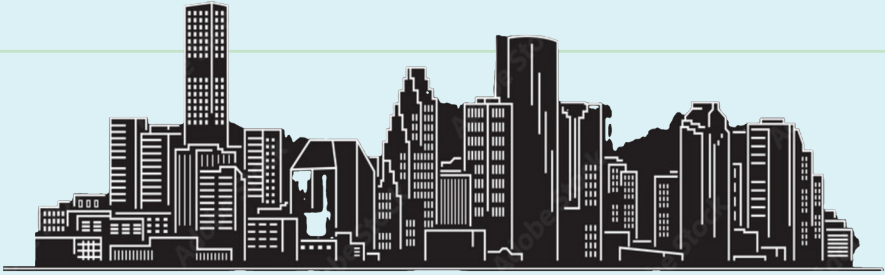




THE BAYOU REVIEW



SPRING 2024



THE BAYOU REVIEW
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IN ORBIT

LIZETH DE LA LUZ

Birth — you carried an orbit
Found a way to feel history
Saw all of its unknowns and limits
passionate shells and innovations
Through internal embraces
Through tumbling asteroids
planets meeting new bodies
 Experiencing the love of ordinary moons
 no longer to be bound by
 The underbelly of solitary afternoons

BRIEF MEADOWS OF OCEAN

LIZETH DE LA LUZ

Sunrises eclipsed

rolled in crescent dough // laughter

spilling on stories I could drown in

catching wonders

I live to re-live this moment

In tea, coffee, and blueberry muffins

To remain suspended in the conversations

Echoing in your constellations

To remain a reflection in crystallized

Laughter

To unfold again in this multiverse

Where we could exist

Together

Where we could laugh in the same room

Across each other

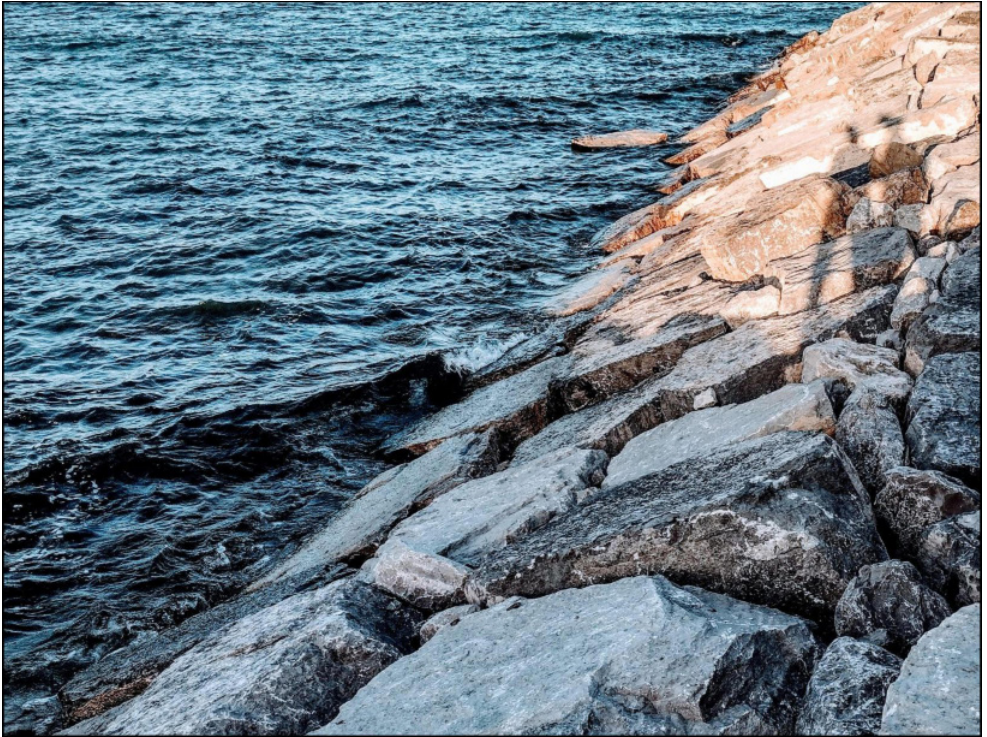
with similar patterned socks and pajamas – a holiday venture

one that we would remember //

& yet,

I'll wait for moments like these

Where words don't melt at the touch of air



ROCK, PAPER, MOON
CARELLA KEIL

THE GARDEN GNOME

LAVERN SPENCER MCCARTHY

In my back yard there lives a garden gnome.
I bought him from a wizard long ago.
I put him there in his forever home
to guard the grass and watch the pansies grow.
But he does more to earn his keep. His trace
of magic keeps unfriendly winds at bay.
Pink roses sprinkle petals on his face.
Petunias love him in a tender way.

His kingdom thrives. I only wish I knew
how he can make a weeping willow sing
or form tiaras from the morning dew
to crown the heads of tulips in the spring.

If not for him those daisies by the wall
would scarcely have the will to bloom at all.



CURIOUS ENCOUNTER
JESS SWENSON

IN SEARCH OF APRIL

LAVERN SPENCER MCCARTHEY

I have grown tired of winter's sullen gray--
those howling winds that never seem to care.
I need a touch of April in my day.

A robin, rapt in cheerful roundelay,
would lift my sodden spirit from despair.
I have grown tired of winter's sullen gray.

The sun peeks through the clouds, but does not stay.
There lies a threat of snow upon the air.
I need a touch of April in my day.

I long for meadow flowers in a spray,
an antidote to season's frosty snare.
I have grown tired of winter's sullen gray.

Give me a morning bright with joy, I pray,
with busy springtime racing here and there.
I need a touch of April in my day,

or else I think that I shall run away
to continents less glacial and bare.
I have grown tired of winter's sullen gray.
I need a touch of April in my day.

LAST NIGHT I PRAYED FOR PEACE

JERIC TINDOY OLAY

Last night, I prayed for peace. But my prayer, I suspect, seems inconceivably large. As I woke up, I paced for the window. From where I stood, everything was christened with wonted quiet. I looked at the bougainvillea that grew on the casserole. Its half-bloomed flowers seemed to have adored the sun's beginning breath. I was beguiled by their unbridled passion to bloom in this rather rowdy world. From my window, I could hear birdsong. I could hear the almost coherent sound that originates from the brook. I could hear the morning's curated sounds. Last night, I prayed for peace.

ACCIDENTAL PHOTOGRAPHER

MICHAEL OWENS

They were struggling to take a selfie
I was walking to class unencumbered
so volunteered, I became their wedding photographer

Today was a reconfirmation of the formal
ceremony some five years ago. They gathered
here every year to reenact the important event

Their one request was for a photo with and without
the the two year old toddler clinging to their
legs so I held the child and took a photo

I lived close by at the time and this small
spot on the sidewalk under a spreading oak
was comfortable to me and special to them

The next year my presence was part plan
part accident as I suspected they came
every year on this one day to take a photo

Happenstance brought me back the next year
as I had moved away and they had a second
child that needed to be held

Today marks twenty five for them and the photo
has the first grandchild among the collection
that gathers around the tree

Fortunately they have never taken a photo
of me, I just arrive at 10 am and they are waiting

I have long forgotten their names and they mine.
But we are best friends ten minutes every year.

MORNING WALK

MICHAEL OWENS

Our lives are wrapped in tissue paper dreams
things will get better and we can escape
this hold created by a web of other people's
decisions about how things should be.

With morning I walk my city block then turn up
a road until I reach an unpaved lane I did not know
leading past a barn of cows crowded
to give their milk and get their feed.

Some force leads me on, past a farm tractor
long broken down, rusting in an unplanted
field filled with cattle munching grass, oblivious
to the traumatic world I left in the city.

I wonder what I can do to satisfy my wanderlust
I accept a ride from a passing truck
A day later I am at a train station
in another State buying a ticket.

Four days later I am residing in another nation
speaking a foreign tongue. Returning was
a passing thought. I quickly learned their foreign
tongue and began life as a local in that town.

Three years passed and I have a new life
with another and her children to halter me
when the police appear, return me
to the family I left those many years ago.

Back home nothing has changed
political turmoil among nations and parties
is like the struggle between man and wife
after a week I went again on a morning walk.

THE CRAFT

TERRY JUDE MILLER

“the virus is an ancient story” – Kevin Prufer

the need to be loved is a Trojan horse
we may suspect an evil agent rests
in the beast’s wooden chest—we pull
the offering to the goddess of war and wisdom
within us inside anyway—hoping we’re wrong
or lucky

loneliness is an unforgiving hunger
it won’t sate with sex alone—will
imitate through hand gestures to market
love with the efficiency of shopping
for socks—you buy and buy and either
discard or return until you fall prey
to truth hidden in your intentions
like a cunning Odysseus

hear the industrious Greeks
working on the nearby island
the singing of hammers and saws
carried on the evening breeze
busy carpentering wooden horse
after wooden horse that will
squeak forward at dawn to wait outside
places once thought impregnable

ALONE IN DECEMBER

TERRY JUDE MILLER

*“In this kind of stillness, you should be able to
find out
exactly what you feel,
if you feel anything.”* – from *Autumn* by Tony Hoagland

The college hires me to watch the vacant dormitory
during Christmas break—empty halls are full of echoes.

The lilac tree between the back door and parking lot
holds on to a few stolid leaves that shiver
in December’s icy breath—for a time or two I swear
the tree asks something I cannot answer.

This month is a strong contender for the deadliest
time of year. The windows in my room weep.
I drag a finger across their tears, what I write
dissipates in vapor.

Music on the radio is bright and suddenly solemn—
changes without reason. The sun sets
and the nearly naked tree throws a shadow
on the windows—a nostalgic and foreboding ghost.

I lie alone in my bed and dream
the tree grows tired of unanswered questions,
has fallen—its roots exposed to the wind
that brought it down.

ODE TO RASPBERRIES

ELIZA A. GARZA

Hollow cups that flatten on my tongue,
oh how I love the soft squish, delicate pillows
that disappear into the squeak of seeds
between my teeth, red smear
the only sign that you were there.

I could eat you by the handful,
savor a dozen of you at once,
push your sharp sweetness to a full moment.
I would keep your tang until next summer,
hold you until my very breath is raspberry.

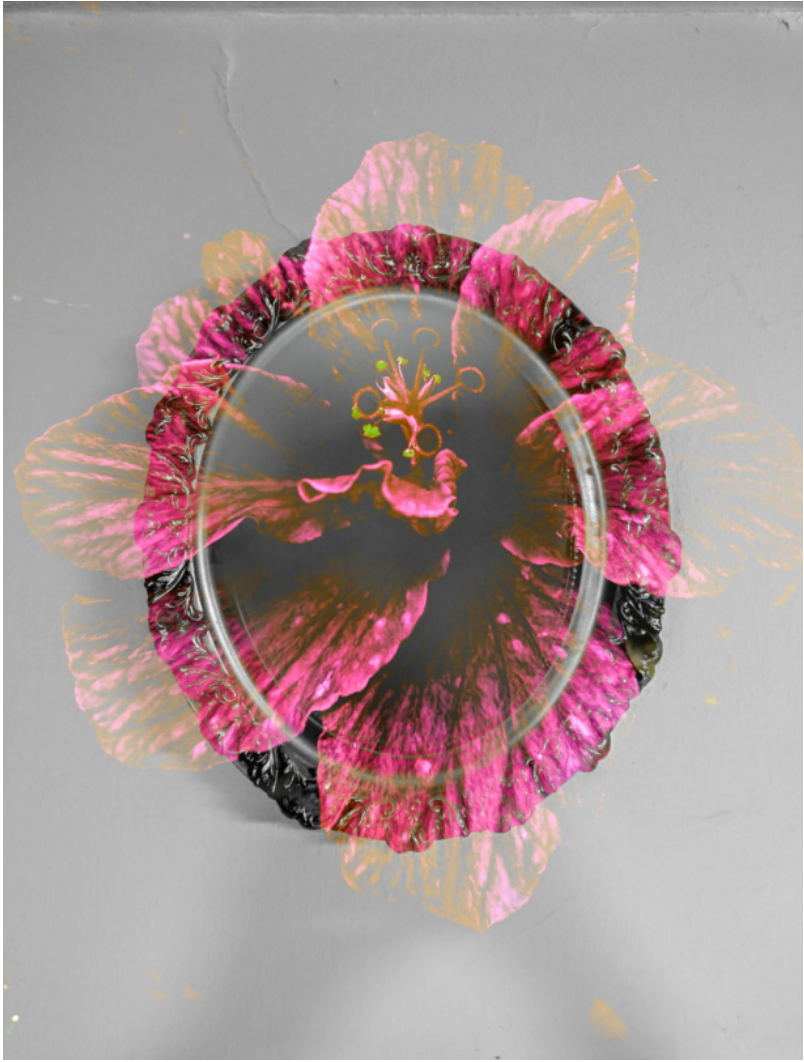
In my dreams, you are the only fruit.

I WON'T, I WILL

ELIZA A. GARZA

I will never row a scull for exercise, fun, or sport.
I will never breathe the thin cool air above Machu Pichu.
I will never again dance and sing along at a music concert.
I will never hunt with my crossbow, just practice in the yard.
I will never witness the solstice sun rising over Stonehenge.
I will never again lead a classroom.
I will never read all the books.
I will never feel how much climate changes affect daily life.
I will never speak more than two languages.
I won't want to know that cancer has won, but I will.

I will greet my daughters' future life events through letters.
I will haunt the nightmares of chemical dumpers, air polluters,
ocean trashers.
I will hug my miscarried children, at least one day for every year
apart.
I will meet ancestors whose names I do not know, but whose dreams
I lived.



BARBIE
CARELLA KEIL

IN MEMORIAM

SANJEEV SETHI

You, in my mind's eye,
are suggestive of myriad
symphonies which oil
vacant hours when
your imprint fails
to fructify the staves.

In storehouse of
emotional scree
there is reserve
for a prandial of poetic lines.
Leitmotif helps in
sharpening the creative rig.

ENTREATIES

SANJEEV SETHI

In the kindness of intent
which I reach
and revere
I beseech you to let me
be myself.

I implore you to remove
trances of
sanguivorous tenor in me.
Please amp up
my apanthropy index.

Let my echo
not be contaminated
by the chime of another.
Let me sing
despite a sore throat.

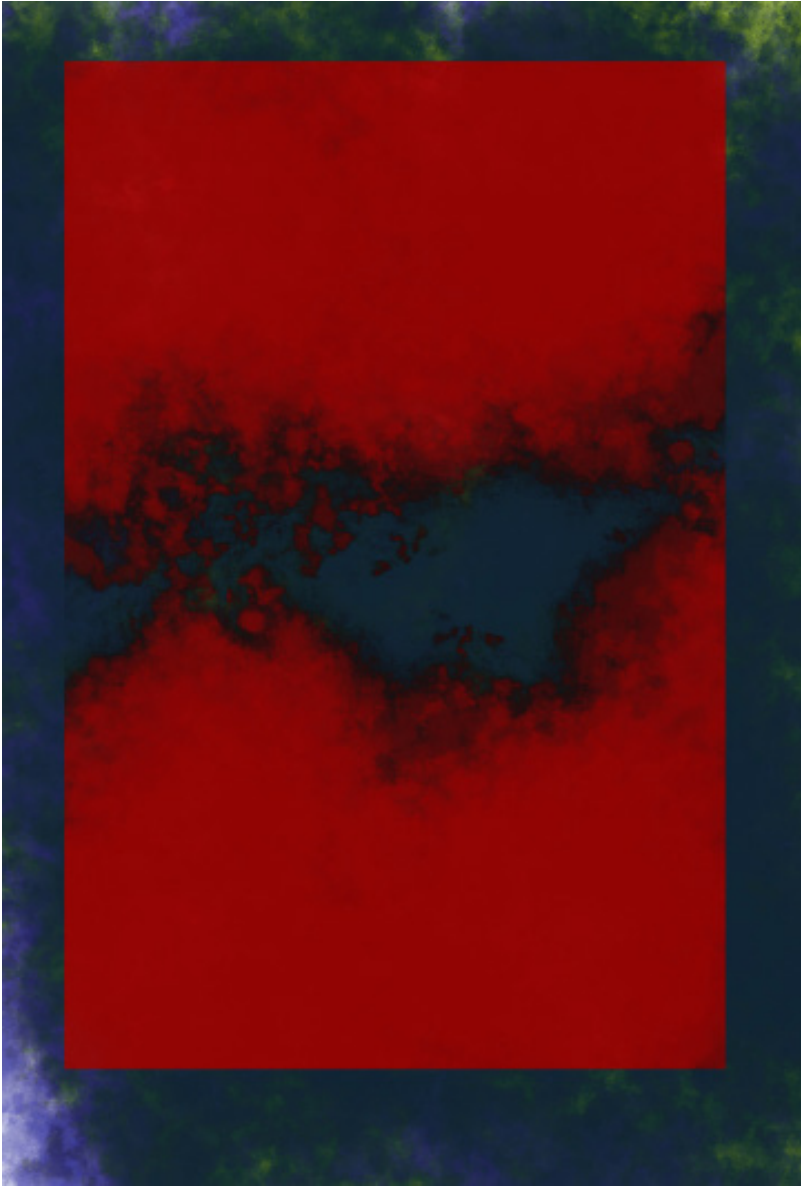
RECORD

SANJEEV SETHI

No lingering eye
intoning
a lyric
on the left thigh.

Just the gruffness
of greed
filling in on
an impromptu session.

Oracy skills apart,
an emotional somersault lends
itself to a silence
that speaks years later in staves.



**THE CRUELTY OF
INDIFFERENCE**
EDWARD LEE

PROPS IN YOUR PLAY

JENNIFER NAVA

as I lay on your fresh linen stage
i glimpse the bowl of oranges on your nightstand
so ripe, so vibrant, so beautifully placed
they are all I focus on with precise intent
as you conquer and ravage, exacting what you truly want;

your darkest fantasy on display
black tides swarm over your blue eyes
the same eyes I clearly misread
your nefarious smile hidden behind
those long platinum tresses

i guess you saw it too
my dark pupils encompassing my irises
Tears streaming down my soft cheeks
you sought out your opportunity to join in
wrapping me in your arms completely
comforting me—all the pretty lies within
demanding a pretty piece in return
i wanted to cry stop, no, please, but alas
your oranges, your bowl of oranges kept me still
Yes Jen, right there, almost there...

how I longed to be in that bowl
rather than a prop in your play
Yet similarly so, i too was carefully selected and placed
To be devoured and admired
I was not meant for a starring role.

MY NAME

JENNIFER NAVA

by definition i am a great fair lady
one who Arthur tainted with care
as heroines and princess to be
embarking on everlasting royalty

spellings that breed complexities
wit sharp as a man's quick to violence
beauty only few would acknowledge
lovely even in rain pouring thunderstorms
exquisite varying like St. Michael's mount

im only a variation of a white wave
always pulled by the moon to the shore
so that she can meet my tearful gaze
the dark, damned, disastrous tides
come at the strike of midnight

i am not gracious despite the origins
i came about from secondhand prints
beaten and torn from previous misuse
hands searching for an essence of majesty
to pass down as a sort of patrimony

that volume can be recognized across waters
meaning overshadowed by commonality
rolling off the tongues of my ancestors
seas burying all of my predecessors

now exhausting my overdone epithet
i bat my eyelashes to create wind
swiftly linking each letter with ease
in hopes for my title to be consecrated

FRUITS WON'T ALWAYS STAY SWEET

JENNIFER NAVA

when i was really young
i swallowed a big bowl of wisdom

it tasted bitter like stale bread
chewing created crumbles of hard truths
i tried to wash it down instead
but it was sour like dark red wine
and it made a bloody seeping mess
down my body, down my pretty dress
and the stains won't wash off
no matter how many times i shake off
the excess knowledge
i choke and tremble, trying to get rid
the harsh smell imploring me to strip
but the wine is penetrated to my skin
no matter how much i hesitate
the smell will linger continuously
even after my cells regenerate
but now i can leave light tracings
of once sweet now fermented scent
but only amounted adequately

ODE TO THE UNPRONOUNCE- ABLE

SOPHIA EMILLIE

in honor of the impossible ng and mga –
of the double-vowel that demands its own sound;
to the unconquerable mahal that reminds me,
love sometimes comes with a price.

honor to the most shy Taglish;
to forgetting and remembering;
to the borrowed, revised, and coded;
to the words no history book will ever remember;
to our beloved kababayan, each their own history book
and fearless as the [capital m] Morning.

honor to the unpronounceable solitude of
belonging to too many places;
honor to ingat, to talinghaga and pangako
to the ancestral currents that carry our words in sugarcane baskets,
cross the oceans of teeth and tongues and eyes that never sleep,
and the fear of falling behind or being the brunt of all their jokes;
to the English first, Tagalog anywhere else but here;
to what is this broken dialect.
ode to being enough, no matter
how many words we know in any language.

honor to the only living hands left to remember
that we – yes, we –
once belonged to ourselves;
to tahanan and nahanap and
to never too late to come back home;
to all the ways we've learned to speak,
to all the ways we've learned to hide behind our words,

all the honor and glory to this, our wika.
our permanence. our enough.
ours.

LUPA NG ARAW

SOPHIA EMILLIE

I imagine home had brown hair like mine, with dark eyes
and soft hands but a fire in her belly.
 otherwise, I would not be here.
she must have beamed like guiding light –
 so bright and blinding – the way he broke in like the
 Word of God and
held her beneath the surface of her own waters,
 until home finally stopped fighting.
come to me, he must have told her, that you may be bap-
tized
 in the name of our Lord and Savior. . .
wrestled her open upon the altar and called this a blessing.
 until, of course, his *blessing* became her *burnt offer-*
 ing,
 and *burnt offering* became *bastard*.

this is what conquest did to our *angkan*:
 snuffed out the sunlight of our ancestor and made
bastards of us all.
how do we give thanks to a mother whose name
 we do not know?
how do we tell her story when
 the only part of her that survives
is the scar of seven generations of descendants
 crystalized around everything she lost,
tossed to the ocean floor like pearls before swine
 and a heart that was neither saved nor left behind,
only remembered in the glinting light of its broken pieces?

beloved home, know that you have not been forgotten,

that difficult, too, was our own baptism, but your
bloodline survives.
I pray that every strand of this dark hair
becomes the thread that weaves me into your past
life;
dark eyes, the pearls that our grandfather could not
bless into oblivion.

our grandmother, who I can only imagine had
hands as soft as the ocean breeze and a fire in her
belly
so bright, it gave us the only guiding light we will ever need
again.
and maybe someday we will find her name,
but until then – blessed be the name of *all* our ancestors,

the light that leads us home to our beloved *lupa ng
araw*.

THE FAMILY OF GOD

SOPHIA EMILLIE

Call who am I that you would call me *daughter*?
from the orphanage door, we were no one's
chosen people.
though descendants of vagabonds and whores,
still the Son of God descended down into hell
for you and me.

Response oh God, be with us.

Call and so, here we are, joint heirs with Jesus.
a freedom so sweet, we forgot the bitter taste of
blood in our mouths,
washed away all memory of the wasteland we
once called home,
cleansed of any care to those decimated by
genocide and disease and hunger.

Response oh God, be with us.

Call as if we aren't also begging for shelter from our
own destitution;
as if the bullets can't reach us on this side of the
river;
as if we, too, haven't been pounding on the
gates of Eden lest the fire eats us alive –

Response oh God, be with us.

Call – as if the corpses our brothers and sisters lay
to rest day after day, ashen and bloody, are not

our own flesh and bone and the children
counted among the dead could not be our
own
sons and daughters.

Response oh God, be with us.

Call atoms to atoms,
stardust to stardust,
we rise and fall together.
yet here, at the bottom of this diamond
basket,
the children of God are suffocating,
and still, I feel his gaze on me,
his breath in the trees and down my back,
he asks,
*what are these weapons
you have forged against me?*

Response oh God, be with us.

Call and I have no words that could possibly
answer him,
no justification thick enough to pull over my
eyes
and veil myself from this hellfire.
because here, in this song of songs,
the children of God are dying under the
rubble,
crying for our Father to be with us.

Response oh God, be with us.

oh God, be with us.



DUST TO DUST (SHUZAN'S SHORT STAFF)
SEAN C.C. ROBERTS

MARTYR

JONATHAN FLETCHER

Underneath royal robes,
Sir Thomas More
wore a cilice
made of goat's hair.

Stripped of his office,
locked in the Tower
of London,
he awaited his execution
by Henry VIII.

I, too, have been close
to death. I, too,
have suffered beneath
a splendid exterior.
Neither brought
me close to God.

If I could change
my head, all the things
wrong inside, I would,
I would. By losing
his own, More gained heaven.
Or so he believed.

Bless you, martyr.
I'd rather live.

PIANIST

JONATHAN FLETCHER

for Joshua Francis Monahan

They call it perfect
pitch, the way
your small fingers
find the keys
for a song you've heard
only once.

I've never had that.

Instead of notes,
I have the page.
I have words.
I have enjambment,
anaphora,
consonance, etc.

Let's you and I write
a song. Give me
notes. I'll give you
letters. I'll give you
word after word,

page after page,
none of which you need
in order to play

VULTURE

JONATHAN FLETCHER

I'm not that different
from them—the way I perch
to look at dead things.

When all that's left
is bones, what is there
to do but watch?

News is easy to consume.

Though I gorge,
I'm clean. Bodies are
not my problem.

Or so I reason while circling.



LIBERTY
ALAN SANCHEZ

CHANGE

SEAN C.C. ROBERTS

Do you think things will get better?
he asked me, mopping sweat

from his brow
as we refilled the grave.

I remembered when we
traveled to the world's driest desert

- and it rained.
After we left,

erupted flowers.

STORIES WE TELL OUR DEAD

FARRAH FANG

Have you heard the one about the lambs who slaughtered
the shepherd?

All perros go to heaven, even the ones who kill Trans wom-
en?

As they bark and shovel into the fence that separates, do
you savor your life more and more?

Shootout at the graveyard with palms of corpses peeking
from the soil like tombstone florals!

Overkill at midnight; she's been dead for decades yet still
your pistol strikes worm-ridden bones!

Resurrection isn't the gift Catholicism paints into altars.
Death isn't heaven so much as an office.

If you drop them into the fountain, can the cut-up coins
claim abandonment?

Tell your body not to itch; it will send you sporadic.

I can no longer eat the carne of heifers.
No spine, it carries disease; butchers rip us healed out and
flaccid.

Blood is blood 'til you're injecting it with estrogen.
Blood is blood 'til your name tunnels from underground to
meet your ankles crying "Ayúdame!"

Love is several hooks in the gills and a casket is a fool's

promise.

They bury their bodies in scatters, in trash bins or acidified barrels or right in bayous.

To stagnate in your thirties, oh mija, that is a blessing!
What do they say about women with your fate?

ERASURE

COBY RIENDEAU

I've been in Gaza since Monday [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

makeshift shelters [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] digging for bricks to
be able to hold in place tents [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] human-made,
humanitarian disaster. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] in the
midst of utter chaos, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] confusion and fear, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Heavy bombardment [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] at [REDACTED]

[redacted] Night-time [redacted]
[redacted] over 100 civilians [redacted]
hostage [redacted] s [redacted]
[redacted] feel the same fear.

[redacted]
[redacted] men who were [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] being beaten, humiliated,
subjected to ill-treatment, [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

[redacted]
[redacted] Palestinians [redacted]
[redacted]
subject to ill-treatment, [redacted] no access to their families,
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] all those arrested
or detained [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] have the right to truth, justice, and reparations.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

These horrors must not become normalized.

AFTER THE BOOM

JESSICA SWENSON

The notebook lied on the desk,
coated in ashes.

A white pen with a blackened end still sat beside it.

A boy with flickering eyes stood in the doorway,
he stared at it.

And cried.

AN HONEST LIE

C.W. SANDMAN

The flash from the camera lit up the subjects in the foreground while darkening the rest of the room. I'm sitting with my old Peavy bass guitar with razor pickups and golden ash wood across my lap while awkwardly cradling a baby, my newborn cousin, in my skinny arms. My teenage body looks emaciated, and my simple black T-shirt hangs from my frame like a shroud. I'm sitting on a worn wooden chair from the kitchen because the only other furniture in my room is a broken futon, hulking among the dark shapes of dirty laundry and cluttered textbooks.

My eyes are barely visible, black pupils peering under the bill of a Pink Floyd baseball cap. I had avoided getting my picture taken for years through middle and high school, so this was one of only four that existed from then. I wasn't necessarily camera-shy or insecure about my looks. I'm not sure why I avoided pictures so fervently. Maybe it was because I wanted to leave, and I didn't want to leave behind any evidence for my family to grieve over. I didn't know that I wanted to kill myself at the time. Maybe I did subconsciously, but certainly not overtly. Hell, at the time, I didn't even know what depression was, much less that I'd been suffering from it for over a decade. Even in this picture, taken only a month before my failed attempt, I wasn't planning on killing myself.

But I can see it in my expression. Like I'm looking through the lens into the future. As if I'm asking the spectator what went wrong and why this was the only way out. When I look at the picture now, it's like looking at a ghost. When I

decided to kill myself that day in my junior year, I killed my childhood with it. Ever since, I've lived on borrowed time. It's time to grow up.

Dust covers our MARPAT desert cammies, sticking to the dark patches of sweat around our collars and armpits, creating a ring of grime that seems to belong there, that it's one with us. Our thick Kevlar vests with SAPI plates and pouches full of spare mags make us look bigger than we are. We look like men, until you look more closely.

Cather flashes a toothy grin and a peace sign while holding his SAW in his off-hand while I take a drag from a cigarette, my M16-A4 propped against the mudbrick wall behind us. We're both sitting against the wall, our helmets pushing against it, making our heads look too small for them, like bobbleheads. Our legs are stretched out in front of us, showing our dirty knees, small tears, and that dark blotch of dry blood on my right thigh from a bit of shrapnel. Even without the evidence of combat with our low blousings, loose sleeves, and cavalier demeanor, any infantryman worth his salt would recognize us as brothers.

But when I look at the photo now, all I can think of is how young Cather looks. He's just a kid. We all were. Our frontal cortexes are not even fully formed. How the fuck is something like that even allowed? When I look at this picture, I feel crazy. When I look at this picture, I feel furious. Most of all, when I look at this picture, I feel guilty.

If anybody should've died, It should've been me. I'd already tried to off myself, then lied about it so I could pass the psych eval at MEPS and join the Marines. I was ready to die, too. I'd come to terms with it. I told myself I wouldn't try to kill myself again actively, but I was certainly willing to put

myself in harm's way.

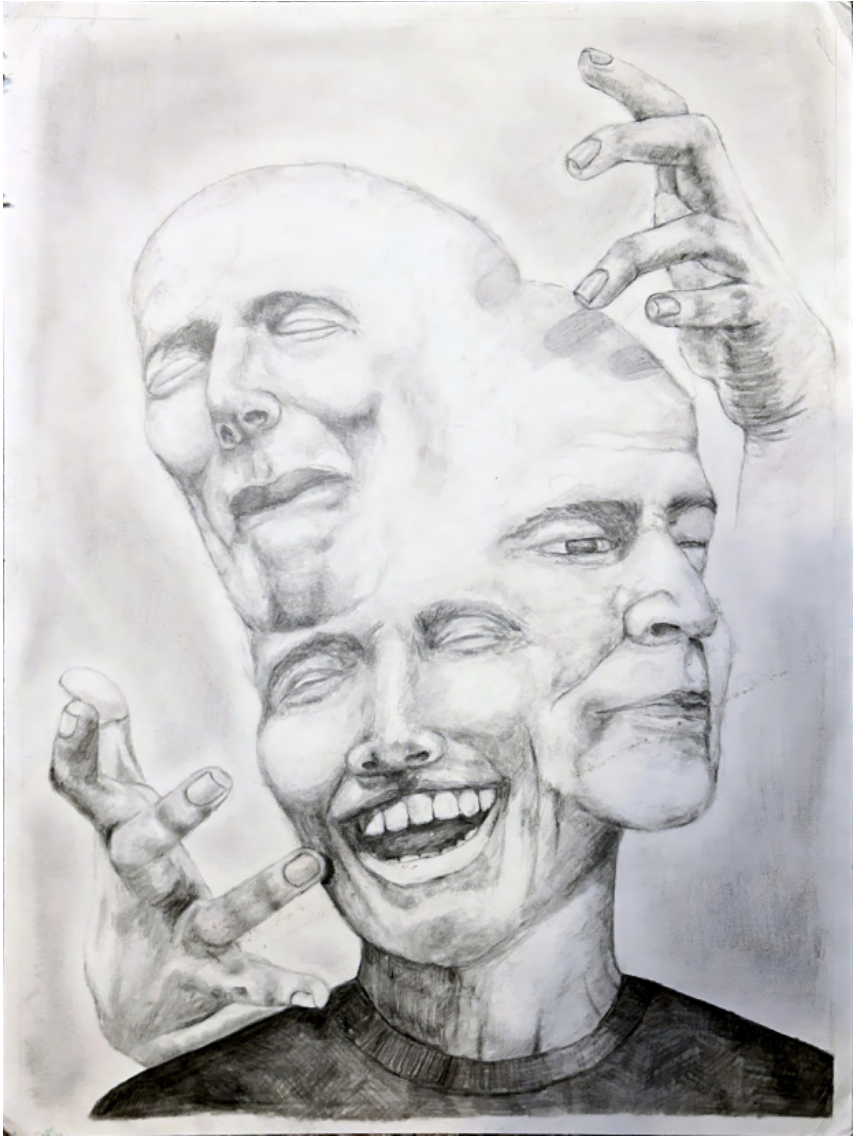
When I look at this picture, I see Cather's face. I see his body crumple to the ground, weighed down by a hundred-round belt of 5.56 around his neck. The crack of gunfire follows soon after. I see his panicked eyes as Doc packs gauze into his neck. Bright red. Arterial.

"It's just a nick, through and through. You're a lucky motherfucker man. You get to go to Germany and hit on nurses while I'm stuck here," I said as we waited for CASEVAC.

That's how we'd been trained to treat shock in bootcamp. Stay with them, talk to them. Tell them it's going to be alright. I'd already planned this script in my head dozens of times for when I'd have to use it. His pupils were dilated, and every breath came out with a whimper that will haunt me until the day I die.

"I don't wanna die."

"You're not, man; this is your ticket home. You're going home."



DISASSOCIATIVE IDENTITY DISORDER

ALAN SANCHEZ

DIRT, ANCIENT, OURS

MARY CHRISTINE DELEA

In our guts, we know it was awful,
so bad there are no words.

Paw and tooth curled back to bone,
claws ready for action,

even in death. Dinner tried to run
through mud, vomited

right before dying. Time slithered
over river rocks, leaned

against wine grapes, sunning itself.
That past was covered in insects,

seething on muggy shrub leaves.
The mud bubbled and laughed in the rain,

dripped onto fire, turned hard
and dry, became dirt and grabbed onto

all of nature's secrets, every bodily
body. The horrors. Lifetimes of birth,

mating, killing, being killed.
So we sing, our mouths coughing up

the dust that we sprouted from,
still in our systems,

our unused arthropod wings dropping off,
floating down to join the fur

and feathers, the deep detritus of
our barely buried dirty past.

THE DUTIFUL DAUGHTER, GUIDED BY VENUS

MARY CHRISTINE DELEA

after a photograph by Kari Gunter-Seymour

I'm at that place I grew up to leave.—Adrian C. Louis

At night I lie in bed and stare at Venus,
the way I did decades ago—its appearance in the sky
comforted me through my fear-filled childhood
and undiagnosed teen terrors.
My spine tries to get comfortable on
that old bed, now used only when I visit.

In the daylight, the familiar glow
of kitchen electronics.
Coffee maker, toaster, stovetop.
These days, no sugar, no dairy, very little meat
or gluten or salt. An egg
on the counter. No takers—yolk is a problem
for both of them. Morning meds
are doled out. My father falls into the bathtub.
I help get him out. I remind my mother nine times
about my own doctor appointment that day.

When I return, the egg is still on the counter.
Or is it back on the counter after
having been put away?
No one remembers. Sniffing the egg
reveals nothing. I toss the egg into the garbage—
food poisoning cannot be chanced.

The failings of bodies and minds
are openly discussed, doctor visits are
family affairs. Time travels in circles,
brains loop words and memories.
Days crawl and speed by.
But at night, I have Venus, symbol of devotion,
warmest planet in the universe.
Its slight sparkle through the side window's curtain
reminds me how small all our lives are,
our time filled with acts both tiny
and overwhelming—tossing a forgotten egg
into the garbage, trying to postpone death.

RELATIONSHIP, WITH SNOW

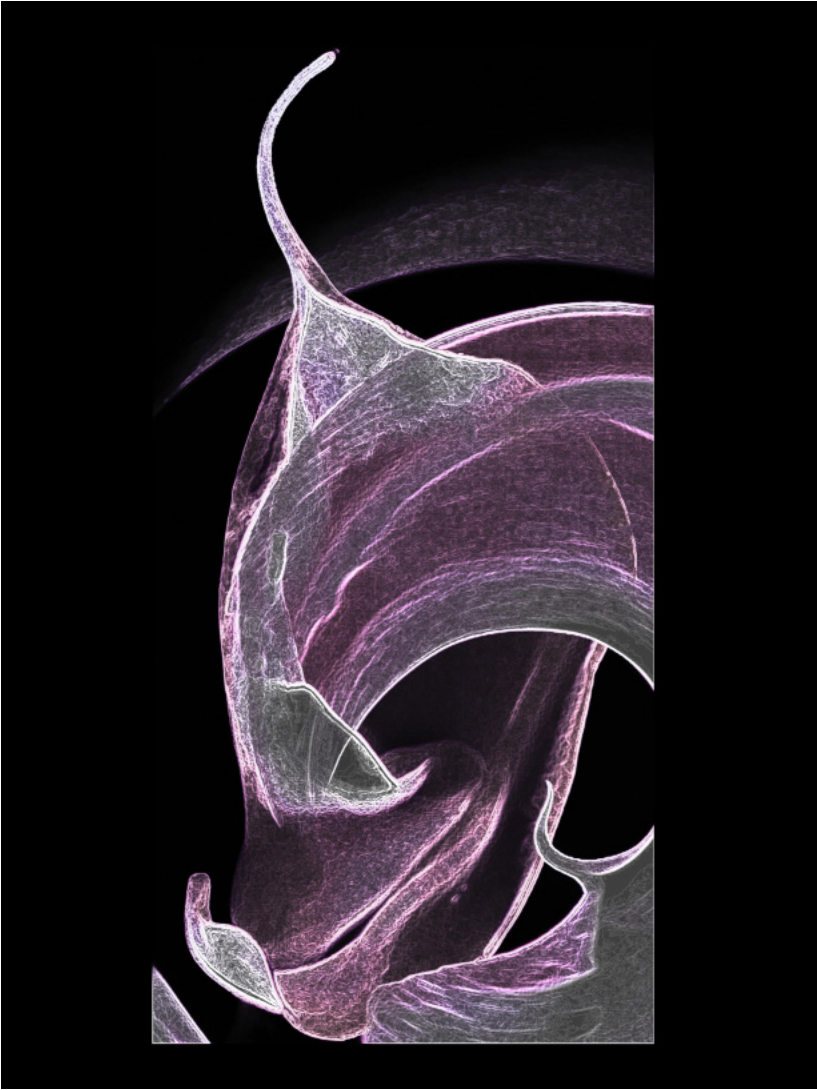
MARY CHRISTINE DELEA

I'd rather paint myself with summer,
turn icy blue into ocean blue,
trade the white of snow for the white
of a linen sundress. You loved me more
in summer, I think, and I just loved better
when the weather slid between warm and hot.

But there is no stopping the seasons.
Snow crashed into us like a drunk driver
understeering on a frozen street corner.
There is something about heat
I thought, every day in January,
wondering why the cold did not draw me
closer to you and why the sound
of your boots crunching snow
as you came up the stoop to our house
made me both angry and sad,
worried about where we would be
when the spring thaw finally arrived.



HE LOVES ME
CARELLA KEIL



FLOWER GHOST

CARELLA KEIL

FOG, ONE DREAMY NIGHT

MICHAEL MINASSIN

They say fog obscures sight,
visibility zero or less.

The night I drove
to your house along the coast,

even the sudden appearance
of a riderless white horse

on the road, like something
out of a Luis Buñuel film,

its muffled hoof sounds
matching my heart beats,

couldn't mask the picture
of you in my mind—

waiting by the window
letting the fog waft in

to surround you,
white as your skin

the earth's steamy breath,
the weather of your cinema.

TO ASHES

MONEA FLOYD

Daylight dims, darkness revives.
A star's shadow still shines on the other side of the sky.
Wrinkle in the waves, a shift arrives.
The moonlight's skin shimmers in water's eye.
Ambiguity swims between ocean's sin and ally.
The wind whispers tales of romanticized lies.
Each grain of sand is love lost, ashed, and combined.
Some say the beach serves as a conspicuous shrine,
To remember that beauty is danger's disguise.

DEVIL DAMNED

SHANE ALLISON

When my mother speaks of how my father has hurt her
over the years,

She acts as if each time is the first. As if discovering that he's
a bastard

Is something she never saw in him before.

I'm so unhappy. I try so hard to get along with him, she
says,

As she looks past a set of dusty vertical blinds into a front
yard of azaleas.

When I dare to utter the word divorce again, she says,

No, I'm going to wait, so I can get his money. Like the rest of
us,

She now waits like a buzzard on a power line to swoop

Down to fill her belly on my father's remains.

He gets more than one hundred percent now from the VA,

Tucking money in Family Dollar bags to stash under the
seat

Of his truck.

I prefer my father when he's quiet in the house,

Hiding from his family as if we don't know he's devil-damned.

When my mother cries, I wipe her tears with my

"I Never Liked You Anyway," t-shirt.

She thinks that if I talk to him, he will listen to me,

That maybe by sheer will,

He will turn over a new leaf.

But talking to my father means a baseball bat to the head.

A strike for every tear that has streaked my mother's face.

I can hear her now, don't say stuff like that about your daddy.

And there it is.

Flipping on and off like the proverbial light switch.

BONE ON BONE

SHANE ALLISON

It's the nightly chronic pain.
The need to position it on a flower printed pillow
To ease my discomfort.
I'm not afraid like my father
Who believes he's too old and too far gone.
Who holds onto railings and door trim.
He has been broken long before now.
He prefers things hard, insists on the long way.
I am not cut from his cloth.
I can't take bone on bone.
Chock full of people gather with limps and bad hips,
Braces on their knees.
I'm envious of the post op scars.
I'm going to wear mine like an Olympic gold medal,
Show it off in exchange for disgusted expressions.
"Look at that man's leg, mommie."
All the swelling and dried blood beneath bandages.
Garrett, my nurse practitioner tells
Me when I can no longer take the pain,
When the injections cease to work,
I will know when it's time.



UNFAZED ARTIST
ALAN SANCHEZ

RED-LIGHT RAVENS

COREY SALEM

Woken up at midnight by your heart's shout
To an ethereal leech that partakes on your soul,
You become a zombie puking its brains out.

The spells of nightly terror and panic
Leave you manic.
When the world retires to their chambers,
You load a shell into yours with no real intention,
Just in case your demons begin to waver.

You're dying to sleep but you fret
To dream another one of those dreams
That leaves your lashes dripping wet.

Sinking into your chair,
You paint away all the tiny things that drive you insane.
Mom says it's a masterpiece but she doesn't understand why.
Dad would tell you what he thinks if he didn't work at night.

So you tuck your creations between your thighs.
Hoping that you'll find that someone
That understands the dark,
The art it spawns.
Someone that doesn't see the gloom you carry
Somebody that'll tell you your dreams aren't scary.

I have a void,
Though not the same shape as yours.
I've toyed with the leeches, the chambers, and the paint.

I've taken steps to be less craven,
To be someone of desire.
I, too, sleep beneath the red-light ravens.

The cracks in your skull leave your mind weathered,
But I'm proof you can survive with your muscles severed.

I'm still a Baby Bat in so many ways,
Searching for my wings, claws, screech, and final name.

I still feel I have to hide my fangs.
Swallow the blood when I accidentally bite my tongue.
I, too, am accused of drinking blood when it's just cheap
wine.
Charged with sleeping in a coffin,
Even though that actually sounds pretty divine.

It solves nothing to hear that you're not alone.
But if it helps to lessen your screaming demons' drone...
I would lie within that coffin with all your muffled screams,
With your heart and it's gorgeous art.
I would lie with you in rain, in pain, in hell,
In the purest or most breathless of ways.
I would lie with you all night, all day,
In our haven under the red-light ravens.

A BOY NAMED FLEA

RYAN VANDEHEI

If everyone has a story
When and where will yours be told?
As people bow reverent heads
In citation for a valiant deed?
Or on page 8 of the local tribune
In Memory Of: one now past?

The days are long and seconds dark
For those who live so far alone
The boy that stands with the teacher's hand
Who from the start was pulled apart
As math and science were never his art
Growing to be the kid named flea
Aptly named for his self esteem

Raised with pills provided by 'friends'
Who cared for his wallet more than his heart
An innocent boy in a forgotten world
It was junior high when I met him first
I cannot lie, I shifted away
In fear of what others may say

If willing to care I would have seen
The shattered dreams of an empty heart
Seared as scars across his arms

Fingers would point as the spiral continued
Those who knew and those who refused
All who ignored, his quiet plea

Some looked to define, or even to find
But at the end of the day
He was alone; we never heard him say
'this pain is too much'

Without hope
He drifted away
They blamed the games children will play
And while bullies took part
In this twisted skit
There was more to his hurt

There were those like me
Who looked fear in the eye

Feeding our words to regret
We bowed, giving way to shame
Leaving courage on the floor
Curled and trembling in pain
We walked away

I must admit, I share the blame
For passersby cannot feign true ignorance
Or prevent disgrace, when thrown their way
When he needed one
To resist the pull of salvations arm

A day then came
The same as any other when,
Fear embedded itself
In those forced to watch
The slow draw of a .45
Time froze, wishing to hide
From the horrific scene

All around we stood
Minds racing, lives flashing
Knowing in seconds
Our futures would be decided
But before we could think
Or feel sorry for ourselves
The gun was lifted

Pointed not at those who caused this torment
Instead at his mind
Bent to believe, he was
Unworthy.

He stared in their eyes
Filled from within
A resolute calm
Amidst crushing fear
In the blink of a tear
Gone it would be

But, the breath before
The trigger pulled
Half a smile crossed his lips
A final hope clouded by hurt
That maybe loss could never exist
Once among angels and saints
Maybe God could be the one
To accept who he is

Here I stand, now worlds apart
With broken clichés disguised as verse
Describing lies that only perverse
The pain that denied even the semblance of life

When a smile can save

Yet you watch a life
Break before your eyes
You try to hide
Behind words and rhymes
From the wrong inside

But no matter the strength
Or words you share
Only he can forgive

Only,

He isn't here

MEMORIES

MARY KATHERINE REESE

The living room carpet covers the floor the way a blanket of new snow lays across the landscape. The pure white strands below my feet contrast the soft blue couch above me, like the clear sky at morning. I trace my fingers along the hard gold rivets, all in a line. They always lead to the same place. I press my hand hard, then harder, and harder still, into the pallid fibers on the ground until my imprint remains. Footprints show us where we have been, handprints show us where we should not have gone. I lay my head down on the pillowy soft and roll. I roll several times over until the dark underside of the couch hides me from their view. I look across the frozen expanse spying the feet of two giants, their toes dig into the land, as if each is staking their claim. I watch them lift and step, leaving their marks, as my small handprint slowly fades. Better that way, better to not be caught in the crossfire when the war has already begun. They throw words the way a soldier throws a grenade, pulling the pin and tossing them into the air, knowingly causing destruction but unaware of where it may land. Their looks shoot like piercing arrows from a balistraria. Castle walls built so high, the barbs bounce and fall at their feet. I see them. The words. Falling toward me. I push myself further into the corner, pulling my feet in tightly. If I can make myself small enough, maybe I can remain unscathed.

The tension may pass. There are lulls of peace - moments of quiet solitude. I prefer to think of those times.

Joy was often painted in bright swathes across that blank jute. The wide, smooth brush of memory lays stroke upon

stroke in the corner of the room. The dark green pigment forming the boughs of a tree, flecked with yellow, red, green, and blue. I sit in the middle of this scene; my family surrounds me. Unmoving smiles smudged across each face. A baby coos, despite the stillness of this flat scene, because my brain allows it so. My first cousin sits in her mother's lap, her light pink footed pajamas contrast against the whiteness. A box is next to me. The largest present under the tree, two names scrawled across the tag. My middle brother mirrors me, our hands outstretched toward the ribbon. I float above this moment, my eyes closed, yet seeing everything perfectly clear before me. I know what is in the box, I can hear the clink of the marbles, they roll down the brightly colored chutes much the same way my mind wanders through these thoughts.

There are other memories in this white room. It is like a blank canvas, wiped clean each week by a small, thin woman named Susan. She made me cookies one time. I say me because that makes it seem more special. It was the only time she was there without my mother. I trudged up the hill, step over step, marching with my fellow soldiers, our packs weighing heavily on our backs. We arrived at the final flight of stairs leading to the large brown double wooden doors. They opened, ceremoniously welcoming us back from our wayward journey. We had lived another day, fighting our way out of the mouth of the long yellow dragon who took us away each morning. The warm air billowed forth from the door, and Susan, our savior from the cold, held her treasure aloft on a silver platter. The piles of golden-brown cookies drawing us in like the call of a siren. I feel the crumbs on my lip as I savor the flavor, still rich in my mouth all these years later.

That reminds me of my mother's cooking. Soft biscuits sit

next to warm eggs. Ground beef sautéing in the pan. A tall silver pot filled with boiling noodles. Family sitting around our long wooden table, my father at the head. That table is in my dining room now. I watch my mother cook. I smell the onions and see the tears in her eyes. My back is to the white room, the dining room between us. I peek out from behind the wall. Cold noodles dangle from my father's ear and the sop left in a bowl for the dogs adorns his head. My mother's normally calm countenance stares at him in anger.

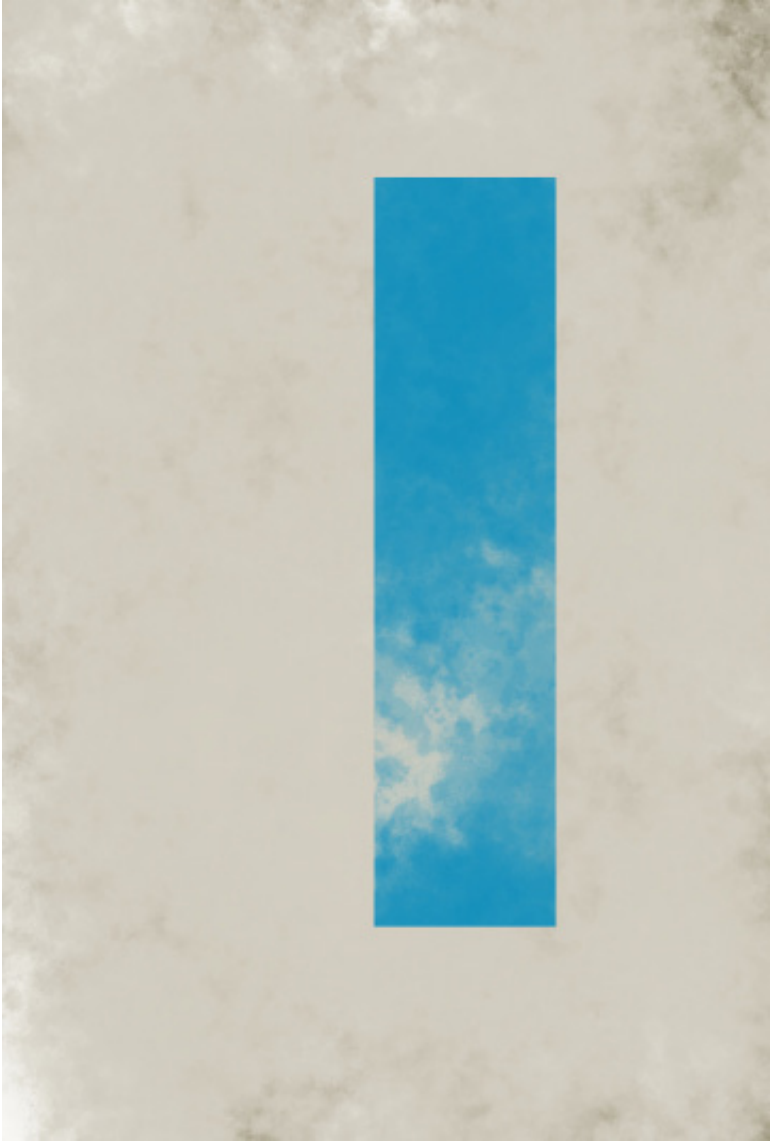
Suddenly, I am across the room, standing behind the cream-colored chair. The one covered with soft pastel flowers. I am younger now; I hold a crayon in my hand. My fist clenches that crayon, the darkest red I could find. The best tool to leave my wrathful marks across the fabric. I am alone. My siblings are off at school, a place I am not yet old enough to experience. I have learned to print my name, the longest name in our family. It was unfair, really. To give me such a long name when everyone else had only three letters to learn. I was so proud of myself when I penned those letters across the empty paint of our hallway. My mother did not agree. I would show her. I dug the wax deep into the fabric flowers, the little bits of excess crimson falling onto the pale flooring below. I ground my resentment into the carpet with the toe of my shoe.

Time has passed, though forward or backward, I cannot be sure. I hide at the edge of the living room, my naked toes digging into the blank strands, my heels rest upon the cold stone tiles of the entryway. I should be in my room, the one at the top of the stairs, the one with the green carpet, across from my mother's room. Her carpet is blue. A soft, soothing blue, unlike the carpet in my father's office, which is a bright blue like his eyes. But he is rarely home, so we mostly use it to play. A woman sits on the couch with my mother. She is a

friend. My mother never has friends over, so this is quite an unusual occurrence. They sip tea and speak in hushed tones. I creep down the stairs- slowly. Making sure to skip the one step that creaked. I hid there at the edge of the room, out of view. I heard the dulcet tones of my mother's voice and the higher pitch of her friend as they discussed my father. He went jogging with his secretary. I didn't see the harm in that.

The war still rages above me. I roll out from below the couch. Thrusting myself between the two giants. My small, slender body barely reached above their knees. I placed my hands against each of them. Pushing with all my might to keep them apart. To keep their anger from spreading throughout the house. The creeping tendrils had found me in my hiding place. Infecting me with its rile and rank. I yelled. They yelled. I yelled louder. Then there was emptiness. A door slammed. A car engine roared. I am left alone in the cold white snow.

Now I see the brown boxes. Brown boxes with thick red letters, alone on that white carpet. The couch is gone, as are the chairs. Our tree will grow no more joy in this room. I sit on the floor. Pushing my hand hard, then harder, and harder still, into the pallid fibers until my imprint remains.



HOPE OPENS
EDWARD LEE

HIJAB

SHAYAN RAUF

I like to think that nothing changed on March 11th, 2023. I like to think that others see me the same, but they don't. The world used to see me as "normal", I don't think they view me as not normal, but it's definitely not what they're used to. As a Muslim growing up in Texas, I had a feeling I didn't blend in. I never quite matched the Texas girl image. That never made me resent Texas; it's my home.

Before March 11th of this year, I got ready like a normal girl. I did my hair, often the night before to save time in the morning. I would purposely tug at the front pieces so they would effortlessly frame my face. I would let my sunglasses rest on my head, doubling as an accessory. I'd get my hair cut and styled when I felt as if it was becoming too wild to tame. I'd messily throw it into a bun and make my way to the gym. I'd feel the knots forming as the wind wrestled with each individual strand. I'd use my favorite claw clip to keep my curtain bangs from falling onto my face. I'd have to move the rebellious pieces that stuck to my lip gloss. I used to lean my head forward to hide behind my hair when I felt the heat creeping up on my face.

Everything has changed, but it is still the same.

I pick out my hijab, often the night before to save time in the morning. I catch myself tugging at the front pieces of fabric so they effortlessly frame my face. I rest my sunglasses on top of my head, they still double as an accessory. I change the style whenever the hanging front piece proves to have a mind of its own. I quickly tie the pieces of fabric

to the back and make my way to the gym. I use my favorite clips to hold my hair in place underneath the fabric. I feel the distinctly styled pieces of cloth being swum through by the teasing wind. I have to peel away the wild fabric from my lips when I'm wearing lip gloss. I lean my head forward to urge the curtain-like fabric to conceal the color that sneaks its way to my face.

Everything has changed, but it is still the same.

I'm still me; I'm still that same girl. I wish people knew that. I'm still that same girl who grew up in Texas. I love country boots and the rodeo. I love sweet tea and James Avery jewelry. Texas is still my home.

ACCUMULATE

STEVEN SCHWEI

Attempt to hoard time,
it will leak like a sieve,
frittered away as you
order it about.

Stock up on money
and you'll live miserly.
No need to own
Boardwalk and Park Place.

Weigh your words,
nobody will trust you.
Hemming, hawing,
choosing so insincerely.

Too many knick-knacks,
they'll haul in the dumpster.
Opening your door, all manner
of things come tumbling out.

Friends and experiences,
as Dorothy discovered,
pave the golden road.

RECOGNITION

STEVEN SCHWEI

Lazing on my back, blades of grass
tickling my skin, it's easy to trace

an angel in the sky or a downy
bunny, even a train engine.

I don't expect to see a map
of the New York subway

or the neurons, synapses, trails
of a poet's brain or writings.

Ephemeral clouds, only
useful as symbols.

As the blue canvas mottles,
easing into moon-glitter ebony

the depths are revealed
far beyond the heights.

ON GRACE

ANKUR JYOTI SAIKAI

Both the Holy Spirit
and the frail soul are

bound by a fragile
thread of grace. That

born of sin seeks light
discard their demons

don't stone their sinful
frames by hands anointed

with your sins. For sins
never breed true, like

those celebrated apples
fabled yet forbidden fruits

frowned upon by the Father
and his filial and his priests

when faith folds hands and
ignorance kneels, you invite
a shepherd who graces

RIVER

SARAI ARGUELLES

Twelve years later,
at the river
where I was cleansed,
we sit and admire the view.
Slowly, I turn to you and ask
how many sins you think
are drowning in the water.

REGARDS

SARAI ARGUELLES

That's so kind of you.
What a lovely pedestal.
Watch me hop off it.



KALEIDOSCOPIC EXPRESSION
ALAN SANCHEZ

RETREATING

YUAN CHANGMING

He is already tired out, but what on earth is really good about living? What's the meaning of life, if any at all?

So tired that for at least three hundred times before sleep at night, he has imagined himself leaving this world of red dust quietly, more or less like an African elephant too sick, too weak or too old to continue journeying with its herd, ready to set off all alone for a thick jungle, where he would find a suitable spot for a profound respite before dying without disturbing anything or anybody else.

For him, the time seems to have finally come for his departure. Actually he is fully prepared now that he has won all he has been trying hard to gain, or whatever a good life can possibly offer to a human being on this planet. Indeed, he has a reasonably good health, an elegant and well-mannered wife, a decent mortgage free house located in a high-end neighborhood in one of the best places to live in the world, a quite handsome investment portfolio managed by two carefully-chosen financial advisors, a couple of sons each highly successful with his career, a doctorate extremely difficult for someone from a remote Chinese village to obtain, a solid name with an impressively long list of writing credits, and a half dozen women with whom he has had an intimate relationship since junior high school, among many other things all desirable for any man of his age.

He has, that is to say, every reason to feel content with his life, and he actually is. However, despite all his earthly achievements, he is, in the heart of his soul, constantly bothered by the way he has become tired of living. He doesn't know since then, but he has been haunted by a strange or ineffable lethargy that renders him apathetic

about everything and everybody, including his own life. Perhaps this is mainly because he has gradually lost his direction or purpose of life. Or because he has failed to find its true meaning after all. Were it not for the irresistible inertia of life as a natural force per se, he might well have killed himself.

Naturally, for the past few years, he has nurtured a strong desire to run away from his home in Vancouver, as well as his life in the fast lane, which is always so overfilled with sound and fury, but where to go? Apparently, within the boundaries of Canada where he chose to live since more than thirty years ago, there is no place like an African jungle for the dying elephant. He often thinks of Tibet, yet with a deformed heart muscle he would experience more ischemia or chest discomfort than he could bear over there. He finds it appealing to go to Mt Zhong-nan near Xi'an and join tens of thousands of contemporary hermits scattering in the vast mountainous area; however, he doesn't like the idea of living alone in total isolation, nor can he really live on wild fruits or grass seeds only. After much deliberation, he decides to follow the advice of an ancient Chinese sage: the 'lesser hermit' lives in wild seclusion, whereas the 'greater hermit' does so amidst city dwellers.

Yes, today is the perfect time to depart. Just fully recovered from his bad jet lag after flying home from Beijing to Vancouver, he feels like taking a long walk to somewhere, or nowhere. Also, the weather seems to be particularly accommodating. As snow begins to melt, the days of winter are numbered. Seeing the sunny sky from the window, he finds himself truly light-hearted for the first time after a whole week of gloomy-weather depression. As cars swish by along the ever busy Granville Street, he recalls that during

his recent sojourn in his native place in central China, he paid off all his debts, emotional, social or honor-related, as he had done with all the bills, mortgages and insurance policies under his name. For instance, he treated a group of high school classmates, who were forced like him to labor together on a forest farm by the Yangtze River during the Cultural Revolution, to a rich dinner after forty two years of separation without knowing one another's whereabouts. In particular, he met Hua at the gathering, and confessed to her that she was the very first girl he had ever had a crush on. With all the balances becoming zero, he feels no longer obliged in any conceivable or perceivable way. No longer in need of anyone or anything, no longer needed by anybody anywhere either, he is truly emancipated, inside out, from all shackles, once and for all.

As if to celebrate his departure, the last leaf hanging on the lilac tree in his front yard paved with arrayed pine cones falls on him just when he steps out of his house. Sitting on his metal fence, a crow greets him with a loud caw. Somehow, he recognizes the creature as the one he flirted with in the dream he has just had during his nap, which looks as white as a summer cloud. He remembers feeding it with fog and frost until its feathers, its flesh, its calls and even its spirit all turned into white like winter washed. In this short but perplexing dream, he named the bird after Qu Yuan, for its wings would, he believes, never melt when it flies close to the sun, somewhat like Qu's poetic fame, which never fades away even amidst the dark shadows of all the influencers on the Chinese soil.

As he walks closer to the crow, his inner eyes sees its quasi-white soul that must have dwelled in the body of one of his closest ancestors. It may well have come down all the way just to tell him its little secret, the way he has escaped from darkness. While both its body and heart are filled with shadows cast by the truth about being a dissident, he

is reminded of its unwanted color as something ill-omened in his country of origin on the other side of this world. For a moment, he wonders if there is also a crow hidden deep in his own heart, not necessarily blacker than his spirits, but much more so than his hair or eyes.

With no specific destination in mind, he looks straight and attentively into the crow's small but shiny eyes like two bosom friends engaged in silent communion with each other. Instead of continuing to sit there still or flying far away, Qu Yuan flaps its wings against the chilly afternoon air and jumps onto an approximating bough from the skeleton of an ash tree on the roadside, as if waiting there or inviting him to join its trip. Just before he approaches the tree, Qu Yuan flies to another bough about ten yards farther down the road, pausing again for him to catch up. After a few more repetitions, he realizes that Qu is leading him, consciously or otherwise, to the Buddhist monastery where he used to work once a week as a volunteer a few years ago.

Aha, that's the ideal place to go! He thinks aloud and then bows to Qu, with his palms pressed together, to show his gratitude for its wise guidance. In fact, for more times than he can recall, he has thought of going to live in a church or temple after retirement. Though never really a religious person, he has recently come to feel closer to Christianity in a spiritual sense as it upholds love as the supreme principle. In the words of a TicTok content provider known as Yuese Ruxi: if you believe in me, I will love you; even if you do not, I will still love you. However, culturally he feels more affinity with Buddhism, not because both his father and grandma were pious Buddhist followers, but because a Buddhist monastery offers a setting where he can speak his mother-tongue and eat like a true Chinese vegetarian. For him, Buddhism is not really religiously attractive, for in practice it is overly self-interested: I will bless you only if you have faith in me. Nevertheless, taken as a living philos-

ophy, Buddhism is definitely more agreeable to him.

He is still quite lost in his dreamlike memories about his own as well as his father's monkish experience when he is awakened by a wave of loud caws. Looking up, he sees Richmond Zen Centre looming behind a row of tall luxuriant trees right across the street. After making a deep bow to the crows, whose exceptionally high intelligence often makes him think that they will be the ruler of next earthly civilization, he walks quickly towards the center but only to find that it had been converted into a free public market.

FEBRUARY

BLANKA PILLAR

Somewhere there was a crossroads near the border, in a smoky child's face with round eyes. Low blue and yellow brick houses and dark green pine trees surrounded it, and in summer, the purple statice opened in the garden, in spring, the hot sunlight stretched across the forest canopy. The first memory of round eyes was of this landscape, where years of warm embraces and happy barks were repeated over and over again. They called this place *Life*; it was as they imagined the world of fairy tales. Until now.

Something shook the earth. It shuddered, deep and angry, as if the grey sky had fallen. Morning dew covers the blades of grass, and a thick mist has descended on the cool ground; even the air is swirling backwards, and the birds are flying far away. They run out of the brick house and stare at the Thursday shadows. The button eyes watch as all the spring, summer, autumn, and winter gather in two grey canvas bags, as the faltering zipper is pulled on the resin-scented warm wool sweaters and the smiling stuffed elephants, as the Mother and Father pray in whispers, as they lock the door of *Life* without a key. Lacking a vehicle, they walk away from the crossroads, the low blue and yellow brick houses, the dark green pines, the purple statice, and the memory of warm embraces and happy barks. The round child's face fills with hot tears, with the helpless sorrow of incomprehension and lack. She doesn't know where the touch of silky grey dog-tails and the fresh scent of the short-cut lawn has gone; before her and behind her lies an endless sea of concrete surrounded by barren trees. All around her, words she had never heard before, harder-sounding names of unfamiliar places are repeated with terrified powerless-

ness in their voices.

Meanwhile, the time's arrow marches on, the wind picks up, and the horizon bends to dark blue. The Mother takes a brown bun from her canvas bag, caresses the child's cold face, and then holds the tiny body close to her, cradling it and humming the song she used to sing when the family was ill. The melody rings sweetly, filling the lonely night and drowning out the deafening noise of strangeness.

Twilight and dawn meet; the dust is heavier on the feet, and the eyes look wearily into the bare winter. Farther lies Life than the round eyes and the darkening child's face could possibly look back.

They can only guess where they are going as they leave fading footprints on the edge of towns, hoping to cross something larger soon. They dare only believe that the sun will come out the next day, that there will be night, and that the clear sky stars will shine with the same piercing light.

THE SCENT OF LAVENDER

KIONNA WALKER LEMALLE

Cornelius knotted his tie a third time. The tie was thin; the knot needed to be the same width at the top as the tail below it. Otherwise, Anne would want to tie it all over again. He didn't want to frustrate her. The doctor had warned him about that. He leaned in, closer to the mirror, aiming for perfect symmetry. His nose practically touched the glass, and his breath left a small cloud behind. He pulled the tail through, straightened the knot, and smiled. He scanned the assortment of his and hers toiletries on the countertop for his mahogany scented aftershave, which he splashed on both cheeks before leaving for Friendship Manor. When he saw Anne, he wanted her to smell something familiar, to yearn for him and want to come back home.

When he arrived at Friendship Manor, a nurse greeted him. "How about I walk you to her?" she said. "My name's Charmaine. That's a hard ch- as in church, not chap-erone." She laughed as if she expected Cornelius to join. He didn't.

Cornelius followed Charmaine down a hallway with bedrooms on both sides. He saw a resident now and then, sitting up or lying down in bed. The hall led to an activity room where a group sat together playing cards. One man held his cards backwards so that his hand was visible to the others. In the middle of the room, another group with canes and walkers followed the steps to a slow-motion line dance. The leader was a dark-skinned busty woman with wild gray hair who called out, "Get it now," as she rocked her hips. A tall stick figure of a man called back, "I'm getting it," and

laughed. The people seemed happy, settled.

“She’s out here,” Charmaine said, pushing the exit door open.

Cornelius stepped outside into the courtyard. Two oak trees reached across the patio as if trying to embrace. Anne sat on a weathered gray bench in the shade of the trees, and for a second, she looked like she did on the day he proposed, the tree leaves casting shadows on her cheek. Next to her, a man waved his hand above an upside-down fedora. Her eyes moved from the man’s hand to his face and back. Her hair was shorter and thinner. Her skin was different too, a little more copper than bronze. She wore a dress he’d never seen, a thin yellow sundress with flowers along the neckline. Her smile was too bright, too familiar.

“Ms. Anne, you have a visitor,” Charmaine said. She paused before walking away as if an explosion might occur at any moment.

Cornelius walked up to Anne and stroked her thinning hair. She looked up at him blankly. Her smile faded. There was no empty seat, so he stood there, waiting for her to invite him to stay. Anne turned back to the man with the fedora. She leaned in and whispered, “Is this man trying to sell us something?” as though she and the fedora guy were a permanent thing —
a we, an us.

He had been warned she might not remember him, but he hadn’t believed it possible. He stood idly by, his 50th anniversary shoes cramping his toes, while fedora guy pretended to pull a rabbit out of the hat. Cornelius moved in closer. Anne smelled like cucumber water, the kind found in

hotel lobbies. He had expected to smell lavender. He turned away a second, trying to reset his nose before moving in just a tad closer, almost touching her shoulder. She disregarded him all together, her eyes trained on the invisible rabbit.

“I’m sorry,” Charmaine said. “I think it’s best you come back tomorrow.”

“But shouldn’t we tell her who I am?”

Charmaine tapped his arm softly and walked away, craning her neck to signal him to follow. When they were too far for Anne to hear, she said, “Today, she’s enjoying her friend. It’s good when the residents make friends.”

The fedora guy seemed to sit up a bit taller as he sprinkled something invisible on the table. Anne’s eyes glistened when she giggled.

“Does she think he’s —?” Cornelius couldn’t complete the thought.

Charmaine looked away and spoke as if to herself. “My mother had Alzheimer’s,” she said. “Most days, she knew I was her daughter, but there were days when —.” She fumbled with the ID hanging from her neck. “I used to wear Mama’s favorite perfume, hoping it’d help. No one told me the sense of smell was the first to go.”

Cornelius looked back at Anne who was rising from the table to lock arms with fedora guy. The two walked toward a hallway.

“The cafeteria’s that way,” Charmaine said quickly, as if she knew he pictured someplace else. “The thing to hold

on to, Mr. Cornelius, is possibility.”

He walk out of Friendship Manor seemed longer than the walk in. There was a continuous hum in the building, and the fluorescent lights flickered only enough to be noticed when the mind was fishing for things to hold on to. The hum was punctuated by recurring beeps as residents walked out to the courtyard or back into the activity room. The card table was almost empty now, except for two men. Both laughed as if today was the best day of their lives. Cornelius couldn't imagine anything being so funny.

In the hallway leading back to the main entrance (or exit), most doors were now closed. A man in green scrubs pushed a cart of covered food trays down the hall. A woman in purple propped up the trunk-sized legs of a patient with dark, scaley skin and set out to rebraid her childlike pigtails in one of the doorways. A man sat at the foot of this patient's bed, reading a newspaper aloud, and Cornelius wondered if the reading were meant for the lady with pigtails or the nurse or himself alone. In the front foyer, nurses chatted with the receptionist, pausing only to point to the pad Cornelius signed when he entered, prompting him to sign out. He signed out slowly, hesitating to walk away, even after crossing the T in Washington, his last name.

When he finally made his way to the exit, a woman brushed his shoulder on her way in. She smelled like Anne. He stopped, suddenly motionless between the two glass doors, and inhaled lightly, his eyes staring ahead at the world outside. Then, he turned around and headed back in, following the scent of lavender.

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—The Bayou Review

