

CONTRIBUTORS

WRITERS

*Mathew Baik
Harshitha Pelaprolu
Anna Rajagopral
Sophia Peng
Alyssa Bernadette Cahoy
Sarah Roberts
Catherine Hettler
Nicole Genevieve Lhuillier
Grace Stewart
Winston Ware*

*Julia Li
Vivian Phillips
Jacob Tate
Abby Webb
Neha Tallapragada
Hector Cervantes
Jackie Wu
Riya Misra
Ella Hoyt
Tamaz Young*

ARTISTS

*Arinze Appio-Riley
Piysha Kundu
Khadija Derouiche
Ethan Perryman
Sachi Kishinchandani
Tessa Domsy
Ava Taylor Johnson
Emma Scales
Naomi Sahle
Raj Anthony
Emma Lunica*

*Carly Ngo
Milkessa Gaga
Taylor Zhang
Amber Wang
Mallory Newbern
Mignote Tadessa
Syed Murtaza Ali Kazmi
Ava Johnson
Amy Cao
Kelton Keck*



RICE REVIEW

R2: THE RICE REVIEW

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Please send all correspondence to:

R2: The Rice Review
Department of English
Rice University 6100 Main Street, MS-30
Houston, TX 77005-1892
r2ricereview.com r2ricereview@gmail.com

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

On this year's cover, "Facilitation of Personalization," curious tendrils venture out of an enclosure, turbulent currents churn and overflow from their well. The square, like the square of our magazine, is a font of energy and movement, unable to contain itself.

The 2021-2022 issue of R2: The Rice Review is a boundless one. For the first time, we are featuring translation as a section, joining poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. This fall, Open Mic returned victorious. With over 300 attendees and 25 performers, this was one of the biggest literary events R2 has ever thrown, and we are grateful to Rice's creative community for the enthusiasm we witnessed at our other events, like ZineFest and Spooky Stories.

That zest and passion for literature is also on full display in this year's issue. In "Ma (妈)," a Rice freshman weighs the heft of her mother's expectations against the love they share. Similarly, "Ghost of Canton" invites us to consider the ways in which family and identity intertwine. The poem, "spoiled dates in a public aisle," leans into the abstract, and out of those abstractions crafts a sapphic and sootier poem about sexuality and faith in the South. "Vampire Girl" recruits Pitbull, funny hats, and Edward from Twilight to paint a heart-warming portrait of young queer love. In these pages, we see writers reckoning with femininity and family, spirituality and selfhood. Of course, there are those pieces that reckon with none of the above. Some pieces even reckon with things we have no words for, like "Trout Roe."

With the words we do possess, we would like to thank all the amazing people who have helped to make this magazine. Our deepest thanks to all of our wonderful staffers, whose collective vision and late nights helped shape the magazine, and to all of our contributors who showed us the literary heart of Rice. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the Husick Family and the English Department for providing us with a home and space for free expression. And to Ian Schimmel, our faculty advisor, our fearless leader and supplier of candy and snacks, we give our undying gratitude.

Lastly, we would like to thank you, our readers. Without a community at Rice to support all of our endeavors and the literary arts, none of this would be possible.

Welcome to the 2021-2022 edition of R2: The Rice Review!

Sincerely,

Colton Alstatt, Elena Hoyt, Kristie Lynn, Marcus Munshi, Selena Shi, and Hannah Young

R2 Editors-in-Chief

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妈

BY JULIA LI

Ma called me the other day.

“Li Duo?” Even after trading Shanghai for the States as her permanent home for the past 21 years, my Mandarin name still rolls off her tongue melodically. My mother’s voice is lovely, deep and rich with natural rivers and valleys when she articulates the four tones of Mandarin. It’s mesmerizing when she speaks Mandarin, but to American ears, it’s cacophonous, curling harshly around choppy English phrases.

“Yes, Ma?” Even after 19 years, I rarely speak in Mandarin back to her.

“Li Duo!” She says in genuine surprise. Shock that I’ve answered the phone for the first time in a couple weeks. Emboldened, an almost unintelligible flurry of Shanghainese Mandarin escapes, the liveliness emanating so vibrantly through the phone that I feel myself wincing.

How are you? You haven’t called me in two weeks.

I’m good, Ma. Busy with school.

Your grades?

They’re fine, Ma.

You have all A’s?

Yes, Ma. Except for organic chemistry. But I’ll bring it up. I always do.

Good. Are you hungry?

No, Ma.



Are you eating well? Do you want Ma to send you some feng-li-su? Your favorite pineapple cakes.

No thank you.

Why not?

I have enough food, Ma. The dining hall is fine.

But that's American food. You like it?

I like the cinnamon rolls just fine.

There's a long pause.

Ok, Li Duo. If you like American food now, that's fine.

I have to go study now. Class is an hour, and I need to finish my homework.

Ok. Ma will go now. You need to study more.

The phone hangs up with a click, and I set my phone back down.

Ma, do you know how much I miss you?

An ocean exists between my mother and I, growing wider by the distance and guilt that has simmered for the past ten years.

One moment, I picture the way she held my hand, pulling me along at Northpoint Mall in Atlanta where we chased the New Years sales at Dillard's, her favorite department store. *Dill-ahs*, she'd say over in her thick Mandarin accent. *I want to go to Dill-ahs*. After spending over twenty years in America, her jaw never fully softened around the syllables of English. We perused through gaudy purses and wool hats — my mother's favorite accessories, things that she was never able to have as a child in China.

I giggled jubilantly as I ran through the labyrinth of Louis Vuitton and Michael Kors, closing my eyes and imagining that we could afford them all. A surreal maze of authentic handbags — the real counterparts to my mother's knockoffs from Shanghai.

In Shanghai, Ma lived in a family of six — with two older sisters and an older brother, they crammed reluctantly into a run-down, two-bedroom apartment clustered with miscellaneous boxes as makeshift furniture and tiny fans to keep the heat at bay.

During the hot Shanghai summers, Ma would run a few blocks down the dirt strewn streets, timing it perfectly to intercept her father's arrival back from working at the nearby factory. There, she pleaded with her father for a few yuan to purchase snacks before her brothers and sisters had a chance to find out. After he finally acquiesced and slipped her a few yuan, she ran along to her local pop-up stand that sold tiny slices of cakes with dollops of fresh cream and candied citruses.

Breathless as she scampered up to the pop-up stand, she laid the crumpled bills and coins down in front of the seller. "*Yi ge. Xie xie.*" One slice. Thank you.

Racing along the backroads to find an abandoned table to sit and devour the cake that was delicately wrapped in napkins, Ma skittered to a stop in front of a tiny, run-down shop that sold second hand instruments. A tiny keyboard sat in the window display, its keys yellowed with age and coated with a thin layer of dust.

She checked the price. 100 yuan.

It was more than what her father made in three months.

Still starstruck by the sight of the keyboard, Ma stood there for what felt like hours, eyes locked on the instrument. Finally, the outraged yelps and screams of her brothers and sisters as they turned around the corner snapped her out of the reverie. But it was too late — they circled her, demanding portions of her half-melted, dilapidated cake.

But back at Northpoint Mall, she waited patiently in the sprawling line at Auntie Anne’s, one hand resting on my shoulder and the other delicately arched as she pointed out the various flavors in a rough combination of Chinese and English — “Chinglish”.

Every time, we pretended to entertain the possibility of trying something new, but in the end, we unanimously opted for the sweet almond pretzel. She handed over a few crumpled bills to the American cashier who would shoot other customers annoyed glances, unforgiving in her distaste towards my mother’s loud, unlawful combination of English and Mandarin.

I clutched my mother’s hand tightly and imagined myself standing before all of them defiantly.

“I WANTED TO SCREAM ‘MY MOTHER’S ENGLISH IS FINE! SHE’S TRYING HER BEST! STOP STARING AT US!’ AT THE TOP OF MY LUNGS.”

But I couldn’t — or I wouldn’t — was there a difference? Did the guilt that I carried make the situation any better?

“Here you go,” she said. Warm, gooey sweet almonds encrusted the top layer of the chewy bread, the piping hot pretzel practically falling apart as she purposely split it unevenly. Always the bigger portion for me and a tiny sliver for herself. All these years,

and she never lost her sweet tooth. Oblivious to the gazes of others, she spoke gently to me. “*Eat, Li Duo.*”

Our relationship became strained when I started feeling like I couldn’t live up to Ma’s expectations. After starting piano lessons when I enrolled in kindergarten, we switched from teacher to teacher for the first three years until we stuck with Professor Cholakova.

I devoted my hours to scaling my fingers up and down the piano keys, discovering the ridges and valleys that existed within octaves and augmented sevenths. Gleefully, I let my hands guide me to new melodic creases as I explored composition after composition. Bach to Beethoven, Chopin to Debussy, and Prokofiev to Rachmaninoff.

By the time I turned ten, *Ma* began entering me into piano competitions. I slid my hands up and down the keys, teasing out Mozart’s sonatas at a local contest. Then came Glinka’s *The Lark*, and I flew through the three rounds of GMTA for two years until I won the title of conference recitalist, first place in state. The stakes climbed, so I pushed myself to keep up over the next few years, sprinting through Chopin’s *Winter Wind* and Beethoven’s *The Tempest*, only stopping to notice how my heart had long withered away from music somewhere along the way.

Have you practiced yet? Ma’s eyes are hopeful.

Yes, Ma. I practiced for two hours.

Not enough. Are you ready for the GMTA competition? It’s in a week, Li Duo.

Ma’s eyes are dark now. Glistening.

I remained silent.

Go practice. Your lessons are expensive, Li Duo.

I sat at the Steinway piano, mourning silently as I stared at the eighty eight black and white keys.

I don't want to play anymore.

But I practiced with a quiet, simmering rage, pouring my resentment into Prokofiev's piano sonata. Lost in the long hours of practicing, I didn't notice part of my pinky nail tore off until ruby droplets freckled the porcelain keys. In my eyes, the keys were irrevocably blemished — forever stained with bitterness. I looked up, and I saw Ma gazing at the piano longingly, a rag fisted in her hand. *It was her dream.*

I didn't understand what exactly I felt, but it was a mixture of guilt, resentment, and grief. Guilt that I was able to access opportunities that she didn't when she grew up dirt poor in Shanghai. Resentment that it's now my responsibility to fulfill her dream instead of my own. And finally, grief for both of us — a mother with unfulfilled dreams and a daughter with a dream that is not hers.

Ma, do you know why I was so adamant on moving five states away from you?

You slammed my Common App essay down with such fervor that I jolted. Your hands shook, almost as if you couldn't bottle in your anger anymore. *Trash*, you sputtered out in Chinglish. *You won't get into any college like this. Rewrite it.*

Then you left, your rag still fisted in your hand as you slammed my door on the way out with a force that shook the doorframe.

I recognize now that it was not that you truly thought my essay was trash. Or perhaps you did — I don't know. But behind that burning anger, I recognized the fear in your wide eyes.

I spilled my struggles and resentment towards the instrument that forged the tumultuous sea that stands between us, letting loose the words that I had carefully kept tucked away in the little compartment in my mind. My thoughts and emotions exploded onto paper, raining down in colorful hues. Free at last. The words came out in harsh torrents,

bubbling up to the surface like relentless tides of rage that I tried to cull for years.

Ma, I rewrote my essay after that day, but I pulled the fallboard closed over the piano, locking it in its place. We never properly made up after that. Apologies in the house are never verbalized. Like any Asian family, they are smothered over, suffocated, and drowned out. But when the acceptances to my top choice colleges quietly rolled in, I came home to a splintered, sweet almond pretzel from Auntie Anne's on my desk. The bigger portion, as always, was left for me.

Now, as I sit in a study room at Fondren Library, I wonder now if I'm failing my mother. My eyes blur before the organic chemistry mechanisms before me. In between the lines of ozonolysis, I draw little oxygens to form molozonide, scribbling in a tiny sketch of my mother's creases and wrinkles. Ma, were you ever proud of me? Ma, are you proud of the woman I'm becoming?

Ma, you are beautiful, and you are strong. You are courageous, but you are sometimes flawed. But that doesn't mean that it makes you any less beautiful, and I still love you despite the stark ocean between us. These are things that if I said them aloud to you, you'd merely scoff and tell me to go back to studying. Your hands — the hands that ached to learn the piano — are now wrinkled and scrubbed raw from handwashing each porcelain dish in the ice cold water because you don't believe in relying on a dishwasher. Your eyes — the eyes that gazed longingly at the keyboard decades ago in a Shanghai shop — are blurry now as you wipe off the dust on the piano in the living room. Your lips — the lips that called out to your father for a few yuan to buy mini cakes — utter silvery, euphonious Chinglish as you wait in long lines to buy your daughter almond pretzels.

I'm sorry, Ma. I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to carry your dreams. But I'm strong enough to love you anyways.



HOW DOES ONE PICK UP THE PIECES

BY ABBY WEBB

How does one pick up the pieces
of ground Gorilla Glue stuck to
green shag carpet
when your boyfriend's busy crying over spilt bong
water?

Mouth breathing and forever believing
that must isn't mildew
that mold is just resin

Your lungs know better.

But when red warning signs are flagged
by yellow phlegm and not friends

(What friends?)

you ignore them for the green flowers
he loves to crumble to dust
just for you

Kneeling for a man who doesn't care to know
your middle name, you scavenge
every square inch of that carpet, skin imprinting shag
yet every pinch of greens you pick
is all just plastic fibers.

Artificial shag green.

The special kind of green found only in mashed peas and baby
vomit, like a sweetener that leaves a sour taste on the tongue, or
a grape flavor
closer to medicine less pleasant
than sickness itself.

You know this shade all too well.
The color of love treated like a chore
calling for rough hands and even rougher words
that leave you lonelier together than ever.

But the green you want—
greener than any pasture or grass on this side or
the next
greener than Roy G Biv's
famous goddamn middle name
yet not green at all:
Coated in technicolor trichomes
Joseph could only dream of,
capable of heights his ladder could
never reach

—that green isn't for you.
Not with him.

It's all just plastic fibers.

FACIAL DYSMORPHIA

BY ABBY WEBB

Gun to my head, hand to my heart
I haven't a clue what I look like.

You think I'd be the expert by now
the way my eyes catch every reflection—
the endless interludes of aesthetic labor—
all the checking, smoothing, straightening, primping, preeningproddingpoking
—forever fixing my body to a standard set by no one
and everyone at the same time.

I swear I'm not a vampire
but when I look in the mirror I don't see a face.

Perhaps my neural pathways for perception were
rewired by school bullies whose ugliness was infectious,
convincing me I was unlovable at the tender age of
training bras, braces, bad bangs, and late bloomers.

Imperceptible yet not invisible,
I see a Ms. Potato Head.
Once wearing plastic features donned by others
(hazel eyes, puffy bags, freckled nose)
she has detached herself and become an indescribable blob of flesh.

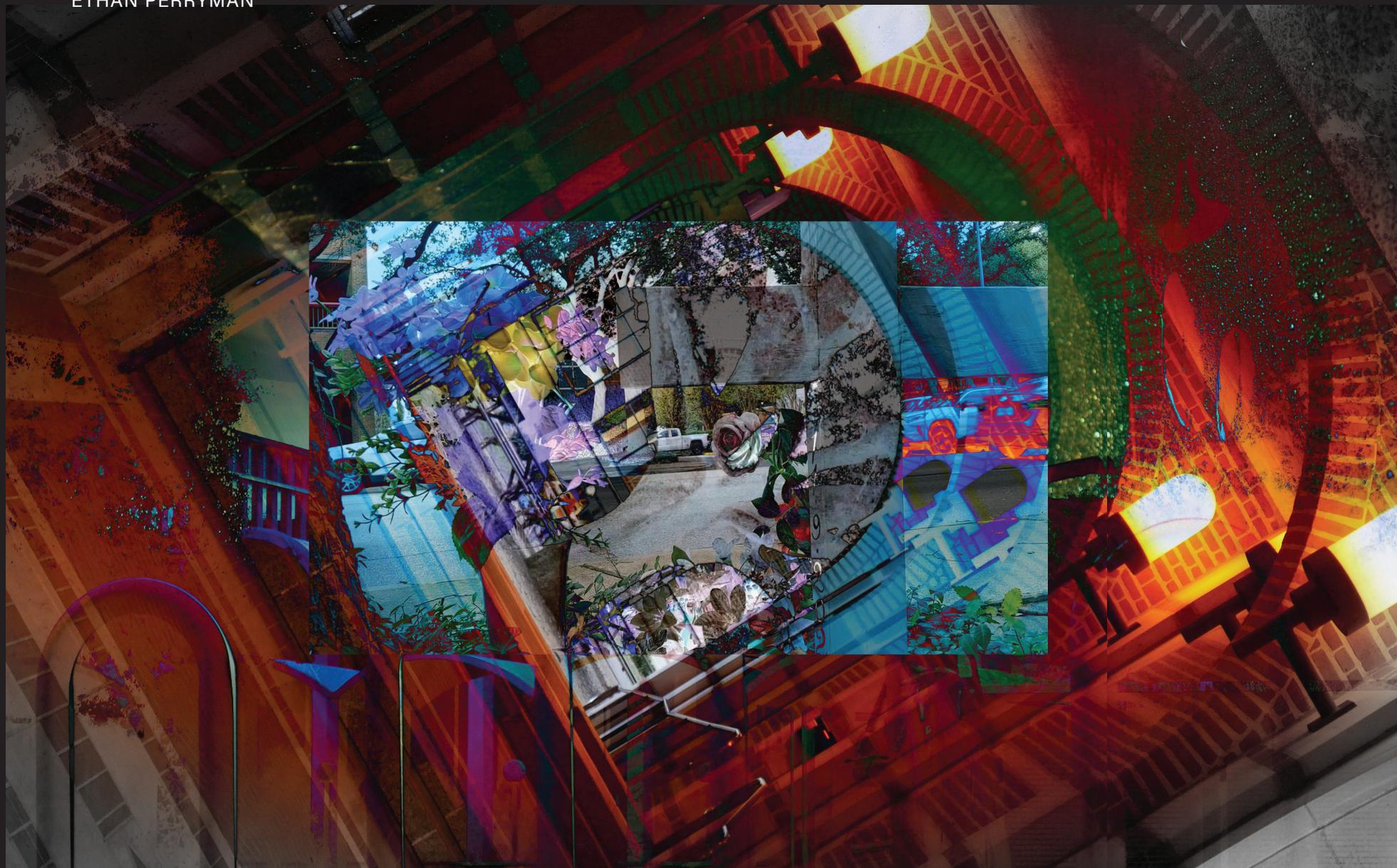
But nobody wants to play with a faceless potato head.
So I line my eyes, conceal the dark purple beneath, rouge my nose—
plug in that perfect combination of lips and ears
to win a few more smiles from strangers.

It all looks the same to me anyhow.

Hand to my head, gun to my heart
why can't "nothing" suffice?

SLEEP PARALYSIS
KHADIJA DEROUICHE





CHANCE SECOND TO SECOND CHANCE

BY ABBY WEBB

They called it the Chronal Suspension. A stupid name really, a relic from the Enlightened minds who staked an etymological claim on a concept they didn't discover first. Everyone was born with the power to do it, but the gene didn't activate until you were 18. No one knew exactly why.

Time froze for 1/3 of a day: humans, machines, flora, and fauna suspended in stasis; a single moment stretched across eight hours. The activator and up to two companions alone remained in motion, free to frolic wherever they wished and to do as they pleased without consequence. But you only had one shot at it.

People used it for different things. Students were a common demographic—overachievers willing to waste the most important eight hours of their life cramming for an exam, the price of a lifetime spent on a three to four letter acronym. More farsighted individuals saved it for a special occasion or for the fulfillment of lifelong wishes, like exclusive access to historical attractions, free scavenges of five-star restaurants, and almost anything else you could imagine.

Some just used it to take a break from the stress of the present. After eight “hours” passed, all physical material returned to its original location at the moment time froze, as if nothing ever happened.

Perhaps the wisest of all saved their Suspension for the ultimate rainy day, the eve of their own or another’s fatal reckoning. Eight more hours with a fading loved one was a gift more precious than even the finest enjoyments Earth had to offer, and many squanderers found themselves vainly wishing to turn back the clock when faced with midnight.

...

Moira Madison yearned to trade her Suspension for a time machine to the past. The moments she wished could last forever had long passed her by, swept away by her seemingly eternal devotion to just going through the motions.

And yet she always seemed to be running late. She was scurrying past the Café du Monde at Louis Armstrong, attempting to catch a wedding—her wedding, to be precise. Dreams of the future and past had tortured her all night, and a clock radio alarm stood zero chance against a woman on her way to nuptial gallows. *It’s fine, it’s cool.* She still had ten—now nine—minutes to make the flight to her destination ceremony in “beautiful Biloxi, Mississippi,” as the Springers had advertised it. Shores ridden with slimy kelp, decaying fish, and biting mosquitoes did little to entice her excitement, but her ever-present nausea reminded her why she was doing this.

As she anxiously rushed through the terminal, lugging behind a bulky suitcase with her wedding dress and veil crumpled up inside, her eyes darted around looking for the right gate. *D15, D16, D17, D18, D19—How many goddamned D gates are there?*

She groaned at her watch’s speedy hands when suddenly her eyes landed upon a most familiar face. The sight stole from her both a breath and a heartbeat; her hands numbed and loosened their grip, and she dropped her luggage heavily onto the floor. The thud drew attention, and far too quickly to assemble any sense of composure, Moira met the gaze of the prettiest ghost from her past. The one who haunted nearly all her dreams and waking moments. The one she thought would always remain firmly rooted *in the past.*

After a moment of pure shock, warmth spread across the woman’s face. Before Moira could reclaim her breath, her oldest and dearest friend approached and snatched it again from her lungs. It was all too much to catch a whiff of the jasmine perfume she hadn’t smelled since high school, to be thrust back into a trove of treasured memories without warning.

“Hey, Mo.”

Oh no. The nickname fell upon her ears like a curse, re-condemning her to an incurable pain she’d spent years tamping down.

Neither was sure what the protocols were for a reunion between almost-lovers after nine years apart. Neither knew where they stood. Should they hug—embrace like they were still good friends? Or had it been too long—had they become strangers? Moira dreaded the thought.

Remembering she was expected to participate in the conversation, Moira let out a strained, “Hey, Audra. Fancy meeting you here.” Stupid.

They stared at each other in silence, reveling in their shared presence after such a long separation. Countless thoughts of what to say filtered through their minds, but every line felt far too weighty to bring up in an airport.

“Your hair’s long,” Audra commented, as she reached out to gently touch a strand.

“Oh, yeah, I’ve been growing it out. Greg—I like it better that way.” Smooth.

“You look different.”

“Good different or bad different?”

“I...don’t know.” She really didn’t. It’s discomfoting to compare the current version of someone to the outdated image in your mind. Obviously, you know it’s the same person, but the slight difference in the set of their jaw or the fullness of their cheeks reinforces the notion that, maybe, you don’t really know them anymore.

Audra looked slightly hurt, and Moira knew she’d stuck her foot in her mouth, as per usual.

“Sorry, I meant good. You’re good—I mean—you look good. It’s just...different. Sorry.”

Gracious as ever, Audra huffed a laugh. “Don’t worry about it. I mean, this is fucking crazy—what are the odds?”

Moira chuckled as a thrill ran through her spine. No kidding. A million questions suddenly popped into her mind, but she settled upon the most neutral: “What are you doing here?” When Audra’s face fell, she added, “If you don’t mind me asking, of course. Sorry.”

Audra’s father had passed the week before; she was in town for the funeral. Moira vaguely recalled the man who spent more time poring over his manuscripts than speaking to his family, but she offered sincere condolences nonetheless. He was still Audra’s father.

After a moment of quiet reflection, Audra said, “I’ve never minded anything you’ve said to me.”

It took a painful while for Moira to recall her earlier question. She laughed, “Bullshit. It took a painful while for Moira to recall her earlier question. She laughed, “Bullshit. There’s gotta be something I’ve said or done that pissed you off. Nobody’s that perfect.” Anxiety underlined her casual tone, a fear that the last time they met had changed Audra’s estimation of her.

Humoring her, Audra affected thoughtfulness. “Hmm. Nope, can’t think of a single thing. Personally, I’ve never found you upsetting or annoying.” The reassurance soothed Moira’s mind. Audra was always good at doing that—understanding her to the point of anticipating her feelings and responses. She’d forgotten what it felt like to receive heartfelt compliments, to feel seen. “Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

“Where are you headed?” Audra asked brightly.

Moira’s heart plummeted. How was she supposed to look into the eyes of the only woman—the only person—she’d ever truly loved, and tell her she was marrying a man who didn’t even compliment her? Moira had made peace with the fact that marital bliss perhaps wasn’t in the forecast for her future, but Greg was a good enough man, and she wanted her child to grow up with two parents in the same house. It was too late for an abortion anyhow—she’d impulsively called her mom after her third positive test (not like she had any friends to tell), and Mary Louisa May Madison then proceeded to tell everyone and their grandma at church that Sunday. They might accept premarital sex if the baby came after a shotgun wedding, but that was pushing it.

A small voice protested that Moira was just scared of doing anything alone and was so terribly passive as to readily resign to mediocrity, but she tended to stomp out that pest of a thought.

“Biloxi.”

“The hell is in Biloxi?” The quirk of Audra’s brow and the smirk upon her lips matched perfectly with Moira’s memory of her, and it was all too much.

She sheepishly admitted, “My wedding.”

Almost instantly, Audra inflated like a balloon, only to pop. “You’re getting married? And you’re flying there...by yourself?” Moira faltered at the edge in her voice. Curse my wretched fertility and its extremely disappointing taste!

“I...” She didn’t know what to say. Isn’t it supposed to be exciting to share news of an impending marriage, a baby on the way? But she wanted nothing less than to reveal the name of her soon-to-be husband, or the reason she had stooped beneath her usual standards. Unconsciously, she lightly touched her stomach. Audra’s eyes followed the movement.

Moira was saved from crafting a response by an announcement that the doors to Flight 756, her flight, were closing in five minutes to prepare for takeoff. She wanted to scream at the timing of it all. Greg and his mother had planned a weeklong honeymoon at his parent’s “beach” house immediately after the wedding, so most likely Audra would be long gone by the time they returned to NOLA.

She ached for a chance to really catch up with Audra, to reminisce and reconcile, maybe even reveal dusty, unspoken feelings. The woman lived halfway across the country—California, the last time she stalked Facebook—and it wasn’t likely they’d meet again. Not until the next funeral or wedding came around. Losing contact with the one you love is painful—Moira knew only too well. But unexpectedly regaining that contact only to lose it again cut even deeper.

“That’s my flight.”

“Oh.” Audra looked conflicted. “Well, um, you should probably go... Don’t

wanna leave the lucky person at the altar, haha,” she joked hollowly.

Her use of the gender-neutral term didn’t escape Moira’s notice. In fact, it inspired a wild urge, a crazy impulse. It was a clue, a hint that maybe Audra had been just as aware of their intimacy as she was, aware that they shared something far deeper than friendship. Or at least that’s what Moira hoped it meant.

“Mo?”

The nickname sealed her fate. As the PA system came on again to summon the missing passengers to their gate, Moira jerkily stepped forward and offered her hand, affecting a lot more gusto than she felt. Audra looked at it and then back at her in confusion.

Moira had no time to explain. But maybe if time weren’t even a factor...

“Do you trust me?”

Without hesitation: “Always.”

Audra placed her hand in the outstretched one, squeezed her eyes shut, and suddenly all the air rushed from the two women’s lungs at once, as if a black hole had ripped open space-time above them. The force of the Suspension threw them to the floor, and it took a while to catch their breaths and push themselves up to standing.

The first thought that popped into Moira’s mind was *Fuuuuuuuck, why did I do that?* This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing—the kind of thing people spend years plotting and planning. But, her brain argued, *some people go forever waiting for the perfect moment and end up dying without ever using it.* Terrified of what she might find but resigned to her fate, she spared Audra a glance. Her look of awe as she drank in their surreal surroundings became her so well that Moira’s worries dried up on her tongue.

This was the right choice.

She joined Audra in noticing with muted wonderment the world in stasis around them: the flight attendant forever pointing someone to their gate, the little girl mid-tantrum on the floor and her mother pretending not to know her, the cop comically postured on her Segway, the bounding golden retriever floating an inch off the ground, followed by his owner stuck in free fall. Neither woman had experienced a Suspension before, and it was more beautiful and frightening than either could've imagined. No threshold of description could come close to fully capturing the feeling of it all. The silence and stillness were immediately peaceful, but the sight of humans frozen like dolls inspired a primal horror. Moira suddenly understood why people were only granted eight hours—she was so mesmerized she could see herself never wanting to leave. Subconsciously, Moira found herself cradling her stomach, checking on her constant companion before turning to her second one. *This must be insanely weird for a fetus.*

Audra stared at her in wonder and what could have been either hope or fear. Moira felt herself blush and looked down at her feet, realizing that of course Audra would immediately catch onto the deep meaning in such a drastic action. Moira didn't love her because she was stupid.

Shyly keeping her eyes glued to the floor, Moira didn't notice her companion approaching her until ratty Converse entered her field of vision. She felt a finger gently lift her chin up and found Audra smiling at her.

“So, what do you want to do now, Mo?”

Anything. Everything, with you. “I didn't mean to do that.” Audra's brow furrowed, so she quickly amended, “I mean...I...wasn't expecting to do that.”

“Can't say I was either.”

“I just panicked, I don't know, I couldn't...”

Audra smiled softly. “It's been a long time. I've missed you, y'know.”

I've missed you too. I still think about you. Every day. The lump in her throat kept Moira from speaking. She didn't know what to say.

“HOW COULD SHE EXPLAIN HERSELF WITHOUT
OVERSTEPPING LINES SHE DREW IN THE SAND A
DECADE BEFORE? WITHOUT WORD-VOMITING HER
UNDYING DEVOTION TO A PERSON SHE BARELY KNEW
ANYMORE?”

She paled at the thought of upsetting Audra and spending eight hours in the epitome of solitude.

But perhaps an airport wasn't the best place to strand oneself in time. At least half an hour's drive from their old neighborhood when stationary cars weren't clogging I10, the most exciting feature of the building was all the rules they could break.

Small talk dominated their conversation as they delighted in trespassing behind the luggage conveyor belts, petting bomb/drug dogs (neither understood how professional dogs worked), and smashing glass knickknacks in gift shops (and feeling guilty even though the damage wasn't permanent).

Audra shared that she was sending out a novel manuscript for publication as well as for an application to grad school. She was living with friends she made at Stanford—all artsy-fartsy queer folk who were probably infinitely cooler than Moira, who wouldn't find themselves in an existential bind of their own making, who'd rather be independent, out, and happy than sad amongst the only community they'd ever known.

Forgoing the customary reply of what was happening in her own life, Moira stood and excused herself to the restroom.

As she caught her breath and shoved aside a mountain of self-pity, she did her business in unnerving silence, marveling at the bathroom's acoustics as the sound of her piss echoed off the walls. Don't think, don't think, don't think. Moira resolutely stared down while washing her hands to avoid her reflection's judgment in the mirror. Exiting the bathroom while shaking her hands dry, she found Audra standing next to two Segways and beaming proudly.

"Ta-daaa!" She wiggled her fingers at her offering.

Moira was impressed. "Where did you find these?"

"Security," she said nonchalantly. Moira caught sight of the badges emblazoned on their front. "One of them's fully charged, and the other has like 70% left. We can go wherever now!"

Moira checked her watch and found the hands unhelpfully frozen where they were the second time had stopped. She had no idea exactly how many minutes (hours?) had elapsed since the world paused, nor where a good location was to spend the rest, but 8 hours in an airport didn't seem all that exciting. So, she mounted the Segway and followed Audra's lead, not caring where they ended up.

Only as they drove past the D-gates did Moira recall her abandoned bridal gown, and at that moment she sent up a prayer in vain for the Suspension to somehow erase the cursed pile of frump from the face of the Earth.

Underwhelmingly, their noble and trusty steeds of steel could travel a max of only 15 miles an hour. Still, it was better than walking, and Moira reveled in the chance to simply watch Audra as they floated through the ever-present, eerie stillness. She paid little mind to the sights drawing her friend's gaze as they exited through half-open sliding doors. Rather than notice the murder of crows or mischief of rats frozen in flight outside, she chose to study the ridges where Audra's hairline met the nape of her neck. Audra had lightened her hair to a strawberry blonde, but those tiny baby curls remained the same.

For some reason, Moira was both surprised and relieved she still had those two moles below her left ear. It felt like a secret sign of identity reserved only for Moira. Did other people know about those freckles? Had anyone but she taken the time to mentally catalog every secret little spot on Audra's skin?

Suddenly, Audra screeched to a jolting halt, and Moira nearly crashed into her. Off-balance and flustered, it took a moment to figure out why her friend had stopped.

"Look." Moira's eyes followed Audra's look of awed horror, discovering a tragic

car wreck frozen at the point of impact. An 18-wheeler running a red light had T-boned an SUV containing a mother, father, and baby. The two women dismounted their Segways and hurried over in helpless distress, but it took only a few moments to know this crash would be fatal. The trajectory of the cab, the massive dent already forming along the side of the car—someone had to die here. Maybe not the trucker and maybe not everyone in the SUV, but there was no way they could all survive. Not according to probability or basic human physiology.

Moira couldn't help but regret the Suspension. Sure, the crash would have happened regardless, but if she'd never frozen time, she'd never have forced a grieving Audra to witness the final moment before another family was destroyed.

Audra seemed particularly affected and set about prying open the car doors. Moira caught herself from bringing up that anything they did would revert to the way it was before time paused, because that wasn't why she was doing this. It didn't matter if it was futile; it felt right. Together, they dragged out each passenger, as well as the trucker. If you've ever had to carry the dead weight of an almost 200-pound man, you'd understand why this took them what they could only fathom as an eon. But they persisted and managed to sit each body up against a nearby sedan out of the collision path. Audra hadn't done wrestling since high school for nothing.

After they chugged water and caught their breaths, Moira's eyes catching on the way her companion swallowed, Audra finally spoke. "I couldn't leave them there like that. They deserve some peace." She had a frog in her throat and a spring in her eyes, and Moira, who'd been sitting next to her on the asphalt road, reached out to gently touch her hand.

"They get to be a family for a few more hours." She thought of the fetus residing within her, and her heart ached for the statuesque mother and infant before them. She gave Audra a few minutes of somber silence before standing and outstretching her hand. "I finally came up with somewhere we could go. When's the last time you thought about St. Mary's?"

Audra narrowed her eyes in apprehension, but the smirk spreading across her lips said she found an illicit visit to their high school quite enticing. Unfortunately (or fortunately?), her Segway was nearly out of battery by now, so she had to hop up behind Moira and hold onto her waist. The pleasant smell of her perfume and shampoo enveloped Moira's senses in a heady way that made her nearly lose balance more than once.

After riding for a while, they pulled up to the chain-link fence surrounding St. Mary's Dominican. Morning carpool rounded the block, the gate luckily open for arriving students. Moira could feel a shiver run through Audra. She never did learn just why her parents had pulled her out before their senior year—maybe it wasn't such a good idea to bring her here. But as they came to a stop, Audra bounded off the Segway and ran toward the chapel. It was all Moira could do to catch up with the athletic figure who held the door open for her.

As they entered the building, she huffed between heavy breaths, "You gotta slow down, I'm not built for this."

Audra turned away from the spectacle of Catholicism to look at her friend. "Oh! Right, you have a baby in there." Her cheery face soon reflected the alarm Moira knew to be written upon her own. "Ah shit, I forgot that was a secret."

Moira felt upon her the judgmental eyes of idols above: a mahogany Jesus suffering upon his cherry crucifix, a stained-glass Holy Madonna glowing and glowering with sunlight, and a live but stationary priest praying before each.

It felt wrong being in there, a fornicator with a bastard child growing inside her, one she never wanted and had simply resigned herself to having as the path of least resistance. But the warm brown eyes looking into Moira's own were clear of any judgment or malice. "H-how did you know?"

"Come on, Mo. It's me. I know you." *Maybe she really still did.* "Plus, you keep doing that pregnant lady thing where you randomly caress your stomach for no reason."

Embarrassed at her own transparency, Moira told her with a sigh, "I'm about three months in now."

A thought seemed to cross Audra's face before she turned and went back into the closet behind the altar. As she dug around, she called back, "Know who the dad is?"

"Yeah..." Moira stood awkwardly with her arms crossed in the center of the chapel, scared to move or speak further lest she incur divine wrath.

After a too-long moment of silence, Audra popped her head out of the closet, an inquisitive look upon her face. "You wanna tell me who he is?"

No, I really don't. Audra seemed to sense her deliberation and helpfully dropped the subject, retreating again before exclaiming "*Aha!*" and returning with her hand in a jar of communion wafers. Moira breathed a sigh of relief when Audra returned to her side, her shoulders no longer bearing the weight of Jesus and Mary's eyes alone.

"Want some? They're actually pretty good."

Moira accepted a few with a smile, and they left the chapel to roam the halls.

Surrounding them were students suspended in journey to their first classes. Moira felt transported back in time as they wandered around: the evil ancient nun who still taught world history and her miserable students caught in a surprise uniform check, the group of teens crowding around a single Juul in the school bathroom, the graffitied dick-and-balls covered haphazardly by a "Pray Every Day" poster.

Moira couldn't help that most of her favorite memories from high school involved Audra in some way. The study halls in which Audra wove her short hair into intricate braids, the masses in which Moira fell asleep on Audra's warm shoulder, the religion classes in which Audra held her sweaty hand under the desk during debates on the humanity of gay people, the doodles Audra always used to draw on Moira's hands, arms, knees, and legs.

At some point, they reached their unconscious destination: the alcove underneath the north staircase, the hideaway where they would eat every day and study during free period. As Moira ran her fingers lightly over the hand-railing, Audra's voice from right behind her startled her. "You really don't have to tell me if you don't want, but... I mean... How'd you end up pregnant? *And engaged?*"

Unsure what to say and scared where this conversation could lead, Moira turned and opted for sarcastic snark, diminished slightly by her shaky voice: "Well, when a woman and man love each other very much—"

"So you fell in love." Sarcasm was the wrong choice. There was something in Audra's voice, some emotion that Moira tried to resist naming "hurt." How could she assure Audra that she wasn't really in love with Greg, without admitting the embarrassing fact that she wasn't in love with her fiancée, but rather a friend she hadn't seen in years?

Despite the fact she'd been on her less-than merry way to her wedding just that day, Moira only truly realized the absurdity of her predicament in that very moment.

Sheepish and embarrassed, she said, "It's... a long story."

"It's not like we don't have time."

Curse her common sense!

Moira sighed hesitantly before answering. "Senior year at LSU, I had this psych research methods course, and I got partnered with *this guy* who went to Kehoe and—well, I'd seen him at Walk-Ons a few times, but he wasn't in any frats, so we hadn't really crossed paths until then—but, you know, one thing led to another, and we've been together since."

"Which guy? From middle school?! Was it Michael?"

Not eager to hear a list of bachelors likely more eligible than her own, Moira cut in. "Greg Springer."

"Egg-breath Greg?! *He's* the baby-daddy?"

"He's my *fiancée*." Moira wasn't sure why she was so defensive, but the unimpressed look on Audra's face struck a painful chord. She desperately desired her approval, and such blatant distaste for her future life partner was a slap in the face. Moira cursed her 11-year-old self for creating that stupid nickname in the first place, she cursed Audra for remembering it, and then she cursed Greg for still consuming abominable amounts of hard-boiled eggs to this goddamned day.

"Why?"

What?

Moira's face must have communicated her confusion because Audra stepped closer and continued, "Why do you love him enough to marry him?"

Unbidden, tears welled in Moira's eyes, and she quickly lowered her head to glare holes into the floor, furiously willing her tear ducts to reverse and suck up the moisture.

Audra seemed to realize she went too far, and she raised her hands in submission and backed away slowly. "Sorry, that was—Sorry." Scratching her neck awkwardly, she turned around and started heading for the doorway.

Wait.

Audra stopped in her tracks. Still staring at the ground, Moira realized she'd said that out loud. She couldn't bring herself to say anything more for fear of sobbing hideously, but good and gracious Audra accepted her olive branch with a smile.

As she turned back around to face Moira, Audra asked, "You ever wonder why I left Dominican—why we never saw each other again?"

"Of course." Moira sniffled, insulted at any implication otherwise.

"My mom found my diary in my room one day, near the end of junior year. And I mean, it was *criiiiiinge*. Just, filled to the brim with gay ramblings and, just, the most godawful poetry and—" She blushed and shook her head as if literally haunted by her past self. Moira couldn't help but relate. "But most importantly gay stuff. That's what Connie didn't like, and my dad pretty much just went along with her. So, basically, I had the choice of either getting kicked out and cut off after graduation, or switching schools, cutting off all contact with you, and getting my college paid for. And I've spent nine years regretting my choice.

It took a moment for Moira to process her words, to put the pieces together on why Audra had been so frigid on their last day together, so different from the warmth now approaching her. But— "Why cut me off?"

Standing a yard apart now and quirking that ever-familiar brow, Audra said, “Who do you think the poems were about?”

Moira’s brain short-circuited. With a quiet, watery gasp, she stepped forward and confessed, “I stopped time because I couldn’t lose you again—I—”

“I know.”

You ever want to punch and kiss someone simultaneously? Moira rolled her eyes with a laugh, her tears long turned happy. “Shut up, Han Solo.”

Taking her up on the challenge, Audra closed the gap between them and kissed her—soft and shy at first, exploratory, before deepening into a passionate memorial to years of repression.

More than anything had in Moira’s past, this *felt right*. Her engagement, her parents, her preconceptions fell to the wayside in favor of the sweet-smelling woman in front of her. But...she couldn’t think only of herself.

“I want my kid to have two parents. That’s why I got engaged.”

Audra smiled with searing sincerity. “Why not two moms?”

As Moira leaned in to kiss her again, they were suddenly blinded by bright whiteness and roughly plucked from their bubble and deposited back in the real world, their hands and arms grasping at the dreaded distance drawn between them. The airport swam back into view, Moira standing there with Audra’s hand in her own. She could have screamed at the timing of it all, but the blatant love on Audra’s face quieted her frustration. They had the rest of forever to make up for the past. This was right.

“Wanna help me ditch a wedding?”



THEORIES ABOUT MY NANI

BY RIYA MISRA

i. chudail

butternut kajal / waterline smudge / my eyes spill lukewarm / and bittersweet / and she stains my hands / red and pulverized

in groves / of mango / and sweet jackfruit / ripe so the sun chokes / we shove forget-me-nots down our gullets / and i collect her literature / her literature

ii. masala tongue

under the vicious sun, i bear on my back centuries of my ancestors' flour beaten, dirt caked, saffron turmeric cardamom stained hands—

these hands, which have cupped my face and blessed the feet of our animal gods

these hands, which grasp stone between chapped red fingers and rough palms

call me atlas: i carry the tears of the women before me upon coconut-sculpted shoulders, searching for splits in our homes— the women dancing in crackling clay pot oil, the women fetching drops of water to sprinkle on tongues, the women aging in cheek rings of paratha flour streaks and garam masala sweat

in death, my loved ones have become warriors of sorts; molded from the alluvial clay of the ganges where they sculpted their lives, and i carry this on my sweat-sculpted shoulders—

guardians and smugglers and worshippers,

we are a monsoon of golden red brown masala blood and sun-blistered skin and banana leaves

and so i bathe in my ancestors' clay in hopes that it will seep into the splits and hollows of my bones,

the cracks of my skin,

and harden

iii. the ides of march

tonight,

i wish to be in the presence of the rotting mango sun

and my nani's soft chapati moon



SPOILED DATES IN A PUBLIX AISLE

BY RIYA MISRA

red rock pools
in bitter hollows,
underneath fingernails.
watch the sun (i mean it,
watch it)
as she stumbles through sugar fronds
and foothills.
cheap citrus handsoap tucked behind my tooth
like comfort,
staining my toothbrush,
if you keep on long enough in this country, you'll find devils!
 maddening devils, he-she-they
 stinging-raw devils with little to love.

sticky church spires in my burnt gums,
i'll count your freckles.

CIRCULATION
TESSA DOMSKY

the frying
pan egg-legged gelatin
youth sprint to the far lands,
our kitchen table. lactic acid (which tastes
nothing like milk)
children, they lay
here with hands outstretched,
pleading,
these lactose-intolerant girls love milk (even more than
they hate themselves).





FRUIT

BY NEHA TALLAPRAGADA

Bananas go for a dollar a bunch, apples for twice that. Watermelon sells by weight. Cantaloupe, too. Apricots and plums tremble in their fragile, velvet skins as Maya kneads them with her fingers. She has never been able to tell the degree of ripeness of fruit, at least not without unzipping leathery hairy casings and examining the rotting flesh underneath. It's the same with older women, too. She can never tell precisely how old they are. Like with this woman here, the woman whom she's been staring at from behind the metropolis of fruit for the past twenty minutes. This woman could easily be forty or sixty. She's one of those women who resembles an intelligent animal: inquisitive eyes and a thin, equine nose. Attractive smile lines hold her mouth in parentheses. Beautiful people always seem more alert, more attuned to the machinations of the universe. They're more real than everyone else.

An obnoxious blue notification lights up against her hip. Her husband is reminding her to pick up more formula for the baby. This is his passive-aggressive way of castigating Maya for choosing not to subject herself to intense pain every morning. Her husband thinks, like Maya's mother and Maya's friends, that motherhood means sacrifice. Or maybe it does and Maya's the one with her expectations flipped.

She looks down at the baby, who is currently strapped to her chest. The baby's name is Anjali, but it's still difficult for Maya to connect the name to the implausible being she somehow created. When she was pregnant, she

felt possessed, and now she feels empty, like something else escaped along with it. The baby's skin is pink and its hands are small. These are the only two things Maya has observed since giving birth, and she hasn't noticed anything new since. She has been waiting for that magical moment that every mother talks about, where your whole perception of life goes shifting and falling. Nothing.

The woman looks up and Maya looks away.

--

It's Charlotte calling, Maya observes as she shoves musty formula and sour kale into the fridge. She's probably calling to rehash the conversation they had when they were getting coffee at St. Mark's the other day, probably wanting to stretch to death all the details and nitpick at all the things left unsaid.

She mentioned this in what she had thought was a glib and slightly self-effacing way, but it evidently wasn't received as such, as Charlotte dramatically stopped mid-sip and gave a long sigh. The sigh, Maya knew, was to show her what Charlotte understood the dynamic of their relationship to be: Maya was the naïve and self-sacrificing Luddite hampered by tradition, while Charlotte was the reasonable and worldly woman who was about to tell her, in precisely cut-out ways, all the things that were wrong with what she had just said and how they were indicators of all the ways her life had gone to utter shit.

Maya, Charlotte said.

I know, Maya said. She paused. We are happy, she insisted. We don't need to bang it out seven days a week to show that we're happy. Anyway, like I said, I think the problem is with me.

Charlotte leaned in and asked, Don't you think maybe there's another reason?

No.

What was Anita to you?

You keep bringing this up. I was twenty. Guys liked watching us together. And we liked that they were watching us.

I mean. If you say so. Have you thought any more about—

Divorce, Maya said, is not an option.

Why isn't it? Charlotte asked. It's not that big of a deal anymore. Half our friends will be divorced five years from now. No one will give a shit.

What Charlotte doesn't and will never understand is that Maya has a responsibility to people other than herself. She cannot think of only her happiness. That's selfish. But if she said this, Charlotte would think that Maya was criticizing her, or worse, she would take it upon herself to drag Maya out from the cave of oppression where she thinks Maya stays. And Maya believes that, if that ever happens, she might as well off herself right then and there. So, at St. Mark's, she didn't say this.

We have a kid, Maya said. So it's different.

Charlotte pressed her lips together into a thin line and waved her arms in the air.

Well, it's your life, she said. I can't tell you what to do with it.

Maya wanted to kick her then because in that very sentence she was telling Maya what to do, and it was infuriating.

At this moment, Charlotte is calling her, not to bring this up but to invite her to a dinner party tonight. Dinner for white people means an unconscionably early meal, so it's really more of a supper, a soiree, even, Maya quips into the phone.

Can you come? Charlotte asks. I thought you might need a distraction from what's going on at home. *Ah. There it is.*

Maya goes upstairs to get the baby. There's no way she can leave it alone with her husband; he'll throw a fit. I don't work all day to work all night, he'll say dramatically, and then she'll say, What exactly do you think I'm doing all day, and he'll say, That's

different, and she'll say, Well, actually, no, it's not, and then because he has nothing to say to this he'll change tactics entirely and say, Don't put this on me, you chose to leave work, you chose to do that, and Maya won't say anything but think, well, it was never really a choice, was it?

It's a quarter to five when she gets to her parents' house. Her mother opens the door, looking over Maya with that brutal stare that used to pull lies from her teenage mouth like a magnet. Relief surges through Maya as soon as the baby is out of her arms, followed by a swift stab of guilt.

Thanks, she says, kicking the duffel bag of diapers and teething toys past the door. I would cancel on them, but it would be rude.

You know, when we were first living in this country, we were all by ourselves, her mother says. Her narrowed eyes make Maya feel like she is standing on the head of a pin. We had no one to help us like this. We were all alone with you. Think about how hard that was.

I mean, I can call a babysitter, Maya says. If it bothers you so much.

Her mother leans in and rubs noses with the baby. I'm not like your mother-in-law, she says. I like children. How long are you going to be at her house tonight, then?

Hard to say, Maya says. But you know how his family is. Could be there all night.

--

I don't believe it's in my best interest to try to understand the mind of the racist, which does not fundamentally ascribe to any logical maxim and therefore obfuscates any attempts at comprehension, Maya says.

At first, she feels proud of this sentence. She feels proud of the way she can, sometimes, sift through the tumbler of her brain and adhere whole sentences to each other that make her seem intelligent.

“BUT THEN SHE FEELS REPULSED WITH HERSELF
BECAUSE ‘INTELLIGENCE’ IS REALLY JUST A MARK OF
SUPERIORITY, ISN'T IT?”

She takes pride in being viewed as smart, as in smarter-than-others, but then she also feels guilty because of the conceit she knows it imbues in her. And then, of course, she feels like a fraud; that's a given.

Bile and shame rise up in her throat, but seeing the envy and admiration in the eyes of everyone around her briefly quells it. Well, everyone except for Ned, whose eyes she meets and whose eyes say flatly, but not without fondness, *Bullshit*.

That's a platitude for the ages, he says as he tips the decanter into her glass.

You're just jealous you can't charm 'em like I can.

Maybe so. Hey, I like your socks. They wiggle their eyebrows at each other. Anytime anyone comes over, Charlotte enforces the rule to take off your shoes, if you could, please, we're a no-shoes household, sorry, that's just how we do things here, my husband's Korean, sorry.

Where's the ol' ball-and-chain? Ned asks.

Fuck knows.

Noted. Oh, speaking of spouses, Char wanted you to stop by the dining room for a bit before she brings dinner out. She left a bottle of Bulleit on the table just for you.

Mm, how thoughtful.

Maya steps into the dining room and steps back out. The breath has been vacuumed from her lungs. She slips into the kitchen via the adjacent door and finds Charlotte hovering over a chicken breast with a lemon squeezer.

Hey, look who showed up. What happened? Charlotte asks.

Maya finds that she cannot speak. She cannot produce a sound at all. It's like someone has hot-glued her vocal cords together. She points to the door.

Charlotte peeks outside into the dining room. Oh, she notes with a small frown, Anita's arrived.

The spark of rage in Maya's throat miraculously unlocks her voice again.

So that's why you kept mentioning her? I don't know what you think you're doing here, Charlotte, but this is not your life and we are not in college anymore—

Why do you think this has anything to do with you? I ran into some old school friends. I invited them over. Charlotte pauses.

Besides, you said you didn't care about when you were together—

We were never together, Maya says.

Anyway, you told me you didn't care about it, so if you really don't, then go out and be a person. Say hi. The edge of Charlotte's mouth quirks.

I'm leaving, says Maya. I'm taking your whiskey and I'm leaving.

Charlotte laughs but doesn't meet her eyes. Maya swings open the door and stalks toward the dining table, locking onto the amber bottle of Bulleit in seconds. She reaches for a stout lowball glass and slowly pours the whiskey. Someone next to her casts a thin shadow over the table. Her hands, she notes, are shaking.

Need a lemon with that?

Well, I drink it straight now, so, she says, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on a point on the wall.

Been a minute, Anita says. The chandelier light glints off of her teeth.

How are you? Maya asks.

Good, thanks.

Good, you're doing good? That's good.

Yeah, very good, Anita says. Why does she always look like she is about to start laughing? And you?

Maya pauses. Yeah, she says slowly. Fantastic. Thank you.

Oh? Is that why you're about to mainline that? Anita raises an eyebrow.

Maya sets the glass down. People change, believe it or not, she says.

Do they?

Where have you been?

You sound like you're accusing me of something, Anita says. Her eyes crinkle at the corners. Amsterdam. I had an exhibition there. I'm bringing it here, actually, in a week or so.

I meant—

Yeah, I know what you meant. Out and about, you know. She waves her hand in the air at nothing in particular. New York for some years, then Europe.

She's pierced her eyebrow, that's interesting. She told Maya she'd never do that because of the pain.

Exhibition?

Yeah. You stuck around with the rest of them, I see. Anita nods toward the door, where Charlotte stands jubilantly with a golden-brown, sliced-up chicken carcass cradled

in her arms. People break out into applause at the sight.

I'm leaving now, Maya says. So, I don't know. It was good seeing you.

Anita follows her out of the dining room.

Well, hey, where are you going?

Right now, it's kind of up in the air, Maya says, emotions lurching in her stomach.

Is this a solo trip?

Maya stops in her tracks and turns around slowly to face Anita. It's just the two of them in the hallway now. She finds it difficult, very difficult, to look at Anita straight in the face, and chooses instead to focus on the slim gold bangles dangling from her wrists. The prospect of being alone with Anita both exhilarates and nauseates her. But, more pressingly, she does not want to be here anymore.

Your exhibition?

That's your car outside, right? Anita cocks her head. That sly smile winds its way around her mouth. Come on. I know a place. You'll like it there.

--

You kind of disappeared after grad, Anita says. Her legs lie outstretched on the dashboard of Maya's car. I didn't know where you ended up for the longest time.

I could say the same for you, Maya says. Do I turn here?

Next one over. I'll confess, though, I did try to look you up online. About...five years ago.

Maya tries to keep herself from smiling. You're joking.

I wish I wasn't. Before you say anything, yeah, I know it's pretty stalker-y.

No, it's not that. I tried to do the same thing.

She sinks into the sound of Anita's laugh, high and clear.

You know how many Anita Patels there are on the internet?

I know now!

You could have just texted me, Anita nudges.

I lost your number, Maya fibs. And then there was...

She hesitates.

And then I didn't really know... I didn't super know where things were. With us.

At the end there.

The air around them goes dry and taut.

Right, Anita says. Right, no. Yeah, no, I lost your number too, to be fair.

--

Do you like that one?

I don't know, there's just something about it, Maya says.

How does it speak to you? There's an eagerness in Anita's voice underneath a flat layer of nonchalance.

Walking into the gallery was like walking into a dream. Anita's paintings are warm and sensuous and alive, excesses of pigment and dramatic strokes swooping over the canvas. Maya feels undressed just looking at them. The piece in question is a watercolor-papier-mâché hybrid of half of a grapefruit. The grapefruit peel is round and bumpy, a warm orange sphere constructed to project out from the canvas, a textured three-dimensional representation she has to restrain herself from reaching out to touch. The fruit on the canvas itself drips suggestively with its own juice, glossy and pink and sticky-looking. Maya imagines licking the grapefruit, feeling it gently explode on her tongue, coating the roof of her mouth. Bittersweet.

Can't you just tell me?

Anita grins. That's cheating, Maya. When she says her name, Maya almost gasps. How intimate it sounds to come from Anita's mouth, like a cold shock to her body. She steps forward, so Anita's shoulder is inches from hers.

It's about the original sin, Anita says. Woman's relationship to temptation. Woman as temptation.

Hmm, not very transgressive.

Sure, but from the female gaze, it becomes transgressive, doesn't it?

Or are you just replicating the same patriarchal bullshit? She raises her eyebrows at Anita. Anyway, where's the apple?

Anita waves her hand. Apples are so cliché, she says. Eve is overdone. My series deals exclusively with the sin of birth. This piece challenges the inherent depravity of conception. She points at the bulbous grapefruit sculpture. See, that's the womb.

What womb?

Really? Check out the curvature. I thought you'd get it. Anita pauses. Given the car-seat in the back of your minivan and such.

Maya bites the inside of her cheek.

You know, Anita says, usually, when I ask new moms about their babies, they can't wait to pull out their phones and show me every single picture they've ever taken of their child. I'm surprised, you know, you haven't even mentioned the kid yet.

I guess I'm just a terrible mother, then.

Okay. Relax, Anita says. A slight smile creeps up on her face. I see time hasn't made you less sensitive.

I'm not sensitive.

You always were so defensive about everything to everyone.

Not with everyone. Just with you. As Maya says this, she realizes that it's true. Something about you, I was always on edge. The way you would look at me, sometimes. Like how you're looking at me right now. She sucks the stale, recirculated air in through her teeth. I know what I am to you. I'm slightly amusing but mostly pathetic.

Oh, come on. That's projecting, now. You're projecting.

Am I?

Anita's eyes soften.

I never thought you were pathetic, Maya.

She lightly presses her long, elegant fingers to Maya's arm in a gesture of reassurance. With the same fingers, she idly sweeps Maya's hair back behind her shoulder.

To be honest, I was actually a little jealous of you sometimes, Anita says. Back then, you were the most captivating person in the room. You're still the smartest person I've ever met—I mean, terrifyingly intelligent. You could completely obliterate someone in a couple of words and not think anything of it at all. It was incredible to watch. So dangerous.

Stop it.

And very attractive.

Enough of that, Maya says. An involuntary grin curves her lips. If anything, I was only trying to impress you. We all were. That smile, and that way you speak—like the person you're talking to is the only one in the room.

Maya might be mistaking it for something else, but she thinks Anita looks a little shy.

They smile at each other, genuine and easy. But then something sticks in Maya's throat. She has the sudden urge to bolt from the gallery and run as far away from Anita as possible. How has her life gotten to this point, where happiness feels like a warning?

I'm not that person anymore, Maya says quickly.

What do you mean?

I mean, I look at you, and you look...

Yeah? How do I look?

Exactly the same, Maya says after a moment. Actually, it's incredible how exactly the same you look. She shakes her head. But I'm not like how I used to be. I got married, you know, I have a daughter. I never went to London or Paris or whatever. I'm not really doing any of the things we promised each other we would do.

Okay. I understand. And would you like me to feel sorry for you, or something?

A brief, hostile silence.

What? Maya asks.

That's what you wanted, Anita says calmly. Right? And now you have it. You got what you always wanted, the husband and the baby and the 401k, and it blows; you're just realizing that now. And you want me to, what? Extend my sympathy?

Maya turns to Anita, whose face is open and glowing, lit up from the multicolored gels of the gallery's lights. Her teeth are showing, but it's more sinister than a smile.

That's not what I meant, Maya says.

No, actually, it is what you meant, and you know that, so don't pretend. Anita releases a puff of air, a dragon's breath of derision. No more pretending, please, Maya. This whole evening, I mean, honestly? Why are you even here with me? Why are you still friends with Charlotte? Why do you go to those parties and hold a wine glass and opine like the scholar you aren't? To feel like you are twenty again and still holding the world in the palm of your hand. To give you the feeling you had when we were together. Tell me I'm wrong. Nuclear family fantasy not working out so well now, yeah?

I can't believe you. Unbelievable. Of course this is about you. You always bring it back to you—

Of course it's about me!

—you've always been self-centered like that, Anita, you always have—

When we were together—

We were never together!

Maya can hear the remainder of the evening clattering to the floor, shattering into pieces. She wraps her coat around herself and strides out.

Anita follows her. They stand huddled in front of the gallery, eyes red and watery from the chill of the twilight air.

Anita takes a shuddering breath. There, see, she says. I thought you'd changed since I last saw you, but it turns out you're exactly the same, too. Even now, you'd rather run away than admit it?

What do you want from me?

For you to tell me what you know is true. Maya, what were we if we weren't part of each other? Anita's eyes are wide like a doe's. Do you remember that, Maya? Time was nothing when I was with you. I didn't notice it at all.

Maya swallows. She wants to throw up. A stream of memories runs behind her eyelids.

You never said anything back then, she says. Anita's eye roll is violent.

No, I didn't, because I was twenty and all airs and affectation and a goddamn idiot! I'm saying it now. I know we were more than what you say we were.

Maya takes a breath. It comes out white and smoky in the cold.

I can't say it, Anita. But not for the reason you think. It hurts me to think about

how happy I was. You have no *idea* how much it hurts to think about you.

You could've stayed happy.

You should understand better than anyone else, Maya says. You know what life is like for people like us.

Anita tilts her head back and laughs. You know what your problem is, Maya? You have an imaginary burden. You're not just an amalgamation of your mother's hopes and dreams.

You're a person if you weren't aware. An actual real live person. You deserve things of your own.

It's so easy for you to say, she shoots back. It's just so easy for you to do, to be an individual, to abandon your family to "be yourself." To just shirk everything. God, I mean, my life is not about me. Don't you get that? Look, what did your mom say when you came out to her?

Anita blinks several times.

Yeah. Exactly. Because you broke her heart. I'm not saying it's right that she did that, but don't you see? You have no roots anymore, Anita. You severed them. I don't know if I could live with myself if I did that. It frightens me.

Anita shakes her head. You kill me, Maya. Her smile—she's always fucking smiling—is rueful and misshapen. Your mother? Why do you beg for the love of a woman who will never give you what you want? That path leads nowhere. Her nose flares. Trust me, I know.

You don't get it—

I get it. I just don't buy it. You're a grown woman. You're not afraid of your mom. What are you really afraid of?

What is she afraid of?

I am afraid, she thinks, that my life will continue to happen to me. Lately, that's how it feels: things just decide to happen to her, and any sense of agency she once had in controlling her own circumstances has fled.

Or maybe I was just horrifically wrong about the whole thing, Anita says. About us.

How to say this? How to say, When we were younger, I used to think about you, and feelings of eagerness and revulsion at the audacity of my own desire would rise up inside me. I had to take deep breaths and push all the air out of my body, as if that would push the idea of you, of me and you, together, out of my head. I couldn't get out of the fantasy. And it wasn't even gloriously embarrassing like I was a princess in a castle or something. It was actually even more humiliating in the desperate nothingness of it. I would imagine my body lining up to yours, being able to feel your heartbeat. That was it. That was all I wanted.

How to say that to a person?

She takes Anita's wrist and pulls her close. Anita places a hand on the back of her neck.

What is this sensation? Maya feels like a live wire. A faint prickle of panic sets the hairs on the back of her neck upright. She can't believe what she's doing. She prays she knows more than she did back then, but she knows in her heart that's not true, and maybe she and Anita are destined to repeat their mistakes. Maybe she will always pull herself back using the strings that have been tied to her. Time is nothing, and time is also a flat circle. But, she thinks, maybe this time, she's smart enough, or selfish enough, to not really care.

AMERICAN GIRLS

BY ELENA HOYT

They are
drive-through strawberry milkshakes
cherry rolling papers
long wheat bran hair grown
on good milk.

They're in cars with boys
in cars with girls
singing.

I imagine them
with ear infections
or holding their pee in on the bus
and even when they're peeing in their pants
and everyone's laughing
they smile big with white teeth
and win.

And in the summer they go
up to the lake
or down to the lake.

They invite me in
to the cabin and lay me down
on the bear rug and feed me marshmallows
and all of their secrets.
I learn how to smell like them
I eat them up.

They have boys
at the lake too.
Inner tubing and drinking and cumming.
Little kings climbing through windows
following the smell like cartoon pie.
They're all like, oh my god I want you.
And at night
we want them back.
We let them eat us.

I am the boys wanting me wanting them.
I am on the bed in fluffy pink swinging my legs
I am climbing through the window
I am laying myself down.

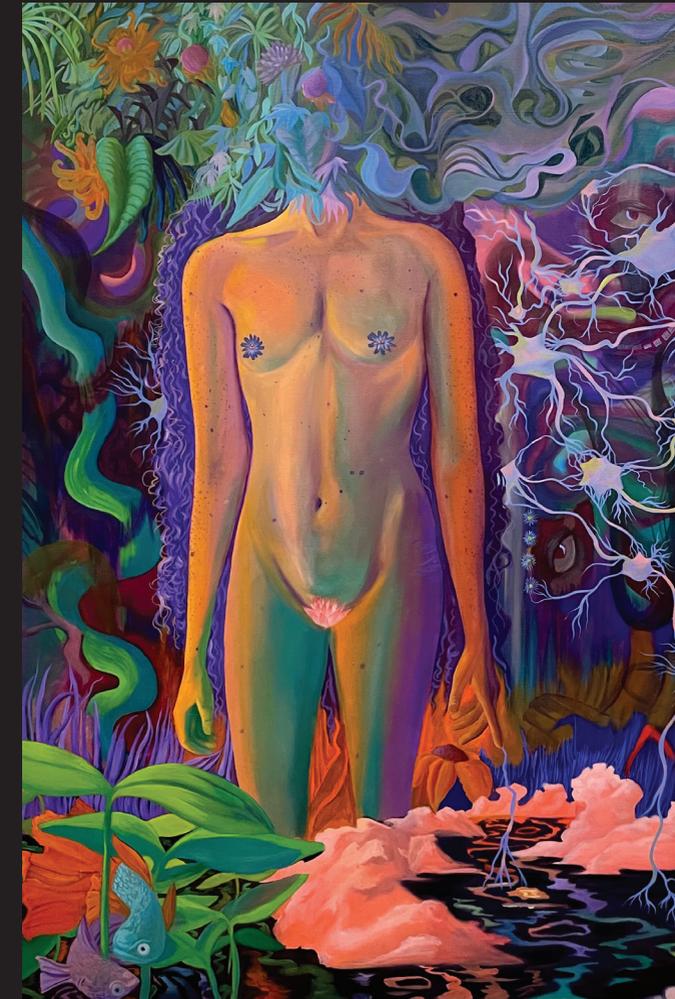
Outside, the ritual.
I hear it inside myself.

They march
with naked feet
glowing orange through the trees
totally hunter-gatherer.
The burning water fills with skinny-dipped bodies
lacrosse bodies, swimmers' bodies
not trying to look
soft anymore.

They think I'm still inside.
They don't know
I'm the lake.

I eat their toes
I lick their skin
green and glittering
all of it.

UNTITLED
EMMA SCALES



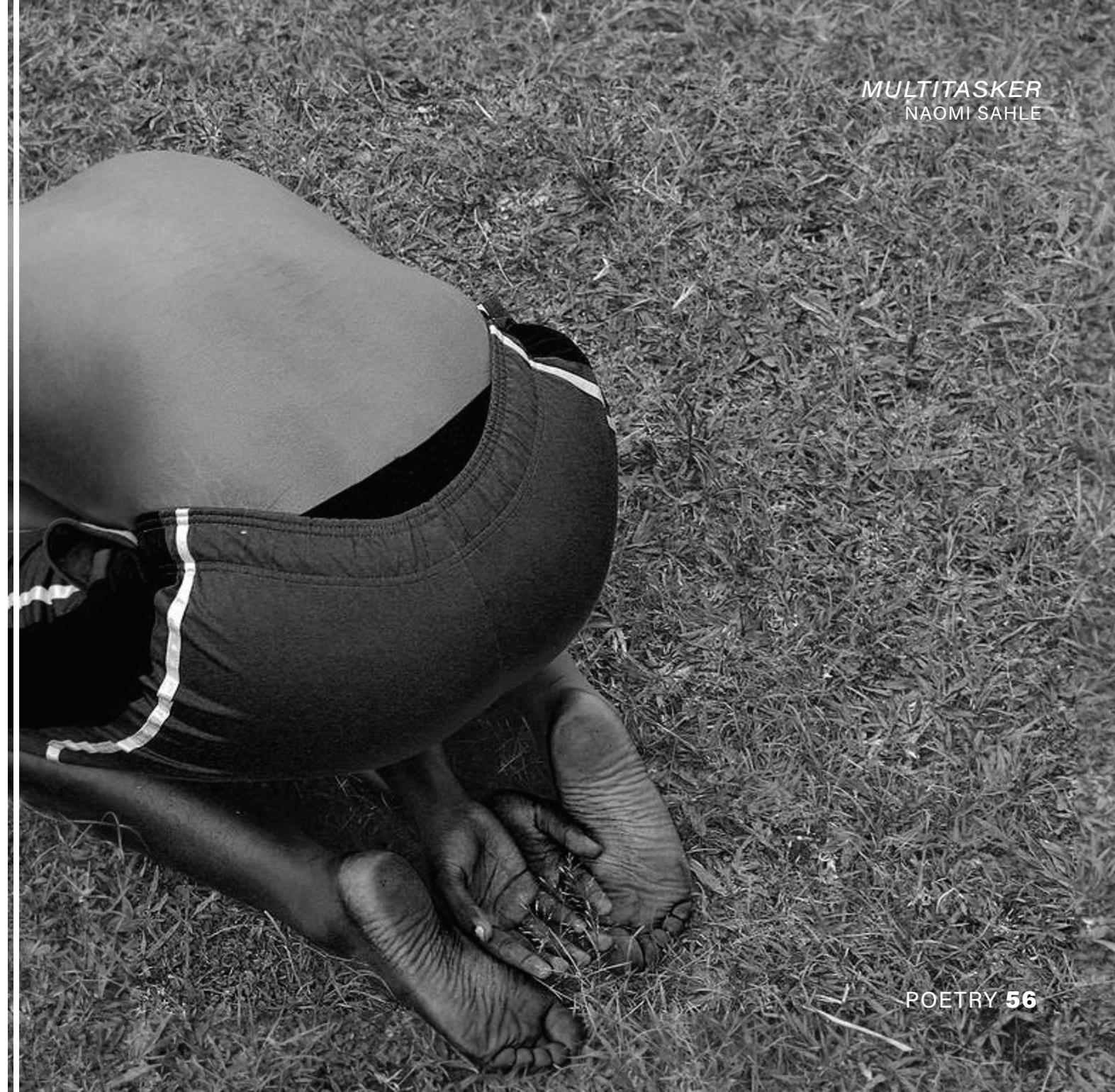
THESE POEMS

BY TAMAZ YOUNG

Every day I wish I could stop
Writing these poems
Poems about being black
About the experience of living black
About the fear of dying black
About the blood of bleeding black

These videos give me so many heart attacks
So much so that sometimes
I don't feel it anymore
I've become desensitized
To the death of black lives
To the point where to be terrorized is normalized

I just want to be a poet
Let me express my feelings
About love, nature, and healing
Yet right now, my feelings have been ripped
Ripped apart so much that I feel nothing
When another black body feels nothing



Trust me, I want to stop writing about blackness
I want my bad emotions to be colorless
But every few months or so
I keep being reminded of what my color is
Reminded it's either feared or wrong to have melanin
Those were the thoughts of my dead brethren

Who were sentenced to death without a courtroom
What if we all got sentenced with bullet wounds
Or knees or arms for that matter
If our different skins' same blood all splattered
But it looks like there's a common factor
In this multiplication of deaths by our officers

Hopefully, you understand it now
I can't help writing about this
But as long as it keeps happening
I'm gone still be throwing my right fist
In this fight for humanity
Because they weren't treated like humans
Not in those videos on the TV screens

How am I supposed to relate to your work
I'm not black, they said
Well sometimes I don't wanna relate to it either
I don't feel like being black today, I responded
Just want everyone to cut me some slack today
I wanna wake up to a world that has my back today
Might just wake up and call myself Jack today

We might as well call it a holiday
Happy "I don't feel like being black" day
I'll spend all my time pushing my blackness away
I guess that will be fine for just one day, okay?

I really do feel comfortable in my skin
I just wish sometimes it didn't depend
On my genetic makeup or my melanin
I just wish I was born into a different sin

Because at least that's what it feels like
Feels like everything is seen wrong when I choose right
Feels like my hearts skips a beat when I'm stereotyped
Feels like I can't escape, especially from the blue lights

Born into this sin, this melanin skin
With no savior for redemption
From the things I cannot change
The things for which I take the blame

I wanna believe it has nothing to do with race
But the simple truth is that it does
Somehow when race has no room or space
It creeps its way in under the world's rugs like bugs

Occasionally my blackness alters the situation
Somehow it reinforces the brokenness of this nation
My melanin makes some feel like their life is threatened
Yet, this weapon can end my own life in seconds

Like I'm always able to commit suicide
Because from myself I truly cannot hide
So, yes, I don't really wanna be black today
Every day I wake up, I feel a way

Like what if I didn't have to get stared at for no reason
What if I didn't have to take the blame or plea bargain
What if I didn't have to think twice for Trayvon Martin
What if I didn't have to be treated as the token
What if I didn't have to be scared of being the next one

The next unarmed black person
The next victim
The next modern day lynched one
The next product of the system
The next citizen in prison

I simply just wanna know what it feels like
To see a cop and my stomach not clench
To walk outside and my neighbors not flinch
To live a life without fighting to stay alive
To be successful without it being a surprise

It's not a matter of wants and needs
It's a matter of respect and equality
That's the true key of being free

So hopefully this is the last one
The last time I'll have to write
One of these poems
Poems about being black
So rest well, Daunte Wright
We all got your back

SANDRA

BY HECTOR CERVANTES

One Sunday morning, as the cold November wind began encroaching over the coast, Sandra took a mighty swing and threw the keys to her apartment far into the depths of the Gulf. The keys broke the water with a distant, satisfying splash.

Already, her mind was drafting what she would say in the ensuing emails and phone calls. Explaining herself. Hi, I'm sorry to cause trouble, and I know this is a terrible time with the holidays around the corner, but I seem to have misplaced my apartment keys. The situation is being resolved; in the meantime, I'm afraid there might be some delays to the completion of the project proposal/scheduling our next doctor's appointment/buying next week's groceries. My sincere apologies for the inconvenience, I appreciate your understanding, feel free to reach out to me with any questions or concerns.

Sandra tugged her coat tight over her arms. The pier boards creaked under her boots as she started, with no purpose discernible to her step, making her way back home. She began to wonder what it would look like once she got there. There was a bench, just across the entrance of the complex, which she could picture herself collapsing into. Her legs would be tired from the walk, her breath raspy and dry, fingers tucked hard into the pockets of her coat.



The people of this city keep their head down. No one looks at anyone, nobody waves, nobody smiles. Hardly seems like they're thinking of anything at all, except of the purpose with which they walk, with which they bike and drive and stand at intersections. Single focus, sharp as a cat's bite. Lonely mornings like these.

The path from the pier stretched for a bitter half-hour walk. The cold front wind blew and blew, picking up dust and discarded chip bags. It blew on Sandra's curly, mangled hair and played the whispers of the passing time in the curves of her ears. Reluctantly, with a breath of resolve, she pulled her phone from her purse and dialed her daughter.

"Hi! You have reached Emilia Sanchez's voicemail. Please leave a message after the beep!"

"Hi," Sandra croaked, "Hi. Hola, hija, it's me. Uh... Hope you're doing well, yeah? For your finals and all? Study hard!"

She approached the highway bridge. Two lamp posts on either side marked the pedestrian's way, their casted light still misty from the morning dew.

"Oye, listen, guess what happened? I was walking to work and I don't know how, but I totally lost my keys! I don't know how, I just looked in my purse and somehow they're gone!" She laughed into the receiver. Cars drove past fast in the lanes down below. "So..."

Her eyes darted. Uncomfortable with the lie, the white lie, uncomfortable with the cold. Uncomfortable with the city, the streets stretching and intertwining like coils, or a nest of snakes, bending, pieces of it folding onto others. Lights and noise bleeding into every other light and noise. Streets and back alleys leading into themselves, recursively placing a curse on her sense of direction.

"So I'm going to go... call the landlord about it right now. I know that they charge a fee and everything but, *ay, hija*, the things that happen to your mother."

There is no need, Emilia had explained some nights ago, for her to come over during her college's holiday break. It would just be more expenses. More travel and stress, more of nothing and more of the same. She will visit during the summer, instead. Right now though, well, they both have their own things going on, and besides—Sandra remembers this part well—and besides, what would be the point?

She switched her phone over to her less-cold hand. "I miss you, Emilia. *Te extraño*. Take care of yourself! Are you going on another trip with your friends? What is it, to New York? Wow! Send me pictures, I wanna see everything! Don't forget!"

The road curved to a close. Buildings gave way to trees, limping and dry for the oncoming winter.

"Okay, I love you!" Sandra said, and put the phone away.

Sidewalk faded into a dirt path that squeezed between the iron fencing. There was the bench, just ahead, in front of the leasing office. A wooden thing, sky blue paint slightly peeling from the backrest. There she let herself fall. Moisture collected where her clothes touched the dew.

She ached. With a groan, eyes shut tight, she tilted her head back and looked up at the falling trees. The hand in her pocket, tapping hesitantly at the phone's screen, knew to make the call to her landlord next. To impose, to be an inconvenience and take up a portion of his time. With tired eyes and the wind wistful at her back, she leaned to the side until her head was against the armrest, and let herself, drifting, fall into a purposeless slumber.



TROUT ROE

BY MATTHEW BAIK

It was a Thursday night,
A bachelor's empty fridge humming in the corner,
and an empty stomach to match.
Remnants of yesterday's meal in the kitchen sink:
Rice.
That's it.
The memories of far too many grains of rice,
bland and white but cheapest in price—

No. No more.

I decided today
I would end my stay
in this food desert I called a home,

So I went to the store.

Rusty carts and rickety aisles,
towered high with unlimited canned potential.
Mountains of produce,
vegetables and fruit juice,
the options were endless.
Finally.
My shopping cart full
I headed to check out.
And then I saw it.

That
Damned
Trout.

Next to live seafood but clearly dead,
its glassy eyes filled with impending dread
seemed to cue,
“I want you.”

As I looked deep back into those clouded pupils,
never before had I felt such moral scruple,

But then something inside me broke like a dam
and feelings rushed out I didn't know that I had,
my vision turned pink, clouded with golden,
a confession I realized I could never hold in—

I was in love.

For the first time in my life, I was in love.

With a trout.

With a “that one” and “thank you” I secured the trout,
bagged right up, up to its snout
and with it I rushed out not bothering to pay,
straight out and through the store's front doorway.
For love, I have learned, has not limits,
and nothing would stop me from kissing these fish lips.

Over the next week
our relationship would grow,
into theaters we'd sneak,
to dates we would go,

And there was no need to take it slow.



Our relationship so passionate,
a fish so compassionate,

All my life I wouldn't have thought
that the woman of my dreams could simply be bought
from the seafood section of a grocery store,
next to the filleted corpses of her farm-raised varieties.

Who would have thought that my love was so fishy,
our mutual feelings were often so squishy,
we would prod and poke at each other's hearts
and could never stand to be more than six feet apart.
Until one day she lent to my ear,
the words "I'm pregnant" was all that I'd hear.

I was about to be a father.

The news just left me feeling hypnotic,
where would I be had my life not turned aquatic,
with a bloom of pride,
I made her my bride.

Three weeks later, the kids were squeezed out,
equally human as equally trout,

over eight hundred of human fish hybrids,
“reverse merpeople” I likened to call them.
For instead of a torso with arms and a head,
and a fish tail replacing two feet and a leg,
the children that had been born to my wish,
instead had two legs and the body of fish.
And they trotted around with fins for arms,
and great glassy eyes as big as their mom’s.
Never a sight could I have greater beheld,
to raise them all, I had felt compelled.

But the money was short.
I could not support.

After months of struggle,
family and job I would juggle,

Our marriage began to fall apart.

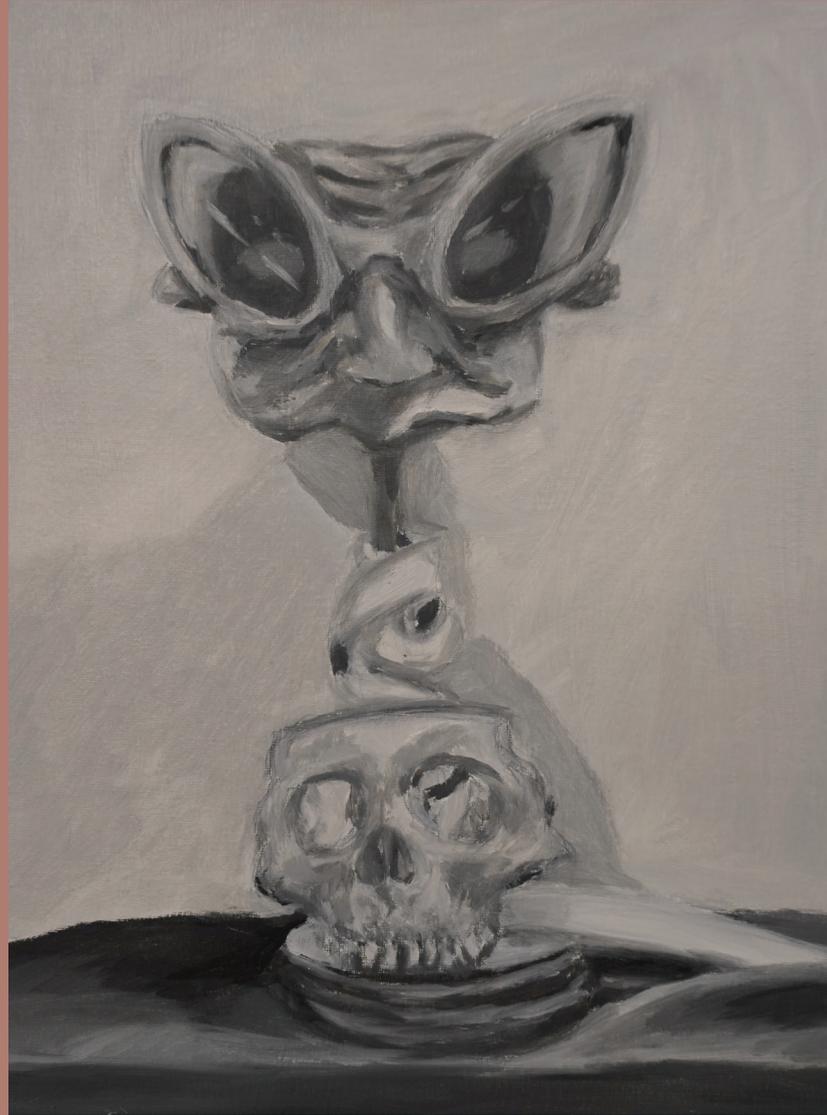
It was slight at first, an argument or two,
disagreements were rife, conflicts all grew.

And then one day,
she called for divorce.

The lawyers were called,
tears were bawled,

And after that pivotal judge decision
the once-love of my life was given provision
of the kids.
She got custody.

And just like that,
the thousands I loved,
away they were shoved,
and once again, I was alone.
Eating rice.
Bland rice.



TEETH

BY HARSHITHA PELAPROLU

I had all 32 teeth when I woke up this morning but
now you've asked me for comfort and
they're falling out.

I want to tell you that things get better but my teeth
are falling out.

I want to pick them up and put them in the little containers
that my mom used to put my baby teeth in
but I don't want you to notice.

I want to be able to form a coherent sentence
and I want you to think that I can.

Your teeth are still in your mouth
but your heart has since abandoned you;
it crawled out of your throat like an
eel desperate for release,
and it slipped between your fingers
when you tried to catch it.

BESIDE THE CHRYSANTHEMUM

BY SEO JEONG-JU

TRANSLATED FROM THE KOREAN BY CATHERINE HETTLER

To bloom a single Chrysanthemum flower
The owl, since spring
Must have cried so

To bloom a single Chrysanthemum flower
Thunder, from within the dark clouds
Also must have cried so

Dear flower, who looks like my elder sister
Whose longing and wistful heart had tightened,
Who, from the far far alleyway of youth
Has now returned to stand before a mirror

It seems that for your yellow petals to blossom
Last night such wet frost had descended
And to me, even sleep did not come

About the poet: Seo Jeong-Ju (1915-2000), who wrote under the pen name Midang (meaning 'not yet fully grown') is considered one of the most notable twentieth-century Korean poets and has been nominated five times for the Nobel Prize in Literature. His works are widely known and often studied in Korean schools. Seo worked as both a teacher and professor for much of his life. After his death, the Midang Literary House was opened—where the Midang Literary Prize is presented during the chrysanthemum season – a reference to and commemoration of his best-known poem, "Beside the Chrysanthemum." By using an external image from nature as a mirror to the far more personal matters of the self, the poem exemplifies a powerful naturalistic tendency common in traditional Korean poetry.





THE FAMILY IN THE DRESSER

BY VIVIAN PHILLIPS

When RD visited the Southern Methodist Hospital for the last time, he told my mother that he hoped he would die. A week before, he told her and my uncle that a family was living in his dresser drawer and moving the furniture in his room around at night.

The dresser drawers in RD's room had been there since he and my grandmother, Poppy, married. RD had proposed in the first week of knowing her, with a diamond wedding ring that he kept on his pinky finger. The year my mother was born he replaced this ring with a bigger one. Their home quickly became the heart of the family—Poppy hosted Christmas parties annually, with one of her greatest joys being to entertain guests. Though she played no role in its construction, Poppy worked to build the image of the house; manicured and full of life—continuously being refurbished. At the age of 37, Poppy reupholstered the living room couch to match the Moroccan rug underneath it. At the age of 38, she died.

The day that Poppy died, the home she created died with her. For the next forty-three years RD left Terrell untouched, apart from items that he brought in from garage sales. The couch's new velvet upholstery became crunchy from lack of use. A film of dust coated the cast iron chairs in the den. Items from garage sales littered the once immaculate rooms, and the house, frozen in time, became a wasteland of other people's objects and memories. RD's backyard looked like a landfill, with piles of metal scraps and furniture that he found on the side of the road propped up to form a wall of junk. Sometimes he would share his treasures with us, occasionally driving over to give me antique dollhouse furniture that he wrapped up in old newspaper. He stopped doing this when I grew out of dolls by the age of twelve but started again two years later. That was the year we had to take away his driver's license.

As RD's body and mind deteriorated, so did the bones of his house. Deep, wide cracks developed in the exterior's white stucco walls. The tile floor looked as if it had been weathered despite being inside. In the far-right corner of the house, Little Baby, a rat terrier that RD adopted and named in his late seventies, lived in the kitchen. The tile absorbed the smell of her piss over the years, and the house's stench doubled after RD had to start using a colostomy bag. Both unable to control even their basic bodily functions, perhaps RD wanted to remember what it was like to take care of something vulnerable, as the children he raised took care of him. Like a toddler tending to a doll, he poured kibble into Little Baby's food bowl every night while waiting for the dinner we brought him to heat up in the microwave.

In the hospital, R.D. lulled into a sleep adjacent to death. We were told that he only had a few days left to live and that we needed to pick where we thought he would prefer to die. My mother chose his house instead of the hospital and two nurses wheeled his bed towards an ambulance. He woke up a few hours later in one of Terrell's guest bedrooms. Promptly, he fell back asleep.

In this room there were no walls, only mirrors. When I walked in to visit, I could see him from three different angles. His face, his side profile, and the back of his head. RD almost seemed at peace when I stood in the doorway and looked at the reflection of his face. More at peace than he did when I came up close to kiss him on the cheek. His skin was damp, as if it was sweaty, though he had not moved all day. Like a statue in the courtyard, his expression was stoic; yet unlike the crumbling marble figures visible through the window near his bed, RD was deteriorating in a way unique to human flesh.

I pulled away from his cheek and wiped the moisture off my lips. A person dying a slow death does not seem to be at peace but rather to be waiting in anticipation.

For the next few weeks RD did not complain about the family in his dresser. My mother and I were at his house most hours of the day doing laundry and sorting his clothes into donation piles. He was still alive long past the doctor's expectations. Cards piled up from extended family members and friends expressing their gratitude for RD's recovery. I stacked them all on the wooden table where he ate the same breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day. Old age seems to be regarded as a blessing only by the elderly's loved ones—as if the continuation of life, regardless of its quality, is the only thing capable of keeping grief's inevitability at bay.

I hadn't regularly spent time with RD until that year. With no memories or anecdotes left to share, the only clues that I had into his personality were ticks and habits. With only a few days to live, RD was predominantly concerned with remembering to leave his leftovers outside for the neighborhood cats. Every day after lunch he would feebly stand up from the table with a plate of scraps. Every day he asked me if I thought the cats might be sitting outside the window waiting for him.

One day after lunch, I asked him how he was doing.

"I'm old," he said.



My mother and I continued to sort RD's things into piles. After we finished with his closet, we moved on to the living room. All of the items he had collected over the years—a wooden statue of Saint Paul, a porcelain washing basin, dishes and paintings and rugs—we sold. From there we began to weed through the many appliances in the kitchen. Little Baby twirled around us in circles while we took RD's broken microwave, mended with tinfoil, into the alley.

One afternoon, sick of being confined to the guest room, RD asked us to take him on a walk through the house. We helped him out of his bed, and watched our reflections guide him past the wooden table and out into the corridor. RD tried to open the door to the living room but couldn't. My mother opened it for him, and we walked in one by one. His cane hit the tile floor and echoed.

RD seemed to be seeing every room that we walked through for the first time. He looked in bewilderment at the ring of dust left on the dining room table by a vase that we sold. It was no longer there, and neither was the woman (what was her name again?) who picked it out.

When we helped RD back into bed, he didn't remember our faces.

He told us to please be quiet when we crawled back into the dresser.

THESE ARE THE WAYS WE RE- MEMBER

BY ANNA RAJAGOPRAL

an old white woman wearing yesterday's makeup like a second skin
accused me
of "messing with" the drink she left in a dirty bathroom stall at a shell gas station in rural texas.
i said, "no, ma'am, i did not".

she said, "i don't know if i trust you".
and then she staggered back to playing the slot machine at the entrance of the station,
which doubled as a greyhound bus stop.

a rack of shirts reading,
"don't mess with texas"
stood across from a molding plate of bananas selling for 75 cents each.
i don't think that's much of a bargain.

the smell of stale cigarette smoke is so familiar,
and gas stations in rural texas are so close to feeling like home.

these are the ways we remember

83

MOVING ON
AMBER WANG



POETRY 84

“MENS RESTROOMS
4 STALL’S
5 URINALS”

a misplaced apostrophe
makes me feel displaced.

the only indian at a rural texas gas station,
is the one who sits behind the counter.

“NICE CORPSE” is written in sharpie ink underneath the word
“JESUS”
on the toilet dispenser.

a Whataburger Large that smells vaguely of alcohol sits on top of all of these words.

i can’t remember if i messed with her drink.

the way her eyes narrowed as they scanned my body make me doubt myself.

i think i messed with her drink.

these are the ways we remember

a fish carcass,
splayed out in the road,
decorates the highway in front of the gas station.
her scales scatter like stars on the black pavement.
there’s a hole where her eye used to be
and her mouth is permanently open, as if she was in the middle of speaking when she died.

little debbie’s honey buns and sweet oatmeal creme pies,
staples of a childhood spent in dallas,
decorate the shelves of the gas station.
they are scattered throughout the store, you can’t leave without buying one.
little debbie’s smiling face looks back at me
her mouth permanently open, as if she was in the middle of speaking when they told her to smile.

these are the ways we remember

THE TRAIN

BY JOSE CORAZON DE JESUS

TRANSLATED FROM THE TAGALOG BY NICOLE GENEVIEVE LHUILLIER

Like a snake emerging
from the station that is its burrow,
the tentacles and fins, of pure iron, copper, lead,
the scales – come close to the open windows.

The rail on which it roams
lies stretching out on the path,
its open mouth smoking as it chugs and rattles,
coming from Tutuban and heading toward Dagupan.

Oh, if night meets it
the eyes catch fire,
you can hear the wail of the whistle even from afar
and the train hauls its freight cars, attached behind.

The machine does not tire,
there are bars on the wheels,
steaming, sprinting, the whistle singing,
its chimes always clanging.

“When will you return?”
“On Tuesday afternoon.”
And the train already carried the journeyed love away,
in the small window, there is a handkerchief, and there is someone left
crying.

Jose Corazon de Jesus (1894-1932) was a Filipino poet and lyricist. He grew up in Pampanga, Philippines and began writing poems at 17. He produced about 4,000 poems for a Manila newspaper and gained renown for winning a balagtasán, a Filipino debate done in verse. His works are often patriotic and express the Filipinos' desire for independence during the American occupation of the Philippines.



CRAFTED BY THE HANDS OF GOD

BY VIVIAN PHILLIPS

Mama takes my hands in hers and runs her wrinkled thumbs over my dimpled skin. Pale and plump and small, my hands are little and so am I. Like she's telling me a secret, Mama leans in and says that my hands look pure because I am too.

In Sunday school I sit on a circular rug and I am taught not to worry about hell until I'm old enough to be held accountable for my sins. During the service our preacher tells my Mama to be more like me.

"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

I look down at my hands that are clasped in prayer and thank God for my flat chest, my sexless body, my smooth and hairless skin. Afterwards, Mama takes me to swimming lessons at the public pool and I want to cry because the naked women in the locker room have bushes of hair in between their legs. I take Mama's hand and squish the veins that run in between her knuckles like long, skinny water balloons.

ANATOMICAL
TAYLOR ZHANG



Mama's legs have veins too, ones that run bright blue and explode into spiderwebs on the back of her calves and thighs. She wears a skirt over her swimsuit to hide them because they remind her of the way her own mother died—36 years old in the Methodist Hospital, after a varicose vein ruptured in her leg. Mama tells you to never wish death upon anyone. Standing by the side of the pool, Mama watches you learn how to do the breast-stroke. She wasn't much older than your swim instructor when she came home from college to attend the funeral. A week later, Mama found a voodoo doll in her bedside that she stabbed with a pin after one of their fights.

“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.”

I don't wish death upon anyone until two days after I get my period. I am in the fourth grade and I pray to God each night for him to stop my breasts from growing. My armpits are thick with hair, and my legs have been swallowed by claw-like marks on my upper thighs—gaping and bright purplish-red. Blood runs down my arms after I shave and drips down my purple scars only to be washed down the drain with my purity. Blood runs down my legs as my organs clench inside me and punish me for not being hairless anymore. Mama takes me to the neighborhood beauty-shop to buy pads and an old man getting his hair cut looks at me with his eyes drawn like curtains. Like he can smell my womanhood, he asks me to give him a lap dance.

“All things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

I stoop over my garments and watch the water that streams from my sink turn rusty brown. I scrub the whites of my underwear but can't seem to get the blood out of its stitches. Mama told me once that she talked to me when I was a fetus and instructed me to come out head first so she wouldn't have to get a c-section. Women's bodies are ruined by c-sections, she told me. My cousin had to get one just last week. I wonder how bloody the threads holding her stomach together are.

“Precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.”

I am too scared to use a tampon, so I pull plastic off the adhesive of a pad. I heard once that inserting a tampon inside me could corrupt my virginity. Mama tells me I should be grateful for the blood because it means I can have a child one day. A child who will be loved by Jesus until the day it grows body hair. A child who will learn how to do the breast-stroke while they're buoyant and small, only to drown in shame when their body is scarred by its own development.

“Thou shalt not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness.”

Mama tells me that my body hair has grown to protect my privates. That my fat is stored to nourish me. I walk by the beauty shop for the first time since I started my period a year ago and stare. Outside, a barber's pole twirls red white and blue almost hypnotically. I wear my pubic hair and body rolls like an armor made of arsenic.

I never gave the old man a lap dance, but I could see in his eyes that he imagined I did.

hid•den cur*•ic•u•lum

BY SOPHIA PENG

The hidden curriculum refers to the unwritten, unofficial lessons, values, and perspectives that shape student success in school. Immigrant and first-gen students tend to have less exposure to hidden cultural and behavioral expectations within American academia. - Glossary of Ed. Reform

FOLLOW me w*ich is to say,

i WIL* be•com

a le*m•ed bea•con.

so i go

my shad•oh

ec•lips•ing itself under the camp•us

lam*•posts.

—
hum•id•i•Tee MAKES it hard to bre*th...

or so i tel* myself.

w*ich is to say,

i pump my l•ungs ful* befor* w•a*•king into clas*

only what ENTERS is water.

Subject: ~~[No subject]~~ yet

DEAR pro•fe**sir;

My name is I am a student in your won•der•ing w*at to do if the a*•sign•ment du* tomorrow
can be exte
has a hard dead•line. I am strug*•ling to get it and need would like more time, ~~(if that is ok)~~. if
that is okay.

~~Sorry.~~ Thank You.

—
“...just something as simple as, like, ‘command F.’ like, no one tells you two keys can cut your
research time in half it’s actually crazy...”

—
a LAPTOP is not a book is not a car.
there is no shur•e•Tee in my hands.

so there is this so
i can•*ot see
be•hind any of their eyes.

so i shut mine of glas* to
keep from BREAKING.

w*ich is to say,
maybe i’m not this maybe i’m not a world b*ilt of par•a•grafs paragraphs.
ar* there stil* words that don’t

wa*k thr*u** me?

—
i wa*k the Inner Loop at night.
lamp•li**t blea•ches the BLACK trees
bronz*.

w*ich is to say,
the world is stil* BEAUTIFUL. it is just...

oil•i•er

now.

and i am
water.

BREAKFAST

BY JACQUES PRÉVERT

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY GRACE STEWART

He put the coffee
In the mug
He put the milk
In the mug of coffee
He put the sugar
In the coffee with the milk
With the little spoon
He stirred
He drank the coffee with milk
And he returned the mug
Without speaking to me

He lit
A cigarette
He made circles
With the smoke
He put the ashes
In the ashtray
Without speaking to me
Without looking at me

About the poet: Jacques Prévert was born in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, in 1900. Prévert is a member of Rue du Château, a group of Surrealist painters and poets. His experience serving in WWI led him to support the French Popular Front and to create poetry and other written works in support of left-wing French causes. His poetry is concise yet provocative; he is famous for his word choice, which captures emotion briefly yet powerfully. Many of his works are taught in French and American schools, and his poems are favorites of francophiles worldwide.

He stood up
He put
His hat on his head
He put on his raincoat
Because it was raining
And he left
In the rain
Without a word
Without looking at me
And me, I put
My head in my hand
And I cried.

JEBENA
MIGNOTE TADESSE



COFFEE WAS NEVER THE ENDS

BY JACOB TATE

Hannah* says she's always wondered what it's like to be punched in the face. I want to tell her that I saw her in a dream the night before we met. Instead, I tell her that I've been punched in a lot of places but never the face. I've taken a few soccer balls head on though. She makes a face. Aren't you supposed to hit the soccer ball with your head?

I watch the cigarette butts melt into the ceramic ashtray under one of Antidote's shriveled umbrellas. I'm sorry, I say. I didn't realize it'd be so hot when I picked this place. I think that's a lie. Hannah says it's okay. She takes off her glasses and ties her pony tail up.

Silence falls. Her iced coffee sloshes. Steam comes off my cup. I amateurishly grip my nameless concoction. I shouldn't have ad libbed answers to the barista's questions. Now I'm burning my tongue. I tell myself I don't mind the price of admission.

My tongue aches now. I've downed my coffee before Hannah's even had a third of hers. I take an egregious number of fake sips out of the cup. The fake sips become a bad habit over the winter. I invite different people to this same place to make the same mistakes. But every time the drink changes.

A year later, I don't dream of Hannah anymore. We huddle inside Antidote and trade anecdotes. The conversation lulls and I pick at my pastry. We both jump when Jessie** says hi. It's been a while. Jessie doesn't tell us she won't go back to NYU in January. I don't tell her that I'd be at NYU if my parents were rich lawyers like hers.

COFFEE OUT OF
THIS WORLD
SYED MURTAZA ALI KAZMI



Once Jessie leaves, Hannah asks me if things are good with Angela***. I say it's hard. I don't realize that isn't an answer.

If I tell Angela she doesn't have to drink coffee she'll say she doesn't have to do a lot of things. But she still does them, doesn't she?

Now that she's at a New England university, she's learning how to be. Coffee we both know she doesn't care for fills her Hydro Flask while I walk her to class through the snow. She changes directions abruptly. The sheets of snow make all the buildings look the same.

In my head, the conversation we're not having continues. In my head, she's almost arguing. You don't understand it, she'd say. When rich white people look at you, she'd continue, they think you're one of them. I have to fucking prove it. Anyways, it's just coffee, mi amor, why do you care? I cared in suburban Boston because I needed to be good at making up these conversations. A few hundred miles gives you the pressure to invent a reality you can't observe. There's enough wish-you-were-here in the text history to justify these Mad Libs.

Well, now I am here and we don't talk on the way to class. She's in a rush and I'm a prop. More accurately, I'm a justification, justifying all the hours of her freshman year spent talking to a screen. But that's just a justification for a high school relationship full of promise and promises that has crumbled into one promise: keep going. And here I am judging her for coffee.

I play SimCity (2000) while she's in Portuguese class. Years pass in minutes and abandoned factories fill again. The futuristic arcologies blast off in the 2051 exodus. I've made something, at least until a Mac update wipes out 32-bit support in a year.

Still, when she walks out of her class I open LinkedIn in preparation for the cursory "what's up?".

Coming out the door, she doesn't ask me anything. She introduces me to her friends, all carrying mostly full Starbucks cups. Her poise says I told you so even though she hasn't told me anything.

Jessie is one of four people I've touched in the last two weeks. It's an easy drive to her Montrose apartment. It's only a few blocks off my old bus route and my Camry's the only car on the road anyways. There are closer spots but I still park around the corner. Despite the fact that I never see anyone outside, I fumble to put on my only cloth mask.

She opens the door holding a moka pot. I start to mouth an apology for how late I have to come but realize we're not here to talk about that. She offers me a cup of a brew that she stole from the place she worked at before the close. I tell her I don't really like coffee and she asks how I manage. I perform a practiced shrug. Lots of people ask me that, I say.

When she sets aside her mug on a bedside table, we explore the novelty of nearness. CDC prohibited touches. Basking in the afterglow, she explains her mermaid tattoo unprompted while Fiona Apple plays in the background.

I almost fell asleep the second night I spent in her bed. Jessie halfheartedly shook me awake. If you want to not spend the night, she says, you might want to take me up on the coffee. In a month, she'll ask me on a date. Nevermind that there's no coffee shop to take you to, she adds. I'll tell her no and she'll act cool with that but we talk and fuck less and less and neither of us can tell whose fault that is. She finds a boy to date with my same name. I text her that I'm happy for her but I feel like she doesn't want me to be.

If I'm going to sell my soul to the corporate machine, I might as well enjoy the gizmos on the gears. Cafe vanilla, espresso, mocha, all on the touch screen. I peruse the mug rack like the choice between green and navy matters. I always pick green, click some arbitrary coffee option, and fill my water bottle in the sink while the machine concocts my perfectly ratioed drink. I carefully walk back to my window seat. Every day I'm afraid the coffee will spill. It never does.

I learn to love a good latte, some syrup cutting the beans like Karo cuts syrup. I realize a month in that I can make iced drinks by pouring the hot coffee into a water bottle filled with ice. But I only do it early in the day, checking over my shoulder. The only thing more ungrateful than taking what you are offered is to even slightly imply that said offer could be improved. Here we all are to drink the same hypothetical coffee.

In my last week, I wait for coffee behind a man I've never met. He lingers while I get a cappuccino.

“PRETTY SHIT COFFEE,
ISN'T IT?”

I shrug. He was running late, couldn't stop at his usual place. But this'll do. He doesn't tell me what his usual place is and I consider telling him that this kitchen is my usual place. But he walks out the door while still talking.

I steal a wine bottle out of the cooler on my last day of work. One last middle finger, telling them that they don't own me. They probably don't even notice it's missing when I kiss it away the night I leave the city. The next morning I get to Houston and I make myself a cup of coffee for the first time. It's pretty shit coffee.

She asks me what I like in my coffee. I frown. I drink cafeteria coffee most mornings but that doesn't require thought. Maybe you can just make another of what you're getting, I offer. She nods and disappears behind the bar. In a few minutes, she brings out two mugs. It's a nameless concoction but it tastes like lavender and cinnamon. I hope my eyes are sparkling.

In a few weeks, I scrunch my face up after taking a sip of my drink. She leans on my shoulder and asks what's up. I hesitate. Then I tell her that today's flavor isn't for me. Okay, she says. Let me go make you the drink you like. I wonder how she knows what drink I like when I don't even know myself. If I ask, maybe she'd say that she noticed how long it takes me to drink it. That I savor it. When she comes back with a navy mug, I ask. She says I told her a week ago that I loved it. It's simple.

Even when she's not working, I spend a lot of time at the coffeehouse. I wave at acquaintances over the laptop where I either play Pokemon or apply to jobs. My friends walk over, lid over their coffee, and vent life updates. Sometimes I talk to them through foggy glasses. Other times there isn't even a cup on my table.

Yesterday I was at the coffeehouse when she asked if I could come over. I held her all night even though I'd just finished a latte. She'd gotten hit so hard in the head by her friend's car door that it must have felt like being punched in the face.

THE OTHER TIGER

BY JORGE LUIS BORGES

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY WINSTON WARE

I think of a tiger. The gloom glorifies
The vast laborious Library
And seems to isolate its shelves;
Strong, innocent, bloodstained, and spry,
He will prowl through his jungle and his morning
And trace his paws in the slimy
Bank of a river whose name he ignores
(In his world, there are no names nor past
Nor future, only the absolute moment.)
And he will bridge the barbaric distances
And detect in the twisted labyrinth
Of scents the scent of dawn
And the delectable scent of deer;
Among the stripes of bamboo I discern
His stripes and I stroke the skeleton
Beneath his splendid vibrating skin.
In vain intrude the swollen
Seas and deserts of the planet;
From this house in a faraway harbor
Of South America, I follow you and dream,
Oh tiger at the edge of the Ganges.

The afternoon suffuses my soul and I reflect
That the tiger evoked by my words
Is a tiger of symbols and shadows,
A series of literary tropes
Of memories from encyclopedias
And not the fatal tiger, the fateful jewel
That, under the sun or the multifarious moon,
Ambles in Sumatra or Bengal
His routine of love, of languor, of death.
I've contrasted the tiger of symbols from
The real one, the hot-blooded one,
The one that slaughters the herd of buffalo
And today, on the 3rd of August, '59,
Lingers, lolls in the shade of the meadow,
Yet the act of naming him
And imagining his circumstance
Crafts a fiction of art and no creature like him
Lives among those that roam the earth.

We'll look for a third tiger. This one
Will be, like the others, a figment
Of my dream, an arrangement of human
Words, and not the tiger of flesh
That, beyond all mythologies,
Treads ground. I know this well, yet something
Imposes this indefinite adventure on me,
Absurd and ancient, and I carry on
Seeking through the afternoon weather
The other tiger, the one not in the poem.

About
the poet: Jorge Luis
Borges (1899-1986) was an Argentinian writer, essayist, poet, and translator. Primarily known for his surrealist short fiction, he was raised in Switzerland where he became fluent in French, German, and English. He was an avid proponent of translation, especially of poetry, and his very first publication at only 9 years of age was a translation of Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* into Spanish. Illusion, time, infinity, mirrors, labyrinths are themes that spiral and refract throughout all of his work. Some of his most famous works include "The Library of Babel", "The Garden of Forking Paths", and "Pierre Menard - Author of the Quixote".

THE BABY OF THE ISLAND HOUSE

BY HYUN-WOO CHOI

TRANSLATED FROM THE KOREAN BY CATHERINE HETTLER

Do not cry as you watch the house alone,
Dear child who has wet their bare feet looking outside on tiptoes
Who linked pinkies with the daytime moon
And promised the night not to come—
Dear child who, while briefly dreaming
The far horizon spread and shut
And you couldn't help but close your two eyes thinly—
Dear child who, while crouched and touching your toes
Upon your shoulder a seagull rests and leaves
And on the cold window blown with hot breath
You warm yourself by rubbing your frozen cheek—
And so upon whose face twilight have thus been smeared,
Dear eternal evening of the sleeping child

O sea, sea
Do not sing lullabies to the child whose bedtime is yet to come
For the mother picking oysters in the shade,
In her hurried sprint along the sandy path,
Will fall

DAYDREAMING
AMBER WANG

About the poet: Born in 1989, contemporary South Korean poet Choi Hyun-Woo has published two poetry collections: *Why Do People Come to Live a Weather That Cannot Be Touched* (2020) and *Though My Beauty and Your Beauty May Be Different* (2021). Choi is often praised for the delicate navigation of sadness in his writing, as well as his tendency to deliver soft joy and reassurance to his readers. His poem "The Baby of the Island House" references a classic Korean lullaby and poem of identical title, written by Han In-Yeon in the 1950s. Choi's poem puts a heartbreaking twist on the original poem by pairing the lullaby with allusions to the sinking of the Sewol Ferry in 2014 – an incident that claimed the lives of hundreds of high school students traveling on a school trip. This poem was published as a part of a collection of poems in remembrance of the incident.

HOW DO WE MOVE ON
AVA JOHNSON

THE GHOST OF CANTON

BY JACKIE WU

There was so much I could have written about you: the permanent fragrance of rice porridge, jook, in your kitchen, the way you never lost an arm wrestle, even when your bone looked thin enough to snap from the weight of my gaze, or the bamboo mat that you claimed “was good for your back” when we slept, our feet at opposite ends of the queen-sized bed we used to share. But I decided to write a ghost story.

You raised me with ghost stories, Po-po – stories that you inherited from your mother, stories that you discovered from strangers, and stories that you experienced yourself. My favorite ghost story was the one you’d tell me in the car on the way to Chinese school. You would sit strapped in the passenger seat, occasionally turning to me in the backseat as if your gnarled facial expressions would add more haunting to the story. You said that when you first came to America in 1985, you moved into a dilapidated apartment that was smaller than half the size of the government-funded house you live in now. When you’d fall asleep, you’d hear music playing above you. Your landlord admitted that no one lived upstairs, but a group of musicians had been shot dead there a few years ago. From then on, you slept with earbuds in, too afraid to fall asleep to the ghosts of a mariachi band.

I believed you, Po-po, and I hung onto every word you said like a prayer. Even now, I believe you. But recently, Po-po, I found testimony for your stories that is stronger than just a child's faith in her grandmother.

I started my freshman year studying computer science. Entering my second year, I made the sudden switch to creative writing. I felt ashamed when I told you – my grandmother who came to Ohio with only a dime to her name. You laughed and shook your head, “Yau seun sam.” Have confidence, you said, which will forever be my favorite Cantonese phrase of yours. You were steadfast like an anchor holding me down to this world, even when you received the diagnosis for throat cancer a year ago. I traded my time between Houston and New Jersey, where I moved back to live with my parents; I had lived with you in a medium-sized Ohio suburb for most of my life, but now, I only saw you through tenuous connections of WeChat calls. When I called you every Sunday in college, I never remembered that you spent weekends in the local hospital, that your throat tangled Cantonese words with mucus, that you were now eighty-six years old and telling me how you always looked forward to my calls.

I saw him for the first time when he showed up at my college dorm room in the last week of August. I was staring at my blank laptop screen, my fingers ghosting over my keyboard in some pale attempt at my English homework, when I heard a knock on the door.

He was silent when I opened the door. He stood only a few inches taller than my 5-foot 3-inch figure, and although his frame was very slim, he gave the impression of taking up the entire space of the doorway. His face was young – younger than mine – though I discovered later that he was two years older than me. I would have thought that he was another university student on my floor, but water dripped down his jet-black hair and his face as if he had just emerged from a swimming pool. His white shirt, which appeared one or two sizes too large for him, stuck to his body like a second skin. I could see shadows of a stomach

that seemed too awkwardly large and swollen for his thinness. His skin seemed to be drained of color, and it was even paler in the hue of my room's sterile light.

The next second, as I blinked, the man in front of me disappeared. I lunged forward, catching air and droplets of water. A puddle formed where he had stood, drenching my socks and my roommate Taya's rug.

It was a Saturday night, not Sunday. I knew that you were sleeping in a hospital bed, but I needed to call you immediately.

You answered after almost two minutes of the phone ringing. Lethargy painted your voice as you murmured quietly, breathing alongside my frantic recollection of the boy. “No, that's my brother. Your Kao-gong, your great-uncle. He drowned many years ago,” you said, pausing. The tone of your voice tilted upward, like your mind was far away from your voice. I wanted to reach through the screen and pull you back toward me. “He'll want to tell you his story. Make sure you listen, okay?”

He came to me a few hours after I ended the call with you. Two slow thuds knocked at the door, and I knew it to be him. I stood from my chair, hesitating. Perspiration kissed my temple, and my breath seemed to be held captive in the back of my throat. I closed my eyes and remembered how you prepared me.

When I opened the door, I quickly glanced downward, bowing my head down in respect. “Kao-gong,” I said, greeting him. After a few seconds of stillness, I stood up and looked at him.

Your brother, my Kao-gong, must have been handsome before he died. His stare was confident and unwavering, and I felt a soft anger in the back of his eyes. His most startling feature was you, or rather you in him – his sharp jaw much like yours when you'd yell at me to wake up for school, his loose posture the same way you'd dance across the kitchen with me as we'd cook noodles for breakfast. In an instant, I knew that I could trust him.

He came into my room, dripping water onto the carpet. I handed him a towel, but he shook his head.

“No need,” he said in fluent Cantonese. His voice slipped into the silence, cracked like something had broken him.

I didn’t want to tell him that his drenched body was ruining my carpet. “Why are you here?” I asked, which might have been a foolish question. My Cantonese came out twisted and American. I threw the towel next to his feet, watching the cloth absorb the liquid on the floor.

“Your Po-po told you about me,” Kao-gong replied, “You’re my blood. Our future.”

“How are you here?” I whispered. You told me that he was your brother, but he looked my age, more my peer than ancestor. More my brother than yours.

He didn’t speak much that day. Instead, he leaned forward and touched his damp palms to my cheeks, the coolness of his skin raising bumps on my arms. And just as suddenly as he appeared, he vanished again.

I collapsed to the ground, sinking to my knees. Scrambling, I reached for the towel that had lay beneath Kao-gong’s feet. The towel was wet, cold – evidence of his presence. I hugged the towel to my face. Kao-gong was real.

He came back a few days later. This time, I was ready. I took out my pen and notebook, a learned habit as a writer, then laid a towel on Taya’s chair for him to sit on. I turned to him, waiting.

“I’m ready to tell you my story now,” he said.

“My name is Po-yu – Po is my family name, and Yu is the region in Sichuan where I was born. My family moved back to Canton a few years later, though the city was still recovering from the war.”

His story unraveled over the course of several weeks. Kao-gong stayed for an hour at most,

sometimes leaving as soon as ten minutes. He didn’t say why, but I pretended that the after-life had tied a string to him, tugging him away from the physical world.

Sometimes, I called you to corroborate pieces of his tale. You laughed when I asked you which war Canton was recovering from. “The big one!” You scoffed because I was your foolish nineteen-year-old granddaughter, then dissolved into a fit of coughs.

Kao-gong was popular as a high schooler: he was a charming, athletic young man. He placed first in track meets, watched girls swoon over him, and even dated a few pretty ones; life was good in Canton.

It was 1968 when the Communist Party forced Kao-gong and all his high school graduating peers out of the city and into farmland. Kao-gong was eighteen and knew only of the fast-paced urban lifestyle of Canton. He left for Shenzhen, which was a small agricultural community in 1968, although it is now one of the fastest growing metropolises in China.

Immediately after Kao-gong left my room, I looked up “1968 chinese go to farms.” The mass relocation of Chinese youth in the 1960s was known as “Down to the Countryside Movement,” with its purpose to educate “privileged urban youth” in farming and humility. They were China’s “lost generation.”

After three years on the farm, Kao-gong couldn’t take it anymore. “I hated it!” Kao-gong exclaimed. His harsh shout pulled me upright in my seat. “I didn’t know anything about villages! About farms! And no money either! We worked all day, only for a little food. There was never enough money, never enough to make a living.” He had the habit of speaking in quick, staccato sentences, half of them ending in fragments. Kao-gong’s voice came out hoarse and heavy, like it was pulled down by the water still in his lungs.

Kao-gong and his friends decided to escape China. They would find refuge in Hong Kong, where they wouldn’t be forced to clean horse shit.

“Oxen,” you said, “Not horses, but oxen.”

I nodded, scribbling out a section in my notes labeled “FARM.”

They were not the only, nor the first, to dream of escape. In fact, there had already been an established route to Hong Kong. However, only the bravest youths dared to go; it took ten days of walking through mountains to get to the river between China and Hong Kong. Then, they had to swim eight hours across the river – “an eight-hour swim to freedom,” you called it.

“It was a risk – we all could’ve lost our lives. Only the truly brave could do it,” Kao-gong said, his eyes shining with pride. He had been brave. “Not just brave,” he interrupted, correcting me, “But I had dreams. You see, I was going to marry this girl, and I couldn’t marry her on a farm. We would’ve had no life, no money! After we went to Hong Kong, we were going to come to America. I was going to open a restaurant – ‘The Flower Drum,’ named after my ma, who was known as the most beautiful flower in her village. We were going to be rich in America, you see.” You know, Po-po, he didn’t look like you then. He looked young and boyish, and he didn’t have the deep laugh lines in your brow or the sunspots in your skin. Your face was evidence of time and life; his was of innocence and loss.

“But you never got there, right?” I glanced at his wet hair and his swollen stomach.

“Many people died,” he said simply. His body faded away into my shadow, reminding me of how easily he could go.

“I don’t know why he’s here. Is it just to tell me his story?” I asked you in one of our more recent calls. “Honestly, I’m scared to hear the end. I don’t think I can lose him.”

You laughed. It seemed like you were always laughing recently. “He’ll talk and talk and talk forever, don’t you worry,” you reassured me.

Ten days till the river, ten days till freedom, Kao-gong chanted as he began his trek through the mountains. It was the only thing in his mind, other than hunger. Hunger was a parasite, swelling in each of their stomachs until they had no strength left to continue

walking. And still, they walked. Each person ate one meal a day: a spoonful of flour and sugar. *If I die here, my last meal will be a mouthful of flour,* Kao-gong thought.

They became nocturnal. They ran through the mountains guided only by moonlight because their lives depended on it; when sunrise came, soldiers with growling dogs patrolled the mountains, tracing the footsteps of runaway Chinese teenagers. As the sun emerged, Kao-gong would press his entire body flat to the ground, imagining himself invisible in the tall blades of grass. He hoped that the reverberations of his heartbeats wouldn’t travel through the soldiers’ thick-soled boots, but every movement of his chest was an earthquake beneath him. During the day, Kao-gong shared the dirt with snakes and other lost youths, trembling from snake bites and the fear of being seen – two of Kao-gong’s friends had been caught before, and they were sent to correction centers for one and a half months. Chen Zigui, Kao-gong’s track rival, surrendered to the authorities midway through the journey.

“ ‘BETTER TO BE ALIVE THAN TO DIE LIKE THIS,’
HE CRIED.”

By the time they reached the river, they were no longer children. Kao-gong was twenty-one, but when I imagined him in his tale, he looked seventy-one – the age he would be now if he were still alive.

“It was an eight-hour swim, but I used to be a star athlete,” Kao-gong said, puffing out his chest. He trusted his track and swim medals, so he hadn’t trained like his peers had.

Some of them had trained for months for this swim – they spent hours every day at the pool, pretending that they were swimming past tidal waves and sharks to Hong Kong.

Kao-gong failed to cross the river three times. The first time, a group of fishermen scooped him out of the water. “We got you! We’ll rescue you!” they exclaimed, grabbing his arm out of the water. Still, they failed to catch Kao-gong’s girlfriend, Hu Rongfen. Kao-gong watched her swim away and prayed that she would reach Hong Kong without him. Later that day, the fishermen handed him to the Communist Party. They tied him up the entire ten-day trek back to Shenzhen, beating two hundred red welts into his back with their military rifles. “Like a criminal,” Kao-gong hissed bitterly. He pushed his wrists together in front of his body, miming the motion of his hands being bound together.

“The next time would be my last,” Kao-gong whispered. He didn’t want me to forget that he wasn’t just my great-uncle, not just your brother, not just a young man who yearned for freedom. He was a phantom, erased from a generation that had long been lost.

I called you the same night he left, but I ended it after the fourth ring. It was 10:21 PM on a Thursday night, which was far past your bedtime, though all I wanted was to hear you tell me everything would be okay. *The next time would be my last*, he had said, and I knew that it would be the end of his story and the end of his visits. Po-po, I didn’t know how to bid him farewell. How do you say goodbye to someone you lost half a century ago?

You didn’t call me that night, but Mom did. I didn’t see all three of her calls until the morning because I liked to turn my phone off at night. After I woke up at 8:30 AM, I made my bed, showered, and got dressed. Taya was still asleep, so I stepped outside my room and called her back.

She assured me that you didn’t feel pain, Po-po. You weren’t even in the hospital, but in your own bed, on top of the same bamboo mat we shared for years since you wanted to keep me close to you. You left your jook in a pot above the stove, ready to be reheated in the

morning for breakfast. You went to sleep at 9 PM like you always did. Then, you were gone. I’m sure you thought that I could write a beautiful eulogy. My mother surely did, when she told me to prepare something for your funeral in a few months. *Write something beautiful for your grandmother. Put your degree to use, aren’t you a writer? Aren’t I?*

I waited for your brother for months after you passed. Every night, I laid a dry towel on an empty seat beside me and prayed for him to return. When he didn’t come, I watched the seat all morning, willing the towel to become damp from his presence.

I should have called you more. In the beginning of my freshman year, I called you three times a week because I had no friends and too much time, then twice a week, then once. At the end of our weekly calls, you always said, “Call me next week too. Remember, every week,” as if you were afraid my once a week promise would evaporate into dead silence. I should have expanded my Chinese vocabulary beyond *jook*, *chau fan*, *tong yun*, and all the homemade dishes you used to spoil me with, so we could talk about more than what you had for dinner. I should have told you that your dishes were my favorite because that’s the highest praise you can give to an elderly Chinese grandmother. I could have watched the wrinkles in your face deepen into a smile as you pretended to reject my compliments. I should have called you more, Po-po.

By December, toward the end of the semester, I was begging Taya to grab me leftovers from the cafeteria whenever she could, otherwise surviving on instant ramen and microwaved pop tarts. My skin paled, nourished only by the artificial wash of fluorescent light in my room. As the last few weeks of classes approached, I stopped showing up to classes in person.

I started to write something about your life, about you. But the thing is, Po-po, I can’t write about you without writing about the dozens of phone calls I sent to voicemail, about

flipping through photo albums of when I was young and you were younger than eighty-six, as if remembering younger versions of ourselves could undo time, about eulogies that turn into ghost stories.

In the last week of school, exactly three months after I first saw him, Kao-gong appeared in my room, already sitting on the towel on top of his seat. He sat upright, dripping.

“I heard your prayers,” he said, as if it explained why he was here. Why he hadn’t been.

“Po-po died,” I said quietly. He kept staring forward, stone-faced and silent. “I have to write a eulogy for her by the end of the year,” I suddenly felt foolish, my voice cracking, but continued regardless, “I’m failing two of my classes. I can’t sleep, I can’t eat, I can’t *breathe* anymore without feeling like I’m —” *dying*, but the word seemed inappropriate — “Kao-gong, it’s been months. Why did you come?”

“I’m here to finish the story,” Kao-gong replied, almost too gently.

I closed my notebook and looked straight into his eyes. We both knew what that meant.

At the shore of the river, before his fourth and final attempt to cross to Hong Kong, Kao-gong prayed to every ancestor he remembered. Please let me be free.

He stepped into the river, dipped his head beneath the surface of the water, and swam. The sun beat down on his body, which had become a canvas for snake bites and welts and sunburn, but his arms continued to pull him forward because he knew that if he stopped, he would never be free. He swam for hours, alternating between breaststroke and backstroke. On his back, he watched the dawn sky bleed into a mosaic of pale yellows and light blues, and he wondered if the sky in Hong Kong looked more beautiful.

Kao-gong thought he saw a pale outline of an island, a speck of light, in the corner of his eye. He imagined the silhouette of the city’s skyscrapers, the bustling streets that could

drown out the gunshots in his nightmares; his body, starved and past the point of exhaustion, for a brief moment, took him to Hong Kong. He would live and work for two years in Hong Kong as a ticketer at a local cinema and a spray painter at a toy store. Then, he would fly to some midwestern city in America as a refugee and pay two suitcases full of cash for a restaurant that he would call “The Flower Drum.” He would marry, have a daughter and a son, take out loans for their college degrees, and retire in a big house next to a lake. He would live.

Kao-gong died in the middle of his fourth swim to Hong Kong, swallowed by tidal waves that also drowned two of his friends in the same journey. Three of the swimmers in the group made it to Hong Kong, where they mailed letters to the deceased’s families, including Po-po. *I’m sorry*, the letter said, because what else was there to say? I’m sorry that I lived and they died. I’m sorry that I lived. I’m sorry.

When Kao-gong finished his story, a heavy quiet fell between us. Him, having said everything, and I, waiting for him to fade into invisibility. “Kao-gong,” I began hesitantly, not daring to move my gaze away from him, “It hurts to lose both you and Po-po... Why would you come if you were going to leave anyway?”

“Does death make us not worth remembering?” Kao-gong asked.

You told me a while ago, after we first learned of your cancer diagnosis, “Save your tears for when I’m gone.” You held my face in your hands, scanning my eyes for any hint of tears. By the time my eyes were completely dry, you patted my cheek and scoffed. “Foolish child,” you said, and you were right. I wasted my tears then, but can I cry for you again, Po-po?

“Pain is for the living, but you will live. Who else will live for us?”

You took me on walks around your favorite garden every Monday and Wednesday morning, where we’d rip pieces of bread to feed the swans. You taught me how to fold paper



airplanes out of any kind of paper, no matter the size or type, and we'd throw paper airplanes at each other while Mom yelled at us to be careful. We'd have contests on who could fold the smallest paper airplane, and even till now, you never beat my airplane folded from the fortune of a fortune cookie. *Like the river flows into the sea. Some things are just meant to be*, the fortune read, neither of us understanding. You raised me with numbers, with lines and points and triangles, with fractions and the Pythagorean Theorem, until I graduated high school as the valedictorian and with four years of near-perfect scores in math. When I visited you after my first semester in college, I came back with multivariable calculus and ordinary differential equations and partial derivatives. You laughed proudly, "Your math is more than mine now." I didn't understand what you meant then because I didn't know how any part of me could be more than you.

Kao-gong held my face in his hands, wiping my cheeks with his ghostly thumb. "Farewell, my child," he said, and briefly, I saw you in him. Or rather, him in you.

There was so much I could have written about you, and Po-po, I decided to write a ghost story. Sometimes, I wonder if these past few months were all a dream, if I woke up one night, aching for some remnant of you that the world could offer. Other nights, I'll light a few sticks of incense for you and Kao-gong. I'll pray, just like how you taught me, for you both to find your peace in the afterlife. With my eyes shut and hands clasped together, I'll dare myself to see you. And I'll imagine that you're both watching me too, knowing that I'll be okay.

PINING AFTER HONEYCRISPS

BY ALYSSA BERNADETTE CAHOY

a wild, luscious orchard [1]

sunshine encased [2] in waxy petals

apple blossoms descending [3] to the soft earth

and [4] eternally perfect day ingrained in childhood memory [5]

savoring the pleasant sweetness until the season's change [6]

1 descendant of eve banished from eden
resigned to littered grocery store aisles and

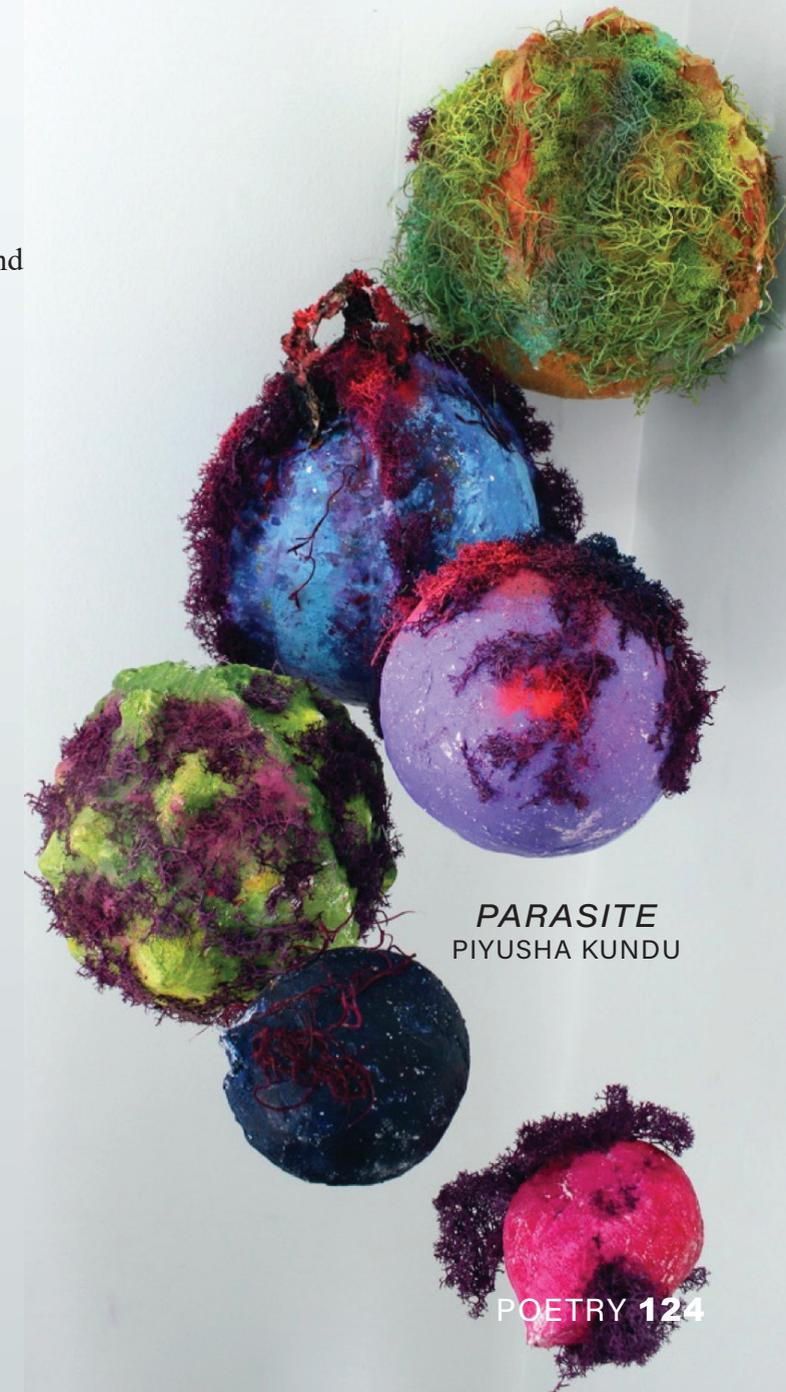
2 candies infused with artificial
apple flavoring wrapped in plastic
manufactured and marketed
in mass

3 prices dropping, fruit rotting

4 continual sales of the forbidden fruit
that keeps the doctor away

5 missing the bobbing, baking, bacon

6 no touching, tasting, smelling
only gasping, itching, swelling



PARASITE
PIYUSHA KUNDU



VAMPIRE GIRL

BY ELENA HOYT

I've almost forgotten the time before, of boys
with silly hats and frothing over them, before I could eat
Chick-fil-A and not feel bad about it.

When he squeezed me so hard it hurt and pushed
my head down because he thought he was meant to.
If I told you that happened I think you would probably cry.

In the bathroom line at the sticky summer party
the girl from Vanderbilt tells us she's gay too and shows us
her lock-screen girlfriend.

I tell you I've never been this visible.
You touch my sweaty back and
Pitbull reminds me he's been there, done that.

I wonder if Pitbull ever made his Sims be lesbians.
I'm afraid to tell you that the boy choked me because I loved him. He choked me
and I didn't say anything and kept loving him after.
Mr. Worldwide would have said something.
The party is purple and orange. The air is soup.
One day I see a photo of two old ladies in love, they hold each other and I sob.

The Vanderbilt girl asks how long we've been
together, it's only been a week and we laugh.
In the movie version, one of us is dead already
or the whole thing is subtext.
In real life I have three of your shirts
which is a lot of shirts for a dead girl.

In the movie, a wide shadow man has trapped me in an alley.
The audience knows exactly what isn't happening.
You are dressed in full leather with cool glasses. You are saving me.
You are Edward in Twilight.
In real life, I bite your neck too hard and when you say something
I want to eat the shower head and drown.

You use de-escalation techniques to reason with the shadow man.
He decides to go back to culinary school.
We ride your motorcycle through the fourth wall and break the screen.
You are the hero. You are Dua Lipa. You are Mr. Worldwide.
You say something because you love me.
The party is warm and wet. Your spit tastes like mango White Claw.

The old ladies are called Lilly and Waltraud. They live on the Baltic Coast.
Maybe one day we'll have enough shirts that Bobby
from Queer Eye can make them into a quilt we hate.
Lilly is eighty-five and Waltraud is ninety-six.
After the party we have sex for the first time.
I'm starting to think lesbians live forever.

COME AND TAKE IT

BY SOPHIA PENG

In 1835, a Mexican military detachment was sent to retrieve a cannon commissioned to Gonzales, Texas. The Texan rebels insisted on keeping the gun, resulting in a dispute recognized to be the first battle of the Texas Revolution. The cannon was buried in a peach orchard for safekeeping.

white moonlight reflecting
white eyes
and white hands

wetting the soil with sulfur.

i can smell the fruit sweet as a sphere in the haymist air.
all you grim faces
ripe with dastardly pride—

tearing out roots like stripes of ink
that collapsed onto
a pure
American flag.

but do you not know? *nothing grows this way.*



where you think i am from

we stretch our almond maws
and slide the cannon into our own
steaming gullets.
let the fruit bloom faster
rather than burden the earth with what we treasure.
but there is trouble to attaching worth
to bodies;
and this you do know—
they can be used, but they cannot
stay.
so you bury your gun; the price of your preservation
a little of next year's harvest.

i carry mine to the ashes
of this earth,
sell my hands and head to feed its growing boom until what i

know of where i am from

evaporates,
like
dawn

crested the Colorado.



ELECTRA WOMAN AND HER BATTERY-POWERED HEADACHES

BY SARAH ROBERTS

My eyes are squeezed tight and suffocating under three layers of blanket
as if the pain in my forehead could be snuffed out.
But still, the light is blinding, my mind ablaze
like glow-sticks cracked a few too many times.

I snapped one all the way open once.
I remember how the fluorescence seeped out, sinking into the palms of my hands.
It was Halloween and the lunch lady screamed something about blood poisoning
But I liked the color.

Maybe she was right
because now my blood is electric green and I'm leaking.
It's slipping off the sheets and pooling on the floor.

It doesn't have time to stain
Before the ants arrive to lap up my mess.

I should probably tell them the glow kills.
Instead, I grab the Raid and spray until my nose is clogged.

The massacre has caused the bedroom to tremble, and three full water glasses slip
off my windowsill, smashing on the floor.
A flood of week-old-water carries away the carcasses.

I used to try drowning my headaches. A liter each hour until I threw it all up and
started again.
But I've learned that an electric soul is no friend to the sea.
My wires are frayed in too many places to count.
Dangerous like a curling iron teetering on the edge of the bath.

But I'm feeling reckless this morning, so I crawl across the leftover puddle
Scattering sparks with every inch.

I know this ache could be cured if I was still small
I would curl up in the dog's bed, knees to nose, and cry until the glow was all gone
She would lick my tears until I giggled

But my own tongue can't reach

Instead, I fumble under my chin until I find the scar, leaking in all its neon glory
And pull the batteries out one by one.

Maybe the voltage is taking its toll
But to be noticed is so rare, and my Gatorade-green blood has always done the trick.
I shove the new double A's in and swallow three Excedrins dry.

Besides, I've always wanted electricity in my veins.

THE 2022 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 the writer and reviewer, Emilia Phillips. 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



Emilia Phillips (they/she) is a poet, writer, and reviewer. They are the author of four poetry collections from the University of Akron Press, including *Embouchure* (2021), and four chapbooks. Winner of a 2019 Pushcart Prize and a 2019–2020 NC Arts Council Fellowship, Phillips's poems, lyric essays, and book reviews appear widely in literary publications including *The Adroit Journal*, *Agni*, *American Poetry Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Kenyon Review*, *New England Review*, *The New York Times*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. They are a faculty member in the MFA Writing Program and the Department of English and cross-appointed faculty in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at UNC Greensboro.

NONFICTION

1st place: “妈” by Julia Li

With its photographic eye, “妈” renders a complex perspective on the relationships between American children and their immigrant parents. As the writer negotiates their fraught relationship with their mother, they move deftly between the present day, their childhood memories, and imagined descriptions of their mother's adolescence in Shanghai. In doing so, imagery—from a second-hand keyboard in a Shanghai shop window to an Auntie Anne's sweet almond pretzel in an Atlanta mall—becomes the symbolic operator in this essay, representing the often conflicting desires of the writer and their mother. This essay's most surprising move is at its very end, when the writer transitions out of a third-person narrative into a second-person address, speaking directly to their mother: “I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to carry your dreams,” they write. “But I'm strong enough to love you anyways.”

2nd place: “Crafted by the Hands of God” by Vivian Phillips

TRANSLATION

Winner: “The Train” by Jose Corazon de Jesus, translated by Nicole Genevieve Lhuillier

“The Train” is a translation from the author José Corazón de Jesús’s Tagalog. Building from its opening image of a train emerging “like a snake... / from the station that is its burrow,” the poem zooms into a bird’s eye view of the tracks’ route and then back into an unnamed, unidentified subjective point of view. As it does so, human emotion begins to attach itself to the poem’s descriptions, ultimately arriving at “the journeyed love” who was carried away and “in the small window, there is a handkerchief, and there is someone left crying.” This fragmentation of object from its owner and person from their identity suggests loss, making this a glancing view of human heart-break and resignation.

POETRY

1st place: “theories about my nani” by Riya Misra

Blurring the line between poetry and prose, “theories about my nani” opens with a catalog of specific details: “butternut kaja / waterline smudge / my eyes spill lukewarm.” Here, the poet affects line breaks with forward slashes (also called “virgules”, while allowing the language to range across the page and take up space. In doing so, the poem rejects containment and limitation. Across three sections, the speaker moves from a literal present to a figurative present in which the speaker “bear on my back centuries of my ancestors’ flour beaten, dirt caked, saffron /turmeric cardamom stained hands” and then turns toward the gesture of a desire, perhaps even prayer. Through the triptych form, the poem unfolds itself with precision.

2nd place: “hid•den cur*•ic•u•lum”by Sophia Peng

FICTION

1st place: “The Ghost of Canton”by Jackie Wu

“The Ghost of Canton” furnishes its world with lush details and distinctive figurative language as the main character is visited repeatedly by the dripping wet ghost of Kao-gong, their great uncle, who died by drowning in the late 1960s. With each visit, the spectral visitor reveals his story the main character, recounting how in 1968 the Communist Party forced Kao-gong and other youth into the countryside. After three years, he tried to make his escape from China. The author writes: ““Many people died,’ he said simply. His body faded away into my shadow, reminding me of how easily he could go.” As the main character struggles to turn Kao-gong’s story into a piece of creative writing, this short story, with its story-within-a-story trope, demonstrates how ancestry and family can shape a writer.

2nd place: “Fruit” by Neha Tallapragada

COVER ART

Winner: “A Facilitation of Personalization” by Tessa Domsy

2022 STAFF BIOS

Kayla Peden prides herself in her ability to chug KFC gravy.

Andreea Calin thinks Lily Weeks and Isabelle Clark are dating; she's concerned how it will impact the workplace environment.

Kierstin Wilkins once used a pogo stick and yo-yo at the same time and it's been downhill ever since.

Abby Webb enjoys long walks on the beach and eating copious amounts of sand.

McKenna Tanner goes through life perpetually concerned, but it's probably not a big deal. Right?

Ariana Wang is in need of a Tetra sponsor. If you'd like to volunteer, you can contact her at axw1@rice.edu.

Kristie Lynn would like to have a fountain in her backyard one day.

Kaitlyn Keyes thinks that chocolate should be on the food pyramid.

Lily Weeks is dating Isabelle Clark, and it will affect the workplace environment.

Caleb Dukes was Josh Safdie's muse for "Uncuh Jams."

If you crack open **Julia Li**, torrents of iced matcha lattes might come flowing out.

Colton Alstatt must be atheist the way they're going ape.

Katherine Jeng is fighting allegations of being a lactose-intolerant, coffee-hating barista.

Grace Yetter is an avid hobby jumper, whose latest activities include learning the harmonica and amateur molecular gastronomy.

Dasseny Arreola is being a simp again. Someone stop her.

Bruno Moscoso will gaslight you into thinking you never met him.

Who the f**k is **Marcus Munshi**?

Cooper Valentine checked the weather, and it's gettin real oppy outside.

Riley Combes moonlights as Megan Thee Stallion's bodyguard.

Maria Morkas avoids her problems by running to Chaus the night before her exam.

Hannah Young is a proud parent of 27 sea monkeys.

Ella Hoyt wants her 27 beautiful babies to know Mama's coming and she'll have custody soon.

Janai Kameka is a reclusive book hoarder who can and will bite your hand off if you interrupt her reading.

On rainy days, **Selena Shi** is a Victorian novel made of boba tea.

Doyin Aderele is powered by Lemonade.

Moses Glickman hopes this email finds you well.

Grace Xu believes that math belongs in the humanities. (It's true.)

Grace Kwon believes Grace Xu (and you!) should just major in English.

Izzy Natchev stared at her screen for 10 minutes. This is all she could come up with.

Hannah Son is at least 6'4.

Cg Marinelli always has the basic requirements of a charcutterie board in her mini-fridge.

Cameron Liu is trying to stop global warming by going to rec once a month.

Isabelle Clark was too busy kissing Lily Weeks to write a bio.

2022 CONTRIBUTORS BIOS

Jacob Tate never shuts up about Houston. Then Jacob went to New York. And now Jacob never shuts up about Houston OR New York.

Julia Li is a self-proclaimed matcha connoisseur. If she had it her way, she'd make the whole world matcha-flavored.

Vivian Phillips is thrilled to write this “bio.” She is an English major and hardly sees those three letters strung together consecutively.

Anna Rajagopal is a student writer majoring in English with a Concentration in Creative Writing; their writing focuses primarily on grappling with identity and peoplehood, and the intersections of self that one stumbles across when pondering who one is.

Harshitha Pelaprolu is unsure of a lot of things including what to write here.

Elena Hoyt can't read.

Tamaz Young cannot go a day without listening to music. He also loves to scroll through Instagram and eat food when he's not writing poetry.

To properly tend to **Alyssa Cahoy**, you must place her on a windowsill with direct sunlight, offer compliments about how clean her leaves look today, ensure her soil is well-aerated, and mist her generously with rainwater

Emma Lunica did not submit a bio.

Sarah Roberts recently started her breakfast routine of a chocolate brownie cliff bar followed by a chaus latte. She can (and will) be bought by tetra.

Matthew Baik was picked from a low-hanging branch.

Riya Misra has an English paper that was due two hours ago. Could somebody please tell her to do her work and stop buying chicken nuggets? She's supposed to be vegetarian, anyways.

Abby Webb is a proud cat mom, queer woman, and recovering fanfiction writer. She's currently working on her first novel about lesbian superheroes fighting the system.

Sophia Peng cannot wait until retirement. She plans to move to Andalusia, obtain a goatherd, grow fat off of dates and almons, and live out her dreams of manifesting *The Alchemist*.

Jackie Wu does not listen to any artist besides Taylor Swift. Despite this, she can only sing about 2% of her discography

Hector Cervantes is currently proofreading for typos.

Neha Tallapragada is a junior studying Genetics and Cell Biology and Medical Humanities at Rice. Her work has been published in R2, Glass Mountain Magazine, and Amarillo Bay. Her political affiliation is: pro-sleep, but anti-naps.

Winston Ware is wandering the spiral.

Catherine Hettler has a small army of hand-swien humanoid children. They are not for sale.

Nicole Lhuillier is in the top 1% of users of the read-it-later app Pocket. An avid teller and consumer of stories, Nicole is studying history and art. She especially appreciates film scores, illuminated manuscripts, and the greenery of Rice's campus.

Grace Stewart is a Jewish Studies minor who isn't Jewish. Also loves skincare, Pinterest, and oddly specific Spotify playlists.

Naomi Sahle will talk your ear off if you don't interrupt her because she hates silence. She is also particularly struck by French idioms.

Khadija Derouiche will never stop stress eating because of her ARCH work.

Ava Johnson has accidentally stabbed herself with an exacto blade... so she knows how the magazines feel.

Murtaza Kazmi is living, laughing, and loving.

Sachi Kishinchandani lives in between the states of "Hi, I'm Jared, 19, and never f&%%\$&\$ learned how to read" and "Oh my god she f&%%\$&\$ dead". She also has way too many succulents for someone who can barely keep a weed alive.

Ethan Perryman is a junior musician and filmmaker from Baker College. He likes drinking tea and making art when he should be doing work.

Carly Ngo enjoy her new life as an ex-premed and often be seen fumbling with the OEDK laser cutter making earrings. Meanwhile, Moge Tea is stealing away her heard (and her health).

Piyusha Kundu is living out her traveling dreams. After her backpacking trip in Europe, she is looking for suggestions (and perhaps a couch to sleep on) on where to go next.

Taylor Zhang is an avid collector of cardigans of nearly every kind --especially those of the fuzzy variety-- and is most definitely accumulating far too many clothing and jewelry pieces that she hardly wears but cannot bear to part with :).

Madeline Ju is on her way to get coffee.

Raj Anthony could lecture for hours about the ingenious design of Apple's M1 chip. Or about some cool piece of technology from 20 years ago.

Milkessa Gaga is Milkessa Gaga... and sometimes Steve Lacy, and sometimes Arsenio Hall, and sometimes Ludacris.

Tessa Domsy likes drinking jam milk and watching The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers-Extended Edition

Amber Wang says she enjoys chilling with her cats over the weekends at home and occasionally trying to make new foods in the kitchen, painting has been a form of expression for her and a bit of an escapism

Arinze Appio-Riley tries his best to be funny. His go-to is "fart in his wallet, call it gas money."

Madison Zhao has a Virginia Woolf quote tattooed on her left collarbone to prove to the world that she is most definitely ~letirate~.

Kelton Keck tripped in the darkroom while printing this.

Amy Cao is allergic to cold air and water. She can swim, but she can't really swim.