CONTRIBUTORS

WRITERS

Abi King
Alina Zhong
Alysa Bijl-Spiro
Amy Suo
Ashley Deng
Avalon Hogans
Charlie Wei
Chi Pham
Gina Kim Kotinek
Hannah Guo
Hope Yang
Jules Houston
Lacole Yang
Madison E. Daniels
Mina Schepmann
Olaoluwapo Oladipo
Ruby Gao
Samantha Mahung
Sarah Jun
Sarai Abram
Shem Brown

ARTISTS

Alex Kim
Amy Wang
Cal Mascardo
Catheryn Liang
Chloé Serna
Ellie Jung
Emma Liu
Jeriel Severina De La Rosa
Jessica Mack
Joselyn Lwigale
Karis Lai
Lily Harvey
Martin Xie
Mia Ridzinski
Nhu Chu
Radhani Kapoor
Samvida Girish
Sasha Miller
Skylar Wang
Steven Burgess
Wenye Zhou

INTERVIEWS

KB Brookins
Kevin Prufer

R2: THE RICE REVIEW VOL 22



RICE REVIEW

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Please send all correspondence to:

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

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THE RICE REVIEW STAFF

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Setsuna Jiang

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FOUNDING EDITOR
Justin Cronin

LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the 2026 edition of *R2: The Rice Review*. As Editors-in-Chief, we had the honor of helming the magazine this year. Before you dive in, we want to acknowledge everything that goes on behind the scenes. In the tradition of R2, we worked hard to engage the literary community on campus. In the fall, we hosted Open Mic Night and our first annual Flash Competition. We ran a writing workshop and made zines. We interviewed authors and attended readings. At the end of the fall, we collected submissions of work from you all. All told, we received more than 300 works, and we spent the spring deliberating. We had an incredible submission pool and it made our jobs quite difficult. Thank you for keeping us on our toes and making our job more fun. Read on for our thoughts on the magazine before you.

ADAM LEFF

Gentle Reader,

Each time I sit down to write, I am reminded that the French verb essayer, from which we get the English noun essay, means 'to try.' I remind myself that every essay is an attempt, every piece of writing a venture. You have in your hands something that looks very much like a finished product. I would not fault you for considering it a finished product. We have worked quite hard to present it as a finished product. But I urge you to reconsider: before you is a collection of attempts. We are students, not experts. Before you is an old-fashioned college try.

That is not to discount the literary and artistic works before you. If anything, it makes them more precious. Every piece of prose and poetry and art is reflective of someone's lived experience, someone's spark of inspiration and hours of work. Tucked within these pages are reflections on family and identity, musings on relationships with each other and the world. We are by no means experts–our authors and poets are figuring out this great and terrible world alongside you. Hopefully, taken all together, this attempt cuts through the chaos of the day-to-day and gets at something true, something meaningful, something you can grasp and build on. The book in your hands took a year to assemble and dozens of pairs of eyes. The book in your hands is an incredible testament to the persistence and vibrance of the literary community here on campus. The book in your hands is the first step, the first take, the foundation. Do with it what you will.

With that in mind, I want to acknowledge a handful of people without whom this attempt would have been impossible. Ian Schimmel, our exuberant faculty advisor, whose infectious joy and fascination with the literary community has altered the trajectory of my life. Rachel Parr, my fearless co-EIC, who can wrangle editors with ease and who you will see again. Our section editors, whose experience and dedication kept us on track. Our staff, who endured my ceaseless hypotheticals and, I hope, learned to love the literary world as much as I do. And our contributors, whose vulnerability and skill left us spellbound. All of you, thank you for making this attempt with me.

I want to end by acknowledging you, the reader. I have spent three years thinking about who you might be, what you might be doing. Maybe you're in line, waiting to get coffee or a meal. Maybe you're huddled in the library, looking for inspiration. Maybe you're killing time before an exam or decompressing after. Maybe you're in commons at 4 AM, not yet ready to call it a night. Whoever you are, gentle reader, whatever you're doing, I hope that you find something resonant in this attempt. I hope it inspires you to attempt something of your own. Build on this foundation, gentle reader. I hand it off to you.

Warmly,



RACHEL PARR

Hey Y'all,

First, I want to take a second to acknowledge the hard work of a handful of people who make this entire endeavor possible. We could not do it all without the tireless effort of our famed faculty advisor, Ian Schimmel, who encourages all of us to share in his enthusiasm for the moment, for the literary community, and for being alive. I would not be who I am (or, really, a sane person at all) without the unwavering support and friendship of my dear Co-EIC Mr. Adam Leff. His never ending hypotheticals and visionary mind have made many of our initiatives this year possible. We made a lot of changes this year and we could not have done it without our fearless section editors, who put up with our late night meetings and never ending emails. And especially, our staffers, who every year make R2 great by bringing with them a fresh perspective and hope for the future of our little square book.

These past couple of months I found myself constantly struck by the realization that the moments I am living in are what will become essential memories of my early twenties. The laughter, the pain, the heartache, the joy. I realize that I will forever remember the sensation of laying my head on someone's shoulder and talking until my eyes go numb and my throat goes dry. Being twenty-one years old—being a college student and a young adult more broadly—is all about living in the moment and existing in a time that you'll never experience again.

Your college years are all about self realization and about putting those first 18-22 years of your life in the context of the next 60. I think this is why, despite our lack of professed theme at the start of the submission process, I've noticed that you can always find patterns in the types of works we receive here at R2. I find that our contributors are often pondering those very same fleeting moments and bygone memories that I find myself reeling over into the early hours of the morning.

The beauty of a publication like *R2* is that we capture the lives and experiences of Rice students in a way that nothing else really can. A work of art, regardless of medium or genre, has the power to tell the audience a lot about the creator. Together, all 34 written pieces and countless art pieces paint a picture of the past, present, and future of the Rice community. This edition of *R2* represents the history, memories, and experiences that have shaped the way that we as a generation and as a student body see the world around us. It represents the resilience, drive, and passion that makes our community what it is.

As an editor, I am eternally grateful to you, our readers and contributors, for the opportunity to make our shared voices heard and to put out into the world a picture of what it means to be young in our current era. I hope that you see yourself in these pages the way that I have. Live it up and give yourself some space to be a little bit messy. Thank you for taking the time to hang out with us here in these pages. I hope to see you back here again next year.

With Whimsy, Merriment, and Joy,



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LETTER TO AN OLD POET (SONG FROM THE WRONG SIDE OF TOWN)

HANNAH GUO

CW: mentions of violence

When you have forgotten, say,
Sun dappled through translucent viridescent
Leaves, the long, all-uphill trek up Canner Street from school
With Năinai in tow–
Head tilted towards gossamer skies, skinning shins
on the sunlit brick corners (we licked the blood away)

When you have forgotten vines of profoundly periwinkle morning glory
Swaying on the barbed-wire fence, climbing, no—
Conquering (the many) giant, red "*NO TRESPASSERS*" signs
Watching the sun and the horizon align

When you have forgotten the scent of sunlight on threadbare polka-dot tights
Trusted outside to dry in the dazzling glow of summer's scintillating light How to skip
across unruly lawns of sun-yellowed
Bluegrass, the hollers of Māma telling us to come inside for dinner, or the

Hallowed song of airy voices ringing through valleys of
Alleys strung with laundry lines—
An afternoon chorus of "Dance, dance, wherever you may be"—
(pinpricks fractured the night)



LUNCH BREAKERS
CHLOÉ SERNA

Or the transient bliss of sidewalk chalk murals,
Knuckles scraped seemingly to the bone and
tiny, quivering palms with skin akin to sandpaper,
pressed against the pavement, stained

With so much ephemeral love and color
Bleeding out of knobbly ankles rubbed raw from discarded
Razor scooters (on the "wrong" side of town);
Not to me, no, not to us—those sirens were our own resilient

sound (we learned their names later)
Dear poet, once you grow old and cannot keep up
With the kids racing down Canner Street
And you do not trip on the brick corners any longer;
brittle bones have learned carefulness

Save this for later and
remember
(remember them)
that striking laughter,
(yes, mostly the laughter)

Loud as daylight.



CONCEALED
RADHANI KAPOOR

GOLD

AVALON HOGANS

We were playing in the river.

The water was pink and blue
and it melted to our skin
like hot sticky taffy in the sun.

The ground was slimy mud cake.

We pretended we were royalty in Egypt,
but we knew nothing of Egypt,
aside from our Grandmother's gold.

We slung through the mush like Tarzans.

Slipping between skips,
we were careful not to lose
what we already didn't remember.

The sun was a runny yolk on a spoiled sky.

We dreaded the day's fold over,
when the mosquitoes would come out,
and we had to return our crowns.



WILD ABANDON
AMY WANG



FIREBIRD

ALYSA BIJL-SPIRO

The first thing he noticed were her fingers. Pale, slim — like a parcel of bones tied together with an invisible thread.

A single flute emerged from the orchestra, followed by the running arpeggios of the harp. It was the day of reckoning for the high folk of Moscow, a crowd of eleven hundred oversized, chiffon dresses billowing out far past the expanse of the small, crimson seats. Glass beads, tinsel, and sequins lined every garment, a million tiny stars twinkling beneath the grand chandelier, the wondrous crystal sun. In a moment of acute class consciousness, a journalist for *Pravda* had, rather coyly, described the whole scene as a thousand ugly heads floating in a sea of even uglier fabric. *If anyone ever needed a sign that wealth cannot buy beauty*, he had written, *just go to the Bolshoi.*

Slowly, the rest of the orchestra began to join in, enveloping the entire audience in a surge of sound. Over two thousand sets of eyes peered up to the stage, watching the blur of bodies come into focus, while a single dancer, covered in delicate white feathers, took her position up front.

Amidst the beauty and terror of Tchaikovsky, swelling through the theatre like a great wave, all Vanya could focus on was the frail bird in front of him. He watched as each movement, beginning in those enchanting fingers, reverberated through her tiny body. Her limbs were like brushstrokes, fluid yet unwavering, working collectively to create something beautiful. Vanya imagined the way her body glistened in sweat as she stepped off stage, her hands fluttering with the rush of adrenaline. The very thought inspired a rush of warmth in his chest.



BETWEEN US
KARIS LAI

The first thing he noticed were her fingers. Pale, slim — like a parcel of bones tied together with an invisible thread.

The trill of a flute emerged from the orchestra, followed by the running arpeggios of the harp. It was the day of reckoning for the high folk of Moscow, a crowd of eleven hundred oversized, chiffon dresses billowing out far past the expanse of the small, crimson seats. Glass beads, tinsel, and sequins lined every garment, a million tiny stars twinkling beneath the grand chandelier, that wondrous crystal sun. In a moment of acute class consciousness, a journalist for Pravda had, rather coyly, described the whole scene as a thousand ugly heads floating in a sea of even uglier fabric. *If anyone ever needed a sign that wealth cannot buy beauty*, he had written, *just go to the Bolshoi*.

Slowly, the rest of the orchestra began to join in, enveloping the entire audience in a surge of sound. Over two thousand sets of eyes peered up to the stage, watching the blur of bodies come into focus, while a single dancer, covered in delicate white feathers, took her position up front.

Amidst the beauty and terror of Tchaikovsky, swelling through the theatre like a great wave, all Ivan Petrovich could focus on was the frail bird in front of him. He watched as each movement, beginning in those enchanting fingers, reverberated through her tiny body. Her limbs were like brushstrokes, fluid yet unwavering, working collectively to create something beautiful. Vanya imagined the way her body glistened in sweat as she stepped off stage, her hands fluttering with the rush of adrenaline. The very thought inspired a rush of warmth in his chest.

Feeling a tug at his sleeve, Vanya was suddenly pulled away from the sight before him. He turned his attention to the toddler sitting at his side, dressed in her first set of formal clothing, her eyes full of a need only known to young children.

"How long?" Darya said to him, her high-pitched voice peeking out above the orchestra.

In his periphery, Vanya could see three or four heads craning to look over at Darya, vying to see the face of the unruly child and what must be her incapable parents. With painstaking effort to not make a sound in his seat, Vanya tilted down towards Darya, putting his lips right next to her ear. He felt her wispy curls gently pressing against his blushed cheeks.

"Not another word or you will be punished," Vanya hissed.

Sitting on the other side of Darya, Katerina Ivanovna turned her head sharply, her frozen eyes meeting his. Katerina could not stand when her husband spoke harshly with their daughter. Vanya challenged his wife's gaze for a moment before sharply turning his head back towards the stage. From the corner of his eye, he watched as Katerina reached out a hand, covered in dark blue velvet, and placed it on the back of their daughter's shoulder, rubbing it slowly with her thumb. *I'm sorry*, she seemed to say.

But that was of no importance to him. Vanya rapidly scanned his eyes across the stage until they once again found that beautiful bird flying across the stage. He felt his pulse accelerate. Vanya moved forward slightly in his seat, attempting to see more of her face than the misty lines of her lips and eyes. Yet even from his second-row box seat, he had little luck seeing more than a blur of facial features.

Three hours passed like this. Katerina took Darya out twice to stop her unrelenting fidgeting, but Vanya did not take notice. As the lights eventually began to rise and the rustling of thousands of dresses erupted throughout the Bolshoi, Vanya went to search for the program he had previously discarded under his chair. There, in that theatre, his body was not his own. He had to find her.

And then, there she was. A familiar name, a name saturated with so much history. Reading it felt like a warm embrace on a cold night, the pulse of skin touching skin while surrounded by snow.

Anna Alexandrova Agapov. Prima Ballerina at the Moscow Ballet.

He read the name one and then once again. An unfamiliar thought came to him.

It was time to hunt.

* * *

"I'd like for us to stay for a drink," Vanya announced to his wife.

At his words, Katerina slowly turned away from the exit she had been walking towards. She looked down at Darya, whose exhausted body now leaned against her mother, and then cocked an eyebrow, her ever-frozen eyes meeting her husband's.

"I think Darya needs to go to bed."

"Then I'd like to stay."

Vanya paused.

"I saw Mikhael was here too. There is some business we need to discuss about one of our clients for Monday."

Darya reached up to pull on her mother's dress, her knees on the brink of collapse.

"So," Katerina started, the tip of her tongue lingering on the *s* for just a moment too long. Her eyes continued to betray not a hint of emotion. "What you're saying is that you would like to meet us at the house."

VANYA FELT HER BEFORE HE SAW HER. FELT THE CAREFULNESS OF HER MOVEMENT, THE HEAT RADIATING FROM HER SKIN, THE SMELL OF MAKEUP PRODUCTS MIXED WITH RAW SWEAT.

Vanya did not break her gaze. "Yes."

An almost imperceptible twitch. A twitch only a husband could recognize. But then, as expected, Vanya watched as the face of his wife softened, melting back into benign indifference. He knew better than to say anything more.

As Katerina and Darya took their leave, Vanya headed towards the small bar located next to the Bolshoi, a spot well known for hosting the dancers after their shows. As he walked in, a warm, dim light flooded the area. Older men in perfectly-fitted suits stood too close to beautiful, young women, their crinkled hands gently resting on perfectly ripe thighs, hips, blushing cheeks. Cigarettes passed from lip to lip, the residual smoke crawling through the restaurant. Amidst the haze, the bronze detailing on the bar and seats looked like melted starlight, a clouded cache where men could act in ways forbidden in the daylight.

"Vodka, please."

Vanya handed the bartender a few copecks, his long fingers accidentally brushing the rough and calloused hand of the old worker. The bartender worked with an impressive efficiency — almost a dancer himself — as he moved from one suited man to another.

Standing at the dark-wooded bar, leaning his weight into his crossed arms, Vanya quickly peered towards the entrance. A steady stream of people trickled into the bar, the dancers identifiable by their slicked hair and darkened eyes. One after another they came. All, that is, except for her.

"Who are you looking for?"

Vanya looked up towards the bartender, who was now polishing a glass with the utmost care. The older man did not look up from his work to speak to Vanya, only squinting his eyes to ensure he did not miss a spot on the crystal.

"Oh, nobody," Vanya said. He found himself tracing his index finger slowly over the rim of the vodka glass. "Just an old friend."

The bartender chucked, finally lifting his gaze from the glass and peering sideways at Vanya. A dark red smirk played out across his wrinkled face.

"A friend, huh?"

After that, the bartender left Vanya alone. Slowly, the suited gentlemen began to leave, some with their wives and others with new women entirely. For his part, Vanya stayed in his same spot, lips wet with vodka and casting the occasional glance towards the staircase door. Time moved slowly, simply, marked by the finishing of one drink and the ordering of another.

It wasn't until past midnight that she appeared.

"A glass of red wine, Gregori, if you will."

Vanya felt her before he saw her. Felt the carefulness of her movement, the heat radiating from her skin, the smell of makeup products mixed with raw sweat. He turned to face her and was greeted by a rather small body, smaller than he expected. Beneath her intense makeup hid a set of beady, almost black eyes, intently fixed on those beautiful bone-like hands that now rested on the bar counter. Her cheeks were puffy, her forehead too large for the proportion of her face. And yet, despite the seeming imbalance, she continued to radiate a sort of frail beauty, even off-stage.

Gregori quickly approached with the wine, setting it down in front of Anna. Before taking a single sip, Anna reached out and touched her index finger to the rim of the glass, circling it in the same manner as Vanya. Her eyes drifted off, someplace faraway, as her finger continued to circle and circle and circle. Vanya studied the scene before him for a few moments, tracking her every movement from the corner of his eyes, until at last, he could no longer hold back the words that were gripping him, digging into his throat.

"I'm sure you hear it all the time," Vanya finally began, turning himself slightly towards Anna, "but you were wonderful tonight."

"Is that so?" Anna responded with a light chuckle, her voice soft. She remained as she was, eyes cast away, index finger continuously moving.

"My name is Ivan Petrovovich Kozlov. It is wonderful to meet you."

Slowly, Anna turned towards Vanya, looking at his outstretched hand before meeting his gaze. She tilted her head to the side, a soft smile pulling at her lips, before accepting the handshake. "Well, what brought you to my show tonight, Mr. Kozlov?" she asked.

"Vanya, please."

"What brought you to my show tonight, Vanya?"

He paused, contemplating his response. "I suppose you could say I appreciate the finer things in life."

At this, Anna chuckled. "The finer things in life?," she repeated back, a playful twinkle in her eye. "And what other finer things do you enjoy, Vanya?"

Again, Vanya was forced to stop and think for a moment. He did not know what he had been expecting, but it certainly had not been this. "Well, I enjoy reading."

"Reading who?"

"Our countries' greats, of course."

She answered with another smile, her fingers gently tapping the rim of her glass.

Vanya leaned in a bit closer. "I don't suppose you've read them?"

"Don't suppose?" Anna lifted her eyebrows at him slightly. At last, she lifted the glass of dark red wine to her lips, taking a sip without breaking eye contact.

"My apologies. I presumed with your training it would be difficult to find time to read." With this, Vanya moved to set down his empty glass, sliding his right arm across the counter and moving himself with it. His skin was now inches away from Anna, a near-completed bridge between their two bodies.

Yet if Anna noticed the advance, she showed no signs.

"I would say my favorite is Tolstoy," she finally said.

"Why's that?"

Anna took a moment to think, chewing on her thin lip, eyes drifting off again. "His characters," she responded. "I love his characters."

"Like Anna Karenina?" Vanya chuckled, unable to help himself.

"Well, of course."

"Shame about her death."

"Yes," Anna responded, another airy chuckle escaping from her. "A real shame." She brought the wine to her lips again, taking another full sip before continuing. "Most people say one thing and do another. At least Anna did what she believed in. Nowadays, it seems nearly impossible to find anyone willing to follow their convictions until the bitter end."

"Is that so?" Vanya responded, taking another step towards her. He felt the heat of her permeate through his clothing and deep into his stomach. "Well, what about you?"

"What about me?"

"What do you believe in?"

At this, Anna once again returned his gaze, looking deep into his eyes. "I thought I was just a dancer with no time to read or think."

"It seems I was mistaken about you."

"It seems so." Anna shifted her weight, leaning slightly into him. "What is it you do, Mr. Kozlov? For work, I mean."

"I'm a defense attorney."

At this, Anna paused. She appeared, for the first time, taken aback by something he had said. "Is that so?"

"It is. Are you surprised?"

"No, not at all," she said carefully. "I just imagine it to be a challenging job. You all are not terribly well-liked, are you?"

"I've never cared much about being well-liked."

From the other end of the bar, Gregori gave a small cough.

"It's getting quite late," Anna said in a level voice.

"You took quite a long time to come out from backstage. Why is that?"

"I was avoiding the reality that awaits me once I exit the door."

"But what's so bad about this reality?" Vanya said, raising his left hand to rest on the small of her back. The heat that had built up in his stomach was now spreading through his entire body. Anna did not move, did not push his hand away. Instead, she finished the last sip of her wine and carefully placed it back down on the counter.

"Thank you, Gregori," she said.

She turned back to Vanya, and in one graceful movement, pulled herself in towards him, wrapping her right hand around the back of his head and running it through his dark, curled hair. Her lips hovered next to his ear, grazing it once before she spoke.

"It really was wonderful meeting you tonight, Vanya," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "It almost feels like fate brought us together."

With that, Anna uncurled herself from Vanya and disappeared into the soulless night.

* * *

PRAVDA

Jan. 22, 1912

HUSBAND OF PRIMA BALLERINA FOUND DEAD IN PATRIARK'S POND

At 2:50 a.m. on the morning of Jan. 22, officials found Leo Alexandrovich Agapov, aged 52, dead. Mr. Agapov was found in the master bedroom with what appeared to be a gunshot wound to the neck. Police have yet to release whether the death will be investigated as a suicide or as a homicide. Mrs. Agapov, aged 26, declined to comment.

* * *

The call came in at 4:47 a.m.

Vanya only heard the telephone after the fifth ring. He had been woken by the cries of Darya, her high-pitched voice echoing throughout the house. Almost immediately, the door next to him splintered open, the bare feet of his wife striking against the wooden floor as she rushed to comfort their daughter. The chaos stunned him. Vanya turned over slowly in his bed, barely moving, staring at the phone sitting next to his dresser.

"Can you pick up the phone, please, Vanya?" Katerina yelled from across the house. Vanya did not answer. Mustering all his strength, he rolled out from under the covers, slipping his feet into the house slippers next to his bed. Slowly, Vanya made his way towards the bedroom door, the ring of the phone continuing to reverberate through the house. He walked past the room where his daughter and wife were now surely in a warm embrace, walked past the large window at the head of the staircase, walked until he arrived at the telephone that unassumingly hung on the kitchen wall.

His fingers, cold and trembling from the dying winter draft, grasped around the metal receiver before picking it up, cautiously placing it next to his ear.

"Ivan Petrovolich?" creaked the voice on the other end.

AND YET, WITHIN SECONDS, A DEEP SENSE OF OBLIGATION ENVELOPED HIS HEART AND SOUL.

It was his frail bird, flying to him.

"Anna Alexandrovna?"

"Oh, thank the lord I reached you," Anna said.

"I need your help."

Many years later, when asked how he felt in that moment, Vanya would respond quite simply. Hearing her voice over the receiver, he initially felt shocked. And yet, within seconds, a deep sense of obligation enveloped his heart and soul. Obligation towards his new friend, towards her suffering, towards the integrity of the newly created open court system. Obligation towards his family, the eternal duty of a father to provide for those he loves.

Truth, of course, is rarely so simple. Still, Vanya did not hesitate before responding. "Anything for you, Anna."

A cool draft seemed to blow into the kitchen. Vanya noted that he could no longer hear his daughter nor her cries. It was as if the entire house stood frozen for him.

"I need you to come to the police station on Petrechevsky Boulevard. I've been falsely accused of —"

Vanya listened as her voice caught on itself.

"Tell me, Anna."

Silence. Then suddenly, the words slipped out. "I've been falsely accused of murdering my husband."

According to the suspect, the story was as follows:

After leaving the Bolshoi, Anna decided to take the long way home. Vanya imagined her tiny frame walking under a clouded Moscow moon, her body covered in a light drizzle of gray winter rain. Anna explained to Vanya that she had needed to cool off, to catch her breath before returning home to her husband.

"Why were you delaying your return?" Vanya asked.

Anna let out a sigh, wrinkled by the static of the telephone. "Delaying my return?"

"I suppose what I am trying to ask," Vanya ventured, "is if there were any problems between you and your late husband."

Another round of silence.

"Can I finish telling you the events before we talk about him?"

"Of course, go on."

Anna alleged that she arrived home around 1:57 a.m. Once there, she drew up a bath to clean herself of both her sweat from the performance and the rain that now entirely coated her body. She would stay in the bath for 45 minutes, until about 2:45 a.m., when she ventured into the master bedroom for the first time that evening. There, she found her late husband, the acclaimed military official Leo Alexandrovich Agopov, dead.

"He was lying on the bed in a pool of his own blood," Anna whispered, "and all I could notice were the sheets. I thought to myself, 'That idiot has managed to ruin another thing that I bought him.'

"You were in shock, Anna. You *are* in shock."

"I called the police as soon as I registered what had happened. My neighbors must have heard me scream, because they began banging on my door, calling out to see if I was okay. When I answered the door, blood was smeared across my chest. I didn't even realize there was blood on me until I saw the look on my neighbors' face. They looked at me like I was some beast."

"How did the blood get on you?"

Vanya heard Anna take a deep breath on the other side of the phone.

"I leaned in to give Leo a final embrace before I went to call the police." Anna paused again. "I don't know why I did that."

All of a sudden, Vanya felt the sour taste of blood swirl around in his mouth, mixing with his saliva. Without realizing, he had been biting on his lip throughout the entire conversation. The comment about Leo Alexandrovich had caused him to accidentally draw blood.

"I will be at the station as soon as it opens," Vanya finally said. "For now, just try to get some sleep. Once I get there, I can have the station officials move you into a better room."

The door to the master bedroom slowly creaked open. Even without seeing her, Vanya could feel Katerina standing outside his door.

"I'm sorry for calling you," Anna whispered. "I just didn't know who else to ask."

"You have nothing to apologize for."

"How will I ever repay you?"

"Nothing. I need nothing. I will see you tomorrow."

"Alright," she whispered. "Goodnight, Vanya."

Goodnight, Anna, Vanya silently replied.

Vanya set down the phone.

* * *

The winter sun cracked open the sky, splintering it into a million shards.

At 7:00 a.m. sharp, Vanya arrived at the police station, his dark leather shoes crunching in the yellowed snow that coated the concrete sidewalk. The station guard recognized him immediately and moved to open the door for him, offering him a cup of tea.

"I am here for Anna Alexandrova Agapov. Can you take me to her?"

"Of course, sir," the station guard replied, passing the scalding cup to Vanya. "

And can you make a second cup for my client, too?"

The station guard raised an eyebrow. "For the killer?"

"Alleged killer," Vanya corrected. "And yes. Bring it to the cell when it's ready." Vanya walked down the long concrete hallway towards the cellroom unaccompanied, the wetness from his shoes

leaving gray shadows on the floor. His heart beat in time with his footsteps.“

Suddenly, there she was, her small body mangled and leaning against the cell wall. Her blonde hair fell across her face, her skin white as porcelain beneath the fluorescent lights. Tiny breaths reverberated through her limp body.

“Anna,” Vanya started.

There was no movement.

“Anna Alexandrovna,” he started again, his voice louder this time.

At those words, the body before him began to creak back to life, until at last, Anna opened her eyes. Two gray eyes focused on him, then immediately began to crinkle around the corners.

“You came,” Anna said, rushing towards where Vanya stood.

“Of course I did,” Vanya said.

In that moment, as he stared at the pale and lifeless women before him, Vanya was overwhelmed with the sentiment that Anna was about to slip away from the world entirely. Without thinking, he slipped a hand through the metal poles, grabbing onto the tiny wrist in front of him, a naive attempt to bring her back. Anna was frozen to the touch.

“I will do everything I can to get you out of here,” Vanya whispered.

Anna peered at him, her eyes clouded by what seemed to be newborn tears.

“Now, I need you to tell me exactly what happened.”

At this, Anna snaked her wrist out of the grasp it was in, interlacing her bone-like fingers with those of Vanya. She stayed like that for a moment, her gaze fixed on the ground. “Leo was a terrible man.”

Her voice had gone cold. Vanya could feel the grasp she had on his hand tightening. “I was

19 and he was 45 when we got married. He saw me in my first ballet at the Bolshoi, back when I was in the corps and could barely be seen by the audience. But he saw me, and after that show, he came up to me to tell me what a marvelous dancer I was.”

Anna paused here, suddenly making eye contact with Vanya.

“Not unlike you, I suppose,” Anna chuckled.

Vanya felt like a hand had been placed around his throat. “I only —”

Her eyes softened. “I’m kidding, Vanya. Really.”

She crinkled her brow, returning to the story. “With Leo, it was quite clear from the beginning that he simply saw me as an object to be obtained and then presented, at least when convenient. I knew it, my parents knew it, and yet, they still pushed me to agree to the marriage. They told me that one day, my body would no longer serve me and I would need someone else to fall back on.”

“And you listened to them?”

“I listened to them.”

In that moment, it seemed to Vanya that there was nobody more deserving in this world of pity than her, his frail bird shot from the sky.

“Did you resent him?”

“I resented him plenty.”

“How was your marital life?”

“Calling it marital life might be generous,” Anna said, her head dipping playfully. “We put up with each other as best we could. He would often leave and not come back for a few nights. The first time that happened, I lost it. I screamed at him, called him a liar, told him to never expect anything from me again.”

Anna closed her eyes.

"And then the next thing I knew, his hands were around my throat, his nails digging into my neck. He told me that a whore like me had no business speaking to him like that, that he would continue to do whatever he pleased."

Anna paused, before her eyes snapped back open. Any trace of tears had vanished.

"So, I didn't say anything anymore. Life resumed as normal."

Vanya was trembling as Anna spoke. He pushed himself closer against the cold iron poles.

"Anna, I'm so –"

"No, don't speak. It isn't as simple as you think." Her eyebrows furrowed. "There were times when, sitting across from me at the table, he would get a little jam on his upper lip. And I'd look at him, at the wrinkles setting into his face, at the way that he studied the morning news like a medical textbook, and I would think that there is no more sympathetic man in the world. In those moments, I loved him dearly."

Vanya shifted his weight. Sweat had begun to form between their interlaced hands.

"He was a terrible man, abusive even," Anna finally said. "But I did sometimes love him. And I would never kill him."

The two stood still, the weight of the words suspended between them.

"You believe me, right?" The fragility had suddenly returned to her voice. Vanya felt the heat return to his chest.

"That shouldn't even be a question."

"But what will we say at the trial?"

Vanya paused before responding. "We can say it was a botched suicide. That it was supposed to be a clean cut but he missed and bled out instead."

"That doesn't sound very convincing," Anna said.

Vanya let out a breath before slipping his other hand through the metal poles, gently running his fingers across her rosy cheek. She was warmer now, her reserve of life seemingly restored. "The only thing that needs to be convincing is you."

Anna took her eyes off his hand and peered up towards Vanya.

"A trial is no different than a performance," Vanya explained. "You don't need to convince the jury that you're innocent, only that you shouldn't go to prison. Cry, wear something beautiful. And then leave the rest to me. Do you think you can do that?"

Sunshine cracked through her teeth. Anna, beautiful Anna.

"Of course I can do that."

* * *

Vanya leaned forward, his glasses moving down to the tip of his nose, eyes squinting at the cursive script dancing before him. Earlier that week, he had asked Anna to produce a detailed description of the events from the night of the death. Unsurprisingly, the description before him was the exact same as what she had recounted that first night over the telephone, not a single incongruent detail to be found. Next to him, his *borscht* sat untouched.

SUNSHINE CRACKED THROUGH HER TEETH. ANNA, BEAUTIFUL ANNA.

"Your soup is going cold," Katerina said flatly. She sat on the other side of the long table, beside Darya, whose mouth was tinted purple from the beets.

"Oh," Vanya said, looking up. He sat the account down. "I apologize."

Vanya dipped the spoon into the bowl before him, watching the bright red liquid slowly fill the silver hollow. Katerina would always cut the beets very thinly, searing them on a low heat to produce a thick, creamy soup. It was a technique she had learned from her mother.

"I presume that's for the trial?" she suddenly asked.

Vanya looked up from his soup, his mouth full of lukewarm liquid.

"The papers you were reading, I mean."

Vanya swallowed. "Oh. Well, yes."

"She seems like a pretty fascinating woman," Katerina said, her eyes focused on delivering another spoonful of soup to Darya without spilling.

"Sure," Vanya said, taking another spoonful of borscht, his gaze still fixed on his wife. "You could say that."

"And how do you feel?"

"How do I feel?" Vanya was not used to Katerina taking any interest in his work. Or, for that matter, in him.

"Well, all of Moscow is talking about it. Even at lunch today, Natalya could not stop speaking about how 'doomed' the case is, how it brings shame to the entire concept of the open courts to defend a woman like that."

"A woman like what?"

"A guilty woman."

She's not guilty, Vanya thought. But he said nothing, not now. "And what did you say to Natalya?"

Katerina leaned back from Darya, tapping the excess soup off the spoon and into the bowl.

She looked up, finally meeting the darkened gaze of her husband. "I said nothing. I said you don't tell me anything about your work."

"Well, you never ask me about anything."

"I'm asking now."

Silence, suspended. A year had passed like this and another was sure to come, marked by nothing but profound silence. All Vanya could hear was the grandfather clock on the wall, its *click* and *click* and *click* resounding through the room. Silence, until finally, a voice broke through, the first chirp of a sparrow on a sticky spring day.

"Do you want to come to the park with Darya and I tomorrow?"

It was always Katerina that spoke first. Always. Vanya looked over at Darya, at her painfully familiar blue eyes speckled with sage-green, trembling leaves in an ever-expansive sky. She was playing with the napkin sitting in front of her, folding and re-folding it to make different shapes. He suddenly recalled that morning, two years ago, when Darya had taken her first steps, her tiny, doughy hands grabbing onto his, doing all she could to not to fall back on the floor.

"She's your daughter too, you know."

It was all too much.

"I can't go," Vanya replied, his voice nearly a whisper. "I need to work."

Briskly, he pushed the now empty bowl of *borscht* in front of him, taking the napkin from his lap and placing it on the table. He got up to leave, striding towards the door, but something stopped him. Pausing, Vanya turned back towards his wife, to his daughter, to the two sets of blueish-green eyes that would forever remind him of everything he had lost.

"Thank you for the meal, Katya."

* * *

The graveyard stood still, smothered by an enormous sky, a thousand dying lights peeking out from behind a curtain of smog. Vanya felt Katerina move beside him, the dried leaves crunching underneath her boots. Neither of them held onto the other.

Without a word, Katerina reached down to place a singular lily on the gravestone. Then she got up, turning her back to the child, their child, twenty feet beneath the earth and drowning in dirt. Vanya stood as he was, looking at the name carved before him. He felt the trees all around him, their black branches extending into the air like a million desperate hands reaching towards God.

"Vanya," Katerina whispered.

"I'm coming."

Vanya crouched down beside the gravestone and raised two fingers to his lips before placing them back down on the marbled rock, barely a year old.

"Vanya," Katerina urged. "We need to get home to Darya."

He got up and walked towards his solemn wife. Together, the two began to walk away from the grave, an infinite silence hanging between them.

Finally, Katerina spoke. "The trial is tomorrow."

"Yes."

Katerina suddenly turned towards Vanya, grabbing onto his arm as though she were clinging to a God. Her face was covered in the translucent shine of dried tears, her cheeks flushed a rosy pink. The two stood there for a moment, enveloped by the moon, staring at the other. There, underneath the wilting black sky, Vanya thought his wife looked almost hauntingly beautiful.

"You cannot bring any more ruin to our family," Katerina finally whispered, her nails digging into his skin. "Not after we have already been destroyed."

* * *

Eyes bloodshot and dressed in an unassuming black dress and shoes, Anna Alexandrovna took on the role of wife-in-mourning exceptionally well. Vanya had become used to the shell-like appearance Anna had assumed for the last few months, helplessly watching as she decayed little by little in her tiny cell. Yet seeing her appear in the enormous and unforgiving courtroom inspired a new sense of pity within him, a new hand clawing away at the insides of his stomach.

Sensing her discomfort at the change in environment, Vanya gently moved to place his palm on the small of her back, turning to whisper in her ear. "In a few hours, this will all be over."

So close to her, he could almost feel the trembles of her body, feel the sweat beginning to form beneath her dress and along her spine.

Without any notice, the judge entered. The time had come.

Many years later, Vanya will claim that it was there, during the trial itself, that he had finally become convinced of the truth. Each time Leo was mentioned, Vanya would watch out of the corner of his eye as Anna and her entire body contracted inwards, shivers rippling through her body. An overwhelming amount of grief poured out from the body seated beside him. He felt then that labels like guilt and innocence failed to accurately portray the scene playing out before him. He felt that Anna had not killed her husband and that even if she had, it must have surely been out of love.

After four hours of oral argument, it took no less than 15 minutes for the jury to find Anna Alexandrovna not guilty for the murder of her late husband.

Amidst a melange of rapture and pride, pull and desire, Vanya would always remember how Anna stopped right before the exit of the courthouse, suddenly taking his head between her hands, her fingertips imprinting his skin. Tears leaked from her eyes.

"Thank you," Anna said, her voice breaking.

Without words, Vanya wrapped his hands around the ones caressing his face, dipping his head so that the crowns of their heads touched.

"For you, Anna, anything."

"I want you to come with me."

I want you to come with me.

Drowned in the brown Moscow haze, the two made their way back to Patriark's Pond, to the large brick house on the corner of the road that now stood empty. Gracefully, Anna opened the door and stepped into her former home, her eyes flickering across the scene until they landed on a tiny frame hanging above the fireplace. Following her gaze, Vanya caught sight of a singular portrait of Leo and Anna, both in what looked to be their wedding attire. Neither of them were smiling.

"Does it bother you?" Anna asked, catching his gaze. She raised an eyebrow. "The picture?" Vanya turned back to Anna. "No."

Two sets of hands began to grab, to undress, to conquer. Two bodies mangled together. Vanya felt as Anna gently placed her lips on his neck, kissing towards his naval. He grabbed onto her tighter, hands grasping her neck, her hair, to whatever part of her fragile body he could hold onto. That fragile body he had once seen on stage, had once imagined glistening in sweat, now glistened before him, naked and in his arms. Submerged in ecstasy, Vanya hardly took notice as Anna suddenly ran her teeth along his stomach, moving up his body and landing back on his collarbone. As she bit him, her canines almost drawing blood, he moaned.

AT LAST, HE CLOSED HIS EYES, ALLOWING HIMSELF TO BE COMPLETELY DRAGGED INTO HER BODY, INTO HER WORLD

"Follow me," Anna said. Unceremoniously, the two crawled up the stairs, to the master bedroom which Vanya had previously only seen in photographs. The police must have taken everything, because now all that stood was a dresser and a bed. The sheets appeared to be new.

"Is this the same —" Vanya began.

Before he could finish, Anna reached up to kiss him, her hands running up alongside his back, nails scraping against his softened muscle. Surrendering to his desire, Vanya felt his back hitting the mattress, watching as Anna climbed on top of him, her beautiful fingers circling every inch of his body. Sound after sound escaped from his lips, until at last, he closed his eyes, allowing himself to be completely dragged into her body, into her world.

Vanya did not remember falling asleep, yet he awoke to the sight of the sun just beginning to rise above the horizon, a soft amber light washing across the room. A warm breeze blew through the white curtains, the first sign of spring. It took Vanya a moment to realize where he was, to sense the presence of the women lying beside him. Lifting his head slowly, he looked over at the body on the other side of the bed, trying his best not to make a sound. He was surprised to find Anna already awake, her gaze directed out the window at the emerging sun. Noticing the movement beside her, she turned to meet his eyes.

"I'm free," Anna whispered.

"That you are," Vanya replied, unable to suppress a smile. "The world is yours."

Anna returned the smile. "The world is mine." She tipped her head back, staring at the ceiling of the bedroom. "Thank you, Vanya," she whispered.

"I did nothing."

"No," she replied, her head turning sharply. Her eyes were serious. "You saved me."

For once, Vanya did not know what to say.

Anna suddenly let out a small chuckle. "I have to ask, though," she said, her voice taking on a childish innocence.

"Ask what?"

"Well, how was my performance?

At these words, Vanya felt the sweat on the back of his neck beginning to chill, prickling his still-flushed skin. Any sense of lightness he had previously felt began to dissipate.

"Your performance?"

"What I'm trying to ask," Anna started, her voice still so delicate, "is if you were convinced."

Perhaps it was the knowledge of what had happened in the bed he was lying in, or perhaps it was the knowledge that Katerina was waiting for him at home, but there, as Anna spoke to him, Vanya suddenly felt unbearably chained to this world.

"I think I ought to leave, Anna," he whispered, quickly moving to get out of bed. Anna stayed as she was, her uninterested gaze following as Vanya scrambled to collect his things. After ensuring he had everything, Vanya moved towards the door, slowly pushing it open. Before he could stop himself, before he could think better of it, he turned over his shoulder, fielding a final look at the tiny body enveloped in a sea of white sheets.

Anna caught his eye, but no words left her mouth.

* * *

It was a typical summer night in Moscow, a humid heat radiating from the cracked cement.

Earlier that week, three front row tickets to *Firebird* had appeared in the mailbox of Ivan Petrovich, accompanied by a handwritten note of gratitude. Katerina picked up one of the tickets, running her thumb over the glossy paper.

"That's kind of her," Katerina said, a hint of mockery present.

Vanya said nothing in response.

"And I suppose you will want to go?"

He had not seen Anna since that night. After returning home in the morning, clothes wrinkled and hands trembling, Vanya had immediately gone upstairs to Katerina, throwing himself at the foot of their shared bed and describing a night of reckless drinking that had left him alone and asleep inside an old bar. Katerina had looked at him, watching him beg for her forgiveness, until she finally cut him off with a voice completely free of feeling.

"So you won?," was all she had asked.

"Yes."

And so, the two continued on as most families did, putting on a performance when possible and falling silent when it all became too much.

"I'm sure it will be a fine performance," Vanya finally replied, glancing at the note on the table, the words looping together in a perfect cursive. He understood what refusing to go would signify to Katerina. Anna had, it seemed, forced his hand once more, luring him back into her beautiful world. "Maybe Darya will like *Firebird* more than *Swan Lake*."

That was how Vanya found himself walking up the stairs to the grand entrance of the Bolshoi, a place he had vowed never to come to again. A thin trickle of sweat seeped through his white cotton undershirt. Amidst his guilt and agitation, he could not stop the endless cycle of images from playing in his mind: Anna on stage, Anna in the court room, Anna on top of him, looking at him, looking through him. He could not stop the pressure building up in his chest, spreading to his neck and down to his stomach, penetrating the inner corner of his being.

"Mister Kozlov?" called out a short, stocky man from the top of the stairs.

Vanya reached him first, while Katerina and Darya trailed behind.

"Yes," Vanya responded, looking back as his wife helped their daughter ascend the stairs, each step posing a significant challenge to her small legs. "That is me."

"Welcome to the Bolshoi, sir. I'm here to take you to your seats."

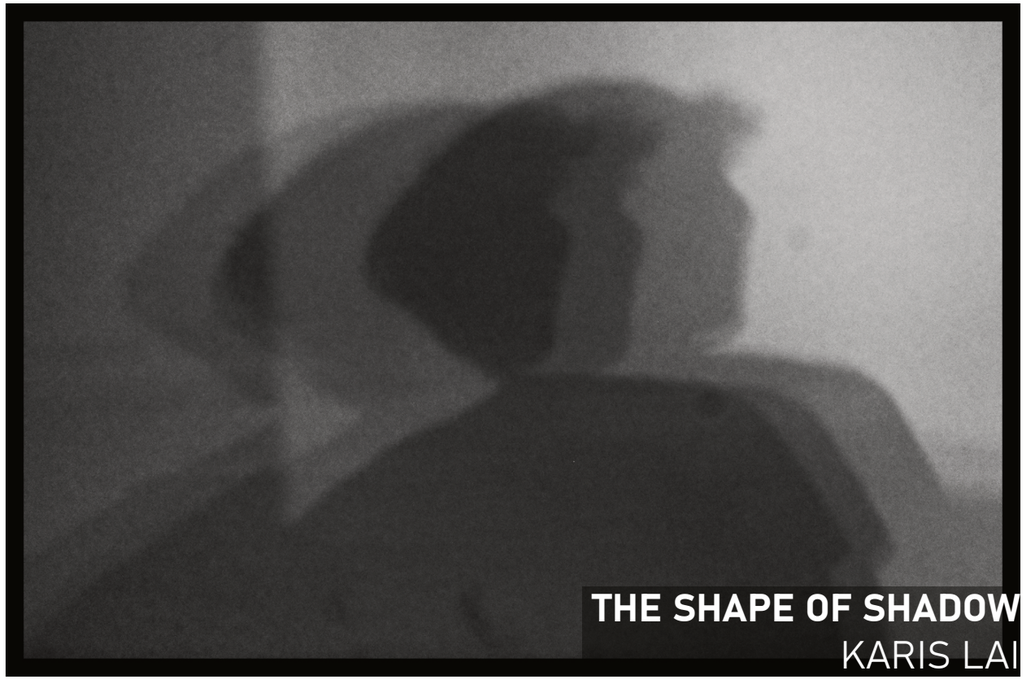
Always preferring an elevated view, Vanya had never thought to buy tickets in the front row. He had always felt that sitting so close would ruin the illusion of the stage being its own world. Now, sitting just 20 feet from the curtains, Vanya ran his eyes across every detail of the impressive set, acquainting himself with the plaster scene before him. He noticed the tiny, almost imperceptible

paint cracks lining the bottom of the set, the faded gray skid marks scattered across the floor. It was still beautiful, yes, but as Vanya looked at the stage, not as it appeared but as it really was, all sense of wonder seemed to dissipate, replaced instead by a dull sterility.

Finally, the lights dimmed. Once again, a single flute spoke out from the orchestra, followed by the soft words of the harp. Once again, a sea of dancers flooded the stage, decorated in pale yellow costumes, their long legs extending into the air with a mechanical charm. Vanya watched tensely, his heart pounding, waiting for the inevitable arrival of the firebird.

And suddenly, there she was, a thousand scarlet feathers covering her body. Anna walked slowly onto the stage, one foot in front of the other, head turned downwards and arms curved in an upside down *u*. At once, the snare hit, and with it, her head and arms sharply snapped up, opening herself up to the audience, to the world. A rupture of applause came from the crowd. Unceasing, unending. Anna lowered her chin slightly, her eyes moving across the audience, taking in the scene, until at last, they stopped on the pale and unmoving object sitting right before her.

Her lips curled upwards, blood red and cruel.





LADY IN GREEN
NHU CHU

THE LAST TIGER FROM JOSEON

SARAH JUN

My mom called me today with another
tale of the crazy auntie at church
who coveted my family's fortune like
a dragon insatiable, eyeing another's hoard.

The tale of the crazy auntie at church begins
with her two daughters, perfect and doll-like,
ever the dragon insatiable, eyeing another's hoard.
She craved vines of Ivy, a task insurmountable,

from her daughters, perfectly doll-like—
it was as if they had to wrangle the sun.
She craved vines of Ivy, a task insurmountable,
like capturing a tiger with their bare hands.

It was as if they had to to wrangle the sun, and
when they failed, as they were meant to, she
asked if they had at least captured a tiger.
But they were bare-handed and heartsore,

having failed, as they were meant to, and
resentment festered, like long-open wounds.
They were bare-handed and heartsore,
wanted to be freed from their mother's claws.

Resentment festered, like long-open wounds.
So sad, my mom says, because she loves them, she does, yet they
wanted to be freed from their mother's claws while she tried to
carve a path of success in this strange land

So sad, my mom says, because she loves them, she does, ever the
protector and provider, pushing and pulling them down the path of
success she carved into this strange land, where nothing is
guaranteed and everything must be fought for,

Ever the protector and provider, pushing and pulling,
scrambling for land in this new empire,
where nothing is guaranteed and everything must be fought for, for
the old one has been drained of life and riches,

scrambling for land in this new empire, and
all the beasts have been executed or fled,
for the old one has been drained of life and riches,
and nothing new can grow in tear-salted lands.

All the beasts have been executed or fled,
hunting a future they were never meant to catch.
Nothing new can grow in tear-salted lands, so
their children hunger, starved by their own mother.

BUTTER PECAN

SARAI ABRAM

CW: mentions of racism

Vanilla ice cream was forbidden in our house. While shucking peas with your grandmother in the shade of the spindly pecan tree limbs, she told me that butter pecan ice cream was created because we weren't allowed to have anything purely white. Its brown is the color of your skin when the sun finds it favorable, and its smoothness is reminiscent of us easing the knots on our backs with each twist of the churn. When asking for the recipe, I became the subject of her laughter. "Pain and love will give you the measurements."

2 large eggs:

One morning, I woke up with two large eggs on my chest, and the duty to scare any men away from their lust was thrust upon me.

Your father reminded me of a teaspoon,

head thick with hair,

body thin and awkward, like its stem.

Whenever I felt his gaze on me, I wondered whether his pupils dilated.

But this, I could never tell.



MOM PAINTED II
JOSELYN LWIGALE

1 teaspoon vanilla extract:

He was nothing familiar and comforting,

and to say his kindness knew no boundaries,

would be untrue.

However, his breath became a new flavor in my lungs.
I was in love.

One day you, my sweet child, will know what it feels like.

To feel so invigorated in a body that reminds you of how you are aging.

1 tablespoon butter:

The yellow sun always dawned on us,

smoothing out everything

until we felt we had melted into each other.

When the draft notice came, I cried.

When the military men came knocking on my door to deliver the news of his death, I cried

harder. It was as if I had been the one shot down in the jungle at night,

forever drowning in brown and caked mud.

⅓ cup chopped pecans:

I'd been brutally cut into salty and almost bitter pieces

thrust into something so wonderfully severing

and sweet

by giving life to something so small in you.

1 ½ cups half-and-half cream:

This ingredient can be used to describe you.

Your likeness is so rich and heavy,

almost luring me into a slumber every time our paths cross.

I love you for this.

It's almost like he breathes every day through your every movement.

You are something I'll always need.

½ cup heavy cream:

It's been years since the last time I saw his face,

but as you mix the ingredients beside me,

I watch the colors melt from white to light brown

I see.

Every shell that has been cracked,

everything that has been thrown has led me to what is uniquely mine.

I don't crave another flavor more.

Vanilla ice cream is something you're allowed to eat now. I can't dictate what you favor, or what type of ice cream you'll craft. Maybe you'll change the recipe, or opt for buying your dessert from the grocery store up the street. These are the choices you unconsciously make, but right now we mix in tandem.

You beside me.

Me beside you.

Stir until it feels right.





WE THINK SO MUCH ABOUT LOVING WITHOUT LOVING

LACOLE YANG

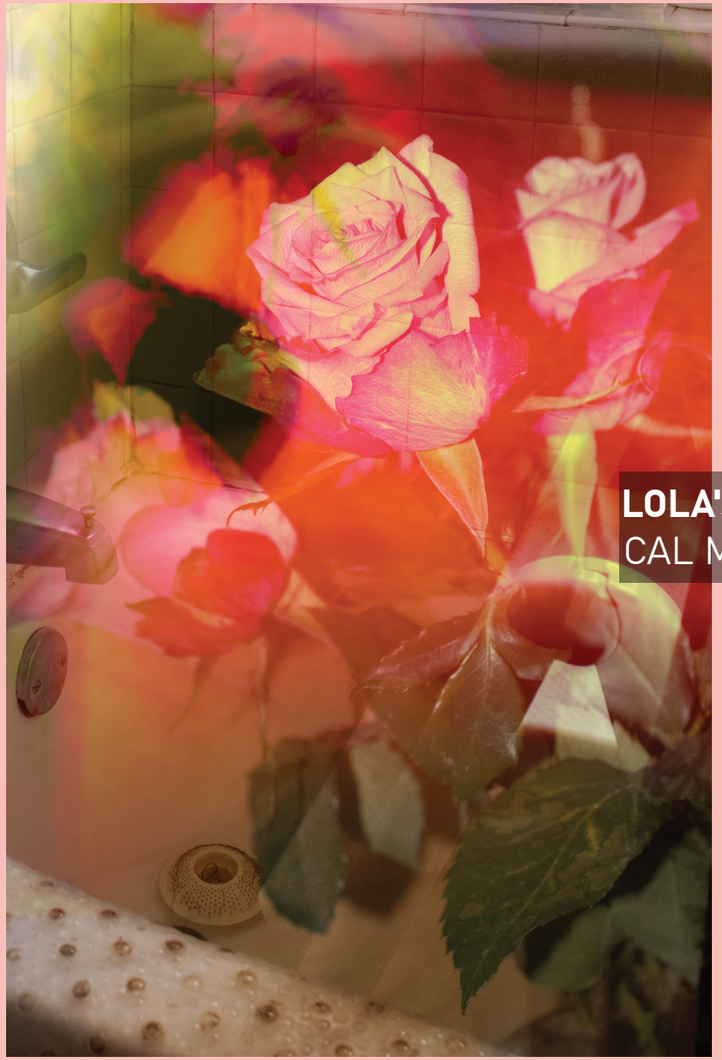
CW: mentions of animal death

Those fragile bird feelings are asking to be kicked
out of the nest. Baby birds, still wet, are born empty,
their mouths begging to learn the right yearnings. Until fed,
they're unaware
of bile's bitterness, of how being loved is a lake
clogged and covered in algae,
blocking the sky's reflection.
Spit moistens their cheeks
from how much they're screaming.
The dirt cradles its collection of bones, humming a lullaby
with its worm-tunnel lungs, oozing with this morning's rain,
supplicating the mother
to feed her bundles of soaked fur and stray ankles.

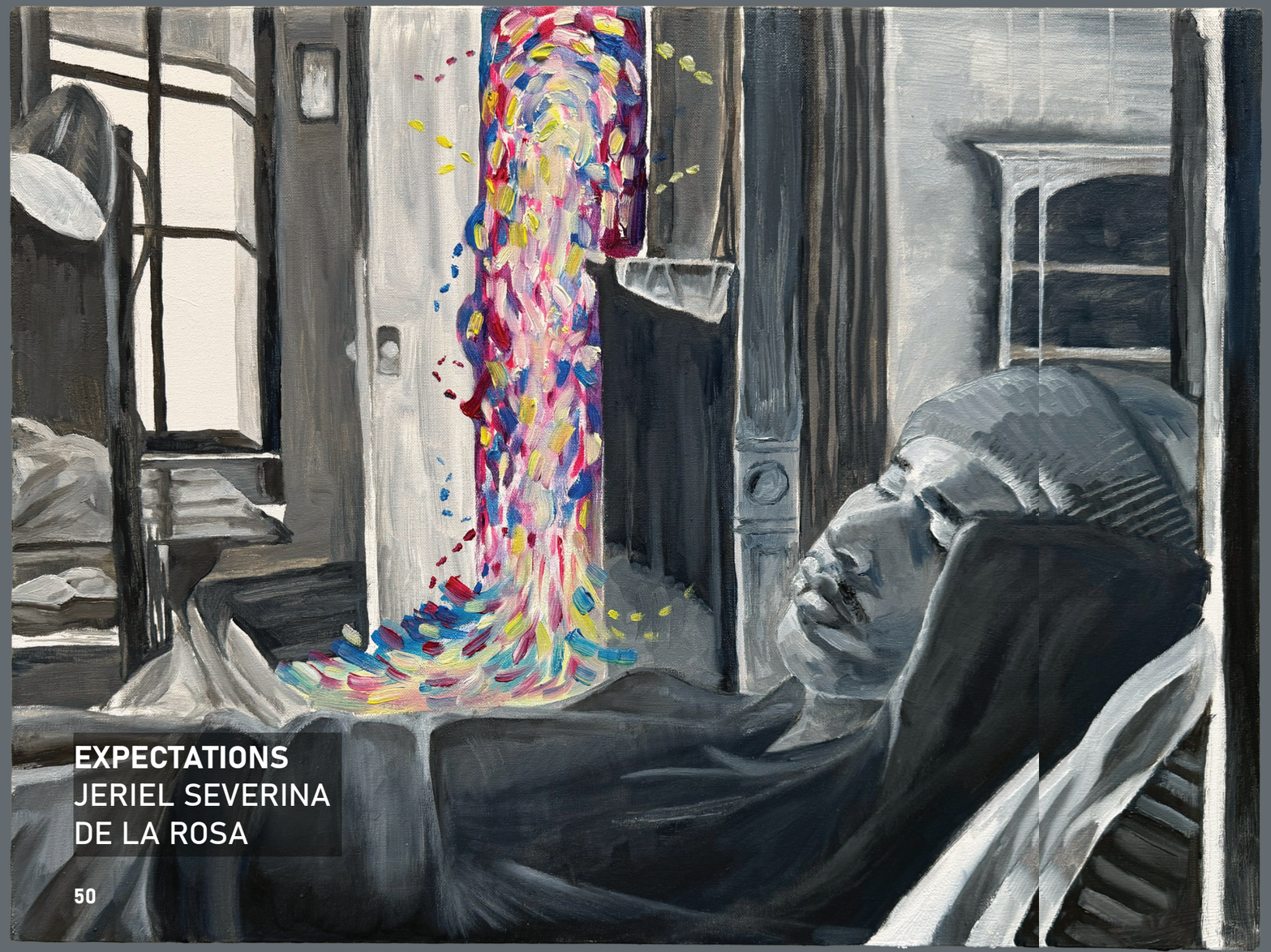
She craves to be in the clouds
and knows that to be free
is to be eaten. Flight brings her to worms.
There are bigger mouths
than hers hidden in the earth. Eyes on the sun,

LITTLE WORLD
CATHERYN LIANG

she teaches her brood to recite the sound of wind
blurring through their dry feathers.
They fly
through the mud and mistake
decay for symbiosis. They're sated
by silt, having tasted nothing else. Eyelids sealed shut,
necks tucked down
as if in sleep, wings crusted
with streaks of brown, they're nourished by the pleasure
of filling something else.
Thankful for the nest splitting her
and the ground, the mother thinks
they were better off starving.



LOLA'S GARDEN
CAL MASCARDO



EXPECTATIONS
JERIEL SEVERINA DE LA ROSA

THE MULE

AVALON HOGANS

CW: mentions of suicide

My great-grandfather committed suicide. I don't know when. I don't know how. And I don't know where. But I imagine it was Florida. My Nana, Valynda, was his firstborn child. She's from Florida. So I imagine he's from Florida. And I imagine he killed himself there.

The Florida I know is sunny, salty, and deep. Summer barbecue. Blue water. Family reunions. Motown, jazz, hip hop, and those colorful horns and drums that we grooved to, that covered the backyard like a canopy. Those grooves shielded us from all we knew and all we didn't. The orange hot sun, juicing us down. We all ate and drank and moved amongst the juice like we were never forbidden fruit.

Florida gave me conch fritters. Crispy fried, mushy-filled patties of shellfish that go down with a little bit of spice. Pigeon peas and rice, the orangey-brown grains with greenish-beige beans. Fried okra, crunchy and slimy. Kool-Aid and lemonade and liquid sugar that stains the tongue. Barbecue that's saucy and spicy and a little bit sweet. What I'd give to be eight years old again, running around with sauce on my cheek and a baby back rib between my pointer and thumb.

Florida gave me cousins. Little Black girls and Black and white girls and Black and Caribbean girls running around and giggling and letting that heat mess up all those hours our aunties spent in our hair. Back home, I loved it when Nana put my hair in two long plaits and smoothed down my curls so sleek that you couldn't tell how curly they were. But in Florida, I loved my

curls because my cousins had curls too.

I'm from Houston, Texas. I've never lived in Florida. But those summers there as a child, specifically in Fort Lauderdale, taught me what Nikki Giovanni would call "Black Wealth." Houston is an important place. I live in Freedmen's Town, Houston's first Black historical district. Once a Black-owned neighborhood built in 1865 by freed slaves from Galveston, it is now a gentrified site with a non-profit conservancy.

I love Houston. I love the soul food in Fifth Ward. The Nigerian food in Southwest Houston. The Chinese food in Bellaire. I love the sweater-weather winter. I love the girl I met in fourth grade from Third Ward, whom I get to see every school break. I love the coffee shops in Montrose. The art galleries in EaDo. I love running by Buffalo Bayou.

But there's a tug in my chest for that Florida city I've never lived in. A green eye for my cousins who see each other every weekend and get their favorite foods from home. My heart drops like an anchor when I imagine what my life would've been like if I lived on the same street as my kin. If I had had the option to kiss my Nana's and Aunties' foreheads every night.

MY HEART DROPS LIKE AN ANCHOR WHEN I IMAGINE WHAT MY LIFE WOULD'VE BEEN LIKE IF I LIVED ON THE SAME STREET AS MY KIN.

Nana is a light in Florida. She relocated to the suburbs of Houston shortly after I was born. But when she returns to Florida, she wears all the colors on her face and laughs out of nowhere when nothing's funny, but everything's alright. That's the gift of reunion.

If my great-grandfather committed suicide in Florida, I wonder how long it took the summer sun to outcolor his cloud. I wonder if his sun was more orange, or yellow, or red. When did Nana get her laugh back? When did the canopy grooves go from a sultry sway to a lively jive?

Did grief ever live in Florida? Or did my family practice what was passed down: working, eating, and grooving with no time to say what we wanna say. Cuz we were taught to endure more and feel

less. It's historic. It's hereditary. It's survival.

Big Ma, my great-grandfather's wife/Nana's mom, used to beat her children and grandchildren with a switch. Oftentimes, her switch was a long, crooked tree branch she'd make the perpetrating child fetch for their own punishment. But sometimes the switch was her belt. Sometimes the switch was her hand. Sometimes the switch was her silence.

Knowing Big Ma beat her children makes me wonder if my great-grandfather did too. And that makes me wonder who beat him. Likely either a white man or a Black father. Beating is a cycle, a curse, easier to run to than away from.

I wonder what my great-grandfather saw or felt or remembered that forced him to confront his fatal pains. I've asked Nana about him. She told me he liked baseball and was a hardworking man. A father of six. And that is all she told me. And that is all I know.

I don't even know his first name. But Nana's maiden name is Davis, so his last name was Davis. Grandpa Davis.

I imagine Grandpa Davis lying dead in his kitchen. Gone away with everything he knew and never shared. I imagine he shot himself. I imagine him spilling unspoken history across the plank tiles.

I imagine that as a father, husband, and laborer, he was stressed. I imagine as a middle-aged Black man in 1940s Florida, his parents were likely sharecroppers, and their parents were likely slaves.

I wonder if, being that close to slavery, he could still feel the whip lashes on his back, and his spirit lost somewhere between the Atlantic and Coastal West Africa.

I wonder.

I imagine Grandpa Davis raised his family in a shotgun-style home and worked hard to pay for it. I imagine Grandpa Davis was more than a father and husband and laborer.

Today I know him as a myth. But perhaps his story reveals he was more. Maybe he was a mule, a

shovel, a metal rod. He could've been a scarecrow. A canary. A stained white cloak. A ghost. A cornfield. Or an oil rig. Maybe he was a reader of the Bible. Maybe he loved to read.

I imagine all he was and all he held was spilling out on that kitchen floor. I imagine all he was and all he held was too deep to be cleaned, so it stained all of us.

They say you call it a shotgun house cuz if you shoot a shotgun from the front door, it'll go all the way straight to the back.

I imagine the front door was the truth, and Grandpa Davis was standing at the back.

I imagine it hit him straight through the head. And when his six children came home, they saw a 6-foot, 200-lb fatherhusband bleeding out on the floor with a shotgun in his hands. And they would never speak of their father, and Big Ma would never speak of her husband, ever again.

But I, seventy-two years later, would think about him from time to time. Too scared to ask anyone about him, but too curious to let the thought fly by. Grandpa Davis would become my muse, my ghost. A reason behind my writing. A force behind my studies. The void. The nudge. The soft whisper in my heart telling me to pursue African American Studies in college. And in every violent story, every ancestral resilience, I would try to find a part of him. Or maybe, a part of me.



WHIRL
AMY WANG

AN INTERVIEW WITH KB BROOKINS

EDITED BY ADAM LEFF, ALEENA AHMAD, ANGELA AN, LILY HARVEY, SETSUNA JIANG, MILES ROBINSON



Every year, R2 sits down with authors, poets, and creatives to get a better sense of the vibrant literary community in Houston and beyond. In the fall of 2025, we had the privilege of sitting down with Lambda award-winning poet and author KB Brookins. Brookins is the author of two poetry collections, Freedom House and How to Identify Yourself with a Wound, and, most recently, their memoir *Pretty*. Brookins' work resists characterization–it includes poetry, prose, photography, and more. Their work tackles complex and difficult topics with care, intentionality and, most critically, joy.

We interviewed them over zoom after reading *Pretty* and picked their brain about their craft, their Texan identity, their activism, and more. We have edited this interview for brevity and clarity.

R2: Your new memoir, Pretty, won the Lambda Award for Transgender Nonfiction. What was that moment like for you in learning that you received it?

KB: So I learned in real time—not beforehand. I had convinced myself that I didn't win. With these awards, I try not to put too much on them. But I think the writer's journey is not about winning something! Sometimes you write good stuff and it doesn't get recognized. And like, there are so many things to pay attention to in this "attention economy." But it does feel nice on those occasions when you do get recognized because it is so rare.

R2: You seem to experience a lot of influence from media and music. What's your experience with that interplay between your art and other peoples' art?

KB: Before I was a writer, I was a music fan, and I come from a musical family, surrounded by it. The storytelling of music, the glint of emotion in their voice, always drew me in. I aspire for my reader to feel like that, as if it was a sonic and literary experience in one. So that musical impulse started young and is enmeshed with my personal writing. I write cultural criticism, and I see art as a reflection of the current times. I'm really interested in that as a reader, or that exposure to a new perspective makes it more possible to you. I teach my students that the media they ingest says something about them and about the world.

R2: Among all the different forms of media, what is the unique value of literature?

KB: Literature is a self-archive. When I was writing *Pretty*, I thought about how early in my transition, I was really trying to find a book like it, and I couldn't. Our individual experiences deserve to be reflected in literature. Libraries can be purveyors of the past, and we can learn a lot about a period through the creative writing of the time. This medium allows us writers to capture our experience and let readers imagine it for themselves.

R2: Who did you expect Pretty to speak to the most? What's the process of that intentional writing?

KB: I think the audience of this book is whoever needs to get something from it. But I would also say this book is best reserved for readers who are willing to be patient and to look up stuff when they don't know. *Pretty* is specific to the trans demographic, and even that community's slang, for

example, can have different meanings to different people. Before this memoirs, I wrote poetry collections, and we have this understanding that you gotta trust your reader to go on the journey with you. And they might not always understand what's going on, but they will stick with you regardless. So I feel very heartened when I do hear from readers who tell me that they liked *Pretty* because it feels like an experience that they hadn't seen depicted in literature before. Simultaneously, I've also been heartened by readers who I have nothing in common with who reach out to say they got something from this. So *Pretty* is for anyone reading it in good faith.

R2: How do you think being from Texas or from the South informs and enriches you, or shapes how your work comes out?

KB: This is really a place-based book. I don't think you can carbon copy these words and it works for me being from Ohio, and that's intentionally so. The place that I come from very much informs the way that I speak. The way that I think about how the world works, especially being from a place that did not have a lot of queer and trans people that I grew up around. I think this book would be very different if I grew up in some metropolitan city that had an LGBTQ center, for example. I think Texas also influences my level of not being judgy. I write about a lot of hard things in this book, but I try to write them with grace. I try to write them with an understanding of like, "Yeah, this person really hurt my feelings at this moment and I understand why. Because x, y, z, because this state that we both grew up in." I'm not trying to excuse harm, but I'm trying to contextualize it in this book. I'm quite protective of the place that I come from, because I know that there are good people everywhere, including in Texas.

R2: How did your background in poetry affect how you write prose, how did you make the transition from writing poetry to writing prose?

KB: I do less handholding than some of my prose native friends who only have ever written fiction or nonfiction or screenwriting. I'm not afraid to ask a reader to be lost for a little bit, for a minute. Maybe I can only really tell you about this experience in a metaphor and I'm just going to expect you to be okay with that. Or, I'm going to do weird stuff where I interstitch song lyrics with prose, which I do in a couple places in *Pretty*. Or, I'm going to do this kind of breakdown of a form where it has prose in the middle. I feel like because poetry was the first creative writing form that I wrote in, I just take more creative liberties and I'm a bit more fearless about it.

When people think about poetry, they think about brevity, and they think about every word counting, and I try to keep that spirit even when I'm writing prose. In *Pretty*, this book is less than 300 pages, because at a point I was, like, "KB, you kind of need to shut up. You're over-exaggerating." That was my plight in the editorial process, and really trying to get things to their bare necessities. I think it's a poetic impulse.

As far as making the transfer, I don't know if I've transferred. I still write poetry. I still publish poetry. There is this idea sometimes in creative writing where you have to choose one genre, and I'm like, what's a genre but the drawing of a line? Those lines get more and more blurry as time goes on. I think I started writing prose for the intents and purposes of *Pretty* because I first tried to write it as a poetry collection, but it just wasn't working. I felt like I was hiding, which you can do very easily, when you're writing poetry. The "I" isn't me. The speaker is not me. It's fantasy. I think there actually is something powerful in me just saying this happened, because I don't want to relegate my Black trans Texan life to just fantasy.

I think there is something to be said about how I could not find a nonfiction account of the life that I've lived in the stacks. Toni Morrison once said that nonfiction is like betrayal of the self. I'm like, yeah, comma, and, it's a betrayal of the self in service of the truth. The truth was really something I wanted to find.

So I started writing prose and reading other people's prose to figure out what it was, and talking, and taking classes, and so on, and so this book happened.

R2: There's a lot of intersections between the different art forms in the book including poetry, prose, and the visual art. What is that process like for you, and what does it mean to bring back photos?

KB: There is something very beautiful about non-normative bodies in literature, in physical media such as books, because when people think of bodies that are presented to them, they are often a specific type: thin, no blemishes. You don't often see the before picture before someone gets all cut up.

And I wanted to show, especially in these harder moments in the book, that I was just a kid. In the moments where I included photos, the intention was to jolt a reader. Maybe imagine this kind of

face, imagine a non-normative body and how this body still deserves to be free, especially in the piece in the book called "How I Learned to Love My Chest." I think gender dysphoria can feel very ominous to people, but with the addition of the photos, I'm trying to make it more regular.

When we think of surgeries, we think of mutilation, and that word is very overused when it comes to trans people in the media. These photos are aiming to narrativize my life and say that this is actually a necessary experience, an experience that led to happiness.

R2: How do you decide on the order of where you place each essay and poem in the book?

KB: The poems and the prose are telling their own individual stories, and I wanted the poems that come before the prose to wet your appetite for what I was going to talk about. In "How I learned to love my chest," for example, the poem right before that one is "I'm not FTM, I am," that piece is depicting hard times. This is like wetting a reader's appetite for something that is not so doom and gloom. It is defining someone's body on their own terms, even though they are both going about that in different ways. They both do have that spirit of self acceptance and being able to define yourself. For so much of the book up until this point, I'm telling you about times where someone tried to tell me who I was. And in this particular piece, I am taking a selfish action in order to have a body that feels more mine. So I think the poems are compliments to the prose. So really the ordering mechanism was: what relates to what? And what kind of story am I trying to tell?

R2: How did you make the choice of using really specific line breaks and strikethroughs throughout the book?

KB: A vital book that helped me understand line break is The Art of the Poetic Line by James Longenbach. It tells me the different possibilities of line breaks. There are so many options, right? And then I applied those options to the different poems.

The strikethroughs come from a similar place: self-editing, and self-correction. Think of a Freudian slip—when you let something slip that you really meant to say, then take it back. Some of those line breaks are invoking that feeling. Other times, they are trying to get out of the habit of living on someone else's terms and trying to get into my own perspective. I'm showing multiple possibilities of what I wrote there and then what I landed on. These are the thoughts that we would usually keep in our heads. I'm externalizing them through that strikethrough. I'm always trying to find, what is it that I'm trying to say? And sometimes what you're trying to say— you strike it through. I know probably everybody in here has experienced when somebody has really upset you and you want to cuss them out, right? But you self edit before you open your mouth. So I'm showing you that kind of self editing process.

R2: Your memoir is extremely deep and meaningful. Is there a specific poem or prose that was most meaningful to you?

KB: I'm legally obligated to say it was all meaningful. But that answer changes as the days do. There's a delay between writing and publishing. Once it comes out, your concerns have changed. Right now, what's most meaningful to me is the experience of being seen, across the poems, prose, and photography. The book is telling you about times when I didn't feel seen. Having the book out in the world, and being able to talk to people about it, is what has created meaning.

R2: Your book contains many painful memories. When revisiting and writing these moments, what supports you or encourages you to continue?

KB: I feel very blessed to have had mentors throughout my life that have really kept me on the straight and narrow. In high school, I was in an after-school poetry society where it was me and all of my friends sitting in a classroom like y'all, talking about poems. And a lot of the poems were bad, TBH. But occasionally it would get down to the real. So that classroom was really my first container for vulnerability, a level of vulnerability that I didn't feel comfortable accessing at home. And the leader of that society was really my first mentor to tell me, you're good at this, you should keep going.

And so I did. I took a little bit of a break to try to get a real job, in college I tried to major in something else. But then I ended up changing my major to creative writing because I took some intro to creative writing class that I honestly thought was going to be a blow-off class. And my professor was like, I think you could do this, you just got to keep working at it. I also had a few teachers that I really latched onto in undergraduate that wrote letters of recommendation for me when I was applying to grad school. A lot of my mentors have been friends that I've just made along the way. The beautiful thing about literature is it tethers you to other people who equally enjoy words like you do. So I keep taking classes, keep asking questions, and stay curious.

Writing this memoir was painful at times, and I had to be vulnerable enough to step away from the page and ask for help. I emailed friends who had written memoirs before me, asking, what is this? What have I gotten myself into? I got through it by asking for help, and by staying around people I admire who are doing the work I want to do. It helps to have people around who care about the same things you do. I have a little bit of a competitive spirit, like, my friend just dropped another novel and I'm like, I'll make sure that I work on my stuff too.

R2: Is there anything that you wish you could change, include, or exclude from the memoir?

KB: I don't know a writer, myself included, that wouldn't change something. But this is the best book that I could have written at the time. The trade-off was: I could have kept working on this book and made it into a refined piece of marble, or I could have just let it be a photograph of time. For me, this book is 2021–22, made in between Zoom meetings, my COVID project.

Right after it came out, I obsessed on the sentence level. Like, when you turn something in and suddenly see so many typos. But I got over it by starting to write another book. I tell students that the best way to stop tinkering is to write something else. Trust that with the time you had, you did the absolute best that you could. I'm still chasing the feeling I had at fifteen when I wrote my first poem, that's what I reach for in the work.

R2: How does art tie into advocacy for you and vice versa?

KB: A workshop that I teach is this workshop called Freedom House. And it is exactly the thing you mentioned there, melding literary practice with social justice. Ultimately, I constantly ask myself how I can be useful? I found looking at what other people have done in the past, like the black arts movement of the 1960s. A lot of black artists across different kinds of disciplines were really making art about the times, now you really can't talk about the civil rights movement without talking about the artistic output of that.

I've done open mics about specific social issues in the past. So I think a lot about how I can make my art useful, how I can push the needle, even if it's in the incremental way of donating $1,000 to this place because I sold some zines for Palestinian families. I'd say "send me a receipt that says that you have donated to this family, and then I will send you a signed copy of this book". So finding creative ways to really put money in people's pockets when possible, spreading the word about an issue, using the platform of art to wake people up, really.

R2: What kind of stories do you want to see moving forward?

KB: What I would continue to like to see is more people from the city that I grew up in writing their stories, because surely I'm not the only person there who has a story worth telling. We got enough of being sad in New York City novels, no offense. But people are sad in Marfa, people are sad in Houston, people have breakups in Alpine. I just want to see more diversity of location and people seeing where they come from as locations worth placing something in. If you're writing, you know, zombies and whatnot, why can't they be zombies in weird places like Marfa.

I also would love to see more works in translation in general. If y'all don't know, the US has the lowest readership from places that are not the US, so I want more people to read stuff from other countries.

R2: What's something that you wish you got asked more?

KB: Really just craft related stuff, which I appreciate y'all asking me about today, sometimes like I do interviews and they expect it to be a free-for-all. And I'm like, I do have a book, I would love to talk about the book. I think, you know, it's a genre bendy book and it's also a form bendy book, like I have letters and stuff in there and I want people to ask me about the letters, so yeah, just craft related stuff.

R2: Awesome, and then just to wrap up, we'd love to hear sort of what's next from you and what you're working on now.

KB: Yeah, I'm writing words. I have to be super secretive because I could tell you and then it could change literally next week, you know, so it's still in that building phase of being birthed so that's where I am with new work right now.

R2: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us, this has been such a pleasure.

KB: Yeah, thank you, I appreciate y'all, have a good day, make good decisions.



THE THINKER
CHLOÉ SERNA

THE WINGS OF A BIRD

MINA SCHEPMANN

A woodpecker flew
through the window

of my bedroom and perched
itself on my desk, singing

a dirge lamenting its
children lost to flying

Their fragile frames into
closed windows designed

the bodies they deem lesser
than themselves. I was conflicted

when we started talking about
the trolley problem in a class

because most people switched
the track, killed the person on

their own, and I realized how
sad it must be to die alone.



AND I DIDN'T EVEN LIKE HER

AMY SUO

How it feels when I can't write.

Knowing that, together, we built this land, this home,

Say this place, a word, a page, say it's late, but lately,

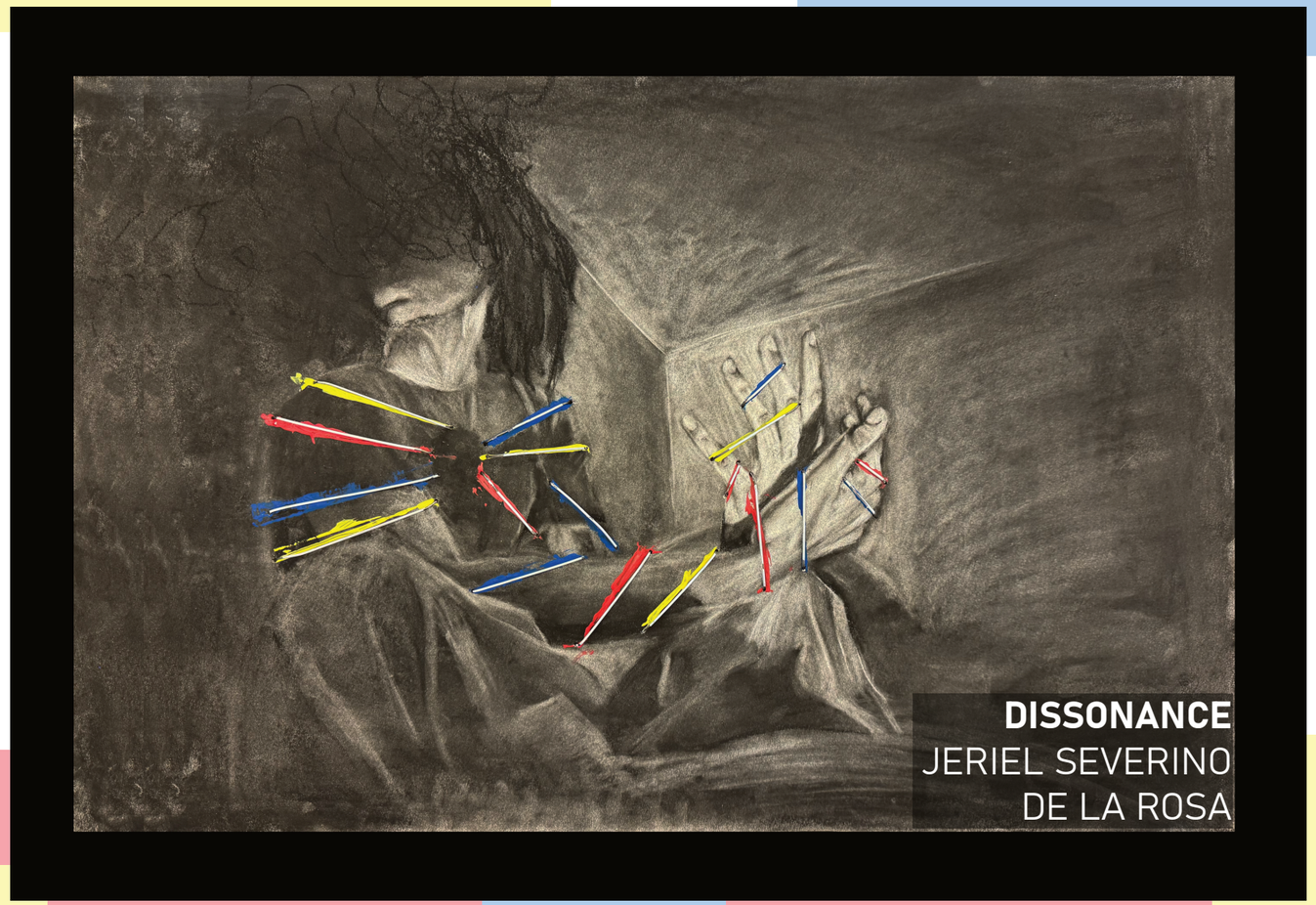
I've been feeling like I don't belong here.

Where is here? Now, say

"I write because I am compelled to, because it interests me, because what I cannot say, I can write, instead, as imperfect as I can."

But how can I say that when I can't even write,

when I know the feeling of betrayal, [even though]



DISSONANCE
JERIEL SEVERINO DE LA ROSA

Say salt, say fault, blame, or amend.
Mend? Oh, hand, hold still with the needle
above a page blank, because thats
what friends do to be friends [unfeeling]
and unalone, and unafraid of loss
until the end of times lost. What can be lost
with an emptiness like pathetic apathy
[Of eyes closed and unseeing]
Say nothing, say no, no, yes, say yes.
Because I always say no,
and it has never quite worked in the past,
and the dust on the mirror is still there.
So now, say yes, yes, both imagined and real,
so that when I lay in her bed [or these beds or that],
I won't feel like I don't belong.
When dawn rises, I will no longer remember how to
Say no or know
how it feels to write.



WASHING
SASHA MILLER

ZOTEHUELA LITERARIA
CHLOÉ SERNA



ODE ON BLACK DICTIONARIES

OLAOLUWAPO OLADIPO

CW: depictions of racism and classism

A-word is how it begins, with Ain't slinking in from the margins, a grammar
outlaw, a tongue that refused its chains,
begets *Baby Mama*, *Backtalk*, *Bless your heart*, and *Bruh*, each
syllable a rebellion, a syntax stitched from scraps,
the way my auntie used *fixin'* like a prayer—
language not taught, but conquered in the cotton heat
of kitchens where women stirred both sugar and sorrow,
as American as the lash, the lies, the ledger erased.
I'm leafing through this living tongue, its pages thick
with spit and gospel, a mouth that was once property
now mastering property's tongue, remixing it to taste—
a gumbo of grammar, a hushpuppy of verbs,
verbs that run, verbs that flee, verbs that fly.

The book says "improper," but improper built this nation.

I keep the dictionary beside Spillers like a secret spellbook, each

word a ghost, each rule a gate.

To say *Mama's Baby*, *Papa's Maybe* is to praise the syntax of absence, to

diagram the wound and call it sentence structure.

O language, you double-tongued trickster,

you said woman but meant womb,

you said slave but meant silenced,

you said property but meant pronoun denied.

Still, we learned to conjugate freedom:

I am. You is. We be.

And in that "be," the grammar trembles—

because it refuses to die, refuses to end in period,

a tense eternal, a verb that breathes like jazz.

My mama's English was a quilt,

stitched from what she wasn't supposed to know.

Her sentences swaggered, unbothered by red ink,

the kind that bled in schoolbooks but never stained her mouth.

She could curse in iambs, pray in broken subjunctives,

raise hell in perfect passive voice.

When she said, "I'm finna go," the whole world moved.

Call it Ebonics, call it vernacular, call it survival.

She called it Tuesday.

O English—cracked mirror, colonizer, chameleon—

How many mouths must you break before you call it music?

You are the megaphone and the muzzle,

the ship and the shore, the scar and the scripture.

Still, we tongue you back into sweetness,

turn you out, turn you loud, turn you ours.

We remix your rules like records,

Spin grammar into gospel, syntax into sass.

Every "ain't" a protest, every double negative a declaration.

We ain't never stopped talking, and we ain't 'bout to start now.

O mouth—mulatto cathedral, Creole engine,

sweetgum of code-switch and side-eye—

what have you not survived? You've swallowed slur and sermon,

spat out art, slang, and manifesto.

You are the grammar of the ungrammatical,

dictionary of the dispossessed,

archive of our mothers' thunder.

So let the Oxford burn politely on its polished shelf.

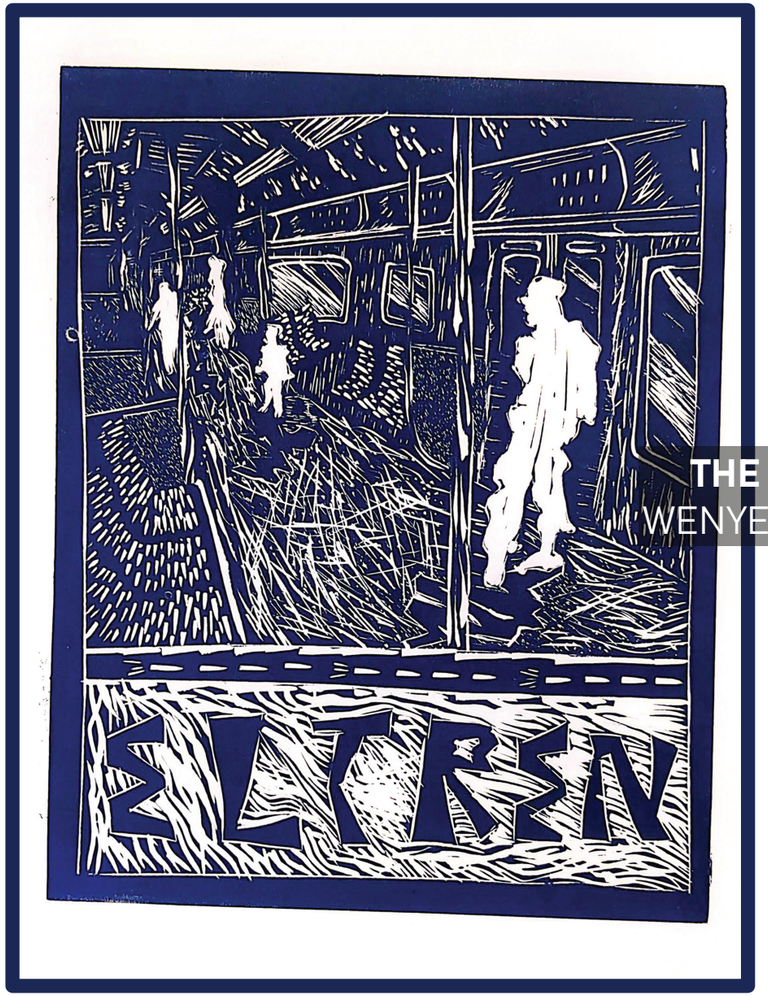
We've written our own gospel,

page by page, sentence by sin,

till every rule hums with what was once unspeakable,

and every word spells freedom in its phonetics.

O glossary of the unbroken tongue.



THE TRAIN
WENYE ZHOU

THE CROSSING

ABI KING

DAY ONE, HOUR ONE

This is the beginning of eternity.

The water is cold and black. He can only see his hands enter, pull, fall back out of sight somewhere around his waist. The bottom of the sea is invisible to him. His strokes are like a steady drumbeat; he goes forward with a calculated kind of anger. The rope, tied loosely around his waist, tugs and pinches mercilessly at him. Right now, it is aggravating. Later, when the exhaustion sets in, the small raft of supplies attached to it will save his life.

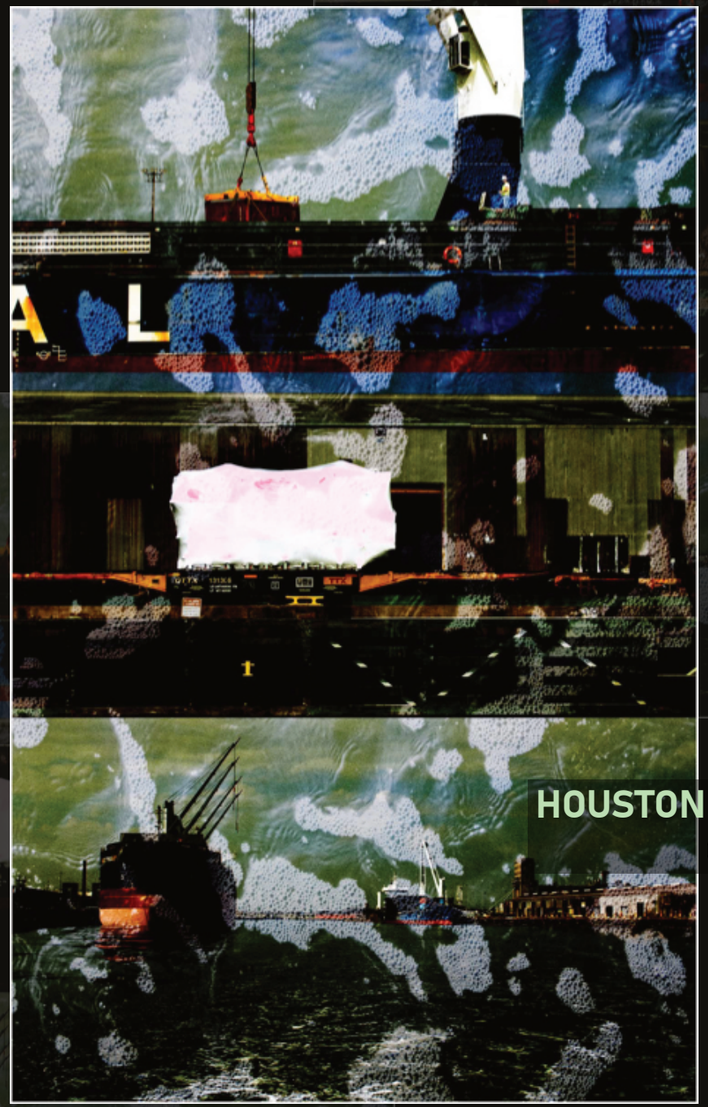
But for now, he is full of energy. The long swim seems doable, even if the logical part of his brain tells him it kills most people who attempt it. He is filled with fire, and he thinks it'll burn away the water before it kills him. He thinks most people underestimate the water, that it's there to smother you and drag you down where death waits. He thinks most people grow a fondness for the water in the years they spend training for this swim. They mistake that fondness for a two-sided friendship, a mutual understanding with the ocean. Forgetting that the water is apathetic and has the ultimate power over life and death.

This is why they died, but he will not.

He thinks of his sister and tries to forget.

DAY ONE, HOUR FOUR

He is in a rhythm now. He can only tell that time has passed from the change of the sun in



HOUSTON SHIP CHANNEL
CAL MASCARDO

the sky. The splash of his hands is hypnotic. A few notes from a song play repeatedly in the back of his head: the deep hum of a cello and a mournful violin, up and back down like waves rising and falling. He knows where this song is from and it reminds him of crushing grief and he wants it out of his head, but he is in a trance now. It will not leave.

When he swims, his brain becomes like a broken record, repeating the same thing again and again. The same agonizing notes, and with it a snapshot of a memory from long ago, printed in the back of his mind. He is young, maybe five, sitting at the kitchen table. The fluorescent lights burn above him. He is staring down at a piece of paper filled with numbers and letters that he doesn't understand. His sister sits behind him in this picture. She must have been helping him.

He doesn't want to think of his sister, but it would take too much mental energy to pull himself out of this trance now. To change the notes in his head, to change the picture he sees. So his sister is with him, a ghost haunting the water. Maybe her skeleton is down at the bottom of the ocean somewhere, on top of the bones of everyone else who died trying to complete The Crossing.

A new image comes to him suddenly: he is swimming over a giant graveyard. But no, that can't be right. His sister's funeral was open casket. The Navy must collect the bodies.

The violin notes in his head play louder. He thinks he is getting tired already.

DAY ONE, HOUR EIGHT

When the sun hits its zenith, the interface embedded in the mask he is wearing lets him know it is time to refuel. The countdown in the corner of his vision begins. He is allowed to hold on to his raft for ten minutes while eating and drinking. He swims backwards five feet to his raft, where he quickly gulps down a gel-like substance filled with carbohydrates and electrolytes. It tastes like liquefied sand. He doesn't mind it that much. He had practiced enough with eating it in the months prior, to make sure it would settle well in his stomach. He thinks that everything is still going according to plan.

He clings to the raft as long as he can, and his mind wanders to the ghost graveyard again.

Why do so many people die rather than choosing to disqualify themselves by hanging on to the raft for too long? He hopes he never finds an answer to this question.

The timer flashes red in the last ten seconds he can hang on to the raft. He lets go, following the GPS arrows pointing him to the bridge, the end point. He keeps swimming.

DAY ONE, HOUR TWELVE

The night comes suddenly.

He has done overnight swims before, as part of his training plan. This immediately feels different. The arrows in his mask interface, pointing him in the direction of his survival, burn like bright flames into his retinas in the darkness. He becomes aware that he is completely alone in a vast, unfriendly ocean. He becomes more aware that the water is monstrous. He claws at it like he is fighting demons. Anger still sits like wet cement on his stomach, but something is beginning to nibble at the core of him that feels a little like fear.

HE BECOMES AWARE THAT HE IS COMPLETELY ALONE IN A VAST, UNFRIENDLY OCEAN. HE BECOMES MORE AWARE THAT THE WATER IS MONSTROUS.

The wind picks up, and clouds move to cover the stars and moon. Even the violin, humming like a sad metronome in time with his strokes, abandons him. The waves begin to beat at him, stronger now in the wind. He can't fall back into a comfortable rhythm anymore without his violin. He becomes aware of every stroke, every breath. The trance-like state of the daytime escapes him.

He feels the graveyard down below in the haunting darkness. The rational part of his brain whispers about impossibility. And yet he expects skeleton hands, overgrown with sea lichen and coral fragments, to reach up from the depths and drag him down, jealous that he is still swimming, still fighting, still surviving.

The waves toss him up and down, and he is suddenly aware of how fragile he has become, like a flimsy leaf being tossed around by a storm. The anger in him flickers and falters, and he begins

to feel the sharp teeth of terror.

He swallows black sea water. He throws it back up. He thinks how there are still four more hours until he can refuel again by the clock that ticks too brightly in the corner of his vision.

Terror bites hard. He knows he can't give up yet, it's too early. His sister made it past this point. His sister could do it. His sister…

As he thinks about his sister, he realizes: it is worse to give up than it is to die. But he isn't willing to do either yet. A flicker returns in the pit of his stomach to ward off the darkness of the night: anger at the water, anger at death. He tells himself one second longer. Just one second. He starts counting his strokes, each one heaving a mountain of water as he thrusts his arms out of the roiling sea.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five…

AS HE THINKS ABOUT HIS SISTER, HE REALIZES: IT IS WORSE TO GIVE UP THAN TO DIE. BUT HE ISN'T WILLING TO DO EITHER YET.

DAY TWO, HOUR ONE

The sun is salvation. It rises like a great fireball in the sky, burning away the remnants of the storm. His strokes become easier now, tinged with exhaustion. The violin returns, playing its sad tune to the timing of his strokes. Or maybe he is the one timing his strokes to it. He is sad he ever wished for the violin to go away. It is his sole companion now.

Red and blue and green dance around the edges of his vision, brought to life in the morning rays of the sun. They're beautiful. He watches them floating in the water like jellyfish, but they evade his direct gaze. They don't want to be seen; they don't want to not be seen. They want to be almost-seen.

As he swims, he feels like he is young again. Like he is young and his sister is teaching him the basics of how to swim. Every stroke cleaves back a year until he is five again, fighting the water like a demon. He has forgotten (or has he never known?) how to swim. His head goes under and he swallows water instead of air. He is gasping and gasping to breathe in something, anything, and his lungs catch fire. Hands reach for him, lift him up to the sweet golden air.

He stops. He remembers how to breathe again. He remembers the memory, and he reminds himself that he knows how to swim. That his sister is not here to save him.

That he is completely alone.

DAY TWO, HOUR SIX

Around midday, the jellyfish become starbursts, turning red, spiky, and angry. He becomes aware of pain like a band of fire around his middle.

He becomes aware and the pain grows and grows and grows until he feels like there is a gaping monster gnawing at his waist, trying to bite him in half. He stops to tread water, his hands going to where the belt that links him to the raft is tied around him. He touches his skin, and a million flames burst to life where his fingers touch. The monster chops down harder.

He screams at the sudden brilliance of the pain, forgetting for a moment to keep himself afloat. His head goes under and he emerges a second later, grasping with his hands for nothing he is able to hold on to. He briefly thinks about untying the belt, knowing this particular pain will only get worse. He knows he can't.

The raft is taunting him. Beckoning him. Trying to cut him in half, make him bleed out. Telling him to survive is to give up trying. Making him question how much more he can swim, how much longer he can go on.

He misses his sister.

Nothing to do but keep swimming, keep surviving.

DAY TWO, HOUR TWELVE

He blinks, and the sun is setting. He is on fire everywhere. His shoulders are burning holes into their sockets. His legs are pillars of flame. His skin is covered in dancing embers. His throat has become swollen and raw from swallowing saltwater. The pain has become as much a part of him as his beating heart, thrumming in tandem with the violin.

The sun sinks and sinks, or maybe the darkness rises up to swallow it. The monster again, with its terrible teeth, chewing up the sun. Maybe the monster is the water itself. That's what he's always thought, isn't it?

He is so tired. He doesn't think he can handle another night in the darkness.

The sun is disappearing, being eaten. If it's gone, he thinks it will be gone forever. Once it completely disappears, he will never see it again. He wants to rescue it from the monster that is actually the water that is eating it. He wants to capture it for himself and keep it like a lantern affixed to the belt looped around his waist to burn away the ghosts and chase away the monsters.

He turns in the direction of the setting sun. He can still save it if he swims fast enough. And his sister taught him how to do that! He churns the water, more energized than he's been in at least 24 hours.

Something is beeping at him, flashing at him. From the blackness of the water or maybe from this mask that is wrapped around his head. Arrows and lines flash and twist and turn before him. They must be pointing to somewhere, but right now he can't think where. The beeping has a pleasant rhythm. He wants to hum along to it. Much more pleasant than that sad violin.

There must be a reason for the flashing and beeping. He can almost remember, but it can't be that important. Not more important than the sun, which he has to rescue. For himself. For his sister.

He is tired from his sprint. He flips onto his back, heaving for that delicious sea air. Trees tower above him like great skyscrapers, black shadows in the dusky light with fingers reaching eagerly towards the blinking stars.

Trees. In the middle of the ocean. How beautiful.

He briefly remembers his starburst jellyfish companions. He misses them. He thinks they would like the trees.

He turns back over, chest still heaving for breath. The beeping and flashing is a nice cadence to his swimming. He looks down, and in the darkness, sees his sister swimming below him like a fish. Her swimming was always so graceful, so much nicer than his own angry thrashing. He thinks it's nice of her to join him on his swim. They will save the sun together. They'll use it as a lantern. A night light.

He'd missed his sister so much. Or, he remembers the feeling of missing her. Where had she been? Why had he missed her so much? All this time, had she just been in the water?

He shouts after her gleefully, bubbles bursting forth from his mouth and trailing up to his head to encircle it like a crown. He wants to dive down deeper, to chase after her, to touch her. These flashing lights and pointing arrows dancing sharply in front of his eyes keep obscuring his vision. He can't see her that well. He is angry at them. He wants his starburst jellyfish back.

He surfaces, breaking the gaze he had locked on her figure swimming in tandem with him in the depths below. Annoyance flutters like a thousand restless butterflies trapped in his chest. He rips off his mask. Tosses it into the watery darkness. Watches as it slowly sinks and disappears.

Sweet silence and peace now. The flashing and beeping lights are gone. The butterflies still their fluttering wings, and he lets out a sigh of contentment. No more distractions. He buries his head back down in the water and opens his eyes. The saltwater burns, scraping them raw. He peers into the darkness below, searching for movement. Where had his sister gone?

His search becomes frantic. He spins around and around, splashing at the water as if pulling it apart at the seams, hoping to find something in its hidden crevices. It has become too dark. The sun has been swallowed completely. He can't tell the sky from the sea. Everything is the same shade, a monstrous shade of the blackest blue. It has swallowed his sister, too.

Something itches at the back of his mind. The kitchen table. The bright fluorescent lights above. His sister beside him, guiding him through the equations that lay before them on the table. Wringing out the puzzle embedded in the sequence of numbers. His sister's chestnut-colored hair is darker than usual. It is damp. Her eyes are slightly red, her skin smells faintly of chemicals. She had been swimming. Training for something. What had it been?

HE PEERS INTO THE DARKNESS BELOW, SEARCHING FOR MOVEMENT. WHERE HAD HIS SISTER GONE?

Another memory now: rabid, harsh knocks on an apartment door. His mother in the kitchen, washing dishes feverishly, her hands red and raw. She must have been waiting for something. At the knocks, she drops the plate she'd been holding on the floor. Porcelain shards and soap everywhere on the kitchen tiles. His mother, running to answer the door, frantically wiping her hands on the front of her shirt.

In this memory, he is sitting at the kitchen table again with more complicated numbers arrayed in front of him. He is alone this time. In this memory, his mother opens the door to officers in crisp navy blue uniforms. She falls to the floor at the words that come out of their mouths, face white and eyes blank. He can't remember the words they said, probably hadn't heard them clearly in the first place. Something about his sister. Something about a crossing.

A flash of lucidity. He remembers.

His sister: dead in these waters.

He screams. Into the water or into the air, he can't tell, because he can't breathe in this claustrophobic darkness anyways. He cries and cries and the waves around him rise as he adds salt to the sea. His sister dead by this ocean and he is surely going to join her as he gasps for breath, but there is nothing to breathe anymore and he is drowning.

He has been drowning. For a long time.

DAY THREE, HOUR ONE

The sun rises.

His salt-encrusted eyes open. He is drifting aimlessly on his back. With the light of a new day, he can see something in the distance. A bridge. He remembers a bridge marking the end of The Crossing, of this nightmare he'd been living in for eternity.

The water had brought him here after he'd abandoned his mask, gentle and kind like his sister had always tried to convince him it was. He hadn't swam half the night, but he starts swimming now, end finally in sight. He'd made it. He'd survived what so many others could not.

As the bridge gets closer, he begins to make out a familiar figure standing apart from the few men in uniform. Long brown hair, loose and free in the salt air, melting auburn in the light of the rising sun.

His sister.



PEOPLE PLEASER
ELLIE JUNG

SELF-PORTRAIT AS A FISH

SHEM BROWN

No one spared a thought for the fish. And why would they?
There are no fish in the desert. There are no angels on the ark.

The rain came down, little bullets. I came alive, grasping.
I saw then, the world that had been kept from me.

I saw visions. I opened my mouth and let the world pour in.
In the overwhelm, I held it in my cheek, like a pearl.

The world wept for want of itself. I kept it close and still.
Overhead, the birds, circling—they cannot be called home.

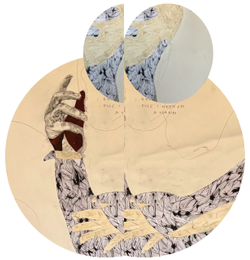
The world was water, the land was held inside its maw.
Where could anyone go? I wanted to follow the birds;

I wanted them to be headed somewhere we couldn't see.
I watched from below the waves, envious—I dreamt of them.

One of their number, speared through the wing.
Another, exhausted by flight, slipping off into the horizon.

I wanted to be one of them: an angel, preventing.
I thought I could take their place. No one would notice.





If I could shed my scales like music, sounds of winged things.
If I could follow them unitl we had nothing to leave behind.

I swam like I could keep up with them and not be left,
but all things went as all things go. They were circling away.

I watched them crest like waves, breaking as a blossom.
“Come back home,” called the world to the birds.

I studied them in silence. They made no answer.



THE AKONTING'S DAUGHTER

AVALON HOGANS

CW: depictions of abuse

After I was told I was just a deer,
I decided to run.

I ran and ran until the akonting's daughter carried me home.

Home was a shotgun sitting on a fire nest.
The shotgun fired in Texas, rang through Flogeorgissippi
and landed back in Texas. My family in the fire

was of strings and sowers who warned me about men like you.
Warned me about the first few trees that burn
before the flame catches the forest.

Said your headlights can't catch me if I'm fixed on running.

So when you told me I was just a deer,
I decided to run.





SAVANNAH
SASHA MILLER

FOUR HOURS TO KILL

SARAI ABRAM

I have four hours to kill. Four hours of nothing but straight highway slicing between filds. I'm making the trek back to Houston, Texas. Back to college. My phone is dying and I don't feel like reaching into my suitcase to get my charger. Four hours. Four hours alone with myself. Four hours alone with the music that brings me back.

104.5 FM - DFW's Hip Hop and R&B

My mom and I sang the "you in traffic" song as it played on the way back from our hair appointment. I am five, and I just got my hair flat-ironed before my mom goes out of town. On the way out of the salon, everyone told me how beautiful and long my hair was. I flipped my hair the entire way home, feeling as glamorous as the women on TV.

When we got home, she told my dad and I the rules. No water could touch my hair. I needed it brushed and wrapped every night before bed. Bonnet on. Only for a weekend. My dad nodded, halfway listening. I nodded too, hoping that I could do everything right. The days pass. I sweat when I play during recess. My dad tried his best to wrap all of my hair into a bonnet at night before giving up. When my mom got back, I was playing with my Barbies in the bathtub.

One side of my hair pin straight.

The other half now fully curly again.

I immediately frowned, feeling the anguish settle in my stomach. "I tried," I



JUNK

SAMVIDA GIRISH

My mom uncrossed her arms, her stern face being replaced with a smile.

"Of course you are," she said. "So beautiful."

I only flat-iron my hair about once a year now. People have realized that telling me I am "prettier with straight hair" has not made me straighten it more often. When we go to our appointments, the tradition my mom and I share is to blast the music on the hip hop station, singing and dancing until our lungs give out (or they play a slow song). In that case, we'll talk about our life philosophies while I look at the tall buildings through the car window.

92.1 Hank FM - Real Country

I was seven years old, staying with my grandparents for a stint in the summer. Granny told me that I was finally old enough to retrieve the eggs from her hens. Papa was sitting in his chair on the back porch, smoking a cigarette and humming a tune by Hank Williams. The chickens stuck their little heads out of the little hexagons created by the wire fencing, and I laughed. Annie, my grandparents' ever-faithful dog, stayed close on my heels. When I opened the gate, the rooster tried to run up to me, squawking and trying to assert his dominance. I backed up at first. He was beautiful, with turquoise and deep blue feathers that somehow melted into red, but his beady eyes scared me. Last time I told my granny this, she shooed me away with a wave of her dish towel. "He ain't nuthin' ta be scared of," she said. "Only thang ta be scared of is them snakes."

My granny was a sharecropper as a little girl. One of nine children who had to work someone else's land to feed themselves. She pricked her fingers on cotton until she was a little older than I was.

On one scorching day, a rattlesnake slithered up to her, rearing its head to strike. She told me how scared she was. Scared of dying right there, before her work was done. Her parents vowed that she would never be out there with them again.

I used her story as my fuel to barrel past the rooster running to the little egg-laying house. I stooped low on my knees, picking up the eggs swiftly but without breaking them. I heard the patter of the rooster's little feet. I heard Annie snarling behind me. Once all the eggs were safely nestled in my basket, I barreled towards the gate. It clanged loudly as I slammed it shut.

I walked to the kitchen triumphantly with my basket of eggs. "You done got me some good eggs," my granny had said. She used some to make my favorite dessert, bread pudding, after supper that day.

Annie, my courageous hero, has since passed away. Now my grandparents have a skittish little dog named Lil' Red. I usually stop and visit them on my way to Houston, since they are at about the halfway point. I listen to country music, but I'll always be a city kid, and they know it. They like that I have the choice to know.

106.7 FM - La Ranchera

I LISTEN TO COUNTRY MUSIC, BUT I'LL ALWAYS BE A CITY KID, AND THEY KNOW IT. THEY LIKE THAT I HAVE THE CHOICE TO KNOW.

¡La Ranchera me gusta más! The phrase blared through the speakers of my boyfriend's (now ex-boyfriend's) car, followed by melodies of trumpets, accordions, and a voice richer than the fertile soil stretched in front of us. I was sitting in the passenger seat, my hands folded in my lap, his tightly gripping the steering wheel. We were silent. The night before, I had cried.

I had just gotten back into town after my first semester of college. The start of May means Kentucky Derby time, and I had been obsessing over the lineage of one of the racehorses, Secretariat. I learned that every single horse in the derby descended from him, and that his own lineage could be tracked all the way to the 17th century. In the research of my own family history, I have only been able to go back as far as the late 1860s. I was dismayed, almost brought to laughter by the fact that a horse's history mattered more than the history of my people. That night I called my boyfriend. His ancestors hadn't been forced here on hordes of ships like mine. I asked him how far back he could trace his family.

He said he'd never asked.

Never really cared enough to.

I began to sob into my cotton sheets, feeling anger for what he took for granted that I never would have. I felt pangs of guilt as he tried his best to comfort me. I asked him to just ask his grandparents next time he saw them, but he said he wouldn't.

The next day, he "made it up to me" by hanging out and getting food. On the way back to his house, I shifted my focus back to the sounds of Los Tigres Del Norte and the quickly moving pavement.

Lonestar 92.5 FM - Classic Rock

I sped down the backroads of Crowley in my dad's old pickup truck to get my little brother from his summer baseball workouts, listening to my favorite rock station. I turned down the Def Leppard song on the radio, slowed down for a second, observed the left side of the road, then smiled and sped back up. This time, Officer Best was not waiting for me on his motorcycle, with the handlebars the shape of his mustache. I was lucky.

I looked to the right side of the road, though, and I instantly felt saddened. What used to be green and lush expanses of land peppered with mesquite trees was now housing developments with yards too small for dogs. The old Victorian farmhouse with the crackling white paint and hay bales stacked on top of each other in the front was gone . My mom always saw it as an eyesore. However, I saw it as a forgotten part of what used to be a small town. When I was little, I fantasized about exploring it. I always said that when I got older I would. Little me dreamed about maybe even buying it and fixing it up to its original glory. Little me didn't know it was promised to a housing conglomerate five or so years before I was born.

I drove up to the baseball field for the last time. They would tear it down next week to make way for the construction of the new high school. I checked my watch, sighing. My brother came out smelling like funk as he got into the car.

When I finally parked in the driveway, I remembered to turn the radio dial back to the gospel station. My dad loved listening to his sermons. He hated classic rock.

I hear mostly static from my radio now. Only a word or two peeking through. No music. That's the sign that I am officially out of range of Fort Worth, Texas. I have reached Houston. Ah. Nothing but static for now.



BLUE SPACE
MIA RIDZINSKI

TAIPEI HOSPITAL VISIT

CHARLIE WEI

in her sleep, my grandmother lies within a bed of maggot
cat fur. The lion's mane eats her
    dowry into tendrils, acne budded
    open by a fly agaric
        and on her arm: chanterelle.

        This could be the death of her.

The ninety cats she raised were buried
        our house in a dumpster,
    cogs overflowed with decay
that when her head fell back on the shower floor, honeycomb
    flowed out, morel honey;
        But my grandmother hated mushrooms
and instead thought of it as the color
    my grandfather's urn was varnished in.
She once greeted a vase that the neuropsychologist drew
    From test cards: *Wei Jing Zhu, Faithful Husband, Golden Pillar,*
            forgetting how gold and honey
aren't the same yellow, how a human couldn't



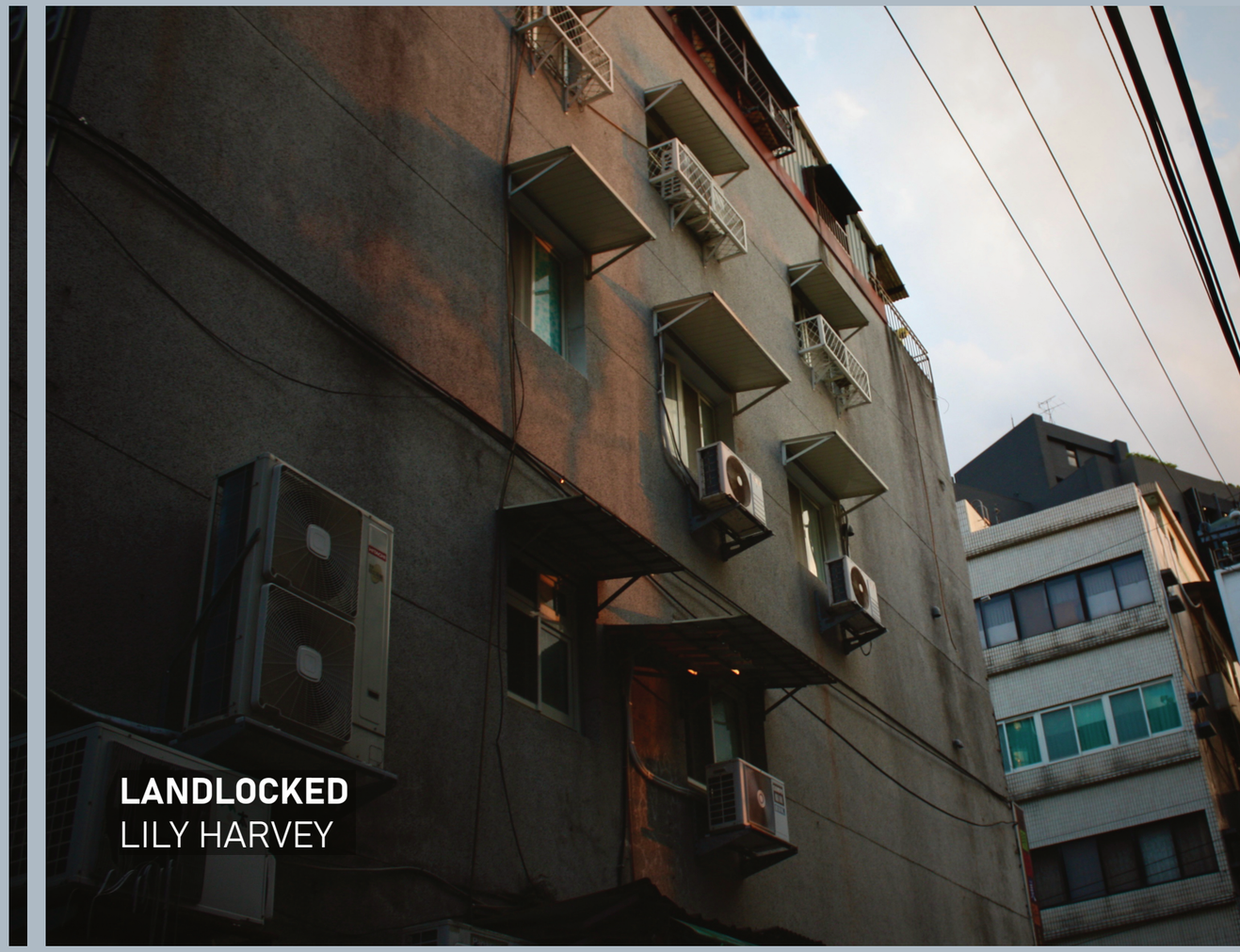
ANYONE HOME?
STEVEN BURGESS

be porcelain and concrete and alive at the same time.
All that was left was fed to the stipes:
His bulldozer, blueprints, blue pills that cleaved his lung
puffballs into shriveled raisins.
If it weren't for a vase to collect them, then

This would be the death of him.

I think of the line in between
an open casket, fungi tearing flesh.
It takes a thunder for a granddaughter to forget
their wrinkles. In honor of those lobed ears,
grey eyes sunk
from two sagging sockets, we swear:

This will be the death of me



LANDLOCKED
LILY HARVEY

ELEGY FOR A LOST IDOL

AMY SUO

CW: mentions of child abuse

You. Godless and unaccomplished child. Always American, drunken dirty on yellow beer.
Son of a king, you sing hazard, teetering on the edge of New York City.

Pure stupidity, heart, and nothing in between.

You wipe grime off your cheek and smile wide, teeth shine.
Your dad is 6 feet under, and mommy can't work for shit, but you're still happy,
shimmering like a star-striking model.
As a child, you worshipped your daddy, but hated your father, his slurred rants and
calloused hand dipped in dust. He read you bedtime stories of gore, bones, and rotting pus.
Daddy might've been a schizo unto death, but you're not sure. His epitaph motivates you,
but for absolute
dirt.

Still,
You persevere.

Play telephone with grown-up friends, whisper empty nothings from ear to ear.
American trash, you surely are. When will you manifest the desperation to climb?
You've been sixteen, six years too long. Kiss the lovely folk goodbye, my darling…

But you're a poet!
You cry, to the judge. What use are the tears you cannot shed? Pinch your cheeks and bite
your lips, you're a prodigy awaiting the end of times.



YEARN FOR THE ABSENCE OF US
MARTIN XIE

Goodnight, Van Gogh. Stumble mercifully to your bed of stars. Down the pyre, and lilies shall unfurl from your gaping lips. But. You remain awake, eyes staring wide and stupid, at the virgin walls of your sepulchre. Your mouth is dry and your stomach hurts.

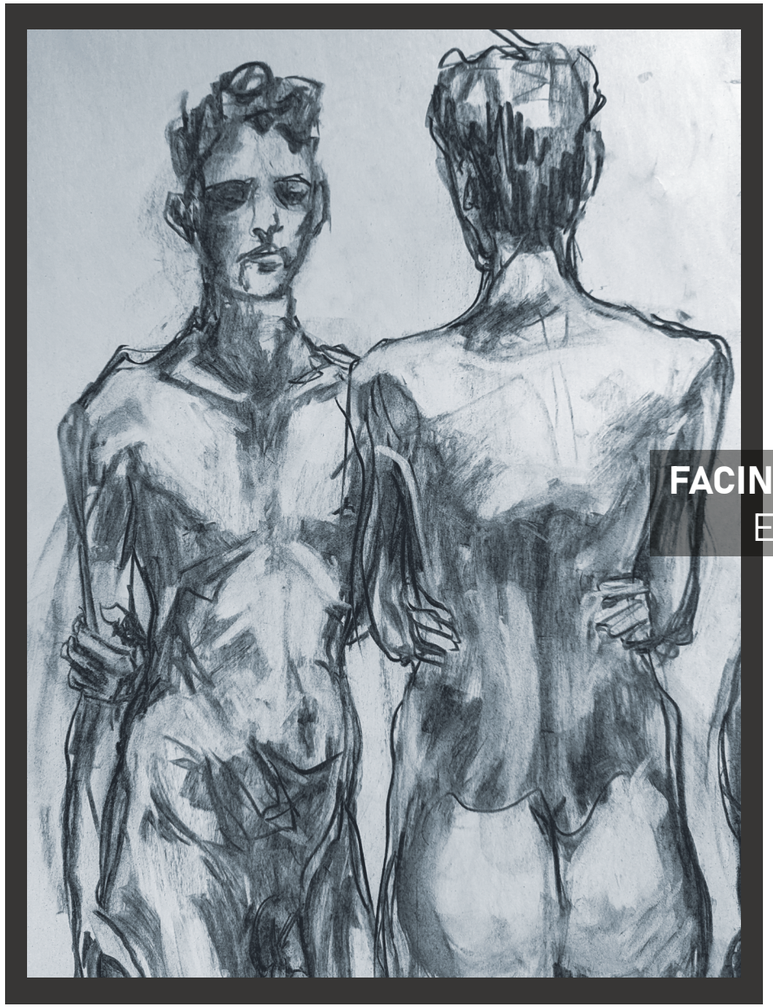
You cannot dream because your guts are riddled with golden eggs that you refuse to lay.

Mutiny!

You cannot dream, so instead you smoke. Mosey 'round the kitchen armed with stale Newports. Memories of daddy and his fixations you inherited drift lazily in grey swirls. It's pretty, and you laugh. Waltz to Rachmaninoff, ashy butterflies frolic around bare legs in tune to your lullaby. Dream harder,
dream American.

When will you fly, little lamb?
Momma was never there to teach you how to soar. To soar is to live, and to live is to die. But you! You are compassed by your own selfish treason. You're gorgeous, and yet, not a single eye is laid upon you. Your existence is arbitrary, and you grin for nothing.

Sigh, what a waste.
Sail away! Ship-wrecked son, where is your boat?



FACING/FACED
EMMA LIU

MAN SPELT BACKWARDS

CHI PHAM

CW: mentions of eating disorders/body hatred/fatphbia and mentions of blood/gore

My mother haunts my makeup bag. *Always be ready,* she'd chide as we dressed for mass, reapplying lipstick at red lights and through monsoon rains—once, as my father's casket was lowered. *Death is impatient, Đạt. He won't wait for you to put your clothes on.*

I inherited her contempt for unpreparedness but none of her grace. Truth is, I see my father more in my reflection each day. At night, I kneel before the vanity light to contour his features into submission. I want to reach beneath my skin and tear him out. Instead, I exchange scalpel for brush, painting a face over his canvas. This one is mine alone. The best compliment I get is *You look nothing like yourself*—that I appear as anything but what I am.

The queens at Gingham call me Ever-Virgin. Not fondly—I don't like to be touched. I don't drink with them after gigs, don't let their acrylics graze my hip. Vivian thinks it's criminal, a body like mine refusing to be shared. *You could charge extra*, she insists, thumbing through damp dollar bills. *For that whole Miss Saigon act you've got going on.*

But I've spent too long carving this form out of my father's bones. I won't let anyone pay to undo it. I wasn't for sale—not how other queens assume when I decline to split a john's paycheck post-show. *You think you're too good?* No. Only that my body hadn't been mine to sell.

The veteran didn't ask to touch. He found me after last night's show while I was scrubbing glitter from my clavicle. A

MODEL
SKYLAR WANG

$500 TO DO MAKEUP. NO TALKING.

29619 SMOKEY BOURBON LN, KATY.

I pocketed it—for the money, but more for the absurdity. A man wanting to be painted in silence, as if my mouth were the dangerous part.

*

The drive from Houston to Katy stretched flat and endless, sprawling like something dying. When the veteran answered the door, I noted how his body began its retreat: the catheter snaking from his sweatpants, colostomy bag slung low like an unfashionable purse.

Rules, he began. *No questions. No—*

No talking.

He led me to a bathroom reeking of antiseptic and talcum. A folding chair faced the mirror, awaiting penance. I unzipped my case.

Sit.

He obeyed.

Up close, his face was a smooth-shaven cadaver's: liver spots blooming throughout parchment skin, veins mapping age with indigo. Confession without partition.

I cradled his jaw, slathering primer over craters. Contoured to map a woman's planes onto his masculinity. Unlike a soldier, his eyes followed me with a trust that felt obscene. Like a boy watching his mother tie his shoes, learning.

You Vietnamese? he asked.

I nodded.

Linh was too.

I didn't ask who Linh was. The photograph on the mantel said enough: a girl, maybe seven, in an *áo dài*, standing between him and a woman. Her foreignness flared against their whiteness like a struck match. The woman's smile was tight, the kind my mother wore in photos before the divorce. The girl's was wide, gap-toothed, doomed. I glued down his brows, tweezing strays.

She'd be your age.

The tweezers slipped. Blood swelled on his lid. I reached for an alcohol swab, but he caught my hand and held it to the scar bisecting his chest.

Ever wished you could cut out the parts that hurt?

I thought of my father facedown in Galveston Bay. The coast guard finding his shrimp boat but never him. My mother, hands steady, fixing her lipstick even as they lowered an empty casket, knowing it wasn't a burial without a corpse.

*

He fell asleep when I was doing his eyes. On the sink: a tube of coral lipstick, unused but blooming with age. In the medicine cabinet: estrogen pills beside a Ziploc of baby teeth.

I wandered his house, fingers tracing doilies and painkiller bottles, entering rooms abandoned and maintained. The bedroom was the worst, preserved like a museum. Child's *áo dài* hung in plastic. A shrine of porcelain dolls with painted faces arranged in rows like war medals.

I lifted one to lamplight. Bone-white skin. Black hair like mine. White kimono. *She loved them.*

I turned, caught between guilt and something harder. He filled the doorway, swallowing the air between us with labored steps. The doll trembled in my hands.

You look like her. When you're on stage.

His knuckles grazed my cheek—dry, clinical. Not a caress. I felt the potential in them: to kill or to hold.

I'm not her.

Neither am I.

We don't speak again. The crisp hundred-dollar bills he pressed into my hand felt just withdrawn, still burning with residual warmth. I pocketed the lipstick and photograph before leaving.

Humid night air filled my lungs. The veteran's gaze followed me still. Through his eyes, I felt my father's, pressing from within. What refuses burial seeps outward. I carry him like a swallowed bone—his skull in my skull, his eyes in mine, watching.

*

Halfway home, I pulled over to vomit in a Whataburger restroom. Under harsh fluorescents, my reflection disintegrated—makeup cracking along fault lines to reveal Father's eyes, Mother's nose. I clawed until skin gave way. Blood mixed with foundation the color of neither parent's flesh. I knew the truth: the body is no blank canvas. We're all just carcasses in revision.

Now, I mix his coral with my mother's Revlon. When I cinch my corset, I think of his colostomy bag. That fragile sack of waste we all carry. At least he has the option to rip it out.

Backstage tonight, Vivian asks, *Why'd you do it? The gross old cross-dresser?* I fasten my wig. *Same reason you sleep with married men.*

Money?

Practice.

She cackles, but the truth is lost on her: I went to learn how to carve a daughter from a corpse. To let someone's fingers trace my father's bones and whisper, *Stay.*

"Man Spelt Backwards" first appeared in Issue Eighty-Eight of SmokeLong Quarterly.



OF MICE AND POMEGRANATES

SKYLAR WANG

ODE TO NIGHTMARES

ALINA ZHONG

after Leila Chatti's "Ode to Ugly Things"

God bless nightmares. There is peace
in every nightmarish dream. I don't mean

the wet eyes with their gleaming whites like
diamonds in the dark, because they are already endorphin.

I mean September, the break in dreamless sleep
that it brought me, the end

of the world in perfect gray fleece,
how the sky was acid-washed, the world was

a parking lot. My mother and I faced each other before the car.
I mean my hand in unmotivated lighting,

my fingers
extended towards her emaciated body



BLINK TWICE, YOU'LL MISS IT
STEVEN BURGESS

taking her hand as cool as remembered paper.
Her wry surprise at a near-forgotten action,

folding parallel our beginning to our end.
I mean the grocery store

she and I crowded into, pushing past the checkout
line of desperate hopefuls.

I mean the store's food that wouldn't keep,
organics engineered to outlive us.

I mean the receipt paper,
its crinkly printing a talisman of another minute lived.

The way the scene shifted, the way dreams do,
my mother and I reaching the store's display bed,

our unison reach for comfort. It was a recall
to a time before pain,

our youths as sisters before anger. When
we held each other, I briefly wondered

what archaeologists might think later
upon finding our intertwined bodies, love



GLOAMING
ALEX KIM

SANDPIPERS

HANNAH GUO

Round, feathered vessels that
never quite grew into
their delicate lanky legs, feeble teetering stilts
streaking unbelievably sprightly across the shore,
running from grief until it finds them
What do you do when grief finds you?

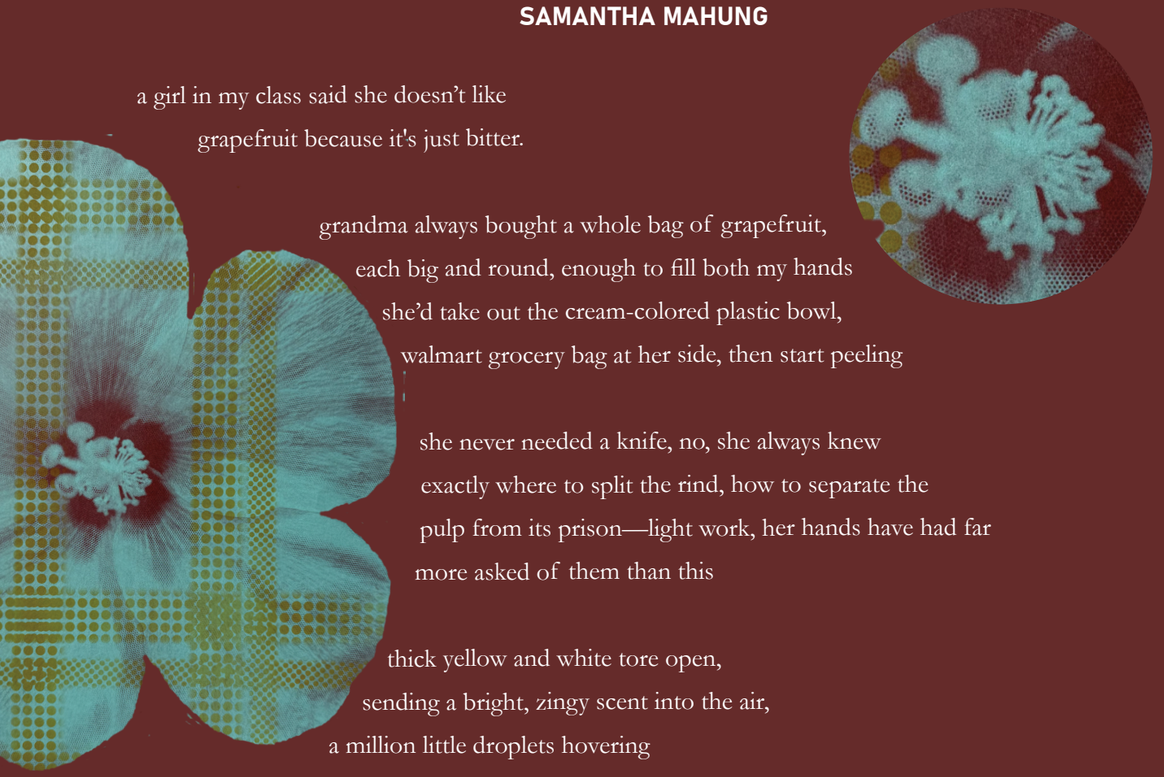
Standing in the middle of sun-warmed sand on a balmy beach
they sit in the light and sink into the sand like it is the couch after a long day
I watch their button-like eyes, tiny and beady and innocuous
You can recognize them by their stuttering wingbeats, I think
That is the sound of my heart
And press a tender promise finger to my wrist
as the little creatures
are jostling each other around,
hopping along the shoreline

An unforgiving tide washes away the little footprints they leave, but
they don't care, they hop around and leave some more
because they too have realized
nothing is permanent— we are always becoming and unbecoming
Waste of time to mourn what we were, what we did

So when Death comes, beckoning
for them to dig themselves into the sea, they chirp, they call out, "It was all such fun!"
In a final breath, swallowed whole
I watch from the sand,
wanting an answer,
wanting to ask what was so fun about it all,
wanting to melt into the waves, too
Nothing but flickers of stardust and souls—
it means nothing
But my pinky finger is still pressed
against the inside of my wrist.

GRAPEFRUIT & MILK

SAMANTHA MAHUNG



a girl in my class said she doesn't like
grapefruit because it's just bitter.

grandma always bought a whole bag of grapefruit,
each big and round, enough to fill both my hands
she'd take out the cream-colored plastic bowl,
walmart grocery bag at her side, then start peeling

she never needed a knife, no, she always knew
exactly where to split the rind, how to separate the
pulp from its prison—light work, her hands have had far
more asked of them than this

thick yellow and white tore open,
sending a bright, zingy scent into the air,
a million little droplets hovering
in a cool and gentle mist



HI BISCUS!
MIA RIDZINSKI

it's part of that trail that lingers in her wake—
leaving fingerprints on the wood of the banister as she walks down the
stairs, resting in the fabric of the curtains while she kneads dough
for johnny cake—always quietly there, while i hold a fistful of her dress in
my hand, trying to disappear into it

even after she moved to california, i could hear her
talking on the phone through the wall separating our rooms i
listened to the chatter from her tv steady beneath
her voice with the timbre of sweet fried plantain,
muffled laughter lulling me to sleep at night

i remember she once tried to teach me punta
turning on the garifuna music cd in her radio, she
danced with the attitude of marie sharp's while
i stumbled—always refusing the hot sauce

in my escabeche—but she didn't mind, only laughed and pulled me into a hug, rubbing my back,
smiling and lifting me into the air
"oh, my child,"
but even then, my tongue knew something
as i drowned my morning eggs in black pepper just to mask the taste of the yolk—
which no amount of seasoning could compel me to eat now

somewhere between our kitchen and my dorm room, i
began to crave the burn, the sting i can control every
morning, i wake up with cold feet, steeling myself against

the temptation to stay in my room,
practicing my steps in the mirror before i head out

my grandma calls me, but i'm busy
in a meeting i feel unqualified to be a part of or
studying because i need to do better this time, so i
let my phone ring until the screen goes dark
ater is always moving, always teasing me from just
beyond my reach, and my limbs are starting to feel
heavy from all this chasing

i wait for the day i get to see her again,
for the day, i can fit right back into her
arms that feel as though they mold to me
when i squeeze her tight and become just
another ball of dough, not yet ready for the oven

for now, i peel grapefruit
pulling off tough skin to reach the soft pink
pulp like a kaleidoscope spilling out patterns
formed by time and those sighs of sunlight
that settle down on us wherever we are

i pour sweetmilk and cinnamon over all of it
and savor the fullness of the taste on my tongue.

LETTERS I'LL NEVER SEND HER

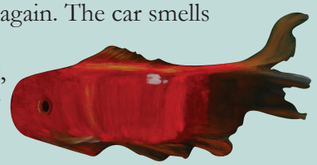
ASHLEY DENG



Summer's not over yet but I'm getting cold thinking about who we used to be. Back when we were younger, we ran in the fields peppered with mosquito bites as laughter and fruit juice trickled down our chins. The truth was easy to swallow; I could still run home. We were too Chinese to be American and too American to be Chinese but too young to understand what all that meant. I thought everything was simple; I thought kindness was a given. Sometimes I think I'm the only one who remembers.

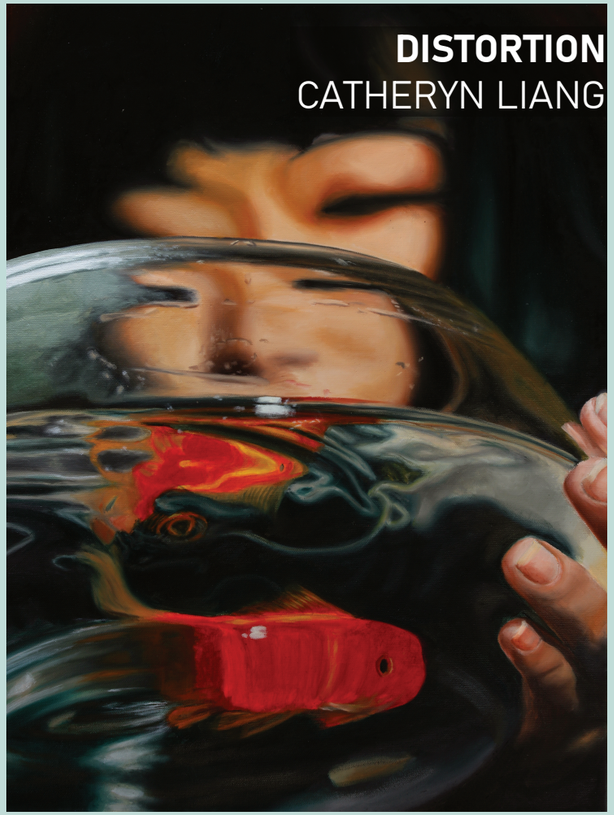
If I could write you, I'd ask you how you were so sure I'd leave California. I remember when I told you I'm getting out of here no matter what and you just laughed and nodded. I believe you, you said. You'll run until it kills you. Somehow it surprised me when you did the same, college on the East Coast, and again when the boys stayed home. When we wake up now, it's in a town where nobody knows our names. And I'd never tell you this but sometimes I'd give it all up to hear you call mine out again as your parents pull away from my curb. My mom tells me I feel too much but I think this is what it means to grow up. Here, this is what I was afraid of: clinging to something that I know will surrender me at every turn. Life cuts me open like a tangerine and I get dizzy from the scent. When we lose touch, a house in California will crumble.

We're in your car when the boys start smoking; they've been gone a semester and they came back talking about alcohol and weed, playing at being grown up the same way they used to play pretend princes. For a moment when the smoke curls just right they look like children again. The car smells like blue raspberry, and I breathe sighs of relief. Is this how we lose them to manhood, is this how we grow old? I think of summer, our hands intertwined, camping by the lake. The water was clear; I never thought it could be anything but. Now I come home and there's mud on the doormat; I look up and there



up and there are men in our room. Hear conversations over stereo about girls, hips, sneaking out, the glory of adulthood without its consequences — I trade glances with you and I'm shocked to find we're not the same height anymore.

When we left each other in the fall, we stood shaking like leaves, praying for an adulthood that would let us stay children somewhere. But I knew even then we'd never be like that again, that we'd leave a version of us in California I'd still search for every time I came back. My hands would reach for yours like missing puzzle pieces, and when they didn't fit I'd act so confused, like we haven't both been running from home since the day we left. I'm scared to admit it but I feel your presence now like a phantom limb, something vestigial, a picture of me I don't remember being taken. There's nothing much to say; we've both gotten quiet. In my head I tell you it's all my fault and apologize a thousand times — out here, where it's real, I close my eyes and let you text me questions about chemistry. I pretend it doesn't hurt that it's never anything else.



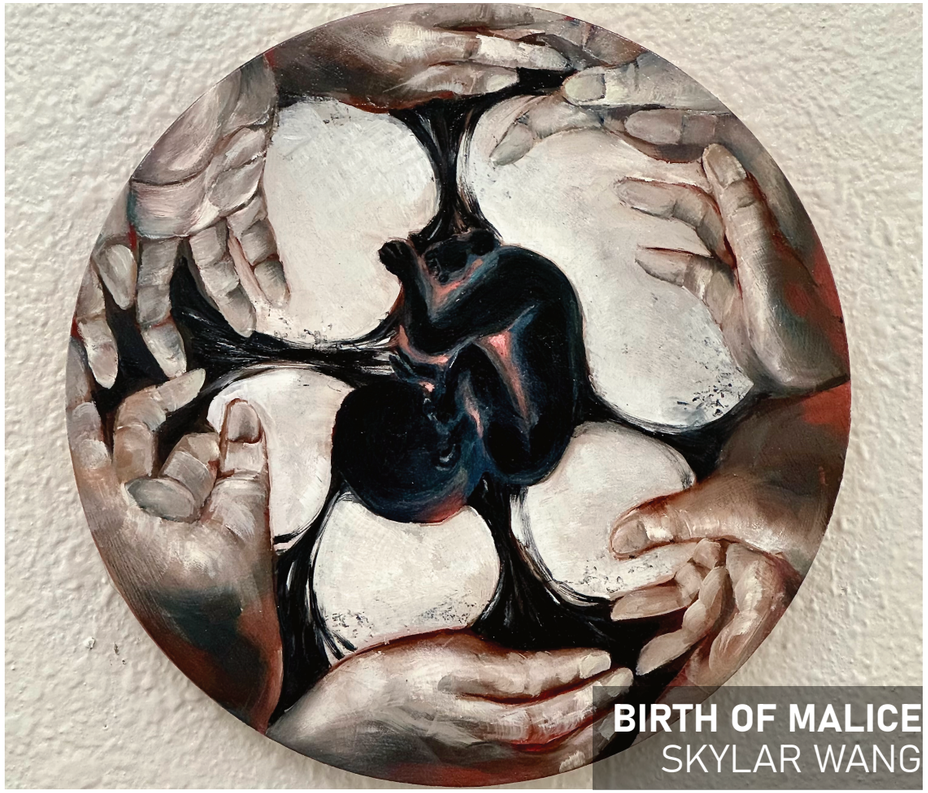
AFTER EVERYTHING IS SAID AND DONE AND DELIVERED

LACOLE YANG

CW: Mentions of animal death



the world delivered to us is less than perfect,
haunted and cradled in its prosperity,
misguided in its poverty, miscasting blame
through a few choice words, spinning
the web wider and wider and have you seen the
black boxes plastered under every headline?
the news is bleeding, and here we are sitting
in our cheerful little studio apartments,
dorms, and perfect square suburban houses
made of cardboard that will live forever
because no bombs will drop here.
no drone flies overhead here, no child
drops flea-like against the blasted wall in the dead
of night, another integer, another statistic.
what percentage of my hands are my own?
my mouth? my body? my womb?
i will never write the poem that i want to write
or exist in a world that wants me to be alive,
but here i am alive out of nothing but providence,
so blessed that these are the questions i ask,
whether i have said the right thing,
whether i have said enough.
are my eyes my own
when stone walls on either side



BIRTH OF MALICE
SKYLAR WANG

tighten my vision forward?
on my perfect walk,
on a well-paved path,
i stepped on the tail of a dead lizard,
blackened under the sun,
ants crawling into it.
i could choose not to look.
blindness is blessing for us,
damnation upon the rest.
are you looking?

HOW 아빠 LEARNED ENGLISH

GINA KIM KOTINEK

He told me while we nursed his favorite scotch on the porch. Rocking in our chairs. Basking in the dusk. Seeing each other under starlight. I asked him what my first word was, not because I didn't know, but because I liked hearing the story. Appa was a great storyteller, and he had incredible English. So I liked giving him every excuse to use it.

Today, he spoke in Korean.

Appa, he said. You'd yell *Appa Appa Appa*, desperate for me to pick you up.

And my first English word?

Appa, he replied.

That's not English.

It basically is. Turn 아빠 into *appa*, and it's English.

I laughed, buzzed. Mom claims my first English word was mom, I said.

Your mother doesn't understand the first thing about English.

I sipped my scotch. It was a joke he told often. He would die on the hill that my first word—both English and Korean—was *appa*. It was just one of those battles he refused to let Mom win.

The cicadas chirped, and the wind rustled through the trees, echoing like rain. On the stone porch, pinprick shadows danced across the chipping paint, as if the darkness had sewn needles



IDENTITY?
SKYLAR WANG

through the light and left tiny holes in its wake.

Then, what was *your* first word? I asked.

I'm too old to remember something like that. He finished his glass, so I poured him another. He shouldn't drink too much, I knew. He was at risk of needing a liver transplant. After hearing the news, Mom had cried, while he had stubbornly declared that if he had to live a miserable life, he would rather drink and smoke than not.

You don't know what I went through, he had told Mom. When people like me first came here—the bullshit we had to endure. You whites wouldn't get it. Smoke and drink help stave off the pain.

Eventually, he compromised to quit, but sometimes, he and I would drink a couple of glasses of scotch outside, away from Mom's prying gaze. It was in these moments I felt most connected to his Korean half in me—when he would open the wounds Mom had stitched and suppressed, and pour his blood over me to remind me who I was, no matter how I looked.

You really don't remember? I asked after a moment of silence. I traced the rim of my glass with a finger. How about your first English word?

He huffed. Drank a bit more. I could tell I had broached a topic he didn't like, but the buzz made me bold, and I hoped it made him willing to share.

Come on, Appa. I just want a new story.

I tell you enough stories.

Not the story of your first English word.

He sank back into his chair, and the clouds shifted, letting the moonlight slice over his body like a blade. He looked old like this—scotch in hand, back hunched, face sculpted into a glare. The silver light immortalized him in his stillness and made his skin gleam like marble.

He smacked his lips, then set his glass on the unsteady wire table between us. He looked out

toward the yard that stretched for acres beyond our home, and the seriousness that hardened his gaze cut through my buzz, leaving only a quiet chill. At his first word, it was as if the cicadas, the wind, the world itself silenced for him. My attention was his.

When I first came here, I only knew Korean, he said. There weren't any resources to teach us English. The whites hated and feared us, and my fellow Koreans didn't know English either, so we could only do our best. I could say my first English word was *no*, or *yes*, or *stop*, but my heart doesn't consider those my first. I didn't understand the weight of the English language yet. Back then, I was still speaking Korean in English. It wasn't until I got my first phrasebook that things changed. It was originally for the Chinese, but a Korean translated one for us. It was a big event. I remember gathering with the few acquaintances I had to learn the English phrases: *Is this the right way to Fifth Street? Next month, my lease will expire. Do you have any other kinds that are better than these?*

So those were your first English words?

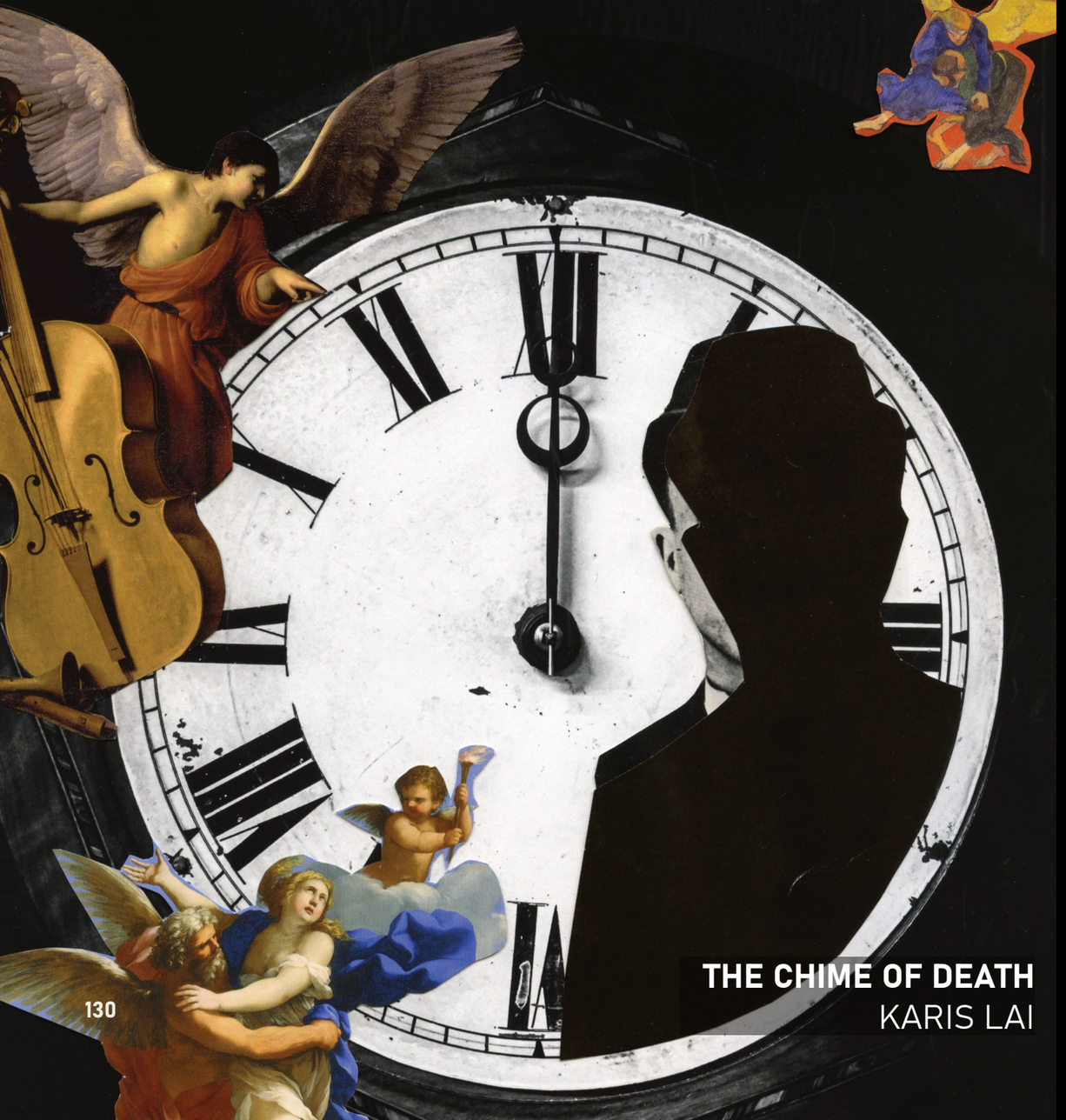
He shook his head. Those phrases were just Korean pretending to be English—all memorization and no understanding. I wasn't speaking to the white men yet. He paused, then turned to lock eyes with me. The day I said my first English word was the day I finally learned. A woman's necklace was stolen, and she blamed it on me. I was a busboy at the time, and I didn't know how to tell the officer I was innocent. So I repeated the only phrase I could think of, even though they wouldn't understand, even though they would beat me regardless.

He downed the rest of his scotch. This time, I didn't pour him another. I fidgeted in my seat as Appa stared straight ahead, his eyes fixed as if his memories were unfolding in the moonlit field. When the silence grew too heavy, I asked:

And what did you say, Appa?

Everything and nothing, he replied. My first English word was much like yours—Korean but English, pummeled from Hangul into the alphabet by pure desperation:

Previously published in Boudin



THE CHIME OF DEATH
KARIS LAI

A WARNING ABOUT HEAVEN

SARAH JUN

So I died, and Heaven is
quite boring, actually. It's all
cloud here, just miles and
miles of eye-blindingly white air.

Everything tastes like it, too.

Bought a matcha latte from
Heaven Café and spat it out
on the first sip, all over St. James' sandals.

Hugged my grandfather, whom I've
only heard war stories about, and my arms
went through his pudgy waist. Tried to hear
John Lennon's new album on a record player—

yes, I met John Lennon, we all run into each other
sooner or later up here—and the damn record melted
into nothingness.

It's so dreadfully dull here that I once spied
Jesus sneaking back down to Earth
for a jaunt, the sly fucker.

I thought to myself,
Why can't I do the same?

I'll drop down and order a Japanese Matcha.
Blended Green Tea from my favorite cafe,
which is so sweet-dizzy and tooth-
achingly cold that I'll forget the taste

of bland dihydrogen monoxide in
my mouth. Tell my grandma that
Grandfather is doing fine, that he misses her
cooking, that the angels can't wash his
clothes correctly and keep leaving holes
in his sweaters. Squeeze Grandma's winter-thin
ribs and leave bruises in the shape of
roses, the favorite of her flowers.

And I'll see Paul McCartney live (John's
request), sit front row, revel in the warm
chaos of his performance, and weep
along to his surprise rendition of "Here

Today." (John likes the song, but maybe the
bridge could've been tweaked, if only he was there
to tell Paul) and maybe I'll enjoy life
on Earth and decide to stay.

But then I left one Sunday, while God wasn't
looking, only to discover that I'm
made of nothingness, too.

Couldn't order a drink or hold it or my
grandma or watch Paul McCartney in
peace—concert-goers have *no etiquette* these days!

I crawled back up to Heaven on my belly
like a serpent, cried nothing tears,
and sat on a cloud bench outside the moonwhite
Pearly Gates when Jesus approached and said,

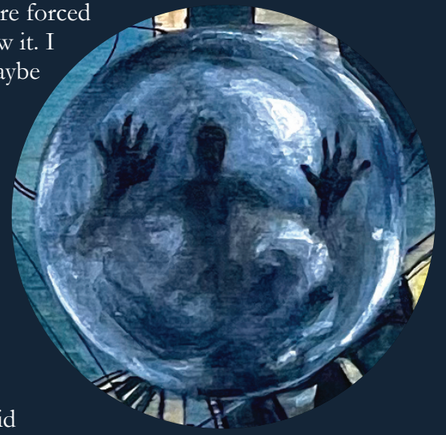
"That's what He forgot to tell me
about Heaven—Paradise is really Down There."

And he sat next to me only to fall ass-first
through the bench, which made me laugh,
and he laughed, too.

ANTIPODAL POINTS: NOTES ON BROTHERHOOD

JULES F. HOUSTON

My younger brother, Charlie, and I are three years apart. It worked out well for us because it kept us from being in the same school almost ever in our first twelve years of education. The issue is that we're the kind of brothers who'd try to kill each other if we were forced together too often. We both knew it. Our parents certainly knew it. I always believed it. It got better as we aged, I like to think, or maybe we just got better at veering away from each other in wildly different directions by the time we hit middle and high school. When he stopped trying too hard in classes and I went full-send into the International Baccalaureate program, and he became a student athlete and I started performing onstage, and he started rapid-fire dating girls and I got preoccupied with the slow realization that I wasn't actually a girl. We didn't try to kill each other like we might've as children, but we were spinning out away from any sort of mutual comprehension as fast as we possibly could.



That same age gap that separated us for most of our lives did manage to push us together for one year, though: my senior year and his freshman year of high school. From the fall of 2021 until the spring of 2022, we drove to school together every single morning. I liked to get there early so I could hang out with my friends. That meant leaving before the sun was even up half the year. Most of those drives, Charlie would sleep, the passenger seat leaned all the way back. Other days, I'd want company so I'd snap at him. "Hey."

He'd groan something unintelligible in response.



CONSTRUCTION
MARTIN XIE

"I'm not asleep."

"Then don't fall asleep."

"I'm not."

And it'd get quiet for a minute, so I'd punch him in the shoulder.

"What?"

"At least play music or something. Don't crash on me."

So he'd grumble his way awake and dig out the Bluetooth speaker we kept in the glovebox and he'd pick out music for us to listen to. He started out with the premise that he was finding bands we'd both like, between the queer indie alt rock and pop and sad girl shit I frequented and his new obsession with hip hop and rap and R&B. But by the time I graduated, I was listening to his music, mostly Childish Gambino, nearly every morning. Not against my will. Driving into the suburban Texas sunrise with your shitass little brother to the tune of *Awaken, My Love!* is a worthwhile experience.

. . .

When I started college, one of the first friends I made was a math major who lived two doors down from me in our dorm. She's now one of my best friends — the kind of friend my brother has met a handful of times, the kind of friend Charlie is always delighted to see so he can poke fun at her for being a nerd. He says it with love, of course, and he always has, but it is objectively funny to be called a nerd by an almost-six foot high school football player with a pseudo-mullet and for it to *not* be some kind of corny preteen coming of age movie bullying.

This nerd best friend of mine once explained to me, when both of us were a little drunk, that there's this theorem called the Borsuk-Ulam theorem. And while I don't actually remember much from our first conversation about it, the second time it came up is a moment I remember clearly. We were sitting on a balcony at our dorm in the new hand-shaped plastic chairs someone had donated to the spot during a party in the middle of the first week of the spring semester. A Sylly Week wizard staff competition. Drunk on a Tuesday night. While sitting there, shivering from the cold hard plastic of the chair and the 11 p.m. January air, bundled up in a hoodie and a flannel and a baseball cap in a desperate attempt to convince anyone else I looked like a man, three Twisted Teas in, my friend explained it to me again.

What the Borsuk-Ulam theorem proves is something fascinating enough to me that I, a double humanities major with a grudge against math from years of unfortunate teachers and programs, wanted to remember it. I wanted to understand it. And what the Borsuk-Ulam theorem proves is this: at any given point, including right now, at this moment, there are two points exactly opposite each other on Earth's surface with the exact same temperature and atmospheric pressure. This isn't a fun hypothetical based on an imaginary sphere with the perfect conditions. Well, it is that, but it is also true, on our imperfect sphere of an Earth, with wildly unpredictable and inconsistent weather patterns. These two perfect points are real, are true, all the time, on our Earth.

. . .

I was an emotional baby. And child. And pre-teen and teen and now I'm sure I'd be considered an emotional young adult. I cried (cry) a lot, and laughed (laugh) a lot, and was (am) prone to screaming and fighting when I'm upset.

I WANTED HIM TO BE HAPPY LIKE ME. EMOTIONAL LIKE ME. EXPRESSIVE.

Charlie is the opposite and always has been. He was a quiet baby, a chill child, a normal pre-teen, and he's a normal teenager today. He's the most normal person in our family, really, at least by the standards of the American ideal.

When he was first born, our mother and I used to play a game with him. He was a stone-faced baby. He didn't cry or laugh much, and he never smiled. For weeks, or months, not that I remember any of this myself beyond the story our mother loves to tell, we would eat breakfast at the kitchen table and ask him, *is Charlie gonna smile today?* We'd wave our fingers at him and smile and laugh and do silly voices and faces. I would crack myself up. I wanted him to be happy like me. Emotional like me. Expressive. He still isn't any of those things — well, no, that's not true. He's none of those things in a way I (or

our mother) understand. I think our father gets it more than we do. Which is probably why it seems to matter so much more to me and her.

He eventually did smile for the first time one day, of course. I hadn't thought about this story in years, until this past summer. There was the trek — a ten-day backpacking trip in the New Mexico mountains he went on with our father and their Venture Scouts crew. The trip was while I was working in St. Louis, my first full-time gig in opera summer stock festival hell. It was mostly manual labor, and most weeks were fifty hours or more, so I didn't hear much about the trek while it was happening. It was the pictures they brought back that got me.

There's this selfie they took on the trail. They're next to each other in all their gear and smiling wide at the camera. They look funny to me every time I see it, my brother with a bleached buzzcut that he only had for that summer, our father without his glasses on. Part of me genuinely has trouble recognizing them in it. But the thing that really struck me about the picture was the way Charlie is smiling in it. Widely, joyfully, sincerely.

Our father said he missed Charlie's smile when he showed me the picture. He talked as much about seeing his son smile so freely like that on the trek as he talked about any of the peaks and sights they'd set out to find.

I've always been a smiler. It's one of those expressions I'm too prone to. I guess the problem is less in the fact that I smile too much but in my smile *being* too much — too wide, too ugly. In every picture, with friends, to myself, without even thinking about it.

At the end of that summer, I found that people were saying my brother and I looked the same. It's something we both heard constantly growing up, that we looked shockingly similar for siblings. We heard it less as we grew older, as I grew into a body and face that pushed me away from who I wanted to be, away from my brother growing into the man he was always going to become. I never used to believe it when people said we looked alike, especially after puberty propelled us so far from each other. But that summer, seeing my own smile, wonderfully wide and delightfully free, on his face across the dinner table while cracking awful jokes at our mother, or across the firepit he'd tend to in our backyard, or across the football field as he ran to high-five us in the bleachers after a game — that was the first time I could believe it. It was the first time I knew they were right about us.

. . .

The Borsuk-Ulam Theorem depends on a few things. These things were explained to me by my friend in our kitchen in the apartment we lived in with four other friends from our dorm. It was a shockingly quiet night, and we were making banana bread muffins. My grandma's recipe, only made into muffins because we didn't have any loaf pans but *did* have so many overripe bananas it would be a real crime not to make any banana bread at all. I couldn't help but think of my brother again — he makes fun of me for hating bananas but loving banana bread, even though he is arguably far worse, for loving bananas and hating banana bread. The previous winter I had discovered, though, that if I added chocolate chips, it was suddenly something he could stand to eat. He was four hours away, at home, so it didn't matter whether he would eat them or not. But I'd decided I liked it better that way, too.

That night, when we had just finished putting everything in the oven and not made the great leap to cleaning up anything yet, my friend paced around the kitchen excitedly and explained the theorem again. Sober, this time.

The thing about temperature is that it's continuous. If you move around our Earth, you're not going to ever hit a wall where the temperature jumps from something cold to something hot, or even really a jump within multiple degrees. Temperature is smooth. Temperature is unbroken. It's all a gradient. Continuous.

The same rules apply for atmospheric pressure (or barometric pressure) (or air pressure). You won't ever hit a wall where the pressure jumps. Pressure is smooth, unbroken, a gradient. It, too, is continuous.

These are pretty simple statements — this whole theorem is built up out of relatively simple ideas. At least, this layman's terms version of the theorem that's been explained to me so many times is. That's one of the things that really does get to me about Borsuk-Ulam. The end result feels too simplistic, too easy for our unpredictable, incomprehensibly complex world. And it being built out of seemingly simple and easy statements makes it almost more offensive. Of course, you can get more specific — much more specific and technical and mathematical and real about it. But I enjoy this hand-wavey version. It is still true.

. . .

Charlie is the athlete of the family. He's a football player now, and good at it, but that's not how he started. Our parents are big soccer people so we both grew up playing in our little Rowlett, TX recreational soccer leagues. Our father coached both of us for many years, which my brother loved but I hated. Looking back, I appreciate it more. He only did it so both of us could keep playing, and he kept doing it even though I was mean to him about it. And an eleven-year-old girl being mean to you is *mean*.

My brother wasn't particularly good at soccer until middle school. Before then, he was like the rest of us in the family — he'd been like me. He was shorter, and awkward, and unmuscular, and certainly far from a runner. But he loved playing, that was always true. And it always showed. It showed even more clearly in hockey, where his stockier build and slow running speed didn't prevent him from shutting out game after game as a goalie.

ALL I COULD THINK ABOUT WAS THAT HE'D NEVER WANT ME TO HAVE THEM IF HE KNEW I WASN'T REALLY HIS GRANDDAUGHTER

When he got halfway through middle school and hit his growth spurt, though, he was ready to go. People always describe teen boy growth spurts as abrupt and fast and blink-and-you'll-miss-it. Which feels true with Charlie, looking back, but of course there was never one day where he woke up half a foot taller than me. It was a slow process, which was why it feels like I missed it, I'm sure. And as gradual as it must have been, there was a day where my baby brother woke up taller than me, a day where he woke up as the tallest person in our house. He'd started playing football at that point, on top of soccer and hockey, and he was well on his way to finding his niche there. He got dedicated, more dedicated to it than to anything in a long, long time. So while he got tall, he also got strong. And he got good.

Our family has always been proud of us. The grandkids, the youngins. They've always been supportive and celebratory of us and our cousins, but between family drama and moves, my brother and I are the only ones around very much. Which means a lot of the attention fell to me and him.

Most of my life, I didn't mind it. I was honestly happy with it, the attention. I've always been a nerd, especially according to Charlie, but also myself, and everyone else who's ever interacted with me. It's been a lifelong commitment. I loved school, until I became so obsessed with it, it made me miserable, and even then, I still let it be my life. And my family loved this. They loved me for this. I was the first grandkid to be this into academics, the first to be this focused on college and a "good" future. Everyone was supportive. They didn't understand it, because none of them cared about the same things I did the way that I did, especially my focus on theatre and my determination to take all my efforts and surely become a starving artist for the rest of my life. But they all showed up for it anyway, every single time. Of course, they didn't hear a word about most of who I was, certainly not any of my queerness or my transness. I have a diary entry from when I was sixteen, when I wrote over and over again for two entire pages that I hated being gay because I'd never get to bring my girlfriend over to my grandparents' house for family dinner. Last March, I cried when I got home from one of those family dinners at my grandparents' house because my grandfather was so insistent on telling me all the parts of his music collection that would be mine someday, and all I could think about was that he'd never want me to have them if he knew I wasn't really his grand*daughter*. But I can't deny that the parts of me they knew — they wanted to know, and that I let them know — they were there for that. Regardless of how little they understood it.

Charlie hated academics. He always has. And he especially hated them when he got to middle school, when he started having the same teachers I'd had three years prior, who reportedly loved to compare him to me every chance they got. But Charlie is an athlete. And while he was suffering through those comparisons, he was becoming that athlete. In high school, he quit playing center in football, since it was too hard on his knees and he was still playing as the top goaltender in the hockey league and couldn't sacrifice that yet, and he started playing longsnapper. He quickly became the best longsnapper the school had seen in many years. He made Varsity as a sophomore.

This, our family understood. And as much as they supported me, this came easy. We're all red-blooded Americans from the south, all Texan and Mississippian and proud, of course we love football. And I say "we," because I love football, even if only because of Charlie. But I love it. I know why my family loves it. I know why it comes so easy.

For the last few years I've watched the family obsess over his football career. And I'm not bitter, because that would make me a shittier brother than I already am. But I do feel jealous. And that jealousy even feels false, in some way, because of how proud I am of Charlie. I can't be upset at how

easy it is for my family to understand him because he's so thoroughly become the best at what he does. He's a 5-star longsnapper, the highest rank you can get, despite being a little slow and a little short. He beat the odds. He's ranked the #18 high school snapper in the entire nation. He committed, just a few months ago, to a D1 university. The University of Wyoming. I'm going to be able to watch my baby brother on TV in the next few years. Playing football. I've never been more proud of anyone. Everyone who knows and loves me knows I love my brother.

But there's still jealousy in it. I think some of it is how he truly has become so thoroughly good at something in a way I never could. And I know that there was jealousy for him, too, at least at one point, in the way I tore through school on my own. And I know he's proud of me the same way I am of him. He's told me how smug he is every time he gets to tell someone that his sister goes to Rice University.

But the thing that still breaks me a little bit, that has broken me since I was a sixteen-year-old angsty kid, is the ease with which the family gets to know Charlie, and understand him. He brings home girlfriends all the time, and my grandparents love them every time. No one ever flinches at him being a grandson. Or a nephew. They celebrate him growing up and becoming a man in the same breath they use to cheer him on at a game. All I've ever wanted was to be exactly the same.

. . .

The last time my friend explained the Borsuk-Ulam Theorem to me, we were sitting in the Queer Resource Center on campus. I was hosting office hours — which just meant sitting at a desk working on homework and telling people where the pronoun pins and condoms and handheld pride flags are and apologizing for being out of bisexual stickers. My friend would usually hang out to work on her own homework. I had started writing this essay at this point, so I asked her to explain it to me again. And she did. She paced around the desk this time, excitedly tracing circles in the air with her hands and cursing the lack of globes in the room, and she explained it all one more time.

Remembering that temperature is continuous, you can imagine that if you picked two perfectly opposite points on a sphere — points A and B, perhaps — they would probably not be the same temperature. But if you were to connect the two by one complete line, still keeping the points perfectly opposite the whole time, until the points replaced each other in their original spot, you might realize that their temperatures would have had to cross at one point. If point A was warmer and B was cooler, A would have to overall lower in temperature to replace B's temperature at B's original location. B would have to overall raise in temperature to replace A's temperature at A's original location. With the ever-essential continuous nature of temperature, the values would have had to intersect at some point.

That intersection is inevitable. No matter how you draw that line, that one continuous band of opposite points, it will always find a point at which the temperatures cross over and find themselves at the same value. The thing is, that ever-essential continuous nature tells us one other thing — that there is one continuous band of opposite points where each pair of opposite points has matching temperatures. Because, otherwise, it would mean there was some way to trace out that line between A and B without there being a crossover. Which we now understand cannot possibly be true.

. . .

Charlie and I, before our one year of campus crossover in high school, had one other source of collision, and it was hockey. We both started playing for fun, him a year before me, in another little Rowlett, TX recreational league.

My brother's first season was when he was in fifth grade. He came in as a goaltender because he'd been a goalkeeper in soccer. The transition from soccer to hockey is famously a smooth one, as far as youth sports go. Right off the bat, Charlie was undeniably incredible as a goaltender. There's this rule in the league we played in, that if a team is missing their goalie for a game and can't get anyone on their team to replace them, then they're allowed to ask goalies in the younger age groups to play for them. Usually it's done with the knowledge that it'll almost certainly cost you the game, but at least then the rest of your team still gets to play. In my brother's first season, a high school coach — Uncle Scott, our dad's best friend, who was the one who invited us to the league in the first place, who wasn't technically our uncle by blood or marriage but he was close enough — called Charlie up to cover. He was ten, maybe eleven. All the other players were somewhere between fourteen and eighteen. And my brother held his own. They tied the game, which was already impressive enough for an elementary school call-up. But then they went to a shoot-out, sudden death, to determine the winner. And everybody knew that they would lose, and that it'd be okay, because a sudden death shoot-out loss really isn't that bad, it's luck more than anything in a children's recreational league, and the fact that this eleven-year-old had done this well already was incredible in its own right.

But when they went to the shoot-out, my brother stopped more shots than the other goalie. Uncle Scott's team won. They won because of Charlie.

The next year, my freshman year of high school, I started playing hockey, too. Badly. Charlie and I played on the same team for three years, him racking up Best Goalie awards every season and continuing to prove himself the undeniable best at what he did, and me spending the seasons learning how to skate with any speed, and then how to take shots from anywhere beyond two feet in front of the net off a pass from a teammate, and then finally how to knock down all the sixteen-year-old dickheads who'd spent the last few years being shitty and calling me uncreative insults. This whole time, Charlie and I loved being on the same team. Every once in a while he'd ask to play out, so the two of us could be on a line together and try to get that Houston-Houston goal. He was always fantasizing about it. I hadn't seen him so excited for us to share something maybe ever in our entire shared life. He made us practice in our free time — me passing him the quickest passes I could and him slapshotting them clean into the net.

We never did manage to get that Houston-Houston goal. But we had good seasons. He got good at hockey, and I got good at accepting that it was okay for me to be mediocre at something. Our mother once told me that she was happy he was so much better at hockey than me because he needed *something*. It was outside of school, so it was finally something that wouldn't be under the shadow of my anxious overachieving obsessive teacher's pet behavior in classes. Of course she didn't phrase it like that — but the comparisons from teachers were exactly because of that. I agreed with her then, and I still do now, though perhaps a bit less bitterly.

When I was a senior and he was a freshman, my last season in the league, we got asked again (like every year) if we wanted to play on the same team. The rosters got shuffled every year, and three or four teams emerged at the end of it. You didn't get to pick your team or your coach, but siblings in the same age group would get put on the same team if they wanted it. Every year my brother and I said yes, since he'd been playing up in the high school league with me for nearly all of middle school. We liked playing together.

But the season before, my brother kept mentioning how cool it would be to play against each other. To just get that experience of a rivalry. I didn't want to, but I got the hint. He wanted space from me — a girl, his sister, older but far less cool and far worse at hockey, the (accidentally) openly gay freak in the middle of a league of suburban redneck teenage boys. So when we were asked, I said Charlie wanted to play on different teams. And Charlie said sure, and so we got put on separate teams.

We hardly even got to play against each other — two games that whole season. I was a senior doing theatre and volunteer work and college tours, and every Saturday morning conflict managed to be on a Saturday morning when my team was supposed to play his. It was stupid, and I was sad. I missed playing with my brother — *I missed my brother*. At the end of the season, I cried about it, loudly and angrily to my family. That emotional side of me, again. The teenage girl that I apparently was.

And my brother, my little brother, who I'd taken the stupidly obvious hint from, said that he'd missed it, too. That he always wanted to play with me. That he never meant he didn't want to be on my team. That he'd never said that. Our parents scolded me for having assumed that, both of us for not having communicated. Because of course Charlie hadn't said any of those things. He really hadn't, but I had known it was being said anyway. I still believed it then, my own imagined implications, when I cried even more, because I'd missed my last season with my little brother. Even when I saw how upset he was then, I believed it. I'm not sure I believe it now.

HE GOT GOOD AT HOCKEY, AND I GOT GOOD AT ACCEPTING THAT IT WAS OKAY FOR ME TO BE MEDIOCRE AT SOMETHING

. . .

It's obvious by now that I'm a bit obsessed with this theorem. The first time I ever heard of it, all I could think was — *this is the kind of thing people write about*. And that night on the balcony, three Twisted Teas in with my nerd best friend, I realized it was about my brother. About my brother and me. I would spend the next six months watching him become an expert in the politics of college football recruitment and end up committing to his top-choice school while I started to try to read the Wikipedia page for the Borsuk-Ulam theorem despite its jargony language that I didn't really understand. Between explanations from my friend, I'd research and read and attempt to write down what was happening. What was real, what had been proven. It's nice to be able to do it somewhat well now, at least to non-mathematicians who won't be irked by my beloved hand-wavey-ness. It's

nice to do it in time for my brother to read it, before he graduates, before he moves fourteen hours away from our Texas hometown to somewhere where it snows and regularly reaches negative temperatures, before he becomes a big-shot D1 football player flying all over the country for games.

When you wrap your head around the continuous band of opposite points with the same temperature, you might realize that pressure, also being continuous, follows the same rules. This is where it all falls together.

Because if pressure follows the same rules, it means that there is also a perfect continuous band of opposite points with the exact same pressure that wraps, unbroken, around the Earth.

And if this band exists at the same time as the same band of opposite points with the exact same temperature — which it must — then that means that those two bands have to cross each other. And if these two bands, made up entirely of opposite points, intersect, then that means that the two points of intersection must also be opposite points.

Which leaves us, undeniably, on our imperfect sphere of an Earth with wildly unpredictable and inconsistent weather patterns, with two perfectly opposite points with the exact same temperature and pressure.

These points are called antipodal points. They have the entire diameter of a sphere between them. That's almost 8,000 miles on Earth, depending on where you're measuring. They are as far away as two points can possibly be from each other.

And yet.

. . .

One night last summer, just before my brother started his senior year of high school, and just after I'd returned home from that full-time opera gig in St. Louis, we spent an hour lying on the hood of his truck sitting in our backyard.

We'd spent a lot of time in that truck in the few weeks I was in town. He liked driving more than I did, so whenever we had places to be, it'd be him driving that truck. He'd stolen one of my old aux cords and bought a dongle to make it work with his iPhone, and he'd blast whatever music he was listening to at the time through it. It was certainly an upgrade from a glovebox Bluetooth speaker. His taste had evolved, too. He once told me he didn't care about genre that much, just about voices. Interesting voices, ones that caught his attention. Kendrick Lamar. The Smiths. Johnny Cash. We'd found a crossover in our interests again, too, a genuine one this time. He'd found the song "Maple Syrup" by The Backseat Lovers on TikTok or Instagram or something, and I'd done their song "Kilby Girl" almost two years ago with my cover band and been obsessed ever since. They were off the same album, *When We Were Friends*, and we blared that shit across every road in our hometown.

That night, he'd been sitting outside for an hour already, and our parents were getting nervous. He'd had a rough summer, mostly from his first ugly breakup. It really was bad, too, on-again off-again, brutal teenage angst. More than once I'd gotten a text from him on my 10pm walk home from a sixteen hour shift, begging me to call him. I'd call and walk and then pace outside my loft apartment so I wouldn't wake my roommate up.

So our parents did have good reason to be a little worried about him sitting outside in the middle of the night by himself. I said I'd check on him. It was dark outside, and he wasn't sitting on the porch. The truck was down the driveway, facing away, so I couldn't see him yet.

"Chuck!"

"Huh?"

"Are you —"

"I'm on the truck."

So, I followed his voice and walked to the far side of the yard. There he was, earbuds in, lying on the hood of the truck with his legs dangling down, staring up at the sky. You can't see a lot of stars in the suburbs, but you can see more there than on Rice's campus, so close to downtown Houston's suffocating light pollution. In comparison, it always feels beautiful to come home to.

"You good?"

"Yeah. Just chilling."

He let me climb up on the hood and sit with him. We probably spent more of the time there not talking than talking. But there was a sense of honesty, of understanding. Eventually I decided to tell him the thing I'd been thinking about all summer — really, the last two years since going to college — *really*, for the last five years, since I'd first understood myself.

"Did I ever tell you I'm gonna, like, transition? Once I graduate?"

"Oh, yeah?"

He knew that I was transgender before that moment. I'd told him I was nonbinary when I first figured it out at fifteen, probably after I tried to tell our mother and was frantically dealing with the nuclear fallout of that conversation. He knew, but he also knew I didn't want him to change anything about how he talked about me. It was too risky with our parents. So he still called me his sister and I never really assumed he ever thought of me differently, either.

THE SAME FACE— FRAMED DIFFERENTLY, HIS SHORT HAIR AND MY LONG, HIS EYEBLACK AND MY GLITTER...

"Yeah." I caught my breath. I wasn't frightened, not of him, but it was still frightening. "Like, surgery. Maybe — maybe testosterone." Definitely testosterone. I had mostly decided by then, but I was absolutely terrified of admitting that to anyone fully, even Charlie, even myself.

"Will you be my… my brother, then? Or…"

And I thought. I thought about a lot of things, a lot of times from my childhood and my teenage years, desperately wishing to be seen as a man and treated like a man and loved like a man. I thought about that summer, the men I was surrounded by. Shockingly kind, middle-aged, good-at-their-jobs-after-a-lifetime men, in their black clothes and their flannels and their work gloves. Those men with their long hair and beards, their beautiful faces weathered by time and IATSE union gig stress under it all. I thought about how desperate I felt, deep in my ribs, to be one of them.

And I looked at my brother. Suddenly, all I could think about anymore was growing up with him and being told we looked the same. All the people who'd said they'd never seen two siblings look more alike. Every time I ever thought about transitioning, about testosterone, I'd thought about the way I'd watched my little brother turn into a man, and how I'd wanted nothing more than to look like him again. The same face — framed differently, his short hair and my long, his eyeblack and my glitter, his football uniforms and hoodies and my patterned button-ups and denim jackets — but the same face all the same. The same smile, wide and toothy. *The same.*

I lied to him in that moment. I was still afraid, still terrified of what it would mean to be a man. To be his brother. It felt like more of a leap than I was willing to do yet. So I lied.

"Nah. Just, like, your sibling, or whatever. Something in between. Just not your sister." He didn't question it. He didn't flinch, or blink, or pause. He just nodded, still staring up at the sky and said:

"Cool."

It was such a revelation I just shared with him — and not even all of it yet. My entire world was falling apart about this, just a little bit. It meant too much, to say to someone out loud that I had plans. It made it real. And he didn't care. At least, he only cared the right amount. It meant something to him, but not terror or guilt or an absolutely uncertain future of waiting for parents' fury and friends' confusion and lovers' disgust. It just meant knowing something new.

So I stared up at that suburban Texas night sky, barely able to make out a few familiar constellations, sitting on the hood of my near-eighteen-year-old baby brother's truck that wasn't quite his, sitting in a confession that wasn't quite truth, breathing easy for the first time maybe all summer. We were still us, still spiraling rapidly away from each other, or simply remaining as different as we possibly could, whatever it happened to be. But we were still us. Brothers, insisting on finding each other, understanding each other. Brothers, a little bit the same no matter what we did. There was always going to be something there, the bond of brotherhood, the love between us. So I stared up at that suburban Texas night sky and smiled.

"Cool."

AND THIRST

AMY SUO

CW: Depictions of sexual assault and intoxication

Dusk is a spiteful thing when you are
Sixteen and stupid and laying in the back
Of some guy's car, thinking

God, how did I get here?

As he's there. If you
Crane your neck just right,
You can see that the moon is full

Moon, 月, 玥, and pearl-white
That was the name my mother gave me

It'll be prettier in an hour,
When the deep of the seas

A pearl is gorgeous, but imperfect, she says, it

Envelops the sky in its embrace,
When he is done and gone,

will never break, but even the softest

But his nails break your skin as he clenches

of touch can leave wounds in its surface.

Flesh tighter, as if his touch was the only
Thing tethering his existence to reality, and
You remember those pills you took,

No,

You try to say, but your lips can't comprehend
The space between one another. Oh

Your tongue is dry, or maybe you said it, and you just couldn't hear over the sound of the ocean crashing into your hips, but, by now, you're sure that you're dying, and he knows, and he's still
There.
Slut.

I respond, But, I am strong.

Because tomorrow, you won't care,
And you'll forgive him by dawn.

She laughs.



GIVE YOU THE MOON
STEVEN BURGESS

POEM FOR MY HEAVENLY FATHER, BECAUSE SUFFERING

HOPE YANG

Zhu a, what do I do with this dying?
All the while I have been breaking
a shattering months in the making
Fu shen, mine, do you mind this suffering?
Why burn these visions into my eyes
a lost right hand, two lost brothers
silent fingers scraping tears, melon rind rot

I have waited for so long and with my eyes —
opened an apartment door to hear a story like this: A valley of bodies, not shadows, just death
Tossed like carrion, he says it with a smile and she was 4 Silky souls from the unexplainable breaking
going up and what if I know they're going
down to continue the suffering

Lord, I fear not suffering
Help me not fear it, let it not come
upon those so loved
Don't let me turn a blind eye



MIDLIFE CRISIS
KARIS LAI

Be splintered, ruined by death

I am frustrated with the thinking, what you could —

Only know I wouldn't have gone there, some hill like that

looking so gentle, viciously broken

Shang di a, wanted to be you, no

You looked at me so gently, voice broken

Didn't know how you must be suffering

Asked me if I don't see the good end with my own eyes

would I still walk in step with you

believe

a God who allows death

God who embodies the dying

the weight of all these brothers and sisters

like someone could carry brokenness

Say, by his wounds you have been healed

A curse bleeding dry, your body up there like

carrion, looked like a loser losing, what suffering

Never thought if you cried, what you looked like, your eyes

Of course I will follow you I

don't know why I dreamed a crucifix

through my ribcage, 23 days gone

Know you reverse the dying, can you reverse the dying

Ba ba, I didn't want to be so broken

by people I stand at the periphery of

Didn't want to end this poem with suffering

You know they asked me to pray for Jacob, his green plot, youth broken

Behind me a boy in diapers closes and locks the door

I'm looking for one grave to signify an end to death

All the things we've been long suffering

and if I cast my eyes behind me —

and if I'm not looking in the right place

help me fix my eyes on you

AN INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN PRUFER

EDITED BY RACHEL PARR, MARY WEEKLEY, YASMIN SHARPE, CAITLYN LADD, TESS MANSFIELD, HANNAH LEE

It is R2's great pleasure to sit down with prominent writers and thinkers in the literary community to capture their insights and perspectives on the past, present, and future of the field. This past fall, R2 had the privledge of sitting down with Kevin Prufer, Texas State Poet Laureate, award winning writer, editor, and Professor of English at the University of Houston. Prufer is the author of nine full length poetry collections, an editor of many anthologies, and his debut novel *Sleepaway* was published in 2024. Beyond his prolific career as a writer, Prufer is a community builder and dedicated educator.

We sat down with Prufer after reading *Sleepaway* to get his unique perspective on his work as an author, a poet, and educator, and the state of the publishing industry today. We have edited this interview for brevity and clarity.



R2: We would like to hear about how exactly you got into writing, what made you want to pursue it?

Kevin: I went to one of those really fancy boarding schools, and at this boarding school we had to memorize a poem a week. I hated it. Everybody in boarding school hated it! I suspect it wasn't designed to create any love of literature in us. I think it was designed to force us to understand comma rules.

But the next year, I had all these poems in my head. And I would walk around campus and think about the poems, which had often seemed really mysterious to me. I didn't really understand T.S. Eliot, I just thought it sounded really cool. And I sort of had this feeling that I could do that! Like I could find some kind of mysterious truth if I could just put the right words in the right order.

I never really formulated the plan of being a writer. When I finished college, I worked as a news journalist. And my plan was to go into news writing, but the pay was terrible, the hours were very long, everything was insecure. And I didn't like the feeling of working for hours on an article, and then discovering, three days later, that it was already obsolete and nobody would ever want to read a three-day old article.

So, I called up one of my professors from college. I was very scared to call her, because she was very famous and I had never actually taken a class with her, I just had passed her a lot in the quad. I don't even know where I got the guts to call her up, but I called her up and said "I just don't know what to do with my life, I hate this news writing thing!" And she said, "Well, why don't you write stories?"

And she helped me get into a little one-year program in rural Virginia. They would bring in 12 writers, mostly North Easterners, mostly guys, my year, and we'd all live on this women's college campus, or near it. And our job was really just to write, and they would pay for us to do that.

So I started trying to write a novel, and then quickly learned that poetry was more interesting, and just sort of shifted over into doing that. So that's sort of how it happened. You kind of stumble into things, you know, and if you stumble into something you're really interested in, you're lucky!

R2: You mentioned that you found poetry to be more interesting than novels, and you wrote ten books of poetry before you switched to prose. What inspired you to write a novel?

Kevin: I didn't take any English classes in college. I was not an English major. I began being interested in stories, because I think that the stories were more accessible. I felt like I could understand a story, and poetry was always attractive, but mysterious. I have to say, I wrote a little bit of both all the time. But when I discovered the tools that are available to poets—which are much greater, more varied, and more exacting, than the tools that are available to fiction writers—I switched to poetry.

I spent ten books, just sort of learning how to use those tools. The tools that create silences, for instance, that fiction writers don't have. Like the end of a line, where there's a silence. Or just the line itself, and all of the permutations of the line that are available to poets, or rhyme, or meter. After my eighth or ninth book of poetry, I got to a place where I thought, "I think I'm kind of writing the same stuff over and over again." The more you write, the easier it is to feel this way. Once you've written eight books of poetry, it's really easy to be like: "Jesus. What am I gonna do next? I can't–I don't want to be that same guy, or fall into that rut that people fall into, where they just imitate themselves for the rest of their lives." I think everybody can think of plenty of musicians who do this, and they just sort of sound like less exciting versions of previous things.

I had sent out my book to my editor, my book of poems, and I just sat down and wrote the first sentence of Sleepaway. Thinking it would be maybe a story, or more likely, one of those things that you write ten pages of and then throw out. But, every day, I just kept on coming back to it. And then, when four months passed, I suddenly realized it had ended, and I had this novel. Then my thought was maybe I can go back to writing poems and be a different person now, having done this. Maybe there's been enough space, and I can go write a book of poems that won't sound anything like the previous ones. Which I think has sort of happened! I never really thought of the novel as anything to publish. I thought of it as a way of getting across a bridge, from one kind of poetry to another kind of poetry. I was sort of stunned when I sent the novel out and it got picked up pretty quickly. I was absolutely prepared to just keep it in the drawer. It was more in the service of poetry than anything, at the time. Now, I don't think of it that way, now I think of it as something that I'm kind of proud of.

R2: In the process of writing that novel, was there anything exclusive about poetry that you missed? And, was there anything you would want to imbue into your future poetry, having written this novel?

Kevin: Yeah, it was actually really different from writing poetry— writing a novel. It felt different, and the reason is that when I'm writing a poem, I feel like I'm constructing a sort of tower made out of individual lines, and each line has to have its own integrity. So you sort of put the line there, you work on it, and you figure out, how does this have integrity? How can I create a caesura or a silence in the middle of the line? Those are the questions I'm asking when writing a poem.

Whereas, writing a story, I got very involved in the characters' lives. It felt like having a roommate, but you keep on returning to your room to learn a bit more about that person every day. And, revising is different. I'd get to page 80 or 90 of that book, and I'd realize that Cora was not the person I thought she was. She had become somebody completely different, and then I'd have to go back and make her that person from the beginning. Then, I would wander around during the day thinking, "What would Cora do?"

R2: I'm curious how your personal experiences have informed your writing, especially on this full-length novel? And also writing about a pandemic that's not unlike COVID? What's this sort of balance between like seeds of emotional truth, and experiential truth, and things made up in fiction?

Kevin: Well, in poems, I'm incapable of writing about myself. I know a lot of poets start writing poems because they want to write about themselves or express some quality of their identity, and that's great. I'm just more shy about that kind of stuff and less willing to reveal things about myself in a way that seems permanent. So, I think I've been comfortable my whole career trying to get at the truth, not through my own experience, but through imagining other people's experience.

When I'm writing a poem, I'm usually asking myself, "Who's speaking in this poem?", because it ain't me. And what are their concerns? So, in that way, writing the novel was not that different. But of course, you can't really escape yourself. I mean, you're always writing about your concerns. Otherwise, why would you be writing? So it's sort of bullshit to say I can't write about myself. If you're writing, in some ways, you're writing about some aspect of yourself, right? And I think the anxieties that Cora expresses, I identified with and felt during COVID— I wrote the novel during COVID, I guess that's kind of obvious.

I was also thinking about the 1980s as I remembered them. I was hoping to gently think about race without trying to make statements that I don't feel qualified to make. And in my mind, there's a little joke running in the back of my mind because I wrote this about wokeness, you know? Everybody

falls asleep. But also, my memory of the '80s is a time when I was asleep to a lot of other people's concerns, and concerns of the world, so I was thinking less about COVID and more about a sort of self-obliteration and what happens when you're not experiencing the world.

R2: Were you thinking of a particular audience when writing the book? And how does that imagined audience compare to the audience that you imagined for a poem?

Kevin: I was always taught in school, I think badly, that a poem functions like a little secret code. You break the code, and then write the five-page essay on the code. The problem with that was that the only audience to write poems for would be those who enjoy solving puzzles. This seems like a weird disconnect, and not only that, but once you've solved a puzzle, why would you ever go back and resolve it? Nobody does the same crossword puzzle twice. At some point in my life, I suddenly thought, well, if I'm writing these poems, then I'm writing to communicate to people. I was naive back then; I thought I was communicating with everybody. But obviously that's not true. You can't write for everybody. It seemed to me that if I were going to write a poem, I'd have to be urgently trying to communicate with some kind of reader, and that the communication would be forefront. Which is why I write poems the way I write them. I brought that to writing the novel as well. I think writing literary work is partly a pursuit of some kind of truth, but it's also communicating and entertaining. And if you lose track of the other two because you're so pure, you can only think about the truth part of it. God knows I don't want to just write for a bunch of poets.

R2: Do you feel like there's something specific that your students have taught you about what it means to write and craft a piece of art that you never would have thought of before you started teaching?

Kevin: Yes, there are plenty of moments when, for example, a student puts together a metaphor that I find especially striking, where I think, "Shit, I wish I thought of that." I learned that you can do a metaphor that way, and that happens all the time. Every time I go into a classroom, this happens once or twice, where I think, "Oh, man, that was sneaky and smart of that student," and, "I'm gonna try to remember that so that I can do something similar," not plagiarizing. But there are bigger ways that I've learned things from my students, and a lot of that involves, for example, questions of audience. When I was starting out as a writer in the early 90s, I wasn't really thinking about who I'm writing for; I just thought I'm writing for the whole world and the whole world needs to hear what I have to say. But the more I've worked with students of various backgrounds, it's

complicated my understanding of who one is writing for and why. I can think of a student who was writing something in class that referenced black culture that I didn't know, and another student challenged it, and the first student said, "Look it doesn't bother me that you don't get those references because I'm not really writing this for you." I thought that was an interesting take on audience. You're not writing it for me. I'll still do my best and offer some ideas for what you're working on, knowing that audience is a very complicated thing. So, you learn things from being around a lot of writers that you wouldn't really know if you were just writing by yourself.

R2: Whenever we type, I feel like all of us have very strong opinions on what font we type in. I know for me, I love typing in EB Garamond.

Kevin: No, that's the right one! That's the right font! No, no Garamond is magic. I've been saying this for 30 years. Back in 1997, I could not place a book of poems. I had gotten 60, 65 rejections on this book of poems, and I was just at my wits' end. Meanwhile, my ex-girlfriend—who I'm still friends with—she finished a book of poems, and she sent it out, and it was accepted at the first place she sent it. So I was on the phone with her, and I was just like, Joy, come on. This is not even fair. Like, I've got 65 rejections on this, and you just write it and send it out, and the first place picks it up? And it's a really good publisher? What am I not knowing? And she said, Joy's regular job is a graphic designer, she said, your problem is you're not using Garamond. And I said, Okay. Like I trust you, graphic designer. So I highlighted the whole damn book, put it in Garamond, sent it out—and it got picked up by two publishers.

R2: It's the best font, objectively.

Kevin: It's the best font, it's the best font. Right. I mean, yeah. I've just made all of your careers—do you understand that?

R2: Are you working on anything else at the moment, like any poems?

Kevin: Yeah, I've got a book of poems out at my editor. I'm still waiting to hear back about that. I'm working on a book called Literary Publishing in the 21st Century that's coming out next year, which is about the state of the publishing industry in America. Like every little aspect of it, like agents and publishers and book designers and bookstore owners and distributors—just all those sort of wonky things that when you're a writer you have to think about. Because it's part of your living.

Then, with two of my former students, I've got a book coming out next year, too, called Other Legacies. It was kind of a cool project. Two of my students and I had this idea that we would call up, I think about 40 really well known poets, who we also knew to be diverse and very well read—our main criteria was it can't just be a famous poet, it has to be somebody we know is very, very well read—and ask them each to pick a poet, not themselves, who nobody's ever heard of. And it could be from any time, it could be 18th century, 19th century, 20th century. Just a poet that nobody's ever heard of, who you think the whole world needs to know about. Because they're really important, and they've been overlooked, and lost, and gone out of print, and their books are not available anymore. And then, to write an essay about that poet, and to give us a selection of about 10 pages of that poet's best work, and it's all coming out in one big book. It's like the book of poets nobody's ever heard of, but y'all should know about.

R2: Is there one big takeaway that you've learned in your work, kind of dissecting what the state of the publishing industry is, and where we're going and that sort of thing; what would you say is the most important takeaway that you found? What have you learned from this experience?

Kevin: Oh my God, I've learned so much. The way we did the book is we invited sort of one person to represent every aspect of publishing that we could think of, from graphic novels to university presses to bookstore chain people to somebody who works in a bookstore chain, not behind the cash register necessarily, but somebody who figures out what books they're going to carry—one person from every corner that we could think of—and ask them each to write for us what their corner of that world looks like right now and where they think it's going. So everybody kind of brings some big insight that I didn't know about. I think one of the most interesting was, the conventional wisdom forever was that books are just going to disappear, you know? I mean, that's been the wisdom since I became a professor, that books are going to disappear, it's all going to be ebooks. God forbid, it's all going to be blogs. Wait, no, blogs disappeared—it's all going to be Substack. And what I keep on hearing again and again from everybody involved in it is like, "Oh no, books are doing great. Like that's all bullshit, people are buying books, like they're buying books all the time." There never really was a big downturn, and that was kind of a nice thing to learn. I wasn't expecting that, just the general optimism. You know, these days you go into a profession and say, How do you all feel? General optimism is not what you expect, but publishers seem to have it.



TO MY UNCLE WHO'S PROBABLY DEAD (BY NOW)

SARAH JUN

To that little boy in (North) Korea, who has
his school uniform on, but no school—the bell rang one
Tuesday afternoon and was taken down for scrap metal the next,



who trudged back home to discover a bowl of
warm rice and beef stew instead of his mother,
two army men in place of his sisters, and
a note from his father that read: be good &
carry on the family name,
where his father should have been,

his father who thought they'd return to their beloved
son, that even as they fled like ants under
a soldier's boot, as surely as winter thawed into
spring, so too would the war end.

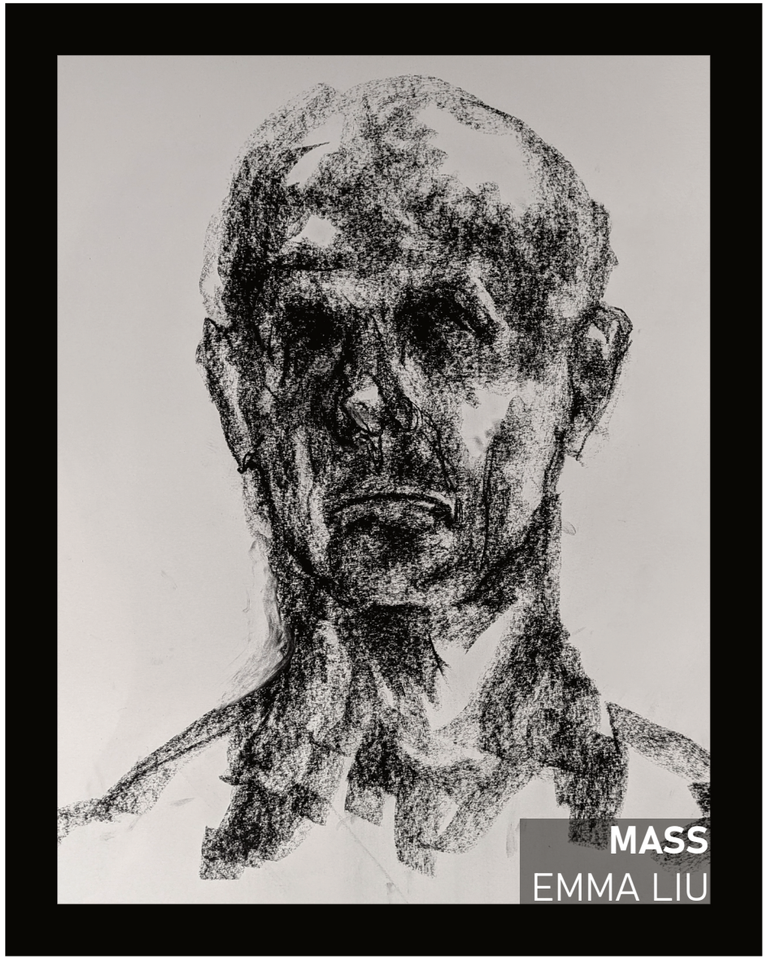
They never met again.



COMING DOWN
AMY WANG

And near a century has passed,
so the little boy must be
dead of old age, if he wasn't shot,
starved, or shit himself to death.

But for one afternoon, he had a marvelous
time, eating a hearty meal, playing with little
green men in the front yard, reading his
father's note with a smile,
determined to be a man.



PORTRAIT OF AN UNTITLED SLOVENIAN IN AREZZO, ITALY

SIENA DAMIANI

One of those kitchens built for falling in love:
cracked blue backsplash, lace half-curtain in the window, warm bulb above the stove
lighting a halo in your wild flyaways — your hairspray's loosened its hold by this hour.

You cook, I hover.
Tortellini in brodo tonight and last night too, but it's a new wine bottle
that you swig from as you stir — *Chef's privileges* — I wonder if you know my name,
if you know I forgot yours the minute you took my hand.
We don't speak much anyway, but when we do, you talk to me like I'm not sixteen, or maybe
like sixteen is an alright thing to be, I'm not quite sure.

It's prosecco tonight and half-empty by the time you start pouring — *Don't worry,
we've got a backup* — you never let my glass get dry. I'm trying to mask the giddy dizziness
of bubbles rising to my head, but you're giggling, you're misconjugating, you're sliding off your stool
to tipsy-dance.

The angel you are, what could a name ever do for you?



COASTING
NHU CHU

PUMPKINHEADS

MADISON E. DANIELS

CW: Implied Homophobia, Transphobia, and Emotional Abuse

In late autumn, there's a place pumpkins don't usually grow. Someplace ordinary children hardly find time to visit. This is where Izza and Wood sit. Fourteen, or perhaps older–these two were not *ordinary* children. They had much time to grow beyond their years–half-buried in the vines of the pumpkin patch.

"Is there a reason you carved them into triangles this time?"

In her mind, Izza traces the triangle eyes of Wood's jack-o-lantern with her fingertips. She refrains. The pumpkin has, after all, been carefully hollowed and placed over their hair, aligned semi-perfectly with their eyes and mouth, and would be difficult to touch without startling the strange masterpiece of it all.

"They look cooler," Wood says.

"True."

"You won't scare anything off," Wood says after a moment. "Nothing will run from you with heart eyes like that. It looks girly."

"I am a girl."

Wood makes a sound like a huff.

"Besides, it's the pumpkin that matters in scaring them off. The hearts are for me."



"You can't see them."

"I know they're there."

She crosses her arms. Wood crosses theirs.

It wouldn't occur to anyone that they were best friends, Izza thinks. They should hold hands or something. Like the best friends at school do.

Her parents wouldn't approve of that. The holding hands.

Or perhaps they would. Because they don't know yet.

"Have you ever seen a ghost?" Wood is looking directly at her when they ask.

"No. I don't think so." That's a lie. Izza had seen ghosts all her life. She'd seen one just a few hours ago, in the pumpkin that lay discarded at their feet.

She'd made one of the hearts wrong, too sharp to be kind. Wood had said it would be okay, but in that moment, she had seen a ghost so awful she'd tossed the thing away and started again.

SHE FORGOT. OR, SHE TRIED TO PRETEND FOR A MOMENT. THAT THEY WERE ORDINARY. THAT EITHER OF THEM COULD GO HOME WITHOUT A PUMPKIN.

She sees her father's eyes again now. When he'd told her to stay away from a girl from school. Lucille.

"She's not right, that one. Stares at girls too long."

She remembers being relieved it was Lucille he disapproved of. She remembers praying he wouldn't find out about Wood.

Her father is, of course, very much alive–Izza had never quite understood a ghost as a thing that was *dead*–but the heart had reminded her of him, so full of joy and love, and yet somehow carved in the way that would make him hate her.

She traces the hearts on her pumpkin head the way she wanted to touch Wood. *This will scare away the bad things. This will scare the ghosts.*

She wonders if Lucille took her jack-o-lantern off when she told her parents. If her ghosts caught her then.

Wood's boredom is so potent it jars her from her thoughts.

"You can take it off and go home," she offers.

"No I can't," Wood says. She thinks they're joking.

"Of course you can. Here–" she reaches over to help them remove the pumpkin from their head.

"No! No! No!" Wood slaps her hands away. The vines shiver with them. Behind the triangles, she swears she sees tears gathering. Liquid light flickering like candlewax inside the hollow shell. "I can't leave."

Izza sighs. "Yeah. I know."

She forgot. Or, she tried to pretend for a moment. That they were ordinary. That either of them could go home without the pumpkin.

"I can't let the ghosts get me," Wood offers as a half-joke. They mean the ghosts from the movies. Not the ones in the house their older siblings already ran away from. Left them in.

"Of course not." She imagines the ghosts in their house. Their mother, always in the most beautiful outfits, and their father in his suits and ties. Ghosts that breathe, and yet still manage to haunt.

She imagines that, to Wood, they are the scariest thing in the world.

She would not want to lose her pumpkin head either.

At least to Izza's parents, she could always be who they wanted. She wore pink. Long dresses and skirts, and she liked boys. Sometimes. She imagined herself grown up, off at uni, removing the pumpkin head for the first time, perfectly intact. Free.

Wood was fiddling with their shirt. They did not like to pretend. Their parents were on to them, if they didn't know already.

She imagined them trying to remove the jack-o-lantern in university, if their parents even let them get there. They'd carved the teeth sharp, the triangle eyes jagged. She thought, they'll turn 18, and when they remove it, their head will fall clean off.

"Veronica!" A voice calls in the distance. Wood drops their shirt. The two of them sit very still.

"Do you think ghosts really exist?" they whisper.

"Veronica!" Wood's mother yells again.

Izza looks up over the vines. She can see the apparition from here.

"Veronica Jane Wood!"

Veronica Jane flinches. Izza watches their mother's figure cover the setting sun. She considers their question.

"They definitely do."

And for a second, as their mother uncovers the sun, the light in her friend's eyes through the triangles in their pumpkin looks just like the candles of a jack-o-lantern, and she considers taking them by the pumpkin head and running away into the field. Away from their parents. Away from Lucille and her girls, and the thoughts they had created in their parents' minds. Away from Veronica Jane.

She briefly considers if a "dead" name is just another kind of ghost, the kind that never stops reminding you of home. If a pumpkin head can rid you of it.

Wood heads off towards their mother. She swears, even though she knows it's impossible, that they never remove the pumpkin from their head at all.

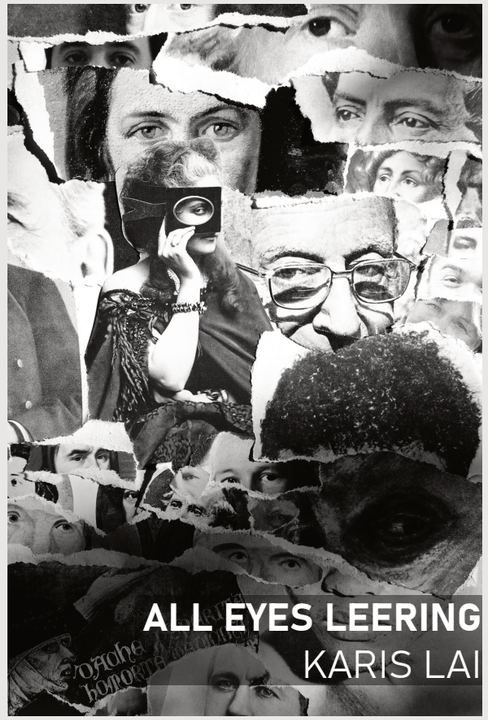
Into the vines, she thinks. *That's where they'll chase them. That's where they'll chase the ghosts away.*

WHAT WOULD YOU LEAVE ME?

LACOLE YANG

CW: Intense depictions of suicide/suicidal ideation

Not a widower, we're too young
for that. Not too young for death
to circle above like crows during migration season,
cloud of specks blackening the clean sky,
mirrored in the eight-foot depths of public pools
littering our suburban paradise.
Everything is clean here. Everything is harmless
and unblemished, perfectly housed.
Did you feel how sanitized the night air was,
how pure, when you crept from your house
at 2 AM to the nearest conveniently located pool
and looked at the stars that we were blessed with
while the light of street lamps kissed your acne scars
because I was too far away to see them,
because I had flown east, away from the crows.
Out of sight, out of mind, and I forgot in an instant.
When you can't see something, it gathers like a cloud,
weighing heavy until the sky comes down
into a hundred piss-filled, lifeguarded pools.
Afterward, I was told that it was not my fault.
Afterward, you told me it was my fault.
Did I not hold you in that pool





when there was still light?
Did I not see the hours of work-from-home meetings
that poured tax dollars onto its tiles?
Was that last night only a foreboding,
a summer of chlorine and ice drinks and water
only a cruel shadow of that silence
between 2 AM and the time you told me?
The only way down is down, so why
did you not drive to me, steal a car and drive
down the I-10? Down is down either way,
and humidity is still water, but light enough to breathe in.



THE LAST INCENSE BURNER

RUBY GAO

CW: mentions of domestic abuse, racism, and sexual assault; intense themes of eating disorder and body dysmorphia

"*Please take out the mottled green bronze incense burner handed down in your family, light a pinch of aloeswood, and listen as I tell you a story of prewar Hong Kong,*" a female voice, gentle and measured, played on the podcast through her earbuds. "*When this pinch of incense burns out, my story will come to an end as well.*"

While winters here have always been unforgiving, she stepped out of her home in a hurry without a coat. The wind grazing her face like a dull knife, not cutting, only numbing.

She quickened her pace, calculating whether the remaining minutes would carry her to class.

She made it before class started. With the Iliad already open on her desk, she slipped into her seat, a small, private triumph. Her professor was standing at the lectern, yet one earbud still lingered in her ear.





The voice continued speaking of Eileen Chang's *The First Incense Burner (第一炉香)*[1], of the work's connection with *Dream of the Red Chamber (红楼梦)*[2], of old stories that seemed to fold in on themselves.

"Which part impressed you most while reading Trojan women's laments?"

Smooth English words unfolded in the air—light, thin, like a transparent film. She listened hard; attention was the price of understanding her mother tongue lay closer, pressed against her ear, yielding itself even when she barely listened, unwilling to loosen its hold.

It is time to go back to class. She reached up and removed the earbud without hesitation.

***

At noon, she had fifty minutes to herself before the next class. For the sake of her figure, she had long since given up lunch.

Instead, she stood before the restroom mirror, took out the eyebrow pencil, and carefully traced the soft arc of her willow-leaf brows.

There was still time to spare. For reasons she did not bother to examine, she pressed play on the podcast again. The same gentle, faintly melancholy female voice slipped back into her ears: *"a slender nose, a small, full mouth… carrying the mild, generous temperament of old China… Shanghai women are like steamed pork."*

As she listened to Ge Weilong (葛薇龙) examine her own lovely face, she found herself studying the pale, saltless face in the mirror as well.

Like steamed pork. She let the greasy, disgusting taste linger in her mouth, while the acid in her stomach rose and fell, burning in slow, repeated waves.

[1] The First Incense Burner: Elieen Chang's novella telling the story of Ge Weilong, a young student lured from Shanghai to colonial Hong Kong, who became entangled in the decadent upper-class society and eventually descended into a life of prostitution to support her playboy husband.
[2] Dream of the Red Chamber: one of the greatest classical novels in Chinese literature

There was a time when she knew how to like this girl in the mirror: skinny, fair-skinned, her face smooth, no excess angles—such words for beauty had once been sufficient.

Now her pale face dissolved into the mirror's cloudy whiteness. All that remained was the dark pool of her pupils, glossy and still, like a sealed room with no exit.

She capped the eyebrow pencil, lowered her head to wash her hands, and did not look into the mirror again.

***

You should know how lucky you are. It is beyond imagination for so many Chinese to skip the gaokao[3] *and be a college student in America.*

Reading the WeChat message from *Baba*, she felt the familiar guilt rise, sharp and impatient, catching in her throat. She stared at the screen for a long time, then finally replied with a weak *okay*.

The surge of emotion ebbed and returned, rushing through her like a river. Then a headline caught her eye: *Confusions of Living an Asian-American Life?* A New Yorker article. She clicked.

She read slowly, her eyes moving left to right, feeling as though she were standing far away, watching other people's pain—close enough to see the flames, but not close enough to feel the heat on her own skin. She could not enter their language, not even stand at its edge.

SHE COULD NOT ENTER THEIR LANGUAGE, NOT EVEN STAND AT ITS EDGE.

She found herself desiring those pains, even envying them: the lovely, lovely pain of being Asian-American, of naming confusion aloud, of speaking it into existence.

It was not like the pain she knew—the acid in her stomach, rising and burning inside her, a pain she anticipated and endured. This was different. This pain did not belong to her. She had never

[3] Gaokao: China's college entrance exam.

possessed it.

Yes, but I am not even American. She wanted to scream, scream until her chest emptied. *I am a Chinese girl who can stay here only on an F-1 visa.*

Tears slid down her face, cooling as they fell, stiffening her features, as though her skin had forgotten how to move.

She wiped her face. The message from *Baba* was still there.

You should know how lucky you are.

***

Dusk settled in, and the moon crept upward. That small, round spot of pale yellow looked like a hole burned by a stick of incense through fine black satin, its edges faintly singed.

RISING AND RISING UNTIL SHE COULD NO LONGER FOLLOW THE SMOG.

There was a Christmas party that night. People dressed in finery drifted in, one group after another. She had deliberately chosen the pink qipao, a small pouch stuffed with dried roses hanging at her waist. The fragrance swayed as she moved, leaving passersby faintly light-headed.

She opened Instagram and uploaded a photo of herself in that outfit. The replies came quickly—sentences sticky with heat. They made her feel as though the pale skin she had left exposed was about to melt into cream, slowly pooling and flowing inside the pink container.

People moved among the tables, wine glasses raised. The wine inside shimmered. She held a glass as well, drinking very little and feeling only the cool surface pressed against her palm.

"It's a Christmas party," a friend beside her said, leaning in and lowering her voice. "Your qipao is unusual."

The words were spoken lightly. Her face flushed at once, as if it might dissolve into liquid.

Sweet, slippery laughter rolled through the crowd, enclosing her. She glanced down at the tips of her shoes, then quickly looked up again.

In this light, her skin—neither yellow nor white—seemed undecided. When she spoke, it was immediately clear where she was from—*everything about me is so painfully awkward next to that damn qipao!*

Smiling still, she took a step back, then another, like a fish slipping through a narrow gap in the water.

The restroom lights were excessively bright. Standing before the mirror, she saw the body tightly wrapped in the qipao—diminished, drained of color.

Laughter from outside filtered through the walls in broken fragments. She lowered her head and opened Instagram. Attentive and interchangeable messages slid upward one by one, as though written by the same person.

Yet that night, looking at the pink shadow of herself, she suddenly thought of the tiresome Shanghai girl, Ge Weilong. It occurred to her that Ge Weilong had not been in a hurry to marry at all; she had merely understood certain things much earlier than others—or perhaps failed to understand them altogether.

Stepping out of the restroom, she found there was an enormous Christmas tree—so large, so lavish, and unlike any she had ever seen back in Shanghai. At its peak, a star glowed with an orange-yellow light, burning in the darkness like a flame thinned by the wind. She stood in the cold, gazing at that patch of color with a quiet fascination.

***

She moved past the clamor of the party without looking back, walking step by step toward her apartment. Crouched on the blanket by the door, she struck a match and lit an incense stick—the one *Mama* had given her before she left home.

The incense burned slowly, curling into dizzying spirals, rising and rising until she could no longer follow the smog. The ash drifted down slowly, congealing the time of burning.

Somehow, in a dream clouded with smoke, she found herself turning the pages of a diary from her early teens. On one page she had written:

每次他们打我，我都想离开家。

要是有一天我能去美国就好了。[4]

On that page, the character 家[5] was written unusually small. The character 美[6], however, was large—pressed down heavily, filled in, etched so deeply it seemed about to burst the narrow green squares of the grid.

Now, she added another line beneath that sentence:

这里很美。[7]

[4] 每次他们打我，我都想离开家。要是有一天我能去美国就好了(Měi cì tāmen dǎ wǒ, wǒ dōu xiǎng lí kāi jiā. Yàoshi yǒu yì tiān wǒ néng qù měiguó jiù hǎo le): They hit me again today. I want to leave home. If one day I could go to America.
[5] 家 (jiā): home or family.
[6] 美 (měi): beautiful. It is also the first character in 美国 (měi guó), the Chinese name for the United States.
[7] 这里很美(zhè lǐ hěn měi): It is beautiful here.



WHAT WE CALL MAKING AN EXIT

SHEM BROWN

Now I'll leave you: I cried
for night, falling. It falls in darkness,
and now? The earth and the sea,
leaden waves and shifting sands—
soon I won't see them anymore.
But if I walk out now, I will have walked
away, and in blindness you will be
a stranger to me. Darkness, falling.
Let me stay here a moment more, then.
Now, I halt by the door, waiting.
Falling, the night cries: so dark.



TANGLED WIRES
CHLOÉ SERNA

2026 GEORGE G. WILLIAMS AWARDS

R2's annual writing contests are sponsored by the George G. Williams Fund. The contests are juried by professional judges not affiliated with Rice. This year's judge was award-winning poet and author KB Brookins. You can find their comments about each of our winners on the subsequent pages. Each of our 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 program.

OUR JUDGE | KB BROOKINS



KB Brookins is a writer, educator, and cultural worker from Texas. KB's poetry collection *Freedom House* (2023) won the American Library Association Barbara Gittings Literature Award and the Texas Institute of Letters Award for Best First Book of Poetry. KB's memoir *Pretty* (2024) won the Lambda Literary Award in Transgender Nonfiction, the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award, and the Dorothy Allison/Felice Picano Emerging Writer Award. Their writing is published in *Teen Vogue, Poetry Magazine, HuffPost,* and elsewhere. KB is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Santa Clara University. Follow them online at @earthtokb.

FICTION

WINNER | *"man spelt backwards" by Chi Pham*

I was really captivated by these sentences. There is not a word misplaced, and not a scene that feels superfluous. I was squirming but not from the grotesque; instead, I was convinced by the writing that what I was reading —especially the main character and the veteran— was real. I feel grateful to have read this.

RUNNER UP | *"The Last Incense Burner" by Ruby Gao*

CREATIVE NONFICTION

WINNER | *"antipodal points: notes on brotherhood" by Jules Houston*

This is a great braided essay jam-packed with interesting ruminations on transness, sibling jealousy, coming of age, and the Borsuk-Ulam theorem. The writer isn't afraid to do some self-indictment (which makes for believable and impactful creative nonfiction), and they show the complexity in decisions like coming out or transitioning. I learned something reading this piece. It is beautifully memorable.

RUNNER UP | *"The Mule" by Avalon Hogans*

POETRY

WINNER | *"Ode on Black Dictionaries" by Olaoluwapo Oladipo*

This poem's use of so many of the things I most cherish in poems —culturally specific idioms, musical alliteration, inventive syntax, and deft critique — made this a winner for me. I really love it when I read a poem that only this particular poet can write, and this one is packed with multiple lines that keep rattling around in my brain. Poet, I look forward to seeing what you write next.

RUNNER UP | *"To My Uncle Who's Probably Dead (By Now)" by Sarah Jun*

ADDITIONAL RECOGNITIONS

FLASH

WINNER | *"man spelt backwards" by Chi Pham*

The R2 EIC Team: This year, for the first time, R2 held a flash competition in the fall. Students were encouraged to submit short works of fiction and nonfiction which conveyed a single scene or idea, to be judged by our editors and staff. We selected "man spelt backwards" as the winner because of its intentionality, attention to detail, and the efficiency with which it conveyed complex ideas and emotional weight.

COVER ART

WINNER | *"Distortion" by Catheryn Liang*

The R2 EIC Team: Each year, R2's cover art is selected by the editorial team with input from the staff. We look for a piece that fits well with the look of the R2 book and that will make a striking cover, and this year selected "Distortion" for its stunning colors and emotional weight.

2026 CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

cal mascardo is like a river but not a stone; a cloud perpetually above buffalo, ny; a boxer with 5-year-old gloves still in good condition.

Amy Wang's greatest wishes in life are to have a home cafe and a dog with eyebrows.

Sasha Miller's life revolves around a 128GB SD card.

Chloé Serna is a big fan of photography and naps. Her hypothalamus only operates within two modes: a 14- or 5-hour sleep cycle.

Samvida Girish wants to pet the very hungry caterpillar.

Skylar Wang spends way too much time drawing. This is the fifth hoodie she ruined because of acrylic paint. Can you please contact her if you have some kind of magic recipe to remove these stains.....thank you.

Karis Lai's idea of annotation includes highlighting the whole page, especially when reading Tolstoy.

Hope Yang loves admiring and eating fish.

Nhu Chu is a Houston-based artist and Rice University sophomore who thinks a lot about lines, borders, and where cities end and bodies begin. She enjoys aimless walks and getting lost, both on foot and on paper.

Jessica Mack will appear if you say her name three times then do the spilts.

Mia Ridzinski loves a good lemonade

Steven Burgess is a Junior studying Film at Rice. When he's not busy editing videos, Steven can be seen rating everything he watches onto Letterboxd, not finishing his 10-page essay due tomorrow and praying on Drake's downfall.

Jeriel Severino De La Rosa is probably recording his 5th Youtube video of the day...

Catheryn Liang is an avid enjoyer of souls games, but chooses to use a laptop that can't run them for its 360 fold capabilities.

Martin Xie spends a little too much time on SSENSE and it shows.

Joselyn Lwigale is considering going by "Josie" full-time.

Ellie Jung is a thing. What is a thing?

Abi King thinks that writing this bio is harder than writing her actual piece was.

Avalon Hogans is a writer, artist, and Gossip Girl rewatcher. Her favorite writer is Nikki Giovanni, her favorite flowers are peonies, and her favorite drink is a mango matcha.

Hannah Guo loves froyo, hiking, and overusing exclamation points!!!!!!!

Chi Pham doesn't know, but let him check on that for you, okay?

Sarah Jun would time travel back to Old Hollywood and give Gregory Peck a kiss on the cheek if she could.

Sarai Abram is a John Hughes movie enjoyer, heavy metal enthusiast, and lover of bright-colored clothing. The rule of threes is her latest obsession.

Ruby Gao has two names and two temperaments: Ruby talks; Yiru listens.

Mina Schepmann hails from Oregon and plays guitar. That's all you need to know, probably.

Charlie (Lian-Xi) Wei wanders between Shanghai and Taipei, where cats and rain overrun her five-story home. When she's not writing, she boxes, draws, and explores abandoned factories.

Olaoluwapo Oladipo is a creative writing student who believes most problems can be solved with poetry, a snack, or a well-timed nap. She is still testing this theory.

Sammie Mahung yearns to frolic.

Alina Zhong is best known for being a blue-haired barista at Chaus. They are working on going to bed early.

Ashley Deng can often be found lurking on her email, which she checks more than she checks on her plants. With gratitude, Ashley Deng

Lacole Yang collects zines and anything purple.

Madison Daniels knows way too much about the Biological Weapons Convention. You should ask them about it.

Amy Suo is the little creature living in your walls making computers have vision and google docs have poetry (and studies have Asians?). They will make anything and everything nondual and whimsical.

Gina Kotinek has a severe case of senioritis and really wants to graduate already.

Jules F. Houston is hoping that the difficult skill of reading for fun and unprompted by deadlines is like riding a bike, and will return shortly after graduation.

Alysa Bijl-Spiro went to lunch with Tolstoy yesterday. She'll tell him you said hi.

Siena Damiani is the most nothing girl you'll never meet!

Shem Brown is an avid playlist maker and has been told he has a discerning eye for obscure reaction GIFs. At any given moment, he is probably thinking about Narnia.

Radhani Kapoor is a salsa dancer at heart but not in practice.

Wenye Zhou is a poor starving artist and game designer

Emma Liu is currently in a tragic, unrequited love story with sleep.

After having gone through albums of photographs taken by his father, **Alex Kim** chose this one to recreate a night scene of a traditional Korean house through an acrylic paint medium.

Lily Harvey is probably making a playlist right now.

2026 STAFF BIOS

Adam W. Leff is pretty sure that no one will actually bother to check his middle initial.

Rachel Parr is probably playing Subway Surfers. She wants you to know that Adam S. Leff is a liar.

Setsuna Jiang's Starbucks order is a Venti Iced Double Berry Matcha with light ice, soy milk, 4 pumps vanilla, salted brown-buttery topping, and 5 scoops matcha powder.

Hannah Lee is probably on dining.rice.edu again

Angela An is in the 212.

Yasmin Sharpe is asking for directions to the 212 .

Miles Robinson is no longer sailing the high seas, but is instead frolicking with jellyfish by the sea shore.

Tess Mansfield is still thinking about that one fiction piece from 2024.

Mary Weekley never liked that one fiction piece from 2024.

Lily Harvey found a fidget spinner and is very excited about it.

Malak Qaradeh is curating her beli account as we speak.

Caitlyn Ladd really likes the number 81 for no reason whatsoever.

Gracie Workman really likes the number 24 for no reason whatsoever.

Eric Chen still has that 10-page essay to finish by tonight

Olivia Brazier would rather die than spend one more minute on Affinity.

Sara Edelstein is in denial about her finals being soon

Shyla Jogi wishes she were a coffee drinker after falling asleep in stat 310 today

Veronica Yang is still workshopping this bio as she downs a matcha latte

Simmy Ghosh is ready to go to sleep

Sarai Abram is a John Hughes movie enjoyer, heavy metal enthusiast, and lover of bright-colored clothing. The rule of threes is her latest obsession.

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