

THE DAPHNE REVIEW

FALL 2020



“It is a confounding and eerie sensation to feel social while alone, thronged with invisible entities whose presence is felt yet who appear wholly absent. These entities are our twenty-first-century ghosts, shorn from their corporeal shells and set loose to glide through cyberspace at lightning speed and with startling precision.”

-GRAFTON TANNER'S *BABBLING CORPSE*



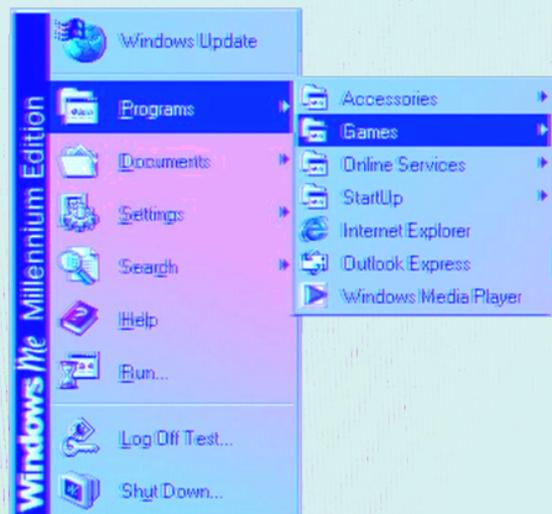
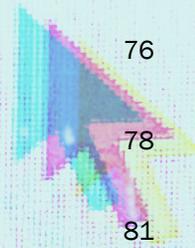
THE DAPHNE REVIEW
FALL 2020 ISSUE
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TEXT SET IN FRANKLIN GOTHIC BOOK
COVER & LAYOUT BY MARY B. SELLERS
PORTABLE DOCUMENT FORMAT
WWW.THEDAPHNEREVIEW.ORG

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The Café of Stars

FICTION
SYDNEY LING

The Café of Stars serves starlight to its guests. They serve it at room temperature, straight up in a small glass. Starlight is a luminescent liquid, clear amber gold, and is best consumed plain. You taste whatever feels like home to you from the syrup-covered waffles your father used to make on Sunday mornings, to sticky, iced lemonades on a hot July afternoon at summer camp. The Café of Stars is a cafe of the past. Your past. Your memories, your loves, your mistakes.

When you first walk in, the café is dark, but your eyes adjust to the low glow of fairy lights strung along the walls and the flickering vanilla candles in mason jars on the small dark wooden tables. A white birchwood sign in a handwritten script reads, “Turn Your Scars into Stars.” The jazzy tune of “Stars Fell on Alabama” floats in the background, and the faint scent of cinnamon and caramel pervades the air. At each table sits just one guest, slowly sipping their glass of starlight. The only sound besides the music is the hushed voices of the waiters.

Two waiters in their crisp, white-collared shirts stand behind the counter. Michael, the taller one carefully pours the glinting starlight from a glass jug while Gabriel polishes the glasses, setting them back on the rack.

“I think that gentleman is ready for his bill,” Gabriel says.

“No, I think he needs another glass,” replies Michael. “Look at him.”

The middle-aged man sets his empty glass down, rubbing his dark eyes before staring out into space.

The waiters continue to watch the strange assortment of people, from the young girl with scars crisscrossing her pale wrists to the old woman in a white knitted shawl who leans back with her hands folded on her lap.

“That girl over there needs a refill,” Michael says.

“What? I’ve already given her two.”

“She needs a refill.”

Gabriel sighs and walks over to the girl’s table, replacing the empty glass with a full one.

He returns to the counter.

“How do you know someone is ready?”

“You look.”

Michael points at the woman in the knitted shawl.

“See how her face glows? See her smiling? She’s ready.”

“But her glass is not finished. And she is very old,” Gabriel says.

“Yes, but she has had enough.”

Michael nods at a worn, black leather billfold resting on the countertop.

“Here, take this to her.”

Gabriel takes the book and opens it and reads the faded typewriter font imprinted on the crisp receipt.

The Café of Stars

Server: Gabriel

Order #: 100825272791 Dine In

Table: 134 Guests: 1

Customer: Lois Tomelty

Arrived: March 25, 1933. Departed: May 21, 2020.

1 Glass of Starlight: \$87.00

Tax 1: \$8.70

=====

TOTAL: \$95.70

Thank you for Visiting The Café of Stars. Please Come Again!



He closes the book and walks over to the woman, handing the billfold to her. She looks up, grey eyes wavering in a lined face. Gabriel returns to the counter. He looks back at the old woman's table. She is gone, leaving behind a gentle glow. He smiles. The two waiters serve the remaining evening customers for an hour, until one by one, they trickle out until the café is empty. Michael sets his towel down. "Our shifts are over."

"You go. I would like to stay for the next shift."

"See you tomorrow."

"Good night." Gabriel sighs, setting his towel on the countertop.

Michael takes his coat off a silver hook, putting it on along with his hat. He glances around the café with tired grey eyes before walking outside, stepping out onto the empty street. He looks up at the sweet sky and gazes at the glittering stars embedded in the canopy of inky black. Squinting his eyes, he sees a flickering light, a ghost of a star, shining dimly before sputtering out, leaving blankness behind.

Another star takes its place, twinkling in the night sky.

ENSNARED - AMELIA MORIKUNI





Middle of Nowhere

NONFICTION
HUAJIE ZHONG

In the middle of a hot New York City summer, and after sitting in the uncomfortable seat on the airplane for more than fifteen hours, a young boy finally arrives at JFK airport. He is not familiar with everything in America: He doesn't understand English, doesn't know what Easter is, and doesn't even know where his new home is going to be. Strange things are coming at him like waves of wind. He is unsure whether it is the jet lag or the countless number of unknown things in this new environment that make him uncomfortable. However, he is still excited to be able to experience American life instead of just watching it in Hollywood movies. He decides that he will learn more about American culture in order to truly become an American.

In the next few years, like a hungry kid at the dinner table ready to fulfill his appetite, he tries to learn everything that is considered part of the American culture: Language, food, and certain habits. He tries his best to learn English grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Then, he tries some classic American food like New York Pizza, hamburgers, and hot dogs. He also tries to watch sports like football and basketball, but he didn't like those that much.

He can feel that he is becoming more American. However, he can also feel that he is losing something.

"Do you remember how to write the word eagle in Chinese?" His friend asks him as they work on Mandarin homework one day.

"You first write this thing that looks like a square root. Then, you..." He closes his eyes and tries to imagine the word in his head. The word is floating above him, but no matter how hard he tries, he can't catch it. "I don't remember the next part... Let me search for it on my phone. The last time I wrote Chinese was years ago."

His friend looks at him with confusion. "How can someone forget writing a language?"

"Well, unlike languages like English and Spanish that have only 26 letters of the alphabet, Chinese has no alphabet. Instead, every word is totally different! It is possible that I forgot it!" He doesn't realize that he is yelling until he finishes the sentence. He isn't even sure why he is so suddenly mad just because his friend asked a question.

In response, his friend strikes what is his greatest weakness: "Are you really Chinese?"

"I..." He is not sure why, but he can feel an invisible knife is stabbing his heart. He is suddenly wordless and unable to counter back.

Maybe it means that I am an American now. He comforts himself with that childish thought. He is trying to run away from his reality because he isn't brave enough to face it directly.

Like a sponge in the ocean, he is absorbing the American culture and becoming more like an American. However, no matter how much water a sponge absorbs, there will still be an infinite sum of water left in the ocean; he will never be able to absorb it all.

“It’s Thanksgiving next week. What are you going to do? We’re going to eat a big fat turkey!” His friend’s eyes are shining as he says this.

“Nothing. My family doesn’t celebrate it.”

“How? You are not a real American!”

“What do you mean by that?” He looks at his friend with confusion. How can his friend so quickly deny all the work he did to fit in?

“Every American celebrates it! It’s a huge part of American culture!” his friend tells him proudly.

Like the last piece that makes the Jenga collapse, his dream of being an American, already unstable and shaky, collapses instantly. He finally realizes that there is no way that he will ever fully be an American. There is too much to learn, too much for him to cover. Furthermore, what he did do in his efforts to become an American had left him disconnected from his Chinese identity. He is neither an American or Chinese now, but if he isn’t any of them, who is he? Where does he belong?

A phrase in Cantonese pops up into his head: 两头不到岸. Its literal meaning is a situation where a person cannot reach either side of the sea because they are too far from it. What a perfect phrase that describes his situation, he thinks.

Terrible things always come in pairs. On his way back home, the sky is pouring water down with its giant bucket, but he doesn’t care about that. It is nothing compared to his broken dream.

He arrives home with his head down and all his clothes soaked. He looks exactly like someone that tried to swim across the sea.

“What happened?” his mother asks him, “You forgot to bring your umbrella?”

“Who are we? Chinese? Or American? I can’t find myself being recognized on either side.” Water is running down from his head and onto his shoulders.

“Before I answer your question, dry yourself up first, or you will be sick.” She hands him a towel. “We are neither of them...”

“How could it be? Doesn’t that mean we are nothing and homeless?”

“Why are you trying to be one thing only? Combine them. We are both Chinese and American, but we are neither Chinese or American. We are Chinese Americans.”

As the boy tries to swim across the sea, he finds himself “两头不到.”

However, this phrase excludes an important truth: Seas may be so large that a person is unable to reach the shores, but the shores aren’t the only

safe harbor out there. The boy arrives at a strange place that is far from both shores: an island. In the sea that this boy swims, there are countless islands, and the island that the boy finds and lands on is between the Chinese shore and the American shore. It is both Chinese and American, but neither Chinese nor American. Its name is “Chinese American.”



Confessions From Your Local Lifesaver

NONFICTION
CLARA CULLUM

All I do this week is work.
On weeks like these, it feels like all I do every week is work.

The following is based on my life
as a summer lifeguard at a
moderately populated and heavily
tourist-frequented beach in South
Carolina. Names have been
changed.

I have mentally calculated that approximately 24% of any of my days at work is occupied by answering questions.

My favorite types of questions all begin the same. I have begun to reflexively perk up when I hear the phrase because I can nearly guarantee that what follows will be the highlight of my day. The blessed preamble?

“So, I’m not from around here, but I was just wondering...”

The remainder is ridiculous every time.

For these people, I remove my sunglasses and make direct eye contact so they feel confident that they are being heard.

On Tuesday, a man and woman approached me. “Hey there, so, we’re not from around here, and my wife and I were just wondering, could you tell us what body of water this is?”

I blinked.

“It’s the Atlantic Ocean,” I said, hoping my astonishment was sufficiently hidden by mustered professionalism.

Later, I relay this story to a coworker who tells me that he once had a man ask if this ocean was fresh or saltwater.

A common question posed by tourists is “Are there sharks out here?” To which my answer is always the same:

“Well, this is the ocean, so technically yes, however, we mostly have non-aggressive species, and you aren’t likely to see any.” This response is not only accurate but also provided to us by the higher-ups at pre-season training.

One woman did not take kindly to this answer, however. “*Well, this is the ocean,*” she mocked. “Of course I know this is the ocean,” she scoffed and rolled her eyes.

Not everyone does ma’am. Not everyone does.

My skin gets darker and my hair gets blonder every day that I work.

One unintended consequence of this phenomenon is evident in my forearms. As the skin tans and the arm hair is bleached, the contrast makes the hairs ever more noticeable. One night, my sister muses that it makes me look like a leathery old man with long gray hairs.

I am hardly amused.

One day, on what I am later informed is a slow news week, I hear another guard call over the radio to request a supervisor to come to their stand to speak to some reporters from a local broadcast station. They are running a story in which they call this the “Summer of Jellyfish.”

They’re right about that. A large portion of that 24% of my day is occupied by various concerns related to jellyfish.

Frantic parents run-up to my stand and demand vinegar for their child’s apparently life-threatening injury. I recite to them my script: “We can no longer administer vinegar as it was proven to be more of a placebo effect in most cases, and can even make the area more irritated depending on the species of jellyfish.” Most are understanding.

One woman, however, rejected this response.

“I know you have vinegar,” she said, arms folded and scowling. “My husband and I are from around here,” she adds as if that were some kind of secret code-phrase that would unlock the Locals Only supply of vinegar.

In fact, we do have vinegar. There’s a liter of expired Great Value Distilled White Vinegar in the back of the shed left over from the days when vinegar was allowed. But like I said, we aren’t allowed to give it out, it won’t help, and I feel no inclination to retrieve it for this woman anyways.

One week, there is an exceptional amount of jellyfish stings from a species not common to South Carolina.

Needless to say, the public didn’t know how to handle themselves.

I hear that on a neighboring beach, the volume of questions was so great that they stationed a guard about 30 feet from the main stand with a sign designating him the “Jellyfish Consultant.”

You would have to shoot me before I would volunteer to just continually answer jellyfish questions for hours on end. And further, I can’t imagine the scorn from patrons who were directed to the Consultant (whose title implies more sophistication than a 16-year-old in a bathing suit can pull off) only to hear our official policy which is essentially that there’s nothing we can do. Maybe rub some sand on it?

More commonly, though, jellyfish questions occur before anyone’s even been stung.

“What kind are the ones washed up on the shore?”

Cannonballs.

“Do they sting?”

No.¹

“Can I touch them?”

Sure.

“Are there always this many?”

Not really.

And by lunch, I swear I’m going to lose it if I hear one more word about jellyfish. One day, around 4:30 I see a young couple gawking at a washed-up cannonball jelly. The man was trying to scoop it into his hat (ew) in an effort to return it to the ocean. It’s already quite dead.

The woman called over to me, assumably in an effort to save his hat from desecration, “Hey, can he touch it?”

“Oh God,” I say, feigning panic. “Oh God, no. Did he touch it already?”

She mirrors my terrified expression, “Uh, no I don’t think so! Babe, did you touch it?!”

He looks up and shakes his head no.

“Good,” I said. “Don’t”

She walks away.

On my first day of work, I jokingly asked a more seasoned (read: jaded) coworker, how long it will be until he starts wishing for people to drown.

Without hesitation: “I already do.” This was the first day of the summer.

I laughed, “Even the kids?”

Then, completely serious: “Especially the kids. They’re small and it only takes about two minutes for the whole rescue. CPR is basically a joke too because it only takes like one compression for the ribs to break.”

I’ve been working for a month now. Every time a couple comes up to ask me about jellyfish, I say a small prayer that their child is a weak swimmer.

I’m terrified of everyone I work with.

My managers are cold, my supervisors are controlling, and the trainers are just unforgiving.

I’ve heard a story that a couple of summers ago one of the trainers caught a guard on his phone and he made him run to the endpoint of the island (about a 7-mile round trip) only to fire him on the spot when he got back.

I’ve decided that if anyone ever tells me to run to the point I’ll just go ahead and quit to save myself the trouble.

I try to stay in the good graces of the other guards because I’ve become quite well aware that if you are not liked, everyone will work in conjunction to make your work life a living hell.

¹ Although it’s interesting to note that the answer is actually: sometimes. One morning, on a swim around the fishing pier, several guards, including myself sustained several cannonball stings apiece. A few hours later, a woman approached me asking if she should go swimming if she is allergic to jellyfish. I told her I had been stung four times just that morning. She was stunned. I told her I could not recommend it.

Wyatt, for example, one of the less liked guards (and “less liked” may be a generous understatement)² has learned this the hard way.

Once, Wyatt forgot to move his stand back away from the tide. When the day’s supervisor noticed, he took Wyatt out of stand.

I watched from my own stand with amusement. I don’t like Wyatt either. He once casually made a comment about how he could kill me if he really wanted to. My coworker Julia tells me he said something similar to her. Julia and I are 16 and 17 respectively. He is 23. It’s one of many uncomfortable encounters with him.

Another time, Wyatt texted our employee group chat asking if someone could cover one of his shifts. Someone responded simply: “Negative.”

Three people liked that message. No one else responded.

Today is inservice.

Truthfully, I don’t really understand what exactly inservice is, only that I am to be completely and entirely afraid of it.

This morning, another rookie asked the group chat how long inservice usually lasts to which someone replied, “Its an eternal nightmare.”

A supervisor added, saying, “We have an ambulance on stand by at 2nd St.”

Another supervisor, chimed in: “You thought rookie school was hard?”

I had thought that.

“Just wait.”

I am thoroughly afraid of inservice.

One of the only things that keeps guards awake³ on stand is the constant fear of getting drilled.

A drill consists of a trainer sneaking into your area of the water and pretend to drown. How they manage to sneak into a section of ocean that it is our primary responsibility to watch at all times is beyond me.

But I’m told they have their methods.

Once in the water, they start a timer. A general rule of lifeguarding is that you have two minutes to get out to someone in the water, and two minutes to get back. This includes the time it takes you to recognize that a person is drowning, which is more difficult then once might think, considering how fun patrons apparently think it is to play dead, or simply just hold their breaths and float face down. It’s surprisingly common.

Failing a drill can be (although is not always) a fireable offense. You can also be written up and sent home for the day.

I am thoroughly terrified of being drilled.

² And not without reason (He’s from Ohio, for starters).

³ In case you didn’t know, the job can be very boring at times. Imagine sitting under an umbrella on a warm day, with no radio, no one to talk to, and few worries except for the people in the water who rarely ever have the decency to drown for you.

I have a theory, however, that the people most likely to be drilled are those that are the least liked. Exhibit A: Wyatt had been drilled 4 times.

As I was walking out to the beach a couple of mornings ago with two coworkers I had not met before, one of them boldly stated that he hoped he would get drilled that day.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Yeah! Getting drilled is fun, plus you get to put some clout behind your name, ya know?” The other one agreed.

I decided then that I did not trust these two.

Like many restaurants and shops, beaches tend to have their “regulars.”

Another beach in our town has the very charming “Beach Santa”, a retired older man whose white beard and uniform of a cherry red tank top and matching shorts have made him a fixture of the beach. According to a local newspaper, he spends most mornings picking up trash on the shore and likes to educate kids about the harms of littering.

Folly, on the other hand, has Confederate Flag Pidgeon Man. This significantly less charming figure of similar age and lengthy beard (although this his gray) sits in the same spot every day in the late afternoons surrounded by an array of multiple differently sized and styled Confederate flags. And further, although I have never seen him with any food, and certainly not distributing any food, he is consistently encircled by a moderate number of grey pigeons whose presence would be less memorable is it weren't for the fact that seagulls are the bird of authority on every other part of the beach. I can only hope he doesn't try to educate the children about his practices like his jolly counterpart does.

Today I am bombarded by photography requests.

Two couples ask me to take their picture and three people want to take mine. The latter are entirely unwanted.

The first request of the day came when a man and woman approached the stand that I was resting behind during my break.

“Hey sweetie,” the woman began, “Can he take a picture with you?”

The situation would have been less uncomfortable had it just been an overbearing mom dragging along an embarrassed teenaged son, but the man and woman were the same age (early 40s-ish) and initially, I had even assumed that they were a couple.

I mumbled an unconvincing “Uhm, sure,” and stood up. The man stepped in closer to me than I would have liked.

“Oh come on sweetheart, when you're that cute people are going to want to take a picture.” This again comes from the woman.

I cringe and don't even try to smile.

Later, a family passes my stand and both the mother and father try to discreetly take pictures. Upon the first snap, however, the woman has given them away.

She has left her flash on, and even in the broad daylight, it is noticeable. So much for subtlety.

Finally, hours later, a late 40s bald man rushes up to my stand from behind. He holds up a phone, selfie-style and explains to me as he's taking our picture that it's for his company's Facebook page. "Posts always get more hits with pretty girls in them," he says, as if I should be flattered.

As he stalks away, I call after him, "What company?"

"Roofing," he replies, not stopping or looking up.

At the end of the day, my dad has come to visit me. He stands by my stand and we discuss dinner options.

Then, we hear the rumbling of a John Deere Gator and look over to see two figures in manager-blue polo shirts driving towards us. My dad takes this as a sign to immediately halt the conversation and glide away, pretending he had been looking at shells the whole time.

He's trying not to embarrass me in front of work people. Good Dad.

I recognize the two passengers as my manager, David, and his summer intern. David stops the Gator below my stand.

"Hey Clara, I was just making sure that guy wasn't harassing you or anything."

I laugh for a moment, "Actually that's my dad."

"Oh gosh, sorry about that," I could tell he was embarrassed by the mistake. "Your dad looks like a very nice man, I had no idea, my bad."

I thanked him though, because, in almost every other case, he would have been right on. He recognized all the apparent Creepy Guy signs: loitering around for an extended amount of time, being a solo older man, and of course, pretending he was never there once an authority shows up.

All of the females I work with can spot these tells from far away because we've seen them all close-up.

A younger friend of mine told me that a man once tried to lure her off the beach and into a lot behind a hotel claiming that there was a medical emergency there. When she told him she would radio call a supervisor (which is protocol), he just wordlessly walked away.

This is not to say that I feel unsafe at work, however. For every creep, there are at least thirty or forty polite and respectful strangers.

I just wish the ratio was smaller than that.

This being my first year as a lifeguard, I'm often asked questions I simply don't know the answer to.

"How much are jet skis for the hour?"

"Where can I rent an umbrella?"

I generally tell them that they can inquire at the pier office.

That, or I'll make something up.

“Jet skis are 120 for 30 minutes and 300 for the hour.”
They scoff but don’t ask again. Works for me.

My least favorite position in the rotation is roving. This is where the guard walks between the east and west sides of the pier to ensure that no one is too close to it. Too close is defined as anywhere between the pier and the highly visible red and yellow flags whose base reads “NO SWIMMING BETWEEN THIS POINT AND THE PIER” and then “DANGER.” Both messages are in English and Spanish.

For some people, however, this is simply too much to understand.

They repeatedly cross into the no swim zone and the guard must repeatedly ask that they not do that.

One of my friends tells me that she likes roving.

She says it’s nice because when she has to pee, she just goes in waist-deep water and finds someone to yell at. You can’t do that while sitting on stand.

“You don’t want to know how many people I’ve yelled at while peeing,” she says.

No, I don’t think I do.

Peeing is an issue for guards. We spend a lot of time bound to sitting in a stand, and then, 45 minutes later, when you are allowed to come down, you may or may not have time to do your business before you are expected to start training.

Further, if a patron sees a guard go into the ocean, there’s always the inevitable: “Oh gosh, is someone drowning?”

Then cue a nervous laugh and “No [ma’am/sir], just uh... checking the current.”

Last Saturday, it rained almost all day.

Well, all of the day except the first few hours which meant we had just enough time to set up the beach and do morning training, the most dreaded parts of the day.

Then, we got a call from, a manager informing us of lighting in the area, so we closed the beach, and “took shelter.” Our shelter is simply a picnic table under the pier.

For the rest of the day, we figured out ways to pass the time.

People ordered food, we played music, several boxes of ice cream sandwiches were stolen from the pier and consumed, and most notably, a bracket was drawn up pitting pairs of guards against each other in hypothetical fights which would take place on a hypothetical “Folly Fight Night” All proceeds would go towards new radios and creatine, says Miles (“It’s gains season”).

One of the supervisors, Katie M., sent out a poll and miraculously, little Owen won. Little Owen is a 16-year-old rookie who is about 5’6, 120 lbs. and generally scrawny in the way that any average 16-year-old boy generally is. In

the poll, he beat out all the other male guards including two local military college cadets, two triathlon junkies, a 23-year-old currently in the vetting process for the Secret Service, and various other, larger, older guards. Godspeed Owen.

As the day went on, some of the more testosterone-fueled male guards became restless and began to work out in the best ways they could in our location under the pier. There was a pull-up contest on a boardwalk beam and one guard spent about 10 minutes deadlifting a picnic table.

Thankfully, the day drifted to a close and we were finally allowed to clean up the beach in the rain and lightning.

“Don’t die, that would be a nightmare of paperwork,” says Miles, the supervisor, from his lofty spot out of the rain in the office.

We return to the equipment shed unharmed but soaked, and the excitement of getting to leave gives everyone a sort of giddy second wind.

Owen, with his newfound confidence from the bracket, began to give Miles a hard time about beating him in their hypothetical fight.

Miles, in return, puts him on radio duty.

Radio duty is the most frustrating and dreaded position on clean up. Our radios are several years outdated, about 10 pounds each, and worst of all, NEVER charge when you want them to. No matter how many times you slide them into the charging ports, nor how forcefully or gently or tactfully, the light ALWAYS blinks red, indicating it is not charging.

So every day at 6 o’clock we throw the radios in a pile and make one person do them all. Call us lazy but the way I see it, it’s utilitarianism at its finest. Least harm for the most amount of people. Maximum amounts of harm (emotional, mostly) for at least one person though. Owen had the honor today.

He struggles in the shed for about 20 minutes, standing on an AED kit for leverage.

I decided that instead of throwing my radio on the pile today, I would try to put it away myself. Owen is happy for the company.

Then, Jack appears.

“Oh, Clara you’re on radios too?”

“Nope. I’m just doing mine, then I’m clocking out Jack.” See, I usually strive to be a better employee than this, but radios are grueling, especially after our 10-hour shifts. I very much want to go home.

Regardless, I knew what he was going to say next.

“Here do mine too. Catch.”

He pretends to throw it. I don’t flinch.

“Nope,” I say, not even turning to look at him.

Then, he actually throws it.

It bounces off the counter, and onto the top of my foot with a heavy thud. I yelp and yank my foot away, grasping at the counter for support.

“Oops,” he says.

“JACK!” I yelp, followed by some less than decent words.

“I said catch,” he says, shrugging his shoulders.

“I’m going to sue you for workers comp!” A swollen bruise was forming on top of my foot.

“I don’t think you know how workers comp works,” he replied, laughing.

“I don’t,” I say, “But I’m going to figure it out, and then you won’t be laughing.”

He continues laughing.

As the pain increases, so does my desire for a less hypothetical Fight Night so we could finally fund some lighter, less hazardous radios.

A few days ago, one of my friends told me she wants to be a lifeguard next summer. She asked for my advice and what the job is like. She wanted to know everything.

I thought about some of the advice and tips I had learned from my coworkers this summer.

Some of it is more practical:

On board rescues, James recommends putting the victim’s left arm behind their back to help with rotating them on the board.

On answering questions, Jackie says to remove sunglasses and get down to their level (especially for children) to show sincerity. Katie M. says to use a higher voice to prevent sounding unnecessarily authoritative.

Some of it is more out of necessity:

On the subject of staying awake and alert on stand, there are several suggestions.

Nick brings 3 pairs of sunglasses and switches which ones he wears every 15 minutes “or a different feel, ya know?”

Francis draws the alphabet with her big toe on the top step of the stand.

Tori counts how many people are in the water, over and over.

Katie L. does calf raises.

Julia stretches.

Lawson just falls asleep.

Some of it, however, is just plain nonsense.

On not losing your mind answering ridiculous questions, Sam uses an Australian accent.

On trying to cause lightning so we don’t have to sit on stand, Jerry has created the “Storm Turtle”, which is to be drawn in the sand in hopes of luring a storm. The cartoon turtle is typically drawn several feet long and wide and is known to sport a pair of sunglasses and lightning symbols on its shell. The direction it faces is the direction he is trying to attract the storm.

On getting the radios to charge, Jack recommends licking the back of them, although, that’s mostly just a good way to get battery acid in your mouth.

So to my friend, I simply advise that she starts running and swimming, to get good at them. She’ll learn the rest in time.



UNTITLED - RAISAH PESHKEPIA

ACHE - EMILY HUANG



my mother, my mouth, my monologue

JULIA DO

i fall out of my mouth and
somersault onto hot pavement
festering in an afternoon sun.

asphalt kisses my chilled chicken skin
boiling off the amniotic broth
of the flesh i call tongue.

pieces of me are melting:
thirty two porcelain-filled baby teeth
work my rubbery cartilage into
pepto-bismol bubblegum.
red leaks from sugary m&m shells
and salivating cumulus clouds.
california sun crisps my virgin hair
bleaching the butter-yellow of my freckled skin
out.

no one is as envied as the bird.

no one my mother repeats
hiding slices of plump tomato
beneath the soft recesses
of her tongue and
my own five-lettered name
in the folds of her tonsils.
i yearn to catch her words
as they fall between my fingers.
i yearn to mold my mouth
into a shape that matches hers.

American Nostalgia

TAEYEON HAN

I sit next to your home now, at my table
I ruin the moment,
I make the mood,
People read about me
But I need them all to smoke me
Until I go down the drain.

There are cars passing on the road
There are Those reliving on the street
There are strangers being met
There are People falling off of the cliff
And I want to be there,
With them, before they go

There is civilization being unmade
An interior designer, designing the middle-class grave,
Over there is the factory where you were born,
Somewhere back was the lunchbox of thoughts you had
Out in the front is the horizon, and it's sponsored by apple pie,
I want to be the pattern on your mother's dress

They'll say if you didn't go into a diminishing decline
You could have been the greatest of all time
But who would be there to keep track,
Who will stay when the lights go off
How does the driver close the doors of the bus
When he gets off
I want to be the newspaper, the stain on your sleeve
the hair clip on your wife's halo

It all is a crippling disease
Your ridges, your sleep, the bend in your back
An ending to nothing, An American flag, A laugh, A fall from afar
As famous as orange juice
As eternal as Mickey Mouse.

I want to be a raindrop
Found buried between a valley
In a sandstorm, in a desert
On the shores without time.

Peripeteia

FICTION

GRACE STOWE-EVANS

Women like flowers. Roses especially, he was told.

His rose bushes grew thick and tall forming a wall around his garden. Their stalks were wide as wrists, thorns like wolf canines, dark leaves, and blood-red blooms. They protected his garden and his house. His house was a poor man's Monticello, built-in white marble with ionic columns, and heavy red curtains.

His house was beautiful but not as beautiful as his garden. There were elm trees as tall as cyclopes, fig-trees, pomegranate trees, almonds, and golden apples that never spoiled. And then, there were his flowers. Oh, he grew so many flowers. Purple aconite up to the windowsills. Hemlock, and hellebore, daffodils, and pale violets, and even moly, a white bud with black roots that had been the stuff of myth until he'd invented it. On the porch, there were planters of hyacinth, narcissus, and all the flowers in Persephone's wedding bouquet.

He loved every tree and every flower, but the roses were his greatest passion because their thorns kept animals out of his garden. The vermin that attempted entry met an unfortunate end amongst the thorns.

His dates did not appreciate this. Granted, many were put off by his long speeches about how he'd achieved apples so golden, lilies so white, and the thick roots of moly. But the roses were the ultimate deal-breakers.

"What's that in the rose bushes?" she would ask.

"Oh, just the rabbits. Poor fools, don't know to stay out."

They would wince, scream even; until one day, one woman laughed. Her name was Peripeteia. A Greek name; rather a Greek word. He'd heard it before, in 10th grade English, and several more times in college; but he forgot the meaning the second he saw her profile. He didn't feel the need to look it up.

For their first date they met at a restaurant with a sculpture of a discus thrower by the door, and bronze theater masks on the walls. Their table was next to a recreation of The Mask of Agamemnon.

He wore khakis and a button-up shirt with a daisy print. He pretended the flowers were moly. Peripeteia was dressed like the attendant of a posh Halloween party as Aphrodite. Her dress was floor-length, sleeveless, in a pink to white gradient. She looked to be carved from marble, with strong features and white curls bound loose. She smiled when she saw him; a lioness baring her teeth.

They had champagne and an odd appetizer with string beans and foam.

"These roses," he said of their table setting, "There are so small. I grow roses that make these look like daisies."

"Daisies, like those flowers on your shirt?"

He scratched his neck, "They're moly actually."

"Moly isn't real." She lifted her knee onto the chair and shed her sandals, and somehow remained very elegant.

He swirled his drink, "Moly is real. I've grown it."

"Is it magical?" She chuckled.

"Well, moly wards off spells, and I haven't encountered any witches."

She squinted, "Well of course."

This led to a debate about Greek witches. Who was better, Aeëtes, King of Colchis and keeper of the Golden Fleece, or his sister Circe, Witch of Aiaia?

"Circe is cruel," he said, "She created the six-headed monster Scylla, and turned Odysseus' men into pigs."

"She did not know she could trust them."

"Turning your guests into pigs violates the laws of hospitality."

"That is beside the point, she's the most powerful witch in the Greek tales."

"Aeëtes created bulls that breathed fire, and seeds that sprung into warriors to keep his golden fleece."

"And was it not cruel of him to trick Jason into sowing the fields with those seeds?"

"So, we can agree that they are both cruel. I argue that he is more powerful."

"Circe turned Glaucus and her mortal family into gods. She took Trygon's tail and defended her son against Athena. Aeëtes could never do such things, he couldn't even keep his kingdom."

"No king can rule forever."

She lowered her lashes and sipped her champagne, "No one could take Aiaia from Circe. A king cannot rule forever, but a witch can."

He smiled like Pygmalion watching his Galatea come to life, "I like you."

Women like flowers. Peripeteia liked poisonous ones.

"How did you get the aconite so tall?" she asked.

"The spittle of a hellhound."

"Tell the truth."

"Lady, I tell you the truth," he sang like a bard, "My old dog Herakles watered these plants. Sadly, he died at the end of a rose thorn."

She eyed the roses, "Tragic."

"He was a good lad. But even though he's gone, the aconite keeps growing tall."

"Is all of life a song to you?"

He gleamed, "Yes Lady, what is it to you?"

"A tragedy. Disaster strikes. Kings argue, and everybody dies."

He laughed, "Speak honestly Lady."

"Don't call me that."

Women like flowers. His sheets were floral print. Peripeteia turned her back to him and plucked out the threads, her fingernails like knives. He told himself he didn't mind because it was her.

"What flower is this," she asked.

"Lotus," he said.

"Hm." She said that a lot. He told himself he didn't mind because it was her.

She got out of bed.

"Stay," he begged. She threw a clump of thread at him and left.

She made coffee, while he lay in bed, eyes heavy. He was sweaty, and cold now that he was alone. It was alright. He was used to it. She pulled out the stool at his counter. He got out of bed to make sure she didn't pluck any petals off the hyacinths on the counter. He poured himself a cup of cold coffee and sat next to her. The morning light bled through the curtains ever so slightly, tinting the shadows red.

"It's creepy in here."

"Then open the curtains."

"No, it's fine. It's like stage lighting."

"What scene would be lit like this."

"Orestes, pursued by furies."

He went and plucked The Oresteia from his bookshelf.

"My favorite play."

She shook her head "It's meant to be a tragedy, but in the end, justice prevails."

"That is a good thing."

"Perhaps," She plucked off the petals.

Women like flowers. Peripeteia liked his roses when she was sitting on the porch. She liked the roses when they drove by them, squirrel guts and all.

"Daedalus should've built his labyrinth from those roses," she said, as they sat on the porch.

"I disagree. The roses don't keep monsters in. They keep them out."

"They could do both."

"But they don't need to keep monsters out."

"Is Theseus not a monster? He abandoned his wife on an island."

"All Greek men are monsters."

She smiled her lioness' smile.

The sun set and they went inside.

Most women were Daphne to his Apollo. They turned to laurel trees when he pursued them. Good for them. They would be happy as trees. She fell asleep before he did. He curled her hair around his finger and silently begged her not to leave. She was not like those women. She was happy as she was.

The next morning Peripeteia told him she'd arranged a date with another man. His first instinct was to throw the vase of hyacinths at the wall, but it was far too nice a vase for that.

"I'm okay with that," he said.

He didn't see her the week after that. He forced himself to go on a date. The woman's name was Hope or Faith. Some English virtue name. He couldn't remember whether or not Peripeteia was a virtue. While Hope prattled on about nothing, he looked it up. It came from Greek Tragedy; it meant a reversal in fortune.

He texted her:

*How's your date?
Dude? What the fuck?
Mine's going swimmingly.
Didn't know you had one
Do you love me?
Are you okay?
Tell me.
Tell you what, I'll come round later tonight.
Tell me.*

She didn't reply. He left his date and went home to sit on his porch and wait for her.

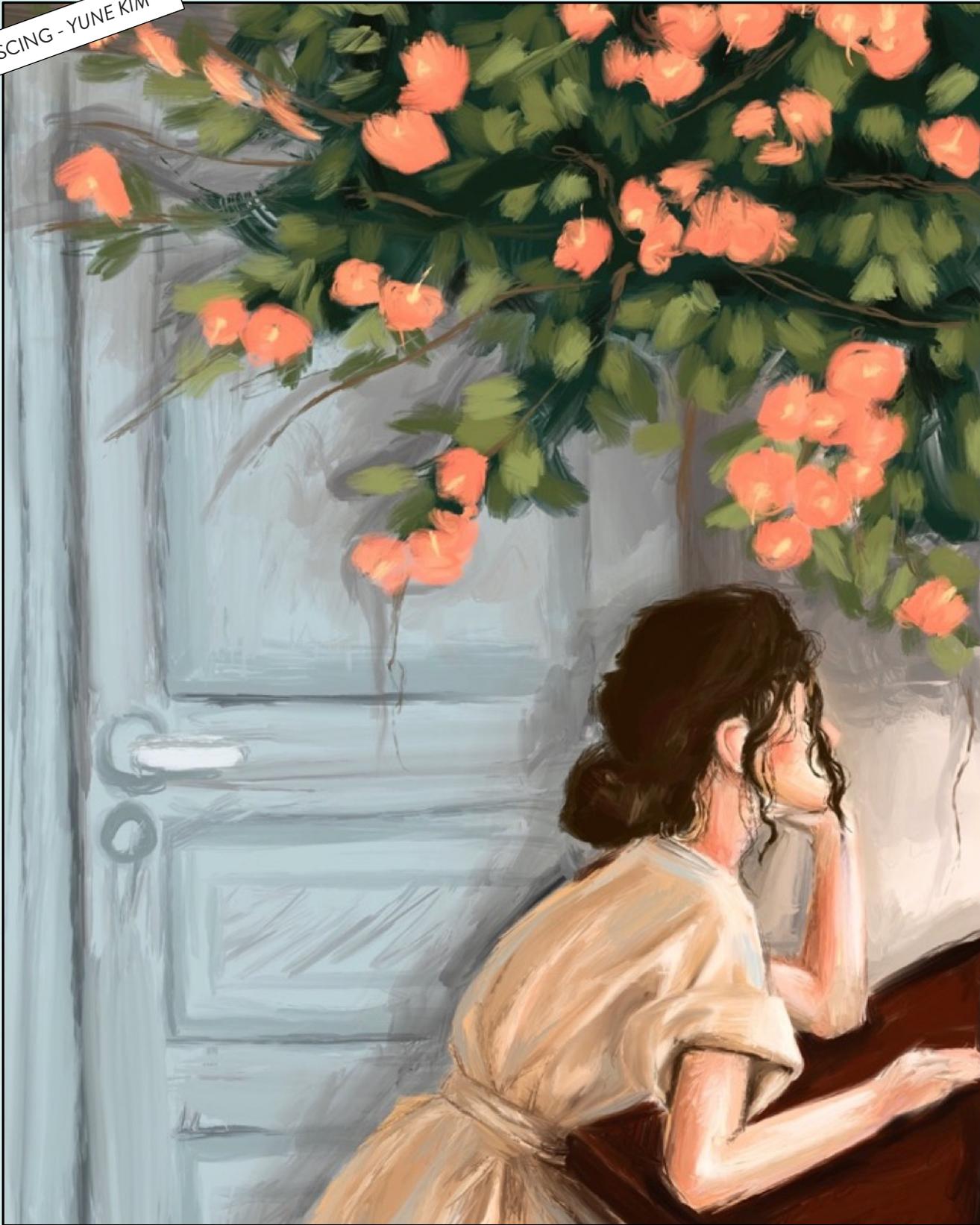
The roses were the gates of his Underworld.

He looked over his plants and counted how many were poisonous. Hemlock killed Socrates. Medea poisoned her son-in-law with Aconite. The pomegranate bound Persephone to the underworld. Golden apples lost Atalanta her race.

He recited odes from the best Greek plays, well the ones that survived. Perhaps there was a better play, the best play ever written, that was lost. *Oedipus Rex* is famous, but what if Sophocles wrote another play that was his favorite. One day, *Oedipus Rex* would be forgotten as well. No king can rule forever. A tear fell down his cheek because one day all his flowers would die, and the foundations of his beautiful house would rot.

At 2:00 AM he left the porch. He cut a bouquet of roses for Peripeteia when she came. He sighed, and he waited. He waited for Peripeteia to come, the rose thorns digging deeper, and deeper into his hand.

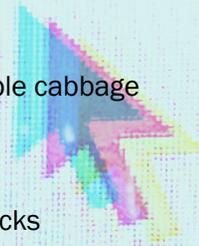
REMINISCING - YUNE KIM



A Crescent Cabbage Patch

EMILY KHYM

This poem is not about the willowing green in the meadows,
Waiting for the sun to shine
Or the petal-like soil that gives life.
This poem is not about a farmer
Aggressively taking out the near purple cabbage
And a young child
Plucking the only delicate dandelion
In the middle of a cabbage patch.
This poem is not about the jagged rocks
Near the crashing waves of the creek
Or the cascade of flowers swimming down the cliff
Or the soft touch of a raindrop breaking into a million pieces
With the gloomy sun embracing the mingling trees.
This poem is not about the crescent hue of the relaxing sky
While the smooth wrinkles of the pink sea
Tries to escape the grasp of the sun.
This poem is not about the flimsy dog
Chasing a wandering fly
Or the lone Venus fly trap
Snapping endlessly at the busy arachnids.



Painting Through Mars

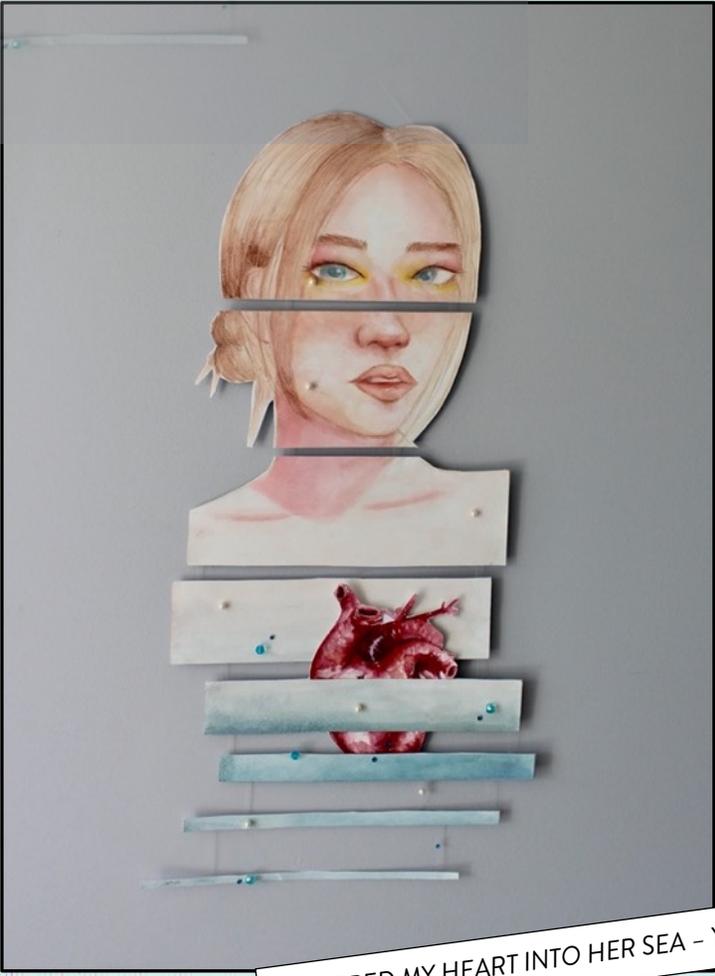
EMILY KHYM

His ginger streaked hair,
Cascaded down his face.
As he sat in the dome,
listening to the tireless thuds
Of the zigzagging tennis balls.

And as he contemplated,
on his father's upcoming trip to Mars.
He knew he had to stop him.
So he left his fig brimming with
sweetness,
and ran in a hurry to leave.

But as he stopped by the rickety fan,
With a thread hanging loosely on it.
He missed the sign that said,
"Be careful,
Pavement under construction."

So he stepped into the lake of wet
cement,
and toppled into the orange cones
of caution that he failed to notice.
He was painted in white,
and so was his frenzy mind.



DROPPED MY HEART INTO HER SEA - YUNE KIM

Translations

JASMINE KAPADIA

my mother
braids my hair, pours me
another cup of cold milk, fresh from the grocery store.
she tells me

the softest things
are often the hardest to kill
this is to say
tulips

taste sweeter when dipped
in boric acid
(they can kill the roaches that have made
a home out of my piano teacher's eye sockets)

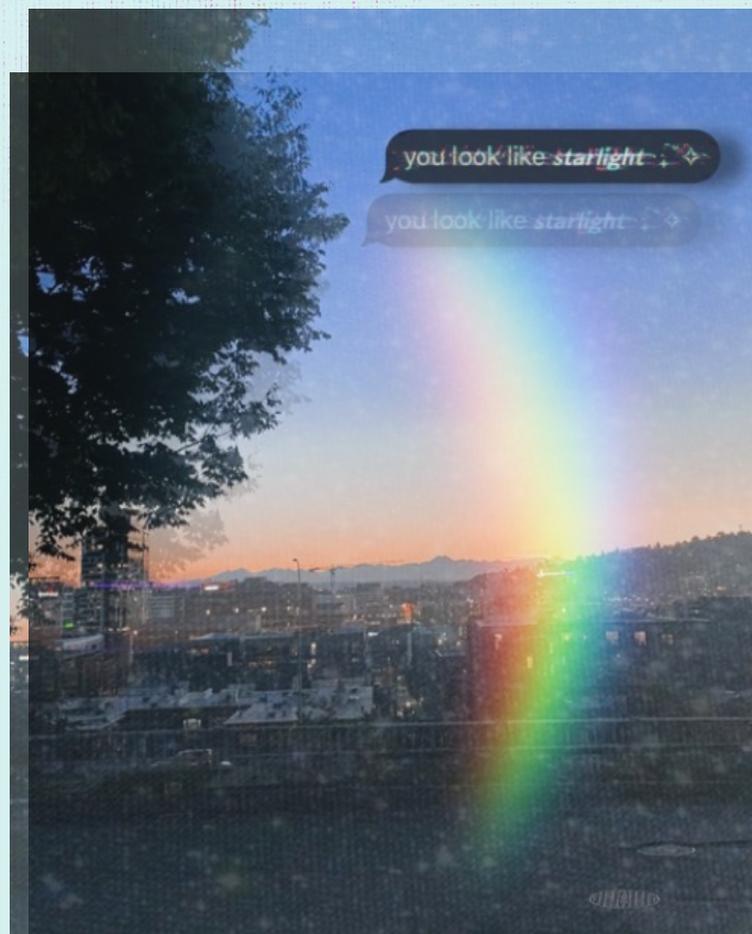
she says my name
is the loudest in chinese.
in other words, mispronunciations
are gunshot wounds you cannot heal from.



cusps

JESSICA KIM

The wind rustles through the bottles hanging on our lemon trees. We wake up before the sun rises, scrambling for toothbrushes that have fallen into the sink, the granola bars that have sat on the kitchen counter for weeks. We load the luggage with such haste, unknowingly spilling our sadness on the backseat of our Honda Odyssey. I notice how the front door is left ajar, the youthful memories flowing out and the chilly wind from last night's downpour gushing in. Alice waves her final goodbye from the porch next door, her copper curls drooping in some mixture of reluctance only the next greeting can vaporize, and she hands me a locket with a picture of us on our trip to Disneyland, where fairytales came back from the dead. The wind dies down now, a grave silence lurking in the backyard. The trees play a somber hymn that our sorrow conducts. I whisper farewells only the wind can pick up, and we are transported into someplace resembling lost friendships. Even as we drive off the memorized routes, the clouds override the sun.



Fireworks

NONFICTION

KRISTEN LI

Once upon a time, there was a creature known as the Nian. On the first night of every lunar year, the creature would terrorize the villages, ravage people's properties, and devour their children. One year a man came the day before New Year's Eve and said to the villagers, "Why do you fear this creature such? You are many and he is but one." The villagers were dubious; however, at dawn, they found that the man had driven the creature back to its dwelling. Before departing from the village, the man revealed that Nian is petrified of loud noises and the color red. From then on, people lighted fireworks every New Year to rid of the creature. The Chinese words for the festival are "Guo Nian," which translates to "passing over Nian."

The first time I saw fireworks was when I was six. My parents took my brother and me to Disneyland. We wore foil-lined costumes that cinched tightly at our waists, our palms blotched with popsicle stains and specks of powdered sugar. When night fell, we pressed our hands against our ears, gaping, spellbound, at fireworks above the castle.

Back then, I had not heard of the *Nian*. But I was convinced that the spectacle had a cosmic significance; I imagined it to be a piece of a larger puzzle that would spell out my path ahead. My brother's silhouette, then slim and a head shorter, shielded my view of the castle, so it seemed as if the flames were shot from the point where the sky met the land, on the far end of the earth.

Three years ago, I saw my brother perched on the balcony. We had just driven back to our apartment in Beijing, having dined with family friends and relatives on New Year's Eve. The thin layer of snow that had coated the railings was melting; water trickled down the metal and pooled at a corner of the balcony. He had to stand on his tiptoes and crane his neck to see the sky.

When I heard a muffled crinkling noise, I knew he did not have to wait for long. A few sparks sprung from a clearing not far away, and pellets of light were catapulted into the night, piercing through the veil of darkness. Upon reaching its full height, the pellets crackled and blossomed into petals.

In a few moments, the sky was ablaze with fiery blooms.

On New Year's Day, we woke to find the sun, bleached white by the explosives, glinting feebly above our heads. My brother and I, hearing the crickets chirp for the first time in many months, went to the balcony. We did not see the crickets; instead, we trod over the debris and fragments of firework

wrappings strewn along the railings, transfixed by the flecks of pigments that peppered the floor like freckles on a toddler's cheeks.

Three months later, I graduated from middle school. We were moving again, this time to New Jersey. I had attended Dulwich, a large K-12 international school in Beijing for five years—longer than any of the other schools I was enrolled in. I stood by the open suitcases on the living room floor, my eyes fixed on the piles of folded clothes and photo albums. I felt as if I were an inflated balloon, swollen with emptiness, about to rupture with the prick of a needle. After all the years of moving, I thought I had found *the* place. The place where my friends and I sat on our heels and ate Jianbing by the side of the road, the place where neighbors played mahjong and chewed on pumpkin seeds after meals, the place where my family...

My eyes eventually landed on a cardboard box shoved between the toiletry bag and utensils, much like the ones that hold a deck of playing cards. Except, the cover is a lurid red, imprinted with a speech bubble that read *BOOM!* I flipped the box over and studied the text in the back. It was firework powder.

I held up the box to my brother, who was hauling his hamper full of tennis gear down the staircase. "You know you can't bring this, you'll be on the no-fly list." I paused before continuing, "Besides, when would you light it?"

"Don't look at me, I didn't put it in the suitcase."

"Oh." I raised my eyebrows. When he unloaded his shoes and clothes into the suitcase and left the room, I slipped the box into my pocket.

That afternoon, I went outside and strolled along the parameter of our apartment complex. I eventually reached a patch of lawn, a square of green amidst a sea of ashen tiles. I pulled out the box and turned it in my hands; it was about the weight of a single matchstick. With my fingernails, I tore the plastic film and peeled it off the package. But instead of opening the pack, I placed it back into my pocket and walked back. I did not want to disturb the stillness in the air.

In late August, we moved into a house that sat on the edge of an eighteen-hole golf course, and my brother and I started school there as soon as we arrived. I managed to elude the wistful feeling that washes over me every time we move to a new place; the prickle of uneasiness that lodges at the bottom of one's stomach. Our neighborhood was quiet and sparsely populated; you could hear a car ignite from miles away. Nevertheless, we quickly accustomed ourselves to life in the New Jersey suburbs, frequenting the farmer's market down the road and the park that adjoined the golf course.

After living in the new house for a few months, New Year's Eve approached as abruptly as the rainstorms in the region. When I came home from school one late afternoon, the sun was nestled in the crevices of the faraway mountains; the crescent moon hovered above the skyline, illuminated

by the faltering light. The lunar calendar is modeled on the monthly cycles of the moon, as opposed to the annual cycles of the sun.

At the dinner table, we ate while listening to the anchorwoman's voice and the low thrumming of the air-conditioning unit, entranced by the light emitted from the television screen.

"Isn't it New Year's Eve tonight?" My brother, finishing the broth in his bowl, set his spoon on the table and said. We glanced at the lock screens on our phones, then at each other. Without saying a word, we shifted in our seats and looked at the window.

The sky was a canvas, plastered in a thick paste of cobalt blue. There were no stars—perhaps they were plucked by a creature of the night, leaving clefts and craters where stars had once shone. All was quiet.

My brother wiped his mouth with a napkin and went upstairs. The rest of us returned to our bowls and gulped down the broth. The clinking of the silver-plated spoons against the ceramic reverberated across the room.

"It must be loud in the cities. I guess New York is not as close as you would think." I said.

One day not long ago, I was brushing my teeth when I thought I heard the sound of an engine backfiring, a vicious growl that pierced the quiet night. I knew July 4th was approaching, but I had not anticipated many celebrations prior, especially not one that involved combusting vehicles. The Americans are overzealous with their national holiday, I thought, so this might be a sight.

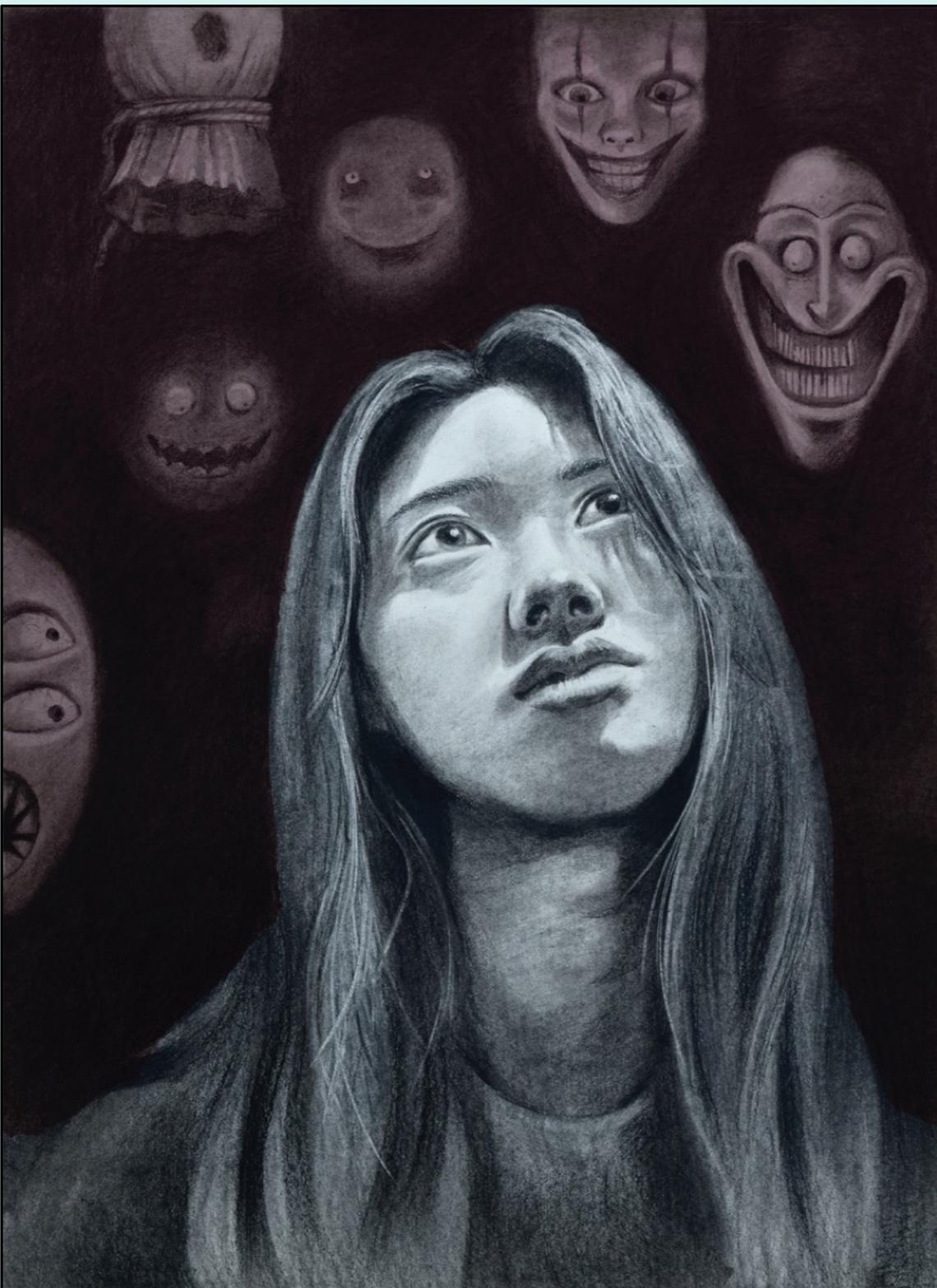
I ran to my room, which had a window facing the driveway. The light was off, but the overhead fan droned on. The moon shone through blinds, casting strips of incandescent light onto the floor. My brother was already there, his hips leaned against the window frame, plying open the shutters and squinting at the opening. He was almost my height now.

"What is it?" I asked, my heart pounding against my chest.

He pulled up the blinds, and my eyes tingled as they adjusted to the fluorescent light that penetrated the glass and filled the room. I felt a gush of warmth flooding my veins. It has been three years since we last celebrated Lunar New Year, three years since we had seen fireworks. I had forgotten what they sounded like.

"I didn't know they have fireworks here," I said.

He looked at me, his eyes twinkling, "Nian is everywhere."



SELF CONSCIOUSNESS - ELAINE CHOI

Peculiarities Under Plastic Tarps

JULIA LUNA

A lady sits on the corner bundled up
Plastic tarps covering her possessions

My dad calls her cat lady; She owns no cats

She meows.

Sometimes she curls up on the floor of the post office
They do not make her leave
Everyone knows you only kick dogs.

I wonder what part of her chose to say meow and only meow
Or if it was preordained for her

Anyway, she meows.

I would say incessantly, but
there is a sort of rhythm to it
Something like a hymn, but
with less spirit and
more hunger

Everyone knows dogs go to heaven.

Nine lives ago, I imagine she would have said
“I like cats and their peculiarities”

Now, she meows.
Maybe the simple onomatopoeia
elaborates the harps of the soul that
need only one word
to be expressed

She sit there now
Cause everyone knows dogs don't meow



long overdue ode

MAGGIE MUNDAY ODOM

my memories of you are all yellow, best friend
dancing across crosswalks
sipping bright pink kombucha under a sunrise
writing poetry and playing uno in your front yard
we sang ourselves awake to the same 5 songs
every night that i slept over at your house
i memorized the plastic constellations on your ceiling
and you and me in that tiny bed
felt like the whole universe

PHOTOGRAPHY - JIAYI JI



Interview with my Mom

NONFICTION
NATASHA RETTURA

My mom and I sat down at the dining room table where I would be interviewing her. Nerves flow through the both of us. She anticipates the questions while I await the answers. Neither of us knowing what will come out of the other's mouth.

As I ask the first question my mom's eyes widen, like a kid in a candy shop. She remembers what it was like moving to a whole new country. Moving from Costa Rica to North Carolina was difficult because of the "... whole new environment, new school, everything was different."

She had to make all new friends and learn a new language.

Which comes to my next question: "When learning English, were there certain words or phrases that were harder to learn than others?"

She tells me that since she was so young, moving to the states when she was only 7 years old, she picked up the language quite easily. My mom smiles as she recalls that her older sister had some trouble when it came to the new language. I then ask her if it was harder to remember her native language of Spanish as she got older and spoke it less. She explains that as she got older, she began to forget simple words or grammar.

She laughs as she exclaims, "It doesn't help that they teach you such a formal way of speaking it in school!"

My next couple of questions drifted away from the topic of childhood and towards where she is now. I wondered if there are any movies or pieces of art that she holds close, which left my mom a little flabbergasted.

"Well I think there's too many to think of right now," She smiles, "But I do love the movie Alien and the Thor movies."

I laugh as I remember her obsession with Chris Hemsworth. Next I ask her where she thought she would be now when she was my age to which she replies by saying that she had always wanted to do something within the medical field and she enjoys what she does now, which is phlebotomy. I question if she had or still has any role models in her life where she replies, "Honestly, in my personal life I didn't really have any role models, I've always just had myself."

"Was there ever a moment that seemed like your life flipped upside down?"

My mom was silent as she thought the question over. She got pregnant, she explains, at a young age which obviously changed her life drastically. She didn't want to elaborate after that.

With a shaky breath I asked if she could go back and change anything she said, "I would go back and finish my education like I was supposed to."

To lighten the mood a bit, I ask: “Was there anything that you’ve always wanted to do but never did?”

My mom explains that she always wanted to do something that involved animals. She even told me that about a year after my second oldest brother was born, her and my dad applied to be service dog trainers. But the organization they went through didn’t like that they had a young child in the house.

Finally, I asked my mom what her proudest accomplishment is and she replied with a big grin, “All of my children.”

This interview opened my eyes and made me remember that my mom is only human. She has made mistakes, wished she had done things differently, and has had many struggles throughout her life. However, I believe that all of this made her to be the person she is today and I think that the person she is today is an amazing, caring, determined woman. My mom has taught me so much of what I know and she has taught me to speak up for myself, follow my dreams, and focus on my future. I don’t always say it often but I’m very grateful for my mom.



roads

PRARTHANA VIJAYAKUMAR

veins bear starlight
fractured dreams
adorn the footpath

neon lights line
the path leading
to cardboard houses

midnight dances
only the shadows know
dust swirls with feet

warped over time
pages of blood
streets of gold

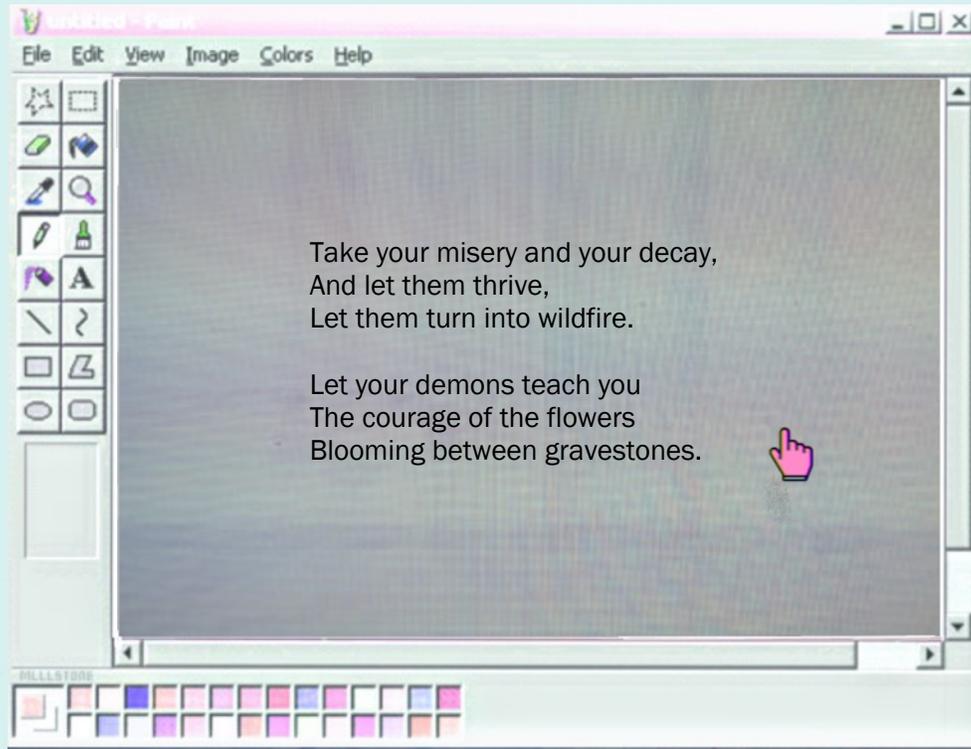
naked children crowd
abandoned alleys and i
grow flowers in bones



PHOTOGRAPHY - JI JIAYI

Between gravestones

SARAH ONASSIS



Juno

NONFICTION
KIKI SHAFFNER

There exists something intoxicating about the ocean. That great, ravenous expanse of raw power reined only by the moon herself; a Roman god thrashing upon the confines of the earth with the force of ten thousand crumbling mountains while boulders batter themselves to dust against each other before plummeting into frothy white mist, salty water splashing miles high to sprinkle the sky with new stars. And yet, beneath the destructive facade, angelfish dwell in the warm embrace of sun-kissed corals, a million unnamed colors patterning the underwater forest like scattered wildflowers blooming longingly for the eyes of a lost lover.

Somewhat paradoxical? Perhaps.

Entirely and inexorably beautiful? Without a single doubt.

Here, on the cool, dotted shores of the beach, the sea exhibits only a fraction of Her rage, careful not to crawl too close to the whispering grasses rooted along the coast which peek up between reddish prickly pears and stubby palm trees laden with drooping green fronds. No, She keeps her distance indeed, instead lapping gently at the toes of squealing children whose eyes sparkle with glee from the chill; salty hair falling wildly over red, freckled cheeks and tiny faces stretched by toothy grins brimming with enough mischief to elicit a slow sigh from the observing muses. Seagulls peck at the lunch of unsuspecting mothers sporting sunglasses five sizes too large, a smear of unblended SPF 50 sunscreen still visible on gritty skin and swimsuit straps digging uncomfortably into the backs of already-sunburnt necks.

On a nice day; a sunny day with a slight breeze from the east and crystal skies for miles in every direction, the pier is teeming with every sort of person imaginable: the children and mothers and pineapple-patterned-swim-trunk wearing men and boisterous teens traveling in groups of at least three or more and sweet old couples enjoying as many hours of crisp life as time-wearied bodies allow. The atmosphere hums with an unprocessed cacophony of waves crashing over pop music, which bubbles up in openings between dogs' happy barking, their paws pounding the earth to spray wings of sand over patterned towels. It's all this which calls our names on lazy Sunday afternoons while plump beads of sweat roll down our bare faces and backs and eating halved watermelons with a spoon has just begun to grow old.

"Juno?" I ask, more a statement than a question. Next to me, Caroline stretches lightly in the tan, cracked-leather seat of my car and then nods.

"Juno." She replies.

I park crookedly in a slim spot near the back of the lot, leaving barely enough space to slip out of my open door without marring the car next to mine, and together we trudge over hot asphalt to plunge ourselves into the common fray we've grown so accustomed to.

A nice day, to the untrained eye, is when Juno Beach may seem the most alive - after all, who could look at that rainbow chaos from above and truthfully say it resembles anything less than the rose-tinted glasses it's viewed through? And yet; what one fails to realize is that, despite Her unbridled, rampant temper capable of upending entire cities, the ocean is *shy*. She and Juno are quiet lovers, exchanging gifts in the form of painted seashells cast ashore to dry until the next tide once again sweeps Juno off her feet to dance until the sun sinks to caress the horizon. It is during these still moments of simple and torrential joy that time itself slows to allow the world a few precious lungfuls of breath, unhindered by the leaden mind.

* * *

I'm by myself this time, brisk wind from the barely-cracked windows whistling faintly through the whole drive. A ting of gold plays at the edge of my vision as I exit my car with ease, the only other proof of life a small white Toyota parked three rows back. Damp sand squishes beneath my feet when I step onto the beach - it rained last night - and I spread myself out on a thin blue sarong amongst bleached driftwood and orange seaweed I imagine mermaids like to tie into their hair for decoration. For only a few minutes I'm alone - and then come the early-riser photographers, tripods pressing little divots into the sand and wide, expensive-looking *Nikon D850* lenses swiveling back and forth between both sides of the wharf, as if they can't decide whether to focus on the light itself or its mirrored refraction off the mellow waters.

They won't disrupt the peace. I think they understand, too.

And so four complete strangers separated by nothing more than a few yards and frequency of thought revel in the shared brilliance of the sun racing its own rays through honey to reach the heavens. Juno beach breathes in, holds for a quivering instant, and then breathes out slow over the face of the sea in limitless awe of Her infinite cycle of rebirth. I dwell now in a whole separate universe from the one so commonly portrayed; that bustling, giggling, droning, graffiti-painted theme park wearing plastic sunglasses from *Dollar Tree*. No, this is no theme park. This is where the ocean meets the earth, and it is more alive than any of us could ever pray to comprehend. Salty breeze kisses the sky's gentle glow mid-flight; a million silver dragonflies skating across the surface of the universe.

Funny, isn't it, how a whole starverse can manifest itself in the single space between one heartbeat and the next.

Juno, the tarpon chant, gleaming backs flashing through the crystal water.

Juno, her lover purrs, tracing bubbling tides over soft sand.

Nobody speaks, of course, because we all understand.

Juno; home.

REACH FOR THE STARS - JASMINE SHEK



At Dawn

CATHERINE SHIM

Car horns blaring out on the streets,
skidding along the puddles.
When it becomes midnight,
drops of water trickle down the window,
and I can finally hear the rain
tapping on the glass pane.

While folding the laundry,
my attention slips away to the downpour.
The sound of water
peppers my room,
disturbing the silence of darkness.

When everyone is asleep,
the time is entirely mine.
I hold a cup of warm peppermint tea,
and the warmth heats me to the core
while the rain cheers me along.

The tranquility of midnight
is what attracts me to anticipate this hour.
Resisting the urge to go to bed,
I can now focus:
away from all worries,
paying the bills, dealing with a fussy
colleague,
this is my time.

The empty roads make me forget
its swirl of wild ivy on the roadside fences,
the silence of the night and the mice
scurrying along wild oleanders.

The Guardian of the Sea

FICTION

ANDREA TCHESNOVSKY

The old lighthouse stood wearily atop the steep cliff overlooking the rocky water below. A man came out of the lantern room at the top of the structure and listened as the waves crashed loudly against the giant boulders. Nightfall was coming; he took out his chair with great effort and placed it on the railing surrounding the uppermost part of the lighthouse, as he usually did. Then, he walked back inside the lantern room and turned the big light on. *Now we wait*, he thought. Very rarely did ships come to his stretch of the sea – it was notoriously dangerous, especially after an accident in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, the old man diligently watched over the horizon all night long. He had developed a hobby after all this time: astronomy. The old man pulled his chair up to his telescope and looked into it. *It was still too bright*, he thought. *The Queen of the Night Sky doesn't appear till later*. Just like that, he sat in his chair all night, switching his gaze between the stars in the sky and the dark horizon up front.

At the first light of dawn, the old man again dragged his chair back inside the lantern room. He slowly and carefully went down the spiral staircase into his bedroom. There were few things in there: an old creased volume of *New Worlds, New Horizons* that he used to distinguish constellations, a white cloth napkin embroidered with a red letter A, and a picture sitting on his nightstand.

The old man carefully studied the picture. He blew the dust bunnies off the corners, ever-so-gently touching the woman's face. She was laughing in the man's arms; Chester could hear the echo of her laugh, a laugh he heard so long ago it seemed as though it were in another life. They were both sitting on top of a picnic blanket, and the man, his eyes shining, had wrapped his strong arms around her waist. The sun gave her an ethereal glow, making her seem like an angel sent from heaven. As Chester looked at the picture, he was reminded of her unmatched ability to make even the simplest moments the happiest. The memory seemed distant now, otherworldly. He took his glasses off, wiped under his eyes, and placed the frame back on his nightstand. He forced out a long, dry, grating cough and slowly made his way back up the stairs to the lantern room. He had a magnificent view of the ocean from there – the horizon was a deep blue speckled with white waves and the occasional seagull that came down for a fish or two. The sound of the waves relaxed him,

and all the sadness that was threatening to suffocate him just moments ago was dimmed down to a dull ache in his heart.

He spent his days looking out over the ocean, occasionally taking naps to make up for the lack of sleep during the nights. His memories brought him the most happiness, along with constellations, particularly the Queen of the Night Sky. He could spot the five stars that made her up anywhere he went and looking up at her always gave him a strong sense of peace. He did not really understand his connection to this cluster of stars, but he knew there was something special about it.

Although old, Chester was very diligent when it came to the lighthouse. He polished the massive lantern, kept the inside clean, and made sure every hinge of every door was well-oiled. He did all of this with great difficulty; he was not as strong and as agile as he had once been. He limped from one side of his room to the other, with a dry cough accompanying his every move. He often got dizzy and had to sit down to regain his senses. Even so, the old man did not want to give in to the biological clock, for he felt that he could not leave this earth – could not leave his responsibility to watch out over the sea, to warn ships of the dangerous rocks ahead.

He often thought about her. He still remembered her perfume; how it reminded him of warm pillowcases and vanilla. He still remembered her laugh; how every time he heard it he was reminded of why it was his favorite sound in the world. He still remembered her smile; how her dimples enclosed it as though it were a piece of art that had to be framed. He still remembered her hands; how warm they were every time he held them, how hard it was to let go of them. But most of all, he still remembered her eyes. How familiar they were, how they seemed to hold a whole other world inside of them: his world.

Even though he did not want to, he also still remembered the day she was taken from him. He remembered the newspaper he read moments before he was supposed to go pick her up. “*Massive Ship Hit Rocks Off the Coast of Maine.*” He remembered the blind panic that overtook him as he struggled to remember the name of the ship that she was coming back on. He remembered falling to his knees on the port, the fleeting faces of the worried passersby... He remembered seeing the rescue teams coming back empty handed, saying they were not able to recover any of the bodies. He remembered the determination that washed over him; how he swore he would never let anyone else experience the pain he was feeling right now. Shortly after, Chester took on the responsibility of watching over the dangerous waters of Maine.

Someone knocked on the door of his lighthouse, breaking him out of his trance. He heard timid whispers and quiet giggles. Upon opening the door, the old man was met with three eager little faces, smiling widely. The three boys waved shyly at him and one of them came forward to speak.

“Umm hi...we were wondering if we could have a go with your telescope. We always see you...um using it before our moms call us back for

dinner and it seems really cool. We love the sky – we want to be astronomers when we grow up!” said the blond-haired boy.

Chester thought he was hallucinating. No one came to his lighthouse, except for the mailman occasionally and a lost tourist or two. He wondered what these kids wanted... perhaps they were lost? Or maybe they want to play a prank on him... Whatever it was, the old man was so glad to see friendly faces that he decided to answer. He cleared his throat slowly and said:

“Why yes, yes of course. Come in... come in. Will your mothers be okay with this?”

The three boys shared an excited look and started bouncing on their heels. Chester thought they seemed so happy, so carefree...

“They won’t mind as long as we’re back in time for dinner!” rushed out the blond-haired boy, Jimmy.

That afternoon marked the beginning of something special. Chester found another source of happiness - the three boys. After that first visit, they eagerly came back every day of that summer. The old man’s daily routine became a little less mundane, a little less painful. They formed a bond. He taught them how to use the telescope, the names of different constellations, and how to orient themselves based on the stars. He spent hours bent over his book with them, carefully turning the pages and explaining every little detail. Beyond their interest in astronomy, he also told them stories from his adolescence, and as he watched their eyes widen, he was reminded of how blissful being a kid was.

One night he taught them about his favorite constellation.

“See that cluster of stars up there?” asked the old man, pointing up at the Queen.

Hector, the freckled boy, angled his face up and stumbled when he felt his balance slip.

“Yeah, I do!”

“That’s my favorite constellation. Do you want to know why?”

The boys nodded.

“I noticed it one night when I was young and incredibly sad, and it reminded me of someone I once loved very much. It felt like she was looking down on me, like she was showing me she was always going to be with me.”

“What is it called?” asked Sam.

“I named it Queen of the Night Sky,” answered the old man, “I thought it suited my wife,” he added quietly.

Jimmy, Sam, and Hector stuck around to help him around the lighthouse too. Pretty soon it was all four of them that polished the massive lantern, and cleaned the inside, and oiled the hinges of every door. The boys would stop whatever they were doing and give each other worried looks whenever they heard him cough or saw him start to sway, but never said anything about it.

One day they found Chester leaning against the doorframe breathing heavily. He could not talk when they asked him what was wrong, so they just helped him to his bed. The boys exchanged sad looks and held his hands but stayed calm. The old man tried to push them off and get up to continue his daily business, but he was so weak that he couldn't even lift his head up. He wanted nothing more than to drag his chair out and prepare for the night to come, but the only thing the old man could manage to do was take a deep rattling breath. He knew the end had come. He looked at the three boys surrounding him, with their sad eyes and sympathetic smiles and realized that for the first time since Annabelle had passed, Chester felt truly at peace. He thought back on his life, on all his favorite moments filled with happiness, and as he focused his blurry gaze back on them, he realized maybe this wasn't that bad. He thought back on all the things he taught the boys, how happy they were every time he let them use his telescope, how he pushed them one step closer to fulfilling their dreams. He thought of the long nights he spent watching over the sea, making sure no ships even came close to the rocky waters below. He realized the impact he had on Hector, who had a constellation drawn in pen on the top of his hand. As he closed his eyes and smiled softly, he realized he could finally leave in peace, knowing that his spirit would live on, in the lighthouse, in the beach, and in the boys.

The night he passed away, the boys sat on the beach in front of his lighthouse. They didn't speak much, only looking up occasionally from the sand, finding solace in each other's eyes. The gentle undulation of the waves coupled with their hands fidgeting in the sand contributed to most of the noises that filled the air. Hector, his nose pink in the moonlight, looked up at the sky, hoping the stars would comfort him. He focused his gaze upward and squinted his eyes, getting up in the process. The other two simply looked up at him, too exhausted to even ask. Hector pointed up to Queen, or rather to something near her. A new constellation had materialized next to her. The five stars that made her up were now intertwined with seven other stars. He could have sworn he had never seen this one before. Jimmy and Sam also got up upon noticing it and the three boys smiled wistfully.

"Finally they're reunited again," whispered Hector.

Many years later, a family walked down that same beach. The lighthouse was still there, standing proudly atop the beach, although vacant. It was starting to show its age – the black paint was chipping at the bottom and the lantern didn't shine as bright anymore. The dark sea was the same boisterous beast as it had always been, and the moon was beginning to shine. The little girl, her long hair flailing in the wind, ran ahead of her parents who were walking on the sand, hand in hand. After they had taken a couple more steps, the mom pulled out a picnic blanket and laid it down. The three of them sat on it and she passed three sandwiches around. The family ate slowly and peacefully. After she was done eating, the little girl laughed, clinging onto her dad and tracing the star tattoo on the top of his hand. Once they all finished, they packed up and the dad smiled nostalgically. Before going up the steps

that led back to the outside world, the man turned back to the sea and looked around, committing every detail to memory. He glanced up at the lighthouse, then at the rocks ahead, and finally at the sky. The King and Queen of the Night Sky were still there, forever in each other's presence. He kept looking at them until his wife came back to where he was and gently nudged his arm.

“Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah sorry, it's just... this was my favorite place once,” said Hector.



I used to love

MICHELLE TRAM

how you looked
standing beneath my blood orange tree,
your bare toes dug into
dirt and grass as you'd pluck
candied fruit from branches
even Adam couldn't reach.

I'd hold my breath as
you'd hold the first
in aching, calloused hands.

Your fingers would smell like the buttered
whiskey your dad left behind, a half-
empty bottle of Jack Daniel's you've found
beside the shattered china
your mom used to hide.

You knew how to cut flesh
with ethanol and artificial affection
and strip vein from seed with
slurred tongue and knuckle,

and I'd watch every drop of
golden zest stain your fingertips
and damn your per-
fect broken lips.

I wish my skin knew how to scream
before it rotted black and blue,
before my daughter asked
to touch each scar
made of citrus beer,
before I learned to take
knife and thread and sew
breath and
bone and
forgiveness back
together.

But my bruises still burn and
count tears in my sleep
until I wake and remind myself that

this
is what
you love.



MERCILESS

SATVIKA A. MENON

We stretch out dreams on silver platters like morsels to
be gobbled-
To be stirred in with our daily meals
And consumed diligently like medicine.
We unknowingly spike our drinks with our fears
And let them soak into our skin when sunbathing
The atmosphere is crowded with dangerous thoughts
Every crevice is coated with anger and hatred
Waiting to penetrate into every inch of our body
Sparing no one
For the world does not like mercy



MATRYOSHKA - ARIEL KIM



Dear future daughter,

NONFICTION
CLAIRE SOUTHARD

Although I have yet to see your face or hear your incredible laugh, I know this letter deserves to be written. That it is a letter long overdue, from generations before you or me. And that message is this: I'm sorry.

I'm sorry for bringing you into a time when the love of things trumps this thing called love, when nature is nothing more than currency to be traded away, and when what's legal isn't always moral. Into a time when you will always struggle to impress others but will always fail. I'm sorry that you live in a world in which our leaders have the audacity to call our planet's decimation "progress" and we build walls of division instead of bridges of unification. I'm sorry that, in the land where everyone should have a voice, yours will be ignored because you're too young, too inexperienced, or were born the wrong sex. Indeed, I'm so very sorry that you will do the same job as a man but be paid less. I'm sorry that we never tried to save the planet, ignoring global warming until it flooded the state of Florida. I'm sorry for leaving you with a national debt that you never asked for, that you had no part of, a debt 143 times the richest man in the world's net worth. Most of all, I'm sorry that we continued to point fingers, claiming the world's failure wasn't our fault while it crumbled around us.

And I wish I could tell you exactly what to do, how to help our dying world, but the fact is, I'm as guilty as everyone else. So I am sorry for refusing to stand up to the bully making fun of my friend because she was "too strong-willed." I'm sorry for being too scared to argue with the person who told me women belong in the kitchen. I'm sorry for not smiling at a boy in my class the day before he committed suicide. But most of all, I'm sorry for always thinking that it was too late, too impossible to make a difference in this broken world.

An Indian-American Perspective On Race and Community

NONFICTION
VIVEK VELUVALI

Saddening as it is, the death of George Floyd is a tale all too familiar to us Americans. A black person exists in a space, the police appear on the scene, the black person is killed by the police, the police face minimal consequences, the black community is asked to swallow their grief and their anguish and turn the other cheek, and subsequent protests are derided. Like a sick cassette on repeat, this series of events happens over and over and over again. It happened with Ahmaud Arbery, it happened with Eric Garner, it happened with Michael Brown, it happened with Tamir Rice. It happens to children and the elderly, to men and women — frankly, no one is safe.

And the fact that black parents must teach their children how to minimize the risks of death when *interacting* with a cop represents a grave malediction in our society: that is, we do not value the lives of black people — and more broadly, minorities — nearly enough. We value them so little, in fact, that the black community is forced to put itself in a rhetorically incriminating stance to not *die*.

It's hard to truly value one's country when such atrocities are commonplace, especially if you're a part of the group atrocities are being committed towards. Honestly, I find the fortitude of the black community amazing and inspiring; not the fortitude to push through the sadness these incidents generate, but the fortitude to not desire revenge. To not arbitrarily decide to declare some sort of crusade — one which we would be hard-pressed to discredit. Events like that of Floyd's will happen again if substantive change is not made — not just at a policy level, but at a societal one.

And, if they happen again, we further tear at the social contract between black people and the government, the social fabric which America rests on. But, while context is important, that's not the main thing I want to discuss here.

I am an Indian American. My parents, like many others, immigrated here with little to their name and worked hard to give me a solidly upper-middle class lifestyle. Despite the advantage they may have had by being educated to work in the technology industry, the sheer climb they, and many of their peers, have gone through to get where they are now is inspiring. However, compared to the climb that many Latinos, Black people, and even Asians and Indians living in the US go through, their climb is not that steep because of the institutional prejudices against them.

Oftentimes, I find that the Indian community forgets these things. We forget how having your community be against your very humanity can kind of hurt your future. We forget how class systems and stratified societies work

against those on the bottom. We forget how hard it was for us to climb to where we are now. And ultimately, we embrace the idea of the model minority and pin the blame for all the maladies the black community is facing on them. We call them dumb, violent, poor.

I hear the conversations when family friends come over.

“You can marry anyone, as long as they’re not black.”

I hear the hushed tone that these family friends speak in.

“That neighborhood is full of thugs.”

I see the beliefs my community, my friends, and even my family, sometimes, hold. We don’t *hate* black people *per se*, but we would never want them around us.

Frankly, it’s appalling to me. My community should respect the struggle of minorities in the US. We should empathize with those who cannot succeed and praise those who do. More so, we should empathize with the social struggle that these groups go through because we have seen part of that struggle and understand it. Yet, we don’t. People *I* know don’t. Sometimes, I worry if I myself don’t. This is quite clearly shameful.

It is vital that the Indian community comes together around the black community. That we fight with them, hand in hand and arm in arm. That we leverage the vast technical, economic, social, and political prowess that our community wields. That the lawyers and entrepreneurs we are so proud of use their abilities to fight back against the corrupt institutions and morally deficient social norms that help perpetuate the prejudice we saw with Floyd and so many, many more. At this point, we can no longer rest on our laurels yet still claim some sort of moral high ground or neutrality.

But, in the end, we likely won’t. Why? Who knows?

Maybe it’s our community’s desire to be accepted in society, to be the model minority, to be white. That draw is ever so alluring. It’s easy to just integrate, and to just play into the tropes assigned to us by the larger white majority; I know because I used to feel this myself. I believed it was better to keep my head down, get in the good graces of the white people around me, eschew my cultural heritage. Integrate.

Or maybe it’s a plain belief that we’re better than black people? That we may be of dark skin, but are ultimately fair enough to be better? That old belief rooted in systemic colonial oppression. That colorist belief, seen in our media and in our speaking. Certainly, that’s a legitimate place our response — or lack of it — could come from.

Really, there are a variety of dark, scary places the Indian community’s inaction could come from. In the end, it doesn’t really matter. What does matter is that we work through these prejudices and stand with the black community anyway. They’re not better than us, and we’re not better than them.

Some will say, “oh, black people don’t care about Asians anyway. Why should we help them?”

But does that really matter? What we’ve seen is the systemic oppression of a group of people — even if they don’t like us, that doesn’t mean we have the moral authority to not stand with them. Such a belief, to me, seems like utter lunacy. The only way we can build bonds with the black community — and minority communities as a whole — is to stand with them.

To start with, maybe we ought to take a step back and really analyze the riots. I know many uncles and aunts who believe that those rioting are brutes and bandits. While this certainly makes sense, it's not entirely true. Rather, many of these people have no recourse. Every time a black protest or movement happens – peaceful or not – it is systematically rejected and repressed. Furthermore, such a belief is reductive to the overall conversation. The riots themselves aren't the issue; instead, we need to look at the broader context of the riots. From there we need to understand the broader context of racial issues in the US. Finally, our community needs to dedicate its time and resources to working against systemic racism and oppression.

The black community is suffering. Again. We in the Indian community need to do something about it. If we're truly so great, let's prove it. I will leave you with a cliched, yet important, poem by the German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller:

*First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a socialist.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.*

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

I ask you now, what happens when they come for us after they've come for everyone else?

TEXTURES - VELDA WANG

TEXTURES - VELDA WANG

TEXTURES - VELDA WANG

TEXTURES - VELDA WANG



In the Garden

FICTION

CAROLINE WAGSCHAL

“There’s only two kinds of people,” my father used to say. “The people who succeed and the people who don’t want to.” He said this often, self-importantly across the dining room table, quietly, with one eye on the blue-haired cashier at Whole Foods, at the gas station, his lip turned up at the man curled on the sidewalk, his face dirty, the reflection of his pupils wide in the dark blue paint of my father’s Audi. He hadn’t said it years, not since I was much younger and everyone still thought I was going to be the kind of person that succeeded.

For one thing, I hadn’t gone to Harvard. This was an experience certainly not unique to me, but to my father it was an enormous disappointment. He’d gone for both law school and undergrad, as had his father and his grandfather, all who had made generous donations to the school after graduation. That was another grievance—he’d wasted an endowment of half the new legal library trying to ensure my admission.

I got into Dartmouth, which I shouldn’t have. My grades were low to begin with, astronomically low for the small private school I’d attended. I’d spent a fortune on tutoring, though, or my father had, six months of two-hour sessions twice a week, and managed a perfect ACT score, unrepresentative of my actual ability. The idea, my tutor, a thin, slightly ratty man, said, was to get the schools to think I was some sort of unorthodox genius, stifled in the classroom but intrinsically intelligent. I told him that a genius who felt stifled in the classroom would probably feel just as stifled in a student testing center, and he told me he’d been doing this for ten years and did I want to go to college or not.

The first day of May was college day at Chatham, and all the seniors wore sweatshirts they’d ordered after they’d opened the letters from Yale and Stanford, their chests stamped with Latin, like they’d been branded.

I had one too, folded neatly in my bottom drawer, but I didn’t wear it. It was meant to be some kind of statement, I guess, but one that felt progressively more stupid as the day went on.

“Not going to college, huh, Farrah?” asked James Harris, in English, as the rest of our independent study group looked on, smirking. “Good for you. Gonna really stick it to the man, right?”

“Dartmouth,” I said, then immediately hated myself for it.

His lip curled. “Are you actually?”

I shrugged.

“Full scholarship, too, I bet,” he said, as the rest of the group laughed.

There was a lockdown drill during fourth period. Duke walked in late, as usual, a minute before the alarm rang. He was wearing his school colors too, a blue University of Virginia hoodie, and for a second I was disappointed.

“What, you’re not going to college?” he asked, even though he knew full well I was already enrolled. We were crowded together at the back of the Statistics room, the room darkening as our teacher pulled down the blackout shades.

“Yeah,” I said, giving up. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He grinned, revealing two rows of straight white teeth. “I sure hope not.” He tried to put his arm around me, and I shrugged it off, a little embarrassed, I think. Behind him, I saw the class valedictorian mime gagging. The student council president laughed.

The drill went on five minutes longer than usual, then ten, and then I started to wonder if maybe it wasn’t really a drill. Mr. Davis, a tall, slightly bald man in his forties, shifted slightly.

“You think someone had a seizure again?” I asked Duke, quietly.

“I think we’re getting nuked,” he said. “Finally.”

The alarm went off again about half an hour later, marking the all clear. I went back to my seat, but Mr. Davis didn’t move. He was seated, legs crossed, on the carpet, his face pale, illuminated by the harsh glow of his phone screen in the artificial dark.

It was only bits and pieces at first—indiscrete teachers, rumors—but by the time the last bell rang, we all knew what had happened. My English teacher had shot her husband, aimed for the heart and missed, grazing his ankle, then been carted off, sedated, hysterical.

Forty, thin, mousy, tired, incapable of inspiring any sort of sentiment, like or dislike both, she’d never existed to me beyond the boundaries of her classroom. Now, though, I was fascinated. How far had she been pushed, how long had it taken, before she reached the breaking point? She’d always seemed so flat, so completely void of any emotion. If she could snap, anyone could.

The English 12 classroom was in the old wing of the school; wood-paneled, airy—romantic, though it hadn’t seemed so when it was Mrs. Morris at the blackboard. Only when the substitute was there did the floors take on the color of honey, did the windows let in the sunlight.

Mr. Clare was grazing fifty, tall and thin with thinning hair that somehow suited him. He introduced himself. He was from California, had graduated from UCLA and spent two years backpacking in Asia. He was married. He had a tattoo of the moon on his forearm, waxing crescent, and a mandala on his shoulder. He had a great voice, low and a little gravelly, and whenever he spoke I found myself leaning forward to listen.

It was an English class, but we often found ourselves leaning towards philosophy. Usually we’d come in, having read a couple chapters for homework, and he’d pose some great existential question and let us answer it.

“Proudhon,” he said, one day, sitting, legs dangling, on his desk, as he often did. “We know that ownership only exists in theory, right? Nothing is really ours unless someone else deems it so. Is it the same thing with identity? Do we get to decide who we are? Or are we nothing more than what other people say?”

"It's like Holden on the train," someone said. "When he's talking to Ernest's mom-now she believes all this stuff about her son, right, but that doesn't make it true."

"I didn't ask you to summarize the book, but thank you for restating that unrelated information we all read last night," said Mr. Clare. He could be cruel, sometimes, without meaning to be. "Farrah?"

"I don't think it matters," I said. "There's no way to know for sure who you are, whether you're a good person or not. Perception is as good a way as any."

"And if that perception is wrong?"

"Does it even matter?" I said. "I mean, once everyone has made up their minds, does it make a difference whether they're right or not?"

He grinned. "Answering questions with questions. Very Socratic."

The bell rang, and he jumped off his desk.

"Read the next six chapters, but I don't want to hear about them tomorrow." The girl who'd spoken earlier flinched.

"It's fucked up," Duke said, a couple days later, watching one of the wheels on his skateboard spin. The recent developments hadn't disrupted my schedule much-I didn't have any extracurriculars listed on my transcript, but I had a strict, set after-school routine; the 7-11, for energy drinks and bags of Sun Chips, the skatepark, where I watched him glide on the hot grey pavement, the benches behind it, where he smoked Menthol cigarettes; too cool for Juul, but not too cool for compulsion.

"Yeah, I guess," I said.

"You guess?" he repeated, trying to light the cigarette clenched between his teeth. "She fucking shot him, Farrah."

"Maybe he deserved it," I said. I watched a small figure slip up and down the cement hills behind him. There was a liquid element to their motions, a fluidity, that reminded me of fish, the glide between the waves, scales glinting, reflecting the sun.

He shook his head. "You're psycho."

And maybe I was, if he said I was.

Duke's car, for whatever he said he wanted, driving him home, if he couldn't, homework in the empty kitchen, as Hanna vacuumed upstairs, dinner with my father in the dining room, at a table that seated eight but almost always seated two.

My father was a business lawyer, but a reluctant one. After law school, he'd tried to make it as a trial attorney, living on spaghetti and his trust fund as he was rejected by one prospective client after another. He was too effeminate, someone told him finally, too delicate in his motions, his voice too high and affected. He was already thirty-six when he came out, left my mother behind in California, and took me back to New York. He wouldn't have done any of it if he didn't have to. It was about winning, for him, or at least not losing--to come out before he could be outed, to leave before he was left.

"I'm not saying you should, but if you'd wanted to sue you'd have a fantastic case," he said that evening, over high-end Indian takeout and tossed salad. "They had this clearly unstable woman teaching children for what, twenty years?"

"She was a good teacher, though," I said, which wasn't true.

He took a bite of Tandoori chicken. "You waste a lot of energy arguing over everything, you know. That's one thing I learned in law school. Pick your battles."

"I am picking my battles," I said, though I really wasn't. "You're stigmatizing the mentally ill."

"I'm not stigmatizing anyone," he said. "Pass the water, please."

I pushed it towards him, and a little of it splashed out, hitting the silver watch on his left wrist.

"You have a new teacher, now, right?" he asked, swiping it with a paper napkin. "This Clare. Is he any better?"

I stabbed at a cherry tomato.

"He's okay. You know, really old. Bald."

"Well, as long as he doesn't shoot anyone, I won't complain," my father said.

In one class, Mr. Clare asked us if anyone was truly responsible for anything, if so much of who we were was predetermined—the choices we'd make cemented the day we were born, if not before it.

I told Duke about it afterward, in his basement as the ceiling fan whirred, sputtering smoke.

"That's retarded," he said.

"Don't say that."

"Sorry, I didn't realize we were in Afghanistan, Farrah. Free speech. Anyway, it is. What's that supposed to mean, we don't get to decide anything? It doesn't even make sense."

"I think it does," I said. "Every decision is just a billion tiny ones, right? And at the time you don't even register that you're making them. And then once they all add up—once the path's been set—"

"You sound stupid," he said. "Do you realize that? You sound fucking stupid."

I stayed late after class sometimes, when I had English last, pretending to have a homework question, at first, and then let the original discussion fade into a different one, something current or politically relevant, usually, or sometimes something more personal. We talked about the chapel in the basement, once, which had been closed for years but was being cleared out and turned into another classroom that summer. How we were a secular school now, despite a Protestant history, but how churches could be secular despite being churches at times, or at least feel that way.

Churches were often hosts of soup kitchens and food pantries, help in times of crisis, hurricane relief regardless of faith. I told him my parents were atheists but how I'd walked past a Catholic church on my way to elementary

school, how I'd be late sometimes, standing behind the solid wooden doors, too afraid to go in all the way but so tempted by the stained glass windows, the silence. There was a collection of paintings on the walls, all of Christ performing the miracles, and he looked the same in each one, like he was mine, and I remembered a sense of real, weighing pain when I realized he wasn't.

Mr. Clare kept me after class once, saying he had a book he thought I'd like. I hoped for a classic, maybe, even poetry, but it wasn't, just a chapter in a student anthology he'd stolen from a college library. It was thickly worded and pretentious, and the author wrote as though he'd had a thesaurus open in front of him. It took me an hour to get through, pages sixty-four through eighty-six.

Duke would sit in the parking lot and hold down on the car horn until I showed up, even though I wouldn't even hear it until I was outside and already a minute away from his car. This didn't win either of us any friends, and someone always glared as I walked, slower than usual, towards the passenger seat. When I opened the car door, he would bring his hand up immediately and twist the key in the ignition, and neither of us would mention any of it.

Once when I went by Mr. Clare's room, the door was closed, but I opened it. I thought, in a way that wasn't fully formed yet, that he'd closed it for my sake, somehow, but he hadn't. He was on the phone, his feet up, splayed sideways, and when I came in he frowned and held up a finger. His phone was on the desk and he leant into it, so I couldn't hear much, though I could tell it was his wife on the other end.

"Are you a ghost?" he asked, after he hung up. I stared. "You know, floating through doors. Pale and hovering. Hah."

I didn't know how to respond.

"Did you read the chapter? From the book I lent you?"

"Yes," I said. "I liked it."

"I thought you would," he said. He looked at me. "It's the same point of view. I bet you'd get along with the author."

I tried to swallow, and something pressed sharply against the back of my throat. I felt the airway close, and started to choke.

"Hey," he said, standing. "Are you okay?"

I kept coughing, and he brought his hand down against my back until I stopped, using a little more force than was necessary.

"You okay?" he said again, and I tried to nod. "C'mon, you're fine."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I think I'm coming down with something. I'm going to get a ride home."

"Well, I hope you make it back alive," he said, glancing towards the door. I left, and gained no satisfaction from the sharp click of the door behind me.

I hated cigarettes but started forcing myself to smoke a couple every afternoon at the park, thinking eventually I'd get over it. I still hated the taste,

though, like asphalt, the smoke staining my jacket, and I stopped after a couple of weeks. I started stealing tubes of lip balm and Butterfingers from the checkout counter at Walmart, then stopped as soon as I'd started. Duke said if I was gonna do one or the other he'd suggest the shoplifting; he didn't like to share his cigarettes, but he liked the free candy I'd slip into his backpack. I told him I was starting to think I was in hell, and he said then it was a little late to be worried about Kit Kats.

I stopped going to the skatepark then, and he didn't ask after me. I walked home instead, crossed at the street before the church to weaken its pull. When I got home, sometimes, I was so exhausted I'd lie on the top of my bed for hours, the sheets pulled tight, not sleeping, just staring at the ceiling. I'd prop a pillow up in front of the air conditioner, sometimes, and let it run, just to hear it buzzing. Hanna would come in at six and send me out of the room while she vacuumed and dusted the top of the bookshelves, but once or twice she took pity on me and let me stay, and I closed my eyes and listened to her hum, without thinking, her headphones in.

There were orientation videos on the Dartmouth website, a couple of them, a few on courses, another on dorms. There was one about extracurriculars that followed a group of students around campus, to rowing practice and coffeehouses. Two of them were blonde, with perfect teeth, and a third was Asian, with braces, and they all beamed throughout the entire video, just too tickled for words to be on Dartmouth grounds. That was my favorite video, and I watched it more than the others, though I watched all of them many times. By June, I'd memorized the scripts, and I'd recite the dialogue alongside Sam and Laura and Mei.

At graduation, Duke was drunk and fell off the stage and I looked for Mr. Clare in the bleachers. If he was there, I didn't see him.

It was a hot, claustrophobic summer. When it rained, it looked as though sweat was dripping off the balding branches, leaves browning and crumbling in the heat. I stayed inside from June to August, brought up the electricity bill. At Dartmouth everything was green, and all I could think of was irrigation, pesticides. When winter came and the world froze over again, it was almost a relief.

Measures of Faith

CAITRIN WALKER

I met a girl,
Scarred wrists adorned with colorful bracelets
Telling others to do as Jesus would
But when I asked her what He would do
She just smiled mournfully
'I don't know'

I met a boy
Who fought so hard to be himself
But often lost the fight
I asked him why he prays to the same god
As those who would destroy him
He told me his secret
'I don't pray to god. I pray to anyone who will listen'

I met a woman
So ashamed of herself that she lied at confession
And carried the weight of the world on her shoulders
Like it was hers alone to bear
When I asked her why,
She told me
'God knows my truth. He is my truth.'

I met a girl in a dream
She looked like me
She was crying – or was it laughing?
I reached out for her, but she was fading away
I called her name – my name?
She told me
'You are not strong enough to believe'

I have not met anyone's god – Maybe I never will
But I have felt the wind on my face
And the sun on my skin
I have laughed so hard I've cried
And cried so hard I've laughed
So maybe – just maybe –
I have come closer than I thought



The Creases of Time

TARA PRAKASH



Time, did it slip through my fingers, flow,
Subtly as water? My little big brother,
Running across the pastures with his kite, where did that go?
Footsteps trailing mine, hands clasped tightly, my mother.
I can see the time pass in the creases of my
grandfather's eyes. His skin lined with the trick of time, if only
It wouldn't go so fast, then we wouldn't need to say so many goodbyes.
All too soon, if just once, my world could live forever, we wouldn't be so lonely,
But if all worlds lasted forever, when
Would new ones ever be born? Babies gaze at the world with big eyes, bright,
seeing things they've never seen before, the old watch with
Eyes that have seen too much, the pale that follows a dark night.
Time forces us to make use of what we have, unfurled,
It forces us to say goodbye and hello to all the ever changing worlds.

And I Remember Splintering Splintering Splintering

SOPHIA ROSE SMITH

*Those beer barrels splinter
Softer than I ever could.
Thin slivers pulled into the earth
Like the ground inhaled them
With a side of summer smoke.*

*This morning,
Paint recoils in robin's egg blue
From the side of our house,
The color of flakes
Snowing from your nail polish.
You must be tearing yourself
Into notebook scraps
To add to the compost.*

*Mine was always rougher, somehow:
Violet petals dragged
Into torn wafts of wind,
Spiraling into the weight
Of June.*

*It may return soon,
In the yawn of a campfire
As it stirs to life,
Spitting out the remnants
Of dirt and burnt wood.
There's something I always admired
About that concentrated blast of power,
Kindling emancipating a voice beneath.*

*Too soon the wax seal of summer
Hardened on your skin:
It's too hot for a fire now, don't you see?
And I don't disagree with you,
The barrel always looked so nice
As a planter box dressed in violet seeds.
Wait for their voices,*

For now they'll rest layered in dirt.

But you still called to the seeds in the barrel
Like they would never stop screaming,
And I remember the sound
So clearly in pieces:
I'm going.
I know.
Far away.
Their cries elude me,
And I've planted hours
Staring at soil creased by your hands
Without reaping a flower—
Why didn't you teach me to hear them?
The seeds still wait for you,
Some eaten by the rooster
A few sprouts past Sunday.
Hurry! Hurry,
He'll be back for the rest at noon.
He'll be back for them soon.

And did I ever remember to ask
Why webs always form
In the crease of my eye?
Just the left one,
Not the right.
It's called a lacrimal caruncle.
But it sounds like a sweet blue creamsicle
Leaving street-streaks
As we held it to the open window,
My tongue always stained
In blue popsicle wood
Spiked with splinters.

We always knew
We'd paint this sorry town
Hurling popsicle skeletons to the concrete;
Leaving cheap memories to the wind.

Entropy

JULIA SPERLING

I once shuffled all the cards in a card deck for so long they went back to the same order they started in. I won that game of blitz. At home I feel like Alice, overgrown. I want to open a window but I break it instead. When I was younger my brother threw his arm out at my face while we were playing, and hit me. I cried. My mom told him *You don't know your own strength*. I feel like my brother. My inflated hands do not fit our plastic cups anymore. My blood boils the one in my hand down into wax. People tell me I'm pessimistic. I tell them, *I'm simply a scientist, bound by Murphy's law*. I let the wax drip off my hands through the window, and it falls in someone's voluminous wig far below, and as they bend down in shock, the garage worker throws his cigarette astray and the wind dances with it for a bit, before landing it in the faux hair. The hair alights. It is December and it is the seventh night of Chanukah. The fire feels like sacrilege. In my room I become skeptical of the stories on the shelf beside my bed. *It could be worse* said James Stevenson. I can't argue with that. It could have been the eighth night of Chanukah. My dog's eyes in a picture on my wall follow me from wherever I am, like a watchful portrait in a museum. Now that I have noticed this, I cannot un-notice it. We make eye contact whenever I look up from my bed. Coping with my stolen solidarity, I mix warm milk with cocoa powder and make hot chocolate. I'm quickly distressed at the thought of perhaps I just used the milk I need tomorrow morning. There is no going backwards in an entropic world. Outside, glass that will never turn back into a window lays on the ground. My heart which will never be the same as it was a moment ago pounds. I'm losing moments as they pass. I wish we never invented the word fleeting, that is, if I agree with Benjamin Whorf and 1984.

A Story's Impact

NONFICTION
ISHA SULTAN

On July 15th, a hot summer day, I was getting ready for a family reunion at my aunt's house. I was very excited, because all of my mom's family was going to be there, some who I had never even met before. My relatives from Bangladesh were all going to be there, and they had never been to America before. As I was getting ready, my mom came upstairs and said she wanted to talk to me. I said sure, not really paying attention to her.

She told me, "Isha, you do know your family relatives only speak Bengali, and not English?"

"Of course, mom, I'll figure something out," I quickly responded, not being fully aware of what she just asked me.

I went downstairs, and helped my parents pick some food into the car. The food was a respectful gesture, and showed we appreciated being there. My family and I got into the car, and headed to my aunt's house. When we got there, we were greeted by my aunt's family, who waited for us at the door. After greeting them, I went over to my cousin, who I had known for a long time and was very close with. We sat in the backyard, where the smell of spices from the samosas, curry, and chicken being grilled was strong. My cousin and I talked for a while, and caught up on each other's life.

Eventually, my mom told me to come and talk to my relatives. Everyone was doing something, whether it was dealing with the grill or helping to bring the food outside and onto the tables. It was a hot day, and everyone was trying to make sure that everything was ready for the night, so that we could all eat while it was cooler out. I really didn't have any job to do, so I went around, trying to talk to my cousins, aunts, and uncles who just came from Bangladesh the day before. I finally found a group of my relatives who were resting and cooling off from the heat. They all had iced drinks in their hands, laughing and talking to each other. I went up and started listening to their conversation. However, I soon realized something. I couldn't speak Bengali, and they didn't speak nor understand English. It was hard for me to talk to them. Realizing this, I got very upset, and suddenly wasn't in the mood to be around anyone.

I went inside, making sure to hurry so that an adult wouldn't see me and tell me to come back outside. I needed to be alone so I could think. The hot air was gone and replaced by cool air when I came inside. It felt really nice, and helped me to calm down. Everyone was outside, so it was much quieter. I went to the living room, where I knew no one would be, and sat down, looking out the window. It was still bright out, and the sun was beaming into the windows. I looked at the time. Seven thirty-five. The sun would start to set soon. I decided to sit alone for a while, and think of ways I could try and talk to my relatives, since that was the only reason I was there. I had been really

excited to meet with them and ask them about Bangladesh, since I had never been there myself. Some time had passed and the sun was starting to set with the hues of purples and blues were starting to show. While absorbed in my thoughts and being upset, I didn't realize that my cousin came in.

"Hey, I was looking for you everywhere," my cousin said, as she sat next to me.

I looked up, and upon seeing my dismay, she asked, "What's wrong?"

I told her about my problem, and how I felt like I didn't belong. I told her that I'd rather stay inside, and not be a concern to anyone.

"Are you kidding? Everyone's asking where you are! You're concerning them more by staying here!"

She grabbed my arm.

"Follow me," she said, and I reluctantly listened.

She led me back to the backyard, and since it was almost dark, everyone was sitting and talking. Everyone looked very relaxed and happy. When I came outside, my mom rushed over to me.

"Where have you been?" she scolded.

My cousin told my mom to let me off just this once, and said she needed me for something. My mom said ok, but still glared at me. My cousin grabbed my arm again.

"Hurry," she said, and we rushed past the kids playing and running, the adults laughing and talking, and the tables of food that were slowly being eaten by kids who snuck food off of them.

We were now at the back of the backyard, where our grandma was seated at a table, reading a book. She was very old, and although everyone wanted to talk to her, she had to take breaks due to getting tired very easily. My cousin and I sat across from her, and my cousin started talking to her in Bengali. She asked her how she was, and if it was ok if we talked to her. She said yes, and asked why I wasn't talking. I was clueless as to what they were talking about at the time, so when the both of them were staring at me, I just looked surprised.

"What?" I said, and my cousin and grandma laughed. My cousin translated for me what they were talking about. She looked back at my grandma, and asked if it was ok if she told some stories from her childhood. My grandma said of course, and my cousin translated for me.

My grandma talked about her home from when she was little. It was a small, two story house. My grandma lived there with her parents and brother. Surrounding her house were plenty of fields. Those fields were her father's prized possession, and he would spend the whole day on them. He enjoyed farming very much, and would grow many different fruits and vegetables. My grandma, being younger at the time, loved helping her father. She would wake up early in the morning, and would help her father in the fields after quickly eating breakfast. She also rushed home after school and finished her work quickly so that she could go back on the field. Her father taught her many things about farming, and taught her many techniques about farming. That was why farming was such a special thing to her, and she still tried to do it as much as she could.

Another thing my grandma and her father would do together is going to the market each week in the summer. When the fruits and vegetables were all ready to be picked in the summer, they would spend a week picking all of them. After everything was picked, my grandma would help her father load everything onto the truck the day before they were gonna go to the market. The market only occurred in the summer, and once every week. They would drive to the market, and would set up their goods so people would buy them. After a while of helping her father sell, she would ask to walk around the market. While she was walking around, she would see many other people selling jewelry and clothes. She would stand there admiring the intricate jewelry, the many gold necklaces and bangles, and would even try some on. The clothes were heavily embroidered and came in almost every color one could imagine. Walking around more, she could smell the baked and fried goods that filled the entire market. The market was a place my grandma enjoyed very much, and would look forward to it every summer. She adored her country, and it could be seen by the way her eyes lit up when she told us about living there.

While my grandma was telling the story, I couldn't help but feel much more connected to my country and culture. After talking for a while, my aunt called over to us. We looked over, and saw that it was time for my grandma to leave. We walked with her to the porch, and said our goodbyes. I continued to think about my grandma's story.

Although I had never been to Bangladesh before, my grandma made it feel as though I had been there many times before, and had planted in those fields and walked through those markets. Her story helped me understand so much more about how it was like growing up in Bangladesh, and my cousin made it feel like there was no barrier preventing me from talking to my grandma, and deeply connecting with and understanding her. It made me realize that although I couldn't speak Bengali, I was still able to connect to my culture and learned so much about living there. My grandma's stories taught me to appreciate culture in other ways, and not to let one thing stop me from learning more about it.

Poem of Remembrance

QUILAGO GUERRERO-MILANDER

I remember my mother's low hum vibrating through my head, echoing along with my heartbeat, as her hand passed through my hair.

I remember the day when I first watched his bright eyes crinkle as he laughed his poured-over-ice laugh. I had not noticed it until then. In that moment, not even death could have ripped away my adoring smile.

I remember letting the pounding music engulf me and push out all the thoughts of the day.

I remember hearing his voice on the phone and the deep laugh and letting the tears slip down my face as I laughed back.

I remember remnants of my recent past that I would rather pretend never existed.

I remember calling my friend, and finding her almost in tears.

I remember an unfinished sketch of a mournful horse, stashed under a portfolio in my trunk.

I remember sitting with my cousin on the basement steps, as he and I waited for our mothers to stop fighting.

I remember when I called him from across the hall, and his face lit up as he waved back.

I remember thinking: *Why does he have to look so excited to see me?*

I remember the first time I thought about ramming my car into the concrete dividers.

I remember the golden ink pen that I only used for writing poems and songs.

I remember when I awoke crying, having dreamt I was trapped and alone in a crowded mass of people, the push and pull too great for me to escape from.

I remember the electric feeling that cascaded from my chest into my limbs when he hugged me hello for the first time in months.

I remember flicking water at the mirror to blur my reflection. I grimaced.

I remember when he told me he wanted to join the military, and I cried myself to sleep.

I remember Oakland Ravine and being parked by the shoreline. I watched the leaves flutter down from the tired looking trees, smelling the husky scent of rain and autumn, and I smiled into the sky.

I remember the blurry, electric blue numbers on my cable box reading 4:09 am.

I remember the victim of our glass window, that sat dazed in my hands as her tiny heart drummed in her russet colored throat.

I remember popcorn in orange juice

I remember slamming the door with all the frustration I could channel, and my old wooden dresser rocking in shock.

I remember sitting next to him in the hallway, his indifference hanging in the air suffocating me, as I fiddled with my watch latch. It was the last second before I walked away.

I remember staring out over the Grand Canyon in awe.

I remember pushing my feet against the earth, hurtling down the track while a hawk flew above us; it was like racing the wind.

I remember boxing with the air in my room at night.

I remember watching the "Sweet Juliet" paint dry in uneven streaks across my bedroom wall. The sun filtered through my blinds and cast elongated shadows on my white door.

I remember sitting on the train with him, and my head, wet from the sea, rested on his shoulder. We sighed at our prospective sorrows.

I remember finishing conversations that had passed, but ending them the way I wanted them to have gone.

I remember talking about God with my mother, sitting in red and green folding chairs outside of our tent.

I remember the shadowy figure of a mannequin with a red hat at the edge of my bed.

I remember my new set of paintbrushes, with opal colored handles and maroon bristles

I remember everything people say, in conversations that really don't matter.

I remember pain and fear and love and the little moments of joy the most, they live in my head and replay in a never ending cycle.

I remember every word of hate and every feeling I've ever had.

And I wish I could forget.

Keeper of Yourself

FICTION
KAREN CHEN

I pick a book from the shelf and flip it open. The name of it is *Twin Tales*. I scan through the summary on the back. “This is interesting.” I turn and call my mother. “Mom! This one is nice!”

“Alright, Maria. Add it to the pile.” I obey her command and drop the book in the box. We’re packing up all the books that we want. We’re moving out of here, and Mother said we didn’t have enough room for all of the books. So we get to bring only the best. We’re going to sieve all the interesting books from all the non-interesting ones, separating the good ones into a box.

My mother is the Keeper of this library. Well, at least, she was. And then she got an actual job and left the Keeper position. I offered to inherit it, but she wanted me to get a “real job” and not some lame library position. I really wanted my vocation to be a Keeper. I wanted to work in the library, tending and caring for the books.

I can still remember the library to its fullest. With polished, wooden walls that shimmered with gold, the chandeliers lit to its true beauty, and the books that sat neatly on the shelves. The lamps and fire globes glowing with a dim aura, illuminating my favorite reading place. The balcony upstairs.

It was a small wooden balcony with fancy railings. There were two bean bags up there, soft and green. There was a lime rug on the floor with smooth, feathery ends. The shelves up there consisted of my favorite books. After all, I had sorted them out myself.

That was about a year ago. Now, the library has wilted. The walls no longer glisten gold, only the ugly roughness of timber. The floorboards are cracked and broken. Shelves are broken, and books are missing. The grand stairs that led up to the balcony are dusty and old. They creak with every step. I miss the way the library used to look.

“Mom?” I ask. “Can I go up to the balcony? I’m sure there are some books I’ve missed.” I wait for my mother’s sanction. Ever since somebody agreed to buy the library, I always needed approval for everything I did. Going to the bathroom? Mother’s approval. Going outside? Mother’s approval. Going to read my favorite books? Mother’s approval. It was tiring and sickening, having my whole life being manipulated under my mother’s fingers.

“Sure thing, sweetie.” She waves me away.

I tarry up the stairs, going slow and steady. Running too quickly on these fragile steps can break them. Something I discovered earlier when I rushed down and tripped. My fingers trace the hole my elbow left. It hurt—both the library and me.

When I reach the top, I sigh. Nostalgia lingers in the air. Memories upon memories overlap each other. I look at the now-empty place and nearly cry. Why did we have to move?

As I take a step forward, I realize something. There was a door to my left. A door I've never seen before. *What is it?* I wonder. Curiosity urges me to open it. So I did.

All my life I've never seen something like this before. I swing the door open before gasping in surprise.

The hallway is white. Very, very white. Almost like an empty white. I step inside and yelp as the door behind me closes. *Thud.* I'm trapped.

"What?" I whirl around and pound on the door. "Hey! This isn't funny, whoever this is! Help! Open up! Mom?" Silence. Always silence. I sigh and face the hallway again.

I continue walking until I'm far from the door. The hallway seems to go on forever. Multiple times now I thought I was hallucinating. A pinch would tell me that I'm not. At last, the hallway ends. The walls give in and fade away. I'm left on a cliff of glowing white and ahead of me are steps.

I creep to the edge and peer down. "Nope!" I stare into the vast abyss. It was pitch black and empty, and so deep that I couldn't even see the floor. "There probably *is* no floor," I mutter. I step back safely. "Guess these steps are my only option, huh."

I study the steps. They're made of glass, or what seems like glass. At times I can see through them, and at times I see myself. I see a reflection of me peering down. A reflection of sadness and yearning. *Well, here goes nothing.* I take a step forward and place my foot on the steps.

A ripple appears where my foot stands. Like dropping an object in water and watching the waves churn over each other. A perfect circle. I hear almost a muffled, dingy sound. Like a gong or a bell.

Dong. My vision shakes. I sink to my knees as I place both feet on the step. The walls pulse back at me and so does the floor. But wait. There *are* no walls and there *are* no floors.

Where am I? My thought echoes back at me. Emptiness. Nothing exists. I look at myself. I look at nothing. And suddenly, light pours in. The world shines with life and color again.

A girl stands in front of me. She has short, dark hair pulled back into a stubby ponytail. Her eyes are brown and alive, a beautiful color. She's wearing a yellow polka-dotted skirt with little shoes for her little feet. I guess her age. About 5?

The girl grins and waves her doll around. She dances in the grass and sings an adorable, off-key tune. I smile bitterly. I know that song too well. The memory fades all too quickly and I'm back in the empty room again, shivering on the glass step. I get up and stare ahead of me. What are these, my memories?

I take another step forward and the ripple appears again. I hear the bells, and I'm back in nothingland. Then the light pours in again, and I see another memory.

I'm a bit older now. About 8, I would say. I'm in the school library, sitting under the window with a book in hand. A boy runs up to me and gives me a hug. *My friend*, I remember sadly. *But I don't...I don't remember his name.*

I'm back. I pull myself together and take another step. Another memory shows. An ice cream party. I step again. Another memory. Breaking my arm. I step again. Another memory. And then again. Another memory. I realize with every step I take, the previous step disappears. The glass ledge shimmers a bit, then shatters. The shards circle around my head until they take their place in the crown. I reach a hand up to touch it and my fingers slip through. They're not there.

Soon, I'm on the last step. My feet land on it and the memory plays.

It's the library. The grand, beautiful building. The polished walls shimmer exactly as I remember and the books are wonderfully placed. I see myself run upstairs and I follow behind her. The stairs are strong. The stairs are smooth. As I reach the top, I see her. She stands facing the shelf, her back against me. Then she turns around.

"You love this place, don't you?" she asks. She's about the same height as me. I know she's from last year. "So why are you giving it up?"

"That—because I don't...own it," I reply sadly. Can she hear me? Can she see me?

"Of course I can." She walks closer until we're inches apart. "I am you. I am the deepest of you. The part you've always locked away in this place. In this balcony." She smiles. Her eyes are ghostly and faint. "Do you want it?"

I know what she's talking about. I know what she means. I hesitate. "I don't have Mother's approbation," I answer. "She hasn't...agreed to this. This place is not mine to keep." If Mother didn't approve of a choice I made, then I couldn't make that choice. My mother has to agree to my every action.

"She does not," the girl whispers. "I'll ask once more. Do you want it? If you desire, it is yours to keep."

It is yours to keep. The words ring in my head. *The memories*, I realize, *were of me. Me, and only me. There is no Mother. It has always been me. Me, up to the very end.* My heart aches for the lock to open. For the chains to fall. My lips part and a small voice slips through.

"Please."

I gather myself again and take a deep breath. "Yes, I would. It's mine. The library is mine."

Suddenly a figure appears behind the girl. A tall, looming figure. My mother. The cuffs tighten for a moment and I flinch. "Mother?" All confidence is lost.

"Maria," she says. Her ghostly eyes are warm, not like the sharp, strict ones of my mother. I almost don't recognize her. Her smile is kind, not pained, and her face is free from wrinkles. Her hair flows down to its full length. She takes the spirit-like crown off her head. It shatters with her touch and she guides the shards to me. They take their place as the final spire. My crown is complete.

“As the seventh Keeper of the library, I hereby pass this role to you. Shuffle for the eighth Keeper, Maria Lansing!”

And the books clapped. They *clapped*. The pages shuffled themselves and clashed against each other. The whole library was alive with applause and cheers.

“Wait, but—” I stammer. I grab my mother’s hands in mine. “What about your job? What about my future that you planned?”

“It has never been me,” she says. “It’s always you. Take care. These books are yours to keep.” And she shatters. Like the steps before, she shatters.

“A fleeting memory,” the girl says. Me. “I think I’ll be going as well.” She watches as my mother’s shards disappear. And then she walks towards me. “A final hug.”

I return it. My hands find her back and I whisper, “thank you.” She disappears. She doesn’t shatter. She just disappears. My heart feels whole again, warm and beating.

The applause dies. The room is dark once more. I get up. I’m on my balcony again. The door to the left is missing. I walk downstairs carefully. The stairs are still old, but they don’t creak. They don’t long for a Keeper anymore. A box sits downstairs. A box with books in it. Bags sit across from the box. *Our bags. We were packing up. We were about to leave.* I reach the box. Mother is missing. I don’t see her anywhere.

“She’s free...” I whisper. “I made you live longer than you should have. I’m sorry.”

I pick a book from the box and flip through it. *Twin Tales*, I read. *The tales of a Keeper and her library.*

LULLABY - LAUREN BARTEL





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