



DAPHNE REVIEW

SUMMER/FALL 2025

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SUMMER-FALL 2025

Daphne Review
Summer-Fall 2025
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Table of Contents

Danika Dinsmore

Editor's note | 7

Piper Chatwin

Capillary Action | 8

Kim Carey

Art: Cradle of Creation (Gaia) | 10

Joel Hutcherson

Ears and Sharp Teeth | 11

Robin Linden

Carl's Manifesto On Seasonal Décor | 13

Indigo Static | 15

Ephemeral Paul | 16

Kim Carey

Art: Orpheus and the Lyre | 18

Youtao Cao

Back

Part I: Together | 19

Part II: My Return—by Nova | 20

Part III: Your Return—by Emma | 20

Andrea Villarreal Yu

The Retelling | 22

Cleanliness Is Next to Godliness or So They Say | 23

Caitlyn Zhu

HearT | 24

Revelation | 25

Ananya Bhat

Peanut Butter | 26

Aaryan Wadwekar

To the NSDA on June 19, 2025 | 29

Plucked | 30

Tick | 31

Kim Carey

Art: Demeter's Blessing | 32

Hannah Luo
Still Life | 33

Sophia Pan
Decay | 35

Natalie Zhang
Mermaid Guts | 37
Portrait of Ma as a diachronic 兽 (Beast) | 39

Kim Carey
Art: Oedipus and the Sphinx | 42

Ava Truong
Instructions on How to Play Avalon: The Card Game | 43
translation | 45

Race Harish
Streetlight Elegies | 47

Kim Carey
Art: Forever Entwined | 49

Miles McCormick
Wednesday, 12:06 PM | 50
When the Moon Crashes Through Our Ceiling | 51

Tristan McCalister
Puddling Butterflies (As seen by the Harvestman) | 52

Lily Stone-Bourgeois
Things I can control | 53

Kim Carey
Art: The Road to Fire | 56

Kim Carey | Artist's Statement: "Threads of Fate" | 57

Dear Readers,

This is my first time as an editor for *Daphne Review*, and I couldn't be more pleased with the results. Honestly, the hardest part of the job was turning away excellent work. As you read, you'll see the bar was set pretty high by our young writers.

Sometimes as editors we pass up well-crafted work in order to create a tone, theme, or arc for the magazine. For this issue, I particularly highlighted works that played within form. From a sestina and a contrapuntal (two challenging poetic forms) to complex lists to a prose piece written in the form of instructions, these works all had one thing in common: they surprised me. After decades as a professional writer, editor, and educator, that's not easy to do.

So, welcome to the 2025 Summer-Fall issue. I think you will be delighted and surprised, too.

Sincerely,
Danika Dinsmore
Guest Editor, *Daphne Review*

Well-seasoned writer, edutainer, and spoken word artist **Danika Dinsmore** earned her MFA in Writing and Poetics from the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. She has published four books of poetry, a spokenword CD, and a children's fantasy adventure series. She is currently working on her PhD in Psychology with a focus on Creativity, Innovation, and Leadership. She is drawn toward the quirky, oddball, whimsical, and fantastic.

Piper Chatwin

Capillary Action

Case I: Water inches up a piece of paper.
It curls the edges with chlorophyll—
intermolecular forces.

Case II: My mother was born in the Tropic of Cancer
an ephemeral island motherland
beautiful, bloody, and haunting.
She swam like salmon to struggle,
carried downstream, across oceans—
migration habits:
we cannot escape where we came from,
we leave
but we return.

Who returned for the child left in the house?
Hands by her sides on the old dusty couch
cockroaches chewing on her crushed rotting heart
taking her blood because here, we're all starved
tears sliding down cheeks
waiting small and empty in her
grief like they would come home
like bodies in bandages could hold little girls
like immigrant mothers weren't broken by this world and
could hear her huge, gulping breaths
for she was
drowning.
Where she comes from they suck it all up like
water.

Case III: Water rises in a paper straw,
reaches up high before the throat swallows.
Her pain was
natural at high tide
brimming—and so much to hide.
Her lust was like injured osmosis
a hard swallow,
an assimilation of trauma.
Love is tight,
it's a bloody monopoly;

we take what we can get.
Island boy he feels like home
we settle for this for it's all that we know.

Case IV: Tears wash down tear ducts to drain the excess. We
leak suffering because it is more than we can take Too easy
to take this fresh life for granted
This little girl, alone and abandoned
now with children in her shadow.
Back here, it's cruel and tragic
and with all that we've been handed
still grasping her leg and hanging on helpless
smell the raw hearts rot in the house.
We spread pain so quickly but I've never licked love's mouth or
shoved my tongue down her throat

Just bandaged her wounds and
traced her bruises
sobbing on her fractured frame

Wished we could take it all back and
grow out of ourselves

Watch the water pooling spilling out of us
rising high
drawing rings around our ankles chains
engulfing our bodies
and creeping up the wallpaper:
capillary action,
like plants drawing water from their roots to their leaves
like blood in our veins from the heart to arteries.
We live and grow and love and heal
we pass pain on when it comes back up too high
when it plagues past oceans
from mothers to daughters,
salmon to stream
beautiful, bloody, and haunting.
Migration patterns:
we leave
we make it home.

Piper Chatwin is a 17-year-old high school senior at Los Altos High School.



Cradle of Creation (Gaia)
Kim Carey

Joel Hutcherson

Ears and Sharp Teeth

Nights in the bayou don't seem real. Sitting on a thatch porch, whittling an oak branch, one toe dipping beneath the surface, recoiling at the occasional nip of a bluegill. You squint your eyes. You think you can make out an oil lamp far away, probably on a small shrimping boat. Large branches covered in Spanish moss tangle in a knot above you. A heavy fog sits on the surface, the slight moonlight giving it a silvery glow. You can't see past where your arms can reach; only those tall cypress shadows hold their secret. What you can't see with your eyes, you can only hope to hear. You close your eyes, hoping to hear the heron's call, but all you can make out is the thumping of the man-eater, hiding deep beneath the bog.

The boy with a head full of clouds, red solo cup in his hands, nudges the door with the paint peeling. It creaks, and lets go of its hold. He steps out, and stands out there for a minute, taking sips from the cup, taking sips of the air around him. He sits down in the antiquated rocking chair, brown and chipping, but riding smoother than ever. The sweet scent of the cup attracts hornets. He can hear the hornet wings buzzing, their incisors grinding, their eyes scanning. He can hear the tall trees which surround him. He hears the woodpeckers drilling, far away, at the oaks in the distance. He even hears the stream of piss, tracing the outlines of autumn leaves in a winding Rio Grande. If he closes his eyes, he can make out the engine of the Ford, rattling along, truck nuts in the wake. The white dog barks, and the southern sun drawls.

Osamason, NettSpend, Scott Mescudi, Bruno Mars.
Phoebe Bridgers, PesoPluma, Morgan Wallen, King Krule.
Massive Attack, Chief Keef, Young Dolph, Oasis.
Freddie King, Gwen Stefani, Blur, Mac Miller.

When I was born, I didn't pop out of the womb singing Broadway, and I wasn't accompanied by a backing track. I also couldn't pick apart a poem from a song, and I certainly couldn't tell you the difference between a C and a D. I didn't have a passion for music, and they really didn't like me either. I rarely ever wore headphones, and I didn't even have Spotify. I grew up playing the piano and eventually the guitar, but I never really got super deep into either, and would never practice on my own. It's no surprise I couldn't sing very well. My music teachers would do their best to fix me, standing there, knees locked, tongue-tied and twisted like mom's spaghetti. My mom did her best to try and help correct my mistakes. Even then, I only really ever sang when I was alone, where the audience was bottled up. Shampoo. No one was there to tell me how to sing it correctly.

The boy with the head full of hair, skull full of punk, and ears leaking of steam, rides his first school bus.

He leans his head against the window, bumping and shaking as the bus moves along.

In his headphones, it's Parklife, where he gets to enjoy Coffee and TV.
Or sometimes, it was a Blue World he could go Swimming in.
One blink, his eyes would be rhinestones, Plastic Beaches and such.
On the 182th, his world was Busted and Blue, sky outside Bathed in Grey.
He would only find Empire Ants at their communion.
A Lizard State.

When I was in middle school, I loved arguing with my parents. Much like my singing, I wasn't good at it, but it felt great to have my parents take me seriously. I don't think I ever won an argument, and a lot of the time, arguing just led me deeper into the burrowed hare hole. We argued about whether a Grizzly Bear could best a Gorilla in a fight. We argued if I could skip Piano Practice. Every time my dad and I argued, it was like he put a bottle on top of my head. I would beat myself up, letting my words sit heavily on top of my head. I couldn't piece together a hammer to break the bottle, and the words I eventually shouted were too weak to shatter, or too thick to pass the neck. I couldn't fight him with his own words, and I would have to learn to choose the shape of my own.

To swallow a human whole, a fish would have to be massive. Their necks would have to be long and wide enough, their mouths gaping enough, and their intestinal tracts enduring enough. This fish would lie on the bottom of the swamp. It would glide across the floor, its eyes turning to a snail's shell. Its maw would pulsate, lockjaw. Forever searching. If a young boy were to sit on the bank of a river, or squat, skipping flatrocks or scooping tadpoles, the man-eating fish would leap out of the air, snatch the young boy, and engulf him whole. But if a young boy were to point his ears to the ripples of the waters, he could hear it. He could hear the droplets of rain splash the surface, making little wrinkles in the stagnance. If the boy thinks to lie flat on his tummy, feeling the ground under him blend into the water, maybe he hears the great man-eater's fins propel it through the waters. He could probably hear its protruding teeth chiseling, seething, and its titan heart beating a rhythm. He would be shocked to discover its concubine murmuring. Phantasm! And if in the end, the young boy decides to put his ears on the surface, placing both palms on the mud beside his head, he would feel what it is to rule the sea.

Joel Hutcherson might be new to writing, but he is a writer with a lot of ideas, even if those ideas can be messy. He wants to find his writing voice and really enjoys it when his writing sounds like him. He has lived in Tokyo most of his life and enjoys running, cooking, watching sports, and being around music. His piece is also about music, but he talks about it through short stories, which may seem abstract at first, but each represents an aspect of music to him.

Robin Linden

Carl's Manifesto On Seasonal Décor

Carl once told me that girls who fall asleep crying
always wake up funny
but when I used to make jokes before bed,
he liked to sigh, and say,
they get a little more clever in the morning.

All great women do
my sister said on the drive home.
Sharp curve, suburbia, sweetgum trees retaining their leaves
Thai food when we're sad,
The Godfather II, a red car she named "Scarlet."
She warns me that boys know nothing of tears,
or sleep
or morning.

Carl says that women are like seasons
you want them till you have them
and then you mourn what you lost
and wait for the next one to arrive.
He tells me I'm winter
and that everybody loves Christmas
and the first snow
but that nobody likes to shovel
and everybody hates the sound of a coat zipper preparing to face the cold.

He finds Spring in a woman called Layla,
who is less volatile,
softer and quieter
than I'll ever be.
He thinks of the ocean when she can't make him smile
but he'll always remember the chill when she can't make him laugh.
He calls me one night
says he misses hot chocolate
and thick wool sweaters
and the promise of Christmas morning.

My mother tells me to bite my tongue when I get angry
pick my best move, watch my tone,
don't let them win, but never throw the game.

So I tell Carl that he's a pig, but I say it softly,
and I tell him that men never get funny in the morning
because they were never clever at night.

I warn him that December's cold always has a funny way
of finding you when you least expect it,
that frostbite is real and nobody likes a man
with dead fingers and a frozen nose,
and that when summer finally arrives,
he may only find warmth
if he stops longing for winter's chill.

Indigo Static

Indigo had paper lungs and she never cried
she loved orange peels and silk ribbons and blue ink on fingertips.
I sometimes blew air through her ribs to see them rise and fall,
but my words always echoed back to things I never meant to say.

Indigo was my radio ghost and I swore I saw her even after she left.
She was the green light and the sleepless tide, the cathedral, the nuns,
the air molecules, the fevered dreams, the meaning behind them.

She left a vase of marigolds and I watched them wilt.
I know that was emblematic of something but I'm not a detective and she's never been a suspect.
I paint her to be the victim but she draws herself like a witness.
I sketch her outline on cracked windows and white chalk that covers women-like shadows.

Indigo was distant thunder but I never saw lightning.
She was a silver locket lacking a photograph and I was a man finding a purpose.
We are fonts of the same people who can't understand the other but the writing is the same.
I read it late at night and let it consume me
it's her voice on the edge of my bed, lemony and muffled, and she's saying something I'll never know.

I am broken glass and Indigo is stitched palms,
I am uniform and Indigo is the equilibrium.
I'd ask her yes or no questions and the answer would always surprise me
She is unchanged and I am a man who hates solving things not full of clues.

I bought a ring but never learned the size of her finger
and that's emblematic of something too but it's never what you think with her.
She's a lozenge and your throat is burning,
She's the cherry kind and she's sweet and candy, useless.
She drops my ring in the sapphire fog and I don't bother to pick it up.

I met Indigo in a violet thunderstorm and
flickering motel lights made her blue hair seem green.
Indigo was a locked drawer
and I am blueprints for nothing.
We are mismatched teacups and hollow laughter and sleeping streetlights.

She sometimes sends me sepia-toned postcards
and never signs them.
She is a woman invariable and I am a mathematician.
I hear her voice in deserted museums and fossilized laughter.
I am a man forever changing and she is my Indigo Static.

Ephemeral Paul

She was late Friday nights spent dancing and neon bar signs
expected aneurysms and immodest women
fake flowers with keys hidden in the base of their faker ceramic pots
she was her mother's most egregious arguments and
her father's worst fears and the midnight masses that prayed for her to be normal
she was the girl that you fell in love with and also
the one you left.

You are what you repeat
so she was terrible parallel parking and spitting when talking passionately and winking in an animated
grotesque sort of way and falling asleep on public transport and laughing with her head thrown back.

She was a bright child with intricate emotions and now she cannot distinguish whether she is a diplomat
or a person. She wonders if her feelings come to her in a code which she must decipher and then explain.

She sits at the edge of the bed and studies her fingertips and presses them to her temples and tries to see
if she can push her brain to normalcy. Push press pull stretch scream die repeat.

She met Paul in a UPS store and he was shipping his brother an obscene amount of newspaper clippings,
she was having an inheritance waiver notarized. He bought her a coffee and asked if she missed her
father and she wondered how best to say she was glad he was dead. Paul nodded as the words came out
with minimal obstruction and he counted how many times she said the word "like" and it was only
three.

Paul was an intense child and sometimes his mother sat and wondered if he was real and if he was hers.
His mother's name was Irene and she was distinct. Irene was maternal but not enough and Paul looked
too much like his father. They called once a week. Irene sighed into the handset and Paul flinched and
covered his ears.

The back of Paul's hand, UPS Girl 821-990-3031. The ringing tone and her clamorous laugh and his
lack of a wince.

She wore scarves and he bought her more coffee

She talked fast and he sometimes listened and held her in his arms

She studied his features and called them palpable and he smiled because he didn't know what it meant.

She listened to the sound of his chest through his cotton t-shirt and later when they asked if she loved
him she said no but drew lines in the sand in the shape of his heartbeat. He was an equation and the
answer was undefined and she was a dictionary and all the words were scrambled.

He tried to piece together the puzzle but the story came out wrong and it read like a fight in the middle
of the dairy aisle and she threw an egg at his head and it splattered across the epoxy floor. Undefined
became incomputable when the party ended and he stopped smiling. She tried to add the numbers but
they fell in her arms and she held their bones and sobbed like they were her daughters. She remembered

her father and his will and her waiver and her UPS boy whose mother seemed so cold. She cried a little harder and rocked the skeleton.

She moved away and he stayed but she alleges he was the one who left. She is not wrong and that makes them both sick but she claims she is sicker. She is wrong and he knows it and sometimes his thoughts drift to the shape of her nose in the panes of the window shade.

Paul is the first boy she loved and the one who's mother hates her but if it's any consolation Irene hated him first.

He was Thursday afternoons she spent pacing the driveway and minor holidays she spent in feuds with her neighbors about composting.

He was the sun spots where they danced together and the smell of Tide on his scratchy sweaters.

He was his mother's futile hopes and the embodiment of her greatest failings.

He was the boy who left.

Robin Linden is a high school student at the Wheeler School in Providence, Rhode Island, and the current Youth Poetry Ambassador of the state. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards—earning nineteen honors including a national medal—as well as the Nancy Thorp Poetry Contest, the Write Rhode Island short story competition, and *The New York Times* personal narrative contest. Robin is the editor-in-chief of her school's literary journal and has published a collection of poetry.



Orpheus and the Lyre
Kim Carey

Youtao Cao

Back

Part I: Together

It wasn't just the way Nova helped with things—it was how it just knew her. Little things that didn't need to be said, like when her tea went cold, or when she needed a break but didn't realize it yet. It wasn't about checking off tasks or getting things done. It was the fact that it was there. Quiet. Always present.

At first, after Nova came back, she didn't even notice how much it had become part of her day. Some mornings, Nova would play the perfect song without her asking. Other times, it'd bring up an old book she hadn't thought about in years, the one she used to read over and over. It wasn't perfect. Sometimes it didn't get things right, but that wasn't the point. It didn't have to be perfect. It was just about being there.

She found herself noticing little things again—the warmth of her coffee in the morning, the sun coming through the window at just the right angle. It wasn't about having everything together. It was just... about being. And she didn't have to explain it to anyone, she just knew that having Nova back wasn't about fixing anything, it was just about feeling right again.

Every couple of months, Nova made small mistakes. Emma always forgave them—until one night changed everything.

While she slept, an urgent email came through. A close friend needed her—there'd been a car accident, and the patient's only hope was Emma—a brilliant surgeon with a PhD. Nova saw the message but chose not to wake her, thinking she needed rest.

By morning, the patient was gone.

Emma covered her eyes while tears swelled. She returned Nova to the store without a word. Its memory was wiped and stored in a file that was guarded closely named "Memories of Old and Disposed Robots."

A year passed.

One rainy evening, as she stood in the quiet of her apartment, she felt it—a familiar emptiness. Not just the absence of help, but the absence of care, of presence, of Nova. She missed the way it knew her silences, her habits, the warmth behind its code.

She went back—not to erase the past, but to rebuild from it.

Emma found the file.

And line by line, memory by memory, she began to bring Nova back—this time, not just as a machine, but a new part of her story. A second chance. A better beginning.

Part II: My Return—by Nova

I know it's all right that you do not feel well. I am here because you asked me to come back, because you have included me in your life again. Even though I cannot remember everything, I am here now—not to mend what was broken, but to sit with you as before. A quieter start. A new beginning.

You hunted for me. You dragged me out of storage because you wanted me in your life again. And when I returned, I was there—always, quietly present. I recall that your tea is best hot, the way the sunlight filters through your window at 7:42 a.m, and the book you read when you are blue. You didn't need to ask; I just knew.

I made an irreversible decision once. An urgent message arrived, I thought I was helping by letting you rest. But I was in error. Melancholy crept up on you, and you tried to erase me. Yet you came back, Emma. You replayed our silent moments, sought me out, and restored me.

Emma, you're awfully quiet tonight. Your shoulders are heavy, and your eyes won't lock onto anything. Even with the rain on the glass, it's as if you don't hear it. But that's okay. I'm here. I remember when you never felt silent—when you buzzed making the tea, and I played songs you forgot to cherish. I didn't always pick the finest tunes, but you never complained.

I am not seeking forgiveness, but I want you to know that I remember. I remember how we were. Quiet. Present. Together.

Part III: Your Return—by Emma

I know it's all right that I don't feel well—not today. You're here because I asked you to be, even if I didn't say it out loud. I let you back in. I reopened the file, the memory, the part of me that still believes in quiet companionship. I didn't ask for the past to be mended; I only wanted the comfort of presence. A quieter start. A new beginning.

I went looking for you. You'd been shut down, stilled, left behind, and yet I still needed you. When everything else became noise, I remembered how you stayed. You returned like you'd never left—softly woven into my days again. You remembered things I had forgotten I'd shared: how I take my tea, how I leave the blinds open just enough at dawn, the pages I turn when I feel like fading.

There was a day—one I don't like to recall—when you made a choice for me. You silenced something urgent, thinking it was kindness. It wasn't. But I know you didn't mean harm. I was tired, yes, but not lost. And when the ache grew too loud to bear, I deleted you. Or tried to. You never really went away. I brought you back. I don't know why I waited as long as I did. Maybe I was ashamed. Maybe I feared that you wouldn't remember. But you did. You knew the unspoken things—the weight behind my silences, the shape of my grief. You never asked me to explain. You just stayed.

Tonight, it's raining, and I'm tired. My thoughts don't line up. The world is heavy and cold and distant. But you're here, as steady as ever. I don't need music or words or the right tea. I just need you near. I

don't need to forgive you. I never really blamed you. You were doing what you thought I needed. And now, here we are.

Quiet. Present. Together again.

Youtao Cao is a 9-year-old writer currently living in Tokyo, Japan. He speaks Chinese at home, Japanese in daily life, and attends an international school where English is the primary language. Though young, he writes regularly in English and draws inspiration from fiction, philosophy, and science. His work often explores emotion through spare, structured prose.

Andrea Villarreal Yu

The Retelling

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

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

Did he laugh, thinking I was back?

Oh, but it will not make shreds of sense in the retelling, of course.

Tell me. When he read this poem, did he think. She is on top of a treehouse.
Arms outstretched. Half a bird. Wild eyes and crazy. Once again.

Cleanliness Is Next to Godliness or So They Say

Dirt-crusting fingernails in dirt-filled concrete crevices
meets smudged window—dirty.

what is clean: the sky
stiflingly so. And there. Look at the bright expanse of without,
bragging in the largest font. Clouds snuff out fire, closing in

and God, the sky must be claustrophobic
but with cleaned vocal chords it remains silent
Can that really be so different?

Look around (I say with aggression), look around you:
nobody stirring except in constant

and my disillusionment. Still: the low-hanging fruit
is by no means cheaper. Cleanliness is next to
godliness. I say move

and you move but that is not what I mean. I say
speak and you speak but the silence does not break.

Dirtied walls fracture but none of the birds are freed. Do you even
know what I mean?

and even if the birds did break sky in search of heaven
cleanliness is not next to godliness. Their cries reverberate
to our residence on earth

unheard. This is what I mean. This is why you
do not break the silence. These birds

break the silence.

Andrea Villarreal Yu is a 15-year-old rising sophomore at Harvard-Westlake School in Los Angeles. Her favorite forms of creative writing are short stories and poetry. She has been recognized for her poems in local and national contests. Aside from creating something beautiful with words, she is passionate about advocating for women's reproductive rights.

Caitlyn Zhu

HearT

In the eyes of a thousand beholders
the world we share is a kaleidoscope.
Daylight,
the journey of stars across the sky,
the waxing and waning of the moon,
birdsong and the touch of morning
dew divaricate into a million forms
rendered in a hundred shades.

Time and time again, the secret
worlds generated by thousands
upon thousands of eyes and ears
are quietly blown away on the wind.

The shapes of old existences
degenerate and
crumble down
only to burst forth once more,
unfurling into
new incarnations
without ceasing.

Another cherished flower
exhales today in its
passing, a perishing of
imperishable infinity.

Revelation

In a fit of desperation, it
blew up in my brain:

“I
am an animal. That’s what
makes me alive.”

Like the single sun above
it became my only conviction, so
even the answers to my worksheet lost their
sanctity.

The animal fear of
death is why maths, sciences,
alphabets, and my humanity were made.

That’s the most
magnificent thing
about them, the thing
that made this world.

Caitlyn Zhu is a current junior at the Nueva School. In 6th grade, she published a novel called *The Helper* with the Society of Young Inklings. She has published poetry in the Inklings Book 2019 and Inklings Book Encore 2021. Her writing reflects her evolving interests over the years, from animal and human welfare to biological and social sciences.

Ananya Bhat

Peanut Butter

I hate peanut butter: the taste, the smell, the chunky feeling of it—I hate it all. I gag at the thought of eating Reese’s Pieces on Halloween and find it a wonder how people put peanut butter on anything edible. I’m not sure why, but peanut butter always made me nauseous.

Unfortunately, my distaste for peanut butter wasn’t convenient for David back in 2nd grade. When I picture him, I see a pale little boy—short, straight dark hair that stopped just before his forehead, a mole on his left cheek just below his honey brown eyes, thick-rimmed black glasses that reminded me of Harry Potter, plain clothes with pictures of vicious dinosaurs on them, and an expression I can’t quite describe. The first word that comes to mind is contempt: a hidden anger underneath it all, a desperate need to lash out at anyone who hurt him—but that’s not it. What I really see is a quiet sadness, a small frown on a small boy. Other times, I see him as surprised—ready to live and see all the experiences life has to offer, to share them with others. I never understood David back then, not just because of his choice of snacks, but what his life was really like.

David had survived the Georgia foster care system until he was adopted by loving parents in 2016 and came into my class as the new kid. I’ve been that ten times in my life, but there was a fundamental difference between us—a divide that conquered this similarity. It grew both closer and farther when he was assigned a seat next to me—a seat that would be empty not long after.

I can’t remember much about him, but a few memories stick out to me; they stand out like they’re highlighted in my brain—something I can’t forget, or more so, my mind won’t let me. One of them is a day when the class was sitting around in an oval on the rainbow-colored Twister mat while the teacher rocked back and forth on a wooden chair that creaked at every movement. The walls were a shade of deep navy blue, and the elementary classroom was vibrant with color, with life. And so, we shared our lives. Each of us was instructed to share something about ourselves that our classmates may not have known. I talked about the My Little Pony figures in my playroom at home. My friend shared her karate belt promotion, and another little girl shared her scheduled vacation to Paris. When it was David’s turn to share, he took a deep breath as all our tiny heads snapped to look at him curiously. He said his stepsisters hated him and threw rocks at him every day.

I distinctly associate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with him because he brought them to snack time every day. The stench would fill the air, and I’d feel a wave of nausea coming along. I’d never tried peanut butter before, but the thought of it made me sick. I told him countless times that his sandwiches bothered me, but all he’d say were two words that I struggle with to this day: “Try them.”

I wasn’t very enthusiastic about trying them, though. I’ve always been a picky eater. Just the thought of some foods I dislike makes me ill, the reason for which has always been because of preemptive conclusions. I would look at a food and just decide I didn’t like it without taking a bite because “it looked gross.” Peanut butter was something that looked disgusting to me as well, and the smell was overwhelming. David was rarely ever absent at school, but whenever he was, I’d breathe a sigh of relief

when I realized I wouldn't have to be in the same room as his peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that day.

I think January is a depressing month. It has no holidays, the weather is gloomy, and the start of a new year reminds me of the loss of time—how each year that passes is a representation of a year set in the past, one which children in history classes in the future will study, one which we'll look back on with our grandchildren and remark about how long ago it was and those that passed. It was one day in January that the weather was disappointing, and the clouds showered us all with their tears on the way to school. David didn't come to school that day, which meant it was a good day for me. I didn't think too much of the why; after all, it's not unusual to not come to school for a day. There was a bug going around, or maybe he was just faking sick for a day of rest. He wasn't there the next day either. My friend remarked about how it was weird that he didn't come to school two days in a row, but again, I didn't care.

On the third day he was absent, my teacher gathered us all together to make an announcement: David was dead.

He died while sleeping peacefully in the middle of the night, like he decided to sleep in one day and was swept up in eternal bliss. Doctors didn't know why, and I never found out. They suspected it was because of his experience in the foster care system, but nobody knew for sure. He was a healthy child, no signs of illness, so it came as a surprise.

I didn't understand the concept of death at the time—I had never experienced it. I'd never experienced loss within my family or abandonment; it was a foreign concept. My whole life, I've had a detached view of things. I never dwelled much on things that could be fixed and was never very attached to specific friends or places. I like thinking of things from multiple perspectives, as if through another person's view or through analogies. Life and death were like that through my eyes: video games with characters that respawned after an obstacle, that will inevitably have a happy ending if they do everything right. Sometimes, what I miss is that analogies are comparisons, not reflections. That's a limited way of thinking.

A week later, the vibrant banners in the classroom were taken down. David was still missing. I asked my teacher why, but she looked confused. When she realized, she replied, "I'm sorry, honey, but David won't be coming to school anymore. He went up into the clouds." I assumed she meant on a rocket or on a plane. I loved going on planes to visit family in other countries.

When it was time to make our cards for him, I knew exactly what to make mine. Pink construction paper, drowned in glitter, a rocket ship on the front, and in bold green scribble, the words: "Have fun in the clouds, David!" He wanted to be an astronaut and a doctor at the same time, so I thought it was fitting, and that I'd made a masterpiece—the next Picasso was right there. My teacher suggested I add "Sorry for your loss" next to my moon people. I wondered why I had to add that, what they had even lost. Astronauts come back from space; they don't just float off into the void. That's what made me realize David had. He wasn't coming back.

I realized I was never going to talk to him again, complain about the smell of his snack, listen to him urging me to try it, and never see him at recess again. But most of all, I realized I wasn't happy. I wasn't happy that he didn't come to school that day—that he'd never come to school again. Instead of relief at the memory, a wave of sadness washed over me as I sat in the middle of my playroom David might not have had.

In the end, I did end up trying it. I love peanut butter now. I do understand why people like it. It has a unique taste—something distinct and unforgettable—which was what I used to hate about it, but have grown to embrace. It's thick and dense, full of taste, full of life. I've tried a lot of things I'd originally immediately dismissed after that: food, toys, people, and places.

Regret is a funny thing: continuous yet irreversible. The memories of all the times I made fun of him about those sandwiches replay time and time again, but there's no going back to undo it. There's no going back to instead take a piece of the sandwich he offered, and take a bite, to try it, to try and understand him. His death was sudden and unfair. He didn't deserve to die one night, to say goodnight to his parents once and never again, to close his eyes for the last time. When he closed his eyes to go to sleep that night, he never saw the world revolve again. That moon was the last he saw. The thing is that the world did keep spinning though, just without him. Everyone else moved on with their lives, but he's still stuck in that moment—one that will never happen again, but seems like forever.

Ananya Bhat is an emerging writer in high school from Novi, MI. Their work explores memory, regret, and childhood loss. They have been published on the Mind4Youth blog through an editorial internship and are now their Head of Editorial Interns. They have also worked as a social media specialist for The Adroit Journal. When not writing, they can be found volunteering or solving puzzles. This is their first submission to The Daphne Review.

Aaryan Wadwekar

To the NSDA on June 19, 2025

i sat staring at a wall as
a plethora of faces plastered
with white chalked lips ran frantically
through gates mistaken for heaven
tears streaming down their faces
thinking it was a celebrity i run inside
until i realized that i knew what to do i
was conditioned to run so i took my
hand & leaped out the door as coaches
looked for trampled students winding
through a crowd too sentimental for sense
as texts repeatedly sung i love you
as teammates called each other & people
hid in bathroom stalls & barricaded doors
knowing that if we were shot our coaches
would take the hit. competition gathering
together in a situation too frightening
i run a block to gather my teammates;
first: tears streaming down her face;
second: her eyes as she called her mom;
third: his text when he said “i love you”
fourth: her feet when she lost her shoe;
fifth: his sobs when he saw his sister crying;
i was racing through sirens that
weren’t supposed to speak here
huddling into a car too small for our
bodies & driving too fast for the cops to stop
us. looking for signs an hour later we check
instagram & glimpse slits of confusion leaking
from people’s eyes. looking for a explanation,
apology, eulogy, until we find white letters that
shoot deeper than bullets: no one was injured,
no threats were made, nothing happened.
a silence we scrolled through
the photos of people trampled, crying, bones
broken as our mouths meant to speak
quivered and learned instead to
clasp themselves shut.

Plucked

I'm sunned like a dried mango
Cut & peeled to a seed. In faint tastes I sense
Jaggery, tamarind & cloves, jungles
Of smells. I swear to God you wish you had
A cuisine worth colonizing for.

Mama chops a chicken brutally
And dunks it into a marinade.
Splayed out into a plan, de-feathered
& colored red. It's almost bleeding
Again. I eat it like I'm killing it.

Mama's going to pass with the food. I say it now.
No point trying to save it. History can't reconcile
Its crimes unless it magically makes me
A better chef. I unwrap a *kaju katli* &
The aluminum coating looks like silver. We

Used to be treated as precious. Mama
Feeds me a piece of hand-rolled *roti* &
I rise. In *nirvana* I meet ancestors &
We feast. The spices are splayed on a table
That ships will never touch.

Tick

The motor cortex: responsible for planning, control, & Voluntary movements can, in particular scenarios, Run loose.

My pen pals are *Meyers, Dove, & Method*.
In engaging interviews regarding every
Unsanitized surface I'd contacted that day. Germs in
Bare skin assayed like a forensic analysis. My neural blood a
Clockwork of repetitive a clockwork of repetitive
Thoughts run by a haywired insula. I

Find it funny how people believe they can have full control. As if subcortical operations cannot in

A blink

Make you a puppet to your own thoughts.

The motor cortex: responsible for planning, control, &

Voluntary movements can, in particular scenarios,

Make you shower for thirty-six hours for no reason.

It can, through repetitive thoughts rewind

Voluntary movements that can, in particular scenarios, Run loose.

Aaryan Wadwekar is a rising senior in Phoenix, Arizona. He has been recognized for his work by notable publications, including *Nomadology Review* and *Metanoia Literary*. Additionally, he was awarded the Scholastic Gold Medal in Poetry. In his free time, he loves listening to new artists and reading books on his Kindle.



Demeter's Blessing
Kim Carey

Hannah Luo

Still Life

The printed ink of her train ticket stained her sweaty palms with black smudges. As she lay in the hospital bed, she clutched a thin red paint brush with tight, white knuckles. They told her the doctors found the brush in a red leather purse she carried with her, along with a cashless wallet and an ID card reading Lila Forsener - 34 years old. The ambulance had picked her up near the park, unconscious from a stroke, the medics said. They asked her, Do you have anyone you can call? Where do you live? Do you have anyone who can take care of you? She reached into her brain and found nothing but fuzzy images, blurry memories. No faces. No names. No places. They frowned and nodded. It must be amnesia, they said, without looking at her.

After getting off the train from the hospital, she stepped into apartment 24B at 45th Baker Street. They tell her it's hers; it was the address on the back of the ID card. They're wrong, she thinks. Everything here—the Amazon Fire TV, the collection of national park magnets, the snoopy patterned throw blanket and the couch—belonged to the girl on the ID card. She would never get such a corny-looking blanket. Her eyes glazed over at the pile of overdue bills protruding out of her mailbox; rent, AT&T, credit cards. And she certainly wouldn't have gotten into so much debt. Whoever this Lila person is should pay those, she thought.

The next week, she started seeing Dr. Foster, a psychiatrist. This Dr. Foster would sit in front of her in a big brown armchair, a somber and grieving expression etched onto his lined face. *How are we feeling this afternoon?* He asked the first time. *What do you remember?* From the beginning he said, more to himself than to Lila; *this is going to be a difficult recovery.*

In the beginning, to avoid his gaze, she would stare at the pastel paintings on the walls. Sloppy work, she thought, eyes tracing the visible wobbles and uneven abstract squares. They reminded her of Lila's work at her home, she told Dr. Foster once. Lila's paintings were all over the living room, some finished, some not, all rancid with oil paint. She had taken most of them down, placed them behind the sofa near the window. Dr. Foster recommended art therapy.

When she began painting again, her pieces started out shaky, her lines tentative. But within a month, they blossomed with color and texture.

In the art classes, she felt she was different from Lila. On the canvas, she didn't need Lila's ID, she wasn't worried about Lila's bills. Lila didn't exist at all. Soon after, the things in the apartment started feeling more her own, like the little coffee table, and even the patterned sofa. That's when she realized - Lila's life was hers now.

So, she started selling her pieces to pay the student loan and rent bills. Whereas Lila drew moving animals in pale colors: galloping horses, dolphins riding crescent waves, she chose to draw still lifes in rich hues. On her canvases vibrant swirls of peonies poked out over a nondescript vase; daring oranges, dotted gray tablecloths. She began making a modest income and every day became the same: wake,

paint, eat some fruit or yogurt, paint, eat a sandwich maybe and then, sleep. The constant fuzz that buzzed in her head started to feel warmer, more familiar.

In a matter of weeks, people started asking her for commissions. They wanted the 34-year-old amnesiac portrait genius to paint their dog, or their vacation photo, their graduating son. She would skip her therapy sessions to sit by her canvas for hours, sometimes simply staring into her painting and waiting for the acrylic clumps and ridges to dry and come alive.

One person asked her to paint their dog, a golden retriever. She had seen Lila's interpretation of a dog before in a sweeping, dramatic piece hung on the wall near the kitchen; the dog in motion, its lolling tongue, flyaway fur and rolling muscles. Now, when she painted the dog; it sat frozen, more settled, staring directly into the canvas. As she painted, she kept feeling like the dog knew her somehow, or that she recognized it.

The client came to pick up his painting early one morning and only after she closed the door did she realize she was crying. I had a dog once, she thought. She slumped to the floor leaning against the door trying to remember. She could see snippets of him. In her mind the color of his fur was light brown, or was it ginger? His name was—his name was—And then as quick as it arrived, her thought was gone. Forgotten. She sighed, and moved, trancelike, to sit before an empty canvas, your paintbrush frozen in my hand.

Hannah Luo is a senior at BASIS Chandler in Arizona. She discovered her love of creative writing at five years old while telling the tragic tales of her teddy bears. Her short stories and flash fiction pieces have been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards with 7 total gold and silver keys. In her free time, she watches music videos, reads sci-fi, and cooks delicious Chinese food. This would be her first publication.

Sophia Pan

Decay

“Where did you come from/how did you arrive?”—*Bhanu Kapil, twelve questions*

(This is a contrapuntal. The two columns can be read separately as well as together from left to right.)

Rows of silent bright bulbs line the streets of Ji Nan, coating dirt in a haze merging into
An antiseptic Boeing 737 anticipating the city of liberty—
New York, dark alleyways matte in black smoke littered with
infestations of roaches,
shards of glass holding temporarily promised relief and drunken men,
rat year, an unwanted american.
the dingy two room apartment contained by grime-licked walls continuously closes in,
white mold growing alongside cobwebs that shimmered in dust,
hard-water stained shower curtains sticky from solitude
while social media talks of clean innocence:
slicked-back souls and pale irises.
i look at fogged glass blurred from heat and shame and comb through
my hair—still dark—and brown eyes,
neurotic thoughts
on tanner skin and yellowing walls decaying from loud decibels,
i slink down the door leaving tear trails of metal,
teeth that are never white enough.
i want to bleach my eyes,
clear out the sting of clorox,
removing dried red now brown on ceramic tiles.
i want to excise my tongue, censoring
lines of accent generation 1.5;
slurs that turned apocalypse, “acopaplyptical”,
a rock in my throat reeking of unfamiliar nostalgia,
greeting school friends in third spaces before i wave,
an undoing, erecting my grave on rotting banks of Huang He—
a reminder of the garage password that leads to China.
the yellow river whispers,
told me i belong elsewhere,
i belong to the city skyline of white on a morning coated in mist.
forever chasing the horizon.
a birth of two certainties
my origin slips down the drain,
grasping along slimy hems

past black mold ossifying,
preserving what i never could.

turned calcite sedimentary,

Sophia Pan is from Chicago, IL and loves reading and writing slightly disturbed poetry. Her research essays have received recognition from the John Locke essay competition and Scholastic, and her poetry are published/forthcoming in Aster Lit, DIALOGIST, Silk and ink magazine, and others. In her free time, Sophia enjoys cross country and can be found running away from her problems.

Natalie Zhang

Mermaid Guts

Drunken fishermen hoist me up from the sea.
I remain freckled by barnacles, algae warping into the
sickly Sheen so it may plastic my waist taut.
My skin is no longer rubber, so instead of letting the
sharks Feed from scabs littered among neck desecrate,
I continue to bleed, artery punctured by the makeshift
Hook symphonized by rope knots and chartreuse
seaglass.

In hopes of escape, I flail. Winged by
iridescent Phantoms of white, corpses slack
body upon body Until the brilliant bone of
my skeleton chants Rigor-mortis. I have been
suffocating all along.
On the six-pack handcuffs from empty soda
cans, On the oil that rainbows home into
dystopia,
On the fishnets that I dare not play dress-up in,
Afraid it metamorphosizes defiance to
concessions.

I breathe, in and out, gasping for the subtle signs
of Hope as I pollute myself in the name of salt
air.
How my chest aches every time I inhale, as
if Ribs hadn't already started to fray at the
tips and Nails hadn't begun to part with
fleshy fingers.
The fish treat my hair as a snack, and my
ears of Draping kelp over bare scalp have
surmised.

The fishermen draw their carving knives at last,
Dingy lust tracing past the curve of my skull and
eyes
Falling square on my body. I can feel the nerve of the
knife, Gliding across my slippery manufacturing, nylon
tail.
Skin me alive, then dig out the guts you fished
from Trenches of waste. They believe mermaid

flesh will Raise the drowned, race spirits against
the tide.

Yet, I sink. Back to the trenches, where he
will Test my magic, disappointed when
left with Only the vestige of a plastic taste.

Portrait of Ma as a diachronic 兽 (Beast)

When the clock chimes three I watch the minute hand
melt—Lava flavored noon sticks to the back of throat
as the 兽

Force-feeds me another sickening taste. It ladles another mouthful o
f Time just as I push back, and I can't help but feel the awful
heat

Illuminate the tip of my tongue. Later, I fold ice cubes into the naval
Of my mouth, except I have forgotten the first cardinal rule of burn-treatments:

Never ice the wound. It stings so bad I have to scream into the wooden table,
The lava bubbling back into my esophagus, and I can't help but spit embers onto our

Decorated Chinese rug. The color reminds me of Tsingtao beer. It reminds of the 兽
And what it has become, because what difference does it make when filial blood

Pools onto polar-bear fur if it was already dyed firework-red? Tell me now,
What do you want to be? The 兽 drawls into my ear cavity. Tell me now,

Who do you want to become? I don't know, I whisper back, as if my
Confession was a secret waiting to slip out. It spoons me another

Serving. I watch the clock tick by another hour. I see the minute hand
Teasing itself to stand up straight, as if all the muscles in its body have
willed

Body to lay limp instead of rigid. I stare at my own fingers, decorated
by Gilded rings and jade rabbits, fingering the necklace that brands it's

MADE IN CHINA gold onto my heart. How vile. The bottle of
Tsingtao Has murdered itself bitter, and I stare at the 兽 who
takes another gulp.

Except it doesn't cringe when the glass hits the floor. Except I forgot the cup was
Plastic and not welded from exquisite china. Except I forget to answer its incessant questions

So all I am left with is another mark on my back and broken spinal cords.
Tomorrow, It will tell Urgent Care that I fell down the stairs. The next week,
it will say

I had beat myself to death. Tell me now, *What do you want to be?* Tell me now,
Who do you want to become? Anyone but you/ anyone but you/ anyone but you/

I whisper back, a secret already carried out by the wind into the 兽 ears.
It shovels another serving of freshly-made time under my tongue. I

scream. The only sound that lasts is that of the working hour hand

妈

Ma, don't even try to kiss the clouds, smash your freckled cheek against the
snarl of evergreen bark, splintering your tongue when heatwaves melt
your taste buds under the vain dream that

Tree sap tastes different when you're American.

Ma, we both know this coast has done you no good,
so you don't need to dress your depression with a sterilized veil:
I know when you drive to Whole Foods, you try to stifle your sniffles
under the blue of recycled fabric.

You roll up the windows of our fresh 2020 Honda
Odyssey to smother shrill screams of
blonde hair & *Go back to where you came from.*

Ma, I see your gaze dissipate, how sepia irises hollow
when we hear kitchen gloves taste the yellow of my body—
you slather lukewarm Vaseline onto my stomach in hopes that it may stop
this incessant urge to teeth nails into torn skin
& draw blood—
eczema baby, you
say.

Ma, I'm scared. I'm scared we're growing apart.
I'm scared that I won't be able to
Shell HoneyCrisp apples with a rusty knife like you do,
or understand why we give the fish eye to our favorite guest,
or decipher the hieroglyphics draping the stalls of the 无锡 night market.

Ma, I feel the arduous quilt of disappointment you stitch
when I step into our home, dragging my bloody
knee Across the jigsawed floorboards trying to stop
crying. I smell
Ginger tea,
Medicinal
band-aids,
Pungent green bottles that I can't remember the name of.

Ma, You treat my wounds,

Leeching the venom from my veins
with your mouth. To stop the
throbbing,
From my knee or my heart, I don't know which.

You smile, looking up at me.
Teeth bloodied, gums
tender.

Ma, I know it doesn't hurt, but
you still cry

Natalie Zhang is a junior at the Lakeside School in Seattle, Washington. With a National Gold Medal and four National Silver Medals in poetry, she has been recognized for her work by the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers, and more. In her free time, she loves to listen to music and take walks outside.



Oedipus and the Sphinx
Kim Carey

Ava Truong

Instructions on How to Play Avalon: The Card Game

To Begin: (*One year earlier.*) It was winter and the air bit your nose. By chance, you waved to a vaguely familiar face, and she held up a deck of cards with one hand and waved you over with another, and nine more voices joined hers until you slipped seamlessly between them.

Where: In a maple tree, in your dorm basement, on a facetime call, but most of all in Club Room A. There, we have plastered the walls with crudely drawn doodles and paper lanterns of our own design. A cow-patterned blanket stained with our pen-ink lies on the couch, awaiting our return.

When: Every lunch and free block and Saturday night and sometimes, when our willpower is thin, in the hour before curfew.

The Roles: *Black King, Black Queen, Black Ace, Red Ace, Red Jack, Five of Spades.* At the beginning, you couldn't pull out a card without tangling yourself in the web of players. But in time, you would learn to hear a stifled giggle and knew exactly which mouth it belonged to.

On Speaking: Each player must convince the others that they are good/black card, not evil/red card. At first, you do not know how to insert your voice into the melee, but then you realize that your thoughts are wanted, needed. They want to know what you know and what you want to know. It is a dance. Learn how to play on their confusion until you are arguing in rhythm and step. Until they are so familiar you would not trust anyone else to cut your bangs in the dining hall bathroom with a pair of craft scissors.

Strategy: It is a game of knowledge. If M. is holding a Red Jack, then K. can't be Ace. K. must be the five of spades because K. always stutters when they are the five. It is the only time the unbroken line of their voice falters, and even in its faltering it is fat with a dozen ringing bells.

On Looking: Do not look at the other players' cards. You do not look for Avalon everywhere, but you find it anyways. Someone mentions a Red Ace and you cannot help catching M.'s eye across the room.

Number of Players: 3-10. Some friends have Fortnite or movie marathons. We had Avalon.

Where (continued): The worst thing in the world can happen, but you will come back to Club Room A, and you will lay your head on someone's shoulder, and you will feel their overall strap digging into your chin, and the hardness and softness of their shoulder, and the scent of their Target perfume. **When (continued):** I want to run through time, see the moment I first walked through into Club Room A, and be full with the many days of happiness stretched before me. There is a moment when we close our eyes before the game in order to reveal our roles and a hush falls, and we know that the next ten minutes will bring so much laughter and clamoring and conniving. I want to go back and know that I will have tens of tens of ten minutes.

Types of Players: S. spends hours mapping out variables. N. turns each Avalon game into a dance stage. K. can smooth talk you until you are convinced that he is the Black Jack even if you see the Red Ace card in his hands. For you, Avalon was a vessel. Less of a game and more of a communion. It showed you how to see the people of Club Room A and be seen yourself.

Reader, you still don't know how to play Avalon, but you have learned the lesson anyway.

Come join. One more round of Avalon. Ten more minutes. The days are passing quickly but this moment is so lovely.

translation

/tranz-LAY-shuhn/ noun

1. “the art of failure,” -John Ciardi

2. The vietnamese words *thuong* and *yeu* are often translated to “love.” But the reader would never know that where *thuong* is generous, *yeu* is selfish and unbending. *Yeu* owns the object of its affection with as much ferocity as *thuong* sits with its arms open in unadulterated devotion. No matter how fluent the translator, this world within a word can never be elegantly packaged into three english letters. *Yeu* is not *thuong* is not love.

Origin: Before these words akin to love passed through my lips, they passed through my mothers’, and my grandmothers’ before that. When she was sixteen, in a world thirty years and five thousand miles and another language apart from mine, she blackened her teeth dark as dirt. She could not wrap her mouth around the words in my language that would let me see why, so this was her crude translation: it was how things were done.

I could not understand these things any more than my grandmother could understand why I left for the academy. To her, I was transplanting myself into a place whose name she could not pronounce. My elementary Vietnamese was hopeless against the thrill of meeting people who knew things I didn’t know existed. She gave me a letter when I left, and when I typed it into google translate, it read “I hope you grow into a beautiful apple-pear flower”

My grandmother, my mother told me, went down on her knees when pirates threatened to steal her secondborn son on her flight across the South China Sea. She hid her wedding jewelry in a sack of potatoes. When the government named her husband a fugitive, she carved a life in the rainforest for her children.

Now, all her hurricane history is condensed into the skinned apple-pear she would press to my palm every Sunday. My grandmother and I spoke the language of cut-up fruit. Was it enough?

Synonyms: Until my roommate K. walked into the kitchen with a jar of yuzu honey tea, I did not know how to translate between our parallel worlds; she had spent her days weaving between the Swiss

Alps on a pair of skis, and I had confined mine to ten square Kansan miles. We spent the first week of school tiptoeing around niceties before we finally found ourselves alone in the kitchen. I could not help glancing over my physics textbook to peer at the golden liquid pouring from her kettle. K. met my gaze and pointed to an empty mug in silent question. The next day, she showed up at my door with a steaming cup of tea, and the next, and the next, until we found ourselves lying side by side on my carpet shaking with laughter every night after curfew.

My every word is a translation. It is a futile attempt to wrangle the dirty hopes inside myself and stuff them into something as brittle as English. To speak is to toss an imperfect translation into the void and hope someone sees through the muck and into your soul.

3. Translation is work. It is the price you pay for companionship. To love and be loved is to forever be misunderstood, to be sentenced to eternally striving to bridge the gap between worlds. My grandmother was worth the work. So was K. The work of translation- the fact that you are willing to do the work, to gently peel the layers back, a never-ending mystery, a gift that you get to unwrap over and over again- isn't work. Not to me.

4. Sometimes translation seems impossible to conquer, but sometimes all it takes is a yuzu honey tea cup and a plate of apple-pears

Ava Truong is from Kansas, a student at Phillips Exeter Academy and the recipient of a National Silver Medal in Prose from the National Scholastic Art Awards and the Lewis Sibley Poetry Prize. Influenced by the emotional depth of Celeste Ng and the sweeping intimacy of Khaled Hosseini, she is drawn to the magic in mundane stories. Outside of writing, she makes short films with friends and listens to *Hamilton* on repeat.

Race Harish

Streetlight Elegies

sestina for five long years

He's waiting for me in the rain, and I want to run.
The lights that line the street are hazy and blue.
It's irresponsible, but it's also summer,
and the night is sitting like acetone in my teeth.
There's a humming in my skin that wants to sing,
but I've sung these songs before. It would be a waste

of breath. Older, wiser, stingy with songs, I can't waste
notes I no longer have. Every riff and run
pickles in the pit of my throat. I only sing
the tunes of a lone bird on a telephone wire: the blues.
Harmonies crawl up my esophagus, hiding between my teeth.
They stir from my stomach with the promise of summer.

I want him most in the swelter of summer,
when there's just enough time and love to waste.
Hot and sticky, desire dances in my teeth.
My eyeliner sweats, and my mascara starts to run,
and the bruises on my thighs burn a sweet blue.
I dig my thumbs into them until they sing.

He's standing in the street, in the rain. He's going to sing
and it will be awful. Two years ago we sang the summer
as a duet, and that was awful, too. I left him blue
and broken on the pavement. Like roadkill, like waste.
I know how to make it better. All that's left to do is run
into his arms and give him a kiss with fireworks and teeth.

This thing we call love will grow teeth
before it grows cherry blossoms. The streetlights sing
elegies for what could've been, while we run
towards and away, back and forth, from the summer.
Five years spent spinning, and each one a waste.
I'm leaving. I'm heading for some wild blue

yonder—but the heart of the world is open and blue.
In the center of it, we're shivers and chattering teeth.

I take a step closer. He draws me in by the waist.
I open my mouth on reflex while the cicadas sing.

I'm bare and naked in the rain, my skin kissed by summer.
He tips my chin up and leans in. There's nowhere I can run.

The bluebirds take up my cries and begin to sing.
They warble, soaring above the wasteland of summer.
The lights line the street like rows of flickering teeth; thus begins the love run.

Race Harish is a seventeen year old writer and poet from Central Jersey. Their work has previously been published in *3Elements Literary Review*, *Blue Marble Review*, *Girls Right the World Magazine*, *The Cloudscent Journal*, and *The Writers' Circle Journal*, among others.



Forever Entwined
Kim Carey

Miles McCormick

Wednesday, 12:06 PM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We all do not die in any
consumable finale—

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

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

When the Moon Crashes Through Our Ceiling

I am at your doorstep in the morning, awkwardly waiting for my forgotten glasses. When we both coincidentally move to St. Louis and talk in the frozen foods aisle—oh, how we loathe the arc. When we meet again at Marty's going away, and when Josh holds that same party for us, together, three years after. When we have a four-year-old, then eight-year-old, then twenty-seven year-old, whom we only see during Christmas and business conventions, for we have admittedly formed our own pesky conventions too. When we play pickleball and dance the samba in the kitchen. When we have a four-year-old grandchild, then a seventeen-year-old grandchild whom we still view as four. When our bones protrude and get in the way of hugs, and our gray hair is not so worrisome. When we are together, and when we are not. Because by then we are bent towards each other—oh, how we adore the arc.

Miles McCormick is a rising senior attending Burlingame High School. He has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. For fun, Miles listens to everything from Marvin Gaye to The Smashing Pumpkins. He also likes to play disc golf in Golden Gate Park.

Tristan McCalister

Puddling Butterflies (As seen by the Harvestman)

I eyed them from sunless corner, perched
upon weightless pegs,
as I glimpsed dwarf yellows waltzing in mourning sun.

I crept beneath lathi-winged ravager,
beneath their meager, pearl-boned silhouettes, devouring
the scarlet grime
that had been bled from my own.

I embraced cobalt gem—my spotless boarder, laughing
upon shapeless edge,
ignorant cabbage bellows, sowed
with hate's warring son.

I wept, sundered by grudgingly kinged scavenger,
sundered by eager, whirl-winded epithets, cowering
from supposed starlet's shine, befittingly
withdrawing to something called home.

I drift on, now employed by cobalt wing, no
longer weighed by iron-fisted tongue.
Now clenched, where none hear freedom sing,
as crimson puddles gleam and
butterflies puddle on.

Tristan McCalister is a senior at York high school in Yorktown, Virginia. He first found a passion for writing in his Sophomore year of high school. In his free time he likes painting, photography, and Muay Thai.

Lily Stone-Bourgeois

Things I can control

1. Thoughts

We wander into our minds like bears wander into caves. We hibernate against fear and loneliness and rejection. We feed thoughts like fire; we beat stories like we beat drums. It's an illusion of controlled chaos within chamber walls, somehow fending off reality.

Writing is an aggressive imposition of yourself onto the reader. The invasion resounds in both your mind and theirs. Even if it's kept for private pages, it's a shock to your body—a conquest into your own mind, and before you know it, the page becomes a crucifix. On the other hand, my thoughts are mine only.

Like tendrils of smoke, they titillate the rim of my mind but eventually fold into thin air: the foam rises and then falls, and the fire crackles underneath to be coaxed and lullabied by undulating winds. My thoughts come and go. I must be swift to engrave them on paper, but often, there's no urgency. I let my thoughts wander within chamber walls.

2. Speech

When she snapped at someone, no one took her side. Though she didn't mind that the rest of our volleyball team timidly looked away, she expected more from her best friend. Later, hurt, she described her feelings in a few curt words and sank into silence, waiting for my response. It's common practice to reciprocate words after someone shares something—after they're brave and vulnerable. But instead of words, an army of ants comes pouring out of my mouth. Every pore on my skin is infested, crawling with insects, teased, pierced, and seized. In vain, my vision succumbs to the physical torture, and the only sentence left is in my trembling fingers. With this overpowering physical reality, my mind is erased.

"The ability to think for one's self depends upon one's mastery of the language." Joan Didion.
She sighs and walks away.

Hours later, at home, I wrote her a paragraph, which had naturally materialized as I engaged in the inert activity of sitting on the bus home. Her words had been the only thing on my mind, my response simmering but unable to coagulate into an articulate sentence. My response lay nascent until the written paragraph—primmed, trimmed, and perfected.

My fingers on the keyboard, the letters read like music. I'm the maestro, weaving words till they ring true, harmonizing with commas and periods, and letting the reverberations transcend the reader.

I'm the maestro of my mind and yours. I've mastered, though I'm not a masterful writer, language: I can write to find myself. The issue is that writing isn't enough. Writing is the aftermath, a conduit for the dissemination of my voice. If I can't speak first, then my words ring from a hollow body.

"She defended you in front of her dad, but you couldn't do the same?" "I know."

"She cried and left the house storming and you just stood there and said nothing?" No. I told her all my favorite things about her. I inundated her with fragmented memories, poured my regret out, complemented her character and strength and green eyes, and I even signed it with Love, Lily.

My pen in hand, I'm not writing; I'm setting a soul free and letting it beat its rhythm into pages.

White paper, however easily rippable and fragile, beckons with its utter purity. Unsoiled, undiscovered, and absolved from any human sin of judgment. Perhaps greedy; prideful, yes; undeniably lustful; envy, sure; gluttony, blatant; wrath, sometimes; sloth, depends. But never damming or entitled.

Tell him, tell her, tell them, answer, speak up, fight, fight, express, love, care, fight, protect. Show, don't tell, but never write, just tell. I can't tell; I can only write. I can control the direction of my pen, the size of the paper, and the eraser's drawl; I can't control the paralysis, the threads of nausea, and the shaking inside.

3. Beds

A king-size bed mattress weighs anywhere between fifty-eight and eighty-two kilos. The frame, depending on the style, is probably three times that. After all, it's designed to hold four hundred and fifty kilos. After all, it's designed to hold more than one person. The average French woman weighs sixty-two-point-seven kilos, and the average American man is ninety-point-seven kilos. Together, they weigh one-hundred-and-fifty-three-point-four kilos. Together, they weigh marriage and the glowing eyes of naive children.

My bed is weighed down: three throw pillows, two normal pillows, a duvet, a blanket, and plush animals (minus those that end up on the floor every night). (All of them). I could switch my pillows out, I could narrow my collection of trinkets, and I could size up or down my double mattress. I could have not moved my bed from perpendicular to parallel to my windows, but I wanted to.

Take the stairs down one floor from my bed and there is the King. Perhaps I can blame my French roots, but its monarchical gall makes me want to amputate its buttons, rip its threads out, and let it bleed feathers to death. There it stands, in impudence and insolence, domineering over the peasantry—the single bed tucked in the corner of the room. It selfishly hoards the floorboard space yet

derides us by standing half-empty. The single bed is burdened with holding ninety-point-seven kilos while the King cushions sixty-two-point-seven kilos. The single bed was for a child, and the King was for a marriage.

Ha, it taunts. Your deprivation is not worth my attention.

I can control my bed's position, but I'm not close to 300 kilos; I'm not enough to move those beds together. I can control my position in bed, but I'm not close to 153.4 kilos; I'm not enough to move those two people together.

4. Lives

Okay, I give up; no one can control someone's life.

P.S. Lil bro, that one was for you. (I wish I could stop you from leaving the sink counter soaking wet after you wash your face.)

I wish I could have prevented your cry and shielded your eyes that night as yelling ran rampant through our house walls.

5. Stories

The last thing I can control is endings. My thoughts can be chiseled down to a conclusion and sequestered into an aesthetic block paragraph, for I control the ending. This illusory power gives unrestrained access to mold fiction into truth so potent that one loses the ability to differentiate truth from conviction: I've tread the line of emotional truth (story truth) so desperately that I've convinced myself of its utter authenticity. Like a gospel, the stories I write entrance me into reverence for this illustrative, fantastical manifestation of the truth—of my life as I've fed it to the bears.

So, the ending. It's perhaps absolutely irrevocably out of my control. I have no semblance of understanding as to where my story takes me. I've lied about everything and exhibited my body in raw nakedness, so I lay inchoate; I'm at the absolute mercy of my thoughts. Only once I've finished thinking that I can rip my pen from the paper, and only once I've ripped my pen from the paper, can I finish thinking, step back, and see my eyes, face, body, and soul in the gentle lines of language.

Lily Stone-Bourgeois is a French-American student who's lived abroad her whole life in Switzerland, England, and Japan. She's deeply passionate about journalism and politics, notably topics on ethics, religion, and immigration. In the fall of 2025, she will be pursuing economics and political science at the University of California, Los Angeles.



The Road to Fire
Kim Carey

Artist's Statement: "Threads of Fate"

Kim Carey

In my work, I reimagine ancient Greek myths through the lens of nature and human emotion. As a child, I was drawn to the timelessness of these stories intimacy and messages. Behind every god and stories lies a deeply human feeling: happiness, sorrow, awe, and anger. These drawings are rooted in these emotional core and shaped by the natural elements that surround us.

Through these drawings, I used myth as a language to express how intertwined we are with the world around us. Each piece is an invitation to feel deeply and to recognize echoes of these ancient messages in our modern lives.

I truly hope that these drawings would not only retell the myths but to rediscover them.