

Red Wheelbarrow



Student Edition 2025

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special thanks to

Ken Weisner

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: Hyejin Jung, "Life is Beautiful"

Frontispiece: Jean Samson, "A Moment in Time"

Back Cover: Eunjung Jung, "Electric Aquarium"

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Comes in Threes

Alicia Aldama



Nigar

Rabia Rasully

I was playing outside with the other kids, laughing and running under the bright afternoon sun. When I came home, though, I stopped in my tracks. There were too many men in the house, talking loudly, laughing, and sipping tea. The air was thick with the smell of chocolate. Since I loved chocolate, I couldn't resist. I grabbed three pieces, feeling the warmth of the candy in my hand. Just as I was about to turn away, my dad yelled, "Get out of here, shameless girl!" I froze. I glanced at my dad and the other men, all of them looking at me with sharp, disapproving eyes. I turned and hurried out of the room, my heart pounding.

I ran to the other room, where my little sister was sitting in the corner.

She said, "Come here." I walked over to her, and she asked, "Did you get chocolate?"

I happily said, "Yes, I got three."

I shared the chocolate with my sister, and we were both as happy as we'd ever been.

The next morning, I woke up early to make breakfast for my dad and my brother. While my dad was eating, he said, "Nigar, I need to talk to you."

I got scared, thinking my dad might want to take the chocolate back. I wondered, "What should I do? I already ate it." At the time, chocolate was a rare treat. People only bought it when their children were getting married or engaged.

I nervously said, "Yes, Dad, I can hear you."

He looked at me and said, "Today, do not go outside and do not play with the kids anymore."

I said, "Okay," because my little sister and I never dared to question our dad. We always had to say yes to whatever he said or wanted.

Every afternoon, after the kids finished their chores, we would spill out into the streets, calling each other to play. It was a cloudy afternoon when my best friend Fatima knocked on the door.

I was sitting by the window, staring at the children outside laughing and running. I felt a lump in my throat, and tears began to fall. Why couldn't I go out and join them?

When I opened the door, I felt as if God had sent me an angel to ease my sadness. Fatima stepped in, and when she saw my red, puffy eyes, she asked gently, "Why were you crying?"

"Nothing," I replied, not wanting to tell her. I knew that if I did, nothing would change. She'd just get sad too.

Fatima tilted her head, a mischievous smile playing at her lips. "Ohhh, because you're happy?"

I shook my head, half-laughing, half-sobbing. "Nooo. If someone's happy, do they cry or laugh? You're crazy, Fatima."

She laughed and then said, more seriously, "Okay, I'm going to ask you something. Why didn't you tell me you're getting married?"

I froze. My eyes widened in shock, and my heart skipped a beat. "What are you talking about?" I stammered.

Fatima blinked at me, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "You don't know?"

I shook my head, bewildered. "Should I?"

"Come sit here, Nigar," she said, pulling me down beside her. "Yesterday, my dad was at your house. He said your dad has engaged you to Ali, the son of Qurban."

I felt the world tilt beneath me. My thoughts became a blur, and my eyes filled with tears again. Everything felt like it was closing in. How had I not known? My hands trembled. The sorrow overwhelmed me, and I thought back to the day my mom passed away.

It had been a sunny, mild day. My mom sent me to ask my aunt to visit. When I came back, I found my mom in a bad state. I sat by her, holding her hand, and she said, "My daughter, take care of your sister and brother. I love you so much."

She asked, "Where's your dad and siblings?"

"Dad and Sher are on the farm. Sakina is outside," I replied.

She nodded weakly. "Call your dad."

I opened the window and called out, "Dad, come home,

Mommy needs you.”

He yelled back, “Your mommy is always sick. I’m not free, you take care of her!”

When Mom heard that, she closed her eyes. And she never opened them again.

At noon, I went to check on her and ask what she wanted to eat, but she hadn’t moved. I got closer and called, “Mom, can you hear me?” She was cold. I screamed, “Mom!”

My uncle’s wife rushed over. When she saw my mom, she sent me to call my dad. I ran toward the farm, crying. When my dad saw me, he asked, “Did you fight with another kid?”

I shook my head, barely able to speak. “Mom...”

“What?”

“Mom’s not moving.”

He ran to the house. My little sister was sitting next to Mom, crying silently.

My dad saw that Mom had already died. He took my brother to the other room and made him sleep. Then he said, “Be quiet, otherwise Ahmad cannot sleep well.”

We buried my mom and said goodbye to her forever. Now I am the mother of two kids who I must take care of. It was not easy for me as a girl without a mom.

A year later, I was married at age 13. I had never seen the groom, Ali. He was strong, unkind, and handsome. On our wedding night, he beat me badly because he thought I wasn’t a virgin. I was just a child. I didn’t understand anything about sex or marriage. He beat me and I didn’t know why.

Because my mom had passed, my aunt came with me—it was tradition for the bride’s mother to accompany her. I cried the whole night. Ali said, “I will send you back to your dad’s house.”

I thought, “My dad will kill me.” I had heard stories of brides being sent back the morning after the wedding and their families killing them in shame.

I begged, “I didn’t do anything wrong. Please forgive me. Don’t send me back. My dad will kill me.”

Finally, he said, “Okay, I won’t send you back, but I’ll marry another girl. I’ll keep you as a servant.”

I didn’t even know what “remarry” meant, so I said, “Okay.”

From then on, I was a servant. I worked on the farm, took care of his sick mom, and did all the house chores. I woke up at 4 AM and went to bed after everyone else. Since I didn’t know how to cook or clean properly, they called me a “senseless orphan.”

After a few months, my mother-in-law said, “I think you’re pregnant.” She was not unkind to me because I served her well.

I was happy. I thought maybe this child could change my life. But when Ali found out, he beat me and said, “I don’t want your child, whore.” He broke my left hand.

That night, I cried and asked God, “Why did you take my mom? Why did you make me a girl?” I wanted to kill myself. I found a knife, but when I thought of the innocent baby inside me, I put it back. I didn’t want people to think I was guilty. I went back to my room. It was a dark, long night.

When my baby girl was born, we named her Zahra. Her grandmother named her. Ali didn’t come home for a month. But when he finally saw her, he liked her. He never kissed or hugged her, but he sometimes looked at her.

When Zahra learned to talk, she said “Pap” first instead of “Mama.” I loved her deeply. She gave me strength. I promised I would protect her from all harm.

Two years later, Ali kissed Zahra for the first time. I cried tears of joy. From then on, he tried to be a father to her. Zahra loved both of us and always tried to bring us closer.

Even though I cannot forgive Ali for what he did to me, I still live with him because of Zahra. She is happy, and I am strong—because I am her mother. Ali treats me better now, but I do not love him. I do not care for his change, because when I needed him the most, he did not trust me, he beat me, and he never listened. That pain does not go away. Nothing he does now can make me love him. But I stay—for Zahra, and for the strength I found in myself. I cannot bear to see my daughter cry or be sad, so I deal with Ali—for her.

Enough

Catalina Ramirez

Why do I fear
Not being enough?
What is enough?
What is this word
That's come to haunt my mind
All hours of the day?
It seems no matter how hard
I try
Enough is always unreachable

I hate how I stack "enough"
On the backs of others
Just to make it more unachiev-
able

Why do I do this?
We are all different
Just because she is
Pretty
Doesn't mean I can't be too
Just because he is kind
Doesn't mean I can't be
Just because I don't feel strong
Doesn't mean
I am not

I dream of a day
When I have the courage
To look a stranger in the eyes
and tell them
"Whoever you are, you are
enough"
I want to feel

The heart flutter
As they realize I am right
I want to see
The light in their eyes
As they live to see another
Beautiful day

I want the courage to pass this
message
Every day
Until one day
Everyone
Even me
Believes it

Then we'll no longer be afraid
Afraid to love
To dream
To dance
To share
To live

They are all
Enough
So why can't I?

Mom's Kitchen On A Spring Morning

Morgan T. Fernandez

Flowery essent winds blow through the sheer lace white curtains,
Over the sink of dishes piled high.

Her soft humming tones with hips swinging back and forth,
A warm bowl of chicken soup dinner burns my little hands.

O childhood, I remember like lemon juice,

Bitterly adored as consumption I can not stay away from.

Yellow hues of sun beaming through the broken frame window

Mom's kitchen is the place of her domain

Where the oval-shape cookie cut-out rests,

Where the thick, leathery apron hung on the wall sway,

Where the fridge in layers of distorted amber and green-
ish magnetics reside,

Where her mountain of magazines unread, untouched-
covered in dust,

Where her breath of sour grapes lingers on the lips from a
purple glass of juice I can not touch

In so many where's I outgrew and selfishly took for granted,

The innocence of a childhood memory being burned into sight.

This was Mom's kitchen, of chicken soup and humming tones,

O childhood that lingers in my mind as lemon juice lingers on the tongue.

Moth

Eduardo Ramos

a moth incinerates itself on her golden porch light, how can a moth
be so stupid.
as i await you at your door we knew our last goodbye was that of a
past life.
like the one when you cut your hair
or the one where you dyed it gilded.
the stars in your eyes were warm
and when the stars died your tears scorched my skin,
as you open the door,
we live a reincarnated relation fated to pretend.
her warm words and promises of sweet nothings soon to be rotten
glow a warm gold,
soothing my skin with tranquility as the light once did before it
burns,
a moth isn't stupid, it's all the poor moth's ever known.

Rooster

Scott Nipert

Wake up young man
Still aching on the concrete
Balled fists and bent brow
Belted by ceaseless life
Spit jarred tooth and paw up off the canvas
Rise from dusted sleep
Shed the defeat from your bones
Untwine those shoulders
So braced for impact
And shake your woe behind thee
Weightless and free
From birth pain and labor
Put it all behind you
Before you have it all again
too weary so young and struck out
Strike out again on the pavement
Steal out into the night
Pound concrete until your feet ache
And you find yourself
At the new day's break
Lost and alone
Just waking up

A Satyr on Emily Graham

Katelyn Yoo

Behold, a saint in words, a devil indeed,
Her smile a mask, her heart a pit of greed.
Reaching out only when she has a need.
The most loyal of friends to the highest degree!
With Bible in one hand, a cross firm in her grasp,
Preaching of virtue, yet judging rash.
Your words say one thing, your actions another;
Condemning same-sex love and scornful of others.
You rant against family dynamics that do not conform,
And bash women who rise to break the norm.
Your greed and hypocrisy, an open disgrace,
Make God weep whenever you claim to speak in His grace.

All your friends have left, your lover turns cold.
Your constant talk of Jesus, our patience grows old.
Misery follows whenever you open your mouth,
The noise even makes the birds fly south.
Far, far away they all land,
Avoiding you and your toxic wasteland.
Feeling captive, we all try to break free,
But your manipulation keeps some from liberty.
You sit alone in your room when your lover's not with you,
Assuming others are jealous, because who can be better than you?

Your hypocrisy and greed will be the end of you,
You will never look within to fix that part of you.
Or perhaps it is I who is the fool.
Your profound wisdom and perfection, greatly misunderstood,
Surpasses the divine and all that is good.
Not meeting your match, you'll find yourself alone,
With no one left but the deceit and selfishness you've grown.

Firework

Maritza Campos

the thrill of the high
climbing as if horizon has no end
as if wind multiplied your rush
swaddling your heat around me like a blanket
my mouth parted in anticipation

you build up into a dynamic explosion
fluorescent colors illuminating the night into day
your glow reflecting onto my gleaming pupils
as the flicker sways me into a trance

lost
in
your
sizzling
hush

boom

quickly dissipating like dirty smoke
your burned ashes clog into my skin
as I choke up on a breath of burnt air
waiting for the rush of you to return
goosebumps prickle downward towards my empty hand
leaving behind a lonely, dull sky and I

Nature's Murmur

Delia Shepherd

Oh, what's this I hear?
The pitter patter
Nature's chatter
Soothing
A sound like no other

Its sounds
Coming out
From the
Depths of my memory

Distant, far away
A lifetime ago

This feeling
So far yet so familiar

Here it is
The steady and soothing
Pitter patter
Of raindrops
Drumming on windows

Its sounds
Bring me back in time
Back to my childhood
On a tropical
Stormy evening

When all you hear
Is nature's murmur
the constant
Drumming of raindrops

Ode to the Fox

Sylvan Semersky

To the fox on a hill, that twists through trees,
We gaze in awe at the blur of ginger,
At such pointed eyes, paws that run with ease,
Such bushy fur, changing with the winter.

We scrambled for your fur, your meat in blocks.
You moved too swift, with grace, for our old spears,
So we call you mischievous, poor fox.
We wrote you the fool in tales through the years.

In tales of old, of birth, you are a thief.
You taunt the Gods, steal your thickened fur coat.
In tales of old, of ghosts, you hint at grief,
Aid spirits in temples who trick and gloat.

Yet you are just a puppy through and through.
Don't worry, there are humans just like you.

Three Kinds of Grief

Brooklyn Hadre

I

Sometimes it is the quiet kind—
the forgetting, then remembering,
then forgetting again.
You open a drawer and find handwriting you know,
and it is like stumbling into rain after weeks of sunshine.

II

There is the heavy grief, the kind that anchors the body.
It makes sitting down a relief, standing up an effort,
and words feel too large to voice.
You move through the day
like someone balancing a full bowl of water in both hands.

III

Sometimes it is the strange, bright grief—
the laugh that catches you off-guard,
the sudden hunger for a food you haven't eaten in years,
the dream where everything is whole again,
and the waking that empties you all over.

Let Us Be Birds

Kylie Arenas

If I float
I'd fly to the sky
And that way
No one would ever find me.

They spread their wings,
Without a second to waste,
Fly into the wide sky
Freedom tucked in each feather.

If a feather falls in my hand,
Will I be granted liberty and agency?
I'll see the wings sprout from my back,
Getting in the air.

It calls my name,
The wind of jubilation.
The trumpets blare,
Screaming my name.

There I go,
Afloat and wild,
Soaring and flying.
I am the bird of paradise.

Swan

Viviana de Leon

She lays upon her reflection,
Resting on what she knows well.
Its depth—familiar, profound—
A quiet mirror of her becoming.
She ponders the waters surrounding her,
Circling the shallows,
Bound to the place she was born to dwell.
Can one escape

Where they were destined to stay?

Enough strength to rise—
From earth to sky,
A flight not of freedom, but defiance.

Feathers shed with each passing summer,
Abandoning the worn and frayed—
A ritual of renewal,
So the wings might lift again in autumn
Without the drag of the past.

Her voice—soft, restrained—
Breaks silence when the need arises.
Many call it aggression,
But it is care,
A cry formed in the long curve of her neck,
A trumpet of worry,
Echoing through the air,
Not for herself—
But for all she holds within

Honeymoon 1

Atharva Salkar



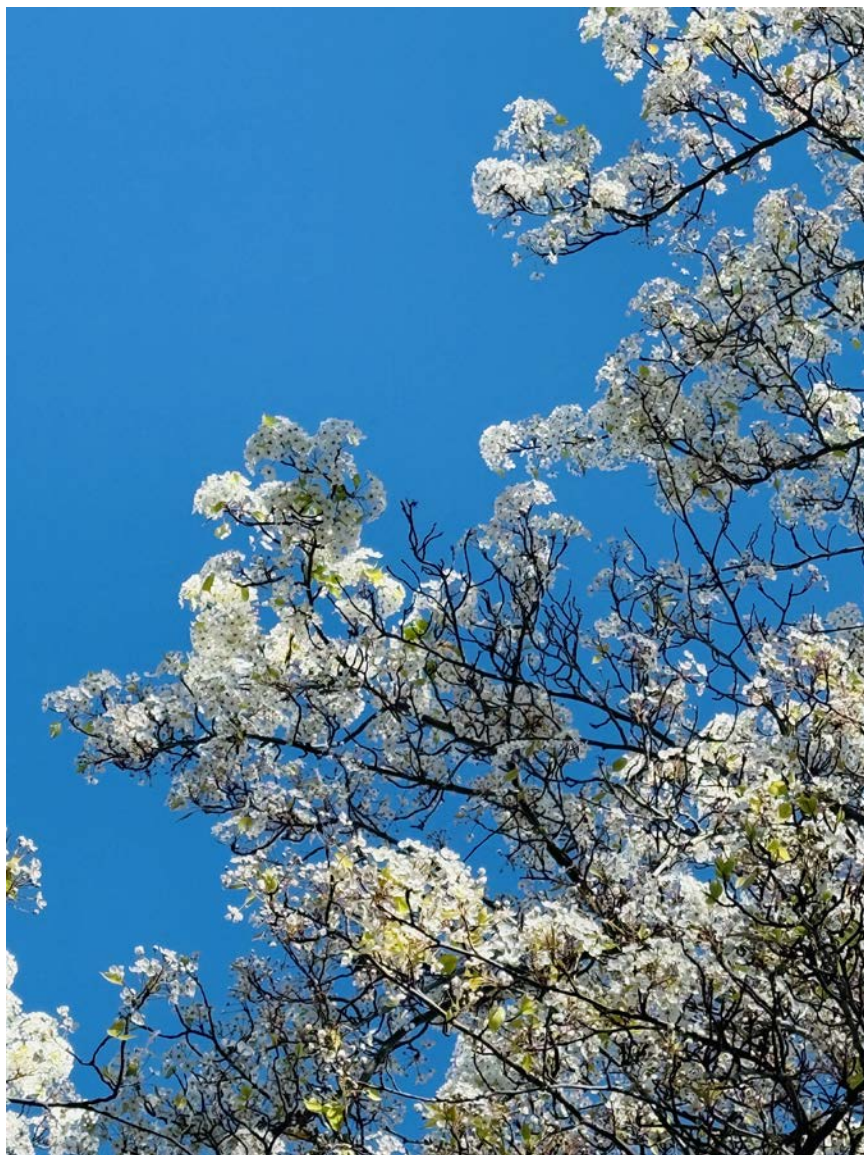
Mosaic

Jiaheng Xu



The Radiance of Life

Panpan Chen



Checkerboard Copper Penny, Raku Vase

Sucheta Sanyal



Ukrainian Weekend

Tetiana Obrizan



Kingsley

Jordan Robinson



Solitude

Ash Morgan



Blue Cat

Eunjung Jung





Food Wars

Norman Aragones



Fake Out

Evelyn Zimmerman

The assassin was surprised, shocked even. When she had taken this job off of the many that were offered in the underground tavern The Black Mamba, she had worried for a second she was over her head. After all, The Black Mamba had a reputation for supplying jobs and quests to the disgruntled underbelly of the kingdom, those who weren't blinded by the allure of magic. She had expected it to be a tougher challenge infiltrating the castle, especially considering the status of the target and the increased security at the palace right now. Technically she could have waited until after the Summer Solstice festival, but that always lasted at least a week, sometimes longer if the King and all his lackeys were in a particularly good mood, and she needed the money now. Besides, it was only a kidnapping, where she would bring him to the tavern to give to whichever person put the job listing up on the board so they could ransom him off.

She looked around her. She only had one hallway left before arriving at her target's room, but the guard postings here were different than usual, with guards popping sporadically out of what seemed like thin air. *They must have adapted that technique just for the Solstice*, she thought, remembering to keep a mental note in case she ever came back. After she was absolutely certain there were no guards hidden in the shadows, she quickly snuck over to the room, which had a distinctive dent in it due to her target losing his temper over his welcome bowl not being either large or welcoming enough. She patted her outer thigh, making sure that the vial that would render him unconscious was still there. Having affirmed it, she slowly turned the doorknob and opened the door.

She kept herself close to the door, closing it delicately after squeezing her way through. She walked more carefully now, stepping only on the tips of her toes knowing that this lord fancied this room due to its wooden floorboards instead of the stone that were common everywhere else in the castle. More prone to wear and tear, these wooden floorboards were known for making quite the commotion in the middle of the night, as was evident last year with the

complaints from the lords who were assigned rooms near him.

She made her way from the lounge room to the bedroom, the door of which was already opened. Her breath was hushed, only the slightest bit of waver in it as she reached for the vial, keeping her eye on the shape under the sheets. She quickly threw the sheets off the bed, and went to pour the vial on his forehead when she stopped. The lord wasn't in bed. *That can't be!* she thought to herself. She had specifically gone up only after watching him retire for the night. Then she heard a wry chuckle behind her.

"Well, well, well."

She whipped herself around at the voice, where she met the eyes of the lord by the door, evidently not asleep like she had planned.

"I know that my cousins in the West weren't happy with me, but sending a trained assassin after me is a bit much, wouldn't you agree, Wistoria Della Luna?" he said, giving her a smirk which she could only describe as dripping with pompous arrogance. It was far from ideal that he knew who she was, and he was too far at this point for the potion to reach him unless she threw it at him, which had less than comforting results. Lord Hyrad began strolling around the room, keeping himself out of her effective range as he continued speaking.

"Now what's going to happen, Ms. Della Luna, is that you're going to stay there while I alert the guards. Obviously I can't let you out of my sight, for fear of you escaping, so I have no choice but to yell, though I hate to be crying out for help, it's very unbecoming of a man of my status." He began clearing his throat out, evidently in order to make the clearest and loudest alert he could. He began to open his mouth, only to stop as he found a dagger now suddenly in his throat.

His eyes widened and he began coughing as he leaned against the door, sinking to the ground. Wistoria sauntered over, taking out her thrown dagger and wiping it on her cloak, the inside of which was so dark it hid any trace of blood. She opened the door, daintily stepping over his body, and made her way to the suite door. She noticed a cheese knife by the welcoming gifts and turned back, giving Lord Hyrad a smile as he sat on the ground, hands still clenched around his neck in a frivolous attempt to stop the bleeding, before she threw it as well, hitting the bullseye directly between his eyes for

good measure. The knife thudded as it went into the wood behind Lord Hyrad's skull as his head sank, no longer any resistance to gravity.

She closed the door behind her then began running as quickly as she could through the halls. Evidently the stealth part of the mission was over, and Wistoria needed to get to the top of the castle to call her getaway. She heard a couple of doors opening as a couple lords started to come out to question the commotion but paid them no heed, only stopping in her mad dash to the top when she spotted a guard. After what felt like a lifetime, she finally found the door leading to the top, where she would have to act fast as the only fifteen minutes that the roof wasn't heavily guarded was during the changing of the guards. She shut it behind her, taking a moment to catch her breath as she slowly made her way towards the edge of the castle roof. She took out a shell whistle in her pocket, which luckily hadn't been damaged, and brought it to her lips and blew as much air through it as she could spare.

She only managed a couple of seconds before she had to stop to breathe, and she hoped that those few seconds would be enough to alert her ticket out of this failed mission. She sat down while she waited to help quicken the process of catching her breath when she heard the doorknob jostle. She got up warily, trying to stay close to the floor as she kept her eyes on the door. The doorknob jostling with fervor now, Wistoria went to dive behind the boxes of arrows by the bow rack just as the door slammed open. She was breathing heavily, unsure if they had seen her go to her improvised hiding spot. She waited, the air filled with suspense, as she heard footsteps. These footsteps were slow, careful, like a predator taunting its prey that has no escape.

"I know you're there, assassin. There's no point in hiding as I've got reinforcements coming at any moment." This man's voice was different from those she had heard while shadowing Lord Hyrule to map out his schedule so Wistoria didn't know who he was and, more importantly, what he would be capable of. She decided it would be better to go along with his plan in hopes of stalling him and got up from her hiding spot. She looked up at the man, his face obscured by a cloak. The moonlight dimmed for a brief second, and he then looked at her and slowly lifted the cloak from his head. Wistoria

gasped, her eyes widening.

"I—but—that's impossible!" she stammered, not believing what she was seeing.

"Impossible or not assassin, I've foiled your plans to disrupt the Summer Solstice festival. I know those in your occupation don't believe they can make mistakes, but I knew you were here the moment you stepped foot inside the castle, and if I do say so myself, your methods were rather sloppy." Lord Hyrad walked toward her with no injuries, not a trace of blood on him, and a knife in his hands that he was currently tossing back and forth. Wistoria walked backwards, her hands in front of her as she kept her eye on Lord Hyrad, who she still couldn't believe was in front of her. She couldn't argue with what she was seeing though, and she was going toward the edge of the roof, with the distance closing fast.

"Wait sir—I can be your private assassin! I won't charge you for anything and you can have a hit list as long as you want!" she said, hoping her lie would make him think and slow him down. He laughed, a big bellowing thing that wasn't anything like the chuckle she heard in the room and it sent chills up and down her spine.

"Oh, you assassins are all the same. Cowardly, thieving, weak. I'm going to enjoy this," he said, raising his knife up above his head, before bringing it down with all his might. His knife swished through the bare air and he looked around, perplexed, Wistoria seemingly nowhere in sight.

"That was a close one wasn't it bud?" she asked, scratching the neck of her dragon Cosmia, who chirped back in reply, the reverberations of it going down Wistoria's arm. Wistoria sighed in relief. *Thank the Stars she got here on time*, she thought. Their signal had worked perfectly, since no one would notice the quick and short blackening of a new moon night if they weren't looking for it. *The landing could have been a bit smoother though*, Wistoria thought, rubbing her hand against her back. Her leather saddle was good for any long period of riding Cosmia, but evidently was not the softest landing pad when jumping from a castle roof.

There was one thing stuck in her mind however, as Cosmia flew higher into the night sky, lowering their visibility. *I could have sworn that Lord Hyrad had a freckle just above his eyebrow, not on his cheek*, she thought, puzzling over it in her head as Cosmia flew them further away into the stars.

Summer at Rancho

Patricia Khouderchah

The sleepy haze rolling over the hills
makes me feel blurry
the warm wind disintegrating
my personality

I am a puddle
of heartbeats
and melted sorrows
How could I forget

the language of
the sun
With beads of her
unconditioned well wishes

dripping down my back
Her limbs
embracing me in
veins of yellow and gold

Papa

Brooklyn Hadre

My grandpa sounds like
“you hungry?” before you even ask,
like the rattle of pans before sunrise,
like the Marine in him always rising with the day.

*He drove the same route every afternoon—
waiting by the curb like clockwork,
his car smelling like comfort and black coffee,
his smile already half a joke.*

*He played like time didn't matter.
Hide and seek. Catch. Silly voices.
Like the battlefield had long been traded
for the front yard and cartoons.*

*He cooked like a man on a mission—
lumpia and vinegar fried chicken were his specialties,
serving it all with a side of “I love you,”
though he'd never say it,
he didn't need to.*

He smells like
coffee gone cold on the counter, like cigarettes lit with stories,
like the past carried gently in his collar.

He feels like
calloused hands that never drop you,
like the warm scrape of a buzz cut cheek,
like camouflage and quiet strength wrapped in an apron.

When he pats your shoulder,
you know you've done something right.

Every day,
he's the reason the world still makes sense.

What Summer Likes

Ingrid Lu

Like sunshine, like a penny heads-up on the ground
Like lovely lovely lakeside eyes and delicate wings on dragonflies
Like soft laundry, down on a cat's belly, midsummer drizzle
and fingers digging into my heart, ribbons of light and dust mite stars
diving headfirst into the creek
Like napping under warm covers, cupping a seashell to your ear
Like glades of glowing wheat, tanning in the dry heat
Like the catseye dandelion, curling on the treacle vine
Like swans lighting on the lake, whipped cream birthday cake
chlorine steeping in my hair
Like earl gray green tea, long afternoons with me
Like climbing into bed, shivering from cold
Listen to the crickets crickets in twilight
sip on a glass of sweet water and sleep.

Innocents of Last Whisper Winter

Morgan T. Fernandez

White snowflake of Whisper Winter,
A swept soundless within blizzard snow,
 O, the wonders of wild intent!
Flush upon the flat frost window it slept,
Tis' innocent child tongue clung to the white class mist
Licks frozen frost of stainless flower glass,
 O, bleed the bells of beauty's life!
White snowflake of blizzard snow stroke,
Melt whiteness wonders for fresh waters,
Soothe tis' innocent child I am blind and I am powerless too,
 O, 'tis innocents I will lesson taste a numbing factor!
Let the innocent taste the wonders of the wild intent of slumber,
Last white wishes of blizzard wonder snow,
Tip of the tongue bleeds the last moment mist of mocking life,
 O, the wonders of wild intent!
White snowflake of Whispers Winter.

Life is a Box Office Hit

Sehej Pawar

I didn't cry watching *The Notebook*,
but I cried on my 17th birthday,
when the candles felt more like countdowns
than celebrations.

I didn't cry watching *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*,
but *La La Land* messed me up,
not because they didn't end up together,
but because sometimes, dreams win over love.

I didn't cry watching *Titanic*,
but I did when I found an old voicemail
and realized I'd never hear that voice in real life again.

I didn't cry watching *Good Will Hunting*,
but *Toy Story 3* hit too close,
not because Andy left,
but because I knew I would too.

I laughed at *Scream*, didn't flinch at *The Conjuring*,
but my hands shook reading an old text,
like ghosts can haunt phones too.

I tell myself I'm fine.
That I don't feel things like I used to.
That I've learned how to sit with the pain.

But then I hear *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*,
“we accept the love we think we deserve,”
and I wonder

if I ever deserved any at all.

A lighthouse is an angel for whaled sailors

Ranhee Choe

I see a circle of light
Not in the sky ringing around the moon
But overlaying kicked up dust on stone
A lighthouse for those with no direction to look ahead
A halo sitting on the earth

I think of angels and their esoteric form of eyes within light
If we were for a moment to believe we are echoes of a god,
If we're molded in God's image is personification sacrilegious?
Does my propinquity to light weigh heavily on my kinship to others?

When will I see you again?
The angel says nothing for I am no messiah.
I plead no more for the light is no Stella Maris

The Keeper of the Enchanted Forest

Anna Graber-Naidich

The bear stumbles first—
biggest, noble, honest as earth.

The wolf follows,
ribs sharp,
eyes like crescent moons.

The fox glides next—
sly, fire-tailed,
half in this world,
half in dreams.

A bush stirs—
silent, shielding.

Behind it hides
the pinky rabbit—smallest,
his heart thundering with fright.

My grandfather smiles,
hand resting on my foot.
“This one,” he winks,
“the rabbit—somehow always gets away.”

Didik is a quiet silhouette
between me
and the darkness of the forest.

No one can cross.
I fall asleep.

Suddenly, Acutely

Cheryl Olano

Diego startled awake to his alarm blaring K-Pop at top volume. He fumbled with his phone for a few seconds before he was finally able to shut it off.

He groaned. It was time to get up.

He shambled around his bedroom in pitch darkness for a few minutes before he worked up the courage to switch on the light, wincing at the sudden brightness. It was well before sunrise, but his job as the weatherman for his local news station required him to be in the office well before the rest of the world woke up. He shed his sleep shirt and deposited it in his laundry hamper on his way to the bathroom.

The lights in the bathroom were even worse, a white fluorescent burn on his retinas. Blinking, he stood in front of the sink and waited for his eyes to adjust. There he was, in the mirror above his sink— his curly mop of brown hair, light scattering of freckles, and the bloody gaping hole in his chest.

Where his heart should be was instead a gorey cavity, a red cavern of tissue glistening with blood. His lungs shuddered in the open air, pink and fleshy. Around the edges of the hole were the broken off shards of his ribs tucked neatly behind torn skin. He had actually reached in a few months ago to file down the sharp edges of his bones. He was worried about bending wrong and accidentally puncturing a lung.

The sight was gruesome, but nothing Diego wasn't used to. It honestly didn't even hurt.

He continued getting himself ready for the day ahead, considering his wardrobe. He's always been kind of nerdy looking— an obsession with meteorology and Dungeons and Dragons had manifested into a physical aesthetic for him— and when he was on air he exclusively wore weather themed button downs. His co-worker, Ricky, called him the Ms. Frizzle of meteorologists.

Diego moved to the mirror in his bedroom and pulled on today's patterned shirt, a blue number that had little storm clouds

printed on it. He buttoned his shirt up over the gash. He felt better when he fastened the last few buttons, covering the gaping hole in his chest. For good measure, he tugged on a thick cable knit sweater. He looked at himself in the mirror, turning this way and that. The layers helped obscure the weird concave quality of his chest wound. With everything covered up, he could almost pretend like everything was normal.

It's been about a year now since Diego's heart was stolen right out of his chest.

He didn't have time to dwell on that now, any more dawdling and he'd be late. His commute passed in a blur and before he knew it, Diego was pushing through the front doors of the news studio and riding the elevator up to his floor.

The office, as usual, was in complete pandemonium. A flurry of movement and light and sound. Diego carefully picked his way across the mess towards his desk, greeting coworkers as he went.

"Diego, hey!" Nancy waved. She was getting last minute makeup touch ups before she needed to head downstairs to the actual studio they shot out of for her live news coverage segment.

"Hey Nance." Diego smiled back, waving.

"Good morning, Diego!" Lance shouted. He was currently wrestling a pile of props for the segment he was doing on winter sports for the kids later. Diego ran over to give him a hand.

"Dude, you're gonna get crushed to death under all this. Why didn't you get a cart?"

Lance wrinkled his nose. "Accounting has all the carts today, said they need to move a bunch of file cabinets for the audit."

After helping Lance, Diego resumed his journey to his desk only to stop dead in his tracks.

There, at the cubicle across from his, sat the person who currently possessed his heart.

Lily Choi.

She sat in a tranquil bubble, headphones on and blasting heavy metal, calmly typing away on her computer despite the absolute chaos around her. She was a fact checker for their news stories which meant her work was literally never done, but if it stressed her out she never showed it. She exuded an aura of cool collectedness

that Diego was envious of. He felt like he was freaking out about everything, all the time.

Today Lily's ink black hair was swept into a twist, held in place by a plastic clip that looked like a cat. It was 5 AM and already she had two empty mugs of coffee on her desk, and Diego knew from experience that that number would only triple over the course of the day.

Diego's breath caught in his throat. He sat across from her almost all day, everyday, and yet he got flustered every single time, winded and dazed. Like a schoolboy with a crush. Like he was being bludgeoned to death with a hammer.

He caught her eye as he settled into his desk. He decided to take a risk and give her a small wave. It was a toss up on any given day if Lily would be in the mood for social interaction, even in small gestures like this. Diego had been ignored before and tried not to take it personally, though it did sting.

Not today, though.

Lily hesitated, then gave him a small wave back. She even smiled a little—just the faintest uptick of the corner of her mouth. Diego melted.

He grinned to himself, ducking his head. He was beginning to pull out the things he would need for the day when a crumpled wad of paper hit the side of his head.

"Ow!" He turned to his right where, across the walkway, Ricky sat in his cubicle glaring daggers at him.

"Talk to her!" he mouthed at Diego, pointing in Lily's direction. Diego flushed. "Drop it," he mouthed back.

Ricky gave him a disappointed look. Diego ignored him.

The truth is, the last time Diego had a conversation with Lily—a real conversation, not just greeting each other in passing or waving in the mornings—was a disaster.

Or a roaring success, depending on how you looked at it.

It was around Christmas time last year. A group of them wanted to go out for drinks after work to celebrate a successful year of reporting. They did these little outings every so often, but this

time was different. It was different because Lily said she'd come too.

"Lily's coming with us on Friday," Nancy offhandedly mentioned to Diego and Ricky at lunch one day, "so please try not to scare her off. I want her to feel welcomed."

"Why d'you think we'd scare her awff?" Ricky asked around a mouth full of sandwich.

Nancy wrinkled her nose, but chose not to comment on Ricky's table manners. "It's actually more of a warning for Diego."

Diego looked up from his salad, startled. "Me? Wait, why?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you can be *really* friendly."

Diego blinked. "Um, how is that a bad thing?"

"No, it's a good thing! Usually." Nancy gave him a kind smile. "It's just that you can get really loud and chatty and social, and Lily is... Lily."

Lily had started at their humble little news station about 6 months prior and already had a reputation around the office. She was ruthlessly efficient, scarily good at her job, and extremely antisocial. She was never rude or dismissive, but she turned down any and all attempts at socialization. A few of the other girls around the office had managed to hold a few conversations with her, but nothing too in depth.

Diego considered what Nancy had said. He did have a tendency to ramble and go off on tangents and ask a lot of questions—it was just that he loved getting to know new people, which yes, does sometimes mean he can get a bit excitable. Diego blamed this on a childhood of being starved for social interaction because of his homeschooling.

"I don't think Lily *isn't* enthusiastic," Diego said, "I think maybe we're just not talking to her about the right things. I heard from Monica that Arthur was adamant about hiring her because of her, quote, 'enthusiasm for the job.'"

Arthur, their boss, had a great instinct for hiring for their station. If he liked Lily, that was probably a good sign.

"I just don't want to overwhelm her," Nancy said. "You're really stressed about this," Ricky observed.

"Yeah, kind of," Nancy admitted. "I mean, it's cool if she wants

to maintain a professional distance. No one's obligated to be friends with their coworkers, but I also don't want her to feel left out. The rest of us are so close, I just don't want it to seem like we're excluding her, you know?"

"We'll do our best," Diego promised, "but if she doesn't like our vibe, that's within her rights. And I'll try not to overwhelm her with my intense friendship powers."

Diego wiggled his fingers like a wizard casting a spell. Ricky snorted.

Nancy smiled. "You are the most extroverted extrovert I've ever met."

Nancy was right, the rest of the news crew was pretty tight. Diego had known most of them since college, he even grew up down the street from Nancy and Lance. And of course, they'd previously invited Lily to go out with them, but she always said no. Diego would like to say that the mystery surrounding her kick started his infatuation, but in all honesty, for the first few months of Lily's time at the station, he only really thought of her as his cubicle neighbor.

Everything changed when they went out that night.

Lily was, at first, fairly reserved. She was sitting in the corner of the booth, across from Diego, and so he had a front row seat to watch her open up as the night went on and the drinks flowed freely.

"I just have a low capacity for social interaction," she'd explained, once she had visibly relaxed. "I get... overwhelmed easily. I'm glad I decided to come out tonight."

It turns out that Lily was a talkative drunk. She was hilarious. She had a dry, at times dark sense of humor that she used sparingly with incredible effect. She had the whole table gasping for air at several points. And after a while, she was answering all their long held questions about herself. The real trouble started when Diego noticed the charm dangling from her phone case.

"Is that the USS Enterprise?" he asked, gesturing to the tiny spaceship. "Like from Star Trek?"

Lily paused. "You like Star Trek?"

"Oh, here we go," Ricky said, rolling his eyes.

Diego ignored him in favor of pulling out his phone to show Lily pictures of his collection of replica Star Trek spaceships.

“Your collection is incredible.” She squinted at the photo, looking closer. “Wait, is that a She-Ra poster?”

It turned out they had a lot in common.

Diego simply could not stop talking to her. He wanted to ask her a million questions, about her interests, about her life, about anything. He just wanted to listen to her talk. He completely monopolized her time, until the others had given up on a conversation with the two of them and left them to nerd out in their own little bubble. Belatedly, Diego realized he’d promised Nancy he’d rein it in but—well, he was having so much fun getting to know Lily. And it didn’t seem like she minded, she was just as engaged in their conversation as he was.

The next few moments were blurry in Diego’s memory. He remembers that he had said something funny. Lily threw her head back and laughed, musical and so beautiful that Diego’s breath stuttered in his chest.

Then, smiling at him, drunk and clueless—she reached across the table and pulled his still-beating heart out of his chest.

Diego didn’t even register the snap of his own ribs or the spray of blood as his arteries severed. He grinned down at her dopily, high on infatuation, as his heart pulsed and gurgled, sending splatters of scarlet across his face and chest. A great arterial arc of blood painted the table between them. By the time the loss registered, his heart was already pulled completely free from his chest cavity, lungs trembling exposed in the open air.

“*Oh*,” Diego breathed out softly, suddenly acutely aware of the emptiness.

She kept chatting, oblivious to the destruction she’d wrought on Diego’s cardiovascular system. Rivulets of blood ran between her fingers and down her arm as she clutched his heart. His heart—the traitorous thing—beat happily in her grasp. Diego watched in muted horror as she absentmindedly tucked his heart into her purse so she had both hands free to gesticulate as she talked.

No one else seemed to care, or even notice. Nancy absentmindedly wiped away a splatter of Diego’s blood that had ended up on her cheek. Ricky caught the expression on Diego’s face and gave him a pointed look that meant they’d be talking about this later. Even

Lily, the culprit of the crime, continued on like nothing happened.

Diego sat there, stunned and enamored, for the rest of the night.

The following week Lily was back to her usual reserved self, though there was a distinct uptick in team bonding participation from her. She never fully acknowledged their conversation from that night, although she would occasionally ask Diego for his opinion about a new show or movie. Once, Diego made the mistake of accidentally trapping her in conversation for twenty minutes while he nervously rambled about a show he thought she'd like. She smiled politely through it, but avoided him for a week afterward. The empty spot where Diego's heart should've been ached for a long time after that.

Diego knows she didn't do it to be mean. Like she said, she just had a low capacity for social interaction. He's been trying really hard to meet her at her comfort level.

Their interactions were brief, but lately she'd been initiating them more. Diego's trying very hard to rein himself in and not overwhelm her, but he'd be lying if he said he wasn't looking forward to work everyday, even just to sit quietly across from her for a few hours.

He just wants to talk to her more. And get his heart back. That would also be nice.

Remember the Moon

Scott Nipert

I'll often strike out on night walks
Silently striding in somnambulistic step
Accompanied by the shadow of my solitude
I once was a magnet for strange encounters
With strange strangers
Every weirdo in the world was tuned to my wavelength
When I'd go walking
Full moons, blood moons, every moon was an ominous sign
Saying here comes a new friend
Who would like a cigarette and an opportunity
To tell their life story in frenzied sermon
A fellow wanderer
I always bent an ear

But now, for over a year or so, things have changed
I must be on a new frequency
One where every time I step out to my midnight jaunt
Society high and low deserts my surroundings
I accept it no matter how confounding
Because peace is a welcome novelty in this life
And so at peace I saunter in the lunar light
Undisturbed

But no such light finds me tonight
That old moon hangs behind the heavy heliotrope cover of clouds
Absent from this walk
I like to think we are both remembering, that blocked moon and I,
How this old chip off the block used to howl at that thing
Back when I was on another wavelength
Always at odds with tomorrow

Red

Mohamed Husain

Red. Red. Red.

Red is the first color of the rainbow.

Red is often the first color that people could name.

Red could be found in many aspects of our lives.

Red can hold so many meanings depending on where you find it.

It can be found in many iconic figures in our lives. The pants of a mouse. The collar of a sailor. The boots of a robot. The hat of a plumber. The helmet of a Bounty Hunter. The suit of a Ranger. The shoes of a Hedgehog. The fur of a Bandicoot. The belt of a genie. The shirt of a new being.

Red is a color worn by both heroes and villains. Heroes wear to symbolize their courage. Villains wear to strike fear into the hearts of men. Depending on how it is worn and who wears it, Red can achieve a whole range of meanings for whoever wears it.

Red is a warm color. Often seen as the warmest. Red is found in a strawberry during the Spring. Red is found on a rose during a summer day. Red is found on a leaf as we enter the fall. Red can even be seen throughout the holidays in Winter.

Some people believe that the sun is red. Its brightness, however, would complicate that perception. That said, some suns do end up becoming red as they get older. It becomes a Red Giant as it nears the end of its life. Through this, red can also refer to something chilling.

The blood that flows through our veins is red. It can come in shades depending on where it shows up. It can be scarlet as it is extracted during a charity drive. It can go crimson as it ends up spilled on the floor for many reasons. A simple cut from an accident or a horrific gash brought out during a murder. Red can be seen as a stain, whether it'd be a horrific blood stain on a body or a clumsy wine stain on

a dress. Red is a part of many people's lives. They find themselves seeing it every day whether they want to or not.

Most strikingly, Red can show itself as a symbol of something. Prior to the turn of the millennium, in the context of our world's culture, red is often seen in revolutions. Specifically, revolutions that involved grand economic change. Nowadays, it is often associated with those who claim to espouse tradition. Regardless, however, red is often seen as the color of a terrifying force. Some fear it through the Red Scare that haunted nations for decades. Some fear it now through the red caps worn by people who claim to wish to bring back tradition, but with the hidden intention of threatening perceived enemies. It is a striking color and it evokes many emotions from determination to insanity, from mirth to embarrassment, from love to hatred.

Nowadays, red is most often seen as a negative color due to these things. We currently live in an era where nobody can see the beauty in red anymore. It makes people feel enraged. It makes them feel terrified. However, for how much we fear it, we should never forget the beauty of red.

A red scarf given to you by your mother, a red blanket that you would always lay in bed in. Red shoes that you walked miles upon miles in. Red lip gloss that makes people focus on your lush lips. Red earrings given to you by your beloved. A red ruby ring that would wear to symbolize your bond with your betrothed.

We see it. Sometimes, we see nothing but red and it can happen for many reasons. Our vision can go blurry as we feel ourselves consumed by rage. Our vision can sharpen as we feel ourselves seeing something we can't help but cherish. It can even be literal as we proceed to abuse strange substances that we should have no business in abusing.

Somewhere out there, a boy would find a red baseball cap. It does not matter what else lays on that hat. It could be emblazoned with the words of a movement. It could be emblazoned with the name of a team. It could even be emblazoned with something innocuous like a logo for a TV show or even the name of a school. Whatever lays on that red baseball cap, that boy will wear it and only fate will reveal to us what will become of that boy as he moves forward.

Shine

Khanh Nguyen

With a loud thud, I dropped my bag on the forest ground and sighed loudly. The longer I stood at the campsite, the more I hated my father. A week ago, he had announced I'd be spending a week of July at Yellowstone Park. In response, I tried everything I could to cancel the trip, with every idea coming to mind. Unfortunately, my efforts proved to be futile, and this Sunday morning, I reluctantly left with my older brother, Cedric, Uncle, and my cousin, Heather.

Currently, they unpacked camp materials as I sulked by a corner of the clearing and concluded that I won't help them, after all, this trip wasn't my idea.

"C'mon, Cyrus! I need some help with this." Cedric shouted from across the clearing. In response, I shook my head and told him, "No thanks." A part of me thought, You'll be here for a while, might as well help them. I dismissed it and walked farther away to set up my sleeping bag for the night.

A few hours later, dark veils settled above the forest, and the moon peeked shyly from behind the pine trees of the campsite. It radiated a heavenly glow and illuminated the black sky. Regardless of the serenity, I still shifted indignantly in my sleeping bag, unable to enjoy it.

Tonight, I didn't join the others for dinner, so instead I snacked on two granola bars. My stomach grumbled from the meager meal, but I persevered through the hunger. Only 6 more days, I sighed. After another hour, my weariness overcame my senses, and I finally drifted off to Sleep.

Early in the morning, I grudgingly joined the hike even though I hated every moment of it. Thankfully, my brother handed me some breakfast before we began the trip. The hike started with a descent down the paved path to the Upper Falls with Uncle and Heather ahead of us. The damp morning air clung to my nose, and the scent of pine needles made me gag. I cringed at the sight of barf-green moss clumps covering the top of the surrounding boulders. On the ground, fallen twigs and branches littered the entire forest floor. I sighed internally, wishing for the end of the week to come. Meanwhile, Cedric and Heather happily discussed the hiking distance, best places for pictures, blah blah blah. I couldn't have cared less, but subconsciously, I felt a small spark of curiosity igniting in

my head.

“So what’d you think of the hike so far?” Heather asked. She slowed her pace to match mine.

“Boring,” I responded blatantly. A frown appeared on her face, and she looked towards Cedric for support.

“Well, the trip just started, so there’s gonna be much more,” Cedric told me. Suddenly, his face lit up and he grinned mischievously. “I’ll bet you 10 bucks you’re gonna love it!” I snorted and confidently accepted the wager. Soon, we arrived at the Brink of the Upper Falls, and I tried my best to look away. Surprisingly, the scene still drew my eyes toward it like the opposites of a magnet. The river water rushed off the ledge in graceful, foamy waves and dropped down majestically. Splashing sounds filled my ears as I inched closer for a better view. Heather, smiling triumphantly, glanced over at me. “Do you like the hike now?” Quickly, I suppressed my awe and responded with a short “nope.” She smirked as she rolled her eyes in exasperation.

Cedric patted my shoulder as we continued our hike.

“There’s gonna be even more at the top,” He assured, “I promise.” After coming up from the fall, we reached the top path of the canyon: North Rim Trail. The sun’s rays passed through the pine branches and provided the path with a warm glow. To my right, glimpses of the gaping canyon teased me from behind a line of dense trees. I edged closer for a look, but unfortunately, the pine needles obscured my vision.

Fifteen long minutes passed, and we finally reached the viewing spot. Slowly, I crossed the concrete platform until I reached the rocky edge. My eyes instantly widened as I took in the astounding scenery. Deep in the vast canyon, raging waves of river water rushed along the red banks and splashed violently. Against the far right, I spotted Upper Falls shining brightly in the brilliant noon sun. A small arc of vibrant colors stretched along the clear water, and I couldn’t help but lean towards it. Behind it, an incredible variety of sediment lined the canyon with layers of tan and dark gray sections overlapping one another. Large patches of lush green pine trees stood in front, but their height seemed insignificant compared to the towering walls.

Finally, I tore my gaze away from the beautiful canyon as Heather and Cedric smiled triumphantly. “Okay, I guess it’s alright,” I admitted with a sheepish grin. My hand dug into my pocket and I fished out a 10 dollar bill for my brother. He shook his head and simply told me, “Nah, I don’t need it, I’m just glad you like the hike now.”

Sojourn

Jenna Otero

After Ellery Akers, "What I Do" & "What I Know"

TW: brief mention of suicide

I always wondered why they named storms after people.

I know not fall in love
too fast
too hard
too deep
too reckless
too irresponsible

But then I suddenly
knew of cold toes on my sand-chapped legs
knew of the mourning wail of cellos
knew the chafe in my throat after
laughter, singing, lumpy tears
after screaming,
after begging,
after stupid, pointless pleas.
Perhaps I forgot what I thought I knew.

I knew we weren't possessable.
I thought the stardust in our bones was intertwined
I knew you were temporary
I thought we were sculpted from the same egotistical clay
I knew it was a momentary glimpse into feigned happiness

The artist smashed us before we dried,
deposited the clay back to its dingy bucket
our souls indefinitely entangled through destruction
I know pottery is made of clay
I know clay requires water to shape
I know water has memories
forced, then, to remember you longer than I knew you

And you always said you had the worst luck with love,
you were bad for me,
that was your history
and

I know you love history
because I watched the way you spoke about it
in your sister's crammed apartment kitchen
until the sun peeked at us around the pollution

but that frigid kitchen floor became the place you tried to leave this world,
knife by your side
turns out silence chafes our throats just as much.

I know what happened afterwards
as we sat on the stiffening stairs and I burned to say I love you
but I wanted and willed it to be implied
or maybe
I knew I shouldn't, still
I'm sorry that I left all the words unsaid

I know that now I have to throw out all my favorite perfumes
because they smell like who I was when I was with you
I know I don't want to hear what anyone else has to say
about whatever muddled version of us did or didn't exist
I know I want to think that the person I met was true

You were a cop-out dressed as a vow
I'd number how many times you said, "I wouldn't expect you to understand"
just to be spiteful
just to prove
I was all in—
my losing hand,
your cold deck,
we danced around the ante:
vitiated by reluctance.
Fold.
House advantage.

Now
it seems
they name people after storms.

Life Changes in Spring

Panpan Chen

The clouds bloom with flowers of pink and white.
Celebrating the arrival of new life.
Warm sunshine spills over every branch,
And each blade of grass glows with light.
Delighted people picnic on cushions of soft green,
Basking in the loveliness of spring.

But the very next day,
Joy is swept away by a cold, freezing storm.
The wind rages, and the rain pours down,
As flowers sway helplessly in the tempest.
Stumbling people totter under umbrellas,
Buffeted by the relentless cold wind and rain of spring.

The changeable weather
The unpredictability of life,
Bringing moments you never expect,
And sorrow you never wished to feel.
The life change I detest the most
Is saying goodbye.
To those I deeply love.
Spring, the season of new beginnings and beauty,
How can you bear to take them away?
Like flowers that must fall,
We have no choice but to let go.

For now I have to resign
Life is not always warm sunshine and blooming flowers.
There are also freezing storms and cold rains.
The ever-changing spring
Yes, how like life it is,
but a changing and fleeting span.

The Silence of Leyte

Karina Aplao

The hot humid air that blanketed the island of Leyte barely cooled as the red sun laid to rest beyond the surrounding waters. As the moon floated higher into the darkening sky, the island quieted as if honoring its presence. The birds, singing and clamoring moments before, hushed into gently flapping their wings and rustling their feathers as they fell into a deep sleep for the night. Even the distinct monotonous hum of the mosquitos which buzzed every hour of the day quieted down and the rush of the waves lapping the shore overtook their droning.

On a warm, beautiful night like this, the lively voices of the people of Leyte typically filled the night air. Songs would be sung accompanied by a simple guitar. The clinks of forks and spoons on plates were syncopated with the voices of families sitting together at the table. The elders' steady croaking voices could be heard telling stories to children, who would laugh, shriek, and clap.

Today, all of it had been hushed by the Japanese soldiers that marched through their town earlier in the afternoon. Stalls in the local market were overturned and oranges and guava rolled into the dusty floors, their colorful and fragrant juices exploding as they were squashed under the soles of marching soldiers. The soldiers yelled out, their foreign language sharp in the air, accompanied with dull thuds as they beat the villagers. At the school, all the school teacher could do was watch as her students shook in fear, crying in their seats, listening to the chaos outside. Would they come for them next? Their bright, terrified eyes pursued the shadows running past their desk from the stampede that persisted outside while she stood at the front, her eyes fiery but silent with her lips pursed. No one could stop the destruction.

Where the sound of the villagers would have filled the night air, a thick, gross silence penetrated the night as the citizens grieved the day. In the distant forest, bright orange fires flickered, and the occasional raucous sounds of soldiers celebrating their victories of the day rang through the otherwise silent night.

With the sun gone, a gentle breeze blew through the trees, and the creatures of the night began to awaken.

A long, suspended note of a cricket's chirp started. Suddenly, a chorus of frogs began to croak. Inbetween, if you listened carefully, there was a soft rustle from the underbrush as someone began to make their way through the forest.

Riiiibbit! Riiibbit Riibbit!

Light footsteps shuffled across wild grass between the tall, looming trees. The moon's silvery light shone through the gaps of the spindly branches, illuminating a figure in black before they melted back into the shadows.

A tarsier's glowing yellow eyes slowly blinked open, and the rings of yellow turning into crescents as it followed the glint of a blade as it passed by.

The figure in black traveled through the shadows, advancing toward the orange glow of a group of soldiers' campfire.

Sitting by the flames were three men loudly cackling. Two of the men were stocky and wide shouldered, twice the size of the third man, who was tall and thin with sharp features. Their guns, wicked and black, lay beside them. As the fire danced wildly, their shadows, which looked like tall, thin, grotesque creatures of the night, danced wildly too.

The tall thin man smiled while he spoke, his voice hissing. It was not a nice smile, but one that curled up and into his face and harshened his features even more. While one of the stockier men jeered and thunderously clapped in response, the quieter one paid no mind to the discussion. He hummed a song to himself and tapped his feet on the ground as his friend shoveled jackfruit pods into his face and cackled, revealing the glistening golden fruit fibers stuck in his teeth. Even though he seemed indifferent to what was said, when the raucous one eating jackfruits playfully punched his shoulders for acknowledgement, he too, nodded complacently with a smile at what was being said.

Thwump. Crraack!

The thin man sat up quickly to face the forest, abruptly silencing the others. His sharp brows were now pointed, alert at the menacing silence within the forest. You could only hear the steady

crackle of the fire and the low hum of mosquitos. The firelight continued wildly casting their shadows across the nearest trees, but beyond the treeline, the night that hid the forest was black, eerie, and quiet. Even the frogs had stopped croaking.

Still snacking on jackfruit, the stocky soldier stood up and sauntered to the trees, waving his hand nonchalantly. The thin man rubbed his neck to relax the hairs as his friend laughed at him, but his eyes still darted back and forth nervously.

The stocky soldier squinted into the night as he approached the black of the forest. The moon barely made it through the dense branches. The crackle of the fire was now far behind him, and he could no longer hear his companions, who fell silent in anticipation. He ventured further into the dark to check when he spotted two small glowing eyes stared back at him from afar.

A tarsier sat atop the branch of a tall tree, the golden beady eyes watching the man. Its eyes were unblinking and locked onto the fruit in his hands and its small pink mouth licked its mouth in hunger. The man laughed at the tarsier and shook the jackfruit in its face, but his smile twisted downward in horror when he looked just below the small animal. There, he saw a dramatic slash hacked into the thick body of the tree. Bark splintered and shattered into hundreds of pieces onto the floor. No animal did this.

Before he could say anything, the heavy butt of a palik struck the back of his head and he stumbled forward in shock. The jackfruit in his hand tumbled into the dirt, and the chewed mess in his mouth flew out before him. His hands splayed before him to catch his fall. Before he hit the ground, a small hand firmly grasped the hair at the top of his head, yanked his head back, and, before he could take a last breath to holler, a heavy blade sliced through the air before catching him right beneath his jaw and pivoting upward in one smooth motion. Then there was complete silence.

The two men left at the campsite had jumped up at the sounds. Hastily grabbing their guns, they called for him and pointed their barrels into the dark before running after him.

They began to holler at the sight of their companion face-down in the ground. The golden pulp of the jackfruit lay beside him, sparkling under the starlight.

Quickly behind them, the black figure sprinted, flying across the forest floor. A bolo flew through the air, striking the side of the thin man's knee, and soon after the palik swung around to hit his companion in the head.

As both fell, the shadow's nimble fingers grabbed the thin man's gun and flung it across the clearing where it landed in a heavy thud. A small foot underneath a long black skirt flew out, sending the other dropped gun skittering away from their reach.

The bigger man did not fall as easily as his friend, and he quickly turned around and lunged toward their enemy. His charged fists met the cold night air as the fighter agilely turned and danced away from him. Mid-spin, the bolo snapped up into his elbows and a loud crack split through the air. He cried out, falling to his knees and once again the fighter grabbed his head, pulled it back, and brought the bolo down into the soft flesh of his neck.

The thin man cried on the floor in pain, holding his knee close, but soon realized what had happened when he heard the dull thud of his friend hitting the ground and glimpsed at the lithe figure standing in the moonlight.

"Hidoi onna!" he hissed, glaring at the warrior before him. The woman narrowed her eyes and gathered her black skirt, quickly gliding across the bloodied forest floor.

The swoosh and crack of her heavy blade could be heard in the silent night before another heavy thud.

Then the frogs resumed their croaking, rejoining the steady gentle hum of the mosquitos, and if you listened carefully, there was a soft rustle from the underbrush as she began to make her way deeper through the forest.

The next morning, the village was still eerily quiet. In her classroom, the teacher heard a sudden knock on her classroom door. She tensed up, reaching for the door, and opened it, fearing the worst for what was behind its wooden frame.

To her surprise, two children from her class were beaming up at her, crying words of joy as they relayed the news that the soldiers had retreated and that the forest was silent from their presence. Someone, or something, had attacked multiple camps throughout the night, scaring them away. As they celebrated with excitement,

she focused beyond them to the edge of their village where the quiet forest loomed menacingly, her heart beating loudly in her ears. They clung to her skirts and the cheer in their voices soon calmed her racing heart. When they ran off to the next door to spread the news, she closed the door and returned to her desk. There, she closed her eyes momentarily, breathing deeply and listening to the sounds of her village awakening and beginning to return to normalcy. There was the patter of children running. The sound of wooden wheels rolling across the gravelly dirt road in the market. The voices of her neighbors rejoicing at the soldier's retreat. With a heavy sigh, she finally opened her eyes and shuffled the papers on her desk for grading, opened a drawer, and delicately picked up a red pen from a box which lay nestled closely to the bolo in her drawer.

Mistake

Jessa J.

That eclipse wasn't meant to happen
We shouldn't have aligned
We shouldn't have seen each other's shadow
Even on rare occasions
For there was never a spark

We weren't perfect at all
We were far apart on purpose
We should have taken the sign
That when we got aligned
Everything went dark

The world was awe
For how beautiful we were
But never knew the pain we bear
Only for us to show each other care

As we shed blood
Everything went red
I hope they can read
The situation we led

Our distance made sense
On how we should be to each other—
Distant
We were never meant to collide
We should have stayed on our side

Crazy Universe
Still leading us to each other
But this time I won't even bother
Because eclipses aren't meant to happen

Enjaulada/Caged

Maritza Campos

Enjaulada

Estoy cansada del esfuerzo
de picar la misma semilla,
con ánimo, pero no abre.
Mi pico fuerte le saca filo,
creando una ranura pequeña
y revelando una oscuridad
profunda sin ni un premio.

Me balanceo en un palito
y mi cuerpo fatigado se deja
caer en una almohada suave
y cómoda, hecha de plumas
coloradas un azul de mar
eterno, sin límite y sin fin.
Me quedo soñando en paz.

Saboreo tener esa vida libre,
pero aún me despierto entre
las mismas cuatro paredes
de rejas blancas despintadas.
Me tentaron con la vista, pero
me desilusionan con la dureza
del metal que no se deja doblar.

Entonces me pongo a gritar,
esperando que alguien escuche.
Y cuando ya no aguanto más,
me pongo a cantar una canción.
No recuerdo dónde la escuché,
pero recuerdo el ritmo energético
que domina mis alas a bailar
entre el lugarcito que aquí tengo.

Caged

I'm tired of the effort
of pecking the same little seed
hopeful, but it won't open.
My strong beak sharpens it
creating a tiny little slit,
revealing a deep
darkness, without any prize.

I balance on a small stick
and my weary body lets itself
fall onto a soft pillow,
comfortable, made of feathers
colored a sea blue,
eternal, limitless, without end.
I dream in peace.

I savor having that free life,
but I am awoken
between the same four walls
of faded white-paint bars.
They tempt me with the view, but
disappoint me with the hardness
of the metal that refuses to bend.

So I start to scream,
hoping someone hears me.
And when I can't endure anymore,
I begin to sing a song.
I don't remember where I heard it,
but I remember the energetic rhythm
that dominates my wings to dance
inside the little place I have here.

The One Perfect Sound

Matthew Falcon

Perhaps the one perfect sound
Is nothing at all
For every imperfect audio
Has their purpose
But lacks the scope
Beyond its own itself

Yet the sound of
Nothing at all
Silence
Could be more perfect
Than any heard sound
For it is universal
And encompassing
For purpose

A breath between tells
A pause in language
Every rhythm of life
Needs a rest note

For when you need
Anticipation and wait of
What to come
A break of excitement of
Exhilarating noise
A breather from urgency of
Driving alarms
Or even time to break away
Ambient monotony
Silence can provide
All and nothing

Yet the silence we can grasp
Is still imperfect of itself
For true silence must be stiller
Than what we can perceive

Not just meditation
Not only sleep
Or the silence of the lambs
Not just mere quiet
Not even the tinnitus
of sensory deprivation

But a moment of respite
of endless synapse
Thoughtlessness
A cleanse and refresh from
Endless neurotransmission

Not true sound
But absence
Emptiness
Calmer
Just

Nothing

A Place of Joyful Creation

Delia Shepherd

A sacred place
Of movement
Of expression
Of joyful creation

An oasis
A community
Of belonging
A meditation
Of movement reflection

Where creative souls linger
To see, to feel
The transcendent gift of movement

Cultivators of grace and artistry
Channeling, sharing
Thoughtfully imparting
The beauty of dance
Their gifts a blessing to us

A single note of music
Expressed through movement
Feels rapturous
Transcending time and place
Connecting the physical
To the Divine

Such is the grace
of this sacred place
of movement
Of expression
Of joyful creation

Flores

Alicia Aldama



Sarah

Hyejin Jung



Binary Black Holes

Frank Yung-Fong Tang



Imperium

Atharva Salkar



Childhood Toys

Jean Samson



Inside Ukrainian Soul

Tetiana Obrizan





The Universe Within

Eunjung Jung



Monument

Jiaheng Xu



Jewel

Jordan Robinson



Miss Baiji

Ingrid Lu

There exists a video of you on the Internet, tumbling through the aquamarine, your fins carving out the water, your snout probing the shallows. The baiji is now functionally extinct, but you float on like an angel for a minute and a half before you disappear forever. It's a hot summer day. The computer gives out.

In Shanghai, August is unbearable. I pass the days reading comics and sucking on melona bars. I have a tiny apartment in which the electricity sometimes cuts out suddenly, and the ice cream will melt in sticky puddles, dripping down onto the tile floor. I leave the mess for a few days before I give in and wipe it down.

I don't have a job right now. I'm not in school. I came here to see my mother before the next semester starts, but by the time I arrived she was gone. At the time there were a billion things I planned to do — revisit my old apartment, contact some former classmates, stop at the family gravesite — but I'm melting too, sluggish and afraid to go outside. I walk around my unit, pacing the same floors a hundred times over and cataloguing the cracks in the wall.

There's a swimming pool in my neighborhood, and I venture there sometimes at dusk to sit on the edge and dip my feet in. I don't know how to swim. A granny passes by with her little spaniel a few days a week. We don't exchange words, but she gives me candy from her pocket when I catch her eye, and I bow my head and let the dog lick my hand.

I don't know why I haven't gone home. Why haven't I gone home?

Liyu is my cousin and she reminds me of the sparkling days I spent here in my youth. We would ride our bicycles to People's Park and drill math problems for the upcoming school year. I asked her to help me practice vocabulary in English, and she would go through a novel and pick out words, asking me to define them. I did so within the constraints of my baby experience and comprehension.

“Abstract,” she read out in her clear voice.

“A-b-s-t-r-a-c-t. Something that’s conceptual, not physical or realized,” I said.

“Good! Melancholy.”

“M-e-l-a-n-c-o-l-y. Sadness or longing for no real reason.”

Liyu corrected my spelling and said, “That sounds like you.”

We continued the back-and-forth up until we found a word I didn’t know the meaning of.

Since Liyu was three years older than me, my mother let her chaperone me on day trips when I was itching to get out of the house. One day she took me to the aquarium. Mama gave her some money for the admission fee, and she kept it in a little red pouch on her side. When we got to the ticket window, she removed it and counted it out carefully with one hand, holding on to my sweaty fingers with the other. She read out words to me from the visitor’s guide, which contained sections translated into English.

“Companion,” she said. The passage entrapping that word was positioned under a photo of two penguins, faces tucked into one another’s feathery bodies.

“C-o-m-p-a-n-i-o-n. A friend or partner.”

“Extinct?” She sounded out this word.

“X-t-i-n-c-t,” I guessed. “When an animal species dies out.” We stopped there.

The biggest gallery was the open sea. The sardines spun in ring-around-the-rosy circles, shining silver halos under the bright lights. Swimming in their fishy wreaths, they reminded me of polished nickles. There was a wide pool populated with dolphins, the staff reaching their hands into the water and coaxing them towards the crowds.

“Dolphins!” I yelled out, running toward them.

“Keep your voice down,” Liyu shushed, and followed me.

I saw you there that day, lying belly-down at the bottom of the pool, slippery wet. Liyu took a photo on her digital camera. Fifteen years later, she moved away from the city, photo forgotten in a drawer somewhere, the camera long dead.

—

I cry in the bathtub sometimes, sitting naked in its pearly shell.

My first day here, I couldn't reach Mama on the phone. I called about a dozen times before I got into an airport taxi and gave the driver her address.

I was prepared to bust down the door, but she had changed the locks recently to a shiny digital one with a passcode. She used the same password for everything, so I tried it. The door beeped at me and didn't budge.

I tried my birthday: 4-4-2004. It unlocked with a dolphin-esque whir and click.

It smelled like death inside. Something was festering in the house, like spoiled milk and rotting fruit. I found all of those things in the refrigerator, which had blacked out. My feet wouldn't move forward. I felt wetness gathering in my eyes. There was a small box of candy set out on the counter.

I found my mother slumped on the bathroom floor. The crown of her head was blooming violet bruises, though the rest of her skin was the wrong color as well. I opened a window, the smell was overpowering. Although she had been dead for at least a few days, her hand was warm when I clutched it: Shanghai summers.

The bathtub was brimming with tepid water, little pink soaps lined up on the table. I like a hot bath too, I must have gotten it from her. Floating in the nebulous warmth and closing my eyes, I feel like I've gone home, back to where I was before I was born.

They've been looking for you everywhere. Wide surveys of the Yangtze River, lab techs in white coats that remind me of hazmat suits, long trips up and down the water. There may be a few baiji left, but not enough to sustain the population. They plumb the river for signs of you, unsure if you exist, holding out slight hope that we haven't ruined you.

I remember you laying absently on the aquarium floor. They tried to save you there, but you were unhappy clinging on to the dregs of life. I want to see you one last time, and then I'll let you go.

I slip into the pool quietly, head dipping underwater. I stay there for a while before I come up to breathe again, bubbles breaking on the surface.

An Instrument for Becoming

Ash Morgan

Can you remember
The child that you were—
A curious and keen observer
Of everything in our world?

Can you recall
Those precious moments of joy
Before you started to pick up
trauma
Instead of a toy?

The consummate helper
As your sails unfurled
Collapsed and turned bitter
When insults were hurled.

I know

Life
Can
Feel
So
Helpless...

That you seek any escape
From those burdens you carry.
From pits and from traps
And from secrets you'd bury.

Life loses focus
When our bodies betray us.

"Fuck all this shit.
I am so over it."

And yet.

Choices remain to us.
Or so I believe.

Choices are human.
That's not hard to conceive.

Though the choices that open for us
Are the ones we perceive.

But fear makes us blind
To the truth of our place
To the systems that nest us
That we might embrace.

And as you seek
So shall you find
The contributions you might make
And the ties you might bind.

You cannot become
The child that you were
But you can remember
Their voice, so it's heard.

And that can be hard
When your mind starts to race.
You must let down your guard
To grant yourself grace.

So take up their tune.
(It's yours anyway.)
Let it renew you
And show you the way.

This is my story;
This is my song—
That the keys to becoming
Were yours all along.

The Fragile Mind

Annie Hien Nguyen

A true artist, a true writer of the world
has a heart that does not belong in this place of Earth
The more unfortunate for those awake,
left to carry generations of feeling
Finding the beauty behind everything leaves every limb exhausted,
it couldn't be human to go this long
For every artist goes against his very nature
Was this hidden potential truly dormant
Or did it only curse the few?
To see love in everything is to see beauty in suffering
Forever living with tragedy, all for the sake of purity
It was never in our true nature to question life
The thoughtless animals that roam not out of ignorance but peace
We break our own hearts trying to name the storm,
trying to make meaning out of every shadow
The home of ignorance so comforting
Was it worth it to trade the silence of instinct for the wail of knowing?

By Chance, Field Guide Poem

Raquel Jarson

fingers flicker, fly across the page
time immemorial, i drop paint on my canvas
thyme immemorial, in boreal forest
a setting: by the hawkweed
a character: northern pacific rattlesnake
an activity: stargazing in September
what they see: constellations Ophiuchus & Serpens
rattlesnake slithers home, past golden hairstreak butterfly and fairy
bells and gooseberry
meadowhawk dragonfly observes the lanky specter from atop a
dense clump of sierra plum
& primrose
epilogue: sated by a passing gopher, rattlesnake slithers on
liveforever, pearly everlasting, groundsmoke

Institutional Voice

Rahul Verma

This place, I've come to call home now,
But whose place is this really,
Because perhaps, I've come to question
All the things I thought were so certain
And because I was under a notion
That you got to work hard and find a place to call home
And that place will be home to my own
But no no, wait hold up
These states taking school away from our kids
And wow, just to build a bridge
And yes folks, these votes were in, and accounted for,
From your very own,
Neighbors and friends', that are
Sitting in a room,
Raising a hand, that takes away from their next generations
To find a real place in this society
To have a high economic social profile
And to live on and keep what I've worked so hard for
When I'm gone, let my sons' sons, keep this place
When the family name doesn't go on
Before the state decides to take what's mine
When a family line ends,
and there's no one left to will my son's land
They say a religious place and
A cemetery where a person is buried
Cannot just be taken over once again
Never.
A crematorium and a religious place of worship
Are the true means to this place now really all yours

Tungsten and Titanium

Aidan Wigger

Stronger than steel, harder than stone.
Above what's real, solid dead to the bone.
The round that kills, the shield that saves.
The cure in the pill, the pain in waves.
The hottest night, the coldest day.
To prove us right and keep them at bay.

Light as mist, savage as fire.
Rage from the fist, born from the pyre.
A Hephaestean gift, a Promethean spire.
By Athena kissed, by Demeter's ire.

A Walk With Myself

Karina Aplao

Sometimes I like to imagine meeting who I would have been if my family never moved to the U.S. from the Philippines.

I like to imagine all the good she is and how down to earth she must be.

Here in America, I feel I have been taught to be selfish. My goal is to work hard, only for myself, and in that pursuit it has been easy to leave family behind. But her goal would probably be different, embodying the spirit of the Philippines, to live for her family and community, and to always put them first and put herself last.

I like to imagine we would crash into each other one day, looking practically the same. She would have short hair (the heat of Manila would be too much for long hair), and my hair would be long, nearly touching the small of my back. Maybe she wouldn't have eczema, the violent rashes that crawled across my skin because of the dry Californian air. We'd have the same wrinkles by our right eyebrow, caused by the constant furrowing from concentrating and worrying about work, but where the wrinkles around my eyes would show exhaustion from the hustle and from the constant bickering and pressure from my parents, hers might be the same but also crinkled with laughter from the warmth of being surrounded by so much family.

She'd look at me startled and ask me, fluently in Tagalog, "Are you me?"

"I think so," I'd say, in English. And we'd stare and not freak out even though it was strange to see who you would've been if life had been just a little different. Then we'd start walking together, shoulder to shoulder, and chatting like old friends and her speaking in Tagalog, and I in English. It would be a rainy day, not a torrential downpour, but a soft sprinkle, enough for her to be wielding an umbrella,

shielding us from the rain.

"I like your dress," I'd say, smiling at her.

"Oh thank you, I like your hair," she'd say back.

We'd walk in awkward silence for a bit, unsure of what to say. I'd think about how her shoes are cute too.

"What is your life like?" I'd finally ask, curiously.

"I work in Manila in hospice with our sisters, and we still live with our parents," she'd say, smiling at me carefully. "Every morning, I wake up early to commute to the hospital with them. I work long hours, and I don't come home until very late, sometimes past dinner. Our dad or grandma cooks us dinner, and all the cousins come over after school and I help them study since they are still in school. What about you?"

And I'd tell her how I live with my boyfriend, away from my parents. How I hardly see my grandparents and cousins and how I despised my work but kept doing it because I had to to afford rent. I have many friends and we all play tennis, go hiking, or travel together. How I'd traveled to many places: Germany, Thailand, Korea, Hawaii, and New York. I'd look at her expectantly, hoping she was impressed.

"Do you miss them? I would miss them," she'd say, frowning, them meaning my parents, grandparents, and cousins.

"Of course I miss them, I love them. I miss them every week. But I live selfishly because they sacrificed a lot to bring me here and raise me and it's a waste if I don't take the opportunity to live my life fully," I'd say with a bite of guilt. Maybe selfishly wasn't the right word. Maybe it was too harsh, too unforgiving. But the guilt in my throat gave that little word truth.

"Wouldn't repaying them mean not abandoning them?" she'd ask,

and it would hurt me, the way it always hurt me every time I moved farther and farther away and assured myself I would eventually return.

“I am not abandoning them,” I’d say hotly. “What about you? Don’t you wish you could leave?” And a pang of pain would flash in her eyes too, a mirror image of mine, and I would see that wrinkle show up by her right eyebrow.

“Yes, I wish I could, but it’s not what’s meant for me. If I am not there, who would help my cousins? Who would help my sisters, my parents, and my grandparents? I could travel and enjoy life by myself but I think either way I would resent myself forever.”

I nod with her. “Yeah, either way.”

A long silence would stretch between us again before she would say, “So you have a boyfriend? I’ve never had one, I’m too busy.”

“Yes, he’s wonderful,” I’d reply, smiling and thinking about him. “You would like him. He is kind and thoughtful, and takes care of me well.”

“I hope I find that one day,” she’d say softly.

“You will.” Why wouldn’t she?

“Can you tell me about the evenings at home?” I’d ask, longingly.

She’d look at me knowingly and begin to tell me about how she and her sisters would walk in the warm air from the bus station, laughing after a long day of work. They’d get to their house where their dad would be cooking and the TV would be loudly blaring along with music from the radio. Their grandma would be peeling fruit next to the fan, and their mom would be keeping her company, gossiping with her. They’d greet them with kisses on the cheeks, and in the other room their cousins would be crowded around the bigger dining

table with their homework. Within seconds of entering they'd beg for help and they'd all joke about how they can't relax for a minute, but they'd sit down with them immediately and help anyway. The air is warm and thick with humidity, and it is comforting, not uncomfortable, like a hug from an old friend.

At night they'd eat from the same food side by side at the table, their voices clamoring as they would talk and laugh about the day. After, they cleaned up: the sisters would clean the table and the cousins would stand crowding the kitchen sink washing the dishes. They'd all take turns in the single bathroom they all shared to get ready for bed, and then they'd all cram into the single bedroom they shared, laying side by side with the fan blowing across them to cool them. This is what evenings were like there.

Hearing it would make me ache like no other, as though this separate life was something I once had and something to miss. As we walked side by side I'd come to realize I was alone because she was me, and I was her, and the guilt and love we shared was really the same.

Lessons From My Mother's Hands

Sandra Tingalay

I. The Hands That Held

My mother's hands were small, with veins that surfaced like rivers in summer. When I was a child, I believed they were the strongest hands in the world. They bathed me, fed me, patched scraped knees, and braided my hair before school. The warmth of her palm was my first understanding of safety. It wasn't until I was older that I realized how much those hands had given - not only to me, but to a world at war, to villages forgotten by maps, to strangers in need of healing.

II. Nurse of the Forgotten

During World War I, my mother became a nurse. She was barely out of her teens when the war came, bringing young men mangled by bombs, old women starved thin by blockade, and children whose coughs spoke of something worse than colds. She traveled from village to village, carrying a tin box of supplies, a rolled mat, and those miraculous hands.

She was known as one of the best operation theater nurses - quick, precise, and unflinching. I once overheard an old doctor say, "If I had ten more like her, we'd need no surgeons." Her hands stitched torn flesh, calmed tremors, and delivered babies into a world still learning to stay kind. When she came home, I'd sit in her lap, fascinated by her stories of field hospitals and makeshift clinics under banyan trees.

III. The Slow Goodbye

Years later, those same hands began to tremble.

First, she forgot where she left her diary. Then she forgot my birthday. Eventually, she forgot me. The diagnosis came like a quiet storm: Alzheimer's. White lungs on the scan, respiratory failure lurking close behind.

One day, she left home and wandered off, lost on the way to a street she'd walked for fifty years. A kind police officer brought her back. After that, I locked the doors. I became her nurse - feeding her Ensure and soup through a breastfeeding bottle I still keep in my drawer. She stopped eating solids, then stopped asking for water. Her bladder gave way. She soiled her clothes. Constipation came, and I—her daughter, her child—used my gloved fingers to remove the hardened matter, weeping all the while.

IV. The Hands That Created

It wasn't only lives my mother's hands tended to - they made art too.

When I was young, she would sit me down by the window with a notebook and a tin of colored pencils. She taught me how to shade a sky with pastels, how to capture the curve of a leaf, how to steady my wrist as I traced the outline of a face.

"A good hand," she would say, "can heal a wound, deliver a baby, and draw a sunset."

She believed every person should leave a mark beyond their labor, something beautiful that asks nothing in return. Alongside medicine, she kept a diary—small, leather-bound books filled with quick sketches of patients, pressed flowers, and pages of thoughts scrawled late at night. I remember reading them years later and recognizing the same restless need to document the world that had begun growing in me.

It was through her guidance that I became an artist and a writer. My paintings carry the shape of her landscapes, my diary the impulse of her reflections. In every brushstroke and every line I write, there's a

trace of the lessons she passed down.

Even now, when my hands move across canvas or keyboard, they move in the rhythm of hers.

V. After the Last Breath

On October 20, 2022, she passed. I sat beside her, holding those same hands—now frail, papery, the blue of the veins having faded like dusk. I wept for the nurse she had been, for the mother she was, for the stories those fingers had told and could no longer hold.

I remember thinking: even after death, hands retain the memory of what they've done. The way her fingers curled slightly inward as if still cradling a child, still holding a scalpel, still stirring a pot of soup for me.

I buried her with one of her diaries.

VI. The Hands I Carry

I keep painting. I keep writing. I teach others to hold a brush, to trust their touch, to document their own memories. Every canvas I stretch feels like an offering. Every word I write feels like speaking to her, through the ether, across time.

I look at my own hands now—the lines etched deep, the faint tremor at times—and I see hers.

This is how we survive. This is how we remember.

I Wish My Mom Had a Better Life

Sehej Pawar

I wish my mom lived a better life,
one where she got to be who she wanted to be,
without the weight of all of us,
without the fear of letting anyone down.
I've seen her tired in ways sleep
could never fix, like her dreams packed
themselves in boxes, and she never
had time to open them again.
She used to say, "maybe in another life,"
and I'd pretend I didn't hear the crack in
her voice when she said it.
She deserved more than chores and
holding in her tears, more than being
everyone's safe place but never her own.
If she had lived for herself, maybe she'd
laugh louder,
sleep longer,
feel more,
cry less.
I love her, but sometimes
I wonder if love ever held her back too.

Three Kinds of Women

Alisa Closson

I

Statuesque

She stands with bold green eyes,
Frozen like Madonna, yet a beauty descended from Mother.
The sun shines over her head at all times, and
she poses, not wearing a flowing Greek curtain, but wearing a cone
bra corset.

II

Tempestuous

She's a top. *Duh!* Or she's vivaciously tempestuous...but that's a mouthful.
With each step, the ground trembles; avalanches start from her aching mood.
But she's composed—
a kind of quiet anger that freezes you to the bone,
a scalding rash that follows closely in your dreams.

III

Vivacious

She charms you, bubbles through your friends, and lures you in.
Seemingly snakish, but ignorant—
innocently offering herself, making you the snake.
She collides with your skin, and you feel her warmth—but question its
authenticity.
She's poisonous, chocolate to a dog.

A Time of Destruction

Frank Yung-Fong Tang

Noise raised up
In the cold winter morning
7:30AM
I heard that in the Main Quad

The demolition
The killing of Flint
Started on time
Every morning

You had your glory
Across from the Sinking Garden Water Fountain
Musician played their Piano, Cello and Violent
Dancer leaped
Apple hosted their announcement here-
Macintosh Classic, iMac, iPod, iPhone, Apple Watch, etc.

Now you are dead!

They open you up
From the top
Carving out your skin
Chopping you in half
Slashing your flesh

Demolishing
Destruction
Dissection

I saw your haslet
Your sickening inside
Pale, no blood
Your gut, cut into pieces, laying on the ground
Waiting to be clean up

The glory of Flint is over
You serve your time
They are killing you
But I will remember you
Forever

Stillness of the Swamp

Anna Graber-Naidich

My heart has missed a silent beat.
I lose control; I'm obsolete.
And in the stillness of the swamp,
Ungodly creatures twist and stomp.

Their soggy, desolating grip
Suffocates me; I can't breathe.
Tall willow weeps in muted tones,
Its arms stretch out as aching bones.

Its fingernails slashing the dark,
They scrape my flesh and leave a mark.
Warm ether wraps me up, engulfs,
And I hear solemn stifled laughs.

I try to run but I can't win
the current that's pulling me in.
The understanding makes me grin,
The swamp resides here, deep within.

To Tolstoy

Jessie Luo

—In Memory of the 115th Anniversary of His Death

A heavy hammer
struck again and again at a hard nut
The nut finally opened—
Not a fresh creature
But a wrinkled face
waiting for your words

An old house crumbled in a barren field.
All voice and fanfare
vanished in the air.
An ancient clock,
Long stripped of lacquer sheen
Against relentless wind and rain
It clicks, clicks and clicks

Since ancient times
so many alchemists have tried to turn lead into gold
A young master joins the old workshop, lights a fire
Burns out the impurities
And separates the metals.
In the hot furnace
Gold shines in its finest glitter
Lead leaves in its blackest plainness

The railway station connects your novel and your life
A blanket of snowfall
obscures the border between heaven and earth
I was weak and full of fear—
But you hold my hand
and led me
through the thickness of fog

Lingers

Viviana de Leon

I still feel you—
like the warmth woven into the blanket we once shared.
Your presence is the sweetest aroma—
delicate,
but it lingers with a bitter trace.

A stubborn note,
like a splinter buried deep
in soft flesh.
A recurring prick that sheds life—

I let you linger,
like your cologne
on every letter I've kept sealed away.

My throat tightens
at the whisper of solitude—
a whisper I've grown far too familiar with.
I tremble at the thought.

Memories,
as sweet as honey
and caustic as the citrus peels
that fell behind your home each winter.

Clinging to every cherished memory,
my hands begin to blister—
loosening with each tangy recollection.

Loosening my grip,
relief fills my lungs—
a fresh breath of air
I have not tasted in years.

Yet,
I still feel you—

Galaxy of Time

Kylie Arenas

My hand brushed through the galaxy
Feeling the air, thickness, hefty.
In that moment,
I felt fate change.

Free to open the next chapter,
my young mind hopes to jump from time,
to see what awaits at the corner,
my nimble hands control time!

Dig deep! Deeper!
I cry, scream, wail.
Control our youth,
for the thief tries to rob us each day.

Once, allow me to feel free
of this timeline.
Restrained me and shackled my hands and feet to—
carry the weight called life.

I'll run free.
Brushing the strands of the galaxy.
Dancing on the stars, removing the dirt of the planet, like a speck.
My hands wild—liberated!

Curse you,
for taking my fleeting youth,
it's mine—does not belong to you!
Now, free my hands so I can roam the world and feel the galaxy.

Ribbit

Amaya Gonzalez

I decided to grab a cup of coffee before work. It wasn't really part of my routine, but it would happen often enough that I was vaguely familiar with the workers and the customers. Plus, it was only 5 minutes away from my job site. As I walked in, the scent of coffee beans rushed to meet me. I felt welcomed by the familiar scent, the cozy scenery, and the hard-working staff. For a Wednesday, it was pretty busy. I ordered my medium mocha after a few minutes and luckily found an empty seat at a table. There was an older man in a beanie sitting across diagonally, but I'm sure he didn't mind. I checked my phone and realized the lack of traffic gave me ample time to do some scrolling. My first destination was Instagram. Apparently, my school friend is having a child! I try to find the perfect emoji to comment—

“Ribbit.”

I look up immediately. My head swivels around the room to find the source. Is something playing a video? Is it a part of the coffee shop playlist? I glance at the old man in the beanie to see if he heard it as well. He looked unbothered. The lack of answers left me unsatisfied, but I had to go back to my phone. Next was Facebook. I opened it up to see—

“Ribbit.”

Now I know it wasn't just in my head. There wasn't anyone close enough to me, besides the man in the beanie, to hear it as well. I looked on the floor to figure out if a frog possibly got in. Nothing. Hm. I began to fidget in my seat. The man was still unaffected, still crouched over himself with his head down, but I'm sure he heard it. Finally, I just decided to ask him. “Excuse me!” I try to get his attention. He looks up to me but his body stays the same. His hands stayed up on the table covering his torso. “Did you hear a ribbit?”

“Yes,” he replies immediately. I'm taken aback at his quick response. Maybe I'm not as familiar with the coffee shop as I thought. Maybe they have a pet frog? Or maybe—

“It's me, I apologize for the distraction.” His eyes sink in shame. He brings his hands and his head closer to himself.

“Oh it's no problem, don't worry, I was just wondering!” I say assuredly, trying my best to not add to his negative feelings.

“There is a frog within me.”

I don't know how to take this. I turn my head to the side in curiosity and chuckle to fill the silence.

“What do you mean by that?” I’m genuine in my ask. He sighs in his chair, his eyes done with me. He looks down at the floor and he opens his mouth ever so slightly.

“When I was 43, I was wandering the swamp just 2 hours from here. There was nothing different about that day. Nothing. I have gone to the swamp every weekend. They and marshes comfort me with all their life, the ones that is seen above water and the unseen below. Maybe it was just a bad day in the swamp. But there I was, looking down in the dirt for different mushrooms and whatever when a baby frog caught my eye. It’s cute because it’s a frog yeah, and of course I’m gonna wanna look closer at a baby frog, but I wasn’t ready for it to jump. It jumped right into my mouth. I don’t know what it was. Shock. Fear. Even maybe excitement. But I swallowed. And now that frog has been living in my stomach for 5 years. I shouldn’t have been at the swamp that day, I had things to do. I thought they would come out the other way if you know what I mean, but they stayed here. Right here. I thought maybe it was a test from the swamp. To see if I really cared for it like I thought. I swallowed worms and roaches so they’d have something to eat. I was so scared to kill them I didn’t eat much else. I stayed close to the swamp to feed them. The frog in my belly. Yeah. One year in I tried to vomit them out. For its own sake. I didn’t know it would live in my stomach like this. I’ve taken laxatives. I’ve drowned it with alcohol. Tried yelling it out. But it’s been five years and I still don’t know what to do. Maybe I’m cursed by the swamp. Or maybe I am the swamp now. I thought it was a test, but it feels like a curse now. I wish I had an answer. Froggy lets me talk when I need to. But nobody is really trying to talk to me right now. So they’ve been real chatty. I don’t know. Sorry again.”

I didn’t know what to say, but I knew to keep smiling and making eye contact. If I knew I would be here for this long I would’ve just ignored the sounds. Ugh. If I had more time I would try to comfort him. If there were more time and resources then of course I would help him and listen to him more and help him know he’s heard! Of course I would!

Unfortunately, I started work in five minutes, and I knew my boss would be in my case if I was late again. Also, my name was called out since the beginning of his story, and I was scared that someone would take my drink. Life is such a bummer!

“Thank you so much for telling me, I’m so sorry. I promise you weren’t distracting me at all. I hope you can figure it out soon. So nice meeting you.” I gave him a genuine, kind smile and our eyes met. He chuckled, waved his hand and brought his arms around his head once again.

Models

Giljoon Lee

For April Dawn Alison

The hulking camera
& the sanitized femininity.

The heels & the dresses
& my eye. His job:

capture others. Outside
the window the light

is too bright, so he closes the blinds.
Soften the strobes, position the reflectors, blocks.

Puts down his bag.
Smoke emerges from the opening

like a birthday candle extinguishing.
A birth, or a rebirth.

Deep inside, a polaroid camera:
a woman fixed inside its lens

permanently like a broken mirror.
But the model strikes

her pose & the trance is lost.
He pulls the trigger

and for a moment
everyone in the room is blinded.

Then the next pose.

Defining Moment

Katelyn Wang

It finally all felt right; my distance and form from the edge of the beam to my position and stance right now were undeniably perfect, I could feel my teammates' lingering stares, and all their eyes were on me.

Most people's earliest memories start with their first steps, or first words, but my earliest memories were my first cartwheel and first somersault. Recently, I finally made it past all the learning levels to my first competitive team. My new team had a meet in the upcoming week, but I was struggling to land a certain move, a back handspring on the beam. I would go through my entire routine over and over, but to no avail; I felt as if I had spent my entire day, from 8 AM to 7 PM, just on the beam that day. "Damn it, what the hell's wrong with me?" I said while pushing my back off the mat to hold my sore arms, which were now adorned with fresh bruises from just today's practice alone. I found myself saying that phrase often throughout that day, but with a little more exhaustion added every time.

On the other side of the gym was this insane, 4'10" woman, also known as our coach, who tormented all the gymnasts from day to night. In the short time I had been on the team, one thing I had not failed to notice was how insanely strict my coach was; she showed no pity for even the smallest stumbles and falls and watched over the gym like a hawk. Luckily, I noticed she wasn't looking in my direction, so I had a moment to lie down after all those falls. I felt all the soreness of my body swelling, and my head was pounding with loud aches of disappointment. The feeling of all that failure felt just as gross as the sweat that clung to my body; the only difference was that I could wipe the sweat off my forehead, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake off the heavy feeling of failure.

"SO IT'S NAPTIME?" exploded through my eardrums, followed by a storm of colorful curses and jarring insults. Before my mind could even comprehend her words, my whole body ripped itself off the cold blue mats, and my body went staunchly vertical like a petrified soldier. I saw my teammates giggling as they walked toward my coach, who had just openly humiliated me in front of

the entire gym, trailing right behind her and making their way to me. Moments like this made me realize what it meant to be part of the team, I wanted to be laughing with those girls, not the awkward fool they were laughing at. I was the youngest and newest addition to the team, but all the other girls seemed light years ahead of me in both skill and confidence. Right now, it feels like them vs. me, even though I was accepted into the team, it hardly felt like it. My coach's eyes followed me, her icy glare made all the hairs on my body stand up as I mounted the beam with shaking limbs. I had been the newest addition to my gym's team of national award-winning competitive gymnasts, but I was the youngest, least experienced, and least achieved out of them all. Their team pictures, medals, trophies, and awards covered the gym's walls on all sides, I couldn't help but feel inferior to the rest of them as I looked down at the red and purple bruises on my feet. I wanted to show them I deserved to be one of them, and I wanted to show my coach that I could improve; my spot on the team wasn't as futile and useless as it seemed.

In one swift movement, my feet left the coarse sandy surface of the beam, and the sound of my teammates' hurried cheers of encouragement flooded my ears. That fleeting moment made me think I was finally about to land this frustrating move after all those hours.

My hands grabbed the beam from under me, its sturdy hold reassured me that this would be the one. My legs cut through the last half of the air. A confident smile crept on my face for just a second, but it quickly turned to worry when I no longer felt the beam securely under me; my balance had faltered.

My left foot crashed into the corner of the beam, making all the blood in my body rush to my ankle. In just one motion, my breath got caught in my throat, my back struck the cold mat, and all the air in my lungs had been knocked out.

I gasped for air as I brought my calloused hands to my chest, rolling over on the blue mat. I'm right back to where I started. Adrenaline ran through my veins and numbed the pain of all the day's bruises and scrapes, but it couldn't stop the feeling of humiliation when I heard the vicarious painful gasps from my teammates. There was no way I could face them again, not when they knew I had been working on this move for hours and continuously failed to do just one simple move. I wanted to scurry away and hide, but I

physically couldn't move. I couldn't bear to stand up or even get my feet to budge, so I lazily shunned my face from my teammates as I put my head between my knees. I hid my head in the darkness of my embarrassment, all the blood in my body rushed to my bright red face, and tears began to push their way out of my eyes. Despite the looming eyes of judgment and jerking pain I was in, nothing was scarier than when I realized my coach was watching every move. As if the pain surging through my legs wasn't enough, I was about to get the loudest reprimanding of swears and insults in my life. I was paralyzed in fear for whatever beration was about to come, so I laid deadly still on the mat like a hidden corpse. I could hear my teammates faintly calling my coach over, and the sound of her footsteps growing closer. Amongst the cloud of soft murmurs that began to surround me, I knew a thundering yell from my coach was impending, and there was nowhere I could hide. I could feel her footsteps as she began to walk near, her movements shaking the mat under me, until she stopped right in front of my still body. I could see a shadow hover over me. Was she about to grab me with her arm or hit me in the head? She held her hand in front of my face and quietly took my hand. She walked me over to the side mats and let me sit on a block.

No harsh words or burning insults were projected, just a quiet apology. Not many words were said, but she handed me an ice pack and put her jacket over my shoulders as I wiped chalk, sweat, and tears from my face. I allowed the refreshing wave of water to soothe the burning sores of the day while she stood in front of me and continued to yell her usual critiques at the other girls.

I started at the back of my coach's head and relished in her unpredictable action. That unexpected gentle kindness stopped my crying and gave me a sense of sudden encouragement. No injury could stop me from what I wanted to do because there were people who wanted me to succeed, but I still had a long way to go to prove to my team that I could be one of them. Although it was shocking and probably out of the ordinary for my coach, that quiet, yet inspiring kindness brought me to my feet and took me back to practice the next day, ready to try again.

Heart of the Sea

Ranhee Choe

There are plenty of hearts in the sea,
But what if I want mine?
Why do I need to throw my heart out there?
When I can float on my own.

Give a soul a heart and they'll feel for a life,
Let them have their own and be free to sail.

My blood is flowing enough for two,
I don't need to rely on a lifeguard,
Who will only steal my lungs,
I am no fish out of water,

What's the point in reeling other hearts in,
When I'm satisfied with mine?
So let me sail the oceans as I wish,
I don't need swimming lessons
I know how not to drown,

I'm just a drop in the ocean,
Something nobody will miss,
I will make waves, but I have not rocked the boat,

I think my heart is ready to dive,
But why should I let someone else discover my heart?
I have my two hands to hold for comfort

I think I'm ready to dive.

Picking Up the Pieces

Annie Hien Nguyen

To see beauty in life is to acknowledge death, for the greatest of
change happens after this timely departure

Forgive my lack of irony I will soon forget this notion

Though to mourn would be hypocritical

I find my reasoning so just

The fabrication of choice will have you wondering what fate could
possibly be

To acknowledge this specifically may ruin ones dream I suppose

Life ready to crack and fall at a moments notice, then stuck together

With the chance that things may work again

I am reminded it is only but a chance...

Yet this grief that walks with the gamble, brings out the brightness
of the world, of what could be

What we want it to be

Still the possibility lingers, though only with the thought of our
passing will this remain

Grief

Catalina Ramirez

How strange is it
To miss someone
You knew would soon
Be gone

I Wish I Was Healed When I Met You

Katelyn Yoo

i wish i was healed when i met you
i wish i held your hand
when you tried to hold mine.
my hands were
too stiff,
too broken,
too bruised,
to wrap it around yours.

i wish i was healed when i met you
i wish i felt the warmth of your fingers
as they combed through my hair.
but i could still feel his icy grasp
lingering—holding me back.

i wish i was healed when i met you
as you held me in your arms,
i felt suffocated from the thoughts of him
walking away
slamming the door behind him
leaving me paralyzed
on the ground
weighed down by all his empty promises and lies.

you gave me
the stars,
the moon,
the sky—
everything i've ever prayed for;

and all i gave you was my back
when i turned to walk away.

you didn't deserve the way i treated you.
all the mixed signals,
games,
silence,
abandonment.
all the scars he left on me,
i gave to you.

i wish i was healed when i met you.
i am so sorry.
you were the most perfect,
kind,
loving,
soul.
maybe one day,
when i am finally whole,
we'll meet again—
and i'll love you the way you deserved
the first time.

Memory of a Long, Long Childhood Day

Panpan Chen

A long, long childhood day so bright.
The endless night will soon depart,
Yet morning's glow still hides from sight.

At five o'clock, the alarm's sharp chime
Wakes a girl from slumber deep.
Rubbing her eyes, she greets the time,
A hurried start from fading sleep.
Breakfast done, she steps outside,
A long, long walk to school ahead.

Breathless steps on hills so steep,
Through rivers crossed, where waters spread.
She must not be late, it would bring shame,
By six-thirty, she is finally in her seat,
An endless cycle, a fate ingrained.
Math, then language, and math once more,
Lessons stretch like time unchained.
The clock hands crawl, she murmurs in her mind,
"Is recess near?"
"When does lunchtime arrive?"

Another long, long walk back home,
Where waiting meals bring warmth and cheer.
A nap so brief, a fleeting rest,
Then back again, the school day only half done,
The same long, long day repeats,
A rhythm worn, yet somehow sweet.
But now, time slips through my hands,
Gone before I grasp its strands.
Was there a thief who stole my days?
Or did they fade in a haze,
Now I search for that endless time in vain?

Landscape With Water

Hyejin Jung



The Eye of the Sky

Grace Li Zheng



Blue Mountains

Khanh Nguyen



Double Rainbow

Jean Samson



The Road Trip

Jigna Bhakta



Vampire Girl

Khanh Nguyen



Big Game

Cheryl Olano

The moon was a silver coin. It was under its full glow that you made your way through the forest, shivering in the wind's chill embrace.

The woods were unnaturally quiet as you picked your way through them. Every crunch of your boots in the snow seemed to ring out like a gunshot. The wool cloak you wore now was the thickest you owned, but even still—you were freezing. It was the dead of winter, after all. You had set out from your house with a small oil lantern, but twenty minutes into your journey a particularly hard gust of wind caused you to lose your balance and drop the lantern. The flame had been extinguished in the snow and so you've been trudging on in near darkness ever since.

And still you pressed on, even as the woods grew deeper and denser around you. You kept warm thoughts at the front of your mind, tucked them close to you like layers of fleece. You pictured your toasty bed at home, the cabin awash with the orange glow of a lit fireplace. You pictured your wife curled up with your dogs, all of them buried under a mountain of blankets. You would return to them soon. You would come through the door and knock the snow off your boots in the entryway, then you'd bumble around your small kitchen and make tea for yourself and your wife while Shadow and Noodle tangled themselves in your skirts. You imagined you could taste the chamomile, but then the icy fingers of windchill worked their way inside your cloak and all thoughts of warmth were gone. You would go home soon, but for now you pressed on.

You couldn't say exactly what it was, but something in you told you to set off into the woods tonight.

The itch had started a few nights ago. Some instinct in you had you standing at the window after moonrise, staring out into the dark depths of the woods. The treeline started a scant few yards from your back door, a close temptation. You managed to ignore it, ignore

the concerned looks from your wife—until tonight. Tonight, you left your wife asleep and warm in bed, pulled on your boots, and stole away into the icy forest.

There was something in these woods, and tonight you were going to find out what.

The longer you wandered the less clear your surroundings got. Your mind started to feel hazy, your footsteps started to slow. It was so cold out here. You just needed to rest. You'd rest, warm yourself up, and then you'd continue your journey. You found shelter at the base of a massive pine, its boughs heavy with snow, and curled up to rest.

When you awoke, there was blood everywhere.

The full moon's light illuminated the scene like a silvery spotlight. Wet heaps of meat slumped in the snow, corpses unrecognizable in their mutilation. Shining layers of white tendon and pink muscle and yellow fat flung far from the bones they were torn from. The once porcelain white snow was now awash scarlet with blood, dark pools of blackened red seeping from the largest flesh piles. Glistening entrails strung between bodies like gorey limp party streamers, white flecks of chipped bone sprinkled throughout like confetti. Under the hot stench of viscera was the stink of animal, so strong it struck you with the primal instinct to flee—to fear the clawed, furred death that must haunt these woods.

The remains might have been solely animal—for it was clear from the amount of gore that more than one thing had died here—were it not for the single human hand, only a few scant feet from you, laying cradled in the snow in a bed of spreading red.

You stumbled back in horror, falling back into the snow in your haste to move away. You yelped as wet ice hit your skin and were startled to realize that your clothes were now in tatters, your heavy wool cloak completely gone, and you were drenched in blood. You stared down at your hands in mute horror, the blood coating them to the elbow and so dark red it was almost black, bits of bone and marrow clinging to your forearms.

You scrambled to your feet and looked around. This was not the clearing you had laid down to rest in. You did not know this part

of the forest. You tried to get your bearings but your gaze kept catching on the hand—that horrible hand, fingers outstretched, palm up as if in supplication—unmistakably human—

A snapping branch tore your eyes from the hand.

You did not stick around to see what had made the noise. Something deep and instinctual in you had you running before you could think. You tore through the woods almost impossibly fast, your heartbeat a drum pounding in your ears.

But the woods were dark and deep, and you were a poor, wretched thing in its clutches. You chanced a look over your shoulder and your foot caught on something. You hit your head on the way down. The exhaustion and fear caught up with you. Vision fading, you curled up on your side and waited for the end to take you. The last thing you saw before your eyes slid closed was the round face of the moon.

That is how I found you the next morning.

You were alive, of course. Our kind are notoriously hard to kill and I knew one night outside in the snow wasn't going to hurt you. Still, I had flown into a panic that morning when I woke to find you missing. I didn't think you'd go out so soon, my sweet thing. I thought we had another month, maybe two before the wolf overtook you. I couldn't believe I had slept through you leaving.

But regardless—I had come prepared. I bundled you up in blankets and loaded you onto our sled. The dogs were happy to see you. Shadow licked your face a few times before dutifully allowing me to clip the reins onto him. Noodle was already in position, and together the two of them tugged us back to the warmth and safety of our home. I tucked you into bed and then doubled back to clean up your kill site.

It was certainly a sight to behold.

Later, when you'd fully recovered and recounted the night to me, you tried to downplay the violence—but, my love, when I saw the aftermath of your first hunt I was nothing but utterly enamored. My heart swelled with affection as I took in the carnage. You had taken down a number of big game, including the rude old man that lived in the log cabin down by the road. That one would be harder

to hide, but people go missing in these woods all the time. It was my fault for not preparing you better.

I reflected as I buried the bodies. I almost didn't recognize the signs when they first started presenting in you. I'd spent so long assuming you were human, that I was the only monster in our neck of the woods. You lack any visible bite marks so I can only assume that you were born a wolf, not made into one like me. We'll need to have a talk with your parents. I have a sneaking suspicion that you might be adopted.

I finished the clean up by midday, then made my way back to our cottage. You would wake soon and I didn't want you to wake up scared and alone. Besides, I was eager to teach you everything I knew. I've never had anyone else to share this side of myself with, and now I have you. My wife, my beloved—and now we are a pack, you and I.

I ran back home with a wolfish grin.

Remisery

Aidan Wigger

Part 1

Where bleak meets black and where the night meets ocean, that is where you'll find me," were his last words spoken aloud before he pulled the trigger of the Smith and Wesson .38 Special revolver aimed at his skull.

"Hello, my name is Dr. Parsotam. You're currently at El Camino Hospital," a woman's voice stated from behind his eyeballs and in front of him. As she spoke, a blue-violet ink drop fell onto the black canvas of his mind's eye. "Can you please tell me your name?"

"A— Alex. Alex Weller," he stuttered as though he had forgotten momentarily. He strained to open his eyes, but the bright fluorescent lights hit his retinas like a baseball bat.

"How are you feeling, Alex? Do you know what happened?"

"My eyes hurt." He struggled to open his eyes fully but made some progress in how long he could endure the pain. He sensed that he was groggy, too, but couldn't grasp how or why. He recalled the click of the gun, then the click of the gun, then the click of the gun, again and again. It started to echo and amplify, click, click, click, CLICK, click, CLICK, CLICK, CLICK, CLICK, CLICK.

Norepinephrine dumped into his guts like frozen acid on boiling asphalt. He opened his eyes instantly, ignoring the pain. Dr. Parsotam looked down at him from the bedside, her large, pregnant belly protruding from her lab coat. A nurse stood opposite, silently observing Alex, the doctor, and the vital signs monitor beside him.

"Wait! Where the fuck am I?! Who is that?! Who are you?!" He tried to push himself upright but felt weak and fluid, as if his muscles were sponges.

"Alex, you are in the hospital. My name is Dr. Parsotam; this is your nurse, Michelle. You've suffered a traumatic brain injury. Do you remember what happened?"

"Yeah! I blew my fucking brains out! What the fuck am I doing here? Did I miss? Am I dead? I'm alive?"

"You're alive, Alex," she responded as if it were good news.

"Oh no! No!" He moaned in pain, writhing in his hospital bed. "No! Fuck no! I wanted to die! You have to let me fucking die!"

"No, we can't do that. We want you to live, Alex," the doctor said, sounding almost hurt but sympathetic.

"Well, who gives a fuck what you want?!" He was starting to panic, like a trapped animal, his eyes darting for an exit, but in this case, it was an exit from his mortal coil. To his left, he spotted it. Summoning all his will and strength, he lunged for the cables hanging from his monitors and wrapped them around his neck,

"Michelle!" cried out the doctor, but the nurse, better trained and more experienced in physicality, was already at Alex's side, trying to pull the cabling from him before Alex could even feel short of breath. He strained with all his might to get them, but could barely move an inch in his state. The doctor had stepped away to call for assistance while the nurse, Michelle, held one arm pinned to the bed.

"Alex, if you keep fighting, we'll have to restrain you!" she threatened.

"Just fucking kill me! It's all black, all burnt!" he screeched at the people in the room, at all existence, to any gods he didn't believe in but might grant his wish.

Dr. Parsotam was giving orders, and Michelle was communicating with the newly arrived nurses and guards, but Alex heard nothing but the sound of his own wailing. His screams filled his lungs and emptied them until they were hoarse, and he screamed again, only interrupted by sobs. He saw nothing but brief flashes of blurry light obscured by tears. So, he tightly closed his eyes while he screamed, begging for death, sobbing violently, and pulling and pushing against the grips of those fighting to keep him alive.

The restraints were applied to him, limb by limb. He immediately ripped them from the bed, their fabric straps too weak to hold a grown man. Everyone rushed to restrain him again as he made for the cables once more.

Before long, strong leather restraints were secured to him, and a shot went into his arm.

"It's okay, Alex, it's going to be okay, buddy," someone said. His fight was quickly leaving him; his raspy screams grew softer. He imagined his brains sprayed over the floor and walls, and he fanta-

sized about those cables wrapped tightly around his throat, his eyes and tongue bulging out of his sickly blue face, and the bed stained with urine.

“Why can’t I have what I want?” Alex muttered to himself before drifting off into dreamless chemical sleep.

Part 2

He awoke to a foul-tasting film covering his parched and acrid mouth, and he remained strapped to his bed. His whole body ached, but his forearms throbbed.

His mind was fogged in like a remote coastal town, but without a foghorn to guide him through it. His thoughts flitted in and out of memory and into oblivion, as if he were static in time while simultaneously soaring through it. Alex glanced down at his body at the straps, while his IV was taped to his hand as securely as if it could weather a hurricane. His other hand resembled a swollen rubber glove turned into a water balloon, with a small scab marking where he assumed the old IV had been.

Dazed beyond measure, he yearned for water, but he fell back to sleep before he could recall that thought.

Some indeterminate time later, he awoke with a slightly clearer head, only to see a nurse, not Michelle, swap out his catheter bag with a fresh one. She didn’t notice he was awake, which didn’t matter, as he immediately fell asleep again.

Once again, he got up later in the day, or perhaps the next day. Dr. Parsotam was softly shaking his shoulder.

“Alex. Alex. Alex, could you please wake up so we can talk?” It was a command masquerading as a request. He tried to push himself up, but his hands slipped on the sheets as the restraints at his wrists cut his leverage short. Dull but intense pain throbbed through his arms and ankles. He was tired and surrendered, resolving to lie still, staring up at the doctor.

“Alex, do you still remember why you’re here?”

“Yeah, I tried to kill myself,” he said dryly yet resentfully. She didn’t reply immediately, so he glanced out the window at the towering redwoods partially obscuring the humble Silicon Valley skyscrapers.

“You didn’t try, Mr. Weller. You shot yourself in the head. The bullet penetrated through your frontal lobe, completely destroying it, and the exit wound was just as catastrophic. You were pronounced dead at the scene. That was six months ago, Mr. Weller.”

“Holy shit... I went to Hell? I’m in Hell? That makes so much sense! Hell is a hospital room?!” Alex barked deliriously, as if he had just realized he was currently in a dream where nothing mattered anymore.

“No, Mr. Weller, this is not Hell. You are alive. This is real,” Dr. Parsotam said with genuine sympathy.

“Bullshit. I blew my head off and this is Hell, some fucking lame, ironic heaven, or some DMT trip nanoseconds before my rotten brains slop over the walls...” Alex paused and thought for a second. “Or some really intense dream? No— can’t be. A vision? I don’t understand what the fu—”

Dr. Parsotam interrupted his ramblings. “You were 5150’d six years ago, am I correct, Mr. Weller? In Michigan?”

“Yeah...” Alex was wary of this line of questioning.

“You moved to California sometime after that? Six months ago—”

“What the hell are you talking about?” His impatience was counterproductive, but he didn’t care.

“Six months ago, California passed Prop 1, creating the SURVIVE law. It was a public health pilot program to eliminate or curb gun violence in the state.”

“What—” She barreled over him. Now wasn’t the time for questions. His face contorted from bemusement and annoyance to stunned stupidity.

“It creates advanced medical response teams that pick you up from the scene of the incident and administer...” She trailed off when she saw his expression deteriorate. “None of this is familiar to you? It was global news. It still is.”

“No, I mean... I avoid the news.”

Dr. Parsotam seemed concerned over this, but for what reason, he couldn’t hazard a guess. She let out a sigh. That, Alex could figure out: she didn’t want to give the whole speech.

“Okay,” she started, regaining her composure. “These teams pick—No, a team picked up your remains within an hour of your

death and administered advanced drugs and technologies in your body and wound. They flew you here, where you underwent complete brain and tissue regeneration and reconstruction. You could, and some do, call it resurrection, with or without a religious connotation. The process is very slow, and you are one of our earliest patients in the program. You are this hospital's first."

Alex Weller stared blankly at Dr. Parsotam. She was entirely professional, and it was clear this wasn't a bizarre joke or social experiment. He vividly remembered loading the rounds into his .38 and pressing it to his temple. He remembered muttering something to himself, closing his eyes, and then... letting go. The warm flood of freedom washed over him, and he yanked on the trigger.

"How? How could this...? I'm not a scientist or doctor or whatever-the-fuck, but how could you put Humpty-Dumpty back together? There's no blueprint. I can remember the steel against my skin. I remember it like it was yesterday. Literally fuck'n yesterday! You're talking sci-fi!"

She almost shrugged. "I couldn't explain it to you if I tried. Brown Bear—the state Artificial Superintelligence—taught researchers and medical technicians how to do it, and how to build it, but we mortals are years, maybe decades, from understanding it ourselves. I wish I had more to tell you. We just know that it works. Look at you! It works!"

Alex didn't care about AIs or that bullshit. He had just thought of something else.

"Wait! You said gun violence! I wasn't murdered, I—" he exclaimed, as if he had found a loophole that let him get out of a parking ticket.

"Shot yourself to death, Alex. Suicide by gun is still considered violent and a form of murder. Self-inflicted firearm deaths vastly outnumber homicides, and they always have, Mr. Weller." Her switching between using his first and formal last name was beginning to bother him. *Why does that matter?* he thought in exasperation.

"It's not fair."

"What isn't?" she wondered sincerely.

"I finally got the nerve to do it, for real this time, and you take it away from me. It's not fair." His head drooped in self-pity.

“On a scale from one to ten, with ten being the worst—”

“TEN!” He roared as he sat up in his bed as much as he could, his arms desperately pulling from the restraints like a rabid dog. “TEN GOD DAMMIT! YOU FUCK! I DON’T WANT TO BE HERE! I WANTED TO FUCKING DIE! I DID! I DIED! YOU CHEATED ME!” Alex screamed, his throat raw with fury and agony. The object of his wrath recoiled reflexively, her arm covering her womb. A nurse entered, and the doctor nodded and muttered a drug name to him, but the nurse already had it on him. He injected it into Alex’s IV bag—far from his reach. Immediately, it took effect, robbing his sails of the dragon’s breath that had been pushing them. Quickly, he devolved into a dribbling, mumbling vegetable with seconds left of consciousness.

“I know you don’t right now, but someday, hopefully soon, you’ll be very glad we did, Alex,” the doctor said before he fell asleep. He never saw her again.

Part 3

He afterwards encountered a revolving door of doctors, scientists, and politicians who showed little to no interest in his mental health. Instead, they bombarded him daily with questions regarding memory, attention, problem solving, and anything involving normal and complex cognitive functions. Some inquired about his mood, which Alex found very unscientific, as he felt a strong urge to kick them all in the teeth because of their badgering. At other times, he didn’t know what they asked about, namely, the politicians and bureaucrats.

Many days later, the questioning subsided and his demeanor softened, allowing for his restraints to be removed from his limbs. He was then transferred from intensive care to a regular room for a few more days of observation.

Alex had indeed calmed down considerably, which he could tell by how he was now taking an interest in the shape and size of the nurse’s butts. That, and he wasn’t wrapping things around his neck to choke his life out.

Besides that, he spent his time sleeping, staring out the window, and doing nothing at all. One nurse, however, made an im-

pression. An onyx-black nurse with an outrageously enviable facial structure, and Alex soon discovered he was from Sierra Leone. His name was Hassan, and he would pop into Alex's room during the graveyard shift and ask if Alex wanted to go for a walk. Alex's initial hopes of fresh air were dashed when it turned out to be a stroll around the nearly empty hospital "racetrack." He would share little stories about his life before coming to America with Alex, some not so pleasant and some very much so. He mentioned he was working to become a physician's assistant, and with that job, he would bring family members over with the money.

He didn't mean to—his humbleness made it clear—but his stories of bravery, heroism, and determination made Alex feel inadequate. Maybe he did mean to? To prove a point? Regardless, Alex opened up to him a bit, and he was glad to move his legs, even if he was dragging an IV. Alex came to admire Hassan and appreciate the first person to care about him, not just their job description.

The following night, Alex was discharged from the medical hospital and transferred to the psychiatric hospital next door. Hassan was responsible for the transfer.

"Hassan, how long do I have to stay there?" he asked while being assisted into a legally required wheelchair.

"You must start your 5150 when you are admitted in a few minutes." He was half paying attention to the question, ensuring Alex was safely in the wheelchair and that everything else was squared away. They pushed off into the hospital's labyrinth.

"Why didn't my stay at the hospital count towards my 5150 hold?" He was irritated at the thought of spending more time in a hospital. Technically, for six months, but he had only been aware of the two weeks that felt like an eternity.

"Because that was for stabilizing your body, this is for stabilizing your mind," Hassan chirped.

Alex grumbled to himself as he fidgeted with his fingers, picked at the wheelchair, and leaned his head back. He saw the underside of Hassan's perfect chin bobbing around while Hassan pushed Alex through the racetrack. Looking down at Alex, Hassan smirked, but the fluorescent tubes overhead nearly completely silhouetted his face. Alex then looked back up at the hallway.

"Where bleak meets black and where the night meets ocean,

that is where you'll find me," Alex uttered to himself.

"What's that?" Hassan asked, keeping his gaze fixed on his destination: a secured door that led to a chamber with another door. They waited for the doors behind them to close before proceeding through the next one.

"It's nothing, I don't know."

"Pretty sad," Hassan said soberly, looking down at Alex's still-tipped head.

"Yeah... I guess it is." Alex straightened his neck and looked down the hall.

"Parasite."

"What?" Alex demanded, turning sharply in his chair to look at Hassan. They stopped moving.

"What?" Hassan looked puzzled. That passed quickly, however, because they had reached the psych ward and another nurse—or something; they weren't wearing scrubs, and he was passed along. The two staff members exchanged greetings and paperwork with each other. However, Alex was thinking about Hassan, who had called him a parasite moments before. Tourette's? he reasoned.

The new person scanned the ID tag on the back of Alex's neck.

"Hi, nice to meet you. My name is Bobby, they/them. Can you please provide your full name and date of birth? And, oh, you can walk from here on if you want."

Alex told them what they wanted to know and pushed himself out of the chair, casting a suspicious glance at Hassan, who waved goodbye and walked away.

Bobby was, in fact, a nurse, and they interviewed him for nearly an hour, asking questions about what had happened, how he was feeling, and his mental health history. He went through the motions, indifferent to revealing how he felt.

"How long do you feel like you need to be in here?" Bobby asked with empathy. Alex could tell they were genuinely there because they liked helping people; he could see it in their eyes. Still, Alex had been thrown off balance. He couldn't figure out why Hassan would say that to him. He tried to let it go.

"I don't have an answer for that. I think that's a trick question."

“No tricks, no wrong answers. Your answer isn’t going to change anything; it’s just a self-assessment. Only a doctor can make those decisions. I want to get an understanding of your state of mind. If you’d like to skip the question, that’s okay too.”

Comforted by this somewhat, Alex told Bobby to skip the question. He had a doubt in the innermost sanctum of his mind. I’m afraid of the truth. Alex jumped on that train of thought and stared off into the middle distance of infinity.

“Parasite.”

Alex snapped back to the present, staring into Bobby’s eyes like a gazelle into a lion’s before the chase began.

“Parasite,” they said, their lips moving to form the words.

“Why the fuck would you say that?” he pleaded, hurt.

“Say what, Alex?” Bobby asked back.

“You just called me a parasite! Twice!”

Bobby’s expression shifted to concern. Alex felt just how significantly the dynamic had changed. Alex had transformed from a troubled peer into a sick patient. Bobby seemed equally aware.

“I didn’t and would never call you a parasite. Are you hearing more voices right now? Have you in the past?” They were subtly yet intensely scribbling notes and checking boxes.

“I—I—” Alex began to feel panic squeezing at his adrenal gland. He was scared.

“Parasite.”

“What the fuck?! Stop saying that!” He kicked his feet on the ground, pushing his chair as far back as the room allowed. Bobby remained calm but resolute.

“I’m not saying anything, Alex.”

“The hell you aren’t!”

“Parasite,” Bobby said flatly and dryly, not increasing in volume or modulated pitch.

Bobby looked on at Alex like the trained professionals they were, and tried to reassure Alex.

“Let’s try to relax, okay? Tell me...” They thought for a moment. “I see some light blue chairs in here. Can you tell me something else that is blue in the room? Parasite.”

Alex’s eyes bugged; he shot up from his chair and recoiled into the opposite corner of the room from Bobby. They, meanwhile,

pressed a panic button under the desk but showed no fear on their face.

“Shut up! Stop calling me that! Stop fucking calling me that! I’m not a parasite!” Alex was furious, flailing his arms with each word he shouted, and moved toward the door to escape.

“Parasite,” repeated Bobby.

Alex was mid-scream when four large orderlies entered the room. Alex felt relieved! Pointing at Bobby, he pleaded with the four men. “They keep calling me ‘parasite’! What the fuck!”

The orderlies glanced at Bobby, who gave them a barely noticeable head shake and an even fainter furrow. The men then looked back at Alex and extended their hands reassuringly.

“Alex, it’s okay, buddy. We are here to help,” one of them said.

“Don’t—Don’t fucking gaslight me! You’re gaslighting me! This is some evil mental hospital 1960’s shit. You guys are playing at some sadist shit!” a manic Alex accused.

“No, Alex, you’re hearing voices. It’s okay! You’re stressed and have experienced serious trauma. It’s normal! No one is gaslighting you. Let’s breathe. What else are the voices saying? Is it just that word? Are their voices telling you to hurt yourself or others?” Bobby spoke firmly but asked gently.

“I’m not...” Doubt crept in. What is reality? Is seeing believing? Was what Dr. Parsotam said real? What if I’m in the ASI and not rebuilt by it? He didn’t buy it. He had taken the heaviest hallucinogenic drugs in the heaviest doses. He was certain this was reality. “I’m not hearing voices, I swear to god.”

The temperature lowered in the room. Alex breathed heavily and looked squarely at Bobby.

“Parasite.”

Alex lunged at Bobby in a rage, but the orderlies caught him as easily as an underhanded baseball. They pushed him against the wall and, as they secured Alex’s arms and legs, brought him to the ground. Unlike before, Alex didn’t resist them as he had with the restraints in the ICU. Bobby uttered something to them and dashed out of the room.

“Alex, you gotta calm down, pal. Bobby’s going to get you help. Parasite,” said the orderly who was holding his left arm down. Alex howled and cried. He couldn’t think; he couldn’t breathe. He

tried to bite the orderly who said it, but the orderly dodged like a veteran.

“He’s trying to bite! Watch it! Turn him.” He frantically attempted to escape, but with the same intensity, he was helplessly trying to attack like a captured beast.

“Parasite,” someone said. It always was the same delivery. What the fuck is happening to me?

“Shut up... Shut up!” But he gave up and lay on the floor. They didn’t loosen their grip but were careful not to grind him into the ground. He began to sob. His sobs became violent, and as his vocal cords gave out for the third time in two weeks in the hospital, he was left with little more than shattered cries and a swollen face. The lights went out in the room, plunging it into pitch black; not even a stray LED was visible. The four guys holding him fell silent. In fact, Alex didn’t think they were there at all.

Then a shockwave blasted the air from his lungs, rattled his bones, popped his sinuses, and shook his organs, booming like thunder in his face. The shockwave was a sound, and that sound was one word spoken into his ear like a gunshot.

“PARASITE.”

The shockwave smashed him into freezing water. He sank and sank, the pressure hurting his eardrums, and the cavities in his skull crackled and popped, heavy on his chest, squeezing him with the weight of dozens of feet of water.

The lights turned on. He was still on the floor and felt a needle being pulled from his now bare bottom. They brought him into a room with a solitary bed positioned like an island in the center, accompanied only by two cameras in opposite corners of the ceiling.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god! What’s happening? What’s happening to me?” he asked. They laid straps over his chest and legs and cuffed his wrists and ankles.

“It’s just a bad night, buddy. We’re gonna help you, I promise. Gonna help you calm down and sleep for now,” he nodded to the others as he secured Alex in the suicide/isolation room. Bobby entered as they left.

“I’m scared.” Tears streamed down his bloodshot eyes. “I’m really fucking scared. Something just happened to me that cannot be real,” he managed to gasp between sobs, shaking his head in disbe-

lief.

“That’s good, actually! That’s called ‘insight’! Because it isn’t real, and you know it,” Bobby optimistically assured him, revealing a needle of medication.

Alex didn’t care what was in it and hoped it was some anti-psychotic. His thoughts focused solely on how he could have become psychotic or schizophrenic. Then he recalled shooting himself in the head. But I was rebuilt, perfectly.

The needle punctured his arm.

Bobby told him what he already knew. “This is an anti-psychotic, but that doesn’t mean you’re psychotic or a psychopath. Even neurotypical people need it sometimes, okay. It’s going to make you feel very tired,” they said after withdrawing the needle. “The other shot was an anti-anxiety med, so I suspect you should sleep very well tonight. If you need anything, you can shout, but we will check on you all the time, so don’t even worry about it.”

Alex’s eyes crossed slightly, and his eyelids lowered.

“Okay...thanks,” he said softly.

“Get some rest. Parasite.”

Bobby closed the door to the room behind them, leaving the lights on. Their final word echoed Alex’s thoughts as he entered an abyssal zone.

Part 4

Ten years later.

Alex sat on his couch and watched TV, which was too big for his living room. He hated news videos on his feed and was about to block the one he noticed when he changed his mind.

“SURVIVE’s Bungling, Privatizing, and Cancellation: Two Years On? Sure, why not?”

The video was AI-generated drivel without a human host, but Alex wasn’t so picky. It started with the history of the program, which he skipped. Then he scrubbed through most of the video until nearly the end.

“When Republicans regained the White House, Senate, and House for the first time since the program started, they eagerly gutted any and all Federal funding. While California generates more reve-

nue than the Federal government six times over, the trillion-dollar-a-year program was deemed too costly and buggy to carry on. Mass protests erupted in Sacramento and D.C., leaving states hopeful for their own program or a Federal one feeling deeply disappointed.

“President Nguyen, at the time, decried the program for its cost, its application in suicide cases, and its distinctly ‘socialist’ slant. He also reiterated unsubstantiated rumors that SURVIVE’s resurrected having their moment of death replayed over and over again, leading in some extreme cases to SURVIVE recidivism.

“After a cartel of trillionaires privatized it and started charging for it, the most significant and violent anti-corporate terror attack was carried out by the—”

Alex stopped the video because he already knew the rest. It’s hard to forget martial law and trillionaires being castrated on live feeds, and how it nearly sparked a second civil war.

Alex navigated to his private video collection and selected his favorite: the last video his late wife had made for him.

He started the video, and there she was in her best clothes, looking like an angel. She smiled at the lens of her camera drone and began talking. Alex was smiling too.

“Where bleak meets black and where the night meets ocean, that is where you’ll find me.”

“I know, baby,” Alex smiled.

From off-frame, she revealed the same .38 Special revolver that Alex had temporarily used to kill himself. The same one that was in his hand.

She put the gun to her temple.

“Alex... You’re a parasite.” Then she shot herself dead, gore covering the wall. The camera drone, designed to follow the person’s head wherever it went, looked down and zoomed in on her blank face with soulless eyes.

“Parasite,” Alex said. And he pulled the trigger.

Last Light

Patricia Khouderchah

The last eruption of daylight
a fever dream in pinks and purple
fill the world in a crescendo of
wailing clouds and summer
heavy with opposites

It's hard to believe
she does this every night
spilling out her entire self
for anyone to see
only to be swallowed whole by the dark

Streetlights illuminate the way home
but I'm still grasping at
echoes of a sky
already

gone

The 2025 Jim Luotto Prize for Essays on Literature

co-winners:

Zoe Adler

Jenna Otero

Framing Resistance: Rhetoric and Reform in Behn and Equiano

Zoe Adler

In moments of political polarization, where free speech begins to carry a greater weight, literature becomes a powerful tool for resistance. In the contemporary moment, we are seeing a rise in book bans, political silencing of discourse, and a growing acceptance of xenophobic rhetoric in the most influential parts of society. It has become increasingly clear that the rhetoric we use holds power, and that we must use language as a tool to resist its suppression. Early literary figures such as Aphra Behn and Olaudah Equiano offer compelling models for this kind of rhetorical resistance. Behn's *Oroonoko*; or, the Royal Slave illustrates the complex 18th-century field in which a female author could wage a battle against the patriarchy. Similarly, Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* provides insight into the fight of abolitionists and the methods they employed to gain a spark of empathy from the public. Both narratives revolve around an enslaved man as the protagonist; however, the stories presented are used for different means. The two works display effective Aristotelian appeals through the narrative voices, the reason-based arguments, and the emotionally provocative imagery, shaping their argument against the status quo, and allowing their semi-fictional stories to resonate with a wider audience.

In both works of writing, the authors use their unique narrators and specific settings to establish a sense of credibility. In *Oroonoko*, Behn uses a white female narrator to tell the story of *Oroonoko*, or the "Royal Slave." The character of her narrator can guide

and control the narrative while claiming the truth of the story she tells: "I was myself an eyewitness to a great part of what you will find here set down, and what I could not be a witness of, I received from the mouth of the chief actor in this history" (Norton's Anthology, 141). Behn builds her authority to tell the story as she claims that it was firsthand experience or related to her firsthand by Oroonoko himself. Behn also acknowledges her narrator's perceived limitations, stating that "his misfortune was to fall in an obscure world, that afforded only a female pen to celebrate his fame" (164). Behn's narrator frames her authoring as an injustice, appealing to the readers of the time who held deep-rooted prejudice against female voices in male-dominated fields.

In Equiano's narrative, he uses an appeal to ethos but employs it differently. His narrative begins with a brief word about how he hopes his story will be received, writing, "I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant. I believe there are few events in my life, which have not happened to many. [...] Let it therefore be remembered, that...I do not aspire to praise" (Chapter 1). The first thing Equiano tells his reader is that his story is in no way special. In a similar fashion to Behn, he undermines his authority and ability to appeal to a white readership, many of whom held racist views and had not yet read a work from a black author. As Equiano's narrative was the first of its kind, he had to plan for its critical reception. However, this statement functions on an additional level as it subtly weaves in the commonality of his story while undermining its intrigue. In a digestible way, Equiano applies the details of his story to the other enslaved people who lack an opportunity to speak up; he is the standard, not an outlier.

The rhetorical appeal continues through the authors' use of logos with the narratives' clear structure and veritable details. Both Aphra Behn and Equiano follow a similar story structure, beginning in Africa where they can provide context and characterization. Behn paints a vivid picture of life in Coramantien, where her hero was raised and educated. The narrator details Oroonoko's life and explains the events leading to his capture and transport to Surinam. Similarly, Equiano spends the first chapter of his narrative portray-

ing his life in Eboe. Just as Behn buttresses her narrative with specific details about Oroonoko's upbringing, Equiano goes into depth on the particulars of the land and culture. Still, although both authors vividly describe these exotic locations, it is worth noting that neither of them is known to have been there. Behn's story of Oroonoko is most likely pure fiction, other than the specific details she includes that illustrate her presence in Surinam. Equiano's narrative is more complex, as the majority of it is true and based on his life experience. However, the scholar Vincent Carretta argues, using historical documentation, that Equiano was likely born in South Carolina rather than Africa: the beginning of his story, including one of the most impactful descriptions of the middle passage, is fictional. Nevertheless, both authors use fictional evidence to boost the logic and reason of their arguments.

Equiano constructs a clear and coherent argument by analyzing the nature of slavery to expose the hypocrisy of enslavers. Equiano poses the evidence of a "Portuguese settlement at Mitomba" where inhabitants were the offspring of the Portuguese and the natives, "[becoming] in their complexion...perfect negroes." Equiano uses this example to pose a rhetorical question: "Surely the minds of the Spaniards did not change with their complexions!" As he continues along this thought process, he says, "Let such reflections as these melt the pride of their superiority into sympathy for the wants and miseries of their sable brethren." Equiano sets forth a clear argument against the logic behind slavery and uses evidence and reason to back up his points.

Although Behn does not present her arguments in as clear a fashion, her sentiments around the tyranny of men are woven throughout her text. Behn repeatedly juxtaposes the morality of Oroonoko with the hypocrisy of the white men persecuting him. While she props up Oroonoko's honor, Behn's narrator writes, "Such ill morals are only practiced in Christian countries, where they prefer the bare name of religion, and, without virtues or morality, think that's sufficient" (Norton's Anthology, 147). Through comments such as these, Behn attacks the hypocrisy found in countries like Britain, highlighting the main argument of her text. As Oroonoko spends

time in Surinam, he grows continually disillusioned with the morality of the systems around him. The white men trick him into captivity (160), repeatedly lie to him about his liberty (167), and spy on him when he visits the plantations (168). This culminates in the ending of Behn's story as they take him apart, piece by piece, stripping every ounce of humanity away from the once "great man." Throughout Oroonoko Behn weaves in criticisms of the oppressive and hypocritical systems she subtly fights against.

Both Behn and Equiano employ an appeal to pathos through their inclusion of vivid imagery, specifically in the dehumanizing moments. For Equiano, his emotional appeal appears throughout his text but is most prominent in his harrowing description of the middle passage. Equiano describes the torture of the experience, stating that he "began to hope [death] would soon put an end to [his] miseries." He continues, writing, "Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself. I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs." As Equiano describes the horror aboard the slave ship, he tells his reader that it made him wish for the freedom that comes from death. This moment is meant to appeal to a reader's empathy, as he describes the experience of a mere child.

Behn's narrator echoes a similar sentiment with her use of pathos. The narrative is packed with intense emotional language describing Oroonoko's state, such as his deep-felt love for Imoinda, his broken heart when they were separated, and his tremendous anger at his oppressors. However, although the final scene does not include this vivid language, the descriptions of Oroonoko's death provoke a deep response in the reader. Throughout the story, Behn's narrator presents Oroonoko as a strong, almost god-like figure: he is near perfect in every way, the opposite of the white enslavers and corrupt king he faces. Nonetheless, at this moment, Oroonoko is reduced to nothing, as his executioners dismember him, part by part, starting with "his members" (186). The vivid imagery of this emasculating display attempts to provoke an emotional response from the reader as this "glorious" man falls apart, reduced to a "frightful [spectacle] of a mangled king."

However, the last line prompts more than just the reader's emotions, asking them to think about the lesson of the story, as Behn's narrator ends by mentioning "the brave, the beautiful, and the constant Imoinda." Although the reader has followed Oroonoko and has read about his descent into slavery and then death, the last line reveals that Behn's narrative is not one of abolition, but instead against the oppressive systems of white men, which attack both women and black men. Through the narrative of the "noble slave," Aphra Behn is able to present her attack against the tyranny of men. She acknowledges that a pure feminist work would not be well received, so instead Behn is able to veil it in the non-antislavery story of Oroonoko, as women "identified with the experience of personal injustice and everyday indignity" of slavery (Norton's Anthology, 135).

Equiano's narrative employs a similar device through a fictitious embellishment. The author was aware enough of the period he wrote in to understand the way to garner empathy from his white audience. As Robin Blackburn writes in his article, "The True Story of Equiano", "his account of an African childhood was a vivid piece of imaginative reconstruction...that perfectly suited the needs of an abolitionist movement then principally focused on the evils of the Atlantic slave trade." Equiano shaped his narrative in a way that would prompt the greatest response from his audience. He used his fictitious African childhood to paint a portrait of a society that is not that different from the Western world and the imagery of the Middle Passage to depict the true horrors no one can excuse. Equiano wrote a narrative for abolition, altering his life story to best fit his cause.

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*; or, the Royal Slave and Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* use narratives of slavery, structured through Aristotelian rhetoric, to challenge the oppressive systems of their time. Both authors demonstrate the rhetorical and social barriers they had to overcome to ensure their narrative's success. In the era of Neoclassical literature, both works of writing failed to conform to the standards of the time: Behn's *Oroonoko* is a precursor to the modern novel and Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* is one of the first slave narratives written.

Both these authors took an unconventional step forward, fighting against the status quo while advocating for their rights. In the current moment of political contention where there is a rise against free speech, it is essential to learn from these early activists and follow in their footsteps. Their rhetorical legacy calls on us not only to defend language, but to use it strategically, passionately, and bravely as a force for change.

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Do As Audre Lorde Would

Jenna Otero

Brilliant author-activist Audre Lorde uses her work as a platform to empower individuals to push for change. Lorde is adamant that the personal is political, letting no one off the hook for the responsibility of societal progressivism in her essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Similarly, in her poem “A Litany For Survival” from her book *The Black Unicorn*, she brings awareness and in the world’s harsh conditions for marginalized groups, calls for empowerment. Through lenses of gender, race, sexuality and societal status, Lorde shamelessly calls her audience to celebrate their identity in a way that enables people to utilize their personal differences for political change.

Lorde’s unabashed voice in her work is the foundation for awareness. She points out societal grievances with such clarity and succinctness that it becomes a new approach to logic for readers. In “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”, Lorde states early in the essay, “It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians” (Lorde 110). Here, Lorde utilizes the themes of gender, sexuality, race, and societal status to illustrate her frustration with openness and certainty. She continues to criticize the ignorant mindset of the panel she was invited to speak on, writing, “To read this program is to assume that lesbian and Black women have nothing to say about existentialism, the erotic, women’s culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power” (Lorde 110). Once again, here Lorde does not brush over the lack of diversity causing a discrepancy in effective approach to societal problems. Her matter-of-fact tone enables her words to be accusatory and draw her audience into self reflection on how these seemingly personal issues inevitably transform into

political concerns. Lorde questions, "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?" (Lorde 110-111). In her rhetorical question, she single handedly brings the audience's awareness of these personal issues into political light by using blunt logic to demand self examination of readers. With this approach to her voice, Lorde urges us to to be truthful in our rationale, thus leading us to inclusion.

Audre Lorde leaves us with a doubtless message that progressive societal movement must be inclusive to be productive and honest. If feminism and strides towards prolific diversity on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, and more are made digestible by conveniently excluding oppressed groups, they become worthless movements. These forward-movements in personal identities are political because we must center our governing systems around our socio-economic situations as a collective for them to be successful. In this way, Lorde reminds us that we are most powerful as a collective, that society has conditioned us to believe our differences make us weaker, less valuable, and utterly powerless. Lorde states, "Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities". She continues, "Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate" (Lorde 111). Through her powerful words and recollection of personal identity, Lorde is adamant that the concepts of gender freedom, liberation of expression on the basis of sexuality, and race, are structures made up of a collective of many different parts, each as valuable and crucial as the next. For example, feminism may have begun as a movement prioritizing cisgender, straight, white women, but Lorde reminds us that redefining "woman" is what brings power and value to the movement. Our differences become our ultimate strengths as they allow us to push for change, to push for lesbians to be included in feminism, to push for black women to be included in feminism, to make space for all who are tired of the way women have been oppressed to be included in feminism because that's what it's about at its core. Hence, it is imperative that we

advance by actively listening to the oppressed.

Lorde is a drum beating steadily and surely for us, guiding our march towards change. While she doesn't falter in demanding attention to the unacceptable circumstances that lack of acceptance has brought upon oppressed groups, her calls to action ring louder than her critiques surrounding harmful, current societal norms. In her poem "A Litany for Survival," Lorde writes, "For those of us who live at the shoreline standing upon the constant edges of decision crucial and alone for those of us who cannot indulge the passing dreams of choice" (Lorde lines 1-5, p20). In her introductory statements, Lorde sings out to her dedicatees: All those of oppressed and marginalized groups who are sufferers of societal injustice. Today, we infer the unspoken themes of gender, race, sexuality and societal status. Lorde spends careful time to acknowledge those "who were imprinted with fear" (Lorde, line 16, p20) and how "when we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed but when we are silent we are still afraid" (Lorde lines 37-41, p20). In Lorde's tactic, she understandingly, graciously, and patiently addresses the emotional aspect of being a part of a group that has been abused by the inequalities of the world. Similar to her essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", her voice carries no shame in depicting the daily horrors and struggles of marginalized groups, "this illusion of some safety to be found the heavy-footed hoped to silence us For all of us this instant and this triumph We were never meant to survive." (Lorde lines 20-24, p20). As she pivots to her call for action, she recalls these emotions, stating "So it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive." (Lorde lines 42-44, p20). Here, Lorde calls for unrelenting courage to speak up in the face of injustices committed against us because of our differences. In the repetition of her phrase "we were never meant to survive", she implores us to realize the personal is political.

Audre Lorde's messages are utterly timeless. Her choice to write unapologetically about gender, race, sexuality and societal status empowers audiences today to become aware of prevalent dispar-

ities and encourages readers to participate in the path towards new mindset and solutions. The involuntary conditions of our diversities mustn't chain us down any longer, but instead serve as realization that we must be outspoken and bravely progressive as a collective. Staying quiet doesn't mean peace, it means continuing on with the injustices and unfairness for oppressed groups. Is that what peace means to you? Be loud. Cause a racket. Cause a moment. Cause a movement. You are a hero for the future, waiting to happen.

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A Taste of the Ocean

Tetiana Obrizan



2025 Video Showcase



Karen Nguyen, "what makes you happy?"



Sandra Tingalay, "Nothing So Untreasure"



Frank Yung-Fong Tang, "Put More Paintings of Asians Into Museums"

Red Wheelbarrow's Youtube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/@theredwheelbarrowmagazined3388>