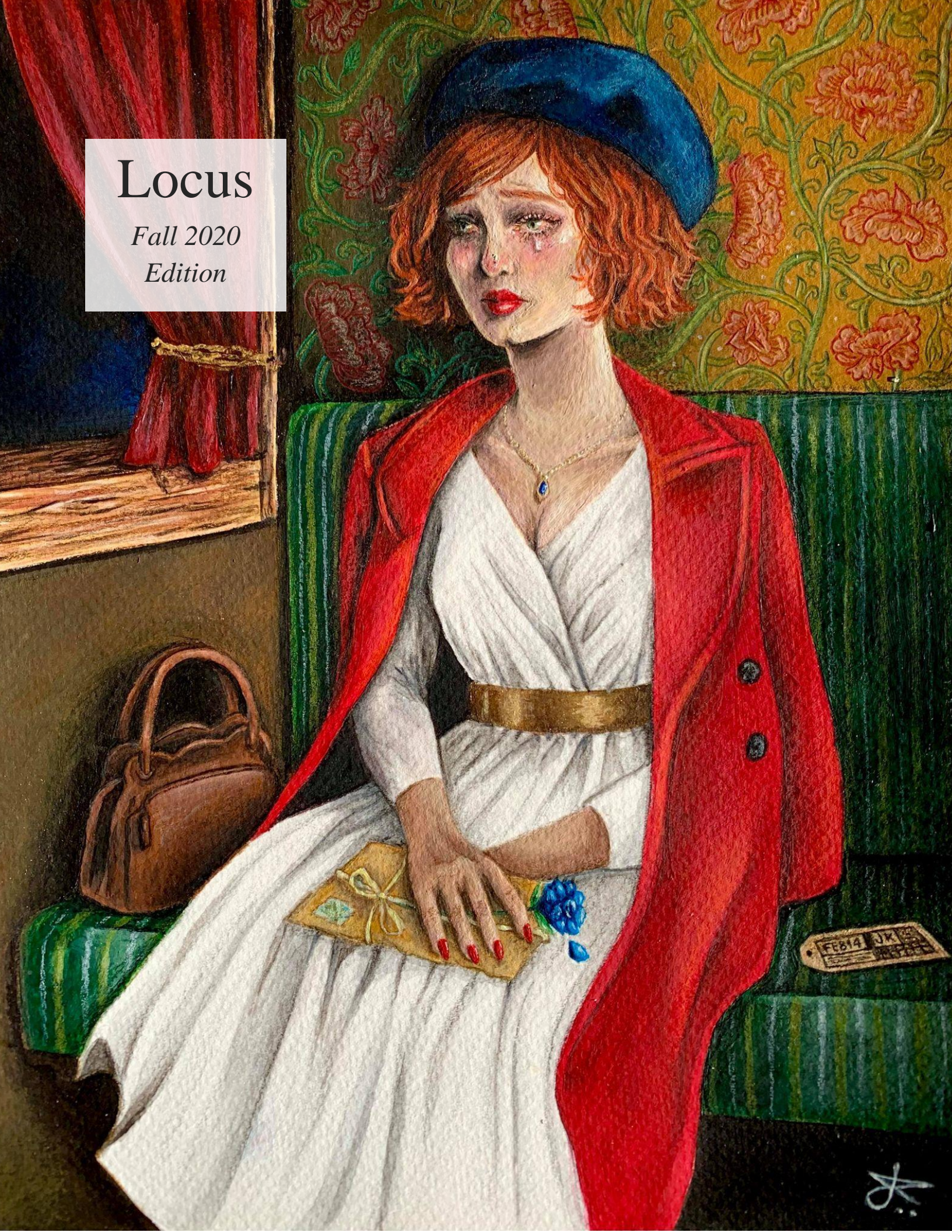


# Locus

*Fall 2020  
Edition*





## **This Ticket is Taking Me Nowhere**

*by Juman Khanji*

I get it now, I have no place in your heart,  
Let alone some space in your train of thought.  
Well, looks like I'm a stop that you'll *always* skip,  
"Should I just leave?" is something *I* always thought.  
So I guess it's time that I walked off, changed stations,  
explored that new faint smile and these unfamiliar thoughts.  
And if I fail to forget your jokes, I might as well laugh at them.  
This sweet pain is undefeatable, and so are my persistent thoughts.  
"Make me forget, somehow," I pray to God. I know I can hop on other  
trains. I can also *try* to listen to sounds louder than these plaintive thoughts.

# LOCUS

*The John Abbott College Art and Literary Journal*

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## Senior Editor's Message



The Fall 2020 Locus Magazine marks my third edition as a Locus Editor and my first edition as Senior Editor - and what a journey it's been. At my first editor's meeting a little over a year ago I couldn't have imagined the state of the world today, nor that I would eventually become the senior editor of Locus.

Without a doubt, this semester has been especially difficult for students and teachers alike. At home, we miss out on the special moments campus life provided us: stopping in the hallway for a quick chat, sharing a look with your friend about a teacher, Bingo in the Agora, I could go on forever. For all the complaining we did, we enjoyed school. Because of the extraordinary circumstances of this semester, I'd like to take a moment and say thank you.

Thank-you to the students of John Abbott who produced beautiful art and were kind enough to share it with the world despite their heavy workloads.

Thank-you to the amazing team of Locus Editors who attended meetings and somehow made this work online.

Thank-you to Harold for supporting me as the senior editor and patiently answering my hundred-and-one questions.

The online version of Locus could have never happened without the collaboration of all these amazing people. So, to everyone reading this, stay safe, stay strong, and, please enjoy the Fall 2020 Locus Literary Magazine.

Simone Drouin

*~ Literary & Visual Art ~*

## **My God is a Woman**

*by Eli*

Soft heaving breaths  
threatening  
to break the silence –  
but never do

Asleep  
Body exhausted  
Serene  
Unaware of her beauty  
Unaware of the spell she's cast

She seems to me frozen  
A statue made by Gods  
I am in awe

Cupid writes epics with her lips  
Velvet  
Strawberry sweet

She says mine taste of blueberries  
She says she loves the stains I leave

I follow the familiar paths down the  
trails of whimpered bruises

*But this destination is new*

Asleep  
Delicate songs  
Whispered stories  
Fleeting  
Like snowflakes  
sighing as they land

Hazel veiled by butterfly wings  
Faint pink flutters softly  
Something falls  
I blow it away like a wish.

*A secret*

Kept only for me

Butterflies flutter –  
She moans like an angel's sigh



asking me gently not to stop  
but never  
expecting  
me to continue

Angels sing choruses  
Strong thighs quiver under my lips  
A power she has given me  
Entrusted me with.  
This power she can so easily take away

I pray she never does

Strong thighs wrapped around me  
Hanging on for dear life  
Shaking, swaying with our music

I find my place  
My home  
Down below  
This is my purpose

She is my foundation.

Awake  
Our words inaudible next to the gravity of our kisses  
*Did we even speak?*

Venus cries out to Saturn  
planting peonies in every valley

Planets colliding  
Earthquakes move us  
Fire crackles under her skin  
I feel her heat  
We are crashing

Gently

We create universes from our destruction  
We birth stars from our sins  
We mold solar systems in our image  
In this moment we are  
Gods

Dew collects like honey on my lips  
I am in awe

I sit back, taking her in.  
Dark, porcelain skin  
stained by my kisses

But I am not gay

I  
    Swear

## **P A T C H E S**

*by Angie Daher*

Forget about my purple aches,  
    Lost in crumbled cobblestones  
My sleeveless blue heart  
    'Till death do us apart.

Crystal clear needles,  
    Do away with my evils  
And build me stalwart,  
    Stitch me back up  
to the patched yellow ground.

## **They Go on Your Legs** by Alex Meleras

Pants! Pants! I can't stop thinking about pants! I can't even stop talking about pants. I'm not taking my pants off. Not today. Do *not* make me take my pants off. Picture this. New pants. Blue pants. New blue pants. Smarty pants in the laundry. Put on your fancy pants, let's have a big Friday! Money back guarantee.

Peter Piper picked a pair of pants. Now it's your turn. Picture this. Your favourite pants. They might be green, they might be brown, you might've bought them out of town. They might be tight, they might be loose, maybe they've worn out their use. Pick your favourite pants. I promise I won't judge the pair you pick, and I promise I won't judge *you* for the pair you pick. Peter Piper picked a pair, so you can too. Your favourite pants, and picture this:

You see them on the wall in a museum. You hung them there with a glue gun. Your favourite pants are on display. Maybe they're behind glass, never to be touched, or worse, sneezed on. I *don't* want sticky icky mucus on your favourite pants. Maybe they're in the open, and everyone who walks by is encouraged to spill some coffee on them. Do we want smelly coffee stains on your favourite pants? Who's to say?

Imagine swinging pants around on the boulevard, like a lasso, to catch treasures. I'm using my pants as a treasure-catcher. Don't steal my pants, these are *my* pants, and I'm gonna catch some treasures! What might the treasures be? A silver lining? A visit to the future? Another pair of pants that I can catch more treasures with? Who's to say?

You can replace words from famous titles with the word "pants." It's fun, try it!

- The Wizard of Pants
- Candle in the Pants
- America's Got Pants
- Snow Pants and the Seven Pants
- The Pants of the Day.

- Pants on the Soles of Her Shoes.
- Diamonds on the Soles of Her Pants.

Isn't that funny? Picture that. Soles on her pants, and belts on her shoes. It's backwards! Close your eyes and put soles on your pants. One leg at a time. Here's the one I like best: "Dr. Seuss' Pants." Imagine that one. Big pants, little pants, what begins with pants? Pants on the alligator, pants, pants, pants. Old pants, new pants, cold pants, blue pants. Old, cold pants with soles.

The tall person has longer pants than the short person, whose pants are shorter than the tall person's pants. The runner pants at the end of the race. Alternate meanings, isn't that fun? So clever of me.

Peter Piper picked a pair of pants, and you can too. Picture this. Your final pants. They might be green, they might be brown, you might've bought them out of town. They might be loose, they might be tight, I wish upon these pants tonight. I won't judge the pair you pick, and I won't judge *you* for the pair you pick. I promise. You have my word.

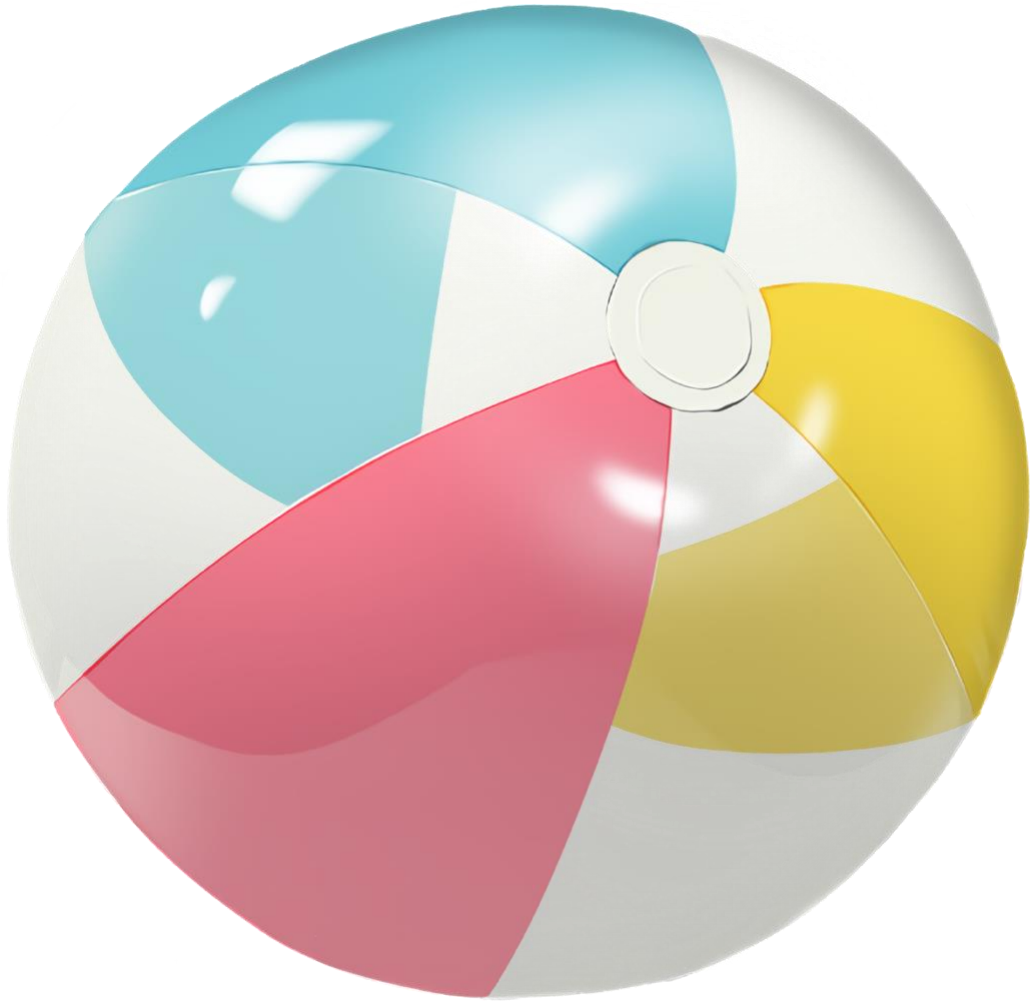
They might be in a museum on display, they might smell like coffee, they might be sneezed on every day. They might catch treasures. Can pants do that? Who's to say? They might be old, they might be new, they might be cold, they might be blue. Your final pants. Now picture this:

We're having a big Friday! You're wearing your final pants. Fancy pants? Maybe. Let's start our big Friday!

- We watch a movie and the characters are wearing pants.
- We listen to music and the singer is wearing pants.
- We tell scary stories and the characters are wearing pants.
- Everyone is wearing pants!

First pants, final pants, today's the day to think about pants. I'm keeping my pants on today. Do *not* make me take off my pants.





**Beach Ball**  
*by Holly Dunn-Asselin*



**African Dress Design**  
*by Jacara Glaudin*

## Why Can't You See Me?

by Jessica Williams-Daley

### Why can't You see me?

Is my complexion too dark for you to see  
Are my luscious lips preventing you from  
hearing my pleas

### Why can't You see me?

Is my hair blocking your field of vision Is it  
a premonition  
That my life rests upon your decisions

### Why can't You see me?

Is my nose too ethnic  
Does it make you skeptic  
Or does it showcase that to You, I am p  
athetic

### Why can't You see me?

Do I not measure up with the standards you  
inflict upon my race  
Are we seen as a disgrace  
Is that why you spray our faces with Mace

**Are my hands reaching out to the sky a  
weapon, as they beg the sun to light up  
my skin to make my gestures more  
visible.**

More visible for **You**

**You**, the one who is trying to kill my  
**Brothers and Sisters**

**You**, the one who does not believe that My  
Life Matters.

Does me being **Black** make **You** want to  
shoot me

Do I *deserve* to be shot at  
Am I an *object* that should be *disposed of*

### Do I really matter?

**You** don't have the right to take the lives  
away from my **Brothers and Sisters**

**We** have rights, **We** are educated, **We**  
matter.

**You** may take our Awards, **You** may take  
our Ideas, **You** may take our Rights and our  
Dreams

But **You** only make **Us** work ten times  
harder

Because **We** are visionaries

Authors, Poets, Doctors, Musicians...

Scientists, Politicians, Diplomats, Officers...

**We** can be anything we dream of

**We** have the same opportunities as you

Yet still,

**Why can't You see me**

~

Below is the link to the spoken word version of "Why Can't You See Me?" by Jessica Williams-Daley

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pV3aNzA9Wij22Q9Sddw3v2KDj3UtLJAaw/view?usp=sharing>



**10 People; Changement**  
*by Jérôme Martin*

**Country Club**  
*by Rachel Anson*

Rows and rows of mansions  
A woman in high fashion  
Green yards and blue pools  
Loud parties to seem cool  
Credit cards taste sweet  
Wine and oysters to eat  
The roar of a Rover  
As I pick green clover





**Relativité de beaux mauvais temps**  
*by Jérôme Martin*

## Mr. Donahue

by Jasper Bleho-Levacher

I had a plan, you see—a seamless plan, really—to make some quick money and in the process get myself out of a jam. I owed a large sum to some guy and now he was coming knocking, demanding it back—and with interest, of course. I had thought long and hard about how I would come up with the needed cash. I spent countless nights hitting my head against the wall, hoping an idea would fall out. I counted and recounted my money, estimated and reestimated the worth of my belongings, ran through a list of my contacts about a dozen times to try to determine who I could con into lending to me. My idea finally came to me when I opened my medicine cabinet one day. I saw the xanax and I saw the painkillers and I saw the cough syrup and the light of miraculous epiphany—that eureka moment—just shone right there in front of me. I took a step forward and then stood there basking in it for a moment, shocked, and I knew I had been saved.

You see, I lived in an apartment building that happened to be situated right next to Benjamin Donahue's Pharmacy. Great guy, really, Mr. Donahue. Over the few years I'd been living here, I'd grown to deeply respect him. Although we only spoke a few times, I knew he was a deeply religious man, a Catholic. But not that pretentious, moralistic kind of Christian. Rather, Mr. Donahue was caring, respectful, charitable. Running down crowded streets in the center of the city, looking for my next high or escaping the cops, I would often spot him serving meals to the homeless, volunteering at community events, cheering up children, and just generally being a much better human being than I could ever be. The light of the world, as his Savior might put it.

Everywhere I looked, Mr. Donahue was there, living his life perfectly in parallel to mine but also fundamentally at odds with it. Where he was the good father, the family man, I was the junkie, the dead beat; where he was a respected member of the community, I was a criminal and a low life; where he was the successful, educated, upper middle-class archetype that immigrants dreamed of becoming, I was the drop-out, the outcast. And so Mr. Donahue seemed to exist as my reflection; a bitter reminder, through all of his saintly endeavors, of my failed and pathetic existence, of just how wretched I had allowed my life to become. I was not jealous of him in any way, however. I was simply in awe. It was impossible not to admire this image of the perfected man which I knew I could never even attempt to emulate. There are some virtuous people who even the most unrepentant of sinners cannot help but esteem.

So, yes, Mr. Donahue had long ago earned my respect. But, like I said, I needed money badly. The plan was to somehow get my hands on some of his stock and then pawn it off to the first interested dealer. Over the next few days I contemplated various ways I could do so. I first considered falsifying prescriptions. But that seemed to be a lengthy process and a tedious one, too. I didn't have the patience and I didn't have the time; every passing day without masked men barging in and breaking me in half seemed like a blessing from God. I thought briefly of bribing Mr. Donahue. But I respected that saint too much to test—and thus also doubt—his honesty and integrity in this way. An armed robbery was out of the question as I instantly knew when the ephemeral thought presented itself to me that I did not have the character nor the audacity to carry out such an act.

Now, you'd think I'd might've gotten discouraged by my unfruitful attempts at finding an easy way to get what I wanted and that I'd instead go back to hitting my head against the wall, but the idea was already there, you see, alive and burrowed deep in my mind. It was without a doubt God-given, or so I was convinced at the time. Even now, seeing all that has transpired since then and because of my pursuing this idea, all my misfortunes and little

sufferings, I am still not willing to dismiss my gut feeling that this was divine intervention. After all, who am I to repudiate God when He has shown Himself to me? And so I pushed on and thought of it some more. I came to the conclusion I'd have a better chance breaking in late at night, at which point the drugs would be remarkably easy to steal, as I wouldn't have to fear the presence of witnesses or rely on the assumed corruptibility of a holy man.

When I had finally figured this out, it was midday and I spent the next several hours planning my robbery in minute detail. I took into account the surveillance cameras and the alarm, I revised my lockpicking skills, I drew a map of the pharmacy from memory (including where I thought the pharmaceuticals would be kept, in order to avoid fumbling around too much), I found myself a ski mask and entirely non-descript black clothes so there would be no way of identifying me. Well anyways, you get the idea: I was ready. More ready, in fact, than I had ever been for anything in my entire life so far.

So that night, at three a.m. sharp, I left my apartment. This is the perfect time to conduct any kind of nefarious activity, when the night owls have finally gone to sleep, but allowing just enough time to commit the crime before the dreadful "self-improvement" crowd wakes up for their morning run or whatever. I already had my robber's costume on. I had also brought a small black backpack where I would throw in my loot when the time came. There was no camera on my floor, so the police would not see me exiting my loft if ever they checked my building's surveillance system. I took extra care to not wake my neighbors. If ever the police came asking questions in our building, I did not want anyone recalling the noise of a door slamming at a suspiciously late hour of the night.

I tiptoed down the few flights of stairs separating my apartment from the street. I had figured the sound of the elevator might also attract attention. I quickly made my way down the hall and through the lobby, pushed open the door and stepped out onto the street. It must have been fairly cold but I hardly noticed: the adrenaline had already begun to course through my veins, allowing me to withstand this sort of discomfort. A bit paranoid, I looked around, half expecting to see a local tweaker staring at me from behind a garbage bin or something. There was nobody. The streetlamps flickered, the wind rushed in from somewhere downtown, pushing brown paper bags of fast food and other typical urban waste ever further down the street. I could hear the bustle of the city all around me: sirens, laughter in the distance, the incessant New York City honking that I had eventually grown accustomed to... These kinds of sounds become white noise once you have been hearing them for long enough, a continuous soundtrack faintly playing in the background of our alienated city lives and always so frustratingly indifferent to us and our miseries. The city truly never slept, but that night my street was eerily quiet, in stark contrast to the mounting anxiety I was feeling.

I headed for the pharmacy, which was to my left. Between it and my building was a narrow dirt alley which followed the contour of Mr. Donahue's business and widened into a small staff parking lot at the back. In my all-black attire I blended in with the starless city night and snuck to the back of the pharmacy. There was still a car in the parking lot. I figured it was someone taking advantage of the unsupervised (and thus free) parking for the night. I turned to face the glass back door of the building, through which I would enter. I took a few steps towards it, and then a deep breath. Ignoring the camera positioned above the exit, I pulled the handleset towards me, pressing my thumb down on the lever. Locked, as expected. I knelt before it and with slightly shaking hands took out my tools. I stuck my tension wrench into the keyway and turned clockwise, applying just a little bit of tension. Then I began picking the pins one by one with my hook. I heard the satisfying faint click of each pin setting, one after another, six times in total. Like magic, the plug rotated and—voilà!—I was in.

I tensed up a bit, expecting to hear the dreaded beep of the alarm system go off, prompting me for the code. I had of course done my research on how to disable the system: I knew how to locate and disconnect its battery. But I wouldn't have a lot of time to do so. This was the only part of my plan that I was not fully confident I could pull off and it had been responsible for most of the anxiety I had been feeling up to this point. I had figured that if ever I sensed I wouldn't finish the task in time, I would simply rush to where Mr. Donahue kept his pharmaceuticals and cram as many prescription bottles as I could into my backpack in under precisely three minutes, so as to be able to flee the scene before the police showed up.

But I did not hear a beep or any kind of indication that an alarm system was active. Strange. Perhaps one of the pharmacy's newer employees had forgotten to arm it on their way out that night. Well, whatever. I exhaled deeply, relieved. I stuffed my lockpicking set in my pocket and turned to close the door behind me. As I did so, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the glass. With the ski mask pulled down onto my face, I couldn't make out my features, of course. But my eyes were there, scrutinizing me. Something about them made me momentarily forget about my mission and I just stood there, being looked over and judged by this reflection of me who in some strange way felt like an Other to me. As I peered into the being's eyes, I felt a great weight fall on my shoulders. I realized how very wrong this all felt—me being here, planning to rob a pharmacy blind in the middle of the night. And for what? Because I needed money, I rationalized. But the being did not accept excuses. Why was I in this situation in the first place? I was brought back in time, every major event in my life leading up to this moment being played back to me in reverse chronology. I saw myself lying, zombie-like, on the bed of my cluttered apartment with a syringe and a spoon by my side, and my belt wrapped around my arm. I saw myself lurking in dark alleys with the other junkheads, dreaming up new ways to come up with the money to pay for our next fix. I saw blood trickling from my forearms and a razor blade in my right hand. I saw empty eyes, dirty hair, a body wasting away. I saw the looks of disappointment on countless faces: those of employers, of friends, of family members. I saw my girlfriend with her tear-diluted makeup dripping from her chin, each bitter, black drop containing a unique world of pain, and I saw my confused baby daughter in her arms, wailing. I saw her driving away from my apartment at full speed without even a glance in the rearview mirror. And finally, I saw my mom and I knew I had failed her. This final realization sent a tidal wave of shame and guilt through me.



I stood looking at the being for a while, painfully frightened and unsure of what to do with this unwanted knowledge. I finally broke out of my hypnotic state and remembered where I was. I knew I had to finish what I had started. I didn't really have a choice. But I made a promise that once all this debt bullshit was over with, I would abandon this empty life of mine and try to make something of myself. It sounds like a vague and empty promise, I know. One that every low life makes a million times in their life and to every single person they meet. I had probably regurgitated this sort of pathetic speech at least a few times myself. But the difference is that this time I meant it. Thinking of the state of my life made me nauseous. I simply couldn't stand it anymore.

I turned away from the entity and back to the corridor leading to the backstore. Most of the pharmacy was lit up but not here, so I fished out my flashlight from my backpack and illuminated a path in front of me, which I then followed. It was like the light of God showing me the way to my new life. I was walking on a ray of divine sunlight. The holy path led me first to the staff lunchroom. The chairs were scattered around the room, as if the pharmacy's employees had not had the motivation to push them back under the table. The small space seemed incredibly eerie to me in that moment, abandoned by its occupants. A small, pitiful room without a purpose.

But I did not have much time to dwell on my impressions of it, as I suddenly became aware of a stream of small noises coming from the adjacent backstore. It sounded like someone rummaging through their cluttered attic. I felt that all too familiar rush of fear-tinged adrenaline and my initial instinct was to bolt out of the building. But the movements didn't seem all that close to me, so, having allowed myself some time to calm down, I figured I was in no immediate danger of being discovered. The more I listened to the muffled sounds, the more I became curious as to what could be causing them. Another robber? But what were the odds of that, realistically? A mouse or some other vermin? But the noise sounded much too *human*, if that makes sense. An employee working overtime? But at three AM?

I turned off my flashlight and allowed my eyes to become accustomed to the darkness, all the while paying close attention to the movements of the adjacent room's occupant or occupants. Just like the rest of the pharmacy, the backstore was lit up and some of its light entered the lunchroom, so it only took a few seconds for me to see adequately. I heard sporadic showers of hard small objects crashing onto some other surface with dull thuds. It brought back memories of marbles being dropped onto the rubbery floor of our elementary school's gymnasium. These were the most prominent of the sounds reaching my ears, but there were a variety of others I couldn't identify, too. I carefully stepped towards the break room's door (which was held open by the doorstop), sidestepping the randomly placed chairs blocking my path. Having reached it, I hesitantly craned my neck around the door frame and peered into the surprisingly vast backstore.

And there he was, Benjamin Donahue, in his pharmacist's lab coat and with his back to me. This surprised me a great deal. Although he was the owner of the pharmacy, I had not even considered he could have been the cause of the noises I had been hearing. Mr. Donahue had a family, after all. A family he cared very much about. What was he doing here in the middle of the night, away from those he loved?

He was maybe fifty meters or so away from me, pacing frantically. A nervous energy seemed to animate him. Prescription bottles littered the floor of the backstore. The cabinets in which the pharmaceuticals were ordinarily locked (and which I had planned on raiding) were flung open and mostly emptied. It took me a while to get a sense of what Mr. Donahue was doing and specifically to see *it*, but the latter became hard to miss when he dragged it to the middle of the room, in the spotlight of one of the large lights hanging from the ceiling.

It was a plastic pool, like those we used to splash around in as children, but much bigger. And it was filled with hundreds of capsules, tablets and pills. All of the colours of the rainbow were present. They seemed to be floating on some liquid beneath. Judging by the dozens of open bottles of cough suppressants that had been thrown in all directions onto the ground, I guessed it was a mixture of several opiate-based cough syrups. It was an odd sight, but also quite mesmerizing. The slow swirl of the contents of the pool was bizarrely hypnotic. Mr. Donahue seemed to be under its spell too because he stood there looking at it for a few minutes. Then, he started slowly undressing. At this point, so entranced by what was unfolding before me, I had stepped out from behind the wall and was standing in the doorway, mouth agape. My all-black outfit blended in with the darkness of the lunchroom so I knew he wouldn't notice me.

Once completely naked, Mr Donahue stopped and looked at the pool once again. Perhaps he was having his doubts. But he made up his mind and—to my astonishment—jumped into the pool. Great walls of purple liquid surged up as a reaction to his weight and splashed onto the ground around the pool, drenching his clothes. What occurred from this point on and well into the morning was the single most unforgettable and puzzling spectacle I have witnessed in my short life. To describe it in great detail would be pointless. I feel like too many words would betray the *experience* of it. But I will do my best to give you a sense of what I observed that night.

Mr. Donahue thrashed, splashed, jumped and twirled with much enthusiasm, as if he were a dancer at an audition and the plastic pool he was trampling were his stage. Other times, he was a dolphin, a human sine function, diving over and over again into the sweet syrup. And then he would rest for a while, attempting to float on top of the polluted pond he had created. As the night wore on, his original nervousness gave way to an intense, almost tangible euphoria. He was drinking from the fountain of youth. And many times he literally gulped down as much psychoactive fabric—whether solid or liquid—as he could fit into his mouth. Mr. Donahue had discovered the pleasures of altered brain chemistry. He laughed and laughed and laughed. He cried tears of joy. No pacifying force could disrupt his joyful riot and no rioter could disturb his peace of mind. He had elevated himself above all things. He was above reality itself. He was a bodhisattva and this was his *pīti* and his *sukha*. This was hedonism taken to new heights. And Mr. Donahue was high, to say the least. I was beginning to think the madman had stumbled into Eternity and had led me there, too. I thought he would never come down.

Sure, he did slow down after a while, the opiates and other substances having significantly sedated him. But his mind seemed to go on exploring the surreal realms he had entered even when his body had come to a stop. And this went on for hours. Eventually, he fell asleep in his psychotropic lake, his head drooping and his mouth salivating.

“Sweet dreams, Mr. Donahue,” I whispered.

At around 9 o'clock in the morning, the holy man woke up with a start. Strangely enough, none of his employees had ever showed up to open the pharmacy for the day and no customer had interrupted the monotony of his snores. I guess he had told everyone he would not be opening that day. I had stayed motionless all that time, not wanting to interfere with what I was witnessing. He looked around, confused, trying to process everything. How he had not overdosed is a complete mystery to me. Even in sin, God seemed to be with him. That is the only explanation I have found.

But I will never forget the transformation his facial expression underwent when he realized what he had done and where he was. Puzzlement gave way to shame, and then horror. Mr. Donahue started crying. Oh and did he cry. If you had tasted the remaining syrup in the pool afterwards, it would have been fairly salty, no doubt. The tears rolled down his cheeks endlessly, as if he were evacuating all the codeine in his blood through his eyes. The scene was the exact opposite of what I had observed just a few hours before. He was the epitome of despair, just like he had previously been the epitome of rapture. It was as if he had been allowed to climb the world's highest peak only to be immediately and brutally pulled back down by his collar as soon as he had caught a glimpse of the sense of freedom it offered. I couldn't help but think that he might still be up there somewhere had he not fallen asleep. Instead, here he was at the base of the mountain, lying in a pool of his own blood with all of his limbs broken. Tragic.

I stood there for a while, not sure what to do. I decided to go back to my apartment. But the being stopped me at the exit again. I looked into its glass eyes and I knew I had been led here for a reason. God had offered me an opportunity to redeem myself. It had been revealed that Mr. Donahue was not a perfect man with a perfect life after all. His life was a mess just like mine. He was yet another man on the verge of drowning, struggling

through any means necessary to keep himself afloat, all the while conscious his body was much too weak to do so. Despite the obvious differences between us—in lifestyle and in temperament—he seemed to be just like me in that moment. Seeing him at his most vulnerable humanized him for me. From the moment we are thrown into this world, we struggle to understand why. Living is truly traumatic; Mr. Donahue had reminded me of that fact. He needed help; I was here to save his soul. So I marched back into the break room, took off my ski mask and then took a few steps into the backstore.

“It's alright, Mr. Donahue. I know what you're feeling.”

He looked up. His eyes widened in terror. I'm not sure he recognized me. He reached for his phone, which was in his pants' pocket near the pool (and which had miraculously survived the purple floods).

And that's how I ended up in here with you, my friend, with nothing but steel bars and concrete walls to look at all day.



**Ocean Mist**  
*By Antoine Shatawy*





**Palm Palace**  
*By Antoine Shatawy*



**Seal of Approval**  
*By Antoine Shatawy*



## **One in the Same**

*by Hailie Szabo*

California, you're on fire and who are we  
to blame you  
Rachel's revenge some would say  
And if I leave you, let me  
So I can bring back to you what has been lost

California, you're nothing now and  
who are we to judge?  
We're all nothing, together, in the grand scheme  
of things  
and I don't worry now about where we go  
when our time is done here

Our time was over before it even began  
and I know there is nothing to change that  
We're 2 minutes to midnight, whatever the hell  
that means  
and no one seems to care except those that  
deserve to live

California, I think you're devoid of  
not people but of soul  
You're on fire and they laugh and take photos  
similar to the way they did when  
they left me  
Cold in a push up bra blowing a lollipop  
Is that what makes money these days?

California we are one in the same  
Where everyone knows our name, but  
Devoid of soul  
On fire raging  
Nothing

California  
we are nothing

**one**

— i will plant  
the seed of my dream  
and watch it engulf  
the vast sea of green  
that is the prairie of life.

with poppy reds  
and daisy whites  
that sprout in spring,  
but do not wither in winter.

**two**

blood runs thick in your veins,  
retracing dormant stars  
and the breath of nebulas,  
passing egg-yolk suns  
and honey-infused milky ways.

you were already destined to be,  
at the first catalysts of the cosmos.  
spun out of the same fabric as the gods,  
(the likes of venus and mars)  
with a flare for the extraterrestrial and the extraordinary,  
both of which you seem to be.

*by SRA*

## **Blue Panel II**

*by Paige Suhl*

Etta sat on her red velvet couch, smoking, facing her newly acquired art piece. She tipped her cigarette into a crystal ash tray and stood up to get a better glimpse of the painting. She tilted her head slightly to the left then slightly to the right, hoping to see something new.

“Goddamn waste of money,” she said to herself, talking through her cigarette.

Etta had just acquired a very prominent painting from The Met. It took quite a large sum of money to get them to part with it but in the moment it felt worth it. Etta had heard rumours the rich widow down the road was looking to purchase it and there was no chance Etta was going to let that crazy old bat upstage her. So, she may have just wasted a couple hundred thousand on a blue parallelogram, it was an investment. At least that’s what she told herself. Etta had hung the painting front and center above her grand fireplace in her living room because she’d be damned if she didn’t get her money’s worth.

Etta decided to get closer to the painting, trying to really inspect it. She had nearly screamed when she found out she was older than the painting (and that it was nearly worth more than her). Now as she reflected on the painting she wondered if wisdom really did come with age because this may have been her worst purchase since she had two trees in her front lawn moved to better block the early afternoon sun. She went to light the two candles on the green marble mantle underneath the painting, hoping it would look different in another light. No luck, it was the same blue painting it was before.

“At least I can say it’s mine,” Etta said, again to herself. She felt satisfied to know that she owned this painting and no one else did. This painting let everyone know where she stood in the world. She couldn’t wait to invite the widow down the street for afternoon tea and rub it in her face that Etta had acquired the painting first. She began heading towards the large staircase.

When Etta got to her room, she finally stubbed out her cigarette. She should really stop smoking in here, she thought to herself, it smelt strongly of smoke, definitely clashing with the usual scent of Chanel No. 5. Etta sat down on her canopy bed, clinging to the silk sheets. She was feeling quite lightheaded and was having difficulty breathing. The air in the room felt hot and heavy, suffocating. She fumbled her way to the bathroom, trying to turn on the faucet to cool down. As she began to run the water, she could hear shouting from below.

“Good lord! I am trying to sleep. Quit that shouting,” she yelled, immediately hearing footsteps rushing up the stairs.

“Miss Etta, I am so sorry to barge in, but you must evacuate immediately,” said her butler Benson.

“For what reason may I ask? And it was incredibly rude of you to barge in Benson. I’ll be taking note of this behaviour,” she replied, moving over to her bed. The room was getting so stuffy.

“The living room is on fire miss,” Benson said matter-of-factly, still keeping his cool.

“But my painting is in the living room!” cried Etta, quickly putting it together.

In an instant she was racing out of her room. Etta didn't know her body could still move like this. The speed at which she descended the stairs surprised her. To her horror when she made it to the bottom she was staring into the burning blue parallelogram. Like a vision from hell, the canvas was curling and falling from the wooden frame that supports it.

Etta stood, her mouth agape, too shocked to say anything. She watched as her home burned and collapsed in the flames, the blue painting at the center of it all. Her beautiful home, her beautiful life, all gone in an instant. She could hear the sirens of approaching firetrucks.

As people ran out of the house around her, Etta couldn't get herself to move. She had grown up in this home, she had cared for this home. She wasn't leaving it and she sure as hell was not leaving that painting.

The red velvet couch and side table that faced the fireplace had somehow managed to stay unscathed from the fire. Etta opened the table's drawer and pulled out a cigarette. She walked over to the painting and lit the cigarette in the burning hole at the heart of it. She returned to the couch and sat down; the cushions huffed with soot as she sat.

Etta sat and smoked, tears slowly falling from her eyes. Etta knew that if her house was going to burn she was going down with it. Etta tilted her head trying to get a good look at the painting one last time. She should have just taken a stack of cash and thrown it in the fireplace, it would have made less of a mess.

Etta was still crying, something she hadn't done for a while. She realized that she wasn't crying over the painting, her house or the fact that she was probably going to die. She was crying because she would rather die in her home surrounded by her riches than leave and have to live a life without her luxuries and the only home she has ever known.

Etta closed her eyes and took a drag from her cigarette. Her home was burning, and she wasn't going to let it burn alone.





**In a Field of Marigolds**

*by Anna Gong*

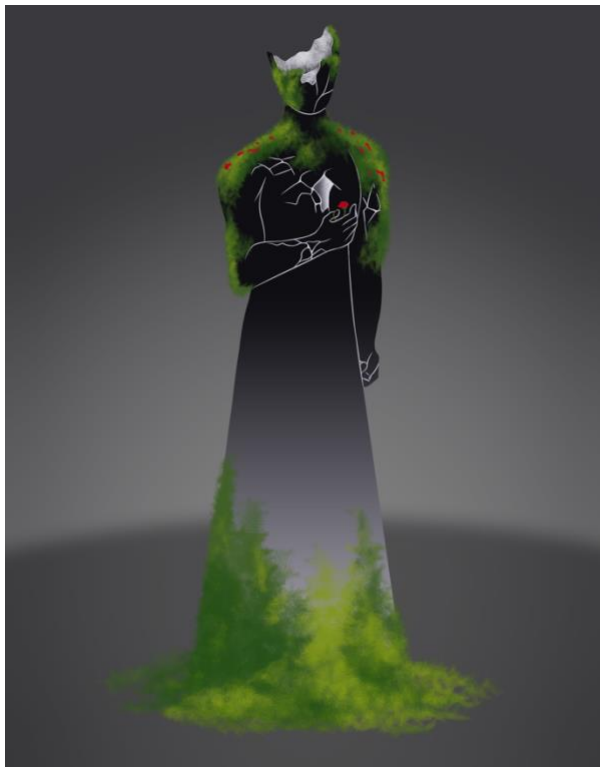
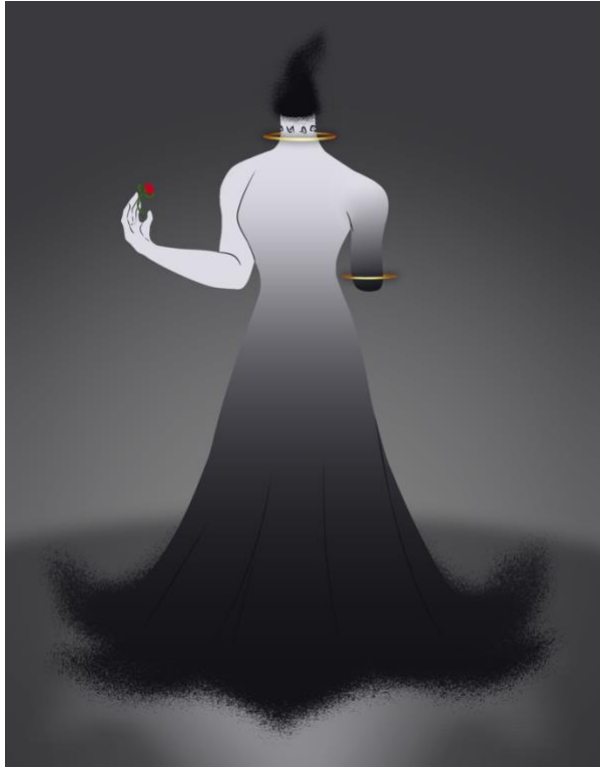
## **Wrong World for You**

*by Angie Daher*

They only glorify when you're gone,  
Like the weapons of unforeseeable crimes.  
The salt from my tears fade into the orange sky  
All I do is cry, cry, cry

No one recalls your silken blue voice  
But in my palms, I can feel it;  
The dress you gave me,  
Stained by the delicate red that painted your complexion.

Yellow hair, invisible clothes  
I see the torture they bestowed  
Though you were dusted off, quick as a broken vase  
All I can do is cry



Top Left: **The Higher Guardian**  
Middle Right: **The Inner Guardians**  
Bottom Left: **The Lower Guardian**  
*by Holly Dunn-Asselin*

## **Smoking on the County Line**

*by Hailie Szabo*

Orthodontist clock reads 2:34  
Minutes before I'm gone under  
And in that dream I wondered  
along a trail with you

Lilac bush fires smoking  
on the County Line  
You hate it but I crave them  
And you still kiss me anyways

Hollow stomach made it worse  
'Cause I felt the fire in my throat  
To wake up and realize  
It had been you inside of me

I still woke up with you there  
Peeling oranges in my skirt  
Fingernails full of dirt from  
Brushing off the ashes

If I could go a million times  
I'd sit right on the County Line  
Waiting for you to light the fire  
Under me over, and over, and over

The way you call out for me  
Over and over  
Instead I stare at 5000k  
Hanging from the ceiling

I pretend it's my camera flash  
You pretend we live on a farm  
Stomach acid raw and on the cusp  
Of making us throw up

It's not the starvation, I think  
it's us laughing  
That's all we do together anyways  
It's all I wanna do forever

Smoking on the County Line with you.





**Farmland Sunset**  
*by Antoine Shatawy*



**Tap**  
*by Aidan Magoon*

I stare at the photograph in my hand. The image doesn't really register in my brain. I don't see it, I *feel* it. And it feels empty. It feels like regret, and shame. It feels like a neglected wound, festering with puss and blood, demanding you cut off your entire arm which has shriveled and putrefied. It feels cold. So I warm myself up.

The lighter burns through the image, leaving ashes sprinkling the ground. It's a good thing I'm outside, or this definitely would've alerted my landlord. This was one of the few days not frosty enough to keep me inside, giving me the opportunity to come sit here in the park. Out of the corner of my eye, I see them: Lindsay and Dennis. My neighbours. I remember going on double dates with them. It was nice. They were younger, more hopeful. They still are. I see Lindsay holding something in her arms. I don't know what's wrong with me, but my first thought is that it's a football. Of course, it isn't. It's a baby. They're chatting about something. Their faces are glowing. The warm sun holds them together, in this moment, truly in love. I know what they must be feeling, must be thinking to themselves. How nothing will compare to this, how they would be ready to spend all of eternity in this moment. Nevermind the freezing temperatures. Lindsay pulls out a camera, and they smile as the baby looks off in the distance. An image captures this perfect moment forever, allowing them to move on while still retaining its memory.

Compared to the warm smiles on their faces, my lighter feels like a block of ice. I cup my left hand around the flame, and shiver. Back before the apartment felt so empty, seeing them out here used to make me smile. I'd see them set up picnics in the grass, the warm sun adding a glow to their already beaming expressions. Seeing them together, so happy, it was pleasant. But as of late, the only thing I feel when I look at them is cold. All I can think of is old photographs lying around a sad, empty apartment. I see their wide eyes, and wider smiles, and all I can think of is throwing up. They seem so happy, so content. Like no force in the world could make things wrong. I don't understand it. They must be too young, must be too naive to see that sooner or later, things will fall apart. Then again, they're about the same age now that I was, right before my life began to feel empty. I imagine it must just be around the corner for them now. I return to my apartment, and sit down at my computer desk. As far as I can tell, any memory left lingering in here has now been burned away. I try to return to my work, but there's something distracting me. A sound I can't quite make out. It sounds like it's coming from right next to me.

I can hear tapping on the wall. It's rhythmic; *tap, tap, tapping*, in consistent five second intervals. I thought that it could be an appliance or something, but I've scoured my apartment for whatever could be making the noise. Nothing. I asked my landlord if it was maybe faulty pipes. She said the place was renovated the month before I moved in. And get this: when she came up to my apartment to listen, it just stopped. It was gone. She must have thought I was crazy. And

when she left, it just started up again. Later, I called her back up to take a look at the phone cable. I just wanted another three minutes of silence.

So, the noise has to be coming from outside the room. I thought it might be the neighbours, Lindsay and Dennis. They said they had no idea what I was going on about. They couldn't hear anything. Probably because of their kid whining all the time. Kids are the worst, just little gremlins. I never understood why my ex wanted one so badly.

Lindsay took the opportunity to invite me over for dinner sometime. As if I'd ever want to walk around their sad little living room, see the telltale signs of deep seeded unrest in the household. That kid must be tearing them apart. I'd almost feel bad, if they weren't such terrible liars. I know that the noise has to be coming from them. There's no other explanation. And it's killing me. I'm trying to sleep, trying to work, and all I hear is the same *tap, tap, tapping* every single minute, of every hour, of every day. Last week, I had to call my manager and tell him that I couldn't come in, couldn't even submit the work I was doing at home. I'm scared I'll lose my job. And those assholes next door, playing some kind of sick joke on me. Maybe this is how they get off. That kid, whining all hours of the night, keeping them up, building the mutual resentment that will kill them on the inside; They want me to suffer like them. They must be so pleased with themselves. Maybe it's Dennis who does it, since he gets home first, or maybe they take turns. Maybe Lindsay does it when she gets in the door, gives him a break. Whichever one, they'd just be standing there, *tap, tap, tapping* away for hours and hours. God, it must be tedious. But it would be worth it, I bet. To see the look in my eyes, the sadness and anger enveloping me. They'd be suffering too, but at least they could make someone else feel worse. But what about when neither of them are home, on their little cute date nights? It's gotta be the babysitter. They must put her up to it, too. I wonder how much they must pay her extra for that. To stand there, *tap tap tap tap tapping* a way, for hours. Two hundred, three, three thousand? I'm sure it doesn't matter. They're at home, with their screaming gremlin, watching the life drain out of each others eyes, always getting into pointless arguments over nothing, just to feel something. And they see me in the hallway, they hear the quaking frustration in my voice, and they laugh. They know I feel the same. They come over and give their best wishes, with big toothy grins. But on the inside,

they're barely on the verge of cackling. If I wasn't so occupied with work, I'd be more sympathetic. You need to offload the pain somehow. But this little prank of theirs is costing me my sanity, and I'm not going to play along anymore. I have to do something, have to act. Have to wipe the smug looks off their faces. I think I'll take them up on that dinner offer.

I smile and hug. The tone in my voice is no longer frustrated, but pleasant and friendly. I wonder if I could just say anything to them- any random assortment of words- with the right tone, the right smile, if they'd react any different. My eyes dart around the living room, looking for any signs: Dishes left untouched, passive-aggressive post-it notes, maybe a dent in the wall. I don't

spot anything. They must've put a lot of work into cleaning things up. I look at their faces, trying to spot something: new wrinkles forming, scabbed lips, a few new grays; a deep irreconcilable sadness in their eyes, a total loss of motivation, the ever-present impression that they haven't succeeded in any goal, any plan in their adult lives. They look like they just came back from their fucking honeymoon. I figure it's makeup.

We sit down to eat. Dennis is cooking tonight. He says it's roast duck.. I haven't eaten anything that wasn't microwaved in awhile, so i'm pretty thrilled. Lindsay says something about new beginnings, about getting back out there, then throws a half-hearted apology my way for good measure. She isn't laughing, but I can hear it rising in her stomach. It nearly escapes through her smiling teeth, and I think about just getting it over with now, doing what I came here to do. Then; crying. The gremlin wants attention. So she gets up to go tend to her bundle of joy, and I sit alone at the table. I am all by myself, and I realize something: There is no noise. No anything. Just silence. And I sit there, and close my eyes. I don't want to leave. I don't want to do anything. I want to sit here forever.

But I can't.

If I miss my shot now, the opportunity won't come up again. I have to do it. I have to end this. Lindsay comes back to the table, and continues talking. Dennis walks over to us, carrying the duck on a platter. He smiles and hands me the carving knife. I smile back.

I'm crying now. I sit alone in my apartment. I can hear commotion outside. A baby is crying, my landlord is talking to someone. Another voice is shouting at me to open the door. I thought all this would be over. I thought I could get back to my work, have everything make sense. I made sure they couldn't pull their fucking prank on me ever again. But I can still hear it.

The tapping.



**Adornment**  
*by Jessica Tzanetatos*

## **If you were Here**

*by Marina Politakis*

*If you were here, I would show you that life gets better.*

That there is hope.

I would show you that most days, you can eat supper without the guilt.

The road to recovery isn't as scary as you think.

You would see that not all days are easy, but that has only made you stronger.

Your caloric intake is now perceived as body fuel rather than body worth.

I would show you that your countless cries for help have finally worked.

With your support system and 6 o'clock vitamin, your sanity has slowly returned.

You go to bed every night soundly without an aching pain in your chest.

You wake up assured that you have a place in this world, your idea of self has never felt so clear.

The distorted self-image you had for years is finally over, you now have yourself figured out.

Your overly euphoric days are now controlled, and you are no longer afraid of the intense lows.

The chronic feelings of emptiness you once felt are no longer a daily occurrence.

Your tattoos now show something beautiful, when it was once ugly.

I would show you that unstable relationships do not equal love.

Your impulsivity is no longer a side of you that you can no longer control,

Most nights you stay in watching Netflix rather than go out and endanger yourself for just a moment of relief and self-worth.

The abuse you once perceived as love is now much clearer, you were never loved.

The manipulation you endured has awoken you and taught you things school couldn't.

That physical touch should be soft and delicate, not painful.

The resentment you feel towards those who betrayed your trust has now healed.

You were never asking for too much, just the wrong person.

To my younger self,

if you were here, I would show you that life gets better.

You are now loved.

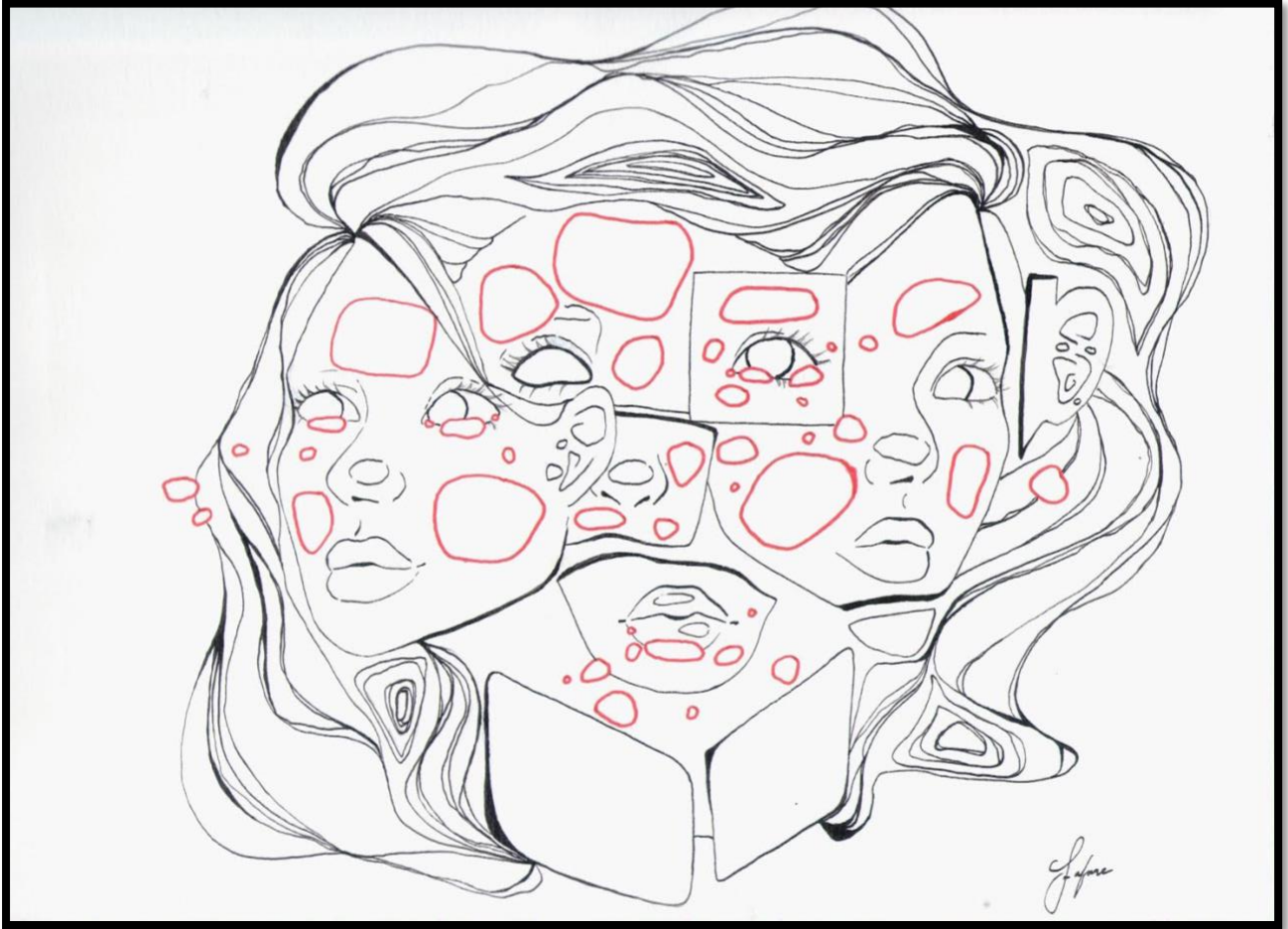
You are now understood.

You are now safe.

And I wish I could tell you all of this today.

But you don't deserve another lie





**Emily and I**  
*by Célia Pain-Torres*

## **4c**

*By Jessica Williams-Daley*

Big lips  
4c hair  
These traits make them all stare

Dark skin Nubian Queen Treated wrong Downright mean

You hurt her  
You plague her  
You say what you want to say

But she's brave  
She's strong  
She's got it all  
And you know that you're all wrong

Thick skin Trying to win

They throw stones At every whim

She tries  
But to her demise Finds herself despised And stigmatized

However she rises  
She survives  
And leaves everyone mesmerized

Because the girl with the 4c hair  
Has all the flair  
And will rise to the challenges everywhere

## **I Filled My Vase With Hostile Company**

*by Juman Khanji*

Damp sand from trips to cold beaches.  
Sharp rocks I stepped on near dirty ponds.  
Wet leaves of a flaxen yellow shade.  
Withering roses from a lover I couldn't hate.  
Rusty coins of countries I still miss.  
Paper cutouts of my most banal writings.  
Sticky glitter of some terrible art project.  
"Good things" that turned out to be  
too good to be true, unsurprisingly.  
And as I filled this vase past its capacity,  
someone told me something  
I didn't want to see.  
"Soon it shall break and spill  
on to your surroundings.  
That's when you'll know;  
these shards of glass will only  
pierce deeper cuts if you  
keep them around."



**Terrence Toy**  
*by Holly Dunn-Asselin*

## **Vampire: The Horrors of Commitment**

*by Anonymous*

A violet sky cracked by a white bolt  
Stretches over the house beyond the graveyard.  
The skeleton orchestra work their morbid symphony  
Up to a spine-chilling scream.

The flowers in your garden  
Have been dead for years but now  
They stir to life in freakish terror  
To watch the night's final chase scene.

Stained glass,  
Red velvet sheets.  
Vampire, you did worse than kill me;  
You brought me to life.

Blush-red knuckles around a gleaming knife  
You sliced me open, caught my heart and seized it tight.  
Now I'm forced to chase you for it  
In the flicker of the candle-light.

The virgin's tattered wedding dress  
You've dressed me in slips down my shoulders.  
The gritty hallway carpet  
Skins the bottom of my bare feet.

The masked minister asks,  
Who giveth this woman?  
We do, say the thirteen skeletons in my closet,  
Standing proud.

Vampire,  
I know you've told me not to call you that.  
No longer a hollow thing,  
your warm skin reminds me everytime.  
But the shadows know you well.  
They've become my friends, you see?



They told me all your dirty little secrets  
And about the bones buried at the old elm tree.

So you say that you're a saint now,  
That you've been purified. Those sterling silver rings  
Around your knuckles may not hurt you anymore  
But we both know how much you loved the burn.

Vampire, everything can be just like before  
When all that mattered to us was grime and gore  
I'll even pierce a stake in your heart  
So we'll be right back at the start

Thunder claps above our heads.  
A storm of bats soar out of my mouth.  
My ribcage isn't a home to them anymore,  
No longer cold, it's as hot as the south.

The end credits are rolling in and my  
Legs are about to give.  
I find you in the cathedral praying, vampire,  
My heart stone cold in your fist.

Determined to make it thaw,  
You turn and you press  
Until it begins to beat out of your grasp  
And into my chest.

Vampire,  
Are you happy now?  
I'm crawling into your coffin to tell you  
All my temporary wedding vows.

Vampire,  
I may be here now with my bouquet of lies,  
But I promise you that I'll be gone  
Come sunrise.

## **The Injured Owl's Dying Words**

by Juman Khanji

Don't fly before growing wings.  
I was once avid, wanting it all.  
But I tore my feathers with a fling.

The tug of my jittery heartstrings, s  
wayed forces like Newton's ball.  
So I just flew before growing wings.

I plummeted with a dizzying swing.  
Oh, how crushing was it to feel small.  
I wounded my most treasured thing.

Older ones circled in a lustrous ring,  
I waited for them to give me a call.  
But they flew *after* growing wings.

Oh, if there's one thing that I can bring,  
it is the wisdom that I cannot ignore.  
I'd know, *I* tore my feathers with a fling.

To anyone wishing to soar above water springs,  
do so delicately, *I insist*. It's a long haul.  
Please, don't fly before growing wings.  
Don't tear up your feathers, it stings.



**Fragile! Butterfly**  
*By Antoine Shatawy*



**Azur**  
*By Antoine Shatawy*

## **Saint Lucy**

*by Paige Suhl*

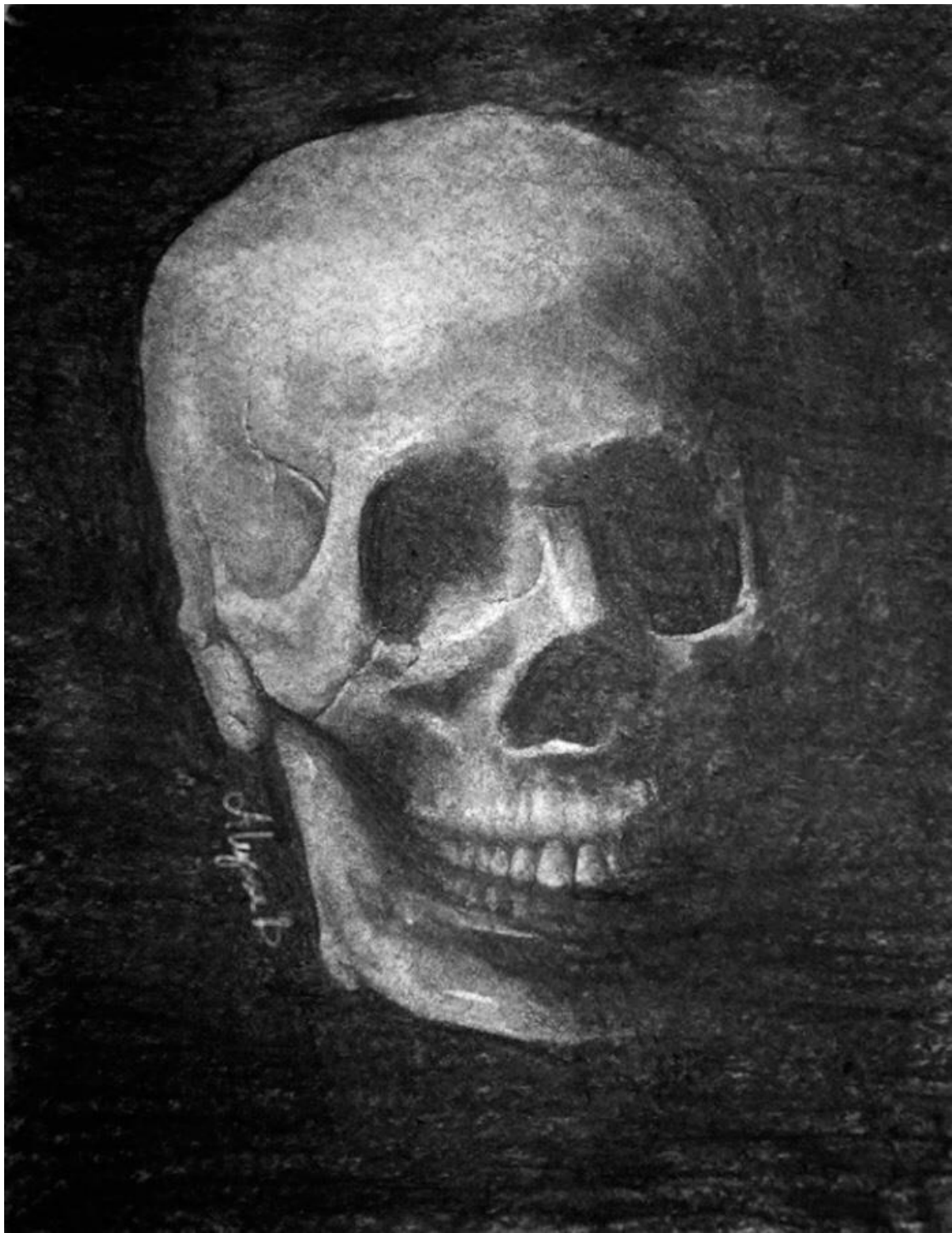
Is she lonely up there, imprisoned in a portrait?  
Standing, a pillar of light in the looming darkness.  
She holds so much power in her piercing stare.  
Eyes sparkling, like diamonds on a silver platter.

Does she see all from where she stands?  
When one eye sets, the other rises  
The eyes that taunted and intrigued.  
No way for her to ever sleep.

No one needs to watch out for her  
A task she can handle effortlessly.  
I like to imagine she is praying for me  
The patron saint of authors, bearer of light.

She smiles meaningfully in her solitude.  
Surrounded only by iconography  
Faded halo shines dimly compared to her.  
I'll keep her company, and she'll watch over me.





**Memento Mori**  
*By Alyssa Durdey*

## **One and Two**

*By Jessica Williams-Daley*

### ***Verse 1***

Gucci shirt  
Gucci bag  
Bet you wish you had it  
Marc Jacobs  
Kylie makeup  
Think it's time to wake up  
We're so blinded by the things that's completely worthless

While people out here working making sure our lives get perfect

### ***Hook***

Too bad my shadow can't envelop me  
I need forces all around against my enemies  
Should I be living in a world where they like killing sprees  
And overlooking the Black people when we scream and plea

### ***Chorus***

One and 2 and 3 and 4,  
Take my pride and something more  
Make me small for sure for sure  
Make me cry for sure for sure

One and 2 and 3 and 4, Sacred walls fall to the floor

Read a book to fill the void  
Make me small for sure for sure

### ***Verse 2***

I'm a believer in the greater good  
Where we can all embrace the different cultures in our neighborhood  
And when we get there  
We gon teach it  
Not impede it  
And believe it  
But just know  
That I can't do it alone

*Verse 3*

When I was young  
my momma used to tell me

Back in the day somebody might sell me  
By growing up I never thought that I'd expect it  
But people now ain't choosing to accept it

*Verse 4*

Was it worth it  
Standing up to them and hurting  
For the people  
Who turn their backs and act deceitful

But now I'm glad cause I can open up their eyes  
and show them that we're all filled with secrets and lies

*Hook*

Too bad my shadow can't envelop me  
I need forces all around against my enemies  
Should I be living in a world where they like killing sprees  
And overlooking the Black people  
when we scream and plea



**Beautiful Bodies**

*By Anthea Marie Tabobo*

## **DNR**

*by Hailie Szabo*

the year is 47  
but you wouldn't get it  
what kind of a life do i want to live  
before i go to heaven  
undressed on a stage, ready to get it  
log cabin in the mountains  
candle flicker, heavy sweater  
go getter with a briefcase  
yellow led better on repeat  
record player on the staircase  
white sheets with a child  
white lies with a smile  
countdown's on the wall already  
kinda unsteady after all the  
amphetamines  
and yes, that's how i've chosen to go  
time of death 1:54  
age 47





**The Connection**  
*By Machenzi Li*





**Contrary Intentions**

*By Machenzi Li*

## **Dawn**

*by Aidan Magoon*

A shadow passes by,  
But the corner is clear. No one's  
Standing there. It's just me at  
My desk. It's dark outside.  
Then I look at the sky; a suburban forest fire climbs high.  
Hands reach up in despair, as the smoke rises below,  
Their gnarled, twig fingers grasping for air.

I look back at my desk and ignore the blazing horizon,  
Its fire consuming everything I don't see.  
The shadow creeps back  
And I ignore it.



**The Bamboo**  
*By Machenzi Li*

**He Who Drinks**  
*by Tammy Haddad*

*Why is it taking so long?*

I am huddling in my mommy's arms just like all the other kids in the hospital waiting room. I start to cough a lot again. My chest hurts and I don't have enough time to breathe between coughs.

'I'm going to go see what's taking them so long,' says my mom when the coughing is done, letting go of me.

I don't want my mommy to go. I extend my arms towards her, opening and closing my small fists desperately. She plucks my hands from out of the air and kisses each one.

'I won't be long, Rami, okay?'

I shake my head. She smiles at me with that weird worried smile she's had on since the coughing started.

'You're a strong boy, aren't you, Rami?'

I nod.

'Well strong boys aren't scared of anything. You can wait for me then, can't you?'

I nod once again. She ruffles my red hair and gets up. As she walks away, I look about the room. It looks, smells, and sounds sick. Other kids are still hiding in their parents' arms. One girl, red all over, is crying, a boy is coughing so loudly the sound is jumping off the walls, hurting my ears, and another boy to my left smells like his parents haven't potty trained him. Yet, the walls are sicker than all of us with their ugly yellow.

It takes me a little bit of time to notice the blond boy who is staring straight at me. No one is with him. He doesn't even look sick at all. In fact, he is swinging his feet back and forth with a big, big smile on his face. He doesn't turn his head away when he notices that I caught his stare although mommy told me it was very rude to look at others. Instead, he gets up and walks towards me, his walk more like floating.

He climbs on the seat to my left and sits cross-legged beside me, taking my hand in his very cold one. I like the feeling. He looks straight into my brown eyes with his big, black ones.

'Hi,' he says, his smile still on his face. 'You look very sick. What's wrong?'

I shrug.

'I'm coughing a lot and I'm very, very tired. But I'm a strong boy, so I'm not scared.'

He leans in, puts his nose to my neck and takes a deep breath. When he sits back up straight, his smile has doubled in size.

'You do seem like a strong boy.'

I nod.

'Where do you live?' he asks me.

'Two blocks away, on Garden Street,' I say, pointing in its general direction.

His face lights up.

'I only live one block from there. Want to be friends?'

I smile at him and extend a hand towards him. I always wanted a friend.

'Yup. My name is Rami.'

He grabs my hand and shakes it with strength.  
'Mine is Shareb.'

...

'Mom, I'm going out to play with Shareb!' I yell to her just as I finish tying my shoes.  
'Have fun.'

I hear her response as I shut the door. I rush to the place I promised to meet my best friend of four years now as I drag the two new water guns my parents got me for my eleventh birthday. They're *clicking* and *clacking* dully behind me as I turn off the main road and head into the forest, keeping a constant pace until I reach a clearing, the sharp blueness of the sky blinding me after the darkness of the forest.

There's a cliff in front of me. Past it is the turquoise sea, patiently brushing and eroding the dirt side of the cliff. Salty air is afloat, gently brushing my skin, and penetrating my nostrils in a pleasant way. The *swish* and *woosh* of waves calm my racing heart down, the latter slowly sinking its beat to the movement of the former. I always liked this spot. It's small and isolated from the rest of the world, the perfect place to come and play with my only friend.

'Shareb!' I exclaim when I see him propped up against a tree.

He doesn't turn instantly at the sound of my voice. Instead, he keeps on staring at the open sky as if finishing a thought he had begun formulating before I disturbed him. We're both eleven but some days I feel like he passed that age a while back. When he's done, he turns to me and grins.

'Rami!'

He gets up and opens his arms into which I rush, dropping my guns on the floor. He closes his arms once my body slams against his and, as usual, buries his nose in my neck.

'Ready?' I ask after some time.

He nods, letting go of me slowly. I rush over to my two new water guns. One was as black as Shareb's eyes, the other as red as my hair. They were the newest model, just out on the market. They both had a 5 L reservoir and allowed for a strong, continuous stream of water. The only time we would be obligated to stop shooting is when we'll need to fill them up.

I explain the features of the water guns to Shareb as we walk down the cliff to the sea from a small path on the left. It's a little dangerous to use, the path being narrow and there being no ramp to stop you from plummeting to the ground and all, but I'm a strong boy, so I'm not really scared of it.

We crouch down near the sea and fill up our guns, him the black one and me, the red.

'Wettest one loses!' we both exclaim at the same time.

And with those words, the game starts. Everything is allowed. You could shoot your opponent while he was refilling, you could trip him and wet him when he's down, anything.

The battle is slowly getting fiercer. I'm drenched but Shareb isn't faring much better. He's shooting at me with all he's got now trying to remedy the equality. I'm doing the exact same thing.

As I try to avoid his squirts, I feel myself moving up something, but I am too engrossed by our battle to really care what was going on. Up and up I go until my gun runs out of water. Shareb still has a lot left. He gets closer and closer as I do everything in my power to dodge his attacks.

Suddenly, I realise we're standing side by side on the narrow path leading down to the sea.  
He trips me.

I flail my arms wildly, trying to regain my balance. Shareb stares at my predicament for a second, and then...

...he shoots.

I fall.

ooooooooowwwwWWW!

My leg, my leg, my leg! It hurts so much. I want my mom. Where is she? I need her help.  
My leg hurts so much!

I was breathing heavily, trying my best not to cry. Shareb is rushing down the path. I extend my arms to him, but instead of helping me, he bends down and puts his nose to my neck, inhaling deeply.

*It's not the time for that, goddamnit!*

When he's done, he straightens up and looks at me with an unfathomable expression. It's his adult face. I dislike it.

'You're still strong, Rami,' he says. 'It wasn't enough to damage you much.'

He sighs.

'I'll go get you some help.'

He turns and walks away. I watch the way his legs look like they're floating, the way the air plays with his golden hair, the way his arms move about his torso.

Through the pain, I feel something slowly creep up within as he floats further and further away from me.

*Don't go.*

...

Shareb is already sitting on one of the park's benches when I arrive, all sweaty and panting from my sprint.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' I blurt out, ashamed of my tardiness.

Shareb hates it when I'm late.

He peers at me with those immense, black eyes of his. Over the years, I had grown to dislike the blackness of them. The colour seems greedy to me, as if it's always hungry for something and was willing to stop at nothing to get it. It devours everything, yanks everything from where it should be, allows no other colour that crosses its path to escape. Nonetheless, I'm



still deeply attracted to Shareb and I refuse to let that selfish colour take him away from me. He's my only friend. Without him, I have nothing.

Shareb grins at me, stands up and opens his arms into which I practically fling myself. He stuffs his nose in my neck.

'How bad do I smell?' I ask, trying to hide just how much the answer mattered to me.

'Not as weak as I'd like you to be.'

I never understand when he speaks like that, but I've learned to stop questioning it. When I did, all it got me was annoyed silences.

He disentangles himself and leads me to the bench, where he sits and I lie down, my legs over his and my hands behind my head. He lays a hand on my thigh as I begin to complain about my mother who keeps yapping about my lack of friends.

'You're enough for me, why won't she get it?'

'Don't underestimate a mother's instincts, Rami. She's a lot more knowledgeable than you think.'

'If she's such an all-knowing being, then why can't she grasp that I'm happy the way things are? I'd rather have a few good friendships than a hundred superficial ones.'

He gives me an indulgent look, shaking his head. Sometimes, he really makes me feel like a child.

Lifting my legs, he gently pushes them off.

'I have to go do something really quickly. I'll be back in about twenty minutes, I'd say. Wait for me at this bench, ok?'

I nod. He leaves as I remain on my back, watching the sky go from blue to purple, the moon slowly making its appearance. The balmy midsummer evening air wraps itself around me pleasantly, like a hug from Shareb would feel if his skin were warm. The crickets begin their nightly song as purple bleeds into black.

The park itself is nice and small. Isolated from main roads, it has this silence, this static feel to it. I like it. Now I understand why Shareb insisted on meeting here.

I am silently gazing at the wonders of the night sky, trying to catch a star or two when an ugly sight comes to block it.

'May I help you?' I ask.

It's a burly teen, not much older than me or Shareb. His visage is scared all over, his nose too large for his already huge face. His eyes are mean, his hair dishevelled and the stench of alcohol, cigarettes and rot emanating from him makes me want to puke.

'Yeah,' he says. His breath is worse than his usual miasma. 'That's our spot you're sleeping in.'

I got up to see who the "our" was. Two other teens, one just as muscular and unsightly as the first punk, the other just as thin as me, are standing a little behind him.

'Really? I didn't know you could own public property.'

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have minded giving up the spot but Shareb asked me to wait here.

He stands up straight, towering over me. If he thinks that's going to scare me, he's wrong. I'm a strong boy, I fear nothing.

'Get lost, kid.'

'And what if I don't?'

'Do him in good.'

It was the thin one who gave the order.

The goon lifts me by my neck, and I begin to wheeze for air. Then, my jaw feels the punch.

*Oh god.*

He doesn't waste time with the second. Or the third. Or the fourth for that matter.

Blood is running warm in my mouth, its metallic taste revolting. He keeps on squeezing my neck. The scars on the guy's face are now covered by black dots. I weakly place my hand on his arm, in hopes of putting an end to the choking, but my bully kindly does it for me by throwing me on the concrete ground.

I spit out the blood and inhale deeply.

Pain, scalding, spreads along the right side of my body yet I can breathe again. That's all that matters.

The giant lumbers towards me. When he's near enough, he comes in for a kick...

... and only meets air.

*Oh no, you don't.*

Again, he tries to kick me and again, still too dazed to get to my feet and run, I roll away. Time and time again, he attempts to place that kick but the sheer size of him slows him down giving me enough time to escape at the last instant. We continue this peculiar dance until I slam into something bony.

*Shoot.*

His kick hurt more than the giant's punch. My mouth refills with blood as all three of them encircle me. I try to get up, but strong guy number two puts his leg on my chest and forces me back to the ground. I wrap my arms around my head just in time for the first kick aimed at it.

My body goes numb after some time. At some point, the small one pulls out a knife and the two giants force my hands off my head and pin them to the ground.

'Let's see how tough you'll feel after you've met Betty over here,' says the thin one as he sits on top of me.

I feel a cool burning on my cheek as he begins to slice. I close my eyes and think of Shareb. Of the way he moves, the way he talks, the way he smells me. He's the only person who understands me, the only person I've ever felt close to.

*Oh no.*

Shareb might be returning any minute now.

*Oh God, oh God. Please keep him busy a little longer, just a small while longer.*

If these punks hurt Shareb because of my stupidity, I don't know what I'd do.

I stopped fighting back a long time ago. I think that's what finally put an end to the torture. The thin one gets up and leaves, the two other following suit.

Tiny fires are ablaze all over my skin where he cut me up, which was everywhere. I close my eyes.

I feel a nose on my neck.

*Shareb!*

I smile.

‘Damn,’ he murmurs. ‘Still too strong to drink it.’

*To drink what?*

...

The *beep* from the heart monitor is unstable. One instant it’s fast, the next I think that my heart has stopped for good. I’m shivering from a fever and the doctors can’t seem to get it down.

Its been thirty years since I was last in this hospital. It was this one my mother brought me to when I was seven, in this one that I first met Shareb.

*Speak of the devil.*

‘I came the second I heard,’ he says, standing at the threshold of my hospital room.

I offer him the brightest grin I can muster which, in my state, looks more like a grimace.

He’s handsomer than ever, the years treated him well, unlike me.

I somehow kept getting myself in trouble. Getting cut up at fifteen is honestly one of the easier things that I’ve been through. I’ve been hit by a car twice, almost got shot in a robbery gone wrong and was poisoned four times. I’m a known figure in almost every hospital in the city.

He climbs into the hospital bed and snuggles with me.

Shareb has always been there for me. After every incident, he always showed up, telling me how I was still too strong, rushing to get me the help I needed. If it wasn’t for him, I think I’d be dead by now.

He sticks his nose in my neck. I shiver violently. As he inhales my scent for what must be the thousandth time, I close my eyes, feeling myself gently slip away, engulfed by oblivion.

Death is near.

‘Finally,’ he murmurs. ‘I’ve been thirsty for the past thirty years.’

He puts his cool hand on my cheek and places his soft lips on mine. Suddenly, I’m dragged out of the darkness. I waited so many years for that kiss. I feel my soul stir and begin to float. It moves up my chest, and feel an emptiness where it previously was, as if it left its proper place. It continues its way up my throat, into my mouth and...

## **The Waiting Game**

*by Jemima S.P. Harms*

Someone always gets up  
at one point, they leave wooden chairs  
bare or a still warm spot on the couch.

I too move, testing my arms reach;

too far.

“Sorry,” I say, “would you mind giving me my glasses real quick?”

You’re closer.”

My family knows me, yet  
this rarely makes them suspicious. Once they realize  
what is happening, it’s too late, they are  
already holding the black frames  
in their hands, feet  
carrying more than they wanted.

Complain

they will, but they

can’t argue.

Closer is closer and patience is key.

*~ Thank You ~*



