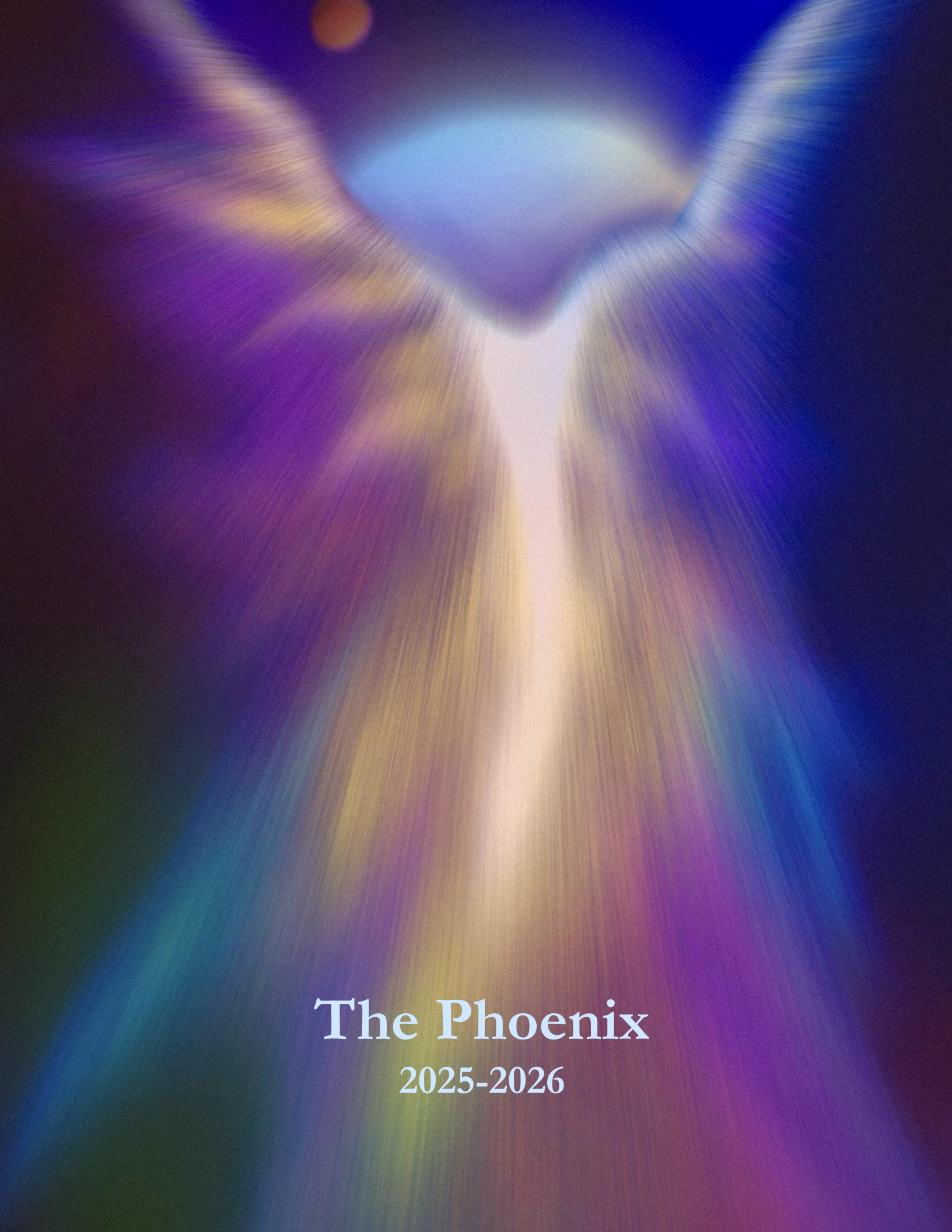




The Phoenix

2025-2026

The Phoenix

is the art and literary magazine of
Manhasset Secondary School

200 Memorial Place
Manhasset, NY 11030
516-267-7600



Submissions –both art and writing– are accepted throughout the year from students in 7th-12th grades.
Submissions can be uploaded to *The Phoenix's* Canvas page.

The Phoenix believes human voices matter, and as a result,
does not accept submissions made fully or partially by AI.

Table of Contents

Portal – Cailin O’Connor	Front Cover
About The Phoenix	1
Table of Contents	2
Thank You to the Manhasset Staff	4
The Phoenix Staff 2025–2026	5
Editor’s Note – Leila Altamura	6
The Karie Sit Art and Writing Contest	7
Still Life of Tomatoes Growing From the Sky – Blair Bi	8
Day’s End – Mia Chen	9
Beyond the Sky – Julia Renton	10
The Cat Chronicles – Jana Taha	13
Seoul State of Mind – Nicolas Keyoung	14
I wanna be... – Nina Machabeli	15
Family Reunion – Mia Chen	16
Frozen in Time – Emma Franco	17
Threadwork – King Yuk Cai	18
She/Her – Zoe Eng	19
Word on the Street – Sofia Ogulluk	20
Diamond Freckles – Emily Shih	21
My Dreams Are Just Dreams – Leila Altamura	22
At the Edge – Emma Franco	23
Gaia – Sonia Sankar	24
Confinement of My Mind – Angelina Yan	25
how to stuff a jar so there’s no empty space – Dylan Chung	26
Mission Mars – Keira Mei Kong	29
Legacy – Sophia Phan	35

Rafah – Nate Seibert	36
Peace of Mind – Rebecca Meyer	37
Albedo – Yue Gao	38
Spring Flower - Childhood Happiness – Ester Wang	39
Roses/Rain – Leila Altamura	40
Love is Blind – Tiana Pan	41
Beyond the Sky: A Poem – Ella Magan	42
Marble-ous – Lily Knapp	44
The Means to an End (Again, Again, Again) – Charisma Shum	45
Humanity’s Destiny – Angelina Yan	47
Threads of Gold – Sophia Nikas	48
The Multifaceted Role of Women in Literature – Remy Huang	49
Latency – Dylan Tanzi	50
Game of Life – Nina Machabeli	51
Revival – Tyler Ng	52
Failure to Contain – Blair Bi	53
Reminiscence – Emily Shih	54
Prayer for Peace – Ayla Wang	56
Where Doves Once Flew – Marcus Park	57
An excerpt from <i>Cutback</i> – Sam Kelly	59
Children of Bone and Bloom – Abella Huang	62
Reaching for the Stars – Dylan Chung	63
Sketches – Parker Yuttal	64
A Voice in Gettysburg – Constantine Vases	65
The Angel – Kenji La	66
Fire and Ice – Olivia Wong	67
Stars – Samantha Kavic	Back Cover

Thank You to the Manhasset Staff

The Phoenix would like to thank the teachers and administrators who have supported our efforts and helped to foster the creative spirit of Manhasset Secondary School.

Administrators

Mr. Richard Roder, Principal
Kim Braha, Coordinator of Student Activities
Brendan McGowan, Coordinator of English Language Arts
Dr. Joseph Owens, Coordinator of Fine and Performing Arts

The English Department

Diana DiPaolo-Caputi
Kathleen Dreyer
Andrea Dunca
Angela Ferguson
Michael Koondel
Christine Linbrunner
Eileen Madigan-Behrmann
Michael McDonough
Robert Novak
Lori Pellegrino
Candyce Pelfrey-Kennedy
Rachel Rahr
Dave Romero
Loretta Schuellein-McGovern
Eric Shapiro
Aspasia Tsampas
Brian Woerner

The Art Department

Danielle Macumber
Lori Oldaker
Natalya Panullo
Emily Shank
Rachel Tripi

Library Media Specialist

Karin Greenberg
Peri Litt

English Department Teacher Assistant

Annie Thornton

The Phoenix Staff 2025-2026

Editors-in-Chief

Leila Altamura
Remy Huang

Literary Editors

Sofia Ogulluk
Sonia Sankar

Assistant Literary Editors

Blair Bi
Nicolas Keyoung
Sophia Nikas
William Pereira
Nate Seibert

Art Editors

Mia Chen
Angelina Yan

Layout Editor

Angelina Liu

Secretary

Emily Shih

Advisors

Candyce Pelfrey-Kennedy
Robert Novak

Treasurer

Beatrice Sim

Public Relations

Anna Pangburn

Student Senate Representative

Katherine Yan

Webmaster

John McCann

Illustrator

Jana Taha

Staff

Alex DeVito
Michael Fernandez
Charlotte Fiorino
Keira Mei Kong
Cailin O'Connor
Paige Pappas
Valentina Peros
Samantha Shih

Editor's Note

Dear Reader,

The Great Gatsby, written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, showed me that the past will always be there. Though you may not be able to repeat it, it is always good to look back and see how far you have come. To start from being a caterpillar to then becoming a butterfly, spreading my wings while being able to look at the person I once used to be.

I started going to *Phoenix* meetings my sophomore year because my friend, co-editor in chief Remy Huang, introduced me to *The Phoenix*. Mr. Novak and Ms. Kennedy welcomed me with open arms that I will forever be grateful for. They helped me work on my poetry every Thursday when I was just a beginner. During December of my sophomore year *The Phoenix* started Candy Cane sales. I was so ecstatic to be able to sell during my free periods and deliver them to people's classrooms during my first period study hall. At the end of the sales I remember how happy we were because it ended up being a major success. I remember last year during my Junior year *The Phoenix* won the NCTE REALM award. This year being able to go to the Board of Education meeting and getting awards for last year's work was very exciting. I felt so gratified that we worked so hard together to be able to be given that amazing award as a club.

Phoenix has been my home for the past three years, and I will forever hold a special place in my heart for this club and the members in it. Being able to go to meetings every Thursday and help the magazine while also getting feedback on the poems I was writing at the time from Mr. Novak and Ms. Kennedy helped shape the person I am today.

To artists and writers, never be afraid to shine and never doubt yourself. We fail to perceive the wings we truly have, though others can see how beautiful our pieces truly are.

To Mr. Novak and Ms. Kennedy, thank you for always being there to read my poetry and for being amazing club advisors. We could not run *The Phoenix* without your help and support. I will miss you both so much next year.

To the officers, thank you for your hard work and dedication to *The Phoenix*.

To the readers, I hope you enjoy this year's issue of the magazine as much as I enjoyed helping to publish it.

With love,

Leila Altamura

Co-Editor in Chief 2025-2026

The Karie Sit Art And Writing Contest



Karie Sit was a beloved member of Manhasset High School and was part of the class of 2015. *The Phoenix* was her favorite club, where she enjoyed expressing herself through creative writing. Her compassion and creativity continues to inspire others. Karie's last piece was a touching requiem that was the basis for the 2016 edition of this magazine.

After her passing, the Karie Sit Award was created in order to encourage other writers and artists to see the same beauty in self-expression that she did. *The Phoenix* is incredibly grateful for the Sit Family's continued support for this contest, and will continue to honor her memory through promoting creativity in art and writing at Manhasset.

Every year, the staff of *The Phoenix* chooses a theme for the contest. One writer and one artist in the high school and middle school categories are selected as winners. This year's choice was "Beyond The Sky." We are honored to announce Cailin O'Connor and Samantha Kavic as the winning high school and middle school artists, whose works are on the front and back covers, respectively, and Blair Bi and Julia Renton as the winning high school and middle school writers.

Karie Sit HS Writing Winner

Still Life of Tomatoes Growing From the Sky

Blair Bi

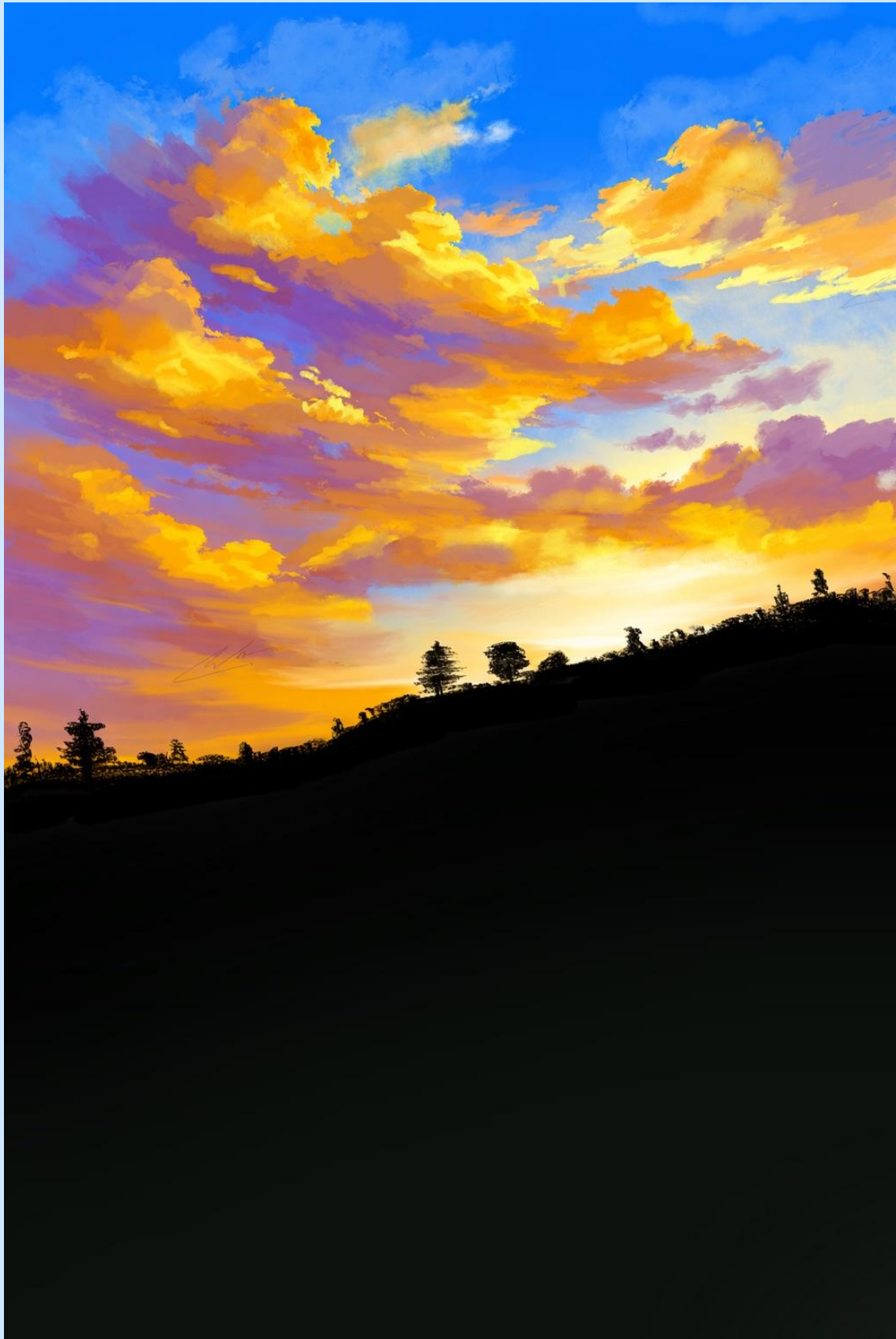
1. Markets turbid with summer:
Newspaper lined, tomato-saturated tabletops.
Piled thickly.
Heavy like wet paint.

This one:
Stripes mapped like meridians.
Green veins beat beneath
the sun. A face that rose above a sea of wine-dark rounds.

2. Air conditioned white room:
This muse. Our Helen.
Sat with other still life objects:
The textured noble clay pot
The glittering *Heineken* bottle.
Like circles of fleets: besieged by our desks.

Our lines black and sharp. Though
Each day this tomato slouched.
Subsided by gravity; giving into itself.

3. Tomato firmly in the bin—
On top of paper towels and paint peelings—full of leakage. Wine dark.
If only I could paint it wild and growing from the sky.



Day's End
Mia Chen

Karie Sit MS Writing Winner

Beyond the Sky

Julia Renton

As a child, I spent my days in our cold basement reading the Bible cover to cover. My mother would beg me to go play outside and meet other kids, but I was perfectly content where I was. I mostly read the Bible because I loved reading and writing stories, and my father refused to keep any other books in the house.

My father was a big man, with muscular features and a bellowing laugh. He was the kind of man who people whispered about, telling stories of dramatic battles and pirates. He had been an officer in the Vietnam War, and while he had some exciting adventures, most stories that were told about him were completely fictitious. I remember one tale clearer than others, about him and his crew being ambushed by pirates and captured. In this story, he masterminded a plan to sneak off the ship during the night and use the crates used to store food as rafts. They slipped away unnoticed, and they drifted for days until another U.S. ship found them and brought them to safety. When I asked my father if this was true, he laughed his huge laugh and said that those ‘pirates’ were enemy ships with cannons and those ‘food crates’ were life rafts from his boat. In reality, his crew had gotten away and radioed another U.S. ship to find them. They were rescued in under two hours.

My father was a faithful servant of God, but he hadn’t always been. He claimed that while serving in the military, he prayed before missions and never got a scratch. He devoted the rest of his days to worshipping the Lord in return for his life.

Consequently, when I was born, he knew he had to make me a believer in the same way. We went to church every Sunday and memorised Bible verses. He insisted on homeschooling me and he taught me science and math and my mother taught reading, writing, and history. This was all to protect me from the poison of public school brainwashing. Over time, we grew exceptionally close. My mother, meanwhile, seemed more like a distant figure. The only trait we shared was a love of books and writing. Before I was born, she was a journalist in New York City. Whenever she and my father argued about something, I assumed my father was right. He had The Lord to guide him, after all.

One day, when my father was visiting an old friend for a few days, my mother told me she wanted to show me something. We put on our winter coats and went outside to brave the Long Island winter chill. We walked to a train station about twenty minutes away from my house and got on a train. This was a new experience for me, and most of the time I stared out of the window at the grey and dreary landscape, listening to the train in the distance. When we arrived at our stop, my mother grabbed my hand and walked me through the crowded area.

“Where are we?” I asked, unclear what we were doing. “New York City,” she replied, still walking quickly and tightly gripping my hand. I was very confused. Why would she be taking me to

such a place, a city that my father said had lost its faith long ago?

The second we stepped outside, the harsh wind whipped my hair in my face. The buildings were tall and grey and I saw a homeless man begging for money on the street corner.

“This way,” my mother said, pulling me down the street. Eventually, we got to a big, beautiful, white building with a staircase to go inside. As we started ascending the stairs, we passed two marble statues of mighty lions. Inside, the warmth relieved my rosy cheeks and I looked around in amazement. We were in a grand space made of the same white marble as the outside of the building, with a staircase on either side of the room.

I followed my mother to a room with wooden desks and green lamps at each. Every inch of the walls were lined with books. My eyes widened as I took it all in.

My mother smiled at me and asked, “Want to pick out a book to read?”

“Yes!” I replied almost immediately. We approached one of the magnificent shelves, and I almost didn’t want to touch anything in fear of disturbing the beauty of it all.

“Here,” my mom said, pulling out a book titled *The Giver*. “I think you’ll like this one.”

I spent the next hour immersed in the magical writing of Lois Lowry before my mother announced that she had something else to show me. “But I haven’t finished the book yet!” I protested.

“We can bring it home, if you’d like,” she offered. I nodded my head rapidly with approval.

We went to the periodicals section and found the archives. In an old issue of *The New York Times*, I saw my mom’s name in black and white print on the cover under an article titled “The Women Who Couldn’t Wait: A New Generation Steps Into the News Room.” It never quite hit me until then that thousands of other people had read my mother’s writing and had been influenced by it. At that moment, my mother seemed like a celebrity, and I was so proud.

After checking out the book and putting it in my mother’s purse so I wouldn’t lose it, we strode out of the back door of the library into what felt like a winter wonderland right out of a storybook. There was a playground, food carts with hot nuts and cocoa for sale, and an ice rink that was the size of the entire park. “Let’s go!” she yelled. I remember to this day the feeling of her hand in mine as I clumsily “skated” around the rink. I fell down over and over again, and was probably on my bottom more than I was actually upright. But every time I fell I laughed, as did my mother, and those moments were the happiest ones.

Afterwards, as we rushed to the train station to catch our train, I noticed the sun starting to peek out from behind the clouds. “See?” my mother said gleefully, “There is more to life than our basement.”

My mother and I kept making trips to the city. By the time spring had come around, she was no longer a stranger to me. But then my life was rocked by a huge piece of news. That summer, my father was diagnosed with blood cancer. We had caught it too late. He fought hard for the next three months, but at the end of the day cancer was victorious. I couldn’t believe it. My father, that strong man, had seemed invincible to me. I couldn’t grasp what had happened until a week later, at his funeral. I cried my eyes out that night.

I was fifteen at the time, and I was about to complete my homeschool education. I felt lost and empty, like I didn’t deserve to have a future and go to college while my father was dead. I lay awake at night, wondering if he was happy in that place I had learned about as a child, that land beyond the sky. I wondered if it was easier there.

I was miserable for weeks following my father's death. How could this be part of the Lord's plan? I mostly stayed in the dark basement and read the Bible over and over again, searching for answers. I saw very little of my mother. I only ever saw her during meals, sometimes not even then.

I continued hiding in the basement, waiting for the clouds to part. Waiting for the storm to pass. Waiting. Always waiting. The warmth never came, and the storm continued raging. My thoughts were consumed with what heaven must be like. There are no storms there, no clouds, no waiting.

One day I wrote a note. I said how much I loved my mother, and thanked her for all of our days in the city. I told her how I had been thinking about the place beyond the sky and the wonders that must be there. I wrote that I would see her again someday, in that place. When I finished writing, I left the basement to go to the store, because mother needed food for the week and wouldn't leave the house these days. I decided I would take action that night. When I came home, I left the groceries on the counter and walked down to the basement. I was surprised to see my mother there, with my note in her hand. She was sobbing. As soon as she saw me, she ran over and hugged me.

"Not you, too," she said, "You have so much to live for, so much to see. I won't let you give up now." I began to cry into her shoulder, and we embraced for a long time. We stayed up all night, talking. We talked about pain and sorrow, but we also talked about hope. I clung on to the hope.

* * *

After that day, things started to get better. We began gradually going to the city together more and more, until it became a weekly adventure. My mom started writing again for the local paper. As for me, I just started my first year at NYU and moved into an apartment in New York City. My mother and I stayed close, and every Saturday she still walks twenty minutes to the train station to visit me. On Sundays, I go to church and pray for my father. And if I'm being honest, sometimes I still wonder what it's like beyond the sky. But then I remember my mother's courage and I know that it will get better. It always does.



The Cat Chronicles
Jana Taha

Seoul State of Mind

Nicolas Keyoung

I know Seoul like my own,
a concrete palace.
There is no place
that breathes with its rhythm.

The clink of soju,
raised to forgive or forget.
The screech of tires,
rushing to subways.
The shuffle of shelves,
stacked with snacks whispering stay.
Night markets glow with fried spices,
scribbling a neon horizon.

I see myself in the noise,
but even silence is home.
There's an old man sweeping
before the city wakes—

Every corner writes a new verse,
a song sung by millions,
each voice a small city of its own.
The river hums with cyclists,
lovers lock promises to bridges.
Steam rises from street carts,
and tonight is a bowl of hot broth,
goodbye softened by neon.

Seoul has mastered them all.



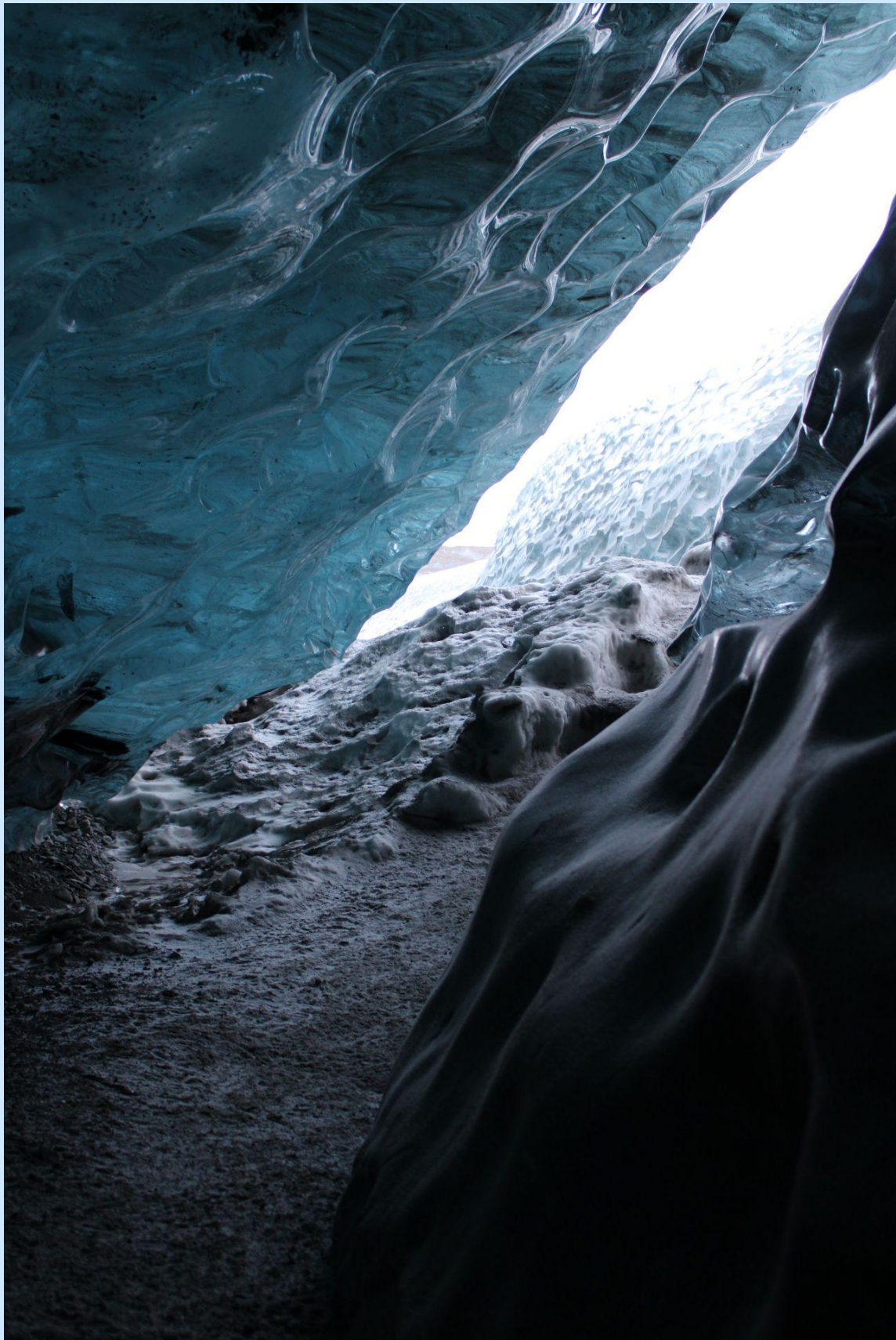
I wanna be...
Nina Machabeli

Family Reunion

Mia Chen

A thin veil of peace shielding the chaos
One wrong move and everything's exposed
A battleground of insults disguised as compliments
A misstep and the entire facade crumbles
Family status—a cover for keeping score—to see who raised their child “better”
Where every accomplishment is undermined and given to the parents
Bragging about useless nonsense
Just another means to flex
At the end of the day it boils down to the strong willed
Keeping a poker face is the only way out
Bait the aunts and uncles with questions about their lives
Avoid the interrogation and unsolicited life critiques
Ask for advice you know you'll never need

And when the veil falls
Between the noise and performance
I'm simply tired
I want to eat good food without the judgement
No competition, no strategy games, but comfort
I want to eat in peace
Talk with my favorite cousins
Reminisce about the good times
And head home without a second thought



Frozen in Time

Emma Franco

Threadwork

King Yuk Cai

In the blue hush before morning
I sit at my desk, a window facing the small shore
facing an ocean of unnamed threads.

The world feels as wide as wide as the winter sea
cold and harsh
and I am the only bit of warmth in it.

Still, I send out a filament.

A message barely finished,
like a question hanging at the edge of my tongue,
like a soft light in the dark.

It drifts like silk from a patient spider,
adorned with doubt,
as fragile as the space between heartbeats.

Sometimes it catches.
on a small laugh,
on a shared, understanding silence
on the fragileness of the words “I’m sorry.”

Other times it breaks
and falls into the endless ocean below
unseen, unanswered.

But I have learned
that it is okay.

Each thread is a secret, a promise
that I will not let go

Alone, I gather my courage,
strung together with filament—
and begin again,

weaving bridges with my breath and hands
until the air itself
hums with connection.



She/Her
Zoe Eng

Word on the Street

Sofia Ogulluk

Shoes crooked
Pointing inward
Pointing down
Pointing...

I woke up from a strange dream
Bones turned inside out
Bones inside out
Bones out
Bones...

I've been hearing whispers on the street
Whispers of dreams
More like nightmares, they speak
Their mouths curled down

I've been visiting Mama's grave
Last time, after church
With dark clouds, yesterday
Foreboding, they'd say

Visited the doctor to see what he'd say
No luck, I'm afraid
Have you heard the rumors? I say
More than rumors, he say

Dragging my feet
Across the cracks of concrete
Bad luck, they'd repeat
But no superstition can save me

Once more crouched down on Mama's grave
First time I've ever *truly* prayed
But as the dark clouds swirl above my brain
I know no prayer can save the day

No, I might as well be
Already nailed to the cross
Where I will soon
bleed

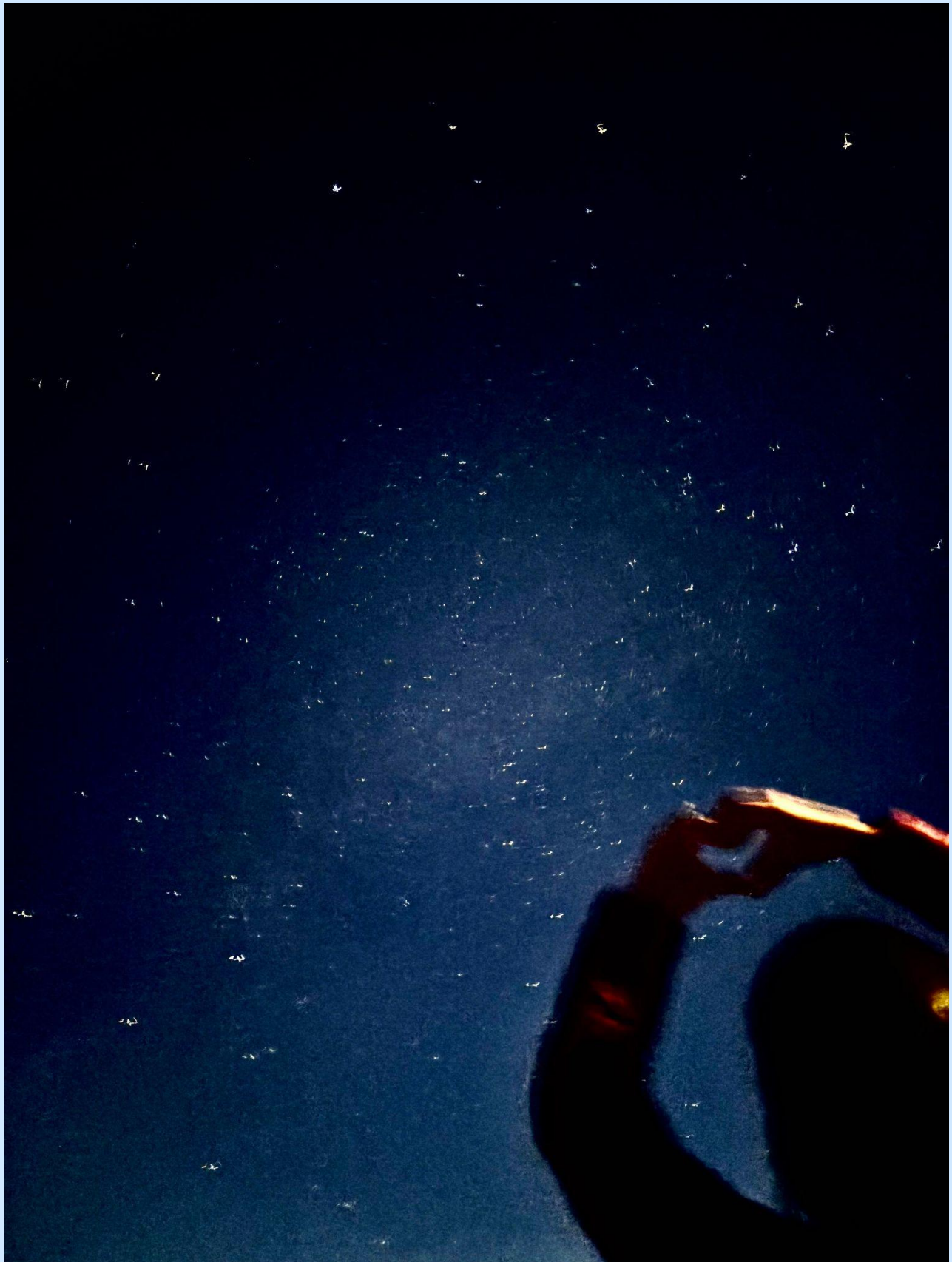
I might as well be
Tied to the tree
Noose around my neck
Awaiting the inevitable

They think they know
They talk of dreams
But it's more than that
It's a feeling in your soul

A feeling they will never understand
Not until it happens
Not until the day
They get turned inside out

No, how could they see?
My sun setting
Stars spinning
Body bleeding
World ending

Feet pointing down
Bones bending
Thick air
Heart pounding
Soul empty



Diamond Freckles

Emily Shih

My Dreams Are Just Dreams

Leila Altamura

Nine missed facetime calls,
To call you back.
A love confession
To finally be able to say I love you.
Though things start to look different
Distorted even,
It all feels so vivid.
Suddenly it's all over.
To wake up cold and...

alone

To realize it was just a dream
Attempting to sleep again so I can dream of...

you

His touch being the ocean, I can drown in his embrace.
It's you my love, it always has been.
Though why can't I tell you this?
Am I scared the closer I get,
The more you'll see the side I try so hard to hide.
To be able to fall into your arms,
Letting all my walls I built up for years crash...

down.

Though maybe, you are my dream.
Who feels so far away...



At the Edge
Emma Franco

Gaia

Sonia Sankar

The forest is quiet
But for the rustling of leaves in the cool air.
Green mother Gaia sleeps,
Content with the tranquil Earth,
Undisturbed.

The forest is shrinking.
A red robin perches on a tree stump.
Each is clean-cut,
Kissed by the razor-sharp blade of an ax,
Fallen.

The forest is in flames,
The plume of smoke thick enough to choke.
The animals are missing,
Fled from their homes,
Petrified.

The forest is gone,
Only ashes remain.
Green mother Gaia weeps,
Marred by destruction and loss,
Devastated.



Confinement of My Mind
Angelina Yan

how to stuff a jar so there's no empty space

Dylan Chung

i.glass jar

Waves crash against the jagged shore,
something monstrous is brewing in the sky.

I need to hurry and get home.

I set the glass jar down upon the silken sand.
Enchanted by its seemingly translucent state,
I find that it just seems so unnaturally...empty.

ii.rocks

I try to find as many pebbles I can,
most of them end up being polished, smoothed out to perfection.
They drop to the bottom of the jar with a loud *kerplunk!*

It still looks quite empty,
I need to pack as much as I possibly can.
I start to play Tetris; more rocks are dumped in.

They are stuffed until they become rigid,
and can maintain an erect position.
There is physically no place for them to be moved.

iii.sand

The jar is not full enough,
inner voices scream.
Am I going crazy?

I pour a generous heaping of sand into the jar,
packing it in with a small shovel I brought.
The weight is growing...but do I really care?

The granules fall into the small crevices,
any open space where rocks have not occupied.
Mesmerized, I need to go for more.

in water

I scan the horizon,
anything that fits will work.
I've fallen down into a rabbit hole, a dangerous one.

I throw my fists to the sky and start to scream; I'm savagely hungry.
Then it hits me.
Perfect.

I scoop up the saltwater,
and start to flood it into the jar.
The water dissolves into the sand.

v. shards of glass

The jar is visibly full.
I am quite satisfied with myself,
leaving is a possibility now.

Picking up the glass jar,
I don't think I realized how heavy it got.
Starting to walk, the pain grows unbearable.

I let go, the jar falling on my foot.
Shards of glass are sent in every direction,
and rich blood seeps into the sand.

Running home, I am crying.
I have succumbed to my fate.

Mission Mars

Keira Mei Kong

Curtain opens on a compact space shuttle cockpit with three seats surrounded by walls of control panels. There is a large window along the back wall, covered with a closed curtain. Three astronauts, CAROLINE (29), PHOEBE (29), and MILLIE (27), are talking and laughing with one another, excited to reach Mars. They've been in space together for weeks.

Note: The conversation between the three girls should be fast-paced, often overlapping. Think Lorelai from *Gilmore Girls*.

CAROLINE (COMMANDER)

Mills, did you replace the wheel spokes?

MILLIE (MISSION SPECIALIST)

(Laughing at her friend)

Relax, Caroline. For the third time, yes! The rovers are good to go.

CAROLINE

Okay, good. I'm just checking!!

PHOEBE (PILOT)

The solar panels and radiator fields are ready for installation too.

MILLIE

Negative 80 degrees has got nothing on us.

CAROLINE

Make sure their dust shields are clean.

PHOEBE

I did, I used the single-axis tracking.

MILLIE

What does that do?

PHOEBE

Remember? Using calculus, I've designed them to maximize the sun's efficiency. They'll follow the sun from east to west.

CAROLINE

Okay, but did you remember to pair them with the energy storage batteries?

PHOEBE

(Annoyed)

Geez, Caroline. I took care of it all. Don't you trust me?

CAROLINE

Sorry, I'm just nervous we won't be ready.

PHOEBE

We will be.

CAROLINE

I hope so.

MILLIE

Navigation says we're just 2000 miles away. Just under ten minutes.

CAROLINE

In ten minutes I'll be standing on Mars.

MILLIE

We have to take a video of us opening the curtain and seeing it for the first time.

CAROLINE

Definitely. Are you guys ready for dinner?

MILLIE

Our last meal of crappy spaceship food. That's a milestone.

PHOEBE

I'll go grab it.

PHOEBE exits the stage to the back.

MILLIE

Oh, wait, Caroline—you have to see what Carter just sent me.

CAROLINE

Ooh, what?

MILLIE

He sent me a GIF of an alien saying “You are A-MARS-ING.” I love him so much!!

CAROLINE

(Rolling her eyes)

Wow, I really did have a good feeling about that guy from my astrophysics seminar...

MILLIE beams, thinking of everything she loves back home. PHOEBE reenters.

CAROLINE

What's for dinner?

MILLIE

Don't tell me it's—

PHOEBE

—Yup. Canned mac and cheese with tortillas.

CAROLINE

(Exasperated)

Every. Day. For. A. Month.

MILLIE

Just wait. We'll be growing potatoes, kale, and lettuce soon. I can't wait for my Caesar salads!

The others laugh. They hear a beeping sound coming from the control panel. PHOEBE stands up to check it out.

PHOEBE

Guys, pressure's down to 12.0 psi. My ears are popping too.

MILLIE

(Concerned)

Oh—should we prep the oxygen masks?

CAROLINE

Guys, relax. The cabin pressure sensors are so faulty. You'd think for the first people to make it to Mars we'd have better tech.

MILLIE

Yeah, just look at our seats. I've never seen so much duct tape in my life...

She gestures to their headrests, whose holes are covered in hot pink duct

tape patches. CAROLINE chuckles.

PHOEBE

Okay then...I'll keep an eye on it.

MILLIE

Oh! I promised Carter and my parents we'd turn on the camera before we land. They are going to tune in to our livestream.

PHOEBE

Oliver and Izzy, too. They're at school right now. Their teacher is doing a space-themed unit, so they can't wait to watch us.

CAROLINE

My aerodynamics lab back home is excited to study our landing.

PHOEBE

Caroline, did you guys end up using the science journal I sent you?

CAROLINE

(Hesitates, but continues harshly)

No, I didn't. The credentials weren't strong enough.

PHOEBE

Seriously? My mentor was the editor.

CAROLINE

(Shrugging)

Sorry, Phoebes, I just didn't want to use it.

MILLIE looks between her two friends, concerned.

PHOEBE

Okay, I just thought you'd consider including it in your Lit Review since

it, you know, perfectly fits your topic.

CAROLINE shrugs again, while PHOEBE looks annoyed. The beeping

sound returns, this time louder.

MILLIE

(Grateful for a disruption)

Oh, is that the pressure again?

PHOEBE nods. An intercom button in the middle of cockpit lights up.

**ANDY FROM MISSION CONTROL
(VOICEOVER)**

Caroline, Houston is detecting a cabin pressure of 10.0 psi and

dropping...can you confirm?

CAROLINE checks the detector's reading.

PHOEBE

My ears are popping more.

MILLIE

So are mine.

ANDY

We are investigating the cause. Prepare the oxygen masks. Millie, did

you close the interior hatch after your EVA twenty minutes ago?

MILLIE

Yeah, of course.

ANDY

Okay, from our end, we are detecting a pressure leak.

CAROLINE's face pales, and she rushes to the back.

The others don't

seem to notice her urgency and continue their intercom conversation.

MILLIE

That's weird. I'll go check. Phoebe, can you steer for a sec?

PHOEBE nods, returning to her seat as MILLIE rises and goes to a

off-colored circular hatch door on one side of the stage. It is propped open.

PHOEBE

See anything?

MILLIE

The exterior hatch is open.

PHOEBE

Okay, well, close it!

MILLIE

IT WON'T SHUT!

PHOEBE

I'm coming. Let me put this thing on autopilot.

CAROLINE reenters, looking apprehensive.

CAROLINE

About that.

MILLIE

COME HELP US.

PHOEBE and CAROLINE rush over to MILLIE.

The girls' frantic

conversation overlaps and interrupts one another.

PHOEBE

CAROLINE, JUST YANK IT SHUT—

CAROLINE

—DID YOU NOT HEAR HER
SAY IT’S STUCK?

MILLIE

GUYS!!! IT’LL BE FINE. EVERYONE PULL
ON THREE, OKAY?
ONE...TW—

PHOEBE

—WE DON’T HAVE THREE. JUST YANK
IT CLOSED.

*There are sounds of struggling as all three girls stick their
arms out and*

try to pull the latch shut.

CAROLINE

IT’S NOT WORKING. WE NEED TO
ALERT HOUSTON. PHOEBE,
PREPARE THE OXYGEN MASKS STAT.

CAROLINE slams on the intercom button,

PHOEBE runs to the main

control panel, and MILLIE sits down in disbelief.

CAROLINE

(Frantically)

HOUSTON???? Do you copy?

There is no response.

CAROLINE

(Continues smacking button)

HELLO?

Dead silence.

PHOEBE

(Looking at the control panel)

We’ve lost our signal. It says here the electrical
system has been
overloaded. And the pressure’s dropping more. I
can feel it.

MILLIE

(Putting her hand to her head as if she was in
pain)

Me too. I’m so dizzy. What are we going to do?

PHOEBE

(Holding up a flimsy, flailing oxygen mask)

These freaking masks are garbage because our
the overload blocked

our oxygen flow.

MILLIE

Okay, guys, let’s just breathe. We can work this
out.

PHOEBE

Mils, I appreciate your optimism, but I don’t
know how we can save
ourselves now.

*CAROLINE has been noticeably quiet. The others look
at her.*

CAROLINE

You guys, there’s something I need to tell you.
She hesitates.

During our EVA, although it was Millie’s job, I
insisted on being the one
to check the solar arrays.

PHOEBE

So?

CAROLINE

(Slowly)

So...I don’t think I closed the outdoor hatch.

PHOEBE

You should’ve just let Millie do it. EVAs are her
specialty.

MILLIE

Hey, it’s okay—you wanted to try it!

CAROLINE

No. It wasn't okay. It wasn't my job. I just wanted to make sure the panels were attached correctly.

PHOEBE

You don't trust us. Millie and I spent weeks designing and installing them.

CAROLINE

I do trust you. I...I just wanted to make sure.

PHOEBE

(Rises and goes to the opposite corner of the space shuttle, finally breaking)

Caroline, can you let go of control for once? We know this mission is important to you. You want to be the first girl on Mars. We get it. It's your dream. But a lot is riding on this—on us. So please, for me and Millie, just listen to us.

MILLIE

(Looking at CAROLINE hopefully)

Caroline, will you trust us?

For once, CAROLINE is stunned silent without a retort. She avoids the others' glances. MILLIE is close to tears. PHOEBE is fuming in the corner.

MILLIE

Please?

After a very long pause, CAROLINE nods.

CAROLINE

You guys...I am so...sorry. I know I'm not cut out to be commander. I can't do this. I have no idea who I am, let alone how to lead a crew. Everything I've accomplished has been because of you. I got us into this mess.

PHOEBE

Well, as much as I hate to admit it, your ability to come up with a do-or-die move is unmatched.

MILLIE

If anyone can get us out of this mess, it's you.

CAROLINE continues, strengthening her resolve in every sentence.

CAROLINE

Alright. Here's what we're going to do. We can see Mars from here, right? We're so close.

The others nod.

CAROLINE

And our pressure is so low, but we just need to hold out, for like, two more minutes.

PHOEBE

Yes, that's true, but we're running out of air. Our words are slurring, listen.

CAROLINE

I know. We're all dizzy. But is there anything around here we can use to, like, temporarily close it?

MILLIE

(Quickly)

My duct tape!

PHOEBE

What?

MILLIE

We can seal the latch shut with this. We just need to remember to put more on it when it blows off.

She proudly holds out a large roll of hot pink duct tape.

PHOEBE looks

over at the navigation panel.

PHOEBE

You know, that just might work. And we're just a minute away.

CAROLINE

It's brilliant. I'll replace the tape later, no problem.

MILLIE runs over to the jammed, open hatch and duct tapes it shut. It looks closed. For now.

MILLIE

We did it!

CAROLINE

Wait, Mils, the livestream!!

MILLIE

OH YEAH!

MILLIE clicks on a dashboard camera.

MILLIE

Hi Mom, Dad, and Carter!

PHOEBE

Hi, Ollie and Izzy! Mommy misses you so much.

CAROLINE

Hello world. A lot has happened, but...here we are.

MILLIE

We're one minute away from Mars.

PHOEBE

(Peaks through closed curtain along the black window) Oh my god. We can see it.

She draws open the curtain, revealing a beautiful, huge reddish orb just a few miles away. CAROLINE gasps in awe. Her childhood dream is so close to being fulfilled.

MILLIE squeals ecstatically.

CAROLINE

It's...beautiful.

MILLIE

We should play a song!! Something that reminds us of home.

CAROLINE

(She opens her laptop and begins typing)

Thank god I downloaded our training playlist.

"Everybody Wants to Rule the World" by Tears for Fears begins to play,

but quiet enough where dialogue is still heard clearly.

MILLIE

I love this one.

PHOEBE

Remember when we blasted this on the Vomit Comet?

CAROLINE

DON'T REMIND ME.

PHOEBE

Worst. Two. Hours. Ever.

CAROLINE laughs.

MILLIE

Uhh...guys? I'm so dizzy.

CAROLINE

It's ok, Mils! Our spacesuits are right by the exit, so the second we hit the ground we can grab them and enter base. I'm lightheaded too, but the air will be cleaner there. We're filtering it, remember?

PHOEBE

That's right.

CAROLINE

Millie, don't worry. Navigation says we're THIRTY SECONDS away!

Silence.

Millie? What do you say?

MILLIE softly gasps and slumps over in her seat.

PHOEBE

MILLIE? ARE YOU THERE?

CAROLINE

(Crying, and speaking with great difficulty herself)

Oh my god. OH MY GOD. No. Millie. You're

my sister. I need you. Wake

up, please, please, wake up.

PHOEBE rushes over to her friend.

PHOEBE

(Also crying)

Caroline—there's no pulse.

PHOEBE breathes very heavily.

Do you feel that, Caroline?

CAROLINE

(Puts her face in her hands, unable to process this)

What are we going to do?

PHOEBE

Wait. Millie told us to put more duct tape on the

latch. See how it came

off?

CAROLINE

(Her thinking is slowed, but she suddenly realizes)

It was supposed to be me.

PHOEBE

What? Oh, oh...Caroline...I can't breathe.

CAROLINE

No! Phoebe. Stay awake. Please. I feel it too. But

we're so close.

PHOEBE does not answer. She, too, slumps in her seats.

Another long,

harsh, stretch of silence passes. CAROLINE begins

hysterically

rambling. She is beyond tears.

CAROLINE

Phoebe. PHOEBE. This is all my fault. Again.

Millie, you reminded me to seal the tape. But I

screwed up. I should never have been named

Commander.

We hear a very small thud as the shuttle touches the ground. CAROLINE's words are getting slower and slower.

Oh my god. We've landed. We've made it to Mars.

But...I'm all alone. And I'm so...dizzy. Okay. But

it's going to be okay. I just need to make it to

base...and call for help—

She is cut off mid-sentence. There is a long, haunting, silent pause in the dark as "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" fades out.

THE END



Legacy
Sophia Phan

Rafah

Nate Seibert

“There, a shooting star!”
the girl tugged at her mama
the night sky still red
the star fell and the ground shook
Mama clutched the girl tighter.

Nowhere left to go.



Peace of Mind

Rebecca Meyer

Albedo

Yue Gao

My mother is the moon.

She never produced her own light; she only ever borrowed it. When I was young, I thought the glow was hers. I thought the way she tucked me into bed, smoothing my hair with gentle palms, meant she was steady and whole, but all along, she was only reflecting the warmth my father, the Sun, cast onto her.

He'd kiss her cheek, and she'd brighten. He'd laugh, and she'd glow. I see it now: she was only luminous when he was looking.

Then one day, the Sun went out, with no explosion and no warning, just a quiet and permanent darkness. The same night he vanished from our sky, the moon dimmed into a silent thing. I waited for her to rise again and beam around the house in the way she used to. She never did.

When I asked, "Mom? Are you okay?" she didn't look at me. She only muttered, "Go to bed. I'm fine," her hands gliding over the tablecloth in careful motions, yet the fabric never lay flat—every attempt to fix it only deepened the creases. The bottles began to clink like broken stars in the sink, and her light turned artificial. She drifted, pale and seemingly distant, orbiting a loss she couldn't name. I became a planet without illumination, a body drifting through space, floating to wherever gravity nudged me. One day, I woke beneath a sky that wasn't mine, standing on land that didn't recognize my footsteps. The dirt was dark and metallic, the air bitter and sharp. I didn't know why, but I stayed. Perhaps planets settle where they're meant to break.

Tonight the sky is smoky, but I swear there's a sliver of moon behind all the clouds, as thin as a clipped fingernail. I wonder for a second if she's trying again, or maybe I'm just imagining it.

A shot cracks the air open. Then another.

Someone screams. Someone doesn't anymore.

I fell to the ground. There is warmth in my chest, sudden and foreign, like a tiny sun has bloomed in the cavity where everything was once frosted over. It spreads along my spine and into my fingertips. I know it is supposed to hurt, but it doesn't. It almost feels like a memory. The soil beneath me is damp and scented like iron. It clings to me and acknowledges my body like it finally recognizes me as its planet, resting at last. Grass brushes my cheek like it's trying to say something. The wind hums a lullaby. I haven't heard one in years. My eyelids grow heavy, and the world blurs around the edges. I let them close.

Somewhere above, a ball of light appears: radiant, full, and bright. Maybe she's finally shining on her own, or maybe the Sun has been waiting all along. Either way, the light reaches me.

For the first time since childhood, I feel warm.



Spring Flower - Childhood Happiness

Ester Wang

Roses/Rain

Leila Altamura

Internal darkness,
External sun,
Love is war,
Hate, your weapon.
Rain, wronged as bad.
While flowers, bloom.
The same roses that symbolize love.
The same rain that symbolizes darkness.



Love is Blind

Tiana Pan

Beyond the Sky: A Poem

Ella Magan

People leave in different ways.
Sometimes it is sudden, a text that changes,
a friend group that quietly reforms without you.
Sometimes it is slow—the conversations get shorter,
the invitations stop coming,
and you are still there, just less visible.

I have learned the language of goodbye
before anyone says the word.
I feel it coming like a weather shift,
a small cold that starts in my chest
and spreads until I am bracing for it.

He left too.
The one I let myself imagine with.
I replayed every conversation,
looking for where I made the mistake,
what I should have said differently,
how I should have been more.

And now there is a pattern I cannot unsee:
the friend who stops answering,
the person who was everything, then nothing,
the space where someone used to be
that keeps growing larger.

I wonder if it is me.
If there is something about how I love
that makes people run,
something unlovable that reveals itself
once they get close enough.

Abandonment becomes a story I tell myself.
It is the lens I look through,
waiting for the next person to prove it true,
checking for the exit signs,
keeping one foot toward the door.

But I am tired of being left.
I am tired of wondering why I am not enough
to make someone stay.

There is a voice that whispers smaller truths:
People leave for their own reasons.
Not all of them are about you.
Not all of it is your fault.
Not all departures mean you are unworthy.

Sometimes people are figuring out
their own storms.
Sometimes distance happens
without cruelty.
Sometimes goodbye does not
mean you were never loved.

I start to notice the ones who stayed:
the parent who picks up the phone,
the friend who texts back weeks later,
the counselor who remembers,
the stranger who held the door.

Connection is not guaranteed.
But it is possible.
Not because I am perfect,
but because I am here,
and some people choose to be here too.

I learn to love differently—
with open hands instead of white knuckles,
with the knowledge that people are temporary
and that does not erase their worth.

I practice staying with myself
when others cannot.

I show up for my own sadness
the way I wish others had shown up for me.

And slowly, I stop waiting for the abandonment.
I start looking for the people who come back,
who ask about the hard day,
who sit in the quiet without rushing to fix it.
I learn that belonging is not about being kept.
It is about being chosen,
over and over,
by people who know you are not easy
and stay anyway.

Beyond the sky is not a place where people don't
leave.

It is a place where leaving does not define your
worth.

It is the horizon I look toward
when the pattern feels too heavy,
the reminder that the story is not over.

I am still here.

I am learning to be enough for myself first.

And from that steady place,

I am learning to recognize the people
who choose to stay,
and to believe them when they do.

The abandonment happened.

The scars are real.

But I am still moving,
still opening my hands,
still looking up,
beyond the sky.



Marble-ous
Lily Knapp

The Means to an End (Again, Again, Again)

Charisma Shum

Vincent had been gone for five months. Lance has never been better. A greasy food bag plopped down politely onto the small dining table, he never learned to cook. He always got takeout.

Vincent always cooked.

Even with him gone, the dishes were stacked up in the sink, courtesy of the effort of trying—and failing—to clean it up. His coats were in all the places they shouldn't be. Locking himself in his room all the time, as if it would help anything. As if it would help the buzzing in his mind. Even in the deadest nights, where the air was thin and the crickets dared not to make a sound. His mind was ticking, racing, screaming. It cut through the silence like a blade, so sharp and precise, Lance never noticed it was quiet in the first place.

He wants to stop. He wants to be able to fix everything. He wants the room to be clean for a change. He wants to eat something other than soggy chicken and rice, or stir fry noodles. He wants his friends to leave him alone. He wants them to run up to him and hold him and show how much they care. He wants to be able to read his own damn handwriting. He wants to be able to work again so Cora's family won't cut his funding. He doesn't care. He wants silence.

He wants, and wants, and wants.

Cora stopped by today. She seemed so excitedly melancholy to see him, leaning in to peek through his door to get a closer look. Her black hair falling over her hazel eyes, and tall as she was, Lance still saw the former girl scout that convinced his mom to buy twelve boxes of the weirdly flavored cardboard cookies. She looked past him hurriedly, as if he might shut the door at any moment.

He let her in.

She knew what happened, to some extent. Enough to know why he did this, not enough to understand him.

Bright as she was.

Her empathy couldn't compensate for loss; his fall from grace.

"Take anything you need," He offered tiredly.

"I was actually wondering if I could talk to you—"

"I need to use the bathroom," He responded, stepping around her.

"Wait Lance, that's—"

He shut the bathroom door in her face and leaned back against the cool wood. Darkness surrounded him, he couldn't see anything at all. Breathing out and dragging his hands across his face. A thought crossed his mind.

Why am I so tired?

Moving his arm out, he started searching the wall for the light switch.

There was none. Which meant he was in the closet. Gripping the handle, he pushed backwards. Prompting land backwards onto the floor.

Cora was standing over him, unimpressed.

“I brought a gift,” she said, gently laying down a box near his face. It smelled like piss.

“Well thank you very much for the thought,” He replied in jest, waving his hand around in the air to enunciate his words. “This piss box will heal me of all my sins.”

Cora left him in silence.

“Well alright,” he muttered, letting his hand drop to his side. Before sitting up and pawing the box towards him, holding it in his arms, and staring at the opening.

“I know you said you were fine,” Cora continued, kneeling down to his level. “But I also know you better than you do, and I think that you care so much about others, you forget to take care of yourself.” Her voice was soft and coaxing, he closed his eyes and exhaled. Preparing for the drop.

“So I thought you needed a friend to take care of, so they can take care of you too.” She continued before moving to open the box herself.

Lance was greeted with the warmest amber eyes. Round and soft surrounding a fluffy face.

Their first look almost feels like home.

The first look reminds him why he’s so alone.



Humanity's Destiny

Angelina Yan

Threads of Gold

Sophia Nikas

I am waiting.

My arms are stretched out to you; I am reaching for you, can you not see it?

Then you look at me,

And you look away,

You turn away from me,

Like I mean nothing to you,

Like I have never meant anything to you.

There is a hole in my chest,

Jagged and cavernous and ugly,

Something has been ripped out—

Something has been torn out of me and I did not notice until I was standing there in front of you,

And I realize that this pit in my stomach is dread,

And the weight in my body is exhaustion,

And I am wondering what I have done wrong,

Over and over again.

Between all of us there is something,

This little thread,

Taut, like the sinew that lies under my skin, that binds my bones,

Golden like the thread of the Μοῖραι,

Through this we are knotted together,

Me and you and all of us men,

All of us people with our golden souls.

It is Κλώθω who spins our thread,

And Λάχεσις who decides how long it will be.

Ἀτροπος, without turn, is the one who cuts our thread,

Who severs these meager lives of ours,

But the knot between every human has been pulled too tight,

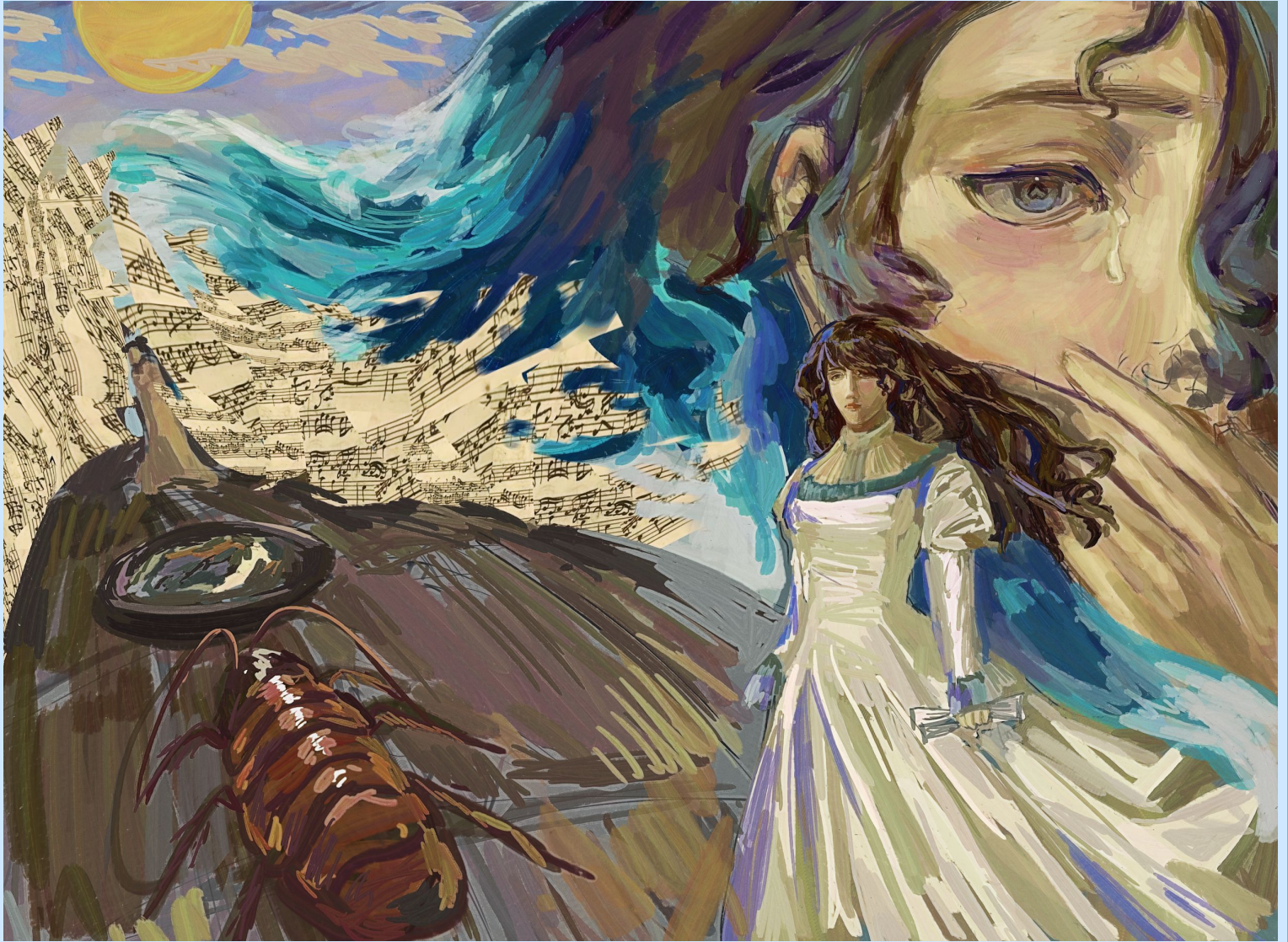
So even when you turn away,

We are tied to each other,

Bound by the moment in our lives when for just a second we touched.

The Μοῖραι - the three Fates in Greek mythology

Κλώθω - Clotho, Λάχεσις - Lachesis, Ἀτροπος - Atropos



The Multifaceted Role of Women in Literature

Remy Huang

Latency

Dylan Tanzi

I was built for balance.
Not happiness—
just function.
Move forward, adjust, repeat.
Keep everything within range.

I learned early
how to keep my hands steady,
how to answer cleanly,
how not to lean too hard
into anything that might leave.
Even loneliness had rules—
manageable, quiet, predictable.

Then you touched me
and something unregistered happened.

Not sparks—
nothing so theatrical.
Just a misfire.
A hesitation where certainty used to live.
A pause long enough
for doubt to install itself
where it had no right.

I still pass for composed.
Still say the right things,
still stand where I'm supposed to.
But now there's interference—
small, persistent,
in the places that used to be clear.

Your hand on my arm
didn't overwhelm me.

It rerouted me.
Suddenly, I hesitate.
Responses come late,
or too carefully,
as if I'm checking myself
against a version of me
that existed before you.

I catch myself anticipating you,
running possibilities I never needed before.
Replaying moments that don't change,
hoping repetition will turn them
into something resolvable.

You never promised anything.
You weren't cruel.
You just treated me
like someone capable of more feeling
than I was prepared to admit.

Now I move through the world
mostly intact.
But there's a quiet loop in me—
the memory of your touch,
the brief permission it gave me
to want without safeguards.

I know how to reset.
I always have.
But I pause now,
longer than necessary,
and that pause—
that misfire—
that's how I know
something human got in.



Game of Life
Nina Machabeli

Revival

Tyler Ng

The sun roared hazy red,
The sky filled with darkness,
The world stopped smiling.

Many unique names,
shattered across the litter of bodies.
The presence of dark red spread like wildfire,
O the cruelty of the world

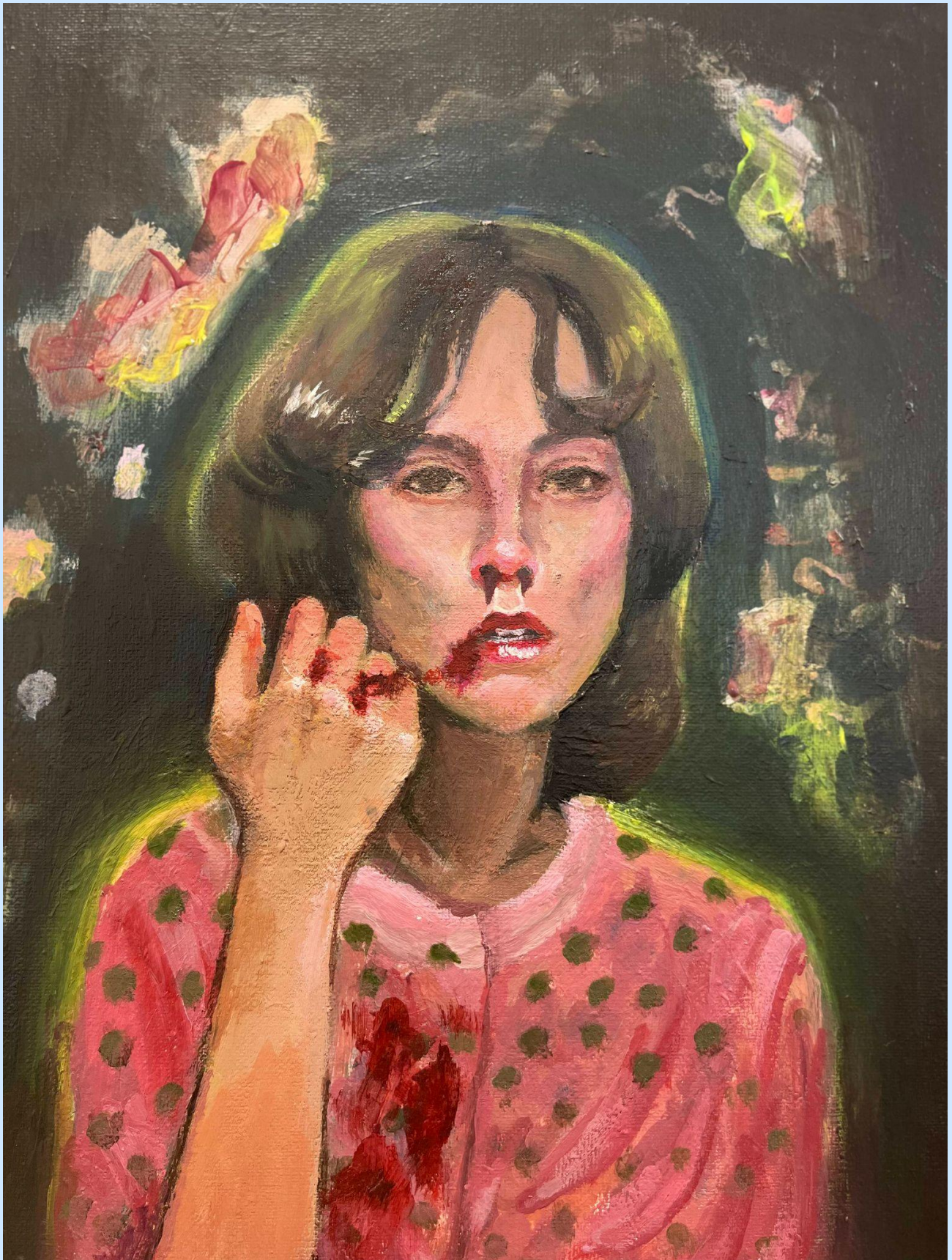
The grim world exhausted fire,
Falling like rain from the air,
The screams exerted their maximum strength,
tears dripped across the faces of innocence.
We were trapped by the devil

Surrounded by the mourning of humanity,
I collapsed on my bloody knees,
Staring into the barrage.
At that moment we were reminded,
humanity was a sitting duck,
in a world with injustice and evil,
and that our lives experience barbaric reminders.

But beneath the ruins,
I saw light in the distance.

A dove,
sparkling with the beauty of this world,
spreading its wings across the horizon,
emphatically flying across the dark atmosphere
soaring outside the cage of brutality

The world glowed,
while the dove continued to surge
a bridge between the grassy Earth
and horizon followed
I smiled



Failure to Contain

Blair Bi

Reminiscence

Emily Shih

I am happy. With my best friends, how can I not be?

It's sunny, but not scorching hot. I open the window so I can smell the invigorating scent of fresh air. The cool breeze feels pleasant as it blows through my hair. Outside, the morning whistles of robins enliven the scene as they soar across the sky, and the rest of nature begins to awaken.

Feeling satisfied, I sigh and make my way towards the living room of my small apartment to join my friends on the couch, and we get lost in the next few hours making jokes, laughing until our stomachs hurt, and chatting about the usual nonsense.

As we continue our lively conversations, one friend suggests that they all sign the cast I wear on my left arm. Another friend wants to paint my nails. A third friend has been dying to try out the new makeup products she has recently bought and chooses me to be her model. So here I am, giggling like a little girl, as I have my cast signed on my left with colorful pastel markers, my nails painted a pretty, pale yellow on my right, and my face slathered with cosmetics.

I beam brightly as my best friends pamper me, feeling a warm, fuzzy feeling in my chest. Closing my eyes, I tighten my arms around my favorite fluffy, white pillow and recall other fond memories we have created together over the years.

As I slowly drift away from reality, I hear the pure and joyful laughter of innocent teenage girls echoing in the distance. Then, I see myself with my friends, roaming the streets of downtown. Though the sky is overcast and dull, we still find a way to make the best of the gloomy weather. We stroll along roads hand in hand, huddling together under our shared umbrellas, and never wasting a single opportunity to jump into an intriguing puddle, causing our boots to become muddy from our frolicsome endeavors. Nonetheless, the midnight atmosphere remains as serene and placid as it typically does.

At one point, we come across an interestingly large puddle. We gather around it, and a reflection of us suddenly emerges, displaying a circle of our matching blue raincoats encompassing the water's edge, and exhibiting the ethereal, silver glow of the moon.

"I wish this could last forever," one friend sighs pensively, breaking the silence. "Just the five of us alone, having fun without a single care in the world." The statement is promptly followed by nods of agreement and tender smiles.

"Forever?" I inquire, placing my hand in the center of the circle.

"Forever!" My friends reply in unison, placing their hands in the center on top of mine. We effortlessly perform our unique five-person handshake and laugh.

As we begin to cross a street holding hands, a sudden noise startles us and we turn our heads abruptly towards the sound. A bright, blinding light; a loud, blaring horn; and through the falling droplets of rain, an ominous mass is charging toward us.

Its tires skid on the slippery asphalt, as we watch the shadow unexpectedly swerve and head in our direction. Time seems to crawl slower, like a ship sinking into the bottomless abyss of an ocean. Though our escape attempts are desperate, we unfortunately find ourselves in an isolated corner, and there is simply no more time to flee. The last grain of sand has already slipped through the narrow bottleneck of the hourglass. We stand frozen in shock like deer in headlights, tightly interlocking our hands. Finally grasping our impending fate, we brace ourselves and watch in horror as the glaring lights approach us and—

GASP

Panting heavily, I look around with alarm and find myself sitting on my couch in my dreary apartment again, violently shaking with terror. Beads of sweat drip down the side of my head like a leaky faucet. The evening is as silent as falling snow, aside from the chirping of crickets outside, and I look around the room to once again be reminded that my once-perfect life is now forever to be lived in solitude, grief, and agonizing heartache. A few teardrops roll down my face and land on the cast on my left arm. The off-white cast displays the scribbled names of my best friends all over it, all in my shaky handwriting. Beside me lies an open box of pastel markers. I glance at my right hand and spot one singular painted nail. An open bottle of nail polish catches my attention, although one can easily take note of its worn-down condition by the fact that its dull, gray hue doesn't quite match the sticker on the side labeling the color as "pale yellow". The bottle lies toppled over on the couch, spilling liquid into the cushions and leaving a pungent, chemical scent lurking around the room. I look at the mirror on the wall and see makeup sloppily smeared all over my face. My heart feels too heavy to hold now, and feeling numb and despondent, I shed tears on my favorite fluffy, white pillow.

"Coward..." it whispers as if through seething, sharp teeth. "How pathetic are you to have just stood there helplessly?"

"I'm sorry," I start, immediately drowning in my tears again.

"A measly 'sorry' isn't going to bring them back. Their doom will *always* be on your hands."

"I'm sorry," I repeat impotently, tasting the stinging salt from my tears. "I'm *really* sorry..."

The sound of a blaring car horn rings in my head, followed by echoing screams of terror and distress. I shudder as I feel an uncomfortable chill course through my body.

I was happy. But now, happiness feels like a depleted candle: the memory of warmth lingering in the aftermath of a burning flame.



Prayer for Peace

Ayla Wang

Where Doves Once Flew

Marcus Park

Day 639. Spring, I thought. What a wonderful, beautiful time of the year. My boots sank in the mud, the morning dew clinging to my coat. The sun and its warmth had abandoned us long before our leaders did. *Why have we been sent to fight an old man's war?* Time has long since been an illusion. Only the cold breezes of changing seasons, the cascading rains from the gods, and the miserable, nauseating stench of rotting flesh, feces, and rodents. I stumbled my way through the winding, endless trenches, only just avoiding the slumbering men atop the disgusting mud. I knocked over a propaganda poster. *"The German Empire Shall Not Fall!"* The man in the picture seemed too stereotypical for an Englishman. Besides, it is all a lie, a mere facade. Even the posters sagged in the damp mud, as if they, too, knew that the flame of the Empire had been extinguished. *I barely write home. My heart yearns for its warmth, the embrace of my father, the laughter of my sister.* My comrades sulked, stood, and sat, all with the same mindless and empty look plastered on their faces. Unresponsive. Inhuman, victims of "shellshock". The remnants of yesterday's assault. *Not many,* I thought. Crows. Ghostly black, harbinger of death. Crows picked at those who fell, barely visible in the fog. All of us expected the same fate, grasped by the hands of fate and dragged down to the underworld, for we are soldiers. *Pathetic. What would Father think of me? That I did the nation a disservice?* I remembered his words.

"I am so proud of you, as is the nation, my son, fighting for this glorious nation. Do not fail me, or this country, you hear?" he said.

"Yes, father," I muttered reluctantly. *Alas, there are no more families to grieve the fallen.*

Day 643. The sky has finally cleared. The rays of Sol struck the blood-soaked mud. How depraved we were from sunlight. For once in this misery, I saw a flock of sparrows soar high overhead. *How strange. No crows.* The refreshing gusts swept away the horrid stench. I peered my head above the once-fog-covered parapet, and, as if a mirror had been erected right through no-man's-land, another web of boundless trenches stretched beyond the horizon. *The "enemy".* I could see their movements, their faces. *They were just young boys. Like me. I wonder what they're thinking about. Fear? Death?* My thoughts ceased, interrupted by the chirping of birds and the smell of fresh air. A pair of doves danced their way across the battlefield. The sunlight gleamed off their elegant, delightful white feathers, their waltz unaffected by the gales. *How beautiful,* I thought. Like us, nature was overjoyed with the serene break in the storms of rain and bullets alike. A glimpse into what peace could be. Alas, all of us—even those in the mirror—knew that this tranquility would be all too short-lived. *It is only the calm before the storm.*

Day 658. The rain had returned. Two men stood over the parapet, their eyes trained on the dead expanse of the fog-covered no-man's-land, their hands trembling while tightly gripping their rifles. They watched, and watched, only to disappear in the blink of an eye, in a flash. *Here comes the whistle. Oh, the dreaded siren of doom. Like the unholy screech of an eagle. The storm had come.* The subsequent stampede was sheer pandemonium. Men tackled one another, throwing fists over every inch of cover. *The whistle kept coming. Growing louder. It never stops.* A man, in the corner of my eye, solemnly stood at his post, pocket watch in hand. *Tick, tock.* He would watch the arcs of brilliant, glimmering shells in the air, until he could no longer. And I ran. *Tick, tock.* The earth quaked, as if being beaten into submission. A group of men were rushing for a shelter. One moment, they were a dim silhouette in the flash, and the next, a mere imprint in the mud. I could hear no longer, replaced by the endless drone of ringing and distant explosions. I froze. Just like the man with the pocket watch, I stared. *Oh, how elegant they are, cutting through the air. Like a flock of sparrows.* And I watched.

And watched, waiting for my liberation from this hell-on-earth. *I was mistaken. Enlisting was a mistake.* I felt a push. Falling into a shelter, I turned, only to see the man become just another songless soul in this meaningless, brutal war.

Day 666. The mud quakes. Sleep is a joke. Senseless. A dream. The struggle of engines, the rumble of tracks-to-earth. The crack of machine guns, the distant, eerie boom of artillery further up the line, as if those who had finally slept, the fallen, had haunted us and forbid us from rest. And the sky, once a vast expanse of freedom for the sparrows and doves, now solely belongs to the reign of metal sky-birds. Horrid creatures that knew no song. No freedom. Only screams and blood. Instead of the wispy, tranquil waltz—the brief solace of our sorrow—it has been replaced by the endless, mechanical drone of steel hawks. The terrors of the sky strike a man with both fear and death itself, for if it sees a soul, it abolishes its rights to existence. *And here it comes.* The hum of the sky-bird grew ever louder, the location of it concealed by the dense fog. *A hunter's wrath.* My compatriots flee, to no avail, for the grasp of the sky-birds is firm. *And the mighty talons show.* A hailstorm of lead cuts them down. Indiscriminate. Unyielding. *And the ground burns. Bathed in life. Soil of souls. Just like the world.* I can only hope the predator spares me just once more.

Only the dead have seen the end of war. And no birds sing for them.

An excerpt from *Cutback*
Sam Kelly

The truth arrived like a quiet fire, burning through the walls of everything I trusted. I could feel the heat beneath my feet carrying me towards the front door. Every memory turned to ash in my hands. I stood there breathing smoke, realizing that the home I thought was burning me was sheltering me this whole time.

Cooper. Fire, snark, and storm. Westley. A liar.

I watched him stand there, kissing her next to the bushes overlooking the ocean. I stood there, unable to move, but unable to look away. But her eyes worked fine. She saw me standing there. I ran past them into the street, my breath getting shorter and shorter with every second. I didn't know where I was. My phone dropped somewhere in the street, but I didn't care. It felt like nothing else mattered anymore.

Footsteps ran up behind me.

"Cade!" the voice shouted, getting closer. "Cade! Where are you going?"

I stopped and turned around. I didn't want to talk to him. "How could you?" I asked in disbelief, backing up. "Where am I going? Away! Away from this party, away from you!"

He looked both confused and hurt. "What?" he asked concerningly, stepping towards me. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

My voice was shaky. "Am I okay? Westley, of course I'm not okay." He shook his head, confusion lighting up his eyes.

"Cade, you know you can talk to me, right?" He stepped closer once again. "Right?"

I laughed, a tear rolling down my cheek. "Yeah, totally. I can trust you," I said sarcastically, wiping a tear on my sleeve.

"Just tell me what's wrong and I'll—"

"You'll what? Go and tell your ex-girlfriend? Go and kiss her too?"

His face flushed white. His shoulders dropped. Realization struck him. After a period of silence, he finally spoke: "Cade, I promise it wasn't what it looked like," he assured him, despite avoiding eye contact.

I laughed shakily. "Then what was it?"

Westley stepped towards me. "Cade, she kissed me. I promise. I would never lie to you."

"Why were you with her in the first place?!" I asked, raising my voice. "And you're clearly lying to me right now! Was everything you told me about her a lie?!"

His face softened. "I swear I'm telling the truth. You know—"

"You told me she hurt you! You said you would never be vulnerable and fall into another relationship again after what she did to you! You sa—"

“Well guess what?” he asked, his voice raw. “I let myself fall into a relationship with you.”

“SHE HURT YOU AND YOU LET HER KISS YOU AS IF IT WAS NOTHING!” I screamed, backing away. I felt weak, like I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t see through the tears in my eyes. “Did our kiss mean nothing to you? Because it sure did to me.” I didn’t want to fight. Not here, not now. I started to walk away, but he continued to follow.

“Cade, just listen to me please,” he pleaded. “You have no idea how she is! She has this way, this stupid manipulation tactic!”

“Oh yeah, right,” I sneered. “Tell me how that’s so different from the ‘wave of Westley’ everyone talks about! Spoiler alert, it’s not!”

He tried to grab my hand, but I shoved him away. “Don’t touch me,” I snarled. “We’re done. Whatever we are—or used to be—we’re done.”

He sounded hurt. “Cade, please!” he begged, but I was already gone. I didn’t look back to see if he was following me. I just ran.

For once, I thought he was different. For once, I thought there was actually something between us, because I felt it. I felt a connection, a genuine spark. Cooper was at least right about one thing. Nothing can stay the same. Everything changes. Everyone changes.

I didn’t know what to do or where to go, so I ran to the beach. After all, Grandma said to go there if we were ever sad or angry. The ocean was healing; it would make you feel better. I took off my shoes and threw them into the sand. My heart was pounding. I stood there on that beach, the same beach I had met Westley for the first time at, and suddenly gained this sort of insurmountable power. I felt like I could do anything. I felt strong. I didn’t care about him. I didn’t care about anything else. I thought he was different, but clearly he wasn’t. A fiery fury was building up inside of me. I was a lit match burning. Burning everything all down. I stumbled down to the water’s edge, looking at the waves crashing along the shoreline.

My fear loosened its grip, like I was floating along a hidden current that carried me forward without my permission. Power felt intoxicating. Because it was. So I ran into the ocean. The cold, chilling waves lapped against my body. It was a shock to the heart, a cold painkiller. It was electrifying. The waves thundered against the shoreline. They silenced everything else. They silenced every thought of mine, except for one. I thought about what Westley had said, what he had said about Lauren. She kissed him. She had a manipulation tactic. The water numbed my body. How was that different from us, from the hot tub? The first time I saw him it felt like nothing else mattered. Whenever I’m with him I never feel ashamed or invisible. He, Westley Reynolds, made me feel complete. I swam out further, and a memory flooded into my mind. A memory of me, Mallory, and Matt as little kids, running into the water with our boogie boards, the ocean spraying up at our happy, smiling faces. Grandma watched from the shore, her ankles wading in the water. We were normal. We were happy. We were too little to understand that our lives would change so much. Eight year old Cade wouldn’t be able to understand me now. He would never have thought in a million years that he would later get his heart broken.

He was happy. He loved Coronado, and he had no reason not to. The first time a boy called me gay was in elementary school, in third or fourth grade. It was a quick “insult” said by this stupid kid. I was too young to even understand what the word meant. I was marked different before I even knew what different was. That thought alone brought another tear down my cheek. I thought about Grandma. A wave is dangerous enough to knock you over, but don’t let it.

That was one of her sayings.

My parents have spent years teaching Matt and me to never swim in the ocean alone and to always be near a lifeguard tower. I knew that the ocean was dangerous. I knew the risks. I knew the waves were powerful. At that moment the lifeguard tower seemed so far away. The worst part about the ocean is its ability to disguise itself into something it isn’t. The lifeguards may have raised the green flag, a signal that it was safe, but they were fooled. The ocean is unforgiving. Because underneath the surface, there are currents. They will drown you. You can never see the danger that you put yourself into before it comes. There’s a reason the green flag is waving. It looks fine on the surface, but deep down it isn’t. It’s a trap. The ocean is full of lies. You let yourself fall into the trap. You become vulnerable. You repeat the same actions that others did. You can change beaches, but it’s all just one big body of water. But it’s too late. Because when you’re drowning, there’s no way out. And that’s when it hit me.

I was pushed to the bottom, my face scraping the sand as I tumbled over and over. I saw nothing but a palette of muted blues and grays as my head hit the ocean floor, the saltwater stinging in my eyes. Waves are the most dangerous when you don’t see them coming, when they hit you from behind. My face smashed against the sand again as the water carried my legs over my head. I was shaken up, gasping for air when I could. I gulped in a mouthful of water by accident. I spit it out, choking and sputtering. The salt stung. Never put salt on an open wound. I managed to stand up once, only to get hit again by another brutal blow. Land appeared fuzzy and far. The cold water didn’t feel numbing anymore. It felt like pain. My body started to shut down. I felt weak and empty. Everything started to spin around with every crash of the waves. I looked up. The moon shone bright, the stars twinkling around it. For a moment it was almost as if the world stopped spinning, but that was when another wave came and knocked me off my feet. All of the life felt sucked out of me. It was as if every wave was a punch to the gut, reminding me of all of my mistakes and my faults.

Why was I so stupid? How could I have ever thought that Westley liked me back? Everything felt silent. Everything felt slow. Never underestimate the power of the ocean. My face was red and bleeding. My breath was shaky and trembling as I looked toward the shore. For a moment I thought I heard someone on the beach, a savior. I looked towards the shore, ready to cry for help, but then another wave hit me from behind. It felt like a stab to the back, pushing me down to the ocean floor, saltwater filling my lungs.

When you’re drowning, there’s no way out.

I prayed the waves would carry me back to shore. It was my last hope.



Children of Bone and Bloom
Abella Huang

Reaching for the Stars

Dylan Chung

i. my world

Soft hums of machine create the only waves of sound
Fingers never stop, raw skin peeling
Cloth strewn throughout a grimy surface
Only for those measureless oceans away.

Plaster ceiling obstructs the world beyond
Waves of heat undulate off the concrete
Enclosed by bleak walls of gray
I cannot escape, they whisper
The voices show no mercy.

Strangled under piles of fabric
Unable to speak, suffocated
Dried up tears hardened
No place for sorrow
For them, our souls don't matter.

ii. the world above

After Dusk, glowing orbs shine above
Illuminating the obsidian void
Oh the sight, how sleep escapes the mind
For the gift of solace radiates stronger.

Forces of nature cannot stop the soul.
It soars up towards the North Star
Reaching for the path of escape
Yearning for a chance at salvation.

Oh how the distance from Earth's surface
grows
Shackles crumble into dust
Blinding light draws closer
Illuminating the world above.

For beyond the sky
Lies an oasis of hope
Golden realm emanating light
Liberation for all those trapped souls
No one can take that away.



Sketches
Parker Yuttal

A Voice in Gettysburg

Constantine Vases

As I sat still in class,
with my peers cantankerous,
I listened and listened and listened,
to a president who stood
for what no one else could.

His voice felt strong and demanding
as he spoke words of bravery and equality.
Even at that time of hardship and division,
while standing on the battlefield where his men
perished, he stood up tall and delivered
truth to a nation divided.

No fear in his voice, only hope
that this once united nation could come together
once more with all who inhabit its land liberated.

And to you, O my soul,
struggling with the pressures of society,
trying hard to fit in with those who walk
the school halls alongside me.
Some days the world feels too heavy to bear
as my small voice in a large world struggles
to find its place, but then I remember
I have heard what courage sounds like,
and that this is my own story to tell.
So I will stand tall and speak,
not for what is common, but for what is right.



The Angel
Kenji La

Fire and Ice

Olivia Wong

ice

the glassy sheet crackles
spider webbing fractures
thread through the ice beneath me
pressure me to seek solid ground

but there's nothing in sight

even if i find land
who is to say it
will be safe forever?

an earthquake will rend it
just as well as pressure on ice

the land's almost more dangerous
i can return from the freezing water
but not from the earth's chasm

my mind screams at me
“run away
or it'll swallow you whole”

so i run endlessly
toward the next “safe” haven

fire

little sparks from the campfire
bounce and pop and crackle
stale dead leaves catch flame

i try to stop the little fires
but i'm afraid to get burned
so i run away instead

i don't hear anything
i'm safe for a bit
right?

then the rushing fire
crashes into the clearing
my instincts scream "RUN!"

the crackling roar of a wildfire
the uncomfortable warmth at my back
spur me to accelerate

faster
Faster
FASTER

my throat's scorched
my lungs are aflame
sweat drips into my eyes

my muscles are burning
still i run
but i'm losing momentum

the fire's getting closer
running won't extinguish it
but it'll kill me eventually

it's too late to turn around
and face the flames
they've grown bold, uncontrollable
and far too large for me to face

now i'm tearing through the woods
trying to outrun an impossible force
where did it all go wrong?

