

THE PAPER CRANE JOURNAL



# frenzy

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# FROM THE EDITORS

Dearest Readers,

Thank you so much for your patience and for tuning into the final issue in Volume II of the Paper Crane. It's difficult to believe that it's been eight issues and nearly two anthologies since this little publication first took flight---and it's certainly been a long journey.

The first story in this issue is entitled *That Strange Feeling* and authored by the talented Victoria Castillo. Of the many pieces we have read over the past months in preparation for this release, this piece, like every single piece in this issue, particularly characterize our mission---the visceral, unnameable feeling that accompanies the very act of being human.

This issue is dedicated to the young writers who dive in headfirst, the ones who give all they have and more, the ones who live and love with every atom they are made of.

Thanks in abundance,

The Editors

Paris LeClaire

Thanisha Chowdhury

Jacqueline Xiong

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uncanny



# THAT STRANGE FEELING

Sometimes I will have these moments when I forget all the constructs we have built as humans, whether that is language, technology, or social customs, when I realize that everything we've invented—the lives we are living—come as a consequence of trying to distract ourselves from the fact that we are strange beings, standing on a strange sphere in the middle of the blackness. We are an enigma, a mystery, something to not be trusted.

When you live in the mundane world, it is easy for everything to become mundane. It is quite easy to lose yourself into becoming a mundane person, drained of intrigue and mystique. As plain as a brick in a wall, as insipid as a mound of dirt in the ground. Many people have lost themselves by believing this is what they are, thus they become it. They believe they are not magical, they believe they are too scared of achieving their greatest height, so their potential atrophies and they become unremarkable, common. It is also true that many people, unfortunately, are born common. They have no spark. No energy to them, no quality that makes goosebumps crawl up your arms when you meet them.

But some places and some people, *some* things still have that spark to them that reminds us of that strange chaos we try to desperately escape from, and when we look at them, it is like we are staring at extraterrestrials. We see the universe in their eyes. We feel an indescribable form of electricity at their touch. They are wild, and ancient, and enchanted, no matter how hard they try to distract us with their modern clothes and vernacular speech and pretend-simplicity. The closest word for this feeling is *eerie*. If you are swimming in a lake

with someone like this, you can see it clearly. They may appear normal at first, but when you sink your head into the water, come back to the surface, open your eyes and stare into theirs, they do not seem human. But rather, they seem ghostly.

And when they leave, the feeling they give you disappears with the force of mundane life. Like a slap to the jaw.

I wish that I could experience this feeling more, to fully immerse myself in it until that's all I know. But I don't live in a strange place or regularly interact with strange people, and I lean towards the mundane. After the *feeling* fades, I return to my learned behaviors, and it is almost like I have a mask glued onto my skin that shouldn't belong to me. A mask of rules and blandness and routine, one that everyone wears in order to deal with this chaotic, confusing world. I try to rip the mask off my face, but it only comes off when the feeling hits me. I cannot control when it happens—it is always unexpected.

But I experienced a tiny sliver of the feeling today on my way to school. As I walked through the sequoia trees, not only did I feel the strangeness—I felt fear. I couldn't explain it, but I suddenly became on edge in a way I never am. It was the distinct feeling of being watched. I was expecting to turn around and see an ominous presence standing before me. Dark clouds unfurling in the sky like stains of black paint on a canvas. Or perhaps a tall figure with murky features, unknown and indescribable and certainly not human.

But I didn't turn—because when the feeling consumes me, I become so fascinated by it, yet so repulsed by its strangeness that my only instinct is to *run*. A part of me wanted to stay, but it was so suppressed by the primal urge to escape the situation as quickly as I could. It happens every single time, and I always regret it.

Maybe the *feeling* doesn't exist. Maybe it's an obsession with something that isn't there, a desperate excuse to find a form of meaning in life. Or maybe it's a bad thing to experience it, an omen. *Something bad will happen. A sign that a malady will flock upon you, like a crow coming to perch itself on your shoulder. And it is only a matter of time before the*

*clock stops ticking and you fall down.*

The thing is, I cannot recognize if the feeling is dangerous or not. And that is why it terrifies me.

*Victoria Castillo*

# WALTZES UNDER THE TANGERINE TREE

Diya Anantharaman

Many things can be born out of the glint in someone's eye. In Mona's case, the conception in question was fiction, in the form of one-liners.

"Didya know my parents own this place? They bought it last summer after they sold the property in Aspen."

*You mean Aurora*, I wanted to say, but quietly nodded instead with soft, tart tangerine pulp dissolving in my mouth. I'd heard this particular work of fiction before, although her latest version's details seemed to stray from its predecessor. We stood eating in her backyard, which was littered with tangerine peels and dog excrement.

"Someone's gonna have to clean all this up later," Mona said flippantly, a loose tangerine fiber hanging from her cracked lips. "Not me."

I didn't say anything. I didn't have to. Mona was always rushing to fill the holes that silence would poke in our conversations as if she was afraid they'd reveal something. Deflate her guise, perhaps. She had amassed quite the impressive library of falsities, spanning from weeknight benders she boldly participated in, to grandiose examples of her success and supposedly effortless intellectual prowess. I think she lies to feel worthy of something. I don't know what it is, but I nod along. She gestures at big things with her arms, swaying with pride. I don't know what she wants from me, but I nod along. We perform this choreography often. When she leads, I follow. She likes to put me in my place.



She took me up to her bedroom. I sat on the edge of her bed. Right across from me, a tangerine-colored glass vase was perched on a dusty maple side table, a derelict lighthouse with no beam. The water inside looked like it had been stagnant for weeks. Little clouds of a soft growth were clustered at its surface—cumulonimbus and stratus, gray and hazy green. Next to the vase was a mostly empty packet of flower food with a few pearly granules scattered at its torn opening. By the looks of it, the bulk of the granules had long dissolved in the vase, and their milky remnants made the water look even filthier. Long, brown stems stooped wearily out of the vase's peach mouth, with withered and balding yellow roses at their tips. Slouching buds, too tired to bloom. Dried and gone before their prime.

I had been getting so goddamn bored of her. Every time we'd talk, she'd initiate our choreography. Her eyes would dart around the room as an invitation for me to nod. Then, when she'd look at me for approval, I'd choose to look at something else instead. Before I could find an object to pretend to be interested in this time, she tossed me a pack of wintergreen gum. It landed on my thigh with a soft *smack*. I lifted two pieces out of the stuffed paper container, carefully unwrapped them, and popped them in my mouth. My nose burned a little from the intensity of the flavor as my teeth sunk into the soft strips.

"Thanks," I muttered, gazing out the nearest open window overlooking the yard.

"Mhm."

Silence. It ended as soon as it began. A pebble from Mona, lodged in the perforation of quietness.

"Did I tell you about the internship I got? It's for this up-and-coming fashion company. They're like, a pretty big deal."

My eyes widened theatrically. This was like a game—discerning whether Mona was lying or not. Either way, I liked to indulge her. I would wittingly waltz with Mona until I moved out to the East Coast in

September. We would both have our fingers crossed behind our backs until then. “That’s incredible! What’s the company called?”

“Oh, right—they’re based in Prague. I don’t know how to pronounce the company name, sorry. Something beginning with an ‘s-r’. They like me enough to let me work remotely, though. Anyway, they said they were beyond impressed at my competence.” Mona flashed a toothy grin, her lips nearly splitting from dryness. “Plus, I was hungover when the interview thing happened. From last night’s Jack Rose. I got so drunk off of all the grenadine in that thing.”

“Grenadine doesn’t contain alcohol, Mo.”

“Well, then it must have been something else in there. Either way, I was hammered.”

I nodded innocently, feigning belief and reverence for her adventurous spirit--the one that miraculously also permitted her to be such a *high achiever*. I bet Mona was secretly a lightweight. I smiled smugly to myself at the thought of her stumbling over herself at a cantina, eyes darting and bile rising.

She ran the raggedy remnants of her fingernails over the edge of the side table, picking up a film of white dust and knocking a dry yellow petal to the ground. My buzzing heart swelled like a leech filling with blood. The second I budged from the guise of naiveté would be the second the truth of my awareness would ooze out, and I had no idea how she would react to this. Mona was currently the only friend I had in Silverton, so I couldn’t afford to flirt with the risk of losing her convenient, reliable company. Our routine waltzes would have to be enough to keep me quiet for the rest of the unrelenting summer. She looked over in my direction as I quickly straightened out my expression and pretended to stare at her pathetic little flower vase.

“What?”, she prodded, focusing her shifty eyes on my face. I could hear the tangerine tree in her yard losing its balance in the parched Colorado gales.

“Nothing.” I said it quickly, as if it were one syllable. *Nuh*. I pressed the gum down with my tongue, casting rubbery molds of the back of my teeth. The cooling wintergreen had faded away, but I sought comfort in the feeling of the flavorless glop in my mouth. A polite excuse to talk less. Mona’s job was to lead and my job was to follow. Every time she speaks, she asks me if she can have this dance and I nod like I’m doing her a favor. I like to think I am.

# MATRIMONY

Brianna DeLima Ifland

CW: body horror, grotesque imagery

In the womb, all the angels and saints  
carved a commandment  
on the left side of the babe's chest:

*Give her a heart bigger than she can handle—  
She is built to love.*

This baby will live not on bread and bread alone  
but love will trickle down her throat like water,  
fill her stomach like home-cooked meals.  
She will hunger for it,  
dreaming of his kiss while she starves.  
She will spend her life starving.

Her first word will be "please."  
Her mother tongue will form,  
And it will weld her lips closed.  
Teeth a pearl gate that poke into the roof and gums,  
Opening only for his tongue  
And her quiet prayers that escape in the night.

*"Hold me, kiss me, love me  
just one second more"*

It is a sweet song played on a shrill organ.  
A psalm that begs for her to be seen  
And taken as communion.

*Please, please, please.*

The babe will learn to read  
through happily ever afters,  
then Keats and Dickinson.

She'll mimic the good women in the parables,  
Who died on their own crosses,  
Bloody and beaten,  
told only that sweet wine  
Could keep their thirst at bay.

And still when she attends Sunday School,  
Her favorite sacrament  
will be matrimony.

She will fast in her lover's name,  
Ribs pushing her skin, aching to escape.  
Her too-big heart will crack at its cavity,  
Pump blood into wild eyes,  
And skin will rip to show meat that aches to be seen and held,  
Make way for bones whose marrow needs tongue,  
Pour out a red sea of sweet wine  
That cannot be parted,  
That must be sipped in a bishop's chalice,  
Stain pearly gates with cherry rust,  
And the animal in her will cry  
Like the Archangel's trumpets.

In the morning, she will confess these sins  
and hope God will repay her by  
making her a good wife.

# WHEN WE REACH THE HORIZON OF OUR DREAMS, WE'LL STOP

Anshi Purohit

“Some days, I feel like driving away and never coming back.”

“Walk me through it, every detail.” We played this game, often when we were drunk and it was late, and you’d finished ruining a good game of checkers. You flung the board upside down, pieces scattered until some unfortunate stepped on them and they shattered. Funny, that; because both of us vowed never to drink, you because your parents told you so—me because I learned about the withdrawal symptoms in seventh grade health.

We used to sit down, me letting you pat my knee and rub my back, my head resting in the shallow dip of your neck. Everything fit, like how we played when I was younger and you a little less refined.

So, I told you to walk me through it, and even on the extra tipsy and god-awful days, it never bothered you to indulge me. *Shit fucks up lives*, you delighted in telling the world. “Everyone knows they have the stuff, but maybe if everyone would share shit we could turn it into compost or sumn’.”

You sound like a donkey raised in captivity in Tennessee when you’re choking on wanderlust, and that night you could not stop laughing like a motor off its guardrails. People say worse about you. I always think of your perspective in a more granulated light: that is, I won’t spew non-

-sense, but your world is the same Earth, wobbling before it breaks free of the hinges tethering the planet to space. Before the globe becomes a toy ball whisked around by ignorant inhabitants, I will practice remaining silent.

(When you read this, I'm sure you will have one of those delirious laughing bouts where you become dead serious all of a sudden and contemplate the meaning of life.)

*Walk me through it.* I'm sure you don't need flashback snapshots, because that is what our lives have morphed into, steadily until it does not matter whether we remember who said what the first time trauma introduced themselves.

Maybe, my palm curled around the scroll of my cello the way he grasped the back of your neck. The bruising up your arms is the same as the stitching through my torn veins, and the months spent in whitewashed hospital halls. A doctor asked me what my plans for the future were, don't you remember? Once, I wanted to be one of them. Either way, the plush of the couches as we collapsed near one another after another fight served to spotlight one failsafe, our trigger: I am on my midlife crisis, and you are on your end-of-life crisis, so today when you brush past me in your high-heel wearing, corset bedecked, heavy eyeliner glory, I am nonetheless floored by your words.

"Let's drive." We're in the living room, and when I blink we are standing on the driveway. "We have to do this before we die."

"I had plans," you reply, and I engage in a silent debate over whether you're referring to the drive, or the death.

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The car, your Jeep Wrangler that has seen better days, smells like that car softener—leather has a weird smell, right—so I spray the tearing upholstery with perfume and pray you don't notice. I set the car into gear and you slip inside, vibrating with electric energy, trembling as both

of us clasp one another's knees, guided by prospect and fueled by the perseverance mustered as we whisper our plans through flimsy walls.

First, I would leave everything, and before we left, I would howl and cry and say everything, because nobody will recreate our smile lines tomorrow. I begin pulling out of the drive but pause midway, my manicured hand rolling down the car windows. A lock of your gray-black hair escapes its haphazard bun, your veiny hands clutching the passenger armrest as you vent to the world, "Thank you for all your rainstorms." You rage, and I'm almost afraid someone will emerge from the suburban, red-bricked family home we tried spray painting black before they torched a sea of anguish to part the waters.

They care about plans, but you and I—I tell you this—are going to become fossils carved into amber. We will dare and despair on our way, so I rage alongside you until the men wearing pajamas, unshaven and bare chested, hear our obscenities and odes to the shittiest part of the world I spur the engine roaring into life, an orchestral medley a ballad through my head as I speed a little faster and you clip in your seatbelt. The quiet town bids us farewell while we leave it behind, the trails of salt serving as stand ins for road markers, stop signs on our cheeks to indent gravel discrepancies.

"How long will we go?" I ask you, and you run a hand through your hair. I have to take one hand off the spiraling wheel and place my heavy arm on your shoulder to keep you from turning back. You speak when I approach the telltale intersection. "Shall we make this fantasy, or should I take the first exit on the freeway?" I can tell which world entices you, but I loiter, waiting for your spark to illuminate the path of self discovery.

"When we reach the horizon, we'll stop. When I can touch and sun and swallow its pureness, I can catch my breath and hold it in the palm of my hands."

I smile as we penetrate the portal gateway, swaths of brilliant and beautiful color spilling onto the floor of this abandoned garage lot. "Ok-



-ay, mom. Let's go."

First, before we pass on, we must clear the gateway. We find ourselves submerged and preserved in a murky gelatin, and I cannot mouth *okay*, *we are going to be okay*, to the person sitting beside me, and a sharp piercing collides with my skin, terror blooming when the voice booms, mellow and uncharacteristic as it rings through my ears. A cloud of smog overwhelms my surroundings and does not settle. The world is a whirlpool binding my decisions.

An undecipherable memory of my teenaged frame breaks to the formless surface, its head bent like a scorned ghost. *Why are you here*, the voice booms, and the gateway creaks. I hear my mother's answer gathering traction, bubbling on her lips. *To escape*, she says, and I watch my teenage ghoul sulk around, screaming in piercing octaves at an older version of my mother (because as I grew, she reverse aged).

"To be free," I lisp, noting the subtle differences between our answers. Our car bites into the sludge, and we pass.

Fantasy world is a wheel on a schedule rolling into infinite dimensions. Or, so I have read. Worlds within worlds within worlds. At a certain point on our endless journey, I hope to turn toward my mother and see not the product of our festering mistakes but the conjoining of limbs and the exhilaration of pain and mood swings that have handheld our futures.

For now, I will remain her speculative, deliberate chauffeur, silent as she lays a finger and traces the invisible spinning wheel in her mind while we float in the vacuum of InterSpace. I do not choose when my mother grazes the rainbow colored wheel, but she is not thinking about decisions right now. Only the stars surrounding us have enough gravity to tug us to the same center.

"They're golden," we say in one synchronized, almost orchestrated, moment of peace. Yes. In their palm of our making, stars here are golden, and if I squint, my palms pressed to our windows similar to a

playful toddler or eager puppy, I can identify ripples of purple fan out amongst the black.

I never believed purples and black measured up to a long lasting bruise. Bruises look pale, and they take time to register before seeping into skin. “Are you ready to make our first pit stop?” I chide, patient with my words. She’s in love with sea otters and narwhals, and those rare pink dolphins that don’t exist anymore because they have nowhere to swim in brackish water.

The woman sitting beside me spins and smiles, water freshening an expired layer of makeup.

We are taken on the defining ride (ride defining) our lives.



# DAYDREAM

Angela Chen

"Daydream" is a mixed media portrait capturing a reflection of the human-psyche. The combination of different textures paired with the use of grey, vibrant red, and dark colors creates a sense of fog imposed on its audience. Essentially, "Daydream" illustrates a story—showing the randomness and vagueness that sometimes paralyzes the human mind.

# SKETCHBOOK FOR A NON-EXISTENT ART COLLEGE

Sarah Amari

CW: death, animal cruelty

## *1. Start With Familiar Objects*

Thin aluminum walls dripping into a frosty inner plate, rainwater mixing with the expectant, biting fizz of Coca-cola. The mouth is small and the edges are few and well-defined, making it a simple reference for beginners. I'm good at drawing soda cans; I could draw 10 on a table, breakfast for 2. My aunt once sketched a figure of a boy with green hair and grayish skin, all spikes and stretches, and she told me that he'd gotten that way by drinking too much coke. I suppose this was an early lesson in addiction. In my own experience, the sleepless refuge in caffeine and carbonated sugar gulped at a kitchen table with the blotchy curtains open has not yet made its indent on the skin and thickly gelled hair of the senior who taught me how to load a question and innovate on an exam—3rd of every multiple-choice question. You never drink them in the dark; you take a shower and watch the early show airings, and you drink the first three on your balcony after you've gotten dressed for school, and the other 2 on the bus. There's also a healthy, balanced breakfast, but who has time to draw that? I only know how to draw the food pyramid, with its prismatic stacks of assorted nutrients and recommended meal portions for each, carefully stocked in the back refrigerator of my muscle memory during the days when I crave the clean nourishment of a smoothie or a cup of juice; my hands search the back of the pantry for dregs of the ashwagandha, pea protein, and frozen strawberries my mother bought in a similar burst of self-care. But I can't draw those, and so the familiarity ceases—like a

wintertime friendship—at polite camaraderie.

We are told, as a rule, that art shapes society. We have a responsibility to regulate what we express, what we promote. We cannot simply draw what we see; we are not simply healing ourselves, we are influencing others as well. That, though, is for the wise and the trained. For now, our teacher says, just draw what you know.

## *2. Use Art To Change Your Perspective*

*A void; that is, an emptiness; that is, a black hole.*

My grandmother lost a friend to cancer this week. The things said: she was always on time. She was strong and energetic, running a mile every day. The height difference between her 5'3 frame and the basketball-fitted frame of her husband. She dyed her hair a smooth, natural black until the chemo took it away, and only when it grew back did she let it go white. She came to every event she was invited to, and she politely RSVP'd to every wedding and baby shower instead of just showing up. She'd neatly prepared everything for her going, as everyone around her was hoping that it was far away. When we call her sister, she asks why we're crying. "She was in pain. She was sick. It runs in the family. We're having the funeral next week and she's not hurting anymore. She's better. That's nothing to cry about." Death is a reality, like snapping grass in a shallow wetland, and there is very little one can do but have a beautiful spring funeral and rejoice in the auspicious last moments of a loved one, moments that make it seem like a gateway to something greater has indeed opened. The divine serendipity of calling your friends, praying, showering, and brewing a pot of tamarind for your kids just before going, as if you knew. Born of this is a portrait of a boy sitting quietly in night school, repeating the lessons he's learned that night. He's not alone; his friends have fallen asleep. Sleepiness can be confused for loneliness in the dim lighting. He wrote a paper last year on the phobia of sleep—the hysterical fear of a lifeblood. He wishes he could find a concrete example of exactly what happens when one goes to sleep. Want of concrete examples is the gateway to nihilism, he thinks. One cannot hope to explain half of all things present in the universe, and soon you can do no better than doubt it all. He pictures their brains glowing fluorescent in their heads, and he can smell the

brand-new jacket that his friend's mother bought him as a graduation gift. It's inconceivable to study anymore tonight. He slides over to a friend's shoulder; the way his hand meets its opaque curve almost shocks him out of his sleep-induced haze, leading him into a place of lighter drowsiness, a plane where all things are sweet and alright. They got coconut candy for free earlier from an uncle who claimed they were the future of the country. They bought a container of Halwa—tahini, flour, and molasses mixed together—and ate it all with pieces of flatbread. The tests are too soon, too soon, but the future is not soon enough. The tunnel has no mouth, only he knows that it leads upwards, to a good place. Like an elevator with the lights off. He leans his head onto the warmth under his touch and enters the void.

*A void, that is, a white hole, that is, a divine gateway to a plane where all things are sweet and alright, and where the good is not gone.*

### *3. Art Can Be A Social Activity*

For character design, I ask people for pictures. I flatter them with a compliment and study them for 10 minutes each. I try to embody loud voices through excessive accessories, or good grades through a straight spine. I notice that those who I first sketched in bright purple vests and velvet blouses reliably persist in wearing bright colors each day, patterned socks and beaded bracelets. I wonder if it's a desire for attention or a natural inclination. I notice that the extroverted theatre kid who stands on the front desk every morning to give us a motivational quote tugs at his jacket strings the whole time, and it might be anxiety or an inability to stand still. I notice the way we flock to the Spanish teacher, offering up our complaints shrouded in grammatical questions, and I draw her as a glowing fairy mother, seated on a rock, holding up the chart of simple emotions: "Feliz", "Triste", "Anojada," "Cansado." We ask how to say, I got my heart broken. We ask how to say, I'm angry and apathetic at the same time. I monitor the local Tai-chi group's community posts and the nearest bake sales and flower displays. I read up on the ethics of business, the intersection of engineering and music, and the vitals that entwine human rights with environmental restoration. I don't know where my life is headed. But why should I? I am still getting to know you. I am still finalizing my sketch. I am still enjoying the mere presence of your beating heart. It is not yet time to decide where you'll go from here.

#### *4. Monitor Growth and Change Through Art*

I taught myself to wink in 6th grade. Every day, I stood facing the mirror in the lobby and winked my right eye. The right side of my face crumpled together and my left eye shut almost entirely to accommodate the unfamiliar movement. I did it for the entire school year, at first focusing on the physical act of it. I tried to make it more natural; I wiggled my shoulders a little and waved like the movie stars I'd seen. Over time, it became a gesture of self-affirmation, and I stopped thinking much about it. It became a habit of comfort and ease for me; it projected a confidence that might not have been there otherwise, allowed for a certain self-satisfaction and smugness that fit into who I was or wanted to be.

Now, the muscles around my right eye have loosened up. My right eyelid twitches when I'm nervous, and my eye shuts a little when I'm thinking hard. I wink in selfies because I don't like to smile in them; I wink at boys and only later stop to wonder if it sent the wrong message. I do it impulsively, one of a few impulses I'm allowed to keep. It's flinching at a boomerang—sliding into a safe zone without really even wanting to. But my grandma worries every time my right eye twitches, so I'm learning to wink my left.

#### *5. Art Should Serve A Purpose*

I took a 6-week art course last summer with a teacher who specialized in cultural art. My teacher had been featured in the New York times and on BBC; she'd done a gallery on the stories of Muslim immigrant women, and another on the social destruction brought about by the spread of fast food in small countries. One of her earliest projects had been a re-mapping of New York City, copied off of subway maps and labeled entirely in Urdu, down to the minutest details and address lines. She said of it: "Painting the subway map and translating minute details was therapeutic for an estranged person trying to identify with a new city, its avenues and landmarks." I don't know the particulars of mapmaking, but I want to learn it as a functional skill. I want to learn for a visiting friend, for whom I'll draw a detailed map of my home for the past few years, with labeled street names, close-up illustrations of favorite spots, and descriptions of the best community centers, plazas,

mosques. Out of this, I want to construct a bucket list, the kind my mom and her family made for me and my sister when we first came to America. There's plenty to show off; it's California, and I know a lot of cool places to hang out. There's the science centers, the ice skating rinks and the basketball games. There's the Sunset district, the ocean visible at every intersection; we can sit on a fountain edge at the top of a hill, talk and film Tiktoks. It's not like we wake up and do these things everyday, but I want it to be extra special. If we wanted to keep it low-key, there's the boba shops, the bookstores, and the Turkish and Asian markets.

There's no visiting friend, at least not for now. But if you come over, we can stay at home and go through our sketchbooks and outfits together. There'd be plenty to talk about; my interests have changed almost entirely, and you can tell me how your life's been different too. And the thought makes me wonder if I really need to make that map.

#### *6. Challenge Yourself To Express the Abstract*

Illustrate a dimension of time. The compromised personal space of two sharing an escalator step. The tiny bit of relief hidden in sadness after waving a last goodbye, like caramel peeking out of a dark-chocolate cube. A diagram of the divisions of the human mouth that illustrates how the formation of one's teeth influence the sound of the singing voice. Coals and emeralds like identical spheres spread on a tray; that is, the burning coal Moses put in his mouth as a baby, giving him the speech impediment he'd have for the rest of his life. But how am I supposed to clarify that?

I drew a canopy of roots on your birthday card, in charcoal, stretched beneath the sagging earth that carried the eight bubble letters of the words "I LOVE YOU". What I meant to say was: it's not just that I love you, it's that I have a deeply rooted, almost unshakeable belief that you deserve every bit of that love. Cut me some slack, though. I'm still learning how to say these things.

#### *7. You Can't Draw Everything; Self-Restraint For The Benefit of Others*

A long line of people stand, sandy and squinting, on the beach. There's



a commotion, and a man with a sharpened pipe chops off the tortoise's head. Everyone reels forward, throwing their cups into the sand nearby. The man grabs its body and ladles its gushing blood into the cups. A little boy runs along the line, collecting 5-dollar bills, and returns with the filled cups. Good luck. That was the belief. Tortoise's blood for good luck.

We don't get tortoises on the shores of Alexandria anymore. I've never seen one. And maybe that's for the best. We can just walk down the sunny, lonely beach, excitement chasing boredom like the sky swallowing the clouds, seeing nothing much, without hurting anyone, without harming anything. That is best.

# A GOD'S COFFEE

Andrei Li

God entered the café at quarter past six. He went straight to the counter and ordered an iced latte.

The waitress was a young woman with untidy hair. She had dark circles around her eyes, and her hands kept trembling. As she turned to the cash register, the cup fell over and coffee spilled onto his jacket.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, sir." She hurriedly reached for a wad of napkins.

"Don't worry about it." He glanced bemusedly at the stain under his breast pocket. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." She mopped up the spill and threw the soggy napkins away. "I'm fine."

She was lying. Most people did. He didn't blame them for it.

The waitress went to fetch him a new cup. When she went home, she'd find an envelope in her mailbox with her lost engagement ring inside. No sender name or address, nothing that might give away who had performed that little miracle.

He thanked the waitress, paid the tip, took his cup and sat down next to the window. He should have felt empathy toward her, and perhaps a sense of satisfaction at having done something kind. Anyone else certainly would have. But he couldn't detect a twinge of those emotions inside him. In all honesty, it felt more like he'd finished a chore on his to-do list.

He brushed that thought away. Looked out the window. Morning mist

curled around telephone poles and the feet of people. The sun was a blur of light sandwiched between shrivelling rain clouds and the soaring forms of buildings. A city, waking up from a night's slumber.

If only he could sleep. As a god it was one of the many things which were, paradoxically, impossible. Closing his eyes, feeling every muscle in his body relax, his mind sliding into silent tranquility until the next day. Humans were lucky to have this gift. At the very least, it would keep the police from wondering why someone was haunting the streets at two in the morning.

The doorbell rang. Someone walked up next to him. "C-can I sit here?"

"Go ahead."

It was a little boy with angry red freckles dotted all over his bloodless face. If he hadn't been the wiser he would have thought it was chicken pox. The boy's eyes, also streaked red, seemed drained from crying.

"Everything alright, buddy?"

The boy finally asked: "Do you believe in God?"

"As in capital-G God?"

"Yeah."

He thought for a moment. "Somewhat."

For all he knew, he could be the famous capital-G God. There weren't any other deities that he knew of. And it wasn't like being a deity was something easy to hide.

Or was it? He hadn't exactly searched for other divinities. Had he not existed, for the last dozen millennia and maybe even more, in the backstreets of human society? Everyone assumed that just because you're a god, you wanted statues and prayers and sacrifices and holidays dedicated in your name. Now, after all his time spent with

humans, even he was falling prey to that fallacy.

Now that he thought of it, maybe he himself had been created by capital-G God. Or capital-G Goddess, for that matter. Or something else.

"I believe God exists. He needs to." The boy swallowed. "It's my mom, you see. She's dying from—"

Cancer. He knew before the boy had finished the sentence.

"Did the doctors say so?" he asked.

"My dad—he said we can't afford the treatment—"

"I'm truly sorry." Then, an instant later, he added: "Do you think God will help?"

"I don't—I don't know!"

Before he could answer, the boy leaped up and sprinted out the door.

He shifted in his seat, sighing. Tomorrow, the boy and his dad would go to the hospital, expecting to prepare for a funeral. Instead they would find his mother alive and fully recovered. At first the doctors would be mystified. Then they'd attribute her recovery to this medicine, that therapy. An article documenting the case would be sent off to one of the notable medical journals. But the boy would know better. His prayers had been heard. God had saved his mother. For the first time in years, the boy would be truly happy.

He rolled his eyes. Happiness. It was something he had lost the ability to feel, a long time ago. Maybe, somewhere along the way, in returning to others their joy he'd given up his own.

Despite being a god, he still felt the flow of time as equally slowly as any human. Twelve thousand years was a long time to have existed, even if you dedicated yourself to your own interests. Added to his

continual, neverending work of blessing humanity, it was incredible he hadn't gone insane yet.

Focus on the work, he told himself.

He took a sip of coffee and almost spat it out. Too much milk. He waved his hand, and half of the bubbly white froth vanished.

The doorbell rang again. This time a homeless old woman, dressed in rags he guessed used to be some kind of sweater. The coffee shop was almost empty, yet she made a beeline straight to his table.

Perhaps there really was another god or goddess out there. He was pretty sure he hadn't summoned the woman over.

"Mind if I sit here?"

"Be my guest."

He wondered what she would ask for. Most people like her were defined by a mix of boredom and weariness. Some were resentful. Others were hopeful for the future. All of them wanted out.

"Do you want me to help you with anything?"

The old woman grinned. She had two ghastly rows of teeth.

"Well, you just gave me a seat. A coffee would be nice too."

"Anything else?"

"No. Thanks, though."

He sensed she wasn't lying. Something stirred deep within him. Curiosity? He had never seen a person like her be happy with their predicament before. And she, with her rat-nest hair and her gnarly, swollen hands, had more reason than many to ask for better.

The waitress came over and asked if the old woman wanted anything. A coffee, the old woman repeated. After the waitress left, the old woman rummaged her pockets—squares of cloth sewn to her clothes—for cash.

“I’ll pay,” he said.

“Thank you again,” the old woman said. “How are you?”

“Good.”

“Anything I can help you with?”

He almost laughed. An odd feeling surfaced inside him—surprise? Here was a homeless woman, a shoe scraping of the world, asking a literal god if she could be of assistance.

“Well, I do want help with something. Though I’m not sure what anyone could do about it.”

“And what would that be?”

“Retiring.”

Now she laughed. “Well, you already look old enough to retire.”

In a sense, she was right.

“It’s complicated, you see. My job’s difficult to get out of.”

“And what would that job be?”

“Being a god.”

She laughed again. “Oh, you got me there. But what god, though?”

There it was again, that question. “To be truthful, I’m not too sure. You could say I’m the embodiment of humanity’s wishes. People, if they believe enough in something, that something becomes real. In my case,

they want someone who can make their dreams come true.”

“A sort of genie, then?”

“I guess so.”

The waitress returned with the old woman’s coffee. She looked between the two of them like a girl with her elderly grandparents, as if something conventionally nonsensical had spouted out of their mouths. Which, of course, just had.

“And what do they ask of you?”

“Oh, mostly trifles. Relationship mending here, saving a family member there. Birthday wishes, good weather, happy vacation trips. Not that they’re actually all trifles, of course. Just that I get a lot of these. In terms of blessings they’re easy to grant. People just write them off. And then there are the harder requests.”

“What are those?”

“Fame. Power, money. Godhood.”

“Godhood?”

“You’d be surprised.”

Throughout the ages he’d seen off countless people who’d craved immortality. Ptolemy, Caligula, Qin Shi Huang: those were just the famous ones. He’d never understood why they’d wanted eternal life. To him, his immortality was a curse. Perhaps granted by humanity or some higher divinity, not understanding its true nature.

For him, mortality was the real gift. It assigned value to every bit of time a person had left on Earth. Immortality squandered that value: for all the time you wasted, there was still an eternity left to make up for it.

“So you want out?”

“Yes.”

“Have you tried making yourself a normal human?”

“I have. It doesn’t work.”

“I’d never think a god would have limits.”

“Wait.” He gazed hard at the old woman. “So you actually believe me.” Most people, when he told them he was a god, gave him wide-eyed stares. The rest laughed it off.

“Well, no offence, but meeting a god isn’t the most surprising thing that’s happened to me.” She took a sip of coffee. “Unexpected, definitely. But not entirely astounding.”

He nodded.

“Maybe you think I’m in a sorry state. For a long time I believed so as well. But then, I thought, I should be thankful. I’ve lived to see and do more things than many people do. I have a trove of good memories to take into my remaining years. I’m fortunate to have all this. My life could have been much worse, after all. So maybe it doesn’t matter how long your life is, or how many low points there are, or what other people need you to do. As long as you choose to be happy with what you have.”

"So you're happy with your life?"

"Yes."

Something had thawed inside him. For the first time in what had likely been forever, he felt a little of something new. Faith? In himself? Funny, since he was a god. But the emotion couldn’t be denied.

He stood up. From his pocket he pulled out his remaining change. Sixty dollars, more or less, his entire allowance for today. He handed it all to the old woman. Where he was going, he wouldn't be needing it.



# BIRTHMARKS

Alex Lalli

They forgot to tell me how purple you'd be  
as they peeled you out from under,  
my thighs a sickly shade of milk.  
Their gloves glared in  
the light of the styrofoam sky,  
starched and appraising.  
They should have kept you, not laid  
your beating body on mine.  
I sweated cold and scared like sixteen,  
even though my arms were thirty and warm  
enough to hold you, softly,  
despite the sight of your cries.  
I dreaded those. How much they'd be.  
You screamed with your whole skin,  
red and unstitching.  
It made me wonder if scars were genetic,  
like the bruises she birthed into my back,  
if they could be stretched back to life from labor,  
the pain of remembering.  
When I was sixteen and thought  
motherhood was something to earn, not inherit.  
I learned to swallow pain like a pill  
and numb the word *Mom* on my tongue.  
As if I could wash her down with water and  
scrub the marks she made into  
an accident. An oven burn.  
You bathed in my forearms, a bank of fire.  
I got selfish and tried to fix  
your screams into my palms.

The only part of me that is soft. Safe.  
I never hit, only took. Never. Not to you.  
Thumbing your sunburnt cheeks,  
I felt a tear slice down my hand.  
You cried, you stilled, but I stayed silent,  
uncaring as I watched your mouth  
morph into mine, a memory.

*Mom.*

The pain of her name  
clinging to my back.

# I DREAMT OF MOTHS

Laura Tian Wang

it wasn't the first time i dreamt of moths  
    craning my necks and drinking sunlight off cusped palms,  
licking up dust from leftover

cigarette holes. i once caught a glimpse  
    of eyelets, carefully plated in hymns, living lives lightly  
sparing the possibility of human touch

while you held me dearly and washed  
    our bruised elbows in the bathroom sink, brushing chintin splinters,  
vowels peeled off my flesh like dead skin, wishing for

a time when your mouth was just a mouth  
    for when we placed little candies on our tongues watching them  
dissolve into sticky, sweet syrup it jammed

between our joints and sought shelter between  
    the cracks and gutters of our skin exposing soft  
white underbelly. i dreamt of moths

where the touch of another human being suddenly  
    became all encompassing, and perennial as the seasons  
left us with the heart of insects

# JOY TAKES MELANCHOLY SHOPPING

Allison Liu

it wants the whole body—  
toenail to tonsil,  
earlobe and elbow.

*(please?)* absurd!

i tell it so.

it frowns a little, ears  
drooping like shy  
sprouts in spring rain.

*fine*, i say. *let's share*.

*you get the insides*,

*but i get the face*.

sniffing, it gazes up at  
me, the picture of woe.

*okay*, i sigh. *i suppose*

*you can have the eyes*.

# HAZE

Yuyuan Huang

let me tell you a secret—sometimes  
I wake up and realize I am still  
in a dream. the world is  
most quiet when the  
birds stand still like time, but  
every now and then the sky  
opens a little wider while  
moonlight drips and pools  
on the floor, and I will find  
a mosquito somewhere in my ribs  
trying to find a way home. while it  
knocks on my bones, hoping for an  
answer as the doors sigh  
and the beds creak with nighttime  
polyrhythms, something inside me  
stirs awake. I stare at the ceiling  
and ache until it caves, longing  
for the texture of weakness.  
sleeping, lying with my eyes  
open, they're all the same; I  
am always pretending.  
so instead, I wait. look, it's August  
already. look, the sky is cracking  
down the middle. look, my heart  
isn't aching anymore. is yours?

THE SCREAMING  
WON'T STOP





EVEN WHEN  
EVERYTHING  
ENDS



# APOCALYPSE IN THE SCHOOL COUNSELING OFFICE

Ella Bachrach

I am fifteen years old and the world is ending. I am fifteen years old and I can see smoke hanging heavy in the air. I can taste it on my tongue. They are getting closer and there is smoke everywhere and the world is ending.

I go see the school counselor. She lets me into her office and flips the unicorn sign hanging on the door handle so that it says “come back later.” She is short and plump, with long hair that drapes over her shoulders. They will come for her first.

“The world is ending,” I say.

She passes me a sheet of paper. It has different bubbles with questions above them. They ask, *How am I feeling?*; *Why am I feeling this way?*; *What are steps I can take to feel better?*; *Who are people I can talk to about how I'm feeling?* I take the purple pencil crayon she offers and I fill out the bubbles. I write, *I am feeling like the world is ending.* I write, *I am feeling this way because I can taste the smoke and I can hear them coming.* After that, I am stumped. I hand it back to her unfinished.

She tuts. She has a large mole on her cheek. I wonder if she has considered getting it looked at. It could be cancerous. I guess it doesn't matter anymore because the world is ending. She tells me I should try eating more bananas. She says bananas are the best fruit and are a great



way to start the day.

I don't know why she isn't paying attention. I open the window shades and point at the smoke.

She passes me a tissue box. "Crying is a sign that you're healing."

I say, "I am not crying. My eyes are watering because I have smoke in them because the world is ending." I take a tissue and ball it up between my fingers. I imagine it is my brain, wrinkled and misshapen. I flatten it back out. I wonder if anyone has ever flattened out a brain before. Maybe I'll put in my will that I want my brain to be unfolded. I guess there won't be doctors and brain scientists when I die because the world is ending.

She says, "There is no use looking for help if you aren't going to tell the truth."

I hear them arrive. They tear down the door to her office. One of them eats the unicorn sign. Two of them take her by the arms and drag her away. I wait for her to turn back to me. I need her to thank me for telling her that the world is ending. I need her to see that I was telling the truth. She doesn't turn. She just gets dragged away and torn apart and I plug my ears as one of them gags on her long hair.

# GUN CULTURE

K. Kannan  
CW: gun violence

*Hurry, quick, before the clock peels off its skin, before  
the moon falls off Artemis's cradle & you are thrown into a moonless  
night & there is no choice for you but to fall gracelessly &  
scrape your knees on the stars, reuniting with the child you are.*

You draw scars from white fires nestling in the  
periphery of your eyes, your blood clotted your sight estranged you are  
peeling thick layers off the clock though I told you  
to never do so.

Your hands grazing the grease, the oil, the blood of a man, dead  
your fingers white, a flayed fish drowning in a pond built for it to thrive  
the sky will tremble as it struggles to carry you, you have been told:  
your job is to make it easier for the sky by carrying your own weight as soon  
as you are old enough. You have been old enough since you were born,  
a stillbirth only brought from the womb to pull the trigger when it is time.

Oh, to love the sound of gunfire, but to hate the gun.  
You stare at your regrets long before they even pass  
you blink the white in your vision until they become black  
you stare at your swollen arteries injected with the school-bus,  
with fear, with being born without a gun, but being born as  
a gun yourself, your mind unhealed but the concrete ready to yield  
beneath your feet; give way to vertigo, give way to fear,  
give way to your paralyzed form still retching guilt-ridden memories  
pressed forget-me-nots burn under red welts and inflamed bullets  
you have been told to hate gunfire but love the gun but you have only  
ever been able to do the opposite.

# ORGANIC CHEMISTRY

Sohyoung Jeong

love is a balanced equation. its acacia flesh sinks into my teeth, and god it's beautiful. one and one is not 2, but an infinity of ephemeral war. i wish i could understand why the squirrel has to find the nut, why the ants are so damn faithful to their queen. a give, a take, equal in the balance nature strikes. have you thought about that recently?

i don't believe in capitalizing letters.

i don't believe in buying dryer sheets.

i don't believe in flip flops.

but i believe that my stretched arms deserve your embrace. you could give me the ocean, and i'd respond with land. call upon your silence and punch through the soft gum of the oak tree. but give and take, push and pull. this way the trees will stay swaying with tweeting swallows in the morning, and my soft skin will stay in yours.

# THE INCURABLE FEVER

Sisi Li

I save spiders that kill ants  
while static saturates dimly lit rooms  
someone insists heartbeats are louder underwater  
but to wait till the thrashing ebbs, you'll swallow fog

while static saturates dimly lit rooms  
bathroom mirrors make for lousy time machines  
don't wait till the thrashing ebbs, swallow fog  
in a child's playground that always sinks

my bathroom mirrors make for lousy time machines  
now thunder is just a sound  
in a child's playground that always sinks  
we float amidst carcasses of castles and crooked things

now that thunder is just a sound  
I save spiders to kill ants  
we float amidst carcasses and  
you insist heartbeats are louder underwater

# RECURSION

Nisha Shenoy

Yet once more, we plunge down the hill  
in a nose dive that rolls into somersault  
and somersault  
and somersault  
until the knoll flattens and  
gravity glues our backs to the forage.

We lay a minute, nestled in the blades,  
fragile like a flower is fragile,  
laced into the soil with a lark's head  
until plowed over by a tractor.

I was a dreamer, once; when your voice raised  
I'd think of fractals and blooming orchids,  
life outside the mason jar.  
Yet once more, we plunged down the hill.

# INSOMNIAC

Daria Krol

I do not sleep. I open my mouth  
and my tongue swells to three times  
its normal size and chokes me down  
like a sinus pill. Sores the throat when

it happens over and over again. The  
curtains stay drawn and quartered. Wish  
bones are drying on the corner of the  
kitchen sink but I do not think I will

break them any time soon. I walked  
down to the light in the road and put  
it in my mouth like a clam with a  
pearl and watched my feeble body

illuminate. It happened days ago and I  
stained the walls with handprints where  
the glow lingered. When the lights are  
off I count the remaining fingers in my

fists. I have been biting them off and  
planting them in the bathtub. Someone  
asked why it happened and I couldn't  
even say. I called the powers in the

heavens above and I said if you're  
going to take blood, take mine, for I  
am young and bountiful, and I can  
make up for it still, and I can get better

\*

still, and yet I did not expect it to hurt so  
dearly when I paid my debts. I have always  
been a special type of fool. I tucked thyme  
under the pillow but forgot to put some

under the mattress. When it comes back  
to me, and come back it always does, I  
do not put up a fight. When it comes back,  
I let poison stream from my teeth until

I blacken the earth I stand on. When it  
comes back, it cowers in my path and begs  
for my mercy. And then, without fail,  
it still happens. It always happens.

So I do not sleep. I gnaw on ink and I  
avoid mirror-like surfaces and I  
hold myself a little tighter and I  
will lose the battle every time.



*epilogue*



# POLAR NIGHT

Katherine Dyal

CW: reference to self-harm

I want to starve myself until I'm small enough to fit in the palm of your hand

and you can squeeze me under your fingers until I crumble apart like snow.

I want to stab myself until blood pours out of me like rivers of Arctic ice, and you can catch me in your arms when my vision goes black like a polar night.

I live in a permanent twilight, a wasteland frozen and desolate, and you keep sending smoke signals and rescue ships, But you could always join me here instead.

I simply adore a self-imposed exile, it's my weakness, and I know this prison better than the atlas of my own body.

I'm a connoisseur of darkness and a paramour of the winter.

I'm a survivalist living off of this sunless wilderness.

I stockpile knives and pills like the apocalypse is near, like my suicide is the Second Coming.

The end is closing fast, but only us at the edge of the world know it.

Stars are dropping from the heavens, darling, it's just a sign of the times.

The sun has gone out, and the moon is bleeding emerald into a darkened sky,

aurora borealis cascading into our lungs like a waterfall.

My iron shackles almost look like the wounded moon,

And the powder on my tongue almost looks like the dusting of snow on a mountain's peak.

The end has caught us in its claws, it's time to lay down in the snow and close our eyes.

You're still waiting on a savior, but I'm no longer hoping,

Because I've learned to love the dark and savor the despair.

I've made the polar night my home, and I've convinced myself that I don't miss the sunlight.

# SABAW

## RECIPE FOR THE SOUP YOUR MOTHER MADE ON SICK DAYS

Brianna DeLima Ifland

**CW:** racism, parental death

Stand on cold wooden floor, hands hovering over the stove. Feel the steam collect on your hands, listen to the song of the whistling kettle. Maybe match its pitch. Maybe harmonize. There's a bass buzz of a boiling pot in your cozy kitchen choir. Has the bone marrow bled into the broth? Can you see the garlic and onion swim?

Make a whirlpool with wooden spoons and the table salt will smell of the sea. Its waves will drag you in, grab you by the ankles. Don't swim against its tide—let it take you back home. It will drag you to long island days under the steaming Philippine sun, golden skin and sand and water for as long as the eye can see. The dish is made with more than boullion and vinegar and bok choy. The cow's marrow cannot compete with your mother's and her mother's before her. You can taste it. You can smell the long hours in a crowded kitchen on her shirt.

You see her—she is young but tired. Hardworking, but weary. Brown skin makes way for dusted ground pearls. Her hands are chapped from washing dishes, waiting tables, and taking orders. Clean the bathroom. Speak louder. Speak English. Mouths form new words to say the same thing: You Do Not Belong Here.

Remember late nights with your older brother. Run it through the filter that only cozy childhood memories have. Your little fists hit the sky as they shake at your elementary god. Ask when you're eating. Ask when mom's coming home. Ask why she's so late. Ask why she works there if she doesn't like it. Ask why we have to do things we don't like. Ask what it means for things to be fair—ask why the world isn't.

Watch cartoon reruns as a small buzz fills your stomach— there are no dogs, but you hear a growl somewhere. Do your times tables. Do them again. Try to remember what 7 times 9 is. Remember what  $7+7$  is. Then add seven more 7s after that. Twenty-one...twenty-eight...thirty—time's up.

The timer sounds like the buzz at the door, so for good measure ask when mom's coming home again. Maybe your brother isn't good at math either. Maybe she'll be back before eleven. Maybe she's already home and hiding in a really good spot, ready to surprise you with a dog. (That's got to be where the growling is from.)

Come up with names for the puppy. If it's brown, Brownie. If it's white, Marshmallow. If it has spots, Spot. If it has stripes—do dogs have stripes? Zebras do. And when you think about it, zebras are really just weird-looking dogs. They're furry, you think, and they've got a tail and four legs. They probably don't have dogs in the Savannah so that's why they've got zebras. You've got it! You'll name your dog Savannah.

You'll play frisbee with Savannah at the park. Your mom already takes you every Sunday, except for the ones when she works. You haven't been in a long time. But once you get Savannah, mom will definitely take you. Maybe even twice a week. She worries that you don't get out enough, that you don't eat well. All she can give you are greasy diner leftovers—but it's better than going hungry. She knows what hunger feels like, and she cannot see her child feel it too. But there is still an ache in your stomach, maybe a little north. In the front of your chest, right in the middle. The part that beats really fast when you run around the park, practicing frisbee for the best friend you don't have yet. The part that twists when you cry in the night for mama, the part that still hungers after she stuffs your small body with cold biscuits and gravy.

You haven't eaten fried foods since she passed away. It used to taste like childhood, but oil, any oil, is bitter. you read somewhere that taste buds change every two weeks. Every cell in the body replaced after ten years. You're coming up on eight. At most, you have two years left until you live in a body that has never felt her embrace. You hope you're still bad

at math. That she's still working late at the little diner. You drive by some nights and hope you'll catch her at the tail end of her shift, and you can split a styrofoam to-go box like you used to. Just a smoke break would be long enough.

Maybe the new taste buds are why your mother tongue has been twisted for so long. It used to dance fluently, the words percussive and beating around your mouth like a drum. But the cells have shed and made way for smooth, White Suburbia. Your teeth a picket fence. Think back to before the diner. Before the new apartment. Before you said goodbye to your grandmother. What did that childhood taste like? Did you add enough sesame?

You remember rice porridge on sick days. Biting into ginger you thought was chicken, coughing it up and sipping tea. Ask for more honey—you can still taste the peppery root. Back then, mom was only a cry away, and she would kiss your too-hot forehead while she told you fairy tales of a better life. Your storybook was filled cover-to-cover with the American Dream. If you had a fairy godmother, you wouldn't worry about glass slippers or pumpkin carriages. You'd wish for a visa, Savannah, and rice porridge (with no ginger). In that order.

The whistling kettle pierces through the memories. Pour it into your cup. Be sure to add more honey. While it cools, turn off the stove so the soup doesn't burn. Open the lid and let the aroma fill the air. You don't believe in ghosts or spirits, but you swear you see her face in the steam. Floating between the garlic and vegetable stock, there is a hint of her perfume.

Pick up a spoon and give it a taste. The heat bites at you and pinches all the way down your throat and into your stomach. Like an old woman's nimble fingers on her grandbaby's cheeks. In your gut, it marries the homesickness, and in that sip the sorrow turns a subtle sweet.

# THREE PAPER PLANES

Andrei Li

CW: Alcohol, implied suicide and drug use, strong language

*EVENING. A cramped room serving as kitchen and living room, stuffed with cardboard boxes, cracks slithering across the floors and walls. The stove light burns a sickly yellow. On the wall, a TV with its screen smashed.*

*A young man, ELI, slumps in his cold bare wheelchair. His eyes flit from the window to the askew door, to the small analog clock blinking down every mechanical minute. His fingers tap about incessantly. He places his hands on the armrests, then puts them back in his lap.*

*Beyond the door, faint footsteps. Moments later, it opens. A young woman, JESS, enters.*

JESS: It's just me.

*JESS walks into the room. ELI relaxes slightly, then notices the bag in her hand.*

ELI [*pointing at the bag*]: What's that?

JESS: Our order. The delivery guy dropped it off. [*JESS pulls three Styrofoam boxes of takeout out of a plastic bag and places them on the dining table. She sits down.*] You hungry?

JESS: Too bad. Eat.

ELI: If I eat I'll throw up.

\*

JESS: You haven't eaten the whole day.

ELI: Do I look like I fucking care?

JESS: Fine. [*breathes in*] I'll leave the other two, if you change your mind.

*She puts a box on the table and the other two on the counter. Then she opens the box on the table and pokes its contents around with a fork. It's clear she doesn't have any appetite.*

JESS: Where's his mother?

ELI: Went to see off relatives at the station. Told me the whole flat was mine.

JESS: And damn good care you took of it. [*She motions at the TV.*]

ELI: It was an accident.

JESS: What a weird-ass accident. What did you do, take a baseball bat and smash it in?

ELI: It was a broom, actually. Took several tries. [*He closes his eyes, breathes deeply.*] Not that she ever uses it.

JESS: I see.

ELI: The news was on, and they were talking about *him*. *Him* this, *him* that. "Tragically Young Death In The Community", "Promising Life Cut Short". At this rate they'll build a statue of him, maybe a temple by the end of the month.

JESS: Did they make fun of him?

ELI: No! They — well, they — they had this *attitude*, like they —

\*

JESS: Were pretending they knew him?

ELI: Yeah. Like he was their hero or something. Like he'd been their friend for their whole lives or some stupid shit.

JESS [*mumbling*]: Could be worse.

ELI: What do you mean, "could be worse"?

JESS [*holding her hands up*]: I just meant—

ELI: That we should let those clowns prance around pretending he was their best friend, their "hero", when they couldn't give two shits when he was alive? Do you remember how we met him?

JESS: Look, I'm sor—

ELI *stares deep into JESS' eyes*.

ELI: Do. You. Remember?

JESS *sighs*.

JESS: At that bus stop, when we were kids. We were stuck in a rainstorm one day, we didn't know school was cancelled. Our phones were dead. So we hung out. He taught us how to fold paper planes. You were so impatient, he thought you were peeing your pants.

ELI [*miming a sheet of paper*]: "Fold it down here — now, you gotta keep it real straight, or else it'll topple over. Now pull this corner—" How could you stand in a single spot?

JESS: Yes, you were like that.

ELI: And then there was you. You were staring so hard at his hands.

JESS: You stared at the planes, when we threw them in the air after the

clouds cleared and they swooped around like real planes.

ELI: And we put them in our pockets even though—

JESS: — they were wet from landing in the puddles.

*Pause.*

ELI [*absently*]: All those farts at the funeral. Not even all of them looked sad. Do you think they ever heard about that moment?

JESS: It was between the three of us, none of us told anyone. That day we became friends.

*ELI rolls away from the table and over to the windowsill. He picks up a dusty pack of cards.*

ELI: Did you know he collected hockey cards?

JESS: I didn't.

ELI: Me neither. [*He raises the pack against the stove light, as if he could see something on it.*] I thought I was going insane, forgetting things I should know—

JESS: No one knows everything—

ELI: Stop it, will you! [*His voice echoes around the room. He blinks, then slumps further into his chair.*] I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I just—

JESS: No, no, it's okay. Here, I'll go get some water.

*She walks over to the tap to fill a glass.*

ELI: It's not okay. [*He breathes in, out. In and out again.*] It's just — I'm afraid of losing him, alright. I'm afraid of forgetting. Now, I don't think I even remember his face, he looks different every time—



JESS sits down and slides the glass across the table. ELI downs it in one gulp.

ELI: Don't answer if you want to, I've pushed you too much already.

JESS: No, don't say that.

ELI: Okay, but have you ever, ever — please, be honest — felt this — thing?

JESS remains silent for a few moments.

JESS: Do you remember when I got my lifeguard certification?

ELI: I do. He was the instructor, wasn't he?

JESS: Nasty scare he gave me on the first day. Didn't tell me until he was up and writing with his dry-erase marker. *[Both laugh, dryly.]* But that's not the point. He taught me it's not always about you. There are bigger things out there than you. I don't remember when, or how, but that's what he taught me.

ELI: Typical Jess. Always looking for the bright side. *[He picks up the glass and turns in his hand, searching for his reflection.]* Now look at where heroism got him.

JESS: With people respecting him.

ELI: With people using his name like you use deodorant. *[He slams the glass down.]* It's no better dying a hero than dying unknown. Worse, even. Save yourself some of the hassle.

*The lights dim. Spotlight on JESS and ELI.*

JESS: Eli, he was a good man.

ELI: Yeah, he was! And look at where that got him! *[He waves around*

*wildly.*] Look at how he was living! Even we — we —

JESS: Neither of us knew, Eli —

ELI: Well, if he stopped being an angel, maybe we would have known! Maybe we would have known about his shitty-ass scam of a job, about his dogshit of an excuse for a family —

JESS: — Eli —

ELI: — about his mother who'll fester for the rest of her life in a retirement home now that he's dead, about his jackass of a father who didn't even leave a penny because he was so afraid of a child!

JESS: — Eli, stop —

ELI: We could've done something! Anything but standing there with our arms crossed, watching as he broke to pieces!

JESS: — there was no way — no way, Eli, we could have known —

ELI: No, Jess, we did know. I know I remember one thing, and it's that car accident.

JESS: — Eli, listen to me —

ELI: You remember that accident. We were in the passenger seat. He was driving. I thought he was driving weird, but we ignored it. Then we almost crashed into that kid at the intersection.

JESS: Eli —

ELI: I broke my spine. Two vertebrae busted, the spinal cord cut clean. The doctor said the bones were shattered into tiny pieces. I would never walk again. [*He shuts his eyes.*] Then we found out — when the fuck did he start? — we should have known there and then — but we didn't — we didn't care — and it all fell apart —

JESS: Shut up!

ELI *freezes, startled into silence.*

*Lights turn back on. Beat.*

ELI [*weakly*]: Oh God. What did I just say?

JESS: No. Don't ask about it. [*looks away*] Just —

ELI: You're crying.

JESS: You too.

*A short silence ensues.*

JESS: He apologised.

ELI: We were so happy before.

JESS: Do you think, maybe—?

ELI: No. He always wanted the best for us. We depended on each other for our happiness. All three — of us.

JESS *pulls something from her coat pocket. A bottle.*

ELI: Beer?

JESS: You want some?

ELI: How much have you been drinking?

JESS: More than I care to admit. [*Her hands shake spasmodically.*] Take some. Or I'll drink it all.

ELI *slides the glass over.* JESS *pours the glass half-full.*

*A knock at the door. ELI tries to wheel over, but JESS has already opened the door. An older WOMAN is standing in the hallway, a bouquet of withered flowers wrung tight in her hands.*

WOMAN [*timidly*]: Hi?

JESS: Oh, we're so sorry about the noise. Everything's worked out between us—

WOMAN: No, um, I don't — I'm an aunt of his. [*stretches out her hand*] Lucy.

JESS: Oh. Nice to — meet you, Lucy.

*As they shake hands, JESS glances back to ELI. Does he know LUCY? A mouthed "no".*

LUCY: I came for the funeral, but the bus was very delayed. Tell me, am I late?

ELI: Y—

JESS [*for the millionth time*]: No. If you hurry you'll still make it on time.

LUCY *looks relieved, but only slightly.*

JESS: I'm sorry, Madam, about your—

LUCY: No. [*She puts a hand up.*] He was your friend, wasn't he?

JESS and ELI are silent. LUCY glances between the two of them, as if unable to decide what to say.

LUCY [*finally*]: I'm sure you knew him better than I ever did.

*She leaves. JESS closes the door.*

JESS: I did.

ELI: Not that I ever believed in funerals. You don't stop missing someone after you've listened to a bunch of dumb speeches.

JESS: Typical Eli. Always looking for the bright side.

ELI: Hey, you stole that from me.

JESS: I know.

*ELI has a moment of realisation. He grabs a few sheets of paper off the counter.*

ELI: Do you still know, Jess? How to—

JESS: Make paper planes, the way he did? I think I do.

ELI: How about we fold a few. Then we could catch up to that aunt of his. Pay our respects, properly. Put the planes up there with the flowers. No one deserves to mourn alone.

JESS: Hey, why not.

ELI: Let's get to work.

*JESS sits down. Both start folding paper planes: slipping back into the old, practiced motions. They become lost in the task.*

END OF PLAY.

# NIGHT-SWIMMING

Alex Lalli

On the bed of two o'clock  
lays your shadow,  
some hurt shade of blue.  
You sleep like sand,  
stuck soundly in every crevice  
of my mind. Outside

the sea sifts itself through the air,  
a cool body shifting,  
your hips into the milk sheets.  
I fear you're flinching  
at me, my softest finger  
on your smallest bone,  
the one that peeks through  
your skin's shy sky.

I gaze up you  
as one does a river.  
How something so still  
as the idea of your eyes  
opening to me  
floods oceans down my chest.  
It's a thick, loving feeling.  
Making love a quiet act.  
The paper sound of your breath  
kisses the waves, their salted lips.  
I breathe in the sea, stinging my teeth,  
and hold you in,  
quietly.

# POET WRESTLING WITH *POET*, AND NOT *SOLDIER* OR *KING*

Ash Anderson

*After the Oh Hellos*

I know how to be two things at once. I know I'll be lucky. If. In a year. I still remember.

That water is. A polar molecule. Meaning that. It's two ends-. Negative &. Positive.

Attract. Each other like. Anything different. My brother, a physicist.

Suggested I. Edit. Lab reports. To tie. My fraying ends. Together. And I forgive him. Because he cannot. Know.

What it is to separate. Art. & artist.

In the way that. Sometimes.

I hold my. Breath when. The plane takes off. In Maine &.

Touches down in Houston

To decontaminate that first glass

Of wet heat:

sulfurous

as rain.

You were told that the best part of here is. Leaving. Rural &. Pure.

But noticed where the skyline glittered in absence of stars.

Dissolve into this (city kid). Who returns to. Northern summers—

Traitor &. Jungle

-grey.

# PRAQUE SPRING

Regis Yang

The letters arrive every day, signed with names she doesn't recognize. White chrysanthemums bloom beneath their window sills, the baby chewing on most things he can grab at, sneaking peeks at the *Arbutus unedo*, drops of red staining his lips, charming hints of a persona. Her father is searching for an answer and her mother for something blue, the clouds painting a future so temptingly fulfilled. *Ma, look!* The Russians had a word for it, the preening young sweeping through the streets—she watched them as they metamorphosed into a single roar, and thought they could lift off and be free, somewhere west, somewhere (here she turned her back, steeled with her doubts) American—a word that sounded like a harsh bark, the door slamming to an end as the last spring breeze ruffled her hair. A man stands at the podium every morning, and she, too, feels the change coming, her mother lingering glances at her own soap-worn, dirt-blushed hands, wonders sketched to the lines of her forehead. What else could she sow now, but defection, but the quiet conquest of freedom? Her father wields his camera like a weapon, carefully developed photos of the Wall that stand between everything and nothing—leaving them littered on the dusk-lit tableside, as if a warning, a call-to-arms.



Her body is too small for herself to contain what has entwined with the  
vines of  
the Strawberry Tree, what makes her little brother grin without fail,  
what she doesn't  
dare spell out loud. August stretches forever. Bread crumbs stay lean  
and flowers grow  
taller. On the 20th, the baby cries from the blistering heat and the thud  
of boots, and for an  
inhale of a moment, she hears the Slavic word again. The slam of doors  
and the violent howl.  
Someone is dragged to their knees in the midst of the crowd. The city is  
dulled by  
ugly things. She hears the roar now weep, the hanging heads, the  
waiting of the ashamed.  
But she doesn't turn her back, then, her body now big enough to  
swaddle her memories,  
and the strawberries—  
they grow again. The minister now lives in a forest and her little brother  
picks them,  
one by one, licking his fingers pink, and they tell the stories. They will  
never stop.

# RED, GOLD, AND THE TRUTHS LEFT UNTOLD

Alice He

red is the color of your shirt when you tell me we are moving from the twentieth floor down to the third. i do not ask why, perhaps because summer break reminds me of how restricted our lives become during the other forgotten seasons, monotone and lifeless, like a creature tranquilized with the chemicals of a society that hates liberty with a raging passion. we move and i do not remember packing nor unpacking. it is an uneventful event, filed away into the dusty archives of my memory until something gives me a reason to dig it out again, which only happens on the occasions that a stranger questions me where i am from. and then suddenly, as if a flip has switched inside of me, i remember there is part of me that exists only halfway across the globe, in the country that was once your entire world. but needless to say, there are parts of that life even you wish you could forget.

the sky burns scarlet, orange, glimmering gold. the sun sets, and tomorrow, a privilege to our very existences, arrives again.

\*\*\*

crimson is the color of my blood when the faceless nurse stabs a needle into the soft folds of skin at the crook of my elbow, withdrawing dark tubes of the fluid that flows, unstoppping, through my body like a circuit with no off button. in just a few hours she will send these vials of *me* extract, as if i am vanilla to be used in a recipe, for examination in case they harbor some invisible microorganism that will kill me silently from the inside out. the pain is difficult to bear but i do not allow myself to speak; for what authority do i have against this figure who surely must know more than i? if wisdom truly comes with age like they say, then

what am i but a naive newborn, fresh to the world like a fish just caught from sea?

you squeeze my arm in attempt to be comforting but i can only think of the way it sends more of my blood into the soul-stealing hands of the laboratories and medical institutions of this country that convinces us health and vitality are only byproducts of obedience. the nurse removes the needle from my veins, a shimmery crimson pearl forming at the surface of my skin, and i wonder about all the bodies who were left with too few ounces of the life-giving elixir ridden with the blueprint of all that we are and all that we will ever be. then she departs, a gentle breeze following in her wake, no one but us and the tingling scent of summer left in the room, and yet still the tears do not come.

you wonder why, and i refuse to answer.

\*\*\*

ruby red is the color of the jewel studs that adorn the plush flesh of my earlobes, piercings that speak more about the fears that plague my dreams than my eagerness to follow modern fashion trends. you have them, my sister has them, all the pretty girls i know have them. i ask you what kind of gems and treasures you wore on your ears when you were little and if your friends got jealous but you just smile into the faroff distance like something in the clouds has brought you back to the days when school was just for learning and your classmates didn't know to want anything besides a stable job and a loving family. and suddenly i feel like i have opened a book that does not want to be read, a history that is better left buried in the past, a part of you that was never meant to be shared. so when you finally look back at me, your chestnut eyes like a muddy well of untold secrets, i wonder just how much there is that i still do not know.

you smooth down the strands of my hair that have fallen out of my braids, a sadness to your complexion i have never seen before. quietly, you whisper, *jealousy is for the ungrateful*.

it turns out that a lot happened the year you turned sixteen.

\*\*\*

vermilion is the color of the logo of our local grocery store, its trademark symbol of an apple ubiquitous, carving a space for itself in our subconsciouses by force until we are left with no choice but to equate its image with essential subsistence. rarely do we visit other brands of supermarkets unless placed out of our comfort zone, in an unfamiliar location deprived of our usual first choice, and even then we find ourselves drawn to the stores that paint themselves in a familiar shade of red as if we are stubborn children addicted to a certain flavor of candy. cheap marketing tactics like these should be lost on generations as developed and advanced as ours but nevertheless they work like the oldest tricks in the books, obvious and overused yet as effective as they were on day one.

when i am eleven we embark on a road trip through the midwestern states, driving towards kentucky for my debate tournament, and you stop at various supermarkets and gas stations along the way. every single one of them sports the color red somewhere in its logo, but we are too focused on the receipts that might as well have *INFLATION* printed on them in giant block letters to notice or care. often, i catch you standing in the middle of the road in front of a store, plastic grocery bags in each hand, oblivious to the line of cars impatiently waiting for you to cross. the only thing you see are the inky black digits printed at the bottom right corner of the thin paper that says "CUSTOMER COPY" in a big bold font, numbers that tell you how many hours, how many lines of code, how many client calls, have just been exchanged for the little stash of items that you now have the right to take home without worrying about shoplifting charges. you do not understand why your life has become so far from the life you dreamed of when you were nothing but a bright-eyed high schooler with good grades and even greater dreams, but you know you will not like the answer. so instead, you square your shoulders, apologize with a hand raised towards the drivers that are a second away

from running you over, and sprint towards the parking lot where i am waiting, putting off your thoughts for another time that will never come.

\*

i find it funny how the human mind thinks itself one of the most intelligent wonders ever to exist yet still remains almost childishly naive to the delusions and false promises of the world. we find safety in the familiar and bliss in ignorance; we believe all that is good must be true and all that is bad can be changed for the better. if only we could cleanse our brains into distilled clarity the way we can wash a car to look nearly brand new with simply some soap, water, and honest work—perhaps, then, we will have something worth talking about.

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hex #eerc25, also known as RGB (238,28,37) or CMYK (0,88,84,7), is the official color of your home country's flag, though the word *home* has taken on many different meanings for you over the past twenty years. the color is so distinctly red that it is often referred to as simply *red (pigment)*, the foundation for all other shades, tints, tones, the backbone of the spectrum, the golden image of vitality and life as the Taoists believed the hue symbolized. but for you, it lost all connotations of respect and admiration, of *worship* even, the moment it bore witness to the unspeakable crimes your government committed against its own people on the fourth of june, nineteen eighty-nine.

on that day, the gunshots stole the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands, of students that could not have been much older than you were. your parents tell you they had been protesting—and *at the Tiananmen Square, for God's sake!* surely they were out of their minds, rioting at one of the most symbolic locations to your country's history, just kilometers from the great Forbidden City. you realize that in your parents' eyes, these students were no longer strong-minded youth barely twenty years old, but instead monsters determined to bring upon their own country's demise, entitled savages who believed they knew better than their leaders and refused to show gratitude for everything they had been given.

and although you would never admit it, you saw pieces of yourself in them.

when the tanks showed up, their ugly green exteriors of steel and

titanium looking like the villain to the heroic red coloring the walls of the Tiananmen Square, you began to fear what the communists were capable of, wondered how much of what you had been told about your country since childhood was a lie. the illusions that had been carefully pieced together for you began to crack, winding lines of guttural cries and utter chaos infiltrating the picturesque scenes of peace, shattered apart by such violent acts of oppression from a government that preached protection and safety for all its people.

the walls of Tiananmen Square may have been painted a color like hex #ee1c25, but you imagine that they must have seemed much darker to the student protestors who stormed the capital on that fateful day, and even darker to those who were shot and murdered by the very government and military they had been told would defend them. as the sweet, sick scent of blood filled the air and corpses were carried away in bags to a place where they would be disposed of like nothing more than ordinary household trash, forgotten and forever unhonored, you do not doubt that the overlords responsible for all this death did the only thing they knew how to do: erase the massacre whose blood now tainted their reputation beyond explanation.

national newspapers might not have been able to deny the blatant open-fire ordered by the General that day at the capital, but they could twist the story into one of public defense, of suppression of rioters, of a need to preserve national security. anything to uphold the facade of their precious communist party in the face of outrage from around the world that was now merely clicks away from breaking into the strictly controlled networks of their shielded microcosm. you watched as censorship policies tightened even further, so heavily curating the information available to the public the very idea of news lost its purpose. the people were distressed and confused; you could feel the buzzing tension in the hours, days, months after. but perhaps more importantly, you were all also powerless.

life continued.

but you knew it didn't. not for everyone.

not for the thousands of innocent civilians that died at the hands of their own government on the fourth of june, nineteen eighty-nine. not for them, not for their friends, not for their families. not for any of the living that they left behind. it frustrated you, because you knew that there was so much people weren't saying, because even the act of grievance had become a punishable crime in this country stained by its own guilty past. the communists were ashamed, but more than that, they were afraid, and fear itself had always been their greatest fear.

# EPHEMERAL IN YOUR ETERNITY

Christina Cao

Ephem·er·al

/ə'fem(ə)rəl/

adjective

When they ask, this is what you remember.

1. You are just shy of ten years old, and you drift through days leaving swirling stardust in your wake. Your nature charms them, though your gaze is distant and aimed just a touch too high to stare them down. You are just as flighty even on good days, and when they come crowding, invited by coiling ringlets and flushed cheeks and ironed clothes, you do not say much. Not when they pluck words from your mouth, spinning stolen measures as they please, patting your head patronizingly when you stare up at them, a picture of obedience. Your mouth tastes of ash, but when you are nine-almost-ten, anxiety is still just shyness, and they will excuse you themselves, laughing off the bluntness they know children wield with pride.

(You regard trust with accusing eyes, but when you are older, you will learn to have faith.)

2. You have wrapped yourself in wisps of clouds, and they have yet to view you in your entirety, not when whispers trail you like flame-drawn moths. Though you man the guillotine with a faux indifference reflected in the set of your jaw, the quirk of your mouth, you are gifted snippets, of inevitability, of bitterness. They do not, not, mean much to you, but you are watched as you straighten upright and tug your cloaks of white closer and closer, til they tighten 'round you and your breaths



come in puffs of smoke, enveloping your form.

(There are eyes circling, constricting your chest and curling in on you, and you will not be freed from this feeling so easily.)

3. But you dream in possibilities and what-ifs and crisscrosses of gossamer webs, and learn the names of constellations in the sky when little paper stars find their way into your hands and spill from your palms and rain down around you, seeping into the floorboards. They cluster in groups of two, three, four, five; man-made nebulae in heaps on the ground as the room wavers with shards of moonlight like crashing waves. You lean over the edges, trailing your hands through valleys of gold and white as a breeze murmurs ceaselessly around you and you laugh as you abandon yourself to the world. You do not look up at the sky, and you do not see the way the stars flicker and burn against backdrops of black and gray.

(You are beginning to shed your skin and your veins course with fire and ice as you seek out the sun.)

4. And when you wake, you close yourself off again and again, even as you attempt to lessen the ever widening gap and they fawn over others who have been made and unmade by the same dust that encompasses you and your own. When you ask what makes one eternal, they tilt their heads ever so slightly and laugh at your urgency and you know they do not, could not, understand. But there are constellations written into your heart and as you fold and tear and tuck strips of paper into tiny points and edges, you imagine hundreds and thousands of stars hanging over your head, brushing against you as you drift by. Your hair is a mess and there is gold smeared everywhere and you are barefoot, but you are running through forests dappled with light and stumbling over craters, laughter ringing in your ears. You trace patterns in the air while you hang the stars by hand and plant them in your chest where they burn every time you exhale, but Cygnus is missing a star when you look up again and there are fissures widening across the sky.

(the world feeds on your wonder and as the stars rage brighter and bright-

-er, you know that this is your truth.)

5. Beneath glinting stars, you will rend time and rebuild galaxies and bathe yourself in stardust. You capture fleeting moments in crystal glasses, faux stars collected in glass jars to replace ones lost from the sky as you form your own universe, for you have no need to pluck them from the sky any longer. You take captured moonlight and lost memories and times you would have liked to experience, and you gather them all up in your arms and they glow under your stars. You tilt your head upwards, light streaking through the clouds, illuminating the sky with their brilliance as little chunks of heaven fall to earth in showers of silver, and you are eternal.

(you are older now and even as the past sticks on, trails and lingers behind you, it would be remiss to hinder you any longer.)

(and the world delights in your eternity, spinning on.)

# SWEETWATER FARMS

Greer Engle-Roe

Cold pool painted my lips  
blue I hiked on a trail dust covered  
searched for foothold skin  
leathering in the sun

white frisbee lay forgotten in grass  
overgrown ivy crawling  
reaching tendrils up  
I stretched for- -ward  
wished I could fly

the pool was colder sun hanging  
low I only dipped a toe inside  
mind wandering to the drive  
hotel resort marred by time  
I expected  
remembered crisp cotton sheets

lay awake on a mattress full  
of springs dragged it to the floor  
slept like a dog curled wished  
for a home  
I could not go back to

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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*Brianna DeLima Ifland*

Brianna DeLima Ifland is a Filipino-American creative writing and multimedia production student at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, where she has also founded the Film Honors Society. Much of her work is marked by interpersonal relationships, culture, identity, and mental health. She was a featured young playwright at the 2022 Arkansas New Play Festival in Fayetteville and was displayed in the first Fellows for Two gallery for her project “Tunog ng Tahanan.” Although she was previously featured in HaluHalo Journal, she's proud to call the Paper Crane her first publication acceptance. Though maintaining a heavy stage influence from her time in theatre, and always having a journal on hand, Brianna hopes to expand to more visual storytelling mediums such as film.

*Diya Anantharaman*

Diya Anantharaman is a writer, musician, DJ/radio host, visual artist, video artist, and undergrad based in California. Diya currently self-releases music under the project name Planet Bones, and additionally hosts Unearthly Machine--an exploratory radio show--on KUCR 88.3 FM on Monday evenings from 8-9 pm. Diya's most recent published works include poetry in Down in the Dirt Magazine, prose fiction in Paper Crane Journal, and a self-released experimental album titled Drones of the Desert. Diya's work across mediums can be found on planetbones.com and @planetbones on Instagram / @planet\_bones on Twitter.

### *Anshi Purohit*

Anshi is a high school sophomore who has work published or forthcoming in eleven literary magazines such as the Eunoia Review, LEVITATE, and Mobius Lit. She has published two books, was a contributor for the Eleventh Hour anthology, and has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. She is also one of the Managing Editors for an international journal, The Teen Magazine, and an editor for Trailblazer Lit. When she's not writing, she enjoys reading while drinking (too much) coffee, listening to music, and learning new things.

### *Alice He*

Alice He is a junior at a preparatory boarding school in the New England area of the United States. Originally from the suburbs of Chicago, she has been writing creatively since second grade, when she fell in love with words as a means of self-reflection and expression. She has been published in the Blue Marble Review. When she's not lost in her writing fantasies, she can be found daydreaming about flowers, listening to SEVENTEEN's latest album, or struggling through her organic chemistry homework.

### *Alex Lalli*

Alex Lalli(she/her) is a senior at The Westminster Schools in Atlanta, Georgia. She runs the school's literary magazine, Evolutions, as its Head Editor, and staffs the Writing Center as a Writing Fellow. She founded the school's Writing Club, a space where students can write freely and share their work with one another. She also is an editor on the staff for the Cathartic Literary Magazine. In her spare time, she enjoys running, baking, and singing.

### *Angela Chen*

Angela is currently a rising senior in high school from the Bay Area who enjoys drawing digitally and traditionally! Starting from a young age, art has always been her passion and she hopes her illustrations can inspire

other young artists to put themselves out there and implement change through the language of art. Angela also does freelance illustration and her work has been recognized by the SF Asian Art Museum.

### *Nisha Shenoy*

Nisha Shenoy (she/her) is a 16-year-old, Indian-American poet from the Bay Area. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, is forthcoming in Writopia Lab's Turning the Page Anthology, and has been published by Synthesis Publications, JUST POETRY!!!, and Reading Redwoods. In her free time, she enjoys playing piano, singing with her grandmother, and trips to Costco with her family.

### *Sarah Amari*

Sarah Amari is an Egyptian-American artist whose writing is an attempt towards order and understanding in the whirlwinds of life. Her free time is spent between making elaborate schemes for the future, baking snacks with substitute ingredients, and gaining inspiration through conversations with family and friends. She's published pieces on various writing platforms such as Teen Ink and Write The World.

### *K. Kannan*

K. Kannan (b. 2008) is a first-generation Indian-American writer. The Editor-in-Chief of Blue Flame Review, a literary magazine publishing science-themed work, she also serves as an editor for Renaissance Review. Her work has previously appeared or is forthcoming from Pidgeonholes and Ice Lolly Review, among others, and has been recognized by Write the World. She tweets @lotusmoonwrites

### *Andrei Li*

Andrei is a first-year student at McGill University, Canada. He is a winner of the UToronto Aristotle Contest and the NYTimes STEM Essay Contest, a Gold finalist in the Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition, and has been published in the Toronto Public Library Young Voices Magazine. His pastimes include swimming, reading on rainy days, and chowing down on sushi.

### *Allison Liu*

Allison Liu (she/her) is an emerging Chinese American writer currently studying in the Boston area. She can often be found working on her novel, photographing the unusual, and conducting bioengineering research. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming in Yellow Arrow Vignette, The Violet Hour Magazine, The Foreedge Review, and elsewhere.

### *Christina Cao*

Christina Cao is a Chinese-American high schooler living in Connecticut. More often than not, her works feature elements of whimsy and tidbits of whatever other topics happen to strike her fancy. In her free time, you can find her playing the cello, fencing, or attempting to tackle her latest artistic endeavors.

### *Greer Engle-Roe*

Greer Engle-Roe is a senior in high school, attending Interlochen Arts Academy with a focus on creative writing. Their work appears or is forthcoming in The Albion Review, Neologism Poetry Journal, and Crashtest Magazine. They spend many hours watching soccer, building models, and painting miniatures.

### *Yuyuan Huang*

Yuyuan Huang is a young poet from the Boston area. Her work has previously been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and is published in Blue Marble Review, Ice Lolly Review, and Glass Mountain Magazine, among others. She is constantly searching for new wonders.

### *Katherine Dyal*

Katherine is a student from Lubbock, Texas. Her work has been previously published in Cathartic Youth Literary Magazine, The Weight Journal, ANGLES, and Navigating the Maze. When not writing, she loves studying history and listening to classical music.

### *Sisi Li*

Sisi Li (she/her) is an incoming undergraduate student studying abroad at the University of Southern California. Besides writing and reading, she also enjoys dancing, afternoon walks, creating oddly specific Spotify playlists, and matcha cream puffs.

### *Regis Yang*

Regis Yang is a high school student who splits her time between the island of Jeju and the city of Seoul. Every day she's learning something about how to write, preferably while listening to her current favorite music. (Elliot Smith and Kim Petras!)

### *Sohyoung Jeong*

Sohyoung is an undergraduate at Vassar College, with recent publications in PORTRAIT Magazine and Ricepaper Magazine. In her free time, you might find her cooking noodles or on her notes app.

### *Ella Bachrach*

Ella Bachrach is a writer from northern British Columbia who will be attending McGill University in the fall. You can find her on Twitter at @ellamaayo

### *Daria Krol*

Daria Krol is a writer from Canada. She has been previously published in Windscrip and Élan.



# MASTHEAD

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