

K A L O P S I A

POETRY | PROSE | VISUAL ART



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Masthead

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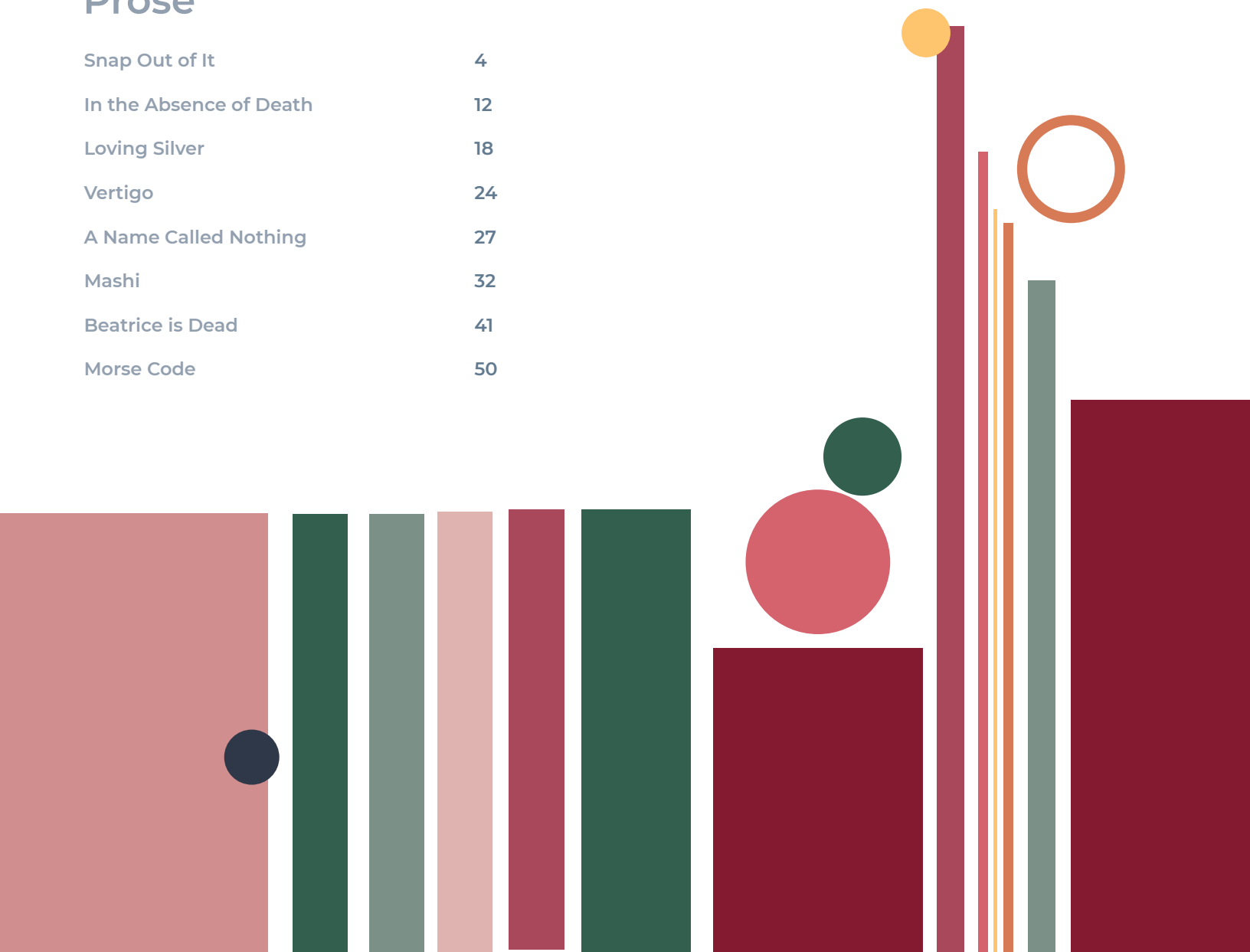
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Snap Out of It

By: Lena Levey

*Content Warning: Contains Depictions of Sexual Assault, Abuse, and Drug Abuse

The funny thing is, I imagined that I would meet him dancing. Not him exactly, but the whole drive, I kept picturing that Jen would drag me to a concert or block party, and some guy would catch my eye and we would know. He would take me in his arms, and in that moment, everything from before would be erased.

I told him this once, when we were sprawled out on his basement couch and he was the only thing that wasn't spinning. He laughed, and it cut through the haze in front of my eyes enough that, for an instant, I felt sober enough to regret saying anything. It sounded so naive to say aloud. I had no idea that I was still that young.

In reality, we met at a gas station. It was just within walking distance from Jen's house, and I would go there to escape her concerned eye the summer I stayed in my cousin's old bedroom. The walk was three miles each way, much longer than I was used to in the city. But the road was flat and there were hardly any cars, and if I walked slowly, I could pass a whole day without having to think of anything.

My memory is not what it was before what happened in New York, but I know this: he saw me first. I have developed a good sixth sense for stares like his, and I could tell his eyes had caught my body as soon as I felt a weight in my stomach. I gave him a moment to look away, but when I turned to him, he did not break my gaze. He was tall, with dark curls covered by a maroon baseball cap. He smiled.

I paid for my slushie and stepped into the parking lot. He followed. "Are you Jen's niece?" His voice was clearer than I expected.

"Uh... Yeah. You know her?"

He laughed. "Sorry if that sounds a little creepy. There are like 50 people in this town. I know everybody, except you. So I assumed you were the summer guest. I'm Cam." He put out his hand, and I took it.

The conversation is blurry from there. I remember that he is eighteen, that he wishes he were from a city, and that I must hate being stuck out here so if I ever wanted someone to smoke with, I should give him a call. 405-246-3453. I repeated it to myself the whole walk home.

I called him that night. I told Jen I wanted to go on a walk, and she was thrilled that I was finally leaving the house after sundown, so she told me to watch out for coyotes and didn't ask any questions. I have since wondered if she would have done anything differently if I told her that I was hanging out with a boy three years older than me. I doubt it. My family wanted me back to normal, and I never used to be scared of the dark.

He picked me up just out of sight from Jen's house and made small talk until he stopped by a field a few streets away.

"I guess this doesn't compare much to the skyscrapers." We sat down by the side of the road.

"Maybe not, but it's pretty." The setting sun turned the asphalt orange and cast the shadow of his car across the grass.

"So, what did you do to be sent out here?" The moment he asked the question, I felt every inch of the pavement sticking to my thighs. I had practiced my answers for when Jen's friends asked me why I was spending my summer here. *I love nature and I wanted to see more of the country. I've missed my family. I just wanted a change of scene.* I didn't think Cam would smile and nod the way the others did, even when they knew it was a lie.

"You don't want to know." I tried to keep my voice light and playful.

"Oh come on. Nothing shocks me, I promise." He smiled and shifted closer to me.

"I didn't do anything. Something happened."

He nodded. I prayed for him to stop asking questions and he did. I knew at that moment that I wanted to see him again.

"You smoke?"

"All the time." I was lying. I grabbed the joint from his outstretched hand. My lungs felt like they had ripped in two, but I stifled my coughs as best I could and took another hit, and three more after that. I watched him watch me, and tried to catch a glimpse of my reflection on his face as I exhaled. It suited me, I decided. He must have agreed because he rubbed my back as I choked on the smoke and then let his hand slide down to rest at my waist. His skin met mine and I felt the warmth of my own flesh for the first time.

For a while, he didn't go any further. We talked mostly about him, which we both seemed to prefer. He was saving money for college by working odd jobs and living with his parents. His mom worried too much, but it was only because her mom probably had bipolar disorder, which they called something else back then.

"She has this idea in her head that if I would get diagnosed, it would prove that her mom was crazy the whole time. She's fucking obsessed, with my friends, with what I drink, my plans for the future or whatever."

I nodded, trying to keep my balance. My body was moving faster than my brain, and it made me dizzy. "That's bullshit."

"She gets it!" He yelled to the field. "Finally someone gets it!" Our voices had gotten louder and slower as the sun disappeared.

"Are you nervous right now?" His words moved in circles around my head. His mouth was right next to my ear, and his hand was still touching my waist.

"I don't think so. Should I be?" I slid closer to him. It didn't feel like nerves. Mostly I was relieved that he seemed to really like me. He was older, stronger, but he mirrored my movements and waited after making a joke to see if I would laugh. *This is something I can control.* In exchange, I would have given him anything.

He kissed me; I let him. He tasted of Pepsi and weed, and at once I decided that, before him, I had never truly desired anything in my life.

I saw him almost every night after that, usually to drink, sometimes to smoke. Every once in a while I would bring the pills that I was meant to save for emergencies and let Cam crush them with the side of his key. I wouldn't think much of it until I was high. Only then did I graze his cheek and whisper, "I don't know if I'm trying to self-destruct or set myself free." But as soon as I said it, the words faded away and I was numb again and so perfectly happy. I said a thousand times over that I wanted to stay as I was forever.

For the numbness, I rewarded him. He was eighteen and he wanted things and I had no objections. He let me get high first, so as to separate my body from my head. If I didn't like it, I wouldn't have noticed. Sometimes, I forgot where I was altogether. My memory is not what it was before New York, but as far as I know, I never said no to him. I don't think it even occurred to me that I could.

He never asked me to talk about my past, and I didn't tell him. Sometimes I would stare into the distance and not even blink, but even then he would just hold my hand and offer me a drink. He must have known, though. He was always gentle when he put his hands on me.

Before what happened in New York, I took a women's self-defense class. We were given pink boxing gloves and practiced punches and kicks for what the blonde lady called "the worst-case scenario." Of course, when my time came, I could not move an inch. All I could do was imagine her sequences over and over in my head, trying to forget that I was frozen in place.

The morning after, I wished he had held a knife to my throat or something, so that I would have an excuse for just lying there for god knows how long. He wasn't that much stronger than me. I could have pushed him off if I tried. I hated myself for the time that I wasted, sharpening my teeth.

If Cam's mom was right to worry about him, I chose not to think about it. Some days, he would kiss me a hundred times and talk to me for hours about the plans he had for us, "away from all this shit." But the next week, he would be empty, barely aware of where he was. He would brighten up, most of the time, if I let him touch me, but as soon as he collapsed onto my chest, he would fade out again.

"It's just that there's no way out," he said once. "I used to be so scared that I'd end up here. Now I'm just slipping away. The worst part is I don't even mind." He told me, a few weeks in, that he hadn't gotten out of bed sober since he was fifteen. He laughed as he said it. I didn't laugh with him, but he continued talking as if he didn't notice.

"Should I be scared for you?" I asked him once. We were in the backseat of his car, using his sweatshirt as a blanket. His heartbeat was so slow that if he hadn't said anything, I would have assumed he was asleep.

"I have enough people in my life who are scared for me."

"I know, I know. But you told me about your grandma, and I've read about these things. You're at the age when people have symptoms, and sometimes you seem so depressed and I get worried you're going to hurt—"

"Stop. Please." His voice was tight. I fell silent. Once he was sure I was done talking, he let out a long sigh and pulled me closer to him. "I don't expect you to understand it. But this is just how it is. Nothing good ever comes from trying to claw your way back." I wanted to ask him what he meant, but I couldn't bring myself to speak. Instead, I burrowed my head in his ribs and dragged myself into shallow sleep. Outside the back window, the farmland stretched to the edge of the Earth.

He called me one night, later than usual. "Can I see you?" He sounded breathless. "My mom's being a bitch again. I just need to get out of here."

"Of course." I was waiting outside by the time he skidded to a halt by the driveway. I could tell something was off the moment he stepped on the gas. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know. I just need to get away." He went fast, faster than I've ever seen anyone drive on our street. We zipped past the fields where we usually hung out, and into the backroads behind the grain silo. Next to him was a bottle of gin, half-empty.

"Do you want me to drive?"

"You're fifteen. You don't even have your license."

"I'm sober."

"Yeah, well." He scoffed, and offered me the bottle. I took it. I knew as it burnt my throat that it was a bad idea. But it was a strange thing to know what I knew: he wanted me most as we collapsed into each other's arms.

As it hit my stomach, he pressed harder on the gas. I was thrown across the car as he rounded the corners. "Jesus Cam, are you trying to get us killed?"

"Shut up, Shut up, Shut up, Shut up. I can't take this right now." He was barely looking at the road.

I gulped down what was left of the gin. I felt every ounce of it in my stomach. I hoped that I would black out and not have to worry anymore, but the more I drank, the more my lungs twisted upon themselves. If I grabbed the wheel, could I safely steer us into a ditch? Would he ever forgive me if I did? I wished that we had not already taken the last of my pills.

"Please, we can talk. It will be ok. Just stop the car. Please. Cam." If he heard me, he pretended not to.

We rounded a corner, too fast. The world resettled and I saw the headlights catch a figure standing at the end of the road. She did not flinch.

The whole summer passed by in a hazy instant, but that stretch of road lasted a lifetime. I knew every inch of it; each tree that we passed faster than we should have. Some leaves were already brown, wilted on the forest floor. Had July disappeared so quickly? I saw the glint of her eyelashes in the headlights, and I knew that she was not going to move. My voice reacted slower than I wanted it to. "Cam. There's a deer." He didn't hear me. "Stop the fucking car." We were twenty feet away, then ten.

"Cam!"

She flies backward and falls to the ground with a thud that seems to echo through the forest. Cam screeches to a halt six feet or so from where she lay on the asphalt.

We sit perfectly still. Neither of us can bring ourselves to move an inch.

"Are you ok?" he asks. His voice is completely flat.

"I don't think I'm hurt. Are you?" I cannot register my words, even as I say them. I do not believe that the body I am in is my own.

"No I'm not." He doesn't look at me. "We need to see if it's alive. We can't call anyone. We've been drinking." As he says it aloud, the stupidity, the inevitability, of what we had done strikes me for the first time. I wonder if I am uninjured enough to sprint away into the forest.

But maybe I am in shock because, as if I am following some screwed-up script, I reply, "I can check." I step out of the car and walk towards her body.

I thought I had seen a corpse before. I had a rabbit that died when I was twelve, and I was the one who found his limp body on the side of the cage. But that was bloodless. The deer is almost ripped in two at her neck. Her eyes are open, unmoving, and her legs each point in a different direction. Her heart is not beating. I cannot bring myself to move my hand from her side.

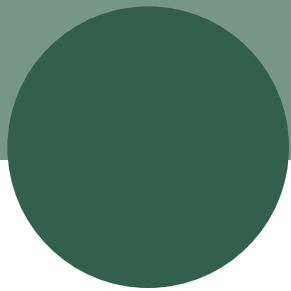
I shouldn't be here. The thought hits me and I start to cry, really cry, for the first time all summer. The tears burn my eyes faster than I could ever rub them away. I think of New York. I remember that it used to just be my home, and now it's a euphemism for every reason why I'm kneeling on the pavement by a bloody carcass and I'm probably too drunk to stand. I hear a whisper, the voice is my own. "Take me dancing. Take me dancing. Take me dancing." I hear it where I should have felt my heartbeat.

I look up, and Cam is next to me. He looks like he is about to vomit. For a fleeting moment, I am furious. I want to ask him what the hell he thought would happen, driving like that. I want to tell him that it's not fair, that I was meant to be doing better, that he's hurting me too. But I catch his eye and his face is blank. If I reached out to touch him, he would shatter into a thousand pieces on the pavement.

I wish I hated him. I pray that I can remember the whites of his knuckles against the wheel, the crunch of his teeth grinding against each other, the growl of the car as he pressed harder and harder on the gas. But it was as if I was trying to reconstruct a dream from the night before. The last of my anger dissolves into the summer air and my ribs collapse into my chest. It hurts more than I knew I still could.

Maybe this is for the best. I don't know how to look at someone and tell them that I fear I will never be whole again. I don't think he would understand it anyway.

So, when I finally speak, I tell him a different story, the one that lets him go. I tell him that this is not his fault. Most animals have better survival instincts, would know to run if a three-ton hunk of metal was racing towards them. He thought she would get out of the way in time. After all, she was staring right at him as he drove towards her. It's not as if she couldn't see it coming.



About the Author:

Lena Levey is a freshman at Washington University in St. Louis studying international relations and creative writing. She grew up in London, England. She has work featured in *Kalopsia Literary Journal*, *The Apprentice Writer*, *The Daphne Review*, and *Salt & Citrus*.



"First Frost"
Katherine Sedlock-Reiner
Photography
5 x 7 in.

bitterness / sweetness

By: CJ Caparros

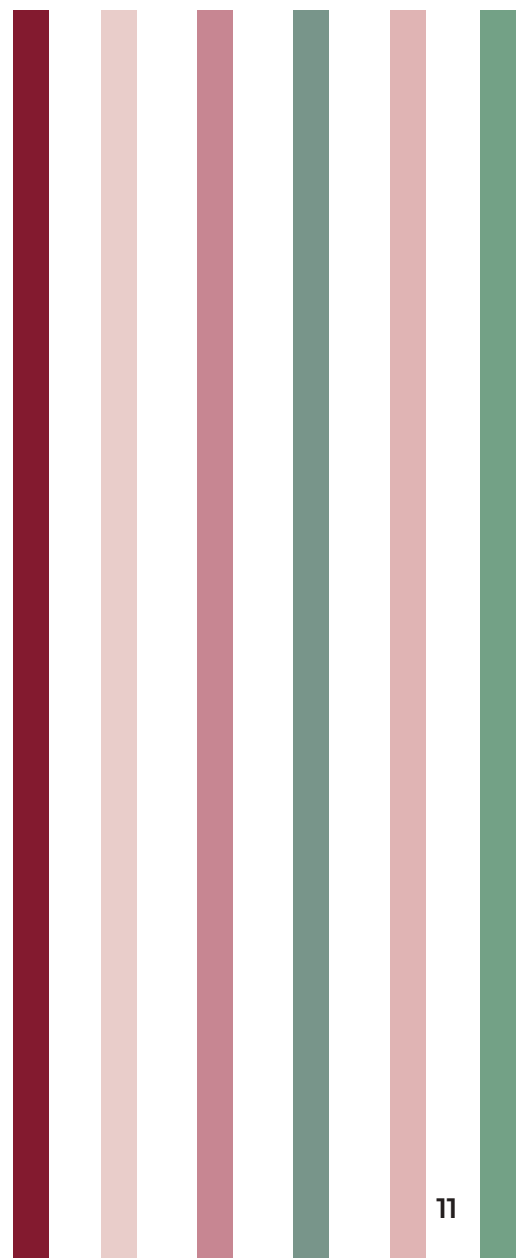
there is an unspoken tenderness when
a fruit is
peeled for flesh
sliced in bits
broken in pieces
for you. / sitting in your room
rotting, peeled
to the core and left out to dry
the fruit you eat alone—your sustenance
tastes bitter against your tongue
like salt to a wound (and now your gums are bleeding;
the first bite of an apple is always the hardest)

but a multitude of seconds minutes hours pass
she creeps up on you (even though you know
the sound of her footsteps)
eight slices
skin peeled
juicy and tart and what you need
granting you paradise reprieve peace—like
water in a sieve
you wonder *why she* does this for you; this is what
happens when you're bone tired

is it atonement / is it service
is this love?
your mother is worlds away yet
with a sliced apple
the pale, fresh pieces blur the space in which she starts
and you begin

there is an unspoken tenderness when
a fruit is peeled
sliced
broken for you. / it transcends time
affection forgiveness
for a moment—time reverses and stops and begins again
you touch the broken fruit (they are turning brown)
and you live in the rotting tenderness
even if for a moment

About the Author:
CJ Caparros a young, Filipino-American writer. They enjoy writing about their passions: chess, kitchens, fruit, and fungi. They hope to move others with their writing, in any way they can.



In the Absence of Death

By: Sarah Castle

The daughter was here again today.

She's here most days, and sometimes I wonder if she goes home, trudging in the January snow, just to come back the next day. Normally, I like to make the rounds in the morning and come back again after lunch to administer medicine, check in with visitors, the usual. And normally, Lisa is asleep by then. So I had to pause when I saw that Marcia was still there, spooning broth to her mother, wiping any drippings with a tender care that can only be reflected in a child's touch. Marcia's not much of a child, really, and by comparison, I'm the child in the room, the young nurse beside the one-hundred-year-old mother and daughter I'd guess to be seventy-eight, maybe eighty. But something about the way Marcia's hands moved, rhythmically replacing each empty spoonful with a brush on the cheek and a pat on the hand, made me stop by the plastered door frame to watch. It was as if I was seeing their stories play out, the ones Lisa had repeated to me over and over again. I wasn't there then, but I've heard their lives so many times I can tell about them as well as Lisa used to. Marcia wiping away her mama's tears after her brother's wedding, the family dog burial in Great-Granny's yard, how the two used to run an antique shop together. It is my job to form connections with the patient and the family, so they trust me when I insert the catheter, tell them it's my turn to brush their parent's hair or change a set of sheets. It's my job to bridge the outside world to our little, indoor one, and to keep the families from doing what they pay to have done for them. But today I watched as a ghost in the doorway, allowing Marcia to sit at the foot of the bed she insisted on making. Her hands had been shaky then, just as now with the broth, as her words had explained that this is how Mama, Lisa, used to do it, with the corners double folded.

"There, Mama," Marcia whispered. "You're going to like dinner tonight, I just promise."

Lisa's heavy-lidded eyes stayed focused on the bowl, occasionally moving to the photo of Herb on her nightstand. It was impossible to know if she remembered him, or even knew that he had been her husband. I remember meeting Herb the day he left Lisa in our care. He had been the kind of man you knew would never retire, no matter his age, and who loved the art of humor as much as he loved the gratification of making people laugh. We were surprised Herb didn't have sicknesses of his own, but he might as well have lived at the home, with the frequency he cared for Lisa. Against the wishes of his children, who were getting old enough to be taking their own advice, he had been driving. In the end it was the rain that took him, the hydroplaning into a white oak on the bend of Route 30.

I remember a Thursday in the rain, the first of many rainy days, when Lisa had whispered Herb's name. I had left her a cup of water by the bedside, and she must have seen the watch next to it, the only salvageable item after Herb's accident. It still kept ticking, and yet it seemed to be keeping track of nothing. It had forgotten that Herb was dead as easily as Lisa. About a year ago it rained, and I was waiting for Lisa to ask where Herb went, why he hadn't come yet that day. I was waiting to tell her that he would come by tomorrow, that she needed to rest now. But she never asked. It wasn't the absence of words that told me her speech had

finally gone, but the way she had turned her head, looking as knowingly as a younger self at the watch. No words.

“And Mama, I promise I am taking care of all your great-grandkids. Lucy and Cece and Piper and Will and Luke and Riley,” Marcia said. “Sometimes they tell me to sit down too much, but I always say if my Mama could cook all of Thanksgiving dinner on her own at age eighty, then so should I! But you know, Mama—Mama, you’ve spilled, let me get that—you know, Mama, the cooking’s not the same without you. Do you remember that night in ‘62, when you and I cooked my entire rehearsal dinner? I still have that silver serving spoon, the one we used for cornish hen pie. I wish I could say I knew where your veil is now, maybe Lucy wore it, or Cece? One of those girls has it now, and she wore it for her wedding, just like I wore it for mine and you for yours. I wish you’d have been there Mama. It was one of those weddings we used to dream about, the kind we’d laugh over never being able to afford. But if I could have it all, I’d still choose your Ham Delights and cranberry sauce over anything.”

Marcia continued spooning broth, catching the drippings of her unsteady hands with the bowl beneath Lisa’s chin. There was no longer steam rising from the clear, fat-free stock, but I don’t think Lisa could have known the difference between hot and cold at that point. In the absence of death is the waiting for red to become gray, hot to become lukewarm. Marcia’s hands went back and forth, bowl to mouth, while Herb stood stoically beside them, his own waiting period eternal.

“Marcia, it’s 2:30. You can come back tonight,” I said, leaning in. “There’s someone waiting to drive you home.”

“Just a little longer,” she said. She didn’t turn her feeble body to look at me until she said it again. Her pink shawl dropped to her elbows and it was then that I noticed her hair was as white as her mother’s.

“Please, just a little longer.”

About the Author:

Sarah Castle is a senior at the University of Illinois. She is a dual degree student studying creative writing and flute performance. She is a previously unpublished writer and an Editorial Assistant for UIUC’s web edition of *The Ninth Letter*. Sarah hopes to continue pursuing literary studies by working towards a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing and eventually becoming a literary editor.

Where We Are Going

By: James Croal Jackson

My hand gentle on the vibration of DQ's back.
We ascribe memories to animals. Anthropomorphism
is our system. Kingsford's scent lies on fewer and fewer
surfaces—we vacuumed his hairs, changed the covers
this August of grieving, and in bed we say
the living one dreams of her human family. If ever
there was a before in this cat's life, if ever she could
recant her past to us—what I hate about the cage is
not the sick animal inside it, but that I can't explain
where we are going, or why, just he needs to trust
me, beyond all his mewling (we pass a fish truck
on Penn Avenue in sunlight)—trust me: where
we are going will end your suffering.

About the Author:

James Croal Jackson (he/him) is a Filipino-American poet who works in film production. He has two chapbooks (*Our Past Leaves*, Kelsay Books, 2021 and *The Frayed Edge of Memory*, Writing Knights, 2017) with one forthcoming: *Count Seeds With Me* (Ethel, 2022). He edits *The Mantle Poetry* from Pittsburgh, PA. (jamescroaljackson.com)

diverging couplets

By: Durva Gautam Kamdar

there is a ritualistic pleasure in painting your eyelids
varying shades of red—it is always red. and, really,

if you were being honest, you'd come to realize that
you are making art, not a person.

you carve your thighs into distinct ellipses,
butcher breathing flesh into hourglasses,

treat your own body like the meat of another,
waiting to be dressed into a meal to consume.

but you'd only realize that if you were being honest—
which you never are. there are truths embedded

in the muscle beneath the skin of your lies. it's true; you are
doing this for yourself. but the self does not exist within

a vacuum. your self remains buried under the layers of
grime clogging your pores, the microbeads of media

embedded into your skin, the sunburn from the scathing
gaze of voyeuristic men. the self is tiny—you are more.

but maybe, you are your own voyeur. after all, you can never
see your body for what it truly is. eyes are the window to the

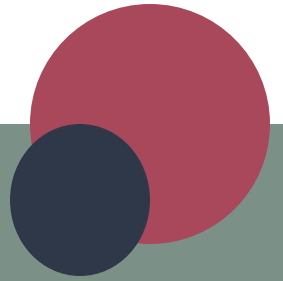
soul but you peer in from your neighbors' ventilation shaft.
there are new eyes everyday—one day you are too spindly,

a paper straw man, and the eyes belong to your friend; you
have the same irises. on another day, too rubenesque in the

eyes of a long forgotten lover; you have the same choroids.
there is grief to it—you will never see your body, your creation,

your identity, in its truth, in its reality. you will never love it for
it has never really been yours to love. and, yet, there has always been

loving and being loved. you think it is too much to ask that you do



both. so, till then, you will paint your lips crimson and ask yourself

in the mirror if he will love you yet. will he look at you and see himself
reflected in your eyes? you have always been taught that beauty is pain

and being beautiful is being enough. so try a little harder, cry a little more
bleed your fingers dry. you're pretty aren't you? enough aren't you?

paint your eyes. prove it.

About the Author:

Durva Gautam Kamdar is a 16-year-old student currently studying Literary Arts at the School of the Arts, Singapore. When she's not panicking over assignments or cramming before a test, she enjoys reading fanfiction and listening to Korean pop music. Her hobbies include mindlessly crocheting squares, drinking bubble tea on student discount and shopping for clothes she'll never buy.

This falling apart is not beautiful

By: Srina Bose

I'm sitting on the seventh-story bathroom floor and I blow smoke rings on the collar of the boy who tells me he loves me. There is sawdust between my nails, and the boy tries to say something but lets out a sigh instead. My lovers have learned not to make a burning woman bleed more ash. Ma messages. She says: *come home*. And maybe this is falling apart.

The boy who loves me knows nothing about me. I promise myself I won't write about blood and hurting myself but I wake up at 2 a.m. and vomit out a poem, and it smells not of roses but the sins I gulp every night. The boy who loves me strokes my hair, and I push his hand off. I mouth: *there has been blood on this body*. He says he'll still try. I want to break him right then and there but I need an escape. He is my escape.

I drink only one third of my water. On the to-do list of five things, I do two. I break a glass. I delete my playlist. EVERYTHING YELLS OUT HIS NAME. And I think I almost got through today without crying. I almost got through it until the boy who loves me asked why I never say the damned four-lettered word back to him. Until Ma told me Grandma wants to play Ludo with me. Until I remember no one knows the fragrance in my bones. Until I realize the boy who loves me is not the one in my poems. Until I'm crying and crying and it's not even falling apart—it's this never-ending feeling of waiting for a train. It's running with every breath left within you, just to fall on the tracks and have your life travel over you—travel without you, and for you to be just a stain, reminding the world of the heavy humanness of life.

And we are not even dead, we are still rotting. Our skeletons are still stating their last wish. We still ache to see sunlight once more but here we lie on this bathroom floor, and I make love not with this boy who tells me he loves me, but with this everlasting smoke—and baby this smoke is the only thing that isn't poison within my tattered lungs, the only one who I don't cry after I kiss.

The boy passes me his jacket. He says I'm cold and I think I'm falling apart and it's not a kind I'd like to write in poems. It's the kind that kills you. It's the kind that is killing me.

About the Author:

Srina Bose is a fourteen-year-old high school student based in New Delhi, India. She has previously had her work published in *Ice Lolly Review* and *Cathartic Lit*. She has also published her own collection of poetry titled "Roses In My Mind," which is commercially available. You can find her poetry blog on Instagram at @teardrops_of_ink.

Loving Silver

By: Lauryn Hamilton Murray

"I've decided that you need to stop loving me," she says, matter-of-factly.

"Oh yes?" I ask, eyebrow raised.

"Yes. It's the only way."

She's lying on her back, eyes closed, fingers tracing shapes in the sand.

"Imagine all the pain you'd be sparing yourself if you just... switched it off?"

"Switched what off?"

"The love."

I look away from her. Chew the inside of my cheek. Think about how strange it is to grieve someone whilst they're still breathing.

"Sage?"

"Mmm?"

"Look at me."

I look at her. Her eyes are still the same. Her eyes are still my eyes.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she says.

"That's okay."

"I love it here."

"I know."

I lean back on my elbows next to her. She nudges my shoulder with her nose.

"Are you cold?" I ask.

"No."

"Hungry?"

"No."

"Thirsty?"

"Quit fussing. I'm fine. I'm more than fine. I'm fantastic. Fabulous. First-rate."

"Funny."

"Fanks."

I roll my eyes. Try not to smile.

"Want to go swimming?" she asks.

The ocean looks white, like crumpled paper smoothed out, poured like milk between the two headlands.

"You'll freeze," I say, shaking my head.

"Please?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe means no."

"No, it means maybe."

She stands up and holds out a hand. "Walk with me?"

I wrap my scarf around her neck three times and loop my arm through hers. Aside from two small figures in the distance, the beach is deserted. We crunch through the remains of a bonfire, blackened wood, charred cans. She bends down and picks something up amongst the debris. A lighter. She flicks it on and off and then puts it in her pocket. As we walk she collects other things. A shell. Another shell. A piece of sea glass. A white feather.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

“Let’s paddle,” she says.

She spins me round and jumps on my back. She’s so light. So fragile. She holds my braids like reins and tells me to giddy-up.

“So this is why you wouldn’t let me cut my hair off?” I call over my shoulder.

I wanted to shave my head as soon as her hair began to fall out, leaving dandelion tufts scattered across her scalp. I’d find hair on pillows, in the sink, on coat collars. I’d find it in her hands as she held it and looked at it and didn’t cry even though she wanted to. But she wouldn’t let me cut mine. She’d said that she needed to see my hair because it was her own. She brushes it for me every night. Braids it every day.

We reach the shoreline and she slides down, stuffs her socks inside her shoes, rolls up her jeans and wades into the water. I hesitate. Then line my shoes up with hers and follow her, hissing as the water glides over my feet and ankles.

“Baby,” she laughs.

Gritting my teeth, I press against the tide until I’m next to her. The sky looks like ash, the clouds swollen with rain. We stand knee-deep in cold wet emptiness like we are the only two people in the world. That’s how it’s always felt. That’s how it’s always been. I didn’t have anyone else, but I didn’t want anyone else either, because I had her.

“Remember in junior school when we were asked what we wanted to be?” she asks, thoughtfully.

“Yes.”

“You said you wanted to be a vet.”

“That’s right.”

“What did I say?”

The corner of my mouth twitches. “A mermaid.”

She laughs. Nods. “That was it.”

“Where did that come from?” I ask.

“I’m just trying to picture you in my head. What you’ll be doing at this exact moment in ten years’ time. Or twenty or thirty or forty or—”

“—I get it.”

“I wonder when you’ll start to gray. Or get wrinkles. See, that’s something I never have to worry about, getting all old and stiff and saggy. That’s one perk of all this at least. I’ll be this age forever. Frozen. Like a vampire. Forever young, like the song.”

I swallow the sour protests that gather on my tongue and let her continue.

“I can’t imagine you with wrinkles because that would mean imagining me with wrinkles and my skin is too nice to have wrinkles.”

“Stop saying wrinkles,” I tell her, laughing.

Then my laughter sputters out. I inhale a lungful of cold salt air.

“Sage?”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t feel my feet. Are they still there?”

I dry her feet with my T-shirt. Stuff them into my socks as well as her own. Tie her laces. It starts to rain lightly and the wind whips up the sea. I watch it all and find myself thinking that she’s vibrant and I’m dull and she’s dazzling and I’m dreary and she’s every type of weather and I’m just drizzle.

“Okay,” she says, after a while. “I take it back. You don’t need to stop loving me. That would be incredibly difficult. Impossible, even.” She smirks slightly. “But you need to contain the love, Sage. Compartmentalize it. Tuck it away inside a little filing cabinet and only let it out when you come here. Love me here.”

Her words vacuum the wind, the lapping waves and cawing, keening gulls. Sand and silence stretch out into the space before us and I want to scream. Just to fill it.

The figures in the distance are getting closer. I can almost make out their faces.

“You can’t let me always be there when I’m not anymore, or else I’ll hurt you forever,” she says, softly. “And that’s not fair. That’s not fair on me.”

She looks at me and I look at her shoes. She picks up a stick and begins drawing in the sand. An S. Then another S, intertwined. Like the tattoos on our wrists.

“This is our place. Ours. And this is where you can come to remember me. Because this is where I want to end up. This is where I’ll be waiting.”

I don’t want to look at her. I don’t want to listen to what she’s saying. I want to crawl inside her ribcage and curl up next to her heart.

“You need to promise me,” she says, driving the stick into the sand beside our initials. “You need to promise that you’ll live for me. For both of us. I want you to go places and see things and then come back here and tell me everything.”

In all these months I’d avoided this conversation. But I knew it was coming.

I swallow hard. “I don’t think I can,” I whisper, hating myself.

She gives me a reproachful look. Tuts. “You can’t refuse a dying wish. You’d be insulting my memory. And you know I don’t accept insults. Only compliments.”

Even now, she’s still trying to make me laugh. To take care of me. I may only be ten minutes younger than her, but in this moment it feels like ten years.

“Promise me.” She holds out her little finger and I smile in spite of myself.

“Are we really still doing this?”

“Sage, breaking a pinkie promise is sacrilege. If you break this sacred vow, I will haunt you. And not in a good way.”

I link my own little finger round hers and squeeze tight. “You better.”

“Fine. Now promise me.”

I want to say: how can I promise you, Silver? How can I promise to tuck my love for you away inside a little filing cabinet, or go places and see things without you? How can I promise to go on living after you’ve stopped? I love you more than anything. I love you more than everything. How can I switch that off? You can’t leave. You can’t leave me. You *are* me.

But I don’t say that.

“I promise.”

She nods, satisfied. “Good. Now close your eyes and hold out your hands,” she commands.

I close my eyes and hold out my hands.

“I’ve realized that when it happens you’ll get nothing. Apart from my clothes. You can have my clothes. Though just remember that they always looked better on me. Anyway. I’ve decided that this is what you’ll get. This is what I’m leaving you.”

Something tickles my palm.

“No peeking.”

“I’m not peeking.”

“Okay. You can open now.”

In my cupped palms lies the lighter. Shells. Some pink, some gray, some white. A piece of sea glass. A white feather.

I look at these things. Then at her. And the pain in my chest crawls up my throat and out my eyes. It claws at me. It burns me. It forces me to feel it. It’s so extreme, so convulsing, that it is silent. I scream. I wail. I sob. And no noise comes out. Silver throws her arms around my neck and over her shoulder I see the two figures, I see their faces clearly now, two little girls, each a mirror-image of the other, laughing, splashing each other, walking out into the sea. One of them turns round to look at me.

“I love you,” I whisper to my sister.

I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you.

The love is carried on the breeze. It's everywhere. I'll never contain it. I'll never switch it off. How could I deny that she is, and will forever remain, my right hand, my favorite color, my light, my heart, my love, myself.

About the Author:

Lauryn Hamilton Murray is an English Literature student from Edinburgh, Scotland. She enjoys writing about complicated girls with chaotic lives, girls who are introverted, introspective and irreverent, and yet secretly long to belong. As well as writing poetry and short stories, Lauryn is currently working on her first novel, a young adult fantasy.



"Sway"
Srishti Bahl
Egg tempera on cradled clayboard
24 x 18 in.

Digging a gun's grave

By: Akshaya Pawaskar

These are
skeptical times
where God is a fog,
where poetry is obsolete,
when an echo of a gun fired
resounds and
shows no signs
of ever stopping,
Where we die like dreams.
And before we become
nihilists harping
on the meaninglessness
of life like Meursault,
Coming out of Camus's
imagination and
killing an Arab for no reason,
Believing it doesn't matter
at all, who lives,
unfeeling, detached to
be cracked at the guillotine,
let's go back to
the roots of
Life and proclaim it
to be Love.
Let's be vulnerable.
Let's end this affiance
of never writing
poems full of tenderness.
Vows are breakable
like petals.
Let's pluck them away
and give in to
the guilty pleasure.
A poem for an eye
will make the whole
world calm.
Let's put a flower in the
barrel of the gun
weave a shroud
lower it down
sprinkle mud.
Bury it with a heart.
Bury it with a heart.

About the Author:

Akshaya Pawaskar is a doctor-poet hailing from Goa, India. Her poems have been published in *Shards, North of Oxford, and Indian Ruminations*, among many other journals. She won the Craven Arts ekphrastic poetry competition (2020). Her poetry chapbook, "The falling in and the falling out" was published by Alien Buddha press (2021).

Vertigo

By: Gabrielle Beck

Originally published in *Aster Lit*

Sade's sultry voice melted on the record player's rusting needle while she rolled each body of flour and sugar, water and yeast. She twisted until the two ends touched in harmony. I sat cross-legged as she sculpted the challah with calloused palms, embedding love in every crevice of the dough.

Taste, Bubbe pleaded as the clamor of Queens, New York, crescendoed. Echoes of police sirens and teenagers beatboxing around the corner writhed through the hollow apartment walls. *I can't hear ya, but I know what ya saying.* My Bubbe only reads lips. She refused to wear a hearing aid. She said she'd earned her right not to listen to people's shenanigans. I ate and pulled apart bits of challah like Legos after a colossal collapse while sitting on the floor watching 21 Jump Street thinking Tom Hanson was cute. Bubbe, grasping a handheld dustbuster, swooshed me away to clean the already spotless kitchen.

After pretending to wipe away stray crumbs and dough remnants, I pulled out her scrapbook albums from the armoire and laid them out on the floor. I admired the photographs from her youth, the ones that time managed to filter out everything but her. Cheekbones slathered in bubblegum pink rouge and lashes drenched in the tar of Maybelline, hair permed and teased to maximum height—all immortalized in the haze of pixels. I'd sit on her couch on weekends as she told her stories of what young motherhood was like, living in the boroughs the same time as Walkmans hung on Bubbe's widening hips and Madonna graced magazine covers. I longed to be embedded in the photographs. I wanted to escape my bleak reality, to feel human connection beyond the clash of dots from my computer, unlike a failed Chuck Close painting.

Bubbe made up for the confiscated challah by taking me for a pastrami on rye at Ragtime Deli, right on Cross Bay Boulevard. Beads of sweat trickled along thick gold rope chains and deft hands pressed the ends of calzones.

I miss all a youse, she declared to the deli men. Her thick Queens accent was ever-so comforting to my ears. I spied Bubbe reaching for a box of Lorna Doones despite kvetching about going on a diet. It wasn't the quantity in question. It was quality. Bubbe liked old things.

Antony, get me some hamburgah meat and a poundah peppah loaf. She stood adorned in an Iris Apfel carcanet, goggles, and a zebra print mask. This was the one day a week she could venture past the confines of her apartment. While Bubbe examined the specialty breads, I walked to the window overlooking Cross Bay Boulevard: boarded up diners, barren avenues, independently-owned-turned-fast-food chains. Its once bustling spirit existed as a hologram of normalcy.

My mind blurred the lines between past and present, hope and despair. Closing restaurants effervesced into the Silver Street Disco blaring "Stayin' Alive" while girls pranced around with crimped hair in Jordache Jeans, and boys sat under fluorescent light with Members Only jackets—oblivious to the perils of 2020.

I remained tethered to a romanticized version of the past as we walked out of RagTime. As Bubbe drove past the boulevard, I saw flickering street lights illuminating this desolate strip of the city. I ignored the darkness that pervaded Queens' history. Instead, my time capsule took me to Crossbay Lanes as "Celebration" roared from the speakers, and swift feet in Reebok sneakers shifted towards bowling pins. Bubbe stood with her waist cinched by Gitanos while my grandpa grabbed his compact to check his pompadour hair. He'd bought

her an Orange Julius and a box of Chuckles.

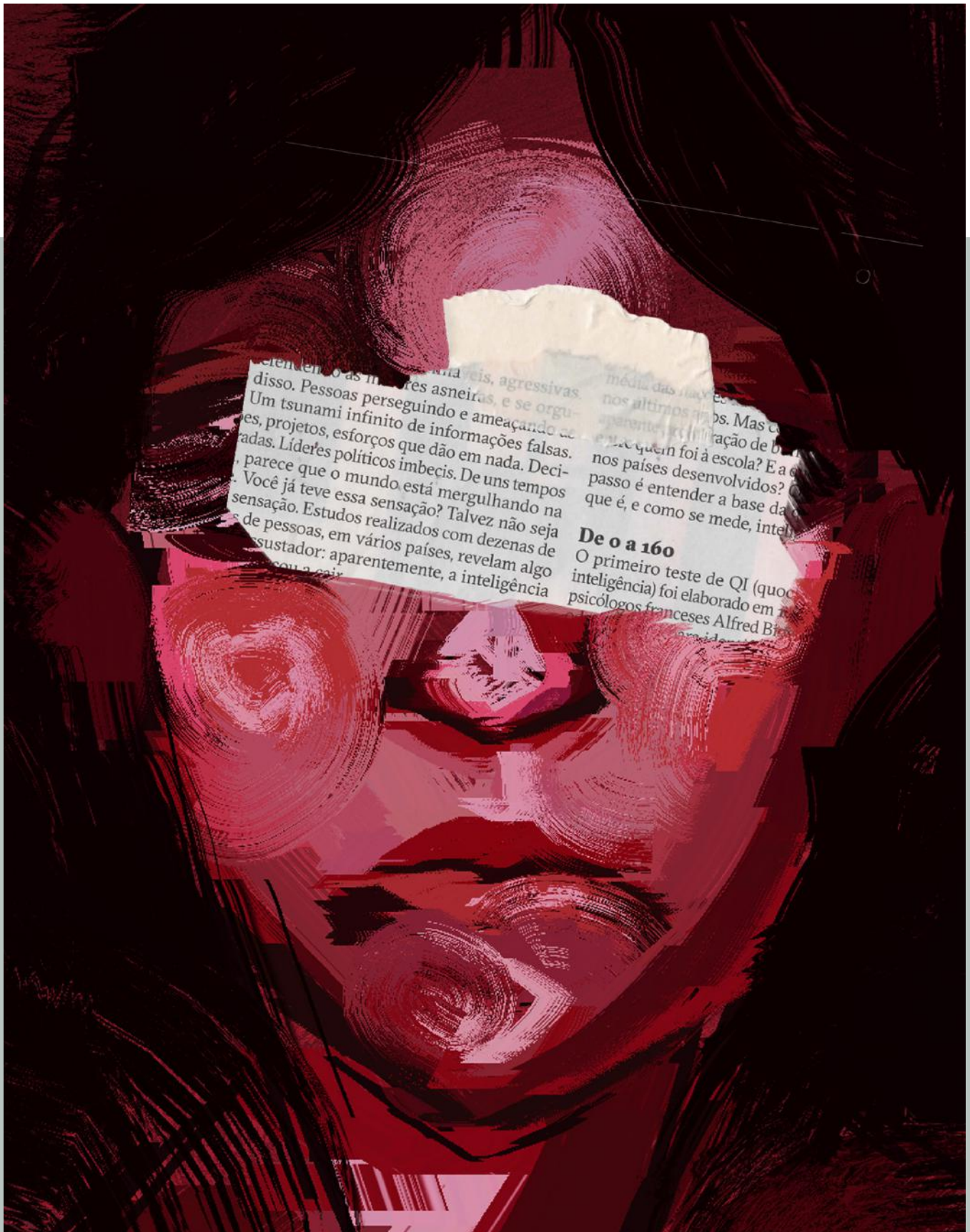
Bubble continued driving down Cross Bay Boulevard to Ozone Park to Woodhaven to Rego Park. My nostalgic daze couldn't withstand the chronic honks that reverberated through the potholed roads. Wading in and out of 2020 and the 1980s, I entered a state of vertigo. There was a strong sense of dizziness that took hold of me as I sat in the back of Bubbe's Chevrolet Monte Carlo awaiting balance's arrival. My stomach calcified the bits of dough from before, churned into aching knots. Disillusioned by a devastating pandemic and the inheritance of a fragmented nation, it was easier to surrender to a false reality. What else am I to do but pray?

Hiding from the side-view mirrors, I held my eyes to the sky.



About the Author:

Gabrielle Beck is a junior attending Tenafly High School. When she is not writing or photographing, she can be found repurposing vintage denim. She is a finalist for New York Times "Coming of Age in 2020: A Special Multimedia Contest for Teenagers," and recognized by the National Council of Teachers of English.



"i see you"
Luana Góes
Digital painting
1500 x 1920 px.

A Name Called Nothing

By: Ming Wei Yeoh

The sad woman had ordered a drink with extra whipped cream because she felt like rewarding herself tonight. She wasn't sure what for, since the assignment had not yet been carried out, but she knew that she liked whipped cream and that's what mattered. On nights like these—when the moon outside was big and bright and it was far too cold to be autumn—the coffee shops were only occupied by the likes of herself, some teenage girls, and the barista. Tonight, there was only the sad woman and the haggard employee. She watched the employee build the foamy cream into a small mountain on her drink. The grayish mixture in the cup looked more unappetizing than usual, packed with enough ice cubes to make her shiver. But as the barista fixed the plastic lid in place, she called out, “Annabelle,” and that was enough to make the sad woman's spirits soar.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the cold drink into her hands. Though the black ink was smudged, she could still make out the letters written on the side of the cup. She smiled. Outside, the cold struck her like a blow. The coffee was bitter, numbing, and mostly ice—she loved it. Her scarf clung to her face, damp with her breath; her boots crunched in the premature snow. She imagined, momentarily, that she was an ordinary adult taking a stroll in the night.

I got back from drinking with my friends and I needed to clear my head, so here I am, taking a loop around the block. While she walked, she filled in the details of her story, like the names of the friends and what drink she had, and what her plans were for the rest of the night.

When she arrived at Dr. Lopez's house, she had already drained half her drink. The doctor's home was drafty and gigantic, the kind of home that the sad woman might admire in awe on any other day. She set down the cup on Dr. Lopez's dresser. The old man lay as still as stone in bed, watching her with glazed eyes. She stood over him. His chest rose and fell in a stuttery rhythm, like a broken car engine. *They might as well have a little heart and let him die*, she thought. The coffee had only cheered her up temporarily, and now her mood sagged. It was always houses like these, victims like these, so quiet and empty that they infected her too.

“You know, the baristas are the only ones who call me Annabelle,” she said to Dr. Lopez. “I think I would want to be friends with a barista someday. Because they're so sweet, you know.” Then again, she was not exactly the best representation of an Annabelle. A woman named Annabelle might be sitting on a park bench right now, or dancing at a party, or holding hands with a lover. Not standing over a dying man with a knife.

“What do you think, Dr. Lopez?” she asked. Of course, he said nothing. She sighed and killed him quietly. On her way out, she grabbed her drink and continued sipping it.

The moon was now hidden behind a shroud of clouds and she felt even more disheartened. Maybe it wasn't so ridiculous sometimes to wonder if society and nature were working against her—stealing her moon, trapping her in this tedious job. She slipped into the identity of Annabelle until she got home. Annabelle had a pretty smile. She had a Golden Retriever called Biscuit and a silver Honda Civic. This type of weather got her a bit down, but she didn't let it ruin her mood like some other women did.

At home, the sad woman rinsed out the plastic cup, dried it with a towel, and placed it in the stack of her other plastic cups, which had grown very tall. The marker usually rubbed off, but on lucky days there would be a letter L or N still visible on the plastic. Today was brutally unlucky; barely the last E remained. She stripped out of her work clothes and sat on the couch for a smoke.

The tabby cat watched her from the corner. She said, "If I disappeared right now, they would kill me, wouldn't they?" She imagined the cat responding—*Of course they'd kill you*—and breathed out a long wisp of smoke.

"I think I want to buy a house in the suburbs," she said, "with a big yard and a driveway. Enough of the city. I'll have two Honda Civics and I'll drive out at night with lots of friends and one or two handsome guys." The cat blinked and then slipped out of sight. The sad woman closed her eyes. For now, she only wanted to sleep. The higher-ups might spring a midnight job on her, but she couldn't accept it if she was knocked out.

Death sometimes tempted her. After witnessing the same crying and begging time and time again, she might have learned to properly fear it. But the more she thought about it, the more she came to realize that death was just the better, longer version of a nap. In death, there was no thinking or daydreaming or working. There was just silence. And yet she thought about the Golden Retriever which she had not yet adopted, and all the drinks and outings she'd be missing out on if she died right now. Maybe in twenty years she would be ready.

She fell asleep there on the couch, and in the morning she woke up to the smell of smoke; sometime during the night her cigarette had dropped from her fingers and singed a hole in the cushion. With a fresh cigarette in her mouth, she opened the letter that the higher-ups had delivered overnight and studied the assignment. 8:30 PM. The target: a businessman with a taste for scenic views. It would be quick. And so she met the man in his car that night, where he'd parked it on a bluff with a beautiful view of the moon. It would be a lovely spot for a picnic with friends.

The businessman's first words were, "It won't happen again, I promise." He was young, with harsh features that harbored all sorts of ambitions, though right now there was only terror. He was the kind of man that the sad woman's employers hated the most. "Please don't hurt me. You look like a nice girl. There's five hundred in my wallet—"

"Mr. King, what are your thoughts on baristas?" asked the sad woman, tapping the dashboard with her blade. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* "Lovely people, right? At first I thought I might just befriend one, but then it struck me: why not become a barista myself? Though I would need to buy a house first, as they don't get paid very well."

Mr. King gaped at her. He quickly said, "Well, of course, of course. Houses are so expensive

these days. So how about I give you a little sum, just enough to get yourself a nice place on the lake or the seashore—anywhere that suits your fancy. How does that sound? Just forget all about this. Please.”

“It’s true that I’d love that,” sighed the woman, “but that wouldn’t work at all. I belong to the boss and that means no buying houses with scoundrels’ money.” She gazed up at the moon, which glowed so gently that she felt she might be lulled to sleep. “If I got a job at a coffee shop and changed my name, moved somewhere far away from here, could they still find me, Mr. King? I’d take nothing with me that they could sniff up. Just a suitcase and my cat.” Mr. King was watching her with wide eyes. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* “I could slip away. Right, Mr. King?”

“Yes. Yes! Of course you could,” he said. “I support your endeavor, miss. You should follow your dreams. Don’t let anybody stop you.”

And the sad woman smiled, almost tearful. “Will you call me Annabelle, Mr. King?” There was a muted click as Mr. King fumbled with the door and fell backward out of the car. The woman’s smile fell. She climbed out, watching him stumble down the empty street. *Oh, dear, she thought. Oh, dear.* It only took her a few seconds to close the distance. He was breathing heavily, his tie fluttering like a kite tail, and crying out, “Help me, help me, help me, help me.” She brought him to the ground with a thud and slit his throat. Blood splattered on her face, like summer rain.

As she dragged the body back to the car, restlessness tore her up inside. She couldn’t stay like this any longer. But where would she even go? She didn’t have any money. She only had this knife, and the job to which it tethered her.

At the edge of the bluff, she took out the box of cigarettes, her second of the day, and stuck one between her lips. “How was your day, Annabelle?” she murmured lightheartedly. “Oh, it was a bit gloomier than usual. Once I have a smoke I’ll be fine, though.” She lit the cigarette, then sucked in gratefully. There were a few red fingerprints on the box, smudged. In one harsh movement, she hurled it over the cliff.

She took a moment to breathe before advancing to the edge. Down below, big waves crashed against the rocks, and somewhere lost in the foamy water were her cigarettes. Her hand moved to the knife resting inside her jacket. Even in the dark, her employers’ symbol was still visible on the blade, a detailed series of groovings that were now partially filled with blood.

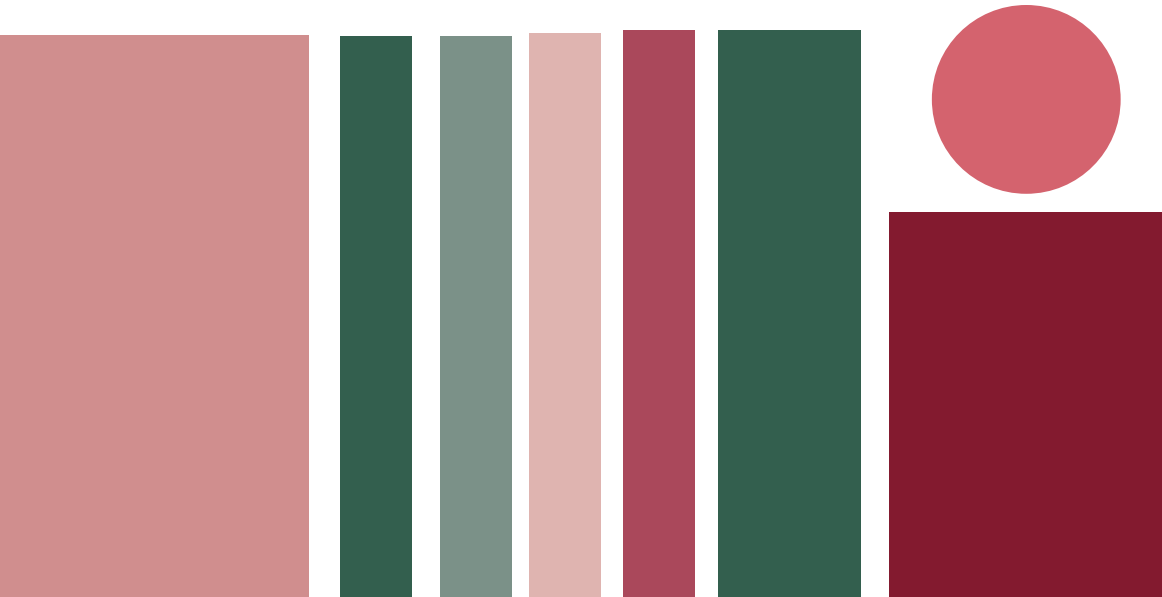
She plucked the cigarette from her mouth and extinguished it on the logo. “What are you doing, Annabelle?” she sighed. Then she threw it over the bluff. Maybe there would be a splash, some sort of visible or audible confirmation that would allow her to release the air trapped in her lungs. But the night was dark, and there was only the sound of crashing waves. She turned and headed back towards the road.

She walked until she reached town. Despite the early hour, the lights in the local coffee shops were on, and she entered the first one she saw. The barista asked for her name. “My name is Annabelle,” she said, and by then she could no longer hold back her tears. The other customers were eyeing her—a strange woman with blood on her clothes—but she found that she could not stop smiling. At last, how good did it feel?

Her apartment was waiting for her, a picture frozen in time. But it was not hers anymore—it belonged to a stranger, filled with that person’s clothes and food and bed. The sad woman packed her favorite dress into the suitcase, her toothbrush, and a can of tuna fish. She was going to go shopping in the city today, and when night fell, she planned to hit the bar. She shut the door behind her, scooping the tabby cat into her arms. It was a lovely morning.

About the Author:

Ming Wei Yeoh lives in Chanhassen, Minnesota and is currently a sophomore attending Minnetonka High School. She aims to go into journalism and creative writing. Her best ideas come from real-life observations.





"Sunken in Winter"
Katherine Sedlock-Reiner
Photography
5 x 7 in.

Mashi

By: Roshni Veronika Mallick

PART I

MIMI

At night when everything is supposed to be quiet, Mimi's house is alive with painful moans, fitful coughs, and sighs of temporary relief. Sitting on Baba's wicker chair, she doesn't have to guess the source.

Since the past month, these sounds have been omnipresent: in the bedroom where she sleeps with her mother, in the kitchen where the cook rolls out dough, in the bathroom and also in her head. In the beginning it had annoyed her, how the din interfered with her concentration as she spelled out words in her notebook. She had complained to Ma, saying it induced a headache; but Ma had dismissed her complaint, saying the pain that people were suffering as they fought the coronavirus was far, far worse.

Thanks to this, she had had to learn the art of ignorance. Day after day, night after night, she practiced ignoring the sounds as Baba started to take in more and more of the infected; so many that the second and the third floor of the house now was an infirmary of sorts.

Today, having had dinner under the watchful eyes of the cook, Mimi waits for Ma to come join her so that they may call it a day. It's way past her bedtime, but having hardly seen Baba properly for a month, she craves her mother's company.

When Ma doesn't arrive for another hour, Mimi slips out of the bedroom into the dimly lit corridor. The stone floor is cool beneath her bare feet. She stops a few feet away from the kitchen.

There's Baba, tall and broad-shouldered; looking at him one can never guess he is a doctor. A pretty competent one, too. He's standing behind Ma, who faces the wall. Even as she watches, he hitches up Ma's saree and presses her flat against the wall. He pounds into her, once, twice, thrice. Mimi dashes back into her room and under the covers.

Later, she's fully aware of Ma dropping in beside her. Feigning sleep, she ignores the smell of her sweat mixed with the odor of medicines and Baba's tobacco.

HEMA

I know Mimi is waiting for me. But it is absolutely imperative that we have this conversation. As he washes his hands in the sink, I notice the slight hunch of his shoulders.

He turns around.

“How long?” I ask, my voice intentionally rude.

“How long what?” He has the audacity to look surprised; it fuels my anger.

“How long are you going to treat them? The infected?”

“For as long as I can,” he says. His voice is determined but I can see in his eyes that he expects me to contradict him.

“What about me?” I challenge. He takes a few moments before replying. When he speaks, his voice sounds weak.

“I understand the danger, Hema. God knows I do. Why do you think I haven’t so much as touched you since the last month? Why do you think I sleep away from you and Mimi, upstairs? That’s because I know the perils of my actions. But I can’t leave people out there to die. Not when I am a doctor and have more than enough room in my house to help the sick.”

I know he is right. But I also know that we are well short of these infected people in our home.

“Have you thought about what it means for Mimi? She’s just seven, for God’s sake. She keeps asking me to get you! What do I tell her? That her righteous father is busy taking care of COVID-positive men and women? Do I tell her that if anyone of us were to get infected, as I think we will, we could die? Do I tell her that her father is not just trying to repair the lives of dying people, but also playing with death himself?”

There is a burning sensation in my throat, and I bet my eyes are shining.

"Mimi," he says. Just her name. His monosyllabic response infuriates me, so much that I want to throw the steel water jug at him. Instead, I get up and turn my back on him.

The air is tense with unspoken things, unexpressed feelings, and longing; because as much as I am mad at him, it is true that we haven’t touched each other in way too long. He must feel the same way, because without warning he enters my body from behind. It’s rough and hard and fast coupling.

Finished, I ask him, “Were you properly sanitized?”

"Yes," he says. His voice lingers at the base of my neck.

“Change your clothes and wash yourself, just in case,” I hear him say. This time his voice is farther away.

SHYMAL

He knows she was right, indisputably so. But he is a doctor and there is no way he will turn

his back on his duty.

She had called him righteous, and maybe he is, for don't the patients join their hands when he checks on them? Don't they look at him with hope and reverence? But right now, standing under the naked glare of the electric lights, all he feels is shame. He's plagued with worry for his seven-year-old diabetic daughter and his relationship with his wife, which seems to be going downhill. The idea of going down and apologizing to Hema is still forming itself in the architecture of his head when a woman starts coughing violently. He quickly walks over to her, and as he forces her to take her medicine, he thinks of all the things he needs to mend.

PART II

This is not how she assumed pregnancy would be like. Sure, she had known it would be difficult with her husband gone away for good, but she had never anticipated that she would be reduced to living under someone else's roof and eating someone else's food. How she will ever be able to pay back Shymal Da and his wife's generosity, she has no idea.

She is aware of how she cannot encroach upon their hospitality for much longer, but part of her wants to remain in the comfort of a proper bed with clean sheets and four square meals a day.

It is hard to forgo the pleasure of being well cared for when her entire life has been an accumulation of compromises and adjustments. Then, there's her growing baby to consider.

All in all, the temptation to fake illness is almost acute.

Shymal Da has come for his usual rounds. She sees him checking the other patients' pulse, temperature and asking them about this and that.

He seems to exude calmness, pacifying even the sickest individuals. Like her, everyone else is in awe of his unending generosity as a human and skills as a doctor. Some take his hands and kiss them, some talk at length: first expressing gratitude and later their heart's troubles. He listens to all of them, nodding when needed, speaking per requirement, and in those moments when his eyes are fixed on the speaker, she thinks that the world is not completely cruel, it just needs a little repairing. The initiative for which is taken by people like Shymal Da.

Once he comes around to her, she beams at him.

"How're we doing?" he asks.

"Getting better and better!"

"Ah, that's great." There's something in his tone that makes her heart constrict.

"I was thinking, now that you've recovered, or seem to be doing so, it isn't prudent for you to remain here. I don't think it's healthy for the baby," he says.

“Isn't prudent for me to remain here, any longer?” she repeats stupidly. Then, without permission, tears start rolling down her cheeks.

Shyamal Da takes her hand in his and smiles down at her kindly.

“When I say here, I mean on this floor. I think we might be able to shift you to the spare room downstairs.”

This is when she feels the baby kick for the first time.

MIMI

The old room across hers is being dusted clean. Ma, with the end of her saree pressed over her mouth and nose, stands in the corner, and dictates action. The stone floor is being scrubbed, and the housemaid scurries in and out of the room, carrying sheets, pillowcases, and curtains. The mirror on the dressing table is polished with Collin.

After an hour's work, when the room is finally put in order and Ma has retired to the kitchen, Mimi steps inside it.

The room hardly has any furniture: only a bed with matching sheets and pillowcases and a simple dressing table complete with two drawers and a stool. Blue lace curtains frame the single window from where the stagnant pond can be seen. With the high ceiling and the big window, the place is airy. Mimi decides it doesn't feel claustrophobic anymore, like it had that one time Ma stayed in the room with dark curtains pulled shut all day. One night when she had asked Baba why Ma seemed so aloof, he said that they had suffered a great loss.

In the morning when she'd gone to kiss Ma awake, Ma had looked at her with strangely vacant eyes and said, “Poor child. You'll have no sister or brother. Poor, poor child.” Only then had she noticed that Ma's belly wasn't fat anymore. The slight bulge had vanished.

HEMA

Truth be told, I am not sure if the pregnant girl should move into that room. It seems wrong, somehow unfit, for her to be exposed to the place that is a relic of death. The death of a baby that had been growing in a womb, just like the one growing inside her womb.

It's vaguely uncomfortable how she will sleep on the sheets that I slept on, rest her head on my pillow. She doesn't know anything about it. But I do. It unnerves me, how she will sleep with the ghost of my dead child while her own child grows inside of her.

But we have nowhere else to put her. So, she must live with the memories that have faded into the walls of the room, the phantom of my dead child and my pain.

PART III

After she is set up in the room downstairs, she has no doubt left about the fact that Shymal Da and his wife, who she calls Boudi, are incarnations of God. How they can be so unflinchingly kind and limitlessly generous, she has no clue.

Shyamal Da keeps mostly to the upper floors and Boudi, meaning older sister, is always bustling about the house. One afternoon, after they've had lunch, Boudi comes and stands at the door. "Can I come in?" she asks, looking uncertain.

"You know you don't need to ask Boudi," she replies.

Hema Boudi is wearing a lilac cotton saree, her wet hair is down, and she wears vermilion in the part of her hair. Her skin is fair, her eyes slanted and her lips a tantalizing shade of pink. She sits on the edge of her bed.

"This is the hottest day of the year, I tell you," she says.

"Yes, but the room is so cool and airy!"

There is an awkward sort of pause.

"The food was excellent, Boudi. I am not even ashamed to say that I licked the plate clean," she compliments. Hema Boudi's tinkling laughter fills the room.

"Flattery won't work with me, I tell you. I will not wash your clothes or make your bed," she jokes. For the next quarter of an hour, they talk about this and that, until Hema Boudi gets up saying it's time for her to tutor her daughter.

"When can I meet her?" she asks. Indecision flickers over Boudi's face. Then she smiles and says, "In time."

It becomes a routine for the two women to talk after lunch. Lazy summer afternoons are spent chopping vegetables for dinner, trading recipes, oiling and combing each other's hair. In the presence of swelling curtains, Hema presses her palm against the bulge of the heavily pregnant mother and her heart dilates with tenderness every time her palm senses movement under it.

One evening, finally assured that it is safe to introduce Mimi to their two-some, she brings her along.

Mimi is in awe of the bulge, staring unabashedly until Hema guides her small palms over it.

Together, mother and daughter relish in the feel of life and movement beneath their palms.

Soon, Mimi finds herself doing schoolwork sprawled on the floor as the laughter of the two women sitting on the bed swallows the sounds coming from upstairs.

MIMI

At first Mimi is not sure if she wants to see the lady living in the room opposite to hers. But she can see how it has altered Ma. She is less crabby now; Baba and she haven't argued in ages. She even lets Mimi have as many mangoes as she likes. So, one afternoon when Ma asks if she wants to tag along, Mimi agrees, wishing to see the lady who makes Ma this happy.

When she meets her, Mimi is not disappointed.

The lady has kind eyes and a laughing mouth. Her skin is like polished bronze, her manners free. Instantly, she is in awe of the sisterly love that seems to go back and forth between Ma and the lady. She begins to spend her evenings in their company, painting roses on paper with a yellowish hue, to the sound of their chatter.

One such evening, as she practices handwriting, she hears Ma say, "Now then, tell me, where is your husband? Has he abandoned you, now that you are fat?" Ma's voice is bubbling with laughter. Mimi quite likes it.

"What's there to hide from you, Boudi?" Mimi hears her say. "He left. Just like that. Whoosh." She motions with her forefinger and thumb, illustrating. There's a beat of silence, and Mimi is sure Ma feels guilty for bringing it up.

But then she says, "To tell you the truth Boudi, I'm well short of him. Not everyone is as lucky as you."

"Lucky? Me? Meaning?" Ma asks.

"Not everyone is blessed with such a kind and loving husband as you, Boudi. More than once I've heard him talk about you like his world has reduced itself to you." She looks at Mimi, smiling.

"And of course, Mimi, too," she adds.

One evening Ma asks her if she minds sleeping in the other room. Mimi instantly agrees, wanting nothing more than to sleep with Mashi, as Ma has taught her to call the pregnant woman.

Mashi, meaning Ma's sister.

That night, Ma wears Baba's favorite flowers in her hair. When Mashi wishes her goodnight (emphasizing *night* more than necessary in Mimi's opinion), Ma blushes.

PART IV

SHYMAL

He re-learns the dips and valleys of Hema's body. By the end of September, beds have been removed from the second and the third floor of the house and Mimi is allowed to wander wherever she pleases. With the onset of the monsoon season, the pregnant lady gives birth to a beautiful girl who has her bronze skin. They call her Meghna, an ode to the weather in which she is born.

Meghna, meaning clouds.

In the aftermath of lazy coupling, Hema tells him she is two months pregnant. Spent, he is already dozing off when she jolts him awake with the news.

"We're going to be parents," she tells him.

"Again," he says. "Again."

About the Author:

Roshni Veronika Mallick is an international award-winning essayist and author of "Genesis: An Introduction to Gender And Sexuality Terminology." Currently in her senior year of high school, she is fascinated by the expansive breadth of imaginary vision that poetry and storytelling lend to her. She has previously been published in a few literary magazines, including *Cathartic Literary Magazine* and *Kaleidoscope*.



Waves

By: Natasha Bredle

dear mother, perhaps the time has come for me to leave again,
although we walk this road together and i relish

the warmth of your quilted hand, you bring to mind
the ecclesiastic verse that rings notes of departure and rebirth.

we've surfed days of sorrow and bliss like photons in a wave,
varied lengths of light sifting through the membranes of our skin

like those ancient gold seekers who sought treasure from dust,
in their dreams embodying the lives of others, higher, brighter,

because where they were was never enough,
and we have mirrored them for so long. look around:

our race has conquered the depths of the sea and challenged the stars,
yet we balance on the same precipice as our primitive ancestors,

the yearn, the ache for what we aren't.
and oh mother, this disease has shaken me to the core

yet as i suffer, you shoulder my burden and bottle my tears,
saying daughter, these will surely fill an ocean

and as it grows i am building a ship, and when the day
comes to sail, the rushing wind will taste like honey,

the stars will glow and light my way and the waves
will frolic and celebrate my sojourn as i depart.

dear mother, you must know your hand is not some physical thing
to let go of. it is this all-encompassing color that has given me the brush.

Cold Company

By: Natasha Bredle

You breathe on my lips and I smell the smoke
of long forgotten campfires, flames billowing
across matted grasses ever closer to forest seams.
Step back and I will douse you
in diamond-clear water—fallen fragment of a fractured sky,
chorus of shattering glass against your skin,
whispers of angels as fluid becomes steam—
a metamorphosis
which reminds me of vernal baptism,
when I declared I would no longer wallow in sin
before my clean hands could even fathom Eden’s woe.
How the Earth looked so fine and spherical then,
not defined by the havens and hollows
which weathered the architecture of its bones.
Now my gaze limps upon your skin,
a delicate plane tainted with scars. I trace
the pale tissue and my finger comes away wet
not with blood, but the ghosts of tears.
Towels may soak up condensation
but these watermarks remain,
faded wrinkles where you wept, unabridged pain
of ages spent in the darkness, a shadow, an unknown.
So I tilt your chin up and hail the wells of your exhausted eyes,
rest, I plead, there are safe places even for the nameless, the lost
and you will tame these fires that have raged on for too long
and they will prove to warm instead of scald
your weary hands, I plead,
let go.

About the Author:

Natasha Bredle is a young (but fortunately not starving) artist based in Ohio. She writes about what she thinks about, which is really too much for her poor brain. You can find her work in *Aster Lit*, *The Aurora Journal*, and *Second Chance Lit*, to name a few.

Beatrice is Dead

By: Rose Knachel

Dear Bea,

Since you didn't leave a note, I thought I'd write one to you.

Maybe this will help me get my hands on some of that invisible, fantastical substance they call "closure." Everyone raves about the stuff, but I'm not even entirely sure it exists. It's been three months since your funeral and according to my therapist, I still haven't gotten any.

On most days the entire quest seems absurd and insultingly superficial. Like I'd prefer to grab a fistful of "closure" to throw at my therapist and tell him where he could shove it.

But on other days, when I see an ad for a movie you would have liked or the back of a girl's head that looks a little too much like yours, I think maybe... *maybe* I'd like some. It sounds peaceful. Maybe I'd sleep better, have more of an appetite. Maybe the urge to scream your name at the sky every time it enters my mind, maybe that would leave. I'd really like that to leave. It's very inconvenient while grocery shopping.

My therapist says that my problem with "reaching a point of closure" is that I'm avoiding everything that might help me get there. Which, admittedly, might have some truth to it.

I didn't come back to town until the day of the funeral, can you believe that? Somehow I still managed to stay away. The thought of driving back was too much. Finally being back, standing amongst all those people again, having to wash down the hurt with fruit punch and small talk about Aunt Susan's hydrangea bushes, proved too much as well, when the day finally arrived. I escaped to my car directly from the graveyard and drove the four hours back to campus as soon as I made the rounds. Didn't even go home. I saw Mom and Dad though, during the service.

They looked sad, don't worry. They behaved themselves.

(Liam White cried, by the way, when the casket was lowered into the ground. I thought you'd get a kick out of that. Didn't you have a crush on him in third grade?)

Anyway, I drove back to my dorm room and I tried to do what our uncles, aunts, and all

the Kentucky cousins seemed to be trying to do for closure: leave my feelings in that conveniently dug hole, buried alongside you beneath the soil, to decompose in peaceful silence. It seemed to work for a while, at least in my own head. I would push, push, push away every stray thought of you I had, evaluate my feelings and nod to myself in the mirror, convinced I was above grief, above anger, above it all. But then my roommate would ask me how I was feeling later that same day with that sympathetic head-tilt thing, and I would just snap. Isn't that a scary thought, Bea? How much you can convince yourself you're fine?

Though I guess you'd know a lot about that, wouldn't you.

To tell the truth, I was very angry with you for a while. I still am, actually. It was a very selfish thing you did. Maybe if you had left a note I'd feel differently but as of now, here we are. I can't pretend otherwise. Pretending didn't get me any closure.

So I've decided to face my feelings head-on. Grab a shovel and dig them up, no matter how difficult they might be. Yes that's right, Bea, your big sister is coming home from college. A visit. A visit for you. For real this time. No flaking out, no broken promises.

Isn't this what you wanted? Isn't this what you begged me for? Over the phone and in all those letters?

(All those letters and you couldn't leave one when it really mattered? No, that would have been too much, wouldn't it have, Bea? Wouldn't it have? Why ca—)

Don't be alarmed that my writing is now in blue ink, it's just that I broke the tip of my pencil and I couldn't find another one.

I think I really need this weekend away.

~ Cat

Dear Bea,

Mom is the same. If the reason you did what you did was to inspire some big epiphany so she would change or something, it didn't work.

As soon as I walked in the door I got a half hug, one of those little smiles she does, and a whopping "Oh honey, bangs? Really? Did you have those at the gathering a few months ago, I don't recall..."

That's what they call your funeral, by the way. The Gathering. You specifically, though,

haven't been mentioned yet. So far, when the day comes up it's to rehash the drama between Great Aunt Jean and the oldest of the Kentucky cousins (Keith?). Apparently there was a major exchange of words over which college majors were "correct" and which were "useless" and "frivolous" resulting in Keith being denied casserole leftovers. A very big scandal, as you can imagine.

So big, in fact, it's managed to overshadow yours. We're already a day and a half into this miserable weekend, and not only have we stuck strictly to meaningless fluff, but your name hasn't come up once. Not once!

Dad is included too, by the way. Although he at least shows symptoms of *something*. But whether it's grief or the beginning stages of insanity, I couldn't say.

He's been glued to grandpa's dusty old workbench since I got here, but won't tell anyone what he's working on. Hours and hours and hours, no breaks_e's lost it.

I'm suddenly reminded that yes, there *was* a reason I stayed away all this time. Our parents are psychotic.

Oh, well. Half a day to go.

~ Cat

Dear Bea,

I've been in this house for six days. Six. Days. I honestly don't know how you put up with this for so long.

I was packing my bags one night, right after I wrote that second letter, when Mom materialized in the doorway and mused, "You know what Catherine? I think it's time for us to do some spring cleaning."

Naturally I respond with, "It's October, Mom."

But then she goes, "Never too early to start," and walks away.

I'm left with a gaping mouth, a gaping half-packed suitcase, and the silence of my childhood bedroom. Classes be damned, apparently.

Four days later, we've cleaned every room in the house twice through. Once to "purge" (AKA getting rid of everything that "doesn't spark joy.") and twice to put all those infomercial cleaning supplies to good use. My arms are sore, Bea.

Dad hasn't helped, obviously. Still too busy in the garage working on his "project." Mom doesn't seem to mind. She doesn't like it when he helps anyway; he misses spots while dusting, doesn't scrub the floors hard enough, tracks in mud from the garage where he's supposed to be vacuuming.

But you know all this. We lived it. I'm starting to see how much fell on you when I left. I'm trying not to think about it too hard.

Mom and I haven't yelled at each other yet, though, which you'll be pleased to hear. Six days; that's got to be a new record, hasn't it? I can't tell if my patience has improved or she's gotten less... herself since I've been gone, but I'm trying not to think about that too hard either. I don't want to screw up a good thing.

This is also the reason I haven't brought up why we avoid your bedroom every time we clean.

I pass it in the hallways while dusting the windowsills, and I turn to look at it every night before bed, but I haven't set foot inside. I don't think anyone else has either. You'll think I'm crazy, but there's something off about the door handle. Sometimes I feel like it's watching me. Waiting for something. Silent. Staring.

Sorry, I'm rambling. I'll update you.

~ Cat

Dear Bea,

I screwed up a good thing.

Mom hasn't come home from Aunt Susan's (she went there to "cool off" last night) and I've barely left my bedroom. Dad is still in the garage.

Something just snapped, I think. One minute Mom and I were vacuuming the sofa and the next we were at each other's throats. I'll spare you the details (I know how you get) but just know that it was a bad one.

Your name was mentioned a few times.

Maybe this is good, though. Maybe it'll be better now _^with all the unsaid said, everything out in the open. At least we aren't pushing it down anymore. Avoiding your name, shuffling around your ghost. Ignoring. Pretending. I couldn't stand the pretending.

You know what? I think I'll go into your room now. Clean it up. I don't care what Mom says, it's time. We've all got to start facing the facts in this house. You're dead. You are dead.

Bea. Is. Dead.

Beatrice is dead Beatrice is dead Beatrice is dead.

I'm going into your room now. Sorry if I break anything. I'm still clumsy. Not that much has changed.

~ Cat

Dear Bea,

Did you always have that poster above your bed? The one of that band? I don't think you did the last time I was here. It's so strange—I look at it and see *you*.

You, seeing it at the store and somehow convincing Mom to buy it, or using some of your own precious babysitting money. You, unraveling it at home and piling heavy books on the ends overnight so it would stay flat. You, teetering awkwardly at the edge of your bed with a scrap of painter's tape between your lips, lining the corners up just perfectly on the wall. You, coming home after school every day, looking at it and having it make you smile.

Did it make you smile? I hope it made you smile.

I left it up just in case it did. I don't want your spirit to come back and get mad at me for taking it down.

Will I be able to feel it if you come back? Isn't that a thing? If it is, how do I know when it happens? I am wholly unprepared. People talk about "feeling" people, but what do they feel like? Cold? Or is it more of an emotional presence? Gosh, they should give you a ghost instruction manual when you buy a casket.

So far I haven't felt anything. Not even sadness, really, like I thought. Just nostalgia and a heavy pinch of guilt. A few heavy pinches.

I found your pile of yearbooks.

In your third desk drawer, beneath the old box of rainbow loom bracelets.

I saw the stack, felt a twinge of something in my stomach, and wondered if they would put

your picture in this year's yearbook. Then I stopped wondering that because wondering that made my eyes sting, so I flipped open to your page in the kindergarten one.

I could almost see through the thumbprint-sized photo into the moment it captured. Back when you still liked the picture day dresses Mom picked out for you and didn't mind when Dad called you his "Little Bea-ver." Your eyes were so bright in that picture I almost didn't recognize you. I didn't know they had the capacity for that much sunshine. Or I guess I forgot.

I looked for signs of what they would become; early signs of the dull, sunken slits that would shoot daggers at Mom, roll at Dad, and plead with me. But there wasn't a trace.

Not in kindergarten, first, second, or all through the elementary volumes.

You used to play sports, I forgot about that. And you were in the girl scouts. I stared at the beaming picture of you with your third grade troop, your little brown vest and three dutiful fingers held up to your forehead in salute, and I tried to remember why you quit. I couldn't.

That's when I moved on to middle school. It's here that your eyes started to change.

Your sixth grade, my freshman year... remember how close we were? Still making up secret languages and secret games, still too young to fathom a world outside the blanket forts and friendship bracelets.

The following year was when you first started to get bad. I can't remember what caused the badness, initially. I don't think it matters now.

You knew, then, if you tried talking to Mom she would have interpreted it as an attack on herself, and Dad would have just blamed it on hormones, so you talked to me. You talked to me and unloaded on me and cried to me until my ears bled and I, no matter how hard I tried to be an impassive dumping ground, started to feel it a bit too.

It was too much. All of it. Maybe a stronger, smarter sister would have handled it better and gone to someone —anyone—to get you some help, but I didn't know where to start.

Instead, I did what this family is so good at: Shut my eyes. Pulled away. Away from you and your little hurricane mind that I was so afraid of. No more forts. No more bracelets.

Without your alliance keeping me steady, I fought with Mom more than ever. More yelling, more slammed doors, more crossfire. We put you in the middle of it, didn't we? Why am I asking, I know we did. I'm sorry for that. I'm so sorry.

There are so many things I'm sorry for.

I'm sorry for going to college so far away. For not calling as much as I should have. For not replying to your letters and not coming home. For not listening, for not being there, for not doing more, for not being who you needed me to be.

I'm sorry, Bea.

I'm sorry I'm so sorry I'm so so so so so

Dear Bea.

I stopped writing before because I started to cry. I think I'm better now.

Dad knocked on my door a while ago to show me what he was making in the garage.

He smelled strongly of sawdust and sweat, but he's finally done. I have to say, it was worth it.

Remember Grandpa George? Probably not, he died when you were four, but you're buried next to him now so I'm sure you guys have had time to catch up. He liked to whittle. Birds, little frogs, pipes for his tobacco, things like that. Apparently he taught Dad.

It's so beautiful, Bea.

A beaver, eight inches high, beautifully intricate, with eyes so realistic, Dad and I sat together on your bed, just staring at them, for a solid five minutes. I think that was when Mom walked in, back from Aunt Susan's. She sat next to me without a word and stared too. Those eyes... I swear, they're made of walnut and pure sunshine.

When we finally roused from our trance, I showed Mom my progress on your room. She looked around for a moment, and I worried she would get angry again, but then I realized the look on her face was something far different. Words aren't enough to explain what it was.

We cleaned together in mostly silence until nighttime. We left the poster where it was.

We probably would have kept going until sunrise, but Dad knocked on the door. He suggested an "outing," and we agreed because we thought it would be good for him to get some fresh air.

He didn't tell us where we were going, and I didn't even have a guess until we pulled up on the side of the road across from the graveyard.

He brought the beaver with him. We didn't speak as we walked towards you, but there was this feeling in the air, I don't know...

Like this was the first time we were really together all week, you know? The three of us. Present. Whole.

We stopped at the stone with your name on it. Dad pulled flowers out of nowhere and handed them to Mom. She took them with a shaking hand and set them neatly beside the grave. Dad propped the beaver up next to them, and stepped back.

We stood in a line, staring at the words “Here Lies Beatrice Gray” in the darkness, and I realized something. There was no part of me, not even in the angry, whispering back corners of my mind, that saw those words and wanted to shout into the clouds.

Is that closure? Is this it? Did I find it? Do I try to hold on, with both trembling hands, and move on?

I don't have all the answers right now, and things aren't perfect, but it feels as though I've unlocked something. The first step, maybe.

Forgiveness.

Take this last letter not as an apology, or a question, but my written forgiveness. I forgive you, Bea. And Mom and Dad. And the Kentucky cousins who will probably forget you ever existed in the first place. But most of all, I forgive myself.

I really hope these get to you. I'm going to put them all in envelopes and address them to Heaven. I don't care if that's dumb because I know you would have liked it.

Don't worry about me, Bea, I'll be alright. We're gonna be ok, the two of us.

I promise.

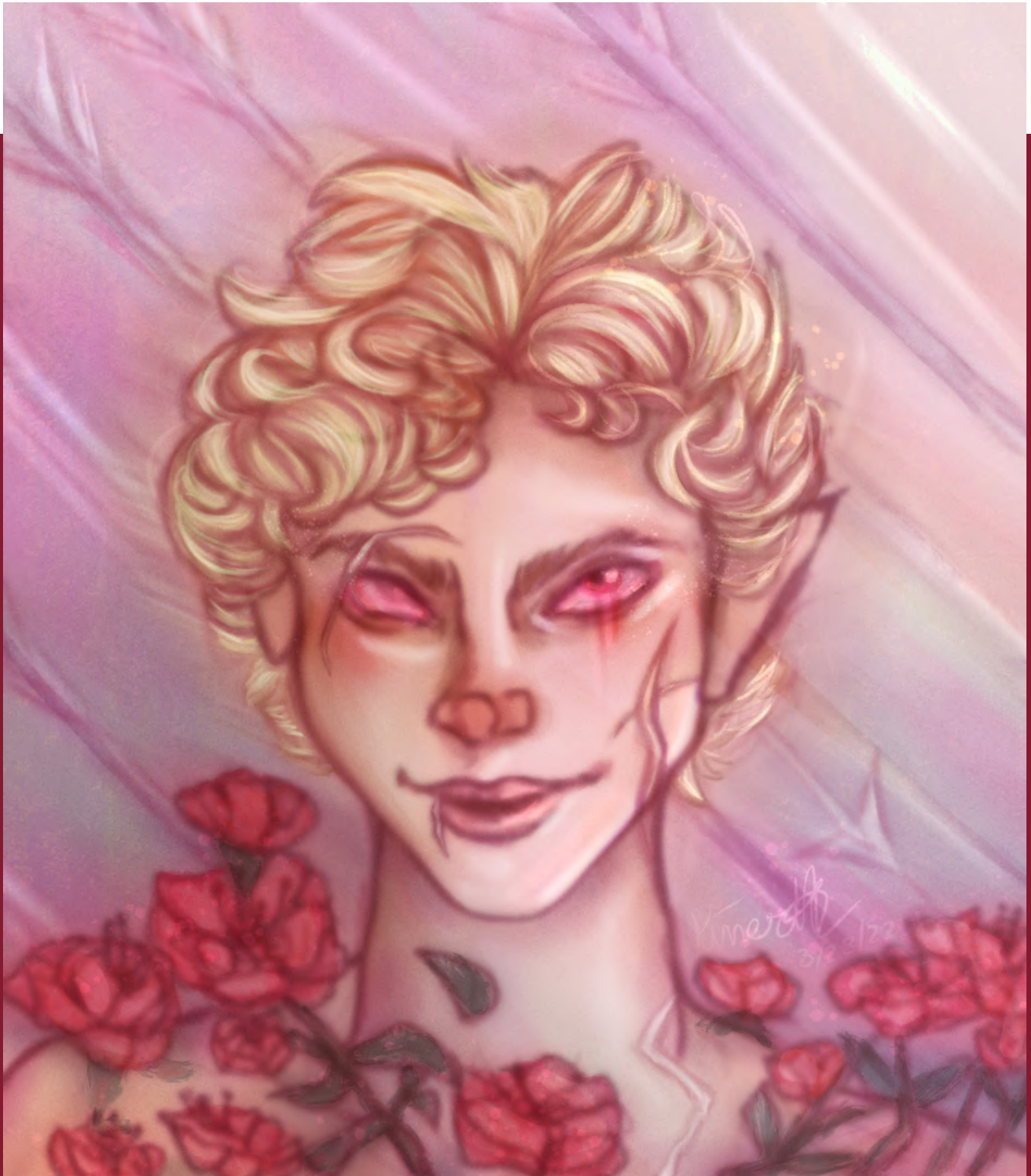
Stay bright,

~ Cat



About the Author:

Rose Knachel is a young writer attending high school in Wisconsin. Some of her passions include fiction, history and listening to Taylor Swift's entire discography on repeat. Her stories can be found in the forthcoming issue of *Buttered Toast Literary Journal* and tucked away in the excessive number of notebooks beside her bed.



"Splendid Fury"
Kinnereth S. Din
Digital
2040 x 2340 px.

Morse Code

By: Stefan Gonzalevski

— Will you write tonight?

He looked around him, trying to see beyond the blinding lights of the projectors.

— I don't see any window.

The young journalist squinted a second, obviously trying to decide if he was mocking her question.

— Do you need to see outside to be able to write?

He smiled.

— Almost. I wanted to see if it would rain tonight.

She felt slightly relieved: he wasn't evading the question. She clung to this clue, a weak branch above rapids. But if it would hold her long enough, she might grab a stronger one and reach the shore.

— The rain inspires you?

He nodded.

— More than you may think. The rain talks to me.

She wrote it quickly in her notebook and underlined it. No doubt there was a potential title here. At least a heading.

— That's a very poetic way to say it. Is that why you decided to live in Scotland?

He had a slightly disappointed grin. She seemed happy about her witty comment.

He just felt he had wasted a confession to an unmindful ear. Rostropovich playing for the birthday of a spoiled brat.

The rest of the interview was about his last book, and he recognized the material that his agent had distributed to every redaction whose issue had a literature section. She had dared to step out of the back cover path, but had quickly and fearfully come back to the soothing editorial road of her magazine's policy.

That night, it rained. He opened a window, and he wrote.

The next day, after a light lunch, he left his apartment with earplugs, an umbrella and a raincoat.

He sat quietly on a deserted café terrace, under the canopy. He had chosen this place for the sound that the rain produces, undisturbed by the noises of the city.

He nodded at the waiter who brought him a long coffee. He opened his notebook on the table, scribbled a few lines to ensure that his Cross pen was well inked.

Then he removed his earplugs and looked at the sky.

— Now you may come, please. I'm listening.

His agent had tried many times to convince him to write before summer, in order to have a book ready for September. He replied that it was not up to him but to the weather.

He always said that he just had to listen to be able to write. That his role was to only pass the words. He never explained where he got them from, though.

It seemed endless. It was a continuous process of listening carefully to the rain, the drops falling in a Morse code rhythm, and sorting them to create words that would make some sense in this universal cacophony. That was his method.

These last weeks, he seemed preoccupied. His agent had to repeat her questions to catch his attention. Although he didn't want to open up to her, she had many concerns. She was responsible for many major authors and the profit they generated for the publishing company. Writing is a money game. Only beginners and geniuses ignore that.

She never knew how to approach the sensitive matter of health. She couldn't just ask how he was doing. She had met enough authors to know that they wouldn't write brilliantly if they weren't, for the most gifted, on the verge of collapsing.

So she always postponed the moment when she would ask if there might be another manuscript.

As he got older, he seemed to age at an alarming rate. He got his first white hair before turning 40. Now approaching 50, he seemed to fade away from the living world.

He knew he was decaying. He wasn't afraid of the word. Because he could write it. He was scared by the fact that his hearing was declining. Slowly but surely.

And the drops never stopped falling. He could not be the only listener. He had to teach someone. The message was incomplete. He couldn't accept the silence of the rain's voice.

The task required someone young and in good shape. The method was odd, at best. The concentration was crucial. The candidate had to be chosen carefully and qualified in deciphering Morse code.

But how to explain what sounds like the delirium of an old man? Where to find an attentive and receptive ear? Should he let fate decide and place on his way the prodigy child? Fate was rarely benevolent. And usually kicked good fortune's ass continually.

He never met anyone adequate in his favorite café. He had to admit that it was not the cradle of universe's talents, rather the lair of two or three nomad workers dressed like lumberjacks, thick like an authentic ax, a couple of Japanese tourists, and two retired ladies flashing their favorite outfits, outshined by the constant smile they sported since the morning of the day they know they'd meet.

However, he was absolutely sure that he brought his umbrella this morning. The waiter hadn't seen it. It had simply vanished.

Now he had to wait in a lull, and had lost his desire to listen. He put his earplugs back in. He wondered where he could find an umbrella store.

With an idle mind, he stopped at the Old Town bookshop. He nodded at the owner.

— You know that I never could stand the abominable sound of your bell?

— Then why do you keep coming?

— I really have no idea. If only you would sell something I have an interest in. I'm sure you don't even sell my books.

— Of course not! I respect my clients.

He grunted with a smile.

Steve shrugged.

— Not too bad. Except that people don't read.

— Maybe because most of the books are lame.

— You mean apart from yours?

— They are as old as me, Steve. They don't count. Besides, I don't know if there will be many more.

Steve looked at him.

— What? You want to stop writing?

He shrugged.

— If I can't hear my muse talking to me...

Steve half-smiled and gestured in his direction:

— By the way, you forgot your umbrella?

He looked at himself and repressed the urge to shake his trench coat.

— It properly disappeared.

Steve pointed to a bucket next to the door.

— Pick one. Clients always forget umbrellas.

He walked to the corner and leaned, hands in the back. He observed them closely, seemed to smell them, and picked one.

— I hope this one will help me make it home dry.

And it did. Quietly. Although it started to rain again, the drops fell almost silently above him. Of course this one couldn't render the perfect soothing sound that his previous one produced.

Once at home, he observed it more carefully. The fabric seemed handmade, by an artisan. And a skillful one. But no brand or label was visible.

When the name Steve appeared on his phone, he was usually not really surprised, although he didn't remember ordering a book these last few days. And it was later than 10 pm.

— Do you harass all your clients like this?

— Only the nasty thieves.

— What do you mean? I always pay for your overpriced books.

— The umbrella.

— The umbrella?

— Yes. Its owner came back to the store.

— I understand that. It's of undeniable quality.

— I believe you. So, stop your career as an outlaw and bring it back.

— And what would I have in exchange?

— Well, first of all, I will prevent the police forces of the whole country from hunting you down.

— You'd like to see that, admit it.

— What I would enjoy is for you to meet the owner and give it back to her yourself.

Her?

He had a hard time fathoming why he felt so nervous.

He didn't want to make it obvious, though, so he chose his usual gray blazer but with a shirt he rarely wore and nice shoes. He knew women pay attention to the shoes. Not that he cared so much. But he wanted to make a point of being respectful. Wouldn't that be a bit old-fashioned, though?

The sound of the bell made Steve raise his head.

— Here is our criminal.

As if it were a call, what seemed to be a giant blue parrot appeared from behind the foreign literature shelves and expressed herself with a very cambridgian singing accent:

— Steve honey! Is this the friend you told to tread lightly?

— Indeed, replied Steve joyfully as he introduced them to each other.

They both simultaneously responded with a harmonic “Pleased to meet you” while shaking hands.

And a sudden silence ensued.

Only disturbed by cracks of the old parquet and the vibrating humming of the city life outside.

Steve didn't dare to move, a large smile on his face.

Until his friend simply said while looking at her:

— Did you hear that?

She raised an eyebrow and simply answered:

— Yes, I did.

He capped his pen, and put it down on the table before asking:

— I have a question.

She was observing the café, its discreet and efficient waiters, its scarce fauna.

— Oddly enough, me too, she said, as she turned her eyes on him.

He made an inviting gesture.

— Well, I... Steve told me who you are.

He tilted his head as she went on.

— Will you really stop writing?

He chuckled.

— Steve talks too much. Even my agent isn't aware.

— You lost your inspiration?

He sighed.

— I can't hear it anymore.

He leaned forward on his chair and asked:

— I have two questions now. What did you hear?

— I beg your pardon?

— In the bookstore, when we met.

She looked at the ceiling, as she seemed to recollect her memories of the moment.

— Words.

He did his best to contain a smile. She looked down on him.

— I can't explain how, but sometimes they come to me. I guess I'm a good listener.

She paused, as he stared at her.

— Anyway, what is your other question?

He smiled frankly now.

— Would you, by chance, know Morse code?

For ten years, they sat at this café table. While sipping her coffee, she used to note the letters that were falling from the sky.

He had explained everything to her: assigned to the Royal Signal Corps during the

last conflict, he had learned Morse code. One night, a shell fell on their post. Injured, he had been evacuated. In a half-sleep, he heard the raindrops falling on the tent roof of the field hospital and, knocked out by the painkillers, he took this sound for a Morse message. He got hold of paper and pen, and started to take notes. This is how he completed his first best-seller.

Back to civilian life, he pursued his writing career using the same method.

Now, almost deaf, he relied on her, who passed him small pieces of paper covered with letters, which he used to create words, phrases, chapters.

Until that day when she realized that he hadn't touched any of the papers, slowly piling in the middle of the table.

She gently tapped on his forearm to catch his attention, and showed her a piece of paper:

“You don't write. Something wrong?”

He held the paper with both hands and looked at her with weeping eyes.

She immediately grabbed their affairs, helped him with his coat, and led them home.

She led him to his armchair and made tea and a nice meal.

After eating, she handed him a glass of Oban and made themselves comfortable on the sofa, in front of a subtitled movie.

She waited until he decided to express himself:

— I can't write anymore. I just can't.

— How is that so? What do you mean?

He shook his head, eyes on the screen where Gregory Peck was struggling with the ocean.

— The rain tells me nonsense. I can't make anything of it. I can't rely on it anymore. I'm lost.

She nodded and sighed.

— Dear, I have something to tell you.

He turned his head to her. He usually disliked this particular arrangement of words.

She went on:

— After a while, I realized that I didn't have to listen to the rain. I just wrote letters, and you made words from them. It made no difference whether it came from the rain or not.

His eyes opened wide. Before he bursted, she said with her light, singsong voice:

— The words took form in your head. The talent is inside you. It has always been. You don't need any rain. You are the creator of all your books. You wrote your own sentences. Nobody, not even the rain, can dictate what you write.

He looked up as if the ceiling had opened up on a starry sky, and he wiped his face with his hand.

He took a sip of whisky to face and accept this small apocalypse. He felt like his sentence ended. He was made free. He turned his eyes on her and articulated:

— Would you mind still giving me more letters?

About the Author:

Stefan Gonzalevski is a photographer and writer. Born in France, Stefan studied literature and photography and worked for photo exhibitions and luxury brands in Paris. Stefan recently moved to Budapest and is interested in architecture, history, politics and art. Stefan writes in French and English.

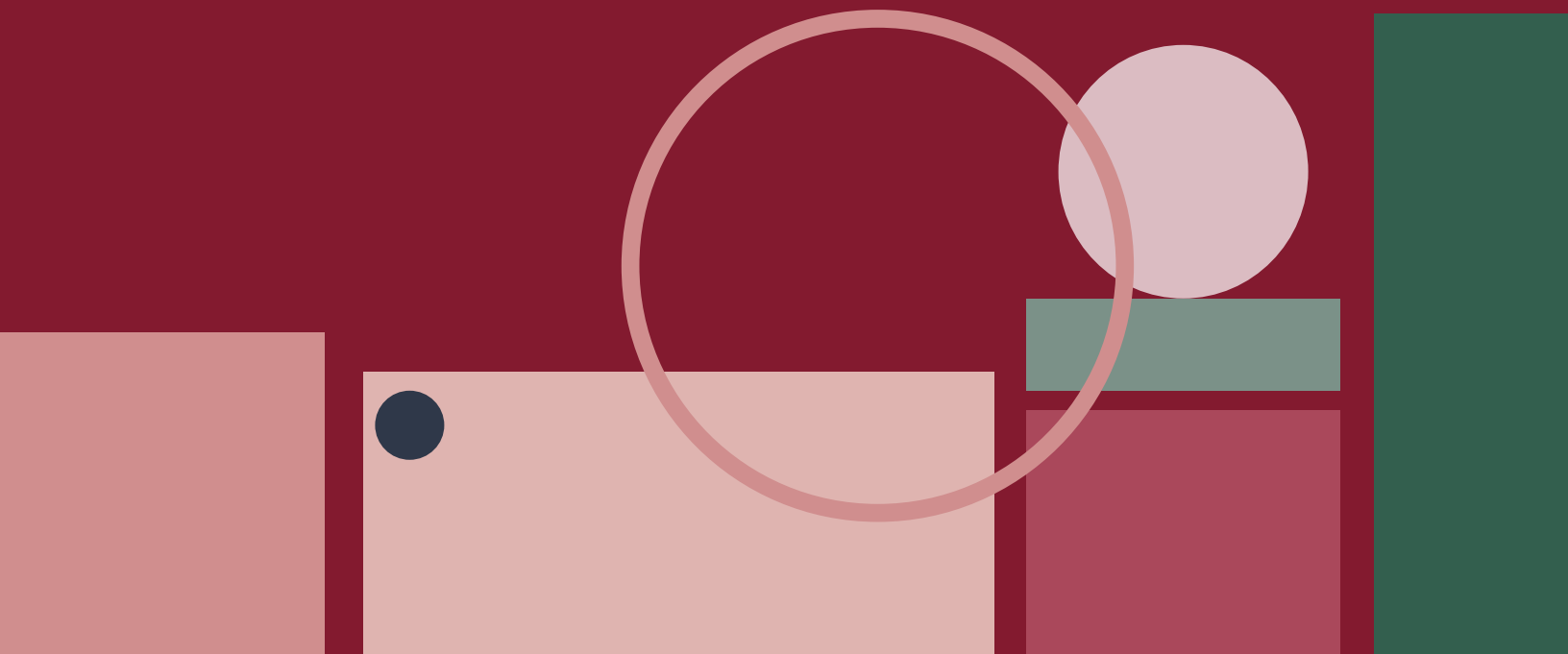
About the Artists:

Srishti Bahl: Srishti Bahl is an emerging artist from India who studied painting at the School of Art Institute of Chicago. She is interested in the existential quest of what faith means. Having grown up in a culture of many myths and legends of Hindu gods, she is searching for the truth in those stories and finding her own answers in the awareness of breath and body as she paints almost in a stream of consciousness allowing the works itself to reveal to her the truth of her own being.

Piece: Sway (pg. 22)

Katherine Sedlock-Reiner: Katherine Sedlock-Reiner is a high school sophomore from Brooklyn, New York. Editor of her school's literary magazine and founder of her school's literary club, Katherine enjoys writing short stories, reading Virginia Woolf, and painting in her free time. Her work has been published in *Apprentice Writer* and has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing awards.

Pieces: First Frost (pg. 10); Sunken in Winter (pg. 31)





Staff Artists:

Kinnereth Din:

Kinnereth S. Din is an eighteen-year-old artist and illustrator from North Texas, who loves thunderstorms, fuzzy socks, and lazy mornings. She has received a handful of local art awards and been featured in the Dallas Museum of Art's 2021 Teen Renaissance Exhibition. Her art was also selected for inclusion in Celebrating Art's National Summer Anthology 2020. While she hasn't settled on a favorite medium yet, most of her pieces seek to explore the poignant and beautiful. When she isn't scribbling in her sketchbook, you can usually find her daydreaming with a cup of tea in hand. Find more of her work, and follow her creative endeavors @artofkinn on Instagram.

Elwing Gao:

Elwing is an 18-year-old artist from the Bay Area, currently studying in New York. She works mostly in watercolor and 2D mixed media, and likes exploring mental health and human experiences in her pieces. In her free time, she can be found going on walks and playing guitar. You can find more of her work, and follow her current art studies @waves.and.washes on Instagram.

Luana Góes:

Luana Góes is a 19-year-old artist from Amapá, Brazil. Her artworks are inspired by various mediums and both traditional and digital art, creating mixed media pieces about her culture, mental health, nature and life in general. Góes also likes to edit videos and music, a topic that can be found in her pieces. You can follow her at @luana.g.m on Instagram.

Art Director:

Peter Donley:

Peter Donley is a high school senior from suburban Seattle. He first joined Kalopsia as an executive editor in June of 2020, and has been working as the layout designer ever since. He will be attending Johns Hopkins University as a freshman in the fall. You can find him on Instagram @p_eterd.

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