

The Rough Draft

Volume XXV

Flint Hill School

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The Rough Draft

...because good writing is never finished

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Our Mission

To provide a forum for creators, both literary and visual; to encourage members of the Flint Hill community to think, to create, to feel, and to experience; to encourage expression, growth, and appreciation of art in all forms.

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Letter from the Co-Editors

Dear Reader,

Every year we at *The Rough Draft* relearn the complexity and vibrance each Husky carries inside them. We learn it through their writing, their art, which invariably lay bare the thoughts, hopes, fears, morals, and passions of the creator. One piece tells infinite things; together, they make something else entirely– a veritable Hilbert's Hotel.

It is always our goal to put these rich inner worlds on display for our school community to appreciate every Senior Day. This year, we designed the magazine with this concept of a "museum" in mind, baring the souls of our talented artists to all. It is a celebration of every one of us coming together as a community.

The creation of the magazine is always equally communal, a marketplace of ideas where every member, whether designing, copyediting, selecting pieces, or simply speaking up during meetings, had their voice shine through in the final product. That was especially true this year as we navigated the unique circumstance of being co-editors-in-chief – twice the leadership styles, twice the personality, twice the ideas, yet working together made the experience something even greater than that. Even the composing of this letter was a matter of both of our voices intersecting.

The composition of this magazine starts with a pitch-black spread and the statement that "poems don't solve problems." We hope that the further you progress into our magazine, the more you begin to believe in the importance of creative expression.

We wanted to bring all of this to life in this year's *Rough Draft*. We hope that you find a piece of every one of us in this magazine.

Cormac Kaplan and Jennifer Kim, Co-Editors-in-Chief

poems don’t solve problems

Amber Li

they never did. they don’t turn the page, they don’t set the sail, they don’t build the nations or destroy them. a poem can hardly change the world; an essay, novel, or shipman could do more. they are the crumbs that fall from the great cake of writing, half-written and diminutive, they hide their meanings like cheating men hide their affairs, they are the things that loiter around heartbreak and blind-sided love like starving dogs around the trash. who has time for that? to linger when you can execute, to watch when you can do, to sleep and dream of billions of stars when there are people dying and people fighting and files wasting away at your desk. the lamplight is sterile, cold, commanding, it urges you to let go: stop pausing at every comma, stop filling each space with this carousel of images, stop feeling your fingers between these lines, stop

feeling. this heart cannot possibly be contained in a space as flat as paper, after all. this love cannot be found, only have its face written for again and again and again, a thousand different accounts, each trying to hold

on.

Simmering

Medina Bryant

Quiet is a dark reserve,
Lonely and silent while words swirl around
Like a tornado I'm standing in the middle of
While projectiles kill me slowly
One scratch by one.

Projectiles like words
Things that have never seen the light of day
Words hidden like secret loves
Words that brew over a simmering flame
Never boiling over the top but constantly simmering
Constantly a gun ready to fire,

It's a game of balance
Keeping it from boiling over
Keeping it just cool enough,
So from the outside the water is cold
Everyone else sees a pot of water
Room temperature.

No one sees the flame underneath
The constant burning
Constant pain

In that pot words brew,
Sentences, paragraphs
A whole biography
Words that no one will ever hear,

Like a caterpillar in a cocoon
Waiting to turn into a beautiful butterfly
But alas it never will





No one will ever see the beautiful butterfly,
Or the cascade of beautiful color
That would shine through its stained glass wings

Words trapped,
Like a child allergic to sunshine
Watching through her window
While others bask in it and play
It doesn't matter if she wants to go outside
She never will.

And no one will ever see that little girl for what she is.

Maybe
One day they'll glimpse the little girl
See her peering through the window
See the words,
Trapped on her lips.

The words that just like her will never escape
Words just like her that long to go out
Long to be heard
Be seen.

Yet never will
Just like this poem.

More words that will never escape
Added to the thousands
Swirling around in that tornado
Simmering but not boiling in that pot
Words that eyes will never read
Feelings that no one will ever see.



echoes

Yousef Rabbani

i sit in a desolate room, with no voice but my own.
it's vast. blinding. white. reminiscent of the ultimate judgement.
i hear voices, echoes, arriving, as i continue talking to myself,
and i can't help but wonder: who are the echoes speaking to?

i mean, they keep greeting someone, as if they're forever-friends.
or perhaps they had just met. regardless, i wanted, needed, to find them.
i search for the person behind the echoes, trying to find the one who speaks.
yet somehow i had forgotten that their voices are mine.

now the world is ringing. the incessant voices are lost to the void.
but can they be found? do they want that? or do they not?
why in the world would this disembodied stranger abandon
the sanctity of this vast white room, where heaven and hell part?

and as i sit in this desolate room, with no voice but my own,
i hear the ringing of these echoes, as they give off
a familiar dissonance...but this is too good to be true.
has someone come in? or have i gone mad again?

The Book

Evie Stover

It sits in the corner, protected by its thick glass casing so clear it's almost like a fresh raindrop. It sits there and it vexes me, makes my skin crawl with... what? Anticipation? Curiosity? Hatred? I'm not sure, though it is quite an odious thing. Wrapped in jagged, aged, peeling leather, black in color, and splitting–I gag just thinking about it.

My sister Leah makes fun of me for it, calls me a "snooty vegan" who can't stand a bit of animal hide. But I'm not a vegan–I really like fish and milk. And I like figs, which I've read are not vegan. You'd think a fruit would be vegan, but wasps go into figs while the fruit grows and they die in there. And plus, I don't feel disgust looking at every other leather bound book, only this one.

This one has pages that remind me of the teeth of a smoking grandmother, yellow and like if I touched it I would need a tetanus shot, and it has no title. No words down its spine, no imprint on the cover, just the stretched skin that still cries to me. I feel like sometimes it still twitches with the essence of life.

Because it has no title, we refer to it in all different ways at school. My math teacher calls it the Manual, my school dean calls it the Good Text, but he likes it a bit more than the rest of us. Most of us just call it the Book. I did hear a girl two years above me call it stupid once and I watched her wrist get grabbed by the teacher monitoring the halls. I saw her get yanked down the hallway, headed towards the dean's office. I didn't see her again after that.

"I wonder if they murdered her," I had whispered to my sister under the protection of my comforter a few nights after the girl went missing. "Probably pinned her to the wall with pens and played darts with her dead body."

Leah had looked at me, confused and somewhat disgusted. "Who?"

"The dean and the rest of the office staff. Who else?" I had replied, exasperated.

"Ew, Danica!" she had hissed. "Why would you say such a thing? You must be reading too many of those mystery books you always check out at the library. God!"

After she asked me that, I wanted to say, "Then where is she?" but Leah had scoffed and slipped out from under my comforter.

I haven't brought it up since.

So every day on my way to class I stare at the dastardly thing, the haunting thing, and I imagine ways it might die: Crumble to ash in a fire, get stabbed straight through that sickening leather, or perhaps I could tear it to pieces with my own two hands. I dream about that sometimes.



I've never gotten to read the Book, none of the students at the school have, only the teachers have. They say that the Book specifies that it cannot be reproduced and since it's so delicate, not many people can touch it, but they tell us about the book. They quote it when we do something wrong, like when I was up too late one night in the library and the librarian found me. She had said, "Follow the book dear, bed at ten!" And I listened.

In fact, it is ten now, and I'd like to know if bed at ten means asleep or if bed at ten means in my dormitory. I shake my head, though, and ponder something else instead. I think back to the glass case at the center of the main hallway of the school, that awful book on display like crown jewels, and I think of how breakable it looks.

They trust us to not touch the glass, but my fist begs to punch through it and tear that thing from its stand and rip it to shreds. My fingers beg to bleed from glass shards and sting from a thousand little paper cuts and I know it will all be worth it.

I don't have to punch it, though, I have a screwdriver tonight.

I have it all planned in my head and tonight is it. I watch my clock, undaunted by its so painfully slow tick. I wish that I could do it now, but I'm scared my teachers will still be awake. I have given myself a safe time, 1:30, to hop from my bed and scurry down the hall and commit my blasphemous act.

I decided of all my twisted fantasies to burn that leather bound terror, so I stole a lighter from the teachers smoking lounge. I had once seen the dean in there, puffing on his cigar, so smugly disobedient of his own preaching.

Since there was a girl, a few months back, caught smoking with her friends, and I never saw any of them again. I suppose I haven't seen the dean's office, so maybe those girls are pinned by pens to the wall as well. Just thinking of it now makes me laugh with deranged spite.

A beautiful thing, I think.

I look at my clock and see time has passed, too slowly, but passed. It is one o'clock now, and I will stare at my clock until it is one thirty.

But while I stare, I will think. I will remember good memories here at my school, if I can come up with any. I think only of my sister, a believer of the book through and through, and feel bad for her. I am leaving her here, but I am leaving her with questions and that is good enough.

It is one fifteen now and I remember the bad, of my knuckles that are ruler-scarred, and I touch my cheek at one the memories of spit splattering there as I am screamed at by my teachers.

"Follow the Book!" my biology teacher bellowed.

"Follow the Manual!" my math teacher hissed.

"Follow the Book!' my own sister told me.

I have never cried for the Book, but I nearly did that time.

It is one thirty now, and I have no time to question myself. I jump up from my bed and put on my slippers and clench the screwdriver and lighter in my hand. I leave my dormitory for the last time.

I pad down the hall, my slippers too noisy for my taste, but I doubt many will hear me. The cold metal of the lighter and screwdriver bites into my palm like a playful new puppy prancing about with its new and good owner.

I like that deep pain that proves to me that at least this is quite real. I know I will cherish the sweet sting that is soon to come.

The light blinking in the corner is irritating to my dark-adjusted eyes, but I take satisfaction in knowing they'll watch this.

I glance at my watch as I approach the glass case and see it is 1:37 now. I smile as I stare down at the Book, but it falters when I hear footsteps approaching behind me.

I must act quickly now.

I smash the glass just then with the handle of the screwdriver and that sound it makes is like a harp, sweet music that heals the soul. My soul, at least. Imagine cups made of crystal that strike one another in a toast, full of glorious red wine that smells too sweet.

Laughing, I tear the Book from its stand and hold it in my bare hands. I am touching the precious, oh so important Book right now. My hands caress the leather and it is just as sickening and just as powerful as I imagined. It hurts me a little bit as I raise the lighter, but it may just be the small and bleeding scratches on my arm from the shattered glass.

I flick open the top and light the flame. I bring it to



the corner, then stop.

I want to see it. I want to open the cruel thing. The cruel, horrible thing and I want to watch the inked words burn. So despite the screams around me, despite the clawing pain in my hand and forearm, despite the gnawing, unright feeling, I unlatch the leather buckle and I flip it open.

It is empty. It is wordless. It is baseless.

And as the world screams at me, I burn it anyway.

Course Syllabus

Will Fennell

Syllabus

Course Description

Advanced Placement Literature and Composition is an intensive introduction to reading, discussing, and writing about literature. This is a rigorous course requiring students to think analytically while expressing ideas clearly. The material presented should challenge students to reach for a higher level of thinking and give their thoughts clear and compelling expression. Our goal is to equip you for the arduous and deeply satisfying task of analyzing literary texts and relating them to our world while preparing you for the Advanced Placement Exam.

Course Expectations

This class is a collaborative effort. Its success–and yours–depends on each of us being considerate and attentive to the material we will be studying, to homework, and to one another's opinions and writings. I expect you to come to class prepared to discuss that day's assigned work. In order to do that, you must read and annotate all assignments. Please commit to reading each text in its entirety.

You will be asked to share your insights with the class in formal and informal discussions, writings, and presentations. If you cannot meet the obligation of critically reading and annotating the assigned texts, you will be asked to accept the consequences of your choices, which will affect your grade in this course. What distinguishes an AP student from a non-AP student is the ability to prioritize assignments, read actively, manage time wisely, consistently put forth one's best effort, and meet deadlines *without complaint*.

Course Objectives

To determine what makes a novel, play, or epic poem a work of "literary merit."
To read and analyze imaginative literature.
To understand the way a writer uses language to provide meaning and pleasure.
To consider a work's structure, style, and themes as well as its use of figurative language, imagery, symbolism, and tone.
To study representative works from various genres and periods (from the fifth century BCE to the twenty-first century) and to know a few works extremely well.



Noah Strottman

To consider the social and historical values a work reflects and embodies.
To write expository, analytical, and argumentative essays focused on the analysis of literature. To write creatively to sharpen our understanding of writers' work and deepen our appreciation of literary artistry.
To understand a work's complexity, to absorb richness and meaning, to analyze how meaning is embodied in literary form, and to become aware–through speaking, listening, reading, and writing–of the power of language.

Winner of the Richard Rouse Expository Writing Prize

"Love is a Force of Nature": Redefining Masculinity through the Natural World in *Sir Gawain* and *Brokeback Mountain*

Sabien Reck

In the epic *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*), Sir Gawain journeys from the confines of Camelot's court "Into a dense forest wondrously wild" (Winny 741), seeking a Green Knight in the name of a noble, knightly challenge. Over 600 years later, Jack and Ennis work on the rugged, majestic peaks of Brokeback Mountain, cowboys seeking compensation for a traditional life in the 20th-century American West (Lee 0:09:52-0:12:20). Each work's fascination with definitions of masculinity in the natural world ties them together across 600 years. Each work, addressing a traditional masculine population of knights and cowboys, seeks to dissect the difficult nuances of manhood in relation to the confines of tradition, juxtaposed with the unfettered "Green World." Stepping beyond the confines of heteronormative attraction through the "Green World," both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Brokeback Mountain* explore nontraditional attraction through their exploration of rest, submission, and, ultimately, intimacy.

James Winny and Marie Borroff's translations of *SGGK*, paired with Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, use the "Green World" as a foil for oppressive society, celebrating an analysis of nature's intersections with manhood. Nature, presented in the form of the mystical, freew, or untamed, is a tool utilized in both *SGGK* and *Brokeback Mountain* to prompt discussion and reevaluation regard-ing traditional expressions of masculinity. An unchallengeable subject within the constraints of the 14th-century knightdom and 1960s American cowboy culture, masculinity is a topic of intense evaluation in the natural world. In *SGGK*, nature, presented by the Green Knight, Bertilak's Castle, and the general "Green World," is "wondrous" (Borroff 764), "bright" (Borroff 765), and "splendid" (Winny 767). Similarly, the natural world of Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* is panoramic, boundless, and freeing (1:10:00-1:10:50). Across centuries, nature serves a common purpose in both works: acting as a space for masculine freedom, challenge, and expression.

Stepping beyond the confines of heteronormative attraction through the "Green World," both *SGGK* and *Brokeback Mountain* explore untraditional attraction outside of society. The concept of heteronormative attraction was consistently reinforced by the acceptance of traditional gender expressions of masculinity dating back to the knightdom. Both *SGGK* and *Brokeback Mountain*, while widely accessible, are works pointedly directed at a specific audience: men. Across an epic poem about knights, for knights, and a Western work about cowboys, for cowboys, the choice to focus on male aesthetic qualities and attraction is deliberate. The tension is in the author-audience relationship. First seen in *SGGK* upon the Green Knight's entrance to the Court, Sir Gawain's initial, unspoken impression of nature's knight fits to feed his aesthetic appetite: "Most attractive was this man attired in green" (Winny 180). Upon first glance, Sir Gawain's initial impressions of this man are aesthetically pleasurable, an untraditional first impression by a knight. As their primal meeting commences, Sir Gawain analyzes the Green Knight's figure, evocatively describing his rugged masculinity "From broad neck to buttocks so bulky and thick, /

And his loins and his legs so long and so great" (Borroff 138-39). Pages later, Borroff breaks down this mystical man's physique, starting with, "And clad his calves about with comely greaves," (575) and building to, "His thick-thewed thighs, with thongs bound fast" (579). Sensual in its description, Borroff draws upon the musculature, strength, and erotic physicality embodied by the Green Knight's figure, characteristically masculine values. The rhetoric Borroff uses to describe this lusty, rugged "giant" (140) from the perspective of Sir Gawain is deliberate, intentional, and demands attention and reanalysis of traditional evaluations of masculine attraction and homoeroticism presented by nature, in this form, the Green Knight. Centuries later, in Lee's work *Brokeback Mountain*, nature presents a space for similar reflection. Upon these peaks, pining, stolen stares of attraction are dictated by masculine values. Whether it be Ennis marveling at Jack's superb command of taming a horse (0:13:04-21) or the countless longing looks Jack pays Ennis during drunken conversation (0:25:20-40), the traditional values of masculine attraction are challenged by intimate intrigue. Where brotherly revelry is expected in moments of homosociality, instead, homoerotic attraction fuels questioning surrounding masculine norms in nature. The spaces of cowboy culture in *Brokeback Mountain* and knightdom in *SGGK* present ample opportunity for untraditional temptation in nature's seclusion, where masculine attributes or characteristics are viewed erotically rather than platonically.

The stark contrast nature provides to the masculine dominance idolized in *SGGK*'s Arthurian Court and *Brokeback Mountain*'s Signal, Wyoming, demands an analysis of uncharacteristic masculine submission. Across both the knightdom and American cowboy culture, submission is uncharacteristic for members of either population; unyielding dominance and independence are the standards in each social group. However, in *SGGK*, nature acts as a setting where Sir Gawain pushes back against the

masculine expectation that knights should be dominant in their pursuits: "But the knight begged leave to depart the next day, / For it was near time for the appointment that he had to keep. / The lord held him back, begging him to remain" (Winny 1670-72). Moments after Bertilak impels Sir Gawain to stay another night in his castle, the noble knight yields, submitting to stay another night in the castle. Not only is this a moment of capitulation worthy of attention, but this subject of submission itself demands analysis. Surrounded by seemingly seductive women in a comfortable castle, it would be expected for Sir Gawain to readily agree, delaying his journey another day, yet only when confronted by Bertilak's wishes does the knight yield. Later in the poem, Sir Gawain again awaits action being dealt to him by the Green Knight, this time in the form of a blow. Where it would be expected for a dominant knight such as Gawain to push back and seek action, defending himself from the Green Knight's incoming attack: "Gawain awaits it submissively, not moving a limb" (Winny 2292). Where it would be standard for Gawain to resist, instead, he submits to Bertilak/the Green Knight. Nature serves as a setting where Gawain can explore the extent to which submission intersects masculinity beyond the confines of traditional social expectations. Mirrored in Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, submission is a concept explored by Jack and Ennis on the peaks of Brokeback. Where Gawain would submit and listen to the wishes of Betilak, Ennis similarly submits to Jack, allowing him to clean his injuries following a bloody encounter with a bear (0:16:45-17:10). Where a traditional cowboy would likely be affronted by this vulnerability, a jeopardy to their masculine independence, Ennis yields to Jack, allowing him to help. In nature, both Ennis and Sir Gawain are incited to explore submission as a facet of masculinity rather than a crux to their manhood.

The confines of masculine action in both knightdom and cowboy culture are expressly challenged in the natural world of both *SGGK* and *Brokeback Mountain*, pre-

sented by the prevalence of rest. In both the knightdom of the 13th-14th centuries and the American cowboy culture that dictated Western masculinity in the 20th century, rest was often admonished as a form of vulnerability in direct contrast to masculine ideals of dominance, strength, and unwavering authority. In contrast to this, in both *SGGK* and *Brokeback Mountain*, rest and its intersections with masculine identity are explored beyond society in nature, where freedom to challenge expressed social norms paves the way for exploration. While Sir Gawain stays at Bertilak's Castle on his journey to find the Green Knight, he openly rests, taking reprieve from the knightly ideal that noble men should only seek action: "Therefore lie in your bed enjoying your ease, / And I shall hunt in the woods, and keep the compact, / Exchange winnings with you when I return here" (Winny 1676-78). In the mystical nature of Bertilak's Castle, Gawain has the liberty to explore rest and the perceived vulnerability it brings to traditional masculinity, breaking gender confines impressed upon him by the knightdom. In *SGGK*, nature galvanizes this unapologetic exploration of rest as an untraditional expression of manhood rather than a fault to be admonished. 600 years later, Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* similarly tackles the concept of masculine rest in nature. While there are countless instances of rest permitted by the mountainous peaks of Brokeback Mountain, the most compelling instance of rest explored in the natural world can be found moments before the first instance of intimacy, when Jack urges Ennis to sleep inside the tent rather than braving and bearing the extreme cold (0:26:00-27:40). In Lee's classic, nature pushes for an analysis of how rest acts as a masculine expression rather than an anti-masculine principle. Contrasting the societal impression that knights and cowboys alike needed to stay in a state of perpetual motion and activity to retain their manhood, nature's push for social reevaluation regarding rest demands attention and challenges present pressures of manhood and traditional masculinity.

Most pressingly, in *SGGK* and *Brokeback Mountain*, the freedom of nature incites untraditional expressions of masculine intimacy. From kisses to copulation, the natural world galvanizes desirous action, lust, and passion in the masculine figures that explore it. In *SGGK*, Sir Gawain's journey in nature results in multiple moments of overt sensuality through kisses shared between him and Lord Bertilak/the Green Knight: "He takes the other's strong neck in his arms, / And kisses him as pleasantly as he could devise" (Winny 1388-89). Winny's focus on masculine characteristics, such as strength, in proximity to pleasure, creates a clear homoerotic connection between masculinity and intimacy. Winny's sensual rhetoric, combined with the natural environment, demands attention. In another moment of kissing, freedom to explore masculine desire in nature becomes only more brazen as what was previously one or two kisses has now become three: "Then he embraces the lord and gives him three kisses, / With as much relish and gravity as he could contrive" (Winny 1936-37). Not only is the numeric increase in kisses a subject for speculation, but Winny's usage of words such as "relish" and "gravity" incites questions surrounding passion, pleasure, and eroticism. The natural world similarly serves as an environment for intimate challenge in Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, where the intersections between intimacy, masculinity, and nature are overt. Clear connections between the free, natural world presented in Brokeback and the intimate moments shared between Jack and Ennis offer ample opportunities for analyzing the overlap of homoerotic sexual desire and nature. Not long after the cowboys' arrival on the mountain, a first moment of intimacy arises between the pair, resulting in a direct challenge to traditional masculine affection and lust (0:28:00-29:30). Each subsequent moment of kissing (0:33:30-34:00), sensual vulnerability (1:10:00-50), or intimacy otherwise (0:34:10-34:50) is accompanied and prompted by the presence of the mountain, embodying the natural world. The expression of experimental,untra-

ditional masculine intimacy is directly tied to the freedom of the natural world, providing a space to challenge the restrictive social confines that generically define manhood, rather than the actuality behind gender expression.

SGGK and *Brokeback Mountain* are inextricably bonded through the fibrous roots of nature, masculinity, and their intersections. Across 600 years, nature has galvanized exploration, freedom, and the challenge of tradition and social constructs such as gender norms and heteronormative desire. Without due attention given to the free reevaluation nature provides, the challenging of archaic and problematic social labels would be increasingly inaccessible, and the power of individualism would be unexplored. The "Green World" in both *SGGK* and *Brokeback Mountain* illustrates the complexity of masculinity and its untraditional explorations, ultimately demonstrating that the desire to escape societal constraint is unyielding, as it allows for individual expression.

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From this Water I Used to Drink

Julia Murphy

I sometimes believe

In a current-smoothed
Pebble, shards soothed
By the rough water-fun.

Jagged, jilted,
Moved swiftly
And shaped
By the hum
Of what is given.

I am borne
Of the river.
Foam-formed,
swayed
Along shore

The reeds watch
And rustle high
In the dirt.
I climb upstream
Slowly,
Against polishing,
Dreaming of what is earned.



Alligator Mother

Amber Li

sing, mother, to us
through our
shells, tempt us
out and tuck us in
to warm, wet mouth.

kiss us, mother, more
than that, devour us,
so we may see
only through triangle windows
and oil-yellow stalactites,
a fortress only revealed
to those who most deserve it—

lunge, lunge, attack with all
your might, your swollen build, spindly nails, searing
breath
hotter than the swamp you lumbered out of,
half-melted and grinning
to some spirit out east, who placed
your teeth all wrong, dripping in tar, gritty as black sesame
shimmering in a child's smile,
knowing she ate
too much.

now, mother, crush her skull
grind it into sugar cubes sweet as
honeycomb, sweet
as sliding into cool water after baking
in your body, your goliath, steaming, clay oven
body lunging
into the deep, past the swaying grass
singing for your
victory, shrill and high
as the die rolled in heaven
that defended us,
that ended
another.

mother, mother, rolling in blood, riled and rejuvenated,
the river is starting
to bruise, mournfully washing
another pitiful creature, another impromptu
grave. mother,
mother, who cannot tell truth
from mere sunlight, vice
from vice, only answering
to those wailing cries,

may you rest
in those plum waters
once more with ease,
when another monster comes
to bash in your head.



Ethel Cain's *Preacher's Daughter* and Reaching Beyond Shock Value

Ariana Blake

I had never gotten chills from music before. Not from the sweeping orchestral music I grew up hearing on the radio, not from the slow, acoustic music I listen to now, not even from the hymns I've heard in church. That is, not until I first heard Ethel Cain's "Ptolemaea." The climax of her subversive 2022 album Preacher's Daughter, the song depicts the murder of the album's titular character at the hands of her boyfriend. It's disturbing, it's exceptionally well-produced, and neither of those things really matter. The point of the song isn't its macabre premise or the chills it gives the listener–it's the voice that it gives the voiceless victim. She's powerless first at the hands of her abusive father, and again at the death of her lover, and at the hands of the abusive boyfriends that follow him, including the one that kills and later cannibalizes her. Cain explores disturbing topics with a sense of follow-through and honesty that brings the focus of the album not to its potential shock value, but instead to its story and its protagonist's perspective.

One way that she does this is by following up the lurid imagery of "Ptolemaea" with two instrumental tracks, "August Underground" and "Televangelism." After word "stop" is sung seven times and screamed an eighth in "Ptolomea," the listener is left with the striking silence left by the death to develop a more complicated reaction than shock. "August Underground" is haunting, in keeping with the musical style of its predecessor, marked by unsettling vocalization and sonorous bass. It gives the listener a chance to truly think through the implications of the death–there is no peace in this rest, only the continuation of her impotence. It ends with a drum kick like a bolt of thunder and twenty seconds of silence before "Televangelism" takes a different tone. The piano sounds are reminiscent of something one might hear in a local church–the occasionally off-tempo notes and slightly exaggerated pauses give it an amateur quality, though the sense of ascension and hope remain strong. In this way, "Televangelism" serves as a metaphor for another side to the death; while it happened in the most tragic way possible, her suffering is put to an end. Instead of capitalizing on the shock value of "Ptolemaea" to keep listeners engaged, Cain implores them to think about the story beyond their initial reaction through the break created by the instrumental tracks "August Underground" and "Televangelism" before the final post-mortem lyrical tracks "Sun Bleached Flies" and "Strangers."

In addition to her depth, Cain's honesty elevates the album by keeping the songs within the perspective of their protagonist. "Strangers," the final track on the album in
which the preacher's daughter reflects on her relationship with the man who killed her, demonstrates the insistence on keeping things within her point of view. Wordplay about cannibalism like "you devour like smoked bovine hide/how funny, I never considered myself tough" and "you look so handsome with me all over your mouth" feels uncanny in the context of the album. This uncan-

an atrocity, a perspective that lines up with her experiences. Violence at the hands of those who claim to love her is all she knows; she's previously been shown "love through shades of black and blue" (Cain, "Western Nights) from an ex-boyfriend and describes her relationship with her father with the metaphor of being mocked while hanging from a tree (Cain, "Family Tree (Intro)"). Instead of the reverent horror with which most would hold her demise, she views it through a lens of informal neutrality, as just something that happened to her. The song also highlights her willingness to forgive and continue to love those who wronged her, sentiments not shared by the listener. In spite of his actions, she continues to implore her murderer, "Can I be yours? / Can I be yours? / Just tell me I'm yours" (Cain, "Strangers"). While the listener regards her murderer as an outright villain, she is still in love with him and wants his approval. She also addresses her mother "I never blamed you for loving me the way you did." While her mother played a smaller part in her daughter's suffering, she still neglected to protect her from her abusive father, a failing most listeners can judge with detached disapproval. To the preacher's daughter, though, she is still her mother, the same way that her murderer is still her lover. This emotional perspective pulls focus toward the protagonist herself and away from the traumatic events she has endured. By centering the victim's point of view, Cain takes the album beyond shock horror into profound storytelling.

Preacher's Daughter isn't an album about cannibalism, love, murder, religious trauma, abuse, or exploitation. As the name would suggest, it's about a preacher's daughter. By humanizing her protagonist, Cain is able to utilize dark themes for something other than shock value. She paints the picture of a girl who is "too young to know that some types of love can be bad" (Cain, "Hard Times") and gives her a voice. In a world where men like her killer have their stories told while their victims' stories are neglected, Preacher's Daughter pushes back against the status quo. The album raises a larger conversation about the potential for media in the popular genres of true and fictional crime that focuses on empowering victims instead of garnering shock value. Through an honest, thorough treatment of their stories, victims can be the centers of their stories instead of those that hurt them.





My Powerful Truths

Naya Chawla

I tell sorrowful truths
That listen to the cries
Of those young and old

The tale of others
The present in our lives
This is all I can see

I tell the days and times
And let out a deep sigh
Yet no matter the crime
You still believe I tell lies

You take out a knife
I'm fighting for my life
You take out your words
And somehow I'm dying on the floor

The days go by
The nights grow longer
I say who dies
And who goes with honor

I try to scream
You only hear a whisper
You try to cut me open
I only show a blister

Chaos and arguments
Believing life is all an act
But I do not distribute gossip
I merely spread facts

Clutching your mask and cape
Treating me as a charity case
But I have yet to escape
Due to your greatest superpower

The good, the bad, the ugly
I promised to stay
Your control over me
Has caused my flight a delay

I hold the mirror
To what you despise
You see yourself clearly
The devil in disguise

You're living in a world of lies
And you will come crawling when it burns
But I won't listen to your cries
And you will finally learn

No one knows
The value of truth
when it is truly seen
The truth has faded your power
And I can finally leave

Ghosts in the House

Evie Stover
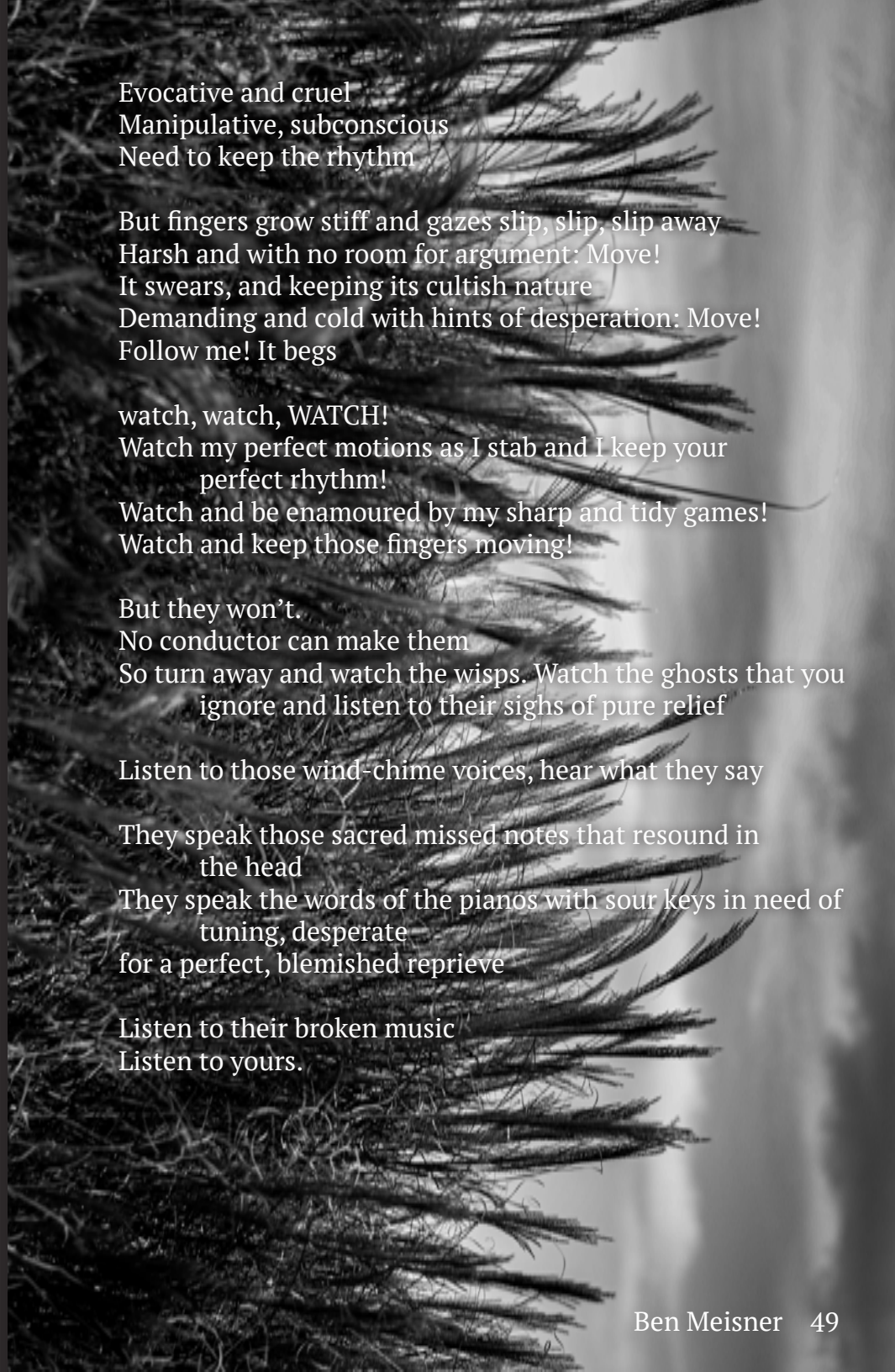
Ghosts in the house are no cause for concern
Simply wisps, missed notes on the piano as little fingers dance across
With a surety that only the stupid few can muster nowadays

Refuse to cross the floor-boards
Creaking things that creak no more
Cob webs that built up
Spun around, caught in the bristles of a reaching brush
Torn viciously from their sacred spot that is so callously ignored

A grimy hand print on a window
Smeared by a soft and unforgiving cloth
Their imperfect pencil marks erased, bubblegum crumbs swept to the floor
A slip of the pen scratched out
Distressed paint splatters brutally scraped from its canvas
by
A relentless grip and stinging metal

A pain in the head and heart alike,
Why, though?
It shouldn't be.
Tear away your gaze and look at the sheet music,
A disconcerting shift into a minor key
That the unprepared musician is wary to make but–
The baton is in the air

Keeping sure tempo and stabbing, agitated
In time
A mesmerizing twitch that urges play



Evocative and cruel
Manipulative, subconscious
Need to keep the rhythm

But fingers grow stiff and gazes slip, slip, slip away
Harsh and with no room for argument: Move!
It swears, and keeping its cultish nature
Demanding and cold with hints of desperation: Move!
Follow me! It begs

watch, watch, WATCH!
Watch my perfect motions as I stab and I keep your
perfect rhythm!
Watch and be enamoured by my sharp and tidy games!
Watch and keep those fingers moving!

But they won't.
No conductor can make them
So turn away and watch the wisps. Watch the ghosts that you
ignore and listen to their sighs of pure relief

Listen to those wind-chime voices, hear what they say

They speak those sacred missed notes that resound in
the head
They speak the words of the pianos with sour keys in need of
tuning, desperate
for a perfect, blemished reprieve

Listen to their broken music
Listen to yours.

My Ultimate Desire

Naya Chawla

A dull planet once filled with frostiness
Continuously spun, never changing
Forcing me endure its torture
And wish for the end of its turning

However, a single glance allowed me to elude the
inevitable
And change the unjust cards I had been dealt with

When I first caught a glimpse of them
Like an eager moth to an irresistible flame
I was instantly drawn to their obscure normalities

I gaze at their effortless nature
Their laughs, filled with artificial sincerity
Their hearts, filled with everlasting deceit

The authenticity of their enjoyment was irrelevant
As I felt sweat swiftly trickle down my palms
I saw a version of myself, of life
That seemed unattainable, a mere dream

I dash into their vibrant lives, glowing with ecstasy
And enjoyed what seemed real, what seemed
straightforward
But secretly contained depth that to scour would promise
exhaustion

I tasted a small sip of a drink they know of as water,
This planet, unheard of to me, but essential to them
allowed me to experience comfort in the distortion of
my truth

I continue, advancing from person to person
Forced to disentangle myself from the web of lies spun,
Craving this miraculous feeling to be eternal

Don't single me out, don't take this night away
I recite in my mind when stares are thrown in my
direction
As if I am child, incapable of living in their world,
Unable to locate my true home



The initial feeling of warmth and rapture shone on me
Slowly fades, as an immense amount of panic
Races down my spine, crushing my chest, and shortening
my breath

Clenching my legs, I sprint, hoping to outrun my history
But my body submits to the pain
Until all I can comprehend is suffocation

With each push forward,
The constant and indelible weight on my shoulders
Drags me down, pushing harder and harder with each
passing moment

Crawling on the floor, the shackles I wear only tighten
And with every inch of my body crying, shouting at me
A muted scream remains trapped behind my lips

I collapse, crashing to the floor
Overwhelmed with sentiments that freeze my entire body
Submerged in the relentless agony
I remember my initial desire
And my unbearable sensations swallow my thoughts

Breathing the air until all I can taste is fear
Screaming out until I can all emit is gasps
Watching the final ounce of hope drain from my heart
Feeling the dread of extinction escape my perception

I close my eyes and surrender to my body's urges
One last sigh flees my mouth before finally obtaining
peace

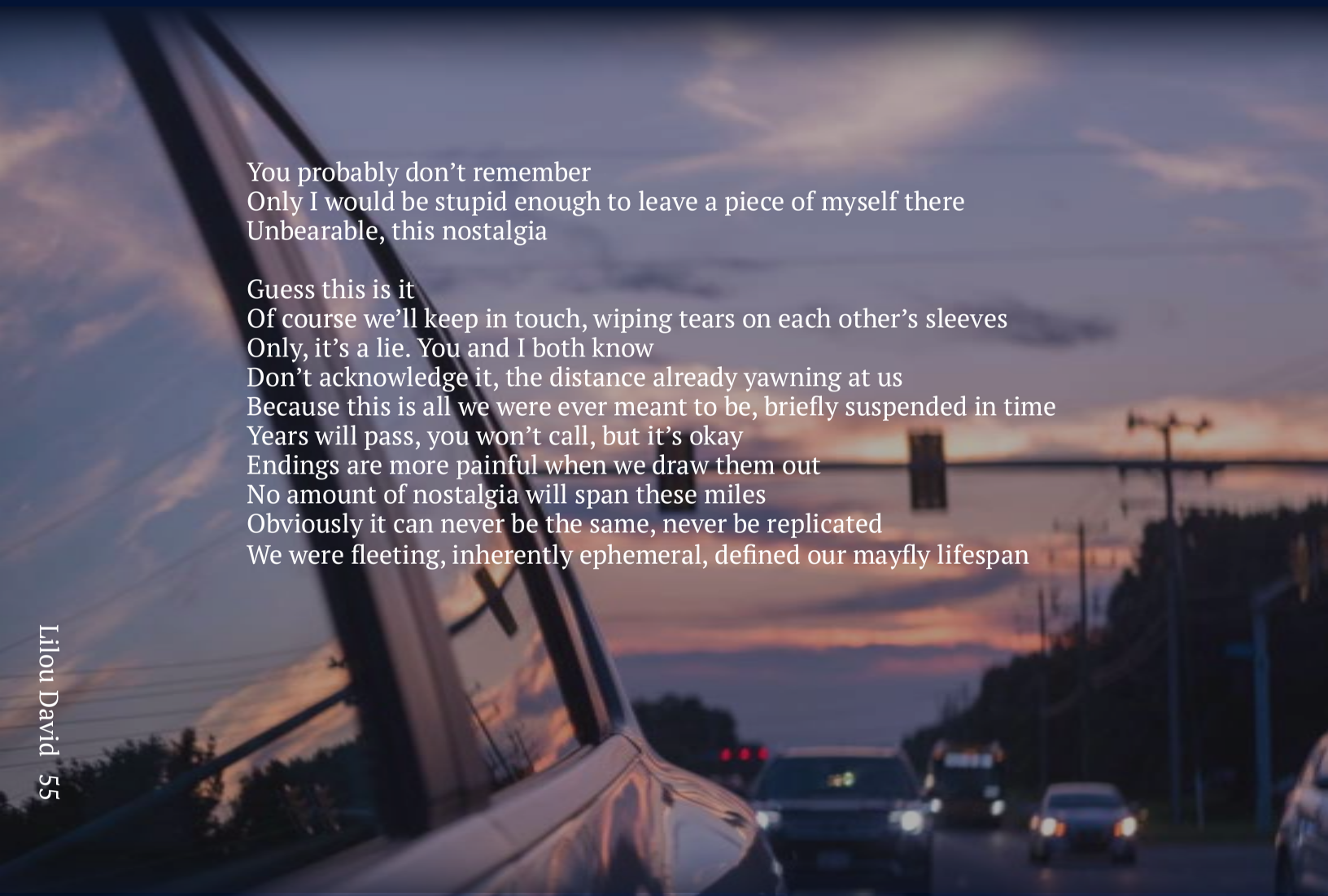
The world that once consumed me
Ripping all facets of my life, allowing me nothing but
terror
Has granted me one last desire

Goodbye Now

Brecken Paige

What if I called you?
Only, not today. I
Understand what would happen.
Likely a quick conversation. Maybe longer
Doubtful you would ignore me
Yet, I'm wondering
One year from now.
Ultimately not much time.
Phone rings.
It's me.
Calling you, again.
Kicked the can long enough, we need to talk
Under better circumstances, maybe this would be a frequent event
Please say you would.

Is it crazy?
Maybe you're thinking about it too.
I somehow doubt it.
Something in my gut says it was never like this for you.
Say you miss me, say it kills you, say I'm living in your mind



You probably don't remember
Only I would be stupid enough to leave a piece of myself there
Unbearable, this nostalgia

Guess this is it
Of course we'll keep in touch, wiping tears on each other's sleeves
Only, it's a lie. You and I both know
Don't acknowledge it, the distance already yawning at us
Because this is all we were ever meant to be, briefly suspended in time
Years will pass, you won't call, but it's okay
Endings are more painful when we draw them out
No amount of nostalgia will span these miles
Obviously it can never be the same, never be replicated
We were fleeting, inherently ephemeral, defined our mayfly lifespan

Fluency Was Never Meant for Me

Siena Assaly

I watch you every day as if you were a language I am trying to learn without a teacher
The curve of your smile is a word I repeat silently, the way your hair moves is a sentence I cannot translate.
I memorize the sounds of you, the tilt of your head, the rhythm of your steps, laughter that slips past my reach
I hold them like sacred syllables etched into my memory, though I do not understand what they mean
I trace every line, repeat every gesture, fall in love with a language I can never speak with a voice that will never answer mine.
So I continue to study you from a distance, how your presence bends a room, how your leaving folds it flat again.

And even if fluency was never meant for me, I will go on learning in the only way I can
Through the ache of every word I will never understand, and a language that will never have a place for me,
And still I will never hear your voice addressed to me, never see your eyes choose mine.



Conversations with Faraway People

Owen Davies

What's more human
Than to connect with a person,
At least their essence and voice.

A few thousand miles away,
A couple hundred words a day,
an idol. A coworker.
A friend.

I'd sit, kicking feet and grinning.
The world outside my window
And the world at my desk,
Spotlighting my face and back.

But as the sun rose,
The truth did too,
And half of the world went dark.

Hey, come on, you couldn't have known.
And, lucky you didn't know him better.
Did you even know him at all?

Is It Snowing Where You Are?

Brecken Paige

I heard it through the static, the weatherman claims you
might be in for a storm
But I don't know if it's hit you yet, your house out on the
edge of town
I'm looking out my window, watching leaf piles start to
form
Yet all I care to know is if outside of yours, flakes are
beating down

I can't just call and ask, it's never something I would do
My number hasn't changed, though a suspicion creeps in
it would ring "unknown"
I really don't believe my name ever flits through
That shiny life you've built, my name gone from your
phone

I still think of you, though,
your presence in my life
a tangled knot
The syllables of your name
have never once been far
I still move about our world,
the question tugging on
my thoughts
Is it snowing where you are?



For You

Chloë Brafman Kittner

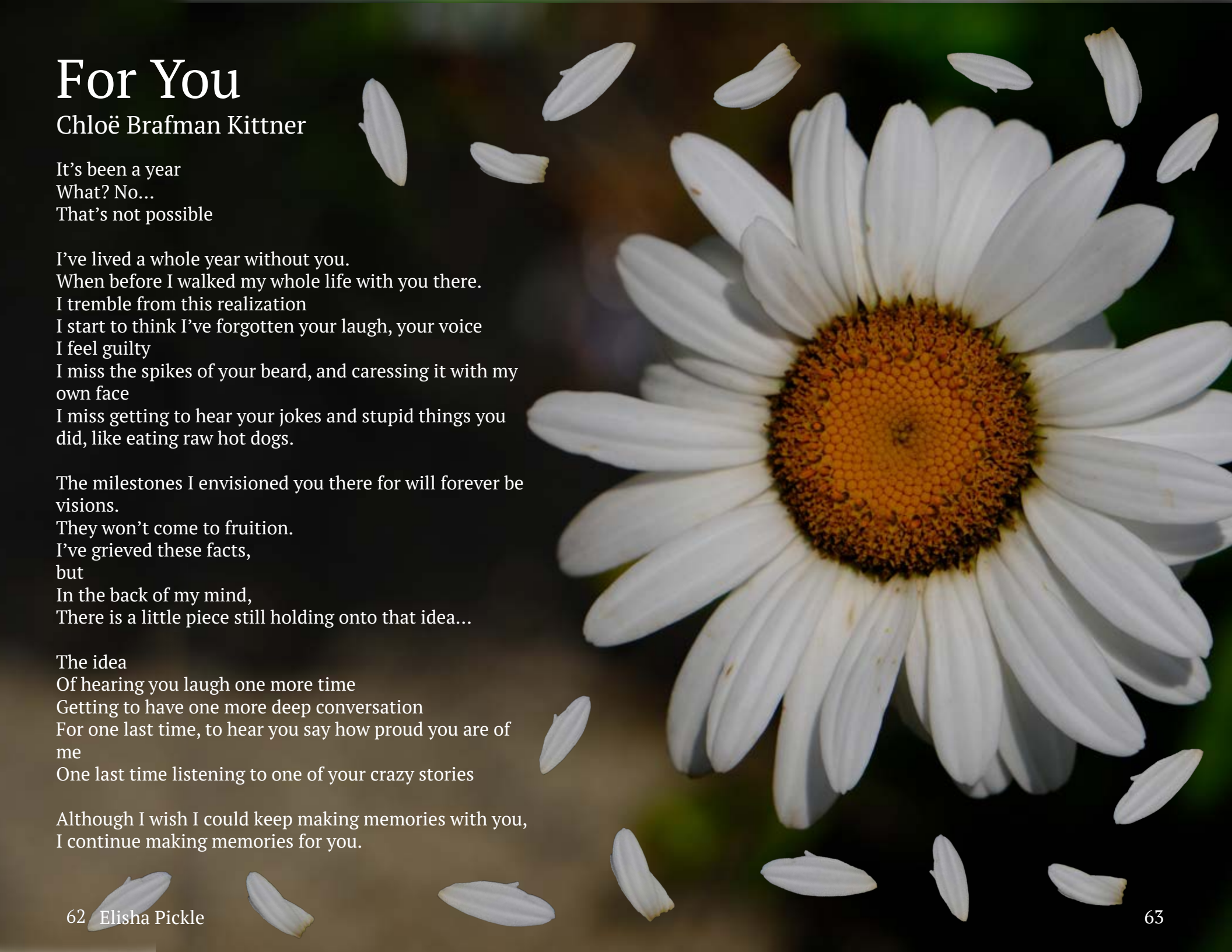
It's been a year
What? No...
That's not possible

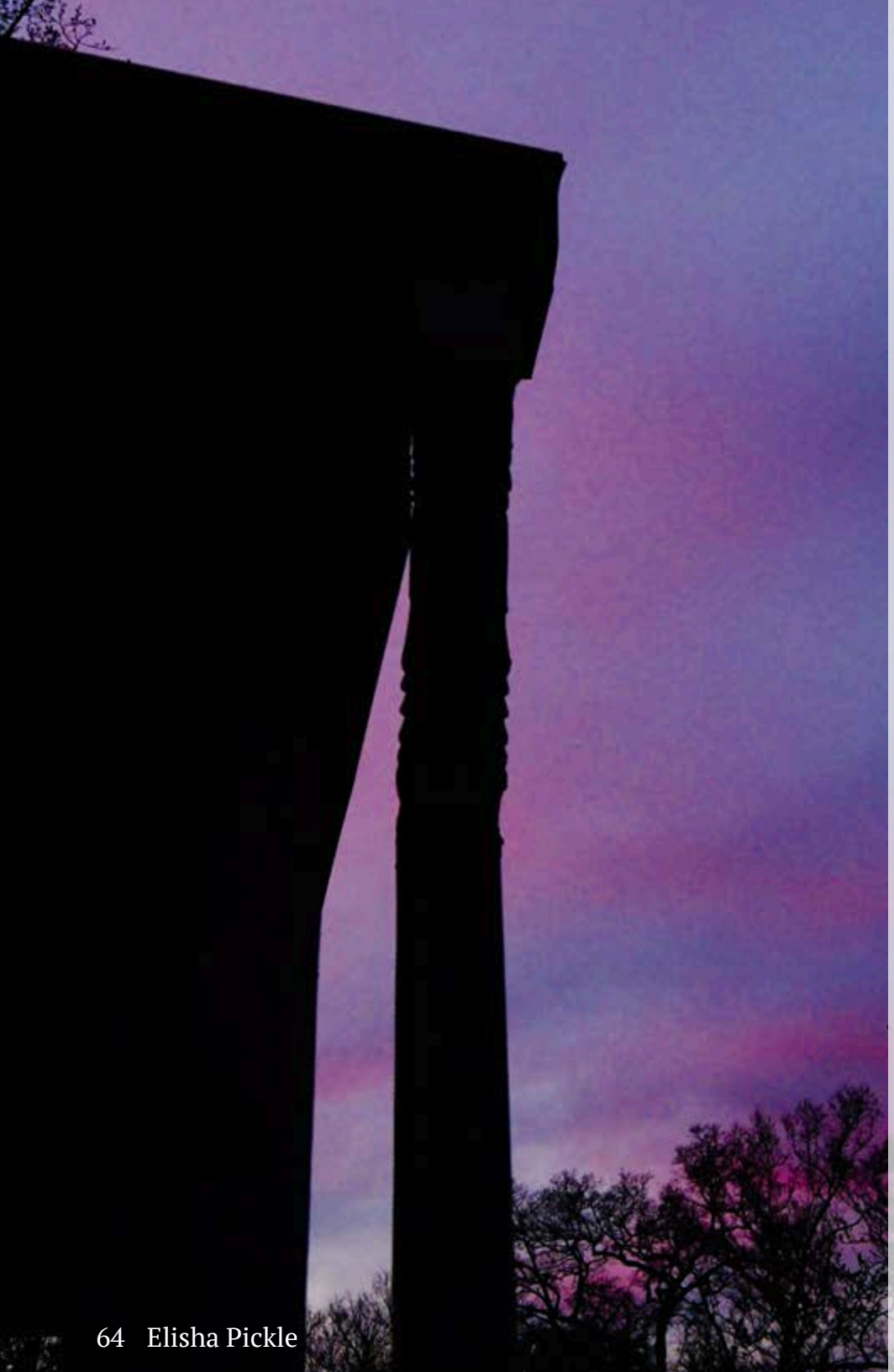
I've lived a whole year without you.
When before I walked my whole life with you there.
I tremble from this realization
I start to think I've forgotten your laugh, your voice
I feel guilty
I miss the spikes of your beard, and caressing it with my own face
I miss getting to hear your jokes and stupid things you did, like eating raw hot dogs.

The milestones I envisioned you there for will forever be visions.
They won't come to fruition.
I've grieved these facts,
but
In the back of my mind,
There is a little piece still holding onto that idea...

The idea
Of hearing you laugh one more time
Getting to have one more deep conversation
For one last time, to hear you say how proud you are of me
One last time listening to one of your crazy stories

Although I wish I could keep making memories with you,
I continue making memories for you.





Peepholes

Jennifer Kim

I watch the sun inch toward the horizon with a determined conviction, as it does every single day of its existence. It drags itself slowly into the distance, leaving a cottony spread of pinks and oranges bleeding over the night sky. The sunset eventually blows into a hollowed gray, and Marzia lets out a small noise to my right as she stretches her arms out to the stars. They have just started to emerge, peeking through the thick blanket of fading clouds. She watches them intently, sprawled behind me across the porch's weary boards. Her belly moves to the shallow pants of her breath, open to the sour breeze of the trailer park. "Mom told me stars are, like, openings into heaven. Like peepholes that dead people can watch us with."

I glance over at her sparingly. "Sorry, what? Why are we talking about this again?"

She turns her head to look back at me, her short brown hair rustling under her neck, and leans over as if she's sharing a secret. "She got it from an Eskimo proverb," she adds solemnly. I take a drag from my cigarette, feeling the smoke burn its way through the back of my throat. "Mm. Doesn't sound like her." A tingle runs down my spine. I roll the cigarette back and forth between my forefinger and thumb, watching a few blackened flakes part from the tip and fall into the grass. Marzia's eyes follow the ashes as they scatter into the wind. I'd started smoking the day of Dad's funeral. Now, I'm a nineteen-year-old with a bad habit and a sister who lives partially in her own imagination. She mumbles an incoherent response, watching me mutely tap the rest of the ashes into the glass ashtray on the stairs. It is dusted with a layer of unknown grime that is somehow a straight black color. I make a mental note to wipe it down with a kitchen towel, since Mom doesn't like me washing it out in the sink.

"You think that's true? That people are looking out for us up there through the peepholes?" she pipes up again.

The crickets sound deafeningly loud as they screech short chirps into the air. My mouth feels like a desert. I fold my tongue to the roof of my mouth and press it there, trying to revive some moisture. I'm ready to go back inside. Truth be told, I'm not believing in some peephole myth, nor do I really want to.

"Well, what do you think?"

I hear her roll to her side, the wooden planks creaking under her movement.

She pulls her large, washed-out shirt to cover her stomach and squirms into a comfortable position. "I think yes."

I turn my body to meet her gaze and bring my knees close to my stomach, taking another breath into the cigarette.

She continues in the same breath, "I think yes because I can hear them sometimes. Or see them."

"Hear who?"

"Dad. Mr. Whiskers. Finnie from the ice cream shop. The one who died from a heart attack. When it's real quiet, I can hear them or see them. Like, you know how Dad used to play the guitar for us here, and he would hum too?" Marzia tugs on a strand of hair that has escaped her ponytail. "Sometimes, at night, when you and Mom are off doing your own things, and I sit out here by myself, I can hear him humming. I can hear someone playing the guitar, and I can hear him humming along."

I feel my forehead fold into my brows incredulously, despite myself. "That's… Really?"

"Shh. Let me finish," she insists earnestly, shoving my arm. I let out a sigh that comes from the bottom of my chest. It suddenly feels too dark, and the grass stirs with a forlorn air. I'm cold.

"You know when you're sitting in the sun on a hot summer day, and you feel it scorching your body? That thought that you need to get up and go inside and sit by the fan, but your limbs are melted into the ground and your mind is spinning all dizzy? I think that's what it feels like to hear them. You can't get up and leave, it's like you're in a trance." Marzia's mouth parts and lets out a tiny exhale. Her eyes stray beyond the porch and into the clearing of trees and trailers surrounding our view. It is now almost completely dark, with the last wisps of oranges fading fast into the dusk. Her face is barely visible, but I can imagine her expression.

"You want to tell yourself you're just making it up, but you just can't get up and go. You want to tell yourself you're hearing things, but you just can't do it, because then it would never be real. It would never be real, and I want to feel it in me, the realness… all of it. I want to hear Dad sing, and I want to be able to picture him, sitting here with us, somewhere in the wind as we talk." Marzia's eyes are glazed with tears that won't fall.

I tilt my head back and let the stars twinkle over my eyelids. I let them fill my vision. I don't hear anything. "Marzia, seriously. Where is this coming from?"

"Listen, Tommy. Can't you hear him?" she whispers. Her hand finds mine, and she sits up and leans her cheek against my shoulder. I can feel her little body bending into mine as I close my eyes and our heads bump together. She closes hers, too. We sit out there for some time before I open my eyes, but Marzia's hand tightens on mine, grounding me to the creaking porch. And as I listen to the crickets, to the quiet fox making its rounds around the clearing, I can hear. As Marzia had described, my limbs seem to melt into the porch. I don't move, don't breathe, afraid to break the fragile spell. Her strange faith in those peepholes in the sky has conjured a sudden warmth in the chill of the night. The sound of plucking guitar strings is so soft that it is almost lost amid the shuffle of the wind. But I hear him, humming away.

Retreat

Cormac Kaplan

"It's nothing personal," I said. "I just, you know, the writing– "

"Don't need to explain," Jimmy said. "Twelve-month tour, sharing space with the four of us, day and night, Al banging on the skins night and day like he's on the last day of his life?"

"Or like he's an idiot."

"Or like he's an idiot. It'd drive anyone crazy, is my point. Get yourself some space."

"Just for a little bit."

"A little bit? I'm booking it straight to one of those Midwestern states. I'm not gonna see any of you for six, man, *eight* months, and I'm gonna enjoy every second. Peace and quiet, nobody using my toothbrush? Man, you might never see me again."

I laughed. "Yeah, okay, Jimmy."

"Why don't you meet a nice French girl while you're there? Then I'd never have to see *you* again."

I laughed again.

"Seriously," Jimmy said, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Retreat, man. Retreat right on to that retreat. And relax, man, just relax and write. You've earned it."

"And take me seriously when I say it's nothing personal. Nothing personal at all."

–

Let me tell you about her eyes. I saw them before I knew



her name, before I knew she was anything, and as soon as I saw them I knew she was everything. Seven months into the tour it was, seven hours into the set. It was the San Diego stop–hot day, but a great gig, passionate crowds. We were doing one of those slow acoustic numbers–"Visions of Johanna." Big eyes, big black eyes. Eyes like the sky in that you were always looking at them no matter where you looked. But not the day-sky, the night-sky. Shining in the candles people raised as they screamed my name, and I screamed another name, and it was hers.

–

I'd rented a nice big villa in the Loire Valley. The guys kept saying "Lawyer Valley," and honestly, I think they believed it really was said like that. That's not how it's said. *Vallée de la Loire.* That's how it's said.

The countryside was as pretty as they say. My driver, exactly as taciturn as I'd wanted, bore me over, past, and around lushness, sheer lushness, the vineyards and the forests and the grass that washed over the hills like an eternal wave of life. It made me feel like God in Heaven, because it made me feel like I'd be able to write again.

I hadn't brought much–three days' worth of clothes, a pen and notebook, and my '34 Gibson. I'd wanted this to be a more, you know, minimalist, trip, because that seemed more spiritual.

We arrived as the sun was setting. The villa was wonderfully French–I believe it was built in the Tudor tradition? It was a vast, handsome house whose every window shined in the cold sunlight, room after room undoubtedly holding classical secrets, and for a moment I could imagine myself in World War II, valiantly slipping valuable Resistance information under the floorboards. It even had a pool.

I thanked the driver, giving him a handshake for his trouble, and stepped out of the car, and watched it drive away, my one little suitcase in hand, watched it disappear over the horizon, and I was alone, ringed by endless green life without a soul around. What a joy it was, yes, what a joy.

–

I saw her next backstage, saw her in both senses this time. We'd finished the gig and were packing up when she flowed through–that's how she moved, *flowed*–through the door, flowed through with her eyes wide open.

"Christ," Bob said, "I thought we told security to keep an eye out for groupies."

"Useless," Al said, spitting on the ground.

"Well now, hold on," I said, looking at her, because I was always looking at her. "She's just a fan. What's your name, honey?"

–

And I could write, I could! The first thing I did, before I even put any of my things away, was get out my notebook and scrawl down a couple lines and pluck a couple strings. The germ of a little country romance was in my head, but one that could really mean something, about Nixon, or Coca-Cola.

Well, she was a girl with class

Brought up in low Savannah

And you know Daddy kept her off all that grass

'Cause she was his

–

"Johanna," she said.

"Is it really?" I asked.

She smiled with her eyes. "As far as you're concerned."



I laughed. “This our first concert you’ve been to, honey?”

“Third,” she said. “More if you ask my record player.”

“Hey,” Al said. “We going?”

“Which album would it be, well, most familiar with? *Electric Eels*?”

“*Sweet Love*.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Paulson did a terrific job cutting it.”

“I–yeah. I guess he did.”

“It just–it sounds warm. You sing so warm. That’s what I like about it.”

“I guess I do.”

“Hey!” Al said.

“I’ve gotta go,” I said. “But listen, we’re at the Hilton down the road, okay? Just down the road. Room 207. You got me, Johanna?”

“I got you.”

–

My pencil hung over the page. “Anna” and “Hannah” seemed too plain to me. And I liked the Dylan allusion. Well, it couldn’t hurt. It was just a name,

Johanna

I snapped the notebook shut. Time to put the things away, and then for a soak, I thought. And then a sleep. A nice long dreamless sleep.

–

“So when are you going to write a song about me?” she asked, eyes on mine, warm weight on mine, hands on my

beating chest.

“What would it be about?”

“Don’t ask me. I’m not the writer, you are.”

“I don’t know.”

“But I think you *do.*”

“I don’t want to say.”

“Why not?”

“It’s embarrassing,” I said shortly.

“You think squirming out of that guard’s arms wasn’t embarrassing?”

I sighed. “Well, I suppose it’d be about how warm you are on me. And your eyes.”

“That sounds nice. When are you going to write it?”

“Soon.”

Her fingers played up to my collarbone, so soft and casual that it shocked my whole body. “And when are we going to make love?”

“Soon,” I said. “I’m tired right now. Let’s get some sleep, okay, Johanna honey?”

“Just as long as you dream of me,” she said, and smiled.

–

I never used to remember my dreams.

–

She accompanied me to the tour bus the next morning. That wasn’t anything unusual until she accompanied me the next time as well.

She got along well with the guys. She was knowledgeable, which they appreciated–not as much, maybe, but they

appreciated it, even when she seemed to think about their work more than they did. She got along especially well with Al. I never liked Al.

–

High noon was as beautiful as I’d imagined, the sky pure blue that turned ethereal as the sun spread across it. Every day I’d watch it from my poolside, sipping my third cup of coffee, my notebook and guitar lying unused back in the house. The hills had a sophisticated, stark beauty – you could pick out every blade of grass and count them all up. It made it so easy to get lost just watching, just counting the blades of grass without even realizing you were doing it. I kept telling myself I’d start writing, and I just kept counting the grass. Every day I never got to work until the sun set and the grass was swallowed by the shadows.

–

“It could be all like, you know, early Beatles. ‘I Love Johanna, Parentheses, And She Loves Me, Close Parentheses.’”

I sank into the pillow, eyes closed. “I hate that stuff.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I hate that stuff. It’s not serious. Hold that up against *Sgt. Pepper?* It’s nothing. It’s–it’s carrion. If I write a song about you, it’s going to be a serious song.”

“Why?”

“It’s what you deserve.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why, why? You sound like some amateur philosopher.”

“Excuse me?”

“Look, songwriting is what I’m good at, okay? It’s the one thing I’m good at. Trust me on this. It has to be serious.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You know–serious. Serious, with similes and metaphors.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It has to be serious, Johanna. Otherwise it’s no good.”

She sighed. “You sound like my father.”

“Mine as well.”

–

Well, I loved her, that’s for sure

And she’d’ve loved me if she could

But Daddy said I couldn’t run with her no more

I stared into the hills. They offered their blank, sprawling stare back.

Said I was just no good

–

“Make love to me,” she said, head on my lap, dark hair splayed out as we laid on the bed, warm firelight around us, as rain drummed on the windows like Al, that foolish, foolish sound.

“Why’d you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like it’s an order. Like it’s something I have to do.”

“Some would say it *should* be like that. Like something you have to do, or else you’ll die.”

“Some? Like who? You?”

“Maybe, yeah.”



"Well, maybe I would if you weren't such a pain about it."

She sat up. *"Excuse* me?"

"You're always nagging me about it. It makes me want to do it less."

"I haven't nagged you about it. I've asked you about three times."

"Well, it feels like nagging. Like when you ask me to write a song about you."

Darkness burned in her eyes and I had to look at them. "I am trying to give you a chance to love me."

"Well, maybe I don't, then."

Rain drumming against the window. She looked at me for a moment.

"Oh, Johanna, I didn't mean– "

"I guess," she said, voice shaking, "I guess I was a fool for trying to save you instead of myself."

She snatched up her coat and wheeled around and stalked to the door.

"Oh, great, walk out on me," I shouted, voice cracking, "I say the wrong thing and you get huffy and walk off and now you're having your little revenge, is that it? Is that it? That makes you feel good? That you're not my muse anymore?"

"No," she said, and she looked at me, her beautiful black eyes rimmed with red, yet smiling, yet smiling. "I *am."*

–

One night I woke up from dreaming and stared up into the dark. I picked up the candle from my bedside and fumbled for the matchbox and grabbed it too hard and the matches spilled out onto the floor. I kicked off the sheets and the

cold hit me as I bent down and grabbed a match and struck it, and the candle lit, and its infinitesimal warmth grazed my bare skin, and with it a shiver shuddered through me. I needed warmth–a fire. I'd build a fire. That was downstairs.

I got out of bed, not bothering to dress myself, not having time, really. I padded across my room and opened the door and walked down the hall, the shadows massing all around me, only the fire holding them back. I walked down the stairs and stumbled and almost fell but didn't and what a rush it was, rushing like this.

I made it downstairs and made my way down another hallway and opened the living-room door with a creak, and sighted a ring of light. Someone had lit a fire.

I walked slowly and stood in front of it and faced it, its vague shapes dancing into one another, its warmth flowing over me. It flickered and crackled and among the soft sounds I heard my name whispered soft, and the shadows burned and Johanna was there before me, naked in the dead of night.

She was as beautiful as I'd imagined in my dreams, the fire roaring at her back. She said my name, said it again and again. I took one step toward her and another and another and I held out my arms and she held out hers, smiling that smile with her eyes, her big black burning eyes, and for just a moment, just one moment, I felt the warmth of her skin against mine, and then she passed through my arms like smoke and the firelight was gone and the candlelight was gone and she was gone, gone, and I was alone in a dark room in a vast house, smoke rising from my candle, and I cried, cried too late.

Feathers in the Sun

David Parkes-Johnson

I first saw it in the full warmth of the summer
a swan poised upon a shimmering lake,
her feathers pure as a full moon.

I, a crow, somber, jagged,
carving the gilded air with unsteady grace,
uncertain that my blemishes could ever conceive
        something so elegant.

Yet I remained unashamedly myself,
and astonishingly, the swan welcomed me.

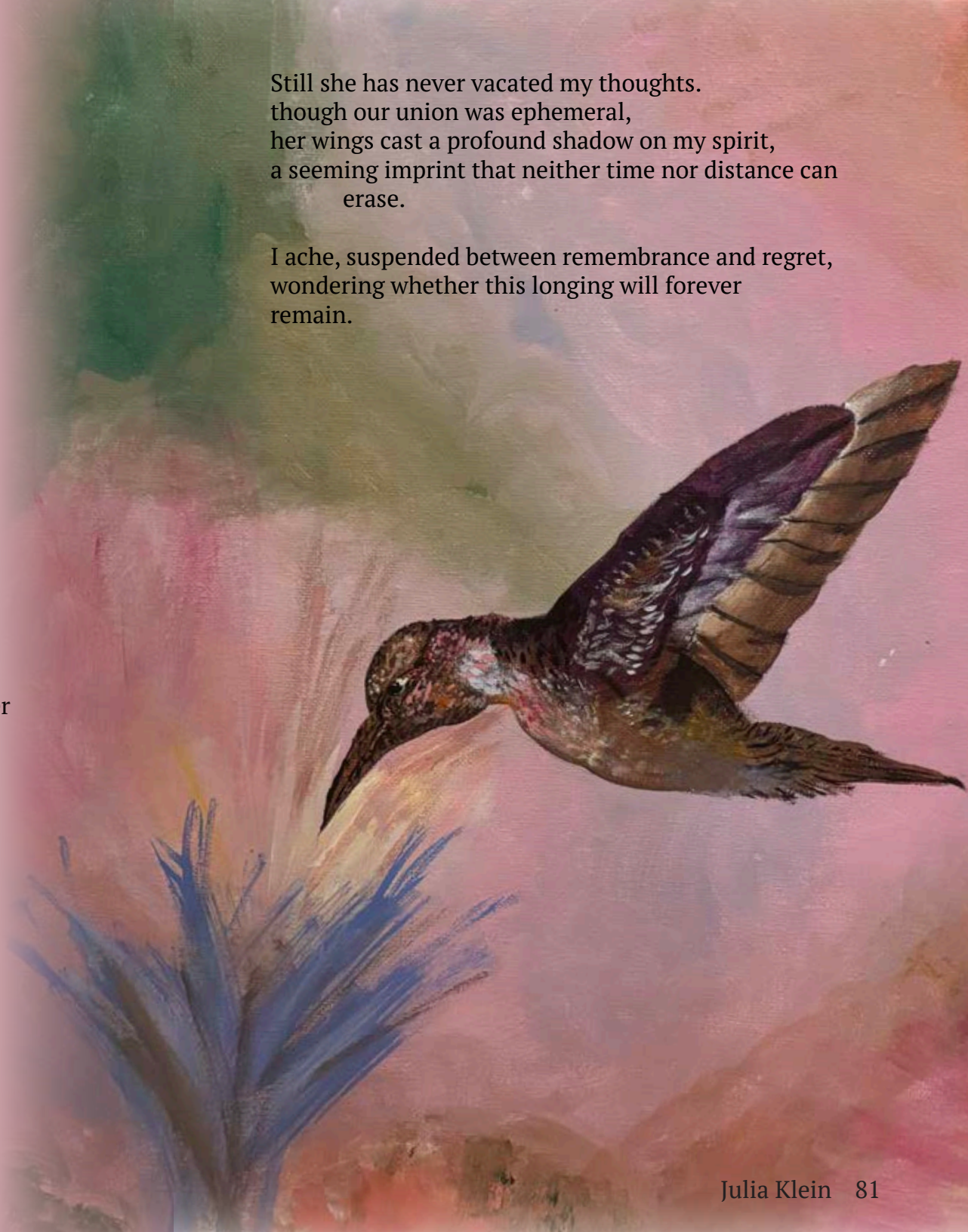
That summer seared with its presence,
each breeze murmured its name,
every moment reverberated with the soft flaps of her
        wings.
I waited, breath held, for the next time I saw her.

But time thinned as summers do.
and its nest was forests away.
visits slipped, moments vanished,
and we both knew seasons were changing.

So we both drifted up into the wind, on to different
        currents of air,
even as a fragment of me stayed behind,
imprisoned in the memory of her.

Still she has never vacated my thoughts.
though our union was ephemeral,
her wings cast a profound shadow on my spirit,
a seeming imprint that neither time nor distance can
        erase.

I ache, suspended between remembrance and regret,
wondering whether this longing will forever
remain.



Mid July

Julia Murphy

Mid July is for sorrow
Days stretched out and hollow
Made to lend and borrow
To people who don't care enough

Hot and dry and somber
Eyes cry under clear skies
Skin crawls on plush pillows
Green grass, soft sand, and I'm down again

Late July is for joy
New hearts refurbished with new hopes
Days lent and returned
Polished by the current
And washed ashore



Late July is for joy
New hearts refurbished with new hopes
Days lent and returned
Polished by the current
And washed ashore

Breezy and salty and novel
Eyes water with the wind
Skin warms under bright sun
Grass grows, sand blows, and I somehow know
More than I did on hollow days.

On Love, Death, Time, and Produce

Ariana Blake

The apple on the counter has
gone bad.
This is certain.

Its ripe red, freshly waxed,
perfect skin
Has crumpled into itself,
Now dotted with a misshapen
mole
That stinks of death.
It has aged,
And so will I.
Well,
Maybe.

Maybe, before I do, someone
will reach for me
Pluck me off of the counter top
And take a bite.
Pierce that perfect skin,
Let the juice dribble down their
chin,
Strip me to my core,
And run barefoot to the back
yard
To bury me in some sunny spot
And plant a tree,
Maybe.

I put the apple to my lips,
Trying to undo what has been
done,
But my nose tastes the rot be
fore my tongue.
I am as helpless to the time
that has passed
As the apple.
I have no choice, I must throw
it away.
This is certain.

I should've eaten it last week,
I think.
I should've eaten it last week,
I say it out loud this time.
I want to scream it from the
rooftops,
Let it ring to the orchards.
A promise, a proclamation,
An apology,
Maybe.



A ninety-eight year old man
shrugs.
He has eaten many apples in
his life,
And watched just as many
rot.
Eat it or don't.
No need to wax poetic about
fruit.
But he's cried for each apple,
And maybe that's the right
thing to do.
Maybe it's alright just to
mourn,
To try to stop the sand
slipping through your
hands,
Even though it's too late.
Maybe.





I Mistook My Body for an Orchard

Siena Assaly

I begged them to harvest my fruit before it soured,
But they let it rot in the grass
My branches filled with poison, aching for release
They didn't want my bitter fruit, only the roots that kept me standing
I mistook myself for an orchard, but they mistook me for firewood

My fruit fell heavily into their open and needy hands
Branches bent under the weight of giving
But when my fruit soured and limbs ached
There was no one there to gather what had rotted

And when the night fell I was left hollow
The dark setting in around me as I prayed for someone to step into the orchard before the rot took what was left

But the night taught me what they never did
Even hollow trees survive the winter, and even the poisoned fruit can bear sweetness again
Still there, splintered and standing, but rooted all the same
The decision was made to grow a forest from what they tried to scorch.



Orchard

Sabien Reck

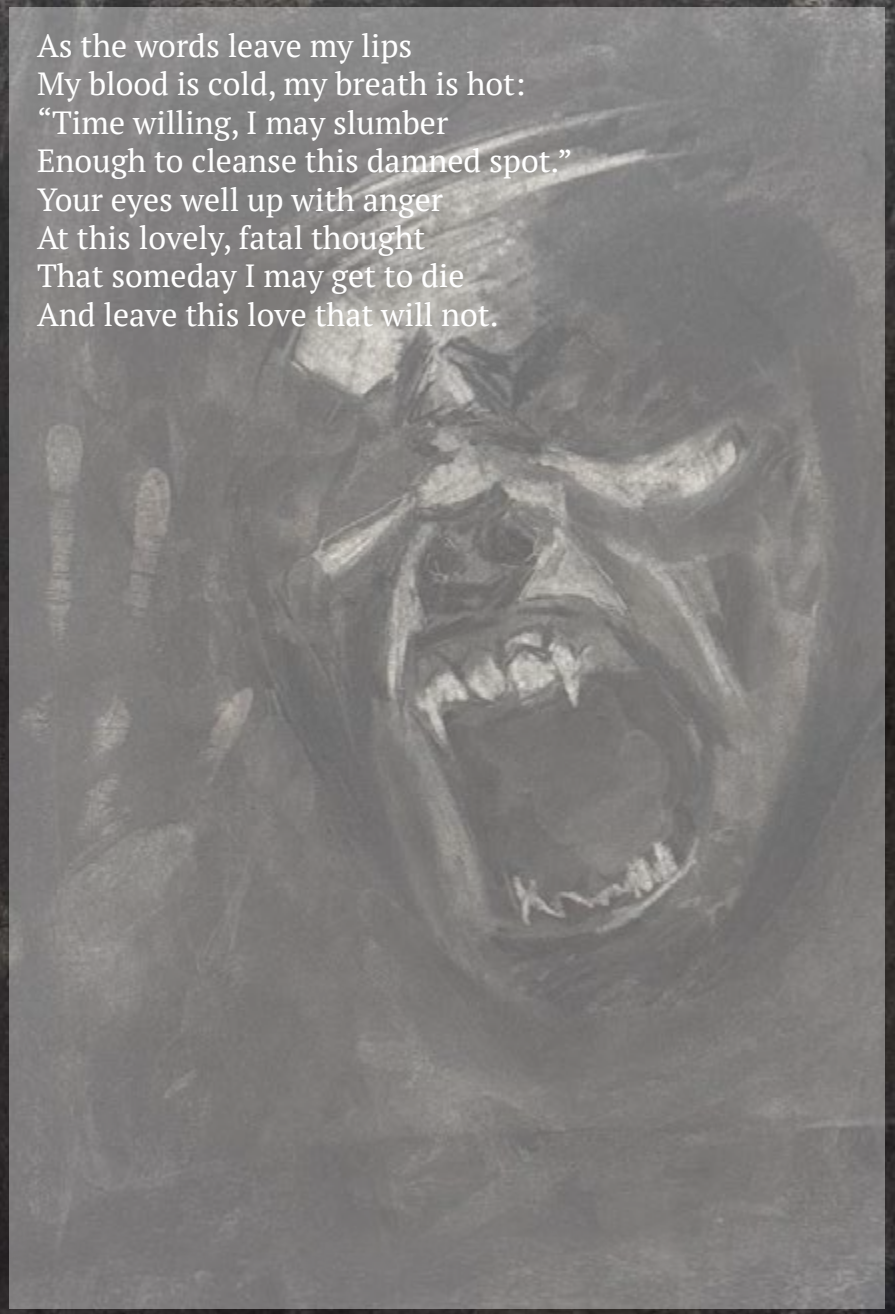
Serpent, O Serpent, why trick you me so?
Were your intentions so little, so low?
Serpent, O Serpent, are you not riddled with guilt?
That you have taken unrequited, destroyed
all I've built?
Serpent, O Serpent, why do you trespass so?
Is it because you are malicious or because I
can't let go?
Serpent, O Serpent, why do you feign to love me true?
Is it to trap me, ensnare me, deprive me of
view?
Serpent, O Serpent, do you hate me this much?
To strip me of respect, leaving you as my
crutch?
Serpent, O Serpent, are you really the one to blame?
Or is it I who lets you play such a cyclical,
little game?
Serpent, O Serpent, I must forgive you, 'tis so,
But I will not, I shall not, how I will, I'll
never know.

Laura's Soliloquy

Ariana Blake

"You will think me cruel, very selfish, but love is always selfish; the more ardent the more selfish. How jealous I am you cannot know. You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me, and still come with me, and hating me through death and after."
–Sheridan Le Fanu, "Carmilla"

My love for you is endless,
My sufferance is not.
You squeeze my hand tighter
And this thing is begot —
A child of violent sweetness,
Our lifeblood reeks of rot.
The sanguine summertime's decayed.
The flies have all been caught.
We're left to drone alone
In the pallid time we bought,
In the safety and the danger of
The gates that we have locked.
We draw close and closer still
To the grounds where we have fought,
But our battles fall like pebbles
Against the iron lies we've wrought;
Eternal entities wound
To form this strangle knot.
Still I stand, start to stutter
Something vague and fraught;



As the words leave my lips
My blood is cold, my breath is hot:
"Time willing, I may slumber
Enough to cleanse this damned spot."
Your eyes well up with anger
At this lovely, fatal thought
That someday I may get to die
And leave this love that will not.

When?

Lauren Bui

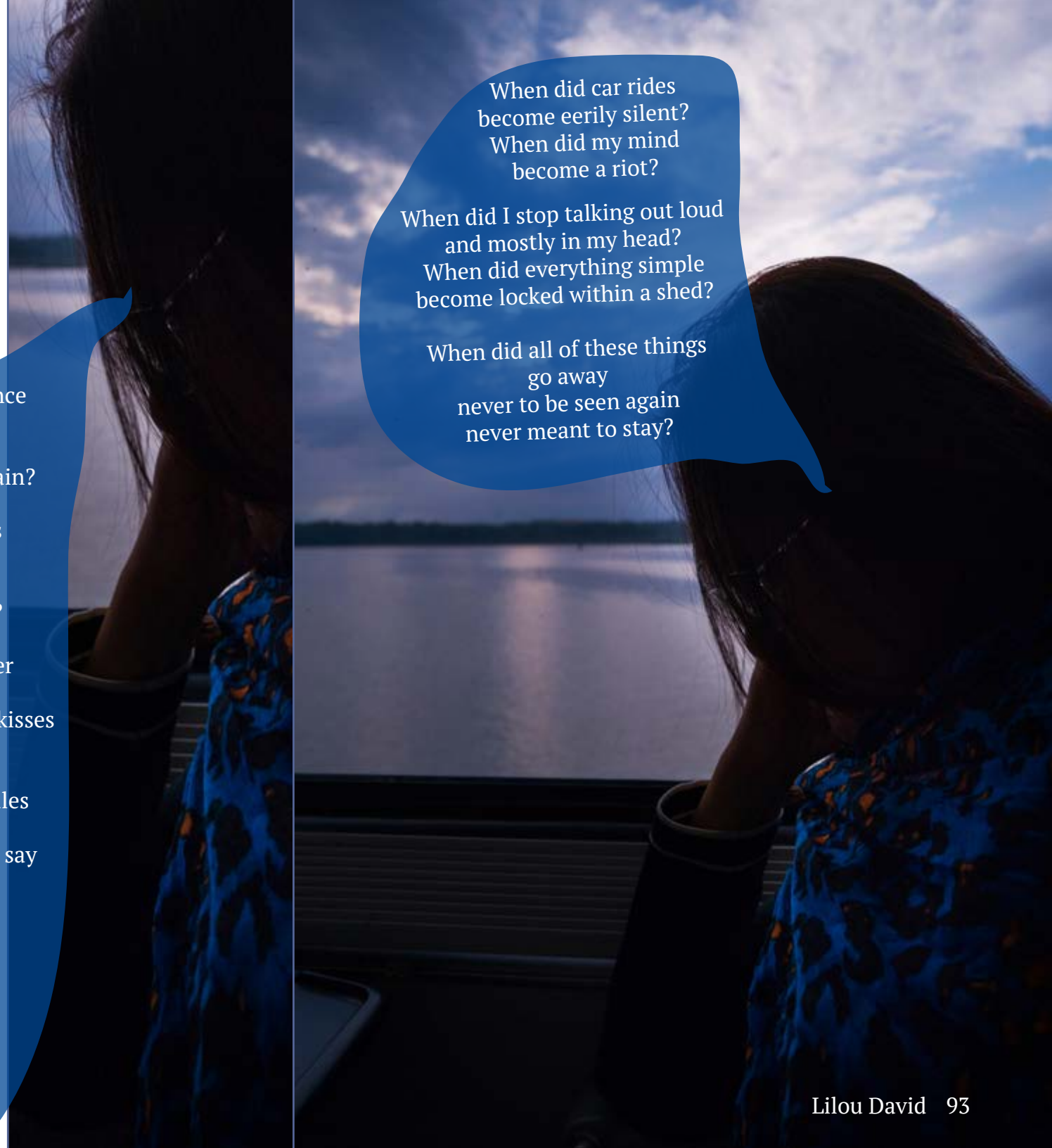
When did my own public presence
start to feel like a burden?
When did all my joy
become so temporary, so uncertain?

When did strangers' opinions
become the death of me?
When did my idea of love
become so fragile yet so free?

When did I long to look prettier
than I already am?
When did I stop giving goodnight kisses
and playing in the sand?

When did princesses and fairytales
slowly slip away?
When did every word I longed to say
disappear without a trace?

When did I stop looking
people in the eye
too afraid of judgement
too afraid to cry?



When did car rides
become eerily silent?
When did my mind
become a riot?

When did I stop talking out loud
and mostly in my head?
When did everything simple
become locked within a shed?

When did all of these things
go away
never to be seen again
never meant to stay?

The Baby Face Filter

Grace Dean

Chubby cheeks. Smooth skin. Enlarged eyes. An image that is playful, youthful, but the only thing it is full of is unreality. The Baby Face Filter is overrated. It is an illusion, and so are the apps it resides in. Social media photos are typically posted because the user is satisfied with their appearance in them. These apps provide the basis of our beauty standards, yet are unrealistic. Filters have become a necessity because they are a quick, digital "fix" for the dissatisfaction bred by the comparison cycle. When we, the younger kids growing up in the digital age, aren't happy with the way we look in our photos because, comparatively, we aren't meeting the beauty standard presented on social media, our fingers flip to the nearest filter to mask our imperfections.

The constant glances we, students, take–in our laptop Photo Booth in class, or through the quick glance in the Snapchat frame while passing between our periods—all culminate in the more frequent usage of filters. In "Social Media Filters Mess with Our Perceptions so Much, There's Now a Name for It," Dr. Patrick Byrne, a plastic surgeon at Johns Hopkins University, explains how we have taken a societal shift towards viewing ourselves more, causing Snapchat dysmorphia.

This condition is created due to the dozens of times you see your face a day, which, in turn, allows for many opportunities to obsess over little imperfections that other people may not even notice. We look at ourselves constantly, and constantly we find new flaws. Byrne continues explaining that when his patients come to discuss what they want to fix, they can't pinpoint it when they look at their reflection, but when they pull up a picture, they can identify it rapidly. Byrne further states, "They're bothered by their pictures but not by their reflections." Since children aren't at the point to make a permanent cosmetic change, they're reaching for the filters they do have access to. I reach for the Baby Face Filter.

I got my first phone at nine and immediately downloaded Instagram. I scroll back to those archived posts today, and I'm embarrassed, but I also see the innocence: no filters, no editing, no perfect poses. Now my usage is defined by self-scrutiny. No makeup on: Baby Face Filter. About to go to bed: Baby Face Filter! Just woke up: Baby Face Filter. My mascara is normally smudged under my eyes, my sweatpants are rolled up like pantaloons, and my hair looks like I just walked out of a wind tunnel. This is when my finger reaches to tap the Baby Face Filter. In these frequent moments, I have this desire to appeal to the people I Snap, to prove to them that I meet the standard. The filter is my crutch–not because it makes me look flawless, but because it hides what social media has convinced me isn't. But in all honesty, the babies that surround me are so much cuter than the way that filter actually makes me look.

The closest thing to a baby in my life is my little cousin. Emme has always been a baby to me, yet she is a young girl, and a part of the generation that was impacted

by the increasing influence of social media on kids. Every time I see Emme, my focus dials in, and I admire her innocence, her smooth skin, and her pure smile. As my focus zooms back out, the purity is clogged by her makeup and the social media-influenced outfit she has put together. Emme is on her phone, specifically on Snapchat, almost every time I see her, using the camera to touch up her lip gloss or stare at herself. When I'm not with her, I see her active on Snapchat, posting numerous photos on her stories. If they didn't have the Baby Face Filter, I would appreciate them, but they do. The digital Emme, filtered and posed, is no longer the real Emme, all natural.

On the surface, the filter alters how I look, but more deeply, it is a metaphor for the loss of childhood innocence caused by social media. Ironically, the Baby Face Filter pretends to capture a time, a youthful era of "not caring what you look like," yet the very act of using it is the ultimate proof that we now care too much about what others think. The younger generation is losing a childhood that should be characterized by embracing imperfection, shifting instead toward one defined by comparison and the desire to reach perfection. In an article by Simon Kuper from the Financial Times, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, author of The Anxious Generation, argues that the transformation into a phone-dependent society, with its usage of filters and social media, has caused the loss of childhood, noting how "no other technology swallowed up so much of childhood." The fact that the filter that makes us look like a baby is increasingly being used by children who are nearly babies demonstrates the ironic loss of childhood this filter symbolizes. The filter is a failed attempt to recapture the innocence that social media has destroyed. Childhood is now replaced by filters, followers, and fabricated perfection.

I challenge you today: Delete the filters. Put down your phone. Look in the mirror–at your real reflection–and embrace the perfectly imperfect you. Do it for yourself and do it for the younger generation, so that they can grow up celebrating their imperfections. I will do it for Emme.

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Spring Morning Captured

Jennifer Kim

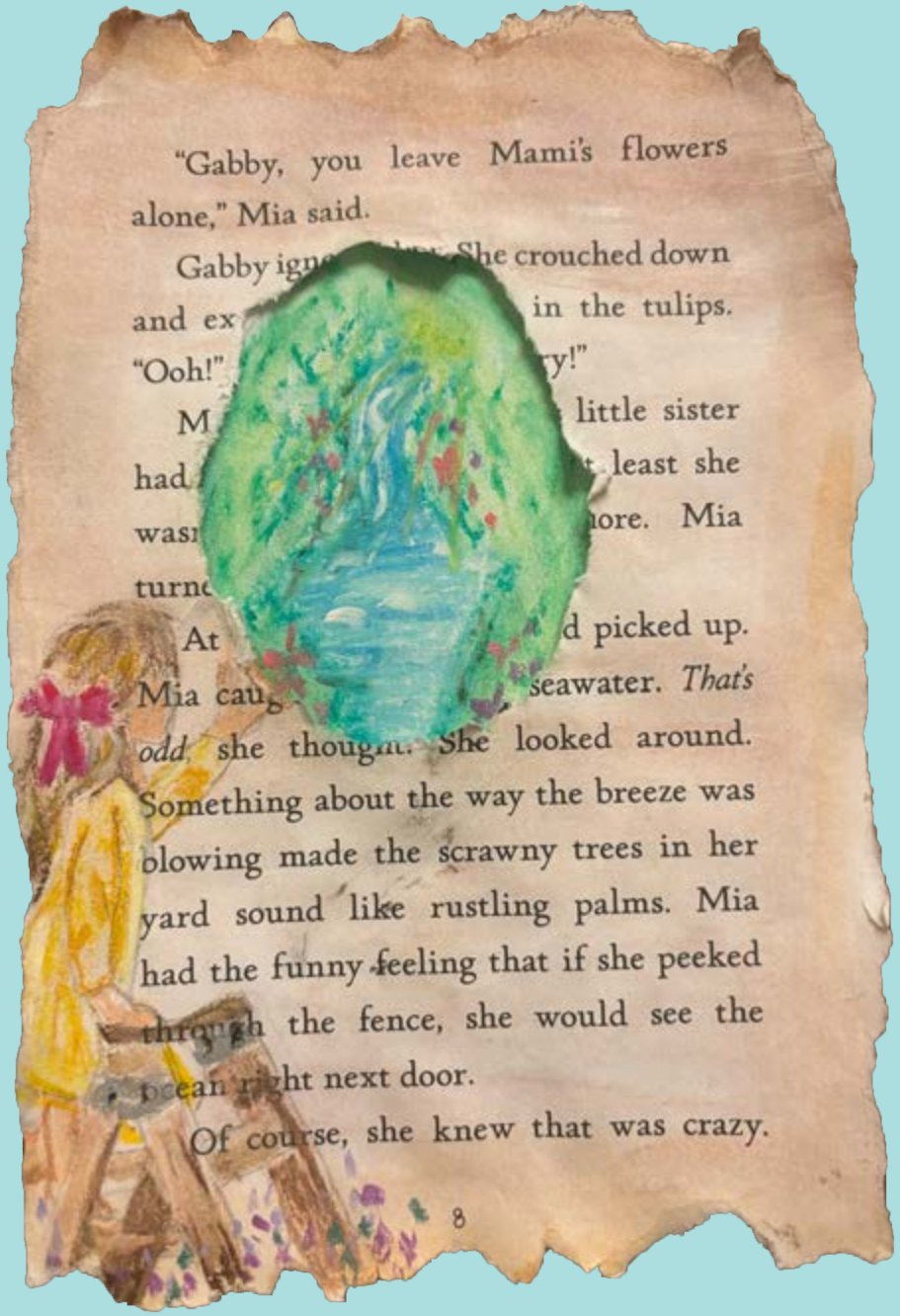
Esli had come to value the rasp of her paintbrush on the linen canvas. She was not, in any capacity, a good painter; her strokes were hesitant and unassuming, and her grasp on color theory was novice at best. But with nothing to entertain her in the bare apartment flat but a few books gathering dust in the moving boxes and a gifted box of paints, she spent most of her mornings poring over a sturdy 12 by 12 canvas with a cup of hot coffee wedged in between her crossed legs. The old calico cat that had leapt up to her window each morning had either moved away or passed–it no longer slunk into her apartment, its paws and black nose wet with dew, to lap to her heart's content at the saucer of milk Esli routinely set out for it. Nevertheless, she kept the window cracked open just in case. Any company was good company to her.

At noon, she got up to make her afternoon tea. She found herself constantly drowsy without a substantial intake of caffeine, though she'd been meaning to cut down for weeks now. Her mother had always told her caffeine led to restlessness, but she felt she didn't have any restlessness to attribute her caffeine addiction to. In fact, she found herself to be a very settled person, with too few words for the excessive thoughts running through her head. Talking to herself was Esli's favorite pastime. She talked to herself as she ate her three meals, as she cleaned the dust from her drawers and windowsills, and as she sat now, rubbing mineral spirits from a rag into the vibrant streak of red ochre she'd mistakenly dabbed to her portrait's cheekbones.



Spring had just arrived in Andern, showering the ground with a sea of fresh grass and flowers. Above the frame of the apartment's windowsill overlooking the trees, three birds perched on the edge of the shingled roof, shaking petals from their tails. Esli rose to rinse the paint from her fingers, dropping the rag over the back of her chair just as the tea kettle she'd set up hissed behind her. She poured the hot water over the tea leaves, steam rising in gentle circles, and watched the spring bloom from her window. Waiting for it to steep, she looked over her shoulder at the canvas sitting over at her workstation. The portrait stared blankly at her, still stubbornly unfinished, with the cheekbones too angular and the mouth too terse. It was a habit of hers to paint expressions she couldn't admit to having herself.

Esli picked up the cup of tea, its warmth spreading in her palms, and carried it back to her workstation. The portrait, upon a fresh glance, definitely needed work; she still couldn't get the folds of light across the forehead right, making the subject look less pensive and just miserable. She sighed and set the cup down near her, picking up her brush again. As she dipped the brush into a pale mix of yellow and white, a small, furry shape finally darted in through the cracked window. It was, to Esli's surprise, the calico cat. It jumped down, shaking the morning dew from its paws and back, and headed straight for the familiar saucer. It began to lap hungrily at the saucer, its sudden reappearance an unexpected delight for Esli's afternoon spent in solitary painting.



Waffles

Brooke Kearney

Nostalgia is a feeling that makes me sick
It seems to me like some cruel trick
I try and avoid it,
But it proves almost impossible to ignore
Especially when it's sitting across from me
at my kitchen table,
Eating breakfast at age four

He gets his train backpack on and heads out the door,
A smile on his face,
Skechers sneakers lighting up when his feet hit the floor
He gets to take naps and have my dad take him to the playground
However, I am not this lucky, I am grown, I am stuck,
Yet somehow everyone else's worlds seem to keep spinning around.



Sometimes it's like looking in a mirror,
Seeing my childhood being relived in front of my face
I feel envious of my baby brother, sometimes wishing I could take his place

As he starts preschool, I will start college,
Missing my childhood, but missing my baby brother more will be something too hard to acknowledge.

I won't be home when he gets back from school
Become too "old" to know what's cool
I will miss his birthdays and his laugh
I will have to watch him grow up from afar, and through a series of photographs

So I guess I don't hate nostalgia, I just hate growing up, I am not ready to leave. I will miss my family far too much.

One thing bringing me comfort through this new phase
Now as Adam grows he will experience the precious years of childhood as he comes of age
All the things I miss and yearn for, he will get to do
Which I guess makes me happy, because I get to watch him live it through

Nostalgia is a blessing, a privilege in fact
How lucky am I, to miss something so amazing that I wish I could go back
All the wonderful memories I have from childhood,
It is now Adam's turn to live it, which is so special and so good.



Congee

Rachel Ji

If you've ever met somebody who identifies as Chinese–in fact, anybody who identifies as Asian, they would say that rice is a crucial staple of the household pantry. You could say that rice is deeply ingrained in Asian culture, economy, and history. I have yet to meet a single Asian person who has not incorporated rice, to a certain degree, in their everyday diets. To say that rice is an important part of Asian gastronomy would be an understatement.

——

Rice, otherwise known as Oryza sativa, was first cultivated in China in the Yangtze River Basin around 13,500 to 8,200 years ago and has played an essential role in people's lives ever since its mass cultivation was introduced in societies. Over the course of time, it has extended its role not just as a fundamental part of the agricultural sector, but in contemporary social welfare as well; according to a New York Times article, the development of high-yield rice hybrids was used to curb famine across Asia in the 1970s (Bradsher and Buckley). It comes as no surprise, then, that rice has now found its way into popular cuisine globally, becoming an indispensable food staple for more than 3.5 billion people, according to National Geographic. Examples of prominent and famous rice-based dishes belonging to different Asian cultures include fried rice, sushi, zongzi (steamed sticky rice wrapped in bamboo leaves, commonly filled with either red-bean paste or pork belly, and eaten primarily during the Dragon Boat Festival in China), pho, mango sticky rice, tteokbokki (a popular Korean street food), and the list could go on and on. Chances are, if a non-Asian person has eaten at an Asian restaurant, whether that be Chinese, Japanese, or Thai, they've probably tried a number of the above-listed foods. But one dish made from rice that was not listed, and that I doubt anyone who didn't grow up in an Asian,

and especially Chinese, household or community has ever tried or heard of, is congee.

Congee is made using two simple ingredients: rice and water. The way congee is made is by boiling rice in a pot of water, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking, and letting it simmer until it's ready. A couple of handfuls of rice should be enough for the whole family, and the ratio between cups of rice and water is usually around one to ten. You can make congee using a variety of different types of grains depending on the specific variation. (For example, I've seen white rice, glutinous rice, brown rice, millet, sorghum, and even legumes such as mung beans and red kidney beans used in congees).

Congee is something that I grew up eating as a Chinese-American kid. I probably started eating congee when I was just a year old, even before my teeth had fully grown. And boy, when I was a kid, I *hated* it. However, as a Chinese-American second-generation immigrant living with two loving first-generation immigrant parents, I had to eat it. I remember dreading coming home from school on a given day and hearing, "Dinner is congee tonight!" The bland, tasteless slurry of rice stewed in water, creating a slurpy, non-liquid, non-solid spoonful of nothingness, was *not* something I would look forward to eating as a kid—not one bit. I would grumble and complain, "Do I have to eat this?" and then pick up my spoon with a hefty sigh after a pointed look from my mom.

——

Some scholars have posited that congee was first invented around 206 BCE to 220 CE, while others maintain that it has been around since 1000 BCE during the Zhou Dynasty of China, according to Tim Carman's Washington Post article titled "Congee: The Chinese Super Bowl." But regardless of the official timestamp of its origins, congee has been around in Chinese and Asian cultures for generations and has not declined in its ubiquity. There are three main reasons why: its economy, beneficial health associations, and nostalgic and homely quality, especially for the Chinese. Because of the minimal amount of rice needed to cook a full pot of congee for families, it was turned to during times of famine and hunger, feeding impoverished families without necessarily using up scarce resources in the pantry. It is also traditionally served to anybody who is feeling ill because of its facilitation in digestion and its ability to soothe nausea, and, allegedly, it may even be useful to recover from hangovers. It has thus been deemed the equivalent of the American chicken noodle soup.

Its flexibility for customization is also a reason why it is so widely embraced. Iterations of the same porridge are made all throughout Asia as well as Africa, but different cultures call it by different names and make it using different ingredients and techniques. For example, as written in food consultant Jennifer Angela Lee's blog in 2024, the Japanese version of congee is called "okayu." Okayu is a characteristically thick porridge made mostly from either short-grain white rice or sushi rice. In Thailand, they call it "jok," and its notable characteristics are its incredibly smooth consistency and how it is often cooked with pork or chicken. In Indonesia, congee is even more embellished and has a strong umami flavor. Shredded chicken, roasted peanuts, fried scallions, green onions, fried dough sticks, crackers, soy sauce, sesame oil, and sometimes fish sauce are added, making it a widely popular street food and breakfast option (Lee). But the classic Chinese version still holds true for many, as Tim Carman explains, "For some reason, the South China version made with rice…has conquered all, probably because it's creamy and mild and…beloved by babies and the elderly. It has to be the blandest food you'll ever love." Its blandness is thus turned into an advantage: congee has the asset of flexibility, able to be molded to suit different

regional tastes and current preferences.

——

As a kid, however, I ignored the good characteristics of congee. You see, as a child, you are drawn to excitement and novelties, and, as such, the bursts of flavors that you get from, say, an ice cream sundae topped to the brim with gummy bears, M&M's, sprinkles, and chocolate drizzle that would send many a dentist to the ER on a stretcher, or the taste of a yummy McDonald's chicken nuggets and fries combo are the ones that you savor and look forward to as you beg your parents to buy you that banana split from the ice cream store downtown or that new My Little Pony Happy Meal.

Definitely not congee.

But now that I've grown a little bit older, I've come to view congee as a perfectly respectable aliment, maybe even deserving of its acclaim in Chinese cuisine. Where I once saw only shortcomings, I could now see past them and understand why many people, like my parents as well as my extended family living in China, actually enjoy eating it.

To a certain degree, this is reflective of the way people grow up and change. As a kid, one constantly seeks stimulation, discovery–boredom is one's greatest enemy. But every adult in society carries the extra weight of responsibilities, duties, deadlines, and promises to fulfill, and even if one meticulously plans everything out perfectly, life still manages to find a way to throw in a wrench. That would prompt us to seek solace in things that bring us comfort and ease and that don't draw our attention into distracting and overwhelming sensations. Sometimes a simple bowl of congee may be what I need at a particular moment, not some adventurous glorified lobster dish sauteéd with caramelized onions and served with truffle cream sauce.



Maybe it wasn't the congee that was "bad," maybe it was the limitations of my scope of perception at the time that was predisposing me against it.

——

I've developed a fondness for congee over the years. Even the taste–or lack thereof–has grown on me. I guess I've just gotten used to eating congee. But there's also a different reason that I've begun to like it, and it has to do with how I associate it with my childhood, and, at a greater level, my identity.

Oftentimes, when people remember their childhoods, they get swept into a certain feeling, a feeling characterized by joy, bittersweetness, regret, or perhaps even a longing for a chance to relive that bygone moment in time—in the past, people with that feeling were labeled as mentally ill, but, nowadays, it goes by a different name: nostalgia.

My nostalgia for my childhood pairs up with feelings of loss of my Chinese ethnicity. As an American-born Chinese, the major part of my childhood was spent in the U.S., but I lived in China for a few years when I was little. I remember looking forward to going back to China every other summer to reunite with my relatives and to bask in their attention (I was the youngest in the family, after all). Now, things are different. I've gotten older and busier, so I don't get to see them as often. And it isn't just me who's changed: my cousins are getting married now, having kids of their own. My once sprightly and resourceful grandmother's health is declining since she suffered a stroke a few years back. Even my aunt's dog, Doudou, who was once so vivacious and who grew up alongside me, is now "Lao" (Old) Dou. Everyone's lives are moving forward, but my mind is still stuck in the past as I try to come to terms with how I now feel like I'm becoming more American than Chinese, and how I'm struggling to keep myself

tethered to that irrevocable part of me that is Chinese, and yet find myself, through time and seas of separation, drawing further and further away from that part of my identity.

But I will never not be Chinese. And congee, for me, has come to symbolize that. Congee will never change, similar to how my Chinese identity will never wash away as long as I have black hair, brown eyes, and a slightly yellowish skin tone. It is strangely comforting, knowing that there will always be a bowl of congee waiting for me at the dinner table, whether I like it or not.

——

Admittedly, congee has gone from a burden to a comfort food. But don't get me wrong–I still don't love congee. There is no doubt in my mind that there are much better foods out there, but even so, congee does occupy a special place in my heart

——

I remember once, when I was a little kid around 5 years old, I was unable to fall asleep. I had just recently moved back to the U.S. after spending a few years living in China, living with my grandparents. I don't know how, but at some point during the middle of the night I ended up downstairs at the dinner table, getting served a bowl of congee by my mom. I ate it then without protest, and as it made its way down into my stomach, I was left with a feeling of comfort and warmth, perhaps not by the congee itself, but rather the happiness it was associated with.

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Refusal of Laws

Logan Lucca

People dissolve. Declare causes.
We hold truths: All men created equal
Endowed rights: Life, Liberty, Pursuit of Happiness.

He has refused laws necessary for good.
He has obstructed Justice, refusing Laws establishing powers.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent swarms of Officers to harass our people and eat out their substance.
For imposing Taxes on us without Consent.
We are absolved from all allegiance.

About Our Inevitable End

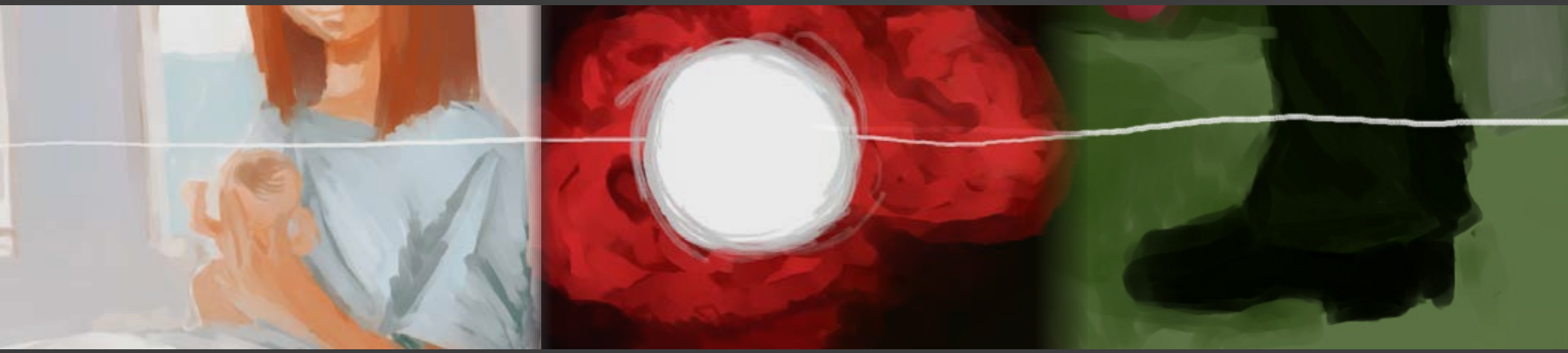
Ash Shatpathy

Oh Shaper, our senseless savior,

Why do the Danes value such heroic behavior?

Since the very base of their society's glue is pretense,

No Dane has a justification, much less a modicum of sense.



Permanently trapped in the cage of a limited mind,

Yet we question, from time to time, why we are blind.

Where is this almighty God, that beacon in the sea of depravity,

Whose power, so I've heard, is said to transcend gravity.

Winner of Freshman/Sophomore Creative Writing Prize for Poetry

I thought it seemed evil to scare men for sport,

I said so to that dragon, and he gave me a snort,

He claimed my evil permits men to define themselves as good,

That, little do they know, they will someday stand where I stood.

We are intertwined, that is all I can firmly say I know,

Parts of a dark void, no parts having a posthumous glow.

My soul will be your soul, and our soul will be the void's,

To someday feed to a million asteroids.

Do not thank Him when I am gone, for your benevolent God is entirely fiction,

Attaining glory and heroism is your strange addiction.

My defeat may have granted you treasure galore,

But if he were you, that gold-hoarding dragon would have still wanted more.

The Enigma

Micah Krasner

I am lost, yet everyone sees me.
I am trapped, yet there's no need to free me.
It's not solitude, nor voluntary isolation.
Do I seek comfort, or validation?

To openly seek without goal is a paradox.
If I am bound to comfort, then happiness is a prison.
If I am bound to validation, then I remain with no sanction
So how do I know my goal?

Goals require inspiration. Where do I find it?
In myself when I'm so empty?
In others when they shun me?
In the world I can't find myself in?
Perhaps it is the search that inspires…

If inspiration requires search, when do I search?
It's too late for past,
The present is too filled,
And the future holds a waning gild.
So I search…

I pull myself from comfort, free from validation, to find it.
I know it, I see it, I reason it.
But as soon as I reach it,
A feeling like a spark, quietly burns me saying
"I am lost."



Nothing

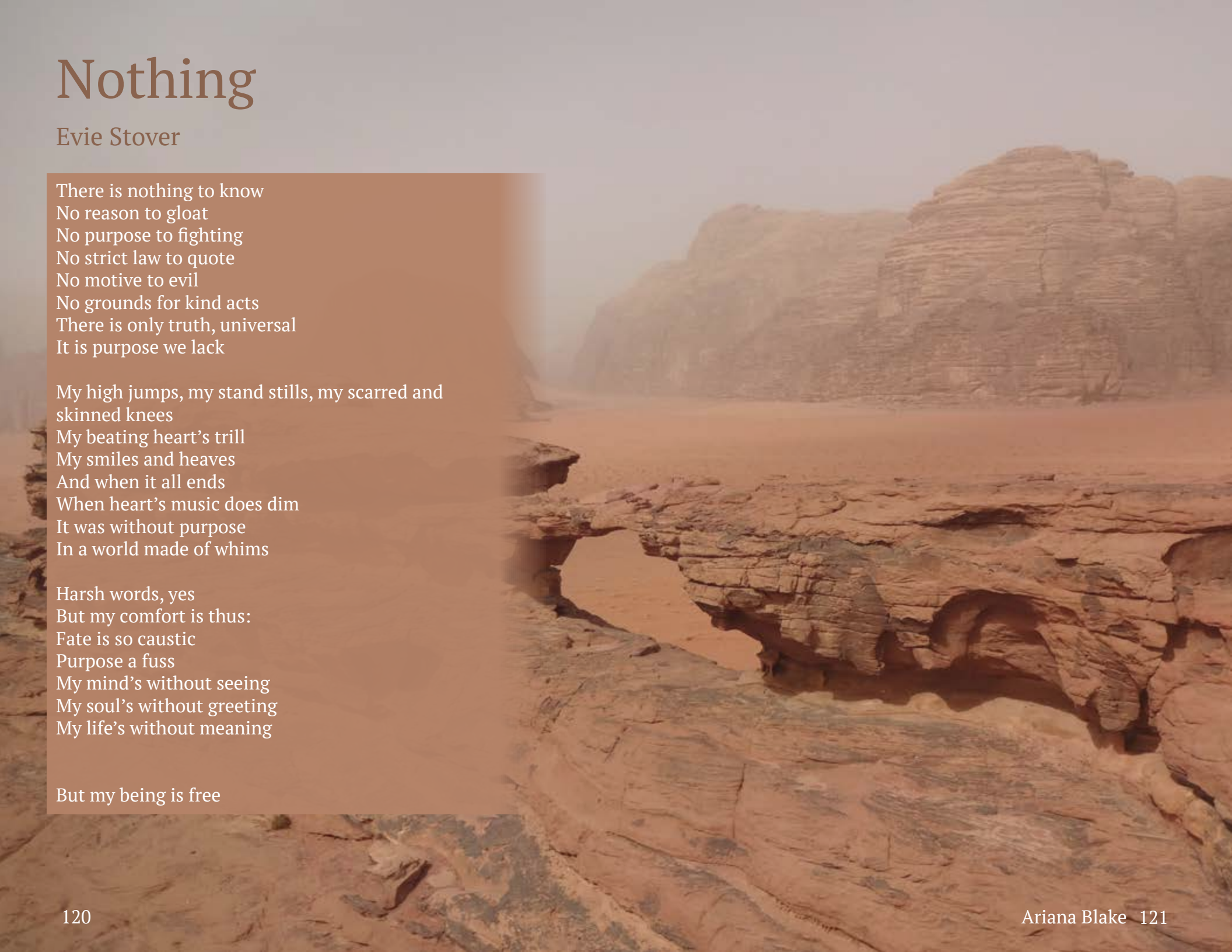
Evie Stover

There is nothing to know
No reason to gloat
No purpose to fighting
No strict law to quote
No motive to evil
No grounds for kind acts
There is only truth, universal
It is purpose we lack

My high jumps, my stand stills, my scarred and skinned knees
My beating heart's trill
My smiles and heaves
And when it all ends
When heart's music does dim
It was without purpose
In a world made of whims

Harsh words, yes
But my comfort is thus:
Fate is so caustic
Purpose a fuss
My mind's without seeing
My soul's without greeting
My life's without meaning

But my being is free



Not Over It Yet

Mackenzie Sanford

As I walk briskly
Berating my actions, calmly
convincing myself that all is not lost, not a disaster
Doubtful that things will get better ever
Echoes of past conversations, failures,
fights and betrayal reverberate and the grim
gossip enters my ears, heralding
hurt that kills me as I
imagine what they said, the judgement
Just as I deserve, I know
Kicking myself as I listen to lively
laughter which I dearly miss,
monstrous as I am. I've never
navigated this, but still I must overcome
offensive things that I have done, plead
patience and pardon from them quickly
question why it is that I react
repulsively, that knowledge I seek.
"She got away" but will I? Talk
to me, say I will, I'll never understand
under what circumstance is it valid
voicing the pain which
wails deep in my chest, ʻxacerbating
ʻxactly the connection I miss, you
yearn for what I do but my zeal
zoomed away and now I ache.



The Cycle

Karan Chugh

After the day's end,
before the sun reaches the sky,
countless people are sleeping when
dawn approaches us again.
Everyone is eager to see what the day brings,
'fore they have surpassed their nightly dreams.
Gone with the wind, the moon says goodbye.
Hardships start with getting out of bed,
in attempts for a move of passion.
Joy begins to fade as they realize the cycle repeats itself.
Knife in the heart as they forget everything but the
luggage that they carry from days prior.
Many memories are starting to disappear since
No novel actions commence.
Obligations grow stronger, and friends turn to
competitors.
Pressure fills the abyss caused by a lack of visibility.
Questions start queuing, but with no answer,
resets of their minds get backed up.
So from here on out,
they try to get through their day
under the faint sparkle of hope, enhanced by
vanilla sweet nothings told through solidarity.
With weight on their shoulders,
'xactly in the same spot every day,
yearning for diversity becomes louder, like
zaps through their bodies, knowing it's the same
tomorrow.



Colophon

The Rough Draft is a student led extracurricular.

Volume 25's 250 copies wee created using Adobe InDesign CC 2026. The magazine was printed by Allegra Print • Signs • Design. The fonts used were PT Serif. The art featured in the cover is by Nadia Ngata, and the cover was designed by Saanvi Lamba.

As in previous years, the publication received submissions in two waves, the first deadline being November 21, 2025 and the second being February 13, 2026. The staff selects works based on the quality of the piece, overarching thematic harmony, and a diversity of authors; furthermore, every piece is evaluated blindly by replacing author names with two-letter codes, stymying reader bias.

The Richard Rouse Expository Writing Prize is open to students in grades 11 and 12. The Creative Writing Awards are awarded in upper and lower divisions, as the contest is open to all grades.

These award winners are determined by the English department faculty. Each submission is blind-read and voted on in a series of rounds.

All work must be published attached to the author's name and must adhere to the Flint Hill School community standards.

Pieces are edited for grammar, and formatting is standardized throughout the publication. If the staff see fit, content warnings will appear with pieces that depict difficult themes.

Thank you to the writers, poets, photographers, and artists who contributed to this year's edition. A very special thank you to our faculty advisor, Christine Allred, whose endless support was crucial to the creation of this year's edition.

Masthead

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