

SOUNDINGS

Saratoga High Art and Literary Magazine

2022 Edition



Editors' Note



Dear Reader,

The 2022 issue of the Soundings Art and Literary Magazine is here!

“Soundings” is a nautical term referring to the depth measurement in a body of water. As the title of Saratoga High School’s decades-old art and literary magazine, “Soundings” refers to the depths that featured works reach and the waves they make throughout the creative world.

We are so proud that we can serve as a forum for student expression, and we sincerely thank all those who submitted their photography, art, prose, and poetry.

This year’s issue is especially close to our heart. Last year’s unprecedented events left the world in shock, only confirming the value of human connection and the arts. With this year’s theme of hope inspired from Banksy’s famous “Girl in the Red Balloon” painting, we hope that this year’s magazine can serve as a way to strengthen our community.

We would especially like to thank our advisors, Ms. Keys and Mr. Tyler, along with the all of Saratoga’s staff and faculty for their support of our student body and the arts.

Sincerely,
The Soundings Staff

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“Dear Mommy” Series by Sanjana Somayajula & Madhu Ayyer

I Made Mickey Mouse Fly

By Nikhil Kapasi

Daddy! Daddy! Look!
I made Mickey Mouse fly!

But look daddy!
He's flying!

He raced after the flying mouse silhouette.
He chased after my tail.
He grabbed me from the sky.

She grinned at me
And let me go once again.
Chuckling!

He's flying.
I made Mickey Mouse fly!

He bounded after me.
He raced past Cinderella,
The wicked witch,
And three crowned princes.
He barrelled through
Babbling brooks,
Future worlds,
Through wonderland,
And 1920's New Orleans.

She chased after him but
She stopped to wave to Cinderella.
She tipped her hat to the wicked witch.
She bowed to three crown princes.
She ventured through brooks,
Faced the future worlds boldly,
Fell into wonderland,
And strutted through 1920s New Orleans.

I did that!
I made Mickey Mouse fly.

Daddy,
What's a dollar?

Sweetie, no!
That was nine dollars!

Here, sweetie.
Thank god, it didn't fly away.

I know sweetie!
Nine dollars for a balloon straight down the drain.

how to live life correctly (there is a right answer)

When the world shut down, I couldn't find myself in it anymore.
I discovered that my friends were there only out of convenience,
so as soon as they had to go out of their way to find me,
they stopped trying.

(distance did not, in fact, make the heart grow fonder)

When the world shut down, I didn't have anybody for a while,
and I worried every day that I was missing out.
I missed my last day of middle school, I missed my birthday party,
A whole summer came and went and I didn't do anything real.

(I went camping a lot. I don't think that counts)

I asked myself if I was "teenagering" correctly,
because if I was, then where were my friends?
Where were all of those main-character activities,
those rite-of-passage experiences that I was yet to have?

(honestly, I'd even settle for being a side character)

I asked myself how I could change that.
The phone goes both ways, a fact that my former friends had yet to learn.
Maybe I could become a friend to someone else,
become the type of friend that I was waiting around for.

(to be fair, I was pretty unrealistic in my expectations)

In order to live life correctly, stop waiting around.
Take the initiative, take the leap, take the risk.
That's how I found myself in a park under the stars and under the moon,
I found myself on top of the world at sunset.

(that's an exaggeration, it was just a roof)

**I found myself because I got up
and tried to**

—Layla Proffitt



Frolic In The Snow

Andrew Hong

Sacred Space

By Anastasia Panidis

**Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut, Deir el-Bahri, Egypt, 18th Dynasty, ca 1473-1458 B.C.E.
Built by Senenmut using limestone**

Held by the amber glow of her cliffs
She is nestled deep inside the rows
Where living walk among the dead
And dead lay peacefully carved with faces of contempt

For they are the guarantor of their civilization
However their contempt is not disgust
For they are the grandeur of worship

For fifteen years she was molded and carved
However fifteen years is not exact
For she had been molding
into the New Kingdom for much longer

Why do these rows she bears resemble vents?
Vents which breathe dust onto great pyramids of the past?
Could she be the New Kingdom?

Not rough like the Roman concrete to come
Or impassioned classicism of the Greeks
But her intricacy is similar
And she is pointing to the future of temples
The worship of greater beings

Their worship their belief
So strong
That people such as those studied

Built
Created
Molded
For years
And worshiped their divinity
Without hesitation



Pilgrim's Beach

Cassidy Coghlan

Pantheon, Rome, Italy, 118-125 CE.

Created by Emperor Hadrian and Apollodorus of Damascus using concrete.

Step to me, I'm from dynasties before,
I've been built to lift your eyes to fake eclipse.
I hold honor everywhere, in my floors,
It is my concrete which opens lips.

I praise the higher beings with majesty,
When you speak I echo it to the gods,
I am not vain, that is a fallacy,
I give comfort when Romans are at odds.

Reflection of architecture previous,
But they will follow my grandeur with gall,
In their futile endeavor to similar homogenous,
The structure we use to tribute and call.

Give reverence to the stars of my dome,
I connect people to the Gods in Rome.

Worth

According to the Hebrew Bible, queen Esther was born with the name Hadassah (“Myrtle”). Her name was changed to Esther to hide her identity upon becoming queen of Persia. The three letter root of Esther in Hebrew is s-t-r (סתרת), “hide, conceal”. The passive infinitive is (להסתתר), “to be hidden”.

The name can be derived from the Old Persian *stāra* (*setāra*, meaning “star”) although some scholars identify Esther with the name of the Babylonian goddess of love Ishtar.

I forgive you for trading my luster for iron chains, the price of each one branded onto tongue.
You gift laughter by the handful and they call it cheap. You never cry alone.
I wish someone would hold you but you won't sit still long enough.
Instead you wipe your father's tears from the eyes of men you do not love,
watch him splinter like ice, finger the shards until your nailbeds are blue-blooded and calloused.
Send knives spiraling to the marble floor without a word and flinch at the squeak of styrofoam.
Mother said humility is to bury yourself and wait for flowers, so
you carve your name into the doorframe and burn its consonants into cloth. These are
all the things that do not last. How silly of me to forget I come from sunbeams.
I want you to watch me liquify this iron maiden,
saunter into the king's chambers with a dreamer's smile and a river.
From my shoulders flows a gown of fool's gold that glimmers like the night sky.

—Esther Luan

Dear Mommy,

I remember the time you left me at the orchard. Somewhere nearby a hive had fallen over, and the bees were everywhere. Their honey dripped down over the discarded apples and trickled onto the hood of the faded Toyota in the parking lot. A stray apple lay near my shoe, its exterior filled with tiny puncture marks. Flies crowded over the saccharine clumps, humming over the remains. The smell clogged my nose, but I didn't move, because you always told me to stop.

*“Stop fidgeting.”
“Stop twitching.”
“Stop moving.”*

You always said that. So I stayed, and I endured it. Whenever you left me alone, you taught me to direct my thoughts upwards, especially the bad ones. If I'm ever buried in any sort of feeling, you told me to look upwards. If I looked upwards, an angel would collect all the thoughts from my mind. Sometimes it feels like a prayer more than anything. Mommy, I bring this up because everything feels upwards right now.

Reflections of a Looking Glass

Morning wake to the ticking wall,
that meets my eyes at every dawn,
although everyday
swiftly breezes by, time
seems to slow down to a halt,
as if a tall mirror
stands in your way, you
cannot move forward,
but merely look back at yourself,
at what you've become,
how much you've changed,
those bright, eager eyes
have lost their glow
your once smiling face
now seems bereft of a soul,
those new clothes
you bought a year ago,

with all the fancy designs and shades of colors,
look bland and merely weigh down your bones,

slowly that mirror
drains your confidence away,
you cannot help but avert your eyes,
even your room to you
is not a pleasant sight,
white desk, white bed, white shoes,

you grow sick
of seeing so much white,
as you lie down
in your bed at night,
you try to cover up that whiteness
with colorful memories,

strolling along the moss green mountain sides,
eating scallops on a water-battered wharf,
meandering about the urban streets,
and as you contemplate your past,
you cannot stop smiling.

—Jason Liu

Ode to My Skull

From the roof onto ruthless concrete,
I laid there, helpless.
On a Saturday afternoon, I stared
at the dusty tennis ball
rolling away from my hand.
My vision turned red
before black.
I was twelve years old.
Between flashes of
white bed sheets, I remember
my hands too clammy yet eager
to hold onto the edge.
My knees too cowardly
to catch sharp tiles of the roof.
My mind too slow to understand
the obvious danger— not once
did I recognize you, my skull.

— Channie Hong

I Want My Thoughts Back

I have lost those thoughts
That were clean and pure
Somedays I want to
Peel my soft scalp back
And push sidewalk chalk
Under my bruised skin
Chalk that I would smear
In between my palms
After I was done

Creating. Without
Boundaries or judgment
My new mind crept up
To me now new me—

Who, me? I haven't

Been the same since I

Stopped eating sweaty

Sandwiches and drinking
Long sips from cartons

We would laugh so hard
Our stomachs pumping
Out the innocence
And powdered chalk

But my friends have changed
Our minds have become
Dirty and vile
I know this because
When we are laughing
Our laughter sucks in
Banging hardened ribs

They tell me to hate
But the little girl
I used to be doesn't

Want to hate or harm
She wants to dance
To pop and funky

Music now makes me cry

—Anastasia Panidis



I Need to Play Tag

Samika Agarwal

You Take What Is Not Yours

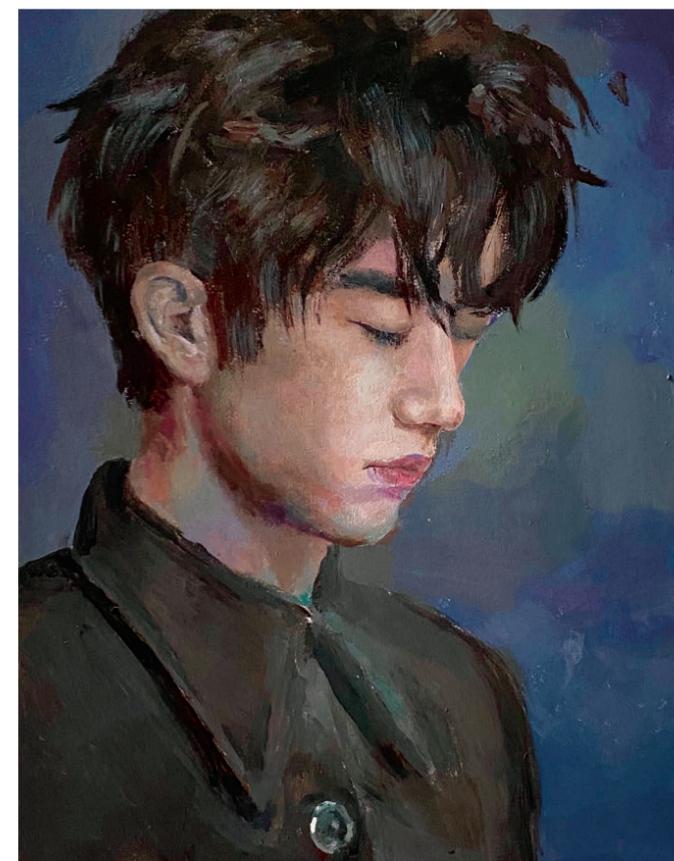
You take what is not yours.
Your soulless hand reached into his mind.
Your ghastly fingers tearing at his hippocampus.
You steal names, stories, identity.

You are meticulous —
Carefully leaving faded images of what used to be.
Your heartless clutches a pale reflection of your value
Derived from the memories you steal.

You chip away like a pickaxe in a gold mine.
Shattering treasures that others so dearly covet.
You sneak in — unwanted and loathed —
Fueled by the pain of others.

You are a parasite.
You are slow and meticulous
Biting when least expected
You take what is not yours.

—Nikhil Kapasi



A Blink

Yue Pan

Biting into a cube of watermelon

is sticking your hand into a receding ocean wave, the water rolling sand against the pads of your fingers, fingertips trying to catch the sand before each particle is gone for another thousand years—lips hugging the melon’s flesh to not let a single drop of sweet water drip onto your upturned forearm. When there’s a bitter sliver of rind spared by the knife, examine it for a moment. Red veins will surface. They crisscross beneath the snow—the sweet is still there, and the cool wetness of the fruit that you wish you had just one more piece of murmurs in the rind. Save its distinctive crunchiness for last.

— Marcus Kuo

The Scale

It sabotages slothful men,
Inflated weights of theirs again,
Pulled down in doctors’ rooms; they said:
Too high, too high! For now, no bread!

You eat, you drink, you sit all day,
Outside is sunshine—it’s now May!
The scale’s finger never plays;
Its judgement you cannot delay.

—Marcus Kuo

Dice

I ache, I itch to write
epics and novels twice my wingspan,
to tattoo parchment the length of the sun’s light,
But like a hummingbird startled, my scattered
wisp of inspiration flees friend and foe alike.

I write the way dice diffract.
They clatter haphazardly, tumbling and tunneling
through quicksand, but they do not drag.
They land decidedly, definitively, and I
am but the hand that throws them into my shadow.

— Kavya Sarathy

Cherry City

i know when my mother is lying
because when she was my age
she tied the city like a cherry stem
under her tongue
said it’s insurance: skyline’s a fraud

but my mother doesn’t know the city the way i do

doesn’t swallow her bubblegum in the middle of the subway because men are snake charmers with serpents for fingers and yellow, drooling eyes that watch her body undulate; sharpened teeth that sink into sinew flutes; cheeks that stretch until veins crackle beneath the skin like electricity; heaving chests wet with lechery and leathery desire / doesn’t drown in city-mouth / doesn’t lick cigarette burns like lollipops because the ashes remind her of burning barbeque in the backyard, the smoke indicative of well-done; the smell runs through her knotted spine and falters at the nape of her neck; this is where he kissed her, and here, and here; and this is where he singed her hair with sins her mother’s skyline-speech was supposed to protect her from / doesn’t swim in city-lips / doesn’t write lullabies to future daughters that exist only in windows and whispers and wistful glances at strollers on the street; the lyrics: elegies for the city she and her mother and her mother’s mother mellowed in; the refrain: this, i keep from you, angel; this: the skyline, the bullshit, the bubblegum, the men, the snakes, the cigarettes, the sins, the song, the singed hair, the way she is seventeen and / doesn’t write poetry about teenage boys / doesn’t gnaw love-skin off city-bones, doesn’t pound memories like meat, doesn’t feed daughters half-chewed stories of girlhood / doesn’t daydream about eighteen or nineteen or even twenty-one / doesn’t spool love around her body / doesn’t breathe blue sky / doesn’t even know what that is

my mother lies when she tells me
she swallowed every lie the city ever told
i know because
the city pens me a love song every time
i step into its gaping mouth

the only truth my mother ever told:
love

—Maanvi Chawla



Sunflowers

Sihon Ma

Dear Mommy,

I am writing now to remember the time, at that bus stop in Colorado, when I accidentally jammed my finger between the seats. You kept shaking your head, and I couldn't tell if I scared or disappointed you.

The entire time you said, "Why do this?"

I didn't mean to.

I think now of that bus ride, when I accidentally got blood on your sweater. You quickly wiped it off, and I felt bad asking you to look at my finger. But when you saw me, and painted over my nails with your special Lotus Rouge polish, I knew you loved me. And even though the blend of blood and nail polish stung, I felt pretty. You never painted my nails again, but I always searched for the red in the corner of my eye, to remind me of the small ways you loved me.

Just like when you gave me those maroon hair bows for my 12th birthday. I tried to put them in so many times, in the neat bunny loops that you always had. But they never sat quite right and they always fell out. They didn't look like yours because yours never fell out.

"The last thing you need is more pampering," you would say as you tied the bows in your hair, not even looking at me. Sometimes I think it hurt you to look at me, maybe I didn't deserve to be looked at. But I wished I could keep looking at you, I still do.

Dear Mommy,

Did you know that soil is really really heavy?

When you asked if I wanted to go to the orchard again, I was so excited. You brushed my hair for the first time. And when you finally put those bows in my hair, I felt pretty, until you pulled them so tightly back that my head started to hurt. I couldn't tell you because I didn't want you to feel bad. I was afraid to write this letter because I didn't want you to feel bad.

We got there and you seemed distracted. "Where'd all the apples go?"

Fall disappeared, and the sky was in a perpetual haze. I got that hazy feeling too that day, but I didn't want to spoil the mood. The apple orchard looked different; the tree branches were woefully bare and clumps of rotting crop littered the ground. I didn't know if something was wrong. Normally things always felt right with you.

"Maybe we should plant new trees," you said. You pulled out your gardening shovel. I didn't know you brought that. You didn't ask me if I wanted to help, but I did anyway. I dug with my bare hands, but you didn't even look at me. I think that's when you decided.

I don't understand why you did it. It all felt heavy, and whenever I felt like this, you told me to think upwards. I didn't know if the angels were listening this time, but I thought it anyway.

Yeah, soil is really heavy. Especially when it's in your lungs.

what rain showers leave behind

shhh, shhh, shhh

a hush from the rain
sprinkles the dimly lit neighborhood,

silencing,
listening,
observing,
wondering.

SHHHH, SHHHH, SHHHH —

rain showers, sun devoured;

water droplets pelt concrete,
murky rivers slither;
against the walls, wet snakes splash
in the grated sewer.

a thrashing, relentless, tormenting
flood. *drip, drop dri—*
sun shines, rain's benign;
petrichor from suburban meadows
spirals above the now miniature homes covered in
sunlight loving solar panels. streaks of prismatic
light paint over the gray abyss, hushing the husher
until color ultimately engulfs and prevails.

earth, too, cries
before it finally colors
its darkened skies.

—Eva Ruemmler

Ever Since We Were Kids

By Maya Singla

Ever since I can remember, I was told to bite down. Riding up the clanking metal elevator of the hospital, wondering if it would stop and answer my prayers, I was told to bite down. Wondering if it would heed my wishes and grant me the victory of a blue raspberry lollipop at the finish line, I was told to bite down. There were never any good flavors left. Only root beer and mystery at the bottom of the once full bowl. When I climbed onto the chair beside the doctor, when she leveled the needle at my arm, when she pushed the shot into my skin, I was told to bite down. Grind my teeth together and it would vanquish the pain. And so I did. From every dreaded elevator ride to the bliss of my tongue coated red with sugar, I did.

"Who is going to go first?" The doctor holds a needle in her hand, gesturing to the empty plastic chair beside her. I step forward. As the older sibling it is predetermined that I go first. That I set an example. I settle into the chair and pull up my sleeve, biting my lip as she applies the alcohol to my shoulder. Bite down. Teeth clenched, a pinch, a bandaid, and it's over.

"See, that wasn't so hard." She smiles at me and nods knowingly towards the bowl of lollipops on the counter. I search for blue raspberry, as I hear her say "Just be brave like your sister." I find none. And my arm is sore. I bite down. Protection against the pain.

"Ready?" I nod. She holds the gun to my ear lobe and I hear it click. A small sting. She does the other side. Only when my mom asks me to pose for a picture do I realize my teeth are grinded together. I unclench them, relieving the pressure from my jaw, and smile.

Habits die hard. Some sprout like weeds, rooted into the minds of the children we were. Even now, I bite down. The phantom pain of a memory, the ghost of times past, because I don't know any other way. I bite down. Restless, warding off promised pain.

Ever since I was a child, my imagination reined a forest of perception from the words I read. From fairytales to chapter books, from sorcery to magic, from love to pain. Pain was not being able to find love amidst the palaces and treasures. Love was perfection, black and white, easy. It was Aurora awakened with a true love's kiss. It was Cinderella slipping into that glass

slipper. It was marriage and riches and jewels and happiness. Love. It was black and white. Good always prevailed, magic was flying broomsticks and wands and potions, and evil lay cast into some far off land.

"And they lived happily ever after. The end." The book's pages reach their end, closing off the world of magic within. There's a simplicity in knowing the end. After having heard the fairytales a thousand times over, there is an assurance, a confidence. The door

closes shut as my mom leaves the room, the walls cloaked in darkness. And I dream of a world of happily ever afters, believing I live inside of one.

I scour the shelves of the library, searching. They say don't judge a book by its cover, but everyone does. The cover must provide enough enticement to read the description within. I don't know what I look for. Perhaps a remnant of the past, of the childhood stories. But it's not the story I search for, although that is what I find. I want the belief in it, the happily ever after, the ink on the pages, life written down, not fantasy. The hope. Yet I trail the fiction section in search of the truth. But that's all it is, fiction, imagination. And I don't live in a world of happily ever afters. All I'm left with is the idea.

Ideas foster. They brew in the minds of five-year-olds and they blossom into perceptions of reality, of the world. They build a glass dome ready to be shattered. Domes built of black and white ready to be flooded with the red of blood, the apocalypse of pain, and the grey of nothing, the despair of color. Ready to be crushed with reality. So now a child enters the world, and the sword she brandishes is her teeth, bite down and it will take away the pain. She enters the world with an idea of love. An idea reflected across every mirror of a fun house until it has become warped, wrecked. Beautiful, but a lie.

Ever since I was young, happiness was a tangible thing. It was rainbows and clouds shaped like ice cream cones. It was a shopping spree, a kiss on the cheek, a hand squeezed. It was finding love, defeating evil, spreading good. It was a choice, to smile, to laugh, and the genuinity, it was real. It was something to grasp, to point at, to aim for.

"Chocolate!" I answer.

"Of course, why did I even ask?" My dad shakes his head, ordering one kid's scoop of chocolate ice cream in a cup. It melts on my tongue, glazing it in sugar and sweetness. He takes my hand as we wait for the walking man to light up. My feet skip across the broken lines, sticky sweetness coating the outside of my lips in brown. My dad produces the handkerchief he keeps in his pocket, laughing as he wipes my face. Happiness, a tangible thing. A cup of ice cream on a hot afternoon.

The night sky mocks me with memories. Memories of melting ice cream, of winning a candy at the carnival. It watches me beg for an illusion, a thing of the past. It watches me clutch

at the air as if there is something there for me to hold on to, a feeling. A taste, a sample, a sliver of the real thing. It leaves me wondering where it all went.

Things slip. They disintegrate with age, they die when the colors crash into that glass dome, exposed to the radiation of



Vedant

Apoorva Talwalker

reality. They suffocate and wither and slip into the darkness. A plant drained of carbon dioxide. And so a once tangible thing becomes rarer than opal. A feeling that can't be placed, recognized, defined. It can't be bought, it can't be found in storybooks or unicorns. It becomes a ghost, a phantom, a myth. Something that is fed by the spoonful to keep hope alive, a fragile flame. Happiness. A thing of babies who don't know better, safe inside their delicate bubble. A destination at the end of a rainbow, an

idea that slips through fingers before they find purchase.

Ideas foster. Habits die hard. And things slip. And so a child enters the world with a weapon against pain, soon to be rendered useless, a false idea of love, and the myth of happiness. And life laughs at her, a wave at its command, ready to drown her.



Mourning Veil

Carina Yee

Rebellion

I once stole four toothbrushes from a CVS and threw them in the trash can outside, f*** capitalism
I may be the world's most unproductive superhero
because I swear up and down this suburban driveway one day I will do something of consequence
but at the theater I smiled at the weary usher
and we movie-hopped for like six hours to wage against minimum wage
I like misquoting Nietzsche
because I will forever be a smartass and just that
since I'm trying to decide if that's enough
you may find me pulling an all-nighter
but I will never write a paper in a reasonable time frame

girl I know who you want to be

thursday nights we drive to Taco Bell and order chicken quesadillas without the sauce
call it Mexican food the way we call this house a home
call us spoiled brats the way I despise this city
I don't bite the hand that feeds me but its skin flakes off
like sparks every time it breaks against my skull
like trying to forge something out of junkyard brass
but I don't want to be a sword I want to be
a janky club you feel me
or something that burns gloriously
I want to taste sweat
fall in love
squirm in anything but this goddamn quiet
I am talking to a Job's comforter who is everything I am not
like pretty eyes and meritocracy and Jordan Peterson
I call him naive but really I'm just jealous
because I swear I was entrusted the world and not allowed to have it
but I can have this coal-black eyeliner
a midnight run in my pajamas
or this 5am viewpoint in the hills
freezing in the front seat of my parents' car
but I'm too in love with the sunrise to feel it

—Esther Luan

Madame President

By Arshi Chawla

“It is my utmost honor to welcome our nation’s first female president.”

The president’s brown skin complements her scarlet pantsuit. With her hands clasped together, she strides toward the microphone, the support and tenacity of generations of women behind her. She wears an homage to the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg around her neck: a silver dissent collar that captures the sun on its jewels. The new power she holds envelops the crowd.

“Vice President Kim, Mrs. Chief Justice, members of the United States Congress, distinguished guests. America,” she addresses.

“Today, I pledge my loyalty to this great nation. More than that, I pledge my loyalty to you. We are gathered here today in honor of every person—every woman—who has walked this nation before us, to uphold the ideals of democracy and prosperity crafted by our forefathers and foremothers. Our American-ness is not determined by the country listed on our birth certificates, or the color of our skin, or language we speak to our mothers—it is our unwavering commitment to our Constitution and to each other. America means unity. America is unity. “Together, we will not only live—we will thrive.”

She pauses, scanning the crowd. In the second row, three seats from the right, a man fidgets in his chair, his discomfort leaving a bitter taste in the president’s mouth. She continues. “While I was writing this speech, I caught myself writing to please, to appease some construct of what a president is supposed to say when she addresses her nation for the first time. But that is not what we are here to do. For far, far too long, women have been arm-candy, eye-candy, their worth determined by the sweetness they leave on men’s tongues—by their appearance and nothing more. Their submission is expected.

“In spite of the ugly brutality of this country’s origins in slavery, genocide, and oppression, women have persisted. Harriet Tubman, who, in the face of enslavement and death, dedicated her life to rescuing slaves from the shackles of their masters: I stand here for her. Rosalind Franklin, whose work discovering DNA was credited to her male counterparts: I stand here for her. Stacey Abrams, who received little recognition for her efforts to rally voters in Georgia that almost single-handedly turned the state blue in the 2020 elections: I stand here for her. I am standing here for every single woman who has been sidelined, silenced, suppressed.

“Too many people believe that the days of misogyny and sexism are behind us—that women are equal to men. If that is true, why, then, do 99% of rapists walk free? Why do women earn 82 cents on every dollar a man makes in the same job? Why are women’s bodies regulated more than guns?”

The man in the second row, three seats from the right aisle, gets up and leaves. His wife remains seated, her chin resting in her palm, her focus on the president unwavering. “As your first female president, I promise to bring us closer to equality over the next four years. I promise to work for every little girl watching who dares to dream as big as her brother or her father or the men that have been telling her for centuries that she is not enough. Little black girls, and little brown girls, and little white girls, and every little girl that will ever call herself American—you are enough. I am fighting for a future where young girls do not have to fear the world itself—for true equality.

“To do this, we must start young: by instituting programs in schools to provide STEM opportunities for girls and arts for boys, by rethinking dress codes to stop targeting girls and their growing bodies, by providing free access to menstrual products, by believing survivors who share their experiences—and by supporting those who have not yet found their voices. To every woman who feels their story has not been heard, I hear you. And I believe you. I hope the rest of this great nation will join me in welcoming this new reckoning.

“Above all, the patriarchy is poison. Mercilessly, its venom engulfs our people, regardless of their gender. We are raising our daughters to feel shame in their strength, our sons to see failure in their vulnerability. No woman should have to prove her worth to any man; no man should have to prove his masculinity to be accepted.

“My fellow Americans, it is the honor of my life to be on this stage in front of all of you. I will spend the next four years and beyond with your interests at the forefront of my decisions. Every single one of you has a voice. I will make this nation the culmination of all of them.

“In the preamble to the Constitution, our founding fathers vowed to form a ‘more perfect Union.’ We must continue to strive towards this ideal, which means progressing past the outdated paradigm that once shaped our nation and being unapologetically angry until we reach that perfection.

“Speak out. Organize. Do not let the government lose touch with the people who put us in positions to make change. I stand here in service to all of you.

“Men have been allowed to overpower women for too long in this nation. I believe in America’s ability to do better. I believe in our ability to do better.”

The president closes her eyes for a moment as she breathes in the fresh air of possibility. “Thank you.”

The crowd stands.

Calutron Girls

The Calutron Girls were a group of Tennessee farm women hired by the U.S. government to operate machinery during World War II. Called calutrons, the machines required careful monitoring to split the uranium atoms used to create the Little Boy atomic bomb, which killed over 70,000 people and began the end of the war. The Calutron Girls were only told what they worked on after the U.S. military dropped the bomb.

Us in Oak Ridge?

EVICTION stapled on ruined wood grain,
Grain ruined by metal screeches, incessant thumping

We were shoved into rooms drunk with white paint,
dusted by dirt of desperation; hurry up, get going, faster
Coal furnaces, coughing,
Smothered, I promise you only to keep the black powder down

These hands weren’t made for dials that
Ticked the years marking corn, tobacco, asparagus, tobacco

Throwing out hushes, snatching them back when
Suit and Tie were spotted.
Glass fence, roped-off mouths zippered shut—
Twenty-four seven, someone had to be on those stools,
You’d rather be beaten then get beat to it

Miss, sit there,
Your brothers are dying out there, so shutupandstayput

Just watch the dials, twirl the knobs
What are we doing?—
Better hope that icy moonshine doesn’t
Snap back in your stomach

Scratch marks, seized letters,
Was it really Robert who wrote back? Doesn’t matter,
Spray cooling on the E box to lower Q

Wynona Butler and her Big Adam that she showed off,
Then her own dear Little Roy—she did that!

Doors busted down by shrill shrieks;
Country girls shouldn’t have
saved lives.

—Marcus Kuo

A Love Story In Nicknames

By Maddie Jin

He called her *Excuse me* when they first met on the first day of eighth grade, when he didn't know her name, nor, frankly, did he care, he was just trying to get past her to his locker before fourth period Spanish, so he snapped, *Excuse me, please move out of my way*. But when she turned around and glared at him with the force of a thousand laser beams, he maybe began to care a little.

He called her *Elizabeth* when he saw her after Spanish that same day, having stared at the back of her head from the moment she hurried into class seconds after him to the minute his friends pulled him out of the classroom to get to lunch. He slipped his wrist out of Mark's tight grab and waited outside Room 104, checking his hair in the window, until he saw her walk out, recognizable to him from a mile away (only because he was very good at memorizing things, just ask Señora Marquez, really). He said *The name's Elizabeth, right?* And she said yes and so he walked her to the cafeteria and ate lunch with her, the two of them arguing and laughing and shoving each other back and forth.

He called her *Liz* when he asked her to the school dance later that year, almost as a joke, a *Hey Liz, over here*. They had been best friends for months and he knew she hated being called that. He did it once in a while to make fun of her, and every time, she would shove him and tell him, shut up, jerk, and he would laugh and they would go back to whatever shenanigan they were up to. But when he did it at her locker that day, tulips in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, she didn't say anything, didn't shove him, she just smiled and took the flowers and the coffee and nodded yes and gave him a hug.

He called her *Lizzy* on the telephone the day she graduated from college, four days after he graduated from his own, as in *I can't wait to see you again, Lizzy*, and she said, *You'll be home soon*, and they both said *I love you* and hung up. In the eight years that had passed since the time he had asked her to the dance, she had never protested once about being called *Liz*, and she insisted she had just grown used to it, but he knew she introduced herself as *Elizabeth* whenever she met someone new, and so he only called her *Liz* when they were alone, like a little lifelong secret.

He called her *Betty* when their daughter gave birth to a beautiful baby boy, when he turned to her and said *How does 'Grandma Betty' sound?* and she said *How does a punch to the face sound?* But that was what the baby called her, Grandma Betty, one of his first-ever words, and she could've sworn that he had been bribed to do so with sweets and gifts, could've sworn she heard his mom whispering it to him mischievously one night, but she could never prove it. When his mom took him home after a long day of babysitting, the two of them sat together on the living room sofa and he put his arms around her and said, *I'm proud of you, Betty*, and she considered punching him and telling him to shut up like she used to, but she just said, *I'm proud of you too*, and they both said *I love you* and fell asleep right there next to the crackling fireplace.

He called her *Liz* again when he delivered a speech dressed head-to-toe in black, staring out into a sea of ebony-clad strangers whose faces were streaked with tears and worn from grief, as in *I miss Liz every single day*, and they all nodded and put their hands over their hearts like they knew exactly what he meant, but they didn't, they didn't know what he meant at all, they hadn't spent over seventy years loving her and enjoying her presence like he had, they hadn't been there for any of it, they didn't call her *Liz*, they didn't know *Liz*, how could they know? He felt the urge to put his hand over his heart too, but he was afraid touching it would cause it to break into fragments like a broken mirror, sharp and irreparable.

And he called her *Elizabeth* again when he approached his last breath in the Massachusetts General Hospital, surrounded by his wonderful daughter and his beautiful baby grandson who wasn't a baby but well in his twenties by then, and he looked up at the stark-white ceiling and whispered *I can't wait to see you again, Elizabeth*, as though she was right there beneath the grim fluorescent lights, and as he smiled and closed his eyes he heard her say, *You'll be home soon*.



Blissful

Anushka Tadikonda

The Earth's Lament

A dark snake of petrol slithers around my neck
Its venom drips
From its glistening fangs
Onto the carpet around my feet.
Help. I'm afraid it will bite me
They say, "Electric vehicles can go in the carpool lane."

I struggle to swallow. Oceans spill into my mouth,
Into my eyes, into my nose
Sparkling with dirty seawater
Laced with dead fish.
Help. I can't eat mercury
They suggest, "Turn your lights off when you leave home."

My fingers are frozen. Far from the warmth I am familiar with
I fear they will fall off.
I fear that I will fade.
Help. I'm cold
They ask, "Have you tried Meatless Mondays?."

A hurricane
Tears off my arm. A tsunami
Rips out my hair. A volcano
Melts my fingernails off. An earthquake
Shatters my teeth.
Help.

There's no response.
They can't hear me from Mars.

—Maddie Jin



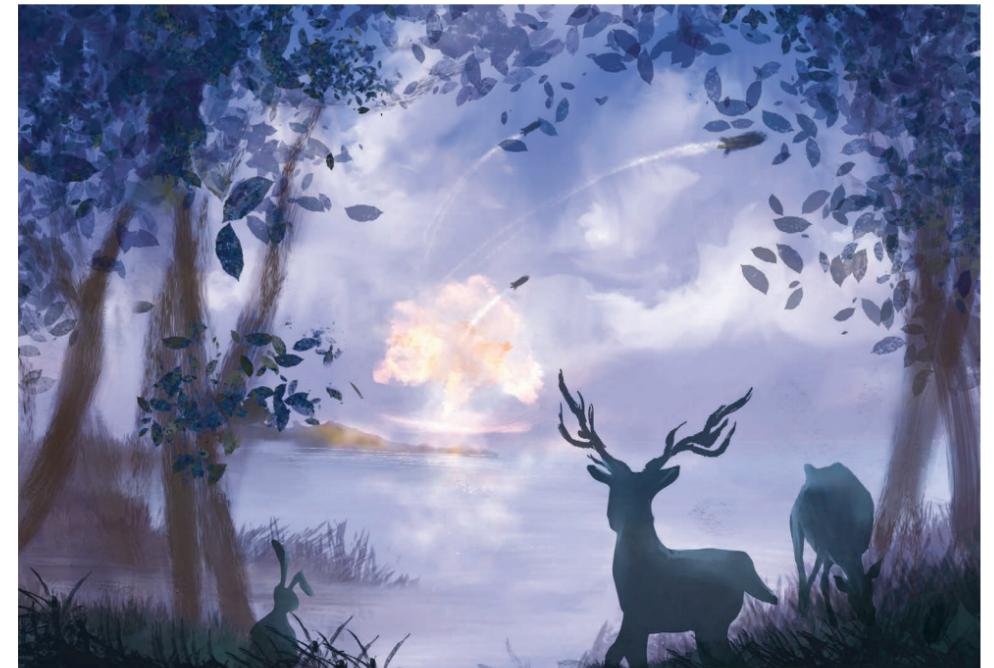
A Cat And Her Bush

Elaine Liu



We Are The Future

Jenny Chan



No Hope Left

Isabella Wang

Growing Pains

By Arika Raha

One of life's greatest gifts is seasonal grocery store displays. Though grocery store plants may seem enticing, always be wary, for they are known for treachery and deceit. They will make promises, try to get into your head. "No effort at all. Low commitment, high rewards!" You must be strong. You must turn away.

"This time will be different," they'll say.

"Only 99 cents," they'll say.

"What could go wrong?" they'll say.

They will assure you, reaching for your hand with neat printed messages in quirky little fonts. "Take me home! Water once every two weeks. Keep in bright light." They will be lying. Do not buy plants from grocery stores; but if you must, be wary, for they are more than they appear.

You must be prepared. A plant is no small task one can begin all willy-nilly. No, it is a life and it is your responsibility to nourish it. Information is key. Go to your local library, peruse the reserves, phone a friend, or take a field trip to your local wilderness: that wild place inside yourself just out of reach—ever-shifting, ever-changing—that corner of your eye where all of possibility lives—who you were, who you can be. Whatever is convenient.

But don't take so long. Don't overthink things. It's just another living creature, just like you. Just a plant. They are literally everywhere. Go for it. You got this.

Everyone has to start somewhere: nursery rose, stolen sidewalk daisy, three hundred fifty dollar masterpiece flown-in across the sea... whatever your poison. It doesn't really matter; they're a pain regardless. They're indecisive; their minds change with the wind. One day the light will be perfect and the next far too blinding. Don't water it every week, that's way too much, but, wait what were you thinking? Seven days is far too long without a drink. They will bend, shed, fret, and make altogether too big of a deal over something so small. But though they are picky and passive aggressive, they are also proud. They will wilt, tossing their hard earned petals into the breeze, long before they'll let you know what you've done wrong. You may fault them for this. You may think them wasteful or foolish, but you would be wrong.

There will be good days too. Sometimes, plants are little angels. Sometimes, they are companionable and cooperative, excited for your partnership together and filled to the brim with only goodwill. They are patient, allowing you to make your mistakes and gently nudging you along the right path, until it is time to bloom, furnishing your life with carefree, effortless joy. Plants are individuals; you have to meet them where they are.

Now, listen carefully because this may be the most important part. You will fall in love. It won't happen all at once—these

things rarely do. However, one day, after the honeymoon glee of possibility that accompanied you home that very first day has long since faded and the dread of knowing you're stuck with this miserable green twig mocking you in its cute grocery store ceramic baby blue pot has long since set in, you will wake up and you will realize you've given a piece of yourself away. Why else would you feel so proud watching that first leaf pop its head out into the world? Why else would you be there every morning adjusting the light, checking the soil, and carefully deciphering the words it does not say? Only 99 cents and you give it the world. You will fall in love, and you will make mistakes.

Many, many mistakes. They'll make their displeasure known; plants wear their stories on their stems. Plants are like people, in that way, wearing their hearts on their sleeves. Like people, they grow, and they change, and sometimes their path forks. They leave you. You wonder where you went wrong or if you could have done more; but, there's friction in change, so maybe the hurt is inevitable or maybe that's just the case we cling to pleading with the jury of the night. "Just a part of life," we say. Just a part of life.

But plants are like people. In the darkest of times they may curve off their intended path, but with a drop of love, a teaspoon of kindness, and a whole lot of patience, they can always find their way back.

Plants wear their stories on their stems. Every collision, every depression, every struggle, they embrace these growing pains, and they make sure you see them too because they are not ashamed. What people hide deep in the folds of their hearts, what people turn away from in shame, what people only dare face in glances, they wear boldly on their stems for the world to see. Plants are proud. They have no time to bother with appearances; they push on. Plants understand that scars are not shameful because growth is a journey. That sometimes the weight is too much and it is necessary to cut loose parts of yourself, even those you cherish most. They do not bother with grieving, or wondering, or doubt. Plants understand all that can be gained during ache, transformation, and growth. They understand and they rejoice.

So Have I

The suitcase thunks to the floor.
I ring the doorbell. But,
I pause.
The melodious song of my past —
Replaced with another.

The once crescendoing bhajan
With the prayer of Lord Ram
And the sweet overtures of the sitar
Abruptly replaced.

My memory stained
With a single move
As easy as changing a lightbulb.

The door opens —
A familiar smiling face. But
The doorbell's changed.
The same spiced smell of fresh breakfast
Soaked with ghee,
my grandmother's love.

Even with the same cool concrete floors,
Blistering Delhi heat.
The same sounds of angry honking and loud street vendors.
I banish that familiarity.

My memory fixated on a singular difference
That reminded me of what I left behind.
That, to me, kept the spirit of this home alive.
But the doorbell's changed.
And I guess — so have I.

—Nikhil Kapasi

Closet Secrets

Soft yellow cotton
A blossom, creased, turned, tucked away
Fluttering to sleep

In my deep dark closet
Secrets stuffed, stowed, squirreled away
Behind demure beauty

Daisies dance on dresses
Daffodils adorn a delicate top
A whiff of lemon

A breeze of unease
Leaks out of Narnia — quietly

I turn away — I fold more clothes

—Maddie Jin

Lurid

By Marcus Kuo and Esther Luan

She lumbered through her house's foyer after sunset, silent butlers carrying fur cloaks and cardboard boxes of gaudy Picasso imitations behind her. A gold-plated tiger glistened in the living room's chandelier light. Surrounded by unfamiliar guests at her house party — which she forgot she told her maids to throw — she swayed around, knocking over stuffed, glittered pelicans and ruining crumpled wolf-pelt rugs. She floated over to the open front door, surveying the mess with an unreadable expression, a large glass sloshing in hand.

Pinot Noir. In her Tokyo house, she would lie in bed, swirling an empty glass bottle upside down over her open mouth while slurring on about the military's embarrassing losses, a collection of other imported European spirits within arm's reach. Once, on her son's fourth birthday, she stood up, back straightened, eyes hazy and distanced — and with the arm strength of a sumo wrestler, launched the bottle towards the wide screen television on the other side of the room. It connected with a deafening shatter.



Poor Prospects

Jaime Fernandez da Ponte

Harmless Habits

“I love you” rolls off her tongue,
like a gentle wave that brushes over sand,
out of sheer routine.
“Love you,” without the “I,”
is a common goodbye,
and she has to hold it back to prevent
accidentally blurting it to strangers, teachers,
the cafeteria staff after they call her honey,
as an extension of the goodbye.
Even if it’s fleeting,
she does genuinely feel love for that person
at that moment. Oftentimes, it’s
the people she does feel it the strongest towards
that she can’t actually say it to.
The teacher that looks out for her and has watched her
cry and complain — it could never be said.
But it is deeply felt,
like the way wood is sanded and worn with age until it has dips from where a hand has rested
for so long. That wood can’t be reshaped, the days of pressing your palm into the groove have
weathered and eroded it entirely. It is part of the very character of the table. That is how
ingrained and interwoven her love and appreciation feels,
especially when
it could never be said.

There are those that she says it to that she doesn’t mean —
an old friend that she passes in the hallways
whom she no longer recognizes, or
a friend she does recognize but wishes
would stop recognizing her.
It’s harmless, in those cases.
It’s like continuing a path
that you both know is heading nowhere.
Maybe it was felt deeply once, but she doesn’t really remember it anymore.

She says it anyway, because
there are worse things to say than
“love you.”

—Kavya Sarathy

Click, Bang! Reload.

CLICK, BANG! RELOAD!

Gasping, the child wakes up; it’s just another nightmare.

10-year-old Lucy Meadows lives on Delmer Street next to the park.
She has one white bunny named Alpie, and a golden retriever named Stark.

Her parents drive her to school and kiss her goodbye.
She squirms away. She is a fourth-grader, after all.

She is walking to class with a group of friends. Suddenly she hears a shrieking cry. But who was it?? She
runs like in her sleep: slow: desperate: bit by bit.

Click, Bang! Reload.

It’s that sound again. Was it the one from her dreams?
But it can’t be, she is awake then. Yet it’s here, she hears more screams.
Where can she go?! She sees people on the ground, her friends. No, they were.

Click, Bang! Reload.

More and more books on the ground. Hide! Hide! She can’t be found!
But it is too late. She sobs for her parents. She whispers, “I am not awake. I am not awake.”
Yet, this is reality? How do we allow him to keep coming back for more?

Click, Bang! Reload — Click, Bang! Reload — Click, Bang! Reload.

Three for one. He wasn’t worried about running out, I guess.

At just 10 she has lived her life. Her parents will live the rest of theirs in strife.
She falls. The light is now gone. Her dog feels abandoned. Just like him, I cannot understand it.

Lucy is now part of a statistic - she can no longer be optimistic.
This is so ballistic, but yet not definitively fatalistic, and god, the solution is so simplistic,
But no, Lucy Meadows, you’re part of a growing statistic.

Oh look, it’s now your child’s turn.
He’s back for more.

Click, Bang! Reload.

—Julian Berkowitz Sklar

毛巾- *Mao Jin*

By Melanie Lee

“12 a.m.,” the low ring of the clock tolled as the house echoed with the high-pitched voice of a little girl yelling, “*Mom! I can’t find my mao jin!*” Shuffling into the chaos, her half-asleep mother helped her rummage through salmon silk sheets and plush plaid pillows draped in darkness. Most kids clung onto their beige teddy bears, or favorite stuffed animals, but not this girl. She had her torn, linen blanky called her “Mao Jin.”

When she slept on her side, she left an empty hole for it between her two far-flung arms, clutching it close like a pillow to keep her company through sleepless nights. When she slept on her back, she had a comfortable spot where it could rest on her otherwise unadorned belly, protecting her from the evil monsters hiding under her bed. She woke up abruptly from light seeping through the window, it was a parasol over her head, shielding her eyes from the blinding rays. When she had bad days and tough nights, it was a tissue for her tears and astress ball for her anger. When a whole world of thoughts towered above her in the middle of the night, it was her fidget to relieve anxiety.

Her *mao jin* traveled all over the world with her, even traversing different dimensions. Her *mao jin* flew from hot tropical islands to cool suburban apartments, relaxed in the tallest hotel in Abu Dhabi and snuggled up inside her cousin’s snowy Tahoe cabin. Her *mao jin* paddled away from sharks in the middle of the obscure salty seas, rode unicorns waltzing across ethereal rainbow dance floors, and conquered an entire city — all in one night. Her *mao jin* witnessed the enraged thunder clouds raining torrents of fairytale creatures and pigs fluttering across the pure pastel sky. Her *mao jin* even experienced sliding under the luggage checkout camera through airport security.

Delicately stitched with woven designs created by the little girl’s grandmother, her *mao jin* embarked on a journey overseas and was delivered to her front doorstep. Her *mao jin* had been forced into rigid corners of a tight box and shoved onto a plane for countless hours until finally settling in the little girl’s possession for fourteen years.

When the little girl was homesick for the first time, her *mao jin* was a shoulder that she didn’t have to cry on because it reminded her that everything would be all right. Her *mao jin* was not a teddy bear she needed to kiss and wish sweet dreams to every night. Her *mao jin* was not a stuffed animal from a toy store that she needed to cuddle.

Her *mao jin* was home.



Spring Water's Warmth

Aiden Chen

Listener

By Maya Tian

The steady whirr of the heater, and the hooting of a distant owl makes up the tiring melody of Brook's bedtime. Outside his windows are chirping crickets that grow quieter with each week as winter draws nearer. Somewhere down the hall, he can hear the leaky faucet, matching the dull rhythm. *Drip drip drip.*

Brook lies in his bed staring at the dimples and ridges of the ceiling above him, and can only listen to the world buzz around him. Some parts of this routine still feel unnatural. After all, he has always been someone with an abundance of words. There were times they came out as a clear mist, gentle and soft. Other times when they gushed out of his throat like smelly squid ink, staining and making a mess of the world. He used to imagine that he tries to keep his speech somewhere between cool lemonade and sriracha.

Brook can't remember when he first had the idea to stop talking all together, becoming a listener, as he liked to label himself, but he does remember it started as an itch. Easy to distract from at first, but too persistent to ignore forever. Eventually, he had to scratch.

Do you think I talk too much?

His friend's quiet, polite, and a little too honest answer was enough for the itch to develop into a rash. The rough ugly kind, that leaves you looking like a diseased shrimp.

Even after the rash covered Brook from head to toe, it didn't do much more than add insecurity to sentences he spoke. *Too loud. Maybe offensive. Doesn't make sense. Give other people a chance to speak. Is it appropriate?* Whenever someone responded with an insightful comment or even a laugh at one of his jokes, he would feel relief. *At least I said something right.*

But what's the point of having so many words if you can't use them when they actually mean something.

It was an early autumn morning, when he was woken up by the shattering of glass. Since Brook heard a moment of silence afterward, he had assumed it must have been an accident. He slipped out of bed, feet hitting cold, creaking floorboards as he tiptoed out of his room, only to freeze in the kitchen doorway.

He didn't say anything when he saw his sister shoving things in a bag, shouting colorful profanities. Not a peep came from him when he saw his dad and stepmom gently consoling the blaze of fire that was his sister. No syllables could've been strung together to properly convey his thoughts, and yet he wishes he had stomped and screeched, and cried, and yelled, letting himself spill words like oozing mint toothpaste and hand sanitizer, sharp and stinging. To say something, anything.

But it wasn't until his sister stormed out of the house casting one last glare over her shoulder, a shard of hate, that somehow flew past his pleading dad, past his weeping stepmother, lodg-

ing right above his diaphragm, that Brook was finally silenced for good. The rash turned to an ache, and his tongue stopped churning letters into sentences.

Unlike him, his sister was always a quiet person. A listener, if you will. She always listened, whether it was a conversation at dinner, Brook reciting lines for a school play, the babbles of their baby cousin, or one of her favorite audiobooks. Listening, listening, listening. Maybe that's why she snapped. Brook never really asked.

It's terrifying to realize how much the listener had to absorb. Absorbing and absorbing, complaints, jokes, apologies, gratitude, confessions, greetings, congratulations, and condolences, all while producing so little himself. Heck, just listening to the stupid faucet felt like too much at times.

Perhaps he'll take a short break. Brook can play a different role just for tonight. Not the talker or the listener.

The smeller?

Doesn't have the same ring to it, but he'll give it a try.

Brook recalls a time his sister and his dad worked together to devise a prank using condiment packets. His memory was spotty, but he thinks it was 4 years ago. Maybe if he closed his eyes and focused he could tug out the scent of mustard from the fraying edges of his rug, yanking the smell out like a thrashing fish caught on a line.

He inhales. Exhales. And inhales again. Nothing. Nostalgia never came to whisk him away from the present. Instead, he still lay in his bed, still staring and listening, still waiting patiently for his sister to come back.

Be patient. When she comes home she can tell me everything. She'll talk and talk, and I'll console her. I'd fix everything up. Just as she did with me. It'll be just like before except maybe both of us could be a talker and both of us a listener.

His eyes are dusted with tears. The selfish kind that burns and stabs, but doesn't leave. Not until Brook is lost in the lull of sleep do they roll down his cheeks, silently and softly.

The whirr of the heater stops, the owl falls quiet, and all that's left is the leaky faucet in the soundless night. *Drip Drip Drip.*



Balletglass

Navya Desai

Socketed by Mr. Marger

By Parav Manney

Last June, I was socketed by Mr. Marger. My particular instance of harassment bore upon me an enlightened moralistic lesson. Indeed, I acquired numerous principles from that harrowing experience, many of which are the basis of my matured character today. The most pure incarnation of sequenced language is thus, at the very minimum, the story which I presently pen. It is an acute allegory for the value of abstract reasoning and critical philosophy; a gourmet of seasoned ideas emanating the aroma of intellectual dignity and prowess. A well of perspicacious knowledge to enrich even the simplicity of ignorance. Through my tale, one can not only sit and admire words printed on paper, but also learn the same things I have without a pickle jar wheeled into their head.

It was the 27th of the mentioned month, and I was staying in Santa Cruz for the Summer holidays. This was a wholly pleasant business near the coast, listening to the low tides of the ocean in the evening, feeling the exquisite breeze which would rustle my hair, and seeing powdery sand along the beach.

On the particular day I was socketed, I had been spending a good portion of my time on the pier up until half past seven. I sat on the wooden platform's edge with my legs dangling over the limpid waters. The vast Northern Pacific spread infinitely in all directions, an enormous body of cerulean blue intermixed with soft hints of moving green. I fail to recollect how long I had been there observing the dream-like aquatic scenery, but it must have been a while since I recall black dots springing before me after staring at the brightness for so long. Every now and then I would also catch sight of a few fish, once even an aged turtle with a speckled shell smothered in algae. But other than that, it was oddly peaceful and still. Cumulus clouds plastered the dome of sky aloft, with fragments of azure between them. Wavelets would curve and subside like dreams up to the sand. Watching over it all, I felt as if I floated above the ocean. There remained an air of solitude.

The light of day eventually dimmed, and the high-flung sun gradually lowered, an indication of dusk's oncoming. I decided to return to my hotel. The pier extended from the central tip of the beach; turning back I could only see two lone vacationers, a man and a woman, packing their foldable chairs and utility cooler as they took leave. I followed shortly, pulling my legs out of the water and standing with wet feet on the deck. After I slipped my sandals on, I looked around to see how the earth's tonality had transitioned almost instantaneously. Ephemeral strands of pastel pink now stretched across the western skyline, and pools of coral flooded over the cumulus clouds. Everything above swam in a deep, heavenly sea of vibrating colors; the semi-circular sun, crisp and blood orange, submerging below the world's rim. Ocean wa-

ter lapped quietly by the shore, a sheen light glimmering on the undulating surface. Mountains hunched around the bay gradually darkened into stark figures, only a soft orange light streaked their rocky slopes.

I began to realize that even if I started my walk back briskly, I would still not make it before dark. The particular establishment I was going to was The Rat's Rear End, and despite the ignoble title, it was actually a rather agreeable apartment complex. The only thing guests had to beware of was Mr. Marger (that was his actual surname, whether he gave it to himself or it was associated with a family lineage, I don't know), the gatekeeper who patrolled the perimeter day and night.

He could elicit a shiver from even the haughtiest of men. I am not certain how or when he gained rest, as he could be seen at his post even between the hours of one to four in the morning, but it may have been that his adverse demeanor was a product of his sleep deprivation.

The main building which hosted the apartments and complementary suites possessed a spacious parking garage beneath it. It was here that an office was built into the right-most wall, fronted by a small white plastic chair besides a cardboard box, surmounted by multiple empty Coca-Cola cans. It would not take even the least assuming individual to determine that this was Mr. Marger's place of stay. The fellow even had his quarters fitted with a double-basin sink, a small pantry, and one mattress laid on the floor (not that it was ever used, I presume).

He was a pasty caucasian with a bent back and protruding pot-belly. His features were less than desirable, as his face was constantly clammy, with a high forehead, along with a hooked nose covered in blackheads. His hair was greasy and white, it came down in long wispy strands on either side of his ghastly countenance.

Often, residents would pull into the garage late at night and innocently park their car in an available area, when, springing from the shadows, Mr. Marger would creep behind their shoulder and whisper, "May I? May I? Oh please, may I?-" That is, may you give him the keys so that he may park the vehicle appropriately?

This was his only duty besides securing the gate lock and opening it. He spent a majority of his time drinking and consuming various assortments of pickles. In fact, he had quite an obsession with the fruit (it is indeed one); his dialogue and thoughts seemed to consist of nothing else but it, so much so that many thought him delirious. Other than this, he would throw Coca-Cola cans at residents and even at stray animals, which, along with his other undistinguished qualities, rendered him a source of displeasure.

My room at The Rat's Rear End was accessible only through a lengthy staircase that drew down to a landing in the garage. When I arrived, I attempted to inconspicuously reach it by splaying my body against the wall and traveling as lightly as I could along. I did not want an encounter with Mr. Marger. The day had not yet deepened into darkness as I expected, the sun's upper half was still visible and a brilliant mixture of airy red and orange inflamed the sky. I almost reached the stairway when, unsurprisingly, Mr. Marger finally leapt behind me and seized my waist.

He began to speak uncomfortably close to my ear. "Ello there boy oh, boy oh, would you like some pickle?" His breath was sour and his hands were cold. I turned to meet his grease-ridden face. Of course, he held a jar of half-eaten pickles still soaked in their juice.

"No thank you sir." I said.

"Why's tha'?" he asked, with a most curious frowning of his brow.

"Because I don't like them."

"What? What? Nonsense talk? You don't like pickle? But it is so- so- versatile! Pickle can be eaten plain, raw; roasted or toasted; steamed and grilled; baked and sautéed; eaten with ginger and mustard- Oh! And with mushrooms they're even better- so much pickle. Pickle on pumpernickel, pickle with butter, pickle in cut salmon, iced pickle, pickle-lemon sorbet, shrimp pickle, fish and chips pickle, pickle on eggs, pickle with soup-" I must have stood there listening to this man talk about pickles for two hours. He continued his elaboration on pickles with great depth and precision.

"Sir, please." I had to interrupt him- who knows how long he could have kept going. "I'm seriously not interested in any pickles, I just want to get to my room."

He really had gone on for hours, for outside the garage, the moon now floated above amongst shimmering stars and tattered clouds. A silvery light poured onto us and illuminated Mr. Marger's pale face. I could see it growing red. His nose and mouth began to wildly contort and a slow sensation of terror welled inside me. He craned towards me and our noses met, "Is that so?" He gnashed his teeth and swung his jar from side to side as the juice within it silently sloshed. "Ya think ya real funny do ya?" His voice grew louder. "Haw?" And louder. "Do ya?" And far louder than before.

I thought of escaping and drew away from his grasp. But as I did so, he angrily threw his left arm forward, slid a worm-like finger down the back of my shirt, and tore it in half. He grabbed me by the bare shoulder and savagely screamed, "You don't know a fine drink when ya see one you goon!"

He whirled the jar into my head, and broke its neck and cap,

then proceeding to crack the half-shattered receptacle on my chest, arms, knees, and I am afraid he even cracked it upon areas I would rather not mention.

After his energy to assault had expired, he casually withdrew, took one Coca-Cola can from his pile, and proceeded to seat himself in his chair to drink the day away. I scrambled off with a scabrous body and escaped upstairs.

From my experience I learned three integral morals which culminated into my aforementioned enlightenment. Firstly, a man must never decline another; secondly, never walk alone in Santa Cruz; thirdly, always accept a pickle when it is offered to you, even when others have taken a bite.



Sunday Windowsill

Ashley Ko

The Unknowable Creatures

By Manlin Zhang

I was a fisherman, who once commandeered a boat across the ocean, and that is all you need to know. My name is not important, nor is my age, or anything else that concerns you or me. The only thing of consequence is what happened one fateful day in the ocean, when I stumbled across the greatest predator that mankind, and anything that came before it, could bear to witness.

That day, though it occurred years ago, I can recall wholly from memory. It should not bear repeating, so horrifying the details, but even now I can feel the words scratching themselves out through my fingers as if drawn by fishhooks. And so I am compelled to tell it, though by my own conscience or by another, inexplicable cosmic force, I cannot say. Either way, I am complying with good will, for the weight of the knowledge I have gained is too precious not to share. It has bought me decades of peace, and I hope it does for you as well.

The tale begins, as most tales too, with an act of foolishness.

I have mentioned that I was a fisherman, but that is not entirely truthful. A glorified sailor would be a more apt description; I was the one who rigged up the boats before leaving dock, who cut the catches out of the nets. I was good at it, too, something I used to hold in great esteem. Why would someone want to spear a fish and throw out the nets, when they had the ability to command the boat itself? That was the only action that was truly necessary. I was necessary.

It was that fatal line of thinking that compelled me to the battered fishing vessel on a morning in early May, when even the skies above foretold a coming storm. My boss, the captain of the boat, had visited me and my crewmates earlier that day, warning the weather to be far too intense to sail in. I remember scoffing at the claim- our crew was barely keeping its head above bankruptcy, yet my superior felt it prudent to call off the day at the slightest notion of difficulty.

Back then, I fancied myself to be a future captain, and I was always itching to show my skill as a sailor. Ignoring any notion of reasoning that might have kept me safe, I climbed aboard the boat, deftly crafting knots and hooking sails in preparation for a roam across the seas. It was with that foolish confidence, that inane urge to prove my worth, that I kept going past the torrents of rain that soon came pouring from the sky, past the first echoes of thunder, past the point where any seaman with half a brain would know to turn back. For hours my faith in my own ability held, and it was only when I saw a bolt of lightning crack from the heavens that I finally considered turning the trip around.

It was far too late to escape the storm, however. Black thunderclouds had swallowed the murky sky, plunging the entire oceanscape before me into darkness. I could barely see through the waters that pummeled the windows, or hear through the

waves that crashed against the sides of the boat. Desperately, I turned the boat around, hoping to move against the direction of the rain.

I had hoped for freedom. What I witnessed before me locked me in place.

A mile or so from the boat, unhindered by the rolling, black sea, a monster loomed before my boat. No, that is not the right way to describe it; "monster" would be too kind a way to label so horrific a creature. It was the kind of thing Hell itself would beg to be rid of, or perhaps beg to be ruled by. I am not even able to describe the entirety of it, for its mouth was all I could see- from my position huddled in a tiny fishing vessel, the measureless expanse over the open waters revealed only the barest hint of the creature's true nature.

What looked like a great mountain, but was surely, surely far larger than that, lay before me. Strips of lumpy, swollen flesh were nestled between the rows of serrated teeth, and a black sludge leaked from the spaces in between, staining its gums a mottled black. Leathery lips were pulled back into a grotesque grin, except how the expression could never, ever resemble anything contortable on a mortal's face. I noticed a gaping, oozing cut from the corner of its mouth that extended up so far, I simply could not see where it ended. I could not see the rest of its face. In retrospect, I am glad for this. What little I could see throws my heart even now into mayhem, my mind into oblivion. The image is eternally etched into the darkest corners of my memory.

To this creature, I must have been a speck of dust, a thing so minuscule and irrelevant it could hardly consider me a being. Size was not the deciding factor to the lack of my importance; though I was far past my youth, even then, I inexplicably knew that my years were a millisecond in time in comparison to this immovable giant, this ancient being, this statute of carnality. Simply witnessing the creature, being in its presence, gave me a wisdom, a knowledge as old as its subject. It was pure instinct that told me to cower down, to pull myself into a ball as tight as I could when faced with this primordial power.

Hiding was pointless, and I was too afraid to scream. Indeed, I was scarcely able to breathe, terrified that the sound of my mere breathing would draw the attention of the creature, and prompt it to release its bottomless amount of omnipotent rage. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realized my fear was misplaced; the all-consuming, roaring of the tumultuous waves would surely cover any sound I made. And then the creature parted its lips, and the noise that came from within its gaping mouth reduced the ocean's screams to tinny feedback.

It was the most horrifying of tongues, a garbled, unholy thing that tore into my ears and yanked at the very depths of my soul. The sheer volume of it ripped out every thought in my head,

reducing it to a painfully blank landscape- gone the appearance of the creature, the feel of the waves threatening to throw me overboard, and I knew only terror. Terror that only escalated as images, murky and waterlogged, emerged behind my eyes.

Through this foreign lens, I witnessed the passing of ages. I saw things that, even as I tell this story, I cannot possibly describe to you. It is not for the feeble minds of humans to remember, and by then mine had almost been driven to insanity. All I can remember is the indescribable emotion the visages had invoked- an ancient, carnal feeling, not quite anger or fear, but something close to it. An emotion that called upon my ancestors, and those who came before them, and before them, and before them. I knew I had terribly misjudged, horribly misstepped. This creature was not simply older than the known world, it was older than time itself. This being, that rose before me, had seen the dawn of the newly-born universe.

And in this state, lost in the cavern of the creature's mind, I remained for how long I do not know. To the being who has outlived everything, the passage of time means nothing. I was blind, deaf and dumb, completely at the mercy of the creature that held me sway. I was helpless, insignificant and irrelevant, disabled from any inkling of action or thought by a single uttering from the creature's lips.

If I was able to think, I would despair of the possibility of being locked in the throes of mindlessness for eternity. As it was, I was simply... Drifting. Barely clinging onto existence. Until eventually, I felt an inkling of awareness return to me. Then, with excruciating slowness, I began to feel the creature retreat from my mind, pulling away from the recesses of reality, away into the depths of the ocean. At last, I could feel my limbs myself, my own consciousness, free of the taint of that primordial power.

Even when I was sure the last dregs of power had trickled from my consciousness, I could barely manage to convince myself to open my eyes. What my eyes gleaned devastated and relieved me all at once. The ocean before me was clear, not a trace of the thing that had polluted its waters left in it. Even the storm had apparently passed, as afraid any rebellious action would provoke the creature to return. Where had it gone? I do not know, and even now, I can only rest peacefully knowing that I will never find out.

I briefly recall stumbling to the bridge room, pouring as much speed as I could into the boat to make it back to shore. It was only when I glimpsed, far out in the distance a sliver of the land that I recognised as home, that it finally felt safe enough for me to collapse into a chair and weep in relief.

I never returned to fishing- or sailing, as is what my job really was- after that. Instead, the next day saw me pulling my savings from the bank and going into retirement. The monotony of the

days thereon bored me, but I knew better than to be bitter about the averageness of my day-to-day.

As hard I tried to convince myself otherwise for years after, I knew that what I had seen had not been a hallucination. The creature had been too visceral, too incredible for my human mind to have conjured it up. I was aware that I would never completely understand what my eyes had seen, what had been witnessed. Even worse than the thought of it being real, was the knowledge that I had never been the target of its attention. I was much too insignificant to be that; I had simply been an unlucky witness to its invocation of its ancient tongue.

The literally incomprehensible size of the creature had a great deal to do with my fear, that is undeniable. But the largest amount of it simply had to do with the mere existence of this being, the possibility that such a terrible, indescribably powerful thing could exist; that is what, protected by the passage of time, still leaves me shaken some days. And yet, I shudder to think that even a creature as dominant as the one I had witnessed apparently had the capability of being damaged, of being injured. By what, I cannot imagine. But it is evidence that some infinitely complex, endlessly more knowing ecosystem is present in the universe, an ancient power that both outdated it and can outlive it.

Recounting this experience decades later, this realization still troubles me. Stronger than that, though, is a sense of overwhelming relief. What matters so much to a person at any given time- my old want to prove myself capable, a person's concerns about the unforeseeable future- inevitably means absolutely nothing. We are nothing, can do nothing, against the whims of the boundlessly powerful forces that drive the cosmic universe.

I, and all of humankind, pale in importance to the beings of the unknown. Every little action, every tiny thought, matters infinitesimally little when compared to a single element of an unknown world we will never understand. In comparison to that, I do not matter. You do not matter. Nothing matters.

And for that, I am eternally grateful.



Typography

Eva Ruemmler



Astral

Yue Pan

The Wishing Star

By Aneri Shah

The stars are awake, and dance graceful patterns, creating constellations in the night sky. Shining together, glowing together, moving together, like a unit across the expansive galaxy. One star, however, gleams and flares on its own. It has many names: Polaris, Pole Star, Lodestar. A small number of people though, mostly young ones, call it The Wishing Star.

It gets tired sometimes, the lonely estrella. Since it leads a solitary life, no other star can talk or communicate with it. Day after day, it watches the humans drink and dance and live so vivaciously, so vibrantly, without a care in the world. It never really likes watching the older ones frolic and waste their life away, with gambling and such. The Wishing One cares about the little ones. They have no worries of paying bills, rent, of push and pull between partners, of exams that determine your entire future. They are free to just be, young kids. They have the most extraordinary wishes, like chocolate milkshakes raining down onto the ground so chocolate rain exists. Or, for there to be a doggy heaven, so my puppy has a new friend and chew toy to play with when he goes to sleep forever. It laughs at the sheer absurdity of these wishes; how can they be thought of by anyone other than tiny tots just beginning to understand the world?

Way up, up in the sky; there are constellations, shining bright and uncaring above us, never not catching our breath. But there is one star, the Wishing Star, that watches over us, every night.



Promised Land

Jenny Chan

self-elegy

from the recipe for Apple and Frangipane Tart from "Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat" by Samin Nosrat

i've forgotten how to write a poem
do i break a LIME
here
or a RIMMED BAKING SHEET

here

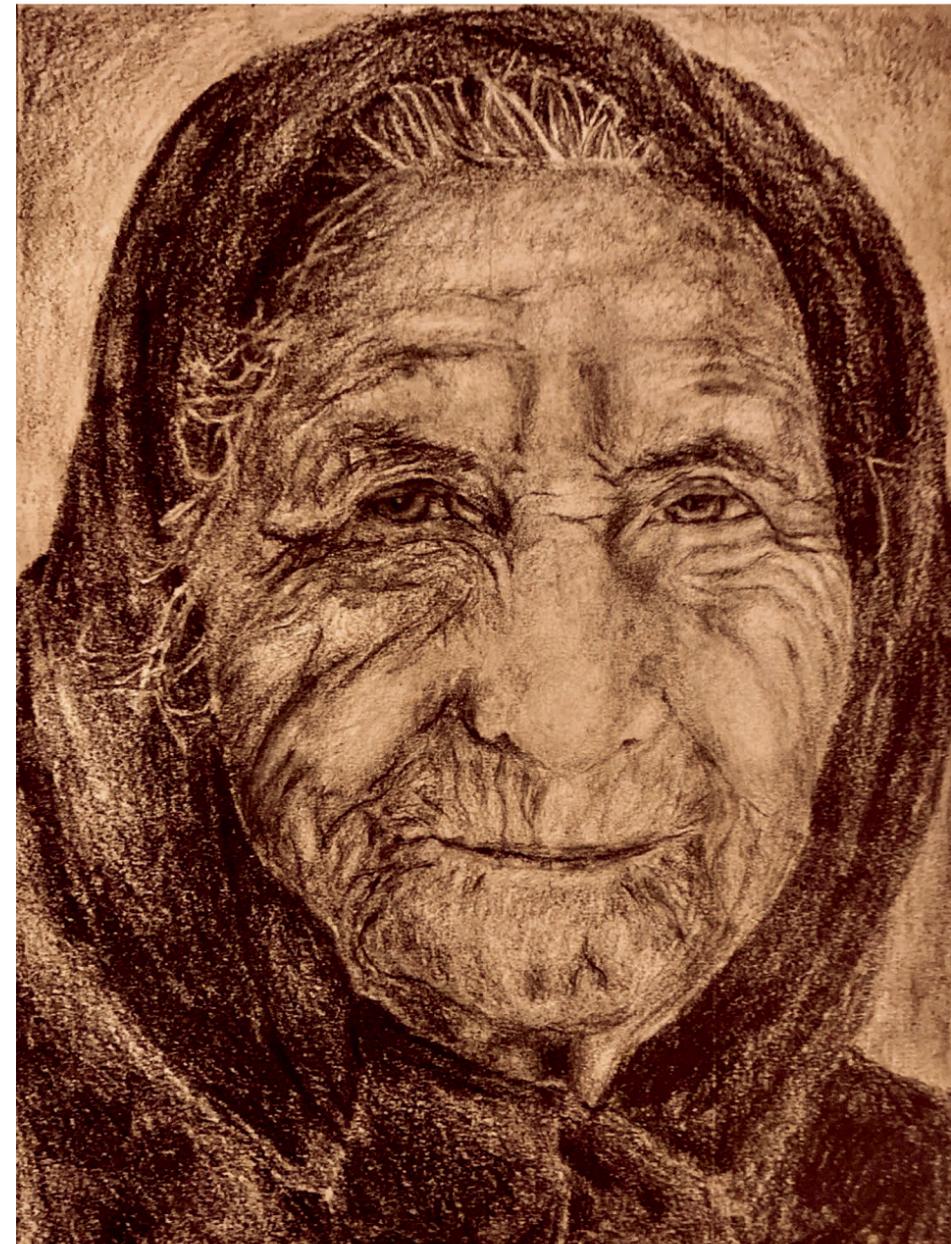
if i rhymed every other line
would i sound more sophisticated,
like a HONEYCRISP, SIERRA BEAUTY, OR PINK LADY,
like i was forty-two and drank wine
and whinged about my kids while i waited
ON A WIRE RACK FOR 45 MINUTES

should i mention that i'm A DEEP GOLDEN BROWN
and that i'm also american and that
i used to write poems about
A PARTICULARLY VISUALLY STRIKING
combination of the two
but i stopped because i ran out
of ways to say [racism is REALLY TART]

can i compare my mind to GREEN
AND PURPLE PLUMS or an open
window or some PLEATED amalgamation
of pure hatred and JUICY FRUITS
and rash decisions and 115 GRAMS
of things i wish i would've said
or is that too literal

can i rip this page out of my diary
and LAYER it on my chest
some pseudo poetic way
of telling the PARING KNIFE
i'm going through a psyche-upheaval
and i used to be able to
Work Through Difficult Emotions
by writing about them but now my heart's
UPSIDE DOWN and i can't say anything
without WEEPING

—Maanvi Chawla



Jenny Chan

Hope

*Dear Mommy,
I write now because everything feels upwards. You always hated
when I looked at you. The way a daughter looks at her mom, for
too long. But now when I look at you that way, you can't see me.*

