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Beachy Vibes by Grace Huang

Editor's Note

No Editor's Note this month

Poetry

Claybody By Samantha Pomerantz

“Sometimes, having a body feels
a lot like being fluent in a
written-only language”

–Emilia Phillips,
Embouchure

Sometimes, I’m afraid to say the things my body knows, and paint my colorful, syrupy insides on my surface. Most days I touch my hands to porous skin and play over imperfection, running the pads of my fingers back and forth like I would to smooth clay surface, trying to compose myself perfect, to machine-made porcelain. No matter how I press and scrape and roll my form is relentless, blotchy and cratered, a terrain of inconsistent rounded ridges, a persistent counterexample to capitalist ambition. In an act of defiance my body exists. I’d like both to have softness and respect. But, I concede, unable to sublimate my soul, instead I unravel scraps of skin in a futile effort to smooth. I fail to pinch off doughy flesh between my fingers like scissors, or squeeze straight my curved sides with palmed pressure like I can with claybody. No potter’s wheel could shape myself the way I choose to match an understanding that changes day-to-day. A dissonance of this 3D life is that effort won’t reap instantaneous result. And today, demolishing decades of inlaid emotional eating proclivity is not in the cards—I’m still expected to function. If I could add water to my exogenic, unformed surface, use the friction between my palms to lay myself out—a slab on the table—and match my self-image to my outsides, I would. I would let this vessel be enough.

–
I don't know what it means to have a body but
I know I'm tired of it.

Samantha J. Pomerantz (she/her) is a writer and an undergraduate student at Elon University. She is the poetry editor of her university literary and art journal and a reader for Yellow Arrow Publishing. Samantha writes out of necessity, to explore the identities of self, one's relationship to the body, and the human condition. She has published work in Colonnades, WWPH, and Star 82 Review.

Witch-Woman By Tanya Rastogi

In this forest of metal, chudail emerges with mask
wrought from oil-entrenched years, arms melted
to gossamer folds. What she wants is soft,
unborn. Her words float through sour air, plop
wetly onto sterile grey; it is not in the world of
flesh. She continues her search, paints her tongue black
with burnished jamun, uncovers a child
around smooth violet seeds. Once—once she was idol,
marble-pure, molded in the gaps between pearly milk
teeth. Once a girl learned what it means
to be holy: how bodies are sugarcane fields,
vacated and ripped bare and re-sown by the first red
twilight. The night sky keens in tautly strung wind. At
the street's end, a woman curls into the gaping womb
of a sewer drain. Chudail wonders if

they fester still, the decades congealed
over linen, undone by his fist. Fulgent
beneath chalk-white moon, two snakes writhe,

entwined, lost in an instant.

Translation:

chudail – In South Asian folklore, a woman turned into a witch after death during childbirth.
Described to have long hair, backwards feet, and a black tongue.
jamun – Hindi for black plum.

Tanya Rastogi is an artist and writer from Bettendorf, Iowa. Her work has been published in The Adroit Journal, Gone Lawn, Kalopsia Literary, and others. She is the founding editor of The Seraphic Review. When she's not hunched over a screen, Tanya enjoys playing the flute and watching video essays.

Loyal Hound By Arthur Gonzalez

I'm a moored loyal hound
Awaiting your return
My indifference has been long gone
I can no longer adopt that facade
I have outgrown it,
fed fat and complacent
on your adorations.
I wish I had it in me to be ashamed
Not of loving you,
Of waiting right where you left me,
But of how loud
my wounded whimpering has gotten.
I love like a loyal hound

you've spent so long befriending.
To go against my nature;
To stop my urge to heel
To stick wet nose, wet nuzzle
Into your hands and to beg
Hurts me more than a distant promise More than uncertain returns
And dates long ago marked
In anticipation

Arthur is a latinx trans man who is no stranger to spending more time in his head, in the world of media and musings, than in real life. His poetry is a fruitless pursuit of pinning down thoughts before they wash away in a sea of prose threatening to drown him.

In a Forgotten Age By Joy Chen

A baby doll clutched
tightly
in his calloused palms.
Rough
blistered fingers
trembling
as they ran through the plastic hair.

Limp sagging arms,
gently
guarded over the doll,
as if it were
his own.

The murmured hints
of an old
folklore tune

that we
could no longer decipher.
Cracked lips
coming together
and then back
apart.

My granddad,
diagnosed with Alzheimer's six years ago,
lost the ability to remember,
yet could not forget
how to
love.

Beneath the shimmering evening sun,
the undertone
of the sizzling pan,
greased smells,
he patiently sat
crisscrossed,
waiting for dinner.

Rocking back and forth,
granddad hummed
the soft tune
to the doll within his arms.

Words he could not articulate,
dissipating
as he whispered,

shielding the child of his own,
from the world he could not make sense of.

Joy is a freshman in high school who loves to read, write, and paint – exploring all the different ways to express stories to the rest of the world. Poetry is a new medium she hopes to use to help illustrate her thoughts and feelings. In her spare time, she often writes about topics she cares about on her blog “Planeto.”

At the End By Natalie Weis

At the end
You didn't know my name
Was I a ghost haunting your fragmented memories?
I wasn't very present in your life
So I wondered why your eyes lit up
When you spotted me?
Your mouth splitting into a wide grin
At the sight of my face
Even after most traces of me
Disappeared from your mind
Did you remember a dark-haired girl
To whom you read stories a long time ago?

At the end
You didn't speak
And yet
In your touch, I felt
that you wanted me near, close
Your eyes soft, your hand gentle on my arm
When you were still healthy, you were never this expressive

Even though you could have been
You never looked this happy to see me

At the end
I think you remembered...
Or it could just be a story I tell myself

Natalie Weis is a 10th grade student at Edmund Burke School in Washington, DC. DC. She has been published by the Parkmont Poetry Festival and Live Poets Society of New Jersey, attended the Creative Writing Program at the Interlochen Arts Camp, and participated in The Kenyon Review's Winter Workshop. Natalie equally enjoys writing poetry, short fiction, and creative non-fiction. Besides writing, she loves the theater and visual arts and performs in as many school plays and musicals as possible.

Where the Mangrove Grows By Emalie Anne Marquez

Take me to where the mangrove grows,
where roots are strong and able to weather the storms.
Thick like trunks, they stand proud and grand,
in the motherland, they fiercely withstand.

'Mid the waves and the sands that shift,
the mangrove holds onto life, their roots a myth,
because they are deep and ancient, a testament strong,
to survival's anthem— a lifelong song.

With leaves fine, a vivid display,
the mangrove loves them when they easily sway.
For in the harsh elements, it knows how to thrive.
For it lives where it lives, where it can survive.

But while the mangrove stands tall and proud,
I am still only rootless, I am bowed.
And with the sense of loss,
a longing awaits,
a something fierce, a poignant cost.

For the mangrove, its roots are its lifeline,
a handshake of itself, strong and defined.
Yet I still wander, and wait for that connection,
to my roots and all their affection.

Take me to where the mangrove grows,
for there lies the place where tales of identity are told.
I travel to its home, a stranger in search of my own,
and the mangrove extends its branches, to help me feel less alone.

Take me to where the mangrove grows,
take me to where it thrives.
For it knows the importance of roots and where I derive.
Take me to its shelter, where solace I find,
a connection to my roots, beautifully aligned.

Emalie Marquez is a Hispanic-Asian writer born in Des Plaines, Illinois. Her verses strive to answer questions, debunk myths, and essentially capture the essence of raw, provocative narratives. Emalie's goal as a writer is to blur the fine line between unsaid

and said and to shatter stereotypes and the standard beliefs. Currently a sophomore in high school, her other work can be seen in the *Alexandrian Review* and *LEVITATE*.

Angstrom of a Woman By Jimoh Adeiza Abdulrahaman

at my wedding I owned nothing but hips heaps of broken dreams
and silent lips I smeared my angst with heavy make-up
and faux grins to *pepper-up* the guests for Mama
I swung my hips too dancing to echoes of my forgone dreams
I've left Papa's abode to thrive at someone else's
my hips will soon dance to poundings to spankings from
strange symphony I will be okay though Papa says I'm rich
I own a waist that bewitches men I know I'm a scrap a mere
swap for gold I know I'm poor if not waist I'd be a waste
I've own nothing but hips heaps of broken dreams and silent lips

Jimoh Adeiza Abdulrahaman is an Ebira-Nigerian creative and a Chemical Engineering undergraduate at Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University, Bauchi. He made the longlist for Abubakar Gimba prize for CNF in 2023, the shortlist for 2024 PROFWIC Valentine Contest. He has a poem forthcoming in Above the Rain Collectives' *Final Passenger* speculative anthology. His works have also appeared in *SprinNG*, *World Voice Magazine*, *Eboquills Our Girls anthology*, *Poetic Africa issue 10*, *50 words stories*, and elsewhere. When not writing or solving intimidating calculations, he's tweeting on X @JimohAbdul19, Facebook @jimmyabdy.

An Ode to Rain By Samuel Posten

The thunder *cracks*, and a V-shaped migration of black flock manifests overhead. Silver orbs caper across a stoic landscape – microscopic spies sent by the atmosphere.

Whispers condense into splash, echo crystal aquamarine.

There is newfound virility in thirsty vegetation as the surrounding plain becomes pallid.

The cake is sprinkled – perfume is scented – tiny, red fire-ants crawl between dirt empires.

Here, perpetually exists a luminous and reflective Siberian, Andean city – an oscillating azure melody sung through the cosmos – dwellings for a cosmopolitan writer-nomad.

Samuel Posten is an aspiring poet and philosopher born in Plano, Texas. He currently attends St. Mark's School of Texas. His work appears in Pandemonium Journal, Tabula Rasa Magazine, his school journal The Marque, among others. He is also a Junior Editor for Polyphony Lit. When he is not writing, he enjoys reading, running, and going to dinner with his friends.

I Am No Lion But By Jordan Kappler

I want to tell you what it is like to love a coward,
then you hung up when I started calling.

I twist in on myself like a wounded bird,
falling backwards into my duvet
as if high from the nest.

Six months since April and I'm
still dying on your doorstep,
an afterthought, a bad dream
blurring at the edges.

I want to show you what it is like to love a coward,
but you turned away from me in the hall,
drifting silently into a sea of passersby,
the perfect version of yourself,
impregnable, unreadable,
enamored with your own shadow.

Does the lifeless greyscale suit you?
Would you like to take it out to dinner,
tell it about yourself in between
sips of cider in some grimy dive-bar,
the haze of dusk still on your clothes, in your hair?

You could compliment yourself in the mirror,
turn your neck side to side,
admire the view of your broad-shouldered back
and never call your mother,
then lament her lack of love.

Your shadow can hold you on the cab ride back,
resting its head on your shoulder,
silent, obedient, needing nothing but your company.

You will stumble into bed and wonder if you dreamed it,
the echo of loneliness in your apartment,
the cold pillow next to you.

Your declaration of love is a scream
sent straight into the void.

One day, you will wonder what it was like to be loved
and you will think I still nurse the shame,
that I am a bird clenched between your teeth,
prickled by your indifference.

But I no longer wait for the next time you will want me,
I no longer search for broken things to fix.

Jordan Kappler is a senior at Reed College in Portland, Oregon majoring in English. She hopes to go into the publishing industry after graduating and strives to uplift minority voices. As a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, she believes that writing material for queer audiences is crucial to make space for minority experiences. In her free time, she likes to play guitar, write, and wander around Portland in search of the perfect boba tea.

Forgotten Dogs By Ellie Simmons

if you set me loose in the country like a moving family's dog
where would i go?
to the bed twice my age
in the copper clay-brick house?
to the summit or the valley
where the stars know my name?
to the pipe across the creek
that saw me stand at its mouth

and sing?
but the bed was my parents'
and the wild was the bears'
and the hallowed pipe
overgrown and echoing
belongs to the singing girl
at the end of the tunnel.
they say the forgotten dog
will always come back home.
i can only hope
i skip beds, wilds, and pipes
and run to you.

Ellie Simmons is a student and author based in an Atlanta, Georgia suburb. When not writing, she coaches youth rock climbing. Her work is either published or forthcoming in Frighten the Horses, COOP, and Genrepunk Magazine.

A Handful of Flying Shrapnel By Elizabeth Imaji Ekawu

At the cusp of dawn, the sermon was:
gone is the year of dead dreams & earthing of love & losses.
I'd like to agree but the news keeps breaking:
a bullet hugs a school boy & froze his body.

10 school buses have been hijacked by terrorists.
a mother wanders into a bomb to save her daughter

from dying before adulthood. In all of these,
a handful of flying shrapnel lays my faith to rest.

The story goes: grief didn't allow the world to be still--
a move that altered the revolution of origin.

Lads, teens, youths & adults: age groups that fell off,
leaving elegies in our mouth. We left them flowers

on their tombs, hopeful of growth,
of a transition from unconsciousness to undeath.
You know I have gone through turbulence to be here
in the manner dust curdles my body to lay claim on me.

Aphthous ulcers: the wounds I had from the live coal
grave times placed in my mouth.

I sing of my dead dreams, still.

I speak of my struggles, a drowning into the night

& reawakening into longing for light.

Survival is not always street matter but I slanged it
the street way. I say: the year showed its rough phases
& I rugged through it, mindful of the life-ending signs.

Elizabeth Imaji Ekawu, a budding writer and artiste is a member of Hill-Top Creative Arts Foundation, Abuja. She is the winner of Uzo-Udegbumam Poetry Prize. She has won twice at Hadiza Ibrahim Aliyu Schools Festival, Spoken Word category. Say hello on Instagram @elizabeth.maji

Lights By Divya Venkat Sridhar

are the blood of the evening.

In the sky, a child pokes a pencil through dark paper
and the wounds singe my eyes.

The window is a yawning mouth
and the breeze its soft tongue.

Sunlight and its rusting frame
cast a jail cell on the ceiling.

A purple glow sits on the tree.

Its branch is seared in half
from the blinking red needle of an aeroplane.

The yellows and oranges move quickly,
bend like a leaf into water.

Fluorescent bulbs hem
the seams of northern california
like ants burrowing on the hills.

In the sky, a cigarette dusts its ash
and breaks into sparkling bubbles of soap.

The moon blinks at them,
bleeding into the dark
like a swollen tooth
in a tired smile.

Divya Venkat Sridhar (she/her) is an Indian poet living in Switzerland. Her work has been published by the Poetry Society, Rattle Magazine, Zindabad Zine, and more. She was also a 2023 winner of the Guernsey International Poetry Competition. When she isn't writing, you'll find her making pasta, playing the saxophone, or singing the La La Land soundtrack (terribly).

Blockhead By Tremaine Shears

You know,
it's funny how life works, Linus
every day I wake up, and it feels like im caught in this loop of hopes and letdowns.
The kite that won't fly,
the baseball that eludes my glove
The football lucy snatches away,
the little red-haired girl I can never quite talk to.

It's s a collection of moments that paint the canvas of existence.
Just maybe people see beyond the missed field goals
and the tangled kite strings.
I Wonder if they see the kid who's trying,
whose navigating a world that sometimes feels like it's designed to trip me up.

I keep trying.
I keep running up to that football hope that just once,
just once it won't be yanked away.
Because maybe,
just maybe the act of trying is where the real triumph lies.

I may not be the star pitcher,
or even the football hero.
But in this simplicity of this ordinary life,
there's a resilience that defines me,

So here I am. A kid in a striped shirt,
navigating a world that's both confusing and beautiful.
Maybe there's a quiet strength in being me.
or maybe,
I may just get candy and not rocks for Halloween.
or even a valentine.

Another chance hits me again,
they let me kick the field goal this time.
I line up,
Linus to my right holding his collective breath.

My foot connects, but
the ball veers right,
shattering hopes yet again.

Tremaine Shears is a tenth Grade Creative Writing student at Douglas Anderson School of the Arts in Jacksonville Florida. He enjoys writing poetry, and also has a passion for writing realistic fiction.

Fiction

because i am in a room, i don't belong By Michelle Li

(after Ocean Vuong, Daniel Liu, and Patricia Lockwood)

,I tilt my head back against the sound. There's a line I read in a poem that I often repeat to myself now: the most beautiful part of your body is where it is heading. I hold it like water, as if once I squeeze too hard, it will break. Back in rural Texas, behind a front porch in the middle of the Bible Belt, is a house; its rickety foundation with watered-down wood soft enough to bend, its daffodils perched by the windowsill withering in the sun's stubborn cradle, curling into their bodies like rollie pollies; it is only early February, the month when the weather has an attitude that won't go away, temper scaring away birdsong. I try to live largely, try to live like a wildly brilliant animal, yet so much for my efforts, because here we all are, stuck on an enormous flatland between two bodies of saltwater, trying out each day of the new year before deciding which one to die on. You are no better than me. I am no better than Claire from across the street. I entered this world with my sadness, I'll take it with me when I leave. On our living days, we are realtors in our own homes, showing our bodies around space and time before picking some punctum to wallow in; I'll never admit any of my flaws to my doctor, when he asks *how much sleep do you average per night?*, I tell him *eight hours*, which is excluding the time when I sit by my bedside, knees dangling from the edge, blue seeping into my joints, running lines from Ocean Vuong's book over and over again in my mouth so my tongue can sandpaper the words into perfection and spit them out in syllables again when I need it. I'll let you guess how long that takes. In Texas, I imagine nothing is happy. They call you fat or gawky or pretty and roll it up like a joint stuffed with insult, well, I figured I'd light it with burning eyes and smoke it, then leave at the first crack of eighteen. The future is parading itself in front of me, a red carpet, and now I am in my twenties, washing after a party I can barely remember just to feel clean. I scrubbed and scrubbed just to see how hollow I was inside, opening flesh to inspect my bones of sadness and calcium, reminding myself of my mother's words, *we are what we eat*, thinking that I must have drank too much milk when I was younger. It is the first time I feel close to death, seen enough of a sliver of him to feel afraid; mother says anything can cause death if you

are not careful; cover your drinks, cover your eyes, girls, live on to try out every day of the year before choosing your death date. The air here is so thin and sharp and keeps you in exquisite pain. There are flowers by the windowsill (old habits die hard) that open their red throats like tiger lilies ready to speak. Beneath the queer retreat of silken sound, the distant cacophony of doors slamming, liquor hangs in the air and my roommate has written up another list of boys she'd like to kiss, her downpour smile sharp, legs curled up against her body like an apologetica. She asked me why I was looking so blue, I told her I had written out an elegy for her. She doesn't know what this is about (but finds it funny), and I don't either: I can say confusion is the best quality we have, so hold on to it when you wake by the darker side of the pool shivering in the summer ode of petrichor and pondering the first time you realized you were alive, your knees giving out beneath your butterfly form when you walk because you don't watch where you're heading, tripping into the chlorine water before you've decided on a date to die, and all you hear is a murky vodka-soaked cry above from some nearby partygoer on land, you are still too young to try death on like a drug, body in the shape of a child falling off a first bike with rusting handlebars, so you pop your head above the water, the taste of hair plastered in your mouth. Remember all the kissing, all the young death flashing through your head like it's your last day alive and the animators are frantically filling up the screentime of your life. I've taken you forward to where I ended up, let me take you back, back to biting off pieces of laughter like mint chewing gum, back to when we took the form of bodies that were none the wiser. I'm putting it all away: homecoming, the snuffing of a last cigarette, mourning. I think so greatly, so far ahead, beyond the starlings above, high and fevered, that nothing matters, not even the fact that I still don't belong here—the rest is a dream.

Michelle Li has been recognized by Scholastic Art and Writing, The Waltham Forest Poetry Contest, published or forthcoming in Blue Marble, Masque and Spectacle, and Lumina Journal among others. She is an alumna of the 92Y Young Writer's Workshop and will be attending the Kenyon Review Workshop; you can find her on the board of the Incandescent Review, Pen and Quill magazine, and the Malu Zine. She'll read practically anything, the more absurd and emotional the work, the better, and plays both violin and piano. She has an unhealthy obsession with Rachmaninoff, morally grey characters, and Sylvia Plath.

The Many Identities of Evelyn Guo By Claudia Parker Joel

It is in my nature to absorb identities. Since I was thirteen, I have played many different roles; hoarding and collecting them like my brother's stamp collection. It started with my mother. Stately and elegant wherever she went, I felt like a caterpillar trudging behind a Rajah Brooke's birdwing. I adopted her walk, first, then her mannerisms. As I grew older, I looked to my sister, who was some ten years older, and copied her, until I stole my next identity.

The first *ipseity* I outwardly stole was in the eighth grade. On the first day of class, I was seated next to Kimberly. There were two other Kimberly's at my school, but neither were as renowned as the du jour Kimberly, and so they faded into a listless obscurity for the rest of their middle-and-high-school careers. My Kimberly possessed the three traits guaranteed for high school success in America:

1. She was athletic,

2. She had perfect grades, and—

3. She was white

Kimberly was a trifecta, a beautiful statue erected in the image of suburbia, and I wanted to be just like her. I wanted her body, toned from track and cheer; I wanted her straight A's, her ability to speak up in class and say what she meant without ums and ahs; I wanted her fair skin, her blonde hair, her white teeth, her blue eyes. I even wanted to be white, though I never told Mother or my sister this.

During introductions that first day, she asked me what my name was.

I did not share with her my home name, *Ehuang*, which means 'beautiful.' "Evelyn," I said.

"Are you Evelyn Smith? You might be in my homeroom!"

"Oh," I deflated, realizing I was not who she wanted. "No. I'm Evelyn Guo."

"Oh," she echoed. We said nothing more, and I felt the silence between us in my bones.

As the days went on, I found myself wanting to be reeled into her circle. While we followed our teacher's demonstration of quiet country scenes on 4 by 4 canvasses, I would ask her questions, prodding her to speak to me, as if we were friends, not merely two people forced to sit next to one another in a class we would forget in ten year's time.

"Math is so hard," I would say, dabbing my brush into our shared paint tray, "what math class are you in?"

"Advanced," she'd answer, with a roll of her eyes. "I hate it. I'm so bad at it!" I paid attention to the way she held her brush and mimicked it.

“I bet you aren’t. You’re super smart.”

She smiled, and I returned it.

As days turned into months, I fell into deep study—the subject being Kimberly. I learned to speak valley girl and nearly fried my hair every morning straightening it. I begged Mother for new clothes. She said no, said I had perfectly fine clothes already.

Said my sister never asked for new clothes—so why am I unhappy?

When Kimberly told me she shoplifted a tube of mascara, I shoved t-shirts from the mall down my sweaters. When Kimberly told me she’d started a new diet, I asked her what she ate, and at dinner subbed out bowls of rice for lettuce.

On the last day of eighth grade, I walked into art class a near identical copy of Kimberly, a hand-painted reproduction of the real thing. Kimberly complemented my outfit, and as we parted ways, she gave me her home phone number.

She never returned my call—and yet, for the rest of summer, I remained a Kimberly clone.

The next identity I stole was in junior year. I was watching T.V when a singer appeared on screen. Her name was Hannah Montana.

My traditional mother did not appreciate the gaudily dressed, white American singers on television; she called them whores, but in her own way. I watched Hannah in secret, focusing on her footwork, the way she held the mic.

At that time, we were the same age, and I saw in Hannah what I wanted to be next. She was a pop star, a global entity which loomed in the hearts and minds of everyone under the age of twenty.

She wore what she wanted: wide studded leather belts over glittery tops, thick heeled black boots. Sometimes, a frilly tiered skirt, or a long sleeveless tank. Mother did not allow me to bare any skin below the collar bone, so I cut off the arms of my favorite shirts in secret, wearing them underneath hoodies so she wouldn't know.

I began waking up earlier to get ready for school, hiding what I would wear under baggy jeans and the thick sweaters bought from Macy's, which I despised. I'd ask to be dropped off at the side entrance, and from there would run to the nearest bathroom to transform.

I took sharpie to my eyes for liner, and used a jar of Vaseline from Mother's medicine cabinet and beetroot powder from the pantry to make lip-gloss. In the bathroom stall, I slipped out of my jeans and pulled my hoodie over my head, stuffing them both into my bag. I couldn't change the color of my inky black hair, but I could style it, and often pinned it back with bobby pins.

For a time, this plan worked wonders; in choir, I would sing out, overpowering the other sopranos in the room, and during lunch I would tell fabricated stories of my fascinating home life. I no longer went by Evelyn; my new name was *Eva*. It was a nice name; short, more modern sounding than *Evelyn*, easier to pronounce than *Ehuang*, and most importantly, white.

I told everyone my uncle was an important businessman in China; to my white classmates, this was exotic, but still distant enough from myself that they could treat me as an equal. I then told them that both my parents and myself were born in Quebec and therefore Canadian; that I had been to China and performed there; that I had a boyfriend in Canada, who was also a musician.

"What's his name, Eva?" Someone once asked. It might have been one of the other Kimberly's, but I can't recall anymore.

“Jason,” I said, thinking that sounded believable. “His last name is French, though.”

“Really? What is it?”

I panicked. “Blanc,” I said, accenting the c. “He’s from Quebec, too.”

“Jason *Blanc*,” remarked the girl-who-might’ve-been-Kimberly, “that’s such a cute name. Do you have a picture?”

I told her I didn’t.

“It’s long distance,” I’d said, “I met him on vacation, when my family went back a few years ago.”

“It’s amazing you two are still together.” “Yes,” I’d replied distantly, “it is.”

Since then, I have taken up many personas; once I was an artist, after I watched my friend Brian sketching out a still life; then I was a bookish girl with blue light glasses, discussing novels I’d never read to impress those around me in college. At one point, I was advertising myself as a DJ, going clubbing despite hating the sound of the bass thumping under my heels.

I have become everyone and anyone, modeling myself after acquaintances, friends, colleagues, people I see on television, voices heard on the radio. But I have never been able to escape my mother, my elegant, stately mother, who wears our culture with pride, or my sister, the model immigrants’ daughter.

When I look in the mirror, I see many faces, fractured, none whole. I see many lives lived, but none of them my own. Who am I looking at on any given day? Who is the woman standing before me, who wears these clothes, this haircut, this makeup?

I will never escape myself. If I could, I have tried. I do not want to be Evelyn, no, never Evelyn.

I do not want to be Eva—she died long ago.

Once, long ago, there was Ehuang, little girl, *beautiful*, who wore her culture with pride, too. I crushed her long ago, in favor of who Evelyn could become.

But if I could be anyone in this given moment, I would choose to be her.

Claudia Parker Joel is a young writer from Ohio. She has received honors from the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, and is currently working on her debut novel.

Fin By Jessy Wallach

It was July, warm, a few days too late for a Virginia Woolf novel, but we could still feel its residue on us like stardust. Red, white, and blue flags, red faces of uncles in tight blue polo shirts that strained to hide their barreled bellies, white wine poured too fast into elegant glasses while we should have been somewhere else, blasting music and emptying red Solo cups. Root beer floats on the shadowy grass, feeling like a kid at a party even though we both know deep down in our stomachs, unspoken yet going without saying, that our childhood is just out of reach, the feeling of what once was still lingering on our fingertips like the opposite of phantom pain. White fireworks lighting up the dark lake, white beneath our eyelids when we blinked. Sweatshirts invisible shapes somewhere by our side, relishing the first chill of the night as it cuts through one of the hottest days of the year. Small shiver, laughing at our goosebumps, saying *I'm not cold* but meaning *I don't want anything to change*. Intertwined hands flashing

red/white/blue//gone under the noise of fireworks displays. Counting breaths, counting seconds until our idle conversation lapses into muggy silence. One/two/three//gone. One of us saying, *this might be the last time we're at a lake without mosquitos*. Music and half-drunk chatter drifting down the hill from the white gabled house, absent of origin by the time it reaches our ears, like a conversation entering our dream from a distant, waking room. Grass tickling our bare feet and arms, thumb over thumb, lightest of squeezes silently returned. Breezeless hair limp on the grass, still damp from afternoon sweat. Morning/noon/night//gone. The final crescendo of fireworks, whizzing noise and color, your face in and out of shadow. Belly warm with root beer and contentment, no shame in waistband unbuttoned. Everything vanished now in darkness, anchored only in sound and touch. Crickets. Quiet breaths. Our own voices and blurry, distant ones. In fifteen or twenty minutes, a call from the house that we will ignore, until the last warmth of the day melts away like a dropped popsicle on asphalt. Crumpled napkins sticky with fudge and melted ice-cream, empty cups spilled out on the lawn, shoes in hand and jackets draped over arms, following you up the hill with a stomach full and a heart bursting. But not yet; linger one more moment on the grass, laughter out of sync with our conversation, everything we feel but need not say stretched between us thick as taffy. The first star of the evening has long vanished into a vast plain of constellations, yet still we wish for the night not to chill, the lights not to shut off in the nearby house, room by room, the fireworks to always be only an instant in the past, their afterimage still brightening the night from black to dark blue. Seventeen/eighteen/nineteen//gone. Not vanished, only a moment too far behind.

Jessy Wallach is a rising senior at Maybeck High School in Berkeley, California. In addition to writing, she enjoys drawing, reading, and spending time outdoors.

Look Up By Malloreë Mullins

Ember Leanne was an unusual name and that name went with an unusual girl. But she wasn't unusual in the bad sense, she was just well, unusual. In fact, Ember wasn't bad at all. Ember was a very pretty girl with a very big heart.

I'm Jack Hill and unlike Ember I was a pretty average kid. But how I met Ember is probably the weirdest way anyone has ever met.

While walking home after work one day I sat down at a bench next to a streetlight. I was drawing in my sketch pad when someone whispered, "You're really good."

I jumped and whirled around but no one was there. Then I heard the voice again, "Look up."

I swerved my head upward and sure enough a girl was sitting on top of the street lamp. A few strands of loose hair escaped from her braid and were moving with the wind.

She was smiling at my confusion and bewilderment.

"What-? What are you doing up there?!" I spluttered.

Casual as ever she replied, "Reading."

"Who are you?" I asked her, astonished.

"Ember. Ember Leanne. And who might you be?"

"Jack Hill."

Then she went right back to her book. I sat there flabbergasted for a moment and then I made up my mind.

“Would you want to come down and talk to me?”

She came down and set her book on the ground. Then she reached under the bench and pulled out a pair of roller skates.

This girl was full of surprises. I watched her for a minute as she put on her skates. Then gathering my courage I asked, “Do you read up there often?”

She laughed. “Yes, but sometimes I just sit in a tree.”

“You know you are the most peculiar girl I have ever met.”

“Then you haven’t met too many girls. Here in Chicago, I’m not the only peculiar girl!”

I laughed. “I guess so.”

“Why do you read in such odd places?” I asked her.

She smiled with her glittering white teeth. “What’s the fun in reading in normal places? How can you escape into a book when you’re lying in bed?” She looked at her watch. “Oh! Whoops. I really ought to be going now. It was nice meeting you though!”

Then she stood up and began skating away. “Wait!” I called.

She skidded to an easy stop. “What?”

“Where are you going?”

“Follow me and you can find out if you’re that curious, Jack.”

She promptly began skating again this time at a slower rate so I could keep up. We'd only been slipping through the streets for five minutes when she stopped in front of an old building. Puzzled, I looked up at the sign posted above the door. It read, "Holy Covenant United Methodist Church."

"What are we doing here?" I asked her as she rushed for the door.

Barely pausing, she waved for me to follow. I rushed after her. Inside were fifty or so homeless or struggling people, all getting food from tables where staffed by several volunteers.

Ember ran over and she too began serving the food. Cautiously I weaved through the people to her side.

"You volunteer here?"

"Yep."

"Why?" I asked her, surprised.

"Jack, you have lots to learn. But to start, what's so bad about helping people?"

"Nothing but—"

She cuts me off. "Exactly. Nothing."

"Yes but—"

"What's the difference between me and these people?" She asks accusingly.

At my silence she snapped, pleased with herself, "There is no difference. You know, I needed help once too and no one was there for me. I want to make sure I'm there for anyone who needs it. ANYONE." She says emphasizing her last word.

Surrendering, I helped her finish passing out the salads.

Later that night I walked home left with the day's crazy events swirling through my mind. After our conversation we'd gone back to talking normally but she'd left me thinking. I mean she had a point.

In the morning I woke up and got ready for the day. I went to work and then I went to the soup kitchen. There skating up to the doors was Ember. She turned as she heard my footsteps approaching.

Then she smiled, "I was hoping you'd come back."

"Well I did. But before we start I have a few questions."

She shrugged her shoulders, "Okay."

"One, how old are you?"

"Seventeen, you?"

"Twenty two." I answered.

"My second question is, do you have a car or do you just use your skates for fun?"

She laughed. "I don't have a car but yes I use these for fun too."

Then she skated through the door.

Laughing to myself I raced after her. We worked for an hour before she said we could leave. Once we were outside she said,

“I want to show you something,” and then she grabbed my hand as she spotted a cab and waved it down. To the driver she said, “Forest Glen Woods please.”

The cab driver nodded and sped through the streets. When we arrived, Ember pulled me out of the cab.

Then she ran through the trees with me chasing her laughing. She stopped all of a sudden and said, “Welcome to my home.”

She laughed as she whispered, “Look up.”

There above me in the trees was a treehouse. Ember raced over to the tree and then climbed up the rope and into the treehouse.

I slowly shimmied my way up the rope to her and pulled myself into the structure. I gazed around in amazement. It was fairly large and from the ceiling dangled Christmas lights.

There was a mattress in the corner, a box serving as a table, a sleeping bag, blankets, and pillows. There was a small stack of clothes in the corner.

Ember told me all about how her dad owned the wood and when he died he left it to her.

On our way back, Ember smiled and said, “Look up.”

I did as she asked, and saw the most beautiful sunset ever.

I looked at Ember's radiant face. "You're always telling me that."

She looked at me, confused. "Telling you what?"

"To look up."

"Well, a rare amount of people ever do. People always miss the beautiful things in life because they're always looking down. For example, there is my favorite bird."

A blue jay was sitting high in a tree looking down at us. Ember, as always, was right. People always miss the beautiful things in life because they never look up.

The months that came after were wonderful. Before I knew it, it had been a full year since the day I'd met Ember.

In those months it had soon become routine for her to eat dinner with us and after eating we would play games together. In no time Ember was a part of the family.

Looking back, there are lots of things I would change, but none of them had to do with Ember.

Then on December 15th the event that would change my life happened.

It was a normal day and everything seemed fine. As always, we ate at my parents' house and then I told her goodnight and she left. I was getting ready for bed when the phone rang.

I ran downstairs and picked it up. About halfway through the call I started shaking.

Once I'd hung up the phone I broke. The cry that emitted from my mouth was one of pure agony.

My mom had come to my side had asked me what happened.

I said, “Ember. She’s gone. Her cab got into a wreck. All three of them were killed instantly.”

My mom held me for hours as I cried. The sadness I felt in her absence was the most horrible feeling I have ever felt.

Over the next few days I sat with my grief. I barely got out of bed. I just sat there with my dark thoughts.

The day of the funeral it took everything I had to get ready.

I don’t remember much of the funeral, but the thing I do remember is that when I had said my goodbye’s I had heard a chirp. I looked up and there sitting in the tree was a blue jay.

After the funeral my parents took me to the Chicago Parks Foundation. Every day I walk to the church and every day I stop at our bench. Every day I sit there and gently brush the plaque on it. The plaque that reads,

Ember Leanne

December 16th 2005 – March 26th 2023

“Look Up”

Like her name Ember Leanne was a very unusual girl. But she was not unusual in a bad way. In fact Ember Leanne was the nicest, bravest, and most extraordinary girl I will ever meet. Ember Leanne will never be forgotten by those she loves and certainly not by me.

Malloreë Mullins absolutely loves writing books. She also enjoys reading, playing basketball, and track, and hopes you enjoy reading her story as much as she enjoyed writing it.

In Fair Weather By Pollyanna Jackson

It is a fine day and the party will go well. Or: can it be a party, and where does the size of the guest list dwindle into a dinner? If there will be five people at the table, or four who do not own that table and clean it before they put down the food they've cooked, is that a party? A party can be a group so, well yes, they are a party after all. And there can be such thing as a dinner party, in fact that is what it must be; two things at once.

The flowers go into the milk jug on the table with the plates and the cutlery and the carafe with cut up pieces of cucumber and lemon peel and there is ice in the freezer to be decanted at the last moment.

The forecast says fair, which is to say it will be mild but bearable; which is to say she probably won't have to take any coats into her bedroom, though she's already cleaned it to hospital standard— just in case. You never know when somebody might look under your bed just to see if you remembered to throw away that collection of used tissues and takeaway containers and dirty socks. She even went into the bathroom cupboard and cleared out all the cheapest soaps, leaving herself with a collection developed mainly through hotel stays. The Molton Brown sits at the front. Templetree, whatever that actually is. From her cousin's wedding, which was four years ago now, and she can't believe that was the only wedding she's ever been to. She's almost thirty now and

everyone she bumps into when she visits home brings up the apparently shared joke of having a wedding on every Saturday and a baby shower every Sunday.

Last weekend she went to the garden centre and spent eleven minutes weighing up the best fertiliser to use on her seven houseplants, all of whom she has named after people she wanted to be once, a very long time ago. Going into winter, they have all started to die, so she has moved them all into the cupboard with the boiler to keep them out of sight. Cleopatra the ficus has lost four leaves already and Nell the fern is browning over.

People always seem to be suffering over the politics of a guest list, of 'who has invited *me* somewhere?' and 'if we invite *her*, we have to invite *him*' and 'he left us off the list for New Year's, or then didn't he bring that nice bottle of wine to your birthday, so we might as well, I think we owe him.'

But no, the guest list was the easy part because she has very few friends. Laughably few. Nothing is owed to anybody. If one decides not to come, the others will graciously bow out in sympathy. In fact this is the third scheduling of a dinner which has been set to happen for two weeks now. She has been out to buy bottles of wine three times, but at least there are five bottles in the fridge. The sixth she drank in the space of an hour after the second cancellation because there seemed to be no other way to use her mouth if it couldn't be telling all the stories and making all the jokes she had organised in her head. It took that much wine anyway to realise none of the jokes were funny. She has workshopped them since then.

The first few drops of rain attempt the windowpane. It's as if the clouds are spitting at her, shaking down the image she had of standing outside to await her guests. Now she will have to put wet coats on her bed. Now she will have to sleep on damp sheets.

When she dips the first piece of fish into the oil, crumbs disperse from the edges and slide aimlessly about the pan, destined now for the drain.

Carefully— she has practised this three times now— she turns the fish at just the right moment, to give it a good strong outer layer, but leave it soft and vulnerable inside. These are going to be served cold as a starter so the texture has to be perfect. Just one of the perks of having so much time to herself is that she has to come up with ways of filling it. In the last six months alone she has mastered the making of: filo pastry, this crispy fish, stonefruit liqueur, blue steak, soda bread, madeleines, lemon posset, dandelion tea.

She imagines herself at forty-eight, a woman in a larger kitchen than this who can afford slightly better bread than this with a slightly tougher crust and wine that has a cork rather than a screwtop. And the people who come will be impressed but unsurprised. She'll let them in by a front door that leads them straight into the house, no abrasive buzzers to interrupt the Hollywood classics crooned by an expensive speaker system; and they'll all kiss cheeks, both cheeks like the French. They will greet each other with 'darling' and 'gorgeous' and 'love'.

As they eat, they'll discuss shared experiences; she will not have to put the smile on her cheeks and slot gentle noises into the conversation as it winds around people she doesn't know, names she has only ever heard in passing, because somehow she has never become caught in the currents of their life. Their circles, now, are a television show she hasn't watched. A band she hasn't listened to. A book she read when she was very small and can't remember.

The rain hardens and now they will have to come inside. They will have to want to come inside. They will have to want to stay inside.

At last, the tremble of excitement lifts her stomach. She is going to enjoy the evening. It's been a while in coming and she needs to enjoy it three times over now to make up for the two failed attempts. She loves her friends. They are not bad friends. Isn't it a miracle in the first place she has been able to invite people to see her? The last time she had a

birthday party of her own she had not yet hit double digits, back when mothers invited the whole class and everybody went home with a slice of supermarket cake and a party bag.

Funny that she keeps giving things away now. As if in exchange; she is buying time, but the time of others, their presence at her kitchen table and in return she proffers books and sweaters and food and wine and once she even gave away a ring she inherited from her grandmother. Every time she thinks about it she gets the same sense of nausea as drinking coffee on an empty stomach. But she would gut her house if they asked. She would hand over her own spleen, peel the skin from her face, drain herself of her blood. And they would let her. Smile and loosen the ribbon from the package and tell her she is so thoughtful, and somehow make it a fault in her to be so thoughtful; this is *too much*, they will say, and somehow it will mean never enough.

It's not sadness that she feels, nor really disappointment. More a tiredness that has been building up underneath her.

She eyes her phone like a dog in a garden watches passers-by.

Hi, I'm so sorry...

Such is the way it begins, and ends. Oh well. Oh well, there will always be other days, other bottles of wine, other excuses to bear. Oh well, she tells herself, demonstrative, in her mother's voice. Not the end of the world. Now is the time when she should pick up that clamouring child, her own small self, and hold it in her arms: there, there, nothing to cry over, you're not killed.

This is the love she has allowed. Staring at the perfectly crisped fish, the piles and piles of rocket she has washed and dried and fluffed up in bowls and drizzled with the last of the balsamic; at the expensive candles her aunt bought her which she has burned to the

base, at the diffuser with only a film of oil left; at the playlist she has queued with a meticulous selection of light jazz interspersed with bossa nova for when the evening draws in; at the napkins she has bleached white and folded into elegant shapes; at the wine glasses she has polished to chrome; at the *New York Times*, paper copy, she has left open on the sideboard; at the cupboard to which she has condemned her plants.

Stupid girl. Stupid, stupid girl. To want love like this. To beg. To need.

We'll reschedule, don't worry.

You don't mind?

It's honestly fine! see you all soon <3

Pollyanna Jackson is an MA English Literature student based in Edinburgh, soon-to-be making the move to the Lake District to start work as an Editor. She was shortlisted for the 2022 Bridport Prize, selected for Mark Gatiss' writing programme with the Dartington Trust, and won the University of Edinburgh's Lewis Edwards Memorial Prize in 2023 and 2024. She enjoys writing fiction and short essays, and is always working on a novel.

Just Get to Canada Before Midnight By Kira Mata

I slide my scuffed All Stars off Katherine's dashboard. She shuffles into the driver's seat, a huge gas station slushie in her left hand, spiked lemonade and Newport cigarettes in the right. She's silent, seamlessly pouring one drink into the other, giving herself a light after moving one hand to the wheel. I sigh, hinting at a slight chuckle.

Even though I'm her best friend, I still can't believe she's thirty. I cross my arms. "You can't drink while you're driving,"

She shifts her janky pickup into reverse. "Big brother is out to get me for much worse." Her shoulders fall. "That man inside did give me a weird look, Leslie. If this trucks bugged, better be safe than sorry." She plops her drink in the cupholder.

"He looked 70-some. Didn't he have glasses?"

"How do you know they weren't the magnifying... no, x-ray type?"

I roll my eyes and raise my hand to my forehead. "If he's a special forces soldier, maybe. Guess you never know." I huff a laugh, signaling I only agree with about a fourth of her statement. About six hours lie ahead until we reach the Canadian border.

I flip through the conspiracy pamphlets sitting in the glove box. They've become less entertaining as the drive has drawn on. "How'll we know Henry will give us a place to stay anyway?"

"He may be my ex-husband, but he's the only other person who knows how much danger we're in besides me."

I look through a side squint at her. "He's for sure the only person as sci-fi-oversuspicious as you are."

The year 2000's approach is the only thing nullifying Kat's divorcee rage. Her overdramatized tangled ramblings about the "extreme Y2K in-compliant technology crash and burn" have been off the wall enough to tempt even me to actually trust the government. The biggest *real* threat to Kat and me is the lack of Wal-Mart stock due to our town's panic buying dilemma. Kathrine's concerned the future lack of power will

attract aliens. I just want some toilet paper. We'd both been planning to take a road trip anyway.

Kat turns down the Jewel lyrics booming from the radio and drones on. "The water will cease when the clock strikes. There'll be mobs at the houses of those who saved up jugs. The national guard will have to fight em off. Or, perhaps, the extraterrestrial tv broadcasts at midnight will zombify the mass out of panic." She says.

I grit my teeth. The atmosphere of our isolated adventure has sucked her ludicrous blubbering dry of any humor. "The whole populous will be watching for New Year's, I guess."

I reach for another one of the pamphlets, but a popping jostle thrusts the car forward. My chest crashes into the dated, useless seatbelt. Kat's slushie spills, and she hunkers up against the steering wheel. "They've made interdimensional contact. This won't be our getaway car for much longer, Leslie. They've got control, Leslie!"

Jumps and bumps continue under both of our peeling leather seats. "You're still driving, woman. Steer."

"I should've installed an ejection seat here—"

I throw my arm to the dashboard to force myself still. "Drive, Kathrine. There's another station up ahead. Pull over there."

The truck's bucking and backfiring refuses to quit while Kat forces the wheel into the squatty little gas shop. She double parks our bug-out-bunker-on-wheels wannabe right near the door.

I relax my hands on my knees. “Letting this thing rest might just fix whatever that was. Maybe they have a phone inside. We could call Henry,” I say.

Kathrine’s now on her last cigarette. “Alright, but you better zip it about our route to anyone inside.”

I try to walk through the gas station’s doors calmly enough to contradict Kats’ sneaky demeanor. I gesture to the haggard woman behind the counter. “Do you have a phone, maim?”

“Phones down.”

Kat flinches. “It’s starting early, Leslie. Taking away power to charge their super solar brainwashers.”

My eyebrows fall, while hers rise. Kathrine jumps behind me, ensuring no eye contact with the slightly unapproachable backlands granny. I stomp my left foot into a pivot, and whip around to face her. “Why does everything have to be a put-up scheme with you? I have half a mind to take those keys. I’d cover more ground alone.”

Kat fists her hands onto her hips. “My best friend would never say that.”

“Well, maybe I—”

The register woman bops the counter bell. “Looks like something needs fixing.”

I cock an eyebrow. “What?”

“That truck. Made a cacophony your whole way in here. If you get back in your car, I’ll take a look for free.” She waddles toward the doors.

I exhale. “Yeah, that. Sure.” I motion my head to the entrance. “You heard the woman. Let’s go.”

Kat follows me, shivering in her own paranoia and anger, eyes darting as we buckle in again. She pops our hood for the granny. We sit in silence, but the next half hour ticks by slower than our entire impulsive venture has. I scan Kat in her scrunched-up position. A worm of guilt buries itself in me. I’m waiting for Kathrine to apologize, so why do I feel at fault?

I pick up her slushie. “You still want this?”

Her voice cracks. “Guess so, if you think big brother’s nothin’ to worry about.”

I place it back in the cupholder. “Nothing? Trust me, they’re *everything* to worry about.”

“You really think so?”

I look her in the eye. “Obviously. I’m sorry.” I smile, remembering why I’m here in the first place.

A knock on the window startles us both. I gasp, but it was the backlands granny again. “Trucks good now.”

We give her the midwestern nod, and back out. The truck starts up just fine. “You think she gave us a weird look?” I ask.

“Pupils looked lizard-like, unreal—”

“Don’t push it,” I chuckle again, staring out onto the open road. Pretty sure there wasn’t much wrong with the truck in the first place.

Kira Mata is a fifteen year old Torah-believing Mexican-American author whose writing has focused on eclectic and strangely original flash fiction since the age of 12. Initially specializing in odd short stories and controversial poetry, she has further developed her likeness of the unordinary by organizing haphazard and irregular or jarring themes into legible creative prose. Her fiction lives on a spectrum of haunting yet plausible tragedies, and semi-humorous unorthodox dramas. Aside from her identity as an author, her practiced artistry extends her labels to also include photographer, Illustrator, portraitist, watercolorist, graphic designer, and (arguably, the most fun) character designer. Her stories will surely send you on a rollercoaster, or at least, leave that funny feeling in your stomach. But, although some areas of Kira's literature may be a little too descriptive, the romance never will be!

Convos at 20,000 Feet By Naomi Beinart

“Is this seat taken?”

Who is talking to me? It’s a boy, a pretty one. He looms over 11A, waiting for my lips to give him a response. I don’t have one. He’s the kind of guy that could be your husband or your enemy: white teeth, strawberry blond hair, so conventionally attractive that you want to sock him in between his button nose and clean eyebrows.

He’s still standing there and I want to say yes, this seat is taken. Ms. Jane Austen and a Diet Sprite with too many napkins have reserved 11A and if they decide to give up their seat later on the flight to India, (they won’t), I will be sure to alert him. For now though, he can grow a unibrow and leave me alone.

“No, it’s free.” I say. Oh Jesus Christ he’s sitting down.

He looks eerily familiar, like I’ve seen him in a nightmare. “Sean,” he says with his tan hand outstretched. “Marina,” I reply, darting my hand out and scratching him with my purple nails instead. Goddamn it he has a good handshake.

“Why are you going to Mumbai?” He asks and I spot a green speck stuck between his molars, most likely from the Chipotle eaten outside our gate. In a way I’ll have to dissect later, it humanizes him. He’s just regular Sean going to Mumbai and he didn’t know he was interrupting my date with Mr. Darcy, and he doesn’t mean any harm and the joke is out before I can bite my stupid tongue. “I thought this plane was going to Sydney!” I exclaim too loudly. 10B turns around.

My dad used to make that joke every time we traveled for his work. He was a great actor, eyes curtaining his lies and so everyone believed for a few seconds that he really was on the wrong flight. That’s probably how he got away with what happened to my mom. Just a theory.

I dig my nails into my palm so hard that crescent moons will linger long after the interaction. “Seriously Marina literally what the fuck is so hard about keeping your mouth shu-” A full-bellied laugh shatters my thoughts. Sean is laughing. He’s laughing so hard his torso shakes and I swear to something the plane shakes as well. He laughs with his mouth open and his head thrown back, and I want to take a picture and make it my home screen so I can remember that joy like this is still alive and maybe one day I will feel it too. His breath slows down but when he looks at me, his eyes are dancing. “Marina, I’m glad I sat next to you.”

Those dancing eyes are so familiar.

I hate myself for talking to him and I love that it’s happening. My therapist would tell me I love to hate myself, but I think I just love him. I love him so much I’m willing to hate myself.

We talk about the wrong way to eat ice cream and how useless pigeons are. He tells me his sister is so autistic that she can’t speak and he feels selfish for knowing three languages. I tell him my dad got away scot-free and I refuse to wear matching socks because I want to express my free will as much as I can. He tells me I’m beautiful and my heart crumbles and rebuilds itself in the pit of my stomach. On hour four, I delete Instagram because the alerts are distracting me from his hair.

I share my fucking Sprite with him.

He throws Welch Fruit Snacks into my mouth and I would bet everything I have that I’ve seen him somewhere horrible.

The flight attendant winks at him so I climb out of my seat and trap her in the tiny bathroom because she is prettier than me and he is the only good thing I have right now. Unfortunately, I am in the window seat so she continues her way down the aisle with walnuts and pretzels and hands ripe to steal true love.

“How old are you?” I ask Sean. “What do you do?” I ask my boyfriend.

“Why are you going to Mumbai?” I ask my husband. “Do you mind if I take a nap?” I ask him on our deathbed, going out holding hands like in *The Notebook* and knowing no one is as lucky as we are. My soulmate is a twenty-six-year-old lawyer whose best friend is having a bachelor party and no, he doesn’t mind. I fall asleep wondering how glad I am that I said yes and wondering how I know him.

My nightmares are as routine as coffee runs. I’m sitting in the back row of a courtroom, watching as my father consults with his lawyer, who I remember being conventionally attractive, -and discusses the likelihood of his being set free. It’s high. I see him walking out of the room, handcuffs jettisoned on the ground as he makes his way to me with the same kitchen knife my mom used to make her lasagna. I see him eyeing me the way he eyed her. I see his lawyer cheering him on. I wake up and see the lawyer taking a sip of my Sprite, ruffling his strawberry blond hair. I see myself crumbling inside, organ by organ. My insides are on fire, flames licking my broken bones, and I feel my heart unraveling like a knit sweater. I see myself kissing him, and ending him and then, -I see myself forgetting to take my medicine in the morning.

Lastly, I see the knife in my hand as I stand in the kitchen.. Sean has gone to the bathroom. I don’t think he’s going to come back.

Naomi Beinart is a fifteen year old girl who lives in Manhattan with her parents and brother. She attends school in Brooklyn

Nonfiction

To the Writer I Was in High School By Fransivan MacKenzie

1. You suck and you know it. You will watch *Stuck in Love* on your laptop that afternoon you were too sad to take a nap. You will fall in love with Lily Collins. You will tell yourself: I think I want to write in English...so people from all over the world will understand me. Haha. No. You will only want that because you wanna be cool.

2. You're not cool. That's why all the kids hate you. So you will spend your free time on one of the benches at the forest park, scribbling poems on your composition notebook. You love rhymes. So you will keep making rhymes even though the grammar is off. You will write sonnets about fall – even though you live in the Philippines, for heaven's sake. You will pen haikus starring leaves. You will curate verses about shiny rocks and flowers kissed by bees. It's funny how when you will most want to die, you will find life in almost everything.

3. You will dream of getting a poetry book published. You will browse international magazines and press on your three-year-old Samsung phone during Physics. You will think about the reading fee and count how much you'll need to save each day to make 10 USD by the end of the year. You will walk your way home to school every day, bearing the heat of late afternoon and the worry that your parents might find out—news flash: they will find out. And then you will spend your savings on something stupid like a skater skirt.

4. The summer after your ninth grade, you will send two poems to an online magazine. You wrote them years ago but never dared to take them out of your diary. One day, for some reason you won't remember when you're writing a feature article about it, you'll be brave enough to take that chance. You will write an email, attach the files, then hit send. They will get back to you six months later. Then, you will squeal at the acceptance email and run to your mother: I did it, Mommy! I freaking did it! Looooook! You will be the happiest you've ever been since you were thirteen.

5. You will dream of bigger horizons. You will chase brighter skies. You will turn your trauma into masterpieces and think: Damn! Look at this fine piece of art! (Don't worry, this one will be addressed in therapy.) You will send out emails in magazines with big names and fancy promises. Months later, they will reply with various arrangements of words to spell rejection. Your Submittable account will resemble a broken stoplight. You will start to believe you'll never reach your destination. Maybe, you never even left home.

6. In spite of life happening—or maybe because of life happening—every now and then, you'll be off your rockers and go into a submission spree. You will never get lucky.

7. Somewhere in the middle of the pandemic, your poem about self-harming will be featured in a mental health journal overseas. You will be paid for the very first time. You will buy some ice cream and think of your words printed somewhere in Saskatchewan. While the vanilla melts in your tongue, you will stare outside your windows and whisper: I think I can do this. I think I want this life.

8. You will apply for a writing scholarship offered by a professional poet. By some kind of miracle, you will get in. You will attend Zoom meetings every 7 in the morning in a state of utter disbelief. You will treat every session like a grand occasion. To be fair, it is a grand occasion.

9. You will keep on submitting to magazines hoping for acceptances. The answer will be no or static silence which is, you know, still no, just more brutal. Once, your mother will find you sulking in the darkness of your bedroom and even before she asks anything, you'll say: Everyone rejected me. She will give you a hotdog on a stick and a cup of hot chocolate. You will ask her to turn the lights off when she leaves.

10. You will wake up one morning and decide to reject your rejections. You will stitch a book of prose and poems out of your failed submissions. You will remember what your kindergarten teacher used to say: you can either find treasures in the trash or make

treasures out of it. You will spend the next three months over caffeinated, sleepless, and drunk in the dreams that keep you off the ledge.

11. You will tell yourself you deserve to be heard. You will convince your inner critic you are competent enough to stand on your own. You will think of the child you were and the empty shelves in the library she ran her fingers across and think: someone needs to hear these stories crowding my head. So, like the crazy girl you are, you will self-publish your chapbook. You will put it out online, but that won't be enough so you will have it on paperback, too.

12. People will pay you for your book. You will pinch yourself so many times. No, you will not wake up. No, you do not want to.

13. You will write for online magazines, journals, blogs – you name it. You will still get rejected. But there will be days when an acceptance email sings its way into your inbox and the stings of the rejection slips go quiet just for a while. You will write truly, madly, deeply. For yourself. For your friends. For strangers. You will write to bury skeletons. You will write to perform exorcisms and resurrections. You will write to escape reality and also to face it. You will twist words into anything you want them to be. You will get paid for this sometimes. You will be able to take your mom out to dinners because of it. You will be tired. You will be sick. You will take your antidepressants and stare at an empty page for the next five months after your diagnosis. When your drive returns, it won't be in downpours, but in drizzles. You will be thirsty. But you have a kinship with waters. Before you know it, you will be flooded again.

14. You will never stop writing. You will never stop submitting. You will never stop getting rejected no matter where you are in your career. You will be twenty with another collection. You will thank God. You will thank your mother for her genes. You will thank Rad Bradbury for saying that you only fail when you stop writing. You will thank every victory, every fall, every road that brought you here.

15. At twenty-one, you will become a staff writer of the online magazine where you began your journey. You will be working with your favorite author on projects. In fact, you will be mentored by several authors from all over the world and you will wonder why at thirteen, every Friday in that forest park, you ever thought you'd be alone.

16. You will host your first writing workshop for the the youth from different planes of the globe. You will announce your mentorship program. You will break down at 2AM in your hotel room and fall to your knees in gratitude. Again and again, you will thank your angels. Again and again, you will thank your stars. And again and again, you will pick up the pen and go back to a blank page where you began.

17. Hey you, little dreamer. Who loves language the way she wishes she would be loved. Who tears into novels during lectures, lists collocations in another notebook, and searches for the meaning of the words in the dictionary instead of relying on context clues. Who thinks of a thousand ways to say "I love you" and "I'm sad" without actually using those words—because then, what else is poetry for? To the girl who should be in therapy instead of at the forest park every freaking Friday. Who seeks the wisdom of classic writers rather than asking her mom to find her a creative writing teacher. Hey you—yes you—with scars on your wrists, stories under your tongue, and dreams by the tip of your fingers...you will make it. You will save yourself with the lifeline of your verses and you will do the same to others in the future. Just give it time. And yeah, kiddo, your peers don't like you right now but one day, they will ask for your autograph. So go, just go home.

18. Go home and watch *Stuck in Love*.

Fransivan MacKenzie is a storyteller born and raised in the Philippines. She is the author of the books "Out of the Woods," "Departures," and "i remember that it hurt." Her works also appeared in *Transition Magazine*, *The Racket*, *Abandon Journal*, *CP Quarterly Review*, and more literary journals all over the world. In 2023, she became a staff writer

for Germ Magazine, the platform that provided her first international exposure. She founded the Fransivan Mackenzie Poetry Mentorship Program to promote literacy while breaking financial barriers.

My Life as a Teenage Girl By Irena Kang

I always read the news before school. It's partially because this year in history we're tested on our knowledge of current events. And partially because I didn't download the New York Times app for nothing.

The Fantasyland of Miss Universe meets Current Events.

A scathing article mocking the hypocrisy of Miss Universe "empowering" women and attempting to become an event of feminism. It's worth noting that Donald Trump owned the pageant for nearly nine years.

"And despite the insistence on internationalism, this pageant, like all pageants, is really a festival of uniformity. Virtually every participant is a tall, slim, young woman with long legs, long hair, long (false) eyelashes, perfect(ed) white teeth and precision-sculpted features — all poured into skintight, extremely revealing sequined dresses, atop vertiginous stilettos. The effect is more Rockettes than United Nations."

I laughed when I read the author's witty jabs, but they couldn't mollify the sadness I felt for the rest of the day. We can make fun of the program all we want, but this media blitz sells.

Millions of people tune in to watch women strut around in fantastical costumes while the contestants answer questions about the Ukraine-Russian war. Millions of little girls are mesmerized by the women in revealing unitards, wishing for a transfusion of that confidence. That beauty. That impossible perfection.

In seventh grade I made the mistake of laughing too hard at one of my friends' jokes. A girl sitting nearby looked at me curiously.

"You know Irena, I never realized this, but I think you have your dad's nose."

When my dad was five years old, he tried climbing on top of one of his kitchen cabinets, failed miserably, and fell and broke both his arms and the bridge of his nose. My sister and I used to compare him to Squidward.

I stared at that girl for a second. "That's nice."

When I got home from school, I looked at myself really closely in the mirror. She's wrong. My nose is a little better than my dad's. It's not nice, but it's not comparable to a botched surgery. What would she know; she has fat thighs. But trying to convince myself that my nose wasn't as bad as my dad's didn't take away the sting. That night, I scrawled in my journal:

why would she say that why would she say that why would she say that why would she-

I can laugh at the story now, but I can't deny that it was her "big nose" comment that propelled my list of insecurities. If I ever came across a genie, I told myself, I would fix me. I'd wish for a smaller waist, smaller thighs, a smaller nose, smaller arms, and at the same time a bigger butt, bigger boobs, bigger eyes. I'd wish for a sharper jawline and angled cheekbones, plump lips and long eyelashes. I'd wish to be pretty. All I wanted was to be pretty.

My older sister's car jolted to a stop.

"What the fuck are you doing, you psycho, we're on the highway!" "I know you're not eating,"

It took me a second to regain my incredulous expression. "What are you even talking about?"

"You skip breakfast everyday, and everyday Melissa sees you at lunch and she says at most you eat an orange, plus at dinner- you barely eat half a serving of everything. I know you're starving yourself, and I'm gonna tell Mom."

"Melissa is such a liar, I eat pizza for lunch. And anyway, I always have dance after dinner, so I don't eat as much but I finish my food after dance."

“No you don’t- I know you don’t because I saw the food wrapped in the paper towel when I was taking out the garbage.”

“Why are you being so obsessive? I literally eat, ok? Stop being so weird.”

“Irena.” Sonia was almost crying now. “Listen to me. It’s not worth it. You could end up in a hospital. You could die. Please tell me you haven’t lost your period.”

“I haven’t. And I’m not starving myself, you’re so paranoid.”

I hadn’t had my period for five months. Only my journal with daily calorie logs knew the truth:

Monday: 1100 calories, Tuesday: 1500 calories, Wednesday: 865 calories, Thursday: 1305 calories, Friday: 623 calories, Saturday: 1610 calories, Sunday: 1081 calories

Sometimes I wonder what that pale, miserable version of me would think of me now. She’d probably just say what she thought about herself.

I need bigger boobs, a bigger butt, way bigger eyes. My thighs are too big, my nose is too big, my arms are too big. My jawline should be sharper, my cheekbones more defined. My eyelashes should be longer and my lips need to be bigger. Then I would be pretty.

I know what everyone says.

Beauty is more than one’s external appearance! You need to learn to love yourself! Body Positivity! Don’t indulge in society’s fatphobia! Appreciate your body because it keeps you alive! Stop starving yourself, you’ll just make it worse! Stop! Stop.

But even today, trying to appreciate how I look without achieving societal expectations is harder than achieving societal expectations. It's too hard. Not when every person I see on social media is perfect. Is pretty. Not when every female character of every TV show I've ever watched has been thin and beautiful. And pretty. Not when a woman's value in this world is almost always reduced to her appearance. She has to be pretty.

But being pretty is impossible. Skinny in some places and curvy in others. Naturally straight hair, but constantly curled and in waves. Eurocentric features with a hint of ethnic genes to enhance them. That weight on the scale, below 115 pounds, never fluctuates. We have to wear makeup, but not so much that it's noticeable. We have to be perfect little pets: smart enough to maintain a conversation, but not enough to be intimidating. We have to know enough to intelligently answer questions about global politics, yet we are encouraged, actually expected, to prance around in ridiculous costumes while leering eyes rank us. We have these unattainable, contradictory, extensive expectations.

And isn't it sad that meeting those expectations is all I could want? It's all any girl could want?

"Women are born with pain built in."

I put down my spoon and stared at my computer screen. Kristin Scott Thomas' intent face stared back.

"It's our physical destiny: period pains, sore boobs, childbirth, you know. We carry it within ourselves throughout our lives- men don't. They [Men] have to seek it out. They invent all these gods and demons and things just so they can feel guilty about things, which is something we do very well on our own. And then they create wars so they can feel things and touch each other and when there aren't any wars they can play rugby. We have it all going on in here inside, we have pain on a cycle for years and years and years and then just when you feel you are making peace with it all, what happens? The

menopause comes, the fucking menopause comes, and it is the most wonderful fucking thing in the world. And yes, your entire pelvic floor crumbles and you get fucking hot and no one cares, but then you're free, no longer a slave, no longer a machine with parts. You're just a person.

Later that night I printed out her speech and added it to the collage on my wall above my bed.

So, maybe it'll all get better when I'm 65, when I'm free of my period. Maybe then I'll look in the mirror and think "I'm really pretty." Hopefully by then I can just, I don't know, be a person.

"So what's happened in the news lately?" I raised my hand.

"Miss USA won the Miss Universe competition on Saturday. She had the dumbest costume."

Irena Kang is sixteen years old, and lives in a small town in Massachusetts. She loves to read— is currently reading *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, and her favorite book is *The Bluest Eye*. Her favorite author, as well as her biggest inspiration, is Virginia Woolf.

Egg Tarts and the City of Juxtaposition By Nicola Pak

Hong Kong is, first and foremost, a land of stark opposites. Sleek sprawling skyscrapers are silhouetted against the verdant mountainous terrain, bustling night markets are dotted between majestic colonial-era architecture, and the roads are either steep and narrow, little cramped side streets that meander between crumbling apartment complexes, or wide and sprawling, one of the many overlapping highways that act as the veins and arteries of the city. In the heart of the city, juxtaposition is the name of the game.

It isn't even eight in the morning, and yet, this concept is already on full display. I'd wandered into a rundown side street, the street before me dappled in shadows and covered in puddles, damp from the unidentified liquid leaking out of pipes overhead. Sunlight is a limited commodity, with most of it being blocked out by the laundry dangling overhead, bridging between the different apartment complexes, as the pungent odour of stale trash permeates the air. Despite the lack of sunlight, the buildings are sun-bleached and weathered, yellowed to a muted sepia from the many typhoons and decades they've welcomed. Clawing at the sky like wild beasts, the buildings are bursting at the seams from housing so many inhabitants.

In the midst of all the chaos, the lone pop of colour comes from a vibrant blue storefront.

A winding queue snakes all the way to the sapphire-coloured door, as a simple, albeit trendy white font spells out the word "Bakery". The clientele is a mishmash of locals and tourists, residents and expats, all eager to get their hands on the treats being sold within the jewel-toned walls. In front of me, a local teenager plays a game on her phone, idly looking up once in a while to check her progress in the queue. Behind me, a group of three middle-aged tourists discuss the best sights in Hong Kong, with thick Australian accents coating their tongues, adding a distinct curl to their vowels. This bakery is known for excellent sourdough loaves, German pretzels and buttery croissants, but I'm only here for one thing. The quintessential Hong Kong egg tart.

When I finally order and pay for my breakfast, it arrives in a paper bag that is the colour of cut sapphire. The handle of the paper bag is a tangerine orange, and so are the cartoonish line doodles emblazoned on the front. It looks whimsical, effortlessly avant-garde in a way that my Design and Technology coursework could only aspire to emulate. However, there's nothing whimsical about the contents of the box at all. The treats encased within are the picture of tradition, of culture, of Hong Kong's vibrant heritage.

Glistening Macau-style egg tarts await me, filled with luscious egg custard, the slightly burnt edges caramelised to perfection, the perfect snack of childhood nostalgia. The pastry is buttery and crisp, a nod towards its origins, inspired by British custard tarts and Portuguese pastel de nata. When they were first introduced to Hong Kong in the 1940s, these treats could only be found in high-end Western restaurants, a far cry from their status now, as popular snacks in Chinese bakeries and *Cha Chaan Tengs*, Hong-Kong style diners. Derived from Colonial recipes, adapted to Hong-Konger tastes, it's a brilliant metaphor for Hong Kong's position as an eclectic cultural melting pot, the perfect cultural figurehead, disguised within the folds of a deliciously flaky pastry.

A city of stark contrasts has its own magnetic allure, a certain thrill that accompanies expecting the unexpected. With Google Maps in one hand and the FOMO-fuelled exuberance of a tourist in the other, I never know where my next adventure is going to take me, whether it's the frigid tundra of an air-conditioned mall, or sublimating in the the sweltering heat, as I take a shortcut through a dingy side alley. There's something to love about having surprises that lie around every corner, a pleasant change of scenery in comparison to the routine monotony of everyday life, back in my own city.

Of course, it wouldn't be a fair opinion for me to regard Hong Kong's infrastructural dichotomy purely through rose tinted glasses. With the city in stark contrast comes a whole host of hidden problems, which I may not fully be able to understand the scope and nuances of, from the viewpoint of a temporary visitor. The polar differences between neighbouring districts speak volumes of growing issues, such as socioeconomic inequality and a growing wealth disparity within the society. It would be incredibly tone-deaf and privileged of me to regard these decrepit buildings as nothing more than an eccentric charm to the cityscape, or praise the unconventional appeal of the 'grunge aesthetic' of these buildings, without pausing to consider the lives of the people who live within them.

However, there's no such thing as a flawless city or country. Hong Kong has a predominantly Southern-Chinese population, and its unique characteristics, as well as the specific issues it faces, stem from Colonialist roots and exponential growth as a global entrepot. As a result, many of these influences have led to these effects being translated across generations, but the vestige of colonisation will fade over time.

I don't visit Hong Kong often, but when I do, I return to find it being completely different from when I left it, the sight before me usually a far cry from the way it was immortalised in my memories. Perhaps, it's due to the time spent away, giving me room to grow, resulting in a change in perspective over the years, or perhaps, it's because Hong Kong is a dynamic city, nimble and quick to constantly reinvent itself. Upon my most recent visit to the city, one thing that was obvious was the way the frenetic, buzzing energy that had died down during the pandemic was slowly but surely returning to the city. Like waking up from a long slumber, life was creeping back in, vibrant hues painting Hong Kong in large, sweeping brush strokes. The returning sensation is a curious, buoyant thing, a spirit that weaves its way around the people of the city, tying them together with an invisible thread.

Although I am half Hong-Konger in ethnicity, I've spent my whole life in Singapore, which led to me forging a significantly stronger sense of belonging with the Singaporean facet of my identity. But this trip to Hong Kong surprised me. In spite of the differences, the contrasting architecture, influences and lifestyles, there's still a deeply rooted feeling of *community*, bringing together a divided society. After all, the differences lie in the heights of buildings, the depth of pockets, the mother tongues that grace the lips of locals, but these factors aren't enough to abolish the sense of togetherness within the Hong Kong society, instead only serving to amplify the unwavering sense of belonging.

Even back on Singaporean soil, I can't help but feel as if I've unlocked another part of who I am, a once-forgotten facet of a diverse cultural identity. Even if Cantonese words feel foreign on my tongue, even if I'm more acquainted with the streets of Tanjong Pagar

than Tsim Sha Tsui, it can't change the fact that there's a hyphen in my passport, there's another city that I have roots in, distanced but not divided by the South China Sea. Like an egg tart, my identity is a layered, rich thing, paying homage to a plethora of influences, wrapped in one, central shell.

Unlike an egg tart, it took much longer than a trip to a memorable bakery to find it.

Nicola Pak is a sixteen- year-old writer based in Singapore, who loves cooking, chemistry and cats. She enjoys writing think pieces, poetry and YA novels about feisty women in STEM.

Run Bulletproof By Riley Young

Mile 1

In fifth grade I concocted an in-depth plan to fake sickness and skip my grade-wide mile run, because I felt ashamed I couldn't keep up with other kids. I look back at that now and smile a bit, 1 mile is just $\frac{1}{3}$ of my warm up. It mattered so much to me that I sobbed a devious confession to my Mom, "Eomma, my stomach hurts" or "Eomma, I feel light-headed". She just shook her head, smiled and made me eat a banana. How I have grown and how trivial my worries were! Today, I have laced my shoes extra tight and they feel like wings under my feet.

Mile 1 feels like “a sleepy summer Sunday and a sweet, untroubled mind”.

Mile 2

When I think about why and realize it was because I didn't want to look weak in front of the boys, my smile sinks. Little perfectionist me had wanted an airtight persona. If I was the top of my class in ELA and math, how would it feel to be mediocre at best at running as everyone sprints ahead? I imagined them zooming past me, making that whoosh sound effect that they put in cartoons as they leave me in the dust. Embarrassing in bold red letters burned holes into my mind. Research shows that girls in classes with high-achieving boys tend to set their academic goals lower and lack confidence in their abilities than girls at all-girls schools. Those same all-girls school students are also more apt to perform athletically. When I found that information, I immediately thought why my parents didn't sign me up for an all-girls school, how could they withhold the benefits from me? It turns out I just needed a fat lesson on smashing patriarchal and heteronormative myths and I'd be fine. Mile 2 feels like fire, gets me riled up a bit and the anger builds.

Mile 3

I don't think I ever learned how to fail and be okay with it. It's still something I work on everyday. Self love needs comes first. Mile 3 feels reflective.

Mile 4

How can I love myself when I don't trust myself? Mile 4 feels raw.

Mile 5

Here's where I convince myself that I am a mess. You are a loser and nobody loves you. Your best friend secretly talks shit about you, that's why she hasn't responded in three

hours. You don't work hard in school or outside, so you will never achieve what you want. You keep on making mistake after mistake, please try harder next time. Your body could be a lot better, why is it so heavy to run with? Why do your inner thighs hit one another when you step? Why can't your lungs keep up? Aren't these shorts a bit too tight? What's going on with your acne? You definitely run ugly. Mile 5 feels like a stubbed toe against the wall of reality.

Mile 6

Italy, 2017, we went to a small beach that was supposed to be the clearest along the coast. Our tour guide told us it was a bit strange because it was a stone beach instead of sand. It was indeed beautiful, so breathtaking that when I fall asleep six years later to the mediation sound of waves crashing, this beach is painted across my eyes. Painted there is 10 year old me, dashing in and out of the water relentlessly. My feet became cut, bruised and bleeding but I was proud of my battle scars. Mile 6 feels like rocks.

Mile 7

Seven has always been my favorite number. Christian theology says there are seven deadly sins: pride, envy, gluttony, greed, lust, sloth, and wrath. Seven was the age when I started sewing, my favorite thing to do in the whole wide world. In China, the stages of female life are denoted as multiples of seven, like age 2 times 7 at puberty and 7 times 7 at menopause. My birth numbers are 02/05/07, the 2 plus 5 making the year '07. In Iran, a cat has seven lives. I was seven when I learned that pulling your eyes back so they look like slits wasn't such a funny joke. For as long as I can remember, I've spent my summers in LA swimming, sweating and eating sweets with my seven cousins. In ancient Egypt there were seven paths to heaven and seven halls of the underworld. Seven is the name of my favorite song by Jungkook, who is in a band of seven mates. Seven was the amount of mornings I couldn't get out of bed because my heart felt too heavy. Mile 7 feels like tip-toeing on a tightrope between love and hate or a line between sweets and sins.

Mile 8

So close yet so far. My mental strength comes out to play around this time. The ground is moving under me, and each step forward repeats again and again. I can control something when I know what's coming next. I start converting my pain into fuel. Each movement is both powered by releasing tensions one step at a time. Mile 8 feels the beginning of proud.

Mile 9

In my room, I had an empty wall. It was naked and I wanted to give it clothes. Since I could read, my Mom wrote notes to my brother and I for any occasion ever or just for the hell of it. I dressed my wall in these notes, arranging and taping them spaced appropriately apart. I've hung up over nine notes up there now. In different words on different papers they all say, "Hey baby! I'm here for you always". Mile 9 feels like it's finally coming together, fully dressed for the occasion.

Mile 10

Mile 10 feels hard.

Mile 11

I'm now in eleventh grade and I've signed up for my first marathon with my Dad. I can run over 10 miles consistently. I started training seriously a year ago when I was tired of always being tired of my anxiety. There were a million problems going on, running through and around my brain. Imagine a room full of little people talking, but you don't know what they're saying or how to help or make them listen or how to shut them up. I needed a way to turn it off, an escape. I found that when I'm sprinting the last mile, music on full blast, playing the song run BTS, all the little chatters float up and fade to dark. So everyday, I lace my shoes extra tight and call out to my mom, "Eomma, I'm headed to the gym". I run and run and run and I can't breathe and I'm flushed a hot burning red. But I am free. Mile 11 feels pretty nice, right?

SOURCES:<https://genius.com/Genius-english-translations-bts-run-bts-english-translation-lyrics> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/number-symbolism/7>
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Stinky Fish By Grace Huang

“Nǚér (Daughter),” Mama whispered, splintering the stillness that enveloped us in our Nissan’s murmur.

“Yeah?” I respond indifferently, double-tapping the gingham dress on my glaring screen.

Mama exhaled a sigh laden with exasperation. “I know you’re only in middle school and college seems far away...But don’t you think it’s time to start preparing? Working harder?”

Add to cart.

My finger twitched as Mama’s tone plunged into despair.

“You can’t continue wasting time like this. Time is water in a sponge, you must squeeze it out. You always have time to study more math. Practice more violin. Professor Yun’s daughters do homework in the car while you dawdle here and there—in the morning,

after school, right before bedtime. Also, does anyone spend an entire hour eating dinner like you?"

My eyes swerved away from my phone, flitting through the darkness and anchoring on Mama's face in the rearview mirror. Vibrant specks of gas station and automobile lights frolicked on her glasses like Skittles. A minor itch of irritation bubbled within me before retreating.

This lecture will pass.

"Everyone is striving while you lag behind for temporary happiness. Angelina's brother spends hours every day completing hundreds of—"

My ears are bleeding.

"You know what?" I barked out of impulse, my voice pricking with bitter shards that slashed through Mama's ramble.

"All you—all you Chinese people do is compare, compare, and compare! Compare to this kid, compare to that nine-year-old violin concertmaster, compare to these random Harvard siblings with a tiger mom on the internet. What's wrong with you?" I shrieked. Leaning forward, I dug my nails into the plush foam of the passenger seat.

"You Chinese people," Mama reiterated slowly in English, the phrase foreign both in language and context. She fell silent, questioning. Interpreting and tasting each word so innocent on its own, yet monstrous when strung together.

"You? What do you mean, *you Chinese people*? How could you say that to your mother? To yourself? YOUR BLOOD IS JUST AS CHINESE AS MINE!" Mama rived screechingly in Chinese, every syllable firing out like quills, tips seeping outrage.

Or was it grief? Disappointment? Shame?

Lashed by Mama's acidic reprimand, I felt my cheeks bloom into a boiling crimson under the bite of night frost. I sank back into my seat, unsure if I was quivering from anger or embarrassment.

"It's really all you do, though. Comparing," I mumbled.

Maintaining her eyes locked on the inky road, Mama replied softly, "Yes, that's what we do. It's Chinese culture. It's your culture. Don't you consider yourself part of it?"

What is Chinese culture? To me...

It's a ceaseless torrent of indecipherable math problems hurled at me from the instant my hands grasped a pencil—the time when each chubby finger merely resembled a bulbous pea pod. Despite bawling through one progressively more horrid book after another, I was...

Never enough. Never *brilliant* enough.

It's an industrious network of children juxtaposed by parents who scrutinize them like jewelers analyzing sapphires. Calculating, establishing product value through a diligent search for scintillating sparkles and glimmers of distorting blemishes. Ambitious jewelers coveting perfection.

It's my austere Baba when he chastised me for even the most trivial matters, his wrath erupting at the first twinkle of a betraying tear. Petrified, I squelched sobs ignited by furiously arched eyebrows that magnified his forehead wrinkles—canyons carved by

hours of memorizing the Chinese-English dictionary. Hours that acted as the key to *Měi Guó* (America, The Beautiful Country). Hours that collected into alphabet soup serenading sleepless nights, devouring youthful onyx hair. Seized by my 4-year-old shoulders and marched to face the ever so familiar cream wall, I'd be whacked on my behind before Baba's storming departure.

It's drowning in apologetic guilt, yet forever being too proud to utter the three syllables of *duì bù qǐ*. Pronouncing the last character *qǐ*—briefly dipping in the middle and jolting up into a risen tone—seems to mimic a defiant question. A statement clumsily declaring, *I was wrong, but does that mean you're right?* Saying *duì bù qǐ* is like forcing a bamboo shoot to squirm out of frozen earth.

Shortly after each timeout, I sat alone on the living room futon that creaked with every hiccup. Sometimes, Baba walked by and ventured closer to sheepishly reveal a cluster of dark chocolate almonds melting in his palm.

A bittersweet apology.

It's Mama at 9 pm, returning home from a sticky star-studded Texan dusk, a weary smile crinkling her eyes as I flung myself onto her apron and whiffed the canvas cloth saturated in restaurant grease. Clung to her legs as she fingered through the rainbow of homemade bows I shoved into my hair that morning. Licked my lips when she promised to bake red bean rice cake, confectionary magic whisked up during my dreams so that I awoke to glutinous fragrance the next day.

It's my *wài pó* (grandma), sweeter than tofu pudding. A *wài pó* who scrambled to talk with me in every phone call, her local dialect's perplexing accents cascading out and tickling my ears. Accustomed to only Standard Chinese, I instinctively winced at hearing the unfamiliar tongue—until I grasped a shimmer of recognition.

“*Xiǎng Wài Pó le ma* (Do you miss Grandma)?”

Wài Pó hushed herself with childlike eagerness, as if my answer to her regularly asked question was a baffling riddle.

“*Dāng rán* (Of course)!” I’d exclaim in reassurance, hoping Wài Pó could detect my vigorous head nodding. I enjoyed picturing Wài Pó clutching her aged telephone with both small, sun-spotted hands. Once a rich wine red, Wài Pó’s telephone began its life in the 1990s, connecting her and Mama, then a budding entrepreneur in Shanghai. Who knew that Wài Pó would one day sail her love across the Pacific?

“*Xiǎng Wài Pó le* (She misses her grandma),” Wài Pó would repeat a few times smugly, audibly in glee.

I miss Wài Pó.

I miss my culture.

I miss how, in the three times I met her, she marveled at how much I’d grown, only to still call me a *xiǎo bǎobǎo* (little treasure baby). I pulled back in shyness when she cuddled her fragile face to mine, giggling moments later as feathery heather gray wisps teased my cheeks.

I miss Wài Pó squeezing every droplet of her affection into the few weeks we’d share in a lifetime. During those days, an ever-changing fruit medley swirled around me as Wài Pó busied herself over skinning apples and rinsing Kyoho grapes she handpicked from nearby fruit stands. Every time Wài Pó caught sight of her outdoor cat, she clambered to hoist it up for me. While I cooed sappily, Wài Pó weathered rounds of swats that swelled into scarlet marks. Sitting on her bamboo mat, as I babbled about Easter egg hunting and slapping mosquitoes under July 4th fireworks, Wài Pó listened intently, immersed in my

chaotic Chinese describing America. When I plopped myself at Wài Pó's wooden table to savor sauteed fern and meatball soup, she observed in delight, her chestnut eyes gently perched on me for the entire meal. Everything tasted better knowing that no one in the world would look at me in the same way Wài Pó did.

Most of all, I miss Wài Pó's signature platter of *Chòu Guì Yú* (Stinky Fish), Anhui province's boasted delicacy that bears a notorious odor symbolical of foot stench. After I endured my first disorienting 15-hour plane ride to China, Wài Pó welcomed me with her Stinky Fish, its malicious stench snaking into and appalling my nostrils. Ironically, the dish was exquisite—adorned with a dynamic array of chilies and ginger slivers, a single grand fish laid cradled in a fiery pool of garnet red sauce. Sandwiching a minuscule morsel of fish between my chopsticks, I nibbled gingerly as the pungent flakes blossomed into a miraculously piquant aroma. Responding to Wài Pó's expectant peer that flicked between me and her salty peculiar creation, the ends of my lips inched to an awestruck grin.

I am clay molded by the hands of Chinese culture. Aged hands that tenderly paint me in Wài Pó's warmth and phoenixes gracing Mama's Qipao dress. Rough hands that place me in the kiln's fiery embrace, as algebra forges a hardened callus on my finger and disciplined scoldings crystallize my heart into jade. Unwavering hands that swash on silky glaze and lift me to the stars as Goddess Cháng é bathes me in moonlight, illuminating love, pride, and resilience. I am whole.

So, perhaps I owe a long overdue word with Mama. *D-duì b-*

Let me try again.

I'm sorry it took me too long to learn that if I cherry-picked my culture, what's left behind is bland, like naked wontons without the scorch of chili oil.

And, to my beloved Stinky Fish, unleashing your tear-jerking curls of putrid steam, how does forgiveness sound?

Grace Huang is a junior at West High School in Madison, Wisconsin. She loves writing about childhood and the Asian-American experience. Her work has been published in the New York Times and recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, the Wisconsin Young Writers Award, and the Ringling College of Art and Design. She has two cats who enjoy hogging the keyboard of her overheated laptop as she types up daydreams.

Lily By Molly Hill



Lily

Ashley Lemons is sixteen years old and attends Santa Barbara High School. She is a passionate artist who enjoys expressing her creativity with graphite, colored pencil, charcoal, watercolor, acrylic, pastel, and mixed media. Art is an integral part of her life, shaping her perspective and emotions. She is inspired by her surroundings and experiments with color mixing, technique, personal expression, and exploring conceptual content. In her free time, Ashley competes in hurdles and high jump for her high school track team, enjoys playing golf, experiencing nature, and spending quality time with friends and family.

Singapore

Sunday, October 12, 2023, 6:30 am

I stand in the kitchen, eyes boring into glossy ultramarine tile. It lines the space between the granite countertop and the stained off-white cabinets, all flung open and boasting their mismatched, eclectic collection of glass and ceramic innards. My thoughts are overwhelmingly slow, my demeanor their languid echo, and I limply cradle a stack of multi-colored bowls in my hands. They belonged to my great-grandmother Agnes, and they were the only thing my mother insisted on inheriting when she died. Her days of ice cream sundaes and red wine in the nursing home finished at last when I was just six, her full set of pastel, nearly cartoonish dishes left one Midwestern storage unit for another until they traveled, years later, each one carefully shrouded and tightly taped in plastic bubble wrap, on big shipping containers across the Pacific Ocean to this kitchen. Now I place them, in stacks of three or more, in their assigned cabinets. My chest feels full, so jam-packed with dread, weighing down my body, my heart, and my deeply worried soul.

The hymn escapes my lips in soft, breathy tremors.

You would sing it before you lost yourself, beginning the round until another voice joined your rich baritone. The sound warmed the space it filled, continuing on and on, unceasing until life drew our attention elsewhere. Cancer throughout your esophagus, intestines, and stomach never stopped you from easing into prayerful song. It had to take away your brain—it had to steal your voice.

I sing it alone, alone in the kitchen of a house on the other side of the world from you as my tears drip onto your late mother's dishes. The song is a prayer that you will feel peace, peace well deserved after such unrelenting suffering. I pray, too, that you can hear my voice across the oceans and continents that span between us and that maybe, in your heart, you can join the song one last time.

In a tiny Texan town, in a home whose cupboards have simple white dishes, you and Grandma watched live television Mass in the living room just as you always did. Uttering a soft 'peace be with you,' she rested a hand on your shoulder, and your heart decided to listen. It was October 11 at 4:30 pm, or October 12 at 6:30 am in my ultramarine-tiled kitchen.

It hit me that you were gone on the long-haul flight to San Francisco. While everyone else drowned out the tedium of the economy cabin with Hollywood's latest contribution to pop culture, I let out shaky sobs. I was so numb until then, the adrenaline wearing off and my mind having the space to wander and wonder. Wondering who I'm supposed to talk to now, now that you're gone. Even the flight attendants, the only people in that godforsaken tin can *not* trying to block everything out, knew well enough to leave me be.

I had been so tired the Sunday morning that Heaven took you. The night before I wrote and rewrote a letter to a boy countless times, choosing each word so delicately for all six pages, meticulously handwritten.

You remember him, don't you? I wanted so badly for you to like him when I brought him home to meet you, to approve of my first romantic choice. You quizzed him about the possibility of dragons existing (which had been on your mind since it had occurred to you how many mythologies worldwide include the massive, fire-breathing beasts), and you seemed somewhat impressed with his knowledge of history and Arthurian legend.

Restless and having given up on sleep, I found that it takes so many painful words, so many not-so-loving phrases, so many not-so-young reasons and feelings to justify ending two years of young love.

Naive love. Hopeful, caring love. Unexpectedly, painful, difficult love that just got to be too much.

So I sat, crammed between the broad shoulders of the two remaining men in my life, my father and brother, realizing I had lost both of my dearest friends– the one who would talk to me for hours, and the one who would have provided that unending embrace when you (the former) weren't around anymore.

I landed in California, Denver, then Omaha, remembering every good thing for thirty-some hours. Crying, though, came in bouts of varying lengths and intensities the week after that Sunday, after I arrived at the church to celebrate your life. The priest had never met you, a frail, cynical monsignor from North Dakota.

You would have hated his homily, absolutely hated it. He made a point to avoid saying your name, referring to “this person” that we all loved. His opening line was “Seeing so many people here tells me what a positive impact this person made on the world, but that doesn't matter.” He never said it outright, but the whole message was ‘This is going to happen to all of you, too, so make sure you haven't sinned that bad!’ I don't know about you, but that's the first time I've been angry in church.

The singers changed the key of “On Eagle's Wings,” a sin in and of itself, and Grandma insisted on a closed casket because she didn't want people to see you looking so sick. She made the man from the funeral home close it while I stood there trying to say goodbye, your friends and family trickling into the pews. I had never cried tears that heavy before, my eyes bearing the weight of being the last on Earth to ever see you.

So many people lined up to deliver their carefully worded condolences, Grandma shoving off the rain of sympathy as if it were false accusations. She smiled as she continued to neglect any loss in the presence of other living souls. She loved you so deeply, but God forbid she lets that show. I can't imagine the loneliness, the horrible

emptiness she must feel after fifty-five years. For all I know, the only way she can express it is to hide in the hotel bathrooms, sobbing to her reflection while we wait outside the door, no longer allowed to ask if she's okay.

To be frank, I don't know if *I'm* okay anymore. I spent the week leading up to the big events (my 18th birthday, and the flights back home) being hit with sudden and overpowering grief, leaving dinner tables to hide in bathrooms and cry. Maybe Grandma and I do have something in common after all.

We spent the rest of the week in small-town Ceresco, staying with the other grandparents, taken aback when my uncle arrived unannounced, three obnoxious dogs in tow, and a new girlfriend on his arm. We took this in stride because, well, what choice did we have?

Once all of the insignificant days had passed, each one taking its sweet time, I found myself in a dimly lit Italian restaurant eating lasagna with much too thick noodles. Grandma sat next to me (probably because all of the established grown-ups kept asking her practical, overwhelming questions about how she was going to get rid of your things), and the exuberant voices of my Dad's side of the family echoed around us while we sat, decidedly quiet. It being my 18th birthday, people wanted to celebrate. When Grandma handed me my gift, a lovely pair of elegant crystal earrings, she waited a few moments before she spoke, almost apprehensive.

"Grandpa picked these out for you, Isabelle," she cleared her throat, tears welling, "and he wanted nothing more than to be here."

At that moment, in the dark yet lively corner of Lincoln's finest Italian establishment, her hardened facade cracked— we both wanted nothing more than to have you around. The ten other people at the table hardly noticed, their excited chatter concealing the oh-so-familiar sound of sadness, but in that moment we didn't need to hide away to express

our grief. We had the safety of going unnoticed, and perhaps we saw a little bit of ourselves reflected in the other. It's unfortunate to say I went unnoticed at my birthday dinner, but at least we were celebrating a day in advance.

They're beautiful, by the way, the earrings. Thank you.

I woke up on my birthday, dreading the arduous journey home that was soon to begin as I scavenged for breakfast. I caught the view from the kitchen window, abandoned all else, and ran out into the street.

It was snowing. Gentle, intricate flurries cascaded down from the sky—no, from Heaven—, melting not but a second after they hit the Earth. In the middle of the dark pavement, I sat, knees tucked into my chest, and let it fall on me, reveling in the best present I will ever receive. I laughed a girlish giggle, I forgot about the boy, the boy who was so much like you in some ways, and I stayed in that spot on the old, cracked pavement until I had no choice but to let reality be itself again.

It's been about a month now since you passed, and I've since returned to the house whose cabinets hold the ceramic pastel dishes, the house that has nearly ten thousand miles that span between it and where you used to be. Of the countless reasons that you will never be forgotten, among them now is that I cannot stand in my kitchen without remembering how you would sing—without knowing that God must be in such good company.

Isabelle Bible was born in Durham, North Carolina in 2005, and moved to Humble, Texas shortly after. She lived there for nearly sixteen years before coming to Singapore with her parents, two younger brothers, and three dogs. Aside from writing, she loves music, cooking for friends and family, laughing much too loudly, hot cups of coffee, and going on long walks with her dogs.

Art

Pascal Eating a Dragonfly By James Corman





Pascal Eating a Dragonfly

James Corman is a rising sophomore at Harvard-Westlake high school. He is a Student Ambassador Blogger for his school and a student journalist for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

Rue Malebranche By Katherine Sedlock-Reiner



Rue Malebranche

Katherine Sedlock-Reiner is a seventeen-year-old from Brooklyn, NY who loves frequenting Film Forum, translating Virginia Woolf into French, and finding faces among

geometric patterns. Her art is inspired by writing and her writing by art. To see more of her work, visit kssrnyc.weebly.com

Juicy Colors By Leah Albaugh



Juicy Colors

Leah Albaugh is a student at Kennett High School who enjoys using her creativity to create art like this. Her style varies and she has a large range of mediums and techniques when it comes to making artwork. You can find her on Instagram at: [leah.albaugh](https://www.instagram.com/leah.albaugh)

Netted By Eva Park



Netted

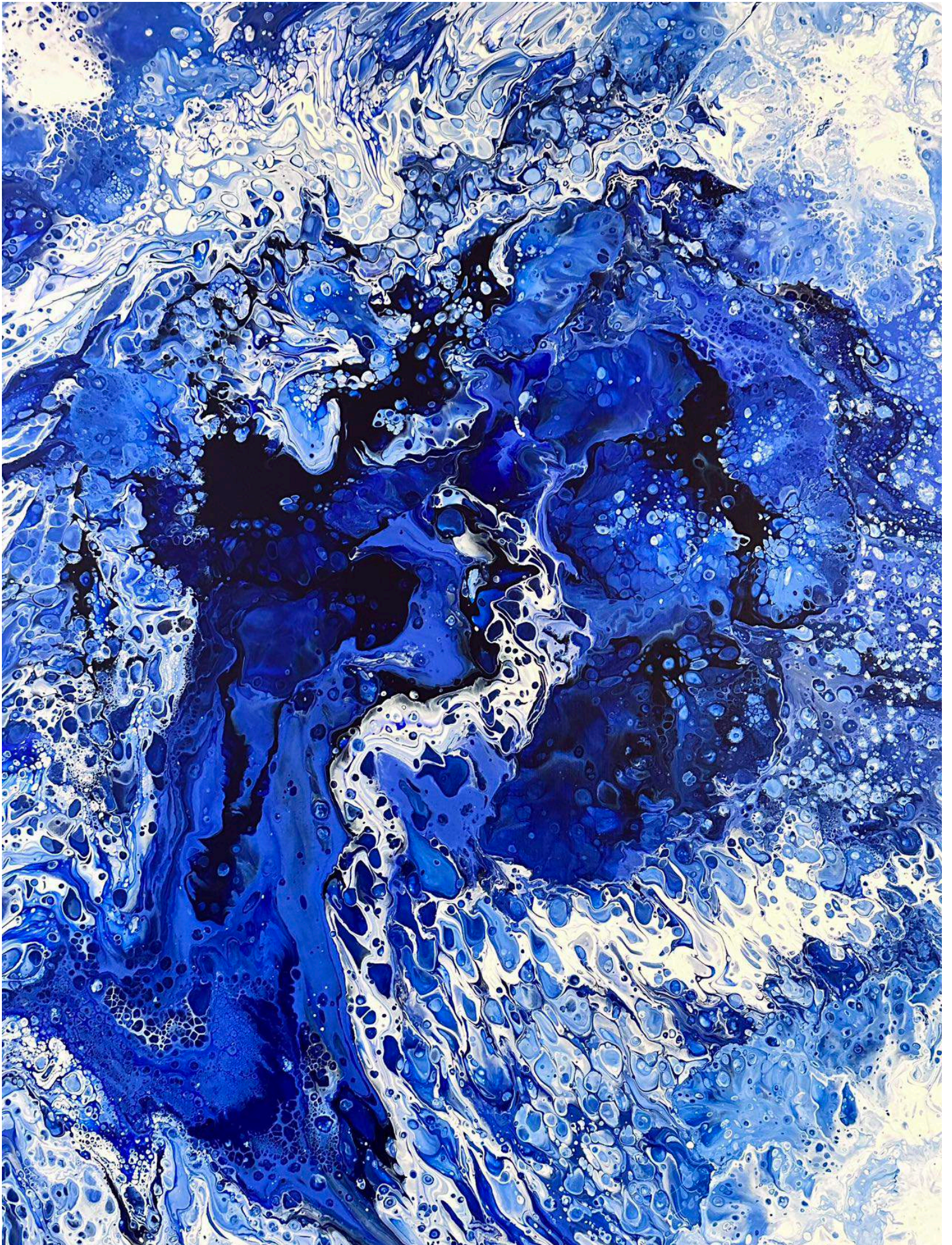
Eva Park is a junior in the Los Angeles area. She loves to experiment with colors and different styles, but ultimately aims to convey the beauty and existentialism of nature. Her work has previously been recognized by Celebrating Art and Scholastic Art and

Writing. In her free time, she enjoys reading, music, and volunteering at her local aquarium.

Untitled By Mason Pan



Untitled



My creative process in art often involves embracing risk. When I create pieces, there are often numerous variables beyond my control, from the unpredictability of mediums to the subjective interpretation of viewers. This is what I believe makes art profoundly dynamic and personal. By surrendering to the unknown and experimenting with new techniques or concepts, art pieces truly become unique and unable to be recreated.

Beachy Vibes By Grace Huang



Beach Vibes

My name is Grace Huang, and I am an artist whose favorite medium is watercolor/guache. One of my favorite pieces, "Beach Vibes," captures the serene and relaxing atmosphere of a beach getaway. Creating art has always been a source of happiness for me, and I love infusing my work with the peaceful, happy vibes that I hope others can feel when they view my paintings.

Book Review

No Book Reviews this month.
