



# THE DAPHNE REVIEW

SUMMER 2022





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## SUMMER 2022

“Daphne Review”  
“Summer 2022”

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## Editor's Note

I have been thinking recently about transience, how summer as a season evokes a blurry line between reality and the spaces just beyond. How sometimes the closer we look at a thing, the less attached to its context and all the more surreal it becomes. The subtle shifting of what we believe is real and accurate comes from a deep observation, but we may not always know what we'll discover there. "find the shades in the chasm / A woman that grasps two worlds and loses both" writes Ananya Vinay in a beautiful poem that explores this notion of holding onto two realities at once through the mode of ekphrasis.

The writings and artwork in this issue have a quality of moving between worlds, of weaving and remaking the world, and of surprise. In "Taming the Tiger," Shannon Ma moves fluidly from the ordinariness of everyday life and conversations at school to an unexpected turn towards metaphor. Similarly, in "The Man," Brian Chen imbues the mundane with the strange as the writer explores the uncanniness of interactions with a stranger who takes on a larger than life persona. Shifting the viewfinder from a wide angle to a close range, and back again, charts the pathway through Tameem Zaidat's "Autophobia" in which the writer dwells on the idea of scope as a way to make meaning: "Ants who tread alone are not ants— / en masse, they were an ant." In "Indebted to Illusions" Lael Kennedy takes a different tack on the surreal, using the texture of the written word of the poem to access the world of myth, spells, and a mysterious journey. It's not clear in the end which of the two worlds is real. And, too, in Emma Chen's piece, "Reality," the earth is held in two cupped hands as it drips into a pool of murky water.

This issue brings a breadth of writing and artwork that speaks to the blurriness, the in-betweens, and the fissures that are all around us if we choose to look close enough. Or, as Ruth Chen so pointedly states, "... our search for adventure never died. It had only become rounder around the edges."

To looking for the cracks,

Nicole Stockburger  
Editor



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## “The Running of the Bulls”

As I carry away his dirty plates  
The Running of the Bulls comes on. I say,  
“We were going to do that”

And remember  
How when I was a little girl, my father  
Dreamed of bringing me to Pamplona, Spain.  
Not my sister, not my mother—only us.  
He sowed the tale of San Fermín:  
*A shirt here, a neckerchief there.*  
*People, as red and white confetti,*  
*Pour out from balconies stacked upon balconies,*  
*And flood into a long band of street.*  
*There, my father and I would pick through a copse*  
*Of well-muscled calves, shiny from sweat,*  
*Waiting for the bulls, when from around the bend*  
*They would charge, or rather, bound, as fat dogs do—*  
*Heads bowed, brandishing horns*  
*The color of sliced apples.*  
“GO, GO, GO!” my father’d bellow,  
And my chubby legs would toddle after his.  
And then I would ride the bull,  
And it would sprout wings, oh yes...

I drag the fork over flower-print ceramic,  
Scraping away fish bones and  
Bruised mango skin. Wet clumps  
Of rice plop into the drain like so many  
Dreams—lost to spinning jaws,  
Scraps discarded.

“We were,” my father says  
As I wheel him to the sink.

\*

Marla Bingcang is a junior from Burlington Central High School. When she isn’t writing, she is sacrificing her wrists to rhythm games.

Marla Bingcang

## 4am, cruise balcony

rip-roar black whispers  
*wind's so loud it could*  
*be going either way*, like  
entropy symmetrized, like  
ocean caressing hinges the  
way oil isn't supposed to slick—  
so I also remember what is  
to come.

I scintillate myself back here—  
stealing forth knuckle velvet,  
gripping glass buoyed to silence,  
groping whatever fickle ribbons  
of sentience flew out into the night.  
like trying to hold monkfruit  
sugar on a sandpaper tongue,  
I only feel them decohere because  
all I can see is reminiscent dark.

I free wet children from under  
shuttering shivery eyelids while  
wave spittle wicks my skin white,  
but only if I see them—  
duality but salted—

in this spacetime and six  
unnamed dimensions am  
I folded infinitesimal or  
stretched inside out,  
bared blue?

Ava Chen

## The Abilene Paradox

In fourth grade whatever nascent morality  
rollicked my milky tongue my classmates  
fermented quantifiable, literally—a girl  
derived a point system with the best insults,  
no more than diaphragm spasms, heard most  
valuable. With soft cheekbones and dogged  
kneecaps we tokenized popularity a currency.  
Apart we knew the scaffolding of nice;  
everyone's nice, the default compliment  
skimmed and garnishing dust motes. Perhaps we  
thought we were our eyes—cones clustered  
at the marksman's center, obtuse pretexts for  
banal banter and dirt skirting. We molded fire  
hydrants to blood, floor screws to dollars,  
our pudgy wrists of conceit linking a Mobius  
strip. Now we try to scoff depthless validation,  
but maybe it stills latent in all our skin, all our  
kin—universal rights an eloquent shell, linked  
by codependence, abhorrent to aliens, mindlessly  
tenable to today. A chain of suspicion between  
truth and subjectivity jangles past and through  
that damned classroom, down to singularity and  
arcing up into the crow's feet lining squinty eyes  
aplomb, the pink-gapped grimace given as a  
smile, the whitened knuckles on stroller handles,  
the *how'd you do?* and *my, my, haven't you grown!*

\*

Ava Chen is a 16-year-old rising junior attending Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. She is an Associate Arts Editor of her school newspaper, *The Phillipian*. In addition to writing poetry, she loves playing the piano in her free time.

Ava Chen



Sivan Pyle is a rising senior attending HANC high school in Long Island, New York. She uses the medium of pen and ink to engage social issues and hopes to inspire action around topics like sustainability and climate change. Her work has recently been displayed at the Heksher Museum in Huntington, NY as part of the “Best of Long Island” 2022 high school artists exhibition.



## The Man

Usually, I never ventured into the park's toilet hut without good reason. It reeked of fermenting urine, and only the janitor ever flushed the toilets, leaving them full of a shapeless brown mixture. But on this day, my bladder was on the verge of bursting. Inhaling a deep breath, I braced myself and rushed into the stuffy room. I shook the only stall with a lockable door, but it only rattled in response. *Crap!* A grunt from inside made me step back. As the door swung open, a towering silhouette, muttering swear words I had only heard once before, took shape before I recognized who he was.

The Man.

The Man had always been there at the park, I assume, even before my friend David and I began regularly visiting. He was a landmark that inhabited the same spot on the field, obscured by the shadow of a few pine trees. Countless storms had stained his blue-and-white striped chair with dirty blotches, but he didn't seem to care. His stony expression, as he reclined, warned us not to go near him or his dog. In fact, the dog's teeth peeked out from an eternal snarl, and its large pectoral muscles seemed unnaturally chiseled for a canine.

Forgetting my bladder, I sprinted out of the bathroom, still holding my breath. Outside, David stared at me as if I were a weirdly phrased math problem. Then, he glanced over my shoulder. Together, we ran to the safety of the play structures before collapsing in the spiky tanbark pit.

After the bathroom incident, we kept away from The Man's half of the park for weeks. Instead, we made it up in our mind that we were fearless explorers. We would someday trek across Banff, Canada in the summertime, drink water from icy streams, and face down bears without backing away. Being seasoned wilderness men was our only aspiration as we darted between shrubs and scrambled up pine saplings. Going to Joshua Park everyday was our way of living out our dreams—minus the salmon, streams, and snow.

Although we rarely talked about The Man at the park, David once asked me quietly, "Have you ever *not* seen The Man here?"

It was a good question. My head raced through years of biking to the park almost every day after school. In all of my memories, The Man reclined in his corner. He was never *not* there. "No," I whispered, "The Man is *always* here."

At the park, David could never keep up with me. We ran the mile every month in P.E. class, and I always finished the four laps one lap ahead of him. No matter how hard he pumped his arms and turned a deep shade of red, his lanky legs became overcooked linguine after the first lap.

One day, when we got to the park, we agreed to play our favorite game. David pushed his way through a clump of brambles as sharp branches tore at his t-shirt. I chased after him, wielding a crooked stick and hollering my signature war cry. Adrenaline overwhelmed our bodies as we squealed.



Perhaps my mind was too occupied with our imagined wilderness, but fifteen feet away from us, reclining in his striped beach chair, was The Man. As if playing the Sneaky Statue game, David and I froze. How in the world did we get so close? The pounding of my heart drowned out chords of classical music serenading from a crackly speaker by The Man's side. He dangled a cigarette from his chapped lips as if he had been waiting for us.

I glanced at The Man and then at David. *Please, just say anything. Aren't you capable of speaking words?*

My entire body locked in place. *Sprint! You are fast enough to escape him!* David's large floppy sneakers pounded away on the grass field behind me. The message sent down my spine finally reached my legs, and my muscles twitched. I took off after David, whose blur of flailing arms had already reached the bathroom hut on the other side of the field.

Finally catching up, I collapsed as we dove into a clump of bushes. "David," I panted, "Why didn't you say anything... and how in the heck did you get that fast?"

"He..." David inhaled a deep breath. "He... He almost got us." His wide eyes were perched on top of quivering, pale cheeks.

For a whole five minutes we lay there in the scratchy twigs. Then I rushed off to the hut, hoping that David had not noticed the dark spot on my shorts.

When I emerged, David dazedly said, "I wonder where The Man lives."

"Me too," I replied.

Perhaps getting so close to The Man had made us bold.

That evening, well after sunset, The Man finally rose from his beach chair. From a safe distance, we witnessed him collect his few belongings into a tattered backpack and place the bulldog into a basket. After mounting a bike, he rode away.

"C'mon!" I said to David, "Let's follow him." In our shiny new bikes, we sped after him. We made sure to stop once in a while to let him gain a few blocks. We followed him down Boyton Road, which ran past a shuttered Trader Joe's, Taco Bell, and some milk tea shops still buzzing with activity.

I imagined The Man living in the large apartment complex. Or maybe a small house, most likely with an unkempt front yard and peeling paint on the walls. I didn't even consider how he might react if he caught us spying on him. I didn't think about the fact that he spent day after day sitting in a park full of children, and we were just about to present him with the perfect opportunity.

He made his way to the circle at the very end of Boyton Road. Hidden in the dimly lit street lights was an enclave of grand stone mansions and driveways flaunting Teslas. He treaded through massive brass doors and disappeared into his house.

Like stalkers, David and I stood behind an oak tree. After a few minutes, one of the bay windows lit up with a red glow, leaving the rest of the house in dim twilight. Hunched over in front of a widescreen television, The Man reached into a box of Lucky Charms and shoved fistfuls into his mouth. The walls

surrounding him were devoid of paintings, photographs, and seemingly any memories. I shivered, but David's presence gave me warmth. David, who greeted me with a foolish grin. David, who saved pine nuts and cool pebbles in his pockets to show me. David, who taught me the five different ways to tie a knot.

In the darkness, The Man's eyes reflected the television light like puddles of rainwater.

"Why does he spend all day in the park when he lives in a place like *that*?" I shrugged and motioned at my plastic watch, which displayed 9:25 in a ghostly green glow.

It was a rule with both our parents: We never arrived home after 9:00 pm.

The bike ride home was silent, except for the muffled clanging of pots being washed and our heavy breathing turning to mist in the crisp, night weather. As I approached the final turn before my house, I could imagine the scene. My mother would be waiting at the front door, my sister would be doing crunches on the yoga mat, and my dad would most likely be scrubbing the dishes. The house would smell of stir fried vegetables, accentuated with a touch of ginger and soy sauce. I'd explain why I was late, and Mom would be angry, but not so angry that she wouldn't pour me a cup of hot water and ask me about my day. I'd tell her while I devoured mouthfuls of vegetables, rice, and beef that had been simmering for the whole day until I was full.

\*

Brian Chen is a 17-year-old rising high school senior at The Harker School, in San Jose, California. He enjoys writing short stories, prose, and poetry and serves as the editor-in-chief for the literature and media magazine of his high school. His works won several awards at various writing contests, including the New York Times Writing Contest (both review and editorial) and Scholastic Art & Writing Contests. When he is not writing, Brian enjoys running and discovering new recipes in the kitchen.

*Brian Chen*





Emma Chen is a sophomore at a Northern Virginia high school. She has a deep interest in volunteering and spends her time conducting virtual art sessions for young hospital patients. As an artist, she enjoys acrylic and charcoal drawings, and is especially interested in realism. She has been drawing since age 5, and wishes to experiment with different mediums to develop an art style.



## Red Pilgrims

I saw the girl in the red cloak four times.

The first time, she was sitting alone on the rim of a paddy field, plucking white petals off a withered daisy and blowing them into the blistering Burmese heat. All around her, waves of villagers were bobbing down the path. An old woman had just reeled off the road into one of the paddy fields around them. And seeing that no one was going to help her up, the girl's father had slid down into the field. So when I first met her, the girl was sitting cross-legged beside him, waiting as he yanked the sweat-stained sleeve off his T-shirt and swathed the woman's bleeding arm with it. When he finished, he helped her back onto the mud-caked path. Another salvo of shots bombarded the sky, and I covered my ears instinctively. Next to me, the old woman stared at the bandage on her arm, watching as blood slowly reddened the stranger's cloth. They never saw me. Never did.

When he strode back to his daughter, she automatically helped herself back onto his sturdy back. "I thought you left me," she said.

"You know I never would." He smiled at her, despite knowing that she couldn't see it. Silently, he dragged his bruised legs across the path. In front of him was a woman whose spindly arms dangled while she staggered. There was a rugged bag swung over her shoulders and a gaunt, shirtless child nestled in her arms.

Early in the summer that year, they lived in a hut at the heart of the village. A piece of frayed, handwoven drugget covered the floor of the shack, and doodles by crayons danced over it. Outside the house were frayed shirts hung over a bamboo clothesline that seldom stirred as there was little wind. When there was wind, it would blow ochre soil up from the arid ground, and he would watch his daughter and son dance beneath the shower of dust, pirouetting before their neighbor's two-story house with stainless shatters and a façade of first-class ebony wood adorned with mosaic tiles.

Around the last week of August, he and his wife started hearing gunshots from the rim of the town. He had aroused in the midst of sleep to find her awake, her breath brisk and straightened back silhouetted before the moonlight. In response to her daughter's concern over the flashes of artillery in the mountains, she explained that they were stars that have dived down from the skies to the earth. The two of us would listen to her, huddled together on a plastic mattress that made up the floor of what we called a bedroom, as she spelled out tales of faraway kingdoms with pink ravines and whales with feathery fins— an ancient castle welcomed to all pilgrims. The man used to smile a lot those days.

Around the same time when killings broke out in the village, his neighbor's wife was diagnosed to be sterile. The local doctor had told the man about it at the bazaar, and the afternoon he went home, he was

startled to find his neighbor at his shack, cross-legged on the rug, where I had drawn a scarlet whale. He began by informing the man that the war was going to last long, and he should be grateful that he had a mansion outside the town— enough cash for an airline ticket to America, at worst.

What do you want? The man asked him.

A son, his neighbor told him. He and his wife wanted a son.

Then one day, her brother was gone.

The second time I saw the girl in the red cloak was two days after our first encounter. It was a night chilled by the crisp breeze, I remember, as autumn was just sweeping into the country. I saw her with her father as they were passing by corpses sprawled out over shabby tenements. He had held his breath and quickened his pace. Above their heads and tousled, pitch-black hair, confetti of stars studded the cloudless sky.

When I approached them, the girl in the red cloak tucked the sleeve left on his shirt and asked, “Where are we going?”

“Where we’re going?” He paused for a moment. I knew all his expressions. And deep furrows in the brow indicated efforts to knit out a tall tale in his mind. When he spoke again, he lowered his voice to make it sound mysterious. “We’re heading to a castle.”

“Castle?”

“Mm-hmm,” the man muttered. “It’s a beautiful place, enclosed by hills and swathes of rose and peach gardens and dancers in crimson dresses hired by the whale.”

“The whale?” She was smiling.

He nodded. “It’s a whale with feathery fins. And holds the most attended banquets in the country. Once we get there, it shall greet us with the best meal you ever had.”

Just as they hurried by a white-plastered clinic, he whispered, “Hey, guess where we are now.”

She shifted her neck up from the red cloak draped over her shoulder and sniffed the air. “I smell medicine and— blood. So a clinic?”

He stopped by a gray-haired woman in a wheelchair before the clinic’s glass door, her head drooped down. There was a bullet hole on the side of her brow and gore on the unpaved road. “You must be smelling— coral reefs.”

“Coral reefs?” His daughter frowned.

He trotted down the crimson street, his bare shins scarred by the weeds. “They smell like antiseptics. But they’re really rolling hills of colors. It’s also why we need doctors— doctors tend coral reefs.”

“And it’s why Brother wanted to be a doctor?”

The man’s steps paused. On his rigid back, she mouthed the word *brother* to herself and tried to picture him watering the flamboyant coral reefs. But it was kind of too much for her to imagine since she had never seen any colors or hills, or even her brother.



“Does he like coral reefs?” She went on asking.

“Mm-hmm,” the man said. In reality, his son had never seen any coral reefs. But he knew that the boy would have loved them, like how he loved everything about life.

I almost missed her, the third time I saw the girl in the red cloak. I had just woken from my sleep, almost late but not for long. This was most fortunate, given that coral reefs couldn’t survive if not watered on their regular schedules— once before the dancers arrived, another after the afternoon banquet, and the last time at night, just when the stars were diving down to Earth.

I managed to go see her again in the idle time between the first and second waterings, and it had also been a night down there. She and her father had been stopped by a river that stood between the end of the road and the seamless sky. He was watching wooden canoes bob down it, carrying other villagers away. A limping fisherman was dragging his boat to the shore.

“Can you give us a ride?” The man asked him, pointing at the daughter on his back. The fisherman studied his pitch-black eyes for a moment and shrugged. He slid down into the ravine as the man settled his daughter onto the wooden seat of the canoe. The oars stirring in the roiled water slowly pushed the boat forward.

When the shore had departed from their sight, she asked him softly, “Are we near the castle now?”

“We are,” he assured her. “I can feel it.”

“But can’t the whale pick us up?” She asked. Her hair fluttered in the night breeze, like a butterfly. Sweat rolled down the fisherman’s forehead into the water beneath. I was braiding her hair as the boat rocked on, but neither the man nor the girl noticed me.

“I’m afraid it’s too busy,” he told her after a while.

She raised her eyebrow. “Isn’t it dancing with dancers?”

“It is.”

“And singing?”

“It is.”

“And while we are here, out in the rain, is the whale dancing and singing in its castle, Father?”

He didn’t answer, but softly, he took her hand in his. Together, they stroked the silky water, his eyes fixed on the dim hues of the stars reflected by the glassy waves. She smiled. “The whale is more selfish than I thought.”

“It’s just—” he muttered, “—the way whales are, I suppose. They are complex creatures.”

She stayed silent, and in a few minutes, she was sound asleep.

“The rain has ended,” the old man broke the silence after a few more minutes. His voice was a whisper. “All rains do, I suppose.”

“Thank you for helping us,” the father said.

The fisherman waved the thought away with his hand. “I’m too old to live anyways.”

As the canoe bobbed down the ravine, two men approached it from the bushes that bordered the shore. The father studied them. One was shirtless and held an olive-green helmet in his hand. Behind him was another soldier, a plastic bottle in one hand and a rifle in the other.

The fourth time I saw the girl in the red cloak, it was morning. It had been some time after dawn, and the day was warm. She was inside a two-story house with her family. Her mother was draped in a silk dress, and her father was sitting on a russet Chesterfield sofa before a grandfather clock. On the wool carpet were a heap of model cars, unfinished jigsaw puzzle pieces, and even a violin. (Mine.)

On the marble floor were scattered drawings of emerald green suns, flamboyant stars, and rose gardens. There was a larger one that featured a pink ravine flowing toward a tiny castle at the corner of the page. The castle had high, crimson-bricked walls enclosed by a garden of peaches, Corinthian pillars, and dancers in scarlet dresses pirouetting amid sequins that made up the clouds. At the center of the painting was a pitch-black whale. It was holding a sign that said, “Visitors not welcomed.”

The drawing’s creator was playing a grand piano in the center of the living room. Her red cloak was of fine lace, and her hair was neatly combed into one braid. Sunlight swept in between the gold-framed windows and lace curtains and spotlighted the side of her face. It looked even fairer without the usual stains of blood and mud splatters.

In fact, she looked almost unfamiliar to me, with the milk-white color of her face, blonde, feathery hair, and a pair of turquoise irises that glittered like zircons. Or was it her smile? A lopsided grin of relief and a carefree childhood she never had? A life I could never experience?

I thought about the promised castle at Kutupalong and wondered if it was as dark as the whale she had drawn.

The End

\*

Renee Chen is an Asian-American writer based in Taiwan. She is currently a high school freshman in Taipei Fuhsing Private School and has been published in the Wilderness House Literary Review. When she’s not writing, she enjoys reading mystery and thriller novels.

*Renee Chen*





Austina Xu is a high school junior from The Harker School. She has been recognized regionally and nationally by the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers in both writing and art and was also named a 2021 California Arts Scholar. Her work is featured in Kalopsia literary journal.



## Free As A Bird

I saw many birds.

It was in a gold spun meadow when the air was hot with the barest undertone of a breeze when my brother asked me if I would like to be a bird. Our parents were there to watch the birds migrate. *We* were there because I wanted to stumble across fairies and my brother wanted to catch a frog.

*If you are ever going to be reincarnated, would you want to be a bird?* A rather silly question, because we were Christian and of the Church, so we would never need to think of such things, even if it were true. Truth be told, it was a notion that I often excitedly pursued, simply because sometimes I was bored, and just because I could. I wanted to dream of a world with no responsibility, where my only thought would be my next meal and destination.

I swatted at the waist-high grass, yellow with the winds of change, now that Autumn was giving way to Winter, and continued to slosh my way through the marshier ground.

Yes, I had answered without hesitation. *I want to be free as a bird. Imagine!*

And then we laughed and threw rocks at the resting egrets.

I was eleven years old then, my brother a year and a half younger than me, chasing wild thoughts and imaginings that not even the craziest person would dream up.

*Free as a bird. Imagine!*

Eleven became twelve, twelve into thirteen, and time turned its hands so that fourteen came soon, complete with birthday candles and a trip to the same meadow that we played in as younger children. I no longer searched for fairies, instead I brought a small pocketbook—*Bird Watcher's Guide*.

Of course, my brother's thirst for hunting frogs never ceased.

But, it is to say that our search for adventure never died. It had only become rounder around the edges. I pointed at the many different birds while my brother held the book, flipping through the hundreds of pages. Later that evening, when the sky had just begun to set and the clouds looked like cotton candy, we began the long traipse back to our lodge, following the footsteps of our parents.

Most of the birds had since long flown away, chased away by colder breezes and frigid winds. My brother held the book high as he kicked up mud shrubs. "Imagine being free as a bird," he finally said.

"Really," I said thoughtfully, because now, I had reasons against such a thought. I hesitated to tell him so; I don't know why. Perhaps because I wanted to hang onto one thread of a delusional idea from our childhood, now that the others were gone.

"I wouldn't want to be a bird," he said loudly, and I smiled at his self-righteous tone. I agreed, but I only waited for him to continue speaking. "They don't do much. And they can't do what *we* do. They have to leave their homes because of the *weather*. We're free-*er* than birds, right?"

I looked up at the V formation of the last of the common geese leaving. A long pause followed his words.

"Yes," I replied slowly, "I suppose we are."

\*

Ruth Chen is a Chinese-American high school student whose writing explores humor while delving into themes of childhood, nostalgia, and memory. She is a rising sophomore and studies at the Orange County School of the Arts, where she specializes in writing and poetry. Her work has been honored by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards organization, in which she received both gold and silver medals in different categories.

*Ruth Chen*



## “i went to the golden gate”

and found a California gull lolling  
breast-up, wings crushed into acute angles.  
i held my breath. it held its breath, too.  
we pretended we were the same.  
that if this is  
    *The Golden City,*  
those were also the golden years.  
and here,  
    the air's balm would create spheres of the perpetual  
        and forty-five-degree.  
but did you scoop your sewing kit between  
    smooth-skinned palms and  
chug west along  
    a sedimentary fault line  
        to flee or begin? to rebirth  
                or un-birth back into quasi-molten cores?  
and here, you'd shed guilt amphibian-like,  
        a too-tight skin.  
and here.  
        and here.  
i lagged, then followed. un-diverged inexplicably,  
    bracing osteoporosis-sponged  
forearms against a beam, reverting  
    from nothing into nothing.  
        a stained-glass door unfurled into the  
        pit viper of a highway.  
a vermeil bridge overlooked mariana's trench. a mottle-mouthed child  
devoured flecks of fool's gold  
    still gummed to chocolate coins.  
your face inflamed into an  
    imitation of mine. a mirrorball supplanted a blood moon.  
and if San Francisco isn't gold,  
    does that make you a liar or an idealist?

\*

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*Emma Cinocca*

## Indebted to Illusions

*Waves crash against me  
The sand disappears, washing  
down, gone with the tides.  
Turns to the sea, but I'm still  
Forever unbreakable.*

Aventura Mendez glanced down at the tanka she had just written. She was a quiet girl, fifteen years old, and never without a book or a pencil and pad of paper. The words of the poem comforted her, making her feel stronger, especially when they finally fit together. Five, seven, five, seven, seven syllables. Perfect. She'd never been to the ocean, but she could imagine it would give her the same relief as the rain, the comfort of the little droplets cool and refreshing on her skin.

It rained often in their small town of Springhaven, but today, there wasn't a cloud to be seen. In fact, it was so nice outside on her front porch she couldn't even bring herself to go inside and share the poem with her twin brother, Zig. Zig's real name was Zachariah, but he'd been nicknamed Zig when they were three because he'd constantly zigzagged around the house, never going in a straight line. Despite being twins, the two of them couldn't have been more different. Aven had preferred to sit down and play with her letter blocks, and no one was surprised when she'd learned to read at the age of four.

The sun shined down on Aven, the dancing beams welcome spotlights on her face, drowning her in a sea of warmth. She loved being outside, feeling the breeze ruffle her hair as nature took over. To her, nothing was more relaxing than vaulting herself up into a tree and reading. The quiet was beautiful, with no sounds except the birds chirping and fluttering their wings in the distance. Aven let out a breath of contentment as she flipped the page in her notebook and started to write another—

"Hey, Aven, whatcha doing?" Zig's voice called out from behind Aven, startling her. She dropped her pen, which clattered to the floor. Aven scrambled to grab it—the pen had been a gift from her grandfather, who was a novelist—but it refused to stay still and rolled through a crack in the deck's boards before she could grab it.

Despite her usual calm composure, Aven wheeled on her brother. "Zig, look what you—"

A gust of wind came out of nowhere, and Aven stopped short. She ducked to the ground, trying to steady herself and avoid the sudden onslaught. Zig staggered and braced himself against the wooden deck chair Aven had been sitting in earlier. It lurched backward, sending her papers fluttering, and they flew up and off their porch in one swift motion. Aven stumbled for a second, trying to snatch them back, but by the time she looked up, the sky was dark as midnight. The steady pour of rain echoed off the metal siding, in and out of her ears. For a moment, Aventura just stood there, stunned, as the rain drenched her. Her red-brown hair was soaked through in seconds. It stuck to her face, plastered there like she'd been out in the storm for hours.

Normally, Aven loved the rain. It made her feel like she belonged—like it was just her and the water coming from above, dancing to their own music. As children, she and Zig would laugh together in the storms. Aven would run inside to keep whatever precious book or journal she'd been holding safe, then dash back outside and splash in the puddles as Zig chased after her.

Eventually, though, Zig had stopped coming. It was odd that someone so wild and reckless no longer wanted to join her, but Aven had gradually given up convincing him to come out. She knew why he wouldn't follow—it was the stories. Springhaven was small and the kind of place where news spread fast, and superstitions were as responsible for their ways as the food they ate. One of their schoolmates, Gwendolyn, had wandered into a blizzard when they were only seven. She'd come back a week later muttering to herself, still dusted with snow and shivering as if no time had passed. The whole town had rejoiced at her return, but it was short-lived. She'd vanished again not long after.

That time, she didn't come back.

The search party gave up after two months. Gwendolyn was pronounced dead, victim to a harsh winter like they'd never seen before. Her funeral was held in the town square the next week, and a gravestone was placed ceremoniously in the churchyard despite the fact they had no body to bury.

Seven more children had gone missing over the next two years. There were rumors of whispered words being carried through the rain, reaching their ears and beckoning them to follow. Abandoned tales that were embedded into the elderly's minds from their own childhoods spent in Springhaven began to resurface, telling of similar incidents decades before. Many families had moved away, not daring to stay any longer and become prey to "The Midnight Girl," a specter who collected the misbehaved kids. Young boys and girls who misbehaved were threatened by their parents, saying that the night's rain or snow would take them, too. During storms, everyone but Aven cowered inside by the fireplaces, not daring to venture out alone and risk becoming one of The Lost.

The last of them to vanish was a nine-year-old boy named Declan. Aven had never liked him—he was loud and untidy and always pranking someone—but he had been Zig's best friend. His body was found in a nearby creek only forty-eight hours after he'd last been seen. People said he'd drowned, gotten sick, hit his head... but no one had believed those explanations. Instead, they'd come up with stories. Fables of ghosts, monsters, and shadows lurking in the woods. No one had ever figured out for sure what had happened—and Zig had never followed Aven into the rain again.

The shock of the moment fading, Aven ran off of the porch, though to where she was not sure. Even after Zig had stopped coming with her, she'd loved to feel the water on her face, letting the peacefulness of being alone wash over her, but something about this storm was different. She couldn't see a thing in the downpour, and despite the fact she could hear Zig calling out to her, his footsteps thumping behind her as he ran into the rain for the first time in years, she didn't slow down.

What was happening didn't seem natural. Lightning flashed suddenly above, illuminating the streaks of rain in odd places. The contrasting contours and sharp angles frightened her, and the world looked different from the neighborhood she knew and had grown up in. Yet she didn't stop running.



The thunder came next, splitting the sky open with a tremendous crack. Although Aven knew by the laws of science that where there was lightning, thunder was never far behind, she still nearly jumped out of her skin. The tremble continued for much longer than she would have liked, making her shiver.

It was only then that Aven realized the sound of her brother's voice had faded from her ears. She felt a spike of terror as it hit her that she had no idea where she was or where she was going. Her home was out of sight, and she was shivering with cold. She looked around, eyes wide and haunted, shrieking like a madwoman. *It's just a storm*, she wanted to tell herself. *No different from any other*.

But something *felt* different. Aven stumbled again, but her hands landed on something unexpectedly soggy as she caught herself. She jerked back, still hearing the sickening *squelch* that it had made when she'd touched it. When she bent down once more to inspect it, she realized what it was. The once beautiful stationery and all too familiar curves and edges of the handwriting were unmistakable.

Her poem.

As she grabbed it, the ink became hopelessly smeared and blurred, the words illegible except for the one in the bottom left corner: *Forever*. As she bent to pick it up, a shimmer of hope glistened around the edges of Aven's mind; a silver lining to the storm. She almost forgot everything else—from the wet, sopping rain caking her whole body and causing her clothing to cling to her skin to the frigid cold chilling her down to her bones.

Almost.

She clawed around, trying to keep her eyes on the paper as it fluttered suddenly and flew away. The wind picked up, howling in agony and tearing Aven's doomed poem out of her grasp. Her body was not her own as she cried out hysterically and ran, limbs flailing, chasing the ill-fated tanka through the storm for reasons unknown to her. Her hand barely snatched the corner of it, batting it down to the ground and towards the calling mud. The rain almost blinded her as it trickled into her eyes, down her shirt, but she was sure she would catch it in time. She reached out, and her hand came up with the paper ...

... torn to shreds and soaked completely through.

Aven swore into the ever-darkening evening. Around her, it seemed that the rain managed to start to pour down even harder. The thunder and lightning flashed and boomed, reverberating in the air, the rain mocking her loss.

"Hello?" a quiet and almost musical voice called out from the darkness. Aven watched as a young child emerged, a small lantern in her shaking, shivering, and outstretched hand. The light only provided a dim, flickering glow, barely piercing through the consuming black. Her simple frock was old and worn, the plain brown fabric and dark patches making it seem like she had just walked out of the 1800s. Her dark hair was done in two braids with hairs sticking out every which way, making it appear that it had either been done in a rush or styled a long time ago, and she'd not had time to fix it. As Aven looked at her, the flickering lantern in her hand seemed to change from a warning light to a call for friendship. It gave off a welcoming glow as she ran to Aven and asked, "Who are you?" in a small, frightened voice. The child continued to keep

a cautious distance from her—like she thought the older girl could have the plague. The poor thing looked to be only about seven or so. Not knowing what to do or where to go, Aven just stood there, mouth agape.

“Who are you?” the little girl asked again.

“I—I’m Aventura,” Aven replied, hating the shaky way her voice came out. “Who are you?”

“I’m lost,” she said, taking a deep breath like she was trying to gather the courage to even speak to Aven. “Can you help me?”

“I really need to get ho—” Aven started, but then she noticed the girl’s wide, ghastly eyes and her red cheeks and runny nose. She couldn’t tell in the drenching downpour, but she thought the girl was crying.

“Oh, don’t cry!” Aven pleaded. “Please, please don’t cry!”

The little girl—whose name Aven realized she still didn’t know—wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “So, will you help me get home?” she repeated.

She put her arms over her chest, her whole body shivering with cold. *Who knows how long she’s been out here?* Aven thought. *She could be coming down with hypothermia.*

Aven may not have believed the stories about The Midnight Girl, but she did believe in sicknesses. She knew that there was *some* truth to certain accounts—people getting lost in storms like this and never coming back, running the wrong way without realizing it, and finding food and shelter too late. Of course, there were also the stories of people—like Gwendolyn—who *did* find their way back, only to be driven back out in the next one in search of things that everyone else knew were gone for good. But what if those missing children had been like this mysterious little girl, kids who were lost and begging for help from some stranger, only to be turned away out of fear and perish in the storm? Aven couldn’t leave this child to their fate. She would never forgive herself.

When Aven looked down at her own arms, she realized she was shivering too. Her teeth were chattering, but that was better than the numbness that would come with frostbite. Even still, they needed to find shelter soon, or Aven knew they might both freeze.

“Okay,” she finally agreed. “Let’s hurry. Which way is your house?”

The girl clutched Aven’s hand, squeezing it so hard her already pale knuckles turned sheet-white. Aven felt another sudden, unsettling chill run down her spine. She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck standing on edge. Her whole body was covered in goosebumps, but she figured it was just from the temperature. The girl’s hand was cold as ice.

“That way,” she said, pointing with the lantern in her other hand. Aven saw a hazy glow in the distance: the lights of a house! She followed the strange girl towards it, giving her a bit of time to think.

Aven could tell something was wrong. The problem was, she couldn’t tell *what*. Maybe it was the small child, all alone in the sudden storm, or maybe it was just the storm itself. The logical part of her was screaming *DANGER!*, but she couldn’t resist. The stories of The Midnight Girl and The Lost Children echoed through her head, but she knew those were just tales thought up by people who were too scared to face the truth—if you weren’t careful, even cozy little Springhaven could eat you alive.



Besides, everything else she'd ever been taught told her to help the young child lost in a howling storm. Eventually, her conscience won, and Aven resolved to continue to help her. It was probably a good thing she did, because they soon emerged from the rain onto the front porch of the ancient house she'd spotted from the distance. Now that they were close to it, it almost looked abandoned. A few of the windows were boarded up, and a couple were missing shutters. She was honestly surprised it had withstood the storm.

"We're here!" the child exclaimed, tugging on Aven's now-numb hand. "C'mon, let's go in!"

Aven took in the entrance as she followed the girl somewhat warily, but her tired and aching bones couldn't help but follow her through the open door and into the warm home. The child pointed to the fireplace, still aflame and stacked with wood.

"We need to get warm," she explained. Aven sat on the woven rug next to her, shaking as she tried to warm her hands. She was soaked through, her clothes sticky and clinging to her skin, but she soon noticed the smaller girl was already dry.

Looking around the mysterious child's home, Aven realized it must have been bigger and more grand than it looked in the darkness outside. There was a furnished, spiraling stairwell near the kitchen that led to what must have been another floor, and everything was cozy and tidy. There were intricate carvings engraved in the door frames, and old, Victorian-style furniture was scattered throughout. It was the kind of place you just never wanted to leave.

"Hey..." Aven said, unable to ignore the opportunity, "Do you think I could maybe...stay the night here? I'm sure my brother's worried about me, but he wouldn't want me to go back out there in the rain. I'd just need one night—"

"Sure!" The girl seemed thrilled to have some company, and Aven was grateful she had a plan to wait out the storm.

"Stay here for a second," said the girl—Aven made a mental note to ask her for her name when she got back—and she disappeared for a second without a word. Aven never saw her get up, just heard her voice from behind her, but she was too busy getting warm and admiring the girl's home to worry.

"Cookie?" The girl reappeared from the adjacent room, shoving a plate of fresh, warm, sweet-smelling treats into Aven's face. Aven almost declined, but the chocolatey aroma drifted up to her nose, and she couldn't resist. She snatched a warm treat, trying to savor it, but soon gave up and shoved the entire thing into her mouth. She hadn't realized how hungry she was. The snack combined with the pitter-patter of rain outside calmed her, and she struggled to remember why she had been worried about staying. The cookie's soft and gooey inside encased in a crispy, crumbly edge—it was just what Aven needed.

"Foe... hare har toe tarents?" Aven asked through a full mouth. The girl stared at her blankly, so she tried again, chewing and swallowing first.

"So, where are your parents?" Aven tried again, adding, "Oh, and I don't believe I caught your name."

"I'm Amara," the girl said.

“And... why are you home by yourself?”

Amara's gaze dropped. “I'm not by myself. My friends are here.”

Aven could tell she was dancing around the topic of her parents intentionally. What had happened to them? Were they dead? Had they abandoned her? What was going on?

“Where are your, um, friends?” Aven asked, trying not to show her suspicion.

If Amara thought anything was wrong, she didn't show it. “They're more like my sisters and brothers. I have four of each, and we all take care of each other while our parents are away! Right now, they should be upstairs. Wanna meet them? You could be one of us, too!”

Something about the comment rubbed Aven the wrong way, but her curiosity got the best of her. “Sure. I'll meet them. But I'm going home tomorrow.”

Amara shrugged. “If you say so. Hey, before you go, do you want a present?”

“Um...” Aven didn't know how to respond. She caught herself fidgeting and glancing towards the door. “I guess so?”

“Here.” Amara grabbed a leather-bound notebook sitting on the mantle and placed it in Aven's hands.

“It's for visitors,” she explains. “We don't get many. I was going to wait till later, but you can have it if you want. Want to write in it?”

*Here goes nothing.* Aven thought. “Yeah, why not?”

Amara handed Aven the book, grinning giddily. Aven wracked her brain for the tanka she'd written earlier, the one that had been destroyed in the rain. The poem that she'd chased into the wind, feeling it meant something more.

Somehow, she remembered the words. She scribbled it down, word for word, syllable for syllable, as quickly as she could. She read it over a couple of times, perfecting it, then signing her name at the bottom with a flourish. She took one more deep breath, then placed it back down, satisfied with her work. It finally felt complete.

“Midnight, you're home!” The figure of a girl who was probably a few years older than Amara suddenly appeared on the balcony. The shadows obscured her features, but she seemed to be dressed similarly, too. And her voice... it sounded familiar. Maybe just because she was Amara's sister?

“Wait, who's Midnight?” Aven asked, eyebrows raised. “It's just me and you...”

“Oh, it's just a name they call me. ‘Amara’ means ‘rain at night,’” Amara explained. She tugged on Aven's hand. “C'mon, come meet your new family!”

Aven stood up, but she didn't follow. “Uh, I think I better get going...” she said, her hands feeling around behind her for something to hold.

Amara's small fingers grasped Aven's wrist, colder and stronger than before. She tried to bring Aven towards the stairwell. “Look, this is my family! Come say hi!”

"Aven, don't leave," the girl on the stairwell said as more children, none older than ten, came out behind her. She took a step to start making her way down, coming into the light in the process. Puzzled, Aven tried to place where she'd seen the girl before—and how did she know Aven's name? The girl felt eerily familiar, with long, silver hair and big green eyes. Eyes she knew...

"Gwendolyn?" Aven asked.

No. It couldn't be true. But it was. Aven was sure of it. This was the same seven-year-old girl who had disappeared eight years ago.

Amara's grip on Aven's hand tightened. "We call her *Karuli* now. She was the first of my friends to find me, and she loves it here!"

"You know, my brother's going to wonder where I am..." Aven started.

Amara's eyes narrowed. That had been the wrong thing to say. "*These* are your brothers—and your sisters—now."

"Amara, I have to leave."

"You're one of us now, though. You can't leave," Amara said, her lip trembling. Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "After all, I found you, and you wrote in my notebook, just like they did."

"Huh?" Aven asked, glancing down at the book in her hands. She'd thought it was empty, but when she flipped through the pages, she saw more writings and drawings, with names written out underneath them like she had written her own. *Charlie. Amariah. James. Saskia. Caleb. Ty. Declan.*

*Gwen.*

"Nothing," Amara said quickly, taking the book from Aven's hands. It was too late, though. Aven knew those names. The gears were already turning.

The pieces slid into place. Old clothing. A house, empty of adults but completely ready for a visitor. A young girl all alone in the middle of a storm. Gwendolyn and the shadows of seven other children, all paused halfway down the stairs and staring at Aven. Her blood ran cold as she looked at the floor, seeing her shadow flicker across the floor in the firelight.

Aven twisted out of Amara's grasp. She looked at the floor around the girl, already knowing what she *wouldn't* find.

The girl had no shadow.

Aven backed up.

She opened the door.

She screamed.

And she ran.



Behind her, she could hear Amara the Midnight Girl shouting. “You’ll be back soon enough!” she cried, waving her tiny fists as Aven fled. “You wrote in my book!”

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“She’s awake! Everyone, come here! She’s awake!”

When Aven opened her eyes, her heart was still racing.

“Are you okay?” Zig asked, standing above her. It took a moment for his face to register in her mind, and he was blurry to her eyes. People filled the small room she was in from front to back. Aven took in her surroundings. She knew she recognized the friendly faces—though they were out of focus, and she couldn’t tell exactly who they were—and she could tell she was in her bed, her house. The familiar wallpaper lined the walls, her writing supplies were sitting in neat rows on her desk, and her shoes were waiting readily by the door. It was as if nothing had ever happened—but she knew that couldn’t be true. If everything was normal, why did she feel so strange?

“What happened, Zig?” she asked her brother.

“You tell *us* what happened!” he exclaimed. “You disappeared during the storm, and you haven’t been awake in over twenty-four hours, since we found you asleep—*outside!* We were all so worried about you, Ave! You can’t just run off like that!”

Throwing off the sheets she had no recollection of ever getting under, Aven stood up quickly, remembering something. Or, at least, feeling a nagging theory press against the edge of her mind. She pushed her way past the many worried faces in the room. She had a mission to complete.

“Aventura, dear, what are you doing?” someone asked. Even though she normally would have slowed down to explain, Aven was immune to the startled cries as she ran to the window, hoping she would find nothing, but knowing she would find something.

Aven thought she could make out the outline of a young girl with a playful smile, slowly swaying on the windowsill. The girl’s once-braided hair was hanging loosely at her sides, and her simple skirt was streaked with mud. Her skin was paler than it used to be, her face gaunt and unsettling.

Amara’s cheeks were hollow and her skin seemed almost translucent, but she—and her expression—were unmistakable. The contentment practically radiated from her, like she knew she’d already won the battle that Aven still didn’t understand. Her presence was a glowing neon sign screaming, *Come and get me! I dare you!* in that singsong voice of hers. Her mouth never moved, but Aven heard the words forced into her, and she knew they’d come from Amara. Aven blinked once, and suddenly she was gone. The last words the child had spoken to her echoed through Aven’s head.

*You’ll be back soon enough.*

*You wrote in my book.*

What happened to people who signed contracts with ghosts?

“Did you see that?” Aven asked, shaking as images of The Lost Children played in her mind. “It was the little girl from the storm!”

“Nobody’s there, Aven. It was just a dream,” Zig replied. “I bet you tripped when you were out there in the downpour and hit your head on a rock or something—you weren’t far from the house when I found you.”

Aven’s voice dropped quieter, and she glanced around to make sure everyone was out of earshot. “Zig, it was *her*. I saw The Midnight Girl.”

Zig just rolled his eyes at Aven and her story. *Silly Aven*, he seemed to be thinking. *You can’t fool me. I know you don’t really believe those stories.*

Maybe he was right, Aven thought. Maybe she just needed to clear her head.

She sat down on their small couch, resting her head in her hands. She closed her eyes, but the action brought her no relief. All she saw was Amara, like the child’s image was burned into the inside of Aven’s eyes forever. Heart thumping and head pounding, she looked up once again. Her eyes drifted to the coffee table in front of her. How had she missed it before?

She hadn’t been imagining it. Because if everything she’d just witnessed was only a hallucination, then what was that familiar leather notebook doing on the table—her signature and destroyed poem peeking out from inside?

\*

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## Gifts: The Accomplice in Lydia's Mounting Pressure

In Celeste Ng's novel *Everything I Never Told You*, attention serves more as a source of burden than a source of love. The story unfolds with the shocking news that the body of Lydia, the middle child of the Lee family, is found drowned in a nearby lake, and the police attribute her death to suicide. However, Lydia's parents, Marilyn, and James Lee, refuse to accept the harsh reality that their seemingly perfect daughter, who they believe excels in school and has many friends, has chosen to end her life. How had it all begun? Through the descriptions of gifts that Marilyn and James have given to Lydia, Ng reveals the mounting pressures and toxic familial dynamics that cause Lydia to jump into the lake in the hope of restarting her life. As the favorite child and the bond of the family, Lydia demonstrates through her experiences that love carries responsibilities and burdens. Hoping to heal their own troubled pasts, Lydia's parents push her to inherit their shattered dreams of becoming a doctor and being popular, disregarding what Lydia seeks for herself. In *Everything I Never Told You*, Celeste Ng uses the symbol of gifts to illustrate how Marilyn and James pressure Lydia into fulfilling their dreams, thus encouraging people to break free of others' expectations to find their authentic selves.

To explore the symbolic importance of Marilyn's and James's gifts, we must first understand their backstories: both characters fail to reach their dreams because of what society tells them they cannot become. Growing up being told that women should adhere to their familial responsibilities, Marilyn has not yet reconciled with her shattered dream of becoming a doctor. Despite Marilyn's deep passion for science, her mother believed that a woman's success depends on her ability to find a good husband. When Marilyn earns a scholarship to Radcliffe to major in physics, her mother tells her how proud she is, adding, "You know, you'll meet a lot of wonderful Harvard men" (30). Marilyn's mother perceives that a woman's value depends on their relationships with men. She envisions Harvard as where Marilyn can find a good husband, fulfilling a traditional familial role, rather than as a symbol of her continued success in science. Though Marilyn has always rejected women's confinement to the domestic sphere, she ultimately concedes to becoming a mother and abandons her dream. She first drops out of school after falling in love with James, who she meets at Harvard, and becomes pregnant. After giving birth to Nath and Lydia, Marilyn leaves her family to finish her studies in Toledo, addressing her regrets. When she discovers that she is pregnant with her third child, however, Marilyn realizes: "She could not take classes pregnant. She could not start medical school. All she could do was go home. [Marilyn] admitted it to herself slowly, with an ache more painful than her hand—she would never have the strength to leave [her children] again" (144). Upon recognizing her pregnancy, Marilyn once again is forced to abandon her dream of becoming a doctor. By telling herself what she can and cannot do, Marilyn understands that as she submits to becoming a traditional woman, she confines herself to a role as a caretaker and a homemaker. Furthermore, Marilyn also refuses to accept that she has lost her last chance to pursue a medical profession, and the pain of leaving behind her ambition hurts more than any physical wound. In Marilyn's early life, her concession to familial responsibilities

hinders her path to success. As she eventually becomes what her mother wants of her, choosing the same path that most women choose, she sacrifices the dream she has sought. Thus, because of her regret, Marilyn puts all her energy into shunting her daughter Lydia toward her perceived perfect life.

Haunted by her failure to become a doctor because of her familial responsibilities, Marilyn uses gifts to pressure her daughter, Lydia, into inheriting her dream. Marilyn mistakes that Lydia seeks to become a doctor as well, and she pushes her daughter to achieve her full potential. However, her gifts—science books that are too hard for Lydia’s age—only burden her daughter: “Lydia dreaded the gift from her mother. Usually her mother gave her books — books that, although neither of them fully realized it, her mother secretly wanted herself, and which, after Christmas, Marilyn would sometimes borrow from Lydia’s shelf” (173). To Marilyn, the gifts she gave Lydia for Christmas represent more what she desires herself than what her daughter will genuinely appreciate. She secretly uses this opportunity, reading the science books, to continue her pursuit of a medical profession. To Lydia, however, her mother’s gifts trigger dread and anxiety. The books mean more than something to read; they mean pressure. The ironic contrast between Marilyn’s and Lydia’s perceptions of the Christmas gifts suggests that Marilyn’s expectations for her daughter conflict with what Lydia wants for herself. In addition, Marilyn also uses gifts to reconcile with her past, giving Lydia books about famous women in science. However, Lydia finds “their stories [to be] all the same: told they couldn’t; decided to anyway. Because they really wanted to, she wondered, or because they were told not to?” (173-174). The books that Marilyn gives Lydia to “inspire her” and “show her what she could accomplish” reflect Marilyn’s regret of being unable to achieve her full potential because she was told that only men could become doctors (73). While pushing Lydia toward success satisfies Marilyn, Lydia doubts whether these women engaged in the scientific field because they want to or that they “[are] told not to.” By questioning these female scientists’ motivations in challenging the gender norms, Lydia finds Marilyn’s demand of her to parallel their stories—traumatized by her traditional mother whose dream was shattered of becoming a doctor, Marilyn turns to her daughter Lydia to attach her unfulfilled ambition. Perhaps Marilyn genuinely hopes her daughter can access the opportunities and support she lacked when she was younger. Still, the gifts serve as a source of stress or, in Lydia’s mind, “unsubtle hints” of what she wants her to become rather than one of inspiration (173).

While Marilyn’s gifts convey that she wants Lydia to become exceptional, the gifts from the father, James, tell Lydia that he wants her to blend in and be popular. James’s obsession with inclusion stems from his experience growing up as an Asian American in a predominantly white community, for which he blames his differences as a hindrance to his success. His exclusion starts as early as in elementary school, when he became the first Asian student admitted to the Lloyd Boarding School. To make friends with other wealthy white students, James “set himself a curriculum of studying American culture...in case anyone ever said, *hey, didya hear Red Skelton yesterday?* or *Wanna play Monopoly?* though no one ever did” (44). James studies a rigorous curriculum in American culture to prepare for any potential invitations to socialize. By using “curriculum” and “studying” to describe his learning, Ng demonstrates the high level of intensity with which James approaches this task. Rather than being motivated by his ardent love for learning something new, James is motivated by his desire to gain friendship. However, he fails, seeding his later obsession with blending in. As James becomes older, despite his efforts, his exclusion from society only increases. He craves being likable, which he believes is the solution to all his obstacles: “if he’d known how



to *handle people*, how to make them like him, perhaps he'd have fit in at Lloyd, he'd have charmed Marilyn's mother, they'd have hired him at Harvard. He'd have gotten more out of *life*" (177). Reflecting on his life, James makes a set of assumptions about how his life will be different if he knows how to blend in. James's hope that he could have "gotten more out of life" suggests his dissatisfaction over his current situation and accomplishments. He believes his moderate success is not the result of his lack of qualification but his inability to "handle people." He fears exclusion and desires a better life, which he believes is only possible if he knows how to assimilate. Thus, like Marilyn, James is also haunted by his shattered dream, which he expects Lydia to fulfill.

Fearful of his exclusion from society, James uses the carefully selected gifts to showcase his expectations of Lydia to fit in, thereby using his daughter's success to heal his trauma. He seeks to offer help to Lydia on how to become popular, the guidance he lacked. For Christmas, unaware of Lydia's hope for a gold necklace, James beams when he hands Lydia the book titled *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. While genuinely hoping that Lydia can benefit from the advice, James also wishes "[he] had [the book] when [he] was [her] age" (176-177). Wishing he would've had the advice on how to become popular when he was younger, James still suffers from his exclusion from the white society. James is proud of the choice of his book, and he seeks to prevent his favorite child, Lydia, from following his path. In pushing and helping Lydia to "win friends" and "influence people," however, James transforms his care into pressure: Lydia wants a real gift, such as a gold necklace, rather than a book demanding her to become someone she is not. For her birthday, James buys Lydia a silver heart necklace, a gift that "had taken him some time... and he was proud of it...he was sure Lydia would love it"; he explains that he "wanted gold, but a reliable source told [him] everyone was wearing silver this year" (226-227). Highly concerned with what everyone else is wearing—silver, rather than gold—James equates blending in as success. James unwaveringly pushes Lydia to pursue "normality." As suggested by his pride in his gifts, James is convinced that this is Lydia's primary pursuit as well: he believes "Lydia would love it." In the name of his perceived love and care, James unconsciously pressures Lydia into becoming what he believes is her perfect self. James relies on the vision that Lydia will be different from who he was, thereby reconciling with his regret and failure to achieve his full potential.

Though Lydia's entire life has been confined by her parents' burdensome gifts, in her final days, she gives her siblings, Hannah and Nath, the gift of liberation, alleviating them from expectations. Lydia hopes that her siblings will have the freedom to explore what they want themselves. Fearful that her younger sister, Hannah, will also inherit their parents' dreams, when Lydia finds her sister wearing the silver heart necklace, she received from her father, "she bunched the necklace in her fist"; she then demands Hannah to stay away from it: "Promise me you'll never put this on again. Ever... Don't ever smile if you don't want to" (261). Lydia reacts fiercely by taking away the necklace from Hannah even though she does not want it herself. Actively aware of what the necklace represents, Lydia liberates Hannah from becoming what their father perceives to be successful. In addition, as she urges her sister never to smile if she does not want to, Lydia hopes her sister will never pretend to be a person that she is not. Through this intangible gift—teaching Hannah the possibilities of what she can become—Lydia encourages her sister to explore her authentic self. Similarly, Lydia also liberates her older brother. Before she steps into the lake in the hope of restarting her life, Lydia promises herself that she will overcome the fear of losing Nath: "She will tell him

that it's all right for him to leave. That she will be fine. That he's not responsible for her anymore, that he doesn't need to worry. And then she will let him go" (275). Although Lydia has previously relied on Nath to keep her from drowning in their parents' sea of expectations, in her attempt to find her real identity, Lydia promises herself that she will learn to deal with the pressure alone. Lydia liberates Nath from having to look after her: she lets him live his own life, chasing after his interests rather than her needs. From her troubled experiences in becoming the perfect daughter, and pretending to be what she is not, Lydia learns the importance and preciousness of embracing her authentic self. Thus, through the gift of liberation, Lydia encourages Hannah and Nath to break free of others' expectations and explore their own identity.

In *Everything I Never Told You*, Celeste Ng uses Marilyn's and James's gifts to illustrate how they push Lydia to fulfill their unfinished pursuits, emphasizing the pressure and burden that comes with attention. Being the favorite child in the Lee family, Lydia not only is the knot that binds the family together but is also the adhesive force that glues together her parents' shattered dreams. However, living under constant fear of disappointing her parents, Lydia does not discover until the end of her short life that she does not know what she truly wants herself. In the hope of finding herself and restarting her life, she jumps into the lake. Though it was too late for Lydia to change her toxic relationship with her parents, through her realization, Celeste Ng shows her readers the significance of breaking free of others' expectations. Reflecting on all she has done to please her parents, Lydia concedes, "Before that she hadn't realized how fragile happiness was, how if you were careless, you could knock it over and shatter it" (273). As portrayed through the cost Lydia pays for pretending to be someone she is not, Ng suggests that when people live under other people's expectations, the consequences do more harm than good. Ng warns that relationships bonded by burden are fragile, and in people's attempts to maintain the brittle balance between happiness and disappointment, they drown. People need to let go of the visions that others have of them because by doing so, they free themselves from the attachment to specific results beyond their control. They are then more able to move forward with ease and clarity and interact genuinely without hidden agendas or disappointment.

#### Works Cited

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Hantong (Jenny) Li is a junior at Wellesley High School, MA. For the past year and a half, she has been working on a paper about the influence of gender stereotypes on female politicians and it is successfully published in the European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. She is also an activist for equality and has participated in numerous Stop-Asian-Hate activities that her town organized. She is extremely excited to receive feedback about her work. Thank you for your time and consideration.

*Hantong (Jenny) Li*

## Calligraphy Lessons

I.

My words, confiscated  
at O'Hare baggage  
claim, dropped in the oceans separating Chicago  
from Beijing.  
*dai.* Wear

II.

Heavy air.  
Sunlight through the window.  
*dai.* Wear

III.

My grandpa and I sit in front of the desk.  
On it, I have written a word.  
*dai.* Wear

IV.

"*dai* means Wear.  
Wear means *dai*," my grandpa says.  
I repeat.  
*dai.* Wear

V.

Changsha has skyscrapers like stalactites,  
wearing steel covers.  
I write *dai*, my hands are shaky.  
The lines of the word cross like flights on a radar.  
*dai.* Wear

VI.

Fourteen stories below an apartment,  
crowds fill the markets.  
Buying fish, eel, and meat.  
Their language is oil in my mouth.  
*dai.* Wear



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VII.

Dark wooden desk,  
warmed by the daylight.

*dai.* Wear

VIII.

My grandpa's voice sounds worn,  
his words form slowly from his mouth.

He is not used to speaking English.

"Wear."

He writes with calloused hands.

The Mandarin character stands statue-like.

*dai.* Wear

IX.

Even skyscrapers cannot block the sun.

*dai.* Wear

X.

Flight to China.

Back again.

*dai.* Wear

\*

Michael Liu is a rising 10th grader going to Naperville Central. Writing has always been a way to question who he is. Pieces such as Calligraphy Lessons are works where he has tried to do something new, by exploring and raising questions about his Asian American identity and where he belongs in the landscape of American poetry.

*Michael Liu*

## Taming the Tiger

“We’re heading out,” my mom announced as she jangled her car keys. “Come on, Emma.”

A giddy smile spread across my face and I positively leaped out of my room and skipped down the hallway, but I didn’t care, I didn’t care! Leaving my room had to be a good thing.

I wondered where we were going, but couldn’t bring myself to ask my mom, seeing that her eyes were so wide that rainbows seemed to shoot from them. Opening my mouth would crush those rainbows. I just hoped she wasn’t taking me to a class.

Mom always said that if I didn’t excel academically and handle heaps of extracurricular activities, I’d end up behind the cash register at a fast food restaurant. I seriously considered the latter. What if I... what if I ended up at... Burger King?

Would it really be that bad? I mean, I’d get free burgers... I thought of the concoction of sesame-sprinkled buns and beef and lettuce and tomato and ranch and licked my lips loudly.

Mom glared at me through the mirror. *Oops*, I mouthed at her.

I thought about the last time I went to Burger King. The employees were smiling, warmth reflected in their eyes, like they would be happy to serve me a box of chicken nuggets and place a crown on my head. I wondered what their moms thought of them.

In fact, I think they looked happier than that grumpy looking Apple guy, Steve Jobs. I saw pictures of him and I couldn’t put a name on it, but he always looked displeased. I wish I could go back in time and let him know that he needed to relax. Was his perfectionism his mom’s doing?

I shuddered as I remembered a conversation I had with my friends.

“Emma, did you hear?” Amy and Janelle asked during recess.

“What?” I joined them on the playground.

“There was this big kid in high school. He was a swimmer and a three-time Science Olympiad award winner. But guess what. He got a bad score on his SAT.”

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My eyes widened. I wondered what his mom thought after years of paying for test prep classes.

Amy almost whispered it. "He killed himself."

I froze, slack jawed. I couldn't muster a word.

Janelle broke the thick silence. "I heard that he was doing too many things. Like when you stretch a rubber band too much and it snaps."

"They buried him at the cemetery across from his high school," Amy said.

"There's a cemetery across from that high school?!" I screeched.

It gave me pause. An icy current of fear ran down my spine. "Yesterday afternoon, I had a violin recital and then math tutoring right after."

"Pshh!" Amy said. "That's nothing. My mom drove me to the Physics Olympiad and then to harp practice."

Janelle piped in, "My mom took me to a speech and debate tournament, to volleyball practice, and then to math tutoring. That's three."

Tom, the smartest kid in our grade, walked past us. "Are you guys complaining about your moms?"

"You wouldn't?" I asked, genuinely curious. In my mind, Tom had to have the most menacing tiger mom; the one with the sharpest teeth and loudest roar.

"No! My mom is so relaxed."

We stared at him.

"But you're so smart! How did you get so good?" Amy asked.

Tom shrugged. "When I'm interested in something I just study it a lot."

Back in the car, I wondered what Albert Einstein's mom was like. Was she a tiger mom? I imagined her saying, "Al, it's time to do your homework!" Whatever she did, it worked. He turned out so smart! Elon Musk was raised by his father. The only woman on the "smartest people list" was Marie Curie and her mother died when Marie was only ten. I didn't get it.

"Emma?!" From her tone and the frown, I could tell that my mom had called my name a few times already.

"Are you listening?"

"I am now."

"Where's your book? Time spent sitting in a car and doing nothing is a waste."



“Uh, I... I forgot it, Mom.”

She pulled into the parking lot and got out of the car, so I did too.

Wildwood Park! Oh my gosh! I hadn't been there in years. I inhaled the scent of grass and saw a butterfly flit past my eyes, its embellished orange wings gleaming under the sun.

I wondered if we were going on a picnic. This day just got better!

Just when I was about to ask, I heard a rumbling. Mom's body shook and twitched. I started to run towards her, to save her from whatever was going on. Her normally pale skin transformed into orange. Fur sprouted from her skin. Two ears formed on the top of her head and whiskers stemmed from her cheeks. She was on all fours now. A long tail sprouted from her back. Finally, as if to make a grand conclusion to her transformation, black stripes ran down across her orange fur.

I stared into the eyes of the tiger who was my mom not thirty seconds ago. The eyes still looked the same as Mom's eyes.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked in her usual voice.

“Because you just turned into a tiger, Mom! Why else?” I shrieked.

Just then, I looked across the lawn. “Is that Amy?!”

Amy was holding a leash, at the end of which was another tiger. I looked at Mom and back at Amy's tiger. They were about the same size.

“AMY! Is that... your mom?”

“Yeah,” she replied casually. “Don't you have a leash? You should buy one.”

I looked across the lawn to see the students of my entire class enter the park with their moms on leashes.

I backed away. Only one person wasn't holding a leash. *Right*, I remembered. *He doesn't have one.*

\*

Shannon Ma, 16, is a rising senior at Saratoga High School in California. She is an aspiring writer, dancer, and an accomplished musician. Not only has she won three Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, but she was recently selected to attend the Fir Acres Writing Workshop in Portland, Oregon. She was also one of 22 violinists chosen around the world to compete in the Menuhin International Violin Competition, the “Olympics of the violin.” To Shannon, language is music and vice versa. Her favorite genre is humor (think Mark Twain). Her cat, Miss Cheese, is the color of cheddar.

*Shannon Ma*

## *“Cecyna Flower” by Magdalena Abakanowicz*

In the prism of air that sustains  
find the shades in the chasm  
A woman that grasps two worlds and loses both  
Fear that leaves dragons at your heels  
In the very place that dares you to break free  
Shadows sprout from all sides  
Steal the world before your eyes  
Rob every hue but glittering gray  
And the glimmer of dark wings suspended between earth and sky  
Between freedom and restraint  
Too often, too late, we lie in the abyss  
Torn between what is and could be  
Quiver at the night and the flames  
Instead of leaving on the waiting monarch  
Why run toward the fence  
When happiness lies in the spaces between?

Perhaps we hunt demons instead of angels  
A dragon to fall as a feather  
Or a protective wyvern accompanying souls to the sky  
The shadows become shoots waiting to bloom  
And the spray of the sea in buried conches  
There are angels in the dark and demons in the light  
The chasm offers a choice to suspend the heart in indecision  
On a drawbridge borne by the palms  
To find the bird in the dragon  
The butterfly in the cloak  
And the contradictions of a conch shell  
That breathes waves of light and shadow

\*

Ananya Vinay is a rising high school senior from Fresno, California. She is a budding scientist who enjoys exploring the whys of the world. Ananya also loves writing in all forms, especially poetry. When she's not writing, you can find her with her nose in a book, inventing stories, or sometimes arguing with her younger brother. Ananya won the Scripps National Spelling Bee in 2017. She is the author of a poetry collection, *Dewdrops on the Mind*, and has work published or forthcoming in the *Ice Lolly Review*, *Apprentice Writer*, and *Teen Ink*. She is a passionate teacher and believes in using education as a tool for equity.

*Ananya Vinay*

## Marooned

Do you remember the fisherman down the pier,  
His apprentice by his side,  
Spitting peach pits into the milky water?

Sometimes the ocean speaks,  
Truths so horrible and lovely,  
Their hooks skewer nothing but  
Unmanned yearnings of hope,  
Those that had been lost many years ago,  
Floating ceaselessly on abandoned islands,  
Feeding mirages of satisfaction.

It is a luxury to die of old age,  
For the waves are sentenced,  
Infinite.

The fisherman's apprentice,  
Sucks on peach pits,  
To him,  
They taste sweetest.

They scatter chrysanthemums,  
Floating upon the water,  
A funeral procession,  
Long overdue.

Their bodies are pulled,  
Puppets of the tide,  
Torn and mangled,  
Bloodied and dismantled,  
Bellies filled with untruths.

A life at sea,  
Their minds blank,  
At the thought of a place,  
Once covered with land.

\*

Michelle is a junior attending Pine Creek High School, whose passions include reading, writing, and art. Her dream is to become a published novelist but also loves writing poems.

*Michelle*



## *Autophobia*

Ants who tread alone are not ants—  
en masse, they were an ant.  
Lonely ants are not of now.  
Its disconsolate mind,  
    clad in a black suit,  
was empty  
before it was lifeless.  
Impending its demise,  
it let its decrepit body  
fall,  
now covered by verdant leaves of deciduous trees.

\*

Tameem Zaidat is a rising high school senior attending Maumee Valley Country Day School. His work so far has been recognized by Skipping Stones.

*Tameem Zaidat*

# THE DAPHNE REVIEW

