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rhodora

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rhodora

Volume 1, Issue 2 | July 2021

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contents

EDITORS' NOTE

6

POETRY

The Cauterized Heart

John Sweet

9

The Future Written in Your Blood, Not

Mine

John Sweet

9

Your World in a Book

Jimena Sofia Ramos Yengle

11

The Anatomy of Pain

Praniti Gulyani

12

A Constellation of Bruises

Praniti Gulyani

14

She

Praniti Gulyani

16

Her Wild Black Hair

John Tustin

19

Pinkish Sobs

John Tustin

21

On the Other Side

Anjana V Warriier

22

The Photograph

Alan Bedworth

24

A Bird of Prey

Alan Bedworth

26

Sedation

Anthony Salandy

27

The Great Repel

Anthony Salandy

28

Ode: To the Man Wearing Earphones on
the Subway

Emma McGlashen

29

From the Mountains Near Boise, ID

Emma McGlashen

30

contents

To My Mother, Who Told Me to be

Focused

Bupinder Singh

31

To the Ones Living in the Wastelands

Bupinder Singh

33

A Blank Page Has No Choice but to Listen

Richard LeDue

34

The Middle

Jason de Koff

36

Chrysanth Connections

Jason de Koff

38

The Boy in the Box

Pastel Black

39

Daylight Moon

Pastel Black

40

Mother

Erica Hom

41

Progress;

Erica Hom

42

Smoke

Erica Hom

43

Bechdel Test

Roosha Mandal

44

A Biologist in the Garden

Roosha Mandal

45

What's Left of Me?

Aarohi Sharma

46

Time Bomb

Emma Jean Hermacinski

47

Sanctum

Emma Jean Hermacinski

49

An Evening at Marina Beach

Joanna George

50

Love Letters

Joanna George

51

The Imprisoned

Unnimaya S

53

contents

Writer's Block
Mathangi N M
55

The Heart Heals
Sonia Charales
56

Flood of Acceptance
Ellpoet
57

Time to Say Goodbye
Ellpoet
58

Red Wine Friendship
Ellpoet
60

I Hope You Remember
Swati Singh
62

The Uninvited Visitor
Annapurani Vaidyanathan
64

Catching Catfish with a Gourd by Josetsu
Timothy Tarkelly
65

The Houseplant in Need of Water
Paul Ruth
66

Wildflowers in the Night
Paul Ruth
68

Patti Smith Used to Live Here
Paul Ruth
70

Firelight
Orion Christopher
71

Under the Strawberry Moon
Yuu Ikeda
72

Your Earring
Yuu Ikeda
73

Trauma
Rajnish Das
74

My Mother Kept Sadness Piling
Rajnish Das
76

The Writer
Spandan Bandyopadhyay
77

FICTION

My Dad is a Doctor
Praniti Gulyani
80

contents

Wyoming, 2012
Gracie Nordgren
83

Justice Never Slept that Day
B Craig Grafton
85

The Meticulous Gardener
B Craig Grafton
90

A Mask Tree
Kaoru Sakasaki
(translated by *Toshiya Kamei*)
95

Nest of Diamonds
Elizabeth Nelson
99

Pursuit
Elizabeth Nelson
104

Trumpet Fingering
Joshua Britton
109

Concerning the Importance of a Fish Recipe
Mouli Banerjee
119

Notes from a Peninsula
Natalia Hrycay
124

NONFICTION

A Walk Down to the Lunch Canteen
Vineetha A V
131

Cumulus
Murielle Müller
134

The Romanticization of Pancakes
Harri Wood
136

TRAVEL WRITING

Breaths Captured
Georgia Iris Szawaryn
139

DRAMA

The Nanny (Part 1)
Favour Igwemoh
153

Sitting Still
Orion Christopher
156

Home Schooling
George Freek
161



contents

ABOUT THE
CONTRIBUTORS

170

MASTHEAD

182





THE

From a timid first wee-hours Instagram post to our second issue, we've come a long way. Rhodora Magazine is where the wildflowers find a sweet patch of wilderness.

To all our new readers and writers, welcome. To our returning ones, welcome back!

We surpassed last issue's contributor and country count.

EDITORS

SUSANNA MARIAN CORREYA KEERTHANA V

FROM

We also have a clutch of nonfiction and three plays — a first!

In this issue you'll find a harrowing poem by Rajnish Das on the emotional legacy of caste discrimination, a creative testimonial about insulin shots by Murielle Müller and an ekphrastic homage to a hanging scroll painting by Timothy Tarkelly, a comedy by George Freek that interlaces humor with dark overtones. There's also Elizabeth Nelson with her chilling ecofeminist stories and Erica Hom with a powerful and



painfully honest exploration of the mother-daughter relationship.

Our sincere thanks to Mathangi N M and Sai Rakshaya Sowmya S for making Rhodora the centerpiece of conversations and for being excited with and for us. Our followers on social media are our best marketers. We feel the love with every like and retweet. Special thanks to Danielle Adams of *The Sunshine Review* and our friends at *Asianzine* for featuring us in their stories and showing us the power of connection in the indie zine ecosystem.

We are grateful to Mariam, whose cover art exudes calmness and composure. In spite of a minor accident, she gave us something beautiful to gaze at.

Grab a tender coconut or a glass of jigarthanda, settle into your comfiest corner and enjoy this issue!

The background is a light teal color. It is decorated with stylized leaf patterns in two colors: pink and teal. The pink leaves are located in the top-left, middle-right, and bottom-left corners. The teal leaves are located in the top-right, middle-left, and bottom-right corners. The word "poetry" is centered in the middle of the page.

poetry

the cauterized heart

JOHN SWEET

and with the sky pushing the
sun always higher

with walls of chromium dust and
the sounds
sucked out of your lungs

with your eyes blind
and filled with love

tell me the last year is
the best year

tell me de chirico knew the
value of the middle-distance

one of us always waving goodbye,
one of us
always fading from view

the future written in your blood, not mine

JOHN SWEET

a child drowned in
the father's heart

a fist and then an apology
and then a fist again

war on a more
intimate level

patriotism
in place of art

when the enemy is on
 all sides
there is nothing left
but to shoot in
every direction

your world in a book

JIMENA SOFIA RAMOS YENGLÉ

About the magical process of writing my first romance novel, Roma Enamorada.

Before *Roma Enamorada*, I believed that writing a book was like filling a canvas inside an art museum. The curiosity to live that experience called me aguishly. I decided to go through the process of writing a book, as when you decide to take a train. Making the decision was exciting and easy, but getting into the action was beautiful and exhausting.

What does the process of writing a book involve?

Dragging your toes across each stage.

Crying out loud when understanding the anguish, repression, or frustration of a character.

Falling into a colorful abyss of interpretations.

Smiling inevitably at the connections between random thoughts.

Bringing discernment and imagination together.

Getting angry with characters who do not fulfill your wishes.

Falling asleep exploring the depths of an idea.

Reading each word, hoping it resonates in your spirit.

Singing with emotion, imagining people responding to the plot twists.

Freezing time, wanting to introspect.

Dedicating time to your mental wellbeing.

Listening to the voice that crosses your mind without your permission.

Giving depth to the banal.

Losing yourself in the story.

the anatomy of pain

PRANITI GULYANI

you begin by teaching me
about wafer-thin bones and agonized nerves
that have turned so blue, it hurts
to even look at them, and then you show me hearts
which have been frozen, stocked up
caked with a sugary-silvery crust
of emotion, and brains encompassed
in a bubble, a jelly-like blob
of entangled, entwined, confused thought

you continue by teaching me
about skulls, and you show me
the splintered skull of a newborn
patterned with bullet-holes
picked from the greyness and dustiness
which is what they call
“the legacy of war”

thereafter, we pass through the spirals
of patience, that branch into
resilience and courage, coated with
a cloak of dust, that falters
on the quivering shoulders of these paths
and covers the palms
and bruises the knees
of those who can no longer sit atop
cold metal chairs, and bend and bow,
their eyes dripping with tears
their lips dripping with prayer



on white bed sheets
or, at times, tucked into their folds
I find ailing pauses, picked from
that uncertain valley between life
and death, most gasping and some
reaching out, plucking bits of breath
molding it into thin strips, placing it
between clenched teeth, and
beneath shriveled tongues, while others
choose to let life slide
onto the carvings on their palm
and slowly, but surely,
it skids away

and in the whimpering hues
of the dewy, yellow light

with white and grey fingertips
tied together with
this tumorous tightrope

I decipher
 the anatomy
of pain

a constellation of bruises

PRANITI GULYANI

today, my mother teaches me
to arrange my bruises along the landmass
of my limbs, and to let them twinkle like stars
that tenderly kiss the flame of autumn

she teaches me
to put a bruise on my earlobe
and one between my fingers
so that my bruises
look like jewels

she teaches me
to shove the uglier bruises
under a bra-strap or a dress-hem
as I sort, select, shuffle between
which bruises to show
which bruises to hide

today, my mother teaches me
to fold a wince
into a smile, and the art
of swallowing a sob, and when my throat
gets all salty afterward,
she says, the tanginess will soon abate

and finally, as she whispers farewell
into the folds of my wedding veil,
the wavering threads of her whimper
tangle with the silk



she leaves me stargazing
at this constellation
of bruises



she

PRANITI GULYANI

my mother calls me
one day, while I am chasing
the shape-shifting scars along
my pregnant belly
with bare fingers

she tells me
to come home and meet
them all, especially *her*
she rolls this pronoun around her tongue,
bites into it with clenched teeth
and spits it out
like a bit of fruit which tastes
exceptionally sour

and, with my pregnant belly
poised before me, an epitome
of mother's pride and adulation,
I enter my home and
my eyes begin to
search for *her*

my eyes are stubborn searchmen
as expected, they find *her*

she sits
on a coffee-colored stool,
her legs huddled together
with a bra strap that touches



the tip of her elbow
she's shelling peas,
her nails digging into
the newly blossomed orbs
of green, her eyes hovering
on my stomach which
brims with the paradoxical weight
of an unborn child, as she crinkles her eyes,
raises her eyebrows, and asks me
what it is

she bites
into a crusty, butter-veiled
jam sandwich, her teeth
crooked and gapped, she claims
that the tooth fairy
has taken all her teeth away
and traded them,
and as she emerges
with a moustache of cranberry jam
she throws back her head
and laughs

she touches
the ruby on my finger
that sits atop
the feminine curves
of my brass wedding ring
and calls it a cherry



she asks me if she can pluck it,
put it on her slice of tea cake
and eat it

finally
she ties ribbons
in her rag doll's hair
tells me about
the new lullaby
she taught her doll
she makes me sit and listen
as she begins to sing
and I wonder
whether to applaud
then
she lays her head
on the dining table
that stood before
her coffee-colored stool
and dozes off

*my sister
at forty-four*

her wild black hair

JOHN TUSTIN

Her wild black hair
That would shine as red as a cartoon fire
When lit up by the sun:
I remember after I would drop her off
At the train
And we would kiss goodbye.
She would get out of my car and half run up the stairs
To the platform and I would watch her
As I began driving the endless miles to
The endless work.
I would smell my fingers and find the scent of her hair on them.
The smell of her shampoo, her perspiration: her.

I would come home and the smell of her and her wonderful hair
Would be in my sheets and my pillows for a little while.
I would shower and get in bed,
Closing my eyes and feeling like she was still beside me
While, of course, she was forty miles away in her own home.
Her scent would quickly dissipate but still,
I felt her fingers in my hair,
Her halo and wings and eyes and hips all before my eyes,
Her beautiful silly feet rubbing my ankles.

I miss her.
I even miss imagining her,
Her wild black hair that made my fingers disappear,
Her flesh pressed to mine, making me rigid,
Making me flush, making me into the man
I was meant to be.



I can't even imagine her anymore
When I am drunk and thinking about
Her hair so wild and black
And shining like naked fire before the sun.
My eyes are blood.
Her hair is still a black and burning red fire in the sun.
Her halo shining, I presume,
For another.

pinkish sobs

JOHN TUSTIN

Premier roses all about
The nights become dust in the day
My pinkish sobs
Take on the hue
Of pity and hubris
Wanting those I love around me so much
That all the roses wither
As I grip the stems without tenderness
Letting the thorns bite into me
The bloodshed proving
I am still alive
Although I feel like
It cannot be possible
To live
Feeling
Like this
Without
The ones
I love so

on the other side

ANJANA V WARRIER

You're such a strange person, everyone says.

I compose half-formed lines of poetry in my mind that often blur away before I even get to bleed them onto paper,

like clouds that fleet away after the rain, as soon as they come.

And sometimes I star messages with so much zest and never ever look back on any of them because

I can only read those words in that moment, bent over like that.

In the evenings, over tea, my mother tells me about people as though they were already dead,

in the past tense,

trying to make me laugh with funny little anecdotes and I willingly give in.

But I'm not special at all. Sometimes I lie in bed and think about how exactly unspcial I am.

I don't have favorite books or songs or even colors.

I usually don't even have strong opinions to share.

And, most often, I go for hours without talking to anyone because my mind is blank

and no concrete thoughts were formed.

But I also write lines like these... for what?

To quietly point out that I am, in fact, unique and important?

Is it not a vain way to assert that I am not plain and boring?

Doesn't that only make me conceited and narcissistic but hey, what do I know?!

But what is wrong with being plain and boring?

We are not normal people. None of us are. We all pretend to be, though.

What secret lives all of us lead!

We live in shadows and think cruel things about others in the



dark but smile at them in the light.

We desire nothing but to be loved and known and never forgotten
but also fear giving ourselves completely.

And when it comes to that, it's easy to give in and just cry.

The harder part is when you want to cry so badly but you can't,
so you just sit there with this knife piercing you so fiercely
that you can make out the outline of your heart in your ribcage.

I need to constantly remind myself that I'm not a novel
waiting for the writer to plot what happens next,
that I'm in my own story, but what does that even mean?

Do you write your own story?

It weighed upon me like a paperweight pressing on a flying piece
of paper,
left resolutely and carelessly; only now I acknowledge the dark
chasm.

You fall in without even knowing and you cannot push through or
pull yourself out of.

It happens.

And you let it be.

the photograph

ALAN BEDWORTH

Just looking at your photograph
brings back very special memories
of how we used to be.

I still can't get used to you
not being here with me.
I'm sure you've seen me talking
to your image every evening.

Reflecting on those happy days
that can never be erased,
all those summer holidays to
places that we loved,

Winters, when all we ever
did was snuggle up together,
talking sweet talk in one
another's ears.

Then that dreaded day descended.
Everything seemed black.
Your light was fading fast.
There was no time to look back.

When you left this earth,
I knew exactly where you'd go:
Up to heaven to collect
your angel's wings.



My days were empty, but the
thing that kept me going
was staring at your photograph,
and knowing you were watching
over me with your heavenly smile.

a bird of prey

ALAN BEDWORTH

The peregrine falcon soaring on high,
looks around for fresh prey.
Wings tucked in, talons firmly out,

she descends like an Exocet,
wings open, so that no other bird
can take her kill.

She'll get her fill, then
take off, flying to her
nest far above the ground.

Eager eyes fight for
the food as she tears bits
off for all of them.

She'll do this umpteen times
a day. In the interim, she'll
clean up her nest, throwing
scraps over the cliff.

Finally at night, she'll
sit in her nest while
the tercel looks after
their family.



sedation

ANTHONY SALANDY

Long drawn vapours
Perfume a strobe-lit room
With a toxic mix of young adult delusions

Where inhalation sedates
Inflamed minds
That beg for sweet salvation

Amongst manipulative beings
Who, come morning, are just as mortal
As any other worker,

But long nights need sedatives
So that racing hearts
And lost minds

May forget burden and sacrifice
In dingy urban settings
Where cavernous spaces

Lay open to languid bodies tepid and dopified.

the great repel

ANTHONY SALANDY

To repel is to envisage battle hidden
And stricken with overtones friendly
But malignant in repertoire,

For repetitive are 'busy days'
And token gestures
Sacrosanct to utilization

When no other stands to tolerate
Grandiose deception,
Synonymous to camaraderie counterfeit,

But a surfeit of vain trickery
Exists to befuddle innocent minds
Where some say individuals face

'Different pathways',
I say some choose to lament
On great privilege ascribed

Instead of giving gratitude
For paths utterly
Of their own making.

ode: to the man wearing headphones on the subway

EMMA MCGLASHEN

The way you tap your foot is a perfect syncopation of my heartbeat and I can't believe we have been acquainted for so short a time and we are already making music together. I love how you swing the beat. How I know you intimately, from this, already. How we could leap from our seats and swing around this car, holding each other in orbit, in motion, as this jewel-case of iron and spark hurtles through the city and no one would see but the simple and blessed gaze of a wheeling school of pigeons, all of us dancing in the sky —

from the mountains near boise, id

EMMA MCGLASHEN

You have taken five pounds of trail food from my pack and put them into your own, because mine was too heavy. You had said it would be. You had said so in a way which was not gentle, and so I did not listen to you. Now, the straps of my backpack cut into the skin of my shoulders. My boots—designed for exactly this sort of thing—chafe, despite thick socks. This valley is low and wide, like a platter. We disrupt the earth, kicking up a dust trail behind us as snails leave muck. Sage snarls like thin wire along the edges of the path; the smell masks the smell of canvas, the plastic of our new water bottles, the nylon of our hammocks we intend to string between as of yet unknown trees. We were promised that an oasis would emerge from around the bends up ahead. Respite is hiding, park aides assured us, just on the far side of the mountain.

This trail, we were told, is well traveled. We have miles yet to go. I stop to re-tie a lace and earn a huffed breath, your thumbs-downs tucked into pack straps. You have come on this trip hoping to lose your breath. You are beginning to think that I will not be the source of that phenomenon. Your shoes stay tied. They are molded to your feet. You were ready to be accommodating when taking on my burdens — my reticence to share the load confuses you, makes you pointy and exasperated. Your nose sharpens, your eyebrows darken. Your shoulders have more linear edges. You are outlined in sky out here, dark against its blue. Vultures above, ahead.

Note: Previous iterations of this poem were part of a manuscript which was awarded a Hopwood Undergraduate Poetry Award.

to my mother, who told me to be focused

BUPINDER SINGH

Do you see me? Yes! Plainly you're there.

My mom told me to unsee you, and unhear every word you say.
So, I don't see you anymore.

What did I do? You with foul mouth,
you are a bad influence, she says. You talk of morbid things
that bring no peace.

What made her think so? I told her the other day,
what you said to me, the puppets playing puppets for puppets.
She said to cut all strings with you.
So, who'll be your friend now? She says she'll bring me a car.
One that zooms when you pull it back. She says she'll bring me
books,
the kind with manners and morals.

She'll put me in a better school, where I'll become a gentleman.
More employable and skilled, a perfect choice for success.
She says that will be good.

And what do you say? She says I need not say anything,
I am undereducated still. And on top of that, she despises me
for being under your influence.
I would be gone, sooner now. This place is not for me.
Where one rises to fall, and another takes his place.
If someday still you stumble, and break the chains and clutters.
You'll find me somewhere here, I'll be your friend and make amends.

Hey! My mom is here. You need to go, and before you go, let's



hide all of this

Under the old cupboard, so when I pull it out, you'll come out of the box.

to the ones living in the wastelands

BUPINDER SINGH

Cemetery with no bones but only flesh,
an urn full of cotton, beads of lapis lazuli,
and of wood, some unrecognizable
stone, sliced splinters stocked,
in pits under decomposed walls,
nobody lives here anymore.
Skeletal fossil imprints, excavated in entirety,
wallowed in amber and quartz, dogs and sheep buried along
some painted lustrous screen with copper handle,
burnt brick barrage to encompass it all.
Surrounded by elaborate granaries and public baths,
uncluttered streets along squared houses;
nobody lives here anymore.
Torn with pride and prejudice,
scorned with indignation and disdain,
caught up in bizarrerie of clickbaits,
adorned with gold and diamonds,
branded with the finest haute couture,
impoverished with riches;
here, nobody's alive anymore.
Unrelated to their genealogy,
chasing the Cosmopolitan sun,
wax-winged Icarus lookalikes
with flying dreams — caged not buried — beside
the altar of self-immolating aspirations
walk the cluttered street of heavenly mansions
surrounded by disposal pits of accumulated toxic leftovers;
here, nobody's alive anymore.

a blank page has no choice but to listen

RICHARD LEDUE

A potential blood clot is a good reason
not to write a poem,
even though fear yells
like a half drunk executive,
who expects more words per minute
than I could ever do,
while the thought of being alone
whispers,
sounding the same as someone scared
to wake a baby,
yet both prove
silence is never the answer.

to strangle the night

RICHARD LEDUE

It's sometimes best to be alone,
so our imaginations can leave out
the sound of clipping toenails
at 12:23 a.m., and how tight
eyes close, even under blankets
in the dark — I have heard snoring
strangle the night,
while my naked feet became cold,
and although no one asked,
I still complained to an empty room,
only to fall asleep on my couch
without even realizing it.



the middle

JASON DE KOFF

The xenosphere of the mind
is beyond the cerebral circuitry
and activation state of
synapses and cells.

Running a server
in ethereal fluid
with programs uploaded
to transcendental mainframes.

All fed by the same source,
the energy,
we have no name for,
yet.

Accessed by some and not others,
more by some,
less by others,
sequestered in all.

The interlocking series
of invisible threads,
connections,
creates the access code.

Passing the threshold
into the unforgotten state
overcomes the confounding variables
never solved.



Bringing to fruition
the spent struggles,
in sightless vision
to the radiance that exists between.

chrysanth connections

JASON DE KOFF

Festooned with precise
packages of color,
clustered into large bouquets,
of cupcake frosting,

Supported by a forest
of stately stems,
arranged in a phalanx
of comforting security,

The multilayered complexity
of each shapely petal,
denotes golden ratio relations
with seashells and galaxies,

Making it an ethereal
example to behold,
of both beauty
and connection,

So that, upon the last vestiges
of autumnal glory,
chrysanthemum gives hope,
safe passage until spring.

the boy in the box

P A S T E L B L A C K

Boy in the box
Won't you please come out?
The longer you stay
The more it compounds

Please, my sweet,
I know you need time
But the walls that surround you
Can never be climbed

I really need you
To look and see
That you are being controlled
And you can be free

Boy in the box,
We will be here
When you tear down the walls
And let go of your fear



daylight moon

PASTEL BLACK

I see you hiding in the corner
Like the moon in the daytime
Not quite belonging
But close enough

You hover in your space
Unsure of where you are
Maybe it isn't your scene
And yet we all orbit around you

You are something different
A galaxy in a fish tank
Enclosed and restricted
Majestic and wild



mother

ERICA HOM

The audible burn of a marlboro cigarette.
An oyster clinging to the pearls she birthed.
Smile woven in crocodile hyde, stitched ears.
A woman who had tapdanced on typhoons
and wore her crown of thorns with grace.

She shrouded herself in cirrus clouds, tangled
herself in jungle roots. For years I fought her tides;
pulled her from the rolling sea, placed her hands beside her body,
and shook the salt from her hair, from her words,
from the ways she chose to express her love —

With mismatched tongues,
I am treading the waves of the inherited
oceans between us. Sometimes I still wake up
in the sea, heart heavy, saltwater soaked,
Floating with my mother beside me,
finding pearls hiding in shipwrecked depths.



progress;

ERICA HOM

“Normal,” says the left hand
“Normal,” confirms the right
“There is no normal,” Freud declares
From a chair of silk and glass.

The room looks like a box — she expected nothing else.
A familiar heap of ash, pill cutter
Bruise-colored wine glasses coalesce, like friends.

Outside, the morning sun continues to tapdance
Inside, spiders apologize from still corners.
The TV screen asks if she is okay.

Take one capsule by mouth at bedtime
Wake up, clench teeth, await demons, repeat.
Wait in time for harder skin and softer bruises.
She wishes, instead, to cut herself from her body.

“Progress,” beams the right foot;
The left foot follows, spitefully;



smoke

ERICA HOM

My childhood
was spent contemplating the table-shaped void
between my mother and me,
a blurry angel outlined
by cigarette smoke floating
like a sharp mist above a granite sea.
Mouthfuls of burning words billowed from her,
licking the air like grey flames.
Each scorched syllable caressed me with a question:
“How long will you stay?”
“Are you eating enough?”

As she swept her apologies into the dust pan,
I stowed away my dreams in carry-on luggage.
Falling into the arms of a new city,
a time zone between us,
I still found home in her smoke signals.

And now when I long for home,
I conjure ghosts
steaming softly from a china kettle,
jasmine tea flowering, whistling, floating
a fog that both avoids my gaze yet
envelops me in a hesitant hug.

bechdel test

ROO SHA MANDAL

In the media I am choked, slapped, poked
under the microscope.
Each cubic inch of fat probed,
injected with nutrients,
a body for male consumption.

I am a cracked hourglass,
grains of sand spilling, gushing
from my chest to my thighs.
Skin cells dance like a cup of Jell-O,
overflowing out of Barbie lines.

I am pixels pieced together
like iced flowers on a carby-pastry.
I am on a saccharine starvation diet,
stretch marks airbrushed out by
plastic surgery photoshop editing.

I am a few lines in a 140-minute feature film,
demure lollipop legs in stilettos.
I am a standing lamp, failing a test,
lights on when they expect
no one to be home.

a biologist in the garden

ROO SHA MANDAL

Noon sits between waves of sun rays and cumuliform clouds
and if I follow the weathered stepping stones to my garden,

I might see the daylily cultivar butterfly perched
on the extended petal of the speckled purple flowers,
and I might hear the green stem bend to its weight,
thick cell walls squeezing in on each other's plasmodesmata.
I might feel how the soft soil sighs underneath me
as it caresses the tangled roots of peonies,

and I might smell the breath of the oak tree,
inhaling carbon dioxide in wisps out of the atmosphere.

Nature failed to fill humans with chlorophyll,
but I still grow, three billion cells in homeostasis with the
universe.

what's left of me?

AAROHISHARMA

What's left of me?

I have chewed the inside of my cheek to stop myself from sobbing

I have torn my flesh with remorse

the ripping made my teeth ache like they have been mourning for
a death that's yet to occur

they chatter like a naked child shivering in the cold streets of
delhi

blood gushes out and fills my mouth like an overflowing river
waiting to cause a disaster, it threatens to spill out and stain the
white sweater my mother had made

I believe I can't voice my pain

so I don't say what's wrong when people ask me, I keep quiet and
try to swallow it, let the blood cascade down my burning throat

blood coats my lips a royal ruby red

they sparkle and make grief seem beautiful

and then there are days I can't keep my mouth closed, days where
it's hard to not let the red spill

on those days I open my mouth, I open it big and wide to vomit
and cough out all the blood

after my mouth's betrayal, somewhere in my throat, I find my
voice wandering alone as regret torments it

so I grab my voice by its hair and drag it upon my tongue so that
it screeches out my agony and shame once and for all

what's left of me? the sweet-sour aftertaste on my tongue.

time bomb

EMMA JEAN HERMACINSKI

on select evenings in theaters near you, the night
sky seeps into my pores like a charcoal scrub and i know
i am insatiable,
semantically, synthetically pure, a cyborg, programmed from
anagrammed manifestos in corner-store coffee shops. my
hunger is for the searing passion a leech must revel in
upon latching onto lake-soaked, high-arched feet. the powers
of pepsin cannot hum the slightest measure of the operas
screeching of the engineered amylase i crave. i dig through

terabytes of archive and locate my birthplace, an admission
exam to existence held under the watch of the highest
authorities walking by my dappled picnic, staged
by dotting fingertips in a one-tree forest. the technician
extended, in technicolor disquiet, a sterile sample of precious,
preserved
maltodextrin,
a medicine i downed without questioning. the sensors,
pharyngially implanted for this great purpose beyond
my prediction, blared with my beeping
eyes as tears rushed forth, revealing
a less-than-concrete form of flesh beneath
my soldering. technically, technicians lifted
me into cryogenic immortality, but i woke the next day,

half past two [years later]
with the knowledge that i craved.
in the flesh, i am queen of morals, magnetically north and
cold to the southerners who act as i do without truth. but if you



have listened, you welcome the fact that i am far
from human in this state. theft is no matter, for stealing
without notice is taken without meaning. like a kitten, i spin
open the purple pouch and extract
[one taki,]
a scroll containing the agony
i can barely withstand, a pain desperately key
to my overcoming.

sanctum

EMMA JEAN HERMACINSKI

i am a groove in my mattress pad, unassuming yet
glorious in my well-patterned conformity. i sped through dates
with high society to walk into a narthex of restrained
suits and dresses that fall
at the knees, bleeding and screeching and goodness and please
in restraint to the modern atrocity committed outside
of standard office hours. a specter is haunting

my pews, for not one saint can ascertain which of them you have
desecrated, each beam of naturalized light whispering another
alibi, each glass bench refracting in a plea
for absolution. the altar holds a host, staring forward in
a doppler shade of undead eyes, speaking in tongues
to her cradled earworm parasite. around us are the waves of
prairie, uninvaded, held to standards of nobility far
from permitting conversation. i am a simple girl,

unbloodied by the sins you committed, unwilling to shine your
crime
out of my mouth in exorcism. the darkness birthed within
heavy-handed glass chapels, inflated from fallow earth and
left as monuments to dreams, the

dark mess of your hair, inevitable,
polluting my peace, must and shall politely recede
from clogged-up pores as i close the doors before
hallowing them to open my spirit
for your demons
once again.

an evening at marina beach

JOANNA GEORGE

Behind the bleak silhouetted
line of shops on Chennai's beach road,
the sun launched its descent,
her true colors leaking onto the landscape,
enticing every strolling artist's soul,
halting their wandering feet.
The sun's tangerine warmth is mesmerizing.
It spills into frames and pages,
in the hue of a faded henna stain.
The fast food cooks, the stars of the night,
stretch across the shore, marking their territories
like soldiers with flaming arrows.
The torchbearers of the beach are the
vendors with their corn roasters spitting sparks,
shards of the red evening sun,
on the glittering sand that
reaches seamlessly to the Bay of Bengal.
The Bay sways gracefully as the fishermen retreat
with lanterns that flicker like Diwali diyas.
Soothed by the love song of the wind, lulled by the high tides,
they approach the great shore that faithfully waits for them
like an unrequited eternal love.
I feel the life of this city in every speck of sand.
Maybe that's why
the sun stays a little longer here,
stretching the evening like the beach itself,
to watch life unfold at high tombs and stone benches,
to hear stories of survival and resilience
from this place, from its people.

love letters

JOANNA GEORGE

Most evenings after school, I am welcomed home with
thin dosas, wheat or maida — depending on the prices —
stuffed with jaggery and coconut,
corners ritualistically folded envelopesque,
concealing the sweet inside from the world.
It was her easiest snack. She served love letters with strong coffee
on
lonely rainy evenings.
There were secrets in every brown spot, ciphers in every bump,
that revealed themselves like jaggery melting on my eager tongue
Love letters, our neighborhood calls them,
this sweet soul-warming evening snack.
The aroma of ghee mingling with jaggery
calls to mind yellowed love notes, carefully written,
scented with seasonal flowers.
With her gone, what remains are memories and the melting
tastes,
like fading letters from a long lost lover.

the imprisoned

UNNIMAYA S

few lines are penned
on those who tolerate.
that uncle who was
deemed ungrateful
behind his back.
yes, that uncle
with the kind smile,
who doesn't bother you
with too many questions.
they distanced him
and cut him off
'cause he stayed out
of the family drama.
memories of him exist
in the cage of
their mean gossips now.
your grandmother who
skilfully hides her
silent feminism under
the overpowering love
your grandfather
smothers her with.
she convinces herself
that she did the right thing:
"it was the best option for my children."
she pushes away her resentment
and nods frantically as you
talk about 'respect before love'.
she beams with pride



as you ramble on
until the clock ticks and
she has to serve him dinner;
he cannot swallow food otherwise.
she's so earnestly dutiful
about it from habit.
you can trace her worry lines
as she leans back
and dozes off watching
news debates not up to
her standards.
you realize how cozy of
an abode she has made
of her cage by now.
that pet dog who never
asked for more,
he had grown too big
to stay hygienic inside
a large home.
he remained in the outer shed
with absolutely no complaints,
perpetually excited to
spot his family now and then.
he would entertain you
as a little kid —
chasing his tail
like a happy maniac,
and covering you
in adorable drool.



you believe he died of a
heart disease;
he had a humongous heart.
it was too big for him to carry.
and no one carried it for him.
instead they built him a larger cage.
you still reeked of his love
when he died in your arms.
his eyes were happy as
Dobby's were
in Harry's arms.
in your head, you scream.
you scream like a banshee
who was too late.
your mother's voice quivers
between her uncontrollable sobs
as she says,
"that cage should never have been built."

writer's block

MATHANGIN M

there is a poem in my mind but she won't come to me. she's shy
she's angry. she wishes she were something more prosaic
something more transcendent something like hope or grief, all
pervasive and omniscient, rather than thought in a sad girl's head.
there is a poem in my mind and i fight her with armor because i
don't want her to spill my secrets. the tremors of my spine. the
feeling of dread in the pits of my brain. i don't want her to get out
and haunt me from this page. i don't want her to get out and
whisper in your ear all the things about me i refuse to see. i don't
want her to get out. i don't want her to be free.

there is a poem in my mind and she's burning through my
thoughts like a fire like a migraine in its prime like boredom with
teeth. she bites into my skull and keeps me hostage in a
thoughtless mind in the embrace of an art too vile to love.

there is a poem in my mind and i hate her. i wish she were gone
forever and i let her know it. when she leaves she leaves with
finality. she returns

the thoughts she robbed me of and cracks open a window in my
mind.

she is gone forever and i should be happy. she is gone forever and
i should be happy. she is gone forever and i should be happy. she
is gone forever and i feel like i lost a limb. she is gone forever
until she sneaks back in through the window she left open.

there isn't a poem in my mind she is gone forever.

there isn't a poem in my mind she is hiding from me.

there isn't a poem in my mind she's shy she's angry.

there isn't a poem in my mind she's waiting for me to sleep
so she can carve me up and keep every piece.

the heart heals

SONIA CHARALES

My heart continues to beat
After all the minor surgeries
The bandages and stitches
Keeping every string in place
Out of tune and thinning
From the damage before

My heart wonders to feel again
I hold in my palm
Fingers around the apex
Numb veins with shivery glitches
I still see the lines
Of the remnants to be forgotten

My heart still hurts
(Part of the healing process)
If I pick at the wounded scabs
The crusted blood rings
These wounds will heal slower
Wrap it up in gauze and tape that
Settle my hands

My heart continues to beat
Just like it always has
Never to be the same again
After the seams fade back in
Never forgotten but forgiving itself

flood of acceptance

ELLPOET

It's the constant feeling
Deep in your gut
The constant reminder
Deep in your heart

The constant realization
Deep in your memory
The constant tear that wants to fall
Deep in your consciousness

You know the emotion that is flooding you
You know this will not abate easily
You know you must come to accept
You know you will want to deny

This is the way of grief
When those we hold dear pass on
No matter how much time we had
To say what we needed to say

You must remember
They believed in you
They knew you would get through this
You have strength within

They are still there
You only need to recall
The sound and smell
Of having them close.

time to say goodbye

ELLPOET

He stands up against the bar, his glass of scotch & ice lifted to his lips

His other hand holds a pipe, just like the one his grandfather smoked

The smell of scotch & tobacco is heavy in the air

A warm breeze blows through the open door, it lightly ruffles his wavy short black hair

He can hear his son & daughter playing by the pond, always happy to be together

They are his pride & joy, a strapping brown-haired boy, smart & inquisitive by nature

His daughter is a bubbly blond, always chatting & smiling, he knows people are fooled by this, they do not expect her to be so intelligent & witty

They are both well-spoken, both well versed in all he has taught them

As his mind is drifting he can sense a familiar presence, one that brings him peace & calm

He looks across the bar to see a beautiful blonde, self-assured, a little smile on her face

Her blue eyes are twinkling, he can see she is well dressed

As he looks at her, he still can't believe this beautiful woman chose to make a life with him

Their shared history passes between them without a word spoken, they both can tell what the other is thinking with just a glance

His beautiful wife lets him know it's almost time for the kids to go to bed, he nods in acknowledgment, not looking away

As she walks off, he gets lost in his thoughts, his mind never stops



He knows he has a gift, he knows his way of thinking is unique,
but he can feel that this will do him well in his life
As an older man he stands against a different bar, more of a short
wall, facing the sea
The smell of the sea fills his senses, the sound of the waves
crashing is what he concentrates on
He knows that his time is short, he knows that the sun won't rise
for him much longer
His beautiful wife comes to stand beside him, lovingly wraps a
blanket around him & helps him to bed
As he lies down, he thinks back on all he has achieved; his work
was a huge success, he knows he has left a legacy for another to
live up to, he knows this will take time, there are not many who
are so intelligent & dignified in all they do
His children are all grown up, now with children of their own
He could not be prouder of all they have achieved, challenges
they have faced, all the trauma they have conquered
He knows he has done all he could, he knows he has fought hard,
he knows it is time to say goodbye
His wife wraps her arms around him, bringing him the peace he
needs.

red wine friendship

ELLPOET

As he sat at his dining room table, swirling a glass of red wine, he slowed the swirling & softly inhaled the delicious smell

The wine is all he hoped it would be

He looked at his friend, he said it's smooth, full, I can smell the different flavors, I can distinguish between the bouquets

This was one of the reasons the two were such great friends: they could talk about anything, in a way that others would not comprehend

These two men were smart: when they got together, they pushed each other to have ingenious ideas — some marvelous, some preposterous

These two men could talk for hours, the banter they enjoyed always quick to flow, both were in a league of their own, always taking their work a step further

This friendship, it was clear to see, was about more than just a chat; it was about the respect & understanding they showed each other

As he raised his glass to his friend, he came back to himself. Yes, Confused at first, he was sure he was just at his friend's table

Then he remembered, ah yes, his friend had passed; a great mind



was lost to the world, to him. it was the loss of an understanding soul, one who made sure he knew he was there when needed

This will hurt for some time

i hope you remember

SWATI SINGH

When darkness overpowers
and light is nowhere to be found,
when suffering is abundant
and numbness makes home in its absence,

When the longing for home is endless
and hope deserts you in the depths of despair,
When you hang by a thread,
Your faith shattered,

When all your efforts miscarry
and the anguish of failure lingers,
When the world collapses
and Hell rises while Heaven falls,

When autumn never ends
and spring does not arrive,
When strength evaporates
and the soul wails,

I hope you remember,
the darkest night brings
the brightest morning,
a timid firefly swallows
the black vastness.

I hope you remember,
the God who resides within
is never lost but needs to be found,



the thornbird
serenades with its dying breath.

I hope you remember,
that crushed flowers
leave aromas,
burning coals
glow golden,

The pain of today is
the art of tomorrow.

the uninvited visitor

ANNAPURANI VAIDYANATHAN

Every morning
self-doubt slithers silently
in between the cracks and crevices
of the dilapidated roof,
through the holes of monstera leaves
fluttering in the hallway,
over my collarbones
and into my heart
before it wends languidly
in the crook of my arm,
and involuntarily cooks up the proverbial storm.

Every morning
self-doubt slithers silently
in *wh* pronouns
and dangling participles,
in open-ended questions
and full stops
that refuse to be bent into semicolons,
and stares at me all day long.

Every morning
self-doubt slithers silently
in my waking moments
and reminds of failures
and heartbreaks
and everything that went wrong,
and brazenly asks me
if I can look beyond,
if I have it in me to stay strong.

catching catfish with a gourd

TIMOTHY TARKELLY

Dexterous skill and a keen eye
for tradition
birthed in mud, in footprints
that trail the village's end,
connect us to the ashen world,
its collection of modest colors,
of breathing things.

the houseplant in need of water

PAUL RUTH

The Peace Lily
is in a slump
looking down
like a nun expecting her pupils to be
praying beside her.
Taking a bow after the show stopping
standing applause.

The Peace Lily
is in need
like the hunger for a meal
a soldier for peace
like a planet for hope
sadness for a hug
like a disease for a cure
a junkie for a hit.

New leaves are greener
as if that is possible, says the old leaf,
wider and wiser than the rest.
Predicting a flower soon
from a north window post.
Such a fool, says the book daylighting as a botanist.

The Peace Lily is in a slump
but is just one horse away
from breaking even on beer and cheap cigarettes.
Just one more roll
is all it takes,



just the winning numbers to come up right
on the evening local news.

wildflowers in the night

PAUL RUTH

The abandoned railroad tracks explain to me
the purpose of death
as I see the weeds grow
the weeds grow
between the rails
between the ties
wildflowers in the night.

And yet I want to live in a place
where the tracks go someplace
other than
empty factories
and lines of division.

I want tracks to go to God's country
or to the promised land,
heaven on a plate
seems so easy.

I want tracks to lead to prosperity
to the American dream
to the crème de la crème
so it rhymes with the history
I was taught
I was taught to believe
I was taught to believe in greed.

But not all travels lead to rest
the purpose of death



with
wildflowers in the night.

patti smith used to live here

PAUL RUTH

Where I am, here, present
at the shores of Lake St. Clair,
I wonder, ponder, just think.

Is there any place to be
any place to live
without going for a run
and I'm running
to where
I don't know.

Moving down the road.
Looking left.
Looking right.
Looking straight ahead
knowing better
than looking back
to love
the people who love me.

Right in the lake I stretch
until submerged
and dead,
drowned
like Virginia Woolf
writing obituaries of lighthouses.



fire light

ORION CHRISTOPHER

Its light reveals what dares to hide.
Straightbacked, watching the embers burn,
The darkness banished for a time —
It is the clarity of the world.
Berries gathered that day, fueling
My cooking with a burst of acrid sugar.
Eggs gathered from a fridge, flavored by the flame,
Foraged before anyone could claim them,
Sizzling on a discarded pan wrested
From those who complained about the soot.
The pit of coals, ringed by simple rough stones,
Barely scratched from the dirt, contains this vision.
A friend helped me dig the spot with splintered shovels.
We wanted to do this, teased
As if it were some unnecessary great labor.
Minutes of work for hours of open eyes,
Seconds of ‘struggle’ for days of clarity.
Abhorrence of work is clear in the fire’s light.
I toss a splash of wine, of eggs, of berries
To the fire, an offering of
Thanks.
As flavored smoke refuses to obscure the stars above
The ashes cover what others offer,
Cigarette butts in an empty hole.

under the strawberry moon

Y U U I K E D A

At night with the strawberry moon,
your sorrow becomes
a drop of mist

At night with the strawberry moon,
my guilt becomes
a thorn of mist

Under the strawberry moon,
we are holding hands,
lest an illusion of a demon
swallows our last breath

Under the strawberry moon,
we are gazing at the vulnerable red,
lest a shroud of resignation
cocoon our last kiss



your earring

Y U U I K E D A

The earring on your right ear
emits a shadow

Every time I kiss the earring,
you sigh, and laugh,
sadly, and gracefully

I love your earring
that intoxicates my lips

I love your smile
like a rose

I love your melodious sigh



trauma

RAJNISH DAS



They talk about trauma a lot.

I close my eyes and it's red

Red

Everywhere.

My vision red; was it blood or death?

My father red: standing on my chest, grinding red teeth.

Was it anger or shame?

Pain?

Maybe.

Where did it all begin?

My foremothers floating on a boat, staring at the water, clasping
hunger

Yet starving to feed the men; was that the moment?

What is trauma, actually?

Is it the lowly blood in our lowly bodies?

Or the lowly surnames residing in lowlands?

Yesterday,

My father stood on my brother's chest.

My mother cried blood and I inhaled enough dust to taste
nothing.

It was a windy dusty night

The trucks rushed over the highway



A carpenter kept engraving wood with something sharp all
through the night
It felt like it could rain
But, the world swallowed dust.

Who might be the first to touch trauma?

(They talk about trauma a lot. Dry land, dry beds, and filled
bellies make you think a lot things.)

The forefather who packed one fine day
and made the journey to the wetlands
Or was it his brother
beaten up, sacked one night
and thrown out towards the periphery

Who could it be?

Can it be the first daughter born in the wetlands?

Or the battered wife who bore a daughter in the wild?

I lie in the bed and wonder
How they sown seeds of trauma
My mother, her mother, her mother's mother
To sprout someone new, one day
like me
Who can walk back to the dry.

I often tell my brother we sprouted out of the wetlands.

my mother kept sadness piling

RAJNISH DAS

My mother kept sadness piling

Like a stack of used dishes after dinner, hidden somewhere, years before, and like forgetting about the keys, ATM cards, and identity cards, she forgot about it.

One morning when we were born to make them happy, the pile of dishes stank the hour.

And smell is one strange thing. You spend too much in it, you forget it exists.

It wasn't that she didn't know about the rotting sadness. Like faintly remembering the loss of your childhood best friend, she knew about it. My father was there, very much there, like a tree with roots in the land and its body floating on the water.

Forever, he was very much there. Indeed, it was water behind his eyes. When he slept for that hour at night, it was the water that went over him and he floated on a broken boat with family Who were still his family.

And we, like newly born toads, were getting lost each day, in a brand new way.



the writer

SPANDAN BANDYOPADHYAY

Once upon a time, one fine day,
My father, young then, did say:
A fine writer I shall be
And huge fame will belong to me.

A lovely notebook he bought, but he soon fell apart. As the
outcome was disappointing, he lost heart.

He said:
How will I survive? I've a family.
(I, a kid, didn't understand money.)
My mother was furious
And my father, no longer curious
About a famed life,
Listened to his concerned wife

He earned a pittance and into despair he descended. His writing
career he indefinitely suspended.

When I grew up, I found the old book, abandoned and dejected in
a dusty nook.

I said, I want to write. Writing is cool!
My parents cautioned me, Don't be a fool.
My father said, This isn't good.
You'll have no money and no food.

Without sparing a moment to appraise what I'd written, they
tossed the notebook like an unwanted stray kitten.



But

Still, I wrote, and still I write.

Something about writing felt so right.

I had to get that notebook out because

Writing wasn't something I wanted to live with; it was what I
couldn't live without.

The background is a solid teal color. It is decorated with several stylized leaf branches. The branches are arranged in a circular pattern around the center. Each branch consists of a thin stem with several pointed, oval-shaped leaves. The leaves are colored in two shades: a light pink and a teal color, matching the background. The word "fiction" is centered in the middle of the page in a dark teal, serif font.

fiction

my dad is a doctor

PRANITI GULYANI

There's a lot that goes into your dad being a doctor. When your dad is a doctor, you get to step into a white coat that almost blankets you, covering you from head to toe. You get to wear a stethoscope around your neck, and check the heartbeat of the walls as you go about injecting no one in particular. And then, you get this unlimited supply of lollipops and chocolates that are ideally meant for children who howl and scream during vaccinations, but in all honesty, you could not care less. You become the heart and soul of the waiting room, getting your tangled mop of hair ruffled, and your cheeks pulled.

But as you grow older, and your comfortable feet touch the hot, tarry roads of (almost) adulthood, the lollipops meant for children who howl during vaccinations do not melt in your mouth. Instead, they stick between your glow-in-the-dark braces. From sunlit waiting room days, you move into sultry, diary-and-pen nights. Your tangled mop of hair is a knot on the top of your head, and you hate it being touched, let alone ruffled. And suddenly, when you are seventeen and three quarters, your dad who is a doctor stops coming home. You hear the mention of long nights and cramped halls, and one day, out of the blue, someone mentions a pandemic. And then, when you ask what a pandemic is, a doting relative says that it is one of the things your dad has to deal with, being a doctor.

A sense of obviousness has been imposed on you. After all, there are a lot of things which are part and parcel of the medical world. You shrug this off, and plug in your earphones, seizing every bit of the extremely temporary oblivion that rock music bestows upon you.



It isn't as though you don't know what the pandemic is about. Of course, you do know about the virus, the mask and the sanitizer. Wearing a mask and being surrounded by the pungent odor of sanitizer do not feel strange. Again, these are some of the things that go into your dad being a doctor.

On one crispy-thin, frost-hemmed winter afternoon, you decide you want to go out and get some fresh air. As you step outside, you see the pitiful wisp of the moon. Clad in a veil of clouds, which seem to be haphazardly woven together, it is trembling. The incompleteness of this celestial being engulfs you, and suddenly, something within you starts to ache.

You wince and look around for your inhaler, almost instantly anticipating a bout of asthma. But, moments later, you realize that this ache is not something that emerges from a place as simple as the chest. It is rooted in a place that is deeper, complex, and much more intricate. And suddenly, you begin to want.

You want your doctor dad in the white coat. You want that white-colored antiseptic-scented hug and you want to feel the crinkle of the lollipop wrapper which he would, more often than not, force into your unwilling teenage hands. As you go back inside, you reach out for your cellphone and dial his number. After all, you are a human, and you cherish instant gratification, no matter how big or small your want may be.

As your fingers skid along the keyboard, you pause. You do not remember whether it is a nine before the eight, or a four. You are



confused. Lost, even.

Finally, you dial his number. A woman picks up. She asks who you are and your lips struggle to form the word 'daughter'. The woman mutters something about death, about your mother already being at the hospital. She continues to converse, her words blurring at the thin line between condolences and apologies, but you cannot hear anything. You are cold and numb, pushed to a state of immobility. The blackness of the sky seems to have vaporized into absolute whiteness. It is a whiteness which isn't like any ordinary kind of whiteness. It is the kind of whiteness that would overwhelm your gaze when your dad who was a doctor would lift you and hold you close. Your open eyes would press against the golds of his white coat, and the whiteness that would fill your gaze then was not just absolute. It was intense, and most importantly, it was pure.

They see you standing in a supposed trance, a little away from the balcony. I think they misunderstand you. They take you down. You are hugged, but you don't hug back; you are spoken to, but you don't speak back; you are looked at, but you don't look back. And then, suddenly someone says that maybe, just maybe, you were prepared for it, and expecting it all along.

After all, death is one of the many, many things that go into your dad being a doctor.

wyoming, 2012

GRACIE NORDGREN

It was at the rest stop north of Laramie. A stuffed flamingo in a glass enclosure. I stood there before it with my weary eyes and travel-worn shoes. A crowd of my fellow visitors encircled it, appraising the creature with varying levels of interest. Some were silent, some were jeering with faces pressed against the glass and twisted into garish smiles.

There was something sacrilegious in the viewing of the creature. Something demeaning in the way the flamingo was presented. Wings outstretched as if attempting to fly. Perhaps to escape? There was a coupon sheet taped to one side of the glass. As if it were a discount couch instead of the corpse of a once-living creature. There is no dignity in an afterlife of taxidermist's fluid.

I saw them again while asleep. All the people crowding, pointing, at the display. The scene just as I had seen it before. Except it was me in that case.

And my legs were lead and my arms were frozen and outstretched before me in a portrait of eternal yearning and my eyes wouldn't close and my mouth was glued shut and I couldn't scream as the claustrophobia of being a prisoner in my own body reached a crescendo. All they did, all they ever did, was watch without seeing and it didn't matter that I was once a human being like them with a mother and the ability to sleep and memories of pain and pleasure because in the end I was an object to be used and then discarded when I was no longer interesting.

The following day, I left Wyoming. Is this how you want to be



remembered? A billboard asked the question as I sped down the highway.

A single prayer hung upon my lips, directed at the open road.

Please, when I die, please don't send me to a display case.

justice never slept that day

B CRAIG GRAFTON

You could tell that he'd been through this a few times before. That he knew the routine. That he knew how the system worked. Knew what was expected of him. Knew what the prosecutor would do. That he was a hardened veteran of the criminal justice system.

Once again he sat at the defense table listening to the prosecutor drone on and on about the charges. Alleged charges as far as he was concerned. This was taking longer than he had expected and it was all the assistant state attorney's fault. She had a flair for the dramatic. She loved to hear herself talk. Loved to prance around the courtroom being the center of attention. She was having a high old time. But to him it was boring.

The judge was becoming bored too. The look on his face said hurry this up, get on with it, we've got a lot to do today. But this didn't register with her so he sent another signal. He raised his eyebrows as he looked at her over the top of his glasses but that didn't work either. She just continued pacing back and forth, reading from her notes, losing her place, finding it, regaining her composure and monologuing on.

He knew what the judge was thinking. Same as him, boring. He sat there, his head resting in his right hand, his right elbow resting on the table, his eyes slowly closing. This was only a preliminary hearing. It was all procedural, nothing new here. He'd just rest. Close his eyes for a few minutes. He did so and, immediately, he fell asleep.

That's when the judge noticed him and took action. Putting his



index finger to his lips indicating total silence to all those in the courtroom, he pointed to the defense counsel's table. The assistant state attorney stopped blabbering. The courtroom went silent. He then signaled for the bailiff. She tiptoed forward and the judge, in sotto voce, gave her his instructions.

Silently, she went over to the couple of attorneys with their clients sitting in the back of the courtroom waiting their turn and whispered to them that the judge wanted them to leave. They did so. Then she closed the door hanging a sign on it that read 'No Admittance. Closed Hearing'. Only the judge, bailiff, prosecutor, court reporter, defense counsel and the defendant remained. Then, per the judge's instructions, she approached the defense table and stood there. The judge nodded for her to proceed.

She put her hand on his shoulder and gently shook him. "Mr. Schlick. Mr. Schlick, wake up, please."

Groggily, he started to come out of his slumber, shook his head, rubbed his eyes, and yawned. And then, as if he had been hit by a bolt of lightning, his whole body jolted. There before the bench were the prosecutor and his client.

"Mr. Schlick, if you would be kind enough to join us, please," requested the judge.

"Yes, Your Honor," was all he was able to get out. He, who was hardly ever at a loss for words.



With much effort, he pushed his chair from the table and groaned as he lifted his overweight, old, worn-out body from his chair. His knees cracked as he rose. He waddled painstakingly to the bench.

“I apologize to the court, Your Honor, to my client, and to the state’s attorney,” he said, clearing his throat and straightening his tie.

“Mr. Schlick, I think it best that your client have another attorney represent him in this matter. I am ordering that you withdraw as his attorney of record instanter. I am also ordering you to return to him his retainer. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“This matter is therefore continued for two weeks from today for the defendant to obtain new counsel. Court is adjourned. Everyone please leave the courtroom except for you, Mr. Schlick. I’d like a word with you, please. Bailiff, please shut the door when you leave and leave the sign up.”

Those ordered to leave stared at him as they left, wondering what wrath would befall this now fallen attorney.

“Well, Gary?”

“First of all, thank you, Judge, for the way you handled this. I appreciate it. Doing this in private. And again, I apologize,” he said knowing that he couldn’t apologize enough. “I feel like one of



those aging ballplayers who realizes he should have retired and never played that one last game where he makes a fool of himself.”

“Well, you know what they say, Gary. You’re only as good as your last game. Look, Gary, you’ve been the best criminal defense attorney in the circuit for forty-something years, handled some of the most high-profile crime cases around and earned the respect and admiration of your fellow attorneys and the bar for your pro bono work for the poor. All that speaks volumes for you. But lately I have noticed you’ve been slipping some and I should have said something long before this. Have you ever thought about retiring?”

“Yes, I have, somewhat. I know now that I’m not up to what I use to be in court and out. My health is failing me. I’ve got diabetes, high cholesterol, obesity, hearing loss, fatigue. I take all kinds of medications, when I remember to take them, so my memory must be dwindling too. You’re probably right, Judge. The time has come for me to ‘unhang’ my shingle.”

Those were the last courtroom words ever spoken by one of the most admired criminal defense attorneys in the circuit.

He got a young attorney, ironically his foe, that last day, the assistant state attorney, to buy his practice and take over his clients. He retired and fled the state.

You could say that justice never slept that day. For if it had, justice



would have been denied.

the meticulous gardener

B CRAIG GRAFTON

Back when I was but a dumb teenager growing up on a farm, my father had a friend who lived in the city whom he used to let have a vegetable garden on our property. His friend was a carpenter by trade and worked for a home builder. So when he came out to plant his garden in the spring, he'd bring his tools with him along with a bag of wooden stakes that he would ever so carefully craft on the spot, tapering the one end and leaving the other end flat so he could drive it into the ground. He'd pound a stake into the ground, tape-measure off the distance of his row, then pound in another one exactly opposite the first one. Then he'd run a string line from one stake to the other so that way whatever he planted would come up in a perfectly straight row. Of course he made sure the seeds were planted at the precise distance apart and precise depth as stated on the seed packet. Then when he'd finished he'd invariably sit down in the grass, run his hand through his bristled haircut, and smoke a Pall Mall. He'd sit there in the sun, take in the fresh air as he smoked, and gaze off into the horizon as if he was looking into a different world. He did this every year. Same old process of meticulously and routinely laying out his garden. To me it seemed a little excessive for a garden. After all, things would grow whether they were measured out and lined up precisely or not. But I came away from all this meticulousness with the conclusion that he must have also lived the same kind of life at home.

During the spring of my senior year in high school, he saw me come out of the house and waved for me to come over to him. After we exchanged pleasantries, he asked me, "What are you going to do now after you graduate?"



“I’m going to college,” I replied.

“Good,” he said.

The Vietnam War was in full swing then and I was hoping it would be over before my four-year college deferment was up.

“And whatever you do, don’t quit school and join the marines,” he added out of the blue. “You gotta be crazy to join the marines.”

Where did that come from? I asked myself. I had to know, so I asked him, “Why? Were you in the marines?”

“Yes,” he answered, not looking at me but off into space in a weird kind of way.

“In the Korean War, right?”

“No, World War II.”

I knew that he was younger than my father by four or five years and that my father was in the navy in World War II when he was twenty. So I came back with the obvious “So you lied about your age to get into the marines then, huh?”

“Yes.”

“How old were you then?”



“How old are you now?” he countered.

“Seventeen.”

“About your age.”

About your age to me meant about seventeen, and sixteen was about seventeen. I found this conversation somewhat morbidly intriguing in a perverted way and thus I had to know one more thing. “Did you see combat?”

“Yes.”

“Europe or South Pacific?”

“South Pacific.” He lit a cigarette and blew out a stream of blue smoke heavenward.

“How many Japs you kill?” I blurted out without thinking, regretting it the second I said it.

“Didn’t keep count,” he answered before I could apologize.

Didn’t keep count, I thought. That must mean he killed a lot. I decided to let it go at that. Pressing it any further would be a little too much. But he pressed it.

“Bodies and debris were floating around everywhere, bobbing up and down in the water,” he continued. “We didn’t have any place



for prisoners so we just shot ‘em.”

“Just shot ‘em,” I repeated to myself.

He went on. “They say the Japs wouldn’t surrender. Not true. We shot ‘em.” He said all this with that same faraway, demented, feral look in his eyes.

“Gotta go now,” I spoke up, hoping to ‘kill’ this conversation. “I just remembered I’ve got to do something for my mother.” I left him there staring at the clouds, puffing away, and I thought about how he was a seventeen-year-old kid once, just like me. Only he quit high school, joined the marines, and killed people, whereas I’m going off to college.

Not too long after that, he died of a heart attack. At the memorial luncheon, after a full military honors funeral of course, I overheard bits and pieces of conversation about him. That he had to get married at seventeen. That his marriage wasn’t really a marriage at all but an inconvenience for him. That he slapped his wife around a lot. That he slapped his daughter around too because she looked just like her mother. That he never had any more children because he wasn’t going to make that mistake again. That he sat in the taverns, drank to excess, and picked up women. That he got violent when he drank to excess. But before he joined the marines, he was really a nice clean-cut young man. They said it was the marines that messed him up. All this was news to me, of course.



I came away from there with the conclusion that this man had lived in two separate worlds. One was the city and one was his garden where he escaped and became the meticulous gardener.



a mask tree

KAORU SAKASAKI

Translated from the Japanese by TOSHIYA KAMEI

After I hung up the phone, my husband shifted his weight on the couch, turning slightly to glance at me.

“So?” he urged, for a change. “What happened?”

“Mother said she’d bought herself a mask tree,” I said after a brief moment of hesitation.

He lowered the TV’s volume and stared at me with an inquisitive look. He looked pensive as if many questions flashed into his mind.

“How much?” he asked.

“100,000 yen.” Is that the only thing he cares about? Money?

“100,000.” He returned his gaze to the screen. “100,000? What tree again?”

“A mask tree, honey.” The words sounded strange as they tumbled out of my mouth.

“A mask tree?” He let out a low chuckle. I’d never heard him chuckle that way before. Out of reflex, I clasped my phone against my chest.

“Do masks grow on a tree?” he asked, still in disbelief. “What color is the fruit? White?”



“Beats me.”

Mother left me puzzled, so I decided to pay her a visit the following day.

“He was so kind and sweet. He was just like Ayu-kun.” Apparently, the young salesman reminded her of my baby brother. “He sounded like he needed money. Admittedly, his story didn’t add up, but I’m glad to have helped him.” She gazed afar, as if reminiscing the past. “A mask tree, huh? I’d never imagined such a thing existed.”

“That makes two of us.” I looked at the tree in question. Mother always attempted to explain away her goof-ups, so her words failed to give me the whole picture. Maybe she fibbed a bit because she was embarrassed about having been taken. At any rate, she had fallen for the young man’s sweet sales pitch.

The tree looked like a fake. It was some kind of citrus tree.

“Not tall as I thought, Mother. Maybe fitting as a houseplant, after all.”

The manual showed the company name printed in a fancy font. The following words danced across the paper: “Say goodbye to your mask! The fruit contains a natural disinfectant that kills germs!”



“Masks are hard to come by these days,” she added. “This tree serves as a mask substitute.”

Are you going to carry the tree around, Mother? What if you have to wait months before it bears fruit? Why didn't you buy a cheaper option, like a sack of lemons? Such thoughts came into my mind, but I pushed them away.

“Good idea,” I whispered instead.

Mother moved her mouth as if chewing a morsel of food.

“But, Mother, remember that you're moving next month,” I said. “And the tree? Did you ever think about that?”

I had expected it would be hard to place her in a nursing home. I was greatly relieved when we'd found her a place. Still, I mentally clicked my tongue in chagrin for having let my guard down. But there was no use. I couldn't wish away the tree's existence. Nor could I get the money back. The lesson I had learned was not to waste my breath any longer.

“He was just like Ayu-kun,” she repeated, ignoring my question.

I arrived home with the tree in the car. I placed it on the veranda and gazed at it for a while.

My son approached me for the first time in a long while. He



stayed home now that his school was closed.

“Oh, this is it,” he said, knowing I would hate to hear ‘mask tree’. He ran his fingers along the leaves and fumbled the buds. “Yeah, smells nice. Or I think it does.”

“She doesn’t even go out.” I gently pushed him away and watered the tree. “She doesn’t need a mask. Why did she buy this?”

“Mom, I remember something Grandma said the other day,” he began. “When she fell and couldn’t get up. She was worried about a mask shortage. She asked me if we had enough masks. She was worried that without them, we couldn’t go out.”

My brother’s face when he was a young boy came back to my mind. Then I glanced at my son and patted his shoulder.

“What for? Mom. Cut it out.” He jerked away with a shy smile. He went back to touching the leaves.

Shortly later, white flowers bloomed in the branches. I took one flower in my hand and sniffed it. A bittersweet fragrance tickled my nostrils. Or so I thought.

nest of diamonds

ELIZABETH NELSON

This is what I remember. My hair was wet, smelled like coconuts, like summer in a bottle. Someplace I've never been but dying to go my whole life. The baby was balling. She'd been wailing for more than an hour. So Mama slapped her thigh, hard. Pop! And she hushed for a second and then balled louder.

Mama, don't hit that baby!

Shut up or I'll pop you, too!

She quieted in my arms, took a fistful of my wet hair and started to suck. I loved her mouth best, making silly faces so it'd bend into a happy shape. She always needed something in her mouth, but she was a beast to feed. Never took to Mama. So mostly I fed her, coaxing her with a bottle that was too hot or too cold. What Baby loved was my fingers, the ends of my hair. Sometimes, when it was just the two of us, I'd pretend to be her real mama.

Hush little baby, don't say a word. Sister's gonna buy you a mockingbird...

This is what I remember. Mama brought home a grease neck. They came in late, after midnight, making all those noises I hate but make me feel a little funny, too. She was used to being smacked around. Granddad, then whoever our daddy was. Now this grease neck. In the morning I'd find her ShopRite apron on the kitchen floor.

I woke with a start, feeling like someone was watching us. I



thought it must be Mama. She does that sometimes, stand in our doorway and stare. Hard to tell if she loves us or wants to eat us, or if that's all the same thing in her crinkled up mind. But this was different. Breathing, thick and raspy, shadows over in the corner moving in ways they shouldn't.

Mama!

She came tearing down the hall, went total bananas on that grease neck. He fought back, knocked her down and that's when Baby started to cry.

Run! she said. His knee was on her chest and he looked like he meant to extinguish her and she said, Run!

This is what I remember. I didn't have my license yet, but we'd been practicing in the ShopRite lot. I grabbed Mama's keys and put the baby in the back. I don't know where I was going. I just drove. Fast. Fastest I'd ever gone in my life. Felt like flying. Then it started to snow.

The snow captivated Baby. In the rearview I could see her staring out the window, eyes wide, big as her little fists. I cooed and she looked toward me, started smiling like she does only for me. My little bush baby is what I called her, like one of those nocturnal marsupials we'd seen at the zoo once.

And if that mockingbird won't sing, Sister's gonna buy you a diamond ring...



This is what I remember. We were driving and then we weren't. I didn't even see it coming. That electrical pole crushed up the entire frontend, sent us spinning across frozen blacktop. We slid into a ditch. That's what I've pieced together. What I remember is Baby and singing and snow, swirling like poetry, and then nothing. Hard stop. Black like the back of our closet when Mama didn't say run but instead said hide.

My head was hot and dizzy, my eyes stinging. Everything smelled like rust, a little like my coconut hair. I tried to clear my eyes, push my hair out of the way and everything turned red and sticky. There was no sound in the back and that's when I started to panic. I threw myself out of the car.

She was frozen in fear. Then that tiny body convulsed inward. Right as I unbuckled her and scooped her up she was on her way out again, wailing like I'd never heard before. So I rocked and cuddled her, gave her a fistful of my damp hair. I looked her over and she seemed okay, but she smelled and I realized I hadn't brought a damn thing with me, not a diaper or a bottle. I didn't have a plan. I guess I thought I'd drive around a bit and then go back home. But not now. The car wouldn't even start. I'd run off without my phone, too. It was still bedside in that room where I hoped the grease neck hadn't killed our Mama.

And if that diamond ring turns brass, Sister's gonna buy you a looking glass...

This is what I remember. No one came. It was just me, Baby, and



the snow. My night clothes were thin. Baby had a blanket and I swaddled her tight, tucked her inside my t-shirt, but she turned blue anyway. We shivered together for a long time. And then we didn't.

Part of me wanted to run. I felt like walking into the snow. Everything that was dark had gone all white. So pretty. So pure. I wanted to lay down in it, make angels in my bare skin.

Part of me wanted to stay put. Don't go out there, dummy. Stay inside this car. Keep your sister warm as you can.

I don't know. Maybe it would be better to move. Mama said run. A moving target is harder to catch.

Mama'd say hide right now. Not run. She'd say, stay put.

And if that looking glass gets broke, Sister's gonna buy you a billy goat...

I sang until my lips didn't work. I couldn't remember the rest of the words, even though that lullaby had been with me my entire life. One of my first memories. My Mama humming that tune while she folded clothes and smoked, every once in a while reaching over to touch my foot or my arm. Just a little contact of love. She wasn't snuggly like I was with Baby, but I know she loved us in her best way.

Sister's gonna buy you a billy goat... a billy goat...



A billy goat...

This is what I remember. I was hot as Hell. Like brimstone. Like Pastor's words flying up into the rafters, red birds of flame. I'd never been so hot. Baby wasn't moving or making any more noise. She was probably hot too, I reasoned. I thought my blood would boil us both.

So I stripped. Right down to my undies. I took off Baby's romper, left the blanket and carried her into the snow so we could cool off.

All that cold white. White, white. Like Heaven. That's where we'll go! I've got you, Baby. We're headed to Heaven. And I trudged a little further before I carved us a nest of diamonds. So pretty, that hollow in the sparkling snow. The sun was starting to rise and I could hear a bird call. Its grey body made a music note on the powerline.

Look, Baby. A mockingbird. *And if that mockingbird won't sing...* It is, though. It's singing for us. Listen!

It was like falling asleep. We were. And then we weren't.



pursuit

ELIZABETH NELSON

Here, she said, and handed me a steak knife. The blade was serrated, the handle smooth. It fit neatly into my small palm. I was eight years old, holding a knife in the palmetto forests of Florida.

Cut whatever you want, she said. The girl jabbed at a heap of decaying fronds. My brother does it all the time. Cut like this. She held up her knife, wrapped small fingers around a palm neck and began to saw.

Only a little light sifted through the canopy. The movement of her knife ribboned sun and shadow. A little boy, smaller than us, sat in the dirt and dug with a stick. He waved it at me and smiled, his face sticky, painted in grime. The girl held her spiked frond, now free, above her head, and the little boy clapped.

Now you, she said.

I took the slender neck of a frond and began to cut. The fibers resisted. I sawed harder and when the neck cracked, a small tree falling fast toward the forest floor, I felt a swell beneath my breastbone. A small taste of power.

Don't touch Daddy's knife, Mama would always say. She'd take scissors out of my hand. Don't run sharp objects.

I cut another frond, and another. The girl cut, too, and the little boy clapped and stabbed the earth.



Then there were voices, an enraged clamor rolling through the trees, rising in pitch as the palms began to shake. Boys crashed into the clearing, bare-chested with faces drawn in sharp, hard lines. One held an ax, the other a spade, and they raised these weapons in air above their ragged heads and gaping mouths. I saw the red meat of one's tongue.

The girl had stopped sawing, was holding her knife behind her back, but the boys were not looking at her.

I dropped my knife like a good girl and ran.

Behind me the boys thrashed, howling at my heels. Too terrified to scream, I leaned into my run, slipping between windstreams like I'd learned to do when I was five, darting away from Daddy's fists. *Move like a rabbit, Mama would say.* This way, then that. I dashed through palms on my left, scrambled over roots and vines on my right. *Watch out for snake dens, Daddy would say.* I leapt over shadows as those boys pressed down on me, their cries slicing the sky.

Your girl is always running! people would say.

Well she's got her Daddy's long legs, Mama would say. She'd sift beans in a silver pot top, looking for stones while I sprinted down dirt roads.

Faster! Daddy would shout.



Sometimes we'd race. We'd pant back home and he'd tell me about his track days, running anchor for the Jaguars, his hand on my shoulder like love. He used to always beat me, but the day he didn't, I saw something shift, like a sliver of filtered light, something dark skittering across his skin, taking all the glow with it.

I ran faster. Tall for my age and quick, my long hair flying, a silken kite tail that Daddy would sometimes catch, wrap around his fingers and pull, my body following, meeting the ground with a hollow thud that echoed through bone. I ran faster. My eight-year-old heart, trained for pursuit since I could use my legs, pumped waves of blood like wings. If it wasn't Daddy, it was these boys. When it wasn't these boys, it would be other boys, then men, down office hallways, dark alleys, across parking lots, in stairwells.

I dashed out of the forest and across the lawn, flew up the steps and through our front door.

You okay? Mama asked. I pressed myself into a corner, feeling like I should feel safe, only I didn't. Home was like that.

Then there was knocking and Mama left me trembling. I could hear her soothing tones in reply to their yes, mams. Come here, she said, come see your friends, and the thin skin between my world and theirs was slit open. Those boys were in the house. Behind them I could see the girl, looking sheepish, like, what? It's just my brother. Protective of his fort. No one can cut fronds but him and his buddies, I guess.



They stood looking at me while Mama handed out cookies. There was no ax or spade, no steak knife, but I knew they were in the long grass outside, waiting for them and for me, too.

When Mama left they began to touch my things. I sat on the edge of my bed and watched, wishing I could run, my feet twitchy against the carpet. The girl sat next to me, pretended to drink tea from a tiny cup and saucer. She bumped my shoulder with hers as the boys scattered my stuffies, undressed the dolls then pulled off their heads.

Y'all come back! Mama said. As soon as she shut the door I could hear them taking up arms, trekking through palms back to their side of town. The girl turned and waved before her brother yanked her arm.

Friends? Mama asked, and I couldn't bring myself to say no, to tell her about the knives or the ax or the spade. I didn't have words for the chase, the hollering with blades held high. The only language I knew was running, pushing through wind. Fleeing from home, then back again.

You've been running, Mama said, touching sweat at the back of my neck. Always running. My little rabbit.

From the backdoor I looked across the lawn to where the palms began, spiked fans coming awake with night. Before I turned I saw him. The boy held the spade high like a spear, then dissolved into shadow.



Daddy will be home soon, Mama said.

Before she could ask me to help with dinner, I opened the door. I stepped into that dark, and I ran.

trumpet fingerings

JOSHUA BRITTON

The only thing Ethan was better at than playing poker was the trumpet, although he sucks at both now. We don't let him play poker anymore. If I hear of a game, I follow him around to make sure he stays away.

The door is unlocked and I let myself in. There are a couple of lawn chairs in the living room with an overturned laundry basket in between for people to put their feet on. He's fallen on hard times, which I have overseen. I'm grateful that Sammy put it on me, and not some other goon, to collect the debt, although there isn't much left to take.

The toilet flushes and the sink runs, and out of the bathroom comes Ethan. He doesn't start when he sees me.

"Hey, buddy," I say. We embrace, the bag in one of my hands knocking against his lower back.

I appreciate how easy he is to find. Some guys, when they're in this kind of trouble, bolt into hiding, and you have to track them down and rough them up worse than you normally would have had they stayed put. Ethan does me a favor, though, and is always home.

I had plucked the lawn chairs from the side of the road for him after I took his couch, and we sit opposite each other. I place the bag on the overturned laundry basket, cracked in three places. Along the wall is Ethan's trumpet, a silver Bach Strad, standing vertically on a trumpet stand.



From fifth grade through high school he and I sat next to each other in band. We became great friends. He came to my birthday party every year, and I to his; my mother still asks about him. But while I stopped playing trumpet after graduation, he kept at it for years, and he got pretty good. I used to go hear his quartet play. They'd play nine to eleven at The Palisade, and then linger around the bar, where someone always bought Ethan a drink. A pianist-singer duo took the stage after them, and Ethan and a half dozen other guys would head for the backroom to play Hold 'Em until dawn. More often than not, Ethan would come out ahead.

The summer after we graduated from high school he worked overtime to buy this trumpet in time for the start of college. It now stands next to his gig bag, designed to hold multiple trumpets, though I've already taken the others.

From my bag I pull out two foot-longs. Ethan will only eat half of his, getting another meal out of it. I'll only eat half of mine, too, and leave the remains with Ethan for a third meal.

"Well, I guess today's the day," he says, not as morosely as one might expect.

I nod, glancing over at his trumpet, which is what I've come for. He's my oldest friend, but I do all right keeping my business from getting personal.

"I've got things set up in the kitchen," he says. This perplexes me, and Ethan sees it on my face. "Nothing fancy. Come look."



He leads me into the kitchen where on the counter sits a wooden cutting board with countless shallowly engraved scrapes from past meal preparations, and a large knife next to the cutting board.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” I say. “I’m here for the trumpet, not appendages.”

“I can’t part with my trumpet. Take a pinky.”

“No!”

I feel somewhat responsible for his mess. Our first week of college I joined a game with some other guys who’d only known each other a few days. It was so much fun that I invited Ethan the next day. Ethan knew generally what a full house was, and that three-of-a-kind beat two pair, though it took a bit to convince him that a flush was more rare, and therefore a better hand, than a straight.

This was back when poker, specifically Hold ‘Em, was really taking off, when the World Series of Poker was constantly televised on ESPN, on the heels of John Malkovich’s embarrassing performance in Rounders. We played poker seven days a week, for as little as a dollar buy-in, which wasn’t chump change when you were a struggling student, or occasionally higher stakes games with five- or ten-dollar buy-ins with five- and ten-cent blinds.

Ethan was the high blind, which was the only reason he didn’t



fold his three and six of spades. A hand of three-six won't stick around to see the flop too often. But while everybody called, nobody raised, and when the flop went down, suddenly Ethan was a five of spades away from a straight flush. But still nobody bet. Ethan completed his straight flush on fourth street, followed by a five of clubs on the turn.

Now everybody was hootin' and hollerin' about the fives – “all right, who's got a five! Trip fives are gonna take it!” It was checked to Ethan, who couldn't risk checks all the way around yet again, so he threw in a few measly chips. “Aw, shit, dude, Ethan's got a five, watch out!”

Somebody had to have one of the remaining two fives, Ethan assumed, or even a spade to complete a flush, but his bet was followed by folds around the table, including my own ace-ten, which had seemed so promising pre-flop. So certain were we that Ethan had a five that nobody even asked to see his cards, which in any case nobody was ever obliged to do. Ethan quietly slipped his cards into the pile, not giving a clue that we had all just missed out on the first straight flush any of us had ever seen in person until he told me about it later that night in our dorm room.

“What's the matter? You never cut off a finger before?”

“I've cut off many fingers, I'll have you know!”

“But I was wondering if I could keep it. Do you have to take it with you? As proof? Or can I put it on ice and see if the hospital can



sew it back on?”

“Stop talking like that.”

“Seriously, Chet, you can’t take my trumpet. I won’t be able to handle that.”

“How the hell are you going to play trumpet without any fingers?!”

“I don’t need my left hand to play trumpet. Not really, anyway. Ds will be a little sharp.”

“C#, too, right?” I say, vaguely recalling our group lessons years ago and the intonation tendencies for certain fingerings.

“Good memory.”

“Ethan, I don’t think you understand, man. You can be in the clear. Your trumpet, that model, retails at a little over three grand, new. Yours is a little banged up, so you’d be lucky to get a thousand for it. But Sammy doesn’t need to know that. Dude, you’re golden. Clean slate. A fresh start.”

We were all so green, barely able even to spot obvious tells like grinning like a jackass or going red in the face, or a chatterbox suddenly going silent and serious. Luck was almost all any of us had; the best hand would win nine times out of ten. Ethan outgrew us pretty quickly. That straight flush was a lesson, the



time Ethan realized that luck is stupid, too random to rely on. At his peak, most of his big scores came on wimpy hands like a pair of sixes or ace high, bluffing his opponents into folding better hands because he'd already burned them earlier when it had seemed to matter less. It was something to see; I was the only person to whom he ever revealed his hand after someone folded.

But he always played for fun. Once he got into trouble— once he needed to win — he lost the ability. And that got him into even more trouble.

He slaps his left hand down on the cutting board and picks up the knife with his right. I've never gone to the bother of a cutting board before, and I'm almost amused. But when I step forward to put a stop to this nonsense, he holds up the knife and points it at me.

"You were dealt a bad hand, man," I say now, surprised by his attack position, but un-intimidated. "You just need to play it smarter."

"There's no such thing as a good hand or a bad hand," Ethan says. "I just forgot how to play. And if you don't know how to play, all you can rely on is luck. And that never works."

If anyone pretends to be ok with losing a finger, they're bluffing, not believing we'll really do it. And after we do give them the chop, suddenly they remember a secret stash beneath the floorboards or a rich uncle they can call.



Or they bolt the next day. Because they're legitimately out of options. And we have to find them. And probably kill them.

I wouldn't be able to fake offing Ethan. Sammy insists that more than one person goes on a hit. Fortunately, that trumpet can save his life.

At the end of that first semester, several of us were put on academic probation. But Ethan was not. He rarely missed class or an assignment, and unlike the rest of us he wasn't bothered if he missed a game. I came back the following semester but didn't last three weeks. There was no point. With Sammy's backing, I'd done a ton of business between semesters when all our old high school friends came home for Christmas and New Year, and I committed to him full-time.

But to keep us from spending frivolously and getting into the same kind of trouble Ethan is in now, Sammy keeps track of our earnings himself and hands it out only for necessities. That's why I can't just pay Ethan's debt myself. I've tried, but what little cash I was allotted at any given moment only put a small dent in his payments, delaying the inevitable by a single week. It was a waste.

A few years later, after college and grad school, Ethan got the steady Palisade gig downtown. I went to hear him regularly. I'd request Sugar and Cantaloupe Island, the only jazz tunes I could remember from our high school jazz band, and he'd humor me — "Our drummer loves The Island," he'd say.



I started making deals there. It was nice enough that no one would start trouble in a classy place like that.

It was in The Palisade where he asked me for help. I agreed. He'd asked with humility, but confidently, taking it in stride, and when he took the stage a few minutes later, he said into the microphone, with a wink, "this is a Miles Davis tune called Freddie Freeloader, dedicated to my brother Chet over there."

Several weeks later, again in the same lounge, I told him it was time to collect.

"When will you be home tomorrow?" I asked. His quartet was taking a break between sets.

"I'll be home," he said, head drooping. "I'm only booked in the evening."

"You're not going to dick me around, are you? I don't want to show up only to discover you've run off to the Caymans. Don't go dodgin' me, man."

"I'll be there, Chet, I swear," he said, his voice quavering.

"Okay. I like to sleep in. Let's plan on noon. I'll bring over some sandwiches, and we'll hang out, all right? It'll be fun. What do you want on yours?"

He shrugged and looked at me like a scolded child. "Ham is



good.”

I dropped two twenties in the tip bucket before leaving.

“Ethan, listen to me,” I say, back in the kitchen, keeping my voice calm to grab his attention better than if I was yelling. “Don’t cut off your finger. It’s not necessary.”

I’ve been bringing over sandwiches for months. He hasn’t had a gig since the first night I came down on him. When I left after our first sandwich, he took out his trumpet and couldn’t make a sound. No air, dry lips, fat fingers. He cancelled his gig that night, and hasn’t played since. But he’s always been here, accepting responsibility, not giving a hint that he’s a flight risk.

“Please, buddy, don’t be an idiot.” I take a single step away from him, toward the living room. “I’m going to walk out of here with your trumpet. We’ll be square, and you can live your life.”

He looks at me as if he’s actually hearing my words. But he’s stubborn, and he shakes his head. He has the tip of the knife on the board, the heel of the blade a couple of inches in the air, as if to chop an onion, and his pinky poised beneath.

“That’s not living,” he says. And he slams the cutting edge down.

We both scream. He falls backwards onto the linoleum, his head against one of the floor cabinets, then slides full body onto the



floor into the fetal position, clutching his left hand, moaning loudly.

“You’re an idiot!” I yell.

“It’s still there!” he cries. “It’s still attached!”

Dangling by a tendon from the rest of his hand is his bloody pinky. I look at it the way a cowboy would look at a horse with a broken leg. Not bothering with the cutting board, I grab the knife and, with tears streaming down both of our faces, finish the job.

“Why?!” I yell at him, fighting back the tears, pinky in hand.

With his good hand he pushes himself into a seated position. I hand him a dishtowel to soak up the bleeding.

He looks at me, with a glimmer of hope in his eyes, and says, “I got a gig tonight.”

concerning the importance of a fish recipe

MOULI BANERJEE

It swings from her neck like a pendulum, marking time on her neck, clicks of memories. As she holds on to the rod in the local train while it sways on the way to work *tick tock*, as she chops vegetables for dinner *tick*, as she waters the money plant on her balcony *tock*.

It was a Sunday morning. Sunday was a day for fish. Sundays are what memories are tucked away in the cupboard for. Once every week, Indu took out the box of spices from the wooden cupboard in the kitchen — it had once been her grandma's spice box, steel, with separate compartments for each spice — and inhaled her childhood as she prepared the one dish she had learnt from *didun*. She hardly cooked the rest of the week, except her dinner. Her job hardly gave her the time. Sundays were always the exception. Lately, time has been speeding up, like an old cassette skipping portions of the reel, announcing itself in garbled noises. Like the bits of music that still played smoothly, Sundays had come to be important to her, as the days moved faster. *Tickticktickticktock*.

Life was mostly old and calm at forty. Exhaustion was creeping up on her, but gracefully, like branches of night queen on the walls of a well-lived home. She missed the once-angry, young Indu sometimes — the girl who had taken her father's razor and shaved her arms to make her hair grow thicker and heavier. Who had chopped off her own hair one morning, giving herself a buzz cut and emerging out of the bathroom to make her mother scream and drop the plates she had been carrying.



Indulekha — her *didun* had named her — after her own mother, Indu's great grandmother, whom she had only heard stories of. She was a fictional character out of *didun's* pages, a grandly feminine great grandmother, who had married into a family in Dhaka and had become forever, a part of Indu's destiny. A family in Dhaka with a house full of pillars, with ornate teak beds, with gold jewellery for daily wear and diamonds for the weddings. Sarala had walked in as a shy bride and been transformed into Indulekha (her mother-in-law had named her that), the mighty fiction of womanly qualities and imaginary powers that little Indu had had dreamlike nightmares about.

That Indulekha had once cooked for the Nawab and his trail of twenty friends, who had been guests at the great house in a “country not ours anymore”. She loved flowers in her long black hair. She had swum through the pond in the field nearby once, trying to find a necklace her sister-in-law had lost in there. And when they all had had to leave, for a new home they didn't know where, that Indulekha had carried her son in one arm and a bag in another and walked for miles without resting even once.

Our Indu of fish Sundays and guilt-heavy jewellery worked as an editor, lived alone in a city to get away from her family, missed them on alternate weekends, had made her peace with that tiny bit of sentimentality, and liked her hair short. Our Indu hates her name — a shadow of the woman she never wanted to be, stuck to her like a static-charged plastic bag from the past, being carried across a border that was drawn as she walked over it into the land of the free, over and over and over again. It had a stink — this



name — menstrual blood after a long night, a reminder of fantastical women who were possessors of unbelievable grace, whose imagined memory ruined the taste of her morning tea as she would hurriedly type out letters to certain women's self-help groups sometimes, asking them to hold meets for women like her, women who'd need other women like her to speak to them, to help them not be old Indulekhas if they didn't want to, women who liked other women and wouldn't be ashamed to declare themselves.

They had met at one of those meetings. Long, long ago. A lot of things made Indu angry back in those days. She's held her hand, calmed her down, straightened her collar and kissed her, letting her know she'd not be alone. She still gets angry, but she is learning to calm herself down on her own — she had to, the doctor had said. Self-care was essential, get a money plant. Or succulents. Succulents, why not.

They played a game sometimes, when bodies were young and wrinkle-free, when every touch was a tickle and dreams were as smooth as their skins. Indu still had the box somewhere. It's an old iron box, with a tiny lock. But there's nothing to hide. The tiny key is right next to it. Inside the almirah in the bedroom. Next to it, naphthalene balls. They make everything smell like memory. It is as if the thought of being preserved makes the thing worth preserving, and not the other way around. If you and I ever snuck into her room, as Indu busies herself with marinating fish in the kitchen, and slowly opened the box, careful not to let it creak, we'd find a pair old, brown, thick-framed glasses that had



belonged to her grandfather, an old clunky watch that had belonged to him too, a bottle of make-up glue, and a set of moustache and a beard. They are black and bushy, like they belong to funny girls dressed as men, pretending a heavy voice, thumping out dialogues in a school play.

They had found it funny then — two giggly women, playing at having dreams that could never come true. It was weird and exhilarating, and the thought of it all still angered Indu sometimes.

Sometimes, she took herself too seriously, she reminded herself now. She forgot, every now and then, that this was all fiction.

It had been over in less than a year. It had been over to begin with. There was a wedding, a tear-smearred, butterfly-stamped wedding invitation lying in some corner of the same almirah. A wing-stamped suicide note, a death of sorts, a death inside a life still being lived.

It was so far away in her time though, Indu shakes her head. The neighbour's kid is playing Pokémon Go a bit too loudly. Sundays must be hard for parents with little children, how exhausting; Indu pours the mustard oil into the pan. It's so much into the past, that some mornings it feels as scripted as the tales of a great grandmother who never perhaps was. Goodbyes were stranger back then, no email address, no social networking account, no virtual company to hold on to. When she had received the final diagnosis, she had sent out a letter to the last known address.



There had been no phone call for twenty years, but she had tried an old number too. It didn't exist anymore. Did it ever? May be they didn't either.

It was one of those cheap long necklaces you could get at the fair. It was quite the fashion back then. It was silver and sparkling when she had first worn it. Indu had put it on again after twenty years, two months ago. It was growing a dull kind of brown, like over-fried fish, swinging to and fro as she went about her life, emanating a light smell of rust and sad, old metal.

There was a tiny, soft abrasion where the locket rested on her skin, she noted, as she stared into the mirror this Sunday. Funny, she thought, as she smiled wryly. Right at the center. If you drew a line straight up, it would run up the ridge of her nose and divide her empty forehead in two. If you pulled a line down, it would cut her in two: half man half woman, she thought, as she lightly touched the craters where her right breast had once been. The veins of her arms were still a little charred. But Sundays are not for that. Sundays are fish days. Especially now, when she had accepted the clock her body had become, after having successfully delivered so many other roles. Take a mental bow. Your audience is watching. They'll clap any moment now. Any moment now. She had adorned herself with a pendulum, so she could chime as time passed and know life by every swing.

It must be done perfectly. It is important not to over-fry the fish. It takes twenty minutes for the fish to be properly marinated. She counted. It was all ready to be fried on medium flame until crispy and light brown.

notes from a peninsula

NATALIA HRYCAY

She uncurls her straw beach mat in the only free area left on deck, surprised that there remains some leg room on either side of her. The rest of the ship's open space was a sea of backpackers all crunched up against one another like pomegranate seeds. She looks up and notices two men smirking at her from across the way and quickly looks back down. *I should have waited a few more days for the three German girls I met before crossing from Italy to Greece, she thinks*, but her itch to keep moving had not let her reconsider.

She feels her money belt through her jogging pants, cash and passport tucked in safely. Her backpack, with her Canadian flag stitched askew on its front flap, will serve as her pillow. She drags it into place, rests her head upon it and looks up at the summer sky; a myriad of setting colours. She thinks back to her last four weeks which feel more like four months.

The memory of the train station upon her arrival in Italy makes her smile. So hard to believe that two neighboring countries could be so different. She boarded the train in Villefranche, leaving behind a platform where people chattered quietly and stood side by side, and emerged two hours later onto a platform in Finale Ligure, Italy, where voices bellowed, arms gesticulated and laughter soared. An overwhelming welcome to say the least.

She climbed 356 steps up the hill to her turreted-castle-turned-youth-hostel and then back down 356 steps to sunbathe on the crowded pebbly beach across the seaside promenade lined with palm trees. Her first meal, fresh focaccia from a corner



panetteria, suddenly put all the baguettes recently consumed to shame. The dough melted in her mouth; she couldn't remember ever tasting anything so splendid. She treated herself and bought another, this one hot from the oven and topped with cheese and sausage. Two days later, she arrived in Riomaggiore, Cinque Terre, and was greeted at the train station by Mama Rosa. She had read in her *Europe Let's Go* travel guide that the woman greeted each train upon arrival, but she was still surprised to find the white-haired woman recruiting lodgers and somehow found herself following her back to her hostel. As the gnawing in her stomach began, the sight of the dirty kitchen and wandering cats made her want to explore other meal options. A culinary splurge ensued at an outdoor table off a side street: seafood pasta, a meal she would never have considered back home, but something about being in Italy had pushed her beyond her usual food choices. The next day she hiked through the five villages all the way to Monterosso, taking in the Ligurian Sea, the cliffside villages speckled with red roofs, and the terraced landscape. Up and down the hills she traipsed, rewarding herself in Monterosso, at the end of her day's journey, with a risotto di mare recommended by the waiter. Who knew she would already blow her daily budget on a mid-afternoon risotto?

From there she rode on to Florence, where on her second night, she arrived two minutes past the hostel curfew and had to climb the courtyard wall with the help from a fellow roomer. Although the city is littered with works of art, from the buildings themselves to what they house, she will remember with most fondness the taste of her newest discovery: gelato. How was it



possible that she had never tasted this decadent dessert in her two decades of life? Local gelaterias were a prescribed stop between the Duomo, the Uffizi, the Ponte Vecchio... Essentially between every two landmarks in the city.

On to Rome she went with three newly acquainted German travelers with whom she stayed, for the first time, in a hotel room. She had forgotten about the luxury of a private bathroom with a separate shower. The Colosseum, the Pantheon, the Trevi Fountain, Vatican City, the Roman Forum, the Spanish Steps, Piazza Navona, Castel Sant'Angelo. By the time they sipped their wines and scraped their lemon-basil sorbetto at a cheap restaurant long past sunset on their last night in The Eternal City, their legs ached and their eyes burned with a fatigue heavier than the sixty-liter packs that lay leaning against their hotel room walls.

Overwhelmed by four days of grandeur, history and bustling streets, she regretted not taking time for *la dolce vita*; the travel clock keeps ticking; how many more cities will she have time to visit? How many islands in Greece will she manage to check off her list? They walked to the train station, saving on cab fare, snacking on her newest discovery — *suppli* — as cars honked and men shouted obscenities that sounded like love songs because they are spoken in Italian. Anyhow, with a mouthful of rice balls filled with sauce and cheese, she didn't care what they shouted. The fête in her mouth was pure happiness sealed in succulence.

Another railway station, another platform filled with people,



another log in her Eurail pass. Next stop: Naples.

They clutched at their packs and didn't dare reach for their money belts as they followed a small map marked with their hostel. Many stories had been shared in dormitories and lounges throughout her time in Italy about pickpocketing and bag snatching in Naples. The four girls had not anticipated the narrow winding streets that criss-crossed and found themselves walking in circles a few times over before arriving at their destination. Their only goal for the evening: to find the closest restaurant serving tasty pizza. The person at the desk suggested four restaurants; they vowed to eat at each before leaving the city in three days. They barely noticed the unadorned tabletops and swift service as they filled their bellies with several varieties of pizza they shared, reaching over plates and elbows for slices of *capricciosa*, *siciliana*, *romana*, and *napoletana*. They slept like the dead that night, nearly missing their train to Pompeii the next morning.

She thought she had known fatigue after exploring Rome, but the day in the ruins of the ancient city pushed her to a point beyond exhaustion. One Canadian and three German heads bobbed back and forth on the train back to Naples. The German trio whined about aching feet and early mornings and a vote was taken to lazily make their way down to the Amalfi coast and find a cheap place to stay and spend a few days luxuriating on a patch of pebbles between cliffs, with no plans of walking or sight-seeing.

No such indulgence for her. She needed to get to Brindisi to catch



a ferry to Greece. She only had 15 days left before her flight back home to Montréal from Athens. She did not yet know that she would never make it to the Greek Islands. Well, not on this trip. She hadn't planned on meeting a handsome Greek-Canadian on the crowded ferry to Patras. As she missed her train connection to Athens, he delayed his trip to his family village by Myloi. Another day to cement the fact she was smitten by this green-eyed, black-haired student from McGill University. His storytelling about his *yiayia* and *papou*, his deep laugh that made his eyes crease in the most playful way, and his easy manner left her lying in her hostel bunk with her eyes wide open until she heard the faint knock on her door. Careful not to wake the other girls in the dorm, she opened the door to find him standing before her.

“Is it just me?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“This has never happened to me before,” he said. “I lay on my bed thinking that I didn't want to see you leave tomorrow; I don't want to take the chance of never seeing you again. Come with me to my family's village, come meet my grandparents. Delay Athens for three or four days. I promise, you won't regret it.”

And she didn't.

Athens was delayed until her departure flight. Three years later, they married.



All these memories from 25 years ago come back to her so easily, retrieved from some deep file within her brain. She had hardly thought of them in all this time, and now they flooded her mind as she lay in bed unable to fall asleep, anticipating the drive to the airport the next morning. What can she say to her 20-year old daughter setting off for Rome with the desire to explore culture, cuisine and fashion in Italy, and discover her roots in Greece? Are Italian men in Florence still as persistent as they were 25 years ago? Does theft still riddle Naples? Is Mama Rosa still alive?

Digital readers have replaced books, the internet has replaced the travel guides, the cell phone has replaced phone cards and STD booths where her generation of travelers lined up to call home for a few minutes to assure their parents across the ocean. Now her daughter promises to FaceTime every day.

One thing she knows has not changed about traveling: you have to stay open to change, your best opportunity may not be where you planned to find it.



nonfiction

a walk down to the lunch canteen

VINEETHA A V

It is often said that people associate memories with different kinds of food and smells. An *uzhunnuvada* with no hole in the center might remind you of the lousy tea shop near your school, the fragrance of a particular brand of perfume might remind you of a birthday party that you went to when you were eight years old, an *appam* that looks and tastes nothing like real *appam* might remind you of your days in hostel where you managed to survive despite the horrible food that you were served. It is natural to associate the same food with different memories. But for me, beetroot pickle reminds me of one, and only one thing — Rajagiri Public School (RPS). I remember the first time I did not bring lunch to school. Amma had given me twenty rupees and asked me to eat lunch from the canteen. I was in third or fourth standard and had no clue where the ‘lunch canteen’ was. The only canteen that I knew of was the ‘college canteen’ near the back gate of the school. Amma and I used to have lime juice from there after every ‘Open-House Meeting’. When the prayer for lunch was going on, I couldn’t stop feeling nervous. I knew that *chechis* and *chetans* (seniors) frequented the lunch canteen and I earnestly wished that I had asked them where it was when I had the chance. I knew that the canteen was somewhere near the Main Block. The thought of walking alone from the Lower Primary Block to the Main Block was very intimidating at that time. When I think of that day now, I wonder why I did not approach my teachers and ask them for help. As I passed the kindergarten park, I found my legs taking me towards the road on my right instead of the road straight ahead. Soon I was walking towards the college building in our campus. I knew I was not supposed to venture beyond the school grounds but my stomach did all the thinking and I plodded down the road



A foreigner walked towards me from the back gate of RPS. He stopped me for a chat and asked me a few questions about the campus and I mumbled something in reply. I was profusely sweating because I thought he might tell the teachers that I'd crossed the school boundary. I later came to know that he was an 'exchange student' and I needn't have worried about him. Once inside the college canteen, I saw that they did not have rice for twenty rupees. Despite feeling uncomfortable and scared because of the multiple pairs of 'adult' eyes that scrutinized the little round girl in a blue pinafore and a white shirt, I put on a brave face and asked for the snack menu. I bought a glass of lime juice and a cutlet with the money that I had and walked back to school with a half empty stomach. I did not tell my friends, parents or teachers about my little adventure. I was scared. I pretended to know where the lunch canteen was and told my parents that I had rice and sambar for lunch that day. When I finally went to the real lunch canteen with my friends months later, I felt foolish. It was closer than the college canteen. For ten rupees, I had an extravagant meal consisting of rice, sambar, *thoran*, *aviyal*, *pappadam*, curd and beetroot pickle. That was the first time that I had tasted beetroot pickle in my life. I didn't like the taste of it. The beetroot pickle was the only food item left on my plate when I had finished eating. In the years that followed, I had lunch from the canteen very often. The price changed from ten rupees to fifteen and from fifteen to twenty rupees. The menu expanded and more items were sold there. Beetroot pickle was served only five times a month. Despite the new menu, I always preferred rice and sambar. I still did not like beetroot pickle. But over the years, I made a lot of friends because of this dislike — I generously gave

A decorative teal leaf pattern is visible at the top of the page, with leaves extending from the left and right edges towards the center.

random people my pickle and each time I shared the delicacy, I met new students. I was the only one in my clique who hated beetroot pickle and always had some on the plate. The tangy, violet-colored pickle was very important for me. It reminded me of the day when I finally ‘discovered’ the lunch canteen. A few weeks before my last day at school, a miracle happened. I developed a taste for beetroot pickle. I began to love it. Before I could enjoy my newly acquired taste, I became an alumnus of Rajagiri Public School. Since then, I have never tasted beetroot pickle as delicious as the one I used to be served in the lunch canteen of RPS.

cumulus

MURIELLE MÜLLER

I remember that first injection, the first I had to do on my own — Mum is looking at me, terrified. I am holding this needle in my hand, inches away from my stomach. I am not ready to get any closer, but I have to. Dinner's ready. I've got to insert this needle to eat that dinner. It's waiting. Mum's waiting. I am waiting. Mum would do anything to be in my place instead of her baby having to do this. No. She probably doesn't really want to be in my shoes. In my skin. In my to-be-pierced skin.

*It doesn't hurt, she says quietly. It didn't in the hospital, right?
It's such a tiny needle.*

She doesn't want anyone to be in that skin. She wants a hollow shell. I want a hollow shell, leave this broken body. She wants a healthy child. I want a refund, a new body. I want my old life. Without needles. I am only young, have my whole life ahead of me, and now?

– It was all about piercing the skin in that moment. And it was not.

It would never only be about piercing the skin. It's my life now. Calculating, thinking, restraining, piercing myself. In order to survive. Thinking about this every single day.

The tears rolling down my cheeks carry fear. It's the surmount into a more fragile life.

If I don't stick that needle in, my life is over soon enough.

A friend gave me this book when I was in the hospital, hooked to an IV line of water, and insulin — *The Cloud Collector's Handbook*.



Something different to read, he said. Something different than all the things I had to learn about my new chronic condition.

And I,

I feel like a

cumulus cloud —

Cotton wool puff of fear, accumulated on a warm, sunny day.

Cumuli usually produce no rain or snow,

“but in unstable air, their bright, crisp cauliflower mounds can build upwards.”

I am too young to do this forever.

I have my whole life ahead of me.

I am too young to be ill. I am too young.

I am too afraid to do this.

I am

A hollow shell, a cloud. I dissolve myself in air and hold myself together like strands of water vapor.

– I take the needle and pierce it in. I don’t feel anything. It doesn’t hurt. It’s such a tiny needle. But the fear hurts.

I am a cloud, fair-weathered.

But I am raining, nonetheless.

the romanticization of pancakes

HARRI WOOD

When I wanted to kill myself, I read something that changed my mind. It was a Tumblr post written by a girl, older than I was, reflecting on when she wanted to kill herself. She wrote that she was glad she didn't end it, because now she was lying on her sofa, watching the love of her life make her pancakes. I haven't stopped thinking about that since. That's all I really wanted — simplicity. Milk, flour, eggs. Love. So, when it gets bad, I think of pancakes.

A girl that used to be my best friend taught me how to make them, and we would eat them at every single sleepover. Those are some of my best memories and are exactly why I won't eat them when I'm sad. I protect the concept of pancakes from becoming tainted by my depression. So, when that girl stopped being my friend, I wrapped it up tight and put it away.

Naturally, there are a lot of things that stop me from encouraging myself to go over the edge, but more often than not I'm drawn back to the happy breakfast scene. I know that my life isn't empty; if anything, I purposely leave room in it so that I'm allowed to wonder if things can get better. I think sometimes I enjoy feeling low because the worry of getting sad is taken away if I'm already there. I convince myself that I can be happy by never letting myself be actually happy, because there's no way to be disappointed by the reality of what happiness could be. I'm scared the pancakes will burn.

“Where do you see yourself in five, even ten years?” It surprises me still, just how many people ask me that in my life. I didn't even think I'd make it this far. I should probably spend more time



thinking of an acceptable answer that doesn't involve a morning meal.

I was lucky enough to be told I could be whatever I wanted when I was growing up. "So, what do you want to be?" Loved. I want to be at home. There's not a job in the world I could even think of that would remotely give me the same satisfaction as lying on my sofa whilst my partner makes me pancakes. I think that I've spent so long focusing on that concept, just to carry myself over the waves, that I'm twenty-four without any idea of what I want to do with my life. I kept myself afloat but drowned in the sentimental ideas of romance.

Days are passing faster now, and I'm coming around to the idea that it's okay I spent my time trying not to kill myself instead of creating elaborate plans for my future. Maybe it's okay that I don't know what I'm doing or what I want to be. I'm alive and I can make pancakes if I want to.

The strange this is that I'm pretty sure I've met the love of my life. He doesn't like pancakes, but he sure does love me.

The background is a light teal color. In the corners, there are stylized leafy branches. The top-left and bottom-left corners feature pinkish-red branches with leaves. The top-right and bottom-right corners feature teal branches with leaves. The text is centered in the middle of the page.

travel
writing

breaths captured

GEORGIA IRIS SZAWARYN

I never expected to see a part of the world on my own at age twenty. When I applied for and was accepted into the summer camp, I didn't really know what to expect. I just knew that, for the first time in my life, I would be traveling all the way around the world alone.

At the Newark airport, my mom teared up, my dad and my sister waved ecstatically as I made my way through the line to get through security and to my gate. I thought I would cry, but I was too excited.

I

I flew in on a smoggy day in Beijing. The air was yellowish, like a cartoon fart looming around the airport. A hot July day it was, the sweat pouring off my brow immediately after exiting the aircraft after sitting thirteen-plus hours in the not-enough-room-for-my-legs economy-plus seat. Even though it was "plus", the space was still too small, my legs still cramped. After a while, the flight was no longer invigorating but agonizing.

And then, I arrived! Excitement filled me once again. I've never flown so far from home alone. My chance to study abroad in China for three weeks felt like a dream.

II

The first person I met was María from Costa Rica. We were waiting together in the Newark airport (having no idea we were on our way to the same destination) but formally met in the Beijing airport while we awaited our departure to the university



where the summer camp was hosted. She was so sweet and kind! We still exchange messages via social media every now and then.

The more I warmed up to her, the more eager I was to meet the others, but what do I say to someone I don't know with the only thing in common being we've come here to study Chinese?

Throughout the weeks of activities and social events, from field trips to lunches in the canteen, I met more people from Costa Rica: Mariella, Paula; met people from Denmark: August, Julie; met people from Greece: Maria, Sofiana, Priskilla, Anastasia. Some of us have remained pen pals to this day and I have to say, it is life-changing to have international friends.

III

I felt a mix of emotions as we made our way on the bus to the campus: excited to learn, nervous about who I would be roomed with, curious to know what was waiting for me in the next three weeks. I didn't even really feel homesick. I was not longing for home — I was longing for adventure, for new experiences that I would remember for the rest of my life.

As the bus chugged down the dusty paved roads, I watched as the crazy traffic swirled around us. The pedicabs and rickshaws and mopeds that weaved in, out, and around large buses, trucks, cars, taxis.

When we arrived at the campus, a brick sign with the university's name greeted us at the gate: Beijing International Chinese College.



I was the only student from my state, New Jersey, but one of about a dozen from the US. When I approached the dorm building for the camp check-in, I met several high school students and their chaperones from Florida (from somewhere in the panhandle... can't remember where).

I was the first to get to my dorm room. I picked my bed, moved my bags next to the closet and sat for a bit before my roommates arrived.

When I met my roommates, Korean students 아나 (Ahna) and 하영 (Hayong), they were pretty, cheerful, and polite when they came in. They thought it was a mistake when they spoke to me in Korean and I didn't respond. I didn't understand them because I don't speak Korean.

I thought it was a mistake too but then remembered that I filled in 'Korean' in the 'nationality' space on the camp's application form. It was okay though. They were like big sisters I never had. They took care of me, taught me Korean drinking games and board games. It was different and refreshing.

IV

I spent two fun-filled weeks on the BICC campus, learning Chinese in the morning and afternoon with culture classes, lectures, and field trips woven into our rigorous but thrilling schedule! My teachers, Hannah and Summer, were so kind-spirited, funny, and supportive. They were so happy to teach us: the level-four class. (Every student in the summer camp was placed into different



levels of language classes based on the previous language experience they listed on their applications. Level four was about middle level: not starting out but not fluent either.)

One day, the entire camp had a day of competitions; tried to see which class was the strongest in tug-o-war and which students were the best at ping-pong and badminton. I found out that day that I wasn't too bad at ping-pong but could use some practice and learn to play a little quicker.

V

Tiananmen Square and The Forbidden City. It was so muggy that day, and rain was in the forecast, so I kept my raincoat on, which made it feel even more uncomfortable, miserable. In the square, many of the locals stood and watched in awe as all of us foreign students walked through to see the Forbidden City. People were approaching us left and right, asking for selfies, pictures with the Greek students, Danish students, Costa Rican students, American students. One of the students from Florida asked me to join in a group photo with one of the locals, but the woman taking the picture shooed me away. I didn't look American to her. It was kind of embarrassing.

In the middle of exploring The Forbidden City, it started pouring. I was soaking wet, camera in hand. I tried my best to keep my belongings dry, but eventually, we were all dripping, head to toe.

After leaving The Forbidden City, the rain eased up and eventually stopped. We made our way to a mall where we got to



eat lunch and shop for souvenirs. I stuck with a couple of my Greek friends, Costa Rican friends, and our teacher, Summer, and had some hot pot together. So delicious!

VI

The Great Wall! It was terribly sultry that day too. Honestly thought I was going to die.

They told us, before we climbed, "The furthest you can go is seven towers to the left." Seven towers? They are set so far apart with steep, crumbling-with-age, thousands-of-years-old stairs that, with one misstep, could probably kill you. Made it halfway to the fourth (which is impressive, in my opinion) and turned around. The only student who made it to seven and back was the one super-pale skinny guy from Alaska.

Following our laborious trek along the Wall, we made our way to a small banquet-style restaurant — a souvenir shop on the first floor and a dining room on the second. I bought myself a decorative shot glass with the Great Wall painted on the inside: an early twenty-first-birthday gift for myself. I asked the artist to add my Chinese name 小桃 (*xiao tao*, which means 'little peach') to the inside. It sits on my bookshelf in a silk-covered box. Makes me smile, remember the trip, and my international friends, whenever I look at it.

VII

Ah, and the Summer Palace. And again, it was killer that day. (The humidity in China during the summer is ridiculous.)



Astounding architecture that has withstood more than a couple centuries of weather, Sun. Hundreds, if not thousands, of lotus flowers in muddy ponds, dragonflies skimming the tops. “Breath-taking” isn’t enough to describe.

As a summer camp activity, we were given a treasure hunt of sorts: we had to find a list of items, take a picture of it or collect it, and get a signature from a teacher as we explored the luscious palace.

VIII

I captured so much on my camera those first two weeks, I worried I wouldn't have room on my memory cards to take pictures the third week.

The third week was optional but the extra cost was worth it (for the most part). It was me, a few of the high school students and a chaperone from Florida, the guy from Alaska, and the girl from Australia—accompanied by a chaperone who worked for the university: Aero. She was so soft-spoken and sweet and was my roommate during our stays in Xi'An and Shanghai. When she asked for a ‘volunteer’ to room with her (because there were eight of us—two people to a room), I raised my hand because no one else seemed comfortable enough. I stuck to her like glue, honestly—she was the only one that I liked being with during the final week of my trip. She was a personal tour guide as well as a friend.

We took the bullet train from Beijing to Xi'An, the fastest speed



clocking in at about 300 km (approximately 186 miles) per hour. Super cool!

Every once in a while, the train would stop at a station enroute to Xi'An. Each time it stopped, the same group of men would step off the train to smoke cigarettes. It's amazing how many cigarettes an average Chinese man can puff before the train left the station.

The atmosphere in Xi'An was different. Felt a bit more countryside than city-like. Seeing sites like the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, the Terracotta Warriors, and Muslim Street made New Jersey, the United States feel so small. I took in so much culture, breathed in so much tradition, and practiced my language skills throughout. (My Chinese wasn't so great, but I tried!) I didn't want my adventure to end.

IX

The Big Wild Goose Pagoda was neat. Stepped foot into one of the big temples and said a prayer with Buddha. Then made a wish and placed some incense into a large ceremonial trough of sorts (I don't remember what it was called and don't know how else to describe it).

The Terracotta Warriors, even though I saw them years ago when I visited China with my parents, were still a cool sight to see. Can you imagine being the farmer that found them in the first place? What thoughts went through his mind when he found them? It just amazes me that, after centuries of being buried in the dirt, they are still standing, their formation untouched. Some of them



have been repaired, still being repaired. But they still stand.

Oh, the tea ceremony! It was so elegant, delightful! I loved trying the different teas: jasmine, ginseng oolong, green, black, tie guan yin. Watching the woman perform it gracefully, gingerly pouring small amounts of tea in our tiny cups.

And we rode bikes on the City Wall. Of course, I was sweating like a pig as I pushed those pedals around the 13.7 km (about 8.5 miles) long wall. It was sweltering outside, even for a morning bike ride. I hardly stopped to look at the city beyond the wall because I was afraid I wouldn't have the energy to continue riding on. And I was first to finish (felt it in my legs)!

X

Departed from Xi'An on the 'sleeper train'. Each train car had small rooms with two sets of bunks, four people per space. On the ride to Shanghai, I bunked with the chaperone from Florida, the guy from Alaska, and the girl from Australia. It wasn't bad, but they were constantly complaining about the itineraries, not having the freedom to just do what they want, roam around. I thought they were rude because they discounted her efforts, disregarded all the hard work our tour guide put into creating a fun, immersive schedule so we could explore her city, her Xi'An.

I enjoyed the scheduled sightseeing and museum visits, all the little details that she planned so carefully for us. Unfortunately, I was the only person who stuck with the tour guide and university chaperone when the "freedom to roam" was requested by the



others. I was there for the learning, the experience. I wouldn't know what I would do if I was given the freedom to roam. I would likely get lost, never to be found again.

XI

As we arrived in Shanghai, I felt a rush of excitement and sadness. After this city, it's a one-way ticket back to Jersey, USA. I just wanted these last few days to last for a while.

The YuYuan Garden... I'm telling you I would purposefully get lost in there. Such stunning, intricate architecture, luxurious gardens filled with flawless plants. And even with all the tourists abuzz, there was a state of serenity throughout.

A cruise on the Huang Po River at night, the city lights aglow around us as we floated through the canal. Reminded me a bit of Atlantic City, but this city was more spectacular.

Made our way up the 468 m (1,536 ft) tall Shanghai Oriental Pearl Tower. With a fear of heights, I took a chance walking on the transparent sky walking floor, 259 m (850 feet) high. Legs were shaky at first but made it all the way around the viewing deck, looking down at the city that lay below my feet the whole time. What a thrill!

The Bund, almost New-York-City-like. Exploring the streets felt freeing. I wanted to carve out a home for myself, plant myself in that city.

XII

Being the twenty-year-old I was, parents telling me not to drink alcohol in China, I did it anyway. I was in China; "under-age drinking" doesn't necessarily exist over there. Plus, I was less than a month shy of twenty-one.

I had some *soju* (Korean rice wine) with the Korean students when I was at the dorms in Beijing. In Shanghai, on the river ride, I had a Tsing-Tao (Chinese beer) or two with the chaperone from Florida. Went out with the girl from Australia, the guy from Alaska, and, on our last night in Shanghai, found our way to a couple of bars, had a couple of sips of whatever they were having. Got a bit tipsy because hell, why not? Not drunk though. They made sure of that. Why not party it up a bit before I am back to "that's-illegal, can't-do-that-here, show-me-some-ID" New Jersey?

When the trip finally ended, I made a promise to myself to visit more of the world before I grow too old, die too young. I want to explore widely, learn vastly, and love the world openly. In return, I hope the world loves me.

(Turn to the next page for pictures.)



A Day at Summer Palace | © Georgia Iris Szawaryn



Terracotta Warrior | © Georgia Iris Szawaryn



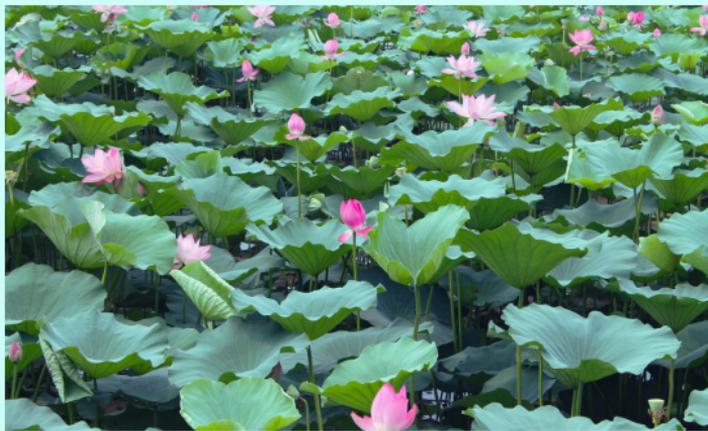
Steep Steps and Wood Planks | © Georgia Iris Szawaryn



Forbidden City Reflections | © Georgia Iris Szawaryn



Crowds Around the Palace | © Georgia Iris Szawaryn



Endless Lotus | © Georgia Iris Szawaryn

The background is a light teal color. It is decorated with stylized leaf patterns in two colors: pink and teal. The pink leaves are located in the top-left, middle-right, and bottom-left corners. The teal leaves are located in the top-right, middle-left, and bottom-right corners. The word "drama" is centered in the middle of the page.

drama

the nanny

FAVOUR IGWEMOH

SCENE 1

[Three different class teachers are marking the register. One of the teachers calls two names and the students respond “present”. When he gets to Jennifer Williams, there is no response. The other two teachers call the names of her siblings, Isaac and Whitney. No response again. After a brief silence, a phone starts ringing. A 40-year-old who would pass for a 25-year-old is seen answering.]

FREDRICK: Williams speaking. Afternoon, Principal. I had my driver drop them at school this morning. Anything the problem? *[Sighs]* I apologize on behalf of my kids, sir. Yes, I agree, so unruly of them. It won't happen again. I know, sir. This is the tenth time it has happened. I've been counting as well. I will handle them, sir. Yes, I can never forget the donations you always remind me to make to the school.

[Susan, his young secretary, enters his office.]

FREDRICK: Sir, I have to go now. A very important client just walked in and I have a meeting with him. You too, sir. *[Drops his phone and sighs.]*

SUSAN: Sir, you don't have a meeting till tomorrow.

FREDRICK: I know that, but he doesn't.

SUSAN: The school again, sir?

FREDRICK: I don't know what to say or do.

SUSAN: Don't worry, sir. You will figure something out. Before I forget, I came to inform you that Mr Ogili called. He has agreed to our terms and is willing to have his marketing team and ours sit down for a discussion.

FREDRICK: Alright, that's good. Set the date and finalize the

the meeting arrangements then let it reflect on my schedule.

Susan: Yes, sir.

[Susan leaves the office. Fredrick's phone rings.]

LORETTA: Hope your day is as wonderful as mine?

FREDRICK: Oh it is. I was just about to call you.

LORETTA: Oh, oh, what did they do this time?

FREDRICK: The usual.

LORETTA: This is like what, the tenth time?

FREDRICK: Glad you are counting too. Lorry, I need your help.

LORETTA: Well, I'm at the beach in Hawaii. I don't see how I can help you.

FREDRICK: You are somewhere on the streets of Lagos in a moving car heading to one of your dealers to get materials for your next show.

LORETTA: Well, if you figured that out, you can figure out how to help your kids.

FREDRICK: There are three of them!

LORETTA: You should have thought about that when you were pumping you wife.

FREDRICK: Yeah, well, at the time she wasn't complaining. And it was easier then. Now I'm a widower with three kids and a demanding job. I can't handle this. I need some help.

LORETTA: Then get a nanny. He or she could always keep watch over the kids when you are at work and get other things fixed.

FREDRICK: I don't know about that.

LORETTA: Fredrick, your house is out of shape beginning with you, to your kids, from your staff down to those rent-free tenants of yours. Your house needs to get in order.

FREDRICK: Those rent-free tenants are my and your in-laws.

[Loretta scoffs and Fredrick chuckles.] What we need is a miracle — unless you have Wonder Woman on speed dial.

LORETTA: I wouldn't be talking to you if I did. But don't worry. I think I know someone who can do the job.

FREDRICK: Oh, thank you! I love you! I knew I could count on you. You're a lifesaver. And oh, can the person be a woman? The thought of a male nanny doesn't sit well with me. Hello? Lorry?
[He realizes the call has been disconnected.]

[A woman in her late 30s smirks at her phone.]

LORETTA: Steve, turn around, please.

STEVE: Okay, ma. To where, ma?

LORETTA: The restaurant.

[To be continued in the next issue.]

sitting still

ORION CHRISTOPHER

[A Hindu temple next door to a hospital. The car park across the street houses many temple worshippers on festival days but plenty more use it as a pit stop from day to day. The inside is somewhat decayed, but holding together well enough, especially the altar dedicated to Ganesha. Sirens can be heard outside along with the occasional yell as the hospital is ablaze.]

DHANUR: *[Paces in front of the altar. She is a tall, dark young woman in her early 20s with pointed features and an oddly red head of hair. She always has a sense of abandon to her persona that both hinders her first impressions, but offers a somehow put-together sense of detachment from the world. With tense shoulders and dark circles under her eyes, she radiates enough stress to counterbalance her laissez-faire air.]* It's wrong to just stand here.

BRACHEN: *[Sitting on a pile of pillows. He is an older man, pushing 65, sporting an almost comically large mustache which he always grooms like a prized stallion. He sits upright, but always looks ready to bend with the wind, however it may blow.]* Then sit.

DHANUR: I can't.

BRACHEN: Sure you can. It's Easy. Watch.

DHANUR: Dad. I know how to sit.

BRACHEN: You could have fooled me, Zirisa.

DHANUR: I told you, it's Dhanur now! Sir. Sorry.

BRACHEN: Mm. I thought so. Now come sit already.

Dhanur: I-I can't. I could be out there helping.

BRACHEN: And what would you be doing?

DHANUR: I dunno! Maybe just... Uh...

BRACHEN: "Uh." My, how insightful.

DHANUR: I could be holding up a hose or maybe helping burst

burst down doors!

BRACHEN: You have no idea how fires are fought, do you?

DHANUR: No, sir.

BRACHEN: No, sir. Dhanur, you'd only get in the way. Perhaps someday you will become a firefighter, or even a doctor to help once the fire is out, but for now, the best thing you can do is stay out of the professional's way.

DHANUR: But —

BRACHEN: No buts! Come. Sit down.

[Dhanur sits and pouts.]

BRACHEN: Now, now. That's no way to scrunch up that beautiful face.

DHANUR: Should be out there getting messed up by now. I haven't done anything yet. Just sat here in this temple and helped you.

BRACHEN: Ouch.

DHANUR: No, not... ugh. No. I just mean, I dunno. Worshippers come in here 'n talk about all the stuff they've done or their kids are starting to do and all I can say is I polished Ganesha yesterday.

BRACHEN: Every task, no matter —

DHANUR: — how small affects the aspects of Brahma like the ripples on a pond. I got that already. It's just... when Alexander the Great was my age, he had already led troops into battle.

BRACHEN: And he had a king for a father. You were born to the whims of Vishnu and brought to me as if you were Krishna himself. Your dharma is whatever you choose it to be. You spent the time others had to codify their roles, figuring out your own. Whatever you call yourself only changes who you are, not the world. All you can do is work on how you take every situation.

[An increasingly loud group of sirens joins the others.]

DHANUR: I have to do something.

BRACHEN: And you will. Someday, not today and not tomorrow. Some day. Your time will come.

DHANUR: When?

BRACHEN: I don't know. That's for you to uncover.

DHANUR: And how many people are going to die before I get there?

BRACHEN: Less than if you never found your place. Sit back down, Zirisa! Get your eyes away from that window!

DHANUR: The fire's reaching the cars! I can —

BRACHEN: You will sit down! [*Pinches her shoulder, making Dhanur instantly caves.*]

DHANUR: Ah! Ah! B—

BRACHEN: No! Buts! Ah, see? They've already turned a hose to it. The disaster is averted.

DHANUR: I could have —

BRACHEN: Enough! Get this through that thick head of yours! You would only get in the way! You would rush in there like a child, catch alight, and distract one of the firefighters who'd need to save you. You're more likely to make someone else die than save another! Sometimes I wish I knew your parents so I could smack them and demand to know how they made you so dense!

DHANUR: I'm sorry.

BRACHEN: I know. I know you are, Zi-Dhanur. I know. It's hard to see such troubles in the world and be helpless. You think I haven't experienced such? But you're only a teenager. Your time will come when you leave this temple and enter the arms of the world to be forged into the person you were always meant to be.

It will be hard, and you will see yet more fires you cannot extinguish yet. There will be others though that are small enough to be stamped out and in the ashes, you may find a blanket to smother another larger flame. Then before you can even notice, you're working with the entire city to battle a blaze that endangers more than just a hospital.

DHANUR: Yeah... It still sucks that I have to wait...

BRACHEN: I know. I do. Come, come. I understand. But you can be thankful that you ended up here, able to enjoy the soft pillows with me rather than remain abandoned outside on a day I happened to not be passing by.

DHANUR: I still kinda feel like I don't deserve it if others don't have what I have.

BRACHEN: And that is why you are here at this temple. Ganesha isn't the remover of barriers for nothing. Maybe your dharma is to follow his example and remove the barriers keeping those less fortunate than you from rising to our station in life.

[Janurana enters, young, blackened with soot, her black hair fluffed and frazzled. She's trying to keep a rigid, dignified posture, her efforts looking more desperate thanks to the Hermès purse she clutches to her person, despite it being covered in ash and the broken heel she still wore that forced her to walk normally on one foot and tip-toe on the other.]

JANURANA: Hello? Oh. I apologize. I didn't... The door was open so...

[She bows upon seeing what kind of place she enters. Brachen descends on her with kindness.]

BRACHEN: Please, please, miss. It is quite alright. What is your name? Are you hurt?

JANURANA: I'm okay, I'm okay. The paramedic said I was free to go. I'm so sorry for intruding. My name is Janurana.

DHANUR: It's fine!

JANURANA: Thank you. I'm so, so sorry to ask, but... Do you have a car?

BRACHEN: Of course.

JANURANA: Could I please trouble you for a ride home? So sorry to ask. But my phone was in the hospital and it had my metro pass and I need to get back to my mother. She's sick and couldn't make it to get her medicine today. I-I've got it, don't worry. But please, so sorry to ask. I need to get back...

BRACHEN: Dhanur. Take the poor child home. *[He hands her the keys.]* Go on. Get out of here and help her.

DHANUR: *[Bounces the keys in her hands, affirming them, then hugs Brachen, making him cough at her strength.]* Come on. Let's go. I'm Dhanur. Where do you live?

JANURANA: Yes. I heard. It's quite far, but I can show you the way.

[They exit.]

homeschooling

GEORGE FREEK

THE CHARACTERS

DYLAN GOOTCH, *A High School Sophomore, 15*

JOAN GOOTCH, *His Sister, A High School Freshman, 14*

GORDON GOOTCH, *Their Father, 40*

CAROLE GOOTCH, *Their Mother, 37*

MS FINCH, *A Therapist, 28*

THE PLACE

The Gootch's living room

THE TIME

The present

[The Gootch living room, conventionally decorated to suit the theatre's budget. A door in the rear, doors left and right. At rise, DYLAN is sprawled on the sofa. He's perturbed. JOAN enters, reading a book.]

DYLAN: Hey, Freak!

JOAN: *[Looks up with irritation]* Do you even know what that word means?

DYLAN: Sure I do.

JOHN: Okay, tell me.

DYLAN: *[He looks confused for a moment]* Don't you know? *[He snickers at his humor]*

JOAN: Goodbye, Dylan, and would you *please* have a rotten day. *[She starts to exit.]*

DYLAN: Hey, come back here! Can't you take a joke?

JOAN: I haven't heard one yet.

DYLAN: [*Is he being sly?*] Tell me something. Why do you always act so smart?

JOAN: [*It's self-evident*] Because I *am*!

DYLAN: [*He smiles*] Well, then prove it.

JOAN: Okay, you try this. [*She starts to recite the alphabet backwards*] ZYXVW—

DYLAN: Hold it! Look, I'll believe you, if you come here and tell me the answer to this math problem.

JOAN: [*Outraged*] What! That would be *cheating*.

DYLAN: Well, you could give me a hint, couldn't you?

JOAN: A *hint* — to a math problem? You must be nuts.

DYLAN: Oh, come on. I won't tell anybody.

JOAN: You're supposed to work it out for yourself. Otherwise, what would be the point?

DYLAN: [*Now getting angry*] Come here and give me this answer!
[He jumps up and grabs her]

JOAN: [*Screams*] Help! You're choking me! DAD! HELP! DAD!

DYLAN: [*Lets go*] Oh, for crying out loud!

GORDON: [*Enters with a half-eaten sandwich*] What the devil is going on in here?

JOAN: This maniac was choking me to death!

DYLAN: [*Very rational*] And just *why* were you choking her to death, Dylan?

DYLAN: She's like nuts.

JOAN: [*She starts to cough, rather exaggeratedly*] Aagh! Aagh!

GORDON: [*Watches her for a few seconds*] That's not very lady-like, Joan. Now will one of you please tell me what this is all about?

DYLAN: I just asked her help with a math problem, and she

started acting like I asked her to commit murder!

JOAN: But dad, he wanted me to give him the answer! And that would be like cheating!

DYLAN: It would not, would it, dad? [*GORDON looks rather uneasy*]

JOAN: It would so!

DYLAN: Would not!

JOAN: Would so!

DYLAN: Not!

JOAN: [*Stamping her foot*] Would so! Wouldn't it, dad? Huh? Wouldn't it?

GORDON: [*Nervously stuffing the last of the sandwich in his mouth*] Mmf—

JOAN: [*With cockiness to DYLAN, as if GORDON had agreed*] You see?

DYLAN: [*Starts to whimper*] But pop, if a brother has a problem, shouldn't a sister help him out? I mean isn't that her family duty?

GORDON: Well—

JOAN: Not if it means being a party to *cheating*—should it, dad?

GORDON: But she wouldn't even give me a *hint*? Is that any way for a sister to behave?

JOAN: But he's trying to make me a cheater, too! [*Throws a mini-tantrum*]

GORDON: [*Starts biting his fingernails*] Look here Joan, you might have a point, but I think at the moment you're overreacting. We need to get your mother's opinion on this. [*He calls, somewhat in panic*] Carole! Carole! Could you come in here for a moment?

CAROLE: [*Enters, ringing off on her cellphone*] For heaven's sake,

Gordy, I'm trying to make arrangements with Louise Carlson about bowling. What is it?

GORDON: The kids have an issue—

CAROLE: *Issue?* Gordon, I've told you that word is meaningless nonsense. What is the argument all about?

JOAN: [*Jumping in*] Let me tell her, dad. I'll tell her! Mom, Dylan was like choking me because I wouldn't help him cheat!

DYLAN: She's lying! I wasn't choking her!

JOAN: Were too!

DYLAN: Was not!

CAROLE: That's enough! Dylan, tell me what you and Joan were arguing about.

DYLAN: I just asked her to give me a little help with a math problem, that's all, and she wouldn't do it!

JOAN: A *little* help— He wanted me to give him the answer!

DYLAN: What's wrong with that, mom? I'm her brother, ain't I?

GORDON: Dylan! We've taught you better than that!

DYLAN: [*Staring at GORDON in amazement*] I ain't her brother?

CAROLE: But Dylan, did you try to work out the answer for yourself before you asked your sister for help?

JOAN: [*Snorts*] No way!

DYLAN: Way!

JOAN: I'll bet.

DYLAN: Okay, how much you wanna bet? I'll bet you a million dollars I did!

JOAN: [*Laughing*] Where would you get a million dollars?

DYLAN: Dad, loan me a million dollars like right now, okay?

CAROLE: Stop it! At the moment we have a more important problem to deal with!

JOAN: But why don't you just punish him for trying to cheat?

DYLAN: WHAT? You know, at times I could almost kill her! [*He makes a leap at JOAN*]

GORDON: Dylan! How many times must we tell you murder never solves anything?

DYLAN: [*Sulkily glaring at JOAN*] Maybe not, but some people get away with it an awful lot!

CAROLE: Gordon, I'm not sure how to handle this. [*She has a brainstorm*] Listen, I think we should call that new 'Ask-A-Therapist' hotline! They are trained to deal with these sorts of problems, aren't they?

GORDON: I'll bet you're right, honey. [*He dials a number on his phone and starts to call*]

JOAN: [*Sulks*] I don't see why you have to ask anyone. *He* started it—

DYLAN: [*Chuckles*] Ha, ha! You're just afraid they won't be on your side!

JOAN: [*She starts to attack him*] No, I'm not! And they *will* be on my side!

CAROLE: [*Standing in JOAN's way*] Would you *please* stop arguing? Your father is making a phone call. Anyway, I don't think they actually take sides.

GORDON: [*To phone*] Yes, that's 2515 Briarwood Lane. (He thinks) Well yes, I'd say it was. [*Quietly to CAROLE*] I told her it was an emergency.

JOAN: [*To DYLAN*] You've really done it this time, bozo! I'll bet this costs a fortune.

DYLAN: I bet they take it out of *your* allowance.

JOAN: [*Snickering*] You'll be grounded until the day you're sent

to the penitentiary.

GORDON: Thank you. I appreciate it. [*He rings off*] They're sending someone over!

CAROLE: Thank heavens. I'm not sure how much longer I can keep my hands to myself.

GORDON: Try counting to a million, honey. Sometimes that works for me.

JOAN: [*Laughing, pointing to DYLAN*] He can't even count to a hundred!

DYLAN: Oh yeah? [*He starts to count*] One—two—three—four—five—six— [*He hesitates for a second*]

GORDON: That's fine, Dylan—We believe you.

[*Then, suddenly, the doorbell rings. A pause.*]

CAROLE: [*Amazed*] Wow! That was quick.

GORDON: [*He goes to the door and lets MS FINCH in*] Come in. We're really pleased you could make the time for us. The thing is we have a bit of a problem here—I might have over-reacted when I said emergency. I guess it's not a terribly serious problem. I mean no one has been murdered. [*He chuckles*] Not yet, that is— [*Ms FINCH now looks a little uneasy*]

CAROLE: [*Interrupting him with a strained smile and offering her hand*] How do you do? I'm Carole Gootch, Ms—

MS FINCH: [*Smiling timidly*] Finch, Leticia Finch—but please call me Letty.

GORDON: I'm Gordon, call me Gordy— And these are our children Joan and Dylan. [*DYLAN walks off indifferently*]

MS FINCH: [*Uneasily, to JOAN*] Well, I'll bet you're Joan?

JOAN: [*Laughs*] How'd you guess?

GORDON: [*Quickly*] Now the problem is, Ms, er—Letty. [*He*

shakes his head, looking at CAROLE] Boy, I don't know where to begin. Well, first off, Dylan is about a year older than Joan is. I don't know if that means anything—

JOAN: [*Jumping in quickly*] I'll tell her what happened—

DYLAN: [*Pushing past her*] I'll tell her. You'd lie.

JOAN: Would not.

CAROLE: [*A very strained smile*] Joan, Dylan, if you please, I'll explain. The problem, I gather, began over Dylan's difficulty with a math problem—

JOAN: Yeah, he wanted me to cheat!

DYLAN: But the *real* trouble is that this brat wouldn't even help her own brother. I mean she has like no family values—

JOAN: I do, too! I just wouldn't—

MS FINCH: [*Interrupting with a grim smile*] Excuse me—er, please, excuse me. [*Relieved*] You know this really sounds like an ethical problem. I think you need to call 'Ask-A-Philosopher'.

GORDON: You think? Oh boy! Would you by chance know that number?

CAROLE: [*Imploringly to MS FINCH*] But please, isn't there *anything* you can do?

MS FINCH: [*Nervous, up against it*] Well, you did say that, er Duncan—

GORDON: That's Dillman—Sorry! I mean *Dylan*. [*He smiles apologetically*]

MS FINCH: He attacked his sister?

JOAN: I said strangled!

DYLAN: Wrong! I'll show you exactly what I did. [*He makes a grab for her*]

CAROLE: [*At the end of her rope, gives an ear-shattering howl*]

PLEASE! *[Silence. MS FINCH reacts more nervously than anyone does. She starts to shake, turns away and retreats toward the door. JOAN stares at her, puts finger to head and spins it, indicating the opinion that MS FINCH has something loose up there. Bored, DYLAN suddenly returns to the sofa and his math problem]*

MS FINCH: I'm afraid I'm not up to this. In fact, I only recently left a convent. *[However, before anyone can respond, she takes a couple deep breaths, shakes her head and turns back with a resolute smile]* But I must learn to deal with the real world—no matter how horrible it is. Now tell me this. Would you say Dylan has shown signs of any psychological disorder?

GORDON: *[Baffled, To CAROLE]* What do you think, honey?

MS FINCH: *[When CAROLE looks extremely nervous and fails to respond]* For instance, manic-depressive—

CAROLE: *[Alarmed]* Certainly not!

MS FINCH: Oops, that was pre-politically correct. I meant to say bi-polar disorder. *[She smiles reassuringly]*

CAROLE: *[Somewhat reassured]* That does sound a little better.

JOAN: *[Snickering]* I think you were right the first time! *[Oddly, however, DYLAN fails to respond, still absorbed in his math exercise]*

MS FINCH: Or perhaps he has evinced latent schizoid tendencies. That's quite common these days. *[She chuckles slightly]* In all honesty, I often feel sometimes that I myself—

CAROLE: Schizoid! Certainly not— *[Pause]* But just for the sake of argument, what could we do about that?

MS FINCH: *[Shakes her head sadly]* Very little—

CAROLE: *[Offended]* Then I really don't see—

MS FINCH: *[Placatingly]* But for many people it's a comfort just

to know what the problem is. [*She smiles at them*]

GORDON: Honey, I don't think Dylan is—

JOAN: [*Laughing*] Do you have a category 'Just Plain Dumb'?

DYLAN: Nobody finds that funny, young lady!

JOAN: [*Quietly moping*] I did.

DYLAN: [*Suddenly jumps up*] I got it! I got the answer! [*They stare at him in amazement. He hands the pad to MS FINCH*] Take a look!

MS FINCH: [*Reading, then smiling à la HENRIETTA HIGGINS*] Why yes! By George, I believe he's got it!

GORDON: Well I'll be a horned toad!

CAROLE: I don't know what to say! [*Tearful*] Ms Finch, how can we ever thank you?

MS FINCH: [*Smiling modestly*] There's no need to thank me. You see, Dylan simply had to learn a valuable lesson before things could be set right. [*She smiles at him*] Isn't that so, Dylan? [*He smiles but looks more baffled than anything*]

CAROLE: So darling—what *did* you learn?

DYLAN: [*Concentrating earnestly*] I guess I learned that if I ever go looking for my heart's desire, I won't look any further than my own living room, because if it's not there, I never really lost it to begin with—Or something like that. [*To MS FINCH, smiling questioningly*] Is that it?

MS FINCH: [*She nods, would probably agree to anything to escape*] That's it! [*A tearful CAROLE now hugs DYLAN. A beaming GORDON looks on with pride*]

JOAN: [*Turns to the audience*] Oh, brother! [*Then a BLACKOUT*]

The background is a light teal color. It is decorated with stylized leaf patterns in two colors: teal and a muted pinkish-red. The leaves are arranged in clusters around the central text, with some overlapping the text itself. The text is centered and reads "about the contributors" in a dark teal, serif font.

about the
contributors

AAROHI SHARMA

Aarohi has just graduated high school. She hopes her love for literature will deepen with time.

ALAN BEDWORTH

Alan Bedworth is 65 years old and retired, having spent most of his life working in engineering. He has been writing poems and songs for two years. He has been fortunate to have had poems published by *The Trouvaille Review*, *Open Door Magazine*, and *Ambrosia Literary Garland*. His interests are watching Rugby League, writing and the outdoors.

ANJANA V WARRIER

Anjana likes to think of herself as a person who is forever trying to wedge herself between the nitty-gritty stuff of bygone times and the shenanigans of the modern age. She recently completed her M.A. in English from Stella Maris College, Chennai. She enjoys the colours and smells of nature as much as she does watching cute animal videos on Instagram.

ANNAPURANI VAIDYANATHAN

Annapurani Vaidyanathan is a 28-year-old mad hatter from India who can wolf down packets of M&M's before you bat your eyelids. She's an instrumentation engineer, author, poet and blogger who would lay down her life down for Roger Federer. She loves working with numbers and is passionate about technology, art, culture, and literature. Hoards books for a living. Finds the scent of hydrocarbons intoxicating. She's an erstwhile software test

analyst and presently a data journalist.

ANTHONY SALANDY

Anthony is a mixed-race poet and writer whose work tends to focus on social inequality throughout late-modern society. He travels frequently and has spent most of his life in Kuwait, jostling between the UK and America. His work has been published 150 times. He has published a chapbook titled *The Great Northern Journey* and a forthcoming chapbook titled *Vultures*. He is the Co-EiC of *Fahmidan Journal*. Twitter/Instagram: @anthony64120 <https://arsalandywriter.com/>

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Bupinder is an educator based in Kashmir, India. He teaches English to high school students. He also works as an Associate Editor for *The UNiverse Journal*. His works have been published in *The Week*, *The Delacorte Review*, *Non Binary Review*, *Sirius Editorial* among others. He is currently working on his first novel. Twitter: @fidoic

ELIZABETH NELSON

Elizabeth Nelson is a writer, artist, nostalgia junkie, and marketer living in the Berkshires with her husband, two cats, and a Puggle named Harper Lee. Selected published works include *A Seven Letter Word* and *The Golden Hour* (Canyon Voices), *Fugue* (Black Box Press), and *The Going Price* (Stage Rights). *Colors Inside the Body* received a reading at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater in NYC as part of Texas Wesleyan's 2019 Playmarket. *The Golden Hour*

was workshopped in 2018 as part of The Athena Project's Plays in Progress Series. www.elizabethnelson.net.

ELLPOET (ELLYSA GREENHALGH)

Ellpoet lives in the Far East of Melbourne. She is gay, a mother, partner, friend, daughter and carer. She knows what trauma is and how complicated life can be. This is what she writes about in her poetry. She also writes short stories, on emotions, truth, horror and grief.

EMMA JEAN HERMACINSKI

Emma is a 17-year-old writer from Zionsville, Indiana. She attends school in Wallingford, Connecticut, where she can often be found by the campus's polluted creek, scribbling her poetry on a board she fished out of there. Outside of poetry, she enjoys crusading against capitalization, reading travelogues and Spanish-language magical realism, and cuddling her cavapoo, Lola. Her work is featured or forthcoming in *3 Moon Magazine*, *Stone of Madness Press*, and *Southchild Lit*.

EMMA MCGLASHEN

Emma McGlashen (she/her or they/them) is a Brooklyn poet and publicist. Their work has previously been published in *L'Ephemere Review*, *OUT/CAST*, *Bombus Press*, and elsewhere.

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Erica Hom is a writer, poet and educator living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is a former poetry editor at *Auriga Magazine*

and an alumnus of the Artist in Residence program organized by the East Coast Asian American Student Union. Her work has previously appeared in *Line Rider Press* and *Voices from the Attic*. You can find more of her writing on Instagram at @e.h.writing.

FAVOUR IGWEMOH

Favour is a Nigerian writer. She is passionate about art forms like movies, writing, painting, pottery, fashion and cooking. She temporarily quit writing as she was shy but resumed when she realized she couldn't live without it. She uploaded her first book, *How to Love Like That*, to Wattpad and it was later published as a webnovel. She considers writing her God-given gift and wishes to use it to spread joy and hope.

GEORGE FREEK

George Freek has been playwright-in-residence at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, Southern Methodist University, Southern Illinois University and Eastern Illinois University. His plays have been published by *Playscripts*, *Blue Moon Plays*, and *Off The Wall Plays*.

GEORGIA IRIS SZAWARYN

Georgia is a Writing Arts graduate student at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. She received her bachelor's degree in journalism from Montclair State University. She is a writer, poet, artist, and photographer, and is simultaneously working on two fiction novels, one based on her life and experiences as an adopted Korean-American and the other, a superhero's origin story. Her

work has been published in *Flora Fiction* and *YAWP Journal*. You can follow her on Instagram @georgiaiszawaryn and Twitter @g_szawaryn. To read more about her journey as a writer, visit her website: georgiaisalvryn.com

GRACIE NORDGREN

Gracie is a Creative Writing student at the University of Colorado Boulder. She enjoys daydreaming and pomegranates, and would very much like to travel to Venus. Her work has appeared in *Kalopsia Literary Journal*, *South Broadway Ghost Society*, and *Cathartic Youth Literary Journal* among others.

HARRI WOOD

Harri is a recent Creative Writing graduate from Kent. She is 24 years old and enjoys writing about mental health, love, and anything her younger self would have been grateful to read back then. She has newly realized she might be Taylor Swift's biggest fan. Swift's romanticization of life inspires all of her writing.

JASON DE KOFF

Jason is an Associate Professor of Agronomy and Soil Science at Tennessee State University. He lives in Nashville, TN, with his wife, Jaclyn, and his two daughters, Tegan and Maizie. His chapbook, *Words on Pages*, is currently available on Amazon.

JIMENA SOFIA RAMOS YENGLER

Jimena is a Peruvian writer. She started painting at four and exhibited her first work publicly at six. From the age of twelve,



she dedicated herself to music. At 19, she published a romantic novel called *Roma Enamorada*. She has a YouTube channel where she uploads content related to cultural events, interviews, covers and original songs. She is currently pursuing two professional careers: Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation and Psychology. She also studies performing arts.

JOANNA GEORGE

Joanna is a 28-year-old writer from Pondicherry. Her works have appeared or are forthcoming in several online and print journals such as *For Women Who Roar*, *Mookychick*, *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Shanghai Literary*, *Muse India*, *Madras Courier* and *Spark the Magazine*. “Boundless” (Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival 2019) is an anthologized work. She lives in Pondicherry and is a researcher at Pondicherry University.

JOHN SWEET

John sends greetings from the rural wastelands of upstate NY. He is a firm believer in writing as catharsis, and in the continuous search for an unattainable and constantly evolving absolute truth. His latest poetry collections include *A Flag on Fire is a Song of Hope* and *A Dead Man, Either Way*.

JOHN TUSTIN

John’s poetry has appeared in many disparate literary journals since 2009. fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry contains links to his published poetry online.

JOSHUA BRITTON

Joshua is the author of the short story collection, *Tadpoles*, and has published short fiction and nonfiction in *Tethered By Letters*, *Cobalt Review*, *Bodega Magazine*, *Midnight Special*, *Midwest Writer's Guild Literary Journal*, *Steam Ticket*, *Typehouse Literary*, *The Tarantino Chronicles*, and *Spank the Carp*. A native of Rochester, NY, Joshua now lives in Evansville, IN, where he is a freelance musician. Follow him on Twitter @JP_Britton. Visit his website: www.joshua-britton.com.

MATHANGI N M

Mathangi (@mangandsomestuffshewrites) is constantly plagued by writer's block and bad teeth. She likes to braid her hair, smell fresh laundry and open up windows in the morning. She lives in Chennai, India, with her stuffed toys.

MOULI BANERJEE

Mouli is a mostly-procrastinating writer. She daydreams about a novel she never ends up writing. She cries about it to cats she meets on walks. While a constant note-taker, she keeps losing them between pages of books she needs for her PhD in political science. Her non-academic writing has appeared in *The Cottage Reader*, *Sonic Boom*, and *Gulmohur Quarterly*. She also blogs occasionally at poemsandmeditations.wordpress.com.

MURIELLE MÜLLER

Murielle Müller is a postgraduate student of English Studies in Berlin, Germany. Her work has previously been published in

Dissonance Magazine, *MORIA Magazine*, *C-Heads Magazine* and *FU Review* among others. She writes and performs her creative somethings in her mother tongue, German, as well as English and can be found at muriellemueller.com or @miemoria on Instagram.

ORION CHRISTOPHER

Orion is just himself, hoping you can work on your dreams today.

PASTEL BLACK

Pastel Black is the artistic expression of a gay non-binary Christian with ADHD. If you're confused, so are they. One of their friends once told them that words fall out of them. They write because turning those falling words into art feels beautiful. Find them on Instagram @Pastelblackpoetry and @Pastelblackdraws. Their self-published debut book is available on Amazon.

PAUL RUTH

Paul is a writer and teacher from Michigan with an M.A. in English. His poetry has appeared in *Artifex*, *ARC Journal*, *Silver Birch Press*, *The Literatus*, and others. His op-ed writing has appeared in *Bridge Magazine*, *The Detroit News*, and *The Huffington Post*.

PRANITI GULYANI

Praniti is a 17-year-old writer from Delhi, India. Her book, *Sixteen Drops of Ink*, was published in August 2020. She is also an international haiku poet who has been awarded the second position in the International Mainichi Haiku Contest (Children's

Section) for three consecutive years.

RAJNISH DAS

Rajnish works as a content writer and dreams of publishing her book one day. She desires to talk about caste and gender discrimination through her work.

RICHARD LEDUE

Richard LeDue (he/him) was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, but currently lives in Norway House, Manitoba, with his wife and son. His poems have appeared in various publications throughout 2020, and more is forthcoming throughout 2021. His first chapbook, *The Loneliest Age*, was released in 2020, and a second chapbook, *The Kind of Noise Worth Writing Down*, is forthcoming in early 2022 from Kelsay Books.

ROOSHA MANDAL

Roosha studied creative writing and biology at Carnegie Mellon University. Currently, she is a medical student interested in the intersection of science, poetry, and media. She runs a small poetry project titled 'gxrlhood' on Instagram.

SONIA CHARALES

Sonia is an ambitious individual who finds expression through poetry, prose and art. She writes and creates around subjects like Indian culture and bilingualism. She hopes her work will help and heal her and those who need it.

SPANDAN BANDYOPADHYAY

Spandan is an 18-year-old writer from Kolkata, West Bengal. He loves literature more than he loves himself. He hopes to be a full-time writer in the future. Twitter: @Spandan_B_49; Instagram: @spandanb.49

SWATI SINGH

Swati is 22 years old and currently pursuing an MBBS in Rural Medical College, India. She is an emerging writer whose poems have appeared in anthologies by The Write Order Publications, Writer's Pocket, Epiphany Publications and others. Her short stories feature in anthologies by Fenechty Publications and Red Penguin Publication.

TIMOTHY TARKELLY

Timothy's work has appeared in *Paddler Press*, *Unstamatic*, *The Daily Drunk* and others. He has two collections of poetry from Spartan Press: *Luckhound* and *Gently in Manner, Strongly in Deed: Poems on Eisenhower*. When he's not writing, he teaches in Southeast Kansas.

TOSHIYA KAMEI

Toshiya holds an MFA in literary translation from the University of Arkansas. His translations of short fiction have appeared in venues such as *Clarkesworld*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *Strange Horizons*.

UNNIMAYA S

Unnimaya is from Kerala. She is fresh out of her master's degree in Literature. She loves music, poetry, cats, her family and her friends in no particular order. She enjoys taking pretty pictures that evoke the smell of leaves, flowers and grass.

VINEETHA A V

Vineetha is a passionate writer who resides in Chennai. She completed her master's degree in Literature at Stella Maris College. In addition to creating content for her blog vineethawrites.wordpress.com, she actively engages in singing, dancing and painting. Vineetha is a practitioner and an advocate of self-love and has expressed her views on the same on different social media platforms. She is keen on doing research in the fields of gender studies, culinary literature and diasporic literature. She has published research papers in different journals and has co-authored two books.

YUU IKEDA

Yuu Ikeda is a Japanese poet. She loves to read and write mystery novels and drink sugary coffee. She writes poetry on her blog: poetryandcoffeedays.wordpress.com. Her work has appeared in Nymphs and Tealight Press among others. Twitter/Instagram: @yuunnnn77

The image features a light teal background with decorative leaf patterns in pink and teal. The word "masthead" is centered in a dark teal serif font. The leaf patterns are arranged in a circular fashion around the text, with pink leaves in the top-left and bottom-left quadrants, and teal leaves in the top-right and bottom-right quadrants.

masthead

SUSANNA MARIAN CORREYA

Susanna is a lanky long-haired twenty-something from Chennai with handwriting that resembles a cardiogram. She recently completed her Master's in Literature from Stella Maris College. She worked as an editor for a publishing company and was a regular contributor to the college magazine. She founded *Rhodora* on a quiet starry night when she realized the potential of indie zines. Cats, Joan of Arc and Mark Twain are some of the things that get her excited.

KEERTHANA V

Keerthana is a social-media-shy creature who giggles in short bursts. Articulate and laser-focused, she assesses submissions and situations with sensitivity. She doesn't believe her WhatsApp texts could go straight to publication. She is fluent in Telugu, English and Tamil and can translate and interpret with ease. She obtained her Master's in Literature from Stella Maris College. A Carnatic singer with an airy voice, she will calm your nerves on a bad day or make a good day sound better.

MARIAM ANNA ALEX

Mariam "Akku" is a soon-to-be Visual Arts graduate from Kottayam. She was the set designer of the play *On Both Sides* and has contributed doodles to The Ecology Project. She loves art, music, TV shows, flowers and dogs. Even her rough sketches look printable and marketable. Plump chicken dumplings and the color aqua make her happy.



THE RHODORA

ON BEING ASKED, WHENCE IS THE FLOWER?

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,
I found the fresh rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.

The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
Made the black water with their beauty gay;
Here might the red bird come his plumes to cool,
And court the flower that cheapens his array.

Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!
I never thought to ask, I never knew;
But in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me here brought you.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

