



# Night in July

by Abigail Swanson

The fountain reflects light  
onto the face of the library downtown.  
We went there once, a long time ago.  
It still glows.

Took note of the swept-out aisles  
in the wavering light that shines through the windows.  
So empty, so quiet.  
A volume fallen down in Biographies.

Through the apartment window,  
saw a side staircase where a fireman bums a cigarette  
off a night nurse.  
They talk, then kiss.

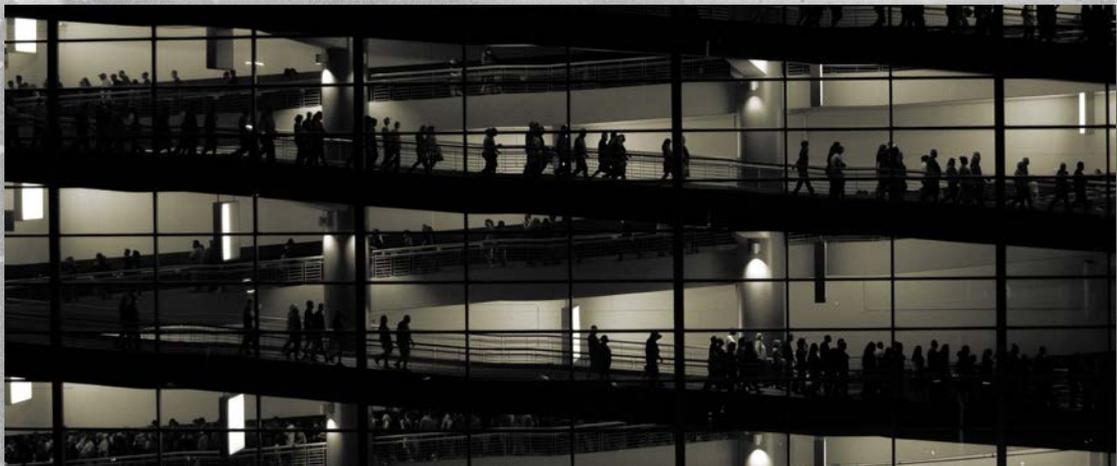
Writes her number on his hand,  
which he types, in a panic, into a cracked phone  
when she leaves  
and then he walks.

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Exodus by Julia Schnittker

Front Cover:  
Stories in the Stars  
by Lilliana Hughey

# FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to *elementia*, a magazine edited and designed by teenagers in the Kansas City metro area and published by Johnson County Library. *elementia* takes on a new theme each year; this year's submissions were inspired by **cycles**.

Throughout the year, our editors discovered the cycles woven into our submissions and the cycles within our own lives. Our authors and artists have explored what is left between the beginnings and ends, questioned the unbreakable systems we find ourselves stuck in and admired the simplicity of the mundane moments we often forget about.

Although cycles was such a vast theme, we found that what we have published feels personal and relatable. Our authors and artists all have conquered a variety of unique ideas while sharing the cycles they find intertwined in their own stories.

Our goal with this issue is to give a platform to a diverse range of perspectives and illuminate the narratives of young adults. We wanted to tackle the struggles of cycles while also appreciating the beauty within them. If you're looking for a place to share your own art or writing, see the last page for submission information and a description of our next theme: **unspoken**.



An Abstract Reality  
by Anna Cameron

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# TURRITOPSIS DOHRNII

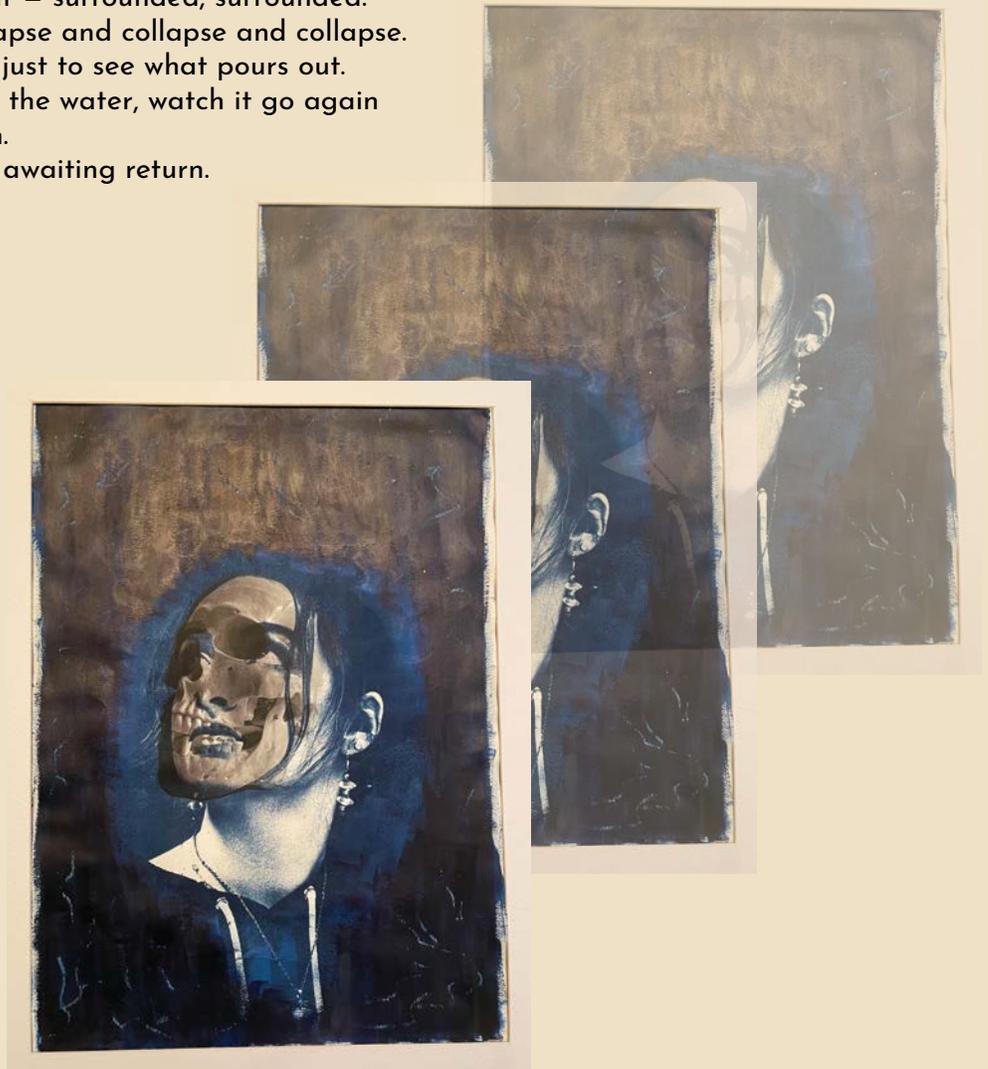
by Caroline Stickney

*In a rare process called transdifferentiation, the turritopsis dohrnii (known as the immortal jellyfish) can, in response to physical danger, leap back to its first stage of life as a polyp. The born-again polyp eventually buds and releases medusae that are genetically identical to the injured adult.*

i go back. i begin again.

i attach myself to my own beginnings, fitted into ancient bone.  
i release from the home i've known and known and known.  
i drift into familiar darkness like my own wet moon.  
i hold the world close and i let it go.  
i open every chamber of myself and see the same selves reflected back at me.  
i ignore the truth that i am alive because i am the only one left to remember.  
i feel each pain until it rattles the same.  
i survive every flood and every fire.  
i live and live and live.  
i sicken at the sight of myself – surrounded, surrounded.  
i watch the same waves collapse and collapse and collapse.  
i rip a great hole in my side just to see what pours out.  
i watch my life beat out into the water, watch it go again  
and again and again.  
i fit myself in this new body, awaiting return.

i go back. i begin again.



Looking Past Death by Audrey Morehead

## The Storyteller & Mobile Home by Alyssa Merry



## on watching a jellyfish cam in a dark room by Caroline Stickney

i watch jellyfish billow on the screen like souls floating across skies, their bells blooming as gracefully as bloodstains in bath water, and i reach through the pixels toward some form of salvation, some return that promises in the next life i'll be something softer, something expansive, wounds bared to moonlight. i imagine how my teeth will look grinning underwater, the hard edges of my body stripping away as the salt scrubs me of all that i remember. i picture how my body will unspool, tendrils grasping and releasing better than my hands ever could, how my heart will beat through my skin, how my limbs will curl like kelp until i'm finally clean.

i think of drifting, of return and return and return, and how in that new body i could be so much more than i am now, surrounded by blue light from faraway water burning holes into this endless night.



# From the Beginning

by Riley Strait

Opposite page:  
Rebirth by Ines Alto

Pause, and capture me how I am now:  
wrap me up in the minute we just lived:

make me your mosquito in amber -  
ephemeral in life, eternal in death.

Freeze and pin me to your little brother's trifold -  
turn me into grade-school, spelling-test vocab:

*colorful, iridescent, delicate*  
(you can skip over *dead*).

If I jumped down your throat,  
would you birth me again?

Would you swaddle me like a newborn,  
and this time - maybe - I can get it right?

On second thought, leave me there: born again,  
given a second chance - just to let it rot, ferment.

But don't throw me out for wildlife to get drunk on.  
Store me in oak and let me live out my life there.

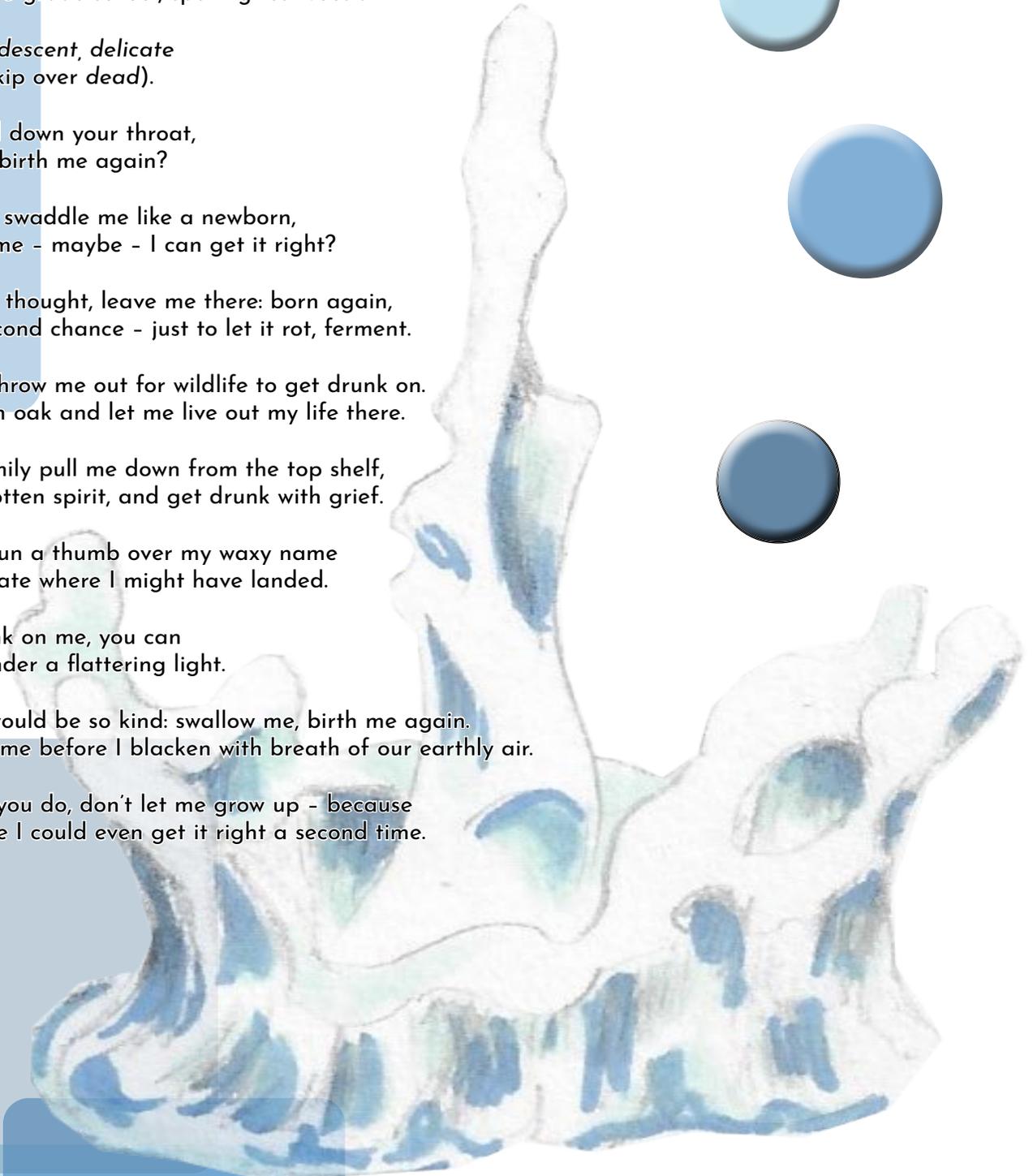
Let my family pull me down from the top shelf,  
some forgotten spirit, and get drunk with grief.

Let them run a thumb over my waxy name  
and postulate where I might have landed.

While drunk on me, you can  
view me under a flattering light.

So if you would be so kind: swallow me, birth me again.  
Then juice me before I blacken with breath of our earthly air.

Whatever you do, don't let me grow up - because  
I'm not sure I could even get it right a second time.





1



2

EVERYTIME I'M ON AN AIR-PLANE



3

I ALWAYS GET THIS URGE FOR THERE TO BE TURBULENCE.



A BUMP.



A SHAKE.

SOMETHING TO KEEP THINGS INTERESTING. OR SOMETHING.

BUT SOMETIMES

I WISH TOO HARD, FOR TOO LONG.



4



5

TOO MUCH.



SQUEEZE MY EYES SHUT.



OPEN



I DIDN'T WISH TO FALL.

FOR EVERYONE ELSE



TO FALL WITH ME.

IS IT JUST ME WHO'S FEELING THIS?

OR DID MY WISH

CAUSE EVERYONE



TO FALL WITH ME TOO?



6



THE PLANE FINALLY CRASHES.



PUT STILL AM I FALLING?

DON'T SINK

OPEN YOUR EYES AGAIN.

LOOK UP.

AND OH.



THERE'S MY LUGGAGE.



8

STILL FLOATING.



9

IT'S REMNANTS THERE

TO HELP

KEEP ME AFLOAT.



10

AND MAYBE

THE VIEW FROM THE SEA IS BETTER.



BECAUSE IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS

I AM JUST A TINY HUMAN BEING ON THE FACE

OF THE EARTH.

11



Chakra Redux  
by Vishak Srikanth

# Ctrl

by Riley Strait

My favorite button  
on the keyboard  
is Ctrl.

(Ctrl + C)  
(Ctrl + C)  
(Ctrl + C)  
(Ctrl + C)  
(Ctrl + C)

*Safe is a set of five.*

Don't ask me why -  
I couldn't begin to answer.

But if you really forced me to,  
then I would stutter around,  
searching for some explanation  
at least halfway sane - something  
I can play off as an idiosyncrasy.

(id-i-o-syn-cra-sy)  
*Safe is not a set of six.*

(ec-centric-i-ty)  
*Safe is a set of five.*

Something I can play off as an  
eccentricity.

(That's better.)  
*That's better.*

An eccentricity: like how, on an escalator,  
I have to board on the fifth rotating step  
behind the last person who got on.

*To ensure structural integrity.*

Or how, to avoid setting foot in a public restroom,  
I'll restrain from drinking water in the morning  
or before I go out.

*No telling what goes on in a public  
restroom.*

Or how I have to beat the decorative towel  
in the bathroom with my hairbrush  
before I leave for school.

*Because I said so.*  
So if you asked me why I like  
the button Ctrl so much,  
I wouldn't know what to say.

For something so elusive and fleeting in life,  
it's just there on the keyboard:

*Press me.*

Ctrl,

Ctrl,

[Ctrl]

# Copy. Paste. Delete. Repeat.

by Ava Shropshire

you,  
taught me how to hide my curls  
in a cloak of shame.  
told me I should cry every time my eyes  
landed on the details carved into my brown face.  
constantly reminded me I wasn't in close enough proximity.

you,  
collected bones from my own skeleton.  
pickpocketed what you deemed perfect  
from a plethora of peoples.  
turned us into artifacts for your exhibit.

you,  
tried to silence me.  
gave me labels when i spoke -  
called me aggressive when i whispered.  
but now i sing.

the fading melodies of my culture  
are more than a beat to sample in your own song.  
the kinky curls of my hair and the twisted strands of my braids  
aren't just accessories to try on.  
each coil unravels into story, emits an emotion.  
my features aren't something to steal  
- copy and paste into your own "curated" collection  
until you delete them when they go out of style.  
my body isn't a passing trend,  
it's where my soul lives - where my heart beats.



## All Eyes on Me by Lola Sidie

# an uncomfortable comfort

by Leandra Ho

for so long, i've crossed the same streets  
i've smiled and waved to the same people in the hallways  
i've thought the same thoughts  
i've loved the same love  
but i've outgrown my attachment to comfort and my warmth for the familiar sidewalks  
i long for a thrill; a moment that doesn't repeat itself  
i long for the feeling i get when i'm looking at the downtown cityscapes in a bokeh lens  
with my glasses off, i feel a sense of freedom  
i couldn't be more in love with the breeze that carries my worries  
and the streetlights that glow on my cheeks  
and the silence that reflects from the pavement  
but i'm reminded that it's temporary  
that my past life will soon chase me down those very sidewalks that i had loved  
it'll chase me with a smile on its face  
telling me that i was never meant for the heaven of change,  
that the beauty of similarity was bound to wither  
and me along with it



# All-American Adolescence

by Riley Strait

Tomorrow, I will worry about the future.  
But today, I wallow in the past.

Tomorrow, I will be 16 and trying to remember  
if the derivative of arcsin is one over  
*square-root-of-one-minus-u-squared*  
or *square-root-of-u-squared-minus-one*.

I'll think it's the first but I won't be sure -

I'll just choose C.

But today, I am 6 and rumbling in the elevator  
of a hotel in some state a 13-hour car ride away  
for summer vacation, and all I think about  
is hotel breakfast and pool.

Tomorrow, I will get home past dinnertime and  
make a list of the homework I need to do and  
try to see which assignment might be negotiable  
because there's just not enough time.

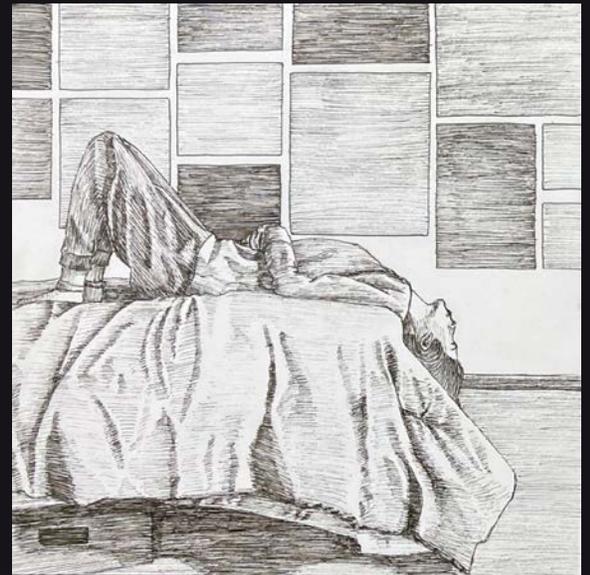
But today, I wear my light-up tennis shoes and  
go to Target at opening, before school, to buy the  
newest video game, and the only thing I need to do  
is play it today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow.

Tomorrow, I will wake up middle-aged in a 16-year-old body,  
limping out of bed with left-foot pain, an old injury flaring up.  
I'll march sullenly off to school like a disillusioned soldier to war,  
worn down from the lengthy battle of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

But today, I am stuck at 6 and wish to fast-forward time -  
but because I can't, I plan a life with childlike gravitas of all I want and more:  
I play air saxophone, sketch my next masterpiece, write my great American novel.  
Today, I will while away time, wanting to be 16.

Tomorrow, I will wake up a stranger in my body,  
and I will get out of bed and squint at the mirror,  
and think *When was the last time I shaved?* and  
*Since when have I needed to shave?*

Tomorrow, I will realize that Today is gone.



## Toska by Kenna Heller



# Paradise Drive

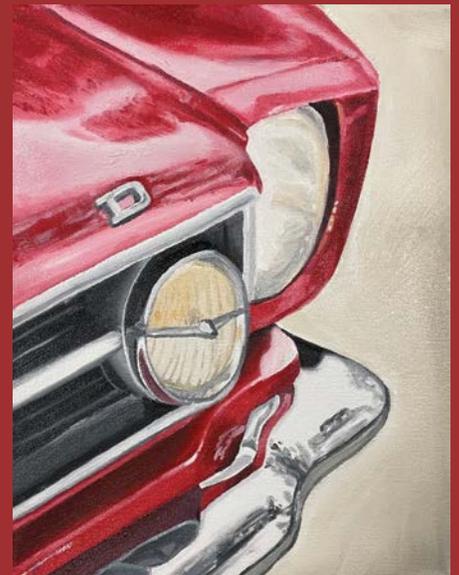
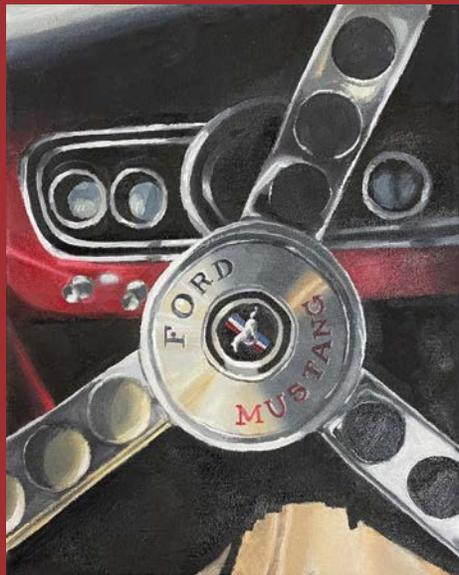
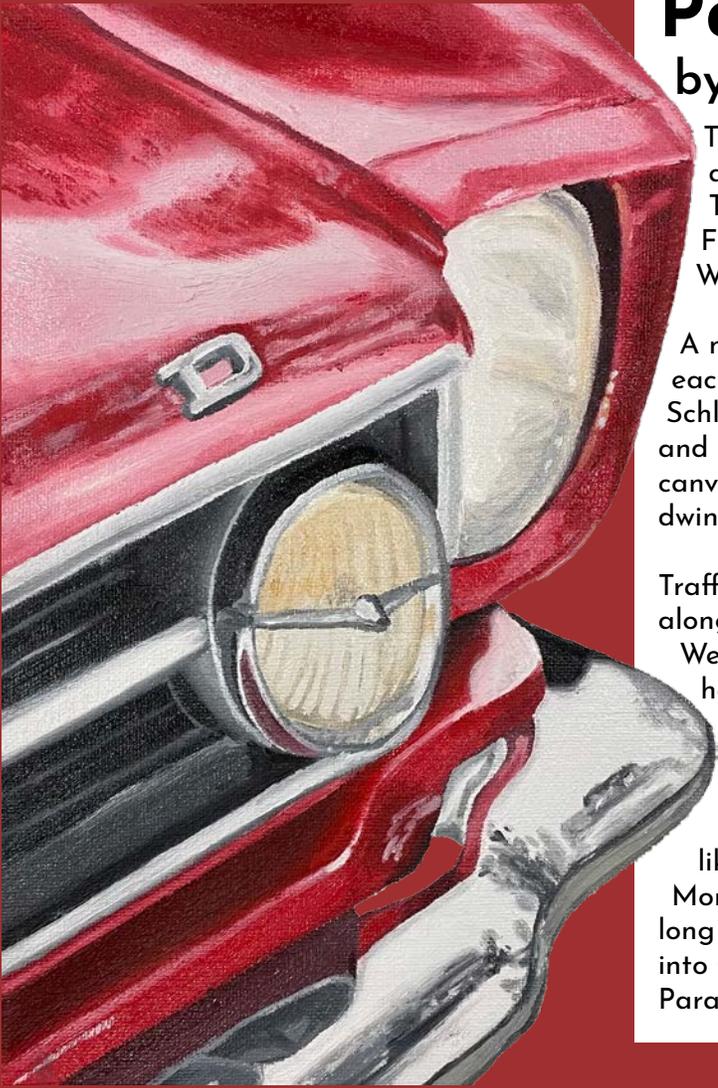
by Kayla Brethauer

Turquoise vinyl siding  
a green darker than any Carolina marsh.  
Twenty steps up to the front door.  
Fifteen more to the bedrooms.  
Will the luggage make it to its destination?

A new tenant  
each week of the summer.  
Schlepping around their swimsuits  
and children and  
canvas Aldi bags with a  
dwindling number of snack foods.

Traffic ebbs and flows  
along with those vacationing.  
Weekend beach walkers  
hoping to find a ghost crab or two, instead  
find themselves photobombing a slew of family photos.

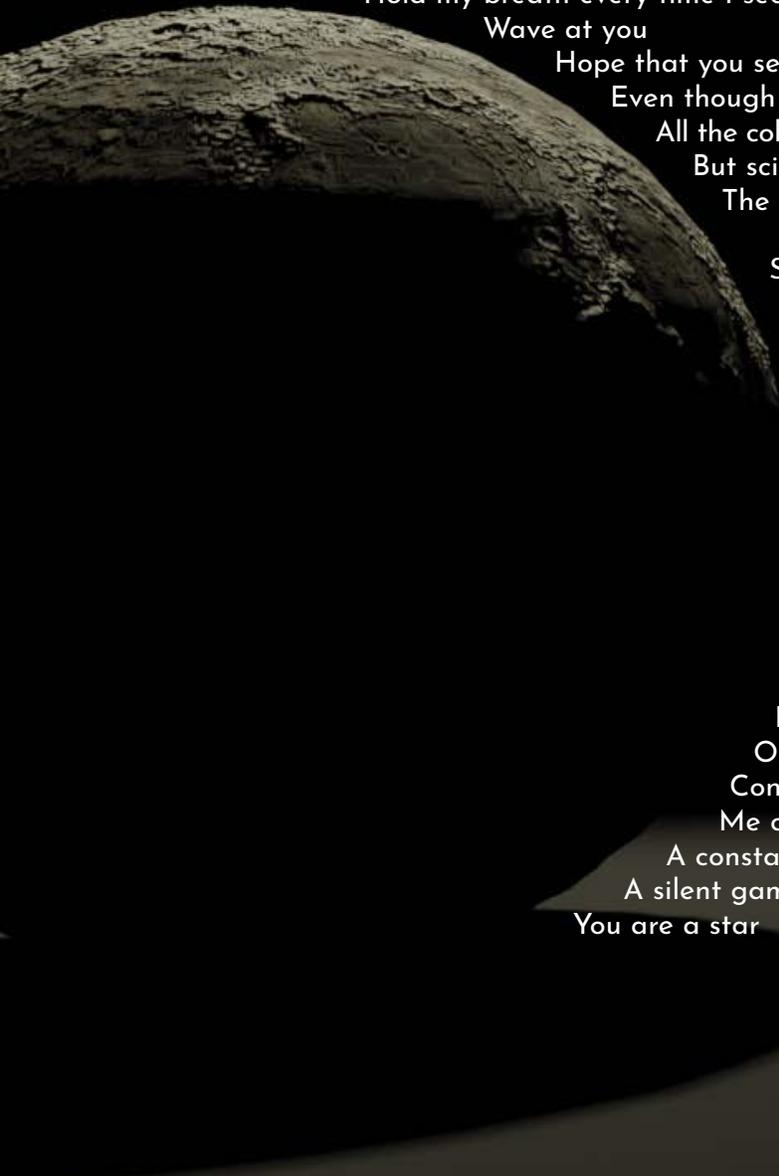
The tide washes in, and  
rolls away  
like the squealing tires of a travel-packed SUV.  
Monday morning,  
long after the last of the hatching turtles have waddled  
into the sea – a silver minivan turns onto  
Paradise Drive.



Stang (1, 2, & 3) by Lily Steinbrink

# Love like stardust

by Erinn Fent



You waltz by  
Zipping through my stratosphere  
Leaving almost tangible trails  
Streams of fog and particles of water  
Falling slowly down to my earth  
You come in and out of orbit  
Following a reckless collision course  
Sometimes I could reach out and touch you  
But you'd burn me  
So I hold back  
I'll watch that pale blond head bob in and out of view  
Hold my breath every time I see your shining face  
Wave at you  
Hope that you see  
Even though you never do  
All the colors of the universe combined should make a mucky brown  
But science says that it makes white  
The rainbow condensed is like light shining through the  
ozone layer, piercing my eyes  
Stabbing my heart  
Soft curls bounce their way around me  
Your eyes and your walk  
The way you carry yourself  
Leaving me like Tantalus  
Forever just a few inches off  
You tempt me like a shining grapefruit  
Ripe and fresh on the vine  
Just out of reach  
Every time I think I could make a move  
Every time I think I'm close  
That I might have a chance  
You slip away  
Into the vacuum of space  
Only to return another day  
Continue this cycle of torture  
Me chasing and you forever out of reach  
A constant push and pull  
A silent game of cat and mouse  
You are a star

Pitted Reflections by Supriya Bolla

Only three classrooms down from me right now  
Shining in your fast-paced glory  
Eyes burning bright blue like the hottest flame  
You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen  
Your smile rivals that of Euphrosyne  
Your beauty beats out even Aphrodite  
The gods of the heavens must consider your presence a blessing to them  
Because you are an ephemeral blip to them  
But a concrete addiction for me  
You, who comes in and out of my life  
A star I can only see on certain nights  
A goddess who can't be viewed in the glorious light of day  
For she would burn our eyes to ash  
Turn our bodies into soil to grow the fruits of our love  
Only flowering and never bearing the rewards  
Kept forever out of reach  
You grace my life like holidays grace the year  
Blessing special days  
Making them believe they're unique  
You brush my hand  
Or touch my shoulder



Your hand hovering over my back  
Almost touching my waist  
The self-conscious lines traced across my body fading with your smile  
Your smile  
The greatest sign of joy  
Nothing could ever compare  
I could only beg for you to come back into orbit  
To grace my home planet once again  
To give me just a touch of your love  
Your love  
Like stardust

# loop pedal

by Ava Shropshire

reverbs of rhythm surround me, and  
the aftermath of melodies float - circling my existence.  
my thoughts are still, as my fingers  
gently pluck the strings of my fender strat.

i'm lost in the serenity of a song,  
the muffled nosies that come from my amp  
flood my room with memories.  
the puzzle piece moments i want to forget  
yet, still can't stop remembering.

my brain constantly  
compiles collages of concerns  
but, my loop pedal repeats  
b minors and c majors.  
overlaps open chords and closed notes.  
and layers a symphony of sounds  
until it's louder than the static.

Instrumental Dreams by Comfort Adegoke

# Will you drive?

by Hanna Docampo Pham

Suburban style van, with its stained coffee cup and sheened sheets. The ceiling that sags and the mail tucked into the windshield, with the dent on the right of the bumper. The keys in the ignition, the fire has started. Will you drive?

Father, staples in his head. The windshield, cracked and covered in blood, that the dealer never fixed, dues not paid.

On his way. The crash, the family always in the second lane, the lights just right, the four wheels stable on the ground. They all wear seat belts. The way it should be.

You know, if everyone lived in a perfect world, there would be no heroes.

But seatbelts got nothing when you're falling down a waterfall, tumbling over a cliff, spiraling into the darkness. Out of the margins, he ran. There wasn't time to brighten the lights. It was like everyone expected.

The shriek of the girl in the car seat as her headband flies off and her dark hair lashes across her face. Her sister with blurry glasses who chooses not to believe. The one who holds them with a steady hand in her safe grip, clutching all she has as if that is all she knows anymore.

Will you drive?

Jagged scars, neat stitches. The police are counting the minutes in his hospital room. Dues to be paid. He never wakes up.

Out of the margins. As if their hearts just stopped, tossed to the wind, swirling in the water, pushed over the edge.

Scars that will never fade. He wakes up; the family ash to wind, as if he has forgotten he was once part of it.

Family, eyes stricken, they drown in tears and no longer open. If the mother has lost her hands, the girl her voice, the sister her glasses. Forgotten, they do not wake up.

If one day they remember, open their eyes, hands, glasses, the voice. Second hand of the city van. The keys in the ignition, the fire has started.

The crash you almost died in. Just like everyone expected.

Except it wasn't.

Open your eyes.

Scars that will never fade.

Everything turns to ash.

You drove.

## Memorial Sweater by Lola Sidie



## Closet Doors by Wyatt Vaughn

Today I am taking down my closet doors.  
With my Dad's old screwdriver, a little elbow grease,  
And the sweat that will drip from my pores,  
I will welcome the old me to the new one.

Tonight I twist screw from wood and pull pin from hinge.  
With each nail I pry and tear I cry, I'll persevere even if I cringe.  
Tonight I permanently allow access to the new world from my old one.

These doors were a mirror of one-way glass  
Once confined to a chamber imperceptible from the other side,  
Slowly, I served a sentence for a crime I'd later absolve myself of.  
For now I see through glass, through its facetious fallacy.

I shatter the mirror, and retrieve from it, a prism.  
A new light shines onto it, forging holographic rays in its schism.  
I'll wear my wardrobe of weary, worried clothes.  
Exhausted from the war fought by my constant self-loathing.

I've found hope, after years, in old shoeboxes, and on plastic hangers.  
Now I see this dusty old closet worked in my favor.  
I am a product of this mold - shaped by these closet walls  
By joining old with new, closed with open, my grit will not waver.

Today I am taking off my closet doors,  
And taking down who I once swore I knew with it.

# Quota

by Wyatt Vaughn

Decorating a Christmas tree,  
Lights cast taught.  
Seeing beads of light - asymmetrical, imperfect.

Grease in my hair and oil on my face,  
Piercing uncleanliness.  
But sharper is the ground leading from bed to shower.

My dim bedroom, gentle gleam locked just outside the door.  
Impulsed to flip the switch,  
Yet paralyzed  
By the dark, lulling me  
Deeper  
Into  
My mattress.

A rope drawn tight.  
Bundled fibers stretching,  
Each popping slowly,  
Then swiftly shredding.

Aching discs in my spine and joints in my knees.  
Exhausted from a journey to promised paradise I'll never witness.

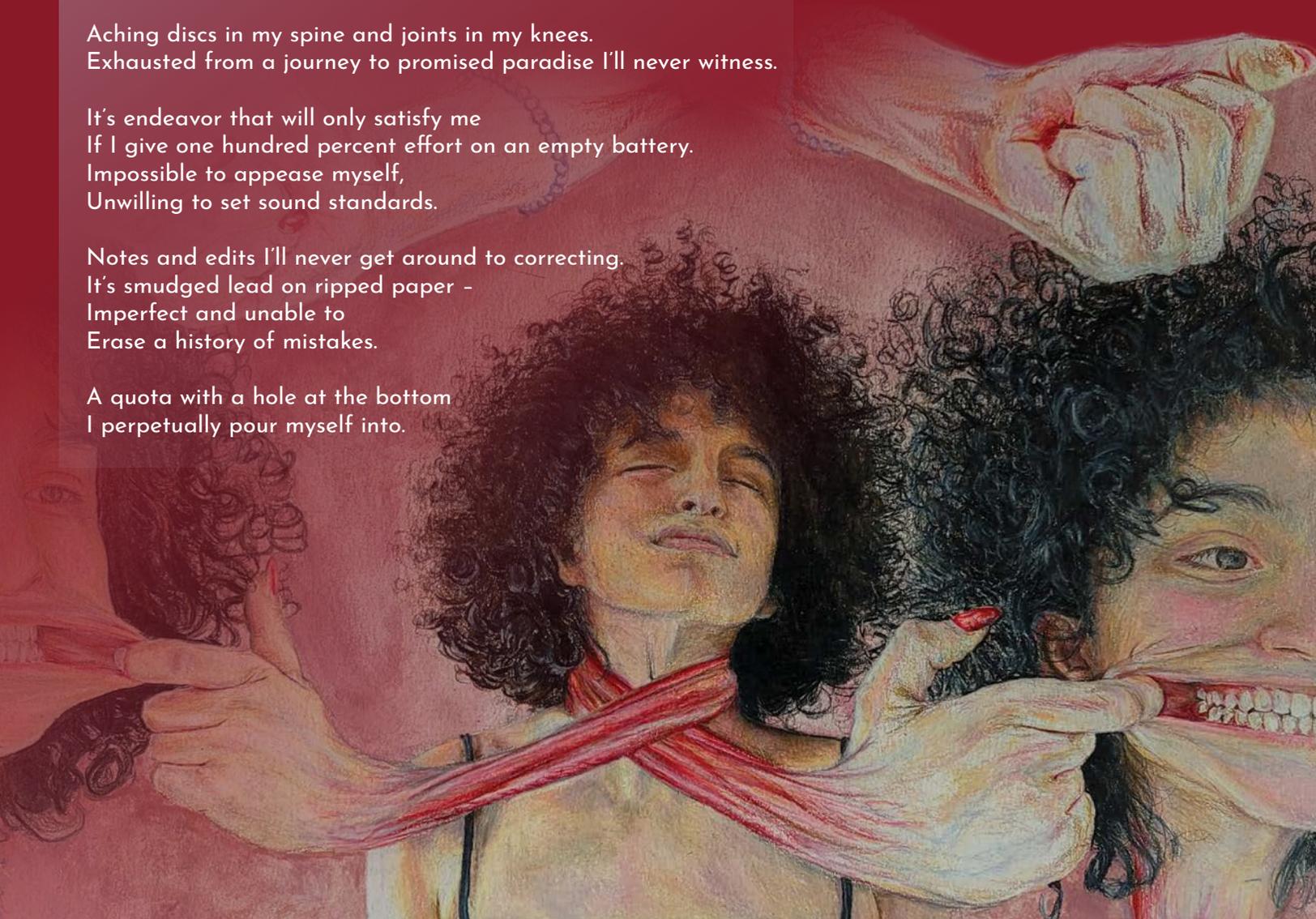
It's endeavor that will only satisfy me  
If I give one hundred percent effort on an empty battery.  
Impossible to appease myself,  
Unwilling to set sound standards.

Notes and edits I'll never get around to correcting.  
It's smudged lead on ripped paper -  
Imperfect and unable to  
Erase a history of mistakes.

A quota with a hole at the bottom  
I perpetually pour myself into.

## Of Loud Body and Mind

by Karissa Rangel





Time Machine by Audrey Morehead

## Silver

by Anonymous

in girl scouts, they teach you sayings  
ones you sing around the campfire  
they're supposed to teach lessons  
"make new friends but keep the old  
one is silver and the other is gold"  
except no one remembers the silver  
the second-place trophy  
the insignificant  
the old friend  
not shiny and new  
the old toy forgotten about  
who needs old when new is readily available

i am silver  
insignificant and old  
forgotten and lonely  
always 2nd place  
replaceable.

# Homegoing

by Sasha Watson

sister I am trapped, my body weighted  
by morning, when I woke  
birds were calling till my heart stammered  
this time gives meaning to *suspended*

I can hear the rain, my call for you,  
making a new language as it breaks  
a tenuous sky  
everything is battling to be beautiful



one way to love a sister,  
wait for her  
as the birds steal her away  
they are flying south, moving on

wind and homesickness  
I was told they flew north  
which isn't a lie  
but a half-truth, half their path

birds go south to trace a circling song  
seeking where they began  
shameless of their cries  
calling for home

in the rain, birds twist their bodies  
at every beat, they have been moving  
for so long they know where to find  
rhythm in the endless outpouring

if I stay anticipation will kill me  
I do not trust the cycle  
to bring you home  
somewhere, birds have freed you



Sweet Dreams  
by Jade Achen

# A Second Home

by Arielle Li

My most vivid recollections of China are filled with fond memories and blissful experiences. The smell of smoke and frying foods wafts through the air, and at night the streets are a disorienting mess of flashing billboards and street lights. Beggars rattle their cups on nearly every corner, hoping for a spare quarter or two, and cartoony murals cover the walls that line the streets.

I remember eating at the most delicious noodle place late at night; my small body would manage to consume the entire serving. The noodles and meat slices were generously piled in the bowl, and the hot beef broth would be so savory that I would somehow manage to eat more.

I remember having dinner with my mom's side of the family in front of the TV, watching 大头儿子和小头爸爸 (a cartoon show). We would laugh together over a shared understanding of animated characters performing simple tasks. I would eat straight from the bowl of 番茄炒鸡蛋 - my favorite dish - although it was intended for my family to share.

I remember my aunts buying me gold earrings and my grandfather joyfully gifting his grandchildren red packets of money. I would stare in awe at the sparkling clover earrings, and my mother would quickly confiscate the hongbao to "safekeep." Years later, when we asked for the money back, it was long gone.

I remember looking into the faces of my relatives and seeing the smile in their eyes despite our lack of a relationship. Although we were essentially foreigners, we had a blood bond, and that was all that mattered. I loved feeling my culture encase me; it felt like my life in an alternate dimension. Being with my relatives was all I cared about, rather than sightseeing at magnificent sites.

I would play Candy Crush on my aunt's phone and frolic with my cousins. We would buy trinkets from malls and play games at the arcade. We would go tubing and explore the city together. Despite being unable to communicate about more profound matters (my Chinese is not fluent), we loved each other.

Even though I spent only a month in China biennially, it felt like a second home. Near the end of our visit, our giant family tree would gather to eat at a fancy Chinese restaurant. The adults would order course after course, and waiters would set aromatic dishes on the Lazy Susan turntable. Those gatherings were the peak of my vacations, and my parents would be the happiest they would be for the rest of the year. I would be stuffed by the time the third dish arrived, and chopsticks would stretch out

and refill my plate before I could blink. A red glow would light up on the adults' faces that appeared after one too many drinks of alcohol. The joyful chatter in Shanghainese was endless, filling my ears with dopamine and a heavy sense of nostalgia when I went home.



On the flight back, the image of my cousins' smiling faces would fade to a blur. The taste of our last meal together would be a wisp of air on my tongue. The sound of honking cars were replaced by the whir of the plane's air conditioner. If I imagined it, I could almost taste the ashy scent of cigarettes.

Certain things would teleport me back to China for a split second - a whiff of smoke, my parents discussing in Shanghainese, hongbao gifted during Chinese New Year. These occurrences would happen less and less frequently, and eventually, the thought of China would gather dust in the back of my mind. But every two years, when I return to China, I experience the joy of China once more. And every two years, I hold these emotions dear until memories fade and the cycle repeats.



Pure Luck  
by Ahna Chang (above)

# The Allure of Home

by Nitya Dave

Salty wind pushes at the falling tide.  
Blue serenity veils the town as a  
melancholy buzz flows through the idle docks.

A boat pushes through the harbor:  
It drifts along,  
lazily down.

The sun naps behind thick blankets of wool,  
but begins to rouse.  
Peeking out of its weft to  
cast soft rays of light onto the cobblestone streets.

And as the fresnel lens sinks on the coast  
to become a buoy in the skyline,  
the town traps a yawn behind its teeth  
as the edge of the earth dampens the day.



The hushed waves brush their fingers, lightly  
against the stone village.  
Tapping and lapping away at the sand floor.

The fish, under the film of the lulling water  
nest on cool rock,  
And snuggle into gentle wedges,  
hiding from the retreating hooks  
as their dreams begin to float to the surface.



Blue Nostalgia by Didi Fu

# Solemnity

by Barbara Matijevic

In the evenings,  
Following sundown  
I observed you  
However,  
I never saw you

Your twinkle of light  
Alone -  
In the dead of night  
Impunity  
In absence from society

I have noticed your insolence  
Yet  
I have never *acknowledged* it

Is anyone there?  
How does your story unfold?  
What are your thoughts?  
Describe to me your dreams.

Did you attain them?  
Do you *wish* to attain them -

Are you *content*?

I hope you are.  
I hope *one day* i will be too -

# Betrayal

by Ashley Rottinghaus



# Hope

by Barbara Matijevic

All is good, good is all  
All is good, good is all

Is it?  
Yes, it is  
At least . . .

I need want to believe it is  
It's my hope,  
For my sanity

All is good, good is all  
All is good, good is all

Ignore Negate the negativity  
The torment  
The trauma  
Focus on what's good  
When helplessness interjects  
Think about it

All is good, good is all  
All is good, good is all

Repeat it  
Over and over and over  
Nothing Something will change  
It won't will get better  
Just keep saying it

All is good, good is all  
All is good, good is all

Nothing is changing  
But I need some peace  
I need to escape  
Just give-up repeat once more . . .

All is good, good is all  
All is good, good is all

Please, don't let go,  
Just keep saying it  
It won't will be ok  
It has always been us  
Myself and I  
I haven't have always been there  
Always present  
For myself

All is good, good is all  
All is good, good is all

Things won't will get better  
I lied promise

## Everything Passes

by Ashley Rottinghaus



# Black and White

by Farah Fehmi

I had a dream last night . . .  
I had a dream last night . . .  
You died!

I studied it for myself  
Looked it up even  
But couldn't wrap my head around it  
Couldn't wrap my mind -

No worries  
Just  
Meet me in my eyes  
What beautiful eyes  
Black and white

It's casual!  
Don't bring a suit  
Black and white's a bore

Wow what a nice venue!  
Black and white decor

Never leave these eyes  
Never leave these eyes  
Ne-ne-ne-never leave  
Please

I finally found you  
Why'd you leave  
The party was bumpin'  
Have I told you how much I love you?  
You're black and white  
You're (ir)resistible  
What did I do wrong?  
Everything was perfect  
Even the breeze!

Hey  
Have I told you about my dream last night?  
Well I had a dream last night  
That you died!  
I've been trying to wrap my head around it  
I've been trying to wrap my mind around it  
The entire dream was in black and white  
YOU were wearing black and white  
It was disgusting

I'm glad I found you  
How did you get lost in my eyes?  
The whole thing's in black and white  
Well . . .  
Not anymore  
The entire venue's rusting

The green's contaminating everything  
Even my eyes  
No longer black and white  
At least my folks are alive  
But you aren't  
You died!

In my dream you died?

In this dream you died?

Hey!

Where'd you go.



Why'd She Leave by Alex Dean

# to the crab nebula and back

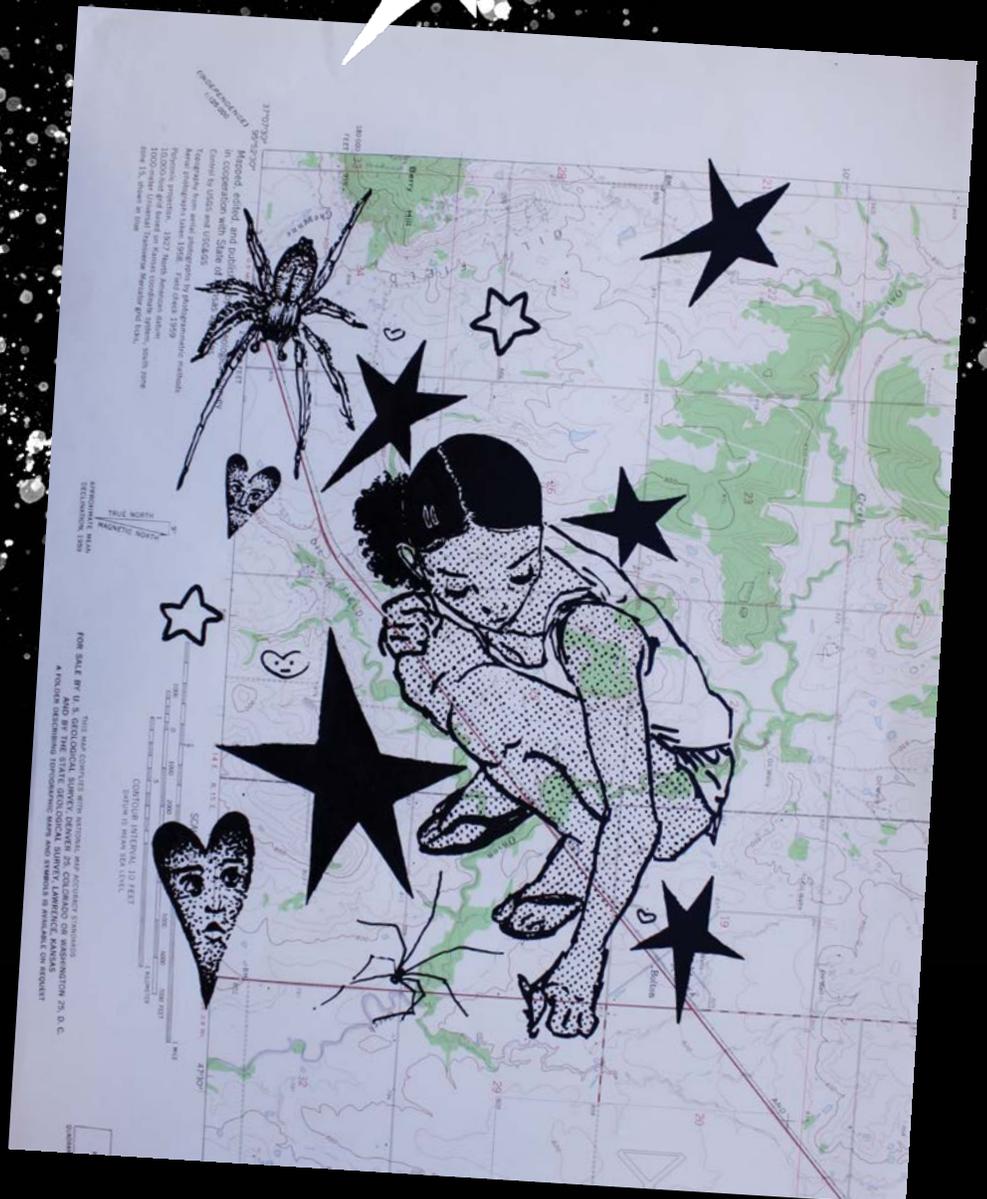
by anonymous

I vividly remember  
the rough feel of my closet's carpeting beneath my fingers  
as they traced lines and circles and stars  
like the ones that filled the sky that night.

My other hand clutched my dying phone to my ear,  
connecting us only by our voices in a call that lasted hours.  
Though we had only known each other for weeks,  
we danced around those words for what felt like decades.

The butterflies in my chest screamed,  
and pounded,  
and roared,  
as you finally blurted out

*I love you.*



Exploration  
by Karissa Rangel

# The Dance of the Moths

by Anastasiya Sankevich

I

On a Thursday at the edge of summer and autumn, when constellations studded the sky, I carried a cup of tea into my study. It was a beautiful cup, hand-painted with buds about to burst into flowers.

I set it down on my desk and lit the candles. The wax turned translucent, rolling down the brass like teardrops. The little flame rocked side to side and I smiled, brushing dust off my vintage typewriter. My fingers pirouetted across the keys. *Chapter I*, I typed, not knowing where to begin. The fresh bud of an idea was too fragile, too starved to write about. Even one wrong word could ruin it beyond repair.

The desk faced the window, so I distracted myself with the night-stained street. Rain cascaded from the sky, appearing radiant on the bricks. A golden halo embraced the streetlights, and a pair of moths waltzed around the silent glow. Those moths had wings of organdy, dull, delicate, and elegant despite the rain. How sweet it was to witness a poem unfold before my eyes.

My gaze drifted away from the moths onto first the sidewalk, then the gloomy park across the street. I sighed and pulled my eyes back to the keyboard, but came across another distraction. A woman stood under the streetlamp my moths circled, her hands embracing an inky umbrella. Something was trapped in her fist. I pulled glasses up the bridge of my nose, trying to make out what the "something" was. Finally, a beam illuminated her, and I smiled. A note tried to escape her clutch. What could it be? A love letter, like those they write in romantic novels from the 1800s? Or was it something darker?

Another person with an umbrella emerged from around the corner. The woman straightened her

posture, waved, and slid toward the stranger. He held a similar note between his fingers. At the sight of the woman, his grasp weakened and the note fled with the wind. Neither he nor the woman seemed to notice. They made silent eye contact before strolling away into the park. I took a sip of tea and began writing in the newfound gust of inspiration.

After twenty minutes, I gazed outside once again. The moths still danced around the streetlamp, and the man and woman emerged into the light. They exchanged paper roses before walking their separate ways. My moths disappeared, too. I was sorry to see them go.

II

I didn't want to write that day, so I sketched the scene I witnessed outside. A man and a woman talking quietly. The moon illuminating the street. Two moths with pretty wings, streetlights, tenebrous silhouettes of the trees. I set my pen down, trying to brush away the guilt of putting effort into something entirely unrelated to my craft. I took a sip of tea. It rolled down my throat, sour and ruby-red,



Wrapped by Clara Burke

loose leafs swirling in the liquid. Two hand-painted flowers that bloomed like stars on the porcelain of the cup.

Just like every Thursday, the man and woman strolled in the park. Every turn repeated many times, every step followed an orchestrated pattern. How I wished to hear their conversation, wondering if perhaps their words would light a match in me, inspire me, motivate me. Desperate, I wrote down the lines of dialogue under their portraits. But those attempts were wrong, hollow, pathetic. No matter how poetic my prose was, I couldn't guess the spinning thoughts of the pair who walked in the shadows of the trees.

Since I couldn't see every detail of their faces from my second-floor window, I had to guess from the glimpses when drawing. The woman was tall, had a prominent forehead, an intelligent brow. A Roman nose, dark hair often wet and ruffled, eyes like the night. She had the ideal face of a lost monarch, or

a mysterious opera singer, or one of the muses that poets and artists rave about. The man's hair was lighter, and his irises gleamed with wit. I didn't draw pupils, for they didn't belong. His face, both stern and fair. I couldn't quite describe it, so I smudged the pencil marks and pretended that the graphite blur added a bit of mystery.

I monikered the woman Lenore and the man Adam as I saw them part ways on that misty night. As traditional, they exchanged fluttering paper roses. Ten years ago, I would have wished for a romance such as this, secret meetings and all. I, a young and foolish girl, yearned for the perfect cutout of a person, but gave up quickly. So instead I saturated my words with that emotion, wrote routinely every evening. Then that passion expired and my time turned to pondering the relationship of two people I didn't know. I was a moth and they entranced me. Speaking of moths, a pair still waltzed eerily around the candid light. When the figures of Adam and Lenore disappeared behind opposing corners, the moths disappeared, too.

Such a ritual repeated for many Thursdays to come. I always sat in my study with a dainty cup of tea, candles lighting up the room. Though it was a distracting obsession, I had to be there, I had to watch, sacrificing productivity with a whimsical look in my eyes.

### III

The shameful moon hid behind a veil of clouds. I stared at the street, searching for a light that would illuminate my manuscript. The streetlamp flickered and orange leaves soared by my window. They forever left their home behind, soon to rot in the drains of some unimportant avenue on the other side of the city. How tragic.

I lit the candles. The brass stand was engulfed in previously melted wax, dripping like tears and blood forever frozen in time. The flames didn't glow with joy and passion. Today, they danced with fear, fighting against the cold air, breathless.

Distracted by the dark thoughts, I couldn't force another word into the joyous and romantic book. So instead I scribbled down lines of poetry. Those poems spoke of death, hopelessness, cold. I almost expected rain, but it didn't come. Only Lenore did. She stood in the gloom all alone, no sign of another figure appearing from the tangled alley. She waited, and I did too. Poor Lenore paced around the park all on her own. She perched herself on the bench, waiting in stillness. A single moth was her companion, seeming sorrowful as it spun around the streetlight.

I wanted to wait with her and the moth, but my energy drained away. Sleep was too tempting to ignore. So I silenced the candles and finished drinking my tea. The cup was decorated with a single wilting flower.

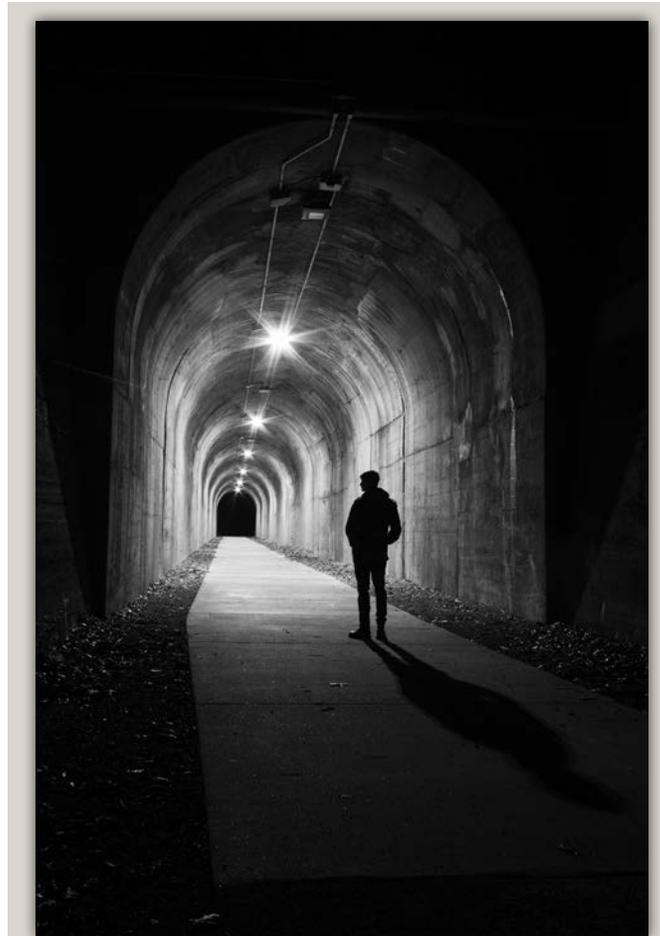
Lenore came for many Thursdays until one day, she did not return. The paper rose remained on the park bench until the rain tore it to pieces. The fairytale in the window was over. I had to put my fingers back on the keyboard and type.

### IV

The stack of writing on my desk begged to be burned. Truly, it was my head pleading to burn it and my heart refusing. How could I let the flame consume those hours, those tears, those ideas? So I buried it in the bottom drawer, hoping to never see the words again. Instead I looked onto the street that

remained empty for so long. I saw a lonely moth, an empty park bench, gnarled trees, a weeping moon, and . . . Adam. Same walk, same posture, same face, but not the same stranger I first saw at the end of summer.

His dim silhouette spun around in the park. I had to remind myself I wasn't witnessing a ghost, nor a shadow, nor a memory. I witnessed only a human, a stranger with a story that I didn't know. Whatever that story was, its emotion haunted me even in the warmth of my study. I couldn't help but wonder why he disappeared for so long, and a little voice inside of me muttered that it wasn't by choice. I would



Leaving Home by Alex Dean

likely never know the answer to the question. I would always remain in the dark. If ran outside in that moment and asked him, I could know the answer. But then they would know I've been spying on them for months, drawing them, invested in their life like I would be in a book. But what I saw wasn't a book. Those were real events, real people, real moths, real umbrellas, real feelings.

I took out the stack of papers from my desk once again and my sight glazed over the words. Those empty sentences were nothing in comparison to the view in the window. I began to rip the page apart, but stopped once the jagged tear reached the letters. I rested it on top of the stack once again. I couldn't do it. I wasn't weak enough to hide from my own creation.

The stars reflected in my teacup, the sepia liquid rippling. That teacup was beautiful. Porcelain with gold details and a painted image of a single flower. The petals were crinkled and dead, a hint of rosiness blooming through. Having nothing else to do, I poured a saturated drop of tea onto a piece of paper, letting it spread into a design. It looked like a heart at first, then a moth with broken wings, then the moon. I looked once again at Adam. He still wandered those paths, still silent, still alone. At last he left, and the moth fluttered away, too. I saw the paper rose in his hand as he pressed it into his pocket. And like that, the street emptied for many days, leaving me alone in my study. Alone with the unfinished book and the flickering candles and above all, wonder.

## V

When the moonlight was copper and viscous like honey, I wrote the last words of the novel. Tears swelled in my eyes. I felt like a free bird, able to break through the milky glass of the window. With nothing better to do, I broke off shards of wax from the solid mass that dripped down the brass stand. When I held the chunks near the jolly little flame, they melted into their kin.

It began to rain. The luminescence of the streetlights distorted in the ever-growing puddles. Tones of orange, navy, ultramarine, and gold blurred together in the landscape like watercolor paints on a wet paper. I sipped my tea from a cup decorated with two fruits that were once delicate flowers. The days became colder and colder. Frost crystallized in the mornings and the moans of the rusty radiator disturbed my sleep.

Despite the stinging temperatures outside, two moths danced around the streetlamp. What a haunting dance it was. Entranced by the brilliance, the beings moved in smooth and natural rhythm of

their beautiful yet brief lives.

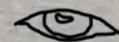
The street reflected every light, and the bare, lithe trees swayed in the park. My eyes widened when I saw a figure emerge from a nearby alley. The person carried a black umbrella, the raindrops bouncing off it in reflective particles. It was none other than the dark haired woman with a Roman nose and eyes like the gloomiest of nights. Lenore in the lamplight, Lenore in the rain. That familiar face that I only ever saw from a distance brought me back to the end of summer, when the leaves only began to change.

The same umbrella, yet it shielded the woman from such a different kind of rain. She also seemed haunted by the thoughts of that fateful Thursday, when she came to the street for the very first time. Retracing her past self's footsteps, she wandered the park for a little bit, before stepping back into the light of my window. Yet Lenore didn't leave quite yet, because another figure with an umbrella appeared in the distance.

Even from my second floor, I saw her eyes widen and her olive skin turn paler. The person appeared so familiar to us both, I was sure. Lenore seemed familiar to the mysterious stranger, too, because the umbrella flew out of his grasp and he didn't care one bit.

He approached her and stretched forth his hand. I glimpsed something delicate and white. Lenore took it, studied it for a moment, and then her eyes glimmered. The paper rose returned to its creator. Adam and Lenore returned to the street.

I watched their figures circle around the park. I didn't want to hear their conversation; witnessing it meant enough. Instead I watched my moths, mesmerized, until Lenore and Adam stepped out from the darkness of the trees. They were now bathed in the lamplight, gazing at each other, lips barely moving. They stood right by my window. Adam seemed to notice my inquiring stare, and pointed it out to Lenore. She waved at me, the little old me with oversized glasses and unbrushed hair. My face burned. Their subtle smiles were bold enough to notice, and they warmed me from within even as the two turned around. It began to snow. As flakes danced in the night, Adam and Lenore walked away down the same street, hands clasped together.



Chaos Part II by Julie Steeb



# bucketfuls of butterflies

by Grace Toscano

real art is dipping myself in paint and throwing myself against the pavement

wow look at that stain

paint

paint

paint

all the feelings away

until you darken the page and there's nothing left to say.

*(darling I miss you*

*baby baby*

*please*

*I'll do better next time*

*baby I'm on my fucking knees*

*I'll do better next time*

*whatever you want and more*

*just please don't leave me here on this stained marble floor)*

god the butterflies

have never actually disappeared

they're dead in my stomach

limp and I can still feel their exoskeleton and the silk of their wings

rolling around my stomach with the pull of the waves

and they won't leave I know that

because matter cannot be created nor destroyed

so they will sit in this graveyard with every last bit of remains

but

where

did

they

come

from?

because they had to have been something else once

I didn't have

bucketfuls of butterflies

in my chest always

or were they dormant?

cocooned and crystalized for years and years?

love is like a caterpillar

crawling around the floor like when I was a child

learning about existence

feeling the world underneath the pads of my fingers

taking in the bitterness of a leaf because it was such a lovely shade of chartreuse

continuing to feast because maybe one day

it might finally taste sweet.

*(darling*

*the seaweed screams*

*there's water in my nose*

*I think the tides have a mind of their own)*

but the frame shifts and the picture tilts

and it's a clean sweep of my eraser

sketching my nightmares in the daylight

come on



draw

draw

draw

personify your feelings and make them into art  
(I said

*I was on my knees)*

mix a red as bright as her lipstick  
splatter it across the pavement like blood

wow

step back

and admire

real art  
is a fucking masterpiece.



**Poker Face**  
by Ashley Rottinghaus

**What Will Be**  
by Lily Steinbrink



# Mystery

by Hanna Cochran

What if the tides bent out from the shore;  
Waves broke from themselves, curling out  
and up, scraping the sky,  
rolling back.

They would collide into each other in the middle of the sea  
and then fall, plunge  
into some slit of darkness, of magma  
that might be the center of the earth, or might be  
heaven.

I have become obsessed with the sea.  
Its ebb and flow.

What is it that lures the sailors in?  
Do all things sink  
and sit there, dully, on the sand bottom,  
or is their spirit wrapped around some core  
Essence of earth  
that is then returned in that vacuum of tides,  
And death?

What does it mean to disappear?  
Where does one go when they die,  
and is end of life the same as death?  
The slit in the middle of the sea might be  
another chance, or  
a welcome call.  
Like reincarnation.

Or maybe our dead live on the other side of the mirror  
mourning us.



where leaves and lives fall  
by Nabihah Syed

# seeds of life

by Jessica Wang

at the end of the Earth  
there is a dandelion plant  
the corner of the sky rests on its bosom  
our world relies on its strength

yellow petals unfurling form the rays of our sun  
flooding us with warmth  
and as the stalk cracks, the milk bubbling out  
paints the sky with clouds

night falls, and its spherical head glows, casting moonlight  
in a luminous silver  
a ghostly wind blows the seeds free into the night sky  
and the heavens twinkle with stars

and it is the very next dawn  
when another yellow bud breathes life  
into the world around it  
and the new day begins

such a pattern repeats, since the start  
and until the very end  
and nothing really matters  
for at the end of the world  
there is nothing but a weed.



Curiosity  
by Ashley Rottinghaus



Western Railway  
by Rose Bennett

# The Life of the Party

by Katherine O'Connor

the purple lights start to fade, the crowd dying with them.  
your eyes once hidden in the crowd glow vermilion,  
failing to camouflage themselves beneath the shadows  
of your white pupil, an outcast among the filthy onyx pupils  
bulging at the centers of the undressed dancers' eyes.

you accept a joint from a stranger's hand,  
letting a choreographed train of smoke  
exit your lips and into mine, leaving  
me with a sore throat, a violent cough,  
and the inability to speak. you let your torso  
sink into the velvet cushioning lining the wooden walls,  
pinching your arm to keep yourself alive and  
focusing your eyes on the life of the party.

your spirit dies as the strangers once around you  
crowd around a young girl in sparkling gold,  
offering an assortment of unmarked pills,  
convincing her to let herself forget for a night.  
they point to you,  
telling her that you did the same  
a year or two ago  
and are so much happier now.

your drugged smile falls into a flat line dividing the upper and bottom halves of your face.  
a red light appears just to illuminate the blank slate you painted,  
highlighting your lips and long lashes that keep your enemies drawn.

"it's dawn –"

you take my hand and lead me through crowded door frames  
and a rug permanently stained by the scent of the shattered bottles  
(not the floral perfume).

the light turns blue

and the sunlight unveils the swirls of gray that lurk beneath your white pupils.

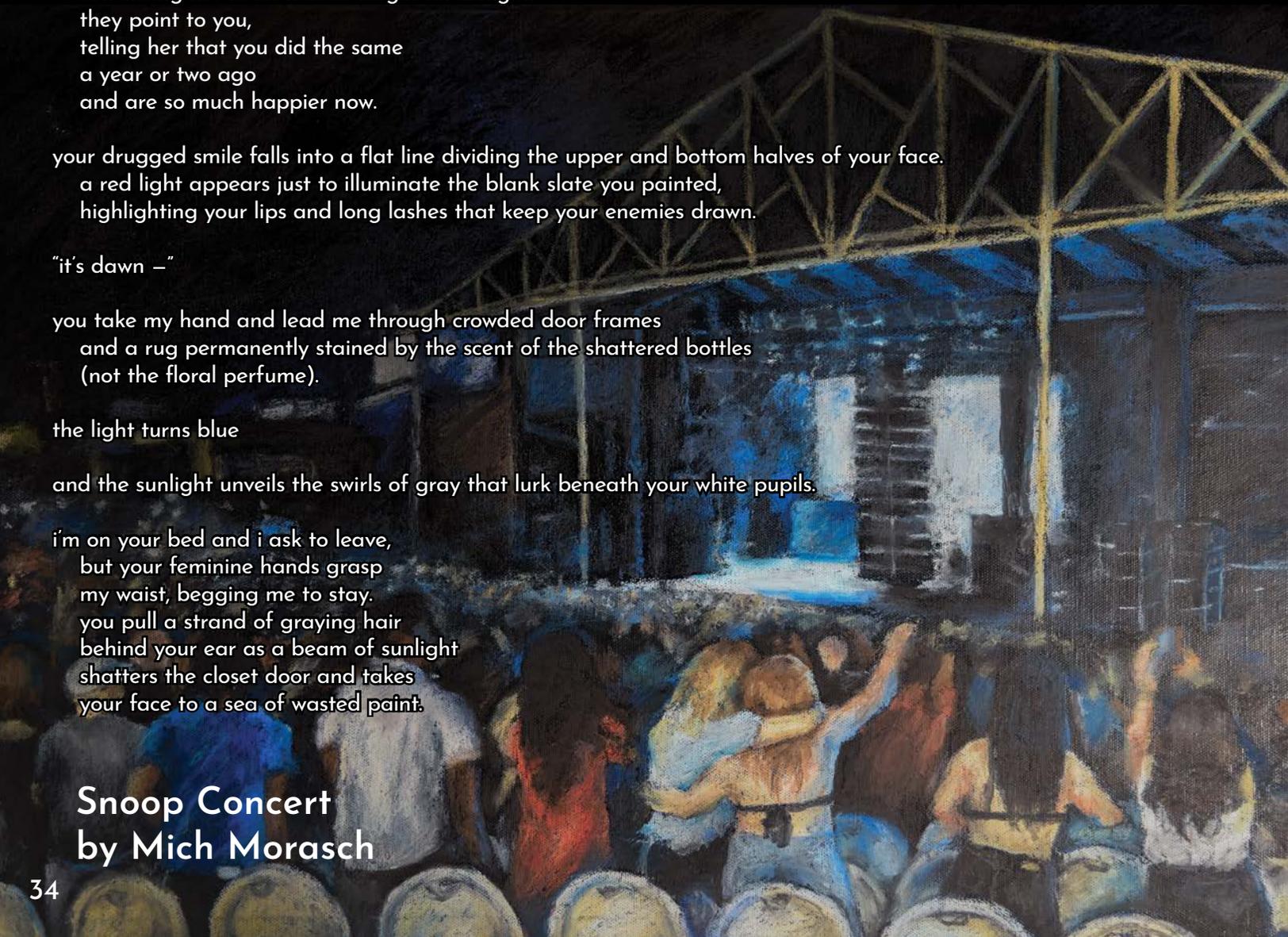
i'm on your bed and i ask to leave,  
but your feminine hands grasp  
my waist, begging me to stay.  
you pull a strand of graying hair  
behind your ear as a beam of sunlight  
shatters the closet door and takes  
your face to a sea of wasted paint.

i run from your grasp, tearing down the bolted door,  
panting with this pungent shard of glass still in my side.  
but when i open my eyes i start to scream i have to leave  
let me die i don't need to stay i can't  
be here please let me out please i have to go

alas

the purple lights start to fade, the crowd dying with them.

Snoop Concert  
by Mich Morasch



# heat stroke

by Anna Schmeer

wet grass  
we are living on borrowed time  
the green of spring will soon fade to browns  
struggling to breathe and blaming it on allergies  
blood is pulsing through my veins and my fingertips  
this isn't my bathroom floor this is real life  
there is no second chance

it hasn't been the same since you left  
the scent of your cologne is still imprisoned in my mind  
your favorite song still on the radio  
i'll always be reminded of you  
there is no story left to tell  
no happy ending  
we flew too close to the sun  
and let the wax drip down our backs

a single light is on  
your silhouette still lingering  
but mine has already gone  
spinning out of orbit  
the streetlights have yet to turn on  
but it is so, so dark  
the sprinklers on the grass  
cars in driveways  
but they don't know  
none of it ever matters

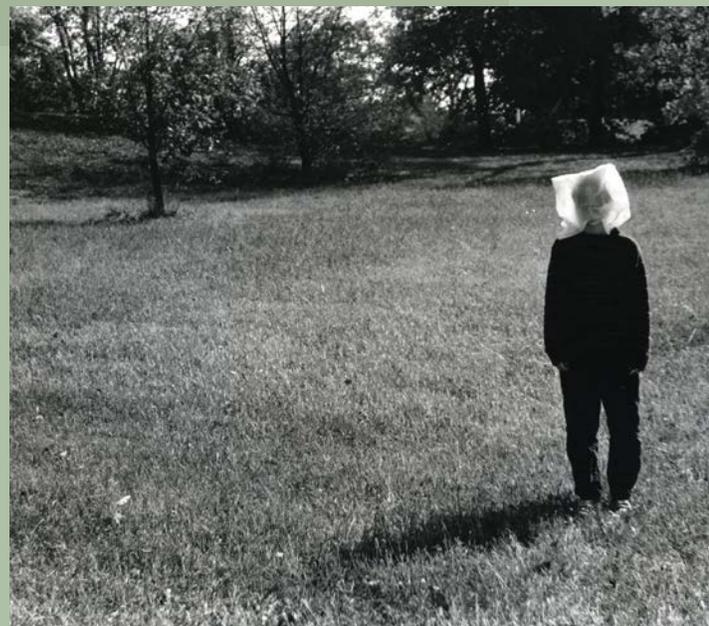
the more i think about it the less real it becomes  
i'm pretending not to be devastated  
but it's written all over my face  
and i know that a piece of you is still with me  
the way you avoid me so ardently  
as if i had cursed you  
but it is you

it has always been you  
you were the curse, the knife, and the flame  
you were the sleepless nights and the restless mornings  
you were the problem and the attempted solution  
it was you  
there is never a good moment to say goodbye  
and now is no different  
but i have to try  
if i don't it will never happen  
i have to try and i will fail  
i always do

the grass is sticking to my feet and will not come off  
lone pieces stranded upon my toes  
forcing me to remember that i have walked through the lawn



## Who Are You by Ava Recker



# The Walk That I Walk

by Cameron Newsom

Every day,  
I walk a walk  
I walk in the hot,  
And in the cold,  
I walk on grass,  
And on the road  
I walk under trees,  
And under buildings.

And when I walk I have no whom to talk  
So I think thoughts,  
Many thoughts  
I think so much, that you might think, I ought to sink  
From the weight of the thoughts I bear.  
But the weight of thoughts can be light  
Not heavy with despair.

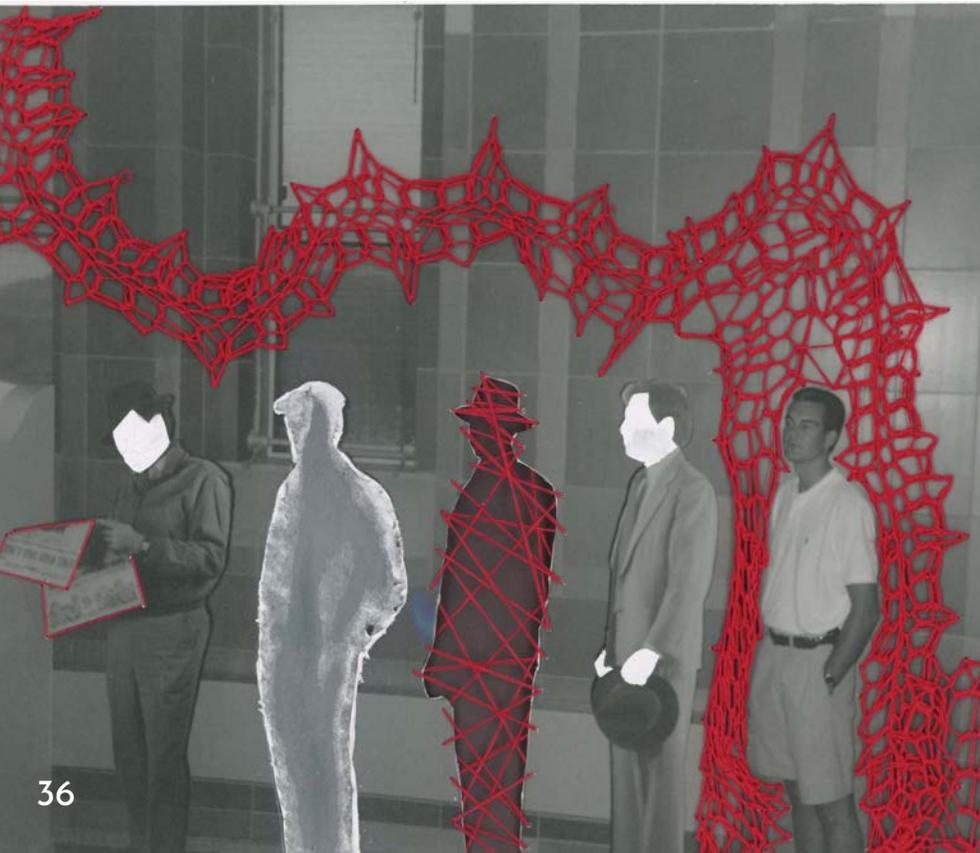
I thought light thoughts,  
Simple thoughts,  
Like how trees grow green,  
Retreat to red,  
Yield to yellow,  
Become brown,  
And decay to dirt.

But is with me,  
What I assume to be with anyone,  
The world changing once more,  
Peace to war,  
And now I think, what I'd rather not think,  
For what I think now, could make me sink.

I think heavy thoughts,  
Complex thoughts,  
Like how folk fight,  
Cry out commands,  
Fall to the floor,  
Bleed out bullets,  
And disappear into death.

But is with me,  
What I assume to be with anyone,  
The knowledge that the world will change  
back to peace,  
War will cease,  
And I will then think, what I want to think,  
For what I think then, can't make me sink.

## Strangers by Clara Burke



I will think light thoughts,  
Simple thoughts,  
Like how day turns to dawn,

Sun starts to set,  
Blue turns to black,  
Sun turns to stars,  
And it transfers to tranquility.

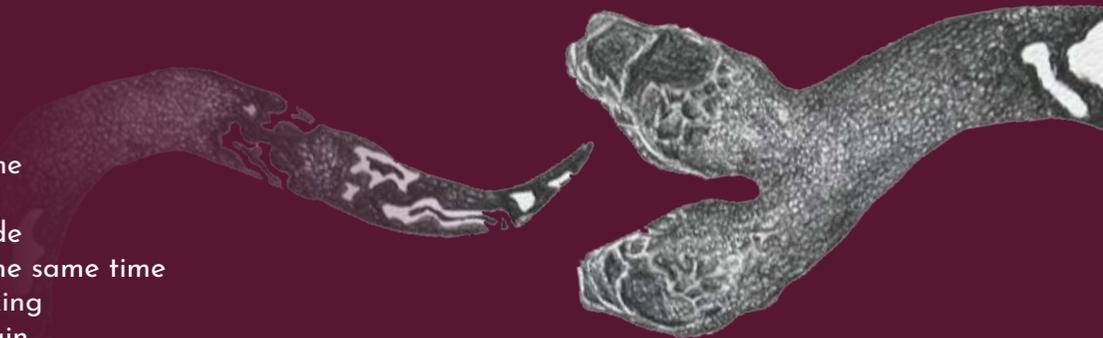
I will walk a walk every day,  
I will walk in the sunlight,  
And in the moonlight,  
I will walk in the country,  
And in the city,  
I will think thoughts, many thoughts.  
Every day, on the walk that I walk.



Consummation  
by Caroline Stickney

## New Hymns by Caroline Stickney

we sink  
& choke on our own want  
& decide it's enough  
& pull down our own quiet  
& swim in swallowed songs  
& follow our own wounds home  
& peel back our skin  
& look at the mess we've made  
& love all things but not at the same time  
& wonder what we were thinking  
& deserve every bit of this pain  
& run towards it  
& pray it never completes us,  
pray and pray and



# The Floor Above

by Douglas Coulter

A myriad of rushing footsteps erupt in the floor above; an orchestra of screeching and tapping performed by the disordered unison of business shoes and office furniture . . .

The current floor is in a state of concentrated ease with a grand hive of office cubicles each housing the same, familiarly stoic employees, staring dead-eyed into their identical monitors as countless fingers type away, effortlessly finding their targets upon indistinguishable sets of dark beige colored keyboards worn to a yellowish white by a history of diluted UV rays coming from the evenly-spaced squares of ceiling lights. The mechanical clicking of keys on keyboards flow together to create an ocean of sound, existing as a singular note dismissed of all individuality; matched only by the conjoined buzzing of electric ceiling lights softly flickering in incessancy. Working in conjunction with each other, the artificial hums combine to form the baseline of noise for the office, drowning out all outliers failing to match their intensity. The floor has no windows and only a sole double door; the subjects inside its monotonously pale walls are cut off from the world outside of them. They are granted no indication of the outside scenery, time of day, temperature, weather, light, or sound. Complete isolation manufactured to eliminate all potential for distraction or independent thought – dull to an extremity, the floor conditions its subjects to find only the contents of their computers to bare any trace of dopamine. Thus, they are helplessly glued; induced to conformity, reduced to mere drones, accompanied only by the cool synthetic air blown through hidden slits of ventilation and the clicking, buzzing hum of the office floor.

It takes a moment for the unannounced breakout of ruckus coming from beyond the ceiling to pierce through that dizzying hum acclimatized to by the current floor employees. Some break their focus, blinking for the first time in hours as they tilt their heads and scan the ceiling with confused, probing eyes looking for a source. However, most stay senselessly locked to their screens, mindlessly tapping their keyboards as their conditioned minds subconsciously block out any external elements. But as the unexplained disturbance from the floor above continues, more and more employees begin to divert their concentration upward, until, a sudden crash

of colliding objects booms through the grid ceiling tiles, giving the entire floor a brief but assertive vibration. The typing sounds of fingers on keyboards cease in an instant, and yet, impossibly faster, sounds from the above floor die down to an utter silence in an unintended response. None of the employees are working anymore, some even stand up, twisting and turning their heads in anticipation of spotting the office manager arriving to calm things down. But no managers are seen. Some employees lean forward in their chairs with squinting eyes, attentively inspecting for any incongruities to the bland ceiling design. But everything stays unchanged; the office has returned back to its previous state of stillness. Only this time, the buzzing ceiling lights hum without company, and as everyone retains their attention for the preparation of any new noises, that once tolerable buzzing rings into an almost deafening roar, as if mocking the employees for being distracted by something that has only occurred in their imaginations. But just as the employees begin questioning the reality of what they heard, the soft, drumming footsteps of a crowd-like movement sound once again, traveling through the ceiling now in full declaration for all to realize: something strange is occurring in the floor above.

Ceiling tiles jolt slightly upward as the crashing of metals sound out in quick succession. Loud banging noises interrupt the indefatigable rhythm of aggressive stomping, reverberating around all areas of the now shaking ceiling frame. Sounds of glass shattering cut through the chaos, clinging and clanging at an elevated pitch compared to the others, standing out as the most identifiable piece to the puzzle of disarray that is the floor above. Something shrieks with pain, something inhuman, yet still capable of possessing the ability to express terror and dread. At another corner, a long, desperate moan is heard, dropping in volume as it passes through stretches of tubing, ventilation, concrete, and plastic separating the two floors, ultimately being distorted to an unrecognizable tone as it finds its way through the gaps of the ceiling. More crashing, progressively increasing in their degree of violence and aggression, at times occurring in many areas of the ceiling at once, all while the tapping and screeching of shoes on unknown surfaces play

out in the background. In synchrony, the employees watched, silent is the current floor as chaotic is the floor above.

Without ever sharing a word, a few of the employees seem to remember something as their gazes drop from the ceiling down to a level natural to their eyes. Blankly staring at no particular direction, they struggle to focus on their thoughts, or on their attempts to have thoughts. When unsuccessful, they resort to following instincts, coincidentally sharing the same intuition to sit back down and return their attention to the monitors on their identical desks. As yet another crash shakes the floor walls, a gush of warm air blows through the vents, but is quickly purged by the dominate majority of cool, chemical air that occupied the office before it. More employees

follow suit and return to their office chairs. Some, with expressions that calm and relax as their eyes fall back to the screen; others, retaining a slight but discernable look of confusion. Within short time, all employees of the office floor have returned back in front of their keyboards. And as more muffled sounds of chaos and disarray transfer through the shaking ceiling, there are still those who occasionally tilt their heads up with quick, uninterested glances, but soon, those occasions end entirely. All attention, all concentration, and all focus has been directed back to the computers, and that ocean of keyboard clicks has formed once more, only now operating as the distant outlier to a new baseline of noise – the combined chaos of the floor above.



**Isolation**  
by Rose Bennett

# liberation

by Richard George

spectra of light shine in and out of  
view a rainbow of emotions envelope the  
mind as the music pumps harder and louder and faster  
computer static is in my ears like bugs  
piercing my eardrum drums faster and harder and louder as tears  
fall.

on a bed  
stained by a waterfall  
wrenched and exposed its foam innards  
of a mattress aged by years of overuse  
i think i should buy a new one  
it'll be more white, pristine, and opulent  
my past won't line its edges  
and my future won't be shackled by it  
i think the darkness of the room will blend in with its  
seamless, pearl-like color and the new bed will be  
the biggest in a small room  
i'll sleep better more and the nights won't be as dark  
or as small or as poor and those nights  
won't be stained by the floods that rush in  
day by day

pump up the music  
that should blare through the entire town let  
them feel the rage of a lonely heart  
that wants love  
harder and faster and louder and let them  
be flooded with feelings unbounded  
silence should forever escape and their ears rot

thunderous lights and blistering eyes  
glare into my small, pin-holed windows  
investigators of an unseen crime  
journalists to an anonymous person  
i maintain the most frugal lifestyle  
unassuming and unapparent

it requires the most perfect adjustments  
my hair and clothes and general fit  
procured like from a magazine catalog  
i shop myself and with my own money of course  
this graphic design is out of a mind unbounded  
forever inspected like a cadaver



Breaking Free by Clara Burke



# What i want as a teenager is to

by Anonymous

come to you in  
cyclical relapse  
with each syllable  
escaping

muzzling silence  
be tempted to borrow  
its imprisonment and speak in  
dialogues conversed by

friction of skins.

entrance myself in suicidal magnetism of  
passion until self-invoked  
implosion occurs and we fall prey  
to salivating glands of heartbreak.

i want to unmask a facade of symbiosis  
follow a dissolved dichotomy  
through the intestines of partnership  
and watch as its remnants find sanctimonious

being in the stomachs  
of two lovers

until diluted in a hypertonic  
elixir of  
new love,

body never  
discards faint remainders  
of our original  
yearning.



Dysmorphia by Lola Sidie

# a box for a body

by Isobel Li

and so the ideal takes form  
shaped by what we think,  
by the way we allow ourselves to think

she was three years my senior  
when she told me about her calorie deficit  
an effort at pre-prom weight loss  
orchestrated by a diet of green tea and boiled eggs,  
workouts in the earliest hours of the morning

i watched her energy wane like a crescent moon  
while she measured progress with her mirror

and in her wrongful conflation of size and beauty  
i learned how much hurt a body can carry

and how we make ourselves fit the things we aren't



Masks Up by Tatum Warren

# The Brown Parcel Box

by Elena Zhang

## Prologue:

Particles tend to bond with other particles, but when they're separated by any natural or manual process, they tend to stay that way. You would think a log disappears into ashes when it's burned, but science says matter is indestructible, even if it's invisible. Because no matter what physical and chemical changes they undergo, none is created nor destroyed through the process. Everything is matter. You and I are matter.

## Part I: The Cube

All sides of a cube have equal dimensions and parallel opposite edges. The sides are flat and smooth with nothing bulging out or caving in. Within the cube, the volume is definite with no empty space.

To commemorate our time together before your upcoming college decisions, you and I transformed a 12x12x12 parcel box into a mailbox, which we kept under our bed and used to exchange bags of chips, apology notes on gum wrappers, unflattering candid polaroids, and codenames in Mei-Po (our made-up language).

Eileen: Welcome! Saturday 5th 6:00pm November

*Today marks our first day of the Mailbox. Please read the following for instructions.*

*Rules:*

- 1. Eileen is always right no matter what.*
- 2. If Eileen does something wrong, remember rule 1.*
- 3. Always seal your envelopes.*
- 4. Keep box out of sight.*

*These are all the rules that you must abide. If you have any questions, please write to me. You will find some envelopes, cards, and ziplock bags for future use. Please sign below to confirm your commitment to the Mailbox and mail it back.*

*Party 1: Eileen Zhang*

*Party 2: \_\_\_\_\_*

*P.S. For your first gift, here are some grape flavored hichews.*

Elena: Hi! Saturday 5th 6:02pm November

*The hichews are delicious but I don't agree with rule 1 and 2.*

*...*

*Party 1: Eileen Zhang*

*Party 2: Elena Zhang*

Eileen: Sunday 6th 10:00am November

*Rules will not be reconsidered.*

We sat on the floor among pieces of cut cardboard and proudly marked the beginning of our mailbox. In the next two months, our envelopes, candies, and birthday cards piled to the top of the box and filled in all the crevices. The once-rigid box began to swell at the sides, bursting with all our offerings.



**Hammerhead (L) and Lonesome Pond (R) by Molly Ramsey**

## Part II: Entropy

Elena: Apology Letter Friday 20th 11:48pm January

*I'm sorry about what I said last night. I want you to know that everything was out of anger in the moment and I never want you to feel that way again. I hope we can fix everything before you leave.*

The second law of thermodynamics states that entropy, or disorder, always increases with time. Nature favors increasing the entropy in a system - an ice cube at room temperature will melt, corn kernels over a gas flame will pop, a minor skirmish between two people will escalate into a full-blown cold war.

Once New Year's passed, the mailbox was used less and less. When you told me to move to mom's room because I was too loud, I snapped: "I wish you don't get into any college."

You didn't say anything that night, but I could feel something rupture. I was disappointed to find nothing when I habitually checked my mailbox everyday. Even when we reconciled from the cold war in our day-to-day life, my life still felt disrupted without a reply in the mailbox. Although you acted as if nothing had happened, I felt as if the mailbox had already vanished from your world.

After I left you the apology note, I waited for you to acknowledge the letter: I averted eye contact, waiting for your confrontation. But my hopes diminished as the days passed and no replies came. Even though you didn't say anything about the letter, after a week or so, you did start speaking to me again. As things returned to equilibrium on the surface, I found it harder to address this growing yet unspoken distance between us and the mailbox that used to bridge our lives.

As each day was crossed off the calendar before summer break, the mailbox became less real. When you left that summer, I moved the mailbox to the garage so that I wouldn't have to be reminded on a daily basis of this split that we never sealed.

After you left, mom announced a cleanout.

"You, pile her clothes and books into boxes." Mom assigned me the hard work. "You can keep things, but the rest is going to storage." With the pain from the mailbox still fresh in mind, I sat back on cleaning your things.

"I'm not obliged to clean up after her!" My words came out more enraged than I intended and I could feel mom's look without actually looking at her.

"God, save the temper for someone else," Mom snapped. "Is this such a big deal?" She turned away. Now that I think of it, maybe what I did was

more out of avoidance than grudge. I'm scared of the subtlety that objects carry, and how often your markers, clothes, and comics remind me of you who's worlds away from me. The house was reassembled after two whole days of cleaning, and I must say the room looks twice the size without your belongings scattered on the floor.

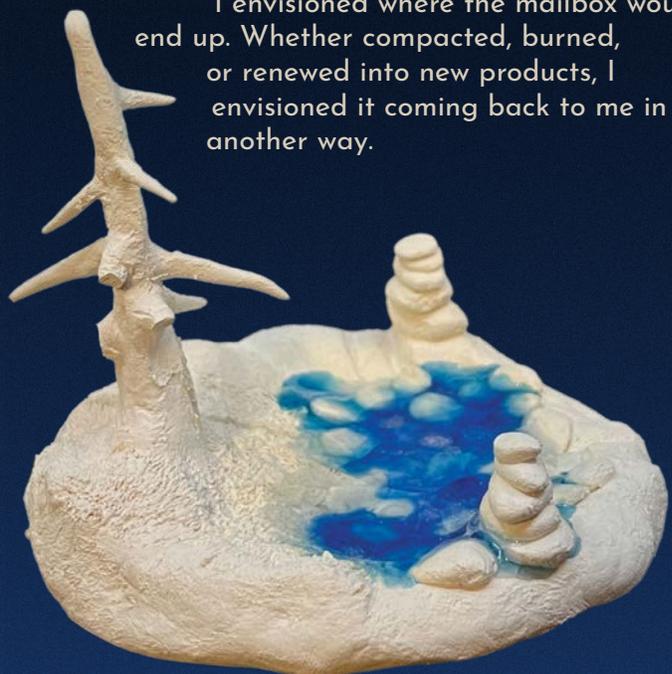
Even though I'd studiously avoided the packing process, I still decided to scan over your things knowing that it's my last chance to grab something. Your things were separated into two piles: one for storage, the other for recycling. Unfortunately for me (but fortunately for you), all the things that I would possibly want to take were packed tightly in the boxes. Even more unfortunately for me, however, I saw a pile of cardboard in the recycling pile. Not just any cardboard. I pulled them out and confirmed that it was our cardboard, our mailbox, broken down into unequal square-like pieces with traces of our craft still visible. I dig through the trash bag looking for the letters like a hungry stray cat looking for food, but there was no trace so I assumed the recyclers must have already taken them. I hold my tears in harder than I hold the torn cardboard, the last remains of our mailbox, and head back indoors.

My mom approached me as I came inside. "What are you doing with that?" she said. "It's going to trash."

Trash. I paused to think of what to say, but I knew that my tears would've burst out at any moment if I let myself explain. So instead, I used anger as my shield again.

"Yeah you're right," I said trembling, "it's just trash, maybe we should tear it down even more, shred it into pieces, and burn it before we dump the ash." I dropped the pieces on the floor and ran away from my mom to save the tears for myself.

I envisioned where the mailbox would end up. Whether compacted, burned, or renewed into new products, I envisioned it coming back to me in another way.



### Part III: Conservation of Matter

I really thought our lives had separated into two tracks after you went to college, only getting farther and farther apart with time. Out of everything, however, who would've thought that a global pandemic was something that transformed the time I thought we had lost for good into a reconnection.

In our endless days sharing a room again, we spent all our time sitting on your bed, updating each other on the times that we've lost together. We devised a plan to sneak pizza in the house during midnight without Mom hearing. We witnessed the sun set and rise in one long conversation through the night. I felt as if we were kids again - taller, older, but still the same us. Something about our bond made me realize that we didn't need to stay together or do the same things to be connected. That original box is somewhere else now - holding a kid's new sneakers, or a birthday present. I couldn't tell you where or how - I don't know what shape it is or if it has a  $12 \times 12 \times 12$  definite volume - but I knew the mailbox had returned to us.

### Abstracted by Didi Fu



### I Can't Fix Myself by Clara Burke

# pretty enough

by Chloe Chou

something breaks in the frozen night  
tearing / you sit up and i stay

right here in these warm sheets  
you say i am pretty only because the word beautiful

is too strong for someone like me. the word lovely too bland,  
the word cute too childish. pretty is enough and pretty is anyone.

i reach for your hand and i want to  
have your fingers between mine but

you pull away / like the sting of a bee / like something foul  
a bird screeches somewhere in the dark, cuts itself off abruptly

you stand up and open the window, moonlight casts on your clean freckled skin  
i am brown against these white sheets, against you

you are strong where i am broken & mama says  
someone like you is someone i need  
there are things we can love enough  
with time / and i am not one of them

the crackling stars, gossiping moon  
abandoned bicycle on the empty road,  
wheel spinning, still.

i feel naked in this cold light  
ashamed i study my fingers, count  
each one like a confession

& again wind rushes through the open  
breeze, i want to call out  
*come back to bed*

but the words flicker and die in my mouth, my  
jaw sets like the pretty girl i am  
please / please tell me again

tell me, again, how pretty i am

The Girl Looking Back At Me by Alyssa Ratcliffe

# Mother and Daughter: A Collection of Phrases

by Christina Bencin

I hate you.

I'm so sorry, Mommy.

...

I love you.

Stop jumping all over me, baby! You're like sticky rice.

But I love you!

And you're fun to hug!

I hope you don't turn out like your cousin Wendy.

She can't keep a steady job. She'll always be

working minimum wage,

jumping from one job she thinks she loves to the next. She will never get that life of luxury that she so desperately wants. She always has to go to therapy, too, and takes all of these fancy, expensive drugs to keep her under control because she blows little issues out of proportion and just cannot cope.

Ok.

*I so desperately don't want to disappoint you. But what will I do if I need therapy, like Wendy needs it? I guess I won't tell you if I'm ever depressed or suicidal, not that it will ever happen. Beats being talked about behind my back like this or worse, going through a conversation like this with you. But it's worth it, for the good reputation, right?*

...

Right?

My friends that you met at the hot pot place a few days back asked if you were a ballerina. In China, that question is a compliment. It implies that you have a beautiful body.

Did you tell them that I play ice hockey?

*That makes me really happy to hear. More happy than you'll ever know.*

Here, wear this dress to the dance. I got it at Plato's Closet for less than \$20. And it's your favorite, purple!

Oh, ok. Sure. Thanks.

*It goes down to my ankles . . . I'm not a nun! Why can't I show off my arms and legs too, like the other girls? I love my body, so shouldn't I be celebrating it? And why are you so cheap?*



## Moons of Us by Siena Masilionis

Telling you about how your father and I met and when we had our first kiss isn't your business. In Chinese culture, we do not talk about this sort of thing with our parents.

Oh, ok. Sorry for ever asking.

*But what if I want to know so I can gauge my own relationship in the future? What if I just want a mother's advice?*

...

*Why does love make her so uncomfortable? Why is she so cold?*

You have to study for the PSAT. This is your junior year and whether you like it or not, colleges are going to be looking at these scores.

The PSAT is really not as important as you make it out to be.

*Why can't you let me linger in the fun I've just had with my friends? Can't you just let me relive the fun childhood I never had? You had your time, stacking my summers with math competition preparation and violin lessons, and now this is my time to live it out. So what if I don't get a 1520? Don't you want me to become a real human girl with a likable personality, a real human girl who can embrace her quirks with grace, a real human girl who can put smiles on people's faces? You're always saying I should go get some real experiences, that doing so, the social skills gained will help me become a boss in the long run. You were the one who pleaded I stop being so serious about everything. Life isn't a competition, you said just a few weeks ago, go enjoy yourself, you said. What do you want from me? What am I supposed to be doing right now? Having fun or preparing for meaningless tests?*

You have really thick eyebrows. No boy is going to want you with those disgusting things! Here, let me trim them.

Ow, stop it! No!

*Why must we succumb to societal expectations? I don't see guys trimming their even bushier eyebrows!*

My eyebrows aren't that thick.

It's summer, why are you wearing that?

I'm cold.

*Um, maybe because I'm so uncomfortable with the rolls of fat on my legs and the stretch marks on my stomach that black sweatshirts and baggy black pants are the only thing that are preventing me from slicing off my flesh with a steak knife until I am the skeleton you want me to be?*

...

*How are you not calling me out on my BS right now? Of course I'm hot, I'm not crazy! Why aren't you telling me to wear shorts, encouraging me that I'll look cute in them? Do you want me to wear long clothing because you, too, are ashamed of my body?*

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# Blackout

by Supriya Bolla

It always starts as a clear spring day.  
Serene curtains, murmuring crowds, warbling musicians.  
"House closes in five."  
Here, time gets to stand still.

I tighten the laces of my boots, usher in stragglers, and click the entry firmly shut.  
Creak open a side door, slide gently into my seat,  
and push aside tangled mics to assure I've taken my cue.

"House to half."  
a sharp crackle in my ear, and

"5,"

"4,"

"3,"

"2,"

"1."

Blackout.

Every time the grand opens,  
I welcome the darkness,  
steady my too-shaky hand,

Without warning, a new world is born:  
Shabby frames turn into portals,  
something akin to magic takes hold,  
standing watch in a dark room

there's a moment.  
to tousle through my too-short hair,  
set my too-tight jaw, fill my inhale, and . . .

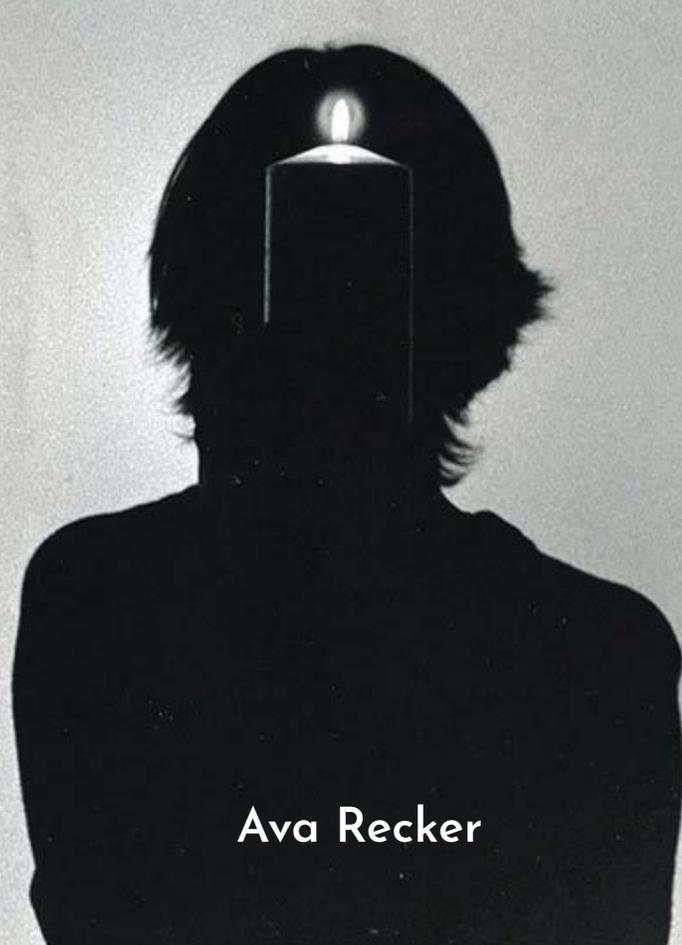
Click.

Sharp beams set scraps of wood aflame,  
a fourth wall shatters.  
I'm telling a story without words,  
knowing no one will ever realise I was there.



Burn

by



Ava Recker

# A Wistful Storm

by Lillian Flood

In all her many years, the woman did not think she ever witnessed anything as ugly as rain. It wasn't just the way it stuck to the ground, leaving muddy piles all over the city, littering the sidewalks with grime and built-up trash. No, what truly made her despise the stormy weather was the way it made her feel. It was such unworldly emptiness that captivated her, as if lightning had struck her directly in the chest. Just like it did on the streets outside, it would stay with her, the hollowness eating up her heart until the sun made rays of light through the clouds and she was able to breathe again.

How nobody else seemed to reciprocate such passionate feelings was beyond her. Many of her loved ones would dismiss her with a wave, scoffing that she could think such a pessimistic thing.

"You need to learn to appreciate the Earth more," her mother had once said, though it held no truth. The woman loved Earth and all it contained. It was just that, when she looked at the raindrops falling down the window of her car, she could see glimpses of a time when he was still around. When their silhouettes would cast dark shadows against the tiny window in her kitchen. When the radio would play some absurdly silly '70s song that fit the moment just right.

Forever ago – which actually wasn't forever ago – the thought of reminiscing didn't hurt as bad. But maybe because he was still sleeping next to her, his hair still stuck in her shower drain, his clothes still making a pile in the corner of her room. Maybe it's because, as she grew old, she found it difficult to picture the slope of his nose, the little curls of his hair, the birthmark on his left bicep. Maybe it's because you can never see the end coming, even if your hands are outstretched and eyes are wide.

After a while, she confined herself indoors, closing the blinds as the sound of raindrops made constant noise outside the walls of her apartment.

She stayed like this for half a year, each day a new weight. Some of this was spent in solitude; the rest was poor efforts at fake smiles and redundant inside jokes. One spring afternoon when winter felt impossibly distant, her friend came over, a coffee in one hand, an umbrella in the other. Without any greeting, any acknowledgment, she pointed to the window and, very solemnly, said, "It's raining."

The woman looked towards the sky and nodded. "I can see."

"Your window is still open."

The woman's eyes widened. They were standing in the living room, by the largest of her windows. And her friend was right – without her even realizing, there had been a downpour in the weather, and slight drops had found their way into the interior of the apartment.

Her heart hurt. She rushed over, shutting the window loudly, and gave her friend a look. They were silent and still for a few moments before one of them sighed – the woman wasn't sure who – and her friend finally moved to shake her umbrella out near the front door.

Later, when she couldn't sleep at night, the woman realized her heart didn't hurt from the pain of before, or the thought of him. She hurt because, for the first time in months, she had forgotten what it felt like for him to leave.

She found that while she forgot the stubble on his jaw, the tension in his shoulders, she also forgot the sobbing after days of nothing. The rage she felt when she repeated the story to her friends and family. The sound the door made when he shut it for the last time.

The unanswered phone calls. The opened texts.

The way his voice caught when he said goodbye.

She had spent minutes, hours, days trying to find a way to be the person "after." After he left. After things changed. After her heart broke. She didn't know if she could handle waking up one day and just simply being fine. The woman had gotten so used to the pain, the way it left her eyes droopy and her fingers nervous, that she had allowed it to consume her.

They told you that love was worth everything, that if you had to choose something in life, choose love. But what was love if you lost yourself in the process? The woman didn't know. So she continued to dread the rain and all of its what-if questions. Some memories were best left ignored.



# The Love Letter

by Tess Vanberg

The second time I got married was the happiest day of my life. It was illegitimate and secretive. It was born of utter foolishness, but the joy that filled my heart that day was unrivaled by anything done before the eyes of the familiar.

There was never a doubt in my mind that Céline was the love of my life. She was the one that I had been made for, not the man that I had been married to. Jacques treated me well; provided for me a home to keep warm and dry, and food to pacify my hunger. It is not to say I did not love him. I did so only in the manner in which someone may love a trusted friend. I loved him deeply in that respect, but he was not my companion in the way that is so often intended between a married couple.

Céline lived in the small stone cottage, so alike to mine, in the farm adjacent to Jacques'. She too was the wife of a shepherd, her tasks the same as mine. On the first day I arrived at the cottage, fresh from the wedding, she invited herself over. As Jacques opened the door, Céline and her husband entered our house with warm welcomes and introductions. I led her to the small kitchen in the back of our cottage. She brought with her a platter of baked mutton. When she passed me, under the sweet herbal scent of the dinner, I caught a wisp of rose from her. Somehow, under all her generosity, I could still find her.

The philosophers and poets tell us that opposites attract, like how a planet of water orbits the biggest ball of fire in the sky. Céline was my star, and I the planet. She was the sun to my rain, the energy to my demurity, the land to my sea. Where I was churning and restless, she was the shore that broke my waves. It was Céline who found the spot between our husbands' properties.

A few months after I moved to the countryside, I was working in the fields tending to the sheep, when Céline appeared on her side of the rotting wooden fence dividing our flocks. With one hand she held a delicately woven basket, not deep enough to hold anything of a substantial weight. With her other, she beckoned me towards her. Curious not only of her shenanigans, I approached the fence.

"You looked terribly lonely out in that field," she said with her honey sweet voice.

"I'm rather fine. I have the sheep and the dog, Berger—"

"Nonsense," she cut me off with a wave of the hand. "You need the company of another intellectual

being."

"I fret that Jacques may be apprehensive of me leaving the sheep alone."

"They have Berger to tend to them. Don't you worry about them."

It was the neighborly thing to fulfill her request, and though Jacques may have been truly upset by my actions, once again, I was curious about her.

"Well, I suppose I am happily obliged."

She beamed and every ounce of her sunshine on Earth radiated from her. She looped my arm through hers over the fence and set off at a brisk pace. She led me to a break in the fence, and as I turned to check the sheep, I found that Berger had followed us. In suit behind him were several members of the flock.

It was reckless, but the spark inside my chest drove me forward to where Céline had extended a hand to me. I took it and followed her a short walk into the woods, our entourage trailing behind.

The small clearing was just large enough to fit the stone pillar topped by the carving of a lion. He lay atop his precipice, large paws crossed before him as he studied his kingdom of sheep bleating from the fields below. Flowers of every color adorned his pedestal. Roses, peonies, marigolds. As I absorbed the beauty, Céline moved to the flowers with a pair of clippers stowed in the basket. I gawked as she began inspecting the delicacy of the flowers, finding the perfect ones and snipping them. She turned to me and smiled once again, "I am simply doing my duty as a wife." She held a chrysanthemum out towards me. I approached to take it, but she tucked it along with a lock of hair behind my ear. "Making sure my home smells nice."

Her laugh was irresistible, and we were suddenly lost in a storm of giggling. She made me feel like a child again, satisfied and unworried by life's trials.

At some point I took off my shoes and stockings to feel the soft grass beneath my feet. The earth still damp from a previous night's rain. Céline stared at me with an unreadable expression, before following my lead.

The spot became our slice of heaven. Our own Garden of Eden. As the flowers bloomed, so too did our relationship. We would sit beside the lion's throne and speak of our troubles. Speak of our joys and sorrows. Sometimes, we wouldn't speak at all. If our husbands were aware of our courtship, I was not sure. I can believe they suspected at least, but I was never confronted. And if Céline was, she would have told me.

One day, as we lay languishing in the Garden, I turned my gaze to where Céline was resting her head on my lap. "What if we were to marry?"

"Don't be foolish," her voice was leaden with sleepiness. "We're already married."

"No. What if we were to marry?"

She sat up with a puzzled expression. "That is not possible. We have husbands."

"We could divorce them. I could pretend to be a man. We could be wed." I had been pondering the idea for some time.

But Céline shook her head. "We could never divorce. Especially at the same time. It would be too suspicious and the Church would never allow it. Everyone would know."

That was a risk neither of us could afford to take. Disappointment weighted my heart.

After a moment of silence, she spoke. "That is not to say there is no other alternative."

"Such as what?" I asked her.

"We could be married here," she whispered. "We could have a ceremony. Just the two of us."

"How?"

"It wouldn't be acknowledged, but it would be real. Between us, it would be real. And we could be safe."

I smiled at her and no star could outshine us.

The following day we met in our Garden. The flora and fauna of the clearing shone in the sun, which had reached its highest point in the sky. The light twinkled as it illuminated the spot where we stood, hands entwined, as to prove that He witnessed our union. That He had led us to this slice of His kingdom.

Berger and his sheep gathered at our feet. The flowers we had picked lay in a basket to Céline's side. Two roses crossed before us. She pulled her vows, written on a folded letter of cream, from the pocket of her blushed silken dress.

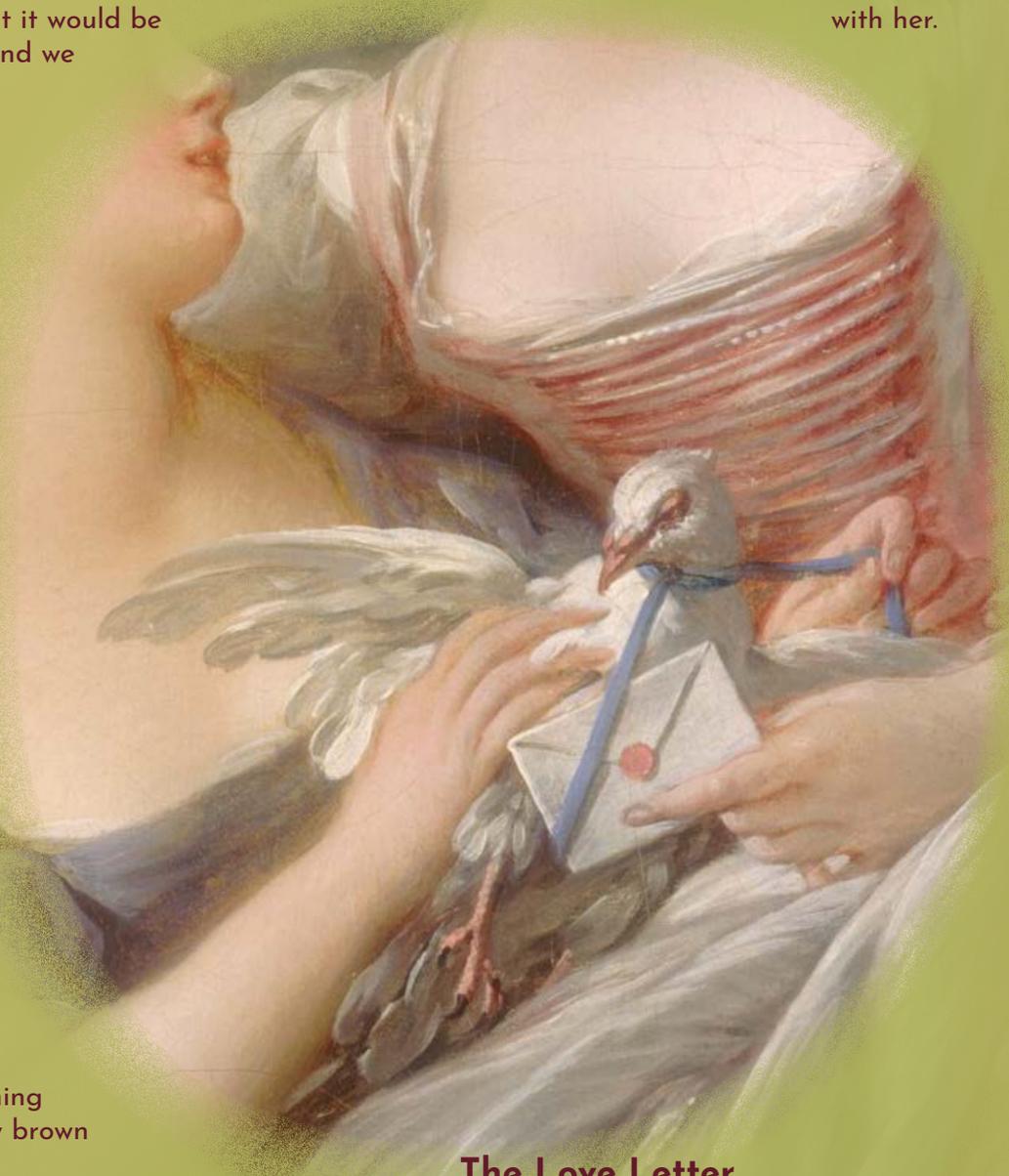
I studied her as she read. Our names had been concealed behind those of lovers. *My Dearest, My Love, My Sweet*. Her face rosened, matching the color of her dress. Sunlight reflected off her locks of spun gold. She was a living contrast to everything of me, from my lavender silks to my brown hair.

Her words carried on the gentle breeze, sweeter than the song of doves. She spoke softly, yet not

quietly. Her voice was proud and sure. Sweet tears fell down my cheeks as she finished the vow. I did not stop them as I took out my own. I couldn't look at her as I read, for if I did a pool would flood our Garden. When I finished, she embraced me, our first embrace in marriage. A marriage valid only between her, and me, and God.

As we sat under the lion, she lay her arm across my shoulders, gentle and at ease. Céline had miraculously secured a pigeon so white it might have been a dove. We had sealed our vows in an envelope with rose-colored wax. I tied the letter to the bird with a blue-purple ribbon. As we released the dove, taking with it the letter to wherever it may land, to whomever may find it, we basked in the easy silence of confirmation. A lamb lay beside us, lazily warming himself in the dancing sunlight.

Heaven was here,  
with her.



**The Love Letter**  
by François Boucher (1750)

# El Niño

# La Niña

by Wyatt Vaughn

*Indescribable, Unfathomable*

Warmth.

Cold.

Simple and mindless.

Sensitive and agonizing.

Basking in the leisure of

*relief.*

Yearning for the asylum of

Carried, effortlessly, by the  
breezing winds

Trapped, suffocating, below  
you

You exist

*only in*

I exist

My absence.

Your absence.

Why should the World want  
to summon you?

True, that when free,  
I summon

You bring

*Drought, Wildfires,  
Destruction:*

The stain you leave  
on

The only mark I can make  
on

*The world*

That cannot handle your  
chaos.

Your world, that will never be  
rid of the scar I leave.

*The world:*

A place I will not relinquish  
To a force that fights for  
change.

A place that will not know  
"destruction" until you share =  
let me restore it.

# Sonatas for Diana

by Marisa Oishi

New

We wake up and feel the absence of warmth.

\*\*\*

*Waxing Crescent*

Slowly now, we embrace  
the blossoming light all around.  
Was sleep an absence  
from the world, or an immersion  
in it? Eyes open, the lights  
offer us their hands.

We take them,  
relishing the sounds  
on our skin as they whiz  
by and past and  
away.

\*\*\*

*First Quarter*

These days, we are compelled  
to begin. We've arrived  
at some leg of the journey.  
How is irrelevant.

All that matters is the nowness  
of the unmanned commands  
we obey. They say  
joy comes with time,  
but we demand to meet it  
today.

\*\*\*

*Waxing Gibbous*

It turns out  
we don't have much  
or any control  
over when we become.

We seem complete, yes,  
so maybe we are.  
We can't imagine  
what it is to be real.

\*\*\*

*Full*

We see it now.

If up is defined by our solar sister,  
we lay on our backs, facing up.  
We feel her power until she paints  
the insides of our eyelids  
scarlet red. We feel  
until it's dangerous  
to open our eyes.

In the oceans, we don't see  
the tides we convey  
nor the stories we illuminate.

\*\*\*

*Waning Gibbous*

Maybe the shadows are now  
our home, and the light  
only an excursion.

It's time to retreat,  
back to the shape  
that makes us recognizable,  
distinct from the rest,  
ordinarily us.

\*\*\*

*Third Quarter*

Our greatest fear  
is to be forgotten.  
We wait for the reverberations  
of our actions to recede,  
then ask

what will seed and take root  
and sprout and launch  
and fly, not unlike a rocket,  
but as far from the sky  
as the ground?

We don't need to make sense.  
To a star, are we not the heavens?

\*\*\*

*Waning Crescent*

We know now,  
it's a sin not to think of the body  
as a celestial being,  
hot to the touch.

Sure, we chase the impossible,  
but only to circumvent  
the possible.

Yes, I am a lunatic;  
yes, I will sing for you.

No one will unsee  
our imprint in the darkness  
and of course  
the constellations in  
and of our minds  
can't escape them,  
not because we can't forget their  
harmonies,  
but because we can't remember  
their ending.

The stars had it right the first time.

Soon enough,  
For every vivid memory  
    *Analysis follows -*  
Beholden with intricacy  
To sounds, smells, tastes, textures  
    *Incarcerated - in this moment*  
Almost as if letting go  
Will mean the end.

In the wake of the betrayal,  
thundering at your door  
    *Having you tortured -*  
Moment by moment,  
Persisting in its presence.  
The touch of emptiness  
    *Lingering -*  
Long after its departure  
Forever present.

The gloom,  
Foisting itself up on you.  
    *Fed up -*  
you try to forget.  
And yet  
with each tug of war  
    *Its grip tightens -*  
Chafing your skin  
Tethered to perpetuity.

Eyes shut,  
you find an escape.  
    *Temporality -*  
Veiling the sentiment.  
A poltergeist white mist  
Breathing space.  
    *Initially heavenly -*  
An easy way to forget  
An easy way to neglect.

But soon its false nature,  
will be made present  
    *Slowly suffocating you -*  
Squashing your breath.  
Until none remains.  
The end befalls you  
    *Betrayal -*  
Still present  
In the depths of your being.

## Betrayal

by Barbara Matijevic

At first, time flies.  
Every moment is enshrined  
    *Ignorant of its fate -*  
Unaware that one day,  
Its presence will be felt.  
Time and time again.  
    *Overanalyzed -*  
The past to which the future  
Will be fettered.

# Persephone's Plight

by Adrianna Brady

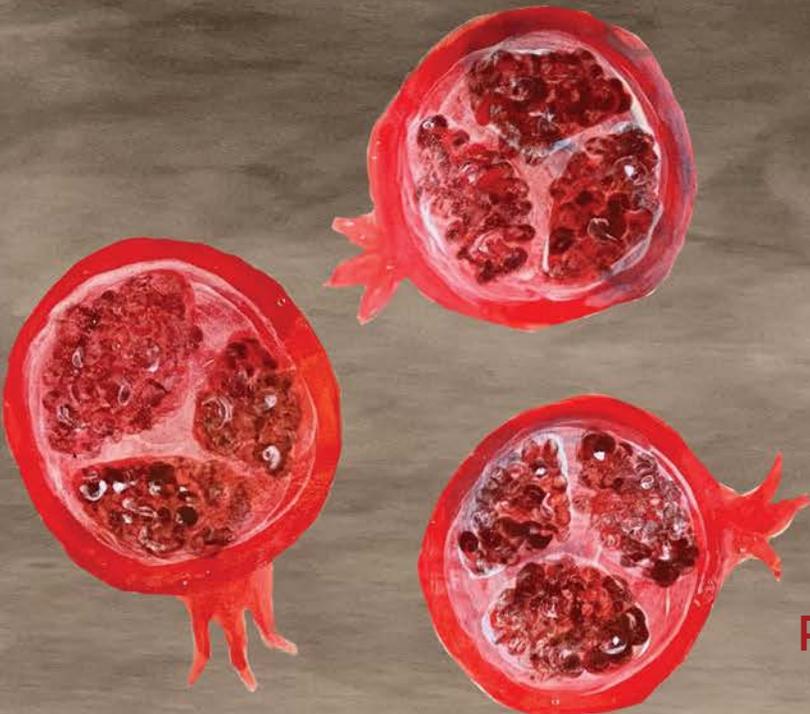
A Prodigal daughter never returns home  
She may enter its walls after her respite,  
but is always a guest  
to the ghost of her mother's daughter

The mother does not draw near  
As Demeter would not kiss the  
Pomegranate-stained hands of Persephone  
For her lips would bear the same color as if  
She too ate the fruit

Had she been a son,  
Her father would wrap his mantle around her  
and cut up the soft belly of a calf  
not yet scarred and webbed by sinew,  
for now the house sits safely on his shoulders.

A Prodigal daughter's lot, however,  
is not her mother's swollen wheat fields  
or orchards filled with fruits that glisten like jewels  
but barren, cold earth vanquished by famine  
and starved trees eaten by pestilence  
left behind by her absent hand.

Even if Demeter does not give absolution  
for Persephone's scarlet sin,  
She is torn between the tomb of the upper world  
and her trousseau in the underworld.  
Thus, a winter of separation will give way  
to a spring of boundless homecomings.



Pomegranate by Hadley Tuel

# Cold

by Barbara Matijevic

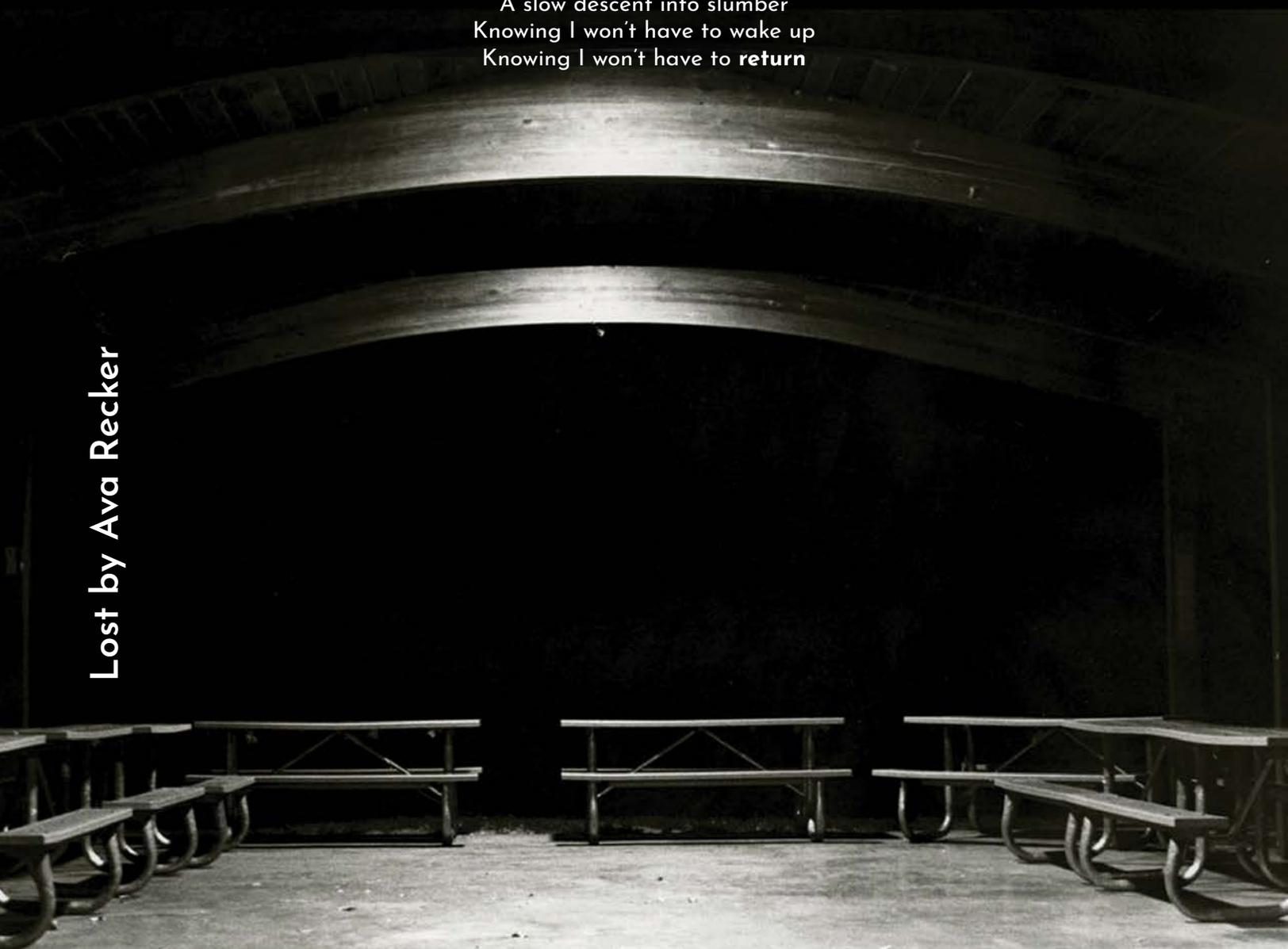
The air is heavy, dreary, and bleak.  
When burdens overwhelm blessings  
The *exit* beckons to me  
But I am *bound* to stay.

Let me take a pill  
*Obliterate* my past.  
For a peaceful departure  
From this world, I **don't** belong  
My time is up, I **want to go**.

**My** departure should be tranquil  
It should be - silent -  
With no one but myself to stop me.

**Peace** is what I seek,  
Silence is my **will**.  
A *lightness* in my shoulders  
A slow descent into slumber  
Knowing I won't have to wake up  
Knowing I won't have to **return**

Lost by Ava Recker



# Daisy Blumes

by Barbara Matijevic

Bittersweetness prevails  
As you set off your sails  
Where a tumulus sea  
once prevailed

Yet, here we are  
With merely a scar.

Your breath is lighter  
The world - brighter -  
Days fly by . . .  
You no longer wish to cry.

Treasuring the birds' tweets,  
The softness of your bedsheets.  
As springtime blooms,  
With Daisy perfumes.

You're smiling . . .  
Reconciling -  
You're dancing . . .  
Romancing -

Your self esteem  
- soaring -  
As you adorn heavens crown.

There's no need to run,  
Put down the gun.

Life is worth living,  
This is only the beginning.



# Werewolf

by Sophia Emerson

I am a werewolf.  
Waves of pain  
Bitter transformation  
I bite back  
When nothing is wrong  
Queasy ramblings  
Crying in the bathroom  
Clutching onto my stomach  
I pray for forgiveness  
Fur on my body  
Shaved and prickly  
Pushing down my nature  
I spit out my humanity  
Scarlet paints the floors  
My fangs throb in my mouth  
I crave contact and solitude  
Flesh and starvation  
I'm colorblind but I can still see  
Red.  
I am a werewolf.  
I soon regain my humanity  
Divine womanhood returns  
At the end of the week  
I can throw my chains away  
And sigh because it's over  
But relief is never permanent;  
Next month,  
I'll transform again.

## Precautions of a Uterus by Lilliana Hughey



A photograph of a white lace-trimmed garment, possibly a collar or cuff, lying on a dark surface. Several strands of red beaded necklaces are draped across the foreground, casting shadows. The beads are of various sizes and shapes, including round, faceted, and teardrop designs.

# Lilith's Vengeance

by Grace Toscano

*Lilith used to bite her tongue when men talked to her, because her responses would end up hurting her more than the bit of blood.*

*Lilith wore layers of clothes as armor, wrapping yards of cloth around her body, but even the plainest garments wouldn't stop the attention.*

*Lilith put blades in her fingernails when she walked at night, even though the dark was supposed to belong to her, but she could never completely hide the sharp metal's glint from malicious intentions.*

*Lilith would close her eyes and detach her conscious from her body when Adam touched her, so she didn't have to feel the grime from his fingertips on her skin.*

And so it was Lilith in overdue retaliation who dropped bombs down on her world, swirled in a mist of violets and gasoline, of poison and torture, of passion and elegance. Lilith slit her throat to watch the blood fall and admire how beautiful it was; it came from her and the darkest things were always the most beautiful. It was Lilith who perched on Tartini's bedside with a haunting melody that shook him into attempting to compose a watered down version of that beauty, which captivated the entire world. But in all its allure, it was nothing like Lilith's. No man could ever understand her. Lilith saw the stars and crumpled them in her palms because she could. She knew they would burn in those masses of dark space, so she laid their ruined figures into coffins and shut the lids with a kiss. Lilith painted her lips pink because she wasn't evil. She left her coat at home because she wasn't good. In a world where Lilith was constantly decimated, torn apart at every given interval, she stopped believing in the concept of good and evil. Lilith climbed her way up space, hair loose around her bare shoulders. She used the planets as stepping stones until she could reach all those who had wronged her, all those who had cast her into the mud below, and Lilith burned with the brightness of all the stars she had slain.

Bleed by Lola Sidie

# If We Should Need a God

by Sasha Watson

the first thing is to wait for the rain    to soften    our skin so that  
might easily peel the surface    away  
and still the blood stays    clinging in our veins    like the fly to  
a horse    pulsing and swaying    to stay the rippling body    veins    outlast  
the blood inside preserved    for the worshipping    :we won't  
tell God he's only built    from our outer skin    when he is drawn  
from sultry waters which hold    gates    we'll not reach    with  
toes caked in soil    we're too dirty    for waters that aren't  
a bathtub    :with blind hands    we tug forth    the beginnings of  
our savior from    that hidden place    and paper his formless  
existence    in our severed skin    until    there is resemblance  
to the fabricated flesh    that made him    our creation is  
infected by our flaws and    perhaps monstrous    but still we  
hold    the nascent god in    our calloused hands  
his stitches fresh enough    to come loose    we tremble under  
new weight but bear    this last pain    to give life to that  
which might see our suffering    and—  
still the light    part the water    scrap our bodies  
you've become us    or    are we becoming you?  
promise you'll save us  
Maker remake us  
better this time



Raven by Madison Orth

# on the top of the cathedral

by Anna Schmeer

as the clock strikes the bell tolls

*clang*

*clang*

*clang*

the steeple has never looked as high as it does

when you are standing on the tip

looking down at the cobblestones

there is no room in the temple

for the sinner

who does not repent

the

*clang*

*clang*

*clang*

will be your last rites

the body of their lord your last meal

the blood of the lamb has turned you into a vulture

even though you do not believe

the prison guards watch from below the tower

they cannot stop you now

the fall of man is upon us

and you are their prophet

the sacrificial dove

*clang*

*clang*

*clang*

three more for the funeral

the flag stands half-mast

but there is no casket

there is no grave



# No Longer Under Atmospheric Pressure

by Julia Truitt

Leaves look up to the rising sun  
A bird sings its song, letting anyone hear  
Dewy grass drips with sweet sugar water

My eyes gift me this  
The clouds know I don't deserve it  
My body was put here and for what?

All for me to slowly deteriorate and return to the soil  
My destination, to rest till I rise again  
I will sink below the surface, the ground will flourish  
Maybe a plant will arise

In moonlight, red with white glistening spots  
A mushroom reaches for the stars  
It takes my soul to the sky, to float there  
I will float to the moon, then all the other planets

There in the open I can rest, I will be content  
No longer under the atmospheric pressure  
The ice and dust will greet me as I say my farewells to the ground



Self Portrait  
by Julia Schnittker

Dustsceaung  
by Kenna Heller



**IN TWENTY  
TWO BILLION  
YEARS THE  
UNIVERSE  
WILL END**  
by Caroline Stickney

and then maybe i can stop breathing in counts of fours,  
as the matter in black holes is reduced to nothing but fragments of time, and  
impossibly cold remnants of stellar light implode like spiders in the sky.  
how is light reduced to remnants?  
is it anything like that feeble memory where you reached out for me and i froze?  
anything like our eyes reflecting the same suns in the mirror?  
imagine, please, a better continuum.  
when you told me that it's my fault,  
you were right,  
not because the bruises bloomed like they'd asked for it,  
or because i'd brought up the vomit from my throat myself,  
but because i stayed in that darkness like a white dwarf stuck fast to the cold,  
like i'd never seen a seam splitting the stars, or i'd never buried myself deep in the  
water grinning as my nails peeled off one by one,  
because i had forgotten that the sun was ever guaranteed,  
and there was no warning that the universe would ever  
blink as surely as you did, tipping off your stool,  
choking on light.



## Saturday Laundry

by Sophia Emerson

Over and over and spinning and spinning  
The beiges are dancing in the machine  
I sit on the dryer and wait so patiently  
for the load to be done and restarted again.

Tumbling and ruffling and slapping and falling  
I sort dry towels while the clothes are still washing  
The sheets are so dry and so warm in my hands  
like an oven preheated and ready for bread.

Slowing and slowing and stopping so suddenly  
The tans and whites have finished their bath  
I open the door and I'm shocked what I see:  
A red cloth poisoning the rest of the batch.

I'll have to settle for pink shirts forever.

## Dirty Laundry

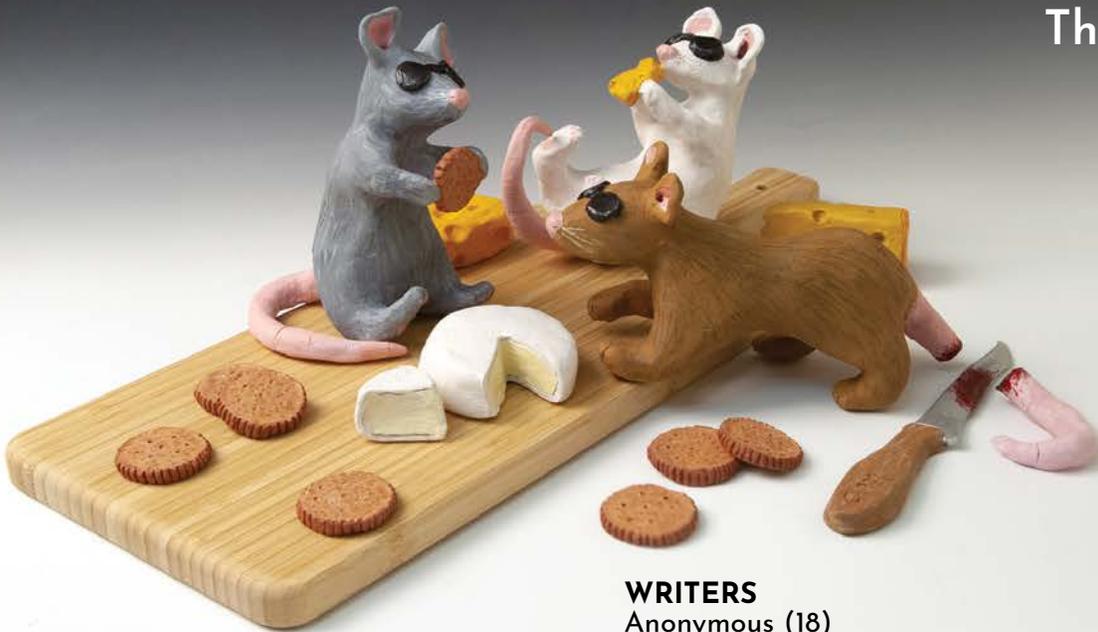
by Alex Dean



## Here we go again . . .

by Ava Shropshire

# The Cheese Thieves by Alyssa Merry



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Party  
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JOHNSON COUNTY  
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# THE UNSPOKEN

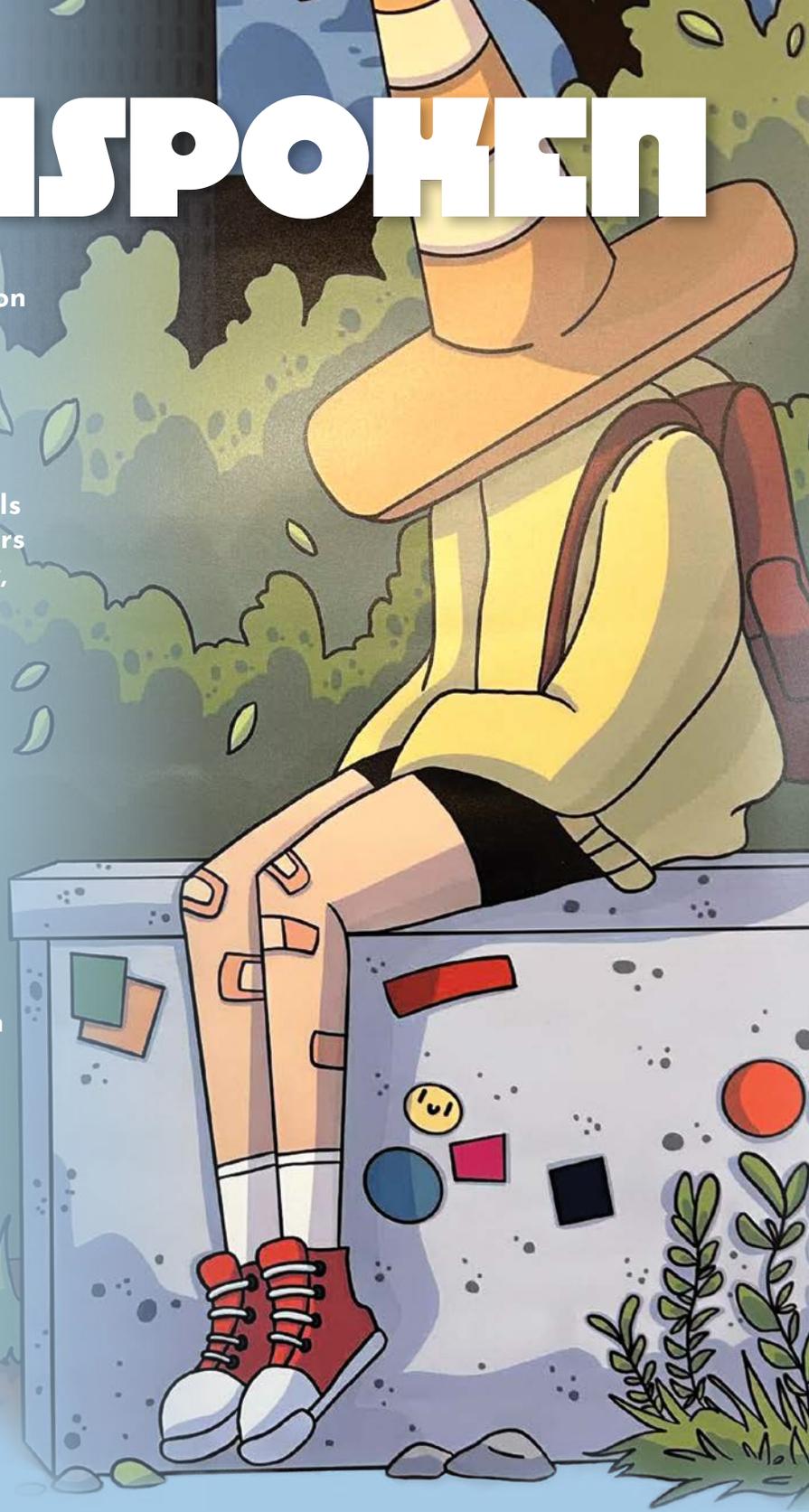
We live in a world fueled by communication and collaboration, yet there are so many thoughts we never share, conversations we struggle to start and ideas that are suppressed.

What are the words you leave unspoken? Is it always truly by choice? Are there barriers that lead to us staying silent? Historically, what has kept people mute? Discover the obstacles in your life that have led you to keep certain things behind sealed lips. Do culture and childhood contribute to taboos? How do the people who surround us mold us into believing we should leave certain things unsaid? Explore how your upbringing has influenced your opinions and how you navigate communication.

What are the random thoughts that inspire you, make you laugh, cry or even cringe? The passing thoughts that spill on to shower walls, down bus aisles or even on the underside of classroom desks. The ideas you can't clearly get out on paper, and are stuck in your head – growing like wildflowers. What are the song lyrics in your brain you haven't quite found the rhythms for, or the beats that don't have words to go with them?

Take a moment to reflect on the unspoken statements and ideas in your life and their effect on yourself and others. Explore the power of the invisible constructs that impact us all. Bring the stories you've kept secret to life, unleash your creativity across any medium and speak what you've left unspoken.

Submit your original poetry, short stories, essays, comics or artwork through Jan. 1, 2024, and set free what you've been holding in:  
[jocolibrary.org/elementia](http://jocolibrary.org/elementia)



ConeHead by Madison Orth

## Life in the Shape of Loops

by Elise Gimpert

–Begin again,  
With an unconscious adoration  
For perpetual repetition.  
Life in the shape of loops;  
Generation after regeneration.  
Comfort in conclusion,  
Because it is also conception.  
Sacred symmetry, familiarity,  
Time's curated conventions.  
Does nostalgia note our reprise?  
Or is there still novelty in origination,  
That same wonder in each time we–