



Q A B C D E F G

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OUTSIDE & INSIDE

by Gabby Gillespie

Being a creator isn't easy. Your inside thoughts and feelings are always on display to everything on the outside.

Like a computer, I copy and paste myself to the world. Every character or piece of art or story, that little bit of me breaks through to that exterior realm. But in that inside realm they are confined in the penitentiary of my brain.

Little fragments of me exist in everything I create. My feelings show through my art, my personality appear in my characters, and my thoughts present themselves in my stories. Even if I don't show these pieces to other people, they are still there for the universe to see. They are there to show the outside exactly who I am.

Inside, I'm just me. I'm not unique or shy or academic or anything in particular. My mind is just a dirty fishbowl of thousands of traits swirling together in a cloudy mess. I can't pinpoint those unique things about me. I can't just reach in and scoop out these identifiable qualities without fishing out hundreds of others, clouding and confusing me. Inside, I don't really know who I am.

Outside, I have aspects unique to myself. I'm creative and dedicated and optimistic. Everything I make establishes those most important features of me. All of those meaningful traits in my head grow bigger while the insignificant grow smaller. I can see clearly through the fog of my mind. Outside, I know who I am.

I write and draw and create and I discover surprises about myself I had not yet known.

What's even stranger is the fact I can be shaped by these creations into something I was never before. I never knew I could be brave or confident in myself. My identity was found and molded by my work.

I already knew I was a creator, but I found I was more than that - I was careful, bright, daring, curious, conscientious.



Who Is the Real You?
by Anjum Syed

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GENE LUEN YANG



Johnson County Library is honored to dedicate the 14th issue of *elementia* to artist and writer Gene Luen Yang. As the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature and through his work as a graphic novelist and storyteller, Mr. Yang has challenged us to "read without walls."

We spent the year reading from unpredictable perspectives, in unfamiliar formats, and built our capacity to listen attentively to new ideas. Through his books like *American Born Chinese*, Mr. Yang inspires us to explore our own complexities, including those parts of our identities that can seem contradictory.

Mr. Yang, we thank you and we honor you for showing us how to incorporate our multifaceted identities on the page, and for encouraging us to seek out all the voices whose identities and experiences contribute to the richly complicated mosaic of humanity.

THE MARK OF LOVE

by Kaylie McLaughlin

Aria pointed at the little flower on her ankle with a short, chubby finger and asked her mother in her unpracticed, fragmented English about what it was. "Pretty," she said, her "r" a little too rounded and her voice broken up by her childish laughter. She stumbled back and plopped back into the tub, splashing into the bath water with a giggle.

Her mother lifted the toddler out of the tub and wrapped the soft pink towel around her. The older woman's eyes caught on the flower on her daughter's skin, the bright pink petals stark against her pale complexion. It was almost lifelike with its crisp green leaves and the pockets of yellow, powdery pollen collecting in the center. A small vine extended from the bunch of leaves, winding around the inside of her ankle.

She ran her finger over the mark, horrified of the other marks that would someday rise on her skin as ugly reminders of the love swirling in her still-pure heart. She felt the burn of all the marks that claimed her skin and her heart pounded at the thought of all the love that had darkened her own soul.

She was six when she asked about the dove that lived in suspended flight behind her ear. Her fingers flew to the mark, so gently that she was sure that it must have burned her hands. The dark ink did in fact burn into her skin, a painful reminder of the love that she had lost.

"Someday," she promised. Someday, when she was older, she swore to tell her daughter about the man she had loved first, the one that had stolen her heart before anyone else had even had the chance.

"It isn't the same as Daddy's mark," Aria probed. Even at that age, already very curious and impossibly observant.

"No, it's not," she replied matter-of-factly.

When Aria was eight, she watched a new mark form on her father's forearm. It wasn't the same as the butterfly on her mother's ankle. No, it was the same music note that rested just above the shoe line of her teacher Ms. Lambert. She pointed it out to her mother one night when the three

of them were sitting at the dinner table. Aria remembers watching her mother nod and her father's expression drown in guilt. Later that night when she got up for a glass of water, her mom and dad were shouting at each other. Mommy was crying and Daddy was slamming things. When she woke up the next morning, Daddy wasn't sitting at the table with his cup of coffee and his newspaper. In fact, she never really saw much of him after that.

She liked his new apartment, they ate mac and cheese every time she visited and he let her stay up to watch movies even on school nights. He sent her birthday cards and she watched as more marks took form on his skin. There was the bunny rabbit that the woman who bagged their groceries also had and the heart that she had seen on her dance instructor's leg.

She was walking home from school with Jessica. It was something her mom told her she was grown up enough to do, now that she was twelve of course. Jessica, who was already thirteen and whose parents allowed her to wear eye shadow to school, happily displayed the mark that had branded the skin behind her thick curly hair. A simple tree drawn out of a single line with a small boy sitting at the bottom. It was more beautiful than anything she had ever seen and she wanted one.

But unlike Jessica, she still saw the boys as carriers of cooties. Don't get her wrong, she wanted to be kissed - like she had seen her father so fondly kiss his new wife - but there was no boy in her grade that seemed worthy to share something so pivotal with. Jessica, of course, had kissed Tommy. A few days later, her delicate daisy popped out of his arm as if it were pushing through the early spring snow, but Jessica laughed and brushed it off. When Aria asked her if she loved him, she reassured her that she didn't.

"It was just a kiss," Jessica said. But that mark on Jessica's neck told her otherwise. Tommy had that same tree peeking out of the top of his sock.

On her sixteenth birthday, the outline of the wolf took shape on her collarbone and she felt this foreign sense of unease and excitement fill her stomach. Hollis, the senior on the football team who sat next to her in Spanish, had that same Wolf. But he didn't bear the flower that claimed her skin. No, he

wore the black raven that Amelia Stevens, the student body president, was born with. Aria felt this unbelievably kind of jealousy burn inside of her. She had always been sort of jealous of the cute haircuts and designer backpacks other girls on the Cheer squad had, but this was something much stronger and lived much deeper inside of her than that kind of envy. It was then that she learned what it was like to love someone who would never love you. Sometimes, her mother had told her at dinner that night, love is only a one-way street.

And it was that night, with her daughter crying in her arms that she told the story of the dove that lived behind her ear. About the boy named Christopher who loved her from the time she was seven up until she was twenty-one. And it wasn't that he had gotten tired or that fourteen years of unconditional love had made his bones weary.

They had gotten married the day after they graduated, already planning for a life that they wouldn't get to have. He was going to serve in the military like his father had and she was going to stay home to go to school. When she graduated, they would buy a house on the corner with a fence and have a big family. He just never made it home.

"Maybe someone up there needed him," she whispered, a single tear sliding down her cheek. "But, baby, sometimes love is too strong for it to last forever."

Her father, he had been his best friend, the best man at their wedding even. "You're father took care of me," she whispered. "We had both buried someone we loved that day. It wasn't too long after that we had you."

That boy she thought would be her only love graduated from high school a few months later and she never spoke to him. Not that she really cared, there was a new tattoo taking form just above the line of her jeans. A fish made up of intricate lines and bright colors. And this time, her flower was on the hand of the man she had fallen so hard for. It was a whirlwind, all of it moving so quickly it made her head spin.

When it all came crashing down, Aria found herself in her bathroom with tears spilling down her cheeks and bile rising in her throat. When she had composed herself enough, she sat with her back against the wall and a broken razor in hand. With a delicate hand, she did her best to maim the fish that

reminded her of the boy who had stolen her heart. When she woke up in a hospital bed, all that it left her with was a nasty scar and a mangled fish, the bright colors still haunting her.

His fingers danced along the lines of the tattoo that sliced through her pale skin. He couldn't help it really, it was just another excuse to touch her. Another reason to feel that static when his flesh touched hers. He felt her shiver beneath his touch, the goosebumps rising on her skin and the shakiness of her breath, tell-tale signs that she felt it too. He watched her twist their engagement ring around her finger and nibble on the inside of her lip as she always

did when she thought. She didn't talk about the boys that had filled her heart before he had, but he was sure there was a tale of heartbreak behind each tattoo.

Years later, her own daughter would ask about the big wolf on her collarbone and the fish that still burned if she touched it . . . And just like her mother had, she wrote it off with distance glazing over her eyes. "When you're older . . . I'll tell you." When she was older, nursing a heartbreak of her own, Aria held her daughter in the way her mother had when she felt the taste of lost love.

"My first love had blue eyes," she smiles

sadly. "Those eyes were some of the kindest, yet iciest eyes I've ever seen. They were magical when the sun hit them. I fell in love with his eyes and the adventure that was held in them."

And just like that, the wolf began to hunt and the fish began to swim as the story behind each mark took shape and the boys who put them there came to life before them. Love, she told her daughter, takes all kinds of forms, but the best kinds are the ones that have no explanation at all.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"If we could explain love," Aria smiled, "it wouldn't be as rare as it is."

DEAR ME: 1 YEAR AGO

by Emme Mackenzie

Dear Me,

You lose in the end.

In the end, you cry for 6 months and spend sleepless nights wondering why you weren't enough. In the end, your bedsheets become tissues for your tears and your pillow becomes a microphone.

Sadness will shake the walls of your room.

The volume is turned all the way up.

Your favorites songs will be ruined forever because now they're not just your favorites.

You have to share them. It's going to hurt, but it gets better.

Your tears will water the vines rooting you to the ground.

They will grow flowers out of your misery.

Let them watch as you bloom during the rainiest days.

You learn to love yourself, before loving someone else and that is the most important thing.

You will be happy and full of life again.

After all, here I am.

Do not become the person who broke you.

Sincerely,

Emme



DEVILED EGGS

by Anonymous

They hold the spirit of Christmas, the Thanksgiving meal, the laughter, the family cheer, and the lost ones that we held near. Every single Christmas, Thanksgiving, and family get together, my grandmother concocted the most delicious deviled eggs. They were always the first things to go; they were the family favorite.

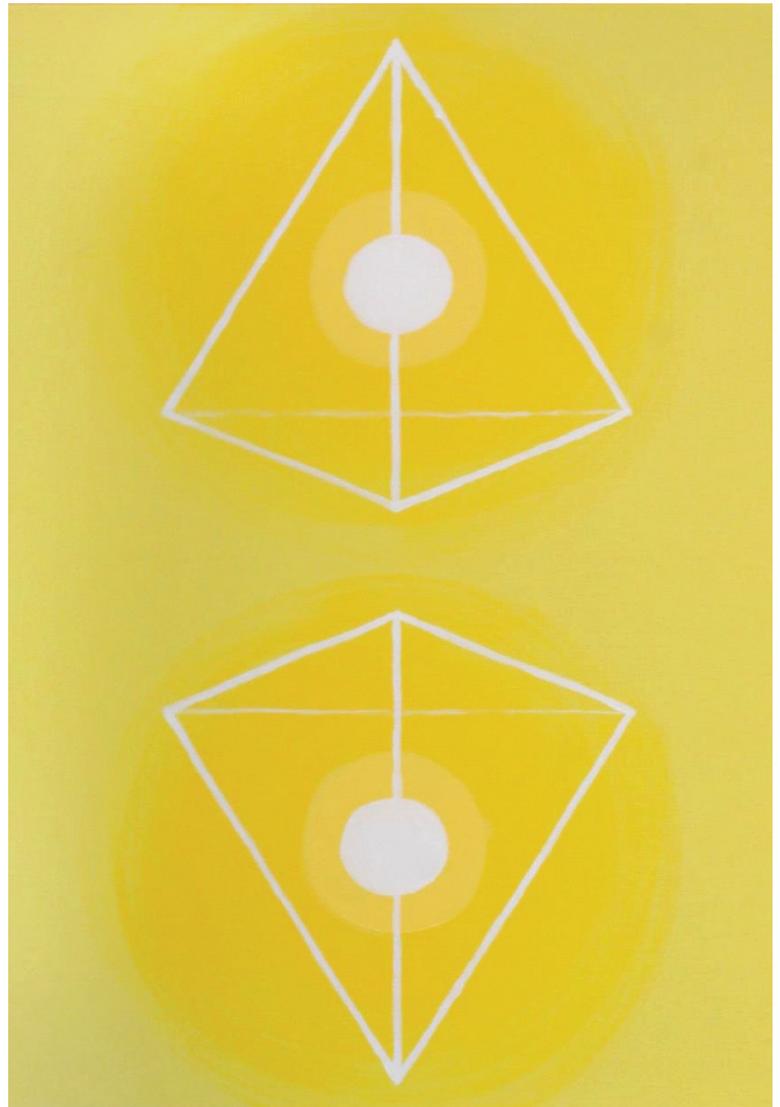
The white of the egg resembled her pure smile, pure joy. The yellow of the yoke was her laugh, her happiness. The red paprika sprinkled on top was her love. I wonder if we loved the deviled eggs, or if we just loved them simply because we loved her.

The mother of ten had the recipe passed down from her mother, and the line continued. She passed it down to my mother. When she passed away, the deviled eggs stayed. We still experience her pure smile, pure joy, her laugh, her happiness, and her love. My mother brings those same deviled eggs to Christmas, Thanksgiving, and family functions in remembrance.

They are still the first things to go; they will always be the family favorite. They still resemble my wonderful grandmother. But now, as my mother makes them, they encompass her in them too.

The white of the egg is her teeth, the same style as my grandmother's. The yellow of the yoke is her warmth. The red paprika garnished on top is her heart of compassion. The wonder has still never left my mind, if we love the deviled eggs, or if we simply love my mother.

I wonder what the deviled eggs will be when I make them.



Fire by Clayton Phillips

ODE TO GREEN TWIST TIES

by Audrey Beckman

At the grocery store
In the days of our youth
The green twist ties were the best part.

So easily entertained were we
With these simple pliable toys
Laughing and forming new shapes.

One minute it was a ring of gold
The next it was a spiraled coin of old
All the things that it could be
Even though
It was only
A twist tie.



Reminiscent of Childhood Wonder by Cassie Wang

DELT SHOP BLUES

by Caleb Bishop

clouds
pink and blue smears
go over my head
like the moon
or calculus.
i long to float up there
where i could eat eclipse and crackers
and differentiate my thoughts.

don't you find it odd
that, sometimes, in order to answer a question
you need the opposite of the thing itself?

i am my own reciprocal.
i hate liars
but i hardly ever come out from beneath
my own silver tongue
or my solidified sadness.
even my body is my own mind's conjugate
but the limit
as i approach everything i know
from the side that loves and the side that loathes
is ultimately me
staring through this restaurant window.

my breath steams the glass
and i miss the final moments of sunset.
"get off there," my mother says
"it's full of germs."

Egypt by Kahill Perkins

BOUNTY BRAND PAPER TOWELS

by Abbey Roschak

Bounty brand paper towels; you know it by name
"The quick picker upper", thirst pockets
Outnumbering the leading brands not only in price
But in absorbency
Who would have thought that a simple household object
Could be comparable to humanly functions?
You see, I am quite absorbent myself
Believe everything I am told, that I hear
Even everything I say
Soak it all in through my fingertips, my skin
My veins, my bones, like a sponge
Make sure it gives me a chill, a rush
Even a little burn
But sometimes my absorbency wreaks havoc
On my outer shell, my soul
I, too, get crumpled and tossed to the side
Wasting away when I was once so strong
So reliable, so bounty brand paper towels
There's only a limited amount of absorbency per sheet
That your apologies can live off of
Not only am I cleaning the same mess
But I am repeating the process of being
Re-used, re-deceived into thinking
That maybe, you'd get a stronger sheet
And clean your own mess



WHAT MADE ME WHO I AM

by Kyle Huffaker



I get part of her one day.
And a part of her the next.
I rarely see the same side twice.
But I don't blame her,
Because she is dying inside.

Cancer is ludicrous.
But has blessed my life.
It defines my character.
And has made me who I am.

Cancer has taught me lessons.
Of attitude and helpfulness.
It has brought me tears and smiles.
It is not easy.
But luckily,
My mother's soft loving face still greets me,
And she has made me who I am.

Cancer is a like balloon.
On a cool November afternoon.
It keeps everything inside.
It floats around miserably.
Until the sun comes up to warm its soul.
Or it shrivels up and is lost.

Through these trials.
I have become a man.
I have done what I can.
She is my everything.
I am not giving up.
Because she has made me,
Who I am.

What Have You Been Told by Maxwell Reber

50% Polish, 50% Russian
I thought.
It all changed in Rehovot.
I flipped through the book.
The dining table crowded with voices.
"Tracing our roots" He said
Turning the page.
The faces of those like me
gazed up from the page.

50/50

by Elie Simon

Aunts, uncles, cousins,
relatives I've never seen.
"We visited the shtetl they lived in, in Ukraine"
Ukraine?
"No, no. Our family is from Russia."
The village they lived in was Russian,
at the time it was Russia
Today Ukraine
So where am I from?

GRAVITY

by Katherine Ellis

I sit on the roof of the building, my legs dangling off the edge. It would be so easy to just lean forward a bit. To finally be free from my life. I consider the idea for a moment, and almost decide to do it and take my freedom, when I hear footsteps behind me.

"Aren't you cold?" a voice asks me from behind. It's a male voice, and it's very familiar.

"No," I say quietly, although the goosebumps scattered across my arms make it a pretty clear lie. I hear a shuffling noise behind me, and suddenly a jacket is draped over my shoulders. I don't look back though, to see the person who's supposedly going to save my life. No one's talking me out of this. I've waited so long to be free, and now that I finally have the opportunity, no one is going to take it away from me.

I hear more shuffling, and suddenly someone is sitting next to me. I look over and see a boy, a very cute and fit boy, sitting next to me. He's 18 years old, just a year older than me. His brown, slightly messy hair, which is probably due to the fact that it's almost two in the morning, frames his handsome face. His soft, chocolate brown eyes stare out at the stars, and it's clear that he's thinking. Of all the people that I expected to try and stop me, Carter Mathews was not one of them.

"How did you know I would be here?" I ask quietly, wondering what was going to happen next. I could always just throw myself off. It's not like he's going to be able to grab me in time to stop me.

"Your window was closed," He replied quietly, not shifting his gaze from the stars.

"What?" My voice is quiet, barely audible.

"You always leave your window open when you're home, but you always close it when you're not."

"But how did you know I'd be here?"

"Where else would you go," he replies quietly, his voice barely above a whisper. We sit together for a little longer before he speaks again.

"I know we're not really that close anymore, but you can always talk to me. I'm the only person who actually understands what you're going through."

This hits a nerve. He knows not to mention what happened. He knows not to mention her. I don't care if he was her brother, he has no idea what I'm going through. It's not

know how to deal with it without her. I don't know what to do. I'm scared, lost, and alone, and no matter how many times you tell me that you'll be there for me, I know that you'll never understand. Not like she did," I reply, breaking down. I start to sob, and Carter pulls me to him, letting me bury my face into his chest.

"Lauren, please tell me, what's going on?" he asks quietly, holding me tightly. I don't reply.

"It's not just Elizabeth is it? Losing your best friend might be part of it, but there's more, isn't there? I'm so sorry I didn't see it before. Please just tell me what's wrong Laur. I want to help you. I really do," he pleads. I just shake my head and pull myself out of his grasp, wiping away my tears.

"I don't want to talk about it. I don't need help. Please just leave me alone Carter," I whisper, looking away from him. I don't want to see his eyes.

"At least let me walk you home. I don't want you to make any bad decisions," he replies.

"Fine, but after that, I want you to stay away from me," I say quietly, looking over at him to see his reaction. He looks hurt, but quickly covers it up with a smile as he carefully stands up, and offers me his hand. I take it, and he pulls me up, gripping my hand tightly. We walk down the eight flights of stairs, and out the front door of the building. The whole time his hand is clutching mine, as if to make sure that I don't run away.



just her either. He doesn't know. He'll never know.

"Lauren, I know you guys were closer than her and I ever were, but I lost her too, and I want to help. I really do. This isn't the answer. Lizzie wouldn't have wanted this. She would've wanted you to stay strong and keep fighting," he says carefully, trying his best to not anger me. It doesn't work though, and I feel fury course through my veins.

"I didn't just lose her, I lost a piece of myself. We were always with each other, we were always there for each other, and now something's happening to me and I don't

After about twenty-five minutes of walking we're standing outside of my house. Carter lets go of my hand, and I walk over towards the tree in my yard. I pull myself up into the tree, and climb up until I'm right outside my window, which is on the second floor. I gently open the window, not making any noise, and look back. Carter is still standing on the sidewalk, watching me. He smiles slightly, although it looks more like a grimace, and I smile back, and slip through the window, leaving it open.

BY ANY OTHER NAME

by Breaunna Dowdy

Names. Titles given to us at birth by someone with no idea of who we are or what we'll become, they are iron-clad chains bound to our lifetimes by those who want us to be something great. We do not all fit our names and we do not all fit in those boxes; a name is always just a name.

Mine is a derivative of a word meaning 'hill,' transferring through language barriers to mean someone 'high' and 'mighty,' to mean someone noble. But I don't fit into this box.

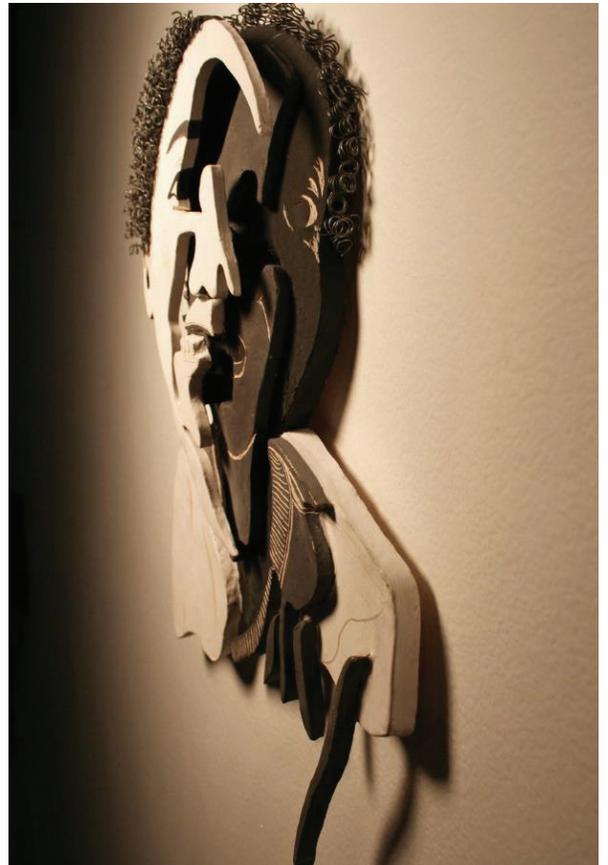
It's a name my mother picked because it was easiest to make intricate, to make unique; a name my father agreed to because it was better than Savannah. It's a gift to me that I didn't ask for, a present better suited to someone else. It's a reprieve from the nameless ten months I lay incubated in my mother's stomach. It was decided last minute when they looked at me and instantly "knew."

I have never had that feeling. I would always rather be a Sage, a Dahlia, Isadora, or an Alice. A name that fits the box that I created for it. I want a name given backwards. I want to live in a title that's the perfect size of my personality, characterizing my tendencies and dreams, passions and favorites. I want a few syllables to describe my favorite civilizations in history.

I don't want to look in the mirror and see a name that I've never truly coined as my own and I don't want to live with a preordained idea of who I am written on my gravestone. I want to see the Aztecs in my reflection on lake water, the quiet war of words on paper in windows as I pass by, the thin jar I use to clean out my paintbrushes on a line at the top of my pages.

In the end, I guess that a name is just a name. Breaunna is to me just as Savannah is, just as Sage is. Because no matter the signature, I will still want to be an artist, and my favorite songs will still be the same, and I will always live every day of my life showing people that I will never be bound by anything. Especially a name.

After all, it is said that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. But I guess I'm not much of a Juliet, either.



Emilie by Cassie Wang

JUST LIKE MY DAD SAID IT WOULD

by MJ Ferguson

Once I was through the door, I dashed down the stairs to my room, flinging myself onto my bed, sobbing. I felt so stupid, so klutzy, so worthless. Questions flooded my mind. Who am I? Am I really Amy? Or am I someone else? I didn't know anymore.

Knock-knock-knock.

"Go away!"

"Can I come in, Amy?" Dad said through the door.

"No, go away!" I cried, causing myself to sob even harder.

"I'm coming in, sweetie," he said before entering the room, then sitting down next to me on the bed.

"Go away!" I quickly sat up and whacked my dad with my pillow. "Go away!"

The pillow was suddenly taken out of my hands and my dad's arms were wrapped around me, one hand patting my back.

"Go away," I cried, my last attempt, before melting and just letting him comfort me while I soaked the shoulder of his shirt with tears.

When I finally started to calm, my dad asked, "What's wrong, Amy?"

I sniffled, trying to think of a way to avoid answering the question. He waited patiently, and when no plan of deflection came, I answered, "I . . . had a rough day today."

"Why was it a rough day?"

I wish he hadn't asked me to elaborate, that he'd just said "I hope you feel better" and left. Why did he even care anyway? Who would want someone like me?

"I'm just tired. I'm fine, really." I hoped he'd

leave it at that. It wasn't a complete lie, but it wasn't the answer to his question.

"Are you sure?"

I hated how his question clawed at my conscious, trying to guilt me into answering. I hated how safe it felt, that I could answer and it would make things better. But what if he saw who I really was and didn't want anything to do with me?

"No." I spoke before I could take it back, hoping he hadn't heard what I said.

"Then what happened?" He rubbed my back in circles, making everything feel even more safe and comforting. "You can tell me

my mouth before I could process them.

"They say things like 'that was a stupid mistake' and 'why do you have to trip over everything' and 'it's no wonder you don't have many other friends'. And I know they're just kidding, but . . ."

"But it still hurts," Dad finished for me, making me feel both worse and relieved at the same time.

All I could do was nod, my words failing me like before.

"Are you sure these people are actually your friends?" He asked.

The question startled me. How could he accuse my friends of not being my friends? They were just kidding, right? What they said was just nothing, right?

"Yeah," I replied tentatively.

"If they were, why would they say things like that about you?"

I hated the question. Are they really my friends? If I answered yes, then it felt like it was true that I really was a nothing and they were being honest. If I answered no, then it meant there was no else one

who wanted to be my friend, which still left me feeling like a nothing. Either way, the answer hurt.

"Maybe because I really am a stupid, worthless nothing." The horrible truth broke loose once again. Why couldn't I control the words? They seemed to have a mind of their own and hated me as much as I hated myself.

"No you're not," he replied firmly, "You are not a nothing."

"Yes I am," I protested, knowing deep down how true those words felt.

"No, you're not." I suddenly shoved away from his embrace, not wanting to hear those words anymore.



Windows of the Soul by Margaret Breidenbach

anything, sweetie. It's okay."

"I know they're just joking around, but..." I couldn't finish the statement, a few tears trailing down my face.

"Who is?"

The question floated through the air, the answer so simple yet so hard to answer.

"My friends." The statement was barely a whisper, but somehow Dad was able to hear it.

"What do they 'joke around' about?" The comforting warmth from his voice unleashed all of my emotions from my inner prison, allowing a fresh wave of tears to take over the small drips from before. I was astonished that this almost infinite supply of tears could come from one human being. The freed emotions turned into words, pouring out of

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CONTINUED . . .

"What am I then?" I yelled at him, turning away to avoid looking into his face. A thick, pressing silence filled the room. I heard Dad get up and leave the room. "That's what I thought," I whispered into the empty air, pulling my comforter around me as hate, sorrow, emptiness, and loneliness wormed their way through my defenseless conscious, soaking up every last bit of energy in my body. I barely noticed Dad walk back into the room and sit next to me again as every feeling turned into a numb nothingness, unaware of time, thoughts, and reality. I felt exactly as I was: nothing.

Something gently shook my side, pulling me back to the present, and something was pressed into my hand. Dad said something, but I was concentrating so hard on making myself small, I couldn't discern what was being said and then he left, leaving me alone again. I felt no energy or desire to look at whatever was in my hand, but a strange curiosity filled me. I moved my fingers, feeling the something smooth and crinkly. I lifted it and saw a piece of plain paper, as white as glaring snow. It seemed to both hate me and welcome me. I let my eyes wander to the words on the page.

Dear Amy,

I know it seems like the whole world is telling you that you aren't worth the space you reserve as your own, so I thought I'd write down some of the things I know that are true about who you are, whether you realize it or not.

You are . . .

Loving, kind, caring, friendly, shy, responsible, hardworking, trustworthy, intelligent, peacemaker, humorous, honest, and willing to help others.

An older sister, a friend, a daughter, a student, a peer, a beloved babysitter, a Subway employee, and a clarinetist.

Good at ceramics, an excellent cook, a movie watcher, a board/card game player, a reader, and a crafter.

Beautiful and perfect just the way you are.

I hope you keep this for whenever you feel down again so you are reminded that you are not nothing. You are many wonderful things and if others can't see that, then they are to blame, not you. I love you very, very much.

Love, Dad

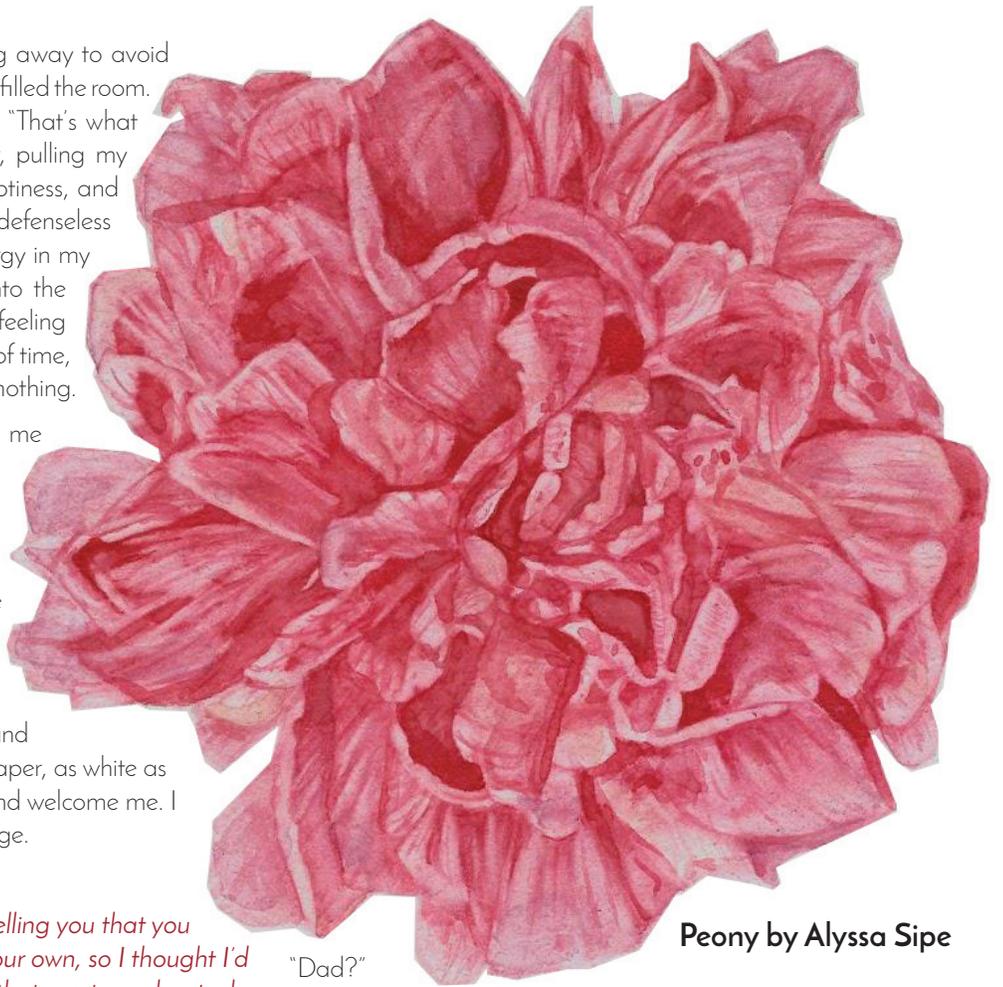
I didn't know what to think.

Could I believe this?

Was it actually true?

What if it was made up just to make me feel better?

I couldn't comprehend it. The only thing I could think to do was to ask my Dad about it, even if I didn't like his answer. So I forced myself out of bed and trudged up the stairs, where I found him chopping vegetables for dinner.



Peony by Alyssa Sipe

"Dad?"

"Yes?" He turned towards me, wiping his hands off on a towel. I hesitated, despising the question I had to ask. I held up the paper loosely in my hands, wishing to destroy it but not having the willpower to do so.

"Is any of this true?" My whisper seeped into the room.

"Yes," Dad responded, his eyebrows scrunched together, his eyes filling with tears. "Every. Single. One."

Warmth filled some of the cracks and emptiness, causing tears to once again sting my eyes. I hugged my dad, letting myself sink into his safety, clinging to the letter as if just holding it would make the words true. It felt so weird to feel like something to someone, like I mattered. It was such an uplifting and soothing feeling.

"Dad, I love you." The words felt so foreign and natural as I said them, truly meaning what I said.

"I love you, too, sweetheart." His heartfelt words melted any lingering emptiness hiding within me. He patted my back, then pulled back to hand me some carrots. "Now, how about you help your old man by chopping those up?"

I pulled out a cutting board and knife, then began the simple task as we started to talk about options for what I could do next. While we talked, I promised myself that I would keep his letter, always there as a reminder of who really I am.

Just like my dad said it would.

ELEGY

by Holly Murfey

There was a time when innocence meant nothing to me.
She was a veil over the childhood I had
And took for granted,
And when she was stripped I wanted her back.
She was pillaged in the basement
of an old friend's house.
She lay shattered on the sheets
Debased and gone for good,
Surrounded by people who said they were her friends.
I try to speak to her ghost,
But she doesn't answer.
Maybe she is in another young girl's heart,
A girl who will protect her and keep her from harm.
And maybe she will come back someday
And say a proper goodbye,
And I will wave this time instead of cry.
She looks so beautiful dressed in all white
Wiped clean of the blood she drained that night.
And she will forgive me for having been so foolish
And I will carry on, just with her gone.



Bad Barbie by Sean Overton

APHRODITE DEFILED

by Farah Dianputri

I didn't ask for your
insecurities
Or your hands
To venerate me.

Shut up
Hold back that
writhing worm
you cage
behind your teeth
Any closer
And I'd bite it off.
Then, watch
scarlet bloom
in the cavity
And melt into
the cracks of those
broken lips
But I didn't.

I allowed flattery
To stream out instead.
"Goddess," one night
you hiss and I think of
flab folding in furrows
cotton candy complexions
Stretched out on the
canvases of old masters.

you may evoke
Venus, nymph,
odalisque,
or any other excuse
in sophisticated guise.
Your diction was crass,
Sycophantic.
So was your
technique.

I am not your altarpiece.

REUNION

by Magda Werkmeister

oh my gosh what song is this
oh my god is it that song
that song i first heard
god it must have been the summer before middle school
listen to those horns
it must have been npr's all songs considered
i always forget about this song finding it again is such a pleasant surprise
gosh that was years ago
i'm a sophomore in high school
junior
junior in high school now
god i'm nostalgic
can you be nostalgic at my age
you must be this old to ride the roller coaster of sentimentality
back in my day amusement park tickets were five cents
back in my day you could ride as many times as you wanted
ha
i remember staying up until midnight
syrupy sounds oozing from headphones
2007 ipod classic
nose inches away from prickly white ceiling
i scribbled my name on that ceiling
magda werkmeister's bedroom
red ink
i thought someone would care one day
another little girl maybe
wow that's amazing this was magda werkmeister's bedroom
i didn't think about how bedroom ceilings can be painted over
or how most people fade away unnoticed
i didn't understand this song then
i liked it a lot though
i think i understand now
i think
i understand
the desperation in his voice
the insecurity
the almost manic energy
god i'm halfway through high school
what do i have to show for it
what am i doing
god i want this song to wrap me up in its arms and take me away
back to that warm red mouth of a room
when i knew who i was
and who i would be
so many hopes
so many regrets
isn't it funny how even at 15 you can feel both 10 and 50



STRANGER

by Chris Wernimont

Last week I found my friend's fake IDs
One from Towson, Maryland, where she is 23
One from an address in Scottsdale, Arizona
Each card different, each with a new persona

In one, she is 6'3" and has eyes of blue
In another, she's 5'2" and has a face tattoo
The one from Washington says she is an organ donor
But she has no heart, and if she does it's a misnomer

Despite all the lies, one thing was consistent
Each one has the same picture, but each person is different
She uses them to cheat her identity
But which cold, plastic card is she?
Is it the one where she lives at the address next to mine,
Sitting in the kitchen, just passing time?

I took a step back, seeing pictures but not a person
Who is this, which one, what version?
I looked at her, just as counterfeit and fabricated as her IDs
A stranger

RED HEELS

by Claire Hutchinson

when you click your heels and wish for home, where exactly is it that you go? i packed away all my ambition in manila envelopes of faded dreams and sent them away to coral reefs so schools of fish a generation after me could learn from my mistakes. start saving for college when you're six, a year for every digit, because if you want a higher education then you can't afford the things that make you happy. (maybe that's why nemo's dad didn't want him to go to school.) sew your stories into the patchwork quilt of your backpack slung across your shoulders and never trust someone that you can't touch with the tips of your eyelashes.

(start wearing mascara so that you can pretend that everyone you love is close enough.)

when you look up at the stars at night, tuck them into your lint-lined backpack pockets and keep the stardust there like secrets. (no one ever keeps secrets.) sprinkle those stars onto your shoes and hope that pixie dust flies you faster than Southwest or Spirit airlines. mailboxes don't go in reverse, so everything that you've sent away doesn't tend to come right back without being stamped in red. NO ONE LIVES THERE. ADDRESS NOT REAL. SANTA DIED IN THE SECOND GRADE. nemo, go home. nemo, go home.

(cross my heart and hope to die for i have lived a thousand lives each covered by a constellation that dot-dot-dots me right back to the deepest shades of blue. how different are astronomers from oceanographers anyway? we're all searching for things that everyone else is scared of finding. we're all searching for things that don't exist but have to.)

destination: still figuring it out. destination: a desert built from a river that ran out a long time ago, from everyone that ran out a long time ago, a delta of broken dreams peppered with sandcastles of stories that never saw completion. destination: roswell, because i've always loved road trips and maybe UFOs will be more comfortable than the backseat of my corolla.

destination: home. maybe these heels will figure out what that means by the time i've finished counting: one (home), two (home), three —

(home).



Girl Power by Courtney Stallard

The Allegory of I
by Maxwell Reber



REVAMPED BELIEFS

by Alice Kogo

if I am to believe in anything,
i believe in the stars.
i believe in the glint the moon gives through a car door window.
i believe in the scattered freckles of lanterns in the sky,
eternally held in place until you
blink and they shift ever so slightly
in pursuit of the moon.
i believe in my mother.
i believe in the womb i was born from.
the umbilical cord.
SNAP the string snapping which once tied us together into one being until i'd begin bawling,
bawling,
bawlin,
ballin,
no, not ballin on the basketball court but bawling for the love found in a mother's womb which until
seven in the afternoon had been extracted from my pre-life but before post-death state.
for the familiar.
for a mother's touch, an embrace, anything close to what i had known for the entire past nine months
i'd spent as a leech clutching her for support.
for life.
for my existence, and now
for a comfort amidst the fact that a black body in a white world cannot exist peacefully but will burn,
but will be angry and what's left is believing, believing.
believing in my father.
believing in the bottom of beer bottles which slowly, oh so slowly turned into wine.
believe in the late nights spent at a cousin's house because, a "oh no, we have to wait for them to finish."
believe in the way he used to be and the way he changed and the way it's hard.
believe in how long it took to
forget, to
remember, to
forget,

remember, forgive and clutch and hold on to that forgiveness and believe in the power of humanity and
remember it and look for brighter days.

younger days when you would be on his shoulders and he'd call you dear and baba and chepkogei and
anything other than the names everyone else used to mutter to you as passing greeting
because what is on my birth certificate is only legal and not as binding as the memories clinging to my
heart each day.

to believing in uncles who called me uncle in an accent, to a man who'd travel around the world with
two kids in kenya and one in the us and still have enough time to bring his favorite niece back a present,
a purse, a baby doll.

i believe in the gift of laughter that erupts from my uncles mouth as he sticks his tongue out (something
my little sister is keen to mention these days) and i believe in my inability to hate him
no matter what demons were brought into my father's life because everything has a meaning, and
every moment has a reason, and
one individual, one brother alone cannot ruin another's life.

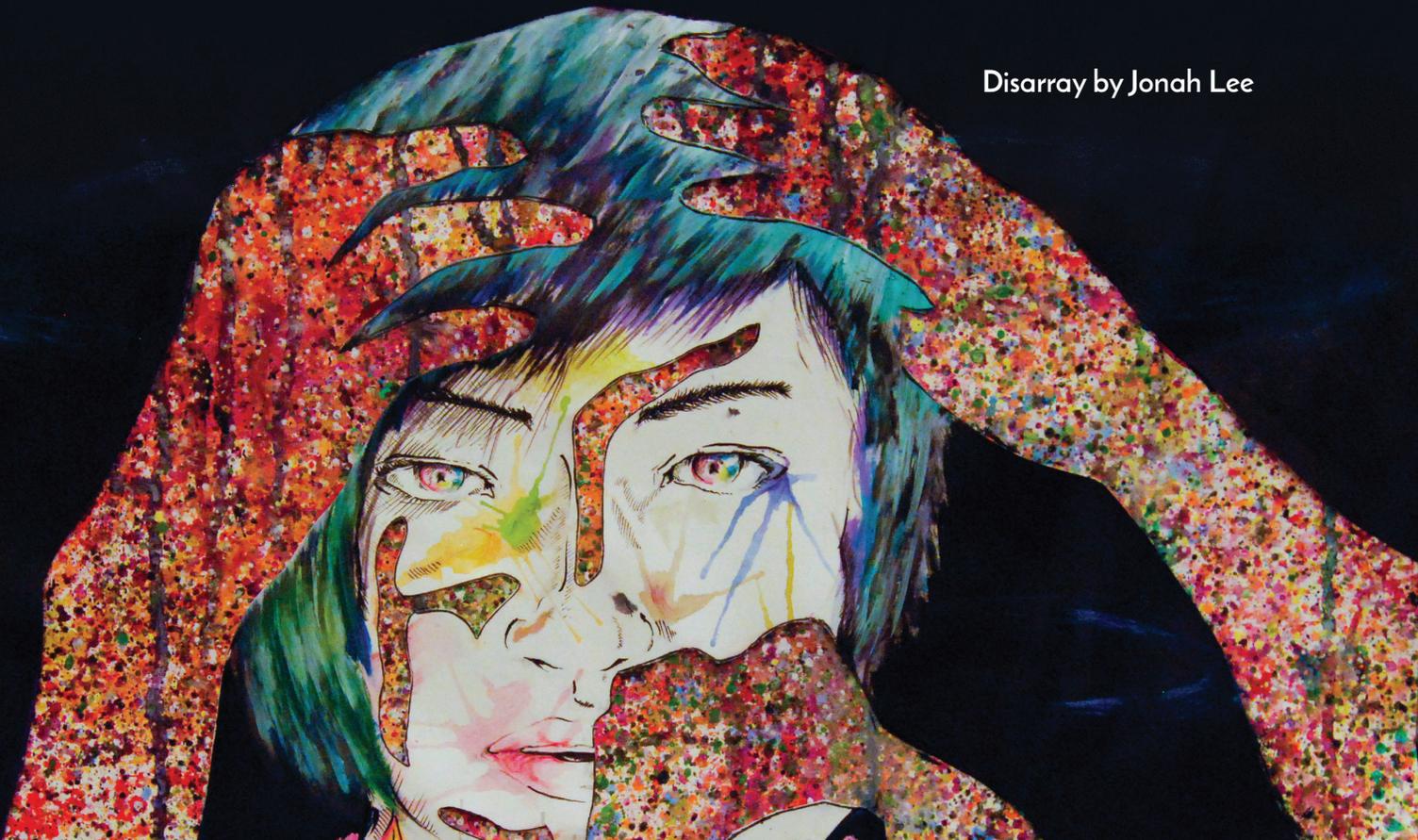
and yet we keep on turning and turning page after page in this novel, life, and i can't stop
believing in the power of a religion to cast away it's undesirables.
emboldened in fear, milked by the patriarchy, black, womyn, gay, what is left to save if my pieces
haven't been won over?

how centuries ago, weapon of destruction, now the same with a beautiful face
i believe in the ability to make myself uncomfortable by denouncing the book that nurtured me with
falsehoods.

i believe in my brother who i looked at up and down, and
labeled "better than me", and
remove the words, destroying my perception, in case he believes that he lives in my shadow.
i believe in him.

i believe in my sister who a decade younger than me, who is yet to grow and unlikely to face every last
one of my struggles, but who will grow with my nose and my body and my skin, the dark pigmentation
which casts us as african and i believe in her ability to succeed
i believe in the stars because they were once my only friends, and
now that there is more than one light in my life,
believing is the platform
upon which i voice the echos of my dreams.

Disarray by Jonah Lee



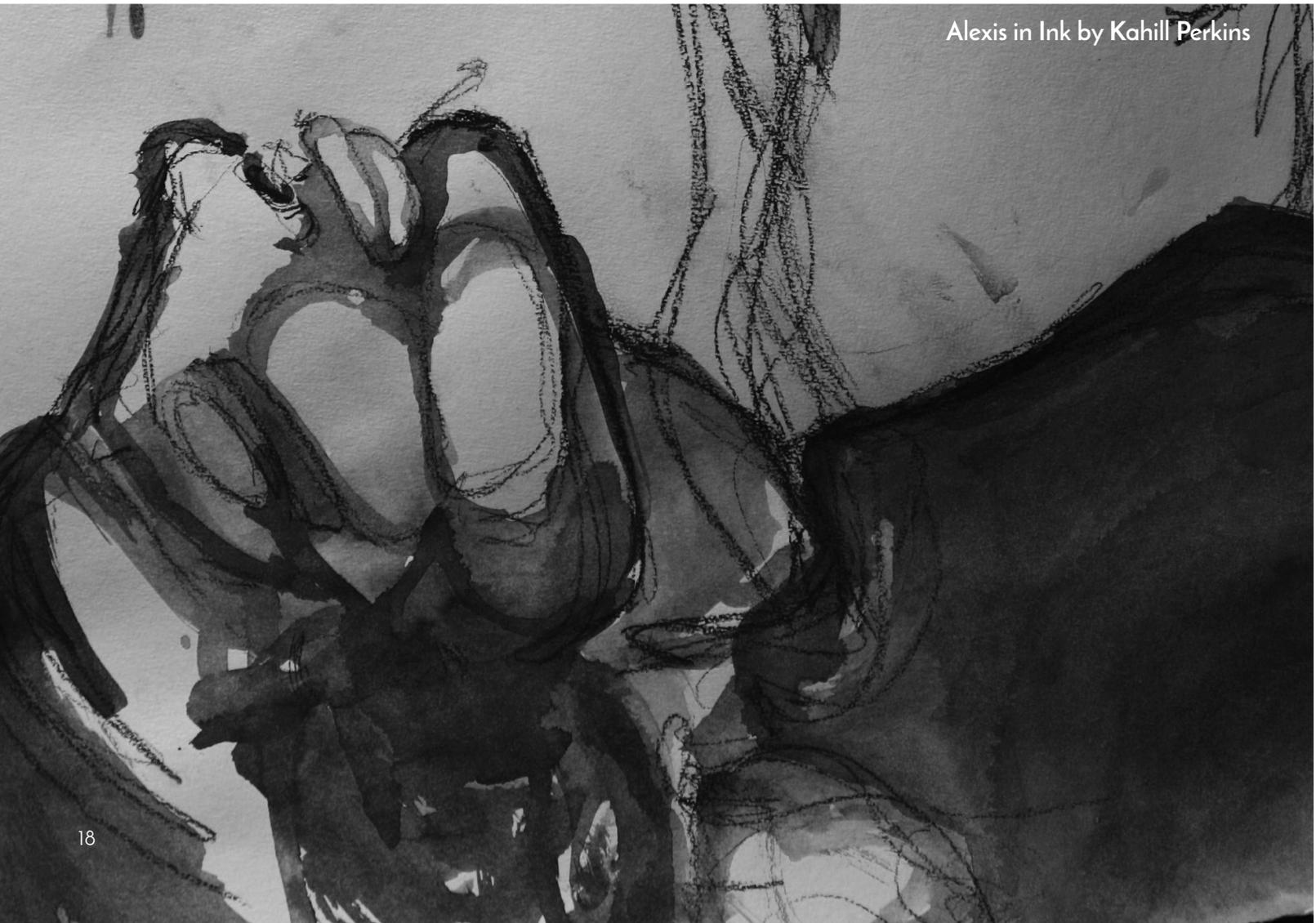
DRAMATMON

by Holly Murfey

I fall deeper and deeper with
Every scathing second.
My eyes are wide open now
And I realize that this is not a dream.
She turns inside me,
Her tiny foot skids the wall of my stomach.
I don't know how she is a girl,
But she is.
And I choose a name after it is too late.
And I kill the time along with her
Because I am a fool
Who would prefer to drown beneath the blue sheets
And stare up at the moon
Than have my child and watch her bloom.
I can't go back now and I hope to God,
That there is a Heaven for babies who don't get born,
Even though I don't believe in God or Heaven

Maybe she does
And maybe then they'll have a place set aside for her,
Better than the home of her poor mother.
And maybe they'll teach her why I did it,
Because if God is so merciful,
Then he'll take care of her when I didn't.
And the moon looks even whiter now,
As pure as my love who deserves so much better,
Than to be the aftershock of a susceptible mistake.
I thought I was dreaming but I never woke up.
My eyes stayed open,
Staring at the moon that I wish she got to see.
The water blurs my vision until I have to close them.

Alexis in Ink by Kahill Perkins



A MOTHER'S LOVE

by Anonymous

I loved you
And you loved me
Many nights we stayed awake together
Holding you close
Every time singing
Rhymes of geese and shoes
Every night

I held your hand
And crouched low
My eyes meeting yours
Seeing your lies
Evoking your tears
Explaining your fault
I still love you
Never will you stray
Going by what you say

I wave
And you walk in
My smile showing pride
Pondering you
Reflecting on your years
Only able to smile
Under which I cry
Daring to go back in time

I walked into the office
And held your wrist tightly
My finger pointing
At the bruise,
Welts that formed on your back
And scratches from other's tiny nails
Rushing to find justice
Eventually we just moved instead

I sat alone
And waited for you
My eyes always going back to the door
Searching for you
Counting the minutes
And fearing for you
Reasoning you just lost the time
Evening outings were new to you
Dawn was when you came home

I cheered at the sound of your name
And clapped
My eyes never moving from you
As you walked to the stage
Looking up at me you smiled
On your own you soon left
Needing to keep going
Education in another state was yours

I sat in the office
And you held my hand
My smile showed fake confidence
Lumps are just lumps
Everything was fine
Is what you told me
Vying for comfort yourself
I see the doctor
No smile on his face
Gently he spoke

I lay here
And you sit with me
My energy fading
Goodbye, my baby
Only my love remains
Never shall it leave
Even as I do

I watched you leave
My hand clutching yours
In an instant you left
Still clutching my fingers
Smiling still
Your eyes closed
Often I saw your smile
Until now I never cried at it

I clutched the rail
Casket heavy on my shoulder
And fingers numb with cold
Resting after putting you in
Reaching the end of the stairs
Young eyes watch me
Your granddaughter
Only able to stare
Understanding would come in age

I visited you today
Looking down at the stone
Overhead the sun shined
Visiting you was hard
Each time got easier though
You gave me life
On this day, you received yours
United we still are





Forward by Maxwell Reber

ICONIC NARCOTIC

by Anton Caruso

iconic narcotic, cut it with a straight edge, that's ironic, feelings are chronic, brought without logic, she broke in with a lock pick, to purify the toxic, joint sockets, fill his deep pockets, talk to him, but change the topic

sporadically lethargic, emotionally allergic, is he artistic or autistic, puzzling simplicit, awkwardly explicit, he's mad, he's livid, watercolor skin contains his mind's limits

he's got half a lung, half of half a lung, yellowed teeth with bleeding gums, coffee stained ivory picked by twitching thumbs, he's just a kid with a gun, he kids just for fun, he's a kid just for fun

he's sleep deprived, the dead hour arrived, right on time, but he feels alive, he's exhausted yet he thrives, he kills brain cells to kill time, he turns on the tv and hears

black lives black lives, gold badges and black ties, news reporters with cat eyes, red faces telling white lies, white wine and bleach blonde orange county housewives, he just sighs and turns it off, he turns over and turns off

His message subliminal, his movements are minimal, rotting millennial, plastic surgeon general, says he's feral, he's illiterate, he's sterile, he's ignorant

he has chewed fingertips, fingertips ripping away at dead skin lips, synthesized loops played over teasing hips, he has a final night list, a euthanizing wish

she's hooked to an iv drip, she's hooked on a blank face, her mind is a fever, she always talks about getting her own place, she always talks about how she needs space, she always talks about how the fun is in the chase, she always talks,

she's bittersweet like a found dog poster, she leaves her mark wherever she goes, so she brings a coaster, she just coasts, she just coasts through her life, she's a roller coaster, she's alive in the night, ever since she broke up with the sun, ever since she left the kid with the gun

CRUELTY IS MY GOD

by Anonymous

The day Reason was guillotined
in the kingdom known as my mind,
his head flung into the murky sea of oblivion,
Cruelty became my god.

He has made me invincible, fortifying my soul
against sense and my heart against tenderness.
Judgment was exiled, and with an iron fist
he crushed my eyes so I lost sight of love.

But how he made my blood boil! How he
whipped my soul into such a pure, raging ecstasy!
The sheer pleasure of cruelty, where all the world
seems so ripe and ready to give way

Under my unrelenting hands! The sweet sensation
of flesh crushing under flesh; the shivering of an upper lip;
the burst of tears and a bloodied mouth like fireworks, accompanied
by the high violin climax of a scream . . .

But what I revel in most of all is a kind of precious pearl
sitting amongst its battered, rotting shell; the treasure
that my god most desires is the single, silent moment,
indiscernible, indescribable, unmistakable, of the breaking

of a heart. When the squirming, cramping red mass
bursts open under a torrent of arrows sent forth by my words;
when tear-drenched eyes give off that most pitiful,
helpless light of loss that simply says "Why?" These moments

send me into such a state of wonder and delight
that I drop down to my knees and break my skull
upon Cruelty's marble temple floor in supplication
to my god.

The unwiring of sinews, the pleading tears, the tears . . .

. . . are my own.



MORE BLEACH, MORE PROBLEMS

by Hailey Alexander

Bleach blonde braids
fall across my shoulders
as caramel curls caress my cheeks
all for the low, low price
of my life's savings
and a bottle of bleach

The weight of the foils
lies steady against the coils
stripping the strands of their pigment,
removing cool tones of chocolate
to assert the perverse notion
that blonds have more fun.

These fraying strands symbolize
not a life of grandeur or excitement,
but one of sacrifice —
sacrificing strength
for a platinum glow to complement
my porcelain complexion.

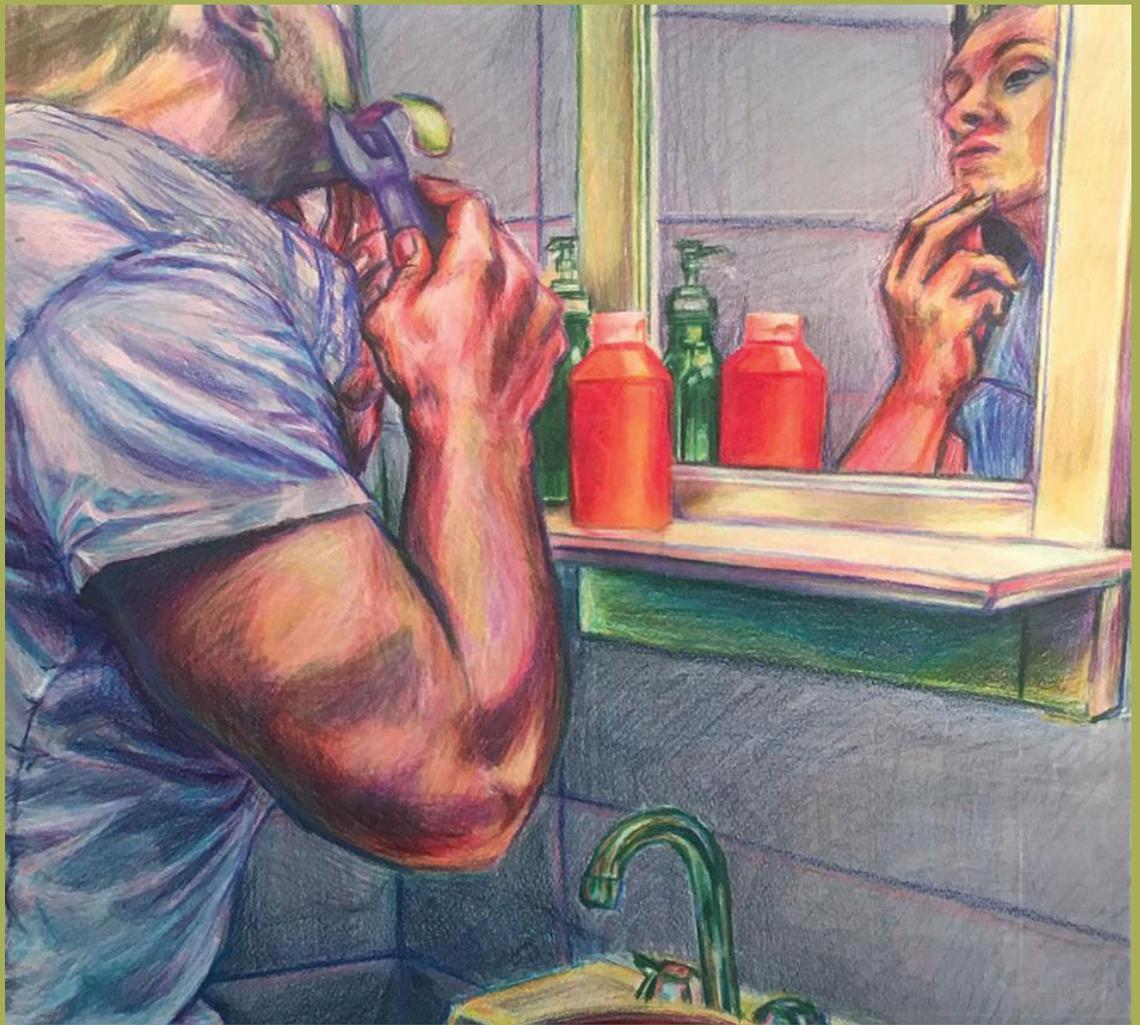
We are the victims
of the bottle!
Trapped inside our homes
by barricades of broke banks
in hopes that one day,
we may finally
have more fun.

DEAR BODY

by Melissa Herzberg

Dear Body,
I'm sorry
For all of the hate you're given
I know you're just trying to make a living
And go on with your life as it is
But every day you're seen in a mirror
And at that moment you're seen clearer
Even when I'm just looking down
It takes a lot not to turn around
I cause you so much pain
Just for my personal gain
When you're constantly being compared
To the fake ones who don't care
About whether they live or die while trying to be tough
Because they're not eating enough
Yet they're an envy
In the mind of almost any
And I'd admit I wish you looked like them
But I'd rather be healthy than thin.





Mr. Potato Head by Margaret Breidenbach

SKATE

by Anonymous

Someone's skin tells a more powerful story than that person can, more often than not. Marbled skin stretched flawlessly over tight muscles and thin bones, rough skin piled over fleshy arms and tree trunk-like skeletons. Skin with imperfections, pieces missing or scabbed over, scars folded over old incidences have many stories to tell. Stories of those few seconds someone's story got an illustration.

With ease, I could recite the tales behind each of my scars, the lessons learned, the trials overcome. For each scab, I could spin up a slightly humorous, slightly bitter anecdote on that trick I still haven't overcome or that hill that remains too steep. Every story on my skin has the same thesis, a lesson for the children to learn: I am a failure in the field of longboarding.

When I began skating, I considered myself a failure. To this day, I consider myself a failure. What else can I call myself when I go out every day to kiss concrete? It took time and a community to learn that failure isn't failure, it's a strategy. At the bottom of a hill with the Missouri River over my shoulder, other skaters bragged about their imperfect elbows and ragged knees. At that moment I realized that failure is a core value when you can't cheat, it should be embraced. Embraced and evolved into patience and persistence. These things, I learned by skating without even realizing it. Mindsets like that are slippery to handle and impossible to fake. This failure is communal as well. It fosters compassion and empathy. When somebody eats it halfway down a hill I feel that. I feel their pain because I know I've made that same mistake before and have been dazed on the ground in their position. Everybody fails together; I've built up others with advice and they've done the same to me. Overcoming one small failure can be exponentially positive. Early on as I learned, an outside observer could see the gears click in my head as I beat small obstacles and gained the bravery to break the next ones. Failure may be the long term plan but in these moments I temporarily came out on top, and these moments ran rampant. These small successes in an uphill battle only pushed me to roll that boulder faster.

In viewing failure as a technique, I've slowly isolated my success rate and my momentary emotions. Failure is essential to growth and my constant failure here has built me up. Calm, collected composure has been instilled in me and my role in a community has gifted me a habitual sense for everyone's tender humanity. I see scars and know the owner had a cut, had a scab, and has overcome a failure with determination. The defects that paint me physically have put a positive, concave correction on the glasses through which I see my world.

HALF A PERSON

by Lauren Yoksh

lace up your sneakers and roll up your jeans: your jeans are blue and worn in the knees because they're your favorite and the laces on your sneakers used to be white but now they are tinted brown from the dirt of the earth you walk through.

you step outside and take in the scenery around you: weak tangled trees and rusty parked cars line your street and you breathe in and feel the crisp scent of leaves and car exhaust in your lungs and you know that you are home.

you take a step down the driveway:

your mouth still tastes like mint from the toothpaste you brushed your teeth with and your bookbag on your shoulders weighs a ton but you keep walking forward toward your car that you bought on your seventeenth birthday.

you sit down in your car and start the engine: your favorite bracelet hangs around your wrist and catches the light of the street lamps and shines and the cd player blasts the same LP by The Smiths that you took from your dad two weeks earlier and you instantly begin to bob your head to the sultry beat – you love when you know what to expect.

you back out of the driveway: the air in your car is chilled and makes the hair on your arms stand straight up but you don't turn on the heat because you're busy dissecting the mysterious language of Morrissey and pondering what your life would be like if you were just a little more like a dream. But ideals will always just be ideals. and maybe you do wear that bracelet too often, but what else are you supposed to do?



River by Stella Shapiro

I AM (NOT)

by Kendall Donovan

I am not you
I am not your height
or weight
or the way you wake up in the morning
I am not the way you comb your hair
or drive a car

I don't know what keeps you up at night
or what makes you so unconditionally happy
you can't wait to tell your friend about
or what things will break your heart in a second
I am not the labels you have appointed to yourself
and I'm not the tears you cry over those labels

I am however, the daughter of an Italian mother
and an Irish father.

I'm the sister to a heartbroken girl
because she experimented with her heart too much
And trusted the same people
one too many times

A sister to two boys
who know too much for their own good
I'm a backstabbing friend
to loyal people
But a loyal friend
To backstabbing people

I'm a walking statue painted with labels
hurt, laughter, experiences that others can't attest to
I am the girl who claims to have it all together,
in the hope I will before society finds out otherwise
I am a person a part of the same routine
but always altering it so I am not like everyone else

I am a person with a medicine cabinet in their bathroom
filled with orange bottles, that are then filled with white pills
That is filled with pills to un-numb me
Maybe this fake smile will hide the real hurt
I am a person with more antidepressants in my body,
than there is blood

I am another person
given an expectation that I know I will never meet
I am a person who fakes it until they make it
because that's why we are all here
to see who can make it through the adventure of life
no matter how much they have to fake.



Wild Insecurity by Jonah Lee

THEY DON'T KNOW

by Drew Gilworth

"Work harder,
Do better,
Study more,
Don't act stupid,
Pay attention."

These are the things that run through my mind nonstop,
But they don't know.

I call myself dummy after dumb blonde,
But they don't know.

I think that I'm the most stupid, and irresponsible person
in my family,
But they don't know.

I act happy to make me feel happy,
But they don't know.

When I feel upset I study because I believe that my
intelligence is the root of all my anger,
But they don't know.

If I had the chance to talk to my past self, I'd tell her to
eat whatever she wants because in the
future your body equals your personality,
But they don't know.

At night I lie in my bed reviewing my homework
because I don't want to make a mistake,
But they don't know.

In the morning I complete a mental checklist because
I don't want anything to be different,
But they don't know.

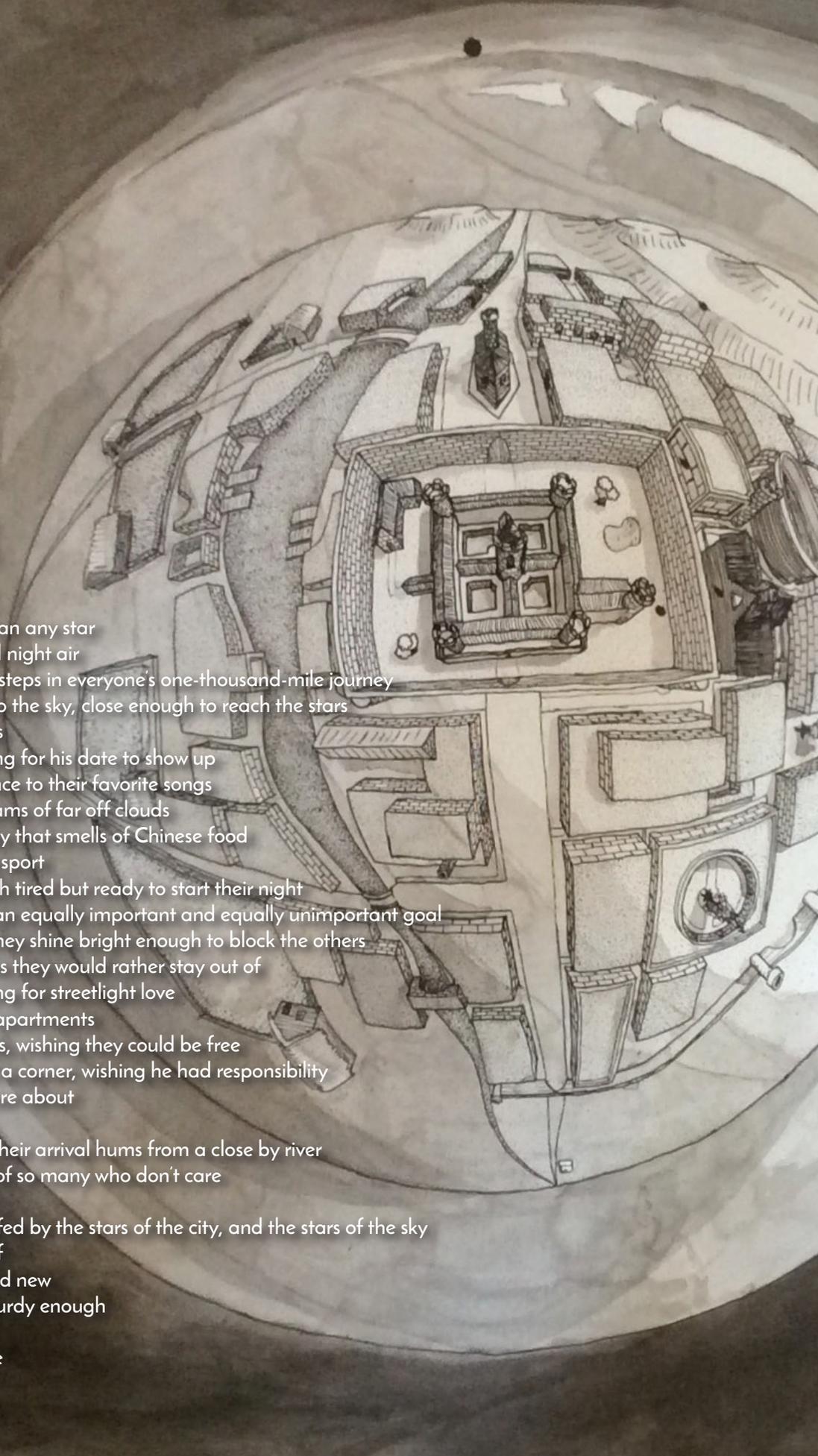
When people look at me I want them to see the perfect
girl that I've imagined in my head,
But they don't know

Because I don't know
who that girl is.

CITY IN THE RIVER

by Jacob Cone

The lights of the city shine brighter than any star
A cool breeze cuts through the humid night air
The sidewalk is cracked by too many steps in everyone's one-thousand-mile journey
Brick and concrete towers fly high into the sky, close enough to reach the stars
And each tower has a hundred stories
In one there is a man nervously waiting for his date to show up
A few over an elderly couple slow dance to their favorite songs
And two down a six-year-old girl dreams of far off clouds
Smooth jazz floats from a far off alley that smells of Chinese food
People cheer in bars for their favorite sport
Workers come out of restaurants, each tired but ready to start their night
Cars crowd the street, every one has an equally important and equally unimportant goal
Neon signs wish to be your stars, so they shine bright enough to block the others
Young girls pull young boys into stores they would rather stay out of
While other boys walk through, looking for streetlight love
A couple fights over nothing outside apartments
Businessmen push through the crowds, wishing they could be free
While a homeless man watches from a corner, wishing he had responsibility
Billboards sell you things you don't care about
While salesmen make you care
The sound of far off boats signaling their arrival hums from a close by river
Suspension bridges hold up the lives of so many who don't care
And so many who wish they did
The moon reflects off the river, engulfed by the stars of the city, and the stars of the sky
The cool breeze grows fair and far off
And then the mist rolls in, calming and new
The railing is cold to the touch, but sturdy enough
Beads of mist make it hard to climb
But the city in the river helps motivate
The city full of life
The city full of many
That won't miss one



SONDER

by Cole Roatch

I am the center of the universe
My problems are complex
My thoughts are intricate, my experiences unique
Surely no one else can live this way?
What a cruel realization it is
Such a curious paradox of existence
In the monumental movie that is my life,
Every passerby
Every random person I see for a fleeting second on the bus
Every extra in the back of the scene sipping coffee or reading a book
They are but mere specks in the grand scheme of life
Short blips in the timeline of my existence
Their only purpose exhausted once the scene cuts
Never to be remembered
But, am I just a speck to them?
What a strange identity to embrace,
To be that one passerby on the bus
To be seen only in the peripheral vision for a transient moment
To be acting as an extra in someone else's movie
To me,
I am the center of the universe.
To them,
I am nothing.

COPING WITH THE WORLD

by Amanda Pendley

I was in the middle of Alabama, silhouette illuminated by the golden hour's subtle sunlight,
engrossed in a conversation with my cousin, just catching up.

He'd asked me if I was any better, and I'd told him that "at least I know my triggers now."

He replied "that's impressive for someone so young, it helps you cope with the world,"

But it's not impressive because its uncommon,

It's impressive because somehow, I am still here.

It's not merely a coping strategy, it is a survival technique.

Coping with the world is taking a pause:

A moment of reflection to mimic the minute memory of the mesmerizing mentality that I once had possessed.

A pause to recollect, reclarify, ratify that despite whatever intangible feeling lay inside of me,
the tick tick tick of the clock will always keep on tolling.

I fluctuate in a fluid frequency between light and dark, finally settling inside a static grey.

Settling.

Coping is always settling. That's why I prefer enduring or advancing

because to me coping is the nuance nagging at the necessity of needing someone.

When I'd much prefer to keep to myself.

Coping is a way to get through, not to, the final destination, a mere proclamation of desire and dependability.

A road sign so close but so far away,

An illusion to the mind that results in

Settling.

I know my triggers because it is intrinsic to my survival,

slithering through life hoping not to trip an alarm disguised as a normality.

The clock is still tick tick ticking, just as I am.

Tick, shaking because of a house painted light blue.

Tick, I read a story that mentioned a rope, had to be excused in class.

Tick, they remind me of someone I used to know.

I tick the triggers off my trembling fingers.

Clairsentience does not ask for your consent to worry,

you feel whether it is your problem or not,

So how am I supposed to cope with the world

when I can't even cope with myself.

But is knowing my triggers really a coping mechanism

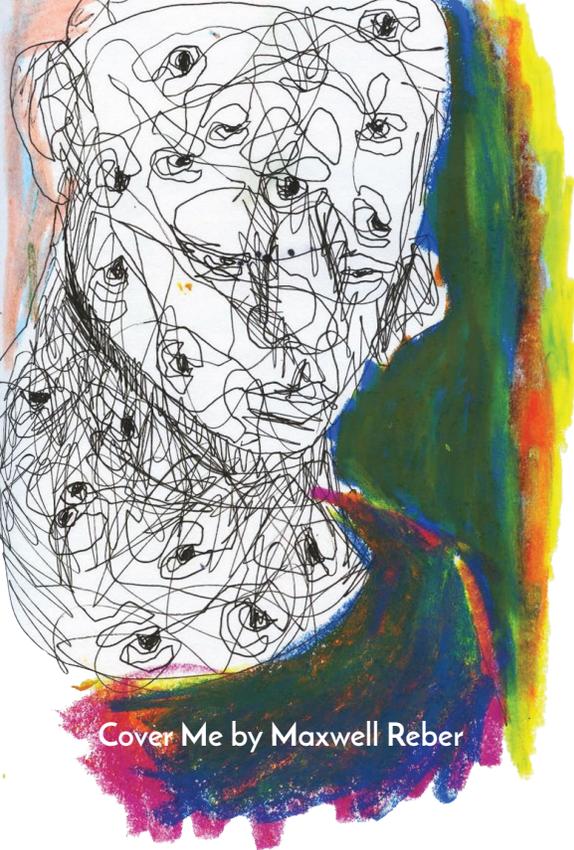
Or is it simply acknowledging the obvious overdose

of empathy clairsentience has created,

Permeating in my bones,

Either way it has kept me alive.





Cover Me by Maxwell Reber

AT THE END OF THE WIRE

by Mahnoor Cheema

There are occasions where I zone out, and during this period of deep thought, I find myself staring at a girl. I've seen this girl multiple times before. Sometimes I see her with a swarm of people lagging gloomily behind her, their shadows reaching out and grabbing pieces of her light, and absorbing it into their own souls, in an attempt to become one with her. No matter where she goes, she cannot escape these people or make them lose her tail – they are always there, and she is slowly losing her brightness to these dark entities, as her purity is corrupted by their dark stains.

And other times I see a single girl, all alone, walking on a lonely road, that eventually branches into multiple walkways with each and every choice that she makes, and only she walks this path, half of which is trodden and the other rare parts of which are brand new and uncharted.

But, no matter if she's alone or with unwanted company, the girl always ends up on a wire. This wire is thin, and always bends dangerously under her weight, threatening to plunge her into an abyss of darkness that keeps growing and expanding – this abyss holds her despair, her anxiety, her depression, and oddly, her comfort.

Maybe she's been wandering around here for so long, trying to find the door that leads her to a source of light, to a source of hope . . . maybe she's looking for a ladder that'll bring her up to the wire again.

Sometimes I wonder if she willingly jumps off the wire just so she can be in the reassuring numbness of the black hole beneath it. She feels safe and secure in the dark.

She doesn't fear it, at least not anymore.

When I was walking in the light, I realize now, that I wasn't being true to myself

I wasn't living – I was in a false reality where everything was supposedly alright and nothing was amiss. Everything that I saw, I recognized, and I believed it to be real – my happiness, the happiness of others, and the joys of the world.

I feared the dark, because I wasn't sure what was in it – I didn't know and I was afraid of being unable to cope with what I'd find lurking in the shadows.

I don't know when I found myself shrouded in pitch black – I don't even know when it got to the point that I was tip-toeing my way on a fragile and narrow wire, one that bent so easily under me and was only kept up by my determination to get to the other side.

Other side . . . when was there a destination? Did I develop one as I got older? Or was there always an abstract goal that I wanted to obtain for getting over my fears? Maybe I just hoped there would be something that would make this horrifying experience worthwhile.

I'd occasionally fall, sometimes on purpose into the abyss, as stated before. At first, I was terrified, and I searched desperately for a way out. I didn't like the various rooms that shaped themselves into existence in the dark, showcasing my worst moments and failures. I hated it. I hated myself. I wanted to run. I didn't know where to go.

So I stayed there for a while. I felt bitterness welling up within me. I felt numb.

Maybe I had been in the dark for too long.

Usually, by that point, a ladder or a door would appear, and I would be back on the wire again, trying my best not to look down. It felt like my mind pitied me, and gave me an easy way out on purpose, because it thought I couldn't handle the stress of being alone and helpless; it was probably right in its judgment.

Over time, as I grew up and learned of the suffering of others, I felt a change in me. I no longer cared about what the destination was at the other side of the wire – I gradually became more curious, and intrigued by the darkness below me. I wanted to examine it, observe it, and see if I could find a purpose in it. It could have been due to boredom, or it could have been due to natural curiosity of the unknown, something that I seemed to have developed as I met more people and thought more deeply about my existence.

I would hop off the wire, sometimes crashing straight to the bottom, or more often than not, surprisingly, I would float for a few long moments. It was as if I were enjoying the journey down. During my slow descent, I could glance into the darkness and it was as if I was looking through a glass – I could see the inside of the rooms, and though I couldn't make everything out, it seemed as if I had gotten used to the darkness. I could see the rooms replaying moments of me at my worst, as if they were mini movie theatres and my life was a film that was cut up into snippets, and these particular times were on loop, forever reminding me of my failures and shortcomings.

But it didn't bother me. It didn't hurt to look at myself anymore. I came to accept it – as part of who I am.

Once I landed on the floor, I found myself reinvigorated, with energy that may have been dormant, backseat to my problems this whole time. I walk confidently through the various dark corridors, and peek in each room, cringing, but accepting that the past is what makes me who I am today.

And as I pass through more doors, I can feel the hallway extend, as if my mind is teasing me that I'll mess up more in the future, and more of my fails will be displayed in this grand hall of shame, but I am undaunted by this revelation.

Sometimes, I think I can see the outline of a door; I can't really find it, but I know it's there – the door that holds my motivation, my dreams, my hopes, and my accomplishments. It may be a small room compared to this – a hut of limited light compared with this castle of infinite darkness.

But it exists. And one day, I'll find the key to unlock it.

At the end of the wire.

LISTEN

by Anonymous

LISTEN

To my vocal chords ring
WISHIN'

That you could be me
You fall for me like autumn leaves
I am pollen in the spring
You love me, but I am your allergy

The stage, I'm on it
The light, I want it
Cause I'll discuss the truth with all of you
The blues, I fought it
Wave maker, heart breaker
Speaking urgently like we're all in danger
I been saying words

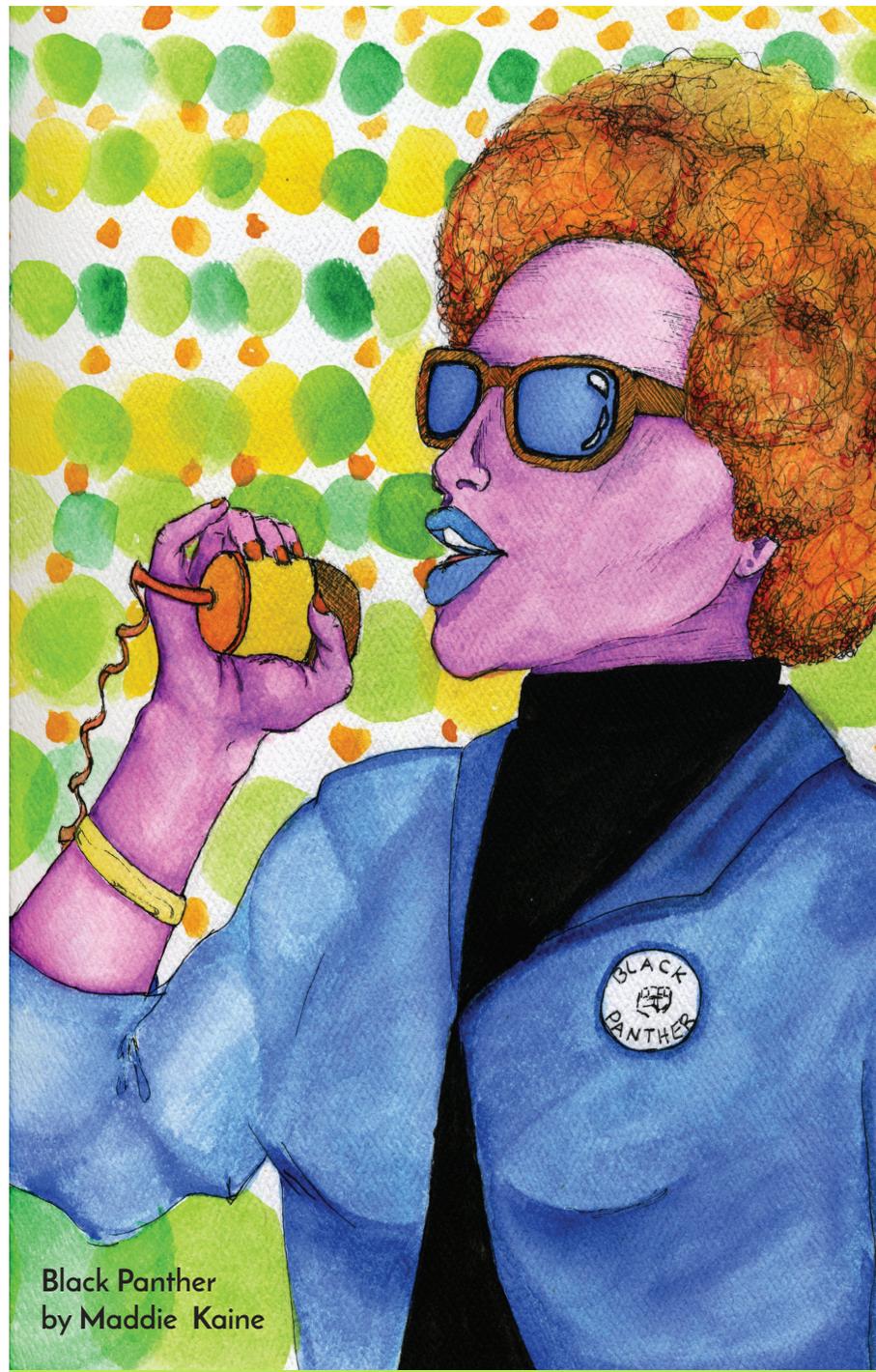
So have you heard
This is for the common good
The rumor, the word,
She brightens the world
Dude, I heard that
Audrey been singing
80 songs a day
Since age 8
She made great
New melodies, with her guitar she'll play

... I'm being honest like that sweet green tea
Not popular, but healthy
My mouth's the open mic
My heart is the MC
My brain's the only part thinking logically
Better than Selena when I write words
A soul singer
... No really, I stole singers

Listen, open your ears to me
It's necessary that you heard
Because I'm like your wif password
My ego is Blue's Clues
A mystery, I don't know what to do
But hope I'm not misconstrued
I'm trapped in my metaphors
But, I'll open the cage for you

It was right there
You knew I had to pull the trigger
Cause if I'm given bullets to good lyrics, I'm gonna shoot 'em
A play on words
A simile
A story of how I came to be
A helpful nerd who struggles
A girl who still doesn't know how she'll fit in the world's puzzle

Listen, these other singers got me wishin'
Their voices shake me
And I don't belong to be on a stage where they once stood
I been on this Earth enough time to know
When lyrics are powerful enough to get emotional



Black Panther
by Maddie Kaine

Believe that there's more than just a flow
And listen loud enough to grow
Cause there's a seed in everybody
Thirsting for nourishment,
the words that speak to it
I've seen death,
And I've seen life
But a metaphor, a melody, a mic, musical style
Helped me believe I am worthwhile
So I confess I'm afraid of when the song decays
Cause when I played
They heard my voice, but now the outro fades
I gotta leave the stage
So I apologize for any arrogance

I may have portrayed when strummin' this
Attempting to leave my everything
Up on the stage, forgive me
People tell me I can sing
My mind tells me they don't know a thing
I've left my heart in my guitar strings
When I play, you hear it calling

But I still thank the audience for listening to my anthem
For allowing me to sing about
My glass heart and how it shatters
Tears will stream on the pages as I close this chapter
This for the ones with no ears to listen,
Every voice who has been
Singing all along



M.A.A.D. CITY MAN

by Annie Barry

This summer I took some chances while listening to Chance the Rapper because I liked the beat
But listened to Kendrick when I wanted some street poetry
Some urban poetry
From poets who grew up in suburban towns with an urban state of mind
Designed to have inclined to remind mankind of what it's like for a human to be kind
I listened to m.A.A.d. city for the first time for the story and not the sound
I'm a kid from Kansas, I just click my heels and my mind runs back to the ideals
My poetry clears my head without having to hide in my bed
It's my xanax, my completely contemporary confusing confiding complex can of comfort
My weighted blanket that's blank when I don't write
But that's not right because my paper is never blank - sometimes I just run out of ink in my pen that's all
Writer's block because I can't block out the black sky when I close my eyes
The bad barricade between blank walls, black walls
I blink red, blink blue - see ambulances coming at you
Sirens like angels singing in times square because the man in the alley told you to "square up"
You said to "shut up"
I said to "get up and go"
You said "No"
I think our world is a m.A.A.d city man
Or maybe you're just a mad man in the city
A sad man looking for pity
Because you got stuck in conformity
Try to rap like everyone else
Because you can't get a job
You write just to show not to tell
You don't write to feed your soul
But because it feeds your ego
I write to breathe, not to please, but the deal with grief
Writing gives me what feels like the right type of rage,
rendering under red lights on a stage reminding me of stoplights I ignored when I started to write

THE HUNT

by Hunter Rahto

I wake early before the birds are stirring
Loading the car with all the supplies
Long drive in the dark with the tires whirling
I get to the land before sunrise

A walk through the wet grass under the moon lit trees
Reaching the stand to make my ascent
I take in my surroundings and feel the cool breeze
While stifling my noise so the day won't be ill spent

The sun rises reflecting off the nearby lake
A deer creeps in from the woods to my right
I breath slowly, so I won't quake
I must be careful or it will take flight

I raise my bow and pray the deer continues its course
Looking down my arrow I find the spot
I take aim at its life source
After a moment, I take the shot

PIANIST

by Anonymous

Trembling fingers, and one deep breath.
Eyes closed as the tips of his fingers
Grace the smooth edge of the ivory washed keys.
And the notes on the page jump out at him -
Decrescendo here! Forte there! A trill now!
The notes dance like his fingers, taking their ending positions too soon.
He's a pianist, they say, in awe of the brilliance, leaping up
On their toes to applaud a man
Who has never once
Considered himself a
Pianist.
And once the stage lights dim,
And the curtains swoosh closed,
He takes his place by the piano again,
To an empty auditorium,
Seats void of chatter and murmur and awe.
No trembling now, no deep breath needed.
Eyes focused on the old black and white keys,
And fingers that tap out a hearty melody.
There are no notes now,
Only his heart,
Playing the song of a musician,
And not a pianist.



Upside Down by Jordan Horton

REPLACED

by Emma Nicholson

Day and night become irrelevant
Time is no longer marked by the movement of the sun
But rather the hours passed in front of a screen

Purpose lay in the number of characters typed
In the number of liked photos, of emojis littering texts
Eyes blurring from the time spent staring at images

Images provoking thoughts
Of "It should be me" and "I should be there"
Emotions spiraling downward, surrounded by "if onlys"

Hours of wishing, talking, stalking on Facebook
Pillow talks conducted at eleven a.m.
Pavlov's bell replaced by the ding of Skype

She is pixels that could be rearranged into something else
Hard squares with sharp edges
Wondering if her hair is still as soft as it once was

Before her blue eyes were replaced by the black hole of a camera lens
Her fingers glide over keys instead of skin
Contact now falters with the WiFi

Change clinks on the bottom of the glass jar
"You cursed," a dollar towards the funding of tickets
She's already booked the next flight

A year here, two there, three trips over the holidays
Plane tickets are expensive nowadays
The fourth visit approaching fast

Excitement, chatter, clothing stuffed in suitcases
One year, six months, three, two
"I can't do this anymore"

There's no discussion, no pleading, no crying
Simply cut off with the end of a call
The finality of a computer clicking shut.





BALLOONS

by Olivia Humphrey

Imagine yourself in a room full of balloons in a variety of colors, all with little white string.
Each balloon is an event; a lunch with friends, a family reunion, a party, a date.
You try to be attentive and pick up a balloon, only to have it pop in your unsuspecting hands.
The sound is nearly deafening - both the burst and the sobering silence afterwards.
The rubber lays across your palms and you know your mistake:
You had momentarily forgotten that your fingertips had been replaced with needles.
Your heartbeat races, your hands twitch, your breathing quickens.
You frantically apologize to no one in particular, tears running down your cheeks.
"I'm sorry! I didn't mean for this to happen! Please forgive me!"
Your shaking has become uncontrollable, and you feel an earthquake rise from the floor.
The stream of tears has turned into a waterfall flowing out of each eye, and you begin to sink.
You're breathing so quickly that a tornado forms from your lungs and spins into the room.
You're not sure if your heart is beating too fast to track or if it's stopped beating altogether.
You look at your fingertips - once soft, small reminders of innocence and identity;
Now replaced with metal pieces of destruction, only bringing adulthood and instability.
You try to remove the needles, only pricking yourself and leaving blood stains everywhere.
You scream for help in the dimly lit room, only to be responded by your own echo.
Your voice is broken and sad and you can barely recognize it.
The bright colors and smooth string seem to mock you with their purity and simplicity.
This is having needles for fingertips in a room full of balloons.
This is missing opportunities and memories and only blaming yourself.
This is anxiety.

ISOLATED SYMMETRY

By Natalie Prauser

i'll carry my fault to the sea and salt
and i know it's dragging me along
i wish i was more than a hollow frame
riding through time on a tidal wave
and i know i won't be here long

so cut me open and count my rings
to know such incalculable things
cause everything is just spiraling
all i've ever been i will be
and i know i'm growing, growing, gone

and from now on i can do no wrong
cause i know this has all been done
what good is it to be stuck on repeat
in isolated symmetry
but i know i'm never alone
i know i'm never alone

you and i will meet
on a cosmic street
where the people are all stars
driving around in cars
and everything looks strange
when you're floating through space
this is home
but you feel out of place

To view a video of Natalie performing her song *Isolated Symmetry*:



1. Download the Aurasma app to your phone

2. Create an account and follow [joco.elementia](https://www.joco.elementia.com)

3. Click the purple square and scan this page.

ALL ALONE

by Nathan Francis

When I am alone
I talk to things
Things that aren't there
Because I have no one else to talk to
When I am alone
I listen to music
Because I like some noise
When I am alone
I get sentimental
Because I like to reflect
When I am alone
I am not funny or bold
I am of little importance
When I am alone
It seems like I am the only person in the world
And the world feels lonely
When I am alone
I play video games
Because I feel like I am with people
When I play with them
When I am alone
I criticize myself
For not being the best I can be
When I am alone
I talk with the voices in my head
Because they are like family to me
When I am alone
I imagine talking with people
That aren't really there
But some place else
When I am alone
I talk to myself
Because when I am alone
It doesn't annoy anyone else
When I am alone
Usually I am sad

Path; Earth
by Clayton Phillips

If You Call Now
by Roxanne Reasco



THOUGHTS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

by Cassandra Griffing

All eyes on those who shimmer with dialogue
All eyes on those with tongues aflame,
blinded
by their empty words
that block genuine insight.

But my mind is hanging in the shadows,
erupting
with silent screams
like a lion in a cage.
It bursts with vivid colors, illuminating me.
Silently, internally.

If the shy girl from chemistry class is "quiet"
then I am silent
The secret force remains inside of me,
never cared to be heard from.

And so the world goes on.
The Screamers continue to dominate its surface,
searching above for what
treasure lies beneath.

MIDNIGHT WALK

by Tommy Tietjen

The streets,
full of people rushing to and fro.
Stepping on the paved concrete,
wearing it out slowly,
like nothing.
Night spreads through,
covering everything,
like a blanket.

The wind breezes past
the buildings,
standing high and powerful.
Nothing else,
no light,
no sounds,
no people.

Deserted and alone,
walk the street,
hear your breath,
feel the breeze.
Feel yourself think,
by yourself,
on the city street,
alone with the darkness.

VANISHING ACT

by Amanda Pendley

Two mirrors face each other, a girl in between.

The girl is me, stuck on the cliché of the introvert; on the outside looking in.

My problem is that I've always been on the inside looking out.

Stuck so far in the depth of my being that I've never been able to see myself for who I truly am.

Afraid that if I finally saw her, eventually, I would lose her as easily as a simple magic trick.

Self analysis has always been my strength, but today I'm trying to live through a new light.

Trying to read between the lines

Whether it be pages, traffic lanes, people

The commonality being traveling: eyes, vehicles, moving on.

There again is that endless maze of mirrors

Immortalization of the things that we think will stay if we stare at them long enough.

A stern concentration on the bumbling, staggering, flickering progression of life.

I put my hand up to the surface,

Touch my cheek thinking that I'll be gone one day too.

My identity a mere illusion.

It doesn't matter anymore that I have been trapped beneath the stained glass ceiling of my empathetic nature.

I hold on to my wrist tightly, close my eyes, and open them moments later to one lone mirror.

I greet my reflection, tell her welcome.

I am done orchestrating a vanishing act on myself.



REGRET

by Savannah Richmond

Your tangy citrus grin
cuddles up against my lips.
Our palms, their creases and our fingertips,
collide together the way kiwis fit snug in their skin.
Harmonies pour out of our souls,
dancing in our laughter.
The sweetness that gracefully orbits around you,
infatuates my entire being.
Each layer peeled off,
exposes another planet
of extraordinary things to be discovered
ready to be adored,
cherished,
for *all* that they are.

with every note played
along our journey,
the more I realize

You are the key to my existence,

you were the only song
for me.

I couldn't consider your song
when we lay together with the stars,
hearing their giggles
over our midnight wonders,
watching their strobe light orbs do ballet across the sky.
You were taken for granted.

I
miss
you.

I'm sorry.

He wasn't worth it.

IT'S DIFFICULT

by Anonymous

It's difficult,
The business of learning a new language.
Words slip away from you like a skittish bird
But you grasp for them
And try to give them some meaning.

It's difficult
Age four, first day of school,
Not comprehending a sentence your teacher says,
Bitter at Mom and Dad
For giving you the wrong words to say back.

It's difficult when they tell you,
"It's time you learn English,"
So you leave what you know
And learn to talk like the others
And suddenly,
It all feels a lot easier.

It's difficult
Traveling twenty-two hours
To a place of palm trees and rivers,
Of bonfires and jasmine and your grandma's cooking,
To a lush Eden full of faces that look like your own
Only to find that the faces can no longer understand
a word out of your mouth.

It's difficult
When they greet you, "Namaskaram"
And laugh as you try to form your mouth
back around the lost syllables
Then turn their noses up at "the whitewashed girl"
And you feel as lonely as you did at four-years-old.

It's difficult
Realizing that the words of your ancestors,
The words that your parents have claimed as theirs,
And the words you have lost
Are no longer your own.

OUR HOUSE OF PERSONALITY

by Ethan Davis

Your foundation is no different than that of your neighbors,
ground firmly into the cool of the Earth with no concern
for those who dwell above you.

Your walls beg to tell a different story, desperate for language
but sit mute, hapless, ill-fortuned, burdened to behold
secrets behind closed doors.

Your roof a brute whose concerns lay only in that of basking
in the symphony of the stars by night and brooding
over the passersby by day.

You are a symbiotic collection of personality:
Foundation, stoic and unmoving
Walls, observing and yearning
Roof, strong but philosophical

Grant me the right to pose but few questions to you, the personalities
who collectively were my father's home.

Where were you when my father collected our belongings,
transformed the place we lay our head at night,
Shifted our lives to the unfinished room in the basement
all in effort to appeal to a woman who
craved power over weak men?

Where were you when my father rifled his way through our belongings,
slithering down narrow stairs, perusing casually through
the possessions of children,

At last laying eyes on the first hundred dollars his two boys have ever earned
only to kneel his greedy soul down to slide the bills into his own wallet?

Where were you when my father's trout partner slit the legs of her own cat
shifting blame to our black poodle who shudders at the sight of his
own shadow,

Her obsession with control driving her to purge every nuance of my father's life
out, leaving only her?

Where were you when my father's utterly poisoned mind,
weaker more now than ever,
diseased within,
blinded by a woman half his age,

Took to believing every word she spoke as if it was divinely inspired,
hoisting our beloved pet into his van making haste
to drown his life out at the nearest pound - saved only
by my mother?

Your foundation peered into our basement room,
witnessed our father's actions.

Your walls watched our father's descent and stood idle,
unable to act as his corrupter's syringe pushed
her toxins deeper into his veins.

Your roof peered into the sky uninterested, eyes glazed
over as our mother at last realized the truth and
liberated us with sirens blaring.

My brother and I were never touched by abuse but I
still wonder to this day: Why had you, our house
of personality, abandoned us too?



Untold History by Jordan Horton

A DIFFERENT PERSON

by Joseph Chaparro

Out there . . .
During the day, around everyone . . .
I can be the funniest guy ever,
a person that don't care about nothing,
someone confident about himself,
and that won't let nobody make him feel less.
But once inside . . .
When the door closes, and the lights go off . . .
When everything is quiet . . .
I'm a completely different person,
lonely and thoughtful,
I could think about my whole life,
I can feel like I got the answers
to everyone's problems . . . except mine.

THE DAYS AFTER

By Allyssa Herlein

It was a dark room. Dark enough that it was hard to tell whether my eyes were open or closed, unless I was looking at the chains that bound my wrists - a dull silver color. My naked body pressed against the cold stones that made up the walls. I moved my hands, listening to the chains clink and clatter on themselves to mute the deafening silence.

hello

No answer. I sat, staring at the blackness surrounding me, counting each second as it went by . . .

one thousand and eight, one thousand and nine, one thousand and ten

The words echoed on the walls. I lost track of time, hours fading together, what I imagined were days, possibly even weeks, passed. In and out of consciousness and all I could do was sit slumped, praying he didn't come back.

I was asleep when the first thud came. One and then another. And another. Louder. Closer. My body trembled, fearing what he might desire this time.

please help

My voice was weak, barely escaping my lips before the sound dissipated.

And then a glaring light above me, "She's here."

Laid in a bed, my body hidden in a blue paper gown, my legs covered by stiff white sheets. My eyes wandered the plain room, until a man in a white coat came in.

"I am just going to take a look at you."

His voice was rough, like listening gravel under an old truck's tires. He moved delicately, gently untucking me from the bed and removing old bandages, exposing the purple welts and red gashes on my thin thighs.

The man left and I let my eyes wander over myself. A tear fell onto my cheek as I saw the mangled body that sat before me.



Sleeper by Gillian Drake

"Do you know your name?"

She smiled softly at me,

no

Her smile faded and she looked down, writing in her little notepad.

"Do you know where you are?"

no

She wrote again.

"Did you know who he was?"

My breath caught in my throat

yes

I opened my eyes and it was bright, the sunlight bouncing off the white walls.

hello?

I called out, my voice a mere whisper.

"I am here"

The voice came from outside of the door and a figure emerged,

"Do you remember me?"

no

They dimmed the lights and I began to see their features. A man, his skin wrinkled and his cheeks tear stained, eyes red from crying.

"That's okay, it's been a while"

okay

Neither of us spoke. He stood in the doorway watching me, and I him.

who am I?

"Cassandra."

After some time, I went home with the man. He led me into a small room, the walls were painted pink and barely showing, covered by posters. Clothes were strewn about the room.

"Do you recognize it?"

He sounded hopeful – that this room would somehow make me remember.

no

"This is your home Cassandra. This is where you come from."

His voice pleaded me, begged for me to remember my past, to remember him, and everything else.

okay

He moved and picked up a shirt from the floor. It was red, with the letters "ON" in blue on the front.

"This was your cheer top, you are a cheerleader."

I looked down at my small body, my thighs exposed, showing the faded bruises and fresh pink scars.

okay

He tossed the crumpled top to the side and moved across the room, picked up a stuffed dog, and handed him to me.

"He was a gift from your grandmother. You would carry him everywhere."

I took him in my hands tenderly and looked him over. He was black and brown, missing an ear, and his fake fur was matted with something sticky.

he's kind of ugly

A small chuckle escaped his lips and a tear rolled down his cheek,

"Yeah, he is."

He pointed at a picture hanging on the wall, his hand shaky,

"That was your mother."

His voice was small, choking back more tears.

I moved to the wall that the photograph hung on, observing the woman. Her long hair, grey eyes, small frame. I reached my hand out and touched the glass protecting the picture.

okay

With a robe wrapped around my body, I stood staring into the mirror. A face stared back at me, blank and expressionless. Blue eyes stuck out from the black circles that surrounded them.

Swollen and bloody lips and a temple with 7 stitches peered back at me. I let the robe fall off and left it crumpled on the floor. I watched as porcelain skin, covered in wounds, became visible in the mirror.

I stepped into the shower, the warm water overtaking my body. Wetting my hair, the droplets running down my back delicately, the water pooling in the tub at my feet.

I ran my fingers delicately over my hips and stomach, and my eyes burned.

Tears began to fall from my eyes as I remembered the way he touched me. How rough his hands were around my throat as I was begging him to stop. How hard his boot was against my ribs. How his fist felt when it connected with my face. How he pulled my hair as I tried to run away.

I shut my eyes trying to forget, to block out what he did to me.

I sat across the table from the man, the plate in front of me still full of untouched food. He ate slowly, and I watched him – how he moved. His eyes looking down, his shoulders slumped, his breathing soft and sluggish.

do I have to?

He stopped chewing and looked up at me,

"What?"

do I have to?

I spoke louder this time.

"Cassandra, what do you mean?"

I confused him, but couldn't find the words to say what I meant. He sat studying me as I struggled to find words that fit what I was trying to ask.

do I have to be who I was?

We sat in silence.

do I have to be Cassandra?

More silence.

"No."

As the words rang in the air, a breath of relief came off of my shoulders, and I smiled softly.

Okay.

BALLAD TO THE UNKNOWN

by Claire Hutchinson

i screamed into the void until my lungs collapsed,
but she barely gave me a glance when the silence relapsed.
i called out to the stars and they gave me an excuse:
"hey man i'm sorry, it's me, it's not you."

i tried to infuse my veins with rocket fuel,
but the mechanical pieces of my internal organs
found the chemicals to be too cruel.
they rejected everything until i coughed up acid:
"why isn't this enough? please just be placid."

so i cracked open my ribs along the seam of my breastbone,
searching for my heart in the empty unknown.
instead i found my lungs, punctured and failing:
"why are you here when there's stars to be sailing?"

i tried hailing a taxi with the blood on my hands,
but my ribs were too messy for the driver's backseat to stand.
so i tried walking home but the sidewalks betrayed me:
"why are you stepping on me when you should be saving me?"

i broke out into a sprint through other people's backyards
but i found myself blacking out and not getting too far.
it was then that i found a fence that caused my stumbling and crashing:
"hey kid can't you read? that sign says no trespassing."

i pick-pocketed other people's dreams until i couldn't hold them anymore,
bursting at the seams with too little to show for.
i picked apart my brain to find the source of my decay,
only to find a note in my own handwriting: "find your own way."

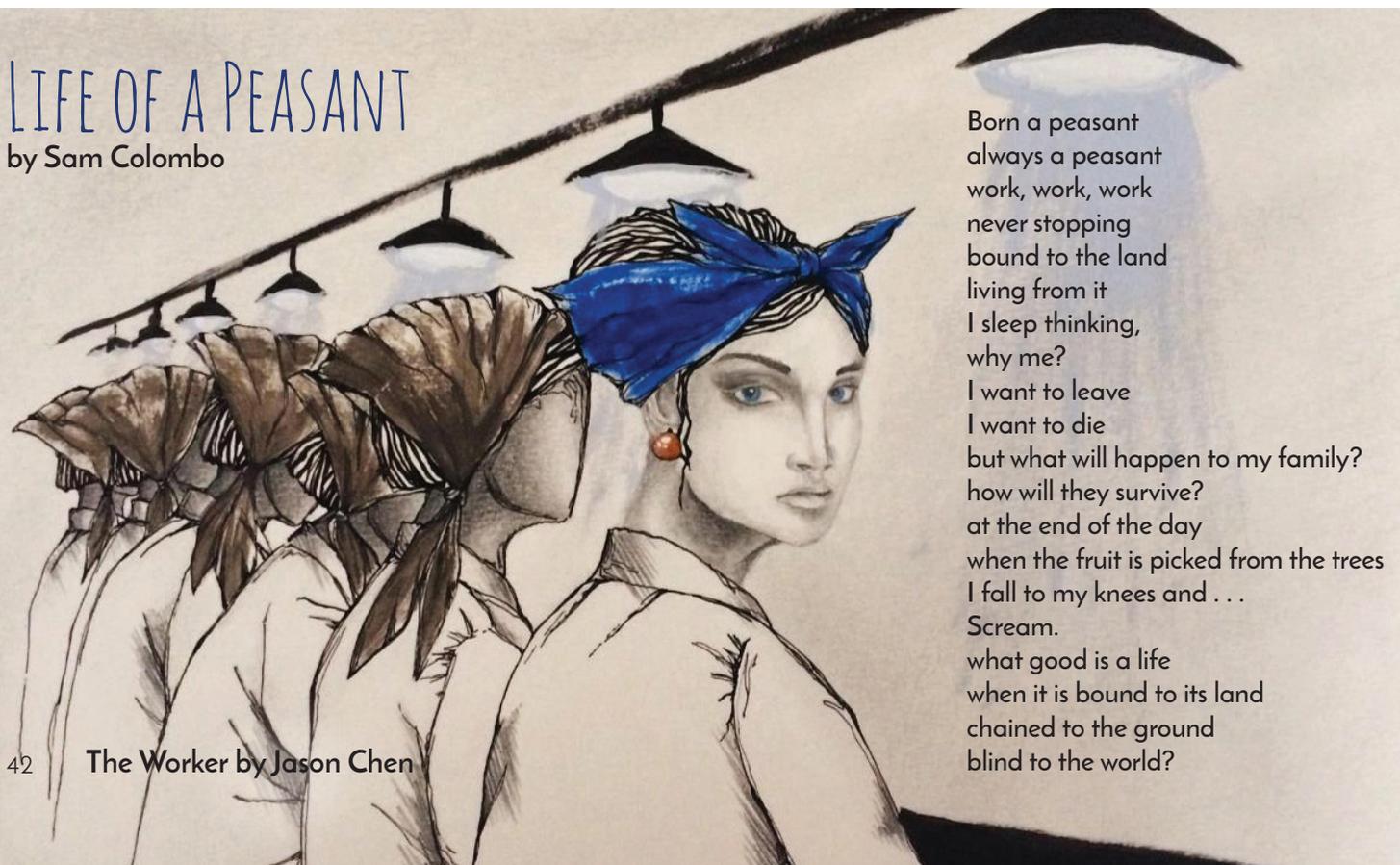
i dropped to my knees and ignored the bruising,
struggling to find anything i've done of my own choosing.
i cried out to the sky and the constellations replied,
"why are you complaining when you haven't let go of your pride?"

so i swallowed my tongue and cast down my eyes,
rising back to my feet but no longer alive.
i looked up to the moon to give me guidance,
but whatever answers i was looking for, i couldn't find it.

it was then that i realized that i've been complacent too long,
finding new beats but always singing the same old song.
so i stitched up all my pieces and washed myself clean:
"i will be okay. it's just, i don't ever dream."

LIFE OF A PEASANT

by Sam Colombo



Born a peasant
always a peasant
work, work, work
never stopping
bound to the land
living from it
I sleep thinking,
why me?
I want to leave
I want to die
but what will happen to my family?
how will they survive?
at the end of the day
when the fruit is picked from the trees
I fall to my knees and . . .
Scream.
what good is a life
when it is bound to its land
chained to the ground
blind to the world?

HE WHO WANTS THE WORLD
TO REMAIN AS IT IS
DOESN'T WANT IT
TO REMAIN AT ALL

IT WENT LIKE THIS

by Jackson Ceule

Republican

Yes! Bless The New U.S.
Making America Great Again
With only the best.
I must confess this victory came a little shocking.
I wasn't expecting Trump to win,
The way the media was talking.
I was walking,
Pacing my living room with a sweat of uncertainty,
But certainly,
Americans won't vote for a corrupt and lying witch.
That bitch should be in jail,
Not running for president,
She needs to be saving up for her bail,
And I'm saying this as a United States resident.
Her negligence is unbearable when it comes to the emails.
When truthfulness comes into testing,
Hillary fails.

Democrat

Dear god save us all . . .
This idiot oompa loompa is going to build a fucking wall.
I didn't think you all were this dumb,
The fact that Trump won is making my body feel numb.
I have rung the bell for help
Because Trump is bound to take all of us to hell.
I can yell and cry,
And changing my point of view you can try,
But Donald Trump is not controlling me.
Before I let that happen,
I will die.
When it was clear who won I can not lie,
I was frightened for what was to come.
His perspective and ideas were all dumb.
He complains on twitter about stupid things like a baby,
I'm surprised there's not a picture of him sucking his thumb.
R.I.P. to the U.S., the dream is done.

Libertarian

I mean like I don't think I like the dude,
He seems kinda rude.
But like Hillary deleted those emails,
Not cool.
Gary Johnson should have pulled the upset.
I'm not ready to give my recreational marijuana
Dream up yet.
Whatever.
It is what it is.

TAYLOR

by Abigail Cottingham

His taste in music was mayonnaise: bland and unappreciated by most of the population. I guess you could say I love mayonnaise. We attended the same school, but a year separated us so we didn't have any classes together. We had lunch at the same time though, where we would see each other in line and accidentally touch hands while simultaneously reaching for the mustard packets.

"Go ahead," he'd gesture, giving me a gentle smile that made my heart melt on sight.

I think everything changed the day I saw him with a look of disgust on his face, his lips pulled into a pucker like he'd tasted a sour pickle. I wanted to know him. I wanted to know where he was going, how he was feeling, what made him frustrated enough to outwardly frown. He'd turned to see me staring and I quickly averted my eyes, my face turning the color of the ketchup on my hamburger. When I looked back up, he was smiling at me, and I was quick to smooth down my hair in self-conscious defense. We slipped into a habit: his striking blue eyes would meet mine across our lunch tables and he'd break out into a soft smile that would keep me giddy for the rest of the day. Nobody else seemed to notice our routine, which made me doubt that there was anything happening between us at all.

I found myself driven to talk to him by my infatuation and when he responded, I was ecstatic. We were shy at first, but I relished in every piece of information he told me about himself. I still remember every detail: his birthday was June 14th, when he was a kid he couldn't stand touching crayons because of the wax, he only put soy sauce on fried rice and putting it on anything else was insulting. We'd always have these talks late at night, sitting in his basement or my living room, where he'd tell me something stupid he did in seventh grade, and I would laugh too hard until I couldn't breathe, which made him laugh. He's one of those people who laughs with their entire being, but his eyes were always the first to smile. It took me a few months, but I finally opened up to him, letting him get to know me as well as I knew him.

One night in particular, we were sitting in his car after seeing a movie, listening to a playlist I had made for him (it became a favorite date of ours - if you could even call it that.) Ever since we became closer, I was trying to introduce him to more music genres, so all of my iTunes money went to making CDs for him of anything I thought he would enjoy. My mom teased me for making him a "mixtape" but a glare from my dad ended the conversation quickly.

He was leaning back against the driver's seat, poorly singing along to the Red Hot Chili Peppers. The song ended and I paused the playlist, quietly drawing back into myself. He asked what was wrong, but I hesitated in answering. We sat in silence until finally I spoke up, telling him about how much I liked him; I probably sounded like I was quoting a Nicholas Sparks book. He smiled after I finished, but the pity was evident in his eyes.

"Taylor," he started, treating my name like a wounded bird, "it's been great hanging out with you, but we're just friends."

I was heartbroken. Here was this guy that I had finally opened up to, spilled all of my secrets to and he only wanted to stay friends. He drove me home and gave me a polite smile as I got out of the car, all while I was trying to hide my tears.

School was hell after that. I guess he went and told somebody about our date. I was bullied constantly; they called me names and wrote derogatory words all over my locker. Nobody ever tried to be my friend during high school again. I mean, I can't say I blame them.

Who'd want to be friends with the guy who fell in love with his straight best friend?



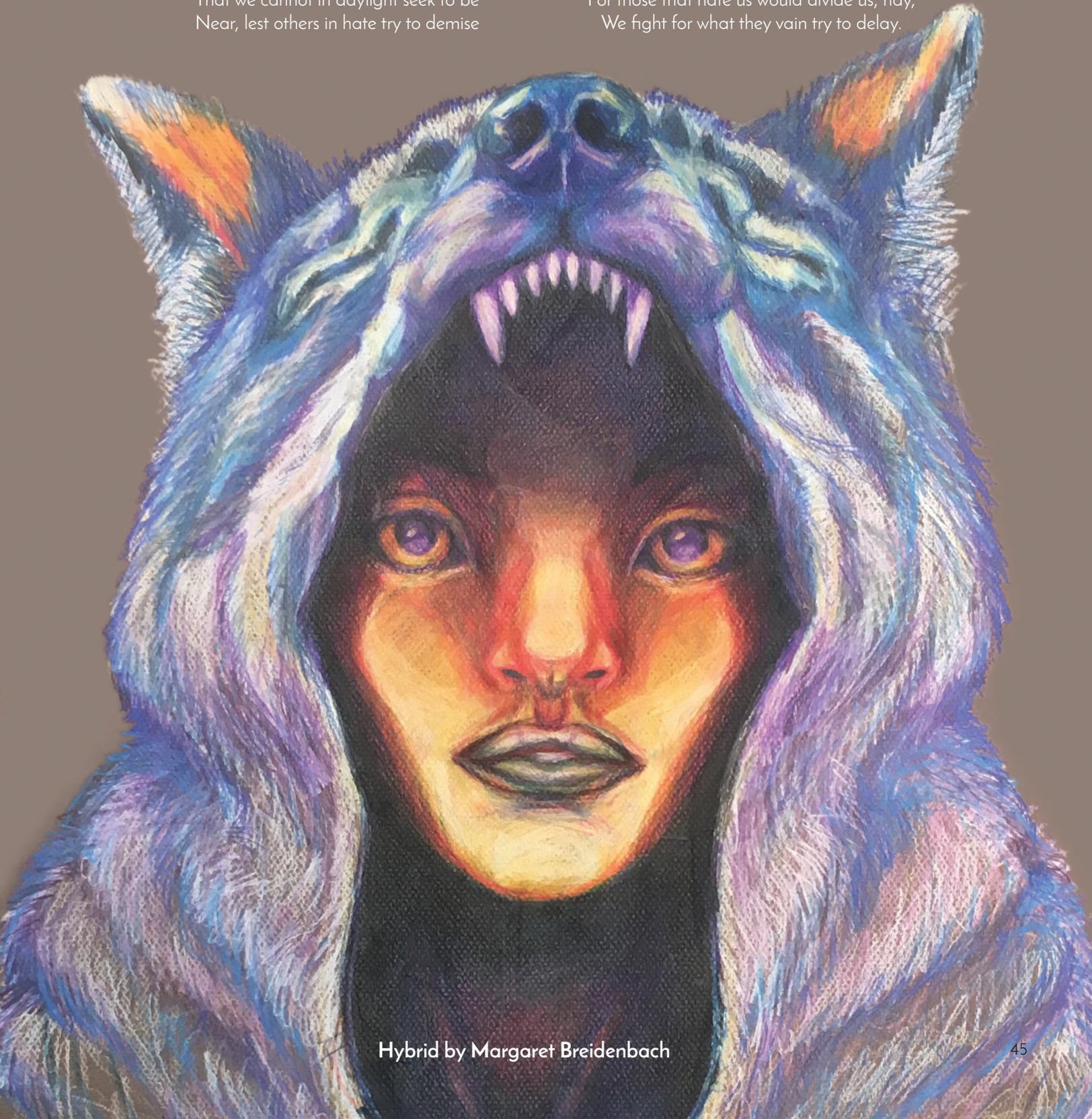
Exposed by Jordan Horton

CURSE OF THE HUNTRESSES

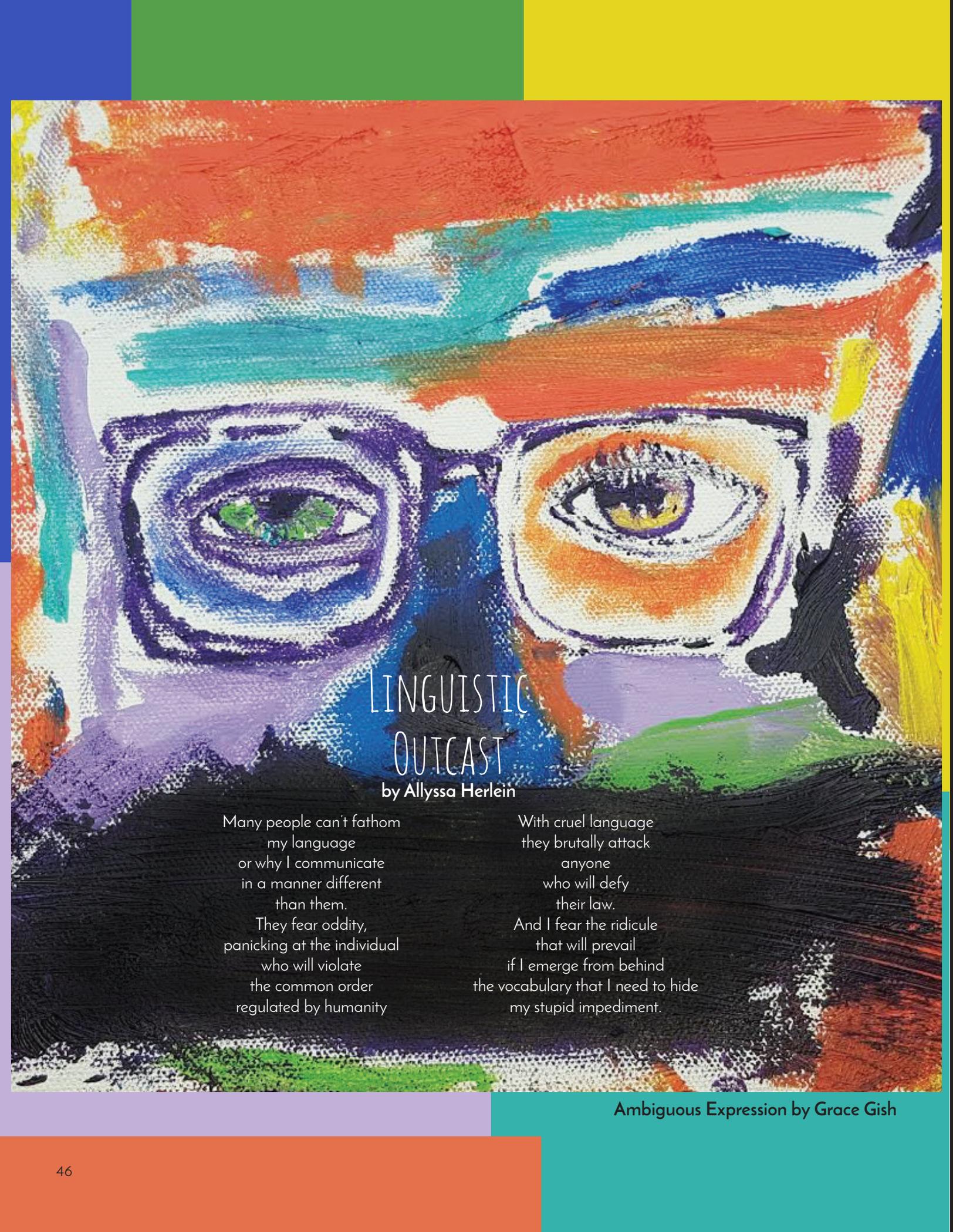
by Isabel Nee

And so the sun, in its dying fire falls,
Into the darkness of the night's black realm.
The moon ascends into the sky, so stalls
I, to see its beauty and feel its calm.
But then come the stars, crossed in others' eyes,
That we cannot in daylight seek to be
Near, lest others in hate try to demise

This love's fragile bond between you and me.
O, how different are we, you with light
Green and blue eyes, long sunset scarlet locks,
I, with pale skin and tresses black as night.
Yet, we are so the same we dare not talk,
For those that hate us would divide us, nay,
We fight for what they vain try to delay.



Hybrid by Margaret Breidenbach



LINGUISTIC OUTCAST

by Allyssa Herlein

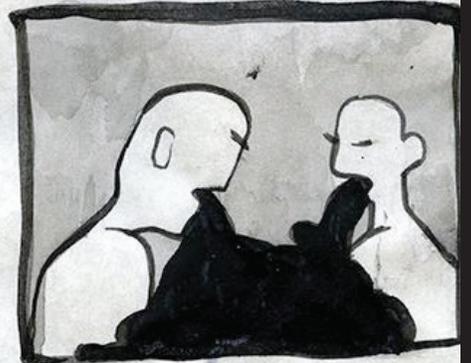
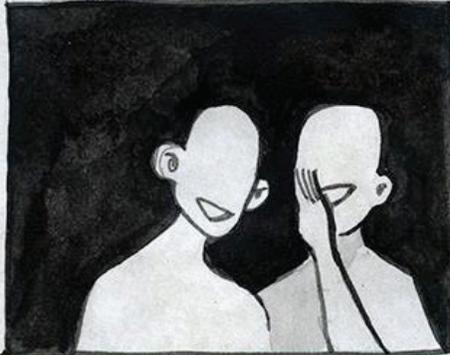
Many people can't fathom
my language
or why I communicate
in a manner different
than them.

They fear oddity,
panicking at the individual
who will violate
the common order
regulated by humanity

With cruel language
they brutally attack
anyone
who will defy
their law.

And I fear the ridicule
that will prevail
if I emerge from behind
the vocabulary that I need to hide
my stupid impediment.

Ambiguous Expression by Grace Gish



T R U T H .

Cycada Self Portrait by Kahill Perkins



BEAUTY

by Caroline Hanson

I am an emerald waterfall flowing with knowledge,
Running through life like a wolf.
While my imagination is like the sea, always more to discover.
There's more to me than what meets the eye,
And only some can see it.
I know people but they don't know me,
And that's what's concerning.

Even though I can't hear them,
Their laughter is debilitating.
When I try to move forward
they always push me back to the beginning,
Yet whenever they think I'm crazy
they always laugh and jeer.
For I am only a little deaf girl who's trying not to be here.

Some people tell me that there is no beauty
ever coming my way,
But they are wrong because beauty is all
and it surrounds me every day.
People think I have no feelings and always keep me away,
But they never understand the emotions I keep locked away.
I am a bird waiting to be set free
in the lonely world where no one comforts me.

I believe in magic and I believe in myself,
Yet others judge me because of my health.
I may be deaf and cannot hear but I can listen to good,
better than fear.
Many don't understand me and fear me
because of the unknown.
But as long as I can see the beauty every day I live,
No one can harm me for every day I give.

I am a single lily in a field of poppies,
And the "swoosh" of the wind is cool.
I am only a little lying lily,
Saying I'm fine but really crying.
People judge and laugh at me but all I do is try.
For the beauty of life is special and worth a lot to my eyes.

I am an emerald waterfall flowing with knowledge,
Running through life like a wolf.
My imagination is like the sea, always more to discover.
There's more to me than what meets the eye
and only some can see it.
My life is full of strangers always trying to help,
But for I am only a little deaf girl trying not to yelp.

SILENCE

by Olivia Dugan

There once was a girl named Sarah
But no one knew her name.
"Loser!" the prissy, perfect girls screeched.
The word sang in her ears.
Silence.

The night arrives.
She is crying herself to sleep.
Nobody cares for her.
She didn't realize the words would hit so deep.
Silence.

The morning comes and the sun rises.
She walks into school like a nobody.
"Stupid!" the same girls yell, followed by more comments
With a tear streaming down Sarah's face,
Silence.

She walked home with tears in her eyes.
Sarah did not understand why they picked on her.
She did not understand why people did not stand up for her.
She did not understand why she listened to them in
Silence.

By the next day, she had the routine down.
Get bullied by the girls, cry, and walk home confused.
Sarah was a show for the other students,
as they stand by and watch.
They never said anything,
they were quiet as the tears roll down her cheek.
Silence.

This time will be different she told herself
As the cruel words were about to escape the girls' mouths,
"Stop it!" Sarah screamed right in the mean girls' faces
They were about to fight back but something stopped them.
Silence.

MARKED

by Emma Olinger

"People just choose to be pink, everyone is born blue."

"People with pink marks are going straight to hell."

"There are places to go to get your pink mark made blue again, so why not go?"

"These millennials with their pink marks."

"Blue marks are the superior marks."

"Hello."

The sounds of the bus were never quiet, and as the bus passed every street lamp, she felt the chaotic tendencies of those on the vehicle heighten. It meant almost nothing to Margaret Claire, though, as her earbuds produced a haunting melody that rang through her eardrums. It was no surprise that Margaret did not hear the greeting of a person beside her, being nearly deafened by the beautiful arrangement of notes. Yet, when she was nudged, she immediately glanced up to see what could only be described as the biggest rose she'd ever seen. A rose, of course, is a slang term for those who had a pink mark on their chest, which Margaret's parents used to describe people they didn't particularly like.

Despite all that, Margaret Claire had been nudged by this rose, and turned down the volume of her music just enough to hear what a rose had to say to her.

"Is this your bag?"

Margaret took her eyes off of the rose's face and down to the black and blue tie-dyed back pack she held in her thin fingers, fingers which were covered bottom to tip with various rusty rings. The two said nothing as they sat virtually in silence for the duration of the next few moments, and before Margaret had the chance to reply, the rose dropped the bag in the woman's lap and sat beside her. Margaret was astounded.

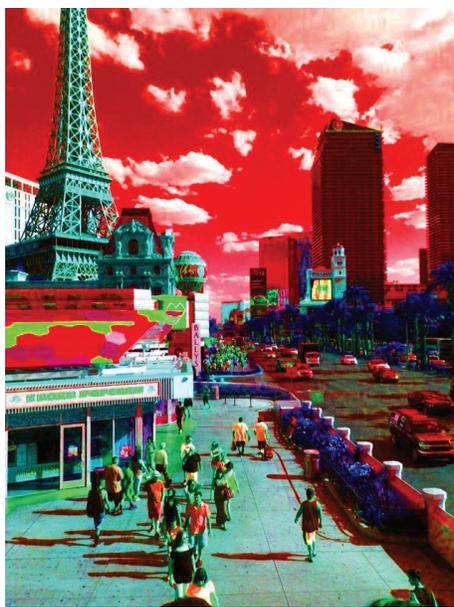
"Wait, wait wait wait - " she began, the minty taste of her breath lingering upon her lips as she spoke. "What the hell was that?"

"What the hell was what?" the rose replied, raising a brow at Margaret's staring. "That stunt you just pulled. My stuff was there and you just - "

"What are you looking at me like that for?"

Margaret paused, stunned by the opposing woman's comments before shaking it off, not yet finished with her rebuttal.

"Listen here, you - you - " she felt the word ready to leave her mouth, the word she knew her parents would finally praise her for saying as she refused to use it her entire life. It wasn't like she agreed with a rose lifestyle. The thought of defacing a proud part of yourself, such as the universal blue mark, and making it a disgusting pink color - it was completely out of the question.



The Red City by Haley Wright

"You what? Come on, say it. I want to hear it."

Margaret Claire took herself and her bag away from the rose, the pinkie, the zany. There it was - the word that rumbled at the pit of her stomach, causing her to feel sick every single moment of every single day. It was no matter, though, as she brought herself to the exit of the bus and awaited the vehicle to come to a grinding halt. It was nowhere near where she needed to be, as if there were a place she needed to be. After exiting, she spotted a public restroom, and entered quickly.

Upon entering, Margaret found the restroom to be empty, causing her to quickly drop her bag in the sink closest to the entrance. She took another look out

of the room, making sure the coast was clear before locking the door. Slowly, she brought herself to the sink and glanced up in the mirror, watching her sunken in appearance reflect the insufficient amount of sleep she received in the last few nights.

Tears were unexpected, as Margaret thought she'd done this enough times to make her feel numb while performing this ritual, but apparently her encounter with a zany had triggered an emotion she hadn't felt in ages. Her fingers shook as she reached into her bag with one hand and used the other to softly pull up her shirt. Slowly, she pulled out a blue marker, her eyes dead-set on the middle of her forehead in the mirror as she knew if she glanced down she would immediately begin to sob.

She had gone through the procedures - the removal therapy, the religious removals, she had even taken it into her own hands by trying to cut off the layer of skin on which it sat. However, none of it worked. So, she had gone back to her old method, one she had used since she realized she was different. She colored it in twice a day with a blue marker to make sure no one thought she was a zany.

She continued, circling the mark until it was completely blue, the superior color, the perfect color. However, something was different this time. She was shaking, small sobs bubbling from her lips as she colored outside of her mark and onto her skin. Margaret couldn't stop, she simply continued to scribble her chest blue. She covered her arms with blue ink, her legs, her face - it was all blue. Blue wasn't right.

Pink the color that defined her life, one that watched her grow up and fall down during her worst times. Pink held her through bad times and showed her a way of living, a way in which Margaret Claire could finally be free again. However, through all the times she had betrayed pink, through all the instances she had taken a color so close to her and so pure to her and shattered it without a second thought, just as everyone else she knew did, pink had become tired of saving her sanity. So pink had let Margaret go, let her right and wrong blend together, and watched as she shook in a pool of her own tears, covered head to toe in blue ink.

MY BROTHER

by Grace Hoskins

He makes me laugh
He makes me smile
We goof off
He sees a side of me that no one else sees
The silly side the ridiculous side
The "Let's make up a word to mean this" side
We have each other's back

He runs
I mean he runs
Like no one I've ever seen run
People notice

Sports come easy
He doesn't have to practice much
He plays almost every sport
People notice

He's kind, he has a love for helping others
He loves animals, talks sweet to our dogs
He's strong willed, as stubborn as could be
He's a character, he makes the funniest faces
He's very competitive, but always unselfish

Cool and Warm by Stella Shapiro

We play, we practice sports, we do anything,
as long as we're together
I do stuff for him
He does stuff for me
We have an unbreakable bond

He looks up to me
He sees his big sister, he adores me
I look up to him, he humbles me

We share a home
We share our things
We share a love
We share an unbreakable bond
We share being adopted

We are also different
I'm 13
He's 8

I have straight hair
He has curly hair
I have blond hair
He has black hair
I have light skin
He has dark skin
Our love is defined by our bond . . . not our skin color





TOWELHEAD

by Aroog Khaliq

The night before my first day of sixth grade, I studied the piece of fabric laid out on my bed with uncharacteristic placidity. It was no work of art; plain cotton fabric, dyed black, with a single strip of black lace for adornment. No, I wasn't looking owlshly at my first bra: the object that held my fascination was the first hijab I would wear to school full-time.

*wisps of hair escape
as innumerable as stars
as infinite as ignorance*

On the totem-pole of hijabi excellence, full-timers received the most respect, but even they had their own hierarchy. At the top were high school and college girls that could take a 12 by 72-inch shawl and wrap it into a masterpiece of rippling fabric on their heads. At the bottom were lowly grunts like me - sixth graders with acne, neon-colored braces, and the cat's eye glasses you realize are lame halfway through seventh grade - who wore plain, one-piece slip on hijabs made in Bangladeshi sweatshops. This latter form of hijab was popular among young children and the inexperienced, and thus, I dubbed it the kiddie hijab.

*little girl, big blink
no, I can't show you my hair
"why?"
violent silence
who knows? not I*

I had taken my kiddie hijab out for test runs on elementary school Crazy Hat Days, during which I had to patiently explain to my classmates that no, I didn't need to take my hijab off for the pledge of allegiance. Those days couldn't hold a candle - nay, a tea light! - to my first day of sixth grade, because now I could join all the cool girls at the mosque as a "full-timer."

*tongue in knots, heart in spasms
how do I explain?
"Say it's religious. Like, modesty."
not enough words, never enough words*

Now, after achieving scarf-master level, I look back upon my kiddie hijab days with embarrassment. The kiddie hijab was as much a mindset as it was a scarf, and we who

ANTITHESIS OF COCONUT OIL

by Alice Kogo

donned it did so for the sake of finally getting accepted into the hush-hush hijabi sisterhood we once watched jealously from afar. At seventeen, I am more cognizant of the divine purpose, and the danger, that lies in the sacred commandment to cover, and this epiphany occurred through my very own trial by fire.

As an eleven-year-old, I failed to realize that she who donned the hijab opened herself up not only to a barrage of asinine questions (I do not shower in it), but, as I discovered throughout middle school, harassment. I was subjected to the classic racist jokes about Osama Bin Laden and camels, the brilliant epithet of Towelhead, and, at worst, particularly irreverent kids who pulled off my hijab on the school bus. To these kids, who thought seeing my hair was akin to pantsing someone, the hijab was just a piece of fabric. To the girl I was before this harassment, the hijab was just a piece of fabric.

*"we just wanted to see your hair."
my hair, my property*

Six years later, the utter humiliation I felt at being violated so carelessly before my peers still blindsides me. That emotion helped me realize that the decision to wear a hijab is one full of gravity. Now, I wear my religion proudly on my head. My hijab says, look at me - not as an object to be valued for its beauty, but as a person with intellect and passion. My hijab removes the rose-colored glasses that obscured my ability to see discrimination and resist it. My hijab is a badge of sisterhood, faith, and honor that I wear despite knowing it makes me a target. My hijab closes the door on the innocence of childhood, and invites me to open my eyes and see the world in all its glory, and all its dishonor.

*rose-tinted glasses with broken lenses
this is the world -
it is the wound and the salve*

my hair bleeds purple when i sleep
dark, violet, translucent in the way that sausage fat boiling on the pan is
before it touches a towel
in the way that a ghost's imprint is before fingerprints are left on the kitchen counter
in the way that black bodies are
before they find themselves in front of the barrel of a gun
before they become that ghost
before the pus leaking from the wound touches a tshirt a hood
the towel they are wrapped up in before reaching the stretcher
and they are dead meat, sold by link, five bullets per pound,
fifteen bullets per pound, twenty-three bullets per pound.
to save money on hospital bills the medics pronounce them dead
to prevent the wasting of money on someone who would've died / been left anyways
they are pronounced dead

maybe if i were in the absence of color my hair wouldn't bleed,
it would drip, straight down, following the lines, rivulets of clear water down my locks
clear as my conscious as i tell myself that i am not a racist
that my were parents were / are
clear as my reflection in
the water i see myself and i can smile will not have to change myself
to fit the image of a black pariah in america

i use coconut oil in my kinky hair because it makes me feel at home
when it freezes into the hard shell of itself that can only be soothed
with the warm pulse of a human hand i see myself
there is no harm that comes from coconut oil,
but its opponent dark & lovely deep conditioner is its antithesis, it makes me bleed
store brand, average, bought when my pockets were too empty
to search for the solace of the barest, the best, coconut itself

they repackage what i know, they call it original,
make me smile with a cardboard cutout black face on the label
remove the sense from my head as i reach to the shelf
forgetting the black owned businesses that exist, that they need me, that i need them
i empty my pockets out for you and you make me bleed
because the money i spent on your white product takes away
from what i could've put in communities that would help quell the bullets
that would bandage the wound / that would keep us alive / but i chose the alternative
and as it makes me bleed i

remember how purple used to be my favorite color
until it wasn't
how royalty is dressed in fine robes of that hue, the shade tantalizing
but there are no more queens in my country
my color has already been assigned to me, black, the absence of light,
and because purple is just a refraction of the sun in a prism
holding a multitude of colors within itself,
it is no wonder that i do not partake in its equiption

MY DIASPORA POEM (REMIX), OR ALL I KNOW IS THIS

by Aroog Khaliq

I hate diaspora poetry
as much as the next
fed-up immigrant

All that bullshit
about "lives stained
with honey and turmeric"
and "the colonizer
cutting my tongue with
aluminum shears"
is utterly boring

But there is truth to
the pain that comes from
racism and xenophobia
and the distance between
the people that are supposedly
your people,
whatever the fuck that means

All I know is this:

My father came here
and he sat hunched before
a computer for hours,
doing whatever it is
a database architect does,
and trying to deflect the racism
that loomed above his cubicle
and bloomed in the sky
after 9/11 -
the day after his
second child was born

My mother came here
and at first she was so lonely,
with only my soft-skulled,
baby self for company,
that she cried herself to sleep
each night for two years,
wondering how her brain,
full of silvery, delicate
Urdu couplets,
was going to learn
flat, counterintuitive
English,
and how her baby
was going to hold onto
a culture green and gold
in a land of red and blue
and always, always
white . . .

All I know is this:

My father is here,
a citizen now,
running a business he
breathed life into,
sitting hunched over a
computer,
doing whatever it is a
database architect does,
clocking in fifty, sixty hours
a week into the secret time clock
in my head,
and thinking
about what life will be like
when January 20th comes
and goes, and telling himself
that he has been through worse,
in Pakistan . . .
and in the States

My mother is here,
a citizen now,
her slip-on beige niqab
on a hook by the coat closet,
her black abaya hanging within,
her four children all in school,
all raised by her love,
her sweat, her tears,
and she holds her thinning
black braid between her fingers,
thinking of all that this country
has taken from her,
and all that it has given,
and she wonders whether
the fear she feels on every
September 11th,
the fear that keeps her from
leaving the house at all,
will soon bloom into
a fear that stains each day,
and she wonders how
she will tell her children
to be safe
without exposing her own
fear

All I know is this:

I am a woman
made of fear and pain and loss
and Urdu couplets and steaming rice
and knockoff Burberry scarves-cum-hijabs
and Beyoncé songs on vinyl
and snickerdoodles

I am afraid,
I cling to hope,
I cling to righteous anger,
I take this silver tongue,
I take these golden words,
I write into existence
my manifesto -
This too, shall pass

In my mind,
I lie in a field of mustard greens
on a charpoy under the stars,
and I let myself think
about every place I feel
at home
and I pray for
those sacred grounds
to remain Hallowed

All I know is this:

My diaspora poem is
written widdershins,
in a language locked
with a key lodged deep
in my eternal being

My diaspora poem is
about fear and the future
fear of the future,
that insidious, elusive
thing

My diaspora poem is
an ode to my parents
and the rocks they
had hewn by hand
for me,
my kith,
my kin

My diaspora poem is
for the hijabis out there
that are tired of saying
they are feminist and
they are Muslim
to people on both sides
of that ugly
Discourse

My diaspora poem is
a love letter from me
to you, with all
my best wishes
concentrated into
each
and
every
word



A LETTER TO MY MOTHER, WHO I LOVE VERY MUCH AND WHO I HOPE DOESN'T READ THIS

by Elizabeth Joseph

The Last Flight Home by Haley Wright

When I needed a white sheet for Toga day at school, my father immediately gave me his own white cloth. The weave was loose and rough, with a smooth strip of gold running down one side, so large I thought it was a sari.

"This is a *mundu*," he said. "We use it for traditional, formal occasions." The first thing I said was, "I can't wear it. I don't want to stain it."

The first thing I thought was; *if I have a son, he will never wear this cloth.*

Mama, you always assume I'm going to have a child. In fact, I'm sure it's expected, to some degree. I'm aware you want me to make my own choices. But I am aware this may not be a choice I completely make for myself.

Here is the problem with uprooting yourself, Mama: the culture you were surrounded in was left behind, and you can't blame me when I see things differently.

Scientifically speaking, the older I grow, the smaller my chance gets of ever learning Malayalam, our native tongue. As my ears grow attuned to the intricacies of English, they fall more and more deaf to the Indian languages you know so well. And I know that you say Malayalam isn't important in the scheme of things. But the last words my grandfather spoke to me were in Malayalam, and I will never get to understand what he tried to say to me six years ago.

When If I have children, they will bear an anglicized name like *Elizabeth Joseph*, the nuances of an Indian-Catholic name lost in the reverberating effect of having a white-sounding moniker. If they ever go to India, it will be through a homogenized process with

no tangible connection to the people. They will only speak the language of a colonizer's tongue. Their hopes of understanding the Indian culture that I have received rests entirely on you, and I don't even know if you'll be around then to share it.

Mama, I'm afraid to have children because, when the time comes, they will have to fight to hold on to a culture that will not belong to them, not in the way it belongs to you. How long will it take for our future family line to forget their past altogether? Ancestry.com doesn't cover immigrant families.

I am afraid because the stories I see around me don't reflect the experience of being stuck in two worlds that overlap but never truly touch. I didn't grow up in the society that shaped you into a blade of pragmatism. I do not have the drive for competition that all of the other Indian kids around me seem to possess so innately. And I know that there are others like me, the second generation immigrants who are also confused of their place. But being surrounded by the Indian kids whose parents took to American opportunity like a fish to water is not easy. Not that you didn't take to the opportunities here, Mama. But you have to admit that you aren't like most of the other Indian parents, who placed their children in activities from day one. I am not naturally talented at math. My chances of being a doctor or engineer are slimmer than yours or my father's. The only discipline I have been consistent in is English. And what kind of Indian only speaks English?

I know that you may not understand, but sometimes, the hyphen between Indian-American is a breaking point rather than a bridge.

And Ma, if I have a child, what's the chance they'll fit into one of my *kurtas* or *churidars*? What's the probability they'll like to eat fish or *Vattyappam*? American beaches are different from the Keralite coastline. Where will they find freshly ground sugarcane juice besides the Mysore Zoo?

Mama, when I told you that I will need to go back to India when I'm fully grown, you said a guided tour would be enough. But a family tree is not a fairy tale. I cannot close a book and outgrow the roots that are still planted a continent away. I can't just forget the food that tastes better in India than in the U.S., the way the architecture stands colorful and bold, the rain that rushes down the outside stairs and rooftops during monsoon season. The entire world is different: the celebrations, the academics, the funerals. Where will I find a partner willing to say the same?

Mama, I know I have years to decide. But I don't want to have children who do not know the losses you and my father left behind. I trace my identity through the hairline your mother gave me, the curls from Pa, the plentiful locks you passed on, the *zha* gene and the absurdly skinny wrists. But I cannot preserve what you have left when all of it seems to be locked in my DNA.

You both are teaching me to pass down our culture through food and clothing. I can tell my children the stories you have told me. Maybe I will inherit the same wistful tone my father has when he shares his memories. I can try to play YouTube videos in Malayalam to make up for the dearth of my mother tongue, the residual taste of English lingering instead. But Mama, until I can make a home from the bones you left behind, I do not want to have children.

FLOWERS EXIST ON THE MOON

by Maggie Golshani

Fidgeting my leg against a familiar school desk, the dreadful anticipation always washes over me while listening to roll call on the first day of school. As the teacher goes down the list of names as simple as Mary and Alex, my face darkens with a crimson hue as I await the familiar butchering of my name and the consequential embarrassment. Slowly, the teacher halts their flawless rendition of Marys and Alexs. Usually following this halt, there is the typical "I know I'm going to get this wrong," or "I apologize in advance." However, my seventh grade teacher didn't apologize and instead made an audacious attempt at pronouncing my name. Confident, bold, and severely misled, this teacher assumed that "my hole" would be the most accurate pronunciation of my name.

My name, Mahgol, literally translates to "moon flower," and surprisingly the beautiful concept of my name is nothing compared to the ugly pronunciation it often endures. I never go by my real name in the U.S. for the sole reason that I wanted to be Iranian in Iran and American in America. Denying my Iranian culture became an instinctive reflex; when people would ask me how to pronounce my birth-given name, I would aloofly reply, "it's not important."

Growing up as a second-generation immigrant was like chasing a cookie I could never get. I saw countless snippets of a "perfect" American life all around me, but it was one I could never achieve. Wherever I went, I was reminded of the other part of me I tried so hard to mercy-kill as it created a divide between the others and me. The shame made me yearn for accent-less parents, Thanksgiving traditions, and weekly church gatherings - not for Christianity's sake, but to fit into the American mold. But Iranian culture ran through the blood in my veins and the pipes in my house.

I stopped speaking Farsi, didn't go to the country for three years, and insisted that I didn't have a middle name, which was just another reminder of Iran. I called myself an easy American name, didn't go to any Iranian gatherings, and started identifying myself as Persian instead of Iranian because of the negative political connotation the word has. Simply put, I was whitewashing myself. This cultural cleanse was less of a purification and more of a misled corruption. It was a waste.

Like Alice in Wonderland, I had been led astray in a deep hole of confusion, but soon I awoke from my dazed state when I returned to Iran after three years. At the beginning of my trip, heavy guilt and embarrassment crept in me and weighed down my heart like an anchor. All I could mutter to my estranged relatives were simple pleasantries that were nowhere near in substance to our previous conversations. Our reunion often resulted in incoherent conversations, awkward silences, and pitying smiles as they had immediately realized what I had lost.

By repeatedly calling me Mahgol for the first time in three years and forcing me to participate in a plethora of activities, my family made me fall in love with Iranian culture after years of fighting it. Like the moon, my Iranian culture shines brightly even when the rest of the world seems dark. Like a patient flower, my Iranian culture

has taken my entire life to slowly blossom and enrich its surroundings. The newfound comfort of my name and the ease in which it rolls off my tongue has inspired me to drop the cultural shield I once had and instead be bombarded with full adoration for Iran and all of its gracious offerings.

The Iranian food that dances in my mouth symbolizes traditions passed down generations that finally end with me.

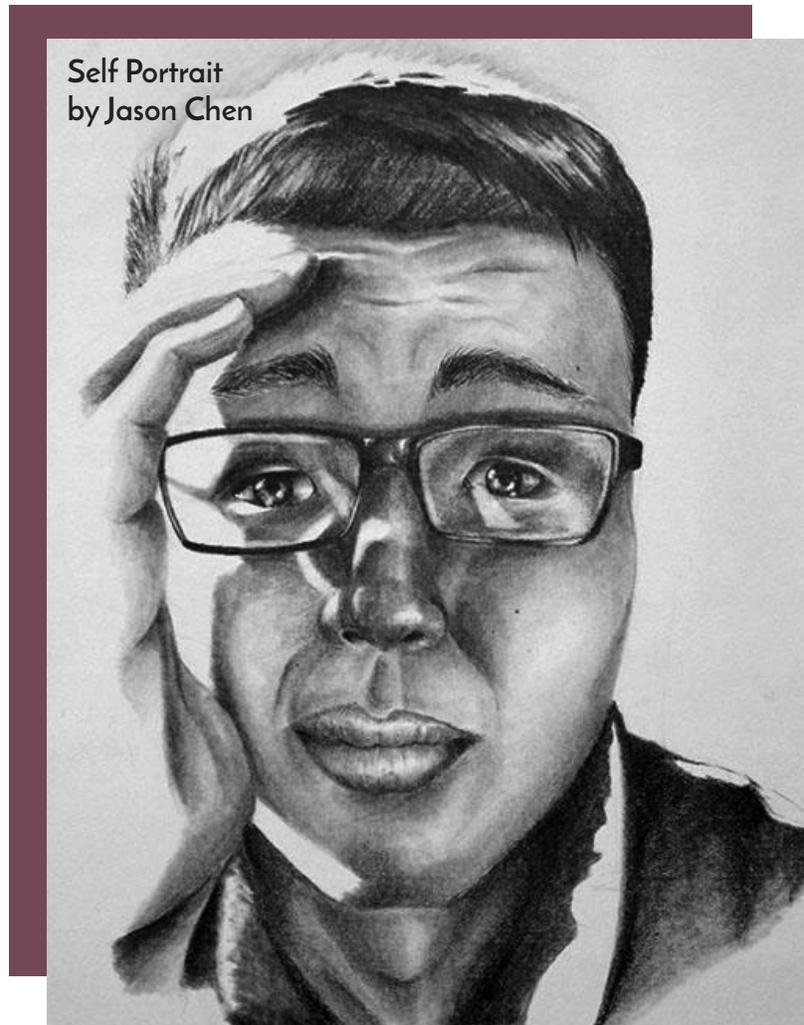
The Iranian sight carries sturdy mountains on the countryside that I would gaze upon while driving to see enchanting coastline of the Caspian Sea.

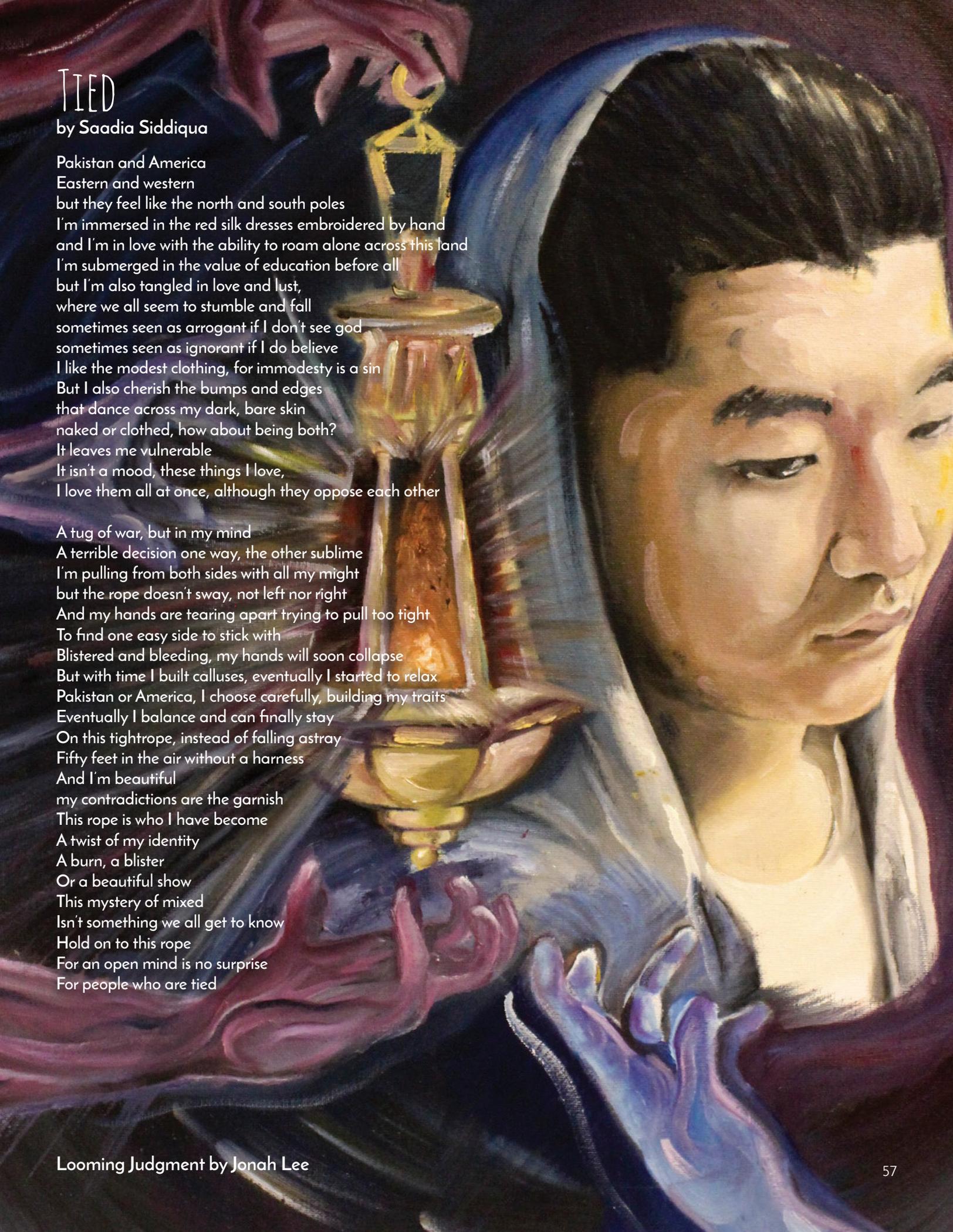
The Iranian voice subtly carries the beautiful hymns my mother would sing to me, as I would fall asleep and into my Iranian mold.

My Iranian voice proudly carries all of me. For I am not half-Iranian and half-American, I am a mixture of the two as they intertwine and embrace one another.

Accepting my culture has been a matter of learning to embrace its diversity, rather than viewing it as adversity. I still struggle with accepting the mixed background I have, but it has allowed me to see the beauty of the world. There is nothing wrong with my accented parents or my hard-to-pronounce name; in fact, there is a unique merit in these discrepancies. Often times, this beauty gets lost in translation - especially during roll call - but it's one worth looking for.

Self Portrait
by Jason Chen





TIED

by Saadia Siddiqua

Pakistan and America
Eastern and western
but they feel like the north and south poles
I'm immersed in the red silk dresses embroidered by hand
and I'm in love with the ability to roam alone across this land
I'm submerged in the value of education before all
but I'm also tangled in love and lust,
where we all seem to stumble and fall
sometimes seen as arrogant if I don't see god
sometimes seen as ignorant if I do believe
I like the modest clothing, for immodesty is a sin
But I also cherish the bumps and edges
that dance across my dark, bare skin
naked or clothed, how about being both?
It leaves me vulnerable
It isn't a mood, these things I love,
I love them all at once, although they oppose each other

A tug of war, but in my mind
A terrible decision one way, the other sublime
I'm pulling from both sides with all my might
but the rope doesn't sway, not left nor right
And my hands are tearing apart trying to pull too tight
To find one easy side to stick with
Blistered and bleeding, my hands will soon collapse
But with time I built calluses, eventually I started to relax
Pakistan or America, I choose carefully, building my traits
Eventually I balance and can finally stay
On this tightrope, instead of falling astray
Fifty feet in the air without a harness
And I'm beautiful
my contradictions are the garnish
This rope is who I have become
A twist of my identity
A burn, a blister
Or a beautiful show
This mystery of mixed
Isn't something we all get to know
Hold on to this rope
For an open mind is no surprise
For people who are tied

Melanin
Estu Pawestri
by Roxanne
Reasco



“I think because I am Muslim and I use [a] scarf, it was a little bit hard to get it because some poeple are really nice, but some people say, ‘I don’t [want] to talk with her’ or **‘I don’t want to have [a] relationship with her because she can’t do something that we usually do,’** like drink or [have] sex. Some people think, ‘I would not like to know her,’ because **we’re not the same [in] society. Sometimes that makes me sad.**”

Melanin
Darius Reasco
by Roxanne
Reasco



“I’ve never thought of my skin color as an inconvenience, **if anything it gives me an advantage over those around me.** But if I had to choose it would be that **people assume that I fit the black stereotype,** even then I still think of it more as a benefit.”



Melanin
Bella Barnes
by Roxanne
Reasco

“...And my mom said, ‘I have an interview, I’m trying to do the right thing here. Please stop yelling at me.’ And Mrs. Porter was like, ‘What? **This colored girl is getting all uppity with me!**’ and **turned the hose on her** and gets her sopping wet.”



Melanin
Roxanne Reasco
by Roxanne
Reasco

“The older I grew, the easier it became for me to ignore my ‘black side’ and my ‘latina side’, until I was ‘white-washed’. When I tell people I was born in Ecuador, I think they don’t even believe me sometimes because I’ve lost all of that culture. There are times when I think: ‘I wish I were white so I wouldn’t stand out in class when we talk about slavery?’ or ‘**I wish I were white so I wouldn’t have other cultures I felt guilty for ignoring**’. Nowadays, all I want is to reconnect with my cultures, but at the same time, **I wish I were white so I wouldn’t have to deal with this identity struggle in the first place.**”

THE BASICS

by Cathy Wang

My brain likes to run amok.
Some days it gets stuck on the same thought:
You are in love with someone and they do not love you.
You ate too much today and are now chubby, too chubby in fact to be loved by anybody.
You will never achieve anything of importance in your life.
You are a terrible daughter, friend, person, human being.
No one in this world has ever been as alone as you.
Other days the rusty wheels in my head start turning,
On those days I write the most.
Some days my head works in my favor.
On those days I see such beautiful things:
Scenes filled with bright laughter and promising futures and so much happy happy happiness.
Moments where I felt breathless clarity.
Running through sprinklers.
A pair of arms wrapped around me at a concert.
The wind in my hair and a song that made me feel endless.
Being loved.
Some days I feel like a romanticized day dream,
I am invincible and the world exists for me to conquer it.
Why should I care what anyone thinks?
I am beautiful and unique in my own right and the love of myself is all that I need.
My eyes, my hair, my smile, my legs, my stomach, all of me is magnificent.
But, on bad brain days
Sometimes, if I let it, the sorrow can swallow me whole.
It's easy to find problems in every aspect of your life once you've hit rock bottom.
Those days, I feel numb.
And sometimes, nothing beats the gray that fogs up my mind.
Thoughts of not enough
not good enough
never good enough
never enough.
My hands and feet are perpetually cold to the touch.
My cheeks are polka dotted with pigmentation and jowls dip around my mouth.
My top lip looks permanently swollen.
My legs are short and my arms jiggle.
But my eyes are a nice shade of brown and my left eyebrow is pretty bangin'.
My teeth are nice and I'm a fan of my shoulders.
I like the freckle on the side of my face.
I'm a worrier and a perfectionist.
An over thinker and a crier.
I have social anxiety with a dash of body dysmorphia.
I can never communicate the thoughts and feelings I want to say and I rely too heavily on routines.
I wear earbuds without music playing.
I'm indecisive and needy.
But I'm also a quick learner and a good leader.
I'm fiercely loyal and an okay storyteller.
I learn and I grow and I'm still trying to figure out who I am.
But those were the basics.

WHAT AM I?

by Clara Rabbani

In Iran, I am a rebel. I show my hair. In Brazil, I am exotic. The nomads left me their yellow eyes to search the desert sand. Where I live, there is no sand. In America, I am my age. Stuck in the in-between where nothing lasts. I am the enemy. No matter how hard they try to rid me of these thoughts the things they do only drill them in deeper. I do not belong in either world. When they ask me where I come from, I cannot say. In Iran I am outspoken. I have no loss for words. They spill from my lips like a waterfall in the Amazon. In Brazil, I am silent. I do not dance. I cannot feel the rhythm. I string words together like beads. In America, I am the empty space. I am what is not there. But when the painting is finished, and I am the only space left, then you will see what I am. I am the color of the clay, baking in the midday sun. A sun so old it has seen both worlds. I am the color of the coffee beans that fall from the trees in the rainforest. They wait for the monkeys to find them. Sprout leaves and last forever. In America, my language is a fragrant blend of spices. Those who have not tasted it will never understand. When they call my name, they are deceived. I am the sun. An egg white. I am light.

IT ISN'T ME

by Matthew Justis

I wake up
Brush my teeth
Then look into the mirror.

I see a kid
Who looks confused
About his true self.
I don't know who.
But it isn't me.

I see a painter
Who lost his touch
As years go by.
He lost his art.
But it isn't me.

I see an athlete
Who looks tired
Of the same route.
Run there and back
And repeat.
But it isn't me.

I see a dreamer
Who looks curious
About what he will do.
Who will he become?
But it isn't me.

This boy stares deep inside me,
Trying to release my inner self.
He shows me many things.

I am a kid.
I am a painter.
I am an athlete.
I am a dreamer.

I am me.

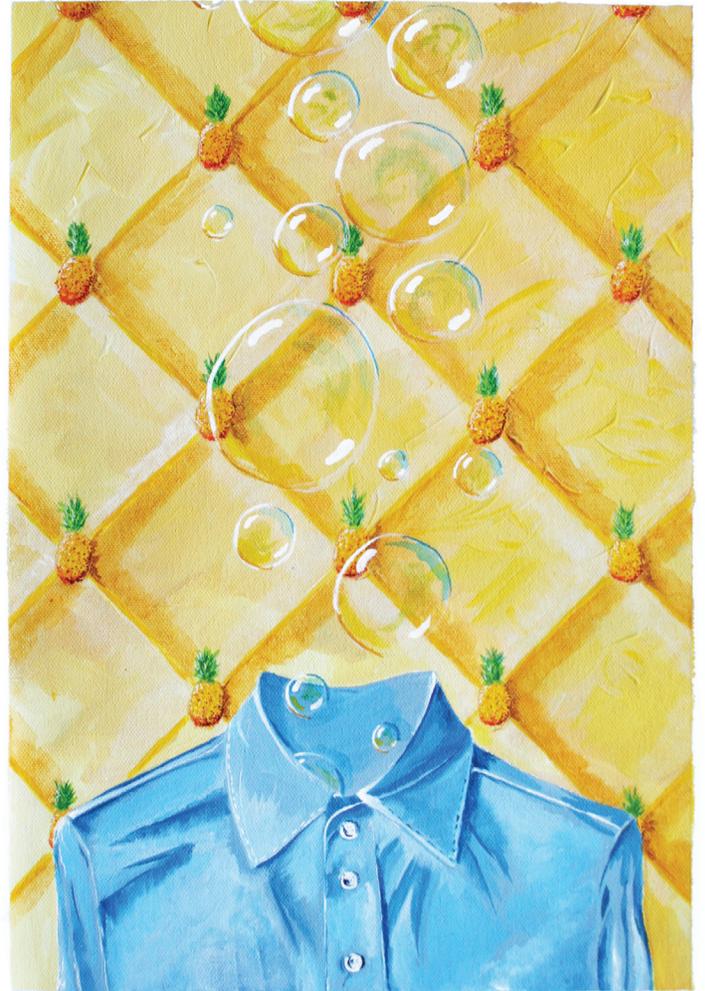
IDENTITIES CONFINED

by Emily Martin

The cheerleader who always holds a book
And the agnostic with an avid church attendance
Someone so silent and simultaneously outspoken
And the fiery spirit which silence most benefits
Her identity, though contradictory, belongs to her
Her friends help her confidence shine
And though she has her friend groups and her favorite things
Her identity can't be confined

A musician who hates band with a burning passion
A dancer who's clumsier than most
Though her personality has spunk and sizzle
She's never one to boast
Her identity, though contradictory, belongs to her
Her talent makes for smiles that are kind
And though she has her trials and limitations
Her identity can't be confined

A divorced father with a court bill sky-high
Who now works as a man of God
With steady jobs at two different churches
The turnaround could seem quite odd



Brain Dead by Victoria Wall

His identity, though contradictory, belongs to him
His love is so strong, you will find
And though he faces his daily challenges
His identity can't be confined

A foster child whose mom wasn't hers
The man she calls "dad" wasn't there for her birth
She changes schools each coming year
But her past can't define her worth
Her identity, though contradictory, belongs to her
Her past is left far behind
And though she has her moments of regression and hurt
Her identity can't be confined

Our friends may influence how we act
And our race often stereotypes us
When religion is connected to morality
It's too easy to judge or mistrust
Our identities, while contradictory, belong to us
Society is often so blind
And though strangers inevitably judge us in seconds
Our identities can't be confined



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arts.joco.org/shooting-stars

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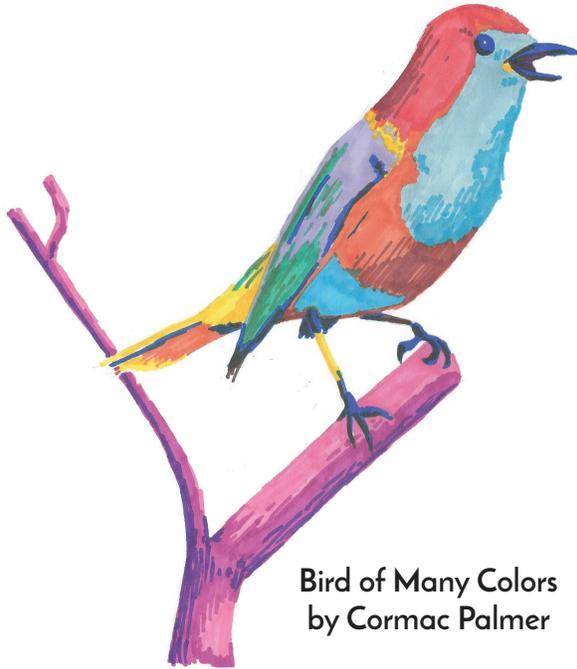


We have 40 ways to say "get ahead"

Don't get left behind before you've even started.

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by Cormac Palmer**

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Liz Chopp
Christina Cooper
Ted Fabiano
Kelly Finn
Maureen Fitzpatrick
Karen Gerety Folk
Matt Fuegen
Mindy Gilman
Mary Gojcevic
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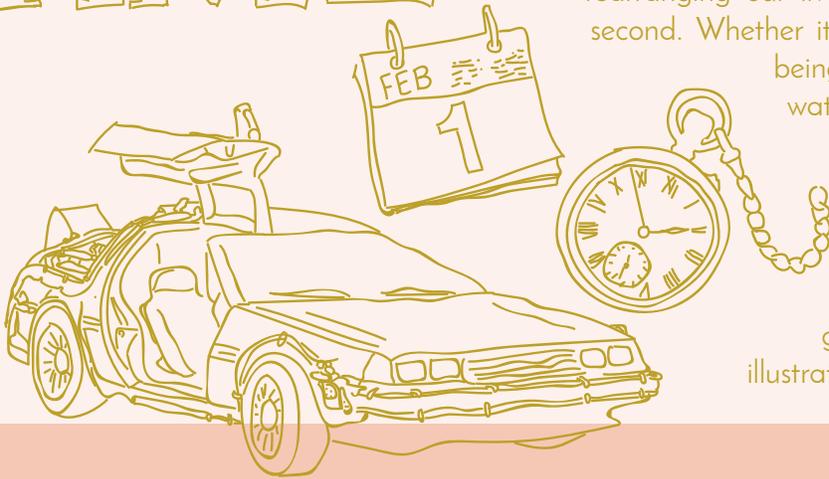
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Whether there's never enough . . .
you've got too much on your hands . . .
or it's on your side...

TIME



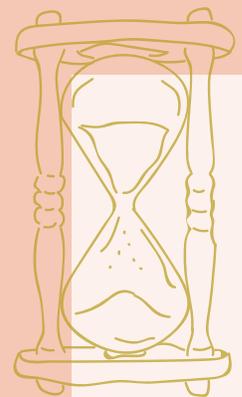
Time, the only constant that is constantly changing, rearranging our lives and brains and bodies by the second. Whether it's daylight savings, time travel or being late to school, we can't help but watch the minutes tick by. We welcome submissions for *elementia* issue xv on whatever timely topic might strike your fancy. But don't delay, the clock is ticking! Submit original poetry, fiction, nonfiction, graphic stories, photography and illustrations through Feb. 1, 2018.

For more information, go to:

jocolibrary.org/teens/elementia

Our featured writer, A.S. King. . .

One time, when she was nine years old, A.S. King commandeered a school bus. There's also that time she ran off with the circus. As a young adult, King spent time - 15 years - teaching people in Ireland how to read. Now, when she's not busy teaching writing at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, or traveling the country speaking about writing to high school students, King lets her hours pass in Pennsylvania, a full-circle return back to the place she was born (on March 10, which means she's a Pisces, if you're into that kind of thing - King is.) Inspired by surrealists like Kurt Vonnegut, King has become a master of magical realism and, as *The New York Times Book Review* called her, "one of the best YA writers working today." Her highly acclaimed and award-winning novels for teens include *The Dust of 100 Dogs*, *Reality Boy*, *Glory O'Brien's History of the Future*, and *Still Life with Tornado*. We can't think of anyone we'd rather have to warp, distort, destroy and deconstruct time with us. We are honored to announce the dedication of the upcoming 15th issue of our visual and literary arts magazine, *elementia*, to A.S. King.



Unsure.

About the question, or the world?

Unsure whether to answer truthfully, or to fabricate a more intriguing narrative.

Unsure what the question implies: Fears,

(Spiders, bad grades, falling out of love)

or physicalities,

(Brown eyes, red cheeks, mutilated fingernails)

or favorite songs?

(Banana Pancakes, Eleanor Rigby, Don't Dream It's Over.)

Happy.

Most of the time, anyway.

Driving eastward away from the sun,

eating brownies with plastic forks,

snapping pictures of dark trees and bright leaves . . .

With other people, driving and eating and snapping prelude joy,

but alone, maybe they don't.

Does the word count if it's not independent,

if its part doesn't play out in the dark as you lay, vulnerably,

with only yourself to keep you company?

Excited.

Perhaps commonly misinterpreted as hyperactive,

but no,

Excited for the birthdays and parties, and holidays and cupcakes,

and kisses, (hopefully) and babies, (maybe)

For money, and triumphant shouts, and good tears followed by good hugs,

and maybe even for the stormy nights, when the tide crashes

wet against your skin,

but drying off in the sun helps you forget.

Mostly excited for the days I'll stop answering questions to trivial personality quizzes.

Can I leave this one blank?

I hope that counts,

because I'm starting to doubt the legitimacy of this question.

Maybe it's not the words you use to answer, but the way you choose to approach it.

Four lines are hardly enough to explain the workings of a

Person,

with a scar on her ankle and stretch marks on her hips,

and stories pouring out of her fingertips.

And though the words I speak do not account

for they think,

I've seen the people around me erasing madly, and here's my conclusion:

four lines may be too much -

Some people only need one.

Ana Schulte

Ink Flower by Alyssa Sipe

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FOUR WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOURSELF?

