

Spring 2025 Issue 37



Editor's Note

Editor Note By Molly Hill

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Issue 37

Dear Readers and Writers:

...the times they are a changin'... as Bob Dylan wrote in one of his songs, —finally something we can all agree on. Now if we could only figure out what to DO in the midst of so much change.

Maybe read some stories?

Since our website first came online nearly ten years ago we've proudly been collectors of creative work, and when we check the submission queue every morning we're delighted, impressed, surprised, moved... but never disappointed. The student work we receive not only reflects life from the point of view of students 13-22 years old, but also mirrors the culture in the wider world. It's a pleasure to read writing and appreciate art from the thrivers as well as the survivors, and our current issue is no exception.

Some highlights:

>We're pleased to publish poems from student writers **Juan Cruz** and **Luke Ross**, both students at Port of Los Angeles High School, a school that sends us so much student writing on a regular basis— thank you POLAHS staff!

>This issue includes writing from **Moseka Nityia** who describes himself as: *a proud Maasai, a patriotic Kenyan, and a true Pan-Africanist with a global outlook. A passionate*

writer and poet, his work beautifully weaves together themes of humanness, justice, and African identity, capturing the rich and complex realities of life in a developing world. Check out his powerful writing in the poetry section: *Two Times Dumb, Never*

>We're fortunate to have artwork from the talented **Mike Wheeler**—> a fine-art photographer from Ilorin, Nigeria, whose work explores identity, cultural reflection, and the human experience. Such a privilege to share work from our contributors all over the globe.

>From the North Carolina School of the Arts, **Chaeun Yoo** sent a thoughtful reflection on Toni Morrison's *Sula*, that's included in our Book Review section.

>To see an example of a poem we loved on the first read through, go to Harvard student **Anna Popnikolova's** *Water Theorem*. Same goes for the lovely *Faces of the Swan*, submitted by **Sophia Campbell**.

> Writer **Nicole Hirt** is an example of a contributor whose work we'll publish more than once. She has a flash fiction story in our March issue (*Caroline Liddell*) and will have another flash story (*All that Glitters*) in our June online issue.

>Personal essays are among our favorites to read, and our Spring Issue includes **Henry Bourtin's** experience on a dinosaur dig in *Chasing Bones*, as well as a piece from Swiss teenager **Emilia Lun**, who shared her story of climbing Kiliminjaro at age FIFTEEN.

Spending a lot of time scrolling are we? Pennsylvania writer **James DeGraaf** reflects on an alternative in *Go Stare at a Wall*.

>In our fiction section Californian **Paddy Dwyer** sent us the entertaining *Almost Surfing*, Malaysian medical student **Chloe Lim** gave us *The Memory Store*, Netherlands writer

Zanchao Hao penned *Different Moons, Different Skies*, and Korean author **Jiyoo Choi** added a well crafted story— *Eight Summers Ago*.

We've tried and we can't pick favorites.

Things to note:

We're grateful to be continually flooded with submissions, and apologetic that it can take up to two months for us to reply. Working on this.

We've taken on a few new editors (welcome!) from the Minnetonka Writing Center here in Minnesota to help with the increasing workload, and continue to rely on our steady cadre of regular reviewers— some who have been with us nearly ten years.

Sumy Designs continues to save us from ourselves by maintaining our website faithfully, enabling fresh writing to go up on our site on a regular basis.

We continue to recommend stories as a means of connection, empathy, and a way to relate to others in a time of so much upheaval and change.

Enjoy our current issue, and watch for our ANTHOLOGY VOLUME TWO coming in real life book form this spring! It'll be available on our site and pretty much everywhere, details to come on our Instagram.

Molly Hill

www.bluemarblereview.com

Poetry

The Presence of Absence

By Anandi Gunda

It's been forever since the beginning,

The sapling we sowed now bears oranges,

I recall giving you my orange every lunch,

A memory buried so deep hit me in seconds,

“Oranges are my favorite!” You exclaimed with a voice I’ll never forget,

Everything else is hazy....

That’s when Oranges became my favorite too,

It's been forever since the beginning,

7 magnets of destinations are stuck on the fridge,

I recall giving you my salary every month,

A memory buried so deep, it occurred to me in seconds,

“Paris, London, New York! Let’s leave no corner of the planet untouched!” You cheered with a smile I wish was on my face at the end of the day,

Everything else is hazy...

That’s when I picked up this hobby too,

It's been forever since the beginning,

A new pair of camping shoes leans against the wall,

I recall giving up on your arguments on how nature makes one calm,

A memory buried so deep, I recollected the incidents within seconds,

“Let’s just sit peacefully on the top of the hill behind your house. You’ve been to many concerts!” You kept nagging me with a childish spirit, I wish I could muster up to this day,

Everything else is hazy....

That’s when I stayed at peace with myself too

It's been forever since the beginning,

The heart you broke is now strong,

I recall giving you my heart when yours was lost,
A memory buried so deep, that it struck me in seconds,
“I love you.” You conveyed with a gaze I still search for to this day,
Everything else is hazy...
That’s when I started to love myself too,

It’s been forever since I’ve forgotten you,
Nothing of yours is in my house,
But your presence is in every corner,
“1 sachet of sugar in my coffee please!” You used to call out from the sofa,
I’ve only been adding 1 sachet in mine
That’s when *I realized* not everything is sweet too,

It’s been forever since I’ve forgotten
you, My niece still asks about you, wants you
to sing, It seems you are the most memorable,
The house still reverberates the hum of your guitar
strings, How could one verbalize one’s emotions when one
encounters a siren?
That’s when *I realized* I am deep underwater,

It’s been forever since I’ve forgotten you,
Our grad pic now frames only my
face, The memories I made with you, locked in a corner of
my brain,
Yet you are an integral part of me
now, “You sound just like him.” Remarked my mom as she silently
laughed,
You’ve not occupied my mind but

somehow... That's when *I realized*
you never left,

It's been forever since the beginning,
And it's never been the end,
For forever seems like a fleeting moment too,
It's been forever since I've forgotten you,
And not a day has passed without you crossing my mind,
For your dreams are now mine too

Anandi Gunda is a sophomore at the University of Hyderabad, majoring in Economics. She discovered her passion for poetry in 11th grade, viewing it as a creative outlet to express her emotions. Anandi's poetry draws inspiration from her personal experiences and keen observations of the world around her. In her free time, she enjoys reading short story collections, binge-watching series, and playing badminton. Her work has previously been featured in *Corporeal Lit Magazine*, *Teen Ink*, *The Cleverly Creatives*, and *The Sunnies Magazine*.

Water theorem By Popnikolova

The ocean wants your body, last
year. Not this year. Things
were different then.

The ocean wants your ribbed chest, your
fear of shells, high tide, the cycle of it. And tired, then,
you, spread on the dry towel, finished.

The ocean sings on an empty stomach, this
high noon, these little swells, this hot hunger. You let her push you
and push you, and correct her gently. Waves

and waves on an empty stomach. She licks
the salt from the french fries, the sand from your knuckle. Presses
up against the dunes, spoons the shore, hollows it out.

The ocean asks you to come back, waves
and waves. Pulls everything in as far as she can. Waves
and waves, openmouthed, ripples, but swallows sand.

The ocean wanted this
to go differently. Tired, then,
she draws back, laying like a dog.

The ocean wants you, last
year. Once you were there. Once,
she had you, held you, turned you

over like a stone. Not this year. Waves
and waves, and things
were different then.

Anna Popnikolova is a first-year at Harvard College, and a member of the Harvard Advocate's poetry board. She was born and raised on Nantucket Island, off the coast of Massachusetts, and is still getting used to life in the city. Her work has been previously published in TeenInk, Veritas newspaper, and The WEIGHT Journal. She is the founder

and president of Farewell Poetry Festival, which is an annual summer poetry festival on Nantucket.

September By Indiana Plant

The rustling bees chide the white fence
& wooden gashes seep their sap
To scent the yellowed grass
Sweet & tawny as hay.

Back in the city, jarred like jewels
The musk-night lights speak their truths
& persuade many good girls
To writhe like water snakes

In lava lamp glow of townhome
Basements. It's a bee-like itch that
Tames them, slick vinyl silence
As teeth to skin, to pray &

Seek forgiveness from the fruit belt
Then sip dusk's moondark cider.
Morning bleeds through slatted blinds
To wash their pale faces clean of decay.

At dawn, the earth blooms gold anew
& the bustling hive of city streets
Becomes a honeyed hymn,
Sung drunk to coming fall.

Here, in this stillness, she breathes
The last warm breath of summer,
& casts her virgin curse away
To the bees & things unnamed.

Indiana Plant is a freshman and Eccles Scholar at the University of Utah, where she is studying applied economics and anthropology. Her poetry has been published by The Palouse Review, Sink Hollow, Live Poets Society of New Jersey, and Scripto Literary Magazine. She has received an Honorable Mention in the Penguin Random House U.S. Creative Writing Awards. Her debut novel, *Beyond the Grave*, was a finalist for the Lost Island Press Publishing Contest for Dark YA Fiction.

Static By Emma Lopez

you're talking about your day
but all i hear is the space
between words, the small gaps
where meaning should be.

like a badly tuned radio,
we keep fading in and out—
one minute clear as summer
lightning, the next just
white noise and distance.

remember when conversation
felt like breathing? now
we choose our words like

landmine hopscotch, testing
each step before we leap.

dinner gets cold while we
warm up old arguments,
reheat yesterday's silence.
the microwave counts down
in mechanical heartbeats.

somewhere between "how was work"
and "i'm fine," we lost
the frequency we used to share.
now we're just static,
two stations playing
different songs
on the same channel.

i want to reach across
the kitchen table, adjust
our antenna, fine-tune us
back to clarity. but my hands
stay busy with fork and knife,
cutting everything into
manageable pieces.

maybe tomorrow we'll find
the right wavelength,
or maybe we'll keep searching
through this interference,

hoping to catch fragments
of what we used to be.

Emma Lopez is a high school junior from Austin, Texas. Their work has appeared in TeenInk, and they are currently working on their first collection of poetry. When not writing, she practices archery and sells watercolor paintings of Texas wildflowers.

Terms and Conditions By Tanisha Bose

You clicked *accept* the first time without reading,
Too busy being born to question the clauses.
The terms seemed reasonable:
Grow up, be kind, chase happiness.
What they didn't tell you was the fine print—
The bits about heartbreak, taxes, and gravity.

At six, you learned the cost of secrets,
When your best friend told yours for a second popsicle.
At sixteen, you met love for the first time,
All braces and late-night texts,
Only to find it couldn't hold
The weight of who you wanted to be.

You signed again at eighteen,
The paper inked with promises of freedom,
But they forgot to mention the debt
That comes with choosing your own chains.

By twenty-five, you're fluent in disclaimers.
The mornings smell of burnt coffee and urgency,
And every "How are you?" feels like
A phishing scam for your vulnerabilities.
You nod, smile, keep scrolling.
Another checkbox clicked,
Another *I have read and agree*.

Then one day, the system glitches.
You're stuck staring at the screen of your life,
Cursor blinking like an accusation.
And suddenly, you remember clause 2.7,
The one about nothing being guaranteed.

You scroll back to the top,
But there's no option for *refund*.
Just more choices:
Keep going or stop here.
And who has the courage to stop?

You sigh and press *accept* again,
Because what else is there
A momentary pause, then the program runs.
The same bright, hollow interface.

But this time, you think—
Maybe you'll break the terms,
Try clicking on something
No one's supposed to see

Boiling Point By Ramatu Audu

The world --its bad auditory nerves making the wailing of a girl
sound like blues. & they danced on, most of the boys in the neighborhood.
Once, in class, when asked what reaches boiling point sooner than liquid,
I answered: my seething bitterness against the world of men.
But I love my father still, I hate to see my brothers weep.
I've loved a boy so much that I named my poem after him.
The toad raced over by a car on untarred road was what he made my heart.
I do not mean I welcome all men. Mediastinum quakes-- bald men
with barb-wired beards make my heart craves flight.
Considering where the disobedience of Eve has led us
I surmised, that everyman has the right to retribution against us,
which I dread wouldn't favour them either. What do you call a home
without mothers? Isn't grave a garden without flowers?

Ramatu Audu (she/her) is a Nigerian teen writer of Ebira descent. She hopes to grow from a budding stage of writing into a pro.

Life of a 20 Dollar Bill By Juan Cruz

8:00am

cops donut dollar bill

9:00

used for change

10:00

sitting in a wallet

11:43

slips out of wallet

12:52pm

flyin—

g

1:20

someone's lucky day someone got it

2:27

donated to man on the street

who needed to get on his feet

3:56

the man who got it got some meat.

4:32

the owner of the store keeps the 20

5:21

the owner has it tugged

6:49

owner is leaving

7:13

owner gets hungry

8:32

the bill now in In N Out cash register

9:49

bill gets used for change

10:43

bill is exchanged

12:04am

bill used for something it shouldn't have been

Juan Cruz is a student at Port of Los Angeles High School.

Seasons' Grasp By Luke Ross

i. Winter's Breath

Frosted whispers weave the night,
Tendrils curling, stars alight,
A tapestry of silence sewn,
In crystal shards, the chill is grown.

ii. Spring's Awakening

Beneath the shroud, the earth will sigh,
Green fingers stretch, the blooms comply,
A riddle spoken in budding leaves,
Where sunlit laughter softly weaves.

iii. Summer's Rapture

Heat dances on the pavement's grin,
A riotous glow where shadows spin,
Melodies of cicadas hum,
And golden hours come undone.

iv. Autumn's Lament

The wind becomes a poet's hand,
Ink of dusk spills over land,
Leaves pirouette, a fading song,
In twilight's embrace, we linger long.

v. The Cycle Unfolds

Each season turns, a clock unwound,
In spirals strange, our roots are found,
The earth, a canvas, vast and bold,
In every shade, a story told.

vi. Nature's Embrace

We dance along the edges blurred,
In moments lost, in breaths unheard,
For life's own rhythm, wild and free,
Is painted in this symphony.

vii. The Stranger Within

Embrace the odd, the unseen grace,
The fleeting time, the empty space,
For in this dance of ebb and flow,
We find the seeds of what we sow.

Luke Ross is an accomplished yet humble writer with beginnings in poetry and roots in "LA Urban street style writing." He takes inspiration from famous and historic poets such as William Blake, Robert Frost, and Alexander Pope.

the summer before you leave By Lia Wang

a dragonfly skims across a surface, and the entire lake creases
underneath its weight. we are tucked within overgrown reeds
that prick my ankles raw. it's dusk. the mosquitos are emerging
to gnaw. you scratch at the red welts lined along your arm with a
ferocity no one can explain. "stop that," I scold. I snatch your hand
into my own, examine your blood-crusting cuticles. I take a tissue
from my pocket and wipe the residue away. "you'll make it worse."
every time, and my words never get through. you, ruined girl: nails

sharp enough to slit. skin of ivory fissures / eyes of bruising flax.
 you shrug, turn back to watch the sky. before us, the egg yolk moon
 hangs so low, we can pluck it from its perch and swallow it whole.
 it's dusk, still. it's always dusk here. the cicadas are beginning
 to sing. you confess that you are being eaten alive, and I think I am
 being eaten alive, too. tongue first, then mind. do you remember? age ten
 we crafted matching glass bead bracelets. you flung yours upwards
 and it shattered against the sky. I think that day, the sky split too. one day,
 I fear you will gather the leftover glass / sky shards and file yourself
 hollow. but for now, there is a crevice in the clouds where twilight
 may filter through, ~~light cradling the cusp of your jaw / kissing~~
~~the slope of your nose in a language I wish I could speak to you.~~

Lia Wang loves stories so much, she decided to create her own. She is the Director of Chapters for The Young Writers Initiative, and her pieces have been recognized by Scholastic Art & Writing, Ice Lolly, JUST POETRY!!!, among others. When not starting another draft, Lia can be found tracing shapes into the clouds. Find her.

Seven, Seventeen, and Seventy By Eziz Hezretov

I am turning seventeen and
 I miss my seventh.
 If I could speak to him,
 in the reflection of
 a puddle,
 or behind
 a mirror,
 to the button-eyed and breathless,
 pure hearted and progressing,

oblivious and open-hearted sprout,
I would simply let be.
For in his gaze of unknowing,
a universe of wonder blossoms.

To whisper warnings and cautions,
to burden an unburdened heart,
to bring about gnawing anxieties,
would be like grasping at him through
the puddle,
or shattering
the mirror,
that separates us –
letting the phantoms of my world
seep into his.

I am envious, though,
of how his young eyes
capture a world
different than mine –
saturated, slow, serene,
of how sun-kissed sand
feels to his hands,
of how his ears perceive
the melodies of birds
like symphonies,
while I catch only
fleeting murmurs or flutters.

I wonder, though, will my seventy
miss my seventeen too?
What if I peer into
the puddle,
or stare at
the mirror,
and visualize before me
a face weathered soft by time,
who hides tomorrow's storms
as I hid mine
from the boy in the puddle.

Eziz is a young poet whose touching, nostalgic works explore growth, innocence, and connection. He enjoys sports and volunteering in the community while trying to make an impact on others through his writing. With each of his works, Eziz strives for an emotional impact on readers by provoking reflection and raising empathy through the universal language of poetry.

The Most Important Thing a Trans Person Can do is Survive By Will Walters

In my head, I am thirty-five and happy
I am a father
My daughter is not of my flesh and blood, but she is of my heart and soul
And I love her like Van Gogh loved sunflowers
We take long walks to the park and home from school
At night I play her lullabies on the ukulele
Just like my father did for me
On Saturday, I say hello to my friends at the diner
And we laugh and laugh and sometimes cry

In the mornings I shave my face
And take my testosterone in practiced, robotic motions
I feed my cat and water my plants
Pour pancake batter into a pan while I harmonize with the record player
Outside, the lawn is green and blooming with dandelions
And at night, stars freckle the darkness above my head
I know all their patterns by heart.
In reality, I turn off the news
I get down from the roof
And I text my friends, “be there in five.”

Will Walters is a Chicago-based poet, author, singer, songwriter, composer, and producer. His hobbies include baking, playing the piano, talking to his plants, obsessing over horror podcasts, and dancing with his sister to Taylor Swift. You can find his debut album “Dawn” on all major streaming services.

Faces of the Swan By Sophia Campbell

~a poem in two acts~

I

The White Swan

The cygnet exhales,
a fledgling wraith
suspended in the eternal silence of stage,
breathing as a specter, as a phantom,
breathing in conjunction with the
perpetual *bourrée* of her toes — which,

entombed in threadbare satin,
waltz across hardwood
to the 4/4 rhythm of her racing heartbeat.
Her face is an enigma,
her mind a fortress,
cloaked behind a pristine, unshakeable exterior
gleaming deceptively in milky footlights.

Spectators embrace her measured sorrow,
her rueful fragility, parceled into the guise
of the white feathered tutu and coiled bun,
a perfect picture of purity,
a falsehood;
with every *développé*, she exudes melodrama,
her composure as fictitious as the *recherché*
folktale on display.

No captivated admirer across the lake can perceive
how the rouge lipstick and Tchaikovsky measures
muffle her heaving gasps. Her serenity is contrived,
her solemnness calculated,
no whisper of uncertainty nor hesitation
revealed to the spectator,
no room to falter,
not until she pirouettes offstage
whereupon she sheds the shackles of her tortured promenade.

||

The Black Swan

Faintness consumes her haggard silhouette,
the avalanche of applause
a distant quake behind her,
out-anguished by the scream
of her searing muscles
and molten toes.

The mangled mass collapses alongside a water fountain
whilst clarinet sonatas chime
like birdsongs, or nightmares
somewhere far beyond.

Unrecognizable now, she is,
a shell of the majestic swan she'd been
mere moments before,
yet still perilously, sensationally
human.

One *adagio* to rest.

Catching her breath, she readjusts the ribbons on her shoes —
loops of blush satin,
square-knotted at the ankle —
knowing that this aching pocket of
time was the product of all her
childhood ballet slippers and missed birthday parties
exchanged for an itch for transcendence,
a bargain sworn in blood from
the wellspring of her naive heart
and yet — without remorse.

The wellspring becomes a fountainhead
as sweat streams from her hairline.

She cannot stop,
she cannot rest,
for she is cued once again
to *tombé* from stage right — and to conceal,
without wavering, from those who watch:
the dichotomy of dancer.

Sophia Campbell is a high school junior who is deeply passionate about writing. She has published three novels, including *She of the Shadows* (2024), and has received multiple awards for her work, including a Scholastic Silver Key. She has worked as a guest editor for Dr. Ralph Bauer of the University of Maryland on the Early Americas Digital Archive. Additionally, she trains in ballet at a professional level and has performed at the Kennedy Center in various productions.

Two times Dumb, Never By Moseka Ntiyia

They said, “You’re too young,
too raw, too unsure to write like Shakespeare.”
“First things first,” they said,
but what is first when the words are already here?
I wanted to write, so I write now—
flawed, unfinished, but unstoppable.

My words don’t flow perfectly,
they stumble and scratch at the page.
There’s no applause, no trophies waiting,
but I write anyway,
because something inside refuses to stay still.

I'm shy, hesitant when I speak,
my voice shrinking in the shadow of others.
So I write to speak louder,
to make sure I'm not two times dumb—
silenced in the room, and erased from thought.

They don't see me win the Nobel,
I don't see myself either,
and I don't seek their vision.
I write not to win, but to exist,
to leave something behind
that whispers, "I was here."

It's not about approval or fame.
It's about the words that refuse to be ignored,
the need to create something that can stand
even when I fall.

Laugh if you will, doubt if you must,
but I'll keep writing.
Because in every line,
I find the truest version of myself.

Moseka Ole Ntiyia is a proud Maasai, a patriotic Kenyan, and a true Pan-Africanist with a global outlook. A passionate writer and poet, his work beautifully weaves together themes of humanness, justice, and African identity, capturing the rich and complex realities of life in a developing world. Deeply rooted in authenticity—whether in faith, knowledge, or connections—Moseka finds inspiration in the rhythm of nature, often

while herding his cherished cows, Noo Pukoret (those worth going hungry for) and Sujarot (those worth chasing as long as they find water and pasture), a reflection of the deep love his people have for their livestock. His writing has graced the pages of Isele Magazine, with forthcoming features in The Arc Poetry and Viridine Literary. With a degree in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Nairobi, Moseka continues to reach new heights, using his craft to inspire, challenge, and connect with audiences worldwide—one powerful story at a time.

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 choppy 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 choppiest 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.

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 playing violin.

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.

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.

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

Narcissism By Sasha Beggs



Narcissism

Sasha Beggs is a seventeen-year-old artist, writer and poet with a passion for learning new things and exploring the world. She has lived most of her life overseas in China and Saudi Arabia. Currently a high-school student, Sasha is looking for new outlets for her creativity and seeking a wider audience after winning several school writing competitions as announced in Shenzhen Standard and getting her work published in Gulf Young Writer of the Year.

Floating Away By Michelle Chen



Floating Away

Michelle is a high school student from the West Coast who wants to make art with a variety of mediums. In her free time she enjoys painting, urban hiking, and watching

Netflix.

A Summer Evening By Claire Hunsberger



A Summer Evening

Claire Hunsberger is an artist, writer, and musician from Portland, Oregon. Their art explores their many questions and observations of the world through block printmaking. Their favorite things are tea, being in water, and their little gray cat.

Isale-Eko By Mike Wheeler

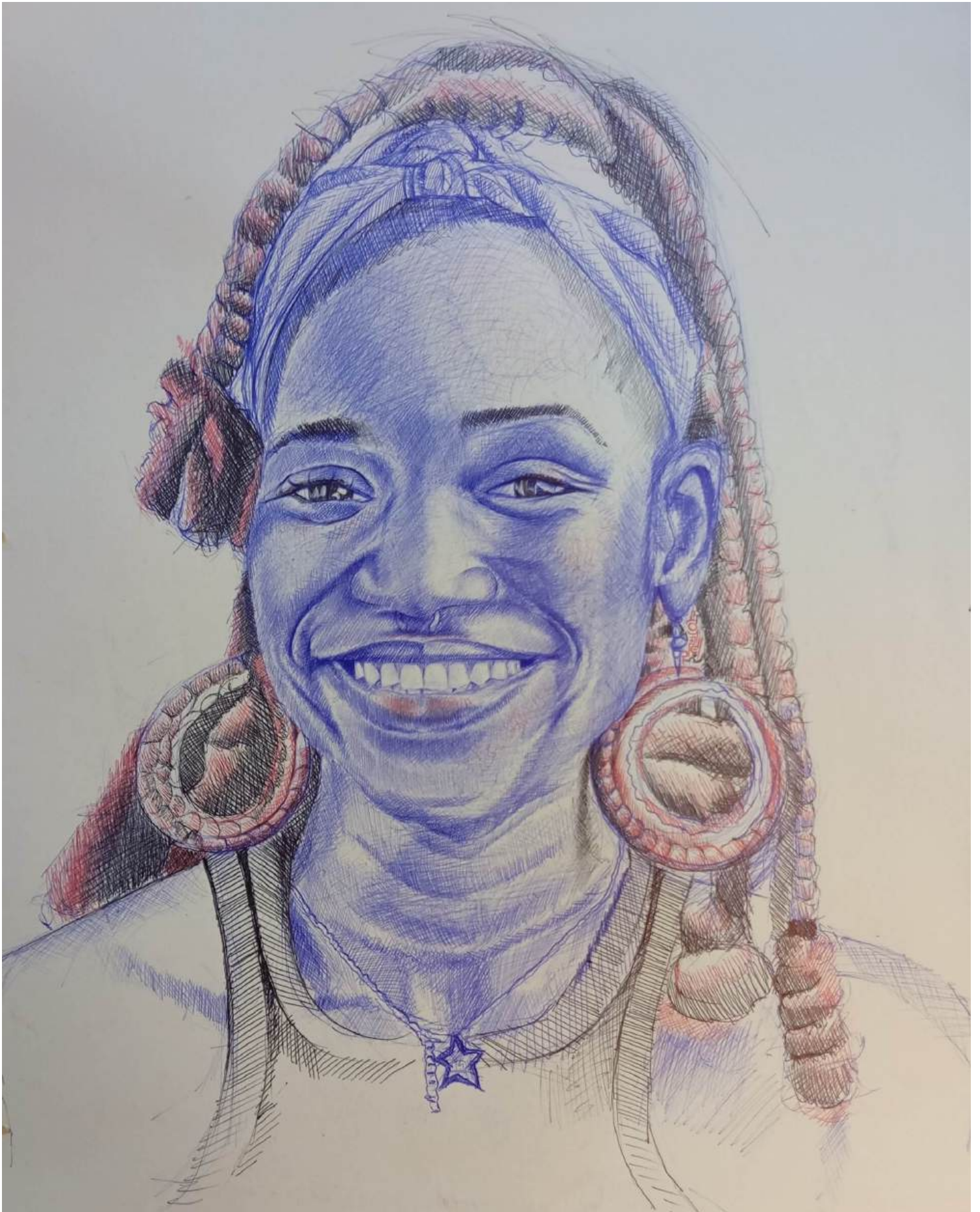


Isale-Eko

Isálè Èkó is a Yoruba word that translates to downtown Lagos. It is a visual ode to the historical and cultural heartbeat of Lagos. The double-exposure technique merges the silhouette of a man with the iconic danfo buses, symbolizing the movement, resilience, and shared experiences that define the city's pulse. Isálè Èkó is more than just a place; it is a living archive of history, from the enduring traditions of the Isésè festival to the mastery of mamà Sadiá's ewa agonyin. It echoes through the language of the streets, in voices calling "kowopé, kowopé!" and in houses standing tall like the unwavering spirit of its people. Beneath it all, the rhythms of Afrobeat bury themselves deep into the soul, chanting Èkó lèlèyi!—this is Lagos, this is Home. The artwork embodies the essence of community, showing how identity is shaped by shared spaces, cultural heritage, and the ever-present hum of city life.

Michael Temi-tope Adebisi (Mike Wheeler) is a fine-art photographer from Ilorin, Nigeria, whose work explores identity, cultural reflection, and the human experience. His photography, characterized by expressionist, surrealist, and minimalist aesthetics, employs layered symbolism and experimental techniques. This approach has garnered international attention, with features in festivals, journals, and galleries such as Chestnut Review, Spellbinder, Ake Review, Canvas Gallery (New York), Superlative Gallery (Bali), ETH Safari (Nairobi), and NFC Summit (Lisbon). He currently lives in Ilorin, Nigeria.

Portrait of a Young Lady By Sholanke Boluwatife Emmanuel



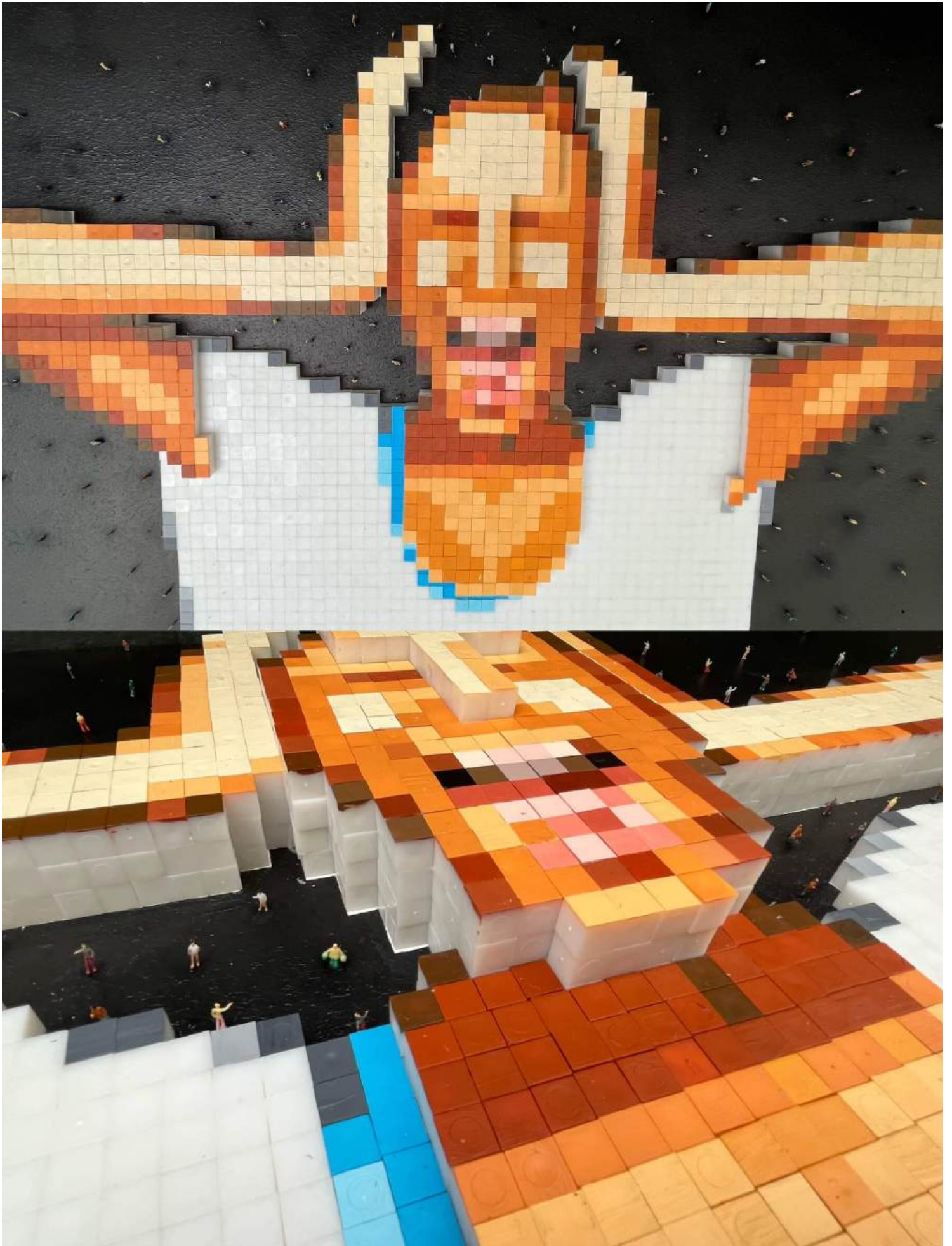
Portrait of a Young Lady

Sholanke Boluwatife Emmanuel is a rising young artist from Ogun State, Nigeria, currently based in Lagos. In pursuit of his artistic ambitions, he has participated in numerous virtual and physical exhibitions, both domestically and internationally. His work has been showcased in various literary and art magazines.

I'm Unique, Tech Stress By Zishan Qiu



I'm Unique



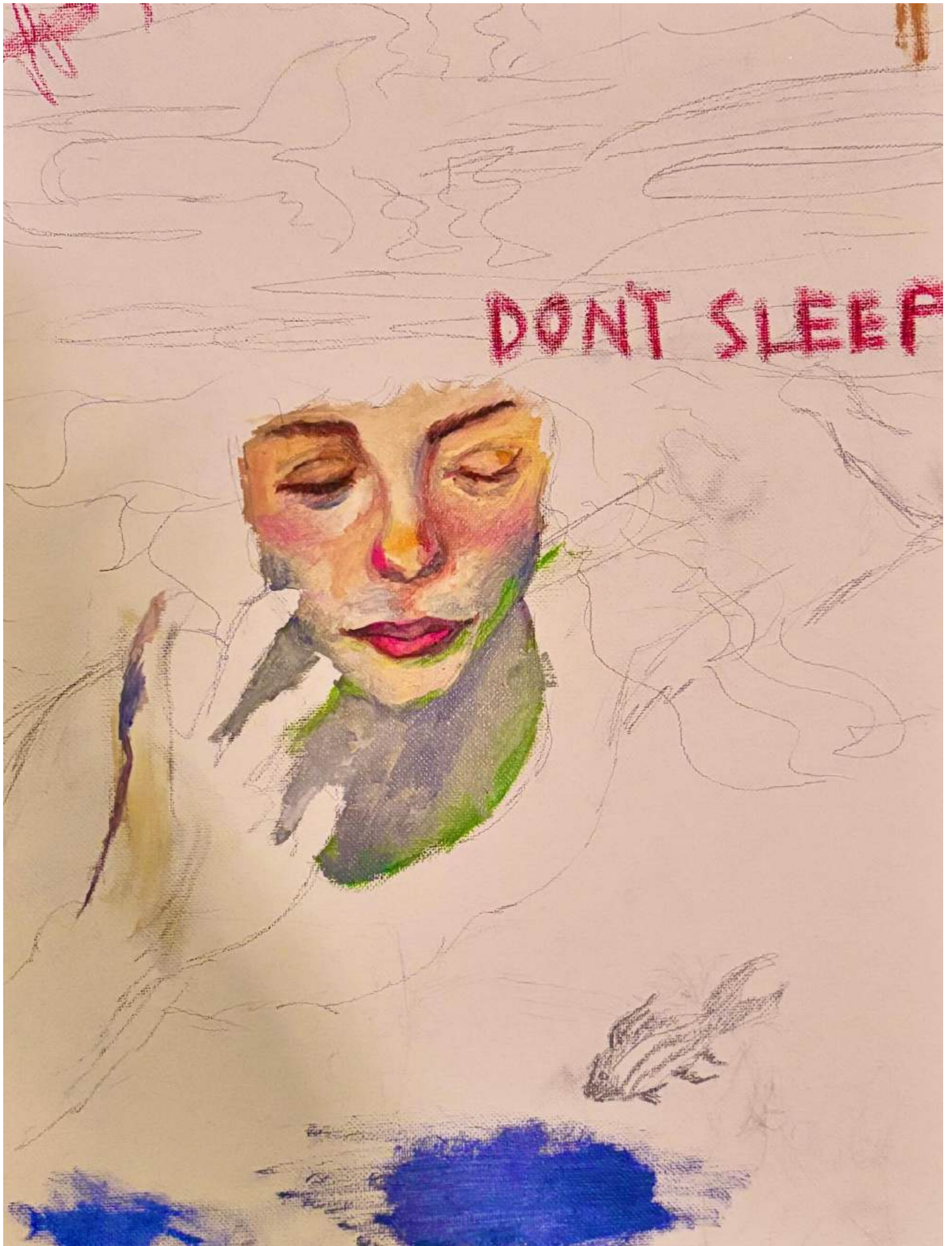
Tech Stress

Born in Shanghai, Zishan Qiu has lived in various cities and countries, including Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Tokyo, and Connecticut, experiences that have shaped her global perspective and enriched her artistic journey.

Zishan's artistic path began at the age of four under the mentorship of Canadian artist Ryan Slivchak. A decade later, she began working with Chinese artist Mao Xuelei, where she explored and assisted projects at the intersection of art, sustainability, and cultural dialogue. In 2023, Zishan attended Sotheby's Institute of Art in New York, where she discovered her mission to use art as a narrative tool to share and celebrate the richness of Chinese art heritage with a broader audience. It was that same year she held her first solo exhibition, Tradition Reimagined, in Shanghai. Her artwork, Breeze, earned a National Silver Medal in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards in 2024.

Now a junior at Watkinson School in Connecticut, Zishan sees her journey as an ongoing effort to foster cultural dialogue and reinvigorate traditional Chinese art for the modern era.

Untitled By Aishani Thakur

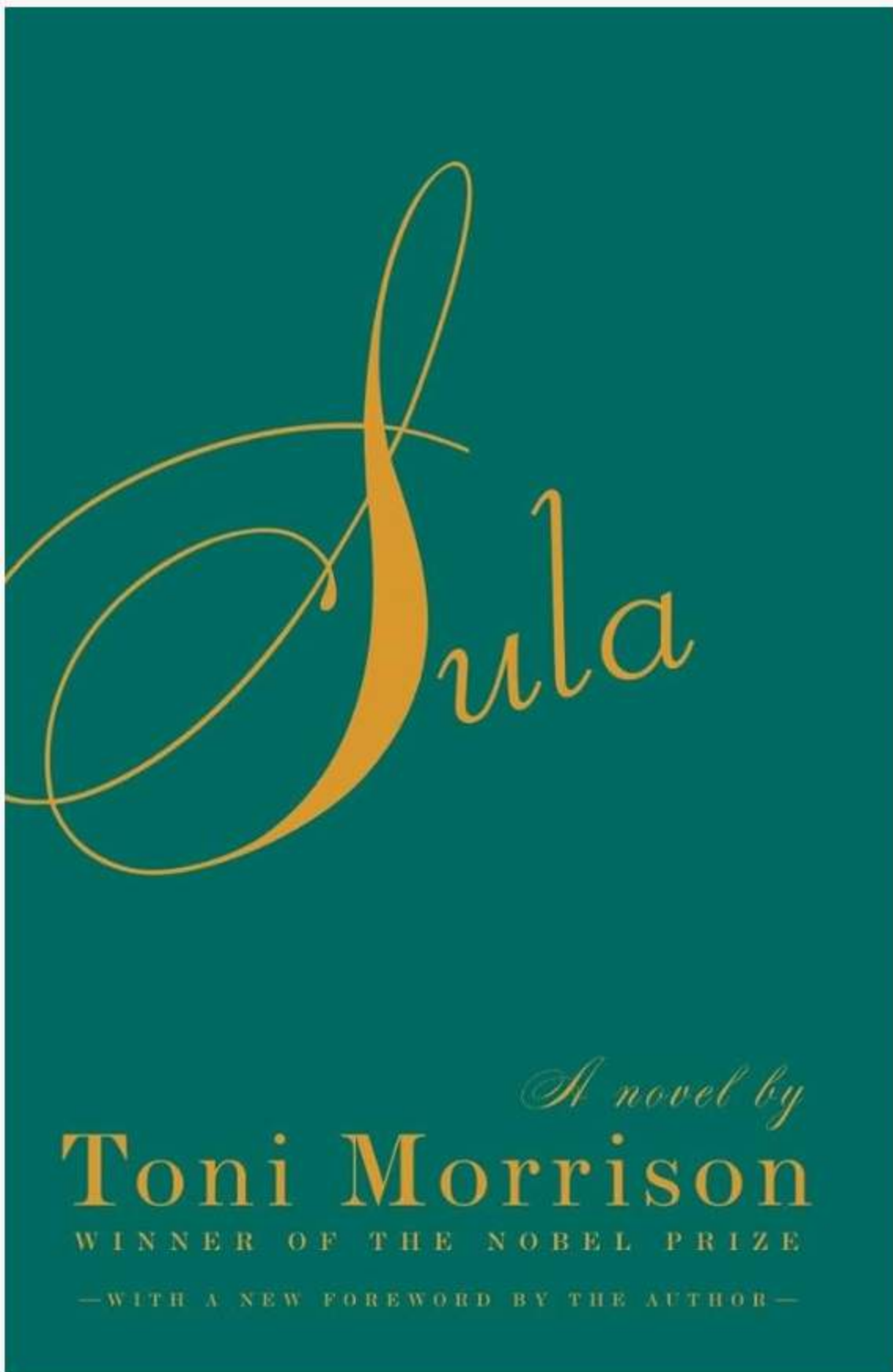


Untitled

Aishani Thakur is a mixed media artist.

Book Review

An Ode to Morrison's —Sula By Chaeun Yoo



There are times when readers have the unquenching desire to melt into the symphony of a writer's words; their orchestration of sentences and metaphors leaves the audience bejeweled with awe and veneration. Hence, it is not rare to proclaim Toni Morrison as a towering literary genius and exceptional novelist, brilliantly capturing the fundamental human condition and Black experience. In her blazing second novel, *Sula*, Morrison's literary themes interrogate white exclusionary politics and celebrate Black girlhood, remaining deeply relevant in the 21st century. Morrison's words, reading like music, illustrate a stunning portrait of Sula Peace and her hostile environment as she grows up in a generational household of defiant women. As Sula's subversive acts are curtailed as malevolent and wicked, readers are granted a glimpse into the turbulent nature of growing up as a Black girl in the midwestern United States, witnessing the impacts of trauma, grief, and ostracization. Whether it is the townspeople's moral repulsion of Sula or Shadrack's gentle fondness and consideration towards her, Morrison extends beyond the lines of an unbiased, third-person narrator, becoming not only the storyteller of the events but also the insider to each of the character's innermost thoughts and fears. Hence, she embraces all the wretched and kind, disparaging and encouraging perspectives of Sula, detailing the politics and shortcomings of freedom and rebellion and asking readers if it is worth performing as to what society confines and defines as a 'moral' person.

I remember reading *Sula* for the first time last year; it was harrowing as it was transformative. Through her writing, Morrison truly was a leading figure in combating 20th-century American conservatism and parochial views on Black life and girlhood. We see Sula, a woman who has been exploited and pigeonholed into becoming the pinnacle representation of spite and malice, as an allusion to general society's demonization of Black womanhood and autonomy. After consuming this brilliant novella, I myself have cogitated on the parallels or contrasts between morality and rebellion, deliberating on the tumultuous nature behind living free and unabashedly despite societal discouragement and denigration. I believe every person should read at least one (or two, or three) Morrison books in their lifetime, with *Sula* being one of them. You'll leave with

your mouth agape, marveling at her ability to incorporate fires (yes, fires) into the book so seamlessly.

A poignant yet stunning portrait of Black girlhood, love, loss, and defiance, she ultimately examines the politics of insubordination in the name of liberation. We question what it means to be either disparaged or commemorated by those who fabricate the definitions of conventionality and morality.

A literary giant and acclaimed genius, Morrison's searing legacy laid the path for the long lineage of Black female writers and their commentary on socio-political affairs. In a world where men are not the primary purpose, her novels defy the customary tradition that it is an inescapable tragedy to craft a story in the absence of men. Inventive for the 1970s United States, *Sula* proves to be a relevant, scintillating story of Black female defiance and power, engaging contemporary readers in continued conversations about ostracized and berated racialized identities.

Chaeun Yoo is a high school senior studying at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. Yoo is the Founder and Executive Editor of The Redwood Review and has been recognized by The Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop, Mint Hill Arts Center, Scholastics Art and Writing, and others. In their free time, they love vermicomposting and tending to their plant garden.
