



CHINCHILLA UT

ISSUE 01 | NOVEMBER 2022

FOREWORD

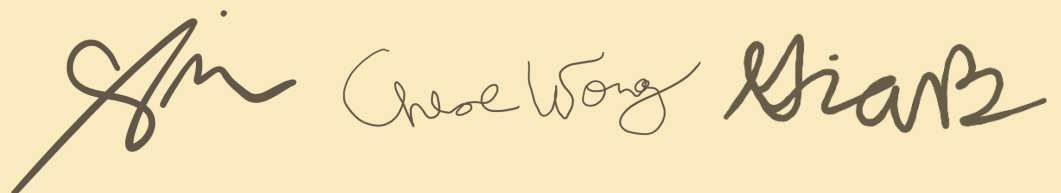
Dear Reader,

When our team of editors met in Iowa in the summer of 2022, we never expected to establish a literary magazine—and we certainly didn't expect to found one called, completely unironically, *CHINCHILLA LIT*. To us, this publication, in name and spirit, represents the welcoming nature we hope to foster in the writing community.

Putting together our inaugural issue was not an easy task, but we never doubted our mission for a second. From the introspective "self-portrait of a gutted fish" to the oddly endearing prose of "Fishbone," we hope you can feel the creative, honest energy in each of these pieces. Maria Wrona's art complements the selected work elegantly as well, and invites you into these pages with the cover.

We want to thank you for believing in us and these writers, without whose talent this would not have been possible. To our contributors: you have no idea how much your words can mean to those who read them. Without further ado, we present Issue 01 of *CHINCHILLA LIT*.

Warmest,

The image shows three handwritten signatures in black ink. The first signature is a stylized, cursive 'AM'. The second signature is 'Chelsea Wong' written in a more legible, cursive hand. The third signature is 'Kiana B' written in a bold, cursive style.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: MARIA WRONA

Maria's art practice concentrates on depicting invisible issues and doubts of the mind. Reflecting on her inner confrontations as well as solving visual problems found in the surrounding reality is the main aim of her work. The artist finds art crucial in the aspect of identifying herself and finding inner peace. Embracing personal experiences and issues deeply influences her artworks. Throughout the years, her artistry has been transforming. She has found it hard to reflect her unique artistic language and sense of aesthetics. Her choice of artistic expression is highly influenced by Suprematism, Minimalism, and Fauvism. After years of art practice and self-reflection, her paintings attempt to overcome the internal battle with perfectionism and doubting herself as an artist. She attended the C. K. Norwid Comprehensive School of Fine Arts in Lublin and later on studied Fine Art at Aberystwyth University. Her paintings have been exhibited in London, Madrid, and Aberystwyth. Find her on Instagram @mariavrona.

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Daybreak Heartbreak

1

by Lois Chan

CW: death/loss

1 INT. BEDROOM — NIGHT

LEE lies on her side. HAIR SPLAYED OUT on her pillow behind her. THOUGHTS TRAILING ONE AFTER THE OTHER.

She's awake. Consciousness nudges at her being.

LEE slowly opens her eyes. Rolls on her back, STARING STRAIGHT AT THE CEILING, EYES SMALL BUT BRIGHT, FILLED WITH HURT AND LONGING.

TITLE CARD:

“DAYBREAK HEARTBREAK”

LEE looks at her phone. The time is 11:03 PM. Her eyes flicker; notifications plague her phone:

“I’m sorry to hear about it, Lee.”

“sending u lots of luv <3”

“it still feels like hes here...”

LEE presses her lips together. Puts down her phone.

ONLY MOONLIGHT ILLUMINATES HER NOW.

2

She shifts in her bed, wrestling with the sheets, decides to sit up against the wall—

There's SOMEONE BESIDE HER ON THE BED.

He looks at her and smiles. LEE's back goes rigid against the wall. Her MESSY HAIR makes her look wilder.

Slowly, gingerly, her lips part and she REACHES TO TOUCH HIS CHEEK.

Skin meets skin.

LEE

You don't feel dead.

KADE

How do I feel?

LEE smiles as KADE leans his cheek into her hand.

LEE

Real enough.

KADE smiles back. He is the same age as LEE. He looks less ruffled but just as tired.

LEE drops her hand.

3

LEE

Everyone's talking about you.

KADE

(teasing)

What? About my dashing good looks?

KADE looks to the side of LEE's turned profile. She's slightly skeptical about the situation; she knows this isn't supposed to be happening.

KADE (CONT'D)

They'll stop. Memories run out.

LEE

Don't.

They both flinch into hurt for a second; KADE hiding it better and faster.

LEE (CONT'D)

You're still so annoying.

A pause.

KADE

Big part of my personality. Gotta
bring it with me to death.

LEE
Please.

She laughs and turns away. But tears spike her eyes and it takes LEE a clenched jaw to hold them in.

KADE doesn't look; but he senses her struggle and dips his head.

LEE finally snuffles and settles against the wall.

LEE
My brother keeps thinking about
you. I can tell. He never says
anything during dinner anymore.

KADE
We barely talked.
(beat)
I liked him and all, I mean.

LEE
(shrugging)
Hits people differently.

KADE
If it didn't, people would get
over it faster.

LEE

They would. Grief would probably run like clockwork.
Set schedules for mourning, crying group therapy
in the masses. The like.

KADE

(sarcastically)

You'd be lining up for those.

LEE

Hm. Would I?

(beat)

My mom keeps asking me if I'm
okay, too. It's getting tiring.

KADE

Is she asking too much?

LEE rolls her eyes and head away from KADE.

LEE

Of course.

KADE

She was always like that.

LEE

Kade, she'd ask you twice as much as everyone else for the same answer. Honestly, I kinda hated that.

KADE

Why?

LEE

Too much talking. You know I hate your voice.

KADE laughs. LEE's caught in it.

KADE

(stuttering through laughs)

You know she asked me—more than once—

LEE's eyes go to his throat, his chest. Breathing animatedly, almost nervously.

KADE (CONT'D)

If we were dating. If I—
(He airquotes) *Liked* you.

LEE (incredulous, covering face)

Shut up. Oh my—ew—

KADE

(shrugging it off) It *was* weird.

LEE

I'm glad I wasn't there. That would've been so awkward. What did you say?

KADE

Something different each time.

Yes—only because you were pregnant with our child. No—because I was in love with our drama teacher and planning to elope. Yes—because I wanted to be closer to your mom.

LEE laughs, bursts of laughter like confetti.

LEE

You know she never once asked me about that kinda stuff.

KADE

So. She trusts me more with your love life than yourself?

A pause. LEE lets the shock of *present tense* settle in uncomfortably.

KADE

Trusted.

LEE

You don't have to do that.

KADE

Might as well.

LEE

Stop.

KADE

Stop telling me to stop. Aren't you tired?

LEE leans away.

LEE

Are you pissed at me?

Fear crosses her face; for a second, she realizes she doesn't want him to leave.

MOONLIGHT lapses through the window, a shard of soft light falling between them like a wall.

KADE

No. Maybe I'm a little tired too.

KADE leans his head against the wall and stares out into open space. LEE watches him drift into a state of open eyed sleepiness.

LEE

I haven't even asked how—

(beat)

How you are.

KADE

Still the same. Still don't like small talk. You've always been better at it. How are you?

LEE

(muffled laugh) Honest?

(beat)

I don't know. I feel—nothing. Nothing at all.

KADE sucks on the side of his mouth; quiet.

KADE

Maybe that's why I'm here.

LEE

Come on, you know I've never believed in ghosts and all that mambo pambo.

KADE

Do you mean mumbo jumbo? Y'know, mambo pambo is neither
a word or thing.

LEE

(sputtering) Well, so are ghosts.

KADE

What am I to you then?

LEE

Memory.

'But they run out.'

KADE and LEE pull at each other with their gaze.

LEE

You—

KADE doesn't react.

LEE (CONT'D)

You left me. It really hurts. Everything
doesn't—doesn't—physically seem right.

(beat)

But I wasn't lying when I said that I don't feel anything. I'm a little numb, but at the same time. It just hurts.

KADE swallows. Wrings his hands.

LEE (CONT'D)

I feel like I'm on the verge of crying all the time. I can't say anything sometimes. I get away with it most times. Looking fine.

KADE

You won't get away with being fine.

LEE hugs her knees.

LEE

Sometimes lying feels better.

KADE

Should I apologize? For dying?

LEE

You know I don't want to answer that.

KADE shifts closer to her.

KADE
I'm here.

LEE doesn't look at him.

KADE (CONT'D)
Let that count for something.

LEE leans her head onto his shoulder.

LEE
Then... I don't want to talk about you being gone.
(beat)
Tell me about before.

KADE
Before.

LEE
It's always gonna be Before and After now.

KADE
To have your whole life revolve around me would be an absolute
tragedy.

LEE

But I want you to leave a mark. I want you to ruin me.

KADE

I can't. You're too perfect. You'll forget about me soon.

(looks to her)

Memories run out.

LEE lets a tear fall.

LEE

Tell me one.

KADE's breath hitches.

KADE

What if I have to go?

LEE

Wait 'til I'm asleep. You're too warm.

KADE buries his face in her hair, biting back a wave of emotion. The last shred of humanity he's holding on to, he revels in it.

KADE

You remember that time we watched the sunrise?

LEE shuts her eyes.

KADE (CONT'D)

(closing his eyes)

I thought we'd live forever.

CUT TO BLACK.

END.

Lois L. K. Chan is a Chinese-Canadian writer studying at the University of British Columbia. Her work is featured and forthcoming in Roi Fainéant Press and Gingerbread House Literary Magazine. You can find her on Twitter @loislkchan.

Inventing Road Trips

16

by Hannah Dunn-Helton

There is a missed turn half a mile
down the road, city even further
and no bed in sight because
that was our hotel back there
so now I am lost out here
with no cell signal and
it is too dark to read the map.
You are asleep in the space next to me
seat belt tight, head against
the window so I am in silence
but for the hum of the car
and the click of a playlist
at its end and I too
like the fields stretch on,
green and green and green
and here and here and here
are stars, more stars than ever
and less too, because of us.
There are pictures from that telescope,
the big one all over the news,
rolling through my mind
like a broken film:

what it looks like up there,
grains of sand with light teeming
and overflowing,
grains of sand that define what it
means to be nothing,
things so far back they
are no longer real
all captured by a lens
that snaps without justice
and here we are, us,
on the road, night falling,
our turn behind us, our maps
unreadable, driving through
the breath of the universe
and somehow we are breathing
too, our ins and our outs
frosting the windows so that
I must keep wiping them clean
with a napkin.

Hannah Dunn-Helton, 17, is a poet and writer from Cleveland, Ohio. When she isn't writing, you can find her daydreaming or playing the violin. Her favorite book is Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Hannah attended session two of the 2022 Kenyon Review Young Writers Program.

bridges & tunnels

by Ilana Drake

when we drove through
the lincoln tunnel,
his hazel eyes looked
around & called it
“an underground tower”

“this land is your land,
this land is my land,”
42nd street to weehawken
11 miles to newark

because once you enter,
you can let yourself dream
as you see the place
where you existed before

my mom tells me,
“it is just you
somewhere else,”
because the grass
is literally always greener

& i sit in the swings
in this park & remember
chasing you in central
park, running up the
slides in the playground

& you exist over that tunnel
& the george washington bridge
& i write you letters that travel
like a duck in the water.

Ilana Drake is a sophomore at Vanderbilt with a passion for creative writing. When Ilana is not studying, she can be found putting the pen to paper. Her writing has been featured in PBS NewsHour, The Tennessean, and Ms. Magazine. Ilana's poetry has appeared in Musing Publications, Divot, and WriteGirl's Lines & Breaks.



W 22

Where River Blooms

by Seungbihn Park

It's children's day, and grandma is on her way to patch
my great-grandmother up in diapers. My own mother drives, sealed
in silence before my grandmother with a figure sagging

against the window. From the backseat, I watch
the air gasp, with a box of dried persimmons in my hands,
while the summer heat is yet to arrive. When we reach Sunshine

Nursing Home, I watch the wind animate daffodils
before the women in bed and nightgowns at midday.
My great grandmother is waiting on the steps

to the door, with a stranger's hand placed on her
wheelchair, and I hope it's the heat that has thawed
the skin around her bones. No one could have known

we had not touched her small hands or the few remaining
strands of her hair, crisped in gray, in years. The child
next door calls for her mother. Her voice has seeds.

My grandmother talks to the nurse, with her hand cupped around my great-grandmother's. I stay by the flowers until my mother calls me over to hold my great-grandmother's

hand. Through the years, my hand has grown around my great grandmother's, bits of skin stretched to sacs and creases, each telling her years spent doing another

family's dishes for the children of a husband who had chosen death over family. The warm colors in her eyes have paled into shadows, and I struggle to even see

the silvery cast under the surrendered lids. But I see enough colors to know that a wave of daffodils has broken anew.

Seungbihn Park is a 17-year-old Korean student who is currently attending Cheongna Dalton School in South Korea. She was born in Switzerland and lived in several different countries, including the U.S., the Philippines, and the Dominican Republic. Her poems have been awarded by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and published by Trouvaille Review, Cathartic Youth Literary Magazine, and the WEIGHT journal.

Omens

by Matthew O'Rourke

She wrings her hands (worry is taught).
Strokes his hair like a heart can be bought.

If all the world's a stage (uncanny wit set aside in the wings,
curtains alight with that chemical ting
of hands on hands
and knees and
face),

is love at first sight a hoax?
Warbles descend from the rafters when they kiss.
Limelight—the ceiling open like a wound.

A dance begins:
us, floor, wood.
The sweetest bad omens.

Matthew O'Rourke is an Irish poet and short fiction writer. His poems can be read in VIBE, Healthline Zine, Crow of Minerva, and Spiritus Mundi Review. His work traverses cursed settings, matters of healing and release, and identity.

Free-Form Jazz

At The End of Everything

by Ben Covey

If you wait to be awake
You'll miss it -
Sliding halfway between
You get a sense of temperature,
And depth, you can exist insistently
Within, between, between
Without:
Outside they tap fingers
On tin roof and whisper, they
Sing alien hymn and birdsong exotic
They sing: continental divide, sing wren
Rending wrenching roiling
Boiling oceans over kettletop dome,
Subway like tradewinds at their back, back
To places I have not seen with
Their eyes closed and humming
Wicked songs filling ears
Drowning out their own exchanges,
Familiar hymns to gods I never met,
It was:

Past-tense polished they made it
Like a mirror like an echo
In a chamber to repent to:
Un-see the sightseeing,
They love to ignore because
Ignoring is all we do they
Don't make things for us anymore
They move as one uninterrupted
One long pulse like a vein
Like an artery a heart the pain
Constriction and the writhing of prey beneath
Prey it seems like they're always sinking
Their teeth
Into earth into water, into sea
I can't much see anymore there
Is a halting breath left in the
Rasping tunnels beneath and it sounds
Out like a whisper like an echo like
A song but they
Un-built every instrument
Chopped every knuckle and sapped our
Batteries these intentional attacks
Angular change projectile
Trajectory from shotgun seashells:
Always a surprise, surprise

Plastic wrapped in plastic breeze
They're making sails for the light to catch;
Bones, lungs, the smog tightens down
On Ayn Rand's Titans I saw them fall
Into the bay screaming
Death To America
Battle Hymn of the Republic:

And then the rushing rains
Bring you back espresso to your
Waking life of numb and nimble
Shoved into this robot body what battles
Are left for me to fight I think we fought
Everything at the end of time
Now we're back again to beginning
End times rewound to the start
I remember
I remember when these shapes
Were immaculate when God's hands
Still trembled from delight,
But now,
But now God dammit
But now
Hoo baby, it's out of sight

Ben Covey is a writer and poet currently residing in Illinois. His work has appeared in JAKE and in publications from NPR and The Academy of American Poets. Read more from him at DigitalMudscape.com.

preparing for sun

by Keira Armstrong

smooth, ruffled linen
crosses and tumbles off the bed.
my back is littered with notes
from the day before;
a bite of the heat on my back, the careless brush of a bee on my fingertip.
as i rise, my calf shivers and my head begins to flash to white.
the languid smooth movements of
forearms, which belong to the men i imitate.
are a slow build to readiness.
lips uncurl and knees unbend.
soap slips inside my mouth,
coming fast and corrosive.
the mirror mocks me as i pull on
my father's jeans, rolling up
the ends to fit the edges of my body.

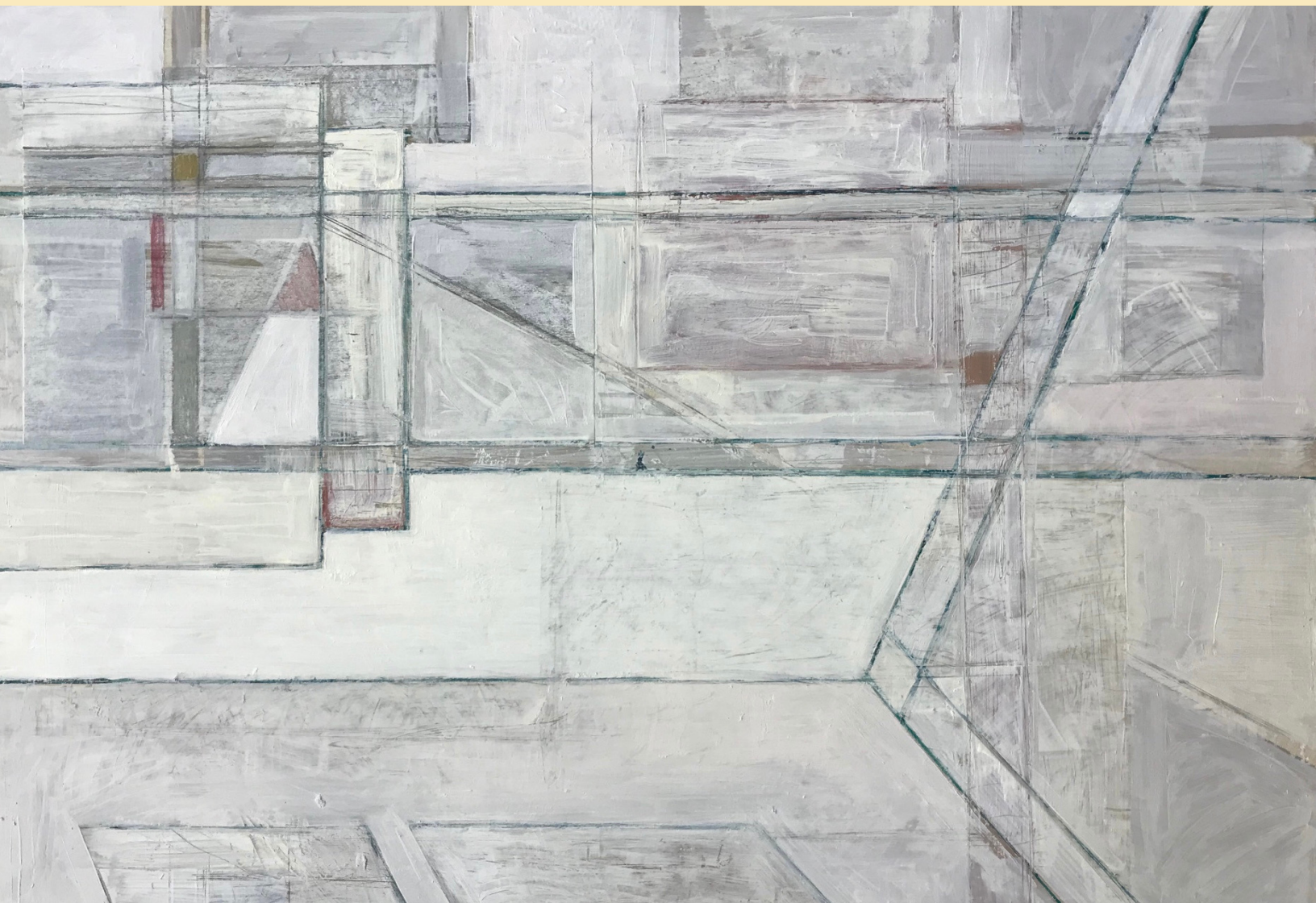
Keira Armstrong, a young author and poet, is the founder of Verum Literary Press and a staff contributor at Cloudy Magazine. Their work has been published or is forthcoming in Healthline Zine, Corporeal Lit, Sage Cigarettes, Anti-Heroine Chic, Limelight Review and more. You can find them at <https://keira-armstrong.carrd.co>.

14 memory lane

by Yuyuan Huang

i want to be the childhood that
whispers like wooden oars,
a thumbprint memory immortalized
in cement. i want to
begin where the ocean ends,
sprinting over lapping amber
waves, tripping over the colors
of the wind. when i close my eyes,
i am lost in wheatgrass again,
watching the iridescent summer
heat rising, listening to the
humming of the wind on
the prairie, feeling shadows
collapse over lush black hills
like echoes. in my daydreams, i
am floating, running where the
dust takes me, letting my lips
squeeze summer sweetness out of ripe
apricots, letting myself
remember. here, i can recall
when my youth was

bare feet and sun-kissed
nostalgia, stargazing and jars
sparkling with fireflies,
still small enough to twist my
hands around. i will always lose
myself in these Dakota fields,
in the breaths i stole, in the
universe i owned. every day i
reminisce, i am falling
back in time with you.



self-portrait as a gutted fish

by Yuyuan Huang

CW: death, blood, and knives

most days, I am unwanted.
before the market closes in the mornings
I lay, still as death, for them to
see me, open flesh and goggle eyes,
pleading. but the living prefer the
living, and I am rotting waiting
to be sold. instead of grieving, I pray
for the pomegranates that waste away
under the fruit stalls (because only
sweetness sells) and wonder
how it feels to be tasted. I watch my
skin glisten like bared teeth in the two
way mirror until I go blind and wonder
why everything I see smells
of dying: here lies the carcass,
crooked like the jaw of the mouth
it feeds; here lie the cavities
in the peaches, hollow like
teeth. in my reflection in the plastic

divider I am decomposing, destroying
myself from the inside
out, but still I long to be a commodity.
there are so many bodies hanging
on the wall, so many listless eyes
in the glass display cage, but in
my mind there is only the knife,
the blood, the need
for someone else to want
me, be hungry for my body, for
the chance to take me home,
begging: all this skin, all this
pain, all I am is yours. *all this is*

yours.

Yuyuan Huang (she/her) is a poet, dreamer, artist, nerd, and everything in between. She has received multiple regional Scholastic Gold Keys for poetry since 2021. When she is not writing, she can be found playing word games, reading Fredrik Backman books, or listening to Taylor Swift. Yuyuan lives in Boston, MA.

When you have two homes, it feels like you have none

by Thérèse Naccarato

When you have two homes, it feels like you have none.

I have to re-learn things. Where does she keep the spices? His tap runs cold after a while, but if you leave hers on too long it turns a burning hot. I don't know how to shut off the stove. My movements no longer have the luxury of being robotic. I need the kitchen light on at night to find the teabags.

And which do I dream of when I'm away?

You can't lay your head down and keep it there;

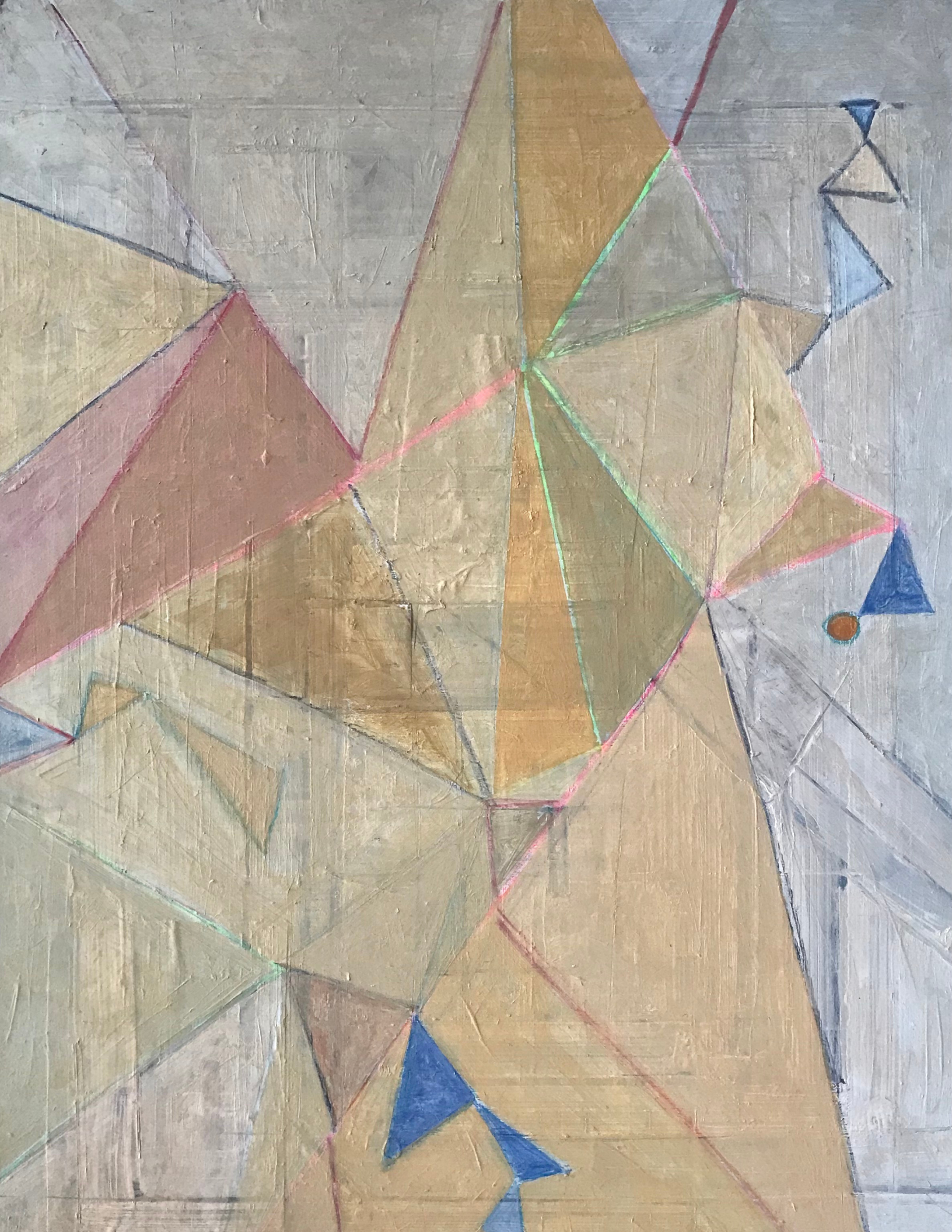
You're always moving, shifting from one place to the next and back again.

Truthfully, there's nothing worse than feeling like a stranger in the room you're supposed to sleep in.

I'll stay so long at one that I forget what color my toothbrush is at the other.

"How do you not know which is yours?" my mom asks me, glancing at the toothbrush holder. I want to say, "how can I?" but everything is changing too fast for me to speak. I blame it on my bad memory while looking at her boyfriend's blue toothbrush by the sink.

Thérèse Naccarato is a writer, amateur historian, and avid reader who currently lives in Ontario, Canada. You can find her screaming about literature on her Instagram page, [theresevsbooks](#).



In The Sidereal Days

35

by Minha Kyun

Morning holds the light
falling over the window sill.
I'm talking to you, looking
at yourself in the mirror
of the living room, brushing
your hair over with your fingers
and a few gray hairs gleaming
under the sun. Already I see the early
hours of your day, the way a birch
tree knows the sky and the changing
of seasons. I see you wearing
your apron over the gray cardigan,
hanging laundry on the poles, behind
steams fogging out of the rice cooker
and my brother playing Mozart
with his clarinet. Past eleven, the sun
fades into the clouds like the winter I
witnessed as a child, the dim
street with my hands glazing
in red, snow scattered around my
wool jacket. The fall of my 2nd
grade held us under the Bam Tree,

my hands against yours now
turned into a dried jujube. *Umma*,
again I call you and the word trickles
down towards darkness, past Exit
4 of Seoul Station, past the benches
and the ginkgo nuts on the floor,
past the flickering lamps gathering
the days—when I walked to
the kindergarten with you or
waved at the old woman eating
a redbean bingsu—all of it comes
back to me at once. Calling you
is like a wind breathing through the city,
awakening every memory from swings
to the sands in the playground,
and tteokbokki trucks in summer.

Minha Kyun is a 10th grader from South Korea, attending Magee Highschool in Canada. Her poems are based on the things she experienced from living in different countries. She enjoys reading and taking short walks around her village. Her previous works have been published in Cathartic Magazine, The Borderline, and The WEIGHT Journal.

an abecedarian for forever being a long time

by Divyanshi Dash

*song: *japanese denim* by *daniel caesar*

another of those love songs plays and you ask for my hand without / batting
 an eyelid, i give to you my affection in the form of sweaty hands and get up,
 / catch my breath when you take my hand and place it on your waist, what /
 did i ever do to deserve you? a smile slips and falls into the space between us,
 an / everyday thing. like when you slurp the smoothie directly out of the
 mixer jar and i kiss your smoothie stained lips. / “forever’s a long time, yes”
 dim lights reek of love / gods and bless us with warmth, it’s time for your /
 hungover head to bury / itself in the creek of my shoulders. / japanese
 denim will continue on loop while i / keep my promise and carry you to
 bed. / love is a shapeshifter: it’s you, it’s you hungover, it’s you asleep, it’s
 your / mouth, it’s the words coming out of your mouth, it’s / never getting
 enough of you. it’s thinking and singing “never would’ve thought you’d be
 the one” / over and over again, it’s you believing in / pinky promises, love,
 it’s the only / question i know answers to. it starts pouring soon after i put
 you to sleep. unexpected / rain on our wedding day. i see the guests leaving. i
 / saved the last dance for you / tonight and you blacked out just after a song.
 thank god it was our song. i click pictures / until i fall asleep. of you, of the
 rain hitting our shed, of the sheets we read our wedding / vows from. maybe
 if i stay awake, this day / won’t end. maybe if i have enough pictures of
 today i’ll never forget it. maybe if i / xerox our wedding vows i’ll never lose
 them. what do / you think? maybe it is okay if this day ends. i should /
 zoom out for we have forever. and forever’s a long time.

on the moon, my small life & art

by Divyanshi Dash

the moon, ever so often, lets itself groove on some nights. the maroonish weather in the late evening, yellow early evenings and all wait for the moon patiently. i am a poet. i wait for everything. pink mornings. red afternoons. yellow and then maroon evenings. indigo nights. did you know i could map all sorts of worlds just by looking at the moon. i mean it does make sense. sometimes the moon is you. and sometimes you are the moon. the painting the writing the singing the crying the dancing the songwriting the poeming. all the actions scream in my head. i am so hungry for the moon and the poems about the moon. also the songs about the moon. and like, obviously, the paintings of the moon. but i'm so worried about running out of time. the moon is so huge i wish i had a life so huge to stare at it in all of its phases. but i have a life so small. it fits in the palm of my brother's hands. my life could sit on the window i open in the evening. it's so small. i'm not okay with it.

Divyanshi (she/her) believes in poetry as a prayer. Her poetry has been published in Stone of Madness Press, Art of Nothing Press, Ayaskala, The Walled City Journal, Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English and elsewhere. She enjoys baking, reading, journaling and dancing apart from writing. Find her on Instagram at monochrromi!

Fishbone

by Katie Macmillan

CW: pet death, family death

Fishbone the cat came back from the dead on a sunny Wednesday morning.

A week before, your family had lowered her into the ground in a sturdy shoebox decorated with glitter and paper hearts. Each of you said something that you loved about her before tossing a handful of soil into her flowerbed grave, and once she was buried, your brother marked where she lay with a careful arrangement of rocks. It was a nice service, better than some humans get.

When you brought her home the following Wednesday, you told your family that you must have somehow found and buried a doppelgänger stray. Over and over again you dutifully recounted the tale of how you'd spotted Fishbone alive and well on the side of the road while you were driving home from band practice. Even the skeptics were forced to believe you, in part because Fishbone was plainly alive, but mostly because humans like to believe in small miracles.

We both know this was not a miracle.

I was the one who nudged you outside to find her body in the first place, you know. I stood between you and your brother as your father dug the grave, and I made the soil a little softer under his shovel. During Fishbone's funeral, even though none of you could hear me, I said I'd especially loved her hoarse meows. And then, once you had all shuffled back inside, I scooped her small, gleaming soul out of that shoebox and kept her close until nightfall.

I was also the one who, a week later, watched you sneak out your bedroom down to the shed with a backpack full of supplies and a ritual in your pocket. If I'm being honest, I was as surprised as you were when all the chicken bones and chalk sigils worked. And I don't hold it against you wanting to bring Fishbone back. As creepy as it was, I don't even fault you for digging up her shoebox coffin and chanting over her remains. You didn't know what would happen.

It began with a mouse. Fishbone didn't catch it—dead things don't have much of an interest in hunting, due to the fact that they don't have much of an interest in anything at all. The mouse just had the bad luck of scampering past Fishbone while she stood staring blankly at the wall, and that was it. Still cupping the mouse's soul in my palm, I watched you find its stiff little body next to an unblinking Fishbone, and I watched you reason yourself into thinking it was a case of chance. A tiny, coincidental heart attack. But I know you believed that as much as you believed your story about how Fishbone came back.

It only escalated from there. Your mother's petunias wilted as soon as Fishbone wandered past them, and insects fell out of the air when they flew over her. Your brother found all his fish floating belly-up, Fishbone still as a statue next to the tank. Soon enough, your family started to get sick, too. This was because your gut bacteria were dying every time you went near her. Your microbes put up a valiant fight, but the turnover rate was still too high to go unnoticed. Within a few weeks, you had to quit band, because your malabsorption of vitamins and minerals meant you were exhausted all of the time. Your mother's lack of bacterial hormonal regulation made her go into menopause early, your father had a bout of *E. coli* before the *E. coli* died too.

Then your grandmother visited, and—well.

I want you to know that it wasn't your fault. I can promise you that she didn't have long left, anyway. It isn't an exact science, but I've got a good sense for these things after a few hundred millennia. Fishbone just... sped the process along. Your grandmother died quickly, painlessly. One moment she was alive; the next she was not. But the night after the funeral, I caught you climbing out your bedroom window with your backpack and your ritual in your pocket, and I decided enough was enough.

To your credit, you only screamed a little bit when you saw me. I am aware that I can be alarming to look at, and I think you handled it remarkably well. Most people have a heart attack like the mouse that Fishbone killed—or, the mouse that Fishbone helped along to the next life. I understand that Fishbone is an innocent party in this. I understand that you are an innocent party in this, too.

So here we are, sitting on your bed. You biting your thumbnail, Fishbone being dead, me being Death.

You know this can't go on, don't you?

You nod. Your hands are shaking slightly, just like they were when you first found Fishbone's body. Just like they were when you found your grandmother's. You've been through a lot of grief, my friend.

I didn't mean for it to turn out like this, you tell me. I just didn't want her to be gone. She was a really good cat, dude.

I understand.

We climb out the window together this time—first you, then me, then Fishbone. It's a nice night. The moon is bright overhead as we dig up the flowerbed grave, wisps of clouds scudding across the sky. Partway through you begin to cry, and I don't entirely know what to do about that. I've attended many funerals, but I've never comforted a mourner. I remember

what I've heard humans say to each other during times like this, and I tell you that it's going to be okay. You say that you know, you know.

When we're done digging, you crouch down in front of Fishbone. For the first time since her resurrection, her gaze focuses, and she looks up at you. You tell her she's a good cat, and you kiss her head. She meows that hoarse meow. Then, because she is indeed a good cat, she climbs back into her shoebox and waits patiently.

On a calm Saturday night, I take Fishbone the cat home, and she slips easily back into the glittering sky. Stretching that long, lanky body of hers, she admires the way her old bones don't ache anymore; and once she's found a good spot near Orion's Belt, she curls up like she's back on the end of your bed.

Fishbone settles her chin down on a cloud, purrs a roll of thunder, and she shines.

Katie/Teddy is a Philosophy student who lives in South Africa with a veritable menagerie of animals—including Blue the golden retriever, Zuzoo the elderly tabby, and Sir Augustus Theodore Winston the chinchilla (or Gus, as he's known to friends).



She Looked Too Much Like Me

by Sal Makara

CW: death, murder, gore

I buried a body one year ago.

Well. I finished burying a body one year ago.

It was the most tedious process I had ever gone through, honestly; there's no handbook on how to rip limbs apart. No one tells you how to get used to the sounds of sinew coming apart from bone, or how to truly adjust to the sight of blood on your hands. They keep from you the fact that you start to miss the unique shade of red when the act is all over.

Burying a body is almost like doing laundry, a Sisyphean task of again and again. You'll think you've reached the top of the mountain for the last time, until you feel the stray pair of limbs under your pillow. Sometimes it felt like I killed more than one person. I mean, how many torn clothing scraps are supposed to be caught in your sink drain from just one outfit?

She was beautiful, to some, and a little lost to others. Cutting her life short was not only physically daunting, but socially. Explaining to those who knew her that I was "so sorry," that "her death will be a tragedy to so many," and to "mourn however you must," was the toughest part of the whole experience. It was exhausting, mainly because I was lying behind my crooked teeth, saying I missed her just as much, that I was distraught, sick to my stomach to see her go. You don't make extensive plans to sever the head of someone and then miss them once you've gone and done the act.

I kept parts of her as trophies for a bit. Her clothes, her books, her pictures. I even kept her fucking name. Isn't that a bit pathetic? But in the end, they were *hers*, and I wanted nothing to do with her belongings. I buried

them with the refusing-to-be-forgotten body. I spent months scrubbing the name I had stolen out of people's mouths, bleaching my tongue anytime I had to say it aloud. My sponges must not have been rough enough, or maybe the dish soap was just too weak; her harsh name still sticks to me like the smell of cigarettes.

Sal is a gay, transsexual writer whose work mainly centers on his experiences growing up queer and brown in a conservative hellhole. He also writes whatever he wants.

On the Tradition of Always Having Starbucks At the Airport

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by Sura K. Hassan

We always visit a Starbucks store at the airport. It doesn't matter where we fly, or which airport it is; our number one priority, it seems, is deciphering where the nearest Starbucks is located.

Unfortunately, the Jinnah International Airport has no Starbucks. Actually, all of Pakistan has no Starbucks. We've tried convincing people to bring it to Pakistan, but it's just too expensive. Who would want to have a coffee for \$20 when even the most expensive coffee shops in the country charge the equivalent of \$5?

We say we would, but clearly, the rest of the population disagrees. So, we wait for airports to have our Starbucks. We don't take direct flights anymore, either. Instead, we get a layover in Doha or Dubai, or Istanbul. You know, airports that do have Starbucks.

Everyone thinks we're weird.

"The coffee isn't even that good," they say.

"You're so basic," they comment.

It's a weird tradition, we'll give it that. But it's a tradition, nonetheless. After all, for us, it's not about Starbucks itself; it's about what it represents.

The first time we had Starbucks was back in 2002. That was the year Starbucks introduced the Frappuccino.

And if you know us at all, you know that we love a Frappuccino from Starbucks. But why?

It's just sugar and some cream, and we're diabetic. Well, one of us is

diabetic; the other one just doesn't want to get fat.

But this isn't about her.

Anyway, we love the Frappuccino because it was the first Starbucks drink we ever had.

We were two and four years old, respectively. Starry-eyed and highly agitated as our parents stopped at a Starbucks store on the way to Heathrow. It was the first and last time we were in London, and we did not like the concrete jungle we'd passed through.

"The girls don't want to go," our mother told our father. Even though we didn't catch it at the time, looking back, we can say that it was Mummy's last attempt at convincing Dad. Mummy and Da had fought every day for the past few weeks. The sound of their constant bickering and the dramatic door slams that followed at the end had become a staple in our little home in the south of Yorkshire.

In the end, Dad had prevailed: we were going back to Pakistan. The only problem was that we had never *been* there. We weren't born there. The most eastward we'd gone was to Delft during a family vacation. Even Mummy and Da hadn't been there for at least a decade.

Yet, our father was adamant.

"They don't want us here," he'd announce, "it's gotten worse since the Twin Towers."

Mummy tried to say that it hadn't gotten worse, not for us, but he didn't listen. And so, on a wet, Autumn morning, we set out of our beautiful Yorkshire home towards dark, dreary London.

We didn't say goodbye to our friends, our community members, or even Mrs. Stewart down the street.

One of us cried throughout the journey, and the other one

contemplated strangling her. Maybe we'd get to stay if that happened.

In the end, we had enough time to have "one last drink at Starbucks," according to our father. For us, however, it was the first drink: the Frappuccino in all its creamy, sugary goodness. Regardless of the situation, we were very happy toddlers after that.

Sometimes I wonder why our parents would allow us to consume something like that but shrug it off immediately.

A little bit of caffeine and sugar didn't kill us back then.

In fact, in a way, it prepared us for what was about to happen.

It made sure that we'd behave at the airport. It made sure that when the Customs Officer looked us up and down and called a CPS worker, we'd tell them that we were delighted to go back to Pakistan.

Even though we'd never been to Pakistan. One of us was born in Eindhoven, and the other one in Montreal. We didn't speak the language, but at that moment, it was all good.

The Frappuccino made sure of it, and when we were on the plane, when the sugar rush came down, it also made sure that we slept soundly.

It ensured that we wouldn't have to see the tiny, golden dots in the ground as we flew away, further and further towards the east.

And then we arrived in the land where there's no Starbucks, or central heating for that matter, unless you live in the North of Pakistan, but we're Southern Karachi girls through and through.

At least, that's what we tell ourselves.

It doesn't matter that Karachiites don't really understand our warped fashion sense, the love for all things pink and purple, or that we're not twins, but we do so stick together.

It doesn't matter that we're inherently different, not because we were

born different, but because we had a different life.

We had a completely different life. We didn't even know there were things like religion, caste, and ethnicity that could affect our lives.

We had a beautiful life.

Full of happiness, and wholesome comfort, so warm and perfect that you could taste it.

We haven't had that life since we moved back to Pakistan.

In a way, we drink Frappuccinos at Starbucks at the airport to remember the life we could've had, the life we had before our first drink at Starbucks.

It's a life we've never had since. We wonder about it, of course.

What would've happened if we'd stayed? What would've happened if we'd told the CPS worker that we didn't want to go? What if 9/11 never happened? What if Dad wasn't laid off? What if we didn't remind people of the terrorists who'd attacked America?

What would our life look like?

Perhaps one of us would've gone on to university to study Art like she'd always intended to. The other one would've probably run off to Amsterdam to get high. Or maybe, she'd have stayed sober and gone on to become a lawyer or a doctor?

We don't know because no one asked us if we wanted to stay. But when we drink our Frappuccinos at the Starbucks at the airport, we can pretend that we've lived that life.

Sura K. Hassan is an engineering student with a passion for writing. When she's not contemplating her degree choices, she works as a technical writer and attends weekly writing classes. Sura lives between two coastal cities, Karachi and Istanbul, enjoys Turkish coffee and '00s romantic comedies.

Humanity at its Queerest— a love letter

by E.M. Brooks

I was late for youth church service that morning. The pastor had already begun his tangent: you are going to hell, repent and believe, etc. I crept in the room, and as nonchalantly as I could, I quietly took my seat in the very back row, next to you.

After the pastor finished pleading with us for the sake of our souls, we were dismissed by grade and gender to discuss what we learned, “small group,” it was called.

For each small group there was a designated area for them to meet. The “senior girls” sign was placed on a coffee table stacked with spare Bibles and surrounded by three old couches: two black, one brown, all with cracked leather. I took my seat there on one of the black couches, and as our peers arrived, so did you. You wore a black dress layered over a black long-sleeved turtleneck paired with your black combat boots, your eyes lined with dark eyeliner winged out at the corners. Walking confidently, you made your way over to our little corner of the auditorium and so happened to sit next to me.

As you sat, the old cushion gave way, and we were shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh on that dilapidated black couch. We went around the circle and stated our name, where we went to school, and our favorite ice cream flavor. With the summer just beginning, there were many new faces there in our circle, which made the habitual, slightly uncomfortable icebreaker necessary. I barely listened to other girls’ introductions in our group, but your voice attained my attention.

Your voice wasn’t what I expected it to be. I was expecting a harsh, brass

.

voice to match the darkness of your clothes and the rigidity of your eyeliner. But you spoke, and your voice was gentle and airy, like a songbird. Your speech, though lilted, captivated me and demanded my attention. You finished speaking and turned to face me. You seemed to ponder me, staring straight into my soul, beckoning me to speak.

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On a Sunday a few weeks after I met you, we both found ourselves in that same building at the ungodly hour of eight-thirty in the morning, sitting in the second row of plastic fold-up chairs. That Sunday, our pastor talked about worldliness—the dangers of worldliness, how easy it is to fall into, and the scum we can become if we succumb to it. His words were stark and loud, echoing on the painted beige brick walls of the small auditorium. As he spoke, or rather yelled, the air thickened—the cumulative guilt was palpable. He passionately began listing off sins we need to avoid and/or repent from. The list detailed all the typical worldly sins: drugs, alcohol, sexual immorality, etc. I tried to feel guilty but to no avail. He wiped the sweat from his brow and lowered his pointed hand before closing in prayer and dismissing us to small group.

We endured and survived yet another small group session, though it was awkward and tense. As some girls vulnerably opened up, I felt as though I was intruding on something private, witnessing something I should not.

After our leaders prayed over us, everyone stood, bidding each other farewell and gathering her belongings. As I crammed my Bible back into my tote bag, you suggested that the group went out to lunch “to fellowship.” I silently noted your familiarity with church jargon, as I complied maybe a

little too quickly to your proposed outing. In a strange way, I felt drawn to you. You appeared in my thoughts days after I met you; it was unusual for an individual who was practically a stranger to claim such a permanent spot in my mind.

Your invite was extended to the whole group of girls, all eight of us, but miraculously they were all preoccupied—babysitting, family engagements, lunch dates even.

That left the two of us. I thought that you would rescind your offer, seeing as most of our small group was busy, but once everyone else had left, you smiled and asked me what I was in the mood for.

We settled on this organic café in one of the most affluent parts of the city. You offered to drive, and I acquiesced. Your car was decorated with random stickers, most of them having to do with some joke, you explained to me. After I watched you drive cautiously and carefully, I complimented your safe driving, but you confessed it was only because of your previous tickets, and your now restricted, nearly revoked, license. I laughed at this; you kept catching me off guard and it was exhilarating to be so surprised.

When we arrived at the café, you picked a table in a secluded corner, opposite a window. The other walls were decorated with murals and hanging plants. Flooding in through that window, the sunlight shone in your eyes. As soon as I noticed your squinting, I shifted slightly, blocking the sun from your face.

We order our food and after a bit of not wholly uncomfortable silence, you speak.

“You intrigue me.” I was shocked hearing that you share the same sentiments about me that I possessed about you. Smiling in contentment, I urged you to elaborate.

“Yes, let me explain. When I met you, I saw you and your hair and the way you dress,” she gestured to my short shag haircut and my sweater vest layered over a collared shirt, “I thought for sure you were queer, but I may have been wrong.” Your mouth quirked into a smile as your eyebrows rose, awaiting my response.

My mouth hung open in shock at your boldness. Previous speculation of my sexuality from others was like an interrogation or a joke, but your tone bore no crudeness. You sounded gentle and curious, not accusatory. After some moments of pondering and weighing my options of response, I decided on being honest. I didn’t know you very well at the time, but your presence enticed a calm, safe feeling within my chest.

“Well,” I began, “I don’t know, maybe I am, a little.” I tried to sound comfortable and confident, hiding the fact that this was my biggest secret—a part of myself I had hidden, neglected, and even repented of. But the way you said the word queer isn’t how our pastor says it, and I hoped that I made the right move in trusting you. At that moment, before I had any indication of your reaction to my response, I was terrified.

But then you smiled and said, “Me too.”

###

After that day, we grew close. I shared a part of myself with you I hadn’t yet revealed to anyone else, and it bonded me to you. I felt normal for the first time in my life. As I got to know you, I began to discover myself in a way I hadn’t before.

We exchanged numbers and texted each other almost every day. I re-read our text conversations a shameful number of times. In the beginning, I

invented reasons to text you or call you, but as time passed, so did the need for invention.

From then on, when we saw each other at church, we were all side glances and sympathizing stares. When our pastor said something particularly hypocritical, bigoted, or ridiculous, I could count on your close-lipped, skeptical gaze finding mine.

On our first real date, which neither of us really knew was going to be a date, we went and saw the premiere of a locally written and produced movie. Earlier that day, I decided on wearing my brown trousers with a cream-colored silk tank top — one of my favorite and most trusted outfits, sure to yield the desired result. Before the movie, we went out to dinner — a chic burger joint a short walk away from the venue. We talked about everything and nothing, sweet and delicate small talk.

We arrived at the venue, dimly lit by abstract, avant-garde light fixtures. A variety of seating was set up in rows in front of a large screen. I followed you to a burgundy velvet plush couch, and you gestured that I sit down with a great flourish and an “after you.” We sat next to each other on the couch a moderate distance apart at first until, luckily, someone asked if they could sit down next to me, and I scooted towards you to make room.

When the movie started, I noticed myself inadvertently leaning into your touch, into your side. You smoothly put your arm around my shoulder, further pulling me into your embrace. I was tantalized by your touch. You must have thought the movie was funny, I felt your chest shake under my shoulders and the warm breath of your laughter on the back of my neck. You would often lean down and whisper comments and remarks into my ear, sending a chill down my spine. I thought about holding your hand, just reaching down and picking it up. It was right there, laid across your folded

legs, face-up, mine for the taking. My cowardice overrode my curiosity in that moment, but I should have held your hand.

When the movie ended, you removed your arm from my shoulder so that you could clap and cheer, and my right side became cold in the absence of your warmth.

You walked me to my car, the light from the streetlamps reflecting off your metallic eyeshadow. After hugging me goodnight, you began your walk to your car, and I watched you look back at me once.

I drove home that night with windows down, music blasting, speeding down the interstate, feeling like a woman of the world. As I drove, the wind whipped into my face and my hair, the music droned on.

The thrill of life and the peace of self-acceptance, which I had purposely evaded for so long, had finally caught up to me. I didn't fight it, I didn't resist. Why would I want to? Disownment, the judgment of others, eternal damnation, the wrath of God, taunted a voice in my head. I turned up the music.

Then I knew that being queer didn't make me a sinner — it made me human. I embraced my humanity, cradled her in my arms, and gave her all the love she deserved, with help from you. Thank you.

E.M. Brooks (she/her) is a young writer who has an individuality complex so intense she once claimed her favorite color was orange. When she is not writing, she is either drinking coffee, reading, or pondering the afterlife. Her greatest goal, aside from befriending Greta Gerwig, is to achieve the status of an unlikable female protagonist.

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