

Issue 24



Wake Up

Editor Note By Molly Hill

Issue 24

December 2021

There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth. -Doris May Lessing

Dear Readers and Writers:

Of the 32 selections in our December issue, seven of them are fiction pieces. There's a short flash piece about taking on a bully (*Turtle Girl*), a funeral with a widow who is decidedly NOT grieving (*Pray*), and one about some wall art that seems a little.. shifty (*Portrait*). Check out *Seedless Soil*, —a very unusual duel at high noon, two 'smoke' stories (*Smoke Ghosts* and *Smoke in the Air*), and *The Window*, a quirky/imaginative vignette we couldn't say no to.

You'll also find a dozen splendid poems, a handful of poignant essays, an outstanding book review (*When Breath Becomes Air*) and some incredible art and photography.

December 1st was the deadline for 2021 Pushcart nominations, and though it was a challenge to select only six pieces from everything we published this year, it was such an honor to recognize these students:

Flotsam(poetry)- Oluwafisayo Akinfolami

Reader, I (poetry)- Zoe Reay-Ellers

Polyester (poetry)- Rena Su

Give & Take or how God Takes his revenge (poetry)- Roseline Mgbodichinma Anya-Okorie

Snow Day (fiction) -Crystal Peng

Bottle Baby (fiction)- Matt Hsu

Congrats to these writers, and to every student who fills out our submission form, attaches their writing and hits SEND. You all are the best.

Molly Hill

Editor

Poetry

Returning Home from a funeral. By Ashish Kumar Singh

In our culture, we burn our dead(s), scatter the ashes
in rivers

and so nothing remains.

Why this heaviness then? What slipped from the fire
and landed on us

like snow on hunched shoulders?

My mother whispers

death is a cycle,

a hoop we all must jump through

and life in that moment, feels redundant.

Returning home, everything remains unchanged, yet
I am making adjustments.

Sleep seems like the best option.

If not death, then I'll take anything that resembles it.

Ashish Kumar Singh (he/him) is a poet from India and a post-graduate student of English Literature. Along with other things, he writes about queer experiences in a country that denies their existence, and the collision between self, culture and religion. Other than writing, he reads and sleeps extensively. Previously he has been published in Brave Voices Magazine, The Mark Literary Review, Dust and Sledgehammer Lit. Twitter:

[@Ashish_stJude](#)

Delirium: By Snigdha Garud

—best viewed on a desktop browser—

Fervid night—

 i er

candle f c s

 l k

a tantalizing blaze.

Light / bleary mind whispers / Achingly, I metamorphosize.

Noctuid anatomy,

thorax propels dark wings

 forward...

Obsidian eyes glisten

as flame dances with intensity.

Image sears each photoreceptor

a hundred superimposed suns;

lost in a trance,

I circle closer.

circle circle

circle

Doomed trajectory,

loose inwards

spirals until I inwards,

taper

immolate this fragile body—

watch: instantaneous disintegration.

Reduced to a fine ash,

organs scatter in the wind;

I watch them disappear a

feeling weightless at last.

Snigdha Garud is an Indian-American writer who loves reading poetry, particularly metaphorical and visual poetry. She has also experimented with these forms in the past—with varying degrees of success. A current rising junior from Erie, PA, she is an avid painter as well, and loves exploring the overlap between visual art and writing in her work.

An End to Praying By Ryan Skarphol

Let me be a witness to true things—
 coffee percolating, summer
 rain early morning cigarettes

Let me speak well, and kindly
 to strangers on the street
 and to myself when I'm alone,

Let all the dusty paperbacks mean something.

Let me know who I am
 without the permission of those
 who don't and let me always strive for better

Let me be content with quiet
 until I'm stirred to move
 then let my actions be sincere

Let me be a journalist
 whose subjects
 are asphalt and tires

Let me not disturb the universe,

but Let me go always further

whether in chairs or in woods, and

Let me bring back a record of the human
heart that will outlive the beating of my
own

Lord,

Let me have the strength to live without
you. Let me know I won't live without love.

Ryan J. Skarphol is a queer poet from Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is currently attending the University of Minnesota, Duluth for English and Journalism.

poem in which i conclude beauty is not for me By Flourish Joshua

in the scale of things, i am a feather plucked from the wings of
grief, motioning towards a citadel of zero quietude. forgive me— i've
tried *stanzaring* laughter into a poem & watering seeds into a garden
of lullabies; but— at the mention of my name, everything beautiful
dies, as if to mean, *beauty is not for me*. in the last poem i wrote, i
danced love into the pages, but it took the back door & seethed into
oblivion— when they say *love is in the air*, i vaccinate my mind &

barricade

every opening in my body. in the scheme of things, i am a dagger

in

the

chest

of

beauty.

Flourish Joshua, Frontier XX, has appeared in London Grip Poetry, miniskirt magazine, East French Press, Olongo Africa, Sledgehammer Lit Mag, Poetry Column NND, Ghost City Review, Brittle Paper, Blue Marble Review, Bluebird Review, No Contact, the Indianapolis Review, Agbowó, the minnesota review, Magma Poetry & elsewhere. He is the poetry editor for LERIMS Quarterly, associate poetry editor for miniskirt magazine & a Best of the Net nominee. He tweets from @fjspeaks.

Birthright By Mofiyinfoluwa Okupe

when they ask you why you do not whisper, tell them fear was not buried in your mouth.
your mother's blood opened your eyes, loosened your tongue, sharpened your teeth. this is
your birth right. let them know you belong here. leave no room for mistaken assumptions.

fill every room to bursting with your presence. never shrink. for him. for anyone. spread your abundance in every crevice. suffocate them with your light. let them look in every corner and find you. smear your blood on the temple gates; they will not pass over you. when they ask you why you do not hide, tell them that creatures of light have no kinship with the darkness. you inherited fire in your blood, if they touch you, they will burn.

Mofiyinfoluwa Okupe is a reluctant lawyer-in-training writing from Lagos, Nigeria. Her work explores the complexity of human emotions, with a deeply introspective self-lens. Her work is published in Guernica, The Kalahari Review, Agbowo and forthcoming in Black Warrior Review. She tweets @fiyinskosko and publishes monthly pieces on Medium.

The Wild By Gabrielle Beck

Our bus is stuck in traffic
and I'm late for lunch with my grandpa
because his silence makes me feel a little bit less lonely
in a world where it's easier to forget
the deaths of old friends, the day's list of tragedies.

I know he longs for fiction—
his home, by the bay, indestructible.
I once ran with innocence through the halls of his apartment,
but I no longer have that lens of childhood sweetness
or his escape from reality.
New York's too cold tonight.
I shiver in the loss of naivete.

The bus lurches forward
in the city where it's possible to be enveloped in the heat

of hundreds of apartment lights and still feel a chill
tremble through your heart.

They want me to be myself like a shark might be herself in a city aquarium
Motionless, encumbered by the glass.
I pretend like I'm told.

I am the only passenger left,
waiting to wade in the tide of unknown
undulate along the waves of my intuition,
and send ripples through the status quo,
but I am impatient.

It is now nighttime and for a fleeting moment
the chaos of the pandemic blurs into stillness.
I tell the driver what is beneath my kaleidoscopic eyes,
my truth fading into the endless cries of taxis
and the wispy strands of smoke rising from concrete.
Whether or not he listened,
I entered The Wild, glass shattered.

Gabrielle Beck is a junior attending Tenafly High School. When she is not writing or photographing, she can be found repurposing vintage denim. She is a finalist for New York Times "Coming of Age in 2020: A Special Multimedia Contest for Teenagers," and recognized by the National Council of Teachers of English. Her writing and photography has been featured in Kalopsia Literary Journal, Cathartic Literary Magazine, Young Writers Project, and Written by the Youth.

From an early age I was taught to be mindful of how I present myself.

Never walk in a store with my hood on.

Be careful with who I'm in public with.

Don't draw too much attention.

Keep my pants pulled up.

Place my hands on the steering wheel if I'm pulled over.

Always be respectful, even if I'm disrespected.

Granted, these all have led me to be a very responsible person,

But I can guarantee there aren't any white kids who have to know this.

Those kids don't have to get "The Talk."

Those kids aren't told they can't drive the car they want because they might get pulled over, because "they look suspicious" then get sent to jail. Or worse.

Those kids don't have to change or cut their hair because "it doesn't fit the standards of the school."

Those kids don't have to worry about their name being "proper" enough for the job they want.

Those kids don't have to live with the fact that they could do everything right in life and still could be killed before their 20th birthday.

You may think these kids have it made—

But what they don't have is pride.

No one can make me feel ashamed about the way I look.

Because that's a huge part of why I am the person I am today.

I have the advantage, whether anybody sees it that way or not.

Being black is not something to overcome,

But something to embrace.

See my brown skin

All this melanin

Is a gift to me

Every “problem” it may come with
Is nothing I can’t handle
It’s nothing I haven’t seen before
Nothing new to me
And no one can make me feel ashamed for this brown skin.

DeAnthony Logwood is a junior at Overton High School. He has been a part of the Creative Writing Option program for three years. He is a part of the track/cross country team and is involved in JROTC and many other activities throughout school.

li li jie xin ku By Lauren Tan

谁知盘中餐

粒粒皆辛苦

-李绅

there’s an old poem every Chinese kid was made to memorize in school; it goes, every grain of rice is obtained with hardship; eat well the food God gave you. the other Chinese girls are size twos and zeros and wear brandy melville; i wonder if they listened.

I never wear low-waisted shorts because the sides of my stomach protrude like a swollen lip; aren’t those pants too tight for you, he says; eyes squinted like a hunter eyeing its prey; he almost steps forward. I almost step back.

I learned to look at my body the way my sister looked at her salad before pushing it to the side of her plate. my body was not my home, not the chafing of thighs or the way my chin

sank into my neck when I smiled; if I could pinch off my skin like wet sand maybe I could mold myself into the swimsuit I bought two months ago.

you look just like your mother; words I never wanted to hear; he laughed at her and she began eating cabbage soup for breakfast and lunch and dinner, put three bowls of rice on the table instead of four. she doesn't say grace anymore.

I cried at dinnertime and hid my tears in the broth of *la mian*; my grandmother slid a spoon across the table and it sputtered to a stop in front of me. dark except for the swinging lightbulb casting shadows in circles around the small wooden table.

nothing in our house goes into the trash before it goes into a plastic container for tomorrow's lunch.

too much rice travels to your hips and your thighs; fried food makes your skin dry like parchment; no snacks no juice no fat remember press downwards on your uvula; whatever happened to *li li jie xin ku*?

I lost six pounds and the scale became my altar.

are those your sister's shorts, he says, why does your ass stick out like that; i think, why are you looking at my ass why are you looking at my ass why are you looking at my ass why are you looking at my ass why are you looking

if our bodies are temples why are they defiled by men who think they are gods.

Lauren is a Singaporean writer currently residing in Bethesda, MD. She attended the University of Iowa International Program's Between the Lines workshop, and is an editor

for the MoCo Student newspaper. She can be found most often in the auditorium lighting booth, where she serves as Whitman Drama's lighting director.

Love-in-a-Mist By Izzy Searle

Magic is
Wet clothes sticking to skin
Sinking boots, mud crawling in
Ink running through tangled footpaths
Scrambled grid references
Clouds dripping into fog
Draping over fences
Aching legs, blistered body
Kendal Mint Cake crumbs
Wind whipped cheeks
Sleet slithering through waterproofs
Blue lips and fingertips
Splashes of colour in the grey eclipse

Then turning the corner
To stumble upon sunflower fields
Stretching towards a horizon
Streaked with Love-in-a Mist blue

Izzy Searle is a neurodivergent poet from Sussex. Her writing is featured on the International Network of Italian Theatre and she has a poetry anthology in the process of publication. In her spare time, Izzy loves to hike and volunteer at Scouts.

Home Will Break Out of Me Someday By Abioye Samuel Akorede

but for now, let the stormy earth take charge of the moment.

In my room, there are silhouettes of things I'm trying to live for—

my room is the only place I act not as a fugitive in this country.

I've taught my legs how to rebel against the soil of the land.

/how do you picture yourself happy in a country like this?/

My body is morphing into a road stretched across this country

Some parts of me scamper towards the North— the abattoir

Where the fates of over 200 girls were buried before vanishing.

Another part of me is sailing across the ocean, seeking refuge

From lands innocent of my origin. I don't want to believe

that our mothers deserve the blame. Is it nothing to call love

when a mother burns out of comfort just to give her child life, but

a country wring out the soul of the child from his body? My body is telegraphing

Seeking asylum in the ruins of this country. I'm still longing for home.

A castle of hope is sinking inside of me. I wish there will be a time

when nothing will know my name or my origin. I'm claustrophobic.

If I ever see God in my dream, I think I'm damn sure of what to ask him.

Abioye Samuel Akorede is a Nigerian poet & an undergraduate student of the University of Jos, Nigeria. His works have appeared on Literary Platforms such as Kalahari Review, Parousia, Sparrow's Trombone, Praxis Magazine, Ice Floe Mag, The Quills Journal, EroGospel, and so on. In 2020, Abioye's poem 'RUNNING OUT OF THE MIRROR' was longlisted for the Nigerian Students Poetry Prize (NSPP). His poem "A BOY, HIS GOD, AND A COUNTRY" was Longlisted among the TOP 20 of The Nigeria Students Poetry Prize in 2021.

Dead Birds and Dead Families By Srina Bose

i. I remember my sister once found robin eggs in the post-box. She tells me they were bluer than a shipwreck, but when I ask her what happened to them, she says she doesn't remember.

My father breaks nests in our house every week. He once threw a birds' eggs down our fifth storey balcony. I think his hands reek of the daughters he has killed before they were even born.

ii. I have a photo album from which I cut out pictures to stick on my wall. They flutter furiously to the wind and refuse to be held down by the tape I attach. Yesterday, I cried for an hour trying to find more tape, and maybe it's the universe trying to tell me that no tape could hold back a broken past. That it's time to let go. Maybe I'm a dead bird waiting to sink into the graves of the sky.

iii. My mother likes to stand at the edge of the balcony at exactly 10:47 p.m. and feel the breeze brush against her skin. She says it feels like her dead father giving her a hug, but sometimes she stands on her toes and tips over a little too much. Then, in her eyes, I see a world pulsing. Maybe she doesn't do that to hug her father. Maybe she wants to see him. ~~Maybe she stands at the edge of the balcony every night at 10:47 p.m. because she likes to~~

watch the ground murmur the names of all the dead birds whose ashes stain this family's hands.

iv. My heart remembers too much. It throbs and searches for names of dead lovers on everything it sees. My heart remembers too much and though I forgive the razor, I forgive my hands, I forgive those who saw in me a shipwreck and watched me drown, and I forgive the birds that knock on my ribs, asking to be let out saying—*please? Just tonight? Let me be free?* I forgive them but my heart is cruel. It doesn't forget. My heart still remembers the hurt.

v. Sometimes, I am threatened by the abilities of others. I look at my hands and see a lost soul. I watch others standing at the peak, while I am still trying to drag my feet. I'm still searching for reasons to not fall.

I'm still lying on the ground; dirt seeping into my hair and I am watching the birds in the sky. They tell me it's time I let go of this heavy pretence of sorrow and do something. Something. Anything. *It's time I bleed meaning into this life*, they say. And in the blink of an eye, the birds aren't dead anymore.

Srina Bose is a high school student based in New Delhi, India. She has previously had her work published in "The Ice Lolly Review", and "Cathartic Literary magazine." She has also published her own collection of poetry titled— "Roses In My Mind", which is commercially available.

You can find her poetry blog on Instagram at [@teardrops_of_ink](#)

portrait as a winter afternoon By Norah Brady

the rink is closed, the sky is purple and full
of ice, we could say the sky is a bruise and
not talk about what might have happened
to bruise it, but it's raining, and a flock

of dogs are pointing south through the park
where the train blurs our words together: howl,
for this is not a garden, for this is not
the garden and I drove us here for nothing

and perhaps we already left the walls and there
is no garden to return to, and maybe this fact
has nothing at all to do with us, young and trapped
as we are in the past with no place to go, beating
the ground with our feet for something to do

if today were a bear trap, I would be the spring
gauge lying tacit in the snow trying not to feel
too beat up about the neighbor's pear tree
(they took it down with a wrecking ball)
(a wrecking ball, and I think about how I might
hurt the people I love) and how I love my eggs in a basket,
how I love the basket and its nest of perfectly timed
meetings, all my thoughts like ribbons
pinned into dinner party art, eating themselves

look, why would a tree be mine, it is not an
egg, it is not a basket, and the wrecking ball is
not a bear trap, something looking for a fight,
something transparent and lonely

look, the ice is melting anyway, the tree
has forgone all possession by becoming a
ghost, the ghost doesn't want to talk to you
but that's ok, you'll both come around

and we're not talking about any of this really,
who would, when there are so many places to
warm your feet, we're listening to classical music
on the drive back from the rink, because
the dial's stuck, because maybe
the world ends, because I know all the words

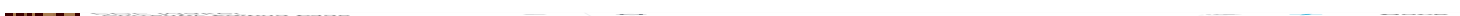
Norah Brady is a moon enthusiast, haunted house, and mountain poet. They were a runner-up for Youth Poet Laureate of Boston in 2020. Their poetry and short fiction can be found in Rookie Magazine, The Ekphrastic Review, COUNTERCLOCK and Kissing Dynamite.

Fiction

Portrait By William MacLeod

It is a warm summer morning, the sun is bashfully peeking over the mountains, filling the mansion with a wonderful warm glow. The halls are empty, and eddies of dust swirl around. My golden frame glimmers in the morning sun, and I stretch my arms out as far as they can go. I flutter my eyes daintily. Another glorious day.

A loud jingling sound emanates from downstairs, then a loud creak. Astonished, I peek out of my painting and glance down the stairs. An elderly woman has entered the building. Her face has melted with age, covered in liver spots. Next to her is a middle-aged woman. When they look my way, I quickly meld back into my painting, assuming the position I was born in. The two women begin to search around the house, my house, rummaging through drawers and file cabinets. I feel my blood pressure increasing with everything they move out of place.



Something seems off about the older woman. Her eyes seem like cruel copies of my own eyes. Her hair is a faded version of my own golden hair. On her finger is the same ring that I wear! I am outraged as I recognize this hag. I hear the younger woman climb up the staircase, the younger woman fixated with an old piano. She sits on the old stool and opens the lid. When I am sure that she isn't watching, I slither out of my frame. When I touch the sleek wooden floor, my delicate foot makes no sound. The woman begins to play, and I recognize this melody. It was something she would play when she was younger; however, her skills are greatly diminished. My eyes narrow as I approach her, standing silently behind her. What a cruel imitation of my eternal beauty. Suddenly, her head whips around, shouting in fear as she sees me. I zoom back into my painting, quickly resuming my pose.

The younger woman rushes down the stairs, wrapping her arm around the elderly woman, who is as pale as a ghost.

"Are you alright!?" the woman asks, panicked.

"Y...yes... I thought I saw someone behind me..." The elderly woman mutters, her eyes not moving from my painting. "But it was nothing..."

"I think we should go," the young woman says quietly.

The pair leave quickly, closing the door behind them. Once more, I am alone.

William MacLeod, 15, has been writing poetry, short stories, and novels before kindergarten. This is his second published work, his first being a poem put in the newspaper of his small hometown in California. When he's not writing, he enjoys other creative hobbies like drawing and painting, or spending time with his cat: Gwyneth.

A tumbleweed blew by.

It was as dead as the rest of the small frontier town: dry, shriveled, a husk that was once a lively plant. The earth was cracked and dry, the sky a pale and unforgiving yellow. The hands of the clock tower pointed to high noon, and despite having ceased movement years ago, they still happened to be correct, just for this one passing minute.

Two figures stood on opposite ends of the main street, eyes shaded by wide hats with hands hovering over their belts. Off to the side, a pair of horses watched, bridles tied to the rotting post of the abandoned saloon. They had seen this showdown hundreds of times before, and would no doubt see it hundreds of times more.

Both outlaws sharply eyed a bird pecking at the ground. The scrawny thing wasn't going to find any food in such a desolate land, but every day at noon, it returned nonetheless. Didn't the simple thing know it was just wasting its time, tapping at the soil in a daily exercise in futility? The first outlaw squinted a little, teeth biting down on the straw in her mouth. The second curled his chapped lips. Having finally resigned its fruitless quest for seed, the bird between them spread its wings and fluttered off to wherever it came.

As soon as the bird's tiny feet left the ground, two gunshots broke the silence of the dead town.

The wide hat of the first outlaw was blown off her head, her scalp only narrowly grazed by the bullet. The second outlaw's hat, however, was the least of his worries. He staggered backwards, his head had been blown clean through. The chunks of skull and viscera never hit the ground, but evaporated into a thick black smog that hung in the air like a ghost. The first outlaw didn't seem satisfied, sliding her revolver back into its holster on her waist as she sprinted to her horse, and pulled a long shotgun from beneath its saddle.

Running to the still standing man, she unceremoniously blew his head clean off, the blast knocking him to the ground. The wounds were exuding more thick, foul-smelling smoke, as

though hell itself were reaching through his body and clawing its way into the real world. She blew a second hole through his chest, opening the coach gun's breach and replacing two empty shells with a pair stuffed with silvered buckshot.

"In the name ov' the Lord," She loudly declared, firing her weapon indiscriminately into the body that still flinched and smoked with every shot, *"deliver 'is unholy spirit n'ta Hell, cast this devil n'ta the deepest pits a' fire 'n brimstone, t'whence it may never return!"*

She chanted for several minutes, invoking curses belonging to every religion and tongue, interspersing them with a double-aught chaser whenever she thought she saw the body move through the dark haze it produced. Once satisfied with these curses and banishments, she returned to her horse once more, retrieving a large jar of holy water and dumping much of it over the smoking husk. Then, she salted the body. Then, garlic. Then, drove a crudely silvered knife into where she imagined his heart would probably be. She used the buttstock of her shotgun to hammer in a few wooden stakes, just in case she guessed wrong. After lighting her lantern, she tossed it on the barely-recognizable mash of smoking remains, engulfing them in oily flame.

She watched the body for a long few minutes, hardly bothered by the suffocating plume that the wind blew into her face. The pillar of smoke hung high in the sky, thick black as tar and infesting the area with the rancid smell of death. Once she was satisfied, she returned to retrieve her hat, before retiring inside the abandoned saloon. Small book in hand, she began taking notes as to the exact procedure she'd undergone this time—her exact words, her exact actions, every last detail.

It wasn't until the sun hung low that the woman heard the saloon doors creak open behind her.

"Sonnuv a bi—" Her curse began, cut short as a revolver's bullet pierced the side of her head. Her entire body slumped to one side, hand reaching out to grab the bar top to prevent falling from her stool. A disgusting black smog poured from the wound in her head. _____

A man stepped behind the bar, sliding his revolver into its holster with a dejected frown on his face. His shirt was full of holes, beard singed and body a dark ashen color as though he'd lain in a campfire. There were uncountable faint scars on his chest and face, although the longer one stared, the harder they became to perceive.

He reached up on the alcohol shelf, fingering through dusty empty bottles before finally discovering one which still contained some diluted liquid. Pulling a pair of small glasses from beneath the splintered wooden bar, the dry man filled both as equally as possible, sliding one towards the hand of the woman still in the process of righting herself. In exchange, he flipped her notebook around, squinting at the poor handwriting.

"Garlic's a no-go." The woman commented, running her hands through her dry hair. The deathly fume pouring from her temple had faded, what was once a lethal wound replaced by nothing but a scar.

"Donno why you even tried, we ain't vampires." He commented, raising his dusty glass to his lips.

"I don' know, I jus' thought... I don' know. We're runnin' out'v shit ta' try."

"You might be, I've got plenty more ideas."

The woman scoffed, taking the second glass. The whiskey was ancient and spoiled, it barely tasted like anything, but it was ritual at this point. *"Y'said that yest'rday. Y'hit my hat."*

"Still shot first. You're getting slow."

"Got'ya today, didn't I?"

The man gave a brief chuckle and a small nod of acknowledgement, swirling the faded liquid around his small glass. Neither of them got much out of the near-empty bottle, but it

wasn't the whiskey they sat in this empty saloon for.

"I'm gonna'b awful lonely once I send'ya t'Hell, huh?" The woman mused, after a long minute of silence between them.

"Don't count on it. Tomorrow's the day I put you down for good."

It was the woman's turn to scoff. They'd spent countless years locked in this halfhearted contest, she hardly let herself hope for such sweet release. Maybe one day one of them would discover the miracle necessary to break their unholy curse. Both were beaten, whipped, they'd outlived everything that mattered to them. They shared a hollowness, a dryness, a certain solidarity two outlaws cursed with immortality could only experience. His lips were chapped and split. Her hands were dry and rough. Their nails were chipped and eyes dull. They were tired, but they were each others' only lifelines.

So, the two drank and spoke for a time longer. Once the moon was high, they mounted their horses and went their separate ways. The fire from the lantern oil was still smoldering on the dusty main street when the weary pair rode past. The moon set, the sun rose, and come midmorning, a pair of figures rode into the otherwise derelict settlement. They exchanged a few brief words, before taking their places.

A tumbleweed blew by.

Mag Callaghan is a student attempting to study English and Education in cruel and unforgiving rural Ohio. Their interests involve visual arts and flash fiction writing, as well as tabletop role-playing games, acquiring keychains, and describing themselves in the third person.

Smoke Ghosts By Norah Rami

I lit a cigarette on my way to the grocery store. There was something in the wind that made its light sputter, so I offered it mine, to breathe life in the transaction. I store every cigarette stub I ever birthed in a box. I feel bad simply throwing into the trash or onto the sidewalk what had once been alive. There are a handful of stubs at the bottom of my purse that have not yet been embalmed for their funeral rites. I simply haven't gotten around to it.

I used to save the Boy's stubs too. This would make him laugh as I stole them from his grasp, or caught them in my palms as they dropped, softly if I was catching a baby. He dropped one on the sidewalk once and I got on my hands and knees to save her from mutilation. He laughed.

The Boy laughed like the wind. Which means everything. I think that is why I loved him even as he swept me away.

I used to keep the graveyard under my bed, until He complained of the smell. It was like living at the bottom of the bonfire. So, I exhumed the corpses to my kitchen cabinet. It is unfortunate one will open a door expecting to find a plate only to be met with death. The Boy threw them out once as if it was a favor. After he left the next morning I pulled out the trash and got on my hands and knees to find every last body.

He dropped them on the sidewalk often. Mostly in the night where no matter how hard I tried I could not save their souls. I would cry in the bathroom at a funeral without a body. Then I would kiss him till I came back alive with tears to spare another day.

When the baby dropped between my legs, the doctor blamed the smoking. I laughed at him like the wind then brought what was left of living to flame. The smoke tasted cool against my skin.

I could never save a stub The Boy did not give me willingly. Which means everything. I think that's why I loved him because some days he would come home with a palm of cigarette stubs, and caress my hair as I performed the funeral rites under his watch.

My graveyard is public property. For my corpses and his are all treated the same. Cleaned softly with a tissue paper and then returned to a cigarette case, as if they were never born at all. In that way, there are always ghosts, though I never know if I or he created them.

When the Boy was looking for a plate and found a shoebox filled with ashes in my graveyard, right next to a stack of cigarette boxes that could never be used and were in use, he lit a cigarette and left the house. I found the stub by the front door when I came home. I was careful not to step on it as I opened the front door, just slight enough to not let the cold in. I imagine by now, the wind must have carried the corpse away, that body, I did not kill but still did not venture to care for.

Norah Rami (she/her) is a pun connoisseur, professional cloud watcher, and writer from Houston. A member of Houston's Youth Slam Poetry Team, Norah's work has been published by Prospectus and Brown Girl Magazine as well as shared at local venues. She is a current senior at Clements High School.

Turtle Girl By Patricia Donato

There was a girl at my school who never spoke a word. She had turquoise hair, a septum piercing, and she wore a green hoodie like a shell. We all called her Turtle Girl.

I don't know why I called her that and laughed with the other kids. You see, I was unpopular like Turtle Girl. The only difference was that I talked, and she didn't.

One day, some bullies hit me at recess. I wasn't much of a fighter, so I took it for fear of worse. The other kids watched from a distance, some trying to defend me but most doing nothing. Turtle Girl sat on her own, away from me, the bullies, and the other kids. She chewed her sandwich and looked bored, until suddenly, she wasn't. She stood up, walked over to the biggest bully hitting me, and she left her shell just like that. She rolled up the sleeves of her green hoodie and hit the bully.

When the bullies retreated, Turtle Girl left the scene. She didn't say a word, just walked away. While the other kids talked, I followed her, spewing thanks and wonder. Turtle Girl remained silent.

Eventually, frustrated by her silence, I asked her, "Why did you help me?"

Turtle Girl blinked at me. "You looked like a turtle going into its shell," she said, rolling back down her green sleeves. "I thought I'd help you, because you don't have a shell."

And just like that, she returned to her shell and resumed her lunch.

I never called her Turtle Girl again.

Patricia Jane Donato is the aspiring author of short stories, novels, poems, and maybe even graphic novels. When she's not writing, she's reading, walking in the woods, drawing manga, or chatting with her friends. Patricia's work also appears in The WEIGHT Journal and Cathartic Literary Magazine.

The window saw. It saw people come and go. It saw happiness, anger, pain. If you were to look through the window, you could see just about anything.

The window was a gateway. It saw worlds crushed, and worlds built back up. Life, death and destruction. Sometimes it showed things that it was supposed to, like the weed-strewn sidewalk in front of it.

Other times, it showed empty space, sprinkled with stars. A flooded world. A futuristic pet shop. An elephant, silently trumpeting as its herd migrated. A necromancer, bent on power, sending his skeletal armies to conquer anything they could find.

But today, for the first time since its creation, the window showed nothing. An expanse of white, devoid of anything. Passersby wondered at its inherent emptiness. Some fretted, worrying about what the blankness could mean. Children came by to watch the goings on within the window, but quickly became bored.

None owned the window, for it stood free of any barriers or walls. None knew where the window came from, or how it was built. They knew only that one day, it appeared in front of a vacant lot, bolted to a three-legged wooden table. That was all.

Presently, within the white, a dot appeared. It grew closer, becoming less blurry and more pronounced with each step, until it was discernible as a humanoid. It appeared to be calling something undecipherable. Sound does not travel through the window.

The humanoid's movements became more frantic, panicked, as it searched for something unseeable.

A frequent visitor of the window, bored and requiring entertainment, brought a lawn chair and sat facing the window, watching the humanoid scabble around. The frequenter was joined by two others, all dissatisfied by their current state of boredom. One coughed.

The humanoid's head jerked up, and it glanced around. One of the other frequenters laughed. "It heard you." The person said, jokingly.

The humanoid stood up straight, bones snapping audibly, despite the constant silence of the window and the distance of the humanoid.

One of the frequenters looked at the window oddly. "It's never made noise before."

"Yeah, that's weird."

The humanoid walked closer to the window, and its features became distinct. It appeared to be a male human, with a sweeping cloak around his shoulders. His eyes were without white, an empty endless black.

He got closer, and closer, still very slowly. The frequenter who had coughed shuffled nervously. "I don't like this. I'm headed home."

The frequenter left.

The man in the window did not. He kept walking until his face was directly in front of the glass.

He pulled open the window, a feat no other being had ever accomplished, and stuck his head out. The remaining frequenters screamed.

The man looked directly at them and said seven words in an emotionless voice. "I will be taking my window back."

He grabbed the sides of the window and pulled it inward. The window popped inside of itself and disappeared. One of the frequenters fainted.

Jack Arnold spends most of his time keeping his three younger brothers wrangled, but when he has time, he writes (or reads, whichever he prefers). Usually about characters he's created with his brothers, who are an excellent source of inspiration.

Smoke in the Air By Florianne Che

The scent that permeates the air in my home has a hard edge to it; on it, a name teeters dangerously. It swings back and forth, threading between two truths, and threatens to tip over into an endless abyss. This is where tears go when we swallow them behind our lids, and where my mom goes when I refuse to say *I love you*. Match in hand, cylinder mistress in the other, she seals her fate in the shapes of gray clouds; a pill, a Bible, a man. *This is what love is*, and she exhales. The smoke obscures her face and sinks into the walls. At night, when I sleep, the scent slips into my pores, nestles beneath my skin, and follows me outside.

The day after is a battle against my body. My words are delivered with the smell of tobacco. When I touch, discolored fingertips pinch skin like a freshly lit cigarette butt. Crooked, my stance is a matchstick burnt too long, and where I walk, a trail of ashes follows. Just as I cannot hide my disjointed origins, I struggle to rid myself of this acrid aroma.

In the stillness of the school bathroom, where the air is crisp and sterile, I rush to clean myself. Tucking toilet paper beneath my leaking arms, I count: *One*. Perfume, deodorant, and antiperspirant to get rid of that disgusting odor. *Two*. I drown my tongue in white mints until it bleeds crimson. *Three*. Scented wipes are tucked into the extra space in my shoes, numbing my toes. *Four*. I pull my hair back into something gentle, unassuming. *Five*. It smells awful.

When I'm finished, I can barely breathe, barely feel, barely smile; I am hardly alive. Still, it is better than the alternative — knees out and neck exposed like a big, red sign pointing to a stinky girl who smells like midnight arguments and disappearing dads; who smells like her life is defined by the gap between her parents' hands and half a presence. Staring in the mirror, I practice my laughter. If I cannot hide the scent, I can at least conceal the stain of an imperfect family.

In my reflection, there is a dark divide between my lips. It's a thin line — an edge — that's broken open only by the name of the past; I let it grow ever older, sharper until its corners bite my tongue. If I forget the way my dad held me, I won't need to remember the days he's left me. On this dangerous boundary, the name sways through two realities. My mom has fallen into one, and I am tipping into the other, where plastic hips and empty promises frolic in fields of syringes.

The bell rings and the name falls. The moment comes to put my methods to the test. When I step into the hallway, the crowd scrunches their noses.

Florianne Che is a high school Junior located in the Chicago area. Each day she is moved by the articulate and impactful words of the novels she reads, and through constant trial and error, she hopes to one day write in a way that moves her audience to the same extent. For now, she settles for half-baked thoughts in the margins of her notebooks and whispered rhymes when no one is listening.

Nonfiction

No One Studies on Diwali By Anoushka Kumar

I have always been afraid of fire.

This realisation does not come to me in a second, incised down the middle. I'm not lamenting a lover, cloaked in white, sitting at a funeral pyre as I watch ashes incinerate into

dust. Because children have no place at a funeral. We call them prayer meetings. I see them in my apartment lobby on Tuesdays sometimes- mothers mostly, the sharp sheen of kurtas reflecting into the monsoon wind. Most conversation is in the lack of it- in the knowing nod when they get into the elevator, the clumped-up mascara around their swollen eyes and the unmade hair, still soft from last night's parlour visit with their daughters, now decaying in party schools in California while white boyfriends visit.

The first person I remember losing was a family friend's father. He was forty. On a spur, he went to the country club instead of the gym. Played thirty minutes of tennis instead of a slow jog on a treadmill. His body couldn't take it. The way the news reaches me is like wildfire, grazing my fingertips. Flames felling banyans to the ground. I know his son from a dream. Three days later, the wife's Facebook status says *look at my love / he is with the stars now*. I think that's what she tells herself every day. I hope it keeps her from falling apart.

The eve of Diwali is known for having no stars. They say the people held wisps of light for the warrior king to be welcomed home. How the people outshined the sky. It is already Diwali and I am wearing the clothes Ma picks out for me every year- the blue cotton kameez and the sequins that itch and leave red marks all over my body, like bruises from dancing too hard at a Pune wedding I didn't want to go to. It is already Diwali and I have spent three hours crying in bed. No one takes naps on Diwali. No one studies on Diwali, because here there are no expectations, no white-collar job, no unpaid internships to go to, no fathers that come home too late and shout for too long. There are only those tepid moments of revelry, and the flash-bang-crack of your neighbour's sparklers out on the lawn. I remember the first time I lit one with my father, his wrinkles illuminated by the candlelight. How I would always step back a moment too soon, think it sparked before it really did.

When I trip my fingers over Debussy on the piano we bought from a family friend before they moved to the South, I see a flame in ivory. And I flinch. It belongs to the diya we light overnight, the one that never dies out. My fingers have always been far more chubby than I would have liked, so they move stagnantly off the keys, mocking my dissonance. I play the

piano on Diwali because it doesn't feel like work. It feels like finishing the raisins in the dry fruit bowl before the guests do and then eyeing the grand, *you know how to play then why don't you show us?* The opening from that one Shahrukh movie everyone loves, the perfect man, his arms open wide. He lives for the show.

I play again. I continue like this- some raging meditation of an unkempt, starving artist. My hands slipping off the ebony, fingertips scorching the slick metal till it dissolves into incandescence.

We don't eat meat on Diwali. Though, I do. *I'm a good girl though, I swear.* I don't talk to boys with gelled hair on Snapchat or drink cheap Old Monk on weeknights. I finish my milk every day, listen to industrial pop and think about shattering the glass ceiling. At garden parties I flay the skin off of chicken and place little toothpicks beneath my palms. The ones in grade school always ended the same- at the end of all the animated movies that should have made me cry and the party games that did, there were return gifts. Goldfish: a pair of fins darting above clusters of fake coral, eyeholes pressed into the Plexiglas. More often than not, they die on the way home, a brake applied too quickly, piscine entrails all over the highway, their corpses floating upwards. To heaven, perhaps.

When my grandfather dies, I am reading a poem. The rough Hindi syllables that years of a high-end job couldn't kill make their way out through the bedroom. In this moment, I take it to be my father, screaming at customer service. I take it to mean, duty, forsaken. Instead, it is duty, ceaseless. They cut the cord. The ventilator sputtered out. Cause of death unspecified.

Dada died, you know. Yes, I do know, I tell my brother. We hold each other for a bit. The last time I held him before he went to college. Somewhere in an elevator, a man says *expired, not dead.* I hate this, how we compare a breathing entity to a tangerine, rotting away in a refrigerator door.

I open an incognito tab and Google how to stop being angry at everything that tries to make me better. *What to do when you're grieving* is the top result.

On a walk, my mother tells me we may have to move soon. But I'm selfish. Because I want to stay in this city that has expensive apartments and bad roommates and poverty porn and girls who live by the sea and push their big-city dreams into the water, wanting to stay afloat. Because it is familiar, and here I can pretend it does not touch me, how I can mould my sadness into the skyline and forget.

There are children in the trees and birds on the ground. And I remember that since it is Diwali, there is light. I think daughter is a synonym for light.

In Hinduism, when a man dies, his son shaves his head. This tradition also takes place when a child is born. Rebirth and ending collide into one another. When my father performs it, it is strikingly cosmetic. Relatives stand around him, watching the barber clip away at his hair. I think he'd joke about his greys finally disappearing, how all the boxes of hair dye were wasted. I remember a boy from school who shaved his head once because he wore a baseball cap wherever he went. He was eight. I hope there were no men in elevators he had to face.

They say the shaving of the head symbolises selflessness- to let go of the world, and embrace your deeds. I don't know if my father wanted this life. If he wanted to be an astronaut, a chef, the founder of a tech company that sold for millions and then retired to a cottage in Spain with his perfect family that never fussed about the electricity bills and always showed up for Sunday brunch.

When we would spend Diwali with Dadi, she would light a single diya on the windowsill, raking the edges of the gulmohars, their leaves rust-brown, decayed by winter. I hope the trees don't catch fire.



I hope they burn if they do.

Dadi: paternal grandmother

Anoushka Kumar (she/her) is a student and writer from India, with work forthcoming or published in Vagabond City Lit, perhappened mag, the Ekphrastic Review, and elsewhere.

The Egg By Aidan Higgins

Everything that exists is you, so treat it well.

In essence, this is Andy Weir's *The Egg*, a two-page philosophy on the nature of humanity and the purpose of life. Weir's short story narrates the reincarnation of a forty-eight-year-old father who, after dying in a car crash, meets God in some sort of gray zone between life and death. God goes on to explain that the meaning of human life is for the man's soul to mature, elaborating that the protagonist has lived many lives before and will continue to be reincarnated into every life that ever has existed until he is worthy of being a god as well. Earth, therefore, is an egg — a vessel in which the man's soul can prepare for the immortality that awaits him.

Andy Weir wrote *The Egg* to invoke reflective thought and remind readers of their common humanity, but if we — just to make food for thought — isolate the religious aspect of the story and analyze it as if it were a legitimate belief system, we find that it is just like most other religions: it provides a rationale for why we exist, describes the afterlife, and demands obedience to a moral code, but ultimately places the thing we crave most — certainty — out of reach. By publishing his 2009 excerpt, Weir inadvertently demonstrates that religion can be *created* by writing answers to life's existential questions and dangling the work beyond human grasp.

For humans, forming and following religion is a natural development. We live in a world where matter and energy cannot be erased, only transformed or transferred. To us, it is illogical that life should cease to exist. Religion gives us a comforting explanation: life is eternal, only ever changing in nature. Recognizing this continuity can sometimes make it seem like religion is orchestrated and that we gravitate towards it out of a desperation to prolong our finite existences. If we try to prove otherwise, we fail; proof always lies conveniently in another dimension.

Provability and truth are not necessarily the same thing, however. Even mathematics, which is based on amassing knowledge through provable theorems, has true statements that can never be proven (see Gödel's incompleteness theorems) and questions that can never be solved (see Turing's undecidable problem). No matter how much we grow to comprehend our being, there will always be gaps in our understanding that are impossible to fill — things we can just never know.

Accepting that we cannot know certain things — the afterlife, the existence of God — provides a sense of calm security. Personally, though, I am unable to shirk the violent restlessness that screams to know and understand. Most people seem to ultimately find answers in religion, so is that where the truth is held? Well, to be honest, I don't know. With religion, believing will always require we cross the gap of uncertainty with a leap of faith. Think hard about whether or not to jump, because what we choose defines the things we stand for and the people we become. —

Aidan is a high school student and avid writer from Middletown, CT. In his free time, he enjoys reading, exercising, and browsing the web.

To Lilah By Jessica Wang

CW: Body horror, homophobia, internalized homophobia

Dear Lilah, yesterday my tongue fell out of my mouth and into the bathroom sink. Slippery organ twisting red into the porcelain bowl. The smell of sea salt from the open window. Nǎinai warned me that something like this would happen. She told me Western ideals would darken my mind and scramble my brain until she couldn't recognize her own granddaughter anymore. Gut my heritage like fish bones from flesh and strip me from my roots. As if ethnicity is something to be earned and maintained, a title gifted and taken away. Lilah, I wish you could have seen her expression when I told her about you. I was foreign.

When I was younger my Nǎinai loved me. She made me sticky white rice with guttered pork belly and washed my back with rough cloth. We were from mirror worlds, same blood different bodies, extension and predecessor. She sang songs about sparrows and springtime echoed from my mouth, I learned how to count and spell through my limbs, our bodies connected by something deeper.

One rainy day I clung to her leg and watched her chop scallions with a large vegetable knife as she told me a love story. There once was a cowherd named Niulang. He fell in love with the weaver girl, Zhinü, but their love was forbidden by the Jade Emperor. As punishment the emperor cast a sea of stars and galaxies between them, purple waves pulling the two lovers apart. But on the seventh day of the seventh month they would be reunited for one day. That night Nǎinai and I watched the sky from my bedroom window and we saw a shooting star, a crystal drop that fell from the same celestial sea. I wished for my own Niulang and Nǎinai promised me that I would find one.

But loving was a blade, Lilah. A curved vegetable knife with a peach wood handle. Loving smelled like salt and reeked of Nainai's wrinkled breath. It carved me with its edge, eviscerated me into something else entirely, deemed me unworthy of something I never had to earn.

Lilah, I've never learned the Mandarin character for queer. Never saw its scratched letters on the cubed paper dished out by my Sunday school Chinese teachers. Never rang its syllables on my tongueless tongue. It did not appear next to the plates of pickled mustard roots and red paper lantern. But sometimes I saw flashes of it, a curve of a character, pinyin dangling above my hair, a black dot seeping into my skin. A friend of a friend of a friend who left the groom on her wedding day. A cousin of a cousin who refused to date. Clipped newspapers of young girls abandoned for the traitorous act of loving.

The day Nainai found out she threw me into the bathtub, steam fossilizing my hair as I drifted in the simmering water face down, liquid puckering my lips. *Liar. Liar. Liar. Say it isn't true.* She scrubbed my back raw, peeling back a body of a body until I was nothing at all. I stared at the bottom of the tub with my eyes open, the ancestors of my ancestors cursing my existence. I wept salt because queerness has no roots, Lilah, no defining heredity for me to cling onto.

I dreamed about you last night as I wilted into half of myself. Monolids thinning and nails popping off like Coca-Cola bottle caps. Anatomy wrung inside out. In my dream we sat on a park bench and ate grape ice pops together, purple staining our teeth, saccharine flowing through our veins. But every time I looked at you, held your hand in mine, burned red from your sweet gaze, I became less than the entity I once was.

The truth was I loved you without loving you. I loved without knowing what love was.

Lilah, do you even remember me? We spent a sticky July afternoon drifting in a boat together. You wore a pink life vest and held your tan arm towards the sky, fingers clenched to your shiny iPod that sang songs about Watermelon Sugar and summer sweat. We talked

about boys with citrus gel hair and washboard abdomens. You told me your letterman jacket crush behind your cupped hand and I told you my basketball jersey one. You watched as I got up and stood at the mast of our boat and shed yellow skin in the Long Island air, bare feet fracturing into spiderless spider webs as I stared into the sun.

Tongzhi. Tongzhi. Tongzhi. Say it with me, whisper it into my ear when I dream of ice pops and lying in the meadow with you, when I lose a body of a body. That's the character, Lilah. I'll never write it in their boxes, never show it to my vegetable knife Nainai. It's my word. I'll keep it here in the cave of my tongueless mouth, chew it with no teeth, run my lipless gums over the bleeding texture.

That day on the boat I had slipped, fell briefly into starry limbo before I lost myself in all this saltwater. Everything is foggy under the sea, muted. The fuzzy bottom of our boat. White flapping sails. Your face red from the sun. Zhinü, my weaver girl from the sky. You were more than Western ideals yet I paid the price anyway. You dropped the boat rudder and reached out to me, dipping your hand into the dark water, fingers tangling in mine as you pulled me up into the air, skinless, limbless, and whole.

Pinyin Footnotes:

Nǎinai- Paternal grandmother

Zhinü – Weaver Girl

Niulang. – Cowherd Boy

Tongzhi – Queer

Pinyin – The standard system of romanized spelling for transliterating Mandarin.

Jessica Wang is the founder of the youth literary magazine Ice Lolly Review. Her work has been nationally recognized by Scholastic Art and Writing, NCTE, and Susquehanna University. She is a Kenyon Young Writers' alumna and her work is forthcoming in The Apprentice Writer. In her free time, she doodles and listens to Indie Rock. She hopes you don't let Imposter Syndrome get to you!

One Thousand Points By Aly Rusciano

The anxious chatter of the crowd fills the small, dimly lit space of my dorm room. My laptop is open in front of me, the flickering image illuminating the fluffy corners of the blanket I'm clutching to my chest.

My heart pounds and my hands shake as I stare at the screen.

This is it. At seventeen my brother is only ten points away from making one thousand points in his high school basketball career. Players don't usually make it to that milestone point, and if they do, they don't even make that one-thousandth point until their senior year. But here my brother was in his junior year, once again, defeating the odds and breaking records one shot at a time.

Being two hours away from home, I don't get the latest basketball news from my brother every night. When I talk to my mom on the phone, I get a summary of the latest, but it's never the same as hearing my brother relay the details through excited or disappointed retellings. When it comes to his own game, my brother has always been humble. The one-thousandth point had been mentioned a few times, but I hadn't realized how close he was until my mother texted me the night before: "Fyi, I saw on fb that the game will be live streamed tomorrow night. He needs 23 points." My brother's average was around twenty-five points a game. This was it.

With each basket he makes, the crowd goes wild, causing the speakers of my laptop to screech with an electronic buzz.

Every dribble, pass, and basket feels like an eternity, the clock ticking down slower and slower with each second. I frantically text my mother to make sure I've counted correctly.

Six points.

I keep my eyes on number thirty-five, the red and white uniform blurring in a clump of pixels.

I double and triple check my WiFi connection.

Four points.

The blanket I had been clutching to my chest falls away as I lean closer to the screen. My legs have fallen asleep, protesting against the criss-cross position I had been sitting in for the past thirty minutes, but I don't risk moving.

White and black uniforms run down the court, the camera failing to fluidly follow the players' movements.

Two points.

Through the pixelations, I see he's standing tall, moving freely with his teammates. No sign of stress or anxiety. His shot has been perfect the entire game. Whenever he gets the ball, it soars through the air in a perfect arch, swishing into the basket. My brother had the weight of the school and game on his shoulders, yet he held it with grace. He runs down the court as if this is just another game, as if nothing extraordinary is about to happen.

My heart stops as my brother is intentionally fouled at 998 points.

He moves to the free-throw line, arms swaying casually at his sides, as the other players take their positions in the paint, forming a pattern of white, black, white, black on either

side of the basket.

My brother wipes the soles of his red shoes with his palm as the referee dribbles the ball.

Each thud of leather against wood sparks the thought of a different shoe.

My brother is suddenly six-years-old wearing black, bulky hip-hop shoes hopping across the stage. Another year goes by and his foot is slightly larger as he kicks a soccer ball with neon green cleats across the grass. The next year rushes by with a thud. He's eight-years-old bringing up dust as he steps up to the plate with mud-stained baseball cleats. The mud and dust wash away as his cleats become shiny, black dress shoes. He's nine-years-old balancing a double bass between his feet, delicately swinging the bow across the large instrument's strings.

Over the years, he had tried on many shoes, but he had only ever asked for new basketball shoes.

A silent murmuring settles over the crowd, and suddenly I'm sitting in the bleachers. "Come on, bud," I whisper as gossip-like mutterings wisp around me.

He kicks the floor, getting his feet into position, and practices his form.

My heart races as I watch his chest rise and fall. He's calm and collected as his eyes move away from the basket and to the referee still dribbling the ball. My brother nods and the ball bounces across the paint into his hands.

He licks his lips and dribbles the ball at his side, taking in the basket before him.

Suddenly, he's three-years-old and his little hands are now dribbling the tiny rubber basketball on the carpet as he licks his lips in concentration. He dips and dives in his dinosaur pajamas toward the blue and yellow Fisher-Price basketball hoop. He dunks the

ball, standing on his tiptoes, pretending to hold onto the rim. “Beat that!” he says with a beaming smile and a gusto other three-year-olds could only wish for.

The small ball rolls across the carpet and hits my knees. I pick up the ball, which fits perfectly in my palm, and say, “Bet I can!” I toss the ball between my hands as I ponder my next trick shot.

I blink.

He bends his knees and lifts the ball up in the air.

A perfect arch.

One point.

I can imagine the bleachers vibrating under my feet as the crowd hollers, the electronic buzz of the crowd from my laptop’s speaker filling my ears.

My brother puts down his arms and shakes them out at his sides. His teammates step over to give him high-fives of encouragement.

Because my brother was fouled intentionally, the referees move the other players to the half-court line, leaving him alone with the basket.

A hush settles over the crowd as the ball is tossed across the paint to him again, the echo surging through us all.

The ball bounces next to his red basketball shoes as he dribbles.

I hold my shaking hands to my pounding chest. “You can do it, bud,” I whisper into the two-hour distance between us.

Everything goes quiet as my brother bends his knees and lifts the large, leather ball into the air. The ball lands into the net with a swish. He pumps the air victoriously with his fist.

Robbie Rusciano has made one thousand points.

A sob escapes my lips as I watch the crowd stand and cheer. I scream and clap, disrupting the dark quiet of my dorm room.

Robbie jogs to his coaches and teammates, doing a different personalized handshake with each of them.

The pixels of the livestream and my tears blend together as a warmth spreads across my chest.

Robbie's beaming smile reaches me from ninety miles away, and for a brief moment, he's three-years-old again shooting a rubber ball through a plastic hoop in dinosaur pajamas.

Aly Rusciano is a twenty-two-year-old recent graduate of The University of Tennessee at Martin, where she majored in English while focusing in Creative Writing and minoring in Theatre. Aly can often be found reading outside or typing away at her computer. She has been writing ever since she could hold a pencil. Aly's love of books and passion for writing continues to positively affect her life as she pursues a career in the publishing industry while simultaneously chasing her dream of being a published author.

I am 18 years old, and I am sure of one thing: I never want to be a mother.

90% sure.

80% sure.

75% sure with a 10% surcharge fee for overthinking.

Maybe it's silly to say something so concrete at eighteen years old. At seven years old, I accidentally ate part of a rubber band and thought I would die two months later. (Two months came and went, and I amended my death sentence to three months, and then four, and then five. For all I know, the rubber band is just waiting for me to let my guard down.)

At twelve years old, I thought "depraved" and "deprived" were synonyms. (I proudly said "I'm just depraved like that!" in front of several of my favorite teachers during the crowded rush between fifth and sixth period.)

At sixteen, I thought my biggest point of pride was being able to differentiate between Jacobins and Jacobites. (And I'll still pretentiously lecture about both to anyone who will ask; you, dear reader, could be the inaugural requester.)

But I make do with what I have, and what I have is the experience of an eighteen-year-old who knows that children feature nowhere in her five—or her ten—or her forever plan.

I like children. I like them in an abstract *they are our future* way, in a No Child Left Behind idealistic way. But raising them myself is a completely different discussion. Involving myself in a lifetime of whining and pooping and screaming doesn't appeal to me. I'm eighteen—teetering on the slim picket fence between adolescence and adulthood—I remember my whining and pooping and screaming.

I look to my elders, the Millennials, for justifications. Climate change—*imagine raising a kid in the era of fiery hurricanes and melting icebergs*. Economic inequality—*imagine raising a kid in an era where Jeff Bezos owns more wealth than he'll ever use while college graduates get turned down for McDonald's positions*. Racial discrimination—*imagine raising a kid in an era where if they look different, if they love different, they'll be targeted*. I don't want to raise a child in these situations. I'll live through them myself, and they're experience enough without forcing someone else to share them with me.

But I don't pretend that my desire to avoid motherhood is wholly rooted in a concern for the future. I'm selfish by nature—everyone says so—and so are my decisions. If I become a mother, I'll be a Pygmalion. Of course, there's philosophical debates that could be had about whether children's minds are truly *tabula rasa* or if they're born with predetermined traits. But children, in my own child experience, are deeply influenced by their parents and the situations they live in. Mothers and fathers take chisels to their pristine block of marble and chip away.

Sometimes parents have discerning eyes and gentle hands, and the sculpture wins awards. Sometimes parents chip too much, and the sculpture cracks on the inside and crumbles.

Sometimes parents chip just enough to avoid the crumbling but not the cracking.

I feel the smooth handle of the chisel in my hands every time I think about children, feel the coldness of the metal against the ridges of my soft palm. The last time I had a callus was six years ago, the last time I dangled from the monkey bars near my home. I am not built for holding tools, for hard labor, for sculpting, for *motherhood*.

At least when you seek a partner, when you swipe right on Tinder, or maybe when you give someone attractive at your local coffeeshop the ol' up-down, you rest safe in the knowledge that you will meet someone fully formed. Someone whose qualities will little budge with your influence, and someone who will little budge your qualities. The two of you will complement each other.

But children come to you just-formed. And when you stroke your rough human finger—because even my bourgeois hands are too rough for those just-formed children—against their cheek, you will give them their first touch. Now your touch is theirs—your touch is their first definition of so many things.

Your touch is *human*.

Your touch is *skin*.

Your touch is *mother*.

Or your touch could be *disgust*, could be *bitterness*, could be *scorn*, could be *regret*.

Forgive me for dating myself, but there was a popular TikTok trend circulating a few months ago: “I love being your mom,” the women in the videos said, “but I miss her.” “Her” being the women before they were mothers, the women who dressed up and went to clubs, and saw their friends and thought of their children as abstract little twinkles in their eyes, not seven-pound babies in their arms in a sterile hospital bed lit by fluorescent lights demanding to see every little flaw.

I love my child enough never to have them.

Kathryn Lee is a freshman at Binghamton University. Her work has been previously published in Binsey Poplar Press, Paper Crane Journal, The Augment Review, and Halfway Down the Stairs. Along with writing fiction, she also runs her own book review blog, le livre en rose (lelivreenrose.weebly.com).

Dorm Room Fridge By Kelsey Day

She wanted to buy the fridge freshmen year, just in case we ended up hating each other. She didn't want us to have to bicker about who got to keep it. We laughed about that in the first dizzy April, then again in the fleeing November sleet – we laughed about it as we barreled toward one another at the airport, against each other's lips, we were always laughing, we laughed at everything but most of all at her foolish attempt at safety before she knew me and realized we would share a fridge forever. We laughed about it during the months we spent apart, me getting high in the Netherlands and her working at Jersey Mikes, we laughed about it in the greedy mountain river, swimming naked and freezing and unashamed, and we laughed about it when she moved in with me, a shitty one bedroom apartment in Colorado, where she stayed for three days and kissed me blind and said she liked men, not women, and boarded a plane the next morning, and I was laughing as I carried her suitcase down the stairs, laughing as I crammed her clothes in a box, laughing as I stood barefoot in the dorm again and saw the same fridge pushed against the wall, kept there just in case.

Kelsey Day is a poet and novelist from southern Appalachia. Her work is urgent, timely, and relentlessly vulnerable, and has been published in literary journals such as Reservoir Road Literary Review, Storm Cellar Literary Magazine, Brave Voices Magazine, and Our Shared Memory Collective. She is a recipient of the University of Chicago's Young Memory Fellowship and is an honors student at Emerson College. She works with women from across the globe with the International Women's Writing Guild, is a staff writer for Two Story Melody, and serves as the Head Poetry Editor for the Emerson Review.

Go Ahead, Open up the Wrapper By Sopheane Avedissian

Trying to keep it in, I bite my lip. I try taking some deep breaths to shake it off, but it does not work. My shoulders start shaking, and I burst out laughing. My small giggle quickly becomes hysterical. The word “tampon” would not get out of my head, and this was the

cause of the commotion. As my loud, infectious giggles fill up the whole room, others join me.

I, along with the rest of the girls in fifth grade, was in a human development class learning about puberty, specifically menstruation. As an eleven-year-old, the words “tampon” and “period” were hilarious, but that is exactly the problem. Why do periods spark incessant laughter? Why is “menstruation” seen as a dirty word? Well, it is simple. We are all taught at a young age to feel this way about periods.

Children are not the only ones who feel uncomfortable when talking about menstruation; adults are too. In 2017, WaterAid surveyed over 2,000 women, 18 and older, about how they feel towards menstruation. The survey found that two-thirds of the women felt “uncomfortable openly carrying their sanitary products to the toilet in public, and around half wouldn’t feel confident to tell their dad or male boss about period pain or PMT.” (1) Most menstruators are ashamed about their periods and are afraid to talk about it openly. A study carried out by *Clue* in association with The International Women’s Health Coalition in 2016 reported that there are about 5,000 slang words for menstruation. (2) Do we really need 5000 different ways of trying to avoid referencing a totally normal biological process?

There is a familiar situation that almost every menstruator has experienced: using menstrual care products in a public bathroom. You are at work or at school and need to change your menstrual care product. You open the stall door, and you take a few moments to get situated. As you are searching your bag for a pad or tampon, you hear the stall door next to you open and close. There is someone right next to you and if you open up the wrapper of your period product, they will know you have your period. It’s an awkward moment. In this instance, the menstruator does not want anyone to think they have their period, but why is this the case?

With that same mindset, why are people comfortable saying “I have to use the restroom” or even “I need to go pee?” Utilizing the bathroom and having your period are similar in many

ways. They are both necessary bodily functions that no one has any control over, but there is a stigma around only one of them.

The shame around menstruation is dangerous because it results in a lack of health education. This ignorance is exactly what fuels myths about periods. In 2017, Betty for Schools found that 44% of girls do not know what is happening when they get their first period. To make matters worse, their research also found that 60% of women feel scared and 58% feel embarrassed about their first periods. (3) Many menstruators around the globe are not given proper education about menstruation. Unicef in 2018 explains, “Many girls do not have a complete and accurate understanding of menstruation as a normal biological process. Educating girls before their first period – and, importantly, boys – on menstruation, builds their confidence, contributes to social solidarity and encourages healthy habits. Such information should be provided at home and at school.” (4)

However, the root of the stigma around periods is from society. Society has ingrained the idea that periods are absolutely disgusting, and like many other issues, we fall into the trap of believing it; all of it. The stigma around menstruation has created a situation where menstruators actually contemplate the idea of wanting care products where the wrapper does not make any sound when unwrapped.

If people are not comfortable talking about periods, then when there is a prominent issue around menstruation, it will not be discussed. There is a crisis that is being ignored: period poverty. Period poverty, simply put, is not having access to period products. Period poverty, in other words, is when menstruators do not have tampons, pads, or menstrual cups to manage their periods. Many menstruators who experience period poverty use alternatives, such as socks, garbage, cardboard, plastic bags, rags, and anything else available. These so-called alternatives can lead to horrible health consequences, including infections. Imagine that you are an impoverished woman who has her period. You look around and you have six dollars. What do you spend this limited money on? Do you buy a tampon or get yourself something to eat?

Unfortunately, this is a situation that many women face around the globe.

Period poverty leads to girls staying home from school and women staying home from work. According to BBC News in 2019, it is estimated that 1 in 10 girls in Africa will miss school when they have their periods. (5) When this happens, girls and women are potentially missing crucial opportunities that could greatly alter their future. This causes the gender gap to expand, making advancing gender equality more difficult.

I often hear the phrase “It’s a problem over there” said by people who do not live in developing countries, but this is inaccurate. Period poverty is a problem that affects everyone everywhere. Global Citizen in 2019 states, “In the US, nearly 20% of girls have missed school because they could not afford period products. Yet, due largely to social stigma around menstruation, period poverty isn’t often discussed and hasn’t received the attention it deserves.”

- Excuses for not discussing this issue need to stop. Remember, there is a woman right now using a sock as a pad. How would you feel? Change will only occur if people stop denying the severity of the issue around period stigma.

The taboo around periods is the reason for many large issues today. Gender equality cannot be attained without first eradicating period poverty and the negative stigma regarding menstruation. It is an issue that needs to be solved, as it impacts so many lives.

There is one main solution that we can easily do: start thinking about periods normally. “Ew” or “gross” should no longer be words associated with menstruation. Instead, we should all have positive or neutral feelings towards menstruation.

Most of the world sees periods as dirty, but this can change. I, as a fifth-grader, thought periods were funny, but now, as an eighth-grader, see it as something natural. Change is difficult, but it is certainly possible. No menstruator should ever feel embarrassed to say “period” out loud, and we need to start normalizing the normal. We do not need menstrual

care products where the wrapper does not make any sound, but we instead need to eradicate the stigma around periods.

This is not just an issue for menstruators. Activist and founder of Free Periods, a non-profit organization that is working towards ending period stigma and period poverty, explains about involving boys and men in education regarding menstruation, “Indirectly, periods will affect them too, and, for too long they’ve been left out of the conversation.” (7) Everyone is part of this conversation, regardless of their gender and background.

Open up that wrapper in the restroom. Do it. Loudly.

Sophene Avedissian expresses her thoughts and opinions through her writing. To draw attention to important issues in the world, Sophene wrote a book, *Stand Tall*, at the age of twelve. *Stand Tall* consists of many short stories that all relate to problems that must be combated in order to advance gender equality. Sophene has written for her school’s newspaper for the past two years, and will be the Middle School Managing Editor next year in ninth grade, where she will oversee the work of middle schoolers. Sophene is also a LA Times High School Insider, where she writes a wide range of articles.

1. <https://www.wateraid.org/au/articles/new-survey-reveals-awkwardness-around-periods-in>

-lead-up-to-menstrual-hygiene-day#:~:text=Two%2Dthirds%20of%20women%20feel,news%20research%20released%20by%20WaterAid.

2. <https://helloclue.com/articles/culture/top-euphemisms-for-period-by-language>
3. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/girls-teenagers-start-period-menstruation-education-women-s-health-betty-schools-a7636246.html>
4. https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-nine-things-you-didnt-know-about-menstruation#_edn5
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-49437059>
6. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/period-poverty-america/>
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/28/stigma-periods-boys-young-women-bullying-menstruation>

Art

Bike Boy By Gissel Gomez



Bike Boy

Gissel Gomez is a seventeen-year-old Mexican American artist. She is the Editor-in-chief of her school's literary magazine, and her artwork has been recognized by several publications. Beauty is her main inspiration and can only hope for people to stop and stare at her work.

What a View By Ryan Podnar



What a View

I took this picture near the summit of Haleakala National Park this summer in Maui. I was walking with my family along a trail when we stopped and sat down. I framed the picture around my sister as she was looking at the view. I also used Adobe Lightroom to make the picture look more like a painting and emphasize the softer sides of the mountain.

Ryan Podnar is a seventeen-year-old student at North Allegheny Senior High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He uses photography as a way to express himself and convey to others how he sees the world. He can be found walking in nature taking pictures and exploring new themes to write about.

Gondola Ride By Ria Parikh



Gondola Ride

Gondola Ride was taken in Switzerland from the top of a mountain, looking down. I kept the entire scene in focus as I actually really enjoy the sort of “overwhelming” feeling it gives off at a first glance. With so much movement and so many colors, I think that this piece highlights how small man-made creations are compared to their surrounding areas. The clouds and mountains in the back add depth to the scene while the actual gondola guides the viewer’s eyes towards the center of the image.

Ria Parikh is a high school junior from Cincinnati, Ohio who finds enjoyment in the small things. She is an avid traveler, Starbucks addict, and dachshund enthusiast. Currently, she

serves as the opinion chief and photo editor of her school newspaper, *The Leaf*. Ria is also the recipient of three gold keys, two silver keys, and seven honorable mentions from the Scholastic Awards for her journalistic writing, poetry, and photography. She is a Kundiman Youth Fellow as well as a first place Writing for our Roots winner. Ria keeps herself busy after school by volunteering, playing varsity tennis, and pursuing her degree in Indian dance. During her free time, Ria loves to spend time with her friends and family.

Life's Progression By Calvin Verner Jr.



Life's Progression

Life's Progression, was made with charcoal on paper and touches on the feeling of losing a sense of control over your life and "losing your mind" in the process. The piece is representative of a

really hard time I went through personally where I felt very out of place in my life and out of control of the things around me.

Kalvin Verner is a high school junior from Kansas City, MO. He has been making art for as long as he can remember. Verner has previously won a Scholastic Honorable Mention for his art and another Honorable Mention award in the Missouri State University Art Competition.

Wake Up By Ally Chen



Wake Up

Through depicting myself in the side view mirror- watching, horrified, as the trash floats toward the car- I hope to bring awareness to the effects of global warming and pollution. The words “current pollution levels are more damaging than they appear” and the murky city skyline represent the foreseeable state of our world. While the car drives away from the pollution, it enters the untouched Antarctic realm, symbolizing life and growth. My piece highlights the deprecating impacts of climate damage and initiating change.

Ally Chen is an ambitious sophomore student attending a high school in Northern Virginia. She has long been interested in art and has been actively creating pieces since around age five. Although it fluctuates, Ally’s most preferred style is realism! Her passion for art grew throughout the years, especially during the quarantine period of 2020, where she found an abundance of time to take advantage of. During quarantine, she used art as a way to entertain herself and relieve mental stress. She now uses it to help children in healthcare centers through a youth-led nonprofit organization. Aside from art, Ally also enjoys travelling and spending time with family!

Grandma’s Gaze By Ray Zhang



Grandma's Gaze

Ray Zhang is a junior in high school and he loves to draw. Ray's works have been featured in Teenink and Bow Seat Ocean Awareness program. In his free time, Ray enjoys illustrating and listening to podcasts.

Book Review

Meaning & Mortality: A Review of *When Breath Becomes Air* By Abigail Blessing

It is a strange experience to pick up a book imbued with death. On lifting *When Breath Becomes Air* from the library shelf and reading the summary, I sensed a subtle shift in the air

— or perhaps within me. I stood beneath the artificial lights, surrounded by the sounds and movements of life, grasping death in my fingers.

Unsettled but deeply intrigued, I leafed through the memoir, feeling the fragments of shattered dreams, relationships, and life permeate the pages. I paused as my eyes fell across a poem, *Caelica 83* by Baron Brooke Fulke Greville, inscribed in the opening pages:

You that seek what life is in death,

Now find it air that once was breath.

New names unknown, old names gone:

Till time end bodies, but souls none.

Reader! then make time, will you be,

But steps to your eternity.

The lines beckoned to me like a sliver of light beneath a closed door. Breathless, I turned the knob, descending into the depths of meaning and mortality. Fear, sorrow, joy, confusion, peace enveloped me in waves. Can the presence of death cause such a contrast of emotions? It can, it seems. Dr. Paul Kalanithi's life, the epitome of juxtaposition, pulled me from the heights of occupational utopia to the depths of mortal uncertainty. Yet, his words dispelled the silence of death, filling it with moving anecdotes from his personal and medical experience.

When I picked up this book, I expected a compelling but technical lecture on dying from a clinical viewpoint. But what I found transcended this presumption. I found compassion where I thought only mechanism occurred. I found hope where I thought only shadows

reigned. I found a soul struggling to make sense of life's meaning in the face of death. And is not that the story of humanity?

When Breath Becomes Air opens a window into the life of Dr. Paul Kalanithi. The son of first-generation immigrants, Kalanithi grew up in Kingman, Arizona. From an early age, his life was cluttered with nature, literature, and a burning ache for knowledge. Kalanithi's mother, dissatisfied with the curriculum at his public high school, helped ameliorate the syllabus, a factor that aided in Kalanithi's Stanford acceptance letter. After earning a B.A. and M.A. in English literature and a B.A. in human biology from Stanford, Kalanithi received an MPhil in History and Philosophy of Science from Cambridge University. At this time, Kalanithi realized that he desired "direct experience"; "it was only in practicing medicine," he writes, "that I could pursue a serious biological philosophy." By pursuing a path in medicine, Kalanithi hoped to answer "the question of what makes human life meaningful, even in the face of death and decay."

After attending Yale School of Medicine, Kalanithi entered a residency program at Stanford. During his internship, he encountered suffering and death — things he had only read *about* in books — first-hand. In his observations, Kalanithi guides readers through the waiting rooms and the sterilized offices, unveiling scenes of profound loss and quiet hope. Through these raw accounts, Kalanithi sets the stage for his own tragedy. He prepares readers in part one of the memoir for his wrestle with death in part two. When the results arrive, a glaring image of stage IV lung cancer, Kalanithi *is* under death's shadow, grappling with his mortality through the words he weaves.

What struck me most about Kalanithi's writing is the degree of empathy with which he conveys not only his anguish, but that of his patients. In one poignant scene, Kalanithi describes relating the option of brain surgery to a terrified patient. He acknowledges that he could have listed to her "all the risks and possible complications... [documented] her refusal in the chart," and departed. However, in line with the resolve he made to treat his "paperwork as patients, and not vice versa," Kalanithi gathers her and her family together,

and they discuss the options. In doing this, Kalanithi writes that he “had met her in a space where she was a person, instead of a problem to be solved.”

Conversely, while in the trenches of death, he cautions readers of the “inurement” and objectivity that can arise through this persistent confrontation. Kalanithi entered the field with noble intentions, yet, he admits, he felt at one point that he was “on the way to becoming Tolstoy’s stereotype of a doctor... focused on the rote treatment of disease — and utterly missing the larger human significance.” In the end, technical excellence is not enough. Mechanical words and statistics cannot balm the wound of fearful uncertainty; true healing lies in the relationship between doctor and patient. “Before operating on a patient’s brain, I must first understand his mind,” Kalanithi explains. By separating the physical from the mental, the tangible from the intangible, Kalanithi can recognize the patient not as an object, but as a soul, a being in possession of an “identity,” “values,” and knowledge of “what makes his life worth living, and what devastation makes it reasonable to let that life end.” At heart, technical excellence without relationality is like a stained glass window without light. In a society that too often reduces human beings to numbers — the effect of a worldwide prosopagnosia — Kalanithi urges readers to view humanity as a group of *individual* beings, not a mere collection of data.

Once Kalanithi was diagnosed with cancer, his perspective on death changed. Kalanithi writes:

I began to realize that coming in such close contact with my own mortality had changed both nothing and everything. Before my cancer was diagnosed, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn’t know when. After the diagnosis, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn’t know when. But now I knew it acutely.

Previously, as a doctor, Kalanithi saw death as the force he grappled with to attain several more grains of time. In relation to himself, like many human beings, he viewed death as inevitable but not imminent. Death’s shadow was omnipresent, but it was forgotten amidst achievement, distraction, and the sense of immortality that accompanies the two. But now,

as a patient encountering the fatal presence in his own body, he felt it. He tasted it. At the pinnacle of his career, Kalanithi was greeted with his finitude.

And his response?

Finding meaning in the life that remained. To acknowledge one's mortality is to acknowledge time's transience. In the face of these two giants, Kalanithi searches for what is significant and what makes his life meaningful. This search results in two significant decisions: the decision to have a child and the decision to write this book.

Kalanithi explains, "If human relationality formed the bedrock of meaning, it seemed to us [he and his wife] that rearing children added another dimension to that meaning." At heart, this line confirms one of the memoir's underlying messages: life's meaning is rooted in relationality. Kalanithi found value in his relationships with his patients, his family, his friends, the world, and God.

When Breath Becomes Air is both practical and deeply personal. It reads as both a guide to living well and a love letter to Kalanithi's daughter. Death is integral to the memoir, laced between the lines and stamped in the cover Kalanithi never held. Like his life, the book was half-finished; his wife and a team of editors worked to publish it posthumously in 2016. Even so, the memoir radiates with life — as Kalanithi quotes Samuel Beckett, "birth astride of a grave." In Kalanithi's poignant reflections and in the promise of his child's life, death and life compose the pages of the memoir.

When Breath Becomes Air offers readers a new perspective on mortality, an echo of *memento mori*, and reveals, through Kalanithi's life experience, how to live and find meaning when breath is still breath.

Although of American descent, Abigail Blessing was born in Pakistan and has lived nearly all fifteen years of her life in Malaysia. From an early age, she has been intrigued by the dark and the deep dimensions of life, prompting her to take an interest in topics of art, death, isolation, and morality. When Abigail is not penning stories or essays, she takes pleasure in reading classic literature, wading through nature, playing the violin, and blogging at abigailblessing.com.
