

Red Wheelbarrow



Student Edition 2026

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Evelyn Chyr, "Miami Street"

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Jen Penkethman

special thanks to  
Ken Weisner

Red Wheelbarrow

From 1976 to 1999 this magazine was known as Bottomfish, a name that referred to neglected, overlooked writing that had (metaphorically) fallen to the bottom of the sea. We hope that Red Wheelbarrow also signifies unpretentiousness and the casting of a wide net in search of new, exciting young writers as well as an ongoing commitment to originality, courage, and craft.

Red Wheelbarrow publishes twice a year. The National Edition publishes literary and artistic works from all over the country and the world. The Student Edition is open to De Anza students. We welcome submissions of all kinds, and we seek to publish a diverse range of styles and voices. We accept student submissions from September to mid-May and publish by the end of spring quarter.

Poetry: submit up to three poems

Fiction: submit one short story (up to 5,000 words) or up to three flash fiction pieces

Drama: submit one play or screenplay (up to 5,000 words)

Creative Nonfiction: submit one personal essay (up to 5,000 words)

Photographs and Drawings: submit up to three b/w prints or digital files (.jpg, .tiff, or .psd format); please do not send originals.

Comics: submit one b/w strip

Other: submit one!

Preferably please submit text files in MS Word (.doc or .docx) format.

Keep your name and contact information separate from the actual submission.

All Red Wheelbarrow submissions are judged anonymously.

Judges for all contests make their decisions independently.

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**Front Cover: Derya Senyurt Elzein, "Tarot Cards"**

**Frontispiece: Mary Mau, "Katrina"**

**Back Cover: Geetika Bansal, "Eyes of Becoming"**

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# Smoke in the Air

Dave Sulcer

**O**n a quietly buzzing summer afternoon in Graceville, California, a glimpse of Mount Shasta at the end of the street, just hot enough to appreciate the dream-like cool of the coming evening, any man should have been content. Even with a haze on the horizon and a slight tang in the air from the distant Red Peak fire.

On the west side of Grove Avenue, Jackson Cobb had his arms deep into the engine of his old Ford Bronco in the driveway, toolbox perched on the radiator. On the chrome bumper a faded sticker read, “No Replacement for Displacement.” A pair of tarped jetskis sat on a double trailer. As he worked, he kept an eye out on the two small boys that called him Daddy and the baby in her stroller.

He was actually their grandfather. Five years ago his daughter, Aline, had dropped the boys off on the way to her first trip into rehab. He remembered the shifty boyfriend behind the wheel, wearing dark glasses and a tattoo down his arm, not even getting out of the car. It was never a good time for her to take them back. Last week, she did it again, leaving baby Janine, barely squinting a smile, from yet a different father (already out of the picture) before melting back into the oxy-riddled world that still had its claws into her.

As he put away his tools, he gritted his teeth. He could handle what God sent him. A man has to step up when it is family. It wasn’t how he pictured retirement would be, but his concrete business was doing better than ever, and he could start to step back from it and provide for these kids.

His other children had managed to do honest work and stay clean; Seth was a state trooper and Craig helped with the business. Lately it was the memory of Aline as a little girl that often floated back to him. Aline making “tea” for him in the play house he built for her. Her busy concentration. Her uncontrolled laugh. Thinking about it

was a scabbed-over wound that still ached. The pills were a curse.

Across the street, he saw his hippie neighbor pull into the carport and plug his blue toy car into the wall. It felt like the town was getting invaded by some of these whiny fruits and nuts and he did his best to ignore them. At least the COVID nonsense was done with. He had mostly been able to ignore that too.

The kids were starting to bicker. They were probably hungry. He called out, "Let's square this stuff away, boys, and wash up."

---

As he unpacked his groceries, Ron Levin could see Jackson and the three young children through the kitchen window. Wasn't the man a bit old to have such young children? He thought blue-collar folks would be more likely to have their kids young but maybe it was a second marriage. He didn't want to judge.

The MAGA banner and blue and white anti-black-lives-matter flag irritated him, though, as always. His neighbor intimidated him and he could hardly remember exchanging a single conversation.

Aside for these kinds of people, and the fire seasons running longer and deadlier every year, he loved living in Graceville: endless hiking trails, the nearby lake, the hot dusty days suddenly blooming into mild breezy evenings, even the distant but incessant wails of the freight trains echoing around the valley. It had all grown on him.

He and Esperanza had discovered the place during the pandemic. They were strict protocol followers and the lakefront was perfect for keeping social distance.

"Ronaldo, we can start over up here," she would say while they sat together on the porch.

As it turned out, the dementia came on too quickly for them to see

it coming. He wound up selling everything back in the Bay and planting a Ponderosa Pine for her. He didn't even mind her constant memory when he jogged around the lake. He knew he would dream of her again that night.

He woke in the morning to find that the winds had shifted and the AQI had climbed overnight into the purple. Looking out the bedroom window, it was almost a Martian landscape. There was a grinding catch in his throat and his eyes were slightly stinging. His phone buzzed with notifications from the county. He quickly dressed and found the stash of N-95 masks that he had put in the bottom drawer.

---

Jackson was already up when he got the call from his son Seth. "Dad, they are closing Route 19 coming out of Graceville. I think you should bring the kids to Red Bluff. You should already be in the smoke."

He could hear one of the boys coughing in the bathroom. "We sure are. What about the logging road?"

"That'll work, pop. You'll need the Bronco though. Is it still running? Got gas?"

"I'm all set. I'll call you when I get to the interstate if this phone doesn't die on me."

As he hung up, he roared, "Boys! Get your clothes on and help me get your sister ready to travel. Now!"

Then he saw his neighbor loading some items into his little car and starting to back out onto the road.

---

As Ron pulled out onto the road, he saw Jackson running out to head him off. He stopped and reluctantly rolled down the window, letting more smoky air into the car.

“The highway is cut off,” his neighbor said. “Only the logging road is open.” He eyed the low-slung car. “You might run into trouble on the high stretch with that car.”

“Thanks,” said Ron, his voice muffled by the sharp white tent of the N-95. “Let me see if there is an advisory with a road that will work for me.”

Jackson just shook his head. “That’s risky. We are heading out in the Bronco in two minutes. I’ve got room for you.”

Ron would have liked to have a few more seconds to think about it, but the suggestion made too much sense. The sky was the color of a warning light. “Okay, thanks, I appreciate that.” Come to think of it... “Wait!” he said to Jackson. “You guys should get these on.” He handed him the box of masks, and quickly parked the car back in his driveway.

As the family got their seatbelts on and got the baby snapped in, a small dog on the younger boy’s lap, the smoke was thickening. Jackson turned the key and they heard the Bronco’s starter struggling to kick the engine over. On the third try it groaned into life and gave a roar as Jackson revved it up.

Ron swiveled around in his seat. “Hello, boys. I’m Ron. Nice to meet you.”

The older boy, holding an unfolded mask, said, “Hello. Can you please tell me how to put this on?”

“Here, let me show you,” said Ron. “There’s a first time for everything.”

# The Beginning of Spring

Yeonju Hwang

The seed that endured  
the weight of cold wind and rain  
swallowed its tears  
along with the promise of spring.

During the long, dark night,  
inside its opened shell,  
a green hope quietly stirred.

As the darkness lifts,  
a single beam of golden sunlight  
pours down like a spotlight,

and the promise once swallowed  
through tearful endurance  
sprouts into a vibrant green shoot,

at last announcing  
the beginning of spring.

# Badminton Villanelle

Mihir Rao

The birdy soared beneath the blazing sun,  
It danced in the air with speed and unpredictable grace,  
Until it lodged where leafy branches run.

We struck with gusto with each serve, and each lob was spun,  
A rally long, no moment to falter or retrace,  
The birdy soared beneath the blazing sun.

We lunged and leapt; the match could not be won,  
As sweat rolled down each battle-hardened, tired face,  
Until it lodged where leafy branches run.

The tension rose with every rally done,  
A storm of smashes set a rapid pace—  
The birdy soared beneath the blazing sun.

A final arc, a mighty shot begun—  
But fate betrayed its flight in cruel disgrace,  
Until it lodged where leafy branches run.

We stood in sadness, the silence now begun,  
Our rackets still, caught in a breathless chase—  
The birdy soared beneath the blazing sun,  
Until it lodged where leafy branches run.

# Ants

Lauren Copeland Axtell

*after Marge Piercy's "I Still Feel You"*

I can still feel you,  
Like finding an ant crawling across my skin,  
non consensually hitching a ride.  
I try to sweep it away but it is stuck in my memory now.  
Knowing there are no more bugs is different than *knowing* there  
are no more bugs.

Some invincible ant, no amount of brushing you away works  
immediately.  
The shadow of you lingers with something to repent,  
but that is as likely as ant apparitions.  
The ghost of your memory is poison oak,  
as I search for your phantom drone friends,  
convincing me to rub my skin raw and red.

Where there is one, there are usually more, with the potential to  
swarm.  
They are searching for food, and yours mistook me before.  
I still feel you when I see even the smallest trail,  
knowing they report their findings before sending reinforcement.  
I remember their arrival,  
engulfing my limbs,  
and my heart  
and how I argued it felt lovely.  
And I remember,  
somewhere along the way,  
I laid down to make it easier for them to cover me.

I still feel you  
And yet your drones appear less and less  
after finding my joy to taste like poison,

mistakenly carried back to their queen,  
your influence grows weaker and weaker.

But erasing you completely  
is like trying to wipe clean a whiteboard  
with years of writing left on it  
There will always be marks left behind.  
And as they fade,  
I agree,  
they are a mixture of stains and art.

One day, when I still feel you  
I will recognize you as the single, rogue ant that you are,  
admire your strength  
and flick you away.

# Para Mi Mama - La que me nunca falla

Anonymous

BRISSA

Her name means “the breeze,” but I’ve only ever known her as a force. My mother does not move gently. She sweeps through a room like a windstorm yelling on the phone in the same breath. But at night, when I was sick, she would care for me like no one else. Then she was the breeze cool and soft.

CHISME

She doesn’t gossip. She “stays informed.” That’s what she tells me as she leans over a WhatsApp voice memo from my tía. The same woman who won’t cry in public will play an hour-long voicemail from three states away, just to hear what people are saying about someone she doesn’t even like. I used to roll my eyes. Now I listen with her.

DIAS DE LOS MUERTOS

She builds the altar in silence. Lights the veladora for my tío Yayo who never came home. Place a beer for my cousin who died young. And always, always: a photo of my tía with a plate of pan dulce. She lets me put the cempasúchil petals down like a trail. “Para que no se pierdan,” she says. So they don’t get lost on the way back.

ESCALERAS

I used to hear her heels on the stairs bright and early every morning. She never said she was tired, but when I’d offer to help make dinner, she’d sit down so slowly, like even resting took effort.

## HURACÁN

Sometimes I think she is one. Not because she destroys, but because people underestimate the storm. She's loud. She'll fight for what's hers. She doesn't ask for space, she takes it. And when she loves, she wraps you in it so tightly you forget to be afraid of anything else.

## INSTRUCCIONES

She never taught me how to cook from a recipe. I used to be scared to mess it up. When in reality she was teaching me to trust my own mouth, my own hands, my own heart.

## JALISCO

She was born there, and came to the states when she was a teenager. A loud city with so many lights, so many horns honking and radios playing cumbias like everyone's in on the same song.

Every year, we go back. When I was younger, I used to complain about the heat and the slow WiFi. Now, I don't want to leave. I love waking up to the sound of the streets and cars and my abuela making us chocolate con bolio for breakfast. I love watching my mother there, how she walks different and feels at home.

## KODAK

There's a photo of her in the garage, sitting on a cooler in a denim skirt, her eyes closed mid-laugh. It's my favorite. She doesn't like it. "Mírame el pelo qué feo." Look at my hair, it's horrible. But I keep it anyway, taped to my journal. That photo reminds me that before she was my mother, she was someone's wild, laughing daughter.

## LENGUA

My Spanish is hesitant, sometimes broken. When I speak to her she listens with a soft face. "You sound like a poem when you talk," she

says. I think she means it kindly, even if she's laughing a little.

## MAR

She doesn't swim. Won't even float. "Me da miedo," she says. I'm scared. As she watches the waves roll in like they might swallow her whole. But every summer we still go I race straight into the water, diving under, letting it carry me. She stays on the sand, sunglasses on, arms crossed. But every so often, when she thinks I'm not looking, she walks to the edge. That's the closest she'll get. I live in the water. She waits for me on land.

## NIÑA

She still calls me that. Even when I've told her about my job, school, my heartbreaks. "Ay, mi niña," she says, after I tell her something grown-up. It used to bother me. Now I let her say it. Maybe we all need one person who refuses to see us as broken.

## OJOS

Her eyes are brown, but not soft. They cut. They flash. They find your lie before you've spoken. But when I cried after my first heartbreak, she looked at me like she remembered being sixteen. "Así duele," she said. "Pero no se muere uno de eso." Yes it hurts, but no one ever dies from it. You survive. Her eyes said it too.

## PEINADO

When I was little, she did my hair every morning. A tight ponytail, parted straight, not a single pelito out of place. She didn't believe in messy girls. "Una mujer se presenta," she'd say, tugging a bit too hard. A lady always presents herself. I used to hate it. Now I catch myself slicking my own hair back with the same focus.

## QUÉDATE

The thing she never says but always means. She'll say, "¿Ya comiste?" Did you eat already? What she really means is to stay. Just a little longer. Let me love you in the only language I was ever allowed.

## RAÍZ

When I talk about my heritage, I mean her. Not just the food or music or traditions but her voice, her fire, her way of looking at the world like it owes her nothing, but she'll still take what's hers.

## SUEÑO

She once dreamed of being a lawyer. But then I came. And my father left. And dreams went to the back burner while bills got paid. "No me arrepiento," she says. I don't regret it. But sometimes I wonder what the dream looked like before it got buried under work and motherhood.

## UVAS

Every New Year's Eve she eats twelve grapes at midnight, one for each wish. She never says them out loud. "Si lo dices, no se cumple." If you say it, it won't come true. I've never once asked. I just watch her chew slowly, eyes closed, wishing the universe would be kind to her for once.

## VIDA

She gave me hers. Piece by piece. Day by day. She carved out a life for me from nothing but grit and her own two hands. When I asked her once if she regretted it, she said, "Mi vida empezó contigo." My life began with you.

## WHISPERS

When I was little, she used to whisper prayers into my hair while I was drifting off to sleep. I didn't understand the words, just the rhythm, soft and steady, like waves. Now, when I can't sleep, I whisper things to myself. Sometimes prayers, or just a similar rhythm. Maybe hers are still in me, humming low like lullabies I didn't know I kept.

## XICANA

I learned the word in high school. Said it out loud like a question. She didn't know what it meant, but nodded anyway. "Con que no se te olvide de dónde vienes," she said. Don't forget where you come from. As if I ever could.

## YO

I am her. I am not her. I carry her language in my mouth and her rage in my chest. I walk through the world with the dignity she gave me, the name she chose, and the wind of her love at my back. Brissa. The breeze. My mother.

## ZARAPE

She keeps one in the back seat for emergencies. For cold nights. For unexpected naps. It smells like lavender. Every time I wrap it around my shoulders, I remember that I was always safe with her.

# In My Mother's Eyes

Jacqueline Falla Reyes

In my mother's eyes  
They are filled with pain  
Like nails stabbing you in the back  
Sleepless nights hovering  
An empty stomach growing  
And Tears falling from the sky

In my mothers eyes  
There is trama  
Trama ! Drama ! Trama ! Drama  
The beating and abuse from her father  
Belt full of blood  
Covers trenched in tears and sweat  
Like watching a lion hunt down a deer  
She was the prey and her father the predator

In mother's eyes  
I see freedom of all  
I see the desert she has to cross  
The water she did not drink

# Mr. Comedy and Tragedy

Martin Diaz Ortega

Comedy

We've recognized the condition of man  
Stretching the smile until the skin splits  
Howling for the show. I'm glad too soon  
Step outside away from this music band

Tragedy

But silence heals, envious towards the deaf  
Sit in piercing showers, wash away my sins  
For this guilt and regret tips off my balance  
My head bounces, like the music never left

Comedy

A right to become greedy is but a human claim  
Dissociate to cope in order to doze off to sleep  
A swig of fresh breath is a desperate measure  
As I plant to meditate to keep demons in chains

Tragedy

Apathy over empathy, a luxury I cannot afford  
But I perform for a purpose that I cannot create  
Former trials and tribulations, that's dead weight  
With anger pressing action, my bearings I award

# Strawberries

Gustavo Jimenez

The clock hits five, and his feet slip into his beat-up Spider-Man shoes  
Today is his first day in the strawberry fields, working with his *pa*  
He goes to wake him up as the sun is still asleep.  
Jumping and dancing, his joy burst like it's been waiting for spring.  
Like a slumbering grizzly with its naive little cub.  
They put on their matching *tejanas* and out the door they go.

The boy never feared the shadows  
until they walked out of vans with guns and masks.  
Too young to remember the home he had left.  
*Sinaloa*, where his father was from  
A land littered with missing people posters.  
The mother was one.  
They come for better. They come for the best?  
But *America* looks more and more like the home  
They once left

Crying and crying, his tears hit the floor  
Holding a box of strawberries, the fattest of the bunch. One after  
another, they roll out the kitchen door  
A gun to his back and a knee to his neck  
“*Are you a US citizen?*” They hadn’t bothered to check  
Indiscriminate wolves surround for a feast in the night  
The strawberry cub approaches the darkness in sight  
With hesitant hands, he caresses his gun.  
*Papa* reaches out to take hold of his son.  
A flash of smoke followed by a deafening silence  
Freedom was no more, and belonging was silenced.

The strawberry nectar drips down to his mouth  
And in his final breath, the sweetness slips out.  
The darkness took hold, leaving nothing behind.

I fear that someday this nation will learn  
and all it will take is for children to

*Burn.*

# Tascari

Juliette Levy

Tascari is the only word my dad could teach me in Mayo  
The food of our ancestors, its earthy taste kisses my lips  
Tascari that maybe just turned into "tortilla" but means so much more

Tascari is nourishment  
Tascari is milpa, stalks that ache the neck when you look up at them  
Tascari is the land that raises generations of happy, full bellies  
Tascari is my family holding on

Tascari was the last word I learned before they cut off my tongue  
They grinded it down into a corn powder, spit in it, and rolled it  
into a ball of masa  
Tascari is the ancestral roots that they aimed to choke out  
Tascari is heritage

The language, the words exist in my blood  
They exist somewhere in Sinaloa on sacred land  
But they cut off my tongue and replaced it with one pale and flavorless  
Yet still, I make it say "tascari"

# Love Me, Feed Me, Never Leave Me

Nitanya Manjunath

Born to be a king  
Stuck in a cat's body.  
It's true,  
I nap most of the day,  
But my ears perk up  
At that cursed word-  
                  '*Die with a t*'  
I call it.

Don't feed me spinach,  
And don't you dare offer  
An oatmeal raisin cookie.  
And if you do,  
You know you deserve  
To find your couch  
In s  
  h  
  r  
  e  
  d  
  s

Oh, it's you.  
*Nermal.*  
Your adorable facade  
And striped gray fur  
With your big fluttery eyes  
Doesn't fool me,  
Eat a piece of my cake,  
If you dare.  
Stand in this box [ ],  
I'll be right back.  
And while you're waiting

Bring me back a souvenir  
From Abu Dhabi, will ya?

Ding!  
Dinnertime for you, Jon  
Means dinner for me.  
My nose twitches  
  Sweet aroma...  
  Cheesy,  
  Gooley,  
Nature's perfect food.  
Gone in an instant,  
There's never too much.

If you really loved me,  
You'd feed me lasagna  
Every day.

You're safe today, spider.  
You distracted that dummy  
So I cut a hole  
Under his meatloaf.

                  O  
He'll forgive me  
And I'll steal his pizza.

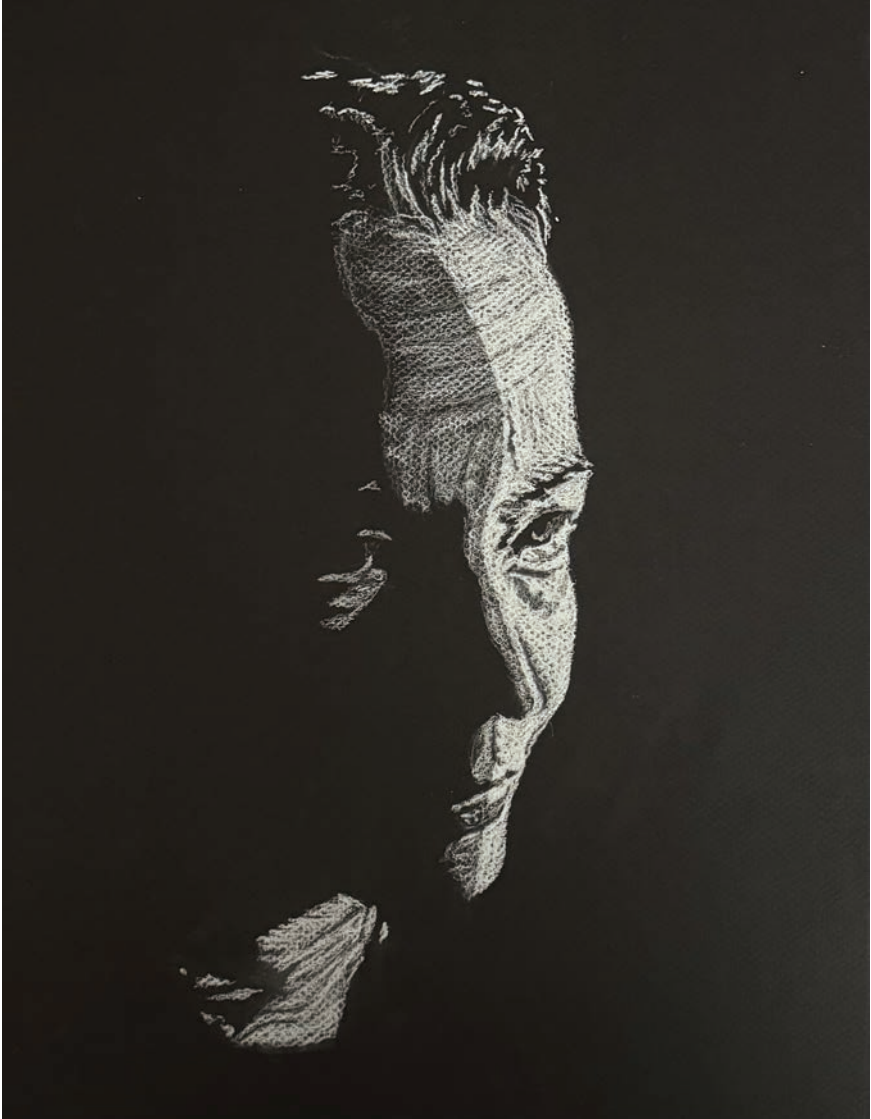
# Izmir

Frank Yung-Fong Tang



# Do I Belong?

Derya Senyurt Elzein



# I Am Ten Again

Halina Lenguyen



# Overwhelming

Alicia Aldama



# Moab Tent

Evelyn Chyr



# Medusa Gorgona

Olesya Pravlotskaya



# Azula's Psyche

Adrienne Makinano



# Muzzle for the Unruly

Lori Malahy



# A Las Mujeres

Juliette Levya



# Inward

Edgar Sedano



# The Nervous Siren

Fiona French

Water splashes my face as waves wash in and out of the tidepools, seaweed and small dead fish wash in and out in quick bursts, almost like a breathing motion. I am sitting on a rock facing the ocean as the sun sets; it looks as if the ocean is eating it. But the more the sun sets, the more my heart races. Tonight is the night of the test, a test to determine my status as a proper siren. I have been avoiding everyone all day due to my nerves, but the time until the test grows closer.

“Mythica! Mythica!” A voice sounds from behind, and I immediately recognize it as Feathers’ voice, my best friend. With a sigh, I stand up, turn around and watch her land on the tidepool rock beside me.

“Finally found ya, there are sailors on the horizon!” she says with an excitement my heart cannot match.

“Oh...that’s...greatttt,” I say, more than a bit nervously. We sirens are known for our beautiful voices, luring sailors to their deaths. But the thing is...my voice is not beautiful. In fact, I’d go as far as to say I’m the worst sounding siren ever. I have been trying my hardest to get it to sound good, but I just can’t. But it’s not like I can just decline the test, not only for Feathers but for my own reputation. I am of age to become a real siren; I would be the laughing stock of our flock if I declined now.

“Let’s head out before the swimming sirens can get to them,” Feathers says, referring of course to the sea-sirens, the half-fish ones (we’re the half-bird ones). “Those fishy freaks always get to them first during newbie tests. Come on, let’s go! There’s this rock that’s perfect for singing on! Miss Dawn and the others will be watching!”

Without warning, Feathers grabs my arm and lifts me up into the air. Once she lets go it takes me a moment to position my wings just right as to not fall into the sea. Feathers lead me away from our island to wherever this rock is.

“So, I was wondering, should we sing *When the Weather Starts* or *Love Through the Mist*? What do you think?” she asks as we fly, catching me off guard as I was lost in my own nervous thoughts.

“Huh? Oh, I’m fine with whatever,” I answer, and Feathers

gives me a nod.

We arrive at the rock Feathers mentioned (it's actually a sea stack) and we get ourselves into position. Our task tonight is to simply lure the sailors off the ship, nothing more than that, should be simple enough. It's good because if singing isn't something I'm good at, seducing a sailor is definitely not an option.

Soon enough, when the sun is completely set, we see it. A ship full of human sailors. Unbeknownst to them, we're watching and waiting. As they grow closer, I try to look up into the sky to see Miss Dawn and the other examiners, but can't see them. Somehow not knowing where they are fills me with anxiety (when it should be the other way around).

I can sense Feathers is shaking with excitement, meanwhile I'm shaking with nerves. What if I can't tone my voice right and it screws everything up? What if the swimming sirens laugh at us and take the sailors for themselves? What if I can't sing loud enough? What if-

Feathers started singing, crap! Why didn't she give me a signal?!

Wait, what song is it?

Oh good, it's *When the Weather Starts*. Simple, but effective! Hopefully I don't mess it up. The test is just Feathers and I tonight, meaning I can't just lower my voice and let the group sing for me like I do in singing class. I actually have to harmonize with her.

Taking a breath, I start to sing along with Feathers. The moment I do, I can already tell I sound like a dying bird, and I even mess up a few lines.

The ship draws closer, and I know I have to make my voice at least somewhat presentable. I cannot fail, if not for me, but for Feathers. They can send me back to singing class if they must, but Feathers has been excited for this for years, and I cannot take that away. Luring someone off the ship is the way for her to pass, even if I sound really bad.

We can see human figures walking towards the edge of the ship; it's working! It's really working! I must be doing something right. There are at least two, two! I cannot fail this now.

Then it happens. I don't know if I got my hopes up or what, but my voice cracks so badly I have to take a breath. Now the human figures are back away from the edge. *OH NO*.

Feathers nudges me with her wing, as if to say, "what's

wrong?”

I take a couple of slow breaths. I need peace of mind for this to work. I open my mouth to sing once more. I have to make this work.

In the end, no humans are lured from our song. The ship passes by us without a single human jumping into the water. We have failed, plain and simple. We have to go home now.

“Girls,” says the head examiner, Miss Dawn, once we reach our island home. “We watched your performance tonight, but unfortunately we cannot permit you a singing license. You will be unable to hunt without your parents or teachers until you can re-take the test and get one.”

“Awwwww,” Feathers frowns. Meanwhile, my mind feels like a whirlpool.

Miss Dawn takes a breath. “We’ll be writing a report on how you did and how you can improve for next time.”

“It’s all my fault!” I blurt out, startling myself. “My voice is awful, it kept cracking and I kept messing up the lines. I even stopped right in the middle at the most crucial point! Please, Miss Dawn, give Feathers her license, she deserves it! Her voice is beautiful!”

“Mythica, I – ” Feathers starts, but Miss Dawn interrupts.

“I’m sorry girls, but professional siren songs are a group activity. We cannot judge on one voice alone. You two were the only ones taking it tonight, so you were considered a group,” she says. “Goodnight, Mythica and Feathers.”

I watch her and the other examiners fly off. Embarrassment and dread fills my heart and mind.

“Mythica, it’s not your fault.” Feathers tries to reassure me, her tone of voice lowered unlike her usual upbeat voice. “Honestly... it’s my fault. I started singing without warning. I should’ve taken notice of how you felt. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s my voice.” I say, “your voice is so good, and mine–”

“No. I messed up,” Feathers says firmly, “I’ll be at singing class the day after next, see you then.”

“... okay.”

I fly back home to the treehouse. My mother asks how the test went, and I don’t bother to answer. Instead, I plop down onto my nest. I think about how the test went over and over in my mind.

*It is my fault. I have to do better next time, I just have to!*

# Her

Ileana Wood

Her floral scent catches me off guard  
No matter how many times I try to wash it out  
Her smell is permanently ingrained in her clothes that are now mine  
Her couch molded to her body, now empty of her  
It holds her shape, like she never left her spot  
Her favorite red blanket, neatly folded in the basket

Abuelita's eyes held peace  
and the weight of our village  
Sometimes even the weight of the world  
She didn't let us get weighed down  
She used her body as a shield

Her eyes are no longer open  
When they were, I was safe  
I was safe  
because of her  
But sometimes in my Abuelita's eyes, her tears were her only escape.

# I Love My Women Strong

Mariana Frias Da Costa

I love my women strong  
with muscles like those  
on the back of a bull  
As it charges into the arena  
Heavy with sadness mistaken for fury

Muscles like  
leaping salmon in the river  
rocks being washed over  
By the current

I love my women strong  
Like the wind upon  
The golden gate bridge  
Pushing and pulling my hair  
A wind so consuming it  
Knocks the breath out of my lungs

I love my women strong  
Like how I felt when I was a little girl  
Outrunning all the boys in my class  
Sprinting circles on the track  
Strong like the sound  
Of laughter,  
Which echoes and bounces  
And moves and performs

I love my women strong  
With a sturdiness in her stance  
And an assuredness in her voice  
A tree which remains standing  
Amidst skyscrapers and high rises

Like rain which pours in torrents  
Does not sprinkle nor hesitate  
Unrelenting, untiring

And I love my women  
With that tom boyish flair  
Big t-shirt and jeans that fit  
A bit too tight,  
Clothes that grips on to muscle  
I love my women  
    I must confess  
Like I love you

# Two Hands I'm Always Holding

Solana Pujol

Pull my hair.  
In every direction.  
In my sleep.  
See how much I can dream.

## NO SABO

Pa, I'm sorry accents and words beat into shame.  
Made us love double first names.  
I am sorry you have to be glad we stay fair like mom.  
Her family wants our tongues swallowed and gone.  
You and abuela learned that your words  
made you little more than fawns stalking a rifle scope

In another life I stare at my own face.  
Bearing the feminine of my father's name.  
We were always going to look the same,  
Hiding from different sides of the same shame.

## LATINA

All I wanted was to copy my dad's bared teeth.  
But how mixed I must have seemed  
my biting mouth in my Sunday best.  
The fake shiny kind of dress.

Grandma's lessons on self-dependence.  
Her red tight dress pressed to my chest.  
Kept my breath for the graduation stage.  
Body knew the sea that carried her  
from one continent to the next  
but never felt a middle school diploma. But I knew her.  
Her hands worked the best to revive me.

### LANDSCAPER'S DAUGHTER

Aloe leaves are grown and cut just for me.  
Soothe my sunburns.  
Wash the fire and flushed skin.  
Matching farmers' tan, our gold arm bands.  
Aloe leaves cut and grown just for me.

### MIXED

I am always holding two hands.  
One pale and tattooed the other brown and calloused.  
What a father's daughter.

Scraped up and muddy is all I see.  
"I hope you fit your mother's wedding dress."  
The zipper is getting tight  
and I can't make my body right  
What a good vocabulary.  
Who placed those words in your mouth,  
So you can throw them right up.

### WHITE TRASH

Mama has stars by her eyes  
She told me she loved  
that the ink couldn't lie.  
All I know how to do  
is prove them right.

# Seashore Sestina

Corinna Kuo

Behind you are the golden hills of sand  
Beyond you are the shimmering waves  
As far as the eye can see  
And a sky littered with birds  
Soaring beneath the gleaming shell  
That beams down on those who fly

How you wish you could fly!  
For under your feet lies the grating sand  
The sharp edges of rocks and shards of shell  
Then, the soothing cool of lapping waves  
And you splash down, a bird  
Bobbing in this vast sea

With such mystery in its depths, the sea  
Holds no secrets where flags fly  
No subtlety lies in the squawking bird  
Nor the crunching sand  
Or the roaring wave  
And the stark-white seashell

Lift up the shell  
To your ear, and you can hear the sea  
A snapshot of the crashing waves  
Softening the sound of buzzing flies  
Surrounding the sandy seaweed  
And the squawking of fellow seabirds

No time to be bored  
When you can watch the shell  
Become the turret of the child's castle of sand  
Or a puppy splashing in the sea  
When you can watch the kites fly

Above the distant surfers catching a wave

And so you wave  
Away a greedy bird  
Picking at a deserted french fry  
Then try to sit perfectly still  
As you capture the last sound of the sea  
And the warmth of the hot sand

Before it's time to find the final shell, and the last gull flies  
Say goodbye to the sea, and the freedom of the birds  
And as your car retreats from the sand, don't forget to wave

# I Still Feel You In Things

Jessalyn Tyree

I still find you  
in the soft places of the day  
in the sound of the train horns late at night.  
Hoping,  
that if I listen close enough,  
I can still hear you tell us goodnight.  
I can still feel you,  
In the warmth of the bed  
only our son sleeps in now.  
In the way  
the sunlight falls through the cracks of the window  
and holds my arm  
gently.  
In the ways you used to.  
I can still see you  
if I close my eyes just right.  
In the stars on a clear night.  
I know you're up there.  
I can still hear you.  
In the way our son throws his head back  
and laughs.  
In the way a stranger talks  
Or in a joke that hits to close.  
And for a second  
My body forgets  
you are gone.  
I still remember you  
the way your ocean blue eyes didn't just look,  
but stayed.  
As if they were trying to memorize everything  
before it disappeared.  
The curls on your head constantly disobeying you  
Like they can't be controlled.

Just like you.  
I still remember you  
at 4 in the morning,  
when the world is still,  
when you left this earth.  
How, when we were kids  
we would talk about a future  
we were so sure  
we would reach.  
Now I sit in the same hours,  
alone.  
And the future feels like a language  
I don't speak anymore.  
I still reach for you  
in small ways.  
In our songs,  
in late nights,  
in the instinct  
to tell you something first.  
Grief is strange like that.  
It doesn't just take you,  
it leaves you everywhere.  
In the light,  
in the quiet,  
in the hours we used to fill together.  
I don't know  
where you are now,  
or if you can feel  
how often you are still here.  
But I swear  
some days,  
it feels like you never left.  
Just stepped into another room,  
and forgot to come back.

# Snowcaps in San Francisco

Eduardo Ramos

The snowdrops bloom as the snowcaps fall in San Francisco,  
Where the ice piles behind your door, no matter how hard you  
shovel the snow.

Coldened blankets keep the mountains warm, I spark my snowcap  
to do the same,

Mountainous paralyzed warmth is selfishness, as the city freezes  
colder,

Ashamed, I wish to be a snowdrop and grow resistance over tenfold,  
I don't remember San Francisco being covered in ICE before,  
I suppose our world has gone cold.

# Her Distance

Wenquan Sun

This is the last time Anna gets to see him before the semester ends and they both fly home. When Brian asked her to go to the movies, she had just turned in her last final. No time to celebrate; she sprinted home to put on her prettiest red dress.

Brian didn't say anything when he saw her. His gaze snagged on her for a moment, then skittered away, just long enough for Anna to catch the color rising in his cheeks. That tiny flash of shyness was better any smooth line she had heard on dates. Not that this was a date, she reminded herself. Brian would be too shy to call it that. It was just two friends going to see *Before Sunrise* and, since the theater was in the mall anyway, grabbing dinner before. Nothing romantic whatsoever.

---

By the time dinner was served, Anna's phone had buzzed five times. Her mother again. She turned it face down and pretended not to hear it. When Brian excused himself to the bathroom, she finally flipped the phone over to check.

Grandpa has passed away.

The words did not land all at once. For a moment, Anna felt as though she was watching someone else's screen, someone else's family. Then the restaurant sounds folded in on themselves, like they were coming from very far away. Her fingers went numb around the phone.

She looked up, unsure what to do, and met Brian's eyes. He was weaving back between tables, smiling his usual gentle, lopsided smile, the one that always made her picture him at a whiteboard, explaining some impossible problem in that loud, patient voice. *He's so smart*, she had always thought, *when can I be as smart so I can stand next to him?*

He did not expect her to be staring at him like that. His shoulders hitched; he half-turned his head away, as if that would make

him invisible. After a second he peeked back, saw her lowered eyes and slack expression, and his smile faltered.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, a little too loudly.

Anna hesitated. Saying it out loud would make it real in a way the text did not. “My grandpa just passed away,” she said.

Brian’s face went through three different expressions so quickly she could not read any of them. For a heartbeat he looked as lost as he did when he hit a rare math problem he could not solve. “I’m... I’m sorry to hear that,” he flustered. The apology came out shaped like a question, a polite phrase glued onto his usual brightness. His smile lingered, a kind of awkward comicality. His loud and confident voice was better suited for explaining derivatives than for comforting. *Comfort me about what? We’ve only known each other for a month. Why am I telling you anything about my family?*

She squeezed on her phone, the small rectangle stands between her and the rest of the world. Brian kept talking, *Do you need to call someone? Do you need to go home? I can help you find flights or –*

Her phone lit up with another call. Anna accepted it on reflex.

“What is wrong with you?” her mother exploded immediately. “I’ve been calling you all night. Grandpa passed away without even a chance to say anything to you.”

The guilt hit first, automatic as a muscle twitch. Then the questions rose behind it, ugly and hot. *Say what to me? How many times have I seen him in the past 20 years? Does he know how old I am? Where I live? What do you care about? The man who let you and your sisters grow up in a slum so he could have his precious son?*

None of that made it to her mouth. She just whispered, “I’m sorry,” until her mother ran out of breath on the other end.

When the call ended, Anna let the phone slip back to the table. She looked as sad as if the passing of her dearest grandpa shocked her; at least that’s how Brian saw it. Across from her, Brian watched with a helplessness that made her want to look anywhere but at him.

“Let’s not watch the movie,” he said. “Let’s get you home.”

No, she wanted to protest, with a sudden, wild sharpness. *Let’s watch the movie. Stay with me; don’t let me go back into that*

*house alone. Let me have this one ridiculous almost-date where you can't look at me in the eyes and your voice gets louder every time you get nervous. Let me hear your family stories, the ones that sound like they came from another planet, where parents pick kids up at airports and grandparents know their birthdays.*

But she only nodded.

He walked her out of the mall, careful not to let his hand brush hers, and drove her all the way back to her apartment. He kept asking if she was okay, if she needed anything, if she wanted him to stay for a bit. She kept saying she was fine and pretending not to see the way his shoulders slumped every time. At her door, he said, "Text me if you need to talk, okay? Anytime."

Anna said "Okay," and watched him leave. The moment his footsteps faded down the hallway, she dropped her phone on the bed face down.

The screen lit up over and over that night. Texts from Brian stacked silently on top of one another: *Are you doing alright? Did you get some sleep? Have you eaten anything? Do you want to talk?* The little preview boxes glowed through the fabric of her blanket. Anna rolled over and pressed her eyes shut.

She tried, once, to pick the phone up and type: *Do you want to go out tomorrow? The words stared back at her, too bright, too selfish. She pictured his reaction: his eyes going wide, his questions coming rapid-fire and earnest. Is everything okay with your family? Are you sure you shouldn't be with them? Are you sure it's all right?* His insistence that she put them first. His certainty about how a good girl should behave.

She deleted the message and let the screen go dark.

In the days that followed, a sentence took shape in her head, heavy as a verdict: *Selfish girl ignored her grandpa dying in bed to go on dates. No one said it out loud. No one had to. It hovered underneath every call from her mother, every short, clipped message from her aunts, every silence.*

---

Anna finished packing in a fog and boarded the flight home,

alone. Welcoming crowds held flowers and handmade signs, laughing and calling names. Anna ducked around them, dragging her suitcase past the crowd and out to the taxi line.

No one was waiting for her at home. She hauled the suitcase up seven flights of stairs, the wheels clacking on the concrete. The stairwell smelled like damp and old cooking oil. At the door, her key stuck for a second before turning. Inside, the apartment was dim and hot.

Her mother glanced up from the couch. “You’re back,” she said, as if Anna had just returned from the grocery store instead of halfway across the world. Her eyes slid over the suitcase, the flight-sweaty shirt, the dark circles under Anna’s eyes.

“Yeah,” was the only proper response. Anna carried the suitcase into her room and closed the door quietly.

Summer became a long, airless corridor. Anna slept late, ate when her mother was not in the kitchen, and spent the afternoons lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling fan. She muted family group chats. She did not answer when her cousins sent photos from gatherings: crowded tables, incense smoke, framed portraits of her grandfather surrounded by flowers. Her mother’s side of the house existed in her phone now, and she kept the volume turned off.

One afternoon, her mother knocked on the bedroom door without waiting for an answer. “I’m going to grandpa’s funeral tomorrow,” she said. “Aren’t you coming?”

The word lodged in Anna’s throat. The urge to spit it back - He’s YOUR father - rose so fast she almost choked on it. *Grandpa, she thought, a title attached to a man who had never bothered to learn the shape of her life.*

She quietly shook her head.

Her mother looked at her for a long moment, something complicated passing behind the disapproval. For once, she did not argue. She just said, “Suit yourself,” and walked away.

Brian’s texts kept arriving at first, poking out small bright holes in the day. They were careful, at the beginning - *What you doing? Are you all right?* - and then slowly slid back toward the comfortable banter they had had before the night at the mall. Anna answered sometimes, with short, neutral replies that said nothing

real. Every time she typed more, something stopped her. The words felt like contraband.

Soon, the messages came less often. He stopped asking questions and started sending links: a song he thought she might like, a meme about finals, a picture of a coffee foam his sister poured into a cat. She double-tapped some of them and watched the little heart appear on his side of the screen. When she did not, the quiet stretched.

Then, one day, she realized she had not seen Brian's name on her lock screen all week.

The realization sat in her stomach like a stone. She opened their chat window, scrolled up through the old messages – his lengthy explanations of formulas he insisted she did not actually need to know for the exam, his rambling stories about his little sister, the time he had gotten lost on his way to the lab because he had been trying to solve a problem in his head. Her own replies looked thin beside them, like she was playing at being someone else, poorly.

She closed the app without typing anything and set the phone down.

---

By the time fall semester started, the guilt had cooled into something harder, that she carried in her chest like a glass wall. On the first day back, the campus air felt almost unreal, too clean and bright after the heavy heat of summer. Anna walked around with her bag on one shoulder, scanning automatically for Brian.

She spotted him near the library, talking to a girl with a floral backpack. His hands were moving in broad, nervous gestures, and he laughed too loudly at something she said. As Anna approached, the girl waved and headed inside.

Brian turned, saw Anna, and froze. His innocent eyes flicked past her like he was looking for an escape route, then back to her face. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“Hey,” Anna said. The word sounded small.

“Hey, what's up?” he echoed. Then, in a rush: “I, um, I actually have to go. I have a d... to meet someone.” He was intentionally being vague, she could tell.

The unsaid word landed between them with a dull thud. For a heartbeat, Anna thought about the red dress hanging in the back of her closet, still smelling faintly of popcorn and perfume and grief.

“Oh,” she said. Brian swallowed. “Also, I... I never really said this properly. Please accept my condolences. May your grandfather rest in peace.”

The phrase sounded practiced, like something he had rehearsed in his head, like a line from a card he had never sent. He opened his mouth again, then closed it. Whatever explanation he was about to offer – about the texts she never answered, about how long summer had been, about the girl with the floral backpack – hung unsaid in the air.

Anna felt the tears gathering already, a familiar burn behind her eyes. If she stayed, they would spill over, and Brian would widen his eyes, worried, and she would have to pick something to confess: the date she dreamt of, the funeral she refused to attend, the way she had turned her phone face down and left him talking into a void.

So she did what she always did.

“It’s okay,” she said. “You should go. You’ll be late.”

She gave him a small, polite smile. Brian hesitated for a fraction of a second longer, then nodded and hurried after his date, his shoulders hunched in that familiar, shy way.

Anna watched him until he disappeared into the building. The distance between them was suddenly precise, like numbers in her head: one summer, seven floors, five ignored calls, a handful of unsent messages, and the quiet, lifelong absence of an old man who never looked for her.

# Never Enough

Fiona Huynh

Growing up,  
love sounded like criticism.

It lived in the wrinkles of my clothes,  
in the way my skin broke out,  
in the number on a scale  
that was somehow always wrong.

Too big.  
Too small.  
Too quiet.  
Too sensitive.

I learned early  
that every room came with eyes  
waiting to inspect me.

My family spoke in suggestions  
that felt more like knives.

“You’d look prettier if your skin were clearer.”  
“That outfit doesn’t suit you.”  
“Did you gain weight?”  
“You look too skinny now.”

And maybe they forgot the words later,  
but I carried them everywhere.

I carried them into mirrors,  
into classrooms,  
into sleepless nights  
where my thoughts grew louder than the world itself.

I began shrinking parts of myself

just to fit into expectations  
that kept changing shape.

No matter what I did,  
I could never reach “enough.”

So I became my own hiding place.

I smiled when I felt hollow.  
I laughed when anxiety wrapped itself  
around my ribs like vines.  
I told people I was fine  
because I didn’t know who would stay  
if I admitted I wasn’t.

The loneliest thing  
is not being alone—

it’s feeling alone  
surrounded by people  
who are supposed to love you.  
And maybe that’s why  
I overthink every word,  
every glance,  
every silence.

Because when love feels conditional,  
you start believing  
you must earn it.

But deep down,  
beneath all the fear  
and all the noise they planted inside me,

there is still a version of me  
quietly hoping  
to be loved  
without needing to change first.

# Illicit Diplomacy

Maria Mangum

Sometimes, I question my choice of profession. After all, I am a professional thief. Today, I was mulling over whether taking a royal signet from a castle keep was a good idea from an ethical and practical point of view. Mostly the practical, like *should I even be going in this way?*

Anyway, these are the kinds of thoughts that go through my head when I'm perched on a window ledge of a turret three substantial, castle-length stories up, shivering from the bite of the cold autumn wind and trying to ignore the drop behind me. I gently bit my tongue in concentration as I slid my lockpicks into the edge of the window, leveraging it so I could swing it open. And yes, I was outside. And no, it was neither easy nor fun.

Contrary to popular belief, being a thief is not nearly as romantic as it seems. Try crouching in one spot between a barrel and a wall, barely moving for an hour, you'll get what I mean.

Carefully balancing on the ledge, I finally swung it open after a solid fifteen seconds of pulling at the slightest gap created by the edge of the window and the frame. The reason this was taking so long was that I was limited by having to make sure not to leave any hints I had been here.

So, I told you I was going to take the royal seal. You probably assumed I was sneaking in to steal it. But "borrowing" would be a much better term in this case, and I really do mean that. What I would actually be doing here was illicitly signing a document I had tucked away in one of my numerous pockets using the royal signet.

I am an actual thief, though. Specifically, a "royal" thief. I steal on behalf of the castle I live in, the rulers of which employ me when something illegal but overall morally right has to be done discreetly. The latch on the window had been opened beforehand from the inside by our diplomat, who had been visited the castle yesterday. I was lucky nobody had noticed the unlatched window and closed it. The reason we needed the paper in my pocket signed by this castle signet was that said paper was actually a peace treaty between the

castles and their respective domains of the surrounding area, since each castle had its own ruling family. Or, more accurately, a renewal of a pre-existing treaty which the family ruling this keep did not intend to sign. Since the four royal siblings were at odds with each other, the idea was that they'd all blame one another, which was why I had to make extra sure not to leave a single trace of my presence.

I slipped inside and glanced around, stifling the uncomfortable feeling you get when you're somewhere you aren't supposed to be.

The big, ostentatious room with a deep red carpet and tapestries on the walls was devoid of people. I mean, I did check before opening the window, but it never hurts to make sure.

I silently crossed the room towards the massive, wooden desk with the side facing the plush chair boasting an exorbitant number of drawers. The silence in the room felt stifling, and the smallest sounds carried clearly.

According to what we knew, the signet should be either in a drawer or somewhere near the desk. I know, very specific. I really did not have a lot to go off of. By methodically opening all of the drawers, I discovered that a small one on the right-hand side was locked. I permitted myself a smirk and set to work opening it. If it was locked, it probably contained something valuable they didn't want stolen. And few things were more valuable than the castle signet.

The lock on the drawer yielded much more quickly than the window had. Once it was open, I extracted the golden signet, admiring the castle's emblem etched on one side of it. The gold glinted in the light coming from the window, but I knew that its value was in the power it held, not in the gold filigree. I pulled the peace treaty out of my pocket and unfolded it on the table, and procured a match from another pocket. I also had wax with me, because you need to plan these things, but I wanted to use the one the royal family used so the shade and texture matched. Conveniently, it was in a neighboring drawer.

I listened for the sounds of footsteps as I quickly started warming up the wax. Painstakingly slowly, it started softening, then flowing, and I dripped it onto the correct place on the paper and pressed the seal into it firmly. After holding it in place for a few sec-

onds to ensure the design was clear, I took the signet away and placed it back into the drawer in the exact same position it was in before, waving my hand in the air to disperse the scent of the melted wax as I did so. I dropped the wax into the heavy drawer and shut it, then tucked the now-legalized document away in my pocket and swiftly padded over to the window, suppressing the urge to rush. I stopped to check the carpet in case I'd creased the rich fabric by walking on it. It's the smallest details that count when it comes to my profession...

The sound of voices came drifting from outside the heavy wood door.

I didn't waste time, crawling out of the window, kneeling on the ledge, and reaching to shut the window. I grimaced. Latching it from outside would be hard to do, but I had to make sure it didn't look like someone had been there. I resisted the urge to mutter something inappropriate as the sound of voices grew closer. Levering the latch in place took me longer than I expected, with the harsh wind at my back and my acute awareness of the dizzying drop behind me. I strained my hearing, hoping to make out what the voices were saying as I coaxed the latch into place using a long, thin piece of metal. Ironically, the window I'd just shut made it harder to hear them. I wasn't able to make out what the two people were saying, but I assumed they were guards.

I popped the latch into place, my heartbeat pounding in my ears, glad I didn't have to close the heavy shutters which had been open when I'd gotten here. I swallowed the nausea my adrenaline rush was giving me. Another pleasant part of being a thief that the stories don't include. In seconds, I was off the ledge and slithering down the wall, using the rough handholds naturally created by the stacked, beige rocks that made up the castle turret to climb down.

The window above me, the one I just left out of, creaked open. I froze, my breathing coming in shallow bursts. Thankfully, I'd had a decently firm handhold at the moment the window opened, so at least I wasn't about to fall off.

This is really starting to sound like a campaign against becoming a thief. And really, I do encourage you to think twice before pursuing the life of a thief. It brings danger, a barely tolerable amount

of stress, and an ill reputation. Even if the things you steal are for a good cause. The day I made the decision to become a professional thief completely changed my life, but I don't regret it.

Most of the time.

After an agonizing ten seconds, the person who had opened the window closed it shut again, probably to avoid the flow of cold air from outside. With nothing more to wait for, I continued my downward descent.

The rest of the climb went smoothly, and after some time that I knew felt longer than it actually was, I stood on the battlement, shaking out my aching fingers.

The wall I was climbing faced away from the inner courtyard, towards the dirt road leading to a small forest. The window was probably put there for the nice view, but in my case it was the reason nobody saw me during my climb. Now all I needed to do was sneak off the battlements onto the wall, from the wall into the courtyard, and finally from the courtyard down a flight of weathered stone steps that led to a huge, official looking set of stone doors in the wall surrounding the castle grounds that led to the drawbridge. The hard part was over, but there was still a lot to be done, including getting back to my castle. I successfully dodged all the guards patrolling the battlement, avoided suspicion during my brisk walk across the courtyard, and was on the set of steps when someone called out to me. I kept going, pretending not to hear. They didn't call out again or go after me, probably assuming I was supposed to be there because of my confident stride.

My heart hammering, I walked out of the doors, across the drawbridge, and out of the keep into safety.

I felt some of the tension in my shoulders seep out as I sighed with relief. Maybe my profession isn't what you'd call a dream job for most, but I am good at what I do.

# A Sanctuary Made of Books

Natalie Villalvazo-Oaks

Poem: "Alone" - Edgar Allan Poe

*From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were—I have not seen  
As others saw—I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring—  
From the same source I have not taken  
My sorrow—I could not awaken  
My heart to joy at the same tone—  
And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—  
Then—in my childhood—in the dawn  
Of a most stormy life—was drawn  
From ev'ry depth of good and ill  
The mystery which binds me still—  
From the torrent, or the fountain—  
From the red cliff of the mountain—  
From the sun that 'round me roll'd  
In its autumn tint of gold—  
From the lightning in the sky  
As it pass'd me flying by—  
From the thunder, and the storm—  
And the cloud that took the form  
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)  
Of a demon in my view—*

## I

**From childhood's hour I have not been as others were.**

In the first grade, I saw a novel at the book fair that I had to read. A *Nest for Celeste*, written by Henry Cole. A silly children's novel that I can't remember much about aside from the title, the main character being a mouse named Celeste, and how desperately I wanted it.

I didn't have any money, so I stole some from my mom. I knew it was wrong, but the need to read that novel outweighed the paranoia I had at the thought of stealing from her.

It never occurred to me that reading wasn't popular, that kids didn't crave a book the way I always have. I thought everyone would steal money for a good book, or just steal the book.

## II

**I have not seen as others saw.**

I have always seen books as a means of escape. These were the books that transported me the easiest:

- *Throne of Glass* by Sarah J Maas
- *Kids of Appetite* by David Arnold
- *The Leaving* by Tara Altebrando
- *There Will Come a Time* by Carrie Arcos
- *Whisper to Me* by Nick Lake
- *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J Maas

I have always craved the thick books that contained my passage to a safer world. I never understood how my real friends never wanted to read.

Weren't they craving a way to leave this world behind, too?

## III

**I could not bring my passions from a common spring.**

For a time, I tried to forget about these sanctuaries.

I had to become vigilant in the story I was living. Keep my head on a swivel to ensure my safety and well-being.

My childhood grew more unsteady, and I could no longer afford to escape it. I could not depart from my reality; I had to embrace it the way the characters in my books embraced their worlds.

#### IV

**From the same source, I have not taken my sorrow.**

I couldn't cry. Couldn't scream. I was a vast ocean of nothing but hidden desires to be in a story far away from this wretched place I was forced to call home.

I remember what it once felt like to escape my hidden sorrows, to chase my childhood desires, but I could not bring myself to move. I couldn't feel anything except the ache of needing to escape.

I told myself to try, but I didn't know what that meant.

*Just try. Please, just try,* I told myself time and again.

I couldn't, though. I couldn't try because I forgot how to feel anything at all. I was a husk of myself, and I had given up on myself.

#### V

**I could not awaken my heart to joy at the same tone, and all I loved, I loved alone.**

I could not find happiness in the fruits of life. I could not touch the sky and feel all right. Where I once felt love inside myself, I felt nothing at all.

I felt *nothing*.

*I was... nothing.*

What happened to me? Was this what abuse did?

I could not fathom the world, and I suppose I never could. I was too young for this. Too young to think death would be better than the

hell I was living in.

Where is that book I just read? They always found a way to save me.

## VI

Then, in my childhood, in the dawn of a most stormy life, was drawn from every depth of good and ill the mystery which binds me still.

My mom took me to a psychiatrist.

“She is not well, give her some meds,” he said. What a fucking joke, that man.

*Some medications that can be prescribed to children (Just to name a few):*

- [Antidepressants called SSRIs \(Zoloft, Prozac, Paxil\)](#)
- [Antidepressants called SNRIs \(Effexor XR, Cymbalta\)](#)
- [Antianxiety medications called benzodiazepines \(Ativan or Klonopin\)](#)
- [Atypical antipsychotics \(Abilify or Risperdal\)](#)
- [Alpha agonists \(Catapres, Kapvay, Tenex, Intuniv\)](#)
- [Atypical anxiolytics \(Buspar\)](#)
- [Antihistamines \(Benadryl, Atarax, or Vistaril\)](#)

None of the medications helped. It did not let me escape the way I used to. Rather, it kept me nailed to this world with a sheer mask around my face and waves crashing in my ears. I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't eating, and all I wanted was to read a book.

WHY CAN'T I READ A DAMN BOOK?

They didn't listen to me when I told them that's what I need. They never listened to anything I said. They never asked me why I couldn't sleep or eat. They just put labels on me. Why was wanting to read such a bad thing anyway? It's not like I was doing drugs.

Oh, wait, they prescribed me my very own personal drugs. Way to go, Doc! What a fucking joke, that damn son of a bitch.

He asked me if I wanted to leave. I said, “Of course I do, wouldn’t you want to, too?”

That was the wrong thing to say. I was hospitalized for three days. For three days, I didn’t sleep, but I did what I could to make sure I didn’t have to stay longer. I ate, even though I wasn’t hungry. I said all the right things, did all the right things. I told them I didn’t want to read.

No one ever asked me why I wanted to leave... they wouldn’t have listened anyway.

## VII

**From the torrent, or the fountain, from the red cliff of the mountain, from the sun that around me rolled in its autumn tint of gold.**

I never should have stolen money from my mom.

Maybe if I had stayed grounded, I could have gone through the Fire unscathed. My dad’s cigarette burns and harsh words wouldn’t have caused me to bruise. My brother’s violence, like ink spilled across a blank page, wouldn’t have broken my bones and flayed my skin. And my mom’s depressive episodes, like a winter that never ends, wouldn’t have made my heart break. I never thought that wanting to escape was the same as wanting to die. I thought I just loved books like a family was supposed to love each other. I guess they all thought books were my drugs.

Books are my salvation.

They tried to keep me from escaping, but they never succeeded.

## VIII

**From the thunder, and the storm, and the cloud that took the form**

**when the rest of Heaven was blue.**

I escaped the life I was dealt. I fell in love with so many more stories and characters between my adolescence and adulthood.

I fell in love with a great man, and I know he would never hurt me the way the others have.

I moved 500 miles away from those who caused me the most pain. It's sad to think that the ones that hurt you the most tend to be the ones that aren't supposed to. I do not consider my blood to be my family; they are just my blood. My family will forever be those who do not hurt me purposefully, and those who share the common goal of making each other feel loved and wanted.

I have found my own family, and they are the first part of my life I haven't had to escape from. Now I read for fun.

## IX

**Of a demon, in my view.**

I will always find a way to escape.

# Physics Class Dialogue Poem

Mihir Rao

**Student:**

Why does the apple fall, not soar, not float, not fly?  
It sits, then slips. I blink, it thuds, and why?

**Physics:**

Mass meets mass.  
Gravity whispers.  
You call it falling.  
I call it law.

**Student:**

But what of light—  
a wave, a particle?  
It bends through water, it tunnels.  
And somehow it's in the dark.

**Physics:**

Light plays both parts.  
It sings and strikes.  
Wave in dance.  
Particle in flight.

**Student:**

And time—what tricks!  
It drips, it drowns. But never regresses  
Why can't I walk backward, like sound?

**Physics:**

Time is a river  
Not meant to turn.  
Arrows are one-way—  
Unless you burn.

# The Dagger

Teresa Jacobo De Leon

I wait for you  
During those dark nights that you creep into my conscience  
In those moments, I ask myself; Is your visit due soon?  
Your aching presence hovers over me in silence

Forgive me for how much I fear you  
For how I am repulsed by the thought of your arrival  
As I hide beneath the sheets, my unease breaks through  
But still, I am in denial

I look for you  
Anticipating the last glimpse, last breath, the ringing bell  
When you pierce into me, there is nothing I can do  
My skin, my body, is nothing but a shell  
I will fall into your embrace, and shed every part of me too

Time is a flowing river that shifts endlessly  
I find myself trapped in your never-ending nightmare  
The pain expands within me, and I fight for my breath relentlessly  
Your touch is something I can not bear

I await being consumed without any remorse  
As you continue lurking, my terror suffocates me with pain  
Tonight, you leave me waiting as you did before  
Until we meet again

# A Metamorphosis

Tajinder Bahia

There are times I gather my strength  
To face the uncertainties of life  
With only the knowledge that I must power through  
And come out on the other side, transformed

I prepare myself to cocoon  
By grieving the life I am leaving behind  
Thanking the universe for its guidance  
And for the blessings and lessons of this chapter

The process of change is bittersweet  
It's hard on the body, mind, and spirit  
And I've gone through the process many times  
Defeating greater and greater challenges

Though knowing this doesn't change  
The fear of what I might become  
But the fear of staying the same  
Is greater, and I fold into myself

I spend time inside a chrysalis  
The shell of it hardened with experience  
That breaks old tissue, using the byproduct  
To form something new

A new set of antennae,  
To perceive my reality

A new set of legs,  
To walk with purpose

A new set of wings,  
To fly towards the next uncertainty

Transformed, and ready to begin again.

# The Sestina Spiral from Purpura Lepus

Matthew Falcon

I did say you would make me burn  
You did, throughout it all, this moth  
After countless unfortunate dwindled time  
Chased after a mighty purple star  
Of one special elusive rabbit  
Until my whole self I lost

In this station a prison, have I lost?  
Did my arrival to new space make me burn  
In this new world of many more of a rabbit  
If not more majestic than us moths  
In another place of many a shining star  
Thus has marked away my time

I know not if I regret the time  
I spent befuddled and lost  
Hopelessly chasing after the majesty of a star  
Through simmering painful desires that did burn  
In pursuit like an eclipse of moths  
But the unreachable light's instead a rabbit

You are still the same lovely mythical purple rabbit  
My wayward impossible dream after all this time  
The brightest lamp to a vagrant moth  
A phenomenal navigator, stranded but never lost  
My blissful, harsh and suffocating burn  
The one popular star

Yes, the brightest star  
Even one with the luck of a rabbit  
Is also the fastest to smoke and burn

And such you left to greener ranches, such lack of time  
And all the chances oh inevitable I lost  
As this dumb, weak, slow moth

You are still the unique flame for this moth  
Still my one, hopeful majestic star  
My wind and one path for a hope, even if one that's cold and lost  
Yet you always were an out of reach rabbit  
Yet the reason I was squandered by changing time  
For it was immolation, not just a burn

I was a moth, chasing after a rabbit  
And more through endless stars, bereft of time  
From that I am lost, so then I did burn

# Léa

Ash Morgan



# Redemption

Frank Yung-Fong Tang



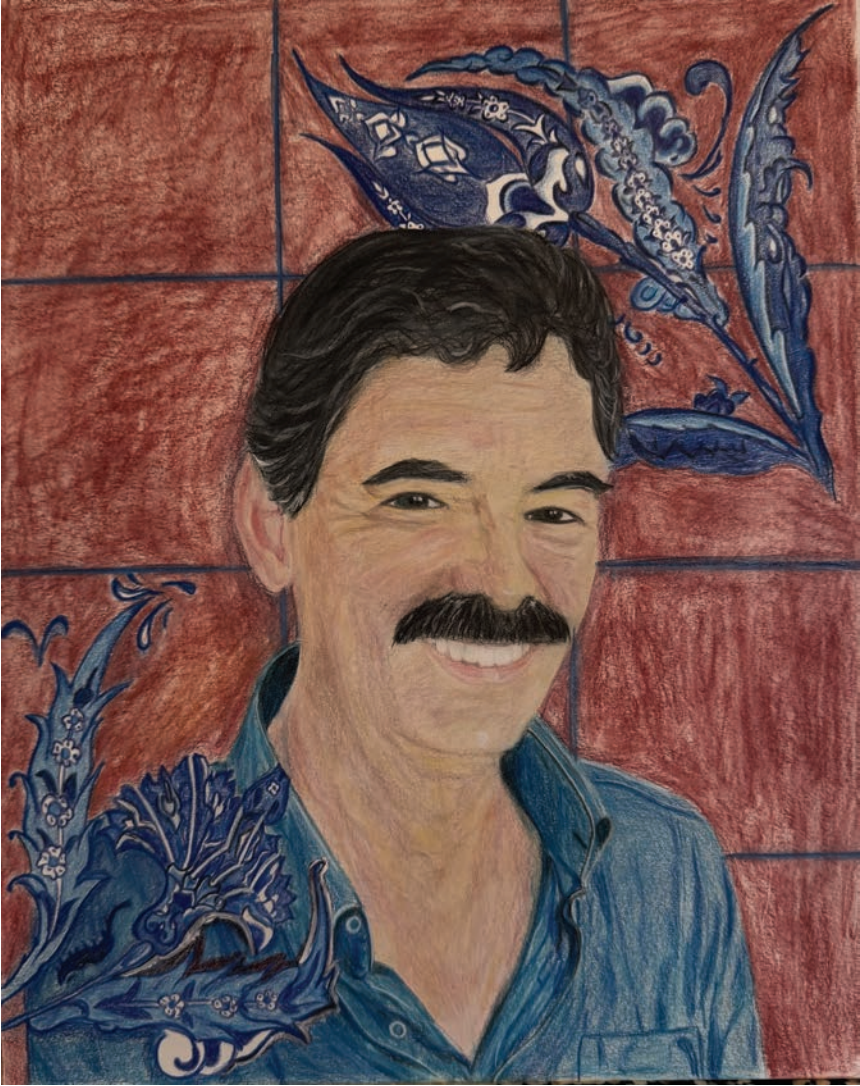
# When the Sea Breathes

Geetika Bansal



# Father

Derya Senyurt Elzein



# Self-Portrait I

Britt Kravets



# Floating

Alicia Aldama



# Fighters

Mary Mau



# Yearning For What's Across the Ocean

Adrienne Makinano



# Flushed Away

Norman Aragonés



# The Blood Moon

Rashmi V



# The Moon Jar

Yeonju Hwang

At 3:50 a.m., the fluorescent lights on the third floor of the library were still painfully bright. They poured a cold white glare over the desk, the books, and Yujin's tired face. She blinked hard, then reached for her artificial tears and dropped them into her bloodshot eyes. Her gaze moved quickly between her laptop, her thick textbook, and the messy lecture played at double speed, the professor's voice turning into a dull, mechanical hum.

In a corner of her desk, the date of her upcoming exam was circled aggressively in red ink on her calendar, seeming to tighten like a noose around her neck. It was an exam where survival demanded absolute perfection, down to a single vocabulary word or punctuation mark. A suffocating pressure visited her every single night, but this goal was too desperate for her to ever consider stopping.

Rummaging through her memory for a brief moment, Yujin realized she had left her crucial review notes back in her dormitory room. With a heavy sigh, she packed her bag and headed toward the dorm. Opening the door, she found her roommate, Chloe, leaning comfortably against her bed, relaxing. Chloe was the kind of person who effortlessly managed her coursework, departmental clubs, and social gatherings all at once. To make matters worse, or rather better, she possessed a wonderful personality, always offering genuine kindness by slipping a piece of chocolate to an exhausted Yujin or recommending a soothing piece of music.

Whenever Yujin looked at Chloe, a strange, aching pain surged from the depths of her chest.

*Do I even belong among these perfect people? Why can't I have it all? Both work and life, like the people on Instagram?*

It wasn't exactly jealousy; it was closer to a sense of profound wretchedness aimed at herself.

Just as she grabbed her notes and turned to head back to the library, her phone vibrated with a short buzz. It was a text from the security guard, informing her that a package had arrived in the

lobby. She had no recollection of ordering anything. Utterly drained and thoroughly annoyed by everything in her state of extreme fatigue, Yujin dragged her heavy feet toward the lobby desk instead of the library.

The security guard behind the desk offered a warm, benevolent smile as he handed her the box.

*"Studying until this hour? It must be so hard on you, student."*

In the past, Yujin would have been deeply moved by such a small gesture of human warmth, and it would have brightened her entire day. But now, with dark circles hanging down to her chin and her hair greasy and matted, she lacked the emotional capacity to even process that kindness. She merely offered a dry, mechanical "Thank you," and returned to her room carrying the box.

Back in her room, she ran a box cutter through the packing tape. With a crisp, scratching sound, the box opened to reveal layers of tightly packed bubble wrap filling the interior. Watching from her bed, Chloe walked over with curious eyes. Under the collective gaze of both girls, Yujin carefully pulled back the wrapping, only to freeze instantly.

It was a jar; round and white, yet strangely warped.

*"What is this...?"*

An incredulous murmur escaped Yujin's lips, and a heavy silence hung between them for a few seconds. Yujin gently lifted the large jar and placed it on her desk. The more she examined it from different angles, the less it looked like a normal, flawless product. The upper left portion was slightly slumped, as if it couldn't bear its own weight, and the overall contour was subtly lopsided. To Yujin, who had pursued nothing but absolute perfection, that asymmetrical silhouette was jarringly offensive. Her day had already been emotionally exhausting and crushing, and for an unexpected package to turn out to be such a crooked, subtly yellowish jar was almost insulting.

Suddenly, she felt a wave of shame just letting Chloe see this misshapen object. Turning her head, Yujin's eyes fell upon the ceramics arranged neatly on Chloe's desk. They were perfect porcelains, adorned with colorful, intricate decorations and boasting a

symmetry so flawless it seemed measured by a ruler. Standing beside those perfect pieces, her own lopsided jar looked even more pathetic, and she couldn't help but feel that its shape mirrored her own self. Tears welled up to the brims of her eyes, but Yujin bit her lip, barely holding them back. Uttering a sigh laced with irritation, she rummaged through the box to put the jar back and return it, when a small yellow envelope slipped out and hit the floor. She opened it, and the familiar handwriting instantly triggered her fragile tear ducts. It was a letter from her mother.

*To my beloved daughter, Yujin.*

*Yujin, are you doing okay, studying alone in a foreign country? Every time we speak on the phone, your voice sounds so heavy and exhausted that my heart aches constantly. I know how terribly hard you are working for your dream, but I wish you would take care of your health along the way.*

*You must have been surprised when you opened the box. This is a Korean 'Moon Jar.' You may not remember this, but when you were little, just four years old, I took you to a museum. Back then, you stood in front of this moon jar and couldn't take your eyes off it. I didn't understand why that rugged thing was so appealing to you, but you held my hand with your tiny fingers and said, "Mom, this moon jar is different from the sparkly decorations in cartoons, but it's so beautiful." That memory suddenly crossed my mind, so I visited a workshop I know and made one myself, thinking of you.*

*My dear, a moon jar is crafted in a truly peculiar way. It cannot be thrown from a single lump of clay into a tall shape like ordinary vessels. Because it is too large and heavy, the clay cannot support its own weight and will simply collapse. Therefore, artisans shape the bottom half and the top half separately. After creating two sepa-*

*rate halves, they join them together with clay and place the piece into a scorching kiln.*

*Inside that raging fire of over a thousand degrees, while those two halves melt and fuse into one, the jar inevitably slumps and warps a little. That is why in the entire world, there is not a single perfectly symmetrical, spherical moon jar. Every single one of them is slightly tilted or dented.*

*Yujin, I don't want you to try so desperately to maintain a perfect shape inside the scorching kiln that is the world. Do not be saddened because your shape is a little distorted compared to others. That warped line is the most beautiful evidence that you did not shatter inside that burning kiln, that you breathed and endured.*

*You spent half of your life safely by our side, but in this stage where you are starting the remaining half entirely on your own, it is only natural for you to be clumsy and unrefined. So, it is okay not to be perfect. You are already whole just as you are, like that moon jar. Just stay healthy, my love.*

Drop by drop. Yujin's tears fell onto the letter, blurring the ink. Through her tear-filled vision, the world bled into a blurry haze.

All this time, Yujin had demanded an unforgiving, absolute symmetry from herself. Perfect grades, a perfect school, a flawless social life. In her harsh inner world, where even the slightest dent or divergence from others meant being instantly branded a failure, she had been enduring by constantly tightening the vice around her own soul.

Yet, even from afar, her mother had heard her taut, silent screams. And she had wanted to tell her: humans are not beautiful because they are perfect, but because they survive without breaking, even as they distort little by little within the kiln-like competition of life. That clumsy survival itself is already precious and beautiful.

Yujin brushed her tears away roughly with her sleeve and looked at the moon jar on her desk once more.

Amid the chaotic clutter of thick books, multicolored sticky notes, and writing utensils, the cold light of the desk lamp poured down. At the center of it all, the lopsided moon jar stood, radiating a strangely warm, complete milky hue, glowing subtly. Looking at it again, it was not an incorrect, flawed line born of bad craftsmanship. The longer she gazed, the more its generous, accommodating curves put her heart at ease. It looked like Yujin herself, who had breathlessly endured today, and it looked like her mother's wide, silent embrace, holding her without any conditions.

Suddenly hearing a choked sob, Yujin turned her head to find tears streaming down Chloe's cheeks as well. Chloe, who had always seemed so perfect and confident, acting as the distant object of Yujin's envy, was weeping silently, as though she understood the contents of the letter. Yujin did not ask why she was crying. Sensing intuitively that this seemingly perfect girl had also been holding her breath, fighting not to warp inside her own scorching kiln, Yujin silently reached out and wrapped Chloe in a warm embrace.

Tomorrow's competition would still be terrifying. Moments would surely come when she would look inadequate compared to others, and nights would arrive when she would feel desperately lonely, as if there were no place for her to rest her body in this vast world.

But somehow, it did not feel as hopeless anymore.

Because this unevenness, this imperfection, was not proof that she had failed.

It was proof that she had endured.

Beyond the dormitory window, as the two girls held each other quietly, the full moon in the night sky smiled gently, casting its silver light over all the crooked things in the world.

# Growing Up Ghazal

Corinna Kuo

Shelves too high to reach on toes—reach up, go up, grow up  
And all the time left wondering, When will I grow up?

You're just a child, You're just too young, You're just too small  
With too much time spent wishing, Why can't I just grow up?

Piano, dance, math, Chinese, and choir twice a week  
No more time left to play, but I will when I grow up

Dreaming of the day I get to cross that platform too  
Still short after all this time, so soon will I grow up

Head-down-pencils-scratch-clickity-clack-on-the-keyboard  
Endless nights, endless days, no time right now to grow up

Flipping through the faded scrapbook of my childhood  
And all the time left wondering, When did I grow up?

# Medicated Midnights

Alegria Mia Serrano

I lie awake in borrowed rooms,  
Restless, watching strangers drift through the halls–  
Asking, who am I beneath these walls?

At 2 A.M., nostalgia creeps,  
A shadow stirs, where pain still sleeps–  
Hospital lights flicker, stabbing sleep.  
A restless mind caught in grief's keep.

Drowning slow in mental quicksand–  
Silent, heavy, no one to hold my hand.

My body, just a vessel, yearns for rest,  
I stumbled, fell, and fought devils in my chest.

Skin cold as ice, the IV hums,  
A hollow rhythm where comfort never comes.  
Medications flood in – numb and cold,  
A silent rage I can't outrun.

But somewhere deep, a flicker burns–  
A whisper stitched into my wounds, still real.  
In the depths where silence creeps,  
I guard the light my soul still keeps.

# Cycles

Juliette Levy

from the earth we came and to the earth we shall return  
the breath in our lungs become the leaves on the trees  
the white of our bones becomes the ash and dust in the dirt  
the flesh that engulfs us in the visage of our predecessors becomes  
immortalized in the minds of the living  
our souls become the cosmos that surround the stars in every direction  
our pains and aches subside and become the creaking of branches  
and brambles  
from the earth we came and to the earth we shall return

# Bless the Biped

Martin Diaz Ortega

Marching up and down the hills  
My footsteps marked across the valley  
Like a bear clawing a tree  
While my mind and calves tense up  
But my blood flows and cleanses  
Lunging for better footing  
Then I run to hear the wind blow  
And pose yoga with my cats  
Squatting and tipping up high  
For thighs as strong as an ox  
Otherwise I'd love to  
Stretch with the ballerinas  
Bones elongating to crack  
For beauty paired with pain  
Dancing in the moonlight  
Black swan  
Oh how far we've come  
Since primates lived easy  
And cavemen limbs breathed  
With a much better purpose  
I'd chop away my manhood  
Before I'd chop away my legs

# What I Know

Mariana Frias Da Costa

What I know  
Is that my body follows the same outline as my mother's.  
They say we are fashioned after God's perfect image  
But in my reflection,  
The perfection I see is not of a distant, cosmic father  
But rather of the mother whose body still carries  
The scar of my birth.

What I know is that  
My mother never wore her nails or her hair long  
That her shoes are well worn sneakers.  
What I know is that  
Women should not decorate themselves so

What I know  
Is the pitch of my mother's voice  
As she asks me, Do I look alright?  
Every time we leave the house together  
The speed in which she speaks  
As she hurries to apologize

What I know is something about  
Domesticity, I'm sure.  
Although my mother never did learn how to cook,  
Microwaving frozen packets for dinner.

What I know is my mother's laughter  
Echoing through rooms, across lifetimes  
Is my mother weaving together worlds  
In the stories she shared over coffee.

What I know is that  
Anger is inherited,  
That the pain which shoots up  
My mother's back  
Grows like a seed in my own spine.

# Black Beady Roundness

Vaishali Kirpekar

In this black beady roundness  
lies a sharpness  
that wakes you from the mundane  
Too much—  
and it turns on you  
A thing of duality:  
*sun-warmed,*  
*rain-soaked*

It calls you out of the night  
leave your heartbreak on the pillow—  
step into the day  
*bright, maybe even a bit citrussy*

Morning is *sunny-side up*  
day turns *woody, earthy*

And night? Hot, smoldering  
a slow smoky simmer  
*from continents far away*

A pinch, and the blandness goes away  
a fleck, and that too disappears—  
as all things do,  
into fragrance

Punchy, a little snark  
lingering in yesterday's dust  
and *promising today's wholeness*

In this black beady roundness lies a sharpness—  
small, but enough  
to make the ordinary zesty

# My Old Classroom

Lauren Copeland Axtell

My eyes follow the neat line of tiny shoes along the wall  
the trim in this room is a string of sunflowers  
just as I remembered  
with little names scribbled in their centers  
done by their own hands for the first time  
below cubbies are full of colorful backpacks and patterned lunchboxes  
this corner was my favorite,  
with its well-loved alphabet rug  
littered with stuffed animals and picture books splayed open  
today's whiteboard:  
"fly high little birdies, you can do anything!"  
the hopeful young teacher's desk,  
pristine, the way she always had it  
almost everything in its place here  
I turn to the center of the room  
small dents all across the carpet  
where miniature desks usually sit  
they practice multiple times each year  
quickly, calmly, **quietly**  
they stand and remember their tasks  
stacking chairs  
pushing and piling desks  
building the barricade  
stay conscious of doors and windows  
I can't bring myself to turn  
to that last corner yet  
a stinging metal already coats  
nostrils, tongue, and skin  
inhaling through my mouth  
there is nothing I can say  
it is spinning  
this room  
where I first decided what I wanted to be

flashing bright colors  
sprayed with red  
the deep stain that slowly spread  
small hands that will never write again  
keep your eyes up  
off the floor  
papers, jackets, a little league baseball cap  
all lay abandoned  
amongst countless shellcasings  
engraved with little names.

# I Still Feel You (HBD)

Gabriel Martinez

I still feel you like...

a warm blanket, wrapped around me,  
that's fresh out of the dryer.

Or the smell of sweet cinnamon  
hugging the room, when you'd make arroz con leche...

and say it was just for me.  
Yours will always be my favorite.

Decades have passed, but  
I still can't find a replacement...  
none even come close.

And I can still feel you...

In the life of every vibrant strike  
of a mariachi's guitar.

I can still hear your shoes tap  
as you dance to the toots of the horns...  
Such beautiful form.

And I can feel the moment  
that warmth slowly slipped away...  
like the sun setting on a beautiful day.

And the loneliness of the moon  
as it sits by my side...  
at the stone-cold absence  
of your grave.

🌸 Happy Birthday, Grandma. ♀  
I love you...  
and thank you.

# The Wall Between Desire

Jaxson Shaw

*To M. Winter*

*My Dearest Mary,*

I hope this letter finds you in somewhat good health, as I know you have been rather busy as of late. We all know you are confined to that wretched city with your new responsibilities, but do take care to maintain your health. Do you exercise regularly as you used to? I still vividly remember the walks we went on together, on the verdant hills, with the poppies and lilacs blooming in the spring, coloring the hills with their bright colors. How we danced and played together, for hours on end, with no one to gaze upon us. There was so much we could do, we were free together. We had the utmost privacy we were never afforded with our families, and the pain the want of it would bring me was unbearable. Being with you was the highlight of my day, and I never wished for our time together to end.

But, alas, here we are now. Not a day goes by when I do not think about and miss you. I wish you would write to me far more often than you do. While they are no substitutes for your voice, graceful and soothing, letters from you would provide me some relief, as sometimes I think that you do not wish to contact me, or anyone else for that matter. We understand that you are unable to visit, due to your obligations, and that drafting a letter may take time you may not have to spend, but even just one letter for every month of the year would suffice. At the very least, it would be preferable to silence.

We all worry for you, and me most of all. I am always deeply concerned for you, especially since you met him, so please respond soon. Your words should alleviate some of my stress, as they did when we spent our days together.

*Your Companion,  
Daisy Vale Woodsworth,  
13 May, 18–*

*To D. Vale*

*My Friend Daisy,*

I deeply apologize for not returning to you sooner. I have been busy, as you deduced, with my new responsibilities. I spend my days toiling away at chores, washing dishes, tending to the garden, mopping floors, and all manner of things. Some days I do not even have the opportunity to step outside the property. I am exercising, even if a little, if nothing else. I miss you much, as well. I would love nothing more than to leave this house with you and enjoy your company; it is rather drab here. The only colors that surround me are dull greys and dark blacks, the walls and furniture bare with little adornment, like the place has been abandoned and ransacked long ago. Even the plants seem depressed, as there is little sunlight for them, leaving them destitute. Not even the windows provide an escape from this dreary atmosphere, as all I can see for miles are bland buildings, for miles and miles.

I understand your concern for me, regarding him. His work leaves him at home most days, the entire day. My chores keep me in close proximity to him as well, and very often he will break from whatever task and seek me out, as if to monitor me. When he is unable to personally watch over me, he sends one of the servants to perform the task for him. Regardless of the time or place, their eyes perpetually gaze upon me, noting my every movement. Frequently, when the mail arrives, he will go through it all himself, reading every letter in excruciating detail, including those addressed to me, specifically. More than not, he will throw out the letters meant for me. As a result, he is the only soul I interact with in any capacity, as even the servants refuse to speak to me. I am only able to draft this very letter because he, either through exhaustion or a simple lack of care, missed your letter. The evenings are when we are most close, but they leave much to be desired. I cannot say too much, but our nights together are not the most pleasant. He is not a particularly invigorating partner, and the time we spend is dull and tedious. They pale in comparison to our countless sleep-overs, which were so much more lively and exciting.

More dull than in bed, is when he is in conversation. When we happen onto a discussion between the two of us, which is a rare

occurrence, he largely has little to say, no matter the subject. Despite his ostentatious education at notable universities, he is dumb regarding most topics. Either he will simply repeat boring platitudes or simply will ignore my attempts at communication. Sometimes, it feels as if he is an empty vessel, one where the soul of a human being should be. You are a far more interesting companion in this aspect as well, as you always have some insight to share, which never failed to capture my attention.

I deeply wish to visit you and everyone else back home, but I am stuck here. I am unsure of when, if the opportunity will ever come, I can send this letter out, or how I will be able to do so.

*Your Bosom Friend,  
Mary Winter  
New Sheffield, 20 May, 18-*

*To. M. Winter*

*Lovely Mary,*

For eternity it felt like I have waited for you to send your response to my epistle. Despite the agonizing time without your words, I am most relieved to hear from you after so long. However, I cannot claim to be in the highest spirits since reading about your time away from home.

I am quite worried for you, my dear companion. While I had my reservations about your relationship and moving in with that man, given how sorrowfully I would miss you and your company, I had hoped he would at least treat you with the least bit of dignity, that any human being should be afforded. Perhaps I was too generous in my assumption, more generous than I had previously thought I was.

It is my deepest desire that you could visit me, or I you. I have never felt more reassured and confident than when I am with you, basking in your warmth and lovely compassion.

However, we are both petrified where we are. I have received news from my father that he has begun his search for a spouse to be wed to me, citing my own failure to submit myself to one as the cause for his quest, forbidding my travel to anywhere outside our humble town. My options as of the present moment are limited, which has

only served to worsen my humor. I have found it difficult and tiresome to find satisfying companionship with anyone, let alone one I wish to devote myself to fully.

You cause me so much worry, and I can never cease these thoughts. Please, if at all possible, attach a photograph of yourself in your next letter. I wish to understand your physical condition, as well as your mental condition. Perhaps then, my condition will brighten.

*Your Faithful Friend*  
*Woodsworth, 24 June, 18-*

*To D. Vale*

*Daisy*

I regret to inform you that our correspondence must cease immediately. After a lengthy and healthy conversation with my husband, we have arrived at the conclusion that our exchange of letters is inappropriate and is ill-befitting of young ladies such as us. Concealing our back and forth is of the utmost disrespect to him, and I am ashamed of my carelessness. My husband is most angry with me, and continuing our communication will only end in disaster for both of us.

We have both entered the period of our lives where we must put away childish things and accept our positions in the household. We need to move on from our past, as difficult as it may be, in order for us to mature into the women we were raised to be. We must look to the future, regardless of our feelings towards it.

I hope you can understand, and do not resent me for our decision. My husband can be very persuasive, and opened my eyes to the consequences of our continued correspondence. I wish you good health, and my final good-bye to you.

*Mrs. Richard Winter*  
*New Sheffield, 1 August, 18-*

*Diary Entry for 9 August, 18-*

I simply have no words to describe this letter. It is horrible, vile, cruel, and every other synonym in the English language. I feel as though my heart has been ripped out of my chest, leaving me with

nothing left to cling onto. What is she thinking? How could she do this, abandon me like that? We have been by each others' sides for so long, and no one can purport to be closer to another like I can for her! Did our time together mean so little to her? But she always seemed so happy when we kept each other company! It could not have been simply a "childish thing" as she described!

Absolutely nothing about the letter is sensible, not in the slightest. I'm in no mental condition to even attempt to make sense of any of it. This news couldn't have come at a worse time. I have been notified that father has found a potential suitor for me, and I dread it more than the damned soul dreads his fate of eternal punishment. Before, at least, I had the prospect of some connection to Mary through our correspondence to keep me company and sane, but now I am left with nothing, but spending the rest of my existence with a stranger who will no doubt disappoint me.

I am left alone in the world, with no one to rely on. I have never felt more hopeless than ever before, and I struggle to see a reason to continue on in this world, which has become nothing more than Hell itself. Even the devil's domain would be preferable to whatever my life is about to become. Our bond was severed before it could reach its zenith, as a flower killed before it could blossom. I can only pray that we may one day reunite, as that prayer will become my sole motivation for remaining in this realm. For without it, what will I have left?

# I Love You, I'm Sorry

Marley Testa

Betty's cooking dinner when Sam gets home. Her back is to him as she faces the stove, swaying her hips to the soft music coming from the radio. Edith Piaf is singing, the stir-fry is sizzling... It's a lovely Wednesday evening. She feels arms wrap around her from behind as Sam engulfs her in a large hug, pushing his nose into her hair and breathing deep, "m'sorry" he whispers into her scalp. Betty smiles. Life is good.

Betty and Sam don't say "I love you." And it's not because it's too soon, or because somehow in the nine years they've been together they can't seem to find a reason to love each other. No, that's not the case.

Betty and Sam don't say "I love you" because they have something better. Much better. In the mornings before work, Betty leaves a still-sleeping Sam with a peck on the cheek and an "I'm sorry!" on her way out the door. And when Betty gets off work at 5:00 on the dot each evening? She opens her cell phone to find a simple "Sorry <3" waiting for her on her lock-screen.

They don't say I love you because *I'm sorry* means so much more. Those famous silly 8 letters don't compare to their sorries.

It began because, as a couple, Sam and Betty were a pretty clumsy pair: "Sorry!" Sam had squeaked on the night of their first date, helping Betty up from where he'd knocked her down with a stray elbow. He'd been a mess with nerves that whole day.

"Sorry!" Betty giggled later that evening after she'd bonked Sam's forehead in an attempt to kiss him. Her lipstick had stained his skin for weeks.

"Sorry," Sam groaned in frustration after dropping a full carton of eggs onto her freshly mopped kitchen floor. Their brownies were rather dry that night, but they ate them anyway.

"Sorry," Betty smiled on Valentines day, beaming across the candle-lit table, eyes full of hearts and hearts full of love.

"Sorry," Sam grinned, 9 years later and down on one knee. The small velvet box trembled in his hands, just as nervous as he'd

been that first night he'd knocked her over. She said yes.

Sorry is a special word for Betty and Sam. Sorry is perfect. Sorry is *theirs*. No one knows sorry like Betty and Sam know sorry. Betty and Sam "sorry" each other.

"Sorry," Sam whispers from behind Betty, his face still tucked into her hair, inhaling breathily.

Betty grins as she turns in his arms, careful not to touch the hot stove. Her heart is full, and tonight is good, because she knows that "sorry." She sorries that sorry.

But there are tears in Sam's eyes when they finally meet. Great, distraught, devastated tears that have his lids red and sore and his pupils blown wide with regret. They're tears that seem to make her very core burn in anguish for him. Suddenly it hurts to breathe, heavy and stinging like a puncture to her lungs.

"I'm so sorry," he sobs as he pulls the kitchen knife from her chest. He buries his face in her neck as he bawls.

Because he really did mean it. This time he really was *sorry*.

# Painting in the Back of the Closet I Forgot Existed

Solana Pujol

*To my grandmother, who raised me.*

Suddenly I'm back and there's a knife in my chest.  
I'm back and it's hurting.  
Hurting like the inevitable is sinking in.  
Hurting like I can hear clocks ticking even after I break them to pieces.  
Hurting like I had to sit with empty palms.  
Knowing I hid my reaching hands.  
Couldn't let you know I loved you.

Grief is back it's the rock in my throat I can't swallow.  
I can't gulp.  
I can barely breathe.  
But open mouths mean secrets being spit out.  
My hurt is mine and I won't share it.

Suddenly *mate* does not taste like home but like metal sticking in  
my mouth.  
Gold chain is heavy on my chest  
It's keeping me in bed  
It's keeping my fists swinging  
It's keeping my lungs full of fighting words  
It's keeping my chest longing for comfort  
But my body repulses,  
wanting to hold hands but scratching the touch away  
Wanting to speak but biting and cursing my tongue  
Squeezing the gold pendant that meant you.

I want to rip it off my neck.

Everything is for you, even the hurting.

The sanded canvas.  
The priming paint.  
The brush strokes.  
The little girl is making *mate* with her abuela.  
Everything was for you and now I'm lost.  
I'm lost in the tears I refuse and the painting I made for you.  
A gift with nowhere to go.  
I wish it stayed lost.

\**mate* is a traditional Argentinian drink

# Jack is Gone! No! He is Not!

Frank Yung-Fong Tang

*April 15, 2026*

Jack is gone!  
All of sudden  
Monday morning  
I got the message

Jack is gone!  
But is he?  
His presence is present  
His grace last

Saw him that Sunday  
After the service  
He recovered from the surgery  
Talking as usual

I think he knew that already  
His day will soon come  
No sorrow on his face  
Just talks as usual

Late December  
Just before the New Year  
So fast

I thought I knew him  
But, No! I don't!  
In his memorial service  
I learned so much more

Elder himself  
Pastor, his son  
Not just what he did  
But his sincere heart

A thousand come

And one hundred more  
Driving from Los Angeles  
Seattle those flew

Everyone gathered  
To celebrate his love and life

Song was written  
Words were shared  
Stories of many  
A true friend was gone

No! He isn't  
He just slept  
In the arm of his Father  
Laying in Heaven still

Jesus is his Savior  
His Master and Lord  
Christ, who he followed  
God's servant, he worked

Teaching and preaching  
Accompanying his friends  
Caring the weak quietly  
As how his Lord shown

Is Jack gone?  
No! He is not!  
He is sleeping  
In his Father's arm

We remember him  
Not just because of what he has done  
But because of who he was  
My dear friend Jack  
I know you are now alive in Heaven  
And will resurrect with me and Our Lord one day together

My dear friend Jack  
There are so many I can learn from you

See you in heaven

# The Waiting

Hailey Crawford

**F**or the past year or so, I've been stuck in this shitty waiting room. I'm seated on a circa-1970's chair with red and yellow etching. A crowd of empty seats fills the room around me. Meanwhile, I'm seated staring at the wall in front of me waiting for my name to be called. Time passes by obviously—the old clock on the wall ticks at me. The sound is steady and aggravating. A voice calls names from behind the door on the intercom, The room doesn't stay empty forever though. I've seen many kinds of people come and go, some sit for only minutes and others, like me, stay for a while. They walk past me over and over like cars whipping past.

I can't help but ask myself, "Why are their names called and not mine? What the hell am I doing wrong? What invisible checklist am I just constantly falling short on?"

I ponder on it because something inside is screaming that I'm meant to walk through that door. More than these other people, plenty more. Every time it opens this beautiful glow seeps out, it encompasses the person in the doorframe as they disappear into its warm embrace. Muffled music drifts into the cold waiting room from a distance and a loud celebration, the clinking of glasses. I try to tuck away my sharp ping of jealousy, but it always stays; festering and getting bigger.

I look at the handle every time the door shuts. Out of desperation I run to it, press against it, pull it, and try to pry it with all my strength. But still, it just won't budge.

Okay, maybe I need to find other ways to open the door, maybe not with brute force but maybe... perfection! I sit up straight as a pin, barely breathing. I don't make eye contact or smile, but again, someone else is called up before me.

I go back to the drawing board this time trying the opposite, I celebrate when their name is called.

Maybe I have to be a good sport?

It doesn't work.

My restlessness rises and my anger follows. In one impulsive

swoop, I throw my heavy chair at the wall behind me. Hoping that maybe through the avenue of fear someone will rush in and save me.

No one comes.

I'm left to shamefully pick up my own pathetic chair and sit back down.

No one else in the room even looked over at me.

My head falls into my hands and the only thought I have pings off of every corner of my mind.

Am I cursed to just suffer and watch other people's happiness forever?

At this point I give up. I no longer look at the door or handle; my head hangs low as I succumb to the very likely possibility that I'm stuck here forever. Then out of sheer boredom and my neck hurting from its awkward positioning I look up. I start to see little details in the room that I've never seen before. Like the painting right in front of me for example. It captures a beautiful coastline, the waves ebb and flow as if it were moving in real time. In perfect turquoise and dark rich navy blues, the water is calm and safe. I then look over and notice a cute succulent plant and a small magazine on the table.

"I could possibly read that while I wait."

In the very right corner, untouched, lies a jumble of other books and magazines.

I could also use that later.

Then just a couple of seats over I notice an older man whom I've never seen before. He's wearing a fedora and suit, seemingly appearing from thin air. His hands rest on his stomach. The brim of his brown hat hides his eyes but I catch a soft content smile underneath it. He stares straight ahead but my eyes are stuck on him. I notice every detail: his scuffed dark brown leather boots, the small threads fraying at the hem of his pant leg.

He feels my gaze and turns slightly. "It feels really calm here, huh?" he says.

I just nod a bit and respond, "Well, it is, but I don't really care about that. I just need to get the hell out of here."

He chuckles a bit to himself, a small cough escapes as he grabs his handkerchief from his pleated pocket.

He gruffs, “Yes, yes, yes, the waiting. It’s always the worst part, hmm? But right now I know this chair, this room, and my feet on the ground. I’ve learned to appreciate that stuff. Some kinda certainty in this unpredictable world.” He looks around us checking as if others are listening then whispers, “You know, a door just leads you to another room. You’ll be opening ’em forever.”

He flashes me an even bigger smile and winks. He looks back at the blank wall in front of him.

I look away.

“Why did he wink at me?” I whisper.

But his words don’t just float away, they land right in my chest. I look back at the painting in front of me, down at my feet on the ground. I breathe in deeply and as I exhale my shoulders fall slightly. I reach over to the magazine suspiciously. I peek over to the old man to see if he’s looking but he’s fast asleep. I start to read and flip through the pages of the magazine and notice my mouth is curved upwards and my brows aren’t in an angry furrow.

And just in that moment I hear from the intercom,  
“Cleo?”

# Never-Ending Cycle

Jacqueline Falla Reyes

14 ½ years old

Working...Full Time

Young latina

First generation

White on the outside and brown in the inside

Many don't want to see, nor believe

Same location

Young and dump

They say...

Pretty but naive

Super taqueria

Money of working hands

We are the face to the receiving end of a rich man

Making enough but not enough to feed your kids

Super taqueria

Treated like trash

Talked to like trash

Grooming at its max!

Everyone talks...

No one listens

Nothing is done

Naive and over-worked

Low pay or no pay

Super Taqueria

Smell that penetrates

Touch that penetrates

Hair, clothing, skin...

Sticky fingers that cannot be washed

Dirty walls, squeaky floors  
Shoes meant for the nonslip  
Slips occur!

Super Taqueria  
Shared tips  
Jealous  
Envious  
No free meals No  
discounts No  
overtime pay

14 ½ years old Young  
and dumb  
Live to work Not  
Work to live Lifestyle  
has changed

Live Life  
Young, Smart and Brave!

# There Is Nothing Natural About This

Jessalyn Tyree

September 11th, 2025

3:42 p.m.

Standing in the Costco bakey aisle,  
surrounded by birthday cakes  
and the smell  
of fresh bread.

I find out  
you are gone.  
Not sleeping.  
Not missing.

Gone.  
I scream  
"He's gone!"

Over  
and over  
and over.

Until my voice  
tears itself apart  
inside my throat.

People stop their carts  
to stare.

The whole world  
keeps moving  
while mine collapses  
between the muffins  
and the rotisserie chicken.

Our seven-year-old son  
is laughing in the next aisle over.

Still innocent enough,  
to believe that fathers  
live forever.

Not knowing  
that in the time

it took him to wander away from  
me,  
his life split into  
before,  
and after.

They don't write books  
on how to grieve  
the loss of your sons father,  
let alone  
how to look your seven-year-old  
in the eyes  
and tell him  
his daddy is gone forever.

The blood vessels  
in his neck  
had burst.

The same neck  
I spent my teenage years  
curling myself into  
while he slept.

Now red,  
with strain.

Because he was awake,  
because somewhere  
in those final moments,  
he knew he was dying.

EMS tried to bring him back.  
When they arrived,  
there were still  
electrical waves  
moving through his heart.

The same heart  
that loved me.

The same heart  
that promised to marry me,  
while I laid cut open,  
in an operating room  
bringing our son into this world.  
The same heart  
that loved our little boy  
so deeply  
he would stay awake at night,  
just to watch him sleep.  
Autopsy reads:  
"Natural Causes: Cardiac Arrhythmia."  
But there is nothing natural  
about 30-year-olds dying.  
There is nothing natural  
about kneeling  
in front of your child,  
trying to explain  
why his father is never coming home.  
Motherhood never prepares you  
to walk into  
your second graders classroom  
and find him  
asking his teacher  
to google ways  
to bring his daddy back to life.  
"Grandma, momma  
there has to be a way.  
Please just ask the angels."

# Recess

Jay Hsu

The courts united the athletes of the school,  
No matter who it was, we would always throw it down.  
People get angry, people get irritated,  
but it would always end with excitement and thrill.

Right at the bell, we would rush to the courts,  
game starts and people start running up.  
Quick dribble, between the legs, crossover,  
drive in and make the layup.

High-fives, shouting, the sound of many many steps.  
It goes on for the ten minutes that feel like five.  
Fast drives, three-pointers, half court shots,  
name the shot and we've shot it.

A minute left but we didn't know,  
a minute left and we didn't even know the score.  
Bell rings, I shout "pass!" and I let the ball fly,  
This was the thrill everyone on the courts chased.

# Time Difference

Yeonju Hwang

As your morning began to bloom,  
darkness quietly settled into my room.  
The words crossing oceans between us  
always seemed to wander around continents,  
arriving late like overdue letters,  
and the warmth we tried to share  
spilled endlessly through the cracks of our misaligned time.

Standing too long in the shape of waiting,  
our days slowly wore away  
within the narrow space  
between the hour and minute hands.  
Your name, once the brightest dawn of my life,  
has now become a small boat slowly drifting toward goodbye,  
slowly sinking beneath deep waters.

Though your day and my night  
will never overlap again,  
I still remember  
the awkward, burning distance between us,  
as we quietly wore away at one another's time.  
We stood beneath the same sky,  
yet were destined to live in entirely different seasons,  
strangers to one another,  
in the end,  
unable to overcome the distance between us.

# Paper Heart

Sabrina Chee

*I'm safe. I'm safe.*

I chanted it in my head. Each word was so small, so insignificant, but it was the only thing that was protecting me.

*I'm safe.*

I placed another piece of paper, ragged and yellow, over the spots that were bending, bowing, threatening to tear asunder. Even in this room, I felt it. I felt the drag against my bones, my chest, my arms. It was strong, even in my paper palace. I felt so heavy. So, so heavy.

I felt the rip before I could see it. My body buckled, crumpling. The storm was here, with me, pulling me down, soaking into my body. But to stay still was death. I was going to die. What was the point?

*I am safe.*

Another piece of paper. This time, over the tear itself, black yawning darkness beyond, pulling, pulling me in. The covering gave some relief – to not stare into the heart of it, to see there was a barrier between it and I. The drag lessened, just a smidge, enough for me to say again,

*I am safe.*

Another piece of paper laid down, I saw it. Sometimes I don't feel myself putting them down. I am fighting against it. I don't want to go. I knew I didn't want to go, but the pull was so strong. If I didn't put down paper, I would be dragged in. Or maybe I would walk in, to finally feel that sweet relief of not having to fight anymore. It was tempting. It wouldn't be hard. But I wouldn't. I promised. I promised I wouldn't go.

*I am safe.*

With my leaden body, I placed another paper down. It would get easier once the rip was covered. I must cover the hole. I must not look into the darkness beyond. I chanted safety in my head, and papers came to me, patchwork and filmy, just like me. But it was all I had. And I didn't want to go.

*I am safe.*

The hole was covered, and I could breathe. I hadn't been breathing. I had been holding my breath, like I was holding my being away from the hole. If I had let my breath escape, maybe it would have taken me with it, sprouted arms and legs and grabbed me, pulled me in as it got sucked out of the room, into the pitch-black beyond. But my breaths, with nowhere to go with the hole covered, remained my ally and I could breathe again.

*I*

I didn't know how long I'd been here. I had been in only darkness before, I knew. That's why it was so terrifying. I had somehow made this paper room, before. I don't know if I could do it again. I told them I wouldn't go, so I won't let myself go. I promised. I had promised myself before, but the promise had gotten sucked away, disappearing into the abyss below, beyond, surrounding my little paper room. I had whispered the promise and the darkness took it from me.

*am*

I needed to stop breathing and continue. I could see the bending, the bowing, the straining of my little papers to keep the room whole.

*safe.*

I continued. It was calmer now. No hole to look beyond. To be tempted by. I promised.

I made the walls thicker. I don't know how long I worked. My body always was heavy. It hurt to move. But I made the walls thicker, and thicker, and thicker, and maybe then I could banish the darkness from me. Maybe then I would not be so heavy. Maybe then it wouldn't be so hard.

*I am safe.*

Some days I dreamed of being in a real room, a solid room. A room that wasn't flimsy and pale and ragged. A room made with sturdy walls and sturdy floors that never broke, that made the darkness a memory, not a storm scratching and clawing to be let in. A room where my bones were light and I could breathe easy, where my thoughts and my words and my promises to myself stayed my own, unstolen by the void.

The days I dreamed were hard. Nothing hurt as much as hope.

*I am safe.*

For now, those words were true. I could rest. I could pretend there wasn't darkness outside, waiting for me. Yearning for me to fall into it, so that we could be one again, no end or beginning, no papers and no lungs and no bones and no body. I would be it and it would be me, alone and together. Maybe I yearned for the darkness too –

*I am safe.*

But I promised. I know there was meaning to that promise. I don't remember it, but I know I wanted it. Even if I don't know why I want it anymore. I would keep on mending my room, page by page. I would keep separating myself from the darkness.

*I am safe.*

# When Everything Goes Quiet

Anonymous

## HOSPITAL RECORD

Name: Ana

Date of Admission: April 20, 2016

Date of Passing: May 7, 2016

Age: 32

## 2. THE LAST ROOM

They said she couldn't hear us. But we spoke anyway.

I told her she could wake up whenever she wanted. That we'd wait.

The machines beeped like they were trying to hold rhythm with her breath.

## 3. ROSARY

Someone brought her a rosary.

Wooden beads. Brown with chipped gold trim.

I watched my mom run the beads through her fingers, slowly.

She wasn't praying out loud. Just mouthing the words.

That's when I knew she was gone.

My mom wouldn't cry then, not in front of everyone.

But her hands wouldn't stop moving.

God would have to listen.

“Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros pecadores,  
ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte.”

(Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at

the hour of our death.)

Now I see it for what it really is: something to hold onto  
when everything else feels like it's falling away.

#### 4. BUTTERFLIES

Orange and black, with wings like stained glass.

Whenever I see one.

I wouldn't say anything. But I felt her.

Now I see them everywhere.

She loved butterflies.

She once pointed at one in our garden and said, "Mira qué bonito."

She always paused for beauty.

"In Mexican tradition, monarch butterflies are believed to  
carry the souls of the departed, returning to visit loved ones  
around Día de los Muertos."

— National Geographic, "The Magical Migration of Monarchs"

The monarch migrates thousands of miles, delicate but determined.

She used to say she liked how they always came back.

Now I wear one on my skin.

It hurt when I got it.

But I wanted something permanent.

A way to carry her with me.

To never forget that she's still here.

Even if only in fluttering pass by.

## 5. ALTAR

We started building it the night after her funeral.

Quietly. No one said much. We just knew what to do.

It sits in the corner of our living room now, next to the window.

Three candles, one for the Father, one for the Son, one for the Spirit.

A small statue of La Virgen de Guadalupe.

Her favorite perfume: a bottle of vanilla body mist, nearly empty.

A silver ring she used to wear on her middle finger.

Marigold petals we laid down in a crooked path from the window to the altar.

Her framed photo stands in the center:

the one where she's wearing sunglasses,

smiling from the passenger seat,

A folded note that just says *Te extraño*.

During *Día de los Muertos*, we add more:

Sugar skulls. Her favorite tamales. A *Sidral manzana* was her favorite.

It's not just a place to mourn.

It's a place to remember.

## 6. DREAMS

I tried to dream of her, but she never stayed long.

Just a shape in the corner,  
or a blur walking out the door  
before I could ask her to stay.  
Once, I thought I heard her laugh in a dream.  
In another dream, she didn't say anything.  
She just sat across from me in silence,  
as if waiting for me to speak first.  
I started keeping a journal next to my bed.  
Just in case she showed up.  
But even when I filled pages with wishes, she kept slipping away.

“When you dream of the dead,” my mom told me,  
“it means they still have something to tell you.  
Or maybe you still have something to say.”

Maybe I do.  
Maybe I always will.  
Maybe grief speaks in whispers  
soft as wings,  
only heard when everything else goes quiet.

# The One Who Stays

Mariam Shamidah

**A**s an old vending machine, I just sit there like I always do. I have seen generations pass by, each with their own favorite drinks and snacks. Most days are boring, filled with teenagers yelling and pushing buttons. Sometimes, an adolescent gives me a good kick when their snack gets stuck. I rarely feel bad though, knowing my treats often bring a fleeting moment of happiness.

Although I sometimes get moved to a different wall, I always have a clear view of the cafeteria, where I can watch the daily middle school drama unfold. As a machine, I have become quite philosophical about my role, a silent observer in the chaotic world of the school. I never speak, but if I could, I could tell many stories. For the past three years, I've been stuck against this same brick wall in the back of the cafeteria and I just can't seem to shake this feeling. Sometimes, I wonder if anyone else feels this way, like they are trapped against the unchanging backdrop of their daily life. This is the place where I have spent countless lunch breaks, simply observing. Being a witness makes me feel hollow in a way I can't quite explain.

Most people think I'm just a big blue box with a glass front, but honestly, I see things the teachers don't. I'm pretty much the only witness to every awkward breakup and every kid crying over a failed science test. My life includes getting kicked and shaken, or sometimes just stared at, by people who can't decide if they want a bag of Flamin' Hots or that dusty granola bar that's been hanging out in slot D4 since last semester.

Honestly, some days, I feel tired and lonely when there are not a lot of visitors. On those days, my humming motor is a constant drone. This is especially true when nighttime falls and the janitors begin mopping, becoming really quiet. The only sound is my cooling fan vibrating which is kind of sad and reminds me of an old friend. I always wonder about my cousin; he's stuck being a vending machine at a highway rest stop. He thinks he sees cooler things—folks on road trips, drivers hauling cargo, people really heading somewhere. I'm just stuck here watching these children grow up and get taller while I

stay in the same spot. It's a bittersweet feeling, seeing them move on when all I can do is just look.

Yet, with each new day, when a little hand drops a coin, and the cycle begins again, a simple transaction brings so much joy. This year, there's this one kid, Leo, I think his name is, who shows up every morning around 7:15 am. He always looks like he didn't get enough sleep, like he was up all night playing some game. His eyelids are always a bit droopy, a tell-tale sign that he is likely still tired. He is usually so tired that most mornings, he literally pushes my buttons over and over, like he blames me for being tired. Today, he's just staring at the Cool Ranch Doritos like they're his soulmate or something. I want to tell him that the bag is actually stuck on the metal coil from when a 7th grader tried to get them yesterday, but I don't have a voice. I just have this crappy little screen that says "EXACT CHANGE ONLY." That means I'm pretty much just forced to be a jerk right back to him.

Leo finally shoves in his dollar, but it's all crinkled and gross, so I spit it back out. He tries again, rubbing it against his jeans to flatten it. I spit it out again. I can't believe this is happening. I start feeling dread, thinking, "I'm not even trying to be mean, but that bill literally smells like old gym socks and I have standards." On the third try, my calculating money motor finally accepts it. Leo presses E6, and the coil immediately whirls into motion. The chips do a little tilt, looking like they are gonna fall, and then... nope. They just hang there with a tiny piece of plastic.

Leo literally puts his forehead against my glass and just lets out a long groan. I can feel his heat from the glass. Usually, kids start shaking me like crazy, you know, the whole "vending machine earthquake" thing, and my bolts feel like they're about to pop out. But Leo? He doesn't even bother. He just says, "of course" under his breath and then leaves. Man, I actually feel kind of bad for the guy.

Then you have someone like Sarah. Her story happens almost every day. She never even buys anything. Instead, she just uses my glass face as a mirror to fix her hair and check her teeth. It's honestly kind of disrespectful. I'm a high-end snack machine, not a bathroom mirror. She'll stand there for about ten minutes, talking to her friends about some guy named Kyle and all the drama he's causing. I

swear I know more about Kyle's red flags than his own mom does at this point.

After each lunch period, when the break ends, everyone goes off to class all at once, creating a total stampede to my machine. I swear, I feel like a whole new being the moment I hear coins jingle in my stomach. Seriously, even if I'm just a box of junk food, I'm the most popular one in the room for a while, like thirty minutes. Leo even comes back at lunch today too, and he finally gets his chips. I double-check to make sure they drop perfectly this time. It is the least I can do.

# The House at the End of the Road

N.Q. Quinnes

There is a house at the end of the road  
Many people talk and circulate what's been told  
Floorboards creek at the haunted ghosts' home  
"So don't go walking near the end of the road"

After years of the talking, I went for a walk  
For talk can be cheap and I met a roadblock  
Old and rusty akin to the house now so drawn  
I decided to see how the ghosts carried on

The road was quiet, the moon lit my path  
The fog carried my feet towards the ghosts' house at last

I walked to the door, saw no bell, so I knocked  
Took one step backwards and heard the door then unlock

A peaceful warmth calmed my goosebump skin  
Slightly scared but excited I took a step in  
I cannot say what I saw, but I know this is true  
The house at the end of the road is waiting for you

# I'm Nobody, Who Are You?

Olly Sandrini

'I'm nobody, who are you? '  
The famous lines I relate to  
I have friends but I'm alone  
I'm happy but I'm scared  
I'm lying to the whole world  
I am nobody, just like you

Disappear without a trace  
Hide behind an empty face  
You are everything I hate

I could disappear and you wouldn't notice  
You'd be happy  
Another burden gone from the world  
I could disappear today and make the world a better place

A pity friend that's all you are  
You never cared about my heart  
Beaten and broken and bruised  
Only made worse by you

'I'm nobody, who are you?  
Are you nobody too?'  
I'll be nobody forever  
Because of you

# You Are Happy

Jay Hsu

Sound asleep,  
no care in the world,  
your soft mattress with  
three blankets, on a  
shivering winter day,  
silent.

A bird chirping  
as you awake, while  
a beam of light lasers  
right through the curtains  
into your eyes,  
a comfortable annoyance.

The time asleep is forgotten,  
But it's time that is precious,  
you miss all the beauty in  
the night, but awake to  
the beauty of the other half  
of the cycle.

Bedsheets crumpling,  
sun shining on your face,  
warm, comfortable,  
Happy.

# White Flowers

Lauren Copeland Axtell

I held my mom's hand  
walking slowly  
across the dew covered grass  
in a maze that went on forever  
past the girl my age  
who cried  
like I should have  
and past small white flowers  
that seemed out of place  
desperate  
and without tears to offer  
I squeezed her hand  
casting my eyes down  
to focus on my wet shoes  
until  
we finally stopped  
and turned

I couldn't read yet  
but I knew what this one said:  
my great-grandmother's name  
carved into sparkling stone.

# Bubbles

Alicia Aldama



# The Charging Rhinoceros Vessel

Rashmi V



# The War Trapped Inside

Natalia Smirnova



# Love At First Sight

Geetika Bansal



# I'll Be Home By Ten

Lesley Alcala



# Grief

Norman Aragon



# Can You Feel Me

Halina Lenguyen



# Quiet Bloom

Edgar Sedano



# Her

Jialin Chen

Be fire,  
Burn the world.

Do not let silence swallow all agony;  
Yell out! Cry out! Roar out!  
Until your soul escapes cage.

Let us flee from the Eden of Adam,  
And rise from the fires of the Inquisition.  
Tonight is destined for a grand midnight escape,  
A journey into a rose-colored sunrise.

She was a daughter, a mother, a bride.  
Silence stays in the shadows.  
But who knows herstory? Who will tell it?  
She has picked up the dust-covered pen  
To write a new start-ing!

Jump onto the high white horse,  
Gallop toward the dawn without stopping.  
She is no longer silent.

She is no daughter, a mother, no bird,  
But a King.

# Dancing in the Dark

Tyler Cobb

May 12, 2018

The four-month wait from China was torture for my patience. There were 2,468 options and she chose me. I am too embarrassed to admit every day was the same routine until her arrival.

**7:00 am:** CLICK, (your package is in customs)

**2:00 pm:** CLICK, (your package is in customs)

**6:00 pm:** CLICK, (your package is in customs)

**6:05 pm:** Open the top drawer to my nightstand. Grab the wrinkled, folded, wide ruled binder paper that has two years' worth of desires.

**6:05 pm:** Crossed one off

## What (I, me, myself) - wants to do:

- Go to Alaska
- Construct a shed
- ~~Get a painting~~
- Learn to sculpt
- Skydive
- Build an elevated dog bed out of oak
- Run a half marathon
- Dancing lessons
- Go to a Premier League Game

September 9, 2018

**10:06 am:** I'm staring closely at the dancing woman. "Put that shit in the garage!"

Slouched shoulders roll downwards, and my focus gets diverted to the little twists on a single carpet strand. Uhhhhh! The oil aroma was

permeating in our room, so you had to squeeze your eyes to focus just right.

**10:36 am:** There is no way, she is right. I want to believe what she meant to say was, “Sophisticated expression,” instead of, “shit.”

**September 9, 2018**

**10:37 am:** I admire her floating across the dark room. Wishing this was an escape into the painting. Not to dance, but to sit stagnate in the dark. Away from the:

- ✓ Auto insurance,
- ✓ Mortgage,
- ✓ Dental crowns,
- ✓ Working while off the clock,
- ✓ Constant criticism surrounding my decisions.

Instead, the frame was strategically placed with precision, temporarily blocking my Makita cordless drill and scroll saw.

**10:40 am:** Questions circulate:

“How much did you pay for that?” Well, it is the first thing I bought for myself in 1,215 days.

“Can you make me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?” I suppose I was the only one in admiration over this painting.

“I never met a man who bought a painting.” As if I should be questioning my sexuality, or men who want a painting are undesirable. What does the Ballerina say about me? Should I revisit the echoes of the past and my mother vomiting epithets? The self doubt and regret pounds an unsteady beat.

September 9, 2018

**10:45 am:** The tutu's brushstrokes whirl around her thin waist. Each line is carefully thought out, or maybe done with impulsivity. I pretend to intellectually analyze the canvas as if I am an art curator.

'The picture is a manifesto and, looking at it, it becomes easier to see. First of all, there is endless repetition of standard movements and poses, and he gets the implausible postures absolutely convincing and right. Then, it provides a neat metaphor for the realist's quest for authenticity.'

- James Davidson, "The Guardian"

My virtuoso critique would be more suitable for profiling the dude that duct taped bananas on a wall in the name of artistic creativity.

**10:46 am:** Shocked to reality, I am reminded of the remedial art course I attempted. Everyone was painting "Starry Night," and I was still trying to illuminate light around oranges using the luminous effect. The professor lit up when I told her I was dropping the course. Now she would be able to save money on my excessive use of paint thinner and isopropyl alcohol; fixing my Bob Ross, "HAPPY ACCIDENTS." Most of all, she was free from being held as an information hostage from all my questions while I tried to paint those bloody oranges.

Artists work alone anyway. Just like the Ballerina. Eventually, my art career produced a solo acrylic work named, "Coffee Shop Cutey." My roommate carefully hung it up using double sided tape. Surprisingly, it was placed behind the front door.

Two years passed before it received its first comment. "Is that a cup on a table? Anyway, that was the same yellow as my cat's throw up I was telling you about." I never got to hear about her cat regurgitating again.

Hi Tyler. Thank you for the dates  
and being so kind. ☺

Read

You are welcome. I would love to take you to the MOMA and look at modern art together.

Read

I need to be honest with you.

You are not my type.

Read

Ok, I wish you the best.

Delivered

## September 9, 2018

**11:00 am:** Her dainty synchronized adagio arms are perfecting her craft. One arm bent ready to take flight. The other stalling the fans' applause. I miss those cheers from the crowds. The praise from athletes, coaches, and newspapers. My envy starts to sweep over the canvas.

1st position.....2nd position.....3rd position 'APPLAUSE'

Bloody toes → Tape and Bandages → Grande Jete Jumps → Black Swan Principal Dancer Royal Theater Company → Dancing on a Canvas → Reliving her Glory Every Day.

My craft was not as graceful to glory, but just as repetitive.

Lap 1-FLIP TURN..... Lap 2- FLIP TURN....Lap 3- FLIP TURN..... Lap 298,567- F...L..I..P... T...U...R...N...

Bursitis in the Shoulder → Ice Packs Every Day → State Finalist and Record Holder → Butterfliier NCAA Swim Team → Overweight Father of 2

Now, because of declining athleticism (and self control), my doctor now likes to bring up silly topics. "Mr. Cobb, has anyone ever discussed with you that cholesterol and sugar intake negatively affects people's health?" I wonder if the Ballerina struggles with her dietary



and he can't sit still.”

Except for Ms. Poe. Her comments were explained by a firm slap, and tying my shoelaces to the desk for the day.

Sister Rose Martin was an improvement. She would leave me outside for hours on end. Until I made the fateful decision to jump the 6 ft chain-linked fence and walked home before lunch.

Nobody was there to tell me:

“Stop touching the purple tulips.”

“Don't spontaneously bust out singing Michael Jackson's songs, (“Because I'm bad, I'm bad, you know it!”)

“Do not be yourself!”

That same day, Sister Rose Martin was perched in the corner of the principal's office upon my arrival. Her eyes could have cut stone. There was a note with perfect cursive penmanship pushed slowly in our direction by the principal.

*Dear Ms. Cobb,*

*Tyler will no longer be allowed in my classroom. Unless you get him on medication. If you refuse, he will be moved to Ms. Glancy's room or be removed from the school.*

*May the Lord be with You,  
Sister Rose Martin*

Mom cursed at the education system like she did me. The words Jesus Christ being dished out like communion. Years passed before I succumbed to the pressure. Finally, the Adderall and suppressants were allowed to dance in my brain. This beginning was the end to help society,

“Wow! I never knew you could finish a task.”

“Why is your face always a blank canvas?”

“Tyler, you are not yourself anymore.”

5 years passed before the zombie pill conveyor belt stopped. Quitting the blue and white pills was easy. The difficulty arrived when everyone reverted back to familiar phrases, “

“Why can’t you be normal?”

“You are all over the place.”

**11:10 am:** I can do basic tasks! Oh ya! I needed to make a doctor’s appointment, phone in my hand I start to dial, notice a hole in the wall, get the spackle, leave the spackle because I forgot to feed the dog, but in the meantime I forgot to send that important text, but where is my phone, (what was I looking for?), retrieve the spackle from the garage where there is a black and white blank face staring back at me. Entranced by her; I couldn’t move. The Ballerina. My medication.

**September 9, 2018**

**12:15 pm:** I stand studying her poetic stance as the frame slants to the right. She seems to pose as I try to get the right angle. ‘Click’ (delete photo). I adjust the frame’s teeter overcompensating; then moving it to perfection. ‘Click’ (save to camera roll). Zoom- ‘Click’ (post to social media page). ‘Ding’ (notification). My eyes grew wider, while my index finger poked rapidly at the screen. The first and only response that day on my post was a 📧 from my sister. Then, four more notifications cursed my phone that day.

Comment Notifications:

‘Ding’- Mary K: “Not in my house.”

‘Ding’- Alex V: “Did you let your kids pick that out?”

‘Ding’ - Scott S: “The artist forgot to put color in it.”

‘Ding’ - Anne B: “Maybe you should get a hobby like fishing or going to car shows.”

Now, I am slanted against the blank wall while the Ballerina and on-line community are studying me. *Ding' - Ding' - Ding' - Ding' - Ding'*

**September 9, 2018**

**12:20 pm:** I am sitting, pondering, what is her purpose, and what is she telling me? Certainly she is not meant to tell me about my past career aspirations of being a painter. My daughter shoots out demands, “I know, the Ballerina deeply wants you to purchase me a boba drink, and take me to a Taylor Swift concert.”

My wife suggests, “She is here to remind you the dishes need to be done, and the fence is still broken.”

My son claims, “She wants you to be a Dad.”

AND my dog, ‘woof woof woof’ right next to the dog bowl as he tap dances his front paws. Excitedly waiting for two scoops of Purina Formula. I realize I have never correctly identified my purpose. Possibly she wants me to educate the next generation using the California State Standards?

**12:22 pm:** Consumed with curiosity, I mentioned the Ballerina to my semi-friend Scott. The same guy who has enraged me since middle school. Mainly because he shifts blame that he is never late. He claims the clock goes too fast making him look unpunctual. This time he was not tardy giving me critique.

“Dude, you are asking me about a painting! She is telling you to grow a pair, you suck at swimming, and watch Marvel’s Avenger’s Infinity War with me Saturday night. You know I would still be your friend if you are gay. Aghhhhhahahahahahaha”

**12:23 pm** I shoot in there, “You remember I was raised by two moms.” Hoping he would understand I am the wrong audience for gay jokes. Immediately, without reflection he responds, “That is right, you are

all gay.”

*12:23 pm* Two options arise:

1. Raise my voice, “Go screw yourself. I am sick of your unsolicited homophobic comments. Go find someone else to go see a movie with. Good luck with that, and good luck finding a girl with your mudflap ears.”

2. “I will see you at 8pm at the Century Theater. Please do not be late.”

**September 9, 2018**

*12:25 pm:* As her moment ends, the connection is clear. She shows it is time I dance in the dark. She is the only one that has offered this encouragement and inspiration without saying a word. Silence and confidence expands throughout the room. My thoughts are mine. My time is mine. My feelings are mine. My hobbies are mine. My body is mine. My family is mine. My life is mine. **The Ballerina painting is mine!**

*12:30 pm:* I slowly get up, knees cracking. I feel the holes in the wall where I misjudged the calculations of where to hang the painting. Kids start demanding, “Take us to get ice cream.” My dog is circulating around my legs while gripping a leash in his slobbering mouth. I hear the fridge open, coupled with the common phrase, “Tyler go to the store to get yogurt and milk, and don't mess up like last time. You always get the nonfat or forget to get organic.” Notifications from Scott pop up. He is sending me political satire and articles to stoke the flames of anger. I briskly walk out without giving anything acknowledgement.

October 20, 2020

**10:06 am:** My son excitedly approaches. Waving a paper in the air as if it were a flag. He discloses, “I found this tucked behind the painting.” I read the title, (What (I, me, myself) - wants to do:).

His darting eyes gravitate towards the canvas. “Why is she alone in the dark Dad?” Thinking of a response suitable for a child I reply, “She dances alone because there is no one to dance with her.”

Pointing at the paper. His voice filled with promise: “Daddy, I will do dancing lessons with you.” I extend my arm around his shoulders, while his head gently rests against my side. We sat in silence, studying the Ballerina.

# The Glue Guy

Joshua Chang

I scroll through my photo album as I look back on various memories before heading to bed. One might call me a background friend, or a floater. I'm the type of guy you'd see hanging out with everyone, but never someone you'd be considered close friends with anyone in particular. I love hanging out and making friends, so I don't mind it too much, but sometimes, I wish everything wasn't so shallow. I wish I had someone who would consider me a true friend. I let out a deep breath as I shut off my phone and closed my eyes, falling asleep for the upcoming school day.

When I went to school the next day, everything was the same as normal. I greeted my friends and sat in my seat as we waited for class to start. I made small talk with my deskmates and played some games as we waited for class to start. When class finally started, the teacher told us to quiet down and told us she had an announcement to make.

She opened the door as she spoke: "Class, today, we're going to be welcoming a transfer student!"

As she swung the door open, a beautiful girl walked into the classroom. She waved politely as she told us her name. Ellie. What a beautiful name. As she continued introducing herself, my friend, Jared, elbowed me in my side and teased me.

"You interested?" He had a big smile on his face. I ignored him as I tried not to let my embarrassment show.

After Ellie had finished speaking, the teacher asked me to be Ellie's tour guide for the week. I was confused as to why she had chosen me, but I was ecstatic to get to talk to Ellie. I told my teacher that I would be more than willing to help Ellie out, but was confused as to why she chose me. She only told me that I had been the obvious choice before she went back to teaching, which left me even more confused.

After class had ended, I walked over to Ellie's desk and introduced myself to her. After I finish, she flashes a sweet smile and follows me as I tour her around the school. My first day as her tour

guide was quite short, as the day was almost over, but I got to show her around campus and made some small talk with her. It wasn't anything important, but I was happy to have talked to her.

Over the days, I got to know Ellie better, from her interests and hobbies, to her likes and dislikes, from the second day, when we talked about our favorite school subjects and various school rumors during lunch, to the last day, when we went to a cat cafe and talked about our favorite show for hours. As each day passed, I felt that I was getting closer to Ellie. It was a strange feeling, but I couldn't stop smiling. It was the first time in a long time that I really got to hang out with someone on a deeper level.

However, I also felt that our friendship wasn't as deep as I felt it was. During our time together, I noticed two key details about her that made me wonder how close we truly were. She was really kind, and she was really popular. Every time I introduced her to my friends, she would hit it off with them and have talks filled with immense laughter and excitement. At the end of the week, Ellie had become acquainted with everyone on campus and was able to navigate her way around the school without any issues. I was happy that she was making friends and that she seemed to be adjusting to the school well, but I also felt a bit empty, questioning if she viewed our friendship the same way I viewed it.

It was the end of the week when my time as her "tour guide" had officially ended. She thanked me with a beautiful smile on her face before leaving. Just like that, she was gone, and my days of having a close friend were gone.

When I walked into class the following week, I saw Ellie. Last week, when I entered class, Ellie would greet me with a bright smile and a gentle wave. But now, she was hanging out with some of her friends on the other side of the classroom. I looked at the sight with a proud, yet empty feeling as I sat at my desk and buried my head in my arms, trying to ignore my surroundings. Just as I was about to wallow in my own feelings of pity, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Jared. He asked me, "You good man?" I assured him I was alright, but a look of concern remained on his face.

"We're all here for you, you know? No matter the struggle, everyone's got your back." He declared, the look of concern still on

his face. I thanked him for his consolation but reassured him I was alright as our teacher began class. Jared's words helped in the end as I managed to power through the day, ignoring any dark thoughts that came to mind. As I was leaving school, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Ellie. My mind was a mess, and I failed to get any words out of my mouth.

"Stick out your hand." She told me with a soft smile. She placed a small item in my palm. It was a keychain from our favorite show, but how could she have known? I never told her. She told me it was a thank-you present for being her guide the past week.

"This is a small thank-you present for being my guide and friend! I know just how much you love this show, and it's something that's brought us together! It was pretty tricky to find a souvenir from the show, but your friends helped me find something just for you! You've got some very good friends, y'know?" I was shocked. I couldn't believe someone got a gift for me, or that anyone would remember such tiny details about me. Ellie looked at me with a bright smile on her face as I thanked her profusely for the gift.

"I look forward to making great memories with you! See you tomorrow!" Ellie exclaimed as she ran into the sunset. I smiled as tears slid down my face. That sounded amazing.

# The Student, Scalpel, and Sorrow

Sahej Sidhu

It starts when you are a kid.

“What do you want to be when you grow up”

You answer them, honest and true

Your eyes shining up at them beaming

With innocence and fragility.

Then you get to High School

Grades, grades, grades.

Doing extracurriculars to pad up your college applications

Volunteering, leadership, service, athletics

Grades, grades, grades.

Then comes college

Things get more serious

You have to learn how to be a person

Whose main priority revolves around studying. Shadowing, clinical  
hours, volunteering, research, MCAT, GPA.

You are worth more as a number than as a person.

Then comes Medical School Applications

Every day is infused with anxiety.

Some days you lay in bed and think about your future

You don't feel scared because you know exactly what it is going to  
be like

Competition, overperforming, rising to the top.

And then you overhear a conversation with an adult and a kid

“What do you want to be when you grow up”

And suddenly you forget what your answer to them ever was.

# Unseen Accessory

Nitanya Manjunath

Glass bottles- crystal for the rich- encage me.

Take fruit, flower, or memory

Concentrate, dilute then I am born.

Release me and I fill elevators

and soak sheets of lovers past.

Musk, vanilla, lemon, and lavender

Remember me from long ago?

You once loved me until you found better.

Noses twitch out of pleasure or

Foreheads ache and wrinkle

if my presence is too loud.

Jasmine, coconut, pepper, and oud

Preserve me in darkness, don't forget.

My lifetime spent on

Wrists and necks and clothes.

I waltz with air and swirl over heads,

my sillage follows after you've left.

Myrrh, sugar, patchouli, and ambergris

# What I Know

Ileana Wood

There are things I know and many things I do not in this life  
I do not know how the man in the wheelchair ended up begging on  
the streets

I do not know his stories  
Or why he is missing a leg  
But I do wonder why me  
Why I was born on this side of the road when so many others are not  
Was it luck, or am I lucky?  
I don't know the answers to these questions.

I know the sound of my morning train  
I know the feeling of the crisp air from the dense fog  
I know the rush of standing on the yellow line as a train zooms by  
I know the jolt of the gears changing as it speeds up  
I know the musty smell of the old carpet that lines its floors  
This is something that I know.

I do not know the name of the lady I befriended  
I do not know if she still takes the same train  
I do not know how her grandchildren are  
I do not know if her knee is better  
I do not know why I was able to go to private school when she had  
to work into her senior years  
I do not know if she would remember my face  
I don't know the answers to these questions.

I know the thoughts that linger when I lie in the comfort of my  
warm bed  
I know the path of my tears as they fall down my face  
I know the poems I write with no intention of sharing  
I know the songs I sing when no one is listening  
I know that I have to let go of the things I do not know.

# Back to the Grind

Lilian Cross

*“BEEP BEEP BEEEEEP”*

I sit up abruptly as my alarm clock goes off at 6:00am. My heart is racing and I’m sweating as my alarm wakes me up from a nightmare I can’t seem to remember now that I’m awake. I have mixed feelings about today: dread and excitement. I slowly get out of my bed, careful to not wake my husband and my infant daughter. Today is my first day back to work since my husband gave birth to my daughter one week ago.

Longer maternity leave is something women have been fighting for for years. Clearly, we haven’t made much progress given the maximum time the engineering firm I work for would give me was 1 week of unpaid leave, while my husband will be getting 10 weeks of paid leave. Because men actually carry the babies and give birth, society thinks women aren’t needed at home as much as the men. I was lucky to get even a week of unpaid maternity leave; a lot of jobs don’t allow for even that much time off.

We have gotten into a new routine since our daughter was born. Our daughter, Lily, has been waking up about every 3 hours. My husband gets up with her the first time she wakes each night and feeds her. He then gets a bottle ready for her for the next time she wakes up. I get up with her the next time and feed her that bottle. My husband normally ends up waking up with us anyway at that time since he’s better at calming her down and feeding her than I am. Then, he gets up the other times with her throughout the night, so I only have to get up with her once. Since I’m going back to work, I need my rest.

We are fighting for longer maternity leave, however, I couldn’t imagine staying home from work for as long as my husband will be. He only works in retail, when I work at an engineering firm, so his job doesn’t rely on him as much as mine relies on me. I do wish I had the option to stay home longer with my baby but 10 weeks would be way too much for me. And I simply couldn’t imagine if my husband went back to work after one week and I stayed home for 10. I

wouldn't know what to do with her. I don't even know how to heat up a bottle.

Lily wakes up with a soft cry as I'm getting ready for work. I pick her up and rock her in my arms for a few minutes until I wake up my husband. I'm already dressed in my business suit for work and I cannot show up on my first day back smelling like spit up.

"I think she wants her dada," I tell him.

My husband gets up and holds her while I finish getting ready for work. She eventually falls back asleep in his arms. I give her a kiss on the head and leave for work.

"Have a great day! Maybe you can catch up on that Netflix show you've been watching if you're not too busy," I tell my husband. "On the way home from work, I'm going to stop by the gym and get you a membership. I'm sure you're anxious to get your body back."

The first thing on the agenda at work today is our weekly company meeting.

"First off, I would like to congratulate Sarah on her new baby and welcome her back," my boss starts.

"What's her name?" my coworker asks. "Lily. She's so big and strong," I responded.

"Oh! You're lucky you got a girl. I bet she's gonna be so successful and rich one day. Maybe she'll be an engineer, just like you," my coworker replies as everyone responds with sounds of excitement.

During the meeting, I let my mind wonder what Lily will be when she grows up. We will put her in a sport as soon as she's old enough and can express what sport she's interested in. Hopefully it's football. Surely she will be good at anything STEM related as I'm sure that runs in the family. Most girls tend to lean towards those studies anyway instead of arts and literature or some other frivolous major.

After the meeting, we all go back to work. I do miss Lily but I know that my husband and her are having a nice day together. As I work and eat the lunch my husband packed for me, I wonder what he is going to have prepared for dinner when I get home. I hope it's spaghetti and meatballs.

# The Last Entry

Mariam Shamidah

I keep replaying the news report in my head, even though I only heard it once. They said my wife was found dead in our house on Vanity Lane. No forced entry. No suspects. Just “unusual markings.” That’s what they called it, like it was nothing. Like these marks were not carved into her skin.

The police keep telling me to “let them handle it,” but sitting around doing nothing feels worse than anything else. I don’t know the whole story, honestly, I barely know where to start, but I know I can’t just wait.

All I have is what I remember. And what I think might be true.

Maybe that’s not enough, but it’s all I’ve got.

## *March 3*

The house is too quiet now. I keep thinking I hear her footsteps, or her humming in the kitchen, but it’s just the refrigerator buzzing.

I keep seeing the symbol on her neck that the police showed me when they called me down to the station. I don’t know what the symbol means. I don’t know why someone would carve something like that into her.

I wish I knew more.  
I wish she had told me more.

But she didn’t. Or maybe I just didn’t pay attention when she tried to tell me.

Either way, I’m starting my own investigation. Even if I’m wrong about everything, at least I’m doing something.

### *March 10*

The investigator helped me find the guy who was allegedly following her. At least, I hoped it was him.

She had mentioned someone once, but now I'm not sure if I'm remembering the details right. My brain keeps mixing things up.

When I confronted the guy, he admitted to stalking her. He didn't even look scared. His eyes were blank, like he wasn't fully there. For a second, I wanted to hit him. Hard. But instead I recorded him. Every word.

Strangely, the perpetrator said he didn't know anything about the symbol. He didn't even react when I described it.

So either he was lying...  
or something huge was missing.

Either way, with the recording, the police were able to arrest him.

They said this "wraps things up."

### *March 18*

I can't stop drawing the symbol. It's like it's burned into my brain. Now, I am starting to believe I've seen it before, but I can't remember where. Maybe in her stuff. Maybe in a dream. Maybe I'm imagining that too.

The police say the case is closed.  
But I know it isn't.  
I can feel it.

### *March 22*

I found her journal hidden under the bed. The last page said:

*“They said no one leaves. But I had to try.”*

I wrack my brain . . .

I don’t know who “they” are.

I don’t know why she tried to leave.

I don’t even know where she was when she tried to leave. And mostly, I don’t know why she didn’t tell me.

But the way she wrote it . . .

It felt like she was scared of something bigger than a stalker.

I keep thinking about all the nights she stayed up late. All the times she jumped at small noises. I thought she was just stressed. I didn’t ask any questions.

Maybe I didn’t want the answers.

### *April 1*

Now the symbol is everywhere — online scandals, leaked photos, conspiracy videos. People are freaking out about some cult. And the symbol they’re posting is the same one that was on her neck.

Everyone is talking about it.

Everyone except the police.

I don’t know if I helped expose something or if I just made everything worse. Maybe both.

### *April 14*

For the first time in weeks, I slept through the night. I keep telling myself justice doesn’t have to be violent. That maybe I did the right thing by not hurting her perpetrator.

But sometimes I wonder if I'm just trying to make myself feel better.

*April 20*

When I got home tonight, the front door was open. Just a crack.

Just enough to make my stomach drop.

There were muddy footprints on the floor. The latch was broken. The whole house smelled like candle smoke, thick and sweet, like someone had been standing in the dark waiting for me.

I followed the smell into the living room. The air felt colder with every step. On the wall, carved deep into the plaster, was the symbol.

Fresh.

Sharp.

Bleeding dust.

Under it was a newspaper clipping about the cult scandal. And under that, written in red ink:

**YOU STARTED THIS.**

My hands are shaking as I write this . . . . I don't know who was here.

I don't know how long they stayed. I don't know what they want.

Above all else, what do they mean by saying I “. . . started this?” But

I know one thing:

This isn't over.

There's a whisper behind me right now — soft, layered, like more than one voice speaking at once.

I don't want to turn around.

I think they're standing right behind me.

# Coming Up For Air

Allie Baker

As the day turns to night  
The shadows begin to creep  
And a sinking feeling starts to  
Bubble and rise to the surface  
A veil of darkness presses on my  
Chest and my heart starts to race  
And those uncomfortable thoughts  
Begin to cloud the once beautiful dream  
Trembling, shaking and the convulsing to the  
Point of bolting up and holding my chest  
In a sweat and I felt like I came up just in time for air

# Chicken Enchilada Recipe

Natalie Villalvazo-Oaks

*Serving Size: There were four of us, and we all had hefty portions.*

*Rough estimate ~6 servings*

*Calories: We did not believe in Calorie counting during this portion of our lives*

## Ingredients:

- 1 whole chicken
- 1 yellow onion
- 3 carrots
- 3 celery stalks
- 2 bay leaves
- 3-4 peppercorns
- A mother's measurement of salt
- Water
- 16oz cream of mushroom soup
- 16oz cream of chicken soup
- 4-5oz diced green chile peppers
- ½ - 1c sour cream
- ~12 corn tortillas
- Mexican rice
- Canned refried beans
- 1 avocado
- More sour cream for when it's finished cooking
- A lot of Mexican blend shredded cheese
- Non-stick cooking spray

## Directions:

For the Chicken:

1. Cut the onion into quarters (or smaller if you're into that)
2. Cut the carrots and celery in half (or thirds if you want)
3. Place the whole chicken in a large pot, and add enough water to submerge it

4. Add the onion, carrots, celery, bay leaves, peppercorns, and salt to the pot and bring to a boil
5. Cook the chicken through so you don't get Salmonella
6. When cooked through, strain the chicken and let it cool in the pot (always try to avoid extra dishes because you may be stuck cleaning them up)
7. When the chicken is cooled, remove the skin (give it to your favorite child), de-bone (give the bones to your least favorite child), and shred it
8. Once the chicken is shredded, add cream of mushroom and cream of chicken soup, diced green chile peppers, and sour cream
9. Mix until well combined

***For the actual casserole portion:***

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit
2. Spray a casserole dish with non-stick cooking spray
3. Chop tortillas into quarters
4. Add one layer of tortillas, then layer the chicken mixture and add Mexican blend shredded cheese
5. Repeat the layering process until everything is gone (No waste) with the Mexican blend shredded cheese on top
6. Place the casserole in the oven for about 30 minutes

***Serve with refried beans and Mexican rice with avocado, sour cream, and cilantro***

***A Chicken Enchilada Casserole Family Tradition:***

During my adolescence, there was a limited amount of time when there was no yelling, cussing, or fighting going on. That time was always during dinner. My mom would get off from her long shifts at the dealership on Madison Street, pick me up from soccer practice at my school, and drive us home to begin the chicken enchilada process, or whatever recipe she felt like making that night. My

favorite nights, however, were always the nights she chose to make her chicken enchilada casserole or beef stroganoff.

A popular tradition my mom had upheld during my youth was that on each of my brother's and mine birthdays, she would make a dish of our choosing. We always choose the same thing every year. Mine was her chicken enchilada casserole. My eldest brother, Nathan, always chose her beef stroganoff. My older brother, Nolan, always chose her nachos. And my younger brother, Nevan, always wanted her famous spaghetti bolognese. We all loved our mom's cooking. It seemed to be the only thing that brought us together for a short time in our lives.

Rarely, but sometimes, it makes me a little sad when I remember that I don't talk to them anymore. I was always told growing up, "You'll all be closer when you're all older." As if they knew the things I had to endure behind closed doors would somehow dissipate in my mind as I grew up. The memories never faded; they've stayed with me this whole time, and remind me of why I don't have a relationship with them anymore.

I miss my mom's cooking. It was the only time I felt like we might be a family, but meals don't last forever. Then you grow up and somehow you forget what your mom's food tastes like, what your brother's voices sound like, and then you can't remember the last time you saw them—let alone spoke to them.

You try to stay in contact with your younger brother because, well, he's not so bad. But he never answers your calls or texts, never sends you "happy birthday" or "Merry Christmas" texts. But you can't blame him because you know he's hiding from his past. That's probably why he took after your dad and became an alcoholic.

You hate your older brother. Well, maybe hate is too strong a word, but it feels like hate.

He's the worst of you all. Is that a mean thing to say? Well, either way, it's so true. He succumbed to the endeavors of your SHARED childhood, and now he lives on the streets of Riverside, smoking Fentanyl and God knows what else. You do pray he's okay, and you're scared of hearing that he's dead. Maybe you don't hate him, but you're terrified of him and for him, and it makes you mad because he abused you the worst of them all. Remember when he'd

spit on you and throw you down to kick you all over? Or how he chased you with a baseball bat? Luckily, you got away, but he took that bat to your car instead, remember?

You speak to your eldest brother once or twice a year, but he's kind of a loser. Not as bad as Nolan, but still. God, you're so judgmental. You're not better than them. (But maybe I am). Your older brother is a good guy, but he's thirty with two kids from two different mothers, and he doesn't take care of either of them. You wish he got his life together, but he's thirty. No degree. Just a GED and a history of legal problems. He's a good guy, though.

What about you? All your judging. You think you're better than everyone else? I am not without my faults. I dwell too much on my past, and I hold grudges against everyone, even the people I love. I don't think I'm worthy of love, and I've been in a relationship for the past two and a half years, but I still think he doesn't love me and that he just feels bad. I'm angry, selfish, and have been a bad friend for the majority of my life. Worst of all, I'm a terrible daughter and an even worse sister. I love my friends, boyfriend, and his family way more than I love my own. But I do love my family. I hate the thought of them dying. I miss my mom's cooking. I wish our childhood were more like her cooking.

All of this to say, my mom's chicken enchilada casserole is to die for. Seriously, you should try it. I'd share a picture with you, but I don't have any. I never wanted physical memories of my childhood.

# Another Sleepless Parisian Night

Mariana Frias Da Costa

She was a long way from home, yet found herself in a familiar situation – laying wide awake beside a half-stranger who was already fast asleep. She was trying now, to come up with an explanation for this predicament. What had it been about Tali that lured her in so easily? Maya knew the answer, readily, it was the steadiness in her gaze while she rolled each of them a cigarette, it was the moment when their hands had met, briefly, and Tali did not pull hers away.

Maya turned in the queen-sized bed, the sheets seemed to swallow her whole. She was sinking, being eaten alive by the bed which she had called heaven a few hours prior.

“Why don’t we go out for a drink?” Maya had begged, when the sun began to lower into the horizon. “We can get a bottle of wine and go for a walk in the city. Everyone is out dancing tonight but us.”

Tali had groaned and closed her eyes, attempted to pull Maya into an embrace but was met only with stiffness. “Don’t you ever get tired? I mean really, do you ever stand still?”

It is true they had wandered Paris for most of the day, aimlessly. It is also true that Tali had not wanted to sit on cement for fear of getting her pants dirty, nor had she wanted to go where the music was playing for fear that men would approach them. Maya supposed you could blame some of it on the eight years they had between them. Was eight years enough to transform a woman into a bitter old man?

Maya was going over it all in her mind now, her skin was too close to Tali’s, the air in the apartment seemed, suddenly, dense and suffocating. And this silence, it just went on growing. What was it that existed outside these walls? Any other night Maya would be out on the street, intoxicated on the company of strangers and tequila. This is how she had met Tali, both of them in a drunken stupor.

“How is the music downstairs?” Maya yelled, over the clamor of a crowded jazz bar.

“I can’t speak to the music but I can tell you it reeks of sweat

and vomit down there,” Tali said.

In less than fifteen minutes time, the pair had moved out of the establishment, acquired a bottle of wine, and started their walk towards the Seine. It was not difficult for Maya to recall the moment, Tali smelled of Marlboros and old spice rock star deodorant and black coffee. So it had started there, this whole affair.

Softly, she began to move out of the bed, pacing into the living room. This two bedroom apartment which belonged to a friend of a friend of Tali’s. This beautiful crowded apartment whose red walls were covered in books and plastic beaded necklaces. It seemed, in the daylight, a vision of possibility, a promise of what home could look like for Maya. In the night the room taunted her with the promise of what lay outside, through the window.

She grabs a couch cushion, the handmade ash tray, Tali’s pack of cigarettes which Maya had already smoked halfway through, and sits facing the open terrace, wondering if the lamps of this street ever go out. A man and a woman walk by, laughing.

“I know how these things go.” Had she said the words out loud? They came out louder than she had anticipated, but were swallowed up by the silence just as soon as they were spoken.

She thought now what her mother must be up to in this hour, what time was it in California anyway? It was Maya’s second month in Europe, burning through the savings it had taken her four years to accumulate. Savings that were meant for grad school and rent and medical bills, etc, etc.

Her mother did not believe Maya was ready to be on her own for such an extended period of time, believed that in her fragile state, she needed rest above all else. Still, Maya knew the real danger lay in standing still.

As a child, Maya used to stay up until four in the morning, not every night, but certainly most. She would pace from room to room, and envision in her mind the world that lay outside her doorway. It was not the sterile suburbia which she had grown up in for the greater part of her life. No, it was the liveliness of cities, of packed clubs and well lit streets. Had anything changed in the years it had taken for her to grow up? At twenty two, Maya still wanders rooms with quiet desperation.

She inhales, exhales, misses the ashtray, the ash falls on the intricate pattern of the Persian rug beneath her. She wishes she was drunk. *God, was this forsaken place always so nauseatingly quiet?* The silence presses down on her chest, muffles her ears.

When this feeling settles in, the only cure is to walk until her feet give out beneath her. The only salvation is to walk and walk until she comes across a nice bench to sit on, an interesting person to speak to, a body of water to watch. But tonight she is hesitant to leave, afraid that if she manages to walk out the door she will never be coming back.

Maya's eyes shift away from the open window, onto her beat up sneakers which sit silently next to Tali's Italian leather shoes. What did Maya know of sex and loneliness? Enough to be moved to tears at the sight of her lover turning in her sheets. If she stayed another moment she would not feel so courageous. If she spent another second in this apartment she was sure the very particles of her being would begin to disintegrate.

Without another thought, Maya put on her shoes and headed out the door. *By morning, she said to herself, I will have walked all the way to the Seine and back. Maybe I will come back with strawberries from the farmer's market down the street. Maybe I will not return at all.*

# My Everything

Gustavo Jimenez

From the moment I rest to the moment I wake,  
you appear.  
Your sleepy eyes,  
in them, the dark sea.  
And I, but a clumsy sailor.  
I want to give you all of me,  
and more.

I can't give you a castle  
or a million rings.  
I can't destroy that tiny insect of insecurity  
that treads past the pink behind your ears,  
From up the withered rose that sprouts at your feet,  
entangled in your thighs  
and blooming at your waist.  
All I have is my foolish little heart.  
That waits for you.  
All of you.

My hips remember your hips  
as I pulled you towards me,  
dancing under the orange lights  
of a crowded street, as if there was no tomorrow.  
Oh, how sweet that night was  
Oh, how sweet those caramel lips looked up at me.

Soon, my darling,  
you will have me.  
But until then, look up at the stars,  
the uncharted waters of mystery, where love  
Never dies.  
Because in them lies a wandering sailor.

# Inherited Dreams

Fiona Huynh

When I was younger,  
my family spoke about becoming a doctor  
like it was the only future worth having.

They spoke about it  
with hungry eyes,  
with tired voices  
heavy from years of surviving.

“You’re lucky.”  
“You have opportunities we never had.”  
“Don’t waste your future.”

And slowly,  
their dreams began to sit on my shoulders  
so long  
that I could no longer tell  
where they ended  
and where I began.

I told people  
I wanted to work in the medical field.

And maybe part of me meant it.

I like the thought of helping people,  
of making someone feel less afraid,  
less alone.

But late at night,  
when everything is quiet  
and I am left alone with my thoughts,

I wonder if this dream  
was ever truly mine.

Or if I only held onto it  
because I spent my whole life  
trying to become someone  
my family could finally be proud of.

Sometimes I think  
if I chose a different path,  
their faces would fall apart in front of me.

Like all their sacrifices  
would suddenly mean nothing.

Like I would become  
another disappointment  
added to the list of things  
they never say out loud  
but somehow it always makes me feel.

So I keep carrying this future  
like it already belongs to me.

A white coat stitched together  
from pressure, guilt,  
and the fear of letting everyone down.

And the saddest part is—

I don't know if I would still want this life  
if nobody expected it from me.

I don't know who I am  
without expectations.

I spent so much of my childhood  
trying to become enough for other people  
that now,  
when someone asks me what I want,

all I hear  
is silence.

# Reasons to Live Through the Apocalypse

Matthew Falcon

Connections. The people you have known, and will know more.  
The experiences you'll feel amidst it all. The passion you'll  
feel, the light you could shine, the anchors you could be  
and find. The moments that demonstrate life. Many an  
eternity in a glimpse.

Even if your world is uncaring, the people are not.

When all will fall, have something, someone, to hold onto to calm  
your descent. Be the someone to calm another's descent.

At the end of everything, hold on to anything.