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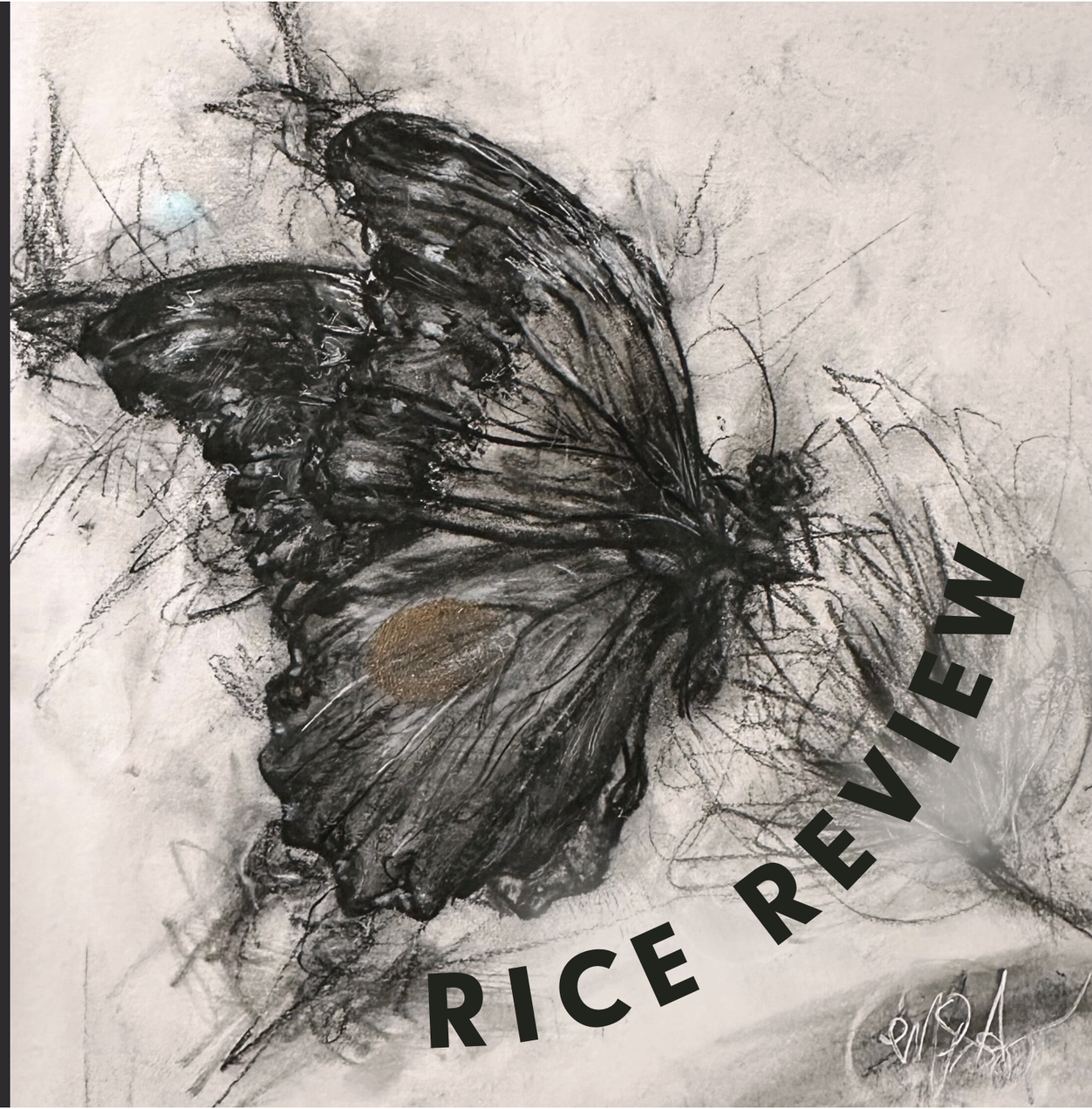
R2: THE RICE REVIEW VOL 21



R2: The Rice Review is a free student literary journal at Rice University.



Cover art: “Nevertheless” by Madeline Ansley



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Printed by Printing-X-Press. Printed in the USA.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journal is made possible by an endowment given by Bradley V. Husick ’86 and Gail Clayton Husick ’86. The publication of R2 has also been made possible by a gift from Sandy ’86 and David Epstein and Family for the five-year period 2009–14.

R2’s annual Rice writing contests are sponsored by the George G. Williams Fund. The contests are juried by professional, non-Rice-affiliated judges. This year’s judge was award-winning poet J. Estanislao Lopez. Each of the student recipients is awarded a monetary prize as well as recognition. The entire R2 editorial board wishes to express their gratitude for this generosity.

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# LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the 2024-2025 edition of r2: The Rice Review. We've had an incredible year. As editors-in-chief, we would like to take this opportunity to showcase what goes on behind the scenes of these pages in front of you.

To start, our annual Open Mic Night theme was bioluminescence, emphasizing the vibrancy of our student acts. We also engaged with the broader literary community by attending readings from authors like Maggie Nelson, Ruman Alaam, Danzy Senna, Taneum Bambrick, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. You may have found some of our handmade zines scattered across campus, inspired by Zinefest Houston. Lastly, we were lucky enough to sit down with three different writers: Stacy Swann, J. Estanislao Lopez, and Taneum Bambrick. These conversations are shared with you in this magazine—you can locate them within the table of contents.

This year, we were thrilled to receive 110 unique visual art pieces and 243 amazing written works. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you to everyone who submitted. If you, dear reader, feel inspired after reading the pieces we chose, we do hope you'll consider submitting your own work when our portal opens in the winter.

And now, us editors-in-chief have penned our own words to express our gratitude for this year:

Dear Reader,

I am beyond honored to present to you this year's edition of R2. Within these pages, I hope you laugh; I hope you cry; I hope you feel inspired.

This is my second year helming r2 as an Editor-in-Chief (lovingly called EICs). This year, I have the honor of being in this position alongside Amelia and Riley. Thank you for your industriousness, for being so fun to work with, and for dealing with my 11pm-2am barrage of texts. In addition, I would be remiss not to acknowledge our faculty sponsor, Ian Schimmel. Thank you for always holding down the fort and shaping r2 into what it is today.

To our staff, I hope I find a third place as warm and incandescent as r2 in every one of my lifetimes. Who I am at Rice and have been for the past four years is defined by all the friendships I've forged through r2 and the hours spent locked away in Herring Hall English Lounge every Tuesday night.

To our contributors, r2 is incredibly lucky to be a home for your work; thank you endlessly for entrusting us with it. As I close off this part of my life, I find comfort in knowing that for so many of you, this is just the beginning. To know you and your work is to be constantly inspired. I am forever your cheerleader and can't wait to see all that you do. Change lives, move mountains.

Lastly, to our readers, you are who we do this for. For the last time under my editorship, thank you for reading.

— Katherine Jeng

Hi y'all,

Writing this note to our readers serves to not only commemorate our work as editors of this magazine but also as recent Rice graduates who've already passed the torch onto the next generation of EICs. In that vein, I want to reflect upon how important and rewarding R2 has been to my undergraduate experience, and I'm sure the other EICs would share the same sentiment.

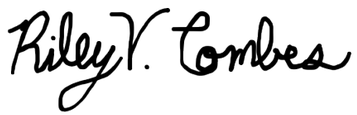
I started college unsure of so many things: what I wanted to major in, what my career aspirations were, and whether I was capable of measuring up to the exceptionally talented and intelligent students at Rice. R2 helped quell a lot of those anxieties over the four years I spent with the magazine. From the very first open mic night in the fall of 2021, no other class or organization at Rice has given me more of a sense of community, direction, or self-assurance than R2. I sincerely hope that our current and future staff members feel that same sense of belonging each time they walk into the English Lounge for every late night meeting.

I'm notoriously bad at offering words of affirmation or inspiration, so I'll conclude with something more direct and perhaps equally uplifting in its own way. This is a magazine the entire R2 staff has spent an incredible amount of time and effort working on throughout the year. We made a few major changes to the process of creating this year's edition, and we hope those changes will be viewed as improvements that motivate future editors to shake things up when times get tough. We're deeply grateful and endlessly in awe of our contributors, whose work serves as the proof of why Rice deserves a publication like R2.

To our writers, artists, and editors, I hope we've done your work the justice of rendering its careful creation into a thoughtful and celebratory publication. To my fellow EICs, Amelia and Katherine, thank you for your patience, guidance, and encouragement throughout the entirety of our long, long journey together through college. To our sponsor, Ian, thank you for describing me as tall and funny after (correctly) gushing over my fellow EICs flawless leadership. That was truly the most accurate commemora-

tion of my contributions to R2. Finally, shoutout to InDesign for really, well, testing our skills–and our spirit!

– Riley Verchota Combes



Hi there,

Thank you for picking up this edition of our favorite square shaped magazine. Every year I'm floored by the talent on our campus, and nothing makes me happier than getting to share that with you, dear reader. For everyone who has ever seen a piece of work and fallen in love with it and wanted to show anyone they can find to make them read it too, R2 is that feeling made physical. I am more than privileged to be part of the process of its making in all my years at Rice.

Thank you to all the people who make R2 possible. To our staff, for your work and your passion, and especially for your patience as we strong-armed you into learning InDesign — which you took to with prodigious speed. To our staff advisor Ian, who was attentive to our needs in every step along the way. To our writers and artists, for creating such amazing works and trusting us with them. To our readers, who are the whole point of all our efforts.

And of course, I owe a million gratitudes to my fellow EICs — Katherine, who has the remarkable ability to become the center of any room she walks in, and whose organizational systems have become the backbone of our processes; Riley, who always had the perfect remark in tough situations, and who is ever so reliable with the work that came our way. You guys have been so gracious and incredibly fun to be with, and I'm glad we got to go on this journey together for our last hurrahs here.

R2 is such a special place. I joined in freshman year on a whim and found 4 years of friendship, community, and belonging. I was always the type to hold my opinions until I felt I had the expertise to comment, which meant I spoke rarely and only reservedly. But in here in R2 section meetings I went to bat for personal favorites just because I liked them, died on absurd hills and raised my voice, changed my mind and then changed my mind again (at others' coaxing), unabashedly. R2 helped me find my voice among others, and for that I am forever thankful.

No matter how un-literary of a mind you think you have, R2 has a place for you. If you love reading and talking about writing, you may even find yourself in our editorial room one day. It's never too late :)

Until then, I hope you enjoy this edition of R2, crafted and compiled with love.

– Amelia Tsai

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## ARTWORK

# ARTWORK

# CHOOSE-YOUR-OWN-SPONTANEOUS-PNEUMOTHORAX

AMY CAO

*CW: hospitalization*

**1.** It's the last day of winter break, and you're walking home from your local library. Feel free to make up any reason why you were there: you're a top-notch student; you're avoiding your mother; you were deceived by the false lull of free tacos. In any case (especially the latter), you're moving at a brisk pace, and you want dinner. Suddenly, you hear a faint *pop!* You can't breathe anymore—pain stabs through your chest cavity. You double over with nausea. You're not quite sure what's going on, but you recognize there are a couple of options available to you.

**A.** If you tell yourself to tough it out, you will pretend nothing's wrong. You'll get on a flight tomorrow to go back to school. That's all good—it's just a cramp, and you can't die from a cramp. If you're still conscious by mid-flight, these are the words you'll say to yourself as the plane experiences turbulence. Almost certainly, the sudden change in cabin pressure will mean death. The autopsy will show you boarded with a collapsed lung, obtained as of yesterday. You'll die without ever having dated anyone. You won't even finish freshman year of college. The last thing you will have experienced in this life is hearing a toddler crying in 17B. **The end.**

**B.** If you decide to call your mother to pick you up and take you home, you may sound sheepish over the phone. You two have been arguing recently, but still, you're confident she'll come to your rescue. Even when you fight about things that are



**CHOICES**
SLOAN YSABELLA

on some of the really important things, like your ability to breathe. **Go to 2.**

**2.** Your mother drives you the remaining 2-3 minutes home, where you're propped up on the couch for the next 2-3 hours. Yawning hurts; coughing hurts; sneezing hurts; talking is hard. Maybe it's best to keep your mouth shut. The world is spinning. Has the living room always been this suffocating? The workaholic in you would like to take this time to knock out some filler episodes on *Dance Moms*. The normal in you would like to pass out. But it's hard to sleep when it's hard to breathe, and it's especially difficult when your mother is freaking out to the max. You see, your brother's lung collapsed a few years ago around this season. She fears that's what's happening here.

**A.** Mother knows best. In fact, urgent care won't even cut it. Go to the emergency room as soon as your father gets home with the car. **Go to 3.**

**B.** Ignore her–you've gotten good at this recently–and assure her you're fine, even though the shade of your face would make for a good Elphaba cosplay. **Go back to 1A.**

**3.** At the emergency room, the technicians take X-rays of your torso from all different angles. They show the pictures to you later, when you're settled in bed. What's shocking at first glance is your scoliosis (what a curve!). Second is your lack of a lung. Healthy lungs are meant to show up on an X-ray as a flat layer of transparent gray. Unfortunately for you, it is all dark and nothingness on the right side. The doctor breaks the news that you have a spontaneous pneumothorax, or a collapsed lung.

Because you are just shy of eighteen, you are wheeled to the emergency pediatrics wing. They feed you snacks and painkillers. At night, when you become the only person in the room still awake, you begin to feel lonely. Thank goodness it's hard for anyone to reach REM sleep in the hospital–you won't be alone for long. Nurses enter every couple of hours to check that you and the girl in the other bed have not passed away. The pediatric surgeon comes by to tell your family about the procedure. Your mother thinks it's too invasive, at least as described by this particular surgeon. Your mother does not trust her. She begins to fight with the surgeon (verbally, of course).

**A.** Do nothing and watch as your mother demands your transfer to the adult thoracic unit. From years of experience, letting her make these important decisions for you without protest is the path of least resistance. **Go to 7.**

**B.** Take matters into your own hands. End the fight by doing what neither of them really wants you to do–to refuse surgery. **Go to 4.**

**C.** Express to the surgeon that you are thankful for her service and mortified by your mother's behavior. It's the people pleaser in you. **Go to 5.**

**EXPRESS TO THE SURGEON THAT YOU ARE THANKFUL FOR HER SERVICE AND MORTIFIED WITH YOUR MOTHER'S BEHAVIOR.**

**4.** Chaos ensues! Legally, your parents have the right to override your refusal, but after a lengthy discussion, your mother allows you to decline surgery. All along, she has just wanted what was best for you and for you to be happy. You learn this hard, hard lesson through the recent series of unfortunate events, and your family dynamic improves more than ever before. With the help of a chest tube, your lung will reinflate by itself in the hospital, and you should be good to go as long as you stay away from planes. However, because you turned down a longer-term solution, your lung has a high chance of collapsing again in the near future.

Within a week of resting at home, you're bothered by something your mother says offhandedly at the dinner table about the weight you've gained during your time in college.

**A.** Make a valiant effort to preserve the peace for the remainder of your life. **Go to 10.**

B. Where's your integrity if you let this slide? **Go to 6.**

**5.** If you do not die from a collapsed lung, you fear you will pass from your mother's rage. Rather than back down, she whisper-screams in Mandarin that she's doing this for your own good, which you can't deny. You find yourself folding like a lawn chair.

**IF YOU DO NOT DIE FROM A COLLAPSED LUNG, YOU FEAR YOU WILL PASS FROM YOUR MOTHER'S RAGE.**

**A.** Tell her what you really mean is that you do not want surgery at all, and that you should've communicated to her beforehand–it's your fault. Apologize if you wish to keep your head attached to your neck. **Go to 4.**

**B.** Be silent and hope she forgets tomorrow. **Go to 7,** with the context that she will not forget and will remain angry with you for as long as you are hospitalized.

**6.** You've forgotten the meaning of familial harmony, and you and your mother are at each other's throats again. Arguments aside, your parents drive you back to school–remember, no planes!–and you forget to show them the beauty of the Houston swamp as you say a quick goodbye and send them back on their way to Florida.

**A.** At school, realize that this is not the way you want to live. There's a small chance you can get your mother to come around. Try. **Go to 10.**

**B.** No regrets. Stand your ground and recognize that not all people need to get along. You just can't bring yourself to understand your mother. **Go to 11.**

**C.** You want a do-over. Amazingly, you go through a whole year of university before the same lung collapses again. Is this a sign from the universe? **Go back to 1.**

**7.** You have been successfully transferred to the adult thoracic wing. Your surgeon is the same as your brother's from a few years back, and he's excellent. The procedure goes smoothly. You lie in bed with a chest tube poking out of your ribs as you watch all the animated Pixar films that the hospital has on demand. You're high on Toradol and apple sauce–but not high enough to forget that the hospital food is subpar. At one point, the kitchen sends an undercooked chicken.

**A.** Is it *really* undercooked if it's just a tad red? Eat it because you're too uncomfortable with the idea of sending it back. **Go to 8.**

**B.** When she's in a good mood, ask your mother to please cook for you. **Go to 9.**

**8.** Are you trying to stay ill? After throwing up from food poisoning, the turmoil of your insides causes your lung to detach from your chest cavity, i.e., ruin what the surgery was good for.

**A.** Luckily, you're still in the hospital. **Go back to 3.**

**9.** She brings you homemade soup noodles and watches as you eat. Since your lung collapsed, you haven't seen her smile once, but she looks happy now that you're enjoying her cooking. With the help of delicious food, you recover quickly and receive the green flag to be discharged. Congratulations! Just be sure not to ride any planes in the near future.

On the way home, you're making conversation, and for the first time in a while, it's nice. She asks you how school's going, and you tell her about your economics courses. You say something casually about what little interest you have in engineering. Maybe you were looking to provoke her, maybe not. But the end result is the same: She says economics majors can't get employed. You, freshly out of the hospital, are stunned.

**IT'S ALL THE STUFF YOU NEVER HAD THE TIME OR CURIOSITY TO TALK ABOUT BEFORE.**

**A.** Make a valiant effort to preserve the peace for the remainder of your life. Ignore the comment and tell her about your lack of rain boots during hurricane season instead. **Go to 10.**

**B.** Where's your integrity if you let this slide? **Go to 6.**

10. You've decided to try to understand your parents better, especially your mother, and they've actually reciprocated your efforts. Plus, you go on to become a respected participant in corporate America, and you save enough money to fund you and your parents' separate vacations (you've discovered that this is the secret to peace). You visit them on select holidays, and over time you learn about their childhoods, how they met, how they passed Immigration Services back in the '90s. It's all stuff you've never had the time or curiosity to talk about before.

When you grow old, you will be proud to be the daughter of two Chinese parents who slept day and night in the same hospital room as you when your lung collapsed for the last time all those decades ago. **The end.**

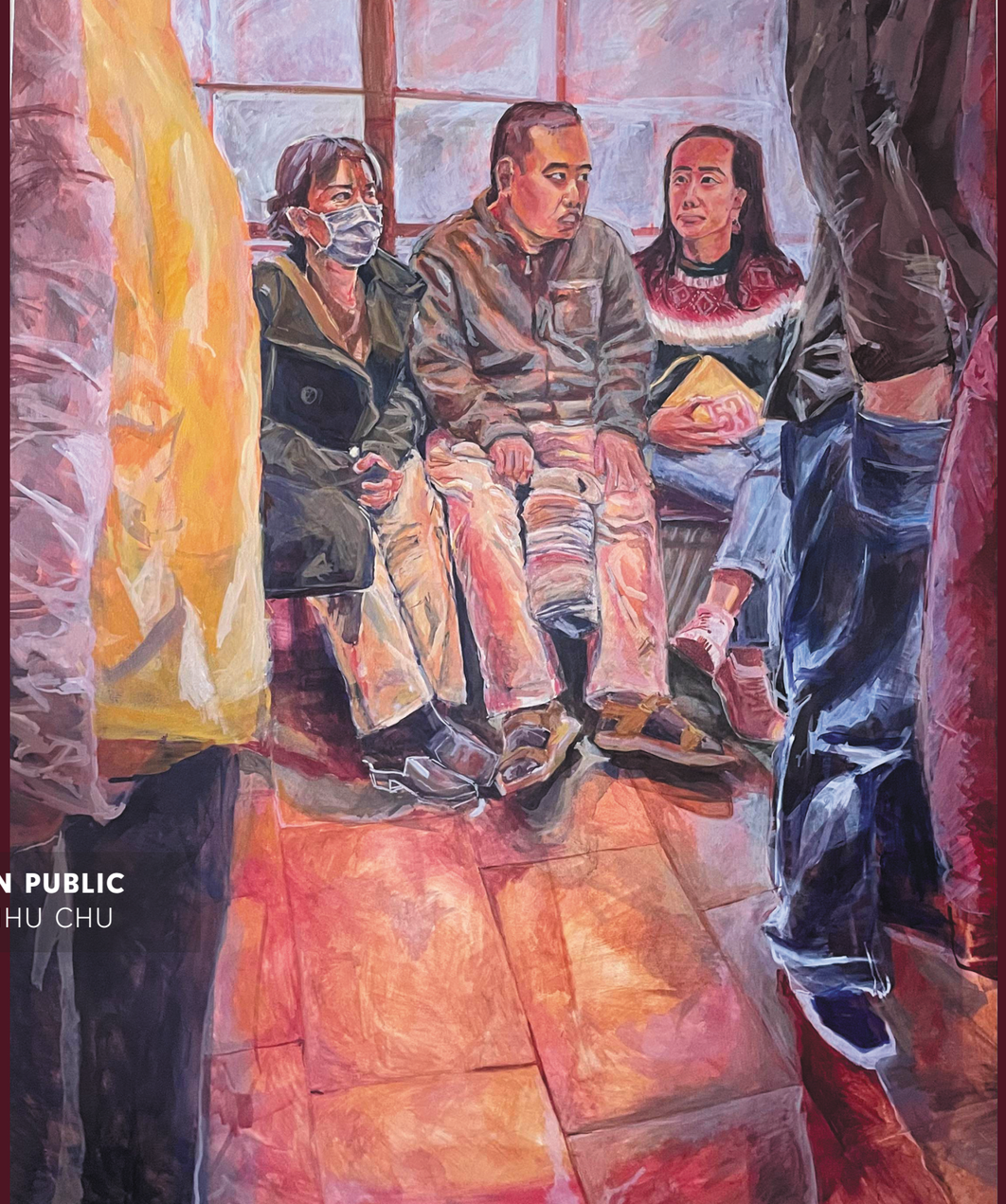
**EVEN THOUGH YOUR BACK HURTS LIKE HELL THE NEXT DAY, YOU SPEND A GOOD HALF DAY MAKING HER DUMPLINGS FROM SCRATCH AND BRINGING THEM IN WELL-PACKAGED TUPPERWARE.**

11. You never make amends with your mother–it's valid. Screaming awful things to you and emotionally manipulating you on the regular is not okay. When you grow up to have your own children, you do your best to raise them differently. One of them gets appendicitis and has an extended hospitalization. You can only imagine how stressful it must be for her, the poor child, because you're freaking out for her wellbeing. You find yourself battling the hospital bureaucracy for the best surgeons they could possibly provide. There are only sitting chairs in the room, so you bring blankets from home to sleep. Even though your back hurts like hell the next day, you spend a good half day making her dumplings from scratch and bringing them in well-packaged tupperware.

Then, it hits you. It's true, you'll probably never forget the way you and your own mother fought. But at the very least, all those years later, you'll come to acknowledge the sacrifices she made for you–whether that was immigrating in the '90s, or staying by your side when your lung collapsed decades ago. It's been a while since you've called. Why not dial her and see what happens? **The end.**



**THE TIMES**
NHU CHU



**IN PUBLIC**
NHU CHU



# IDOLS OF CUT

**HONGTAO HU**

*CW: mentions of suicide, blood/gore*

I am still lying in that friend's basement after homecoming,
telling them things about myself but really
telling them about my desire. I tell them things so my want
can leave my mouth, abdicating something for once. I said
that even my god of
want was just the name of a book
that I could not make into my own selfish god. But I
made other idols, yearning-killers so the
past would live through me no longer. I said,

SHE

stands at the kitchen counter.
The angel of the hour. The god
of green onion, chopping,
chop, it is as simple as that, she tells me.

She slices onto a wooden board in my dream.
My father once cut off his finger like this, I tell her.
She shrugs. It has always been like this, she says to me,
throwing the onion white into the trash.

Outside, a few onion stalks grow from the ones that she's saved.
She asks me to hand her an onion from the fridge. Says, If a
pinky can heal,
you can forget your past.
Block your want with the feel of the cleaver
striking the board and chop again. So do so.
Cut your vestments of dread and move on.
Work. Chop. Grades. Chop. Sleep. Chop.
So you cut off a finger. Toss it away, and cut again.
It's not like it means anything.

It is now fall, and her faithful work could not save me,
so after every testing-room I fail

HE

stands in the foyer, pointing a spear at my head.
He is me if I was a fascist. He has a shard of
glory and faces the world with dark, tar-lunged skill and perfect.
In his concrete garden, he lives like this:
victim, sureness, headshot. He lives for nothing but god.
Cut through—rather than block—the want, he says to me. I must purify myself
with cruelty. It is not the neutral certainty of chopping,



but rather the skill involved. Anyone can cut,
or be cut, but mastery is chewing on the suffering,
sharpening yourself on it.

CHILD

My friends are talking to each other, so
I am on the train home from Chicago.
In my ears the podcast hosts ask,
What would you tell your child-self?
I would learn nothing from myself
if I were ten; I would
kill myself if I was sixteen for
spurring my want to form.
He deserves it as much as he deserves nothing.
He was the one who ruined my life.

The podcast guest says that her friends are cruel to themselves.
They want to do everything right the first time, she says.
They never give themselves a second chance.
I pull out my earbuds and ask my friends what I am deficient in,
and the one with tousled hair responds that I am too hard on myself,
and I think if strictness substitutes well for desire. I think yes,

but what of him suggesting, spur of the moment, that I get a haircut,
and I agreed, and we wandered the winter streets,
getting our sneakers and socks soaked,
trespassing into commercial buildings,
only to find no one to cut our hair.
He was sadder than I at this failure,
as ever since I was young, luck held no sway over me.
It was always the forgetting, or the mis-test, or
the indulgences that tore my sutures open.

FILAMENT

I sculpt a pigeon for my friend as a test of my skill,
so that my skill can cast off my desire. I watch the plastic
filaments stack upon themselves, layer by layer,
sure in their home.
But now everything's changed imperceptibly, as I slice
the pigeon's wing off. I sand its head down. I cut my own
bangs in the window of my mother's house so that she will not
know that I could provide for my own needs. A million filaments,
in the bottom of the sink, how large the smallness of my want,
how I suffer for wanting it still.

I flip the scissors between my hands, thinking of which idol this cut was for.
Kitchen or spear.



They both agree that the worth of men is what they do.
But this was less than that, more a happening than a want,
nothing behind it, barely even a flicker of desire. So sure.
No idols. I throw away my hair, and walk out of the bathroom,
godless, to bed.

**IN THE FIELDS**
NHU CHU



# FLOUNDER

## HOPE YANG

I think back to the time your father, no, your father's father, caught that big flatfish, that flounder, off the coast. I think it was in Kenting and I had just gotten acquainted with your uncle through my PI and no one was really sure whether we were together or not. And anyway your grandfather reeled it in with that unmovable expression that he always had. I hadn't wanted to raise Wei and you to be like that, but it's not that easy, external silence, like you could seal up your heart somewhere. But your grandfather was a man who never flinched and rarely smiled. It just came with the upbringing. And it was a big flounder, that one. Prize fish. A spectacular catch. And as it lay dying, just flopping there on the floor of the sailboat, I thought I saw him straighten up a bit, with equal parts triumph and something like pity as we oohed and ahhed — your uncle making a move to congratulate his father, then thinking the better of it. Later, when we got back, he'd tell his little brother, Dad caught a big one today.

Your father: That's just too bad.

I think your grandfather liked fish as much as he liked fishing and cooking and eating them. But then again, I didn't know much at the time, and anyway, I was getting seasick from the constant rocking, that swell of water in an inconsistent up-and-down. And the next thing I remember was throwing up,

and it was whenever your grandfather was telling us to be silent, to stop talking, so that we might see the setting sun over the waters and hear the sound of the ocean moving. So it's all nice and dreamy and the waves are flowing and there's me, just hurling my guts out on the side. But I wasn't the type to worry that it'd make your grandfather dislike me.

We'd expected to gut and cook and eat the flounder that night when we got back, but your grandfather was adamant that it be kept frozen in the fridge, that same stone expression on his face. So we made rice and had chicken instead. Your uncle was a good cook even back then.

That's just too bad, your father kept saying, because your grandfather was waiting for your grandmother, who was so boisterous and clear-headed and well-loved, who'd gone back to visit her family in Hengchun. Seeing that smooth contentment on his marble face reminded me of what he looked like when he'd told us to look and listen in that pocket of sunset and ocean tainted by my nausea.

When you first came to live with us after your father died, your grandfather was worried about you. You probably didn't realize, but he didn't quite know what to do with you. You got into secret fights with Wei instead of becoming brother and sister like we hoped you would, and later persuaded her to set off firecrackers under our neighbor's car, which got the police involved. But you know he'd always be sure to get the food that you liked — in particular, some flatfish from the market. He liked that you liked it best. In a way, he liked you best.

**HE LIKED THAT YOU LIKED IT BEST. IN A WAY, HE LIKED YOU BEST.**

Your father is not too much like your uncle. To me, he was always the youngest son, the baby of the family, full of energy that, once released, would drain out and leave him in a momentary and frightening emptiness. He still had traces of that stoniness so common in this side of the family, but he took after his mother more. He knew how to look at you in a way that conveyed something more than concealed it. He was a good man, your father.



After your grandmother died, your grandfather stopped fishing. He took one long trip to Kenting by himself a few weeks after, which got all of us really worried, and then he never wanted to go back, no matter how hard your uncle tried to persuade him. I think the only other time he went to that lake down south was whenever you'd said that we should take Wei fishing out of the blue. She was in her rebellious stage and you were the only one she thought was on her side.

I'm glad you drove him to see your grandmother's grave those last years when your uncle and I were too busy at the university. We were on the verge of a major breakthrough. Taipei was quickly becoming our new world, and you and Wei were going your own ways, which we were glad for. Your great uncle said we were too much like Westerners in letting you go, in that you were bound to grow filially impious and ungrateful, but you know that had never crossed our minds. We were trying to do right by you. It was the right thing to do for you.

You know, even after you went to America, our neighbor would take your grandfather to see her. To bring your grandmother some flowers or offerings or the like. Every day. He was consistent like that. We weren't surprised that he only had a couple of years left, even though he was solid and healthy. Once you were gone, all that final bit of responsibility seeped out of him. He deflated and laxed, and I was glad for him.

That day, seeing that flounder with its glistening, mottled body; alien, the way its two eyes were embedded on one side, disgusting yet gorgeous, I wondered what your grandfather was thinking. That day, as I, a city girl from Tainan who'd wound up farther down south than I thought I ever would, barfed over the side of the boat, your uncle holding my hair, equal parts laughing and soothing me, hazarding to touch my back as the sun broke gentle light onto his wide teeth, your grandfather manning the sails and tying neat knots, I wondered what kind of face he would make, your grandfather. I knew he was excited about the catch, a sort of humming tension beneath that stone mouth. I'm sure you've seen it before, but I really wondered about it. What kind of face he'd make when he finally took out the flounder.

**AN IDLE PASSING**
SLOANE YSABELLA DOMINGO



# AT NINETY-FIVE LBS, BEFORE THE CITALOPRAM

**AMY CAO**

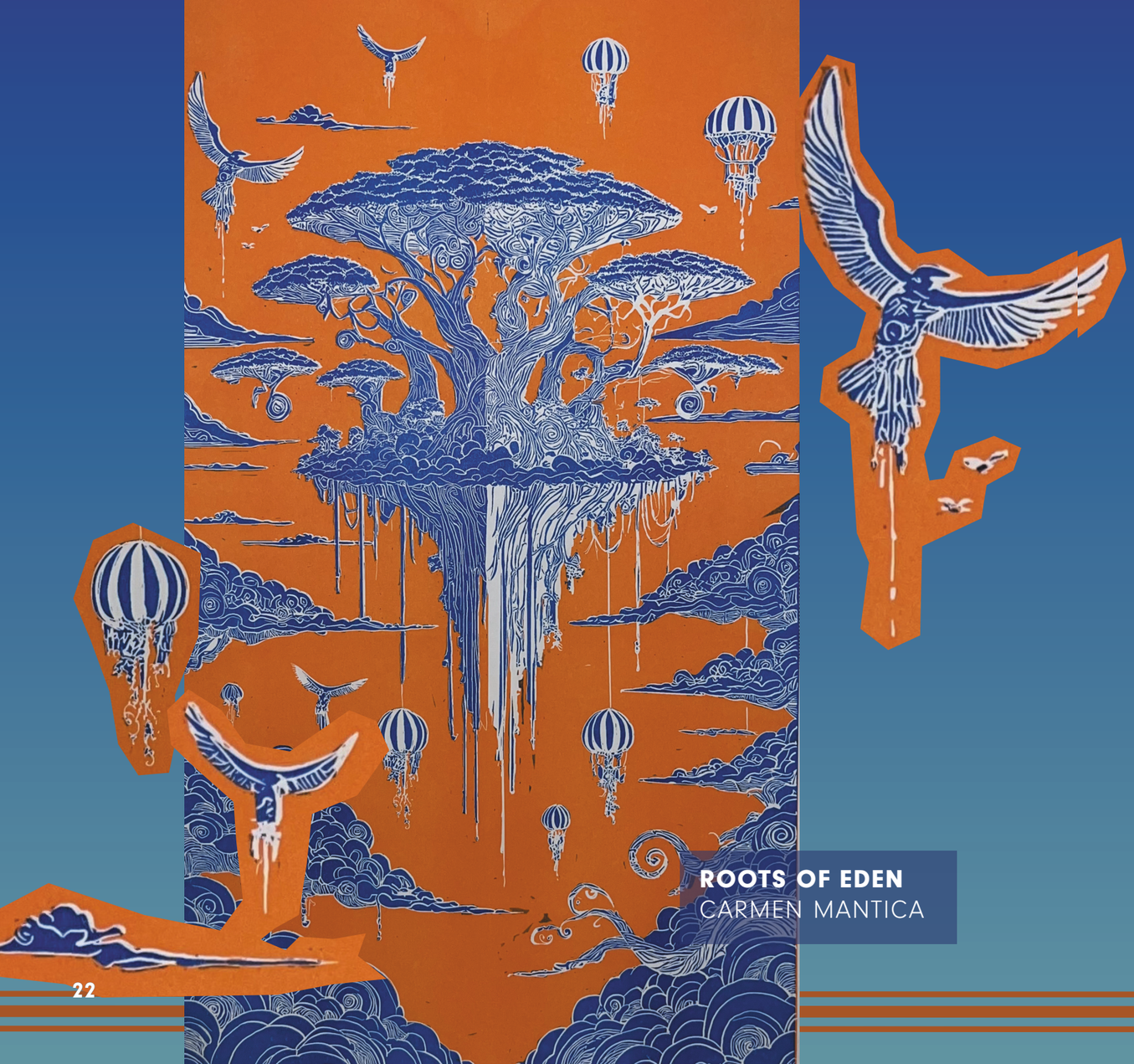
***CW: mentions of suicidal thoughts and eating disorders***

You were lost
in bits
and
pieces,
cut by the weight of November.

Fell asleep
to lullabies composed of
heaving and
*sorry sorry sorry* between the hiccups.

—

What salvation did you find that winter in your
shoulders, hips, thighs? You vanished like rock under
running water, cotton candy in those raccoon paws.
Like taffy,
days
spun into
weeks stretched
By the time I saw through you, your mind had long
collapsed before your legs had ever been given the
chance.



**ROOTS OF EDEN**
CARMEN MANTICA



# STARLINGS

## ADAM DHALLA

Winter charges the land with dead radiance.
The starlings are still here. Ten thousand
picking in gray pastures, swept to the sky
by hidden motion. No one scared them—
it was winter, after all. Yet, they flowed from
field to field, clouding over emptied fields,
settled on the cottonwoods for sleeping.

Do the dying fall away silent, immaterial,
disarmed from the black battle of the starling
cloud? Like a parable, life goes on, unburdened
by individual grief. Blown about in phantom
bondage we struggle apart in ancient ways,
identical, in dreaming ways.

Still, I try,
to make my starry cosmos,
and map each flailing atom orbit,
a falcon in a field chasing a frantic pulse.
Every time, the smothering force amalgamates—
I stagger in a single starling eye.

A cure for loneliness is in the crowd.
Live on and prune the burnt-out
ends for common purpose,
and love, and breed, and tend the nest.
I have almost tired out my fear and finished,
when I see advancing,
        restless armadas of light.



**INTERSTELLAR**
VALENTINA HOOVER

**SEE NO EVIL**
TONI ODUFUYE

# IMAGINE THIS

**TALIA LEVY**

*After Richard Siken*

The Sun hasn't set
There's something hanging in the air and –
We'll call it a good night's rest –
It doesn't know that you're the best thing that's ever happened to it
You're waiting
Maybe there is an afterlife in the clouds that you want to see
I don't think you want to hear the question
We both know we don't believe in it
But there's a hesitation as
The sky turns pink, or maybe blue

Imagine this:
You're alive inside the painting on my wall
The one you painted
And the race boats are both ours
And the cottages are both ours
You didn't paint any clouds
Did you mean to?
You take the best nap of your life on the stern
Just like the best nap of my childhood
Maybe you won't get sunburnt either

**DREAMCATCHING**
LILY HARVEY

Imagine:
The house has a green kitchen
More important, the house has a big kitchen
And we both know where the dishes go

I didn't think I could live like this
In the mountains, I mean

Not just my home
We can go and lay in the boats
While the whole sky turns pink
And I'll ask you why you didn't paint the clouds

And the house overlooks the lake

You are my city



## MY LITTLE GARDEN
DANIELA AMBRIZ

# JOANNA

RIYA MISRA

*CW: body image*

I stand legs akimbo, navel drawn into spine — my hips have started to grow, a coastal shelf jutting out, an unwelcome disruption to the sharp line of my legs. Miss Joanna walks behind me and grasps the rotator muscle in my hip, twists it, yanking my right knee back. It lies parallel with the rest of my body. My wrists soften. The music turns on.

When I was 14 years old, Miss Joanna told my entire class of pre-professional ballerinas that I had no breasts.

We had just received our casting for the Moscow Ballet's annual production of the Nutcracker. To my chagrin, and my peers' mirth, I was a party kid, one of the elementary-level children scampering around the stage during the production's opening scene. A party boy, to make it worse.

From an audience's distance, she tells the class I seemed to have the hips and waist and breasts (read: none) of a convincing seven-year-old boy. It was a compliment. She meant it as one — I took it as one.

Earlier that month, Miss Joanna approached me in the studio as I practiced a pirouette en dedans to no success. Her hands slid around my pelvis, grasping the handlebars of the bones that she had coaxed out of my body. She pulled my center taut and shoved a yardstick down the back of my leotard (to keep my spine upright) as I bit my tongue. She gripped my waist with her fleshy little hands, her body gone soft after years of disuse, and spun me around.

Tucked away into a shitty little basement studio on a lakeside, Miss Joanna was well-known in the state (my former teachers despised her — she kept stealing their clients) for spinning straw into gold. I hate to admit that it was true. I still reap the benefits of the body she made for me.



P.J., or Pre-Joanna, I used to dance in a small hobby studio in the back half of an abandoned mill factory. I liked the instructors just fine, but they were all American and too scared to hit their students, so nobody ever excelled. I wanted to excel. By middle school, I had started to outgrow the studio that raised me.

When turned out, my hips splayed to a full 180 degrees. When pointed, my toes curled

straight into the ground. I was an arsenal of talent, God-crafted and man-made. The American teachers had no idea what to do with me. I can say this now, bitterly, having lost what I once had. I can say this, now that my body defies me.

My friend — I had one, but I hated her — slouched during class. No, really. Tracing up her spine (which she

**DEPENDENCY**
KARIS LAI

asked me to do, often, in between enchaînements; she liked having her back tickled) was like ascending a ski slope. So badly, I wanted to stick a ruler down

her leotard. But American teachers don't let you do that. She sniffled all the time, like she constantly had to blow her nose, and she wouldn't stop whispering during class. Undisciplined.

The studio is your holy ground. You respect the earth under your feet, and you pay it no mercy. This demands another level of consciousness: Leave your life at the door. Straighten your spine. Break your body down, then rebuild it into something more beautiful than you entered with. Come here to learn. Come here to be raised.

I left that studio eventually, in search of that holy ground and the people who could raise me on it.

A mother nurtures, tends, loves. Miss Joanna fed me green grapes in the studio, farro and bone broth, wiped my sweat with her linen tunics. Breathed muscle into my bones until my nails fell off. Kissed my cheekbones in the wings of every show, stage lights reflecting off the pink smear she had left behind. When angry, she'd withhold her gaze from us, pretend we didn't exist — until we just about believed it was true, questioning our own flesh and the space we could occupy. She was good at such things: Crafting my body into an instrument of her making, then a weapon of my own.

**BREAK YOUR BODY DOWN, THEN REBUILD IT INTO SOMETHING MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN YOU ENTERED WITH. COME HERE TO LEARN. COME HERE TO BE RAISED.**

Only my mother can hurt my feelings, really. But for a little bit, Miss Joanna challenged that. She knew how to deliver lashings. She knew how to make them sting. She knew my weaknesses, the date of my next history midterm, the number of knots across my spine and fractures in my knees. She brought me into existence and knew just how to wipe me from it.

So what, then, is a mother?



**CHILDHOOD IS FINITE**
SOPHIA OLIVEIRA

**PRIZES**
MIA RIDZINSKI



# ARCADE

## MIRANDA XING

*CW: mentions of sexism and misogyny*

The way I sobbed and sobbed
and sobbed when you called me *girl*,
*girl* pleasure, like crisp starch offerings,
*girl* instant gratification, at a fast food stand,
big bites,
crinkle wrapping.

I've never felt *girl*
pretty, *girl* soft,
*girl* discerning, doe eyes
ink spewing from the tip of a white pen,
neatness, describe, the night of the dance,
sparkling pink neon prance.

*Girl* I love you, girls share a straw,
*girl* all the past years feeling like a body,
*girl*
*girl* Kristeva, *girl* I'm sorry,
*girl* is a demon grinning, the purple *girl* child,
I tried

to not be *girl*,
I yearn for something better and wiser,
to scream and shout and supremely laugh,
it is not because I've never been touched.
Love is war, I make love war,
I practice the craft of dying in crowds,

but when you said it,
the center of me collapsed into the palm of your hands like the claw of the machine
you clench into my fuzzy plush skin,
there is something obscene about fluorescent lights;
I slide over, on roller skates,
waiting to be fetched.

**DON'T SELF DESTRUCT**
VALENTINA HOOVER

# AN INTERVIEW WITH TANEUM BAMBRICK

EDITED BY RILEY COMBES

Taneum Bambrick is the author of *Intimacies, Received* and *Vantage*, which was selected by Sharon Olds for the 2019 American Poetry Review/Honickman first book award. Her chapbook, *Reservoir*, was selected by Ocean Vuong for the 2017 Yemassee Chapbook Prize. A graduate of the University of Arizona's MFA program, she is the winner of an Academy of American Poets University Prize, an Environmental Writing Fellowship from the Vermont Studio Arts Center, and the 2018 BOOTH Nonfiction Contest. Her poems and essays appear or are forthcoming in *The Nation, The New Yorker, The American Poetry Review, PEN, Narrative, The Missouri Review, 32 Poems, West Branch,* and elsewhere. A 2020 Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, she is a Dornsife Fellow in Creative Writing and Literature at the University of Southern California. This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.



**Q: I've found out that it's pretty hard to choose a title sometimes. What's your method of choosing titles for your poems?**

Taneum Bambrick: The title is always the last thing for me. Does anyone else have that experience? Right now, I feel like I go through kind of stages where I write titles differently with a lot of intention. I've been writing sentence-long titles and then sort of making them shorter and shorter as I write the poem. I'm just gonna over-share and tell you two examples. The other day I was in therapy. It was Halloween and my therapist opens the Zoom dressed as a minion.

**R2: Oh, my God!**

TB: Yeah. And I was like, I have to write a poem where the title is "My Therapist is Dressed as a Minion," but I ended up shortening it. When I wrote my first book, I was really interested in one word titles, and so I would try to find the one word that feels like a little emerald inside this poem you could pull out, or the one word that encapsulates it. Sometimes it's like an energy where I want the title to really contrast with the body of the poem, or sometimes it's like, I named the poem after the place where it came from. I would write a lot of place based titles, but it's just really whatever season I'm in in my brain, or whatever is interesting to me at the time. Right now, I'm doing this thing where I think I'm trying to be funnier in my poems. Actually, your professor, Tomás Morín, really inspires me to be funnier in my poems. But if I'm trying to be funny, I'm like, how do I talk? And so, to be closer to my own voice, I'll just write a sentence out that sounds like something I would say, and then try to figure out how to make that into a title, but I either let the title inspire the whole poem and write it that way, or I just wait until the poem's completely done, and don't even let myself worry about the title. Just thinking about the title can make you not write, because it's so frustrating. Right?

**Q: Have you ever had any experiences where people have tried to categorize your work into one particular theme like, "Oh, she's an environmental writer." How do you reconcile with that feeling**

**of not wanting or wanting to be known as like a particular type of writer?**

TB: Yeah, I think when I was younger–when I published this book–a lot of people wanted to call it confessional or narrative poetry, but it's not just narrative poetry. I used to get really mad about that, because when I was in a program similar to what you are doing now, narrative poetry was considered the easy way out of being a good poet or something, or it was like a negative term, and I wanted to write a book that the people I grew up with would read, even though it was poetry. I didn't have anybody in my life that liked poetry, and I wanted to write something that the people I cared about would read when I wrote this book. I didn't have a lot of friends who were writers, so I was trying to think: what would it take for people to be able to hold a poetry book in their hands and actually understand it and feel something and not feel excluded or pushed away? I felt like calling it narrative poetry to me was a way of saying it wasn't smart or something, and I think for personal reasons it was a really painful categorization. But now I'm like, who cares, I'm just happy when anyone talks about my books! I stopped caring about that. I do think with identity stuff it can be weird to be like, oh, someone is able to sell this book because they market it as queer, but I want them to sell the book! I want them to make money, so it can feel really weird. And a lot of my friends have had different experiences with that. This year one of my friends won the Lesbian Book Award for her poetry book, and she's not a lesbian, and she was like, what do I do? She identifies as bisexual, so she was like, do I say something? I have another friend who's trans whose book was up for the same thing and they were like, I'm not a lesbian. It can be really weird. It's really tricky. Most of the time I feel like my book gets left out in certain situations. One time I went to a conference and they had this an evening of queer poetry, and they only asked the gay men who were there. They didn't ask anybody else who was queer. I feel like it gets left out of categorizations [like that] that I would have appreciated. It's just an interesting thing trying to sell your book, and the way that it takes on a new shape. I wouldn't necessarily have called myself an environmental writer like you brought up, but again, those categorizations don't bother me as much as the formal ones do.

**Q: You mentioned how a lot of the poems in *Vantage* are based on your personal experience, and I really liked how you used humor in some of these poems to process the horrific or visceral scenes that you're encountering. How did you decide when to incorporate this humor? When was it appropriate, and how do you think that it contributed to your voice in the collection?**

TB: Thank you for thinking that it's funny. Sometimes I feel like a lot of people read it, and they're like, this a very sad, heavy text. But I think I'm trying to be silly sometimes, too. When I wrote it, a lot of it was just like how it happened. There are a few poems in there where I recorded actual things people said to me, and maybe–sometimes for sound or for the line breaks–there were things that I would kind of stretch what was said. Not to make someone look worse, but to make the poem feel like a poem. I'd have to make some sacrifices.

Like someone saying, "oh, nice beehive" when I wore my hair in a ponytail, and I had to be like, "what's a beehive?" I had to Google this old hairstyle. Do you know what a beehive is? I didn't know what it was. I think that's really funny. One of the things that was so important to me that I just kind of alluded to is that I never wanted any person in the book to feel flattened, or to feel like the villain. I wanted it to feel like a nuanced experience, like it was in real life. I made a lot of rules for myself about how I would portray someone else's voice, or how I would portray a violent scene, and a lot of times, I do think that humor is how I get through things. The Minion therapist would tell me that I need to stop doing that, that I will make jokes when I shouldn't. My poems reflect that. Maybe it's like a sign of not being very healthy, but I feel like that's my voice, that's who I was when I wrote this book. Also, it was just funny–it's funny to work in garbage! One really funny thing that I always fell for was: I love snake skins; I think they're so cool, and I collect them. All the guys I worked with knew that, and they'd be like "Taneum, we found a snake skin, and I'd go to look, and it would be a used condom." It's so mean and gross, and I would be so upset, but that did happen, and it was a cool image, and it was funny, and I couldn't have made that up, you know?

**Q: Obviously, something that's really important to *Vantage* is just the use of poetry to write it.**

**What specifically about the poetic form stands out to *Vantage*? Do you think that maybe you could have written *Vantage* as a prose piece?**

TB: I had an agent call me. I used to think it was really cool to be completely off the grid. I didn't have any social media until I felt like I had to–until my book was coming out. I didn't have a cell phone for a long time. I just didn't want to be able to be contacted. I had been volunteering for this magazine, and my boss at the magazine was like, "This agent is trying to contact you through us. This is a big deal, why are you so unreachable? You need to talk to her." No one had ever cared about my work. I was so shocked by this, and I was suspicious. I was like, I don't even know what agents are. I talked to this lady on the phone, and I had no idea who she was or what she was trying to do. And she was like, "Yeah, I think you need to rewrite your book as a memoir and stop trying to publish it as a poetry book" and I was like "Why can't I do both? Why can't I write it as a poetry book and as a memoir like Ocean Vuong?" At the time, I was really committed to hybrid genres. I considered *Vantage* to be a hybrid genre, not poetry. I thought of it as partially poetry, partially nonfiction, and that meant a lot to me. I was really angsty; I was in grad school. I was like, "I don't want to write in any way. That's traditional. I want everything I do to be sort of like experimenting with form, because I'm trying to write about these experiences that don't fit into neat categories, so why would I write into neat categories and not disrupt them?" That was really important to me at the time, but now I'm like, I should have just taken the money, what was I doing?. I think I sometimes still feel proud of that younger self. The person who was like, "no, I want to write weird prose poems and essays and poems altogether. I want that to be the kind of writer that I am." I'm not ashamed of that choice. I think this book could have been written in any genre and been something. I guess if there's something I would say to you at this stage is, if something feels important to you, maybe listen to yourself first. Maybe I wouldn't have written a good memoir when I was 23. I don't think I could have done that, and so I don't regret it. I wasn't ready, and you can't make yourself ready for something that you're not ready for with writing–or with anything.

**Q: One poem that really appealed was "Biological Control Task." In the poem, some of the characters suggest that we only feel pity for the death of something that's beautiful. That kind of raises questions about who, or what, we as people owe responsibility to. What role does the idea of this responsibility play in your work, whether that be to other people, animals, or the environment as a whole?**

TB: That's a really big, beautiful question, it could take me like five years to answer that question. I think that one of the responsibilities I felt was to portray human and environmental issues as connected to each other. A lot of the time when people write about the environment, one of the mistakes we can make is to sort of suck all the human consequences out of the conversation, to look at a place and not talk about it in all of its complexity. I wanted the people to be the center more than I wanted the place; I didn't want them to be concealed by the place. There's this one guy that appears throughout that was probably the most sexist towards me, but then, at the end you see him become more of a human when his wife passes away. He goes through trauma, and the crew of people kind of come together, and I wanted it to be a part of revealing the things that the people I worked with had been through that led them to that job. I was always thinking about the way that it's the system that we're held within rather than just the people within it that are to blame. I wanted my poems to do that, not just for the environment and for the birds and the landscape, but also for the people. There were a lot of stories that I didn't tell that were in the book originally. I took out things I just couldn't get permission to include. I felt like, how can you ever get permission? There are things that I felt like, ethically, I shouldn't have included. There were a lot of decisions that I made with cuts that came later on that were important to me. I felt a huge responsibility to portray nuance in everyone that I brought in, and a lot of that work went into literally asking people for permission, showing them the poems. My dad is still really upset about this book, but when he read it the first time, he said it was fine, and he gave me permission. Even when you ask for permission, sometimes people will take it back years later. Permission is not a linear thing, the same way that time isn't. I don't know if I'd be brave enough to write this book now, as a more adult person who has experienced real life consequences for things. I don't know if I would be so bold. Now, my poems don't have as many people in them. I've stopped doing that as much. I learned a lot

from some things that I consider to be mistakes that I made when I wrote this book, things that have followed me that I wake up at night being like, why did I do that? I still have those feelings when I think about it. There's this poet, Andrea Gibson. and I think she was quoting Maya Angelou when she said this, but she was like, 'when you're a writer, you grow up in front of people, and everything that you've done is public forever. You have to be the person who gives yourself grace, even if you're embarrassed of something that you did or you would do it differently now. You'll always feel that way when you publish something for the rest of your life.' I'm trying to learn how to do that all the time.

**Q: *Vantage* has such a poignant somatic quality, at times reducing bodies to mere flesh in an almost lawless, animalistic, merciless manner. "Rules," my favorite poem, has a sense of unspoken, even taboo intimacy between the speaker and her boss conducted through the conduit of a third party, a lacerated human body. What guides your approaches to rendering bodies both human and animal? Is there a distinction between the two for you?**

TB: "Rules" is my favorite too! Well, my 'rules' have completely changed since I wrote this book. The world is so merciless and vicious and horrible right now. I feel like I wouldn't bring a book like this into the world right now. At the time, I was this poetry student taking these classes in school, but then, during the summer, to pay for school, I have to do this disgusting job. I just felt really disgusting. I mean my coworkers and I would call each other trash. We would talk about ourselves like we were trash cans or something; our bodies didn't feel like ours. I can't tell you how many times I tried to throw a trash bag into a dumpster, and it split all over me, and I had salmon guts in my hair–salmon guts that had been in the sun for three days. The nastiest smells, the grossest things, and just being asked to look directly at like what it means to be a body, what it means to live in a world where some people have to see our trash. In my regular life, I feel embarrassed when I throw something away. I had a friend who I helped move out of her dorm, and she had a cat sneakily, and she just put the litter box full of gross used litter into a trash bag and threw it into the garbage can. I was like, someone is going to interact with what you've just done. I was thinking about that level of being in filth. That really changed me,



and it made me desensitized to seeing dead things. The people that we encountered when we were in the middle of nowhere, they would be like the people in "Rules." The guy that we met was this sturgeon fisherman, and he was famous because he had a hole in the back of his head from a surgery he had, and he would always try to get people to put their finger in the hole in his head. I was always like, not today! The speaker [of "Rules"] and her boss were flirting with each other, but not dating, and it was this weird moment of like, 'let's just put our finger in this guy's head.' I am no longer desensitized to gore or violence or death, but when I worked there I was just like, this is life. I had a little bit of a curiosity about what would happen if I bring these poems into the poetry classroom, where everything is roses and rainbows and I come in with this hideous mess to show everyone. I thought that would be interesting. That's not how I write now, but I celebrate that. I can't believe that's your favorite poem. I've only heard that a couple of times, so that means a lot to me.

**Q: Writers tend to write our words out of order. Were there any poems in the collection that were written first and last, and did they end up being like the first and the last one?**

TB: I actually think no one's ever asked me this. The first and the last poems were the first and the last poems I wrote for it, definitely the first one. The first one, "Litter," I wrote that poem when I was a junior or senior in college. That poem came out of an exercise in an intro to poetry workshop class that was like everybody giving each other words to use in their poems, and the words I got were "blue condom" and "garbage," and that unlocked this story. I never thought I could write about the garbage crew until I wrote this poem. My professor was like, "Is this real? Did you just make this up?" and I was like, "No, this is my real life," and he was like "you should write a whole book about this," and then that opened the book up for me. "Litter" was kind of the 1st poem I ever wrote that I felt proud of in my life, and then it was also the first poem of my collection. That poem felt like the key, like a kind of map to the rest of the collection, like it needed to be the first. The last poem, sometimes I'm like, why did I put that in there? I wanted it to end with no conclusion, just the feeling of a dream, like how it felt to leave the job. That's probably why that is the last poem.

**Q: Speaking of that last poem, "Horse Stands While It Sleeps," I immediately noticed the lack of period at the end of the last line, and you kind of touched on that a little bit just now. How did you come up with that as the way to leave it with no real conclusion?**

TB: I wrote a lot of poems that were like that last poem. I wrote almost a whole other book of poems that felt like that. When I think of this book, I think that it's talking about all this stuff that happened in this one place in time, but there's sort of a shadow to the book, or a suppressed narrative of abuse that would happen before all this stuff happened, and that made working on the garbage crew feel empowering for the speaker. That last poem was a part of this long series of poems I wrote that really went into that traumatic experience that made becoming physically fit, becoming desensitized to grossness, and being able to be around men so important to me. These poems really dug into that, but then I felt like it was exposing too much, and part of me wanted those poems to find a way in. That last poem was the only one that felt like it worked, and the title was something I thought of that I loved. It was this idea of being strong, but not being present: being able to carry yourself through something but leave your brain somewhere else. I think that that was sort of how I felt the whole time I was there. I wanted it just to feel like the dream state of just being in a place where you don't feel safe, but you're still interested in the place.

**Q: I'm interested in how you balance your voice as a poet with the work you're doing as a student.**

TB: I'm getting a PhD in poetry, so it helps to be really specific in that way. I'm also teaching gender and sexuality studies, and so that's the part of being a writer where sometimes oversharing is really comfortable to me but not something you bring into the classroom. Every class I teach, I try to make it feel like a poem: I try to bring in weird games that don't make any sense, or I'll make my students personality quizzes like what kind of egg are you? They're like, why are you making us do this? I'll somehow connect it to writing a poem. With gender and sexuality studies, I'm always like, okay we're gonna watch *Love Island*, and then we'll talk about one scene, and then I'll make them act out a play. Then I'll make them do it again. I want the classroom to feel alive. Editorial voice is so different from a creative writing voice. I think what I've actually started to do is collapse the difference between the two. I started making these unhinged classes, like I taught a class called "Poetry and Slime," and I wouldn't let students call me professor or my name–we had to call each other an invented thing every time. So they'd be like "Dear Gummy Bear, Today I worked on this …" I found that the more I talked as a teacher, I was weird. The collapsing of those voices made it so that I was enjoying my job more, and also I think my students liked it a lot more, and they wrote weirder things, and they trusted each other more, and it was just fun. They all had to have a slime companion for the semester, a weird object they had to be able to take with them everywhere. I spent a lot of my twenties learning how to suppress my creative voice to be a better teacher. Now, I'm learning that that's actually the opposite of what makes a good teacher. If you're working for a journal or magazine, it's different–it's hard. But then you can look at examples like one of my favorites: *Taco Bell Quarterly*. It's a magazine that exists to antagonize *Paris Review* and the *New York Times*, and they actually publish really good stuff and are winning awards, but they make all these jokes and are always being really silly online but still making good work. I think you can do both, but it's hard. That's something I've been thinking about a lot, too, is how much have I internalized that language of, 'you can't be your real self, or you can't show yourself when you're working.' I'm trying to learn how to do both.

**EQUINE LOVE**
MEDHA FOTEDAR



# ELEGY FOR THE SOUTHERN POET

**KATIE NELSON**

They are swept like dust across the splintered racecourse,
trampled beneath longhorn hooves. Highballs toppled,

paper glued with honey, line breaks jammed shut as
storage units. Unread while the pressure potential (force

with which water sank the Library of Alexandria) is double-
digit zeros. Beakers open and free how downy woodpeckers

break into cypress trunks, begging for a mouthful of sonnets.
Polymerase chain reaction multiplies a genetic destiny:

matches via their father's side, a sculptor housed by the silt
of Buffalo Bayou. He got his plaster free, a scoop from the riverbed,

sheets of algal blooms on top. When the poets told him they'd
like to live off language, he crawled among bridge inhabitants

and wept. Only coding batteries, calculating rocket flames
will suffice. The spark has gone out. In the rulebooks of plasma

membranes, nonpolar substances pass. Things that flow
towards the solute. Reverse diffusion, and chaos awaits,

a beggar's future. Stringing words along like polypeptide chains,
their futures a misshapen unfolding. Ain't no free verse where

the cacti grow, just windmills and the men who made them.
Study biology and suddenly it's clear why petroleum dominates

this land: rocks grind out what is wanted, prehistoric whales
fueling the trucks of cowboys. Ain't no room in the back

for stories. All facts here, no nonsense, tumbleweeds for fertile
fruit. The poets curl into Plato's cave, chewing magnolia leaves.

They know at their core, they are desert folk, skulls poking
above the sand as a final metaphor. Another species extinct.



## POISE
CORY VOSKANIAN

**YOU ARE WHAT YOU** _____
TONI ODUFUYE

# EYES BETWEEN THE HEAVENS AND EARTH

AMY SUO

*CW: suicidal thoughts, domestic abuse/violence, child abuse; depictions of racism and blood/gore*

I despise this country and its stupid eyes, staring at me always, always those lusting eyes. They have no mouths, they do not speak. But I know what they say.

Listen closely, and you can hear it too. The eerily quiet sounds of southern suburbia at first. But, then, all of a sudden, like a flame onto gasoline, it's here. Hyena laughs and diesel oil wounds. You can hear it too, right?

In here, there is no pity. In here, it reeks of blood, desperation, and smoke. In here, I eat angels for breakfast.

**Now and always I will be seen,**[1]
**从眼睛藏在土和泥。**[2]

It is a cold Saturday, the day before service, and the church is usually empty, but today is different, today is of import. As we enter the chamber, I feel a vile nervousness rising up my chest like bile, and my hands go over the motions nailed into them, a practiced dance. A little Post-it note directs us to sit at the front, and we obey. Behind us, shuffling feet and shifting eyes, a crowd starts to file in, filling the pews with a respectful quiet. If I look too hard at any of their eyes, their faces will start to distort and twist all red and eerie, so instead I stare at my lap. Today, I decided to wear a frilly blue dress with pink polka dots. I like blue; its calm comforts my frenzied stomach, and my eyes trace lines through the dots. The church doors close and the people settle down to whispers – our cue.

My brother Raymond and my sister Lucy stand, and I do too, adjusting my skirt as I rise. We walk, like soldiers to the war drum, *badump*, *badump*, over and up the stage to the grand piano welcoming us at the center. I wonder how they managed to move it; it looks heavy, burdened. We sit down in front of it, my brother on the left, my sister on the right, and me squished all puppet-like; the bench is a slight too small.

A purposeful mistake, packaging us like meat, a trio, three for one sale.

Our hands rise in perfect unison over and atop the glistening keys, and it begins. Our fingers flutter just like how we had rehearsed a million times before, except this time, we feel the groping hands of those sober eyes lined up in the pews, reaching out until they feel our yellow skin. They touch us, adore us, infantilize us.

Tearing off flaccid flesh to feed the undeserving.

[1] Classical Chinese novel chapters were often titled using couplets that would summarize the events in the chapter. The couplet lines written in this piece are all original.

[2] 从眼睛藏在土和泥 (Cóng yǎnjīng cáng zài tǔ hé ní): From eyes hidden in dirt and mud.



They want more, more.

Jagged teeth tug apart tissue and tendon, we feed into their lust and hunger. We act the roles of the obedient, patriotic immigrant children that they dream of. We play their song, something to do with starry freedom and militant stripes, and the notes taste sweeter to them under our foreign hands.

They kiss our bones and lick our marrow. Wandering hands, diseased with white and lies, trace bruises upon our skin, pressing deeper and deeper our subservience, and we try not to flinch.

Finally, our ligaments are severed, our skin desperately clinging onto the skeleton of something that looks human–wants to be human–but isn't. It never was. They are full, and our performance has concluded. We stand, one by one, tired and empty. My siblings bow, and I curtsy, and Raymond will call me a "retard" for this difference.

Difference is arbitrary. A useless qualifier, yet all so insidious. Its existence is a plague, its creation a mistake. Everything in the world is different, people included. If no one person thinks the same way as another, then who truly decides what is different?

It started then; there was that one day. Scene: Mom was screaming, crying, her hand wrapped in a towel already soaked brown with blood. Lucy, being the oldest and the strongest of us, was waving around the landline, threatening to dial 911. Raymond was yelling too, a little scared, a little. There was glass shattered and splattered across the floor, venomous snakes ready to strike. Dad was going to kill himself. My dad was going to kill himself. And there was nothing I could do to make it all stop. I went to school the next morning with a swollen lip and a hidden eye. Everyone looked at me differently after that. After that, I realized just how different we were.

So I will stare at the mirror, picking and plucking until my face melts away into the edges of the sky, yellows, reds, and blacks embracing in their danse macabre. *You are not real, and I am dreaming.* But I am sentient, I am whole. There is nothing I can use to wash away my ruined painting.

See that pretty red house.
It has nothing without.
See the lawn with green grass.
With dew like sparkling glass,
Over there look, it's Mom.
She is happy and calm.
Will Mom play with me now?
Mom is cleaning the house.
In the kitchen, see Ray.
Smart Ray, can we go play?
No, Ray has to study.
He can't be my buddy
Here comes Lulu, see lu!
Wearing a dress so blue.
Pretty Lulu, let's play!
She is cooking today.
Through the front door, see Dad.
See his smile. He is glad.
Does strong Dad want to play?
No, Dad has work today.
See that pretty red house.
It has nothing without.
See the lawn with green grass.



With dew like sparkling glass,
A happy family there,
They are pretty and fair.
But, who will play with me?
Do not look. Do not see.

**I am not who they say I am,**
**我们想飞从地到天。**[3]

Our parents often hit us. Although, I should clarify, not in a way particularly abusive, but in a way strictly disciplinary, demonstrative of their care. Later in life, I would tell this to a select group of people I had trusted to not judge. Each time, they all looked at me with the same eyes, pity, at first, and then concern for the indifference plastered across my countenance, and I saw it in their clenched fists that they were pathologizing me, malleating my character into some preset notions of an abused, scarred child. I am not that child. I never was that child, so I decided, then, that these people would no longer be deserving of the right to my memories. I later broadened this boundary to include all others as well.

I didn't blame their eyes for looking at me that way. I suppose it would have been a natural reaction to my described images of my mother strangling me with furious abandon or my head being slammed into the hardwood floor again and again, stuttering, sputtering, until I felt dizzy from concussion, yellow from the bruises on my skin. What infuriated me was their presumptions of what kind of person these events made me. A small part of me wished for them to be correct, that it really was that simple, that all my problems could be tied to a few bad memories wrapped into a perfect knot of some Freudian diagnosis. But it never felt *right*, something always seemed off with the way they described me, like I knew deep down that it was much more complex, that the question of "who I am" was truly and

3 我们想飞从地到天 (Wǒmen xiǎng fēi cóng de dào tiān): We want to fly from the earth to the heavens.

utterly unsolvable, nondeterministic in nature. I despise therapy because it always reminds me of this uncertainty. *My back aches; I am old now.*

I am becoming. Unrelentless and unwavering. The inescapable violence didn't stop until I turned eighteen, and when I turned eighteen, I learned how to fly.

The stars do shine much brighter when I am
    Alone. The air is still and neath my feet
The dull concrete feels hard and coarse. I slam.
    And to escape, I want to break and beat.
And yet, my feeble strife persists in vain,
    Like wringing water from a mangled cloth,
While in the midst of howling April rain,
    Or like a stranded man at sea in wroth.
A boat of rot and wood at his avail,
    Surrounded by the vast ubiquity
Of dark. Though he knows not of where to sail,
    He persists for sanguine obliquity,
And row and row and row he shall against
    The current pounding at his curs-ed soul.
He knows for this he's owed no recompense,
    But will and row forevermore til null.
And such incessant spirit as is he
    has surely lost his pitied sanity.
The oscillating waves and thunder be
    And gone all hopes of that humanity.
Yet row and row and row and row he shall,
    Until his reason why he rows has been
Forgotten, lost at sea, and all the mal,
    Interminably deep, will now cut in
That frail mortality, he yearns to own
    Some faculty divine. Alas, to know,
A man of tooth and grin and hollowed bone,
    A child of Man and Sin, shall naught but row.

**The ground is cold, but who are you,**
**在月亮里, 留意小兔。**[4]

And you know you can't hate them, no matter what they did. You can't hate them, because they are just like you. Their damage is yours, for all of eternity. You hate, instead, the world that made them that way, the curse placed on your bloodline, the inevitable fate of war, displacement, and the venom of memory.

I've learned that despair comes from war. The recalcitrance of dirt. The spit of mankind. I was young, too young to remember, too young to know better. We had planned a family ski trip, but none of us really knew how to ski. We were excited, nonetheless. Kentucky never got cold enough in December to snow, so we drove up to Indiana, an hour's drive across the Ohio River. The change in temperature past the resort's flamboyant entrance was almost immediate, and I shivered as I layered on puffy jackets and fuzzy clothes. Once warm, I was greeted with a glittering lawn of snow and sun reaching into the darkness of winter. The wind blew little white clusters onto my woolen gloves, and I giggled, watching the flowers deform into sad beads of water.

It was a happy day, however. We rented cheap equipment and were quickly on our way to discover how ski lifts actually worked. I dangled my legs off the bench and looked down as we got higher and

4 在月亮里, 留意小兔 (Zài yuèliàng lǐ, liúyì xiǎo tù): Up there in the moon, careful little rabbit.

higher into the clouds, wondering what would happen if I slipped off and fell down, down, down. *Would I sink into the cold? Would it hurt? Or would I fly away like a crane with feathers as white as snow and wings as dark as night? Flap my wings and sing into the heavens where no one could see me ever again.* Too late now; there is ground beneath my feet.

I was a much worse skier than I had ever imagined. I hadn't anticipated how awkward it would be to have two long sticks clumsily attached to my slightly too big hand-me-down boots. After repeatedly tumbling face down full of snow, I eventually got the hang of it, but, by that time, the sky was turning red with fury and my clothes were soaked with ice. We decided to return indoors.

The lodge was filled to the brim as worn-down bustles of people trickled in to escape the dying of the warm light of sun. We passed by several full tables, and my eyes bounced around excitedly. I spotted a family with yellow skin and blackened hair, and I expressed my naive excitement of seeing people like us in such a Southern-Midwestern setting to my mom. She glanced over them quickly, and with furrowed brows, pulled me away from them. "Those are not our people. Those are 日本鬼[5]. Stay away from them," she hissed in a hushed voice. Under her breath, I could see the hate and trembling she tried to hide away.

I was too young at that time to know the clear (but really quite vague) differences between race and ethnicity. All I saw was that the family looked like us and talked like us, an especially rare occurrence for Kentuckiana. I later learned that 日本鬼 meant Japanese Devil, a derogatory term picked up after the atrocities of WWII in the East. It was only much, much later, when I was old enough to hear such things, that I would learn of the genocide, rape, and carnage from which my parents' contempt stemmed from. But back then, I didn't know of such things nor did I understand the intricate complexities of racial hatred and post-war bitterness. So I believed my parents when they told me that the Japanese were an evil race and that I should never ever associate with them.

5 日本鬼 (rìběn guǐ): A derogatory term used to refer to Japanese people after WWII.



My mom had packed a thermos of warm soup, and we were quick to lap up the nectar in our eyes before returning outside to watch a light show. The neon colors and exuberant displays should've captured my attention, but all I could think about was the encounter from earlier.

**We are all deeply marred to fear,**
**别哭， 跑跑快跑, 我儿。**[6]

Recently, I've read Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking* (the most heavily annotated text I own by far), a book detailing the timeline of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Nanjing Massacre (南京大屠杀[7]) with a *Rashomon*-esque narrative and excerpts and interviews from survivors. Many historians cite the beginning of WWII being in 1939, but the East's war began much earlier in 1931 with the Imperial Japanese invasion of Manchuria, a Northeast region of China on the border with Korea. Their fascist control seeped into the rest of Northern China and into the province of Hebei, where my dad's family lived in a tiny rural town named Suo Village (索庄村).[8] When Japanese troops marched into the city already impoverished by famine and disease, no one had the strength to resist their demands, and for this non-resistance, his grandfather was killed.

The Japanese made their way down to Nanjing, wiping out large populous cities along the way, one of which being Suzhou, where my mom's family had lived. Being the lucky few, they had managed to quickly flee the area. Later, the city of 350,000 was reduced to only 500.

The total civilian deaths in the war ranged from around five to six  million, not accounting for the millions of Prisoner of War executions.

6 别哭, 跑跑,快跑, 我儿 (Bié kū, pǎo pǎo, kuài pǎo, wǒ er): Don't cry, run run, my son

7 南京大屠杀 (Nánjīng dà túshā): The Nanjing Massacre or the Rape of Nanjing.

8 索庄村 (Suǒ zhuāngcūn): Suo Village, tiny rural village. Population of ~1,000.

Iris Chang's research took a toll on her health, and the thousands of threats from ultranationalists and denialists drove her into a paranoid psychotic state. In 2004, she committed suicide. Her work and dedication are immortalized in a wing in the Memorial Hall of the Victims in the Nanjing Massacre.

**HATRED BREEDS WAR, AND WAR BREEDS HATRED. A NEVER-ENDING CYCLE OF VIOLENCE AND DEATH.**

After the war, China was swept with a wave of anger and enmity, passing down to my parent's generation in Mao's Cultural Revolution of the 1970s and then the Tiananmen Square protests. Unlike Germany, Japan never officially made a direct apology for the atrocities they committed, and a shrine was even built to honor many of the convicted and unconvicted war criminals of Imperial Japan. The American government interfered with the war crimes tribunal, granting immunity to the Japanese researchers in charge of the most notorious human experimentation ever conducted in Unit 731. Thus, the anti-Japanese sentiment in many older Chinese generations has persisted strong and stronger.

Such is the nature of hatred. Imperial Japan, idolizing European fascism and bitter from Western invasions, was engrossed in a deep disgust of other Asian nations, considering them  inferior and dirt-like. Soldiers were beaten into this mindset, trained to think of the Chinese as nonhuman in order to desensitize them to the mass killing and raping of Chinese civilians.

The soldiers and people of Japan were not the ones to blame for the deaths of millions, yet the blood of family members and those dearly beloved was on their hands, and with no proper recompense, the path of least resistance led the grieving Chinese towards furious hatred. Never again will the people of China breathe  happy.

Hatred breeds war, and war breeds hatred. A never-ending cycle of violence and death.



**Dear father, pray you hear me now,**
请你的爱不大不小。[9]

My dad hadn't always been insane. At some time in our childhood, he lost his mind, never regained, never grounded. But there had always been something about him. A certain creative arrogance that kept him wayward and wandering. He wasn't incompetent, that wasn't it. Despite not being able to keep a job, he was quite an intelligent man, but he functioned in a different way than others did, and stubborn as he was, he refused to conform.

By the time he was seventeen, it was 1977, and Mao's communist regime had ended. The Chinese national exam, Gaokao (高考), took place for the first time in years, reopening all higher education to students. Being dirt poor and having nothing to his name, he took his chances with the exam and was granted a full coverage scholarship to a prestigious aerospace school. There, he got a bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering. In his mid-twenties, he tasted meat for the first time in his life. For a few years after graduating, he worked for very little wage before immigrating to the U.S. to chase the American Dream. He applied to graduate schools and got into Columbia but lacked the funds to afford the daunting tuition. He received a scholarship to Rose Hulman, however, and he eventually ended up in Indiana with a Master's in Engineering. After being let off and fired from multiple jobs, he decided to start a small business, throwing away his academic degrees to work in agriculture trade, exporting ginseng farmed in the Appalachian Mountains to China.

He never wanted to have three kids. I don't think he even wanted to be a father in the first place. By the time it was my turn to be fathered, he found excuses to be away from the house, embarking on business trips all over Kentucky. Despite being absent, I still think that he truly did love us, he simply didn't know how to love us in his awkward way. Even when he was home, he was still far away, drifting somewhere in the skies, because the ground was too hard. Growing up, the other kids in the small Chinese chain migration community often made fun of my dad. His aloof nature was often the topic of

9 请你的爱不大不小 (Qǐng nǐ de ài bù dà bù xiǎo): Please let your love be neither big nor small

petty gossip and whispers, and growing up, I was embarrassed of him. He was a strange man, stranger even, the older and more paranoid he got.

Then, in my sophomore year of high school, I was in the car with my mom when we got a phone call. His frantic voice on the other end of the line, stammering, stuttering. It took a while for us to interpret that he was stranded alone in the parking lot of a Cracker Barrel — he had been assaulted and robbed. We rushed to the scene of red and blue flares in the sky like fireworks. My mom warned me to stay in the car, before running out to where my dad stood, paralyzed like a dazed statue, his face all blue and puffy and swollen unrecognizable. I watched as my mother shook him, asking him what was going on, what happened. He shuddered violently, and broke, tears streaming, smearing the dried up blood down his chin and neck, eyes tainted with red, wide open and crazy. He started stumbling – half-yelling, half-ranting, half-slurring – to the police, but everything he said was in Chinese; he had forgotten how to speak English. His words were indecipherable, and my mom struggled to translate everything he was saying.

If the world had ever ended, this was it. This was apocalypse. I felt water welling up in my eyes, but I pushed the mire back in; I cannot cry, I cannot cry, for there are already too many tears on this earth, and so my skin prickles with cold of invented detachment. Soon, my brother arrived as well, and my mother quickly pushed him into the car with me. We sat, in complete silence, for what seemed like hours, until our parents eventually got into the car. My mom paused, and then explained softly and slowly.

My dad often dealt with rural Appalachian farmers, buying wild ginseng indigenous to the mountain range that he then processed and shipped over to China. Some of these encounters were characterized by a xenophobic hostility; to them, he was a foreign man trying to fraternize with wary hillbillies. Most of the time, he got along just fine, being a high-paying businessman who came from a similar poor rural background and on several occasions was even gifted deer carcasses, moonshine, and homemade sausages. But sooner or later, something bad had to happen, and that was today. These were



new clients, two men and a young woman. When my dad arrived with his broken English, they saw an opportunity. In the eyes of America, the Chinese are infantilized, seen as weak, subservient, and slow, and here one was, alone with a minivan full of valuable goods and a bag full of money. One of the men talked to my dad as a distraction, and the other snuck up behind, smashing a brick down into his head. The girl, oblivious, screamed and ran off, as my dad crumpled unconscious to the ground, and the men drove off with the minivan and the hundreds of dollars of ginseng.

For the week following the event, my dad was locked in a catatonic state, not eating or sleeping. Then he became frenzied, buying obscure Chinese remedies and smearing mixtures of herbs, snake venom, and medicine on his wounds. And finally, a depression that lasted months.

He was a changed man, a broken man. His mind became empty, and his memory left him as if all the famine from his childhood, the starvation and death, had finally resurfaced to combine with his bruises, leaving a shell desperately clinging onto the frame of a man that once was real, that once was human. The tears I saved up back then come to me now. I cry for my father.

**Always stuck with sighs and goodbye,**
**永远不是心爱的孩。**[10]

It is 11 pm, and my mom is in the kitchen humming to the melody of some communist anthem, tuned to long ago memories of shimmering lament. Her hands, wrinkled brown from years of rage, are keeping busy with careful folding and pinching. I sit down beside her and join in the motions over the wooden board powdered with flowers of flour and crumbs of dough. Together we are there, crafting imperfect dumplings to be frozen tonight and eaten next month.

She pelts me with questions about my future and my failings, and I pause, I glance, I wait for her

10 永远不是心爱的孩 (Yǒngyuǎn bùshì xīn'ài de hái): Never will be a dearly beloved child.

to tire. Smiles so pretty and I do not weep. You breathe, then look at me, eyes glimmering with love. I miss you, mother. Do not go.

And when she pauses, I am curious.

I've noticed that, whenever I asked about her past, her eyes would glaze and she would give some vague answer. She never liked talking about her past, whether it be the poverty of Mao's attempt at communism or her protests post-university in Tiananmen Square. She, like me, avoided the pains of memory altogether.

I write because I am compelled to, because it interests me, because what I cannot say, I can write, instead, as imperfect as I can. Imagined and real. Until the end of times lost.

I am my mother's child, and it frightens me terribly. Always running from all that ails me, to where? To when? Feet stirring, heart blurred. Until I am lost in the bluest grass and the clearest skies. Oh mother, forgive me now. I do not know where I am, but this is content. Where the wind sings west and the waters are sweet. Where the eyes do not see, do not look, cannot be. But mother, I miss you. Your smile and your hate. Love and punishment. Your tears salt the earth and the core of all that is real. Hum me a pretty tune of everything you lost and everything I've gained. Because of you, mother. I owe it all to you, mother.

**I WRITE BECAUSE I AM COMPELLED TO, BECAUSE IT INTERESTS ME, BECAUSE WHAT I CANNOT SAY, I CAN WRITE, INSTEAD, AS IMPERFECT AS I CAN. IMAGINED AND REAL. UNTIL THE END OF TIMES LOST.**

You are your mother's child, but American-born. Dream of a time more sweet and kind, flittering, fluttering beyond your grasp. In between what is real and what is good. Empty rhetorics and silly minds. You will never be your mother, child. You are different. The egg will hatch, and you will learn this, but now you can cry feeble with all the intent you can muster. You long to dig into the dirt and take root, entwined with the deep for as long as you can stand. You long to reach up to the sky and fly away, pass through the veil into dreams and imagining. But all you have are legs to walk on this American dirt. Please.

Laugh, child. Laugh.

Laugh, mother. Laugh.




# FRACTURED FRAMES

ARIANNA PETTEWAY

*CW: mentions of racism, death*

I keep our fading image
on my vanity
in a fractured, rotating frame
the one from my cheer days

I stand tall
in the middle in my
blue, black, and white
you shrink to the left of me

with Liyah on my right, you
wear that green polo
that stretches way
longer than your torso

my arm rests over its collar,
drapes your shoulder,
mirroring the thin blue bow
that veils my crisply parted twists—
this would be way back
when *I* was noticeably older,

our fingers interlocked
and playful
our eyes bright and mischievous, presenting
a glimpse into what was and what could've been

I still see possibility in that frame,
in the vast open field behind
just the three of us
but I also can't look at it
without feeling like I'm going insane
death lives here

it rests next to a button,
the one I got while eating
Papa's greens at the repast—
a pin with your face

and a scratch on your forehead
looming over a cityscape,
bigger than a city
larger than a life



you gave me seventeen years
of joy and chaos and thrill
and I thank you but I hate you
for leaving me with just
this picture and this stupid
button that I let collect dust
cause they give me

a glimpse into what is no longer
into what the world deems disposable
that'd be
a black boy,
finally tall enough to rest
*his* arm on a sister's shoulder

and to jump and touch the net,
old enough to go to real jail now, no juvie
old enough, tall enough
yet still the same boy in that frame,

left to draw his last breath
by a beating heart with a badge
*celebrating the life of*
but all I see is death

# PYRE

SARAH JUN

*CW: suicidal thoughts, self harm, eating disorders, body image, domestic abuse/violence, blood/gore, sexual content*

## Act 1: The Forge

i.

Before I was born, Dad directed a film about a biker gang who did nothing but drift along American roads, smoke, drink, and fuck. Grandfather despised the film, thought it worse than Dad's usual "spectacular money-eating shit" fare, and had done his level best to stop it from being released. Arguments about the movie quickly spiraled into personal insults. Dad shouted that Grandfather was part of the old guard holding back Hollywood who oughta be ushered into nursing homes, and Grandfather yelled back that Dad was a light-headed alcoholic who wasn't good enough to lay eyes on his precious daughter, let alone marry her.

It was early enough in their marriage that Mom still cared for Dad and had tried to intervene during one of these fights. Dad ended up slapping her in front of Grandfather. She got a black eye and a bruised cheek. Dad landed in the hospital for a broken wrist and two black eyes. After that, he never touched Mom again. He apologized on his knees, brought her flowers and diamonds, and she forgave him.

Grandfather neither forgave nor forgot. Actors mysteriously quit, release

dates shifted, promotion was nonexistent, and the film tanked. Dad's biker flick was a Failure, but for years he had claimed that without Grandfather's influence, it would have been a Success.

In my family, there is only Success or Failure. You're either a Winner or a Loser. You can only have Triumphs or Defeats.

Being a Wolfstein means you have to fight for the laurels. We're not allowed to stand around and look pretty, like all these other spoiled American families. If you want recognition, you have to bleed for it.

So you're in the arena, sword in hand.

You're eight paces from your opponent, and shooting at nine.

You're the one with the match stick, watching your enemy's house burn down. Maybe your enemy is in the house when you light the fire. Maybe not. Better if they are, though.

ii.

The clock is ticking and tocking, its hands creeping closer to midnight, and I still haven't come. I'm in bed, envisioning every hot scenario, all the red lipstick and boobs and sultry voices, and nothing is working. Maybe I'm too tired from all the late nights and early mornings or too stressed out about my grades or maybe it's genetics. Maybe Dad's Ingber genes have fucked me over once again. Whatever the issue is, I wish it would go away so that I could have a night of peaceful sleep.

Dick in hand, dirty magazine propped up on my chest, tissues on the side. I'm stroking and stroking and I can't feel anything. I might as well be touching white cast marble, like my dick's been replaced with one from a Greco-Roman statue.

I turn the page and try to make up another little fantasy to play in my head. I'll hear a series of *click-clacks* down the hallway, growing louder and louder as she approaches my room. *Click-clack, click-clack, click-clack*. Then, a brisk knock on the door. And she won't wait for my response, she'll just open the door and stride in, clad in nothing but her high heels. I haven't decided on whether she looks like Julia Roberts or Cindy Crawford, but it doesn't matter. She'll be here, in my room, on my bed, on top of me, and—



Oh, fuck. *Finally*. I pant harsh, short gasps, and my hand works faster and faster. A flame ignites inside me. It's weak, but goddamn it, it's something. There's something alive in me and if I keep it up, maybe it won't die so quick this time. *Fuck, fuck, fuck, oh God baby, oh yeah,* I chant in my head. *Don't stop. Fuck, don't stop*.

The scene is so vivid I can almost hear someone walking to the room, the door creaking open, and a little voice saying, "Jakey?" A moment of pure, excruciating silence. "Jakey, I had a bad dream again." I open my eyes and squint at the door to find a little girl clad in a Little Mermaid dress, a halo of golden curls around her head outlined by the amber hallway light. Shit, it's Miri. My hand falls to the side, and I stifle a groan.

Under the covers, I discreetly slip my boxers back on. Miri shuffles forward. She stares at me with her big, brown eyes—doe eyes she inherited from Dad. "They're always staring at you like they're begging you to hit them with your car," Grandfather once said about them. "Go to your room, Mir," I say, my voice rough. "I'll be there in a minute."

**SHE STARES AT ME WITH HER BIG, BROWN EYES—DOE EYES SHE INHERITED FROM DAD. "THEY'RE ALWAYS STARING AT YOU LIKE THEY'RE BEGGING YOU TO HIT THEM WITH YOUR CAR," GRANDFATHER ONCE SAID ABOUT THEM.**

"Okay." She sniffles, a warning that I've got about two minutes before the waterworks start, and leaves.

I go to the bathroom and wash my hands twice. Rinse my face for good measure. The corner of my lip stings from a half-healed cut. My face still wet, I open my eyes and find a guy who looks like he got worked over by Brian McCarthy at Neil's boxing gym last Friday. The left side of my face is covered in mottled yellow-purple bruises. I have a nasty black eye on the right. But hey, at least my nose isn't broken. Yet.

Brian's good—he got in more hits than anyone else ever has. But I was better. Magazine hidden and erection more than gone, I head for Miri's room. The color pink assaults my eyes as I open the door. Pink

walls, bedsheets, lamps, and even the freaking glow-in-the-dark stars. In the middle of Pinklandia is a lump buried underneath the sheets. The only motion it makes is when it breathes. "What is this?" I say, prodding the lump's ribs, right where the ticklish spots are.

A squeal as Miri tries to escape the tickling. "Stop, Jakey, it tickles!"

"It speaks! I wonder what else it can do." I go back in for another tickle attack, and this one pushes her right into my trap. She crawls out from under the blanket, desperate to escape, and lands right in my arms.

I scoop her up. "Ha, I caught it!" I exclaim.

Miri wraps her arms around me and buries her wet face into the crook of my neck. "Only cuz I let you," she mumbles.

"Sure, kid."

She huffs, and the sarcastic gesture is more cute than derisive. It's a bad habit she picked up from me.

I lift a hand to pat her hair. "What was it this time?" I ask, though her answer never changes. "The volcano," she says. "Pom…Pompee—"

"Pompeii?"

She nods. For the millionth time, I mentally curse out whatever idiot nanny thought it was a good idea to let Miri watch the TV documentary on the Pompeii eruption. "Why don't you tell me about it? It'll make you feel better if you let it all out."

"Me, you, Mommy, and Daddy were standing outside. And then I heard a big boom! That's when the volcano erupted, and lava flew everywhere. It was the really fast kind, too. I looked for Daddy and Mommy and you, but you were gone. So I tried to run away to find you, but my legs were stuck, and the lava was all around me."

iii.

Miri is five years, four months, and seventeen days old at the time of her death. That's 47,160 hours of life, or 2,829,600 in minutes.



It takes her approximately nine minutes to pass out from smoke inhalation. It takes two more minutes for her to die.

iv.

Dad calls for me as I'm walking back to my room. "Jacob?" he says, voice slurring, tongue tripping. He must have just returned from his weekly Friday bar excursion. I roll my eyes and approach his office. The sour odor of beer attacks my nose, and one peek through the door confirms that, yup, he's drunk. Dad's sprawled across the couch on his stomach, a position he's going to regret in the morning. His wireframe glasses are perched precariously on the arm of the couch. He turns his head towards the door, his eyes still closed, and repeats, "Jacob? Is that you, son?" If I answer, I'll have to help clean him up and guide him to bed, which will be the fourth time this month. My limit is three Fridays. I remain silent.

His breathing slows and his face relaxes. He falls asleep. In sleep, they say, people look younger or more innocent. Dad's appearance doesn't change. He looks as middle-aged and cynical as he does when he's awake. The only difference is that his eyes are closed.

This will be the last time I see Dad. If I knew this, would I have answered? Would I have entered his office, crouched by his side, and said, "Yeah, Dad, it's me. What do you need?" But it is the fourth Friday of the month, and my limit is three. I could not allow myself to help him, however much I wished I did.

v.

Mom's been seeing someone behind Dad's back for six months, and I still haven't told Dad about the affair.

I'm probably a bad son.

Correction: I am a bad son.

But if I tell him, it's not as if the situation will improve. Dad learning about the affair will lead to an implosion. Instability in the form of a messy divorce and messier custody fights. Chaos is the last thing Miri needs. I read this in a child-rearing book I borrowed from the library. Young children need stability. They need a singular place of living, two parents, and lots of love. This is important in building

their identity and self-confidence. An absence of any of these elements can impact their well-being in the future. I can provide love and ensure that we live in one house. Unfortunately, I can't force my parents to parent, for all my efforts these past years.

Besides, New Guy makes Mom happy. His name is Sonny Ruvolo, and he's a novelist. "Mostly short stories," he said in a thick New Jersey accent, "but I was taken by the desire to write a novel. And"—violent hand gesture—"out it sprang, like Athena from Zeus's skull." Mom is producing an adaptation of Ruvolo's novel. It's going to star Al Pacino as a detective who finds out his daughter isn't his biological kid. Fun shit.

Ruvolo has been over to our house for dinner a couple times. He makes killer spaghetti. I spotted him and Mom doing the spaghetti kiss-thing from *Lady and The Tramp* in the kitchen and almost threw up. I wanted to sock him in the jaw—show him who the man around here was when Dad wasn't home, but Mom was smiling. A real smile that carved lines into her cheeks. And in that moment, the woman I was spying on wasn't Mom but an entirely different person, a person she could only be without us.

vi.

*Everything made in the forge cannot be unmade.*

This is the opening line to Ruvulo's new novel. I can't believe this shit is an actual New York Times bestseller. Who let Ruvolo anywhere near Penguin Books, let alone a typewriter?

vii.

Is there anything more mortifying than finding your Dad's Viagra in the medicine cabinet when you were trying to find a razor?

I close the cabinet door and give up on shaving. Hopefully, Tess digs stubble. I'm not surprised, though. Dad's been drinking since he was fifteen. He's "quit" a dozen times, gone to multiple rehabs, and cycled through the 12-step program so many times that I can recite the exact apology he always offers on step ten. Of course he can't get it up.



viii.

I hold my hand over the open stove for as long as I can stand it, and then longer. My hand is covered in red, weeping blisters for the next two and a half weeks. I burst open most of them by day two. Some would call this self-mutilation. Dad would call this equality. Mom would call my psychiatrist. I call this duty.

ix.

One night, I have a dream, too.

I'm standing in the front yard, watching the house crumble into ash. But I can't move. My feet are sinking into the ground like quicksand, and my arms are wrenched behind me. I'm howling for Miri, Dad, Mom, anyone.

"Please let me go," I beg, and they tell me, their voices muffled like they're underwater, *No, son, we can't do that. It's for your own safety.*

Two firefighters emerge from the house. Between them is a stretcher covered by a white sheet. They try to drag me away before I can see more, but I pull away, ignoring the pop-hiss of my shoulder ripping out of its socket.

Beneath the sheet is an outline of a figure so small and so recognizable—how many times have I seen that exact shape underneath a blanket—but it's okay, it's alright. Soon she'll start squirming around because she's a hyperactive five-year-old. "Surprise," she'll exclaim. "Did I scare you, Jakey?"

"You sure did, kid, you scared the fucking heart out of me. Never do that again, I swear, or you'll be in big trouble. Aw, don't cry, I didn't mean it. You know I could never get mad at you, Mir. Just tell me you're not hurt. Tell me you're fine. Shake your hand or wiggle a foot or something. Why don't you get out from that sheet so I can see you? What's the matter, why aren't you moving?" Why isn't she moving?

I can't breathe. I can't breathe. My lungs feel like they're being crushed by compactors. It is only when I wake up that I realize that that was not a dream.

x.

"Beverly Hills Mansion Burns Down," the Los Angeles Times proclaims on the front cover, complete with a vivid photograph of the fire in question. In the full picture, I'm in the bottom left corner, kneeling on the front lawn, but they cropped me out.

"Arson or Accident?" the headline continues. That's the Question of the Year, and for a period of time, in L.A. at least, it's an issue that's more pressing than other national concerns like "Where's Osama bin Laden?" or "Did you watch The Two Towers yet?" The full report is going to be released by the fire investigators in a few weeks, and the media is practically having a countdown to the day.

*As of today, the fire investigators are still examining the scene to determine the cause. While they have declined to comment, there is significant evidence that the fire was an—*

Mom rips the newspaper out of my hands and tosses it into the trash.

**WE ALL ARE GUILTY, THE LIVING MORE THAN THE DEAD.**

"Hey!" I protest. "I was reading that."

"Until the report comes out and exonerates your father," she says, "I won't have you read these lies—"

"Exonerate him?" I repeat, raising my eyebrows. "What for? He's guilty, Mom."

"Your father—"

"—drank that night, like he did the night before and the night before that." Mom crosses her arms. "That doesn't mean that he set the fire."

"Don't play stupid. How the fire started changes *nothing*. He would still have been too drunk off his ass to do anything but sit in a burning house and let Miri die." My voice begins to rise of its own accord. "Do you get it? Your alcoholic bastard of a husband that you picked to be a father let Miri—"

Mom slaps me across the face, stunning me into silence. It doesn't hurt—all the nerves in my face are dead from boxing—except Mom's never hit me before. I raise a hand to my left cheek and find blood. Her wedding ring must've cut me.

She drops her hand and swallows. "He's not the only one to blame," she says quietly. "Everyone had a part to play." And I smile because, for once, she's said something that we can both agree on. We all are guilty, the living more than the dead.



## Act II: The Stake

i.

They keep asking me what I remember. And it doesn't matter who it is asking—the medical staff, police, reporters, Mom—my answer is the same: nothing.

The whole night, up until I wake up in the hospital bed, is blank. The doctors call it "dissociative amnesia" and say it'll take time before I regain my memory. How long exactly? They don't know. Could be days, weeks, months. Depends on how fast he recovers. Could be forever.

ii.

During a fire, the oxygen concentration drops to 10-15 percent, at which point death from asphyxiation occurs.

iii.

I open my eyes and taste ash in my mouth. My throat is dry.

*"Where's Miri?"* is my first thought. It's a question I learned to ask the day Miri learned how to walk and I never stopped asking it since.

I'll never stop asking.

Where's Miri? Where's my baby sister?

iv.

I stop eating. It's not like one of those disorders college girls get, but everything I put in my mouth tastes like ash. I start getting real skinny to the point that I can count my ribs in the mirror. It's cool. Real Edward Norton from *Fight Club* like. Hey, maybe I can convince Neil to do something with that half-finished basement of his.

v.

"When can I go home?"

Mom is sitting on the hospital chair next to me. Her eyes are bloodshot and dull. There's nothing behind them. Creepy as shit. A silence balloons up between us, with only the steady beeps of the monitor threatening to puncture it.

"Mom?" I say.

"I don't know, sweetheart," she finally answers. She reaches out a hand to stroke my hair. I flinch at the cold touch, and she pulls her hand back as if I've stung her. "When you get better," she says and smiles weakly. "The doctors will tell us later."

Since when did she do motherly affection? And what happened to her nail polish? Her fingernails are bare, and it disturbs me. I move to sit up in the hospital bed, tired of being loomed over. She tries to stop me, but I bat her hands away. She hasn't treated me like this since I was seven and caught chicken pox. Like I was something fragile or something to care about. I sit up despite the shoulder pain and look at her. Her blonde hair, usually straightened and sleek, is a frizzy mess. She isn't wearing any lipstick either.

I frown. "Shouldn't you be in London with… him? Why are you back so early?" Mom's expression crumbles for a second, and it's like someone pulled the curtains before the stage is ready, and you wish they hadn't because everything backstage is a wreck. What the fuck's wrong with her? She's afraid. I can see it in the lines around her mouth and in the way her eyes widen. I just don't know what it is that she's afraid of. She's hiding it from me. Before I can demand an answer, the curtains have dropped back down.

She says, "You were sick, honey. I had to come back." She reaches out again to smooth my hair back from my clammy forehead and this time, I let her. Her hand is trembling. She pets me like she's trying to soothe herself.

vi.

The hallways of the hospital are long, narrow passages, sterilized and empty. And it is freezing. These damn hospital gowns are so thin. I shiver, rubbing my hands against my bare forearms as I stagger down the path. The exit is every other blue push bar door, but I ignore them all. There is another destination I am searching for. Finally, ahead. A glaring, red sign: BURN UNIT.

The putrid, sweet stench of impending death threatens to overcome me, but I can't turn away. Inside lay rows and rows of bandaged corpses-to-be in various states of decay, but I recognize Dad immediately.

He is wrapped in bandages from head to toe, with only his face visible. It's like viewing a Pharaoh before their entombment. He's attached to a monitor, but it's turned off for some reason. The dark, blank screen shows only my gaunt reflection in the glass.

I step towards him. My legs shake as if I were a newborn walking for the first time. "Dad?" I whisper. "Is that—is that you?"

He opens his eyes—doe eyes, brown eyes, eyes that beg you to hit them with your car—and lifts a bandaged arm. Stretches out his bloody hand. He's beckoning to me. I try to obey, but I can't. My legs won't move. I'm sorry Dad.

His lips part, and where his tongue should be is a dark stub of flesh, as black as coal. His not-tongue flops against the floor of his mouth, and it should be impossible for him to speak. When he does, it is both declaration and condemnation. It is the voice of God, and he has spoken, and he says: "Jacob."

He said my name. Oh God, he's alive.

I run to him. Except it's too late. He's fallen asleep, and he won't wake again. I grab him by the shoulders and shake and shake and shake—

A flash flood of nurses crash into the room, a sea of blue scrubs. "Hey! Hey!" I shout at them. "My dad's awake! He opened his eyes, he moved his arm. Just look for yourselves!" They ignore me, pretending as if Dad isn't there at all. They keep trying to drag me away, but I will not go, I will not leave him. The sea parts, clearing a path for the exit. If I leave, I can never return. I drag my feet against the slippery tiles, but my strength fails me as it has failed everyone else in my life. He said my name. He was awake. He's still alive.

The nurses don't believe me. It's the shock. The grief. Your over-active imagination working your trau-

ma. You poor thing, why don't you get in your bed and rest some, honey, alright, everything will be okay, your mom is coming back soon, don't you worry. You just close your eyes and dream, dream something sweeter than this, than the smell of burned flesh and the sight of charred skin and the sound of the death rattle your father made that you mistook for your name. But he said my name, I know he did, don't fucking sedate me you bitch, don't you dare fucking do it, I know what I heard, I'm not crazy, I don't want to go to sleep, please don't make me. Please don't make me.

But I sleep. I dream.

vii.

On the second day, I remember.

I should be dead, but I'm not. Here I am, a should-be corpse lying in a hospital bed, surrounded by flowers and "Get well" cards and smiling teddy bears like I'm fucking three. Laughter bursts out of me. I can't stop. This is fucking hysterical. It claws its way out of me. Tears form in my eyes. I shouldn't be doing this; I should be crying or screaming or rocking back and forth. Mom runs into my room, holding a stack of my old comics. "Jake, is everything alright—" I double over, my laughing fit intensifying.

**THE NURSES COME, ARMED WITH THEIR HONEY-SWEET WORDS AND DRUGS, AND I REMEMBER THAT CURSING IS ALSO A USEFUL REACTION TO LIFE'S BULLSHIT.**

"What's so funny?"

I wipe a tear with the back of my hand. The IV pinches my skin at the motion. My cheeks ache from the unnatural contortion. Mom stares at me, bewildered. There's a familiar crease between her eyebrows as she frowns, contemplating when to call the nurses and tell them I've officially lost it. Maybe I have. Maybe I am crazy.

The nurses come, armed with their honey-sweet words and drugs, and I remember that cursing is also a useful reaction to life's bullshit.



viii.

Mom wants me to speak at Dad's funeral, but I'm not sure she'll like my speech. I tell her so. She tells me to write one anyway.

"Why can't you do it? You're his wife."

"You're his son," she replies evenly.

A sneer, ugly and vindictive, spreads over my face like an oil spill across water. "And whose fault is that?" I say.

She doesn't have an answer for me. She never does.

ix.

Death has a funny effect on a person's reputation.

Take Dad. People couldn't make up their minds on whether they hated or loved his works. As the years passed, public opinion fell on the side of the former.

Now, critics thought his films were artistic masterpieces. Actors, even those who had only stumbled upon his sets by accident, praised his genius. "Shem Ingber was a visionary who never let anyone stop him from achieving his dreams," said Will Hartley, rom-com idol and the jackass who mistook Dad for a server once during the 1997 Academy Awards ceremony. "I would've given anything to work with him," Hartley added, knowing very well that he rejected three separate offers to star in Dad's movies. This effect is known as "posthumous fame." I call it "jumping on the funeral carriage."

x.

Sonny Ruvolo appears at the funeral.

He leaves twenty minutes later with a broken nose and crimson shirt.

xi.

Hi. Um. My—my dad was—well, he wasn't my hero. I never idolized him like that, even as a kid. But I admired certain parts of him. Uh. He always told the greatest bedtime stories. Looking back, I'm not

sure if they were meant for kids. A few gave me nightmares, but he—he was fantastic at the voices. And I had fun. That's the thing about him, I guess, that I want people to remember most. He just wanted to entertain other people and show them the world the way he saw it. Sometimes, that view wasn't nice—it could be macabre and depressing. There was a certain beauty to it, though. People didn't always appreciate his works, but Dad kept trying, anyway.

## Act III: The Hearth

i.

For Mom's fourteenth birthday, instead of a pony or necklace or kiss from Robert Redford, she received two officers on the doorstep, who crisply informed her that her beloved older brother had died in combat. Somewhere out there in the ever-deepening jungles of Vietnam laid the fragmented chunks of Jacob Aaron Wolfstein, dead at the tender age of nineteen.

Grandfather and Grandmother had two younger boys, Henry and Samuel. Grandfather loved Jacob, the most out of his sons. He adored Mom by virtue of her being his only daughter. He didn't give a shit about the other two.

Uncle Henry turned out okay. He lives in New York with his "housemate" and works as the family lawyer. Dad likes to call Uncle Henry "queer consigliere" behind his back.

We haven't heard from Uncle Sam in decades, not since he turned up high and begging for money at my parents' wedding.

I ask Mom about Uncle Sam, and she gives me a strained smile. "He's my brother. Of course, I love him. I hope he's doing well, wherever he is."

I ask her again some hours later. She's five drinks in and willingly retrieves her childhood family photo album. I ask her where the pictures of Uncle Sam are, and tell her I'm curious what he looks like now. Why haven't we met him? When questioning, I am cautious. The excavation of the truth is a delicate operation and the mine might collapse at any point.



"He didn't have it in him," she finally says, her eyes affixed on a photograph of her family at the beach. She and Uncle Jacob are hugging either side of Grandfather. The rest of the family is standing a slight distance away. "He wasn't like us. Sam didn't want what we wanted. And that really disappointed your grandfather."

Late at night, while everyone is asleep, I creep back into the living room and crack open the album. Jacob A. Wolfstein is my carbon copy. Or am I his? Anyhow, we share so many of the same features: deep-set blue eyes, large nose, thin lips. Curly brown hair. And we even have the same scrunch between our eyebrows when frowning. I wonder if he has the deep baritone voice that I have, or my barking laugh. Would he be my favorite uncle? I'll never know because he took the wrong step onto a landmine.

ii.

Brothers are weird like that. They're your heroes one day, bullies the next. They're funny, annoying, kind, and childish in the span of ten minutes. They'll promise to be by your side forever, and then die in a war or elope with a boyfriend to New York or become a heroin addict. They'll swear that they'll protect you no matter what, and then be at a party, making out with a girl. They'll climb up onto the roof of her house as your roof caves in. They'll lose themselves in the pleasures of a warm, tight heat, the very heat that'll burn you up like tinder. But they'll be too distracted by the processes of fumbling with a bra strap, and finding the right spots to kiss, and murmuring false words of adoration to have even noticed that you are gone.

iii.

*Singing in the Rain* is Miri's favorite film. God knows why. She's way too young to understand most of it. All she gets are "pretty pictures and pretty songs." But she loves that film to death. She'd watch it every night if she could, and I don't have the heart to tell her no. So I'm nodding my head to Lina Lamont's shrill Brooklyn accent or Cosmo's comedy routine. Sometimes, it's Gene Kelly's voice lulling the both of us to sleep.

I once read that Gene Kelly performed the title song with a 103-degree fever. Makes no sense

to work while you're that sick—he should've been in the hospital, not on a movie set—but you have to admire his fortitude. The guy kept on dancing and singing and twirling his umbrella around flawlessly all while he must have been feeling like he was burning up from the inside out.

iv.

The key is understanding that nothing's real onscreen. Not the kisses or tears or laughs or "I love you"s or "I hate you"s or cocks or tits. Nothing's real. It's all one big magic trick, starting with the one where they made you believe that man took a trip to the moon.

v.

I don't sleep. I don't dream. I lie awake in bed as numbness creeps up my limbs, and stare up at the flat, shadowy ceiling of our penthouse suite. Back home, my room had a sloped ceiling with a whole system of paper mache planets and stars dangling from it. Here in the hotel is an expanse of ghostly white.

The faintest echoes of Mom's call trickle through the walls. "I don't know what to do with him. He's not eating or sleeping… beginning to resemble a skeleton… Yes, I've tried, I—" She breaks off with a frustrated sigh. "He's seventeen. I can't treat him like a child… he won't talk to me. Oh, Sonny, I don't know what to do."

A long gap of silence as Sonny tells her what to do and Mom listens dutifully. "I understand what you're saying, but I—" The distinct clinking noise of glass hitting a surface. "I feel like a terrible mother," she continues in a hushed tone. "I shouldn't say this. Oh, I shouldn't say this…"

I roll onto my side, and bury my head underneath the sheets. Covered by the darkness, suffocating in it, I suck in as much oxygen as I can in one breath. Exhale. Repeat the process until there's no more air. Wait. Be patient. It'll take about eleven minutes, and that's not long at all. "I want my Miri back," Mom says. "I want my poor, sweet baby back."

vi.



The psychiatrist prescribes medication—she thinks a cocktail of drugs will help me. "Calm you down if you feel like everything is flying out of control," she says from behind her leather notebook, holding it like it's her shield. She taps her fancy quill pen against the cover. Tap. Tap. Tap. I am resisting the urge to take her pen and snap it in half. I'd watch in satisfaction as black ink drenches her silk white button-up shirt and tan carpet, like blood spilling from a broken artery. She'd scream and scream and scream, but she'd go quiet, exactly the way I would want her to be.

"What do you think, Jake?" she asks gently. I turn my attention back to her bland face. I don't need medicine. I don't need to be turned into some waltzed-out zombie, shuffling through life, chemicals dampening my senses. That's for crazy people. And I'm not crazy. Right?

Well, doc, I snap back in my head, you try having an asphyxiated baby sister and burnt-up dad, and not be the emotional equivalent of Hurricane Andrew. I don't need any medicine. Thanks. I storm out of her goddamn titty-beige office, only to be frog-marched back in by two of Mom's henchmen, Tweedledee and Tweedledum.

"You're going to let this lady drug me up without a fight?" I say on the phone later. "Are you serious? I'm fine without them, I swear to fucking God, I am."

Mom disagrees. She thinks I carry the same illness Dad has. She thinks I'm weak. But above all, she thinks, Like father, like son.

She's afraid of what my rage will do. Funny thing is, I didn't inherit my temper from Dad.

vii.

Mom is five glasses of wine deep and I am too, when we pull out a surviving family album. That's the only way us Wolfsteins can reminisce. Our inebriation washes away the sorrow and all that's left is a hazy, bittersweet nostalgia for a past that we trick ourselves into believing had existed.

"Look at her swimsuit," Mom murmurs, pointing to a photograph of Miri, age two, at the beach in a striped, red-and-white bathing suit. She's mid-clap, her little hands a blur of motion. Her face is scrunched up into a familiar grin. Next to her is a "sandcastle," which is more of a lump of sand with

shells stuck on the surface. She had been very proud of it, having built it herself. Wouldn't let me near it.

"She looks like a candy cane," I say and hold the picture up. "Must have been the one we got from Macy's."

Mom shakes her head and sets her glass on the counter. Her nail polish matches the deep, burgundy red of the wine, and it reflects in the light. "I don't remember buying anything from Macy's."

"It was."

"I think I would remember where I bought my own children's clothes—"

"When I say 'we', I don't mean you. You were in France for the summer, remember? Ana and I got it the weekend before Independence Day."

"Oh." Mom takes a deep drink from her glass. "Ana—?"

"The nanny from El Salvador. She was with us for three years."

"Yes, of course. I remember her. Lovely woman. Did an amazing job with you and Miri." I finish my drink—one of Dad's treasured bourbons that he never got the chance to open. "Yeah, she was so great, actually, that Miri started calling her Mom instead," I say and clamber off the stool. "That is, until you fired her."

When I venture a glance over my shoulder, Mom has her head in her hands. She might be crying. She might not. Either way, I can't bring myself to care anymore. I stagger towards the dark hallway, and once I'm out of sight, I clamp my hands over my ears to block out Mom's sobs. I don't care, I chant to myself. I don't care, I don't care, I don't care.

That summer, Miri would ask me every night when Mom was coming home, but I only had one answer to offer her: "I don't know." It could be next week or next month, or hell, tomorrow. The only thing certain in the movie industry was that a schedule meant shit.

Mom eventually told Miri over the phone that she'd return by Independence Day. She said, "Then we can all go watch the fireworks at the beach." In the background, I could pick out a man calling her name repeatedly. Liza, Liza, Liza. No one's ever called her that before. She said, "I promise, honey."

Fourth of July, and Mom never came anywhere near America. She chose to spend the holiday in the French Riviera with recently divorced actor Jacques de Lyon. Fourteen years of this bullshit, and I was unsurprised. As for Miri, she might have been a toddler, but Wolfsteins are quick learners. After that day, she didn't ask for Mom so frequently, and soon, she stopped asking at all.

viii.

Jesus fucking Christ, I can't breathe. There's ash in my mouth and lungs. The smell of sulfur is overpowering and my eyes are liquifying, the cornea and pupil and iris dribbling down my cheeks. My skin is the surface of the sun.

I'm dying, but that's ok. This is how I'm supposed to die. This is my right. This is my duty. It was always going to end this way.

ix.

Grandfather was a refugee from Poland, having fled Hitler and concentration camps for a life in America. He wandered into Los Angeles penniless, sickly, and alone. He died one of the most powerful men in Hollywood.

He had three sons and a film studio that you could carve up like a fat roast turkey on Thanksgiving. All the sons expected a portion, but they disappointed Grandfather in various ways: dead, gay, junkie. And instead, his only daughter, who never even had a seat at the table, got the whole damn dinner to herself. And it turned out that that was the best decision Grandfather ever made. Elizabeth Wolfstein was smart, ruthless, and bold, everything he had been attempting—and failing—to instill in his sons.

It's a shame that she was born a girl. If she wasn't, she could've been Great. A Triumph. A Success. There's a TV interview she gave right before Miri was born. "How do you juggle the duties of motherhood and the duties of business?" the interviewer asks her. "Especially with a second child on the way."

Mom places a hand over her pregnant stomach. The gesture is meant to be maternal, but she covers her stomach like she wants to hide it. Her media training kicks in and she smiles warmly at the interviewer. You would've thought she was never happier in her life than pregnant with a ban daid baby. "It's

difficult," she answers, "but I try to keep in mind my priorities. Time management is key, and to accomplish that—"

I turn off the television, and stare at the fading afterimage.

TV glass is harder to break than you'd think.

x.

I blame Mom. I blame Dad. I blame the firefighters for being too slow, too incompetent. I blame the doctors. But more than anyone, I blame myself.

It's my fault she's dead, and I'll never see her again. I'll never hear her giggles, or feed her breakfast, or play Cowboys, or watch her graduate high school, or even fucking kindergarten. Nothing. Not anymore. This is it. Five years of tender memories, squeezed into a compact space to make room for the rest of the years to come, only to find that this is it.

**FIVE YEARS OF TENDER MEMORIES, SQUEEZED INTO A COMPACT SPACE TO MAKE ROOM FOR THE REST OF THE YEARS TO COME, ONLY TO FIND THAT THIS IS IT.**

If I was there, if I didn't sneak out, if I hadn't forgotten my duty, she'd be alive. I would've bundled her in my arms, carried her out of the flames, and she wouldn't have felt the heat, would've slept through it all. She trusted me—her big brother, her Jakey, her hero—to keep her safe. And I didn't.

xi.

It is two weeks before I turn eighteen in February when Mom discovers my stash.

"What is this?" she asks. I'm standing in the backlot, repairing Dad's old motorcycle. It's a beautiful 1985 Yamaha VMAX that had been rotting in the garage for years and came out of the fire untouched.

"Cocaine," I reply and crouch to assess the front. The bike needs repainting, but otherwise, it's functional.



"Jacob Benjamin Wolfstein, look at me. What is this?" she demands. I drop my wrench, rolling my eyes as I turn around. She holds up a half-packed bag.

"It's clothes, Mom. Stop freaking out."

She rummages through the bag and pulls out my passport and Social Security card. "And these?" she says, waving them in the air. "Where are you trying to go?"

An answer muttered under my breath.

"What was that?"

I square my shoulders, raise my head to look her in the eye. "Away from you," I say louder. "I'm going away. From. You."

Her face slackens with surprise. The wind ruffles through the pages of my passport, and tugs curiously at my Social Security card. As it's about to slip from her loose grasp, she curls her hand into a fist, preventing its escape. She opens her mouth. Closes it. And opens it again. "Fine," she says, nodding her head. "It's your prerogative to live where you want."

There's a faint buzzing sound in my ears. It's too early for the cicadas. "I'm surprised you didn't kick me out earlier," I say, "considering how difficult it was for you to live with me." The buzzing grows louder. Dark spots appear in my vision. Mom flashes in and out of view as I blink. Her hair shines golden underneath the afternoon sun. Miri is—was—her daughter, no doubt. What does Mom see when she looks at me?

I smile humorlessly at her and continue. "The hotel walls are thin, you know. I can hear every thing, like you threatening reporters, or you praying. And I heard what you said on the phone to Sonny that night."

My bag falls from her hand, my clothes spilling onto the ground. Mom walks forward, her arms spread out. "Oh sweetheart, you must have misheard," she says, shaking her head. "Whatever you think I said—"

"If it was Miri, I'd know what to do," I recite. "But he looks at me with such hatred in his eyes. He looks at me like he can't forgive me, but the truth is, I can't forgive him either." Mom's face is so drained

of color that she's translucent.

Picking up my bag and clothes, I say, "I'm only doing what you want, Mom. I can't bring Miri back, but I can disappear. Then you wouldn't have to look at me, day after day, wishing I was Miri"—I sling my bag over my shoulder, ignoring the faint ache—"and I wouldn't have to look at you, wishing you were Dad."

Mom flinches but remains silent. I close the distance between us. Her eyes widen as she tracks my approach. She doesn't move, but she's shaking, a fragile blade of grass, swaying in the breeze. We're so near I can smell her perfume. Chanel No. 5. That was my gift to her for Hanukkah last year. Her sunspots are visible without makeup. "So tell me that I'm wrong," I whisper, looking down at her. "Tell me that you didn't wish, not even once, that I had been…"

Mom flicks her eyes up to meet my gaze, with those Wolfstein blue eyes of hers, and in an instant, I know. I am my mother's son, after all. She might've spent seventeen years raising me, but I spent seventeen years observing her. We know each other too well to be spared from all the pain we inflict. I lean forward. Her breath catches.

I smile, all teeth. "That's what I thought," I say and wrest my crumpled IDs from her hand.

xii.

Here's the twist on Dad's biker flick: the world's already ended when the movie starts. You don't know how or why. All that the movie reveals is that about three-quarters of humanity had been wiped out and the world as the bikers knew had ceased to exist. But what could they do except do as they've always done? So they smoked, drank, fucked, and drifted along desolate American roads, leaving behind all that they've known for the slight promise of something different. They had taken on that chance and left it up to the roads' mercy.

xiii.

The wind is sharp and bitter, clawing at whatever scraps of skin it can get at, but I persist. There's some thing out there, something better than this, and if I keep riding, if I'm far away enough from home— I take Dad's bike and his battered leather jacket. In my pocket is Miri's favorite stuffed doll. And I have Mom's knit scarf wrapped around me because it gets chilly out on these long, dark roads, and you wouldn't want to catch a cold now, Jacob, would you?

# TODAY WE

HOPE YANG

marijuana on the street, streaks on bus seat
Metro men tossing each other joints
ashes on the floor

me and you and Vincent Valdez
devour fire-licked strangled bodies and dim tonal forms
stars behind the martyr Jesus

tell me a fun fact about yourself because I
am 18+ years too late in knowing anyone — did you say you fenced?
as I fail to navigate down wind-whipping streets

afraid I'm some sheltered child
getting us utensils so we don't share saliva
even if they call it family style

Fia's pizza and salad mixed in a brown bag
I tote your leftovers back to my room before I realize
you're already too far on the way home

tomorrow we'll go to church together
and all of today I'll think oh God this world is so large
I wonder how we ever found each other




**SHOWA**
SYDNEY CHANG

# HOW TO OPEN A BOTTLE OF SPARKLING APPLE CHERRY CIDER AT 11PM IN THE TARGET PARKING LOT (WITHOUT A BOTTLE OPENER) WITH YOUR BEST FRIEND AND HER BOYFRIEND OF A YEAR AND TWO MONTHS

JULES F. HOUSTON

*1. the metal box on the light post*

she tries to brace the bottle cap against the frame of it. he's next to her, laughing and smiling at me. he's telling her to be careful the same way that i have told her to be careful for the last ten years. he offers to take the bottle from her before she breaks something. the angle just isn't right.

*2. the rail around the shopping cart return zone*

she keeps the bottle. she tries to latch it against the rail. he kisses the side of her head and i just know he loves the way her hair smells. the bottle won't catch. the rail is too smooth.

*3. my six month old house key i've only used twice*

i take the bottle from her. i unclip my carabiner of keys from my belt loop. i press the bottom of the bottle against my thigh and try to wedge a tooth of the key under one of the cap ridges. he tells me

to be careful now and i'm surprised. he says he doesn't want it to mess up the key. he cares, i think. that makes me smile. i still try. i can't get the right leverage.

*4. teeth*

he takes the bottle. she offers to use her teeth and he tells her no. he chipped a tooth doing that, once, when he was eight years old. see, he says, opening his jaw wide and pointing it out. plus, it's been all over this shit, she adds with resignation. she looks around at all this shit, the parking lot furniture. we all look around for a moment. we all see nothing.

~~*5. a bottle opener*~~

i offer to go inside and buy one. it's my fault, i say, because i should have remembered this cider pretends to be too nice for a screw top. but no, no, no. she says it's the principle of the thing. he agrees and he smiles and he laughs and he kisses the side of her head again. and i smile and i laugh, too. and it's not fake. i offer one more time. *no.*

**THEY SMILE AT EACH OTHER AND ARE SO SICKENINGLY IN LOVE THAT I FEEL BREATHLESS. NO TEETH WILL BE BROKEN TONIGHT.**

*6. teeth (again)*

out of ideas. not out of time, though. we have all the time in the world. tonight can go on forever if we want it to. he is still holding the bottle. he looks at her, and he looks at me, and he gets a new smile on his face before baring his teeth and placing the bottlecap between the rows of them. no! she and i both start to stop him. he is already laughing too hard to even try in the first place. not again, she says, and she takes the bottle from him again. she turns away, then turns back to kiss him on the side of the head. he has to bend down just a little bit and he does. i don't think he even has to think about it. they smile at each other and are so sickeningly in love that i feel breathless. no teeth will be broken tonight.

*7. her key ring*



she is no longer out of ideas. the little metal loop in her bag seems the right size. she holds everything so tightly in her hands. the key ring starts to bend almost immediately, just as she braces the bottle against her hip and pulls with calculated strength. it is bending too quickly to work.

*8. the buckle on her thrifted purse that would never close anyway*

her face lights up when she thinks of it. i can tell what she's thinking then, that she's got it, that she's sure. and i am sure he sees it, too. i am not too proud to admit he probably knows her as well as i do by now. he probably knows her *now* better than i do. i am also not too proud to admit i am jealous of that. i am not too proud to admit i always wish i was in first place. i hear a pop, or a crack, or some other breaking noise of possible success. the orange-pink elixir, glowing under the streetlamp light, starts to bubble. before she gets any further, there's another crack. she swears to herself as she shows us the buckle. it's cracked down the middle, useless for all purposes now.

*9. his key ring*

he thinks that his might work. it looks a little stronger than hers. and it's already started. so he tries, and there's a louder fizzing now, and the bubbling is faster and the cider is foaming its way out and down the bottle and over his hand. but the cap won't budge. so she takes it back, she tries her key ring again. i like my key rings too much, looped through my carabiner, so i don't volunteer while they pass it back and forth. the three of us stand close, a small equilateral triangle of giggles and coats just a little too heavy for the dallas december. he takes the bottle back. and she takes the bottle back. and he takes the bottle back.

**I AM NOT TOO PROUD TO ADMIT HE PROBABLY KNOWS HER AS WELL AS I DO BY NOW. HE PROBABLY KNOWS HER NOW BETTER THAN I DO.**

*10. the thin piece of metal that attaches the grocery pick-up sign to the pole it stands on.*

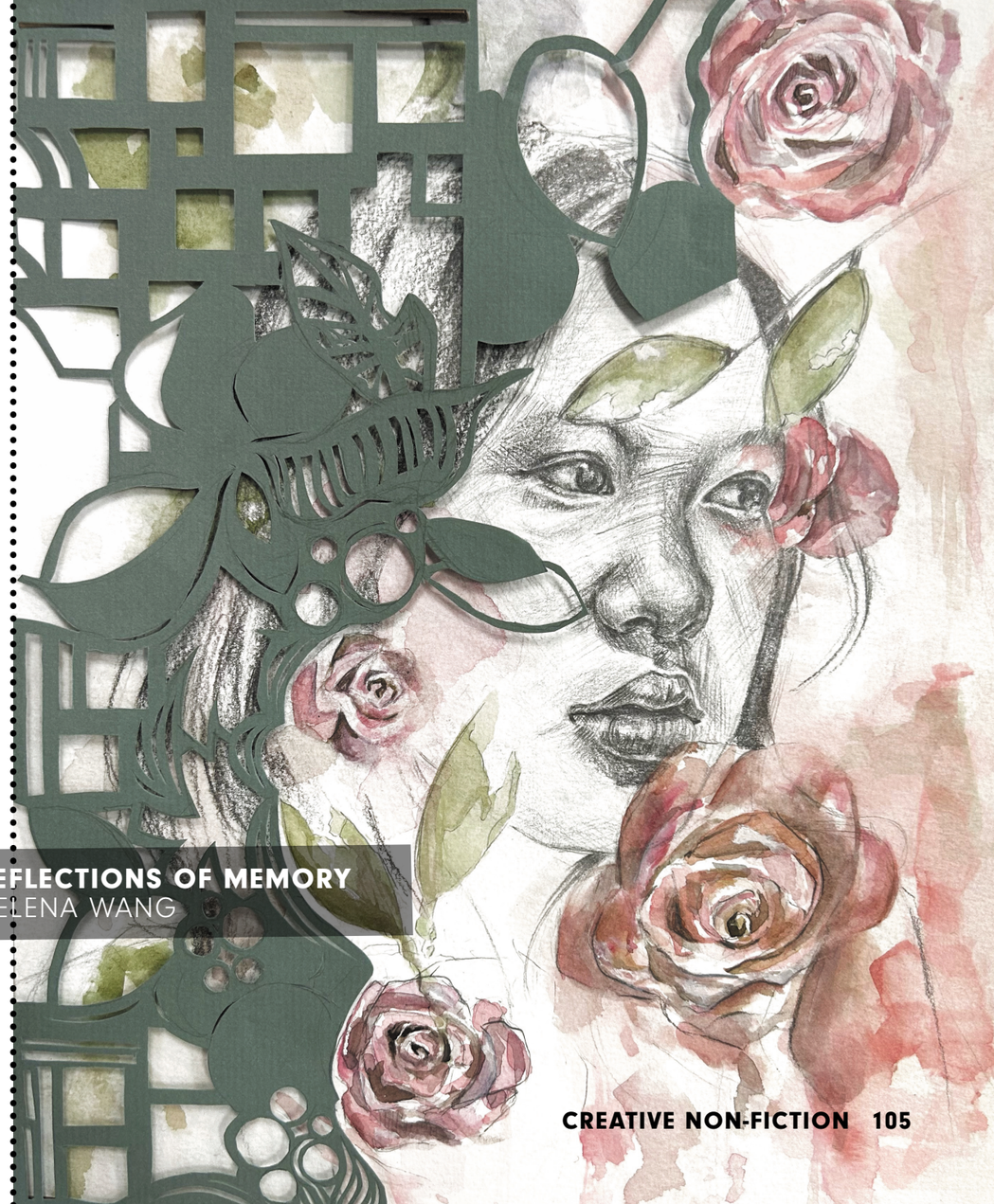
she gets that look on her face again. she's got it. there's a gasp this time, too. she sprints the four feet over to the pole and he and i follow right away. i wonder if he's always following her, like i always have been. i think probably he is, and that he loves it as much as i do. she's shouting, cheering as she leans all of her weight toward the ground until —

*clink.*

all three of us cheer and high-five and hug. she takes a victorious first swig, barely dodging the overflow getting on her sweater. he takes the bottle. and i take the bottle. and she takes the bottle. i can't stop laughing. i can't help but feel like this is how it's supposed to be. i can't help but think that the two of them are probably the kind of idiots that get married two minutes after they graduate but i also can't help but think *god. it would work for them.* and i can't stop thinking this is the kind of happiness i have always wanted for anyone i've ever loved, and god, i have loved her more than i've loved most.

**THE THREE OF US STAND CLOSE, A SMALL EQUILATERAL TRIANGLE OF GIGGLES AND COATS JUST A LITTLE TOO HEAVY FOR THE DALLAS DECEMBER.**





**REFLECTIONS OF MEMORY**
HELENA WANG

# WHY PALESTINIANS ALWAYS TELL YOU WHERE THEY'RE FROM

MALAK QARADEH

They say it in
Every conversation
"Did I mention
I'm Palestinian?"
They brag about their food
And love-grown fruits

They search for any excuse
To wear their Canaanite thobes
Hand embroidered and passed down
Symbols and flowers
Keffiyehs draped
Over their shoulders

They rave about their Dabke moves as
They assemble in a circle
Their stomps on the ground
Hands connected
Bodies coordinated
Intersecting and intertwining
Into one olive branch

Palestinians always tell you where they're from
Because maybe one day
Where they're from
Will be a playground for the colonizer
White washed and gentrified
Skyscrapers where stone homes
*Used* to be

Because maybe one day
It will be a place
That *used* to exist
But we'll never let you forget
That that's where we're from.

**BROKEN WALLS**
ANONYMOUS

# AN INTERVIEW WITH J. ESTANISLAO LOPEZ

EDITED BY ADAM LEFF, KYRA MCKAUFFLEY, ANGELA AN, RITA AJIT

J. Estanislao Lopez is the author of *We Borrowed Gentleness* (Alice James Books, 2022), a finalist for the 2023 Texas Institute of Letters John A. Robert Johnson Award. His poems have been featured in *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry* magazine, *The Rumpus*, *Best American Poetry*, and elsewhere. Lopez earned an MFA from the Warren Wilson Program for Writers. He currently teaches in the community college system in his hometown, Houston, Texas. This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

**Q: As a poet who also teaches, how does working with students influence your own writing?**

JEL: It helps me because with the amount of teaching that I do, I am in my head, at least, editing and revising hours and hours a day, so when I go and I write my poems I am just as merciless, in fact, maybe even more rigorous and demanding of my own writing. I think that the main benefit of teaching so much is that It's a habit, that editing eye and that revision eye. It's very embedded. In fact, I think that maybe it's a personality thing. Some writers just like to write. They'll put words down, without stopping And they say, 'you put everything there and that way you have material to work with.' But I don't write that way at all. I edit and revise every single line. In fact, it happens that what would seem as though it were the first draft, if you were to kind of like trace the edit history on the Google Doc, It's actually been revised hundreds of times on its way down the page. So, I think that what I retain from teaching the most is just the fact that the editor and the revisionist in me never leaves. I can never suppress it.

**Q: In addition, how does being a poet change the way you interact, view or even respond to other poetry or other poets' work?**

JEL: I think the amount of empathy that goes into the act of reading is a little bit different when you're also a poet. I'm a poet, so  I don't really know what it's like to read a poem not being a poet but I imagine that when a non-poet reads a poem, but I imagine that their engagement with the way the information moves down the page is not one that evokes a mimicry. I could be completely wrong about that, and I suspect that I am, but my best guess, if there is a difference, is that, as a poet, when I'm reading a poem I'm trying to mirror or trying to understand how the neural pathways were activating for that poet. In order to get from the end of that syntactical unit to the beginning of the next syntactical unit, you know? Which is exciting. I have a lot of fun reading that way. I don't know if I can read it any other way, In fact.

**Q: One of the things that stood out to us reading your work was just the wealth and variety of forms your poetry takes. How do you decide how to structure a poem? Is it sort of emergent from when you're writing it or do you sort of set out with a structure in mind?**

JEL: Yeah, it's such a complicated process and there isn't a single answer. There are definitely layers to that decision making. Probably the most basic layer, is that you, as a poet, have one word in your mind that informs the general shape of the poem. And for me, it often is after I've already written the words. Usually, when I come back to it, I think, 'okay, let me now think about form a little bit.' There's one word, which is the general psychological effect you want looking at the poem to have. So, I want my reader to look at this poem and think, 'cramped, claustrophobic.' Or I want them to look at this poem and think 'space, breath.' So that's one level of that decision. But then you also have to consider the units of meaning, how that's going to be affected by your playing with that form. So maybe I want compression in this form But I really care about these two words sharing a line, or these two units sharing a line. So I can't compress it to where that messes up, or if I do, then I have to rewrite the whole thing. So it's a balancing act. The microcosmic details that you want to happen within the line, and then the macroscopic visual component that the poem will have on the reader's approach to that material.

**Q: All your poems feel unique and personal, especially because of how rooted in family and lived experiences they seem to be. How do you draw the line between your own autobiographical voice and the speakers of your poetry?**

JEL: Good question. This is a question that comes up in all stages of your writing career, and your writing friendships. Many of these speakers are conceived as a cross-section of my mind in some way: a bit of rhetoric that's maybe echoing around in there, or maybe just an interaction I've had, especially with the family poems. A lot of those family poems are probably 70 percent ripped straight from my life. And then there are poems where the speaker is very far removed. So, for example, the speaker that makes me the most uncomfortable in that book is the speaker of "The Framework of an Imaginary Nation." In fact, the speaker makes me so uncomfortable that I italicized the entire poem. "Look, this is not me, people, okay? Listen, this is completely a figment of my imagination." Because that speaker said some pretty horrible things. But, and this is a thesis behind the book and me as a writer, that evil is inside all of us. It's been languaged into us, whether we know it or not, and it can be manipulated. So, it depends on the poem, how much I call upon my personal experience. And when I do call upon my personal experience, what my motives are. Is my motive to understand someone I couldn't understand? I think, for example, a poem that comes to mind in that regard is the poem where I'm talking about a mother, the speaker's mother, and the speaker's grandmother, who had a very clearly troubled and loveless relationship. That's definitely trying to reach out for some understanding. And then there are times where I'm reaching out to distance or critique or flip or invert. So I have a less generous view of that part of myself or that part of somebody from my past, someone in my family. It's a variety of attitudes and motives and percentages when it comes to how much I draw upon my personal life and for what reason am I drawing upon my personal life.

**Q: When you write a poem, who is your intended audience? Does that change? And how much do you think about your audience when you write your work?**

JEL: When we all think of audience, we think of a big room of people. And that is very terrifying. But as a writer or an artist in general, you have to make certain decisions, especially once you start evolving beyond the workshop mindset. Which is not that workshops are inherently bad. They are very useful for a lot of reasons, but they create a certain mindset, which is to please the most amount of people. You get endorphins when everyone around the table says, "This is an amazing poem." Maybe you don't want everyone around the table to think this is an amazing poem. Maybe you want someone to be very

offended that you would even call this poetry.For me, I knew I had something that really got on people's nerves because I heard about it in the workshop. And that is—and in fact, I make fun of myself a little bit in the book about this—that I love abstract language. Concrete language is great. Imagery, love it. Love, love imagery. But man, I love being abstract. So when I think about audience, I think, what kind of mind am I writing toward? What kind of receptiveness am I playing with? And who am I okay with not liking my poems? The person who says, "No ideas but in things," you know, the imagist, I'm okay with them not liking my poems because I think that ideas and the abstract have so much psychological potency. And they're so amorphous. And we care about this. For example, the word "justice." Justice is so vital to all of our spiritualities, to the deepest part of ourselves. It is so amorphous. It is so fluid. And hard to pin down. And two people who vote in opposite ways will both say they are voting toward justice. It boggles my mind and it's very exciting. And I want to dig in there and play with that, and see what I can find. So when it comes to audience, I think of it that way. What kind of a mind? Because then I don't think of a whole room of people, I just think of an individual that might think my jokes are funny and my lines are clever.

**Q: While reading a lot of your poems, we noticed that a lot of them were set in Texas, specifically like West Texas. We wanted to ask if you could speak on your relationship with being a Texan, and how has it influenced your identity?**

JEL: I think it's had a huge influence. I'm so unconvinced of the righteousness of my existence and my lineage and that is because–I'm not an expert on every single state. I'm not even an expert on Texas,so maybe this is true in all states–there is a narrative here in Texas that is so troubled and especially among the Mexican American community, the way that we have betrayed each other and turned on each other in pursuit of white privilege or maybe just in fear of persecution. My own family is evidence of that, like literally split down the middle of liberal and conservative thinking. That has caused me to never see things in a purely generous light. Whether it comes to the bond of brothers or the love between a father and a son, you know, father, child, mother, child, nothing is beyond reproach or skepticism. And that's been informed by what I've learned about my own family's history and Texas history in general.

**Q: We were wondering, especially in a moment that is really intense, how do you think your poems would apply today?**

JEL: I thought about this.Clearly everyone's responding and or reeling from the most recent election,and one thing that's been talked about is the swing of particularly Latino men toward conservatism. So I definitely feel the urge to respond to that artistically.

I asked myself if 'We borrowed gentleness' did, and I think it did because, like I said, my family split down the middle [and] patriarchy is very attractive to men in my family for a lot of reasons and reasons that I don't pretend I can escape from either. So my motive is not to enlighten so much as that is to interrogate. But of course, as you interrogate a little bit of light spills [through], right? A little bit of light, a little bit of blood, a little bit of sweat. I don't pretend that a poem I've written will go out and change anybody's mind. But I think it is useful to have some artifact of that that at least there are some of us struggling with these concepts and their influence. But we got to do something, right? I think that I'm interrogating the psyche of the man, maybe the Latino man, slicing the fruit open. Hopefully that's useful or at least comforting to somebody out there.

**Q: Zooming out from your work and more about you as a whole,what is something about you or your work, which people don't often ask, but you wish they did?**

JEL: Nobody asks me enough about the short poems. People always want to talk about the longer or the medium length poems, but when you see a writer has published a short poem, you know that they left that poem like, yeah, that's all that needs,that's it. The short poems for me, I have successfully resisted going on and on about something. You always love it when you feel like you've said what you wanted to say in one sentence. It's just such a wonderful, magical feeling. Very rare You have to leave it.You will

want to add,"I think I got an even better second sentence for it." No, no. Leave it where it is. And maybe no one will read it. No one will like it, but You know what's there.

**Q: You mentioned earlier, with writing your poems, how some of them didn't start out to be for the book and they're just in a Google Doc. We wanted to ask with your process, when and why did you start writing?**

JEL: I started writing seriously I think my junior year of undergrad. I started off as a physics major. And then I got an internship at a lab and I realized that it was not what I hoped for. And so I switched to philosophy. I became a philosophy major. And then I think the last semester of my junior year, I took a creative writing class taught by the poet Lauren Berry. I was such a terrible writer and she was so encouraging. And it was such a wonderful experience I wanted to take all these ideas I was so excited about for my discussions in philosophy class and write poems about them, which made for, at the first go when you're first starting out, you know, not such great poems. I had also not read a lot of contemporary poetry. My understanding of poetry stopped at probably the Tennysons, maybe into the Yeats. The poet she showed me who I will always remember and continues to be maybe my favorite poet Even to this day is the poet Li Young Lee who writes these gorgeous, intimate, weird poems. And that's whenI realized there are still people alive writing poems, and that's amazing. I want to do that. And I want to do it that way. I want to do it like him. And so I literally took some syntax of his and copied it, used some of his thought structures to trap some of my own ideas. That's where it came from. Maybe something was there already. Maybe you have to resent your parents a little bit or something, to have that punk rock in you to really say, "I'm going to be a poet."

That experience, that creative writing class, pushed me toward ultimately what would become the book. None of those poems that year made it to the book.



**Q: What's your writing process? How are you starting?**

JEL: Usually it's that first line. I get that first line in my head, I let it echo there for like a day. And then that will eventually generate the poem.So yeah, I'm definitely a top-down writer. Sometimes it's a title. Sometimes the title will generate the poem. Never the ending. I've never had an ending for a poem, and then work backwards. I don't know. I guess that is possible. I feel like I've heard of writers say that they had that ending first, that they knew how the poem needed to end, which boggles my mind. It's like they're psychic.

**Q: We always talk about the similarity of music and poetry. How is it different for you?**

JEL: Well, there are certain artistic principles that are the same across all arts, which is about creating an expectation and then inverting, or subverting, or meeting that expectation in an interesting pattern, right? Like maybe it's meet, meet, subvert. Maybe it's meet, subvert, subvert, meet, meet, subvert, right? It's like a binary code. And that spans all arts. Like someone sits down to paint a face and they can meet your expectations of a face in certain ways. And then they will subvert your expectations of a face in a way and that will make it modern and interesting and new. Same thing with music. You can start in the blues form, very traditional form, one, four, five, and then do something interesting with it. Subvert the expectation, have dissonance where they expected harmony. And it's true of poetry as well, right? Language, every time you put a word on the page, the reader will create an expectation for what's supposed to follow that word. Maybe a specific phrase, or maybe they know that a noun is supposed to come after the article. And then you can meet that expectation or you can subvert that expectation. So, ultimately, and this is something that Tony Hogan emphasized to me, and it stayed with me, which is as deep as you like to think you are as a poet, poetry is supposed to be entertaining. It's an aesthetic object. You have to keep in mind that there should be a bit of play to it, in terms of subverting expectations occasionally. Now, he was a bit more of a writer probably than me, but I think that lesson never left me.

# BLACK CHICKEN SOUP

ERIC CHEN

While eating grandmother asks me
to stop tapping my foot under the table, because apparently if you do
you'll lose money, and if you tap it hard enough
you'll become broke, making me wonder
if grandmother tapped her foot a lot in her childhood,
as she's been living in the same apartment for
over twenty years on 830 45th st, where I first remembered

eating Chinese black chicken soup
that grandmother steamed in the white pot for hours on end
and
being the kid I was, I asked her what this did to the body, to which
she said it could make your skin bright and cure asthma
among other bizarre things only old Chinese grandmothers could say,
after which I immediately

searched up "*Chinese magical chicken cure for cancer,*"
tapping my foot again, this time harder, as I proudly showed her
that Chinese black chicken soup does not in fact
cure cancer or asthma or lead to magically white beautiful skin overnight
much to her dismay and
she said something about how kids these days are so misbehaved,
like the fact that



**FORTUNE**
HELENA WANG



I'm the only one in my entire family majoring in visual art,
making creatures come to life through energetic charcoal strokes
while my shoe restlessly taps on my easel,
listening to ten sixty- second- long audio messages from my aunt
on how good Asian boys should study cool things like
mechanical engineering or chemical physics or go into medicine,
like my cousin,

who went on to study to become a doctor with two hundred thousand dollars
in debt and counting, who texts me daily with three crying emojis in each message but
*I'm sorry*, I type, *I'm done trying to fix ur issues bro go fix it urself.*
At least I'm making some art now in my own apartment, drawing a self-portrait while
contemplating whether or not to stay with art,
or do engineering or become an economist or go into the FBI like my mother suggests,
as I block my cousin on Instagram and sign in cursive next to my drawing, *stay and stay with art,*

pulling out grandmother's fish -sauce-d stained paper in my drawer
as I check off
*ginger, hong and hei zao, goji, dong quai, huang chi, and more,*
black silkie chicken simmering in my own white pot as I sit and
raise my head to look at the large mirror behind me, reflecting
myself grinning as I tapped my foot, then the other, then both,
faster than ever.

**STREETS OF GRANADA**
CARMEN MANTICA

**SEAFARING SEIRA**
DOMINIQUE SENNET



# FLESH AND OIL GIRL, UNMADE

DINGDING YE

*CW: self-harm*

it was at that gas station
that we found out that you and I have
matching scars not matching as in
the same shape or location but scars
with the same intent
yours healed mine fresh
scars of our self-inflicted unmaking

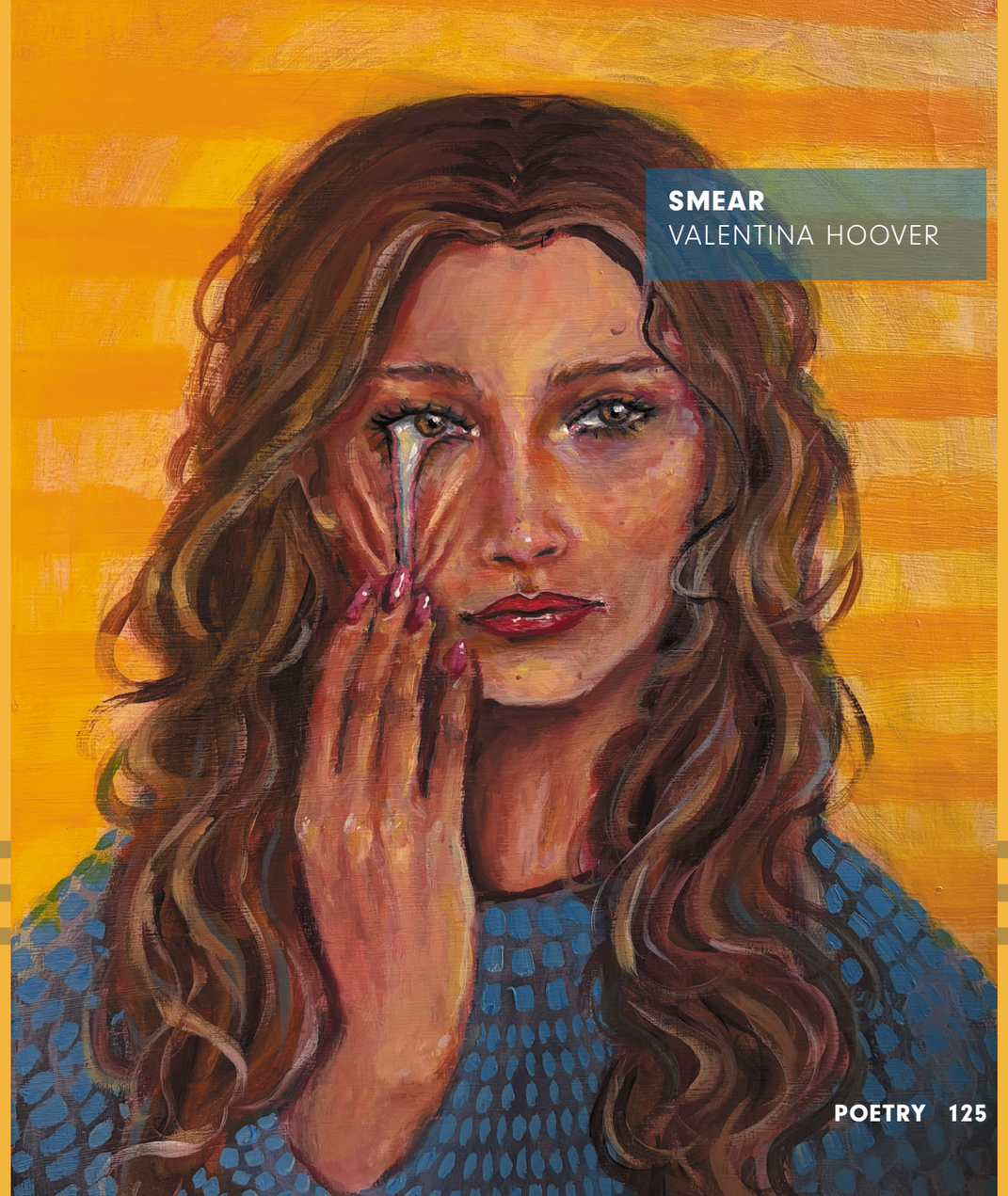
we never talked about it after
but you watched as I
sat on the broken gravel
trying to force my broken pieces back
into this bag of human skin the gas pump
knocked askew when I
fell to the ground gasoline dripping out
onto the concrete in puddles

forced out of the hose gurgling
as blood from the jugular

I thought at that moment that
if I could reach out to touch
the spilt oil my hand would
come away sticky dyed black
its surface was glossy able to
hold my reflection contorting it
to something I almost recognize no
this can't be
they told me I was human but I'm just as alien as the rest
fed fat on lies like a pig for slaughter
I tried to say this to you
but the thistles I had forgotten about
turned into needles piercing the
inside of my throat

you stood there a few meters away
a hand over your mouth
and the other around your
torso as if to keep your insides
from spilling out
red-black sanguineous
as mine had done





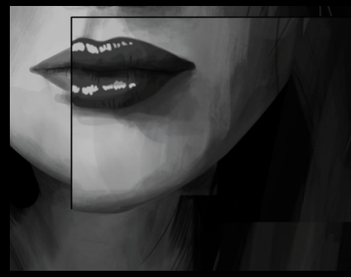
**SMEAR**
VALENTINA HOOVER

**ACT NATURAL**
AMY CAO



# INSOMNIA

**KARIS LAI**



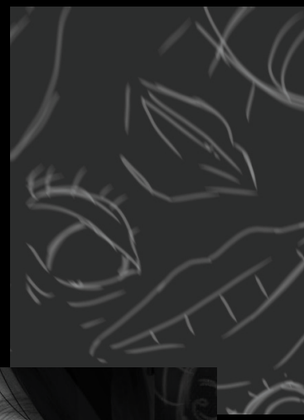
*CW: mentions of eating disorders, racism, and mental health*

**Cast of Characters:**

**Me:**
Born 2003, nighttime–prose, daytime–script.

**My Mother:**
Born 1975, prose.

**My Grandmother:**
Born 1948, prose.



**Night 1: The Darkness.**

*The room is not quite pitch black; it has neither the solidity of black ink nor the transparency of black cloth stretched toward the light. In the early morning hours, the room transforms from a formless void into an uneasy landscape.*

*I twist and turn under my sheets. No longer do they lightly cover me, but only hold me down. It's been hours, but for me, tiredness and time don't equal sleep. I'm occupying the liminal space between sleep and wakefulness that eternally taunts me when I hear a sound. My eyes fly open and search the room, but I can't make out anything specific. My heart pounds.*

*I thought I'd outgrow my fear of the dark, but here I am, aged twenty and still afraid.*

*Vague forms dance around my room. The muscles in my body routinely tense, waiting for a figure to materialize and attack me. As a kid, when sleep refused to whisk me away, I became so scared of sitting in the arms of the undefined that I would hoist my mattress over my little shoulder and urgently drag it out of my room into the light of the hallway. When my arms gave out from fatigue, I would nudge the mattress forward with my foot, watching it inch slowly away from the darkness until the tip of my mattress was wedged comfortably against the door of my parents' room. Sandwiched between light and protection, I would curl up into a ball and finally let my mind be at ease.*

*That same feeling of relief floods my body as the light comes in. It's reluctant at first, weakly struggling against the weight of my blackout curtains, but it gains strength by the second. Soon, even the heaviness of my curtains can't hold back the light that trickles in, sneaking across the room and streaking across my walls.*

*In the distance, the birds warble an opening symphony. I stumble towards the source of the light and open the curtains. Instantly, a forceful beam radiates onto my face.*

*A spotlight.*



*It's morning. Scene one begins.*

**Act 1 Scene 1.**
**Princeton, New Jersey, 2018.**

*(Lights up. Kids filter into a cafeteria that has been converted into a rehearsal space. There's been whispering about the new girl, an eighth grader, who landed the titular role in the high school musical. They clump together in the back corner of the room and wait. "Cinderella" walks in tentatively, timidly. )*

*(A singular black plastic chair acts as a stage prop. It's the first full show run-through, and the cast has reached the climax scene: Act 1, Scene 8. In it, Cinderella's stepmother rips her dress from her hands and shoves it into the fire. Cinderella weeps, and the fairy godmother, hearing her heart-wrenching crying, runs quickly to her aid. )*

Director: Alright, Act 1 Scene 8! 3, 2, 1, action!

*(Everything goes as planned. Cinderella's dress is wrenched from her hands, and her stepmother heartlessly throws it into the fire. Before she leaves, she hurls insults at the kneeling Cinderella. "No one will ever love you," she shrieks, "You're worthless!")*

*(Desperate, Cinderella falls to the floor, fighting back a smile, drops her head into her hands, and limply shakes her arms to denote crying. The cast holds back laughter. )*

Director: PAUSE! Cinderella, what was that?

Cinderella: *(giggling uncontrollably, immediately stops and looks down)* I'm sorry, I don't know what …what came over me.

Director: Ok… let's try that again. FROM THE TOP! Act 1 Scene 8.

*(Again, the stepmother grabs the dress and tosses it into the fire. She narrows her brows and speaks furiously to Cinderella. In response, Cinderella contorts her face and tries to bring tears to her eyes. Then, the corner of her mouth twitches. She begins to laugh, shaking her arms limply as before. )*

Director: STOP! *(Muttering to herself)* Has this girl ever cried? *(To the Cast)* Again! From the top! And Cinderella?

Cinderella: Yes?

Director: Please don't shake your arms like that. No one does that when they cry! Pretend that you're breaking, combusting!

*(Blackout.)*

**Internal Combustion**
**Chinatown, New York City, 1969, My Grandmother.**

The other high school girls had no responsibilities except their schoolwork. Often, her schoolwork was the least of her responsibilities. Every weekday, she was tasked with cooking every meal while her brothers idly sat by. On Saturdays, while her friends were out ice skating with the school's pastor, she was the one lugging the family's laundry to the laundromat to sit for hours on the hard-backed plastic chairs. As the clothing was roughly tossed like a salad in its soapy dressing, she thought about what it would be like to be an American girl.

The worst part was, she was an American girl. Born in the capital of the United States, her life in Washington, D.C. had been idyllic. Surrounded by family and friends, she'd never felt more supported, but her father's new job sent them packing to New York City without warning. She wasn't too surprised by the seeming spontaneity of the move because her parents never informed her about things anyway. Chinese parents were different. It was her Chinese blood that barred her from becoming a "real" American girl.



The moment she set foot in New York City, she hated it. The golden glow of her days in D.C. taunted her as she picked her way through the bitter cold of the crowded streets. The people were louder and rougher here. Although she lived in the enclave of Chinatown, it didn't feel like home for her the way it did for her parents. As her English surpassed her Tui Sun, she grew tired of translating for her mom at every English-speaking store and being judged by her Chinese peers for being interested in American guys.

Since her mother worked all day at the clothing factory, Brenda was left to figure out how to navigate a world that her parents couldn't even speak the language of. She felt like she had one foot in America and one foot out. During the day, she struggled to fit in with the girls who lived with such unfettered freedom.

She could conform during the day but never at night. At night, she was under the strict supervision of her mother. At night, her mother talked endlessly, but she never got to say a word. At night, she was pulled back into an outdated order, a life of submission and service, a world where she was expected to sacrifice all for a mother who never truly knew her.

**SHE FELT LIKE SHE HAD ONE FOOT IN AMERICA AND ONE FOOT OUT.**

**A Sick Reversal.**
**Chinatown, New York City, 2002, My Mother.**

Walking briskly down the streets of New York City, a young woman makes her way through Manhattan to a looming brick plaza just as the birds begin to chirp. Right as the Chinatown elderly begin their morning stretches, the city sounds come alive, and she finally gets to end her day. Exhausted from her red-eye shift at the hospital, she rides the elevator to the 26th floor and swings open the door of her grandmother's apartment. Immediately, she is greeted by the loud guffawing of her grandfather in

cutting Toi San and the rude conversations of New York cars partaking in chains of beeping, each car unwilling to take responsibility for the delay. Head down, she walks quickly to the spare room of the apartment, the floor creaking under her.

Before her exhausted body can hit the mattress, the phone rings. She groans internally. It's Mom. It takes every ounce of willpower to muster up a cheery front:

"Hey Mom, what's up?"

"You wouldn't believe what Dad did this time…"

She sighs. It's the same conversation every time. A broken record. Her body yearns to escape it all, the horrid night shifts and her mother's incessant talking. She tries to think of an excuse to leave. "I'm tired" simply won't cut it, because then she'll have to bypass the guilt-tripping…

She can hear her grandmother's voice piercing through the walls, accompanied by the clinking of her knitting needles. Her grandmother had started going deaf a couple of years ago, probably from the loud factory environment, but her communication style was always one-way. If anything, going deaf only encouraged her to talk louder.

She knew her mom felt like her grandmother had always been a bit deaf. Deaf to her words. Deaf to her feelings, loyalties, and fears.

And she understood that feeling because she felt the same way.

Mom called her every night, a steady stream of her feelings, loyalties, and fears. She wondered how they could talk every day, and yet her mom knew nothing about her feelings, loyalties, and fears.

She was tired of it all.

Antisocial; that's what her grandparents would call her as she collapsed exhausted in her room after hours of caring for holocaust survivors on the general medical surgery floor.



Antisocial, she tossed and turned for hours as her body rebelled against the daily chaos she subjected it to. Monday to Thursday, 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Then the next week, from Wednesday to Sunday. Never permanent enough for her body to adjust, always just long enough to push her to the end of herself. All these hours, all this toil, all for a sliver of the income her boyfriend was making as a consultant.

By the time her mom finishes ranting and hangs up, it's nearly 10 a.m. Another all-nighter. She reaches for the half-opened pack of Benadryl lying on her bedside table. She's too emotionally and physically exhausted to fight her body to sleep. Yet even with the medicine, her body plays a nasty trick: the pull of her bladder wakes her up only hours into her fitful slumber.

After those night shifts, she was never able to sleep through the night again.

**Scene 2:**

*(Cinderella kneels on the floor of her room. On the floor lies her phone. It is open to a YouTube video, "How to Make Yourself Cry Quick For Actors, Guaranteed." Sad music is playing in the background. She stands in front of a mirror and contorts her face.)*

Cinderella: *(Frustrated)*. Cry! Just cry!

*(The audio from the video cuts into the scene, "Step one: Envision something really sad. I like to think about if my partner was dying in a hospital bed".)*

Cinderella: *(To herself)*. Ok, Mom is dying, Mom is dying.

*(The tears refuse to come. She screams in frustration).*

**Breaking the Mask.**
**Hartford, Connecticut, 1986, My Mother.**

Mom must be dying. She already was barely there, a sliver of herself.

She had snapped a while ago. The process of unraveling often happens in this way: no one can see what is trapped, building up behind the decades of wearing a mask of perfection. Repressing emotions is like trying to repress a rolling river. Then, one day, her outside shell simply cracked and fell off. Terrified by what she encountered, she retreated into her room and, ultimately, into herself. Mental breakdown eats at you first from within and only manifests in the physical realm when it's far too late: a game of brinkmanship destined for destruction.

During the day, everything was fine. "I'm just tired," was what Mom always haggardly muttered, and she let herself believe Mom. Unlike her Mom, who stayed inside all day, she had to go to school and be the warm, bubbly, pretty one. She was loved by everyone. It was no surprise that she had been elected class president. She was also dating the captain of the tennis team and the only student in her district who would attend an Ivy League school.

She was so liked, yet so different. As a child, Mom would force her pin-straight hair into tight ringlets. She hated the stench of the home-kit perm solution and how the curlers pulled at her scalp. Her natural hair didn't have the "body" like the girls at school. She followed the unspoken high school dress code: chunky black Doc Martens, an oversized green plaid flannel, and loose low-rise boyfriend jeans. The problem wasn't her costume, but her face.

Everything she could change, she did. Light beige foundation smeared so thick that it felt like clay. Eyeliner to enlarge her slanted eyes. Whenever she forgot it, her mom reminded her again and again.

"Don't you want to put on a little makeup?"

It wasn't actually a question, not even a rhetorical one. It was a command.



Every day, she perfected her persona. Even though it was nothing but a performance, at least it was a convincing one.

In the day, she basked in the light of people's approval. So she'd stay as late as she could.

At night, things were different.

At night, she heard her mother's screams of terror.

At night, she was stripped of her mask and felt naked.

At night, she was scared.

At night, she couldn't sleep.

**Scene 3:**

*(Lights up. A navy blue minivan pulls up to the school drop-off. A mother leans over to give her 13-year-old daughter a hug and stops abruptly. She pulls back, eyes narrowed. Her daughter can sense what's about to happen. Quickly, she grabs her backpack and opens the door, trying to make a run for it. )*

Mom: Stop. Are you wearing makeup?

Daughter: *(A guilty look flashes across her face. It's quickly replaced by anger. She narrows her eyes, which are coated in clumpy black mascara that falls in flakes as she blinks.)* No…What do you mean?

Mom: Are you lying to me?

Daughter: *(She's a terrible liar; her cheeks redden and she starts to blink faster as she formulates a lie. The rapid blinking causes a cascade of mascara flecks to rain down her cheeks)*. Nooo, it's the clear mascara you got me, remember?

Mom: *(Exasperated, sighs)*. That doesn't look clear to me. *(Holds her daughter's gaze)*. Where did

you get the mascara?

Daughter: I used my own money! I don't understand why you don't let me wear it like all of my friends. It's not even like eyeliner or something!

Mom: *(Saddened)*. I just don't want you to feel like you need it to look pretty! I don't want you to feel like… you have to wear a mask.

Daughter: *(Exhales sharply).* Not this again! Just because your Mom forced you to wear makeup and it messed with your self-esteem doesn't mean that the same thing will happen to me! I'm not you!

Mom: *(Heated)*. Well, isn't it already like that with your eyelash curler? You always complain you look ugly if your eyelashes are straight!

Daughter: *(Caught with no comeback).* Well…well…argghhh. *(Forcefully opens the car door).* You know what, I'm going to be late. Good Bye. *(The door slams shut)*.

Mom: *(Sighs).* I love you.

*(Lights out.)*

*(Lights up. It's the dress rehearsal for Cinderella. "Cinderella" waltzes into the dressing room, wearing her costume ball gown. She smiles brightly at the makeup lady. )*

Cinderella: Hi! I'm here to get my makeup done.

Makeup Lady: Hello there, it's nice to meet the princess in person! *(She motions to the chair in front of her).* Please make yourself comfortable. Now, let's make you look beautiful!

Cinderella: Great! Try to do something with my eyes so they don't disappear when the stage lights come on–get it? Because I'm Asian! *(Laughs).*

Makeup lady: *(Laughs uncomfortably).* Oh no, honey, don't say that, your eyes are beautiful.



Cinderella: *(Shrugs)*. Not really, but thanks anyway. *(A pause, thinking. Then her eyes light up with an idea).* Could you try to do winged eyeliner? My mom never lets me wear makeup, and I've always wanted to try it! *(The makeup lady nods and smiles. Another pause.)* Oh, and try to cover up those gigantic eyebags while you're at it. I had trouble sleeping this week.

Makeup lady: Of course. Pre-show nerves?

Cinderella: Um…not exactly, I have insomnia.

Makeup lady: Oh no… I'm sorry.

Cinderella: *(Clears throat awkwardly).* It's fine. That's why we have makeup, right? To cover up those eye bags! *(Laughs hollowly).*

*(Makeup lady works in silence for a couple of minutes. She sighs with satisfaction.)*

Makeup Lady: Alright, honey, I'm finished! You look beautiful! What do you think? *(She holds up a mirror).*

*(Cinderella is practically bouncing with anticipation. The moment the mirror reveals her reflection, her face falls instantly. The makeup lady had smeared dark gray eyeshadow up to her eyebrows, making her look like a raccoon. She's crestfallen, but quickly plasters on a smile).*

Cinderella: Oh wow, that's great! I love it!

*(Lights out.)*

**Roger the Rabbit.**
**New York City Hotel, 2010.**

*"Now when Roger has fallen asleep, it is your time to sleep as well as he is doing right now. Since Roger the*

*Rabbit can fall asleep, so can you now."*

*- The Rabbit Who Wants To Fall Asleep, Carl-Johan Forssen Ehrlin*

*I knew I had a sleep problem when I first heard The Rabbit Who Wants to Fall Asleep in its entirety. My siblings and I were packed like sardines in a queen-sized bed at a hotel, giggling mischievously. After an hour of tolerating our shenanigans, my mother issued an ultimatum: fall asleep or face the consequences. No one wanted to face the consequences, but we were so riled up that we could not sleep. Our little bodies squirmed in the bed as we tossed and turned. My mom, softened by our efforts, googled a solution to our restlessness and stumbled across The Rabbit Who Wants to Fall Asleep as an audiobook.*

*The Rabbit Who Wants to Fall Asleep is an objectively unentertaining book, but I believe that is the point. The beginning of the book issues a warning, that listening to the story would make the reader very, very, sleepy. When I first heard this warning, I was spellbound. It was clearly a magic book. The plot (or lack thereof) centers around Roger the rabbit, a bit of an insomniac, who searches for the solution to his sleeplessness and visits various friends who give him tips on how to fall asleep. Eventually, Roger falls asleep just like the rest of his siblings. Throughout the audiobook, periodically, the Siri-sounding voice hypnotically announces, "You are getting very sleepy…now" or "You will go to sleep, now". I suppose the author assumed that combining an uninteresting plot, monotone voice, and a little bit of hypnosis on minors would be the ultimate solution for insomniac children.*

*On this particular night, it worked like a charm. Well, for everyone except me. At first, I bought in. I imagined my eyes getting heavy, just like the narrator said. I willed myself to sleep, now. My siblings slowly drifted off, the Siri hypnosis taking hold of their consciousness, leaving Roger as he journeyed through the forest to meet Uncle Yawn. Unfortunately, I was stuck on the journey, unable to exit. I felt like I had overstayed my welcome. As Roger himself was hunkering down for sleep, I realized with horror that I was still awake. I started to panic as the narrator announced that since Roger had fallen asleep, so could I. It was my last chance. I scrunched my eyes shut as tight as I could and willed with all my might to fall asleep, but to no avail. The author concluded with a "goodnight," perhaps also going to sleep herself, leaving me staring up into the black void, with my siblings peacefully breathing beside me.*

*Suddenly, a man's voice broke the silence, startling me. Did someone enter the room? Or perhaps the story was not over? Maybe Sleepy Snail had something extra to offer Roger. To my horror, I soon realized that the audiobook had restarted. Tortured with a sliver of hope that perhaps the second time would really knock me out, I retraveled with Roger through the woods, staying until he fell asleep a second time and the dreaded silence returned.*

*I wasn't sure what was worse: a remedy that worked for everyone except for me, or the silence that told me I was alone in my suffering.*

**I WASN'T SURE WHAT WAS WORSE: A REMEDY THAT WORKED FOR EVERYONE EXCEPT FOR ME, OR THE SILENCE THAT TOLD ME I WAS ALONE IN MY SUFFERING.**

**Hearing Voices.**
**Hartford, Connecticut, 1985, My Mother.**

All of a sudden, Mom started hearing voices.

What broke her? She could never figure it out. Mom would always smile so brightly at their neighbors and then go inside and have a meltdown. It felt like Mom was so unpredictable because she was so unreadable. She was so concerned with achieving a perfection that she could never attain that it ate at her from the inside out.

It started at restaurants:

"Everyone is listening to me."

"Everyone is laughing at me."

If there's one thing Mom couldn't handle, it was feeling and looking out of place. She couldn't handle feeling like she was missing out on some secret knowledge that everyone else knew about—like

everyone else was against her. Soon, it escalated. One day, she stayed home from work, insisting that her boss was plotting her death. Then, the panic attacks started coming, like invisible punches in the dark. She'd wake up screaming and rush to the hospital, only to be told that nothing was wrong

**Scene 4.**
**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2009, Me.**

*(Lights up on a small cafeteria filled with picnic-style tables. A preschool class sits at a lunch table, their lunchboxes perched next to them. Sounds of intermittent laughter pierce the relative quietness of eating. A little girl sits in the middle of a bench, swinging her legs. Since her father moved the family halfway into the school year, it's her first day at a new school.)*

*(A bell sounds, indicating recess time. The kids nearly jump out of their seats in anticipation.)*

Lunchlady: Ok, kids! Make sure to throw away your trash and then you can leave to recess!

*(Like popcorn kernels, the kids jump up one by one and run toward the playground. The little girl in the middle had been taking her time eating her sandwich and mandarin orange fruit cup. By now, only around five kids remain. She looks up and notices with alarm that her classmates are leaving. She shyly addresses the boys seated across from her.)*

Girl: Excuse me, can you tell me where the trash can is? I need to throw away my fruit cup.

*(The boys look at each other. Then, they smirk.)*

Boy 1: No, we won't!

Boy 2: We know where it is, but you don't!

Boy 3: Guess you'll have to stay here forever!



*(They laugh maliciously, then rush out, eager to play tag. The girl is left sitting alone in the cafeteria. She swivels around on the bench and turns her head, but can't find the trash can. She thinks that maybe she will be there forever. Her lip quivers. Her face begins to burn. Slowly, silent tears trickle down her cheeks and drip into the empty fruit cup in front of her. After the sadness wears off, anger takes its place. She tells herself she will never again be laughed at and humiliated. Never again will she not know something that everyone else does.)*

*(At age six, she vows she will never cry again.)*

*(Lights out.)*

**The Glue.**
**Princeton, New Jersey, 2019, My Mother.**

She felt like crying, but she knew she had to be strong. She would not break like her mom did. She would break her body, yes, like the time she slipped off a bench and hit her head trying to retrieve a balloon for her 5-year-old daughter, but she would not internally combust. She held her faith in front of her like a lantern, guiding her through the thickets of life's trials.

Three kids progressed steadily along the insecure pre-teen, to selfish tween, to rebellious teen track, and a toddler who was, unfortunately, picking up the quirks of his older siblings. The toddler had been a complete surprise. Their mother discovered she was pregnant as she was single-handedly moving the family to New Jersey. As she rummaged through a cardboard box in the garage, she found an old pregnancy test and decided to take it for fun (why waste it?). She was shocked to see it was positive. She quickly drove to CVS to pick up two more tests. Then she called her husband.

"Babe…I have news".

Her parenting tactic with her fourth was survival. She spent hours training her older children to

develop a taste for vegetables while her youngest lived off of mac and cheese. The family joked that he was a "banana," yellow on the outside, and white on the inside. While the older children would perform the little Einsteins theme song to her and her husband, she found her toddler, just forming words, sitting in the corner muttering "Panini" by Lil Nas X to himself.

"Hey-nini, why you be meeanie."

In order to maintain sanity, she had a constant habit of rehearsing everyone's schedule in her mind, making it a participatory ordeal.

"So I'm going to drive Josh to tennis at 7 and then I'll go straight to pick up Joelle from camp and bring Evan to the doctor and then…[NAME removed for R2 Submission], what's your schedule again?"

"I'm seeing my friend at 10! Remember? I have to get to the mall by 9:45."

"Ok… So I'll drive Josh and then pick up Joelle, and you can watch Evan until I can get back home and pick you up and drop you off and then I'll bring Evan to the doctor, and then I'll make lunch." (Which she never really ate much of) and so on and so on for the rest of the day.

When the kids weren't there to be her active maintenance rehearsal, she relied on her ratty paper calendar that looked like it had been resurrected from the 1600s. She knew she was notorious for forgetting things (like the time she lost her phone under her car and didn't discover it until she had run it over), but she refused to go digital because she "needed to see it in front of her." She only ever used the monthly spread on the calendar because the day-by-day didn't give her enough foresight into the future. Different events for different people were written in whatever writing instrument was near her at the time. The conglomeration of everyone's schedules appeared as a bit of a catastrophe. The chicken scratch blended the days together, sometimes written in with a pencil so blunt it became questionable whether it was English or not. Her family saw it as her secret code; no one knew why or how it worked, and sometimes even she wouldn't be able to decipher what she wrote, in which case, the day began to descend into



a slow burn. Without her, the family fell apart. She knew she was the glue and would do whatever she needed to maintain it, ratty calendar and all.

**The Funeral.**
**Chinatown, New York, 2019, My Grandmother.**

The day her mom died, the family fell apart.

Her brothers' long-held resentment towards the "favorite" used to be contained in darkened glances and backhanded comments. Now, on the day of the funeral, with their mother's body lying limp in the open casket, they wore their contempt openly on their faces.

The funeral proceeded through a blurry lens, tears cascading down her cheeks. She watched, as if through a plastic film, her daughter leading her granddaughters by the hand, marching up to the casket. The last time she'd seen her daughter walk down an aisle in this way was at her wedding, nearly 20 years ago. Now, her daughter walked up, fearlessly, to the mahogany coffin. She knew her daughter dealt with death daily during her hospital shifts, but she had only confronted it once.

As her daughter stood right in front of the coffin, she saw Kim whisper something to her eldest granddaughter, Karis, who was shaking silently. Karis obediently shut her eyes tightly. In contrast, Karis' sister stepped forward and widened her eyes in fascination. Kim's grip on her children's hands tightened, and she pulled them away from the dead body.

It was her turn. She walked shakily toward her mother, keeping her composure as people politely averted their eyes as she passed by. She was greeted by the pungent smell of formaldehyde and the sight of her mother's face. Something snapped, and she began to wail a gut-wrenching, hair-raising cry.

"媽媽!" "My mother!" she shrieked, kissing her mother's cold cheeks and throwing herself on her small, rigid frame.

Her daughter, Kim, quickly ran to her side and gently pulled her out of the coffin, holding her as she shook violently.

"I know Mom, I know," she whispered, stroking her back.

Kim's children stood in the corner, holding each other's hands and staring at her open-mouthed. When all her tears had soaked into the pink dress she'd picked for her mother to wear, she let herself be numbly led from the building to the burial ground. She felt as if her agency had left, her purpose drained and wrung out from her body. Who was she without her mother? Without a constant reminder of how she was failing the Chinese standard, how could she access it on her own?

After they lowered her mother underground, she realized with horror that her eyelids hadn't been fully closed. It was as if her mother had been awake this whole time and would stay that way throughout her eternal sleep. An eternal insomnia.

**This is What Insomnia Feels like.**

*Spending the night with insomnia closely resembles the first four stages of grief.*

1. Denial

*"This is not insomnia. Look, I'm so tired! I just need to breathe deeply, and it will go away."*

2. Anger

*"Why does this always happen to me? It's not fair!"*

3. Bargaining

*"If only I didn't eat that piece of chocolate 3 hours ago…I bet the sugar is keeping me up."*

4. Depression



*"Nothing helps. I give up. I guess I have to resign myself to the fact that I'll never sleep again. I will be highlighted on the news as 'Teenage girl dies from sleep deprivation.'"*

*There are a few times in your life when you have to accept that you are utterly helpless. Sleep, and the ability to sleep, is one of those times. It's a point in time where comedy and tragedy converge. When you've cried and prayed and screamed, and finally you go quiet and lie there as still as a corpse. Suddenly, you start to laugh. It's not funny, not in the slightest, but there's nothing else you can do, so you laugh. You laugh at the pathetic reality: a baby sleeps in a few seconds, and you, you've been tossing and turning for hours. You, with your productive little life and big dreams, can't even go to bed. Your brain is sick; why stop it? You let the merry-go-round of your mind turn endlessly.*

**Not Even Melatonin?**
**Princeton, New Jersey, 2020, My Mother.**

A random woman's wrong turn in the parking lot left her seriously concussed. Her baby in the backseat, miraculously unscathed, had only bitten his tongue. Relieved that further damage hadn't been done to her child, she drove back home with a dull headache.

What she hadn't anticipated was the constant brain fog and nine relentless months of insomnia. Nine months. She'd carried and birthed four children, but none of them had caused this much psychological pain. The daytime was brutal: she couldn't think clearly, she couldn't read, and at times she couldn't find words to form coherent sentences. It felt like she was processing in slow motion, but the world continued on at 2x speed. Her baby constantly cried, her teenage daughter was sneaking a boyfriend, her son was recovering from a leg injury, her youngest daughter needed rides to extracurriculars, and her husband was at work. Everything that she'd previously done simultaneously loomed large as she tried to perform with the same perfection she had before.

If the daytime was brutal, the nighttime was unbearable. Her brain, rattled by the crash, refused

to settle at night. Like static on the TV, it refused to shut off, instead emitting insufferable noise. She prayed fervently, listened to podcasts, and lay there. Nothing helped.

One night, she felt a familiar pull on her bladder and got up to go to the bathroom. Two minutes after lying down again, she felt an urgent stab again. Confused, she got up again to use the bathroom. This time, she barely made it back to the bed before she felt another jab in her bladder. It refused to stop. Her daughter walked in on her sitting on the toilet seat, exhausted and crying as her bladder desperately tried to wring itself dry; her twenty-seventh time in the past hour. Her daughter, unable to cope with her mother's suffering, left to go back to bed. Just because her daughter quit didn't mean that her bladder did. Throughout the night, she got up to use the bathroom over one hundred times, her body desperately trying to release everything.

Sleeplessness induces a desperation similar to starvation. Just as one needs sustenance, so does one need sleep. At first, she tried the "natural" route. Consulting homeopathic doctors, she started to take magnesium daily. Slowly, her enthusiasm fizzled out as the metal did nothing to calm down her ever-active brain. She found herself at the mercy of a baffled medical professional, begging them to do the impossible. The urologist and somnologist had no clue what was going on, so they did what every medical professional does best: run tests and give drugs. At this point, she was simply doling out cash to get poked and prodded. Reaching the point of desperation, she tried Ambien, a medication that claimed to slow down the brain and allow one to sleep. She was scared about potential side effects, but weighed it out in her mind: nausea and headache or another night of no sleep. When nighttime came, she swallowed the pill only to find it had absolutely no effect. Left with no other choice, she cautiously turned to Belsomra, an addictive pill. It helped a little, enough to allow her to fall asleep at 5 a.m., only to wake up at 7 to get the kids off to school.

**Scene 5:**

*(Lights up. It's musical rehearsal again. Cinderella faces her snarling stepmother with a pleading look.)*



Cinderella: Kindness! You must try it! *(Smiling brightly)* What a beautiful hairstyle you have!

Director: Stop! Ok, that was great, Cinderella, perfect! *(Turns to another actor)* But Prince! You weren't paying attention to her while she was talking. From the top! After that, Act 1, Scene 8!

*(Cinderella sighs.)*

*(Lights fade out.)*

*(Lights up.)*

*(It's the end of rehearsal. "Cinderella" is about to walk out when the director stops her. )*

Director: Hey, can I talk to you real quick?

Cinderella: Sure, what's up?

Director: I know Act 1, Scene 8 has been bothering you for a while now, so I was trying to figure out how I could best help you. I actually noticed something, but it's a bit more personal.

Cinderella: *(furrows brows).* Ok…

Director: I noticed that you use laughing as a coping mechanism when you're sad. Did you know that? All of the "pretty kind princess" parts are easy for you because that's what you're like in real life. Your growth as an actor is only going to come when you can confront the parts of yourself that you don't like, the parts that aren't pretty. Just think about it.

*(Cinderella nods, pensive.)*

**Donald Trump.**
**January 20, 2017, New Jersey, My Grandmother.**

The night Trump was elected marked the start of her insomnia journey. Her daughter blamed it on her constant diet of CNN and Diet Coke, but she knew it was simply the stress of the election. She was 66.

She had never had trouble sleeping before, only that she slept too much. Whenever the voices came, inside or outside her head, she retreated to her bed. She would sleep for days straight.

Now, suddenly, she could no longer sleep at night. Saving the world had become her sole responsibility. Her stomach turned with the awareness of injustice. It was an uncomfortably familiar feeling. It took her back to the time she felt suffocated in Hartford, Connecticut, when she was left with two little girls under her care and only questions.

In Chinatown, she struggled to reconcile the two parts of her identity, which seemed as different as day and night: the well-educated, successful American girl and the traditional, subservient daughter. She felt like both sides taunted her: she was always either too American or too Chinese, but never enough of one to fit in anywhere. However, in Connecticut, there wasn't another Asian in sight for miles. Disconnected from half of her roots that she'd never fully make peace with, she felt lost.

If being a Chinese daughter left her with responsibilities that felt too heavy to shoulder, being a Chinese mother tripled the burden in a way she wasn't expecting. Her mother had always been so grounded in her ways, mainly because her ways were not her own. Her mother had taken the Chinese ways and inflexibly applied them to any circumstance, ignorant of how these rules dissipated once they left the walls of the apartment. Like trying to fit a round peg into a square hole, the Chinese village's way of life was not interchangeable with a Manhattan one.

Growing up, she had figured out the "American" part of her identity: smile constantly, be polite, and work hard. But the Chinese side had always been forced upon her, not discovered. Even if she didn't personalize it, it was internalized, deep within her bones. When she looked at her daughters' black hair, she knew they needed to know that part of themselves, too, but she lacked the connection with her culture that her mother possessed. She could not be her mother.



Whenever she picked up her daughters from school, she swallowed a wave of anxiety. As she greeted the other moms, those with blond, bouncy curls, she felt that she was the sole ambassador, the responsibility of the Chinese people resting on her shoulders. "I'm the only Chinese woman they've ever met," she thought to herself, "I have to make a good impression." She'd absorb racist comments, ignoring the churning in her stomach. She'd stand up straighter and widen her smile. Picture perfect.

**SHE'D ABSORB RACIST COMMENTS, IGNORING THE CHURNING IN HER STOMACH. SHE'D STAND UP STRAIGHTER AND WIDEN HER SMILE. PICTURE PERFECT.**

Slowly but surely, she felt her picture cracking. There was nowhere for her to turn, no one to understand her. The questions were too loud, the anxiety too strong. She shattered.

Decades later, the same questions remain. Her performance, sustained for so many years, had become tiring. She spends time with her grandchildren until she gets too tired, the smile on her face too heavy, and she leaves. She sleeps for hours during the day and lies awake at night.

**Curtain Call**

*The lights begin to dim, and the cast stays frozen in position. Only I, Cinderella, move off the stage, leaving reality behind. Once the curtains close, everyone around me will take off their costumes and return to their selves. However, my costume was one of two things that permitted me to show more of myself. Everyone else will lie in bed and go to sleep, but I'll slip back into the world of the night, the world of wide-eyed sleeplessness: insomnia's domain.*

*Here, I act no more.*

*Here, I am left with me and only myself.*

*Here, I am tortured by the weightiness of the present.*

*Here, I stop smiling.*

*Am I more of myself when I lie awake at night?*

*I think insomnia comes to the ones who try to hold it together the most. As if to say,*

*"Your picture-perfect ends here. No more hiding.*

*Look at your thoughts.*

*Look at your helplessness.*

*Look at your humanity."*

*If this is true, is insomnia an enemy or a friend? Does it force upon us a viewing of ourselves that we aren't brave enough to see in the bright sunlight but can tolerate glimpses of in the murky moonlight?*

*They say we only see in the light, but we feel in the dark.*

*It is in the clutches of insomnia that three generations of Asian American women lie as they wrestle with their masks. Three women whose restless breathing disrupts the early birds' songs.*

*(Blackout).*



**THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM**
HELENA WANG

**EXCAVATED PRESENT**
ANONYMOUS

# HOUSTON

**HOPE YANG**

She told me this place looked something dystopian—
scorched and desolate enough to house the undead
us half human half charred sunsapped skin bag rats racing
straight from a movie, you know what I mean?
Except Houston breathes like a yawn
and already I stretch across miles of hot air
get so lost in the distance I might find myself
a decade of checking the AQI and dodging mopeds
clean trains intimate skyline urban savvy in the making
this, here, so much sky you forget to breathe
so much space you could disappear
Yeah, I know what you mean
weather-weak pale bloated cotton candy-clouded city
dear God, I fill into this place
like egg broken into broth, suffusing

# WHALEBONES

## ADAM DHALLA

*CW: blood/gore*

There had been a storm. For three days the sound of it broke around her, the muted sound of wind on the walls, sensing twice in the night the sharp but distant thwack of a pine split and fallen far above the tideline. But it was quiet now, early on the fourth morning. Sunlight crossed the room in armadas.

Leaving the house she walked to the water, through storm-permuted dunes. The fog was so thick that she could not see the shore beyond the dune, and looking back after a minute she could not see the house, only an atmosphere of total light.

She followed the wave sounds to the beach. Walking over the line of bullkelp and beerglass drawn up the night before, the flies scattering and re-conforming behind her, she followed the curve of the bay still hidden by mist, walking high on the shore, beyond even the longest waves. She looked at all the sea had thrown in her absence, each mangled nest of metal and wood a work of muscle irreconcilable with the quiet sea beside her, scrunching and rolling like the back of a silver dog. It was all similar and cold, her caneholding hand rosy with cold.

Then—down the beach she saw on the white plains of shore and sea something dark. A *skiff hauled halfway out the water*, she thought, even though she knew it was not, it did not have the shape. It was long, reaching the tideline and sparkling like a slab of black wet marble. *A skiff, a skiff ran into the sand—*

And then she saw it gently heave with life.



**SKELETON + FABRIC**
MIA RIDZINSKI

* * *

At home she boiled water. Outside was still mistsullen. As the water simmered she found she could not keep the two in her mind at once—what she knew lay outside, and the calm kitchen before her, the calm heater churning away. She paused at the window. A whale. Beyond the mist slowly receding. Thinking of it pulsing with breath she became conscious of her own. With ease she had done it all morning but now she felt a faint whistle. Had she really smoked so much? Sixty years of cigarettes, yesterday's stuck to the windowsill like thunderstruck oaks. But she had come far. Whatever scars her body had gathered had not caused it to stop moving altogether.

**BUT NOW LIFE BEFORE THE WHALE HAD BECOME SO UNIMAGINABLE, RENDERED SO ILLOGICAL IN THIS NEW SYSTEM OF THOUGHT, THAT IT HAD BEEN VOIDED ENTIRELY; LIKE THE UNIVERSE BEFORE THE FIRST DAY.**

She drifted through the room. Yes, she had weathered well. Not like her mother, numbed away at sixty and gone by seventy. Evidently some things had been lost. Movement, mostly, and her skin wept a little on the bone. Yet it was all superfluity, shaved away to reveal more clearly now than ever the exacting scholar's mind within. Not even her husband—magnificent as he was, even at the end—could follow her here, to face each torrent of wind with unshielded eyes, straining for meaning. The mist would lift soon. To reveal, to reveal—she hesitated, pent in a half-turn. Would she be able to see it from the window?

More and more she saw all things as symbols of what was passing or to come, messages ferried to her from a providential world. Like Joan of Arc she was another in a great line of human listeners, those weathervanes receptive to the faintest whispers. But beyond the fog was not a message. On the beach it lay mute and dying or dead already. It did not beckon her, and there was nothing to do, the main road fifty miles off, the closest town further. It was too simple, too futile, too suggestive of an utter lack of fluency in a language elemental and unforgiving. There would be no inconsistency if she had never seen it, if only she had never seen it—but now life before the whale had become so unimaginable, rendered so illogical in this new system of thought, that it had been voided entirely; like the universe before the first day.

* * *

By early afternoon the fog had lifted and the fishermen had come in. The village had only two fishermen now, and only needed two. Tall Raúl and Small Pedro. Both were badly sunblemished, and being nearly eighty, had the sinewy thinness of men who had once been muscular. Each household solicited the services of one of them exclusively in arrangements determined by old family circumstances, and they came to their respective doorsteps twice a week with packaged rockfish and mackerel. Raúl had seen the beached whale from the bay, and after mooring his boat he walked along the beach to look at it better. Pedro came in later and had seen Raúl first (there were so few who could still stand that straight) and then saw the whale and followed in curiosity.

"Jesus," Pedro said, walking up behind Raúl and the whale. The blubber sparkled in the new sunlight.

"Dead," Raúl said. "I have not seen one for a long time."

"Do we have to do anything?" Pedro asked.

"No."

There was silence.

"These types have ambergris sometimes," Raúl said. "In the guts. Calcified blocks of squid beaks and shit. They use it in perfumes and the companies buy it for millions."

"*Alright*, Ishmael."

"You've read *Moby Dick?*"

"Do I look like I have time to read?"

"Yes."

"Fucker," he says. "Have *you* read it?"

"No. But I don't go around calling people Ishmael."

Raúl left and Pedro left soon after. When Raúl returned to his boat the fish were swimming weakly in the faintly bloodstrewn water, shallow in the two refashioned paint buckets. He took them to his house. One by one he drove an iron spike through their brains and bled them out in the sink. Each time the spike was driven in, the fish would tense under his hands and the fins would flay outwards and globes of blood would form and fall across the head.

An hour later Raúl was knocking at a door with a cooler of fish wrapped in waxpaper.

"Raúl," the woman said, opening the unlocked door.

"Mrs. Hogsden."

"I keep saying since Mr. Hogsden has been gone for four years it would be better if you called me Ellen."

"It would be too much like childhood. They say you become a child again when you are old, and I do not want it yet."

"Sure, sure," she said. "Would you like to come in?"

"I have three more houses."

"I see. Thank you for the fish then."

She had put her hand on the doorknob but Raúl did not move away. He was thinking of the whale. He did not know if he should mention it. *She has probably already seen it*, he thought. *She does*



*walk in the mornings. And if she hasn't? Then what? She would come out just to see it? There is something sacreligious in that. It is better that she stumbles upon it herself. And what would I say? There is nothing to say. It is too macabre for a widow anyways. She has had enough of death.*

"Mrs. Aimard is going to live with her sons," he said abruptly.

"I heard. It doesn't surprise me. She has been ill for some time."

"We will soon be empty."

"Yes," she said and sighed.

"Well," Raúl said. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

He did not mention the whale to any of the other residents and neither did they. This was strange, as the sky had cleared and, since all the houses lay on a single road around the bay, you could see

it lying massively on the beach from almost everywhere. Raúl began to feel like he alone could see it and followed it with his eye as he walked from house to house. He watched two seagulls lower onto its breast. He waited nervously for them to whine and bellow and summon the rest of the screaming flock, knowing that ignoring the corpse would be impossible then, but they remained utterly silent and in an hour they had gone.

* * *

Pedro had no money, but there was no shame in this since he had no children or wife and his brothers were dead. He had stopped receiving cash when the town became so small that it regressed into barter. He received tomatoes and cucumbers instead, and this did not bother him until now. Now he could no longer look at his house without wincing a little. A century of salted air had rendered it more archaeological than architectural. The pipes were naked and rusted and you could taste the rust in the

water.

He winced now because he saw himself dying—in his sleep, he would have it no other way—and being left to lie in the house for days before the paramedics came and unmummied him dead and stinking from the bedsheets. He saw their pity and hated it. Seeing him encased in the pathetic ruin of a house, he knew they would make for themselves a version of his life miserable enough to merit the grotesque end. He needed a worthier mausoleum, and so he needed money.

So he was thinking about the ambergris. Raúl was smarter than himself. Maybe it was not all bullshit. He watched the window darken as the room took on an inert dread. At this time he could always feel the isopods in the walls. *It wouldn't hurt to try*, he thought. An animal among animals among animals. He looked to the spot on the beach where the dead whale sat eclipsed by darkness. Thoughts fell through him like boulders into a pond. *It wouldn't hurt. It wouldn't hurt to try.* Then he went to the kitchen for his two largest knives and took his camping lantern from its hook beside the door and walked into the night.

A hundred little things scuttled invisibly over the rocks and into grass as the carcass appeared under his light. It already had an ungodly smell. He was not on the right side and had to straddle it to cross over, and illuminating the underbelly with his light he saw that it was already roseate. He knelt beside it and began to cut long and horizontally into the blubber and continued this way for ten minutes. Blood, unlike human blood, viscous and lavender-colored, spilled from the incision. Since the whale had not unbuckled entirely he began to cut vertical crosses.

He had made the third cross when he saw the lightbeam. It had been sauntering over the dunes without him seeing for some time but he managed to look up right when it became too late to shut off the lantern and leave anonymously in the dark. He could tell from the light's sudden hard direction that it had seen him. Pedro stood up. He was still holding the knife, which was covered in fat and blood that was spreading down his hands. He knew who it was and was not worried about scaring him.



"Motherfucker," Raúl said. "*Mother*fucker."

Pedro did not say anything but stood like a psycho with the knife still up.

"Fucking Ishmael," Raúl said. The contours of his face were visible now behind the lightbeam. "Who's fucking Ishmael now."

"Alright alright," Pedro said. He knew how he looked. "We can split it."

"Bullshit," Raúl said. "I suggested it."

"Sixty-forty," Pedro said.

"Bullshit."

"Seventy-thirty."

"Asshole," Raúl said, placing his flashlight down and stationing himself distantly from Pedro and beginning to cut at the belly. An assembly of moths wrought dim and folding shadows over the light but still it was too bright. They did not want to see each other or themselves and wanted their hands to be the hands of others.

**"FUCKING ISHMAEL," RAUL SAID. THE CONTOURS OF HIS FACE WERE VISIBLE NOW BEHIND THE LIGHTBEAM. "WHO'S FUCKING ISHAMEL NOW."**

It took thirty minutes for the incision to rupture. Festoons of steaming whalegut spilled onto the beach and Pedro, looking at Raúl, opened his mouth to speak, but did not speak. The smell had infiltrated him, and he turned to retch on the rocks. Finishing and walking back to Raúl he stopped and retched again. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand he stood looking at Raúl with the desolate sick wild eyes of a martyr. They learned to mouthbreathe, and crouched to begin dismantling the mass of knotted flesh.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck," they said sieving through the guts. At first they used their knives, then their hands, running back and forth to the ocean to wash them. Over and over Raúl made the symbol of the cross and since his hands were bloody there were red spots on his forehead and chest. Pedro did not even know what ambergris looked like, and was thinking of a massive pearl. *Hell is nothing* Raúl was whispering *my soles will burn in hell but it will not be this*. Often the undead smell would thicken in their throats and overflow, flooding their noses from behind, and they would double over and add to the puddle.

A general pain was blooming in them. This came with an outer pain, a hot pricking pain like every hair had become a needle. The world slowed and they slowed with it, clutching at their blistered hands, cursing. Ten minutes had passed and they did not touch the corpse and sat on the rocks cursing. They looked at each other as if to say *do not rest* but they knew now that they had sat nothing could make them return. The lamplight clung to the knives in the blood and their desecration lay twisted and undone in chiaroscuro.

**HELL IS NOTHING RAUL WAS WHISPERING MY SOLES WILL BURN IN HELL BUT IT WILL NOT BE THIS.**

"Aye," Raúl said. He heard himself and it was the same sound his father used to make in the morning with the arthritis, when he needed Raúl to help him out of bed. They shut off the lights and sat in the darkness. Slowly they saw again. The moon was thin and useless for light. The tide was lunging upwards, drawing in langours at the end of the carcass. Flies bristled against them and though they could not see them clotting over the opened corpse they heard them, and the sound was another manifestation of pain. "Aye," Raúl said again before getting up and walking away along the beach, carrying his flashlight but not using it. Pedro did not move and remained there with his brain just noise. Murmuring language droned in his head like a river sounding, running into a canyon. Mostly indecipherable, but from time to time the vestige of a word drifted by before slipping down into the canyon. It was an hour until he could pick up his knives and Raúl's knife and the lantern, and it was nearly two in the morning when he began to hobble blindly homeward, certain his sleep would be his final sleep.



* * *

She looked out a window and felt like a fish under a frozen river. Shy columns of sun impaled the clouds, setting patches of grass briefly alight before being doused again by darkness. Raúl had not come the day before. He had not missed a day like that for twenty-six years. She walked around the house, smoking and thinking. *Ah*, she thought, feeling her age when her mind ascribed his absence to death almost automatically. *Well how will I get my fish then. I will have to go to Pedro*, she thought. What she knew about Pedro she did not like, but the other option was to call her son for groceries, and she would not do this unless she had to. She resolved to go to Raúl's house and then to Pedro's if Raúl did not answer.

* * *

Raúl had left town. The day before a pain had woken him and there were boils on his hands and arms. He could see the predawn light outside and forgetting the boils in a trance of habit he went out to the boat. As usual he had put everything in a trunk on the boat the night before so there would be no time wasted in the morning. All he had to do was unmoor it. Bending down and grasping the bristling rope in his hand he felt an inhuman pain and shrieked and was rung out of his trance by his own noise. In the fuzzy ring of first light he looked at his hands and saw the boils black as tarpits.

He went to Pedro's house. Pedro had the same, but more of it.

"The fucking whale," Pedro said. "God knows what was inside the whale."

"I'm going to the hospital," Raúl said.

"It will go away on its own."

"I rather not die over this."

"Will you tell them about the whale?"

"No."

"Because it was illegal?"

"Yes."

"What will you say then?" Pedro asked.

"I will say it came from a fish, and that I am a fisherman."

They exchanged goodbyes that were almost sentimental and Raúl went to start his truck. His hands and arms were burning and the pain was extraordinary. He thought of telling his clients he would be gone so they could make arrangements but reckoned this was unnecessary since he would soon be back, and that he had served the bastards faultlessly for decades and did not have to excuse himself this one time. The pain was too great and he had to martial his energy for the hourlong drive to the hospital. All that time he would have to suppress the thought that had burgeoned in him from when he had decided on going, the thought that half the town had gone to die in that hospital.

Pedro heard his name called at the door in the midafternoon. *God damn it*, he thought. *One of Raúl's women. Hogsden maybe*. "Pedro," she cried sternly at the door. Pedro was lying in bed with a towel over his head and the window open. The boils hurt like hell but it was the fever and nausea which had come in the morning that made him immobile and light-sensitive and made her voice sound like a million copper bells. "Pedro," she said again and he thought *if she says Pedro again she will kill me.* She did not say it again. She stood on the doorstep and looked into the bay, noting for the third time that the boats of Pedro and Raúl were both moored and bobbing dumbly against the bulkhead so they could not have died at sea. Thinking that Pedro might have been out walking she sat nearby and Pedro could hear her cursing about how useless they were and how she hoped that Pedro and Raúl both were dead because it was the only excuse she would accept. She stayed for thirty minutes, called his name again, and left.



At home she stared violently at the telephone and called her son.

* * *

She was adjusting a vase when he came in.

"Mamma," he said, carrying two bags of groceries. He had the face of an opossum, and a body that with any other face would have been formidable.

"They were out of the wafers," he said, placing the bags on the table. "So I got something similar." He was excellent at this type of kindness, these attempts to soften the concessions of life that led people to say he would make a good father. At forty-five this remained hypothetical.

"You like chamomile tea," she said, going to boil water.

"Yes, thank you," he said and though this had not been true for many years, seeing her emerge from the kitchen, stooped and small, ended all possibility of telling her this and countless other things. She pulled out a chair to sit and splayed her hands on the tablecloth. He sat opposite to her and he looked at the dull calico roses that patterned the tablecloth that had not changed.

He did not speak much. Both were tired by a spell of arguments which had erupted over his attempts a year before to convince her to move to a nursing home. He had not visited for months and she did not want him to, and when they spoke they spoke with fragile carefulness. Most conversations expired in minutes and were extended only by excessive attention to detail (how much were the eggs?) as long as the details did not dredge up the past or question the future. Like ants they spoke and existed within a thin margin of the present.

**HE WAS EXCELLENT AT THIS TYPE OF KINDNESS, THESE ATTEMPTS TO SOFTEN THE CONCESSIONS OF LIFE THAT LED PEOPLE TO SAY HE WOULD MAKE A GOOD FATHER.**

"Mind if I step outside?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Cathy was wondering what this place looked like and I was going to take some photos." "Of course, of course. Go ahead."

And so he stepped out. She watched him stand on the porch for a moment, back heaving. Cathy. The lawyer. She had heard the name years ago. Perhaps he was resuming with her. Continuity would be good for him. She looked at him and wondered if he was cold and if he would step back in. Him, her only son, her only child. For a second it seemed this was so. But he did not. He stretched, throwing his arms out at nothing, and began to walk to the sea.

There was little residual mist. She watched him shrink into the sandhills. He would only have to make it to the beach to see it. *But he cannot see it*, she thought. She looked at the bubbles that rose and expired in her tea and thought *he must not see it*. It was not that she wished to protect him. A dead whale is no worse than a dead man, and he had seen that, his father, and if anything it had done him good, spurred him on. But that had been different. She could appreciate now the immense questionless grief of his death.

**LIKE ANTS THEY SPOKE AND EXISTED WITHIN A THIN MARGIN OF THE PRESENT.**

But the whale, the whale. It emerged from the same void her husband had so exquisitely disappeared into four years ago. Like a bullet it ripped through her and at night she felt the cold hemorrhage it had left inside. But she could take it, she could bear it, if she could do so alone. The whale had become entangled with too much of herself and if he were to return saying have you seen it it would begin an unraveling that would lay everything bare. *He has probably seen it already,* she thought, looking out the window. Imagining him prodding it and photographing it she felt more naked than she had ever felt in her life.



She did not know how long it had been when she saw him through the window, returning. She closed her eyes and heard the door open and close.

"There's no connection here," he said, waving his phone.

Nothing. She waited.

"Got some pictures though. I'll send them to her later."

"Oh. Good, that's good," she said finally.

"Well," he said. "I should be going."

"Yes," she said, getting up. "Don't forget anything."

She walked with him to the door with weary authority. He stumbled into his car and waved back to her as he loosened from a turn, as he used to do. She watched the car recede into the outside land. Under the medley of loss and love was something else entirely—a quiet triumph. *Yes*, she thought. *I have kept myself.*

* * *

As he drove it rained and the raindrops on the window drew shadows on his hands that made them look mottled and old. Again and again he began to think of what was on the beach.

* * *

For months she did not go to the sea, finding other paths far up in the marram. She watched summer row over the hills, the summer sun tasseled over her skin. It was never warm, but there was a crisp vividity in these days of waiting. She did not know how long it would take. She remembered after her husband's death there had been a hurry to 'lay him to rest.' Surely then it would not be long with the sun and the flies. Still she waited. Patience that she had lacked for her entire life now came to her effort-

lessly.

She never saw Raúl again or Pedro, the lights in Pedro's house never turning back on. There were no fish. The few complaints from those remaining were silenced when they learned there was no one to receive them. It was as if a conspiracy had descended onto the town that the two fishermen had not masterminded but became conduit to, channeling the austere dictate of time that had before forced a thousand grander exoduses by subtler means.

Cars, miraculously clean, began to clot the single road. Out of them came families, trim-bearded men in flannel, fleeced women who had not seen the sea for months. On the beach, grandchildren—the younger ones running from the cold surf like sanderlings, charged with the long-fettered curiosity of city children, and the older ones bundled up in scattered, wandering flocks, living out wilderness fantasies and coupling off arbitrarily as twilight fell—they spoke a disparate language, born and accumulated for an alien purpose, deriving from the land a romantic enjoyment endearing but incomprehensible to their grandparents, who watched from behind screen windows as their adult children rolled up carpets and threw out judiciously things that could be replaced or bettered in the city. One by one the houses emptied, gleaned of their essentials, left to be sold for land, not before serving as background for family photos, three, sometimes four generations packed in, the littlest standing head-to-head with their time-curled elders in arrangements that would be elegiac if not for the strained smiles. All that time, the corpse. Suddenly smaller than life, deflated and rotting, barely even noticed, unremembered by the children.

And yet she stayed, without fish she stayed; she did not need her son again. She watched the cars hurtle away with her neighbors with amused and benign resentment, subsisting on less and less, needing nothing and imbued with the same divine patience, the intention of her patience shifting as fall turned to winter. Every morning she looked outside and assessed the weather, the light, looking for a set of conditions satisfied that she could not enumerate explicitly; did not even consciously calculate but would know if she saw. She ate tuna from ancient tin cans with the still-tempered intensity of a starved alley cat, knowing but not worrying that she was running out. She became stationary, hazy-eyed in the wicker chair with an unopened book on her lap (always a book of one-act plays, which she seemed to know without ever reading, the characters crying out in her mind the exact lines); and yet her mind's tumult grew in inverse proportion to her movement, the static noise mounting, mounting—

And then silence. Waking up one morning there was total resounding silence. The mist outside opaque and white. She could almost forget that beyond it were the other houses, all emptied now, nature slowly claiming them again like snakeskin on a forest floor. She would leave.

Closing the door behind her she carved a trail through a mist so thick it melted on her clothes. Through and through the silent hills she walked towards the sea. On the beach she looked into the visible sphere around her. The ocean was a silver pond. Visions of seas incarnadine, of perverted dews of blood and oil and a fat corpse smell, all of it vanquished by the pale invariable flood. It was not living or dying. Walking over the stones she looked into the mist, she strained into the mist, and she saw; pale on pale she saw the fronds of bone.

**DISTORTED PERCEPTIONS**

DOMINIQUE SENNET



# KINTSUGI

DINGDING YE

*CW: suicidal thoughts depictions*

from the womb
i was quiet {eerily silent}
from there i
fell
from their {momdadcaregiver's} grasp
left out in the sun for too long
a freshly sizzled worm
scraped off the sidewalk
watched a slug melt
and took a course in mimicry
she {by that i mean i} melted too
puddle of goo
sludge unfeeling adaptable
conforming to her them every(any)thing
river flowing around her circumstances — stream over a pebble — a rivulet around
the dead bugs plastered on a windshield
hanging on without a semblance of life
no will no soul nothing {no one} left
a husk of a being {a thing barely}

i gathered my selves *(noun, plural)*
with a broom
reached into the depths of my pantry
and swept out a form *(noun, singular)*
from the cobwebs
assembled into
my idea
of a girl a woman a human who am i really
{not her}
— but i did become her
taking her skin as my own
for my own definition of becoming

broken body mind {her}
shattered shards in a trench coat
clothed fed and watered
slathered in makeup (blood)
dressed for slaughter
and sent out into the world
when she flashed the world with her nakedness
and they saw and {monster they cried}
not in horror
but disgust
like the treatment of the detached legs of a cockroach to be flushed down the drain
expired milk curdling foaming {hate}

hate: *(noun, plural/singular/collective)*
one of the feelings in which the aftertaste cannot be masked



she stole her body parts back {from them, who?}
picked and chosen from
the next door neighbor's
three-four-who-knows-weeks-old dumpster pile
lit ablaze and left there
to rot {like her, you know?}
but a mere glimpse in the mirror
undressed her pain
tired of the cycle — of forming a being from the dust
without powers of a god — and piecing together
sewing stitch by stitch the mile
(5280 feet 63360 inches) long
tapestry that would (could, might?) free her
pricked by the needle one too many times
she couldn't do this
{so she decided not to try}

why why why do you blame her *{memyselfi}* find fault in the world that forced her hand

# GOD'S OWN COUNTRY

RITA AJIT

*CW: illness, death*

**I. Big Jesus**

In early April of 33 A.D., Jesus was nailed into the wood of the cross on the hill of Golgotha. In early January of 1998 A.D., Jesus was nailed into the wood yet again, on newly painted walls in the first house that my parents had in the United States of America, on a quiet tree-lined suburban street.

In this massive portrait, his head is emanating soft light. Like either he is the sun or he's eclipsed it perfectly. His heart is doing the same. It is also on fire, or maybe the crucifix extending upward from his heart is. Big Jesus wears his own cross on his chest. This portrait is filled with hues of gray-blue and white, unlike the one in our house now, which is far more warm-toned. I associate this older one with peace and nostalgia, the feeling of my parents' bedroom where I slept more often than not. The same portrait in a smaller frame hung there too.

His chin ever so slightly tucked, he's looking straight ahead, almost through his eyebrows so a little bit of the whites of his eyes are showing below his pupil. It's almost a sultry expression, like he's seducing you with his tranquil radiance. I've told this Jesus a million of my secrets and he's kept them all. He's given me none in return. Worse, he never says anything at all.

Big Jesus lived in that house before me, Jake, and Leeza did. The walls of that house remained bare otherwise, until the arrival of new stray dirty fingerprints



**THE LIGHT IN YOUR EYES**
HELENA WANG

and impassioned streaks of (un)washable Crayola felt tips, literal markers of three childhoods simultaneously unfolding under one roof. Bare still, but for those and for Big Jesus. That was about as far as decor went in our family in this place. We never stayed anywhere long enough to make it quite our own.

The walls in their homes in India were muted Dettol oranges, with jackfruit green ceilings and sky blue bathroom tiling. Almost tacky, always humming with life. Windows open so warm air and mosquitos can circulate. Humid, buzzy, vibrant. Jerky ceiling fans whose noisy rattle puts you to sleep and gently ripples shapes into the silky patterned curtains by the windows. Everything loud and everything colorful. Here, white walls, silent AC, and those plastic blinds that keep getting stuck on one side.

There is only so much of the old life that can be imported, and the larger-than-life portrait of Jesus from India was deemed essential. Wrapped in layers of Malayala Manorama and bubble wrap to ensure his safe voyage in their suitcase, Jesus was risen once more—tens of thousands of feet in the air on a Qatar Airways flight from Kerala to Virginia. Jesus the immigrant, happy to lead my parents through new Customs. They braved the second coming, the new world, together.

Here or there, Big Jesus remained a singular constant in their uprooted life. Much like the rumored rule in the capital city of the new world that you can't build at a height exceeding that of the Pentagon, you cannot place anything above Big Jesus. He sat in his permanent throne above the mantle, below nothing but the ceiling and next to nothing at all. I used to think everyone had a larger-than-life portrait of Jesus in their house and a rosary hanging off the rearview mirror in their family minivan. Religion was a fact of life.

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*"You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."*

*Exodus 20:3–6*

We worship the likeness of God as many days as we can praying to Big Jesus. If that violates the second commandment, we are repeat offenders. We orient life towards his wall in the old house.

Before I start my first day of kindergarten at St. Joseph's school, I put on my Bratz backpack, pick up my Hello Kitty lunch box, and bring them to the living room so the Bratz and Hello Kitty and I can have God's blessing. My mom tells me to face the portrait, fold my hands, close my eyes, and complete her call and response while my dad gets the car keys.

"Jesus, help me have a good year at school," she says.

"Jesus, help me have a good year at school," I repeat.

"Jesus, help me make new friends."

"Jesus, help me make new friends."

"Jesus, make me a good girl and love Amma and Appa."

"Jesus, make me—" I am a good girl. I don't think I need Jesus' help but I say it anyway. It feels more patronizing when I am in high school and still saying the same prayer. And I'm not sure if it's me or my parents praying that I should be good to them, but I say it anyway. It doesn't take prayer for me to love them.

After our family eats dinner, we all join together in the living room. During the day, we sit on the

sofa facing the TV. But Big Jesus is on the other wall, the one he has all to himself, so now we sit on the floor and face this wall.

Praying the rosary daily has many benefits. It strengthens your family as a unit graced by faith. It advances each of your dedications through consistency and combined prayer. It brings God into your daily routine. A rosary has five decades, and there are five members of our family. The math could be simple, but it never is. We rotate who does two decades each time, one on their behalf and one on my older sister. Leeza is exempted from her turn in the rosary and from the kneeling, but she has a call and response prayer just for her. It is almost always just one line.

"*Eesho*, heal me."

"Heeme."

Sometimes she says it, sometimes she doesn't.

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When we moved to India when I was in second grade, Big Jesus went into storage in Virginia along with our TV and beds and boxes. We didn't need him to come with us. There is an abundance of Big Jesuses in nameless roadside markets in Kerala, a state whose tourism tagline is "God's Own Country." Big Jesuses abound in God's Own Country, the same state where Christianity was first introduced to a nation originally known as "Hindustan," or land of the Hindus. Kerala, however, became Big-Jesus-stan by the 19th century, with a Christian population proportionally much larger than that of India as a whole. Every house I went to here had a Big Jesus, or a Big Krishna, or a Big ElderRelativeNowPassed. Gods take up a lot of space in India.

There, we started every day with a school-wide assembly. Each day, we sang a prayer song together. On Mondays and Wednesdays, a Hindu song, on Tuesdays, a Christian song, Thursdays, a Muslim song, and Friday, "Hum Honge Kamyab," a Hindi translation of "We Shall Overcome" that grew popular in India. I walked to church with my neighbors on Sundays, and then we'd play outside until it grew dark. The local mosque blared the evening azan, calling the neighborhood mothers to action from their evening strolls to get all the kids back home. We wake up to the sound of devotional music playing from the temple loudspeakers. We let the gods keep time.

Two years later, we moved back to houses of dreary whites and silent AC. I was starting fourth grade in a public school. Once or twice, our family has been asked when and why we converted to Christianity. We didn't. My parents have only ever switched between two radio stations in our minivan: 91.9 "Christian Music" and 102.9 "Bollywood Hits." Only two percent of the Indian population is Christian, and my family falls into that category. I can often spot Kerala Christians by their biblically-derived names that often sound so white that no white person could ever possibly have them, like my cousin "Joseph Joe." It felt like a contradiction to be so Indian and Christian. We got another Big Jesus internationally shipped to us this time, and the old one from storage went to my parents' bedroom. When my friends come over, we hang out in the dining room or my room so as not to be third-wheeled by God in case that made them uncomfortable. There's also a huge photobook in the living room with a cover of me in a white dress, lace gloves, and a veil, melodramatically posed in a photo studio. White bold letters spell out "RITA'S FIRST HOLY COMMUNION" against the blue backdrop of the studio. My friends who have seen it will call it the photo album from my wedding with Jesus.

I began to prefer that our guests avoid the living room. Most of my friends didn't have Big Jesuses or gods at all. They have an Elf on the Shelf during the holidays, who is meant to be a moral figurehead who watches over affairs in your house and reports back to a higher power. That is about as close as it gets. We have Jesus on the Wall all year round. Unlike elves on shelves, Big Jesus is featured in countless family pictures, his hand raised to bless all beneath him.

Before my first day of college, I bring my suitcases to the living room so we can have God's blessing on our first voyage to the new world named Texas. We orient ourselves around the portrait, fold our

hands, close our eyes, and say a decade of the rosary together.

"O my Jesus, save me from the fires of hell."

"Jesus, help me have a good year at school," my mom says.

"Jesus, help me have a good year at school," I repeat.

"Jesus, help me make new friends."

"Jesus, help me make new friends."

"Jesus, make me good and faithful."

How many times can I be made good?

*I the LORD your God am a jealous God*

In my new world, there is no Big Jesus to orient my life around. There are posters on my wall, but all are less than or equal to life-sized. I've made false idols of Lorde and Hozier, and the longer I look at them, the longer I start to see the ethnically-and-even-gender-wise-somewhat-ambiguous Big Jesus I've known and loved. There are three separate posters of Dev Patel, whose facial hair and kind eyes also bear a resemblance to a certain portrait I have seen before. Jealous God, are you bitter that Dev Patel is on my wall now and you are not?

**JEALOUS GOD, ARE YOU BITTER THAT DEV PATEL IS ON MY WALL NOW AND YOU ARE NOT?**

**II. Small Rita**

Shoes off, feet sprawled, the backseat of the 2003 Honda Odyssey becomes a bed after a long family function in an itchy dress. The heater is warm and the pillow that is always floating around the



minivan that says "Sweet Dreams Baby Sleep" is the perfect intermediary between my head and the car speaker. The youngest of three may be relegated to the furthest row back in the car, but she wins all three of its seats.

I am looking up at the moon and it is moving at the same speed as the car. I know everyone can see the moon, but it is moving with me right now, just me, darting behind bare branches to keep up.

And I think this is what God is.

From here, I can only see sky and not the road beneath, but my internal compass tells me that we are on the winding woods road two turns from home. No one has to say it to know where we are going, all together.

And I didn't have enough time to fall asleep so I just pretend. My parents carry me to their bed and my eyes are closed but I know I am being taken care of and there is nothing that I have to do but be still. And I think this is what god is.

Everything takes care of itself. Only, if I opened my eyes I would see that it is living, breathing, human love taking care of me all the while, running warm fingers across my forehead and whispering "good night Rita" without even expecting it to be heard. I would say it back but I am asleep.

The moon appears to be moving with you because it is so far away, a years-later Google search tells me. God appears to be moving with you because he is so far away.

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As a young girl, I was determined to be the best Catholic in the world. I might even achieve sainthood, I think. Only a few years after I learned how to read, I set a goal to read the bible. I didn't understand every other word, so I put it on hiatus until around fifth grade, after we had moved back from India. This time, I stopped because I could tell they started talking about sex really early on. I tried to

cover the bad words with my hands because I didn't know what exactly they meant but I knew they were not for me. I don't know who put this in there if I wasn't supposed to read it.

One of my most prized possessions, even now, is my "Good Samaritan" award. At St. Joseph's Catholic School, where I spent kindergarten through second grade, students vote for one girl and one boy from each grade to receive the annual award. Jack and I were deemed the Good Samaritans of second grade. My parents came to the church for the award ceremony, beaming at me standing under that Big Jesus with their cameras out. It was better than any academic achievement; it said I was a true child of God, the best thing a child can be.

The funny thing about the parable of the good samaritan is its underlying message that your religion does not define your goodness and your willingness to help others in need. In the Book of Luke, chapter ten, a Jewish traveler is robbed, beaten, and left to die by the side of the road. A Jewish priest and a Levite pass him by, their indifference owed in part to their perceived ethnic and religious superiority. A Samaritan stops, asks no questions, and gives himself over to the traveler to nurse him back to health.

Selflessness and love, the ingredients for good samaritanism, are human before they are religious.

**III. Appacha**

Appacha lived in Meridian Gardens in Kerala, India, for as long as I knew him, in house number 8 with the plaque engraved "M.J. Alex." Everyone in the neighborhood ignores the plaque and calls him Appacha, meaning grandpa, even his own wife. Appacha spent a lifetime in the garage, tinkering with small inventions like a new handcrafted mega bubble wand for a six-year-old me or a cage for the mongoose my grandma had acquired by unknown means, which she soon abandoned by unknown means after it bit her. Within a week of getting a label maker, he had churned out tags for every switch in the house, fans, lights, water heaters, and all.



Appacha was soft-spoken, even in the Before, a sweet character with big round glasses and a rosy complexion. One of the great mysteries of our family is that most of us are brown but he is somewhat pink. Everything about him is soft: his voice, his skin, the way he'd always let his grandchildren win, and how he'd loan out money to family and friends (he rarely made such distinctions) in need and conveniently forgets to collect it back, to my grandmother's chagrin.

When I was visiting, the six-year-old mega-bubble-me and him started each week together the same way. Pill day was the best day of the week. I sat on his lap, endowed with the important task of breaking his pills out of the smooth foil and hearing them clatter into his teal pill organizer, keeping meticulous count. I assumed it was good counting practice for me. I also loved the feeling of splitting the foil with the edge of my nail, creating perfect empty circles, and getting to use the pill-halving tool. One of the small tasks given to small children to feel important and useful. Not because his hands were starting to shake more and a pill was becoming a very difficult thing to pick up once dropped.

Appacha was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease before any of his grandchildren were born. Parkinson's sends the body into a slow decline, one that can be seemingly resisted for decades until it finally, inevitably triumphs over the past self and becomes all-consuming. In home videos of Appacha in America, where he met his grandchildren for the first time, you can never tell. He took the large patch of grass called our backyard and transformed it into distinct plots of soil, supported by wooden siding and wired fencing of his own creation, where he planted everything from strawberries to tomatoes to peach trees. He plays little of a speaking role in these videos; he is hard at work. My mom or dad narrates behind the camera, "There's Appacha, tilling the soil."

"See Appacha, building a swing set for the kids. We went to Home Depot and got the wood today."

"There's Appacha, pushing Leeza on the swing set he made her."

He did it all, racing against the countdown his body had set.

When I was one, Ammamma and Appacha took me back to India with them. Leeza was hospitalized, and my parents had hardly enough capacity to take care of one baby, let alone three. My grandparents insisted they take the baby with them, who could not care for herself the way her brother could, being five by now. They went to the airport with a letter from my parents that probably said "THEIR ENGLISH IS NOT GREAT BUT THESE KIND OLDER FOLK ARE NOT KIDNAPPING MY CHILD," I imagine. We spent a few months there, just the three of us. I don't remember any of it, but he did, even when it was one of the only things he could remember. I always slept in between them in the bedroom of house number 8. When Appacha's memory started to go, my grandma told me he would pat the empty space next to him in that same bed and ask, "Where is the kid?" This remained.

Not long after, Appacha's life in India, in America, in Libya, back to India again, in the garden, in the garage, in the backyard, then the front yard had shrunk to a life spent in his bed, and the rocking chair by his bed, and then his bed again. He became someone I prayed for more than I talked to. Even in the two years we all lived in India, I spent more time thinking of him than engaging with him. It was hard to watch. He started getting scolded like a little child when his spirit found itself in conflict with his body, when he insisted on walking to the garage without his walker, alarming everyone because he was a fall-risk first and Appacha second.

He rifled through his drawers one day, looking for something to keep the body and the mind engaged, each slowly slipping away from the other. My grandmother walked into the room to find mercury balls, so spherical and perfect if only they weren't so dangerous, scattering on the floor from an old thermometer he'd found and accidentally shattered. My mom and grandma were livid that he could have hurt himself when he should have been laying in bed or sitting in his rocking chair. He was frustrated by overreaction after overreaction; he, for one, was no longer afraid of chemicals. He'd worked in a factory in Libya for five years. We know now that factories like those can contain the toxic inhalants that contribute to the development of Parkinson's. It is possible that in Libya, he unknowingly sold his body to work for his family. He was neither the first nor last to do so. God let his physical form die too, so that his innumerable children would live.



Every time I said goodbye to Appacha, I worried it could be the last. I don't know if it was my love or fear that caused me to pray every day, some days even for hours, that Appacha would get better. Our phone conversations were frequently "how are you," "I'm okay, Rita", "what are you up to," "I'm praying for you Appacha," followed by a stream of unremarkable updates about my life, which only felt to me like an irreverent contrast to the lack of updates he could provide. It was harder to hear him and make out his words, our communication further strained by my shaky Malayalam and his fading voice. Just pray, just pray, just pray. He told me this, Ammamma confirmed, and my parents said the same.

My mom told me often that God sees children's tears first and these prayers mean the most to him. So I would dwell on worst case scenarios, forcing my eyes to well until the tears formed themselves and rolled off my cheek and onto the pillow. At the very least, this meant that my dedications skipped the queue on God's priority list, I had hoped. I exploited my own emotions and my grandfather's sickness for a compulsion to cry before God, so maybe he would listen. Appacha passed away, and it's hard to say he did so peacefully (though many did) when the peace he knew was down the hall, in his space in the garage, where he hadn't been for years. When peace was the ability to eat his favorite foods, or any at all, or have a sip of water by mouth. To say he passed away quietly, just as he lived, would be a more apt description. I had stopped praying that he would be miraculously cured, but I never stopped praying that he could get a little bit better before it was too late.

I was starting to stop believing in God, although I wanted nothing more than to pray for his peaceful passage into heaven. It was an inconvenient time to lose faith because the following days were filled with prayers and religious rituals I was fortunate to never have known before. The body is brought back to the house and prayed over all night, mostly by the women. It brought some comfort to think that we would never leave Appacha alone, but my mom and I both wonder why it couldn't have been more like this when he was alive. Faces that had never come to visit him were now the most solemn, with closed eyes and veils over them, reciting prayers where no one even knows what exactly the antiquated words even mean. Prayer as performance, comforting who, I didn't know.

It felt pointless at best and abrasive otherwise. It's hard to say that everything happens for a reason, unless we make up a reason that no one can confirm or deny. It was convenient to think that he was tinkering away in heaven with buzzsaws and epoxy galore, but it was harder to believe. But God watched his own son suffer the greatest pain in the world and did nothing, my mom tells me, her

faith restored by our great uncles and aunts in the clergy who explained the value of suffering in house number 8.

God can do or not do whatever he wants with his son. But this was our Appacha, the only one we had.

**GOD CAN DO OR NOT DO WHATEVER HE WANTS WITH HIS SON. BUT THIS WAS OUR APPACHA, THE ONLY ONE WE HAD.**

It was not exactly God, but my grandma, who took care of him until the very end. She would've walked with him all the way up to heaven's door if God let her. She lost decades of her sleep to monitor his, lost hair and her appetite from constant stress, and lost the man she married long before he died. She is an A+ Catholic; the biggest losers will reap the biggest rewards. The more you can lose in this life, the more you shall gain in the next.

**IV. Leeza**

1. Chechi

2. Appacha

3. My parents

This is the definitive list of the top three people I have prayed for, four if you count my parents. Chechi has not gotten better. My grandfather passed away, slowly and painfully from Parkinson's, and



my parents spend nearly every waking hour taking care of Chechi. I've hardly ever prayed for my brother, yet he's working a great job at a hedge fund in New York City and currently on a trip to Japan with his girlfriend. It's becoming hard to rationalize prayer with such a low chance of return on investment.

Two years ago, my sister's birthday was one of the rare days when I decided to check my campus mailbox, just in case. In it, I find President Reginald DesRoches's inauguration invite from over a month ago, along with a large folded envelope from a lawyer-sounding name I didn't recognize. It had come from "Judicial Drive" in Fairfax, Virginia. Something to do with the courts. My friends, behind me in the mail room, joke that I'm being called to baby's first jury duty. I opened the envelope to find my copy of my parents' official guardianship request for my sister. It's quite the birthday present, I imagine. I put the papers back into the envelope dismissively because it's "just family stuff," I reassure my friends. Not hardly as fun as jury duty, if that's saying anything.

In my room, I flip through the pages, greeted by facts I have already known repackaged in all-caps typeface and cold, legal language that makes me feel like my sister falls short of total personhood. "At this time Elizabeth Vanniamparampil Ajit suffers from the debilitating and degenerative effects of her condition to such an extent that she is physically and mentally incapacitated and incapable of taking proper care of her person or her property." I am thankful for the first three words, "at this time." Their quiet hopefulness softens the blow. Another page shows a list of criteria to be deemed self-sufficient, all of the filled-in circles united on the "no" and "unable" sign. It all feels wrong; her identity to me is my sister and all the things we have ever done together, and her legal identity is her disability and all the things she cannot do. As she gets older, the realities of her condition have inched ever closer to my family as the miracle we all pray for seems to grow further away. Although my parents have always taken care of her and always will, putting these things down on paper adds a layer of gravity that we are still beginning to grapple with. Her nightly prayer prescribed by my

**SHE IS AN A+ CATHOLIC; THE BIGGEST LOSERS WILL REAP THE BIGGEST REWARDS.**

parents is still "Jesus, heal me."

It's like the legal paperwork has already written its own flawed, one-dimensional profile piece on my sister. I understand the necessity for concise and objective legal writing, but they really leave so much out. Excessive and subjective has always been more of my style. My first complaint is hardly fair: her legal name is indeed, Elizabeth, but it feels like it has nothing to do with her. To almost everyone who knows her, she is Leeza. Names are integral to identity—nicknames even more so. My family video-calls to celebrate her birthday, and I ask my mom how "Leeza" came to be spelled that way of all possibilities. Understandably, no one ever gets it right. She tells me it's just "for style" which makes me smile. Z's are commodities–10 point letters, I remember from the games of Scrabble my family used to play. My mom elaborates, "Leeza sounds very fancy...and there are enough Lisa's, Liz's, and Lizzy's in the family." I have never met another Leeza.

To me, though, she is Chechi. Our older brother is Cheta. In Malayali households, elder siblings are often called this way. I want to ask Leeza why she defies the nomenclature and calls me Chechi when I'm two years younger than her. And yet, my mom tells me that when I am at college, she points to my pictures and says baby (they are not baby pictures). She keeps me humble, reminding me that I was once infantile and she'll never let me live it down. I guess it stuck. Younger siblings will always be babies. To be her sister is to perpetually be both her baby and her Chechi. I do my best to help take care of her when I am home, calm her down when she's upset, and advocate for her when my parents and her get frustrated with each other. I still know I have a long way to go before awarding myself the title of big-sisterhood that she has bestowed on me.

There's no section in the paperwork that tells you that Leeza is one of the most interesting people in my life. She totes around a collection of—in as linguistically precise terms as I can describe—things, which is always fluctuating in size and composition. Currently, there is a non-functioning credit card, an iPad with a giant toddler-proof (and Leeza-proof) case, a book filled with cats, one of our dog's toys, multiple toothbrushes, a mug, nasal spray, and a small steel plate—probably the cause behind some



lonesome steel pot missing its lid. She is very particular about keeping a careful inventory of all of these things. The steel plate has been around for a long time, for example. She once took it to a restaurant in India and we'd left without it. It didn't take her long to notice, so we went back and asked the staff if they had seen it. It was returned to us cleaner than we had ever seen it: the staff had assumed it came from the kitchen and washed it with the rest of their dishes. Recently, she's been trying to bring back markers from school in her backpack to incorporate into the inventory, but my mom keeps sending them back to school with her. They always make it back again.

On paper, Leeza is "nonverbal," but our family knows she's far from it. Besides the standalone words that she uses regularly, she's introduced us to bits and pieces of a language of her own creation. "Pikki pikki" in a high register means she's happy, and "waaayne" is that times a hundred. "Thukkuthuk-ku" signals anger or frustration. Like an onomatopoeic description of grinding gears. To outsiders, it's nonsense. She used to call our grandpa "game" because he used to ask her to play a game with him often, so much so that he became the human embodiment of a game. Now we call him "game" too sometimes, because it's cute. Our family has slowly acquired a third language, courtesy of Leeza.

There is so much left unsaid. She can answer simple questions, like her name or how she gets to school (enthusiastically: schoolbus!) but there's a lot more I wish I could ask. Everything I know about her feelings is from what I can see on her face and hear in the sound of her voice. She can't even tell me if she gets tired of being spoken for all the time, even here. Maybe you would rather be spoken to.

We prayed for so long that you would be "normal." I'm sorry for those prayers, that decided the person you were was in a temporary state that could be fixed in time by God. I love you as you are, even if you can't or wouldn't say it back. People like to tell us you are a special gift from God. I don't really know what that means. I'm sorry that when I was younger I loved you harder so I could be closer to God because they said you were innocent and you were like God. I love you now for no reason. I love you when I can't tell if you love me back, when I don't believe there is any reward for loving you unconditionally. For little things like the way we both understand a love for music that doesn't require words. I

think that means a lot more.

This is what real, unconditional love is like. It is painful but durable. I love you even when you hurt me, not because I do not think you know better, but because I think it is okay to express that you are unhappy in the only ways you know how, to let me know that you wish it were different. It is your way of letting me carry some of your burden, I think. Even when I feel like we are doing good together, you remind me that good is so easy for me to say and so much harder for you to maintain. Amma still has dreams that one day you will just start speaking in full sentences. There are stories like this in the Bible. But you are not a miracle away from your true self, you are here today as the sister I have always known and always loved, and there is no more room for contingencies for who you may or may not miraculously become. Whether or not God is here for you, I am.

**V. Amma**

My mom has not been afforded time for hobbies in the plural sense in this lifetime between caring for my dad, Leeza, our grandmothers, grandfathers, and everyone in between (besides herself). She has just enough time to spare for one, which is gardening. In other words, in her spare time, when she is not caring for others, she cares for herself by caring for other living beings to help them grow and make the world around her more beautiful. Classic. On bad days, my dad insists that she gives herself a trip to Meadows Farms, a nursery ten minutes from home to go look at the plants and have time to herself.

We made a habit of spending Thursday mornings this summer at the local farmer's market. My mom would ask the sellers why her plants weren't growing and how to fend off deer. At one point, the deers were eating every promise of a bud off her blooming roses. Years of nurture lost to a careless appetite. "Oh, Rita. It happened again," she'd inform me in the morning. No matter what barriers she constructed, they'd find their way in. Nothing belongs solely to her.

Her garden is most beautiful in late May. The roses bloom for my birthday, she tells me. The strawberries begin to grow, reminding us of Appacha, who littered our backyard with these plants. The birthday card I got from her this summer hangs on the wall next to my bed. Taped to it is a mama rose and a baby rose, according to her. They are crunchy and dry now, but I've preserved them. Utterly unappealing to eat and still beautiful to look at. They are finally safe from the deer.

They say the love of a mother is fierce and protective, but a daughter's love for her can be just the same. The story of Amma is a story of a woman who has made her entire life about her love for others, about everyone but herself, about growing things and nurturing them and giving them what they need to thrive until she has run herself dry. I want to believe in a God for her. I want all of this to be worth something in another life that belongs all to her. If there is no heaven, God will have spent up a lifetime of taking from her and giving so little in return. Whatever I can do for her is not enough. If her reward is not in the afterlife, her just reward does not exist. I cannot stomach this, and so I have to believe in some god, somewhere, somehow so my mother can one day cultivate a vibrant, flourishing garden of dreams where there is good soil and no deer at all.

When I was born, my brother came to the hospital dressed in a crisp button-down flannel shirt, with two strawberries in his chest pocket. In the home video, my grandma in a lavender saree, the first Rita, is there holding Leeza in her arms. Appacha is behind her, beaming in a quiet way. He grew all of those strawberries in our backyard.

"Jakinne kannam, Jakinne kannam!" He shouts in front of the camera, bobbing up and down. Can you see Jake, see Jake! He reaches into his shirt pocket and tells my parents that he brought a strawberry in case I was hungry. My mom finds another strawberry there, and he explains in Malayalam, "Jake will get hungry."

The baby looks like she is checking his pockets for strawberries herself, hungry after a long day of being born. He takes out a strawberry and we smile. Love has long lived in fruits, but there has never

been so much softness contained in a single strawberry in the history of the world.

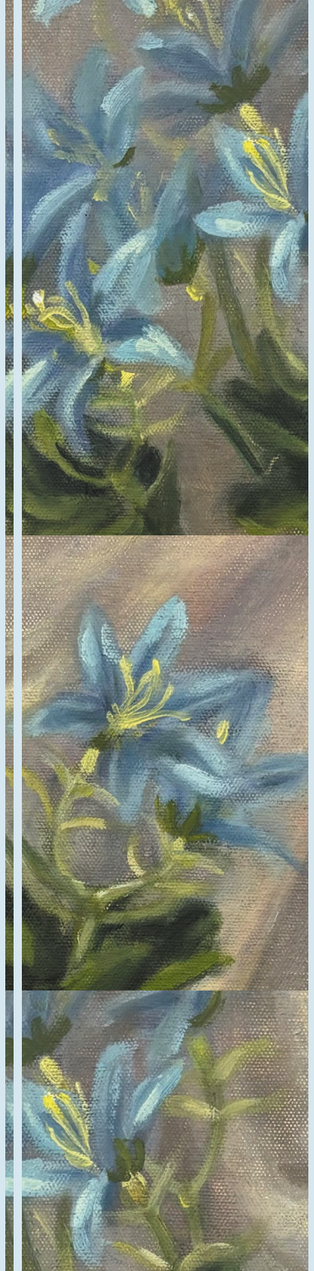
We use symbols long before we know exactly what they mean. We fill the tiny plastic beads of the rosary with love and care for one another. We put love in strawberries and take them to the hospital for baby sisters with no teeth to eat them. We plant gods in the garden and let them grow and we gift god to each other over and over. They tell us the body of Christ is in that little piece of bread they serve us on Sundays. But that baby witnessed god before church, her first eucharist tucked away in the seeds of a strawberry gifted to her by her big brother from the soil tilled by her grandfather.



**FLORENCE 2024**
ELLA LANGRIDGE

**I THINK SOMEONE FORGOT A STRAWBERRY**
VALENTINA HOOVER





# PEACE, ITS LOOKING FOR ME.

**RIYA PARMAR**

I come outside to look down Ashby Street, the
cardamom tea on the stovetop brewing, the
carpet lined with the vacuum's path, when
the crescent moon rises, I
leave my outside lights on, its
slightest orange hue burning, and
peek through the burgundy curtains, I
sometimes see a shadow, yet
it disappears at second glance, erased
by the dark night or simply
drawn up by my mind, I
live on like this through days on end til I
decide to find them myself with no
map of Houston in hand, I
wander around, becoming the
chaos, hitting every
dead end alley, looking
under every stranger's hat, peering
into every Honda or Camry, til I
finally return home, to sleep a little
only to find a presence by
my door and it asks
hello how are you

# AN INTERVIEW WITH STACEY SWANN

EDITED BY ISABELLA CAMPOS, GRACE YETTER, AND KAYLA PEDEN

Stacey Swann's debut novel *Olympus, Texas* (Doubleday) was a *Good Morning America* Book Club selection, an Indie Next Pick, and was longlisted for The Center for Fiction First Novel Prize. Swann holds an M.F.A. from Texas State University and was a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. Her writing has appeared in *LitHub*, *Electric Literature*, *Texas Highways*, *Epoch*, and other journals.

We spoke with Swann about her creative journey, her complex, love-to-hate, hate-to-love characters, and publishing for the first time. This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

**Q: Can you tell us about your journey up to publishing this novel?**

SS: It was a fairly long journey. I graduated with an English degree from the University of Texas, and I didn't know what I wanted to do with that. I was working at a used bookstore in Austin. I really liked working there, so I stayed awhile, then bounced around to a few different jobs. In my late twenties, I realized that I would like a job that I found really fulfilling and interesting. I was going to probably need to go back to grad school, so I started thinking of the different things I might want to do. At first, I thought of very practical things, like going back to get a Master's in social work and becoming a therapist, or going back to get a degree in library science and somehow working within the library system. I was trying to decide on these practical things, and I had always wanted to write and liked writing. I had taken a creative writing class in undergrad, and then I started taking some extension classes through the University of Texas. I realized that if I didn't go to graduate school to get my MFA — at that point I was 27 when I was applying — I probably never would. And I thought, "I'm still young enough, I can take a detour." So I went to get my MFA at Texas State University.

Since then, even though it took me a while after that to finally publish the novel, I have been able to work in the field, whether it's teaching or editing or things like that. I was able to have jobs that, while they didn't pay well, were helping make me become a better writer. Then, I went to grad school in 2003 and finished in 2005. I had the Stegner fellowship at Stanford, which is a creative writing fellowship that had weekly workshops. I had two years of that, so really a lovely amount of time to focus on my craft and focus on writing. After that, it still took me about a decade before I got the novel published. A lot of that was me ignoring the novel for long stretches of time, then coming back to it. I've had a long history of writer's resistance and writer's block, which is better now, thankfully. But it does slow down the process a bit.

**Q: What was it about *Olympus, Texas* that made you realize you needed to tell the story? What were your sources of inspiration?**

SS: First of all, much of my writing really up until this point has come out of landscape. I grew up not that far from Rice, outside of Seeley, Texas, right off of I-10 and the Brazos River. Most of the book, thankfully, is not taken from my actual life. But the landscape is definitely where I lived from ages five to 18 when I went to college, so I always get drawn back to that. I write a lot from landscape, so that was a big part of it. For the mythology angle, I had a childhood love of mythology, so I had all those myths rattling around in my head. I can't even remember how old I was at the time, but I was driving down the highway and thinking about all these friends I had in Austin that were from other states. They were not Texans, and they were really annoyed by how much Texans love Texas. For all the ills of our state, in certain ways, we tend to really love our state in a way that annoys other people that aren't from here. And so I was thinking about that. I was thinking about how we have a sense of these larger than life Texas characters, and we have a mythology all our own that we often really buy into. And I was like, "Oh, that would pair wonderfully with these Greek myths." Because it feels like the mythos of Texas is bigger mythology, so I thought those two things would work well together, and I started from that. But where it wound up was also influenced by novels, movies, and TV shows about dysfunctional families. I thought *Succession* was amazing – you can't get more dysfunctional than the Roy family. I think those all fuse together into the novel.

**Q: The Greek mythology aspect was a creative way to connect to rural Texas because there's already a large canon of pre-existing plots, characters, and personality traits associated with Greek mythology. How did you decide what to bring into *Olympus, Texas* from the mythology? How did you make space for your own characterization of the characters?**

SS: Luckily, I got advice early on. During my first workshop at Stanford, I workshopped the beginning of the novel. I only had maybe 60 pages at that time. The professor, John, gave great advice. He said, "Don't be too wedded to the myths themselves. What will make the novel really come alive is if you let it go where it wants to go, rather than following specific myths." That gave me freedom to move things around a bit and add in new characters that maybe you wouldn't even find in myth. I think that was really helpful, and mostly, I just really like using outer scaffolding for writing fiction. I've always really loved retellings — books that take a minor character from one book and make them a major character in another book. I found it really helpful to have these archetypes of Greek myth. Then, I could sit down and think that, if I put that through the meat grinder of Texas and made it realistic and not fantastical, what kind of man or woman would I wind up with? That part was really fun for me. Out of those characters, more of the plot appeared.

**Q: If you could spend a day with one of the characters, who would it be?**

SS: It depends on how much trouble you're up for in a given day. It's interesting, because over the course of writing, Vera became the most fun character to write. I am not a person who likes drama though, so I might be afraid to hang out all day with Vera. I feel like if I wanted a low-key day and didn't want excitement, I would probably pick Artie to hang out with.

**Q: A lot of your characters do unlikable things and make selfish decisions. How did you write these characters? Did you intend for readers to dislike these characters? Is there one character who you wouldn't want to spend a day with?**

SS: I really like flawed characters. I find it easy to empathize with characters in general if they're interesting, even if they're deeply flawed. I find them all really interesting and to have redeeming qualities or some likability in them. So I was a little surprised when I started reading reviews – and I don't recommend reading your reviews on Goodreads but it is hard sometimes not to look at them – and I would see these funny reviews that were like, "I don't understand why I liked this book, because I hated every character." It's a compliment in its own way, but I discovered a lot of people really did not like the majority of the characters. I understand why, but for me personally, I do really like them all. There's none actually that I dislike.

I would say that the most common one that other people would say they don't want to hang out with is Peter, probably. He's the one that's harder to argue there are redeeming characteristics in. But I find there's a certain charm in his fecklessness. I enjoy him because part of the reason why I enjoyed exploring the mythology was looking at it from a more feminist point of view. When I grew up reading mythology, even in the children's books, it was very hard to like Hera. They made her the villain quite often, and then you get a little older, and you're like, "Wait a minute. She's only doing these things because Zeus is so awful." Zeus is always so powerful in those myths, so I think I took a great deal of pleasure in making Peter so useless in so many ways, because it felt like undercutting a lot of what we thought about Zeus. But I still find him somewhat charming.

**Q: Can you elaborate on the role nature plays in the story and in writing it?**

SS: [Nature] is something that I both love to write and and love to read in other books. I really draw into fiction that deals in landscape. When I was growing up as a kid, we were out in the country, and I would spend a lot of time outside wandering around. I really loved that feeling of being on a river as well as the sound of the river. Central Texas — where I'm at now — is still Texas, but it looks pretty different from that Gulf Coast adjacent area, which is really flat. But when I drive from Austin to Houston and hit that area where it flattens out and you get the fields but you still have the big trees, I just relax a little bit. There's just something that encodes in you and the places where you spend your childhood, so it feels natural to me to bring in.

**Q: You start the novel with an image of June sitting on the balcony, practicing her morning coffee ritual. At the very end of the novel, we come full circle, with June thinking about the next morning and how she'll be able to wake up and sit on the balcony with her coffee without Peter. It was this lovely, full circle moment that puts her character into perspective based on how she was at the beginning of the novel. When in the writing process did you realize that that was how you wanted to end the novel? Did you plan on re-including that image at the end?**



SS : It was at the very end of writing the first draft. My outline of the book was really sketchy, so once I got halfway in, I did outline to the end, but there were big open questions I hadn't answered. One of those was which kind of relationships would survive and which wouldn't. I initially thought that Vera would divorce, but then they wind up not divorcing in the novel. I kind of figured those things out as I was actually drafting the ending, and by then it felt clearer, because I had gotten all the chapters up to that point. But I do think that so much of our creative work is coming out of the subconscious, and our subconscious really loves symmetry and patterns. So I didn't consciously think about it, but that's where the ending presented itself.

I have to admit, in the draft that sold that I was working on with my editor, the last chapter was a lot more ambivalent. I felt like I had left the door ajar, that Peter and June might actually get back together. My thinking was that once you've been with someone for so long, and your lives are so tied together, a part of you does still love them in a certain way that would be really hard to leave entirely. But my editor was like, "No reader in the country, especially no female reader, is going to want June to stay with Peter. So you need to take that ambiguity out of the language, so that it feels more final." I think she was right, and I was pleased with the ending.

**Q: Can you walk us through the process of publishing a book? What was it like to find and work with an editor? Was there anything that surprised you about bringing a book to market?**

SS: It was hard, because I feel like publishing is a bit opaque. They don't really advertise what goes on behind that curtain. I've said more than once to people that they should give first-time authors a manual, and they don't. We feel like we're stumbling around. But my experience was really great. When you've got your novel finished and want to find an editor for it, the first thing you have to do is find an agent. That agent-finding process can take a while: you write a query letter, do all your research, and send out letters. That process for me took about four months. The agent I wound up with, Nicole, was my top pick. I had sent [my manuscript] to her, but under their guidelines, they say, if you don't hear back from

us in six to eight weeks, it means we're not interested. And so I thought, "Well, she's not interested." I kept querying, and then, at the very end of the summer, I found out that my manuscript had been put in a no pile by an intern, but it hadn't been checked by anyone else. And so when Nicole's assistant was looking through that pile, she found it and really liked it, so she pulled it out to give to Nicole. When Nicole read it, they contacted me to see if it had sold yet, because she was interested. I felt super lucky to get her as an agent, and she's fantastic.

Sometimes, you work with the agent for a long time on editing before it gets sent to the editors, so agents now do a lot of editorial help. Here's a little insight for you: a lot of agents really like to send out manuscripts right before the two big international book festivals where they sell international rights. One of those is in Frankfurt, and one is in London. Nicole tends to send out the majority of her books right before those happen, because the agents get in a frenzy a bit, or the editors do, and they pay more than usual right before these big events. So she uses that to get bigger advances for her clients. And so, because the Frankfurt Book Festival was coming up, Nicole was like, "Let's just clean it up a bit, but I think it's good enough to go out, and if we don't send it out right now, we're going to wait six months until the London Book Festival." At that point, it had been so many years. I was like, "Oh, no, we should put it out now." And so it went out and sold to Doubleday, the editor that I work with.

There is a woman named Lee, who is amazing. She's just so good at editing, and so we wound up. We were supposed to just work for seven months on edits, but because I'm a procrastinator, the first half of the book was way better than the edits in the second half, which were much more rushed to get it to her by the deadline. She had really liked what I had done for the first half, so she said, "Let's bump the publication date so that you can have another six months, so that the second half is as polished as the first." We streamlined some of the plot. She wanted to amplify some of the events. The funeral scene, which is almost a little climactic scene for a lot of characters in the book, was not quite as big and flashy in the first draft. There was no denunciation from the front of the church by



anybody, but there was a rift between Artie and Arlo there. So we worked for a long time on that. But I was really lucky, because what you always want is an editor who has the same vision for the book as you do, which doesn't happen all the time. Sometimes, you might get an editor whose vision is slightly different, and then it's harder to figure out how much you want to give up your vision and if it's a good idea to give up your vision. I didn't take every edit [Lee] gave me, but I always understood where she was coming from and saw that she had identified a problem I needed to solve – maybe in a different way, but a problem was there. I can't say enough good things about both Nicole and Lee.

**Q: As an undergrad literary magazine, R2's audience is a lot of aspiring writers, and making that first step into publishing is daunting. Do you have advice for students hoping to publish their work?**

SS: I don't think anything makes us better writers faster than reading other people's work, especially other people's work that is not already perfectly edited on a bookshelf. I don't know why exactly, but it's much easier to see your own potential weaknesses as a writer when you read them in someone else's story. I always tend towards fragments — that's just how my brain works. I used a lot of fragments, and I still probably overuse them for some writers' tastes. It wasn't until I read another writer's story in workshop that had a lot of fragments that I understood that this is why it can not work as well in certain situations. So I tell writers, after undergrad, there's so many volunteer opportunities to be readers for the large national literary journals. Now that you don't have to be in the same city quite often, because everything is done electronically, so doing that is incredibly helpful. And then it's always just the time spent in the chair and the more you write. What really helped me is that I spent years doing freelance editing. That was the way that I started to understand structure and how to fix structure on a larger level.

The thing to keep in mind, too, is that it's difficult. It's a career that's difficult to pay your bills,

so in some ways, I think what's really important is keeping in a community of writers. When you have people around you that also are interested in spending all this time and thought on a thing that may not be giving immediate financial rewards, it's a lot easier to stay in it for the long haul, as opposed to being around a lot of people that are kind of puzzled why we spend so much time alone on a thing that's difficult to get published. Keeping that community around you is really helpful.

**Q: What do you do to overcome writer's block?**

SS: On a practical level, the thing that helped me the most is kind of a variation on Julia Cameron's book *The Artist's Way Morning Pages Journal*. She recommends that first thing in the morning you write by hand on paper and just dump out three pages worth of thoughts onto the page. It doesn't even have to make sense. It can be very free. The important thing is to just keep writing and not really think about what you're writing before you put it down.

I didn't always do that in the mornings. But for a long time, I would have all this resistance. I didn't want to sit down and work on the novel. The thought of working on the novel was really painful, but the thought of sitting down to do three pages longhand of whatever, including just complaining about my resistance, didn't sound scary. So I would be able to sit down and do that, and 99% of the time, by the time I got to the third page – and sometimes just the end of the first page – the resistance had loosened up enough that I could work on the novel.

Since then, I finally started going to therapy about three years ago. I think a lot of times when we're having writing resistance, there's some internal story that we're telling ourselves that is getting in the way of us writing. Sometimes it's as simple as, "We're not good at it." Someone told us when we were young that maybe we weren't a good writer, or we weren't creative, or something else that we interpreted to mean we're not naturally good at it. That can really get in people's way. I was carrying around a lot of baggage, thinking I needed to be doing a career that was of practical use. It felt self-indulgent to write, and I had to work through that and come to understand that's not how everyone in the world thinks, that you need to be of use to other people before you can even think about yourself. Breaking that down and seeing that when we do the things that we love the most, that's where we're most likely to do the most good anyway. If we do things that we don't really want to do and feel resentful about them, it's not going to work out for anyone in the long run.

**Q: Is there a message that you want your readers to have from your writing on a larger level?**

SS: It probably varies depending on what I'm writing, but I think the kind of philosophy that I write out of is that people are really complicated. I believe that all of us walk around with a lot of good and a lot of bad in us. Having empathy for that in other people and not flattening people and seeing those complexities – if we all can manage to do that, even in messy, real life with people who we maybe don't agree with, the world would be a much better place. So if there's any kind of larger philosophical thing I'm thinking about, it's just trying to see that messiness in all of us and a sort of human dignity in everyone.

**Q: Who would you cast if this were adapted to film?**

SS: It goes back and forth. I want Jeff Bridges, but the Jeff Bridges of 20 years ago. Modern Jeff Bridges is a little too old now. When I was first writing Artie, I thought of her as Jennifer Lawrence. Margot Robbie was someone I thought about with Vera. Also, I recommend, when you're writing, to look at portrait books and photographs of people's faces up close. You can really see, for example, a nose in a new way and then bring that to a description on the page.

**Q: Do you have any parting advice for our readers?**

SS: What I tell my students when I teach classes is that even though it can feel bleak as an artist,

especially where we are in capitalism right now, no matter what, nothing takes away the feeling we get when we write. I think those of us drawn to writing feel as if writing is an extension of our brain, and we don't understand ourselves or the world as well until we get it down on the page. When things feel hard and when you're tempted to stop, remember that it's giving you a feeling that's important. I learned it early because when I was teaching extension classes for Stanford, I had three different students who were over 80 who had wanted to become writers. When they were in their twenties, they did something practical. They became a lawyer or a doctor, and they lived their whole life feeling like something was missing. The thing they did when they finally retired was take a writing class, because that desire does not go away. We can ignore the urge to create, but it's always going to be there. We might as well write, even if you're just writing for yourself.

**FLOWER PORTRAIT**
MIA RIDZINSKI



# CARRY

## AVALON HOGANS

I'd like to be your seamstress
and your poet.
I'd like to be the Band-Aid
on your right hand index finger.
I'd like to be the sound
coming from a ways away
that makes you want to sway
but no one else can hear it.

I will tell you you're
a calm ocean.
I will knit you a sweater
in a color not blue
and I will put some words
in the front left side pocket
for you to carry.
I will build you a door
to a curious room.
I will trace your lines and hips
and fold them when you tire.

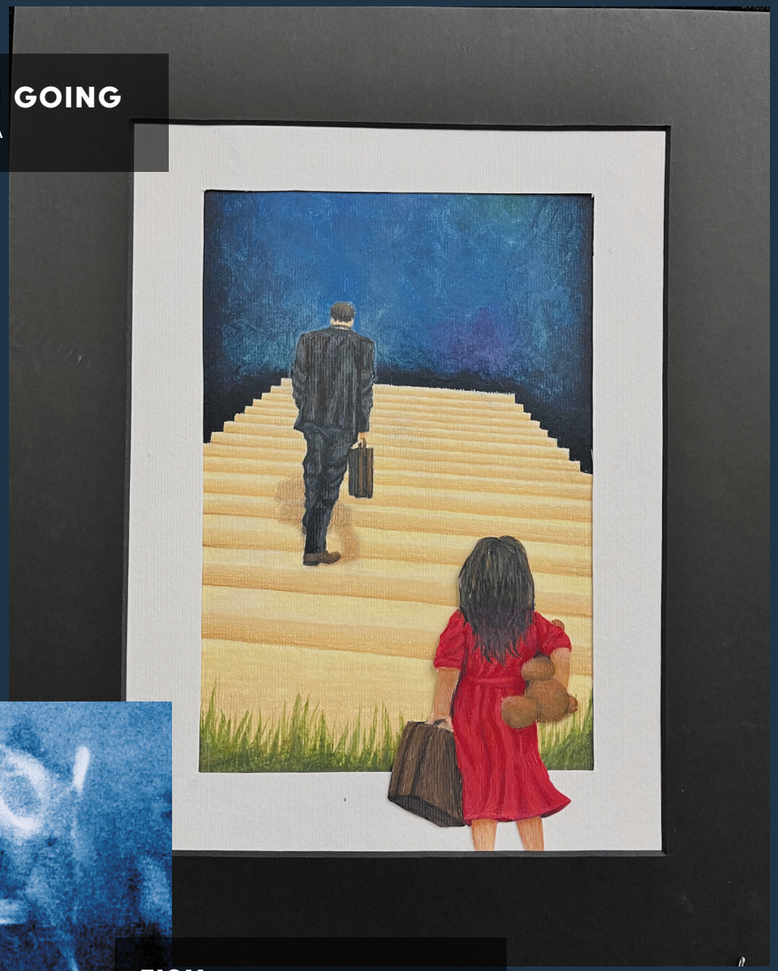
I'd like to be the reveal
on the spines of your books.
I'd like to be the give and pull
of your tide.
I'd like to be that sweater,
so heavy from all it will carry.

When that day ends,
I'd like to be your next.


**ALTERED STATES**
LILY HARVEY



**WHERE ARE YOU GOING**
SOPHIA OLIVEIRA



**FISH**
ABDULLAH JAHANGIR

# SHE DON'T BACK WHEN I BUCK

ARIANNA PETTEWAY

*CW: domestic violence, substance abuse*

a black girl,
a barrette, a bonnet, a bandaid
to cover up or rather gently obscure
the gaping gushing wounds of those who came beforew

who we know of solely through scarce
tainted record-keeping,
a fading picture
or two if good fortune serves

and of those before,
one asks me why I must pat my head
"you're going to hurt yourself,"
she'll say with that rehearsed look of concern
or disgust or pity and
growing tired of explaining, overexplaining
I tell her
"Granny, do not start."

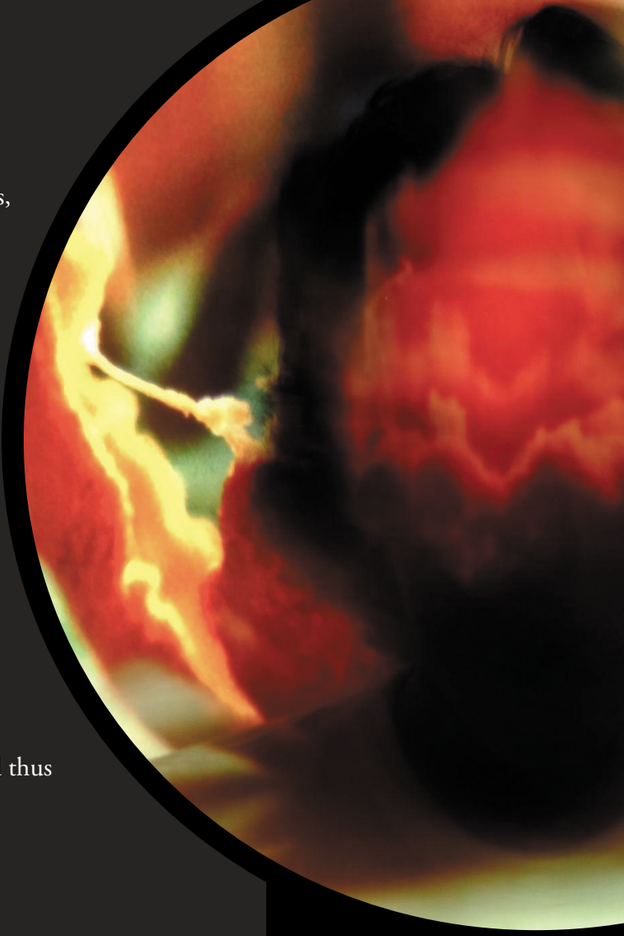
**FRUITS OF LABOR**
ABDULLAH JAHANGIR



you see, my Granny,
she has a windowsill adorned with plants and flowers,
a room of self-crafted jewelry and crystals,
she wears her thin gray hair and flowy blouses
drape her
a wild old thing,
she keeps her vodka in a secret spot,
drinks it straight

savors the burn
while hiding
a stash in her drawer
that we share
as she tells me stories of
her three, four?
Mexican ex-husbands, tales of how she was poor and thus
could not be privileged
of how she would begin her day at three a.m.
to make biscuits and sausage for her man
dinner done by the time he
took his work boots off

stories of how my biological grandpa would've loved me
"I'd tell him Serena had a beautiful baby girl,



gave him the number when he'd ask"
she tells me
and I imagine the sound of his voice
had he called

stories of how he'd beat the shit out of her
how grandpa Robert would once punch her in the stomach
while she was pregnant with momma
for embarrassing him at his "go-to titty bar"
they say he'd fling and whip his long black hair
and I wonder, would he really have loved me?

stories of how she pulled a bat on his brother,
my great-uncle Henry,
who, some nights,
I'd have to escape from with
fists, stools, cases of beer mid-air

she'd tell me, boastfully,
"I had that motherfucker scared of me!"
after I'd mention how terrified I'd be
—I'd laugh—
and she'd follow that with an assertion
that my elbows were dirty,
to wipe them, but



"I'm just fuckin' black, granny."

a black girl? yes, with a white bohemian grandma
and a Mexican grandpa she's only heard of through stories of inebriation
a black girl—
trying to place her father through letters
out an old pink and purple keep-sake
with a big black peace sign on the front
searching in words, in visits of surrendered freedom, in the lap of distant affection—
was once buried
and resurrected, and buried and resurrected

and could never be told what to do
and yet was tender, quite impressionable
who wouldn't say enough at home, but too much at school
`insubordination, rude to adult,`
wearing
a silk press, a sew-in, a slick back
pony or bun every day, it is true,
I may get traction alopecia,
and Nana tells me this and that
I should put down the reefa, and I don't present her with a rebuttal
cause my audaciousness is seldom met with acquiescence here.

you see, my Nana,
she don't back when I buck and
it's harder to get stories out of her
she wears those slightly see-through slippers that come
in a variety of colors from the beauty supply around the house that
always seemed to be spotless yet
I never saw her cook or clean in
her curly wigs sit awkwardly on her forehead
she still goes to church every Sunday
and I find it funny, admirable that
she never took shit from a man
always quick to get on my Papa
never took shit, period,
stubborn, a bull-head
as the Taurus she is
she goes off on the Sonic worker for getting our order wrong
she speaks in song, scorn a close second, her words rounded,
well-rounded, never shaky
often soulful, especially
when she would assure me he missed me too.
she gets my hair done for the first time
makes me feel like
a black girl,
who came from a line of stories, of folktales
told and many, too many, untold
I can sometimes hear the faint whispers
can sometimes feel the weight of their wounds
creeping onto my skin
wearing, me,

a black girl,
except she's a woman now
and all she has are stories and letters
and when they ask her what she is mixed with
she tells them
a half-torn prison letter, a smidge of bohemian docility, six years of surrendered freedom,
approximately eighty beer cans, thirty curly wigs,
a hint of undiagnosed mental illness, and
stories
that take life over a bowl, in a sea of smoke.

# 2025 GEORGE G. WILLIAMS AWARDS

R2's annual writing contests are sponsored by the George G. Williams Fund. The contests are juried by professional, non-Rice-affiliated judges. This year's judge was award-winning poet J. Estanislao Lopez. You can find his comments about each of our winners on the next pages. Each of the recipients is awarded a monetary prize as well as recognition. Many thanks go out to the generous donors who support Rice's undergraduate creative writing endeavors.

## OUR JUDGE | J. ESTANISLAO LOPEZ

J. Estanislao Lopez is the author of *We Borrowed Gentleness* (Alice James Books, 2022), a finalist for the 2023 Texas Institute of Letters John A. Robert Johnson Award. His poems have been featured in *The New Yorker, Ploughshares, Poetry Magazine, The Rumpus, Best American Poetry,* and elsewhere. Lopez earned an MFA from the Warren Wilson Program for Writers. He currently teaches in the community college system in his hometown, Houston, Texas.

## FICTION

### WINNER | *"Whalebones" by Adam Dhalla*

Many associate worldbuilding with the grand geographies and architectures of their stories, but it is the idiosyncratic details, the wax paper and patterned tablecloth, that do the cognitive work of immersion. This writer engages language and narrative structure with an exhilarating dexterity. In one part of the reader's mind, the acrobatic syntax and vivid images mystify; while in another, characters, in their foolishness and vulgarity, terrestrialize. The care this writer takes with language rewards the sensitive reader and demonstrates how our best storytellers do not just excite our perceptive powers, but expand them.

### RUNNER-UP | *"Pyre" by Sarah Jun*

## CREATIVE NONFICTION

### WINNER | *"God's Own Country" by Rita Ajit*

The quiet and straightforward style of this author allows room for their profound meditative leaps, jolts, and arcs. No stone is left unturned; no moon undeified. Interlacing the familial and spiritual practices of sacrifice, this narrative renders a set of characters that read as tragic as they are transcendent of their respective tragedy. Like the mother in her garden, this author skillfully cultivates the nourishing paradox and irony of human suffering as both aesthetic object and philosophical subject; in other words, art.

### RUNNER-UP | *"Insomnia" by Karis Lai*

# POETRY

## WINNER | *“elegy for the Southern poet” by Katie Nelson*

With a voice that is tender and boldly imaginative, this poet achieves a musicality that threads the richly juxtaposed images down the page. The strategic use of couplets gives regularity to the fluctuating registers of diction that span nature, science, and sadness. Guardrailed by this structure, the reader can surrender to the poem’s restless, Rilkean lyricism. We desert folk, we poets, may be lost to the scorching truth of language’s beauty and misery; this poet, however, reinvigorates our faith that our lands do yield fruit.

## RUNNER-UP | *“she don’t back when I buck” by Arianna Petteway*

# COVER ART

## WINNER | *“Nevertheless” by Madeline Ansley*

*The R2 EIC team*: Every year, the R2 editorial team carefully selects the magazine’s cover art. Finding a piece that not only captures the diversity of voices featured in R2, but also captivates readers is a difficult task. This year, we were drawn to “Nevertheless” for its resilience in finding beauty amidst the chaos.

# 2025 CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

**Abdullah Jahangir** likes fruits. He thinks pomegranates are a metaphor for something.

**Adam Dhalla** is a writer from Canada.

**Amy Cao** craves beef jerky exactly once a year.

**Amy Suo** is a poet by day and garfield by night. Also they teach machines, I suppose.

**Ari Petteway** wants to remain as mysterious as possible.

**Avalon Hogans** is a junior English major. She loves writing poetry almost as much as she loves shopping and getting her hair done.

**Carmen Mantica** is an art major who claims Diet Coke is her muse.

**Cory Voskanian** takes all of his pictures with his eyes closed.

**Daniela Ambriz** is just a chill guy who really enjoys drawings and making things look nice. She has recently started enjoying oil pastels and wanted to draw some flowers she has seen when she goes out once a month.

**Dingding Ye** has severely overestimated her spice tolerance. Currently, she is devouring chili oil dumplings, while their fiery heat consumes her from within.

**Dominique Sennet** is continuously asked if she plays basketball. Spoiler: She does not.

**Ella Langridge** is a senior Art History and Medieval Studies major who thinks too much about Biblical iconography. She enjoys being in churches much more than your average former Christian.

**Eric Chen** is founder of Chenism, his own artistic and literary movement. When he is not reading or

drawing, he loves fantasizing about what superpowers he would have in real life.

**Helena Wang** loves expressing her creativity through art, with watercolor being her current medium of choice. When not painting, you'll find Helena indulging in the spiciest food she can find, though she draws the line at mint, which she considers too fiery.

**Hongtao Hu** enjoys thinking about linked lists and looking at blackbirds in his free time.

**Hope Yang** loves admiring fish, and eating them.

**Jenny Liu** hates it when gum loses flavor and searches around her body for birthmarks when she's bored.

**Jules F. Houston** is perpetually trying their hand at new hobbies they can't possibly be good at. They refuse to be limited by anything (except a refusal to venture beyond the comfort of the Humanities).

**Karis Lai** is so sensitive that watching Frozen gave her nightmares. To cheer herself up she reads Dostevesky instead.

**Katie Nelson** is the author of the short story collection, Parties All Around. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Eucalyptus Lit, Girls Right the World, Intangible Magazine, and the Alcott Youth Magazine, among others, and she was shortlisted twice for the 2024 Bridport Prize.

**Lily Harvey** has been late before because she was playing Papa's Freezeria.

**Madeline Ansley** attempts to not tear up her art piece immediately after finishing it, for once.

**Malak Qaradeh** could write a love letter to salt and vinegar chips.

**Medha Fotedar** is a physics major with a soft spot for the arts. Though she mostly draws free-body diagrams, every once in a while she manages to churn out a regular piece.

**Mia Ridzinski**'s only enemy is the boy who cheated on his 4th grade science fair project and won first place instead of her.

**Miranda Xing** has nothing to say in her defense.

**Nhu Chu** has perfected the art of balancing her love for baby tomatoes and her intense disdain for onions—she's still recovering from the "Onion Incident" of 2016.

**Rita Ajit** has accumulated so many writer's blocks that she has begun to construct a home out of them.

**Riya Misra** is still sorry she hasn't texted you back. Maybe try calling?

**Riya Parmar** cannot think of a bio to write. So she wrote these two sentences.

**Saami Baig** has proven that humans are capable of missing 9am alarms even when they sound like impending disasters.

**Sarah Jun** has very strong opinions on fonts. She'd kill Arial, kiss Times New Roman, and marry Sabon.

**Sloane Ysabella Domingo**'s daily life got a lot more interesting when they started occasionally imagining they are living in a southern gothic novel.

**Sophia Oliveira** is known for falling face first while skateboarding down the inner loop street with chaus drink in hand. Those bruises may go away but the pain of embarrassment is eternal.

**Sydney Chang** eats an apple a day to keep the doctor away.

**Talia Levy** studies marine biology and creative writing at Rice with an attempt at an attention to detail. In her free time, she likes to go for a swim or find a sunny spot to read in.

**Toni Odufuye** likes to read people and paint riveting fiction.

**Valentina Hoover** sometimes watches washing machines for fun.

# 2025 STAFF BIOS

*At the end of every academic year, r2 staffers and editors finish their year-long positions at r2. True to r2 tradition, you'll find our unique staff bios below.*

**Katherine Jeng** only has three fears: Rainforest Cafes, wallpaper in bathrooms, and unorganized spreadsheets.

**Riley V. Combes** is trying to start incorporating his middle initial more, mostly for attention.

**Amelia Tsai** had a class with you once in freshman year and still remembers your name.

**Grace Yetter** is terrified of the Cheshire Cat.

**Kayla Peden** is terrified of Grace Yetter. Hiss.

**Kyra McKauffley** is here for the vibes.

**Joanna Coram** has a tier ranking of salt and vinegar kettle cooked potato chip brands.

**Isabella Campos** isn't beating the allegations.

**Angela An** purr hiss bark bark moo.

**Alysa Bijl-Spiro** does not wish to compete with the other staff bios.

**Adam Leff** is eating rocks. Crunch munch.

**Rachel Parr** is probably losing her mind. You shouldn't ask.

**Caitlyn Ladd** and Spider-Man have never been seen in the same room together.

**Hannah Lee** is probably thinking about what to eat next. Nom nom.

**Aleena Ahmad** is growing out of her justified margins phase.

**Malak Qaradeh** is probably ignoring her screen time limit as she scrolls on Instagram reels.

**Ziana Ukani** is too indecisive to write a bio that she feels fully encapsulates who she is.

**Ashley Wang** is mentally in Tokyo.

**Grace Kwon**'s average Goodreads rating is 4.45 stars.

**Mary Weekley** goes shopping when things get tough. $7 iced lattes help too.

**Tess Mansfield** wishes Times New Roman was the default font for all writing softwares.

**Setsuna Jiang**'s Starbucks order is an Iced Black Tea with light ice, hazelnut and caramel syrup, whole milk, heavy cream, chocolate malt powder, and no water.

**Jessica Mack** failed the nyt connections today and doesn't want to talk about it.

**Miles Robinson** is currently sailing the seven seas.

**Yasmin Sharpe** is currently testing if she is still banned from House of Pies.

**Shrusti Modi** is mentally in Hawaii eating an acai bowl.

**Lily Harvey** is probably making a playlist right now.