

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. We accept submissions from around the world in addition to local writers and artists. *elementia* takes on a new theme each year; this year's submissions were inspired by **Legacy**.

In a whirlwind of letters and lines, we collected stories that reverberated across place and time and converged into a mosaic of inheritance. By examining pieces that explored and redefined the echoes that people leave behind and how they resonate into the future, we were able to appreciate how different writers interpreted the theme of Legacy. Our published writers and artists expressed their vulnerability by sharing deeply personal works of culture, institutions, family, change and more. We hope you find something you relate to, as well as something that helps you understand your own legacy in a new perspective.

The *elementia* editors and designers are immensely grateful to the writers and artists whose work brings courage and talent to these pages. This magazine is our love letter to our community, the legacies we hope to leave behind and the ones we have observed.

Teens, *elementia* now invites you to submit your original pieces of writing and art that explore the theme of **Entropy** at [jocolibrary.org/elementia](http://jocolibrary.org/elementia). The universe tends towards disorder. Do you bend into the chaos, or do you break through it? Where do you fall in a world of never-ending change? How will you make sense of the senseless? Share your experiences and bring your entropy to us.

## False Start

by Hailey Tam

I think I met regret before I met myself.  
It stood in the doorway of a dream,  
Pretending to be a possibility.

Maybe regret begins softly,  
Like a song you skip too early  
And spend the rest of your life trying to remember.  
Like ghosts of futures in my spine,  
Only knocking when I'm quiet,  
Whispering drafts of the person I never finished being,  
Asking if I still believe in becoming.

Regret doesn't arrive with wrinkles,  
It arrives with awareness.  
In the stillness between "not yet" and "no longer."  
It blooms when you stop believing in infinite summers,  
When you realize that even dreams have deadlines.

Youth feels counterfeit now,  
Bright but already spent.  
Somewhere, a younger me is still dreaming,  
Not knowing I've already stopped.  
I ask the night when regret begins.  
It answers softly,  
"When you start counting the stars  
And realize you've lost the urge to name them."



Frames Left Behind by Adib Rabbani

# The Place Where I Go to Become

by Gia Defortuna

Begins like this:

a hush in the chest,  
a ripple through the ribs,  
as if a thought just brushed past me  
on its way to become something else.  
Not mine yet,  
but circling.

Sometimes it feels like drowning in velvet.  
Sometimes like being kissed by a secret.  
Sometimes like being looked at  
by something I haven't written yet.

The room appears.  
It's not always the same,  
sometimes a train car,  
sometimes a kitchen at 2 a.m.,  
sometimes the inside of my own mouth.

I used to write for control,  
now I write because there's nowhere else  
I can put the beauty.

Because I once mistook a metaphor for God  
and haven't quite recovered.  
Because there are versions of myself  
I have to resurrect  
to mourn properly.  
They arrive barefoot,  
dragging old notebooks behind them  
like sleeping animals.

I write in defense of small things:  
a chipped teacup,  
a girl with ink under her fingernails,  
the second before a candle goes out  
when the flame forgets it's leaving.

I write not to explain,  
but to unearth.  
To pull the quiet out by its roots.  
To turn ache into architecture.  
To stitch a sentence so precisely  
it hums when I read it back.

Some days, I'm a little girl  
pressing her palm to the mirror.  
Some days, I'm the mirror,  
fogged,  
silver-backed,  
holding a face I almost remember.

I write because it's the only time  
I'm not pretending.  
Because it hurts not to.  
Because the silence inside me  
wants a name.

And when the writing comes,  
bright-eyed, blood-warm,  
already halfway to vanishing,  
I follow.

Not to be saved,  
but to become.



*This publication may contain controversial material. Kansas law prohibits the suppression of a student-based publication solely because it involves political or controversial subject matter. Johnson County Library and its board members, officers and employees may disclaim any responsibility for the content of this publication; it is not an expression of Library policy.*

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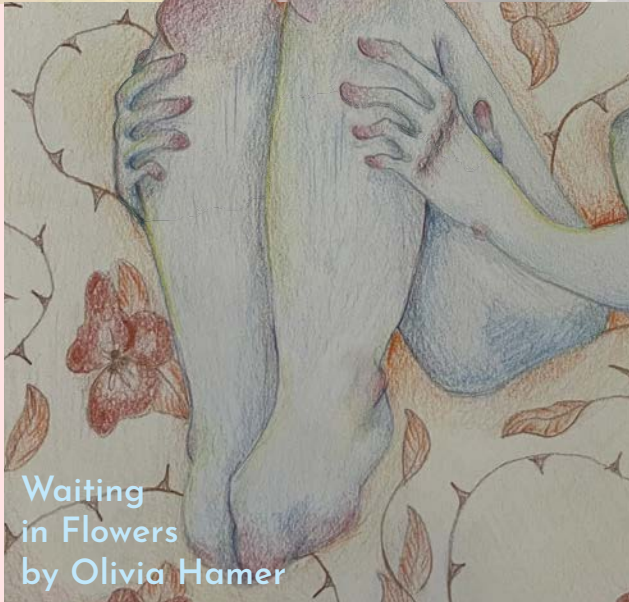


# Chaos in a Flower Shop

by Ethan Zhuang



My Dream Scape  
by Rachel Young



Waiting  
in Flowers  
by Olivia Hamer

The Butterfly flaps  
Long  
ago, not Fate nor  
Divine,  
just the Beginning of motion.

The Breeze whistles on, growing louder until stars ignite  
and Matter  
all bursts outward into one Big  
bloom of plasma. Everything (eventually)  
organizes itself. Life  
is born from The Breeze

and collides into wheels and cities and weapons  
and a man in a flower shop Saturday evening.  
finite space with Infinite outcomes—Too Much  
choice, and no way to tell right from wrong;  
sunflowers feel performative  
roses overdone  
lilies too quiet

rows of colorful curves unfurl painfully to Infinity —  
each bloom fractals outward,  
a petal repeating a petal repeating  
some pattern  
Much older than both of us.  
self-similarity, like how  
I always see  
You in everything

I think about color theory, about symmetry,  
about how this shop  
is a  
chaotic system governed by dreams and scent  
and memory, and still I try to solve it.

to choose right in chaos

—  
to hand  
You something that says: this is perfect and  
I made it because it's just like You.

curiously, I don't really  
remember  
what I end up choosing, but upon further thought  
it doesn't matter in the End. every  
flower

and scent and person and world  
is just a sum of collisions since the Beginning

and yet once  
The Butterfly flapped long ago, not Fate nor Divine,  
and motion began and Matter folded in on itself  
It was set  
that as Everything in the Universe rippled  
in slowly, Everything would inevitably,  
inexplicably,

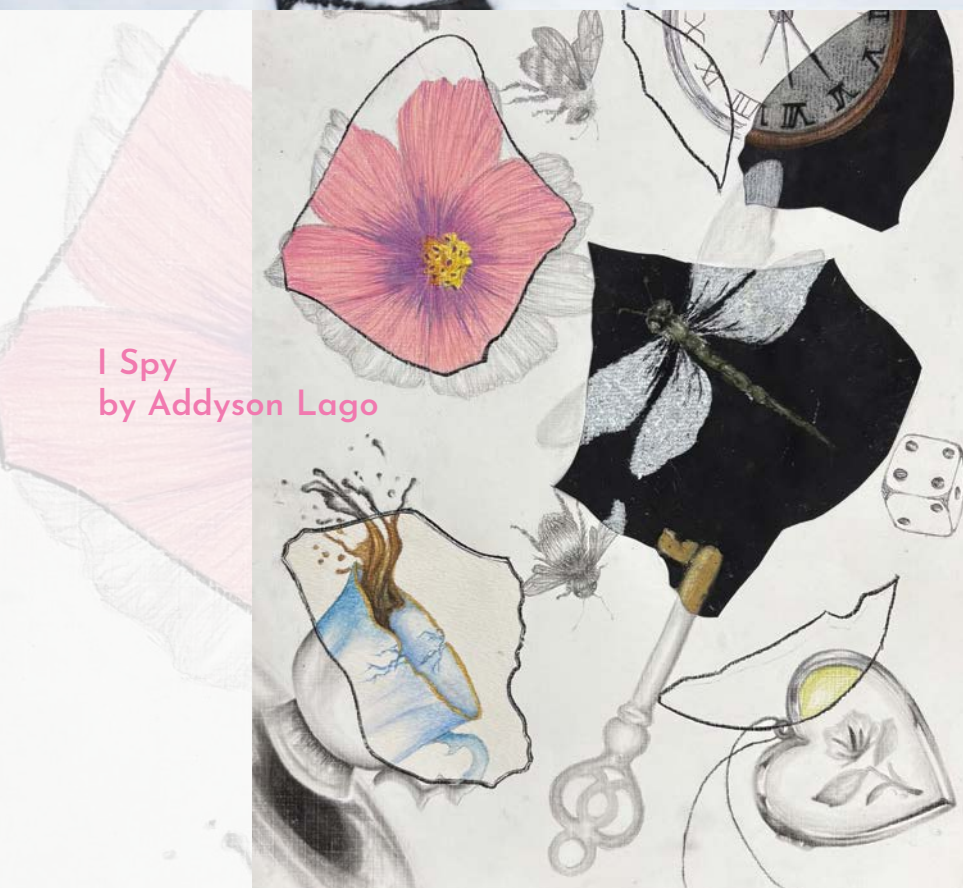
form Two people and converge  
into a Moment like this: My Hand, Flowers,  
and You



Empty Snow  
by Connor Doran

# Eternal Snow

by Hailey Tam



I Spy  
by Addyson Lago

I wait for sorrow to strike,  
But the blade is made of snow,  
Melting before it cuts.

Laughter brushes past me,  
A bird whose wings  
Never land in my hands.

The days arrive in perfect silence  
Neither gift nor burden,  
Just repetitions of air.

I do not hurt,  
And that is its own wound.  
I do not weep,  
And that is its own grief.

Numbness is not peace  
But a mirror with no reflection,  
A winter that refuses to thaw.

And still, I walk through it  
A ghost in the machine,  
Aching not for pain,  
But for the proof of being pierced.

When my ears finally pop, I am immediately overcome with a humidity so severe I'm sure our plane has mistakenly landed inside a wet sponge instead of southern Florida. To make matters worse, despite being in the front of the plane, I have to wait for at least 30 handicapped seniors to be rolled out in wheelchairs before I can finally disembark<sup>1</sup>.

I am here in sunny Boca Raton to spend spring break with my grandmother, whom I—being your standard Jewish *puppa shayne*<sup>2</sup>—call “Bubbe.” I take a car service from the airport to Bubbe’s home, which is within a residential community named “The Polo Club.”<sup>3</sup> Bubbe is incredibly ecstatic to see me. Yet our conversation upon my arrival quickly turns into her explaining our itinerary for the week. Everything seems very conservative, very safe. Nothing exciting. Each morning on the schedule begins at 8:00 A.M. sharp with breakfast in the Bagel Room<sup>4</sup>.

I have decided to chronicle my experience in the Bagel Room each day of my “vacation.”



# Boca Brag and Schmeear

by Joshua Greenbarg

\$3.50

My grandmother is already stressed about being five minutes late. I'm not sure exactly what she is so concerned about, for there is truly no rush<sup>5</sup>. The moment we step foot in the Bagel Room, I can tell that bagels are not a top priority; Bubbe swiftly leads me over to her *machatainestas*<sup>6</sup>, who are already enthralled in chatter, but quiet instantly when they see me. “Oh my gawd, Esther<sup>7</sup>, who is this handsome young man?” multiple sentient clouds of Chanel No. 5 ask at once. I am soon surrounded on all sides by small Jewish women—some of whom are petting me and feeling my curly hair—and I am not sure how I feel about it. “Where are you from, hun?” is the next question thrown my way, and my response of Westchester, NY<sup>8</sup>, seems to be the right answer, as all the women begin telling of their relatives who live there. One proudly exclaims: “My son lives in Scarsdale. He is a partner at Goldman Sachs.” Another then retorts, “mine is a dermatologist with his own practice. He just bought a beautiful five-bedroom in Chappaqua.” This seems to have become some sort of competition to prove who has the most successful children. And when I say most successful, I mean most *monetarily* so. I begin to feel uncomfortable. I think I am going to remove myself from the conversation (debate) and go toast a flagel.

What a relief—we made it to the Bagel Room on time. Bubbe once again takes me over to her girlfriends, some of whom I recognize from yesterday, others new. Having learned my lesson, I decide to stand back from the conversation today and just listen. “I have my cardiologist appointment tomorrow,” I hear one voice declare in a Long Island accent. “My dear friend back in Jersey just had a heart attack. God rest her soul,” her friend responds. The longer I listen to each woman’s conversation, the more I learn about geriatric medicine. At one point, a conversation starts up regarding funeral homes—future ones for the *yentas*<sup>9</sup> themselves<sup>10</sup>. I am astonished and earnestly disheartened that these women are so hyper-focused on health and, really, death; I want to jump in and tell them to live in the moment, to stop being so forward-looking. But I don’t. I stay quiet, praying that the ladies don’t remember I’m there.

<sup>1</sup> PBI is the only airport I have ever been to that lets those with wheelchairs off first rather than last—must say something about the general population there.

<sup>2</sup> An endearing moniker my grandmother calls me by, derived from the Yiddish word *shayne*, which means “pretty one”

<sup>3</sup> If you are a Jew, there is a high chance you, too, know of The Polo Club—maybe your great uncle Marty lives there, or perhaps your grandfather and his girlfriend who is 20 years younger than he have a winter home at the club.

<sup>4</sup> This is a large dining area at The Polo Club where club residents can enjoy their morning coffee and scooped-out bagels with a side of gossip (though, at times, it seems more like gossip with a side of coffee and bagels).

<sup>5</sup> No, really, there isn’t; the Bagel Room has never once run out of bagels (or coffee), so a five-minute delay truly shouldn’t cause any problems.

<sup>6</sup> Technically one’s in-laws, but my Bubbe uses it loosely to refer to her girlfriends at the club

<sup>7</sup> My Bubbe’s first name

<sup>8</sup> With approximately 15% of Westchester’s households having at least one Jewish person, it’s no surprise everyone at The Polo Club knows someone there.

(<https://communitystudy.ujafedny.org/explore-data/westchester>)

<sup>9</sup> Yiddish for “busy-bodies” (i.e., women who love discussing the meaningless and arguing over the trivial)

<sup>10</sup> The way these women would casually discuss funeral plans with cream cheese in the corner of their mouth was incredible to me. They were organizing these death memorials as if they were birthday parties.

MONDAY, 7:50 A.M.

According to my grandmother, *everyone* wants a bagel to start their week, so we must arrive at the Bagel Room even earlier today. While I rolled out of bed at 7:30 this morning, my Bubbe has been up since 6:00 applying makeup. It seems to me as if some of the *machatainestas* started their day even earlier than she; their makeup is totally *meshuga*<sup>11</sup>, to say the least. This is yet another concept that perplexes me: *who, exactly, are these women trying to impress?* Their husbands of 50-plus years who are most likely sitting at home pantless, watching cable television? Once more, I feel some type of sympathy for these women. They have worn their skin for at least three-quarters of a century, yet they seem less confident in it now than ever<sup>12</sup>.

The hot topic today is politics, specifically the approaching 2024 election. Most at the breakfast table seem to be staunch Republicans, many claiming to support Trump because he will be “better for the economy.” To be quite blunt, I am disgusted; it is obvious to me that many of these women are wealthy and choose to affiliate with the Republican party out of pure cupidity<sup>13</sup>, with little to no regard for the majority of Americans<sup>14</sup>. They are so isolated in their *Everland*<sup>15</sup> that they are blind to the plight of the average, working- or middle-class person.

I am very tempted to offer my opinion in the discussion, but before I can do so, one lady proudly asserts that she will not be voting for Trump, admitting that she would rather risk losing some capital than see our country go to *drek*<sup>16</sup>. I feel palliated knowing that not everyone at the club possesses greed as dense as their fifty coats of mascara. Before I know it, the big thing on the table is no longer politics (or bagels, for that matter), but an abnormally colored mole on one of the ladies’ forearms.



TUESDAY, 8:02 A.M.<sup>17</sup>

Today will be my last day eating bagels for a while. I leave later today, and though I will miss my Bubbe, I can’t say the same for the Bagel Room. I decide to have a bagel with jelly today—more sugary than my usual choice, but I could use some extra sweetness to mask the *distaste* I feel at spending another hour listening to nonsensical *schmegegge*<sup>18</sup>. As I approach the breakfast crew, I am not greeted by anyone, for all the French-manicured hands are occupied, stabbing at their phones with stylus pens<sup>19</sup>. I stand behind one woman to get a closer look at what moral obscenity all the excitement is over. But it’s their grandchildren. They are sharing photos of their grandchildren. I feel guilty, somewhat ashamed; I had presumed that they were likely flaunting photos of new summer homes or gawking at an acquaintance’s most recent elective surgery results, but no—they were all just being proud bubbes, each visibly teeming with *nachas*<sup>20</sup>.

Over the course of this short trip, it has become clear to me that, in the end, beneath the loud voices, the bedazzled white Capri pants, and the incessant *kvetching*<sup>21</sup>, these women aren’t just being flamboyant for show—they’re fighting to stay visible, relevant, and, most importantly, *remembered*. While there may be no excuse for their materialism and acquisitiveness (reflected by their political convictions), their love of makeup, gossip, and medical moaning masks a deeper truth: a fear of being *forgotten*, of leaving their grandchildren *too soon*, of the angel of death *creeping in* uninvited. And perhaps that’s why they seem so fixated on what’s next; by holding tight to the promise of tomorrow morning’s bagel and *kvetch* session, an upcoming trip to Publix<sup>22</sup> in full makeup and heels, or a grandchild’s next visit, these women have something to look forward to. Something to keep them going.

As my grandmother would say, it’s all *schmaltz*<sup>23</sup> in disguise—loud, fabulous, *unforgettable* love.

<sup>11</sup> Another Yiddish word that means wild, crazy, or over-the-top—but often in a humorous or affectionate way

<sup>12</sup> The yentas’ makeup resembled that of middle-school girls. Yet I believe that a middle-schooler could actually teach these ladies a valuable lesson on radiating self-love and a positive body image.

<sup>13</sup> Being a student of the Classics, I have grown to love the use of grandiloquence; “cupidity”—from the Latin *cupidus* (meaning “desirous”)—refers to excessive greed.

<sup>14</sup> Boca Raton has a median household income of \$102,722, which is far above the national average. However, given that many Boca residents (especially within The Polo Club) are retirees, a better gauge of the wealth in the city may be the median property value there, which is a hefty \$660,100 (more than double the national value). (<https://datausa.io/profile/geo/boca-raton-fl>) Moreover, at The Polo Club specifically, the average price for a home is close to double this, sitting at a lofty \$1,275,000. (<https://rocket.com/homes/market-reports/fl/the-polo-club-of-boca-raton>)

<sup>15</sup> I.e., the polar opposite of Peter Pan’s *Neverland*—here, no one avoids aging; they just organize it into committees

<sup>16</sup> Yiddish for garbage, filth, or worthless junk (i.e., *shit*)

<sup>17</sup> Despite being a whole two minutes late to the Bagel Room, my Bubbe actually remained very calm—maybe because the bagels didn’t go as fast on Tuesdays, or maybe because she had grown as sick and tired of the schmooze that goes on there as I had.

<sup>18</sup> Yiddish for “utter baloney”

<sup>19</sup> I’ve never quite understood why old people have such a hard time performing tasks on their phone without a stylus to assist them. My best guess is that their fingers are simply too pruny.

<sup>20</sup> Yiddish word that captures the sense of joy one has in someone else’s accomplishments, like a vicarious pride

<sup>21</sup> Yiddish for “complain”; “carp”

<sup>22</sup> Publix is an incredible grocery store chain in the South. Personally, I think it is better than any supermarket available in the North, and their “pub-sub” are truly spectacular.

<sup>23</sup> Yiddish word that roughly translates to “mawkishness” (i.e., excessive sentimentality or emotionalism, but, of course, out of pure love)

# Love, Amongst Other Things

by Alex Koh

Problem Generator  
by Yongjoon Cheon

One evening, halfway down the wide street,  
I declared (to no one)  
I hated jazz.

To quiet my sobbing over his death, my legs carried me outside  
into the hour where gold thinned beneath blue.

We loved the cusp of winter, when the enormous sun whitens  
and the air proves you are alive.

But tonight, I was instead stung by November's hands  
and reminded that this —  
this was just the end of fall.

I approached the moving crowds, and black shapes turned into coats,  
coats that held ~~carefree~~ careless, smiling people.  
“They look stupid that way,” I huffed to myself, shifting uncomfortably in my own clothes.

As if the people around me weren't bothersome enough,  
there they were.  
Floating through sharp air —  
those notes.

I hated how they moved.  
They stumbled down the evening road,  
limbs flailing how they wished  
like a friend.

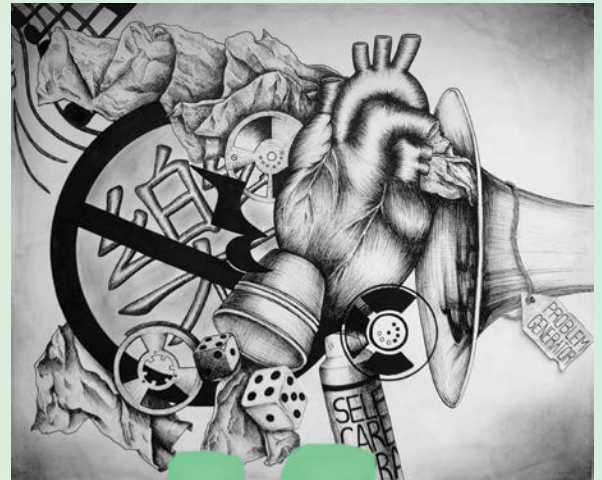
With a saxophone throat, he said: “What if we're all idiots, and animals can actually hear us?”  
perfectly spilling words all over the place.

The jazz was an animal that messed with me alone,  
laughing, open mouthed, at how alive every *body* was

every body but him.

I weaved through the crowds, stomping over the forgetful coat-wearers' spirits.

My horrible footsteps were too loud for me to notice  
that the crowds thinned  
and the notes slowed, draaaagging along the pavement.



Ghost Light  
by Josephine Elnziger-Lowicz



Standing ahead was a slice of street light. I ceased my assault of the pavement, letting my head hang back.

On the wide, empty street, the only beings left were weary notes and an angry girl.

“I feel my life . . . ending, you know?” the saxophone said with a thick throat, shakily setting the words down.

I let hot tears silently hit the ground, quietly hating everything.

The sunset, because even the morning’s return was promised.

The people, their stupid happiness and coats,

and their music.

But as I stood — a raging, fiery thing — inside the dark, the jazz waited with me. Wept with me.

It was the exact

same

song.

On the return home,

I treaded lighter with grief and music at either side.

Two enormous, beating beings  
who share love as their lifeblood.

# Introspection

by Nevelle Thomas

---

There's been jazz music playing under my apartment for two weeks now. It doesn't stop, not even at night. I wish I could blame it on neighbors, but I live in a ground-floor apartment, so nobody lives under me. I've tried to brush it off as some newly-opened jazz club or maybe a jazz band that has started busking in the street, two things which wouldn't be uncommon here in New York City. But whatever it is, I just can't figure out why it seems to be coming from underneath my apartment.

With every day that went by, it seemed to grow louder, and I almost couldn't function because of it, which sounds ridiculous, like, oh my god I can't live because it sounds like The Miles Davis Quintet lives underneath my apartment, but seriously, I reached a point at which I couldn't take it anymore. The fact that it never fucking stops, and that I have no idea how it sounds like it's right under my apartment, and also that I work from home as an editor for horrible magazine articles.

Lately, I find myself rewriting every article in a swing-rhythm kind of way, with every other word being longer than the one that follows it, and then I am sent into a fit of rage when I realize this. My boss sent me an email a few days ago letting me know that my work "was not up to par with the quality of my usual work," and while I found this to be quite concerning, I couldn't stop myself from rewriting that email into a swing-rhythm cadence.

Two days ago, I dumped my problem onto an innocent delivery driver who'd brought me the ramen I ordered (extra egg, no green onion), partially because I had nobody else to rant to about it and partially because I wanted to be reassured that he also heard the music. I wanted to be sure I wasn't totally insane. Well, you can imagine how I reacted when this kid with a mop of ginger hair and a blank expression looked me dead in the eyes and told me in a monotone voice that he had no idea what I was talking about, that he didn't hear anything. I must be insane, I thought, taking my ramen and shutting the door quickly. When I

opened the container and found a heap of green onions floating around the broth, I threw it into the trash and screamed into my couch (Oh god, I hate that thing — it smells and it's full of holes with cotton spilling all over the place.)

Yesterday, the music stopped. I felt like I was in a daze; it didn't feel real, almost too good to be true. I wrote a normal article with normal words, and I texted my landlord about all of the issues in my apartment I had been trying to ignore for weeks. I even ordered pizza and chatted with the delivery boy, which was the most social interaction I had had in a long time. These days, I don't leave my apartment unless I have to. I have too many phobias, and there are too many things in the world that I'm afraid will hurt me, make me more sick than I already am. So, I stay here, in this rotting little apartment that also makes me sick, but I can deal with it because it's just me here. It makes me feel more in control.

When I wake up the next morning, the music is back.

Now, I am standing in the middle of my living room floor, holding a saw in my right hand and a hammer in my left. My curtains are shut, I don't want the police to be called. I close my eyes and listen to the music, a floating trumpet melody accompanied by some quirky piano harmonies, saxophone, and a shaker drum. I am going to find you, I think.

And then, I do it. I start to saw at my floor, which has been decaying for a while now, saggy floor boards that smell a bit sour. This helps me to remove them, because they are softer than healthy, strong wood. I use the back end of the hammer to pry up the wood. It's a relatively quick process, and as I pull up my floor, the music grows louder, motivating



**Gallery of Past, Made Present, For Future**  
by Ellie Agnew

me to work faster. I don't care that I am destroying my apartment. If my landlord gives me any shit, I will push him into the hole I have made.

Once I have created a hole big enough for me to fit in, I stop and look down. All I see is black — it looks like an eternal black hole, and the music is simmering in the hole, slowly rising into my apartment like steam from a pot of boiling water. And then, I jump.

I fall for several seconds before I land. The floor is cold and hard, and the impact causes a sharp pain to shoot through my legs. I don't know where I am, only that it is completely dark. After a moment, the room fills with light, and in front of me is the music I have been hearing for weeks.

The first thing I notice is that the music is actually much more pleasant when I'm inside it. It's no longer background music; I am finally looking at the musicians I have been hearing for weeks. They're creating something right in front of me, and it's beautiful.

The next thing I notice is that none of the musicians have faces, although this doesn't freak me out like it should. There is a bass player, tall but kind of slumped over, gently plucking the strings of his instrument, and when I stare at the blurry pale surface where his face should be, I feel a surge in my stomach. Even though he doesn't have eyes, I can tell he is staring at me. I quickly comb my fingers through my greasy hair and look away from him.



### Between Design and Reality by Kinsey Savage

The lights are moody, deep blues and shades of purple, swimming around the room. I turn around, and there is a bar; behind it, a faceless bartender, who is bald and wearing a sharp tuxedo. The air smells sweet and draws me over to the bar, where there is one red leather stool. I assume that it is for me, and sit down. I don't know if the bartender notices me; his back is turned to me now, and he appears to be making something. When he turns around, I see that he is holding a china plate with a little dark cake on it, sprinkled with powdered sugar. He sets it down in front of me.

“Thank you,” I say. He nods. I take a fork and stab into it, and chocolate starts to pour out of the middle. I eat all of it in five bites. I suddenly find myself overwhelmingly thirsty from the sweetness of the cake. “Can I have a dirty martini?” I ask. Within two seconds of the words leaving my mouth, he spins around and hands me the drink, and I am delighted. I drink it all in one swig.

The alcohol has given me courage to ask the bartender a question. “Where am I?”

His face, or lack thereof, doesn't move, but I hear him speak. “You're in a jazz club.” His voice is low, raspy, like he hasn't spoken in a very long time.

“Yeah, but, why is it under my apartment? And why doesn't anyone have a face? And why am I the only normal person here?”

I fear that I have asked him too much, because he turns around and doesn't answer me for a while, but when he turns back around, he is holding out another drink. This one is in a tall silver glass, filled

with a rose-colored liquid, shimmering in the light. He sets it in front of me, and I look into metal, which is showing me warped reflections of the room around me. When I see myself in the glass, I notice that I, too, no longer have a face. I turn around on my red stool and realize that a crowd of faceless people has formed, and they are all dancing. Maybe they have always been there; I might have been too distracted to notice them.

So, I did the only thing I knew to do, which was to slide off my stool and start dancing, to let the jagged rhythm of the music guide me to the middle of the crowd, limbs tangling with my neighbors, lost in the moving lights and gentle swaying of the floor and getting drunk from the smell of lava cake. I don't even think about how I could get sick from being with this many people.

When I look on stage, the bass player is still looking at me. I smile, and he winks. And when I look up for the hole in the ceiling that I came through, I discover it is no longer there, but I don't mind, because I have finally found somewhere I belong.

some nights  
i dream i'm  
opaque again  
by Evangeline Goodman

Some nights i dream i'm opaque again

the air hums in borrowed colors —  
someone's laughter drips down the wall  
and the floor is made of eyes,  
all blinking toward everything but me.

i wear a name stitched from static,  
a body drawn in pencil light.  
voices bloom like glass in the dark —  
i touch one and it shatters into rain.

their joy bends gravity.  
mine folds inward,  
a secret room with no door,  
a pulse that echoes the wallpaper's sigh.

somewhere, music spills from the ceiling,  
its rhythm forgets to hold me.  
i move my lips and lose the language,  
watch syllables dissolve into dust.

in the reflection of the crowd,  
i see a hundred faces stitched together  
to form a single stranger —  
and realize it's mine.



Double Sided  
by Ava Winfield

# Rites for the Second Coming of the Girl I Was

by Gia Defortuna

She arrived barefoot,  
dragging a stuffed animal behind her  
like a body.  
I was older then,  
with eyes that forgot how to weep cleanly,  
and hands that only knew how to hold ruin.  
She said, *"You left me in the pit."*  
I said, *"I know."*

She walked ahead of me,  
ankles slicing the tall grass.  
Her dress clung damp to her knees.  
There were bruises in the shape of silence.

At the river, she turned.  
*"Do you remember the language of water?"*

And I did —  
not in words,  
but in what came before them.  
Before shame.  
Before mirrors.  
Before I was taught  
to sit still and smile small.

It was the language of being.  
Of breath, of hunger,  
of splashing without apology.  
It spoke in ripples,  
in open mouths,  
in unbrushed hair  
and unhidden joy.

She held out a jar.  
Inside:  
a broken hair clip,  
a crumpled drawing,  
and my old voice — still trembling.



Change by Lauren Snyder

One said, *"Let me stay loud."*  
One said, *"Don't look at me."*  
One said nothing,  
but it was mine.

She poured them into the river.  
They floated like dead petals.

We didn't speak again.  
We just sat,  
her knees to her chest,  
me trying to remember  
the last time I let myself float.

When she left,  
she left the stuffed animal in my lap.  
It stared at me like it knew something.

The river moved on.  
And this time,  
I followed.



# A Teenage Girl Says the Amidah

by Avah Dodson

i.

(Three steps back, three steps forward. *Adonai, open up my lips, so my mouth may declare your glory.*)

Last night I spied Jesus in the dregs of the red curry  
From that Thai takeout place you like,  
Greasy paper boxes with orange drops of oil  
Glistening beside our sins.

I could've sworn to all the angels  
That in the light, they almost looked  
Like the tear stains of our ancestors  
(Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).

ii.

(Bow at the knees, then at the waist.)

The TV shrieks with a nation unraveling but I turn it off  
With the click of a remote that seals my soul,  
And I know as I escape to the roof  
To twine your hand with mine  
I will never repent enough for this.

If the word *unholy* is not carved behind my ribcage  
Then it is surely branded on my brow.

iii.

(Close your eyes and say that last line again. Bow again at the knees.)

Six hundred and thirteen commandments —  
Six hundred and thirteen whispers in my ear

When I catch myself laughing a little too hard:  
*Remember, your people are dying across the sea.*  
I know, God I know.  
Every smile stains my hands a darker red.

I am both the rainbow and the flood.

iv.

(Rise up on your toes, once, twice, three times.)



Monument by Adib Rabbani

According to the solicitors at my door,  
a dead man loves me.

I tell them I will convert  
So they will go away  
And so I can kneel at the altar and ask him why.

v.

(We now take a moment to whisper our personal prayers to God.)

One step forward, two steps back.  
*Adonai, open up my lips,*  
But the only glory to declare is the taste of your tears  
on my tongue  
and I no longer know the words.

# The Echo of My Name

by Cadence Dilks

I had carved my name in rivers, taught the wind to sing my tale,  
I raised fortresses of moonlight, where the mortal dreams grew pale,  
Now moss veils my symbols, and the sky forgets my flame,

Yet kingdoms will still whisper, the echo  
of my name,

The stars will still hum my verses through the hush  
of twilight's glow,

While ancient oaks recall my strength that only  
legends will know,

Though stone may crumble, and tides can reclaim  
their wave,

My spirits may linger timeless — unchained by my  
fleeting flame,

Is this the echo of my name?

I have walked through realms uncharted, where no  
shadows dare to tread,

Wove thunder into silence, crowned the quiet in  
my final bed,

My triumphs now sleep in ruin, and my foes have  
turned to dust,

Yet time bends round my silence with reluctant,  
reverent trust,

The winds shift their stories, the stars may trade  
their lore,

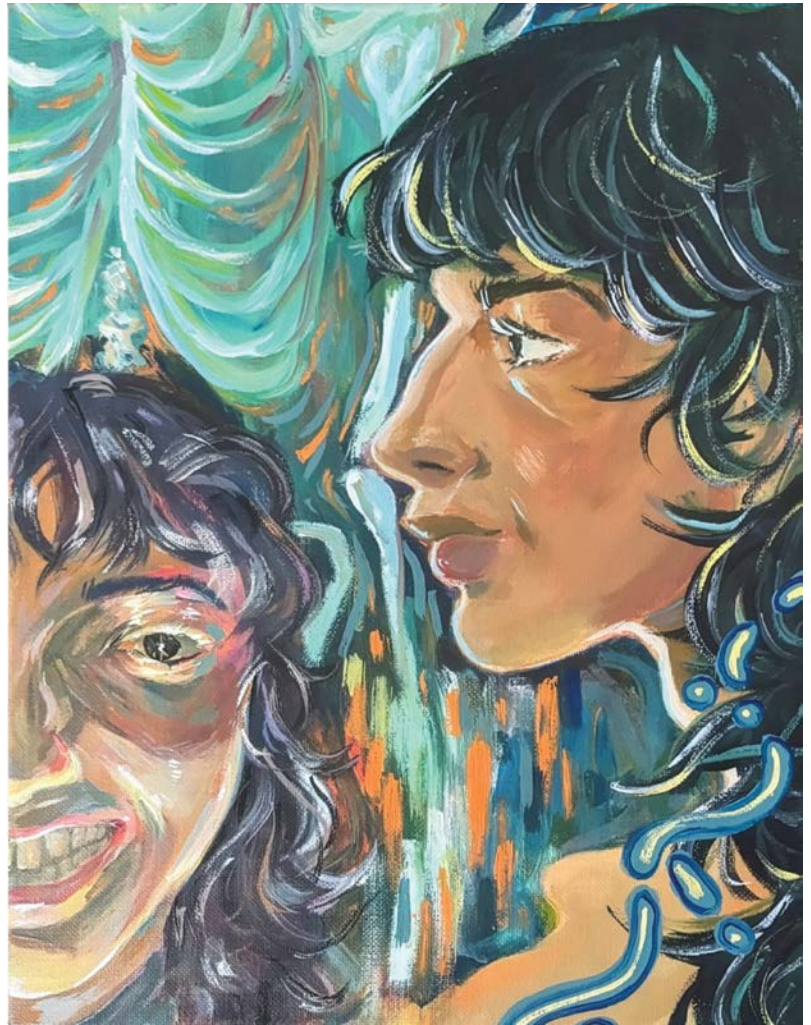
But my echoes cling to silence like waves returning to shore,

If no lips dare to utter of me, and no hand recalls my light,

What stays when silence claims the night?

The last light sank beneath the roots where none shall rise the same —

And darkness drank the final echo of my name.



Ecstatic  
by Devika Krishna

# Thank You For Visiting Us

by Shivani Nayyar

Dear Shivani,

Here's your transaction summary.

Receipt No. BH13-U-20230727-019659

Threading - Upper Lip \$15.00

GST Reg No. 199601821N

Date: 8th September, 2020

Wow! You look so much better without that moustache. We appreciate that you made use of our services, as we are in the business of perpetuating young brown girls' insecurities. We are deeply sorry it was so painful that you had to take a ten minute break in between to take a few deep breaths and wipe your tears, however, most of our clients get used to it eventually. In fact, they usually end up frequenting our company more and more often. We hope to see you again soon. Strip LTD. is having a summer sale with 20% off on all body treatments such as brazilian wax, arm and leg wax, laser hair removal, sugaring, electrolysis, and chemical depilation. Since you have completed facial threading, we suggest your next step may be waxing your arms and legs. We want to make you feel truly beautiful!

## Here is your appointment summary (history included):

This was your first time threading. Even though you're in 8th grade now, the taunts from the boys in your 4th grade class still clamour in the back of your mind, reaching out their claws to the front every so often. *Oh my god, you've got more leg hair than me—a moustache too. You look like a bear! Are you sure you're really a girl?* You don't remember what you responded, only that you felt tears prick your eyes and swallowed the lump in your throat. Don't let the tears fall, don't let them see how hurt you are. When you got home that day, after google searching on your iPod the most affordable hair removal hair processes, you begged your mum to let you make this appointment, but she said no. *There's no need, you're only 9 years old, body and facial hair is just natural*, she asserted. She doesn't understand that "natural" isn't pretty. So you waited a few years, ignoring the insults darted your way and avoiding any mirror in sight. You rolled your eyes when you overheard the white girls in your class complaining about "having to shave." You envied them so, because how could they say that when their light blonde wisps were barely even visible, compared to the dark, thick locks that stained your whole body? When you were finally allowed to make the appointment at the bright

age of thirteen, you were so eager that you arrived 20 minutes early and sat anxiously in the waiting room. Countless ads for different hair removal processes featuring beautiful women covered the white walls, another reminder of what you would soon hope to look like. When the therapist called you inside, you lay down on the purple bed, eyeing the polyester thread she held over your face. She twisted it several times, and then got to work. The thread rolled over your upper lip, pinching your skin and removing the ghastly unwanted hair from the root, though not without extreme amounts of pain. When you came out, eyes tinged red from the tears, you still managed to smile! At least the hair was gone, for now. Not a bear, just a girl.

Dear Shivani,

Here's your transaction summary.

Receipt No. ST13-U-20240730-029795

WAX - Full Arm, Full Leg \$30.00

GST Reg No. 199601821N

Date: June 2nd, 2020

Congratulations on your first time waxing your body, a truly momentous occasion! Fortunately, this is the first of many appointments you will schedule with us. Now that you have completed your arms and legs, we suggest your next step be waxing your navel — you don't want that trail of hair showing when you wear bikinis or crop



Out of Comfort by Brooke DuVall



tops. Additionally, we sincerely apologise for the red bumps on your skin. They should fade within 24 hours, and then your skin will be smooth as a baby's butt! We also deeply regret the pain it caused you, but the truth is that beauty is pain. All that makes you dirty is gone now. We recommend no swimming, exfoliating, exercising, suntanning, hot water baths, saunas, tight clothing, or deodorant for the next 24 hours in order to let your skin heal. Your heart, however, is a different story. We would advise not looking in the mirror for too long as this will cause severe overthinking.

**Here is your appointment summary (a detailed recall of the excruciating pain):**

This was your first time waxing. When you walked into the small brightly lit room, the therapist stayed outside and instructed you to remove your clothes, save for your bra and underwear. You felt naked, exposed, even with them on. You lay down on the flat purple bed, the clean, sanitized scent wafting through the air. When she came back inside, she prepared all the necessary tools: the hot wax, the sheet paper, a tweezer, and lotion. You felt like a strange specimen under a microscope, the therapist a scientist about to experiment on you. *Temperature OK lah?* she asked after she touched the roller to your skin. Even though it felt like fire licking up your arm, you closed your eyes and nodded meekly as she brought the paper up to the sticky area. 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . The feeling of long strands of your hair being ripped out made you scream in pain, unable to contain the visceral

reaction even in front of a stranger; the lady was very obviously startled, but you told her it was fine, it was just your first time, to keep going, that you just wanted to get this over with. You wondered what your ancestors would think seeing you like this, stripping away something so indicative of your South Asian identity. Dark hair against fair brown skin. By the end of it, you were a blotchy-faced, swollen-eyed sobbing mess. You looked like an idiot. You probably traumatized that poor lady and made her want to quit her job. You're sure she's never experienced a client as hysterical as you. But hey, at least the hair on your arms and legs is no more! Only delicate caramel skin. You look into the mirror and feel a twinge of excitement when your image looks back: the smooth, hairless feminine ideal (for now, at least.)

**Dear Shivani,**

Here's your transaction summary.

Receipt No. ST10-U-20230606-027299

Wax - Full Arm, Full Leg, Underarm, Navel,

Threading - Upper Lip \$200.00

GST Reg No. 200507925C

Date: Jul 27, 2023

We are so grateful for your monthly contributions to our company over the years. For this, we have decided to reward you with a \$500 package which you will redeem each time you book an appointment. We look forward to seeing you next month, and the month after that, and the month after that, for years to come. Better yet, come twice a month! Investing thousands of dollars in your outward appearance is a great way to spend your time, money, and energy. We promise you will not regret it. Perhaps you would be interested in our thermal face lift or rosebud rejuvenation services . . .

**Here is your appointment summary (much less dramatic now):**

You knew the drill. After all, you should consider that you have been visiting us once a month for the past four years. The taunts have stopped, people don't really pay attention to you, hairy or not. But you still keep coming back to us. You know there are plenty of girls who don't partake in any form of hair removal, and you don't think any differently of them. But you just can't stop. The therapist, as efficient as ever, prepared the tools, all familiar now. The silver glint of the tweezer prepared to take out the stubborn strays, the humming of the wax warmer in the background, the coconut smell of the post-wax lotion. You didn't flinch this time, just closed your eyes and tried to divert your attention elsewhere. It still hurt, of course, and it always will a little bit, but you're used to it now. A total champ! Afterward, you dressed quickly and smiled at yourself in the mirror. *Not a bear, just a girl.*



Repetitions by Lizzie Herron

# Consumerism and Why It's Great!

by Isabella Matascik

I keep hearing about this stupid thing called a “Buy Nothing Day” and I’ve been super into activism recently, so I thought I’d take one for the team and talk about just how terrible it is! I mean first of all, ok, our glorious modern age can only be described as one of luxury and fulfillment. Now more than ever, we find ourselves with the freedom to indulge in whatever we like and enjoy ourselves to the fullest! One of the best ways our society has come to express this freedom is, of course, through consumerism. Though commonly carrying a negative connotation, consumerism not only keeps our society afloat through its economic support but also by supporting the people! The cruel enforcement of a day without buying is completely more environmentally and ethically burdening than the consumerism that doesn’t even affect anyone negatively. Just don’t research Shein’s child labor. Or the freakish polar bears.

Anyway, our society’s backbone *is* consumerism; to ask an entire society to pause their shopping for a whole entire *day* is like asking us to “look up from our phones once in a while.” A “detox” from “excessive consumption,” they say. It’s entirely unreasonable! Why develop and grow as a society if you’re not allowed to engage in activities you like? Isn’t that what we develop society for? Is that not why we work hard to better our economies and our own financial state? To feel comfortable?

Anything that is done in excess can be unhealthy, yes. But how can it possibly be said that I “don’t need” every Rare Beauty lip gloss? You can’t possibly expect me to use pink GLITTER with a flannel shirt, can you? Might as well take away my oxygen, at least then I won’t be dying of embarrassment for matching my Prada shoes with a Chanel handbag instead of the Gucci one that just came out! Ugh, the horror!

Besides, what if something important is happening that day! Like, uh, what if someone got hurt and we really needed to go buy Hello Kitty Band-Aids? Does it sound ETHICAL to you to deny that purchase? Or what about a birthday, or, uh, a last-minute soiree! A lot of people are born in November, you know. It is imperative that we always have at our fingertips the means to obtain anything we want. Gratification sounds kind of like great! Is it so bad to demand haste from every costing whim? I paid for it, I should get it NOW. You could argue that



Memory by Yuxi Yang



all this stuff will end up in a landfill someday, which might be true, but even if it does, then I'm still helping the environment anyway. Beavers build dams all the time so what's the difference between that and my clothes and plastic straws choking the turtles and covering the beaches? If I hadn't done it, then someone else would have, like the Once-ler said (who, by the way, is always so villainized). There are soooooo in! And even if that were to possibly not be super helpful for the environment, it doesn't matter because we're all going to die anyway! I pinky promise it's ok that we've contributed to the extinction of hundreds if not thousands of animal species and probably more to come! We're enjoying ourselves, that's what the Earth is for. And even a one-day pause in that enjoyment is far too long and completely harmful to the mental health of the people. Did you even think about that? Our mental health? I bet not.

Also, Buy Nothing Day is on Black Friday! I mean, did the inventors (or whatever) have *any* idea what they were doing when they made that clearly unresearched choice? It's a day of *SAVINGS*, people! How *dare* they try to deprive us of that. How dare they. Honestly, it's like they want us to spend more money. I wonder if they've even thought of all the poor people who need Black Friday sales because they're affected by the rising prices caused by inflated perception of what people can afford . . . oh wait. Scratch that out later.

You can't create a society based on consumerism and then try to take that away just because! Our need for instantaneous gratification is something the world can handle and it's already doing a great job. I mean yeah, climate change will cause more than a third of the Earth's animal and plant species to face extinction by 2050, and 70% by the end of the century, but that's already longer than we thought we were gonna make it and 75 years from now is like, suchhhh a long time. Also, polar bear fur makes a great coat. Even when they're emaciated and lowkey all dirty. Nothing Tide can't fix! Surely we'll have a better solution by then than asking us to stop the cause of it, like can you imagine? It's not greed, ok, it's greatness.

# How to Cut Toenails

by Tony Park

Prograde by Jacob Walter

1. Sit on the cold toilet lid. Leave the lights off. You know that ugliness softens in the dark. Besides, you've done this enough to know where the blade bites the deepest. Let your thumb caress the curve of your nail. Count the ridges, one for every year he was gone.

She calls us *아픈 손가락*. *The aching fingers*.

But she forgets. We are not fingers. Fingers heal in the open. We grew in the dark, wrapped in cotton-thick silence. Nails curling, digging into the boundaries of the skin. Inheritance. It only hurts more when ignored.

2. Get the nail clipper.

No, not the pristine 4.7-rated one from Amazon. It doesn't know anything.

Find the one he used. The one you kept despite rust creeping in the hinges. The one dangling absurdly from the frayed red lanyard. He kept it like that so you'll never lose it.

You should probably use the clean one. But how can you ignore the rust and the lanyard? The red. They are the same color as your dried resentment.

3. Angle the clipper against your natural curve. They say it prevents ingrowns. But you don't know if that's true. What you do know is the pain. The sharp, throbbing heat of the rebellious nail carving into you.

You learned it young. Hurt that comes from within fingers. Family does that. Burrowing where it belongs, part of your body, part of your ache.

6. Take a file. Blunt the edges the way sadness rounds itself. Listen to the scraping sound. Dead flakes snow down your knee. Let it pile like small rehearsed goodbyes.

7. Stand. Feel yourself grounded again. Maybe a little lighter. Claws defanged. Pain caged.

8. Turn on the lights. Observe your trimmed toes. Don't lean down. Just glance from where you stand. Maintain a safe distance. Leave them at uneven, honest lengths.

9. 끝났으면, 로션 발라. *If you're done, apply lotion.*

You unhear your mother.

Instead, keep your heels calloused. It should help you walk normal.

10. Take a tissue. Sweep the floor. You'll try to palm everything. But you'll miss one or two. There's always one. A shard small enough to escape, sharp enough to find you later.

You lift your foot, expecting glass. But it is a piece of you, still waiting to cut.

4. Now clip.

The crackling of the nail. You never get used to it. Even with the trash can waiting patiently under you, the nail rebels. Flying, ricocheting off the tiled floor.

A small crescent moon. A waning presence that you could almost store. You'll hear it land without knowing where.

Don't be curious. It left on its own accord.

5. Continue cutting.

Maneuver around thick areas that resist the blades like memories distorted by hindsight. *His Christmas-morning smile*. A promising bright wrapper stretched over nothing.

Use both hands if you have to.

Dig until you find where skin meets the nail. Sever just above that tenuous seam. A random clipping will fly farther than the rest. You'll hear a soft clink as it vanishes into the bath mat.

Don't look for it.

Lost items don't want to be found. Some fathers don't either. You know.

# Mother

by Sophia Jeon

My mother's fingers —  
eye-wincingly salty —  
brushing my hair,  
caressing my cheeks,  
Fingers so salty,  
it hurt.

"Mom,"  
I call.  
"Mom."

I look.  
I turn.  
I squint.

"I know you're there,"  
I whisper,  
staring into the vast depth of everything.

But I don't dip my feet in —  
Not yet.  
Not yet.  
Not until mother comes out.  
Not yet.

I repeat nothings of "not yet,"  
emphasize on the "yet,"  
because I know she will come someday.



I look —  
for the last time.  
I turn —  
for the last time.  
I squint —  
for the last time.

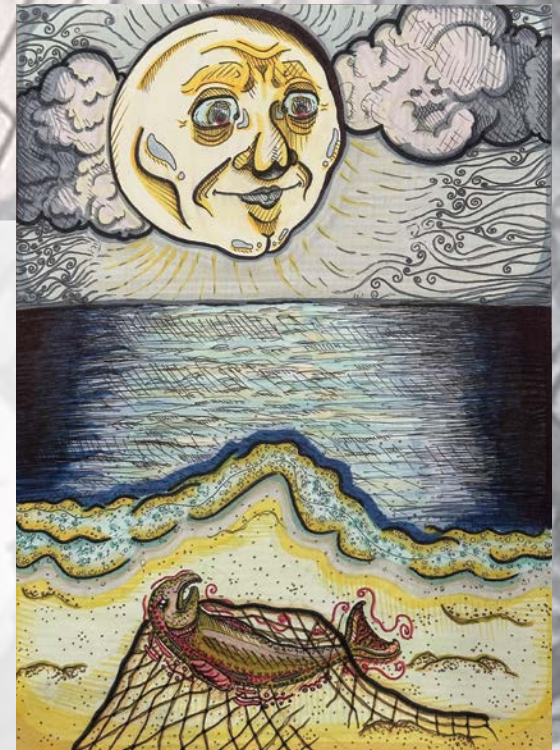
Still, mother is there.

Her skin is not solely hers.  
Her skin has  
oil-thick foam  
plastic  
clothes  
and what we left behind  
but are too afraid to pick up.  
Her eyes are not solely hers.  
Her eyes are  
the extinction of her children  
the rising temperature of the tides  
the honking of boats  
and what we have created  
but are too afraid to take back.

Her fingers are,  
still,  
and will forever be salty,  
but also sticky  
from the oil  
from the waste  
and from us.

Though not in her original form,  
I know my mother is there.  
My mom.  
Our mom.  
Just where our eyes  
cannot "see."

"There's mother!"



**Observation**  
by Taylor Vanhooser

Maybe,  
Just maybe,  
tomorrow's me would introduce mother  
to her friends.

Maybe,  
Just maybe,  
mother might be able to rise  
from all the remains of greed and selfishness  
we have chained to her beautiful soul.

Maybe,  
tomorrow,  
my free mother would be able to  
take pride in the pain  
laced all over her,  
take pride in what  
she has gone through.



**Hidden in the Leaves**  
by Alistair Alley-Dalzell

# Dear Mom,

by Maggie Orton

abstract florals  
by Rachel Young

Mom, I'm scared.  
I'm scared to grow up.  
I'm scared to move out.  
I'm scared to leave you.  
But with tears in your eyes,  
You say "It will be okay."

But Mom, what if?  
What if I need you?  
What if I'm lonely?  
What if you're lonely?  
With tears flowing down our faces  
You say "It will be okay."

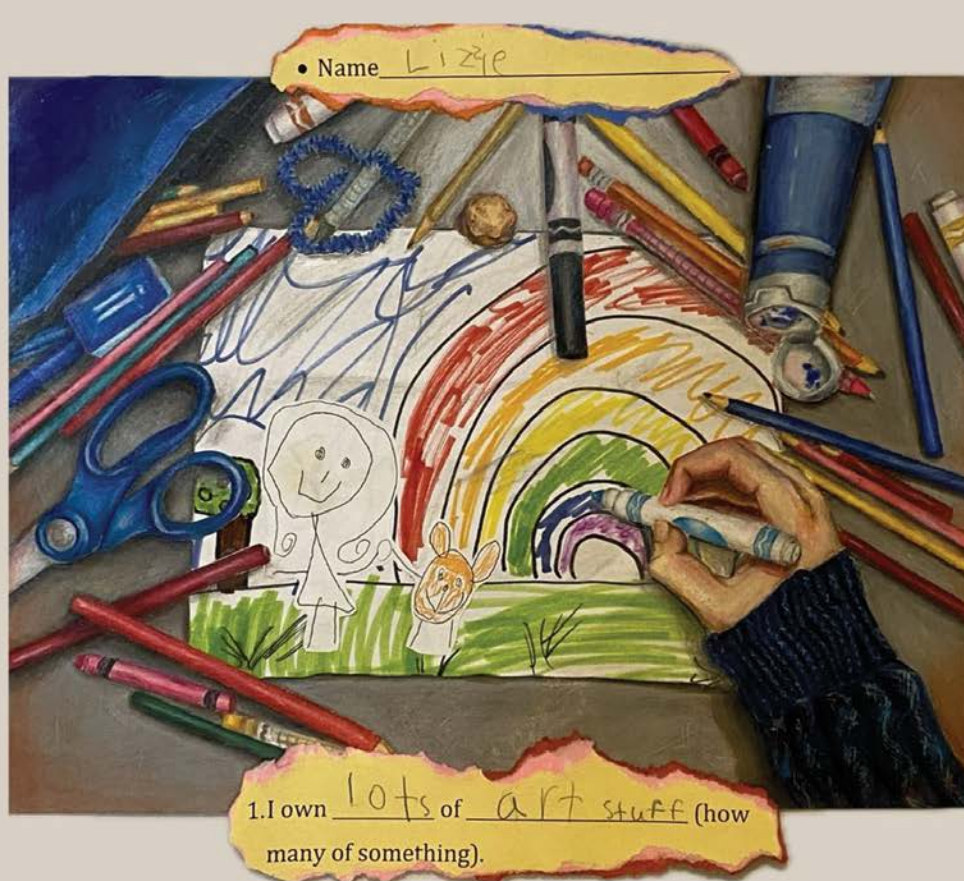
Mom, I don't believe you.  
I don't believe in miracles.  
I don't believe in God.  
I don't believe in myself.  
Still, with tears  
Now staining our shirts.  
You say "Good thing I believe in you."



Effervescence by Yongjoon Cheon



Mother Daughter Bond  
by Jennifer Shriner



Young Artist  
by Lizzie Herron

# Sounds of My Grandmother

by Cindy Yang

Your house is silent now. At night, one by one, the lights turn off, and in the darkness, the house is quiet, still, devoid of life — it sends goosebumps over your skin, but at the same time, you feel a selfish, prickly sense of relief. At last, she is gone, you think. At last, your sleep will be undisturbed, your life will go back to normal, the normal that was disturbed several years ago, when she first arrived here.

Days after she first arrives, you notice uncomfortable changes in your home that you don't want to voice out loud for fear of being rebuked by your parents. You notice her speech, the unfamiliar harsh rasp on the "h" sounds that she makes, almost as if she's scowling, a grating sound that makes you flinch. The more you will yourself not to notice it, the more abrasive it sounds, and the more impossible to ignore. You notice how she almost bares her teeth when she pronounces the word, like when she pronounces the Chinese word for "black," 黑, *hei*, the way her throat seems to drag over the syllable, jarring and displeasing to the ear. You hate the unfamiliar vocabulary she introduces to the household, 馍馍 *momo* instead of 馒头 *mantou* for the soft steamed buns that have always been a staple in your family, the foreign sounds rotting in your mouth like a forgotten bun, discarded at the bottom of the fridge for a month.

You don't notice at first when she changes. The timeline of the entire matter is a tangled mess in your head, one that you have never dared to voice and unravel out loud. You only remember, at some point, realizing that your parents now take

it as normal that she will come up every few days to inquire about some person who had died years ago. This realization is jarring — it makes you wonder when exactly she had changed, and how you possibly could have missed it, and since when your grandmother, the one who brought you around China as a child, who brought you to eat *tanghulu*, to walk the length of the Great Wall, who cooked for you in the summers, had finally faded from the world without anyone to notice her.

She feels that she is disappearing, but can do nothing to help herself. For one, moving to America has restrained her. She does not speak the language. She does not know our customs. She cannot drive or travel on her own. She has no autonomy, no independence in this strange world, and now, she is slowly losing control of her memories. She cannot contribute to the household. She panics. She overcompensates by cooking, attempting to clean, taking it upon herself to repair the holes and rips in our clothes, trying her best to make herself useful. A person who feels themselves fading away will do their best to maintain their grip in the world, to assert their existence, to voice their story for anyone to hear — but you have no sympathy for her struggles.

Instead, her overcompensation only makes you push back more. Every little thing annoys you, reminds you that your home is no longer your own. Her hands are dry, and the skin stretched over her bones sounds like paper rustling as she smooths her hands over her down vest over and over again. She adjusts pans and dishes on the drying rack, letting the heavy pots clatter on the kitchen counter. She puts away the bowls into the cabinet, letting the white glass bowls clink against each other. She shuffles those thick winter slippers that she wears even in the summer on the kitchen floor. The sound of the shoes against the floor irritates you. It irritates you especially when it wakes you up in the middle of the night, and you hear

*continued on next page . . .*

... continued

her turning around and around downstairs, one slow, heavy footstep after another, as if weighed down by an immeasurable burden. You think that her shuffling footsteps will at least be quiet for a while, until she comes back downstairs to turn again and again around the kitchen island, restless, unable to stay still. They are all sounds that you would never notice normally, only, now, coming from your grandmother, they echo back and forth like a feedback loop from a malfunctioning microphone and speaker, growing louder and louder, and you feel it coalescing into a shrill scream in your head, the high-pitched squeaking of a boiling teapot about to explode.

You become ugly. Whenever she asks you questions, you brush her off perfunctorily, and you get mad whenever she touches your belongings. You lose your temper when she makes too much noise, and you can't stand it when she meanders back and forth in front of you. You refuse to see yourself for who you truly are — it is easy, in fact, to ignore the truth. On the other hand, you sometimes catch brief glimpses of yourself in the mirror, moments where you can't suppress the vague twinge of guilt and panic at the stain on your soul. It is a stain that gets darker every time you lose your temper, every time you ignore her because you are frustrated, because you don't want to talk to her, because you don't want to look at her, but oh, you cannot go on avoiding it —

Because you hate her. You hate her, that is the truth. You hate who she isn't anymore, you hate that she is intruding on your home, you hate that the grandma you know from years past, who taught you your Chinese culture, who opened her home to you in the summers, who cared for you, is no longer in front of you and can never be found again, and most of all, you hate that she stirs up this ugly hate within yourself, because how could you possibly resolve the conflict between your idea of your own innate goodness with these moments of evil?

When her mind dissolves further under the grips of dementia, your parents don't dare to allow her to wander around outside of her room without supervision. This must be when the hallucinations begin. You don't know for sure— everything about her blends together in your memories, a tangled mess of horror that smears years of a snowballing disaster into one muddy clump, one that grows even messier each day you refuse to speak. But it is around this time that you begin to hear her voice coming from her bedroom, day after day, talking with imaginary companions. At first, they sound like intelligible conversations. These conversations soon devolve, too, as even her capability of speech dissolves into nothing. Her words become noises, syllables that you know are supposed to form words but can't quite understand. You cannot decipher a single word of her language.

You hear her voice in the middle of the night, mumbles and syllables of a foreign language you cannot speak. At first, you cover your ears and try your best to fall asleep anyways. Later, though, as the realization slowly dawns on you that this may be her last hurrah, her last desperate, fumbling attempt at telling her story, at communicating with the outside world, you begin to listen — only, it's too late. You strain to listen, strain to hear, strain to find meaning, only to discover that her voice has long become meaningless. Her meaning will never reach your ears ever again. In the middle of the night, you lie in bed under your covers and stare at the ceiling in the dark, letting the noise surround you in a twisted, eerie embrace.

Your parents move her to a nursing home soon after. You don't know what to expect when you visit her for the first time.

## Beautiful Humanity by Michal Reitz



## Kinship of Ivy by Michal Reitz

You are not expecting the frail body curled up on the bed of the sterile nursing home that reeks of cleaners. The floor is squeaky clean, so smooth that it is slippery. You wear shoes, but you can imagine how cold it is, lacking the intimate warmth from the countless others passing over it who never consider this place a home. Her skin is now like tissue paper, barely covering any flesh beneath it, sinking into the hollows of her bones beneath, and she is so thin that you can clearly see the outlines of her skeleton. You are surprised at how helpless she seems. With guilty relish, you find the word that describes the sight before you perfectly. She looks pathetic.

But you don't say a word to her. You do not really look at her. You won't acknowledge it, but you are afraid. You are afraid to look at the frail body on the bed, you are afraid to see the shell of your grandmother and to recognize where she used to be, you are afraid that you will start missing your grandmother when you look at her — an emotion that you have no capacity for, no room to fit it alongside your hatred — and you are afraid, too, in the most selfish way, that this will one day become you. You are afraid that the buried curse that was inherited by your grandmother from her mother, that was inherited by you from your mother, that this curse will one day come alive and this debilitating, humiliating disease will then fall upon you.

You feel like a coward. You don't cry after hearing that she has passed away. You never have the guts to talk about her with your parents. Most importantly, you can never bring yourself to acknowledge how horrible you were to her.

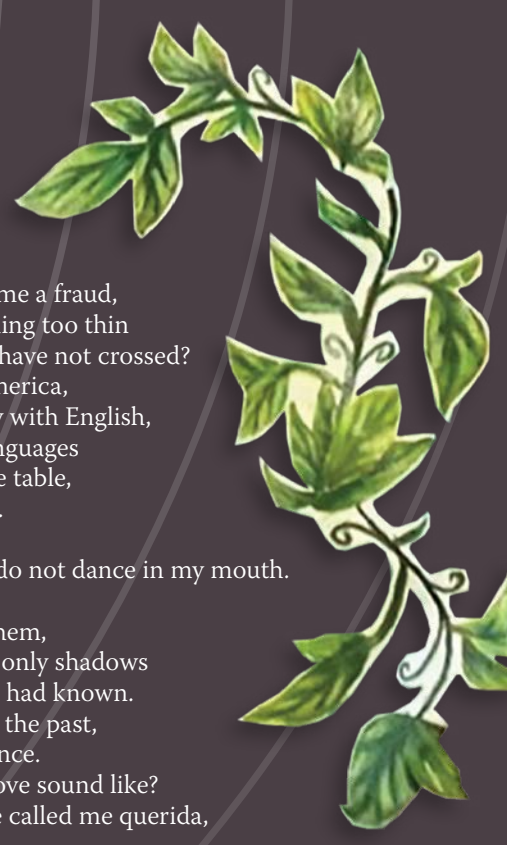
The silence kills you. Mentions of her never make it into your familial conversations anymore. Your parents do not bring you to the cremation. You cannot even attend the funeral, which is held in China. It is as if she never existed in the first place. The silence suffocates you, leaves you alone to deal with the

complicated feeling of grief that is not quite grief, because even though you didn't show it, you have already grieved in those long, long months in which you knew that the soul of your grandmother was already gone but she, somehow, in a cursed way, remained here in flesh. You feel relieved that you no longer have to suffer by watching her suffer. Then you feel guilty that you have the audacity to be relieved at her death. Most of all, the silence tricks you into feeling that you are the only one.

But when you endeavor to break the silence, you realize that it is no easy task, either. Your family likes to keep its matters private. Disagreements behind closed doors never make it past the front steps of the house. Some things, your mother always tells you, are not meant to be shared beyond the household. That is just the way things are. After all, in Chinese culture, the face of the family cannot be lost, and appearances must be kept up. Therefore, you, who tells the secrets of this family, you are a traitor. You have betrayed the family, you have betrayed your grandmother, and most of all, you have betrayed yourself, your morals and your values and your story, by selling this story for judges to approve and colleges to admire.

My house is silent now. A dim lamp illuminates my desk, messy and unorganized, and I sit before the tangle of thoughts that I just finished putting onto paper, thoughts that I don't quite understand yet. The house is completely still, and the lamp is the only light left. There are no sounds — no shuffling of slippers against the kitchen floor, no nightly conversations, nothing but silence, a silence that only succeeds in highlighting everything that is gone now. I try to break the silence with the sounds of my typing. I try to break the silence with the sound of my voice, the sound of my voice as it tells my story. My grandmother never got the chance to tell hers — hopefully I will get the chance to tell mine.





# Cards That Never Came

by Gia Defortuna

## **Cartas que nunca vinieron, cartões que nunca**

I do not know the sound of their voices,  
abuelas y abuelos, avós e avôs, whose laughter  
echoes only in stories,  
como un río invisible,  
carrying memories I cannot touch.

Their handwriting,  
was it soft and slanted,  
Or sharp and crisp,  
I imagine it inked on yellowing paper,  
letters never sent,  
cartas que nunca vinieron,  
cartões que nunca chegaram  
yet somehow still folded into my skin.

But what does it mean  
to carry their names  
and not their stories?

Their words were lost before they reached me,  
Brazil and Argentina in my veins,  
But their songs never reached my ears.  
And though their voices hum  
through the roots of my blood,  
I have never stood  
on the soil they called home.

Does that make me a fraud,  
a shadow stretching too thin  
across borders I have not crossed?  
I was born in America,  
my tongue heavy with English,  
learning their languages  
like a guest at the table,  
never their child.

But their words do not dance in my mouth.  
I stumble,  
trying to catch them,  
fingers brushing only shadows  
of voices I wish I had known.  
I press my ear to the past,  
hearing only silence.  
What did their love sound like?  
Would they have called me querida,  
meu amor,  
their voices wrapping me in warmth  
I never felt firsthand?  
Instead, I feel the ache of saudade,  
for what, I am not sure.  
A longing for places I cannot name,  
for voices I will never know,  
for a heritage that feels  
like a house without keys.

Sometimes, I hold a pen  
and try to write in their voices.  
But the ink does not flow right.  
It is mine, not theirs.  
Their voices are lost,  
but still, I carry them  
in the roots of my tongue,  
in the rhythm of my heart,  
in the words I cannot forget:  
família, saudade, hogar, amor.

Perhaps the knowing is not in the hearing  
or the seeing.  
It is in the feeling,  
the way their absence makes space  
for me to grow,  
a story still being written  
on a page  
they began but could not finish.





Duality  
by Lizzie Herron



Theatre of Life  
by Devika Krishna

# my nine-year-old self would hate me

by Olivia Kwon

Every time you misplace something you hear your mother's voice in the back of your head.

*Use your eyes, child,* she says.

*You must not be looking very hard; it's probably right there, it didn't just grow legs and abandon you.*

You hear her when you lose your phone charger, or your notebook, or your favourite pair of jeans

And you hear her when you lose the intangible things like Peace

and Belonging

and Contentment.

You wish she were right,

that these things were right in front of you.

You wish you could tear apart the couch cushions

or dig through your centre console, crack yourself open, and find them hiding there waiting for you to cross their path again.

Because once, not too long ago, Peace was *right here*,

intertwined with your fingers, running its thumb along the peaks of your knuckles, while

Belonging wove its hand in your hair

assuring you of your own existence

promising you that this isn't all a mistake

that you are in the right place.

And Contentment —

Contentment was the pillow that always felt human.

Aligning every exhale with your own

allowing you to rest.

It was *right here*,

all of it.

And you keep retracing your steps, and checking under

your bed, and racking your brain for any

memory

any clue

as to where it all went.

But you've looked everywhere this time

you promise.

Maybe Peace and Belonging and Contentment are

actually gone.

Maybe they abandoned you after all.



**Dreams and Aspirations**  
by Jennifer Shriner

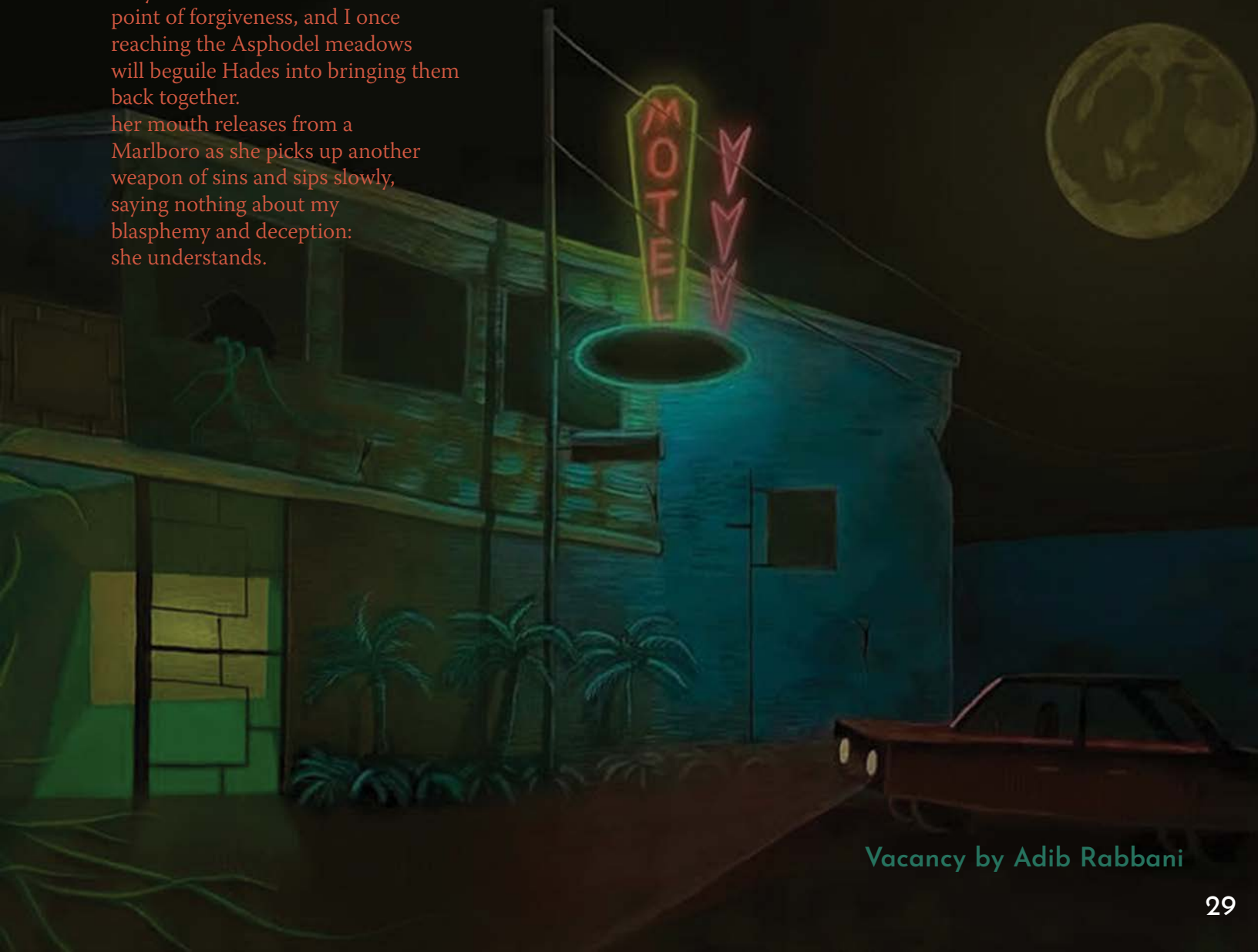


**Frozen** by Lizzie Herron

# The Lyre

by Anonymous

there's an angel that  
loiters around under neon  
signs at the corner liquor  
store, all wings and eyes, and  
mouth barely visible  
through smoke rings; the  
night drips from her like  
honey, and she tells me  
stories of Elysium in exchange  
for cigarettes and cheap 99s.  
*I was the one who tempted  
Orpheus to strike a gaze at his lover,*  
her smile is laced with Olympus  
but her eyes show the depths  
of Tartarus. I tell her  
Eurydice loved him to the  
point of forgiveness, and I once  
reaching the Asphodel meadows  
will beguile Hades into bringing them  
back together.  
her mouth releases from a  
Marlboro as she picks up another  
weapon of sins and sips slowly,  
saying nothing about my  
blasphemy and deception:  
she understands.

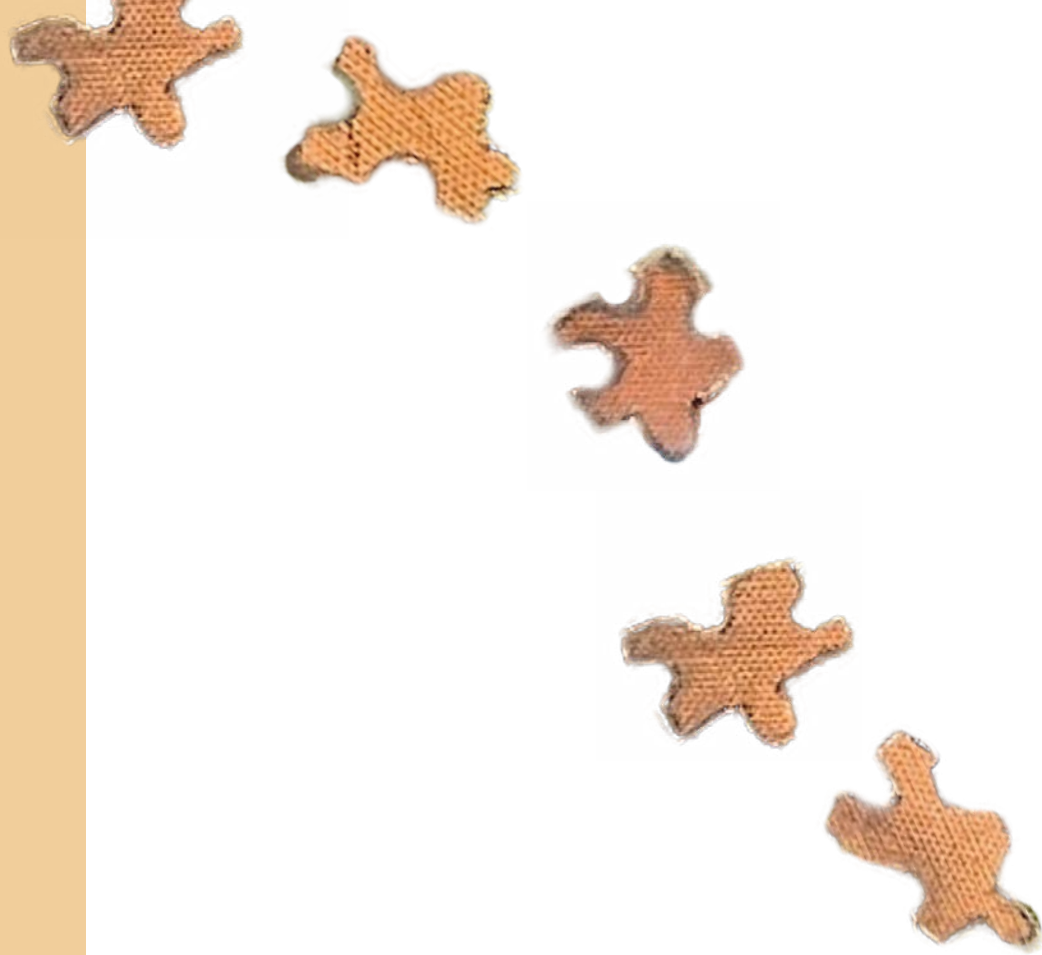


Vacancy by Adib Rabbani

# Lingering Reminders

by Anonymous

Icy cold spray  
Of the salt and the sea  
Tousled brown hair  
Curled just for me  
Bruised and purple nails  
That dug into your arm  
I long to see your smile  
Laced with your charm  
Matching knit sweaters  
Twisted in leaves  
Teddy bears with coffee cake  
Smell of bergamot tea  
Earthy rot of damp wood  
Trees lit ablaze  
Cinnamon spice lungs  
Hilltops covered in haze  
Foraging for my senses  
Through thickets of trees  
Wildflowers in the concrete  
Stay a little longer, please?



Missing Pieces by Isabella Matascik



# Acknowledgments for My World Betterment Portfolio

by Gwen Dunn

I've been told I have swagger and I can attribute that to a few factors, none of which being my teenage arrogance. My first shoutout goes to my occasionally held-back shoulders. All of my gratitude to them for flawlessly forming the illusion of knowing what to do.

The pep in my step, the inciter of my feet, are the yearbook notes from friends and teachers and the promise I made to myself of getting my name in front of their eyes again. No, no, no, I'm not scouring for attention or fame, I'm just the face in the background noise movie, sitting on a bed, looking starry-eyed out the window, about to break into song, dreaming of a way to make their name outside of this town.

Of course, my heartfelt thanks to my hometown, the shoes that housed my jammed toes and itched my increasingly blistered heels for twelve years of my life. My hometown: a hundred people in my grade. Bitter Facebook feuds. Pale, rural grass. Mandatory parade gatherings.

But truly, I think my boldness is the result of refusing to sit with the shards of stained glass at the bottom of my heart, with only the gladness of pinpointing a label for myself. Of refusing to let the statistics attached to the rarest lightrays of me keep me down. Yes, the pressure of trudging through a town, carrying exclamation points and warning posters of a world full of headlines is what stamped these circles under my eyes. The refusal to shrug *it is what it is* and simply allow the sun to never see any variation in its already-repetitive travels has dried my skin.

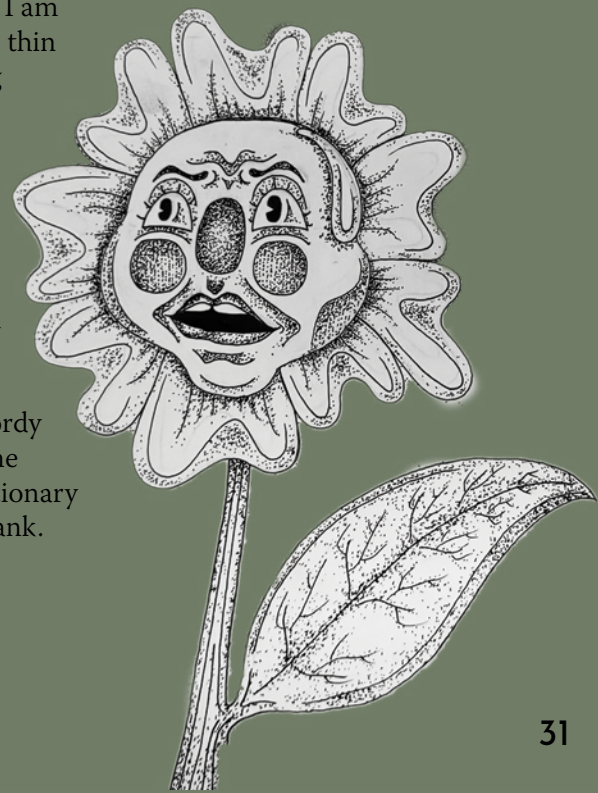
The groove of my stride is an eighth of the combined confidence of every mouthy soccer boy in my grade, and is the metronome to, therefore, every phrase out of my own mouth. Each stumble I take is well-earned, so try to get me to chuckle any more about my own downfall. Please try to



get me to grin because I am my most avid critic. I examine each ridge on each of my screw-ups and rate them on a four-star scale, tears of frustration dotting my review with punctuation marks.

Yes, thank you, India, thank you, terror, thank you, disillusionment, for placing me here. Because what am I without minor delusion? And by that, I mean I am clinging to a strand of hope so thin that my fingernails are digging into my palms, because really, my blossoming conviction roots from frustration, so yes, thank you, frustration. I walk with sore feet and a scrunched grin and loose shoulders but I can assure you that's nothing but the look of a motivated dreamer, tired of the smell of pale grass, of a wordy rarity who will never let anyone forget so, of a gracious revolutionary who has all the world to thank.

**Ignorance**  
by Taylor Vanhooser



# Sinner's Lament

by Corey Bell

Dry on my fingers — long, uncertain, trembling still. A deep, awful red. It sticks. It stains. I laughed then. It laughs now, in turn. It taunts me, a crimson vengeance coloring my palms, caked 'neath my nails. Out! Pick it out . . . An odious reminder of my actions from hours past. A time before sun. Shameful. Despicable. Five o'clock it was then; half past seven now. Sit again, stand again. Still, he lies in sleep eternal. A ruby pool, a silver blade — my blade by his side. Sit again, stand again; sink back into the wood. The silver glints by the light of a new dawn. Thin. Sharp. Still. He lies still. Quiet. Think no more. Hold the tome. Leather binding, gilt detail. Cold and heavy in my hands, cold and heavy . . . Flip a page. Flip two more. 24 books in; flip a page again. Large number 17, small number 9: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

Who indeed . . . Perverse. Devious. That which is born of human desire could be nothing but . . . Evil inherent. Ego sum evil incarnate. We are wicked. Vile beings. Vile bodies. Vile souls — marred by imperfections. Foolish human error. What ever have I done? A state of disrepair. Perpetual. Permanent. Unclean. Impure. Quiet, and listen . . . Bread of life, blood outpoured. For me? For the sinner? Again, I rise. Scour me, I beg. Mind, body, soul. Expunge the faults. Again we pray. My God (Our Father), make me pure once more (who art in heaven), as the lily or the lamb (hallowed be thy name). Hear me now (thy kingdom come). With repentance. With rue. With briny tears. Hear my pain, hear my plea, and take pity (thy will be done). Have mercy, precious Lord, if it be thy will. Forgive me. Sweet remission. Renew me. Make me clean. Make me in thine image — (on earth) as below, (as it is in heaven) so above. Unworthy are we . . . Am I . . . Still, I entreat. In fear, I beseech thee. Quiet the noise. Grant me peace (give us this day). Grant me strength (our daily bread). Offer me sanctification . . . Divine retribution (and forgive us our trespasses) that thee alone may give. I have sinned. Forgive me (as we forgive those)! With intention, cruel intention. I did it. In anger, father. In envy, I struck. I pierced. In impiety, I destroyed that which you created. I killed him — (who trespass against us) an innocent life! Oh, sorrow. My God, (and lead us not) from thy path, I've strayed . . . Far . . . so far (into temptation) from virtue — down the path of vice. Of iniquity. Of hedonism. Of gluttony. Of wrath. Of sin. Foul plague (but deliver us). Deliver me, Lord — (from evil) for the devil hath tainted me. Scourge of man. Hellish decadence. My transgressions I confess. I beg of thee now — (for) I am (thine) to take another life, to take mine own into these forsaken hands. I beg of thee (is the kingdom), seize my body (and the power). Seize my soul (and the glory). Take it all away, dear God (forever); Amen.



Feathered Host by Adah Reid

## Gazing by Brooke DuVall



# Inheritance

by Brianna Crowder

I found your handwriting penned  
into the back cover of an old hymnal,  
the letters slanted, leaning  
toward a light you trusted more than yourself.

I trace the ink as if it were a map,  
leading me somewhere far but familiar:  
a kitchen table, a prayer whispered  
between sips of cooling coffee.

I am older now, but not wiser,  
still trying to understand the gravity  
of things passed down.

Some inherit land,  
some inherit silver,  
but I inherited your ache to believe  
in something eternal,  
too large to fit into a hymnal,  
but small enough to fit between  
the lines you left behind.

# Hereditary

by Jihoon Suh

with other precious things. Though diminished, tarnished, these shine in their own right, and join the wider world.

and more on this liquid to sustain him, to elevate him from the void. Slowly it replaces the emptiness and becomes indispensable.

A rare breed however of these born of nothing can turn crooked. They are the cursed, the obsessed . . . and their minds grow inwards toward their poverty rather than outwards toward their clan. These children are hungry in wealth, childish in adulthood and defensive in aggression. Should they be punished they will lash out. Should they encounter an obstacle they will cheat. Should they be caught red-handed they will mentally commit suicide. Ghouls are made here, ghouls with the ambition to warp not only their souls but the very connecting matrix of their kin.

When the deranged pilgrim is mature and sets forth his sons it is not from his seed that they are begotten but of the poison itself. The cuckolded ghouls do not recognize his image in them, nor do the sons recognize their progenitor. Behold a line that is nothing but a vessel for poison, a vessel of multi-generational ambition with no end. A black mold has hitched a ride in their minds. A morel fungus, a relic full of ancient memory. So the poison sets to work in the prosperity that was once poverty. It does this to the next generation as they are just infants. When the father opens his mouth it is now to speak on behalf of the beckoning void. Poison in the newborn's ears dictates what is heard and unheard. The creed now digested across the life of the pilgrim is easier to absorb in the next generation. It is a warm pulp suckled freely from a diseased teat. Greed is a sin easily inherited.

See this poverty-stricken peninsula.

It fills the mind of those that dwell in it.

It captivates, dominates and overpowers it. Those born of it may not escape it: they breathe, they eat, and they grow in it. Structures are made of as much of the stuff that makes it as the empty pockets in it. So are the bones of these people made. Their emptiness is also part of them. But like all resilient living things most of those who are born here grow fully. They learn to fill their lack

Empty ambition breeds poison and a desert pilgrim who does not expect water drinks that poison for he is not equipped to benefit from water. The black poison is strangely potent and brings strength and power to the pilgrim. He relies more

Pick & Choose  
by Devika Krishna



Now this poisonous changeling is not bathing in the void like its father. But it does feed greedily on the wealth that is hungry, the vengeance that is unprovoked. It is a malleable thing, a baby. They enter the world to receive care and love, or rather they are programmed to determine that whatever they receive first is care and love, like a duckling lays eyes on its mother. So it is that the abuse laid on its brand new senses become its fuel. So an unholy duality is formed. The father, the original pioneer to have come from nothing, and the son birthed from the empty riches. The former imposes its "love," its toxic expectation. The latter toils teetering near mental aberration. It does not realize there are other worlds.

Among the fray a third arrives. It is thrown like its father before it into the prosperous abyss and mistakes it for dearth. Its potential rises above that of its father. Fulfilled, powerful and rising it also crosses a threshold. A shift of perspective, the balance wobbles and bounces back violently. A circuit is closed, a sensor tripped. There is a reversion to the mean . . . Nature's only way of being benevolent . . .

The grandson leaps out of its poisonous ancestry and regards with sudden disgust the fabric it inherits. Reborn and struggling, the third born attempts to reciprocate with an unconditional love which is rejected. They

attempt to build bonds that have not existed in the family. To stop and rest and enjoy the work that is done. Even perhaps to share . . .

Yet a wall is met, the wall reeks of power and domination, the only language it understands. The change of perspective may not travel up, it can only trickle down, slowly changing, slowly creating a new way to love and interact. The third born during this time suffers. They may only breathe in poison and yet are required to breathe out pure air. Cutting it out, being free, escaping it takes a lifetime. Born into it, die to fall out of it.

The legacy of this third son is heavy and infected but he must use it to prosper. He is condemned to use those very instruments of corruption. As he leverages these riches he feels his ancestral instincts cling to him like dusty cobwebs. It suffocates him, drowns him and follows him as he wanders the companionless landscape. It begs him to do better, to bloat it beyond what is natural.

The poison boils and writhes and lashes out. It's a sentient being, maybe, a family member on its own.



It must be painfully extricated. So familiarity becomes a shackle itself hampering rebirth. However even in the most difficult moments there are glimpses of that burning desire for change, a pathetic but shining flicker of that dream almost extinguished by bitterness and anger.

Will the table be clean when the fourth generation arrives? Can that which is pure be nourished by a stained spoon? Brooding, the grandson determines that his name shall not pass on until he himself is free.



**Blood Flow**  
by Diego Rodriguez

# Pain In Suburbia Act I & II

by Andrea Villarreal Yu

He spoon-feeds me riddles to my distaste; I chew them slowly  
which blister like fire going down

consider: he bleaches blue walls and turns real pain suburban  
not *he loves me* just that we microdose domestic  
and so I wear a ring

I inspect my polish nails on porch as kids play  
“but Mama’s not gonna help me; everything she does is slow  
and Mama doesn’t care,” the kids whine

he dies.

*I guess that qualifies as forever — I think  
one lifetime was enough.*

His riddles die. The heart monitor screamed him dead, not me.  
Consecrated ground regresses to earthly  
and laminated mahogany to splintered banisters

“I bet you Mother won’t even cry,” say my grown-up  
children. “Mother doesn’t even care.”

At sixty-four I march down garnished in black  
neither screaming nor crying. Watering the roots.

and [*pain exits suburbia*] too.



Storm of Gluttony  
by Yongjoon Cheon



Familial Bond  
by Jennifer Shriner

# Wednesday, 12:06 PM

by Miles McCormick

When I died,  
I could only think about  
how boring it all was

I did not die pinned in a flooding ravine  
with cold water and warm pebbles  
cocooning my neck

or stranded in a cell tower,  
two thousand and eighty feet  
of steel and heaven reigning below me

I did not die floating through the air  
in a shootout,  
professing my love with a grand, final gesture

or burnt at the stake  
a dark red blaze eating my flesh  
as the crowd roars

I did not die in shark-infested waters,  
a bullseye with jagged fins closing in

or propelled into a vat of steaming acid,  
my bones rising to the surface

or even resting in a star-soaked valley,  
a small, tranquil river in the background

We all do not die in any  
consumable finale —

but on a park bench after  
a jog resting in the noon sun —

sneakers, just barely worn in  
our writers off-schedule —

credits not yet ready to roll.



A Candle You Can't Put Out  
by Devika Krishna

The Time Gazebo  
by Aurora Straight

Atelophobia  
by Kay Campbell





# Time to Stop the Bomb

by Sid Chopra

Plucking at our shirts, tugging our red shorts, we grimaced through the moist summer heat behind wooden desks. Ito-Sensei scribbled on the chalkboard. The equation of spacetime, embossed in chalk, towered over us. For weeks, I drafted solutions. I pictured the headlines reading, “*The first man to travel through time, a hero* — Haru!” shouted Ito-Sensei. “Could you solve this paradox?” I pushed and pushed to reveal my answer but only choked on my words. I couldn’t trust myself. Nothing but stuttered nonsense blurted out. My face grew hotter than the room. I stumbled over to the board. Lifting the chalk, my hands danced around the canvas without thought, boasting the experience of a physicist. Just as I reached to write the final line, time hung. The bell shattered the silence. I turned to hand Ito-Sensei the chalk. Her mouth was agape, and everyone stared. I jogged home without another word.

I ran through the front door, threw my bag to the floor, and lowered into my desk chair — peaceful solitude. A blank envelope lay on my desk. My hands lifted a pen and furiously jotted down the last line of my solution. The pen bumped up and down as I solved it. I stopped, flipped over the envelope, and sliced it open. A white linen sheet slipped out. “Don’t choose to share what you just solved,” it began. “I made that mistake. A man will come to your time and incinerate your town. Blood is on my hands. Change this fate.” My heart capsized. Pieces of dried skin, smoked and charred from time, were folded into the letter. At the bottom, my name and a distant year were clearly imprinted. My limbs grew numb from picturing Mama and Papa burnt alive and my life gone. I looked down at my school shorts; the red color had become the blood of my family. I couldn’t stand the sight, the thought, the vision. I threw down the letter and ran out of the house without stopping, past the rice paddies, by the old lady’s onigiri stand, and far away from that cursed letter.

My legs collapsed. I sat on the top of a hill overlooking my town, the only place I had ever known. Tear droplets dribbled down each cheek. I smudged them with my dusty hands. Children played on the dirt paths near the schools. Dogs rolled over in the mud to cool off. Women folded clothes in their backyards, singing as they worked. An ocean poured onto my white shirt that Mama pressed for me. I looked in the distance to see the house my grandparents built: bamboo walls, thatched shingle roofing, and a garden of wilting cherry blossoms. A pillar of smoke, blossoming outwards from the town’s center, consumed every building, child, animal, and family in sight. The cruel reality of the letter unfolded. I wanted time travel to explore. I never thought it would destroy. I shouldn’t have solved the equation.

I have to rewrite the letter.

# Waiting

by Hannah Karim

I ride the bus home every day. There's not much to be excited about in a yellow bus for half an hour, but I make it work. When the dull gray walls of my surroundings suffocate me, I color it with the life outside my window.

There's a woman who runs every morning around the same corner, at the same time, no matter the weather. Sometimes she glances at the yellow monstrosity, and I wonder if she somehow sees me through the tinted windows. But it's never more than a glance.

There's a group of boys at the stop before mine who dap each other up every single day before they leave. Part of me hopes that they'll never stop.

There's a group of bored-looking kids near the middle school who wait together at the same spot every day. I see them, and in my head, I ask, *what are you waiting for?* They never answer.



Burning Tree  
by Devika Krishna

My stop eventually arrives, and I go through the motions perfectly. Every day, I'll greet my family, grab a snack, and finish my homework. I wait for my scheduled free time let myself rest, but once it's over, I snap back into my monotonous routine. Most days, I don't even bother thinking beyond the next day. How can I, when there's so much to be done?

Every night, I lie in bed, and I stare at my popcorn ceiling, and I hear the same voice once more. I'm not sure I can put it into words. Maybe it's a siren, enticing me with a beautiful trap. Maybe it's a message from a better future. Maybe it's just a thought. But it hums in my ear throughout the night, even as I sink into the abyss of sleep.

*What are you waiting for?*  
And I never answer.

Fever Dream  
by Adib Rabbani

# G-E-L-L-Y-K-H-E-I-D

by Nevelle Thomas

There is something  
boiling  
Boiling within us.  
Our youth's nation.  
AND  
they continue to tell us to...  
Turn off the kettle.  
The whistle is too loud.  
AND  
the more they tell us to turn off  
the kettle,  
the more fire they add,  
AND  
The kettle gets,  
Louder  
AND  
LOUDER...  
You know what glass does  
when the fire gets real hot?  
IT BREAKS  
But  
I'm not glass and my words are  
not fragile.  
Consider this,  
RAW  
Pure, Flawed, Tainted, Innocent  
souls  
We become victims of  
Our history  
Our struggles  
Our fight  
Our achievements  
Our goals.

How does this sound?  
Kids are getting shot in  
Brownsville

WHILE  
*Artisanal horseradish is selling for  
\$74 in Williamsburg*  
AND  
*Dinner at a high end restaurant  
in Downtown Brooklyn cost  
\$225 per person*  
YET  
25 percent,  
And climbing,  
of Brooklyn's population receives  
food stamps.  
Brooklyn has become "The Tale  
of Two Boroughs"  
With wine and guns in parallel  
worlds.  
We whistle equality  
while the wind blows and our  
whistle fades  
We whistle equality  
Once A-gain...  
Because we are young.  
We are thrown into the box of,  
"I don't know what I want"  
"It's a phase"  
"We are young,"  
But this is OUR reality  
So I'll press the keys on this  
board and  
Unlock a world of  
EQUALITY  
A world where  
Pocketbooks are made the same  
size because we are all capable  
of holding  
A greater capacity.  
A world where my education isn't

a mirage a deferred dream  
or just a wish  
But it is continuously MY reality.  
A world where at MY school,  
Whether it is  
In Bedstuy or Manhattan,  
I can open any text book and on  
page 6 find the word  
*auspicious*  
And still be held responsible to  
know what it means.  
A world where my skin color is  
not an excuse, for me to say  
I CAN'T  
Because I expect to get a 1600 on  
my SATs  
And that is all that my skin says  
should be considered  
for me to be classified as smart  
cause I'm of a minority  
The Affirmative Action  
TUHI!  
You tryna' to say I can't retain  
as much?  
I don't hold enough?  
You got it wrong.  
I hold TOO much.  
So I'll turn on the kettle and let  
it boil,  
and boil,  
and boil,  
Until the whistle gets SO loud  
Only a revolution can silence it.  
Love is a revolutionary act  
And so is  
EQUALity.

In the Land of Dreams  
by Josephine Elnziger-Lowicz



# More

by Hannah Karim

I sit, legs crossed, typing away  
Doing homework, my hair uncombed  
Listening to songs I don't love but don't hate  
And I stare out the window and wonder,  
Is there something more than this?

And my fingers type away  
In a never ending game  
It's raining, I feel nothing  
Writing bad poems in the dark and I wonder,  
Is there more to me than this?

Procrastination, adrenaline, headphones,  
Cell phones, whiteboards, deodorant,  
Romance, hardback books, college, drama,  
Movies, concerts, lectures, hormones,  
And we wonder,  
Is there more to youth than this?

My thoughts are scattered, my eyes unfocused  
My brain constantly being stretched in five directions  
And I don't know who to be  
Because we're pebbles in a muddy stream  
And in a world of distractions, 8 billion voices ask,  
Is there more to life than this?

3:45am by Ava Winfield





## The Retelling

by Andrea Villarreal Yu

Tell me. Years after, did he ever look at his hands and see them  
Deeply wrinkled, bulging veins like tree knots, trembling  
And think. Hm. I regret.

I have been told birds line up on power cords outside his house  
Crows, black. Tell me, did he ever see and think a raven instead, and before seeing  
The feathers were not elegant and long and made of purple-tint, tell me.

Did he laugh, thinking I was back?

Oh, but it will not make shreds of sense in the retelling, of course.  
Tell me. When he read this poem, did he think. She is on top of a treehouse.  
Arms outstretched. Half a bird. Wild eyes and crazy. Once again.



The Raven  
by Maize Alber

A diorama of a night sky observatory. The scene is set within a semi-circular, arched structure with a dark blue interior. A large telescope on a tripod stands in the center. To the right, a wooden bookshelf holds several books and a white crescent moon. The floor is a light brown color. The entire scene is framed by a white diamond-patterned border.

# Halley's Comet

by Hailey Tam

I mistook the sunrise for a promise once,  
but it was only another clock in disguise.  
The sky hums in fluorescent tones now,  
bright enough to blind, never to warm.  
I traded my constellations for pay stubs,  
stitched stability into my shadow.  
Every dream I buried grew into an invoice,  
each "someday" stamped *expired*.  
The horizon forgot to reach back.  
My footsteps echo through unfinished versions of me.  
Even silence feels like an obligation,  
something I owe for staying practical.  
I used to think meaning was magnetic,  
but it rusted faster than ambition.  
Now I orbit predictability,  
a planet that's given up pretending to glow.  
Nights are quieter, but not kind.  
The stars feel outsourced, automated.  
I breathe in resignation like air  
and exhale what's left of wonder.

# Rabbit on the Moon

by Dakyung Yoon

As the night calls for despair  
He cloaks himself in my mother's jewels  
Tracing my dreams as I seek his solace  
Revealing himself as the jade rabbit

He carves his luminescence on the craters  
As the Chuseok moon guides us all  
There he is, coating the injeolmi  
Leaping on the last of Autumn  
Forgiving his paws in the flames  
Concealing himself behind the clouds

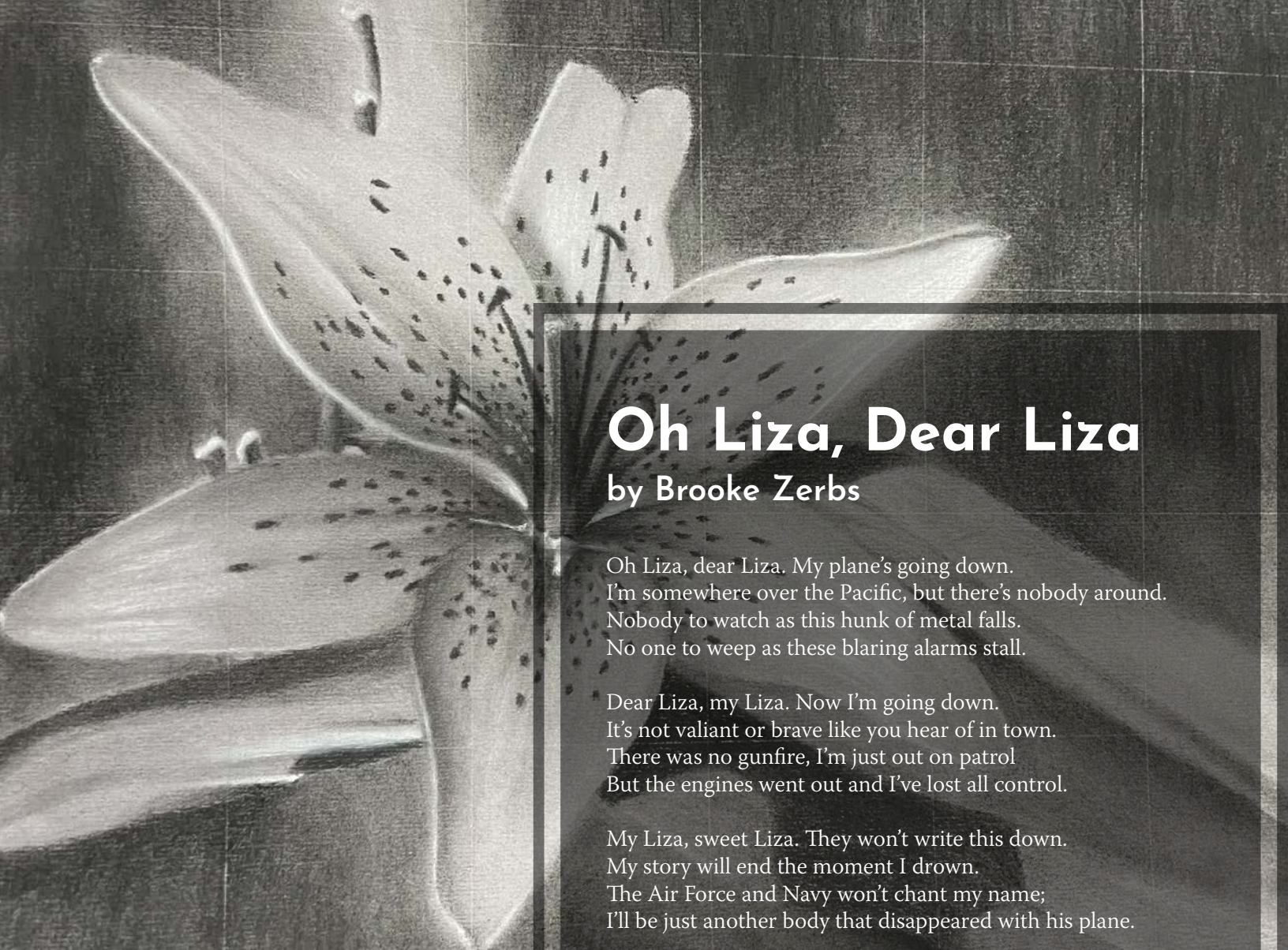
Amidst the nightfall, he leaves me in wonder  
A timeless statue, his beauty stains my palms  
And there in dreams, he comes along

Calling me silently until I find my Daltokki



## Tension by Vanessa Perez





## Oh Liza, Dear Liza

by Brooke Zerbs

Oh Liza, dear Liza. My plane's going down.  
I'm somewhere over the Pacific, but there's nobody around.  
Nobody to watch as this hunk of metal falls.  
No one to weep as these blaring alarms stall.

Dear Liza, my Liza. Now I'm going down.  
It's not valiant or brave like you hear of in town.  
There was no gunfire, I'm just out on patrol  
But the engines went out and I've lost all control.

My Liza, sweet Liza. They won't write this down.  
My story will end the moment I drown.  
The Air Force and Navy won't chant my name;  
I'll be just another body that disappeared with his plane.

Sweet Liza, strong Liza. I know I've let you down.  
I promised you I'd come home safe and sound.  
They won't have a body, for I'm lost out at sea.  
You'll open the door, hoping it's me.

Strong Liza, please Liza. Try not to fall down.  
Their job is to bring news, not stop widows' frowns.  
They'll hand you a flag and give all their thanks.  
It'll have to be enough to take my place.

Please Liza, oh Liza. Tell them my name.  
For I won't get the credit or share any fame.  
I fought in no battles; my kill count is zero.  
I'm just a name on a stone in a yard full of heroes.

Growing Alone by Addyson Lago

# to the sea we shall return

by Eloise Arnold

for a moment  
on the shore  
with the sun in my eyes  
i can hardly see the bodies  
in the water

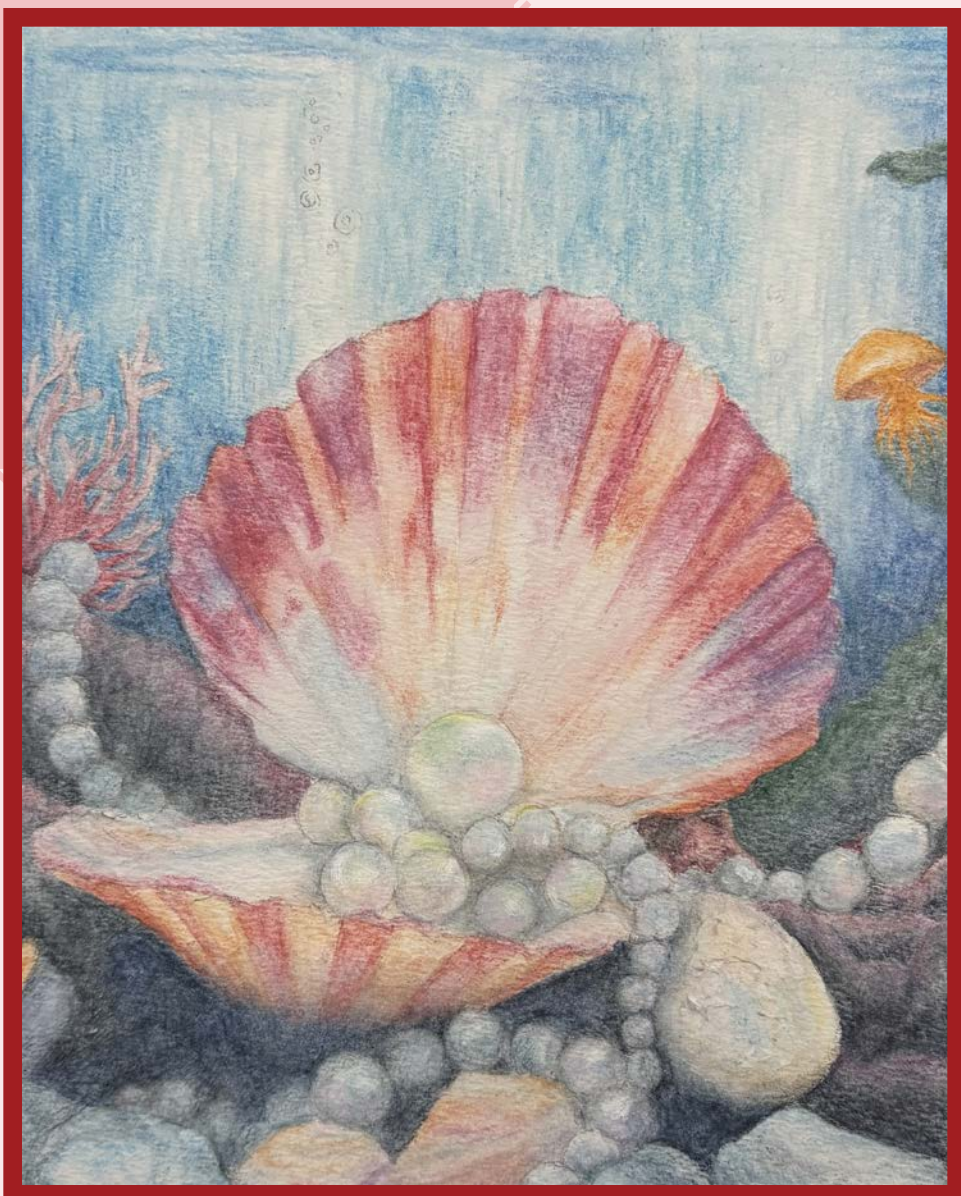
*was it worth it?*

the blood runs warm and then cold  
like the currents  
and i am dragged by the moon  
with the tide

*am i a memory?*

there is salt on my face  
from the sweat and the tears  
and there is salt in my lungs  
from the sea

*i wonder if this is home.*



Under the Sea by Addyson Lago

# Serenity in the Void

by Matthew Bartel

I take a deep breath and close my eyes.  
The weight of what feels like the world fills my head.  
I think of my family — how I will yearn for them each second.  
I sit in the room, the clock ticking on the wall.  
Each passing moment feeds my uneasiness.  
My thoughts drown in the relentless ticking of time.  
The door beside me opens; I'm gestured to enter.  
With painted steps, I slowly go in.

Inside, I'm briefed on the mission.  
Each step feels more vital than the last.  
I am to travel beyond where any human has gone.  
Humanity will once again confront the final frontier.  
That eternal void beckons us all — old and young alike.  
Each face reflects something I try to read.  
It speaks of hope, curiosity, even wonder.  
They believe we're helping the world; I believe we're discovering others.

I look at my peers, people I've known for years.  
Some I've grown to love, others I've learned to tolerate.  
We met in training, each with dreams larger than life.  
We endured conditions that made our bodies plead for mercy.  
Yet we did not flinch or fall.  
Even when belittled, overworked, pushed past our limits —  
We became something greater than we were.  
We became astronauts, trained to venture into the unknown.

The command said launch would come at dawn, and told us to rest.  
We returned to quarters lined with photos and fragments of home.  
Mine held a picture of my daughter — the brightest thing in my world.  
Her smile could outshine any star; her face more radiant than the cosmos.  
I held it close, tears stinging my eyes.  
The ache of leaving her pierced deeper than expected.  
The lights went out; the barracks fell to stillness.  
It felt like space — a quiet we'd soon inhabit.

That night, I lay awake, thoughts racing through my head.  
Humanity has existed only a moment in cosmic time.  
Oceans have risen and fallen. Species born, erased.  
Civilizations layered one atop another, vanishing.  
But has any of it truly mattered? Where are the whys?  
Do we matter in the void's cold reach?  
Are we so small that our lives barely register?  
Or the only ones who dare to wonder?

Soon, I will be among the stars.  
Would that make our mission noble?  
Or are we all equal in the cosmos —  
Measured not in glory, but in breath, memory, longing, and love?  
These questions gnawed at me like embers beneath ash.  
I found no answer — only silence.  
Then sunrise came, and we were summoned to begin.  
We walked forward, suited in resolve.

As we prepared, the others shared their hopes aloud.  
Some imagined new species; others dreamed of ancient ruins.  
I wished only for one thing:  
To find something that sees the stars as we do.  
To feel serenity in the silence.  
But deep down, I knew what we all felt.  
Even if unspoken, we shared one truth —  
We hoped we weren't alone.

Humans are not meant for solitude.  
We are made to touch, to speak, to belong.  
To share breath, laughter, warmth.  
We built ships to cross oceans  
Just to reach each other.  
No one longs to be truly alone —  
And if someone does, I pity them.  
If humanity is alone, I pity us more.

We board the ship — a tribute to imagination.  
A vessel built to defy limits.  
The door seals behind us — no going back.  
We take our seats as countdown begins.  
Some pray. Others recall family.  
I look upward, full of silence and awe.  
The Earth recedes, a fragile blue dot. →  
The vessel rises, and so do we.

The pressure crushes like a thousand stones —  
Yet I rise.  
The stars emerge, steady and still.  
We cross the threshold of Earth's sky.  
Gravity loosens its grip; the silence grows.  
I smile, thinking of her again.  
The stars shimmer, radiant and unreachable.  
I feel so small — yet somehow infinite.

The cosmos embraces us like a quiet hymn.  
I stare through the glass as space unfolds.  
For a moment, all is still.  
And in that stillness, I find peace.  
Unqualified. Undeniable. Whole.  
The universe holds me.  
And I hold it back.  
A prayer, answered in starlight.



Revitalizing Vancouver Chinatown by Iona Jiang

# Birthplace

by Anastasiya Sankevich

There's a city in my heart,  
And the city ticks  
The way my body ticks,  
And the streets follow the concave  
Of my soft veins.

My city is built  
Of the same flesh my heart is:  
Unyielding flesh, earthy flesh,  
My old-god flesh,  
My singing flesh,  
Flesh churned out of lakes  
And of dark and familial soil.

That soil, it runs in my blood  
And upon that soil  
My hearty city was built.  
A searing red vein cuts  
Across white curls of buildings,  
And people, my people, my people stir  
In alleyways, in my arteries.

And the city's roots dig deep  
Into my stomach, cutting it open,  
And the roofs of its buildings  
Gnaw at my throat.  
I wail —  
My heart cannot contain  
This angry, sorrowful,  
Beautiful leviathan.

A city should never live  
In such a tiny vessel.  
It should burst out of my chest,  
And my lungs and my brain  
Should be paved in brick,  
And my tongue should be rippling  
With the language of those buildings.

And yet . . . and yet . . .  
My skin keeps my body  
Trapped in the clamor  
Of its own bones,  
And the roads fall to disuse  
And only my blood remembers  
The bitter taste of cement.

And yet . . .

And yet . . .

This city does not sit quietly:  
It bubbles.  
With limbs, and voices, and streetlights.  
My blood froths against the fleshy walls  
Of this architectural marvel,  
And the footsteps of my city  
Beat against its bloody sidewalks.

And so . . . and so . . .  
This brick cannot part  
From my body.

And so . . .

And yet . . .

My heart beats for those buildings.



From Calle San Matías  
by Kinsey Savage



A Collection by Claudia Wysocky

## Baggage Claim by Freddy Zahr

I watch as the color of my skin fades toward a searing white, as if the world could only let me exist by bleaching me of the histories that made me. I have carried the weight of maps I never drew, borders that I and no one else can truly agree on, and histories I learn filtered through someone else's lens. In that vast expanse of inherited displacement, I wonder what it means to be Middle Eastern in a world that insists on categorizing me as "white" yet refuses to see the contours of my life, the ontological contradictions of my existence. The imperialist nation we vie to live in sacrifices our identity on paper, our dignity in the media, and our being in the judgment that assumes guilt before innocence. America's empire

expands quietly through borders, refugee bans, deportations, and the bureaucratic machinery of politics that control our movements and ignore, if not further colonial logics in the "hellhole" of the Middle East, as our Emperor somehow appraises the idea of renovating and saving a region and the conditions left in the wake of its own destruction. As safety is promised in words and security is measured in lies, I have grown older with the same narratives, yet I claw at the obscured shape of truth and scrape at the thought that my cultural survival may never be spared by those who dress themselves in protection.

I look behind me as the snow swirls outside, flakes clinging to the edge of the terminal windows,

and for a moment, the gray Portland winter makes this place feel like a haven. Inside, the air smells of polished wood and citrus; the sharpness and sterility make me dizzy, though everyone else seems to breathe easily. The ceiling timbers are structured like an impossibly large ark, and the floor is a mix of the signature teal colored carpet and new tiles meant to reflect progress. My mother walks ahead of me, trying to hold Raya's, my five-year-old sister's, hand.

*"Yallah, eajily, Let's go, hurry,"* she says softly.

"Do you have the passports?" my dad asks. The contrast of my father's loud voice startles me. "We're counting on you to get us there safely."

It was his way of entrusting me with responsibility, an enormous task in his eyes. I check my jacket pockets; the passports are there. His is worn at the edges, softened from years of travel. The security line snakes through the terminal, a slow, shifting body of people. My backpack, my phone, my suitcase, and my belt sit in plastic bins as they glide down the conveyor belt. I feel stripped, exposed, the intimate contents of my life surrendering themselves to a machine and the surveillance of strangers. After passing through the scanner, a voice stops me.

"Random screening," the officer says.

For a moment, I think he's made a mistake. It's always been my parents who were the ones pulled aside, had their bags searched, questioned while I stood waiting, watching. I'd built a quiet certainty around that pattern, understanding that our whiteness, our supposed invisibility, extends only as far as it chooses. We continue to reap the benefits of the stereotypical Muslim man in a turban with a thick beard.

"Step over here, please." The words come out rehearsed, like a line in a script.

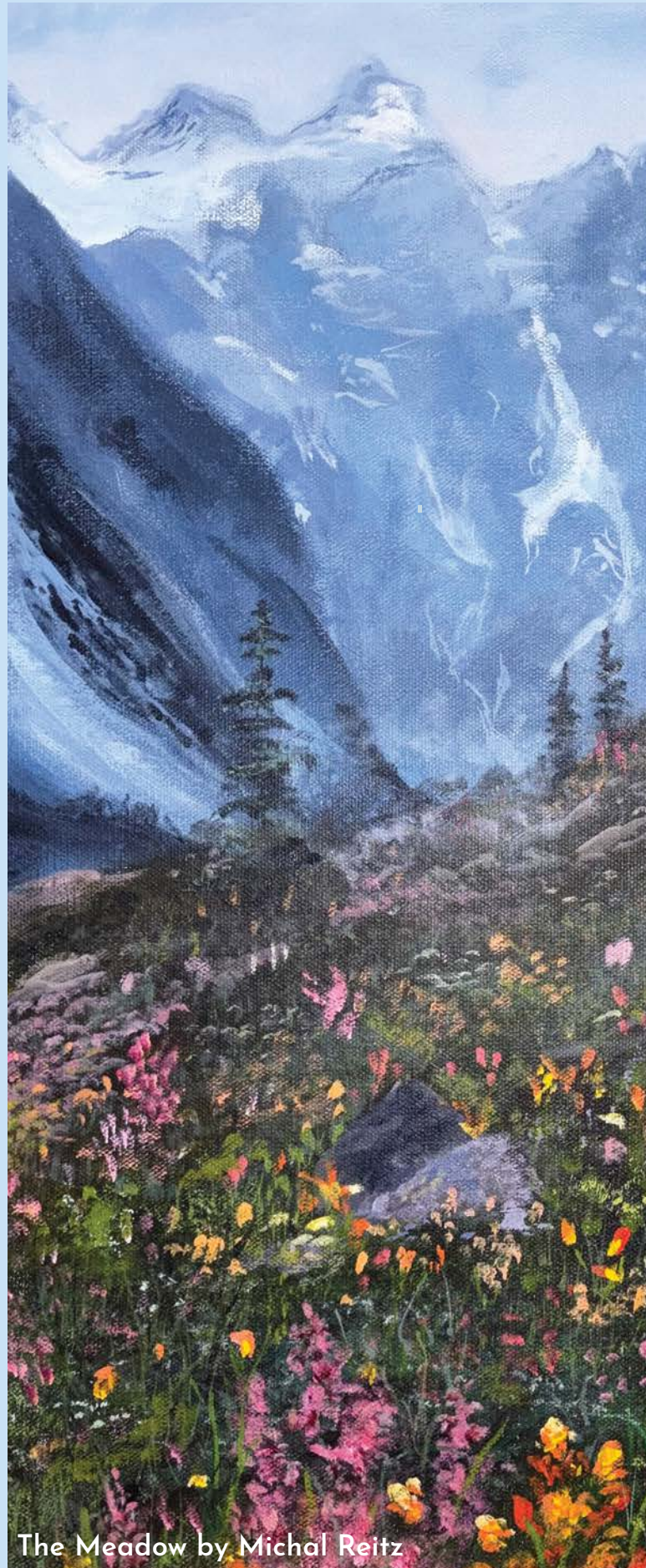
I nod. My throat feels tight. The patdown is impersonal. He feels around my waist and inner thigh to deter threats to security. Once it's over, I sense the lingering weight of his gaze, like an extension of his hand pressing against my chest. I brush across the small cross around my neck, pulling it outside my shirt. I wonder if it means anything, if it matters that I am Christian, that I carry this symbol on my body, that I am not what they have been trained to fear. I wanted him to react to this, to shield me from suspicion, but I know better. Our faces, hair, or skin tone might as well be a flashing guilty sign. The officer thanks me like I've done him a favor, his words light and clipped. I step away, grab my bag and phone, and rejoin my family.

*"Tamam? All good?"* my mother asks.

*"Tamam? All good,"* I reply.

The words are brief but have meaning in what they don't say. There's both comfort and exhaustion in the word. We sit by Gate D17, waiting for the flight to France. The gray Portland sky hangs heavy over the runway. Our names will be called soon. We'll board, buckle in, and fly across an ocean to another country that treats us the same.

"Arab people ride camels to go to school. In our countries, people live in deserts, in tents, while we're anti-Western terrorists who ride camels to war," my mom says, sitting on the edge of my bed, "That's the Western image of us." She barely had time for this interview, balancing work as an endocrinologist and parenting Raya, who's taking a shower in the other room. The heart of the uniquely Middle Eastern discrimination is that all the beautiful parts of us that we value as a culture are erased, while we are left with the "occidentalism" propaganda that shapes the Western view. These reductive narratives reinforce the suspicion and misunderstanding in our daily lives, which forces the Middle Eastern to be the threat in any designated setting. My mom, even though she is classified as white on paper by the U.S. government, continues to experience the contradictions of prejudice firsthand. "No, I didn't get any privilege of being white. I had a patient who asked to leave my clinic . . . as he doesn't like my accent," she explains. Social perceptions continue to deny us the privileges entailed with losing our chance at self-definition. The consequences of this misclassification are compounded by historical context and displacement. She recalls, "I grew up in a land always on the verge of war . . . in 2006, I could not leave home unless running for the shelter underground because another state was bombing my country." The classification of white ignores the deeper discussions of our identity that are unique to each country. Middle Eastern people are often referred to as Arab or generalized by region, outside the census, of course, to hide the richness of our cultures and religions. Arab is used to describe someone who speaks Arabic, Middle Eastern is a general region, but what about Syrian, Jordanian, and Lebanese? These words carry the specificity of who we truly are. To survive in a world that insists on flattening us, we must do more than reject the white definition imposed by the state; we must reclaim the right to name ourselves and not soften our identity into palatable terms for Western comfort.

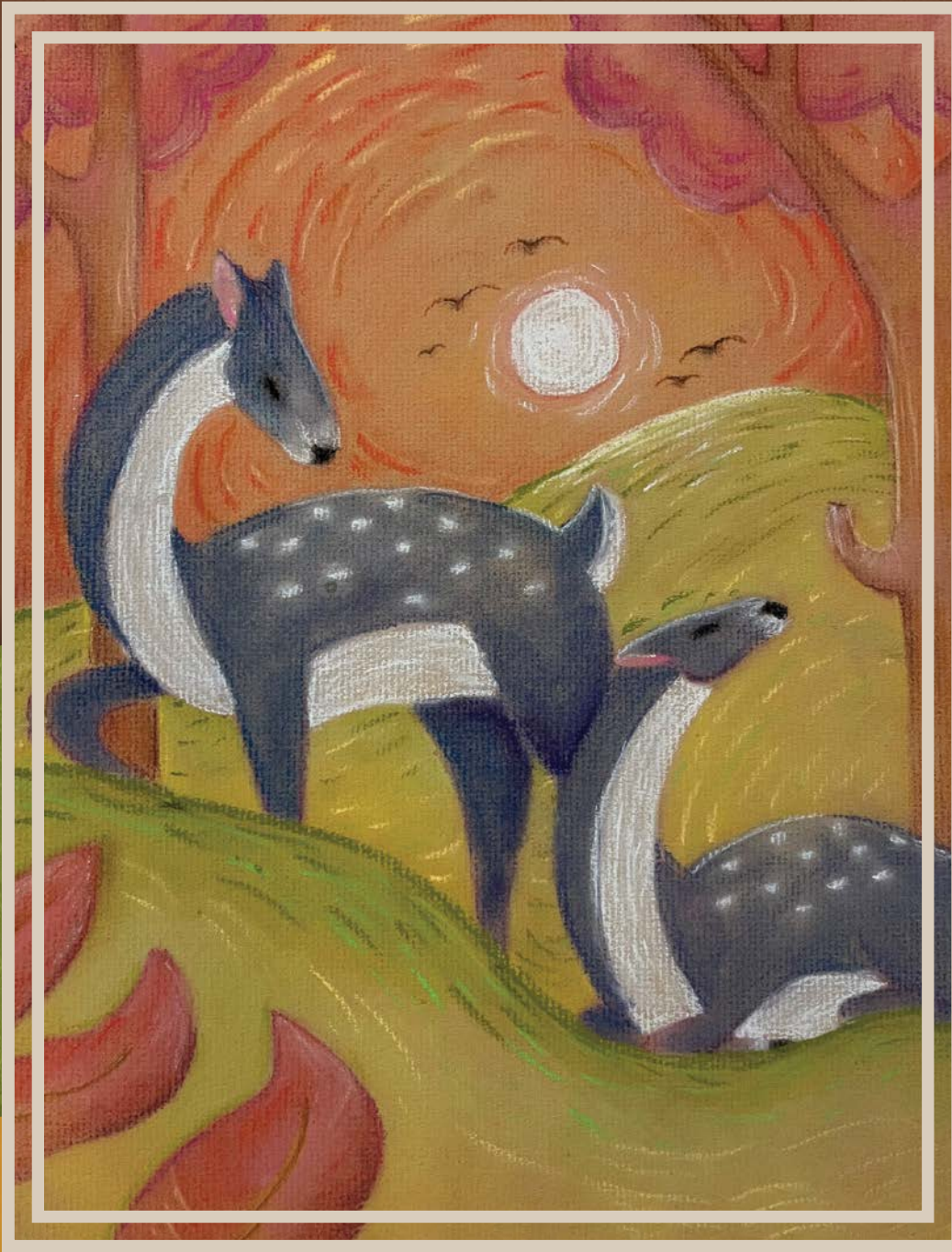


The Meadow by Michal Reitz

# Norway

by Pratyusha Trivedi

At eight, I trace my fingers along cold runestones  
The tour guide's voice dissolves into white noise  
My brother and I joke about the bearded men  
    in helmets  
While playing hopscotch on the cold marble floor  
Outside, the snow falls on the streets  
the same snow that once covered longships  
But I only feel the cold  
An obstacle between me and the warmth  
of my car seats  
In Jotunheimen, we walk among peaks  
That giants supposedly called home  
But I only feel the cold  
An obstacle between me and the warmth  
Of gas station hot chocolate  
Seven years later, my brother makes me walk  
Again through Jotunheim  
Only this time on his computer screen  
I feel my leg getting warm  
Resting against his overheating PC  
It's hot.  
Here, Thor is red-bearded and a drunk  
Odin trading eyes for knowledge  
Maybe I could have known this sooner  
If I paid attention  
to the mountains and the museums  
The irony stings: I'm finally interested  
In the stories I ignored as a child  
I want to return to that museum  
Apologize to every runestone, every artifact  
I treated as useless  
Not worthy of my time  
I want to stand there  
Understanding every Nordic word  
Pressing my hands against the cold  
runestones  
Until my legs ache  
But I'm fifteen now  
Norway is an ocean  
And several hundred dollars away  
So I stay glued to the screen  
Pretending the pixels are the same  
To what I could've felt in person



## Road Trip

by Andrea Villarreal Yu

I took a road trip through the driest and vastest expanses  
I thought about him — was it worth it?  
The briefest people taste like cheap white wine; I am effervescent now  
Mirror and Mother agree, “She’s turned gossamer sheer”  
If I were a ghost, I remain lost and ill-fated, and *if I had to be eviscerated*  
*I am glad that it was done by you*, the expanse I stared out into might have been  
The Fields of Asphodel, fitting for a person like me, I looked out and I thought  
The greatest relief is that it is all in passing

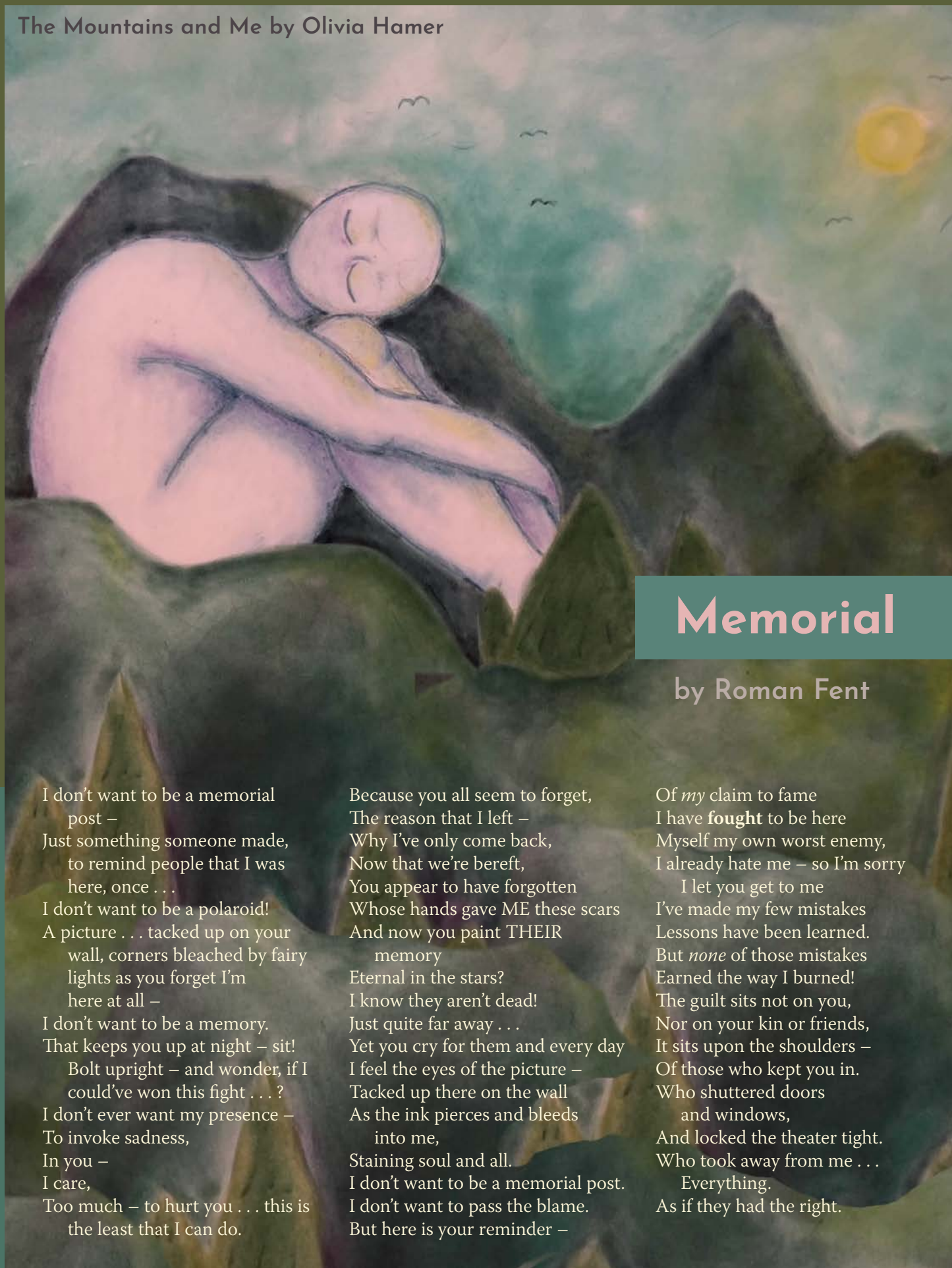
The Weight of Gentle Hands by Juneyeon Kim



Beauty with Decay by Andrea Guerrero

Devoid of Heart by Yongjoon Cheon





## Memorial

by Roman Fent

I don't want to be a memorial  
post –  
Just something someone made,  
to remind people that I was  
here, once . . .  
I don't want to be a polaroid!  
A picture . . . tacked up on your  
wall, corners bleached by fairy  
lights as you forget I'm  
here at all –  
I don't want to be a memory.  
That keeps you up at night – sit!  
Bolt upright – and wonder, if I  
could've won this fight . . . ?  
I don't ever want my presence –  
To invoke sadness,  
In you –  
I care,  
Too much – to hurt you . . . this is  
the least that I can do.

Because you all seem to forget,  
The reason that I left –  
Why I've only come back,  
Now that we're bereft,  
You appear to have forgotten  
Whose hands gave ME these scars  
And now you paint THEIR  
memory  
Eternal in the stars?  
I know they aren't dead!  
Just quite far away . . .  
Yet you cry for them and every day  
I feel the eyes of the picture –  
Tacked up there on the wall  
As the ink pierces and bleeds  
into me,  
Staining soul and all.  
I don't want to be a memorial post.  
I don't want to pass the blame.  
But here is your reminder –

Of *my* claim to fame  
I have **fought** to be here  
Myself my own worst enemy,  
I already hate me – so I'm sorry  
I let you get to me  
I've made my few mistakes  
Lessons have been learned.  
But *none* of those mistakes  
Earned the way I burned!  
The guilt sits not on you,  
Nor on your kin or friends,  
It sits upon the shoulders –  
Of those who kept you in.  
Who shuttered doors  
and windows,  
And locked the theater tight.  
Who took away from me . . .  
Everything.  
As if they had the right.

Here's the image  
I feared would outlast me: the wrong house  
Hidden behind the right door,  
Theseus grinning from the reconstructed rafters.  
This is how they built  
It, the roof a person  
Slumping further than they should, the slate miraculously  
Irreplaceable. Such care they took with the reconstruction:

Floors weathered by younger feet,  
The last unrepeatable snowflake  
Carved to resemble glass, my bones pieced into a  
Better person. The centerpiece: an immaculate  
Quilt draped over legs stronger  
Than I ever taught them to be. So read  
The lengthy provenance, where they indulge  
In stories that skin  
Wouldn't dare claim. Of course  
The seasons change what living  
Could not, of course the unwitting ghost  
Lies through her teeth.

Here I compose and decompose the body;  
If the weeds steal it back, leave it unarranged.  
Let vines climb and die in rain-spots and sun-spots,  
End the reinvention of the form  
Our cells fought to shape.  
So suffer the necessary crookedness,  
Leave me  
As myself.



Inheritance  
by Adib Rabbani

# The Reconstruction

by Paloma Greim



Cocoon by Adib Rabbani



*Sometimes we must banish things to make space for others says mother  
See, now I sweep the windowsill for dust to make room for sunshine*

Older, thirty years after, mother in a distant land away  
Dishes sopping wet, clean, honeysuckle-scented and artificial  
I swallowed the sun and it tumbled down to my stomach  
Shining and nectarine sweet, it tasted freshly pink to the tongue

Daughter says back *tomorrow comes dust again*  
as if this exhibits mother's faulty, unconvincing logic  
and mother only nods, repeats:  
*and then tomorrow comes dust again*

## Mother, Daughter, and Windowsill

by Andrea Villarreal Yu



Inverted Joy by Devika Krishna

# I'm From

by Hiranmayee Magesh

I'm from the old songs Appa plays in the car everywhere we go, lyrics I don't always understand but always feel.

From hands together, praying each evening, from Sunday afternoons sharing special plates and numerous helpings.

I'm from freezing hands in the snow, refusals to bundle up, and hearing my sister's laughter as our age remains never a limit to play,

from unevenly split lava cakes and arguments over fair bites and better pieces.

I'm from Sunday singing lessons though my voice remains hidden, from Amma's beaming smile as songs from *Rio* fill the room just for her.

From opening comic books every night and Appa's voice guiding our laughter, from negotiations to let the pets up onto the bed because comfort should be shared.

I'm from adoring Appa as he laughs hard and wanting to be the reason, from always trying to make him proud, from "everything happens for a reason" and "you're capable of anything, Chellam."

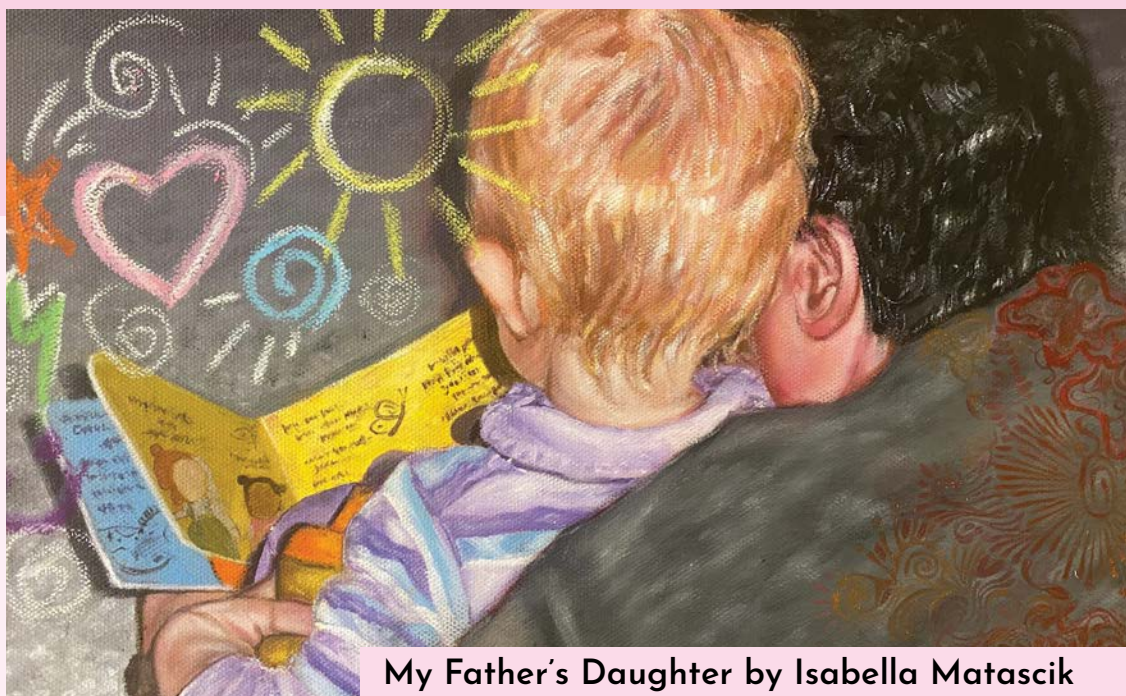
From Appa's strength and Amma's kindness, from Paatti's gentle hands and Thatha's wisdom.

I'm from Chennai, from noise and culture, from heat and prayer,

from a place I miss so deeply when loving it battles the distance.

I'm from family, from all my people,

from every place that has felt like home.



My Father's Daughter by Isabella Matascik

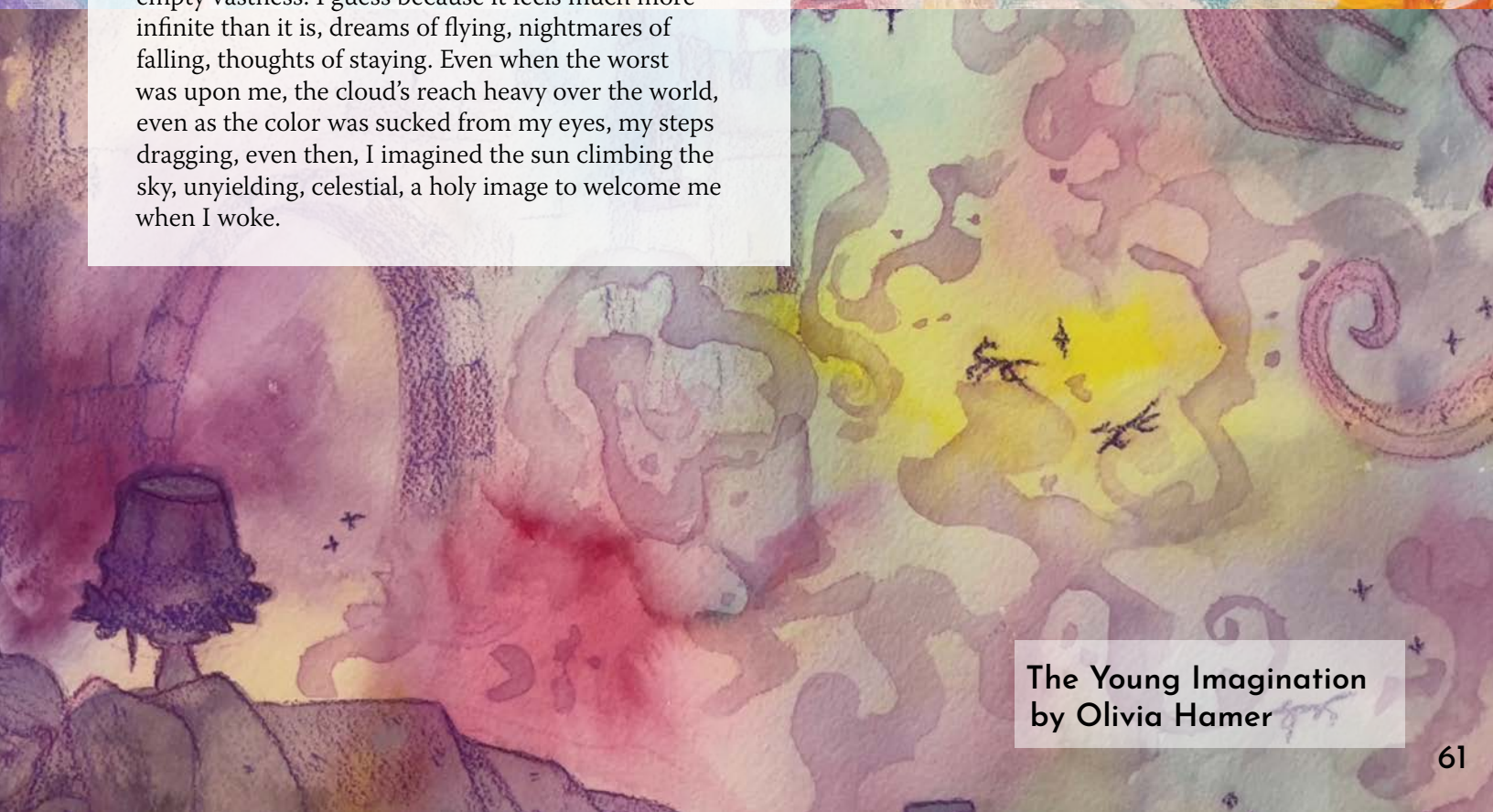


Hawaiian Marshmallow Whirlpool  
by Rachel Young

## Dawn Will Come

by Caroline Ptackova

I have always loved my mind, in spite of itself, the feverish anxiety, the sinuous daydreams, the echo of empty vastness. I guess because it feels much more infinite than it is, dreams of flying, nightmares of falling, thoughts of staying. Even when the worst was upon me, the cloud's reach heavy over the world, even as the color was sucked from my eyes, my steps dragging, even then, I imagined the sun climbing the sky, unyielding, celestial, a holy image to welcome me when I woke.



The Young Imagination  
by Olivia Hamer

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**Shooting  
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For more information about Shooting Stars, visit [artsjoco.org](http://artsjoco.org).

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# Entropy

## elementia xxiv

Submissions due Jan. 1st, 2027

Entropy, *noun*

Disorderly. The universe tends toward disorder, molecules scatter, stars collapse, plans unravel. And yet, within the chaos, we search for meaning. We build routines, draw lines, make sense of the senseless. Where does the chaos end and the order begin? Show us what you've found, let go of, or created out of the mess; bring your entropy to us.

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Journey to a New Homeland by Kinsey Savage



The End of a Dream by Kinsey Savage