

The Paper Lantern

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The Paper Lantern

WORD BANK

PEOPLE

Biden
DeSantis
Hammas
Musk
Putin
Trump
Old

PLACES

China
Gaza
Israel
Iraq
Palestine
Russia
Ukraine
USA
Free

COLORS

Red
White
Blue
Tone deaf
Silence
Love
Hate

COMPANIES

Amazon
Apple
Tesla
Twitter

JOBS

Attention
Education
Healthcare

Cop
News
Police
Sports
Supreme court
Tech

BEASTS

Elephant
Donkey
MAGA

CRIMES

Assault
Conspiracy
Crime
Drug
Fake
Genocide
Insurrection
Lies
Prison
Shooting
Violence

DIRECTIONS

Election
Left
Right
Climate change
Global warming

MONEY

Bans
Boycott
Economy
Fund
Lawsuit
Oil
One percent

Pay
Strike
Taxes
Wages
Wall Street

ENEMIES

Antisemitism
Classism
COVID-19
Depression
Homelessness
Homophobia
Misinformation
Misogyny
PTSD
Racism
Sexism
Transphobia

"ENEMIES"

Birth control
Choice
CRT
Culture war
Gender
Indoctrination
IVF
Pronouns
Woke

FRENEMIES

Artificial intelligence
Constitution
Guns
Religion
Rights
Social media

WHAT WE SEE

ABILYN BAHR

R R Q A R I N O I T A C U D E R A C H T L A E H
E A P R O N O U N S L O V E N I T S E L A P K O
C W C T S I L E N C E T E E R T S L L A W T S M
O E H I N D O C T R I N A T I O N L I E S S U E
N R O F S I E L E P H A N T E N I A R K U D M L
O U I I D M S P O R T S E K E S H O O T I N G E
M T C C Y A P R R S P S O A I D R I G H T S R S
Y L E I B L U E Y E L W T R U O C E M E R P U S
S U A A N S D S C A S N O I T N E T T A T T C N
N C N L S C O C A L L S W E N K E T I H W L L E
U S A I N S U R R E C T I O N E G A Z A I U A S
G F A N O T P I I E C I L O P Y S E M M T A S S
N V B T I R A M P I D E S A N T I S A A T S S C
I I I E T A N E S T R I K E N R I T O Z E S I H
M O R L U N T O N E D E A F E X E L N O R A S I
R L T L T S I R O D M P U D E C I N E N Y A M N
A E H I I P S C C I O N N S H O M O P H O B I A
W N C G T H E T U C D E A A A V F I E A T O S L
L C O E S O M I S O G Y N Y T I A G R M A Y R I
A E N N N B I D E N A G A M E D K I C A X C A T
B L T C O I T F R E E N O I T C E L E S E O E R
O P R E C A I W A G E S Z D R U G E N A S T L U
L P O L D T S O C I A L M E D I A R T I O T N M
G A L E F T M I S I N F O R M A T I O N I T U P

OPEN

CHLOE GALASI



CONSERVATORY

REN TAYLOR

Damp, humid air clings to my winter-dry skin, settling onto my hands in a cool film. The Fern Room is bursting with greenery, wide glossy leaves with scalloped or jagged edges, cut through with cobbled dark walkways made of puckering stone. There are small pools of obsidian water, shining black mirrors that throw light onto the bottom of fern fronds like a golden Christmas projector. When I lean to look into the water, I see myself as a dark shadow with static frizzed hair and glowing frames among speckles of algae and miniature water velvet.

The air is dirt-sweet and alive. Every few minutes or so, the pipes shudder and cough out a fine mist from the ceiling, cooling the pressing heat of the room and raining down on the swaths of ferns. Some of them are hardly the size of garden gnomes, others the size of trees. The mist gathers on their leaves until they begin to drip heavily onto the dirt mulched floor and flat benches. By the water, these benches are edged in pocked concrete and topped with slatted wood, grayed and smooth from use. Embedded into all of them are bronze plaques, each with polished names, years, and dedications to the dead: In loving memory of, In remembrance of, Loving mother and wife.

The Como Conservatory is a languid, green oasis in the middle of a cold dead winter. On days when I felt the most restless—which was most days—I would hightail it out of school before the third bell and catch the 3B Eastbound a few blocks, trudging the rest of the way on foot through high banks of snow and slush covered sidewalks. By the time I arrived, my socks would be damp in my boots from snow that had managed to pry its way in, melting down my ankles and pooling by my heels.

My wool scarf, sticky from heavy breaths, scratches against my nose and mouth as I enter the conservatory: A sprawling collection of interlocking rooms made of long curved beams of white painted

steel and thousands of glass panels. Green exit signs glow above the doorways. In every room is the sound of rushing water, from fountains and small waterfalls embedded into mossy rock walls. That same thin moss creeps quietly over everything, reaching out towards anything it can get its hands on; stone, wood, glass, concrete. Small fans spin unbothered on the ceiling, stirring the stems and leaves and giving each room a slightly different tempo to sway to.

Everything is alive here. Entering each room was a soothing balm to my frost nipped hands, a place where I could sit quietly with a black bag full of markers and draw. People were always blessedly sparse on weekdays; my only company being ambling old couples and parents with toddlers in bright plastic strollers.

The Fern Room always came first. I'd sit on the bench of a dead police lieutenant and shed my heavy winter layers, piling them next to me. Pulling out a sketchbook full of heavy, cream-colored paper, I was happy to spend the next half hour trying and failing to catch the way the sunlight shone down through the mist.

After a brief walk through a dim no man's land consisting of two restrooms and an ancient drinking fountain, is the Palm Room. It's comfortably warm, less humid than the monsoon-thick air of the Fern Room and the benches are dry. This is where the paths turn into mosaics of different marbles, pale yellows, pinks, blacks and whites, all filled with small dark cracks.

The Palm Room, in perfect self-awareness, is stuffed to the brim with palms. Each specimen has a black name tag with white lettering introducing itself, either staked into the ground or hung around their limbs with dark thick wire: the bamboo palm, *dypsis lutescens*, the foxtail palm, *wodyetia bifurcata*, sentry palm, *howea belmoreana*. There are also lamps pretending to be palms themselves, brushed green metal pillars planted into the dirt to light the area with large glowing bulbs. The damp air smells like wet mulch and mashed leaves. It's a beautiful room by itself but it has always been my favorite for the ceiling, where the glass frame rises to a beautiful sparkling dome. It

filters the midday sundown through the palms and onto the back of my head, warming through my hair.

A toddler motors by, pushed in a teal plastic stroller by her parents. She stares at me with wide glassy eyes, fist stuffed into her mouth crunching loudly on a cracker. I raise my brows at her, then stick out my tongue. She smiles coyly, lips curling around her fist before her eyes disappear behind the wide trunk of a feathery cabbage palm, the wheels scraping along the marble back towards the glowing green exit sign.

The bench I choose stands on its own four wooden legs, unlike the stone ones sunken into the floor. Its plaque is collecting dirt in the very corners. In energetic and adoring memory of. I look closer at the dates. The math I do in my head tells me this boy was seven years old when he died in early June 2002. He'd be fully grown by now. Old enough for a house and a job and someone to marry. Instead, he's memorialized on a wooden bench tucked between the red leaf palm, which doesn't even have red leaves, and the oblong fruited palm, which carries no visible fruit; his body long sunken back into dark earth.

He has the same birthday as my mother: September 23rd.

I get up to move to the next room.

The Sunken Garden is the jewel of the conservatory. Exploding with color and the sweet, powdery scent of seasonal blooms. A dark trench of water spears its way through the middle of the garden, capped with a fountain of a naked little girl slouching on her toes looking down at the little toads spouting water by her feet. The water echoes up and down the long, tunnel of a room, uninterrupted by rising foliage.

My mother was married here—the first time—on March 19th, 2002. She was nineteen, her fiancé, my father, was twenty-one, freshly back from training in Illinois from the US Navy. They already had one child, my older brother, who tottered around the wedding on chunky little legs. I knew they had gotten married in this room, surrounded by bright spring flowers, but Mom never talked much about the

details. My parents were done and divorced less than four years later, thankfully not before pulling me into the world.

When I call to ask her about it, Mom hums and thinks for a while, trying to recall the details two decades later.

“It wasn’t a great proposal, she confesses,” her voice through the phone sounds crumpled up, a little raspy at the end after a long day. “We just kind of agreed that it made sense. Your grandma planned everything. She paid for it all.”

I ask what she wore, who was there. She pauses occasionally, hitting walls in her memory before finding other ways through. She wore a dress off the rack from David’s Bridal in the mall. She got her hair done by a mean old woman working out of a salon on the corner of University Avenue.

“I hadn’t washed my hair in two days, and she bullied me into keeping it dirty. She curled it into these tight little ringlets—I wanted to have it half up, your father said that’s how I looked the prettiest. She must’ve stuck me with a thousand pins. They hurt so bad. I looked like . . . like a bad nineties dance recital.”

It was mostly my mom’s family there, parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles. My father didn’t have much family, just his mother and her husband, a couple of friends. They crowded into the walkways among the beds of tulips, buttery daffodils, and white hyacinths all standing at attention to watch my parents get married. Afterward, everyone crowded into my grandmother’s little duplex apartment on the West Side to eat sheet pans of lasagna layered with thick flat noodles and beef, and salad covered with cherry tomatoes and Italian dressing.

“Did you even have cake?” I ask her. She laughs.

“I don’t even think we did. Just little premade desserts. Isn’t that strange? I was a cake decorator, and we didn’t even have cake.”

When the reception was finished, my father insisted they go visit a friend of his instead of going somewhere special or, god forbid, home. To end her wedding, my mother sat at the corner of a stranger’s kitchen table, alone, picking pins out of her greasy hair.

“I actually wanted to have the ceremony in the other room,” she tells me, “the one with all the spices and the koi pond.”

“With the statue of Saint Francis in the bushes?”

“Yes, exactly.” There were just too many people. Her sigh sounds tinny through the phone speakers.

The North Garden.

It’s always the last place I stop, normally too tired now to bother with the markers and the paper. Instead, I lean over the walled edge and stare into the oily black water and suck on a stick of rock candy from the gift shop. I feel the sweet crystals cut into the top of my mouth as I watch little orange fish spark through the darkness.

I wonder, staring at their shining little bodies, how much it costs to put someone’s name on one of those bronze tags. I wonder if they let you choose which spot they super-glue it to.

I picture my mother’s name, etched into the yellowed marble above the koi pond. In remembrance of: Mother, daughter, wife. I wonder if she got the chance to slip away during her own wedding and watch the bright little fish swim in their pool, the edge of her mall-bought dress tickling her ankles, hair dipping into the water.

JUST UNTIL SPRING

SARAH HUDERLE



JUST UNTIL SPRING

SARAH HUDERLE

Her limp begins in a patch of pines. You grip her leash as she trots through the underbrush, weaving under cedar branches and over mossy boulders. Brown needles, clusters of five, rustle under her paw pads, but the pace becomes irregular as her hind leg starts its subtle drag. She pauses. Wind rustles her black fur, and you see swollen hips under her sleek coat. She raises her ashen face, so you pause and join her, seeking a smell past pine sap and wet soil, but the scent she drinks evades your senses. Maybe it's some squirrel or mouse or distant hiker, or perhaps it's meditation, a bottling-up of this adventure to cradle it in her ribs. After all, you're hanging up her leash after this journey, not that either of you know it yet. A patch of barren, knotted oaks shades the path between your front door and these white pines, and for months, she's walked only through acorns and umber leaves. Her stiff gait betrays the difference in distance. One more month, and her plaid collar will gather dust on a shelf with a half-empty box of biscuits.

You step forward. Wide eyes turn your way as her tail swishes and she pulls against her collar, but you lay in a patch of bedstraw and pat the moss next to you. "Sit," you say. Her bat ears pop up. She meanders over, sniffs the dirt, and blinks at you. One turn, two turns, three turns, and she plops onto the ground with a soft huff. You smile, scratch behind those ears, and stare into the sky. Lichen-coated boughs sway overhead. Cirrus clouds drift beyond. Crows caw. You think of her limp, then her love of walks in this forest. More. You just want to do this more.

Another huff. She plops onto her side and leans into you. Her tail thuds against your calf and she twists to lick your cheek, so you laugh and pat the white cross on her chest. It beats like a heart, like a large chamber of life that stays warm in autumn's cool breath. One more month, and you'll listen as she breathes three rapid breaths, two deep sighs, then nothing. You'll buy her a wagon this spring, you decide, and pull her through the forest. She'll love it.

You just have to wait a few more months.

GHOST OF AN UNKNOWN BROTHER

OLIVIA MINEAU



NOTHING TO FEAR

JESSE NAVARRO

Swing so high the swing set shakes and creaks
Breeze brushes my skin in the blinding sun
We seek to claim the land in the clouds
And fly with the dragons that roam above

I'll follow where you take me
Your hand drags me
Making me pick up my feet
Stomping while we discover the world
You lead me through magical woods
Glitter becomes fireflies, butterflies as we get closer
Chasing creatures from every story we read
'Cause we have nothing to fear

Building memories through bruises
On knees with scraped hands from every fall
Caused by pushing in lines to be first,
First in every competition we make up as we go

Laughing at the stupid jokes in your face
Under trees that used to be our height
While the dragons turned out to be birds
And every shadow was just a broken branch
Playgrounds with all our memories are now fields
I'll be on the highest hill someday as a hero
But promise me that you'll never leave my side
Then I'll have nothing to fear.

CONNECTED

CHLOE GALASI



(IN)ORGANIC

KIANNA PHILLIPS

You are my personal window
into an undiscovered galaxy filled with
strange green milky ways and planets of
mysterious white bubbles.

Are you covered in sea foam?
Bubbly, creamy foam bursting
from the vast ocean with
streaks of chartreuse and teal.

Is it algae?
Are you a slice of life
with thousands of bright cells
running around within the turquoise
of water, multiplying faster
than the speed of
light?

Or are you chemicals?
Are the bubbles a chemical reaction
of vicious gases bursting
forth, threatening anyone that goes near you?

Are you not living?
Is everything that makes up your being
a combination of inorganic materials
and chemicals that create those
brilliant colors of tortoise
and cobalt blue?

You answer to no one while
the square portal that has been cut
into your being
hangs precariously on a wall.

TEMPEST

CHLOE GALASI

“Oh no, did I send out the last invitations? I had some sitting on my desk.”

Mateo sighed through the phone, ever patient. “You already asked me four times this weekend. I sent them out to everyone on your list the day you asked me to.”

Hae triple checked her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes looked glassy compared to her matte skin. The combination of powders the makeup artist had used smoothed out the wrinkles starting to form between her eyebrows. Powders pulled her cheekbones up, widening her dark eyes. She looked like the porcelain doll her Halmeoni had given her as a child. Despite Hae’s nightly crying about it watching her, her mother had insisted they keep the precious gift on a shelf in her room. Her pale skin glowed in the moonlight as she kept watch every night. With her light footsteps, Hae would sometimes catch her mom brushing the doll’s hair, humming a tune Hae would only otherwise hear when she cooked.

The hairstylist had gathered her hair up into a beehive. Her soon-to-be mother-in-law paid for it, but it already weighed enough to hurt Hae’s neck. Even though Mateo’s mother’s recent diagnosis led to rushed wedding plans, Hae would’ve let her choose everything anyway. She gave with a smile, never letting Hae feel like a burden. Hae still tasked herself with going with whatever flow her mother-in-law decided in return. She switched Mateo to speakerphone and started picking at the hairpins. Clumps of hair released from her head with relief only to be repinned tighter against her scalp. She already fantasized about driving to the bed and breakfast at the end of the night and washing everything off.

Hae sighed, letting her posture relax from princess to pauper.

“Who did you put at the back table? You didn’t put Mrs. Vanderhall next to your college friends, did you?”

He laughed, cracking a smile across Hae’s cemented face.

“Of course not. I don’t expect they could handle her,” he teased. “The last table has the Vanderhalls, the Fischers, Katie from your parents’ church, Ali from high school, Leilani from college.”

Hae turned her head to her phone fast enough to rip out the bobby pin she was holding. A few strands of her black hair stuck between its metal jaws, but she registered no pain.

“You invited Leilani?”

Mateo paused. “She was on your list.”

“The list you grabbed from my desk, right?”

“I found it on your nightstand. Why do you sound shocked? Are you not friends anymore?”

“That was my preliminary list. I told you I put the final one on my desk.”

“Shit, I’m sorry. I thought you had just moved it.”

Hae could tell Mateo pretty much anything and everything, she knew that. She wouldn’t be marrying him if that were the case. But there were some things she didn’t want to admit even to her husband. Some things she didn’t want to admit to herself.

“Did she RSVP?” Hae asked, softening her voice.

“Yeah, she’s coming.”

The foundation the makeup artist used on Hae was too expensive to sweat off. Instead, her sweat gathered underneath like a murky pond. “Did she bring a plus one?”

“Maybe? I’m not sure who brought a plus one, but I know we have enough seats and food for everyone.”

Hae sagged her head into her manicured hands, blowing a sigh into the phone.

“Hae,” Mateo’s voice came through the other end low and gentle. “Listen to me.”

She didn’t reply, but Mateo had learned to be the voice she needed when words evaded her.

“We’re getting married today. No matter what goes wrong, you’re still going to be my wife at the end of the day. That’s the only thing that matters, okay?”

Hae nodded, choking down the tears burning the back of her throat. He was right. She was here to marry Mateo. As long as she succeeded in that goal, nothing else mattered.



The music clicked on without issue, allowing Hae to release a breath. She watched her closest friends and family file out of the backroom in twos, disappearing into the traditional Korean tune. The beach they were supposed to be getting married on bellowed outside the window. Rain held off but the possibility loomed over in gray clouds. The sea raged against the wind, blowing the water in every direction. A subtle roar leaked through the window open in the backroom for ventilation. It wasn’t the beach wedding she’d imagined, but it didn’t matter. Today, she was marrying Mateo.

The last three notes of the verse climbed, hanging with a pause as seats squeaked beneath guests, rising too. On this cue, Hae stepped out from behind the doorway. Mateo’s family had done a commendable job converting the beach house into a venue at the last minute. String lights lined the pillars, bringing a glow to the room darkened by cloudy weather. Light reflected off the white roses lining the aisle.

She tried to focus on Mateo before she could catch the eye of any of the guests staring at her. He looked the same as he did every day except for the suit. The neat line of his beard cut his cheekbones high on his face. His shoulders stretched across the space between the bridesmaids and groomsmen. If he weren’t in the center, the entire image would be off balance. Eyes followed his sturdy frame, assuming he was in charge of every situation. Inside, however, Mateo was soft and sweet like a grapefruit. He took on her anxieties without letting them consume him. Like a stone in water, wear and tear was only visible on him through the lens of time. Even then, he was smoother for it. Tears

shone in his eyes. He wiped them away with a handkerchief before they could drip into his ever-present grin.

At the altar, Hae handed her bursting bouquet to her maid of honor and took Mateo's hands, his skin soft on top but rough underneath.

"Dearly beloved," the preacher started, but Hae couldn't hear anything except the ocean waves outside. They crashed and curled, spraying salt against the sand. Even the seagulls had been pushed out by the wind. Only the water remained.

Mateo squeezed her hands, either to convey his excitement or to pull her drifting attention back to him. He had been her rock these past couple of years. Whenever she started to drift or drown, he pulled her back with his strong arms. Besides his appearance, he showed everything at his surface. There was no guessing or games. He told Hae his thoughts and urged her to do the same. "You look beautiful," he whispered and sank back into his smile. It was bright white, not a trace of plaque or food in sight.

Objectively, she knew she looked beautiful. Her bridesmaids had gasped when they saw her. Mateo's parents had cried. She knew she looked more gorgeous than she ever had before and probably ever would be again, but the layers suffocated her skin. She wondered what her mother would think when she saw the pictures. If she would ever choose to look at them.

"Thanks," Hae whispered, giving her eyes a break from his smile. Wind leaked through a cracked window, but she tasted sweat gathering on her upper lip.

She let herself glance into the crowd. Regret flooded her veins as her eyes landed on Leilani, hands clasped in the furthest row. Shadows wrapped around her, but Hae could still discern her features. Three years later, her hair still spilled in dark rivulets over her shoulders. Her dress had a high neck but clung to her hips, showing her figure without showing everything. The spot next to her sat empty. Suddenly, a beach wedding sounded like the worst idea. Hae snapped her gaze back to Mateo, throwing herself into the moment.

“Do you, Mateo, take Hae to be your lawfully wedded wife? To have and to hold, from this day forward, as long as you both shall live?”

Tears leaked down into his beard. “I do.”

Mateo was the present Hae had chosen, the future she wanted. Time had solidified his presence in her life, making it a necessity. She needed his smile to carry her through every day.

“Do you, Hae, take Mateo to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold, from this day forward, as long as you both shall live?”

Hae held the question, flicking her gaze to the back row. At every point in their time together, Hae had imagined Leilani somewhere at her wedding. First in the crowd then, later, up front with her. Never in the back row. Leilani remained silent in the back, twisting the rings she still wore around her fingers.

“I do,” Hae said.



Once she was on the dance floor, Hae felt herself relax. Two cocktails on an empty stomach blurred the mess of bodies around her into a supportive ambiance. Anxieties swirled into flashing colors. Leilani disappeared. She could be on the dance floor, sipping a drink at a table, or on her way home. Out of sight, out of mind.

“Congratulations!” Mateo’s aunt, who had yelled at her cousin, said. She was half dancing, half herding her toddlers away from spilled beer. Hae’s face slipped into a smile as she thanked her. For the first time that night, she meant it. Now that the attention had been taken off her and Mateo, she could relish her achievement in a room full of people who supported them. Marriage was a milestone she had never seen herself reaching. Her years of searching for stability were over. She’d found it.

Mateo’s hands rested steady on her hips. His head pressed against the side of hers, the smell of her sweat mixing with his expensive aftershave. He tossed her around freely, leading her in circles to an electronic beat that belonged in 2012. They only took a break for another

drink and hopped back into the next rhythm. Hae's stomach burned with a comfortable warmth. She looked at Mateo, her fresh husband, flashing blue, pink, and green in time with the bass that shook her ribcage. Mateo pulled Hae toward him, singing along to lyrics about a DJ searching for love in the club. She laughed into his neck.

"I love this," she shouted into his ear. The back of his neck felt slick in her hand. She strengthened her grip. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He leaned down to her ear. "I chose this venue because the ocean reminds me of you. Quiet and beautiful with roaring strength beneath."

The beat dropped into the chorus. Mateo sprung from Hae to bounce up and down, fist in the air. The room swirled. Hae froze, a pillar among chaos. The liquor in her stomach bubbled into a burn, enough fire to pump smoke into her lungs.

"I'm gonna take a breather," she shouted to Mateo and left before he could reply. She stumbled through wall after wall of bodies, keeping her eyes down to avoid more well wishes and to keep her footing.

Brisk air hit her face as soon as she opened the beach house's doors. It felt fresh in her lungs, cooling her from the inside out. She sucked the salty scent into her nose for five seconds, then blew it out from her mouth for seven like her therapist had taught her. She repeated the process until she found a spot on the beach shielded from the wind by a hill. Waves beat the shoreline, crawling closer and closer to the edge of her dress. The night was almost over, and she'd never wear her most expensive purchase again. She let herself slump into the sand, allowing the grains to mold into her shape. Deep sky muted color and vision. The water looked like it ended before it even began. The ocean's roar was overwhelming, wave after wave crashing into each other.

Three drinks was too many. Hae felt like puking, kissing and sleeping all at once, preferably not in that order. Instead, she watched the water cycle between still and tumbling. She wasn't sure if it had been five minutes or fifty when she heard a voice behind her. Soft, up and down like the water itself on a calmer day.

“I thought you might end up here.” What she meant by ‘here,’ Hae didn’t ask.

“Hi, Leilani,” she said. She surprised herself with how easily her name slipped off her tongue. Like a song she hadn’t heard for years but whose lyrics got stuck in her head.

“May I?” Leilani gestured to the sand next to her. Hae nodded. Out of her periphery, she watched Leilani tuck hair behind her ear. The back of it twisted in the wind.

“You chose a beach wedding,” Leilani started.

“Don’t,” Hae warned. The air bit at her skin now, leaving goose-bumps on her flesh.

“Don’t what?”

“You know what I mean,” Hae tried to give her words an edge, but they fell out tired. Honest after liquor.

“You invited me here.”

Hae felt Leilani’s gaze on her like a force. She resisted, watching a wave start from the shore, rise into a crest, and burst into mist. “Mateo did.”

Leilani broke her stare.

“So Mateo doesn’t know.” A statement. A realization. Not a question. Leilani snapped her eyes back to Hae.

The ocean grumbled in the silence. Hae’s teeth chattered.

Leilani scoffed. “Even if you never told him, how does he not know? Is he too busy going to the gym and checking his stocks?”

“Stop. This is why we haven’t spoken—”

“We haven’t spoken because you can’t face your own truths. You said you couldn’t betray your mom, but she didn’t even come to watch you marry a man.”

Hae let herself look at Leilani. Her face was almost the same as it was three years ago, but more mature in subtle ways. She’d gained weight, her cheeks more full and pink. Despite always being covered in them, additional freckles had sprayed onto her skin. There was still a patch of them gathered on her shoulder. Small changes that added up to a different whole.

“Don’t you remember how happy we were?” Leilani asked, her voice softer now. “That night in Hawaii?”

Hae’s stomach clenched at the state’s name. She had gone home with Leilani for Christmas, meeting her family for the first time. It was a month of smoked meat and fresh fish, stars hanging over beaches. The sweet smell of Lei’s watermelon shampoo. Her skin smooth against gritted sand. It was a month of sightseeing mountains and valleys Hae had only dreamed of. Tasting and smelling a world that had been so close but somehow felt out of reach.

On the beach now, Hae felt Leilani’s fingertips against her hand. They were gentle, searching. Hae kept her eyes forward as if not looking meant she could play oblivious to the situation.

“Do you remember?” Leilani asked again.

Two waves collided, misting a damp layer over the two of them. She watched a fallen branch ride the crest of a wave and then get sucked under. The water swallowed it, swishing it around before spitting it back out closer to shore.

Hae sighed. “I can’t forget,” she told the ocean.

Leilani’s body heat radiated to her arm. Memories flooded her body in all five senses. Salt on Leilani’s lips. Her hands warming every inch of Hae against the breeze. Waves humming beneath the moon, burning the black sky navy as its backdrop. In that moment she had learned Leilani didn’t smell like the ocean, the ocean smelled like Leilani.

Hae shook. Each blast of wind scraped her skin raw. Threatened to rip her wedding dress into pieces. She turned to speak. But she hadn’t even chosen a thought before Leilani’s hands cupped her face.

“Lei—” was all that escaped before Leilani pressed her mouth against Hae’s. Her touch smoothed out her goosebumps, warmed her stomach. Leilani opened her mouth, coaxing Hae to turn their brush into a crash. Hae followed Leilani like she always had. She looked back while Leilani pulled her forward. Timelines crossed, the scent of watermelon blending with thunder, salt replaced with vanilla lip gloss. The tide threatened their feet, licking the hem of Hae’s dress.

Hae grabbed Leilani by her hand and peeled herself off of her. The ocean groaned so loud it became static in her ears.

“Lei, I—”

“He’s not right for you, Hae. Remember how happy we were? Does he make you that happy?” Her chest heaved with every statement. “I think about those nights in Hawaii every night when I go to sleep. I should never have left to live there without you. I should have been more patient with you. You’re everywhere there, Hae. You’re everywhere I go.”

For the first time that night, tears streaked hot down Hae’s cheek. They fell as warm relief against her freezing skin. A gust pushed Hae into the sand. Her foot caught in her dress, the sound of it tearing shattering her thoughts. Her dress weighed heavy with wet sand that had gathered around the ends. Waterproof makeup couldn’t be wiped clean, so it chunked in smudges, preserving the night’s events on her face.

“There you are,” Mateo’s voice called from the beach house. He jogged over, the same bright grin spread across his face. A shadow of a petite person hooked onto his arm. “Look who came to find you.” Mateo stepped into the moonlight, revealing wrinkled concern on the face of the woman he brought.

“Mom?” Hae asked.

She was dressed in her favorite gold dress. The dress she kept zipped up on a hanger for years. As a child home alone, Hae would sneak into her parent’s room to look at it. Her mom never let her close, so Hae wouldn’t dare to touch it. She would just stare with reverence, imagining what it would be like to be as perfect as her mother.

Mateo followed her mother’s gaze to Hae’s hand, still trapped in Leilani’s fingers.

“It’s not—” Hae tried, but her mother was already gone, her dress blending in with the sand.

Mateo stood unmoving. A shawl flailed in his grasp, flapping as if it would fly down the shoreline if he let it.

“I thought you might get cold out here,” he said, reading her thoughts. As he looked between Leilani and Hae, his eyebrows formed a singular crease of concern. The beginnings of a wrinkle that would stay after a lifetime of making sure Hae had eaten enough that day. Making sure she’d gotten out of bed. Holding her as she cried about her guilt of not being enough for him.

Hae looked at Leilani. Her expression showed lines that Hae had missed. A laugh line on either side of her mouth. Three lines joined to the corner of each eye. Carvings from years of laughing and smiling. But the space between her brows remained empty.

Unable to face those in front of her, Hae turned to the ocean. The waves were running toward the shore, toward her. Saltwater bit at the hem of her dress, climbing up her legs. It washed the sand from her feet but left behind a dry itch. She thought of the Dead Sea, alive in its cerulean hue. She imagined jumping in, letting the water do the work of bringing her buoyant from the gritted floor. Her mother never taught her how to swim. Now she had to fight against the pull of waves herself, thrashing and gasping for breath.

BATMAN AND ROBIN

OLIVIA MINEAU



ANXIETY IS A STORM IN MY HEAD

KAITLYN ILIFF

They speak of a silence
where the storm doesn't exist.
Banging!
A cracking of thunder
throughout the inside of my occipital bone.
Surprise!
It hasn't created cracks in the bones holding my skull together . . .

Close your eyes and
breathe in air.
Focus on breathing out slowly . . .
I cannot create peace in my head
and the clouds do not clear.

I am in a dark haze of storm
no sunlight in the forecast.
Blue skies are a distant wish of another season.
Peace leaves as soon as thoughts fill the empty spaces like thunder
banging loudly inside
the spaces beneath my parietal bone.

Thousands of thoughts drip like heavy rain drops
each hitting my brain forcing their way to the frontal lobe.
My eyes are heavy carrying the internal weight of the raindrops
Building . . .
They hold the water like a dam but when they close
the weight is a heavy feeling.

The storm is polluting my brain's crevices.
Thoughts are lightning searing my brain

forcing pieces of hair to fall,
dripping their way out of my scalp.
Into my lap the fallen hairs collect.

A pile of anxiety builds like a storm
unavoidably loud and flooding in my dreary head.

THE TOWERS GET SHORTER THE LONGER I DRAW THEM

JAMES LOU



REAL TREASURE

KIANNA PHILLIPS

Towering whitecaps cut jagged edges in the ocean
as a great soaring giant searched the
waves on thin wings for traveling treasure
to feast on. Yet the hollow space was bone-dry.
and his long face grew to a midnight blue
of worry and self-doubt.

Year by year, his preferred treasure chests
were arriving later and later. Blooms from the
deep that spurred life in the turquoise blue
sea were growing smaller. Not enough to feed a whale's
grumbling stomach. His lips peeled in the dry
heat and bled red as the rusty shipwreck.

Broken and forgotten pieces of trash
drifted on the surface, a cloud that devoured all
it touched. Lifeless, sandy beds were littered and flat,
as the beating force of the ocean's heart
pounded. The whale's ribs poked through dark skin and
he prayed to find a shining chest left in the cloud's wake.

Colorful, rough pieces of frail coral dried
up and mourned in white cloaks. Blazing rays of light
melted the whale's icy home and made him sweat. Hot
in his blubber coat, he found a small, gleaming chest.
All manner of giants were there, armed and ready, to devour
the silver ball of moving treasure.

But he was too late, left with a mouth full of water
and a few slimy tokens. His tail created brushstrokes,

pushing him forward through the water. Trash scraped against his face as rays of pale light pierced the water. He continued his eternal search in murky clouds of brown for small chests of silver treasure.

LE FILS DE LA VIGNERONNE

JAE MARION

A long time ago, when tigers still smoked, there was a small village in the French countryside called Chablis. This picturesque village had been nestled in between the rolling hills and the River Yonne for over a thousand years.

That is when the predecessors of Le Maître Abadie the Third traveled up the river, seeking a sanctuary from the marauding Vikings that had been pillaging villages throughout the valley. The high priest and his monks enlisted the help of other refugees and at first could only offer them salvation; however, two hundred years later, they not only offered salvation but also protection within the high walls of their splendid chateau, which was built high on the hill, overlooking the vineyards on the hillsides and the river below. They also provided food that they grew on the lowland of the river plain.

Now, in the interim, those who were the skilled and ambitious Bourgeoisie started their own shops in the fledgling village, and they did quite well for themselves and their community . . . in part because of the bustling commerce on the river, but also because of the success of the Grand Chateau D'Abadie.

This success was built on two things; the first was the backs of those called Les Bas-Ne (the low-born).

There were about a hundred Les Bas-Ne that lived and worked in and around the Grand Chateau D'Abadie. For generations they toiled at the chateau for nothing more than food, shelter, clothing, and the pride of doing a good day's work. Their hard labor made it possible to turn over fifty hectares of rocky hills into the best vineyard the world has ever known.

As the magical months of warmth came to a close, all the Les Bas-Ne would gather in the vineyard along with the monks to harvest all of the ripe grapes. They would carry hundreds of huge wooden

baskets overflowing with bunches of green-golden sun-drenched grapes. They would take them down four flights of stairs into the vast caves that their grandparents and great grandparents carved out of the chalky white soil.

Once the fresh grapes were safely inside the cavernous cellars, the vinification process began, which the monks had perfected over the last two hundred years. The principal vigneron was Diego Desmoulins. Diego's mother was a Spanish Calé, and his father was a Les Bas-Ne field hand. Even though his parents were always at the Chateau, Diego was raised by the monks in the cellars and amongst the vines. In his lifetime of watching and learning, Diego Desmoulins discovered all the wine-making secrets passed on by the monks of old. This is the reason why Diego dressed in the traditional monk robe, but by birth was Les Bas-Ne.

The high priest Abadie was happy to grant Diego the extra privileges of a monk (which amounted to better sleeping quarters and less strenuous labor, plus extra wine if he desired, though all the Les Bas-Ne were rationed one bottle of wine each day), because Diego created the most elegant wine.

As Abadie brought the glass to his nose he deeply inhaled the aroma of wildflowers and white grapefruit. As the golden liquid gently rolled across the tongue, there was a mouth-watering hint of salinity, lemon, and lime zest. "Exquisite," he thought as he tilted his head back to finish off the glass. Catching sight of the holy cross on top of the cone-shaped roof of the abbey tower, he muttered under his breath, "Blood of Christ my ass, I'll serve that swill from Beaujolais for the sacrament."

Most years the Grand Chateau D'Abadie produced over three-hundred thousand bottles of the liquid gold. Most of it was shipped up the river to the palace of the king and then throughout Paris (the capital of the world). This arrangement made the high priest Abadie extremely wealthy, and for hundreds of years the Chateau dripped with splendor.

Of course, with the revolution came great change throughout the whole kingdom. Amongst the promise of "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité,"

there was no safe quarter for a wealthy priest. In order to save his head from the guillotine, Camille Abadie the First made the decision to take the cross off the steeple and replace it with a rooster. He was also persuaded, rather convincingly by an angry mob, to give up half the vineyard (not the best half, but the people were happy). There was no place left in the new order for monks, so they were disbanded. Many went back to live with the families of their upbringing, as they were rather well off, and the others just became pilgrims and set off for the holy sites of the world, living on their beliefs (and the kindness of others, of course).

The revolution brought change for the Les Bas-Ne, too. They were all allowed to leave and find their own plot to plant or a job for those with the marketable skills. Camille Abadie was even so kind that he forgave all their debts (they had all accumulated massive amounts of debt because all the food, wine, and clothing was charged to them, and the company credit given to them for their labor was never enough to cover the charges. That's how they were trapped; they were even held responsible for the debts of their ancestors.) About a dozen of the Les Bas-Ne decided to stay on at the Chateau. These dozen men and women decided to form a "Guild of Chateau Ouvriers." As a guild they negotiated a fair wage for their work and a bonus in years of exceptional vintage.

One of these guild members was the master vigneron, Pierre Desmoulins, the descendant, of course, of Diego Desmoulins. Pierre agreed to remain as the "Maître Vigneron." In exchange, he wanted his own small vineyard with room for a small house. Camille Abadie agreed to this in part because he loved Pierre like family and he needed Pierre. The grapes needed Pierre, too, because he held the secrets of unlocking their magic.

More than forty vintages slipped away as easily as dandelion seeds drifting on a warm summer breeze.

Pierre built his house of stone and married Juliette. Juliette died just days after giving birth to their only child, Eloise. Eloise was raised by everyone in the village, which is why she was so skilled at so many

things. She of course learned how to coax the magic out the grapes each season, but she also was great with horses, and skilled at making beautiful furniture, Eloise could even fix the new-fangled gas-powered “autos.” Eloise was very smart and very plain looking. In fact, Pierre was worried about her not getting married ever. Though he was OK with Eloise taking over the vineyard, Pierre wanted Eloise to know what it was to love and be loved in return.

Since Eloise was so capable, Pierre spent most of his time at the Grand Chateau D’Abadie, which was still known for making the best wine in the land. The chateau was also known for being a very strange place. The workers all lived in the chateau together. The villagers say they are known to all sleep together, even having wine-induced orgies. In the summer they were always in the courtyard playing music and laughing and singing. They didn’t wear shoes and the villagers would say they barely wore clothes. The “guilders,” as they were called, were almost never seen outside the chateau walls.

One summer day, during the twenty-fifth vintage of Eloise, while she was pruning some vines, a beautiful young man came walking down the row of vines she was working in. Eloise was puzzled, but the gorgeous young man introduced himself as Shiloh. He was from Avalon, and was on his way to Paris when his auto broke down. Shiloh had walked into the village for help, but everyone was at home for lunch, so when he saw Eloise, he asked her for help. Eloise looked at him closely up and down; Shiloh was kind of short, his hair kind of long, he had green, friendly eyes, and his face looked like it was made from porcelain. Eloise thought to herself that of course he needed help. This young fellow had never worked a day in his life. Eloise put Shiloh on the back of her beautiful Clydesdale, and they clopped down the cobblestone to the place the auto had stopped.

Eloise lifted the hood, inspected everything, tightened this, oiled that, pulled off a part (spark plug) that Shiloh didn’t know existed, and proclaimed that she found the problem. “Pas succi, don’t worry,” she said. “It will take a few days to get a new one from Paris, but you

can stay at our place until we get you on your way. Besides, I would be happy to have some help and company at the vineyard.”

Pierre couldn't believe it! He liked Shiloh right away. Not only was Shiloh smart, fun, and funny, but her mother was a chef for the Pope at Avalon, so of course Shiloh did amazing things in the kitchen. Days turned into weeks and suddenly Eloise and Shiloh were deeply in love.

In the forty-second vintage of Eloise, Shiloh and Eloise were living a happy life together. Shiloh was still looking like a beautiful porcelain doll and making delectable meals for the family of six. Pierre, however, was almost always living in the cellars of the Grand Chateau D' Abadie, because even though it was just a few blocks away, he couldn't make the journey often, as he was near his one-hundredth vintage. The villagers said his blood had turned into wine, which is why he needed a constant supply, and it was rumored that there were over a million bottles in the caves of Abadie. Eloise said her father had liver failure. Everyone helped him. The guilders brought him food often. There were about twenty-five of them living there now and they were as strange as ever with the added mix of young adults, babies, and children. It was a lively, trippy place.

Shiloh had been there regularly to bring Pierre some meals that he made, and Shiloh said they all looked at him like lions watching a gazelle. They were nice as pie to Shiloh, but Shiloh said it just kind of gave him the creeps. Eloise said, “They're very fond of you because you are so easy to look at.” Shiloh said they also had a magic mushroom garden and the strangest thing (which is saying something), was the way they were all so incredibly in love with “Le Maître Abadie the Third.” The guilders all just call him “Le Trois.”

What's not to love about him? He was incredibly generous and kind. He played music and sang. The guilders children were always laughing and having fun with Le Trois. Plus, he was amazingly handsome, which was a big plus being in a community of free-loving people, who were equally happy to play *pétanque*, make music, or make love together.

It had been said that there are more than trois “petit-trois” at the Grand Chateau Abadie.

Eloise and Shiloh let their children hang out with the “guilder kids” now and then, but they seemed to prefer to spend time with their friends from the village. There were three (coincidentally) Desmoulins children. The twin girls, Aurelie and Elodie, were in their twentieth vintage. They were beautiful. Aurelie had a girlfriend named Margot. They had been dating since primary school. Margot was just part of the family now. Elodie had a beautiful voice, and everyone loved to hear her sing. It was especially delightful when everyone was working in the vineyard together. Both girls were determined to take over the vineyard some day from their mother. Eloise knew they would someday. She just hoped they would include their little brother Sebastion in their planning. Sebastion was in his sixteenth vintage. Aurelie and Elodie were beautiful, but Sebastion was the most beautiful, the fairest of them all.

Sebastion inherited the perfect beauty of Shiloh and the strength of Eloise, and he inherited the kindness of all living things. Sebastion was kind of short like Shiloh with wavy golden-brown locks. His skin was sun-kissed from working hard in the vineyard, but the most notable feature of Sebastion Desmoulins was his beautiful hazel eyes. His eyes were almost too big, but no, they were perfect for him, perfect for anyone looking into those hazel globes of love and kindness. The thing is, anyone who looked into his eyes felt kindness, warmth, and acceptance; instantly you knew, as you stood before Sebastion, that he really cared about you. That was why Sebastion was the fairest of them all. Loved by all, Sebastion had been helping Grandpa Pierre at the Chateau D’ Abadie for the past two vintages. After he would do all his chores and usually all his sisters’ chores, he would go to the chateau to make the wine with grandpa. When Sebastion came to the gate of the Chateau, the guilder kids would practically throw a party (they loved parties). Sebastion loved to draw portraits of people and they would all be practically begging for Sebastion to draw them. Positively giddy was what they were.

It was the summer of the forty-third vintage of Eloise. Ever since the snow melted there had been rumors of war and rumors that people who had ancestral ties to “Les Bas-Ne” were being arrested and sent to work camps near a place called Treblinka, far to the north.

For Eloise and her family, the work on the vineyard continued, and because everything in their valley was peaceful, most people thought the rumors and stories were just that. The whole family was in the vineyard pruning the extra leaves because this made the grapes grow bigger. Each of them had a row and they all worked their way up the row and then moved to the next row and pruned their way back down that row. Even Shiloh was out helping. He was by far the slowest, as was usually the case, but today he was even more so because he had his new best friend with him, Shia, a little fluffy white puppy about the size of a loaf of bread. They were so happy together and just to be outside with the family. Elodie was singing and Sebastian was a whirlwind of pruning efficiency. When Eloise and the three (Elodie, Aurelie with Margot) got to the top of the hill, she looked back and saw Shiloh and Shia still playing at the bottom. Eloise called out to Shiloh to tease him. Shiloh stopped and waved to her while holding the puppy Shia.

Abruptly there was a massive and deafening explosion that shook their hearts and knocked everyone down. Except Shiloh. The explosion happened exactly where he stood. There was Shiloh . . . then there was just the earth in the air. Eloise got to her knees and looked in stunned silence at the deep crater that now existed right where Shiloh, the love of her life, had stood not one minute before in his everlasting happiness and beauty.

There were other explosions happening, but the Desmoulins family was too shocked to notice or care. All they could do was hold each other and cry.

The next morning the village awoke to the sounds of the invading army marching on the cobblestones. The soldiers were so loud: they sang their marching songs loud, their feet were loud, they talked to each other so loud, too, even though they were not far apart.

The trucks they had were exhaustingly loud, but most disturbing was when they talked to the villagers. They barked orders so loud that they were almost impossible to understand.

Everyone was terrified of them and tried to stay away, but that was impossible for most because the soldiers took over the town and moved into the homes of the villagers . . . with the villagers still living there with them. Except for the ones that fought against their home being invaded. Those people were shot dead in the street by the infamous Colonel Dirlwanger, the most brutal of commanders, who had been known to have ordered the bayoneting of women and children to save bullets.

The only place in the village that the soldiers did not take control of was the Chateau D'Abadie. The day of the invasion, Le Trois and the guilders resurrected a one-hundred-year-old, thirty-foot-tall wooden cross, and mounted it on the stone wall next to the gate for all to see. The guilders were skeptical that an ancient torture device would keep soldiers away, but Le Trois was confident that it would work. Some of the villagers would say that it did work, and some would say that the soldiers were superstitious and a bit unnerved by the "bizarre" guilders because they were all long-haired, barefoot, and barely dressed. Plus, they always acted bizarre, probably because of that mushroom garden of theirs that they seemed to be fascinated with, with its red-capped and white-spotted mushrooms . . . at least as much as they were fascinated with viniculture . . . and each other.

It was now the one-hundredth vintage of Pierre Desmoulins. The guilders would tell you that Pierre sustained himself on nothing but the wine and grape leaves. He walked extremely slowly with the help of a cane that he had carved out an old grape vine. Pierre had adopted the fashion of Diego Desmoulins and the monks of old by sporting the brown robe because it was simple. He rarely left the caves of the Chateau D' Abadie. He felt safe down there, and he felt like he was protecting the cache of wine that he had borne and nurtured his entire life. He also felt protected by the caves and the bottles, like each was a close friend of his.

With a deep breath of the aroma and the taste on his tongue he could travel vicariously back to the magical months of warmth in his youth when some of these bottles still hung on the vine, absorbing every good thing about this earth.

Outside the walls of the esteemed chateau the skies seemed much darker, even in the afternoon sun. Eloise had sent the precious Sebastian to the chateau to protect him from the soldiers. The guilders of course were more than delighted to have “their” Sebastian amongst them on a permanent basis.

Eloise, Aurélie, Margot, and Elodie toiled in the vineyard not only because that’s what they knew and loved the most but also because the soldiers demanded that they produce the wine and forfeit each Cuvée III for them to drink (particularly Colonel Dirlewanger, who aside from being a seditious murderer was a raging alcoholic). What they couldn’t drink they refined into gasoline for their clunky war machines. The soldiers always desired more wine like the Sahara longed for more rain.

Eloise and the three girls did have two crew-cut soldiers residing in their stone-walled abode. It was contentious from the beginning, and it finally came to a boiling point when one of the drunk soldiers spat wine in Aurélie’s face and told her this swill wasn’t fit for the gas tank of a troop carrier.

Aurélie punched him right in the mouth before he even finished his sentence. He knocked her out with a blow to the jaw and was in the process of beating up Margot and Elodie, who wouldn’t hesitate to have their sisters’ backs even if it meant being sent to a detention camp. But that never happened because as he was reaching back to deliver another blow to Elodie, Eloise put the double-barreled shotgun, which she kept in the shed to scare off the lupin, right up against the soldier’s temple and pulled the trigger. Before the other soldier could get himself off the couch . . . his brains were all over the fireplace, too.

Eloise and the three sisters buried them in the hill under the vines at midnight, and played dumb when the drunk Colonel came looking for his AWOL goons.

Thereafter, the four vigneronns became notorious amongst the “Maquis” far and near for their acts of resistance, sabotage, and subversion.

Colonel Dirlewanger eventually got word of rumors about an enormous cache of wine in the cellars of Chateau D’Abadie.

Now Le Trois over the past year, had been forfeiting a case of wine every week to the Colonel’s place of residence as a token of peace. But the Colonel became enraged at the thought of those “freaks” holding out on him. That’s when he hatched an evil plan to break their spirits. He would destroy their beloved Sebastian, who was the fairest and the best of them all.

The very next week after the guilders had delivered the usual case of wine to the Colonel, he prepared a basket of beautifully ripe apples as a gift of “peace and goodwill” between the army and the Chateau. Only, the evil colonel had injected all the apples with a deadly poison. He only hoped that the jubilant and naive Sebastian would eat one and then it would stop his heart and break the hearts of the entire village.

If all the guilders ate the apples, it was not of the colonel’s concern, if he eventually destroyed the fairest of them all.

So, in his best dress uniform, officer’s cap on his head and wicker basket of apples tucked in with a red-checkered cloth, the colonel approached the massive wooden gate of the Chateau D’Abadie, lifted the heavy iron knocker that was in the shape of a rooster (which matched the one adorning the steeple that had replaced the cross so many years ago), and slammed it against the oak door three times.

Out of the silence stirred the sound of bare feet treading on the earth. Then the sound of the iron bolt, the latch, the faint sound of a hand on the iron handle, and the heavy oak door opened to reveal Sebastian standing there innocently with the look of joy and love in his big hazel eyes, his succulent, wavy-brown hair glinting in the late afternoon sun. He stood there shirtless and perfect with a short skirt covering his waist.

The Colonel was even taken aback by his beauty and the depth of Sebastian’s eyes, which made the colonel uncomfortable and furious

at the same time. The colonel hefted the basket towards Sebastion, saying, "A gift of peace and appreciation for the beauty, I mean friendship and wine." Sebastion took the basket, saying, "Merci Monsieur." Then, smiling, he closed the gate.

Sebastion excitedly brought the basket over to the very long community picnic table that was made from beechwood and lined with handmade chairs of the same. He enthusiastically hopped up on the table and proclaimed the apples to be "perfect and beautiful." Then he took a bite . . . "Delicious!" He fell onto the beechwood table, spilling the basket of poisoned apples.

He laid on his back, eyes blinking at the white puffy clouds in the sky and then his heavy eyelids slid over those big, beautiful, hazel eyes and Sebastion lay as still as alabaster.

The guilders rushed to the table to help Sebastion of course. There were cries for help, there were cries for witch hazel, and wormwood, and there were just cries. One of them even started saying a prayer . . . until everyone turned and looked at him and one said, "Really JP, this is no time to be talking to an imaginary bearded fellow in the sky."

Le Trois told the guilders to rub olive oil into his skin, and they did, to no avail. Sebastion seemed no more alive than the beechwood table. Everyone wept in a hushed solemnness that even the vines on the hillsides could feel and they drooped in sadness, too.

The ancient Pierre slowly and silently made his way through the crowd of guilders with his twisted cane and his dark brown robe, the hood pulled over his head, and an old satchel slung across his body. The maître vigneron picked up the poisoned apple with a bite out of it. They all watched as he put it to his nose and breathed a deep breath of apple air. He swished the spittle back and forth on his palate . . . paused . . . then spit decisively into the clover. Pierre reached into his satchel and pulled out a very old bottle that was covered in many years of cave dust. Expertly slipping out the cork, Pierre extended the silver tastevin chained around his neck and poured a bit of the golden liquid into it. Again, he inhaled deeply, closed his eyes, and slurped the wine from the tiny scallop-shaped cup . . . He swallowed and said,

“The aroma of wildflowers and white grapefruit, as the golden liquid gently rolled across the tongue, there was a mouth-watering hint of salinity, lemon, and lime zest . . . Exquisite . . . If paired with a pure and true love and pressed to his lips with a kiss, it will break the spell of the poisoned apple.”

All the guilder girls one by one took a sip from the crystal wine glass and then kissed the cold, gray lips of their beloved Sebastion.

Then, one by one, they all spilled their tears when Sebastion did not stir. It seemed there was nothing left to be done. It seemed the old man had lost touch with the magic unleashed by the grapes.

Then, with tears in his eyes . . . Le Trois picked up the crystal glass, took a small sip and gently pressed his lips to Sebastion's. Everyone watched with bated breath.

A covey of sparrows swooped low under the trees, and over the table, then spiraled around each other as they raced into the clouds.

When they all looked down again, they saw the color return to Sebastion's lips, and his tan skin was glowing with the kiss of the sun once again.

His eyes opened and Le Trois and Sebastion embraced in a long kiss amidst the sound of cheers, celebration, and laughter. The celebration of love lasted for three days and sometimes stories of the epic celebration are still told to this day.

Of course, Sebastion and Le Trois lived happily ever after.

As for the Colonel, the remainder of the war years did not go well. After being defeated on the field of battle, in no small part due to the efforts of Eloise, Aurelie, Margot, Elodie, and the rest of the Maqui, the Colonel's end came when he was captured and beaten to death by the villagers.

ONCE IN A TRANQUIL SPACE

KIANNA PHILLIPS

Air tasted of chlorine and there was no breeze to be felt as we sat on carpeted steps in a serene aquarium. Daunting walls of smooth clear glass created echoes of everyone's voices, bouncing. Aliens from the deep glided, as wingless angels in a cage.

Giants made of rough, thick skin and huge hungry rays of softest black sucked in slimy morsels of tiny food from jugs being dumped in the visceral water. Dead pink krill were consumed and dissolved in different acids as

little children smeared sticky coated fingers across glass and mothers whispered hushed conversations, ignoring the nagging of their offspring for more butter-soaked popcorn. Occasionally, a giant would cause them to go silent in awe as it passed, swallowing them in an eclipsing shadow. A sudden

quiet smothered my ears as I turned on the reading of an audio book spoken with a British accent. My thin nails scratched the coarse, prickly carpet in the dark enclosure and tasty puffs of popcorn melted on my tongue as the spotted giant loomed up above my head. Light rippled in pulsing vibrations from the vastness of the pool of water. My heart jumped

with each wave and absorbed the vanishing beauty as the giant floated by. My xerographic mind snapshotted every painful cut, purple bruise, ragged scar and yearned to help more, do more. But within the cacophony of the zoo-like institution, there was nothing I could touch.

TREASURES FROM MY YOUTH

C. B. JAMES

I want to walk with you
past the tree that was split by lightning,
and the willows on the hill that weep
over the picnic shelter's collapsed chimney
to the beach
where I first learned how to swim.

We'll watch shirtless guys play volleyball,
and boats come and go.
We'll sit on the swings,
chains creaking as we stare across the lake.
The setting sun paints the sky and water orange,
before night paints it over with blue and black.

Tomorrow we'll join that line of cars and trailers
that goes all the way down the street
and ride together
on the boat as it soars across the waves,
bouncing across whitecapped crests
to a popular, secluded cove.
Float on the water,
Inflated tubes our thrones as we bask
in summer's radiance.

BORN AGAIN

CHLOE GALASI

“Amen” you mutter from tricolor braces, raising bowed heads after gossiping to God and others who circle flag poles as vultures hungry for atheists. Drenched in holy bathtub water, pigtails hugging my neck, the congregation witnesses my temple beneath the robe clinging wet and white to spaces of skin reserved for Him and my future husband.

Jesus loves me even when I hate
my gapped front teeth kids compare to a rabbit’s
between throwing dodgeballs, drilling
verses and stringing beads onto bracelets.
My favorite shirt is purple with stripes, but
after our bodies overflowed Darla’s living room to
learn off-the-shoulder shirts make brothers in Christ
fall on their drooling faces. I pull
the stripes up to my neck. Fold myself
into the corner. Small enough to tuck between
the ancient pages of His Word.

Love one another as I first loved you
and so we do in harmony around campfire
light. College confessions of self and love
gather with the smoke, free endless hues
from white prisms. A girl with red hair smooth as
her voice holds my hand in the rotting cabin.
Liquor warming our lips, we find each
other and are born again and again. We praise
the art our souls live in, arms raised with our voices.

Grapes, beaten by bare feet, release into wine,
flowing life into once xeric land. Sprouting
flowers from mud, we learn to say yes
between sheets with people who share zealous
love of our Kintsugi selves and maybe even God.

REVIVAL OF THE GODS

ABIGAIL POST

CHAPTER ONE

Marwen watched the pulsing brown mass from above. The thieves thrived in these dim hours, filling their needy hands from others' needy pockets, before disappearing into the crowd once more. Disgusting, really. They were doing it so poorly.

Marwen's stomach grumbled. She dropped down from her window ledge, closing the shutters on the single, small room. She took one last breath of lighter air, then descended, across the beams, hastily banded together like spiderwebs, and down ladders, to the alleyway below. It was thin, storefronts pushing in on each side. Hardly any light illuminated the cobbled street, save for the few shops that could afford oil to light their lamps, leaving the edges shrouded in inky darkness. The air was dry and thick with dust. It nipped at her skin as she made her way to the heart of the crowd.

Peaks of gold came into sight as she neared the end of the alleyway. The fortress was not glimmering, for the sun had not yet risen to overtake the huge, domed walls of the city, but it was formidable and regal nonetheless. Before the fortress, however, was the mass of people and market stalls. Marwen slipped in.

Immediately, bodies shoved and gouged her. Each drab garment, layered in dust and dirt, made it easy to get lost in the churning of the sandy swarm. She kept her footing, moving head-strong through the crowd until she found a target. A woman in long robes walked ahead of her, a bag resting on her hip. Practically pressed against this woman, shoulder to elbow, Marwen's bony fingers found their way through the latch and into the purse. She felt only the cool touch of a few coins against her skin, but it was enough. Marwen let the crowd swallow her, before pushing to the front to find something to eat.

The smell of spices wafted from a stall to her right. To her left, a man shouted about his hand carved bowls, spoons and chairs. “Wood all the way from Valyurn! Bowls only ten copper!” barely heard over the din of civilians.

Marwen had managed only three copper and two silver pieces, but she wasn’t looking for wooden bowls. She had her eyes set on the fresh bread, still steaming a few stalls over. Pressing in among the customers, she caught the attention of one of the women behind the table.

“One brenish loaf and two seed cakes,” Marwen shouted.

“You got money, girl?” The old woman looked at her scornfully, eying her torn clothes and ratted hair.

“Of course,” Marwen said through gritted teeth. “One brenish loaf and two seed cakes, please.” She held out the copper coins sitting in her upturned palm.

The woman reached for them, then hesitated, before quickly grabbing the coins. When the woman’s fingers touched Marwen’s, she turned hastily around to face the fortress, murmuring the words Marwen had heard time and time again.

“O powerful, forgive me and wash me clean from this dishonor.”

In the time it took for people to do these recitations, Marwen found she could usually pocket a couple things. Her record was five. This time however, she was able to whisk only two tarts into her pockets before the woman faced her again. Marwen waited expectantly, peering innocently up at the woman. Her bread was quickly packaged and shoved across the table, before a hand shooed her off.

Marwen fought her way against the crowd and back to the maze of alleyways. It wasn’t until she arrived at a sign, a book icon carved into its wood, that she stopped. She pushed open the door below it and welcomed the quiet and warmth.

“Marwen, welcome,” said a familiar, baritone voice.

“Hello, Mr. Wymond. Have any work for me today?”

The robust man bowed his head slightly. “I’m sorry, Marwen. I don’t have anything to spare right now. It’s been slow going here.”

“I know. It’s alright.” Marwen said softly. She peaked around the shelves. “Mind if I stay a while, though?”

Mr. Wymond smiled kindly. “Make yourself at home.” Then, he looked sheepish again. “No one saw you come in?”

Marwen raised her eyebrows and smirked. “I see everything. You’re all good.” She then turned, face falling, and rounded a corner of books stacked almost to the ceiling. She took the small bag that held her seed cakes and stuffed it into the leg of her boot. With the loaf, she tore it into four pieces, one going into her other boot, two into an inside pocket of her shawl, and the last into her mouth. She scarfed it down, relishing every crumb.

Marwen poked her head back around the corner. “I finished the ones you gave me last week.”

Mr. Wymond chuckled. “You’re going to read me out of business pretty soon.”

Marwen selected two books from a pile and held them up for him to see. “These any good?”

Just then, the door began to creak open. Marwen immediately slipped behind the books again, out of view.

“Hi Mr. Wymond. I was wondering if you might know anything about this book I found.” The voice was that of another young girl.

“Of course, Zyanya, let me see what you have.”

Marwen heard the opening of a bag, then a sharp gasp.

“Put that away! Quick, away!” Mr. Wymond rushed to the window and peaked through the curtains. “Why in The King’s name would you have that book?” He didn’t give the girl time to answer before launching into another question. Marwen had never heard him sound angry before. “Did you show this to anyone?”

“What? No, I found it in my father’s room. I brought it straight here.” Her voice was meek, a hint of fear quavering in her tone.

There was a moment of silence. “That book is banned. I didn’t think any were left.” Mr. Wymond’s tone softened. He sounded almost mystified. “You’d be smart to burn it, although it pains me to say it.”

“But Mr. Wy—”

“Girl, if you are caught with that book, it is instant exile! For you and your family!”

Marwen’s breath caught in her throat. She heard the girl, Zyanya, set the book on the counter again with a heavy thud. She couldn’t resist a peek around the corner. The girl stood with her back to Marwen. She wore a school uniform, thick brown hair pooling over her shoulders. Her body blocked the view of the mysterious book, much to Marwen’s irritation.

“I’ll get rid of it once I read it.”

“You don’t understand the danger you’re putting yourself in. You’re lucky I don’t call the guards on you this instant.” The girl shifted on her feet and Mr. Wymond sighed. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“There’s a man’s name written on the inside. The pages are filled with his notes, in all the margins. Look at it, please?”

The bookkeeper held the girl’s gaze, then said, “Whoever this man is, he has probably been dead for a long time.”

Marwen’s fingers gripped the wooden shelf tight, forcing herself to keep hidden, though she was holding on to every word.

“Well, his writing does stop about two thirds of the way in,” Zyanya said.

Mr. Wymond shook his head. “This isn’t good,” he said as if he was going to regret what he was about to do. He reached for the book and flipped it open.

“You can only see the name if you hold it up to the light. It’s pressed into the inside of the corner there.” The girl pointed.

Mr. Wymond raised the book up and for the first time, Marwen was able to see it, leather bound with a beautiful tree, a myriad of colors, adorning the cover. Its roots trailed all the way down to the bottom. He held it to his lamp sitting on the corner of his desk, angling it this way and that, until he paused and squinted.

“Clayland Seifer.”

Marwen’s world went silent. The room felt as if it had shifted and she stood frozen, wide eyed and cold. Then, without thought, she yelled, “That’s mine!”

Both pairs of eyes turned to her, the girl jumping back with a shriek. “Clayland Seifer, that’s my father,” Marwen said, trying to keep her voice steady. She approached the desk carefully. When she reached for the book, Mr. Wymond pulled it away.

“Marwen,” he warned. “You shouldn’t be getting involved with this.”

“I already am.” She looked imploringly up at the man. “I just want to see it.” She swallowed. “Please.”

With great hesitation, he brought the book back to the light. Marwen ran a finger over the name, feeling the indent of each letter. Then, she turned her hand over, palm to the ceiling. She sighed, hoping she wouldn’t regret what she was about to do, before pulling her sleeve to her elbow. The flame danced over her bare wrist, playing over the rises and dips of an old scar. She knew it was probably unnecessary. There was no doubt every person within the city’s walls knew well what the scar meant. However, there was something unfamiliar in the girl’s eyes that made Marwen feel as if she had something to prove. But it was proof. Proof that she was the daughter of her exiled father. That she was linked, in some way, to this text.

To Marwen’s surprise, the girl did not back away. Nor did she look at her with disgust or fear. Instead, she stepped closer. “Do you remember him?” Her voice was gentle.

Marwen blinked at her, taken aback. “Uh, no. He was exiled shortly before I was born.” She yanked her sleeve back down and crossed her arms in front of her. Her fingers itched. If she shoved the book into her shirt, she could run out the door and disappear in seconds.

Zyanya pursed her lips in thought. “Mr. Wymond, do you know of somewhere Marwen and I can look over this in private?”

A look of pure confusion crossed Marwen’s face.

“This is much too dangerous, girls. I implore you to leave this behind you. Walk away.”

Marwen’s mind had been made from the moment her father’s name was spoken. This book could hold answers to every secret that had been kept from her about her family. There wasn’t a chance she was

letting this go, no matter what it cost. It wasn't like she had much to lose, anyway.

"We can go to my house. I'm the only one who lives there," Marwen decided.

Both of them looked to Mr. Wymond once more.

"I won't stop you. But I have a family. If you're caught, and I hope to the Golden Palace you aren't, but if you are, you were never here."

The two of them swore that he'd be safe. Zyanya packed the book away once more, her bag keeping every answer withheld. All Marwen had to do was reach out and take it.

She didn't.

They made their way into the street.

Judging from the girl's clean hair and skin, her still mostly white uniform and uncalloused hands, Marwen guessed that her family lived on the ground, probably not far from the King's Palace. "How good are you at climbing?" She asked.

"I don't know, probably not bad," the other said, craning her neck up at the shoddy houses stacked unevenly, one on top of the other.

Marwen smirked and turned down the alleyway, towards the city wall. When she reached the end, she ran a knuckle along the rough sandy surface. Every once in a while she'd press her hands to it, imagining she had the strength to push it over and explore everything that waited for her on the outside.

A few sandstone bricks jutted out from the wall, forming a small stairway. She quickly bounded up them until they stopped just above the second row of homes. Walking out onto the roof of one, she checked to see that the girl was following, before continuing up the ladders and skinny planks.

They climbed higher, the buildings leaning further and further out over the streets as they followed the curve of the city's walls.

"Are you sure this one's safe?"

Marwen stood at the other end of a particularly long stretch of wood that crossed over the next alleyway from several stories above. "Oh yeah, I use it a lot."

Zyanya looked at the beam and then down at the cobblestones below, clearly struggling to make up her mind.

Marwen rolled her eyes and shouted, "Better hurry!" before squeezing herself between two houses and scurrying off.

She heard a frantic, "wait!" behind her and laughed. Just a moment later, the girl emerged, wide eyed.

"Come on, it's just up here." Marwen motioned above them. Zyanya swallowed thickly and watched as Marwen climbed like a spider among her web, quick and agile.

Zyanya's attempt was far less impressive.

"Now grab that one. No, not that one! Right there, yes," Marwen directed from above. Zyanya's knees trembled, but slowly, she arrived at the top, ready to collapse through the door and forget how high up she was.

Marwen's residence was little more than four walls, a roof, and the nails that held it together. Still, Zyanya wondered how she had a house at all. Marwen sat on her sleeping pad, straightening out the blanket and pillow, then the small pile of books that sat on top of a small wooden crate beside her.

Zyanya's eyes wandered and Marwen cleared her throat. "Let me see the book," she said, maybe a bit more forcefully than she cared to admit.

Zyanya turned her attention to Marwen, then joined her on the mat, sitting with her legs tucked neatly underneath her, back straight. She brought her bag into her lap and reached inside, pulling out the strange book. Marwen grabbed it from her, immediately opening it to the first page. The tree symbol adorned this page too, stamped in black ink. Above it was a series of symbols, some foreign language. Underneath, in what must have been Marwen's father's handwriting, was the translation: *Revival of The Gods*.

Marwen spoke these words under her breath before turning the page over. This next one was loose and lifted straight off the spine. Marwen gasped as a map unfolded before her eyes, yellowed and brittle on its edges. She felt a smile tug at her lips and she laid it on the floor

in front of them. A dot of ink near the southern shore had “Eshar” scrawled beside it.

“That’s us!” Marwen pointed excitedly at the dot.

“And that’s where Kegror and Valyurn are!” Kegror sat north east and Valyurn even farther north, to the west. Above it all looked to be a rift that split the continent almost entirely in two.

Marwen almost couldn’t believe what she was looking at. Never before had she seen what lay outside of Eshar’s walls. She stared at it in pure wonder.

Zyanya and Marwen pored over the book for several hours, each page covered in more symbols. The scrawlings in between the lines seemed mostly cryptic, a translation of the original text clearly hard to discern. However, the basics were clear. Giant tree-like Gods supposedly created life on this planet thousands of years ago, only to be wiped out by a winter so long that the world was forever changed. The Gods could feel it coming and hid the magic that the land lived off of in order to protect it. This book held the history of these Gods, their ways, and somewhere, the location of their magic. That must be what her dad had been trying to piece together.

“This sounds like make believe,” Zyanya said as she closed the book.

“This sounds amazing,” said Marwen.

“This could transform Eshar.”

“This would transform the entire world. I want to see it. All the trees!”

“It’s only a dream,” said Zyanya, rising from the floor. “There’s been no change in hundreds of years. We’re not going to suddenly figure all of this out. We need to keep studying the text and take our own notes.”

“But that’s the problem. No one’s actually attempted anything!” Marwen paused as a realization struck her. She glanced to the floor. “I think that’s what my father was trying to do. He wanted to finally do something about it.” She looked up at Zyanya again, standing. “He could be out there.”

Zyanya's eyebrows drew together, a look of pity in her eyes. The one thing Marwen hated more than the looks of disgust were the pitying stares. "Marwen, nobody survives out there."

Marwen's chest grew hot. "How could you possibly know that for certain? Have you ever been out there?" she challenged, eyes narrowed. The girl didn't respond. "Have you?" Marwen yelled.

Zyanya flinched slightly. "No."

Marwen quieted. "We don't know what it's really like. Everything we've read is far bigger than Eshar." She looked into the girl's eyes intently. "Everything is on the other side of the wall."

"So you want to risk death for something we know hardly anything about? I can't leave home for something that sounds like a fairytale."

"The King wouldn't have it covered up if it was just a fairytale."

Zyanya grimaced, as if there was something she wanted to say. Ultimately, she decided against it and looked at the floor. "I'm sorry, I can't abandon my family. I've got to get my little brother from school soon, and then I'll help my mother cook dinner. I have a life here, and so do you." Zyanya looked worriedly at Marwen. "I'll work with you, but," she paused, fidgeting. "We have to stay here."

Right. Marwen took a step back. This was all so easy for everyone else, yet she floated, untethered around the city. She nodded stiffly. "Yeah. I get it."

There was a pressing silence.

"I should really get going," Zyanya continued to stand in place.

"I'll keep the book here. Unless your father will notice its absence?"

"No, it's okay. He's not home a lot." Zyanya gave an attempt at a chuckle, running a hand through her hair. "Working."

"Do you need me to show you the way down?"

"No, I think I've got it. Thank you though." She smiled shyly. Then, she stuck out her hand.

Marwen looked at it, then to the girl's face, then down again. Slowly, she placed her palm against hers, lingering just long enough for a cordial goodbye, then sliding them apart. Marwen watched Zyanya carefully. If she was bothered, her face gave away nothing.

“I’ll come back tomorrow?” Zyanya asked.

Marwen nodded, schooling her face.

“Good. I’ll bring anything else I can find.”

It wasn’t until the girl had closed the door behind her that Marwen realized her hand was still hovering in front of her. She reached up and touched the feather behind her ear. It was tied to a piece of thread that she had woven through her hair many years ago. Along with the feather were a few beads and even a small bone; all things she found among the streets of the city. The dark feather was much bigger than the small birds that littered Eshar’s streets and abattoirs. Whatever this bird had been, it had come from outside, the feather dropping through the hole at the very top of the wall and fluttering through the dust and sunlight. There was life out there, no matter what the King had everyone believe.

Marwen’s room was quiet. The din of the market street below, the dock workers at the other side of the wall, nor the guards barking orders from the center, could be heard, and Marwen sighed. She took the map from the book. The longing in Marwen’s chest would not release its grip. Like this she fell asleep, curled into her blanket, map propped up against her knees, fantasizing about every river and mountain scrawled within its cartography.



Marwen waited for Zyanya the next morning in the dark of the alleyway, just before it opened up to the market. Before long, she saw the girl’s figure among the crowd, fighting her way through. She was stopped however, by a guard, dressed in a red and gold tabard, sword holstered at his hip. Marwen’s heart seized for a moment, then calmed when Zyanya smiled up at him and bowed. She watched their lips move, trying to discern a few words, before the guard gestured to Zyanya’s bag. Marwen saw a brief look of fear pass over the girl’s face and hoped the guard hadn’t seen it too.

Zyanya took the bag from her shoulders and reached inside. She drew out a stack of papers. Marwen knew she needed to get in there

before Zyanya had a chance to say anything. She ran into the crowd, pushing bodies out of her way.

“Those are mine!” She tried to make herself sound as furious as possible, but fear buzzed in her throat. As she drew closer, she met Zyanya’s eyes and pleaded for forgiveness, before shoving her to the ground and grabbing for the papers. “You have no right to take these from me! You can’t turn me in!” They were both on the ground now, Marwen holding Zyanya down as she stared up at her, eyes bulging with terror and confusion. Marwen felt a sick sort of triumph at the look. I knew you were scared of me.

A rough hand grabbed Marwen’s arm, just below the shoulder, and yanked her to her feet. His grip was so forceful that she almost cried out, despite knowing it was coming. Much of the guard’s features were obscured by his helmet, but his eyes were fiery. He ripped the pages from Marwen’s hand, and as one dropped to the ground, she saw her father’s writing in thick black ink.

The crowd of people pressed in around the three of them. A few market stalls even stood empty as curiosity got the best of their vendors. Other guards stormed in as well, hands already on their hilts. One reached down to help Zyanya up, placing her protectively behind him.

“Marwen Seifer,” the first guard spat. “Your line should have been eradicated a long time ago. We show mercy and here you are, following in the path of such scum as your father.” He turned his face to the crowd. “Propaganda and lies! That’s what this traitor is trying to spread!”

People whispered and pointed.

“Conspiracy against the king is punishable by exile, as I’m sure you are very familiar with,” he growled. His hold tightened and Marwen winced.

Another guard pushed his way into the circle carrying a torch and an iron rod, one end glowing red. Marwen struggled against her restraint, panic flooding her veins. A different hand took hold of her other arm, forcing it out in front of her.

The hot iron was brought closer. She could now see the end was a circle, an “E” in the middle. An exact match to the one already on her wrist.

“No! No, please! Don’t do this!” Marwen begged. She pulled and pulled, but the guards’ grip did not give way.

As the iron pressed into her skin, Marwen screamed through gritted teeth. She looked at the guard, refusing to take her hateful glare from his eyes as he held the iron to her pink, raw skin. Behind him, a golden spire of the palace sparkled. She felt as if from the rage in her heart alone, she could dash it all to the ground, gold, stone, and blood all mixing together. The smell of burning flesh struck Marwen’s nostrils and she only hoped everyone else could smell it too. Her father’s notes were set ablaze. Knees almost giving out, tears collecting in the corners of her eyes, the iron was finally pulled from her wrist. She thought she might collapse if the guards weren’t still holding her. The sound of the huge city doors opening behind her filled her ears, then the gasps from the crowd around her.

The two guards began to pull her. As she was twisted around, she saw for the first time, light streaming in through the doors, blindingly beautiful. With each step, they opened further, agonizingly slow. Marwen so desperately craved to see it she thought she might be delirious. Maybe the pain had made her crazy.

She hardly noticed herself being hoisted into the air before she was thrown across the threshold of her city.

What she landed on was soft and hot. So hot in fact, she pushed herself off of it, stumbling as her boots sank and slipped through it. Sand. For the first time, she took in what she had always dreamed of seeing. Desert stretched as far as the eye could see, and who knew for how many miles beyond that. Nothing but sand dunes and a raging sun. There was no life. No trees, no flowers. No birds. She stared into the nothingness as it replaced everything that had once been inside her.

The doors closed behind her with a deep boom, and she turned, facing the city that held her entire life. The noise faded until there was nothing but the rush of wind over the hills. A choked sob strangled its way out of her throat and her shaky knees collapsed. At that moment, Marwen knew she’d die out here, alone. Just like her father. Following in the very footsteps of the man she tried to prove she wasn’t.

MELANCHOLIC

ERIN ANDERSON

lull in a morning

still.

floorboards creak
hummingbirds sing
an open window,

a song, buried by time

laughter comes far away,
melody for dust's dances

floating in the air,
waltzing with the sun
drifting in the window

still.

an attic, abandoned—
you forgot to be sorry,

but the dust doesn't care.

REACHING

CHLOE GALASI



DHYANA

KIANNA PHILLIPS

Crunch, crunch,
said the fall leaves
as I shivered under my puffy jacket.
Revered beasts lounged under
the afternoon sun.

Squishy mud spurted beneath my boots,
in the grassy pasture of Mother Earth.
I was kissed by a sandpaper tongue
as I picked sharp burs from short fur.
Apples mushed to pulp in a
munching mouth dripping
sugar water.

A corner cut out of the world.
A place to finally breathe,

maintain a resting beat
surrounded by life moving at its own
pace.

Let me rest
by the sleeping cows.

Let me breathe
the air filled with fresh grass

Let me sink
into it and lose myself.

Let the earth swallow me
and erase the stamps on my skin labeling
everything that I ought to be.

Let me be
at peace.

IN SEARCH OF SNOW

KAITLYN ILIFF



DRIFTWOOD, FORGOTTEN

ERIN ANDERSON

stuck pages
puddle of spilled ink
resembles the constellations of worlds forgotten
we drift

pillars crumble
a forest that no longer stands
the last ember
we drift

empty lakes
with mistaken reflections
an unmoored boat
we drift

in ashen skies with cold petals
falling snow
up or down, there is no difference
we drift

fate or a choice, it's lost with the moon
alone, undetermined
stuck pages
I'm drifting

I FLEW MY KITE IN YOUR HALLWAYS

C. B. JAMES

I flew my kite in your hallways,
when we had gentle breezes
and the warm breath of summer.

I flew my kite in your hallways,
when green grass and crackling corn
grew through your basement carpet.
your foundation's soil thriving with agricultural life.

I flew my kite in your hallways,
hiked quietly through your master bedroom,
watching a red fox
Stalk through the forest of trees that grew,
and pierced your cookie cutter roofs.

It lapped up water from the streams that trickled through your basement.

I flew my kite in your hallways,
And snuck through the wheat and corn and barley
to visit my friend on the other side.

I flew my kite in your hallways,
your neighborhood
in its field and forest form.

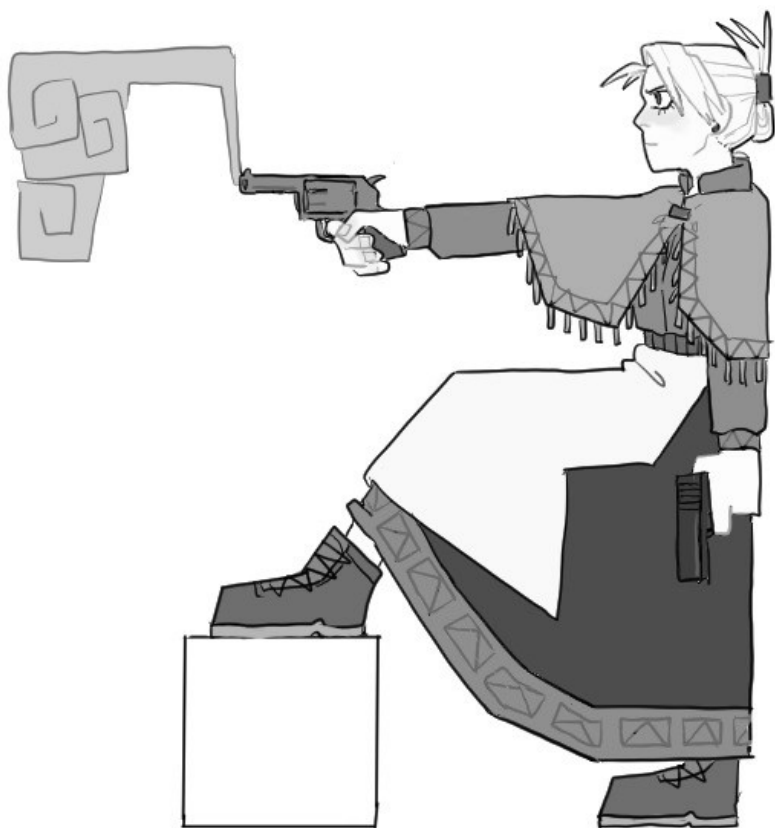
ตลาด (TALAHD)

CHLOE GALASI

Between the tents you feel and taste this land
which blooms fruit red, orange, yellow, green, and blue
The mangosteens unfurl sour stars
Their drops pull flip flops off from dusty feet
Smell golden ducks that dance on silvers poles,
dropped crumbs a feast for strays—perhaps monkeys
Bananas fried in baths of sizzling grease
squish sweet between your teeth much like the fish
so fresh they stink, delicious dipped in sauce
igniting tongues with chilis, thirstier
Ripe mangoes blended soft and cold to serve
to patrons wet with heat and monsoon rains
The street a swarm of buzzing mopeds, cars
A background to the singer's lingering call
Kids run with chicken plucked off wooden skewers
while mothers barter “lot ra ka dai mai”
Pajamas neon, pants with elephants
above as fabric leaves outgrowing stalls
which burst with shining jewels, fakes name brands
You leave with stomachs, bags, and senses full

A WOMAN AND A GUN

OLIVIA MINEAU



I FEEL LIKE PUNCHING SOMEONE

CHLOE GALASI

Learning the power I hold
between moisturized knuckles
ringed with rhinestones instead of brass.
Reduce a man six inches taller
(probably only five)
to one foot shorter,
hunched over to protect his purse.
I crave iron's sharp taste.
To season someone with pepper,
not insults because
(actions speak louder than words and)
I am quiet.
Concealed in baggy clothes
to fit opinions
(litter grated into gravel)
inside my pockets.
Pants sag heavy
from a keychain dangling
bedazzled weapons
waiting for me to punch someone.

RUBBER MOON

REN TAYLOR

I am sitting, legs folded, across from my mother with my mouth stuffed full of peppermint gum. It's half-dark, the only light seeping into the living room comes from the hall, which gives my mom's face a soft, moonlike glow.

In this moment she is the most beautiful and talented person I have ever seen. Her hair is long, draping over her shoulders like silk. She's leaning toward me, lips pursed, jaw shifting with focus. Then, like a slow birth, her tongue pushes out from her mouth covered in glowing white gum that begins to expand with the gentle hiss of her breath. I study this movement with the rapt attention an astronomer would give the creation of the universe.

The bubble grows and grows, stretching so thin I can see straight through to the mole above her lip. Then, the hiss reaches its crescendo note, bubble disappearing with a sharp "Pop!"—the story of the big bang told in reverse.

She chews self-satisfactorily, sinking back into the cushions of our old couch.

"Now try again," she says, nudging me with her bare foot.

So I try. I press the flat of my tongue to the roof of my mouth and crush the fat wad of gum into a lumpy disk. Transporting the gum to its launch position behind my teeth is difficult. I lose it a few times beneath my tongue.

"Don't poke too hard," Mom reminds me.

I don't understand the words 'fine motor skills' just yet, nor do I possess them, particularly in places I can't see like the inside of my mouth, still, I try. The cooling crackle of peppermint makes the tip of my tongue tingle as I press it through my scattershot collection of wiggly little baby teeth (my biggest moneymakers).

I inhale through my nose, ready to perform the greatest magic trick of my life. I picture it in my head, a great big moon made of

peppermint gum, but when I blow gently, it whistles straight through my sticky lips.

Utter despair. I am forced to resign myself to adding yet another skill to the list of things Mom can do that I will never be able to: blowing gum bubbles gets chucked right underneath tying my own shoes, doing a cartwheel, and saying the word goddamn.

“I can’t do it,” I mumble, my tiny face screwed up in a pout. I gnash at the piece of rubber with my molars, trying to convince it of my rabid disappointment.

Across from me, my mother smiles.

“Try again,” she coos, “practice makes perfect.”

IF I AWOKE AS I MAN

CHLOE GALASI

I would rise with the sun.

25 percent wealthier.

A full bank of testosterone
begging to be used.

I'm Elon Musk, spending energy around the block
without looking over my shoulders.

Nothing but shorts and full-coverage underwear
between me and the world.

With five-in-one "shampoo"

(shampoo, conditioner, body wash, deodorant, toothpaste)

I'd freshen up in seven minutes flat.

Trade my brush for a comb.

Spare time for cooking Mac and Cheese.

Does it feel as good as it sounds?

Leave the house bare of bullets
for emergency bleeds.

I could take the train to work

wearing jeans that hug my new curve.

Spread my knees two seats wide. Take up space.

Sure, I could still get mugged. Bring it on!

Kick my newfound treasure!

Let's see if the blast bleeds cramps
beneath my stomach.

I'll raise my hand in today's meeting.

No I won't,

but I'll talk anyway.

Announce ideas of someone with quieter shoulders.

Louder. Eye contact.

Let's hit the bar after work

fresh off a fifteen dollar haircut.

I'll dance with my eyes closed, arms up in surrender.

Set down my drink in the strobe lights to hold

a woman I'd kiss like the fantasy creature

I know she lusts for between pages

devoured next to her farting husband.

I'll leave my mark.

Piss my name in the snow!

Spit on the sidewalk!

Who's to say I'm not the man of my own dreams?

VIOLETS

REN TAYLOR



VANITY

ELLANEY DAMAS

I was five years old. From the little exposure I had to the world around me, I was already sure of one thing—that I was obsessed with being beautiful. I didn't necessarily want to be beautiful in the way my Barbie dolls or favorite singers were pretty. In my mind, the highest beauty standard to achieve was looking like my mom.

To me, all my friends' moms looked the same—long, flowing blonde hair, fair skin, big blue eyes, and straight white teeth. In the pickup line at school, I couldn't even tell them apart.

They would all stand in a platinum-haired, yoga-pants-adorned huddle at the curb, waiting for their lookalike daughters to run up to them. Sure, I thought they were pretty, but no one stood out quite like my mom. My mom was different. She had deep brown hair that was soft to the touch with bouncing curls that sparkled and shone when light hit them. Her caramelly skin glistened in the sun, and her smile lit up every room she entered. When my Mom arrived, her stride demanded attention. She dressed smartly and tastefully, refusing to set foot out of the house in any kind of leisurewear. Women complimented her as we stood in line at the grocery store. Men of all ages stared, and the bold ones stood up straight and puffed out their chests to get her attention. She was terribly fierce, but sweet as honeycomb, always honest with others without being unkind. She was everything I wanted to be.

Every morning when I rolled out of bed, I would stumble into mom's room clutching my pink, fuzzy blanket to find her sitting at her vanity. It was an old, dark-stained wooden furniture piece that had four drawers with golden knobs set on either side of a large oval mirror, ornamented with swirling carvings in the wood surrounding it. It fascinated me. Every drawer that rattled and creaked with age as it opened was filled with endless items that I was burning with curiosity to discover. When I entered her room, my mother would speak to me

without straying her eyes from her activities—rubbing in moisturizers, busily brushing on blush, and carefully combing mascara through her lashes. The corner of the room that the vanity sat in smelled floral and sweet, a combination of scented creams and perfumes. As I sat and watched my mother in silence, I was awed by her skill and how she effortlessly went through each step of her beauty routine.

Sometimes, I would muster up the courage to get up from my place on the muddy beige carpeting and creak open the drawers of the vanity. My mother could see the eagerness in my eyes as they danced across the makeup inside. “Look, but don’t touch!” my mother would say. The drawers of the vanity were organized by their contents. On the right side, the top drawer contained hair fixings and the bottom drawer contained different makeup brushes and Spoolies.

On the left, the bottom drawer was dedicated to face makeup, and the top drawer, my favorite of the quad, contained all the decorative makeup—sparkly eyeshadows, colorful eyeliners, black and blue mascaras, and vibrant lipsticks in various shades of pink and red. As my mom’s hands went in and out of the drawers, I would point at things and ask, “What’s this? What’s that?,” making sure to take notice of the names of my favorite products.

Some mornings my mom had less patience for my meddling than others. On this particular morning, she was whirling the brushes around her face faster than usual, not bothering to put things back in their place in the drawers as she went. Amongst the array of items sitting out on the top of the vanity, I spotted my favorite item, the one I had been hyper fixated on since she first brought it out of the store in its black and white striped shopping bag. It was a small, black, rectangular eyeshadow palette that, on the inside, was nothing special compared to most. My reason for being obsessed with it, however, was the picture of a bleach-blonde Barbie doll printed on the front of the packaging. At the time, I didn’t know that the contents of this thin package were nothing more than pressed circles of powdered pigment. My imagination went wild with the possibilities of what was

under the lid, and I became convinced that the secrets to my mother's beauty were kept behind the face of that plastic doll.

As my mother went through the steps of putting on her face, I waited patiently for the special palette to work its magic. When she finally picked it up from the vanity and flipped open the lid, the face of the Barbie doll looked down at me as it covered the contents of the package from view. I stood up, straining to get a look inside, but just as soon as I was up, the lid briskly went back down on the palette, and mom returned it to its scattered place on the top of the vanity. I sat back down, regretting that I'd have to wait until tomorrow morning for my next opportunity to peek inside. At that moment, mom got up and left the room to tend to something, probably the phone ringing or my older brother calling her name. I was left alone with the vanity and its tempting, scattered contents.

I hesitated for a moment, then hoisted myself onto the butter-yellow, cushioned stool that sat in front of the oval mirror. I looked around at all the makeup, itching to hold it, but my mother's warning echoed in my head—look, but don't touch. I was set on being obedient, that is, until my eyes met those of the Barbie doll. I peeked at the doorway to make sure I wouldn't be seen, then reached for the object of my desire with great excitement. I opened the lid, anticipating great things while also not having any real idea of what I had hoped was inside.

When I had pondered it before, my favorite theory was that every time the lid of the palette opened and closed, the contents of the inside would change, just like the magical closet I had seen in my Barbie cartoons that provided Barbie with a new outfit every time she swung the bright pink doors open.

I threw the lid of the palette open with anticipation, but instead of magic and wonder, all I saw were three colorful circles. A faded pink, purple, and brown. I ran my finger across its dry, chalky surface, and when I lifted it, the color was left deposited on my fingertip. Disappointed by this outcome, I quickly closed and opened the lid again, hoping for something new to appear, but the same powdery

tins stared back at me. Feeling disillusioned, I closed the package and set it down on the vanity. Yet again, I thought, maybe the secret to my mother's beauty really was that simple. I waited a few moments more to see if my mother would return. With no sign of her, I picked up the eyeshadow palette once more, along with the small, black brush I watched mom swirl around in it. The items were awkward in my little, chubby hands, and I struggled to keep the lid of the palette open as I maneuvered the brush. Unsure of what to do, I pushed the brush into the three shades, watching as the powder transferred onto the bristles and flitted into the air. As I swooped the brush over my eyelids, I was filled with glee at the fact that my reflection mirrored that of my mother's when she sat in this spot.

Just as I was wrapping up, anticipating my mother's return, she appeared in the doorway.

Initially, her face fell and her eyebrows furrowed as she was agitated by the mess of pink-and-purple dust that now coated me and her belongings. Then when her eyes met mine, her face softened into an amused smile. She came over to the vanity and picked me up, then took my place on the stool and sat me in her lap.

"What on earth are you doing, silly girl?" she beckoned through a tired sigh.

"I wanted to be pretty just like you, so I put the makeup stuff on my eyes like you do." I said, pointing at the now smudged and disheveled palette and brush that lay on the vanity. Mom struggled for a moment to pull out one of the drawers, took out a wet wipe, and started cleaning the makeup off my face and hands.

"You don't need to wear my makeup to be pretty just like me Ella," her voice was soothing. "You already are."

"How come?" I asked, unsure of her reasoning. She set the wet wipe down and turned me around in her lap to face the mirror.

"That's you, and that's me," she said as she pointed to our respective reflections in the mirror. I studied and admired her reflection as she spoke. "You're my little girl, so all of you has a little bit of me in it." I wasn't quite sure what she meant, and the furrow of my tiny brows

showed it. She took a hairbrush out of the vanity and started combing through my bedhead as she spoke to me. “Look at everything we have the same. You have my dark hair, my brown eyes, and my nose.” She tapped my nose with her finger and I giggled as I studied our reflections. I saw the resemblance in our faces—our eyes, our suntanned skin, our smiles, and I saw that I was like a little version of her. I suddenly forgot all about the eyeshadow palette, and was fascinated by how the beauty I wanted was right inside me—that my features were made up of the face that I loved so much.

Although I was satisfied with that answer, I still wondered why mom felt she needed her makeup. If we were already pretty the way we were, why put all the time into getting ready every morning? This question continued to perplex me as I got older, but with time I grew to understand the complicated nature of a woman’s relationship with her self-image. Mom’s increasingly negative comments towards her own appearance as she aged took their toll on my view of myself. If my mom, the most beautiful person I knew, still had reasons to hate herself, then what merit did I have to think that I was beautiful? I started to feel as though mom never really meant what she said that morning in front of the vanity, she just wanted to appease my persistent curiosity.

Any time mom would complain about her crooked teeth, or her dark spots from working in the sun, or any other physical attribute that she had decided made her ugly, I made an effort to compliment her. I would highlight not just her physical beauty, but the aspects of her character that I admired. They were genuine expressions that came from a place of childlike innocence and affection, but mom understood them as being moved by pity and became aggravated by them.

“I don’t need you to make me feel better about myself” she would say. “You don’t know what it’s like to get old yet, you’ve still got your good years ahead of you.” These words stung and embittered me. I was only nine years old, much too young to grapple with ideas of mortality and existential dread. Instead of feeling sympathy for mom’s struggle,

I understood her negativity as a personal attack. I didn't see the evidence of a woman who was fighting a much larger battle internally.

I would watch my mother; the way she spoke, the way she frowned, the way she laughed—and I started to notice details in her aging that I hadn't paid much attention to before. Although my mom despised them, I loved these lines and wrinkles, because they told the story of the life my mother had lived and the woman she had become. My favorite of these details are these lines that have formed on the corners of mom's mouth from years' worth of smiling and exaggerated facial expressions. When she feels something, any kind of emotion, it's seen on her mouth. When she's confused or thinking hard, the corners of her mouth are downturned. When she smiles, the corners of her mouth stretch wide and tug at her lips, leaving indentations that sit like parentheses on either side of them. She smiles at everyone she passes, as if she knows that even just her presence could brighten a person's whole day. When mom is telling a particularly interesting story, she opens her mouth big when she wants to put special emphasis on a word, and leaves it hanging open to create a comedically hyperbolic look of surprise when she tells her story's twist ending. The wrinkles used to fade when her face was resting, but now they act as evidence of the years of gossip shared and the countless bright smiles she's flashed in her life.

By the time I was sixteen, it had been years since I had last watched my mother sit at her vanity. Early one morning before school, I went into her room to find her in her place on her butter-yellow stool. The vanity was just the same, but the corners and sides now wore dents and scratches as evidence of all the times it had been haphazardly wrapped up and packed away into moving vans. The swirling, ornamented oval mirror was slightly dented and scratched, with a small crack running across the lower left side. Mom felt my presence but ignored me as she was already deeply focused on the steps of her beauty routine. I approached the vanity and opened the four drawers one at a time. As they creaked and squawked, I found that the contents were mostly the same, with some lipsticks worn out and perfume bottles emptied. I

noticed that mom's moisturizers and sunscreens were now enhanced by anti-aging serums and wrinkle treatments. She reached for one of the bottles as I struggled to get the drawer to shut. I observed as mom pulled and tugged at the lines around her mouth, running her finger over them as though she was trying to erase the wrinkles.

"I just hate these lines," she sighed with a disappointed breath. "I could really use some Botox." I felt a pang in my heart as I watched her rub her anti-aging serums into her skin. I thought of speaking up, of telling her about how much I loved her smile lines, but I couldn't help but think of the negative reaction I might be met with if I attempted to compliment her. After a moment, I decided to say something anyway.

"You know," I said sheepishly as I looked down at the wood paneled flooring, "I like your smile lines. They remind me of how much you smile." I looked up, searching her face's reflection in the mirror for an indication of her coming reaction. She hesitated for a moment before she spoke, as if she saw the truth in what I had said but then remembered the irritation she had felt at the lines beforehand.

"Don't be ridiculous" she huffed. "They're ugly and you know it. Oh, what I would give to be young like you again."

It upset me to watch her nitpick and criticize her reflection like an immature teenage girl, to hate herself in the same way I hated myself. She had to be aware that all anyone did was admire her and shower her in compliments. She had to know that all I ever wanted was to look just like her. If she couldn't believe the opinion of countless others, or her own daughter, was she just incapable of seeing the beauty that the rest of us saw in her? I just didn't understand how mom could hate a detail about herself that I admired so much.

Sometimes I wonder what my detail is, what people could pick out in my appearance that carries the story of who I am. Do people notice my hands and all the dimples in my knuckles, or how I have exactly five freckles on my face? Do people notice how the way I carry myself depends on whether my hair is straightened or curly? I also wonder what characteristics I overlook when I look at myself. Maybe

something I hate the most about myself best captures the way that I am? Sometimes I'm afraid that I won't come across someone who will notice those little things, someone who will take the time to study me and appreciate me the way I do my loved ones. I'm also afraid that if I do meet someone like that, I'll be too wrapped up in myself to believe them. Too distracted by my own self-loathing to believe that others could love the parts of myself that I hate.

The bottom line is that my mother's issues are rooted in a lack of balance. She focuses too much on the negative over noticing the good. If mom was more balanced, she'd be unstoppable. A force of confidence, pride, and determination that could dominate the world. Yet, she lets something as silly as some lines on her face distract her. It holds her back. Makes her blind and deaf to all that I see and hear. Mom can't see all the heads she turns, can't hear all the compliments she gets. I hope that as I get older, I'll be able to find my balance. I'll pay special attention to how I'm received by others, and when someone compliments me, I hope I'll believe it.

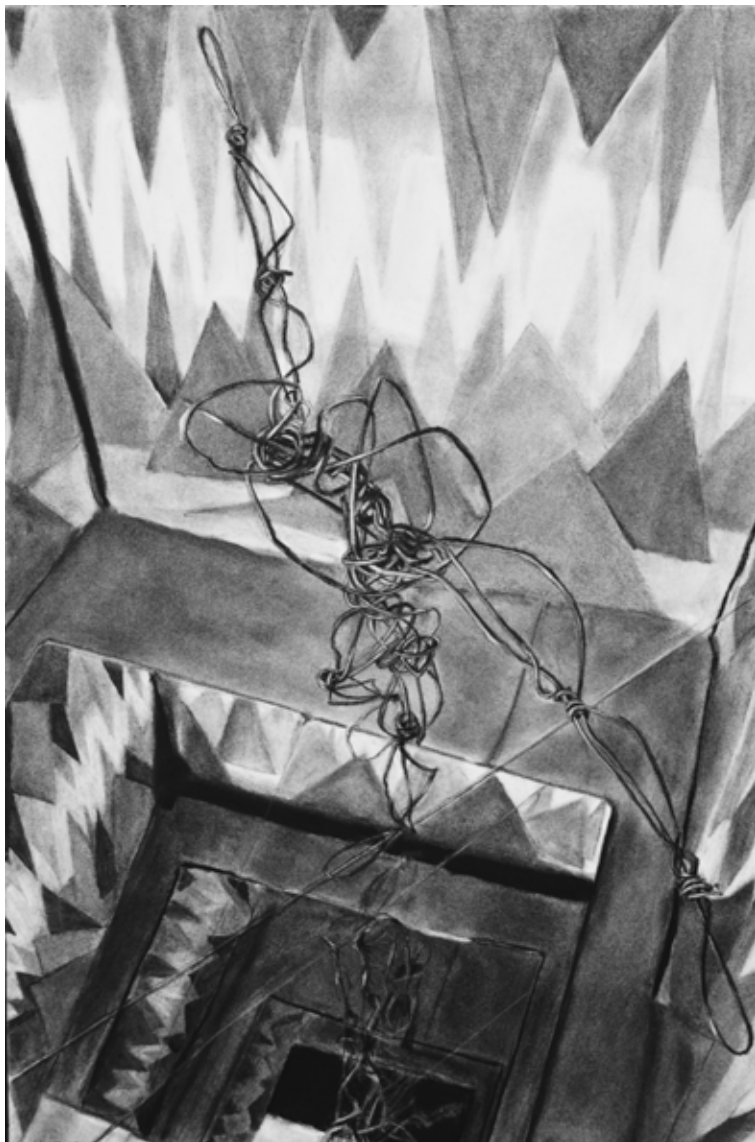
MOURNING FOR A LOSS THAT MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE BEEN

MEREDITH BOMSTER

His mother asked us last night when we would have a kid. The question—most likely brought on by the sight of me brushing his little sister’s long, naïve hair—flared up a familiar uneasiness in my womb. Can you feel your womb if there isn’t a life growing? My past-self had a baby. Lost a baby. Her loss now passed down to taunt me with a six-dollar newborn Familia onesie sitting in a baby box upstairs. Resurrected in the cry echoing deep in my Nexplanon. I am a mom-friend, with all the nuances that come with pretending to be something you are not. It is like trying to tie your shoes but your fingers are spaghetti noodles and the laces are thermometers and you can’t see because you are crying the whole time. I dream about our baby. I roll in bed and look for my baby. Frantic fingers hurry over IKEA sheets and comforter finding the warm spot your body left. No baby. Just me and you and our parts.

SENSATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE

JAMES LOU



COLLISIONS OF WATER, METAL, FILTH, AND FLESH

WENDY HURD

*Mayflies in the night sky cling to the light
gathered as if the drama lived only a day
only a night, only in the tiny opera house
only behind the closed doors splattered with blood
from the guy rumored
to have cut off his own head with a chain saw.*

*The failed attempts of the people smiling
as if the truck didn't plunge through the ice
and leave the children crying, the mothers mourning.*

*Going on and on like a kid in the back of the bus
burping the alphabet, wanting to hear you laugh
but we all just want to vomit.*

Not normal. But what is normal? I'm not sure. The tragedies endured by the people of a lake town with only seven hundred residents over the years completely astonish and amaze like an evil wizard selling false cures from a wagon. This might seem like a weird detail, but my father grew up on a century farm just outside of town. His grandfather arrived in a wagon with trunks filled with trinkets and essentials, as well as a random fur coat. But no secret potions. A floor-length fur coat? Really? Completely out of character for a family traveling west to plow the earth. What had they heard? What was the advertisement? "Come here to a civilized place on the plains! Find your fortune! Fly a plane!" It's more likely the fur resulted in some sort of illegal trade or other human misfortune. I'll never know.

*Connected to the lake of the town
cursed by ancient memories
of when the sky took away the water
and turned it into tears
leaving the soil to be planted.*

*Here where lives started and stopped
where some chose to grow
and others departed.*

*Just like that, the rains came
and lost were tractors
and trucks too,
stuck in the mud,
drowned with the minnows and leeches.*

*In the shadow of the mountain
deep within lie the stories
dormant, sleeping, ready for spring.*

A mix of bored teenagers, alcohol, live music, tolerant adults, and a dumpy hang out/dance hall/horrorville situated between the lake and a swamp = a trough full of lost buttons. Some found a home on a reasonable jacket, destined for kindness, others got threaded into a sort of strange artwork and still some stayed in the trough, forever having given up on a purpose. During the winter, the pints easily fit in an oversized winter jacket. In the spring, the pints stayed tucked under the seat or tossed on gravel roads between here and there. Dancing to “Pretty Woman” and waiting in line for the toilet while standing in a two-inch deep slew of toilet overflow didn’t matter to the wasted. If the parents cared it wasn’t apparent until the morning after when the blurry-eyed, sedated, lethargic and sad failed to show up for the sunrise. Gone were the days of having a dozen kids to help on the farm.

These were the days of shoving them out the door on a dangerous mission of frenzied speed blended with cognitive dysfunction.

*Bubbling to the surface
releasing the long, forgotten implements
with the laughter and freedom of dancing
some dragged to the shores,
stripped naked,
then redressed in colors of rage and confusion.*

*The music vibrates the soul into knowing
and yet the laughter sneaks around the corner
as if to play the game we remember
Simon says when to stop and when to go
when to take three steps forward or two steps back.*

*We go back again and again, hoping for changes
where the rays burned stronger than the droplets of life
the sons and the daughters desperate in silence.*

The secrets weaved their way into the hidden pockets of the jackets forgotten and the bottles scattered in the fields, ditches and porches. How many ingested the shards of glass from the broken bottles thrown into the ditch along the way? How many returned to school on Monday morning, and worked the combination of the locker next to the rapists disguised as track stars? Many fled on a different track, cheerfully posting their perfect lives—at the same time emptying their pockets into therapy sofas, counseling sites, and pharmacies.

*We open the windows
listening to the unseen now stronger
than the security of where we once left the keys
next to the unlocked doors
trusting them all but soon turned inside out for eternity.*

*The smiles seen through the apertured lens set just right
we read the books and tell the stories
we write, step, and strum in glory
by the light of the moon.*

The environment set the stage for equality in terror. Talent, kindness, affluence, poverty, loneliness, popularity—nothing mattered. A random card drawn from the middle of the deck dictated destiny. Once a card from the deck turned a trip for future adventures, into a motherless daughter. Not just motherless but forever traumatized by witnessing her very own mother die in the very car by a very stupid head-on collision by a very stupid driver on the wrong side of the road. The event turned the school into a void. No way. No sense. It just couldn't be. How could it happen? They were on their way to visit a college. Strength disguised by weakness and not the other way around. The sunny morning in a car filled with laughter, the collision met confusion and words left abandoned. All wanted to scream, “but they did nothing wrong!”

*With sad eyes
we discovered
the signed contract
of unknown futures
as we carried them
one by one
to the well
once filled with hope
now drained
in a spiral of dreams.*

NOTES

CHRISTIAN JEFFREY

As I walk the tired grasses—pleated by past snow or dead from the heat—my phone mirrors my thoughts. I feel the most creative outside, when you can consume your environment, noticing new things. It's how I realized what is so ugly about Minnesota. And it's many things. Looking up I see the clouds and how slowly they move, or how gray the sky always seems to be. When I look down I write about it. I reflect right there, and then months later, looking back at the date and time, I'll know I was outside, breathing, and seeing.

Sometimes even if I've lost the date I can tell when I wrote something. The winter and summer read different from each other. The word count tells me little bits; some days are more prolific than others. Some days are busy, almost too busy to get an idea down, and then some days there is nothing else to do but think. Having amounts of time not devoted to anything but being present in the world and in my own mind lead to the creation of these thoughts that end up defining times in my life. And it's so important, in retrospect, because the older I get, the more I cannot recall what I do these days. The older I get, the more I know I will forget if I do not write it down.

In March, I wrote of *Trying harder but feeling less*, and it was 1:03 p.m., so I figure I was inside the house trying to get through some of my own feelings. School always ran around eleven to three, but it was online so you hardly had to be available. I didn't have much to be doing at the time, but then there is always so much available. Sometimes I couldn't write—especially inside—because it was too lonesome.

In the deeper winter I wrote that *Everything is blue—the way you see the things you miss and even the things you don't. I can feel the deadness in the grass, the stripped nature of the trees, frail with their branches, like giant tumbleweeds. I wonder where the leaves are now, and when they will be back.* Minnesota can be the most colorful in winter. The white reflects the light, and the skies are blue when the sun shows. It's so

cold your nose runs and when you widen your eyes they sting. *The Sun mirrors off the snow, sometimes you can't see anything, and sometimes you just close your eyes. Sometimes there's so much to see it hurts.* I wrote this late in the morning—when you could see the world for a little while before dark. I remember going to school before dawn, and the Sun had already set when we got home. I felt like an adult for the first time, like life wasn't meant for enjoyment anymore—because being an adult meant the light was gone.

Up north there is something odd in the water you cannot place, the dogs shit in the walkways, all the blondes dress like mannequins. It's a lumbering town. The Blandin Paper Mill looks how it sounds: bland. And it's blue, too. A big blue box. That was around Christmas. I know we were visiting our grandparents, because I would only describe Grand Rapids that way. It's the kind of place where you might visit the same book store every week; not because there's anything new, but because it's all you can do.

I drove seven hours to Chicago in August, and seven more the next day to Erie, Pennsylvania, to see a friend. Some moments from the trip ring ethereal in my head, things I'm not entirely sure happened. I was sober the whole time—I'm no Jack Kerouac—but through twenty-eight hours of driving in six different states, you experience a lot of stimuli both internally and externally. You take in information, losing it all about the same time. You think so much that you end up forgetting how. You wonder what you did to yourself. And you try to stay awake, too. Caffeine—something for your body, something for your tastebuds, something to grab from the console just so I remember to move my arms from time to time. My mother would call and remind me I could speak. I could have conversations. I write these memories down. I remember happenings—on the fact that I write them down.

One hundred and eighteen beats-per-minute I can feel heavier than any song; the pounding feeling of distress. 480 mg. of caffeine in 16 oz. intervals; conflicts of your coping mechanisms, talking with your hands so the shaking is intentional, feeling it in your shoulders when you try to stop, going 100 and seeing how long your car can screech for. It's not

sustainable, but I love to have a reason for living unhealthily. And when you're not around your family for the first time, or your teachers and bosses, you realize that people can't really tell you shit. They don't mean anything to you, and most of them know it, but even the ones who don't are so insignificant it hardly matters. Driving this much shows me free time in clarity. Because there has always been free time, but it's harder to notice as a younger child. We do the same things at different ages and still claim to have grown up. But I am glad to not be grown up yet.

Feeling isolated sometimes leads me back to these notes. Back to driving the most mundane roads, alongside a hundred semi-trailer-trucks—when I wrote about how slow the clouds move. It was an exercise in abstraction, really. My mind would latch onto phrases or words I felt significant, but with my hands on the wheel, eyes on the road, I had nowhere to let it out. I would think about a phrase for an hour, maybe longer, and when it came time to stop somewhere, I had a story to tell. The notes bring me everywhere. Gas stations in every Midwestern state. Never knowing what city you're in. Descriptions of people I found some interest in. Couples who looked not quite fit. My newborn cousin. The notes remind me I am the oldest of a generation. That everything gets passed down. That I have seen so much.

SMOKE

CHRISTIAN JEFFREY

Auntie's a cigarette.
Grandfather's a dark cigar.
And I used to wish they'd throw the pack,
But now I miss the smell.
We all choose how to kill ourselves.

Annalie's a flick lighter and
Momma's out of control.
Chevy learned a bad word
For where we'll all go.
Tony's on the run so
We have to help him out.
The dogs watch the house
And sniff cigarette butts.
Jessie moved south
And now she never comes home.
Grandfather's dying
But he hasn't lost his light.
The breathing's getting harder
So he's puffing all the more.
Last month we went to Chicago
To meet Baby and her Mom.

One day he'll be in the clouds.

Where the Paper Factory smoke trails
And you breathe out all your bones.
Where the animals we shot
Dance with Tracy and Bill.
Where you see Marge and Joe
And the ones who were never born.
Where you give everything
From yourself to the world.

ON THE CORNER OF NICOLLET AND 36TH STREET

MEREDITH BOMSTER

Its feathers are albino at first.
perfectly white
and matted against the
barely illuminated sky.

Formed from the snow
that fell at six thirty this morning.

Branches, growing faster and faster into wings
with every flake that
lands and zippers itself to its
neighbors.

When the sun rises just enough: he ignites.

Rays of light land on the snow
clinging to every millimeter,
every flake turned to feather flashes, first crimson,
then butterscotch.

A phoenix formed from a snow owl's body
rising from the snowplowed mush.

TO DIE FOR GOOD

SARAH HUDERLE



TO DIE FOR GOOD

SARAH HUDERLE

The raptor has no head. Fallen leaves cradle its carcass, which sits as a shock of white among the scarlet, hazel, and gold. From a distance, I'd mistaken it for one of the giant puffball mushrooms littering the forest, but when I trudged closer, I gasped at the limp corpse. Now, I sit on a log and extend the mottled lump's wing with a stick. Wind rustles its feathers, revealing wiry musculature under the soft down. One foot juts out of the fluffy mess, talons curled as though grasping for something, perhaps a crushed mouse, or the branch of some tall oak whose leaves once concealed the bird in the cloudy sky. Did it glare at the forest floor, that sharp raptor, head twitching, eyes fixated on a scurrying mole? When it dove and wove through maple branches, wind howling, feathers slick to its bullet body, did its hooked beak chatter in anticipation? Maybe one of those gnarled branches snagged that beak and snapped the head clean off with a quick celery crack. Maybe the body sprayed through moss and dirt, settling by the log while the head, eyes spasming, toppled and bounced down the esker. Maybe the head decays nearby, nestled under a patch of ink caps while woodlice gnaw the pink throat flesh.

I stand and squint down the esker. Pallid puffballs glow in the low sun, illuminated by splashes of light that pour between bobbing branches. They resemble skulls half-buried in the earth. Among the pops of white, I look for another strike of feathers, a glinting beak, or a narrowed eye. I even seek a splatter of crimson. Nothing.

Turning back to the raptor, I kneel in the soil. My eyes trace the wings, the speckles of brown peppered onto the tips of each feather, then flick back to the headless stump. Gentle, slow, my fingers trace my jaw, my cheeks, my eye sockets, everything. They rest on my throat's pulse. I try to think of the raptor, its hooked beak and sharp eyes, but at this moment, I think only of woodlice chewing that pink throat flesh.

ME AND LITTLE ROCK

OLIVIA MINEAU



THE CURLING IRON CONFRONTATION

RYAN LIPPERT

SETTING

A cafe in the city. In the middle of the stage is a small, round table with a tablecloth and two chairs on either side, facing each other. Down stage right is a counter, and up stage left is a glass front door.

AT RISE

Brian sits in the chair facing the door, which he never takes his eyes off of, other than to check his phone. He is nervous. He is wearing a suit that doesn't quite fit him right and has used entirely too much product to tame his long, messy hair. In front of him, on the table, is a coffee mug. After a few moments, we see Allison approach the door from outside. Brian sees her too. She is dressed smartly, but casually. Her hair is straight. When Allison enters through the front door, Brian stands to greet her.

BRIAN

Allison!

ALLISON

Brian.

BRIAN

It's so nice to see you.

ALLISON

I'm sure it is.

Brian moves to hug her, but is rebuffed.

BRIAN

Won't you sit down?

RYAN LIPPERT

ALLISON

I'd rather just get this over with. Do you have it?

BRIAN

Won't you at least stay and have a coffee?

ALLISON

Look, do you have my curling iron or not?

BRIAN

It's here, but you'll have to stay and have a coffee, if you want it back.

ALLISON

This is extortion.

BRIAN

Not according to Merriam Webster.

ALLISON

Fine. I will stay for however long it takes me to drink one coffee.

Alison walks to the counter.

BRIAN

(Before she can speak) A large dark chocolate mocha. No whip. You thought I'd forget, didn't you?

ALLISON

One small, black coffee. In a to-go cup.

They wait for the coffee to be poured. Allison moves to sit opposite of Brian.

BRIAN

How have you been?

ALLISON

Well.

BRIAN

Wonderful.

Beat.

Recognize this place?

ALLISON

(Lying) No.

BRIAN

Well, it's the place we went to on our first date.

ALLISON

I see.

Beat.

OK, I'll bite. Why are you wearing a suit?

BRIAN

What? This old thing? No reason. I just wear suits now. Ever since I got my life together, that is. You know how, while we were dating, you were always telling me to get my life together? Well, when we mutually agreed to break up, I took that as a real wakeup call. Now my life is together.

ALLISON

You finally got a job then?

BRIAN

Sure did. I give out samples at Costco.

ALLISON

And they make you wear a suit?

BRIAN

No. The suit is just what I wear now that my life is together. I wear an apron at work.

ALLISON

So, this was your plan. You thought you'd put on a suit and lure me out to a coffee date on the pretense of returning my curling iron, which I'm starting to suspect you don't have, tell me you have a job now, and suddenly I'd be begging you to take me back?

Beat.

BRIAN

Yes.

ALLISON

I appreciate the honesty, at least. You do realize—what am I saying? Of course you don't—that I didn't break up with you just because you didn't have a job. I broke up with you because you never took anything seriously and never put any effort into anything, including our relationship. Three years of letting me support you and never even once considering how that made me feel.

BRIAN

I put effort into some things.

ALLISON

Playing video games all day.

BRIAN

Not just playing video games! Streaming on Twitch. And if I had kept at it, I would have started getting sponsorships.

ALLISON

Streamers only get sponsorships when they don't suck at video games.

BRIAN

OK, first of all, ouch. And my subscribers didn't just come to see me play. They were drawn in by my personality.

ALLISON

Your subscribers? All three of them?

BRIAN

I'm detecting the sarcasm. I may have only had four subscribers, but my streams had an average viewership of twelve.

ALLISON

And that somehow wasn't enough to cover rent? Look, I'm glad you have a job now and aren't living on the streets or something, but giving out samples at Costco doesn't change anything.

BRIAN

But it does! Working for Costco has given me a whole new perspective on life. I realize now that I was treating you like a free sample, you see, when I should have been treating you like the full-priced product that you are and putting in the effort that requires. I'm a changed man, Allison. Hence the suit. I'm ready to take you back now, and if—

ALLISON

(Cutting him off.) I'm seeing someone new.

BRIAN

What? Already?

ALLISON

Yes.

BRIAN

And what does he do for a living, huh? Does he work the stock room? Is he a manager? Don't tell me you're dating the CEO of Costco, Ron Vachris!

RYAN LIPPERT

ALLISON

He doesn't work at Costco! If you must know, he works with me.

BRIAN

Oh. Oh, I see how it is. The firm hires some hotshot young Ron Vachris type and all of a sudden it's "Brian who?" Is that it?

ALLISON

It's been over a month—

BRIAN

It's been thirty-two days.

ALLISON

—Even if it weren't, I would still have every right to start a new relationship whenever I want.

BRIAN

Not with someone you just met!

ALLISON

We didn't just meet. We've been working together for years.

BRIAN

Were you working together while we were dating?

ALLISON

Obviously.

BRIAN

(Growing increasingly loud) Oh. Oh, OK. Oh, I see how it is! Yes, it's all becoming quite clear now!

ALLISON

What are you doing?

BRIAN

Just putting some pieces together is all!

ALLISON

Brian, you're making a scene.

BRIAN

What's worse, Allison? Making a scene or cheating?

ALLISON

What are you talking about?

BRIAN

Oh, so you don't think it's at all suspicious that you start dating a coworker just one month after breaking up with your lover of three years, one month, and eight days?

ALLISON

What do you want me to say?

BRIAN

Obviously I want you to say that you didn't cheat on me!

ALLISON

Do you have my curling iron or not?

BRIAN

You're changing the subject!

ALLISON

You're the one changing the subject! I'm only here for the curling iron!

BRIAN

DID YOU OR DID YOU NOT CHEAT ON ME?

ALLISON

All right! Fine. I cheated on you with Alan. And I'm sorry. I really am. I didn't mean for it to happen. At first I just went to him for emotional support because I felt like I couldn't go to you. Eventually, I started going over to his house, which I had every right to do, and then this

one time—one time!—I ended up . . . staying the night. I felt terrible about it. I didn't want to hurt your feelings, so I broke up with you the next day. I was going to break up with you eventually anyway. That night was just the push I needed.

BRIAN

You broke up with me to not hurt my feelings? Uh, mission not accomplished, babe!

ALLISON

I am sorry. Maybe I should have come clean earlier, but I was worried you would overreact.

BRIAN

Overreact? OVERREACT!?! Being upset that the love of my life slept around with other men is an overreaction, is it?

ALLISON

It was one man and one time. And I'm not the love of your life. In fact . . . I'd bet you never want to talk to me ever again. I'll just take my curling iron and be on my way.

BRIAN

You are the love of my life, Allison.

Beat.

Why didn't you tell me how you felt before?

ALLISON

I didn't think you would listen.

BRIAN

Well, I'm listening now.

ALLISON

And I'm with Alan now.

BRIAN

So that's it?

ALLISON

What else would it be?

BRIAN

I don't know. I thought if I could fix what was wrong with me, we could go back to what we had, and I understand what was wrong now.

ALLISON

And is that what you really want? To go back to what we had? The petty fights over nothing, the empty words of affection, the loveless nights spent on opposite sides of the bed?

BRIAN

That's not how I remember it.

ALLISON

And what do you remember?

BRIAN

I guess I don't know really.

ALLISON

For what it's worth, I don't think there's anything wrong with you. We were just wrong for each other. We probably should have had this conversation years ago, and for that I'm sorry, but we're not getting back together. Goodbye, Brian.

She moves toward the door.

BRIAN

Wait.

He removes the curling iron from under the table where he had it taped the whole time.

RYAN LIPPERT

ALLISON

You're ridiculous.

BRIAN

Yeah. Goodbye, Allison.

I AM FROM VIBRANT ANKARA MATERIAL

ADAMA KABIA

I am from vibrant Ankara material,
from Jollof rice and plantains,
from the candy melody of Krio greetings,
and the aromatic scent of Ataya tea.
I am from the relaxed, bustling domestic,
warm and lively, packed with laughter and chatter,
a sanctuary of love, resilience, and team spirit.
I am from the resilient baobab tree,
its roots anchored in Sierra Leonean soil,
a symbol of power and endurance.
I'm from energetic family dinners and storytelling,
from Binty's infectious laughter,
and Mabinty's understanding of those courses.
I am from the call to prayer echoing inside the air,
a reminder of the peaceful inclusion of Islam,
a religion that shapes my values and concepts.
I am from Freetown, Sierra Leone,
a vicinity wherein the ocean whispers memories of ancestors,
a connection to rich records and cultural tapestry.
From the savory flavors of cassava leaves,
to the sweet flavor of mangoes below the African solar,
symbolizing the essence of family and tradition.
From the tale of Grandpa's bravery all through the civil war,
to Grandma's unwavering love and resilience,
echoes of power resonate through our own family tree.
In the picture albums and dusty files,
where moments frozen in time inform testimonies of the past,
I discovered the roots that ground me in my identification.

CONTRIBUTORS

Erin Anderson is graduating from Normandale this semester with an AFA in Production and Design. Their future plans have not been made known to them quite yet, but they are excited to uncover what mysteries and excitements await them in the future.

Abilyn Bahr (she/her) is an ambitious girl who wants to learn a lot of skills. She likes crocheting, sewing, cosplaying, playing video games, reading, and—oh yeah, writing!

Cody Boller, who also goes by the pen name C. B. James, is a fantasy writer and poet who enjoys capturing childhood nostalgia and natural beauty in his poetry. His dream is to write stories about worlds that, once the main conflict is over, people could envision themselves living in.

Meredith Bomster is currently working toward her AFA in creative writing.

Ellaney Damas is a second-semester AFA student at Normandale. She loves reading and writing in the creative nonfiction genre, and hopes to explore it more throughout her career as a writer.

Chloe Galasi stays up too late most nights reading and writing. After some time in the medical field, she changed directions and is now pursuing a bachelor's degree in English with a Creative Writing emphasis. She wants to use her degree to teach English as a Second Language in Thailand.

Sarah Huderle is an LGBTQ+ artist and writer from the heart of Minnesota. She enjoys long hikes through the woods, playing D&D with friends, and writing about and drawing the great outdoors. At

Normandale, they're about to complete their AFA, pursue English, and embrace the world of writing.

Wendy Hurd is interested in a wide array of genres, though her love of witnessing life and observing people always seems to find a way into her work. She resides in Minnesota with her husband, two cats and a dog.

Art, in **Kaitlyn Iliff's** opinion, is one of the best ways to express yourself through painting, photography and writing. She can connect with others without using her voice.

Christian Jeffrey is a PSEO student studying Creative Writing and the Arts.

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Ryan Timothy Lippert is a hot single in your area. He is 6' 2" and he enjoys long walks and quiet nights in and . . .

James Lou is a Normandale student with over ten years of experience in two-dimensional mediums. Within this past semester he has taken a deeper dive into inking and has now begun his slow descent into the fancy pen rabbit hole.

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Abigail Post has loved writing since she was a kid. Fantasy and science fiction have always been her favorites, as she loves the magic and creativity. This is Abigail’s second semester at Normandale, and she hopes to continue writing long into the future.

Ren Taylor is an Art History major living in South Minneapolis. Writing was their first love and painting came running close behind. They enjoy indulging in any creative project they can get their hands on, assisted by four enthusiastic cats.

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

The Creative Writing AFA Capstone class of 2024 edited and produced this issue. They are: Darren Almgren-Bersie, Abilyn Bahr, Cody Boller, Saff Drayton, Chloe Galasi, Sarah Huderle, Gavin Hung, Jesse Navarro Vazquez, Rochelle Nibbe, Kianna Phillips, Dhoha Qasem, and George Wahl.

Interested in joining the amazing list of *The Paper Lantern* contributors? *The Paper Lantern* accepts submissions biannually, in spring and fall semesters, respectively. Fall issues are produced by the Creative Writing Club and spring issues by the AFA Capstone class.

All work is reviewed anonymously, and acceptance is based solely on literary and artistic merit. Work in all genres of creative writing (fiction, creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama) as well as visual art are considered. Multiple submissions are accepted. Submissions are open only to registered Normandale Community College students.

More information, as well as the archive of previous *Paper Lantern* issues, can be found at www.thepaperlantern.org.

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