

Johnson County Library's teen literary magazine

elephant

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 **The Unspoken**.

From the fall of 2023 until the spring of 2024, our team looked for submissions that exemplified the unspoken presence in all of our lives. We've pored over pieces about unspoken and pressing feelings, injustices in modern society, and the power of the written word, especially when the burdens are far too difficult to express verbally.

The unspoken is often cast aside; it is easier to ignore what hurts than face turmoil head-on, but our team was able to pick pieces that represent this topic's dynamic angles and relatability. Our artists and authors have explored various meanings within this theme while not shying away from the vulnerability it requires. We discovered approaches to the unspoken in nostalgia, admiration and grief, as well as trauma, toxic relationships and more. We are proud of the ways our submitters conveyed these heavy emotions through unique prose and a variety of artistic methods.

Our mission for this issue is to give young adults a platform to share their diverse and ranging perspectives and spotlight these unique stories. While the unspoken is often a difficult topic, we have created a magazine we believe best handles it with its required appreciation and care. If you are looking to submit your own writing and/or art, see the last page for submission information and a description of our next theme: **humanity**.

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No Ruler by George Newham



salt bridge

by Caroline Stickney

i'm stuck on the edge of something and i'm sure i'll find it under the waves that tug me like a hook in the eye and i know there's something where the sky ends but i'm not sure what this pain is supposed to bring me closer to or what stain this salt is supposed to scrub or even if this is the longest form of forever i just know i'm stuck between two eternities and i want to be something caressed until a new form emerges from the tide i want someone to tell me what to do with the wound and the knife i'm twisting or where this is bound to go because i don't know i don't know and all i want is to bridge this ache with something closer to you and to see you just once, just once before this sea floods and all that's left is the memory of bone and a bird picking through what's left.



table of contents

cover

- Undine rising** by Kate Wren
- 1 **No Ruler** by George Newham
salt bridge by Caroline Stickney
- 3 **Help** by Kate Wren
- 4 **Everyday I Bleed on Paper.**
by Ana Alonso
Unmet Expectations
by Danny Fisher
- 5 **Scott City** by Lydian Cochran
Condensed by Austin Liu
- 6 **Aboard the Censorship**
by Daniel Joon Lee
**Looking Down on Looking
Down on Myself**
by George Newham
- 7 **Untitled #17** by Lydian Cochran
Untitled #18 by Lydian Cochran
The Face by Honey Brown
Match Print by Payton Butler
- 8 **Anomalous Perceptions**
by Yeshe Rai
Rotting by Lee Rea
- 9 **Addicting** by Bella Meili
Speak Up by Tatum Warren
- 10 **a guide to facing the world**
by Eden Amaryllis
Painted by Rhea Sadagopan
Youth by Lee Rea
- 11 **Things That I Feel Guilty For**
by Linnea Heiny
- 12 **the unread letter**
by Ananya Kashyap
as it Burns by Lillia Kleinow
- 13 **Reshape** by Grace-May Hansen
By Candlelight by Payton Butler
- 14 **String Theory**
by Haley Kleinman
Thin Line by Noah Panjada
- 15 **Sol Borrego**
by Caroline Stickney
Still by Austin Liu
- 16 **They're All Going to Laugh at You**
by Kate Wren
- 17 **The Doctor's Appointment**
by Sumlina Alam
- 18 **From my Perspective**
by Nate Cooper
I am Still Rotting
by Lillia Kleinow
- 19 **fall** by Olivia Peters
Leaves by Eloise Arnold
Battle Against the Clock
by Payton Butler
- 20 **Subway Perspectives**
by Abby Lee
- 21 **Counting the Seconds Till
Departure, Trying to Find
Reasons Not to Go**
by Haley Kleinman
Pulled Back
by Logan Fixsen
- 22 **Home** by Eva Bacon
Casting on the Hudson River
by Abby Lee
- 23 **heaven is the woods behind
my childhood home**
by Madeleine Kimball
Summer Bubbles
by Alex Robertson
- 24 **Leap Year** by Harrison Jones
- 25 **Encased Heart**
by Adriana Cazares
- 26 **Disillusion** by Alea Schrock
- 27 **Next April** by Elena Zhang
World of Wishes
by Cecilia Lapetina
- 28 **kentucky** by Caroline Stickney
**Your Hair is the Color of
the Fields**
by John Hudson
Midnight Moth
by Gabriella Jordanova
- 29 **Sold to the Highest Bidder**
by Jawad Alazzeh
Yixing Teapot
by Adriana Cazares
calf
by Anafely Hernandez Perez
- 30 **Letter to Hades**
by Amelia Frank
Over Time by Honey Brown
- 31 **elevator thoughts**
by Emily Natanova
- 32 **A Guitar, a Campfire,
and a Spaceship**
by Isaac McKeag
- 33 **Cosmic Hypocrisy**
by Wyatt Vaughn
Christmas Chaos by Abby Lee

- 34 **First Confession** by Maria Tan
Interpolation by Claire Jiang
- 35 **Reese** by Haley Kleinman
Girls by Lillia Kleinow
- 36 **Coping Mechanisms**
by Emma Clement
- 37 **voidmice** by Nelle Rain
- 38 **the sun and i** by Arielle Li
Paragon by Lillia Kleinow
- 40 **Hush** by Nhu Chu
- 41 **left unsaid** by Sundos H.
- 42 **dear margot** by Yeshe Rai
- 43 **Smiling** by Katelyn Patrick
The Unseen Artist
by Anna Cameron
- 44 **Love Ghazal** by Kayla Brethauer
Eve by Leo Connelly
- 45 **word vomit** by Bethany Lines
drowning by Rhea Sadagopan
- 46 **unable to say goodbye**
by Lexi Newsom
Peach Blossom Spring
by Xizhe Wang
- 47 **Like the Ballads**
by Que Tran Tran
Calming Environment
by Lucas Nguyen
- 48 **K A** by Sia Mehta
Too much, not enough
by Rhea Sadagopan
- 51 **Measure Up** by George Newham
- 52 **Side Effects From the Cure
for Loneliness**
by Sophia Liggett
- 53 **November** by Rhea Sadagopan
- 54 **Asian Silence** by Katelin Chan
Out of Sight, Out of Mind
by Claire Jiang
- 55 **Light, Color, Reflection**
by Hailey Kasten
Vivid Eruption by Abby Lee
- 56 **her sunshine girls**
by T.J. Penman
A Memory by Lillia Kleinow
- 57 **The Woman, the Daughter**
by Cady Stevens
Motherly Care by Abby Lee
- 58 **Requiem for Banana Bread**
by Haley Kleinman
A Day at the Beach
by Mallory Terrell
- 59 **The Fishbowl Theory**
by Chloe Schoenfeld
Waiting to Create
by Siena Masilionis
- 60 **Valediction Gift**
by Wyatt Vaughn
Mirrored Images
by Danny Fisher
- 61 **If the mind is a palace . . .**
by L.C. Herbst
Programmed by Austin Liu
- 62 **Dancing in a Fight For Myself**
by Hanna Cochran
Dancing from the Heart
by Noah Panjada
- 63 **infection of idolatry**
by Francesca Arnold
In My Own Image
by Kate Wren
- 64 **Atonement**
by Joseph Shonkwiler
Beeswax by Austin Liu
- 65 **Metaphysical** by Katie Chung
Supplement by Noah Panjada
- 66 **Where I hope to be**
by Katelyn Patrick
- 67 **Checkmate**
by Gabriella Jordanova
- 68 **The Times** by Nhu Chu
- inside back cover
unaware by Rhea Sadagopan
- back cover
altar by Caroline Stickney
Protection Faces
by Alex Bergman



help by Kate Wren



Everyday I Bleed on Paper.

by Ana Alonso

Everyday I bleed on paper,
(It looks prettier that way.)

Here I present to you my blood,
Crimson seeping through sheets,
Spelling out words that stitch themselves into sentences,
That become paragraphs and poems.

Here I present to you my blood,
The scarlet of over exaggeration,
It all felt that real to me,
Even when it wasn't.

Here I present to you my blood,
Its purest form. Unfiltered,
Unflinching.

It's easier to be confident,
When you've given up.

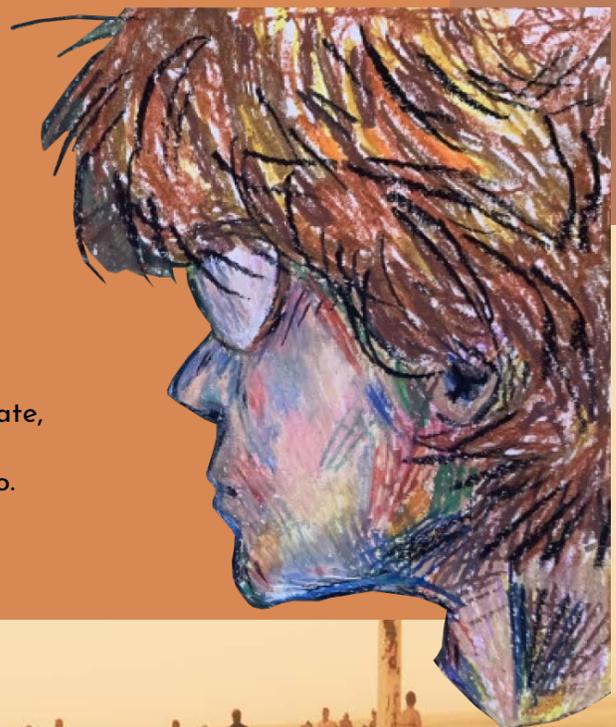
You know no one will care,
You know no one will understand,
All of your expectations turn to false gods,

The pen bleeds with a force so possessive and passionate,
You'll be grateful for the maroon that spills out.
Everything will fall into places you carved out long ago.

Here I present to you my blood
The blood I lost, so I could breathe again.



Unmet Expectations by Danny Fisher



Scott City

by Lydian Cochran

Does it scare you?
Does it remind you of when you were young?
A thin dirt road unpaved and unexplored like your heart.

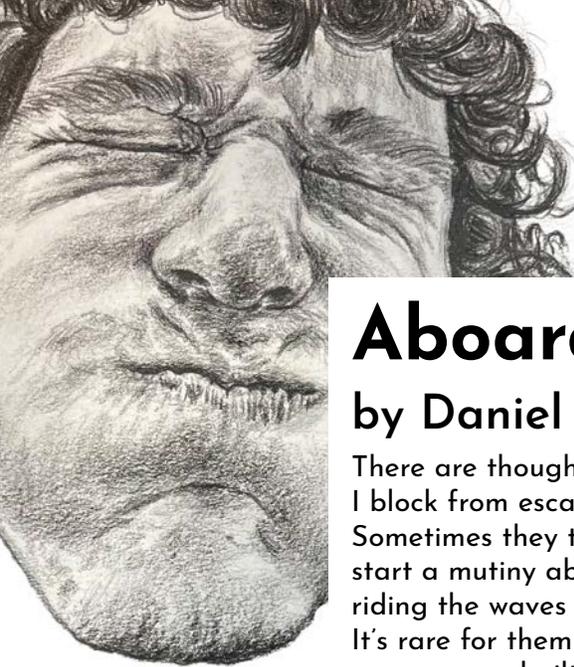
You were born at the bottom of an infinite whiskey glass
Your dad isn't ever gonna reach you.

It must feel like it's never gonna end, right?
But every thin dirt road leads to a highway one way or another.

You can see rain in the east.
You can ride faster than them. Can't you?



Condensed by Austin Liu



Aboard the Censorship

by Daniel Joon Lee

There are thoughts I have that
I block from escaping my lips.
Sometimes they try to pry them open,
start a mutiny aboard the ship
riding the waves that roll along my tongue.
It's rare for them to slip past the dam that
my manners built a long time ago,
but at times tempests and tears reflecting
clenched fists of rage
throw themselves too hard,
like attrition against my eroded mouth,
and they flow past the crevice between my lips.
They drop down the steep edge of the precipice,
ride the violent current down the waterfall,
and crash in the pool of awkward stares and silences.
I even slap my hands against my stubborn mouth,
and feel a pang of betrayal towards the stubborn captain.
But no – it's too late.
Too late,
too late, and the crew all abandon ship.



Looking Down on Looking
Down on Myself
by George Newham

Untitled #17

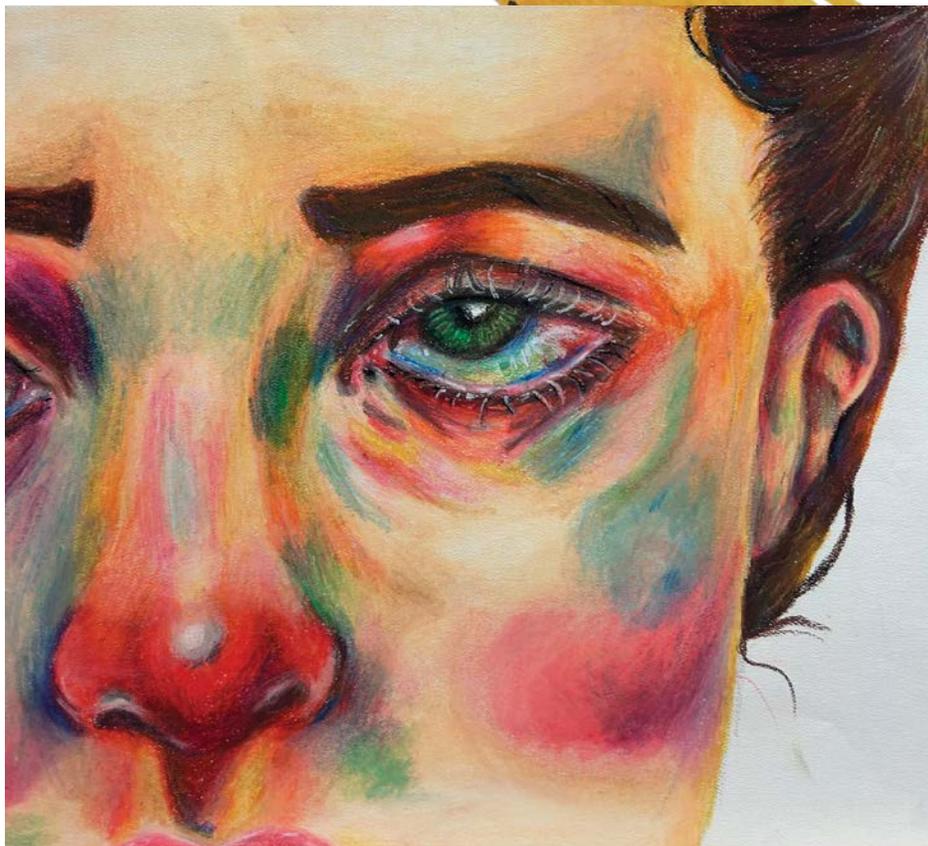
by Lydian Cochran

Tomorrow my heart will thunder.
rain will pour like a thousand tiny words

summer can swallow me whole.
I'm ready for an ending

the sunlight can eat me alive.
lay me down in the backyard.
I'll fall right through the grass

the heat can bury me deep
I'm ready for an ending.



The Face by Honey Brown



Match Print by Payton Butler

Untitled #18

by Lydian Cochran

i crave what i can't reach.
burn me into an iris
i want the sun to love me

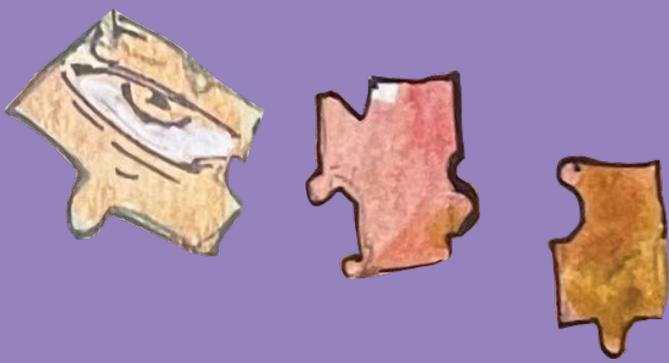
what is a god anyway?
these cicadas are singing all wrong

boil my bones
i'll hold this family together

to be eaten is the greatest form of love
i keep my family well fed
snap my ribs off one by one
i want to hear it again

when i die i want to come back as a tornado
humans fear the flood
but the animals fear the wind

i am the greatest hunger that has ever dared to live.



Anomalous Perceptions

by Yeshe Rai

It's much easier to listen than to be heard,
so I assemble a wide-eyed, open expression,
and shelve all the blaring thoughts
to the dead wood walls of my mind.

I am an expert at starting sentences,
horrendous at finishing them. How can I
tell you I resent you? Ingrained into my being
is the declaration of one-way transactions.

My parents may offer unwarranted criticism,
I may not. I open my mouth every time,
hesitate between each doorway,
and choose not to step through.

Conflict avoidance requires premonition,
and the fear of the tension
that could fill the air if I step wrong.

Do I write an apology or a love note?
The best observations
do not receive a response.

Nature does not argue. Deer in the streets,
swirling wet snow, and a felt blanket of fog
over the mountains. I may whisper
to the immovable pine that I miss him.

I'll tell my dreams where the cardinals can hear.

All the could-have would-haves are swallowed
by the stars. Anger is felt in peace. Stories are born
and fade quickly. I could tell you that my pencil sharpener leaks,
I'm afraid of loud noises, and I am reckless
but self-contained. My town awards silence
as introspective, even intelligent, and I wear
the blue ribbon like the lies do not hook into my rib, thornlike,
and yank me up for air.



Rotting by Lee Rea



Addicting

by Bella Meili

They do not tell you how it happens.
Ignoring the signs does not make them disappear.
The sadness has a voice now,
it speaks in moans and incoherent cries.

They do not tell you how it clings to you,
like a dog licking the back of your heels.
You find yourself stroking its fur,
making friends with your suffering.

They do not tell you not to love it.
To not sacrifice your sleep, your freedom.
They do not tell you depression is addicting.
Don't touch it. Don't let it in.
Do not fall in love with your pain.
It makes for an exhausting relationship.
You give, it takes.
Love is not supposed to look like that.
Love is not supposed to hurt like that.

Do not name the thing that follows you,
lock the doors and cover your ears.
It is howling, can you hear it?
Do not listen, do not listen.
Depression does not love back.

Speak Up
by Tatum Warren

a guide to facing the world

by Eden Amaryllis



leave your house for a while,
traipse around and think that
you'd rather be at home.
remind yourself the world has meaning
even though
you don't believe it.
work tirelessly,
rest after it's too late.
note that privilege comes with guilt
feel guilty
for thinking that.
talk to people, even if
it makes you sick to your stomach.
order yourself to trust,
despite the fact you know you never will.
be consoled by your accomplishments,
never feel like you earned them.
look at the stars and
feel comforted by
your own insignificance.
stress to yourself perfection is a myth,
berate yourself for not being perfect.
wake up and
compel yourself to face the world,
however unalluring it is.



Painted by Rhea Sadagopan



Youth by Lee Rea

Things That I Feel Guilty For

by Linnea Heiny

Things that I feel guilty for:

The endless nights, bitter as vodka, which I grasp to remember
but turn to smoke
as things go.

The nights and the stars will soon be writ across the sky, where they have fallen from my
memory
and speckle this night's dinner table, silverware set
and in the middle of the table
sits the salt.

The life cycle of a coat, which once gathered memories on a bus at night like a rug
gathers dirt;
unwanted and eternally rust-brown
and next gathered dust in my closet, once its fibers are contaminated
with my regrets, your blood, our memory.
Next, I return it to the nearest thrift shop, brought forth like a bottle from the sea; secrets
and saltwater inside.
may it bring its next owner the chances it brought me
and may its next owner never throw them over their shoulder, so nervously, so
superstitiously, like spilled salt.

The death of a deer under a backlit moon, causing a new headlight under the sun
and now its bones hang in some hunter's living room;
and now my car can only limp where it and the deer once ran,
reminding me that I am a murderer with each speck of blood across my coat
like salt.

That I am the unwelcome, dripping, weatherworn visitor,
replenishing in my friend's homes and cabinets,
like salt.

The scale growing power in the bathroom,
the salt shakers growing more numerous, soldiered between napkin holders, and

How impolite I was to waiters
and how I told them things so deep, my bone-vision
sinking through malleable skin and into smooth muscle
how I shook them up and down,
and how it made them small
like grains of salt.
so many grains
of useless salt
this bitter pill to swallow
may I force them down my throat at every meal to come.



the unread letter

by Ananya Kashyap

I.
The sun dipped below the horizon; I clutched my grandma's hand a bit tighter. She had turned sixty-seven that day, I was a mere ten. We strolled through the old neighbourhood, the streets lined with trees bearing shiuli flowers, their fragrant aroma hanging in the air.

In a hushed whisper, she cautioned me: "Be careful around here, dear," I glanced at her, as she continued. "There are a lot of pickpockets in this area."

I nodded, although I wasn't afraid of the pickpockets at all. Instead, I was occupied with my bubbling curiosity about something that might seem stupid now, but it was a great mystery for ten-year-old me. "Grandma," my voice barely audible, "do you know English?"

Grandma smiled warmly, her eyes lit up. Then, she sighed softly and began, "It is soon going to be a year since your grandpa passed", her voice clouded with nostalgia, "you know, after your grandpa passed, I spent a lot of time at home. I thought I'd never get over it. The quiet house drove me mad. It was during those hours that I took up walking in the evenings as a way to clear the fog in my head, and it became a habit. I can walk much farther than most women my age now, my dear."

My young mind barely knew anything about love. Ignoring whatever she said about walking, I replied, "Grandma, did you love grandpa very much?"

I stared at her face. She wasn't looking at me; her gaze was fixed at the stars in the sky that slowly appeared, one after the other. Her expression held a depth that I couldn't comprehend then.

"I did." She finally replied, as she smiled once more. "I remember once he wrote me a letter, after our wedding, when he got transferred to Shillong. But it never reached me, some issue with the post office. I wish I could've read it. When he returned home and asked me if I'd received it, I had to say no, and he was terribly disappointed." I clutched her hand a bit tighter.

She continued, "He told me he had written that letter in English. Mind you, I was a scholar in Assamese, but English was foreign to me. He wasn't the type to express his feelings through spoken words, so he turned to writing. After that

lost letter, he wrote poems for me, all in English, but he longed for me to read that initial letter. Seeing how much it meant to him, I decided to learn English just for him. To answer your question, I do know English now. However, his letter still remains unread now, I wish I could have the chance to read it, even once."

I don't know why, but I'd turned red from blushing. "Grandma, can I see the poems?"

She looked at me lovingly. "Sure, baby. I'll show them to you someday." And together, we walked back home together.

II.
Dear Padma,

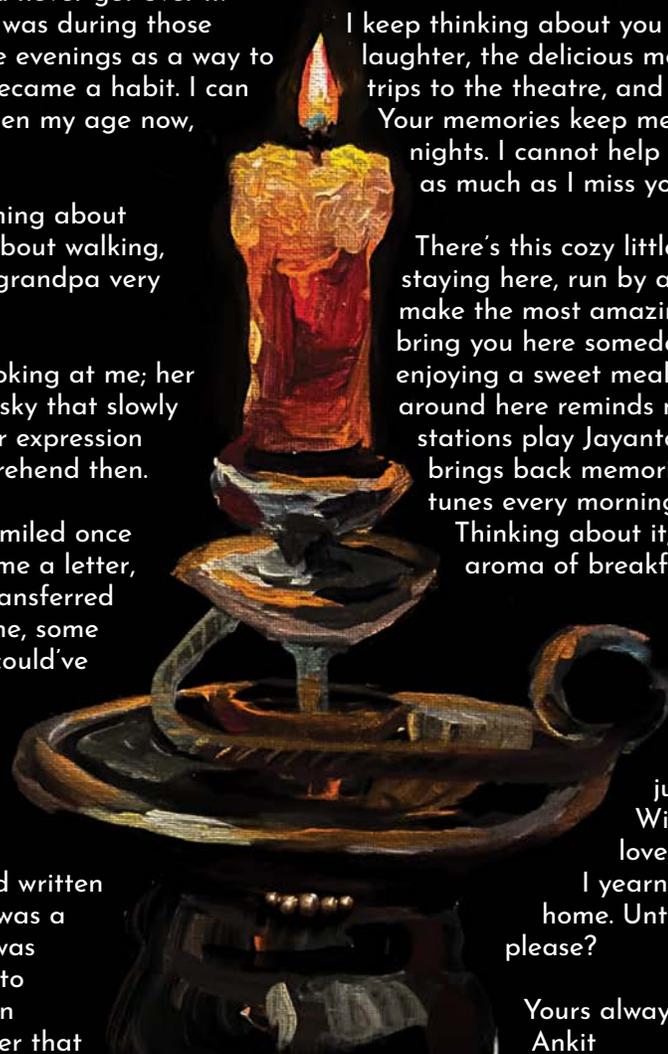
I miss you terribly. The distance between us feels like an eternity. The world here is different. I'm taking my time to get used to the weather here, it's a vast contrast from our city. It rains too frequently; the cold cuts right through you sometimes. I've succumbed to the flu two times in a span of a single month.

I keep thinking about you all the time; about your laughter, the delicious meals you used to cook, our trips to the theatre, and reading books together. Your memories keep me going through these lonely nights. I cannot help but wonder, do you miss me as much as I miss you?

There's this cozy little restaurant near where I'm staying here, run by an old Khasi couple. They make the most amazing bamboo pork. I'd love to bring you here someday, and we can just sit down enjoying a sweet meal together. Ah, everything around here reminds me of you. The local radio stations play Jayanta Hazarika often, and that brings back memories of you humming his tunes every morning while preparing breakfast. Thinking about it, I can almost smell the aroma of breakfast in our kitchen right now.

I'm writing this right after a long day at work, so my thoughts might be a bit jumbled. But honestly, words can't really express just how much I miss you. With each passing day, my love for you grows deeper, and I yearn for the day I can return home. Until that day, wait for me, please?

Yours always and forever,
Ankit



as it Burns by Lillia Kleinow



Reshape

by Grace-May Hansen

My temper is a candle, with its wick burning low
An impermanent cloud where I come and go
My mind is a cavern, where I bury things deep
So mostly I smile, but sometimes I weep
My body is a temple, at which I throw stones
The collisions break away soul, leaving only some bones
My skin is a trap, I cannot my escape
If only I could reshape

String Theory

by Haley Kleinman

there is a gentle pulse on the other side of forever
when Mother Nature's whisper grows hoarse
and our two hands hang limply in the space between us
leaden feathers dragging on the corners of fickle consciousness,
the laughter drying,
morphine for the pre-dead

I still remember the way your skin felt on mine
cool like lemongrass

every single variable scrambled fearfully until my x met your y
I stole those dreary stars and drowned them in molasses
so your skies could always be clear

don't tell me you don't love me

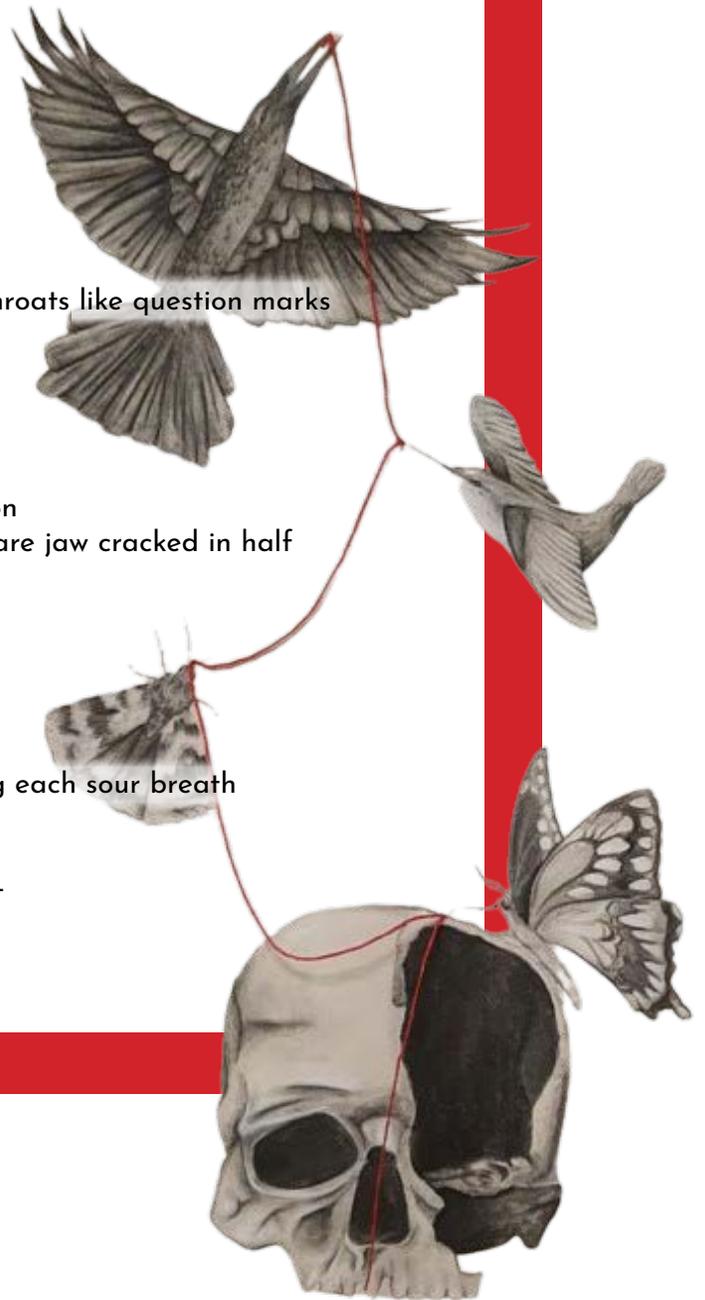
your arm, bruised against your chest, wrapped in gauze
mine tied behind my back
and still I found
a way to heal you
particles froze in our wake, stuffed themselves into our throats like question marks
but we didn't burn

don't tell me you don't believe me

when we lose the war with gravity
our bones decaying, preparing us for the River of Acheron
I'll remember your cupid's bow on my forehead, your square jaw cracked in half
even as your good memory flickers under the pressure
and I'm extinguished like the last flame of starlight

I'll tell our grandchildren about your glory
that in every elusive dimension
your heart still beat for me and mine for you
no matter the infinite forces pulling us apart condemning each sour breath
– we could've been two points on a nonsensical graph
a hiccup in the gap of time
a scream echoed abstractly in two discordant universes –
and still we would have made our way together

don't tell me we weren't inevitable



Thin Line by Noah Panjada

Sol Borrego

by Caroline Stickney

Heat becomes a god faster than
anything else – agave creeps up, bursting
like a yolk cradled under the tongue.

Walk as far as you can and get nowhere.
Scales thrash; sand unwinds lazily.

Stars split at their seams – we forget ourselves.
Pale flesh, burn brighter.
Glass bottles melt into our palms – you become something else in this sun.

Life shrinks to your shadow.
Something beats underneath your feet.
The body becomes unbearable.
Entrails hang from the hawk's beak.

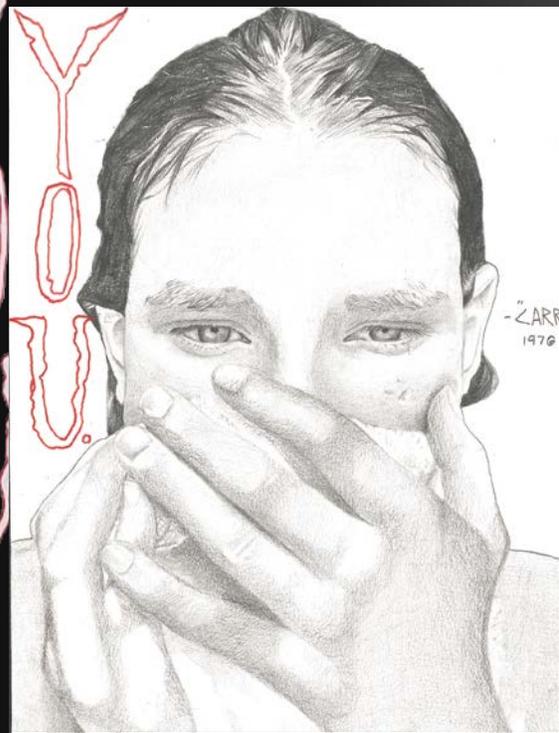
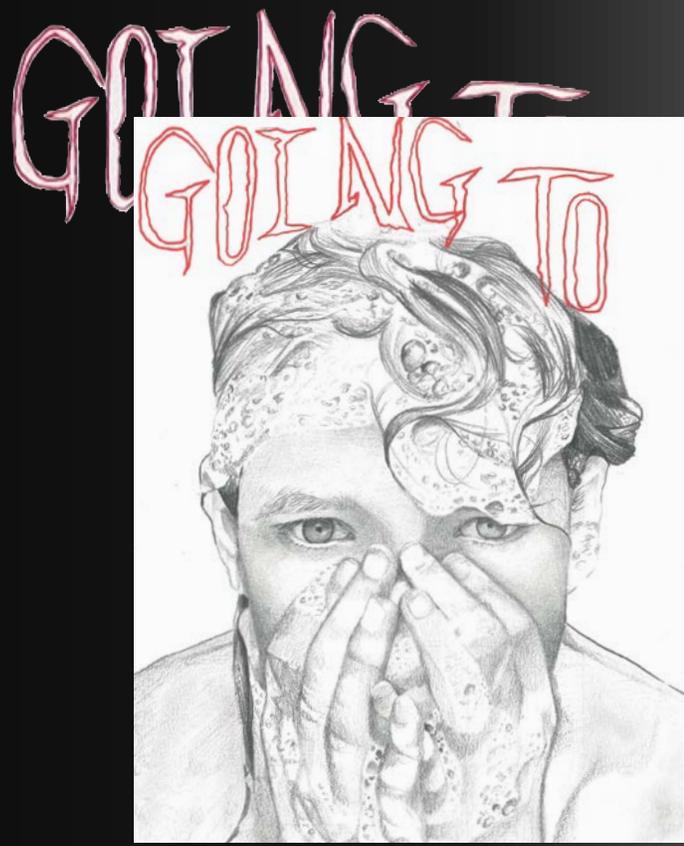
Darkness grows absolute: coyotes shriek in excitement.

Oh, you are starving.

Come closer,
just a bit more.



Still by Austin Liu



They're All Going to Laugh at You by Kate Wren

The Doctor's Appointment

by Sumlina Alam

My feet bounced as I waited in the dimly lit examination room. The dark curtains blocked out any hints of sunlight, the only light source being the single fluorescent lamp standing in the center of the room. The wrinkled leather chair was colored a faded brown (more like in between orange and mustard; I wasn't too sure), and the chair squeaked as I shifted my seating, creasing in the same aged folds. Outside, it was raining drearily, the raindrops pittering and pattering against the roof. I wanted to go home now, but I knew I couldn't. My head had been pounding for days and felt heavy as a rock. Something was throbbing inside my head; I could feel my forehead and the bags under my eyes tighten as I tried to sit upright. The doorknob rattled, breaking the long silence, and I saw the Doctor enter, barely glancing at me as she sat on a short, spiny chair with a deflated top. The Doctor tightened her sandy ponytail, pushed up her thick, dark, rounded glasses, and drew out her scratched, tan clipboard. "How are you today?" she asked, her head facing the other way while she scoured through the worn drawers and pulled out a pair of oft-white gloves.

I replied with my instantaneous and programmed response of "I'm fine" and ended with my signature smile, my body straight and still. The Doctor paused, turning her head to the side as if she was listening carefully before swiveling abruptly. I blinked. She blinked. I frowned at her peculiar, piercing stare. "I mean, my head hurts a little," I added. The Doctor swiftly rose, grabbed the lamp, and shined it on my face. Surprisingly, I didn't flinch at the blinding light, but the intense heat penetrated my face. My skin screamed in agony as the individual muscles loosened and melted into mushy clumps, dropping onto the dusty floor with a satisfying splat. The weight of my face grew lighter and lighter, and I clenched my fists at the sizzling burns.

"Just as I thought," the Doctor remarked with a sigh. She retrieved a facial mirror from the drawers and handed it to me. I gasped and almost dropped the mirror in shock. My face was a void filled with small, slimy tapeworms crawling and squirming over one another. The worms jabbered and fought with each other; their tiny voices rang in my ears. I dared not to touch the churning pot of muck, and my arms froze in horror. Like a magician, the Doctor produced a pair of tweezers from the cuffs of her sleeves and delicately plucked the worms from my face. She dropped the unwanted chatterboxes on a metal plate before crushing them to their inevitable deaths. I closed my eyes and grimaced at their last cries.

Plop.
She must hate me.
Crush.
Silence.

Plop.
Am I good enough?
Crush.
Silence.

Plop.
No one would care if I had disappeared.
Crush.
Silence.

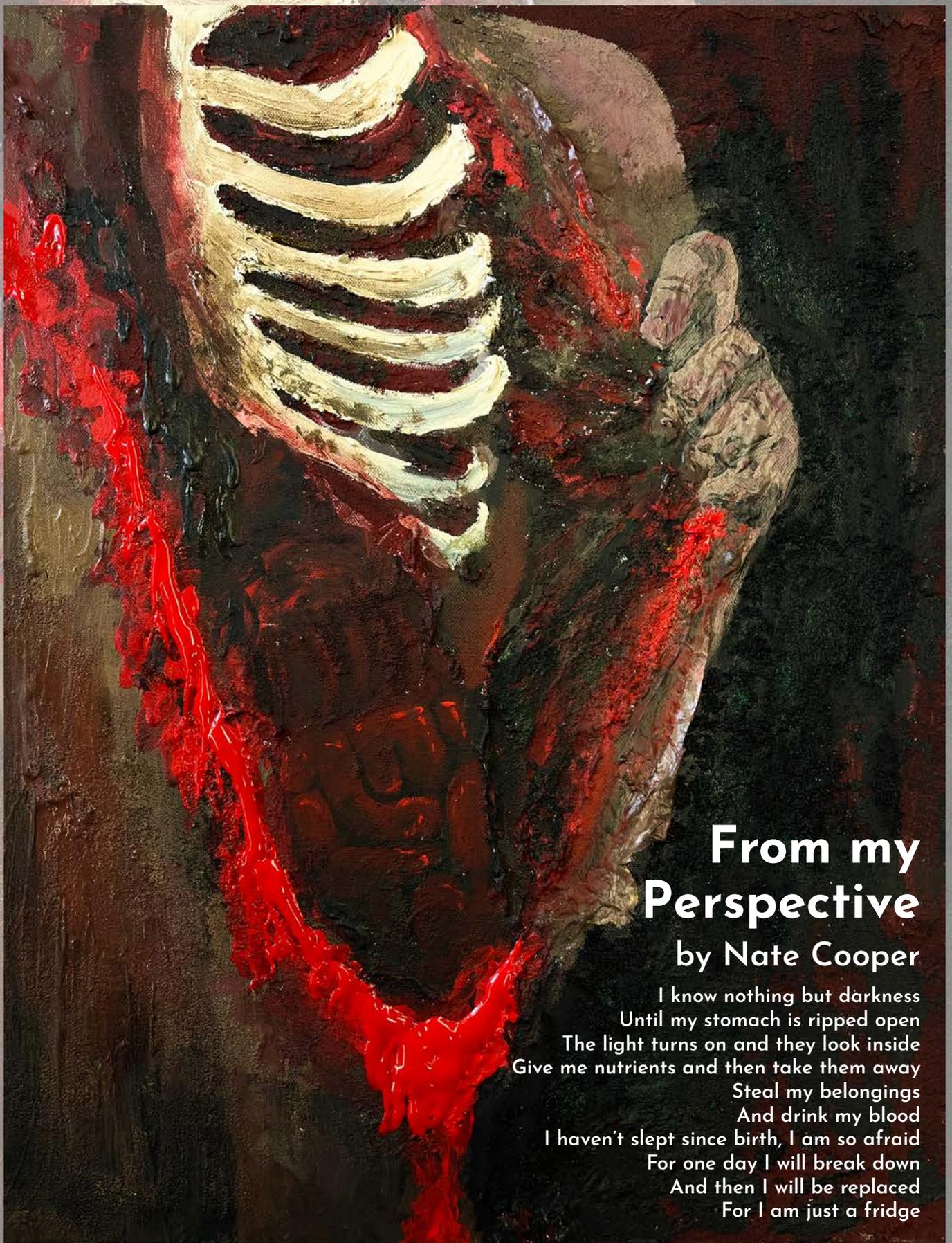
The Doctor did not even repulse, did not even wrinkle her nose in disgust as she plucked – it was almost as if she had been cleaning worms from people's faces all her life. And so, the Doctor tidied my face and repeated this cycle of plop, cry, crush, silence for what seemed like an eternity. I finally opened my eyes when I no longer heard the tapeworms. The Doctor handed me the mirror again, and I sighed in relief. My face was just a dark, empty hole. I raised my hand and attempted to touch the gap, grasping nothing but sheer air. Moving my head felt odd, as my head already felt light as a feather.

"You should be able to rest easy tonight," the Doctor said. "Those gibbering worms are long gone now, and you won't have to hear their insults anymore." I nodded.

"What about my face?" I asked.

"Oh, your face? Don't worry about it. In time, you'll grow a new one – a natural one this time," the Doctor chuckled and grinned. It was the first time I had seen her smile.

I gazed at the mirror again, hunching over to analyze my face. It was strange to feel empty; I was so used to feeling bombarded. My head no longer felt packed and ached; the strain along my skull eased. A feeling of solace washed over me like the peace one would receive when a cacophony subdued. No more squirming, crawling, churning. No more yaps, cries, and shrieks inside. No more fear, anger, hopelessness. A calm ocean, a quiet forest, a silent mountain filled inside me. The past no longer haunted me; instead, I could now move forward – I was free.

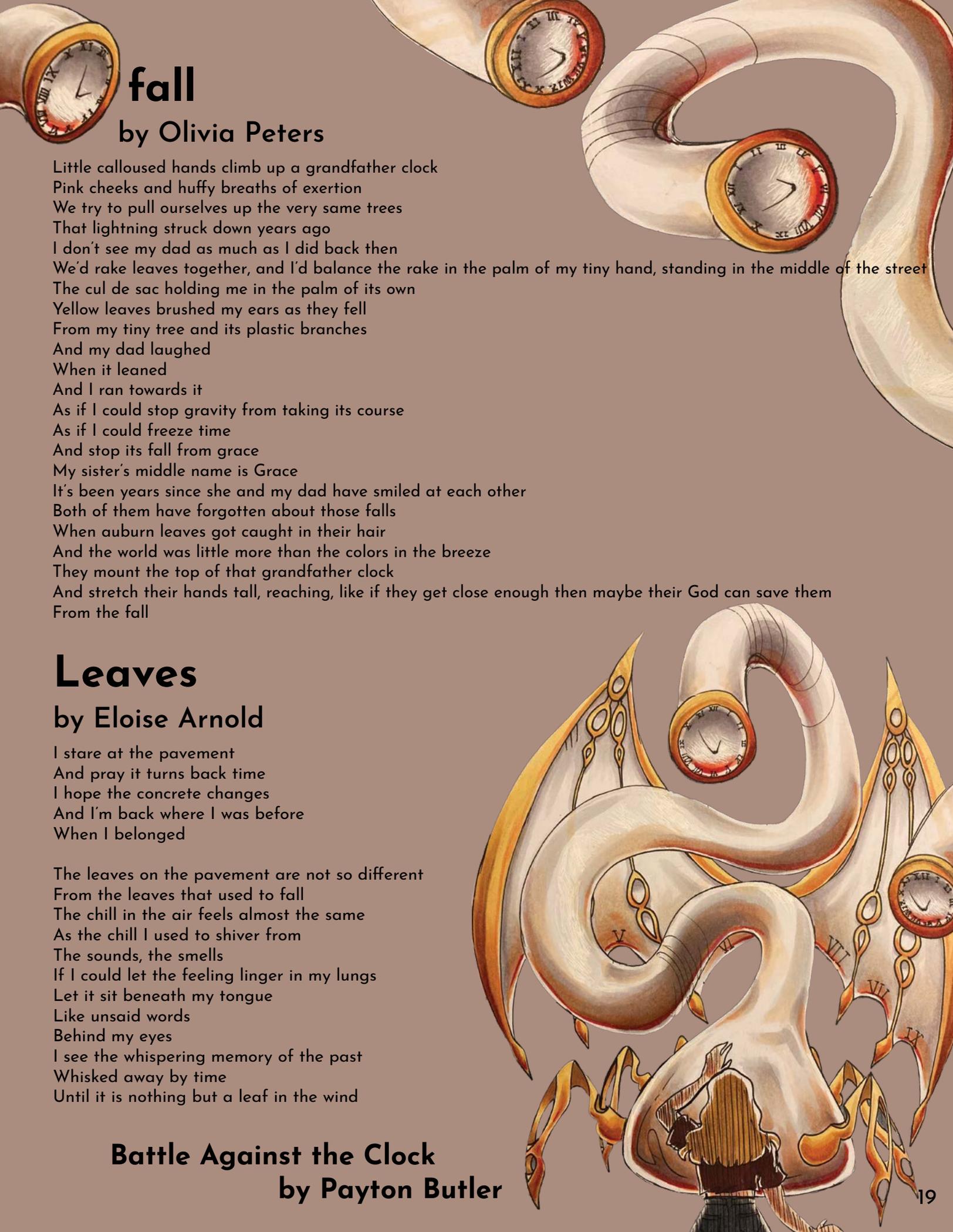


From my Perspective

by Nate Cooper

I know nothing but darkness
Until my stomach is ripped open
The light turns on and they look inside
Give me nutrients and then take them away
Steal my belongings
And drink my blood
I haven't slept since birth, I am so afraid
For one day I will break down
And then I will be replaced
For I am just a fridge

I am Still Rotting by Lillia Kleinow



fall

by Olivia Peters

Little calloused hands climb up a grandfather clock
Pink cheeks and huffy breaths of exertion
We try to pull ourselves up the very same trees
That lightning struck down years ago
I don't see my dad as much as I did back then
We'd rake leaves together, and I'd balance the rake in the palm of my tiny hand, standing in the middle of the street
The cul de sac holding me in the palm of its own
Yellow leaves brushed my ears as they fell
From my tiny tree and its plastic branches
And my dad laughed
When it leaned
And I ran towards it
As if I could stop gravity from taking its course
As if I could freeze time
And stop its fall from grace
My sister's middle name is Grace
It's been years since she and my dad have smiled at each other
Both of them have forgotten about those falls
When auburn leaves got caught in their hair
And the world was little more than the colors in the breeze
They mount the top of that grandfather clock
And stretch their hands tall, reaching, like if they get close enough then maybe their God can save them
From the fall

Leaves

by Eloise Arnold

I stare at the pavement
And pray it turns back time
I hope the concrete changes
And I'm back where I was before
When I belonged

The leaves on the pavement are not so different
From the leaves that used to fall
The chill in the air feels almost the same
As the chill I used to shiver from
The sounds, the smells
If I could let the feeling linger in my lungs
Let it sit beneath my tongue
Like unsaid words
Behind my eyes
I see the whispering memory of the past
Whisked away by time
Until it is nothing but a leaf in the wind

Battle Against the Clock
by Payton Butler

Subway Perspectives
by Abby Lee



Counting the Seconds Till Departure, Trying to Find Reasons Not to Go

by Haley Kleinman

cradled in the peak of an eclipse my breath capsizes into
the fray
a shuddering recognition of lost time

we sit back on the river rock letting the waves trickle between our toes
wrinkling our fresh skin into prunes

how did we get here?

when I lie down at night my back curves into the
mattress like a hook

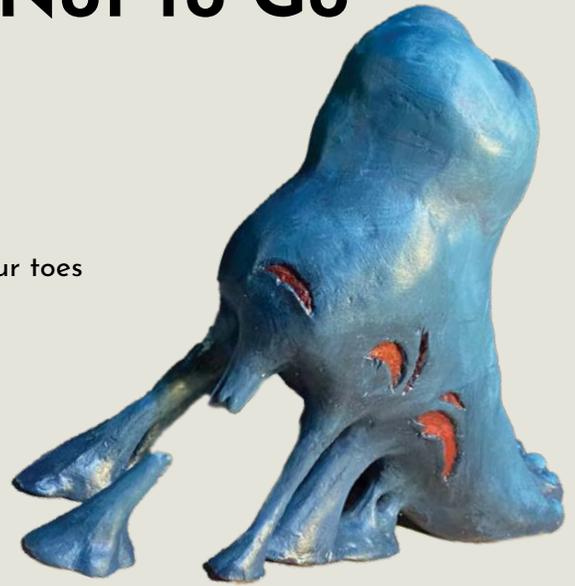
our bodies hold memory, you used to say
we counted the bike-riding scratches along our arms
the mosquito bites from summers swimming in the lake
at night when we got drunk off the smell of honeysuckles and the sound of our own laughter
mother's gardening gloves stained with coarse dirt
your dad's shirt converted into a dog towel

now as I stand my bones are metal-filled,
medallions, testaments to our tween days
tireless as the sun is bright
but my eyes are weak and I refuse to get glasses
still determined I can get my vision back
still trying to reverse the clock ticks

our jeans don't fit us
we're bursting
trying to grow into this big world
a perfect sprout

excited for the change
this chance to be someone new
adult – simply because our training wheels are
gone and we've learned how to pedal sloppily
which is still pedaling, by the way

but something inside us cracks in the silence, our hearts a broken vase
burning for the sweet warmth of our memories
safe, predictable, and now held beyond grasp
fading into oblong reflection of goodbye



Pulled Back
by Logan Fixsen

Home

by Eva Bacon

Oftentimes, it's said that people make a home, not the place. But when I look at the moss-ridden brown of the front porch that has kissed the faces of all my shoes, from kindergarten to college – green and red strawberry-shaped lights hung haphazardly around the belly of my parent's beige house from three Christmases ago, with an eggplant-colored roof and shutters and door – I am inclined to disagree.

As I step into the entranceway, residence of summertime ants with pomegranate bellies that hide in the overstuffed closet, and hang my coat on the rack to the right, over-loved with my mother's thousands of jackets, I question the validity of such a statement.

As I sink into the couch, leather soft and brown like tree bark after rain, and see the faces of all my family in the bear-studded and crayon-drawn picture frames of photos taken long ago, I wonder if it's true. There's something to be said of a home in the green, phosphorescent fingers of the money tree we never water, clawing for the sun as it breaks through the rightmost wall, and the huge, shared sill of three windows that opens the beige house to the rest of the quiet street – the sill that used to be the abode of tiny dolls my cousin gave me.

What would they think, those dolls? Is the sill, with its fake potted plants and fly carcasses, a home to them? Are their rubber dresses and boots, their purple cars and fuchsia limousines, their plastic mirrors and brushes, a home to them? Or is the vaguely defined term of "home" not any of those things, but each other, buried in a hot pink and green-swirled box in the bottom row of an upstairs cabinet, only themselves to listen to the echo of childhood?

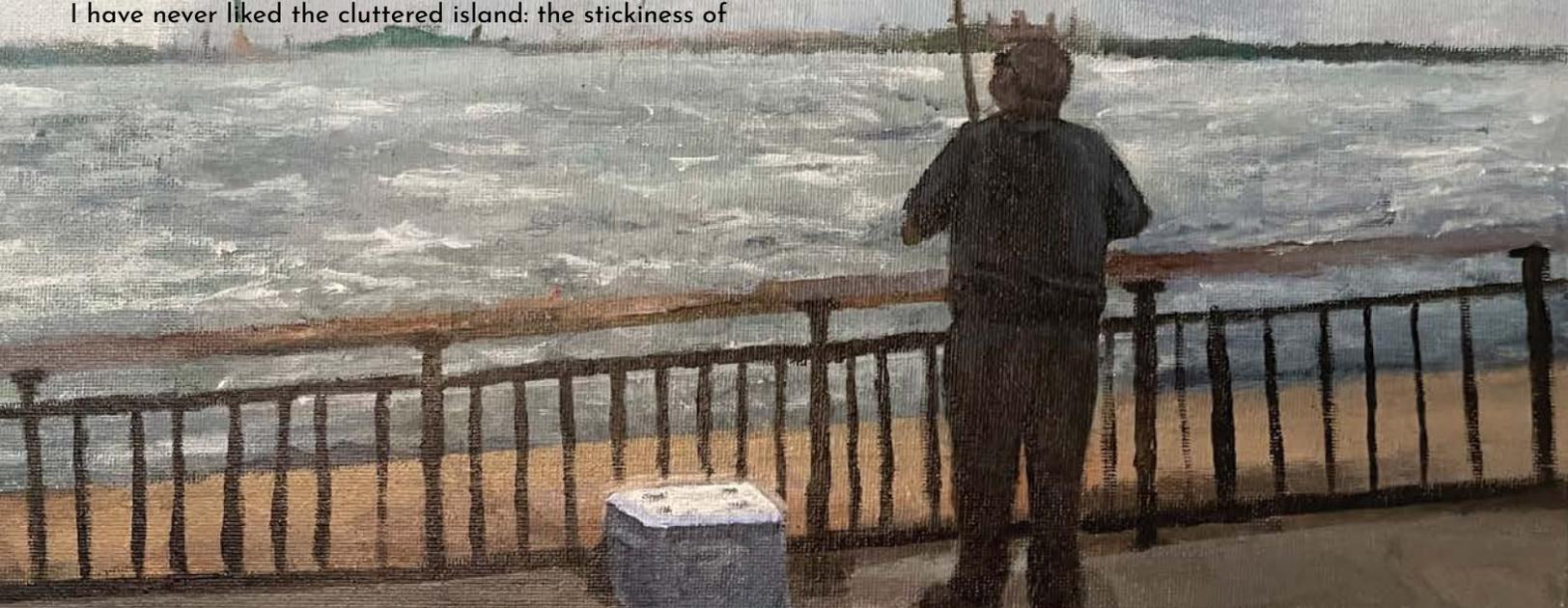
I hunger for something unexplainable as I amble into the open hallway (brown carpet, white chairs, litterbox) that leads to the kitchen. Maybe what I crave is space. I have never liked the cluttered island: the stickiness of

the cabinets, and the stains on the tangerine, octagonal linoleum – forever bruised. Three tall, ebony chairs on the right side of the island, my mother's nontraditional desk; water-perishable objects with steel insides like the coffee maker and the toaster and the microwave; the sink and the cavernous hole that was once the dishwasher on the other.

Counters that can't be kept clean. Cutting board with scars. Still there is a home here, in the spices used to flavor my favorite foods; the air fryer, the rice cooker, and the oven used to make them. The old white refrigerator from my adolescence I used to decorate so meticulously with magnets. The green wallpaper with vertical strings of pink flowers, on which is embedded a wooden carving of *The First Supper*. The cushioned seats around the table hold the Thanksgivings and birthdays of thirteen years. Even in the Elvis Presley calendar by the window, and the piles of shoes by the door.

As the people I love vacate this house, and I leave for another house – a house I hope will match the one I have envisioned, again and again, in my mind – I will remember this place, because it was where the dreams of that house were born. This is the place that I dredged up these words in, legs crossed and seated in my bedroom with my Zelda lamp and old toys and stacks of books. This is where I dreamed of running away from the town that holds this beige house on cracked, empty roads, to a life I yearn for, desperately, but am not ready to live.

I think back to the money tree, the yellow counters and the tiny dolls, and know that love is not definite. It cannot be limited. People can be a home, and love spills out of people, taking the shapes of dusty bookshelves and a bean bag chair in the living room where my mother sits and watches Jackie Chan on the TV, fingers sticky with the residue of rice from dinner, air rich with the smokey smell of fish. Where my friends sprawl, laughing beneath the blue light of their phones. Where I sit with my cat, sandpaper tongue on the skin of my pinkie, as I press lead to paper. Pouring, pouring, pouring, until a beige house is a home, too.



Casting on the Hudson River by Abby Lee



Summer Bubbles by Alex Robertson

heaven is the woods behind my childhood home

by Madeleine Kimball

when i go:
scatter my ashes in that clear cold stream.
let the current take me down,
down,
to that small place,
where god stains her cheeks with river-clay
and cicadas scream sweet hymnals.
where life is raw and quiet and sublime
and the worms find heaven in
the damp dark spaces.
i will scrape my knees on mossed concrete
wash the blood in the water like isaac upon the altar.
in that small place i am holy;
i am whole.

Leap Year

by Harrison Jones

It was mid-November, 1983 when James first got sick. It started with a dry cough and exhaustion; in all ten years that Edward had been with him, the occasional affliction was nothing out of the ordinary. James got sick like no one else he had ever known; he'd get chills and shake for nights on end, and then he'd simply go back to work. So, when mid-November, 1983, came around there was still lingering hope that James had just gone and caught another nasty cold. They had heard the rumors, but James never got too sick; he'd take Robitussin for a couple days and then would be fit as he'd ever been.

It wasn't until Ricky died that Edward started worrying. Ricky who got sick just as often as James, Ricky who had been in the hospital for a few months and slipped away on the cold morning of December 2. He didn't get worried until he got a call from Ricky's partner Charlie crying on the phone about how he needed help finding a churchyard that would bury his body. He didn't get worried until Charlie was the only person standing at the front of Ricky's wake on December 9, and James had to leave to go cough outside when it was their turn to give their condolences.

They fought about it, of course, and James would soothe him softly and say he'd just taken medicine, it was just a cough, he could still go to work. Like clockwork, James seemed to get better and Edward could stop worrying; they would settle back into their routine. This was broken slowly.

First Edward heard James in a coughing fit late one night, and as he stumbled out of bed found him on the small balcony of their apartment. James had given him a lopsided smile and held up a cigarette.

"I really should stop smoking these things, huh?"

Edward stared back at him, and James stamped out his cigarette with the sandal he'd slipped on and went back to bed. Edward looked down at the cigarette; it was barely burned, like it'd been lit just before Edward had walked out.

Second was the rash creeping up red and awful across James's back, that he refused to talk about.

"I'll go to the allergist after the holidays I swear, I must've developed one in my old age, did you know you can develop allergies later in life?"

"James, you're 31, I think we should see a doctor now, you're clearly sick—"

"Just allergies."

"James—"

It was then that James slammed his hand on the table; in ten years together, never once had he raised his voice. December 23, 1983, he did.

"Good God, Edward!" – He never called him Edward either, he was always Ed or Eddie to him – "you're too much sometimes you know that? I will go see an allergist after the holidays. I promise you I am fine, good-fucking-night."

And with that he stood up from the table and left.

James heaved in his room before he began to cry. Sob is a better word, shoulder shaking, wheezing sobs. James knew he was being cruel, promising things he couldn't; it was selfish, he knew that, but by God he just wanted to

enjoy one last normal Christmas, he just couldn't let those last couple of normal days slip through his fingers.

When you love someone, you begin to inexplicably recognize their needs as your own. If James craved a little more time, so then did Edward. He opened the door slowly and quietly, but even that creaky old thing couldn't puncture the sound of his sobs. Slowly Edward wrapped his arms around James, pressing his face into the nape of his neck. Within a few minutes the sobs calmed to an occasional whimper, and then the only sound that whole night seemed to just be soft breathing. Sometime in the early hours of Christmas Eve, 1983 Edward asked:

"The 26th?"

"The 26th."

They did not speak again until they made coffee in the later hours of that morning.

That Christmas was as normal as they could make it. They talked, they laughed, and then they would go into long lapses of silence that felt like purgatory before one of them would break it and the cycle would start anew.

When the diagnosis, if you could even call it that, was given, they both got the same feeling. Like water was filling your ears before you drown, the inevitable is coming but your ears have just popped for now; there's still a chance of being saved, isn't there?

"I'm sorry," were the first words out of James's mouth when they stepped out of the hospital room. He wouldn't have even had to say it because when James was sorry, he'd always get this look in his eyes, his eyebrows would turn down just a little and his eyes would go a little bit lidded. His body could say sorry before his mouth could produce the words.

Edward shook his head and just hugged him; he hugged him so tight that maybe God could forgive every gay man on Earth if it really had been a plague to take them out. Every second they hugged in the hospital lobby felt like begging.

"Please God not him, I have loved him so much it makes me feel holy. Please, we just had Christmas, please, doesn't he deserve another one? His smile is the whole world and I met him while dancing. God, if that doesn't sound like love to you, I don't know what you're looking for."

Perhaps God doesn't listen to begging.

Ten years they'd made it; maybe that's good for people like them, ten years. The doctors gave James a month, telling him he's got an especially bad case, and he'd made it through two. Edward wondered if that prayer in the lobby was what brought about that extra time, but truth be told he never wanted extra time. He just wanted the man he loved to live.

A couple weeks in they decided to move him to the hospital permanently. It was overcrowded, and loud, full of grieving people, all compiled in one place since not every hospital was willing to help a gay man. A medical professional would never admit to not viewing them as human, but if given a choice between helping or not, many would still choose to let them die as dogs.

James would sit in bed, hooked up to all those medical machines, and annotate books to pass the time. There was a notebook he kept, shiny and new that he'd gotten for Christmas, he'd begun writing down all his symptoms and how his body had been deteriorating. James, he'd always considered himself a bit of a scientist, he was writing the progression of illness from one who's experiencing it so

other people might be able to catch it sooner, so they can live longer. That notebook only ever got to be halfway full.

They pulled Edward out one morning; he knew what they were going to say, and they knew that he did.

"If he has any family, you should call them, start getting affairs in order," and that was all that could be said before a patient needed attention.

Years went by in the doorway of room 364; he saw the man in the hospital bed writing in his notebook before he got too tired to do so anymore. But he also saw New Year's Eve 1999, turn of the century and if the world was going to end, they were going to do it together. In 2011 the state of Illinois would let them adopt two teenagers who needed a family, and they'd get to be dads just like they'd always wanted, and two teenagers would get parents like they always needed. He saw 2015, because the world wouldn't end when the clock struck midnight, and at ages 59 and 58 they could've waltzed themselves down to the courthouse and gotten themselves a legalized marriage.

But it was still 1984, and James was still sick, and arrangements still had to be made.

It took an hour of searching through the hospital's phonebooks to find the number of James's baby brother, who was all grown up by then. It took three rings for someone to pick up, there was a woman on the line, the wife from the wedding James wasn't invited to. There is a long lapse of silence after Edward tells him, there's a soft murmuring as he tells his wife he's driving to meet them.

Three hours later a man hesitates before he opens the door to room 364; he has the same eyes as James, his are sharper though, on guard. Edward and James's brother mirror each other perfectly, two grieving people, but one had been there, and one hadn't.

"I'm his brother. Robert."

Edward stuck out his hand to shake his.

"Ed. I'm his partner."

The hesitation to shake Edward's hand is clear, and he feels anger and resentment bubble up in his chest.

"People like this are why people, good people like James are dying," Edwards felt his breath stop and words rise up like he's about to say something, or throw a punch when James breaks out into a laugh.

"You're not going to catch anything, I'm the sick one here."

Only James, his James, could've laughed over something like this, he's still chuckling when his brother shakes Edward's hand, till he's breaking out in a coughing fit and he's at his side again, smoothing the hair across his forehead and pressing a kiss against it. Edward watches Robert turn away and Edward can feel his eyes roll. James squeezes his hand. His eyes pleaded with him, "give him time," they say, Edward knew his eyes asked, "but why couldn't you have more?"

"I forgive him, you know?"

Edward's breath stops a little in his throat.

"I think he's having more trouble forgiving himself."

The afternoon drones on as Edward and Robert are saddled with paperwork upon paperwork about what happens in the after. When you fall in love with someone it becomes difficult to remember what it was like before them, but you know that the before still happened and is real. You relish the present, every touch, laugh, and kiss is vivid, colorful, and real. But as you get caught up in the present and as the past slips away, you fail to consider the afterward.

Edward feigns strength, but everyone still saw tears smudge the ink of his signature on paper after paper. The doctors ask about funeral arrangements; they knew it was coming. Robert steps in before Edward can.

"I'll take care of it."

Edward doesn't ask why until they leave the doctor's office and they're back in the hallway of the hospital. Robert's shoulders sag and Edward sees him stare off down the hallway towards James's room.

"Because I would hope someone would do the same for me if my wife was dying."

And he does take care of it. Edward sees Robert standing outside the hospital room making phone calls while he tends to James. This is what coexisting is; Robert doesn't understand them, but he loves his brother enough to plan his funeral, so his partner doesn't have to.

It's a Sunday when James asks if they can get married.

"Would you marry me?"

Edward is quiet for a long moment.

"We can't, you know that."

"But if you could, would you?"

He knows the answer, they've discussed it a thousand times, but Edward responds with the same heart and the same wistfulness as the first time.

"Yes, James, I would marry you."

He sits up in his bed all of a sudden and gets this gleam in his eye James only gets when he has an idea.

"We should get married."

"We can't."

"No, no, listen to me, no courthouse, no government, fuck the government, if they're going to let me die, we might as well stick it to them and get ourselves married? Right here, my family's all here right now, we'll get rings, we'll—"

Edward's heart shatters when James breaks out coughing, he can't get too excited anymore without his body fighting back. When he finally calms, he takes both his lover's hands in his.



Encased Heart
by Adriana Cazares

"Please, no papers, just the ceremony, it's been ten years, it's about time we got around to it. What do you say, marry me, for a dying man's last wish?"

Edward couldn't help it when he started crying, just nodding against him, and crying. He'd promised to make calls, to get their friends there, he'd make them a ceremony right there in that hospital room. And so, he did.

That evening he went down to the closest pawn shop and tried on wedding bands with teary eyes. No point in buying anything fancy when there are hospital bills to pay, a funeral to plan and no one to wear the ring for too long. Ring after ring slipped onto his shaking hands; it's a miracle he found two silver bands that slipped onto his finger, he and James had similar enough hands, it'd fit well enough. He bought a plain white sheet cake from the local grocery store and flowers from a florist who they'd known for years. She closed up shop early and brought the flowers for free.

On February 21, 1984, Edward and James were married, surrounded by a tight-knit community that this same crippling disease would dwindle over the next ten years. James sat up in his hospital bed, giddy and eager, and Edward stood holding his hand, softly running his thumb over the knuckles, lingering on the ring whenever given opportunity. There was no real officiant and no paperwork. He told James he loved him, and that ten years wasn't enough, James laughed and then coughed, smiling all the while, and told him: "well then here's to many more."

He was the only person Edward would ever know who could joke like that.

James told him he loved him, and Edward nodded, he told him he loved him and that he'll find him in the next life, or in whatever afterward there was, he'd be waiting. Edward nodded and didn't speak so he wouldn't break. He didn't want to find him in the next life, he just wanted to have him in this one.

There was not a single dry eye by the end. James was trying to cheer people up, cracking jokes only he could make, but Edward wasn't sure he needed to be; he was happy, really happy. They would never marry on paper or in the eyes of a stained-glass depiction of Christ or Mary, but with pawn shop rings and polaroid photos taken throughout the night, they were married in the way that mattered.

James died on the 29th of February, 1984. On a leap year, he held out till then, hoping this way Edward would only experience the anniversary of his death every four years, but their wedding anniversary every single one. Edward crawled into bed with him and held him like he could breathe life back into him. James went peacefully, but it still felt like a cruel joke; people don't

attend their own funerals, and here was James making home in his own grave.

"I'll be okay," Edward told him, and maybe it was cruel to make promises he wasn't sure he could keep. "We'll just have to find each other when or wherever's next, right?"

James's breath shuddered and he nodded a little, it killed Edward a little when he realized he'd been too tired to respond. Edward holds him like that, James's head buried in his shoulder, it's silent except the sound of hospital machines and his breathing, until there's no more breathing. Edward stares out the window and the whole world looks still.

Edward doesn't plan the funeral, just as he promised, Robert does. It's held in the same funeral home everyone in the communities' funerals have been, whether it's because they're the only ones who will take their bodies or if it's because of amazing service no one's really sure.

Hundreds of men file through the door, this is not the life Robert imagined his brother would have. But James was loved, he really was. They shake hands with people Edward and James had known for years, and some they'd never even met. People like them don't have to be friends to feel the loss, there's so few of them anyway, someone's loss is everyone's to a degree.

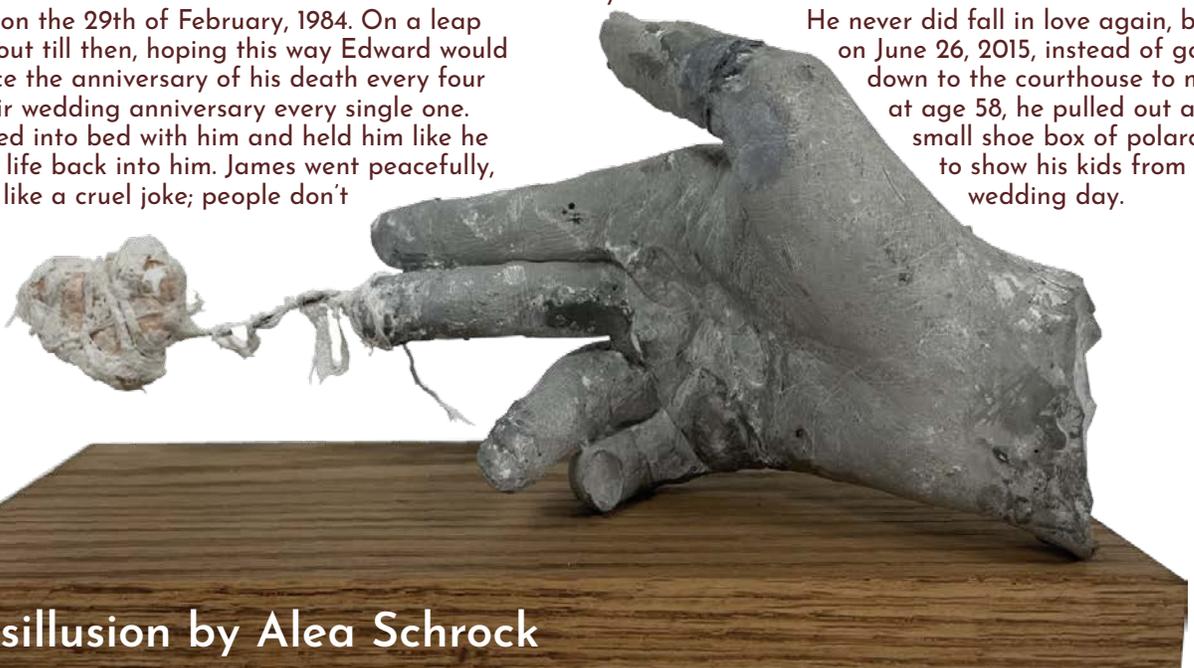
Edward goes to shake Robert's hand as they linger outside his car; he's going home to his wife and baby, but he's pulled into a hug and whispered the promise of a family. Robert cried against Edward's shoulder; Edward saw him then as the little boy James must've seen him as. Older brothers never stop seeing their younger brothers as anything but little boys, and little brothers never stop seeing their hero.

"You loved what you did understand about him and what you didn't. Forgive yourself, James did."

Those are the last words Edward says to Robert till he shows up on his doorstep a month later, wife and baby in tow.

Years go by and the world doesn't end in 1999. Edward laughs on the couch as his nephew gags as Robert kisses his wife at the turn of the century. 2011 comes around and Edward decides those two teenagers he's been fostering have been his children all along; it's time to make it official, just as Illinois makes it so if James was still around, they both could have.

He never did fall in love again, but on June 26, 2015, instead of going down to the courthouse to marry at age 58, he pulled out a small shoe box of polaroids to show his kids from his wedding day.



Disillusion by Alea Schrock



World of Wishes by Cecilia Lapetina

Next April by Elena Zhang

Once again,
my eyes have failed
to cradle the sorrow
of her last morning's cascade.

Once—
my back bathed
under the lazy midday sun,
lightly awakened
by her calloused touch.

Now—
my days begin
without gentle caress.
A voice, unfamiliar,
and distanced by shut doors.

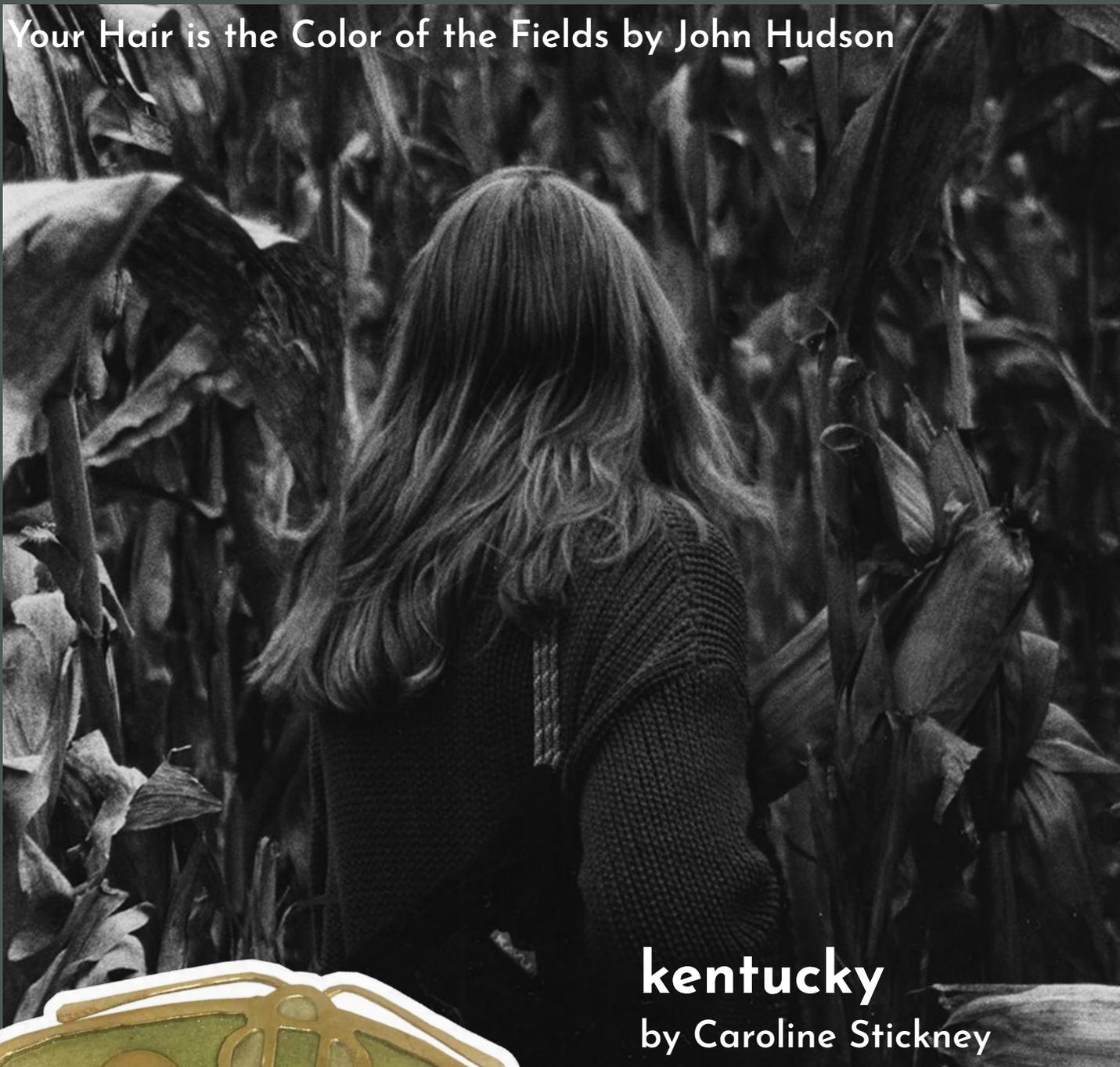
More dishes on the dining table—
too salty, too bland, too creamy,
all too much but
one chair less, one more
joss paper burning next April.

My mother's fingers tremble
in her mother's weathered hands.
I was calm like
a headless goldfish because
the salty ocean has yet to rise.

Again—
the unsaid butterflies flutters its
wings.
In opaque letters, I bottle
what I can't acknowledge,
carried away by the tides.

Maybe we're all just waiting for
someday,
When the water ebbs
and the letters wash ashore.
Then our eyes will finally embrace
them.

Your Hair is the Color of the Fields by John Hudson



kentucky
by Caroline Stickney

seven horses dead in 10 days, track dirt still painting damp mouths and eyes that will never start again and here we are with our feet kicking up ground and orange light staining like iodine on skin and we never think to worry it'll be us splayed out on the cold table and instead wait for the mercy of blade to the back because at least that way our eyes can fill with sun when we tip sideways into a burst of stars just behind the eye, just a bit to the left—



Midnight Moth by Gabriella Jordanova

Sold to the Highest Bidder

by Jawad Alazzeh

It seemed clear at the close of a lengthy conversation,
In the cool heat of late Spring.
We have long mourned,
The colonial appropriation of the ancient East.

Destined to be housed in museums framed by symmetrical columns,
As far as the eye can see,
A foreign culture stands on display.
Intricate forms, curated by the educated,
Delicate designs, celebrated by those who know their value,
Saved from the result of the benign neglect.

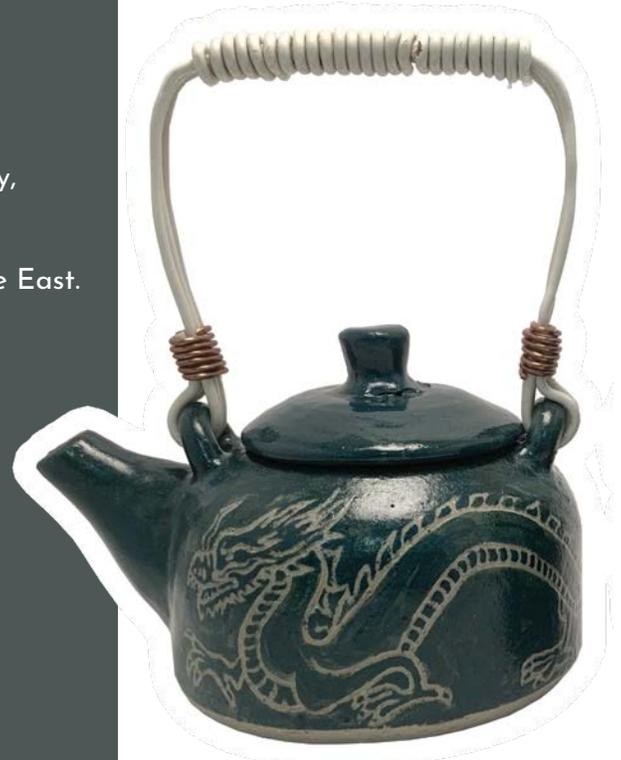
Symbols of power and grace, literally irreplaceable,
Stories lost in translation,
While beauty endures, a festival of culture,
They stand in ironic tribute, to the rugged proximity to history,

We grew angry at their loss, taken by the other.
And now today, the enemy in the mirror, the East robbing the East.
Artifacts no longer strangers in alien soil,
To cultures unknown. Rather,

Stolen by kin,
Orphaned in the vast destruction of humanity,
People are poor, they need a few dollars to live, we justify.
Our heritage, hidden, like gold deposits,
Seized and sold to the highest bidder,
The strangers may have better guarded the past.

Pried from the earth, ancient homes lost,
Hands of greed, and the cost is heavy,
Vestiges of our past drowning our presence,
The legacy of what was home, now irreverent.

Yixing Teapot
by Adriana
Cazares



calf
by Anafely
Hernandez
Perez



Letter to Hades

by Amelia Frank

Demeter's calloused hands inch towards mine
I taste each fingertip in the golden dust that sprinkles my scythe
Her pitying reflection in each bead of sweat that rolls down my earth
Wetting its molten core.

You are a shadow oil that spills and spreads
In my twisting sea of dreams

Leaving beached whale calves and bleached ocean treasure
On the windy shores of my mind.

Demeter's lustful sister has shackled me
In the sands at war with the waters of Paphos
Surrendered against the filmy foam that immured her nascent body.
Stuffed with the ash of stolen fire

I am unable to touch Pandora
Whose glassy body curves around the shivering aches in my chest
Preventing disaster's sweet release.

The earth yawns open upon your arrival
Golden chariot hurtling through the ducked heads of narcissuses
Your spoked wheels puncture the airways of my heart.

You rip Demeter's daughter from the souls of soil
Push her pale shaking body into labyrinthine blood tides
Let her drown and spin my face to watch her.

You wanted my daughter too.
When she inhaled the world you filled her lungs with black water
Poured undulating waves of underworld
Into her swimming green eyes forever frozen in fear
And red traffic light.

I have decided to retrieve her.
Walk through soulless ghosts who mourn
The absence of forgiveness in its fiery form
And flit about the fading grey fields of asphodel
There I will find you
Perhaps dining with Persephone or
Swimming in the rivers that encircle earth's sad shape
Buried under the crying cosmos
Your ruined body among this hellscape.



Over Time by Honey Brown

elevator thoughts

by Emily Natanova

lobby

i step onto the elevator
and push for floor 12
a woman in a black dress rushes in and asks for 13
she has red hair and her perfume smells nice
we wait in silence for the doors to close and begin our ascent

floor 2

i look down at the ragged carpeting
the woman is swiping at something on her phone

floor 5

the elevator is creaking and
i feel myself growing uneasy
i've always had an irrational anxiety in elevators
it's fine, stop freaking out.

floor 7

i catch myself bracing for the elevator to crash
for the doors to glue shut
or for the ride to suddenly turn turbulent
and drop hundreds of feet

floor 8

if the elevator wouldn't open
*would we become friends while we waited for maintenance?
would i get to know this rose-scented woman?*
or if the elevator falls
*would it feel fast or like slow motion?
would i die?
would this woman die?
am i the last person she will ever see?
i think i could survive the impact if i jump right before it lands like in that one youtube video.
should i ask for her name in case?
it's more humane that way.
but it's easier to grieve when you don't know someone.
the awkward silence between two strangers on an elevator would be a weird last memory.*

the elevator brakes abruptly
my grip tightens around the handles

*is this it? is this the end?
should i ask this woman where she got her perfume from?
it wouldn't matter – i'd be dead anyway!
fuck, i knew i should've taken the stairs.*

ding!

floor 12

the doors open and i walk out
the smell of roses lingering behind me

A Guitar, a Campfire, and a Spaceship

by Isaac McKeag

Whistle a tune by the fire with me friend
There's whole worlds out there,
But right now you're on this one . . .
So take it in

Freedom is only a tool,
Soon, you'll see that.
Timber giants stand among us here,
They cannot walk, but their spirits are reinless

So whistle with me, an endless refrain
That you may have rest here, in these mountains
Among these forests,
And repair your vessel, to brave the vast emptiness beyond.

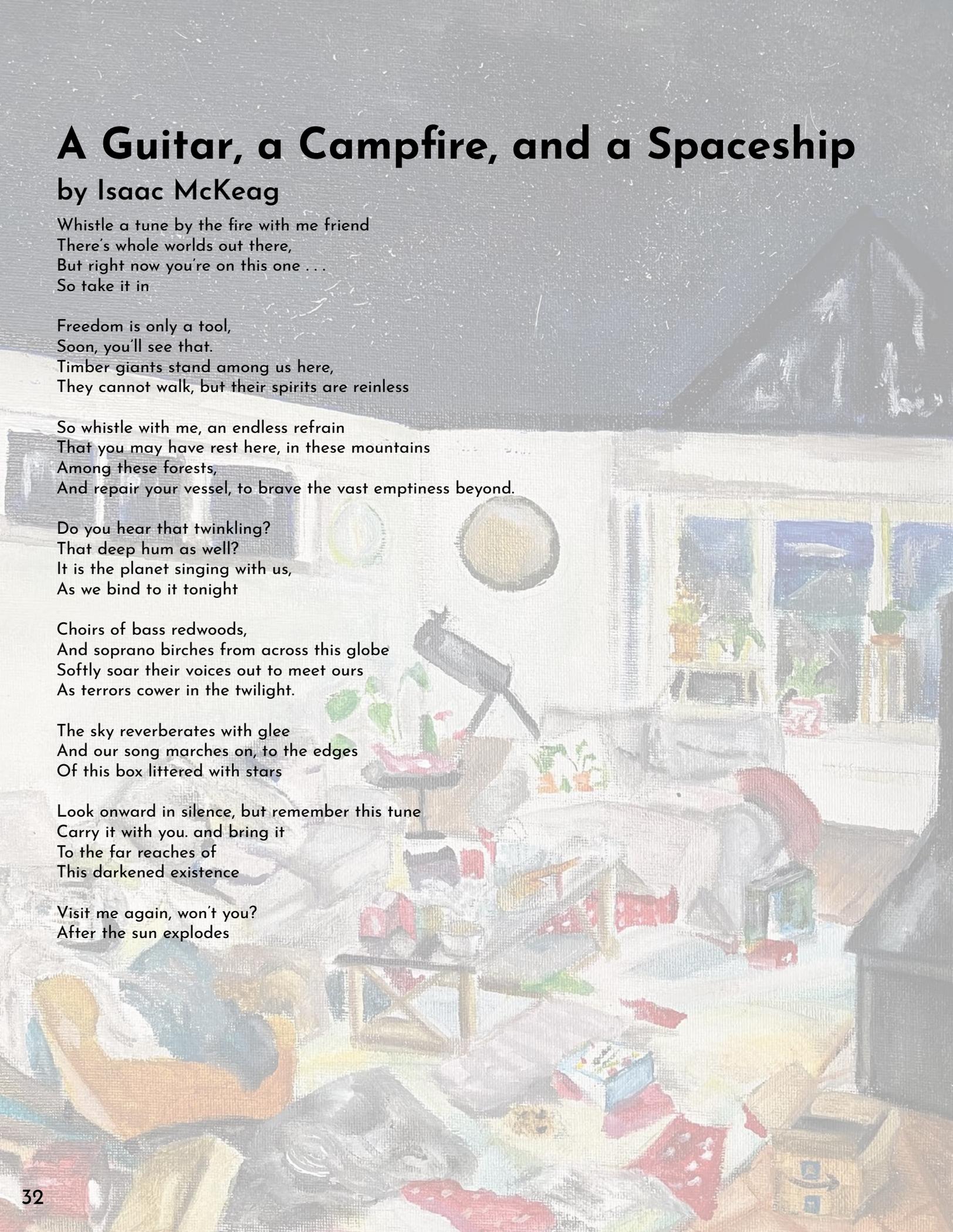
Do you hear that twinkling?
That deep hum as well?
It is the planet singing with us,
As we bind to it tonight

Choirs of bass redwoods,
And soprano birches from across this globe
Softly soar their voices out to meet ours
As terrors cover in the twilight.

The sky reverberates with glee
And our song marches on, to the edges
Of this box littered with stars

Look onward in silence, but remember this tune
Carry it with you. and bring it
To the far reaches of
This darkened existence

Visit me again, won't you?
After the sun explodes



Cosmic Hypocrisy

by Wyatt Vaughn

Have I ever told you that
Once, I reached my arm
In the sky, to try
To pinch a distant star—

I wanted to squeeze it,
To secrete its sweat
And watch it drop from light-years away onto my tongue

Hope is funny that way,
Because my mouth is (still) empty
And I am (still)
Pinching

Each time my tongue turns
White with thirst,
I justify
A reason why it didn't work

Maybe I didn't pinch hard enough;
Maybe you've never been there—
You live on a different star.
Aching, I keep my arm raised

But I can't lay back all day,
So I work on blueprints
For telescopes, but
never spaceships.

Say I found you. What, then,
Could I say? What before
You blind me, and burn me?
Yet, hope is funny that way.

Strange that I reach out but withdrawal
before contact.
And peculiar, too, that I both want you
And want me dead before I get you

That I'd prefer the blank cosmos
Over extraterrestrial communication.

Christmas Chaos by Abby Lee





First Confession

by Maria Tan

Red scratchy fabric lining the confessional
 Imprinted a checkerboard into my knees;
 My spine stacked upright,
 Leading to heaven, or down into hell;
 Guilt or shame pulling my head down;
 Tears would've fallen on my baby cheeks
 If the church hadn't been as cold as hell was hot;
 My hands pressed firmly against each other,
 My fingers pointing straight to heaven;
 Just like Mrs. Conte taught me
*Don't fold your hands,
 Don't let your fingers point straight down to hell below,
 Point them to the sky, to God, to the heavens,
 Church steeples in their own right.*

I went to do my penance.
 15 Hail Marys and 1 Our Father,
 The Act of Contrition said and done,
 I continued to pray,
 Tears flowing from my cheeks
 Steady as the water from the baptismal fountain.

Red fabric now carving checkerboards of my knees
 Father Dave would pass by my pew,
 His fire and brimstone sermon finished.

I sat straighter,
 Pressed my hands together tighter,
 Made my face holier.
 Father Dave's face was always red,
 riverlike veins bulging,
 little stubbles poking out of his chins and over his jowls.
 Robes starting at his shoulders,
 rounding over his well fed stomach,
 flowing down to hell.

Petrified of going to hell, I wanted to do the right thing,
 But I was scared of that too.
Would I still go to hell

*If I was doing something simply for the sake of going to heaven?
 Shouldn't I just be motivated by my love and desire for God?*

I prayed and prayed and prayed,
 My whispers hallowed His name
 Dear Lord,

*Please help me be a good person, help me go to heaven, help me be beautiful.
 Immediately I would feel sick with guilt or shame,
 Why am I praying to be beautiful when I could be praying for starving children?
 Dear God, Please forgive me, let me be good.*

Frantically under my Tinker Bell blankets,
 I recited Hail Mary after Hail Mary,

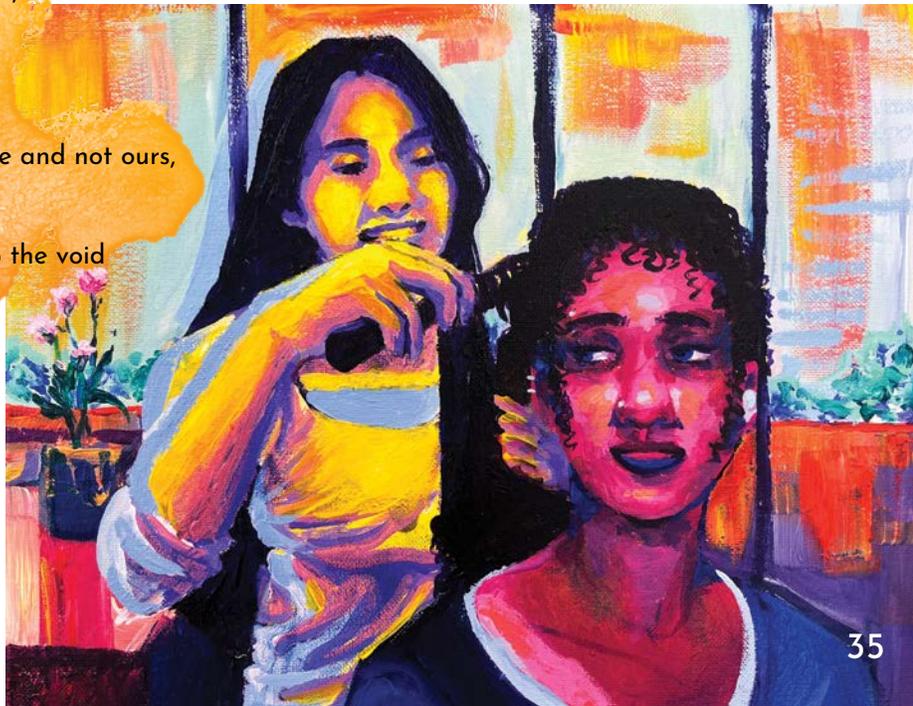
Eyes clamped tight, teeth clenched, legs curled, fingers pointing up to the sky, even though I was sideways.

Interpolation by Claire Jiang

Reese

by Haley Kleinman

Her hands were golden, as if baked under runny sun,
Yolk dripping into the palms,
Painting her in ancient warmth
As her fingers held the cigarette to her lips, allowing the aged paper to crack her mouth open
Autumn afternoon senior year '08
We stood in the rose colored bathroom,
Laughing over hyperfemininity and profanity,
Words scratched into the crumbling walls like prisoners' babble,
But her eyes were forever upward, gazing at the black ink mural
Where countless women stood frozen in time
Women huddled close together under a single umbrella,
Women with flowers growing from their skin like additional limbs,
Women staring up at stars drawn on the ceiling, pointing, praying.
There were bodies and bodies covered entirely in faces, each face screaming,
Eyes hanging from strings out of sockets,
Skin distorted and wrinkled and decaying,
Disintegrating into a fervent wind
She was quiet but the drawings were screaming and I knew from the teary-eyed glint in her eyes that they were hers
She spoke of forgotten people and heartbreak but I couldn't stop thinking about
Her brain
Infinite as the land is wide
She went on about Frida Kahlo, the hundreds of self-portraits mere reflections in the pool of reality
Ripples in the fabric of identity, slippery
Slippery pieces
And I started thinking about her soul
Its curves molding into mine, devouring
People change in subtle, imperceptible ways, she said
And I wanted to inhale her citrus scent, press the slope of her neck to my mouth to whisper
All the earnest things I could never say out loud
You are the best thing about this universe, the most beautiful invention
But my mouth had already crumbled into oblivion, so I handed her my eyes, which blinked
Furiously against the weight of hers
Demanding not to be revealed
The space between us yawned outward into an abyss, where she stood at the other end
Smiling and knowing
But never speaking
Trading her voice for my dignity
Words, she'd say, how superficial
Guarding secrets which she pretended were still mine and not ours,
Gifting me the silent promise of possibility
And doing so without any hesitation
So that one day, when I reached out tentatively into the void
And it was her soft hand that I touched
Held
I wouldn't have to close my eyes



Girls by Lillia Kleinow

Coping Mechanisms by Emma Clement



voidmice

by Nelle Rain

part 1: carmine

you want to see my heart?
go on then
haha
not what you expected?
here's a secret: it never is.
oh, look at that – it's still trying to beat
but the mice are already gnawing.
was that a grimace? how rude.
you get used to the smell of rot after a while

part 2: ochre

i was stung by a hornet once.
when it's humid enough, i can still feel it
a prickle
an itch
a blister
a bite
my veins are stained with yellow-black venom.
one drop kills the mice
but now i'm surrounded by bodies
and i can't touch them without burning my hands.

part 3: charcoal

it's a windowless, hourless time of night
say that again, a little deeper, a little smoother
when i can perfect my narrator voice (it's a windowless)
and the mice make an excellent audience (hourless)
it's time to go to bed (time of night)
say that again, but sigh it
it's time to go to bed
anger is practiced, pleasantly sharp (it's a windowless)
sorrow is false, always held back (hourless)
it's time to go to bed
fear is just shaky enough to tell that i'm afraid (time of night)
it's time. to go. to bed.
it's a windowless, hourless . . .

part 4: lead

trimmed my bangs with a seam ripper
couldn't find the scissors
brush it nicely for sunday service.
don't pray except late at night
soapy water running down my skin.
all i want are answers with no lacing.
truths i don't have to lie for.
i sit with my back to the boy with the bible
so i can't see his self-righteous smile.
the voidmice are singing
in the voices of devils and saints
they're asking
why

the sun and i

by Arielle Li

She was the epitome of fragile beauty: lips slightly parted, rosy flush tinting the apples of her cheeks, raven hair framing her face. I knelt there, holding her wrist, touching the papery skin that shielded her blue-green veins. A ball of unshakable guilt weighed down my chest. It was my fault. I had sat there and watched as she overworked herself to shine as brightly as the sun; now, I was sitting and watching her sink in a sea of stars.

Himari was always loved by everyone. People were drawn in by the way she carried herself with confident assurance. She was too kind and worked too hard to be hated, and she was too talented for her own sake. Himari was overcommitted; time trickled through her fingers, and I always felt frustrated that she never had any left for me.

We became friends in eighth grade. It was the end-of-year school talent show, and I had watched, starstruck by her shimmering performance. She wore a golden dress with a sparkling skirt that rivaled the sun. She was poised. She was flawless.

The richness of her playing was addictive. Enchanted, I admired her fiery, captivating movements as if she were dancing. Her final cadenza erupted through the air as she lifted her bow and

tore a grandiose sound from her violin that stole my breath. Dazed, I closed my eyes and surrendered to the haunting passage, feeling the desperate notes fill my lungs and listening to the urgent melody that twirled faster and faster. Too soon, it was over, and Himari's last note lingered in the air. A penetrating silence filled the auditorium, and we sat there, frozen

in time by the spell she had cast. The only movement was her vibrato, ongoing until the applause had nearly died down.

I remember clapping the loudest. I remember feeling irritation towards people who didn't seem as impressed as I was. I remember feeling strange, almost like I'd fallen in love.

The meaning of the name Himari is "sun." I'd always seen her as one: invincible, undefeatable, marvelous in her radiant glory. I viewed myself as a planet orbiting her, pulled in by her

gravitational force. When I found out she was in the hospital, my mind went blank.

The doctors said it was a prolonged seizure from low blood sugar. They said she was in a medically induced coma.

My initial thoughts were that I was wrong, that I'd falsely embedded the belief of her unconquerable nature into my mind. Now, I realized she still was the sun. She had burned too brightly to do what she was good at and was sputtering out.



Paragon by Lillia Kleinow



We were juniors the first time she invited me to her house. Excitedly, she sat me down in front of her vanity, gathering makeup products I didn't know the names of. "Stay still," she instructed. Our faces were inches apart, and I could only hear our intermingled breaths as she used one hand for eyeshadow and the other to cup my chin. The soft brush tickled my face, but I didn't notice. I was too busy staring at the freckle below her left eye.

She artfully constructed winged eyeliner on my uneven monolids. I wanted this moment to last forever. The delicate care in her actions felt meaningful in a way I couldn't ignore. Our eyes locked as she slid the lip gloss applicator over my lips, and for a second, it felt as though she wanted to say something. Our bodies inched closer until our foreheads nearly touched, and I felt her cool breath touch my cheek. I searched her face, admiring the light's reflection in her brown eyes. My stomach felt strange as if I were experiencing a new emotion.

We broke eye contact, and she spun my chair towards the mirror. "Look how pretty," she whispered. Staring back at me was a girl I didn't recognize. The parts of my face I'd come to hate were subtly emphasized as if Himari found them to be the most beautiful aspects. She had found a way to enhance my natural features unconventionally. "I've been imagining how I'd do your makeup for months," she added. I wondered if this meant she had thought of my face regularly. "Let's find something to wear."

She rummaged through her closet. Dresses of all lengths and patterns were strewn across the floor. Feeling self-conscious of her undivided attention, I interrupted her search. "Wait," I said. "We should find one for you." Before she could complain, I grabbed a satin navy dress from the floor and pushed her into the bathroom.

I heard the rustle of clothes and then an empty minute-long silence. When I knocked on the door and asked her to come out, Himari refused to show me. She emerged wearing her previous clothes and a disconcerted expression. Her hands pressed anxiously at her collarbones.

Afterward, I left her house without thinking much about it.

One night, Himari and I sat on the bed of my room. She looked different from when I'd first seen her at the talent show. Her face was sallow, and there were purple hollows beneath her eyes. She looked tired, and her left fingers were constantly drumming, every so often falling into a complex rhythm that I assumed was the new piece she was preparing. Her collarbones jutted out, starkly

contrasting with her ghostly skin. Anxiety clawed at my throat from her appearance. It was our first time alone together after a month, and even though I wanted to treasure the precious moment she had managed to spare, I only felt sick with worry. The agitated movement of her hands distracted me, and I took them and placed them on my lap, forcing them to be still. They were cold and clammy, but I didn't let go. I let my warmth flow into her until I felt numb with endless cold. Our hands fit together like they were meant to be.

"This isn't healthy," I quietly said. "I know," she replied. I offered her an apple slice, and she halfheartedly took a bite. She set the slice back into the plate, almost untouched. "I'm not hungry," she whispered. I opened my mouth to speak, but she looked pleadingly at me, silently telling me she didn't want to talk about it.

That was the first warning that I should've stepped in. But I didn't. Even with all the time I had on my hands, I didn't do anything.

Stupidly, I thought she was superhuman. I nodded every time she told me she was completely in control. And when I heard her play, I believed her.

I couldn't see the small cracks appearing on her exterior, the minuscule mistakes becoming increasingly frequent in her art. I didn't notice her fingers slipping when she performed or how she began to only wear oversized clothes.

I loved her in a way I didn't love anyone else. I couldn't look past her carefully built facade, and I didn't realize it was crumbling. By the time I did, it was too late.

The last time I saw Himari before her seizure was at school. She was smiling, and she looked healthier. She was with her other friends, and one of them gave her a chocolate chip cookie. I watched her hesitate for a split second before she ate the entire cookie, and I felt pure joy fill my heart. Relieved, I thought Himari had been right all along – she could handle everything she took on and still thrive.

In the hospital, I sat with Himari for as long as possible. My tears dripped onto the blankets, each droplet blossoming into a star. Memories flitted through my mind, and I was overwhelmed with frightening regret. There were too many things I had left unsaid. I kissed her forehead and ran my fingers through her hair. "I love you," I whispered, and I promised ourselves that I would repeat this after she woke up. It was an understanding I finally reached after almost losing everything – to stop hiding my emotions because life is too short to have regrets.



Hush by Nhu Chu

left unsaid

by Sundos H.

a split second meeting
one glance,
and nothing more.
i do not know your name.
neither do you mine.

a short friendship.
we drifted apart.
i have your number,
but i won't call.
you won't either.

years together.
in the end,
we both hurt each other.
but even if i could,
i would never take it back.
i hope you wouldn't either.

our bonds are not blood,
not even water.
but your home is in my heart.
it is in my mind,
late at night,
when i cannot sleep.

people come and go,
so you came and went.
perhaps you think of me
the same way i think of you.
perhaps not.

sometimes,
i fear i made you up.
a mild hallucination,
a fever dream.

deep down,
i know i will forget you.
chances are,
you already forgot me.
but chances also brought us together.

fate destined us to co-exist.
i wish i could see you
and know how you're doing.
i wish you the best.

it hurts to know you're gone
for good.
you have your own life.
and i have mine.
but i hope you know
i think of you,
even though i may not know
who you are.

i wonder if anyone thinks of me
like this.
someone with eyes i never met.
someone with words i never heard.

this is human nature.
hellos become goodbyes.
present becomes past.
not everyone stays
forever.
most people don't.

but when you are driving home,
or drinking coffee,
or dreaming pleasant dreams,
it is my hope
that i am buried somewhere
in your subconscious.

whether the effect you had on me
was minuscule
or magnificent,
it was a change.
a chemical reaction in my brain.

i never had the chance to say this.
maybe i ran out of time,
or i was too afraid,
or i didn't realize it then,
but
thank you.
i am who i am
because you were who you are.



dear margot

by Yeshe Rai

you open all the blinds for moonlight
to make a place at your dining table
the radical yellowed pages say "liberty is an illusion"
& you must agree,
crouched on your cold chair in a t-shirt
& underwear. eating tomato soup.

today you screamed at a wall,
punched it, apologized,

& spent two hours in silence

simmering soup.

he told you yesterday you were pretty,
his voice a tiny radio under the

corner of your ear.

sometimes it feels nice, you concede,
to be reduced to simply the
skin hiding your delicate lungs &
your bones holding back
pent-up dewdrops of contemplation.

you pretend that you've always
only told the truth,
& your friends toss
their silky heads back and forth
like ribboned horses,
laughing at your attempt.

in class an invisible shovel
hits your hand down, presses the blade
to your chin &
begs you to stay silent or
sudden shame will engulf
your already red cheeks

& the cycle starts anew.

you live among extremes
push yourself to every edge, never doubting
the small rocks at the bottom of the fall.

in your cluttered glory

you are expectant of change,

& soon. the garden tools bringing
dirt to line your skin & remind you

of the glorious gold of dawn

as the moonlight

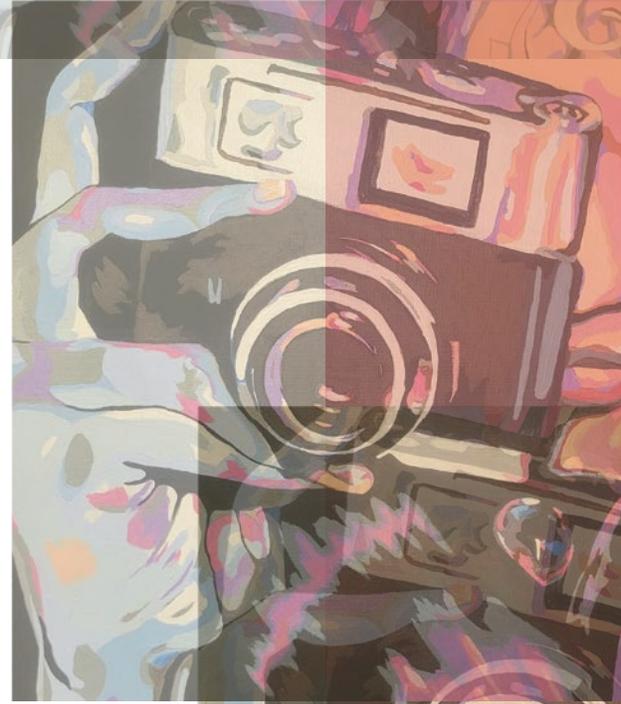
silently slips out your door

Smiling

by Katelyn Patrick

I smiled when she said
That I was the only person she really talked to
In the only class we shared.
I would ask her
How her week had been
Since we both knew
The quality of our week
Far outweighed our day.
Only, I don't think she ever realized
Why I always chose to ask that.
I smiled every time when she told me
She would get my whiteboard along with hers
As if it was the purest form of chivalry a knight could perform.
I stared at my laptop as she took the red marker
And drew smiley faces.
When she noticed, all she said was
"Don't worry, it comes off"
As if she believed that was why I was staring.
As if nothing in my chest twisted
When she started erasing them.
As if there weren't words
Being swallowed that very moment.
She thought I only worried about her ruining something of mine.
But she doesn't know
That she can mark anything of mine
With those smiley faces of hers.
Create sleeves up my arms,
To the tips of my fingers.
I just wish what I truly wanted gone
Would peel off like a second skin I could just start picking at and shed,
Leaving behind an old image.
Nothing can prepare you
To fall for people
Like gravity on Jupiter.
And the problem seems harder than
Derivatives and integrals,
Or case studies and lab write-ups.
I might not have the solution yet,
But I'll keep smiling
And some day I will.

The Unseen Artist
by Anna Cameron



Love Ghazal

by Kayla Brethauer

Two sleeves brush. In a single touch, it blossoms: love.
Wide-eyed, whisper anything in my ear, I'll call it love.

Barefoot on a pedestal, white lace, floor-length mirror.
If you don't cry when I walk down the aisle, is it love?

You ask, *what's your name?* Twirling my hair around
your finger. What a disappointment, this fleeting love.

I could cut the birthday cake you never thanked me for,
or I could cut the skin above your heart. Feel my love.

Tell me everything. All of your secrets and demons,
a vault holds them in my heart, secured with love.

Lazily, your fingers run over the bridge of my nose.
Do you dream of finding a better somebody to love?

Tears pool in the hollows of my heart. Sorrow rushes
through my bloodstream. This once felt like love.



Eve
by Leo Connelly

word vomit by Bethany Lines

no words. even *they* do not like to stick around to save their sanity. i am not like you,
but i'll give you children
i'll try
just promise you'll make a real thing out of me; a real useful thing. one that talks. and let me hunt for
myself. and for every thing
that couldn't bear me long enough to hear my silence
or to really listen 'cause if they did they would have learned that i can make them beautiful.

and look no now look, i know i'm not a grasshopper
i am a spider i am a designer – i weave a web so beautiful, so enticing not only do i fool and trap
you
and do a good job of it
not only do i make you feel safe enough that you finally think you have a home but i fool
myself too.
you know

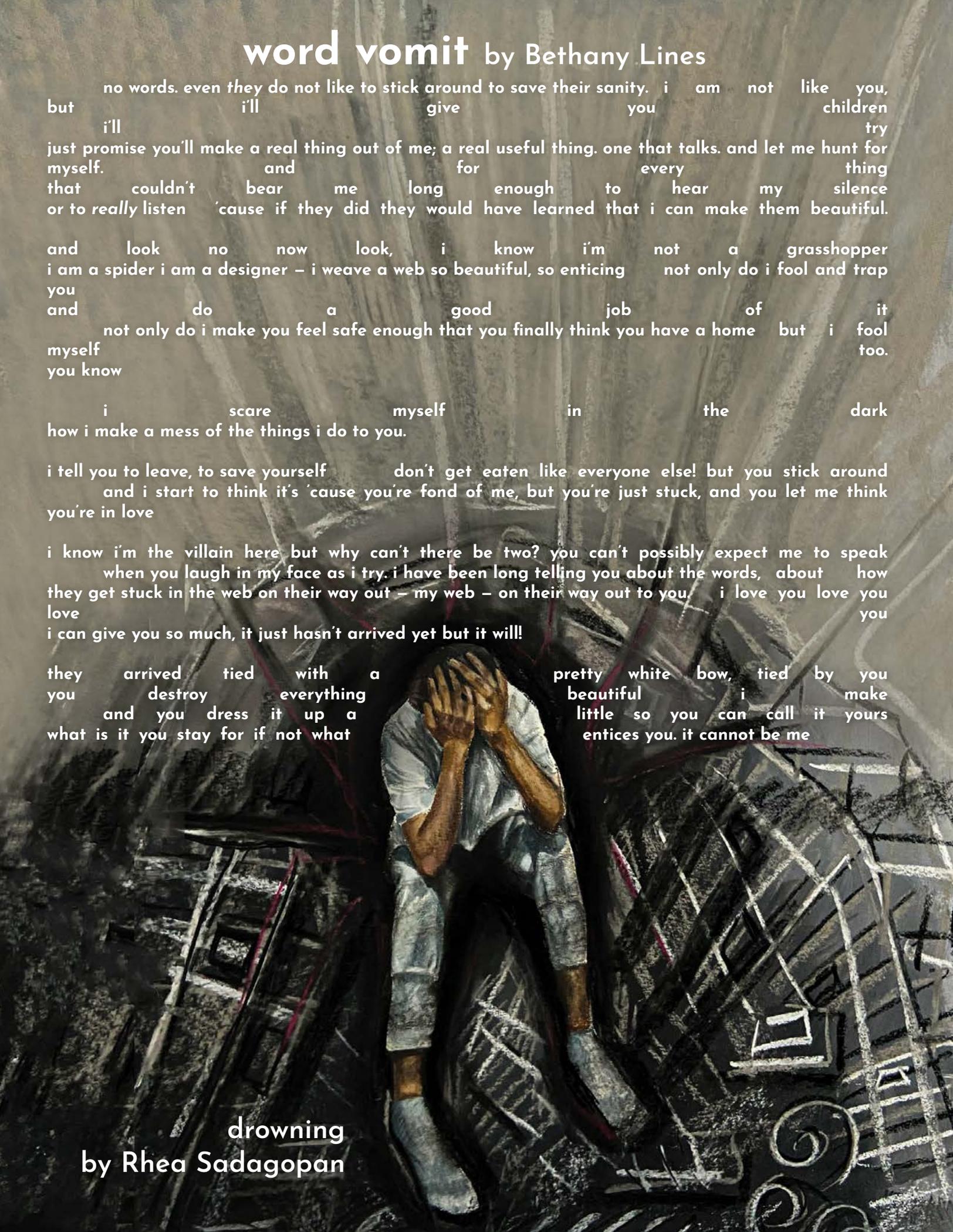
i scare myself in the dark
how i make a mess of the things i do to you.

i tell you to leave, to save yourself don't get eaten like everyone else! but you stick around
and i start to think it's 'cause you're fond of me, but you're just stuck, and you let me think
you're in love

i know i'm the villain here but why can't there be two? you can't possibly expect me to speak
when you laugh in my face as i try. i have been long telling you about the words, about how
they get stuck in the web on their way out – my web – on their way out to you. i love you love you
love you
i can give you so much, it just hasn't arrived yet but it will!

they arrived tied with a pretty white bow, tied by you
you destroy everything beautiful i make
and you dress it up a little so you can call it yours
what is it you stay for if not what entices you. it cannot be me

drowning
by Rhea Sadagopan



A photograph of a stone archway leading to a forest with a stream. The archway is made of dark, textured stone blocks. The stream flows through the center of the archway, and the forest beyond is filled with bare trees, suggesting a winter or late autumn setting. The lighting is soft and natural, coming from the opening of the archway.

unable to say goodbye

by Lexi Newsom

the two of you walk around the lake,
trying to balance on the familiar, unsteady ground.
around you, icicles hang from trees like glass ornaments,
swaying lightly in the wind.
they're on the edge of breaking off the branches
but they don't.
as if the heavy silence in that canadian forest
froze every glinting piece of ice halfway
between break and connection

you look into the nearly frozen water at her reflection:
her face, slightly stretched and pinched and distorted;
her pink jacket, once lovingly warm, now looks exhausted.
how did I love you before?
the ripples in the lake bring your reflections closer together
and you feel guilty, for a moment, for thinking that question.

but the two of you are pushed an inch away again,
and you realize
your pink jacket in the water is just a shade duller too,
your face pulled in just as many directions as hers, and
you think, *what if she's also ready to say goodbye?*
maybe she's as ready as you.

you watch both of your reflections as they dip, rise from the water
the space between them growing closer and farther,
closer and farther, as if they're caught in a dance
resisting the urge to finally walk away

the edge of the water starts to freeze,
engraving the blurred reflections of you and her into the ice.
in this silence, the figures refuse to break

Peach Blossom Spring
by Xizhe Wang

Like the Ballads

by Que Tran Tran

In his head, he is
beneath the stars,
that are shimmering
but silently so,
quiet in their
overwhelming beauty.
They reach out to him
despite being held
captive
in the sky's embrace.

In his head, he sees
a scene just like the ballads.
A picnic along the river.
A field of tulips swaying
in the night's breeze.
Her face lit up by the moonlight.

A scene that cannot seem
to reach beyond his dreams.

In his head, a voice
haunts him.
Reminds him
*they were so lovely
don't let go yet.
he can still save them.*

despite everything.

Despite that he held on
too tightly
Suffocating her
and himself
in their embrace.

Calming Environment
by Lucas Nguyen





K A

by Sia Mehta

I can't grapple with – understand, process, comprehend – the fact that I am, by all evidence against me, very mentally ill. I am sick. I am weak and guilty. There is something – a variety of things – wrong, here. My mother is published in numerous medical journals.

On spring break last year, in March of 2022, my family and Daisy's family went to the Dominican Republic. And I tried and failed, in this pocketless, sunshiny, sleeveless world – for is that how I see the world? Where can I disguise what, where is safe to be and remain relatively anonymous? – to hide my vaping habit and my burn scars.

The vape I left out on the hotel dresser when Daisy and I returned to the room drunk on all-you-can-drink margaritas (or something more Daisy for her, like a mule or a Manhattan).

I woke in the morning, under a thin sheet despite the frigid air-conditioned temperature, to my mother shaking me awake. I buried my head further under the sheet, hungover, but the yellow light came through nonetheless, and even when I closed my eyes my vision was pulsing red behind the eyelids. *Let the light in, at your back door yelling cause I wanna come in.* She shook me again.

Do you know what this is?
What's what.

I opened my eyes, looked at it, saw the black cylinder. I was instantly, heart-poundingly awake, because I was 17 on vacation with my mother, and I was about to get old-school busted and iced out. I knew it.

Oh – that's Daisy's.
(beat) What is it?

Buried my head further in the sheet. Mumbled, to seem unconcerned.

I'll explain later, don't worry.

She walked away, into the master suite off of the room where I slept, the fold-out couch centered in marble. My heart would not stop beating, faster and faster. Panic. Panic. I tried to think but no plot would come. I knew I was fucked. I heard her enter the room from underneath the light shield. She took the sheet off of my head and I squinted, lying.

I know what this is. I looked it up.

Oh. Yeah.

Is this yours?

No, it's Daisy's.

(beat) Are you sure?

I sat up in bed. Looked at her so honestly. I have always been a phenomenal liar. That's what you learn to do, when you live in a house where truth is not rewarded, and is rather punished, and lies are accepted or praised if told with enough conviction.

Mom. Come on.

What, Iya? I have a right to ask!
You know me, I wouldn't do that.

Too much, not enough
by Rhea Sadagopan

Have you tried it?

Well, yeah, but I didn't like it. (so classic) Besides, you're *literally* a lung doctor. Like, I know better. I would never do that.

(beat. Long beat)

Are you sure.

Yes.

She stared at me a moment longer.

Okay. I trust you.

Hilarious. Peak comedy. I watched her go back to her room, then laid back down, sheetless now, so I could observe her. She gathered her things to go to the beach. She put on a floppy sunhat, a white linen sundress. She has always been girly, she sometimes wears barrettes in her hair. Stunted, perhaps? Menopausally regretful, sorry, apologetic to herself? How cruel I can be. I am certain that I will never know the answers to these questions. She didn't say much, and then said,

I'm going,

And left the room, the hotel door shutting solidly behind her, its lock brand-new. I watched the door. She didn't mention the encounter ever again.

The scars. The burn scars. K A.

When I was 15 or 16 – genuinely, I have no idea nor distinction between the two, because both years were largely spent isolated and alone and quiet, in my attic-room in the dark, with yellow LED lights sometimes because I believed they made me more cheerful, a sunshiny lamp that sits in my dorm room now because I *know* it makes me more cheerful – I was feeling very sad. Depressed, I guess. I was never a true believer in mental illness. But I have known the word *depressed* since I was very young, and a tomboy, and told my mother I was depressed because she was making me wear a sparkly butterfly t-shirt.

So when I was 15 or 16. I was having a hard night. I remember now, it's come to me. I was 16.

My friends had just iced me out and ruined my life for getting with Macy's ex-boyfriend in the back of his car. I called the suicide help line – Kids Help Phone – because I believed I was about to die. I texted them instead of calling because I lost my nerve. They tried to help but they did nothing and still I was about to close my eyes and sleep forever and die in a heavy state. Like when I overdosed on codeine pills and threw up on the carpet and had since moved my bed to cover the stain. I felt like that and hadn't realized, yet, how unhelpful sobriety was to managing and accepting one's own life.

I got up. I don't know how the idea came to me. But all I could think was

I deserve this. You deserve this. You miserable brat. You piece of shit. Worthless slut. Whore. W h o r e. You bitch. You deserve this, what's happening to you. Yeah,

cry, bitch. Cry more. I dare you. Keep going, don't stop, keep going, fuck don't stop don't stop fuck.

Leave one's body to look down upon it in disgust. This, also, I have always known. That is why my BMI is now 18.6.

I got a sewing needle from the assortment of miscellaneous objects in my grandmother's wedding jewelry box. It stands, propped open, burnt and tired from its 1960 induction into the Mehta family, and the mirror on its face stares back at anyone who looks into it. Or maybe just at me. On the mirror sits a printed photograph of me and a dead redheaded girl standing in the downtown square in December. Snow falls around us, the lights shine red and blue on the slushed streets, dark Ubers blur past the mahogany stone of the square. We are grinning, mid-speaking. We are 15 and loving it. Whenever I am in a state I stare at us. Hard. I try to make eye contact. But every time, the only person I can really look at is myself, tear-strewn, in the mirror.

I picked up the sewing needle. Grabbed the neon-green Bic lighter I told mommy was just for candles. I do love scented candles. I go crouch by the lamp that brings joy into the room. I used to have a space heater because I was always cold; printed on the top was the company name

Sunbeam

I have written lots about Sunbeam. I love Sunbeam. Sunbeam makes me feel good. So does my lamp. I want to have a smiling sun tattooed on my back.

I sit on the side of my bed, my bare feet grazing the carpeted floor next to my bedside table. I stretch my arm out under the lamp.

Karma karma karma karma karma karma karma

This is what you deserve – you always get what you deserve – you are to blame for all of it

I had a mind to write "KARMA" in burn lines on my forearm. I had already done so, months prior, but just lines, no words. Just burn lines, in a row on my inner wrist, periodically. I was building up to a tally of five. I've only ever made it to four.

I didn't think it through. I didn't realize that the spot I chose would be obvious to those close to me for years to come. I didn't realize that short sleeves would be a problem. I didn't know. I'm sorry I didn't know.

I sparked the lighter and held the sewing needle in the flame for a couple of seconds.

Mesmerized. Wanted to make sure it was hot enough. Flames are hot, if you didn't know.

I removed the needle from the lighter and positioned it above my arm, my palm facing upwards slightly closed, holding the lamplight. Chipped black nails from October. My skin is so pale in the fall; so thin, so papery. Burnable, feeble, weak.

I pressed the needle into my arm, horizontal, the first line of the letter K. It hurt so bad. I pressed it down for as long as I could, eyes squeezed shut. I removed it. Opened my eyes. A dark red line appeared on the beige of my forearm. I stared at it. My baby, my child, my creation. Hello.

I wrote K A. Two angular letters is six lines. Is six important? Seven is the devil's number. I am still a girl.

After a couple of minutes I laid back down in my bed. I watched my arm. Every time I looked away and returned it would be slightly more raised; I ran my fingers over the burns. The texture was so smooth, so soft despite the rising blood underneath. I went to sleep like that. Fingers over K A.

Everything is K A. I went to bed looking forward to seeing K A in the morning.

Over the next few weeks it stayed red, and then scabbed, and then slowly I picked the scab off to reveal pale pink, burnt off skin. At work I had to wear short sleeves, skirts and dresses; I put a bandaid over K A. A 30-year-old bartender asked me what happened; more people noticed than I would've liked. I said,

Oh, got a burn.
Oh, yeah? How?

It might've been wise to say hair straightener. I have always been smart, but never wise.

It's so grandma-y.
What's that mean?
Just, a grandma way to get a burn.
Try me.
I burnt it on a kettle making tea.

He laughed good-naturedly. I can't remember his name. I had learned recently that he was fucking a server named Bree, and one time in doggy, he had stopped to hit his Juul. Everyone knew. *Everyone*. When they stopped fucking Bree quit and never came back. She was so pretty. He left me alone, went back to the bar.

Over the next few months the pink faded to a pale white, and then a light beige, and then light brown. K A would never be covered up with concealer; there were just too many colors to adequately disguise, and the concealer I use for my face is too light for the rest of my body. When I look closely at K A I can't even see the difference in skin tone, between the marred and the unmarred. When I look from far away, from the average distance of arm to eye, K A glares at me, obvious and alarming. K A looks at me and says, karma, baby, karma, honey, karma, sweetie pie. Karma. K A.

In time no one has noticed K A. I do well disguising K A. I turn my arm unnaturally when reaching for things in sleeveless shirts, in a way that only I will notice is abnormal. Daisy noticed K A, after we had

lived together for a couple of months. It is hard to hide things from people you live with; mothers, sisters, brothers, selves.

On vacation in the Dominican Republic, in March of 2022, I was greeting my mother at the beach, where she sat in a beach chair, reading on her red iPad mini, sunglasses and floppy hat on her girly curly hair. She has dark eyes, my mother. My brother and I, our eyes are a lighter brown, a visible brown. Hers, from any distance other than cheek-kissing distance, are black.

I reached for something. She grabbed my arm. I knew it.

What's this?
Nothing.

I tried to take my arm away. Panic. What was it with this fucking trip. She gripped my arm harder, too hard, pulled it back. I supposed she can grab my arm as hard as she wants to. It came from her body. It was made of her flesh. The flesh belongs to her; I'd burnt and marred what belonged to her. I, too, would be upset.

This. Here.
(she touched K A. No one is allowed to touch K A, feel the ridges, but me.)
What is this? Iya?
(I stared at her.)
Iya?
Mom. It's nothing.
(She stared at it in silence; I tried to pull away and again she restricted me.)
It's something. Is this . . . (whispered) cuts?
No. Burns.
Burns? Iya . . . why?

She sounded like she was about to cry. I felt bad. And annoyed. K A belongs to me and me alone.
It's not that big of a fucking deal. Stop overreacting.
Don't you fucking dare cry.

I wanted a tattoo.
A . . . tattoo?
Yeah.
Why couldn't you . . . just wait and get a tattoo?
I wanted one immediately.
Bitiya.
What?
A tattoo?
Yeah.
Why... burn yourself?
(beat)
Did it hurt?
(I shrugged)
A little.
(beat)
Iya . . . why? Why would you do this to yourself?
Tattoo.

And so the conversation went. It ended with her sitting there, dejected, on the beach chair, her feet in the sand. When she is about to cry, she looks pitiful. Weak. She is reduced to a little girl. Barrettes or not. She is my daughter and I am hers.

I stared at my toes in the sand. I thought about how much I love feeling sand on my toes. I tried to distract myself from the potentially destructive nature of this conversation, the fact that it could end my habits and ruin my routine and take away from me the way that I like to do things, the way that I like to treat myself. I was afraid that she would tell me it was wrong. I knew it was wrong, I knew K A wasn't normal. But in my way, it was so right. It was meant to be. If I am alive, I want it to be in my way.

The conversation ended when Kallous and Zayn arrived. Little brothers. Tension suckers. Babies. I have never known love like the love I feel for my little brother. If he dies, I will die. If I have a son, his name will be Kallous. I have never known this love and friendship. I imagine the next closest thing is to be a mother.

She never mentioned the encounter again.

It has been more than a year, and now, usually, I live away from her, in New York City. She does not know that I am sick. She can't bring herself to believe it. Not hers, not her flesh. Not the child of her blood and tears. Not the product of her belly, of her volition. Anything but that.

When I started taking meds, I was afraid of what it would mean to her. My therapist told me that I'm an adult, I have the right to choose what I disclose to my mother about my health. I realized that yes, I had that power. In time, I embraced this. It's now my power to keep secrets. Secrets about myself belong to me. My mother will only know what I disclose to her. K A and I are far away, inaccessible, undiscoverable from her watching black eyes.

I told her on the phone a week or two ago that I have a therapist now. She didn't know what to say. Something like

Oh – and he – or she – helps you – deal with things?
Yes – I guess

Yes I'm helped to deal with things. But never has there been, and perhaps never will there be, a question as to my wellness. The health of my brain. Of course, if she asked, my answer would be a lie. But the problem lives in the unasked question rather than the answer.

I wonder, sometimes, if I have any problems at all. Any negative feelings, any troubling emotions, any confused ideas. Or if I just think that I do. If I just think of ways that I could be worse off, and project them onto myself until I believe in them wholeheartedly.

I had a doctor's appointment today. It is 2023. I have a new sickness. A name I can't bring myself to give it. I know it. I can't name it or look it in the face in fear of turning it on its head. Never look a gift horse in the mouth, they say. I am beautiful now. It is so glorious to be ill.

Today I sat on a hospital gurney chair in a pale blue gown that tied in the front. Exposing my

neon green, lacy thong. Braless. Pointing nipples poking through the thin material, one out the open gown-front where the tie couldn't reach. I did a urine sample in the bathroom. In the enclosed room I sat on the edge of the chair, socked-toes dangling. Did a blind weigh but once the nurse left the room I weighed myself anyway and saw the number. They should really prepare better for people like me. We're tricky all the way through. Tricky girls live here. I've never had my head reach my body like it has now. K A.

I think I got it all wrong.



Measure Up by George Newham

Side Effects From the Cure for Loneliness

by Sophia Liggett

I can still remember the first time I felt true devastation – it was the 28th of January 2019, I'd been keeping two pet mice for almost six months at that point, and I rarely thought about anything else. I can still remember sitting on the couch, about a month away from finally buying them, and asking my mother have you ever wanted something so badly it hurts? At that point she was still largely unconvinced by my obsessive campaigning. She replied, without any clear tone, yeah, it was you. In any case, I got the mice home somehow. I cobbled together a habitat for them out of an old fishtank, some store-bought toys, and a handful of sticks, rocks and similar materials from outside.

Each morning I waved goodbye to them as I pulled on my shoes and climbed into the car. At that point I was almost done with elementary school, and I really couldn't care less about it. The only class I looked forward to was my challenge class. Initially designed to keep bright students on the honors track, it had evolved into a sort of vaguely educational exploration of our interests. So of course I told my challenge teacher about the mice. After all, he was the only non-kindergarten teacher I remember liking. I'd had some sort of feud with all the rest of them, usually over something stupid (and usually, I was right).

That was a glorious time. I would return home every afternoon and check in on them. When I was bravest, I'd gently pick them up and have them run up my arms. It was love that I was feeling, an obsession with the thought that I had them to hold, to cradle in my hands or slip into a pocket. I fantasized about taking them out walking on miniature harnesses, or training them to respond to the sound of my voice. I pictured myself walking onto the school playground in front of a crowd of curious classmates, and reaching into an oversized coat pocket to reveal two white mice. The crowd would cheer as I raised them into the air, introduced them by name, and then placed them down on the red dirt kickball field. I'd whistle (something I couldn't, and can't do) some simple tune, and the mice would begin a routine of synchronized running, jumping and flipping through the air, before returning to my waiting hands at the final whistle. I imagined it almost every time I walked around the track at recess, changing details and outcomes by minute amounts for the best possible show. Of course, I never did anything towards this circus routine – I think I knew then that it was better to leave it in my imagination, lest some fragment of my real life ruin it for me.

There wasn't a "beginning of the end" for the mice. One day they were there, in a tank on top of my dresser, and the next they were gone. I came home on an uncharacteristically warm Friday afternoon – the 28th of January, like I said, with the intention of replacing their bedding and washing their toys. It was something I did weekly, another small ritual in a life of predictable routines. I had something to eat – not important – and I

walked into my bedroom. I opened the tank, and began removing the toys. I placed them one-by-one on a towel, save for the last one. It was an end-piece to a set of tunnels they played in almost daily. They'd built their most recent nest in it, where they slept most of the day away. By this time, my mother and I were staring over the edge of the tank at it. The end-piece was completely still.

The mouse I knew least was the first to die. She was dead when we opened the end-piece to go rooting through the nest. I lifted her powdery fur from the bedding into a small decorated box, fit for one. The other was still breathing, but barely. I spent the next hour with a heating pad over my lap, feeding her from my hand one piece of grain or drop of water at a time. All I could think about was how much stronger our bond would be once I became the one she owed her life to. I told myself that it'd be easier to choreograph a trick show for one mouse, and that it'd be easier to carry a solitary mouse in my pocket like I planned. I told myself that she'd need just a few more minutes of warmth, just another capful of water, just one more sunflower seed, and then I'd have a friend for life. One who wouldn't move schools or indulge in mild mockery the one day of school I missed. One who was always just a hand-lift away from being right where I needed her. I smiled when I thought about it, deciding that tragedy can be lucky (if I knew where to look for the upsides).

I returned the second mouse to her tank when my mother came to tell me that she simply had to go out to dinner. My father was out of the house for some reason or another, and of course I just couldn't possibly stay at home alone. She dropped me off at the apartment of my closest human friend, who I told the news in a suitably miserable tone. I didn't tell her about my secret hopes for a newfound closeness, I didn't want to jinx it. We ate pizza and sketched the mice, putting wings on the lost mouse and tears in the eyes of the other. I folded the sketchbook papers and placed them in my back-slung bag as I packed my things to leave for home. My mother had finally showed back up. I got in her car and listened, without interest, as she described her dinner. When we got home I ran inside as fast as I could. My father was sitting on the couch, watching something on television. He already knew about the first mouse. Like every afternoon, he had a flurry of questions, none of which I wanted to answer. I fled back to my room, feeling that wall of bereavement pressing up against my cautious optimism. Scratch that, it wasn't cautious at all. It was all-engulfing, drowning out every other horrible moment I'd had in the last three hours. I pushed open the door, and ran up to the tank. I opened the lid again, moved the toys again, and I wrapped my impatient hand around a dead mouse, again.

I was at the dresser, and then I was on the couch. I had my knees up to my chin in an oversized sleeping shirt, and there was not a single positive. I never really

November by Rhea Sadagopan



got along with my mother at that age. She used to find something to shout at me over just about weekly. Worse than that, she thought my reactions were something calculated, intentionally meant to force her capitulation. Obviously, they were not. There's no child in the world who knows what manipulation is, let alone has the presence of mind to effectively use it. Still, I was more irritated than usual when I stared at her from my corner of the couch. Part of me knew that there was nobody at fault. The rest of me was angry. I wanted someone to hold a grudge against, and it wouldn't be myself.

She turned to me and asked why I was crying. I didn't want to answer a question that blindly stupid, but I thought about the answer as I turned away. I considered it for a few minutes, watching the television without attention, and I tried to pinpoint an exact reason that I was so horribly upset. Was it the change in status quo? Quite possibly. The emptiness of a life without my dearest friends? Again, likely. But that wasn't all of it — I was certain that I could find just one reason that it hurt so badly. After all, I'd lost pets before, and it hadn't felt like this. I walked through my memories of the mice, from present backwards, to try and find some sort of reason. I remembered every mundane feeding, every water replacement, each and every time they crawled up my arm and into the curtain of hair at my shoulders. Why had they been so special to me? Before I had them, I wanted them more than I'd ever wanted anything. I spent every free minute imagining them, where I'd put them, how I'd train them, what my future with them would look like. My future. That's why it hurt, I began to realize.

I spent so much time thinking about my future. A future where I could pull mice from my pockets in front of the school and flawlessly send them into a circus-act. A future where I was never more than a hand's scoop

away from a companion. It was a future that I'd never get to see, not in earnest. Death, something that had previously been such a foreign idea, had come unwound. The end to a future, or the complete lack thereof; something we learn is called death. I put a towel over the tank that night. I dreamt that I removed it and saw both mice running happily in their wheel, and I woke up still believing it. I pulled off the towel and was greeted by a perfectly clean, virtually untouched tank. It'd been set up just the way the mice liked it. There were no mice inside it, of course. How could there be? Why did I let myself believe that they'd be restored? Did I really think that I was immune to tragedy, just because I didn't want to feel so bad anymore?

I threw the towel back over the tank and picked up a book off my bunk bed's ladder. Monday, I'd have to go back to my real life. And then it'd be Tuesday, and Wednesday, and so on until it'd been a whole horrible week since the 28th. Eventually I put a tiny hamster in the tank, and eventually I stopped feeling a flash of overwhelming anger, regret, something strong and soul crushing, each time something reminded me of them. But I never got over them; I thought I did, but I really, truly didn't. I remember when the thought first occurred to me, that I might never forget about them, that I might never wake up without wishing they were beside my bed. I was sitting in my challenge class, designing a house on grid paper. I made a layout for it very carefully, three ballroom-sized bedrooms and one massive kitchen, private bathrooms, everything I wanted out of a house in my strangest dreams. I put a spot for the mice right next to my bed. In my fantasies, they would always be there. By the bed, or in a pocket, or performing tricks to wow even the most skeptical of my classmates. I owed them that much.

Asian Silence

by Katelin Chan

Morsel of fire-kissed stir-fried greens
Tossed, unmissed through clouds of steam
Hissed as they dished in the wok, has been
A familiar sight preceding my teens

Pungent odour of fine-diced onion
Swamped my eyes with spicy tears
Flickered like dim lights in oblivion
But flew wide open at my worst fears—

"Asian man, 60, stabbed in the back"

One more harsh reality smack
Perhaps he was bad, deserved this attack
Or was another song in hate's soundtrack

"You lai" (Yet again), said Mom as she let out a sigh
And shook her head from left to right
Why are we attacked in broad daylight
And forced to live in fight or flight?

Fought with thoughts of distraught—
What caused our defeat?

"Di Tou Guo Sheng" (Bow head down to live), once taught
Preached to us retreat

Once in the interest of ours
Silence now costs the lives of our elders
Strips our children of their powers
Never survives but only surrenders

It is not a sound virtue
That shields us from Auntie's judgment
It is a killer that pursues
'Til doomed death has its moment

So unlearn the rooted lessons
Of generational conformities
Break the chain of staunch successors
Of silent model minorities

Speak for the voiceless
Weakened by soulful cries
Those bounded by Asian silence—
The common killer vice.



Out of Sight,
Out of Mind
by Claire Jiang

Light, Color, Reflection

by Hailey Kasten

Colors dance across frosty ground
Golden sunlight reaching far corners
Dusty shadows filling unseen crevices
Painting the land with magic and wonder

Beauty danced before us teasingly
"Have you seen an enchantress such as I before?"
It sang out crisply
"And will you view me yet again?"

These, the questions of day and night
Every moment the earth would turn
The sunlight changes yet again
Every angle producing a new sight to behold

One would not expect
Such a simple thing
As the science of light, color, and reflection
To fill an afternoon for three

And yet
Bonded by the tranquility
The infinite photographable possibilities,
And the ever-changing joy, were we



Vivid Eruption
by Abby Lee



A Memory by Lillia Kleinow

her sunshine girls

by T.J. Penman

i was raised in the house that neither of my parents built
although my mother was the one that raised me
she took a home not built yet and filled it with daughters
and when her husband left

he took his paintings of french women
garbed in robes with eyes grinning into the sun
admired by little girls with hearts that wanted to be filled with the same laughing sunshine

a woman laughing, "monsieur!" to fill the cup
had been replaced
the paintings became flowers
soft shapes, lines, birds from relatives, corn from the sixties

and soon little girls became young women
with clothes scattering the bedroom floor
people to chase after, cars to drive
so grown-up and yet so different from the women they stared at in their pink school dresses
women with wild eyes, plump lips, and filled bosoms, all in a black frame

walking past medical dictionaries, old office
abandoned
carcasses of ladybugs, barbies, triple-A batteries
a slow, silent, amicable death
years in the making

sometimes the little girl resents her mother
for choosing to make an incomplete family
even though it wasn't really a choice but a gradual transition

however she doesn't realize it was

her mother who replaced the paintings with signs bearing:
"i love you more"
and kept lights on
and windows open
even during dark hours
she grew hearts and gave them to her daughters
even when they didn't know the sacrifices
or why the paintings that they had memorized
changed shape and location

they may have not been the same wild-eyed french girls
holding "du soleil dans un verre"
but she dressed her house for her daughters, her own sunshine girls.



The Woman, the Daughter

by Cady Stevens

Auburn curls waltz in my eyes, flames in my earliest memories.
I remember most parts fondly.
Matching blue eyes, struggles inherited
from your mother.

We struggled existing
as the proper mother and daughter.
We never struggled to love,
simply struggled to agree on how to.
A first time mom, a first time daughter,
we were never perfect
and never easy.

You raised me to never be easy,
but your mother raised you to be her.
I am older now, so are you.
I will keep getting older,
you'll stop.

I have to stop
fighting so I can soak up our time.
We grew up together,
learned from each other—
how to be better. We are.

I take your precious energy, your time,
life,
blood,
sweat,
tears,
yet with everything taken,
you manage to find more to give.

My everything,
my mother.



Motherly Care
by Abby Lee

A Day at the Beach by Mallory Terrell



Requiem for Banana Bread

by Haley Kleinman

The paper is old and wrinkled
Tapered along the edges like a fairy's carpet
Billowing outward, flowering, creases unfolding in waves.
Rising off the words is the scent of brown sugar, old parchment dancing on the kitchen island.

It remains vibrant in every house it travels through
Crunched into loving pockets,
Pocketing
The whispers of eager tongue
Secrets of the newborn generation
Time tests its durability
But memory is stronger

This recipe proudly crossed the border,
Lit up with the promise of new opportunity
It glistened in the palm of Abuela's hand as she stepped into the next life
But it remembers

As my mother and I stick bananas in the blender, laughing at the cursive that urges
Una taza y media de azúcar,
—O una taza, written discouragingly in parentheses, we melt at the charming voice that
Rises from the paper
And survives another day
In our hands, as we mix the butter into the bowl and pull out the bread pan
I know it's her warmth that spreads through me comfortingly
The soft echo of her giggle I hear when I fold my hands together at the dinner table
Her heart that I hold in mine when I unfurl the words she wrote,
Press them to my lips like gumdrops,
And watch them come to life



The Fishbowl Theory

by Chloe Schoenfeld

A fish doesn't know what water is
But I think the water is full of—
Questions

The answers don't matter nearly

As much as the act of asking

But I digress

Maybe my fishbowl is the best

Place in the world or

Maybe it is the only place in the

World

And everyone else is merely

A reflection in the glass

Waiting to Create
by Siena Masilionis

You need to clean your room, honey.

—I know, I will.

*Do you have homework tonight? Maybe we can
watch something after dinner.*

—No, I have a bunch of homework, sorry.

How have you been? I haven't seen you at all today.

*—I'm okay. I'm just tired. Things have been . . .
happening. I don't know. It's weird.*

*I'm sorry to hear that, honey. Can you tell me
more over dinner? I'd love to talk to you.*

—Sure. Yeah.

Okay. I love you.

—I love you too mama.



Mirrored Images
by Danny Fisher

Valediction Gift

by Wyatt Vaughn

Three strings across my body,
Pinky and thumb pinching each fraying end.
Pulled across my chest, three strands
Strung taut in my open arms.

Pink,
Blue,
And white.

The fibers sliced into the soft bedding
Of my thumb's print
As I pulled the strings into
An irrevocable knot.

Pink,
Blue,
And white.

And you lay in the sun – suspended by
Water – and I sat by your side
In the shade.
How could you not know what I was doing?

Pink,
Blue,
And white.

Wrapping each color around my finger,
I formed a figure four and pulled the string
Tight.

Whispering an intention into each knot,
Pink: I hope you heal – that you grow and
Your heart scabs and recovers from the
Damage of my absence

Blue: I hope you realize – that your mind will
Become a mirror and clarity will wash it
clean

White: I hope you forgive me– that you will
One day see why I left and expunge me of a
crime I didn't commit.

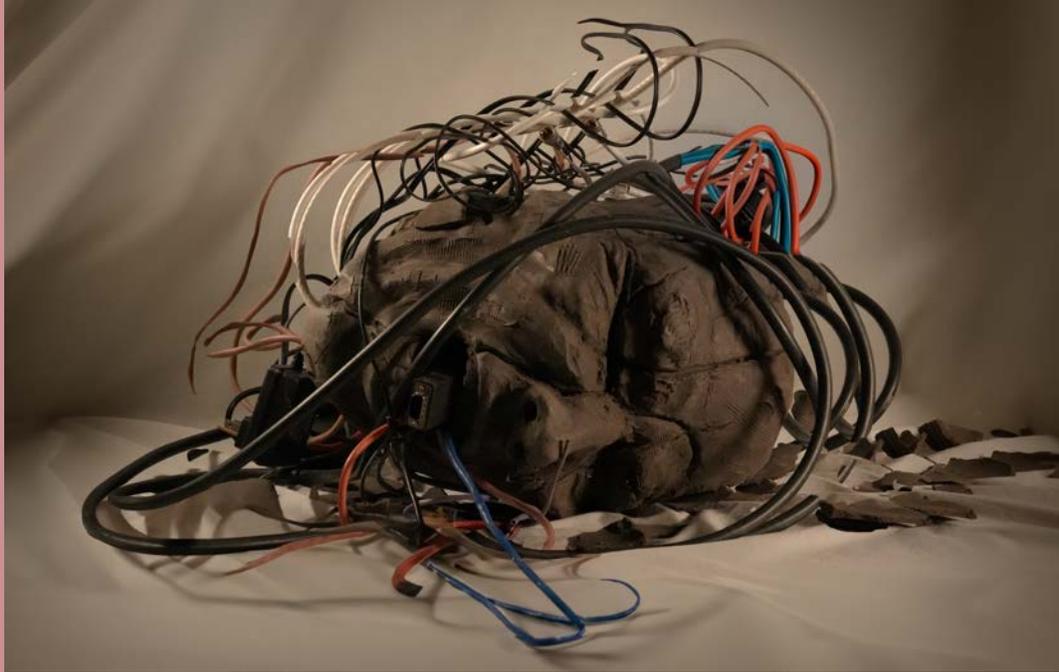
And I murmur my last wish,
And you return from the sun,
And you give me your hand
So I take it and tie the band on

Soon I'll be gone,
By my own accord,
And all I'll then be will exist
Pink,
Blue,
And white,
Wrapped around your wrist.

Programmed
by Austin Liu

If the mind is a palace...

by L.C. Herbst



And I'd make myself sick if I was another person watching my thoughts. It's a blurry and slow-moving compilation of coincidences stacked on top of each other: sticky teacups stacked on a desk, junk mail stacked on a table, clothes stacked on an unfortunate dresser, dirty plates stacked in a sink . . .

The thing about my hoards is that every piece of clutter could have my heart in it, and it would be better for my heart to be lost in the pile than trashed. In reality, I can't see where it is until another piece of it is gone, and I divide myself smaller yet.

So everything becomes a mess sooner or later. The difference between clean homes and messy ones is the habit of the owner. What makes a mess and what makes clean, though, is up to the owner's opinion. But by all my definitions, this house of mine is a clutterfunk.

I hung up a picture the other day of me burying my face into her back shoulder. If we're speaking metaphorically, I hung it up in my closet, behind all the clothes and the view of the public. I had my arms around her waist, I could smell her hair (just plain conditioner-scented), and maybe she had her hands settled around mine. No eyes, I don't like to look people right in the eyes. But I looked at it, and that same old longing trotted up to me and asked again to be fed.

It has not been fed in a while. It feeds off table scraps, from momentary memories that I don't keep the images of, and only the essence. By the time I realize it's been fed and filled, it will be gone and I will have forgotten it was ever there.

This house has been still, lately. Sometimes it rains. I haven't seen the sunlight come in through the windows in a while. It's terrible that that was my favorite part. Living here feels like a chore more than a blessing. All these years of biology built up just to realize there isn't a point to it – and that I just have to come up with things myself. If I start to favor throwing in the towel, I hope that I'll be asleep when it happens.

I go through my memories like faded magazine pages, because all the new ones I buy get lost somewhere: under the bed, on top of some furniture, under a stack of other magazines, or thrown away by accident. Though, I actually lied about that, because I've been leaving all those old memories strewn about the same places. I'm in some literary limbo and have lost my senses.

I wish that this all would change. I consider myself a homebody in the sense that I can't stand this old house but can't stand leaving it. I just want my eyes to see again. But misery keeps standing in the doorways like a child, and I'm nursing an anger that won't stop crying until it wears itself out.

Someone told me to start pulling apart all those stacks that sit around the house, and put them in their right places, but starting that is so much more than I . . .



Dancing in a Fight For Myself

by Hanna Cochran

When I dance for the kitchen window, the mirror it becomes in the dark, I become shapeless. Like my soul feels. No longer a female body – or male – but an artform; my representation of authenticity. I couldn't place this feeling until very recently – feeling genderless – until I understood that movement was freedom and my body is a cage. I have always danced for that window, watched myself grow up in that room. Snapshots of my life; learning my left and right from the arts & crafts table, playdough in my hands, my sister's feet in my hands as we wheelbarrowed each other from the couch to the kitchen. Cello bow in my hands as I serenade my paintings on the wall. Life in my hands as I bend air to my chest, push the dysphoric hollow out that fills me.

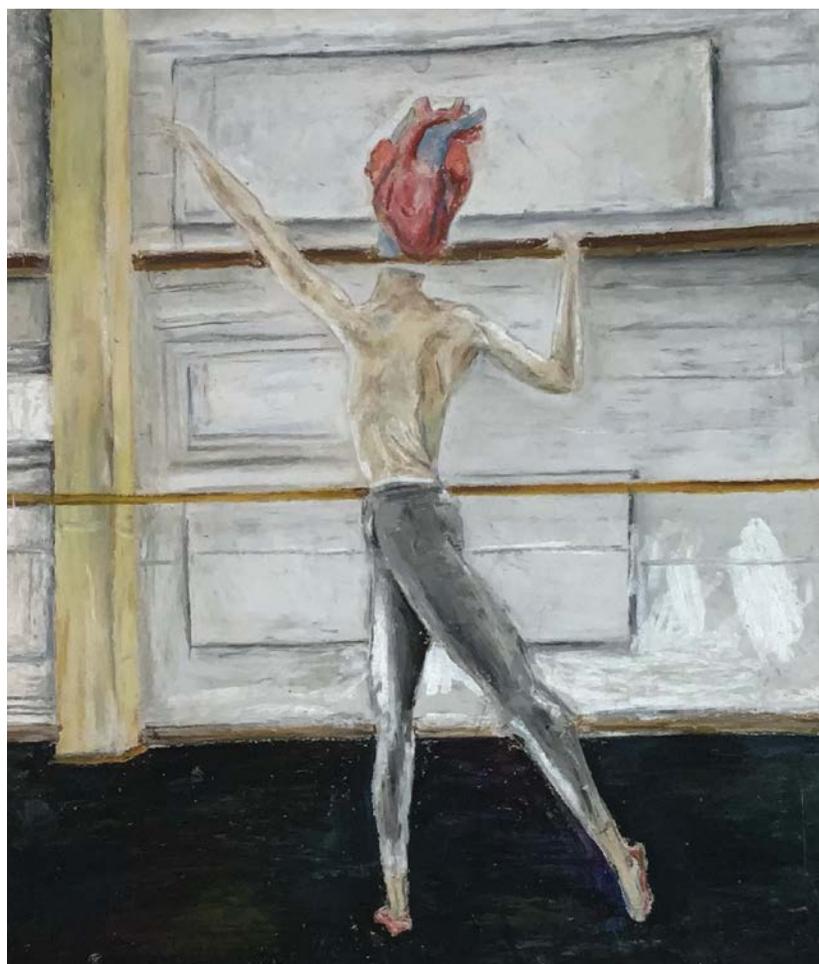
When I dance I become concrete.

I do not write this as a dancer, not in the traditional sense. I took ballet in elementary school, in the studio that has become the site of my high school health class. Then I took jazz, and ballet again, two years each, and an online hip-hop course when COVID hit. But it was never about professionalism for me, it was about fluidity. I've watched countless dance shows on Netflix, and no matter how tired I become of the same academy-school drama that runs through the veins of every new plot, when the characters dance, they become beauty, they become light, and that is the allure. The band The Killers ask, "Are we human, or are we Dancer?" It recently dawned on me that there is no difference. Bodies; in movement. We are gravity, and we are flight.

Most of the time now I wish I could erase my body; leave the rest of me. And not because I am particularly religious, but because I am a poet, and in dealing with gender-identity I believe there is naturally a spiritual aspect to it. If only I had known what unsettled me when my ninth grade tennis captain called us "girls." If only I had understood why it had rattled me so much when my friend changed their pronouns and their name. I was next to cut off all my hair, leaving curls like I had when I was young. My dad said it looked like a boy's cut and I remember asking myself if I liked the way boy sounded in my heart – but that wasn't it yet. I remember standing in the hall between the men's and women's sections of clothing stores, thinking my confliction was for the same reason everybody else complained about outdated gender-norms. I think about my journey now; playing four-square on asphalt courts with the boys, taking my ex-girlfriend to Homecoming, and for as long as I can remember, being called an old soul, years out of my body.

Out of my body. Space, my best friend said, classifying my gender. All the stars, I typed back, smiling because this was the first time anyone had ever made confusion feel wonderful.

Dance is about control. Movement makes the body holy again, artificial temple to ruins again; lived in. It is an escape from a feeling of living outside of myself. For that window, for the high trees outside and the moon, I am me. Just me, and it is a breathlessly liberating feeling. Body-positivity becomes hard to promote unless I think about each part separately, but tell me I am made of skin and arms and hips and eyes and I will believe you. I am the flesh mold for my soul. Perhaps that floor space, window, square of security, was the only place I danced before. Only place I let go aside from in my journal. But I have started dressing according to what my body feels; wrote she/they at the bottom of my email and came out to friends. I can feel myself on the way to being proud in public spaces. And while I believe the body is naturally limiting to most people, sore and easily broken – especially for dancers – that is all the more reason to continue listening to the music inside of you, until you train your feet again – that were always born artists and honest – to dance for you. To find freedom.



Dancing from the Heart
by Noah Panjada

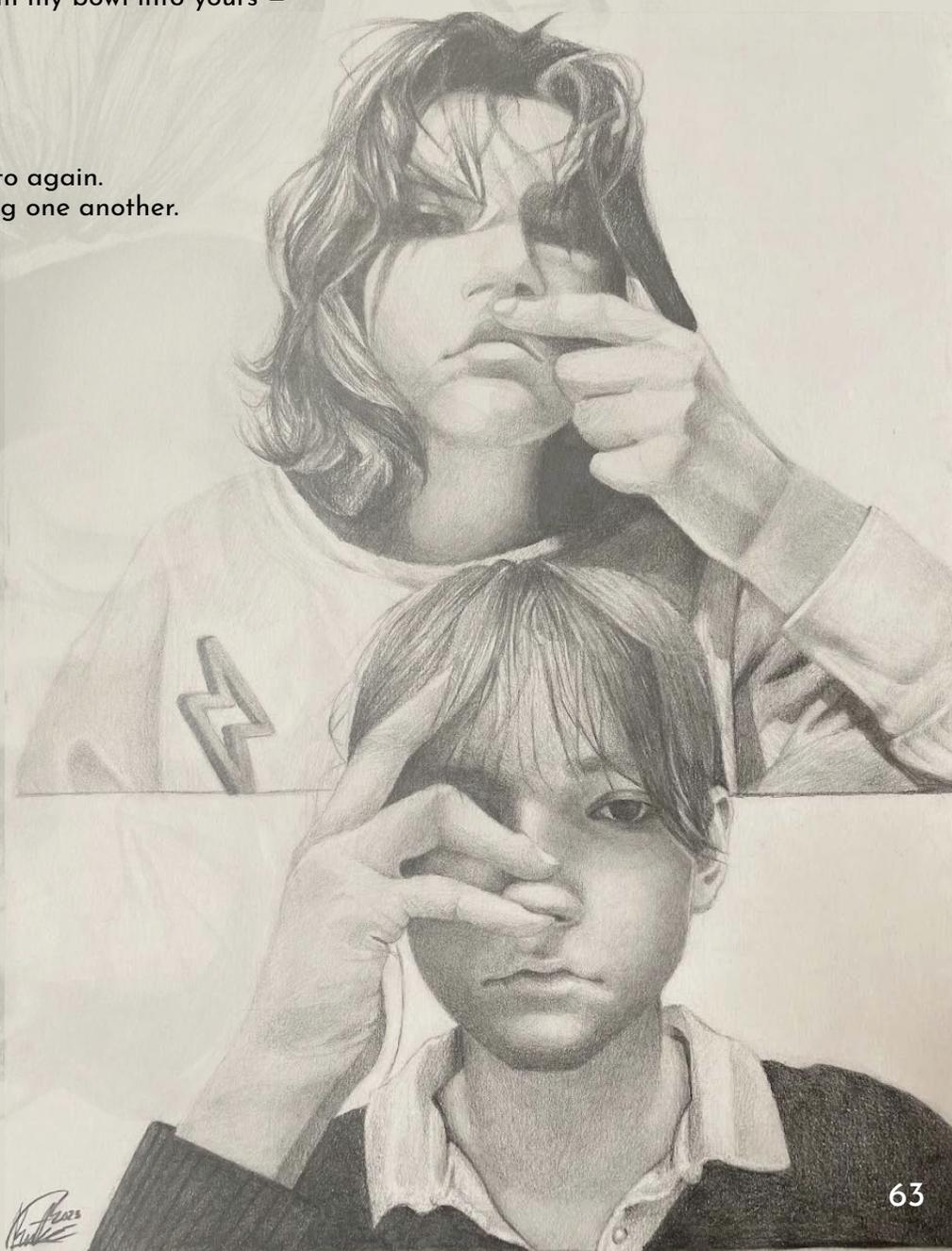
infection of idolatry

by Francesca Arnold

Studying my nose in the mirror
I recall roaming for comfort
My fingers are my ailment – dismay
That you will one day let go of my hand,
Not necessarily for another, (though it has been so)
But from a gradual loosening
My knot of insecurity,
A continual,
Conscious awareness of myself, everything in which I am
A constant state of indecision where I must choose between you and myself.

Staring at the bowl in my hands
I plead,
"Never quite empty never quite full"
A gradual thinning of emotions,
For it is too drastic to comprehend my insignificance to you.
My desperate fingers cup the water from my bowl into yours –
Over
And over
And over.

Yet, our paths are parallel.
Driving forward, instead of past, back, to again.
Growing as flowers do, weeds suffocating one another.
A flourishing of selves.



In My Own Image
by Kate Wren



Atonement

by Joseph Shonkwiler

A man walked down cold, desolate streets wearing nothing but a patched up hoodie and ill-fitting boxers. He didn't know how he had gotten those clothes. He wasn't sure how he would explain them to his wife. Admittedly, he probably wouldn't have to. Little chance she would care.

The thought of his wife made the man sad. He hadn't spoken to her in weeks, and the guilt was overwhelming. He wanted to fix their relationship. But first, he had to make things right.

White sunlight lit the night. The man had three places to visit around the city, so the light was welcome. His first destination was a small motel, Little Rock Suites. He had already reserved a room. When he walked in, he flinched at the smell of sweet grapes. Was that the same perfume Jessica wore?

Of course it was. That's what he had asked for. He took a seat on the bed, next to the silver-haired prostitute he'd hired. She looked just like Jessica, but taller and thinner. Her eyes were different too. The same meadow-green color, sure, but . . . less alive.

The man felt a wave of shame pulse through him. He hadn't touched his wife in twenty years, so he resorted to this? It just wasn't right. He stood up. "Here's two-fifty," he said, handing her the cash. "I'm sorry for wasting your time."

The woman understood, and let him go. As he walked towards his second destination, he realized

her perfume stuck to his clothes. How would he explain *that* to Jessica? Almost certainly, he wouldn't have too. Almost no chance she cared.

The second place he went to was a liquor store, one of the few places open this time of night. The cashier – a plump young woman with white roses stuck in her hair – waved to him slowly.

As he walked up to the counter, the cashier looked him up and down. "Rough night?" she asked. The man nodded, so she pulled out a canteen from under the counter. It smelled sharply of vodka. "My rainy day fund. You can have some if you want, Mr. Tanner."

Mr. Tanner's hand twitched as he stared at the bottle. He imagined the liquid flooding his mouth, burning all the pain away. A moment later, he remembered all the times he'd come home drunk, all the times he'd sobered up to her crying. He pushed the canteen away.

"I . . . want to make my wife happy," he said. He pulled off his wedding ring, and hesitantly placed it on the table. "I'd like to trade this for one of those flowers in your hair. They're her favorite kind."

The cashier frowned, then shrugged. She handed him one of her flowers. Its thorns stabbed his fingers, drawing blood. He thanked her as he left. It was only a block away from his third and final destination that he realized what a grave error he'd made. He had no pants, stunk of perfume, and had sold his wedding ring. How would he ever explain?

He wouldn't have to. She wouldn't care.

His last errand was inside a narrow alleyway. His shoulders rubbed against the uneven brick walls

as he approached a skinny girl sitting deep inside. He didn't know her name, but he visited her every week.

She looked up at him, then held out her hands expectantly. She wanted a loaf of bread. He always gave her a loaf of bread.

Mr. Tanner sighed, took off his hoodie, and handed it to her. She frowned. "Why, Mr. John?"

"I have nothing else I can give you," John said. He quickly started walking away; the girl made him hurt too much. She made him think of the daughter he and Jessica could've had, more than 20 years ago. But back then, they didn't have the time, or the money, or the energy. And now . . .

The girl grabbed onto John's leg. "Nobody loves me," she said. "Do you love me?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I need to tell my wife I love her. I can't spare those words for anyone else." He smiled as he put a hand on her shoulder.

"Once I can, though, I promise I'll come back for you."

The girl huddled up against the wall, but he could see a glint of joy in her eye. He kept on smiling then, even as he left the alley, even as he headed home.

The smile faded as he walked into the graveyard. He could smell rain coming as he walked the familiar route. Jessica's tombstone was in the center of the field – small and beautiful, just like her. Cold rain dripped onto his forehead, washing away the scent of perfume. He laid the white rose in front of her grave, then sat down – his back against hers.

"I love you," he whispered as he started to cry. His warm tears began to mix with the cold droplets falling from heaven.

He liked to believe they were crying together.



Metaphysical

by Katie Chung

I have tried to paint this beautifully
in swirling pastels of childhood
like Vaseline over a camera lens
hazes of slow-motion imagery
if it's naive to believe in changing the world
then I am still a fool
a child's helpless grasp on hope
in a woman's intuition
tumultuous time, tunnel vision
into a light I do not know
My body is a map and navigates
to the irresistibility of what I know
Is Inevitable And True
Can we extinguish the grandiose?
little "i" and little "you"
release the abstract, feel the visceral
don't let illogical go
part-time job paychecks for
fake IDs and vodka shots, not stocks
parted lips, a pause in gravity
an age where everything is *not*.

Supplement by Noah Panjada

Where I hope to be

by Katelyn Patrick

Where I hope to be
In case you ever need to find me
And I am no longer here:
Find me in the stolen glances
Across the room when everyone is busy.
In the anxious anticipation
Of someone's presence
Or the small thrill that comes
From a brief moment of locked eyes.
Find me in the room
When your mind wonders
And eventually concludes to them.
In the longing you feel
After learning all about them
As if it was your duty to do so.
Find me in the tilt of your universe
When they walk in the room.
But when all this eventually dies,
As it always has for me,
Find me in the letting,
The acceptance,
The quietness your mind finally lets you have.



index

ARTISTS

Alex Bergman back cover
Honey Brown 7, 30
Payton Butler 7, 13, 19
Anna Cameron 43
Adriana Cazares 25, 29
Nhu Chu 40, 68
Emma Clement 36
Leo Connelly 44
Danny Fisher 4, 20
Logan Fixsen 21
Anafely Hernandez Perez 29
John Hudson 28
Claire Jiang 34, 54
Gabriella Jordanova 28, 67
Lillia Kleinow 12, 18, 35, 38, 56
Cecilia Lapetina 27
Abby Lee 20, 22, 33, 55, 57
Austin Liu 5, 15, 61, 64
Siena Masilionis 59
George Newham 1, 6, 51
Lucas Nguyen 47
Noah Panjada 14, 62, 65
Lee Rea 8, 10
Alex Robertson 23
Rhea Sadagopan 10, 45, 48, 53, inside
back cover
Alea Schrock 26
Mallory Terrell 58
Xizhe Wang 46
Tatum Warren 9
Kate Wren cover, 3, 16, 63



WRITERS

Sumlina Alam 17
 Jawad Alazzeah 29
 Ana Alonso 4
 Eden Amaryllis 10
 Francesca Arnold 63
 Eloise Arnold 19
 Eva Bacon 22
 Kayla Brethauer 44
 Katelin Chan 54
 Katie Chung 65
 Hanna Cochran 62
 Lydian Cochran 5, 7
 Nate Cooper 18
 Amelia Frank 30
 Sundos H. 41
 Grace-May Hansen 13
 Linnea Heiny 11
 L.C. Herbst 61
 Harrison Jones 24
 Ananya Kashyap 12
 Hailey Kasten 55
 Madeleine Kimball 23
 Haley Kleinman 14, 21, 35, 58
 Daniel Joon Lee 6
 Arielle Li 38
 Sophia Liggett 52
 Bethany Lines 45
 Isaac McKeag 32
 Sia Mehta 48
 Bella Meili 9
 Emily Natanova 31
 Lexi Newsom 46
 Katelyn Patrick 43, 66
 T.J. Penman 56
 Olivia Peters 19
 Yeshe Rai 8, 42
 Nelle Rain 37
 Chloe Schoenfeld 59
 Joseph Shonkwiler 64
 Cady Stevens 57
 Caroline Stickney 1, 15, 28, back cover
 Maria Tan 34
 Que Tran Tran 47
 Wyatt Vaughn 33, 60
 Elena Zhang 27

Shooting Stars Scholars

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unaware by Rhea Sadagopan

humanity

elementia xxii

Submissions due Jan. 1, 2025

Across generations, distances and cultures, our humanity connects us. Despite this seemingly infinite connection, however, one of the most fundamental parts of being human is being unique. This dichotomy is at the crux of the human experience and something we have all shared. Tell us your stories: those of your unique human experience. Share with us the joys and pains that have been a part of your humanity. Speak on your relationships: those with family, friends, significant others. When have you felt most connected to other humans? Most distant? What makes you feel close to your own humanity? Tell us about the times you felt less than human, and when others convinced you that you were. Has humanity changed? Or will it? We seek expressions of your culture, traditions, mannerisms. Share your innermost thoughts and your outermost traits. What makes you unique? What makes you human?

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altar

by Caroline Stickney

take the knife and never use it -
press mercy into your skin and
hope it's enough to fling the stars'
light back. grow into your teeth
and remember all their faces.
open your mouth and drink down
every drop. can't you see?
you are nothing until you are wanted.
wait until you can't stand it
and receive nothing in return.
carve into your own mute body
and wait for something to
wink
back.



Protection Faces
by Alex Bergman

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