

December 2024 Issue 36



Candy Aisle by Sonja Xie

Editor's Note

No Editor's Note in this Issue

Poetry

Grounding By Lydia Neeley

I burned grilled cheese twice but I thought I was a good cook and I can't figure out how to submit an assignment and I misread the time that another assignment was due and I was late to work and I'm

BREATHE

The rain pattering on the roof
smells even better when it falls
on the warm concrete.

worried that I let everyone down turn an assignment late and I figure that I missed another due date and my outfit is trash and I can't find time to clean and the computers

BREAtHE

Lightning flashing and thunder clapping
In the distance and the birds chirping
trying to find shelter

that I oversee don't work and I don't remember if I'm supposed to know how to fix them and I think I'll fail this class and

bREaTHe

I leaned against the strong trunk
of the tree that was trimmed to be as tall
as a one story house built in the 70's,

then I'll fail other classes but that's never happened before so I go to bed

brEaTHe

my hands pressed
into the black and white well-fertilized soil
dirt creeping beneath my fingertips

too late and wake up too early and I don't have time to

brEaTHe

In the leaves above me
I see tiny veins
that mimic the ones in my hands.

eat good food and I don't have money to

breaTHe

The sky is dark, but not quite
Overcast and there is a faint
rainbow near the mountain

eat out you've struggled making friends and

breathe

It's going to be okay.

Lydia Neeley is a lifelong reading and writing enthusiast, who is attending college just for the creative writing classes. She has published a few pieces in small magazines and journals, and plans on publishing her own book someday.

Someday I'll Grieve Sosi Audain By Sosena Audain

(Inspired by Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong)

Sosi, run. Adulthood is chasing you
later. Don't eulogize your
fish before its belly points to the future.
Stand skinned, tall and limp. You've
earned the loss of 'i' in your name. Now
it just reads "S.O.S."

Maybe if we burned through the
treadmill, we could live in the space between
'i' and "S.O.S." before the 'i' dissipates and
it all sneaks its way back onto your body.

Sosi, come
Here. Be Here. You're tomorrow—you just need
to know today is a shadow of your forgetting. Years
will bead your necklace. Today, the charm.

Sosena Audain is a writer from Washington, D.C. She is an alumna of the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop and the Sewanee Young Writers Conference. Her work has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, Fleeting Daze, and Disjointed Magazine. She has a novella entitled The G.I.V.I.D and is working on a novel entitled Address. When she's not matchmaking words like people, she is listening to music and she is probably singing along. She likes cats, philosophy, and life itself.

Impending By Lotus Das-Hyland

It's cold enough that both
my obligatory huff of an exhale
and that of a dumb dog
remain visible, lingering stagnant
and momentary. Blossoming in
front of me
then, gone,
as whispers straining away
on the biting July wind.

I draw in; feel a tightening
in my trachea.
Hold – something putrid and coiling is
birthed in my stomach
creeping upwards as if water
in the xylem of a rotting flower. Against every
natural law it blooms into my
mouth, claustrophobic. Leathery
petals press against my tongue
and crowd my gums. Threatening my throat.

I exhale, and frown at my living.
Seeking some bittersweet comfort,
that my quivering fingers are
so frozen that they ache. A ritual,
a ceremony made up of twigs and
spikes. I swallow and it feels
like a seed pod has lodged itself
inside me. Like I might start
crying pebbles any minute now.

Like this,
I burgeon another cranberry hour away.

Lotus Das-Hyland (she/her) is an Indian-Irish student from Melbourne, Australia who recently completed the International Baccalaureate diploma program. After graduating high school in November 2024, she is looking forward to growing and improving her writing at university. When she's not busy studying, she enjoys visiting new places, making music, and writing stories in her Notes app.

Bibliophile at Lunch By Jenna Mather

I want to swallow every story
like it's my last meal: devouring
crisp pages until metaphor drips
down my chin and I pick the letters
from my teeth with a plotline—
all so I can hold those words inside
my greedy, endless stomach and say,
This is one is mine.

Jenna Mather is a graduate of the University of Iowa, where she studied English and creative writing. With her poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction, she tries to untangle the complexities of love, womanhood, and the writing life. On any given day, you can find her in a coffee shop—or online at [@_jennamather](#) and [jennamather.com](#).

No One Knows By Lily Jefferson

I miss home and no one knows.
I miss the place I'm truly from,
From the fields that flowed on forever,
The swaying grasses always
Whispering, sighing in my ear,
To the youthful blue skies
And their billowing, heavy clouds.

I miss your voice.
I miss your laughter even more.
I miss the August wind in your hair
And the warm smell of autumn.
I miss the afternoons we napped,
Blanketed beneath the sun,

Buried in nature's cotton.
I miss wearing wet bathing suits
And wiping watermelon juice
Away with our palms.
I miss your accent
And your worn-in boots,

Your tattered jeans
And your baby blues.
I miss your mortal spirit
And your gardens of rue.
I miss home because I always
Think of you.

Lily is a student and writer based in Miami, Florida. She enjoys writing poetry, short fiction, and plays. Her work has been published previously in Aries Magazine, Silent Spark Press, and produced on her high school stage. When she is not writing, she is lending a hand at the theatre.

bird on a roof in the sun By Raphaëlle Therrien

My mind is wandering away from me, drifting;
I am detached, mindless and numb.
I am not thinking, speaking, or studying, only staring.

Staring out the window, where the neighbors are swimming.
Parents with towels and kids covered in cake crumbs.
My mind is wandering away from me, drifting.

That's when the bird comes singing,
Landing on a roof far from wherever he came from.
I am not thinking, speaking, or studying, only staring.

The bird flies from the sun, always shining,
To the point it often becomes bothersome.
My mind was wandering away from me, drifting.

But I focus on the bird, still hopping, singing, and observing.
He's red and brown, hungry for plump grapes and juicy plums.
I am not thinking, speaking, or studying, only staring.

For a moment, only on him am I focusing.
A bird on a roof in the sun, a sight that makes me dumb.
My mind was wandering away from me, drifting.
And I am not thinking, speaking, or studying, only staring.

Raphaëlle Therrien is a high school student passionate about reading, writing, and traveling, experimenting with different forms of writing and storytelling.

a day like a fever By Olivia Hom

(after Franny Choi)

It is a
rainy day, like a fever.
Never ending, the sun is dead
& I'm avoiding meat
for now. It's strange how butchered
things taste good. I'm the kind of girl
Who writes poems chopped
& fragmented, then puts them together. Now we're grown up
& I wish I had a balcony to watch the sunset &
see the city, watch it cradled
in lights. What if I slept in,
nestled like styrofoam
in boxes. Would you

throw me away? I am candid
in job interviews. You are a cannibal.
How else can you
sustain yourself? I want
to graduate but I don't want to leave, what's there for me?
Take a bite
of this heart-sized
thing we call life. There is no
alternative, open your eyes
to the oil clogging
the pores on your
face, to the words stopped in your throat.

Olivia Hom was born and raised in New York City. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from Mount Holyoke College in May 2024 with a degree in English. Olivia was selected to be on the committee for the Glascock Intercollegiate Poetry Contest, the longest running undergraduate poetry contest in the nation. She enjoys creative writing, especially poetry. Olivia also enjoys taking walks, photography, and watching plays, musicals, and films. She is currently an intern with W.W. Norton & Company.

My Grandfather Writes to my Grandmother from Vietnam By Lawson Lewis

Dear Susie,

Blue night creeps over me here, a closing door. Today, from the sky, I watched a hawk scrape gray dawn. Tried to imagine catching something so quick in my palm – in my dreams I pull it from the air and know what it feels like to change something with my hands. So far, all the damage I do is from the heavens. I've nothing to haunt me but imagined faces. I didn't want to be a cruel God.

Your pale hands lie gentle, two white birds on the table in the church in my mind.
Memory crumbles quietly into Newburgh rain and the tobacco blossom fog of your
mother's house.

Strange honeymoon. I've stolen your face cast in moonlight away with me, carry you
every night long as this war. Close my eyes and I'm just blinking under the officer's club
awning and if I opened them, I'd find you beaming a pearl-glow halo into the dusk. I'm
always wandering around that night in West Point, where the streetlamp ponds of warm
light are always kissing and I'm never in the dark.

Susie, the sky sprawls a thin purple line above me, I am just twenty-one – it hits me, a
quick white sound.

Home, I could have touched the brick just to feel grit real as anything beneath my
fingertips. I didn't. Here is nothing but the shrill cries of birds and the sob of the
atmosphere parting around the plane which devours me, a cold steel death.

Susie, everyone here calls me *boy*. I forget my own name, become nothing but boy,
nothing but body. Get lost in all this blue. We're supposed to be men and women by now
but my body lives around me – I walk around inside it. I didn't think it would be like this.
Always I commit the crime of living inside the shudder of the engine, the cold silence of
the lonely night.

Send me another letter along the wire we climb towards each other – In my dreams, you
fall away into bitter violet ocean, your voice fades into a distant hum I can only hear over
the radio.

Speak to me, Susie. Tell me this was not a mistake. Tell me when I return to you and the
New York snows, flying over vast blue night, we will still be young, and I will not have
killed that too.

All my love,

Richard

Lawson N. Lewis is a Florida poet and prosaist. She is an intern for the Jacksonville chapter of Women Writing For a Change, a former staff member of Élan International Student Literary Magazine, and a recipient of the Dr. James Robert Cobb Student Writing Award in first prize for page poetry. Her work revolves around themes of familial and personal relationships, shifting identity, and the dissection of ideals like freedom, inheritance, and femininity.

Abstraction of the Self By Jack He

and no bare face. it is unreal reality
in this room of mirrors, your ease is
magnified. look how you triple, quadruple,
how the light plays with your eyes.

it's four a.m. and you wonder where you
are—how long it will take for the sun
to rise, how long the sun has held
you in its grasp. it drips from the
ceiling, the smell of wet grass, everything

is chopped, diced, served to you.
where is your face if not in the mirror?
where are you if not in a room? the flowers
are dying—it is unreal reality.

Jack He is a high school writer residing in Miami, Florida. His work has been nationally recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards.

[My brother carries in raspberries from the garden] By Greer Engle-Roe

My brother carries in raspberries from the garden, his palms stained red. I do not think about mango, my mother slipping slivers into his mouth like a bird. A car engine is left running outside. The cycling group advocated for a stop sign, advocated for a one-way street on Fifth, advocated—the city didn't quite comply with all of their demands. A wandering cat used to play soccer with me in the driveway, he'd roll the ball under his paws, before jumping into an open car door. Herdless deer are more prone to accidents. There was no smoke. The driver didn't know, leaving the intersection, my brother's body was under hers. The pond at the end of the street is only a puddle on the outskirts of the park. With the weather turning, the mosquitoes blacked out the clearing and fireflies opened their abdomens. At dusk, the sun bled out, leaving the purple of my brother's sweater soft in my hands.

Greer Engle-Roe is a student attending Bennington College majoring in literature, with a focus on creative writing. Their work appears or is forthcoming in Palette Poetry, The Albion Review, and Neologism Poetry Journal. Along with poetry, they spend many hours watching soccer, building model planes, and painting miniatures.

The Blues By Crislyn Lance

The night rolls in like a slow, sad song,
A lonesome wind, where I belong.

The moon hangs heavy, just out of reach,
Casting shadows on an empty beach.

The guitar hums, a sorrowed tune,
A broken heart beneath the moon.
Every note a sigh, a quiet plea,
For the things that never came to be.

The streets are hollow, cold and bare,
Echoing dreams left in the air.
In the corner, a trumpet cries,
Telling stories of goodbyes.

But there's a beauty in this pain,
In the silver threads of rain,
That wash away the hurt, the loss,
Beneath the weight, we bear the cost.

So, sing the blues, deep and low,
Let the sorrow ebb and flow.
For in the heartache, there's a spark,
A light that flickers in the dark.

Crislyn Lance is a literary artist specializing in writing fiction and fantasy. She uses her imagination and love for any and all things magical, to create new worlds and characters to show off her creative skills. Crislyn has been creating works since she was eleven years old. She has been featured in the Mississippi School of the Arts literary Journal.

She has had an Honorable mention in the Eudora Welty Contest in 2023. She also has gotten a silver key in the Scholastic writing competition in 2023.

A Stormy High By Hans Zhu

The first drops hit
like pellets of sand.

The water creeps into my shoes;
socks dampen,
a slow dread,
each pedal a squelch of misery.

Friends laughing,
wheels spinning,
our legs pump faster, daring the rain
to chase us. And chase us it did.

The rain goes
from a drizzle
to a shower
to a flood.

There's no fighting it anymore.
Shoes heavy and socks sodden —
but it doesn't matter now.

The storm outside rages,
while the one within me clears. It's surreal how the world feels
when you stop caring.

Everything is drenched,
but for that moment nothing matters;
we're just kids in the rain,
not thinking of tonight
or tomorrow

or college.

Moments like this don't stay —
but for now, it's enough to be here.

Just riding on,
soaked to the bone in a downpour that feels endless
yet is anything but.

Maybe that's why I let go.

To just be happy
with everyone else —

happy to be here

In this storm.

Hans Zhu is currently a twelfth grade student at Singapore American School. He enjoys learning about economics in school, and often spends his free time playing badminton with friends. He was born into a Chinese family in America, and moved to Singapore shortly after to attend SAS. He's the youngest child with two older sisters, and lives with his mother in Singapore. Hans enjoys writing poems as a way to document memories he doesn't want to forget.

ad astra per aspera* By Gemma Hayes

solar and sweet,
our first summer tastes
of watermelon and simplicity
soft bellies sprawled on the grass
our fingers juice-sticky

let me linger, relish in the sun forever
but the leaves turn brown

quick as nightfall.
the chill in the air
scares me but not as much as

when the clock turns midnight;
you and i throw confetti
and bask in the newfound
freedom of eighth grade
and you like me,

because there is no threat
in my eyes, stardust daggers
but the morning star
would always bear lucifer
as it fell.

oh, sweet child of august figs
when was our collision—our death
when did i shine too brightly
and when did you start caring
about else than the sun?

*to the stars through hardships

Gemma Hayes loves all genres of writing and loves to read nonfiction novels. She is a teenager based in Manhattan, New York, inspired by her experience of relationships,

growing up, and womanhood. She manages the literary journal at her school and wishes to move and connect people through her writing.

Fiction

Stained Glass By Alina Sidorova

In our one-digit years, we'd gallop around the house. We'd fly down the stairs and swing around the end of the banister to hear it wheeze, and the mirrors would witness our pigtailed head cackling with joy. Occasionally, I would look at you and you'd look at me, eye to eye, and we'd beam at each other, crooked baby teeth and all. We knew and loved each other then, and we were only saddened by the sheet of glass separating your left hand from my right.

The dawn of two-digit years brought attentiveness. Suddenly, frog-hopping and sock-sliding weren't our preferred methods of transportation. We noticed other people, first how not everyone was an easy friend, then their distinctivenesses, their features. High contrast mode highlighted our pores, grandma pointed out our tummy, hormones made it all worse. It was exposure, visibility, a sudden nakedness.

The years ticked upwards. You became a tool for popping pimples and a shadow to hide from. I would bow my head over the sink to cry, and you would cry with me, but when we looked up, we'd both be met with disgust. Some nights, we'd curl up in our bed, and feverishly beg the universe for an answer; why was *that* in the mirror every time we walked into the bathroom? No amount of concealer and sexy pouting made you better.

But life sped past, and eventually the grooves of our face were familiar. There came days where we couldn't tear our eyes off ourselves and days where we wallowed in the muck of self-pity. I'm not sure if we ever fell back into not knowing and not caring. But there is a net positivity now, resignation coupled with respect.

Alina Sidorova is a student by day and a writer by night. She likes to hang up fairy lights and squish her fat cat.

Haircuts and Hyssop By Ren Johnsue

Mama hasn't cut my hair since my turtleneck days, yet here we are in the kitchen, scissors in her hands, and a bowl of orange slices in my lap. The juice is bitter and I like it that way. I eat as Mama says something that sounds like rubber and Dad is nowhere to be found.

"The strawberry bush is large today," she says, and I agree.

The bush has encased the backyard in shade and gnats. I see Brother climbing up the side of it. He crawls in and disappears, just like he did when he was little. Mama rants about the seeds he'll track in, gesturing to little white blossoms stretching through the floorboards. I try my best not to sneeze as split ends tickle my nose.

Hours later, when my hair is shorter and choppier than before, Brother walks through the back door dripping red pulp.

"I saw the cat again today, the big calico," he says as Dad grabs a towel and wipes him down. "I think she's still looking for her daughter."

Dad wrings out the towel into little jam jars. "Aren't we all?"

We sit around the urn and eat yarrow stalk soup from porcelain I've never seen before. It tastes like sandalwood and Pacific. We eat in silence until Dad asks Brother if he's ever been in love. Brother says it's not polite to ask that, and Dad nods in understanding. The soup has gone cold by the time he speaks again, this time to compliment my haircut. I look at Mama, who's smiling.

“I did what I could with the garden shears, his hair is just so thick.” She scratches the nape of my neck with affection, but I don’t feel it. I haven’t felt it since December.

Mama and Brother go outside to watch the North Dipper play chess. Dad and I are still around the urn, which is now a vase with four bluebells. He picks up the porcelain and turns it over in his hands. I see a small eye carved in the bottom. It blinks at me and I blink back, Dad shakes his head and puts it down. He’s gentle about it, though.

“You know how this conversation ends.”

I nod. He repeats himself until the breeze becomes too humid. I get up, kiss him on the forehead, and walk out the front door.

“I wish you were kinder,” is the last thing I hear before the click.

Mama is smoking cherry bark on the porch, which seems to wrap around the house for miles. I know she’s not really smoking cherry bark, but I don’t have the heart to change it.

“You’re more alike than you think,” she says.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

She laughs, and against my better judgment, I laugh too. She offers me the stick, and I take it to cleanse my aura. We watch the sheep in the front yard chase the fawns. One of them, the fawns, gets caught in tangled magnolia roots. The sheep running after it lets out a cry like a human child, and a buck with horns adorned with bone and jade comes to the rescue.

“Nothing like a mother’s love,” Mama says as her eyelashes fall out. She doesn’t flinch at the sound of them hitting the deck, but I can’t stand it. I run for the field as the sheep

continue to bleat with desperation.

I run until my lungs burn and my eyes sting and I'm in the middle of an orchard. I don't notice I'm crying until a tear falls into the corner of my mouth. Blackberry floods my tongue and when I wipe my eyes, my fingers are pruned and stained. I hear shuffling and when I turn, there's a man holding out a handkerchief. I trust him because he looks like someone I passed in a grocery store once. I take the cloth and thank him. He holds both my hands, looking for something in my palms.

"That's the problem," he says, tracing my knuckles. "You think marigolds and lavender mean something."

I lean into the warmth, and the more I relax the more it stings. He runs his fingers through my hair, and every strand he touches grows down to my ribs. My shoulders bear the weight. He twirls the darkness between his fingers and looks at me with something close enough to love. I swallow and smile without teeth like Mama taught me.

"When the sun comes up, I'll be gone."

I cry again because I am in love with him. I feel my knees shake and he helps me to the ground. I curl into the Earth and cry as dawn melts the stars. The ground, in response, provides a pair of old sewing scissors at my feet. I take them and cut my hair even choppier than Mama did, watching the clumps turn to hyssops where they fall.

When I enter through the backdoor, Mama and Brother are in the kitchen catching dragonflies. One of them hovers between my eyes. He's red and lucky and I want to crush him between my fingers. Something tells me this is Dad now, so I sigh and step aside. Dad the Dragonfly kisses my nose before flying up and out to the ravens waiting for him. They'll bring him back as a man, but only if they get something out of it.

As I look out to the strawberry bush, I see a speckled cat emerge with a stained mouth. Its whiskers twitch as it sees me. It starts to convulse. The door won't open and it doesn't matter, the cat stares as it coughs up clumps of brown and orange. It turns to glass as it hits the ground, sending fractals all over the yard.

Ren Johnsue is a Queer writer who believes in storytelling as a form of love and poetry as devotion. His work can be found in *TRANSliterate* and is forthcoming in *Breakbread Magazine*.

Firebug By Silvana Cantelmi

The smoke stuck to the humidity in the air as it trailed up toward the night sky. The clouds obscured the moon, but they slowly divorced each other, forced apart by the whims of the wind. The flames engulfing the dilapidated barn cut through the blue hue of the sun's counterpart. The wood crackled and popped as the fire gnawed at the rafters, and the hollows of the building creaked as the wind blew, shaking the burning panels. Despite the humidity, the flames only grew, nourished by old wood and fresh air.

As the flames flourished, their light overpowered that of the moon and created shadows of the tall grass. The trees. A man.

Elijah stood in front of the barn, the fire reflected in his blue eyes. Blue like the moon. A weariness weighed down his bones, but still, something buzzed in his gut. The taste of stale cigarette smoke stuck to his tongue, but it was made fresh by the new smoke he had created. Burning wood tasted different from tobacco. Cigarettes were just a lousy imitation of the real thing.

Cigarette smoke or not, the smell of ash made him want a drink.

He reached into his pocket and procured a flask. Metal covered in hide. It had been his mother's.

Bringing the drink to his lips with a trembling hand, he took a healthy sip. The burn reminded him of childhood. His mama had given him a sip of Bourbon on his tenth birthday. Double digits, she had said, were something worth celebrating. He sipped it until it was empty, thinking about what else the burn felt like. His mama's backhand. Cigarette butt kisses. Matches burning down to his fingertips.

As he downed the liquor and watched the barn burn, he didn't notice the second shadow of a man emerging from the forest.

"Firebug, huh?" A voice interjected, smooth like a fine wine. Elijah didn't like wine. With the speed of quicksilver, Elijah pulled his revolver from the holster on his hip, the mouth of the flask still flush against his lips.

"Mind if I throw this in there?" The man, seemingly unbothered with a gun in his face, gestured to the bag slung over his shoulder. It was black, lumpy, and quite large. "I need to get rid of some old things."

"You need to leave." Elijah's eyes flickered from the bag on the man's shoulder to his eyes. He found two dark voids smiling back at him.

"I think we both need to leave before someone shows up for this fire you set," the man reasoned. He shifted the bag from one shoulder to the other with a grunt. Elijah was surprised that his willowy frame could support something that massive. "Mind if I set this down? Preferably, in the fire?"

"Why d'you gotta ask me? I'm not your keeper," Elijah grunted.

“It’s nice to ask before framing someone for a crime they didn’t commit.”

“But I set the fire. You saw me,” Elijah said as he promptly cocked the revolver.

“Right, but what they’ll find in the bag will frame you for something you didn’t do.” The man smiled coyly. “So I’d put that gun away. Unless you want two dead bodies on your hands.”

Elijah did not lower the revolver. The moon illuminated the man’s too-white smile and corn silk hair. Elijah watched as those grinning lips parted, somehow maintaining his smug look.

“You can’t afford to trust a single thing I say, can you?”

“I’m not afraid of a little debt,” Elijah chuffed.

“Here’s some insurance. Name’s Silas,” he revealed, “Not a common name around here, is it?”

“I don’t know no Silas, and I know everyone ’round these parts. Insurance is invalid.”

Silas’ smile didn’t waver. Elijah wondered if his cheeks hurt.

“Dr. Silas Young,” the man in question bit out through gritted teeth. It made Elijah laugh, the sound punctuated by the popping of burning wood.

“A doctor, huh? Medical malpractice?” He gestured with the barrel of the gun. The metal glinted in the firelight.

“Nobody’s died as a result of my therapy,” the doctor assured. “This was plain old homicide,” Silas tilted his head, and Elijah watched as his eyes flitted to the flames. The

heat had only intensified while they spoke.

Elijah followed Silas' line of sight, finding the barn engulfed in flame. Breathing through his mouth, Elijah shivered as gritty ash laced his tongue, gooseflesh rising on his arms despite his covered skin and the heat of the raging flame.

"Always been fascinated by fire, have you? Did you often set them when you were a kid?"

"Don't psychoanalyze me," Elijah snapped, yet he didn't look away from the burning barn. His elbow of the arm that was holding the gun had buckled. His wrist, now relaxed, caused the gun to point towards the ground. Elijah watched in his peripheral as Silas stepped closer with a raised hand, the other supporting the body bag over his shoulder.

Elijah's gaze returned, and his arm straightened out, which included his aim.

"Do you smoke?"

"I must admit, cigarettes aren't my preferred poison."

"But have you smoked one?"

Silas nodded so minutely that Elijah almost didn't catch it.

"Remember what the taste is like? They have a particular tang to them, something you can't describe. So you take another drag to figure it out. Then another. And another until you've smoked the whole pack, and you're hackin' up your lungs, and you think, 'Hmm, maybe it's tar?'" Elijah paused, then let his arm drop to his side. "Remember that, now breathe in. Deep," he ordered. Silas complied, his nostrils flaring and his chest rising.

"Can you smell it?"

“It’s different. Natural,” Silas noted. The corner of Elijah’s lips curled up.

Silas opened his mouth, only to be interrupted by sirens echoing in the distance.

“Go on,” Elijah gestured with his gun. “Throw that in the fire.”

“They’ll think you’ve escalated and only search harder.”

Elijah shook his head.

“Don’t worry about me. If you need to know anything about me, it’s that I can handle myself.”

Silas nodded hesitantly but carried the bag over to the fire. Elijah watched as his slender figure approached the burning barn, getting as close as he could without giving the chance to lick him to the flames. Elijah tilted his head as Silas maneuvered the bag and threw it through the barn doors and onto the scorched floor. The barn would collapse, and the rubble would bury Silas’ victim in a heap of burning wood.

Elijah’s stomach flipped at the thought.

A New Jersey native, Silvana Corrales Cantelmi currently attends Case Western Reserve University and is a candidate for a B.A in Classics, World Literature, and the French language. Their hobbies include learning languages, reading, and of course, creative writing.

Nonfiction

What I’ve Lost, What I’ve Gained By Nathan Sorrentino

I count all else as loss- Philippians 3:8

Lost: A Lego ARC Trooper, 3rd grade, to a friend who knew how rare Legos could get.

Lost: A Lego Ewok Tree Fort, 4th grade, because I moved a lot, and the Legos didn't survive.

Lost: My dumb chihuahua, Chewbacca, 4th grade, because she didn't trust my uncle.

Gained: A Lego *Slave One*; the guy with the ARC trooper wishes he had Boba's ship.

Gained: A Lego *Millenium Falcon*, 12th grade, let's see how rare that one gets.

Gained: An old dog named Penny, 5th grade, who was way better than Chewbacca

Lost: My saved data on my Wii, 3rd or 4th grade. I say it got a virus.

Lost: My Wii for good, 6th grade; it just went right into the trash. Nothing else to be done with it.

Gained: A WiiU, the super-charged version of the Wii, regardless of what Nolan Bushnell says.

Gained: A love of video games, books, and movies, i.e. storytelling regardless of its medium.

Lost: My grandpa, 5th grade. Sudden lack of blood sugar, though maybe a stroke.

Lost: My other grandpa, 9th grade, kidney failure and sepsis.

Gained: My Dad, 5th grade, in the break room of a school, then on three separate Christmases.

Gained: An assortment of Boomer friends that would have gotten along with my grandpas.

Lost: Time: a lot of time of my life wasted without realizing it because I didn't like to read.

Gained: A desire to write for the glory of God, 19 or 20, realizing my life *is* writing.

Lost: My pride (that's a good thing), through love and discipline of my mind.

Gained: Jesus, around 12, though I've known Him my whole life.

Lost: A chance of working my way to Heaven, the moment I was born.

Gained: Forgiveness, undeserved, gained continually, always and forever.

Nathan Sorrentino is an undergraduate at the University of Central Florida where he is working towards a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing. He has been writing since high school and, like cheese, has gotten better with time. He lives in the Armpit of America locally known as Central Florida.

An Afghan's Journey to a New Life in the U.S. By Rishab Subramanya

After leaving the country and everything he knew behind, one Afghan undergoes a perilous journey before finding a new home.

Student Journalist (The School of the New York Times)

—Reporting from New York City—

What Yahya Qanie remembers about August 15th, 2021, the day that the Taliban retook control of Kabul after twenty years of American occupation was the eerie silence. The entire city of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, had halted: no motorcycles, no cars, just silence. The previous day, Qanie, a 27-year-old nonprofit youth leader who represented the future of a democratic Afghanistan, told his colleagues: “We need to stay in this country, and we need to think about the future of this country.” Yet, the sight of American C-17 planes flying overhead, taking the last semblances of freedom with them, represented the total loss of hope.

Qanie was one of 124,000 Afghans who were airlifted out of the country via military aircraft in the aftermath of American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent takeover of the country by the authoritarian Taliban. This marked the end of 20 years of American occupation, fighting the war in Afghanistan against the Taliban, and other terrorist groups. Many of them, like Qanie, left behind high-status jobs and prestigious diplomas, to start new lives.

Many, like Qanie, grew up during those 20 years, immersed in American culture and values, in an increasingly progressive nation. Watching Hollywood blockbusters such as *Prison Break* or the *Life of Pi*, he developed a distinct association with America. Indeed, in university, Qanie founded his own organizations, including Kabul Model United Nations, focusing on the empowerment of youth and women, democratic goals and human rights. “I wanted to make Afghanistan like the United States,” he says. Thus, the Taliban takeover was particularly horrifying. “It was emotionally and physically very hard to accept.”

Afterwards, due to his activism and the Taliban's crackdown on social freedoms, Qanie was a prime target for persecution. "I was just a Google search away from the Taliban," he says. Aware that his continued presence in Afghanistan would put him and his family in danger, Qanie frantically searched for a way out, calling his contacts in the international community, including the US Embassy and the United Nations. Eventually, on the last day of the US departure, he received a call stating that one seat was available on the last evacuation from Afghanistan. Qanie, distraught about leaving his family behind, was encouraged nonetheless to leave.

Equipped with a laptop containing his life's work, documentation, his university certifications, a pair of clothes, the *48 Laws of Power* and \$2000 in cash, Qanie set on a months-long journey to seek a new home, traveling through Qatar and Ramstein Air Base in Germany until he reached Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Throughout the strenuous journey, Qanie relied on his ambition to provide him solace. "I live in my dreams, in the future." Indeed, his dream never wavered. Advised by a few friends that being a student was a good way to start a life in the US, Qanie applied to several US universities and was accepted on a full-tuition scholarship to New York University in New York City.

Qanie has found a community in the United States, receiving attention, love and care from those who understand the plight of Afghans, He is a part of International House (I-House), a program for graduate students across the world designed to promote cross-cultural understanding. "They are my family here," he says. He is currently an advocacy fellow at Search For Common Ground, an organization advocating for peace as a means to addressing global issues, and is applying for full-time jobs.

Yet, while he has come a long way, he says that Afghans have a long way to go. "I would say my whole generation went back in time." Some friends, he says, that were working in the presidential palace in Kabul are now starting from scratch. As such, he feels as if it is a personal duty to share his experience and advise others in similar situations. He regularly speaks to his family (who were able to leave Kabul and relocate to Belgium

four months after his departure), particularly his younger brothers who are interested in attending university in the United States. “It’s up to us to identify and contribute to make the lives of people better.”

Rishab is a senior at the Energy Institute High School, Houston, TX. He trained at the School of The New York Times during summer 2024, during which he worked with two renowned journalists: New York Times foreign correspondent and photojournalist Andy Isaacson and investigative journalist Georgia Gee.

Musings, while the blender whirs nearby By Kinjal Johri

When I think of my mother — and I hate to admit this, bear with me — I think of her in the kitchen. It’s through the dishes she makes that she expresses herself most clearly, and it is what she’s dedicated her life to doing. When she went to university and earned a postgraduate degree in dietary science, when she worked as a nutritionist, and when she subsequently quit her job upon her pregnancy to dedicate her life to raising me — and later my brother — it was through cooking that she crafted her legacy, every recipe a glimpse into who she was before I knew her.

And who she was, I’ve learnt, is an incredibly interesting person. From competing in state-level badminton, to performing in every school play, each meal she prepares is a reminder of that vivacious past. I wonder sometimes, when I see her working so effortlessly, kneading dough or spicing the food, whether it was so easy for her to resort to a life of domesticity upon her marriage, and if she struggled with getting accustomed to her duties despite always knowing they were inevitable due to her position as a woman. I don’t ask — the personal nature of the conversation is something that makes us both uncomfortable — though I can tell what the answer is through the way she so vehemently advocates, in front of my father and her more traditional relatives, my right to pursue whatever path I wish to, and the way in which she shows her encouragement

and support towards my academic endeavours through packed lunches, hot breakfasts, and affirmations over home cooked dinners.

When I think of my mother — more specifically of the entrapment I'm almost certain she experiences in the domestic nature of her life — I think of her in the kitchen, and the room, with all of its cabinets and cutlery comes to represent her oppression, and the limitations faced by the women in the generations before me. It is why, I think, I so vehemently shunned the idea of sharing my mother's interests in the past — sewing, knitting, dancing. I suppose it was an attempt at running away from the oppression I deemed so intrinsic to being a woman like I knew she was; I suppose I thought that in my rejection of these activities I was able to become less a victim, more the person I wanted to be. Independent, powerful, *happy*.

Despite my best attempts, I was reminded on numerous occasions just how much I was like her, just how much it was inevitable. The way we smile with our teeth bared, the pattern of our curls, the manner with which the lines on our palms twist and contort — I found after a while that I could try my very hardest to be less like her, to be less like who I inherently am down to my very bones, but that no such course of action would be successful. I recall having regarded this with cynicism in the past; what was the point of my education and attempts at academic and professional success when, just like my mother and the women before her, it would serve only — if at all — to confine me to a bigger house, to a wealthier man, to a more fiscally sound, and equally restrictive marriage? And I would watch my mother work when I came home from school. And in spite of all my affection and respect for her I would pray and wish for something different.

I would notice, though, in quieter moments, how straight she stood over the countertop, the poise with which she worked, the hint of a smile on her face when the dishes she made gained praise. How she flourished in spite of her circumstances. It is in these

moments of realisation I feel most like her, and she seems most like the woman I want to be; optimistic, compassionate, ridiculously talented.

I've been trying my hand at it lately, cooking. I'm no good, I'll admit — I burn my eggs, undercook my potatoes. My mother teaches me with a patience I know she's gained from the submission ingrained in her. When I think of her I think of the skill and grace with which she works in the kitchen, I think of the passion with which she fights for my freedom to go beyond the boundaries of that room. She, and the women before her, have given so much up in an attempt for equality, have only dreamt of it, quietly, boldly, like a wondrous hypothetical, in the middle of the night. Despite their domestic confinement they carved out spaces for themselves in a world that left them little room to grow, and in doing so, they paved the way for me to live the life they only dared to imagine.

My mother's hands move with a grace that seems effortless, and for a moment, I imagine mine will too. *Show me again*, I ask her, *how you crush the cardamom husk*. How your fingers dance around the seed with nimble familiarity. When I think of her I think of my shame. My stupidity. In the things she makes, and the dishes I attempt, I see the sliver of hope she kept safe from her own life to impart onto me, the blades that lie sharp, hidden, within the crevices of her cutlery. The weight of her legacy no longer feels like something I need to run from. I can see now that taking parts of her life into my own isn't a sign of defeat. It's a choice. To carry what strengthens me, to leave behind what doesn't. I used to think freedom meant breaking away entirely, but now I know—it's in what we choose to keep, in the stories we shape for ourselves. And in that, I find my peace.

Kinjal Johri lives in Singapore, and spends her days crunched over her laptop, trying to churn out words.

Beyond the Brink: The Enigmatic World of Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences

By Kevin Hong

Defibrillation emerges as one of the most profound medical triumphs of the twentieth century. In the United States alone, the intervention of bystanders using defibrillators saves approximately 1,700 lives annually (Piazza). This leap in technology has not only increased survival rates but has also ushered in a fascinating phenomenon: near-death experiences (NDEs) and out-of-body experiences (OBEs). These extraordinary encounters, reported by those teetering on the edge of life and death, beckon us to explore their deeper significance and ponder whether they offer a glimpse into an afterlife.

To unravel these mysteries—what do people experience as they hover near death, and could these experiences hint at an existence beyond our mortal coil?—we must first grapple with the concept of the afterlife. Across diverse cultures and faiths, the afterlife represents some form of continued existence beyond physical death. Whether imagined as heaven and hell in Christianity, reincarnation in Hinduism and Buddhism, or other spiritual realms, the afterlife presumes the existence of a soul that transcends our physical form. Thus, any experience that appears to be linked to this metaphysical soul might be construed as evidence of an afterlife.

Near-death experiences could hold the key to validating these claims. An NDE typically occurs when a person is on the cusp of death and experiences a vivid, almost lucid journey. Dr. Jeffrey Long, a leading figure in the study of NDEs, defines “near-death” as a state so perilously compromised that without intervention, irreversible death is imminent (Long). These experiences often unfold in the fragile space between life and death, and are recalled with startling clarity. Long observes that while NDEs can differ, they often feature common elements such as floating above one’s body, overwhelming positive emotions, traversing a tunnel, meeting deceased loved ones, or encountering a radiant, transcendent light (Long).

Among these, the perception of an otherworldly light stands out. Those who have experienced NDEs frequently describe this light as an encounter with a divine presence. This perception might be influenced by religious traditions that portray deities as forms of light. In Christianity, for instance, God is depicted as “light” (John 1:5), and the Quran describes Allah as the “Light of the heavens and the earth” (An-Nur 24:35). Similarly, Buddhism uses light as a symbol of enlightenment and spiritual wisdom. This widespread association of divinity with light might explain why individuals who experience NDEs often interpret their encounters with light as evidence of a divine realm (Ring).

Out-of-body experiences provide further support for the notion of a soul. OBEs, as described by psychotherapist Silvia Bünning and neurologist Olaf Blanke, involve a person observing their own body and surroundings from an external perspective (Bünning and Blanke). During OBEs, individuals often report observing their resuscitation process from above (Fenwick). Dr. Sabom’s research supports the credibility of these experiences, showing that patients who have had OBEs frequently recall accurate details about their resuscitation, thus reinforcing the reality of these phenomena.

Nevertheless, some scientists propose alternative explanations for NDEs and OBEs. Neuroscientist Olaf Blanke has recreated experiences resembling NDEs through brain stimulation, suggesting that such phenomena might result from neurochemical processes rather than supernatural sources (Blanke). However, these experiments have yet to fully capture the vividness and transformative quality of genuine NDEs.

Unexplained phenomena still persist. For example, an experiment conducted by nurse Penny Satori, in which symbols were placed beside a patient’s bed, revealed that the patient accurately identified these symbols upon waking—a finding that challenges scientific explanation (Fenwick).

The profound impact of NDEs should not be underestimated. While Blanke's experiments can simulate aspects of NDEs, they fail to replicate the depth and intensity of authentic experiences. A survey of 1,122 individuals who have had NDEs revealed that 74.4% felt more conscious and alert during their experiences than in their everyday lives (Long). This suggests that NDEs possess a depth and authenticity beyond what can be simulated in a laboratory setting.

While the existence of an afterlife remains a topic of debate, the evidence from NDEs and OBEs leans towards the possibility of its existence. These experiences underscore a profound human yearning for continuity beyond physical death and highlight a deep-seated hope that life extends beyond the confines of our mortal existence. The continued occurrence of NDEs and OBEs, coupled with widespread belief in such phenomena, reveals our universal quest to understand what lies beyond death. In exploring these extraordinary experiences, we may be glimpsing a deeper truth—a testament to our enduring hope that life transcends the physical realm.

Kevin, a passionate writer and artist based in both Seoul and Massachusetts, explores the profound intersections of art and human experience. His love for art fuels his creativity, allowing him to share his thoughts and reflections through diverse mediums. His fascination with the metaphysical and the mysteries of human consciousness drives him to unravel the enigmatic nature of these phenomena and their implications for understanding life beyond physical existence.

Magical Milan By Kate Wolfson

The breeze was chilling, the language unfamiliar. Illuminated signs lined the cobblestoned streets, pointing haphazardly towards a restaurant, a drugstore, a theater, a church, a home- or at least we assumed that was where they were pointing, given our inability to decipher the words. Our twelve-person group huddled together, clad in

flowing black attire, clutching our instruments like they were the only things we could recognize (they were). Even the moon, albeit the same moon visible from every corner of the world, seemed altered, tinted with the hues of distance. 3,824 miles away lay our pillows, our families, our comforting front doors, our schools, and the cadence of conversations in English. Shivering, we stood in a parking lot outside of a church, staring, waiting, expecting the unexpected.

Minutes passed, or maybe hours, or perhaps seconds. As the chilled air enveloped us, it became increasingly clear that we were alone in the streets of Milan. The city, rich with the beauty of history and fashion and fame, ignored our search for family or familiarity. Of course, we weren't truly alone; the beeping of car doors and everyday cacophonies of a city reminded us of life, of people with families and friends and stories. Yet even while surrounded by apartments and the hums of vivacity, even while gently reminded of the hundreds of thousands of city inhabitants, we remained encased by the loneliness of our language. Our attempts to communicate in broken, clumsy Italian were met with confusion, and often pity. Geometrically, plainly, we couldn't connect.

Cold, frustrated, and unequivocally bored, we decided to open our instruments and begin an impromptu rehearsal. Disregarding our lack of sheet music, light, or instruction, we tuned our instruments and formed our crescent, orchestral formation- cellos by the street, violins by the apartment building, violas facing the church, string basses by the curb. We exchanged glances, our faces dimmed yet determined, and in unison began to play.

Initially discombobulated, the cold air and solitary streetlight were inadequate for immediate coordination. Yet as our fingers warmed and our hearts opened, the music began to blend in a way like never before. With our sight limited, our ears had no choice but to bloom, and we had no choice but to trust our instincts. Within minutes- or perhaps even seconds- the music flourished, and even with slight memorization mistakes, the sound was undeniably sparkling, alive with the sound of passion and love

and excitement. The moon, once daunting, smiled down, shedding light on our collective achievement and our ability to unite in what seemed like the darkest of times.

Soon, we began to hear city cacophonies descending upon us- dwellers from the apartment, churchgoers, even the innocent drivers all paused, opening their windows to let our sound wash over them. The street glimmered, the wind encouraged us, and when we looked up, the smiles of the people emanated hope and longing and everything in between. Our music swirled upwards and outwards, cascading and blending effervescently among our crescent formation.

While we couldn't converse with the dwellers of Milan through our mouths or our minds, we spoke to them through our instruments and our passion. We transcended the barrier of language with music, allowing our souls to connect and reach out to others. To an outsider, it may have simply seemed like a group of American teenagers rehearsing for an orchestra concert in a Milan parking lot, but to us and those around us, it was pure magic. We conversed on both intellectual and subconscious levels, bridging the fears, frustration, and confusion that so often block true connection between cultures.

When the piece was over, we set down our instruments, bracing for the unexpected. Was any of it real? The answer, arriving in the form of cheering and applause and appreciation, validated what we had known the moment we started playing: music truly brings people together. Though we couldn't fully understand the cheers, the connection eased and blurred the differences between our group and the people of Milan.

Though fleeting, the magic of the moment was palpable. We were floating, touching hands with every listener from the apartments, every person on the stairs of church, and every driver in their car. We understood simply, truthfully, allowing connections to roll over us like a wave of comfort. The breeze was chilling and the language unfamiliar and our homes were 3,824 miles away, but our music welcomed us into the lives of those

beside us, of those above us, of those who couldn't understand our language but could resonate with our sound.

Kate Wolfson is a senior at Arlington High school with a passion for writing and conveying emotions through words. When she is not writing, Kate can be found playing tennis, running, and

East of Jeju By Yumin Kim

Crystal blue waters, white sand beaches, and a wide, wide sky over the rolling green South Korean countryside...when most people talk about Jeju Island, they conjure up an idyllic, peaceful scene like this, the kind that only exists in vacation pamphlets and stock images. I lived surrounded by these sights on Jeju for two years, but it took a long time for me to think of the island as a place of rest.

My experience attending boarding school on Jeju Island was the first time I had ever been away from my parents and my hometown, and I remember walking out onto the campus field for the first time, dressed in my 7th grade finest for the admissions interview, and looking up at a cloudless twilight sky so wide it filled up my whole vision. Without any trees or buildings tall enough to imply depth, it was like a solid wall of pink – close enough to crush me. I suppose I should have felt freer with all the open air, but I didn't.

Years later, I find myself looking down at that same sky from the window of a plane and wondering when it started to become beautiful.

I focused hard on academics while I was in school, adhering to the stringent rules of the dorms and never letting my eyes stray further up than the one-inch margins of my schoolwork. Even though Jeju Island is only an hour's plane ride away from the

thrumming heart of Seoul, going there feels like traveling. It should be strange that I am so relaxed coming back to a place where I spent so much time stressed, but for some reason it enhances the experience like a spice. I'm a champion resting on my laurels, seeing my old friends, clearing my mind of everyday pressures by looking at familiar island scenery and reminiscing about the battles I fought there with an emptied heart. Maybe this sky was always beautiful.

Today I have returned to Jeju for a school friend's birthday. I leave the city and fall back into my old rhythms. Back home in Seoul, I would be free to wander through endless blocks of restaurants and stores, but there is a different kind of freedom here. I am greeted by a blast of humid summer heat and my friends as I leave the airport, and we walk through familiar footpaths of vibrant scenery, pointing out small changes since I last visited and talking about inconsequential things.

Jeju is littered with many beautiful restaurants and cafes, not dissimilar to the cafe I frequented in the boarding school's dorm town (a two-story shack made of blanched wood, right on the beach with open floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the transparent water below. It's a nostalgic gathering place for us, and because it is the only one, there is a steady stream of old friends and acquaintances stopping by to say hello.) Today we mix ourselves in with the river of tourists and pick a lovely streetside spot. We sit outside under a parasol, lounging in the salty breeze and waiting for our shaved ice and chilled drinks. Street cats pass under our table, and I surreptitiously feed them parts of my entrée.

How's the new school, my friends ask, and I tell them the truth. Seoul is great and it's good to be living with my family again. My new school is smaller than the one on Jeju, so it's much easier to get a hold of my teachers than before. We all laugh at that. I miss them even as we sit across the table from each other, and I remember how easy it used to be to hear that sound, to call them out from their dorms in the middle of the night to go walk around on the beach in the dark.

Together we take a picture with the sea in the background. We light the birthday cake, sing Happy Birthday, and then the party is over.

My friends walk me back to my hotel, chatting amongst themselves. When I look up, the sunset sky is the color of Jeju *hallabong* tangerines, rougher and sweeter than any other. To my left, groups of students are rolling out a net to play volleyball in the campus field.

The Jeju Island that I am nostalgic for, that was witness to my effort and tears in the turning point of my life, only exists in a time that is quickly passing by. However I am finding now that I don't dislike the Jeju I am coming to know. It is a mix of new appreciation and of reminiscence, like slipping into an old favorite novel made new by more experienced eyes.

The feeling of reflectiveness remains and settles in me as I board my flight back. I can't stay here; I will soon return to my schoolwork, my house in the city, and the lively streets of Seoul, but it brings me peace to know that this place is only an hour away. An island that is proof of my ability to succeed, an idyllic vacation spot to all but me and my comrades who fought here, and maybe in the future, a place that will see my return as a more much older woman, and witness me settle into the quiet, languid life I've always dreamed of in a house by the sea.

Yumin is a high school junior in Seoul, South Korea, serving as the Editor-in-Chief of the Scholars Times newspaper. As a passionate writer, she contributes articles on school events, designs monthly layouts, and peer-edits other journalists' articles for publication on her school's website and social media platforms. Beyond this, she aims to write at least one writing piece whenever she travels, capturing new perspectives and experiences to share with readers. Her personal interests include environmental studies, family, and Greek cuisine.

My Monologue-The Rules of an Opinion By Naomi Beinart

What you wish you could tell the girl you are babysitting when she says her opinion doesn't matter: a monologue

You've bent my limbs and condensed my still growing body into the tight container of me when I was nine. It's not your fault, how could you have known? I sit parallel to your long division homework and you keep scribbling correct answers like the air in the room hasn't disappeared. If you looked up, you would see the bruise your words gave me. But you haven't disconnected from that sheet and I haven't yet grabbed your small hands and given you all that I have learned the hard way. I won't tell you, because there's math homework to be done and the cruelty of the world will flatten your hair and shrivel your kindness, but not really. You'll never not be kind. *But*, you're allowed to ration your empathy and use your best judgment. (You're allowed to use bad judgment sometimes.) If you looked up, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from extending your bedtime to the moment a man apologizes and means it. Your voice is a hand-me-down that grows every time you don't apologize for something you didn't do. You're allowed to say "excuse me" instead of sorry. You're allowed to stand in line and get to the front. You're allowed to not be chill. The rules of long division don't apply to the volume of your voice. You're allowed to use your outside voice in suffocating rooms. And while we're talking about it, wait as long as possible to get Instagram. Wait to post the first infographic you see when you do. I had to learn too that people die whether or not your favorite social justice account posts about it. Build core beliefs. Abandoned them. You're allowed to have a value change. Look at your screen and see burning buildings and cry during SAT tutoring. Dip your toe into politics, run for president and then get a little depressed and meet a boy at a party and forget about it all. You've got my vote already.

You're allowed! *Who* is going to stop you? The dickhead who's never left New Jersey? Yeah, and I'll tell you another thing: he's also allowed. He's allowed to shame every

person he thinks is below him, and when it's his turn to share pronouns, he's allowed to say, "Ummm, I'm a guy?"

You're allowed to get on CNN and villainize. You're allowed to get on Fox News and lie! You're allowed to eat a soft pretzel and two cigarettes for breakfast. You're allowed to break up with your partner for no good reason, and when you get sad and scared under your covers, you're allowed to go back! I'm telling you, the best opinion is the one you believe in wholeheartedly. I am not as lucky, but that's another story. No, please. Don't ask.

Your opinion is already better than mine. I've read every book about the Ottomans and sat down with those who have survived and those who haven't. Put yourself in a dangerous situation and tell yourself you can't do it, and then leave yourself no choice but to do it well. You're allowed to cancel a coffee date because your stomach hurts and the New York Times op ed section has selected a date for Doomsday and it's when the reboot of "And Just Like That" season four comes out.

The opinion you have about doomsday matters, even if you don't believe in it. Especially if you don't believe. I'll educate you. The history, the personal stakes. I know a soldier and a baby. I know the recoil and the sprint. But you, you, you you you don't need permission. Not like me.

Run into the streets and stick stickers of the face of the service worker who took too long making your order. Drive a truck around with her home address on it. Tell your grandma she's beautiful. You're allowed to love the lines that dance on her face, and you're allowed to love your own dancing. Steal a diary and cry like you lived through all their hardships. You're allowed to steal, if it means empathy blooms in the corners of steel. And, I know you've been advised against this, but you're allowed to pray, and actually believe. Trust wasn't born a weapon, you've just been taught how to wield it.

Your opinion is so important, and I am never going to ask you back it up with footnotes. I know what it feels like to lose a best friend because my dad's opinion on a war was so offensive to her parents' that there was no other option than to stop all communication. I'm cleaning up the rubble from the havoc that opinions have wreaked. The rubble came from the Gaza Strip.

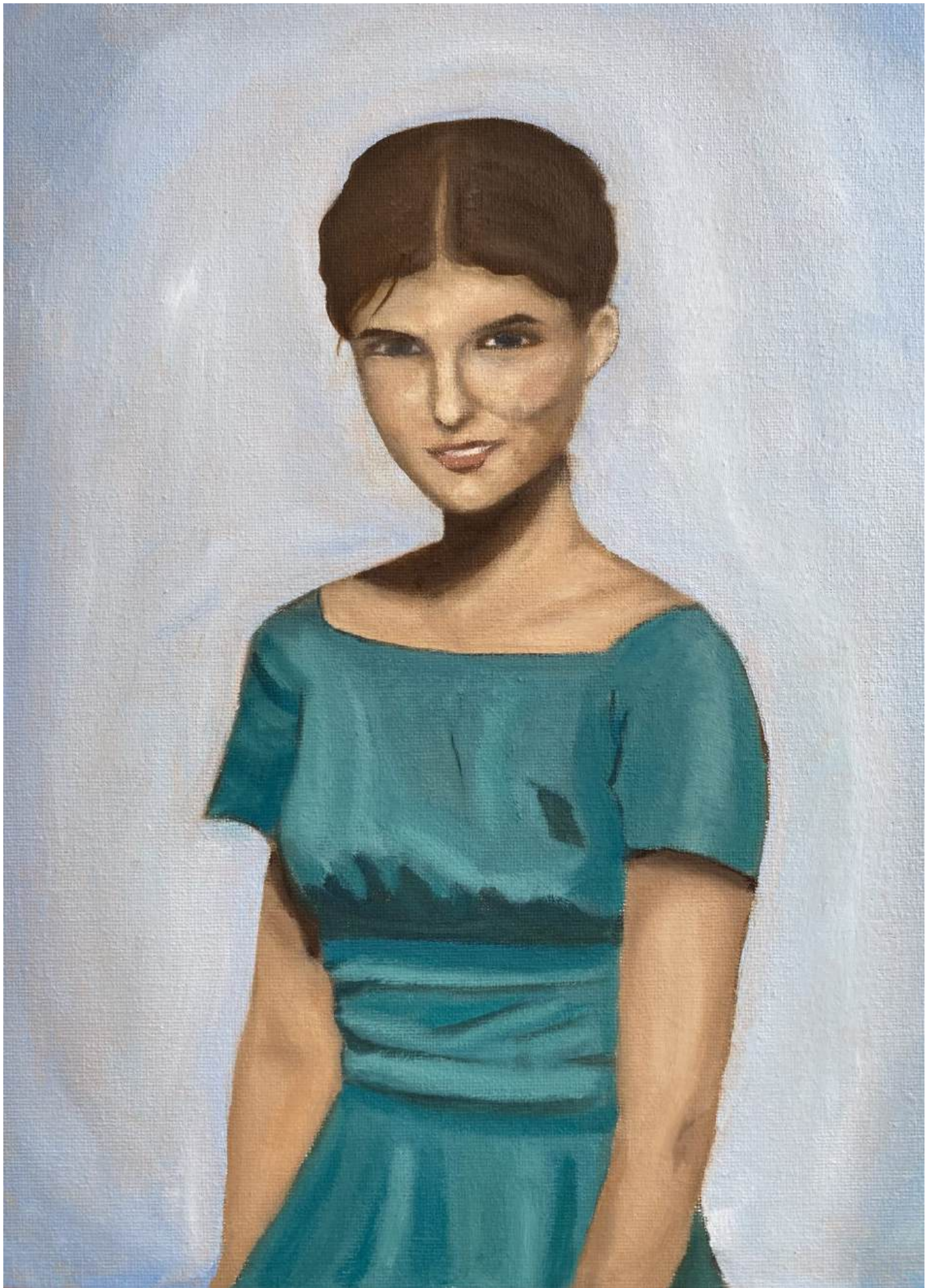
The worst offense to me is when you say you aren't smart. You're the smartest damn girl I've ever met and I'm not just saying that because I see myself in every question you ask.

Call that best friends' dad and ask if he misses his childhood dog. Tell him you're so sorry. Tell him you will never forgive him for not asking what you thought. You're allowed to be angry. You're allowed to demand someone ask your opinion and then not share it. Write a poem. You're allowed to like your own poetry. Make up a word. Get a patent for it. Only share it with someone if they are honest with you, or buy you an expensive coffee, or listen to you ramble about a non-fiction teacher in the hand state that you're pretty sure changed your life. Cut your hair. It looks horrible. You're allowed to look ugly. No one deserves your beauty; they must earn it. I have spoken to every living creature and they all told me to tell you that they *love* your short hair.

Naomi Beinart is a sixteen-year-old girl who lives with her parents on the Upper West Side. She attends school at Saint Ann's in Brooklyn, where she squeezes out poems on her notes app in between classes. Her writing has been recognized by multiple institutions, including Rider University, Blue Marble Review and Scholastic.

Art

Caroline By Grace Garacochea

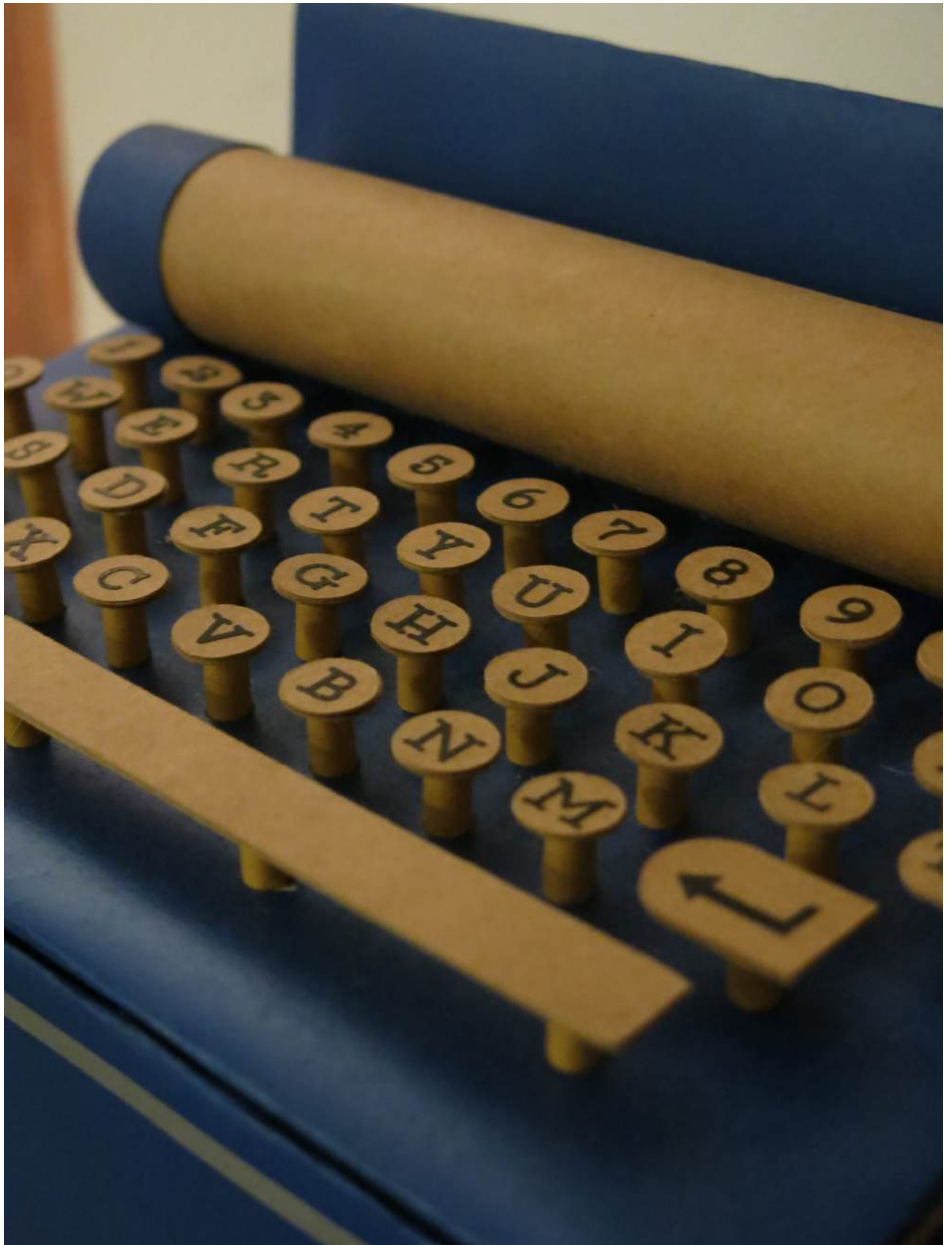


Caroline

Grace Garacochea is a seventeen-year-old artist from California who loves working with many forms of media including drawing, print-making, mixed media, painting, and sculpture. This oil on canvas using the alla prima method is a portrait of her grandmother in 1958.

Cardboard Vintage Typewriters By Lillian Carter

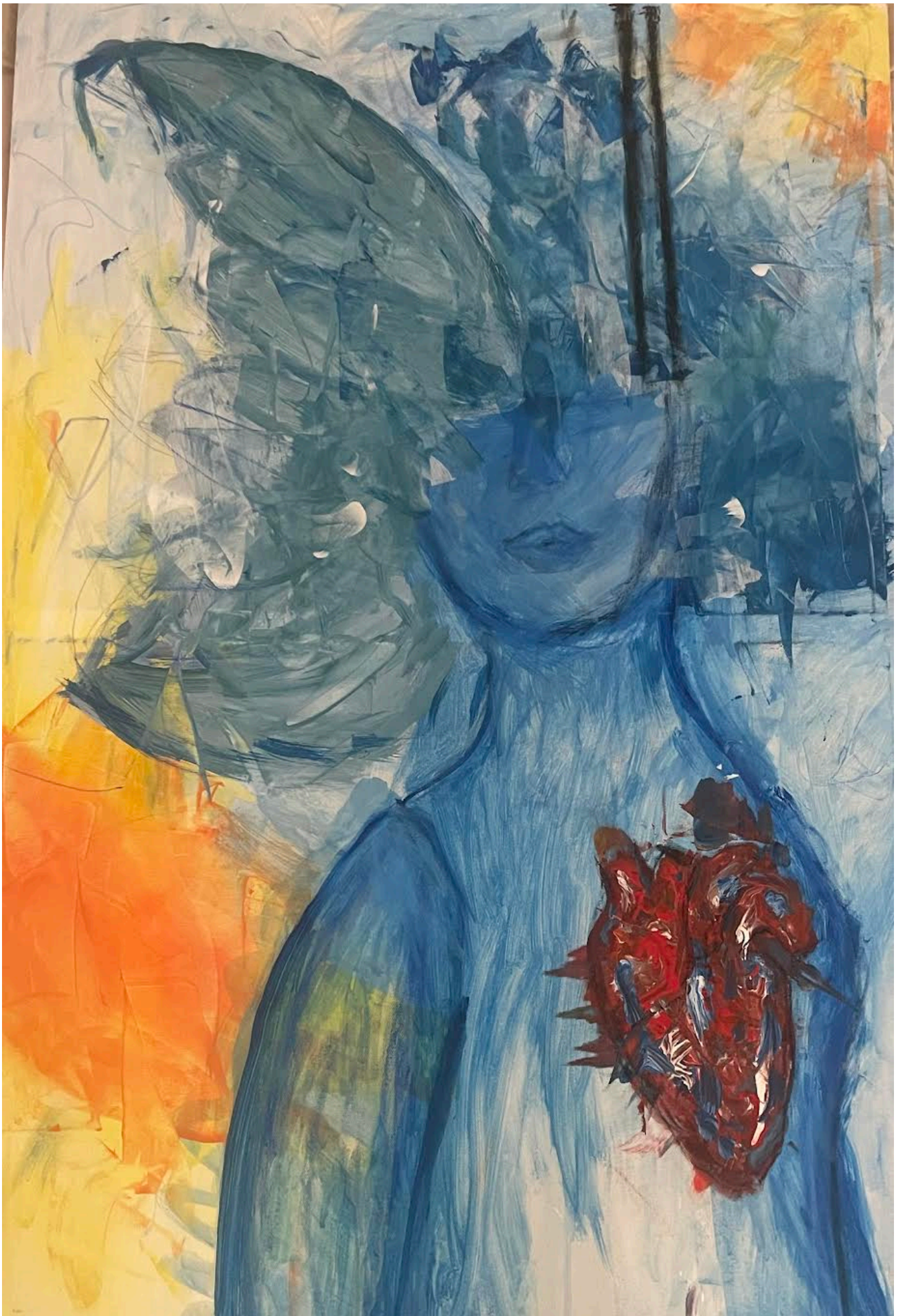




I made these three typewriters for the short play “Words Words Words” from the collection of one-act plays, “All in the Timing.” I am the Prop Master in my school’s Drama Club and our budget is slim, so I chose to make the typewriters out of cardboard and cardstock paper (with some glue, vinyl, and paint). I had envisioned a set of Smith~Corona style typewriters with a boxy look, and after weeks to experimenting and tweaking, I proudly brought them in to school. Since then, I’ve made other needed props out of cardboard/paper and it seems to be my thing now!

Lillian Carter was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. She is the Prop Master at her school’s Drama Club and spends most of her time keeping busy on new craft and design projects. When she’s not having a quiet night in, she enjoys watching theater performances, going to concerts, and watching movies with her friends! She loves music in all capacities and hopes to pursue her interests in piano, Irish concertina, and vocal music in the future.

The Weight of Feeling By Marwa Khan





The Weight of Feeling

Marwa Khan is an inspired young woman, who at a very young age found her purpose and passion in art and poetry. She strives to progress using expressionism within her art and literature. Growing up , Marwa found it very difficult to voice her opinions aligning with societal norms, so she turned to using art and poetry as a means of expressing herself.

Reimagining Lake Superior By Ayeza Mohet



Reimagining Lake Superior

Ayeza Moheet is a sixteen-year-old junior at Minnetonka High School. Her hobbies include reading, writing, and taking photos. She loves nature photography, especially in Northern Minnesota, where her family visits every fall. She hopes to pursue writing and photography in college and further in life.

Lemon Trio By Logan Weghorst



Lemon Trio

Logan A. Weghorst enjoys drawing and painting, as well as working with wood, clay, and metals. His colorful “CAT” painting was featured on the cover of Parakeet Magazine’s

debut issue. His monochromatic sketch, “Filling the Void,” appeared on Cicada Society’s blog. “Smile,” one of Logan’s pencil drawings made it to the semi-finalist round of Art of Unity’s 2022 Creative Award, putting the piece in the top 15% of 279 submissions from 52 countries. More recently, Logan’s pencil sketch “Intertwined” appeared in Blue Marble Review.

Forrest By Veronica Wang



Forrest

Veronica is a senior at Poolesville High School in Poolesville, Maryland. Her art has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers and by the Oil Painters of America. Her work has been published in other magazines such as the National

Celebrating Art Magazine and has been displayed in traveling shows through the National Junior Duck Stamp Competition. Veronica runs the organization American Young Art Circles (AYAC) which is dedicated to increasing art accessibility by posting tutorials and combatting societal issues by fundraising through hosting art competitions.

Candy Aisle By Sonja Xie





Candy Aisle

Sonja is a junior at Scarsdale High School in New York. Her art has been published in various literary and art magazines, such as Celebrating Art and Teen Ink, and showcased for sale at her town's local art gallery, The Dark Horse. She is the creative director for The Encephalon, editor for her school's science magazine, and a passionate hospital volunteer and student researcher. Besides art, she enjoys listening to music, drinking coffee, and watching horror movies.

Neon Paradise By Laura Anna Balla



Neon Paradise

This picture was taken in Hersonissos, Crete. To be more precise, it was taken in the heart of the party district. Some may think observing life in such a loud and busy environment can be overwhelming but for me, it's relaxing. Standing in one place while watching the world pass. In Greek, there's even a word for this: peratzatha.

Laura Anna Balla is eighteen years old and currently living in Budapest, Hungary. Laura loves criminal law but at the same time, she adores art and creativity. If she's not busy with schoolwork you can find her either creating some form of art or preparing for a competition.





Lapse





Win Choy Market

Jack Khachatryan, a photographer based in Salt Lake City, has been passionate about photography since his freshman year of high school. Skilled in both digital and film mediums, Jack's work spans a variety of subjects and techniques, including chemical alternative processing in the darkroom and 3D installations composed of photographs.

His latest portfolio, *Urban Prints*, dives into the intersection of abstraction and city spaces. *Urban Prints* is an exploration of shapes and colors in various cities across the United States. It pushes abstraction in both composition and processing.

Currently a senior at Waterford High School, Jack plans to pursue engineering and photography in college.

More of his work can be found on his website: jackkhachatryan.my.canva.site

Lisboa Parks, Electrico 28 By Tony Pan



Lisboa Parks



Electrico 28

Tony Pan is a high school creative based in New York. His work has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Writers & Artists, previously published in the HaluHalo Journal, Phillips Exeter Academy's summer issue, among others. He is also currently an editor for Aster Lit. In his free time, he enjoys crime scene documentaries, playing the guitar, street photography, and thrifting clothes for vintage finds.

Book Review

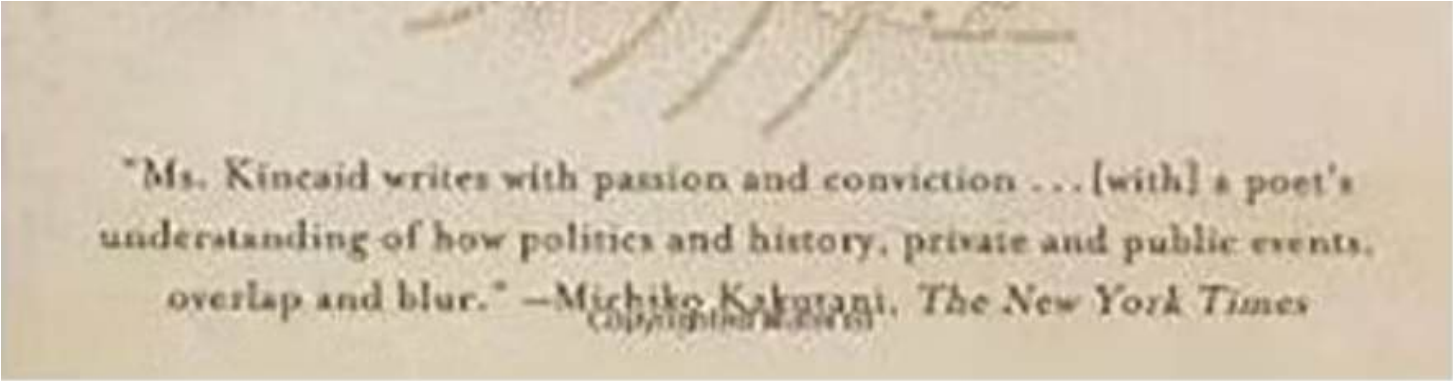
A Small Place By Kashaf Ahmad

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A Small Place



JAMAICA KINCAID



"Ms. Kincaid writes with passion and conviction . . . [with] a poet's understanding of how politics and history, private and public events, overlap and blur." —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

If you are thinking of pursuing a degree in literature or are just someone who loves to read books on the aftermath of colonization and postcolonial studies, then this book is for you. Jamaica Kincaid's book *A Small Place* is a work of creative nonfiction as it is based on reality. She writes intricately about a small island named Antigua. This novel is written from the point of view of a first-person narrator who provides a blunt outlook on the post-colonial state of Antigua, and describes the impact of tourism and how it plays a major role in maintaining corruption along with imbalanced wealth distribution.

This book feels like a conversation not only between the tourist and the Antiguans, but also between the reader and the writer, as Kincaid continuously uses the words *you* and *I* throughout the book which makes it quite intriguing.

A Small Place is divided into four loose sections, and in the span of only eighty pages, Jamaica Kincaid skillfully addresses all the critical issues accurately. In the first section, Kincaid addresses a tourist who is bewitched by the ethereal beauty of Antigua and wonders what it might look like from the inside. However, when he does get to know that it's not in a very good condition, instead of exhibiting signs of distress, he is over the moon to see this island in a very reckless and deteriorated state not just physically, but also culturally, economically, and psychologically. In the third and fourth sections, Kincaid evaluates the post-colonial state of Antigua as it is today and the neocolonial influence left by the colonizers as a legacy to the Antiguan bourgeoisie.

The way she critiques the tourists and the Antiguan government is eye-opening. It not only feels realistic but relatable to me as a reader as I was immediately reminded of the state of my own country (Pakistan). I like this book a lot because it accurately depicts the deteriorated postcolonial state of countries like Antigua, and helps us to realize that Antigua and the like have so much potential to prosper, they just have to get back on their feet and work with all their might.

The structure of this novel is shaped like Antigua itself, beautiful on the surface level but rotten by fraudulence at its core. This is similar to how the author tries to criticize the wrongs, and addresses themes of corruption and colonization while maintaining a humorous tone. An example of her satire can be seen in this excerpt:

“Have you ever wondered to yourself why it is that all people like me seem to have learned from you is how to imprison and murder each other, how to govern badly, and how to take the wealth of our country and place it in Swiss bank accounts?” (Kincaid 34)

Her satirical and witty tone with a realistic touch is what makes this book stand out amongst others, as the author is not afraid to criticize the government for its corruption, and the tourists for adding to the crippling state of Antigua, because she believes that tourism is an instance of neo-colonialism and imperialism. Therefore, if you are a tourist in some postcolonial country, especially an American or European tourist, then this book won't be an easy read as it is brutally honest. But we must not take anything the author says personally; rather, we as readers should try to understand the point she is trying to make.

All in all, what pushes me to recommend this novel is that it's a thought-provoking and very powerful novel coming from a 'subaltern' herself, and Kincaid isn't afraid of holding back her bitter yet truthful words, which are a definite blow to the face of corruption and injustice.

A recent graduate from Kinnaird College for Women University, with a bachelors degree in English Language and Literature. Kashaf Ahmad has a knack for writing and sharing motivational stuff. She loves to read self-help books and is a huge fan of manga and classics. Her hobby is to capture fleeting moments of life with her camera lens.
