

Issue 22
June 2021



Editor's Note By Molly Hill

YOU KNOW WHAT I'VE NOTICED,
HOBBES? THINGS DON'T BUG
YOU IF YOU DON'T
THINK ABOUT THEM.

SO FROM NOW ON, I SIMPLY
WON'T THINK ABOUT ANYTHING
I DON'T LIKE,
AND I'LL BE
HAPPY ALL THE
TIME!

DON'T YOU THINK
THAT'S A PRETTY
SILLY AND
IRRESPONSIBLE
WAY TO LIVE?

WHAT A
PRETTY
AFTERNOON.



Calvin and Hobbes
(by Bill Watterson)

June 2021

Issue 22

Dear Readers and Writers:

I've never been a fan of the word *closure*, — same goes for *journey*, or summative statements like *my takeaway*, *all in all*, or *at the end of the day*. Yet it's hard to ignore the urge to reflect on what we've all been through over the past year. * While some might claim they've emerged from 2020 a bit more insightful, with a deeper sense of gratitude and compassion, it's hard to experience that basket of virtues without also feeling the lingering pang of loss, the still simmering sense of anxiety, and more than a hint of bewilderment and apprehension about what comes next.

In the midst of this possible-post-Covid, mid-vax, no more mask wearing era — we present our June 2021 issue.

Remember pre-Covid summer movies? THAT feeling, — you and your friends in the air-conditioning with a tall tub of popcorn drenched in butter, a blue raspberry slushie, or the XL box of Milk Duds? In the dark hush of the multiplex, the outside world receded for a few luxurious hours as you fell into the thrall of the story. Lights dimmed. Curtains opened. And as you settled back in your seat you also kind of *leaned* forward eagerly awaiting what was to come.

This is our 22nd issue, but that movie theater feeling is always what we're going for. Anticipation and reward, the story with the surprise twist, the essay that punctures the way you used to think about something.

Pull us up on your phone from your hammock or Adirondack, — scroll and lean in. Escape.

Molly Hill

Editor

*Resisting the urge to provide *closure*, we instead offer comfort from some of our favorite philosophers: Calvin and Hobbes.

Poetry

Minnows By Samuel Adeyemi

I used to have this dream where my father tosses us into the ocean's blue belly, & when we try to scream, we would only scream water—language as bubbles floating out from our mouths. Of course, it is nothing but an outcome of worry. I am still the first child of a marriage waltzing on the nape of a precipice, & like some broken souvenir, my mother still keeps the cursed family name. They still sit beside each other in church while every God I know dies in my throat. Swear to me you will not let either of them touch this poem. Once, they tried to pray my worry away, built a chapel in my room, used my pillows as cymbals. & while they uttered each prayer, I refused to permit the holy words, refused to *amen* my soft exorcism. It is not cleansing but love I desire. Husband, take your wife & flower a kiss upon her head. Wife, take your husband & pluck out the sorrow from his lip.

Samuel A. Adeyemi is a young writer from Nigeria. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Palette Poetry, Frontier Poetry, 580 Split, The Maine Review, Leavings Lit Mag, Kissing Dynamite, The Shore, Jalada, and elsewhere. When he is not writing, he enjoys watching anime and listening to a variety of music. You may reach him on Twitter and Instagram @samuelpoetry

First Born By Divya Mehrish

There is a folded photograph on the vanity and a daisy
tucked above my right ear and I'm waiting for the woman

who birthed me to claim my childhood in unfiltered
motherness. In my mouth, her embrace tastes like a shot

of raw apple cider vinegar—sour and hollow with a touch
of sweet. I know that it's good for the body, but it burns

the throat as it goes down. My mother's hot love has never
been motherly. Her voice is loose and her lids are heavy

and her dreams are steely-eyed. All I want is an angel
to drape a shield of tongued sleep over my flat chest

and shower me with golden kisses and golden light.
All I want is to be lulled to sleep by a prayer sung

like a summer breeze across parched lips. All I want
is to learn how to mother a life too young to adore

anyone but the creature who nursed it. All I want
is to learn how to love and how to be loved. Mama,

I've been waiting for you to fall in love with my eyes
and my body and my voice since the day I watched

your uterus convulse into my baby brother's existence.
Ravenous for a man's protection, your lips immediately

imprinted on his sickly yellow skin. That drab morning,
you produced the child who would one day let you be

a child again. Mama, I'm sorry I am a daughter. Mama,
I'm sorry I am you, but motherless. Mama, I'm sorry

I have nothing to offer you save my thin frame and a pair
of swollen breasts that pound each other in the wind

like the fists of a big sister jealous of her infant brother.
Mama, I want you to know that I love your son despite

the fact his existence negates everything I am worth. Mama,
for eighteen years, I've been waiting for you to choose me

and place me, gently, into your curated museum of prized
possessions. Mama, let me be peaceful in your arms. Mama,

tell me everything will be okay. Mama, tell me you wanted
me to be born. Mama, please just tell me that I am enough.

Divya Mehrish is a writer and student at Stanford University. Her work has been recognized by the National Poetry Competition, the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award, the Scholastic Writing Awards, and the Columbia College Chicago's Young Authors Writing Competition. Her writing appears in Sojourners, PANK, Coastal Shelf, Prairie Margins, Broken Pencil, Roadrunner Review, Ricochet Review, Polyphony Lit, Tulane Review, and Amtrak's magazine The National, among others.

Ode to Anxiety By Melanie Lau

ode to the dust bunnies on the bathroom tile / the
bleached toilet seat / the white lights / the warm water
setting of the shower faucet / steam drifting through the
rungs of the curtain / the sting of feeling on frozen hands

ode to the clothes on the floor / unmade bed / catch of a
sweaty duvet against sticky skin / naked body wasting /
waiting for the evening to end / sinking into the ground /
wet hair rotting in a tea towel / burial tease

ode to the spiral in a small room / tremors / chattering
teeth / the storm in the calm / how the dark is deadly / the
sanity is throttled / the throat closes up / and the night
burns / can't get enough breath / gasping for safety

ode to the something bad that might happen / the
something bad that might happen right now / the

something bad that might happen to me right now / the
something bad that is me right now / the bad / the me

Melanie Lau is a writer from Honolulu, Hawaii. She focuses on fiction, with a love for magical realism and low fantasy, but she dabbles in nonfiction and poetry too. She is currently pursuing a BFA in creative writing at Emerson College.

God in Summertime* By Haniya Shariq Khan

In the afternoon time becomes
the oil dripping off flatbread fresh
from the stove in my childhood home.
We don't have language for those fifteen minutes between
the muezzin's exhales. All we have is
the phlegm rattling in his throat and the verse:
Say, God is one, God is refuge.
Repeat it to the black stone
in the land of your prophet.

For a long time, it used to be full of idols, that stone,
back when the Arabs worshiped the Three Daughters
but you won't find their names anywhere these days.
If I were a black stone, who would I have carried?
Yes, I see the idols now: stupid little girls made of stacked pebbles.
Which apostle will come to knock you down, child?

Say, God is death, God is rebirth.

O teenage bloodstain,

You teeter between saint and sinner,

This world and the next.

Which pagan will come to put you back together, o pile of stones?

Haniya Shariq Khan is fifteen years old and lives in Lahore, Pakistan. In her spare time, she likes writing stories nobody will ever read, doing macrame, and practicing her embroidery.

**The poem is mostly about the death of the old self and religion is my metaphor of choice. It takes a lot of inspiration from my Muslim roots and my fascination with pre-Islamic Arabia. In the religion of pre-Islamic Arabia, the Three Daughters were the goddesses Al-Manat, Al-Lat, and Al-'Uzza, daughters of the chief god, Hubal. They, along with the rest of the pantheon, were worshipped at the Kaaba (which is also referred to in the Qur'an as the black stone), which is something that's always struck me as ironic because the Kaaba is considered the holiest place in the world for Muslims but it once housed the gods of another people. So, I use the Kaaba as an allegory for change – maybe someday it'll be ironic that I was this way, because I'll be completely different in the future.*

The stacked pebbles are a reference to the way some historians believe indigenous Arabian idols may have looked. Some were apparently represented by circles of raised stone, others were carved out of a singular slab, and others still as cairns. I was pretty fascinated by the idea of cairns, since in theory you could just go and knock it down, but pure faith prevents you from doing so. When I refer to myself as carrying idols made of stacked pebbles, I'm talking about how flimsy my beliefs are, how easily you could collapse them. The apostle coming to knock

them down is a reference to the way thousands of idols were destroyed with the rise of Islam and its prophet (PBUH). So, who's going to come and change my outlook on life?

Start Line Standards By Charlotte Moon

Ticking through seconds
the clock mocks
my mind grinding past duds,
discarding one good idea after another.

Pens scratch.
Keys clack.
Pages Flip,
filling with compelling sufficiencies.

The girl across from me is writing
too much. I glare at her.
Label her a suck up to ease my mind.
I bet it's bad whatever she's writing.

I'm a thinker.
I'm busy.
I'm sleep-deprived.
Inspiration hasn't struck.

The second-hand screams,
reminding me of extra-long blocks
two hours
before I can escape into the safety
of other priorities.

I shift, uncomfortable, forced to sit and examine my shortcomings.

Mediocrity and bad work habits

a poem due

about yesterday

I'm scared

to tarnish a perfect mark

even a perfect zero over zero

Why did I write better poems last year

when all I've got now are scribbles?

How did I play harder piano pieces

when I was nine than I do now?

When did I get so damn scared of failure?

Why do I care so much?

So set on perfection I can't commit

and here I sit.

Writing about my feelings.

Pathetic.

What I need is an idea.

An ok idea.

Any idea.

Why can't I—

Charlotte Moon is a Vancouver based writer who has published fiction in the Tricities News. She enjoys the seasons, making music, and the rush of adrenaline induced from

being chased by Canadian wildlife.

Welcome to our Weekend Paperclip Parade By Anandita Abraham

crimson pincer party
we dance in indigo skin,
bathe in cloth-covered strobe lights, flood
highways and there's nowhere to put all of

this. I'm going to cry, you say to graffiti,
the moonlight mumbles something
incoherent, a single honey-soaked
wing blooms from spine.

We drive so far and distance
fill cavity, greet curious smiles with
tongues blue and insecurities bleeding
from headlights like flash mob – loud, occupying,

unannounced. We know the future
philosophers will be rib-caged and
smoked, so we skip meals.

We had promised to stop groping for closure
in the dark, stop saying my to
whoever would listen. Time to desire shiny
objects, storefront possibilities, checklists.

For so long, our mothers were nails
hammered into obstinate cement. Iron
rusts to powder, bends under all
these wreaths. Another

box to tick. At dawn we are our
genes, scrambled and speed-walking
In open-ended circles, peaks of mountains.
Hold up your rods, demands Hell

Stride into a storm. Hope to be struck
. Do it on repeat. Let your grins
be sirens, mid-funeral like
hypothesis being tested – absurd, giggling, painfully

unapologetic. You'll forgo your name, coat and
fruits. Who cares? You are still
floating upwards, in colour too.
The first time you saw this world, you

Bawled. The least you could do is explain
Why

Anandita is a seventeen-year-old self-proclaimed poet and writer living and studying in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Her work has been published by Bitter Melon Magazine, in the International Human Rights Art Festival's Youth Anthology, and she recently placed first in a national poetry slam.

In her free time she enjoys debating with unassuming strangers on current issues and alternative rock music.

Report By Amy Wolstenholme

Good morning / someone you know is
probably dead. Have you checked yet? /
It's your fault / If you followed /
If you didn't follow / What the government
said / Blame someone else / We did
everything right / Best in the world /
Top of the line / But someone you know is
probably dead. Have you checked yet? /
We follow the science / It's not our fault
/ Tests are readily available / Next month /
America is burning / It's a boy /
How do you identify? /
Tick male / tick female / tick OTHER /
What do you mean other?
/ Were you born here? / There are migrants
dying in the channel / PEOPLE /
What do you mean people? / Someone
you don't know is probably drowning /
There's no need to bother checking.
The fisherman pull skulls from the deep /
/ all the fish are swimming elsewhere /
the scientists who cry *extinct* will be
inexplicably missing this evening.

Amy Wolstenholme is a scientist by day and a poet by night, originally from the beautiful Jurassic Coast. Whether slicing up a genome or carving out a stanza, her work comes from a place of awe and love for the natural world. Her recent works can also be found in Visual Verse, Crow & Cross Keys and in several places on the Young Poets Network. She can be found at [@AmyWolstenholm3](#) on Twitter.

In the Trees By Hannah Kleinkramer

In the cara cara trees
I walk down the row and stomp
on oranges rotting in the dirt;
the guts slide across the treads of my Timberlands.

I pick a shiner, twist it off the stem,
dig my fingernails into its peel,
tear off the rind and pith
and take a bite.

I look down and see the miles of tubing
and remember that day...

My dad and I were checking the irrigation;
We followed tubing up the rows
in between the trunks and weeds.

I knelt to fix an emitter.
My dad turned to me and said,
“I got the results back from my biopsy;
It came back positive.”

I nod my head, and we continue checking sprinklers.

I manage to focus by counting trees

And finishing off the row...

I take another bite of the cara cara

And look to the dirt.

There's another orange in the path of my boots

and I stomp down.

Hannah Kleinkramer is twenty years old and is an English major currently attending Reedley Community College in California. She enjoys writing poetry and short fiction stories.

3:45AM Yellowstone Park By Leigh Banner



3:45AM Yellowstone

The air is black when I unzip my tent
I step quietly on wet moss
into early morning mist
Into a world as still as stars.

The river reaches through the canyon
Deep red slides slowly into pink
And mixes with hues of blue.

At the water's edge,
I breathe in pine needles
and the soft cedar bark

My kayak rests
belly up

I pack the inside with a light load
And wade into shimmering shallows
I push off hoping to beat the wind and ease into the glide

Gentle waves knock the bow
I float to the center

The shore fades away
Orange sky meets wide water blue
in a collision of color and light
The only sound is the oar dipping
And my breath

Leigh Banner is a seventeen-year-old student at The Spence School and lives in New York City

voicemail to brutus, By Julie A. Larick
after "I Know a Man" by Robert Creeley

to wonder if brutus was cute

on the ides of march is

to laugh at julius

julie, julia, juliette

jeweled upon a feathered crown

is life a life

if you are not glorious

or should i focus on driving

i fill my hollows with sun

each day, my blood

runs dark, moony

i buy supplements and wonder

if mottled skin droops

i suck in my stomach

i hope for the best,

say thank you, have a nice day,

and think of brutus

sorry caesar.

Julie A. Larick is a student and writer living in Cleveland. She studies English, Environmental Science, and Activism at The College of Wooster. Julie edits for The Incandescent Review and interns at GASHER Journal. She has poems forthcoming or published in perhappened mag, Ogma Magazine, and others. Julie loves to sew, thrift, watercolor, and was born in 2003. Her portfolio is <http://www.julielarickwriting.com> and her Twitter is @crookyshanks.

This World Has Walls II By Miles Mikofsky

Stay in bed till

three pm

My underpants – dead elastic

Deli cheese and seltzer

Because the progress

of a sentence

makes me anxious

Rainy days, sick days – Given

the limitations – Praise!

This box life –

The falcon

will not leave its hood – Knock out

every powerline

By four thirty there is a rosy

spin on time – dizzy head – Even

the dust, the least, glows

What's to come? Consult my modern auguries:

the gyre of clothes in a dryer

My sister weeps quietly beside me. Tonight, a million Nigerians will cower in bed, tens
of millions will become lava. *He is breathing! He needs air!*

Mark my words. We will all die together you know. We were born for it
We should stop calling this nation [absent of motherly feelings] her. An iron fist
is an iron fist, wrapped or not. They really bring hell fire & call it children toys
Everything is baseless now. See how they reduce us to mere flesh & empty
cartridges. What is it with soldiers stealing corpses? If I am burned,
We will sing our way into death. Let me burn to the
Let heaven know our land
was too green with envy. last
A man passes away from the flicker
struggle. Hallelujah. What am I to tell
my children unborn? That I hoped in
a country which pilfered like smoke
before my eyes or that I once
had a life?

Formatting: The Nigerian Map.

Anointing Obuh is a writer, singer and photographer from Nigeria. A one-time best of
the Net nominee, her works have been featured in Rattle, Mineral Lit mag, Honey and
Lime Lit, Barren magazine and elsewhere. You can find her tweeting [@therealAnniekay](https://twitter.com/therealAnniekay).

GIVE & TAKE or how God takes his revenge By Roseline Mgbodichinma Anya-Okorie

Heaven is divinity's finest theatrics

But

My creation is no play,

Though my mother
Formed me behind closed curtains
& my birth was like staging a scene for holocaust,
I am no drama.

What name do you give to children
Who caused their mothers to push into Eternity?

What is my identity if
I switched costumes with my mother in this plot twist called life?

She was cast as an extra for a judgement scene in her hospital robe

Nine months was the Audition for her role in this death series.

The scorching Sun is a portrait of
My mother's wailing face,
The moon is her soul lighting up
My darkness.

& Every day I manage to squeeze out a prayer,
I ask God if salvation
Means taking a mother
Simply because He gave his son.

Roseline Mgbodichinma is a Nigerian writer whose works have appeared or are forthcoming in The African writer Magazine, The Hellebore, Serotonin Poetry, West Trestle Review, JFA human rights mag, Serotonin poetry, Indianapolis Review, Kalahari review, & elsewhere. She won the Audience Favorite award for the Union Bank Campus writing challenge – Okada books, she is the third prize winner for the PIN food poetry

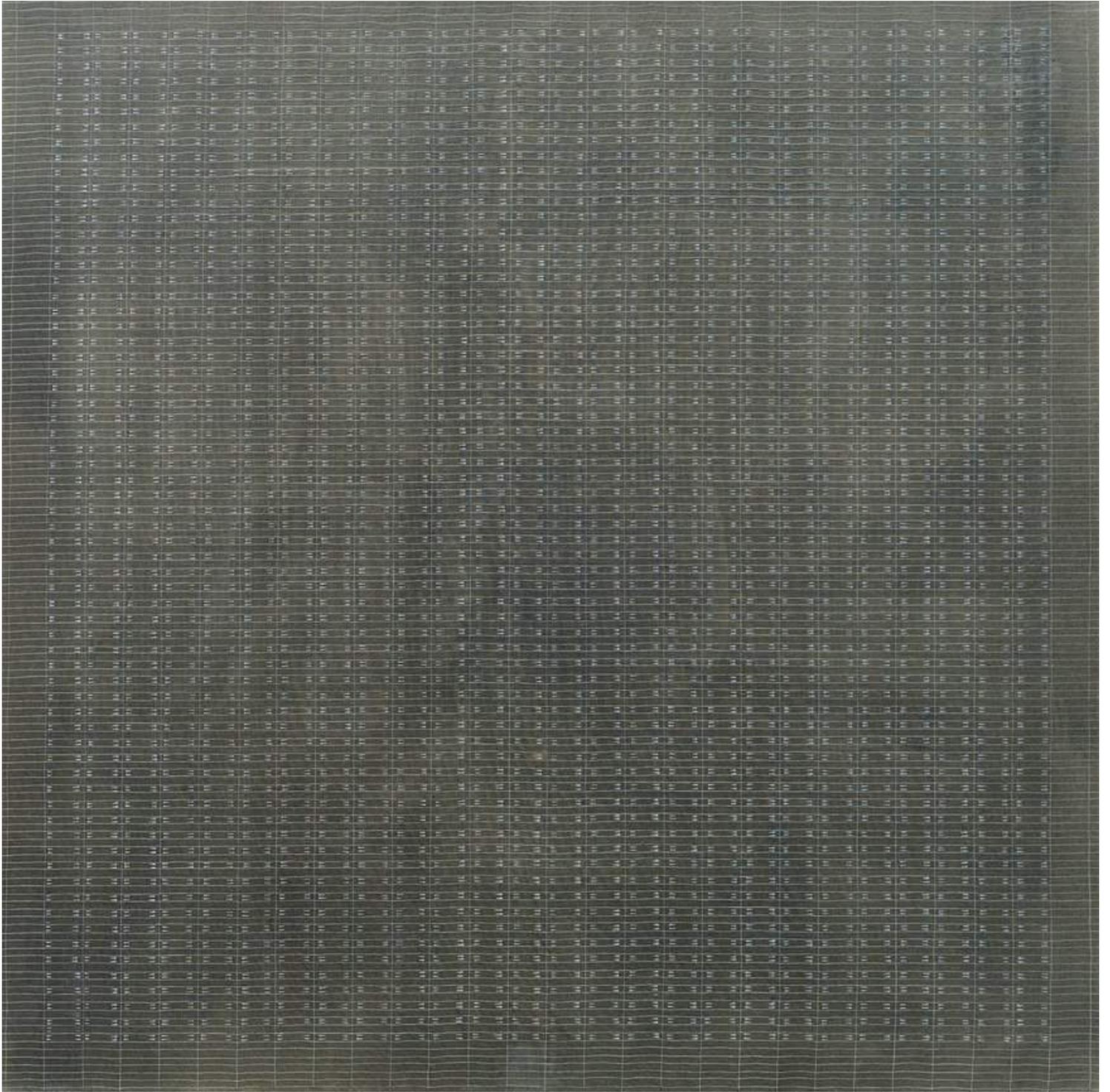
contest and a finalist for the Shuzia Creative writing contest. You can reach her on her blog @ www.mgbodichi.com and Twitter @Rmgbodichinma.

Shh By Elizabeth Train-Brown

she put her finger to my lips
said
this –
this dip here
this is from when they tell you to keep quiet
the split second before you fall to earth
flop out of a scarlet canal
scream yourself into the world
this is where that being
that Being
kisses
presses their finger
says
'forget me'

Elizabeth Train-Brown, a circus performer and award-winning journalist, studies Creative Writing at Lancaster University. She is the Marketing Director for MPN Magazine and Poetry & Fiction Editor for Flash Literary Journal. She won the 2020 Literary Lancashire Award and has been shortlisted in competitions by Creative Writing Ink, Voices, and Beyond Borders Scotland. Her work has appeared in *Planet in Peril* (Fly on the Wall Press, 2019), *The Future of Text* (Future Text Publishing, 2020), *Allegro*, *Tastzine*, *Qutub Minar Review*, *Cake Journal*, *SKYE Magazine*, *SCAN*, *Horla Horror*, *Wax Poetry & Art*, and *Crossways*. www.bethtrainbrown.journoportfolio.com

White Flower (after Agnes Martin) By Grady Trexler



White Flower, Agnes Martin

Halfway up the spiral of that spacecraft,
there it was — suspended at the level of
illusion, box after box after box
of white flower humming like an icemaker.

The closer you got, the louder and more beautiful the human hand, the brushstrokes, the flower, the flower, the flower. They hang the paintings on a slant, flush with the floor so that the viewers think the work is level.

Gridded out into the dark, the white flower — not so perfect as to lose the human touch, the artist starting with something perfect, this is that something less-than which survived; up close, the grid dissolves into the boxes, the boxes fade away into the strokes, oil, pigment spread across canvas — the hum, fractals of grids and flowers and beauty. Even the sloppiest of circles conjures the perfect circle in our minds, and every grid belongs with other grids: anything more would be impossible.

After, I saw white flower everywhere: crosswords, calendars, the subway map guiding us back to the hotel room post-Guggenheim. We took lazy shots then you crashed into sleep. It was too hot so I stayed up and counted tiles in the purple dark, the afterimage still humming in the aisles of my mind, even on the bus ride home to Richmond: white flower in the grid of windows, the lattice of chain link fences, the sidewalks,

everywhere, packs of cigarettes repeating themselves over and over and over behind the counter, all of it.

Grady Trexler is an undergraduate at Princeton University studying philosophy and linguistics. He is from Midlothian, Virginia. He is currently using a purple and white toothbrush.

My Great Grandfather Had Nine Wives By Kechi Mbah

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter”

– Chinua Achebe

Egwu adiro atu afo, oburu uzo.

My great-grandfather’s squinting eyes drew haze over the horizon belonging to my great-grandmother, creating a painting of African sun.

She was a woman of the earth///the earth made woman of her dirt laced fingers and sand peppered knees spoke love to corn and cassava praying only to the god she held within her bosom.

At the rise of afternoon pestle etched callous as she pounded fufu into brown freckled mortar.

Like all men—-- my great-grandfather admired.

His yellowed eyes enchanted by her flat nose and cow belly plump lips to her skin peeled ripe from ebony and hips swept wide for birth to the sweet smell of a hardworking woman.

So he grew chest and three goats to bring back to her village
and she agreed to be his seventh wife.

Uto mmii wu ete bele.

Drums beat to the laughter of pot bellied men
wine carrying IS the wedding.

My great-grandfather squatted hidden in murraya bush leaves
while my great-grandmother's feet kissed the ground to it's pulsing rhythm
red wrapper bouncing to her waist
palm wine swimming in the ivory tusk of her forefathers.

She searched through purple plume grass and behind corkwood trees
only finding men pretending to be my great-grandfather.

Until the the rustle of murraya bush leaves seized her eyes
tusk weighed his hands
palm wine touched his lips
and a river stretched out around their families.

Mmanu akara di uto; onye ratu, ibe ya a ratu.

My great-grandfather's land could make a village.
Splitting vast of dust rich colors.
For each wife had a house of her own
and they stuck together tightly
(clay, women, bamboo stick, children).
Leading to feasts that were long and winding~
sun fed siblings chasing behind the shadows of their mothers

and snapping stomachs waiting for their dent of garri to be filled with okra soup.
The open air hugging them tenderly.

*Translations

**the following are all Igbo proverbs in relation to which part of the story they were put in front of, but not all their meanings translate that well, when put into English.

*Egwu adiro atu afo, oburu uzo~ fear doesn't affect the stomach, that's why it's always in front

*Uto mmii wu ete bele~ wine tastes sweeter when you dance

*Mmanu akara di uto; onye ratu, ibe ya a ratu~ bean cake oil is sweet, one who tastes should allow others to have a taste

Kechi Mbah is a high school junior and was born and raised in Houston, TX. She is the founder of her school's poetry club, and recently started writing poetry for the page in August 2020. Her poems have appeared in *The Incandescent Review* and *The Courtyard*. She is a 2020 semifinalist in Space City Slam (Houston's largest teen slam competition). In addition to writing poetry, some of her hobbies include: reading on the lawn chair outside, learning ASL, playing soccer, and participating in hackathons.

Sorry! By Jack Greenway

I call blue!

After my friends and I make our way back from lunch,

we go straight to the old, broken down box,
worn from years of kids like us playing at indoor recess.
I sit on the cold floor with the boys
and we begin to play.
Our games are always heated, full of trash-talk
and petty arguments
but I come out on top.
“Sorry!” I say.
But we all know,
I’m not.

Jack Greenway is thirteen years old and goes to St. Patrick’s School in Rolla, Missouri. He wrote this poem because it shows his competitive nature in all of the games he likes to play – and in just about everything he does.

Salvation of Maple Leaves in Haiku By Morgan Flodman

I

The maple leaves blush
in the fine fabrics they wear
for their funeral

II

They prostrate toward God
once they hit the winding road,
humble in the dirt

III

The wind carries them
and they glide rapturously,
soon to resurrect

IV

What about the buds?
Righteous anger buries them
underneath the snow

V

Until the Sun shines,
they await their baptism—
water seeps new life

Morgan Flodman is a writer from the village of Cherry Valley, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in *The Apprentice Writer*, *Calm Down Magazine*, *Kalopsia Literary Journal*, and *Trouvaille Review*, plus she has been honorably recognized by the International Torrance Legacy Creativity Awards, and the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Keep up with her literary endeavors on Instagram: [@morganflodmanwrites](https://www.instagram.com/morganflodmanwrites)

Insomniac By Zoe Cunniffe

it is an autumn of hypnic jerks and dim-lit ceilings,
turning over until both sides of the pillow smolder
with the residue of last summer's heat.

you are a mess of limbs, and sleeplessness creeps,
leaking in the windows, melting across your sheets.
here, in this three am purgatory, caught between stages
of waking—here, it spreads across you like a sea of stars,
glossy and gleaming, piercing every edge of your skin.
something greater than daylight bears down
on you and your restless head, and you blink,
blink, blink, the syncopation of your circadian rhythm
pounding like a bass beat all night long.

Zoe Cunniffe is a poet and singer-songwriter from Washington, DC. She has previously been published in literary journals such as Meniscus and The Showbear Family Circus, and she can be found on Instagram at [@there.are.still.beautiful.things](https://www.instagram.com/there.are.still.beautiful.things).

sometimes, I forget to: By Sunny Vuong

i.and it all starts like / sometimes i forget to comb my hair in the morning & then it turns
in to / i forgot to drink water in the morning & then it turns in to / i'm eyeing the scissors
on the printer for much too long & then it turns in to / wishing i never woke up / and it's
like: i look in the mirror and i am packing my bags and hiding in a motel room with no
reflective surfaces & then / i am alone / & it is not unfamiliar.

ii.and it's starting to look like an ending. / you know? please don't ask me what that
means. / it looks like *no, love, but really, how are you?* and it's like / *i am a passenger in this
body watching myself speedway off the bridge. you're so sweet, thank you for asking.* / i don't
even like anything about myself anymore but i still crush wildflowers in my palms and
scream at them to sing / i killed the choir! i killed the choir.

iii. it's starting to look like *you know i'll always be here* / & then it turns in to *well, yes, but i'm starting to think the more you know about me the less you're going to wish you did at all* / and it's like *i am always here to catch you fall* and i am always stretching myself like elastic in parachutes to be right there for *you* but *i am* / reaching terminal velocity, you know? / & i won't let you ask me what that means. / & it's not your fault, because i just / can't cut my thoracic cavity open but oh my God i am falling / and i am falling alone. /

sometimes, i forget to ask for help. / kidding. i always am. always do. / i didn't forget, i just didn't. / & it's like: don't ask me what that means.

iv. and it's like, *do you even like me anymore? was i even a warm presence in the first place?* / if you're going to cut me out in silence, then be over and done with it because i am battling far too many closet skeletons / to deal with this right now. / i am your friend or i am not. /

v. sometimes i forget to be alive, and then i think sometimes i forget to let people notice. / not like i ever tell them, i just forget to. / & it's like: no i don't. sorry. / & then i'm on the highway again, and i'm looking for heaven, and polaris sends me her butterfly kisses to soothe my aching heels, but / sometimes, i forget to look both ways.

Sunny Vuong is a second generation Vietnamese-American writer, and founding EIC of *Interstellar Literary Review*. Her work is featured or forthcoming in *perhappened mag*, *FEED Lit*, and *Eunoia Review*, among others. Find her on Twitter @sunnyvwrites.

Fiction

The Liar's Game By Sophie Sheumaker

It begins like this:

You are thirteen. Four girls sit around you at the lunch table. Their lips shimmer with layers of gloss, the air around them is thick with the smell of vanilla perfume. They talk about boys and you think about how their lips shine.

There's a game they play called boy crazy. They tell you that if they tickle your leg and you laugh it means you're boy crazy. One of them runs her fingers over the top of your thigh, laughing, and you feel the hot burn of blood rushing to your face. You laugh but you don't think it means what they think it means. You don't know what to think.

There's one girl. Her hair is curly and her eyes are brown- she says they're brown like mud but you think they're brown like chocolate- and she looks at you. Asks you which boy you like. The answer is clear, it's there, it's burning holes in the pit of your stomach. No one, you want to tell her, I don't like any boys. Something inside you says she won't like that. They won't like that.

So, you say your first lie- your first lie that really matters. And the game begins.

There's a boy on the football team. He's tall and blond and he's not quite handsome yet, but he will be. Everyone can tell he will be. The girls all know it; they talk and talk and talk about him and you know that if he's the one you pick, they won't think anything is wrong with you.

When she asks you who you like, it's his name that you give her.

You're fifteen and summer's changed everyone, changed everything. The brown eyed girl's got legs that stretch for days and days and days. Everyone stares at her. They can't help it. She tells you about how she wants that football player, the almost handsome one, to look at her.

She asks you if you think they'd be good together and you tell her yes. You tell her they'd be great together.

It's another lie, but she can't know that.

You watch as it happens, as she bats her lashes and he takes her to the movies, to dinner with his parents, to nights out in his car. You see them kissing against her locker and you feel something rise in you. You feel like you're going to be sick, but you push it down. Deep, deep down. You tell yourself it's nothing.

You still haven't had your first kiss by the time you turn sixteen. The other girls tease you. They smack their glossy lips and they tell you how pretty you are, how smart you are, how you could have any boy in the school if you only tried. They don't understand, but you're starting to. You're really starting to.

Boys ask and ask and ask you out and you always say no. You're not ready. You're the kind of person that dates in college, not high school. You have homework, you're too busy, you don't need the hassle of it all.

You're the worst kind of liar because you lie to yourself.

The brown-eyed girl wants you to be happy the way she's happy. She talks to her football player boyfriend and gets you the number of one of his friends, the quiet, dark haired one who's always looking at you. *Please, she says, please please go. You're perfect for each other.*

You've gotten close to her since middle school. She seems so excited, she wants you to go so bad, you don't want to disappoint her.

So you say yes.

You're starting to figure out that you don't know how to say no to her.

There's a movie showing at the theater near your house. When you go to see it, he leaves his hand open on the armrest. For the first half of the movie, you watch his hand lay there waiting for you. But for the second half, you reach out and you hold it.

It's what you're supposed to do. It's fine, you tell yourself. It's fine it's fine it's fine.

Afterwards, he parks his truck in the middle school parking lot. The town stretches out in front you, shining. Burning. It's practically on fire. He's looking at you and you don't want to look back at him, but it's what you're supposed to do. His eyes are so very green.

There are no butterflies when he kisses you. No magic. No fireworks. But it isn't bad. It's not horrible. It's not the worst thing in the world. It's nothing. There are lips against lips and nothing more.

Later, she sits on your bed, wet nail polish shining on her fingernails, and she asks you how it went. You think about telling the truth, but it catches in your throat. *Great*, you tell her. *It was great*.

He tells you he loves you three months later and you tell him that you love him too. It's not a lie, you tell yourself, because you do love him. You love the way he laughs at all your jokes, the way he reads every book you recommend to him, the way he always wants to stay up late talking to you. You can't help but love him.

But at some point, you have to admit to yourself that it's not the same. Maybe you love him, but he's in love with you. He's seventeen and he's fallen in love for the very first time and you've broken his heart before he's even realized it.

She calls you crying at three in the morning. You put on your jacket, you go to her house, you knock on her window like you've done a thousand times before. She pulls you into

her bed and you hold her until she tells you what's wrong.

It's the football player. Because of course, it's always the football player. He's decided he just can't love her anymore. You try and try and try to wrap your mind around something like that, but you can't. It doesn't make sense, not loving her.

You get her to stop crying. You get her to start laughing. You're good at that. You've always been good at knowing just the right things to get her to smile. She holds your hand while she falls asleep and you think, just for a moment, of how nice it feels.

He cries when you break up with him and even though you thought you wouldn't, you cry too. You cry because you wanted it to work so, so badly. Because you've been lying to him and to yourself and to everyone else and for what? You couldn't make it work. You couldn't make it feel right.

She crawls through your window. She holds your hand. She tells you about all those fish in the sea. The two of you are going to go off to college and find someone right. The right boy.

You don't know what to say. Or maybe you do and you just don't know how to say it.

You're eighteen when you have to face the truth. College is so close you can touch it and you're running out of time.

She hasn't dated anyone since the football player. Instead, she spends all her time with you. She reads all the books you recommend to her. You take her to the movies, throwing popcorn at the screen. She stays up late every night talking to you.

You think of the way your name sounds in her mouth.

You're alone with her in her car the night before you leave for college. You've been talking and talking and talking about everything and nothing and you're so tired of not telling her the truth. She looks at you and you look at her. You say her name.

There must be something about the way you say it, because her face changes. Her eyes soften, her lips part just the smallest bit. She says your name too.

This is the moment.

You can feel it in the air, in the silence that stretches out for miles in between the two of you. It is hot and heavy and endless and for the first time you think *maybe*.

Maybe you can tell the truth.

Maybe, just maybe, she'll love you the way you love her.

You're drowning in her brown eyes and you have a choice to make. You've been playing this game for a long time and you don't know if it's a game that you can win. You just want to make her smile. You just want to hold her hand and have her hold yours back. But to do it, you have to make a choice.

The only way to win the game is to end it.

So you do.

Sophie Sheumaker is a twenty-year-old aspiring writer from Colorado. She's currently a Writing, Literature, and Publishing major at Emerson College. When she's not writing,

she's helping edit papers and working for Emerson's resident publishing club.

Jumping off Point By Hwankyu Song

There's a woman standing at the other end of the subway platform.

There's nothing abnormal about her appearance: backpack slung over one shoulder, hoodie emblazoned with the name of some college, jeans ripped at the knees, scuffed sneakers tapping a rhythm against the yellow tiles, presumably on beat to the music she's listening to on her phone. The epitome of a college student. I would know, considering my own ensemble of clothes.

None of that is what grabs my attention, however; what does are the numbers floating above her.

A timer, I realize after they count down to **two minutes**. As the woman turns her head to cough into her hand, the numbers follow the movement, as if they are attached to the top of her head.

I look around to see if anyone else sees this, get an unspoken second opinion or reaction. There's no one else around, however; it's late, and this isn't a popular stop to begin with, being located at the outskirts of the city and all.

Staring at the changing numbers, I wonder if this is something of the norm. New pieces of technology seem to pop up on the daily, and it's impossible to keep track of every single one. Still, if such a thing was possible, something akin to a holographic display, Emily would have talked my ear off about it already. I consider taking a picture and showing it to her later when I get home, but don't. Knowing her, it'll be met with some snide remark – “Oh, this girl caught your eye, did she?” – followed by a lot of passive-aggressiveness for the next few days. After the week I had, that's the last thing I want to deal with.

Anyways, back to the floating numbers.

For the briefest moment, I even entertain the idea of a supernatural explanation, before banishing the thought. I haven't believed in anything supernatural all my life, and am not going to start now.

Of course, there are countless other questions besides the how.

Is the woman even aware of the numbers? If not, am I the only one seeing this? Why only this woman, and not the countless people I met throughout today? What makes her special?

Is it somehow contagious? Will I wake up tomorrow morning and see a timer above my head in the mirror?

But most important of all: what is the timer counting down towards? What happens when it hits zero?

My initial thought is that it could be the waiting time until her train arrives. This is promptly disproven when her timer hits **one minute**, and there's a ten second delay before the waiting time on the nearby train sign follows. So, not that then.

It could just be something mundane she set as a reminder for herself, like 'buy milk' or 'feed the cat'. Something that doesn't matter to anyone besides herself, especially not a stranger waiting for the same train. But then why showcase it for everyone to see, which brings me back to the question of whether she's aware of the numbers being shown.

Then, it hits me, the most obvious, cliché answer that I somehow didn't think about; it could be the time of death.

Now that I look again, the woman has this sort of resigned look on her face, tired but determined. She pockets her phone just as the light from the incoming train can be seen, growing brighter and larger as it approaches the station.

“Train approaching,” says the station-wide announcement from above. “Please stand back from the edge.”

The woman takes one step forward towards the edge of the platform instead, and it’s all the incentive I need to break into a run. The first passenger car enters the station, closing in on where the woman is standing, and I’m still too far away to reach her.

“Stop!” I shout, but my voice is drowned out by the screeching of train wheels against the rails, and all I can do is watch helplessly as the woman brings a hand up to her mouth, timer reaching **zero** and-

She sneezes, inaudible but unmistakable in motion.

The timer disappears.

Hwanky Song was born in Korea but raised in a multitude of countries, the most recent one being the US. He’s currently attending Carnegie Mellon University, where he is majoring in Math and minoring in Creative Writing. His stories are usually lengthy, but he also writes flash fiction on occasion.

The Fire By Avery Sauber

It was a Thursday night and outside was the coziest thunderstorm. Perched where the great woods met a cliff overlooking an ocean was an old house, taller than it was wide. Sitting inside this house, a woman, in her favorite wingback chair, enjoying the comfy storm. Unlike most in her current situation, she wasn't reading, or listening to music, or doing anything particularly entertaining. She was simply sitting, staring at her crackling fire and thinking. Of what she was thinking we may never know, but one could almost be certain she was thinking. The house was dark—it always was this time of night—but the storm had cut what little electricity the old house had. But she had lit a candle, and that was all she needed. The thunder boomed.

She was staring; you couldn't verify if she was thinking, but one look would confirm that she was very much staring. At one point it seemed that she was staring so hard she forgot exactly what she was staring at, for in the blink of an eye she realized that she was not in her chair by the fire, but in the hallway upstairs. Looking at a wall. She wondered how she had found herself in this predicament—she didn't remember moving at all, and even if she had, why had she gone here? As she turned her head, she heard a child's laugh coming from the bedroom door. Strange, her daughter had grown up and moved out long ago. She went back to her chair.

As she sat in her chair she heard crackling, the crackling of a radio tuned to a channel with no signal. A voice cleared the crackles, and the old sound of a 1920s vocalist flooded the room. The woman by now was most likely deep in thought, perhaps she was thinking of how strange it is that a radio with no source of power that has not worked for 6 years would suddenly turn on. But it was a lovely tune, so she stayed put. Or perhaps, she was thinking about a child's laugh coming from an empty room. Or maybe not.

She was sitting, staring, and listening—listening to the rain and the song. She closed her eyes and listened, listened until she heard a new sound: water. She opened her eyes to find she was no longer in her chair—she was sitting on the edge of her bed. She sat staring, not at a fire, but rather out of an ocean-view window. Yet the water she was

hearing was not the ocean, it was the sound of the sink in her bathroom, the sink with the spout that never turned on. She was glad that it was finally working. She walked back downstairs.

When she sat back in her chair she could see the fire, and through a window she could see the ocean. Through that same window, she could also see the light falling of snow. It's on cold winter nights that one loves to sit by the fire and think; although for the woman it was getting increasingly hard to think, with the radio and the fire, not to mention the buzzing and flickering of the table lamp's bulb. She considered turning off the lamp but decided she needed the light. As the musical stylings of 20s swing faded into 40s jazz, she decided that she needed something to drink. She walked across the room and grabbed a mug out of the cupboard. The particular mug she grabbed was found at the very back of the cupboard and read "World's Best Dad" on the front; it was the only one clean. She rinsed out the dust and made some hot chocolate. She sat back down and relaxed into the music. During one song a noise peaked her ears. It was the sound of a bell, the kind you would put on a house cat. It sounded identical to the one she had put on her old pet. After a rather loud meow, she felt her cat walk across her feet and settle on the chair beside her. Anyone else in this moment might have been perplexed: why, after 24 years of being missing, had her cat finally come back? I suppose she was just happy her cat had returned.

She sat listening to the radio, the ocean waves, and Edith the cat purring softly in her sleep. After finishing her drink, she returned to her staring, the light of the fire consuming her attention. As she stared, she felt a gust of wind brush her cheek. She was standing at the edge of the cliff and looking at the water. This was not unusual, although she usually enjoyed being here when the weather was nice. Tonight was very foggy with a slight breeze—not ideal conditions if you are looking to view anything. Light wasn't an issue, not even in the dead of night; the moon shines so brightly here it could pass for a second sun. But due to the fog, the only thing she could see was the gleam of a lighthouse on a distant shore. Until the ray from the lighthouse went out. Now tell me

why, in the middle of the night, when the earth was nothing but fog, did a lighthouse go out? Conceivably, the only notion she held at the moment was that she now had to go back inside.

She turned and started to wander towards her house. About halfway there, an intense beam of light engulfed her sight. The beam came from the woods and stayed on her for a second or an hour, or what could have been any amount of time, then disappeared. She lightly shook her head in an attempt to clear the floaters from her eyes and walked to the front door. As she was walking, she hoped that whoever was holding that flashlight escaped the foggy woods and got home safely. But she wasn't too worried, after all, Edith made it back. When she had settled back into her chair, she listened to Edith's bell slowly make its way down the stairs and into her lap.

She got lost in thought for a little while, but when she returned, she determined that not too much time had passed; it certainly wasn't morning, and the hailstorm was still going as strong as it was in the late evening. Her cat had moved back to her separate chair and fallen asleep. At some point, the radio had stopped playing tunes and reduced itself back to crackling, and the old lamp bulb had finally given out. The one thing that grasped her consciousness most urgently was the fire, which had gone out. The house was nothing but a pit of darkness, light coming only from the moon. She was paralyzed with fear, her mind consumed with the sound of hail striking the walls, a broken radio crackling, and a dead cat purring. And then she heard it: a pounding. This wasn't hail, this was the front door. And as she slowly turned around to face the door, it happened. She finally stopped thinking.

Avery Sauber is an eighth-grade student at Centennial Middle School in Minnesota. When she's not doing schoolwork, she can often be found playing lacrosse, taking naps, or updating her personal book index -complete with title, page number, and publication date. She hopes to continue with her writing pursuits in the future.

Portrait of Oil on Canvas By Nithya Ramcharan

Red velvet curtains; ornate, centuries-old windows; snobbish-yellow light washing the walls with nineteenth-century aristocracy; an ottoman and an intricate, plum-colored cushion; empty crystal vases; Persian carpet choked with antique dust ... one couldn't care less about the setting, glorified and mundane.

The subject sitting atop the ottoman, however, is far more compelling. She looks ahead with wide black eyes, this woman so similar to yet so incongruous with her backdrop. Her rings glisten gold and platinum, matching the colors of the thick frame surrounding her. Her hair is tightly pinned behind, not a single strand out of place. The camera is positioned toward her, with all intent of capturing more than just her beauty. Not just her lightly blushed rosewood cheeks smoothed over with layers of makeup, the luxurious folds of her brightly patterned dress, but also the creases of her hand, the tense grip in her jaw.

What has she been through to voyage all these leagues? Expulsion or persecution from her land, lack of support, a temporary sojourn in the first world...the possibilities flip through like stills. She is asked to turn a little more toward the westward window, where dwindling rays of sunlight fall upon her, illuminating irises like muddy rivers, beating violently against the boulders that constrict them. A glistening film coats those tumultuous eyes.

Weep, but don't let those tears fall, woman—you cannot choose who sees them. Let them sit atop your lashes like morning dew.

She does not react to the first blinding flash. Her mouth is pinched into a small rosebud, her hands clasped tightly on her lap. Her skirt, intertwined with gold and red and violet, is frozen, unruffled by movement. Underneath the heavy volume of her dress, the outline of her legs becomes more apparent. She is thin, bony, constructed of scaffolding. The skin on her face hangs against her cheekbones, creating hollows her paint cannot hide.

Tremble, woman, but don't rattle your seat.

Finally, an aperture: in between takes she exhales, mouth open. Within the gateway, cumulonimbus clouds pulsate dense grays and lash out lightning bolts. Gnarled, ancient trees with young lime-green foliage reach for the ceiling, bending before they can shatter it. She conceives universes she is too frail to hold. She yearns to release the wealth she carries inside, but the image she maintains is unrelenting.

Bleed, woman, but do it gracefully; don't fall apart, or we cannot piece you back together again.

She shifts, pouring her life's discomfort into the tilt of her foot she has been taught to maintain for years. Her joints creak in their limited span of movement. Her lips purse, stopping the whistle of air that fluted through her sighs. The gleam in her eyes disappears and she becomes the portrait the camera is supposed to create.

Where is the vibrancy of your youth, where you questioned the walls built before you? Where is the vigor that propelled you to climb them? Was it age that weakened your hands, that made you slip and tumble to a kneel? Who makes you crumble under the weight of his pronoun? Restricting your realm to the claustrophobic box of your mind, all the while taunting you with soft brushstrokes of foundation, creams, silk or cotton dresses and vibrant geometric patterns. Stuffing you in this room...what are your origins whose primitive lies bind and gag you?

Woman, where is your essence? The colors inside you are locked within that golden chest surrounding you, key long lost. Look at you now, still-life fixture. Have you traveled this far to be an ornament clasped onto tradition?

But stay still. This is hardly the time to speak.

Nithya Ramcharan is a high school senior from New Orleans, Louisiana. She loves writing in her free time, along with drawing, playing the piano, and walking her dogs. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and the Apprentice Writer.

Breakfast on the Weekends By Olabisi Aishat Bello

It's Saturday morning, and I'm trying to ignore the empty chair at the head of our table.

In front of me, china plates carry the weight of yam and scrambled eggs, guarded by one tall glass of grape juice— my usual weekend breakfast. We eat in silence, my mother and I, like this is normal, like things have always been this way.

After two or three forced bites from her meal, she clears her throat and asks,

“Don't you like the food?”

“It's fine.” I poke the same piece of yam I've been playing with for the past five minutes.

“But you haven't even touched your juice. Is grape no longer your favorite?”

I suppress a sigh then bring the cup to my lips. It smells funny, so I know the juice is stale, but I take a deep breath and drink it all.

“It tastes good,” I tell her, once I’ve emptied the glass.

She smiles at me. “Thank God. I was worried it had gone bad or something since it’s the same bottle from last week.” She chuckles and pours some for herself. “I don’t know why I forgot to go to the supermarket.”

Because he used to be the one who bought the groceries. But I won’t bring it up.

The doorbell rings, and we both drop our forks.

It rings again, this time its echoing *ding dong* stretching over the room like overworked rubber ready to snap. My mother looks up at me.

Of course.

I get up and walk to the entrance, drying my sweaty palms on my jeans. As I pull the door open, I look away from his face and focus instead on the buttons of his Polo shirt.

“Welcome sir,” I say then move back to the dining table before he gets the chance to hug me or touch me or say anything that would fill the emptiness of our house, even for only a second.

I try to make eye contact with my mum as I sit back down, but she doesn’t look up from the piece of yam she’s trying to cut up.

“Bola.”

“Kunle.” They acknowledge each other’s presence as a mere courtesy. No more sweethearts, or darlings, or delicious apples of their eyes.

He reaches for the empty chair but hesitates right before he pulls it out. We act like we don’t see it.

“So, how’s school, Sope?” he says, smiling at me after he settles in.

“Fine.”

“And the teacher that was giving you trouble?”

“Fired.”

“Really?” He laughs and takes a bite from his yam. “How come you didn’t tell me?”

“You weren’t here.”

He pauses then shifts in his seat. “Okay. Okay. Understandable,” he says, nodding.

I don’t even need to look at my mum to sense the *bad eye* she’s giving me.

“Sope?” she calls me.

“Ma.”

“Bola, it’s fine. Don’t worry,” he says.

She ignores him and turns her attention back to me. “We agreed no *wahala*, so behave.”

I stuff eggs into my mouth. “I am.”

“You better.”

She picks up her fork, and he focuses back on me, but before he launches into another question, I scarf down more food until eggs start to spill from the corners of my mouth. He must take the hint because he looks away from me, turns over to my mum, then realizes his error and faces his meal. Silence finds its seat back at our table.

I pick up the juice carton and pour some into his glass, hoping the sour taste does the work for me and lets him know just how awful life has been without him these last few weeks.

“This would be the best thing for our family,” he’d said.

The juice rushes past the halfway mark on the glass.

A divorce isn’t always bad, Sope.

Three-quarter.

I’m still going to come for our Saturday breakfasts.

What use is it if you won’t be here for dinner?

I pour and pour until the juice bursts past the brim and cascades over the sides of the glass. My hands are shaking, and the liquid is spilling everywhere.

“Sope!” my mum calls out, and I jerk my hand off the now-empty carton.

I glance at the tablecloth— it bleeds purple.

My dad is looking at me, his eyes livid, right eyebrow twitching in that way it does when he's angry. This is the same man with such a hatred for messiness that he would yell whenever my shoes dragged in any dirt from outside. But this isn't his house anymore, so I stare right back at him, daring him, almost begging him, to yell, to get mad, to act like he's still my father and not a random stranger who just pops in, but he clenches his jaw and looks down at his plate—saying nothing.

“What's wrong with you?” my mum shouts at me.

I turn and pick up my fork, trying to breathe through the growing tightness in my chest. I know she's restraining herself. If this were a couple of weeks ago, she would scold me, and I would cry, then my dad, my only best friend, would tell her to stop, and she would. But I'm crying now, and no one's saying stop.

I stab another piece of yam with my fork, piercing fresh four-by-four dot patterns on it, and paying no attention to the eye signals and head movements happening above me. They always used to communicate like this, when they were happy and in love, but now they're neither, so what's the point?

After a while, my mum's shoulders relax, and she picks up her silverware, my dad following suit.

We eat in silence, ignoring the juice dripping on the floor. Mother, daughter, father—three parts of a puzzle that will never fit together again, but it's Saturday morning, so we have to pretend that when my dad walks back out that door, he won't take the missing piece of our family with him.

Olabisi Aishat Bello is an aspiring biomedical engineer from Oyo State, Nigeria, currently studying chemical engineering. Despite her passion for science, she has always loved the fluidity and joy writing grants her, and she hopes to make an impact in society with this gift and overall devotion to making the world a better place. She loves writing both poetry and fiction, and you can find her works in the Kalahari Review, the Neurological Literary Magazine, the Open Culture Collective, the African Writers, among others. You can follow her on Twitter @OlabisiBA.

Pulling the Plug By Mrinal Pattanaik

(TW: self harm)

I never know how to start these things, you know?

[1:53 AM]

And I'm bad at conversations anyway — it's worse when it's one sided. But you didn't pick up, so I guess I should just get it over with. I might leave more than one voicemail, sorry.

[1:56 AM]

Remember when we went grocery shopping and every week I'd mess up the list? I always left out the milk or the eggs or the lettuce and you'd mark it down on my hand so I'd remember it this time, and I'd forget anyway. You laughed it off, though. Every time, and then you drove out near midnight to fix my mess. I've never been good with checking everything off.

[1:57 AM]

This was the last thing on my list. I really hope I didn't forget anything.

[2:01 AM]

Lately I've been thinking about supernovas. They burn so bright for so long and then when they go out it leaves a mark — like a black hole or something, or a flash in the sky for a million miles. Something big before they're gone. I've been wondering — *[a sigh, long and soft]* — I've been wondering if it makes any difference because at the end they're gone anyway.

[2:05 AM]

You used to want to be an astrophysicist. I remember that, still. And I remember you'd say you

would have gone through if it didn't take so much math, because when you were little you had books and books of stars and moons and planets and black holes, enough to take over a wall in your room. You sent me pictures once. I still have them saved somewhere but I don't want to look or I'll miss you more.

[2:07 AM]

People always ask if it hurts to die so slow. I never know what to tell them — I haven't died any other way. *[a crackling laugh]* Sorry. Probably not that funny.

[2:12 AM]

Do you still have that list of movies you wanted to watch? I remember whenever we talked to new people you'd mention how you've never seen Snow White and everyone would stare at you. You liked that, I think, how they'd look with their eyes wide open, and you blushed, sweet and soft like the princess you didn't know, like you wouldn't laugh about it time and time again.

[2:13 AM]

I'd say I'll miss you but I don't know if I'll be anything after this, so — I don't know, maybe I won't miss you, I guess. This feels anticlimactic.

[2:13 AM]

It's a lonely time to die.

[2:14 AM]

I wish I'd picked the afternoon instead.

[2:15 AM]

Or maybe I don't, because then you'd pick up.

[2:16 AM]

This is the last one, I promise. I'll miss you even if I'm nothing anymore. I hope you'll miss me too.

Mrinal Pattanaik is a senior at Neuqua Valley High School. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, Sandpiper Magazine, and Up North Lit, amongst others.

Nonfiction

99 Ranch By Jireh Deng



99 Ranch

In elementary school, I loved the seafood section, the teeming clams with their tracheal tubes peeking from two shells, Mercy and I poked at them with the scooping nets when the butchers weren't looking to see if they would react to our prodding. We could stare for hours at the Darwinism acting itself out in gurgling fish tanks as lobsters with red tags clamping their forceps scrambled over each other in close quarters, the undulating fish beating rhythm as a dozen eyes glazed back at us. Once, my mother had to drag me away from a box of frogs just as I reached a questioning hand into their ribbiting colony. She bribed our silence and complacency with rice crackers, pineapple cakes, pretzel sticks, Yan Yan strawberry dips, xiao mantou. Nothing spoke peace more than blissful chewing. Guzzling down Yakult and chrysanthemum tea was how we nursed our lips from the ravage of saltiness. If our mouths were occupied with an assortment of snacks, there would be no room for fighting throughout the rest of the day. We were too focused on making sure the Pocky sticks would ration out for the car ride home, sucking

the sweet, pretending we were smoking a long one. Mercy would always be the most patient and giving when Cether and I would beg to share her snacks after we carelessly gobbled ours down. We never saw anyone at Trader Joe's but here, we managed to always run into another auntie from church, BSF, or PTA who would also be shopping the deal they heard from their friend about the niu rou sale. It made sense, though, where else did all the magic in our kitchens spring from? Even though I can't read the labels, I know by sight the sauces and spices that are hot pot necessities, the way my mom rests her head against a watermelon to hear its well-grown echo reply back to her. This knowledge, so primal, the taste buds craving the salt and sugar is a heritage I can always name.

Jireh Deng (she/they) was born and raised in the San Gabriel Valley of Southern California. Her words appear with the Asian American Writer's Workshop, podcast "VS", Edsurge, Level Ground's "Blooming in the Whirlwind", and YouthSpeaks's anthology "Between my Body and the Air". She is a workshop participant in Get Lit Words Ignite 2020-21 Poetic Screenwriters Lab. Summer of 2021 she will be an editorial pages intern at the LA Times. Connect with her on Instagram and Twitter (@jireh_deng).

Telekinesis By Vicky Sang

When I was seven years old, I was a bad kid. My parents would send me to bed at 8:30, but I'd sneak my mom's iPad into my room and watch YouTube videos when I was supposed to be sleeping. While the television blared a soccer or basketball game downstairs in the living room, I'd lie under the covers, stealthily watching my favorite shows. As soon as I heard my parents' footsteps, I'd shove the iPad under my pillow and close my eyes.

I loved different types of videos, like cooking videos and pranks. My favorite ones depicted dogs protecting their owners. There was this one Doberman that ran full speed, jumped, and knocked the “intruder” down. One day, I clicked on “recommended” and began watching a video of a girl and her friend walking down a street. Then a stranger approached. The girl, defending her friend, stuck her hands out in front of her. The man suddenly flew backwards through the air to the wall. She catapulted him with her bare hands! Everyone around them screamed. It was an energy force! I replayed the video several times, pausing to look for ropes or pulleys. I even enlarged the video, but I saw only the man flying through the air.

Afterward, I Googled, “What is the force that lets you move things with your mind?” The answer was “Telekinesis.” I’d watched Wonder Woman and seen her put her wrists together and push things away, but I didn’t know what it was called. Google said, “If you try your best, you can feel that energy and use your mind to move objects, but you must practice.”

The rest of the day, I watched YouTube tutorials on how to practice telekinesis. All day, I tried to move a piece of paper with my mind. From that day on, I practiced whenever I had time, focusing my eyes directly on the paper, not letting anything or anyone distract me. Scared of mosquitos at the time, I didn’t even let one bother me because I made a deal to myself: if I moved the piece of paper, I would allow myself to swat it. The paper stayed still. I even used my breath and blew the paper, pretending I exceeded my goal. Sometimes my breath didn’t even work. I never realized that a piece of paper could be so heavy!

At age seven, I was about three foot nine inches tall and weighed about 50 pounds. I had no muscle mass and couldn’t even open a bag of chips. Forget the pickle jars and bottles of Coke and Gatorade. In physical education class, I couldn’t catch a dodgeball. And I couldn’t run very far. My legs were like twigs. I was only good at swimming because I could float. Every time I walked into a classroom, no one would turn their heads. At

lunch, I could start a conversation about a book I read over the weekend and talk about all the exciting characters and scenes, but my classmates would be talking to one another, playing board games, and looking at their phones, like they couldn't hear me at all. They didn't even lift their heads up to look at me. I was there, but people couldn't see me. It was as if I weren't an actual human being. It made me lose my confidence. I was like a neglected puppy; I desperately wanted attention and friends, but no one noticed or cared.

So, at school one day, I told my friends, "I have to tell you guys something. In private!" I made a dramatic face as if this announcement were terribly important. In the bathroom, my three friends gathered around me. (They were more like acquaintances who let me eat lunch at their table, and I often gave them gummy worms and chocolates.) In the brightly-lit tiled bathroom, they gaped at me, waiting.

I said, "Guess what? I have something I never told you about. I have one power. I can move things with my mind!"

As soon as they heard it, their faces lit up, eyes wide and stretched. I could tell that they were shocked, but they remained calm as if they didn't believe me.

"That's not possible, Vicky. If you were telling the truth, you would have shown us," my best friend Christie said.

"Not right now. I can't let anyone know, or else I'll get caught. If I get caught, I'll get in trouble. Besides, the principal will get mad if I tear up the bathroom."

It worked. I captured their attention.

I wasn't sure if they believed me, or if I simply intrigued them, but after the announcement in the bathroom, people started treating me differently, as if I were a mythical creature.

Kids I didn't even know would stare at me across the playground, and even the teachers looked at me, no doubt wondering why students were surrounding me. Kids would argue over who got to hang out with me.

“Let go of her! She promised to hang out with me today!”

“Shut up, Jenna! She's not even your friend! She's MY friend.”

There were always two or more students holding my hands, pulling me along as if I were a doll they wanted to keep. They took me to climb the spider web with them. They dragged me to sit on the bench in the garden. They towed me along to ride the swings or play in the sandbox. Sometimes I was being pulled back and forth, left and right in opposite directions. They gave me chocolate, fruit candies, cookies, and sandwiches. They made me feel like a celebrity. Perhaps, I should have felt guilty. I was a con artist, but I was so focused on my new life that I didn't even care.

From then on, I received many birthday invitations—some from kids I didn't even know. When I attended these parties, I was always the only kid who got presents from the birthday kid, like nail polish, nail stickers, or even makeup for kids. Only special kids got these fantastic gifts. Everyone else just got smiley-face stickers and a piece of cake.

Second grade was the best year of my life.

Occasionally, kids pulled me aside and secretly asked, “Can you show me? Please? I really want to see you do it.” My powers were like a spark in their lives that kept them from losing hope.

“You have to come to my house to see it, but my mom has to agree first.” But every time they asked to come to my house, I would shrug and say, “No, it's not a good time.”

Second grade passed by like time does when I'm watching Netflix. Maybe because I'd wished enough that I wouldn't get caught, my wish came true. That summer, my parents transferred me to a new school. I didn't see any of my friends or classmates from the old school again. So all the burden of my lies floated away.

There, among the taller twelve-year-olds, I also grew taller and stronger. I could do pushups and a handstand. I could catch two dodgeballs at the same time. I could open bags of potato chips. I made many more friends in my new school without any lies or fake talents. We'd hang out at the library studying in study rooms, sitting on couches, doing group projects. I realized that if I showed people my kindness and interest in them, they would treat me the same way.

One Sunday, I was at the mall with my dad. There, the marble floors, golden staircases, elevators, and Gucci brands made me feel poor. My dad stopped to investigate the map to find a shop we could afford. I was quietly standing beside him. In the sunlight through the ceiling, I could see a familiar face strolling through the mall.

Then it hit me. It all clicked. Second grade, when everyone was crowding around me all because of a tiny lie about my "powers."

Shoot, I thought. I lifted my hoodie up, covering half my face, and begged my dad to take me home. Instead, we made our way to McDonald's, where we ate burgers in the back corner.

As I ate, I thought about the lie.

My parents have always said, "You can't do wrong and feel right." Still, it had been nice to have an entire year of being the focus of attention, like being in a movie. A part of me missed that life and wanted to go back. But a part of me was proud that I no longer needed to lie to make friends.

As I ate my burger, the flavor wasn't as full as I remembered it. When I finished, I stared intently at the wrapper. With all my mental focus, I willed it to move. I wasn't quite willing to give up on the idea that I might have just a little bit of magic.

Vicky Sang is a ninth-grade student who lives in Shanghai. She loves to write about her fictional pets and scary dolls who lurk in the shadows. She is determined to someday write her own Dear Abby Column.

Liminality of Voice Notes By Vibhavari Desai

Everyone talks about skin hunger, but have you been thirsty for someone's cadence? Their lilting *hello*, choked *goodbye*, whispered *stay*, raspy *please*, and muffled *sorry*? I have.

I tried recreating a friend's *goodnight*, wrapped in an audible smile and punctuated by a yawn, one night before falling asleep. I tossed and turned for hours because my best imitation was the worst attempt — it did not sound *like* her. Often, I wake up in the middle of the night, filled with an unknown dread, unable to recall how she pronounces her *t*'s. I know her words flow like stifled giggles, birthing on her tongue even when she tries to hold back. She talks through films. Gasps loudly, chuckles softly.

The past year presented numerous opportunities for moments that I willingly surrendered: hugs that I didn't offer, hands that I didn't shake, cheeks that I didn't caress, ribs that I didn't poke, and sides that I didn't tickle. I thought there would be a tomorrow. Lemony Snicket said even though death is inevitable, it manages to take us by surprise like walking up the stairs to your bedroom and expecting an extra step.

Even if I spend all of next year generously giving away parts of myself, it will be to new people. The old ones are gone, they reside in my phonebook now. My friends send me voice notes sometimes. I play them days later. Over and over. Until I can memorise them, until I can identify the patterns: *S* sighs twice before talking about her father; *L* groans at my tendency to ramble; *D* giggles when she runs out of things to say; *K*'s voice trails off for seven seconds and then the notes end. I counted.

Voice notes alter reality because these sounds are ours to keep, even years after they are sent. They are detached, disembodied noises; you can be a continent away, but I can still lull myself to sleep listening to you describe your day. I used to wonder: Where do words go once spoken? Nowhere, they can now stay.

I used to wonder why *aaji* would listen to her sputtering radio all day long, even when it croaked and most of its knobs fell off. I understand now — the only other voice in the house was her own

Vibhavari loves self-indulgent essays, cats, Tumblr, and photography.

Competitive Swimming Deteriorated my Mental Health. Covid 19 Helped me Realize

It By Shreya Prabhu

I stretch my fingers towards the slick wall of the pool. As soon as they touch, I flip, exhaling as I steadily release the pressure from my nose. Planting my feet hip-width apart, I push off the wall, into a streamline position. In a few seconds, I resurface to the jarring sound of whistles. Just as my arms break their tight position, my coach yells for me to speed up, her shrill voice piercing the air like bullets. For a few seconds, I am all arms and legs. Before I know it, the race is over. I remove my goggles and cap as I look at the scoreboard.

Place: 6/8

Time: 36.43

My worst time yet. A month ago, I would've been devastated, but now, I don't even care. This is my last race.

As my feet carry me inside the room, I can feel sweat beading from my eyebrows, warming my already perspiring body. My limp tongue tastes shriveled in my mouth. I suck in a shallow breath, attempting to calm my electric nerves.

"I wan- want to quit," I stutter, studiously avoiding my coach's solid brown eyes. I open my mouth to elaborate, but she interrupts me.

"I'm not surprised," she says quietly, meeting my eyes with an unwavering gaze. "You know, the only problem you'll have is when it comes to college applications."

I gawk at her, open-mouthed. I had just quit her team, which I had been on for two years, and the lack of emotion on her face was appalling. She seemed more passionate about college applications than me, her own swimmer.

The unfortunate truth I witness every day is that teenagers continue with sports they aren't passionate about just for the golden emblem of admission from an Ivy-League u

I didn't want to fall into that trap.

Swimming had been an integral part of my life, ever since I was eight, when I made the team. It was paradise for years, like most people imagine. It required minimal effort, and my strokes were aimless and languid. That is, until I switched to a more prestigious team of hand-picked swimmers. My new coach, a nationally ranked swimmer, made my first few days on the team a nightmare. Her yelling was incessant and her coaching wasn't any less harsh. In the water, my body would barely inch forward no matter how strong

my kicks were. My arms were weak and flabby. I would be lapped by nine-year-olds while my body felt inert in the icy water.

A couple of weeks later, I had settled into a routine, although my improvement was minimal. I was willing to work hard and push myself to be better. I swam until my tendons ached and my arms vibrated after countless chin-ups. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I spent three mind-numbing hours at practice. Two for swimming and one for dryland. I survived the rest of that year through sheer grit. It wasn't easy, but I kept swimming for two hours a day while balancing my homework and other extracurricular activities.

As I came to know soon, that routine wasn't sustainable. As seventh period approached in school, I could feel my mood become weary and my footsteps become slower. My usual ebullient mood was replaced by a ticking bomb of anxiety. When I walked onto the pool deck, I was consumed by an unexplainable sadness. I could feel myself glancing at the clock every couple minutes, as if I was desperate to leave.

I had never really considered leaving the sport because I thought people would see me as a loser. Quitting was truly unthinkable for me, until Covid-19. The pool was shut down, and all I had was dryland on Zoom, three times a week. Over that period of time, I realized that I'd been defining myself as a swimmer. If I quit, I would be losing my identity. At age 13, most people are building their personal brand, not reforming it.

I kept procrastinating on saying the words "I quit swimming" because it just was too difficult. Swimming was quite literally my life, the one thing that was constant as my beliefs, personality and friends changed. I had gotten so caught up in being perfect and steady that I forgot that there was a way out of swimming. My mind had become so one-tracked that I couldn't imagine life *without* swimming.

When I finally detached my self-worth from swimming, against the seemingly prudent voices in my head, I told my coach I was quitting. It was the greatest relief I have felt in

my entire life. The weights had been lifted off my shoulders, making me feel taller and more relaxed.

I've learned that quitting isn't giving up. It's choosing to focus your attention on something more important.

Shreya Prabhu is in the eighth grade at Eastern Middle School. Her work has appeared in The Hartford Courant, Teen Ink, GEN-ZINE and YR Media.

A Name Disconnected, A Branch Bare By Saif Nasr

The name Nasrullah is Arabic for “victory of God.” It has been in my family since the 18th century, forged in the bustling bazaars of Damascus and the ancient valleys of the Levante. It was always worn with pride, like an emerald ring or a diamond necklace. The name is my family's connection with their Islamic faith and how we are servants of God. However, a harsh climate in an alien land would soon put this beautiful name into harm and threaten its legacy.

My grandfather was Moen Nasrullah, an established lawyer and the most intelligent man I knew. He and his young family fled Damascus, when a coup d'état broke out, to the haven of Nashville, Tennessee. There, he had my father, Ahmed Nasrullah. My dad would always question my grandfather about why he has such an ethnic name and not something generically American like “Robert” or “John.” My grandfather would explain that in his haste to leave Syria, he could not bring any tangible objects; their name was their only bridge to Islam and Arab culture. As my father got older, he met my mother in St. Louis and they soon got married. During this time tragedy struck the nation: 9/11. These horrific events shocked the nation and threw the United States into a whirlwind.

The climate towards Muslim and especially Arab Muslims began to shift and Islamophobia became a common occurrence. My father got many comments like “traitor” or “terrorist” and these began to frighten my parents. Two years later, they had their first child. They gave me an Arab name, Saif, but out of fear of malice towards Muslims, changed my last name to Nasr. Our family name that survived wars, turmoil, colonial occupations, and civil war came to an end on the fateful day of March 11th, 2003.

I grew up oblivious to this change but somewhere deep inside me there was a void. I was too young to understand why I had this void or what I needed to fix it; I could only identify its existence. I obviously recognized that my last name was different, but paid no attention as I thought it was a mere simplification. I never believed that this shortening of five letters would ever compromise my connection to my culture. Or so I thought ...

Last summer, my family traveled to my grandmother’s house in Maryland to see how she was holding up amidst the pandemic. After greeting her and hearing the usual “look how tall you have gotten” despite seeing her a month ago, I headed up to the attic. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a cardboard box with the Arabic word aa’lia, meaning family. The box didn’t surprise me as much as my ability to read my grandmother’s atrocious Arabic handwriting! I pulled out a large framed manuscript and dusted off the thick cluster of cobwebs. It turned out to be a family tree that dated back to the 1800s. It had a beautiful gold leaf border, dark oak branches, and jet-black text. At the very top was our family’s name, Nasrullah, in a vibrant light blue ink. Seeing the Arabic calligraphy filled me with radiant pride, until I glanced at the bottom left-hand corner. On a tapped piece of paper lay a skinny branch reading Saif Nasr, without my family’s surname. The characters (ر ص ن) n, a, s, r) looked deserted, as if they didn’t belong. This was the first moment I felt disconnected with my family and utterly embarrassed. I felt disconnected with their triumphs. I felt disconnected with their struggles. I just felt disconnected.

During the remainder of lockdown, I struggled with this insecurity. There were days spent in my room staring out my window thinking about my name. I understood that it was changed to protect me from violent Islamophobia, but times are slowly changing. I was not going to let a 19-year-old fear dictate who I am today or who I will be tomorrow. I longed to be part of my family's legacy, so I made a promise to myself that once I turned 18, I would change my name to Nasrullah. I promise to carry on the Nasrullah name and wear it with pride to ensure that my ancestor's sacrifices were not in vain. I hope to finally take my rightful place on our ancient family tree and read the word Nasrullah in a beautiful Arabic script after my first name.

Someday in the distant future, I want to return to the rocky Syrian shores, look upon its rolling hills, and claim victory over Islamophobia by taking my rightful place in the Nasrullah family.

Saif Nasr is a high school senior living in McLean, VA. He has a passion for personal writing, especially about his Arab heritage. He runs the Arab Student Alliance at his school and loves hearing about each member's relationship with their culture. In his free time, he likes to read, fish, and stargaze.

All that is stole, but what shall stay By Geetanjali Purohit

-16/04/2021-

I didn't know what grief was. That hollow feeling of helplessness and despair is consuming me now. Ever been to a casino and despite knowing the high odds of losing, felt the situation will be in your favor? It's like you know the uncertainty yet don't fathom its nature until you lose. Though I was acquainted with the uncertainty of life it is not until now during this pandemic that it is stark clear to me.

The coronavirus is still holding onto my chest, not treating me so bad but its effect on my family has got me weak in my knees. It was pretty late until my family realized corona had us in its radar which led to a series of unfortunate weeks and long hospital bills.

My grandmother and dad were hospitalized and the rest of us were quarantined at home. It's this week that I realized how cautious we are to be of our frail lives, only one chance on existence. People spent a fortune on lives and not to my surprise my mom could spend an entire night sleeping on the administration room sofa in a Covid-19 ward while she was healthy to make sure my dad's oxygen levels are in control.

I distinctly remember the scenario; it was almost midnight when my mom felt it was necessary to take my dad to the hospital, in the midst of the night on the streets of the once bustling city which was now dead, my mom rushed out with him during the curfew. You could only see the beaming lights from the sirens of patrolling cars and cops on duty making sure the curfew rules are strictly followed. No one was allowed to leave their homes after 9:00pm and so my mom was stopped by a cop but considering the emergency she was given a grant. On reaching the hospital and admitting my dad, it was so late, around 1:00 in the morning— there weren't any Ubers available and it wasn't safe to leave then,— and so my mom was left with no option but staying the night at the hospital despite the prohibition.

I guess I was never the loving kind, took the little things that people do for me for granted. I wasn't very appreciative of the love I am often showered with and failed to notice its magnificent impact on my life until it was my mom with her immense love, who stood by us in our times of despair to rekindle the word grateful in my heart. I realize after having fallen multiple times, how important it is to notice and be expressive to people, as finally relationships are the reason you wake up every day with a smile and sense of comfort.

I kept hope imagining this phase to be a passing cloud, since everything is supposed to be temporary after all. However little did I know this pandemic was going to leave a mark of permanence. It got my grandmother.

Each night I slept looking at the void space on her side of the bed. Today I noticed the abandoned bird feeder and the weary wilting plants that have lost their lush in her absence. Right now, I peek down the balcony wall to see Kali our lovely black dog pressing on the bars of our iron gate, wagging his tail, still waiting to welcome her back from the hospital; little does he know she won't return.

Battling through life's harshest fights and always winning bruised but with an aura of bubbling confidence, I could describe my grandmother as invincible. Her sparks could make anyone's day, so right now the steel cold silence that surrounds me is a reminder of her not being here.

Walking through our backyard now, where we use to spend a lot of time gardening together, I really feel lonely. I grew up eating her *green chutney* and *pickles* made from the mint leaves and lemons growing in our garden. I remember holding her hands when I was a child while she described all the herbs and plants in our garden. Her hands were always warm, a bit rough and sturdy. She had some scars which told great stories. She uses to tell me a lot of stories and I could see them come alive through her scars and her wrinkled hands.

She was a lot like me; fearless and full of energy, she used to tell me how she would climb on trees to pluck juicy fruits, how she had petted all sorts of animals she really adored and had seen mystical things I loved hearing about. My grandmother was nothing short of sunbeams, she used to light up the entire bazaar as she cracked up chatting with vegetable vendors, and catching up with the shopkeepers who adored her. The pandemic stole my greatest source of joy.

The surreal nature of this kind of loss is its contrast, with it being the most normal thing in life, everyone has to die. Yet strange; a coliseum of thoughts, dreams, and inexorably unique persona has been dispersed and will be a memory.

I can only promise to keep kindled her spirit of liveliness and bursts of energy, keep her love in the things that stay alive in her presence. I'm writing this to remind you lives are frail, change is constant. In this pandemic dark times are inevitable. Everything is temporary but our spirits shouldn't die, just like my grandmother's will dwell, the only thing that is permanent, the only thing that is not temporary.

Geetanjali Purohit is a fun-loving girl with a radiant personality. She loves to be the reason for someone's smile. Having an array of interests from coding, writing, hanging out with her freaky friends to gardening with her grandmother she could be described as an amiable person.

We are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, & purple By Maanas Sharma

Content Warning: Mentions of homophobia and transphobia.

FOR US, RED IS LIFE.

Our blood stains red, and it has bled at the hands of bigots, governments, and the police for centuries. Across races, religions, and genders, this blood unites us in life.

Ghastly as it may seem, we are here because of the blood, sweat, and tears of thousands, perhaps millions, of people before us. During Pride, we honor those who fought the good fight before us as we continue to make the world a more inclusive place one step at a time.

FOR US, ORANGE IS HEALING.

Trapped in the closet, we live every second of every day trying to hide our true selves. Our biggest fear is people discovering who we truly are, so we constantly put on a façade to act like someone we are not. Often times, we smother the very parts of us that give us life. Other times, we project our insecurities on others. Be it through depression, anxiety, or internalized homophobia, we as LGBTQ+ people struggle with the repercussions of this.

Disentangling this mess often takes us years. But ultimately, it is worth it to finally be ourselves. Being out, and being proud, is therapeutic. We are in the constant struggle of healing, but during Pride, we remember that there is a community of millions like us who will support us at every step of the healing process.

FOR US, YELLOW IS SUNLIGHT.

The sun is eternal.

We will be queer for as long as the sun will rise. We will be proud for as long as the sun will set. We will be here for everyone else in the community as long as the sun will shine.

There is sunlight at the end of the tunnel. Although sometimes it is hard to see in the darkness, we know it is here, because we are the ones holding the torch.

FOR US, GREEN IS NATURE.

We are natural. Through green we remember that who we are is who we are. Period.

And when people try and tell us otherwise, we simply quote Lady Gaga, because “Oh baby, I was born this way.”

FOR US, BLUE IS SERENITY.

Pride is serene. In a world where our identity is not accepted and constantly demonized, self-love is the most powerful force. Let us be at peace with ourselves, and let us take pride in our identity.

FOR US, PURPLE IS SPIRIT.

“You get to exhale now, Simon.”

Though millions of people heard that line in theatres, we felt that quote at a visceral level. Our young lives are spent hiding within a husk of a person we are not, forced to live a lie. Finally accepting our identity allows our spirit — smothered for so long — to breathe at last.

WE ARE RED, ORANGE, YELLOW, GREEN, BLUE, AND PURPLE.

Never underestimate the power of a queer person who loves themselves. For those who may not yet, never underestimate the power of a queer community that loves you.

Maanas Sharma is the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Interdisciplinary Public Policy and a junior at the School of Science and Engineering in Dallas. His academic interests lie in bringing social scientific perspectives into quantitative public policy and he is vehemently opposed to all forms of injustice. He is the Director of Finance at Redefy, the nation's leading youth-led social justice organization, co-founder and Program Lead at Seeds2STEM, a youth collaborative targeted at underserved in the DFW metroplex, and has a personal interest in LGBTQ+ liberation.

Nobody's Empire By Zinnia Hansen

I'm a poet. I write my body and soul with the desperation of a prostitute. But when I sit down to describe my illness... I am *on the edge of nobody's empire*. My words fail me. It's like staring into the void. Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, ME, or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, is a complex, multi-system chronic disease that feels like having a persistent flu and leaves you utterly exhausted, both mentally and physically.

I found Belle and Sebastian last spring, right as my symptoms started to worsen. Bedridden with nothing to do except listen to music, I fell in love with the band's lyrics. Their songs were delicate, gritty explorations of life's glorious triviality. In a poetic tribute, depressed by the pandemic and my failing body, I wrote: "My dearest Belle and Sebastian, you break yourselves into pieces so casually/ such casual living is beyond me."

It wasn't until later that I learned that Stuart Murdoch, the band's lead singer and songwriter, also suffered from ME. Songwriting was Murdoch's way of accessing a world he wasn't able to fully participate in. In an interview, Murdoch talks about how though ME had permeated many of his songs, "Nobody's Empire" was the first time he attempted to write directly about his illness. I understand his hesitation; the void our illness creates is terrifying. Writing "Nobody's Empire" was a truly courageous act. The song is helpless and helpful, hopeless and hopeful. Being ill is a lonely experience. It's

cathartic to empathize, but it's especially exhilarating when that empathy comes in the form of an escape. Through "Nobody's Empire", Murdoch makes our disease beautiful. He embraces the emptiness. He allows it to be filled by fluttering, tender moments of love and pain.

I told myself I would not let my disability define me. But here I am, writing an essay about my musical medicine. The truth is our limitations do define us. They sculpt us. They form our contours. They help us choose our heroes. In *Nobody's Empire*, Murdoch's hero is a friend who is sick alongside him. He addresses her with poignant, defiant acceptance and love: "Lying on my side you were half awake/ And your face was tired and crumpled/ If I had a camera, I'd snap you now/ Cause there's beauty in every stumble." Sometimes I think I may have found a hero in Murdoch. I will never be superwoman, but I can tell stories, create metaphors, take a camera and capture humanity as we stumble towards a better future.

*Lyrics in Italics and quotations are from Belle and Sebastian's song *Nobody's Empire*, *Girls in Peacetime Want to Dance*

(this poem has also found a home on Write the World)

Zinnia Hansen is a seventeen-year-old essayist and poet from Port Townsend, Washington. She has a tendency towards abstraction, but a deep love of the idiosyncrasies that make us human. Her work has been published in several magazines. She was a participant in the 2020-2021 Hugo Young Writers Cohort. And she is the 2021-2022 Seattle Youth Poet Laureate.

Art



Abeyance

What is it like to be suspended in time, motionless, uncertain of what to do next, of how to carry forward? When the world seems to go against our preconceptions and we are lost, either dwelling over the guilt and regret of the past or the fear of the future, we default to a state of psychological and even physical abeyance. But the world does not wait for us to catch up – time continues to move forward, for that is its nature, and you can choose to either wither away with it or navigate alongside it.

Aileen Xie is an artist and creative writer in high school, based in the California Bay Area. Much of her work explores the intricacies of human nature, including guilt, ambivalence, and contradiction. When she's not drawing or writing, she's reading some classic literature with music playing in the background and a cup of coffee in her hand.

Toxic 2020 By Erick Buendia



This piece depicts a student looking lost and unsure. The background is based on my school campus at St. Albans. I wanted to evoke my feelings of being unsure of my future as a student. Many teens are unsure or nervous about what comes after high school and how they should plan out their lives, careers, and colleges. The gas mask on the student represents the added pressure that COVID has brought. COVID has taken opportunities and made lives harder for many teens and the gas mask symbolizes that extreme toll that COVID has had on students and their community. While being in quarantine, I felt what I describe as an emotional toxicity in which I was deflated, claustrophobic, and tired. This piece is a summary of my experience and the relationship of COVID and school overall.

Erick Buendia is an aspiring artist, filmmaker, and writer from the DC area. He looks towards creating striking and fun imagery in his art while capturing a mood. His art has appeared in 3elements review, and CelebratingArt.org. His short stories have also been seen in Bombfirelit and 101words.

Updated Shopping List By Zainab Iliyasu Bobi



Updated Shopping List

This picture was taken in a moving car, during the pandemic somewhere in Abuja, Nigeria. The photo holds the theme of survival; survival from the pandemic, and survival from hunger.

From where I came face masks were not well known before the pandemic, but due to the Coronavirus outbreak, everyone knew the importance and use of face masks.

The woman in the picture appears to be stressed and at the same time focused on searching her luggage, making sure that face masks weren't omitted. I tried my best to capture the emotion of the woman shifting from worry to satisfaction as she searches her bags—survival from the pandemic. On the other side is an orange trader that was mostly affected by the lockdown because of low income—survival from hunger.

Zainab is a Nigerian writer, poet, spoken word artist, and an aspiring street photographer.

Her poems have been published and forthcoming in magazines and journals like Kalahari Review, the shallow tales review, Praxis Magazine online, Spillwords and more.



Mind



The Future

Mind, is a capture of what exists in my mind, expressed in a tilted box. In it, there is my puppy Scott, fruits to start the morning, and books I like to immerse myself in. But beyond that, this piece is a spin to what people always say, “think outside the box.” I feel that there needs to be more effort to be introspective, to look inside what goes on in the mind to make rational and right decisions. To express my message, I placed a human making his move inside a brain.

The Future, depicts what I envision our future to be. Don't be fooled by the smiling faces of the astronauts – it is a disguise for something more serious. With so much pollution created every day, it seems inevitable that we will look beyond life on Earth and find alternative life habitats in space. I depicted the technology that will embark on the search, and placed buds to show

that we will eventually find or build habitat we will be able to transition to. So the image depicts at once a dreaded future and a hint of hope.

Junseob Yoon is a junior in an international school based in Seoul. Junseob's interests are painting, mixed media, drawing, fashion design, and illustration. He loves using art as a way to bring communities together. His work has been exhibited in both school and professional venues. He intends to major in the fine arts in college and dreams that he will be a creative director and industrial designer one day. During his free time, he runs his auction platform in school, studies contemporary artists, paints in studio, and makes clothes.

Ops By C.T. Dinh





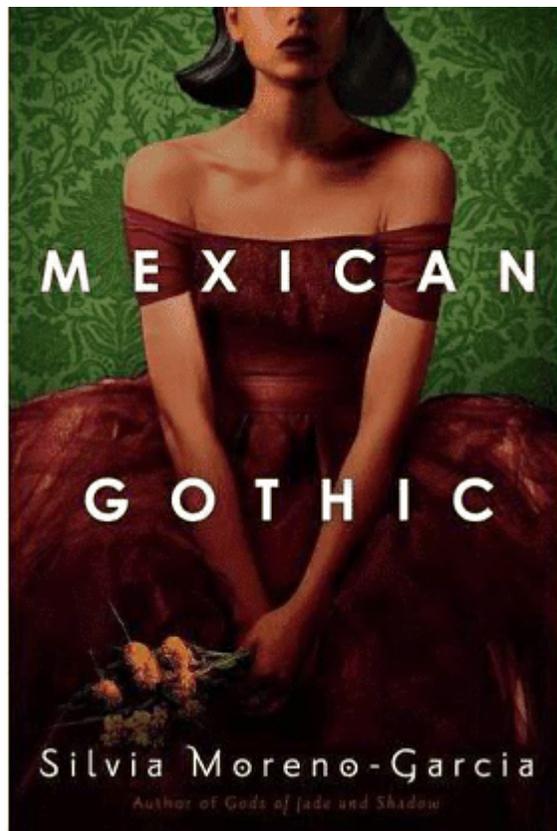
Ops

This piece is part of an art portfolio highlighting the intersections of femininity and STEM. It is titled "Ops" after the wife of Saturn in Roman mythology. (Why Saturn? In tribute to the color scheme and the ring of stars around her helmet. Why Ops? To highlight the lesser-known women of space and of mythology; and because her name can be read as a pun on "operations.")

C.T. Dinh is a DMV-based artist and writer. She edits Backslash Lit and has speculative work featured in Flash Point SF, Strange Horizons, and Ample Remains. She will attend UMD in the fall to study immersive media.

Book Review

Mexican Gothic By S.G. Smith



Mexican Gothic

“You must come for me, Noemí. You must save me.”

Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s bestselling novel “Mexican Gothic” begins with Noemí Taboada receiving a frantic letter from her newlywed cousin Catalina, begging for Noemí to save

her from an unknown horror. Noemí heads to High Place, a dark and eerie Gothic mansion in the Mexican countryside. Little does she know what she is about to uncover.

Noemí takes the stage as an unexpected heroine. She plays a noncommittal debutant who switches her college major almost as frequently as she drops suitors. Her chic gowns and glossy lipstick appear more fit for a life of glamorous parties than a seemingly haunted mansion. But it is clear from the start of the novel that Noemí is also an intelligent, nose-y woman, talented in unearthing secrets. She will do anything to protect her cousin.

She finds High Place filled with mysteries and horrors, such as the elderly patriarch who ogles her and the old cemetery in the backyard. The hostess keeps an ever-watchful eye on her, and Catalina's husband exudes a foreboding presence. Haunting portraits decorate the walls, mold grows in corners and servants maintain a sinisterly poised composition.

In a harkening back to Shirley Jackson's classic *Haunting of Hill House*, the house itself seems to have its own persona. It invades Noemí's dreams with visions of gore and violence, and it seems to observe her every move.

The descriptions of the house as a stately Victorian manner play on Catalina's love for romance novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Catalina has found her brooding Mr. Darcy and his Gothic mansion, but can she and Noemí survive the horrors it contains?

While the family members keep Catalina under strict surveillance, Noemí's only friend is the youngest son in the family. He appears to want to assist Noemí in recovering her cousin, but he struggles to discern where his true loyalties lie.

Many mysteries lay buried in High Place. The family's colossal fortune was built upon the backs of miners, none of whom survived; madness and violence mar the family's history;

and no one has ever escaped the house alive.

As Noemí tries to draw out the secrets of High Place, she finds herself slowly being held captive by its daunting power. She is both haunted by and drawn to the cryptic house.

With *Mexican Gothic*, Moreno-Garcia attacks the period romance genre and flips it on its head. The book's feminist use of a heroine in a Victorian mansion is a dark parallel to the Elizabethan romances in which a wealthy estate-owning man saves the female protagonist.

In *Mexican Gothic*, Moreno-Garcia writes a breath-taking thriller that can be read in a single session. She builds a mystery that the reader uncovers along with Noemí, but upon looking back, the reader can see that the explanations make perfect sense. The ending is shockingly delicious to fans of the genre and will dwell with readers for days afterwards.

S.G. Smith is an undergraduate student studying English with a concentration in Creative Writing at The Ohio State University. Her work has been published in *The Journal* and *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and she is the second place recipient of the university's Jacobson Short Story Award.
