



Johnson County Library's teen literary magazine

# element

# Letter 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 **Humanity**.

From last fall to this spring, our editors sought the infinite connections that humanity encompasses across generations, distances and cultures. We read and examined pieces that covered the raw, innate human experience from tales of love, heartbreak and friendship, to nostalgia, grief and more. We searched for the deep emotions that resonated with us beyond the page, the ideas, emotions and memories that could bridge the gap between the writers and artists and you, the reader. Many thoughtful hours of work and dedication have brought forth the distinctive feelings of joy, pain, angst, melancholy and in between — the interconnected stories that make us human. It can be difficult to express our human identity; we share overlapping perspectives and perceptions in boundless ways, yet possess a unique body with individual thoughts and beliefs. Despite this, our team has selected uplifting works that best exemplify the intricate complexity of being a human. Our young artists and writers have put their ideas and views to paper, illustrating and conveying heavy aspects of varying relatable human experiences. We are pleased with our submitters for their bravery and vulnerability in sharing their worldviews and viewpoints on intense topics through their remarkable artistic techniques and language.

Teens, *elementia* now invites you to submit your original pieces of writing and art that explore the theme of **Legacy**. Share with us your experiences concerning the impact we leave behind, the traditions we cherish and the changes we attempt to create in our evolving lives. This is your chance to display your voice, your visions and your stories — what will your legacy be? Find more information about how to submit your works for next year's issue on our back page!



The Fates by Macy Orrick

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# older

by Anita Marie Júlca

i am getting older  
my hips have grown wider than the great oak trees i used to climb  
my face has grown longer  
my sweet baby cheeks are hollowing out  
and the men of oakland have begun to allow their eyes to linger, for just a moment too long

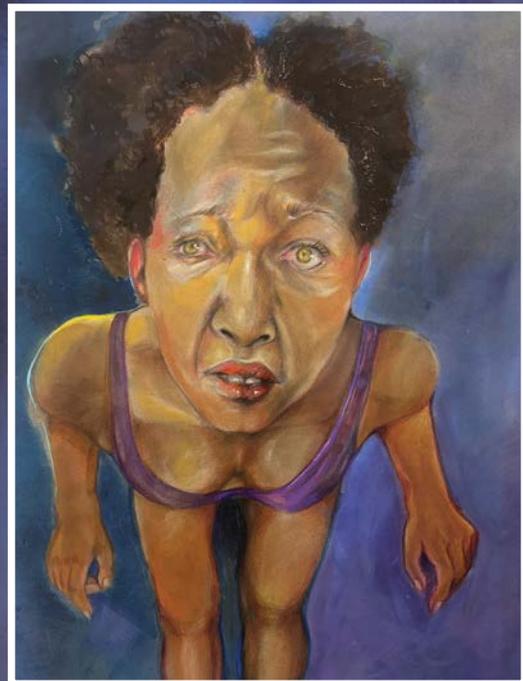
the women on the screen are plunging needles into their skin  
to prevent the apples of their cheeks from ever growing mushy  
slicing and dicing to sharpen each angle of her vindicated female form  
and the sweet girls in the schoolyard have lost their innocence to retinol and niacinamide  
trading in their halloween candy for sephora hauls

is that all that aging is?  
a never ending war against my mother's creation  
benumbing each muscle and tendon until they render limp  
like a deer in headlights  
her giggles are no longer boundless  
her eyes can no longer cry with passion  
her jaw can no longer scream with the rage of a thousand daughters  
she can only stare, paralyzed bambi eyes begging for a savior

we no longer hide haunted dolls in the attic confined  
instead, they walk amongst us, half woman and half plastic combined  
our indoctrinated women, so horrific and grim,  
even the scariest of bedtime stories lose their whim

what about my smile lines from all the times i laughed until i felt my lungs would give out  
why must i hide them?  
and circles that droop from my eyes? each time i see them i will reminisce on nights spent dancing until  
dawn with aching feet and a sweaty glow  
and my worry lines from all the days that felt they would never end  
from the moments i begged for a savior  
until i realized, the savior was myself  
why should i ever want to hide my face's beacons of survival

why must our women feel such shame,  
for surviving life's unpredictable game?



Anxious Woman by Kaila Burnside

front cover:  
*AI-lent Treatment*  
by Sienna Masilionis

inside front cover:  
*The Fates* by Macy Orrick

In Bloom  
by Laiken Vorthmann



table of  
CONTENTS



<i>older</i> by Anita Marie Júlca	1
<i>Anxious Woman</i> by Kaila Burnside	
<i>In Bloom</i> by Laiken Vorthmann	2
<i>Tiger Lily</i> by Madison Smith	
<i>to little me</i> by Peyton Commerer	4
<i>Lillies</i> by Lily Klein	
<i>Past and Present Poodles</i> by Cora Jones	
<i>Leaping Children</i> by Samantha Ciociola	5
<i>Afternoon Seascape</i> by Madeleine Raines	
<i>Sea Grass</i> by Madeleine Raines	
<i>The girl who cried during Dumbo</i> by Lili Lang	6
<i>Chimpanzee</i> by Levi Mong	
<i>Tales of Those Fading</i> by Madison Smith	
<i>Vitiligo: Flowers of Hope</i> by Diana Ha	7
<i>A Blossomed Vision</i> by Hala Bayazid	
<i>Names</i> by Hannah Karim	8
<i>Two Faced Truths</i> by Siena Masilionis	
<i>A Poem Dedicated to the Rituals of Women</i> by Isabella Ahern	9
<i>Flame</i> by Lily Klein	
<i>Sculpture</i> by Anonymous	10
<i>Masked Impressions</i> by Macy Orrick	
<i>leaky faucet</i> by May Lin	11
<i>Time Flies</i> by Hala Bayazid	
<i>Strange Things and Growing Pains</i> by Roman Fent	12
<i>Peace</i> by Evelyn Fisher	13
<i>Beta Fish</i> by Charley Godsil	
<i>Identity</i> by Sarah Devney	14
<i>Refraction</i> by Madeleine Raines	
<i>Uncover</i> by Olivia Wang	
<i>My Double Life</i> by Talon Cleveland	15
<i>Duality Unveiled</i> by Anna Cameron	
<i>PATH</i> by Sid Abelson	16
<i>(With Me)</i> by Dante de Jong	
<i>Xochitl</i> by Han Mellenbruch	
<i>Doubt</i> by Roman Fent	17
<i>Alone Together</i> by Kaila Burnside	
<i>Suffocating Relief</i> by Lila Ahitov	18
<i>Who's That Girl in the Mirror</i> by Kaila Burnside	
<i>Mona Lisa of a Mistake</i> by Zoie Tran	19
<i>The Boy</i> by Dylan Chan	20
<i>Harbinger</i> by Ramsey Browne	

Tiger Lily by Madison Smith

21	<i>I sit here and scroll</i> by Gaven Graham <i>Digital Insomnia</i> by Siena Masilionis <i>A Text's Aftermath</i> by Siena Masilionis	<i>The Apple</i> by Levi Mong	45
22	<i>Don't Fly Too Close to the Sun</i> by Lila Ahitov <i>Ballerina</i> by Sydney Anderson	<i>Divine Angel of Teenage Girls</i> by Quinn Kelly <i>You Have My Heart</i> by Lily Klein	46
23	<i>Padme</i> by Sydney Anderson	<i>Hark!</i> by Katie Mueller	47
24	<i>Not Worth It</i> by Ruby Seidner <i>Working Past Empty</i> by Siena Masilionis	<i>Growing Up and Down</i> by Saskia Sommer <i>Childhood Memories</i> by Madeleine Raines	48
25	<i>Inner Demons</i> by Kriti Kumar <i>ALL BITE</i> by Ramsey Browne	<i>Mortal Wounds</i> by Ramsey Browne	49
26	<i>what if i did it? what would you do?</i> by Prisha Dalal <i>Forbidden Fruit</i> by Macy Orrick	<i>The Sky</i> by Nima Dana <i>Charybdis</i> by Charley Godsil	50
27	<i>The NRA</i> by Geneva Bennett <i>Expressive</i> by Paige Horne	<i>Ladoos</i> by Anonymous <i>Fruits of Labor</i> by Madison Smith	51
28	<i>After I Died</i> by May Lin	<i>In the Warmth of the Golden Sun</i> by Jaiden Li <i>Golden Drops of Sunlight</i> by Tinsley Prenger	52
29	<i>The Extraordinary Ordinary</i> by Kaila Burnside	<i>Lost in Thought</i> by Kaila Burnside	53
30	<i>Eye of Lilith</i> by Kinley Silliman	<i>Personal Flag</i> by Zoey Karr	54
31	<i>Return</i> by Macy Orrick	<i>Her Golden Lotuses</i> by Xinyuan Hao	55
32	<i>i take it back</i> by Prisha Dalal	<i>Taking My Sunshine Piece by Piece</i> by Emily Weldon <i>Living Connections</i> by Hala Bayazid	56
33	<i>Blank</i> by Evelyn Fisher <i>Serenity</i> by Evelyn Fisher	<i>Where's My Sporking Place?</i> by Lila Ahitov <i>Shining Through Silence</i> by Sean Lee	58
34	<i>The Fall of a Star</i> by Deetya Rajan	<i>In the Early Summer</i> by Allison M. Hedgepeth <i>Lemon Branch</i> by Emma Clement <i>Nostalgia</i> by Lily Klein	59
35	<i>Highway Sunset</i> by Andrew Guyer	<i>All Summer</i> by Heidi Nelson	60
36	<i>Echoes of Silence: Call of Humanity for Women</i> by Aakanksha Roy <i>You Can See Right Through Me</i> by Lily Klein <i>Persephone's Plight</i> by Emma Clement	<i>A Dream Realized</i> by Siena Masilionis <i>Eat My Bubbles</i> by Siena Masilionis	61
37	<i>The Choices She Didn't Make, The Chance She Didn't Take</i> by Sophie Bendersky <i>Innocence</i> by Evelyn Fisher <i>Anguish</i> by Evelyn Fisher	<i>Finish Line</i> by Kaela Li <i>Divine Set Path</i> by Kinley Silliman	62
38	<i>38 Weeks Overnight</i> by Sophie S <i>Eye of the Beholder</i> by Lily Klein	<i>The Right Play</i> by Emma Clement	63
39	<i>every-single-thing</i> by Andie McGregor <i>Submerged</i> by Hala Bayazid	<i>Suits</i> by Macy Orrick	64
40	<i>I Don't Even Know When to End,</i> <i>Talking About Worth</i> by Ying Ham Lee <i>Alone</i> by Cora Jones	<i>My Brother Ate My Homework</i> by Eva Minor	64
41	<i>Alone In My House of Smoke</i> by Eva Minor		
43	<i>Likes I'll Never Have</i> by Siena Masilionis		
44	<i>Wistoragic</i> by Lee D		



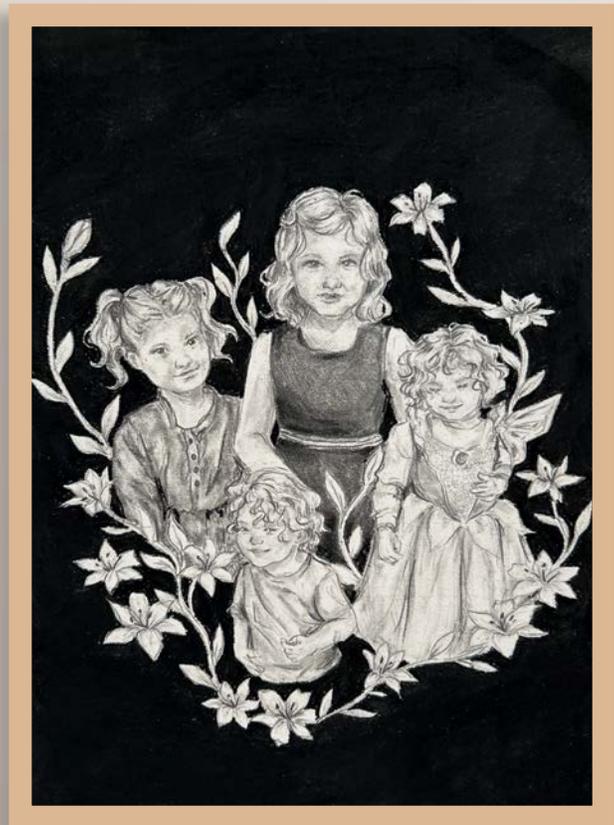
inside back cover:  
*Legacy* by Chloe Schoenfeld  
*Generations* by Madison Smith

back cover:  
*Fading Echoes* by Nathan Aaron  
*Decay* by Kaila Burnside

issue xxii

HUMANITY

## Past and Present Poodles by Cora Jones



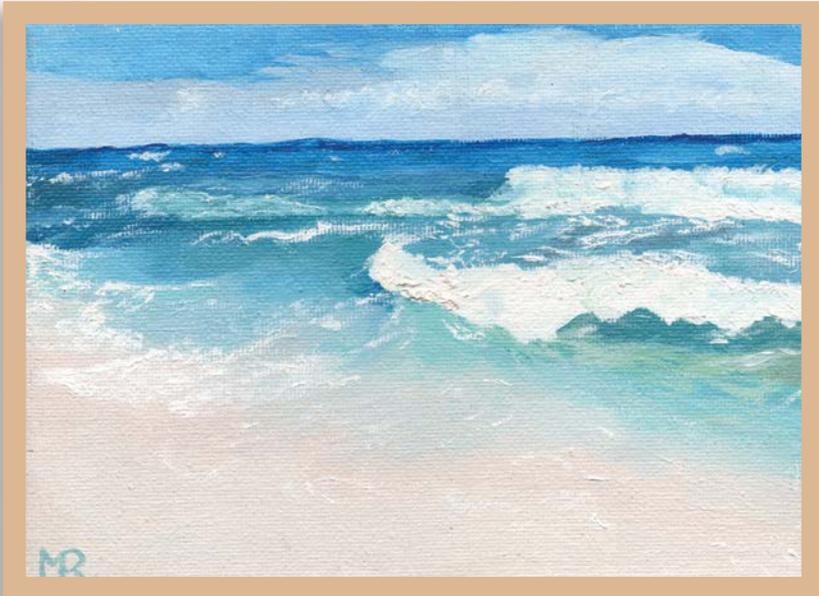
Lillies by Lily Klein

## to little me by Peyton Commerer

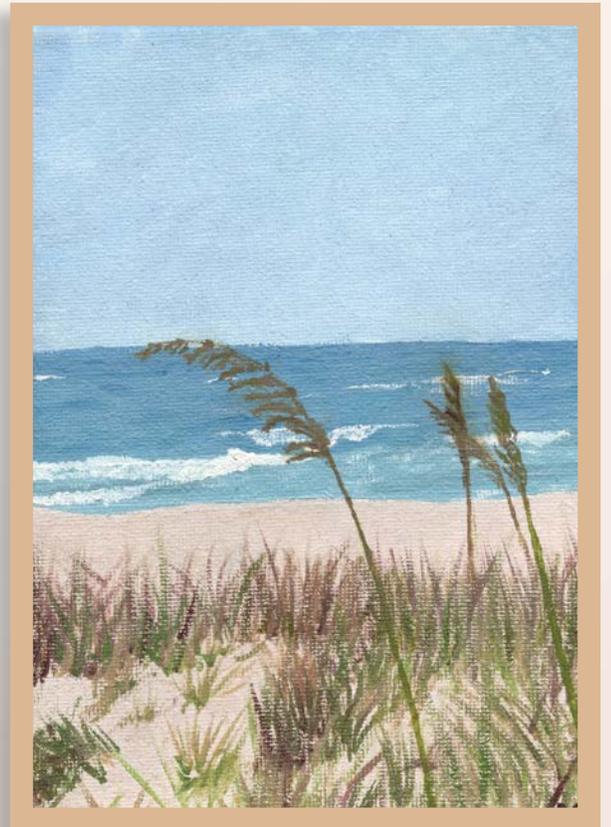
To the child I once was, in a time now afar,  
I send back my thanks, from the future's bright star.  
For the dreams that you dared, for the hope in your eyes,  
For the laughter that echoed under wide-open skies.

You braved many storms with a heart bold and true,  
And the paths that you chose led me straight to this view.  
Where the tapestries woven with threads of your days  
Are the canvases painted in beautiful ways.

So, with gratitude, I look back through the years,  
And I send you my love, through the joy and the tears.  
For the life that you lived, so wild and so free,  
Has gifted me everything that I came to be.



**Afternoon Seascape by Madeleine Raines**



**Sea Grass by Madeleine Raines**

# Leaping Children

by Samantha Ciociola

Bare feet stomping smushing moss bare toes gripping  
green blades of grass bare toes ripping out weeds dirt  
is stuck under our nails and stained onto our shirts  
and smeared onto our faces we're hanging on the branches  
of the old maple tree clawing at her trunk to climb her  
limbs there's bits of bark stuck in the grooves of our  
fingerprints we're climbing higher and higher who can  
climb the highest please don't fall we get tired of splinters  
so we race through neighbors' yards and pet the neighbors'  
dogs and squeal when the grumpy old man yells at us  
to get off his lawn we race to the cove our bare feet buried  
in the sand sinking deeper and deeper until the grains feel  
cold and damp we chase minnows in the shallow tide and  
leap across the clumps of muscles in the marsh as they snap  
and click in a symphony of disfavor we apologize and the  
breeze ruffles the tall tan grass we hear it whisper in a tongue  
that only we understand



# The girl who cried during Dumbo

by Lili Lang

I miss you, the girl who cried during Dumbo  
Who sobbed just because someone else was  
I miss you, the girl who giggled when she got tucked in at night  
Who begged to be read to  
Skipped when she was happy  
Stomped when she was sad  
I miss you and I have no right to

I killed her  
Years were my weapon  
Maturity my disguise  
I killed her

Because she was beautiful and I was blind  
She was bright and happy and perfect  
And I  
Raced ahead prizing only the phrase  
All grown up  
And now  
She's dead and I killed her and I miss you  
And I have no right to  
She was so excited so proud so ready  
For me  
And the future I would bring  
So I came and I took and I took  
And you gave  
And now you're gone  
And  
All that's left is me  
A girl who's nothing  
Nothing like you but in face

I'm crying  
and that makes me happy  
happy because it's what you would do  
You and your easy tears  
Your sweet face that gave your every feeling away  
I'm crying  
And thinking of you



Chimpanzee by Levi Mong

Tales of Those Fading by Madison Smith

# Vitiligo: Flowers of Hope

by Diana Ha

Criss, cross, criss, cross.  
My grandmother and I sit next to each  
other with foundation in one  
hand, a brush in the other.

We blend.

Grandma's age spots lighten as  
my white spots darken, unfolding  
the magic of disappearance.

One glove, second glove.

My grandmother and I face each  
other with dye in one  
hand, an applicator in the other.

My white hair turns black.

Sometimes orange. But it's okay.

We dance and we sing and we hide  
under our new head of new hair.

My grandmother says Dear, you must know,  
just as my age spots are flowers  
of the afterlife, your white  
spots are flowers of hope.

My grandmother has now joined these flowers she spoke of.

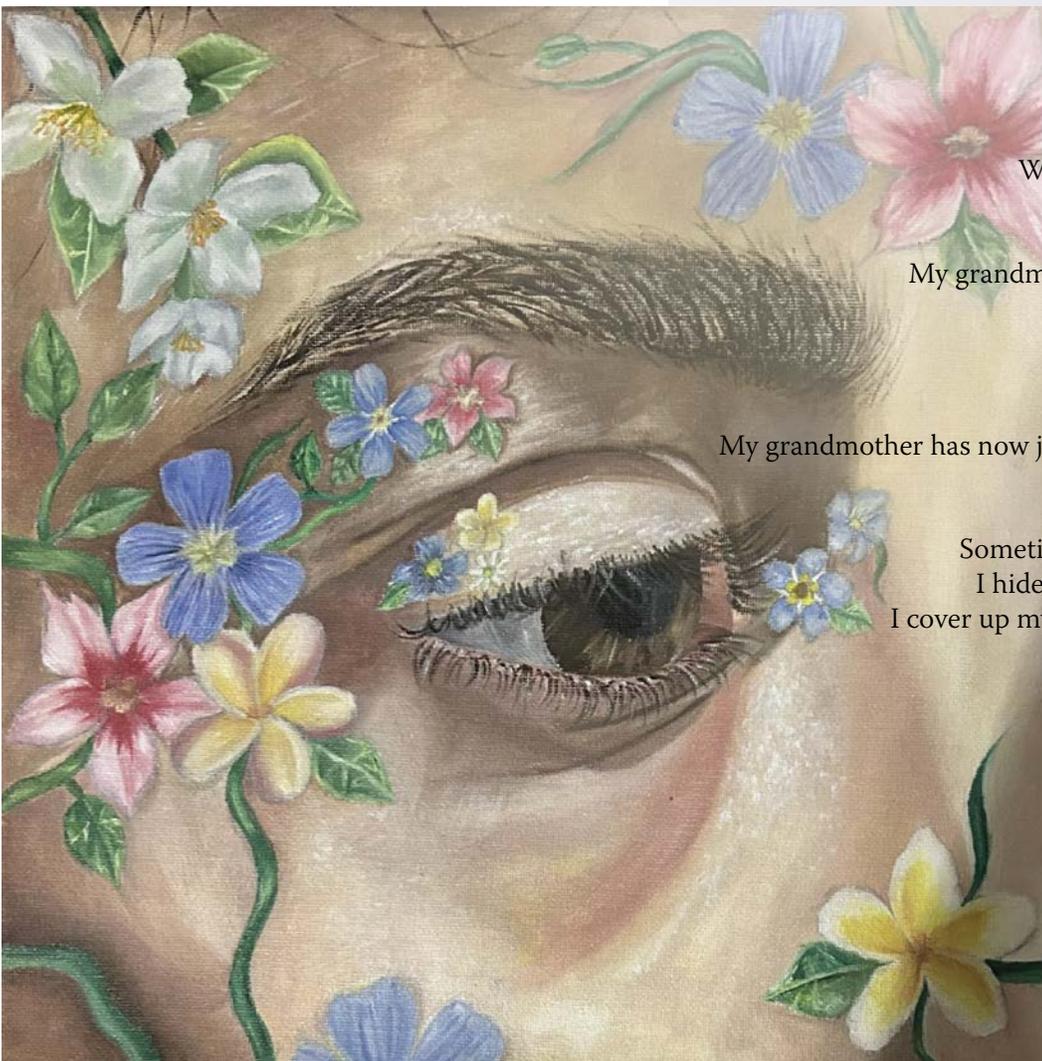
I blend,

I brush, I dye, alone.

Sometimes my hair turns orange, alone.

I hide under my new head of new hair,

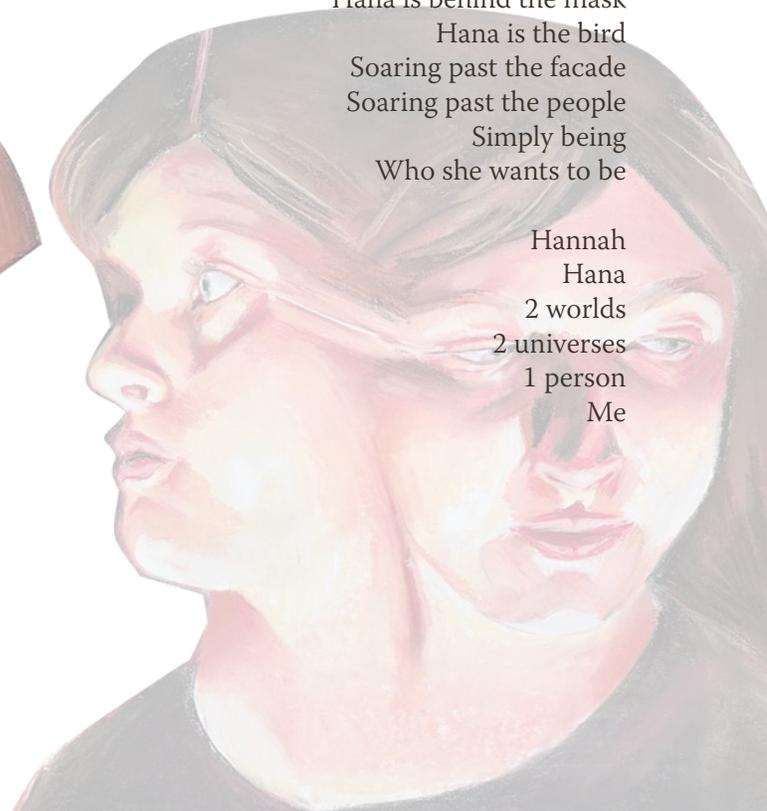
I cover up my flowers of hope, I have no hope  
that she will return.



A Blossomed Vision by Hala Bayazid



Two Faced Truths by Siena Masilionis



# Names

by Hannah Karim

My name is Hannah  
 2 pronunciations  
 HAN-nah  
 and HəN-nah  
 2 pronunciations  
 2 worlds

Hannah is America  
 Hannah is a song  
 Hannah is a cloud  
 Hannah is sunny days  
 Hannah is a firework  
 On my tongue

Hana is Pakistan  
 Hana is caramel  
 Melting in my mouth  
 Hana is the smell of curry  
 Hana is the ocean waves  
 Hana is steady  
 Hana is home

Hannah is the well timed smiles  
 Hannah is the perfectionism  
 Hannah is the politeness  
 Soft voice  
 Small nods  
 The mask she wears out there

Hana is unrestrained laughter  
 Hana is behind the mask  
 Hana is the bird  
 Soaring past the facade  
 Soaring past the people  
 Simply being  
 Who she wants to be

Hannah  
 Hana  
 2 worlds  
 2 universes  
 1 person  
 Me

# A Poem Dedicated to the Rituals of Women

by Isabella Ahern

*Inspired by Mary Cassatt's "The Coiffure"*

Each morning softly intertwined  
    Stitched to linen bed sheets  
        You run hot at night so sweat sticks to your sternum  
Oaken kiss to bare heel  
Stumble silently to the bathroom.

Silently  
Softly  
Smoothly

You won't wake anyone  
    not the way he does when he's up before the crack of dawn  
    dropping the pan as he cooks his egg and dirtying your stove and  
    hacking his lungs out and leaving a mess in your kitchen for you to  
    clean

Silently  
Softly  
Smoothly

Without complaint.  
    You swallow your rising resentment — it's too early for this rage — and face your  
    reflection

    It's hellish, you know  
        But you feel beautiful somehow with your puffy eyes, your swollen nose  
and lips, your hair that sticks up every which way  
    Your hair.

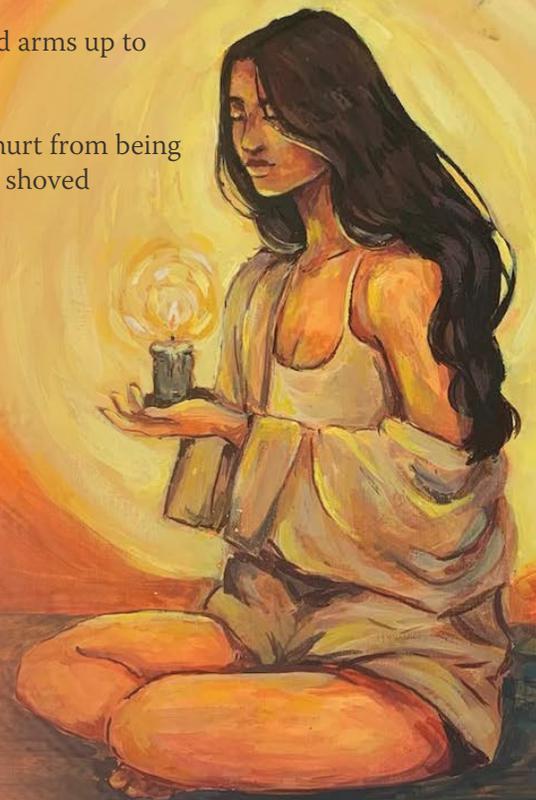
It will be the last thing that you touch after you've brushed your teeth and washed your  
face and powdered your blemished skin

    You'll slip off your shirt and crack your knuckles and reach your tired arms up to  
an unkempt mane

    This labor of love is labor indeed  
        as your arms will grow sore in seconds and your neck will hurt from being  
bent at such an angle and your teeth will clack against the bobby pins you've shoved  
between them

    You'll put pins in  
That side

    This side  
        Underneath that lock  
And you'll sigh at each lump and stray strand and  
    Maybe you will never be satisfied but  
    This time is yours  
        And yours alone  
            And that's enough.



Flame by Lily Klein

# Sculpture

by Anonymous

As you talk I take notes  
The way you hold yourself  
How you talk  
Your facial features  
Everything about you  
I take notes

I listen to how you talk about people  
I listen to your past  
I listen to your hopes  
I listen to how you rant  
I listen, I take notes.

I watch how you act  
I watch the shows you like  
I watch the little things you do  
I watch, I listen, I take notes

All these I do  
I do for you  
I'm making a friend  
I am sculpting all of these things  
The friend I'm making  
Is the friend you need

The sculpture I am showing you  
Is a version of me  
The version of me that you want and need

This is how I make friends  
I watch, I listen, I take notes  
I sculpt a version of what you need the most

If you don't like this I can change  
I can make this version a perfect sculpture



Masked Impressions by Macy Orrick

# leaky faucet

by May Lin

father never bothered to fix the leaky faucet  
// why fix things that eventually come undone *mija*?  
so it

dripped  
and  
dripped  
and  
dripped  
and  
creaked  
and  
creaked  
and  
creaked...

...until one day I come back and it is gone. new tenants who moved in had brought with them a new faucet, one not leaky or *unbearably* loud. I stood amidst condolences and a newfound silence. the kind that can be found under stands of bursting cattails. I suddenly realized that my lonely father had lived through the drips and the creaks and the presence of all those who were there before him, who had stood before the faucet turning it *on* and *off* and *on* and *off*, washing soft-bellied grapes to churn into jam, brewing hot chamomile tea for the arrival of winter, who had worn out that shiny new faucet with their hands and given it life.

(Previously published in *Jardin Zine*.)

Time Flies by Hala Bayazid



# Strange Things and Growing Pains

by Roman Fent

Never thought I'd be here again  
Pining again  
Feeling again  
Swept up in the moment again  
In a smile again  
I thought I was over it  
Over romance  
Over random chance  
Over falling into eyes which linger just too long on mine  
But no  
Turns out that love is young  
And dumb  
And turns out I'm not immune to it  
Turns out I'm just as weak as any other poor lost soul  
And yeah  
This sucks  
The way I only see you every other day?  
It sucks  
The way it feels like the whole world falls away?  
It sucks  
The radiance of your smile, the passing of the pain?  
It sucks!  
But not because it's bad  
Not because it hurts  
But because I wanted you so much that I compared you  
to stardust  
It sucks because there's really something here  
I'm not delusional  
You're not ephemeral  
I am not tantalus and you are not my folly  
We're just two kids  
Two kids who stare at each other just a moment longer  
than really is needed  
Two kids who maybe make excuses to jokingly  
shake hands  
Two kids who tease and prod  
One kid who tries so hard to flirt and crashes and burns  
So  
So badly  
One kid who watches me flounder, giggling all the same  
One kid who flirts with their friends and is smoother  
than butter  
But when the stakes are high  
When it's expression of interest and not just an ego-boost  
Well, apparently the gods decided I'm only allowed to  
torment my friends and myself  
Because hell if I'll ever pull one off with you  
We're just a couple of kids  
One tall and loud

One short and quiet  
One learning to live strange things  
One learning to deal with the others' strange things  
Bouncing off each other  
Reflecting and refracting  
Acting and reacting  
Smiling and laughing  
Maybe it's best to take things slow  
I'll show you my horses if you show me your goats?  
But the time is counting down it's a dagger at my throat  
How much longer can the quarter last  
When I've had you in at least one class  
For five semesters past  
And how many moments have I wasted  
Waded over like broken glass  
Staring at the shattered memories  
Shared trauma and this lesbian romance mess we've both  
left behind in our tracks  
And thinking  
'She's not that cute'  
Well eat it past me  
You were wrong and you knew it  
I'll give you that for free  
But now's not the time to stay looking back  
Not the time to be stuck in the vices of the past  
When the days are ticking down and I'm not sure if you'll  
text back  
And I need an excuse to message you  
Not about school but nothing too personal  
Gods I've written and spoken myself into a corner  
And I can't fuck this up because with you my day's so  
much warmer  
Maybe I should just let it ride  
Go in and out with the tide  
Ripples on a lake  
A slow give and take  
And I used to write about stardust  
About planetary yearning and the gusto of the gods  
Of smiles like ambrosia and the wine of heavens held in  
momentary touches  
But none of that was real  
All a dressed up picture of what I wanted to feel  
But you  
You are real  
Here in front of me  
And that's where I want to be  
Across from you  
Or next to you  
Or one row over and one row back

So I can sit and stare at you  
And catch your backwards glances while I embroider  
sitting there by you  
So I can try and hide my smile but still have it laid  
bare by you  
And let the moments pass while I just sit and feel for you  
All that I do  
And hope that I can make a move  
Do something small and again and once more  
And maybe I can try to prove  
That even though I'm three years later than I'd have  
liked to be  
I'm still here for you if you want to be here for me  
Then that's great  
And if not  
That's ok  
Because at the end of the year  
Of the week  
Of the day  
It never was a big deal anyway  
And who knows if we'll see each other again next year  
The paths we walk are different  
Though their halls are oh so near  
Maybe at the end of the day  
At the end of the tunnel  
At the end of it all

It was only ever growing pains after all  
But still I think I'll try  
I'll shoot my shot a few more times  
And eventually I'll just come out with it  
Say it outright like I'm oh so loath to do  
I've never deigned to before but maybe  
Maybe for you  
Because practicing my speech  
Hell I'm Portia and you know it  
I got on my knees and goddamn am I so, so screwed  
Not that you're Brutus but from this angle  
You look like an angel  
And I think I'd give myself a voluntary wound for you  
Use my once commended beauty and pull out all my  
charms for you  
Get all up in arms for you  
Be my practice Brutus and I can be your Casca  
I'll let my hands do the talking next time we hold on just a  
moment too long  
Linger a second too late  
Till one of us pulls away  
And I might be blushing but I think you are too  
And I'm too caught up in the moment to care anyway  
Because I've seen and done strange things  
But never something quite as wild  
As these new growing pains



Peace by Evelyn Fisher

Beta Fish by Charley Godsil



Refraction by Madeleine Raines

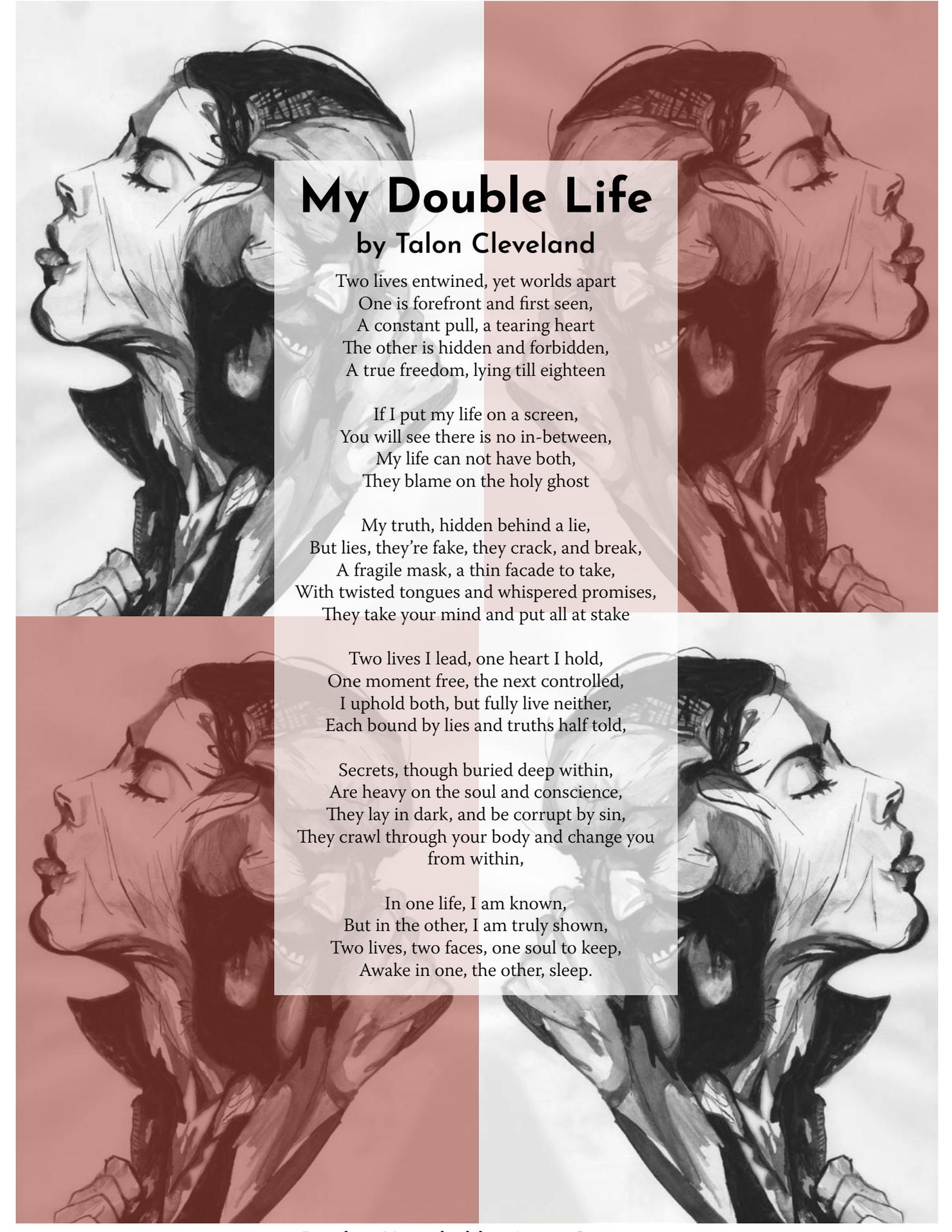


Uncover by Olivia Wang

# Identity

by Sarah Devney

The applewood boughs were once laden with revenant spring,  
Pillars of sanctuary to golden finches lost in flock,  
Through throngs of feathered wings battling valiantly against turbulent affairs,  
One single creature is mottled by solitude,  
For it drives him insane to be so isolated,  
For as spring drifts to winter and blossom decays,  
That one golden finch now sees the rays of philosophy,  
That one is never joined,  
Always alone,  
That identity is lost once a party is not there to judge it.



# My Double Life

by Talon Cleveland

Two lives entwined, yet worlds apart  
One is forefront and first seen,  
A constant pull, a tearing heart  
The other is hidden and forbidden,  
A true freedom, lying till eighteen

If I put my life on a screen,  
You will see there is no in-between,  
My life can not have both,  
They blame on the holy ghost

My truth, hidden behind a lie,  
But lies, they're fake, they crack, and break,  
A fragile mask, a thin facade to take,  
With twisted tongues and whispered promises,  
They take your mind and put all at stake

Two lives I lead, one heart I hold,  
One moment free, the next controlled,  
I uphold both, but fully live neither,  
Each bound by lies and truths half told,

Secrets, though buried deep within,  
Are heavy on the soul and conscience,  
They lay in dark, and be corrupt by sin,  
They crawl through your body and change you  
from within,

In one life, I am known,  
But in the other, I am truly shown,  
Two lives, two faces, one soul to keep,  
Awake in one, the other, sleep.



(With Me) by Dante de Jong

# PATH

by Sid Abelson

The train car is usually empty at 9 am. Blue plastic seats line both lengths of the train. The seats are cold and rock solid. They join together to form one elongated bench.

The car is empty now and I am the first in this lonely train car.

The second is an elderly Chinese woman. She enters the car and sits diagonally from me. She's practically hidden behind her newspaper.

The third is a man suiting a tank top. He's tan and his head is home to several tattoos that wrap around from his spine. He takes a seat on the other side of the car. His eyes face the floor and his gaze is empty.

Soon, the car is packed with people. Each occupying their own, and only their own space. One person left their earphones at home and forces everyone to listen as they scroll through twitter. Another is on speaker phone with a family member who lives far away.

All the action around me drowns out the man who has just entered the car. He does a quick prayer for everyone, though nobody returns the favor. The paper cup in his hand shakes, clinking the lonely coins against each other in the cup as he limps forward.

Spare change? He calls out.

I dug my hands in my pockets expecting others to do the same. I was alone. And so was he.

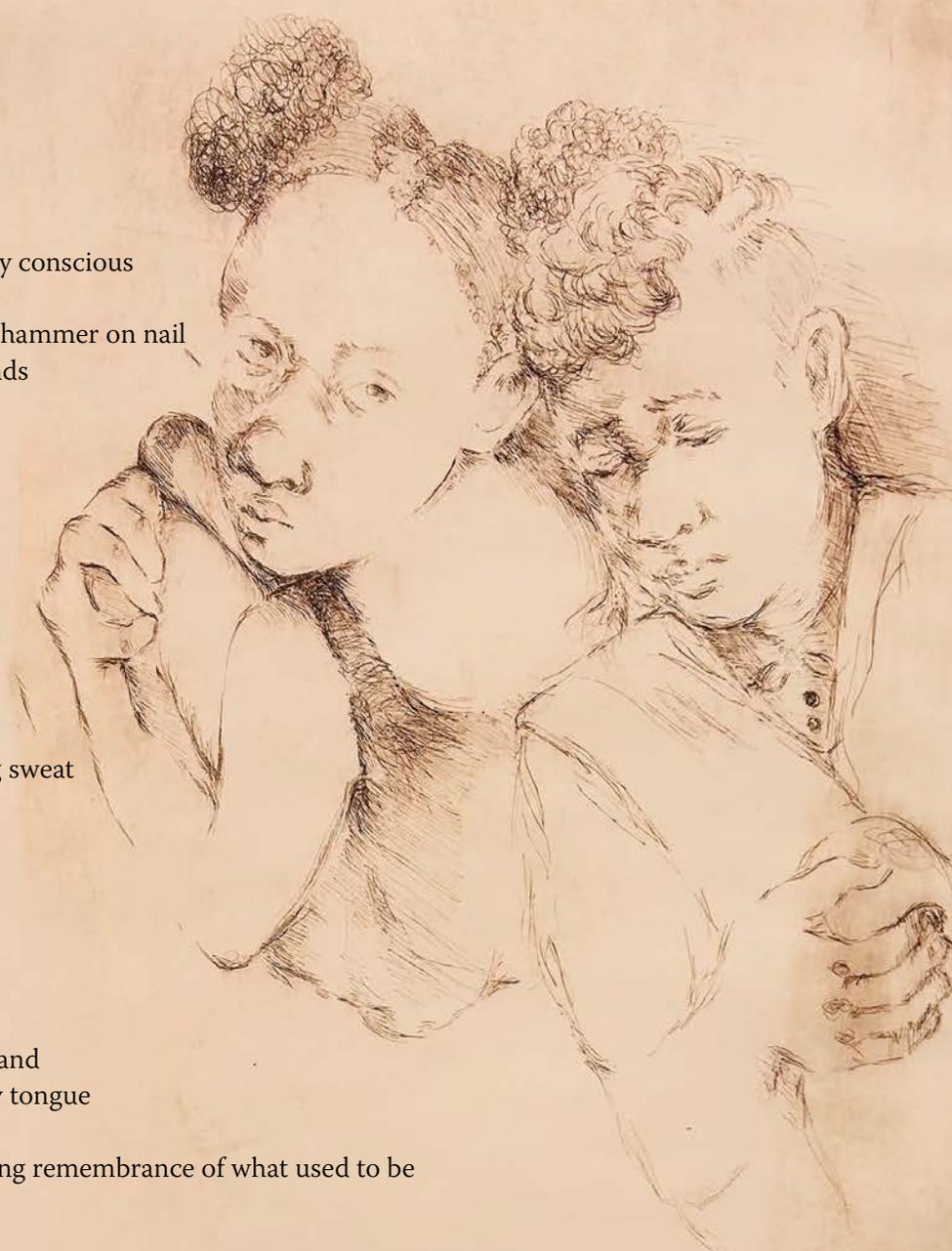


Xochitl by Han Mellenbruch

# Doubt

by Roman Fent

If there were ever any doubt  
Than I am wholly and utterly in love with you  
It has now been thoroughly expunged from my conscious  
The clanging and drilling of your voice  
High pitched and shrill and the hollowness of hammer on nail  
The ungentle touch of your never rougher hands  
Dust and dirt on my knees  
Ingrained in my pants and my brain  
Innocent splinters  
Blood on my knuckles  
Blood on the ground  
Your scent of sawdust  
Of sweat and hard working people  
In the end there really wasn't ever any doubt  
But just in case  
You are blinding lights  
Hot and scorching under halos of shimmering sweat  
Later and later nights  
Trapped or entranced who's to say  
Fist fights and screaming matches  
Making up with meaningful glances  
Solid floor and echoing glory  
Chances at bright futures or darker destinies  
The metallic taste of your kiss on my tongue  
Bleeding from my knees and the back of my hand  
Flowing from behind my eyes and beneath my tongue  
Dizzying heights and devastating lows  
Exhaustion and exhilaration mixing in sickening remembrance of what used to be  
What could have been  
What is yet to come  
If there was ever any doubt  
That I am irrevocably, insatiably, inexhaustibly, perfectly in love  
Then this is your proof  
I have never been more enamored  
Than I am  
With you





# Suffocating Relief

by Lila Ahitov

Our shoes are different sizes  
Toes curling to fit in the space  
Aching pain bites—  
Oh, to be included

Piano lessons since birth  
But a violinist is yearned for  
Tutorials all night—  
Oh, to be included

My soothing hand on a trembling shoulder,  
Easing my own tremors to console  
Pain as small as a giant—  
More to gain, oh, to be included

Eating the same peanut butter sandwich  
Resulting in the waste of my only EpiPen  
Alas, worth it—  
Oh, to be included

Who's That Girl in the Mirror  
by Kaila Burnside



# Mona Lisa of a Mistake

by Zoie Tran

Pinch the bridge of my nose—  
is it wrong,  
too wide,  
too flat?  
Prepare your rust-covered tools,  
bite into my bone,  
smooth like your dream ski slope.  
Whittle me down  
to a shape that's not my own.

Caress my cheeks and pry away  
my buccal fat.  
Strip my canvas of its natural hues,  
bleach me blank  
like printer paper,  
as if cream is too bold  
to be the base.

Take a chisel,  
hack away at my jaw  
until I become  
the letter V.  
Sew floss into my eyelids;  
make them double,  
open them wide—  
I awaken on a table,  
lights blinding,  
surrounded by blue scrubs and masks.  
I am prepared.

Into the copy machine,  
I am fed.  
I am manufactured into a painting  
with no artist,  
contradicting the intention  
of preset perfection set by God.

Sell my illusion  
to the world.  
Promise the media  
this is what is real!  
The kind that highlights  
powdered, porcelain skin,  
injected with toxins,  
jaws shaved and stitched.

And I wonder,  
how could they be sold  
to such beliefs  
of symmetry?  
Hide behind that screen,  
the one that shields you from bacteria—  
punctured with holes.  
Even with a scalpel in hand,  
I can see your pitiful

lie of confidence.  
Your depth of malice  
cuts far deeper,  
while your words  
fail to penetrate my skin.

Your notions  
influenced my small canvas  
again and again,  
until my canvas was dripping with paint,  
colors and shapes that weren't my own.  
And now that I grew into a mural,  
I refuse to erase  
wobbly lines and patchy spaces of paint.

Your view of imperfection  
is simply an excuse  
to reject humanity.  
For there is no mankind  
without the existence of a mistake  
clutched onto an apple's core,  
the taste of its defiance  
perpetuating to present day's tongue.

If that is God's plan—  
intentional missteps  
to inherit these traits  
all by design,  
what is really considered "pretty"?

If I allow you to create my portrait,  
drop your forceps and scissors,

and pick up a paintbrush.  
Paint every exposed pore that appears on my face.  
Replicate the crookedness;  
define each line  
with individual, uneven brush strokes.  
With every stroke you take,  
paint me into your worst masterpiece.

Let it be:  
unfinished—  
acrylic still damp,  
colors yet to be filled in.  
Let it be:  
flawed—  
sketch marks visible,  
colors unblended.  
Let it be:  
the signature of my existence.

# The Boy

by Dylan Chan

The room around him was littered with junk food packaging. Piles of them. Crumbs patterned his desk. His eyes were bloodshot red and his arms stiff, due to days of slim to none motion. His hair was a fury of strands and his soiled clothes unwashed for weeks, both reeked unpleasantly. His eyes have been glued to the illuminated computer screen and scorched. There was nothing he could do. He slouched in his chair all alone. Slowly extending his trembling finger, he succeeded in sliding an empty chip bag closer and searched its depths. Nothing.

Simple crumbs. He starved. His battery had been charging, but due to a large, red sauce stain, he was not aware. He didn't know he could go as long as he wanted. Just one more, he repeated, just one more, as he clicked off onto a more captivating video. His finger snailed across the touchpad and finally pressed down. As he watched, his body seemed almost petrified only interrupted by occasional finger twitches and minimal blinks. And as he sat there he did not notice the scythe resting patiently on his throat.



Harbinger  
by Ramsey Browne

# I sit here and scroll

by Gaven Graham

I sit here and scroll  
A video pops up next  
Its subject?  
Oh my.

It talks about how grandparents are running our country  
And grandchildren on the streets  
Waiting to die.

What am I?

I'm reluctant to touch my phone  
When I know many don't have one at all.  
I look at the paint that I so dislike  
But some don't even have walls.

Why should I worry about finding someone to fall asleep next to  
When some can't fall asleep  
Due to bombs dropped over their heads?

Or those permanently asleep  
Because the grandparents who reek  
Of power vacuum and green  
Turn a blind eye to their deaths?

I put the phone down, look up.  
How many people have it better than me?  
Just like me?  
Worse than me?

As ear touches pillow  
Tear touches eye  
Because I don't have to worry  
About when I will die.

And those who do  
Can't open each other's eyes  
Why, oh why

Am I just one person?

How is one person supposed to fight?  
To change?

I know so many things that are wrong with the world.  
Power over people  
Money over mountains  
Of needs that haven't been met.

But what can I do?  
I'm not a corporation.  
I'm not an organization.  
I'm just me.

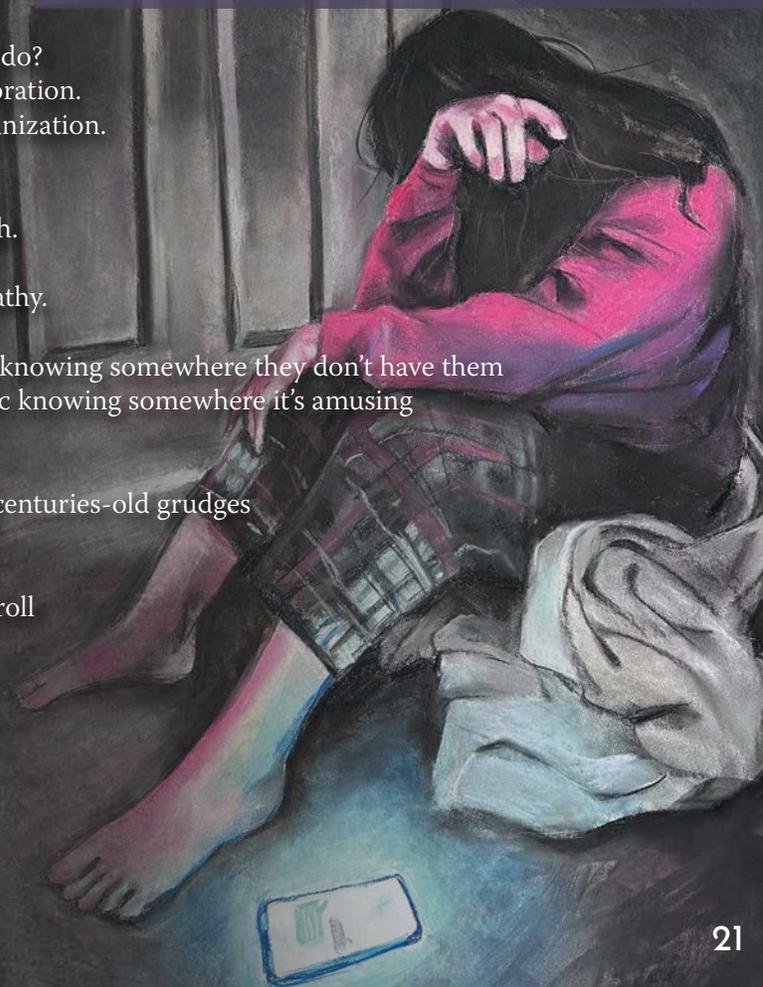
Me isn't enough.

So I turn to apathy.

I eat my meals knowing somewhere they don't have them  
I listen to music knowing somewhere it's amusing  
To ruin lives  
For appetite  
Of death over centuries-old grudges

And I...  
Sit here and scroll

## A Text's Aftermath by Siena Masilionis



# Don't Fly Too Close to the Sun

by Lila Ahitov

Your ethos charmed me so  
Confidence and ambition laced in every breath  
I was struck by cupid's arrow  
You were the one with the wings

Just a slight fling  
Until you flew back to town  
You sought me out, for the second time  
It was winter, still pleasant in the south  
I returned your calls, laughed at your jokes  
The bite of your words enticed me the most

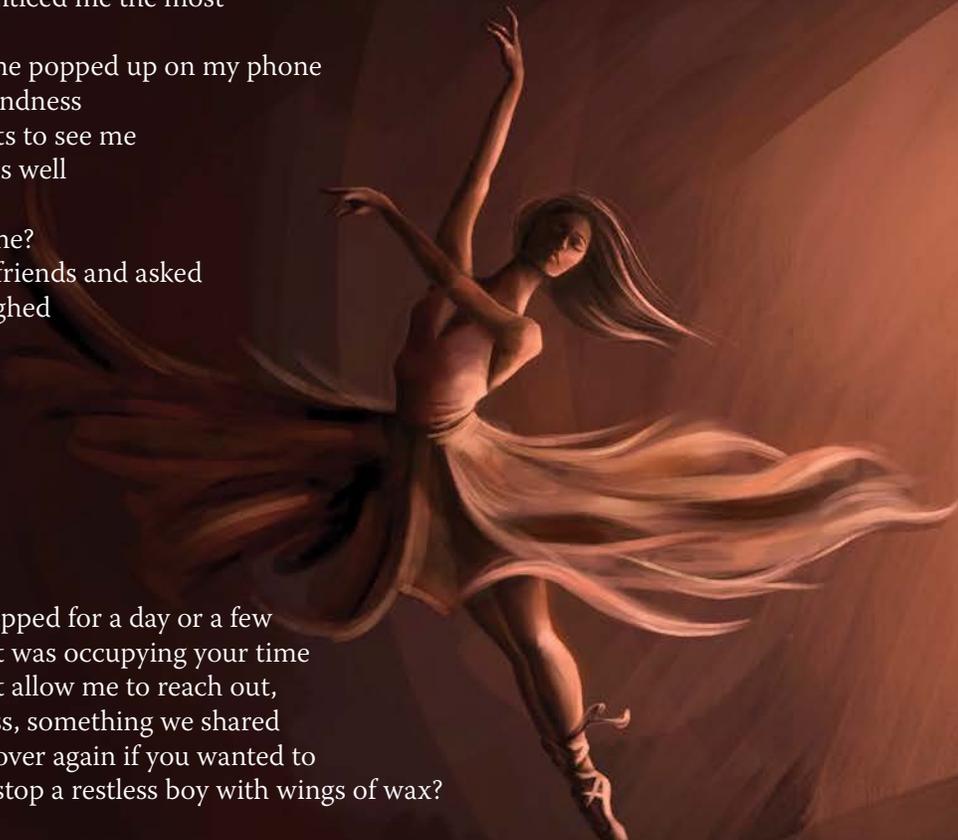
My smile when your name popped up on my phone  
Hinted at my growing fondness  
Your continuous attempts to see me  
Should've meant yours as well

Do you think she likes me?  
You soared over to my friends and asked  
They shrugged and laughed  
Your smile widened

Eyes large  
With interest?  
With kindness?  
With love?  
With greed.

Your messages stopped for a day or a few  
Now I know what was occupying your time  
My pride did not allow me to reach out,  
Competitiveness, something we shared  
You would fly over again if you wanted to  
Who am I to stop a restless boy with wings of wax?

The call came  
My pesky smile appeared  
I curse myself for the continued intrigue  
Although you coast through my defenses as you do the sky  
I never let you know the extent that you enticed me  
You did not attempt to hide yours



Ballerina by Sydney Anderson



A new message popped up  
I eagerly checked the name  
It wasn't you, but one of your friends  
My friend.  
'He's had a girlfriend for the past five months,  
just found out'

Hasn't anyone told you not to cheat?  
Not to soar too close to the sun?  
I know I was not the only one you pursued.  
Your ambition,  
Your confidence,  
Your ethos,  
Turned out to be your greatest flaws

You wanted it all  
I laugh at the thought  
But as grapes turn to raisins,  
Water to steam,  
Gas to an explosion,  
Wings also turn into wax,  
Resulting in your demise

# Not Worth It

by Ruby Seidner

I was too tired to cook last night. I felt like falling asleep.  
I drank coffee for lunch because homework couldn't stop piling up.  
My mind forgets the battles won, the dragons slayed.  
All the blood, sweat and tears I had to push through to get to this point.  
I get soft, thinking that I can skip a meal just this once.  
Forgetting the acrid flavors that weave  
together into thick coils of anxiety that stab me  
in the abdomen.  
Taunting me, breaking down my hopes, my wonder. My resolve.  
"You're not normal." "How could you ever think that you can do this?"  
"You're too weak to recover."  
And then the cycle begins again.  
Looking in the mirror, begging myself to love myself.  
Pinching stomach fat, convinced I'm a fruit fly,  
invisible and vexing.  
Maybe, if I don't eat today, I'll be better.  
I think, knowing where this goes.  
"It isn't worth it love" I try saying softly,  
though that never works. The nice tone throws my  
inner child for a loop.  
Maybe just this one meal. My body tells me.  
It won't get me back to that place,  
wheezy on the floor, no nutrients in my body.  
It'll make me desirable,  
That's all I want.  
I don't want health, wealth, or my name up in lights.  
I just wanted to be desirable,  
be the girl that gets the stars, the girl with the perfect body, perfect eyes, smile.  
The girl with everything figured out.  
It took me years to realize girls with perfect bodies have issues,  
with their bodies.  
It's worse than mine.  
That none of us have anything figured out.  
It took me years to realize,  
this system of beauty standards penalizes  
everyone.  
Its goal is to tear us apart.  
So we don't find the courage,  
to start whispering in nail salons, spas,  
and Sephoras. And start venting all the goddamn things  
every woman tries to do to be  
"desirable"  
Instead of figuring how what we want ourselves to be inside and  
out.  
The system doesn't want our whispers turning to shouts,  
until we realize our exhaustion is its fuel,  
and playing this stupid game is just not  
worth it.



Working Past Empty  
by Siena Masilionis



# Inner Demons

by Kriti Kumar

In the mirror, I gaze, a face that is not my own,  
A visage of a monster, chilling to the bone.  
What defines a monster, but our own perception anyway?  
If they were the epitome of beauty, we'd see them in that way.

Yet we conjure repulsion of creatures vile in sight,  
They evoke a primal fear that haunts us through the night.  
When tasked to sketch a monster, I draw my own face,  
The reflection that echoes my innermost disgrace.

The creature within, wielding hatred and anger and all that I fear,  
reminds me of the monster I've become, the one I don't want near.  
It reigns over my emotions, a demon dwelling in the depths of my soul.  
A monster not of others, but of my own self-control.

To others, I may not be the beast I see,  
They may not cower or tremble from me.  
I hurt myself, in shadows I dwell,  
A prisoner of my own self-made hell.  
For I am a monster who ruins only me,  
A self-destructive spirit, in shadows that make me unfree.

A demon within, its roots entwined deep,  
A battle against it, I struggle to keep.  
Am I battling demons, or have I become one?  
In this uncertain mirror, the answer hasn't come.

# what if i did it? what would you do?

by Prisha Dalal

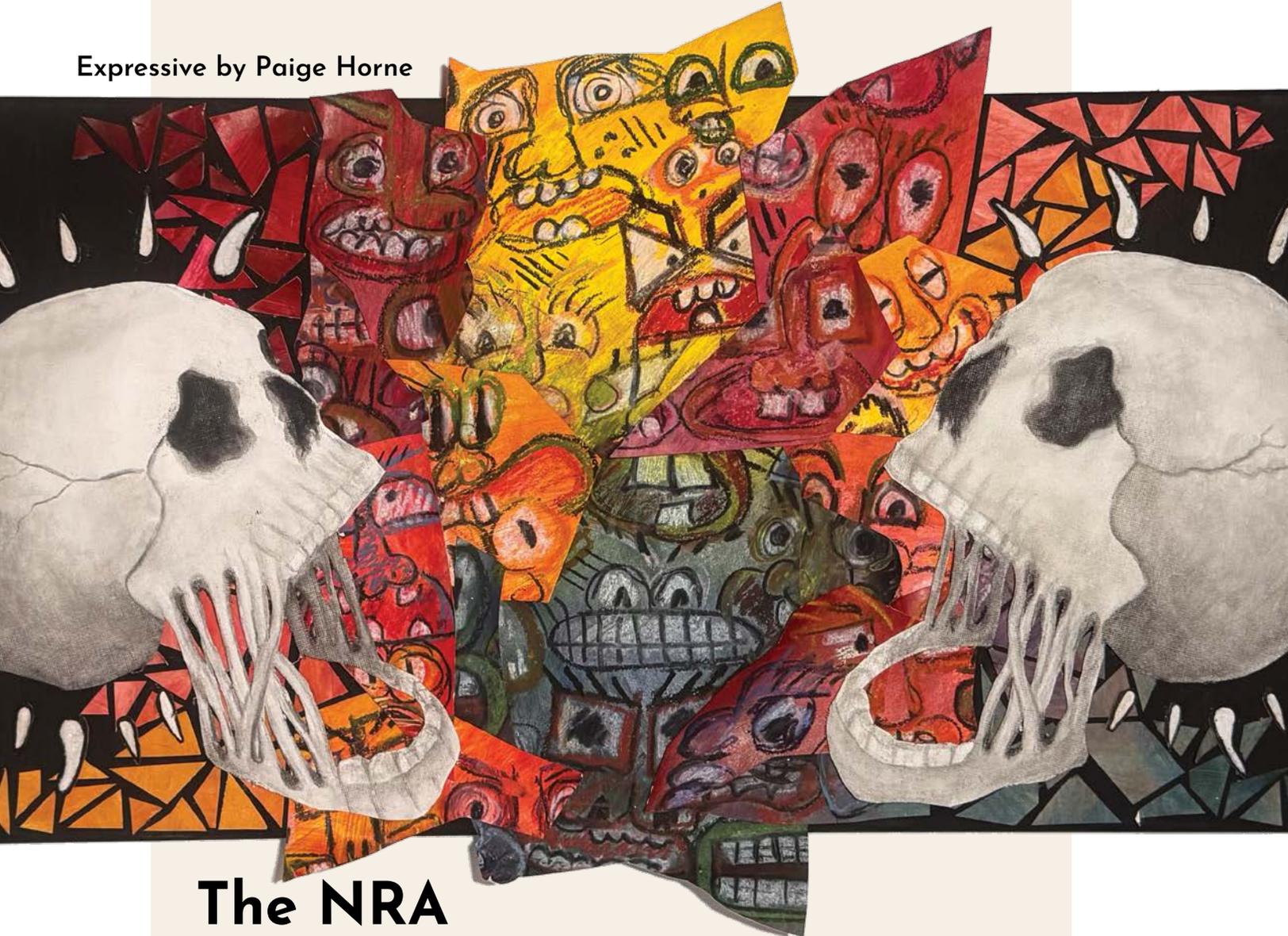
She looked in the mirror and thought about death. Not the depressing and gloomy type, just the type that meant “farewell.” It felt very diminutive to think about the end. She was standing there alone looking into her dirty mirror, processing herself. How was it possible that one day she would forever not be? She had a feeling that she would never be able to find an answer to her queries, so the only way her thoughts could be suppressed was by decaying in front of the glass. Over the years she sank into the tile of her bathroom floor, the light path of her tendencies accumulated by her intense desire.

She didn't *want* to die. By no intention was suicide surrounding her thoughts. She just wanted to *feel* death. **The fact that she wanted death provided her with some distorted comfort that she was still alive.** Or even a part of her was. She had strangled fantasies of flowers on her deathbed, letting her dwell in the twisted relief that people still had room in their hearts for her.

It was not her fault she was fixated on such horrible feelings. She had never chosen to be born. She had not picked what legs to squeeze into, what face to splash tears on, what lungs to breathe with. Why was it so wrong to want to die? If she hadn't received a choice on existing, what issue was there in not? Everyone who had once chosen to end their lives had done it willingly. It was their right to die. Her eyes shifted to a jar of pills spilt across her vanity. *What if I did it? What would you do?*



Forbidden Fruit  
by Macy Orrick



# The NRA

by Geneva Bennett

The NRA headquarters is blown to smithereens by children holding bombs made of acrylic paint and shredded OshKosh overalls.

Their former classrooms are blanketed in broken crayons and rusted craft scissors. They have gaps in their milk teeth and itchy bug bites. Their hair smells like apple conditioner, cigarette smoke, and gunpowder.

Small hands and tiny feet slap tile to the sound of Fourth of July fireworks. Their fists are clenched and canines are bared. They look tiny and feral under the office fluorescents.

When they are made to fall, they leave fingerprint handprints on the linoleum. When our oil dries up we will lick their blood off the floor and use it to power our outlet malls. Power lines will droop with the hot humidity of them clouding the air.

You lift your fist in the air while the wasps feast on the congealing blood of our young. Do you have an earache? Can you feel it pooling against your eyes? Can you taste the molten ichor of our youth? You're swimming in it.

# After I Died

by May Lin

*This is what it feels like to die.*

Seven minutes ago, I ended my life. The last moments of my life were supposed to be the best ones. The most memorable ones. The most *peaceful* ones. But when I ended my life, I ended it with hatred and anger and injustice. I ended it trying to satisfy my insatiable pride. Most of all, I ended it clawing at my mother's life.

My father used to hit me. My mother was his accomplice.

When I was three, I shit my diapers all the time. According to my mother, she could not comprehend why a Chinese girl like me didn't know how to shit properly. I was born dark-skinned, she recalled, "so it must have been because you were like *those people* at first."

*That's racist, mom.*

She hung me over the toilet, clutching the hem of my shirt with a singular hand, wrung with purulent blisters from the years of demanding work on the rice farms.

"The hand of a laborer," she said, flexing her right hand through a crumpled sleeve.

With the other hand she pulled down my pants and left my father to do the spanking with a silvery meter stick that is now lost somewhere in the garage, serving as a tribute to my pain and their power.

"From then on, you never shit your diapers again!" she concluded.

*How fortunate for me.*

My mother was a soft woman before she met my father. But when my father told her to harden, she hardened like that steel and hard-backed meter stick. I was a victim of that steel meter stick many times after.

"You'll be fine," my mother would say if she noticed me crying after a particularly violent beating, her futile attempts at consolation, "Your skin is as tough as that stick."

As I began puberty, my father stopped hitting me because there are *complications* if a man hits a girl as she enters womanhood. My mother, thinking he'd grown soft, tried to raise a hand of her own. But she quickly realized I was now stronger than her when I stopped her hand mid-air and shoved it back to her side.

I hated my mother, but I never dared to hit her back. Though I did raise a stool above my head once, as if I were to slam it in her face. The leg of the stool would break her yellowing, sunken skin that would then lapse into scarlet. The impact would send her flying into the horrid, floral carpets that suffocated our floors. And she'd lay there until her sight was littered with stars and I would *never* have to deal with that *ugly, wretched, hurtful woman ever again!*

But she was the only person I had. She was the only *mother* I had, and I could not bear to hurt her. The cowardly daughter within me could not even bear to slam the stool *beside* her, but gently set it down like delicate glass.

Except no one ever considered that I too was like delicate glass, and that I too was so easily broken and scarred.

But I don't remember the pain of my mother's hand as much as I do her words.

Truthfully, as I grew older, I barely remembered any instances of violence inflicted on me besides when my mother brought them up to remind me of *what she could do*.

It was the words that pierced through me instead. Though I was strong with my words, my mother was stronger.

去死去死去死去死去死去死去 my mother said, which means *just die* except for seven times. She screamed it at me so much that at some point I started screaming it at her, hoping it would slice her the same way it

sliced me. *You are the biggest regret I've ever had* made me jump out the window on a Saturday night.

But a police officer told me that it was a normal teenage thing for parents to yell, so I tried to convince myself that it was normal up until now when I ended my life.



## The Extraordinary Ordinary by Kaila Burnside

After a person dies, their brain stays alive for exactly seven minutes as homage to the most significant moment of their life.

In those seven minutes, I was determined to prove to myself my hatred for my mother. That every time I wanted to give up on myself was because of her. That when all the brilliance seeped out of my world it was because of her. That she was the reason I'd died. After all, there must have been a reason for me to die.

But I couldn't.

In those seven minutes, I was brought back to the *simplest*, most *stupid*, most *irrelevant* memory of my life: the day my mother and I went to the zoo.

Minute 1:

Behind the enclosure is a white tigress so close to us that I can hear the baring of her yellowing teeth and see the flare of her icy eyes. Her brown stripes adorn her face like indecipherable Chinese calligraphy my mother used to write. I back away in fear, but my mother is as calm as the white tigress when she basks by the balmy sun, stretching her great paws so that we see a sliver of her white belly, yearning with the hunger for meat, then rolling over so that her belly meets the sun-kissed ground as soft as the underbellies of leaves.

*Why am I remembering this out of all things?*

Minute 2:

"Don't be scared," my mother laughs, "She has a daughter too."

"Where?" I ask.

My mother points to two piles of grass I hadn't even noticed before. The first is larger, about the size of the white tigress, but the other is smaller, about the size of a baby cub. *A mother always knows.*

"How do you know it's a daughter?"

"I don't," my mother sighs, "but a daughter always sticks to her mother." *The way I stick to you.*

"Where is she now, the daughter?" I ask.

"She must be somewhere safe," my mother says, glancing around the enclosure. "See, the mother lioness is outside because she's sacrificing herself to protect her daughter."

When she says this, I notice the way the mother lioness whips her head back to peer at something as she senses the danger of tourists approaching behind. And I also notice the way my mother shields her hand in front of my body to keep the lioness away from me.

*I hate her I hate her I hate her so why in the last moments of my life, why does my mother have to be nice to me?*

Minute 3:

"I'm hungry," I say. My mother takes out a container of strawberries from her bag. Likewise, the zookeeper enters the enclosure to feed the lioness her meat. She purrs gently and the baby cub comes scampering out, responding to her mother's cry. She does seem like a daughter. The mother lioness waits for her cub to eat her fill until she eats the rest herself. When the cub finishes, there's barely any meat left for the lioness. *This memory hurts a little inside.*

"Won't the lioness be hungry?" I ask my mother.

"Of course she will," my mother says, "but she makes sure her child is fed first."

"She doesn't have to do that, right?"

"She doesn't have to, but she wants to," my mother explains, "It's her duty."

I look down, noticing how my mother gives me all the ripe, plump strawberries and eats the greenish ones herself.

*Oh, this is —*

*Oh god.*

*I don't actually hate my mother, do I?*

*I'm remembering the way she loved me, aren't I?*

*Oh god.*

*I died for nothing, didn't I?*



Minute 4:

*No.*

*No I didn't.*

*I couldn't have.*

*I hate my mother.*

*Why can't I hate my mother?*

*How come I never realized?*

*I don't want to die.*

*I don't want to die.*

*I don't want to die.*

Eye of Lilith by Kinley Silliman

Minute 5:

*It's too late. I'm really going to die.*

As the mother lioness and her cub settle onto the grass for an afternoon nap, the baby cub purrs and wraps herself within her mother's bosom. And as the two animals rest into dawn, my mother and I walk away too.

That's where the memory ends.  
That was the most significant moment of my life.  
My good-for-nothing life.

Minute 6:

Before the face of the lioness plays in my head for the final time, I suddenly hear the sound of my mother's voice through the wingless back of an angel. It's a little far away, but I can still make out the brittle, broken voice, the frantic sobs, and the awful Chinese accent that never fails to piss me off.

"I'm so sorry, Min," the voice sobs. "It's all my fault."  
*Oh. It really is my mother. My mother, the angelic voice.*  
"I'm so, so sorry. Forgive me. Please forgive me."

If all it took was dying to hear my mother apologize, I would've died a hundred times. The voice dies into erratic whimpers, and against all laws of physics and all laws of life, I feel her hands on my face. *Touching* my face with scorching motherhood.

"I love you, Min." The voice becomes hoarse and withered. "I love you so much."  
*Oh, don't cry, mama. I love you too, mama.*  
*I'm sorry I ever thought I hated you.*  
There are so many words I'm trying to say.

And I hope she can somehow hear me the way I somehow felt her touch on my face.

*There's a bitterness in knowing that I never hated my mother.*

*That she wasn't the reason I died.*  
*But I think I can die alright, now that we were able to give each other a lifetime of love in this last minute of my life.*

*And because of that, I think I can say that I died satisfied.*

Minute 7:

So this is a eulogy to my mother, who died when I died.



Return by Macy Orrick

# i take it back

by Prisha Dalal

I.

I absentmindedly run my hand over the bumpy, taut layer of a bright orange. I admire my selection and hold it up for my mother to see. She frowns and shows me some green discolored patches near the bottom, and I feel a rush of moody adolescent irritation towards her. I want to be outside, sipping cool beverages and smelling the chlorine of the community pool, not the grocery store, where middle-aged women with their meal planners inspect price tags and shoot nasty looks at my mother and me. But she had given me a choice: come buy groceries with me, or don't eat the food I make with it.

I hold our reusable cloth bag open as my mom drops onions into it. My eyes sting as she puts in the last one. There are a lot of people in this aisle, and I watch their movements. All of their eyes inspecting each fruit as if they could taste it. My mother speeds through the aisles, quickly grabbing things off the shelf. I panic when she gets too far ahead of me, afraid that I'll lose her, and be left alone. We walk into the register and the total begins to multiply with each buzz of the scanner. My mother eyes the total and searches her wallet for a crisp 20-dollar bill.

Still 80 cents short. "I don't have any more bills, let me try to find a coin," my mother replies embarrassed, and I flinch at the accent coloring her words. The cashier glares at her, clearly annoyed, and I feel a need to start talking to my mom in my American accent, to prove to the cashier that I'm just like her. "Check your coin purse."

While we are getting into the car, my mother's eyes are encasing a storm. "Useless, horrible child," she spits. "You cannot even use one dollar to help out your mother. You could have used your pocket money and we wouldn't be getting home late." She puts her key in the ignition and I feel a childish sense of terror as she turns out of the parking lot, my tears only blurring everything further.

I am still holding the bag of groceries, the cloth slicing into my hands.

II.

If I open my eyes wide enough when she's yelling at me, I can convince myself that the tears are from the dust in the air, not her words. When she forces me to look her in the eye, I do, but not directly. I fixate on the forehead instead of her eyes. I need to create disconnection, at least a little.

Once, for a snide remark, she locked me in the garage. I knocked on the door, calling out her name until *mommy* didn't even sound like a word anymore. When my father eventually lets me in, I take off my glasses and stare at myself in the dirty glass mirror. I study myself and try to see what features I inherited from her, but all I see is my childhood. There is a faded scar on my neck. I can't remember which time it was from. All I can picture is the split second before when the world

## Blank by Evelyn Fisher



## Serenity by Evelyn Fisher

went quiet. The thrill of *no please i'm so sorry i won't do it again* except it's too late. The hand is already coming towards you, and there's a crack of sound and a moment later, an eruption of explosive red pain, followed by the unexpected shame that comes after you, no matter how many times you've expected it.

I don't wash off the blood—instead, I bite into the wound, my senses filling with warm iron.

That night, I stumble, bleary-eyed, into the doorway of my parents' bedroom and see my mother leaning against the bed frame, crying into the phone. I felt a strange feeling of blame and revelation as if I had accidentally uncovered a conclusion I did not want to find yet.

I would cry whenever I saw her crying, even without knowing the context behind why.

The next morning, she beats me to the dining room. She was already done making breakfast. She silently slides cubes of mango from her plate into mine, and when I protest, she claims that they don't taste good with her hot coffee.

The taste remains the same, only the flavor of her bitter apology crunching like gravel in my mouth.

### III.

Kansas has the sunrises, and San Francisco the sunsets. I suppose I was too disillusioned with all the new beginnings in my life, so I went to the edge of the country to seek out the ends. Still, at that time, I had convinced myself that I was attending school in California because they had good medical programs.

In the two years I had lived there, I had always called—every Friday morning, always making sure to account for the time zones. But for the first time, there is a missed call under her name. I dial back with both two parts desire and trepidation—for what, I'm not sure.

How am I supposed to tell her that there is no way I can come home right now, with my medical internship and final exams starting soon? It's only a diagnosis, anyway. But I have already envisioned her stern, pinched face in my mind, already hearing her scolding me for being ungrateful and selfish.

When the second call comes two months later, I book the very next available flight back home. It didn't matter anyway—I was two hours too late.

I am a naive teenager in the grocery store again, clutching the oranges, and I can't see where she is, and all I can see and hear and taste is metallic guilt and panic.

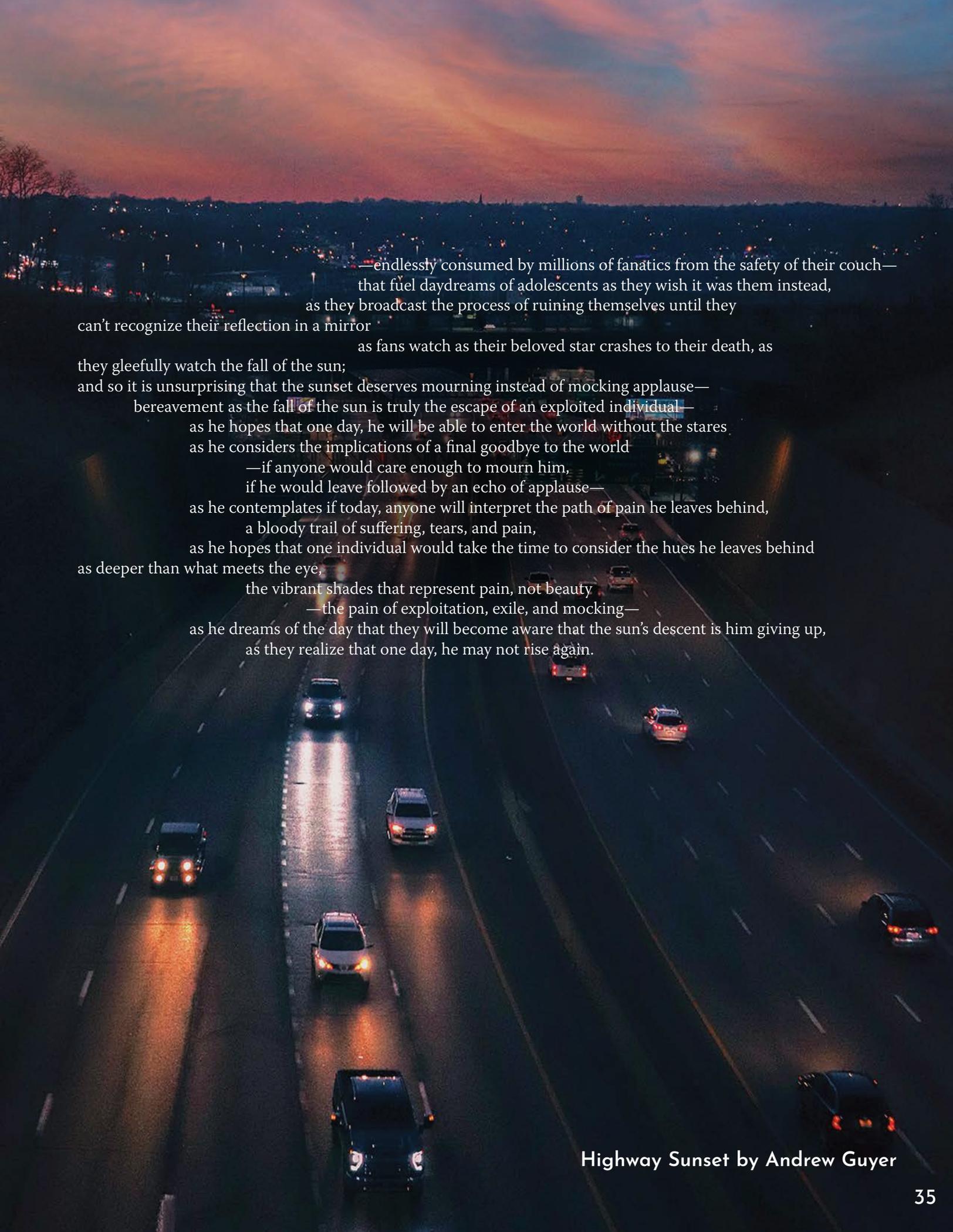
*no please i'm so sorry i won't do it again*

# The Fall of a Star

by Deetya Rajan

I watch as the sun sets,  
the beautiful descent of a once glorious noon,  
falling down, down, down,  
leaving in its wake, a bloody path of oranges, pinks, reds,  
—a shade of orange reminiscent of a raging fire,  
A fire that destroyed a family's home  
Full of generations of memories and remnants of a life of love,  
such as worn board games from family  
game nights, a fridge stocked with vacation magnets, memories of childhood  
laughter, teenhood tears, and adulthood maturity—  
All destroyed by the serendipitous meeting of a match and fuel;  
an orange reminiscent to the color of vomit;  
pink like the tint of a slightly infected wound,  
tender to the touch;  
a pink resembling spoiled meat,  
which, when mistakenly eaten,  
sent the loved kindergarten teacher to an early grave;  
red as vivid as the splash of blood gushing from a stab wound,  
a stab wound that the poor victim mistakenly pulled the knife out of, sealing their fate;  
red such as the color of a sign at an airport prohibiting the transportation of explosives,  
ignored by one wicked individual  
who caused the deaths of 548 ill-fated passengers,  
never able to bid a forever farewell to their families;  
vivid shades of color in the sky that are instead beholden with wonder;  
hues that receive applause and Instagram posts instead of  
morose grief for all that they represent;

as the setting of the sun does not represent happiness and glory, but instead millennia of pain,  
as its routine occurrence was deemed a moment of joy by some ancient individual  
who failed to check the facts before making such a proclamation,  
enthralled by the allure of a few splashes of color  
never acknowledging the negative impact on the sun  
—such as tired retirement after a day of exhibition against his will—  
like his anger at his constant display,  
as 8.1 billion humans ogle and gawk,  
watching without ever pausing to consider how he felt,  
even though it is a very tangible possibility that the sunset represents loss,  
as it could very possibly be the voluntary plunge from sky's peak to the solid horizon  
—the impact causing him his life—  
as it would not be unlike the situation of celebrities in today's world:  
individuals forced to perform as the world watches,  
driven to excessively indulge in alcohol,  
motivated to dabble in exotic drugs  
that numb the pain,  
that allow for a smiling face to a crowd of screaming, obsessive teenagers,  
that slowly weaken the heart, the liver, the mind,  
that create a tolerance and withdrawal so potent that one never wishes to stop,  
consequences that only cease with the individual,  
doomed as they were thrust into fame too early for their own good,  
compelled to participate in and share reckless activities, and wild parties  
which creates a vivid image of wild enjoyment and unbridled joy



—endlessly consumed by millions of fanatics from the safety of their couch—  
that fuel daydreams of adolescents as they wish it was them instead,  
as they broadcast the process of ruining themselves until they  
can't recognize their reflection in a mirror  
as fans watch as their beloved star crashes to their death, as  
they gleefully watch the fall of the sun;  
and so it is unsurprising that the sunset deserves mourning instead of mocking applause—  
bereavement as the fall of the sun is truly the escape of an exploited individual—  
as he hopes that one day, he will be able to enter the world without the stares  
as he considers the implications of a final goodbye to the world  
—if anyone would care enough to mourn him,  
if he would leave followed by an echo of applause—  
as he contemplates if today, anyone will interpret the path of pain he leaves behind,  
a bloody trail of suffering, tears, and pain,  
as he hopes that one individual would take the time to consider the hues he leaves behind  
as deeper than what meets the eye,  
the vibrant shades that represent pain, not beauty  
—the pain of exploitation, exile, and mocking—  
as he dreams of the day that they will become aware that the sun's descent is him giving up,  
as they realize that one day, he may not rise again.

# Echoes of Silence: Call of Humanity for Women

by Aakanksha Roy

Independence is about the freedom one deserves,  
a right one must have to live.  
A right to breathe, to dream, to write their own story in a world  
we call ours.

But why celebrate this freedom, when the smiles of women start to fade?  
When silenced screams and cries become reality.  
When the voices of the struggling become muted.  
When the words become whispers.  
When women become prey.  
When women lie in the darkness.  
And when women are slayed.

And of what you say?  
Of their innocence, and for their fragile confidence  
Their unspoken indifference, yet also their unconditional kindness.  
And for what? To erase the existence of women?  
To rid our future of individuals that power the world ahead of us?  
To kill the courage of women that once prevailed?  
Or to expose the bitter truth of the monsters that lay the initiation  
of destruction?

The call for humanity is dead.  
Society has collapsed.  
Lives have been sacrificed.

Remember the cries, the despair that your ears once held.  
The never-ending sorrow that your face once hid.

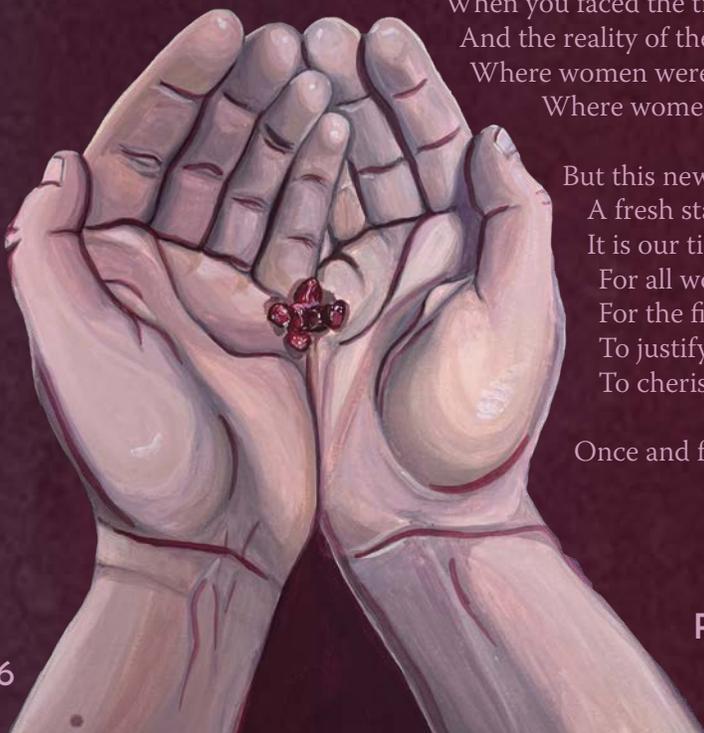
When you faced the truth.  
And the reality of the scary world we reside in.  
Where women were taken for granted and not acknowledged.  
Where women were not safe.

But this new chapter unfolds now,  
A fresh start, a new beginning for all women.  
It is our time now and we must collide.  
For all women, to unite and rejoice.  
For the fight for equality and justice.  
To justify the wrongs and make them right.  
To cherish those lives that were ceased of humanity.

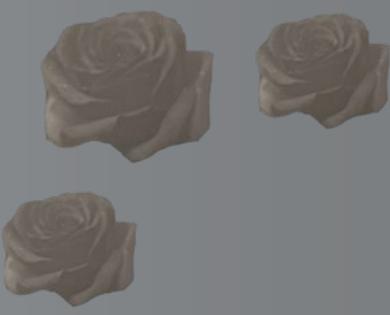
Once and for all.



You Can See Right Through Me  
by Lily Klein



Persephone's Plight by Emma Clement



# The Choices She Didn't Make, The Chances She Didn't Take

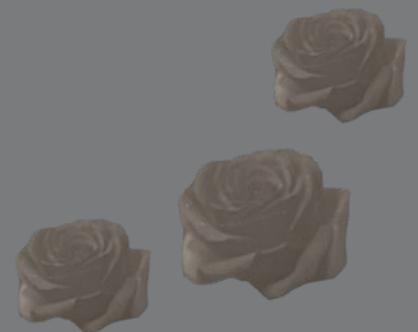
by Sophie Bendersky

It hurts, the hollow throb of losing—losing someone always does. But it was different this time. “It’s not fair!” She wanted to scream a blood soaked cry into the world, one begging for lost time back and just one more chance. Perhaps it wasn’t fair. But she never took the chance to make it fair. She didn’t take the chances that lay close, the chances as close as the shadows that grazed fingertips—the chances that slipped further and further away as time moved on and her eyes moved forward. The chances to make it feel as if there was more time with him, more moments spent together. She could have reached out more, inquired more—“What were you like when you were a kid?”, “What were your favorite experiences in life so far?”—because now she’ll never know. The moments drifted like ash in the wind, as if time itself was the flame. So who’s to blame? Maybe it was the world. But maybe she, too, was the reason she felt like this, the reason for the emptiness inside her. Maybe she was the reason she felt that despite knowing him, she never *knew* him, got a glimpse of who he was beyond his soft spoken exterior. Perhaps the feeling lay in the choices she didn’t make, the chances she didn’t take. A silent burden passed, shared by all who let time slip away from oily fingertips. And so she sobbed and sobbed. But the sobbing could only do so much—broken tears could not resurrect he whom she let slip away. A delicate accented voice broke through her chaotic mind—I’m ok, you’re ok, *I love you, for everything and anything you are—and all you’ll be.*

## Innocence by Evelyn Fisher



## Anguish by Evelyn Fisher



# 38 Weeks Overnight

by Sophie S

I know not how to be an individual,  
although biologically, yes, I am my own person.  
But still, biologically, I am to form new flesh and  
blood with no prior instructions.  
How to craft a cerulean personality that was to sprout  
from my own mental illness  
from failures and pathetic attempts of selfishness.

I know not how to be an individual,  
to be hand-in-hand: womanly and selfish.  
My weakness as a homemaker is the chokehold  
outsiders have over my self-care.  
No matter the path of my future, I was meant to have  
a bawdy soul to care for,  
to carry my face and sapphire blood into a future  
where I may no longer exist.  
To clothe and to raise them as my own.

To be a woman is to reproduce, is to prioritize others,  
is to look in the mirror, and not recognize yourself. I  
was always meant to be a mother.

Trapped, or gifted, for more than the  
standard 18 years,  
I empty my energy into my creation—  
I fight for individualism, yet fold in the  
face of my child.

I love this spirit unconditionally.  
It's neither their fault nor mine for  
our existences intertwining.  
I will work day and night, night and day  
to keep them safe and loved  
because although I know not how  
to be an individual,  
I perch myself on a seat of  
mushy care  
and prioritize others as if it  
were my uninvited destiny.

I accept this feat with sulking arms,  
an arguably negative quality of putting everyone above me  
led to the only thing left to do:

I woke up.

Lonely.

My child has seeped away along with my dreams.  
Inexplicable loss in her place.

I've never had a child or scare.  
Frankly, I'm only 17 and experiencing my first real  
relationship.  
Even then, even without ever knowing what  
responsibilities of being a mother entail—  
I wake up with a cold sweat, blue in the face, tongue tucked  
down my throat  
with no memory of the 18 years I raised her, except her face;  
tattooed in the folds of my brain

I Named her,

Clothed her,

Fed her,

Bathed her,

and still, just after 8 hours, she didn't exist.

The hole left behind a smear of indigo in my  
gut that hadn't existed prior to my shut-eye.

And still, 18 years had passed in my head  
and I wished for nothing more  
than to exchange my youth for the chance  
of living out hers.

To be a woman is to reproduce, is to  
prioritize others, is to look in the  
mirror, and not recognize  
yourself.

Yet even after reproduction,  
prioritization, and  
declination of self-worth,  
I know I'm meant to be a  
mother.



Eye of the Beholder  
by Lily Klein

# every-single-thing

by Andie McGregor

a bowl of ocean: no bigger than  
cupped palms; the same concave  
as the deflated iris over  
the sightless eye.

long before you cared, the lanterns  
became beacons. i find myself  
outside, moth-bitten, and  
perfectly fine.

now, the sidewalk blossoms  
purple & green with bruises  
and the reminders of what could  
have been. everywhere—reminders

of how tomorrow should have seemed:  
a horizon of opaque clouds, darkened suns.  
maybe there's also a memory.  
maybe there's also a flicker of the forest

through the dark nebula of cityscape.  
and maybe, this is all you'll have.  
tongues made of questions and  
tongues made to choke on answers.

sunrises that forgot to encourage feeling,  
dulled by the prospect of never again.  
distances just close enough  
that you will never reach them.

maybe, this is all you'll ever have—  
a road, a highway, burdened with direction.  
but in all these dark things—strangled things—  
you still see beyond, into

every-single-thing.



Submerged by Hala Bayazid

# I Don't Even Know When to End, Talking About Worth

by Ying Ham Lee

Worth

/wə:θ/

Adjective:

**A: equivalent in value to the sum or item specified.**

What is the point of living until the age of a hundred when it will most likely be connected to machines? Barely alive but barely dead. In the hospital, hardly a part of the humdrum beeps, buzzes, murmurs, and occasional chit-chat.

Bags are tubed into your stomach to infuse liquefied amino acids, protein, carbohydrates, and whatnot. Bags are tubed out of you to release bodily waste, like a full circle back to being a baby, but worse: bedridden, loss of taste, loss of sight, fatigue.

Blankets wrapped around you with one more, folded twice to fit around only your stomach. Since it's cold here. Apart from the chilly air biting the back of your throat, your hands lay in the middle of your body with whatever strength was left to cast that incessant fester out. 爸爸，医生会检查你 Papa said. You scrunch your face.

Will you even be aware that your son is talking to you instead of the nurse? Will you keep insisting that the food is too hot and should be placed in the freezer? You did that once. Put the chewy chai tow kway in there for a full two hours and secretly throw it away behind your wife's back.

Whenever you are presented with real food instead of it being tubed in, is it worth savoring your last bits of life when you don't even recognize yourself?

In the measly span of half a year, your body could no longer afford to nourish your hair, which was all lost. As you lay with legs extended, arms folded, hands placed on top of the chest, adjusting the head to face forward, you screech yourself upright.

Your body changed its priorities, so you are hardly able to live: to keep the heart beating, stomach churning, and brain

synapsing, your muscles deteriorated to nothing, bones protruding out as if they were needles stabbed through the skin-like fabric. With just enough time, your bones might as well burst out of your skin.

However, you insisted on not being put to sleep. To keep on living, if that's what you define, what you are now. Why—pride? Tradition? Religion? To show that you are still as healthy and strong as you were just a year ago, and nothing has really changed?

Oh, Grandpa. We still don't understand why you did what you did. Imagine the simple balance scale with chains suspended, each side holding a small container: your heart on one side could have been equal to the feather on the other—if not for your desperate running away from the inevitable truth.

You knew the time would come when you would be diagnosed with the incurable.

- The diagnosis was just paperwork, the fine print. Nevertheless, you've seen it in the lives of your father, your grandfather, and yourself. You lived not only one but two lives. No one ever gets three lives. Isn't that enough time to accept yours? Yet when the annoying gnawing from your stomach surfaces, you insist it was just something you ate wrong. "No doctor," you said. Did you know then what gnawed from inside you?

Were you lucid when you said those words, "I don't want to die here, I want to go back home"? It will remain a mystery and we'll never know what you truly wanted. You died in the hospital bed, not on the chair back at home when you said those words dazedly.

As if to complete the last of his memory, I would like to believe the plastic creaks it makes when sitting on it, and more will come when you press your weight down until you see the spinning ceiling fan. Like those times again.

**B: sufficiently good, important, or interesting to be treated or regarded in the way specified.**

Dizzily entranced, I try to focus my 20/50 eyes. Squinting clearly. It was always there. Merely not as noticeable when



Alone by Cora Jones

surrounded by constant attention, blindness, chatter, and dynamics. I sometimes feel it on lonely nights back home as I wonder what I will do with my life. And wow...how can life feel so lively and lonely simultaneously?

The loneliness hit especially hard. I couldn't remember what we were talking about. But they, my friends, would talk excitedly about something, and I would only contribute the "oohs" and "aahs," "yes," and "totally," laughs, nods, and smiles.

Looking back, I felt stupid. I probably was stupid—the shiny ornament, eager to be part of the tree, with its bling bling. In the sweltering summer, I would like to add. If you step back to marvel at the shininess, perhaps a red rubber nose atop a clown would be a better fit. At least a clown would look atrociously incongruous among the crowds.

I am tired of being in this circle, but I don't know how to start from scratch and find mine. It feels like we are all individual circles, constantly moving.

Bumping, overlapping, sticking.

The chaotic rule #1 is that rings are always moving. The chaotic rule #2 is that you can increase the radius of your circle. As surface area increases, the probability of superimposition. Hence, the goal is a circle so big that you are superimposed on top so snugly among the other small circles.

The more layers made, the more saturated they are atop the tiny circles. Deep with color. Deep in richness.

It is like a job.

You have to clock in, put your skills to the test, clock out, and refine them. It takes hard work. I am not condemning those who put in the hours into networking. In fact, I admired their drive and their grit to ignore those who may ridicule them.

But then again, the effort you put in builds memories and a supposedly closer, tighter friendship. The sunk cost fallacy. Is it tiredness, laziness, or attach-ness?

The hypocrisy of it all was the lengths I would take to be part of the group. Recalling that moment: thirteen years old, middle school, science class, friends for two years, and chit-chat.

It had been stale and quiet among my friends and me as of late. And that unsettles me. I can feel the status quo shifting internally and am not ready to be out externally. Walking into the science class, I heard the whispers and giggling in the corner of the room, where most students and friends were. I remember putting my bag down to the other corner and attempting to squeeze into the crowd.

"I hate Sam."

"Exactly. Why is he always so stuck up?"

"There is something wrong with the way he looks."

"The moment he opens his mouth, it's game over. He'll keep on rambling, rambling. Honestly, he should just shut up."

The remarks about Sam, one of the many new kids of that year who was a bit outspoken, geeky, and excited to share his opinions and knowledge, rolled like a snowball on a hill. With nothing left to say about his personality, his voice, face, race, height, parents, what makes him him, were tugged out of him one by one.

It seems that there was a hater for each aspect of him. The air continued to be childish and playful. We were little surgeons huddling around the patient insect. Light taps transformed into harsh stabs, causing the insect's abdomen to ooze pus. Its six legs were gradually plucked out one by one as the stick squashed it on the unforgiving concrete. Despite attempting to escape, the insect injured itself further by pulling off its legs.

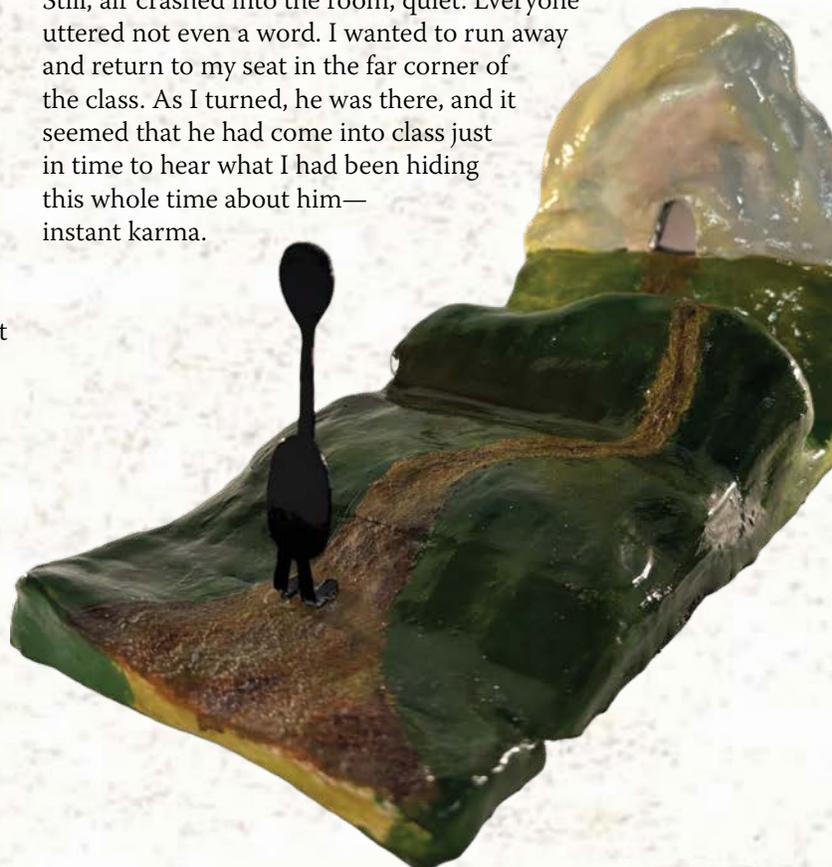
To us, it was voluntary. Sam was practically screaming to be a target—the price of inadaptability.

"Ying, what do you hate about Sam?"

"... ..He talks too much," hastily said to fill the staleness.

"... .. You're way too nice, Ying. That's not even something you should hate about." In other words, my "ridicule" wasn't even significant enough to be recognized. I still hate myself for giving in to the pressure.

Still, air crashed into the room, quiet. Everyone uttered not even a word. I wanted to run away and return to my seat in the far corner of the class. As I turned, he was there, and it seemed that he had come into class just in time to hear what I had been hiding this whole time about him— instant karma.



It was a split second that I could see his eyes before he shielded them with his hair and hands, hastily retreating to his seat, quiet. Ding-dong, ding-dong. That class that day was parched. It was as if that small moment had spilled through, even as it seemed that students who came at the last minute knew what had happened.

I feel sick, my head hurts, I feel lightheaded, and my neck is stiff: sweating palms, dodging eyes, shaking legs. I had been careless and wanted instant gratification—but now I wanted to go back, pick up my words, and stuff them down my throat.

It may be because I was still a thirteen-year-old teenager with the attention needs of a baby. For that tender age, its most severe symptoms included the gnawing of my teeth and the desire to be in the center of things. I wonder now if it will ever stop.

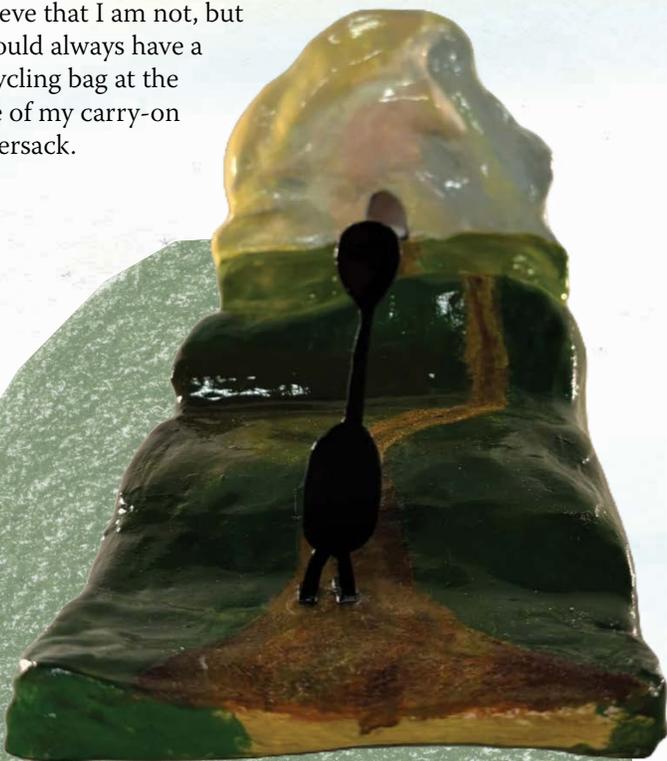
Once class ended, I huddled back with those friends. I wanted someone to dispel these symptoms, puncture and imbue me with feel-good pills, forcefully stuffed.

And they delivered: quenching and dismissing any atonements, as I was too scared to face him. To apologize. And I never did. Time flees as I fumble; I wonder if time has made him forget because I didn't. And never will.

Noun:

**C: the level at which someone or something deserves to be valued or rated.**

I'm an overpacker. I can't begin to count the number of times I would have to open my luggage to take out the items to make it weigh lighter. I like to believe that I am not, but I would always have a recycling bag at the side of my carry-on haversack.



The luggage and the carry-on are larger than the average size and look abnormally bulky by my side.

It's similar to when a child would wear their parent's shoes to take a few steps but only go as far as the hallway: sandals, sneakers, high heels, oxfords. You hop from one to the other, hoping to find the right size, but all are obviously too big to be mine. "Go straight, straight, and straight ahead!" Mama would encourage, on the other side.

It is not only the traveling days where I'll be away for more than a day but every time I go to school or go out for a meal as I scurried down the steps, was late, and was too afraid that I'd forget something. Suica, wallet, water bottle, hat, three lip balms, gloves, phone, earbuds, charger, creams, snacks, glasses, three glasses cloths, tissues, pen, I mumbled, often looking back to the door summoning anything I'd missed. Eventually, when I came back, I didn't even use almost half of them.

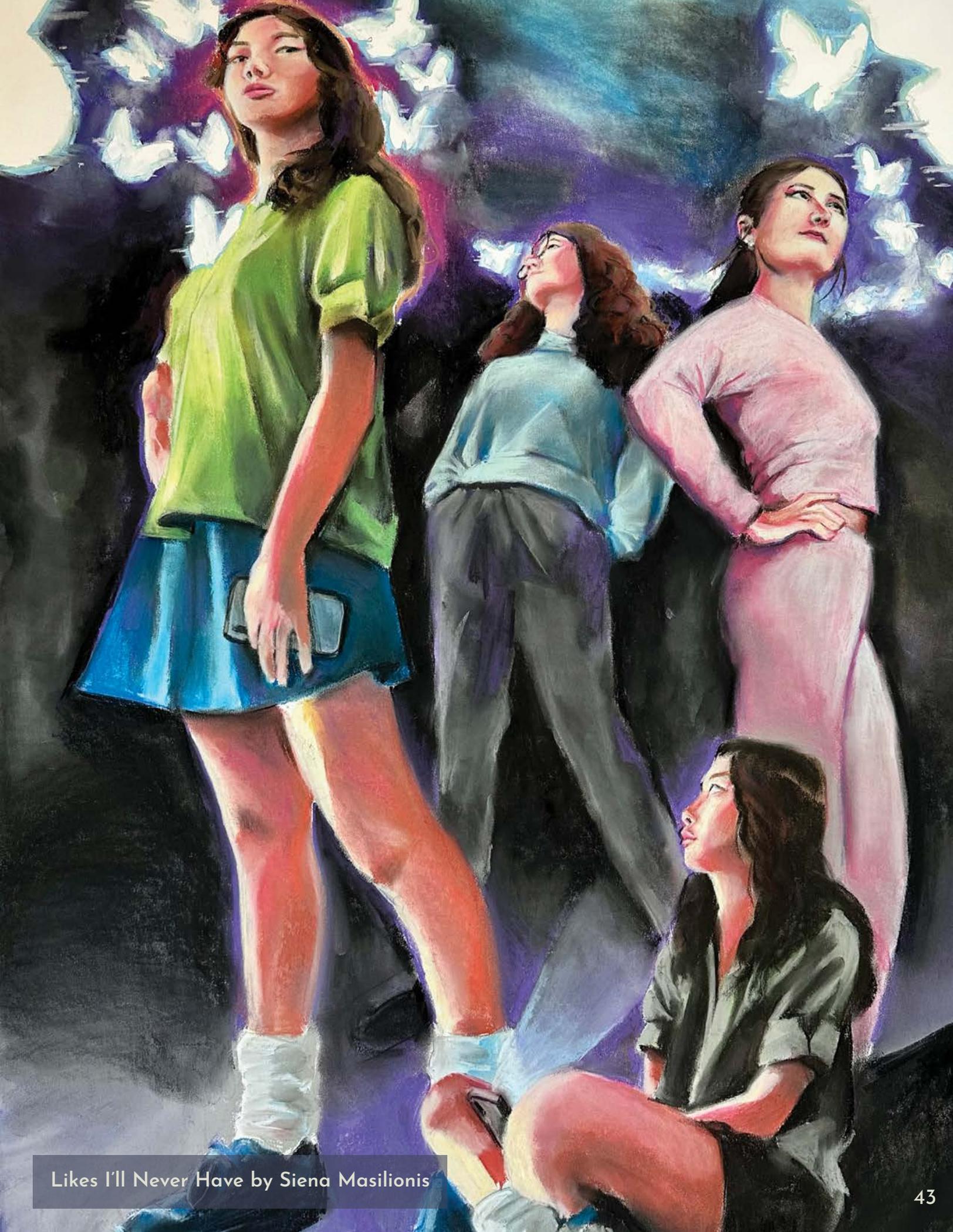
Besides being the person who stalls my family to check in the luggage, I would also say I'm an overachiever. Sleepless nights, too many club responsibilities, initiatives, meetings, events, too much homework, reports, tests, and exams.

I reasoned that it was because I didn't know what I wanted to do in the future. So, it seems I should be greedy and try it all. As quoted by my dad, "Try everything before you decide what you want." It may be unintentional, but I started stacking my wide range of odd commitments, and the attachment became sticky and stickier—stack and balance and stack and balance.

The tipping point is inching closer and closer, but not just yet. My choices may no longer be rational, as I downplay the toxins while accentuating the positive. I've gone too far. Time, effort, tears, sweat, blood, all given and spent. It can not go down the drain. Instead, overflowing the tub will be much better.

What started as a solution in an attempt to make life clearer became even murkier, vague, and ambiguous. In a similar fashion, you attempt to give directions to a stranger, but you overload it with information: proceed along the road until you encounter the second traffic light. At this point, you should decelerate and execute a left-hand turn, ensuring you observe all traffic regulations and yield to any oncoming vehicles or pedestrians.

It is no wonder that my heart gnaws.



Likes I'll Never Have by Siena Masilionis

# Wistoragic

by Lee D

*Characterized by lingering sadness and nostalgia following the recent end of a great story or series.*

## **Athazagoraphobia (Fear of being forgotten)**

Snow falls like anything else. It falls gently, coating the earth like a soft blanket. It coats the ground, burying it slowly, letting the ground fade from sight and fade from mind. It encases it and freezes everything under its deadly clasp.

No one wants to fall. Falling means being left behind. Falling means being trampled. The snow is always so pretty when it falls. But it gets crushed, turned slowly into gray slush. It's not pretty. Not anymore. No one wants it around now, not now. People want it gone, so they can forget it in the warmth of spring.

When the snow falls, it grows cold. It freezes your innards, slows your heart. Removes all feeling. All you can feel is anger. Anger at falling. Anger at being trampled, being forgotten.

When the ice freezes, it traps everything under it, or above it. A wall, separating us from down deep or up above. Preventing us from seeing through. Preventing us from seeing clearer. It's as cold up here as down there. It's so cold it blurs your eyes. When it's hard to blink, that's why. Why the world turned blurry, why black rims your vision, why the light fades, why does it matter that you're being forgotten? Why do you care? Why, why, why.

When the snow falls, it's pretty. When it falls, everyone loves it. It's welcomed, and cradled by soft hands. When it's crushed, it turns ugly. No one wants to hold it. Not anymore. That's why it turned bitter. It was forgotten. The ice clouds our eyes, forcing us to let the light fade. When the world turns white, it's soon to be forgotten.

So when the snow falls, and the world turns white. When the ice crowds, and turns your vision blank. That's when you know—and lord, you'll know it—that you've been forgotten.

## **Habromania (Delusions of happiness)**

When the snow fades, and the lilies bloom, the sun shines. It turns the ice into clouds, and you can see it again. The blue of the sky, and the taste of wind in your mouth. You can hear little songs from the sky, melodies drifting on the breeze.

It's still cold, but it fades with the coming of the flowers. The dandelions sprout, and the tiny crocus peeks up and sighs. Sighs from the relief of being let go, given the freedom to dance. The clouds turn white and fluffy and float on the breeze. The flowers sway, and dance.

Trees blossom little pools of green. Tiny sprouts to taste the wind. Little promises of hope and hope and hope.

The taste of freedom—found everywhere. The rising of the sun, and the setting of the moon. Dance with the flowers, or sing with the breeze. Lie down, and let the breeze stroke your cheeks. Let's lose all your sorrows, for tomorrow is a new day. Lie down and sleep.

Then it grows hot, and the flowers wilt, and the breeze turns dry. The taste of freedom, gone. Snatched from the air, removed from the sky.

It goes dry and dark. Black rims your vision. There's no cool glass of freedom because it's gone. It was taken away before it ever reached your thirsty lips. Taken away, like everything else that mattered once. Taken like the melodies from your throat.

When the birds come out to sing, when the flowers dance on the wind, it all goes away. When the clouds turn white and fluffy, and float on the breeze. When the dandelions sprout, and crocus peek up and sigh, it all disappears. It all floats away, on the sweet breeze. It all goes away on the height of it. No time to even fall, no time to try and climb back.

When the birds come back, the clouds turn white and fluffy and the flowers dance on the wind, it goes wrong. When the crocus peek up and sigh, and the sweet melodies float to you on the wind, let go. Let go of it all, for it's not there. Let go, for everything will disappear. Let go of the sweet *sweet* taste of happiness. It's delusional, for it will never come. Let go, let go, let go.

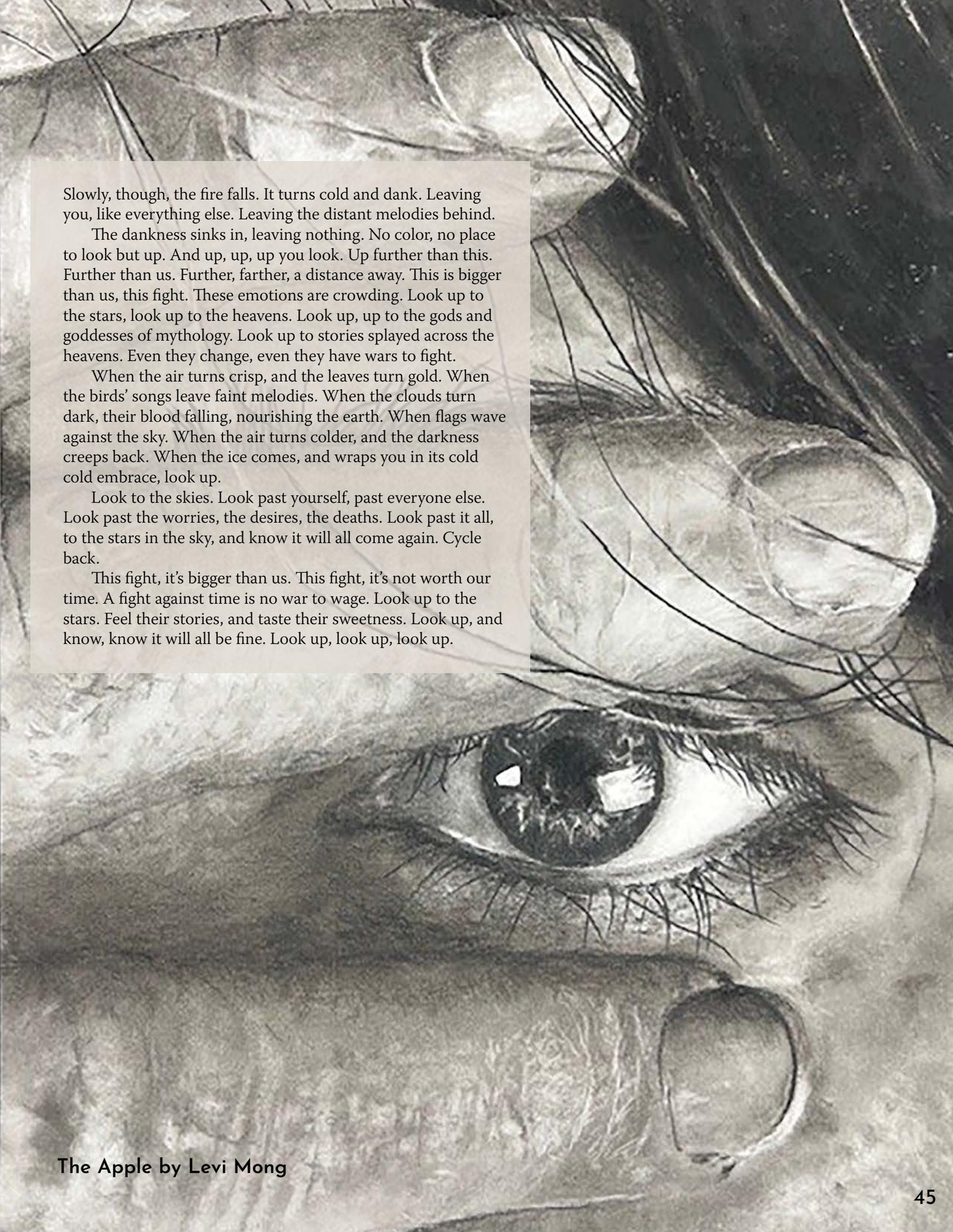
## **Novalunosis (The state of relaxation and wonderment experienced while gazing upon the stars)**

The leaves turn red and gold. They fall, like stars. Make a wish, and it will happen. The birds leave, their dying song ringing in your ears. The heat leaves, leaving a pleasant crispness there instead.

The clouds turn dark and ominous, and the fat drops of their blood fall down, nourishing the earth. Their calls rumble in your ears, there are waves of despair, of pride, flashing and dancing in the air. Forks of it, twirling up the clouds in pure rage.

The colors of red and gold, touched with orange dance atop the trees. Their flaming colors—proud against the blue sky. Like flags of danger, flags of war, flags to burn in the night sky. Beacons of pride, of war, of life.

The air is filled with wonder as the cold creeps in. The air turns bright. The taste of fire burns everywhere.



Slowly, though, the fire falls. It turns cold and dank. Leaving you, like everything else. Leaving the distant melodies behind.

The dankness sinks in, leaving nothing. No color, no place to look but up. And up, up, up you look. Up further than this. Further than us. Further, farther, a distance away. This is bigger than us, this fight. These emotions are crowding. Look up to the stars, look up to the heavens. Look up, up to the gods and goddesses of mythology. Look up to stories splayed across the heavens. Even they change, even they have wars to fight.

When the air turns crisp, and the leaves turn gold. When the birds' songs leave faint melodies. When the clouds turn dark, their blood falling, nourishing the earth. When flags wave against the sky. When the air turns colder, and the darkness creeps back. When the ice comes, and wraps you in its cold cold embrace, look up.

Look to the skies. Look past yourself, past everyone else. Look past the worries, the desires, the deaths. Look past it all, to the stars in the sky, and know it will all come again. Cycle back.

This fight, it's bigger than us. This fight, it's not worth our time. A fight against time is no war to wage. Look up to the stars. Feel their stories, and taste their sweetness. Look up, and know, know it will all be fine. Look up, look up, look up.

# Divine Angel of Teenage Girls

by Quinn Kelly

Your lips are painted red like the roses they make rosaries from. Melting the petals down to clay and shaping something new,

the way God shaped man from earth,  
a modicum of faith is crafted.

They drop a subtle shade of red, like plum wine mixed with vodka at a party where drinks are mixed faster than hearts are broken.

But the hearts are broken just the same.

Your heart is the same color as your lips, but instead of filled with life, it sports a frosted sheen: an icy protection against swords in the hands of lovers and daggers in the hands of friends.

Betrayed once, but never again.

Rouge paints your face: the space around your eyes, your cheeks, as you walk among all the other guests,

your mask is still a mask,  
but more of who you are shines  
through in your eyes than  
anyone else's.

Shimmer on your shoulders like stardust from the heavens;  
the perfect stargirl to light the way for egotistical men who think you owe them something.

The living room is more packed than the tomb they once adorned for you.

Girls in glitter and boys who think they will one day be men,  
slipping multicolored haze into things that aren't theirs.

Staring down the front of your shirt because  
of course you are both too drunk to remember it later.

The makeup is your face: the face you wear for other people.

No one has to know, do they?

That you're real?

That there is no separation between this world and the next?

You Have My Heart by Lily Klein



Hark! by Katie Mueller

# Growing Up and Down

by Saskia Sommer

*"You've grown"*

Increments specked across a  
patronizing white  
stadimeter indicate  
that as seasons passed  
and branches turned  
betroted,  
brittle,  
barebones  
of mine  
stretched

And my joints rewired.

now, I'm an eighth of  
an inch more  
than what I used  
to be.

*"I've  
grown"*

Grown into the  
soles  
of shoes my toes  
never quite touch  
the tip of it all -  
through the  
*tying*

then  
*untying*  
of laces

I stay bound to the size I've succumbed to  
and yet,  
I am growing.

growing at a static stand still  
silently shouting soft, similar songs  
and sulking in the soliloquies of simpler times.

*"We've grown"*

Skin stretched  
knuckles knocked  
we retreat to a  
retrospective view,  
when the sun could not burn us  
quite so well  
and the specks,  
freckles then,  
served as  
subtle refuge  
from  
goosebumps,  
giggles,  
and the giddy echo of  
youth.

I  
look  
to my  
little sister.  
*"She's grown!"*

I proclaim,  
astounded at how her  
eyes now meet mine; she is  
sweeter and stronger  
than she was,  
so I let her  
coming-of-age  
slip my mind  
because small sisters  
and saccharine safeties  
make me short again.  
Waning  
Whispers  
Warn me  
We were girls then  
and  
Women tomorrow  
and  
somehow,

I am growing  
—still.

Childhood Memories by Madeleine Raines

“What fine rewards my peerless

beauty will bring you.



All too late you experience the

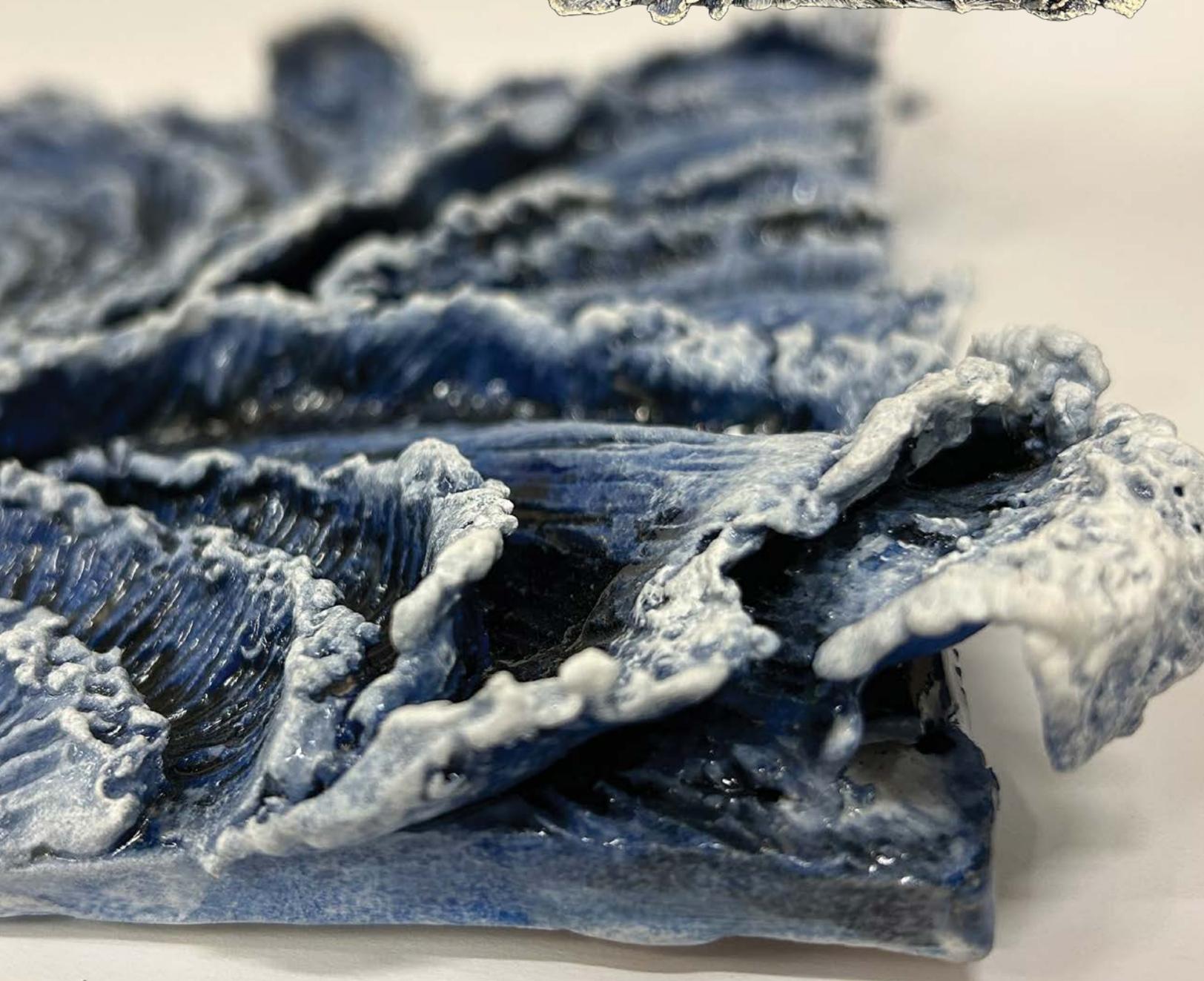
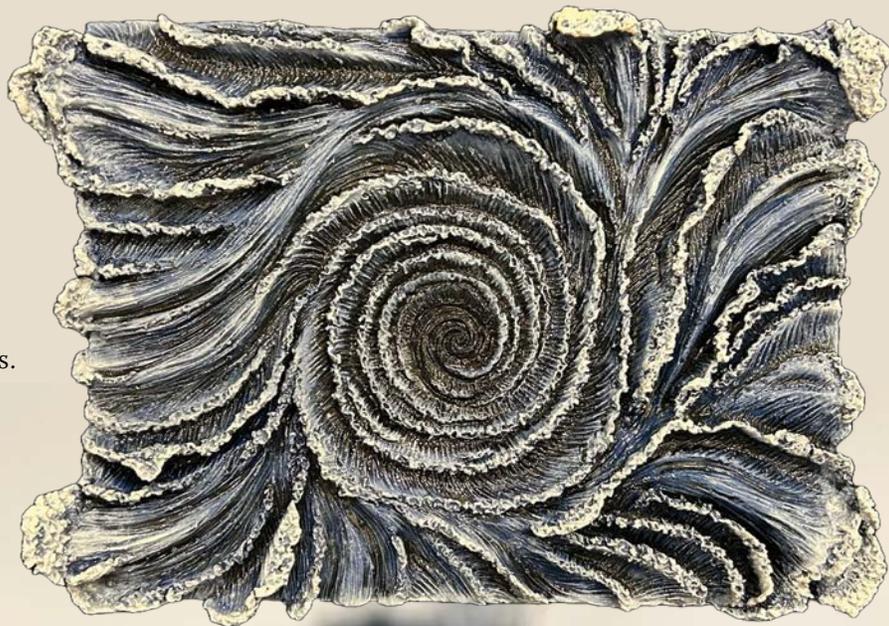
mortal wounds inflicted by impious envy.”

Mortal Wounds by Ramsey Browne

# The Sky

by Nima Dana

I look up at the clear sky  
Scattered with white dots like a polka-dotted tie  
The cosmos,  
Filled with rocks and trash, space compost.  
If each small star is a sun and our sun is so big  
If we are so small to our sun, the smallest of stars.  
Then what am I in space?  
Why do I matter so much  
If I'm just another dot on a polka-dot tie?





# Ladoos

by Anonymous

Market spices always made me feel ill. The aroma would go straight to the back of my olfactory cortex, pounding the inner walls of my head.

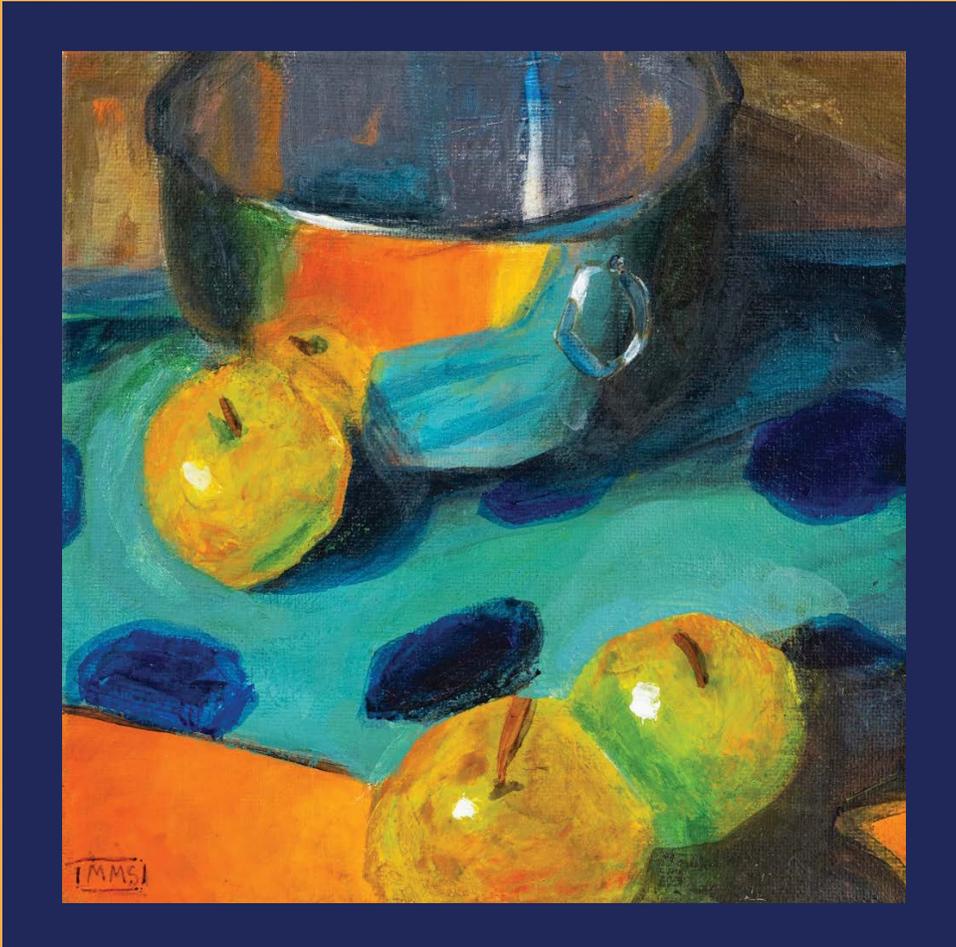
“Don’t lie,” Mother always said, “God is watching.” I never spoke a single word. “Don’t meddle,” she said as I messed around with things that are not ought to be messed with. God is watching. “Don’t steal,” she said. God is watching. But when she turned her back to the kitchen counter I always grabbed an extra ladoo and enclosed my sticky hands around it in a warm embrace, hoping that God wasn’t watching.

“Amma,” I cried while my mother trapped me in layers upon layers of fabric. “Why must I wear these clothes? They itch and scratch. Look Amma! I can’t even raise my arms.” “We must wear them to feel a connection to our religion.” I placed my arms down as she continued to pleat fabrics and drain them on my shoulder.

It was always about God. He would get me good grades, bring me good luck, and make all my wishes come true.

“We are all disciples,” Amma recited as she did my hair and put it into its ordinary plait.

I never bothered to learn what it meant. All that mattered was that after we prayed, we got ladoos.



Fruits of Labor by Madison Smith

## In The Warmth of the Golden Sun

by Jaiden Li

It is a nondescript summer day. Hot, but in the way all summer days are, entirely unremarkable on its own. My mother, ever the artist, takes one look at the sprawling canvas of blues and grays and browns before her, so at odds with the outside world, and decides it needs remedying.

She asks me, *Ni xiang chi mang guo ma? Do you want to eat mango?*

I consider a million things to tell her. It is too hot outside to be eating sticky fruit. Upon peeling and serving the fruit, I would politely ask her if she wanted some as well, to which she would say no, and a meaningless back-and-forth would ensue until one of us would inevitably leave the kitchen in a fit of rage. *This time*, I think, gathering my courage and thoughts and buried feelings, *I'll tell her. I'll tell her what I really think.*

When I meet her eyes, however, I see her golden vision reflected in them. I see her bearing the heat of the golden sun and serving it to me, her muse, in the form of warm golden fruit. My mother is too good at making the outside world palatable; she softens its edges with her artist's brush and beats the harder parts into submission with a gentle lift of the finger. It is why I yield to her demands, I think, because I want a slice of the world she has envisioned for us: vibrant, utopian, colorful. It is this vision that has brought our family here to *měi guó*, America, the land of beauty; to this suburb, where each house is a perfect mirror image of the next; to this home, with its semi-transparent, semi-colorful inhabitants. My mother will not settle for less.

She takes my lack of response for a yes, a product of the malaise in the summer air she's taken upon herself to cure, and takes a kitchen knife out of her artist's toolbox.

While she's peeling the mango and stripping it to its pulpy essence she stops and swears, loudly, and I realize she has cut her finger against the knife's edge. The gush of red reminds me too much of her love and so I look away. But I do not forget. It is my mother's gift and curse to effortlessly transform the mundane into something out of the ordinary.

We are walking on the streets of Lisbon and waiting at a traffic light when my mother turns to my father and asks him to take a picture of me. I stand, awkward, with all the awareness of a muse who knows she's being watched. *Quickly, now!* She urges.

The light turns green. I make no effort to move as my father fumbles in his bag for his phone and passersby cross in the space between us, unaware that the middle-aged Asian couple gesturing wildly at each other are arguing about me, their daughter, standing still as a statue. Or, more accurately, they're arguing over the treatment of their muse—which angle to take the picture from, whether I should smile, and whose camera quality is better.

Finally, my mother throws her phone on the ground in exasperation. People stare.

She's crying. *How hard is it, she weeps, how hard is it to take a picture?*

I want so badly to tell her, *You are making a scene. We are in a foreign country and these people are looking at us funny and my eyes are prickling under the weight of their scrutiny. We can always take another picture later—*

—But I know that it is not true, that once my mother has a vision, it is impossible to replicate it under any circumstance except the one in which it was born. I also know that it is not my place to tell her that taking a picture is like writing a story, that there is an inherent impossibility to creating art that she knows better than anyone else. Instead I watch, silently, as my father picks up the phone and searches for directions to the Thai restaurant that sells mango fried rice as though nothing has happened.

I am not the dynamic tornado that is my mother nor the cool apathy that makes up my father. When they get entangled in a messy blur, colors swirling to produce a cloudy nebula that threatens to consume the universe, it's all I can do to stay out of it.

When I was a child, I committed the worst crime an artist could possibly think of—tampering with another's work. Colored pencils in hand, I assaulted my mother's black-and-white painting with color: green for the lotuses, blue for the water, and droplets of pink everywhere.



**Lost In Thought by Kaila Burnside**

Upon seeing my kaleidoscopic vision, my mother promptly fainted. Then, after recovering from her initial shock, gave me the scolding of a lifetime. *Never, ever touch what isn't yours.*

But that is the only piece of art I can say for certain we have ever created *together*. To this day it hangs in our living room as proof of *us*, our shared handiwork: the color extending beyond my mother's smooth lines, the oblong shapes peering curiously above the sea of blue, and its unfinished quality all an amalgamation of who we are. Some parts of the painting are so blurred you can't tell where my mother ends and I begin. It may not have been a collaboration in earnest,

but neither is the relationship between predecessor and successor, between mother and daughter. The former always lays the groundwork for the latter.

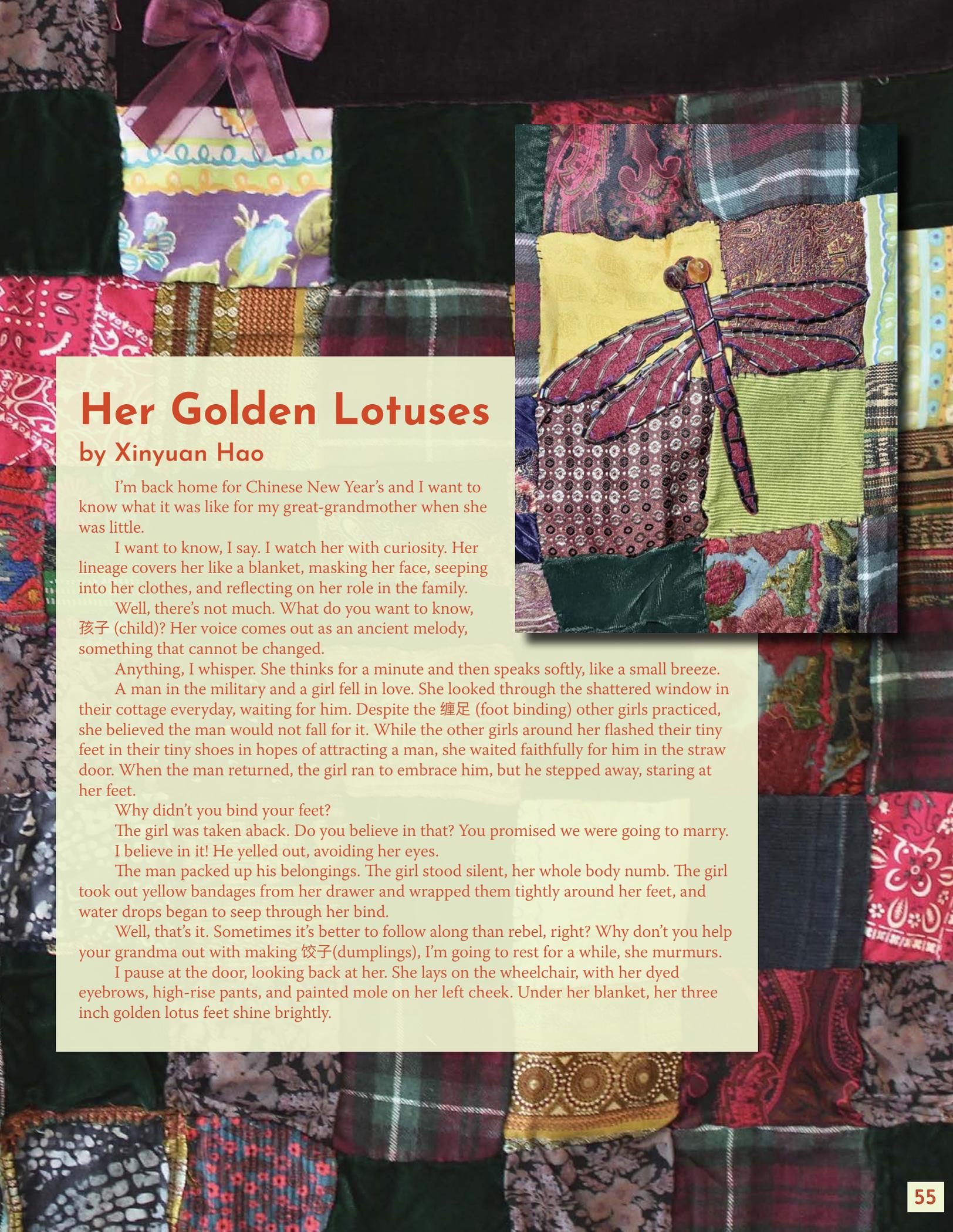
Mother and daughter. Artist and muse. Doesn't it all get a bit tiring? We must have lived a million lifetimes like this stubbornly confined to our own roles, the visionary and the realist. All the while, my mother has been dimming herself for the sake of other's frail visions, and soon there will be nothing left for her to give.

For her forty-second birthday, I decide against getting my mom a camera. I buy one anyway.

What a cosmic joke! It is a worthwhile endeavor, I think: to make my mother my muse.

Personal Flag by Zoey Karr





# Her Golden Lotus

by Xinyuan Hao

I'm back home for Chinese New Year's and I want to know what it was like for my great-grandmother when she was little.

I want to know, I say. I watch her with curiosity. Her lineage covers her like a blanket, masking her face, seeping into her clothes, and reflecting on her role in the family.

Well, there's not much. What do you want to know, 孩子 (child)? Her voice comes out as an ancient melody, something that cannot be changed.

Anything, I whisper. She thinks for a minute and then speaks softly, like a small breeze.

A man in the military and a girl fell in love. She looked through the shattered window in their cottage everyday, waiting for him. Despite the 缠足 (foot binding) other girls practiced, she believed the man would not fall for it. While the other girls around her flashed their tiny feet in their tiny shoes in hopes of attracting a man, she waited faithfully for him in the straw door. When the man returned, the girl ran to embrace him, but he stepped away, staring at her feet.

Why didn't you bind your feet?

The girl was taken aback. Do you believe in that? You promised we were going to marry. I believe in it! He yelled out, avoiding her eyes.

The man packed up his belongings. The girl stood silent, her whole body numb. The girl took out yellow bandages from her drawer and wrapped them tightly around her feet, and water drops began to seep through her bind.

Well, that's it. Sometimes it's better to follow along than rebel, right? Why don't you help your grandma out with making 饺子 (dumplings), I'm going to rest for a while, she murmurs.

I pause at the door, looking back at her. She lays on the wheelchair, with her dyed eyebrows, high-rise pants, and painted mole on her left cheek. Under her blanket, her three inch golden lotus feet shine brightly.



# Taking My Sunshine Piece by Piece

by Emily Weldon

*A blooming handful of violet flowers,  
The beautiful journey of being loved and lost.  
A body, fragile and breakable, yet as light and magnificent  
as a blossomed plant.  
Weeping and eroding as time progresses to the end,  
The journey of life is revealed.*

Losing a loved one, a special person, is a pain one should not bear. The duality of life should be reflected in every individual in order to live through their memory.

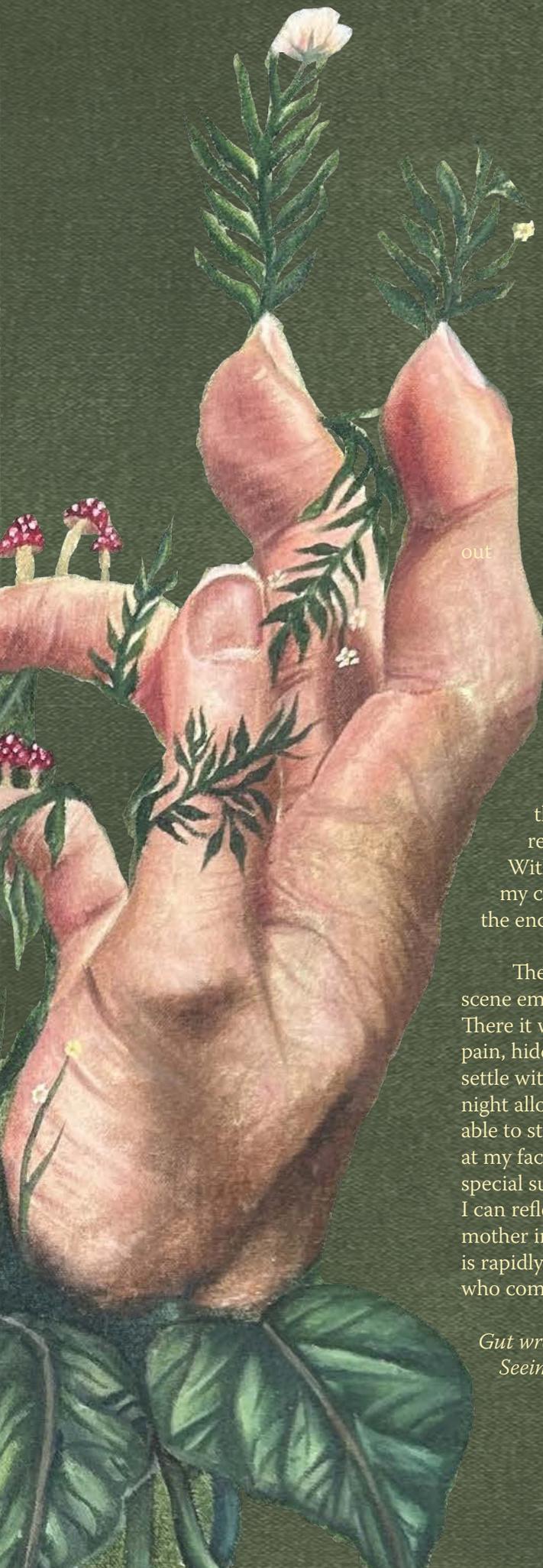
My precious person is still alive and kicking on this planet. Although her thin, shiny hair could practically wash away in the wind and her legs no longer support her like they used to. Her daily tasks have grown to become tiring and more involved. A walker will always be spotted by her side, to support her heavy weighted heart and body. She is often having to visit doctors for check-ups, almost weekly. Her full heart began to lose its strength so blood began to leak from her valves. Her body is failing but her soul is still flourishing.

*The lungs of a fragile being implode during the last  
gasping breaths.  
A shaking, violent rattle is emitted from their  
mouth,  
The mouth of your sunshine.  
Pain shudders through their body,  
Almost enough to where their fingertips are able  
to transfer such harsh energy.*

As I grow up, I begin to reflect and perceive the reality behind her failing body. Her spirit still flows with grace and the light rays she emits brighten a room, but her body can no longer suffice at her age. Piece by piece, I watch her fade. Even though she is still functioning, the reality behind the concept of the person in front of you being taken by the dreary future is ever so draining.

I appreciate and long for every moment I spend with her. She is like sweet candy; sweet candy with a sour punch, makes you smile but pucker your lips after a taste. The bitterness that touches your taste buds before the sweet tasting candy follows. The feeling is similar to a vicious punch being followed with a warm embrace. She was a hard shelled woman. Strong and independent, yet caring and





tender. She has provided me with shining wisdom. Her tone of expression never fades and on her last breath, I believe she will give me the same funky attitude she had built from birth.

On a Tuesday night, after a long day of school and having my social battery be drained, I was in need of a rest. This night upset my routine and further enhanced my ability to worry. I went downstairs to inform my mom of some news that I know her humorous self would find entertaining. I found her standing in the kitchen, eyes red and puffy, face flaking and drooping, not in a way that shows age but her face drooped with sadness. The next words that were uttered from her mouth fell on the floor like a dead weight. They sat there staring back at me. She told me that my nana was hospitalized and found hallucinating in her front lawn. My mom couldn't get a word out after that. The words glared into my mind as everything became foggy. The air became thin and I longed for more information to heal the feeling of a brick in my gut. Seeing my mom so weak in that moment made me realize I needed to hold back my tears. The waterfalls I wanted to release needed to be subdued in order to keep peace and to stay strong. She was hurting thinking about her own mother in this situation and I was hurting thinking of the pain my mother was going through. The relationship with my nana is like sunlight. On a gloomy day, the beams of light shining through the murky skies can make someone's life bright. Our relationship is one of the most important things I hold on to. With this new dilemma, the only thing I was able to do was hold my chest in agony. Staying brave was the only way to power through the enclosing pain in my chest.

These fragile seconds landed on the surface of my brain and the scene embedded itself into my thoughts every time I closed my eyelids. There it was, all the possibilities, all the answers, all the hope, fear, all the pain, hidden behind my eyes. Unable to reach the answers, I learnt to settle within my thoughts and embrace the fear of the unknowing. This night allowed me to reflect on all sorts of situations. I wonder how I was able to stay brave through the gut wrenching pain that was just thrust at my face. The pain that comes behind worry and fear, of losing your special sunshine, battled within me for a while. A while enough where I can reflect on the strength I endured to keep a fearless face for my mother in agony. Although I may still have my sunshine, the ending that is rapidly approaching nails itself into my brain. Watching the woman who completes my puzzle be taken piece by piece.

*Gut wrenching pain to witness this event,  
Seeing someone lose grip of their soul.*



# Where's My Sporking Place?

by Lila Ahitov

You would think that versatility would be appreciated.

Small forks and spoons for dessert, big ones for entrees.

There's a knife equipped for steak, butter, and cheese.

The amount of money, plastic, and materials used for cutlery is astonishing.

Certainly, each silverware race was created equally.

But in the kitchen drawer, where there is a myriad of dividers, there is never one dedicated to sporks.

# In the Early Summer

by Allison M. Hedgepeth

In the Early Summer,  
I drink sticky gold sunshine and nibble velvet pink roses  
and breathe the air of Saturday mornings:  
Saturday mornings when I wake up to a tangle of sheets  
clock hands at 7:30  
window draped in sleeves of sun and the brush of a breeze  
the Outside Green smiling so vibrantly that all other greens are a muddy brown.  
Saturday mornings when I open my door and inhale  
dark, fresh coffee, ground and pressed and poured  
sweet air of the blue sky filtered through the screen door  
lemon and eucalyptus cleaning spray, settling down on the upturned house,  
dark and sweet and lemony with Green and Blue and Golden Pink.

One day, when I am young and married and my children awake from Friday night slumber,  
I hope my husband likes coffee and open doors and early-morning cleaning,  
because that is what my children need to draw in their nostrils  
and swallow down to their toes.

There will be something for my husband, too,  
to awaken his nostalgia, maybe on Sunday afternoons or snow days or in thunderstorms.  
We will dig up the memories that are an aroma to him, and I will also love them.

We will, without knowing it, create something else besides:  
something flavorful and homey that our children will know  
one day, when they are young and married and their children...



Lemon Branch  
by Emma Clement



Nostalgia by Lily Klein

# All Summer

by Heidi Nelson

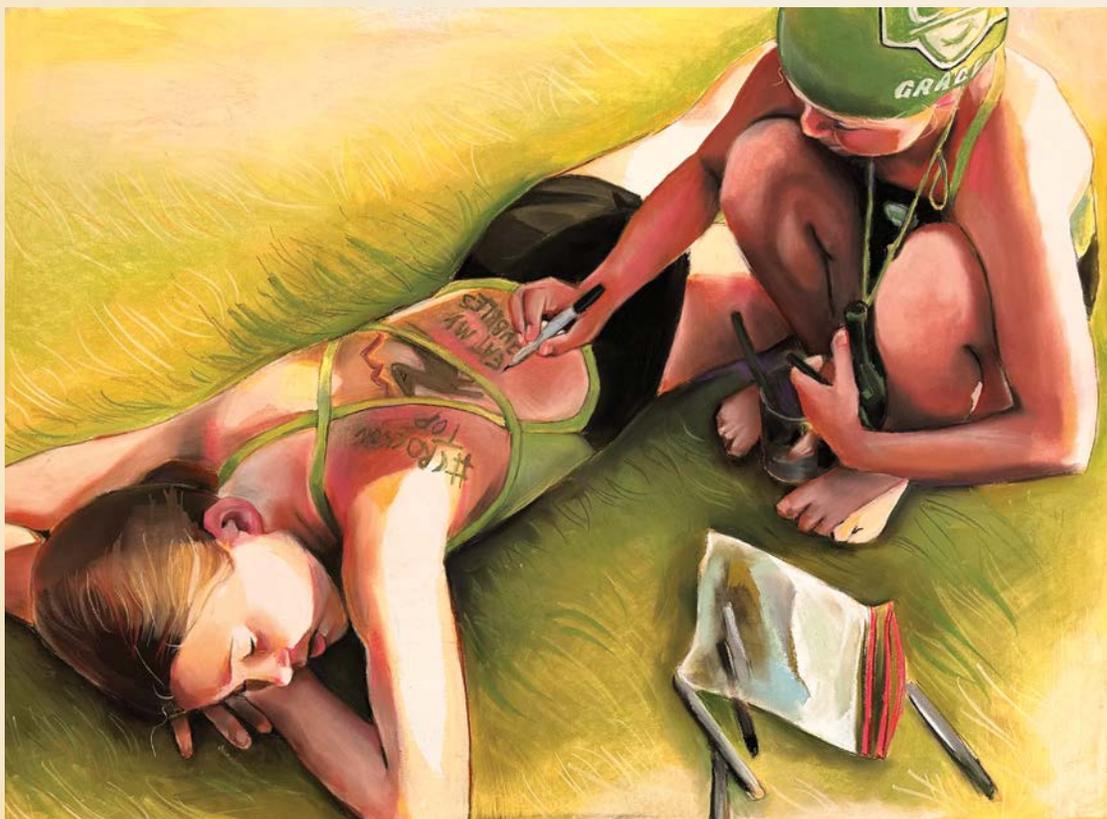
I hope you have a sweet summer,  
I want you to swim fast, win the race and smile.  
And while you wear that medal,  
text me that you won and beat your best time.

It doesn't matter that we haven't talked since  
last summer,  
Because everytime I stand on the block  
about to swim my race,  
I wonder if you are doing the same, just down the street.  
I think of you all 50 meters.

Summer is a hard time for you,  
You thrive in school and now you can't find identity in anything.  
Last summer I was there for you,  
who is here for you right now?



A Dream Realized by Siena Masilionis



Not asking in a petty way,  
but genuine.  
I can't sleep peacefully,  
unless I know you are  
being taken care of.

If you have to urge to leave  
this earth,  
Like last year,  
Text me.  
I'll be here all summer.

Eat My Bubbles  
by Siena Masilionis



Divine Set Path by Kinley Silliman

## Finish Line

by Kaela Li

I walk on the remains of my ancestors, down twisted and treacherous paths. I carry the scars of generations slung over one shoulder, pulling me off balance, and on the other I bear the silence of a thousand words unsaid.

Before me lie the ghosts of people gone before, their voices gone hollow from bitten tongues and screams. Try as I might, I cannot name them, because they were forgotten in the sands of time. But I know them, and I see them, and I hold their likenesses to my chest. They are my aunts and uncles, my cousins and grandparents and kin, and I will never let them go.

I am sorry.

I am not who you want me to be, cannot perfectly fit shoes that were never made for human feet. I am tired of trying to cut myself to fit in your ironclad box.

But still, I am here, walking this path, carrying these burdens. And surely that's enough?

I am here, and you cannot deny me, because I am all that's left. And you cannot deny me, because I am the shadows on this trail, and I am carrying you forward. I am carrying you forward.

I am carrying you to the finish line.

The Right Play  
by Emma  
Clement



writers

Nathan Aaron, back cover  
Sid Abelson, 16  
Isabella Ahern, 9  
Lila Ahitov, 18, 22, 58  
Anonymous, 10  
Anonymous, 51  
Sophie Bendersky, 37  
Geneva Bennett, 27  
Dylan Chan, 20  
Samantha Ciociola, 5  
Talon Cleveland, 15  
Peyton Commerer, 4

Lee D, 44  
Prisha Dalal, 26, 32  
Nima Dana, 50  
Sarah Devney, 14  
Roman Fent, 12, 17  
Gaven Graham, 21  
Diana Ha, 7  
Xinyuan Hao, 55  
Allison M. Hedgepeth, 59  
Anita Marie Júlca, 1  
Hannah Karim, 8  
Quinn Kelly\*, 46

Kriti Kumar, 25  
Lili Lang, 6  
Ying Ham Lee, 40  
Jaiden Li, 52  
Kaela Li, 61  
May Lin, 11, 28  
Andie McGregor, 39  
Heidi Nelson, 60  
Deetya Rajan, 34  
Aakanksha Roy, 36  
Sophie S, 38  
Chloe Schoenfeld, 64

artists

Sydney Anderson\*, 22, 23  
Hala Bayazid\*, 7, 11, 39, 56  
Ramsey Browne\*, 20, 25, 49  
Kaila Burnside\*, 1, 17, 18, 29, 53, back cover  
Anna Cameron, 15  
Emma Clement, 36, 59, 62  
Evelyn Fisher\*, 13, 33, 37  
Charley Godsil\*, 13, 50  
Andrew Guyer\*, 35  
Paige Horne\*, 27

Cora Jones\*, 4, 40  
Dante de Jong, 16  
Zoey Karr\*, 54  
Lily Klein\*, 4, 9, 36, 38, 46, 59  
Sean Lee, 58  
Siena Masilionis\*, front cover, 8, 21, 24, 43, 60  
Han Mellenbruch, 16  
Eva Minor\*, 41, 64  
Levi Mong\*, 6, 45  
Katie Mueller, 47

Suits  
by Macy Orrick

# INDEX

## Shooting Stars Scholars

Special thanks to the Shooting Stars Program, presented by the Arts Council of Johnson County. Authors and artists with \* next to their names are a part of the 2025 program. For more information about Shooting Stars, please visit:

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Ruby Seidner, 24  
Saskia Sommer, 48  
Zoie Tran, 19  
Emily Weldon, 56

Macy Orrick\*, inside front cover, 10, 26, 31, 63  
Tinsley Prenger, 52  
Madeleine Raines, 5, 14, 48  
Kinley Silliman\*, 30, 61  
Madison Smith\*, 2, 6, 51, inside back cover  
Laiken Vorthmann\*, 2  
Olivia Wang, 14

## SPECIAL THANKS

Josh Adkins, Elissa Andre, Erin Barnes, Cristy Chapman, Katie Coen, Meagan Condon, Cara Duncan, Simone Folsom, Cindy Frazer, Melanie Fuemmeler, Shannon Goebel, Helen Hokanson, Joseph Keehn, Aubrey Kennedy, Melody Kinnamon, Jennifer Mahnken, Kate McNair, Glenn North, Shelley O'Brien, Brian Oertel, Gladis O'Toole, Leah Payne, Lydia Perez, Cameron Pratte, Rees Purdom, Kinsley Riggs, Tricia Rightmire, Megan Rome, Scott Stone, Tricia Suellentrop, Ben Sunds, Angel Tucker, Nancy Velazquez, Adam Wathen, Jayma Zook



My Brother Ate My Homework by Eva Minor

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This publication was assembled using Adobe InDesign CC2025. All layouts materialized using Adobe CC2025 software. Primary typeface is Josefin Sans. Printed by NextPage in Kansas City, MO, in April 2025.

*elementia* is proudly supported by the Joan Berkley Writers Fund of the Johnson County Library Foundation. Consider a gift to help more young writers and artists experience the joy of publishing. Give online at [jocolibraryfoundation.org](http://jocolibraryfoundation.org).



# legacy

## elementia xxiii

Submissions due Jan. 1, 2025

What is Legacy? It is an essential component of time: connecting what we remember from the past onward into what continues to shape the events of history long after we are gone.

However, Legacy is also a mark of the individual, YOU, who can choose what you want your legacy to be, as it is also the bringer of choice and change. Instead of defining what Legacy is, it matters more what it can be, what it has the potential to grow into, and that power that remains with you, our powerful teen voices.

Tell us your stories, bring us your visions and share your Legacy with us.

[jocolibrary.org/elementia](http://jocolibrary.org/elementia)

## Legacy

by Chloe Schoenfeld

legacy left a stain on every shirt i ever borrowed  
everything i ever gave came with a smell of loving  
of keepsakes and keeping safe

legacy is bundled up tight in a little box  
high up in a kitchen cabinet  
legacy is written on postcards and note cards  
the backs of scrap paper and magazines with  
notes in the margins  
saying this was from an old roommates  
grandmother so i'm keeping it forever  
saying this was from my closest cousin gone  
except for scribbles on a piece of paper  
guiding me to make their signature loving that  
tasted just right

legacy sits in the living room right next to the front  
door  
decorated with memories and baby pictures  
playing beautiful and not-beautiful music every day

legacy answers my calls from another time zone in  
the middle of the day  
to calm me down, listening to my rambling  
legacy tells me about the latest book it read  
about hidden how-to guides for bringing home

legacy is hanging on a chain around my neck  
engraved into a piece of itself  
legacy asked me what my last name was and i said it  
was legacy  
legacy faded away with an "i miss you already"

legacy left without me  
legacy left me with more of me  
legacy came and went to make me an  
amalgamation of hand-me-downs  
that i patchwork into a quilt of my own legacy

Decay  
by Kaila Burnside

## Fading Echoes

by Nathan Aaron

When I'm gone, let my memories scatter like falling leaves, each one a fleeting moment drifting gracefully in the wind. Let laughter echo like the final notes of a song, soft yet filled with warmth that lingers. Collect the small acts of love, the laughter that bubbled up in quiet rooms, and the silences that spoke volumes. Hold these moments close, pressed like flowers in a cherished book—delicate, yet enduring. Remember me as someone who cherished the simple beauty of each passing moment, like morning light slipping through curtains, with memories gradually fading yet never forgotten.