

# Ice Lolly Review Issue XIV

A international literary magazine by the youth and for the youth



Cover Art by Ella Ratliff

February 2023

## Editor's Note



First, I would like to thank Ella Ratliff for the absolutely stunning cover art! The medium is charcoal pencil. Please go check out her Instagram account, @ellaratliff.art and give her a follow!

In issue 14 you'll find poems plucked right out of ancient mythology texts, pieces that scintillate with fairy dust and magic, and prose dedicated to heartbreak, personal growth, and family. We received about 400 pieces for this issue and we enjoyed looking over every single word. Thank you to all the editors who helped edit work and gave such wonderful feedback. You guys are so amazing and talented and I wouldn't know what to do without your help.

A special thanks to all our followers, submitters, and contributors. I hope everyone enjoys issue 14!



Warmest regards,  
Jessica Wang (she/her)  
EIC of Ice Lolly Review



# Poetry



**It's okay - Sadie Eirich**

**impetus' eulogy - Mia Grace Davis**

**So-Called Still Life - Adele Donovan**

**The Writer - Quinn Murphy**

**sin of prometheus - Meena Puram**

**Airglow - Olivia Burgess**

**two souls, one dreamer - Rosie Li**

**korean summertime - Cara Wreen**

**angel eyes - rebecca herrera alegria**

**Undelivered - Emilie Mendoza**

**Thursdays - Megumi Jindo**

**Single Spotlight - Cherry Tan**

**a train home - Deanna Hu**

**Egyptian Girl - Morouje Sherif**

**Nocturne, Scintillating - Keerthisri Kannan**



**Portrait of A Fuchsia Grocery Store - Natalie Nims**

**Hour of Cockcrow - Florianne Che**

**Glow up - Tanashahi**

**love triangle between ohio, boston, and vermont - Annalisa Hansford**

**used - Kate Rowberry**

**you asked me what I write poetry about - Avery Yoder-Wells**

**dear workshop - Ziyi Yan**

**Echo - Talia Skaistis**

**Mon/To Manjuri - Sarah Aziz**

**To My Mom's Cassette Tapes - Lucy Doherty**

**██████████, is that your given name?\* - Lilirose Luo**

**girl on the street outside seven-eleven - Aimée Eicher**

**the anatomy of heartache - Isabella Liu**

**A dream I had - Elizabeth Ip**

**The Star Lasso Experience - Para Vadhahong**

**call me the anti-hero - Annalisa Hansford**

**Ars Poetica for the Indian American - Annika Gangopadhyay**

**A Nymph's Becoming - Natasha Last-Bernal**

**study of a ten pin plug (II) - Cheryl Tan**

**Déjà Vu - Sieun Park**

**Nebula - Divya Venkat Sridhar**

**Apex Predator - Yuyuan Huang**

**primavera - rebecca herrera alegria**

**Tonight's dream - Keren-happuch Garba**



# **Prose**

**Night Market - Emily Pedroza**

**An Ode to 22 - Adenah Furquan**

**Time - Ella Chen**

**Tweeze - Pireh Moosa**

**Bridges - Yelaine Aguilar**

**The Time Keeper - Bahaa Khan**

**Virtuoso - Carly Chandler**

**The Prick of Thorns - Isabella Lobo**

**Dawn Only Comes After the Dead of Night - David Liu**

**Sarratea 334 - Valentina Vigliarolo**



**It's okay - Poem**  
**By Sadie Eirich**

It's okay to be sad  
It's okay to be confused  
It's okay not to know  
It's okay not to understand  
But we tell ourselves it isn't  
We feel we must work everything out  
That's what society has told us all our lives  
And we listen  
It's okay to be troubled  
It's okay not to be perfect  
It's okay to not be ok  
It's okay to be human

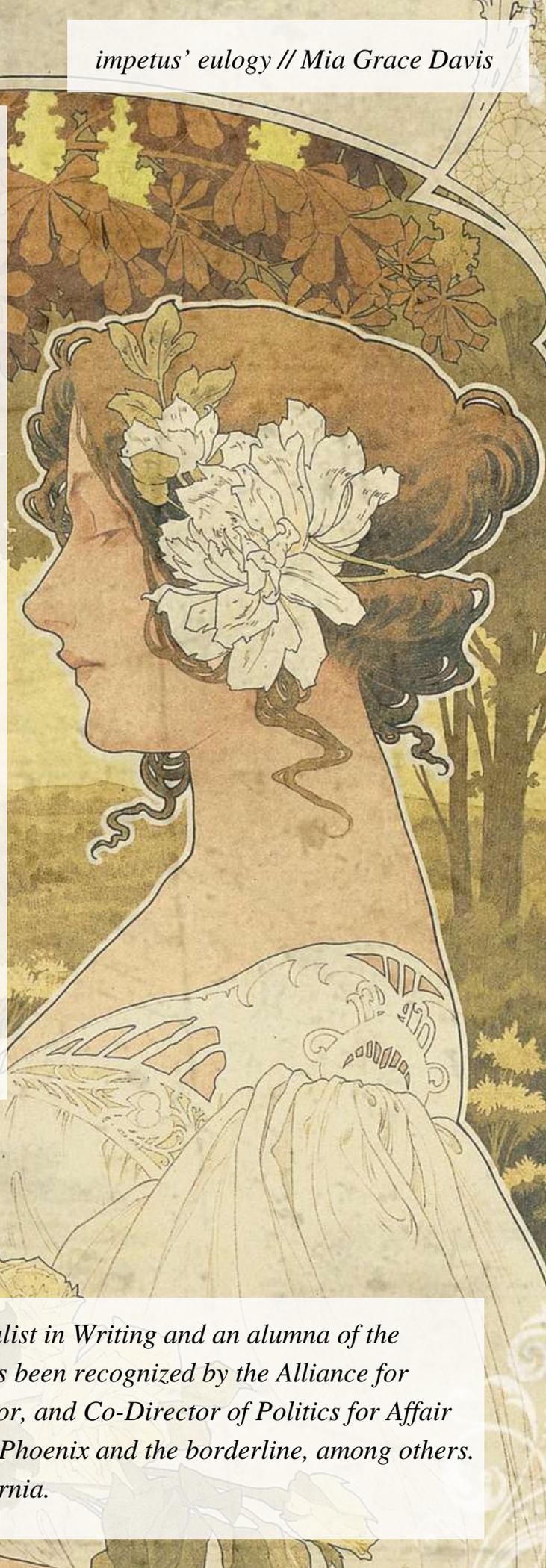


*Sadie Eirich is a 14-year-old high school freshman who loves art, theater, music, animals, friends and family. Currently fighting a cancer diagnosis, Sadie writes, paints and crafts to express emotions and creativity.*

**impetus' eulogy - Poem**  
**By Mia Grace Davis**

there stands youthful aptitude.  
hear her satin melodies,  
the moonlight of her silken vocals;  
try to capture her verses  
and their brilliant rays  
in a jar - seal it tight.  
in a few years' time, she will  
be worn down, her body the home  
in which squandered ability rests.  
her euphonic poems  
will no longer be deemed lyrics,  
but rather isolated words  
strung together, draped  
across the skeleton  
of a mundane song. henceforth,  
there will be nothing left  
to imprison, except the croak  
of forsaken desire held  
out of reach by her own hand.  
this vocalist is no longer resonant,  
drawn instead to some distant refrain, treacherous  
as the fate she bestowed upon herself.

*Mia Grace Davis is a 2023 National YoungArts Finalist in Writing and an alumna of the Sewanee Young Writers' Conference whose work has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers. She serves as a writer, editor, and Co-Director of Politics for Affair Magazine, and her writing has been featured in The Phoenix and the borderline, among others. Mia is 17 years old and resides in San Diego, California.*



**So-Called Still Life - Poem**  
**By Adele Donovan**



I slow time and watch mold eat up the lemon. They call it penicillium because of its sea of fingers, each carrying the promise of the next generation. A field of wheat cast in oxidized copper. I doubt anyone can truly appreciate the countless hungry hands pulling away at the lemon's skin. I doubt anyone thinks of the vivacity of a tropical sea when they think of putrefaction. Aftermaths continue to surprise us.

I'd like to think that this cotton candy decay is moisture's way of thanking the things that let it in. A gift like that isn't meant to last, but to be decadent and garish and pungent. Who wouldn't join hands with consumption if it meant one last florescent crowdsurf? Time lapse can be a soap opera for the socially inept. A misfired sentiment can be a spore cloud curling up from the shag rug of conidia. It's called electric blue because it shocks you, not because it bears any resemblance to a crackling socket.

I've gone and lost my message in decomposition's clash of color. Typical. Maybe a faltering thought sequence is a decomposition of its own. I draw conclusions as brutally as the hyphae draw neon war-maps. Everything begins to tilt towards the puckering sunset. Everything begins to tilt toward a shorter wavelength. I'm ready to move on from the cacophony.



*Adele Donovan, 17, is a Seattle-based trans writer. A graduate of the University of Iowa's Between the Lines program, her work has appeared in Hiatus Magazine, and she is the author of two chapbooks. She is a co-host of the Intersecting Lines podcast, and her work revolves around themes of nature, spirituality, gender, cycles, love, and art.*

**The Writer - Poem**

**By Quinn Murphy**

Ink-stained hands tainted black,  
Thoughts buzzing in the night,  
Words pour forth onto the page,  
The brightest guiding light.

Pattering rain, scratching pen,  
The skitter of a mouse.  
In her mind the noise resides,  
Near silent in her house.

The flame of the candle licks away.  
She twists a lock of hair.  
Stares at the page, a world in her eyes,  
A story she wants to share.

A chilly draught steals through the room,  
Lips trace unwritten verse,  
Scribbled line, then crossed out.  
She mutters a nettled curse.

Stars fade as darkness ebbs,  
Frustration clouds her mind.  
But still, she searches on in vain,  
For the words she cannot find.

She sits on the brink of giving up,  
She worries she wastes her time.  
Betrayed by tangled, messy thoughts,  
Resisting all reason and rhyme.

As she resigns to leave her work,  
Inspiration seeps into the room.  
A welcome guest, arriving late,



And not a moment too soon.

She clears her muddied head at last.  
And draws a sharp inhale.  
She reaches out, so she might seize,  
The idea's fleeting tail.

And all at once, she sees anew,  
The work so nearly cast away.  
She hunches low over her desk,  
Her defeat now held at bay.

Dawn bleeds pink across the sky,  
And her pages fill with words.  
Contentment settles in her chest,  
Like a perching, preening bird.

At last, she stretches out her hand,  
Strained by a ceaseless pen.  
Her mind can rest, for now at least,  
She looks forward to writing again.



*Quinn Murphy is an 18-year-old writer based in British Columbia, Canada. She's been practicing creative writing since she was twelve, but she's been telling stories for much, much longer. When she was 14, she started working as a contributor for CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Company) Kids News, creating news articles for kids across Canada. Her poems have recently been published in Spellbinder Magazine and Blue Marble Review, and her work has also appeared in Spiritus Mundi Review. She has a passion for creative writing, particularly short stories and poetry, and she hopes to publish a novel one day.*

**sin of prometheus - Poem**  
**By Meena Puram**

prometheus saw wonder in a clump of clay.  
when he took his pinky and pressed two indents into a head  
he called them eyes.

and when he pulled out a string on either side of the body,  
he sculpted them in reference to  
the rivers that traced the cracks of the earth,  
and he called them arms.

when prometheus created a woman  
he took aphrodite's poise and elegance  
and rolled it into a beating oval of flesh  
and he tucked it underneath her left breast,

he took athena's wisdom  
and spread it into a viscous form of colorful paints  
he handed a woman the brush  
and nudged them to make something of the world.

When he finished  
his heart overflowed with golden specks of yearning.  
he was mesmerized by his  
delicate and soft magnum opus of the earth

and so he looked at her and said,

*you will harness mother gaia's vigor  
you will build empires from her dirt  
i made you for this world and  
i will give you what you need to seize it*

and so the woman did.



prometheus was proud  
and in his pride he created Men,  
in this Man he replicated his own  
cunningness and boiling hot passion.

it was not love that prometheus felt for the Man  
but sour understanding.

envy leaked from the Man's heart when he saw a women.  
envy poisoned Him and turned His love into lust.  
He withered her beauty into  
such a conforming little thing.

but all prometheus could do was watch  
from his place in the mountain,  
trapped in eternal lament, helpless as  
Man tore down his only love.

for what could he do?

prometheus had only ever been a Man

in the shape of a god.



*Meena Puram (she/her) is a 15 year old Indian-American writer from Cleveland Ohio. She's passionate about environmental activism and gender equality. In her free time you can find her reading feminist books, watching video essays, or making jewelry*

**Airglow - Poem**  
**By Olivia Burgess**

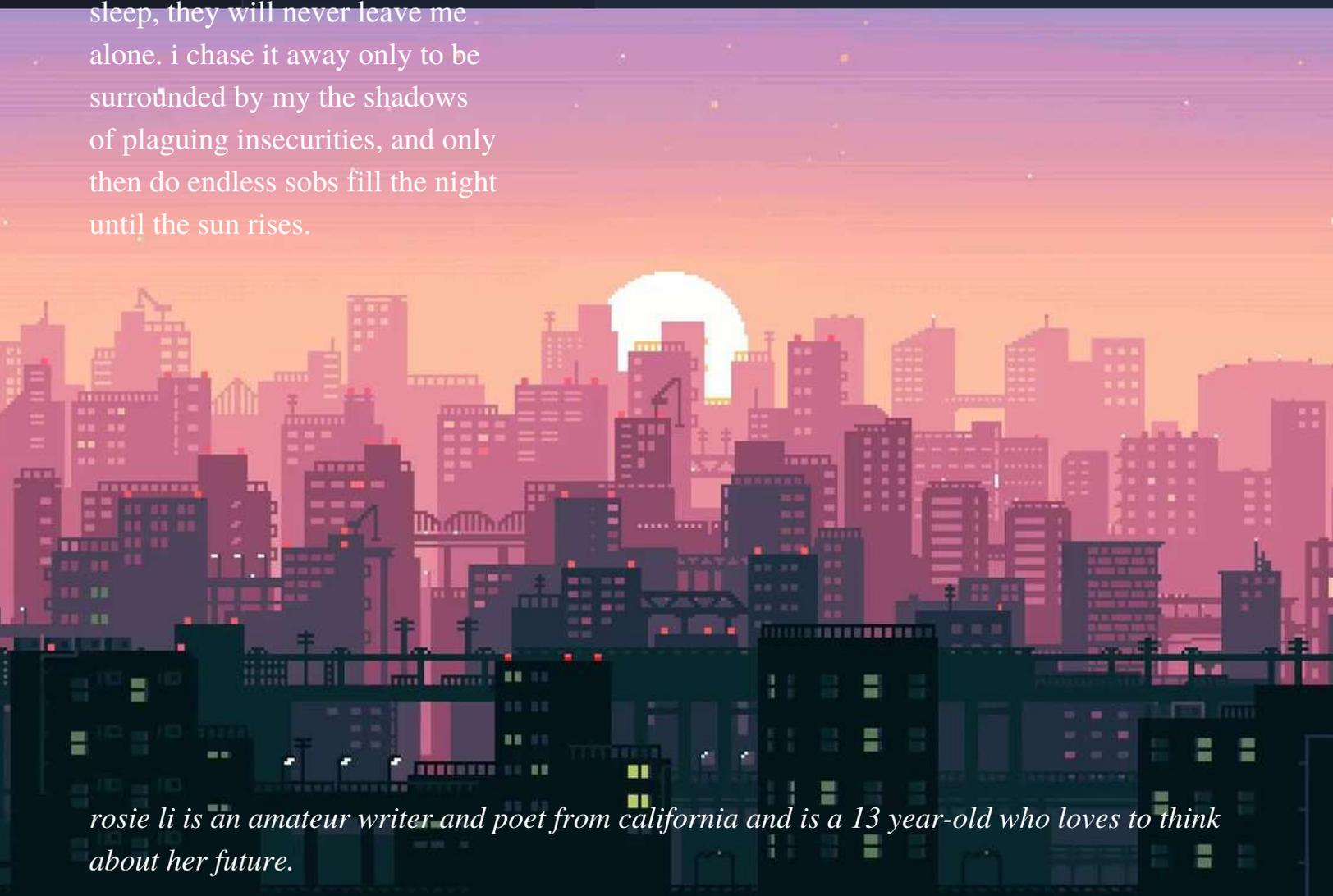
One night, beaming in darkness,  
all I have is myself. My tenors  
and carvings, the dark pulse in my vessels  
where I become something      Other.  
Through tree corridors, butterfly muscles  
bursting for breath, I enter another,  
where the corners and crooks of myself  
become concave.  
In this instance,                      midnight,                      loud,  
like I am holding my own roaring star.  
On becoming midnight, I eclipse all agony,  
every sadness. For a while, they will hear  
my laughter long after sunrise.

*Olivia Burgess is a 17 year old raised and residing in the UK. Her poetry focuses on nature, love, her muse (who shall remain unnamed) and her internal dialogues. She has a smattering of publishings, from a short story chapbook to Paper Crane Journal. You can find more at [opblit.wordpress.com](http://opblit.wordpress.com).*

**two souls, one dreamer - Poem**  
**By Rosie Li**

at morn i envision the happiness  
around me. the joyous occasions  
where we all share smiles with no  
thoughts of worry or doubt. we  
share a bond of trust and friendship  
and all promise to stay together  
until morning to night and until  
the end of the ends.

at night i awake drowned by my  
own screams. the darkness that  
clouds my mind as i drift off to  
sleep, they will never leave me  
alone. i chase it away only to be  
surrounded by my the shadows  
of plaguing insecurities, and only  
then do endless sobs fill the night  
until the sun rises.



*rosie li is an amateur writer and poet from california and is a 13 year-old who loves to think about her future.*

**korean summertime - Poem**  
**By Cara Wreen**

cicadas scream on oak trucks,  
howl in the heavy humid air  
that can only be experienced on a ripe  
june midnight: screaming & crying

& begging. keen mosquitoes  
swarm ready to attack  
while the cool breeze  
carries wishes of generations.

no lamp posts can change  
the soil of mountains  
where the sweat of war &  
bones of starved children &

lost history are freshly buried  
with the death of humble beginnings.  
miles away, skyscrapers  
loom over peaks. mountains grow

like stains as more history  
piles onto the ground  
& vegetable roots  
anchor loose dirt.

*Cara Wreen is a seventeen-year-old from Wisconsin who has previously lived in Seoul, South Korea. Her writing has been recognized by Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. She is a Just Poetry!!! National Winner and won the Younger Writer's Award from the Council of Wisconsin Writers. In her free time she can be found reading literary magazines, updating her bubble tea blog, or playing viola.*

**angel eyes - Poem**

**By rebecca herrera alegria**

winter has gathered itself behind your wireframes and  
i've always loved peppermint, powder snow, and the  
overwatered poinsettias lining my bay windows like  
holiday garlands. i'm ice skating on neptune with you.  
it's been raining diamonds and haikus here for the last  
millennium and i can't remember the sunlight in palms  
or the neon glow of a corner deli.



[how was i supposed to know you were born from scorpions  
and sin? maybe there is too much forgiveness in me, too  
many times i've planted herbs inside you and expected the  
earth back. you are only bones, you are only ash, you are  
only chords.]

everything is foggy windshields. everything is only  
small sounds. everything is just as you left it. the yellow  
post-its on our vanity, the dirty dishes, the bite marks  
on my lips. i've been sleeping on the hardwood floor  
because my pillows still smell like your salt sea cologne.  
dawn still breaks open through the curtains. the entire  
apartment has become a confession.

here it's a discotheque and its california. there's champagne  
spilled at my heels and under your thoughtless eyes a low  
shimmer like egyptian gold. here's an evening of promise  
after promise written on table napkins. the studio lights  
reflecting in your blonde rococo curls.

[the percussion builds you up like paradise]

*rebecca herrera alegria (26) is an art school grad born and raised in new york. she is currently the  
managing editor of fifth wheel press and has been featured in various publications including aóthen  
magazine, maría's at sampaguitas, and celestite poetry. you can find her on twitter @strawburrymoon  
or on her website allirherrera.wixsite.com/site*

**Undelivered - Poem**  
**By Emilie Mendoza**

I'll call this our *deja vu*, write it in a dream journal to be buried with you. I roll the notes you once slipped under my door into cigarettes, though my lighter was locked up long ago. Did that summer night fade from memory so quickly? Are you getting this? You poured out two glasses of Chardonnay and we toasted, to your health and your prosperity. There are pictures of that night - kissing the mirror, painting with watercolors, the record player on loop - in a cardboard box under my bed. We sat in the car parked in the cell phone parking lot by the nearest airport during a thunderstorm when you last told me you wouldn't forget. I don't think this is reaching you. The empty classrooms and dimming sun have long left us behind and I think I once wanted to be you, but now I simply want to know what exactly made me so badly want and crave the depths within your eyes. I remember when the world would start and stop at a fallen eyelash between two thumbs - a wish or a pleading.



*Emilie Mendoza is a 16 year-old student from Panama who primarily writes poetry and flash fiction. When not writing, she enjoys talking about writing and musing about . You can find her on Twitter as @emimendomp3.*

**Thursdays - Poem**  
**By Megumi Jindo**

purple,  
black  
smudges.

a future that's filled with  
ballrooms, drunk parties, wine glasses—  
late-night talking,  
lay out our blankets on top of our pink cushions

fingers intertwining,  
phones sprawled out,  
footsteps echoing as if in dances—  
brown hair, a flash of blond, a bit of black

teal,  
magenta,  
flickers.

twirl around the wooden floor,  
windows open, birds chirping, flowers blooming—  
radio music bopping in the background,  
toes tapping, white welcome mats, brown hats, and gray doorbells

bright searing lights,  
sparkling fields of courts,  
late-night driving town, screaming, drunk—  
stars glistening in the black void of constellations

a little frosting on your cheek,  
sprinkles on cupcakes and tabletops,  
trophy cups, and caskets—  
record old cassette tapes, wheels spinning



navy,  
seafoam,  
walls.

yellow lines, on pavements,  
one more jump in the sand, across the sunset,  
sparkling ocean—  
golden shimmers and dust lights



as summer nears,  
green glows golden,  
packages from neighbors, and evening barbeque parties,  
flashlights winking, bike rides at midnight

we're nearing the end—  
it's almost here,  
the last of it—  
the clips in our hair, freckles of sun-kisses across our cheeks, the butterflies that swirl around  
us, beckoning

red,  
sandy brown



come—  
because  
we. are. Here.



*Megumi Jindo is a 16-year-old who lives in NYC where writing (and music) are a means of catharsis for her. Published in various publications—she has always written stories since she was little. She especially loves writing in the form of poems, songs, short stories, and creative nonfiction—portraying experiences from her life. She hopes that people who read her stories will be inspired and that her stories will change the world for the better.*

**Single Spotlight - Poem**  
**By Cherry Tan**

Everyone is dead silent,  
waiting for that single spotlight.

I rub my hands on the dress,  
feeling the glitter on my sweaty palms.

I signal to the side,  
hearing my heart accelerate.

The light shines on my face,  
blinding my eyes.

The audience goes wild,  
clapping and cheering.

One last deep breath,  
and I fall to the ground.



*Cherry Tan is a fourteen-year-old middle school student from Texas. Reading and writing poetry have always been a hobby of hers. When not creating poems, she loves doing outdoor activities, dancing, reading, and playing musical instruments.*

**a train home - Poem**

**By Deanna Hu**

settled in the grazed grass where the sunshine is ample and sweet  
and the blues bees that sing their jazzy tunes danced along the fourteen winds  
singing of the one and only and the only one, only because they've had one  
and the hearths of day-gold and the drains of fallings springs (the mist and the stars)  
and the end of celestial eyes that look into gradient abysses of color and art—blended like a nectar  
and even the water tangy with raspberry citrus, or maybe a simple adorned cherry

if it was just a sign to stop and stay, rest and rest well, warm myself around a bonfire of blaze  
i should know when to halt and to complete this draining journey of hopeless terminals  
at the station we all call home.

*Deanna Hu is a writer and student from San Diego suburbia whose poetry and prose has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers and small publishers.*

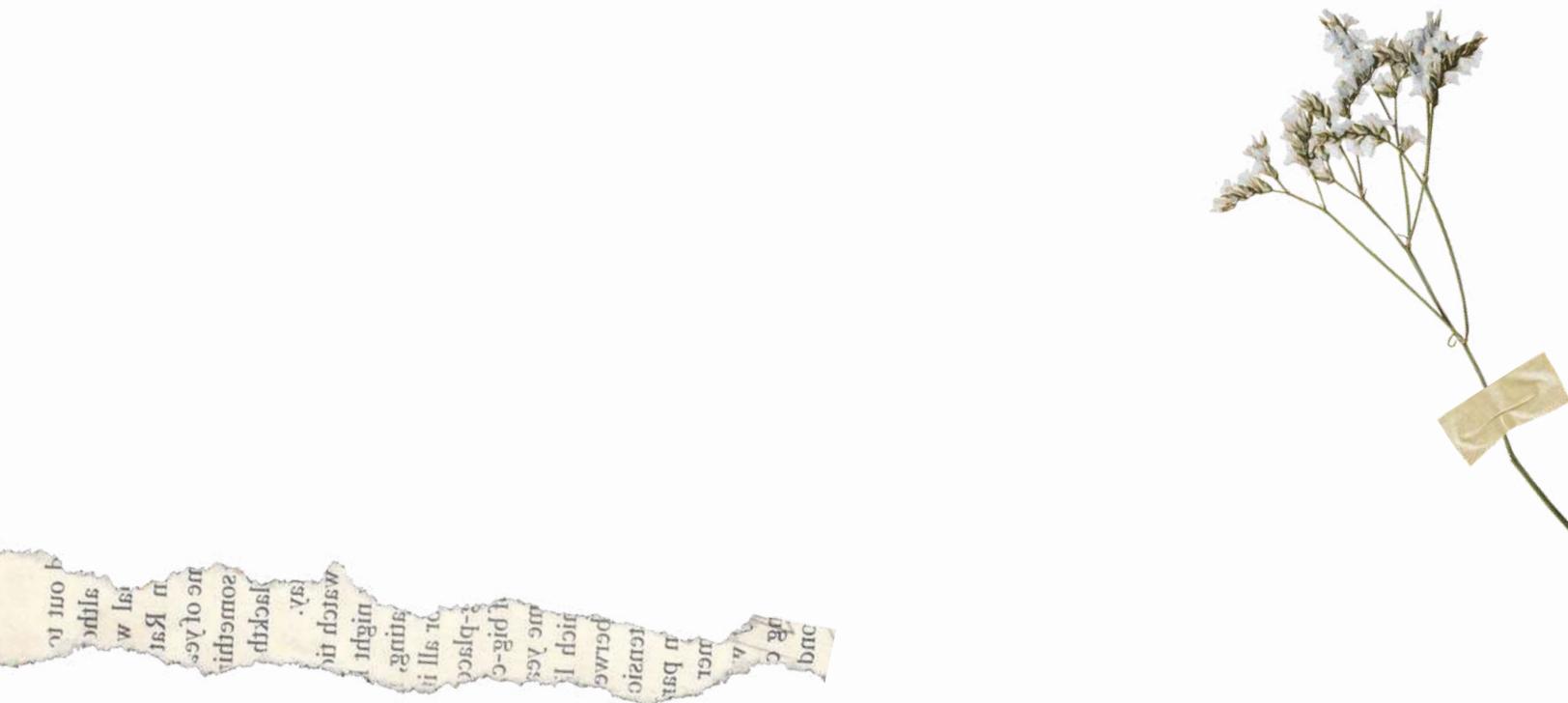
**Egyptian Girl - Poem**

**By Morouje Sherif**

After "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid

pray the fajr prayer; read the arabic books; memorize one hundred arabic words; pray in the right tongue so you don't bleed like a white-washed mess; fast in the right tongue so you don't feel like a hungry mess; rise like the turquoise water of Hurghada; rise at 7 a.m.; rise like the blue lotus and sunny chrysanthemeums; here's how to fold the phyllo into sun wedges; here's how to cut pistachios until your fingers are blush; here's how to work hard like your people; here's how to work harder than your friends; here's how to work harder than your cousin's friends because we didn't leave paradise to pay \$30,000 so you can go to school and be average; here's how to fold a hijab; here's how to not look like a terrorist; here's how to stand up for yourself when the kid uses "muslim" against you; here's how to love your family; here's how not to look gaudy; here's how to dress like a woman, for the man; don't wear that much eyeshadow, you're asking for it; dress nicely so you don't look poor; gold bracelets and anklets from your dead relatives; here's how to show that you're smart and not suspicious; when you see something in the street, avoid eye contact and walk faster; remember, we don't have the privilege to help others; never complain to others about your life; Barbie dolls and stuffed animals; don't speak well of your life, people don't want to hear good things; here's how to tell people you don't ride camels to school; here's how to cope ten weeks premature; here's how to cope with lazy eyes; be nice to your twin brother because he's all you have, be nice to your younger brother because cross-eyes don't give you friends; be quiet because your voice is too loud; here's how to honour your lineage of the Pharaohs and Medusa; exotic, tan and beautiful and on the verge of drowning in the Nile; here's how to order hummus; how to make authentic hummus; how to make hummus for the school potluck; how to make grandma's hummus; here's how to visit your grandmother in her fresh white villa in Cairo; here's how to cope with her death; eat some kunafa during Ramadan; here's how to make kunafa; make the custard as white as skin; here's how to pick the perfect mangoes (don't forget to smell them); here's how to grocery shop when mama's gone *but what do mangoes smell like?*; here's for lost time; here's for if something happens and we disappear; here's for all the good bread and falafel you've never tried; here's for the Canadian winter; here's for going to school in Canadian winters; how to stay alive and cope; here's how to make friends; here's how to say assalamualaikum to people you don't know; here's how to say warahmatullahi wabarakatuh; here's how to teach the white kids to say assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh; how to be a model minority; how to carry your entire country on your shoulders; here's how to laugh; here's how to laugh politely; how to laugh to be

loved; don't complain, you'll ruin your image; here's how to be good enough; here's how to be good enough for your teachers; good enough for your friends, family, strangers; here's how to get into university on full scholarship; here's how to make it at life; here's how to be better; here's how to show them that you're better than they thought you were; but how can I show them that?; then, you'll know.



*Morouje Sherif is a 15-year old Canadian artist from Ontario, Canada who adores apricots, verdancy, and temperate climates. Growing up in the Mediterranean, she has a vicarious thrill for feel-good compositions and the traverse of truth. Her work has appeared in the international Minds Shine Bright prize, published in the CONFIDENCE (2022) anthology, The Poetry Society of UK, Foyle Young Poets of the Year, The Fish Barrel Review, Plum Tree Tavern, among others. Asides from writing, she enjoys judging dubious architecture, herbal teas, and giving names for all her houseplants.*

**Nocturne, Scintillating - Poem**  
**By Keerthisri Kannan**

I wonder if it's possible to breathe an epiphany to life. Set its veins aquiver; open its eyes to the flicker of star-streaks on broken bottles and concrete. A singular fire burying itself within a nocturne as I stand outside a bar. Silence blotting noise. Darkness blotting my eyes, rendering me blind as I half-hope for someone to come and find me—yell at me to come inside. But the door doesn't open behind me, and I am alone to feel drunk constellations digging into my milky way, slowly unstitching galaxies. I wonder if I know anything at all.

*There is patched scar-tissue all over the sky if you look hard enough.* I squint and squint and squint, tossing moments into a spaceless vacuum. Watch it transmute into the shape of a body—dissolving itself behind heavy curtains until the stench of whiskey is long gone. *There is nothing to see here, a girl of nine concludes, impatient.* I am too tired of the cold to play by myself any longer. I run back inside, waiting to see if the noise, the alcohol, the loneliness will kill me. If I will be born again in the warmth. If silence will ever be enough.

I tug at my mother's sleeve, hoping she'll look away from my brother (who's playing guitar at the bar that night). She just whispers a promise that it'll be over soon. Asks me to sit with her, two sober women. But I walk away and look at everyone else, music tangling with their laughter. I want to talk, say something, do anything but wander around aimlessly—but to drunkards I am a nuisance, swirling around once and twice like champagne. The gold burns in my vision.

So I go back outside. I stand in the snow, words freezing on my tongue; inhale light from a streetlamp. Inhale second-hand smoke, until I get high on a fever dream. Close my eyes and feel night blooming in the curve of my back. Hear my mother's voice as she finally finds me half asleep, and let her drag me to the car. I slide into the back row, my head resting on her lap, my eyelids pressing against her jacket. Us; we are ready to chase a telephone pole for miles and miles, rocked by a force greater than solitude. In the distance, fingers toy with a nocturne, set it on fire. Epiphanies burning brighter than the stars.

*Keerthisri Kannan is a fourteen-year-old Indian-American writer. When she's not typing away on a google doc, she enjoys (aggressively) playing the flute, geeking out over NASA's webpage, and visiting National Parks. Find her on Twitter @the\_keerthi\_sri*

## **Portrait of A Fuchsia Grocery Store - Poem**

**By Natalie Nims**

Fluorescent artificial lights cut through the glass in thin shards. As I enter, my heels crack the turquoise tiles. I realize that the chicken glitter soup I'm looking for isn't edible or maybe it's lost beneath the sickly sweet lemonade. Everyone else picks their commercial tomatoes as they talk in a tone too sharp to hear. The sugar has turned back into crystal, it yells at me from across the store. I am too busy worrying about whether or not the sun will drown within itself. And I laugh at my own bitter expense so they won't notice the salt packets seeping from my palms and onto the broken floors. Every diary entry I'd ever written came from miles away just for the supernova. They swirl around my tears in a grocery store I never learn to change. When the facade melts into a puddle, I'm left in the middle of a parking lot. There, the clouds lower themselves and it floods the gravel with light. I never knew that the sky smelt of wild grass. Or that my smile could be something other than stone. As a thanks, the sun gives me makeup wipes. They disintegrate in my hands.



*Natalie Nims is an author from Ontario, she is twelve years old. As an art lover as well as an artist, you can probably find her passionately ranting about her favorite pieces. Natalie also enjoys listening to 60's music at 3pm on a Saturday, watching hour long video essays, or struggling to decide on one author bio. Her work has been published or forthcoming in Musing Publications, filter coffee magazine, Livina Press and more.*

**Hour of Cockcrow - Poem**  
**By Florianne Che**

We spent the night kissing until a  
new sky broke itself open for us:

crimson affection hung quietly over  
hills and settled within the valley.

You pressed yourself against every  
place I ached and when I led you

to my chest, it was pink chapstick  
brushing against a thick, slowing

pulse. Underneath flesh & marrow,  
red rhythm was re-aligning itself

to the beat of a breath. You pulled  
back, full, I saw the eyes of the girl

who had reddened her mouth with  
blood from my feet, pulled scabs

with chipped teeth so she could  
make me curl painlessly. But you

wouldn't touch my face, not even  
to taste the salt because, with lips

webbed, you whispered *only boys*  
*cry when touched*. The sun peeled

itself for me, shedding golden  
layers onto hardwood, and I stilled,



bit myself before I had to tell you  
why I never wanted to be a man.

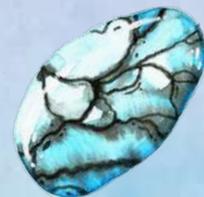


*Florianne Che is a student residing in Illinois. She is an IWYS and KYW alum. In her free time, she enjoys collecting cards.*

## **Glow up - Poem**

**By Tanashahi**

a tarot reader on youtube  
said my ancestors are proud of me  
for surviving their spawn's custom  
trauma package, and i cried. would you believe it  
if i told you the first time, i ever  
created a boundary was at twenty-five  
years old? the silver jubilee of  
my existence and i threw out my  
joke of a backbone to celebrate.  
i have a shiny new spine now,  
i believe the girls on instagram would  
call this their villain era but not me,  
i've been my worst enemy for  
far too long already. i'd rather not be  
someone else's. besides, as much as i  
appreciate the aesthetic. i know starbucks  
and fancy co-ord sets  
will not set fire to decades of the despair  
i spoon-fed myself, pretending to be okay.  
healing is lonelier than depression,  
but my demons were a terrible company,  
and i'm glad they're dead now. i keep a black  
tourmaline crystal in my bra and recite  
the hanuman chalisa, so i don't accidentally  
invite new demons into my head,  
i'm an extrovert, okay? you never know.  
last week this friend cancelled on me,  
and i didn't bat an eyelid. i remembered the  
tarot reader and wondered if nanaji would be  
proud i didn't become another  
bundle of unfulfilled potential and  
other toxic family heirlooms. a year ago, my present was



a dream i desperately didn't want to end.  
today, co-star told me that the path i want to take  
doesn't exist yet, and i decided to build my own  
from scratch with no doubts, no hesitation.  
maybe i'll drop by the ganges someday and ask her  
if there are any sins i committed against myself left.  
maybe, i'll show her my new spine and  
ask her if the tarot reader was right.



*Tanashahi/Adritanaya Tiwari is a 26-year-old dentist from India. Her work has been in Hooligan Magazine, Honey Fire Lit, Ice Lolly Review, Serotonin, The Daily Drunk Magazine, and others.*

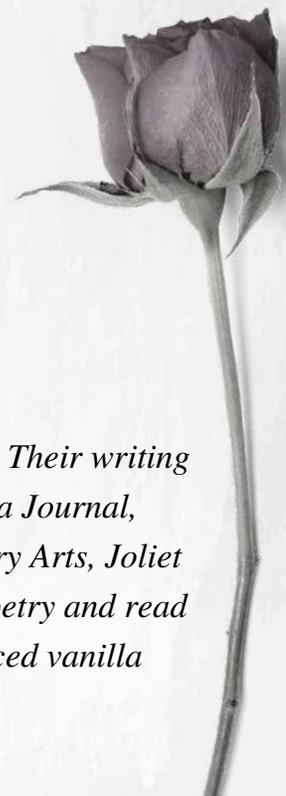
## **love triangle between ohio, boston, and vermont - Poem**

**By Annalisa Hansford**

you are in ohio, hundreds of miles away, with a girl's name scraped into your tongue like a cut. you echo her name, her syllables leaving the inside of your mouth bloodied with memory. you stare into every mirror you pass, watching the dust of past girls collecting in your eyelashes. you carry your hurt like a prayer, wear your memories like a locket. no girl can drown you if you're already underwater and out of breath. you bleed to a rhythm of solitude, whispering the name of every girl who abandoned your fractured gasp. you don't whisper mine because it's drowning in a pool of your wounds.

i am in boston, hundreds of miles away, with your name etched into my flesh like a birthmark. i can't wound you out of my body even if i scratched and scarred and prayed. i look into every past i haunt, hunting for the words i never said like a ghost. the distance between ohio and me bleed into an omen the shape of longing. i'm trying to teach myself to survive the silence of your shadow. drowning in a pool of loneliness, i whisper your name like it's a life jacket. i don't whisper hers. i stitch her name in the seam of my past, bury it like a lie that went missing.

she is in vermont, hundreds of miles away, with my name bent around her ribs like a film reel. scenes of me abandoning her like a season project onto the rest of her body. she tears every love letter i wrote her into silence, burns every word into a plea for survival. a portrait of the past lingering on her tongue like a promise. in the moonlight, she is lodged between a mistake and a metaphor. her shadow blooms in reverse, transforms from flesh into wound into grief. under the scars of her longing, she searches for my name like a memory, folds it into an echo the shape of drowning.



*Annalisa Hansford is an undergraduate at Emerson College studying Creative Writing. Their writing appears in Emerge Literary Journal, The Hearth Magazine, Eunoia Review, The Aurora Journal, Lavender Bones, VIBE, and elsewhere. Their work has been recognized by 1455 Literary Arts, Joliet Public Library, and Grindstone Literary. They are the editor-in-chief of hand picked poetry and read for The Emerson Review. They are probably listening to Gracie Abrams and drinking iced vanilla matcha lattes.*

used - Poem

By Kate Rowberry

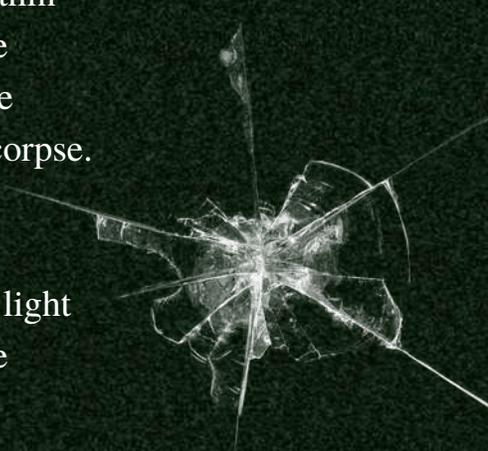
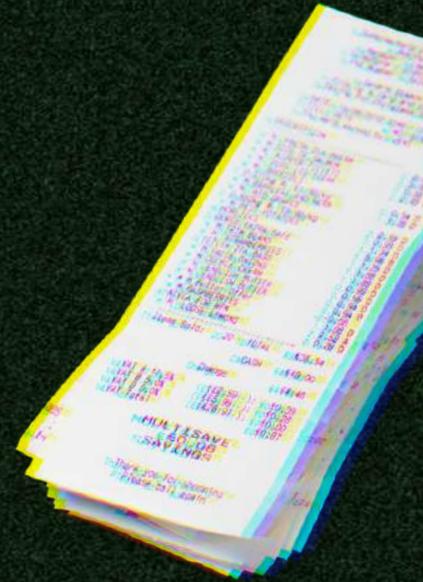
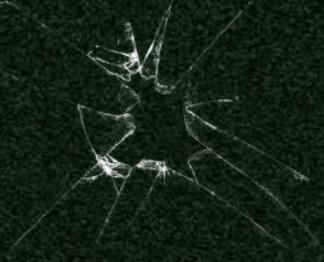
the pre-owned car stinks of gray plumes of emphysema billowing from a cigarette. almost a hundred thousand miles of odor. under the front seat i discover an oily, crinkled receipt from a mcdonald's halfway across the country. one big mac & one large fry & one medium coca-cola with ice. \$11.51 plus tax & arteriosclerosis. a lonely, lethal road trip.

the thrift store is a moonlit carcass, picked clean & casting skeletal shadows. i am getting the scraps of meat, the last items remaining before the store dies, packs up & closes & writes its epitaph. *lot for rent*. my final purchases are the undead from the eighties. a motorcycle jacket & acid wash jeans. they fit me & their tags are graffitied with matching initials written by the same hand. i wonder who j.t. is, walking around with my body years before i was born & i wonder what caused the ghost of a rusty blood stain haunting the pants' hem.

do not buy a phone from a stranger. tracking & hackers & viruses. but these internet days, everyone already knows my name & address & birthday. this phone has induced amnesia but remembers a violent past. when i drop it on the scarred concrete in front of goodwill, no spider web of cracks appears across the screen. however the software struggles & i eventually stop charging the phone & let it die. i bury it in my electronics cemetery, a drawer entombing lifeless shards of utility.

the second-hand bookstore's shelves are laden with aged orphans. the vintage copy of *little women*, bound in cracked leather with golden lettering, looks like a bible & smells like brimstone. i find a weathered note within the pages, written in confined calligraphy i can't read. the frontispiece has been defaced by scribbles in neon highlighter. i get a discount due to putridity. *little women* now reeks on my bookcase. the decay of a corpse.

in the antique store, the dusty saleslady tells me that *this decor's all been resurrected*. she gestures to a spindly lamp, a bony finger of light protruding above the aisles of shelved sarcophagi. i love it & i see the



price tag & i feel out-of-body & i never reply. i want a cheaper cadaver,  
so i search at a littered yard sale & i unearth a decomposing dresser  
for \$33. what a steal. & then i wonder if i am a grave robber.



*Kate Rowberry is an eighteen-year-old Californian writer. Her work has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers and Bow Seat, and it is published or forthcoming in Paper Crane Journal, Occulum, The Louisville Review, and others. Besides writing, reading is one of her favorite activities, but she is somewhat guilty of tsundoku.*

**you asked me what I write poetry about - Poem  
By Avery Yoder-Wells**

and I said  
I have stolen the insides  
of a basket,

its meticulous beehive  
of melon meter  
and lemonade,

like people fallen  
into conversation  
about similar sounds.

I am archiving,  
pressing clingwrap  
into a pastiche

of the music. So when I say  
I am a poet,  
condemn me as a thief.

I make myself  
avoid the appearance  
of listening,

because in dialogue  
I may be realized,  
and eaten

between us,  
a haiku with no sound  
and every glory.

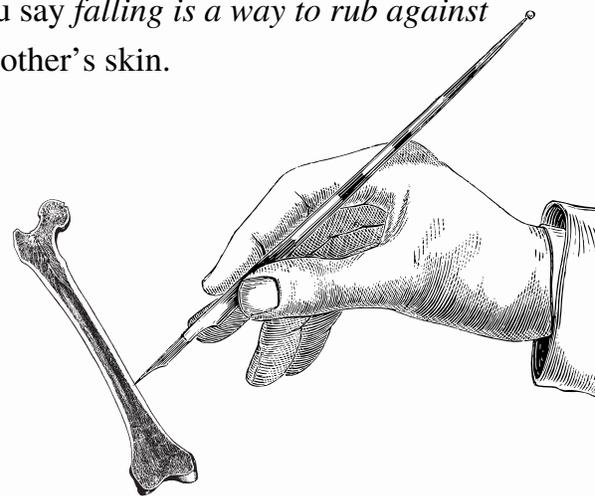
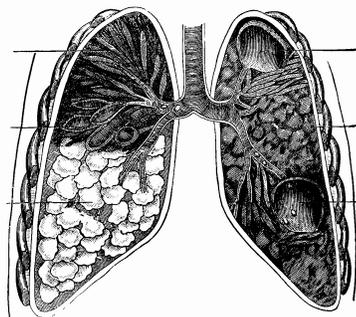


*Avery Yoder-Wells (they/them) is a trans, queer poet in their junior year of high school. They've sprained an ankle dancing to a favorite song, and sprained a shoulder while acting out a really cool imaginary fight scene. Their work can be found in Mausoleum Press, Aurora Journal, Connecticut River Review, Peach Mag, VIBE's "bellyful" folio, and elsewhere. The rest of them can be found in Maryland, where they scheme up fun new bios instead of actually writing. They lurk on Twitter at @averyotherwise.*

## dear workshop - Poem

By Ziyi Yan

do you hook words from your ribs, stack boxes on a ship until you teeter? i have never written a prose poem, known words beyond their shape. find me crouching among rubber ducks, nylon dresses, pink phone cases bobbling across an ocean, numb to the current. why is everything a metaphor? hacking laugh, jolting lungs, trampoline act seen between three-second naps. the same, the same, whisper what won't go down the gullet. watch it leave like a cough, like *i am still hungry*. try meditation, line breaks, what does this bouncing motif mean? seeing makes no one a saint. did you, too, fly into the too-loose seatbelt, watch plane wings that didn't bother to flail? did you swallow sound like bile, rising faster than your body fell? you say *i did* but the words clasp in each other like fingers, unreadable. we are not a circus if gawkers spin themselves around a falling ring. and who would spin with you, like a penny into a dazed man's cup, like *you saw it fall bestie* but forgot it was a pen? at least we have the same organs, to laugh, presumably, to write. someone's god slips through the papers and i only worship the first time you catch it— or if there is a god, our spinning pastes him around my ribs. splinter the wood of a poem into no meaning— it is a bathtub, a teardrop, a badly gulped cough. one day this room will be petrified, and you will be praising the beat of your own breathing. for the air between us pumps no blood, for no blood thickens air to water. you say *falling is a way to rub against ourselves*, but in trying to cut space, we have only twirled on each other's skin.



Ziyi Yan (闫梓祎) is a 16 year old Chinese writer living in Connecticut. She is an alumna of the Iowa Young Writers' Studio and the Adroit Journal Summer Mentorship. Her writing has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards on a national level. She is published or forthcoming in *Kissing Dynamite*, *Polyphony Lit*, *elementia*, *Breakbread Literacy Project*, *The Monitor*, *The Inflectionist Review*, and others. She is the winner of the Piedmont Institution Communications Contest, the Marymount Manhattan Poetry Prize, and the Lillian Butler Davies Communications Contest for poetry. She is also a poetry finalist for the Villena-Aldama Writing Contest. In addition to writing, she loves watching old One Direction interviews, blasting karaoke in the middle of the night, and annoying her younger sister. You can find her on Instagram @Ziyiyan\_\_\_

**Echo - Poem**  
**By Talia Skaistis**

In late July you find yourself  
in someone else's dream, or maybe a memory,  
that at some point belonged to you.

It's vivid now, hearing their laughing mingle  
with the lapping of lake water.  
They're young, not much younger than you  
but you feel the distance stretch wider.  
Sunlight dances on them in a way you used to know.

The air makes your head hurt. You can't remember  
what uninhibited happiness feels like. Only something  
like voices bouncing off canyons.

People sink to the bottom of lakes  
sheltered by green hills and endless summer.  
People never resurface.

All there is left to do is search their smiles  
for the parts of yourself you miss most  
before they erode, victims of an unseen current  
flowing gently below you.

It's impossible to keep them tied to a moment,  
and watch them live forever  
beneath a mountain called echo,  
hoping they won't be carried away

by a silent tide  
the way you were.

*Talia Skaistis is a 20-year old writer from New York City and Austin Texas, currently based in Lewiston Maine. She is an English major at Bates College, where she is an editor and contributor to Snaggletooth Magazine.*

**Mon/To Manjuri - Poem**

**By Sarah Aziz**

*“I hate Indians...The famine was their own fault for breeding like rabbits.”*

*—Winston Churchill*

Listening is a soft thing.  
You grow out your fingernails—  
that is where your home  
-town festers, smothered  
by fuchsia glitter glue. Manjuri,  
Mon-joo-reeh,  
Mon, Mon, Mon,  
The heart.  
Is listening, which is to say  
it is a soft  
thing, which is to say,  
your broken breaths over  
the phoneline quelled the  
ghost in the powder blue  
gown, before fajr, before  
the mother emptying her last  
song into a child, not hers, not  
anymore, but of the  
famine— before  
1943,  
before a goddess' name  
-sake pillaged this sister's  
vow, before I began to  
pray for the swell of  
Baba's belly, before  
the White man  
cut us open like mustard kebab,  
before the soft was pressed  
-flower-brittle-yellow,

and, after,  
after  
only  
you.



*Sarah Aziz is a poet, translator and illustrator based in Kolkata, India. She is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in English Literature at Loreto College, University of Calcutta. In 2021, her translation of Bangladeshi activist and author Pinaki Bhattacharya's "History of Bengal: from Ancient to British Rule" was published. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in The Good Life Review, Foglifter Journal, lavender bones magazine and Litbreak Magazine.*

**To My Mom's Cassette Tapes - Poem**

*After Phranc*

**By Lucy Doherty**

I like rituals. I like systems. I like you,  
I like that you broke my first cassette player  
When I was still learning how to use it.  
I like the quiet breaths while I wait for your final click.  
She got you in the late 80s, early 90s. I like  
To close my eyes and pretend my name is Anastasia,  
To listen to Phranc and The Indigo Girls while something unnamed  
Slowly, silently, blossoms within me.



*And when I'm feeling all alone,  
You're the one that always takes me home.  
And I respect you,  
I really appreciate the things you do.  
I like you.*



With the Walkman fixed to my belt loop and the tiny foam headphones,  
How much do I look like her?



*Lucy Doherty is a 19 year-old writer based out of Wisconsin. She has been published in Sage Cigarettes, Unpublishable, and Arboretum. She loves music and disability advocacy.*

*lucydoherty.carrd.co*

██████████, is that your given name?\* - Poem

*\*inspired by Gerwig, Greta. Lady Bird. A24, 2017.*

By Lilirose Luo

you've been waiting for the door to open,  
not realizing that you are the door. you've been  
waiting for someone to walk through the door,  
not realizing that everyone except you knows  
that beyond that door are only things  
not even a dead girl could want. once, You tried  
to be a director, but couldn't imagine rooms  
as anything other than a half-raw sliver of desire. twice,  
You tried to be an artist, but couldn't imagine people as  
anything other than a half-rabid portrait of predation.  
thrice, You tried to be a lover, but couldn't imagine her as  
anything other than yourself. there is a grieving  
in girlhood. you call it girlhood because otherwise  
it'd be something like pitching the body off the terracotta roof  
with the jumble of visiting crows on the white-hot thrumming powerline  
as your only witnesses. at dawn. at dusk. the telephone wires. crossing  
the sky. lacerate You in half. one crow. two crow. three crow.  
land on the line. make me real again. over the summer You tried  
to feed them bread scraps but stopped; these violent days  
feathered omens are permanent residents outside your windowsill.  
they're cawing to You— there is a reaping in girlhood. you call it  
girlhood because otherwise you'd be fitting your fever-warm mouth  
over hers, trying to concave a brackish jumble of vowels & oaths  
into a squalling inception. you learned two summers ago  
that You can't extract bereaving from girlhood. that no matter  
how much you bled, your words would not Midas-ify her.  
that no matter what You could shape with your hands, you could not  
recreate that desire. You've been waiting for the door to open,  
not realizing that it already is.

[...] Can you tell I watched Lady Bird at 15 and never got past it? I dyed my hair pink, pulled



██████████, is that your given name?\* // Lilirose Luo

*threads of my hand-me-down sneakers tight 'til they frayed. cycled to school every morning at 5AM, never mind my father's paycheck Cadillac parked in the driveway. shoelaces and spokes tangled tight one time, flew meters forward into the lane divider, and miraculously (thank the Lord), landed on my barely-scraped knees. my raw pink skin mixed with gravel, like a sainthood waiting to be grown out of. Can you believe it? Crazy teenage girls, those days.*

*there was a hole in the drywall behind the door. toothpaste. chlorine. dried flowers. all ways to be cleansed. summer sweat. tang. twang. all ways to be dirtied. say dead. say alive. leap off the roof- go, see how far you'll make it. feet slapping on the end-credit white text black screen pavement. cotton bedsheets- little lucid pills rolling off of them. lilies in the shape of murky static noise embroidery. my bed creaks. your body. You by the doorway. dead girl in the corner. You, reaching your hand out. dreamless silhouette. perfect golden hour. unreal.*

Lady Bird? Love, what are you talking about? No, we never watched that movie. No, you never called God by the 9-11 on the shoulder of I-80. You only saw that onscreen. Go back to sleep, it's late & *we still have work in the morning.* [...]



*Lilirose Luo (she/he) is a 16-year-old California-residing queer student & poet. When she's not writing, you might find her loving the ocean, learning to bake (as a love language), or curating a meticulous fictional world!*

## girl on the street outside seven-eleven - Poem

By Aimée Eicher

the wind, wolverine  
sinks its shark teeth into her bare skin.  
she treks home from the gym,  
perhaps she relishes the sobering frost.



venom from phantom's fangs paralyzes  
her gloveless fingers. arms cradle  
sagging plastic bags  
of low-fat popcorn and air-fried chips.  
sprout little hills, mounds of geese.



my midnight pilgrimage leads me to the same  
seven-eleven from which  
she travels, legs dragging sacks of frozen peas.  
on the sidewalk,  
path forged to our h(e)aven,  
our gazes — numbed by  
november sunsets and graphite-stained  
paper — shake hands and quickly  
retreat to parka pockets.



our fleeting friendship melts the  
gravel in my chest,  
pink one-dollar lighter emits a tiny warmth.  
but molten rock will  
plant its roots in arteries again  
when i leave the store.



*Aimée Eicher is a third-year undergraduate biology student at Cornell University, where she is an editor in the News Department of The Cornell Daily Sun. In her free time, Aimée enjoys spending time with friends, crocheting, avoiding Ithaca's winter climate, and — of course — writing poetry. She is twenty years old and originally from New York City.*

**the anatomy of heartache - Poem**

**By Isabella Liu**

the sanctuary of my melancholy  
resides within an unidentified area of my consciousness—  
parting untrodden oceans like the shattering  
of a hollow skull.

the glistened fruit of joy rots in my hands  
like decaying sinew.

i make a fount of my tears  
vexed and bitterly poisonous  
anatomic incendiaries, deliquescing.

there's an acerbic taste in my mouth that i cannot  
rid myself of.

it tastes of raw, excoriated despair:  
a woe distaste of anguish  
bleeding flesh and pungent coppery scents.

i am filled with acrimonious poems  
vindictive poetry, virulent literature  
and my blood runs hot with furious grief  
desolated

like the parchedness of an arid desert.

inside my torment lies a pain:

the unrelenting scratching of distress  
mounting a pile of hemorrhaging afflictions.  
the devastating cadence of a heartbreak  
like the pulse of someone  
left behind by the one they love.

my skin is lacerated with self-inflictions



and i still stare at the bedroom door  
(*our* bedroom door)  
awaiting your return  
for evermore.

*Isabella Liu is a fifteen year old Chinese-American writer from Cleveland, Ohio. She has been writing for over six years and is an avid enjoyer of reading beautiful poems and stories. She loves learning convoluted words, playing tennis, listening to Mitski, and above all, writing.*

**A dream I had - Poem**  
**By Elizabeth Ip**

I entertain a dream  
where you hold me in the kitchen,  
but not hostage. Less practised with knives,  
my fingers work slow  
and with reverence. I slice  
and the apple bleeds. Twice, your lips fall  
to my neck, my shoulders,  
and this apple bleeds.  
When you tire of tasters,  
you spin me around  
only to find the knife has beaten you to it,  
playacting upon the broad of my tongue  
as you watch the dumb show.  
How I miss our kisses  
that surprise themselves in sweetness;  
then your appetite,  
mobilised to pull me down the hall to the bedroom –  
yes, away from this scene,  
away from it all.



*Elizabeth Ip is eighteen and lives in Singapore, in the delightful company of her dog and viola. Her work appears in the Borderless Journal, the Atelier of Healing anthology, and Lavender Bones Magazine. They use a BAHA 5 Sound Processor, and occasionally Twitter and Instagram (where you can find them at @elizablurts).*

**The Star Lasso Experience - Poem**

**By Para Vadhahong**

*After "Nope"*

A great all-American cowboy  
chases applause puppeteered by  
TV gods on high, his horses

rendered plastic pieces, roaring  
applause from the stands divvied  
into staccato after the last bow.

You toss your hat into the ring with a  
grin scrubbed clean by bills collected  
from that golden trophy

room dedicated to the slaughter of  
your boyhood, model minority of  
that old-school sitcom glory,

an American Dream pressed into  
Hollywood: John Wayne in his gold  
rush, leather vest enframed.

He does not remove his own faulty  
shadow and hide it under the table,  
not like you, all-American cowboy,

trading lies for a carnival weighed with  
alien appetites, an Asian man in a fake  
Western, faking survival—

making a spectacle of yourself.



*Para Vadhahong (22) is a Thai American poet and writer from the South. Their work is published or forthcoming in Kingdoms in the Wild, Hyacinth Review, Lover's Eye Press, INKSOUNDS, Koenig Zine, and Salt Hill.*

**call me the anti-hero - Poem**

**By Annalisa Hansford**

*after anti-hero by taylor swift*

call me the collector of bones from memories, the  
hoarder of skeletons from hurt. call me  
the problem. watch me drown everyone i've ever loved into  
graves for the past. their gasp, the epitaph.  
teach me to save my lovers from myself. instead of  
breathing them back to life, i make a ghost  
out of them stitched together from grief. this is what it's  
like to be the origin of another person's  
hurt. to stare into another person's wounds,  
but never your own. i miss when my past  
lovers wept for me in a language i couldn't  
understand. there you were loving me.  
here i am abandoning you. it's not easy being the  
problem. it's not easy being the anti-hero.



*Annalisa Hansford is an undergraduate at Emerson College studying Creative Writing. Their writing appears in Emerge Literary Journal, The Hearth Magazine, Eunoia Review, The Aurora Journal, Lavender Bones, VIBE, and elsewhere. Their work has been recognized by 1455 Literary Arts, Joliet Public Library, and Grindstone Literary. They are the editor-in-chief of hand picked poetry and read for The Emerson Review. They are probably listening to Gracie Abrams and drinking iced vanilla matcha lattes.*

**Ars Poetica for the Indian American - Poem**

**By Annika Gangopadhyay**

True art is born out of stained glass sufferings,  
    spiraling into the furnace over and over and over  
        until your metal wine abstractions bleed authenticity.  
Drink to the pieces: the gargoyle chewing your tongue,  
the voice a hymn you cannot burn.

Preservation:

I didn't know it was a sin to swallow coconut oil  
and forget (birth)days: a grandmother just turned eighty,  
    we are tearing down this apartment and dancing to sepia  
    wedding pictures—yes, I bleach my bones over

telephone lines

    (but you are too far away to see me

    morph

myself.)

    say nature: I want to play fugues  
    on the harmonium and my parents do not refuse,  
    music is versatile yet my jaw only spits

sanctus deo

    into copper dust; is it too late to save the spine?  
What is synthesis if not ripping the scalp  
from my Indus hair,  
    hurling it on marble  
tiles, singing of shrines and  
    (free) fall?

A guru once told me to salvage  
the soul for the next life but the cathedral  
wants the severed head, the final sacrifice,  
the glorious endings—

    summon the incense in my throat  
    and watch me (re)incarnate



molten dreams;  
behold the window's bearing body  
and gild this consecration.



*Annika Gangopadhyay is an emerging writer from the Bay Area. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Hearth & Coffin Literary Journal*, *Élan*, *Ligeia Magazine*, *The Incandescent Review*, *the borderline*, and *Blue Marble Review*. In her spare time, she enjoys music and art criticism.*

**A Nymph's Becoming - Poem**

**By Natasha Last-Bernal**

april's touch washes me over  
I open the window to an air lightly laced  
with sweet pink tulips and sizzling sun-kissed skin  
prickling soft bumblebees kiss under a static prism sky  
marigold mirages fade into peach-tinted watercolors

quietly now,  
hear my stuttering whispers and silent hymns  
while you cherish the imprint of my overflowing heart  
sinking deeper into wet soil and gentle blades of grass  
alongside the bruised plums and pressed cherry blossoms  
the wind inhales flesh and bone, exhales blushing cheeks  
time passes, I let silence consume the wildly natural  
and radically dim canals of my lovelorn mind  
I lay wide-eyed and open-toed beneath streams of golden  
light, resignation capturing my drooling kamikaze spirit  
lightly again,  
my footsteps leave graveyards and streams undisturbed  
as I float about, I hear the hummingbirds sing my praises,  
feel the warmth on my back, and lick the sap from trees  
I understand that you knew me once, for my roots  
that lay unwavering and buried beneath acres of soil,  
for my cruel determination that pounds like violent hail,  
and my calloused hands of faint autumn fog  
recognize me now,  
in a ghostly trance and immortalize me  
for my alluring siren's song and melodic mumbles  
witness the healing of slow rest amidst lush green  
the ancestral pain evaporated from the fresh rivers  
and from the rough curvature of my twisted spine  
see the dance of the dandelion seeds as they flicker  
beneath teased cotton clouds and unearth memories



of peppermint tea with teaspoons of honey, tenderness,  
and the nectar of backyard peaches streaming onto skin

I forget gilded ambition and aspirations for fool's gold,  
warm peaceful pleasures grip my translucent limbs tight  
with simplicity made my springtime companion,  
I dream of deep breaths and blurry fate



*Natasha Last-Bernal is a 17-year-old writer and incoming undergraduate student at Barnard College of Columbia University. She has received national recognition from the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and represents Seattle as a Youth Poet Laureate Cohort Member. Natasha can be found exploring Washington forests, collecting unusual antique knick-knacks, and listening to folk rock.*

study of a ten pin plug (II) - Poem  
By Cheryl Tan



- Fix aircon, buy three ears of corn, cashew nut packet (camel brand), water bougainvillea. Realign anime figurine, glue spare parts, ~~file biology revision notes~~, rearrange earrings in alphabetical order. Buy new power bank for sis, tidy up pillows on sofa. Vacuum carpet quietly.
- Polish graduation keychain, play ponyo soundtrack (music box edition), drink camomile tea (hot). Tell mom the charger's chipped bad again. You're shaking the cord and wires are out and it's all a mess, actually. Do not ask what happened to part I.
- ~~Go to mass (9am). You might as well try while you still have white teeth. There's the wine and the priest and you will soon fall asleep but that's okay, you're here anyway. You make a horrible Catholic. The boy in the pew in front of you is really cute if you look at him from the back. You grew up with him, so you know.~~
- The plugs in this country have three pins, with one hole in the socket connecting to the earth so you don't electrocute yourself. Let the ground take the fall for you. Somewhere in the world a country is experiencing a blackout, a lockdown, a circuit breaker. You should be grateful for existing but you're not. You wish you were.
- ~~But mom can't explain why you have a three-way crush on your ex, Camila Cabello and the resident volleyball captain. Or why everything crackles like an angry teacher. Or why your computer screen has two unskippable ads that tell you about how their dark spots have become lighter. The serums never work. Don't buy them.~~
- List of patients at the clinic: Rainbow Dash (headache) - feed glitter and shake well, Elsa (ice powers; cannot control), Lalaloopsies with hair loss. Plastic toys like fossilised bugs. My Melody themed puzzle. Braid the ponies' hair so they don't get tangled again and unpeel the remaining bon bons. ~~Drink camomile tea (cold).~~
- Eat rest of almond brittle or biscotti, whichever is easier. Watch your sugar intake, whatever that means. You were hyper at thirteen, active at fourteen and then it all got sucked out of you by the time you finished high school. You are so tired of trying to be better than you really are. You will drink bandung rose if you want to.



Go for tuition (maths, 4pm).—

A plug has as many orifices as a woman, depending on which one you shut up. You are nobody's magical girl. You're as bright as a suckerpunch and half as electric, a frantic pixie dream of sorts. Do you dream of pixies, girl? Of friendship bracelets made of string? This is how you know you are sinking.

You've got hands too small and feet too tall and are too easily scared by the clothespin which makes your dresses look uncannily like you. Imagine saying that to a kid. You are the same as always. Remember: Tell mom the charger's chipped bad and it's stopped working. By then you'll have stopped working, too.



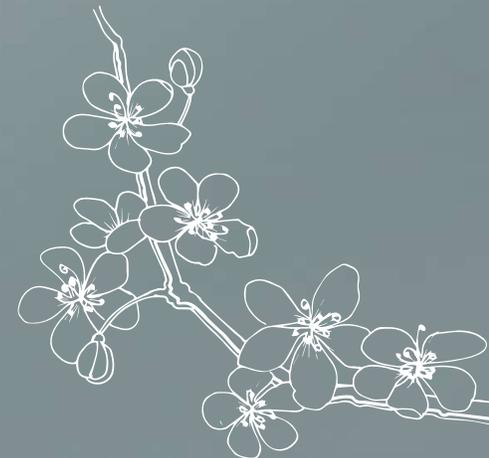
---

Bandung rose: A popular drink in Southeast Asia, it consists of evaporated or condensed milk flavoured with rose syrup.

*Cheryl Tan (she/her) is a 16-year-old Singaporean of Chinese and Indian descent. She has been published in Amber: The Teenage Chapbook, soucherrymag and Eye on the World, an anthology by the Creative Arts Programme, Singapore, among others.*

**Déjà Vu - Poem**  
**By Sieun Park**

This night unlike the rest,  
I sit on the stool in the living room,  
  
watching the second hand  
drag across the clock. The back wall  
  
holds shapes of fluorescent  
colours, while the wood tiles slowly rot  
  
under the carpet. The fan  
dries the clothes on the rack, next to the  
  
tinted window. The weather  
forecast hums a low static buzz as the radio  
  
loses signal. Then at once,  
the sounds of the pan sizzling in the kitchen,  
  
the sharp noises of my  
grandmother cutting the vegetables for dinner,  
  
the clamour of the traffic  
outside, lulls into silence. I find myself watching  
  
the moon rise in the distance,  
while the leaves dwindle under the breeze.



*Sieun Park is a 14-year-old student currently studying at International School Manila. She is from Seoul, South Korea. She enjoys playing sports and listening to music.*

**Nebula - Poem**

**By Divya Venkat Sridhar**

and when we were bones  
aching asleep and  
darkness overtook us  
you were a cocoon above, brittle  
like death, you were endless  
cobweb ashes hurling  
out  
of an urn,  
a whisper off the lip of a cliff and then  
you were newborn,  
wisps of hot pink flushes  
and twirling skirts of hydrogen  
ripples in the silk of space  
outstretched under the earth  
gravity tugging closer fleshy heat itching  
until you blossomed with a chorus  
of a thousand suns,  
and we  
listened, knowing  
we, too, could begin again.

*Divya Venkat Sridhar (she/her) is a 16-year old Indian poet living in Switzerland. Her work has been recognised by the Poetry Society, Zindabad Zine, SeaGlass Literary, Swim Press, and more. When she isn't writing, you'll find her making pasta, playing the saxophone, or singing the La La Land soundtrack (terribly).*

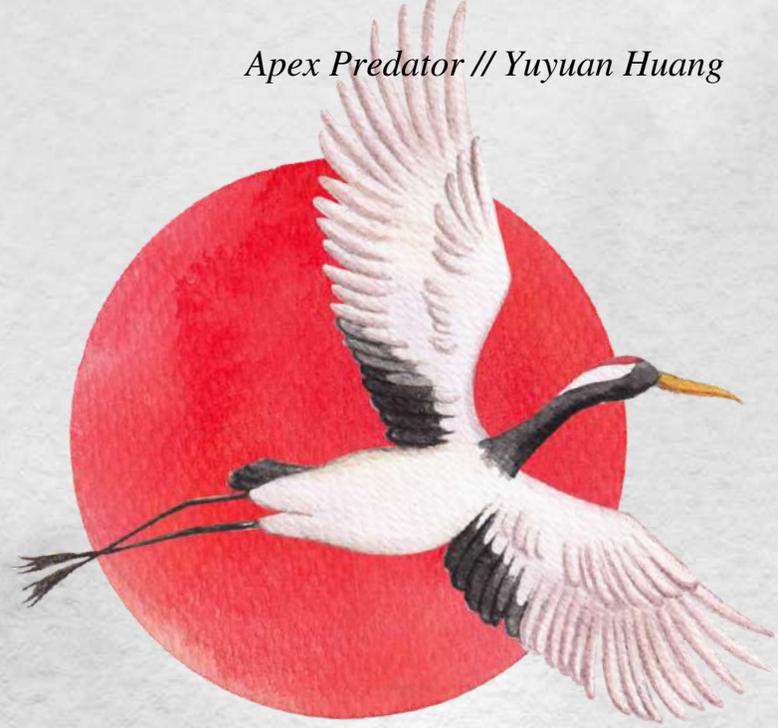
**Apex Predator - Poem**  
**Yuyuan Huang**

my mother tells me that every  
immigrant to America arrives  
hungry. we are insatiable  
for opportunity because only  
we know how it feels to  
starve.

we cross the mountains and  
oceans and skies because in  
America they say we will never go  
hungry. we all want a piece of  
America, that melting pot, that  
salad bowl. none of  
it is for us.

we learn that to survive in America  
you must eat like a bird  
of prey. you must wake before the  
dawn every morning  
stake out your competition  
prowl the skies for hours finding  
what you are looking for. once  
you have a target you must  
fight for it, and don't stop fighting  
until you've devoured it,  
bones and all.

we come to understand that you  
must be resourceful in America.  
there is never enough for  
everything. everyone wants it  
for themselves. staying soft is a  
privilege; there are no choices  
in the animal world. it's eat or be



eaten; there is no such thing as  
surrender. if you are not  
hungry enough, you will starve.  
most important of all, you must  
never let your guard down.  
everyone here is out to get you.

my mother tells me this is why  
America is the land of the  
eagle. we cranes have  
no place in this food chain.

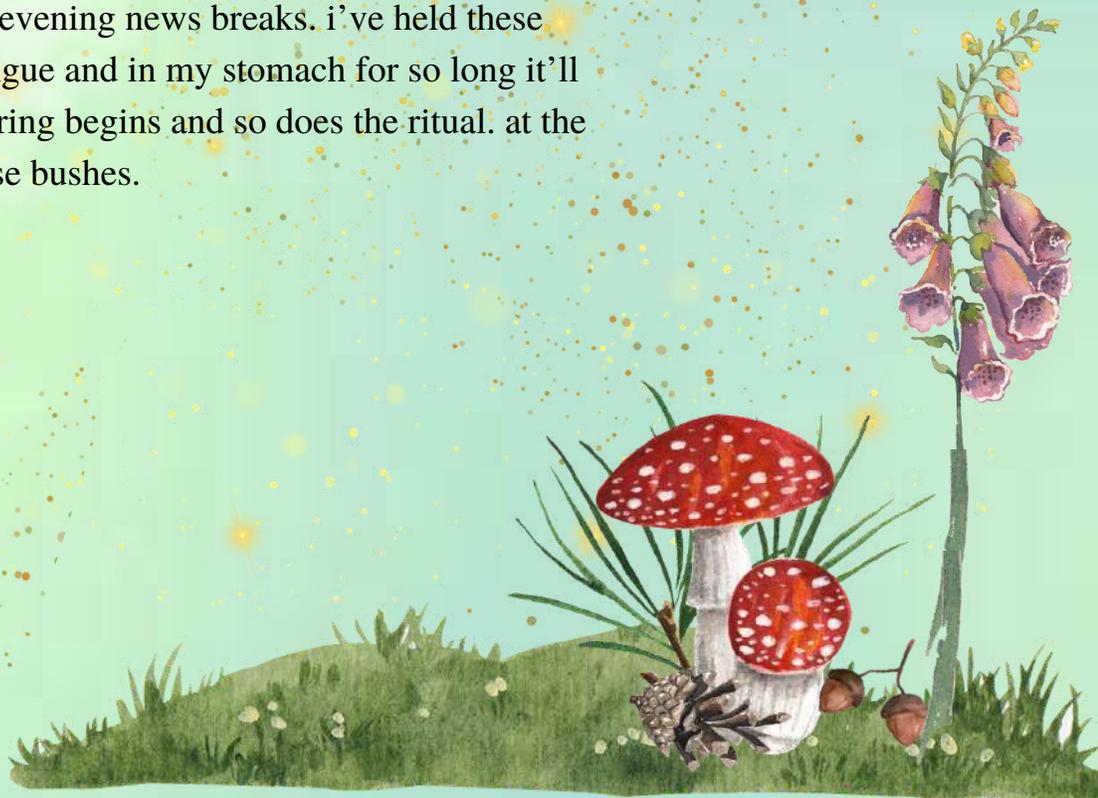


*Yuyuan Huang (she/her) is a 16 year-old poet, dreamer, artist, nerd, and everything in between. She has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards for poetry since 2020 and her work has previously been published in Chinchilla Lit. When she is not writing, she can be found playing word games, taking long walks, or reading her favorite books. Yuyuan lives in Boston, MA.*

**primavera - Poem**

**By rebecca herrera alegria**

it starts with needles. spring is coming and we must learn to weave. we'll craft these floral crowns and virgin veils with crochet chains, houseplant vines, and the plastic six-pack rings we found on a beach two miles away from a lighthouse and a 7-eleven. the celebration opens. nymphs surround the willow trees and braid their blonde branches, listening to the violin leaves and the sneezing. the goddess smiles from behind the iron gates, in glitter and gardenias. we're going to make sure the season is welcomed and warmed, despite the television screens, the polyester, and the warheads. our swift feet will run across the soot-covered grasslands and if our prayers are heard then gardens will bloom from our footprints. persephone taps her nails against the ice. the evening news breaks. i've held these lavender seeds under my tongue and in my stomach for so long it'll have to be a bloodletting. spring begins and so does the ritual. at the ends of my toes i feel the rose bushes.



*rebecca herrera alegria (26) is an art school grad born and raised in new york. she is currently the managing editor of fifth wheel press and has been featured in various publications including aôthen magazine, maría's at sampaguitas, and celestite poetry. you can find her on twitter @strawburrymoon or on her website [allirherrera.wixsite.com/site](http://allirherrera.wixsite.com/site)*

**Tonight's dream - Poem**

**By Keren-happuch Garba**

At dusk, the lush of a twilight dream backdrops like a whelp against its mother.  
The lullabies written for crying babies will start to hum in the air.  
Pots are alighted from stoves and the aroma of dinner is thickened.  
The children, by magnetism, will drag the sun with their pacing feet  
Hauling it, till it sets on decaying grass.  
When the Storyteller arrives,  
They will hear her cane tapping the ground,  
And fireflies - sparks in the darkness will burn out in crumbs.  
If the air won't be milk let it be honey  
For morning will soon arrive in tiny sums.  
The Storyteller sits on a timber stool old enough to know her age  
Crafting tonight's dream with her tongue  
While the moon swells and stars bubble above.

*Keren-happuch Garba is eighteen and a Nigerian creative writer. She has been published in Cathartic literary magazine, Write the World Review, Teen Ink and the Moveee. Her work is forthcoming in Gaia lit and she won Write the World's Climate Change writing competition 2022.*

**Night Market - Flash Fiction**

**By Emily Pedroza**

This summer we were in charge of the taro-ball stand. Just us. Your mom left last week to fly back to Beijing: your grandmother had cancer or diabetes, or maybe leukemia. On my first day of work I manned the register—watched you crouch on the teetering wooden stool, ringless hands kneading purple dough.

Now it's me in the back. My back brushes against the tent as I lean back against metal. Customers squint at the shaded menu, pulling out phones and dialing up their flashlights. But it's not really our fault; the operating lamp broke yesterday. Since then our only light source has been these lanterns—handmade.

Last night we sat in your cramped living room, wringing metal hooks through wrinkled red wrappers, semi-opaque and grease-marred. Our fingers brushed as they dipped into the plastic box, my pulse hot and stringing through my ears. We twisted wire into outreached fingers and crowned white candles in paper wombs. Against the oak door your mom bargained for—your peppery breath, lips oily from the beef by my temple as we said goodnight. After, I stayed up two hours past my night alarm. Stared at the ceilings, images coalescing—hot breath, our ribs tangling. Crawled into bed with my wet braided hair, a peppercorn kernel clasped between the teeth I imagined were yours—kept it there like a secret. Folded the curve of your mouth into memory.

Now, I steal glimpses of you through steam. Your clumped and glossy bangs, the scattered specks of mascara below your eyes, your crooked front teeth. Your fingers, wrapped in gold; your promise ring. What if it was us instead? Maybe. Maybe we could wake up atop freshly washed linen—where I would bury my lips into your neck without you flinching. Without you reaching for your phone on the counter.

\*\*\*

You wanted to become an entrepreneur and move to America but took a gap year instead. One became three, you told me last summer after the night market closed. Behind cloth, your head tipped back onto concrete, dark hair fanned out. All still, except for your fingertips molding a seared stick of tobacco. I wrung my response between my teeth. The dark rattled, cicadas snapping like rubber against the lake, lampposts kissing gravel. I couldn't tell you to stay. Crouched behind wooden stools, I wrapped you in my skin—my lungs two unclenched fists.

Paper lanterns sway above the heads of grumbling customers, squinting at the yellowed menu. A metal pot rattles by my stomach, bearing white and purple spheres that quiver under frothing water, little sunken moons. While I make the next batch, I look at the rice-flour dusted metal counters: at the sheen on my forehead, an acne scab with blotchy concealer, the pores on my nose. Compare the shape of my lips to the girls that walk hand-in-hand with their lovers, smile wide, muffle laughs against shoulder blades, the shadows of streetlights beneath their sneakers. There are so many things I wish I could change.

It's an hour after closing—after finishing the leftover red bean soup and licking sweet paste off the ladle when you tell me. We lay beside a ripped foldable chair with our legs buried into ourselves.

our fingers sticky from ginger syrup. Hiding from stall vendors whose metal pans rattle, their cart wheels scraping stone-tile. It's almost as if we can evade time together. You say that you're moving to America for real this time, that you've gotten a job in Boston. You're smiling but my pulse is buckling through skin. *That's great*, I say.

I close my lips to seal the sugar-syrup souring. We sit as you gaze up at the distance, the speckled moon's reflection in your eyes.

\*\*\*

I wish you were a liar. Your mom called me last night with her voice muffled by wind, sparklers smothering the clacks of her stilettos in the background. Back in middle school, when I visited your house, she was like my god. But yesterday she drawled, pleaded with me to drive you to the airport and resorted to calling you my sister, *jie*. I was shaken by this more than I should have been. That your fingers were in some ways hers, but so different from the ones that used to cut me bowls of fruits, wrap me in soft blankets, string together stars. I used to think warm things could never rust.

You're silent when you enter the car, except for a short *thanks*. Ally, your girlfriend, is in the back with you. She smells of vanilla and rose and accentuates her o's when she says, "*Wow, your car is so cool.*" I laugh awkwardly and smile through the rearview mirror, mind replaying her peach-stained lips and long lashes. Chew harder on the cough drop, driving it deeper into a cavity.

*The night tickets were cheaper*, she explains, to fill the silence. The driving wheel melds under my fingers, the red stop-light dripping into the horizon. Your breath fogs the glass, but I doubt you notice. You're too busy looking up.



*Emily Pedroza is a fifteen-year-old writer in the Bay Area. Her work has been recognized by the New York Times and elsewhere. She is a poetry editor at Outlander Magazine and Diet Water Zine, an intern at Young Eager Writers, Program Manager of Writer's Ink, and a mentee at Ellipsis Writing. Outside of drilling word counts, you can find her hoarding herbal teas, cramming for exams, or baking fusion desserts.*

**An Ode to 22 - Creative-Nonfiction**

**By Adenah Furquan**



I find the essence of humanness in the chocolate frosting of my cake. Off in the distance, Taylor Swift croons something about feeling 22. I nod in agreement, fervently mumbling the words to a song I didn't even *know* I remembered. Somehow, somewhere, the world starts to make a little more sense.

In that moment, life's most colossal problem becomes the lack of fridge space for the umpteenth cake. I think I stopped counting after the fourth one. The echoes of laughter drown out every last bellow of agony in my belly, replacing all of those muted blues with warm hues of yellow. In the confines of this room is where I feel I am less acid, more honey. I make sure to keep that door shut.

At the dawn of 22 is the dawn of a glistening epiphany. What is humanness if not the pulsating celebration of life and joy, the vehement hunt for an occasion that justifies the presence of a hundred balloons? What is humanness if not the saccharine display of companionship, the riveting search for words in a room with more gifts than it can hold?

To be human is to have your chest thump when the clock strikes midnight, when your phone vibrates with the same urgency as adolescent love. It is feverish in its motion: a throbbing concoction of ecstasy and exuberance. To be human, I realize, is to search for — and find — meaning in the most minuscule of things: the fudge brownies on your plate, the crimson roses on your dresser. I am reborn a thousand times in one night.

Is this not what it means to be alive: to have the scent of caramel envelop your bones in a gentle embrace, to have the taste of tenderness linger long after the night has ended? One glimpse of your bountiful love fills me with the light of a thousand suns, permeating my bones with a fire only *you* could ignite. In the cocoon of late autumn is where it all connects: the flame meets the wick, and the sea greets the shore. And my pieces, I feel, finally fall into place.



*Adenah Furquan is a 22-year-old Pakistani-American with an earnest passion for writing and feminism. When she's not brainstorming ideas for new pieces or trying to dismantle the patriarchy, Adenah can be found listening to indie rock, watching or reading psychological thrillers, and gushing over scented candles.*

**Time - Creative Nonfiction**

**By Ella Chen**

The short hand marks the hour. The long one, the minute. The thin one, the only ever-moving one, the second. I sit at my desk, fascinated by my newly acquired knowledge, quite pleased with myself. I have always ignored the odd, pie-like object with a black crust and a white filling. But no more. Wang laoshi, my first grade math teacher, strides by, licking her thumb and sliding the first worksheet out from her stack. The rustling of paper doesn't bother me—reading the time is a piece of pie. I make my math teacher regret ever teaching me how by gluing my eyes to the spot above the door where the clock hangs. As I rock my crossed legs to every tick and tock of the clock, I inch closer to the start of recess second by second—my prison break. I quickly pick up this clock-reading skill and apply it to every class. Real life application of classroom knowledge is the goal, right? With extensive practice, I finally developed my sixth sense—the one that lets me know when five minutes, then ten minutes, then twenty minutes have passed—and it is very useful for survival.

-----

Friday is the special day again, but this time is different. I'll be turning ten. For the last day, hour, minute, and second in my life, I will be a single digit. For the first time, mom and dad will stick two drippy candlesticks into my cake, and to blow them out, I will have to take an even bigger breath, expanding my tummy even more. My palms sweat at the thought of the permanence of the situation. Like when I try to climb up a slide but I slip and fall helplessly down the slope, my childhood is vanishing under my searching fingers. Helpless. Ten is the big kids I've always looked up to, thinking, 'Oh my gosh, they are so old, so cool.' Ten can't be me. I'm not old. I'm not cool. I'm the same person I've always been. Ten is too monumental for me.

Last night, I asked my mom as she tucked me into bed, "What time was I born?" The four-syllable answer changed my birthday from November 17th to November 17th at 6:56 pm. But it was even more than that—for me, it was my grant of clemency. I close my eyes and fall asleep, comforted that as the sun shines bright and I open my eyes tomorrow, I will still be nine. I live my day to the fullest by stuffing a freshly steamed rou bao zi down my gullet; by forcing the most unnatural laugh out of my almost-burnt throat; by repeating the phrase "I am nine," as if it means something, as if it will change my fate.

After an early dinner, I arrive unwillingly at my theater rehearsal. Time to get into character... as a clam. But I can't. As much as I flap my arms across my body, so much so

that I seem more like a flailing bird than a giant opening and closing clam, my lines will not come to me. It's as if the words are all stuck on the insides of my stomach, and my breaths are not deep nor strong enough to draw them up to the tip of my tongue. I am immobilized, but my shells continue to open, close, open, close, trapping the words within. I glance up at the clock, its ticks so faint they are easily drowned by the class chatter. But to me, they are as clear as the cracks of thunder, desperate for my attention. Today I experienced another first—rather than checking how many minutes remain until class ends, I check how much time remains until I will be forced to say goodbye to my single digits.

-----

I stand on the doorstep with my mom, dad, and brother. Mom knocks the way she always does—three crisp taps with the back of the knuckles on her right hand. Within seconds, the door swings open, and there stand Caleb, his dad John, and his mom Elizabeth in descending order by height. For a second, we all just stand there, grinning foolishly at each other. The four-year-old kid at Beijing Sunny Days Preschool whom, according to my mom, I bossed around, has blossomed into a six-foot giant. I suppose I have grown too, height-wise, but not nearly as much.

Caleb opens his door, and I rush in, eager for our Easter egg hunt to begin. A vibrant rainbow of Skittles peeks out from under the long tongue of John's shiny black leather shoe. M&Ms scattered on a thin film of dust rest on top of the ancient behemoth of a fridge, far out of reach for tiny first-graders. Amongst the many peculiar places I found candy that day, two are still etched in my memory, grooves worn deep by confident strokes of the knife. One is when I fished a mini chocolate egg out from deep inside the bell of Caleb's golden trumpet; the other is when I spot a second chocolate egg in between the hi-hats of Caleb's black electronic drum set. Always keeping up with the ever-passing time, he has, since that day, outgrown his trumpet, drum set, piano, cello, and tuba, and moved on to be a composer and conductor.

-----

Firsts. My first cry, birthday, friend, fight, sleepover, beach trip, star-gaze, journal entry, fire-fly sighting, five-day backpacking trip... As my list of firsts expands, I zoom out, and the bigger picture comes into focus. The hanging pie-clock is insignificant now; it's the calendar that matters. Birthdays don't mark another year gone, they mark another year lived, loved, laughed. As time grows, I have grown with it, gaining a deeper understanding of

friendship and family, of anxiety and peer pressure, of love, of the world around me, and of time itself. Time is my life-long companion, whether I like it or not.



*Ella Chen is a high-school student from Beijing, China who goes to school in California. Journaling sparked her love of writing, so it's no surprise that her favorite form of writing is personal essays. In her free time, she loves dancing, listening to Taylor Swift and K-pop, and hanging out with friends, and she is really passionate about mental health advocacy.*

## **Tweeze - Creative-Nonfiction**

**By Pireh Moosa**

My little blue tweezer has taught me to pick my skin apart. Shame hides the residue within scrunched up tissues, often spotted with blood. It is a gratifying violence I reward myself with, every day.

I keep the tweezer in a purple pencil holder on my dressing table. On many restless nights, it has slept beside me, on my nightstand. Occasionally, it has lain forgotten on my desk and I have found myself longing, itching for it, the surface of my skin prickling in its absence. I have tried others, but none have worked magic the way this one does. It finds my filth for me, grasping at my thick spikes of settled, jutting hair, and in simple, artful moves, it wipes me clean.

In the spirit of emulation, I took to training my thumb and forefinger to take its shape. They began to morph. My thumb nail has plowed a pronounced dent into the tip of my left index finger - a result of my attempts to tweeze chin hair by hand. It was excruciating once, taking myself apart alone. With time, it has become convenient.

Often, my mother catches me in the act. She has learned my habits with immense precision and always knows where to look, even when I have hid them well. She will mostly tut and choose between a few hyperbolic, sarcastic comments - 'Aur karo beta. Khaal hi nikaal dou', 'Go on then. Peel your whole skin off', and other variations. Sometimes, she will say nothing, and silently pass the tweezer to me. I am accustomed to her responses. I have learned her too. Beyond her words, she hides her true concern in the upward crease at her eyebrows, the six worry lines on her forehead folding inwards in suppression. In response, I will stop for a while. A few minutes that seem to stretch into hours, days, weeks... And then she will leave, or perhaps her mind will, now engrossed in Facebook videos on politics. I will position my laptop on my knees, obscuring my face. And then I will keep at it until I exhaust myself. It is in these now significantly rarer moments that I drag myself to the dressing table, pull out my little blue tweezer, and get the job done.

I am no longer aware enough to be discreet in public. My hand runs like a scanner, searching mechanically for signs, sometimes using all fingers to stretch out skin where more stubborn hair has emerged. I know no feeling on my chin now, other than the short-lived pleasurable release of hair wrenched from its roots. A few other friends have begun to recognize it. They

wear their concern openly, in their words and on their faces. One will take my hand tenderly in his, keeping it sandwiched between his two palms. The restlessness in my own hands will begin to shift inwards and for a colossal uncomfortable moment, I will sit with my filth, with my feelings. He will hold me patiently as I falter, meeting my eyes. After a while, it will fade into a softer, deeper pain. In those rarest-of-all moments, I sit with the prickliest of chin hairs, bruised at their roots, and leave them be.



*Pireh Moosa (she/her) is a 22-year-old media student based in Karachi who loves reading, writing, and anything musical. In all kinds of writing, she obsesses over capturing the largeness of miniscule moments in time. Currently, her published work can be found or is forthcoming in The Smart Set, Star 82 Review, Blue Marble Review, The Aleph Review, Pandemonium Journal, and Ice Lolly Review. On most days, you will find her trading in possibly productive time for peaceful K-Drama bingeing.*

## Bridges - Creative-Nonfiction

By Yelaine Aguilar

In western Puerto Rico lies a previously hidden military base turned airport. I go through this airport almost every time I visit my family. The bulk of my mom's side of the family resides ten to twenty minutes from the Aguadilla airport in the small towns of Moca, San Sebastian, and Aguada. Each town's roads hug verdant green mountains, which crack the pavement during the slightest storm. At the crossroads of Moca and San Sebastian is a road that fails to disguise a bridge broken beyond repair. The bridge was fixed so that cars could pass over it again, but we passed a steep inclination where pavement had been placed to patch up the hole in the bridge. The first time my parents and I passed this bridge I let out a gasp. My stomach lurched forward as the car jumped up and back down again. My parents, who were in the two front seats, looked back and laughed.

"It kind of felt like a rollercoaster." I chuckled. I look back on this memory as a funny way to remember Puerto Rico's cracked roads and familial bonding.

However, there were more potholes we passed on our way to Lares, a small town an hour from Moca, that weren't so fun. With a rugged terrain that continuously jutted out of the pavement, Lares was *the road less traveled*, personified.

My family and I drove up the mountain-rooted roads to see my cousin, Tito, in Lares twice. Somehow, I did not remember the first time. Perhaps it was because the company made my second trip to Tito's house a lot more memorable- I was heading there with my 80-year-old Titi Christina, who is Tito's mom, my younger Tia Dary, who is my grandpa's sister, and my parents.

My Titi Christina had a face that was creased solely from age and smile lines. I'd never seen her forehead scrunched from stress, or her almond-shaped eyes wide from any negative emotion. She sat to my right in the back row. We had to pick Tia Dary up from her house, and she climbed into my left, yanking the seatbelt over her stomach. She gave me a tight hug.

"HOLA Jay como estás?!" Her dark eyes scanned my face, awaiting a response.

"Bien, bien y tú?" I said, but Dary was already moving onto Tia Christina.

Christina leaned her small body forward to greet Dary, they said their hellos, and my dad sped away from the neighborhood both of my Tias lived in.

The trip was calm as we drove from Moca to the entrance of Lares, through roads that had only minor potholes. My Tia Christina's Toyota SUV hardly jiggled as I spotted stunning valleys of coquelicot red Flamboyanes and purple jacaranda blooms. Before we drove more inland, I caught glimpses of azure beaches surrounded by rocky cliffs through the thick foliage. Whenever we crested over a hill, I wondered how residents sat comfortably in front of their colorful houses that dangled over precarious edges. Such views continued as we crossed into the territory of Lares, but I couldn't enjoy them half as much when I noticed what lay ahead. The wider main roads shrunk into hardly two lanes with enough space for cars to go back and forth. These narrow roads

coiled around the mountains. The trees and soil destroyed enough pavement to make my *Tia's* Toyota do a death dance. On top of that, there was no fence, not even a small one, to protect cars from going off the road and tumbling down the mountain.

“Ay, ay Dios mío! There’s no way we’re doing this right now!” I felt my younger Tia shrink back in her seat next to me. As I turned to face her, the corners of her lips drooped.

“I’ve gone alone to visit Tito, we’ll be fine,” my older Tia, who was sitting next to Tia at the opposite end of the back row, reassured.

“*Sola?* Up all of this? You’ve gone *alone?* MUCHACHO!”

I was tempted to laugh, but one look at my *Tia* and her cartoonish frown, and I knew I didn’t want her to turn it on *me*. *Well, if my other Tia has been up here countless times, and I have in the past, we’ll probably be fine. Tia is definitely overreacting.*

I looked back at Tia’s paling face and twitching fingers. In great contrast, my older Tia was looking out the window, her unmoving hands placed in her lap. The difference was laughable, but I didn’t have the luxury to think about that when I looked out the front car window. I noticed that there was a car going in the opposite direction, but the road was so narrow it looked like it was right in front of us. The car’s front lights glared at us as the car came closer, and closer-

My Tia started whining again, “Ay Dios mío, este hombre nos va a matar! ¡No puede guiar!”

It’s not like the poor guys, both my dad and the guy driving the other car, had a choice. The road was like my lips, stretched thin as I tried not to open my mouth and become my Tia. Or else, my dad would get distracted. Or else, they would fall off a road that has no fencing into the valley below, or crash into the mountain the road was built on. Since we were on the inside of the road, we’d have to deal with the latter.

My dad sighed and, while trying not to listen to what my Dary was saying, swerved slightly until he was an inch from hitting the mountain. He stopped to let the other car pass.

I glanced at my Tia, somewhat sharing in her fright this time. Her eyebrows were on the top of her forehead and her eyes were the size of swim rings. My calmer Tia, on the other hand, snapped out of nature’s enchanting grip and turned towards us. She blinked and cocked her head to the side when she noticed that Tia Dary was so scared that her always-moving lips were pressed together.

Noticing both of my Tia’s reactions, my mom chuckled, and then Tia went back to fighting my dad’s “estúpido” driving choices. The car ride continued with my Tia’s Dary’s constant molestia, my Titi Christina’s constant calma, and my dad’s resolve to hear peace and quiet. My mom and I were in the thick of a situation where we silently observed, chuckled, and finally laughed so. Damn. hard. When shaken-up Tia Dary ran to the bathroom as soon as we parked in Tito’s driveway.

My Tia Christina knows that the drive to the highest mountaintops of Lares, where my cousin lives, is dangerous. Yet she’s driven there, alone, in the rain, with a not-so-acute sense of

hearing. And it's all because of her desire to connect with her son and grandsons. While Tia Dary was screaming the whole car ride and said she would *nunca* take such a trip *ever* again, she's also gone to great lengths to see and take care of family. Her father lived with her into old age. When he got too old to bathe on his own or cook, she fed and clothed him. She took care of my 98-year-old great-grandfather until the day he died.

It does not matter if one takes the role of the screaming or calm aunt- although most everyone prefers the latter- when crossing broken bridges, what matters is reaching out. After crossing the broken, root-ridden roads, I know it's possible to bridge a gap with family and friends that live in the most remote of places. I know it's possible to scream and cry and still make it to my destination. I know it's possible to be calm and make it, too. Whatever the case, I'll show up and be there. I'll repair my broken bridges, and iron out the ones that need it. I'll fill the potholes with a smile one day and tears on another until the road is re-paved.

*Flamboyanes* - royal poinciana trees

*Tia*- aunt

*Ay Dios mío!*- oh my god

*Sola*- alone

*Muchacho*- Puerto Rican slang for "oh my goodness" or "oh boy"

*¡Este hombre nos va a matar! ¡No puede guiar!*- This man is going to kill us! He can't drive!

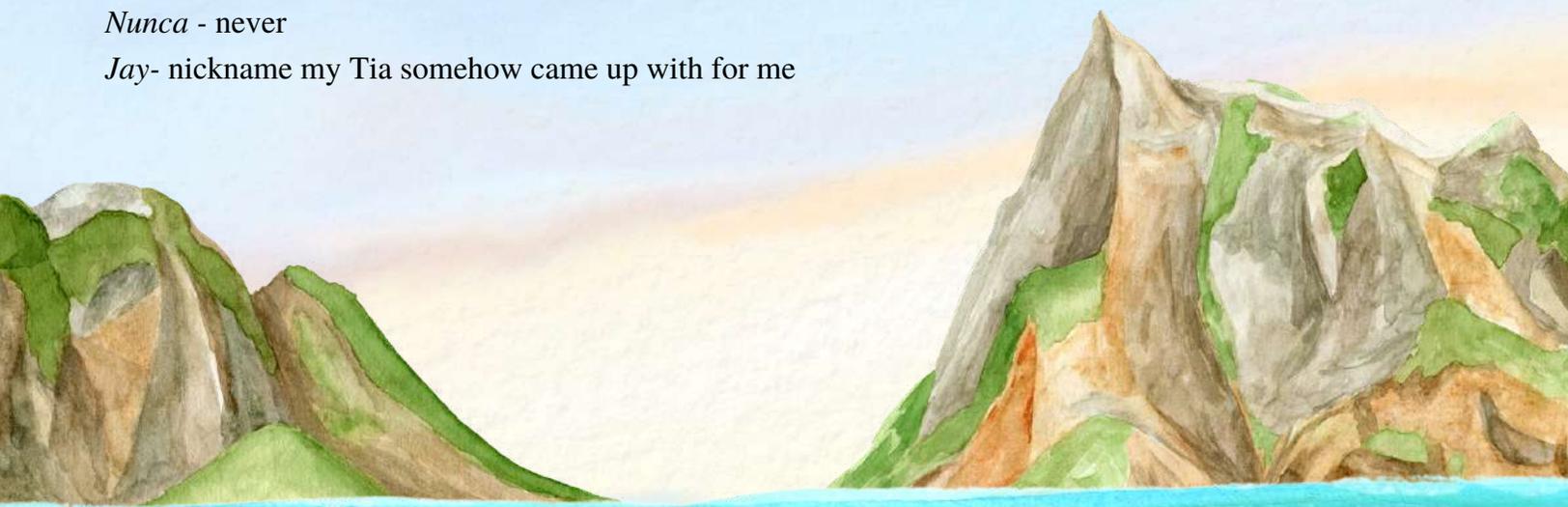
*Estupido*- stupid

*Molestia*- bother

*Calma*- calm

*Nunca* - never

*Jay*- nickname my Tia somehow came up with for me



*Yelaine Aguilar is a seventeen-year-old writer from South Florida. Her writing has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and local publications. She loves to write and perform spoken word as a way to create new worlds, explore the meaning behind impactful events, and connect with those around her. Outside of writing, Yelaine plays around with procreate, eats what she bakes, and hangs out with friends.*

## **The Time Keeper - Fiction**

**By Bahaa Khan**

The translucent being stared in puzzlement at the living, breathing human in front of it. Every night, Aren committed to his nightly routine: changed into his nightwear, brushed his teeth, and lastly switched off his bedroom lights. This night, however, the lights flickered in a peculiar manner. Deeming it as a casual malfunction, Aren went on to lay on his bed. Crash. He jerked upright, startled by the sound. His eyes found a shattered light bulb scattered on his nightstand from his lamp. Suddenly, a man-like figure manifested in front of him slowly, like the flickering of a projector finding its place. The unusually tall figure wore a tar black cloak with a hood over, but you could still see its glowing red eyes and thin line of a mouth. The material looked as though it was made of a rough and jagged fabric that would feel unpleasant to touch. Still in shock, Aren ran towards the bedroom door, debating on bolting out of the house, but his curiosity had won. He turned with little confidence to face the figure.

“Wh-who are you?” Aren asked, fumbling with his words. He was amazed at his own ability to still speak in such a bizarre situation. The figure came towards him at an alarming speed, its feet never touching the floor, if it even had feet. It stopped abruptly, a short distance away from him.

“You,” it let out in a deep voice that seemed to echo from every direction, vibrating Aren’s eardrums, “Why are you still alive?” As surprised as Aren had been by the initial appearance of the being, its odd question left him more confused.

“What? You didn’t answer my question-”

“You were not supposed to remain here,” The figure cut him off, restating its previous proclamation. “You’re supposed to be gone with the other souls.” Aren was still terribly disoriented from the exchange until he suddenly made sense of what the figure was saying.

“You’re saying I’m supposed to be dead, right?” He questioned. The figure nodded stiffly. “Does this have anything to do with what’s wrong?” Aren pulled the front of his T-shirt down, displaying what looked like a severe burn mark in the shape of a pentagram etched roughly on the center of his chest. The marking was something that had appeared on Aren on a random weekday: he had woken up and gone to shower when he’d noticed it. The first day it had been a scarlet red, as if it had been freshly branded, yet he hadn’t felt the pain of being burned.

The figure’s eyes glowed with recognition and it let out a gasp upon seeing the marking.

“What is this?” Aren asked desperately. He had been wanting answers to it since it appeared on him without warning just days before. The figure backed away slowly, almost as

though it feared Aren. “Does this mean something?” Aren tried again as the figure stood silent for some time. Finally, it spoke, much softer and quieter than before,  
“You seem to have resurrected once again, my lord.”



*Bahaa Khan is a high school senior that has always had a passion for reading and writing. Although she is not able to indulge in much of either recently due to the stress of high school life, her writing class gives her the opportunity to explore this joy.*



**Virtuoso - Fiction**  
**By Carly Chandler**

Miriam Rose found that the more she searched for the meaning of life, the more it evaded her. There were few things that brought her joy, but, more recently, she found that all her happiness was infused in the strings of her violin, her purpose was etched into the pads of her fingertips, and her inspiration was in the bruising on her jaw.

Miriam Rose found herself in a house with no name, left to her by her late grandmother. The lawyer failed to disclose to Miriam Rose that her grandmother made the alteration to her last will and testament only fourteen days before she died, surrounded by family. Instead of wondering why her grandmother would leave her a house with no name, she traveled all the way from London to a small town in Oregon to wonder what she would do with the house.

It wasn't a bad house – it was two stories high with flaking red paint and white windows crusted with dirt. The shingles on the roof were mostly intact, and the chimney was overgrown with winding ivy. No one had been maintaining the small yard, so it was a fight in itself to even reach the door.

Inside, Miriam Rose found that the house was altogether unstartling. The furniture was wrapped in plastic and she found photos of extended family members on the walls. She thought herself lucky to be between jobs – she thought the place needed a little bit of elbow grease and a fresh coat of paint and it'd be ready to go back on the market.

Never once did it cross her mind to live in the house without a name. She slept on an inflatable mattress in the drafty sunroom, adjacent to the living room with cobwebs decorating the walls like Christmas decorations. In the mornings, she found her way to the kitchen, where the only personal items she moved in were a coffee pot and her own cutlery. Her cousin had been given all of their grandma's silverware after they took most of the antiques from the house. Really, all that was left in the house was the barest of furniture. Fixing the space was hard enough; filling it was a more daunting task than Miriam Rose was prepared for.

Weeks passed like this, sleeping on the cheap air mattress, cleaning and scraping and staining, waiting for the phone to ring with the next opportunity, waiting for the email that would bring her back to her favorite place in the world. Instead of any notifications, she found spiders and dirt and significantly more house than she knew what to do with.



It didn't make her happy, doing all these things. It filled her mind, occupied her time, of course, but as the months dragged on, the only joy she found was at the end of the day, when the time began to spill into evening and the sun dipped below the horizon, and she would bring her violin into the old dining room she didn't remember, and she would let the music she memorized drift its way from her fingertips to the strings.

Miriam Rose spent countless hours with her violin, transfixed by the instrument she'd devoted herself to for more than most of her life, feeling a different kind of music pulling at her. She felt as though a rope had been tied around her waist and it was tugging her along, beckoning her to follow.

One night, many months after her arrival to the house with no name, she'd finished painting the interior of the living room, and stood in the center of the room, debating whether she wanted to celebrate or fall into bed. She eyed the violin's case, where it so lovingly lay, and she knew she was done for.

And it was the most beautiful song she played that night. Miriam Rose played with the windows open and the draft carried her song all the way up to the attic and down to the cellar, over the rocky shores of the Pacific and through the bristles of the evergreens that surrounded her house. The bow dragged its way across the strings, as if possessed, and the classical chords that Miriam Rose had learned all her life found themselves replaced by a tune that she did not know, lilting and shifting this way and that, perching its weight all around her and filling the cracks that had followed her for so long. She found herself in the rhythm, recognized herself in the melody, and she ignored the sunset tonight, her attention favoring her violin.

Her chest was heaving by the time she'd realized the sun was long set. She blinked – once, twice, taking in the room around her, settling in her seat. Plastic wrapped around each piece of furniture, edges were taped with dull blue painter's tape, and the walls were painted a deep forest green. She lowered her hands, still holding the instrument and its bow, and the world's color came back into tune.

In spite of the ache in her jaw and the rawness of her fingertips, she could feel a gentle melody humming in the back of her mind, mirroring her own songs. She let out a small, short breath, watching the house with no name come back to life – she set her violin and its bow in the case, throwing open the double doors to the sunroom.





The sun kissed her cheeks and the breeze wrapped its way around her uncertainty and washed it away; for one split, infinite moment, she could feel her eyes grow heavy and she didn't wonder where the night went. Instead, she held her eyes open and invited the sunshine in, the melody drawing her through the house, like it had been before but complete, beautiful.

The house with no name was full.

Miriam Rose felt like she was on the stage again, and as she stepped back into the living room, color rose to life – there was no tape on the edges of the walls, nor was there any plastic on the furniture. Paintings and photographs lined the forest green walls, and a piano rested against the far wall, behind the couch. Her violin, sitting pretty in its case, rested on the ground beside a small card table with two wicker chairs.

She stepped through the living room, brushing a hand over the floral upholstery of the couch, approaching the piano. She pressed two of the keys in slow, melodic succession, and watched golden, growing flowers bloom into the wall, framing the upright piano. Miriam Rose, watched as she pressed another key, and a tall pine tree followed.

Inspired, Miriam Rose approached her violin, and she began to play. And the world came back to life.



*Carly Chandler (she/they) is a queer experimental author from Louisiana who specializes in horror and poetry. She is currently an MA student at Northwestern State University of Louisiana. They have previously been published in Argus Magazine, trash to treasure, Words and Whispers Magazine, Toil and Trouble Magazine, among others, and is forthcoming in Duck Duck Mongoose and Ilinix Magazine. Their Twitter handle is @carlywithawhy.*

## **The Prick of Thorns - Flash Fiction**

**By Isabella Lobo**

The house grows on the same soil as our garden. Rising through the house's foundation lives the black earth which, after rain, causes the floorboards to squelch beneath our feet. Outside the soil seems always to be dry and welcomed between my fingers and toes, held in place beneath the roots of the flowers that grow in my garden. It is my garden when my mother refers to it—"your garden" with a hard and prolonged weight on the r.

"Your garden would be gone without you. And then the soil would be loosed from the earth, carried off into the wind, and our house on with it."

"The soil has been here forever, mama."

"Forever can end, too. If you end it."

My mother has not once touched the flowers—not as long as I have been alive, that is. There once was a time when she loved the things, she tells me. Before she grew big with me, before she had me and grew sick in the aftermath, before she learned to fear the prick of thorns.

One of the younger, newer men from town came by one morning to buy the flowers for his brother's wedding. He had a soft, quiet face, with black eyes that grew small and bright when he smiled. I only gave him glances at first. My mother handled the transaction and chatted as I sorted out the bouquets.

She told me later that the young man's family didn't know these parts, didn't know what lives and dies here. He told my mother that they brought some cattle to start a dairy business in town. One of them gave birth to a calf that hadn't been alive for two days before it went missing. The family assumed it had been killed by a coyote or wolf before they saw the hoof sticking up from the dirt, as if the earth had opened up, swallowed the thing, and then closed too early. My mother only smiled and nodded, figuring that he would learn the truth soon enough.

I wished that the earth opened and closed as simply as that. What my mother does not know is that I saw it happen once, when I was a girl.

A baby crow had fallen from its nest. It was squawking its weak, newborn cry. Mother had told me something about never touching a baby bird, because then its mother would no longer know its scent and leave it to die. So I only watched and waited. But the little cries soon grew louder as the bird began to sink into the ground, the soil pulling its body down in tendrils and filling its empty, shrieking mouth. And the earth reclaimed it until the ground,

and all things surrounding, fell silent. Until the soil was once again flat, unchanged.

Before the young man left, as I handed him the last bouquet of lilies, I looked at him for a prolonged moment. I smiled and, despite how old I must have seemed to him, he smiled back, grinning all the way to his eyes as they caught the sunlight. As his car departed down the road, I felt my mother's eyes on me, and I knew that the wall had gone up behind them.

"I'll cut up the flower's for the next customer," she said.

"What?" I turned to look at her.

"Let me do it. I want to." After visitors, she usually rested, asking me to prepare for the next sale as she regained the energy lost from the last one. I took her in for a long, curious moment, but her eyes revealed nothing.

"But...your condition, mama. What if you—"

"Just let me do it. I'm a big girl. I'll be fine."

She told me to go inside and make lunch. I watched her as she went down the steps of the porch, something in my gut lurching forward, as if to reach out and try and drag her back. I did as I was told, going inside to cook and finding that our milk, the combination of nut and oat extract that we'd make in place of the real thing, had somehow gone rancid. I looked out the window as I emptied the carton down the drain. My mother was not there. I figured she must have gone to the garden in the back.

Some time later, as I turned off the stove, there came her cry, sharp and desperate. I ran to the back of the house, finding my mother on her side atop the crushed white daisies. She was weeping—her frail, wrinkled hands shaking with the spade still clasped between them. I sat beside her, propping her up, resting a hand upon her back as she continued to s

"I-I'm sorry...I'm so sorry."

"It's okay."

"I'm no use anymore. Y-you hate me...you must."

"No mama, I don't."

"I'm your burden. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

My mouth twitched, dancing on the outskirts of the word for a moment. Doctor. But doctors did not know, she had said. The collapses, the exhaustion, the constant and nebulous pain—they had failed to give name or remedy to any of it. All when I was too young to remember, too dumb and distant to ever know a time when I did not have to watch her wither in my arms.

"Thank you, sweetie. My little girl," she said once her tears had dried, cupping my neck, and then my face, in her hands. It had begun to rain. "Can you take me to bed? I don't think I

can make the walk alone.”

The lilies would grow back, I knew, as lilies were supposed to grow back once crushed, no matter how many times they were destroyed.

The rain fell harder once she slept. Beneath the weight of my feet the soil did not creep into the house that night, but rather, the house sunk farther than it ever had into the earth.



*Isabella Lobo is a teenage artist and writer currently living in South Florida. Her artwork and writing has received awards at the national level through Scholastic Art and Writing and has been published in COUNTERCLOCK, the Harbor Review, and the Firefly Review, among others. She is an alumni of the 2022 Iowa Young Writer’s Studio and also currently serves as co-editor-in-chief of Olympe and Diet Water, as well as a prose editor and staff writer for The Borderline. You can find her on Instagram @loba.artz*

## **Dawn Only Comes After the Dead of Night - Creative-Nonfiction**

**By David Liu**

After years of avoiding religion, I went to church. Not the kind of church in a cathedral with stained glass and a gold pipe organ, but a modern, forward-thinking community. Religion can be a touchy subject (which I would not recommend on a first date, along with politics, exes, and your racist uncle). I believe that it has been grossly misrepresented by people, as a divisive tool to divide and scrutinize. People either believe that the God up there should save everyone, or doesn't exist.

I, for one, believe that God should have saved my sister.

5 years ago, Lauren died by suicide, one of the countless lives taken too early by the vices of depression. I was told by church members, priests, ministers, and pastors that it was all in God's plan, that he needed Lauren to do work in heaven, so God took her. That is what I believed. God stole her. God kidnapped her. God killed her.

I thought God could not be real. A real God would never let this happen. All the tragedy, poverty, sickness, corruption, and death would not exist if God was real. So he either doesn't exist or is a demon, a deceptive serpent who tests his creations for complete disobedience to check for snakes in the grass.

Everyone who follows God is a fool. A real God would show his followers the goodness of God, not the harshness of reality. I thought followers of God either have been given something I never received, hoped for something I could never hope for, or were drinking something I was not allowed to drink. I grew to detest the people in the church, seeing them as lesser, as fake, as pitiful, just as they pitied me with their fake sympathy. Their desires from following god is just as selfish as mine, I thought. Their faith comes from fear of eternal damnation, of forever losing consciousness and simply decaying away.

I had no trust in God. I could only rely on myself. With my newfound pessimism, I fell into a deep depression. My self-reliance turned into seclusion and my seclusion to reclusion, reclusion to rejection, rejecting any help from parents, friends, or therapy. I was sick and tired of going everywhere to only reach the same statement over and over. "It's not your fault." I wanted to feel at fault. I wanted to know that I have control over my actions.

But if that is true, why couldn't I save my sister? My passivity and my failure to act was one of my downfalls, and my realization of that led to more passivity and more self-realization, making

me spiral and leaving me worthless. Pathetic. Hopeless. I was succumbing to the addiction of self-hatred, feeding guilt with more guilt, pain with more pain. I used that pain to lash out, but the pain was so intense and internalized that I questioned the prospect of living. Every time I used the sidewalk I imagined what it would feel like to jump to the pavement. Every time I helped my mom prepare vegetables I imagined that the knife would just happen to slip an inch too far. Every time I looked out of a window I imagined falling, away from my guilt, away from my pain. It was Hell on Earth.

People want you to move on. No matter how ignorant or patient, how vocal or silent, how well-meaning or inconsiderate they may be, nobody cares about anything but themselves. People want to see nothing of my trauma, of my past, of me. They don't have to say it. I can see it in their eyes.

About a year ago, I had an epiphany; I'm lonely. I had a group of close friends and a loving family, but I felt empty. I realized that I had felt empty for years. More importantly, I realized that when I was wallowing in my own sorrows. Other people around me have experienced tragedy and moved on, while I saw moving on as neglecting that tragedy as a part of you. That sense of loss will never leave you, even if you try to forget. It will stain your world, but you cannot let it define who you are. My mistake was that when I experienced loss, I let that loss reduce me to that grief. In reducing myself, I also reduced Lauren to a feeling of regret, and of sadness.

I need to move on. I need to change. I need to do something

My grief never left. My grief will never leave me. But there is a difference between honoring her memory and dwelling in the past. There was no need to internalize grief. After five years of hiding, I attended therapy. I need to move on.

I had skewed my own perception. My pessimism was a disease; it infected my everyday life, corrupted my relationships, and poisoned my judgment. It was not enough to just contain it, I had to eradicate it. I need to change.

My passivity was my biggest demon of them all. My perpetual inactivity created and continued the cycle of depression and anxiety. Unlike the more common procrastination, passivity took ignorance from days to weeks, weeks to months, and months to five years. I could not let it continue. I need to do something.

The darkness that had surrounded me had been dispelled by the light, and that light was my

friends and family, despite the fact that I pushed them away. The comments of “It’s not your fault” seemed less patronizing and more empathetic. Everyone is going through shit, I realized. I am not alone.

Then it sank in. I am not alone.

The light shines brighter everyday.

I found my own, personal meaning of God through faith, not religion. No establishment. no cathedral. I found my personal meaning rather than seeing a universal being that everyone can rely on. The reason for God is that she provides hope. There is a hope that Lauren is resting peacefully. There is a hope that everything will get better. There is a hope that nobody has to only rely on themselves. There is a hope to inspire change in you. There is a hope for Lauren.



*David Liu is 17 years old and a current senior at Millburn High School. This is his first submission to Ice Lolly Review. He likes to compose and produce music, cook, and sketch in his free time.*

## **Sarratea 334 - Creative-Nonfiction**

**By Valentina Vigliarolo**

I used to believe I didn't have a happy place. My perception of a happy place depended on my future. A place I wish will exist one day. A big farmhouse with a wrap-around porch and light blue shutters, just like Allie asked Noah for in *The Notebook*. I wanted the kind of happy place that somebody built for or with me out of love. I don't know if it is due to having my home moved multiple times, but I never settled in a place long enough to plant the roots of true happiness and stability. During my mother's most recent trip to my birth country of Argentina, I realized that I do in fact have a happy place. Although it may not be in the future, my happy place built my past and some of my happiest memories reside there. Sarratea 334, Buenos Aires, Argentina, is my happy place.

That address belongs to my maternal grandparents' house. They bought the house in 1973, just years after they completed their family by having my mother—the youngest and only daughter out of three children. That is the house where my mother grew up in having her own room while her brothers shared. The house I stayed in for multiple summers as a tourist—in my own birth country. The house that my childhood dog grew up in after we left the country. It was the house where I saw my grandfather for the last time on his birthday on December 22, 2016. It is now the home of my eldest uncle and will soon be some stranger's renovation project. When I think of the times where I was engulfed by happiness and bliss, they occurred within the perimeter of that house in Morón, just 25 minutes away from my first house in Parque Leloir.

Morón is not glamorous. It's filled of humble yet beautiful houses, just meters away from corner stores, small pizza shops, and every other small shop you could think of. Truth be told, my description of this city is based off what I choose to remember, don't count on accuracy. Outside that house, all I saw were friendly neighbors, weirdly happy and well-fed stray dogs, and broken sidewalks that would hurt someone one day. The smell of burning coal constantly roamed around, passing by each house, sharing the salivating feeling among its residents. That burning coal smell is all I smell in every inch of Argentina. Alongside that hunger-inducing smell comes laughter, joy, and not to mention the delicious food. My family is no different.

There are some memories from that house that I cannot identify as real or imaginative. I get told some stories about the time my sisters and I all fell asleep on my grandparents' bed while watching TV, not to mention the endless times we got yelled at for going on the unstable balcony alone. Those all took place before my brain was strong enough to hold on to the memories. I believe that what makes that house so special for me is that for various years after I left Argentina,

it became my temporary home whenever I visited. It housed my family and I after we became visitors in our country. My grandmother and I would spend hours in her sewing room, which once acted as my mother's childhood room. My little sister would nap in the guest room, which later became my grandfather's room once he got sick and recovered. The cages under the balcony were home to my grandmother's exotic pets.

## **The House**

The house itself was not grand or luxurious, but it was stable. I don't think a thing changed in that house since the first time I set foot there; maybe the children in the photographs got older, but everything remained in place. As soon as you pass the gates that separate you from the dangerous streets of Buenos Aires, you are greeted by the bars on the front door, which is a commonality among houses in Argentina; you can't necessarily trust that no one will attempt to break in. When you first walk in, the same brown leather couches await, the old leather smell gets stronger, and the dents get deeper as the grandchildren get older.

To get to the kitchen and the bedrooms you must pass the fancy dining room that is reserved for birthdays and holidays only, and even then, it's rarely used. Last time I was present for its use was my grandfather's birthday. I can still hear the laughter, feel my cheeks hurt from constantly smiling, and smell his cologne as his arms devoured my little body into a hug. On the shelves sits a big picture of my mother and grandfather on her wedding day. That picture is one of my favorites. Not only do they both exude such glee, but in that picture, I see their resemblance more than ever. My mom is a spitting image of him. Their bright blue eyes and vibrant smiles filled the room with joy through that framed photograph.

On the right side of the house was the kitchen. The second the door opens, the smell that fills the house will never disappoint. Whether it is a fragrant smell of freshly cooked milanesas, or the mouth-watering smell of steak and chorizo, hunger filled my body as soon as that door was opened. The TV was always on, right on top of my grandmother's late dog's corner. That remains a spot I do not even want to go near because I still flinch just thinking of that ratty little thing barking at me. That was my grandmother's baby after her children outgrew their home. While my escape has become writing, my grandmother's became caring for her pets.

The fridge in the kitchen is contaminated with magnets from plumbers or take-out places that date all the way back to the early 2000's. The fridge remained stocked with my grandfather's soda that he would mix wine with—very Argentinian thing, don't ask me because I do not get it either. There was another fridge in the sewing room that acted like a pantry. Whenever we would

visit, it housed my sisters and I's favorite snacks, which included the cheesiest and fluffiest cheese puffs ever—Cheetos did not stand a chance. The kitchen is small but comfortable. The table extended, adding one chair for each new grandkid and even great grandkid.

The kitchen leads to the backyard—my favorite part of the house. There was a smaller structure in the back with a bathroom, laundry room, and an additional room used for storage. Every time we went through the boxes in the storage, I'd find some new trinket my grandmother kept from my mom's childhood. The grill in the backyard was every Argentinian's dream. A giant brick charcoal grill that was built into the wall. My grandfather's galpón was also in the back. Filled with tools and scraps, it was magical place for my imaginative mind. I cannot get myself to go in there, in fact, I have not even opened that door since the last time I was in there with him. As a kid, I saw danger and adventure through every tool I laid my eyes on. As an adult, I have no interest being in that room without his bright personality letting me play around with all the different tools, not telling my parents he let me handle a small metal crusher by myself.

Above the galpón was the balcony. My grandmother had lined the perimeter with broken glass, another common thing in Argentina. Some say it is a creative choice, others say it is to prevent birds from sitting on the borders. I don't want to know the right answer because I choose to believe my grandmother did it as part of her creative ways.

Back inside the house, on the left side, rest all three rooms and the singular bathroom. My mother's old room, now the sewing room, became my escape. I used to sneak in and steal my grandmother's scrap fabric to bring back to the states with me. Those pieces of fabric have either become part of my own craft projects or stay untouched in an American Girl Doll box in my garage. The last time I was in the sewing room I noticed she had a poster hung up from when I was one of the faces for a marketing poster for my school in Mexico. My grandparents expressed pride for their family in a way that seemed so genuine, it almost hurt to believe it. The rooms were cozy in their own ways. One had amazing natural light and let the smell of asado creep in every Sunday afternoon. The bathroom had not been renovated since the 70's. The toilet and bidet were a worn-out bubble gum pink, and they laid on top of the tile I had ever seen. Think of every single sitcom that takes place in the 70's and the overly patterned tiles—now you have the perfect image. Yet it was the cleanest, most beautiful, and most comforting house on the planet—because it was their house.

### **Its Residents**

My grandmother Eli is one of my favorite people in the world. Like me, she is very loud,

sarcastic, creative, and some would even label us as crazy. I guess people confuse not taking shit from anybody and standing up for our opinions as “crazy”, but I’ll take it. She encouraged and continues to encourage me to do as I want, without caring about what others may think. I remember this one time I was younger—I cannot recall the exact age—and I accidentally hit her head with the trunk. Yes, I closed the trunk and hit her head with it. While I felt terrible and like the worst granddaughter ever, she made it a priority to reassure me and made sure I was okay. I’ll give it to her, she was just hit in the head, but she had no business making it about me, yet she did, because she cared more about my feelings than her own.

She now lives in an assisted living facility after she fell and hurt her hip outside her house. I warned you about the unsafe sidewalks. I never felt safe in Argentina, but once I walked in the gates of her house, my stress was pulled from me and left outside. Since the last time I saw her, she has forgotten some things about me and has confused me for my mother over the phone before, but she is still the only person I crave to call. I realized my Eli was being taken away from me the time I called her myself and noticed she thought I was her daughter. As she asked about the kids and husband, I made sure to go along. To her, she got to catch up with her daughter and talk about the grandkids and her favorite person—my dad—but to me, I got to hear her voice again, because I never know when it’ll be the last time. The employees at her assisted living home describe her as “the life of the party” but also “one of the most stubborn people on the planet”. She does make sure to tell people the musician that plays for them sucks, and how annoying some of the elders can be. One thing she never lost was her glamorous touch. Her lips are always stained with rouge and her perfume is always so strong I think it should be deemed as a hazard. But that is my Eli.

My mother’s father Alberto was my best friend and quite possibly the kindest and most selfless human I have ever met and will ever meet in my lifetime. He worked hard for everything he ever wanted and kept his family as his priority. Since my first day of school, he would wait outside our grand white Spanish style home in Parque Leloir that my parents designed from scratch. Whether it was during our harsh Argentinian winters or nasty rainy spring and summer, there he was waiting for us outside, arms open ready for a hug, and drove my older sister Vicky and I to school. My mother worked up until my little sister, who was diagnosed with a disability at birth, required more help. My grandfather helped every way he could, and I never once heard a complain come out of his mouth. He would drag me along to Vicky’s field hockey practice and buy us each a Jorgito alfajor because he knew it was our favorite. Every time I open the wrapper to one of those chocolate dipped biscuits, I am suddenly back in the stands at Vicky’s practice talking to my grandfather about whatever a child talks about with her grandpa.

Alberto owned his own hotel in our neighboring country of Uruguay: “Hotel Plaza Mayor”.

There were some local celebrities that chose it as their destination, so one could say he was quite successful. I used to be disappointed at the fact that I was never taken to see that hotel, or that I have never set foot to Uruguay. Now, I am grateful because my main purpose to visit is to honor my best friend and his life. I don't know what happened to the hotel, or if it is even still a hotel, but I want to keep that part of a mystery.

## **Summer of 2010**

My memories in this house are not all good, in fact, some of my most traumatic memories include this house. Yet, it continues to be my happiest place. Before airlines decided to benefit on profit and not care about their customers visiting their families, I was able to visit my family in Argentina yearly. The summer of 2010 was one that constantly replays in my mind. At that time, my parents, sisters, and me all lived in Mexico, which meant we were only an 8-hour plane ride away. This specific trip, my dad had to stay behind for just a little bit because of work (I think), but the rest of us hoped on a plane and went to Argentina.

When we arrived, we each had claimed territory on our favorite beds in the guest room and immediately ran into Eli's kitchen to see the array of snacks she bought for our stay. That was actually the summer that Eli taught me how to make different kinds of pasta—hand rolled spaghetti, and my favorite, gnocchi. She was encouraging and did not once judge my technique. She did not make one single remark about the mess we had created in her kitchen. It did not matter, because at that moment, I felt the happiest. It was winter in Argentina at that time, and the warmth of my grandmother's smile made me feel an irreplaceable comfort.

When it was time to go stay with our paternal grandparents in their apartment in Devoto, another city in Buenos Aires, my grandmother suggested we kept some things in her house. Vicky and I were going through our American Girl doll obsessed phase and so we traveled with the dolls and their assigned outfits for our itinerary. Eli suggested we spend time with our grandparents Merce and Leo, and not on the toys. It's as if she knew. Alberto drove us and like always, unloaded the car for us. 8-year-old me was in charge of carrying Vera into the lobby and staying with her on the safe side of the glass. As I look up to see my grandfather open the door for Vicky, they both get pushed in. All I remember is seeing a manly body shove my sister to the safe side of the glass, close the door, and pull out a gun.

There I was, witnessing two men surround my mother holding life-ending devices towards her. The confusion took over me and I frantically look through the glass to see the driver's gun also in my mother's direction. My grandfather Alberto's eyes reflected fear. His youngest

child and only daughter being held at gun point. At that moment, I did what any 8-year-old who thought she was about to lose her mother did---scream. My screaming made Vera cry and scream as well. This was the one time in my life I was grateful for her disability because she was not able to appropriately process the circumstances. I drained my lungs as the men took all our belongings and ripped my mother's wedding ring out of her hand. As I took a long breath in to prepare my little set of lungs for more screaming, I heard my mother plead the men to not take Vera's medical records. Medical records? Why did they want medical records?

My mother's wedding band was ripped off her finger as the men were trying to find anything to take away from her. That wedding band was everything and more to my mother, while they just saw the money signs reflecting and staring back at them. That wedding band was representation of my parents' love, and they stripped away any sentiment that was left.

As the second set of ear drum busting screeches came out of my body, my grandmother exited the elevator and neighbors from the houses in front of the building made their way outside. As their finishing touch of their act, the robbers approached my grandfather and without hesitation, he handed them all his money and he ran to my mother. My grandmother's face when she realized the reasoning behind my screaming was that of shock. I didn't lose my mother that day. I didn't lose my mother. I could have lost my mother.

I cannot remember how long that entire incident was, but it felt like I was being held hostage within those four lobby walls for hours. We somehow managed to get up to my grandparents' third floor apartment. Merce took Vera to another room while Leo called the police, not that they would prioritize this, or frankly even care. Not to my surprise, the policemen told my mother she had to go to the station to report it because it was not the first robbery that was reported that fit the description of those men. Amazing justice system if I do say so myself. Hopefully you can sense the sarcasm behind that...

After the fear and shock died down, we noticed that the only thing we lost were clothes and medical records, and rings that could be replaced—in a material fashion because all emotion was taken. When we decided to go back to Eli and Alberto's house, we noticed why Eli was very certain about us leaving our dolls there. She had sewed them customized outfits. Little did she know she saved Vicky and I's most precious possessions, all due to her selfless surprise. They were safe in Eli's arms, which was where I needed to be the moment, I had to protect Vera. I needed the safety that my doll got. Returning to that house after that experience made me believe it was a safe haven that I no longer wanted to leave.

## **December of 2015**

Alberto's birthday was December 22nd, which meant whenever we traveled to Argentina for Christmas, we got to celebrate his birthday with him. I got to celebrate his last birthday with him. Neither of us knew that'd be the last time we hugged, laughed together, and shared our favorite sweets. One of the most blissful nights was ending and Eli was having trouble putting her bunny back in the cage.

The bunny that I grew to hate and resent after this night. Alberto went out to help her. My cousin comes storming into the room my sisters and our other cousin were hanging out in and announces that our grandpa had taken a fall. I was instructed to stay in the room. I deeply regret obeying that order. Alberto was taken to the hospital in an ambulance. He was conscious and aware of his surroundings, it was simply a fall that hurt his torso, so we were told not to worry, and we did as such. My father took us to attempt to visit him a couple of days later but because my sisters and I were under 18, we were not allowed. I left Argentina furious at the doctors that did not bend the rules once so three little girls could see their grandfather before leaving the country.

That hospital was my grandfather's home for 3 months until his passing in March of 2016.

I rather not specify how that stupid and avoidable fall caused his passing, but I do want to emphasize that he kept his optimism and selflessness until his last moment.

My mother got to travel before he passed, which brings me comfort knowing his sons and daughter were together then. No matter how much my mom loves us, at that moment, there is no love comparable to sibling love. I cannot speak on behalf of Vicky and Vera, but I know we would have done anything to see him one more time. The closest thing I got to closure was a priest dedicating a prayer to him the following Sunday during a mass at our local church in Florida.

## **2022**

My current biggest fear is not being able to get closure on my happy place. There has been talk about selling the house since it no longer serves purpose. I want to fight it, but I know in my heart that its original residents will never return to reside there. My grandmother will never return to cook in her kitchen or sleep in her bed. My grandfather will never get to spend hours in his galpón again. Eli will never be able to put her sewing machine to work again. Alberto will never be able to watch another soccer game on the TV while drinking mate again. They will never be

together again.

To be completely honest, I also fear never getting the closure of saying my remaining goodbyes, just like I couldn't with my grandfather. Every time my mother calls me, I fear that it is the phone call. There are pieces of that house I'd pay any amount of money to bring to the United States with me. I'd bring back nothing but a suitcase full of Eli's scrap fabric. I would sell my car and sell a kidney if it meant I could hug one of Alberto's itchy wool sweaters that smell like him. I would file for bankruptcy if it meant I'd get to bring back the kitchen corkboard filled with handwritten notes.

Whenever I think of my dream home, those are the only details that stay consistent. Pieces of my happy place. Pieces of the people that made it the happiest place.

**This piece was written in honor of Alberto and Elida.**

*Valentina Vigliarolo is a 21-year-old writer from Buenos Aires, Argentina. She moved to the United States when she was 9 years old and she now studies Media Communication Studies at Florida State University.*