December 2020
Issue Twenty

Isn't it Just Like the Sea

Editor's Note By Molly Hill

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Work while you have the light. You are responsible for the talent entrusted to you.
Henri Frederic Amiel

Dear Writers and Readers,

Welcoming you to our 20th issue is only partially accurate. While we publish four full *numbered* issues (March, June, September, December) every year, we also sneak in two poetry-only shorter issues in January and July. Still it seems significant in some way that our 20th issue pops up online at the end of 2020. A quick dive into numerology reveals that the number twenty is powerful and related to the characteristic of unlimited potential. While it's difficult to explain a lot of things we've experienced as a whole in 2020, we do recognize potential and are always impressed with the singularity, power, and originality of the writing voices, and the creative artistic skill in the submissions we receive.

This is our largest issue to date, the most submissions we've received, and the largest volume of work we have published online. We're grateful to *all* the student writers who submitted work, because while it was a pleasure to select the work for this issue, we also regret having to say no to a lot of good work due to the large volume of submissions.

As with every issue there's something for every reader. A quick flight to space? *Per Aspera Ad Astra*, by Freddie Coffey. A poem with an unusual theme? Try— *Break-up Letter*

to Eczema from Evy Shen. Unexpected funeral behavior? — check out *Lou Goes to Vermont* (Ida Mobini), and Samantha Liu's *Funeral Day.*

Don't miss the strong voices in our non-fiction section—*Why Africans Don't Talk about Race but Blacks Do*, from Nigerian writer Idowu Odeyemi, and Natalie Parker's take on the issues 'inclusive' media have with queer women, in *Erasure and Fetishization*. Our non-fiction essayists also take on travel abroad, loss and lies, what's in a name, and *Sweet Misgivings* (Brianne O' Gorman).

Enjoy the writing, admire the art, and keep sharing your creative work with the world.

Molly Hill
Editor

Poetry

Persimmon Tree By Jacklyn

My head lolls off this slope
    and I gaze past the hill upside
down, half asleep, the cushion
    of the earth tempting to roll down
in. Though the thrill
    would be short lived,
a shower of soot waiting
    for me at the bottom.

I sit upright to escape the bright
    sun, not feeling up to shine.
I hide my head and walk
    until I am safely tucked under

the lone broadleaved hulk,
        where I can spy in the shade.

I peer into and through
        the branches above me
and deep within there's a batch
        of fruit as if a gift for those who pay
attention, care beyond the outside.

On my tiptoes I pluck the nearest
        one and hold it between my forefingers.
It's an unfamiliar shape, the color
        combination bursting with energy,
its limited lines passionate. It
        appears sour, but the next moment
it's honey sweet in my mouth.
        I expect it to be soft as a peach,
but my teeth are at war
        with the skin that's tougher
than an apple.

Having never been told
        to come here, the persimmon
is as unpopular as its color,
        but that treatment
makes it rare, exquisite.

I face the bark and mold my
        fingers into the wrinkles,

swearing an oath
to protect this tree.

Jacklyn is 15 years old from New Jersey. She likes to write poetry while drinking a matcha bubble tea. Her work has been recognized by Creative Communications, Runes Magazine, and more.

A Buzzer Beater By Maria Polizzi

Cheers of the crowd ring in my ears,
Players from both teams jump up to block a shot.
I slap down the ball making it fall into Bridgette´s hands.
Bridgette starts running down the court, while I run beside her.
She passes the ball to me, and I launch it in the air.
The ball spins around the edge of the rim
Time comes to a complete stop as it hovers over the edge.
Finally the ball slips through the net,
with a crisp *Whoosh* sound.
The buzzer sends out a deafening noise.
Victory!
Bridgette gives me a high five, Graysen jumps on my back,
but the most proud of me is my coach.

My Father.

Maria Polizzi loves to be busy,— playing basketball, dancing and hanging out with friends. She loves to eat Italian food and go on road trips. She has just recently started writing poetry and hopes she can continue to be published.

In Love With Living By Riya Yadav

I'm falling in love with living.

I'm falling in love with impulsive tattoos in shady studios,
with midnight walks and shared hoodies on narrow pavements.
I'm falling in love with the smell of fresh rain and cut grass,
of barbecues and sea salt in the air near beaches.

I love the beach, the waves and how the sun
shines a bright orange before setting in the sea
I love rainstorms, grey clouds and lightning
a steady rhythm of drops falling on my skin

I love holding hands, interlocking fingers
and rubbing thumbs in circles on skin
I love wearing my heart on my sleeve
Because everyone should know I love them

I love how my mother kisses my forehead on nights I can't sleep
my father has tears in his eyes he won't let us see, but he is so proud
I love my dog, who sleeps a little more peacefully if I am next to him
and reminds me that simply existing is good enough

I love the sun for rising when I don't want to.
how each day goes on despite me,
how life is still worth loving when I feel like I am not

I'm falling in love with hope.
hope for better days, for better moments and memories
and reasons to go on.

I have so many already, but
I'm falling in love with so many more.

Riya is a nineteen-year-old psychology student who spends her free time obsessing over dogs, reading and singing along to Harry Styles. She's only been published a handful of times and usually writes rambling pieces in her pink diary.

Beijing in 16 Eyes By Maggie Sun
central business district

the silk market is a game of chess and
ambition, a power ploy: all sharp tongues
and hands on hips. calculators speak
for the foreigners here but those of us
whose eyes have run obsidian since birth
know that to punch numbers and box for
a bargain is to lose. in these vendor stalls,
serenity is a strategy and nonchalance is
the mark of a winner. look the snake in the
eye, and pay double after the bite.

underground

there is triple, quadruple irony in the
posters underground. rusty tiles crumble
with age as aspect ratios demand attention

to the emerald opulence of beijing. cigarettes,
half-smoked, sigh from a nearby corner.
still, we giggle shoulder-to-shoulder as
we venture through a mundane morning.
to the gray cement of the country, our
young eyes add value beyond comparison

great wall

rain wears at the monument's rambling
steps and eccentric asymmetry. history is
told in color, yet centuries of the great wall
have only lived in gray stone. still, plastic
tourists crowd its peaks like triumphant
crayons. we huddle in threes under black
umbrellas to evade the uneven storm. i
shudder to imagine what wes anderson
would think.

forbidden city

deciphering the stylistic wooden strokes
on these crumbling monuments does
not come easy. english may flow like a
river of words but chinese will always
shudder irregularly in dirty droplets as
it rambles down these red shingles. my
dark dress suddenly becomes fitting; i
am not meant to wear royal gold in this
hallowed city.

Maggie Sun currently lives in Southern California. She loves listening to history podcasts, and her phone case collection is inspired by the likes of Audrey Hepburn and Do Ho Suh.

Graveyard Waltz By Ana Carpenter

sun sallowed, sunken eyes— we swallow
each other before dusk. cemetery gates

flutter open. darkness is only an idea
we believe with all our shadowed selves, throats

cracked with mourning, blackened bits of voices
in the grass. i am the youngest, loving

each tomb more than the last: children
of stone that need my imaginary arms

to hold them close. this is what i have always
wanted. the others are older, sing

with hollowed mouths to bind the dead. in the dark
we can't see ourselves. limbs fill

with what we want to be, hills seize
our false ankles and begin the cycle

of dragging missing bodies into earth. truth
is, we died long ago. truth is, we will never

die. truth means nothing as night slips
through our fists—

we dance on the graves of ghosts.

Ana Carpenter is a high school junior at Walter Payton College Prep in Chicago, Illinois. Her work has appeared in Polyphony Lit and Rare Byrd Review. When she's not writing, she can be found reading, exploring, and shamelessly defending the YA genre.

The Cat By Morgan Lamkin

The cat, he hides in shadows bleak
Creeping in his coat so sleek
Flick of tail and gleam of eyes
Presently a mouse he spies.

Swift as lightning, dark as night
From his eye an awful light
Quick he pounce and pounce his best
And so he puts that mouse to rest.

Ah dear friend, now you go
My tale is told so now you know
Of the midnight meal and a mouse's woe.

Morgan Lamkin is a student from Wisconsin.

Break-up Letter to Eczema By Evy Shen

maybe it's incongruous to part ways in a letter / but
you've become an extraneous integral to my identity / everything
since birth revolved around your axis: / *no sun, no chlorine, no dairy* / but
our priorities diverge still further apart / i like to play tennis & piano / but
you cling to my fingers, unable to let me out of your death grip / until nights
i scratch to death trying to get you off my body / i'm embarrassed when my friends
see the red marks you extrapolate onto my skin / the way you get heated
swelling out of proportion / & it didn't use to be that way / at first we complemented
each other / you made me conscious of what i input, tossed the processed food
and sugar / taught me nourishment and self-care / warm baths ten to twenty minutes,
fragrance-free soaps / i tamed your beast of a personality / but our relationship is an
asymptote / until you approach zero i will never be at my max / & this series
has no end, no convergence / until days make it seem i have
no life / so take away your dried blood, wounds, and the smudges on my sundress.

Evy Shen is a high school junior from Statesboro, Georgia. Her writing has been recognized in an international Roundpier Poetry Contest and is published or forthcoming in Lumiere Review and Eunoia Review. She loves to travel, her favorite place in the US being Soho/Times Square in New York City, whereas her favorite place outside of the US is Suzhou, China. When she is not writing and furiously studying, she is outside with her family enjoying God's beautiful nature.

Topsy Turvy By Jessica Kim

Here, the world inverts itself and I wait for no car
to pass by, afraid and unafraid. A man stops

in the middle of a traffic junction and the lights turn red
but he does not run. This is still life. It starts to rain

and for a moment I imagine a foldable umbrella in
my bag, gone as I watch the ground split open, only it's

the sky. Tell me about the new rules here: how I can
only think in backwards, how tears fall upside down,

reaching for the rooftops, how divinity lies in the bottom.
Pray to the calcified fossils in the basement, ask for

an ending instead of a beginning. When I arrive home
there is no one but the windows shatter upwards

and the attic floods first. I wonder if I am different
too: do I still have a mother, do I still write poetry

for a living, am I still in love with the moon? The trees
in the front yard grow into roots and a family enters

the closed bakery across the street. I want to belong
here. I beat prayers into the front door and I find out

that my mother died in April. There is no spring here
and I bloom last. It is harder to shrink than to grow.

There are spaces that are not meant to be filled, shadows
that swell up when they are closer to the light source.

I am opaque and transparent in the starlight, afraid
of departure. Still, I pretend not to exist as if the night

would notice. But see, the world sleeps with its eyes
open, only closing when I ask for morning to return.

Jessica Kim is a writer based in California. Her works appear or are forthcoming in Cosmonauts Avenue, Longleaf Review, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, and more. She is the Editor-in-Chief of The Lumiere Review. She loves all things historical and sour, and can be found @jessiicable on twitter and Instagram.

Cassiopeia By Sophia Vesely
Wrathfully sentenced to the sky
by a constellation of envious wenches.

Withheld from my rightful throne
and condemned to forever orbit the celestial poles.

Whisked suddenly by the night air
and bound with unsightly shackles to these heavens.

Wretched inferiority has procured these seawomen
to astronomical outbursts.

When did hailing the candor of one's beauty
become less righteous than creating a lie?

When did the love for my star-cluster of mirrors
become mistaken for deplorable vanity?

Well regardless,
wishing me away was a fool's errand.
The night sky is divine for my complexion,
and my hair flickers by the moonlight.

With this dome of scattered light as my stage,
I am the most beloved star
for my nocturnal company.

Watch these wenches
banish me from their ocean waves.
I've made love to the Moon,
and guess who controls the tides.

Sophia Vesely is nineteen years old and a class of 2020 high school graduate from St. Petersburg, Florida. She is currently taking a gap year before her matriculation to Swarthmore College in the fall of 2021. She has work published in *W-Poesis*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, and *The Fiction Week Literary Review* as well as a published poetry collection on Amazon.com entitled "The Road to Amour de Soi" that aims to empower young women through the notion of self-love.

Pinecone By Seirce Mhac Conghail
That out sprouted from the branches
The brittle egg, bouquet arranged
Neat as a skeleton, perfect, twisted watchcog,

Earth's clock, absent of a tick.
I press it to my ear and there is no sea.
I try to peel but there is no skin.
Rindless, that bone of fruit, a dragon's seed chrysalis is
Spiraling out itself,
Mathematics in pirouette,
Bowing.

Seirce Mhac Conghail is a student of English and Irish at Trinity College Dublin. Their work has been published in Dodging the Rain, ODD Magazine, The Phare, and Trinity Journal of Literary Translation.

Archaeology By Jennifer Chiu
— after "Meanwhile in America" by Christina Im

They tell me *you can do anything*, so I unlayer these photographs,
dig enamel into cartridge like any archaeologist.

My grandmother's grainy smile lifting from resin, warping
into something of a frown. Her lips sewn closed. When she opens

her mouth to piece fruit between her teeth, I look for ways to bore
fossils from her lips. Unravel the stitches keeping her

wounds mute. Gouge away every splinter and sculpt it
into myth like I've always been told I can.

They tell me to seek *history*, so I sink my teeth into the dirt for scraps
of what they might call revelation. Discovery. I call it

exploitation. They tell me that *every story is worth telling*, pressing
rounded metal against my palm. That there are always fossils

to be excavated. Skin to be lesioned into bruises. *There is no shame*
in heritage, they say. Yes, *there is no shame*, I repeat to my grandmother,

begging for any leftovers to turn fable. Her tongue knots, and I have
scavenged every cavity empty, so now I resort to bone. My hands vising

breath into strangulation, and I brush her skeletons unspoiled
and veneer them gleaming white. I have already bleached

them of every last word I might claim *heritage* or *history*
or *family* and sold them smooth. All the jutting edges

sandpapered soft, everything ugly and messy buried.
My grandmother's life claimed for my own, and I grind it

into powder to be capsuled neat and beautiful
down their throats. How convenient, their maws gaping

with hunger. *There is no shame in this*, I tell myself as I carve
penitence and gag on my own hypocrisy.

Jennifer Chiu is a writer from Memphis, TN. She has been recognized by Susquehanna University and the National Poetry Quarterly, and her prose and poetry are published or

forthcoming in Rust + Moth, Sine Theta Mag, and others. When she's not writing, she can be found admiring the sky or bullet journaling with one of her twenty-one 0.38mm black pens.

Bedtimes By Alicia Hsu

i.
Eight o'clock feels like a revolution won
leaving Seven Thirty on the ground like a ragged stuffed bear
grubby fingers grasp at a hazy moon; looks like butter, smells like wax
if only I was tall enough to pull it down by its cheeks.

ii.
Nine o'clock is dangerous territory, my father warns
but I wield excitement like a storybook sword.
I haven't yet heard of girls who hunt dragons;
perhaps monsters are afraid of red lips and sharp nails.

iii.
I heed my father's cautions at Ten
the stars smile sharper; their light sears my skin
I am tall enough to brush against the moon
careful not to dip too deep into his craters; they suck my fingertips
into cold shadows and horrifying emptiness.

Fear is waiting when I climb beneath my sheets
(as if they will protect me from the darkness crowding at my window)

iv.
I forget sleep, discarded like Seven Thirty in a happier house
I float in frozen space
with monsters who devour dragons and girls alike.

I climb into Eight for the smell of my blue blanket
for nothing tethers me to the ground but fleeting memories;
consciousness is a curse
and I miss my dreams.

Alicia Hsu is a Taiwanese-American junior at G.W. Hewlett High School on Long Island, New York. Her poetry is published and/or forthcoming in Euonia Review, Skipping Stones Magazine, Vintage (her school's creative writing journal), and more. When she isn't dreaming up new stories or escaping in a fantasy novel, you can find her watching nostalgic movies and taking walks with her two dogs.

to be black and sixteen By Suzi Peter
i feel more black than i feel sixteen,
as if sixteen is a cinematic dream that escaped me,
but black is my blood and the blood on the concrete.
it's funny that the times i feel the most black
are when bullets sink into my brother's skin
and turn them into tragic pieces of artwork
for the nation to marvel at for a week or two.

that's the black life here in america–
our lives are defined by our deaths.
we are killed as monsters,

our darkness misinterpreted.
we're resurrected as vampires and hashtags,
a pantomime of life, a pat on the back.
when we die again, we die in peace if we're lucky,
disappearing before we can be destroyed,
existing only as ghosts to the fearful,
the black and young who can't forget or look away.

sometimes, i wish i were sixteen instead of black.
i could be reckless instead of restless,
obsess over cute boys instead of dead boys.
but nightmares paint my future in despondent shades of pain,
my identity is sectioned off into acceptable or evil,
my innocence distorted like nighttime shadows.
i'm black first and sixteen second,
sixteen *for* a second.

when you're black, you don't get to be sixteen.
you age in tears and oppression;
you *are* your dark history.
there's only one story you're allowed to tell
and only one story that you'll become.

you live black, but not really.
you breathe black, laugh black, cry black, but
the only time a black life matters
is when you finally die black.

Suzi Peter is a teenage creative from the nation's most undesirable state, Tennessee. Her work has been previously recognized by Germ Magazine, Creative Communications, and the boy in her eighth grade Creative Writing class who called her writing "too cliche and melodramatic." She enjoys reading Young Adult literature, writing poems and short stories, putting off homework until the last minute, and isolating herself from her friends because she's always the first to reach out. Her primary sources of serotonin are going on long-distance runs and listening to podcasts about murder.

Fiction

New Truths By Ishita Shah

"I had dinner in Queen Elizabeth's palace this summer!"

Oohs and aahs rang across the classroom. All eyes were now on the new girl, no longer an inconspicuous figure in the back row shrouded in a hooded lavender raincoat. Daisy stood up from her seat and scanned her prey for the first time. She spotted the deer, wide-eyed, and she sensed suspicion amidst the serpents. The birds grew thrilled and chatty, and the bugs were fazed enough by the news to inch their antlers just a little closer. With a subtle raise of the eyebrows, she lured her game yet closer, and with a flash of her smile, the jungle was under her reign.

The charades continued that afternoon. On the playground, upon her announcement of her distant relation with Taylor Swift, Daisy had gathered an entourage. The girls chased her in clusters like puppies in a litter.

Her band was charmed. She told them about the time she sat third row in the 2016 Olympics. She boasted about the street in New York City that was named after her. She described what summer had looked like in Belgium when she lived there for three months. Each new fairytale drew a new curious face, and by the end of the week, Daisy was forced to implement a recess schedule to meet the desperate requests of her

awestruck peers, who yearned to stroke the fur of her newly imported Swedish wool coat.

But after Lucy Hall spotted the Old Navy tag on the inside of the woolly coat on Daisy's backpack hook, the whispers traveled in ripples. As Daisy passed them by at recess, the students hollered, calling her a phony, a wannabe, a laughing stock.

The girls began to observe Daisy from a distance. They watched her jump out of her seat at the tap of a pencil on a desk and bury her head in her hands when the dismissal bell rang. They heard her mutter to the tiles on the floor as if she could see right through them. They saw her claw and bite at air like it had slipped right out of her.

The girls conjectured. They said her eyes were hollow like lightbulbs, that the blaze inside hardly flickered. But Daisy could see it all. She saw monsters in the trees and shadows in her childhood swing set. She heard voices in her head, voices which told her that her ticket to the school fair was a ticket to Belgium. She couldn't make out the words on her clothing tags; she could only see fuzzy hazes of unfamiliar script and of a life forgotten. She was no longer Daisy – she was one with the voices.

The voices told her to forget about pills and problems and to kick and scream and pace. They showed her the underworld and took her to Europe overnight. They left her unfazed. They left her renewed. So, she let them consume her.

And she mumbled the truths in her sleep.

Ishita Shah is an aspiring writer from Texas. Her work has been featured in The New York Times, Polyphony Lit, and Positively Positive. In her spare time, she can often be

found baking with her family of four or listening to Christmas music (all year round).

Per Aspera Ad Astra By Freddie Coffey

10:41am, 28th of January. Smith walked through the threshold and set foot onto the air bridge. The door to the bright, gleaming rocket lay not ten strides away from him. He looked down through the bridge's metal grates. They were red. Through them he could see all the way down to the icy ground, several hundred feet below. It was cold. He could hear the rocket creak and groan and had to assure himself it was alright, the rocket always expanded and contracted when it was cold. It was alright.

He walked briskly across the bridge. He didn't look down through the red grating again when he crossed it. He didn't like looking down. It reminded him of being high above the ground, dropping thunder on the forest in Vietnam. He was glad that the windows in the rocket only pointed upward.

As he crouched to fit through the hatch, he paused in the threshold. Reaching to his chest, he removed a small pin. It was firm in his hand. On one side was emblazoned the word 'NASA' in blue. On the other side, that morning his wife had scratched the agency's motto. "Per Aspera ad Astra"– through hardships to the stars.

He brought the pin up to his lips, kissed it, then leaned out and let it slip from his hand through a gap in the bridge's red grating. It fell, fell, fell through the cold air for what seemed like an eternity. He thought he saw it land near the base of the boosters, but he couldn't be certain. It was too high up to make out such a small object clearly. It was too high up to hear it land either. The rocket was creaking too loud anyway. He stepped back into the rocket and looked out. He sighed. He paused, then pulled the hatch shut.

The ignition flared; its flames enveloped the pin. It melted into the ground. The Challenger rocket lifted itself into the sky.

Freddie Coffey is a rising senior at the Collegiate School in Manhattan. While now firmly a New Yorker, Freddie was born in the UK, and attended Eton College on an Oppidan scholarship until he emigrated at the start of his sophomore year. A long time poet and writer, Freddie founded and directs The Decameron Project (decameronproject.org), a non-profit organization that connects thousands of students, teachers, and passionate authors worldwide through the power of storytelling during the pandemic. Freddie is a contributor to and editor-in-chief of his school's literary journal, Prufrock.

Why the Kids Can't Sleep By Divinity Sykes

I emerged from my room around seven in the evening to grab a snack and chat with my parents after a long day of school and video games. As I opened my door the national emergency alert signal stopped my blood cold in my veins. Three endless, atonal sirens later and the announcer was prophesying the end of the world.

"This is an emergency broadcast," echoed that robotic male voice that I and the rest of the population have been conditioned to fear since birth, "Nuclear missiles have been detected and are currently inbound. Shelter in place, under furniture in the innermost room of your house."

He kept going, but my ears were ringing too loudly for the harbinger's cries to reach me. I stumbled out into the hallway, collapsing against the wall to keep myself upright. It felt as though my heart was beating so fast that it had begun beating slowly. The corners of my vision grew fuzzy, blurring out the family photos hanging up on the wall, and the soft blue glow of the living room television at the end of the hall.

Thoughts of my parents snapped to the forefront of mind, and I stumbled on weak knees towards them. My mother reclined on the living room sofa, listening to the emergency

broadcast in her bathrobe with a can of peanuts in one hand and her decrepit old poodle curled up in her other arm.

Dad was sitting back in his brown leather chair, his eyes only half open. I couldn't be sure if he was hearing the whole announcement, on account of his bad hearing. I stared at them from the hallway, my hands gripping to anything solid.

This was it, then.

This was how we died. Me, having just spent the last couple hours wrapped in blissful ignorance as I played first person shooters with my friends. My parents here with me, to the very end. Likely, my sister would call any moment, and then we could all die, the four of us, together.

I breathed deeply, and with each breath I started to accept my fate. If we were lucky, it would be quick. I simply had to be strong for Mom, now. I put on my brave face, tossing my long blonde tresses over my shoulder, and in the manliest tone I could muster, asked, "How much time do we have?"

Mom turned back to me, that sweet smile of hers decorating her beautifully round face. I made an effort to memorize every sparkle in her olive-green eyes. It took all my willpower to let her answer my question, before I broke down and curled up sobbing in her arms, as I had done in my younger days. Telling her and Dad both that I loved them so much, even though we never said it very much.

Casually as could be, Mom popped a handful of peanuts in her mouth, chewed, and once she was done chewing said, in answer to my question, "Oh, well, the movie has only been on for about thirty minutes now. Why, did you want to watch something else?"

As quickly as fear had rushed over me, it drained out of me all at once. Leaving a sick, but blessedly numb, sort of relief in its wake. I curled up beside my Mom, smiling weakly into

her neck, breathing in her familiar smell like oxygen. “No, no, leave it on. I like scary stories.”

Divinity Sykes is a senior at UNC Chapel Hill who is pursuing a degree in Spanish Interpretation. Writing is her life long passion and she is blessed with a loving family, and wants to thank them now for all the support they give. Especially Cedric, the inspiration for this story.

Philomena By Isabel Su

Mother has always been excruciatingly devoted to God and my imperfections, in that order. Saturday nights I stumble back home seventeen minutes-thirty minutes-an hour past curfew, and there she’ll be standing, statuesque in our kitchen, worry lines flooded by the fluorescent light, arms crossed under her chest. She rakes her eyes over the half-hidden bruise on my collarbone, the rumpled chaos of my skirt, the soft smudging of my bubblegum-pink lipstick, but says nothing.

In my hand, my phone is still open to a video I just took: untitled boy’s lips on my cheek, lips on my lips, hand possessive on my left thigh. I tilt the moving screen away from my mother’s dissection.

***

Mother had once been a *good girl*, in the suffocating Stepford wife sense. Her skirts probably never dared to ride up past the dimples of her knees. When I picture it, her mouth is always stretched into an almost grotesque eager-to-please smile and her hair is always neatly brushed into mahogany quietude. A girl with respect for authority in abundance.

Mother had once been young & unaware that a man would burden her with not only a lifetime of guilt and a yearning to inflict purple-blue-banana-yellow bruises on the pale expanses of her thighs, but also a child: a shrill baby girl loudly resistant to being controlled.

Philomena, she reluctantly named me, a woman once martyred, newly forgotten.

***

My mother, now, is relentlessly pious: knees bruised in homage to the ground, face strained with conviction as tendrils of moonlight filter through our window. Baptism by nature's incandescent rays. She'd surely crucify herself on the browning grass of our front lawn under the heavy dominion of both God and a late summer afternoon sun if only for capital-s Salvation.

My faith is irreverent, unhallowed, in comparison. I worship the simple act of being known: soft gaze on soft skin on soft sheets, a passing nod, an acknowledging half-smile. Loving scrutiny, no matter how brief. Unadorned appreciation in the neat squares of my Instagram page: made-up, painted-on face, body contorted. Red lips drawn up like a puppet's, back curled like a dancer. Immortality in the bleached-white glare of my phone, lust from the fingertips of strangers. I keep my real name far away like a taboo, replace it instead with something weightless.

She who stares coyly from my screen reminds me of the characters my classmates and I used to conjure up in the fifth grade, one-dimensional and grossly perfect. I use her to search for my own absolution: Fingers soft and assured around my wrists, hot breaths on my neck, eyes dark in my gaze. Releasing me from my mother's relentless expectations, forgiving my existence.

***

I am sixteen and my mother dreams of life before me and as me. Instead of her usual examination, she looks through my body, through taut youthful skin, through bright hopeful eyes, like I am a vessel to her. Her own dreams inflate me, set me afloat, and I fight to keep above the water.

Philomena, she reprimands, voice harsh and insistent. The way she says my name is always the same, tinged with a little bit of violence, dressed up in grievance. The list of complaints is long: *put down your phone. Straighten your skirt. Cross your legs. Have faith for once. Pay attention when I'm speaking to you.*

It's a sharp contrast to the way boys whisper my name: a little bit unsteady, a little bit like a prayer when my mouth is on theirs. Sometimes I feel like I'm sucking their soul away, filling my own vacancies with their generous affection. Their words vary yet are always really the same: *you're so hot. I love you. Let's go see a movie sometime. Here is my heart, let me have yours.*

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In seventh grade I learned about how some families used to drown newborn babies for the sin of being born female. Blue limbs thrashing in the cold. Hands closed around a tiny neck, a snap. Wails bubbling up from a scalding coffin. Wasting away into a husk.

I've never stopped thinking about how easily that could've been me or you. A different kind of immortality, and not the kind I yearned for: instead, the permanence of death without remembrance. If a girl dies alone in the woods and no one is there to see it, did she actually ever exist? We pay the shared price for our original sin, an eternal punishment. Eve plucks an apple from the tree: disobedience.

***

Mother looks at me like I am not enough, but I look away. My gaze slips unharmed from hers when the world sits in the palm of my hand, when a boy, hard/soft, blond/brunet, whispers like poetry/like commands, sings prayers to me as I do to him. Meaningless nothings, reverent in their delivery. His pulsing heart warm in my hands as mine is in his.

For I know the real truth to immortality: even as I leave my sanitized portraits floating untethered to reality, it is in memoriam that I plan to live forever. *Philomena* branded on countless tongues; bronze hair diffused in collective memory.

Isabel Su is a junior at the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut. She is an editor for her school's literary magazine, and her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from Short Vine Journal, Hypernova Lit, and Cathartic Youth Lit.

Lou Goes to Vermont By Ida Mobini

I learned how to play the organ two days before your funeral. It was the most last-minute of arrangements: Dad wanted me to play something at the service but apparently there was only an organ available. It made no sense. Nothing made sense anymore. What happened?

It was thirty minutes until my six-p.m. flight to Burlington. I vomited my lunch in the airport bathroom and then swallowed a whole Ativan to calm my nerves. There were two green boxes of laxatives in my carry-on. You never wanted me on medication; you said it would cloud my greatness. What *greatness*, I always wanted to ask, but never did. In hindsight I wished I had; it was always a desire of mine to get inside your head, to pick at your brains with my piano fingers, to figure out what it was exactly that kept you so meticulous and wired and always so impersonal. But I had robbed myself of the opportunity. I would never know.

You signed me up for piano lessons when I was five years old. Eighteen years later I stopped returning your calls. You left voicemail after voicemail—asking how was I doing? and where had I gone? and why didn't I tell you I was going to Europe? You discovered I was in Paris from my cousin, who showed you a picture of me: standing in front of the Eiffel Tower, wrapped in two coats and a gingham scarf, holding a postcard from the Louvre. Mona Lisa smiling at the camera like she knew something you didn't. You saw that I was dead-eyed, and clearly flirting with the possibility of never returning home. I remember the picture well because I had zoomed in on every detail, searching for signs of weakness—and I had done this for days, even, after Julie sent it to me. When I was very young, you taught me the art of self-surveillance.

I liked Paris, but also felt that the whole concept of the trip was lost on me somehow; first I wished you had been there with me, and then I grew unbelievably happy with the idea that you were unable to spoil it. The problem was that I was thinking of you either way.

The organ at the service was a five-octave chamber organ. I played the piece I'd learned two days prior, with the sheet music in front of me because I couldn't remember what to do with the pedals.

No one clapped. That was strange for me, in spite of the fact that I knew it wouldn't have been right if they had. I always guessed that I was, inherently, a performer—or rather, the thing that you raised me to be.

The reception was a groaning affair, but you would've loved the attention. Would've eaten it up like *that*. You know what I mean. There were sandwiches on the table and a cocktail maker, alongside everybody you ever knew. My cousins sat neatly in a row on the red sofa, dabbing gently at their eyes with tissues crushed into needlepoints, and in front of them were Dad's parents, who couldn't believe you were dead. "So sudden," they

said over and over again. “So sudden.” Eventually my old piano teacher came to me to ask when I had learned to play the organ.

“Just last month,” I said. “I wanted to *explore*.” It felt good to lie. She gripped my arm, tight as death, and waited for me to burst into tears—like I was some unstable widow, drowning my sorrows in red wine, and not your daughter.

I drank four plastic cupfuls of Diet Coke and thought about you, flipping through old memories like worn, delicate photographs: how you would sit me down at the piano bench when I was little and look over my shoulder as I played; how you threw a lampshade at my head; how you apologized afterward, and asked about my day; how there had been a school project when I was in the second grade where I had to pick a hero, a person in real life that I looked up to—and you screamed at me because I hadn’t thought to pick you, the immigrant, the self-sacrifice. I regarded the memories with an indifferent, albeit gentle touch, careful as not to provoke them. After all, you were already dead. In other words, you had managed to escape the last of my vitriol. What could I do now? What would change anything? You had a heart attack during your morning commute to work. Your car went, screeching, into the intersection. They say you died on impact, but that’s just what they say.

After several hours, the reception had shrunk considerably; the only ones left were the cousins and the in-laws, and in my pocket a shiny bottle of Ativan. I swallowed one in the guest bathroom—your candles were still there, lined-up by the sink, vanilla and sea salt, and I wondered, strangely, if Dad would ever replace them—and then I returned to the main room, hands in my pockets, eyes absentmindedly wandering across the picture frames hung on the wall. Family portrait: me, smiling like a girl; you, about to sneeze.

Meanwhile, Dad was entertaining the last of our guests with the tired story of how you two had met: on a ferry boat. Then he found me.

"Come and play something for us, Lou," Dad said.

"I'm fine."

"Marylou." His smile said please.

"OK." I slowly made my way toward the piano. Cracking my knuckles, I sat down at the bench, placed my fingers on the keys, and tapped out an unenthusiastic Chopin etude. Then your voice in my head, as if your ghost were there to inform the audience: *They call this one the "Wrong Note." Isn't it perfectly imperfect?* I heard my father sigh behind me and wondered what I had done wrong. Not just to him, but in general.

It could have been that I hated you. Or, it could have been that I missed you like a little kid misses summer vacation—that naïve longing that felt brand new, and heavier, with each passing year. Either way, I took two Dulcolax and an Ativan and, straight after the reception, went to sleep in my old bedroom, still decorated with polaroids and Martha Argerich; and I dreamt of the train ride from New York to Vermont. It should have been winter, I thought, but everything was green and shining. Fresh and easy. I looked out the window and saw trees of many colors.

When I woke up the next morning, I felt the effects of the laxatives. I shuffled into the bathroom, sat down on the toilet, and stared at my toenails. For a moment I thought I might talk to you—out loud, like they do in movies when someone is feeling particularly sad, or lost, or alone—but decided against it. I didn't feel any of those things. For a long time, sitting there, I didn't feel a thing at all.

It was nearly January when I returned to Manhattan. Everything was just as I had left it. What you'd like about New York City is that you don't need a car. I walked to my favorite bakery on Seventy-eighth Street and ordered my cakes: Black Forest gâteau, tiramisu, strawberries and cream. I bought a slice of each and carried them back to my apartment on the Upper West Side. You don't know where, and I can't show you. That's it.

Ida Mobini is a junior in high school living in the flat suburbs of San Diego, California. They have been writing since they could pick up a crayon. Currently, they work on their school newspaper and literary magazine.

Funeral Day By Samantha Liu

The biggest ironies about funerals were the fucking hats, honestly. The floppy-brimmed one dangling in front of me had this massive agglutination of black netting and feathers on top that reminded me vaguely of roadkill. While the minister with worm-on-a-string eyebrows went on about "death begets life" and "blessed are the living," the birds who sacrificed their plumage and lives to make that hat were probably throwing a riot in bird heaven.

I wondered what Jay would think of all these huffy men choking on their ascots or the minister whose mouth gaped like a fish every time he said 'Thessalonians.' I imagined him in his clean-pressed suit and polished shoes, fighting to keep a straight face. He happened to be really good at that—"years of practice with the Exeter profs," he said—but I could tell when he was laughing inside. His jaw would set and his chin would jut out, as if the laugh were a bullfrog in his throat which he was trying to contain. I glanced inside the casket to look at his white face. Not even a twitch.

The last time I saw Jay, he was packing for a charity mission to Mozambique.

"You know, just because you're an Ivy graduate," I said, taking a drag of my cigarette, "you don't have to fill the shoes of some old white philanthropist just yet."

He didn't reply. Jay had this brilliant way of talking through his silences. A quirk of his mouth, a pause, and you'd understand exactly what he meant. This one felt like a tether, drinking up your words and gently tugging on you for more. I took the cue.

"It's like, sure mom and grandma and, heck, this entire town thinks you're America's biggest darling since Shirley fucking Temple, but—" he raised his eyebrows at that, and I went on hurriedly. "—but the point is, are you *trying* to make yourself into a walking stereotype with this 'helping orphans in Africa?'"

He put down the shirt he was folding and looked at me. "That's the point, Reed. Everyone makes this about me, but it's not. It's about the orphans."

"So, the Catholic prep school valedictorian has been soul-searching."

"Maybe I'm a hippie after all."

"Tell that to your monogram," I said, jabbing my cigarette where his initials lay embroidered on his shirt collar, and I took satisfaction in the scraggly ash circle it left behind.

Jay's following silence was rare and resigned and final. We hugged good-bye and he set out half a world away to feed the starving of children of Africa while I discovered the wonders of rolled marijuana. Two weeks later, we got a call that he had been killed by four of the teenagers for whom he had just built a school.

"It's truly tragic, but not uncommon," the doctor had said. "A lot of the kids here have a lot of, ah, resent, for the white people who come here and interfere with their lives."

"He had a whole life in front of him," my dad kept saying in disbelief, while my mom shuddered silently. She graciously took a handkerchief from the doctor and blew her

nose twice, crying louder. I just shook my head in amazement. If I could by chance make it into heaven, I'd have to give the bastard a dollar for being right again.

Another month later and my mom was still crying next to me, at the funeral paid for by Jay's remaining mission funds. The minister had finished his speech and people were walking around, making an ocean of those godforsaken hats. I made my way to the side exit and almost got away with lighting a cigarette, before my dad clamped his hand on my shoulder.

"Seriously, Reed? You're at Jay's goddamn *funeral*. The trash can's by the other exit."

I rolled my eyes and walked across the room. When I got to the casket, I stopped. There were dozens of roses wreathing Jay's body. Nearby was a lady I didn't recognize handing them out, and she gave me one when I walked up.

"Oh, you must be Reed. I'm so, so sorry for your loss. If there's anything I can do… "

I turned the rose. It was black. "I didn't know black roses existed," I said stupidly.

"Oh, yes, beautiful, aren't they? They're very rare, only grow on the Euphrates, but all of us were so touched by your brother's story that we thought he deserved them."

"His story?"
"Yes, the one about the thugs in that town—oh, when I heard it, I just—"

"Beira," I said dully.

"What?"

“The town’s name was Beira. In Mozambique.”

She frowned at me like I was an afterthought. “Yes, anyways, he was so kind, your brother. Aren’t those kids horrible—well, all of them are, those not raised by our Lord. Anyways, we were all so moved and set up a fund to import them from Euphrates. And, oh… ”

For the first time, I looked at her face. She was smiling thoughtfully behind about seven layers of black mesh, as if she actually found the whole ordeal beautiful. “Yeah,” I said flatly, looking straight at her. “They sound really horrible.”

She sniffed sympathetically and patted my back. “Anyways, honey, I’ll be headed back to my seat. Your dad’s eulogy should be starting soon. But you take your time with him, alright?”

She drifted back, still with that affectionate smile plastered across her face. Her hat was one of the tiny stiff ones, but no less horrendous than the carnage of feathers I had been staring at for the past two hours. I wondered what reason she had to hide behind all that mesh, as if *she* were too modest to show her face, while there was a literal corpse, sprawling mesh-less and visibly face-up in front of her.

“What a fucking spectacle,” I said, turning to Jay. With exaggerated care, I tucked my rose underneath his elbow. “But you saw all this coming, didn’t you?”

I wanted to say more, but my dad was mounting the stage, and my shoulder was still sore from where he grabbed it. Instead, I turned to head back to my seat, where my mom was still crying. Her eyes hardened when I approached, though, so quickly that I had to wonder if she was only crying for show.

“Your dad said you were smoking just now.”

I shrugged helplessly. “I wasn’t. Well, I was going to, but then he stopped me.”

“God, Reed,” she said after a hard moment, “What is *wrong* with you today?”

I never got to answer. In that moment, the lady two seats down began screaming. My dad doubled over coughing onstage. I smelled smoke.

“Everyone out! Fire!” a man shouted from the back.

I didn’t need a second signal. I jumped up and ran, pushing past wizened professors and hunched old ladies to the exit. A couple yards away, smoke was pouring in great black gusts. The mahogany casket—Jay had always despised mahogany—had finally found a less mundane purpose and fueled the flaming mass that was now engulfing the front stage. While I watched the stack of ungiven Euphrates roses wither and catch fire, I breathed in the summer air, almost giddy with excitement. It was over. Even the old men were hobbling safely out of the building now, everyone well and intact except for Jay’s body. That would have already disintegrated to ash, and the fire department would never find the cigarette stub tucked under its elbow.

What was that for? Jay would’ve asked.

For you, bastard, I would say. *For the kids in Beira.*

Then he would give me a sad smile and watch in resignation as a woman desperately fanned her hat at the flames, only for it to ignite a moment later. God, funerals were hilarious.

Samantha Liu is a fifteen-year-old aspiring writer in New Jersey with a penchant for all things Voltaire. She thinks optimistic nihilism is underrated.

The Untouchable By Shreya Dhital

The teacher introducing me to the class did little to bring me out of my reverie. My head was preoccupied with anxiety. Not to mention, my new name was unfamiliar. Before, they just called me *chotu**[1]***. At least, the nice ones did. I shuddered remembering the other things I had been called.

"Ramesh, would you like to share something with the class?" The teacher spoke again.

I silently shook my head and moved towards the backbench.

"Ramesh, why don't you sit in the front. Here." She gestured to the seat right in the middle of the front row.

I looked around at my classmates. All eyes were on me, but none held the contempt and disgust I was used to. No one seemed to have a problem with me sitting front and center in the class.

For the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt safe. Here, they didn't know me. They didn't know where I came from. They didn't know the name I was given at birth. They didn't know who, or *what* I was. I almost felt like one of those undercover agents in a Hollywood movie. Yes, I had watched a Hollywood movie. More accurately, I had watched half of one while working in my previous landlord's house.

When the final bell rang, all students rushed through the doors. One even brushed past me. I winced, instinctively thinking that he would start screaming and cursing as the

others had always done. Then his mother would sprinkle some holy water on him before letting him enter the house. Embarrassment flooded my cheeks. When I raised my eyes from the floor, I saw that the boy had already gone ahead, unconcerned that he had brushed past me. *They don't know the old me.* I reminded myself. *All they know is what I let them know.*

The next day, when the teacher asked everyone to line up and proceed, everybody did so without a question; all seeming to know what was going on. After a few minutes of moving along in the line, I realized everyone was going to the temple, touching the statue's foot and returning.

"Ramesh, move along." A teacher said. "What's wrong?" She asked when she saw me hesitating. "Go in. It's *Saraswati Puja*[2]." She prompted me to step in.

I remembered what my father had told me before changing our religion. *We are Hindus, but they will not let us enter temples. Do not misunderstand, my son, for we are not against the religion. We are simply against certain people who relish in making us feel vulnerable. Those people deny us our basic human rights. In Buddhism, we can get the equality and liberty that we deserve.*

"Ma'am, I'm Buddhist." I told her.

"That's alright. Just go in and join your hands. Your religion doesn't matter." She told me, and I wondered if she would tell me my caste didn't matter either.

During lunch, I sat on an empty table at the corner, the same as I had done the day before. I looked up in surprise when I heard the rustle of another person sitting across from me. It was a boy who had introduced himself to me in one of the classes.

"*Aloo Paratha*[3]!" His eyes were fixed on my food, clearly in delight. "Do you mind if I have some?" He asked, but dived in without waiting for my response.

I kept staring at him in shock. *He was eating my food.*

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was being rude." He said nervously, assuming that I was angry at him for eating my lunch. He offered his sandwich in exchange.

If my thoughts weren't stuck elsewhere, I would've found it funny that he wanted my Aloo Paratha in exchange for his sandwich.

"No. No, it's not that." I cleared my throat, trying to rid my previous thoughts. *You are not him anymore*, I reminded myself. "It's just that no one used to even touch my food."

"Oh, so you're one of those people." He nodded to himself as though he had made an important observation. My heart stopped for a second. "Don't worry. I'm not judging you. My brother is the same. He can have my food, but I can't even touch his."

"I don't mind. We can share our lunch." I smile; the simple act of sharing food with friends was new to me. *Friends. Huh, I guess a lot of things are new now.*

"So, what does your father do?" He asked me, after telling me all about his father's business.

"He has a job in the Public Service Commission." I could hear the pride in my voice.

"That's so great! I heard it's really hard. My cousin attempted it thrice but couldn't get in."

"Yeah, it is great. We even got to move here because of the new job." I instantly wished I hadn't given so much information; it could lead to more evasive questions.

"New job? Is that why you changed schools?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Cool. I've always been here. It's kind of boring. What did your dad do before?"

"He, uh, he used to prepare for the PSC exams. He studied all day." I looked away. I was proud of my dad, but I didn't want to tell a new friend that he used to do manual labor at night while he studied during the day. It is hard for people to understand coming from a low caste, getting a day job is nearly impossible. After all, they called us the *untouchables*.

"Oh, he must be really smart."

"Yeah. He is." My father had always been wise, despite his circumstances. He had single-handedly changed our condition.

Dalit. My father told me it was just a word. A very negative one at that. Even its meaning was broken people. *We're not broken people*, he had told me. *We're just people who they are trying to break*. Although he had a mature mind, he made me change my name; said he didn't want any of the negativity to touch me. Sharma is a surname of upper-caste Brahmins, but it also meant comfort and happiness. He said that was all he wanted for me. Maybe, in this new life, it is possible.

Shreya is a literature enthusiast from Kathmandu, Nepal. When she is not busy with her school assignments and extracurricular activities, you can always find her experimenting in the kitchen and – of course – writing fiction. With great aspirations, Shreya is a daydreamer. She is always focusing on certain mere objects around her and imagining their stories in her head. During the lockdown, she has set goals to write as much as possible and have them published!

[1] Chotu – Literally means small. In India, it is a common word to address small boys.

[2] Saraswati Puja – A Hindu festival in which Goddess Saraswati is worshipped.

[3] Aloo Paratha – A bread dish popular in the Indian subcontinent.

Non-Fiction

Foreign Exchange By Justin Li

He walked a few steps ahead of me on the Bund. In one gust, the air smelled of the briny Huangpu salt water. In the next, it smelled of dead pigs and chemicals.

"Martin, look. This is the old side of Shanghai." He spoke out of obligation, like a tour guide, telling me about the history of the older architecture behind the trees and pointing across the river at the Oriental Pearl and the Jin Mao towers. I asked him how people got to the other side and he said that there were ferry boats and a shuttle tunnel with colorful lights and sound effects on the inside.

His voice was vague and apathetic. He wore Harry Potter-esque glasses, Adidas sweatpants with stripes on the side, and a grey hoodie, which he kept covered over his head. In his hand, the plastic grocery bag he carried swung with each stride, and I heard the contents shifting but couldn't tell what was inside. The wind blew his hood off and he rushed to put it back on, as if he didn't want me to see the back of his head. Unintentionally, I mimicked his reservedness, pressing my shirt down to stop it from showing the skin on my stomach.

He turned back to me sparingly, only looking to check if he hadn't lost me in the crowds. When I did see his face, he was not unattractive; his facial features were not

disproportionately large or small and his skin was neither perfect nor blemished. He walked cool, like an athlete. I tried to decide whether I had a crush on him or not.

In broken English, he asked me if I'd seen enough of the water, and I gleaned from the boredom in his posture that he was trying to tell me that he had. I told him that we could leave if he wanted to. He led me down the steps to the lower level platform by the street, away from the noisy crowds on the riverside. There, people wandered along a 12-foot wall of flowers. As I passed by, I brushed my fingers through the petals, which mixed into psychedelic waves of green, orange, and purple and stretched around the bend so that I couldn't see the end.

"This is the *Qingren de qiang*. It means lover's wall," he told me in a mix of both languages as he walked towards a bench in the square. "It's nothing special." He sat and opened the plastic bag, revealing colorful packs of Chinese coconut candy and yogurt drinks inside. "My mom packed this for you."

I reached my hand into the bag and pulled out one of the yogurts. The bottle was still fairly cold and dampened by condensation. The tart liquid rolled on my tongue just as I had remembered from my visits to China as a kid; I thought back on how my mom used to buy packs of the drink from the grocery store beneath our Chengdu apartment so we could have them with steamed buns or pastries for breakfast.

*

We took a cylindrical glass elevator up the Pearl Tower. Framed between thick cement pillars outside, the sky tried to be blue; the Shanghai smog ensured that it could not. His hoodie was black and he wore a bracelet, a braided one whose blue and white intertwined around his wrist. I caught a glimpse of it before he hid it in his sleeve.

At the top, with her hand gripped firmly around her father's, a little girl touched one foot onto the glass floor as if the panel might loosen. As I watched tourists point their

cameras downward to take photos of their feet floating way above the grass at the base of the structure, I wondered how many of them could stand on the glass until it would start to crack, and how many more you'd have to add for the floor to give way completely and cause them all to fall a thousand feet.

I asked if this was his first time up here and he told me no, that he'd been up here with his friends many times before because they knew that there would always be foreigners. He said that he didn't get to see foreigners often. I saw some American students with University of Michigan sweaters by the elevator, and I knew I didn't seem to be as interesting to my host as they were.

Again, he handed me snacks: rice crackers and lychee gummies. The river below circled halfway around us and moving through more city on either side, like the tortuous, wound up sensation of yearning for an attachment, with anything, but failing. Watching the crowd shuffle in front of us in silence, my inadequacy seemed as heavy as the Shanghai sky. I wasn't hungry, but I accepted his food and the nostalgia that it brought me nonetheless.

Over the next few days, he took me to other touristy landmarks during the day and sequestered himself in his room when we returned home each night. On the night before I left, we visited Jing'an Temple, a single street block of sloping gold roofs and traditional architecture among a hundred blocks of metropolis; the surrounding towers of metal and glass seemed to stare pompously down upon the temple. I wondered whether the attraction was built as another tourist attraction in Shanghai or whether long ago, the city had been carefully built around the temple. I'd like to imagine that it was the latter.

He bought us a pack of incense sticks from a wooden stand in the courtyard. After my great-grandmother died, my mother had taught me that I was to light the yellow end and hold the stick from the red portion on the bottom, bow three times, and place them in

the ash. After we'd both finished, we stood in front of the smoke for a while, watching the rows of tips glow.

That night, his parents cooked me a farewell dinner of red braised pork belly, sweet red bean soup, and other dishes usually reserved for special occasions. Against my host's mother's nudges and sighs, his father poured me a small shot glass's worth of a strong Chinese alcohol and a cup of the same colorless liquid for himself. He encouraged me to drink, which I did. The bitter taste moved from the roof of mouth into my nostrils and burned all the way down my throat, where it remained for the next few minutes. After I'd helped them clean up, my host disappeared into his room as he'd done every other day this week.

Left by myself in their living room, I figured I'd do some homework, anticipating my return to America. I almost looked forward to the emptiness of my suburban neighborhood and the familiar sound of my garage door under the floor of my bedroom, and being alone, still, but at home. I carried my thick, hardcover, history textbook from my suitcase to their kitchen table and opened to pages filled with images of the conquest of the New World. From there, I moved through each line, word by word, feigning reading. I underlined a date or two and circled some names to convince myself that I was really doing anything productive.

I had gotten a quarter of the way through the chapter when I heard my host pad his slippered feet around the table and pull out the chair to my left. I looked up at him for a second and quickly turned my head towards the living room. In the dark window behind the couch, I saw our silhouettes on the same side of the table, a row of vacant chairs across from us. We were close enough that I could smell the fabric softener on his clothes. He had taken out his phone, and the tapping of his fingernails on the screen became background noise. We did not talk or look at each other. In the hallway, a key clicked inside a lock and a door closed; I presumed that the person across the hall had just returned home after a day of work or school. Behind our reflection in the window,

the lives of other people played on the illuminated windows of neighboring buildings like programs on television screens. I couldn't quite make out the characters but I could imagine them inside, wiping down kitchen tables, tucking children in, and getting ready for bed. My host remained at my side until I got through the whole chapter pretending to read and felt weary enough to excuse myself. As I collected my books, he told me goodnight.

The next morning, I left China early on a packed United flight no doubt full of tourists like me, heading home. Halfway, I opened the parting gifts my host's parents had given me: egg custard tarts and purple sweet potato buns. They were nearly sickeningly sweet but I ate them all.

Justin Li is a rising senior at The Pingry School. He was born in New Jersey and has lived there his entire life. The recognition his writing has received include a regional American Voices Nomination and a national Gold Medal from Scholastics Art and Writing, as well as an Honorable Mention award from YoungArts. In addition, one of his pieces has been published in Issue 6.1 of the Maine Review. He also attended the Iowa Young Writers' Workshop as a rising sophomore.

Sukriti By Sukriti Sinha

In Hindi my name means beautiful creation. It means wisdom and grace. Flower petals and olive wood. the number seven, indecisive and unstable, a petal too large. A dark and dusty green, that of a deceased trunk. It's the jazz on the streets of sleepy Portland, the smell of burnt bacon wafting into the street from a dingy looking pub. It's rusted and iodized, like the skeleton of a façade.

Along with my house I inherited her name, but not her grandiose or whispering voice. She was the pure meaning of 'Sukriti', muted and unfurled like a cherry blossom.

symmetrical, with every petal a replica of the next. Open rooms and windows as though calling the overlooked with open arms. a soft breeze whipping the pale curtains, as though she was ruffling her feathers. An air of acceptance to her that I could never understand, let alone recreate.

A towering mother, who protected us from the storms outside, an entity you could feel safe with. A hearth for a nature, but a scythe for a mind. The numerous facets of the diamond of a heart that I could never excavate, my vision blackened by the coal concealing it. The raging winds of the tempest easily whipping me away into an abyss. An abyss of unspoken insults and barking hellhounds. That's how they did it, the storm clouds of uncertainty.

Soon she got weaker, as even titanium does. An air of acceptance mutating into an air of foreboding. Ceilings falling to the ground, walls caving in and heart flickering from the blow of the outside world until only the grandfather clock remained on the porch standing poker straight, showing how much time had really passed. Along with my house I solely inherited her name, the diseases of her old age and the drug to cure the malady that destroyed her.

My name has been twisted and turned into grotesque rip-offs more often than not, leaning towards being a block stuck in your throat rather than a whisper of mere air. In Sanskrit it means the trickling of water, the balance of nature, the fluid motion of a running cheetah and a soaring eagle. Sukriti churned down to Shukku. Plain Shukku. Ordinary Shukku. But no matter why the ceiling crumbled or why the grandfather clock stood unswerving on that cloudy day, I will forever remain me, myself and I. Sukriti.

Sukriti Sinha is an eighth grader living in North Texas. In her free time, she loves to read, write and play the violin, but her all-time favorite activity is sleeping. She was born in the

drowsy town of Portland in spring and moved to Texas when she was eleven.

(Inspired by Sandra Cisneros)

Equals By CC Avinger

"Feminism," Sherry declares at lunchtime.
"Stupid boys," Maria agrees.
From the other girls, consenting voices float above the table.
Biting my tongue, I pick at the table's peeling red paint, revealing the rusted metal underneath.
I remain quiet.

My brothers are not stupid.
My father is not stupid.

"Team," Coach addresses us two minutes after I've arrived at cross country practice that afternoon. "Varsity hits the forest today, JV goes to the coast. Girls, free run," he says.

Chatter fills the room as my fellow runners lace up sneakers,
I tie my laces, too, but
I remain quiet.

My brothers are runners.
My father is a runner.

"Chelsea," Coach calls, his voice echoing across the room.
"Run with the Varsity boys today." I sigh. I knew to expect this.
They're noisy as I approach.
I plaster a smile on my face, but
I remain quiet.

My brothers are brave.
My father is brave.

"So, how's the chemistry project?" I ask Tucker, the exertion of keeping up with a pack of local champions causing my heart to pound in my ears.
"Hard," Tucker responds. Most of the time I am scared to say anything at all because I worry that they won't find my conversation interesting, so at first, I am elated to have spoken.
Then, Noah turns Tucker's reply into innuendo, and they all laugh.
My face turns red from more than the exercise, and
I remain quiet.

My brothers are funny.
My father is funny.

"Hey, look at this!" Noah calls, and the boys stop running. Coach doesn't want us taking breaks, but I have no power against the group.
"It's a condom!" he says, and they gather around him.
Noah pulls it up to his elbow and the guys cheer, but, turning my back,
I remain quiet.

My brothers would know what to say.
My father would know what to say.

What am I supposed to say? I wonder, hugging myself awkwardly.
What's the cool response for a lone sophomore girl surrounded by junior boys?
I try to think of a witty comment. I want to be cool, but
I remain quiet.

My brothers could help me.
My father could help me.

"Hey, Chelsea." Tucker comes over, an apologetic look on his face.
"I'm sorry about them," he says, voice soft. Although I am grateful that Tucker has noticed how uncomfortable this turn of events has made me, he has only reminded the others of my presence. I give him a tight-lipped smile, but I remain quiet.

My brothers care about me.
My father cares about me.

"Hey, Chelsea," Noah says, his amusement obvious as he stumbles over. The others boys watch. "High five!" He raises his latex-wrapped arm in the air.
I shake my head. "Aww, come on," he complains.
Although I know a cool girl would have agreed,
I remain quiet.

My brothers are cool.
My father is cool.

The next day, Max spits a glob of phlegm as we run. It lands where my shoe meets the top of my sock. "Max! You spit on my shoe!" I protest. "Blech!"
Oliver grins. "What if it wasn't spit?" Another raunchy joke.
Max lifts his hand in a solemn oath. "I promise I did not have sexual intercourse with Chelsea's shoe." The guys laugh uproariously.

I walked right into that one. I shouldn't have said anything, I think, shaking my head, but I remain quiet.

My brothers are the noisiest people I know.
They get it from my father. My three guys are never quiet.

But why am I so uncomfortable around these guys?
Is something wrong with me?
Days pass and, as Coach requires, I still run with them. Every day, however, I remain quiet.

My brothers see me as their equal.
My father sees me as his equal.

These boys didn't ask for my presence.
Why shouldn't they be allowed to joke around just because I'm here?
But why does it feel so wrong?
Why should they treat me differently because I'm a girl?
Girls are not better than boys.
Boys are not better than girls.
We are, after all, equals.

CC Avinger is a high school senior. Along with editing her school newspaper, she enjoys exercising outside. A lover of all forms of words, CC Avinger is excited to have published her first historical fiction novel, The Angel Oak. Find it at https://www.amazon.com/Angel-Oak-Caroline-Coen/dp/B08KSMGK9Y/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=the+angel+oak&qid=1605304978&sr=8-2

Love and Other Irreconcilable Lies By Natasha Lim

You never thought you'd be here, but the clock hanging askew on the opposite wall reminds you otherwise. Its hands push forward the way you wish you could. *This time will be different*, you tell yourself in a last-ditch attempt to soothe this building anxiety. This could not have been further from the truth, but then again, what do you know? You're sixteen, and you left school for this. You could be writing shitty poetry in the back of physics class right now. Instead, you're writing shitty poetry in the holding room of a courthouse, white walls bordering you in. You wonder if divorce court is intentionally designed to be this bleak, this clean solemnity that signals: *We handle this like adults*.

So do you feel like an adult now? The severity of the present is jarring enough to catapult you back to playground days, back when setting the table for four wasn't a blasphemous sin. You're starting to regret ever wanting to grow up. You cross your arms and hug your backpack tight, hyperaware of the irony present between your falsified maturation and your awkward schoolgirl uniform. You stick out like a sore thumb in the courthouse, your adolescent disposition warning of a naivety these white walls haven't welcomed in a while. The way the hands of time mock you from across the room forces you to stew in your own rage; you fiddle impatiently with your phone and try to focus on the positive—this means the yelling will finally stop. Isn't that what you've wanted?

The judge waves you and your brother in, and this silent calamity triggers your fight or flight response. You've never wanted so badly to escape as you do right now, so you settle for dissociating out of your body (for running away like you always do). You feel like you just walked into an active battlefield—smug and frustrated expressions threaten to implode, and all you can do is try to find shelter.

He starts: I know this must be difficult for you.

You hear: I can't believe your parents brought you to this.

He drops: We've reached a separation agreement with both parties.

You hear: This is how love dies.

He pleads: I hope you can understand and support your parents.

You hear: You're the adults now.

You stare back at the judge, mentally present but emotionally elsewhere. You feel numb numb numb, like your feelings finally decided your wasteland of a heart was too barren, too empty; they packed their bags and you've been searching for them since. A prolonged silence hangs between everyone, but you refuse to relieve it. You've been expecting a catastrophe, some seismic upturn in the world.

But all you feel is a change in your soul—something shifts ever so subtly, so quietly that only you can hear it move. You dig deep and try to uncover what you've lost, but all you find is an emptiness where home should fill. Where no amount of love could ever parch your thirst for safety. Where love doesn't exist, clearly, because if it did, you wouldn't be praying for a reprieve. If love existed, it wouldn't be reduced to tan lines where wedding bands used to be, or the stack of settlement forms laid out in front of you right now.

Do you hear that? That's the sound of trepidation settling in your heart, of bitterness planting its seed in your soil. This unassuming placidity clutches onto you, but it'll be days before it sinks its teeth into you. You'll spend the rest of your newfound adulthood wondering if you'll ever break free from it, if time would ever lend a hand to liberate this fear. If love—the idea of it, the home you so desperately craved for— will ever mean the same again.

You walk out of that courthouse unscathed, but you're struggling to piece it all together. Is this what love is supposed to look like? You don't think you ever want to find out.

Natasha Lim is a psychology student from Singapore. She writes poetry and prose, and is an editor for the Interstellar Literary Review. In her spare time, she enjoys drinking copious amounts of coffee and reading books that make her cry.

Sweet Misgivings By Brianne O' Gorman

Guarded by trees and heavy foliage, dotted with bulbous lamps, a winding road covered with wandering leaves lead to the streaked pink walls of a hospice. Cahercalla Hospice; the scene to my childhood. Despite the smell of old soup and antiseptic, stifling in its pungency to a child as young as four, it was homely and bright. The corridors were yellow, like the few patients who kept their teeth. The hospice was the heart of my youth; it held within its walls my nana, a great area to play in, and all of the friends I had made.

I don't remember what she looked like, or her voice, or the feel of her embrace, but I remember the fudge. Rolled into tiny balls by my small hands and stationed upon the bedside locker like soldiers in formation. Nana loved fudge.

Mam and I would visit twice or three times a week. The nurses loved me because I was generally well-behaved and very cute. Sometimes I would sneak them fudge, too, but never rolled. Only Nana received such special treatment. She liked to call me, fondly, her 'little nurse'. The real nurses would watch over me if mam needed a moment. I never thought my early childhood to be strange. Didn't all children spend their formative years in a hospice?

I found out that most children did not, in fact, spend the first four years of their lives running along shiny corridors, weaving through the legs of kind orderlies and trading gummy smiles with patients. I found it even stranger when some friends told me that their nanas lived in their own homes, that their nanas didn't have fake teeth and trouble chewing. Their nanas could walk and talk and smile and sing and dance. My nana used a wheelchair and her speech was slurred, and when she smiled it was toothless but enough to make me giggle. I had never heard her sing. I certainly never saw her dance.

These things bothered me up until they didn't. My nana was special and I was her special nurse; that was enough.

***

The clearest memory I have of her is quite a simple one. I'm standing next to the railing of the bed, bag of fudge abandoned while I concentrate deeply on creating perfect tiny spheres of sweet goodness. Nana watches me with a smile. My efforts were always praised to the highest and I would glow with pride. Mam observes the scene with glistening eyes I was too young to consider.

One ball of fudge is swallowed, and another. Nana gifts me a present of my own, then. A porcelain Easter egg, small and pastel pink and covered in delicate white frills. I take it reverently, amazed, and watch as a frail hand quivers and removes the lid. Inside sits a rabbit amongst grass, a daisy in its mouth, ears perked happily. I stroke its shell and babble my thanks and carefully climb upon the bed to hug her.

I wish I remember what that felt like.

***

Nana died not long after and I never set foot in Cahercalla Hospice again. I often wonder if I missed it, and if it missed me in return. If it mourned me the way I mourned Nana. I

hope so. I missed her deeply but never understood where she went. Or maybe I did, and I simply couldn't think about it. I can't recall. I don't want to.

***

Uncle John was a man whom I knew more from seeing him cycle through town than from any actual conversation. A flash of grey hair, a quick salute, gone in a flash. In truth, the first honest conversation I had with him was when he lay on his deathbed.

Cahercalla hadn't changed. Same bend in the road, same obnoxious lollipop lamps, and the same gaudy walls. I felt conflicted; childlike joy from years lost warring with the urge to burst into tears and flee. The corridors were too cramped, or I had grown too large. It felt totally different. The essence of Nana was lost in the place I had hoped it would remain. I was mocked by the sign: *Mortuary*.

Up the steps. Legs of lead. Through the corridors, past patients unfamiliar and *wrong*. The nurses didn't smile with any sincerity. I nearly grabbed for my mother's hand like a scared child. I had never been scared here before. Not even when I split my upper lip on a glass table and it had to be stitched together. The nurses were there to help, and Nana had given me an extra piece of fudge for my bravery – what was there to be afraid of?

The scent of lung cancer permeated the room. The flowers by the window drooped sadly. Were they hiding, too?

My uncle lay in his bed, resigned to the inevitable. He looked weary. If I spent my days surrounded by sunflower-yellow and white trim while relatives visited and got their goodbyes out of the way before the shopping in the boot defrosted, I would look the same. A bag of fudge would have done Uncle John some good, I thought. Maybe I would have even rolled it for him, for old time's sake. Those little soldiers, standing *en garde* again. I thought perhaps the flowers would have waved a final goodbye if I had.

***

Uncle John was laid to rest in the same plot as Nana and Granddad. Wind and rain whipped noses till they shone like red beacons and camouflaged the tears cascading from heavy eyes. Dozens of flowers wept their sorrows as they sat by the tombstone.

Here Lies James "Jimmy" Daly and Catherine "Kitty" Daly, they warbled, *and their son, John Daly*.

On the way home we pulled into a shop. Bags of fudge hung on hooks. They stared as I marched towards check-out, as I shook in damp funeral clothes, as I paid and brought them home. Older. Taller. Hair longer, shoes bigger. Same scar on my lip.

I rolled the fudge. Same texture, same taste.

Bríanne O'Gorman (she/her) is a twenty-year-old Creative Writing student from Ireland. Previous work is featured in Neuro Logical Magazine.

Why Africans Don't Talk about Race but Blacks Do By Idowu Odeyemi

Being African is different from being Black. If you are an African, it means you do not get to know anything about your past, except that you know that your grandmother died due to malnutrition or any of those simple propositions your parents tell you to remind you that you are a product of a particular genealogy through ejaculations. Why is this? History has been excluded from your school curriculum, since the beginning of your primary education, because you are expected to see your ancestors as carcass of what seems to be of value and white men as the originator of what and where you are today.

So, you just go to the exam hall and tick the box that says Mungo Park discovered the river Niger, even though when he came to the town, women cooked his meals with water from the same river. However, Mungo Park is white and *everything a white man sees he names.*

You are African and you don't get to learn history in school because, today political leaders see themselves as failures. Old people don't want their young ones to know of their failures. Old men can bear no shame. Yakubu Gowon could not imagine his great-grandchildren learning that he orchestrated the pogrom of Igbo people. Obasanjo, too, could not bear the guilt of relearning that he was a commander of the army that attempted a pogrom. Therefore, here we are, living in the shadows of our fathers fear and for that, we do not get to learn history except if it is the history of America, history of Britain or the history of the transatlantic slave trade as explained from a very Eurocentric perspective by a European.

There are many things I do not understand: How somebody like Donald Trump, despite the pinkish color of his body, fits into the race of *whites* or how Barack Obama exhibited chocolate all over his body and he still counts as *black*. Human beings, most times, are wrong when it comes to descriptive analysis. An editor after accepting my poem in a UK based online magazine said I cannot substitute pink for white and they have to edit. I asked them not to publish the poem – they get to define me as black, despite the fact that I might be yellow, but I cannot describe them as pink, even though it is a very subjective opinion, because colonialism makes me unworthy of that. If that is not racial, then I must be too sensitive. Western validation should not be a necessary requirement towards authenticity of being African and African academicians do not care. In 2019, the Oxford Dictionary added some vocabularies and calls it Nigerian English. Nigerian and African academicians will reject a research paper that does not italicize such words like danfo until pink people said," it is okay, and we'll let the vulgar word count as English." That is imperialism and African academicians do not care. Most lecturers if not all, are

doing the work to feed their families and not because they have a major interest in changing the face of Africa educational system which is majorly westernized.

Being African is quite eccentric. You don't get to get annoyed with your past because you don't know it. Africans will not have time for race discussion because there is no time. The little time Africans have, they have a lot to fight already: bad roads, epileptic electricity, no salary, corruption, sex trafficking, climate change, bad leaders, terrorism, the other person at the neighborhood who they don't like because he/she just bought a car, patriarchy, poor water, poor healthcare… among others. So, talking about racism, with all these problems, is quite subtle. Neglect, therefore, becomes Africans ally when it comes to issues related to race.

The character Ifemelu, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's sublime novel "Americanah" tells a lot about Africans and race. Ifemelu does not identify as black, but just African, when she is in Nigeria. It is until she gets to the United States of America that she realizes that there are boundaries to one's personhood. Being African is different from being Black. Being African means that you live in a geographical place marked as Africa or furthermore, you came from the continent but you now live somewhere else, though your grassroots are from Africa. That is what makes you count as African and even though your British accent is fluent and you barely know that in your mother's town, they speak another language different from English, you count as African. So of course, African is different from being Black. Egyptian, Libyan and Algerian folks will rebuke the attribute of being Black because the Arabs have systematically eradicated the Black community from the social and political scene, albeit retaining them in the economic – labour- scene. Blacks in those countries now serve at the back stage curtain. Chimamanda Adichie emphasized the strangeness of transforming one's personhood from being African into Black through Ifemelu in one of her blog posts:

Dear non-American Blacks, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican, Ghanaian. America doesn't care."

With those lines above, Adichie systematically appraised the fact that anywhere you come from in Africa, when you get to America or Europe or any country that is dominated by pink (conventionally called white) people, for the pink people you have no longer any heritage that qualifies you as African. You have been initiated into the class of former Negroes, as Adichie stated. Because for white people, it is a privilege that you get to be in their country; to enjoy all the luxuries of their good government, who albeit, corrupt and poke-nose in other countries' affairs, yet, still take good care of their citizen's welfare, unlike the government of African countries, that all they do is steal and launder money abroad. African leaders are not concerned about a lot: epileptic electricity is never an issue for them to tackle; bad road is normal since they get to travel in luxury cars. In Nigeria, the country in which I am writing this essay, people no longer buy newspapers; the problem is everywhere for them to see: if you turn your face to the right side, you will see bad-roads, turn it to the left you will see a senator sharing radio for members of his constituency. Despite all these socio-political absurdities, Africans, due to insensitivity, are yet to develop resentments, excluding few who read books out of school curriculums.

The facets of racism in white dominated countries are so large. Providing justification for this assertion, former Nigerian Football Star, Jay Jay Okocha, said, "I do not know I was black until I got to Germany."

Africans do not talk about race, Blacks do.

It is easy to identify, as an African, and then Black if you live in Africa. One does not get conscious of the self as black until one gets to America or Europe. This is because Africans don't care about race. Even though Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a negation of another story that attributes Africans as irrational, and Wole Soyinka's poem *Telephone Conversation* is another, we opt to know that these writers were not conscious of their Blackness until they came into acquaintance with white supremacy and how it

diminishes being Black. In other words, their reaction to racism was not born through intuition but through acquaintance with Race.

This is the simple reason Blacks talk about race but Africans do not: when the p.m. news was reported, and you are in the living room with your white folks drinking beer, and the broadcaster starts reading a report about a crime, you start murmuring prayers that the person is not Black. Because one of the folks in the room, while trekking back from school to your apartment, said *most Blacks in America are into drug trafficking* and you'd tongue-lash him for not knowing much but saying too much. Now, he might just prove his proposition with just one premise.

Another reason Blacks talk about race is while walking to the first-class section in a plane, white folks are looking at her like *hey, girl, you actually don't know where you are walking to, right?*" And when she tells her white friends about it all they say is racism is no more and it is because of too much sensitivity that makes you think people, especially white folks, are watching you when you walk to the first-class section."

You will think you are just an African, but you will transmit from being African to being black when you travel to a white dominant country who psychologically initiates you to the class of former Negroes. So, please, after transmitting to black, while walking in pedestrian areas, don't pocket your hands. A cop might have a reason to blow your brain cortex with a pistol. And (s)he will have justifications. Justifications like self-defense. Some white cops may think you were bringing out a gun when they say, show me your hands. Pink people expect every Black person to be a rogue.

Idowu Odeyemi is a Nigerian poet and essayist. He is the winner of the 2019 Merak Magazine Annual Recognition Literary Awards for Poem of the Year. He was shortlisted

for the 2018 Nigerian Students Poetry Prize, and the Christopher Okigbo InterUniversity Poetry Prize.

Erasure and Fetishization: The Issues "Inclusive" Media have with Queer Women By Natalie Parker

Honest, thoughtful, and well-rounded popular representation of historically oppressed groups in the media is a difficult hurdle to overcome. Even women, arguably the most prolific group that has experienced historical inequality, are underrepresented on film and television, so much so that the Bechdel Test has gained popularity as a way to measure whether female characters on-screen do not entirely revolve around men. Dynamic queer characters are even rarer; the LGBTQ+ on-screen demographic is oversaturated with white, gay men who are either brimming with sassy one-liners or are deeply tragic. Many of them also die at the end, a feature that is perpetuated by the legacy of the Hays Code. Unsurprisingly, when the queer and female demographics are combined, numerous problems arise, creating a surplus of poor representation. Transgender women are so underrepresented that they are essentially nonexistent in fictional media. Lesbian and female bi+ characters do exist, but those characters are almost universally fraught with issues, three of which are distressingly pervasive: the "predatory lesbian" trope, bi+ erasure, and oversexualization.

Many queer women can recall a time when a straight woman made a remark insinuating that lesbians are naturally vulturine or greedy, and oftentimes such statements are upsetting to hear. The "predatory lesbian" archetype only bolsters the ideas behind these comments. In a nutshell, the trope consists of a self-assured lesbian "converting" an apparently straight woman. The novel, *The Price of Salt*, is generally considered the stock example of this plot, along with its movie adaptation, *Carol*. The cliche can also take the form of a young queer girl exploring her sexuality by kissing her straight friends without their consent, as in the Netflix show *Insatiable* and its character Nonnie Thompson. Admittedly, both *The Price of Salt* and the character in *Insatiable* are considered to be at least slightly more complex than just the trope, but the overtones

are still definitely present. Representation in this form is generally detrimental to the status of queer women, because it implicitly adds predatory undertones to their actions in the eyes of straight women.

The representation of bi+ women in cinema and popular culture is also faulty and largely contributes to the erasure of their demographic. There are many characters who are "just experimenting," or "don't want to put a label on it." Alternatively, they can be obviously bisexual and yet never say anything about it at all. Amy Farrah Fowler from *The Big Bang Theory* is an example of a character that is clearly bisexual but never actually addresses the topic. And although the show *Glee* is often held up as a paragon of queer representation, the character of Brittany S. Pierce is actually deeply problematic in terms of a well-written female queer character. Not only does she never say that she is bisexual, she plays into the "slutty bisexual" stereotype. The same goes for the show *Orange is the New Black*. Language like "she used to be gay and now she is straight" permeates the dialogue. The character of Beca Mitchell in the *Pitch Perfect* trilogy has an ongoing joke about her sexual confusion, but never actually acknowledges the topic head-on and instead treats it as a punch line. Bisexual erasure is a real issue, and it is exacerbated by the existence of characters like these in the mainstream.

One of the most egregious issues when it comes to creating valuable representation of queer women is their oversexualization. "Lesbian" is one of the most popular search terms on porn websites, and there is no shortage of queer women in popular media whose characterization is either the direct product of male fetishization or indirectly stems from it. The popular sitcom *Friends* falls victim to a litany of jokes about the character Joey's fetishization of lesbians, and Ross treats his ex-wife Carol as if her being a lesbian is a personal affront to him—a point which the show never fully contends with, thereby centering its female queerness around men.

Here again *Glee* fails, especially in its early seasons: many aspects of the relationship between Santana Lopez and Brittany S. Pierce are mildly ludicrous. There is a scene in

one episode where they share a fateful kiss. And people in same-sex relationships being openly intimate in the same high school corridors where homophobic bullying is rampant is momentous, but that point is completely undercut by the fact that Santana and Brittany kiss from roughly a foot away and pucker up a ridiculous amount. It looks exactly like two straight girls putting on a show for the male gaze. It was almost certainly not intended that way, but the director and the writers clearly did not understand how to depict queer female relationships in any other light, which is indicative of the larger problem of fetishizing lesbians and bi+ women. Poor representation usually begets poor representation if nothing changes, and the writers who grew up with poor representation then begat poor representation.

The television show *The L Word*, another classic example of a trailblazer in the field of LGBTQ+ representation, also has its own points of contention regarding oversexualization. For instance, many of the scenes are unapologetically sexual. This is not an issue on its own, especially since queer people having healthy sexual lives is a topic that is generally unexplored on film and television. However, the problem arises when these scenes become oddly numerous and graphic, and appear to cater to a male audience. People disagree about whether this is in fact true, but the issue is still there as long as people can interpret those scenes that way, because that means that dubious undercurrents are present.

Both *The L Word* and *Glee* showcase the pervasiveness of the problem of oversexualizing queer women. They are hailed across the board for their levels of inclusivity and pioneering natures, and even they fall prey to the same pitfalls. Incidentally, both also have poor representation when it comes to bi+ people, and the character of Kurt Hummel in *Glee* displays "predatory gay" behavior early on in the show.

Queer women of color have a particularly difficult time finding themselves onscreen; their characters fall prey to tropes more often and are much rarer. The majority of characters on *The L Word* are white, and those that are not are often tropes. The

character of Bette and other characters of color are generally depicted as more belligerent than their white counterparts. The show *Orange Is the New Black* also has a limited number of Black lesbians, and there are no bi+ people of color at all. *Glee* has a Black genderqueer character, Unique Adams, but her identity is handled in such a ham-fisted way that it does not really count as proper representation. Her characterization regarding her gender is muddled and inconsistent; the show conflates gender performance with gender identity and the writers are only ever vaguely sure of obstacles that she should face. One memorable scene involves the bigoted principal being so opposed to making the bathrooms inclusive that she dumps a Porta Potty decorated with a question mark into the center of the choir room of the high school. Such an action, while based in a real issue, is so utterly outlandish that it loses touch with reality. Clearly, the writers have never witnessed a real "bathroom battle," and Unique's storyline suffers because of it. Furthermore, treating bigotry in such a lighthearted manner is actively dangerous. Unique constantly faces a mountain of transphobia, but the harm done is often laughed off or ignored. Since her identity is so unclear, and since her roadblocks are so grievous yet treated with so much levity, Unique Adams does not feel like a person with real struggles, meaning that her character does not represent those people.

None of this makes any of these television shows or movies terrible pieces of media, of course. They are flawed, as is everything we consume on a day-to-day basis, and they deserve credit for the ways they did advance representation. You are allowed to enjoy flawed media—that being said, it is important to acknowledge and think critically about those flaws, or you risk internalizing queerphobic messages.

I remember when I discovered my sexuality. I immediately went on a hunt for characters I could watch on screen that would represent my experience as a bi+ girl. For the most part, I was only able to find static, oversexualized characters. There definitely were several gold nuggets: the character of Rosa Diaz in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, Reagan in *New Girl*, and, more recently, Amy in *Booksmart*. The landscape is changing, and every year

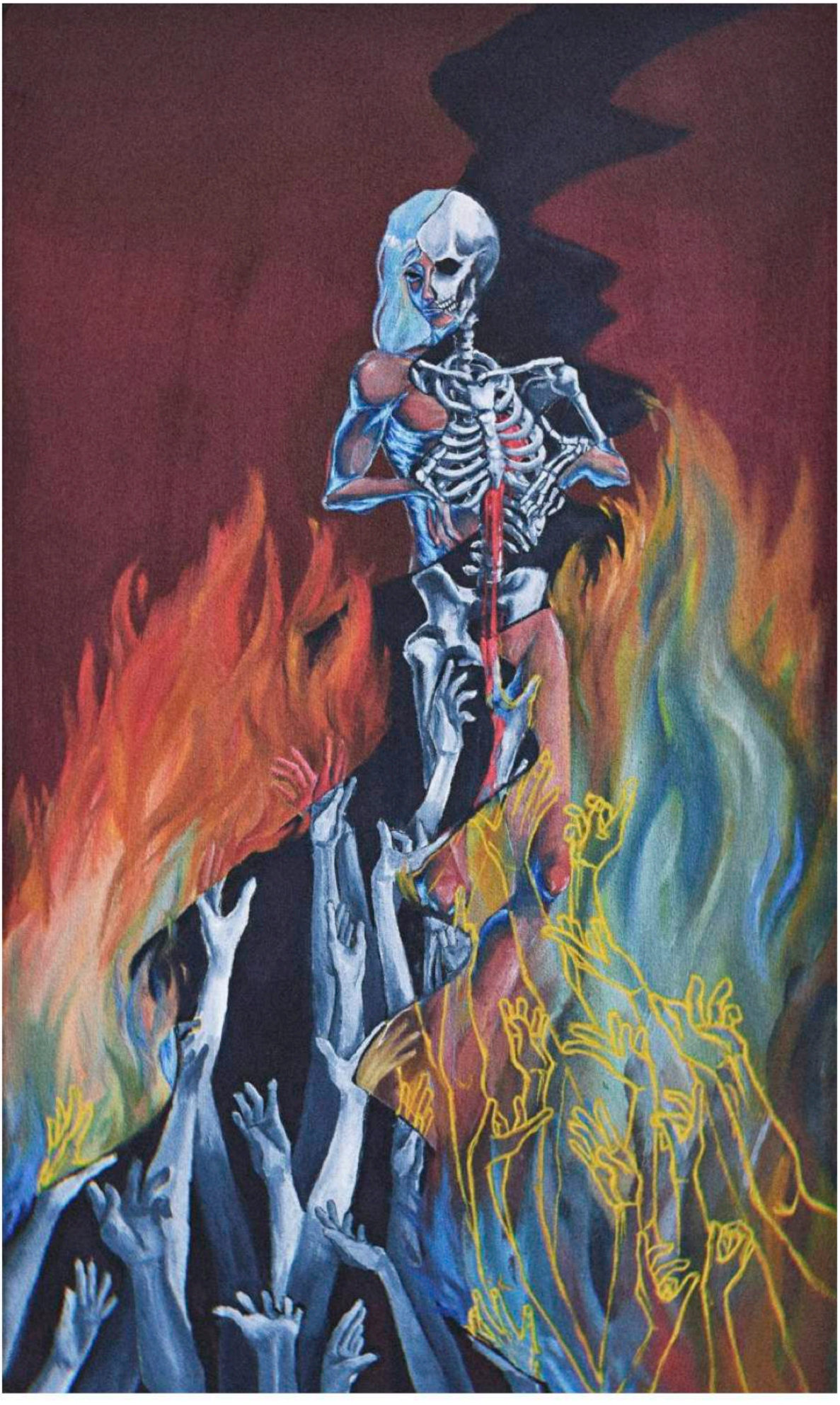
there are more fantastic female LGBTQ+ characters. However, Brittany and Santana in *Glee* were really considered the premier example of queer female relationships on television when I was exploring, and I ended up internalizing some of the harmful aspects of that depiction. I did not know what well-rounded queer female characters were because there were so few of them and, consequently, I suffered. When I was still in elementary school, I saw the first two *Pitch Perfect* movies and the lesson they taught me was to treat attraction to the same gender as a joke.

That is why representation is so important. If I had been surrounded by thoughtful and relatable queer characters, especially when I was younger, I would have grown up to be more accepting of myself, and those around me would have been more accepting too. As is, the media has a plethora of issues regarding representation, but, with more care from creators, they can be overcome. Again, the situation is improving. Shows like *Sex Education* feature a diverse cast of queer characters, even including an asexual girl, and that is a fantastic step in the right direction. Nevertheless, we have room for improvement, especially when you consider that the most inclusive media often cater to the same demographic and thus reach the same audiences again and again. We need more diversity across the board, and, until then, we all have to gauge even champions of inclusivity with a critical eye.

Natalie Parker is a longtime literature lover and current high school junior from Long Island, New York. Her writing has been recognized in a contest affiliated with the AAUW and her local library, for which she wrote a prize winning essay. She has also been published in the online literary magazine Inspired Ink. When Natalie is not writing, she enjoys acting in community theatre productions.

Art

Beneath By Junyue Ma



Beneath

This piece, Beneath is my first oil painting. I used extreme colors to bring out the contrast between the "surface" and "beneath". Usually the surface we see is not the truth. We will have to tear open the skin and flesh, look inside the bones, in order to see what the heart really looks like. Even if the heart is already bleeding, people won't notice as long as your skin is intact.

Junyue Ma is a sophomore at Miss Porter's School from Beijing, China. She started painting when she was a kid, and painting has become the best way to express herself and relax. She loves to share her work with other people so that more people can appreciate the power of painting. She looks forward to sharing more work in Blue Marble Review!

Isn't It Just Like the Sea By Seo Won Yun

Isn't it Just Like the Sea

This piece, titled "Isn't It Just Like the Sea," is another idea sketch for one of my theatre projects on "The Old Man and the Old Moon" by PigPen Theatre Company. The story revolves around an old man whose job it is to fill the moon with liquid light as he goes on an adventure to find his runaway wife. It is a story about finding and re-remembering love and sense of wonder in one's life, and one that resonates with me much more today as we live in this perpetual state of ennui and isolation. Like most of us right now, the elderly couple in the piece are all alone, drifting through in the dark night sea, not knowing what awaits them. However, through the brushstrokes, shapes, and colors, I hoped to convey a sense of comfort, warmth, and intimacy that exists in spite of the uncertainty.

Seo Won Yun is a rising senior at Miss Porter's School in Connecticut. She often draws inspiration from the works of Kurt Vonnegut, mythologies from around the world, and soft rock or folk musicians–namely Lou Reed and The Oh Hellos. Her work has been published on "Girls Right the World". In her free time, she enjoys making odd menageries, embroidering, making failed attempts at sewing, drawing, and catching up on Modern Family. She hopes to major in Theatre Design and Production in college.

Father and Daughter By Vyshnavi Viju

Father and Daughter

The father and the daughter shot is actually my dad and my sister. I have a lot of pictures of them walking hand in hand in forests and parks. It just warms my heart because I think their relationship is just adorable. This one especially held a lot of significance because my sister learned about Abraham Lincoln at school and has been wanting to visit the Lincoln Memorial since. She was really excited and was pulling our dad with her. Along with that, my dad was often traveling outside of the country due to his job during my childhood so I didn't really get the chance to do a lot of the "dad-daughter" things others did so it's nice to see my sister get those moments with our dad.

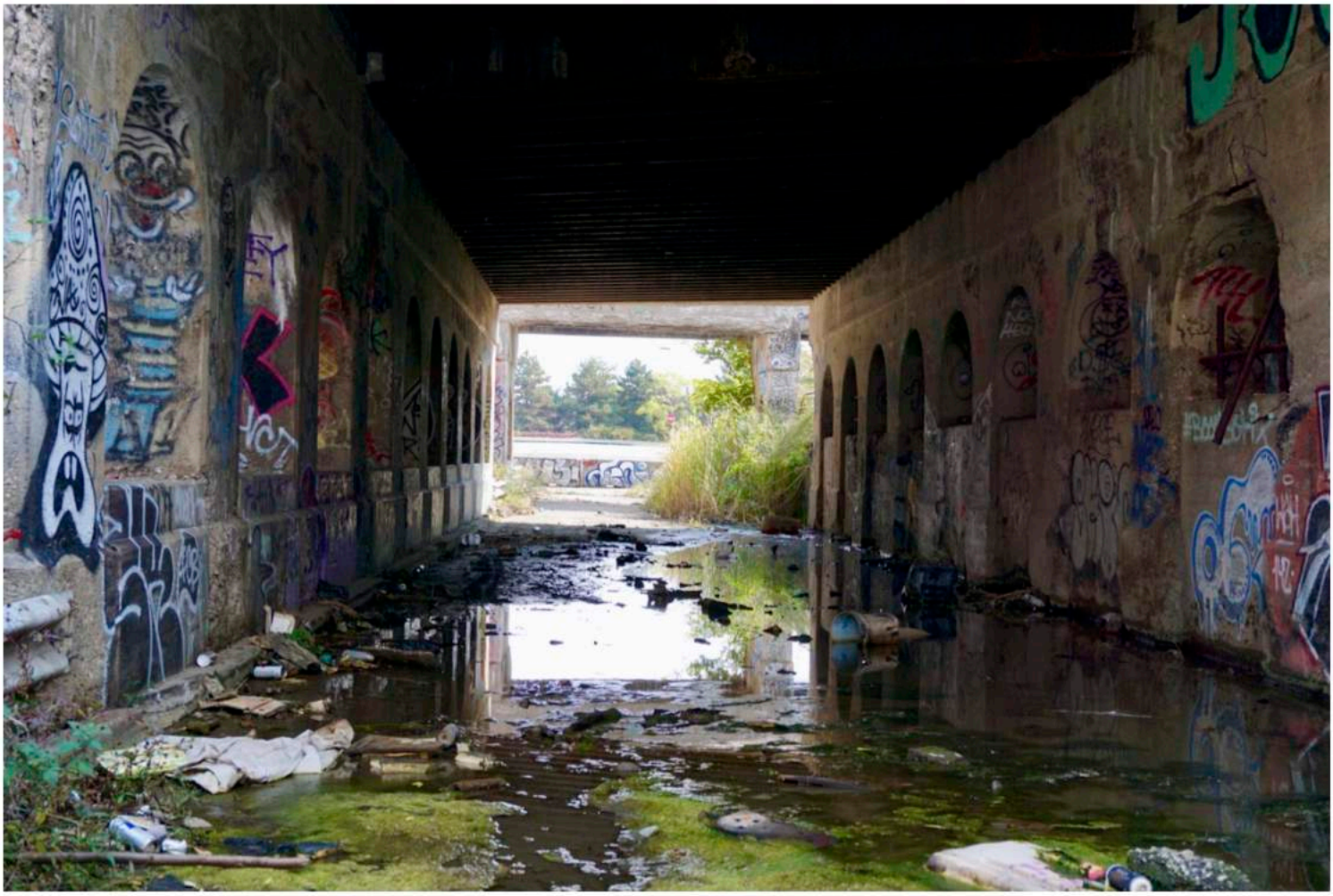
Vyshnavi Viju is a sixteen-year-old girl who enjoys photography and writing. She is a huge fan of traveling to new and exotic places and loves adventure once in a while, even though she would rather read about it if she can. Her favorite part about traveling, besides getting to experience new cultures, is being able to capture the weird, the beautiful, the awkward, and the downright funny moments on her favorite camera.

Little Tourists By Skylar Stewart

Little Tourists

Keep Moving Forward" though these words were originally made famous by the great late Walt Disney, Skylar Stewart a twenty year old from rural Ohio and an Illustration major studying at Ringling College of Art and Design in Florida still believes they ring true. She focuses on aspiring to that quote everyday of her life whether through her artwork or just living through the pandemic. Her art cherishes all the good in the world and emphasizing valuable lessons. Each work usually starts with the good ole' graphite sketch but she explores different medias no matter how foreign they are to her. Her family, life experiences, and upbringing are her main inspirations for her work. Growing up, it was a family tradition for her to watch movies every night while eating a bowl of ice cream. It is these moments in her youth she truly cherishes and relishes as she traveled with her family to different worlds where anything was possible. It is her dream to instill this idea of family and possibility into every child or the child within us. She would like to be able to say her artwork made a child laugh, a mother cry, or even a grandpa smile.

Quotidian Moments By Juna Hume Clark



Reflecting Pools

Forgotten Factory

When you see Detroit and Ypsilanti in the news at all, it's usually for something negative. People who don't live here only see these cities as the media portrays them—violent, impoverished, and ruined. This narrative is what the world has come to expect from my city. The smaller presences are easily lost when no one takes the time to notice them. I suspect part of why we often walk right past places that embody tenderness in "bad" cities/neighborhoods is because our bias holds us back. We don't expect beauty from such destinations, so we are blind to it. I felt the need to capture all the places you'll never see on a screen. The unconventional wonders I see everywhere when I walk around. I want to elevate these spaces to the status of monument. Monuments are usually thought of as state sanctioned statues of "heroes" or war scenes. Stone structures that seem to speak down to you. My monuments reflect the collective mind of the people living here. They embrace juxtaposition where the natural parts of the city meet its industrial side. This overlap creates some of my favorite new monuments.

Juna Hume Clark is a sophomore at Washtenaw International High School in Michigan. She is a passionate artist and activist who has had art and writing published by Black Ink, Root & Star, Pank Books, and Stone Soup. She is currently working with Claudia Rankine on a Young Person's Citizen.

An Indian Doctor in Covid PPE By Afresh Frankincense

Indian Doctor in Covid PPE

Afresh Frankincense is twelve-year-old and in Class 7th. He's a child art-prodigy and writer from Odisha and lives in Hyderabad in South India. Though he loves math and science so much, art has a special place in his heart. His work appears or forthcoming in The Elephant Ladder, Moonchild Magazine, The Celestal Review, The Ekphrastic Review, Kids 4G and elsewhere.

Book Review

Brave New World By Tara Awate

A dystopia wherein all the citizens are forever happy and content, —can it even be called a dystopia? This is the theme that Huxley plays with throughout the novel *Brave New World*. Unlike other totalitarian novels, here, stability is achieved by deluding the citizens from reality and drugging them into happiness. Promiscuity is the norm, families

no longer exist, and children are reared in large factories where they are conditioned by birth to love their drudgery and hate nature and books.

All citizens are satisfied, thanks to *Soma*– a hallucinatory euphoria inducing drug available on demand. It is only Bernard Marx, (a brilliantly done anti-hero) who feels ill at ease. And it is through this dissatisfaction that the plot is kickstarted. He has to struggle to not give in to this morally corrupt world and be true to himself.

Huxley paints a vivid portrait of his world, describing it with harrowing detail. It doesn't sound so bad, when the governments agenda is only to keep the people happy and be mindless consumers, does it? It is only as Huxley walks us through what the people lose and are ignorant of, in order to attain that everlasting state of bliss, when we marvel at the sheer brilliance of the premise.

Far away in America the old way of life continues of which John (the main character) is a part. John, coming from very unique circumstances, is very derisive of the civilized life. He is often extreme in his actions and character, very much in stark contrast to the world, to the point of being unreasonable.

While reading this book, I came face to face with life's greatest questions of which Huxley does an impeccable job of answering. As I read, my carapace of long held beliefs and accepted norms and values was slowly ripped away in short painful successions. By making bold statements about how a life should be lived (through each character's point of view) Huxley mercilessly uproots the dormant thoughts of existentialism, musings on the meaning of suffering, traces of nihilism and the subsequent allure of hedonism that reeked in the attic of the mind and brings them to limelight.

Through the fleshed-out characters, all these ideologies struggle against each other and within me,— each character representing a different school of thought.

Though it seems blatant what Huxley himself stands for, he nevertheless presents meritorious arguments both for and against his 'brave new world' solely through his characters. At one point, it had me considering whether I would want to inhabit this world instead of immediately dismissing it as vile.

The society is not a blatant dystopia which is what makes it so compelling and haunts you days after reading it. There are no uprisings, no unrest, all people are happy.

The book had me hooked for the themes it explored more so than the story itself. But there is still enough suspense and conflict to keep you going.
