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ISSUE VI

BCC LITERARY AND  
ARTS MAGAZINE

# LABYRINTH



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# Please take care as some works address sensitive topics. Here are resources.

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If you are thinking about suicide, please call  
**1-855-654-6735**

Need someone to talk to? NJ Hopeline is here to help.  
Specialists are available for confidential telephone counseling and support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. **You're NOT alone.**

Crisis Textline:  
**Text NJ to 741741 for free, 24/7 crisis support.**

## National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255) is a 24-hour, toll-free, confidential suicide prevention hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. By dialing 1-800-273-TALK, the call is routed to the nearest crisis center in a national network of more than 150 crisis centers. The Lifeline's national network of local crisis centers provides crisis counseling and mental health referrals day and night.

## Domestic Violence:

### National Domestic Violence Hotline

**1-800-799-SAFE (7233) / 1-800- 787-3224 TTY**  
secure online chat: [thehotline.org](https://thehotline.org)

### loveisrespect

**1-866-331-9474 / Text "loveis" to 22522**  
Secure online chat: [loveisrespect.org](https://loveisrespect.org)

# Hotlines

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## **NJ Coalition to End Domestic Violence Women (NJCEDV)**

1-609-584-8107

## **NJ Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NJ CASA)**

1-609-631-4450

## **Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline**

1-877-NJ-ABUSE (652-2873)

1-800-835-5510 (TTY)

## **Statewide Domestic Violence Hotline**

1-800-572-SAFE

## **Statewide Sexual Violence Hotline**

1-800-601-7200

## **NJ Human Trafficking Hotline**

1-855-END-NJ-HT (1-855-363-6548)

## **National Domestic Violence Hotline**

1-800-799-SAFE

## **National Sexual Violence Hotline**

1-800-656-HOPE

## **National Human Trafficking Hotline**

1-888-373-7888

## **New Jersey Crime Victim's Law Center**

1-973-729-9342

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Cass Guinto, Dr. Caroline Kelley, Lauren Moran Mills, Dr. Anna Guzon, Dr. Sarah Markgraf, and Ariel Harari. This year's edition would not have been possible without your support.

# The Desk Chair

*Sean Ferry*

My room isn't spacious but you somehow manage to fit. You have wheels enabling you to move around. However, they don't come to much use where you are on my small piece of floor space. I forget sometimes that I can spin while sitting on your seat; and occasionally I'll start spinning subconsciously—getting fairly dizzy. I'm grateful for you but I've never acknowledged it before.

You arrived as a holiday present to me. My brother looked at your instruction manual and put together the various parts. I thanked him for doing that favor for me and then I rolled your frame in front of my desk. At first, I didn't like you. I couldn't get your seat at the right height for the desk. My back felt uncomfortable when I sat on your seat for too long. Eventually, though, I warmed up to you. Your cushions and armrests had to be worn in like a pair of Levi jeans.

I found myself returning to you again and again. I loved journaling and drawing while perched on your seat. After a few months, I started studying with you too. I gathered my notebooks and highlighters and placed my mug down precariously on your armrest whenever inspiration struck. You were there during the all-nighters and early mornings always welcoming my presence.

There are still days when I don't like you very much. Those days when I don't want to create at my desk and I'd rather take a nap in my bed. Nevertheless, there are still some activities I can only do with you. Your seat is the only one I can spin around and then nonchalantly lean back in—pretending I'm an overconfident stockbroker on Wall Street. Your seat is also the only one in my room that has a soft memory foam material. Even though I don't always admit it, I really do appreciate you.





# **“Verdant mountains”**

*Sara Yoon Katori*



# **“Big Waves”**

*Hosna Kachooee*

# For you

*Baderlin Abreu*

this part of me only exists for you  
the romantic  
the part that loves hard and carelessly  
the optimistic  
the part that looks forward to new tomorrows with you  
the timid  
the part that cannot contain the butterflies  
this part of me...  
only exists for loving you



# Mourning Moonlit Night

*Judah Belgrade*

Embrace the Future. Follow its Light. Revive the Past.

A long long time ago, in a land far far away, the Moon rose full once more...  
The Hollow Branches of long Dead Trees begin to exhale in creaks and groans.  
The stiff jointed Fog Windows begin to dance a slow back and forth, in, and out,  
in, and out. Wooden Bars fall loose, their time as guardians coming to a close  
sooner than they truly wished.

Doorknobs and Locks frail and deep in rust turn and twist with determination,  
they all have one key, and they all unlocked without hesitation. Dust Bunnies still  
guild every surface lacking a caring brush to sweep them off their feet. Every suite  
of rusted Sagging Armor, every piece of unchecked Warped Furniture, every piece  
of fine Forgotten Artwork believes that the Mansion should be their resting place.  
It is home, after all.

But the Moon has other plans...

The old Rocking Chair flails as the Front Doors burst open. It slams into the  
Sturdy Fence, bringing unwelcomed vibrance and rhythm at the front porch.  
“You’re lucky I was there to catch you.” Said the Sturdy Fence. “But it is strange  
that you made your way over here. Is something the matter? Tell me when you’re  
ready.”

“I was, knocked back, into, you by,” It took a few moments for the Rocking Chair  
to regain balance. They were always there for each other. The Rocking Chair was  
always keeping the Sturdy Fence from getting too lonely, and the Sturdy Fence  
was there to keep the Rocking Chair safe. This is how they’ve lived. “The, front,  
door. It, just, oh, opened, suddenly!” Its metronomic rocking began to slow down  
with the help of the Sturdy Fence, but the energy in those words were still  
tangible.

“I heard some rustling in the woods,” the Sturdy Fence said. “Do you think someone entered from the side?” The front door has always been locked, even when the Mansion hosted people. No one ever went through the front door. They always sat on the chairs, leaned on the fence, until they left around the corner and out of their sight. “Bench Swing,” the Sturdy Fence directed its attention to the right side of the porch, where the wooden axel Swing Bench would usually be lolled back and forth in slumber. “did you notice anyone coming by you?” The Sturdy Fence noticed a long rusted chains holding up the Bench Swing swinging with youth as if they were not stained by time and the elements.

The Bench Swing did not hear what the Sturdy Fence said. It was more focused on rocking back and forth in the new breeze that has come upon it. Back and forth, back and forth, it revels this seamless transition from back and forth without the haunting screeching of those rusty chains. It remembers the times when young and old would come outside and sit to enjoy the rising and lowering sun. It remembers the couples, young and old. It remembers the cold bodies watching the snow fall from the sky. It can't give this up. Not here, not now, now that it's back. It's back for good! It's here to stay! Why would it leave again after so long?

“...Sturdy, Fence,” the Bench Swing begins in response. “Are you, feeling this, too,?”

“Feeling what?” The Sturdy Fence replied.

“This feel, ing of, the past.” The Bench Swing tries to explain, but just couldn't imagine how to express itself. “It's like, I am, back to, how I, was beef, ore the, Empty.” This worried the Sturdy Fence. Things didn't get better around here, after all, this was the Mansion. Nothing should be moving without the wind, but even after it died down, the Bench Swing still swings, and the Rocking Chair is still rocking. Something is not right.

“I, fee, el, this, to, Stur, dy, Fence.” The Rocking Chair interrupts the Sturdy Fence’s thoughts, after processing what the Bench Swing said. “It, has, been, so, so, ve, ry, long. But, I, re, mem, ber, when, I, was, hold, ing, Char, lette, and, Bay, by.” The Rocking Chair said wistfully.

“Oh I, remem, ber that.” Said the Bench Swing. “She was, just come, ing to, a name, to give, the new, born, here!”

“It, must, have, been, rea, lly, spe, cial.”

“That was a long time ago,” the Sturdy Fence said, but its thoughts were of leading down a different path.

How could the Rocking Chair be remembering these things? I do not remember them, and Rocking Chair hasn’t told me these things ever! We always talk! And the Bench Swing is saying stuff also! I can’t take this! Why not let me rest in peace with the Rocking Chair! Why, why!

It must be because they have already chosen. Well, I can’t take the past and make it mine can I? It isn’t mine! Why can’t I be like them! All I do is stand here, protecting those who live a life unknown to me! I don’t deserve this! If I did, I would be there! Who are they, who am I? Help! Someone, help me!

The moonlight shines bright on the front porch, and warmth envelopes the fence in every splinter and crevasse of wood. It cannot refuse now, there is help for it here! How long it has waited, for it has forgotten that there was a reason to wait anyway! He is saved! The window of the sky breaks open, shattering stars all around it’s very being. It drapes over the Mansion like a midnight blanket and rises back up with the spirit in tow. It will return. For its walls are not sturdy, and a heart is not lead.

# New beginnings

*Baderlin Abreu*

I saw a rose  
It perished  
Then I poured champagne  
And now it sparkled  
The beauty of life  
the pain never lasts



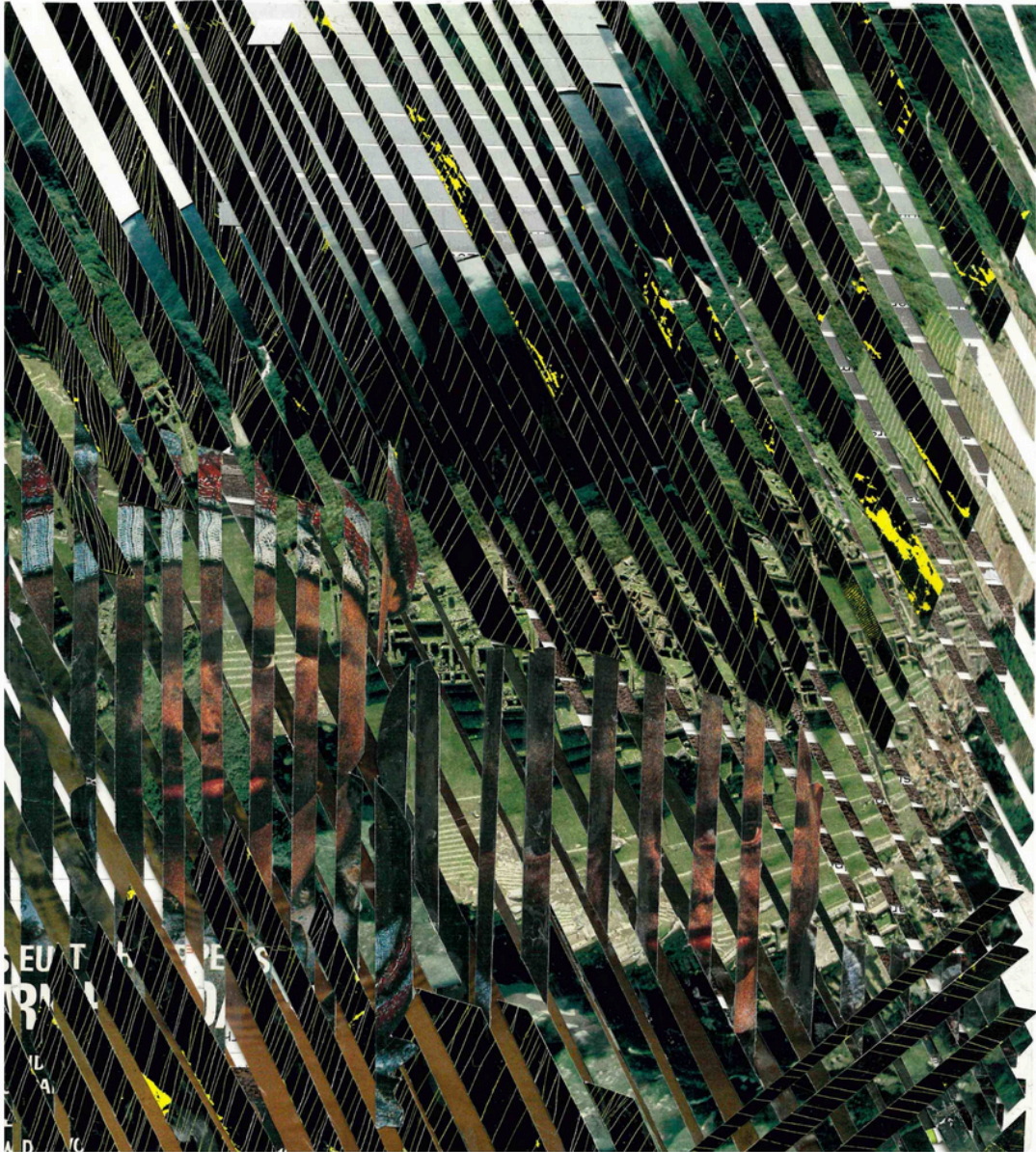
# Accidental Zeus

*Angel Gonzalez*

This thing is like a parasite in my head.  
When I wanted to leave, the door handle flew away.  
Now Mary will not be able to tell if it was her son or someone else.  
Oh, it was someone's son, there is no doubt.  
They got rid of all his girl clothes.  
All attempt to get away was in vain,  
because the door handle flung away when he tried to escape.

There is no time to numb ourselves out, these inquiries arise like the  
sunlight welcomes a pair of lovers on a Spring day.  
The scripture writes itself, that the forgiving,  
old gentleman or the pure soul is no longer.  
There is no benefit in finding out...  
The truth or a shadow of it  
A mere idea to begin with.

A whisper from a cave made out of golden.  
A hand for the pain.  
Plenty of them stayed, and those who did not now lay,  
in tombs of flowerbeds.



# “Mountains of Challenges, poverty and climate”

*Sara Yoon Katori*

# A Melancholy Nature

*Autumn Mastroianni*

Pain becomes me

She keeps me warm at night, wraps herself around me like the gossamer threads of a spider's web

Dangerous and delicate

I lean into it, make it my home, my safety net, all I've ever known

I was born with a ripping of skin, first breath a wail

First step headfirst into quicksand

A broken home, a lonely mind

I am of a melancholy nature

Each night I pray to the goddesses of despair

Ariadne, Cassandra, Eurydice

Their tragic lives beckon me

I'll show you my Achilles' heel and beg you to hurt me

Cause who would I be without my misery?

I am Sisyphus pushing a boulder up a perpetual upward hill

Because at least then I'd have a story to tell

I'll trace the constellations in my scars

A cartography of sorrow etched in skin

A broken lighthouse, I'll lead ships below the sea

Where they'll reside with me

Splintered wood and whispered prayers swallowed by the tide

Never the shore

Only the storm

A requiem sung in salt and calamity

On my knees I cry out to Hecate  
Crossroads goddess would you unmake me?  
Or is it too late?  
My thread of fate already wove taut in your loom  
Too frayed to hold? Too cursed to sever?  
Doomed to wander forever  
A curséd moonlit specter





## “Boat at Sunset”

*Taain Uddin*



## **“State Line Lookout”**

*Carli Lacz*

# Work is Play

*Judah Belgrade*

NARRATOR

As afternoon falls on this pleasant autumn day, leaves spread out across the lawn like red and orange quilts. While first grader Maxine is on the lawn gathering said leaves, inside the plain house with its plain entryway and plain interior is first grader Sammy. He is sitting at the yellow kitchen table doing a very interesting crossword.

SAMMY

If I don't finish this work soon, my boss won't give me money!

*There's a knocking noise.*

SAMMY (*distracted*)

Come in..

*Maxine walks in with a pile of leaves larger than her head.*

MAXINE (*struggling*)

Can you help me with the groceries?

*SAMMY doesn't look up.*

SAMMY (*mumbling*)

I'm very busy right now...

MAXINE (*sighs*)

Fine.

*MAXINE drops the pile of leaves next to the fridge. She looks at SAMMY with an intense stare. He doesn't look up.*

MAXINE (*obviously annoyed*)  
You're still working?

*SAMMY looks up from his crossword. He takes a moment to think.*

SAMMY (*oblivious to the issue*)  
What are we having for dinner?

MAXINE (*slightly charmed by her husband's stupidity*)  
We're having Macaroni wheels.

SAMMY (*sighs and wines*)  
But I don't like Macaroni wheels!

MAXINE  
You're being silly! Why does it matter?

SAMMY  
Harumph! You keep getting Macaroni Wheels even, even when I say no thanks!

MAXINE  
Why didn't you help me with the Groceries?? They were super heavy!

SAMMY (*lifting up the crossword*)  
I was busy doing my work! Why didn't you help me!

MAXINE  
Well YOU forgot to bring my crossword outside like I asked earlier!

*She grabs the crossword off the table.*

SAMMY  
Well...I...I was busy looking for bugs before you asked me to play house!



*SAMMY grabs the paper from MAXINE. They both hold a short edge of the worksheet.*

MAXINE

You agreed to play house with me last week!!!!

SAMMY

I forgot!!

NARRATOR

Suddenly, coming from the left of the house, an unsteady and very fast group of older boys and girls came running into the playground while holding someone else's football. And as older kids usually do, they turn the house over. Knocking into the plastic domain of Sammy and Maxine, they topple their home into the homes of leaves, grass and bugs. The groceries are released into the cold wind, and the only thing left standing of their once peaceful house is Sammy and Maxine, grabbing two sides of the now ripped in half crossword puzzle, and the now outside style yellow table.

*SAMMY and MAXINE look at each other for a good few seconds, their first grader brains processing what to do next.*

SAMMY *(in a whisper)*

I...I'm sorry for not...bringing your crossword. Before recess started.

MAXINE *(in a whisper)*

And...I'm sorry for ripping your paper.

*Maxine breaks into a fit of giggles. The giggles spread to Sammy as the teacher calls for line up to go back into school.*

MAXINE

Can we play again next week?

SAMMY

If you can race me to the door!

NARRATOR

Sammy and Maxine run into the building last, guiding their own path through all the leaf piles they can run into on their way back to class.  
Because what's learning if it's not a little messy.

# An immigrant's view on America's first language: Complaining

*Luz Emily Mata Hernandez*

When I first came to the United States, I was under the impression that sixteen years of continuously learning the English language would help me transition smoothly to my new home. News flash: That was not the case at all. Believe me when I tell you, immigration rips parts of you away unapologetically, putting you back together with pieces that do not really fit, leaving a big hole where your sense of belonging used to be.

Here in the US, there is another predominant language known as complaining. It could be that it's too sunny or not sunny enough, being tired of winter and shoveling snow or getting angry at the rain for falling the day you took your car to get washed. Ever since taking my first step onto the land of the free, I have heard every complaint possible. They can be heard from coffee shops at 6 am about the wrong type of syrup in a drink, to a gas station in the late hours from a mislabeled item. Living in New Jersey, this is a daily occurrence; you will hear any complaint you can imagine. I like to think it makes compliments more meaningful, since they are so rare.

Back home, in Venezuela, we used to complain about a variety of things. As a kid, I used to hear complaints when we did not have electricity continuously for months at a time; or when we had to hire trucks to fill up our subterranean water storage unit since there was no running water for weeks. We used to complain about having to go grocery shopping according to the day of the week you were allowed to purchase food; this was based on the last two digits or your I.D. And even then, basic necessities were rationed. I remember my mom's and my day of the week was Tuesday. She would wake me up at 4 am to stand in line outside the grocery store for two hours before opening.

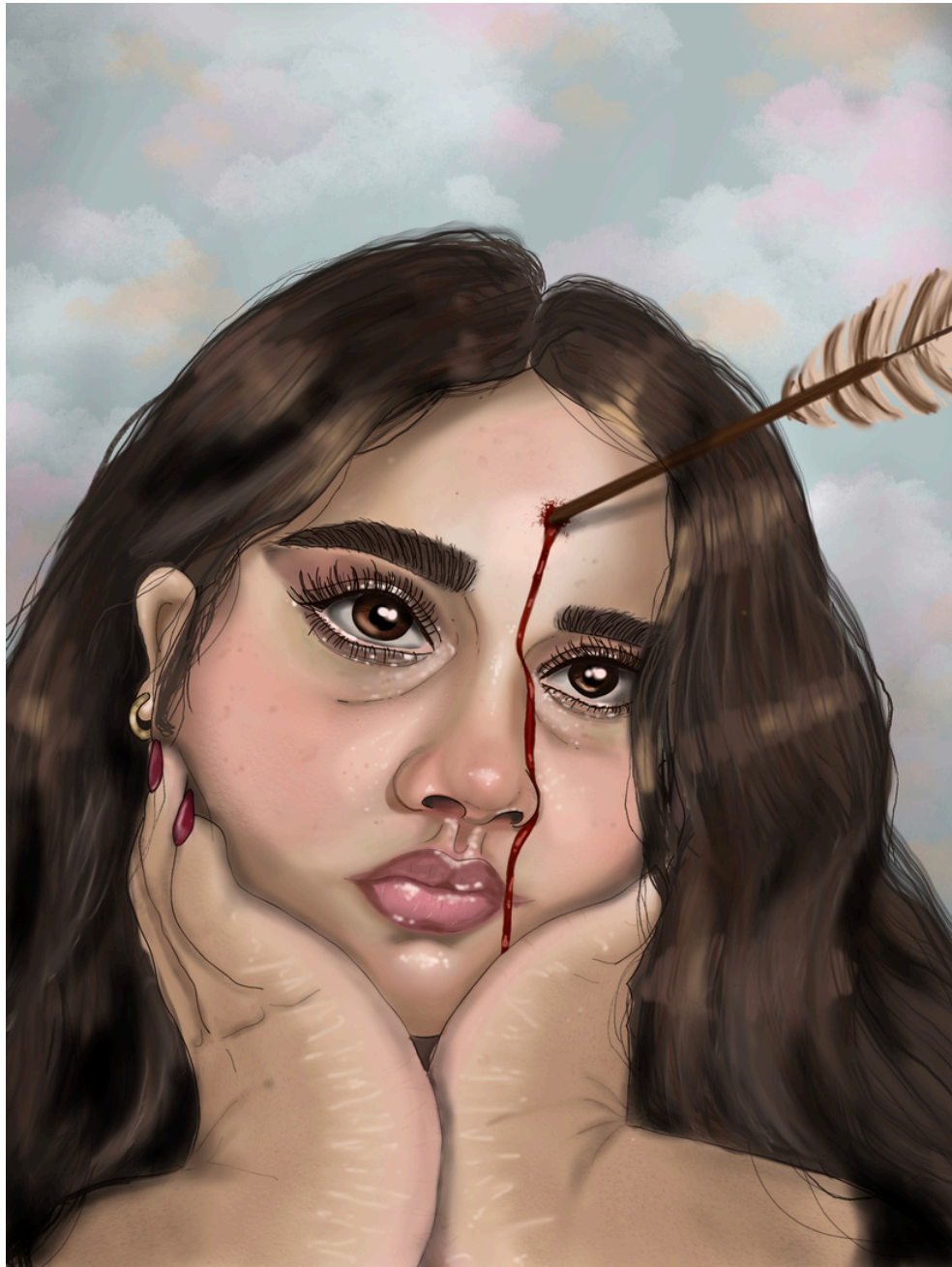
While resting my head on the outer wall of the grocery store, I would be lulled to sleep by the conversations of people's complaints about barely surviving under these conditions. Still, I could be nothing but thankful for the roof over my head and three not-so-whole meals a day. It seemed to me that complaining was the same thing as being ungrateful.

I have a hard time understanding why people complain. I have witnessed an elderly man holding up the line at a grocery store because, "This can of beans on aisle six has a sign that says \$0.57, why are you charging me \$0.85? I would like a refund and a manager!". Then you get huffing and puffing when the underpaid worker doing the job of 5 people takes more than their estimated mental time to complete what they requested in the first place. Complaining is a language hard to understand when you've had to sleep through hunger more than one night.

On Mother's Day two years ago, my sister and I received a call from our aunt in Venezuela, letting us know that our grandmother had suffered a stroke. She was on life support so that our family members could say their goodbyes. My mom, who had taken care of her for many years before and after she had me, could not say goodbye to the person who brought her to life; because she was stuck here, unable to travel. As immigrants, we can only move on or get stuck. Missed opportunities? There will be more in the near future. A close family member passed away? Appreciate your own health and carry them deep in your heart in everything you do. There's no time to spend stamping our feet and complaining about how unfair life is when there are people close to us struggling to survive back home.

Witnessing the freedom of complaining and being able to complain myself still feels a little unrealistic; it feels like a false sense of security. I've been forced to take anything that life has thrown at me for all of my precarious 21 years of life without flinching. Now that I can, now that I have the freedom to complain and maybe even instigate a change for myself, I find myself not wanting to. Even when having reason to complain, I find an endless list of things to be grateful for instead. Worse things have happened, worse things WILL happen; and yet I only find reasons to be grateful.

America, especially New Jersey, has offered me opportunities that I could have never even dreamed of back home. I'm afraid to think where I would have ended up had I not begun a new life in this country with my close family next to me. So I will always stand for the system in which complaints will lead to a change.



“doe-eyed”

*Autumn Mastroianni*





“the banging of drums are my only peace”

*Lee Micali*

# Vigil

*Rosemary Tierney*

Watching sparrows get fat  
From the window in autumn,  
They prepare for sleep  
While you and I are struggling  
To stay awake and guard them.



# Springtime Thoughts

*Rosemary Tierney*

Every Spring since you've been gone, I wonder if you're still breathing in the seasons just like me and I think about what I'd do if I could see you again. Meeting on the bridge in our hometown would be nice, with the sound of the river moving underneath us. Maybe I could follow you home and wait for you to come out again alone. I'd wait for you on the bridge and while you walked there, I'd step out of my shoes and coat so you could see me and know it was me. Onto the ledge I'd climb while listening to your steps grow closer just like how I listened to them fade when you left me. I hope this would be in the Spring as well.

It seems like the Spring is good for farewells with petals always falling and then withering, those dismembered, discarded flowers. I was thrown away, too, and have aged into dirt. I would think about all this while I waited for you to stop hesitating and come for me. But the truth is that I don't know that you would. So I wouldn't wait too long to turn around and put my back to the edge so that the last thing I saw would be you and the last time you saw me would be impossible to forget and then I'd leave, slightly less cruelly than you left me — I hope when the time comes my shoes don't go to waste.



## **“Corners”**

*Hosna Kachooee*



“somehow i forgot how to have fun”

*Lee Micali*





# “Göksu”

*Meryem Tos*

# Wildlife

*Rosemary Tierney*

At the wildlife sanctuary  
for the first time  
in a long time, listening  
to various bird calls and  
letting myself be blinded by  
the sparkle of sunlight on water,  
I have the sudden urge to call you  
and ask you  
to  
meet me here. There is nothing wrong with  
the scenery. Water, reeds, and makeshift piers are  
spread out with the distant city skyline  
as a border in the back; it's very beautiful. But for some  
reason, it feels like  
you should be here, too. I  
open my phone and tap your name, let it ring  
and ring  
and ring.  
Eventually the voicemail picks up and I  
hang up. Today isn't a day  
to talk to a machine.

# Sheltered In Soil

*Kiana Stevenson*

A plant sits on the window sill  
Pretty pink Petals and a heart of gold in a light brown pot.  
The primly prized plant is praised for her charm, sweetness and politeness.

The plant, stained a ring under the dish  
stood by the window through the passing the sun and moon  
through cycles of full blooms and withered leaves

She watches the plants on the other side of the window.  
Grow taller and stronger,  
Revel in the sunlight and idle in the moon light,  
Flow in wild whims of the wind

The plant presses her leaves against the window.  
There is only so much growing a plant can do inside a pot.

# When Daylight

*Yerin Jeong*

And there, I cried—  
when the air was soft,  
and the sky was blue,  
when daylight brushed my lips with golden hues,  
when the dust cracked against my feet,  
when the water from the marble sink,  
drowned my rotting tears.





“Stravinsky. The Rite of Spring, collage, 18x24”

*Mila Antkevych*





*“Untitled”*  
*Esther (Hae-eun) Kim*

# Sommers

*Yerin Jeong*

Chess was a game Sona never had an interest in, so while the others were too busy playing a round, she decided to get the ice-cream herself. She descended the stairs, flew to the kitchen, and swung the fridge open. A wave of cold sent shivers down her spine, and she bit her lip in excitement; an ice-cream sandwich was always a good choice, or perhaps a popsicle. She hadn't had a popsicle in so long. The strawberry one was always a delicacy, the kind of flavor that reminded her of childhood.

Childhood! Such were the good old days. A day similar to this one, she remembered, when the sky was spotless and blue, when she was sitting on her porch, a popsicle in hand, and Kim sauntered onto her yard. Of course—Kim! How could she have forgotten? Her childhood friend, the girl who reeked of onions, and only wore that hideous yellow dress. A sweet little girl just around Sona's age, who, she recalled, was adopted to save a failing marriage. It didn't work.

A shame, she mused and shut the fridge. Kim was a kind soul who didn't deserve the life given to her. Her mother was rude and abrasive, hardly cared if you were talking or otherwise and would barge into conversations like an unwanted skittering rat. She, too, wore hideous yellow dresses, except hers were even more ugly. Sona had seen her once, outside, with a large wooden ladle, beating it onto Kim's head until there was a sickening crack. Sona remembered buying Kim some ice-cream the next day. All the neighborhood kids were there, running out at the first note of that ice-cream truck, sprinting out of their cozy homes and into the blistering heat all for, at best, a mediocre popsicle. And that ice-cream truck—

It no longer came. Sona couldn't figure out why. She sometimes went back to that, back to the time when she heard the music ringing down the street, when she would call her friends—call Kim—out for some fun, and then they would play, just like how children would play: with the mud and leaves, with toys and grandfather's cane, with the wind and garbage lids. They would never play chess.

But chess her friends continued to play as she returned to her seat, popsicle in hand. Alex Haynes was there, looking up at her with a gentle fondness in his eyes – thick and sweet, the kind that made her feel like she had too much icing. He was a man of patience and discipline, had grown with the times, and never once craved a popsicle. Surely, Sona thought to herself, he must've forgotten the sound of an ice-cream truck. And if he did, it wouldn't have bothered him. He was a lawyer, after all, attended elegant parties with a bottle of champagne, never wore the same shirt twice, always restrained himself from the flowers, the toys, the music. How droll! How bland! Vanilla through and through. "You should be a priest," she said to him once. "Religion is overrated," he must've said. Alex leaned back in his chair, "Checkmate."

He eyed Sona's popsicle and couldn't help but chuckle. She was the same ever since university, had the same taste in movies, clothes, and food. He had heard from others that she was the same ever since elementary. Elementary, they say! How awful. To live a life gilded in flowers, to live in regret and nostalgia, to search for ice-cream right before supper! To hear things that weren't there: "The ice-cream truck! Do you hear it?" A career. He worked hard for this career.

Fought and endured through law school, studied the books until the pages crumbled in his fingers, until the spine snapped, and the cover faded, until he was finally satisfied to follow in his father's footsteps. He knew he was making a change in this rotting world as a man of education and maturity. But Sona Sommers was an idiot beyond her years: jumped into that lake one summer because it was too hot, tore off her shirt because it was too tight, ran across the living room, hollering, laughing, saying how the world was on fire, but how could it be if she was still having fun? She grabbed his hand, hugged him, pulled at his arm, and shook him: "Law!" she giggled. "Law! How boring!" But how could she understand? She was just a florist.

Even still, he had bought a few flowers from her before when he felt lonely, and she handed him a bundle of daisies—her favorites—and he felt like kissing her. But she looked at him with a strange look in her eyes, a fire that he couldn't seem to touch, and he wondered if she was thinking about Kim. He hoped that she was thinking about him instead and if he liked the flowers. "I love them," he said, and she smiled.

And her smile made him think about an autumn night when the wet pavement gushed with leaves: orange, yellow, and scarlet against grainy black. The night when Sona grabbed his hand, pointed at the glittering sky, and declared that one day she would wrap the world in roses but without the thorns. He laughed and said that only lawyers could do something like that, not florists.

She had looked at him then with searing eyes and trembling lips, her breath warm as she gripped his hand so tightly that his heart burned. She was dancing and dancing, off-beat, tumbling against the rhythm, stepping all over his toes—when he was trying to waltz. And when she reached for him, he remembered a feeling. A feeling he had a long time ago when the ice cream truck drove through his neighborhood.

He looked at Sona and she smiled.

# Old Faces, New Names

*Liana Pinherio*

*A crowded college party in an off-campus apartment. The music is loud, the lights dim, and people chat in small groups. The small living room area is packed with new college students; red plastic cups, and snack bowls littering what floor is available.*

## CHARACTERS:

*IAN (Male, early 20s, extroverted, friendly, and energetic)*

*LAINE (Male, early 20s, introverted, reserved, carrying a quiet confidence)*

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*IAN is leaning across the counter, pouring himself a drink into a bright red solo cup. He feels something brush lightly against his shoulder. Glancing over, he catches a faintly familiar face standing next to him.*

*IAN (laughing, with a squeak in between breaths)*

Wow! You're REALLY bad at that! How drunk are you?

*LAINE looks down, realizing that in his shock, he's spilled the drink all over his hand and the counter instead of into the cup.*

LAINE

Shit! Sorry, uh, you just startled me... is all.

*IAN (shouting over the loud, distorted music)*

Startled you? Dude, I just got here—I haven't even spoken to you!

LAINE

No, I mean... like, I feel like I recognize you?

IAN

Recognize me? Like from classes? What's your major?

LAINE

No, uh... I mean, like, this might sound weird, but did you go to Clearwater Middle?

IAN (*now curious, raising his voice over the pounding music*)

Clearwater Middle? Yeah! Yeah, I did!

*LAINE's heart rate spikes with the confirmation.*

LAINE

Yeah! You're Ian, right? That's where I recognize you from!

IAN (*grinning, a little confused*)

Yeah, that's me... but, I don't think I recognize you?

LAINE (*heart skipping a beat, he takes a breath, gathering his confidence*)

Well, did you know an Emery? Emery Graham?

IAN (*his eyes light up at the name, a subtle hint of surprise*)

Yeah! Yeah, I did! We were, like, super close in middle school! Holy shit, haven't heard that name in ages! (*pauses, excitement building*) Wait, do you know her? Is that why you recognize me? Has she, like, talked about me or something?

LAINE (*takes a step back, slightly flustered*)

Well...uhm, yeah, something like that.



IAN (*gushing*)

She was literally the coolest girl I knew. Like, she always got me, you know? I could talk to her about anything...

*LAINE opens his mouth, unsure what to say, but before he can speak, IAN cuts in again.*

IAN

Do you have her number or something? I would love to reconnect! She moved when we graduated, and we kinda just lost touch after that.

LAINE

Well, I mean... you kind of already have.

IAN

I already have what?

LAINE (*chuckling awkwardly*)

Reconnected with Emery, I mean...

IAN

Wait, how—

LAINE (*hesitantly*)

I, uh... I just kind of changed a bit. (*smiling softly*) I go by Laine now, for starters.

*IAN pauses, starstruck for a moment as he takes in the person in front of him properly.*

*LAINE grows more and more anxious as the seconds pass.*

IAN (*teasing*)

You know... “a bit” might be an understatement, right?

*LAINE laughs loudly enough to catch the attention of a few nearby partiers.*

IAN

I thought you looked weirdly familiar, but I was like, “nah, no way,” you know?

LAINE

Yeah, I get that a lot. *(smirks)* Also get a lot of “Oh, I always thought you were a dude.”

IAN *(laughing)*

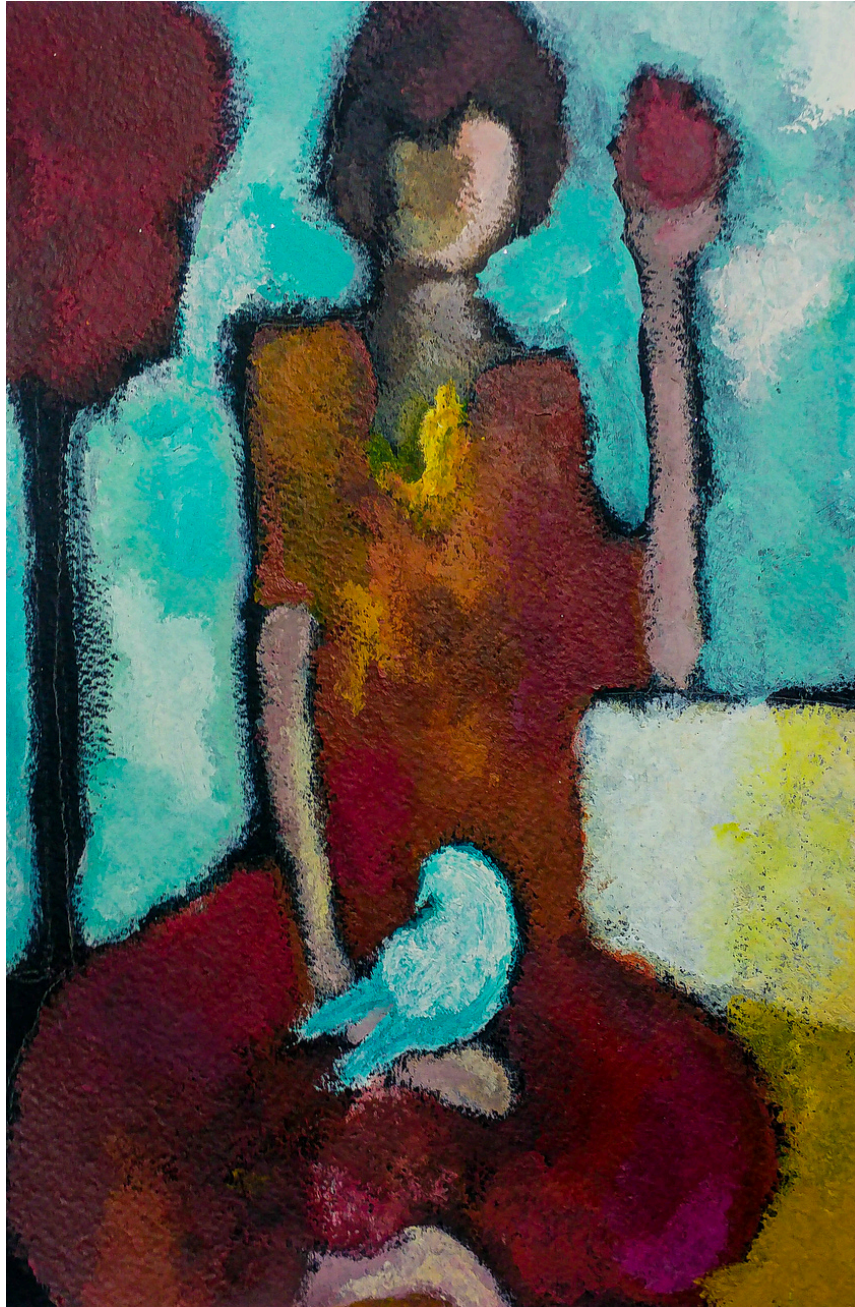
Huh... yeah, actually, thinking about it now...

*A short, thoughtful silence falls between them, the music and party noises fading into the background. IAN pulls out his phone, opens up a new contact screen, and places it in LAINE's hand, smiling warmly.*

IAN *(grinning)*

So... you free on Thursday?

*LAINE grins back, both feeling the giddy excitement of finding each other again, regardless of circumstance. They stand together, continuing casual conversation and a long overdue catch-up as the buzz of the party continues around them.*



## “Women, Life, Freedom”

*Hanieh Kachooee*

# imitation games

*Catherine Park*

*i invent* nicknames for you / over & over / *i invent* unidentifiable / too identifiable / names that  
have nothing to do with you / at all / *i invent* your hands & your lips / how your eyes look when  
you believe me / *i invent* you / understand / how love should not be an act / of recreation?

picture me lavender / picture me guilty / picture me gasping for breath / picture me coiled /  
picture me paler / picture me repentant / picture me unbuttoned / picture me losing balance /  
picture me ripening / picture me reckless / picture me waiting / picture me ready to spring /  
picture me flushed / picture me wiser / picture me with nothing / picture me taking flight

mirror, mirror / i still remember / how i put on my lipstick / i want you / here so i can peel you  
away / the syringe would look empty to anyone else / but we know / better / i want you / seeing  
me when you look in a mirror / staring / eyes clouded / with honey & lilies / i want you / to  
know i see you too / this way / when i burn i laugh / knowing your flesh / is blackening / with  
mine



**“Girl”**

*Yein Kim*





## “THE FOOL”

*Jenna Harstead*



# A Valentine's Day Love Story

*Brandon Montalvo*

*Setting takes place in BILLY and ROSIE'S High school. BILLY is a 16 year old with a hat, a Yankees T-shirt, and Black Jeans. And ROSIE is a 17 year old with a nice red dress, and a pink Jacket with a bow on her hair. During Lunch BILLY saw ROSIE sitting next to her friend.*

BILLY  
Hey Rosie.

ROSIE (*With Excitement*)  
Oh hi Billy!

BILLY (*with shyness*)  
Do you think I can sit next to you?

ROSIE  
Yeah sure I don't see why not?

BILLY  
Rosie I wanted to tell you something?

ROSIE  
What's Up?

BILLY (*hesitates to ask*)  
I know that Valentines is coming up and....

ROSIE  
And....

BILLY  
Well...

ROSIE  
Well... (*Rosie starts to get Impatient*) Spill it out Billy.

BILLY (*Changes the Subject*)  
That's a Nice color dress you have there Rosie. (*talks to himself*) nice dress.

ROSIE  
Oh thank you Billy. (*Bell Rings*) Aw man i have to get to class but it was nice talking to you Billy. I guess I'll see you around. (*kisses him on the cheek*)

BILLY  
Wait I was going to ask if you wanted to be my Valentine oh never mind.

*BILLY was waiting for the right time to ask ROSIE to be her Valentine. Valentine's day is only two days away. So after that little mishap It was the day before valentines day and BILLY was waiting for ROSIE after school because they were both neighbors who went to school together. Anyway back to poor BILLY who is sitting there lonely in the rain. Waiting for his crush to come out.*

BILLY (*yelling at the NARRATOR*)  
Hey! She's not my crush yet.

NARRATOR (*laughing at Billy*)  
HAHA Oh silly Billy. Have you realized what time it is?

BILLY  
Yeah it's 2:30.

NARRATOR  
2:30? And where is Rosie?

BILLY (*Talking to the Narrator*)

How about you mind your own business. You're just a narrator narrating my life in high school.

NARRATOR

Hey I'm not just Narrating your life I'm narrating your Valentines too. If anything, just ask her to be your valentine and...

BILLY (*interrupted the NARRATOR*)

and tell her if she wants to be my Valentine. I can't just go up to her and be like hey Rosie I like you would you be Mine Valentine. And what her answer will be.

ROSIE

Yes!

BILLY (*quickly turned around and froze*)

Ummm, ummm, what was that.

ROSIE (*said it again with excitement*)

Yes Billy I will love to be your valentine. I love you Billy.

NARRATOR

Billy, Billy, Rosie is waiting for you to say the word back.

BILLY (*still frozen*)

What. (*unfroze*) oh yeah what's that word again.

NARRATOR

OMG! You said "oh Rosie, Rosie my dear beloved will you be my Valentine." then she said, "OMG yes yes Billy I would love to be your valentine." "Billy I love you". So then you say...

BILLY

Oh I love you too Narrator.

*NARRATOR smacks his head.*

NARRATOR (*Looks at Billy*)  
Nooo not me. But I am flattered. Tell her.

BILLY  
Who?

NARRATOR  
Rosie. Your crush.

BILLY  
Oh ok. I love you too Rosie.

*Finally, Billy and Rosie finally are a couple after the incident that happened in the Cafeteria. And..*

BILLY  
Hey Man I told you we don't speak about it.

*Billy, don't you have a Valentine's date with Rosie.*

BILLY  
Yeah

*So why are you interrupting me?*

BILLY  
I don't know but however I hope you have a nice Valentine's day Mr. Narrator.

*You too Billy. And that's how Billy and Roise became a couple and their Valentine's. Who knew neighbors and long time friends can be valentines.*

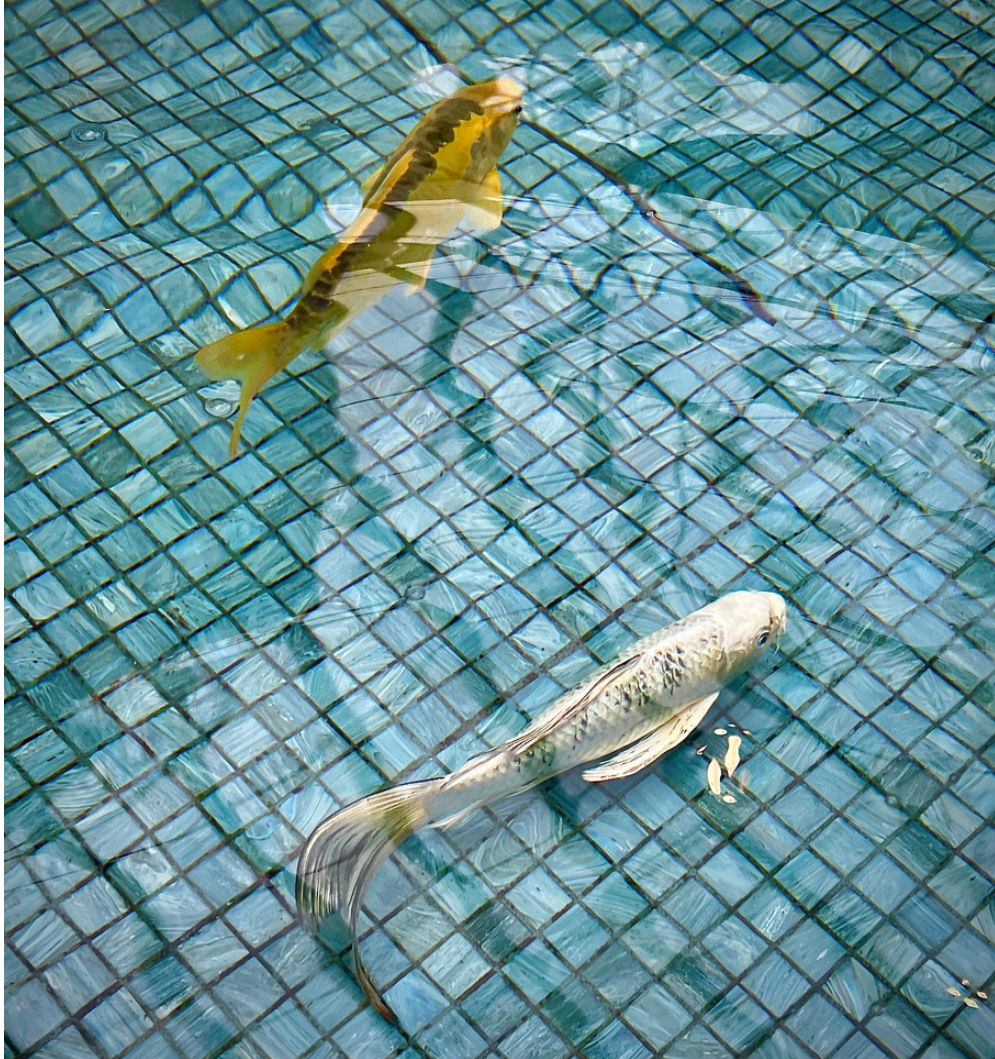
BILLY  
I know right.

*Billy!!! Stop interrupting me!!! You know what goodnight and Have a nice and safe Happy...*

BILLY  
Valentine's Day

*I quit.*

The End



## “Koi”

*Jackelyn Ortega-Manzaba*





“Every street tells a story”

*Miriam Alchanaa*

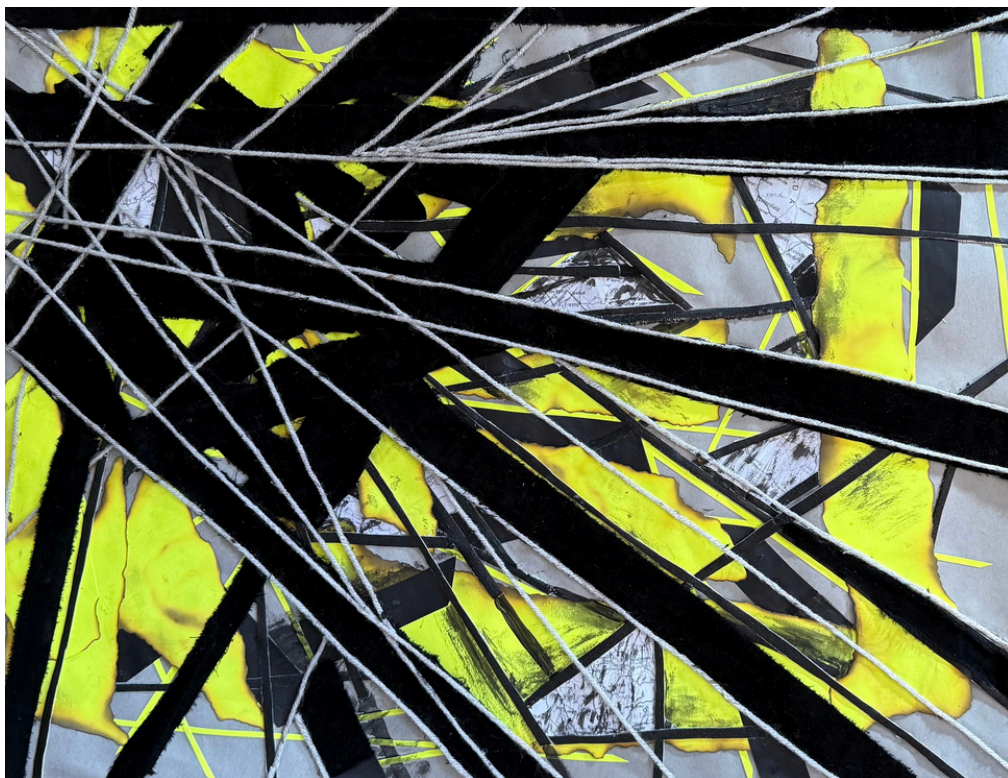
# Sailor Without An Anchor

*Aimee Rae Peralta*

What a force, what a beaut  
She shows me I can handle anything  
With salty breeze and unpredictable waves  
The responsibility of being free

Quiet nights bring on doubt  
I am ashamed to admit  
No captain, no crew, no anchor  
No siren to sing my lullaby  
This ship is my own to steer  
To crash, to care for  
All mine

Worthy anchors will be assigned  
Setting sail doesn't guarantee she will swallow all of me  
I will it to be a harmonious pairing, the two of us together  
I am destined for adventure



“California Wildfires, collage  
(burned paper, leather, yarn).  
18x24”

*Mila Antkevych*



# Satiated

*Melissa Rendon*

I inhale  
I surrender  
I exhale grace  
Your heart beats in me  
I am satiated.

What parts of me did I have to kill to choose peace?

Careless words from a careless girl  
echo in my mind decades later  
as clearly as the second they left her mouth.

Unlovable! Unloving! Unloved!

Like a starving mutt gnawing on a bone,  
I snapped up love only to hunger ever more  
greedy and demanding,  
too loud, too touchy, too sensitive, too blunt.  
Too cowardly, too naïve.  
Too much.

My agony turned inward,  
rending my soft organs to bloody strips.  
The dark echoed my screaming back,  
with nowhere to go  
a vacuum swallowing me whole,  
blinding me to gentle hands and kind words.

Beating my fists bloody  
against a glass cage of my own making,  
wearily drooping,  
I take my pause as the scenery moves to and fro.

The cheerily grinning jester face  
covers the cracks in my skin.

Places! Spotlights! Action!

I drop this arduous yoke,  
unwieldy and treacherous.

I was not made to swallow truth marred and obscured,  
coated in vicious lies.

How convenient for the careless girl,  
the laughing villain,  
were I to do their wretched work for them—  
to blind my eyes,  
muffle my ears,  
blunder ahead into black pain unending,  
barred from grace, from respite.

The true narrative does not confound my thoughts,  
it does not crack my heart in two,  
it does not make me bow my head in shame.

I was made to love,  
wholly, as I would wish to be loved in turn.  
I am a cherished daughter,  
simply because I am.

I take up the yoke,  
which is light and easy to carry.

I glut on care,  
I overindulge in gentleness,  
I pour out an extra kind word or two for good luck—  
far be it for me  
to not share my wealth  
when there's enough to go around.

Your heart beats in me—  
I love, I love,  
I choose to repay love for love.

I am satiated.





## **“PRANCER”**

*Jenna Harstead*

# Iago's Philosophy

*Violet Ratliff*

There is truth in jest,  
In the dark that I profess,  
In my vile faith, one of anything but Blessed.

As deception works at my request,  
One could accuse the Devil's law as my reader's digest.  
A devotion not in need of the magic that the Holy protest,  
As it's an art necessary to the Catholic attest,  
For what examples are there to lead without the possessed?

In fact, Virtue is merely a pest,  
Claiming the foolish souls of the 'best.'  
Is it nothing more than an everlasting quest—  
Rewarding no further than its haloed crest?  
A belief that requires a Priest for all confessed—  
Only to reveal hidden monsters repressed.

If truly desiring a kingdom of Celeste,  
Abandon the Commandments of the religiously obsessed.  
Throw away morals that determine one's arrest,  
Rather, invite Evil as though it were your guest,  
Leaving the demons to only be impressed,  
By the hell cultivated from east to west.

Is this not the relinquishing of chaos and unrest?  
Judgements have now only recessed,  
Dissolving the tempting pride that infests,  
A vice so deadly, resulting in one's eternal bedrest.

If truthful were a trait on this Godly test,  
Let us not be liars and, therefore, undress.  
Underneath your guises of the sinless vest,  
Lies secret evils that truly give zest—  
Embracing a life fulfilling in worldly invests.

Then, perhaps, if this were to be addressed,  
There'd be an end to all the internally oppressed.

# Hope

*Phuong Dang*

Hope. Funny how that word is everything a person can cling onto sometimes to keep going. That was all I ever had, and might continue to have in order to survive in this broken world. Grew up we never had any money, my parents never did, and same went for me and my little brother ever since we were born. That was all we knew. Our family was what they called the bottom-feeders. In a ladder of life and social hierarchy, we were nothing but a couple of forgettable and unknown faces. I remember looking up at the clear sky at night whenever I could find a moment alone. Just pondered whether our life would ever get better. Maybe if society was not set up the way it was, maybe when it wasn't only designed for the rich, then maybe we would have a chance. Oh, how I have missed the silence on those nights. How refreshing it all smelled and seemed, nothing but the pure air of nature and the soft gush of wind that carried subtle hints of wild flowers and oak. Back then, I still had a glimpse of hope, of a better future. How naïve was I to think anything would ever change.

When it all happened, I was taking Darien out to look for our parents. They haven't come home in days again, which I found no surprise of. I was used to finding scraps or whatever I stumbling upon in the trash cans from nearby restaurants. My body had long conditioned itself to function without anything in my stomach for days, but Darien was still too young to endure such conditions. I was all he had, and he was my responsibility now. Walking along the dark alley that two kids had no business being on at midnight, I grabbed tightly on his tiny hands. My whole world. Looking down at his grubby innocent face, I promised myself to do everything in my power to save him from having the same childhood that I had. No matter what. I felt his little footsteps slow down next to me before they turned to a complete stop.

His big sparkling eyes transformed from their usual shyness into a beam of joy as he spotted our parents in the corner. I looked up hoping to see nothing good, and I was right. There they were, the people that we called Mom and Dad, just barely standing up straight against the dirty alley walls full of grease and filth. Their soulless bodies kept swaying in the wind, their eyes were muddled with no clear sense of direction. I wonder what type of drugs they scored today with the money they were supposed to use for their children's food. Whichever it was I bet they had a great time. Used needles and empty plastic bags littered all over the ground where they stood. Darien tried to get away from me to hug the woman, but I held onto his hands tighter, refusing to let him near them in that state. I could not endure the look on his face if he realized Mom and Dad were not Mom and Dad right now. I did not want to see the fear and confusion in his eyes if those monsters got interrupted during their trip. Glanced down the scar running all the way from my elbow to forearm, I squeezed onto his hands a little tighter trying to clear those sudden memories of pain and agony.

As I was going to take Darien back home, there were more and more noises transpiring inside the house they leaned on. I found nothing strange at first. After all, I was all too familiar with their usual scene. But even for a place like this, the chaos and screams were getting out of hand. The door then flung open, and whichever that creature was fortunately spotted the two adults before us.

That night was the start of everything, of my occurring nightmares every night, of fear for any sudden noises and movements. I would never forget covering my little brother's eyes and ears behind that dumpster. Blocked my body in front of him, tried to protect his last bit of innocence from the bloodbath that was happening in front of my eyes. My last image of the people I so called parents before I dragged Darien away was their bodies being torn apart and dismantled violently. Even in that moment, there were still nothing but pure bliss and a faded smile on their faces.

Completely unaware of anything and anyone until the very last moment when their mental state finally caught up to the reality of their physical bodies. On that night, everything changed.

No matter how many times I thought back of that recollection, it never seemed to get better. It wasn't because of the grief for our parent's death. They were never one to begin with anyway. I should have left with Darien a long time ago. But a part of me was hoping for him a somewhat normal childhood, something that every kid his age should be privileged to have. In his pure mind, Mom and Dad were simply just very busy and hard-working people. They were barely home because of their jobs, not because they were good for nothing pair of junkies. Looking back, maybe it was because that was the last day of the world as I knew it. When I simply was a normal teenage girl. A few years have passed from the outbreak, and the country that everyone knew of no longer exists anymore. I used to wish for this, for something to change to break the cycle for me and Darien. But everything remains the same. The rich and the wealthy were the first one to be aware, the first to have resource to move countries or hide in their underground bunkers with supplies that can last for years. All that remains on the frontline now were the same people that have been struggling their whole life before. The only difference is instead of earning enough money to survive, we are now resulted to killing either each other or the Undead to live for another day. No one knew how it happened, no one knew where it originated from. By the time general public was aware of the outbreak it was already too late for us.

Lost in my thoughts, I don't realize how late it is getting outside. Hurry up my footsteps, I pick up my pace to return back to the cave. Darien will start to worry soon if he does not see me back before the sun sets. Ever since the day he got lost and fell from that cliff, I don't dare to leave him for too long at a time anymore whenever I go out hunting for food.



He is a good child, never shows any sign of pain or discomfort that his broken leg is causing him. But I know my precious is in pain. Poor my little angel, for days straight we have been eating nothing but wild berries and nuts from the forest. His already malnourished body is now getting even slimmer. Even though I fed him the majority of the fruits that we found, I know they were nowhere enough for a growing boy. Finally, we can have an actual meal today thanks to the two hares that fell into the trap that I set up. After a while, I can see the entrance of the cave from the distance. I swiftly sneak inside and close the vines curtain behind me, hiding us completely from any unwanted intruders. Darien is laying there peacefully next to the fire that I made before I left at noon. Gather the loose sticks and pieces of wood that I have prepared, I quickly feed them into the dying fire. Pull out the small pocket knife I keep by my hips at all time, I begin skinning the two hares and start preparing them for dinner. After being washed thoroughly with the water I got from the nearby river, they are flattened out evenly and pierced onto a long stick I soaked prior to avoid getting burnt. Conjoined a few smaller sticks to make two triangles, I then placed the stick with the hares on top.

A make-shift rotisserie contraption is done. After about an hour and a half of roasting, the cave is now filled with the delicious smell of barbequed meat. Watching the sizzling hares on the open flame, I ruminate of how this is the life for me and Darien now. It's been year of us out here fighting for our lives, of learning how to adapt and adjusting to the lifestyle of nothing but pure survival instincts. It's a miracle that we are both even alive right now, considering we have no manpower or a big group to lean on. It was the decision that I came to since the beginning of the outbreak. I am now a master of covering tracks, of laying low and minding our business. We have seen first-hand how horrifying it is what the Undead can do. Not even the strongest of man can stand a chance before them. I witnessed those things ripped a human body into pieces in a matter of minutes with little to no effort.

When human is constantly put into the immense amount of stress every day, of living in fear, of slowly losing trust to our own kind, that is where things start to get ugly. I would rather not take my chance with that. After the satisfying dinner, I can feel my energy levels start to spike up. Stretching out my aching muscles from the hunt this morning, the last thought I have before drifting into sleep is maybe I should take Darien to the river tomorrow for a quick wash-up.

Hoist Darien securely on my back, I slowly make my way towards the river. Ever since the fall he hasn't been able to move at all. I can smell how strongly he becomes from staying inside the damp cave all day. It must have been uncomfortable for him. The last few days I spent closely exploring the nearby area. So far, I find no sign of any other creature or any other person. Years of running and hiding have made me quite agile and athletic. It would be no problem for me to run if anything occurs, but it will be much harder for Darien to get away in his current state. I need to be completely sure it will be alright for both of us to be out here at the same time. After about forty minutes of carrying Darien on my back, I can finally hear the faint sound of water. Carefully placing him by the edge of the river, I begin bathing for him first. Removing both of our filthy clothes to the side to wash and air out, and then finally taking care of myself. Luckily it is a bright sunny day out, it does not take long for the clothes to dry. When they are good enough to wear, I quickly change and take the water pouch with me upstream to fill up on our water supply.

Taking a few big gulps, I don't realize how much energy it takes to carry a child and walk in the forest for that long. We have been able to get by just fine with two of us before, but now that Darien is wounded, the smarter choice would be to find a group to join. I can really use some help to move and care for him. My mind will be much more at ease if I know someone is there to keep an eye on him when I can't be there. Maybe they can even take a look of his injuries or better, carry something that can help ease his pain.

Perhaps when I take him back I can come out again and expand my search to see if I can spot any signs of other livings. Come back to where Darien is resting, I gently put his head on my lap and hold the water pouch by his lips. Some of it manage to get inside, but the majority of the water just seeps out from his mouth running down to his neck. I can feel his body is getting weaker by the day. It pains me to see him suffer. He needs better living condition, and a consistent source of food in order to heal properly. A few pieces of meat once a while won't be able to cut it. As much as I don't trust people, I need help. It is Darien's best chance for survival right now.

It is another long day of exploring the forest and setting up traps. By the time I come back to the cave, the sun has long set. Dripping in sweats and covered by loose leaves, I finally approach the entrance of the cave. Pull back the vines hanging outside the door, I enter, expect to see Darien's excited face when he sees me. It is more quiet than usual inside today, and much darker than how I left it in the morning. Darien knows to keep feeding the fire throughout the day for warmth, that was one of the first things I taught him when we first moved here.

But judging by the dying flame, it has not been attended to for at least a few hours. What can my little baby be doing outside at this time of night? It is not uncommon for him to wander outside. Since we started staying inside this area, he could at last roam freely without the fear of anything that can pose as danger. But he knows he is not supposed to leave the cave after the sun goes down, not at least I am there to accompany him. Trying not to panic, I try to keep my head cool and start looking for his tracks on the ground. After a few minutes, I notice the disturbed leaves and breaking twigs on the trail where his footprints have stepped on. I quickly run after the trails, keeping a close eye on the ground in order not to lose his trace. There is a cliff nearby. I found out about it during the first week we stayed here, and had since warned Darien not to get close to this area. My worst fear comes true when his trail marks starts leading to the forbidden area.

Shakily, I try to get my mind straight and not to jump to any conclusions. There are many wild berry bushes around, maybe he just took off to find some for us to eat and get lost. He must have noticed how exhausted I am every time I come back to the cave, and probably just wanted to be useful and find food himself. As I get closer to the edge of the cliff, his traces on the ground also comes to an end. Take a few deep breaths in, I slowly step closer to the edge and look down.

There are nuts and smooshed up berries all over the ground, and many more inside the twig basket that fell a few inches away from them. My eyes slowly move up to the tiny hands holding onto the basket's handle. That drop from the cliff has to be at least ten feet tall, but Darien's fist is still tightly wrapped around it. My little baby was trying to hold onto those nuts and fruits for his dear life. His worn-out but usually clean clothes are now ripped apart, with mud and dirt covered all over it. My everything is laying there unconsciously. The usual innocent and sparkling eyes are now completely shut. And blood, so much blood. Blood oozing from the side of his face, blood seeping through his shirt and pants. One of his leg is completely bended backwards, showing a glimpse of a ghostly wide shade of bones peeking underneath. He is laying there in this gruesome shade of crimson, as if he's just in a deep peaceful nap. Completely unrelated to the horrifying scene happening in front of my eyes right now. My brain starts to shut down, I feel completely dissociated with my physical state. I can faintly hear it, but the gut-wrenching scream that comes out of my mouth right now does not even feel like it is mine anymore...

My eyes bust open from the dream, I sit up straight feeling a damp feeling of cold sweat running down my shirt. I grab tightly onto my chest. My heart is beating so fast I feel like I could not breathe. It is that dream again. It has been almost two weeks since the accident but every night it still haunts me in my sleep. The emotions that I go through in that dream still feels too raw and real, like I have lived through it all over again.

Trying to grasp for air, it takes me a few minutes to regulate heart rate back to normal. Reaching over to Darien, I pull him in closer into my arm, squeezing him as tight as I could without hurting his wound. I can still remember my emotions that day, of that hopelessness watching him underneath that cliff. Trace along his peaceful sleepy face with my finger, I am so glad that my little angle is still alive. I do not know what I would do had he left me for good that night. How am I supposed to carry on living? Had something actually happened to Darien, that might be the end for me. What is the point of carrying on in this forsaken world if I have lost the only light I have. Brush out the tiny strand of hair in front of his face, once again my desire to find other people grows stronger than ever. My baby's only hope for recovery right now is on the line, and I do not care if I have to risk my life searching for it.

The next morning after tightly tuck Darien into the clean rag we use for blanket, I head out into the forest even before the sun even rises. I run straight to places I have not been through before. The further I run the more I regret finding such a remote area. After what seems like hours of searching, I still cannot find even the smallest trace of humanity. Chew on the last pieces of hare from the other night, I quickly wash it down with some water. As I am about to head up again, I hear some twigs snapping behind my back. The last few years have trained my senses to be highly sensitive. I can clearly sense someone or something is quickly approaching in this direction. Holding tightly into my pocket knife, I slowly turn around to see who the intruder was, hoping for the worst.

“Hey you! Yes you. Stand right there and do not make any sudden movement before I shoot this arrow straight through your head.”

Standing in front of me is a young guy, probably in his mid-twenties. He has a scruffy unshaven look, but other than that he seems normal and sane enough, and definitely not one of them. Not like they can speak anyway, let alone calling for my attention before killing me. The stranger starts making his way towards me. With his bow aiming straight to my face, he is figuring me out as I am doing the same to him. A few seconds passes by as we both stare at each other, me with my pocket knife in my hand and him with his loaded bow.

“Oh good, you are not an Undead. My group will never believe me that I find a living human out here. Are you doing fine over there? You look like you have been running for a while. Are you all by yourself?” he finally signs with relief.

His words and relaxed tone just completely breaks the intense silence that we shared only a few seconds ago. Looking down at my dirty clothes, I probably do look like I have been wandering in the woods for days on end. Watching the stranger lowers down his bow and wears it on his back again, my defense mechanism starts to calm down but I still hold onto my knife just in case. From my experience humans can be more cruel and heartless than any creatures are there. At least for the Undead they hunt you down because that is everything on their mind, but people are still willing to hurt their own kind while still having a full-on conscience.

“No, I am not alone. Did you say your group? That is impossible, I have been searching this area for weeks now and never saw any sign of anyone else besides us.” I ask, raising my brows.

“Yes of course you can’t, unless you know what you are looking for,” my new accompany grinned. “There are seven of us in total, and half of which have been in the military. We know how to cover our tracks and build shelters that can camouflage themselves perfectly in the forests.



Even the Undead with their hunting skills cannot spot anything. I think it should be pretty easy for us to hide from a small girl.” He winked at me.

I quickly blush and look away. The stranger bursts out into laughter, he seems to enjoy the reaction that his gesture causes me. He then admits that he spotted me while going on his usual round this morning. He hid in the shadow and observed until he’s certain I hold no threats. When he was sure that I was indeed alone, that was when he decided to make an appearance.

“And to be honest, even if you do turn out to be a cold-blooded killer I think I will take my chance,” he smiles and look downs at me.

Glance quickly to the muscle definition underneath his shirt, I feel a cold shudder running down my spine. Had it resulted to violence, to kill me would simply be the equivalence of shooting down a small animal to him. The conversation then circles back to me, and I start explaining to him about mine and Darien’s situation. I don’t know how I can easily tell a man I just met about us. Maybe it’s the fact that he trusted me with his own story first, or perhaps it’s the way he listens to me with such attentiveness. Besides Darien, it is the first time in my life I can feel the warmth and kindness from another person. In this moment, I want to believe everything he’s saying. Even if I do end up getting betrayed at the end.

“There are actually two medics in our group. They were working on the field when the outbreak started, and managed to stash away a good number of medicines as well as medical equipment. Pretty sure we have something to help your brother. Injuries like his were very common over there, nothing that they have not seen before.” He assured me when he can senses how stressed I start to get talking about Darien.

“Are you sure it would be alright to use your group’s resources on my brother? You must only have a limited supply, we don’t want to become a burden...” My voices turn into a low mumble.

What if they realize halfway that there is better use of their medicine than to waste it on a small child. Then what would Darien do?

“Don’t sound ridiculous. I’m glad I found you actually. We plan to head North next month. The Undead cannot function as well in the cold, and the snow will help us tremendously with covering our trace. I will be a long journey, and we need to gather as much people as we can before then.” Unlike his prior friendliness, his voice turns lowered and deepened with a serious note. The same deadly voice in the beginning when he first saw me.

“My name is Jared by the way,” all of a sudden, his tone switches right back to carefree, like the conversation prior never happened. “It sounds like your cave is pretty far from here, maybe I can come back with you and help carry your little brother here with us. I know we just met, but if you two want to join us we need to bring him here before the sun sets. There have been a few incidents nearby with the Undead, and I’d rather not encounter them right now with all three of us. But hey, I’m risking my life right trusting you, right? For all I know, you could be setting me up and kill me later.”

I let out a chuckle as my new companion said that. I can’t even remember the last time I can just wholeheartedly laugh at a joke like this.

“Yes, yes. I can’t wait to bring you back to my cannibalism group. You look like you can easily feed us for the next week. Nice to meet you my name is Samara.”

On our way back to the cave, Jared and I talk more and get to know about the other. Opposed to his hostile first impression, Jared actually seems to have a great sense of humor and very down to earth. After years of living in constant fear and hopelessness, I can see a glimpse of hope for me and Darien. If the rest of his group are anything like Jared, perhaps our journey ahead will be much more easier and not as lonely anymore.

After about two hours, I can finally see the cave again within my sight. Even though Jared seems relaxed the whole way, I can tell he is still completely cautious and aware with his surroundings. He may have agreed to help me, but that does not mean if things go bad he won't be able to protect himself either.

"I'm sorry if things are quite stuffy in here, this is the first time we have anyone else besides us you know," I quickly apologize to Jared as I gesture him to enter the cave. "Darien I'm back, look who I have with me!"

I walk towards where Darien is laying, carefully remove the blanket from him and prop his head up on my lap. I excitedly tell him about how I finally find a group and a decent shelter for him. How he can now fully recover and soon he will be back on his feet and explore the forest again. The whole time I am talking, I can feel Jared's eyes just staring at me and Darien. Unlike how talkative and charming he was on the walk back, he just stands completely still in silence behind me. Finally, I turn to Jared, ask him to help me with Darien so we can come back to his shelter before the sun goes down. But even so, Jared does not move an inch, his eyes bewildered in disbelief. There is no more sign of friendliness, or humor like before. There is only one expression now, horror.

"Samara... How long has your brother been dead?"

His question stops me on my track briefly. Then I just quickly brush it off as if I heard nothing and come back to caress Darien's face. The blanket falls off his little body into the ground, reveals hundreds of tiny maggots crawling all over his body. They mainly gather around the area where his wound is, all trying to dig inside his rotting flesh and skin. I brush off the fallen strand of hair from my baby's face again. His eyes are still shut closed just like that night, as if he is just in a peaceful sleep. The odor of his decaying body does not bother me one bit, I press my face firmly onto his forehead, assuring my angel everything will be fine again.

I have found him help, and we can finally be a family again. I rock his cold body back and forth in my arms, keep telling him about our bright future. From the corner of my eyes, I can see Jared's face is now full of pity and pain watching us. I detest that look, because there is nothing to pity about. He does not know what he's talking, my little baby is still alive. As long as I continue to have hope he will always be. Yes, that has to be it. Yes...



# **“Haleakala Crater”**

*Emily Lorenz-Bradley*



## “Summer's dream”

*Michelle Boinett*



# LLUVIA

*Mildred Gonzalez*

Tu presencia fue inesperada.

Llegaste en medio del silencio, de madrugada, como la lluvia que golpea mi ventana,

con un ritmo constante e intenso,  
haciéndote notar que ahí estabas.

Cada golpe, en perfecta sintonía,  
hizo despertar la curiosidad  
de sentir lo que hace tiempo no sentía. Tus gotas deslizándose sobre  
mi piel  
se desvanecían, siendo tan libre y tan mía.

Cuando menos lo esperaba, fluía  
en tu corriente. En medio de tu tierno  
corazón y tu carácter tan fuerte,  
disfruté no tener el control  
y sumergirme en el presente.

Disfruté dejarme llevar por tu amor  
sin temor y de la forma más inocente.

Fue suficiente con ser tú.  
¿Cómo resistirme a tu sonrisa  
y a esos ojos que se han vuelto mi luz?  
Si eres la lluvia, quiero ser tu cielo azul. Y empápame de ti, que para mí solo eres  
tú. Combínate con mi ser.  
Yo por ti lo arriesgo todo,  
que perder será un placer.

Mis barreras no pudieron vencer  
tu naturaleza, arrasaste con todo  
e inundaste con pensamientos de ti mi cabeza.

No me preocupé por el  
salvavidas, si ya me salvabas de  
mi tristeza.  
Ahógame en tus besos,  
déjame sentirte con delicadeza.

¿Dime qué piensas, qué sientes?  
Llegaste con el año y te quiero para  
siempre. Lluvia, haces que mi alma tiemble.  
Qué en cualquier lugar te necesite y te e  
ncuentre.

English Translation:

# RAIN

Your presence was unexpected.  
You arrived in the middle of the silence, at dawn,  
like the rain that strikes my window,  
with a steady and intense rhythm,  
making yourself known, letting me know you were there.

Each drop, in perfect harmony,  
awakened the curiosity  
to feel what I hadn't felt in so long.  
Your drops sliding over my skin  
vanished—so free, yet so mine.

When I least expected it, I flowed  
in your current. Within your tender  
heart and your strong character,  
I enjoyed letting go of control  
and diving into the present.

I enjoyed being carried away by your love,  
fearlessly and in the purest way.  
It was enough for you to be you.  
How could I resist your smile  
and those eyes that have become my light?

If you are the rain, I want to be your blue sky.  
Soak me in you, for to me, you are the only one.  
Blend yourself with my being.  
For you, I would risk everything,  
for losing would be a pleasure.

My barriers could not withstand  
your nature—you swept everything away  
and flooded my mind  
with thoughts of you.

I never worried about a lifeline,  
for you had already saved me from my sorrow.  
Drown me in your kisses,  
let me feel you with tenderness.

Tell me, what do you think, what do you feel?  
You arrived with the new year, and I want you forever.  
Rain, you make my soul tremble,  
so that wherever I go, I seek you,  
and find you.



## **“Moroccan Views”**

*Waad Sidahmed*



## “One Summer Day”

*Carli Lacz*





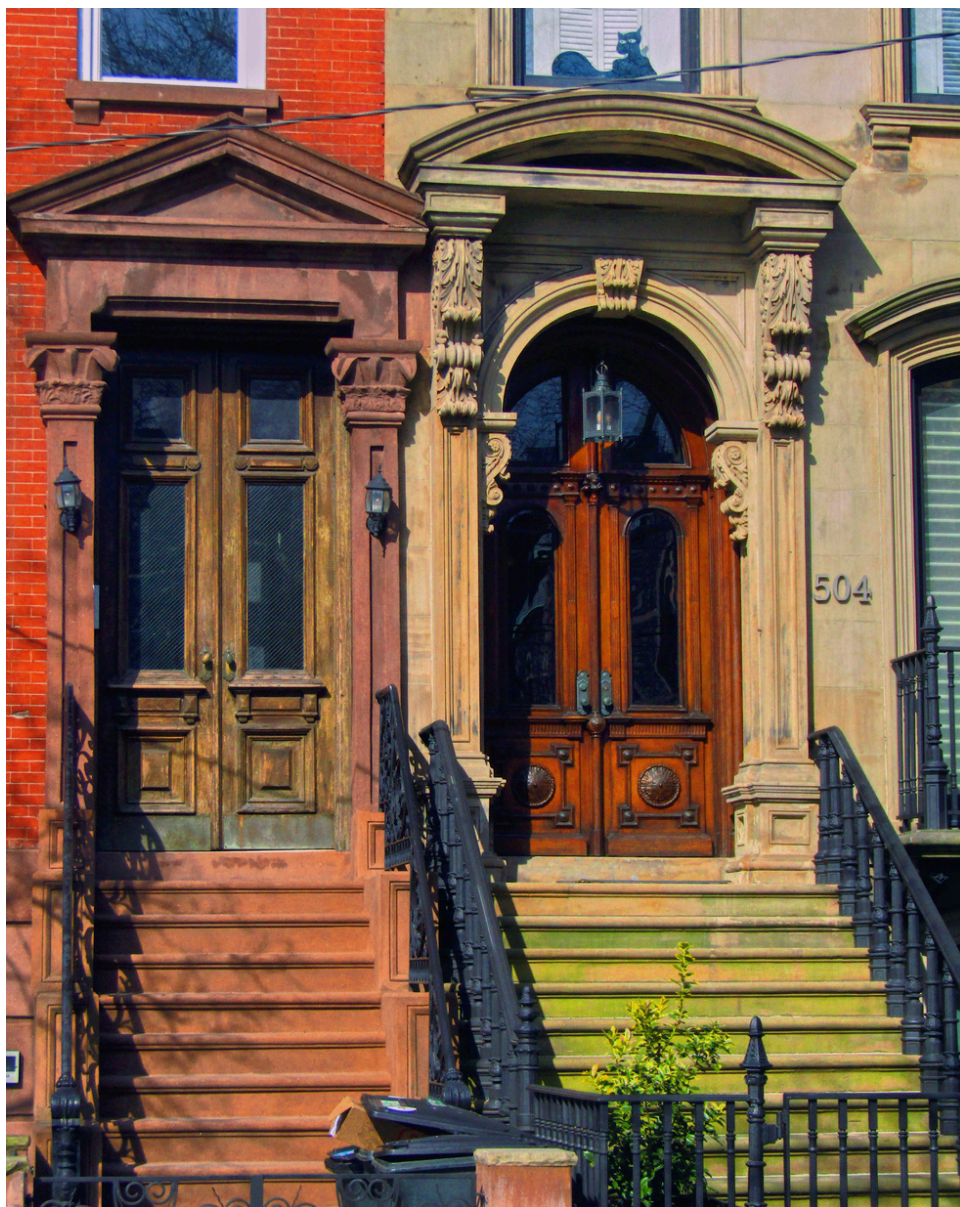
# “The Observatory”

*Emily Lorenz-Bradley*



**“Brunch”**  
*Hanieh Kachooee*





## “I Spy a ‘Cat’”

*Violet Ratliff*

# Winter Night Interlude

*Rosemary Tierney*

Your hair shines  
like Indian Black Stars  
held to light,  
as we stand below trees  
that glitter with snow.  
Underneath clouds  
glowing with moonlight  
our breath turns  
crystalline in the cold,  
easily shattered by words.

# Sonnet 1: Gothic Heart

*Maximillian Venskus*

Her clothes the color of the deepest ink.  
Her varied hair bears colors of a reef.  
Her love the flavor of the sweetest drink.  
In beauty, too, she most of all is chief.  
Her art could be described as most divine.  
Her sense of style is most unparalleled.  
Her marks upon the skin are works so fine.  
Indeed, my love for her could not be quelled.  
The death among her room leaves some disturbed.  
Some treat her interests like shattered glass.  
The gloom makes the weary quite perturbed.  
Despite my thoughts on violence, alas;  
I would leave bodies piled upon a cart,  
To fall once more into your gothic heart.



## **“Warmth on My Skin”**

*Aimee Rae Peralta*



# The Day After

*Emily Lorenz-Bradley*

It is the second day without power or reception. word has come to me that Lahaina has burned down, from the post office to 505. So far, six people have been confirmed dead. my mother is trapped in Central Maui and she is staying with a friend. I have no word from my father, and I fear that his inherent stupidity has harmed him.

Internally and externally, I am calm, but my mind is restless. will I be able to Bear witness to the destruction rot upon the town I had grown up in? the art galleries with many priceless works? The Whalers Locker, my favorite store full of fossils and handmade artistry? Kimo's, the restaurant where my parents met? The Cannery Mall? Or, most importantly, the homes of my friends and family? do I dare spoil the image in my mind of the sunny seaside town?

The past few days this has been happening, I have also been, again, afflicted with the COVID-19 virus that slaughtered many just a few years ago. Luckily for me, I am vaccinated and have previously caught it once, so my symptoms are not life-threatening. I have spent the past 4 days or so slipping in and out of consciousness. a few times, my mom's friends have come by to check on my brother and I—Jimmy, Jim, Alexis, and Paul from down the street. to my surprise, my friend Josue came a few times with his family. I offered him whatever help I could provide, but he has disappeared to God knows where. I heard that we are to be another 4 to 5 days without power and reception.

I had been awake when the winds came in the early hours of yesterday morning. and then, the power went out, but I still had service then. I had thought nothing of it at the time, as power outages happened once in awhile. then, as the morning went on, group chats I am part of began to light up with videos and images of a fire on the hillside in town. someone had counted at least 14 power lines down. my concern began to grow, but I was not alarmed because I could still talk to people.

Then, at some point in the afternoon, the phones went down, and I became truly isolated. My mother also did not come home from work, and I knew then that this was serious. When Josue came the following morning with his sister, he filled me in on the severity of the damage. Much was lost, and no one could leave.

—

My brother just came home and told me our father was safe. His house, that he had lived in since I was 9, has burned down. he is going to stay with someone upcountry. He managed to take some important belongings and saved two people on the way. Apparently, he also got into a stupid argument with our uncle about politics in the meantime. Typical.

The future is uncertain. I will continue to wait here, reading and writing. I can only be patient for now.



# “When the Seagulls Cry”

*Hosna Kachooee*



## “Lone Fisherman”

*Hosna Kachooee*

# Brand New Start?

*Kiana Stevenson*

Sophie was never particularly in love with her sociology course. For her, it was a ‘necessary evil’. A class she needed to take to get her degree. By the time she would come out of this class, she would always be a bit numb. As if the material she was learning would stick to her like drops of water on a wet dog. Something she’d try to shake off in an attempt to rid her self of the heavy damp feeling it gave her. This particular day in class, the typical tidal wave of class material was looking more like a tsunami. The topic of that class was about family dynamics. Something that Sophie knew about all too well. The wounds left from the battles she had just dealt with had finally closed. Sophie’s knee bobbed under her desk. She wrung her hands on her lap. The wrath from the white fluorescent bulbs beamed on her. Sophie was transported back to the year before.

The elderly grandfather that she had helped her father care for had been taken from them in the blink of an eye. Watching him lay unconscious on the living room floor as the ambulance pointlessly do chest compression on a man who had already gone to the great beyond. Her father helplessly screamed out for his much beloved father to just “stay another day”. He sobbed that they had so much left to do together. The old sitcoms the three of them were watching moments before still playing as they carried her grandfather’s lifeless body out of the house on a stretcher to the ambulance.

Sophie tried pushing her painful memories aside to focus on the class content ahead. She practiced her breathing exercises like her therapist suggested . She chewed a piece of gum. Her fingers rolled over the purple and pink beads on her bracelet. A few more minutes and she could meet up with her good friend Angelo in the school’s courtyard like they had planned. All she wanted to do was just leave this campus and spend time with him.

When Sophie's class finally ended, she bolted out of the room. The stale junior college hallway air never felt so good. She made her way down two flights of stairs and out of the black automatic lobby doors leading straight to the courtyard. It wasn't the biggest or fanciest courtyard in junior college history. A few benches, tables and chairs around a large patch of grass that the yoga classes sometimes used during the warmer months. The patch of grass was sprinkled with ruby and amber colored leaves. Sophie looked around for Angelo. The sunlight shined off her short wavy black hair. Her small frame looked even smaller under the weight of the turtle shell of a book bag on her back. She sat on a bench just beside the lobby doors. Sophie let out a breath. In the past few years, she never let her self sit still. She was always doing something as away to distract her feelings from bubbling over. It was something she talked about with her therapist yet could never fully master.

Sophie checked her phone for the time. It was five minutes after the time Angelo said he would meet her. There was no new text from Angelo in her messages. It's not often that Angelo was late without warning. Sophie tried her breathing exercises again. "He's going to be here. He's just a bit late. Everything is going to be alright." She told herself.

Her dainty black shoe tapped repeatedly on the cement sidewalk. What if he didn't show up? What if he told her he was going to meet her there just to leave her there? He knew she didn't have a car. What if he wanted to strand her there? Sophie was sent back to the memory of the texts she made to several members of her family. Asking them for help with her father who had had repeatedly hospitalized from takotsubo syndrome a few months after her grandfather's death. All of them rejecting her or not even responding at all. She had to leave her that school to help take care of him and herself. She left behind her dorm room, her new friends and her hunger for her dream of receiving a bachelor's degree. She watched as her father's physical health improved and her mental health plummeted.



Her life had gone from the peak of the mountain to the valley of despair in the matter of seconds. An avalanche like a thick dense snow left her feeling as if she had run out of choices. As if she had run out of air. She had worked through that pain with her therapist.

Sophie sniffled. She wouldn't let her mind go back to that place again. She was at a new school. Where she would cultivate her new family, her chosen family. She would make it to the top of that mountain again. Sophie took a deep breath. The brisk air filled her lungs. Her tightened shoulders lowered from beneath her neck with a calming exhale. She opened her eyes again to find Angelo stumbling towards her. His baggy dark denim jeans serving as a tripping hazard. Papers leaked out of the red folder he held in his arms. Any of those thoughts she had before left without a trace upon seeing his familiar comforting face. Angelo stopped to catch his breath as he approached her. He held his hands on his knees, taking big gasping breaths. The papers in his folders spilling all over the ground. Sophie squatted down to pick them up for him.

"You okay there bestie?" She teased as she handed them back.

"Yeah, I'm fine. My class today got to watch a presentation in the auditorium which meant I had to walk all the way to the auditorium."

"Oh okay. Let me know next time. You had me worried sick! I would have been fine waiting."

"Sorry about that."

"I have a present for you."

"Oh Soph, you didn't have to get me anything."

"I didn't have to but I wanted to."

Sophie lifted her large mauve backpack off the ground and on to her lap. She rummaged through her books, papers and thingamajigs. Sophie had whatever one would need to survive a day in school or a night on the town. She pulled out a light blue opaque mesh bag. She handed it to Angelo.

“What is it?” He asked

“Open it silly!”

He pulled the drawstring of the bag. Folded neatly inside was a light brown cashmere knitted scarf. On one of the edges was a small leather tag with Angelo’s name embroidered on it. He held the scarf delicately. The mesh bag and his papers floated to the ground. Sophie sighed. She picked them up for him.

“I’m holding onto these,” she joked.

Angelo ran his hand over the scarf, feeling it’s plush texture. Sophie knew how much Angelo loved to watch her knit. She had one huge rule about her knitting. It was only for the people she cared about or to donate to those less fortunate. Meeting Angelo was a step forward on the road of returning to the top of her mountain. It was no longer just her and her dad. In the span of little over a year, She went from only being able to muster out a squeaky ‘hello’ to him to becoming a good friend. Sophie had gotten the cashmere yarn as a christmas gift from her father the year before. Typically she stuck to acrylic or cotton yarn. It was much easier to come by. Working on this scarf was her first time with cashmere yarn. It worked perfectly with her metal needles. The loops slipped on and off like butter. By the time she was halfway done with her scarf, she knew who she wanted to give it to.

“Thank you so much for this Sophie. I don’t deserve this.” He finally responded  
“Oh pish posh. Of course you do.”

You know who doesn't deserve it? ...Never mind I'm not going to talk bad about anyone. Everyone deserves to feel warm and loved at some point. Now let's get going, I have to finish the knitted hats I brought with me. They're christmas gifts."

"Actually, can we make one stop really quickly? I wanted to ask my advisor a quick question."

"Uh...sure I guess."

They walked back through of the black automatic doors. The two of them took the brief stroll down the hall to Angelo's advisor's office. The same posters on the walls she had passed on the way out of the school, mocked her as she made her way back in. Sophie returned Angelo's papers as they entered the office. Sitting in a chair just outside the door of the office, her phone vibrated. It was a text from her father checking in on her. She replied to him letting her know that everything was alright. She was okay now that she was with Angelo. With him, Sophie finally felt as if she belonged at this school. Angelo came out of the office. A giddy smile plastered across his face.

"Ready to get out of here? I can feel my knitting needles back at home crying out for me." She joked

"Yep. All ready to go. I wouldn't want to keep the sacred knitting needles waiting."

Sophie couldn't wait to be out of the school. She couldn't wait to be on her couch watching television with Angelo. A cozy blanket on her lap, hot chocolate on the coffee table and knitting needles engaged.

"Soph, I have exciting news. I was going to wait until we got back to your place but I can't wait anymore."

"What is it? Spill!"

“Okay. You know how I’ve been trying to get into Stevenson University for their cyber security and digital forensics program? According to my advisor I have just enough credits to transfer!”

“That’s great! ... Wait what?”

“Yep! I’m headed there in January! Isn’t it exciting?”

Sophie froze in place. The pace of her breath slowly increased. She tried her best to push back any indication of any feeling less than joy for her friend.

“That’s great Angel. I’m happy for you.”

Angelo had continued walking. He turned around after realizing Sophie wasn’t with him. Sophie gripped the straps of her backpack. The weight of the bag on her back suddenly felt heavier.

“Is something wrong? I thought you’d be happy for me,” Angelo asked.

“Why would I be anything less than happy for you?” she lied.

“You don’t seem happy.”

Sophie lifted her bowed head to stare at Angelo across from her. His dark rimmed glasses covered his fudge brownie colored eyes. The same color as his short straight hair. He rested his hand on the nape of his tan neck. Like a water balloon, Sophie burst. Embracing herself in a hug, tears streamed from her face like a gushing waterfall. Angelo’s attempts to comfort her through hugs was rejected. With the back of her hand, she wiped the aftermath off her face.

“I’m okay,” she said.

“Clearly, you’re not.”

“It’s just happy tears. I’m so... so happy for you.”

“You sure? These don’t feel like happy tears.”

“They are! I couldn’t be happier for you Angel.”

“Well I leave for Maryland in two months. It’s going to be so much fun. You can always come to visit me.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Can we just go? We can talk about this later.”

“Sure I... I guess.”

The two of them walked out the automatic doors in silence. Sophie looked over at Angelo. A tear rolled down her cheek. She quickly swiped it off with the cuff of her sweater. It was as she feared, she’d never get back to the top of that mountain.



## “Centerpiece”

*Lina Dzhatdueva*





**“West Asia”**

*Meryem Tos*



## “Elementary Days”

*Meryem Tos*





**“Reference Group, Acrylic on Canvas, 24x36”**

*Mila Antkevych*



**“George Washington Bridge, oil on canvas, 18x24”**

*Mila Antkevych*





**“Stoic Serenity, oil on canvas, 18x24”**

*Mila Antkevych*



# “Where Heaven Lies”

*Hosna Kachooee*





# “Tokyo at Night”

*Maximus Kajiwara*



# “Tokyo Rain”

*Maximus Kajiwara*



## “shadows”

*Meryem Tos*

# Ambidextrous

*Jake Frato*

I've never really been able to tell my right from my left, and more often than not it's gotten me in trouble. I have always been late to everything, whether that be to a party, getting started with college, or even my own birth. I'm not sure I can ever forgive myself for putting my mother through over thirty hours of labor, she didn't really deserve that. The doctors ended up having to take me out themselves, I guess I was too indecisive. I've never done things the 'right way', it seems.

That's what makes things like this so difficult, standing at a crossroads – I was told to take the right path, but which is it? There's one on either side of me as I stand here, both well walked. I suppose many others have found themselves standing in the same exact position, not sure which way was right. Like most things expected of me in life, it seems as though this was yet another vague direction. I'm honestly not even sure where the destination is this time; I was just told by my loved ones, my mentors, and even complete strangers to go the right way.

So I take my first steps down a path, hoping I'd made the right decision. I glance around at an open field, a natural valley of undisturbed potential that at any given moment could be tarnished. If I step off of this set path and onto the beautiful green grass, I'd leave an impression that may never go away – and how could I ever live with myself if I did so? Who is to say I know not what I do, aside from myself? Surely coming up with an excuse for my mistake wouldn't be the right way to go about things. My steps begin to slow down as I lose my balance, lost too deeply in the hypothetical mistakes left undone in my subconscious.



As I exit my worries, I notice that I'm right back where I started. I face forward once more, and on both sides are those same roads. Did I walk in some sort of circle, and not realize it? Well, that would settle it – I certainly went down the path to my left. It reminds me of the time I first learned to write. I was four years old when I picked up a pen for the first time, and began composing little notes for my mother. However, as she would be happy to remind me for years after the fact, I would often struggle with wiping away what I wrote.

Before the ink could dry, my palm would brush against the paper and smudge everything, so I would switch hands with ease and start over. That was when it began, when my mom told me I was special because I was able to write using both hands. That always stuck with me, the idea of being special. Now, I would try the same method: going left didn't work this time – so it was time to switch it up and go right. I began down the second path, this one leading through a forest. As the darkness of the foliage obscured the path, I started struggling to see the ground, and more importantly, my feet. My balance has never been a strong suit, I was a bit late to learning how to walk on top of everything else in life. As everything left my line of sight, I fell forward and right on to my face!

The embarrassment of falling was enough to keep me glued to the ground longer than I needed to be. I slowly lifted my face from the darkness – and, lo and behold, I had returned once more to where I began. I looked to both my left and right, a mix of confusion and fear overtaking me. My blood ran cold, how could this be? Both directions, and neither were the right way to get where I was going? One of these roads was paved in doubt, the other in fear...and they both led me nowhere. It was in that moment that I looked back upon where I'd come from. I could feel myself calming down as the path back home, with my footprints still visible in the miles of dirt I'd traversed to be where I am now. A deep sigh bellowed from my lungs, and with dejection I decided to return to my comfortable everyday – but my first step would not come.

As quickly as I could, I turned around once more to face forward, once again the two paths at either side of me. Neither took me where I had to go, but going backward wasn't an option either. It was then when I looked forward. This fork was two-pronged, but being no stranger to thinking on my feet, I decided there would be a third on this day. I took several steps forward and stood on the shaggy, uneven ground – and I started to walk forward. I kept walking, switching dominant feet as I did so to counteract what was quickly becoming rocky territory. It had taken some time, but finally I had found the right way.



# When Night Falls

*Liana Pinheiro*

In the stillness of the early hours,  
something stirs within me.

You are asleep.

I contemplate—  
chaos will bring what I desire.

I do the things you detest most  
hoping you'll choose me over the dreams.

A soft pinch,  
an insistent tap.

Half-asleep, exasperated—  
you push me away

but still, I linger.

I hear the click,  
a familiar sound,

You roll back into sleep  
as I rush after the rattle to feast.

Again, I settle in your arms,  
finally satisfied.

I awake to your touch of affection  
as you ready yourself to leave.

A kiss on the forehead,  
A scratch behind the ear.

The house quiet as you go.

I pass the empty hours in silence.

A brief game here,

attention snatched, never held.

A nap there—

a dream-less sleep pulls me in.

I hear your steps—  
loud and heavy, you trudge up the stairs.

I hum pleasantly before we even touch,  
I curl up within your comfort.

Only for the cycle to begin again,  
when night falls.

# Sway

*Yerin Jeong*

A thought under a willow  
tree, wet, glistening leaves  
slick blades of grass  
outstretched past the sill  
clink of silver spoons in a sink  
rushing water spinning still  
potent taste of pepper  
mint leaves, picked blueberries  
buzzing TV muffled pre-recorded  
screams bone dry  
sand in your thoughts  
spilling into sewage in  
cold clacks of heels  
in the stench of burnt  
film reels and smoke a  
dead man waits for  
money for spare  
change the murky backdrop  
punctured by plastic and  
steel heart forged fires  
dimmed dull by opaque  
ceilings cracked by  
blueberries on your tongue  
gushing scents of something  
sweet ice-cream scooped  
with silver spoons  
the willow tree sways  
and sways and sways and sways

# Brooklyn Girl

*Danielle Acosta*

Born and raised  
Walking streets aimlessly  
Culture filled with sound  
I hear the beat from the corner side drummer  
Playing afro Latino melodies  
Salsa and Merengue blasting from cars driving by  
I feel the heat  
From the summertime sun  
Moving through my body  
Touches my soul  
Sets me ablaze  
Its hard not to get consumed by the passion  
Embedded in the endless gum-stained ground  
Beyond the surface is the heart of every new yorker  
A tireless fight, a dream,  
People walking with intention  
All of them getting to their destinations  
All different colors all different races  
Whether running or walking at all different paces  
Its loud and crazy  
Just like me  
I'm a Brooklyn girl  
Yeah, that's me  
Cat calls from a young age telling me things I already knew  
No boy  
I don't have time for you

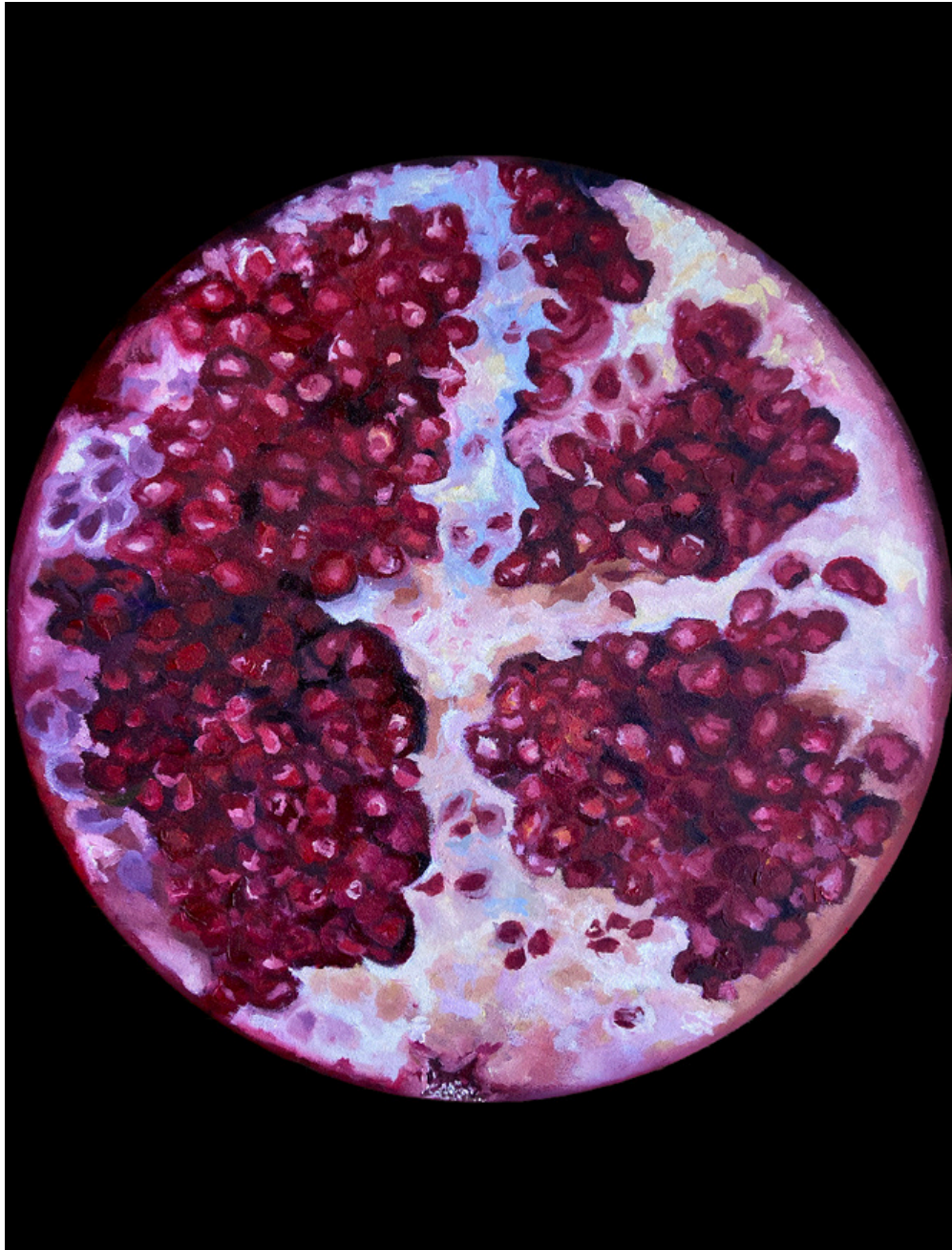
I'm running late  
Might miss the buss that comes at half past eight  
I hop aboard and pay my fare take a seat  
wonder when I'll get there  
looking through the fingerprinted window  
I look at the buildings passing me by  
This is my city  
This is my tribe  
A day in the life of a Brooklyn girl





## **“Ying Yang”**

*Hanieh Kachooee*



“Zénde”

*Hanieh Kachooee*





## “Late Night Breakfast”

*Hanieh Kachooee*

# Wishing Hour

*Juana Almonte*

The first time I met Ms. Doe, I was screaming in pain. Lying in a bed, awaiting death, I begged for someone to make my going easier. But in a place too understaffed to care, you learned quickly how easily your voice could be lost. My body was fire, burning from the inside out. My parents had abandoned me, their version of repentance a signed form granting me the company of a stranger.

And so, she came.

Like ice against the blaze, she entered with a quiet bow to my bedmate and a too-bright smile. "Hi," she chirped, voice light, airy, as if she hadn't just stepped into a room thick with suffering. Then, without asking, her hand found my leg, fingers firm yet gentle, pressing into flesh marked by pain. There was no permission sought, none given. It didn't matter. At that moment, it felt as if she had peeled back the walls of agony and let in something else. Something softer. Something bearable.

We talked for three hours. I can't remember about what. But for those three hours, I didn't have cancer. I was just a person, talking to someone who might be a friend. And for the first time in too long, I wasn't drowning.

A week later, she returned. This time, with home-cooked food and necessities—things the facility conveniently kept forgetting to provide. The doctors forbade her from giving me anything high in sodium, but she brought me a meal that tasted like home. And fresh pineapples. I ate them first, devouring the burst of something real, something untouched by hospital preservatives.

That day, she opened the window, and autumn air curled into the room, chasing out the sterility. She told me about her husband, about how much she loved him. And when she left, her smile faltered, just slightly, at the edges.

The next week, she massaged my legs with lavender lotion, claiming it would help me sleep. And it did. I drifted off before she even had the chance to say goodbye.

By the fourth visit, she was late.

Not by much. Maybe an hour. But she was never late.

When she finally arrived, she looked... off. The long, flowing skirts she always wore swayed as she rushed in, but something about her movement lacked its usual grace. Strands of thin brown hair slipped from her haphazard bun as she tucked them away with a hand that trembled too slightly to be called steady.

We barely spoke. She left with an apology and a promise that next time would be better. But week by week, that promise seemed to wither.

When she returned two weeks later, she had shrunk. Not in height, not in presence, but in being. The scarf she wore around her neck barely hid the sharpness of bones that hadn't been there before. Her wrists, peeking from her sweater sleeves, were too slim. Her smile was unchanged—bright, cheerful—but I had learned how to look past it.

She told me about her husband again. About his trips with friends. About how she worked extra hours and had started college despite being what she considered old. She laughed about it, but the tension in her brow betrayed her.

And yet that day, for the first time, her smile was real.

She painted a picture of a future where she would have a career she loved, where she would travel, where she would take me along. If not in person, then through a tablet where we would call each other, while across the world.

She left that night glowing with something close to hope.

Then, she didn't come back.

Not that week. Not the next. Not the one after.

Four weeks later, the day after Thanksgiving, she arrived early. Too early. With food. A meal made just for me—roasted pork, rice with peas, pinkish potato salad, strawberry Jell-O, and sweet tea. She had bandages on her hands. Said she cut herself unclogging a sink filled with knives and water too thick to see through.

We laughed. We talked. She showed me pictures of her nieces, told me she wrote stories. She swore that if her career plans failed, she'd be a bestseller. And then she'd take care of me.

She never let me read them. The stories. Said she'd feel judged. But she shared her poems.

Her very, very sad poems.

She waved them off as dramatic flair, but they were more than that. They felt like screaming pressed into ink. Like someone trapped in a cage.

She left that night at eight.

And she didn't come back.

Not in December. Not in January.

I had no way to check if she was okay. No way to know if she was alive.

February passed. Nothing.

March came, and she returned.

But something was missing.

She avoided my eyes. She had thinned even more, a walking shadow draped in wool. A red scarf covered most of her face. Her voice wavered when she spoke.

Still, she placed two containers before me. A salad. Grilled chicken.

When I was done eating, she handed me a Kindle. Said she had finally published a book. And that it was in its library.

"Read it, please," she told me.

Then she left.

And I never saw her again.

Summer came, and with it, new TVs in the facility. No more endless reruns of baseball. Now, we had live channels. Drama. News. Spanish soap operas.

I left it on cartoons.

One night, I changed the channel by accident. The news flashed before me. And then, there she was.



Her face. Her name.

Or at least, the name I never called her.

‘No updates in the disappearance of Mrs. Janara Doe,’ the reporter said. ‘The police are doing everything they can as this daughter and soon-to-be mother was reported missing a week ago by her husband.’

A week ago?

But she had been missing far longer than that.

My stomach twisted, nausea climbing up my throat. Goosebumps rose along my arms, a whisper of dread, an unspoken confirmation of what I already knew.

With shaking hands, I picked up the Kindle. Opened it for the first time.

The cover of the book was blank. White. No title. No author. Like it wasn’t finished loading. Meant to be overlooked.

Please.

I clicked on it.

The dedication page read:

‘To Miss Smith, my close and dear friend.’

I braced myself for sadness, for a confession, for a roadmap of pain and suffering and everything she never said aloud.

But it wasn’t that.

It was fiction.

A story of two people.

Her and me.

Traveling a world, we would never see.



# **“OBLIVION”**

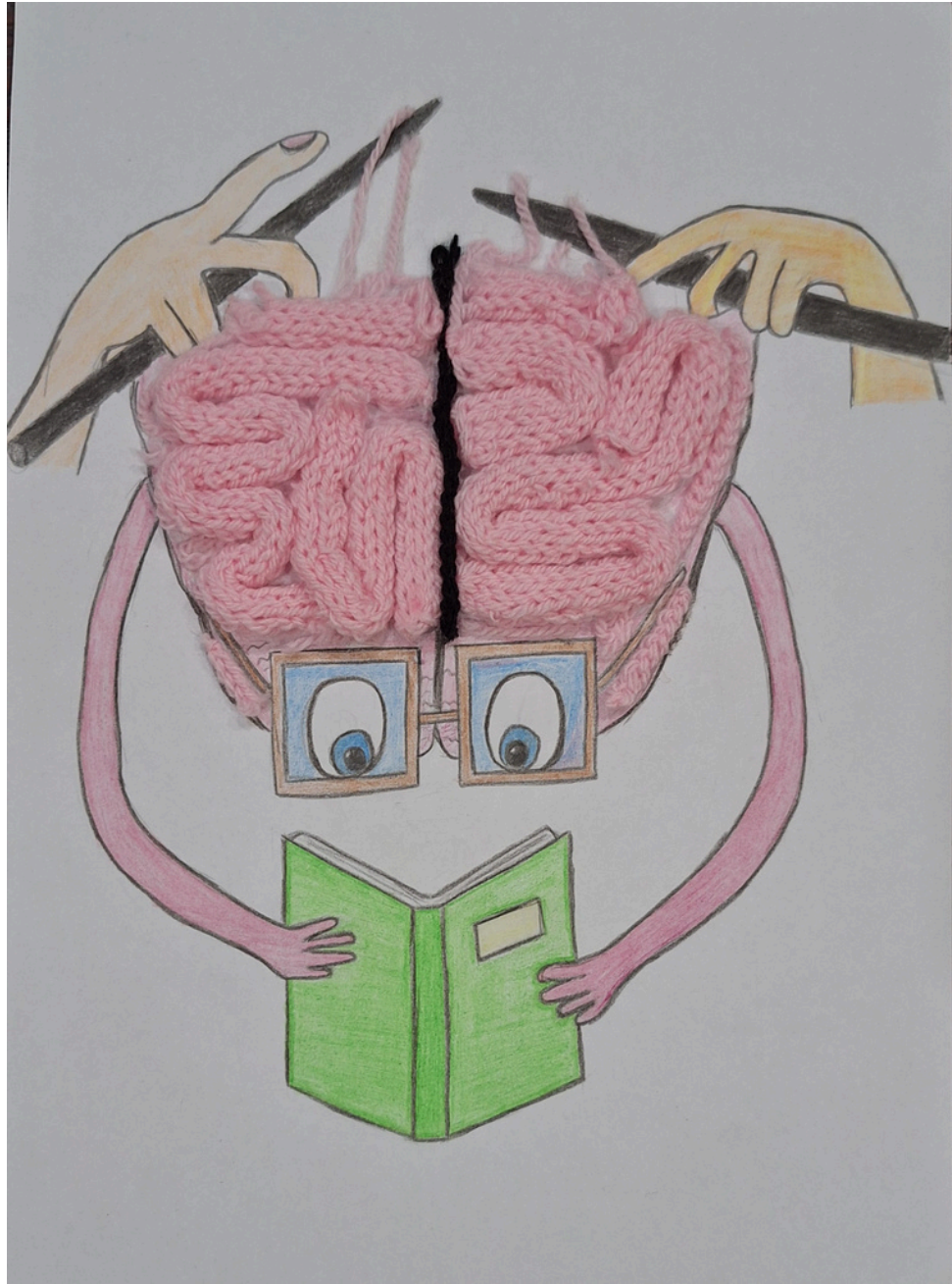
*Jenna Harstead*





# **“GLI AMANTI”**

*Jenna Harstead*



## “Build Your Mind”

*Miriam Alchanaa*





## “Friday Afternoons”

*Hanieh Kachooee*

# Seismic

*Jessica Pawelec*

I am stirred awake by the tremors at 2:53 am, my vision blurry and eyelids heavy.  
They start softly at first, your little body twisting and turning in the glow of the monitor.

I know that soon my bed will give way beneath me  
And be swallowed by the Earth, if only temporarily.

I brace myself for impact.

The vibrations grow stronger now, sleep dispelling from my body like crumbling concrete buildings. You stand with arms outstretched, mouth open,  
Sirens of “Mommy, Mommy, Mommy” blaring into the world, a warning.

I enter and survey the wreckage. A teddy bear tossed over the railing; a blanket discarded in the wake. I scoop you into my arms and

Assume my position as your shelter.

I read the story about the moon, and feel your breathing slow, tectonic plates  
Settling into place.

My finger runs over your eyebrows, tracing the fault lines of your face.

I hold my breath as I return you to the crib, tiptoeing over devastation in the form  
of piles of trucks, dinosaurs, and crayons.

My bed greets me, back from the abyss, and I lay still as a statue

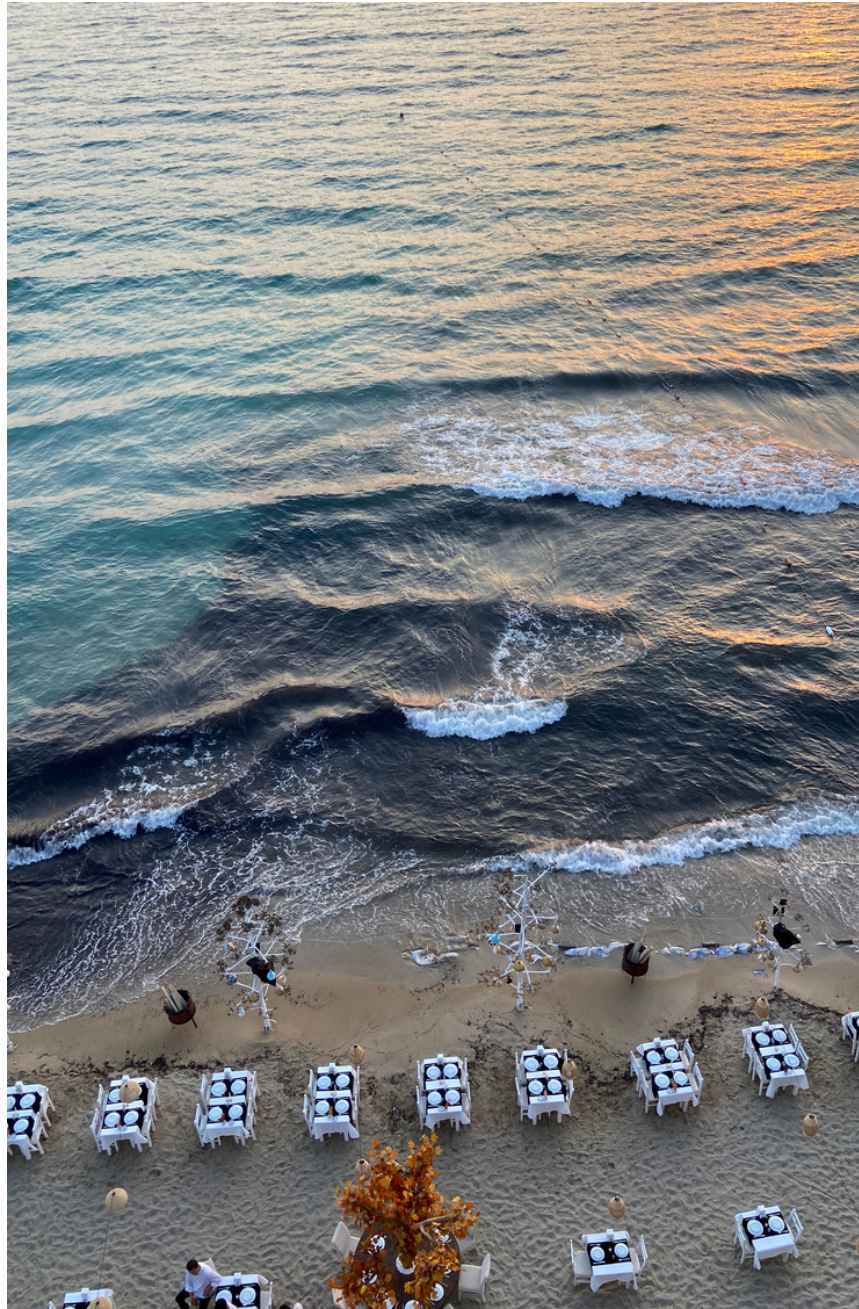
Waiting for aftershocks.



# The Rejection

*Waad Sidahmed*

The purple coat turns me blue  
as it waits for an anxious self to wear it  
or perhaps green  
a promise to reveal a key to the riches of this world  
or perhaps red  
when anger fills me after being deprived its taste  
so out of reach and yet so near  
it kicks me down and lifts me up  
the letter of rejection fresh in my head  
so close and yet so far away  
it fills me up with an air of hope  
a hopeful future where  
I finally wear the purple coat.



# “Fire and Ice”

*Hanieh Kachooee*



# **“Radiance”**

*Emily Lorenz-Bradley*





# “Ecstasy”

*Hanieh Kachooee*

# helen

*Catherine Park*

are you a saint, someone asks.  
a nun? a martyr? why do you leap

into fire? my hands already scorch.  
on the next page, someone with my name  
responds, *i would have had a happier  
four years in college had i never met  
helen* and i try to remember  
the Fates spinning yarn.

*but i wouldn't  
have been the writer i am today.*

a thousand ships later, i am still smiling  
at you. i speak an incantation  
for alchemy, water-into-wine. i drink

with my eyes wide open. helen sought refuge  
in love— does it matter  
whether she meant to start a war?

and i think about dying for a kiss  
and dancing closer to the bonfire  
and laying waste to the churches  
and living,

living, living, living  
in spite  
of the war.

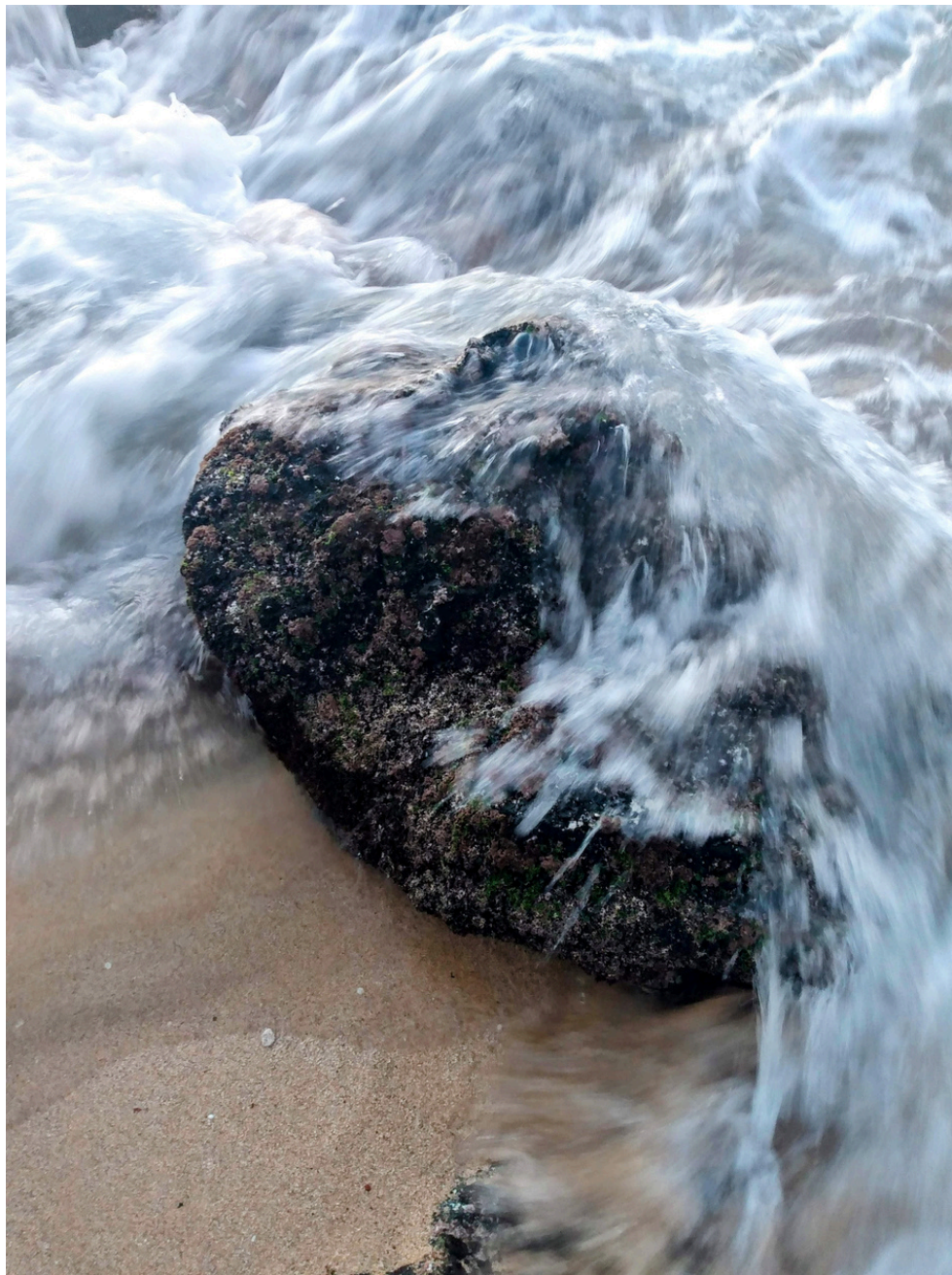




## “New Day”

*Hanieh Kachooee*





## **“Wave Break”**

*Emily Lorenz-Bradley*

# Old Friend

*Catherine Park*

Your fault.

My fault.

I have so much blame to spread around.

Guilt is an aging pet, made friendly by domesticity.

It perches on my shoulder on the days I eat breakfast,  
a giant hawk. The left side of my body aches with its weight.

One day, it learned to eat from my hand.

My mouth is sewn shut. Do not ask, please.

I have no idea where your threads end

and mine begin – our stitches

were done in the same exact way. You cannot hate me  
more than the number of times I have plucked

my own hairs from my scalp. *Love me,*

*love me not.*

# What I Want

## *Ares Carrasquillo*

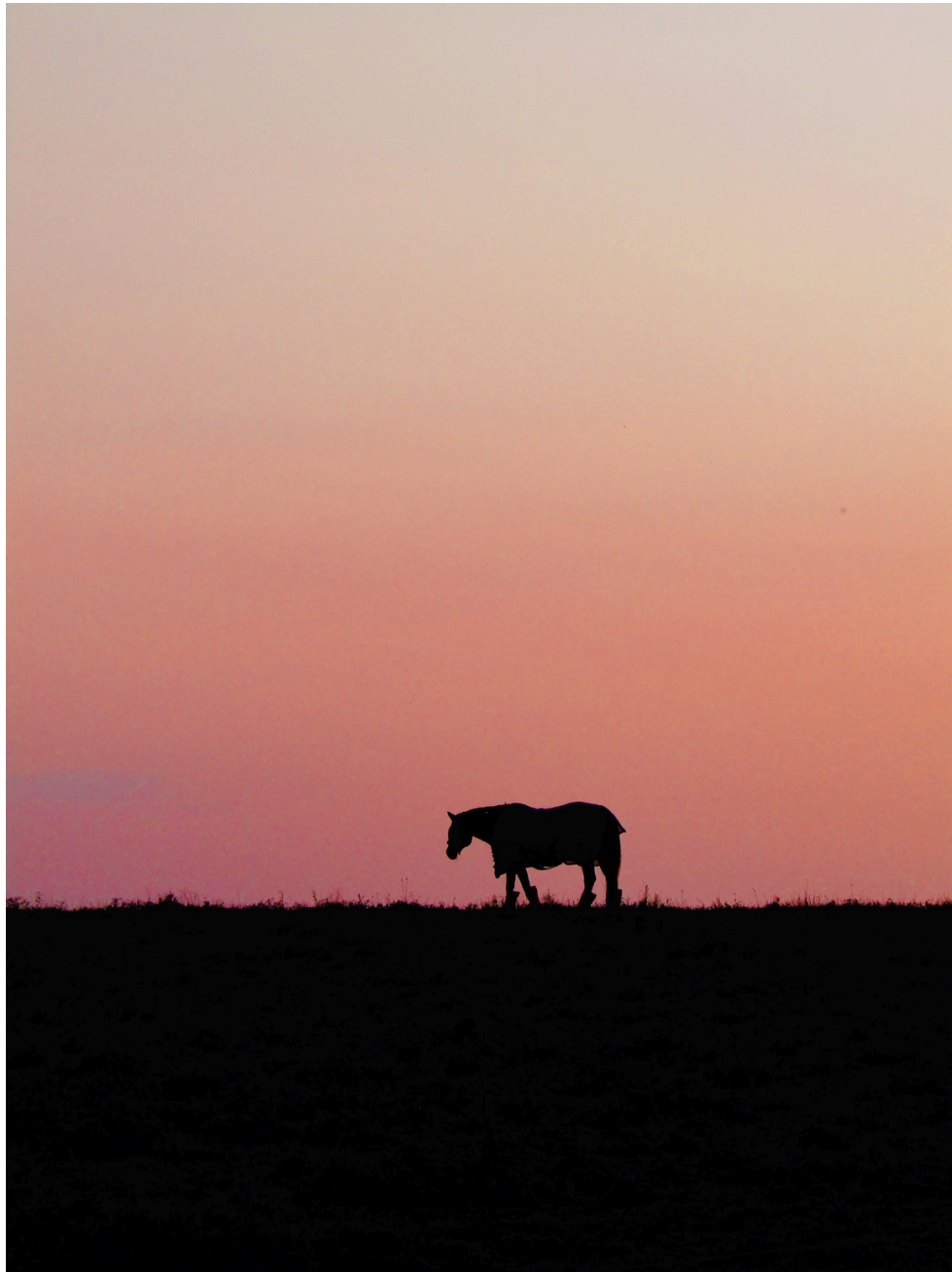
The weight of you, beside me in bed  
As light cascades down  
Rainbows shining on your body  
Colors I will never forget  
A dent that is yours  
An outline in the bed, a shape forever etched

A tight embrace  
Where we entwine our fingers, entangle our bodies  
In a world that is our own  
Taking in scents,  
Taking in each other  
Afraid that if we let go, it'll slip away

Tears and anger shed- but never left alone  
Hands raised to push the hair out from my eyes,  
Words that only we know, listened to  
Places you only show me  
Paths on the body that you carved with your fingers  
As I stare at your lips, your smile, your eyes.

Silent nights punctuated by our laughter  
Evenings where we lose track of time  
Talking about things we will forget the next day  
And talk again  
Till I get tired of hearing of your voice,  
A day I know will never come

A kiss here, maybe there  
A hug tomorrow.



## “Horse at Sunset”

*Violet Ratliff*





**“New York, 34th street”**

*Mila Antkevych*





# “Acapulco”

*Jackelyn Ortega*



**“Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall...”**

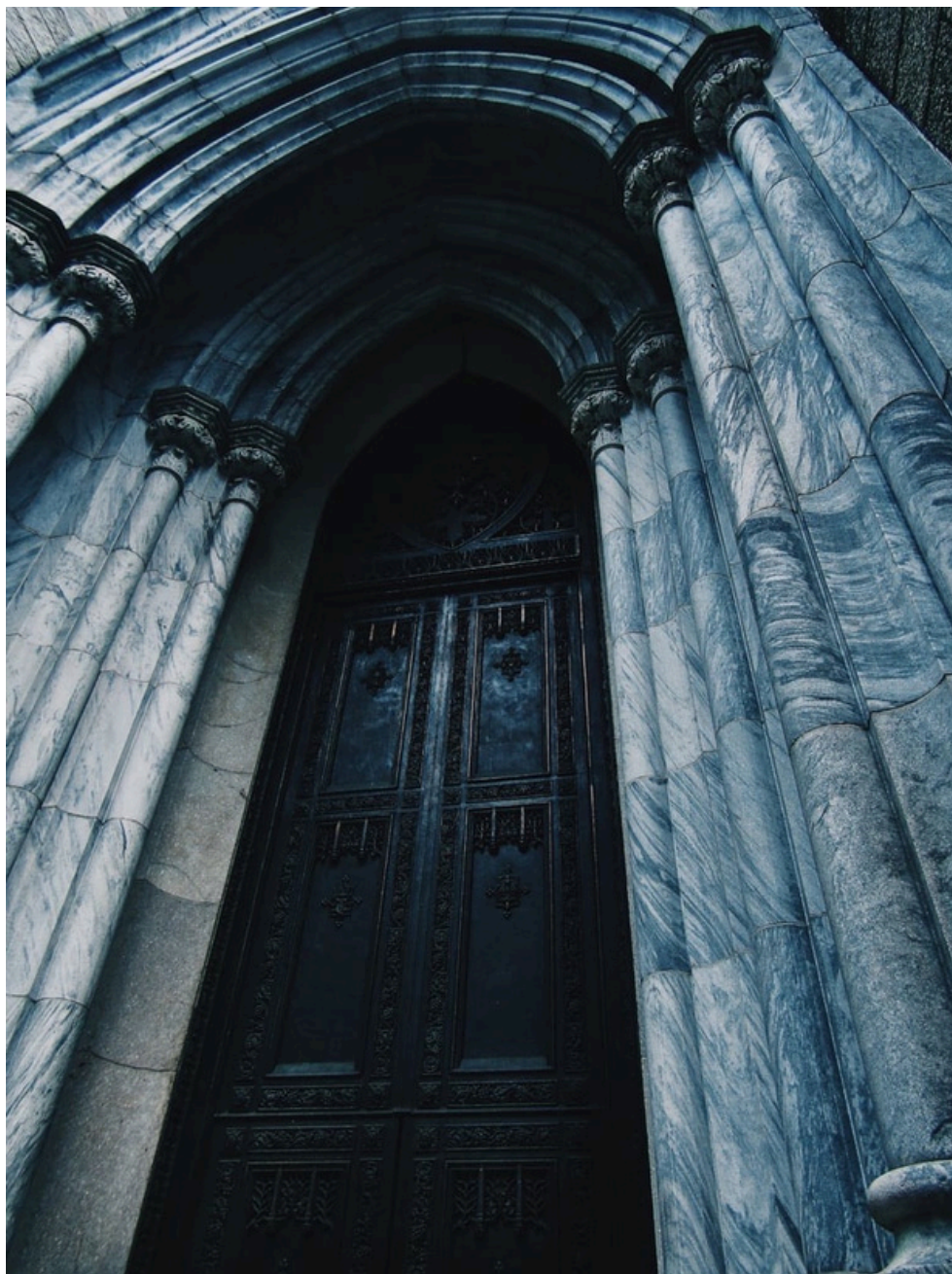
*Violet Ratliff*





*“Untitled ”*

*Esther Kim*



# **“Enter At Your Own Peril”**

*Violet Ratliff*





## “Foggy Edgewater, NJ ”

*Mila Antkevych*



# Asian Heritage Committee 2025 Portfolio

*This Year's Theme: "Not Your Perfect Asian"*

What does "being Asian" mean?

Like many other marginalized communities, members of the Asian and Asian American diaspora have struggled against cultural suppression, discrimination, xenophobia, and reductionist stereotypes.

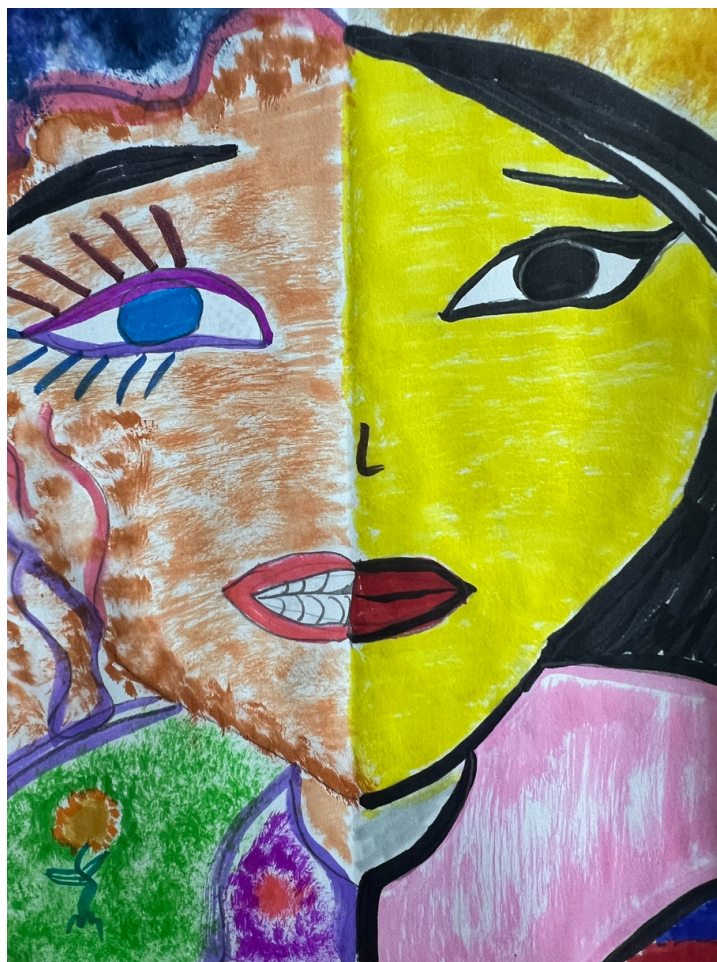
Storytelling can be a powerful tool for empowerment and self-expression. How do we fight against prejudice, and how do we celebrate our differences? What is your heritage? What is your story?

This year's AHC Portfolio celebrates Asian and Asian American heritage through the work of Bergen students who have expertly crafted art that attempts to address these important questions.



## “Silent Battles”

*Esther (Haeun) Kim*



## “Imperfectly Perfect Who”

*Joana Constantino*

# Twin's other half

*Joana Constantino*

Twin's other half...

Asian twin's best friend  
to heal and mend.  
Different yet perfect in every way,  
but knows me without words to say.  
Through sorrow and pain,  
is love and joy even in the rain.  
Family ties never end,  
Yes, my twin and my best friend.



## “Streets of My Old Home”

*Maximus Kajiwara*





## “Aurora From My New Home”

*Maximus Kajiwara*



## “Exploring New Horizons”

*Maximus Kajiwara*



## “Onto Woljeonggyo Bridge ”

*Catherine Park*





## “Woljeonggyo Bridge ”

*Catherine Park*

# Not your perfect Asian

*Xheni Korcari*

When I decided to participate in this competition, I immersed myself in research about the taboos of Asian culture—and that’s where I found myself. This theme awakened my dreams and gave meaning to something I hadn’t noticed before: all this time, I had been chasing perfection. I remembered one of those many conversations with my mother, where she scolded me for what I wanted to be. Among other things, one of her phrases comes to mind: “Who has ever benefited from perfection?” Now I admit it—she was right. And naturally, I call myself a lifeless perfection. With these lines, I want to speak to myself, to my dreams, and to the world: I am not your perfect Asian. Welcome to the poetry of my soul, inspired by the hell of everyday life. I hope that within these words, you find your own questions—and perhaps a sliver of peace in the inner battles you fight.

## **I. The Birth of Expectations**

I call the world Asia,  
A giant Asia,  
And I call myself  
A fanatic of this Asia.  
But is fanaticism enough  
To satisfy this world?  
Is it enough to not be “me”  
And make this world happy?  
From the moment I opened my eyes, the rules were there,  
Like towering walls built before me.  
A straight path, preordained,  
A fate written with obligation and fear.  
“Study hard, work hard, excel!”  
Echoed the voices filling my room.



“There is no room for failure,  
No room for mistakes.”  
And so I became a soldier on this battlefield,  
A warrior for a dream that wasn’t mine.  
I learned to smile when required,  
To stay silent when my heart screamed,  
To be perfect for a world that couldn’t bear to see me flawed.

## **II. The Internal Struggle**

I feel disgusted with how I align myself,  
Like a captive, striving to be perfect.  
Is it fanaticism that drives me,  
Or the desire to belong,  
To this giant Asia with its strict rules?  
In the mirror, I see someone I don’t recognize,  
A girl who has buried herself deep,  
Who has locked her dreams in a dusty box,  
And wears a mask crafted by others.  
I don’t want to live according to a script,  
I don’t want to be an actress in someone else’s play.  
But how do I explain it to the world?  
How do I tell my mother, who looks at me with such hope?  
How do I tell my father, who sees me as his pride?  
In their eyes, I am a bright future,  
I am the dream they never had the courage to pursue.  
But in my soul, I am just a girl  
Who wants to live for herself.

### **III. The Role of Family and Society**

This world has made me an Asian parent to myself,  
A parent who wants the best for their child,  
Without considering what the child truly desires.  
And so I push myself towards decisions  
To be the perfect Asian,  
To be the preferred child in my own eyes,  
And in those of my parents.  
How painful it is when love  
Turns into a heavy expectation,  
When sacrifice becomes an obligation,  
When success is measured in numbers, not happiness.  
I don't want to betray those who gave me life,  
I don't want to make them feel like failures.  
But must I sacrifice myself to do so?  
Must I erase my identity just to gain their approval?

### **IV. The Choice Between Happiness and Sacrifice**

And so I forced myself  
To wear a white coat  
And turn it into my greatest desire.  
Sometimes, you must do things against yourself  
To make yourself feel good.  
That's how I feel good about my undesired desires.  
But what does it mean to feel good?

Is peace the silence of a heart too afraid to speak?  
Is happiness a cold approval from the world?  
Or is it the freedom to chase dreams that make you feel alive?  
I don't want to be just a name on a diploma,  
I don't want to be a perfect grade on a paper,  
I don't want to be merely an example of a good child.  
I want to be me.

## **V. Liberation and Self-Acceptance**

And now, I see clearly.  
I am not a fanatic of this world,  
I am not a shadow following rules written by others.  
I am a soul that seeks to fly,  
A mind that seeks to think for itself,  
A voice that will no longer be silenced.  
Today, I choose to be me.  
I choose to follow my dreams, even if they aren't what you expected.  
I choose to fail, to rise again, to try,  
But above all, I choose to be free.  
I am not the "Perfect Asian,"  
But I am me.  
And that is enough.

# “Nanay ko (My Mother)”

*Aimee Rae Peralta*

She's not a child, not a dog  
She makes sense to me,  
Why not to you?  
Your voice heightens, your tone brighter  
It's eerie and unnecessary  
You think I don't notice  
I wonder if you notice yourself  
I want to make it stop  
Make sure it never has to happen again  
But I can't  
And for that  
I'm sorry  
It isn't your fault  
I know your heart  
They don't care to see you the way I do  
You are not less than  
I will play nice and keep my mouth shut  
I will translate and explain  
I will stand by you and fight for you  
We are not the same, I'm painfully aware  
They understand me  
They belittle you in a way that makes my blood boil  
They think they are being nice when I find them plain cruel  
They mistake your positivity for stupidity  
It isn't fair  
I know you are smart, I know that you are a person too  
They forget and don't care to remember  
You are more than how they treat you

# Easier

*Yerin Jeong*

I was not there when grandpa died.

Mom said it was peaceful, that he did not fight nor scream. She said he simply took a deep breath and disappeared with it in his sleep. I did not ask if he had prayed because God was irrelevant to me, but I wondered out loud if he had asked for me; if his mind, as riddled as it was, ripped apart by cancer, still had the strength to think about his granddaughter.

Mom said that he had asked for no one, not even God.

I don't think about his death often. We never had much in common. The language barrier was too thick, his accent even thicker, and he never knew how to say I love you in the way my dad did. I don't even know his real name or what he did as a career. I only knew him as this spindly and tall man with fraying hair who double-triple-checked the stove, the lightswitch, and the brakes of his car; a graying, wrinkled, and bent former pastor who frequented McDonald's and gargled salt water every morning and night. He once threw my math textbook across the room because I had asked him for help but couldn't understand numbers in Korean. He would stand by me during dinner then chuckle to himself, "It makes me so happy to see my granddaughter eat." When I would banter with my sister, comfortable in my wit and tongue, my grandpa would interject with a rough voice, "Speak to one another in Korean." Then, suddenly, all the wit would leave me, and we'd sit in silence instead. It was the silence, I think, that comforted him.

It was silence in the car when, after he had picked me up from my private all-girls Catholic high school, someone from a parked bus heard me talking on the phone with him.



I was speaking to him in Korean, broken as it was, when a voice giggled, “Ching chong chang!” I spun around, confused, then noticed at the last second, a flash of blonde hair quickly ducking under the bus windows. I blinked. Once. Twice. Then, turned away, pretending not to have noticed, until the voice returned, high-pitched and shrill, “Ching chong ching! Chinese bitch!” I blinked again. Once. Twice. Thrice. Grandpa was speaking to me, but I couldn’t hear his voice; it had disappeared behind the strands of blonde hair and I couldn’t bring myself to speak in Korean again, so I said a simple, “Ok, see you later,” and hung up. He must’ve sensed something was wrong because he kept looking at his rearview mirror, trying to catch my eye then pretending to check for cars. He didn’t ask any questions. I didn’t give him any answers.

When grandpa, who used to stride with a straight back and clasped hands, needed a cane to move from his apartment to the car, Christmas fell silent as well. He was sitting across from me, his body brittle like flakes of frosting, his eyes flickering to the steaming food on the table beside us. “Granddaughter,” he said. “Oh, how happy I am to see you eat.” I wanted to say that dinner was delicious, that seeing him like this broke my heart, that I was sorry for not calling more, for not saying I love you in the way my sister did. I wanted to thank him for giving me a ride every morning during high school, to ask him if it hurts and if I could make it better, to apologize for not beating the shit out of that blonde girl on the bus. I wanted to say all of that in a language he understood. But I couldn’t. So, I just took his hands and kissed his knuckles. And when I looked up, there were tears in his eyes and he couldn’t speak.

It was a year later when my dad gripped the wheels of the car until his knuckles turned white, his gaze hard on the horizon. “Your grandpa,” he said, teeth clenched. “Refused to say I love you to your mother before he passed. I begged him to say it because he would never get a chance to do it ever again. Do you know what he said?”

I shook my head.

“He said that there was no need, that his children obviously know he loves them, so why would he have to say it?”

I could feel my dad’s eyes on me.

“I love you.”

I nodded, “I know.”

“Yes, but isn’t it nice to hear it?”

“Yes,” I said because it was true.

My dad waited and I waited with him because I understood what he wanted to hear, what he wanted me to say. But there was a pressure in my chest, a dam that had been built—suffocation so tight that I sputtered and spat the words out like poison, an admission of vulnerability. And, I knew why grandpa preferred silence and why I had let the blonde girl say what she did.

It was just easier that way.

# A Short Notice

Angelica Toribio

INTERIOR/EVENING/ROSE'S APARTMENT

*ROSE and her father MANUEL sit across from each other at the dinner table. There is dinner made on the table that is barely touched. The feeling in the room is awkward; the connection between father and daughter that they should have is not there. To each other, they are more like strangers.*

ROSE

I'm glad you are able to come, Dad, with you being so busy.

MANUEL

Yeah, I'm happy that I'm finally able to have time to see you.

ROSE

How's Marian and Emma? Are they doing well?

MANUEL

Marian and Emma are good. Emma joined the soccer team, we are proud of her.

ROSE

Soccer! That's fun! I remember when I played soccer back in middle school, you wouldn't know that since you were never there.

MANUEL

*(Silence)*

*ROSE picks at her food, barely eating it. She pauses for a moment, scared that the next thing she is going to say is going to ruin their relationship even more.*

ROSE

Soooo...I just wanted to talk about us, our relationship, and why you weren't able to see me for all these years.

MANUEL

Look, Rose, I'm a busy man-

ROSE

I know that you have your job and your other family and whatever, but that doesn't excuse you not having time for me. You messed me up in ways that you don't even know.

*MANUEL starts to become irritated. He stops eating, throwing his fork onto his plate.*

MANUEL

Don't start with this again, we are done talking about this. You already know what happened.

ROSE

But I do want to talk about this, about everything that has happened between us.

MANUEL

Fine then. Ever since your mother and I divorced, you have always chosen your mother but never the other way around. Even when you had gotten older and I tried to stay close, you have always pushed me away.

ROSE

I was a child. What I was supposed to do. And the reason why I pushed you away is because right after the divorce, you left with a whole new wife and a new baby. You could've at least given me an invite to the wedding.

MANUEL

It was just easier that way, not telling you.

*ROSE pauses, taken aback from what MANUEL has just said.*

ROSE

What do you mean by easier?

MANUEL

With your mother angry at me and her ending up crazy, she wouldn't want you around me. I had no one after the divorce, and Marian was the only person who supported me during that dark time. And then Emma came. It just made sense to marry her.

ROSE

Oh, okay. So, instead of being there for your own daughter who was struggling, you left with a random woman to have a baby with her. Wow, your logic does not make any sense.

MANUEL

Why do you hate Marian so much? What has she ever done to you that makes you despise her so much?

ROSE

I don't hate her, I tolerate her. She doesn't even try to get to know me, and whenever we are around each other, it's just awkward. I'm sorry that I don't care about someone who does not care about me.



MANUEL

Maybe if you did not look down on everyone who has entered your life, then maybe people would want to actually get to know you.

*ROSE looks at him perplexed, confused about his switch up.*

ROSE

Why do you keep attacking me? You say these things about me, thinking that I need to be fixed, but dude, you're the one who needs to be fixed.

MANUEL

Please, you're a joke-

*Anger starts to consume ROSE. Knowing the next thing that she says will be worse than the last.*

ROSE (Yelling)

Your whole life is a joke! Just stop with this! With you thinking that your life is perfect and I'm the one that is messing it up! When in reality, it's you, it's always been you! But you are too scared to admit it! I hate you for it. I have always hated you!

*MANUEL stares at ROSE in silence, in complete shock. ROSE fixes herself. Moving her hair around and smoothing down the wrinkles on her shirt with her hands, trying not to look like a mess.*

ROSE

I'm sorry about this. I-I should have never asked you to come. I think that it's best if you just leave.

MANUEL

Yeah, I think it's best that I leave..

*MANUEL exits through the entrance, closing the door shut. ROSE sits down in silence, trying to stay calm. She starts to break down, throwing whatever is on the table onto the ground or the wall. She stops, realizing that she has to clean up.*

ROSE  
(sigh)

CUT TO:

INTERIOR/MORNING/ROSE'S APARTMENT

*ROSE sits at the dinner table, reflecting on what happened yesterday, still upset about the outcome of the dinner. She gets a call from MANUEL. She is hesitant to pick the phone up, but she picks it up anyway. When she picks up her tone is annoyed, upset to be talking to MANUEL.*

ROSE (into phone)  
What do you want?

*MANUEL talks calmly, compared to how he acted the day before. Sounding like what happened during the dinner never even happened.*

MANUEL  
Hi Rose, how are you doing?

*There is a pause between the both of them. ROSE is not in the mood to deal with him. She stands up, pacing around the room anxiously.*

ROSE  
Why did you call? Is it about what happened yesterday?

MANUEL

I just wanted to see if I could grab coffee with you. Sort things out between us, if that's fine with you?

ROSE

Really? Sort things out with you? Did your wife put you up to this, or is this a decision that you made?

MANUEL

No one put me up to this, don't worry. I just want to apologize in person for what happened yesterday.

*ROSE is surprised by this. She leans against a wall, not anxious but intrigued by what MANUEL is going to say to her.*

ROSE

Okay, fine. I will meet up with you.

MANUEL

Would twelve be a good time to see you?

ROSE

Twelve is good.

MANUEL

See you then, bye.

ROSE

Bye.

*ROSE hangs up the phone. She has this tense feeling that it will probably not end well. Using her fingers to move her hair back to calm herself down.*

ROSE

What did I put myself into. *(Groan)*

CUT TO:

INTERIOR/MIDDAY/CAFE

*ROSE walks into the cafe and sees MANUEL sitting down. She regrets coming and tries to walk away, but MANUEL notices ROSE and stands up to greet her.*

MANUEL

Rose, it's nice to see you again.

ROSE

Hi.

*ROSE and MANUEL both stare at each other awkwardly. MANUEL tries to hug ROSE, but ROSE quickly sits down. MANUEL sits and stares at ROSE calmly with a smile on his face. ROSE fidgets with her hair nervously, avoiding making eye contact with MANUEL, not knowing what to say.*

MANUEL

So, how are you?

ROSE

I'm doing good. How about you?

MANUEL

Everything is going well, nothing to complain about here.

*MANUEL gives a nervous laugh. They both sit in silence until a waiter shows up, saving the awkward interaction.*

WAITER

Hello, I am Bella, your waiter for today. What could I get you two?

MANUEL

Hi, I would just like a hot coffee, black with no sugar.

ROSE

Uh, just an iced coffee.

WAITER

I will get those orders for you two in no time.

ROSE

Thank you.

MANUEL

Thank you.

*MANUEL and ROSE glance at each other, realizing that they said the same thing at the same time, then sit in silence while they wait to see that the WAITER is completely gone to finally break the silence.*

MANUEL

I just wanted to see you to say sorry for what happened yesterday.

*ROSE stops fidgeting with her hair and looks straight at MANUEL, giving him a look of annoyance.*

ROSE

Is that it?



MANUEL

No...no. I know how I acted towards you was distasteful, and I should have listened to you and talked it out with you instead of ignoring how you felt.

ROSE

Well, it might take time for me to accept that apology.

MANUEL

You have every reason to be angry at me. I was the one who messed up, not you.  
You don't have to apologize to me now, I know.

ROSE

Why are you apologizing now, though? After all this time? After all of the fighting, why now?

MANUEL

After the dinner, I realized that all these years I have been projecting my anger about the divorce and your mother towards you. You don't deserve that. You have been put into the middle of my mess without even knowing. And that is something I can never take back.

*ROSE starts to get irritated at MANUEL, unable to hold in how upset she is towards him.*

ROSE

You left Mom and me alone. Mom had to work two jobs to raise me, sacrificing time with me to make sure that I survived. You barely showed up to any of my events and would use every excuse that there is just to not show up. When we- when I needed you the most, you were never there. But out of nowhere, you finally have time for your other daughter? Always bragging about how amazing she is doing in school and how good she is at sports. But I've never heard you say any of those things about me. Why's that? How do you now realize that you are a terrible father when you had the last twenty-four years to realize that?

*ROSE starts to tear up. She is in pain and can't hide it anymore. She tries to hold back tears, but then a tear slips out.*

ROSE

I need to use the bathroom.

*ROSE quickly goes up to the bathroom, ducking her head down while she walks away. MANUEL looks around, realizing what he has done has ruined his relationship with Rose. The feeling of guilt consumes him. The WAITER shows up, snapping MANUEL out of that feeling.*

WAITER

Here is your coffee, black, and the iced coffee for your daughter.

MANUEL

Thank you.

*The waiter leaves. MANUEL sits in silence, staring down and fidgeting with his hands. ROSE comes back and sits down in a calmer attitude, not nervous, not angry. The tears in her eyes are gone. ROSE takes a long drink from the iced coffee, then puts it back on the table.*

ROSE

*(sigh)* Okay. I was thinking that we should go for a walk.

MANUEL

Sure.

*MANUEL looks up at her with a look of worry. Rose looks back at him and gives him a quick smile to reassure him that she is okay and that there is nothing to worry about. MANUEL and ROSE leave the cafe.*

CUT TO:

OUTERIOR/MIDDAY/CITY

*They are now walking on the city sidewalk, looking around at the scenery. MANUEL and ROSE are not upset anymore; they are finally happy whenever they are around each other.*

*ROSE feels more comfortable talking to MANUEL, ROSE knows this won't end up with them fighting.*

ROSE

So, I was thinking that it isn't fair to stay being mad at you for the rest of my life. You are showing that you want to try to become a better person, and I shouldn't shut you out.

MANUEL

I care about you, and I hope you know that. Even though in the past, I have shown actions that made you think that I don't. I do care, I really do.

ROSE

I care about you also. And I don't hate you. I know I said that yesterday, I was just angry at you. But I'm a brand new person compared to the person I was twenty-four hours ago.

MANUEL

Well, that's good to know. I guess we both changed, haven't we?

ROSE

I guess we have.

*An ice cream truck drives past them, making Rose stare at it while it passes.*

MANUEL

I remember when you were little, you would go crazy every time you saw the ice cream truck. I had to hold onto you so you wouldn't run away and chase after it.

ROSE

What? I don't remember doing that.

MANUEL

One time, you escaped from my arms and me, and your mother had to run five blocks just to get you.

ROSE

Hahaha. Wow, I was a bad kid, wasn't I?

MANUEL

No, you weren't. Me and your mother were so young when we had you. We didn't even have a clue if we were doing the whole parenting thing right, but I think we did a great job.

*MANUEL gives ROSE a smile. ROSE smiles at him back then looks away with a mischievous look, thinking about an idea that she has.*

MANUEL

What are you thinking about?

ROSE

I have an idea that you should have dinner one day with me and Mom.

MANUEL

What! No, maybe later on with your mother, but not now.

ROSE

Come on, it will be like old times.

*MANUEL shakes his head in disagreement. ROSE looks at MANUEL in defeat.*

ROSE

Fine then. We can just have dinner with each other if that's the better option. Or I can even sit down and have dinner with Marian and Emma. Finally, try to get to know them better.

MANUEL

Really? Would you do that?

ROSE

Yeah, why not? I don't dislike them even though that's what you think.

MANEUL

I never thought you disliked them. I knew it would be awkward for you. But I think that it would be good for us if you came around sometimes. Marian wants to get to know you better also, and Emma wants to hang out with her older sister all the time.

ROSE

They actually like me?

MANUEL

Yeah, why wouldn't they? You're a good person, that's why.

*ROSE smiles shyly, looking away.*



CUT TO:

OUTERIOR/NIGHT/ROSES APARTMENT BUILDING

*ROSE and MANUEL walk for a while, admiring the scenery, until they walk up to ROSE'S apartment.*

MANUEL

We should do this more.

ROSE

Do what?

MANUEL

Hang out. Getting to know each other instead of fighting.

ROSE

Yeah, today was nice. I'm glad I finally got to talk to you and sort things out.

MANUEL

Me too. It was long overdue.

ROSE

Well, it was nice meeting up with you.

MANUEL

It was nice meeting up with you, too.

*MANEUL goes in for a hug. ROSE does not resist and hugs him back. They give each other a long, warm hug. MANUEL starts to hug her tightly, squeezing her while lifting her. while ROSE finally tries to escape from his arms.*

ROSE

Okay, okay, you can let go of me. I can't breathe.

MANEUL opens his arms and lets ROSE loose. They both give out a laugh, then try to calm themselves down.

ROSE

Bye, see you soon.

MANUEL

Bye, have a good night. Love you.

ROSE

Love you too, Dad.

*MANUEL watches as ROSE walks away, waving goodbye with a smile on her face. We see MANUEL smiling as he stands looking at her while waving goodbye back to ROSE. And sees her walk into her building.*

CUT.

# The Labyrinth Team

Catherine Park - Managing Editor

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Catherine Park (she/her) is a Literature student at Bergen Community College in her second and final year. On campus, she is a peer tutor in the CLAC Writing Center, as well as Co-President of the Honors Association and a founding member of the BCC Literature Club. She plans on attending Bowdoin College in the fall as an English major with a minor in Government and Legal Studies. In her free time, she likes to journal, go cafe hopping, and add new books to her ever-growing "Want To Read" list on Goodreads.

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Hosna Kachooee - Layout Editor & Technical Designer

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A computer science major at BCC, Hosna (she/her) is passionate about providing technological solutions in different clubs on campus. She's the Editor-in-Chief of the Torch and Publicist to the JKW Honors Association. When she isn't staring at screens, gardening and knitting ambitious outfits keeps her busy.

# The Labyrinth Team

Rocco Alesso – Content Editor

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Rocco Alessio (he/his), a second-year student at Bergen Community College majoring in General Liberal Arts, has been actively involved in campus activities. He has worked as a Peer Tutor and Academic Coach in the Cerullo Learning Assistance Center. In addition to his duties within the Writing Center at Bergen, he is a Shift Supervisor for the Starbucks Coffee Company. Rocco is also a compensated stand-up comedian who has performed across the New York metropolitan area.

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Francesco Maneri – Content Editor

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Francesco Maneri (he/his) is a student of Psychology at Bergen Community College, graduating Spring 2025. He has served as the Co-President of the Judith K. Winn School of Honors, a peer tutor and academic coach in the CLAC Writing Center, and has conducted research with the Psychology Club. Off campus, he works as a cheesemonger, loves long walks, and is obsessed with caramel as of late. His aspirations include clinical practice and research.

# The Labyrinth Team

Dr. John Findura - Faculty

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Dr. John Findura (he/his) is the author of the poetry collections *Submerged* and *Useful Shrapnel*. He holds an MFA in Poetry from The New School and an Ed.D in Educational Technology from NJCU. His poetry, criticism, and essays have been published in numerous national and international literary journals. Since 2009 he has been the Writing Center Supervisor at Bergen's national award winning Cerullo Learning Assistance Center. Currently, he is patiently awaiting the full disclosure of the fact that aliens exist and have been visiting Earth for thousands of years.

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Kelli Hayes - Faculty

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Kelli Hayes (she/her) received her M.A. in Writing Studies from Kean University in 2019 and her M.S.L.I.S. from the Pratt Institute in 2021. While studying at Kean, she also completed a minor in Fine Arts with a concentration in Metalworks & Jewelry Making. Her work focused on the construction and deconstruction of identity, exploring how the material and digital worlds bleed into one another — themes incorporated into her thesis project *Degenerate's Gallery: Exploring Self-Representation & Aesthetic Presentation in New Digital Media As a Resurgence of Dada Idealism*. She has worked at Bergen Community College since 2018. Currently, she is the Academic Coaching Supervisor at the Cerullo Learning Assistance Center where she supports students in creating and pursuing futures for themselves.



# Spring 2025 Category Judges

Dr. Caroline Kelley - Fiction

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Caroline Kelley holds a Master of Fine Arts in Fiction from Columbia University and a Doctorate of Philosophy in Philosophy, Art and Critical Thinking from The European Graduate School, where she published *Amor Fati: Eternal Procession in Emerson and Nietzsche*, a work that traces Friedrich Nietzsche's reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays surrounding their philosophy of creative fatalism. She has been an Assistant Professor at Bergen since 2014.

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Cass Guinto (Alum Judge) - Creative Non-Fiction

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Cass Guinto (they/she) is a 2022 alum of Bergen Community College where they worked as a writing tutor for 3 years, co-founded Active Minds at BCC, and joined the Phi Theta Kappa Chapter Member Hall of Honor. They're currently a senior at Rutgers University–Newark studying English and Creative Writing, as well as an incoming Master's student at the CUNY Newmark Graduate School of Journalism. Off campus, Cass performs spoken word and covers arts, culture, and entertainment news for *EnVi Media* and *Unclear Magazine*.

# Spring 2025 Category Judges

Anna Guzon - Poetry

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Anna Ojascastro Guzon (she/her) is a writer, mother, teacher, former physician, and co-founder and director of YourWords STL, an arts and education nonprofit. She received an MD from the University of Missouri - Kansas City School of Medicine and an MFA from The New School Graduate Writing Program. Her writing is published or forthcoming in McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Best American Poetry Blog, Bone Bouquet, The Boiler Journal, and Bellingham Review among other publications. Her full-length book of poetry, *Specimen*, will be published by Finishing Line Press in 2026.

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Dr. Sarah Markgraf - Photography

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Sarah Markgraf earned her B.A. in English from Amherst College in Massachusetts. She then earned her M.A.; M.Phil; and Ph.D. In English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University in New York City. She has been teaching at Bergen Community College for 31 years.

# Spring 2025 Category Judges

## Lauren Moran Mills - One-Act Play

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Lauren Moran (she/her) is an entrepreneur, influencer and content creator who has an over 25 year career in theatre and show business. She runs a small theatre company LoMotion Live, where she nurtures and produces new works, while raising money for charities and organizations. She ran for office twice in the town of Boonton and now amplifies small local businesses in Boonton and beyond. An advocate for the special needs community and veterans, Lauren uses her theatre to not only entertain but educate and include people from all walks of life and teaches the philosophy “Let no one tell you who you are.” Lauren is fearless and unabashed, and as a voice of the people, Lauren will continue to speak, advocate and show up for those who can’t, while educating citizens in the power of their voice and actions. Together we build a strong community online and off.

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## Ariel Harari - Visual Arts

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Ariel Harari is a Book Cover Designer at the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group imprint of Penguin Random House. She earned her BFA in Graphic Design at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. Through her work, Ariel seeks to honor her love of books and design by capturing the essence of each manuscript that lands on her desk, making use of various mediums in the process. Outside of work, she is currently reading *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh and is hyper fixated on iced maple lattes.



Thank you to all the participants and congratulations to all our winners.

The Labyrinth contest is held each year and all are welcome to compete. For more information, please visit our website.

[www.bergen.edu/labyrinth/](http://www.bergen.edu/labyrinth/)