pumping their fists towards the stars. I read them, my eyes duller now but are still the same ones that had roved over the pictures so long ago.

I tuck the old photos in these books, like bookmarks marking a chapter already read, but too good to go forgotten. I keep them, books and photos.

The black hole can devour every tangible, including me, but it can never swallow the memories eternally vivid in my mind.

Written Tapestry

Kristen Lee

I suppose I enjoy writing because the glorification the hobby permits me to paint of life is such a harsh contrast to the dullness of the world in its true form.

With words, I have the power to weave a sort of tapestry that depicts a grand scene from a story I imagine my life to be. I pretend I am a protagonist and each second of my life is invaluable; I pretend like everything matters more than it does.

On ordinary, unremarkable mornings, I wake up. Slowly open my eyes, annoyed at having my rest cut short, then begrudgingly begin to sit up.

But on the page, I tell it differently. Here, the impatient flower-feeding sunlight shatters as it hits the glass of my window, painting the insides of my eyelids a jarring red and hauling them open so I see the dusty sparkle of morning, gentle and young. The balmy scent of fresh spring blooms begins to envelop me as I blink away the last remnants of a wispy dream and stare at the ceiling for a moment, where dancing shapes of light trace swirling patterns before me. Briefly, I watch them slink along the plaster as I let my eyes adjust to the golden glow, my vision blurred so my surroundings look like a sort of abstract painting—everything spontaneous smears of a palette knife and lazy flicks of a brush on canvas. In these spaces between waking and rising from the soft embrace of cotton sheets, it is as close to a dream as real life gets.

From then on, the hours of a typical day are filled with dull errands and the same neighborhood I've lived in my whole life. Nothing exciting, nothing fit for a compelling tale.

So I step onto the sidewalk, weaving around familiar sunbaked-roofed houses and lifting a cordial chin to familiar faces, imagining I am making my rounds as a villager heroine in a typical storybook. The town is alight with energy, birdsong accenting laughter mixed with the musical sounds of a guitar strummed casually in the local park—a familiar song streaming its ribbons of notes through the streets. Somewhere behind a white picket fence, a dog howls with its ancestors clustered on a summit a thousand miles away. A child's cries pierce the air, youthfully yearning. Feet pound the sidewalk as early bird runners thunder by, zigzag-soled shoes making patterned imprints on the grass. People bounce

around like grasshoppers, caught up in their own lives, but like ants bustle around each other and reinforce an entire society.

Then as usual, the sky eventually begins to dim. Night falls. Suddenly, the entire town is mundane and quiet.

But I tell it like the sun puts up a fight, taking his time as he sinks lower and lower in the blue. The moon advances, the darkness that pools around her descending into the sun's terrain, bleeding a deep navy into the stretching expanse of sky. Her celestial regiments of stars laugh a bit, twinkling their ivory glow as they surround the ball of flames and force him towards the burning horizon. Angry, and in a final attempt to resist, he bellows, setting off an explosion of ocher and carmine and lilac bursting over the hills and setting the trees on fire. The colors taint the sky for a while even after he is finally forced over the ledge, slain by the moon, and the goddess of the night relishes her reign in familiar darkness until the sun is reborn and climbs back up again to shove her out—a never ending cycle.

But no matter the richness of the details, no matter the intensity of the passion in my vessels, once I am done imagining the scene—and the clacking of keys and scratching of graphite on paper ceases—everything always just...falls away.

My life is not an intricate golden-washed work of art, but a flat and pragmatic scene of tangible reality. I am not a villager heroine; I'm just me—an jejune twenty-first century adolescent. Every night, the sun isn't thrown from his throne and slain. It simply moves farther and farther from sight as a result of the earth's eternal spinning.

This is what is left behind when the tapestry frays and falls apart. A cold, monotone truth.

Silent Echoes

Maia Mohsen

Each *crunch* against the dark, moist soil placed solace into Circe's ears. The mushy composition of departed undertones grooved into her poor-quality boots. That was likely not the best environment to place her shoes, but these were her spare pair.

They were meant for muddy situations such as what was presented behind her: an empty row of fallen leaves pressed into the mud, though they were mostly left unburied.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. The leaves defied their capabilities, as even the ones that looked as if they had already answered the distressing call to their sisters echoed a trampling response. They almost formed a chorus of unity, a coalition of a new, weary image of sound that sounded terror into the hearts of those who threatened to leave them on the ground, had they not been delicately browned by the change in weather that never failed to ruin their plans.

Unity. Friendship. Those too, were dried out into crackable whole concepts, only to repeatedly shatter into pieces at each possible moment. Just like how each tree once housed thousands of those leaves that begged for entrance into another world of leafiness: the leaves simply *refused* to stay attached to who was once their staunchest supporter. They were once whole, but betrayal wore their souls into thin, crinkled texts like Circe's old soul. With her daily walks throughout this half-forgotten forest, she would know.

Her promenade through the forest was her only refuge against the rest of the world. Like the horrendous shade of dull colors that all of the leaves were, she was. Friendless, broken, she was simply another outcast, one to live with the trees for the rest of her life. Now, the only ones that she bothered to remember were the leaves. It didn't matter much to her though, or so Circe would have liked to believe.

She could run, or even powerfully walk through the woods that she happened to abide close to; she could hide amongst the trees better than any newcomer. She could flee from herself, the twists in her mind, the tight ropes that tangled her heart. Still, each moment left her more lost than the previous.

But she still had the woods. The grove of trees that unburied all the hidden leaves and leaflets within her.

She looked upwards, towards the grayish sky. The pang within her intensified, leaning into that excavated pile. She could handle this burden of loneliness, that secretive isolation, or even the profound feeling of static, of nothing ultimately changing.

She could remember the forgotten last words she said to the waves of the ocean, her feet digging into the sand, extinguishing the flame of anguish and agony towards herself. She could reminisce about those old thoughts in a place of cool air and higher altitudes, still questioning her purpose. She could ponder on all the places she went over the years, though the forest would always be her true home, for reasons Circe was still not able to admit.

I'll never forget you.

She could not stare anymore, not with the rain beginning to dribble down from above, falling onto feeble branches. The refreshing water was but a prelude to what was to come, but it was also a new chapter, a step towards the end that was bound to happen.

I'll never forget you.

She had to continue walking. It would be useless to throw it all away now, with a bit of excess rain in the way. Just because it happened to be as dreary as it was the day it all happened, it didn't mean that she had to live in the past. It didn't mean that she had to repeat it.

Each step that pressed against the moist leaves that no longer crunched brought the thoughts back: unformed tears in her eyes as she stared into the endless expanse of the sea, as she was unable to do anything as it tried to take one fateful life into its eternal embrace. She remembered the sudden force pulling her out, though her heart remained in the depths.

Almost nothing changed. Now, as she felt the bark of every passing tree, the regret tingled between her mind and her heart. Her single mantra kept her steady, though for now, it worked.

I'll never forget you.

Deep, Deep Breaths

Bella Pavlovici

It smells so much like freedom it hurts. Every waft of warm air and fresh air and air with a pinch of sea salt in it shoots right to my heart, right to the place where I breathe. Close my eyes, breathe in, breathe out - and I am in Portugal. In Croatia. In Italy, France, Australia, Kenya. Not here. Anywhere but here. Anywhere but the place where the days go by too quick, too meaningless. Too fast and I have not made the hours worth the passing of them. Not done anything new, seen anything different. *Anywhere but here*, I think. Close my eyes, inhale, exhale. I am ignoring how the clock sounds in the corner of my mind as it marks each second. I am matching the scent of the air with a place, *any* place. Iceland? I've always wanted to go to Iceland. *Tick, tick, tick*. I breathe in - imagine the waterfalls, the lights, the nature - breathe out, and it *hurts*. It hurts because I *am* free, and yet here I am - in the back of a car, windows open, air slapping me in the face. It smells new, and I feel worn, insatiable. Inhale, exhale, and I know the whole world will never be enough for this smell. I will always be hungry, suffocated in the scent of memories. Of *could bes*, *maybes*, *had beens*. I want to close the window, I want to open it wider. *Tick tick tick*, the clock laughs. *I move on*, it taunts, *but you, you always stay stuck right where you are*.

- b.p.7/20/23



Puffin Party
Madison Kooblall

Upon Remembering

Bella Pavlovici

When I think of love, I think of an array of beautifully stolen moments. There is not just one person, one entity, one manifestation that I can attribute to the feeling. Even still, there is no way I can describe love as a feeling, emotion, or trait. Love is a constant. Love is God, seeing Him in all the quintessential happenings as they pass through the paysage of your life, taking comfort in the fact that even the smallest of details are purposeful, that every little piece of nothing means something, that love is grand and glorious and full even when divided into a million tiny shards. Love is the sound of your mother's heartbeat under your ear - the first physical thing you ever come to recognize at the beginning of your tragic life and still, the comforting tempo when you're seventeen years old, afraid of growing up and afraid that you are not someone who knows how to do said *growing up*, and that it might never happen to you because of this. Love is the drowning cheers from the group of girls around you, yelling your name as if words could lift people up like hands do, like the arms of your father when he would lift you onto his shoulders so you could rightfully rule the world around you. Love is the heavenly hum of Tchaikovsky or Chopin, the paradisaal notes swarming your vision as you realize you were probably born more to dance than you were to play music, that even though your sister was always more talented at playing piano than you—and likely a little more determined in her own life too—you can be praised instead for the way your muscles inevitably twitch to the idyll you find yourself in, worlds constructing and unraveling in every infinite second of your mind.

Love is a universal craving, a pitiful ending, a prerequisite to grief. Love is a transforming energy and a powerful drug, an excuse and a reason and a means of letting go when you are hanging on from the edge of a cliff and ration is screaming at you to hold on. Being loved is a blessing and being loved is the premise on which we define human nature, but being loved does not always mean being understood. When I think of love, I think of infinite fantastical tales in languages no one else will ever speak. When I think of love, I think of the book my teacher asked my seventh grade English class to read—about the boy who saw the color red while everyone else regarded the world through a monochrome filter. When I think of love, I think of all the moments I preserved in pristine,

elegant glass and, still, all the times I fatally brought someone else to peer in my sacred mirror but they could never see their own reflection.

- *b.p.11/25/24*



Pastel Skies
Madison Kooblall

You're Mine, But I'll Never Be Yours

Emma Wen

Bleary, tired, stargazing were her eyes. Captured by a haze, chased all her days for lifetimes. Fancying his silhouette from afar, oh, she wished she could unveil his arcane shadow; his eyes ever-present, his hair wistfully curled her heart alike. From her dimly lit vanity, she began to reminisce and remind herself of the gentleman she could never have. Penned down her love and adoration for he would never reach her levels of admiration as must be kept.

01.01.1595

Had we crossed paths once more did your presence lighten my morning. Swift as a song, your steps hum to the rhythm of my heartbeat racing for you to acknowledge my love and admiration. Could it be fate when you stood across from me at the midnight ball? Suited in black with a cup of tea underneath the gold chandelier? Oh, how it is a dreadful sorrow that my father shan't allow me to fall in love with a man whom he does not allow for me to kiss.

With every day that passed, she observed every swift move of his broad figure, his outspoken yet charming character, his eyes the color of the Earth's surface, for all she saw in them was the world she would never be able to enter. And with every passing day, she only grew more desperation and deep sorrow, though it was only her true destiny that she knew she would face. From the midnight ball to the market square to the evening tea ceremonies, her eyes only saw him as if she were a vignette with dark charcoal caving in so that he would be the highlight of her darkened surroundings.

07.24.1595

Why must you cause me such suffering without any awareness of what you have done to me? Why must I be the one who devotes every bit and part of me to you, knowing that reciprocation from you is a sin I will have to confess to my bloodline? Oh, how the husband my father chooses for me will never be tied with the same red string that I tied on to you, though your end of the string never reached you now, did it?

Her sunsets were spent on her balcony as she watched the tranquility of subtle waves swish back and forth like a melody on repeat. Her cheeks were cupped with

the palms of her satin-gloved hands while admiring the painting with pink and orange hues, and suddenly her eyes lit up. She folded up her most recent letter, completely disregarding the words that she needed to remind herself with.

12.26.1595

Be as it should for I now realize what never happened has happened not for pure fate but for pure destiny. My fate had led me to you not to mock my ditsy daydreams, but to lead me to my destiny with each day that I continued to fall for you and your loved soul.

An enchanting evening sprung about as she saw him; he stood there charmingly on cobblestone below with the moon as a candle, enthralling her like Cupid did. His hair as gold as the sky, oh, how she continued to dream about frolicking in fields of daisies with her rose, ballroom dancing together at midnight with linen touching satin.

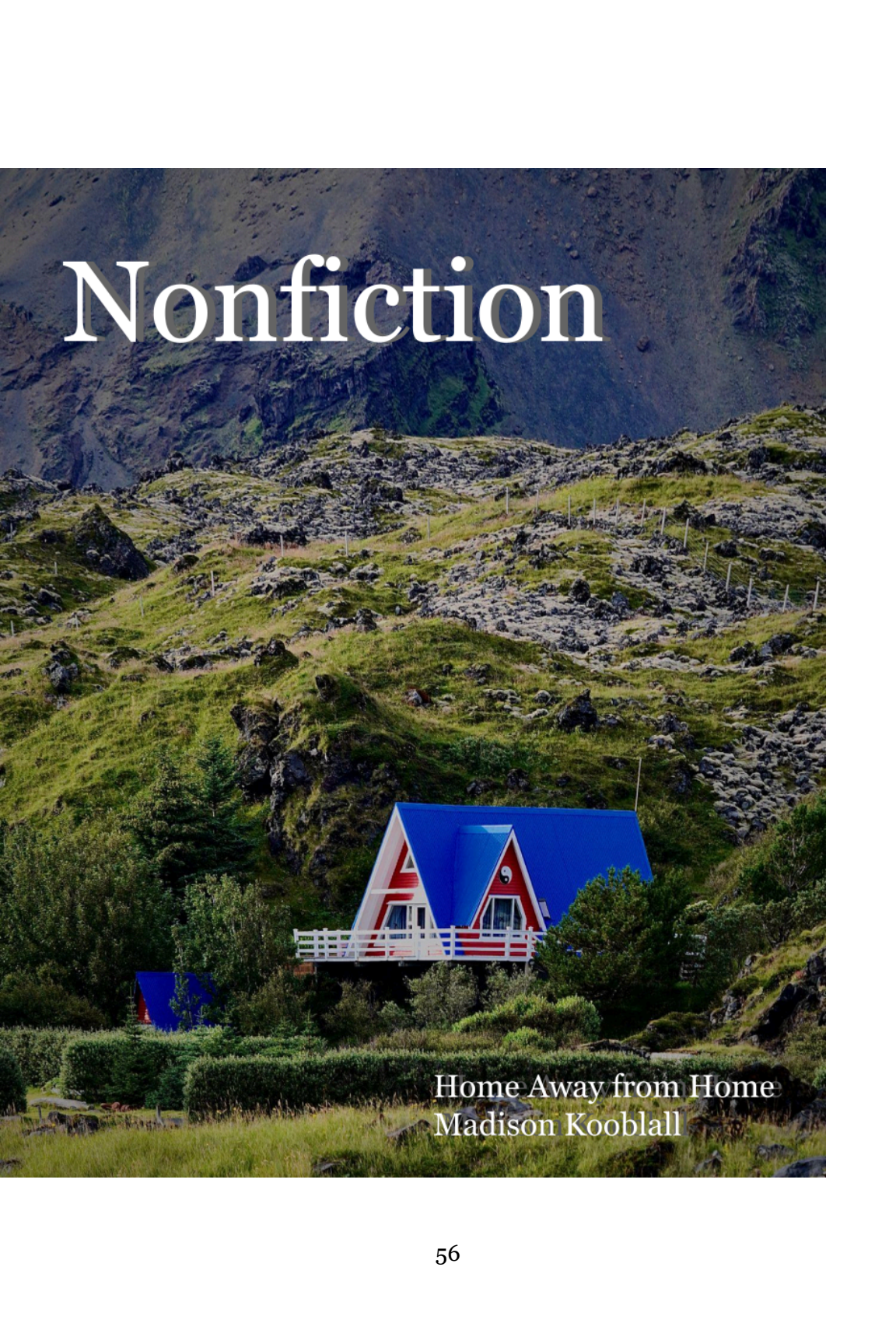
She smiled with heartache and glistening eyes as a diamond began to roll down her cheek. A lean figure entered the picture with a ball gown laced much the same. Her mid length hair flowed with the wind, matching the rhythm to his words floral.

Her soul dropped to the stone floor. Following were tears and ripped satin. Roses stole the moon and framed her, leading her to be sentenced for eternity in pitch darkness and hopelessness. Shame drowned out her entire vision as the last thing she ever saw was a kiss she would never receive.

12.27.1595

Oh, how it pains me that another woman's children will have the eyes that I fell in love with at 16.

Nonfiction

A photograph of a red and white A-frame cabin with a blue roof, situated on a grassy hillside with a rocky mountain in the background. The cabin has a white balcony and a small white fence in front of it. The hillside is covered in green grass and scattered rocks, with a rocky mountain peak in the background.

Home Away from Home
Madison Kooblall

Curly Hair

Laiba Bajwa

Curly Hair.

The first thing your eyes probably drift to while looking at me are the voluminous curls that cascade down my head, carefree in their spirals and twists. If you knew me as a child, you'd remember how I tightly tied my hair up—curls struggling to breathe, begging to be released from the confines of my ponytail. Back then, I was terrified of letting them down.

What if my hair was frizzy? What if it got in people's way? Those endless "what ifs" filled my young mind and convinced me to hide my hair away. But I was wrong. I see that now. As I've grown older, I've started to embrace my curls, letting them flow wherever they want. The thought of leaving my hair down once scared me, but now it feels like freedom. Who cares if it's frizzy? That's what makes it unique.

Now, I appreciate my hair for what it truly is—a reflection of myself. Each curl, every twist and turn, carries a lesson I've learned about self-love and acceptance. They remind me to take up space unapologetically, to let go of the worry about what others might think. My curls aren't just a physical trait; they're a connection to my parents, to the curls they passed down to me. When people see my sisters and me, they immediately know we're related. It's not just our resemblance—it's our shared crown of curls that binds us together.

When the wind catches my hair and my curls dance freely, I feel a sense of liberation. They're more than just strands of hair—they're a symbol of growth. They tell the story of a little girl who once hid them away and the young woman who now wears them proudly. My curls are a celebration of everything I've learned to love about myself, a daily reminder of my journey.

When I look at my reflection now, I no longer see an inconvenience; I see a crown of identity. My curls remind me of where I come from and who I am. As they continue to grow and change, so will I.

My Giving Trees

Vivian Huang

“I am sorry, Boy, but I have nothing left to give you.”

— Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree*

Although it is cliché, my parents have been my supporters since day one. Naturally, they enrolled me in art classes in elementary school when they realized I loved drawing.

I took art classes from fifth to seventh grade. Although my teacher never admitted it to me, I was her favorite student. I sat separately from the other students so she could show me the advanced techniques. I delicately smeared pastels and paints across a canvas to form wispy sketches of portraits and landscapes.

In middle school, my art classes were canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Spending more time online, I scrolled for countless hours instead of chalking up a Parisian landscape. I chose the easier choice.

One day, a snippet of poetry appeared on my feed. Intrigued, I clicked into the account. There were poems— not the grimace-inducing rhymes we read in elementary school, but beautifully woven words that symbolically conveyed deep messages. I told myself, *I want to write like that one day*.

I experimented with haikus first, inspired by the poems I encountered. I soon incorporated metaphors and sensory experiences into my work. My English teacher encouraged me to start writing prose after seeing the work I churned out. I started with short stories, my plots evolving from daily-life fragments to intricate characters drowning in feathery cash.

I lost myself in my unconscious dreams of a perfect world—I wanted to become my characters, to always have happy endings no matter what setbacks I encountered in the 400 words before the climax. I lost myself in these inked fantasies and lost interest in drawing. I questioned why I could not just pick up my pencil again to sketch *anything*, but my pen always beckoned me back.

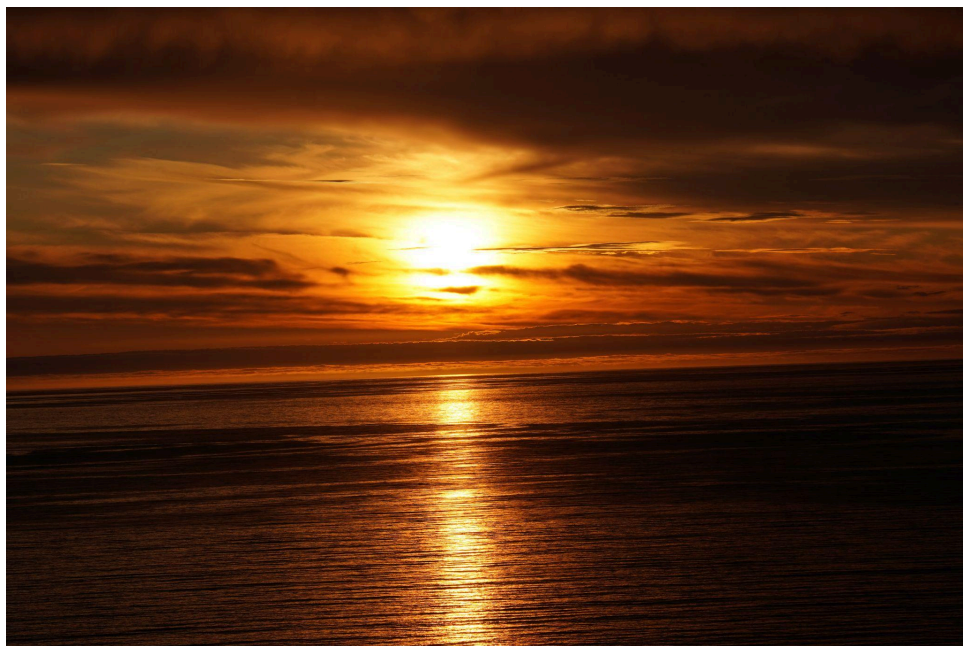
Initially, I was guilty. My parents spent so much money and time driving me to class and paying the high class fees. When I finally told my parents about my newfound love for writing, they told me that I should continue exploring it if I truly loved it.

Their advice reminded me of the children's book, *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. I saw myself in the boy, taking all the resources from the tree— my visual art skills—only for those resources to help my writing. In a way, I saw my parents as the giving tree as well. They always supported me emotionally and financially, no matter what.

I was the boy who swung from the branches of visual art, dancing with the leaves of pastels and paints. I was the teen boy who called upon the generous tree when I needed an artistic imagination to help me write. I was the man who cut down the trunk because I needed money for writing classes. I was the grandpa who sat on the stump when writer's block and insecurity reared their ugly heads and I needed comfort.

I was the young boy even though I am a girl. Writing was the playboy that swooned me, the unfazed wallflower, until our eyes met.

Now, I realize I was too young to commit to an interest as a kid. Even most adults end up in a career that misaligns with their college major. I may have been selfish in dropping a decade-long interest, but I would never regret choosing writing. I needed the resources from my giving trees so I could pour my love back to my parents and stories—the gifts I give to the world.



Golden Hour

Madison Kooblall

Something Blue

Ifrah Jalil

He's moody today. Even as the sun graces his calm soul, his waves thrash against our rocks. I wonder if he is aware. All around him.

He's decided to be a dark sticky blue today. Some sharp shells I step on leaves him snickering. His salty flavor only makes it sting more. His silky-dull appearance only makes me more anxious. He looks hungrier today. Or tired. Tired? Even at night he can't seem to calm down. Stirring constantly. He threw back those plastic straws sitting at the base of his abdomen, not even his acid could dare to decompose this. Plastic doesn't sit well in the stomach. It sits, it molds, the acid burning up within you cannot remedy the pain. Pain that is universal . . . pain felt down to His bones, down to the pit that consumes us all, his corals and his ice caps. This sticky syrup I hated, not some mess of salt and water, more of that heterogeneous mixture embodying life. It seems that our minds move too fast in the wrong direction, too slow in the right direction.

Even as the sun sets, day after day, solutions and answers created for what seems to be our unsolved problems only add a new path to the maze we created for ourselves. There isn't a clear path out of it, all we know is that there's a ticking time bomb we tune out.

New Start

Shristi Nigam

When did poetry become a 100-meter dash? As I stood under the regal dome of Federal Hall, surrounded by the shine of Wall Street capitalism, I was ready to recite my poem. Sweat dripped down my forehead, my hands clutched the mic like it was a relay baton, and my heart pounded out of my chest. The Olympic race had begun: ten young poets, one coveted title. The NY Youth Poet Laureate title was the gold medal I was chasing, and I was determined to get to the finish line first, but my nerves were doing the cha-cha slide.

Second by second, the clock ticked down, and poet by poet, our words filled the air with intense passion and competition. My heart raced like I had three shots of espresso at 7:00 a.m., but I was determined to cross the finish line—or at least not trip over it!

When my turn came, I spoke about change and civic engagement. My gold medal was right in front of me. But it was as if I were caught between Sha'Carri Richardson and Shericka Jackson, sprinting towards the finish line, but with more iambic pentameter and less spandex.

The weight of competition pressed down on me, making me question whether winning was worth it. Looking back, I know that this was the beginning of a sequence of events that would shift my mindset entirely.

Twelve weeks. Ten poets. One title. If the Federal Hall stage was the Olympic race, our training center was the small room tucked to the right of the museum's imposing staircase. I entered my Federal Hall Fellowship with a competitive attitude; like any other competition, I thought I was a one-person team, ready to take on the world (or at least the poetry scene). As I stepped into that quiet room week after week, I felt the tension in my shoulders begin to ease. Instead of aggressiveness I was met with openness. The atmosphere was calm, almost meditative, and I was encouraged to reflect serenely on what I thought about my own creative process. My poems were no longer a solo act to an ensemble performance. We weren't just poets racing for a title. We were individuals from different worlds, coming together to share stories, listen, and learn.

The NY Youth Poet Laureate Fellowship became my poet's burrow. We would sit together for hours, enchanted by each other's communities and stories. I learned about the power of human connection and multicultural understanding. I heard about the colorful bodegas my friends grew up in and how the sound of the train filled their heads with music and the parks that restored them after long days. I related to their resilience, traditions, and challenges. And these perspectives found home in my poems. Our characters came out in the best way possible, and our stories threaded together like a mural, waiting to be seen. Poetry slams and the power of our pens sustained us. We were the New York poets, as diverse and electric as the city itself. And for us, using poetry to make a change was cool. It gave us a sense of being.

The more time I spent in this space, the more I realized that the value was not in winning but in our forged connections. I had made it to the starting line of the poetry Olympics, and discovered a new community with whom to grow, as well.

And now, I use my pen to foster change in my community. From publishing my own book, to performing on stages and slams, I have made poetry my instrument. The Youth Poet Laureate fellowship lit a spark in me, and now I am determined to keep this flame ablaze, as well as for the poets who supported me. They became my compass. We crossed the finish line together.



Undertaking

Kristen Lee

Hidden Colors

Shristi Nigam

My azure-colored glasses have been by my side since my first adventure, revealing the beauty in life's small, often unnoticed moments. Growing up on the 19th floor in Queens, I watched people live their lives from my window, imagining stories for each one. A car cut someone off—perhaps the driver forgot to water their exotic plant from Belize. Someone stopped too long at a green light—perhaps they were dreaming of being a Blue Jay, soaring through the sky. A runner crossed during a green light—maybe they were lost in a podcast, imagining themselves swimming alongside Green Sea Turtles. Over time, I realized I've always seen the world through an azure hue—a lens tinted with calm reflection and curiosity.

My vision has been shaped through a plastic lens for ten years, and my glasses have shaped how I view life itself. When we moved to Long Island, my surroundings changed and my curiosity ignited. Through walks in my quiet neighborhood, I found myself drawn to stillness after a busy day. As my eyes explored the unique pattern of rocks on the ground and my ears felt the rhythm in the wind, I was open to a deep sense of calm and serene appreciation, and I learned that every story I see has layers. Each a different shade of azure. Each laced with the possibility of something more, something larger than me.

Just as I used to give stories to the people I watched from my window, I now find myself intrigued by how different ideas, disciplines, and perspectives intersect. Whether it is the connection between my math research on prime numbers and my english research on poetic techniques, or my desire to help my community and work alongside my Superintendent to foster change, I'm drawn to connections between seemingly unrelated things. I find beauty in their complexity and simplicity side-by-side through my azure-tinted glasses. Different tints of blue come together to form my azure-colored perspective: a hint of Ultramarine Blue for my outlook on the arts, a pinch of Alaskan Blue to oil my mathematical hinges, and a snuffle of Warrior Blue to project my voice for those who need help. The blue perspective is sharp and it also has a certain ambiguity to it, reflecting all the possibilities for my future. My ability to think across disciplines drives my curiosity. Much like the view through my azure-tinted

glasses, my life is a balance between clarity and mystery—and it's in this balance, I find my deepest engagement with the world.

These glasses have become a metaphor for how I navigate life: with a sense of wonder, reflection, and hope—appreciating the sharpness of the present while embracing the blur of the unknown.

Viola. Not Violin.

Dianne Noh

I've tried a lot of stupid things growing up. As one might expect, most of the lessons I've carried from my trials were insignificant and remain so to this day. Amongst all the stupid things I've tried, the strange soda concoctions, failed craft projects, and faulty "magic tricks," one thing turns out not to have been so stupid after all: playing guitar with plastic broomsticks.

When you're a kid inspired by watching videos of YoYo Ma and Prodigy Justin Yu playing cello and you don't have a cello, it's a call to improvise. Depending on how you define "play," what I learned was that:

1. Guitar cannot be played with plastic broomsticks.
2. Guitar with plastic broomsticks $\neq$ cello.

Specifically, pink plastic broomsticks, if that makes any difference. It makes noise for sure—dead, squeaky, and ugly noise. If that was all I took away, my story would end there. It would've been another thing to add to my "stupid things I've tried" list. Lucky for me, there's more. You see, my early (pink plastic) broomstick-guitarist career planted this seed in my head, a seed that would lead me to want to play cello. Too bad for me; this also planted a seed in my brother's head. He beat me to it, but I'm not complaining.

Before any of these thoughts were processed, I began learning piano. Quite Asian, isn't it? To fulfill the checklist of being a typical Asian-American kid, I decided I wanted to learn another instrument for my summer into fourth grade. As a nine-year-old, as far as I was concerned, the only instruments that existed were piano, violin, cello, guitar, and maybe flute. Because I had to be original and not a copy of my brother, I ruled out cello. Guitar and flute were also quickly eliminated, but violin remained. To help me decide, I listen to clips of violinists on Youtube. The intense, high-pitched sound pierced my ears, and that was a solid "no."

During my selection time, my mom asked if I had any interest in the viola. To be honest, I thought she had confused the terms violin and violà and mashed it into

viola. As it turns out, the world of instruments expanded beyond piano, violin, cello, guitar, and flute.

Voilà. A month after I moved, a month to spare before I enrolled in my new school, I began viola lessons.

My new school district happened to be known to excel at music. Fittingly, within the first week of school, the orchestra teacher came into my 4th-grade class and asked to speak with any new students. She asked us if we played any instruments, how advanced we were, and a few other basic questions. I didn't know much, so all I could say was "I can play a few songs." I had meant songs as in Hot Cross Buns, Mary Had a Little Lamb. Unlike all the other new students, I was sent to the orchestral ensemble instead of the lesson group. From the short, soft, simple, easy melodies I was familiar with, the long, aggressive, complex, difficult pieces were quite a transition.

Something you have to know is that, compared to violin, viola is way less competitive in terms of numbers. So there I was, thrown in the third row, sandwiched between experienced fourth and fifth graders. Thinking back, I could've easily corrected the misunderstanding, but I'm glad I didn't. Though I would spend the next year nervously watching my stand partner in my peripheral vision, copying her bow movements, I don't have a single regret. Through practice, practice, and more practice, there was less copying and more real music. Was it good music? Absolutely not. But somehow, through miracles, a lot of grace, and through practice, I ended up as principal violist by fifth grade.

The more I played, not only did I get better, I grew attached to viola. I started with the ignorant mindset that *viola* = *fat violin*, but somehow grew to the person who will defend the viola's honor at any statement such as this. If I were to express my journey as a musician as nothing but joy, it would be fair to label me as a pathological liar. The salty, tear-saturated wood of my viola can attest to this. My viola holds the weight of all the stress, anxiety, and pressure felt in the weeks approaching the big auditions and concerts. It knows all the times I've been yelled at through my practice, the frustration felt through discipline.

To say my journey is dictated by anxiety would also leave me labeled a liar. Despite all this, the joy and pure adrenaline felt as you play that perfect run is unmatched. The moment you overcome that trouble spot, the moment you see your name on the acceptance roster, the moment you see the 100 written on your

exam sheet, the moment the judgmental teacher says “good job,” makes it all worth it.

I’ve come to learn my instrument, as it comes to know me too. I’ve learned how each finger delicately, yet powerfully, must be placed on the fingerboard and how the bow needs the perfect angle to dig into the string and produce the deep, round sound that’s unique to the viola. I’ve learned that the viola isn’t “fatter” than the violin for nothing, but the size allows for this echoing, bold sound to be produced as you press harder into the instrument.

This complex, musical relationship goes beyond just me and my viola, but to those around me. If you’ve experienced a live orchestral performance, you know. If you’ve played in an orchestral ensemble, then you really know. Even if you’ve never met the people next to you, the moment the conductor lifts their baton, a story unfolds. An intricate conversation between the woodwinds and strings, between the brass and percussion, with the sheet music as a dictator of where the story goes and the musicians as a dictator of how the story goes, a sacred bond is made. And at the center of it, whether playing the harmony or melody, lies the viola. From humble beginnings of plastic broomsticks and guitars, a musician is born.



fault lines

Kristen Lee

Where I Once Bled

Avni Sharma

I hold my head up. No—holding it up implies confidence. This is exactly the opposite.

The muscles in my neck contract as I maintain my position, feeling a strain build along my spine. I resist, the strain mutating into an agonizing sensation—as if someone was taking a dull knife and wedging it between each of my upper vertebrae.

I would be an unreliable narrator if I didn't make this clarification: this "someone" was no mysterious, malevolent entity. It was me.

By the last flash of the all-too-advanced camera, the kind that captures each shallow crevice in your skin to each out-of-place hair in the crux of your brows, I didn't think I could ever force my neck out of its position.

I didn't hate the sentiment. At this angle, everyone would be greeted by the left side of my face and spared from the right.

I accepted reality and slowly shifted to my natural state, the photographer beckoning me to come acknowledge his work. The second I lowered my eyes to his iniquitous device, I wished I hadn't.

"Candid," he shrugged casually, flipping to more shots of when I had just taken my place on the stool—before I could semi-permanently fix my neck to the left.

I focused on my face, my gaze fixed on its right. Contrary to its epithet, the profile seemed morally wrong—I felt wrong for even looking at it.

My right eyelids sit a millimeter closer together, covering an analogous section of my iris. I view the world more brightly with my left eye, with more iridescent positivity. On the right, my vision is obstructed by that infuriating eyelid, the one notorious for inspecting existence for every flaw, foible, and fissure, the one unable to allow any idealism through.

The bridge of my nose is more prominent from the right—the supposed ski-slope more of a straight, downhill path destined for doom. It is distinctively South Asian; years of hating my ethnicity, refusing to acknowledge my heritage, and silencing my mother tongue.

My right cheek is fuller, an issue unresolved by months of starvation. Each hour spent remodeling baby fat in the mirror, each dinner invitation declined, each calorie in toothpaste tracked seemed to have no effect, leaving the taunting symptom of my dereliction.

I couldn't spend another second looking at myself.

A few months later, with eyes not blinded from the stress of insecurity, I revisited those lamentable portraits. While my hatred for my right side was far from gone, I had grown to understand my features.

My right eye's refusal to match my left is representative of my view of the world: positivity is meaningless without its counterpart of incredulous examination. It is this mindset, one where the contribution of cynicism is essential, that keeps my optimism resilient.

The trajectory of my Indian nose is the legacy of my lineage, the anecdotes of the unimaginable journeys of the Sharmas and the Rajputs. It is relearning my forgotten first language with the support of my parents and practicing my grandmother's recipes in the kitchens of my family's restaurants.

The fullness of my cheeks are a manifestation of recovery. They remind me of all that I have gained from distancing myself from disorder and dysmorphia—how I am blooming from where I once bled.

Insecurity has entangled itself with every aspect of my life. I have always chosen to present my left side, the one I deem as objectively palatable. But understanding my insecurities, rather than allowing them to destroy my perception of self, lets me construct my narrative in a way that truly encompasses all of me—especially my flaws. My right side is just as much, if not more, of the story I tell about myself.



cactus stars

Kristen Lee

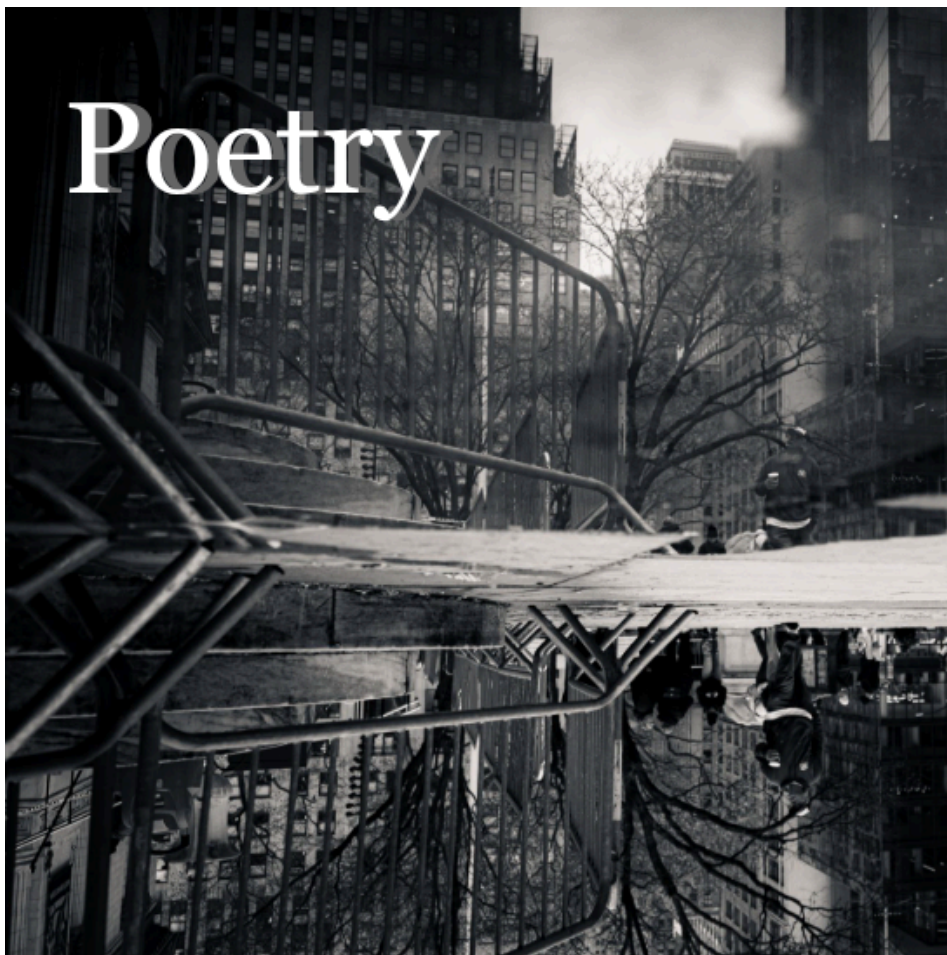
Noses: Big, Small, Flat, Pointy

Brianna Tran

All of our noses are a little flat: mine, Lauren's, Mom's, and Dad's. Dad knew this, and he made sure we knew it too. He warned me of my too “扁扁”¹ nose. He would remind me and my older sister to pinch our noses every night, a ritual to be followed religiously. It would be the antidote — our redeemer, our emancipator — to the bedeviled deformity we were eternally burdened with. This ritual was an attempt to sculpt our cursed, big, flat, ugly noses into ordained, petite, pointy, pretty ones the Chinese so heavily idolize. Or maybe it wasn't the work of a savior complex, rather the guilt for passing down such a scorned upon trait. One that would land us laughs behind our backs, murmurs wherever we went, pitiful and abhorred looks alike. Mom had the prettier nose, a slim, perkier one. The kind that wasn't fat, wide, or flat. Maybe this was his attempt to right his wrongs. Lauren, none the wiser, never understood enough to heed his warnings. But I listened, I believed. I'd pinch it, 1, 2, 3 times, hard. Then in the mornings the hope would wear off. With a brief glance in the mirror I'm finally brought back to reality.

¹ bin2 bin2 (flat)

Poetry





Blue Sunsets on Mars

Rebekah Abraham

1.

There are blue sunsets on mars.

A lone rover wandered mars,
was only supposed to last for 2 years

A lone rover wandered mars,
Lasted for 12

Curiosity

2.

There are blue sunsets on mars.

Mars is known as the red planet
Mars is also known as the god of War.

A red planet
A battlefield of red bodies.

Mars is covered in soil, dirt and dust
I wonder what it's like
to see that sunset
at the end of the day

3.

There are blue sunsets on mars.

The largest volcano in the solar system,
Mount Olympus

Littered with the palaces of gods
But they're gone.

At the top, there are craters.
I wonder where their palaces have disappeared to

4.
There are blue sunsets on mars.

Isn't that interesting?
Their blue night is our blue day

Earth is the blue planet
It's full of poverty
Full of pollution
Full of turmoil and strife
But the earth is beautiful

During the day the earth is alive

And mars is the red planet
It used to be gorgeous
And now its desolate

The night is when mars will awaken,
To see that blue foil in the horizon
That blue sunset

Dawn

Anonymous

The sky, a canvas brushed with light
Awakens soft, from velvet night.
The stars, like secrets, fade away,
As morning spills its golden ray.

The earth breathes deep in quiet grace,
The winds, like fingers, kiss the face.
A bird, unchained, begins to sing,
And all the world feels new, takes wing.

The shadows stretch, then slowly part,
As daylight paints upon the heart.
Each moment born from dreams unspoken,
A fragile thread, yet never broken.

In every dawn, a chance to rise,
To chase the stars, to touch the skies.
And in the quiet of the morning,
We find ourselves reborn.



Unnatural Contrast

David Noh

phalanges

Aarini Chakraborty

a cry reverberates
along the rusted prisms
newfound light
a crimson substance leaks and leaks infiltrating the oxygen with iron
coating and tainting and ruining.
her tortured battered body
forced to produce something it was seldom ready for.
this newfound light
it is
tainted and
 coated and
 ruined
by the wails
of the tortured battered body.

a cry reverberates
along the depths of the deepest floor
the carpals, the phalanges are white
curled around a rusted gray wire dripping hellish crimson
her sobs echo
as she bleeds
 unnatural
from the place
that was sworn to not be handled by anyone but.
the wire had been twisted and forced
into that sacred, sacred place
no,
much superior than that it had twisted
seeking to rid of the clumps that would have later defined her with a
simple three letter word
her tortured battered body
 young
forced to produce something it was seldom ready for.

a cry reverberates
all of our wails do
against the barricade of the ones who forced,
of the ones who warp our screams.
our bodies pulse as one,
their claws puncture our skin
“we keep in place what we know the bodies need,”
the warpers proclaim; yet one had never been so spurious.
so the forcers place them higher than the heavens
the ones they believe they will go to
their phalanges on our bodies
our blood our bone our skin
their phalanges will have them gripping the edges of
the depths of the deepest floor
to where that newfound light will burn
yet they construct themselves the barricade
to stay as distant and unscathed from our
tortured
 battered
 vindictive
bodies
that they remained uncaring for
that they forced
to produce something she was seldom ready for.

Grandpa's Garden

Isabella Chang

The mosquito's bite left red blotches of constant itching
The wind would carry a layer of dirt onto my clean clothes.
The weeds pricked my ankles like the fire ants that roamed.

My persimmon tree
Planted for me by my *yeye*

I eagerly waited for its growth into fruition for its sweet, subtle flesh

My naivety was planted as a sapling, fresh and small,
as the care and attention nurtured me as I rose
Gradually alongside my persimmon tree,
my appreciation grew,
like a bud that transformed into a flower,
into fruit.

The mosquitos can be deterred by eucalyptus spray
The wind carries the scents of the herbs to my nose as I inhale deeply
The luscious, leafy vegetables brush my ankles before they are harvested for a
nutritious meal

With each leaf, fruit, and bud that grows,
I am grateful for my family that showered me with their love,
removed the weeds,
chopped off the bad parts

My roots, spread wide
I continue to dig deeper as I shoot up from the ground
My branches covered with fruit
I am sweet and subtle,
Like a persimmon

yeye: grandpa in cantonese*



Reflective Nature

David Noh

The Weight of Escape

Veronica Chung

Fast footsteps and crunching leaves fills the forest
The silent night, usually so quiet
Is unbearingly loud tonight

Running away to no end
Sweat running down your head
It's blurring your vision
You try to stay still, hoping
It won't find you
It's no use
You can't run

You steal a glance worriedly.
It moves silently at night. Soundless, Swift.
It doesn't have a body, but its presence alone sends a shiver down your spine.
It resembles a tornado, spiraling with hatred and resentment
It doesn't think, composed of irrational emotions
Chasing after you with no true motive
It doesn't know why it bites or runs endlessly
It just knows it's tired of hiding

Panting, you lay against the tree
You don't understand
"Why me?"

Suddenly, you feel a thump.
Thump, thump, thump.
No time to run,
No time to hide,
No time to get away.

Out of breath, no stamina left to outrun it.
You clutch onto a tree, depending on it to save your life

Heavy exhales reveal your location almost instantly
Distance closing
You squeeze your eyes shut
Only hearing silence, you open your eyes in confusion
It's...
Crying?

Anger no longer visible
it comes closer. Slow, hesitant.
Unsure.
Inching forward, its slobbering mass reveals in itself a water so clear, you can see
anything through its reflection.
You gasp.
It's true form prevailed to be...
You.

Covered in the same black goop, composed of all the same ingredients.
You look into "its" eyes
They're round and shiny, empty of any evil
It took a second to realize
It's you
You that tried so desperately to escape
Suddenly, Ghosts flood into the forest, whispering memories you longed to
forget.
They're giggling, laughing.
What are they laughing at? Don't say.
You don't want to know.
You try again to run away from it all
But the weight of it is too much
The black substance covering your body from head to toe holds you down
Immobilizing you
The weight of escape is too heavy.

Inching closer, warily
It wasn't chasing you
it was asking for Help

Blinking rapidly to sort out your new discoveries

It's too late.

Looking into the darkness of the night, it has vanished; never to be seen again

You could've sworn at the end it looked back at you

But it couldn't be the same monster from the start

Full of embarrassment and shame.



Liminal Light

David Noh

nothing ever grows inside your bedroom

Fiona Ciccone

five thousand nights
 lain under the dirt
 where i wait for the worms to
tickle my hair and
 under
 my shirt
as they recycle the decaying roots of my dreams
 into that of another familiar hue.
i can see the stars shake their disappointed faces from high above,
daring not to shine when i've wished upon them
 empty promises and searing lies as i
 instead fall heavenly once again to where i deem
 paradise.
(How could you?)

every day i wake,
 strolling through the forest with a
 caterpillar for a back.
pay my gratitude to the brother wolves ravenously devouring my
carcass,
 of whom i always rely on to save me from
 countless heart attacks.
cuddle with the snails, hermits within hardened shells
 kicked aside while we observe with blurry vision from afar
 all our friends winning to become soaring
 butterflies
 under the brilliant spotlight within this
 starry
game of life we all call hell.
(You just haven't yet metamorphosed)

why here, the morning doves sing their alarm year-round,
all soaring 'round in circles above my body earthbound!

the only season that comes of all the four
is the one that provides me with the utmost
warmth.

(Wake up and fold the blanket)
how could i ever possibly want to abandon this home,
protective from harm with secured
privacy alone?

(Bend that thin horizon)
i will just rot here, watching you successfully leap
while i myself am still learning how to crawl.
(Shout your voice louder)

i will only wipe dry these hot, runny streams
once the sun shines and the ice begins to thaw.
(It's for your own good)

i'm so sorry, but i can't leave—
(Get back up and quit your crying)
becoming a better person is hard to conceive.
(The animals are saying their goodbyes)
you've always known i can't will myself to budge, no matter how hard i try,
(You can't hole up here forever in lies)
so please don't push me forward because you know i will die.
(You would really be saving your life...)

back then, you had always used to ask me,
*(How are you ever going to grow, cooped inside this microscopic place you call
your bedroom?)*

'cause
the chirping doves have ceased their morning song from clean-cut fronds;
the familial wolves nevermore glisten fangs to bare their hungry jaws;
the friendly worms living in the soil have long
since bid farewell;
the comforting snails have broken free from their moldy shells;
and now the youthful flowers are all wilted and dead
just like the haven i had once created inside my head.

Rainbow Stained Mosaic

Fiona Ciccone

Poise yourself tall when the sun first tips its hat—
you, brilliant as Sappho, strong as Patroclus.
Express your heart with andamento, so luminous
that the colors permanently stain through
traditionally dull, foggy window panes—the puzzle of
certainty within falling perfectly into place so they
can't ever dare to define your sins any longer.
Tiny shards, despite their diminutive and jagged edges of fragility,
seal together to paint a god of starry love, a focal creation
the backbone of a named identity so undeniably beautiful, priceless—
one that is all yours to claim for the world to see.

A Dream (You)

Dahlia Corporan

- I. You leave me so subtly.
Your love
Wispings away

A petalled dagger
Through my airways
That I don't notice until I take my last breath of you .

- II. We walk down the halls
And talk about how this is
Nothing like the teenage
Dream
We fantasized

- III. Only for you I'm all lungs
All ears
All admiration

- IV. You always were better than me at math
So I counted your imperfections
To the negatives.
I tried to count the snarky remarks
The open insecurities
To no avail.

- V. You were always better than me at being
Poetic.
It's crazy that
I'm named after a flower
But you're so
Pretty pink
And I'm so
Confused and

It's why I told you I need to sleep on this poem.

- VI. Succumbed to your floral scent,
I dream of a meadow
Plans of gossiping together by the lake on the weekend
Until I arrive and the flowers start to wilt and
Now i'm just
Alone
And my mind is flitting
Flower
 to
 Flower
Looking for the one whose roots will intertwine to tug on the sun
And scream
Wake up
Wake up
But my midnight anxiety
Does nothing but shroud my love for you
In a concoction of coughed up blood and forget-me-nots.
- VII. Which is why I wake up gasping, distraught, with no clue of who I'm
trying to be when I'm not trying to live up to you.
- VIII. Is this where I plunge into insanity?
Obsession?
I love you
But I am torn
Between flower pressed
scrapped journal sheets, and giggling
And reality, acceptance,
Isolation.
- IX. I have come to realize that only thing that can
Come out of our separation is
A world in which you are sane and sad
And I am just sad.

And I don't know what to do now.
Your poetry was always better.

 You sing sweet lullabies
 And tell silly stories
(i love you)
 And how
 Your every word
 Is uncontradicted

I miss every moment spent in clarity
The dream in which we can be young and free and together
Arms stuck together by the blood
Forget me nots interlaced in between frizzy hair strands
I long for us every second we're apart
I'd die for our friendship
Even as I live it

X. So leave me so subtly.
 Your love
 Wisps away

A petalled dagger
Through my airways
That I don't notice until I gladly take my last breath of you .



City Peace
David Noh

Forgetting

Dahlia Corporan

To be honest
I really thought
we were killing you

Nowhere I had ever been had reeked
In expired dreams
In hopelessness
Like it had here

But you sat down
Satisfied
Ready to move into your new

apartment

And I don't ever know
If you're just oblivious or wise

And I don't really know
If you actually know my name

But you invited this stranger in

And now every Saturday
Upon my visit
Im greeted with your
Brightened
Caribbean skyline
Smile

On top your wooden dresser
We place photos of your mother

Your brothers

Anyone who could keep you company
Around your room

Rummaging through every sauce packet you've ever received
A meal slip for every time you have eaten
The meals
Long forgotten
Memories stuffed into a tin
that doesn't care to open

You've always loved sweets
contrary to your temperament
And only ask for ice cream
When the nurses come with your food

And it's tough to know whether you're oblivious or wise
But it's even tougher knowing that
So much of my blood
Is yours

I don't think you remember
That you were the one who got me on my toes
Bouncing my knees up and down to the rhythm
Your hands beneath my shoulders provided
Security
In a time where my legs trembled and my words
Came out in a crooked line

And since
my contorted sense of identity
Is something that has centered so greatly around
What you've held up to the sun
The distances you've traveled

Your tough
Pruned fingers

Coarsened from
Swimming us
Across oceans

And
now all that's left of those memories
Are the faint traces of the sun's embrace
The sun etched freckles from
Days in a music coated
Salty moistened air

And the ashen green sincerity of your eyes
Bold magenta lip
Overly furrowed brows
Seem to be one of the things you never forgot

Forgetting
As the sun dips deeper into the horizon
Stretching thin
Memories are unraveled
Leaving behind nothing
But a soft familiar warmth
A quiet glow
Fading out
Till all is left is a blur
The sweet after taste of the sunset across the ocean

The Tricolor

Loucas Dong

Sunrise flourish on cold stained stone.

Boots of man click through and through;
wake the sleepy lowlands from restless slumber, for death knocks upon the
gates of first and second.

Crows fly in clouded skies, for even the sun in all glory bars the heavens, turns
the blind eye
on the world she watches
on this woeful day.

Time feels heavy upon raw blades.

Curious eyes wander afar, to see what fate has in hold; from across the sea in
the royal palace of another to the Prussian soldier who watches
the city of light
burn ever,
ever,
brighter.

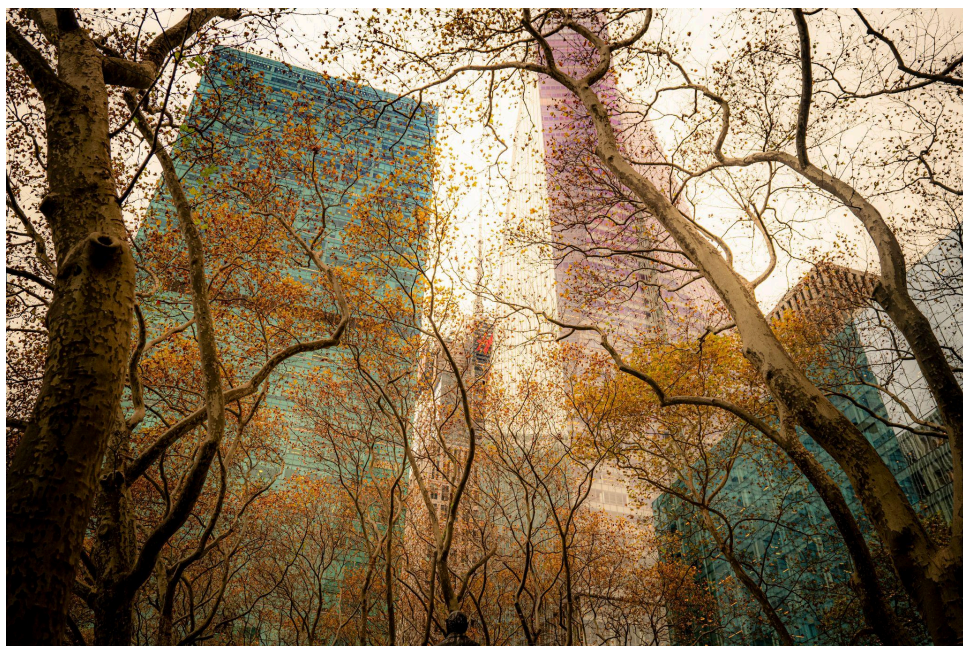
Pure feet march shackled sans purpose more. Heart yearns to throw
sense,
to leave on own terms;
a final flight of soul and spirit.
But the candle is snuffed,
and as if asking for reason,
he looks to the covered horizon
in a voice outspoken.

Pourquoi?

Then silenced once more, forevermore.

Glimmer of steel bearing redden blood
meets soft splintered wood;
a gentle symphony done too many times.
Long live the Republic
as white flags burn,
till the blaze turns red;
till dust blows away yesterday.

He who once came, divine
in words and moves, fated
to see kingdom turn wild;
be plunged to the ground
from graceful heaven,
whilst laughter fills the tombs, welcoming many more heads
to come.



Natural Encroachment

David Noh

I Don't Know You

Renee D'souza

It started small,
a quiet breath you could hold in your hand,
as harmless as air, you said,
but sweeter,
lighter.

I watched you pull it in,
the way water disappears into sand—
gone, just like that.
And maybe I didn't see it at first,
how something invisible
could sink so deep,
how a habit could make itself a home.

You never spoke of it.
Why would you,
when it seemed like nothing?
A small thing,
a thin vapor curling into itself,
but even the smallest things
have weight.

It clung to you,
a haze I couldn't touch,
couldn't fight.
Your voice softened,
your laughter slowed,
and when you smiled,
it was thinner than before.

I wanted to break it,
to pull it from your hands,
to tell you—

it was holding you,
even as you held it.

But you didn't see it that way.
You still don't.
To you, it's nothing more than a habit,
a breath you can let go
whenever you want.

And maybe I'll never understand
how something so light
can press so hard on your chest.
But I'll sit here,
quiet,
waiting for the day
you let it go
and remember how it feels
to breathe.

Weight of Their Glasses

Renee D'souza

They passed it around like a secret,
like a key to something they couldn't name.

One sip,
two sips,
and suddenly the world was easier,
brighter,
their laughter a little louder,
their words a little smoother.

I watched them fall into it,
like rivers carving their paths
through softer earth.

I saw the way their faces changed,
eyes distant,
smiles too wide.
It was like watching them slip into someone else,
someone I couldn't reach.

And I stood there,
hands empty,
trying to stay steady.
The bottle glittered in their hands,
and I could feel the weight of it
in the air between us.
They didn't ask me why I didn't drink,
because the question didn't need to be asked—
it was a wall I built without knowing it,
a line I refused to cross.

But I could taste it,
the pull of it,
sweet and sharp,
calling me closer with every laugh,

every whispered promise of freedom.
It would be so easy to fall,
to forget the tightness in my chest,
the weight of being the only one left
who still remembers how to walk without stumbling.

Sometimes I imagine myself there,
just one sip,
one laugh,
one moment when I wouldn't feel so different.
But I see them,
so lost in the blur of it,
and I wonder if they even know
how much they've let go.

I'm still standing on the edge,
the weight of their glasses in my hands,
the taste of their freedom
sinking into my skin.
It's hard,
so hard,
to stay when they've all turned away,
but I hold on.

For now,
I hold on.

one day

Rachel Ha

I. DENIM

There's a chill in the air; it turns laughter
to smog if you exhale too quickly. Life swigged
us like a bottle, wrapped in a brown paper
bag, that burned like peroxide when it took
a gulp—& prescribed us each a stranger,
whose laugh has become my favorite sound.
The night breathes of gasoline; I can almost
taste the kerosine you've laced into our
milkshakes: two jokes in & I'm a kid on the
schoolyard, trying to fight the punchline
with my eyes closed & fists unclenched.
You smile & wipe away the fog that escapes
from my lips. Sometimes I think we're the
only two idiots in the world who find
ourselves funny. "It takes one to know one,"
but I think you broke me in, like a glove
or denim, that has left me concave.

ii. one day

you'll forget me, like car keys left in the ignition;
a song blares on the radio & you chant the lyrics

wrong. i will put your things in a drawer & turn
the light off in my room. the dog, on the porch,

will stop sitting near the mailbox, waiting for your
car to pull in. the fridge bulb will go out & no one

will come to replace it. my phone will stop ringing
with calls from friends: "are things better?" some

stupid, corny joke will remind me of your laugh. a

green jacket will pass me in the grocery aisle. i will
chase it down for a few seconds, before realizing
that's not you. your keys will jangle in my doorway
& make my heart stop. i'll forget the artifacts still
haunting my room. i'll forget all the reasons you
came by to get them. we'll make small talk about
the weather & your sister's new job. you'll lean in
& whisper something funny, which absolves you
of all the hate i bury in my chest. i'll watch you go
when porch lights start shining & remember that
goodbye is just truck tires, crunching the gravel,
making way for new love to pass.



Double Vision

Avni Sharma

salt legs

Rachel Ha

before:

you brought me here once & taught us how to swim. i remember my sun hat & how it flopped like the sails of a ship, or the way you smiled when i doggy paddled across the lagoon. so much of my youth i've outgrown, it hangs on my shoulders like the excess fabric of a t-shirt. i wish i could go back to that moment. i wish i could be there all the time. as i got older, you taught me when life breaks your ribcage, it leaves your heart more open. but somehow, i wish to be less kind.

after:

twin gashes on my knees.
still a tinge of pink, raw skin:
peel back the wound &
anoint with salt.

folks used to call seagulls
“useless birds” that pluck scraps
from the shoreline &
survive on pity.

i fear that you look at me the
same: perhaps i've become
too soft for the way you
choose to love me.

“you used to be so happy,”
you sigh, bereaved, as if
i'm the counterfeit
bones of a child.

my body *quakes* at rebirth.
somehow i've changed but not
transformed. i guess that's what
happens when you get older:

when soft lungs turn to rust &
you learn to laud past mud tracks.
wipe the saline that dribbles down
your chin & crawl back into

sunken bones. maybe i'm too
tall to fit that twin-sized bed.
maybe i'm too hurt to learn from
the things meant to break me.

i guess that happens when you get
older: find the antidote in how
your skin scorches when the
world treats you wrong, thinking,

it prescribed you all the things right.

The Orange Peel

Mariyah Habib

I dropped the peel—
one long spiral—
slipping quietly to the pavement,
forgotten in a small heap.

From the fire hydrant,
a crow's sharp voice flickered like shadow:
"Excuse me,
you dropped something."

I blinked.
"Do you want it?"

Claws clicked on concrete.
"No,
but she does."

Across the street,
she sat cross-legged,
hair tangled like wild branches,
wearing a garland of dried orange peels strung on twine.

"The crows bring the bad," she said,
her eyes gleaming like midnight stars.
"But oranges?
They bring the good—
balance."

The crow nodded,
dark wings folded like secrets,

and I held out the peel—
an offering, a small chance.

She took it with swift fingers,
threading the spiral onto her string.
The air shimmered—
like heat rippling over asphalt.

The crow whispered softly in her ear.
She laughed—
a sound like leaves stirred by breeze.

Suddenly, the sidewalk tilted,
the hydrant melted like wax.
I blinked—
was I dreaming?

When I looked again,
she was gone.
The crow was gone.

But where the peel had fallen,
a tiny orange tree pushed through cracks,
impossible and perfect,
bearing one bright fruit—
a drop of sunlight hanging just out of reach.

I reached out.
The orange was warm,
its scent wrapping around me
like a forgotten memory.

I peeled it carefully—
the spiral held in my hand.
I bit in—
sweet, tangy, alive.

The world steadied,
the air crisp and clear.
I walked home
with the taste of oranges
and the quiet promise
that sometimes,
things grow exactly where they're meant to.

The Garden that Remembered

Mariyah Habib

The garden sleeps—
rows of plants caught
between remembering and forgetting.

Lavender stands silent,
its fragile stems bowed,
afraid to reach
the wrong way.

Margot kneels,
aching knees pressed to earth,
her fingers tracing brittle leaves.
“Why have you forgotten?” she asks.

A tug at her sleeve—
small, green-stained fingers,
mossy eyes full of quiet hope.

“It’s scared,” whispers the child,
“scared of being wrong.”

Margot’s voice breaks,
a fragile thread,
“But growth needs courage.”

The child leans close,

lips brushing soil,
breathing warmth like sunlight.

The lavender shivers,
purple blooms unfurl—
a quiet burst
of bravery.

Margot turns,
but the child melts
into shifting shadows,
leaving only
the scent of something new.

The garden exhales,
breath slow and steady,
alive again—
because it remembers.

Margot smiles,
her aching knees eased
by the promise of growth.



The Lighthouse

Om Thakur

Questions from The Orchard

Abdullah Yusuf Hassan

Does a sunflower dream of the moon?

Does it stretch to reach heaven
Growing out its stem to climb higher than the clouds
Does a sunflower know of the grass it lives in or
Does it grow so quick it never notices the greenery
Does it question the flowers which define beauty
Does it criticize the plants missing petals
Does a sunflower laugh when it withers
Does it take note of the bees on its bud or
Is it too focused on growing to care?

When a sunflower dies
Does the sunflower cry
Does it scream and fight as the end fades near
Does it flail its arms begging for just one more chance or
Does a sunflower die peacefully
Does the sunflower sob before it's gone knowing
It spent too much time trying to grow into something
It simply wasn't meant to be
Does a sunflower feel regret?

When it grows old
Does a sunflower try to warn the other flowers
Does a sunflower ever succeed or
Are the sunflowers too busy watching the sky
To look down and thank the soil
Does the sunflower feel regret because
Does it think it would have grown taller
Would the sunflower choose to be someone else?

Does a rose listen to the rain

Does it take it freely without thought
Does the rain ask for restitution or
Does it offer up its life in exchange for
The beauty of a rose
Does it know of the roses it falls upon
Does it know of the somberness which entails
Does the rose recognize its beauty or
Is it only admired when its time is gone?

Does a bonsai get jealous when placed in a forest?

Does it look around intimidated
Does it compare itself to the bark of a tree
Does the bonsai look down on the wood chips below
Does it feel good when it does
Do the trees look down on the bonsai
Does it feel good when they do
Do the clouds laugh at the trees
Do they laugh knowing they're higher
Does the sun scold the clouds
Does it feel irritated knowing that it's on top
Does the sun feel satisfied knowing it will never be lower than anyone or
Does it feel the pressure to keep things running

Knowing that if it looks away for a moment then
The world would collapse?

Do the plants in the orchard talk to each other
Do they wonder what happens when they die
Do they question the beauty of roses
Do they question the intellect of sunflowers
Do they recognize the petiteness of bonsais
Do the plants live in harmony or
Do they bicker endlessly
Do they wonder whose nutrients they siphon from the soil

Do they ever thank the dirt for life or
Do they believe they can exist without support
Do the plants in the orchard fall asleep to the sound of silence?

They think they are alone as they look up to the sky
But they are accompanied by each other.

If only they looked down and took notice.



Mirror Mirror on the Lake

Om Thakur

I want to turn that clock handle

Shannon Hong

I wore the veil of the indigo sky,
Ancona white-speckled stars,
trailing the blinding moon's scars.

Felt shadows of broken sapient bark
that stalked my billowing blouse,
which spoke through whispers
of a numbing breeze.

I heard your voice—
those times we walked alongside your home. But it was only the continuous
chirping of a longing cricket.
I hid from the wickedness
of the blazing orb.

Mouth dry,
could have returned.

But I drank the scent of nostalgia:
humidity and golden honeysuckle.

Went on, heavy feet planted on the earth, springing through wet cracking mulch,
till I felt the tick-tock of my tightly strapped watch you should have never given
me

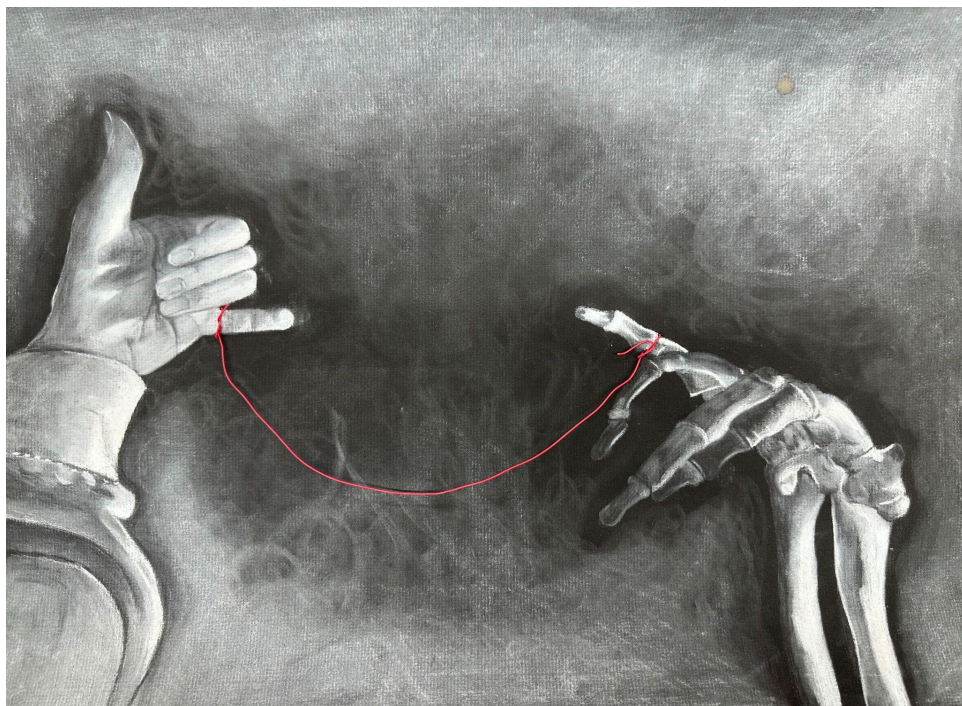
Wanted it to melt,
like fogs of drowsiness after sleep.
Wanted it to stop,
like our broken promises, but
time stops for no one.

airborne hope

A contrapuntal poem dedicated to my family

Vivian Huang

in china,	a farmer sows
a mountain filled with	ambitious wishes of
jade rings and lush,	velvet beds sailing
blessings	to new york.
american	hands catch
dreams of	wind-billowed
suburban rooftops becoming	tulips within
a sea of aligned stars—	a hopeful harvest.



The Red String of Fate

Emma Wen

Delilah with Dignity

A monolingual poem after Sarah Phillips.

Vivian Huang

I apologize.

Tonight,
I chastised my head into nakedness.
The winter froze my sense
and replaced it with a sharp
frostbite.
My conscience gnaws at my hallowed bones.

Heavenly Father, I fear when I thaw
I will remain unchanged.

and Heavenly Father, he crumpled
the pillars today— too blinded by hateful
lust, you gave him rest.

Heavenly Father, my crimson-stained body walks
on cracked marble, shards
piercing my lungs.

Where has his discipline gone?
A follicle or a worshiped hall?
Heavenly Father, you deserted me.

I am aware
I stemmed from his rib,
as did everyone else.

I bare no verse
No pride
No status ahead of him.

So Heavenly Father,

as Hell burns for me,
they wait on You.

Tonight,
The hairs from his apple tree
burned, trickling the ripened juice
under the dirt.

Why should I apologize?

parting is such a sweet sorrow

Chloe Hui

parting is such a sweet sorrow
sweet it is, you're bound to see thy again
sorrowful it is, since you never know when

How long can one stand on a tightrope
Of winds cause buildings to tremble
Standing, I said
Haven't even acknowledged that it is in fact, two
In fact a duet dance instead of a lonely quiver
Of embraces and kisses on sky-line high wire
Of metallic tightrope creaking with anticipation
To sharply snap under hefty weight of unbound heartaches

Do you believe in soulmates?
Of red thread running in our blood
Pinkies, weak yet tied around tenfold
By the many burdens ridden by our fate?

I, bound by shackles of mileage
Making do with a screen that broadcasts you
Of blue light and my monitor
Of matching necklaces and keychains
Instead of castle railings and yards of garden
Of pledges by my room and secret cryptic messages
Still have yet to unravel thy answer
Of freed from shackles, let alone
A soulmate in which I couldn't even sit next to
Not after a few months, therefore

he sits there
arms embraced around me
of testing hours and days of buildup
of fear that grains of time would dissipate

between the gaps and cracks of his calloused hands

And when will I see you again?
Soon, I pray
Laid besides him helplessly
Not by besides one another in a church grave
Shunned by monuments and the pope himself
But by the thick walls of our modern homes
Shunned by thy sin of secrets of our amour
Instead of lips singing all syllables
Of nourishing happiness
I linger for the buzz of text messages
No longer able to be sneaked up by your embrace.

Growing

Ivilyn Isaac

They grew in tandem, roots stemming from the same soil

A Chrysanthemum, a Marigold, and a Lily of the Valley- in that order

One without water

One without stalk

One without either

In their conditions, they each grew with thorns, withered petals and a skewed body

Without subsistence, without support, these flowers were forced to flourish through their own will and wonders as confused vines attempting to navigate a world of bouquets



Sounds of The Harbor

Jeremy Yu

Untitled 2

Francesca Javor

I wish they made something that covered your whole face,

I said because I'd erased the idea of a balaclava
from my mind since I was ten,
irked by the tingling of my warm breath colliding
with the cold radiating from the snow,
resulting in the dampness above my chin
that repelled me so.

Now I know that a scarf won't hurt me,
even though does a little bit when I remind myself
I'm wearing one.

Oh, the dancing snowflakes
cling onto my hair like glitter that goes away,
they sneak into the car and wait out their own cold
until the heater kills them gently.

It's dark out now,
even though the sky above the mountain still holds
a tinge of blue.

You can see the stars here,
their endless home so hollow yet cramped

There's the big dipper,
my cousin said once as I ran inside the house,
boots shuffling because I refused to zipper them.

And I still do-
bringing in the groceries doesn't take long.
One hand full of kidney beans and a bag of apples,
the other grabs a tuft of snow,
I watch as it melts into my hot fingers,
so now both of my hands are filled with red.

Living in a room facing the corner is parallel to a freezer,
glass panes aren't the best insulators,
neither is a house built a century ago.

But I make do,
a hoodie with balled up lint from middle school,

and a blanket I still use in the summer.

The City Without (?)

Aditya Jha

(?) *imagine* the city without us—

It breathes without pause,

(Did (?) ever leave a mark, anyway?)

They go about their lives, unbothered.

(“Look at them,” one whispers, almost laughing.)

The City Without (?)

(?) see a village, far away—

No, it’s a sanctuary!

a quiet place where the air is sweet,

(But no one is there, not even the echoes.)

(Why would they stay? They never liked (?).)

A free village, a hollow dream

The City Without (?)

If I want to lie down,

I’ll sprawl across the earth.

(“Touch the grass,” says a softer voice.)

(Lie still, they won’t find me here.)

I’ll wander where I please, like phantoms in the night—

(Or like children playing a game only they understand.)

The City Without (Me?)

When I think of it—

When (we?) think of it,

(It feels like letting go, doesn’t it?)

(We?) find peace in (our?) absence—

(But what if they forget (us?)?)

(We?) are relieved, like clouds after a storm,

(Or is it dread, lurking beneath?)

The City Without (We?)

When (?) leave—

(They'll rejoice, I promise you.)
No one will feel the sting of ~~our~~ mistakes.
When the time comes to disappear,
 (Finally, I can rest, don't you see?)
A new world will emerge, one (we?) cannot touch—
 a blank page, a sigh of relief.
A world that is only (us), a singular, fractured unity—
 The City Without Us.

The Burden of Being

Aditya Jha

A heavy weight upon our heart—

(It's unbearable, isn't it?)

A sadness that wraps around us,

(No escaping it, no matter what we do.)

A shadow, it follows us—

(Why can't it leave us alone?)

It never fades, never disappears.

Oh, but look at the rain,

(Can't you feel it wash over you?)

Tears that fall, and they cleanse.

(Isn't it strange how it feels so real, so alive?)

A storm inside us,

Can't we just let it rage for a while?

Pain, it's the only thing we can trust—

**(And what if it's the only truth we know?)*

But no, we can get out of this,

(There's always something to hold onto, isn't there?)

We long for brighter days—

Can't we see them just beyond the clouds?

Laughter, light, hope—

Don't we deserve it?

We deserve to smile, to feel good again—

Don't we?

No, no—there is no escape!

(You're fooling yourself if you think there is.)

The weight—it drags us down,

We're sinking...

It's endless—

I can't breathe.

It's okay to cry,

(Don't you ever let anyone tell you otherwise.)

Cry until the storm is done.

(What's the point in hiding it?)

The ache? It's part of us now—

It feels good to just let it out.

There's no need to fight—

We don't have to.

But we *shouldn't* let it take over—

(We're stronger than this, aren't we?)

Why do we keep holding onto the pain?

We should *want* better.

Brighter days are waiting—

Don't we owe it to ourselves to try?

No, don't listen—

(You think it's that simple?)

We've tried before, remember?

Nothing changes.

We're trapped in this forever,

(Let it be.)

So let it all out.

(Cry, scream, let it go.)

It's okay—

Until we can't feel anything at all.

But wait...

(What if there's something to hold onto, just beyond the fog?)

We don't have to stay in this place.

It's *possible* to see beauty in the dark—

We just have to look.

tv glow

Faiza Kamal

i had always been told to be abstemious with my misery
i couldn't possibly waste my heartache on the predetermined tragedies
of those on the screen above me and the pages beneath
and so my compassion caved in on itself
until i could fit it into a pillbox,
all the media i drank in and all its swirling humanity
met with my own apathy
i soon realized i'd misplaced the antique shop,
with its telltale grandfather clock and
lachrymatory bottles and
vintage bookshelf of my childhood diaries,
tangled somewhere within my intestines
or perhaps it had ceased to exist that moment
i'd thought back to the look on my mother's face,
the disappointment that i'd once mistaken as commiseration
i'd thought back to the girl i'd been,
sitting on her knees in front of the television
with her heart in her hands like a broken plate
i'd thought back to how the film from which
silver light had been stirred into the salt on my lashes
was now a hazy memory,
how i'd turned it off after meeting her eyes,
how i hadn't waited to see the end in case it
further shattered the porcelain ventricles
i'd thought back to how i couldn't remember whether i
swallowed the plate's shards to rest
in my chest in shambles that day
or threw them away;
despite spending my life thinking i'd done the former,
with the way my memory deceives me,
i may have succumbed to the latter.
how many of my heartstrings haven't been ossified?
i miss that antique shop i'd found such warmth in

with late november eating at my lungs outside,
that antique shop where the only red
on my fingertips were inflicted by the cold
i hadn't hesitated to flatten every character i came across
to mere brushstrokes of artists ever since,
and every time was a baby step towards the day
those brushstrokes would be at the hand of god



Golden Hour

Jeremy Yu

women are trees, living in a man's artificial world

Ceri Kang

men will never understand
a woman living in a man's world.
men can drown their wives
in the richest dresses,
but they will never have taste.
the gown can be sewn with layers of
rich, silky, wispy feathers
to cover up any women's flaws.
but, men will never understand that
feathers were made to fly.

reach.

reach high
in a man's world.
even though
she is rooted to the dirt
in man-made, artificial parks.
she is planted to the ground
next, inside, outside, above, under
a building
set for display.

pose.

pose
in a man's world.
woman. spruce up to meet
society's beauty standards
because it's suffocating.
force women to
tangle herself in her own branches,
even though

women are blessed with natural beauty
given by their mother
nature.

restrict.

restrict women
in a man's world.
woman, the sun is right there
close enough to burn your eyes.
the blazing sun will not melt
the Glass that
will protect you.
stretch her arms up high
because that is how far
she may go.

criticize.

criticize women
in a man's world.
she looks down on her structure
because she is constantly morphed
by his standards.
shave off your leaves,
carve yourself down.
burn down, calm down.
stop being so insecure.

men will never understand
the perspective of a woman.
women will die with their organic proof,
whether her death be by nature
or by deforestation.
their body is embedded with rims,
representing each year of

survival and hard work.
their organic matter
will nourish future generations.
leaving the tainting truth
that women
are the trunks to our foundation.



Itch

Ellia Zhang

wish

Grace Kuriakose

amber rises and flickers in front of me,
taunting me.
melted wax falls on each side of the candle.
a melody of happy birthday flutters around the table.
in this moment, we are together.

but soon, we will leave the smallness of this town.
the familiar voices, the comfort, the creaking table,
memories suspended in nostalgia.
it's strange to miss something while you're in the moment, knowing it's fleeting,
taking its last breath and ceasing.
i feel the glow of the candle, soft with childhood's weight.
hands, tug at the knife, slicing the cake open.
learning to grasp, hold on, let go.
beneath the glow of string lights, it illuminates.
a mosaic of faces i've known too long.
laughter spills, overlapping like waves as if we can outpace goodbye.

i know that tomorrow we scatter like stars,
too far too see the same constellations.
i drink the moment,
silent to the fact we'll become faces in a yearbook
faces, so vivid tonight, that will become blurry at the edges.
i close my eyes and make another wish
in this moment, we are together

The Sun, The Hills, and I

Kyra Lew

A

Golden sun,

Just about to peek out of the horizon

Rising slowly, but surely

And clouds tainted with the color of a short-lived night

That will soon become pieces of cotton in the day

Along with rolling hills full of green,

damp,

wild grass

And us, running like there was no tomorrow with laughter as wild as the green below us,

As if we could live our lives like they weren't evanescent or impermanent.

As if for one, single, microscopic moment,

nothing mattered.

As if somehow, we didn't have to be plucked out of our places,

to be shined,

shaped

and appraised

just to get someone to say a simple

"Yes"

or even a nod of approval,

When we know our worth is so much more than just opinions.

That same field of grass with rolling hills lives in my memory while walking down a road.

A

Dull sun,

Set two-thirds of the way in the sky,

Setting slowly, but surely

And clouds tainted with the color of the miraculously blue sky

That will soon become harborers of the sky's tears

Along with long roads full of nothing but gray,
solid,
Tangible concrete.

It's similar to what I had envisioned before yet now, there is no laughter or wilderness,
No whimsicalness or amusement.

Just the solid concrete,
The dull sun
And I.

I wish to go back to those rolling hills one day
Where hopes and dreams can roam free
And so can I.

State Lines

Kloie Liao

“state lines”
by novo amor.

i packed to this song
i heard from an instagram reel
on the last day of camp.
i was getting ready to head back to new york, you to upstate ny, georgia, new jersey, and seattle.
i tried not to cry
as i folded my yellow cardigan to put away in the suitcase
along with our paintings, rocks, and concert programs

i packed to this song
remembering all our late night talks, boba runs, rehearsals, and “healing sessions”,
trying to shake the feeling of the fear that bittersweet nostalgia was creeping up too early,
whispering in my ear that one day these would all turn into memories

i packed to this song
after we parted in the hallway for the last night
having just sung and danced our hearts out in the dark together
of 4th floor karaoke night
screaming lyrics into a microphone
making silly faces
and hugging, bumping into each other and swaying at each chord change of every cliché teenage song

i packed to this song
thinking i liked it so much
realizing it'd fit perfectly in the playlist we all said we liked to listen together,
I added it and

knew someday I would send it to you all like a love letter of our memories and an attempted reflection of what the love you showed me felt like.

it's scary, but as it all slips away, i know we'll have these memories to hold onto.
even if they're only across
state lines.

Rochester Waffles

Kloie Liao

it wasn't until I heard the way you say "okay"
that I realized how warm it was to hear your voice again,
how much I missed it.

"okay" you say with one of those cool straight faces,
overtones of teasing your friends and subtly telling them how stupid what they
just said was,
sprinkled over
undertones of telling them you're here to stick it out and see it through no matter
how stupid
it may be, because you've just got them like that
and you just know they're making it big someday.

it wasn't til I heard the way you say "by accidentally"
and heard your stupid ass jokes,
watched you laugh your head off at dinner
and heard you call your mama over the phone,
that I realized I missed the language your love speaks –
the rough edges that push your friends around
and the soft centers that still call your mama your day one.

i know it's been some time, we're not meant to be close anymore,
but I'm happy to see you're doing well.
to my brother from another mother – a name we declared ages ago in middle
school –
i'm proud of you man,
i'm glad I got to hear your voice again.

strangers at the end

Whitney Lin

we never started as strangers
no, we connected like old friends,
like we had known each other in lives before,
a bond that felt too strong to bend.
but somewhere along the way it faltered,
a thread frayed at the seams,
what once was real and unshaken
now feels like a distant dream.

i don't remember when that changed,
the time seems to blur and blend,
like a book missing pages,
a story with no clear end.
but when i walk past you now,
we just share an empty glance,
as if we've never shared our secrets
or danced in the light of chance.

there's still so much i wish i could say,
words tangled in my chest,
apologies, memories, questions
that never found their rest.
but i know the silence has grown too loud,
a barrier i cannot break,
so i act like you don't haunt my thoughts,
like my heart doesn't ache.

i act like you don't know my secrets,
like you can't read my mind,
like every time i see you
i don't wish we could rewind.
to the days when laughter came easy,
when the world felt safe and small,

when we thought we'd never drift apart,
never imagine a fall.

what once was the purest connection
now feels impossible to mend.
so now when we walk past each other,
we both just pretend,
that we were never anything more
than strangers in the end.

and yet, beneath the quiet distance,
i wonder if you feel it too
the shadow of what we used to be,
the echo of me and you.
but time has a way of moving forward,
of sweeping us in its tide.

we never started as strangers,
no, we saved that till the end.

snap

Whitney Lin

Sony α6000

Compact and powerful

Lightweight and versatile

Fast hybrid autofocus

Shooting speed of up to 11 frames per second

Tiltable LCD screen

High-resolution electronic viewfinder

24.3 MP sensor

Mirrorless

Perfect time freezer

Shutter speed: 1/200

Aperture: F/2.8

Snap

A baby's laughter, soft and unrestrained,
Fingers chubby and dimpled, reaching for the world.
The room is still except for the symphony of giggles,
Blocks topple in vibrant chaos, yet they rebuild—
Again and again, with infinite patience.
The air hums with discovery,
Every moment a first, every glance a marvel.
In the golden haze of morning light,
There's something fleeting in this moment,
A purity, a joy too perfect to last untouched.

Shutter speed: 1/200

Aperture: F/3.2

Snap

Two hands clasped on the playground,
Fingers sticky from popsicles, clasping as if they'll never let go.
"You're it!"—words shouted with reckless glee,
Velcro sneakers racing toward an unspoken promise.
Pebbles of laughter erupt like bells,

Matching braids bobbing in sync,
Each stumble and scrape met with the other's hand pulling up.
A friendship as pure as the sky they play under,
Boundless, unbroken, as if the world will never grow bigger than this.

Shutter speed: 1/200

Aperture: F/4

Snap

Middle school hallways echo with uncertainty,
The shuffle of sneakers against linoleum,
Eyes darting, hoping to land on something familiar.
A small circle forms—hesitant at first,
Then growing, strengthening like roots in shallow soil.
Whispers over juice boxes hold the weight of secrets,
Notes passed between hands that tremble with possibility.
They giggle through braces and blush through crushes,
Finding belonging in shared playlists and messy handwriting.
A delicate chaos,
A fragile, beautiful moment of figuring out who they are together.

Shutter speed: 1/200

Aperture: F/8

Snap

High school—a blur of motion, noise, and fleeting faces.
Friday nights under stadium lights thrum with excitement,
Arms draped around shoulders, linked by the warmth of shared memories.
Every laugh feels endless, every argument seems monumental,
Yet all dissolve into the collective hum of belonging.
There are sleepovers filled with whispered dreams,
Polaroids tacked on walls, smudged with fingerprints and love.
The world is wide, but this group feels like its center,
A constellation of moments, each star brighter than the last.
Stretching to hold them all,
As if to say, “This matters. This will always matter.”

Shutter speed: 1/200

Aperture: F/4

Snap

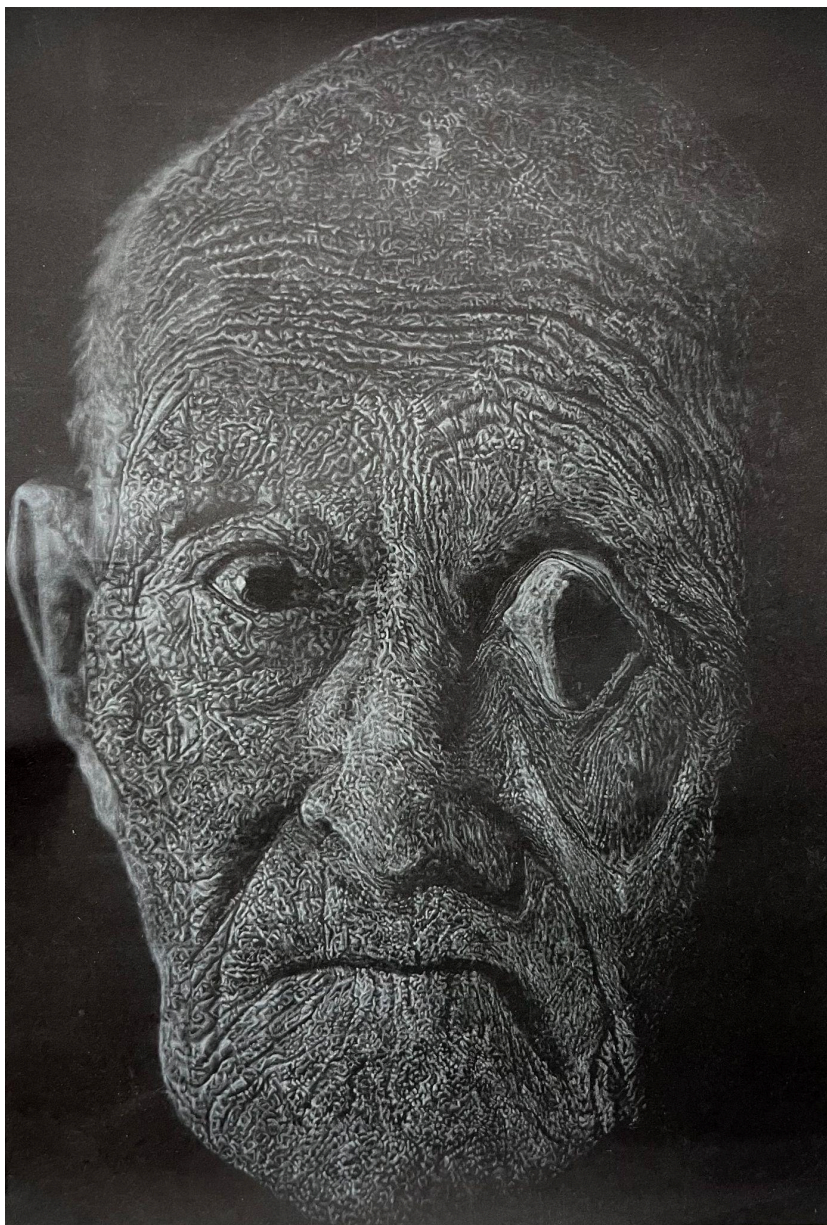
Graduation caps hover mid-air, frozen.
Voices cheer, yet the undercurrent hums with quiet ache.
Arms wrap tighter now, no longer carefree—
These hugs are weighted with what's been shared,
And what will soon be left behind.
The sprawling group has shrunk, condensed,
Leaving only the few who weathered every storm.
Tears and smiles intertwine, bittersweet threads of emotion.
The grief of goodbye
The hope of tomorrow, the love that lingers unspoken.

Shutter speed: 25

Aperture: F/2.8

Snap

Stars smear across the frame like scattered dreams.
Infinite specks of light, each one a question,
Each one a possibility suspended in velvet black.
The sky whispers secrets only the daring can hear,
Its vastness both daunting and magnetic.
Constellations map old stories,
But the spaces in between—
Ah, those are where the future lives.
The unknown becomes something beautiful,
Not a void, but a canvas.



Bend
Ellia Zhang

i want to be loved

Whitney Lin

i want to be loved
loved like a home, not a place
to feel your warmth in every space.
not bricks and mortar, but shelter and peace,
a haven where all my doubts release.
a love that welcomes, soft and kind,
a sanctuary for the heart and mind.

i want to be loved
loved like a story, not a page
a tale that grows with every age.
not bound by an ending or fleeting words,
but alive in whispers, felt and heard.
a narrative woven in moments we share,
a legacy built with infinite care.

i want to be loved
loved like a song, not a note
to feel the harmony, deep and true,
a melody crafted by me and you.
not fleeting, singular, or incomplete,
but a masterpiece where hearts meet,
a crescendo that builds, a rhythm that flows,
a symphony of trust only we compose.

i want to be loved
loved like a habit, not a chore
not something done out of duty's call,
but natural, constant, the truest of all.
a love that lingers like morning light,
effortless, simple, and always right.
like the sunrise that graces each new day,
steady and warm, in an unspoken way.

i want to be loved
loved like a breath, not a sigh
to be needed, not as relief, but as life,
a quiet rhythm through peace and strife.
not heavy, resigned, or laced with despair,
but light and vital, always there.
a love that fuels, not just sustains,
bringing fire to my heart, like blood through veins.

i want to be loved
loved like a privilege, not an obligation
to be chosen, cherished, without demand,
held with care by a willing hand.
not weighed by duty or grudging intent,
but freely given, a gift well-spent.
a bond that's sacred, not out of need,
but a garden tended with thought and deed.

i want to be loved
loved like a treasure, not silver but gold
a love that gleams through years and wear,
valued beyond gems so rare.
not weighed by cost, but by its shine,
a love that's timeless, wholly divine.
like heirlooms passed through gentle hands,
forever cherished, a love that stands.

i want to be loved
fully, freely, without restraint,
a canvas of life, with joy as the paint.
not just in pieces, but as a whole,
a love that nourishes my very soul.

Olympic Pride

Matthew Liu

Oh, the pride I feel when I finally impress Dad
with a fiddle of my cello to express
the traits of my Taiwanese culture.

Transposing tunes from groovy pop
to the tranquil waters of those tungsten strings.

Oh, the pride I feel when I order my family's food,
and although my tongue gets twisted in the complexity
of Mandarin's system of expression,
I am proud that these Mandarin seeds could bloom
into the national plum blossom.

The pride people feel as their nation's athletes
march and wave back through the television screen
back at their people from home.

With wholesome sights of refugees and minorities
finally able to show their olympic-fired hearts
and shake hands with their life dreams.

Oh, the pride that I wish could feel
seeing my nation's flag being waved.

What pride should I feel when I see
this fraudulent flag waving in the wind?
Why are these Taiwanese athletes
being announced as Chinese Taipei?

Oh, the pride these Olympic officials feel
when they allow this nation, whole, to once again
be stuck in this superficial masquerade.

Oh, the pride that's drained
seeing my people struggle to make their people shine.

As my innocent eyes scan the audience,
I do not see my nation's identity being expressed.
I clutch my small Taiwanese flag, synchronized with
others who grip onto theirs as officials rip away their pride.

Show your national pride!
But some should be shown more than others

The audience's voices are to be suppressed
from the singing disrespectful tunes of Taiwan's national anthem;
let us all sing from our heart, and I will sing first
through the voice of my cello on this side of the world.

Oh, the pride we feel when
we watch this historical battle for sovereignty
in the final round of this badminton court.

And across the world people, like me,
are waiting to express their pride for our athletes;
together our voices harmonize as voices jitter
when their rackets swing against the birdie —
our bird is ready to fly.

Oh, the pride that's fueled
when our olympic athletes bring home gold,
and I see Mom's rare cheer and excitement,
We are Taiwanese pride.

But oh, the pride that's dwindled
when we are still known as Chinese Taipei
under that foreign flag.

Sunset

Maia Mohsen

Carnage colors bless the opening of night
Pinks, reds, oranges, all blended together,
Otherwise an unbleeding sky would cry itself goodnight.

A gift from God, a new night to arise
The ending of a day, soaked with reds, oranges, yellows
Carnage colors bless the opening of the night.

The sins of the world unload unto the sky
The pinks and purples: bruises, and the red blood underneath
Otherwise an unbleeding sky would cry itself goodnight.

A relief from God, to hide the burdens away
The sun tucked away, resting can take way, and thus
Carnage colors bless the opening of the night.

Despite the tears, the shouts for forgiveness
The colors beam brightly downwards, but not quickly enough;
Otherwise an unbleeding sky would cry itself goodnight.

Rest assured, the painted sky blends grey into a palette.
Pinks, reds, oranges, all blended together when
Carnage colors bless the opening of the night
Otherwise an unbleeding sky would cry itself goodnight.



Family
Eddie Zheng

i hate myself when i eat

Maddox Pinzon

“You can be the most beautiful person in the world and everybody sees light and rainbows when they look at you, but if you yourself don't know it, all of that doesn't even matter.”

— C. JoyBell C.

1.

the feeling of food slipping down my throat feels uncomfortable.

the food i see in windows when walking down the streets of new york city, look...

untouchable.

so delicate those wedding cakes in the bakery's window—looking so pretty, eye catching and mesmerizing.

yet, deceiving because when i imagine eating it—i don't see myself enjoying the cake as the baker would've wanted me to. savoring each bite, licking my lips from the whipped cream that got too attached, loving the cake with my heart and soul - i focused on one thing. The after effects:

- the weight gained
- the bloated feeling
- the sea-sick like impression on myself
- the *disgusting* look i give to me when looking in the mirror

younger me would be in disbelief from this statement.

shocked from the words that came out of my mouth.

i can see my younger self thinking:

why would you hate yourself for giving your body the nutrients and energy you need to survive for a day? why would you torture yourself by not eating? by not feeding yourself?

separating

yourself from food.

as i would agree with my younger self,

there are so many joys in life from the food, from the flavors, from different the cuisines, from the amounts of seasoning and spice, from the love and soul cooked into each dish, from the knowledge passed down from each generation delicately practicing each dish, from the satisfying taste of each dish, from the different cultures combining, from the diversity of each dish, from the delicious-ness of each food, and back to just food itself.

2.

the memories

from my mother's cooking, the scent traveled across the room as if it were a siren telling me to come over. the different spices and flavors mixing together in perfect harmony. the crackling of the oil ringing in my ears, as if they were bursting fireworks of celebration over the meal that would soon be in my belly. the excitement i would have when she called everyone for dinner. my family rushed to the dinner table as if it was about to be a sold out concert. finding my seat next to my mother anxiously waiting for her to lay my plate on the table.

from dining at *the authentic* asian restaurant near my house. the commotion of the chinese restaurant workers, rushing to get each order to their designated table. the yelling from the chefs and the servers of each order that needed to be made. the relaxing feeling when the food you ordered looks like the picture on the menu. pulling apart the wooden “one-time use” chopsticks, grabbing the food from each dish to travel it to my plate. hearing my mother say, “i could probably make this at home - even better,” as my siblings and i roll my eyes at her comment while stuffing our faces with food. telling the waiter that the food was a 10/10 because that’s how full our stomachs were.

from being at h mart with my friends deciding which snacks we should get. ramen, sushi, chips, bulgogi, ice cream or maybe ALL of them!? feeling the good vibes as we carelessly put any items that spark interest in us in our shopping cart. exploring into each aisle, as if we totally weren’t there the past week. to finally arrive at the cash register, while scrambling throughout wallets to pay for a plethora of food. grinning ear to ear as we eat the food we just bought walking to someone’s house to eat dinner together.

from watching master chef to living with my family. invested on their tv personalities and rooting for my favs. so concentrated on the judge’s every critique, carefully listening to their opinions. imagining myself as one of them—thinking of how cool it was to be one of them. trying food every day, the “coolness” i saw when looking at them on the tv when i was young. oblivious to the fact it was tv, not real life. but it didn’t matter. i wanted to be transported, in what seemed like a far away world—a dream-like fantasy. i wanted to step through the television screen. traveling through all the wires, the air waves, the circuits, tuner and the monitor. as the grass seems greener on the other side. separating me from them. a reality i can only envision in my mind and not experience. as reality soon washes over me, as i am teleported back into the living room. on the blue couch. watching a cooking show with my family after dinner. a fantasy only visible through a screen.

from rushing to the lunch line in elementary school to get the mystery meats, the unboiled vegetables, and the chunky milk—food that I still enjoyed. telling the lunch ladies, “thank you” as they gave us our food. running back to my lunch table where we talked and ate, and talked and ate, and talked and ate, and talked and ate again. trading lunches and snacks with my classmates as i saw value in each item of food for how yummy they were, and not the amount of calories each

had. sarcastically sighing when i heard our lunch monitor's piercing whistle ring in my ears, saddened that i couldn't eat anymore.

from the piercing sound of my spoon scraping away the food from my bowl. the piercing sound of the metal spoon scraping against the ceramic bowl. making sure each grain of food is not to go to waste. as it happily gets scooped onto a spoon too big for me, but not big enough for my love for food. after i am finished eating, it is as if the bowl hasn't been touched by food. spotless, clean, without a trace of food. eating up every last bite of food. because even if i was full, i would still eat more. that love for food was greater than the weight i gained.

3.

however, change is inevitable and natural...right?

once from love turned into hatred.

a guilt washes over me as the food touches my lips. the flavors that used to enrich my tongue with excitement, turn into resentment.

from starting to see love for food—now there were numbers in each direction i looked at. from the calories attached to each food, the number on the scale, the amount of grams that each food contained, the serving amount that each food had.

because the number on the scale never goes down no matter what i do. no matter how many meals i skip. no matter how many diets i start. no matter the amount of sweat that comes off my body after a workout. it will never be enough. nor will i.

I cannot be satisfied with it—not as much as how i felt when eating my love for food away

because,

"i hate myself when i eat."

Ode to My Horn

Kaitlyn Rams

To my French horn,
As I move onto the next stage of my life,
I cannot help but look back on the past few years we've spent together
Although few, in the little time we've had, you taught me colors I didn't know
were possible
You tinged my life with something I thought I had lost forever
and gave me feelings I thought I was incapable of having
Individually, we may be flawed, but together, we are one beautiful, tangled piece
of art
Our strengths and flaws complement one another so perfectly
such that when we are apart, I feel incomplete
I will forever be your musician just as you will always be my instrument and
voice.

To my French horn,
Sometimes I yearn for your cold yet comforting touch
When we are apart, my fingertips feel bare without the reassurance of your brass
keys
I know that as time passes, it is inevitable that you and I will change
But that doesn't hold the same for the string of fate that connects us
Wherever we go, whatever happens, and whatever change comes our way may
tangle this string but it will never break our everlasting bond together
You are my soulmate just as I hope in another universe, I am yours.

To my French horn,
Thank you
You have been with me through every emotion
Your strained and loud screams resonated through floors of the house
when every blow, filled with teenage angst, was reaching out and trying to grasp
at the world that seemed to be leaving us behind
Your quiet and melodic whispers danced across the living room
as I snuck downstairs to play you when the whole house was sleeping
Refusing to take another breath cause it felt like it was just you and I,

frozen in a world that I didn't want to end
Whenever I felt angered with myself and the whole world seemed to be working
against me,
I would simply put in my ear buds
and let your dulcet and euphonic sound engulf me until my body was moving
with every lilt:
My chest rising with every crescendo and falling with every decrescendo.

Dear French Horn,
You help me regain my composure and ground me.
You are my escape, my voice, and my anchor.
You are my constant amidst a sea of uncertainty.
You are my right in a world of wrongs.

Azadi

Deepika Sadoo

They came for me at the darkest time of night
They showed me the revolution pamphlets hidden under my mattress
My death sentence
Father watched, entertained, as they dragged me
He stood there with his hands folded behind his back and walked away when my
eyes tried to meet his
Anger started in my throat
I remembered the disappointment on his face when I came back that evening
Right before I hid the pamphlets under my mattress
As he watched from the doorway
The anger boiled out of my mouth
I could feel it searing my esophagus
And coming out as a curse:
Coward!
I fought, bit, and clawed at the men dragging me towards the stairs
Grabbing onto everything that I could hold on to in my reach as they dragged me
down the stairs
out the door
I screamed at the top of my lungs
A scream that pierced through the nightly silence and quieted the chirping
crickets for a moment
Only one person could've saved me and healed the damage anger had broken me
down to
Ammi!
Ammi!
Mother raced out of her room in her nightgown
I heard her screaming, but didn't hear exactly what she was saying
She scratched at one of the men and tried to pull them away from me
He shoved her off
Ammi!
I screamed louder, kicked harder, struggled stronger
Yet they still dragged me to the threshold of my house
My fingers found purchase on the doorknob and I fastened my grip

One rough, scarred hand tried to peel off my fingers one by one as the other men
still struggled to pull me

Torches lined my front yard

I don't remember how, but my fingers lost the doorknob

The men held me to the earth and took out a rope

Ammi!

I looked up towards the door

Closed

Three men held me down while two others tried to bind my wrists

My hands were pinned down

Ammi!

A loud moment passed in which I glimpsed the sky

The clear dark sky

The stars I made acquaintance with in stolen glances over the years were greeting
me as they always had

The moment passed

The men raised a white woolen blanket above me

Ammi!

They tried to cover me, but I knocked it off again and again

Until they resorted to carrying me on without it

The cold night air pierced through my thin nightgown

But rushing blood left me numb to the cold

Ammi!

The door was still shut

Ammi will save me

She'll give me warm chai

And put me to sleep

The light turned on in the upstairs bedroom as I broke free of the mens'
iron-binding grip

I raced under the window and called

Ammi!

The window closed and the lights turned off

Ammi!

Ammi!

Ammi?

Why isn't she coming?

Hurry up!

My heart broke as my calls for Mother quieted
Turned into a question
And then to sobs
Mother wasn't going to save me

I fell to my knees
All the sound drained from my ears
My heart was the only thing I could hear
Its unsteady beats

Brutish arms pulled me up again
As sound re-entered my ears
The men dragged me away as a bitter feeling grew in my heart
Betrayal
That's what was growing inside of me
Alongside it, another feeling took over, masking the bitterness as it grew
Overruling it
I took a deep breath
The men hadn't gagged me

Inquilab!

I screamed into the crowd of torch-carrying figures
Zindabad!

Anger was ruling my heart
Anger at the people who took something from me that was never theirs
My country
My family
My justice

In my damp cell, the iron shackles brushed against my wrists
Irritating the rope burns and blisters
The attar the men wore left a reminder at the back of my nose
If the draft blew in from the window in the right direction, I would smell it
I shook my head not wanting it to be the last scent I breathe
I heard my anger in the silence
It paralyzed me
Tearful down my face

Or perhaps it was indeed the betrayal
That reddened my eyes
Ached my head
And lulled me to sleep
As I prayed for anger to return and mend my heart that was emptied of love

When I woke, I found that sleep was the salve that numbed everything else
And I knew what I had to do:

I concluded when the sun broke the dawn and entered my cell
There's nothing left for me
Love was what woke me and lulled me to sleep
Turned the mill of my life

I concluded when the sun broke the dawn and entered my cell
I can't live in a world in which betrayal and injustice were eternal springs in
which my anger flowered
Anger only burns the possessor
And it was the only thing that filled the empty kingdom love once had in me

I concluded when the sun broke the dawn and entered my cell
That I accept martyrdom

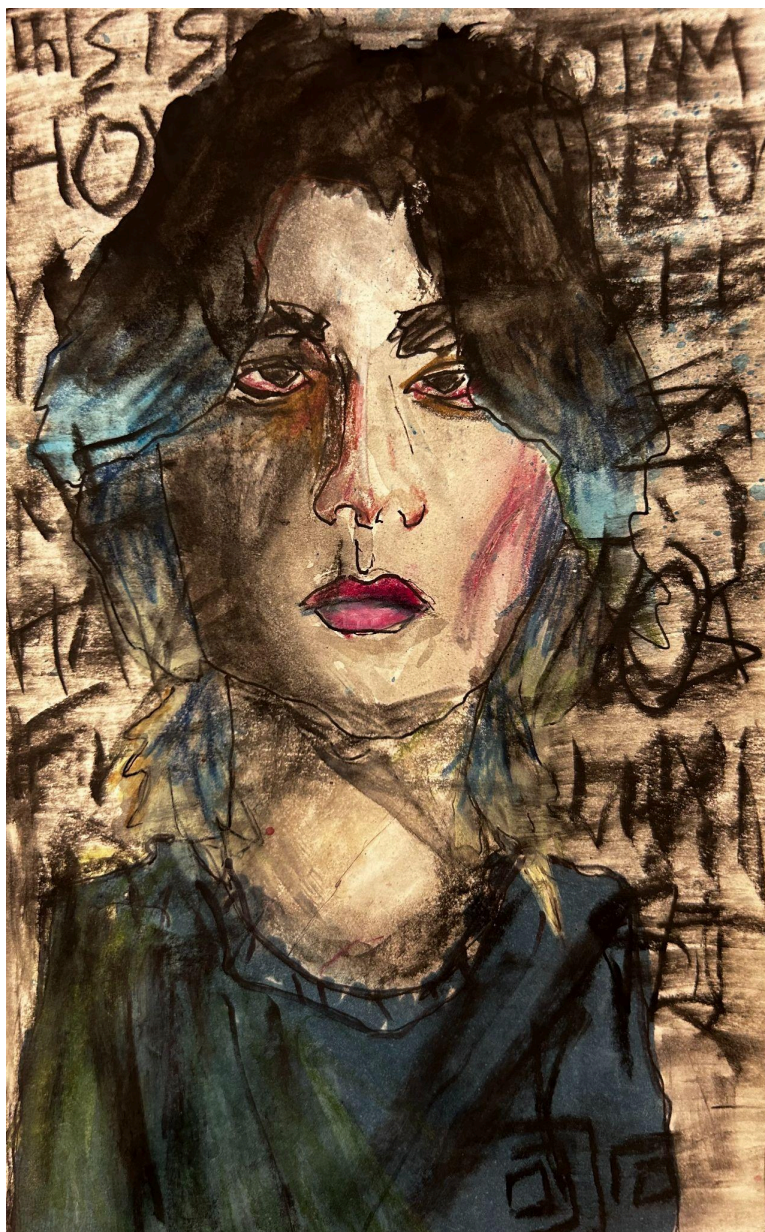
Azadi - freedom

Ammi - Mother

Chai - a type of tea originating from South Asia

*Inquilab Zindabad - "Long Live the Revolution", a phrase associated with the
Indian Independence movement*

Attar - an oil perfume used in South Asia as well as other parts of the East



Despite everything, it's still you

Eddie Zheng

Camouflaged Tears

Enya Sakhrani

Normally, I would have an umbrella.

A shield.

But today, I sit there, an umbrella forgotten
while the raindrops fall lightly from the gray sky.

Falling gently,
ever so gently,
on my dark hair.

To others, it's a drizzle.

To me, I feel the weight of each of them.

One droplet is equal to a hundred,
ten a thousand.

Each drop feels like one of my regrets:

Un-bothersome in the day, but burdensome at night,
I tell myself that I am proud of what I've accomplished,
That I'm happy where life is taking me.

But without an umbrella, I can't stop the wetness from seeping through my
clothes and into my skin.

The "what-ifs" that blur both the sidewalk and path of life that I'm supposed to be
walking on.

What if I had tried harder?

What if I had put myself out there more?

But although I tell myself I hate the rain, I should be thankful.

It covers my pleas, cries of frustration.

My tears and thoughts are camouflaged, concealing my sorrows from the people
around me.

And even though it plasters my long hair to my body,
restraining the trapped casing further,

I'd rather have wrinkled fingers and wet clothes
then share this inky darkness that envelops me further.

Nature in Cities

Alexis Tsui

The damp streets beckon the innocent
sales of sells clamp on the smoke
desperate to cradle minds
wisp truths into dirty speech

Here, on the streets
 Lie crowds that quicken
 steep and settle
 Some are to stay rotten— knowing dirt

A loud boom of the drum
swerves sparks into fragile minds.
cracking the tiniest curves
red paints the faintest of faces
Coating ones with a new founded curiosity

Yet some call that fondness a new hope

Shipwreck

Wenshu Wang

i.

On some seagull-ridden shore, I'm taught how
to swim. My father's voice threads
through the salt air, heavy
as nets, dragging me toward
ancient tide. The ocean creaks a hollow
guzheng, each wave a plucked string
I cannot name. My limbs pistol into
movement, blooming
out into ravaged pine— a fish-hook
catches my oiled back and splits me into two.
My spine hooves, stretching to the sea. It
was quicker, maybe, to let the water rise past
my mouth, my body translating into scales.

ii.

Mother scrubs the floor with an old shirt,
hands set to a weathered timezone.
The buildings slide together in quarters,
buckling into wilted scaffolds. Windows
blink out against a bruised horizon. I,
melded into the architecture of absence,
a seam in the blueprint, fractal and folding.
Hairline fractures in between us, I
press my palms to the edges: they
start to mold.

iii.

The words clouded in my mouth, abject sharpness
spilling shattered jade into hollow.
My tongue fraying at the edges, each syllable
wingbeat in a

typhoon. In that bruised street, I begged:
You're still here, right? When I go home,
you'll be there waiting
right?

iv.

On Sunday a boy in a gleaming silver Mercedes
rolls by, catches my side on a snapshot. How
easy it seems to see hardship through
a point-and-shoot frame— maybe the colors are
less sour, the outline of my ribs more romantic.
Another day I'll be a canvas, some metaphor
for *America & the Chinese body*, but now I'm here,
morning ripping into me like red rockets, the
skin on my back opening into a quieter sky.

Gap Year

Wenshu Wang

The racehorses like to cut corners,
turning dust into aerosol quick & dirty.
When I round another curve on the
I-something it'll be hugely tawny,

the wheel in exchange for a rider
in velvet lines. There's another network
saying the next day will be over the
mountain & we'll be new again.

Dad stashes orange peels
in empty cans, dry them out sliced as
crossword strips. It's easy, yellow
flipped out into almost-whiskey years.

I had learned early how to swing for gold,
grass pitches into stars & wait to
be swollen in the stands. Now, just that
I don't fit in my pajamas

& every corner is too big for me to hold.

Young Love

Emma Wen

I had always thought that the clock was running out of time. Drowning out the ticks of the hands like sand in an hourglass. Anticipating for my fatal last breath to arrive before my feet and abduct my bare soul. I beg for it to dissolve everything that I have into fine dust and dispose of my soul into an overcasted faint void.

Take me for a touch of young love.

The ticks of the clock's hands have halted as sand swings in between the numbers of time. Take my hand and lace my fingers into yours. Coax my mouth into falling out of touch with my dignity. Linger on until the clock ticks and our blissful fantasies smile at our honeymoon.

Time has closed its eyes ever since ours have opened up to each other.



Between the Trees

Tiffany Zhou

return

Madelyn Wong

return

to my past is not easy

it comes with a bravery i'm not quite sure i have obtained

it is a journey i have chosen to make alone

yet i feel your presence beside me

the door creaks in forewarning as I cross the threshold

and into this place we once called home

every step I take cloaked with a sense of familiarity

yet so much has changed

i wonder, now

if my souvenirs of our life have been made into lies

since the day you chose to take the smoother road

the hallways are empty now, their paint pale and peeling

handprints on the walls from the nights we spent

laughing, screaming, hoping, dreaming

but now those moments lay forgotten

a happy orange memory turned bitter and blue

a lovestruck serenade rewritten as a forlorn elegy

you and I orbit one another in endless cycles and circles

never meant to reach

your path was paved for you, mine i had to carve by hand

for two parallel lines,

convergence is a fairy tale

until one day

to home we both

return

a bird in a cage

Madelyn Wong

7 am

feeding (morning)

my eyes flutter open as the sounds of this place awake me from my slumber
i watch, eyes rounder, as he unhooks the golden key from his belt
it glistens, blinding
metallic gleam reflecting off of the sun i used to strive to soar to
now its warm rays stream through a pane of tinted glass
i hear a click and the door by my weathered feet swings open
crushed seeds in a silver dish push their way towards me
ravenous, i grab them
relieved at a meal, regret that those seeds once had the chance to grow
that i am the reason they won't

10 am

waiting pt. 1

i watch and wait and listen from morning till night
nothing
i walk around and within three steps
find myself at the place where i began
instead i look beyond at the world around me
the clock on the wall ticks my time away
the large black square adjacent to me moves with bright blurry images
plastic faces in neon lights, i cannot look
the golden key is back on his belt in a line with all the others
he sits on the sofa, limbs outstretched and face twisted sour
my muscles squeeze tight, begging for release
it's been days since he let me stretch
days since he let me out
days since he let me live again
i think about the silver key

1 pm

waiting pt. 2

the black square is no longer showing fast neon pictures
now the screen is enveloped in red
horrifying sickening red, again i cannot look
suddenly stung with the memory of that one night that got me here
i feel pain strike my head
wince at the thought of my skin torn
then cover the echo with pretty flowers
hide it away
through the shiny bars i can hardly see the keys
only the priceless prison cell for the best, he once said
because i am his favorite
i wonder why he won't unlock it
doesn't he know that i will always come back anyway?

4 pm

waiting pt. 3

staring through the gaps in the gate all day is a routine of my mind and heart
i am only here for show as he puts me on his highest shelf, on display for all to see
capable of toppling, forever on the edge
ready to fall
i am only here for the show
guessing the game of will he or won't he move
will he see me or won't he
does he love me or doesn't he
if he didn't love me i'd be dead wouldn't i
at least i am alive
but then why am i always gasping for air?

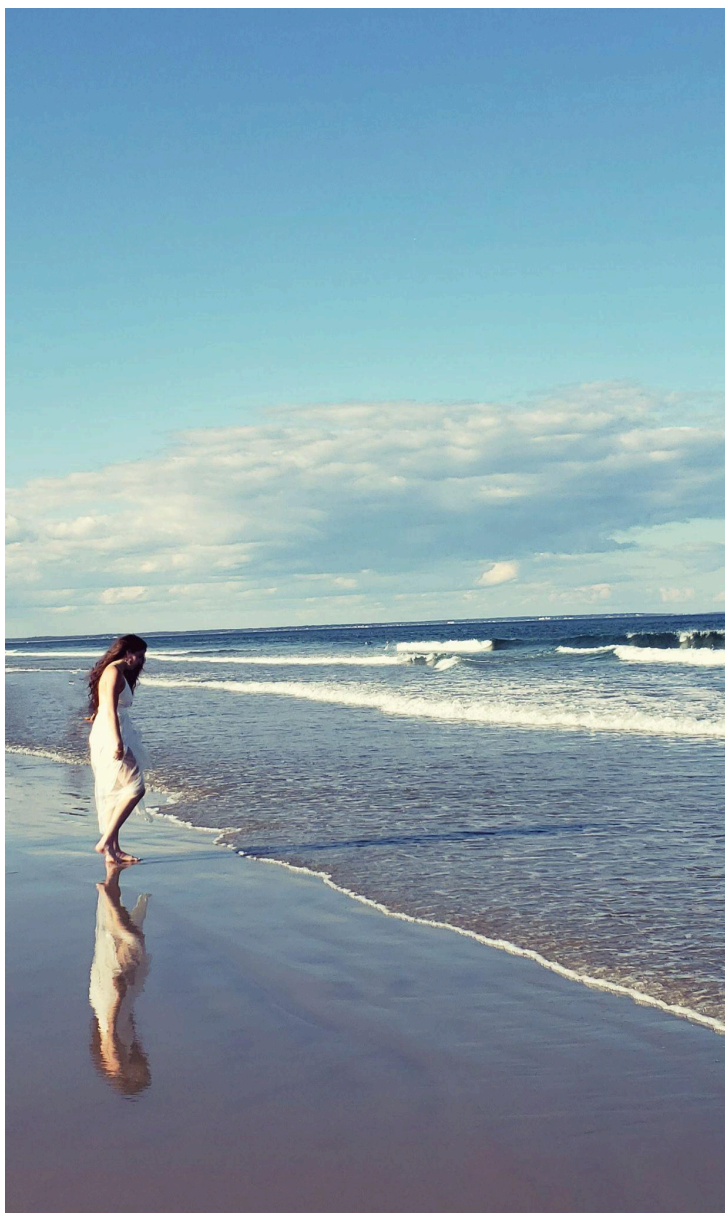
7 pm

feeding (evening)

the golden key gleams again
though by now the sun from where it gets its shine is gone
replaced by the pearl white moon i once flew in front of
the seeds in the silver dish taste like dust tonight
how i yearn to stretch my wings and fly
ruffle my feathers that once were soft
launch myself into the sky, the wind and clouds beneath me

like i did before
instead i tuck my head into my neck, cut by my own beak
shot down by this pipe dream
helpless and hopeless and sad
if i could only be free
if i could only bite back
if i could only soar

i am tired of what i have become
what he has made me and
what i have let myself turn into
one day, maybe
i will fly again
but until then
i am only
a bird in a cage



Amphitrite

Anna Zou

Catskill Mountain

Anna Zou

Down the side of the cold barren hill,
Dried grasses whistling with the winds,
Beyond the sloping snow drift where we played,
The little creek behind the mountain moves along.

We were children once, here together.
A place kept alive by foggy memories,
Held carefully by the leafless canopy,
Remembered by the once ever falling snow.

Our winters were filled with the sights of this mountain
Every year we'd be back to ski down the cold slopes
Sit by the warm fire and watch as new children come and learn
Watch as they stumble and fall, just to stand back up again
Watch as their fears and struggles melt away like the falling snow.
They flow down the trails gracefully like the water in the stream.

It's been many years since the moment that fated us to never return
When a stumble, didn't lead to standing back up
Since the memories were tainted,
By the sounds of wailing sirens in the distance
And ambulance lights flashing red and blue.
The snow, now colored by drops of crimson blood.
Blood that can't ever be washed out,
Even by a new stream of memories and healing.

It's been many years since I've seen the sloping hill,
the snow covered peaks of the catskills,
the evergreen trees made everwhite
by the soft blanket fallen from the sky.

The memories have started to fade,
Moments that were once as crystal clear as the water

Now dissolving like snow in spring.
Seasons change, people too, waning and shifting like the light of the moon.

All that's left is this hazy vision I hope to one day return to,
One I'd always question, "Was it real?"
Or simply a dream that came one sleepless night,
Whispered to me by the still darkness.

It was a colorless scene but our laughter painted multitudes.
From the empty boughs of the forest where winter resided,
A fire in our hearts that lit the lonely night sky,
Melting the winter days away and filling the woods with light.

I'm my dream I see myself walking through this story,
Remembering the footholds and feelings,
The wanting to sink into soft white blanket of snow flurries,
Piled on the river bank.
To have the lazy water in the catskills creek,
Roll quietly over my legs, a stream of my youth.
Watching as reflections of bright starshine and moonlight ripple,
On the surface of icy glass, as we drift off in rest and dreams.



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