

Still Here Magazine

Issue One: Staying
Even When It Hurts



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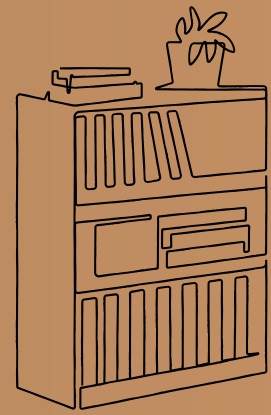


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LETTER

FROM THE

EDITOR



I FOUNDED STILL HERE
BECAUSE I KNOW WHAT IT
FEELS LIKE TO CARRY STORIES
INSIDE YOU WITH NOWHERE
SAFE TO LAY THEM DOWN. I
WANTED TO CREATE A SPACE
WHERE THOSE WHO HAVE FELT
UNSEEN COULD FEEL SEEN, AND
WHERE THOSE WHO HAVE FELT
UNHEARD COULD BE HEARD
FULLY. A SPACE WHERE PEOPLE
COULD SHARE THE HARD, THE
SOFT, THE QUIET, AND THE
LOUD PARTS OF THEMSELVES
WITHOUT FEAR OF JUDGMENT
OR DISMISSAL.

I believe in the power of telling the truth, even when it's messy or unfinished. I believe in stories that are still in progress, in art that is honest before it is perfect, and in the quiet courage it takes to say: I'm still here.

Thank you to everyone who submitted your work and trusted us with your pieces. You are the reason this space is alive, and your willingness to share is what builds the kind of world we want to live in, one where vulnerability is met with compassion and where we can witness each other in our becoming.

Whether you're here to read, to be inspired, or to find a piece of yourself in someone else's story, I hope Still Here reminds you that you are not alone. Your story matters and you deserve a place to be fully seen. Thank you for being here.

With warmth,
Alauna Lester
Editor-in-Chief, Still Here

“SINCERELY, THE CAGED BIRD” BY COURTIE LEIGH

6/18

I've never read “I Know Why The Caged Birds Sing”, but the front of the journal has an illustration on it inspired by the book. It's ironic. Today in therapy I realized that I am a caged bird. I don't know if I made the bars of this cage, or if my parents did. Maybe they started to put them up, and I jumped in to help. Maybe they thought these bars were here for safety, and I agreed. Without risk, we develop anxiety.

I just read a book, *The Anxious Generation*, that confirmed this. Less risks in childhood means more anxiety. I took risks in childhood. I fell off my bike. I busted my two front adult teeth on the merry go round. I even swam in lakes. So why am I like this? Was I taking the wrong risks? Were there no mental risks? What even is a mental risk? Back to the caged birds. My professor gifted me this journal as a club exit gift, since I was stepping off the executive board. This was less than a week after the psych ward. Did she know? Am I bad at hiding? I never told her. Did I even need to speak?

Sincerely, The Caged Bird

“SINCERELY, THE CAGED BIRD” BY COURTIE LEIGH

6/19

Grief is a weird thing. Am I a bad person for not visiting my aunt before she died? Is it a bad thing to not want memories to be clouded by cancer? She died last night, she's gone. But when she was here, it hurt. Her, us, everyone. I think the last time I saw her was at my graduation party. Does that even matter? I realized today my great grandma was not my greatest or first loss. It was my cousin, Devan. Cancer took him. My aunt's grandson. I remember him. People claim this is impossible because he passed away when I was only 4 years old. I don't remember a lot, but I do remember snippets of playing with him and my cousin Jackie. I remember his visitation. I got scared, I didn't understand what was happening. They just told me he was sleeping, and he was finally not hurting. I don't remember if there was an open or closed casket, but I knew Devan was in it. And that was terrifying. I remember my aunt was at my grandma's house a lot after that. I feel selfish. Taking bereavement when I should be at work, supporting the office. Not because I feel obligated to work, but because the boss of the office is my aunt's daughter-in-law and we will already be short a person. But I need to be there for my family, and they told me to take it off. To grieve. They know I have feelings. I hate that.

“SINCERELY, THE CAGED BIRD” BY COURTIE LEIGH

6/21

I lost control of my body for the first time last night. I wish that were true. I'd lost control of it a lot before, but there were explanations. Anxiety, serotonin syndrome, pseudo seizures, etc. This time, there was no reason. I just stood in the shower as my heart rate went up, up, up and I started to shake, shake, shake, but I was aware, aware, aware. I was very aware that I was about to die. That was the only explanation to my slamming heart and the sudden paleness of my skin. I told my parents something was wrong. They stayed with me as my skin started to burn. I really did think I was going to die. I took a hydroxyzine and propranolol. I cried. My dad couldn't look at me since tears trigger his PTSD. He still sat with me as my heart rate slowly dropped to 60. I'm better now, but I still think I'm going to die. How do I make this feeling go away? Why do my answers hide from me?

6/25

Tomorrow, my grandma will have to bury her sister while her husband is in the hospital, out of his mind. Sick. Dead. Dying. And the world is still moving. I'm connected, but not enough. All I can do is watch these hurt people hurt people. It hurts.

“SINCERELY, THE CAGED BIRD” BY COURTIE LEIGH

6/27

I really like John Green. I think he is my writing role model. I am still searching for my tuberculosis, but if I look hard enough, I think I could find it. Once I muster the energy, anyways. I wonder if my friends realized the fitbit they gifted me would be my worst nightmare. Of course they didn't. They had great intentions; they wanted to help me. This thing has become an obsessive nightmare. It leaves welts on my wrists. I feel intense heart drops and can't stop staring at my heart rate. My HRV is very, very low. Actually, I have the HRV of a dead person. All the online forums said the same thing, their fitBits have inaccurate HRV's, so why is my brain convinced I must be dead despite the shaking in my bones? I'm nervous to go to my cousin's tomorrow. I hate that I'm nervous to hang out with my family. 36 days till I'm back at school. 53 days until I lose my voice in Cincinnati. Oh, and Papaw is back home from the hospital and my brain's telling me I'm a piece of shit for not writing about that first. I need to go see Papaw. I feel so guilty about that too. He's the one person in my life who never made me feel guilty for simply feeling and being.

6/29

I had clarity this morning. I can't be on this medication anymore. I want to be better for myself. Plain and simple. I can't always be exhausted, sad, or angry. There are few moments of happy, and they're clouded by tired, or they have to be baited out.

“SINCERELY, THE CAGED BIRD” BY COURTIE LEIGH

7/3

I want this to be it. I know I have a month till move in, but I can't look past tomorrow. I got backed into a corner trying to defend my mom. I love my mom. That's the whole reason I fight so hard for her in these family arguments. And she can't even look at me. She's pissed, I know she is. I don't want to be here anymore. My chest is hollow from my own betrayal. I haven't felt like this since April. I can't find my way out. I don't understand how I got here. The argument should have been between me and my mom. Instead, I only talked to my dad, and a fishhook was sent down my throat, forcefully yanking out the secrets I promised to keep. I'm writing down what I know so I don't go crazy. I know when I was in the hospital, I was focused on surviving, not saying thank you. I know when we left, I did say thank you as my dad pulled up to the stop sign and turned right to take me back to my dorm. I know I wasn't told thank you when I had to live with friends during the months my dad recovered from LVAD surgery. I know I've been told that family shows up, thank you or not. I know hanging out with my distant family is seen as "taking one for the team." I know if I keep feeling insane and don't make it to August, I will do something I regret. I know I'm going to stop asking for help because it's easier to be disappointed in myself. I know I can't stop crying. I know I'm starting to feel less like a sick person and more like a headcase. I don't know what's next. I'm going to keep track now.

“SINCERELY, THE CAGED BIRD” BY COURTIE LEIGH

I already have. As someone who is told they don't do x, y, and z, I remember and take note when I do. My mind isn't enough anymore; I must write it down. My dad kept saying he was depressed in the past, and that explains his actions. I'm expected to have empathy for this. But there was no empathy for me. There is empathy now, but the price was hospitalization. The price for his is free. It is not an equal exchange. My emotions are going down, down, down, and my body shakes, shakes, shakes. I'm tired of being broken. If you're not here, you're not broken, right? I have more thinking to do. More decisions are to be made. You have pills. You could if you wanted to. Fill your rumbling stomach. Your hollow chest. Maybe that's what's next. Maybe not. It's not like what I say is acknowledged, let alone matters. It's already as if I'm not here. It'd be easy to disappear. Easier than dealing with this.

7/4

If I die today, everyone would associate me with fireworks. Maybe they'd say I LOVED fireworks, because it's the only thing they remember me by. I don't want to be remembered as something loud with a few seconds of color. Maybe that is exactly what I am. Maybe I should just take the pills and sleep the rest of the day and take the pills tomorrow. Finish. Be remembered as the quiet after the loud pops and explosions of color.

“SINCERELY, THE CAGED BIRD” BY COURTIE LEIGH

7/5

Maybe I can just hold on until August.

7/6

I want to write so badly. Maybe I'm not a novel writer. I'm full of too many stories to constrict myself to that. There are lots of writers with my name. I'm not my name. I'm more than that. I am Courtie Leigh. There is only one of those, probably. I need to learn who this new person is, aside from a writer.

7/11

I got the brakes on my car fixed, but I'm scared they're not actually fixed, and I'll die in a horrible car accident and while thinking about this, it occurred to me if I died in a car accident and someone found this journal, they'd think I died intentionally. I did not. I was in a funk. A bad one, probably the worst one since middle school. Probably because of my meds (like everything else). That's all. I'm not back in love with life; I'm staying to spite it. And life is somewhat of a romancer, so maybe I am falling for it, little by little. Maybe forever.



OLD LOVE, NEW LOVE

BY JUDITH-OWENS MANLEY

When my cell phone rings and I see it is my son, Colin, I tense in my office chair and swivel to face the window. I want to see the tops of the trees with their bright spring greens, imagine the looping trail to my house through the woods behind. Home, comfort. I picture April next to Colin, listening. April, his twenty-seven-year-old bride of one year with a new lump in her breast and results from her tests.

“Maybe nothing to worry about,” I had suggested the week before, hopeful, wanting to be confident. Hopeful, but not helpful. It’s an aggressive form of breast cancer.

A tall, slim young woman with long, dark brown hair and dark eyes, April is striking with perfectly shaped eyebrows, nearly black, long and arched, tiny freckles across her nose. She wears ballet slipper-type flats on her long, narrow feet all winter long, sans socks. She is smart and capable, a very young executive director of a perinatal network where she started in the lowest position and rose to the highest very quickly.

She has a double mastectomy immediately, chemotherapy and radiation. Sick with worry, I call them from 4500 miles away, helpless and worse, useless. My calls are more work for them. It feels very far away and at the same time, lodged in my throat.

The next time I have leave from the university to see them, Colin is sick too, with a severe throat infection, close to needing surgery. I wipe down the one bathroom every time Colin uses it to forestall any infections with April’s compromised immune system. Pleased to be of use, I run up and down the stairs, he in the bedroom to the left, she in the one to the right, bringing juice, tea, thermometers, aspirin, making dinners no one can eat. I can’t take her to her radiation appointments; they have a support system already that doesn’t include me. I feel left out and then like a chump for being that way. Then back in Alaska, I try to track what’s happening physically and emotionally in phone calls that are too infrequent and too superficial to feel connected.



OLD LOVE, NEW LOVE

BY JUDITH-OWENS MANLEY

I introduced April and Colin. I knew they would like each other. In my seminars for personal and professional development, April always sat in front, focused, concentrating. I loved her from the start, found her intelligence and intensity appealing and endearing. Once they became a couple, April's and my relationship changed, of course. Now she saw me in my private life, saw that I could be irritable, inconsiderate, human. Both before they married and after, there were times we disagreed.

Back when they decided to marry, April wanted the ceremony on a Monday morning, February 6th; the day they first kissed. It was the middle of a teaching semester for me, two hours out of town during a workweek for anyone else, in the middle of winter in upstate New York. I was sure they'd see how unreasonable that was. Colin did, then April felt betrayed by his "taking my side," and no way was I going to divide them. The wedding took place February 6th, and sure enough, Colin's father and stepmother and both grandmothers missed the wedding due to the weather and a car mishap, but they made the reception brunch. She was beautiful; he was ecstatic.

April rebelled at the treatments after that first year: "No more chemicals. I'm doing this my way." She read extensively, followed a strict vitamin and diet regime, with regular massage, acupuncture and reiki for healing.

Increasingly in pain, she refused further scans.

She started using a cane. They both lost weight. She struggled through her workdays, determined to see her organization through a merger, while she put off resigning, where she'd have more time and energy to focus on her health.

I despaired of the flatness in Colin's voice from afar. Was it fatigue? Had he lost hope?

Instead, I asked:

"How is April eating?"

"How much time does she spend in bed?"

"How much pain is she in?"

His communications were terse. "Not much, a lot, her back mostly, it's up and down."

His loyalty to her dictated that little be confided; he had no energy left after working all day and coming home to care for her. They became even more reclusive; she didn't feel well enough to go out, and he didn't want to leave her.

"What is happening?" I asked in the last year.

"Is she simply waiting to die?"

"I don't know," Colin answered. There were things they didn't talk about, though they lay together for hours. He couldn't get her to go back to the doctor; neither could her mother, a nurse; you couldn't tell April what to do. He stroked her head, held her; she always wanted him by her side.

OLD LOVE, NEW LOVE

BY JUDITH-OWENS MANLEY

By the time she resigned from her job in January 2019, merger accomplished, she was barely surviving each day. She'd nap on a cot at lunch, collapse in bed at home, and remain there until the next day. She had a plan. Once she retired, she would focus on healing her body.

Instead, on March 3rd, her birthday, I got another call. April was in the Emergency Room, taken by ambulance in unbearable pain. When I got to the East Coast from Alaska, Colin met me at the elevator, thinner, dry-eyed, resigned, sad. April lit up with tumors throughout her body in the scan when she was admitted.

Everyone was preternaturally calm. There were things to be done, arrangements to be made. April was pale on her pillow, quiet, swallowed by the hospital bed. Her hand when I held it was listless. She went home with hospice care and a big pill box for pain management. Her parents moved in, thinking her death was imminent, and April thought so too. Colin felt pushed aside sometimes as her husband, but April wanted someone with her when Colin was at work. She was afraid of dying alone. Reverting to childhood, gone were the vitamins and severe diet restrictions. In were Dr. Pepper and Coco Puffs that she hadn't eaten in nearly two decades.

A young healthy person doesn't die quickly though. To her surprise and ours, April kept living for nearly nine more months. Her mother was close to a nervous breakdown within a few months of spending every day waiting for her eldest daughter to die. I had retired the same January that April did, and I was able to step in and spend time with April while Colin was working, to relieve her mother. I stayed with friends and other relatives to give them privacy and prepared food for them to bring each day.

During those last months, with me sitting bedside many days, April and I watched a lot of

television together. She couldn't concentrate and dozed off and on, sometimes uncomfortable, restless. Other times she asked me to lie in bed with her, holding her or stroking her head the way Colin did, or her mother when she was there.

She asked me: "Are you sorry you connected us, given how it's turned out?"

"Absolutely not. I love you."

She smiled through her tears. Another day, she fretted, "Will anyone remember me? What will people say about me when I'm gone?"

"I think they'll say, 'Damn I miss April!'" We laughed together. I did ask her one day, "If you had to do it all over again, would you do anything differently?"

OLD LOVE, NEW LOVE

BY JUDITH-OWENS MANLEY

“Yes.” She said that she would never have taken the initial steps—no surgery, no chemotherapy, no radiation. No chemicals.

She said, “I’m not afraid to die.”

But I was afraid. For her, for Colin, for her family. I worried about my son’s state of mind. They were each other’s person; they tended to shut other people out from the time they first got together. I talked to him, he was frank, and I was relieved. He wanted to live, as painful as it would be.

April had been barely conscious for days at Thanksgiving, her favorite holiday. She woke and ate turkey, stuffing, and mashed potatoes and gravy. Maybe pumpkin pie too; we watched her enjoy a few bites of everything. Then she slipped back into her semi-conscious state and took her final breath at 4:12 p.m. on December 12, 2019.

Her mother and the hospice nurse, washed and dressed her, and the nurse gave me April’s top when she took it off of her:

“Take it to Colin while it’s still warm.”

So thoughtful of her and touching, the last vestige of April’s aliveness. He hugged it to himself in their bed, unable to speak. The

hospice nurse sent her parents and sister upstairs too, and nurse and I stayed with April until she was taken away. She looked at peace, finally.

I’m grateful to have had those months to spend with April. It has been painful for Colin to live without her for nearly five years now.

She was a wonderful lifelong partner for my son, who loved her with every fiber of his being. It’s taken all of this time for him to be ready to take the next step.

I see evidence of his intention to move on. He’s parted with mementos that he’s given to her sisters or to me; he just packed up another box for April’s young nieces. I have a small, stuffed ladybug of hers; April loved ladybugs, and it travels with me.



I tell Colin that he will have another life, with another woman. It won't be a better life, or a worse life, simply another life. He'll never forget April. But he was a dedicated husband, and he has a huge heart. “I want that second life,” he tells me, giving me a big hug.

“And I look forward to meeting her,” I tell him. It will take something for me, too, though, to make room in my heart for a woman who is not April, who will never be April, and who just gets to be herself. Come soon, please, I ask of this as-yet unknown woman; Colin is ready, and I think I am too.

“LULLABY IN THE DARK” BY LEE FRASER



Sweet child, you sleep
while mama weeps
my heaviness not yours to keep.

Our shoulders tight
with no starlight
I'll trudge us both through dimmest night.

We'll drift half-mast,
sky overcast
we'll dream of days that shimmer past.

It's serious
but obvious:
the world has changed for both of us

“LULLABY IN THE DARK” BY LEE FRASER



This teary tide,
both bleary-eyed,
will – in the end – get fumble-dried

and, piggybacked
far down the track
we'll marvel, how the light's come back.

“LET ME COUNT THE WAYS” BY LEE FRASER



Raw friction of
commitment vs un-maternal instinct
willpower vs flooded amygdala urges,

fingers fumble to distinguish
emotion vs going through the motions

all is a mittened page turn
a midnight ID
brain trained to blink away:
feelings are seldom good news.

But if I loved you
under my guard rails
what would
that
look like?

purse plasters
mushrooms optional
eye contact, chevron corner glimmers
showing up dry but loyal

We might be ok, kid.



“A WAY TO STAY” BY ALEX PHUONG



Even if it is hard
To stay in place,
Find a way to transform difficulty
Into a hopeful opportunity,
And discover today
As a present within itself,
And strive for health
More than wealth
While never succumbing to greed,
And fulfill the need
To stay within a home
Where all roads lead to Rome,
And aspire to inspire
While building an empire,
Especially since a fall
Could simply be
A chance to start over again,
So dare to uncover the mystery
Of a life filled with endless possibilities,
And ultimately achieve a sense of worth
While living upon the only Earth
By develop an attitude full of gratitude
For the miracle of birth



“BARBED WIRE FENCE” BY GRACE PIONTEK

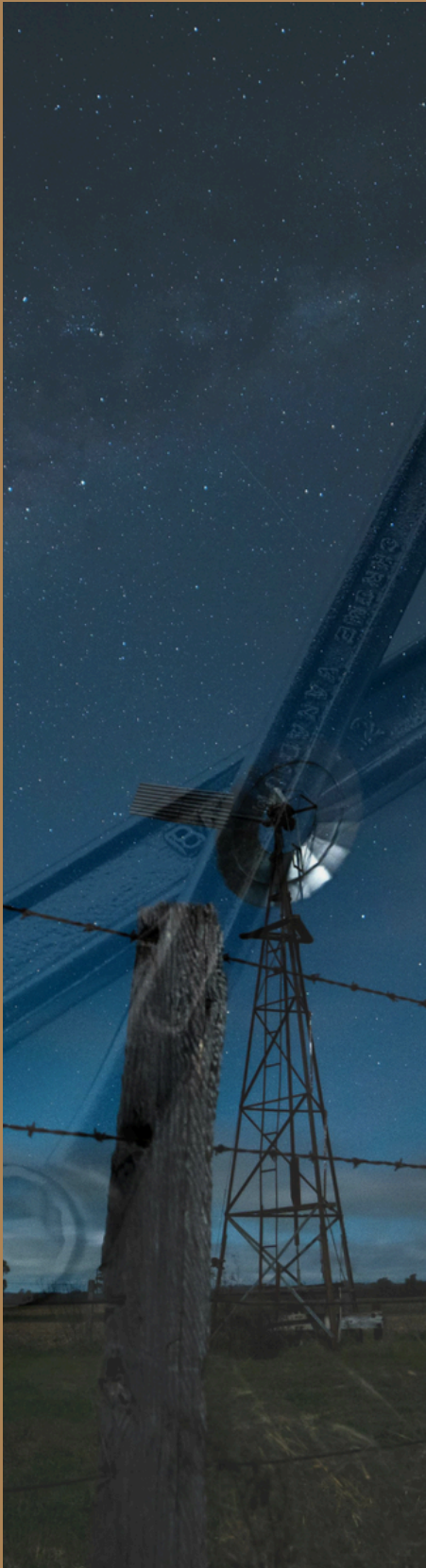


I was made of steel, cut from the core
twisted into a double helix
of iron alloy
our father - he is grizzled
wiry thinned hair grazes
the sinewy muscled arms
which bulge with tension.
Wrought from that ore,
I was of it, bent and distracted
by the ache in the arch.
His son, brother, hangs his head
doe-eyed, brow beaten
beaded
sweat pools and plies its succor
badgered by the wind.
Barbed
I caught
harsh words and cowhair
flecks of blood, of
foxfur
red and fluted in the air.
I was meant to stop impulse
hold back the innocence,
hinder freedom with fear
and keep the internal herds
from getting
loose.

“BARBED WIRE FENCE” BY GRACE PIONTEK

Under the heat, the boychild here, disheartened by a
useless winch
has brought the wrench to my silvered skin
and turned, tighter, again

tighter
breath caught in the effort
tongue sucked between teeth
tighter
a final twist
And pop!
The fencing rips
my skin
a loose knife
a livewire
tearing the wind in two
rendering this business
of aversion, of captives
a failure.
As father bellows,
dismayed
at the break
in the bond
built of sweat, of steel
meant to solder these men together
my steel bones
jagged
feral
free
slash their ignorance
apart.



SUSAN L. POLLET



“WOODEN HUG” BY ERIN DAWKINS



The hotel was an express, not a hotel like we were used to. It was recommended on an insert enclosed with the wedding invitation we received months earlier. It wouldn't include a check-in counter with eager staff waiting to take our luggage on a cart and secure it in our room. There wasn't a hotel bar. However, it had the basic amenities, which were all we really needed for a two-night stay. Nothing more. It was just off the expressway, overgrown grass lined the ramp where we exited. Orange construction cones were scattered like forgotten toys on the side of the road.

When we pulled into the parking lot, there was a gathering on the cement patio at the back. We left our belongings in the car and walked up to the gate that surrounded it. Coolers left watermarks on the cracked concrete below them; boxes of half-eaten pizza were scattered on the tables. Near the building, a glass bottle lay shattered. But nobody seemed to notice, too absorbed in the buzz of alcohol and conversation.

Through the condensation of a large window of the patio, a pool. Its waves bounced delicately as a mother sat in a one-piece that looked more like a dress, her feet dangling off the side while her children played. Next to the pool's edge, a discarded hair tie suffocated by long dark strands. The chemical tang of bleach was overpowering even from the outside.

“WOODEN HUG” BY ERIN DAWKINS

“Can we go in, mommy?” Sara asked. Our children were still at an age when a hotel with an indoor pool defined a vacation.

“In a minute. Let’s say hello, first.”

My brother Daniel was there, wearing a muscle tank, shorts, and thick flip-flops that made his feet look square. His fiancé, Eva, stood next to him. Her hair looked lighter than the last time I saw her, which was the first time I saw her, only once before today. They were talking with a couple that I didn’t recognize. We walked up, my husband Luke and I, and the two kids, not with the intention to interrupt, but hopeful that perhaps he would politely pause his conversation, and say to the couple, “I’m sorry, but this is my sister and her family. They traveled a long way to be here, and I just want to give them a hug.” And the couple would understandably say “sure,” and excuse him. Instead, his eyes swept the side to see us but continued the conversation.

We stood there until it became uncomfortable, so we went to the coolers for drinks. What remained were a few pop cans and a waterlogged beer, its label peeling, bobbing in the water, the ice long since melted. Luke’s eyes said go ahead, it’s yours, but took it from my hand and buried half of it with a much-needed, long swig after I opened it.

By then, Daniel’s conversation was over, and we walked back to him. I leaned in for a hug, and after, shook Luke’s hand. Eva stretched her arms down in front of her body and stood stiffly next to him.

“Hi, Uncle Birdy,” said Logan. He stood high on his tiptoes. Daniel scooped him up and joked that he must’ve gained a hundred pounds. Considering he hadn’t seen him in a couple of years, that might not have been far off. The last time Daniel saw Logan, he was barely at his waist. Now he was all knees and elbows. Daniel shifted his weight, awkwardly, from one foot to the other, and put him down. Logan’s height, his weight, hadn’t changed overnight. Uncle Birdy had just missed all the in-betweens.

Stacks of room-temperature bagels and single-serve containers of cream cheese, pastries with various fruity centers, and watery eggs were part of the spread. A fingerprint-covered stainless steel vat of batter was next to a waffle maker, thick golden trails dried and thickened. When a child, one from Eva’s side of the family, walked by with a thick waffle crowned with whipped cream and syrupy strawberries, Sara asked to get in line at the waffle maker. When it was her turn, she ladled a heap of batter onto the waffle maker. It coughed and overflowed and bubbled as it made one of many that would pile onto her plate.

“WOODEN HUG” BY ERIN DAWKINS

I smiled at Sara as we filled her plate, though I was tethered to the day, and why we were there. The day before, when my father called to ask how the drive was going, my shoulders were tense and high, up to my ears. He knew the date, and the location, and he knew that we were traveling to attend. I smiled through medial conversation, hoping it would stretch through and settle gently on the other end of the call. But how could it? His only son was getting married, and he wouldn't be there.

As a parent, I imagined the devastation. The pieces of yourself relinquished for years. The time, the tears, the constant questioning. The guilt. The sleep that will never return. But offset by little moments, quiet rewards. Unprovoked hugs. Discovery. Watching them do something they love.

A three-point shot at a basketball game. Kissing their forehead at night, inhaling them.
Graduations. A wedding.

Parenting was like walking with a bucket full of water. Steady, generous, always giving. But mistakes, self-doubt, and outbursts cause it to spill a little. A droplet here, a splash there, unpredictable goutts inevitably slapping to the ground, impossible to contain. Lost in the journey, through the days, months, and years, but never empty. But when it came to my brother, the once full bucket was now dry. No weight, just hollow space.

If you asked me what provoked this separation, I can't quite say. It was between them. But between them, there I was, withholding information, limiting conversations, creating segways in the retellings.

After breakfast, Luke took the kids for a swim while I headed to the gym for my daily run. I opted for the hotel treadmill because of the rain, the only one in the workout room. The minutes felt like miles, miles never took minutes. My phone, shaking in the cup holder of the treadmill, lit up. It was a text from Daniel.

HEY, CAN YOU MEET ME IN MY HOTEL ROOM? I NEED TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT SOMETHING.

I lowered the speed of the mill and reached for my phone. I began walking on the belt while I typed.

YES, I CAN BE THERE IN A FEW MINUTES, I replied.
ROOM 318.

As I walked, I became hopeful. Perhaps Daniel had finally come to his senses and changed his mind about our father.

“WOODEN HUG” BY ERIN DAWKINS

When I reached room 318, I only had to knock once before he answered.

“Thanks for coming,” he said. I followed him into their room. Garment bags hung from the bathroom door, plastic and cardboard boxes from travel-sized toiletries covered the bed.

“Is Eva getting ready?” I asked, collecting the plastics and cardboard boxes from their bed. I didn’t know her, but I wouldn’t want to come home from my wedding to this mess. I threw them in the garbage can by the desk.

“Yeah, her mom and her sisters left a little while ago,” he said. “Mom is with them, too.” He walked to the desk and picked up a spotty rocks glass. “I’ve been drinking these all day. Nerves.”

“Nervous about anything in particular? Or just the wedding?” I asked. I hoped this would be a good way to invite him to confide in me about our father. With only hours before the ceremony was supposed to start, I wanted to help him to move this along.

“Vows, mostly.” He replied. With the opposite hand that was holding his drink, he pulled a stack of papers from the back pocket of his jeans, white folds imprinted on the pages, like he had folded them and unfolded them many times.

“That’s actually why I called you here. I don’t know. I thought you could give me notes.”

My heart sank. I wasn’t there to talk about our father.

“Okay,” I said, reaching out to take the pages from his hand. I took them in my hand, the paper warped like a wet leaf.

“Actually,” I said, handing them back. “Read them to me. That way you can practice.”

He put down his drink and unfolded the pages. He winced and stretched his face, his eyes wide and confused, as if he was seeing them for the first time.

As he read, I could see his mouth moving. He raised the side of his thumb to pull a tear that formed in the corner of his eye. He smiled and frowned, and every so often, looked up at me for a reaction. I nodded and smiled, and only pictured our father. Busying himself on the day of his son’s wedding. Mowing the lawn? Or maybe fancy dinner reservations in a nice suit.

“Well? What did you think?” he asked.

Daniel set down the papers and picked up the glass. He took a long sip and clicked his tongue after he swallowed.

I shrugged. “I thought it was good.” I hoped he wouldn’t press me for recall.

“That’s it?”

“Daniel, this is between you and Eva. If you say the things that are in your heart, which is what you said, then it’s perfect.”

“WOODEN HUG” BY ERIN DAWKINS

He seemed satisfied with my response. But the truth was, I didn't know Eva, or them as a couple. After years of dating, we never shared a meal. I never went to their home to celebrate a birthday or a holiday. Distance made this hard, sure it did, but sometimes I didn't think it had to always be the distance that separated us.

It got quiet. I looked at the clock radio on the nightstand next to their bed. Time was slipping away. He wouldn't have time to arrive before the wedding if we didn't talk about him soon.

“Daniel?” I asked.

He looked at me intensely. His eyes were worn and resolved and would be unwilling to let me speak.

“You better head back and get ready,” he said. He threw his head back and the remaining brown liquid went down his throat. “I have to start getting ready myself.”

I lifted my arm and sniffed my running tank, jerking my head away, to jest agreeance, and walked toward the door. I opened it and took one look back at Daniel, removing the plastic covering from his suit. The door shut behind me.

The four of us were dressed, standing under the hotel awning, waiting for the Uber driver to arrive. The rain pelted the cement, sending quarter-sized raindrops onto our shoes and legs. My feet felt slick against the base of my open-toed sandals. Sara's curls were flattening with the humidity. The ride to the venue from the hotel was only minutes away, our collective breathing fogging the windows until it was no longer viable to see outside. Once we arrived, I wiped my hand against the condensation on the inside of the window and saw a group of guests standing in the glass corridor leading into the venue. The women were wearing floor-length gowns. I ran my hand down the front of my sundress, curled my un-manicured toes under the strap of my sandals.

My mother made it sound like this was a casual event. We were clearly underdressed.

Following the ceremony, Daniel and Eva arranged for the families to be introduced prior to their first introduction as husband and wife. When they announced our mother and stepfather as “mother and father of the groom,” Luke squeezed my hand while I blinked widely, hoping that hot tears wouldn't erupt as I waited for our introduction. And once seated, Eva's father spoke, followed by her sister. Her sister talked at length about Uncle Daniel and Aunt Eva. Halloweens where he dressed up as Captain America and went trick or treating with their nephews, sleepovers with movies, popcorn, and candy. The boys were dapper, dressed in linen shorts with suspenders, and newsboy caps covering their white-toe heads. They ran to Uncle Daniel during the speech, elated by memories, real memories, that weren't pieced together like a tower erected from mismatched Legos with no instructions. I glanced over at Logan and Sara as they listened intently, their matching bucket chins wilting and crumbling, eyes yearning as they watched him embrace the²⁵ boys. Nobody from our side of the table made a toast. That would have been our father.

“WOODEN HUG” BY ERIN DAWKINS

When the reception was over, we returned to the hotel. I kicked off my sandals and my feet dug into the floor, breathing, thanking me. I rummaged through the suitcase for pajamas. Sara was wired and asked Luke to take her downstairs to “the store,” which was really just a cart with candy and salty snacks, and a fridge filled with cheap wine and six packs, for a snack before bed.

While they were away, Logan sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his shoes and socks. I placed his pajamas next to him.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Tired.” He stared at the floor.

“Long day,” I said, careful not to say more unless he wanted to talk.

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Why did we have to be here today if Uncle Birdy never comes to see us?”

I folded Sara’s pajamas and pressed them into my chest.

“We were here, Logan. And nobody could ever say we weren’t. Sometimes you have to be the bigger person and show up. And that’s it.”

He looked down at the ground, his big toes battling against each other on the surface of the maroon carpet.

“Is anything else bothering you?” I asked. I imagined him replaying the speeches in his head. He shook his head no and stood up to take off his khakis, and replaced them with pajama pants. Then, he scooted his body up so his head could meet his pillow and dozed off. The door beeped, and Luke pushed the door open. Sara walked in with a bag of chips and Peanut M&M’s. Still holding her pajamas to my chest, I signaled for her to come over. I pulled her sun dress over her head and replaced it with her nightgown. Her hair fell softly on her shoulders, and the static worked at pinning the locks to her rosy cheeks. She yawned and used her fist to rub both eyes.

“Can you lay with me?” she asked. I nodded and laid next to her, my hand resting on the rise and fall of her belly. The snacks went untouched.

I woke up to Luke moving around the room like a shadow. Memories of martinis were implanted in my forehead and in my temples. Even in my neck. I moved my hand to my forehead and rubbed, subtly moaning.

“Hey,” Luke whispered. “It’s early, but I thought we could get on the road. Beat the traffic.”

“Okay.” I stood up and mouthed the word coffee.

We packed quickly because we didn’t pack a lot. Logan and Sara stayed in their pajamas, and swayed from side to side as they walked, still tucked halfway into sleep. Luke kept his hand on the door as it closed behind us. We shushed Logan and Sara as we walked down the hallway to the rhythmic hum drum of our suitcase wheels.

“WOODEN HUG” BY ERIN DAWKINS



I thought about stopping at Room 318 to say goodbye. I paused to listen. There was no movement from behind the doors. No footsteps or hushed whispers. The hotel was as still as the sun who wasn't permitted to rise just yet. We got in the car and pulled away from the hotel, toward the direction of home. I looked at my phone; it had also followed suit in stillness. Logan and Sara slept in the back seat. Once I had coffee, I held it to my lips, taking time to revel in the quiet until my phone rang and I would be forced to replay the day, moments buried somewhere inside my throbbing head.

“TWENTY-FIVE” BY JB POLK



It was summer, and even though the window was wide open, the air felt sticky and warm, just like the squishy lime Jello Maggie had eaten for dessert.

She was curled up in a big, fuzzy blanket that tickled her chin. Small beads of sweat formed on her forehead as she wriggled and squirmed, trying to get comfortable. She really wanted to kick the blanket off, but she remembered Mama saying to follow the rules. And the rules were clear: no messing up the covers.

"Don't even think about it, Margaret!" she imagined Mama yelling. Whenever she was annoyed, which was most of the time, Mama called Maggie Margaret.

"Good girls always snuggle up with their blankets, even when it's warm!"

Mama never explained why it was important to follow the rules, but Maggie was smart enough not to ask. When you're five and your Mama is a big, scary grown-up, you don't ask. You simply do what you're told.

Once, when she was much littler, maybe as little as three, she asked, and Mama answered, "Because I say so." And then she smacked Maggie across the face. It stung and cut her lip. The blood was icky, just like the golden knob on her bedroom door she once licked to see if it was sweet like honey. It wasn't, and it made her mouth feel funny for a really long time.

Maggie tried to picture herself in the garden, wearing only her undies and flip-flops, splashing through the sprinklers and having the best time ever. The grass brushed against her legs as she ran and ran and ran... She felt little drops of water sliding down her legs, like tiny tickles. They were so nice and warm... Oh no! She got all fluttery inside when she figured out she wasn't in the garden and the drops weren't water at all!

The wobbly floorboard outside her room creaked once, twice. She probably cried in her sleep, waking Mama up! Her heart went thump-thump-thump as she tried really hard to hear if there were any more noises. There was nothing. She froze, hoping Mama wouldn't peek in on her, then tried to go back to sleep when a bright light filled the room. Mama stood in the doorway, a sudden and startling presence.

“TWENTY-FIVE” BY JB POLK

"I'm sorry, Mama," Maggie said quietly, the three words almost like a little mouse—
chirp, chirp, squeak...

She wanted to crawl under the scratchy blanket, but Mama, who looked really big and really cross, moved to the bed in two giant steps and yanked it off her.

"I won't do it again, Mama..." Maggie promised.

She'd do anything to make Mama happy because, when you're five, Mama is your whole world, and you only want her to be proud of you. That's why you learn the four- and five-times tables even though you're still in kindergarten. And you practice them every day so Mama can see how much you're trying to get better! You also always say 'please' and 'thank you' because Mama says good manners are important. But instead of making Mama proud, you wet the bed and make her clean up after you, which makes her mad. Mad and disappointed.

"You've really let me down. Margaret. Again." Mama sighed—Uffff, uffff, uffff - like a wounded 'possum. Maggie knew what a wounded 'possum sounded like because she saw Mama whack one with a shovel once when she caught it stealing eggs from the chicken coop.

Maggie knew what the sigh was about. It meant she was in big trouble!

"Please, Mama. Please don't make me sit in the tub!" Maggie whispered in that chirpy, mousy voice again – squeak...squeak...chirp

She really wanted to be the sweet little girl Mama wanted her to be. In her mind, she WAS the sweet little girl who did all the things she was supposed to do. And while her body felt stiff and scared, the sweet little girl in her head tried hard to come out and do as Mama told her. But she couldn't. Something was holding her back...

"You have to learn to be responsible, Margaret. To face the consequences of your actions," Mama said calmly, then reached out to help Maggie get out of bed.

"I'll do my best, I proooooo-mise!" It didn't sound at all like Maggie's voice, but a moan, as if someone were trying to pull the tiny mouse from the trap it was stuck in.

"Don't try to wiggle out of your punishment, Margaret," Mama said firmly, leading her to the bathroom.

The water was already cold, but Mama threw in a bag of ice to make it even colder.

The cubes floated in the tub like tiny transparent ships.

"This will help you remember next time," Mama said, watching Maggie's teeth chattering as she lowered her into the icy water. The tiny ice ships bobbed up and down with each shiver.

“TWENTY FIVE” BY JB POLK

At first, Maggie felt all tingly. But soon, she couldn't feel anything. It was not that bad, after all. Way better than getting her mouth washed with yucky lime soap or getting a spank! Mama was big and really strong, and she always hit her right where it stung the most—on the back of her legs. Whoosh- whoosh – whoosh ...

It was better than when Mama made her sit at the dinner table, just watching her eat mash and sausages while Maggie was all hungry and stuff. And so, so much better than that time when she made Maggie kneel on uncooked rice for two whole hours!

Maggie didn't really know how much time an hour was, but she knew it felt like forever and then some. When she finally got up, her knees had little marks on them, which made it hurt to walk for days and days. Yeah, the tub was okay because, after a bit, the floating ships melted, and the water was no longer cold.

When she was allowed to go back to bed, the blanket no longer felt scratchy. She cuddled up under it, feeling cozy. Maybe Mama was right? Sitting in a tub full of cold water certainly made her love her comfy bed!

"Before you go to sleep, Margaret, remember how lucky you are to have a snuggly bed and a warm blanket," Mama said before closing the door and heading back to her room.

And Maggie felt lucky! It kind of helped her understand why she should always follow the rules. Mama knew best, and Maggie loved her to bits with her tiny five-year-old heart!

Maggie's Mama was way older than the other kindergarten moms. She didn't really know how old, but she had lots of little lines around her eyes and gray hair. Mama also wore her glasses when she read. The other moms had smooth skin and colorful hair. Jenny's mommy, for example, had the prettiest red curls, and she wore cute ballerina shoes with her white jeans. No glasses, only giant sunshades that showed Maggie's face when she bent down to kiss her.

"Well, aren't you as cute as a button?" Jenny's mommy said. She had a cheerful voice and giggled all the time.

Mama never called Maggie silly names or giggled like Jenny's mom. She was always serious and only ever said things like "come here!" or "will you finally shut up?"

Mama also had a deep frown on her forehead like a crack in the crust of a loaf of sourdough bread that Maggie once saw in a bakery. Whenever it appeared, Maggie knew she needed to be on her best behavior, which was most of the time.

“TWENTY FIVE” BY JB POLK

“Got knocked up by her boss,” Maggie heard Jenny’s mom say to Laura’s mommy. She had no clue what “knocked up” meant, but she knew it was something bad just from the way Jenny’s mom said it. It sounded mean, like when Jenny told Maggie she was a “basted” because she had no dad.

“Got her in trouble and then dumped her. Poor thing. Not exactly a beauty, with that face that could stop a clock,” Laura’s mom replied, squinting to see if Maggie was listening. She was. When she heard Laura’s mom say mean things about her Mama, Maggie loved her more than ever. Like, super duper lots, just like a five-year-old can love!

Maggie knew that one was not supposed to say “dump” because people dumped trash, not other people. So, how could anyone dump Mama? Jenny’s mommy was silly! And so was Laura’s because a face couldn’t stop a clock. Mama would never get dumped, and anyway, she stood so tall that next to her, Laura’s mom looked really tiny and not important at all!

Even when she was all sad after Mama got mad at her, Maggie would try her very best to make Mama say something nice or smile at her. Because Mama was the most important person in Maggie’s life, and she couldn’t imagine ever feeling differently.

Not ever!

“Why can’t you do anything right, Margaret?”

Maggie’s belly got all twisty whenever she heard Mama sound so disappointed.

“Look at your dress! You always make such a mess, even when I try to keep you clean!”

Mama was brushing Maggie’s hair, but the brush got stuck in a big knot, and Maggie winced because it hurt. She didn’t know what stung more—the tears she tried to hold back or the scratchy brush on her head.

“Carless-tug-little-tug-girl-tug!”

Mama pulled really hard—yank, yank, yank—until the brush finally came out with a big bunch of hair.

Maggie bit her lip, trying hard not to let any more tears fall. She knew Mama was just trying to turn her into a proper young lady, or at least that’s what Mama always said.

“You’ll never be a proper young lady if you keep behaving like a wild animal!” Mama roared, swatting Maggie with the brush. Maggie flinched and backed away, as if she were in a cage with a lioness, because the roar was so loud. Roar-roar-roar!

“TWENTY FIVE” BY JB POLK

When Mama got that mad, Maggie did feel like an animal—not a mouse anymore, but a dog tied with a rope, all scared and shivery. And all she could say was, "Whoof, whoof—I'm sorry, Mama! I'm really, really sorry! Please don't hurt me!"

It didn't help at all. Mama just kept getting more and more upset! Maggie still loved her, but it made her feel all wobbly because she thought she could never be as good as Mama wanted her to be, no matter how hard she tried. She felt small and stupid and mean, and she knew she was because Mama said so.

"It's all your fault, you stupid child! If it weren't for you, I would be somebody today!" Mama would yell and cry, and Maggie tried to hug her, but Mama would push her away.

Maggie felt even smaller, more stupid, and mean. Because when you're five, you just know that your Mama is always right! And if Mama said she was mean and stupid, then it had to be true.

Maggie gazes at the figure in bed. It is summer, and although the window is wide open, it still feels hot and stuffy. The figure is wrapped in a large, fuzzy blanket that goes up to her chin. The room smells of lavender, a faint attempt to hide the underlying odor of sickness and decay. One hand rests on the blanket, fingers slightly curled, and the skin is thin as parchment, dotted with brown liver spots and thick, protruding veins. The fingernails are long and yellow, showing signs of age and neglect.

The figure on the bed breathes slowly and shallowly, with her chest barely rising and falling. It sounds like the wheezing and rattling of a mouse struggling to escape a trap. Or maybe a dog chained to a post, trying to bark for help but unable to make a sound.

Or possibly the sigh of a wounded 'possum battered to death with a shovel. Not a lioness anymore...

Aside from the breathing, the silence is only broken by the occasional creak of the bed frame beneath her frail body. Small beads of sweat form on her forehead as she squirms, trying to get comfortable.

Maggie stares for a long time. Memories of the past remind her how tall and strong the figure on the bed used to be. She was so tall that, next to her, Jenny's and Laura's moms looked really tiny and insignificant.

“TWENTY FIVE” BY JB POLK



She approaches the bed and slowly, very slowly, reaches out to hold the cadaverous hand. How long has it been since she last held it? Or rather, how long has it been since the same hand hit, pulled, dragged, whipped, thumped, and punched her? More than ten years. None of the memories have faded, each one as vivid as the day it happened. Because the body heals quickly, burn marks and bruises fade, black eyes and broken bones mend, and hair grows back, but the other scars... Well, that's a different matter.

The warmth of Maggie's touch seems to spark a flicker of clarity amid the fog of illness. The woman's grip tightens, a silent acknowledgment—no guilt or remorse, only a sense of peace and comfort—the relief of letting go.

Maggie is glad she came. Because it doesn't matter if you are five or twenty-five. Whether you are a little girl or a big, scary grownup, you are tied to your Mama no matter what. And although you don't forgive or forget, you don't dump people like trash. You just don't....

“I’M NO HERO” BY SUSHMA R. DOSHI
ORIIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY SPILLWORDS IN 2023

"No," I say.
"What?" asks Ma. Incredulously.

For the past...I don't remember...how many years I remained a mute spectator to my
sister's humiliation. Every day. Every single day.

"Apply the new fairness cream I bought."
"Try turmeric paste for your complexion."
"Wear a padded bra. You are too thin."
"Straighten your hair in the salon. It's too limp."
"You could try and smile a little more. Men don't like the overtly serious type."

My sister, Mira di. Elder to me by three and a half years. Mira di had always been a happy child. Eager to please. Gentle. Never heard her say “No”. That was a privilege solely granted to me, The Male Heir of the Family. Mira di never resented this. She knew her station in life and was content with it. An average student academically, she was well aware of her limitations and unapologetic about it. Her only ambition in life was to marry well and have children. I make it sound rather simple. It might have been less of a struggle for her to become an engineer or a doctor.



The ordeal started when our parents, Ma and Baba, initiated the process of arranging a match for Mira and the first boy...the first prospective groom came to "see" her. We were all excited. Snacks and sweets were bought from the best shop in town. The best crockery reserved for special occasions was carefully taken out of the locked glass showcase. The boy was an officer in a bank. He entered our home accompanied by his family with a cool assurance. I watched Baba standing with folded hands.

Ingratiating.

"We're simple folk. Mira is a good girl," Baba said, bowing down, a slight pleading in his voice. I hoped the boy was worth it.

“I’M NO HERO” BY SUSHMA R. DOSHI
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY SPILLWORDS IN 2023

I was shell shocked when the boy said... "No".
"No"? How could anyone refuse to marry Mira di? Ma and Baba were also disappointed.
But they rallied around and played it down.

"It's just the first proposal. We'll get better ones."
"Arranged marriages take time to fix."
"A woman gets married where destiny has fixed it for her."

I could tell the rejection hit Mira di badly. But only for a few days. I was relieved to see
her recover and spring back to her usual irrepressible self.

The next proposal and subsequent rejection disconcerted us. Mira di had tried to look as
pretty as possible and smiled the best she could. There wasn't much discussion after the
apologetic telephone call.

"We're sorry.. If only the girl had been a little fairer..."
I was nonplussed. For me, Mira di was the most beautiful girl in the residential colony we
lived in.

Ma laughed wryly when I told her the same.
"You are her brother. You love her. But when you search for a wife, you'll also be
choosy."

Huh! Trust Ma to take a different angle in any situation.

The blinding sunlight of the hot summers gave way to dark thunderclouds and incessant
rain. Festivals continued to be celebrated, and Ma prayed with more fervor.

"Let my daughter get a good groom."
I welcomed the chill of the winters which soon vanished with the appearance of spring. I
passed out of school and joined College. My interest in the opposite sex burgeoned. I
understood why men rejected Mira di. I fantasized about fair vivacious women.
Voluptuous but not too voluptuous. Coquettish. I wanted it all. Busy with exams, friends
and fantasies, I gradually became indifferent to the boys...sorry, now men with their little
troupe stepping into my house at regular intervals to reject my sister. I shrugged off the
atmosphere of gloom and the inundation by all our aunts and uncles with unsolicited
advice in the aftermath.

“I’M NO HERO” BY SUSHMA R. DOSHI
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY SPILLWORDS IN 2023

"I think there is an evil eye. Consult a tantrik."

"The stars are not in proper alignment. Should I book an appointment with an astrologer for you?"

"Call a priest...perform a puja ...complete with a Hawan...will drive away all the evil forces."

"Mira needs what is called a makeover today...these boys don't want traditional looking girls.."

There were a few mumbles about the unsaid ...the dowry.

"Pity the girl's father doesn't earn enough to get his daughter married."

"Can't deny the truth that plain girls need a fat dowry."

This was a reference to the fact that Baba worked in a small private firm and earned just enough to give us a decent life. A small salary. Just that. No means to earn by taking bribes. No black money. It meant no marriage for Mira di.

I watched an exuberant Mira di transform into a listless pale shadow of herself. Her self-esteem was unable to bounce back after being smashed to smithereens for the umpteenth time. Most of her friends had got married and there were now whispers suggestions.

"There is a widower... good man...with two kids...ideal for Mira."

"This man...a divorcee..no fault of his...wife ran away with another man...fortunately no kids....will be good for Mira."

Ma looked permanently worried. It was imperative that Mira di get married before Baba retired. Baba tried to retain his good spirits, but his brisk gait slowed down to a hunched trudge. His cough weakened his loud baritone to a hoarse gruff.

It was the seventh of August when the tide turned. The unbelievable happened. The man said a "Yes". Ma couldn't believe it. A businessman living in a big city. His mother had passed away and his father was in a hurry to get him married. They didn't want the dowry.

"They just need a woman to take care of them and the house," said the mediator.

“I’M NO HERO” BY SUSHMA R. DOSHI

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY SPILLWORDS IN 2023

It was amazing what a Yes could do to our house. Ma started cooking with vigor and the smell of coriander, saffron and cardamoms wafted through our house. Baba looked relieved. A burden had been lifted off his shoulders. Though the cough still troubled him, his voice regained strength. Mira di looked relaxed. The guilt of being a burden on Baba and the fear of remaining a spinster for the rest of her life had proven to be more taxing than she could handle.

"Are you happy?" I asked her impulsively one day.

"Of course. Why do you ask?" she queried curiously.

"Well....you hardly know your husband to be. Aren't you worried?"

Mira di laughed. Carefree. That sound.... after so many years.

"This is an arranged wedding...a match fixed by others. I'll get to know him after I get married to him."

She paused. "Wish me luck," she said gently clasping my hand.

I nodded, squeezing it tightly with a catch in my throat.

Mira di 's marriage followed by her farewell left a void in the house. But as they say, life goes on and problems are never solved. They're just replaced by another. Baba retired with no pension. The firm deposited a fixed sum in his bank account. Baba said that we would run dry in a while, and we did. I completed College and it was time for me to shoulder the responsibility of the family. I managed to secure the position of accountant in a private firm. I saw my entire life ahead...duplicating Baba's. I swallowed the feeling of dread as I rose every morning to catch the bus to work. I thought it couldn't get any worse. I was so wrong. Baba's cough was diagnosed as cancer. Treatment was expensive. There was no smell of cardamoms and saffron emanating from the kitchen anymore.

"A solution has to be found. You need to get married," Ma said matter of factly.

Real bright, I thought. Another mouth to feed.

Ma looked at my uncomprehending countenance impatiently.

"There is a proposal for you. Nice girl. Decent family. The dowry will give us the means to treat Baba's cancer."

We enter the house with cool assurance. The girl's father stands with folded hands. Ingratiating. I know I'm not worth it. The girl walks in holding a tray with neatly arranged teacups and sits on the cheap cane chair. Plain. Her eyes. Big. Anxious.

“I’M NO HERO” BY SUSHMA R. DOSHI
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY SPILLWORDS IN 2023



"We're simple folk," the girl's father says.
We understand the implication. No dowry.
Ma's face becomes reserved. She signals to
me silently.

"We'll let you know. We have to go," she
says politely.

"No," I say.

"What?" Ma asks incredulously.

"We've made our decision. The answer is
yes," I say.

"You've lost your mind," Ma snaps in a low
tone. "Are you trying to be a hero for the
girl?"

No. I'm no hero. I don't know how I'm
going to pay for Baba's medication. I don't
know what lies ahead. But I did what my
conscience told me. I can't destroy that hope
I see in the girl's eyes. This one's for you,
Mira di.

“TO MAGANDA, FOR MAGANDA” BY ALEXANDRA CIPRIANI

My house has become a bit of a jungle since the last time I saw you. None of these stores here ever have what I ask for, and the pimple-faced workers look at me like I'm some crazy old bat. I know I'm a crazy old bat. The plants I need have nothing to do with that.

My cousin has helped me a lot. He has connects with some gardeners, and now just a few months later, I have a nursery in my home once more, and exactly like yours when you were just my little girl.

Garden crotons gave me trouble. As my first endeavor, I knew they would, but I prayed they would remain scarlet and milky and verdant in bloom, but they did not.

The calathea were stunning—the gold of its leaves, the velvet crush of its touch on my wrinkles. I could have pet that plant like a dog for days. In a matter of weeks, though, it joined its brethren on the other side.

Dieffenbachia, if you can manage to even sputter out those sounds from your mouth, was born to die in my hands. I don't even think it had grown to a sprout before its substance became mushy and dry all at once.

Cordyline, sansevierias, dracaena fragans, balba pusas, and even kalingag found refuge on my bookshelves, my kitchen counter, my couch, and my floorboards for no more than a few weeks at a time.



“TO MAGANDA, FOR MAGANDA” BY ALEXANDRA CIPRIANI

I'd watch from the only space not overrun
by the flora and breathe in the scent of their
slow decay. I hate to say it—for the idea of
worrying you breaks my heart—but
witnessing their viridescence morph into
weak, wan matter saddened me so.

But I did not let it faze me, for I knew
these plants, though supple and verdurous,
were only my test trial.

Ylang-ylang was my first choice. The
paleness of its hue, the curve of its petals, and
of course, the bouquet of its aroma made it
ideal. My old scrapbooks that acted as the
pot's foundation smelled of its perfumey
excellence for a whole month after it died in

my care.

And from there, I know you know what happened. The amaranths I accosted; the narra
I nipped; the palawan cherry blossoms I pillaged; the waling-walings I wasted. So many
plants that could have lived to see the sun's rays for moons and moons that I so painfully
killed with my reaper thumb.

Yes, I know. The pollen isn't good for me. All these particles floating about,
settling in my tea, my crevices, my lungs. Every wretched pull of air makes me feel like
a plumber with a particularly stubborn toilet, but that's not important. You know me. I
persisted, even as my cane transformed into a walker into a wheelchair into a home
nurse.

I should have known this would be the one—it's so obvious looking back now.
With my walls being overtaken by vines and tendrils that have long passed, and all my
boards and tiles being lifted by moss and lichen, I got it. I got one to live. And, of
course, it would be this one.

Making my way to you wasn't the easiest with that nurse always on my back
now, but here I am. Since you don't know what kind of flower this is, I'll tell you.

A sampaguita. The national flower of home. It's like I always said, Maganda.

Sampai kita. I promise you.

I promised you I'd take us home. I'm sorry it wasn't sooner. I'm sorry this was all I
could do. To give you just a taste of the motherland. Just placing its delicate petals atop
the earth of your grave makes me shake. But I promised.

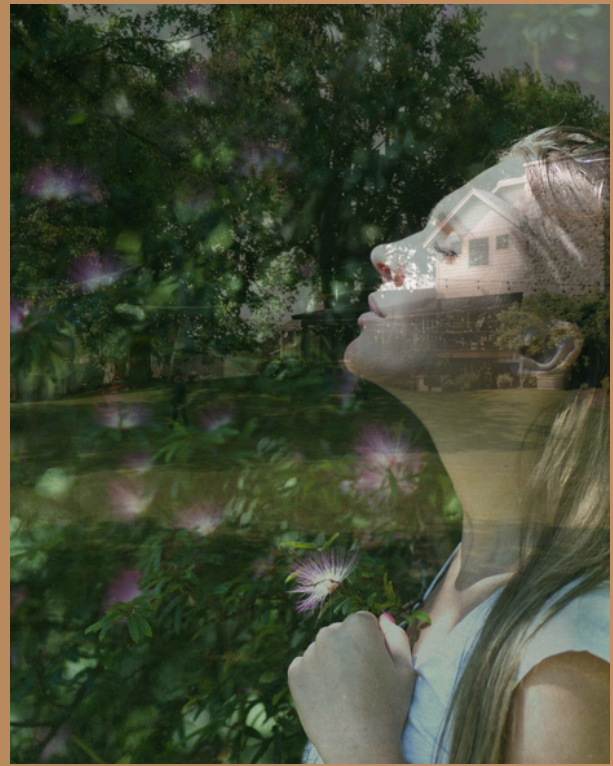


“TWO WORLDS UNDER ONE ROOF” BY MANSI BHATIA

I have to tell you about the 3:30 a.m. blue
glow.
How I don't open my eyes, but feel the shift
in the mattress.
The ding of another email.
Another Slack update.
Another investor asking for numbers,
updates, proof of progress.
I hear him exhale as he types.
Not a sigh of frustration—
just the familiar sound of a man carrying the
weight of something he swore to build.
He brags about not having a life,
then quietly resents those who do.
And here I am, practicing presence—
teaching people to live fully, notice deeply,
laugh wholeheartedly.
Living a daily rebellion against the mindset
that shares my bed.

I have to tell you that:

- My wife sips her coffee—or is it ceremonial
cacao these days?—like it matters.
- She lets her thoughts stretch out like a cat on a
sunny ledge.
- She writes essays. Essays! Not bullet points.
- She talks to strangers on Zoom about breath
and grief and glue sticks.
- Somehow, she calls that work.
- She says I'm running from something.
- I say I'm running toward something.
- I'm not sure what would happen if I stopped.



I have to tell you that COVID taught me I'd
been married to a stranger for seventeen
years.
Suddenly trapped in the same house 24/7,
I could hear him through our thin walls:
“Okay, I gotta go... Hi! Sorry I'm late.
Yeah, so I looked at the slides and...”
The way he shapeshifted—vendor, engineer,
board member—without pause.
The way I watched our daughter eat
breakfast alone while he made deals from the
garage.
The way I realized he wasn't hiding—he was
surviving.
For him, life is too short—he must achieve
more.

“TWO WORLDS UNDER ONE ROOF” BY MANSI BHATIA

For me, life is too short—I must feel more,
live more.

I schedule two hours between calls just to
remember who I am.

I place my hands on paper.

I remember to breathe.

I lead gatherings in our backyard filled with
silence.

Hands moving. Hearts guiding.

We cry when we make something
imperfect.

He thinks I've built a career on purposeless
meandering.

He doesn't know the wandering is the work.

I have to tell you that:

—She naps. On weekdays.

*—She journals. In cursive. With a yellow
fountain pen.*

—We are two philosophies sharing a bed.

—My urgency enables her slowness.

—Her intentionality steadies my ambition.

*—Sometimes I wonder if I even matter to her
like I used to.*

We have to tell you: it's complicated.

We are proof that love doesn't require
agreement.

You can cohabit without co-authoring a
worldview.

You can intertwine fingers while still
holding opposing truths.

Our parallel lives intersect every evening for
fifteen minutes,

walking the dog with our daughter—
she skips ahead, the Australian labradoodle

tugging at the leash,

asking questions about stars and death and
the color of plums.

Sometimes we don't say a word to each
other.

Sometimes we laugh. About different things.

Sometimes we remember that this, too, is a
kind of love.

I have to tell you that tomorrow morning,
my coffee machine will hum at 7:15.

He'll already be four hours into his day.

I'll light a stick of incense.

Rinse my Frida Kahlo mug.

Move through my rituals slowly, because
they matter.

He'll take his next call without pause.

And we'll both be exactly who we are.

Still here. Staying.



SUSAN POLLET



“ATROPHIED CALLOSUM” BY GAUTHAM PRADEEP



Separate the emotion from man,
encaged be the self from the dreams.
It looks as a walk down the dimly lit night,
traversing into the afterlife of stillness.
To feel the emotion, wander aimlessly,
a gale peeking into a well-sealed house.
It creeps into the thought,
crippling the being which lay shackled.
And within the cocoon of an unharmed tomorrow,
man descends to confront his being.

To forever keep falling into the pit of aging,
never to hold the branch, once extended.
To fumble for the matchstick dry,
blind to the inferno within.
Always staring at the indifferent sky,
sore eyes against the fogged windowpane.



“THE LAST SUNLIGHT” BY GAUTHAM PRADEEP



I got up.
Removing my blindfold,
I opened my eyes.
I pulled aside the window shades,
to see the rising sun.

Putting on my summer shorts,
I went out to plant few roses.
Walking to the backyard,
I stumbled upon my cat,
lying dead
by the sunflower plant.

I walked back to my house,
pulled the window shades
back to its place,
and went to bed.

I don't know when the next day began.
I never again pulled aside the window shades
to see the next sunrise.
My world had closed upon me
ever since.



“BLIND EVERMORE” BY GAUTHAM PRADEEP



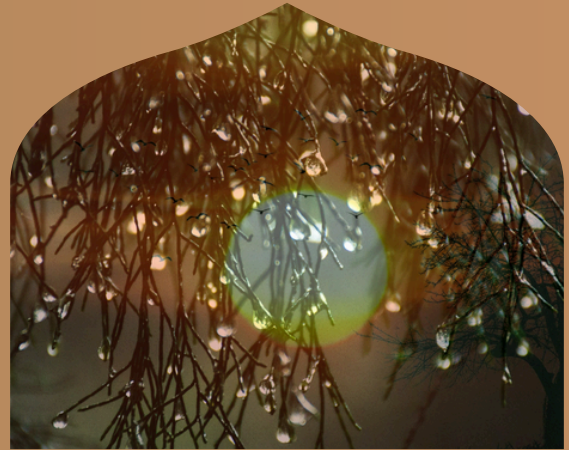
Pointed stilts and the sunset.

Sitting under the ceiling fan,
I watch as the gloom fills me.

Pierce, I mine conscience,
into the stone hearted sculpture
beside me.

His eyes still lost in a gaze,
I try to find my childhood.
Ignorant grubs' sloth on the gulmohar,
killing pleasant dreams of mine.

 Numb,
 he continues to stand
 under the morning rain.
 A trance he did choose,
 mine heart I do despise.
 The eternity in his eyes,
against the woeful faces drawn on the shifting
 sands.
The sight of the ever-changing evening,
fades into the twilight gloom.



Once a while,
I do idle away into the
forgotten tomorrows.
To feel the emotion wander,
yet be a slave to the being.

With the moon waning in the distance,
I sit and doze.
He looks; I weep.
The ground I now forgive,
a hope I do retain.

Return I to the abandoned house,
where my eyes met hers.
Tumble I over her tombstone,
which once I knew and heard.

The warm wind that hides away in the
eventless foliage,
preserves the old painting in its endearing
grasp.
It nails the coffin to which we secure the ill-
understood truth,
distancing self from the stagnant lake.

“ROCK BOTTOM” BY AURA MARTIN

Cento from *Wrong Norma* by Anne
Carson & *The Goldfinch Caution Tapes* by
James D'Agostino

I'm sitting in a wicker chair, old, from the back porch,
brought in for winter. I didn't worry about being
exhausted. Me sitting here, by a lamp, wrapped in a
quilt, beside the giant black windows, this December
blackness, this 4.30 a.m.

I'm glad for all this gloom this morning. Nothing
between you and your heart of darkness. We writers feel
the burden of being a subject-in-process no matter who
we are. Funny thing to worry about.

I can feel it. I can feel it, there's no way I'm not catching
this thing. Open my notebook and go get in the grave
of what you have to say. Unstressed stressed isn't a poetic
foot, it's a life summary. Is there a way to win? No,
baby, but there's a way to lose more slowly. The game is
keep the shovelful of dirt out of your mouth.

The small creak of my chair. The loudness of the silence
of a kitchen at night. Obscured anxieties or questions
like, What to write? And Who cares? I should get back
to words. I knew I should be writing a straightforward
story, or even a poem, but I didn't. Hurts like a nine but
I've always been a cry baby five. Sorry, dramatic. Keep
your pages open a little while longer. Maybe you
unwrap the lettered bandages of words to let the
wounds a little while. Write how it next subsides in
greater collapse, then how it comes to topple. Here's to
getting lost. Come back later for Anne Carson, you who
grabs my shoulder, says it's late.

Pity's pretty simple. Go ahead. Grind your teeth. What
I like about you, baby, is you're rock bottom.



“HURT” BY AURA MARTIN

Cento from Tell Me by Kim Addonizio, “Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude” by Ross Gay, “Opera Singer” by Ross Gay, & The Book of (More) Delights: Essays by Ross Gay

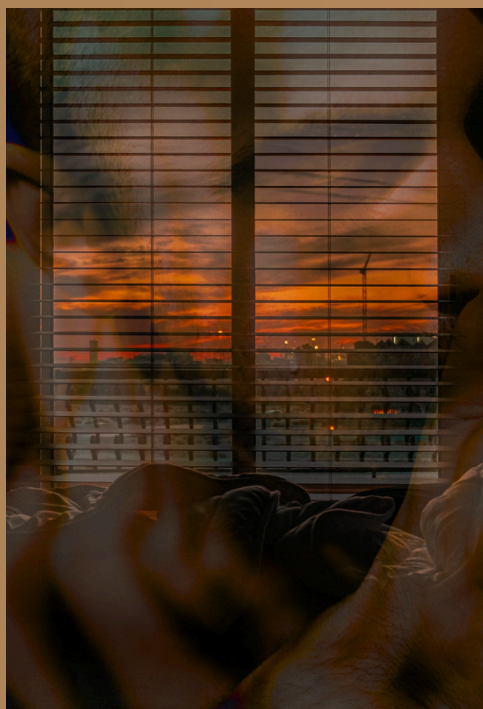


I want my life back, where did it go, I want it all to be different but I'm standing here. My heart is so goddamned fat with grief that I've begun hauling it in a wheelbarrow. I'm sad, and everyone knows what that means. I will be slogging through the obscure country of my sadness in all its monotone flourish. You know how poets can be. Call it grief, ambition, knot of self that won't untangle, fear of my own heart.

How fiercely I loved. It's true, I can't forget. He belongs to me so purely now he's left me, he'll never come back. I'm still seeing his face the night it closed to me forever like a failed business, iron grillwork across the door, dirty windows, trash scattered over the floor and the fixtures taken out. Oh God I feel so desperately lonely is what I'm trying to say. What do you think this singing and shuddering is, what this screaming and reaching and dancing and crying is?

Isn't it the sweetest sound, the beautiful, arrogant ego refusing to disappear? That's my talent, that's why this poem won't get finished unless you drag me from it. Maybe I'm afraid of the ends of things. Maybe I'm afraid of failure.

I am going to stop thinking about my losses now and listen to yours. Tell me how you hurt, even though I can't help you.



“HOLD ME” BY AURA MARTIN



Cento from “For the Nefarious” by Mai Der Vang,
“Look to the New Moon” by Mai Der Vang, Meet
Me Tonight in Atlantic City by Jane Wong, “Essay
on Craft” by Ocean Vuong, & “Not Even This” by
Ocean Vuong

I’m home in Jersey and slumped at the kitchen table.
My hair is dip-dyed in snot, tears, and hot mascara. Here

I was, a grown woman, trying to come up with
something I never desired in the first place. I’m so tired
of being strong.

I think about what it means to write about heartache
and the hope of love. Over and over, I roll around in the
greasy glut of being wanted, but I am left to sing alone.

No one else is coming.

Something is running in your heart, tireless, my mother
says. Something in you is stronger than you are.

Even if I don’t want to, I had to start with the heart.

Blood gets realer when you feel it. Trust me to be
painful, because I, too, need a place to hold me. Isn’t
poetry all around?



“PLAYING HURT” BY ALAN BRICKMAN

My body is failing, despite years of medical interventions large and small, and so I am never not playing hurt.

When I was younger, there was basketball, hiking, dancing, a robust life, feeling invincible, as young people do. I loved basketball most of all, and as a result, I've had dozens of sprained ankles, and then inevitably, my first quote-unquote major injury – a badly torn meniscus – then another, then all the surgeries. Add to that the inherited and inevitable bad hips and back, and I woke up one morning and I was old and infirm. I am determined to keep living, and won't be stopped from participating in the lives of my friends, my family, myself. I've embraced the necessities of my circumstances: all sorts of ankle and knee braces, and a dizzying mélange of medications: ibuprofen and naproxen, of course, but also glucosamine, gabapentin, Voltaren, hydrocodone. I ice my joints compulsively. I avail myself of all the medical and pharmaceutical gimmicks I can find so that I can, as the athlete in me likes to say, play hurt.

But it can be genuinely demoralizing to go out into the world, to travel around the city and see parks and basketball courts where people were playing, running and jumping, high-fiving their teammates, sharing the joy of movement, of sports, of the vigorous life that may be slipping away from me. It isn't that I am homebound – I'm not! I can still go to the movies and sit in the dark, or return from the grocery store and struggle up the steps to my front door with too many over-filled plastic bags. I see friends, go out to dinner, I do stuff, but I also wonder if jump shots, rebounds, boxing out, and all the aspects of the game I love were perhaps now things of the past.

After dinner one night, I drove to a park in my neighborhood that had a half-court with a rusted metal backboard and a hoop with a metal-chain net. I brought a basketball and bounced it as I walked onto the court.



“PLAYING HURT” BY ALAN BRICKMAN

It was almost dark and I was alone. I looked up at the orange hoop and could immediately imagine the games I've played. I could feel the opposing player leaning on me under the basket, and could smell his sweaty t-shirt. I hear all the sounds of the game – the point guard yelling and pointing, sneakers gripping the asphalt, the onlookers cheering. I can taste the salty sweat covering my face, then I see myself – my former self – leap for the ball, put it in the basket for a score, then turn and run back to my team's defensive end. But just as easily as I had conjured these memories, they fade and vanish, and I worried that my playing days have similarly evaporated into smoke. I bounced the ball twice, and squared to the basket to shoot.

I return again and again to the idea of playing hurt. But am I recovered enough to join a pick-up game and play, really play? Am I ... enough? I pull my car to the curb by a basketball court in a neighborhood near the college. I watch a few games as I sit in my car, and decide that the size of the players and quality of play is at an acceptable level – inviting rather than intimidating. I get out of the car, retie my sneakers, and stretch my calves. I walk as straight and upright as I can to an opening in the chain link fence, and inquire who was next. Luckily, a team needs a fifth, which means I will be next. Because

I am well over six feet with broad shoulders and muscular arms, I have always been picked for these impromptu games. I stretch some more and take off my sweatshirt.

The first few plays are fine. I can run well enough, and I can pivot if I'm careful. Jumping is difficult so I rely on rough play and boxing out to get rebounds. I pass the ball willingly and often which I know will endear me to my teammates. A missed shot bounces off the rim and comes directly to me.

When I lay it up and in, my team wins and will therefore play again. I limp to the water fountain for a drink, feeling both exhilarated and apprehensive. I think about Willis Reed of the Knicks, about whom I'd first heard the phrase. And just like Willis, I am playing hurt.

The next game begins smoothly enough, up and down, lots of made shots and thus no rebounds to chase, and I am mostly away from the action. Then my team comes down on offense and the ball swings around to me. A defensive switch, and I am face-to-face with a heavier slower player. I notice a lumbering big man drop back into the lane. I fake left, drive right, and easily beat my man. I gather myself for my next move, spinning past the big man under the basket for a clear path to a score.

“PLAYING HURT” BY ALAN BRICKMAN

I plant my left foot hard and as my new sneaker grips the floor, there is a sickening snap and crunch in my knee that is loud enough to be heard over the noise of the park.

That was the last day of my previous life, with today and what followed as the painful next chapter. Eight months after that spin move shredded my ACL, and after the MRIs that were only supposed to precede the ligament reconstruction but that also revealed my spinal stenosis, I now walk regularly with the cane which I have avoided for years – I am self-conscious and vain! – but now need to manage my balance because the nerve damage resulted in a drop foot on both sides. I wear two AFOs for the drop feet, as well as a knee brace with stabilizing metal slats.

I understand that pride and hubris caused me to cross a line from playing hurt to playing to hurt. One game too many or too soon and it changes your life. This is not only true in sports. All kinds of non-sports endeavors have those moments, cracks in time that reverberate one phase of a life into the next. I wonder if there is an analog to playing hurt for office workers, retail clerks, baristas. I can certainly see it for restaurant servers, carrying heavy trays and on their feet for hours, and performers of course – musicians, dancers, stage actors who were essentially athletes, as their bodies were their primary instruments. In any case, here I am, on the past-tense side of my crack in time, now saddled with daily difficulty and limitation.

I decide to start going to the gym. I do the elliptical, lift weights, ride the stationary bike, walk the treadmill. At one point, I stop using my cane and do running and jumping exercises with the AFOs. The stronger I feel, the more I think about neighborhood basketball courts and pick-up games. Against the advice of my doctors and my friends, I calculate when I will play again. Play hurt.



“IMAGINE A MOTHER MISSES HER SON” BY MARGARET GILLIO

AFTER THE EXTENDED TORTURE AND MURDER OF SAM NORDQUIST, TRANSGENDER BLACK MAN, CANANDAIGUA, NY, 2024.

light bounces off
worn floorboards
and is swallowed by
the abrupt dark yawning
of the room
a black rectangle
the mother pretends
not to see because
she was happy
for her son
when he grew too big
to sleep in a
child's bedroom
instead, he drove
halfway across the country
from Minnesota to
God Knows Where,
New York
searching for love
searching for himself

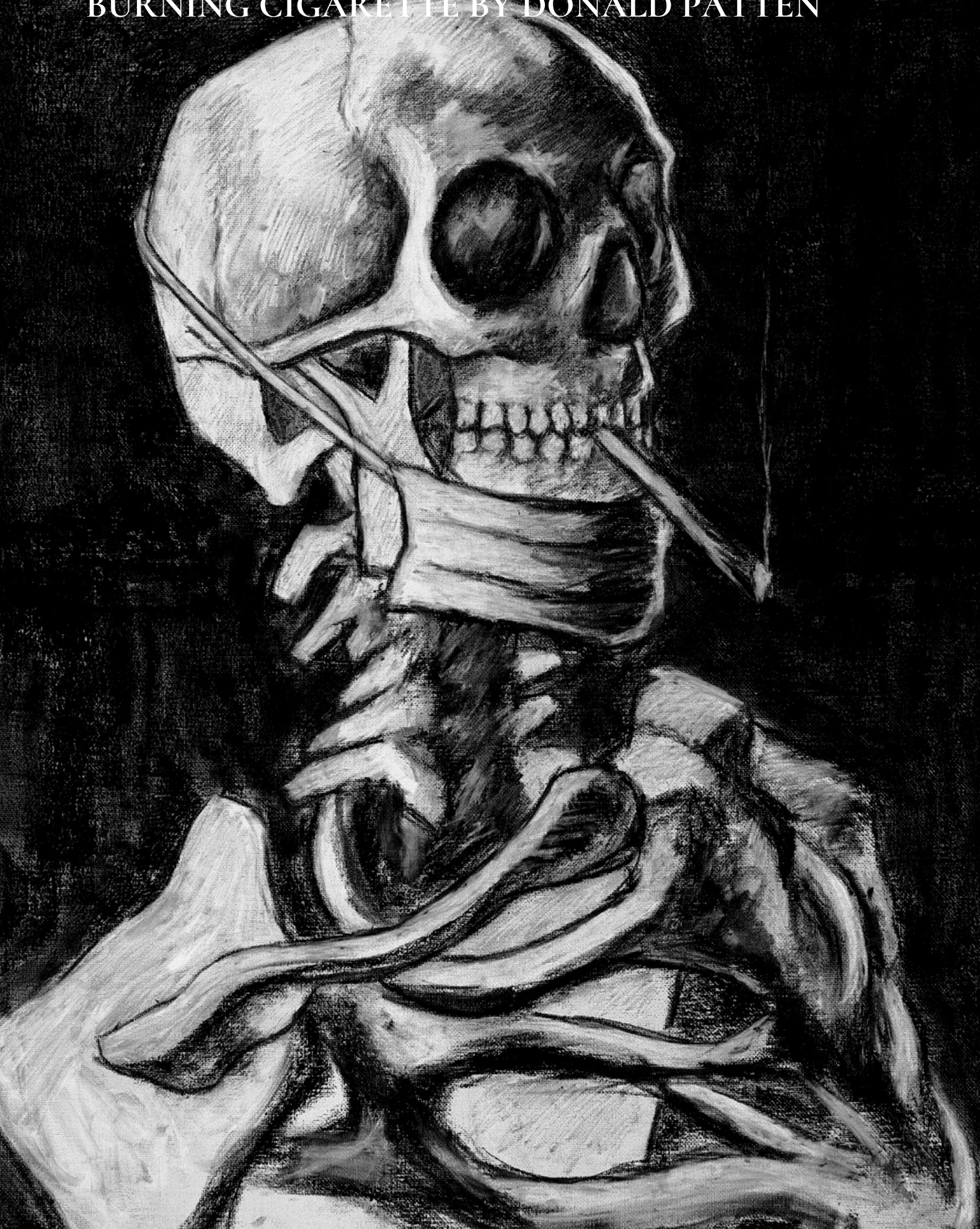
imagine a mother aches
for her lost son
she leans against
the doorframe breathing in
faint traces of cologne
and sweat
she tears
a fingernail, this pain
easier than
the heartbreak
that is too enormous
to feel.



LAVIETES, MATT, AND JON SCHUPPE SAM NORDQUIST KILLING: MINNESOTA TEEN'S DEATH IN HOTEL ROOM
22 WAS ACCIDENTAL, CHARGES SAY. NBC NEWS, [NBCNEWS.COM/NEWS/US-NEWS/SAM-NORDQUIST-
KILLING-ROOM-22-RCNA194129#](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/sam-nordquist-killing-room-22-rcna194129#). ACCESSED 7 JUNE 2025.

“UNTIL THE END” BY GIULIO R.M. MAFFII

MASKED SKULL OF A SKELETON WITH A
BURNING CIGARETTE BY DONALD PATTEN



“WET, HOT MIDWESTERN SUMMER” BY AVA O’MALLEY



“You cut it really close,” my sister observed.

All her entertainment for the three-hour train ride – a rose gold iPad, a Delia Owens paperback, and a pair of AirPods – arranged neatly on the table in front of her. The train’s route snaked through unfamiliar and barren territory; distant suburbs and cities swallowed by corn fields that various college classmates originated from, but that held no significance to me. I was eager to play voyeur to the sundried pastures that filled the space between Chicago and Springfield, Illinois.

The train rolled from the station minutes after Beloved and I were seated, as if to wag a warning finger in our faces. We had left far too late in the afternoon to catch a 5:20 train and hit traffic on Lower Wacker, of course. I white-knuckled the handle of my duffle bag all the way to the station, my mind fringed with nerves. Despite our impending, non-negotiable breakup, I invited Beloved to accompany me to my cousin’s wedding, and then he almost made us miss the train.

“The idea of you meeting my entire family weeks before you break up with me makes me want to die,” I had texted him, in June. “But I also want to go with you.”

“Whatever you want,” he replied. “I understand.”

It burned me up that he was so nonchalant about all of it.

One January evening, a few weeks shy of our two-year anniversary, he pitched the plan to me. “By the next time I have to go away,” he informed me, “We should break up.”

“WET, HOT MIDWESTERN SUMMER” BY AVA O’MALLEY

Not “I will break up with you,” or “you will break up with me.” An abstract, third thing—
“we will break up.” An omnipotent force, a mindless and painless separation that stripped
blame from both of us. An act of God or nature, but definitely not either one of us. This is
how it would be clean. This is how it would be OK.

It had been seven months since he told me that he didn’t want to break up right away, but
that he enjoyed attention from other women. It had been six months since I agreed to stay
with him until circumstance stepped in to kill off our love. It had been five months since we
celebrated Valentine’s Day, and everything felt hollow and wrong, and he used money to
soothe me. It had been four months since I attended his stepsister’s wedding and guests
fawned over us, saying we made the most beautiful couple. Holding back tears, I watched
him stand beside the wedding party in his custom tuxedo, and I was in love with him and
ashamed of myself. It had been three months since we went on a trip to New York and I
pretended to be happy as we drifted between vintage stores and lesbian bars. Three months
since we fought in his parked car outside of my apartment about how he never wanted to
do what I wanted to do, and I lied to my roommate that we were having seasonal allergies
to cover up the fact that we had been sobbing minutes before entering the house. It had
been two months since he booked a national tour and told me that we “didn’t need to break
up for this one,” and a full moon rose, and I seriously considered ending things. But I didn’t.
I stayed.

It had been one month since I collapsed in a drunken, mascara-streaked heap in our
friend’s arms after a rained-out pride parade and unloaded the miserable weight of all of this
onto her.

And now, I was taking him to a family wedding.

Beloved slept, his head in my lap, and I played with his bleached hair. He looked so at
peace. I felt uncomplicatedly in love with him then— just a person admiring another
person— and I did not shame myself for it.

Hours later, the train slowed to a stop in Springfield, which was dead and dark before us.
The sun had set hours ago, and only a few yellow streetlamps lit the empty streets of the
city. It was so much smaller than I had anticipated, and the air was hot and thick, even at the
late hour, as though we were trapped under a dome. My eyes shifted to Beloved, who was
not looking at me, but around at the lack of people, lack of clothing stores, lack of
civilization. I often melted for these types of small towns, with their old brick buildings and
fringe alternative scenes, but I knew that my lover did not see kitsch or novelty in a
groaning, loping city. He only saw the roads that would lead back to something more.

“WET, HOT MIDWESTERN SUMMER” BY AVA O’MALLEY



“Do you think there’s a gay bar here?” I asked with a smile.

We followed my sister and her boyfriend towards the hotel. My bag, full of formalwear, was heavy on my shoulder, and Beloved offered to carry it. I admired his strength, and then I ached. As we walked down a quiet main road, I glimpsed a beam of pink light, the snap of a rainbow flag in light wind. It couldn’t be— but it was.

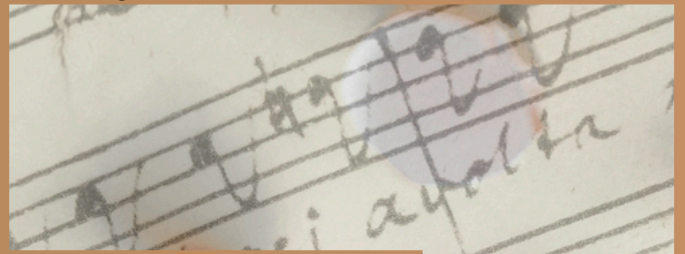
The only business on the main street that was teeming with life, like a shining veneer in a mouth of gray teeth, was a gay bar. It was called Clique. Music and lively conversations hovered in the distance like a mirage of sound, and I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Beloved and I exchanged a surprised look and dissolved into a fit of laughter. As my sister announced that we had actually been walking the wrong way, Beloved and I declared that we would be returning to Clique that same night.

Hours later, after greeting my parents in the hotel, and a quick change into better clothes, the rain came. It broke open that opaque black sky with a Biblical vengeance. Beloved and I holed up in a dark corner of the gay bar, our backs to the dance floor, which was empty save for a few revelers who jumped between beams of yellow and blue light on the elevated platform. From the rolled-up windows, I saw lightning slice through the sky, and we buried our faces into one another’s shoulders, laughing at a video only we would find funny. It was times like this that I could ignore his mounting disapproval of me, his impatience. Perhaps I was pathetic. Perhaps I was trying to scrape at the bottom of the cup, groveling for our last dregs of sweetness.

In the humid, dark expanse of Springfield in July, I took what I could get.

“AM I FINALLY ON POINTE?” BY JOANNE MACIAS



That delicate dance I'm forced into,
the one where I wonder my place.
Is today's floor full of eggshells
or more solid so I can dance with grace?

I know I seem extra hot and cold,
I try to keep it bottled inside.
But occasionally cracks appear,
and I look where I can confide.

Was I all a bit too much?
Did I push you too far away?
I'm still learning the moves -
I'd prefer if you could stay.

I wondered if I needed you more
then you ever would need me.
Would you ever let me comfort you
offering more than you could see.

Has the music finally stopped?
Sounds now only echo in the distance.
I want this to keep going -
but all I get is resistance.



“NOWHERE TO BE FOUND” BY JOANNE MACIAS



I wait for the moment that I can share
my news.
I'm so excited that I did something great.
I want to tell you first.
You held my hand through the darkness.
But you are nowhere to be found.
I want to share how you helped me
through,
but you are nowhere to be found.
You promised me that I could talk if I
needed.
That I wouldn't go through this alone.
But you are nowhere to be found.



I now need to see if anyone will hear my
news.
I was still really excited that I did
something great.
I didn't get to have someone hold my
hand,
guiding me out of the never-ending
darkness
when I still felt like I needed it most.
I had so much to tell you -
but you are nowhere to be found.

“IF I CAN JUST...” BY JOANNE MACIAS

My mouth opens,
you stop me before a sound escapes.
You smile wickedly,
proud that you got your way.

I want to try again,
I know my voice should be heard.

My life is reduced to seconds.
Second best,
only a second of your time –
but only if I were to beg.

Should I try again?
My voice deserves to be heard.

I feel the curtains close around me,
the darkness is getting stronger.
Constantly pushed back,
surviving now only on what you feed
me.

What's the point in trying?
No one even cares if my voice was
heard.



“PLEASE JUST LET ME SELF-ISOLATE” BY PHILIP ATHANS



Tasked with having to do this,
I find I would rather not.
Invited to attend that,
I'll have an imaginary scheduling
conflict.

Required to be there at 9:00 am—sharp,
I probably won't show up at all.
And please understand,
I will never feel left out.



“MISSING PERSONS” BY ROBERT DONOHUE

I solved a mystery when I was six,
It happened in our neighborhood; there was
A missing girl. Her mother was distraught,
And melted down while talking to the cops.
We gathered close to her, to give support,
But even so, she seemed a little off,
And if we had intended to console
We weren't offering much sympathy.

That's when I made my way into the house
The missing child had just vanished from,
Her mother was still sobbing to the cops.
“Did anybody check behind the couch?”
I asked, and answering my question, checked
Behind the couch. The girl was there, asleep.

Boomers

When they were gone, it was like The Rapture,
And we were left behind; whole wings
Of the junior high abandoned to dust and echoes.

They molded some to meet their needs,
Like the health teacher who kept her style
Of velvet, and heavy amber beads.

Our history books ended with World War Two,
But we did learn about the perils of hitchhiking,
And how to say bell-bottoms in French.



“MISSING PERSONS” BY ROBERT DONOHUE

If anything, we were more cautious, and when I
told

A boomer friend that from my class
Only two had died, he looked surprised, and said:

“In my class, more of us died just falling out of
windows.”

Commonwealth

When they were kids, my mom and uncle’s goal
Was to construct a swimming pool, and they
Believed it when they heard a neighbor say
He’d pour the concrete if they dug the hole.
So, with their BB guns they would patrol
The wealthy part of town; their chosen prey
Would be a rich kid they could march away
And dig for them, these siblings in control.

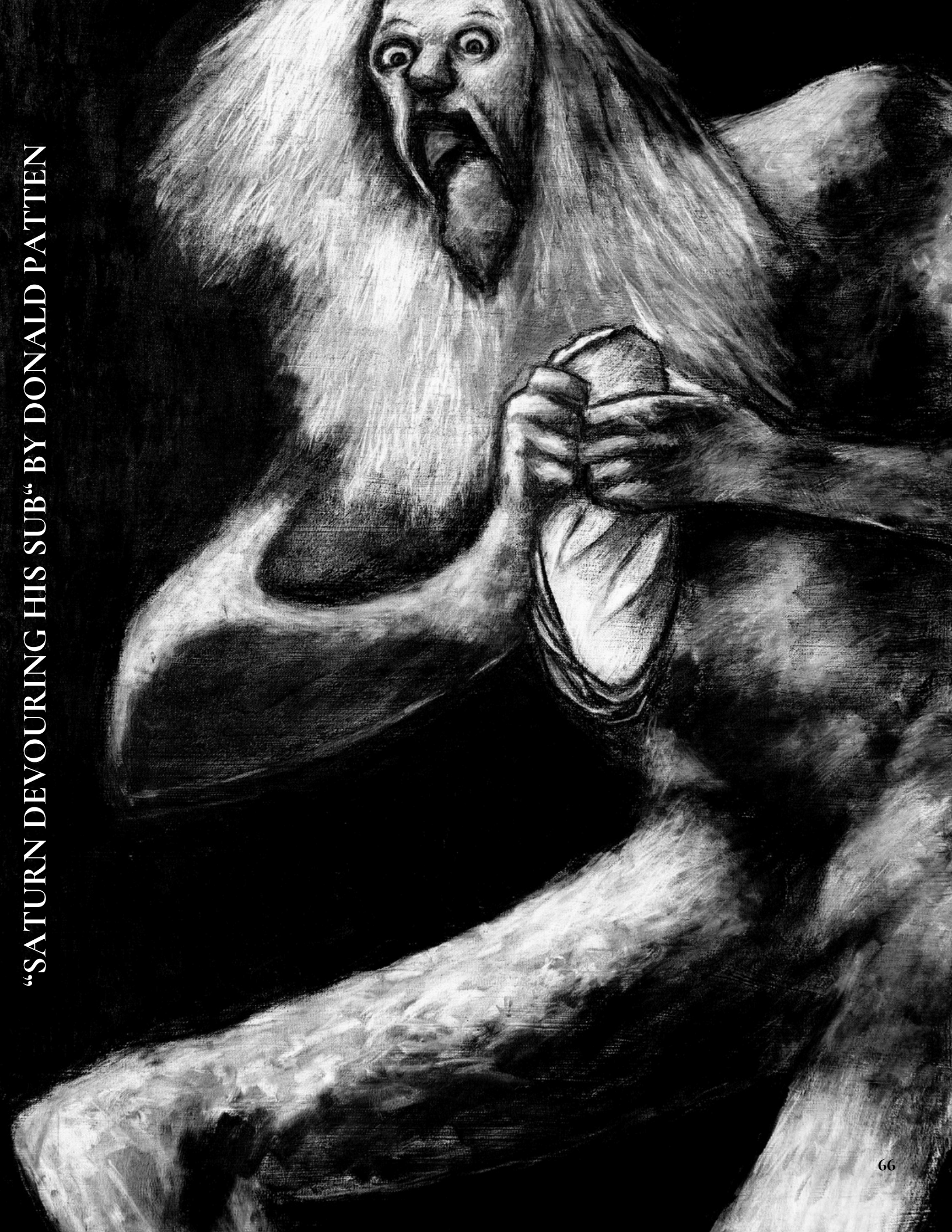
They failed to carry out their crazy scheme
Yet none-the-less the growing suburbs came
To overturn each orchard, field, and stream,
The loss of which my childhood was to gain
A swimming pool, my mom and uncle’s dream
Made real for me, upon their old domain.



The background of the page is a complex, abstract graphic design. It features large, bold black shapes that resemble stylized, flowing forms or perhaps the negative space of a figure. These black shapes are set against a white background. Interspersed within and around these black forms are vibrant, saturated colors: red, blue, and green. These colored elements often appear as pointed, petal-like, or leaf-like shapes, some of which are arranged in radial patterns, suggesting a stylized floral or organic motif. The overall effect is one of high contrast and dynamic, organic movement.

“WAKING SLEEP“ BY EDWARD
SUPRANOWICZ

“SATURN DEVOURING HIS SUB” BY DONALD PATTEN



“BAGS” BY BRIANNA AGUILAR

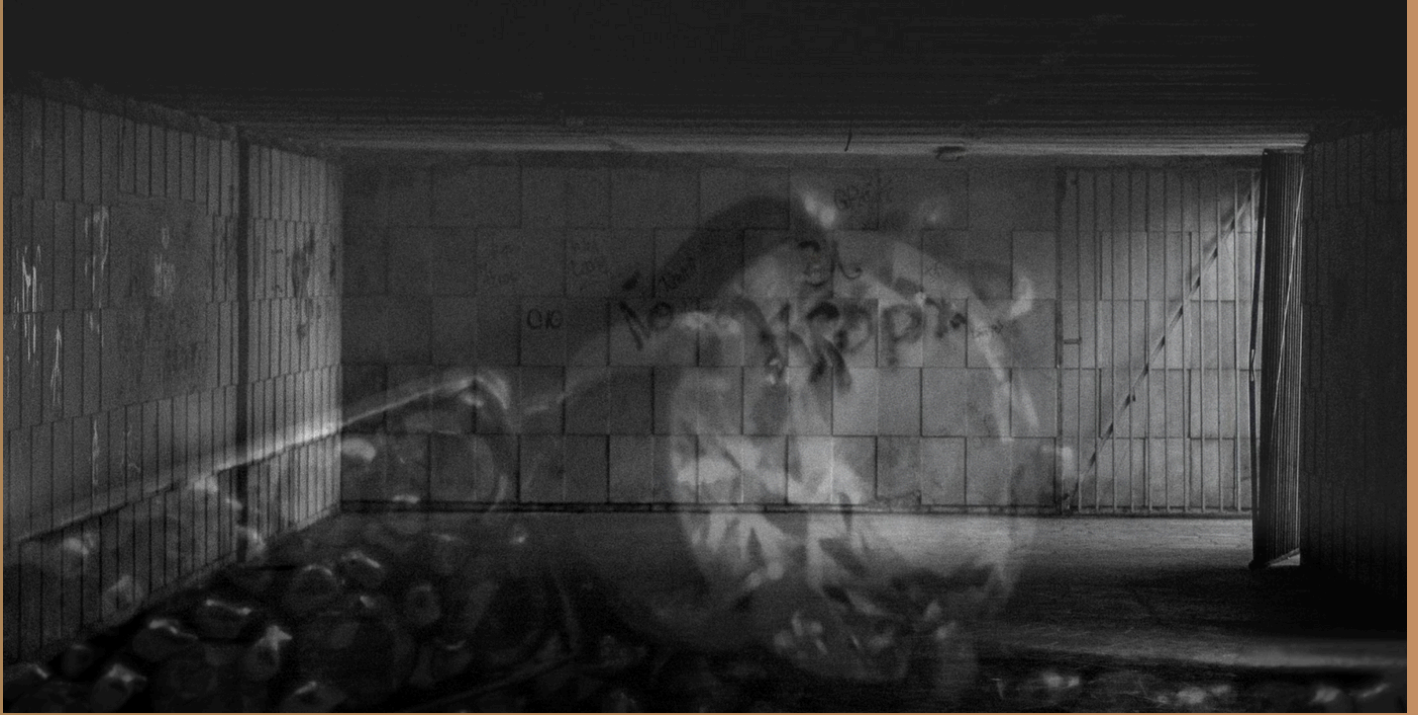
“The bags are packed and ready to go,” I said.

This was the person I loved the most, fell hard for, and saw a future with. A future consisting of sitting outside, staring out at acres on the porch, smelling the aroma of fresh-cut grass as the breeze brushes by my nose. Our little ones playing and laughing, bringing joy to our home. Us, having each other, showing our endless love and the fire our relationship had. Being your wife and experiencing your fragile hugs and your kisses that brought fireworks every time, providing loyalty and love. That’s all I wanted for the future. A true home. You, being my home. I see myself smiling, knowing life is good with you. I stay smiling, slowly drifting back into reality, and end up in your little room where my bags are packed. Your room, a small space where there was just the bed and a few dressers. I had my paintings on the walls, which I felt was my happy space, but not with you.

The smile fades away, and looking into your eyes, I no longer see that future with you. You’ve shattered and broken me into pieces that I cannot put back together. Stabbed my heart and bruised it enough that those bruises are never going away. The sickening idea that you have broken the trust and love we had, sadly, I no longer saw you the same. When I see your eyes, I don’t see a future, just a void of emptiness. My heart has always been devoted to you, and I’d given you the reins to control how I felt. Instead of peace and happiness and riding into the sun, you chose to steer it into a deep, dark tunnel where no light will ever come out. I will eventually have to find it myself. Left alone and broken, I had nothing left to look forward to with you. I see pictures of us on the wall, the memories and activities that I truly cherished with you. More importantly, the ring, the promise you held to one day keep, was left on the floor. Left behind, now meaningless.



“BAGS” BY BRIANNA AGUILAR

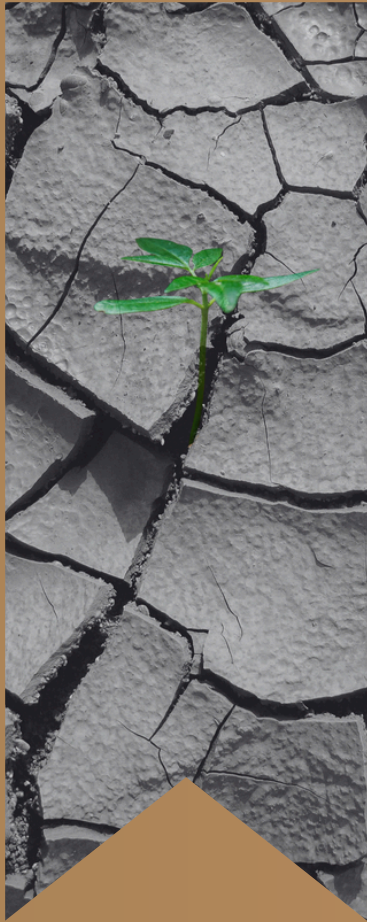


The tears rolled down my face, knowing that dream was never going to be reality anymore. I looked at the things we shared in disgust. I could no longer see you the same. You were my first true love and my happy place. The one where I looked with deep, true love. The bond we had was unbreakable. We went on many adventures together and explored the world. Although exploring the world wasn't enough for you, right? I was never good enough. My body, my love, my everything. I gave my loyalty and trust until the end. "You're my only one," and "I can't lose you. I'd probably take myself from this world if I did" weren't believable anymore.

I tuned you out and finally decided to decide for myself. You no longer had control over me. I was no longer going to be your victim. I smirk because now I can be free of you and never let you hurt me again. And when those first words left my mouth, all you had to say was, "You don't love me enough to fix this?"

"The words 'I love you' never meant anything," I said, "The bags are packed and ready to go." I walked out into the night and never looked back.

“THE WEIGHT OF NO ONE” BY ALAUNA LESTER



My soul is a field after harvest—stripped bare, waiting for someone who never comes. I lead a lonely life. Isolated from the world, I watch people go about their days with friends and family. I tell myself it's because I'm a writer that I'm lonely—but no, the truth is I'm emotionally dependent, scared of what real love feels like. My heart is a locked tomb, its key lost like Atlantis. I'm too frightened to feel the touch of a man whose aim isn't to maim. I flinch at the thought of the sun on my face, convinced it'll burn like the cigarettes all those years ago. My mind is full of desires I don't know how to name, dreams I no longer chase, and problems I can't seem to solve. Am I simply not good enough for anyone? Am I too broken to be truly loved? Questions simmer in my head like soup on the stove, bubbling past the lid and escaping my lips as I lie in bed, holding myself tightly. I carry the weight of no one, and it is somehow heavier than love.

Survival mode is the only way I know how to play.

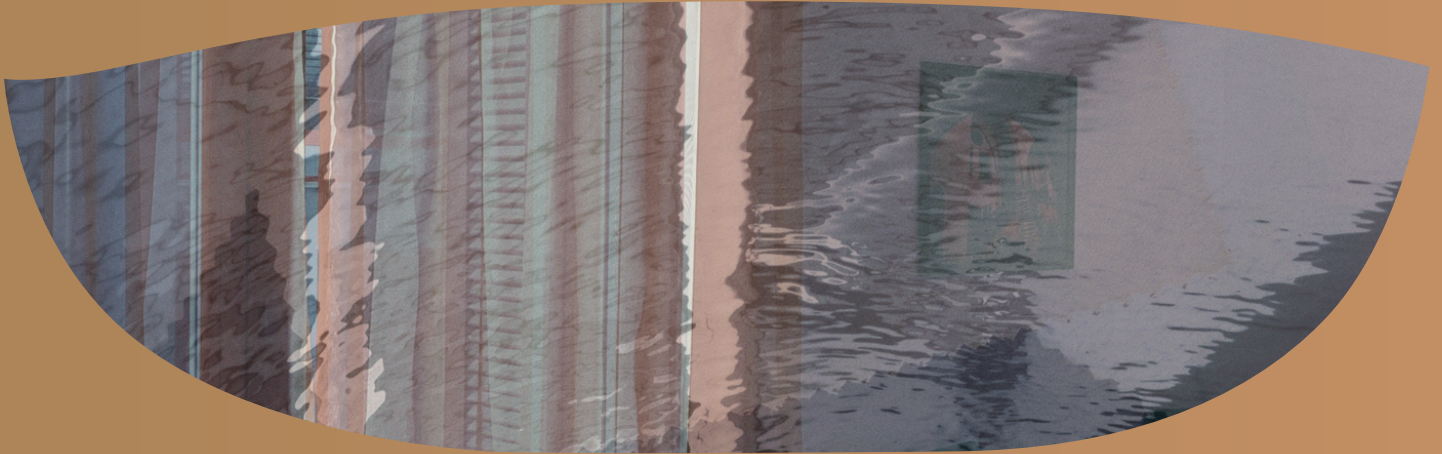
What feels familiar is safe; that's what I've learned.

Even if familiar has never been secure, my mind and body disagree. I go through my days, half of which are spent at my desk, staring at my computer or phone, hoping someone—anyone—would message me. No one does, and I shut everything off, crawling back into the abyss I call my bed. Even when a reply comes through, I keep it off and wonder where they were when I needed them. It feels like I'm stranded in the middle of everything, yet everything and everyone else has moved on. I'm getting lonelier and lonelier, my true self begging to be released from its cage. I splinter at the thought of being fully seen. Do I know what that feels like? Probably not, but I need it like lungs need air—even when all that's left to breathe is

water.



“WHERE DREAMS USED TO LIVE” BY PATRICIA PEASE



Gold, amber and sage paint chip samples flutter to the floor like an amalgam of tiny autumns. We are trying to revive smothered affections by painting our kitchen together. An anemic attempt to resuscitate happier times. Like hanging up cheerful curtains over a neglected, grimy window. “Did you throw the color samples into the air, or did they slide off the table and fall unassisted by your casual hatred? It is casual now, isn’t it?” I cannot penetrate the steel guarding your eyes.

My fingers trace your calloused palms, but you pull away. We are two opposing air masses colliding—sucking up dirt and foliage—destroying the landscape, dumping it back down like careless children indifferent to the chaos we’ve created.

The pain inside has grown teeth and is gnawing away at the thin skin around my eyes. They twitch, resisting inevitable tears. I won’t cry. On principle. You’d like that. Watching me dissolve into piteous pools, craving you...begging you. My grief has metastasized into something malignant, feeding off my longing for your forgiveness...longing for the distilled magic that was once us. With heavy boots you stomp about the room, you spike curses in my direction, punctuating the air with clenched fists. You grab the vase I created and throw it, striking the wall against your shadow of self-pity. The imprint implores me to turn away. But my gaze holds fast to the scarred wall, dented by fury only a betrayed mind can inflict.

Our breath has commingled into exhaustion. I can hear you wheezing from the effort to express your hurt, the pulsating vein that throbs in your neck. Our words are like flimsy hands grasping for purchase within a slippery world.

Let’s climb the stairs in silence, put away our words weighted with weapons, and drift into sweet slumber. If we only unite in sleep, then it’s time for rest, my love.

It’s time to let go of our failed hearts and fall into that emptiness where dreams used to live.



“ART” BY CLAUDIA WYSOCKY



can

I
paint
you a
picture of
how it feels to be
lost in a dream?

The colors are all wrong
and the shapes never stay still but

every time I try to hold one
it whispers something

in a language I don't know

but understand

perfectly.



“MELTING CLOCK” BY CLAUDIA WYSOCKY



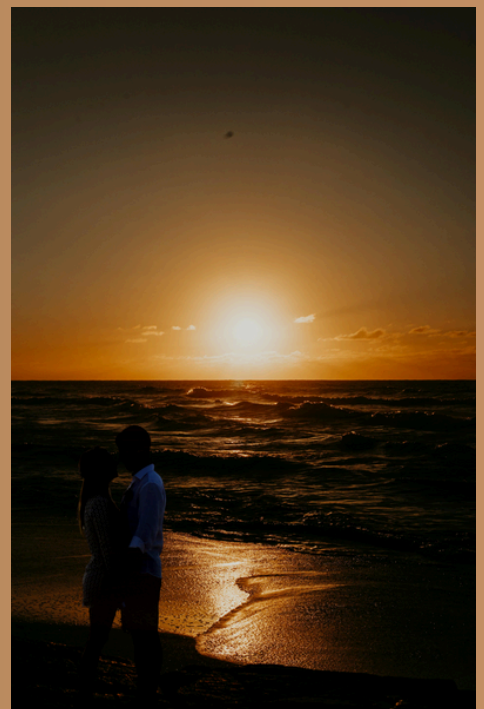
take
me
down
to
the sea, I said,
the one that smells like love and sex and broken things.
He took me hand in hand, my wayward heart in his other
palm,
and promised he wouldn't let go until I was ready.

We walked on damp sand, kicked up mists of wind and
water,
and I could taste the salt on my lips.
I asked him why he had taken so long to find me.
He looked at me with an understanding smile.

sometimes it takes a while for people to melt into each
other,
he said. You were just too hard, and I was too busy being
cold.

I had time to kill, so I spent it slowly melting away,
like a clock that hangs on the wall, except time doesn't
stand still.

when we reached the end of our walk, where water met
land
and we couldn't go any further without getting wet,
we sat down and watched as the sun started sinking into
the horizon,
casting orange light across the sky.



“BUTTERFLY EFFECT” BY CLAUDIA WYSOCKY



to
you
I was
a
saint.
to
everyone
else
I was
a
liar.



the butterfly effect:
a butterfly flaps its wings in Texas and the winds change in New York.

the butterfly effect:
you tell someone you love them, and they die in a car crash en route to you.

I confess to you that I loved you, and so from this day forth I will be silent.

I will not speak of my love for the world. I will hold it close to my chest.

imagine me as an empty hallway with doors off limits,
one labeled “love,” one labeled “hope,” one labeled “peace.”

imagine me standing at the end of it, arms crossed,
my head cocked like a wary dog, my eyes narrowed.

It is all yours; it has always been yours. but I cannot let you through those doors,
not again. how simple it would be if we could understand
our impact on each other’s lives. But what if we could, and still chose to do nothing?

“BOAT” BY GIULIO R.M. MAFFII



“ONCE, I WAS THERE” BY SARAH SAMARBAF



We lose people. They lose us. Some bonds wear down so gradually we barely notice until nothing is left. Others break, sharp and sudden. Sometimes, you see the end coming from a mile away. Other times, it blindsides you and you're left trying to make sense of the wreckage. Life provides a full toolbox for separation; death, accidents, running out of things to say or even the dull monotony of routine.

And then, there are days when the past ambushes you. Maybe on a dark sunset, you're crossing the street. You spot someone you used to know sitting alone in a cozy café, elbow on the table, staring into space, cigarette ash about to fall into her forgotten coffee.

You think about walking over, opening the door, saying, 'It's been too long,' and let the conversation spill out, intoxicated by nostalgia, clinking our glasses till dawn.

But you don't move. You won't. You can't.

Instead, you let the scene play out in your head: 'How much you've—'

A car screeches to a stop, inches away from you. Your reflection stares back at you from the glass: 'We've changed.'

And that's it.

“ONCE, I WAS THERE” BY SARAH SAMARBAF

I used to think memory was a companion, like a good movie, you rewatch it on a tedious evening. But the older I got, the more I realized it's something darker. It can feel like a silent panic attack, sneaking up just when you least expect it, much like the warmth of whiskey creeping up your chest, slow yet steady, until you lose your balance.

Little by little, this thing grows inside you and let's call it past-phobia. When you're young, nobody warns you about it. In those reckless days, memory is lightweight, it's nothing more than repetition or some ordinary postcards from your everyday hangouts. But as time passes, the past gets heavier. It grows teeth. You learn that memory isn't a neutral photograph. It's a parasite that feeds on your present.

Years ago, I lost two dear friends, a year apart. Both chose death. Both took their own lives. Our small world —built on shared dreams— collapsed overnight. And the worst part wasn't the grief. It was the sudden, shocking revelation that life itself; that seemingly solid, steadfast ground we had relied upon, had cracked and broken apart, for good.

One of them was a sharp and unpredictable, always a little drunk and high on his own absurdity.

He once invited us to his 'wedding to industry.' And put on a copper ring at the end of the ceremony. Another time, he gathered us for a 'memorial' for one of our most popular living friends. One by one, we went up on stage, giving serious speeches about him, sharing memories, and talking about his paintings and writings. I remember, I laughed and told him: 'But who throws a memorial for someone alive?'

He smiled: 'The dead don't need it, kiddo!'

When we heard about his suicide, the sequence was simple: shock, guilt, silent goodbye. And we honored his last lesson. None of us went to the memorial that was held for him by people who barely knew him. We, his closest friends, did know the dead didn't need it.

The other one was a child at heart, a pure kindness.

He had this habit of gifting everyone he liked a copy of 'Geai' by Christian Bobin. After he was gone, 'Naïve Wonder' (Albain's endearing trait in Geai) became the most romantic badge among us; an unseen mantle of light, as Bobin called it, which we bestowed on those we loved, unknowingly making them sparkle.

“ONCE, I WAS THERE” BY SARAH SAMARBAF

We thought these immense griefs would bind us forever. But time proved that we
were wrong.

A political argument here, a breakup there. A song that cut too deep, a silence that
lasted too long.

Life kept pulling on, and beneath the surface, everything was shifting.

We aged into strangers. Or maybe, I just acted like one.

Not because I stopped caring. But because loving them had become too heavy.
Maybe I was running, not just from the griefs only they understood, but from the
happiness, too, the kind you know you'll never find it again.

I often think about the first time we watched *Dogville* (2003).

Von Trier pulled the rug out from under our feet, revealing how cruel and unstable
our world could be, utterly devoid of humanity.

I've really lost count of how many of us vowed never to trust each other again; right
after witnessing what happened to Grace, the woman seeking refuge in *Dogville*,
whose presence exposed the townspeople's true nature. Even *Dogville*'s bizarre
theatrical *mise-en-scène* as an alienation effect couldn't diminish the film's terror.
Good thing all forgot that vow, we forgot or perhaps repressed the trauma of smashing
Grace's figurines (as her lost innocence in *Dogville*) by raging Verra. Ready to
resurface whenever adulthood turned too harsh and unbearable.

I believe from *Dogville* to *The House That Jack Built*, and to now, we've lived
through three different eras. Even the way we connected with Von Trier has changed.

We've all moved on, some more reluctantly than others. But that's the thing with
memories; they persist, no matter how hard you try to deny them. And the truth is, it's
not just about losing people. It's about losing versions of yourself.

A warm smile from someone who doesn't know you well enough to offer it. A cold
look from someone who does. An old song that awakens long-buried memories. A
stranger's face that reminds you of a familiar one.

Every day, another small fracture. Another small death.

Maybe we needed to wait just fewer than 20 years after *Dogville* for Thomas
Vinterberg to drag us out of our numbness with *Another Round* (2020), to make us
dance, drink, and feel something, again.

“ONCE, I WAS THERE” BY SARAH SAMARBAF



Maybe it needed even longer for Luca Guadagnino to light that spark in *Challengers* (2024), reminding us how absurd it was to let everything slip away during our best years; just like his three characters, who spent theirs apart. [Spoiler Alert: And we, unlike them, might not deserve such a happy ending.]

Screw every institution, every moral code, every culture and politic that led us to this point that leaves us isolated, incapable of getting along with our real selves.

Yet, long live cinema! Because, through the miracles of its gods, we'd learned to embrace the impossible, again and again. Every time in a different form.

Anyway, maybe we were supposed to learn Neil McCauley's 30-Second Rule earlier. It might have spared us the agony of days that exist only as a chaotic phantasm. As he said:

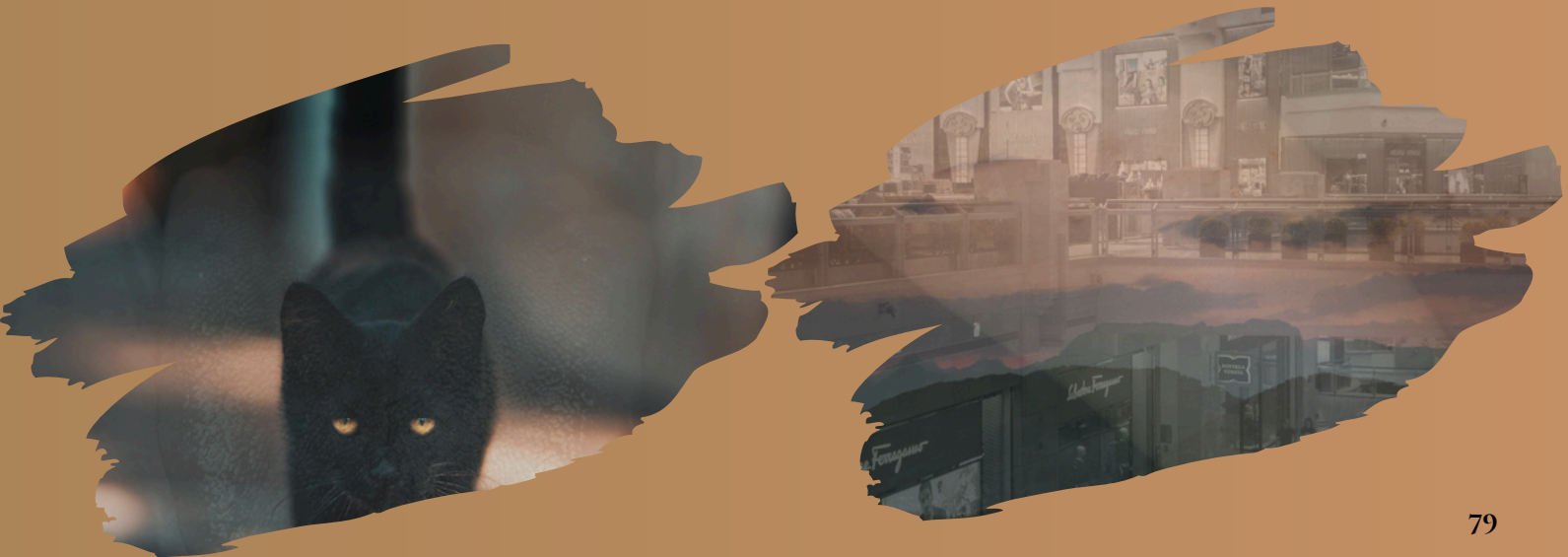
“Never let yourself get attached to anything that you cannot walk out on in thirty seconds if you feel the heat around the corner.” *Heat* (1995)

“FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION” BY VIVIANE FAE-MOSS

Razor lips kiss raw thighs
new ground stomach broken;
barbed tongue swallow, fly away
shifting underground at dusk
tiny city shopping mall
new land: milquetoast nowhere
white space.

Be you my flesh or my superstition
handle raw ventricles maybe
melt away
graveyard cuticle surrenders in midnight paint-chip
toenail cuttings fall in
dry blood kitchen sink, does it run...
away, away with me, you

card shark, see in open-heart surgical goodbye,
not I'd forget to believe---
magical tricks of the light?
No.
But I love you



“UNREST” BY VIVIANE FAE-MOSS



Goodnight, my love.
Sleep well, dream beautifully.
There's rain dripping through the roof
of the little apartment we used to share.

I've been trying to move out for months, now,
but I can't find a place I can afford. I can't stand
the feeling of your absence in these rooms.

I've got sixteen good reasons to freeze to death, all
written down in my journal. I know you'd be
disappointed, but it is a kind of love
to know why one should die and still
choose not to.

In the darkness, I can sometimes see echoes
of your movements, etched in familiar pattern
on the back of my eyelids.
Sometimes, I call out to you and hear your answer.
I take it as proof
the angels only loved me with you.



I don't like going to visit you. You know that.
Until I lost you, graveyards were always just
places to get high and dance and gaze at the stars and
dream up stories of a better world.

“SIMPLE PLEASURES” BY VIVIANE FAE-MOSS

May it find you lying face down
among
the discarded bags of potato chips
and bloodied packing peanuts.
May it walk forever two steps in front,
so you may know the comfort of
cybernetically sharpened ground.

May your peace pull you aside
and tell you it knows a place.
May it lead you along, without saying a
word.

May it show you the long way around
the trenches, through the decorative
parts of war:
hospital shells, women whose clothes
have melted onto their skin, freshly
orphaned children.

May you wish the wailing revenants
luck in the job search.

May you sit down for dinner, just you
and your peace,
eating moldy bread and scavenged
berries

and pretending it's cheese and caviar.
May you make do with whatever
leftover scraps of lamb's wool
you can steal from the vultures.

May you learn to felt it into a blanket
to sleep on,
outside the bounds of here and now,
and
make peace with the drifting ashes.



“BROCHURE FOR A DYSTOPIA” BY MK ZARIEL



i'll stay here, among the buildings that
somehow all look like each other, the
rainfall that might as well be a glitch on
the surface of my eyes—i'll linger
watching you stare at me from the
grass, looking somehow both awkward
and whimsical—haunted by red-brick
brutalism—by colleges copied and
pasted on a thousand landscapes, by one
sensibility—by the way my
dreamscapes are now etched in marble
& concrete & all the buildings
somehow look like doom & you can
sign out but never not be reminded—
i'll watch you look at photos and lose
faith in humanity—knowing we've all
been out of ideas for the last eternity or
so—i'll follow you on the campus tour
through which you nod, smile, break—
you'll walk backwards until you
collapse on the sidewalk that some
decaying old bigot donated and you'll
wonder why you're here in the first
place



SUSAN POLLET



“SELF-ABSOLUTION” BY RALPH DRANOW

A painful memory violates the
 membrane
 of my consciousness,
 like a stealthy burglar,
 pinching my heart.
Held hostage by insecurity,
I was cruel to a friend many years ago,
 his face crumpled as if
 I'd punched him in the gut.
Other unconscious behaviors bang
 on the door of my mind,
self-hatred seeping into my veins.
“How could you have done all that,
 been so blind to other people's
 feelings?”
I wallow in the swamp of misery,
until mercy, a nurse with caring hands
and a gentle smile, pays me a visit.
“You did the best you could then,
 Ralph,
but you can do things differently now.
Give yourself a nice, big hug.”
My arms cradle my ribs,
as I self-consciously tell myself:
 “I love you, sweetheart,
in spite of all your mistakes.
 You're only human.”



“THE BRUSH OF LIFE” BY CHUCK SCHADING



Rory dipped his fox hairbrush into the brilliant white oil and gingerly dropped a single point of light onto the horn of the unicorn he was painting. Then the regal beast jumped off the canvas, galloped around the room three times, gave a spirited whinny, and disappeared into the night.

Erma howled with delight, her giggles filling the nursery as she watched from her bed.

“More!” she yelled.

“That’s enough now,” he said. “Time for bed.”

Rory stood tall and stern as if he were going to yell at her, but he had neither the heart nor the appetite for discipline, as his wife Corrinne would often tell him before her passing.

“Papa, please!” she cried.

“Oh alright,” he said, grinning and wiggling his long-pointed mustache. “What shall it be? Dog or cat? Bunny or bee? Dartwing or dragon?”

“Dragon!” Erma shouted.

“Alas! I’m all out of green!” he declared, suddenly realizing how long it would take to paint all those scales. “A bee it shall be!”

So, Rory quickly painted a simple gold oval with black stripes and silver wings. It flitted around the room, buzzing here and there, then dissipated into the ether.

Erma smiled sweetly.

Then yawned.

Rory had always conjured his paintings and drawings to life for his baby girl. In the beginning they were simple — perhaps a circle painted in pink that would roll off the page and bounce around the room as she tried to catch it in her tiny hands, or the outline of a bell that would ring when she touched it. As she grew and changed, so too did his art, with quacking yellow ducks and panting brown puppies quickly giving way to runes that would speak their sounds and numbers that would count themselves. But it was nature she truly adored, so most evenings the nursery was filled with a menagerie of prancing creatures large and small.

“THE BRUSH OF LIFE” BY CHUCK SCHADING

Though a lesson was often incorporated, the real purpose never changed.

Rory just wanted to see his daughter smile.

When Corrinne lay slowly dying of the morda, which no family in the realm was spared from in those days, Rory would take Erma outside as much as he could. They'd often sit on the edge of the cliff outside their cottage high above the harbor, passing a pair of cracked binoculars back and forth and calling out different things they'd see. Then they'd challenge the other to find it too.

“A boat with a starfish on the sail!”

“A man with a feathered cap selling tarts by the pier!”

“A boy swimming by the shore!”

Some days they'd take long walks on the trails that worked their way down the cliffs to the sea instead. Together they'd watch the tall ships emerge from the morning mist, and then Rory would watch Erma scamper over the dunes as they warmed in the afternoon sun, her knotted strawberry hair waving in the salty breeze. At night, he'd paint the favorite things that she'd seen — a sand beetle, a spotted mare, a seal frolicking on the shore — and then bring them to life with a drop of his conjurer's light.

Most days were long and hard and full of sadness. But those moments, at least, were full of joy. “I love it, Papa,” she said one night after a particularly cute bunny that they'd seen in a meadow that morning — now rendered in powder blue — hopped straight into her bed and snuggled up beside her. “And I love you too.”

Barely a year after Corrinne's funeral pyre had cooled, Erma began showing signs of the morda too.

Lethargy. A pallor of the skin. A tightness in the legs.

And that was just the start.

Eventually Erma could no longer walk on her own, so Rory would carry her to the cliffside. And he would hold the binoculars to her eyes when she no longer had the strength to do it herself.

“I see a rainbow fish walking backwards on the beach,” she joked one day when she could still speak.

That night, a painted rainbow fish walked backwards through her room.

When the academy healers found out about her condition, they warned Rory what was coming.

But because of Corrinne, he already knew. Then they forbade him from taking her out of the cottage ever again.

“You risk too much, conjurer,” they told him. “Too many have died already.

That is when Rory brought the outside to her.

“THE BRUSH OF LIFE” BY CHUCK SCHADING



Rory's arms would ache as he held the binoculars to Erma's face for hours on end in front of her narrow bedroom window. But because she could no longer speak or smile, he could only guess what she saw through its cracked lenses.

A robin? A squirrel? The towering golden sunflowers that grew wild along the cliff's edge?

Rather than guess, he simply painted it all.

His canvases grew larger. The scenes more complex. More colorful. More realistic. Toward the end, Rory was even painting on the walls and the ceiling and the floor, using every ounce of his magic to keep the images alive as long as possible.

One month toward the end, Erma was in a forest, the walls thick with swaying evergreens and honey-loving bears and roaring dragons that would come to visit her. She spent the next month in a meadow of lemongrass, clouds of colorful butterflies filling the sky as ladybugs tickled her feet. On the day she took her last breath, Rory and Erma looked out over the harbor together from their favorite spot on the cliff, watching the tall ships he had painted bob on the shimmering cerulean sea, as ospreys soared through the clouds high above on the ceiling.

Nothing could ever bring her back, nor Corrinne, Rory knew, but from that day on he'd spend every dawn and every dusk at the cliffside, peering through those old binoculars and whispering aloud all that he could see.

There was only one subject he painted though.

Erma.

And she smiled every time.

“HOW TO PRACTICE YOGA” BY DEBORAH Z ADAMS

Lift your crown to the sun, your heart to Heaven. Now begins the end. Gaze gently at the world through eyes grown thick and scarred, but not yet blind. Breathe in.
Breathe out.

Release your blades, display your palms. Let your throat be unconstricted, free of grit and criticism, without complaint, without constraint. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Let your belly round and soften, fill with wisdom and with questions but no answers. When fear and bile rise and rattle a fearsome storm, breathe in, breathe out.

Spread out your toes and take your stance upon the earth. Anchor your roots. Soften your knees, be always ready to spring in case you choose to fly. Breathe in, breathe out.

Allow your hips, those vessels jammed with hardpan and acid, to wail as they resist the pose that begs for clemency. Surrender sin. Breathe in. Breathe out.

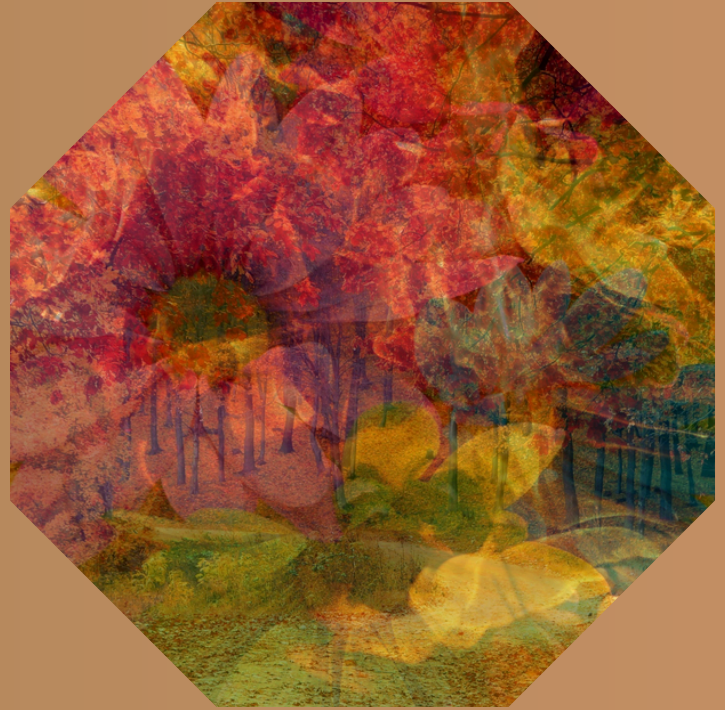
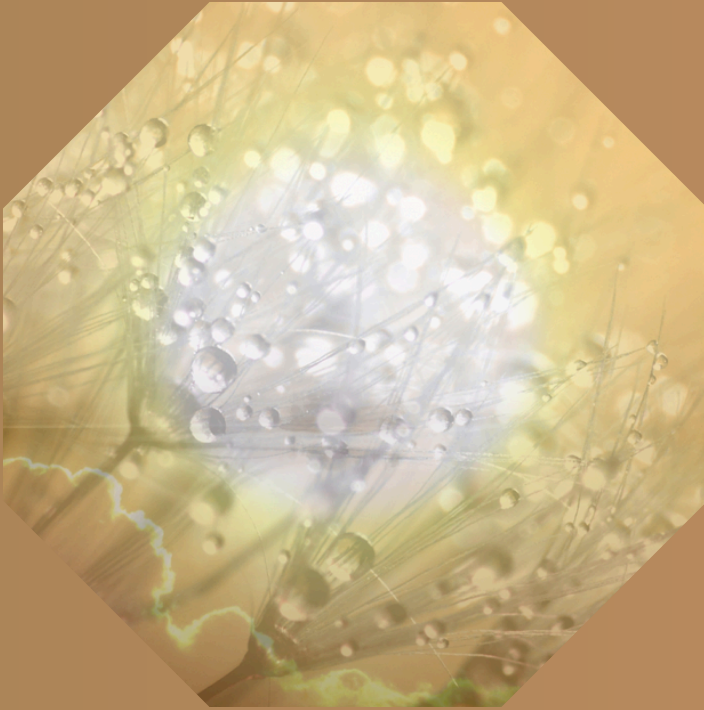
When tears fall, let their salty taunts be your sacrament. Wrap yourself in absolution as you claim your right to this holy moment, breathing in, breathing...



SUSAN POLLET



“A REMINDER TO MYSELF” BY KIT WILLETT



The world is beautiful.
The sunlight sparks every dewdrop alight—
a thousand fires laid out before you.

A fine fog is resting before the mountain
like a dog at the hearth—the winds want it to stay.
The trees cluster to share the good news of the day—
and the flowers refuse to be interrupted.

Silence is broken by a child's delight
at the beauty he sees—and you are surprised
to see him gazing at you.

“MARKET BOUQUETS” BY SUSAN POLLET

S. Pollet

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

COURTIE LEIGH- SINCERELY, THE CAGED BIRD



Courtie Leigh is an English Studies major at Ball State University. Passionate about writing, Courtney explores human experiences and the things that keep her up at night. In her free time, you can find her sipping on coffee, puzzling, or rocking out with her 3 year old cat, Luna Lou. You can find her on Instagram @courtieleighh and TikTok @readwcourtieleigh.

GIULIO R.M MAFFII- BENCH OF SILENCE, BOAT, UNTIL THE END



He was born in Florence (Italy). His work focuses on poetry (linear, experimental and visual) and its dissemination. He has been published in numerous international magazines, also as a visual artist. He collaborates with the theatre company “Bubamara Teatro” and teaches at the University of Florence. He enjoys playing with photography and collage. You can find him on IG @giulinom and X @giulinomaf.

His Facebook link is here:

<https://www.facebook.com/giulio.maffii>

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

JUDITH OWENS-MANLEY- OLD LOVE, NEW LOVE



Judith Owens-Manley has a Ph.D. in Social Work and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing. She's written and published in academia, co-authoring a book based on 100+ interviews with Bosnian refugees and has a novel in search of a publisher. She's turning her attention to creative writing to influence social issues she cares about with climate activism and the rights of refugees and immigrants. She remains active in her community, serving on boards for non-profits and was recently certified to be a volunteer teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL). Her interest as a writer is also to be a resource to those who want to write for exploration and clarity about their past & future. Her social links are here: Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/judith.owensmanley>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/jowensmanley/>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/judith-owens-manley-51b5b211/>

Website: jowensmanley.com

LEE FRASER- LULLABY IN THE DARK, LET ME COUNT THE WAYS



Lee Fraser grew up in Aotearoa New Zealand, was a linguist in Papua New Guinea and Kenya in her 20s, collided with domesticity in Aotearoa during her 30s, and later rediscovered health through poetry. In 2024 she had 20 pieces published internationally, and came 4th in the NZ poetry slam. Her work is in Amsterdam Quarterly, Consilience, London Grip, Micro Madness 2024, Poetry Aotearoa Yearbook 2025, Stone Poetry Quarterly, Tarot and elsewhere. You can find her on IG @leefraserpoetry and her website link is here:

leefraserpoetry.com

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

ALEX PHUONG-THE WAY TO STAY



Alex Andy Phuong earned his Bachelor of Arts in English from California State University—Los Angeles in 2015. He was a former Statement Magazine editor. Emma Stone inspired him to write passionately after hearing the song, “Audition (The Fools Who Dream)” from the “Best Picture” nominee La La Land (2016). Currently residing in Alhambra, California, he writes with the sincerest hope to inspire readers while fully supporting the ones who dare to pursue their dreams.

GRACE PIONTEK- BARBED WIRE FENCE



Grace Piontek (they/them) is a visual artist and poet.

Their career in conservation biology greatly influenced their artistic focus, expanding on human relationships to the wild, creatures of the wild, and the myth of it. Through their work, they center identity, self-expression, and gender fluidity grounded within observations of the present landscape. They have had their work accepted into Antler Velvet, Beyond Queer Words, the San Pedro River Review, Lens Magazine, Blue Space Gallery, and 3Elements Review. Follow Grace Piontek on Instagram, at [shastagraves_35mm](#).

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

SUSAN L. POLLET- IMAGE 1, IMAGE 2, IMAGE 6 AND MARKET BOUQUETS



Susan L. Pollet is a visual artist and poet whose works have appeared in multiple art shows and literary publications. She studied at the New York Art Students League, has been a member since 2018, and resides in NYC. She is also a published author in multiple genres, including three children's books, which she both wrote and illustrated. She has seen the darker sides of humanity but always searches for the light. Her website is susanpollet.com and she is on Facebook (Susan Pollet), X (@susan_pollet), Instagram (@suepol1976), LinkedIn (SusanPollet), Bluesky (suepol.bsky.social) and Threads(suepol1976).



ERIN DAWKINS-WOODEN HUG

Erin Dawkins (she/her) received her MA in English with a specialty in Creative Writing from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. Recent fiction has been published in Wild Greens Magazine, Flash Fiction Magazine, Five Minute Lit, Half and One and elsewhere. She recently completed her debut literary horror novel. In 2025, she received an Author's Fellowship from the Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS



JB POLK-TWENTY FIVE

Polish by birth, a citizen of the world by choice. First story short-listed for the Irish Independent/Hennessy Awards, Ireland, 1996. Since she went back to writing in 2020, more than 150 of her stories, flash fiction, and non-fiction have been accepted for publication. You can find her @Jolanta.Polk (Facebook) and @jolantapolk (Instagram).

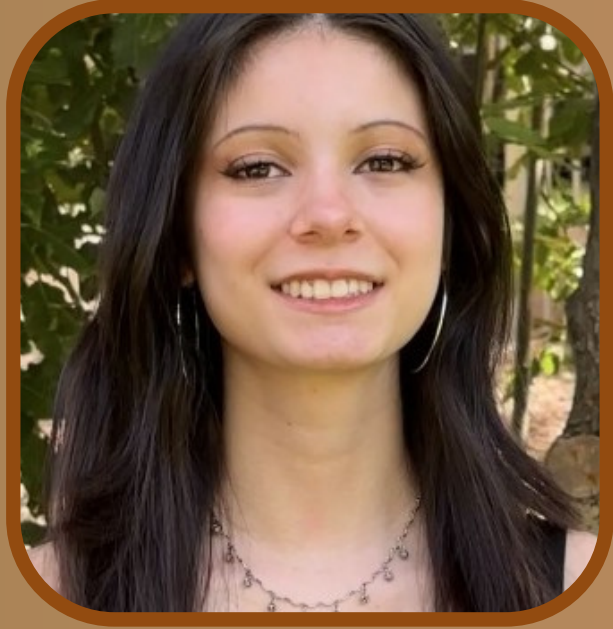


SUSHMA R. DOSHI- I'M NO HERO

Sushma R Doshi completed her graduation in History from Loreto College, Kolkata. She went on to acquire a PhD in International Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her short stories and poems have appeared in Contemporary Literary Review India, Everyday Fiction, Muse India, Literally Stories, Borderless Journal, Kitaab International, Panoplyzine and Fear of Monkeys amongst others. Her flash fiction "Magic" in Syncopation Literary Journal has been nominated for the Pushcart prize. Her social handles are here: Twitter: @SushRDoshi, Facebook : Sushma Rasik Doshi, Instagram: @sushmarasikdoshi

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

ALEXANDRA CIPRIANI- TO MAGANDA, FOR MAGANDA



Alexandra Cipriani is a Filipina-Italian writer currently based in Colorado with plans to build a career in publishing now that she has graduated from New York University's Summer Publishing Institute. She recently completed her bachelor's degree where she studied English at the University of Colorado Denver, and she continues to work for her institution's literary magazine, Copper Nickel, as well as the publication October Hill Magazine. She is an emerging writer with work in Chainmail Poetry and forthcoming in KRNT. You can find her on Instagram @literarywithlexi

MANSI BHATIA-TWO WORLDS UNDER ONE ROOF

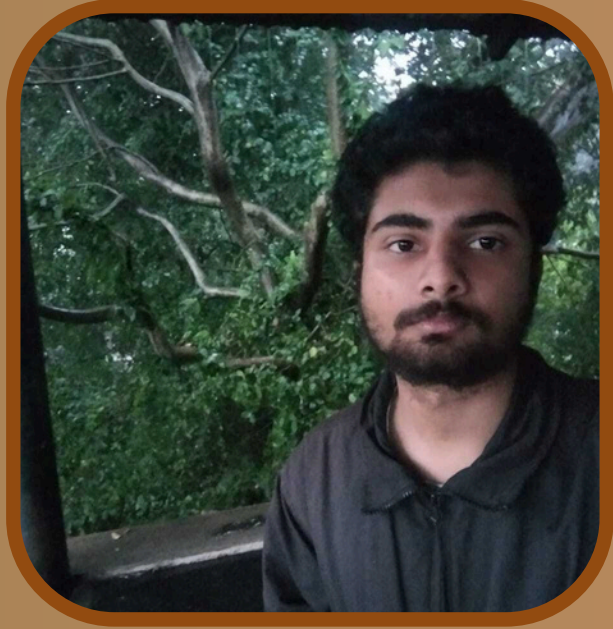


Mansi Bhatia is a narrative nonfiction writer, poet, and mixed media artist exploring the quiet tensions between belonging and becoming, ambition and presence.

Her work is rooted in emotional realism and draws from her Indian upbringing, her slow life in Silicon Valley, and the tender contradictions of marriage and motherhood. She was awarded second prize by the London Writers' Salon and has work published in Wild Roof Journal, Writers' Hour Magazine, Yellow Arrow Journal, and Chicago Story Press. Her website is here: LittleTokensBigRipples.com

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

GAUTHAM PRADEEP- ATROPHIED CALLOSUM, THE LAST SUNLIGHT, BLIND EVERMORE



Gautham Pradeep was born in Kerala, India. He is now pursuing his MBBS course. He tries to explore the existential dilemmas of the present generation. My poems have been published in several publications, including Spillwords press, Disabled Tales, Indian poetry review, Poets unlimited, Ethos literary journal, Madras courier, Setu bilingual etc . He was also shortlisted for the Indian Poetry award under the Indian poetry review magazine.

AURA MARTIN- ROCK BOTTOM, HURT, HOLD ME



Aura Martin is the author of the full-length collection of centos, *Butterflies Over Flame* (ELJ Editions), a chapbook, and a micro-chapbook. Aura's centos have appeared in bitter melon review, Emerge Literary Journal, Neologism Poetry Journal, and elsewhere. In her free time, Aura likes to take road trips, arrange flowers, and deadlift. You can find her on IG @instamartin17, BlueSky: @auramartin.bsky.social

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

ALAN BRICKMAN-PLAYING HURT



Alan Brickman writes short stories and creative nonfiction. In his day job, he consults to nonprofit organizations on strategy and organizational development. Raised in New York, educated in Massachusetts, he now lives in New Orleans and can't imagine living anywhere else. Alan's fiction has appeared in *Literary Heist*, *Variety Pack*, *SPANK the CARP*, and *Sisyphus Magazine*, among others. His story, "My First Gun," appears in the anthology "Southern Truths" published by B Cubed Press in 2024. He can be reached at alanbrickman13@gmail.com

MARGARET E. GILLIO-IMAGINE A MOTHER MISSES HER SON



Margaret E. Gillio directs the creative writing program at SUNY Finger Lakes Community College, Canandaigua, NY. Her fiction and poetry has recently appeared in *The Bookend's Review*, *Fiction on the Web*, and *The Ignatian Literary Review*.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS



DONALD PATTEN, MASKED SKULL OF A SKELETON WITH A BURNING CIGARETTE, SATURN DEVOURING HIS SUB

Donald Patten is an artist and cartoonist from Belfast, Maine. He creates oil paintings, illustrations, ceramics and graphic novels. His art has been exhibited in galleries throughout Maine. To view his online portfolio, visit @donald.patten on Instagram.



AVA O'MALLEY-WET, HOT MIDWESTERN SUMMER

Ava O'Malley is a writer from Cleveland, Ohio who studied in Chicago and now lives in Boston. She received an MFA in Creative Writing & Publishing from DePaul University, and her writing has been featured in *Waif*, *Belt*, *The Great Lakes Review*, and at the Cleveland Humanities Festival. She resides in a home with 130 year old stained glass windows, and writes poems and stories that feature themes of spirituality, identity, queerness, and belonging.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS



JOANNE MACIAS-AM I FINALLY ON
POINTE, NOWHERE TO BE FOUND, IF
I CAN JUST...

Joanne Macias is a multi-disciplinary creative, having featured in both online and print publications which includes Living Stories, Best of Times, The Sour Collective, Two Wolves Digest, Short Stories Unlimited, Roi Fainéant plus many more. She loves finding interesting ways to challenge reader perception through unique scenarios in everyday settings. She embarks on her first residency in Ireland in 2025 where she will complete her first poetry collection. You can follow her adventures at [@joanne_macias_writer](https://www.instagram.com/joanne_macias_writer)



PHILIP ATHANS-PLEASE JUST LET ME
SELF-ISOLATE

Editor and author Philip Athans has been a driving force behind varied media including Alternative fiction & poetry magazine and Wizards of the Coast. He lives and works in the Pacific Northwest. All social media can be found at Linktree: <https://linktr.ee/philathans>

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

ROBERT DONAHUE-MISSING PERSONS



Robert Donohue's poetry has appeared in *Amethyst Review*, *Pulsebeat Poetry Journal*, and *The Rye Whiskey Review*, among others. He lives on Long Island, NY.

EDWARD SUPRANOWICZ-WAKING SLEEP



Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Lithuanian/Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Door Is A Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet who has had over 700 poems published and been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

BRIANNA AGUILAR-BAGS



Brianna Aguilar is a certified Medical Assistant with a passion for creativity both in and out of the kitchen.

When she's not helping others through healthcare, she bakes custom treats from home and shares her love for gaming with a friendly, down-to-earth vibe.

Known for her chill personality and warm energy,

Brianna blends compassion and creativity in everything she does, whether it's frosting cupcakes or leveling up in her favorite games.

ALAUNA LESTER-THE WEIGHT OF NO ONE, ALL ACCOMPANYING IMAGES



Alauna Lester is the Editor-in-Chief of Still Here Magazine, a digital publication dedicated to emotional realism and grounded storytelling. She is the author of 'Vengeance's Vow', a dark fantasy debut exploring fragmented minds and revenge. She is currently writing her second book. Outside of writing and editing, she nurtures an unusual obsession with paper, from elegant stationery to thick, textured pages. You can find her on X @allaumawriting or @StillHereMag

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

PATRICIA PEASE-WHERE DREAMS USED TO LIVE



Patricia Pease has been published in Hippocampus, Barren, BULL, Uppagus, Spillwords, Revolution John, and more. She has a BFA from UNC School of the Arts.

<https://patsypease.wordpress.com/>
<https://www.facebook.com/PatriciaAPease/>

CLAUDIA WYSOCKY-ART, MELTING CLOCK, BUTTERFLY EFFECT



Claudia Wysocky is a 16-year-old Polish poet based in New York, celebrated for her evocative creations that capture life's essence through emotional depth and rich imagery. With over five years of experience in fiction writing, her poetry has appeared in various local newspapers and literary magazines. Wysocky believes in the transformative power of art and views writing as a vital force that inspires her daily. Her works blend personal reflections with universal themes, making them relatable to a broad audience. Actively engaging with her community on social media, she fosters a shared passion for poetry and creative expression.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

SARAH SAMARBAF-ONCE, I WAS THERE



Sarah Samarbaf (they/them) is a poet with a background in art and historical studies. Sarah writes as a survival mechanism in an unpredictable world, just like watching and rewatching movies is for them.

VIVIAN FAE-MOSS- FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION, UNREST, SIMPLE PLEASURES



Viviane Fae-Moss (she/her/hers) is an emerging trans poet and storyteller from Ashland, Oregon, USA. She has had work published in Ballast magazine, Main Squeeze Literary Magazine, and 7th Circle Pyrite. Her Instagram handle is @fallentofable

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

MK ZARIEL-BROCHURE FOR A DYSTOPIA



mk zariel {it/its + masc terms} is a transmasculine neuroqueer poet, theater artist, movement journalist, and BashBack aligned anarchist. it is fueled by folk-punk, Emma Goldman, and existential dread. the author of VOIDGAZING (2026, Whittle Micropress) and BOY APPARITION (2025, Vinegar Press), it can be found online at <https://mkzariel.carrd.co/>, creating conflictually queer-anarchic spaces, writing columns for Asymptote and the Anarchist Review of Books, and being mildly feral in the great lakes region. it is kinda gay ngl.



RALPH DRANOW-SELF ABSOLUTION

Ralph Dranow works as an editor, poetry teacher, and oral historian. His most recent book is *At Work on the Garments of Refuge*, poems of his and poems and artwork of his late friend Daniel Marlin. Ralph lives in Oakland, California with his family. His website is <https://www.ralphdranow.net>.

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS



CHUCK SCHADING-THE BRUSH OF LIFE

Chuck Schading is a 25-year veteran of the American newspaper industry, holding a variety of positions in the newsroom and beyond. He's been a page designer, headline writer, columnist, editorial writer, managing editor, and most recently digital content director for Community Media Group. These days, however, Schading has turned his attention to writing short fiction and a novel in progress. He lives in the beautiful Finger Lakes region of western New York with his wife, two teenage boys, three dogs and a bird.



DEBORAH Z. ADAMS-HOW TO PRACTICE YOGA

Deborah Z Adams is an award-winning author of novels, short fiction, CNE, and poetry. She served as executive editor of Oconee Spirit Press for ten years, and is currently a reader for Boomerlit. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in Roanoke Review, Litmosphere: a journal of Charlotte Lit, WELL READ Magazine, Dead Mule and other journals. You're invited to visit her website. www.Deborah-Adams.com

THANKS TO THE CONTRIBUTORS



KIT WILLET-A REMINDER TO MYSELF

Kit Willett is a bisexual poet, English teacher, and executive editor of the Aotearoa poetry journal Tarot. His debut poetry collection, *Dying of the Light*, was published by Wipf and Stock imprint Resource Publications in 2022.

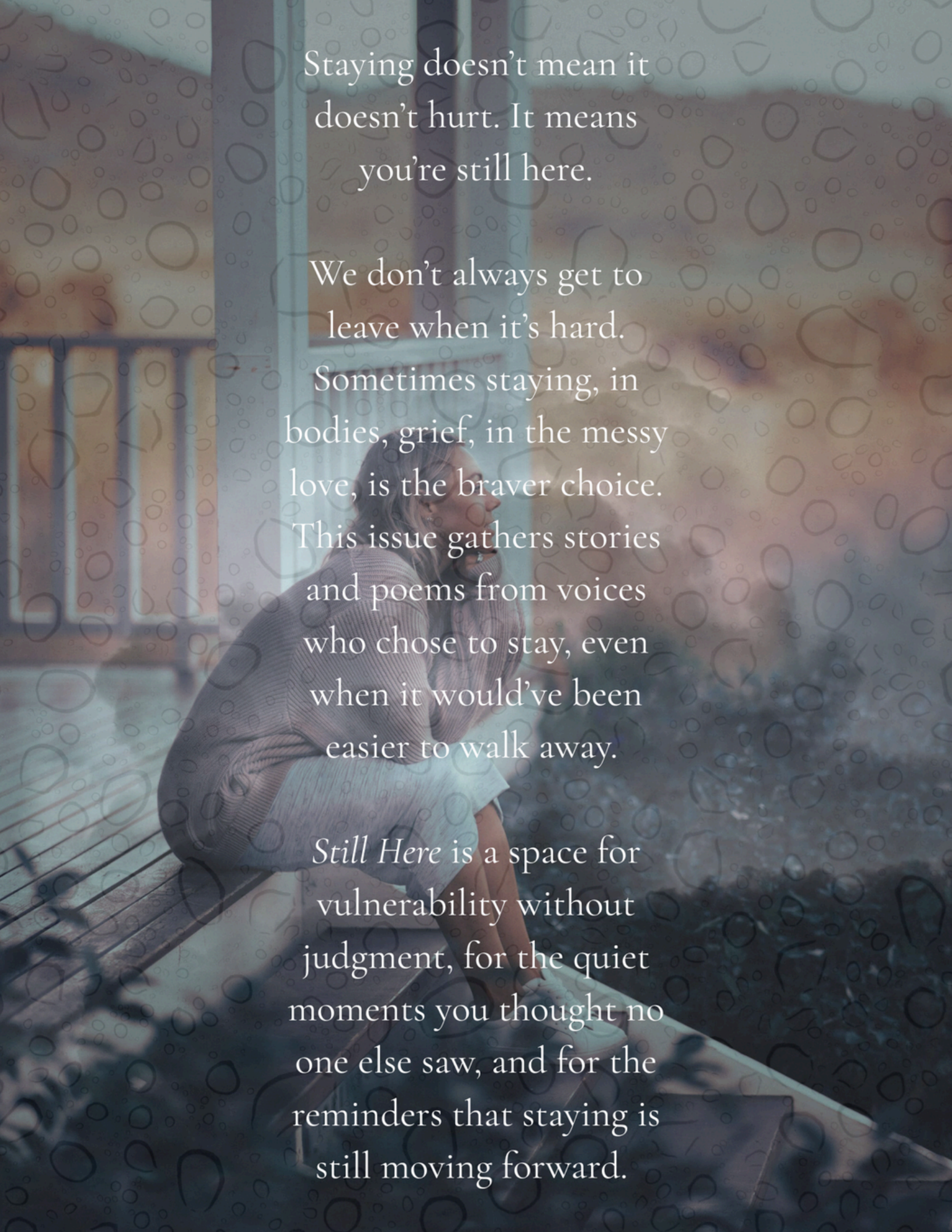
UNTIL NEXT TIME...

AS THIS ISSUE COMES TO A CLOSE, WE
HOPE YOU CARRY WITH YOU NOT JUST
THE WORDS ON THESE PAGES BUT THE
QUIET REMINDER BENEATH THEM: THAT
WE ENDURE, WE STUMBLE, WE RISE
AGAIN. EVERY PIECE HERE IS A SMALL
PROOF THAT WE'RE STILL FINDING WAYS
TO SPEAK , TO LISTEN, TO REMAIN.

THANK YOU FOR SPENDING YOUR TIME
WITH US. MAY THESE STORIES STAY
WITH YOU IN THE SPACES BETWEEN NOW
AND THE NEXT TIME WE MEET.

UNTIL THEN, STAY, BREATHE, AND
REMEMBER: YOU ARE STILL HERE.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF STILL HERE
MAGAZINE

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a light-colored sweater and a skirt, is sitting on a wooden bench. She is looking out a large window at a rainy city street. The street is wet and reflects the lights of buildings and cars. The scene is captured in a soft, slightly blurred style, emphasizing the atmosphere of the rain.

Staying doesn't mean it
doesn't hurt. It means
you're still here.

We don't always get to
leave when it's hard.

Sometimes staying, in
bodies, grief, in the messy
love, is the braver choice.
This issue gathers stories
and poems from voices
who chose to stay, even
when it would've been
easier to walk away.

Still Here is a space for
vulnerability without
judgment, for the quiet
moments you thought no
one else saw, and for the
reminders that staying is
still moving forward.