

6/3/2020
6/3/2020

June Literary

Issue 01

look on the world made for your hands

a storm twists itself by night

writhing and nude.

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M.E. Lee & Madeleine Carrington



LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER

As our debut issue, I wanted this to be as good as possible. Ever since I've started Aluné Literary, I knew there's always been one single goal in mind: to showcase the complexity of women and shout to the world, "See? See how beautiful our minds can be? Isn't art just amazing?"

In a span of a few months, Aluné had somehow become something bigger than me. And as a result, we've gotten **Umbra**.



LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER

This issue took such a long, long time in our attempt to convey the beauty of the works it contains, and I sincerely hope it's worth the wait. I love the act of making. I am so grateful for all of the contributors who took their time to come forward and share pieces of themselves with us. **This is what Aluné is for.**

It means so much to me that our first issue is about dragging our **umbras** into the light and seeing how far we can go once we step out of the tunnel.



LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER

This issue is for all of you creatives who cannot step out into the light yet. We shall continue waiting and illuminating the way for you. *Like a moon, ever so constant, ever so bright.* I hope you enjoy reading through the lenses of so many different women, as much as I did.

With all my gratitude and love,
Lain Pascual
Editor-in-Chief of Aluné Literary



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BY CALLA C. SMITH

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(mixed media collage)

BY CASSANDRA ARENCIBIA

BY KAREN ZHAO

BY BAILEY FLAHERTY

BY AMIA TAYLEN EVANS

(RESIDENT STAFF)

BY LILLY FLORES



Shadow Self



madeline sewing

I avoid sunlight as one might avoid their math teacher after a particularly dreadful exam. The result is about the same. One cannot avoid their faults forever, and no one knows this better than I.

Even when I stay inside, the sun blazes through the window. I am caught in it. I screw my eyes shut on instinct, but I can feel it, hear its wrong comments whenever my shadow springs into existence.

“It’s always going to be like this. We’ll make life harder for everyone, you know that.”

And there it is, unwelcome and uncomfortable. I allow its remark to sit there for a while, trying not to take it to heart.

There is nothing I’d rather do than get out of my bed and lower the blinds, so my shadow self will disappear, taking its foul attitude with it. However, I can’t. The effort is too great. There is not enough strength within me to fight against the shadows. So, all I do is pull the blanket over my head. Trying to block out both the sun and the shadow, I stay quite still and wait until the moon rises.

Throughout the hours, the shadow continues to bother me, despite my inability to see it. I’m underneath a blanket—no sunlight reaches me—yet the taunts and unfortunate truths find me. I mull over how I burden my loved ones. My mind runs in circles as I wonder why I can’t do something about it. I wonder why I’m unable to do better.

I can’t help but curse the sunlight which forced me to confront my shadow. I’m wholly unprepared. There is a reason—actually, there are plenty of reasons—why I dare not leave my home. From the desire not to be seen, to the lack of energy, to the wish that my shadow may remain hidden from all and everyone I know.

I feel most comfortable—or rather, I feel least uncomfortable—because I can't remember the last time I actually felt comfortable or good, when the sun has set. When there is only the moon to keep me company.

But even moonlight casts a shadow.

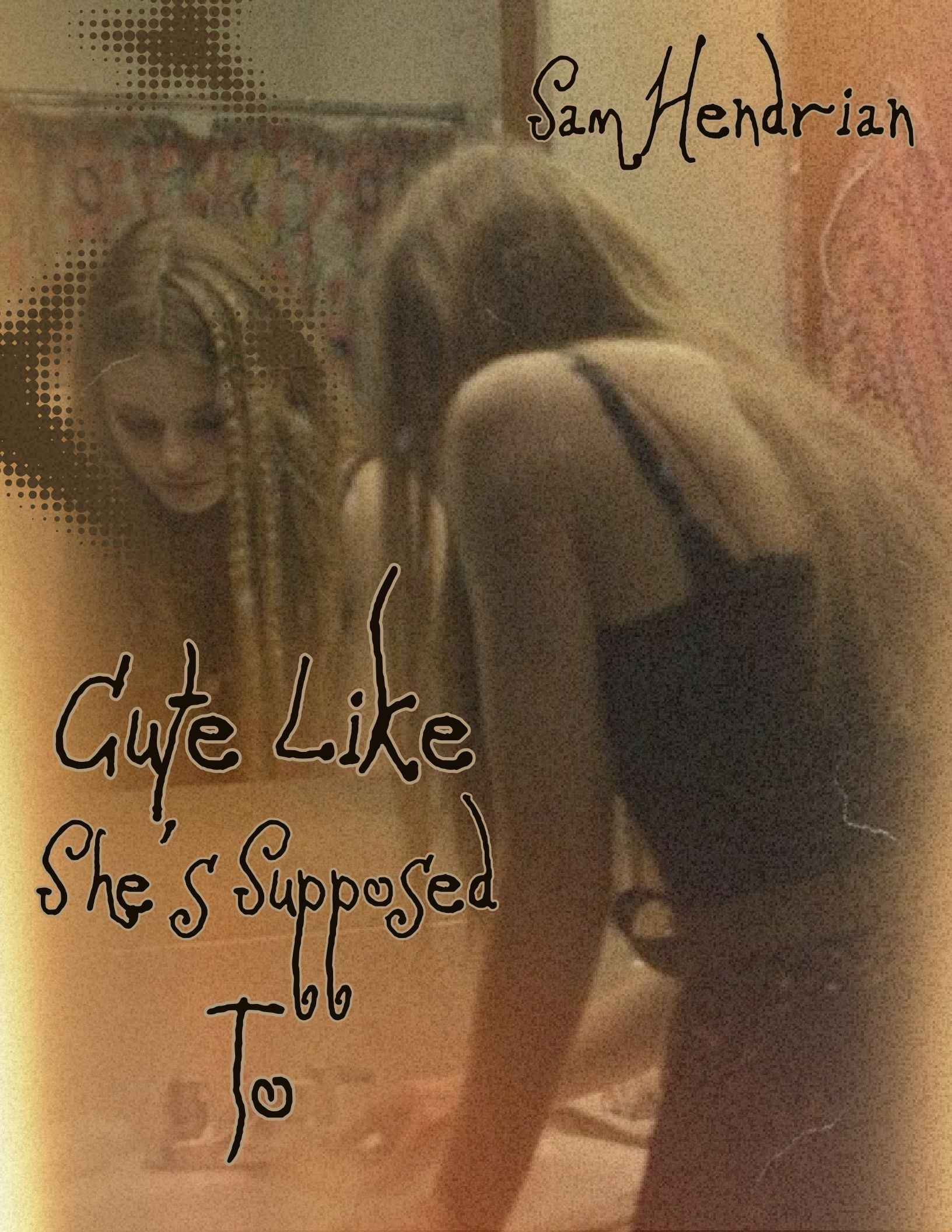
It manifests beside me as I sit and breathe. I close my eyes, reopening them after a few moments pass. The shadow copies my movement. It sits motionless, almost relaxed, but even then there's some tension in the shoulders.

Although its presence is still hard to bear, my shadow is more serene at night. There is no one here but us and the moon, who never judges. She allows me to exist as I am.

My shadow looks healthier in the moonlight. It looks more like the way I used to be before; it's similar to the me which I dearly miss. Now, with the moon forcing me to acknowledge my shadow as a part of me, I realize my faults are human. My shadow is human, for I am human. It has every right to exist alongside me.

I don't know if I'll ever be able to fully forgive it—or myself, I suppose—but I vow to have more grace from now on. Life is not easy, and my shadow self makes it inexplicably harder. However, that is simply the way it is. It will always be there, whether the sun or the moon shine upon it. It is in the back of my mind, always.

And if it's my forever companion—a part of me but also a different entity in itself—why shouldn't I learn to treat it kindly, so we may live on in what resembles harmony?



Sam Hendrian

Cute Like
She's Supposed
To

Tank top, short shorts, Amazon shoes —
Something had to give —
But no one looks down anyway.
Unless it's at their phones.

She looks cute like she's supposed to,
Safe from obligatory gossip
If not inevitable judgment
From grandmas and conservative warriors.

Why isn't she smiling?
Well, one can't be happy all the time
And often the most miserable people
Are those who smile 24 / 7.

She isn't playing a part
Despite the obvious costume
Which some might call a uniform
But uniqueness is the fastest route to loneliness.

All she wants is not to want.
An unintentional Buddhist monk
Whose concept of satisfaction
Is forgetting what satisfied means.

Tomorrow will be different
Albeit more of the same:
Fresh tank top, new short shorts, muddy shoes.
Why isn't she smiling?



Half-hugged like cordial strangers do
Then sat down among the ghosts of first dates past,
The middle school cologne on the college-faced suitor
Distracting from his nervous compliments.

She leaned back and smiled
With the sad defensiveness of thank-you
Knowing she'd have to see him 'til the end
But would rather not see him again.

Both had a checklist they'd never dare share,
Each had reasons for not bringing a pen
Hoping invisible ink was enough
To mark what was and wasn't there.

She hadn't said Grace since her last family dinner
But thanked God when the food arrived
Expediting escape
By eating more quickly than usual.

Of course he barely ate a bite
Asking questions he thought she'd like to be asked
While the Frank Sinatra song on the speakers
Gave him just the right amount of wrong confidence.

Half-hugged like failed sparks do
Then stood up among the ghosts of first dates future,
The middle school delusion on the college-faced suitor
Distracting from his pending disappointment.

The Sad Defensiveness Of Thank You by Sam Hendrian

Normal Girl

Fall



Sam Hendrian

Passed by Victoria's Secret
On her way to the ice cream shop
Which meant the ice cream shop
Was no longer an option.

While everyone got hyped for hot girl summer
She sat there pining for normal girl fall
When she could eat a sleeve of Oreos
Without staring in fear at the bathroom mirror.

She'd never fallen for "body positive"
Nor any euphemism for the physically disadvantaged
Understanding that being approved
Didn't equate to being celebrated.

Not that a slender silhouette
Won any special favors from the sun.
Just another way to stand out
By not standing out at all.

Still there were standards and lanyards handed out
To anyone who longed to belong anywhere
So the ice cream shop would have to wait
At least until the end of September.

redacted

a triptych by diya parekh

I. Zelda

She was a Southern girl, spun from heat and piano keys,
Montgomery light caught in the curl of her laugh, already
too fast for the rooms she was born into.

She danced like a sentence that didn't trust its period,
refused to settle into the grammar of "wife."

Then Paris. Then parties. Then him.

They called it partnership,
but his voice arrived first in the sentence,
her words trailing after like a shadow
that had forgotten it was once attached.

She wrote herself into margins,
but margins are where other hands go to work.
Pretty. Erratic. Muse.
Wife.

Later, the body begins to misbehave:
clinics, diagnoses, the soft correction of brilliance
into something easier to file away.

She keeps insisting on other versions of herself,
but history is already smoothing her into legend:
a woman who happened around a man's work.

And somewhere beneath the biography they approved,
she is still writing at speed,
trying to outrun the sentence
that keeps finishing her wrong.



redacted

a triptych by diya parekh

II. Rosalind

Cambridge, then war air, then laboratories: rooms where light
behaved like a confession if you knew how to trap it long enough.

She held it until it fractured into instruction.

She made the invisible speak in structure:

A, C, G, T of shadow and scatter,

a grammar of diffraction,

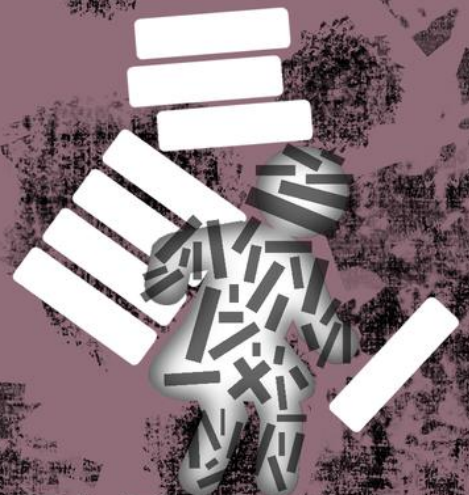
a language of X-ray bone and absence.

A helix not guessed, but seen.

They looked at her data the way people look at whether they plan to attribute to someone else.

The image travelled.

The name did not.



redacted

a triptych by diya parekh

III. Emily

She wrote it in the upstairs room, wind-pushed, ink-stained,
Ellis Bell on the cover, a name that did not tremble in public,
a man's grammar for a woman's weather.

The manuscript travelled cleaner under disguise.

Publishers nodded at "him,"
at the firmness of tone, the absence of feminine hesitation.

The book grew teeth in circulation:

Heathcliff, Cathy, names like weather systems colliding,
love that refuses civility, refuses correction, refuses ending.

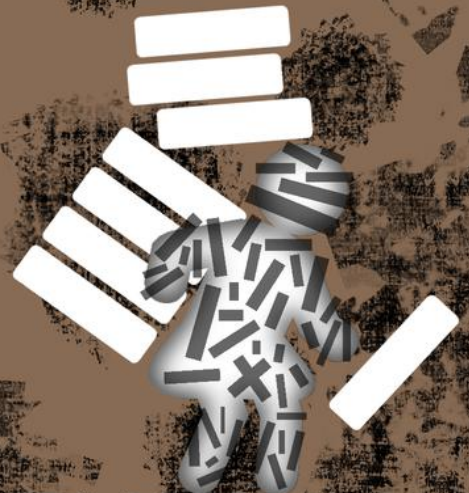
Readers said it felt unnatural.
They meant: it did not behave.

She did not attend the praise.

She was elsewhere:

in cold rooms,
in the quiet refusal to explain herself twice.

Later, they learned the truth.





Visceral Fire

SORREL BEYA FIVECOAT

couldn't tell you southern moons or oil
torches as we drove through midnight
singing old seasons, not needing anything
more. was the black cat crossing the street
our tether? do we grow with music like
plants? when was the last time we curved in
poem? would you take passion now or more
time? what plans have left you for sweeter
ones waiting? would you travel south to
catch stars on the side of the road like your
mama did over 30 years ago? she swam
with water moccasins and high tailed it over
state lines to see bon jovi and some called her
a sinner. she got whooped real good, but
mama was all tug of commas in buckling
breath. a natural born go-getter.

would you do it all again?

59 windows



Macky Yeates

Nothing Comes Alone

by Diya Parekh

Even the cleanest object arrives
with a second version of itself
walking half a step behind.

This is how shadows begin to think:
not as absence of light,
but as what refuses correction.

A room enters with its echo already inside it.
A face carries the memory
of how it will look when it is leaving.

They mistake flicker for fact;
the wall becoming a kind of certainty.

You call something wanted
and it immediately produces its twin...
the version that wanted you first.

At tables laid outside,
hands perform exchange as ritual,
while something darker learns participation.

Bread breaks into smaller proofs.
Flies arrive like forgotten punctuation.
No one agrees on where the moment actually happened.

Even language develops a trailing edge:
what it means, and what it cannot stop meaning.

At night, the doubling becomes visible.

The stubborn companion
that refuses to remain abstract.
It sits where you are not looking,
occupying the exact space
your certainty leaves behind.

Everything is still here.
Slightly offset.

What you wanted is present, yes.
but so is what it brought with it.

And neither agrees to leave.

Simple Math; fractions

by Sienna Gallus

My face is hot.

Input search:

How to go to stats class when you're paralyzed

Results:

Call 911 immediately. Sudden paralysis is an emergency.

I get up.

I get up.

(bodies on the floor of our classrooms do not.)

Nor those who couldn't outrun
the wreckage of war we fund.

I have half a mind to fake sickness today.

And I should not scroll on Instagram today,
because the home page kicks off with a Kirk memorial; then shrapnel
lodged in the leg, the head, the heart of another Palestinian.

Next a dance trend,
an ad for a "Grow-your-booty" Pilates challenge,
then, back to mutilation, then a bikini pic.

A Hollywood scandal.

A video of Elon - nearly indiscernible as AI if he weren't forcing his
tongue down Donald's throat.

Then a selfie.

Then a selfie.

Then a selfie.

I'm going crazy.

I have half a mind to disable my account,
and half a mind to start a livestream
and cry.

I'm not going to class.

Skeletal people follow me back into my bed.

I dream of one meal a day - if that
flour and water.

And when I wake and I eat, I am full and I am empty,

I remember:

"Having an armed citizenry comes with a price, and that is part of
liberty."

And there are parents curled into themselves
screaming tonight.

Half a mind to buy Starbucks,
and disregard the casualties this chai latte sponsors.
I won't think of the faces torn from their skulls.

I won't think of the infants never given a chance to touch their own
feet to the ground,
Before they are nothing but flesh
in a concrete collapse.

I have half a mind to
click "don't show me posts like this again."
I want to turn my head;
want to go on and live.
But they are dead.

Question:
If you subtract the innocent and add some thoughts and prayers, what
do you get?

Answer:
I don't know. I haven't fulfilled my math requirement yet.

I have half a mind to place a bet on the names within the Epstein files.
I have half a mind to buy up and preserve every contraceptive for miles.
I have half a mind to erase myself as lawmakers sought.
Half a mind to sink your billionaire yacht.
Half a mind to be the next Aaron Bushnell.

So I can get my mind off my friends in a cell.
I have half a mind to force you to see
the crimes of genocide they don't show on TV.
Half a mind to tell you we can't agree to disagree
on who gets to thrive on and profit from fascist liberties.

I have
I have
a whole, still-beating heart
and I have half a mind.

And I am reminded not to find any solace
because a man has died - (presidentially recognized!)

A man who has rooted for,
hoped for,
prayed to his god for,
the death and dehumanization of
billions.

And my face is hot,
and I have half a mind to stop trying.

And there is a fear in me
that to write this is to ask for my murder
- a plea
for my grief to be met with a bullet -

This is the American way (at least, after we stole its land).
Violence aimed at conquering violence, ununited we stand.
Because freedom is granted or stolen by the hand of a
gunman,
but if I lay myself down, who will cry for them then?

Who will cry for the boy: his eyes sunken in.
Who will cry for the eighteen-hundred whose bodies were misplaced
and their records erased from within,
where they were held in custody for having brown skin.
And who will fume and who will unravel at the racist masses
that booed when a professor uttered his title,
while teachers risk their lives in their classes,
but shame on them for not teaching the Bible.

Politicians, do you too mourn?
Because grave after grave, urn after urn,
we finance the obliteration of the lives yet to be lived.

I have half a mind to lose faith in it all.

It's not you.

It's

not

me.

Sienna Gallus



Today, the cold will be unforgiving,
and you and I will know why.
Any sliver of skin exposed will be bitten by
frost,
the memory of sweet monogamy
lost.

[A lake house in Vermont; brother who does
hallucinogenics while his fiancée sleeps around;
a feline without a name; sleeping on my side, my
pillow takes the shape of your shoulder every
night.]

These are all forbidden topics.]

There we are happy
at the beach. Young, sandy love reproduced in
watercolor, hanging beside your bed. Poured so
much love into you: dried dried dried
dried dried
up.

You will have to ruin your walls to get rid of me.
I will have to ruin myself.

You called today to say you're moving out of
your apartment,
leaving a paint-stripped bedroom behind.
I find it amusing –in a gut-wrenching sort of
way– that all that I'd created for you would not
be removed easily.
To remove my love is to disfigure.

Off to find someone who can join in my rituals
of crying [unprompted]: running my fingers
through my hair in the shower and counting the
clumps that [concerningly] amass near the drain:
flooding the bathroom [on accident]:

I become a wet thing. Not a girl.

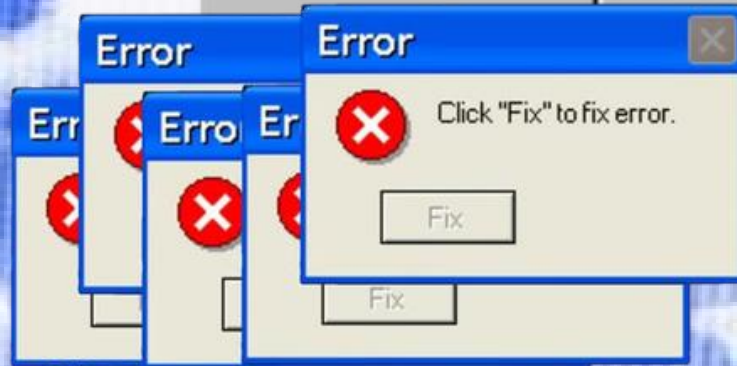
A rotting apricot;
I'm all mush and the world gets slimy with my
spoil.
You can find me sticking to the side of the
compost bin,
waiting for someone to dump me, waiting to be
absorbed into the soil.

Hypothetical euphoria: being used again.

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*Why did I accept
the cookies??*

I'm wondering about surveillance;
spyware

—How did my phone learn
That I feel different about us
now?

The posts generated “for you [me]”
are no longer about love —with you.
They're about kissing girls.

You're asleep next to me.

Am I sick?

And I love the way you purse your lips when you're lost to the
nighttime. And I love how you learned Paramore for me on the
guitar. And I love your strong hands, your seafoam optics, the way
you rent out a studio apartment but never buy any dishes or
silverware.

The cabinets are empty.

I squeeze my fists. My nails puncture my palms.

I hate myself for entertaining the idea of something more than this.
I don't know if there could ever be something more than this.

My doctor shakes her head. They double my meds.

You are seared into me.

These years are irremovable by lime and vodka, by
psychotherapy, by those who want to see me naked.

You. are. always. there.

Again and again again and again again and again again and
again again and again again and again again and again again
and again again and again again and again again and again
and,

Your presence begs the English language to synthesize a word
that is deeper
and rawer,
and richer
and more excruciating
than “love.”

I want to take you back to the beach. When the world slowed
on its axis, was brought to faultlessness. My eyebrows,
platinum, and we climbed into the ocean’s freezing embrace in
the dark.

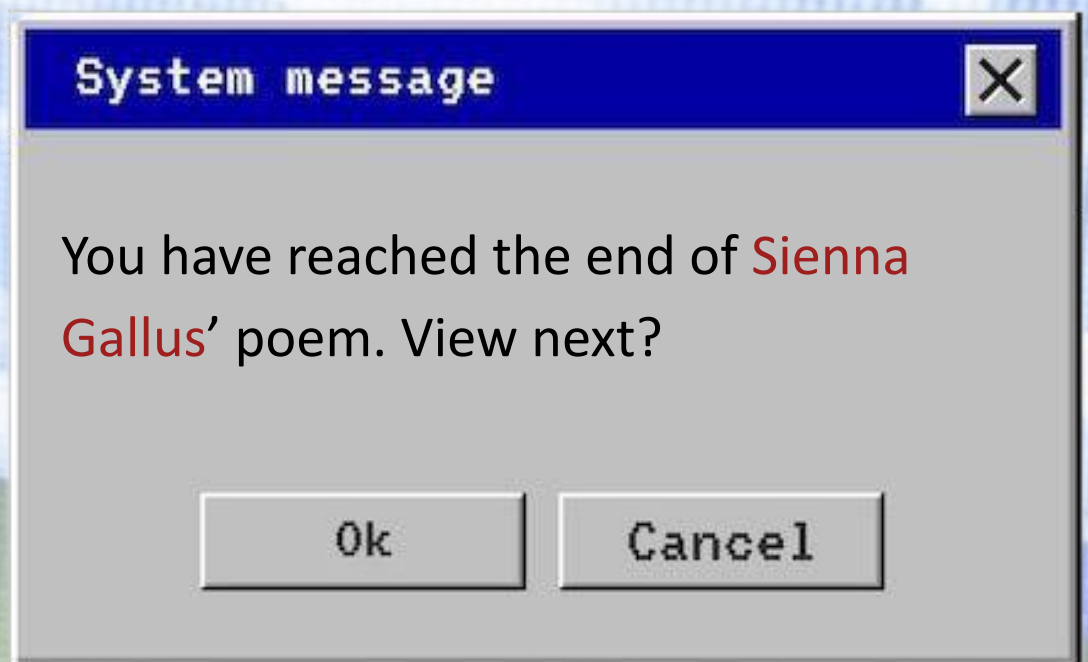
In the dark

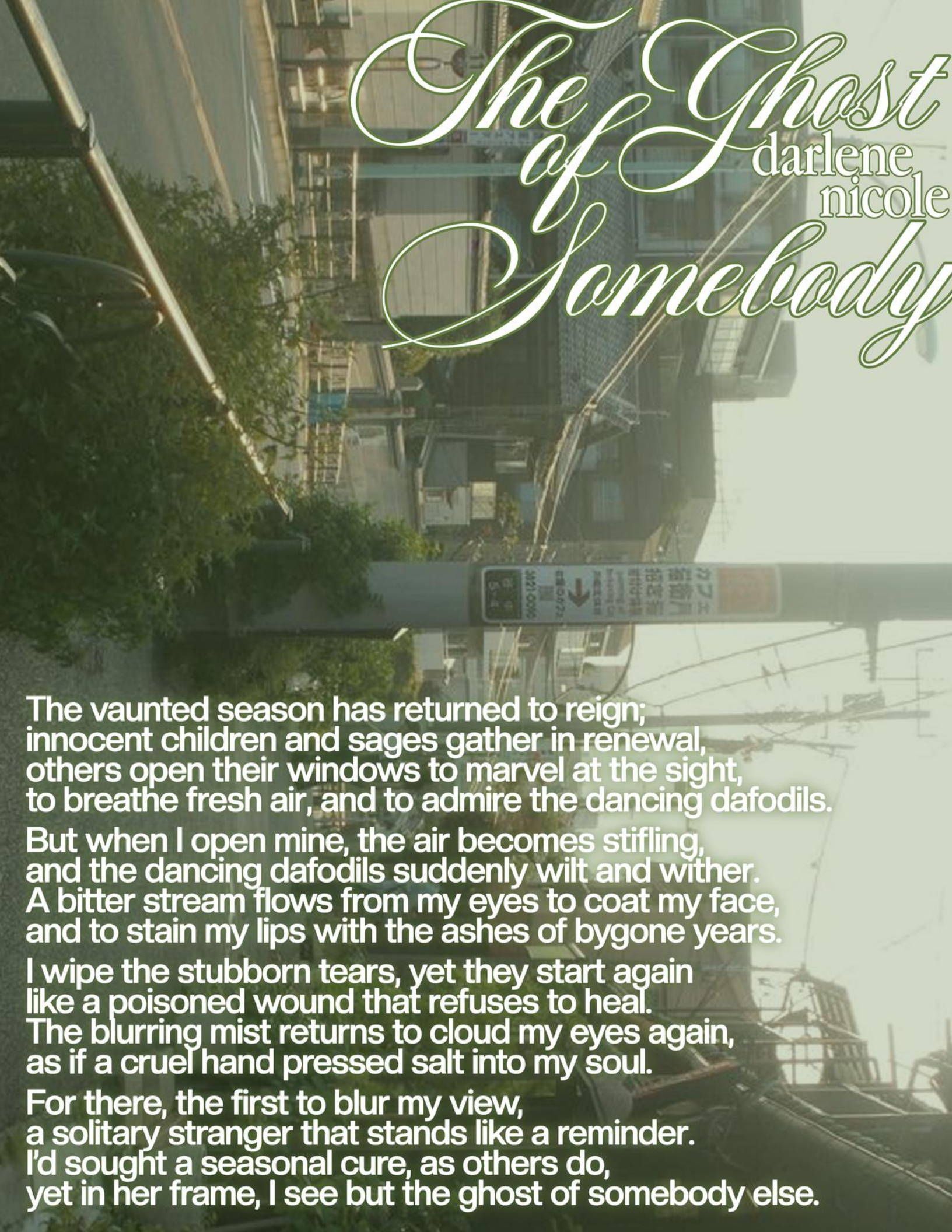
We are perfect.

—A perfection unachievable in singularity
or in duality with another—

To soothe myself:
Everyone devours and is devoured.
Everyone inflicts / receives pain.
Everyone ruins and is ruined.
Everyone shames / becomes ashamed.
Everyone is infectious, everyone: infected.

I don't know if I should end this [poem].
I don't know how to end this [poem].
I feel too weak to end this [poem].
I am either lying to myself or to you or to everyone.
I feel too much to end this [].



The background image is a photograph of a street scene in Japan. It shows a multi-story building with a balcony, some greenery, and a street sign with Japanese text and an arrow pointing right. The overall tone is slightly desaturated and hazy.

The Ghost of Somebody

darlene
nicole

The vaunted season has returned to reign;
innocent children and sages gather in renewal,
others open their windows to marvel at the sight,
to breathe fresh air, and to admire the dancing dafodils.

But when I open mine, the air becomes stifling,
and the dancing dafodils suddenly wilt and wither.
A bitter stream flows from my eyes to coat my face,
and to stain my lips with the ashes of bygone years.

I wipe the stubborn tears, yet they start again
like a poisoned wound that refuses to heal.
The blurring mist returns to cloud my eyes again,
as if a cruel hand pressed salt into my soul.

For there, the first to blur my view,
a solitary stranger that stands like a reminder.
I'd sought a seasonal cure, as others do,
yet in her frame, I see but the ghost of somebody else.



Seeing ★ Stars

Matilda Bray

Who can
Love, Once
Love is Born

Darlene Nicole

Thou art the truest and the most faithful flame,
whose lips ne'er kindled treacheries.

On thy truthfulness my heart may sleep,
while thou doth soothe mine evil dreams, so deep.

Thou art the fairest and the most glorious too;
thine eyes are like the jewels I may ne'er forget to wear,
and
thy hair, so soft, is blest by King Midas' heavenly hands.
What more could my desiring heart wish for?

I shall not e'er forget thy virtuous voice;
thy praises breathe like music to mine ears.
Speak on, I pray, and sing as Calliope might,
for when thou art silent, wicked whispers do haunt me.

Darlene Nicole

Indeed, when thou art silent,
the voices of men cry in wrath;
Love not! For passion endeth peace:
Loose thy heart! For thy mistress' flame burns hot,
and such heat shall consume thee eternally.

But who can unlove, once love is born?
To still my breath were less,
and to still my heart were gentler;
so Death, come forth and lay me in unbroken sleep.

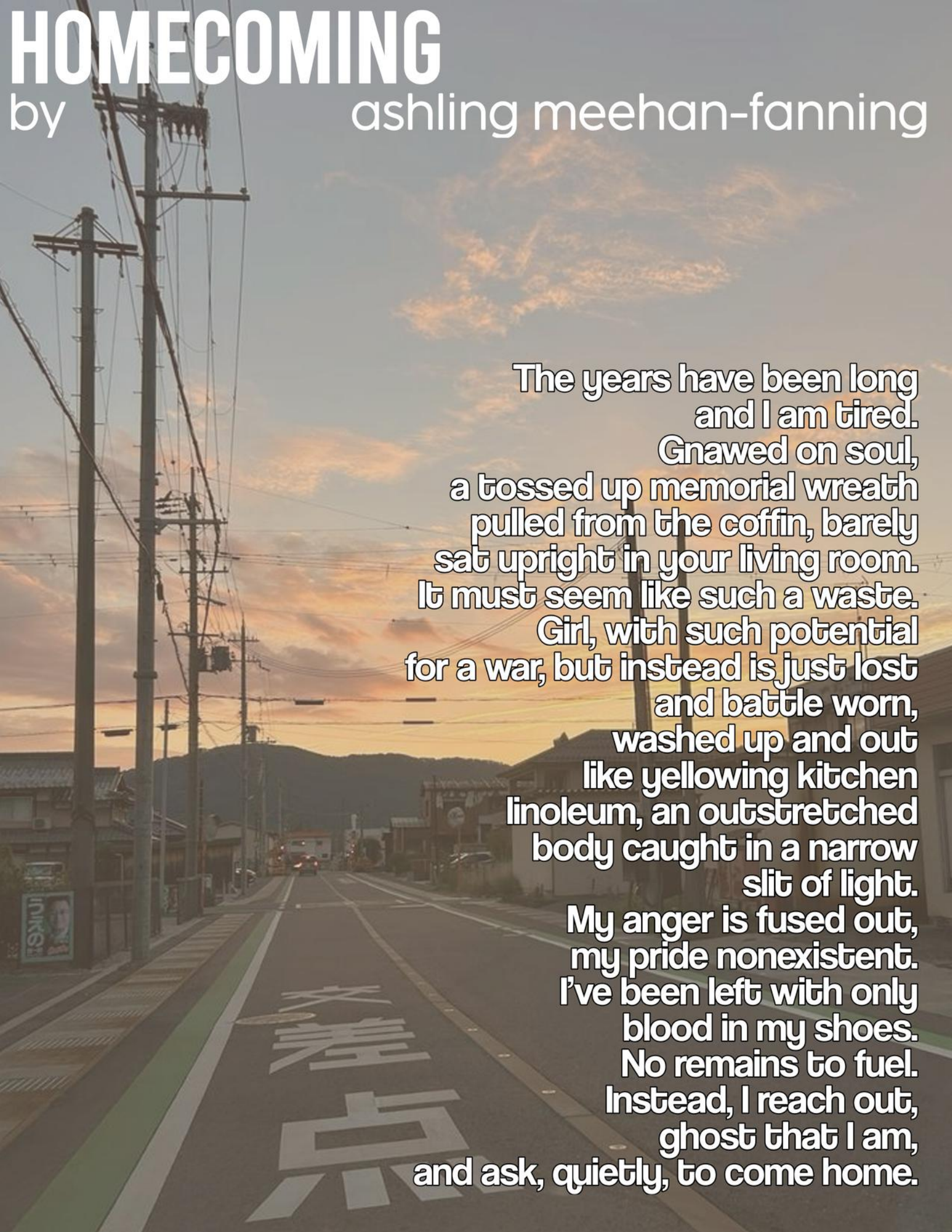
Tho' my last sigh escapes these trembling lips,
and my flesh leaves this world for quiet rest,
I shall ne'er forsake thee: my Love doth remain, for
whilst thy mortal days endure, my Love shall ever last.

Darlene Nicole

HOME COMING

by

ashling meehan-fanning



The years have been long
and I am tired.
Gnawed on soul,
a tossed up memorial wreath
pulled from the coffin, barely
sat upright in your living room.
It must seem like such a waste.
Girl, with such potential
for a war, but instead is just lost
and battle worn,
washed up and out
like yellowing kitchen
linoleum, an outstretched
body caught in a narrow
slit of light.
My anger is fused out,
my pride nonexistent.
I've been left with only
blood in my shoes.
No remains to fuel.
Instead, I reach out,
ghost that I am,
and ask, quietly, to come home.

WOMAN WHO EATS

by ashling meehan-fanning

My family calls me thief.

They complain I steal photos, memories,
words of the dead that to me
do not belong. I am a dragon hoarding
virgins; a shadow in moonlight slithering
into their dreams, their homes, taking
what they have taken for granted;
a terror waiting around corners, ready
to lash out, to take locks of their hair,
their eyelashes, their teeth, while they sleep.

They complain I've lost my sense of humor.

I wonder what they would look like without eyes,
sockets open, mawing. Would still they
wonder if I will inhale the words they waste?

Will I steal and seal their tongues?

Yes. I will thief them away like a witch
in the woods, like Baba Yaga, Cailleach in winter.

I have eaten the parts of themselves they have lost use of.
What they are is what I am and I am what they are for. And so on.

FIT FOR SURVIVAL

by

ashling meehan-fanning

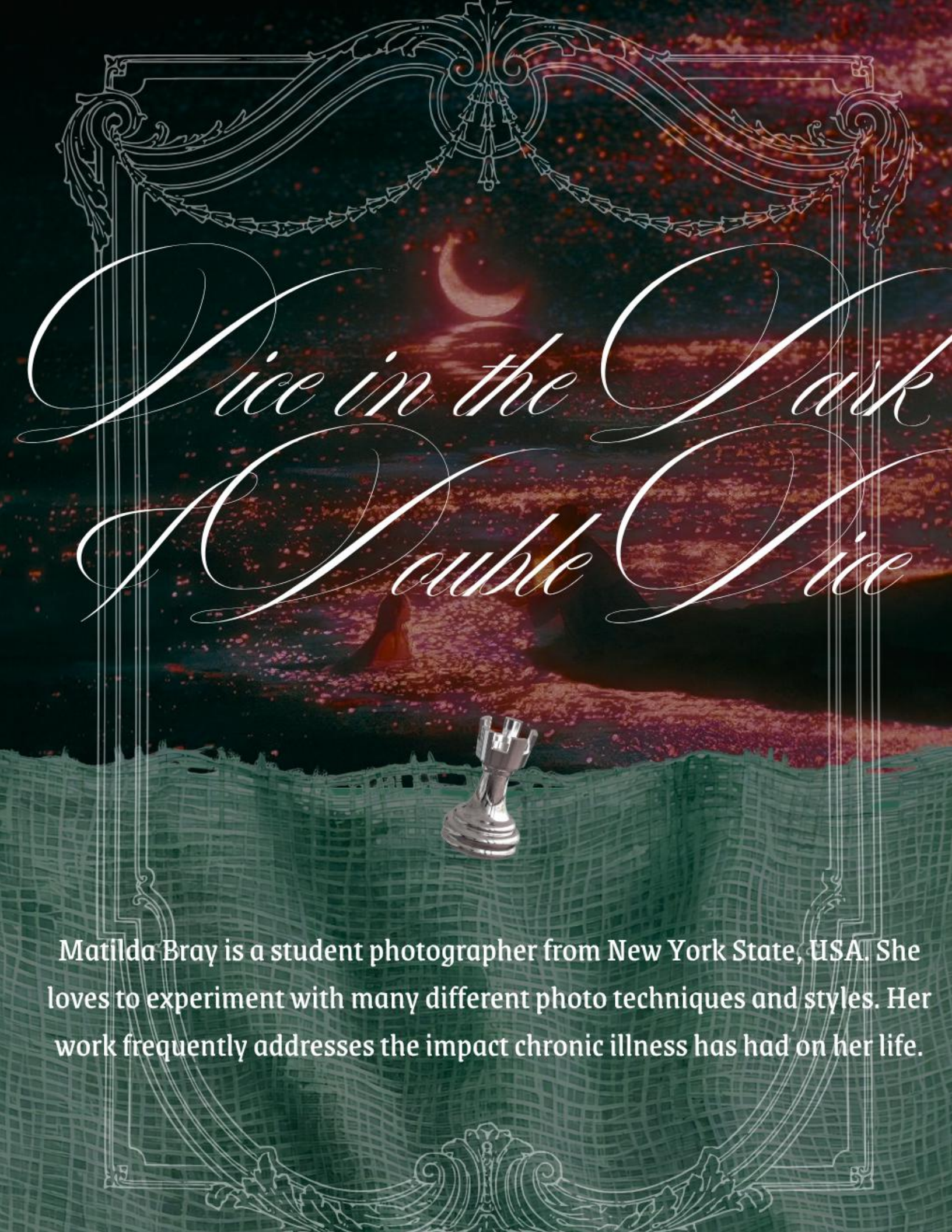


born from the ground
with fox teeth eyes,
daylight pressed to tongue.
girl, with thorns for spine
nettles grown in her chest.
voice like snake tails, rattling
words slithering, masking.
mouth a maw, void,
endless graveyard.
girl of bone light, girl of marrow,
the battle ready daughter,
fit for a haunting.

Diary of Penelope Steiss

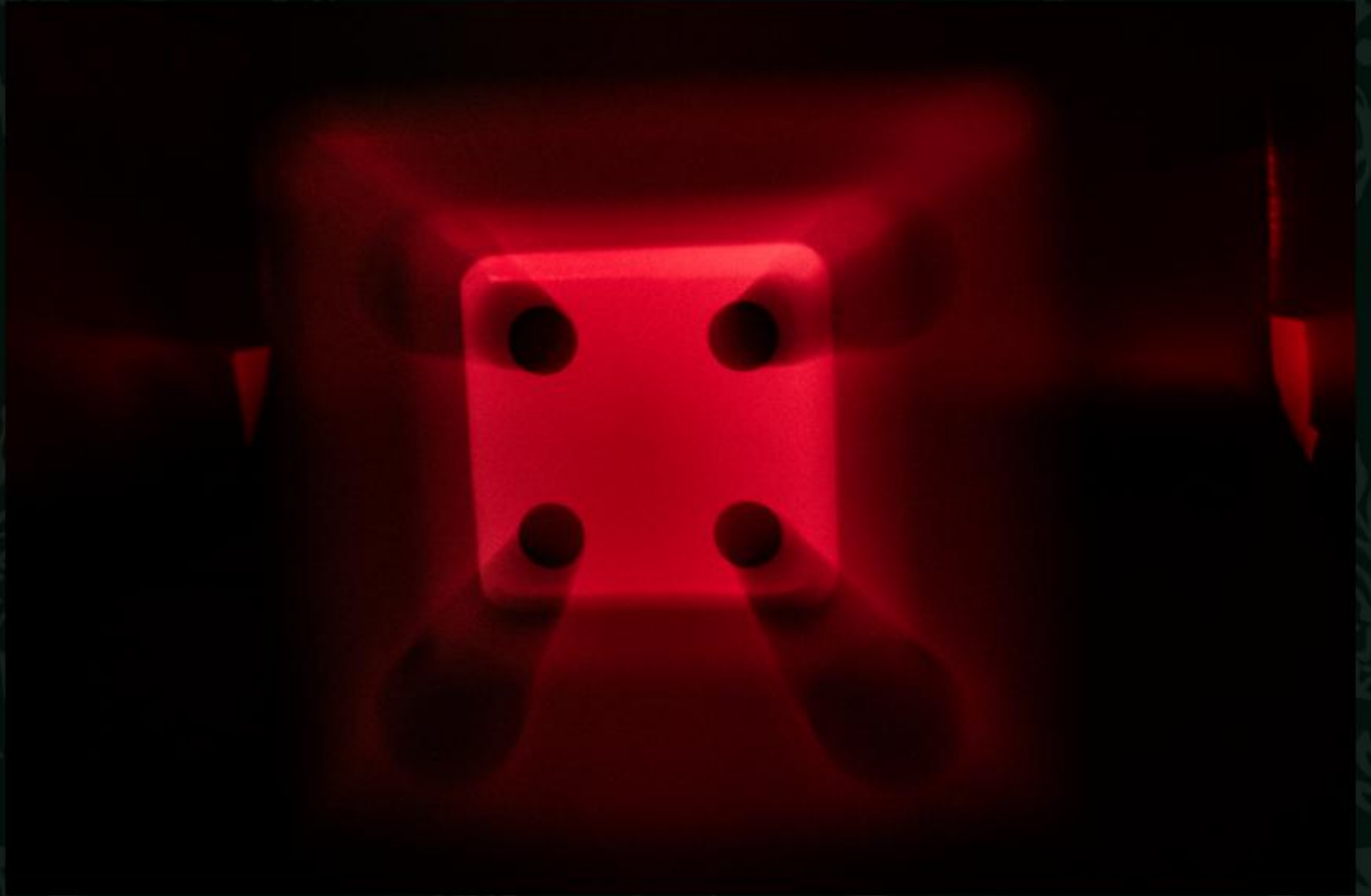
若松通り
Wakamatsu dori

The journal I kept when you were my keeper had been long rotting when I found it again,
Wine drunk one summers evening,
Cleaning my cluttered nightstand,
Only because my idle hands could think of no better thing to do.
The cover was sticky from substances dripped down over the years,
Dirty, dusty,
Covered in hair, both mine and the cats,
And the words within were a blight to behold,
Or maybe a blessing now, I've yet to decide.
Beetles had laid their eggs between my guilt and rage.
The husks left behind where larvae had wriggled out and died,
Over my confessions and pain.
I wondered if they sucked the blood from the stains on the pages.
It brought me some small peace to know that anything had, for a brief time,
Lived from the remains of our long dead dalliance.

The background is a composite image. The top half shows a dark, starry sky with a crescent moon. The bottom half shows a green checkered surface, possibly a chessboard, with a silver chess piece (a king) standing on it. The entire image is framed by a white, ornate, Art Deco-style border.

Ice in the Dark Double Ice

Matilda Bray is a student photographer from New York State, USA. She loves to experiment with many different photo techniques and styles. Her work frequently addresses the impact chronic illness has had on her life.



"Dice in the Dark"



“Double Dice”

Hand Me The Scissors

Macie
Quinn Jones

When I turned 19 I promised myself I would let things play out as they should without interfering and take a fatalistic perch. Why did my teenage years gasp for control, and why did my body always shake with frustration as when one cannot untie a small knot? I used to keel over and press my palms so deeply into my sockets, so I could see a more intimate blackness when closed eyes were too shallow. I liked when it felt like watching a screen saver. Lately, I've allowed myself to sit with the see-through dark because there really is no point in causing my eyes so much pain. If I can adapt well enough to walk confidently to and from the place that smells like my friend (marijuana and some musky sweet) which is the parking deck at my university then I know I'll get used to the strain. While practicing my forgetfulness he sent me a picture of box black hair tufts in an apartment bathroom sink, and I knew it would be too thick in the back and I wanted the scissors for myself. When will I learn that not even my fingers can navigate them well? Will I always offer unsolicited repair when I've lost access to myself above the eyebrows? Further from what I can pinch? Articulation beyond basic expression has been lost on me and I feel like I am choking myself for originality, so how could I dare expect him to hand me the scissors.

Corridors
of my
Mind

There is a spot on my mirror. A perfect circle of solid black. I rub my eyes but the spot stays. I cautiously rub at it with my thumb, but it doesn't move. Instead, the image of my face starts to warp into a frightening blur. I must be tired, exhausted from yesterday, whatever it was that I had done. I know I need to carry on with my day.

I walk out of my room and into a long corridor. I know it must be my house, though I can't remember it being this big. I turn to my left towards the staircase. I begin to make my way down, but each step feels like a mountain, with the drops from one to the other becoming steeper and steeper. The stairs lengthen until I have to throw my entire body off each stair. Finally, there are no steps left. Just darkness. I can't see past my own hand. I decide that I am dreaming. I leap into the shadows.

I am in a large room, standing in front of an immense play area. The colours hurt my unadjusted eyes. I have not been to one of these since I was a young child, but I feel an insatiable urge to climb, jump and slide.

I run into the web of climbing walls and crawl through the frame. I think this is the best dream I have had. I climb to the highest point in the area, reaching the biggest slide I have ever seen. I throw myself down the tube and fall. Then I become faster, then faster. I continue flying down with no sign of an end. I try to grasp the rounded walls that surround me. I open my mouth to scream but stop short as I roll out.

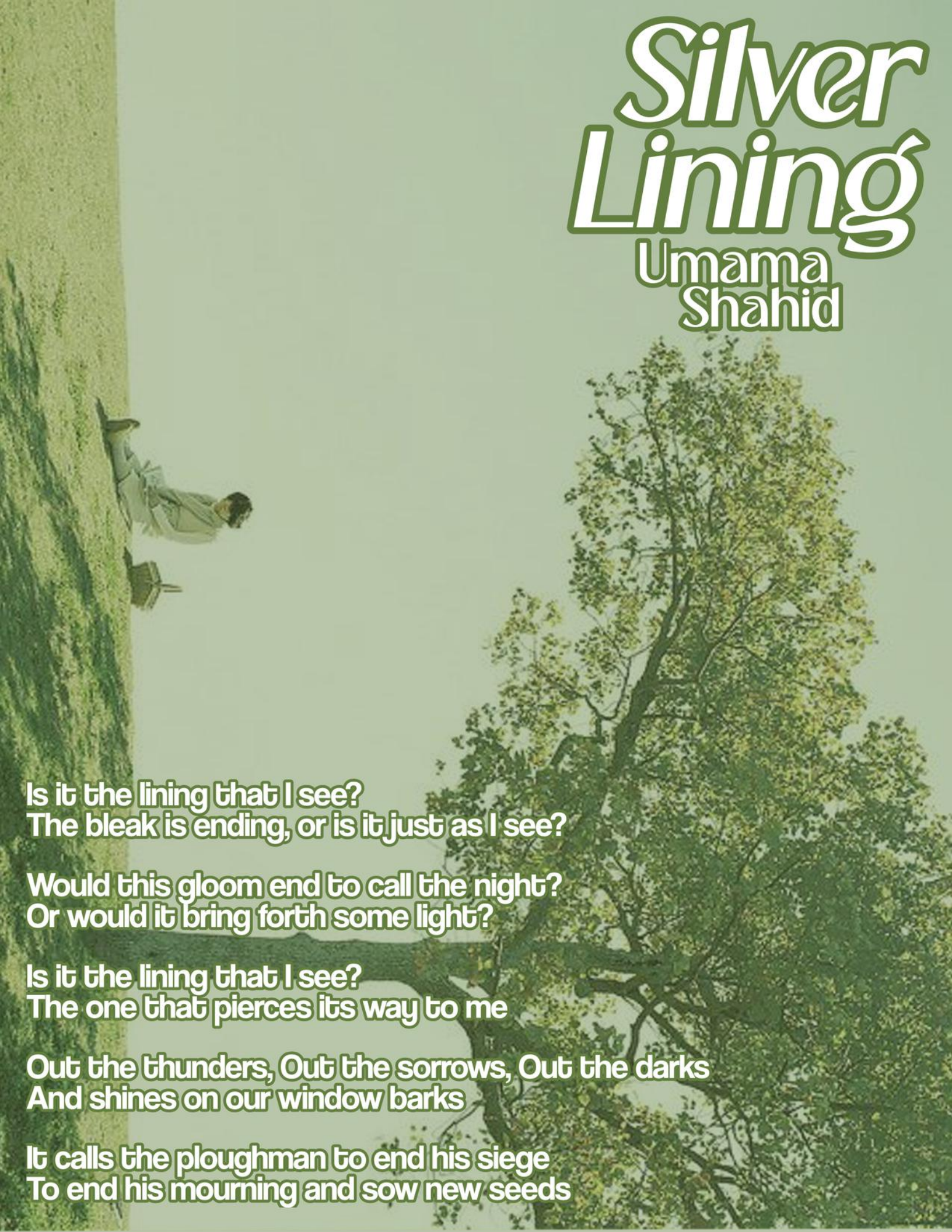
I am in a living room. I am sure I recognise it. A man walks in and sits on the sofa. I feel the need to conceal myself and sneak behind a sheer curtain. A phone rings loudly. The man jumps then seems to calm once he sees who it is. He picks up the call. He makes a wailing noise and sounds as though he is crying, but I see no tears. After a few minutes, the man ends the call. He grunts and throws the phone to the floor. I feel nauseous and want to wake up. I walk out from behind the curtain and look around for a way to leave. I hear a blood curdling scream and turn towards the noise. The man is standing and staring at me as if he has seen a ghost.

Not again, he shouts, leave me alone.

He rushes forward, waving clenched fists at me. When his hand goes through my chest, it all comes back. I see blood down the front of my shirt and feel my stomach sink. This is the man who hurt me. My knees buckle and I feel myself drift away as I fall to the floor.

There is a spot on my mirror.

Emily Alexandra

The background of the entire page is a photograph. On the left, a person wearing a white robe is sitting on a large, textured tree trunk. To the right of the person is a large, leafy green tree. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

Silver Lining

Umama
Shahid

Is it the lining that I see?
The bleak is ending, or is it just as I see?

Would this gloom end to call the night?
Or would it bring forth some light?

Is it the lining that I see?
The one that pierces its way to me

Out the thunders, Out the sorrows, Out the darks
And shines on our window barks

It calls the ploughman to end his siege
To end his mourning and sow new seeds

World Of Ours

Umama
Shahid

We were kids of a broken sky,
Forced to see others die

We were youngs of a fractured land,
Watching lameness of our stand

We were grows of a world that lied,
Choking our pride, to fill our child

We were olds of a sinking ground,
Watching the world hear, its final sound





Blind Sight

Umama
Shahid

What if one day
You gain the eyes
To see the marks
You leave on life
Of someone else,

The hate you give
The love you impose
The peace you steal
The smiles you tore,

Do You Think
You're brave enough
To see the monsters
YOU sow?



Pam Parvathy

SUPERPOWER

Tamizh Ponni VP

The world has finally given Medusa her flowers. She is a victim with a justified female rage. Her slithering shadows of shame cursed those that never fully understood her struggles. Darkness too has a delicate backstory.

dissonance of bodies

by kirpass

let me breathe life into you
while i scrub death off our hands
my dreams chase me
—daytime madness—
but i am faster when i crawl
let me hold your heart
while you choke my soul into oblivion
did you like me a little—
when i tore our(my) heart with my teeth
to please you
did you hate me a little—
when i lied to the stars
about the horror of us(me)
bring me to my knees
and whisper bitter nothings
until my ears bleed
the noise of my breath
tangled in our lungs
pores on my skin
absorb the notion against our(my) existence
my voice begs
for an ear to
land my trembles on
my mind rejects
the prophecy
embedded in the palm of our hands

(does this unrhythmic dance bore/excite you?)

outgoing from champaign to bangor

by

sam dubey

WINTER

I call you once a week during my 7-minute ride on the silver line
i'm sluggish but do without my morning coffee to catch the 8:17 a.m.
Leave it to you to breathe life into me.

you answer on the first ring from somewhere in
Maine. It's nice, peaceful there, and maybe soon you'll head West
if your van will take you that far but more importantly

Do I remember going to that county fair 2 years ago? It's been on your mind.
We take turns filling in the details, indulging in the easy nostalgia—
sweltering heat in a no-name north carolina town, nothing to see or do
but stand in line at the filthy petting zoo or stuff ourselves with fried Oreos
careful to leave out the part where you pulled me behind a barn
to kiss the overpriced lemonade off my mouth

SPRING

Months from now you will make a 6-hour drive
from Kentucky to Champaign, and I will be just another stop
on your nationwide tour from college to college where you
visited Sarah in New Hampshire but did not visit Sarrah in New York

by this point, we've fallen out of our habit—
our call logs show no sign of an attempt at rekindling
so when you ask what I'm doing Friday night out of the blue
no doubt just trying to sort out motel bookings and travel times
my subconscious cannot help but betray me, hoping.

I fall asleep that night after agonizing over what to wear
pinterest was not rife with inspiration for when your ex-boyfriend
now-friend/occasional confidant/gossip monger

takes a 4-hour detour
on the way to a country music concert so that he can see you

When my jackrabbit heart finally slows its thumping

I dream of you

& me going to my favorite Japanese restaurant

on Green Street

splitting two plates of maki rolls

taking a walk in the cool

evening air to share a crêpe

laughing all the while

When the night is over, you walk me up to my dorm,

pause in the doorway for a second before

pulling me in and kissing me, sweet and sure and

I jolt

awake

outgoing from champaign to bangor

by sam dubey

overcome by the shame of wanting,
red-faced and covered in a sheen of sweat
like some kind of sushi-loving pervert.

Friday is at least twenty degrees warmer than it has
been for the last two weeks.

you show up an hour and a half late after calling to complain
about parking and i take you to the most scenic spot
on campus, a pond surrounded by more types of trees
than i can name
home to the red winged blackbird and koi and 6 species
of turtles; can you believe
it!

But you are unimpressed after dozens of hikes in
Vermont and Washington and Utah

You don't really experiment beyond
chicken tenders so we go to an italian restaurant instead; i do
laugh the whole time but that's because i have always been
funnier than you and we get dessert after,
froyo that we eat on the way to where you parked
so you can show me the inside of your van

outfitted with woodworking that admittedly takes my breath away
eventually it is nine thirty and you need to go and we embrace the way we
used to, me on my tip-toes, your palm warm against my back. goodbye i
watch you drive and take the long way back to my dorm lingering in the
doorway before flicking the light switch off

WINTER

We're coming to a halt at the Transit Plaza
when you tell me that you're 4 months sober.
My fingers tighten around the stanchion
Frigid air bursts

through the doors, and I shiver.

busted my knee in gym class when I was 12
picked at the damn thing so much
last summer you ran your finger over
the raised skin

where it never quite healed right.

It's like pulling at stitches, the sound of your voice.

a recurring dream of dirty myrtle

a recurring
dream
of dirty
myrtle

Sam Dubey

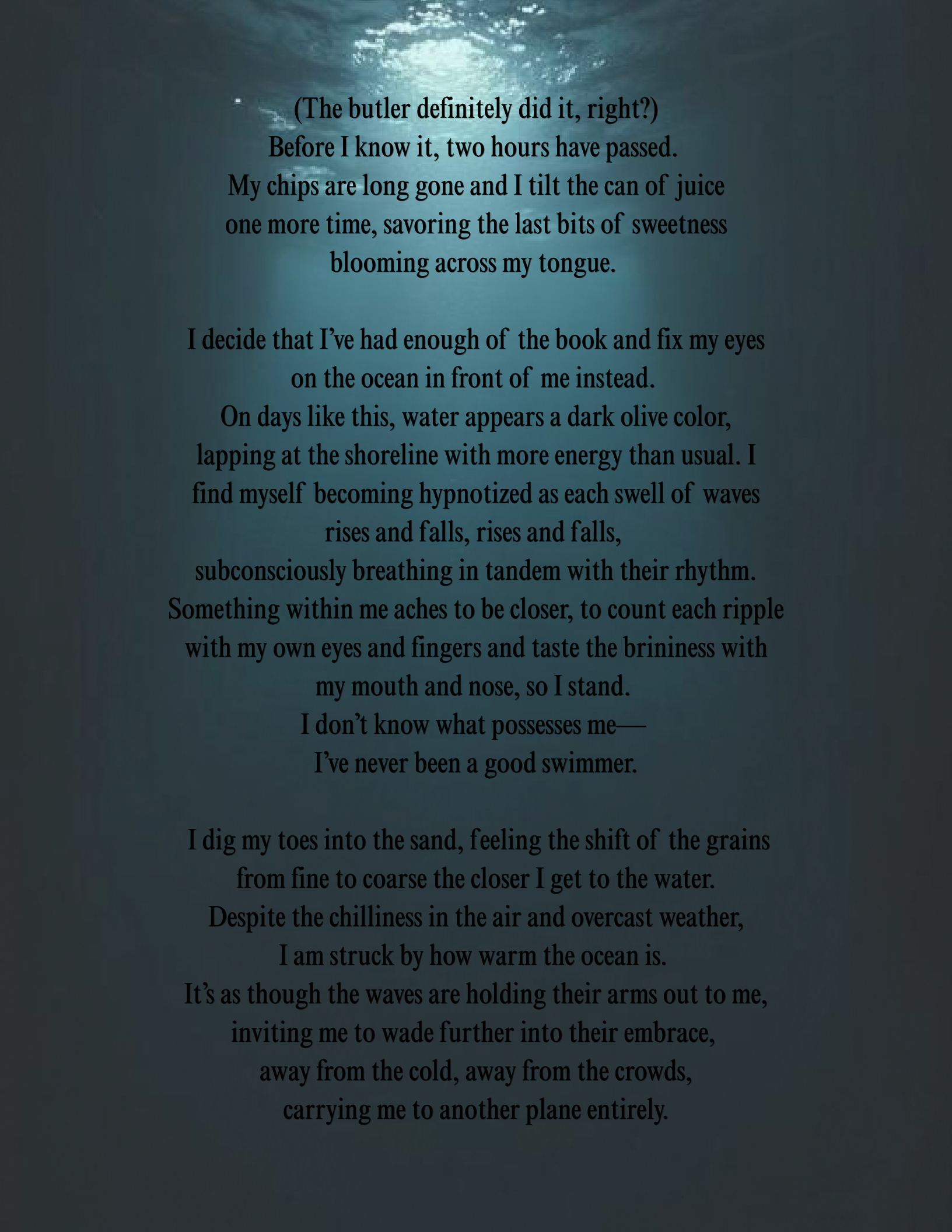
Even in June, the beach can be gloomy.
The sky darkens to a moody steel gray,
accompanied by a brisk, salty breeze that dances the
line between refreshing and uncomfortably cold.
Clusters of tourists from across the Southeast
dot the coastline anyways,
tossing hard plastic frisbees to their golden
retrievers or eating ciabatta sandwiches on picnic blankets
or meticulously dragging metal detectors
across the sand.

I choose a spot in a relatively empty pocket of the shore,
laying out the striped beach towel I borrowed
from the front desk and emptying out
the contents of my bag:

1. cold can of pineapple juice (1),
2. tube(s) of sunscreen rendered useless by the weather (2),
3. bag of barbeque potato chips (1),
4. crime thriller paperback I stole from my mother (1),
5. pair of wired headphones connected to
my phone, blessedly silent (1).

The protagonist of the novel, a hardened lawyer,
is completely insufferable.

Still, it's easy to get lost in the story,
shutting off the parts of my brain that question
the dubious ethics of his supposed heroism
or attempt to piece together the plot twist
from the first fifty pages.



(The butler definitely did it, right?)
Before I know it, two hours have passed.
My chips are long gone and I tilt the can of juice
one more time, savoring the last bits of sweetness
blooming across my tongue.

I decide that I've had enough of the book and fix my eyes
on the ocean in front of me instead.

On days like this, water appears a dark olive color,
lapping at the shoreline with more energy than usual. I
find myself becoming hypnotized as each swell of waves
rises and falls, rises and falls,
subconsciously breathing in tandem with their rhythm.
Something within me aches to be closer, to count each ripple
with my own eyes and fingers and taste the brininess with
my mouth and nose, so I stand.
I don't know what possesses me—
I've never been a good swimmer.

I dig my toes into the sand, feeling the shift of the grains
from fine to coarse the closer I get to the water.
Despite the chilliness in the air and overcast weather,
I am struck by how warm the ocean is.
It's as though the waves are holding their arms out to me,
inviting me to wade further into their embrace,
away from the cold, away from the crowds,
carrying me to another plane entirely.

One where I am
weightless
and completely placid.

For some time, I achieve the kind of tranquility
that fills me with heartache over the life that could have been.

A lone seagull calls overhead and shatters
the moment.

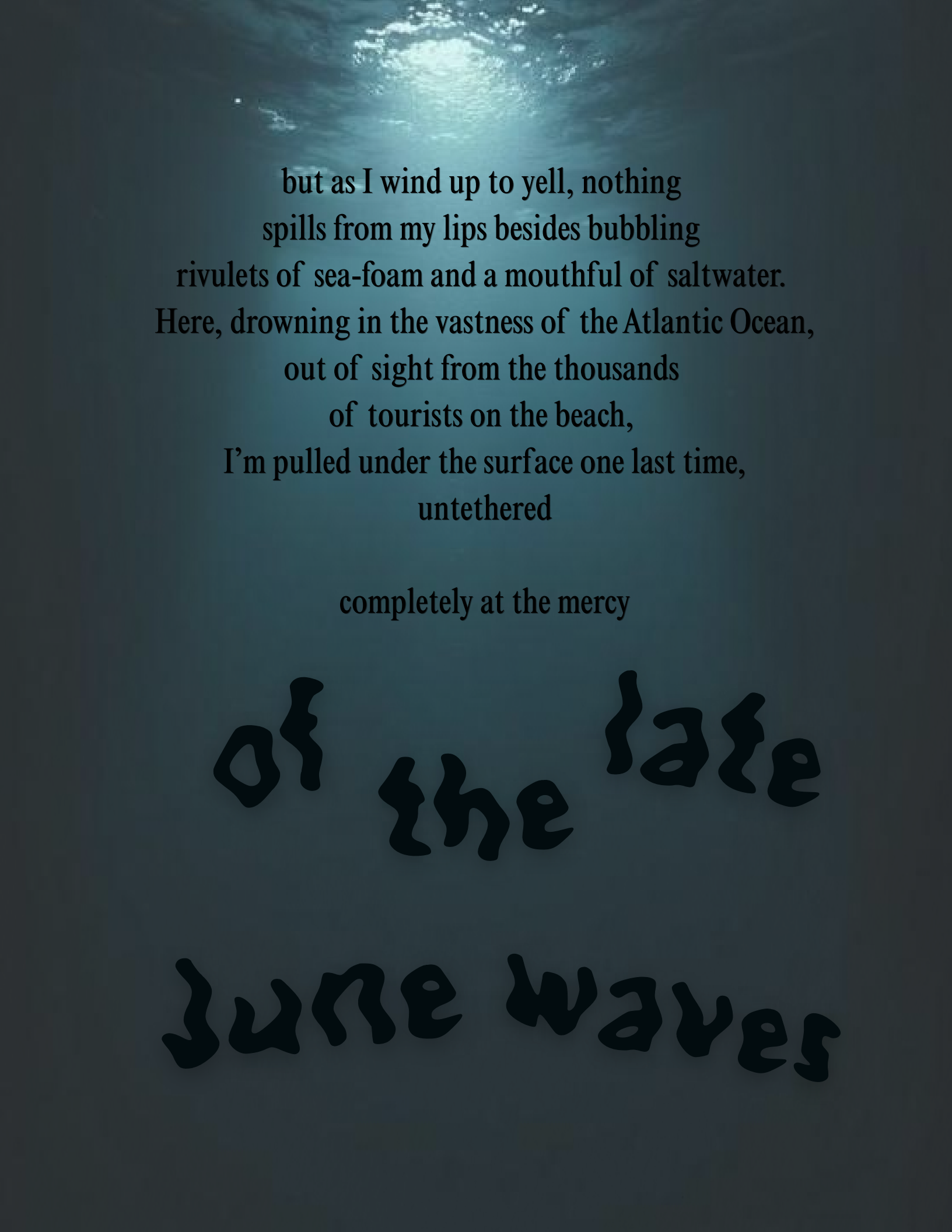
I snap my gaze to see if it's coming from the shore,
only to realize with a start that I can no longer
spot the beach at all.

All I see for miles, in every direction,
is an endless expanse of water,
shades of green and gray and brown,
waves building in momentum
like the climb of an angry pressure cooker.

I turn every which way,
desperately trying to make out a line of umbrellas
along the sand, and lose whatever vague idea
of direction I once had.

The water is deep, much deeper than anything I've ever swam in,
and my limbs feel like lead from my dazed excursion. When the
current finally crescendos and fights to pull me with it, my arms
thrash like the branches of a magnolia
during a Carolina hurricane for just seconds
before I go under.

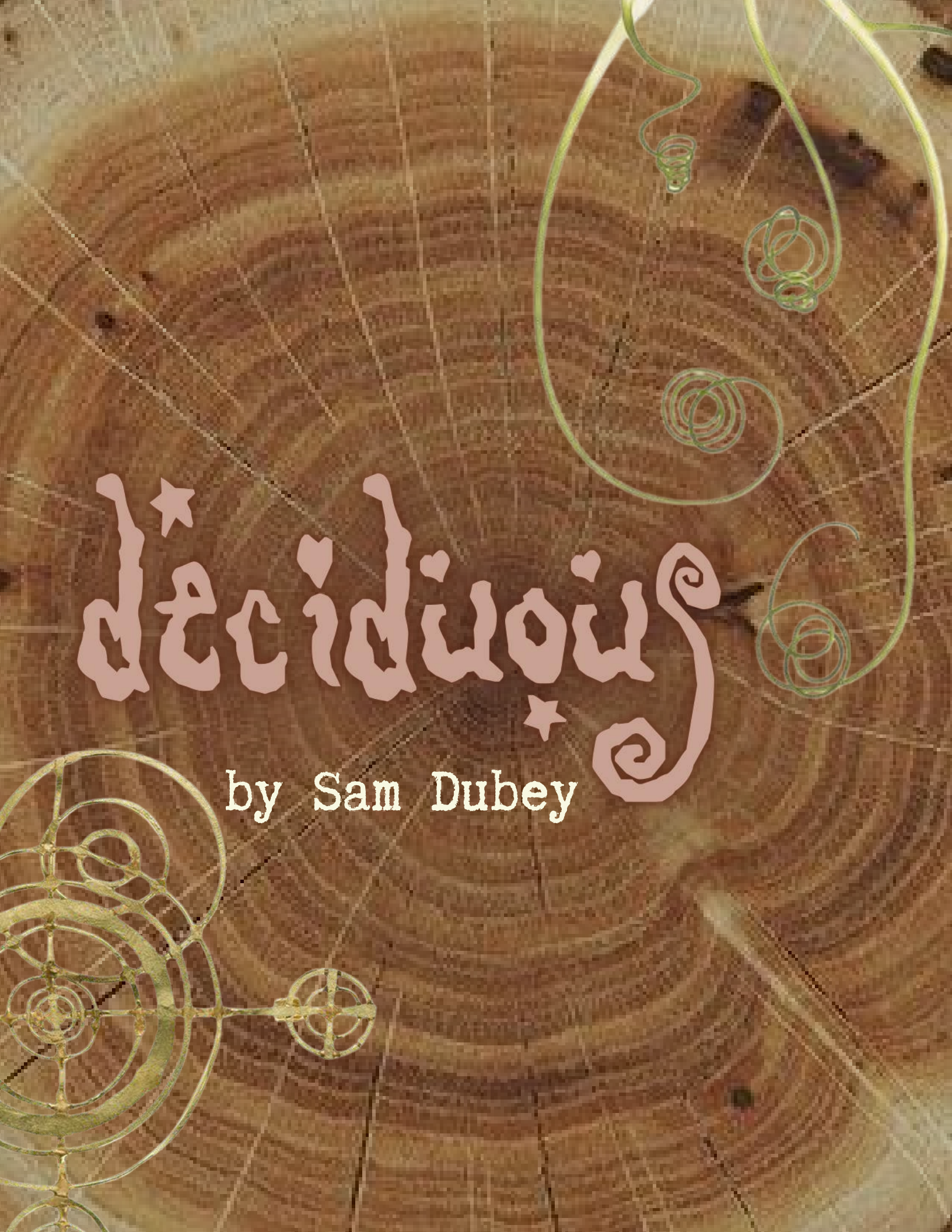
Panic rips through my chest,
white hot and sharp and painful,



but as I wind up to yell, nothing
spills from my lips besides bubbling
rivulets of sea-foam and a mouthful of saltwater.
Here, drowning in the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean,
out of sight from the thousands
of tourists on the beach,
I'm pulled under the surface one last time,
untethered

completely at the mercy

of the late
June waves



★ deciduous ★

by Sam Dubey

HORTICULTURE MONTHLY

JAN 2026

Dear Gardener,

There are temporary remedies
to mask the tendrils of rot in my chest cavity,
crawling out in search
of sunlight like a neglected thicket of wisteria,
once sturdy and overflowing with fragrant
clusters of
lavender blooms.

When the feel of decay in my mouth is too much
to bear in the midst
of a wet, cold winter,
I find myself
choking on the artificial
freshness of an old friend's favorite chewing gum,
spearmint bullet stuck
in the barrel of my throat.

One day, they will notice,
and I will not be able to
cough up
yellowed flowers
into the cup of their
waiting palms.

During these times, it feels like a great act of service to
skip dinner, ignore any and all messages, stop the spread of
phytophthora in its tracks.
It isn't working. What shall I do?

Dear Reader,
I have been where you are many times.
Any experienced gardener will tell you stop
watering the vine, give the soil time to dry out.
Expose the dark, mushy roots to the world,
then prune them with sterilized shears.
Apply a fungicide to whatever is left
before you replant and wait for it to grow back.

Write to me again come spring.

HORTICULTURE MONTHLY

JAN 2026

Dear Gardener,

I took your advice.

It isn't easy, you know, to pick up the phone,
cry into the receiver and wet the glass
of my phone screen with my tears like it is someone's
wool-covered shoulder.

I called my friends, the ones in the photo
next to my bed and we talked
for a long time about whatever came to mind:
the weight on my chest and lunch and New York.

Once I had cried all of the tears out of my body
I put on an ugly wool winter coat and headed to the park.
The trees had all been stripped bare
by unforgivingly low temperatures.

Good company made it easier to write until my wrist burned,
incomprehensible ballpoint scrawl about the quiet misery of the Midwest
that I could leave buried
in the fading lines of my journal.

The rest of the winter passed like this,
crying and talking and writing,
waiting for the scent of hyacinth and honey to return.

Three months of forcing
 myself out of bed
to take a walk around the frozen ponds and share
a tattered vinyl booth in the cafeteria with my friends,
 poking around the arugula
 on my plate,
trying desperately to sink
into the pleasant embrace of company.

Three months of reading those mystery books I used to
love when I was a kid and trying to figure out
 whodunnit
before Poirot and doing
 yoga zumba pilates.

Three months of being honest with my parents about
the loneliness and Wrongness and listening to them say big words like
 professional help and therapy
and taking a second to at least
 consider it.

It was a Wednesday in the middle of March
just warm enough to trek through
the slush on the street and walk to class.
I felt it within me, then,
the shape and feel of it;
lanceolate smooth,
real to the touch ,
sprouting from the gaps between my ribs—a single
leaflet..

longlegs by tamizh ponni vp

I got ten minutes tops.
My school bus ran on callous grease
And the selfish clock simmered scarlet.
Ripples of fear have raided the room.
One small shift and my cover's blown.
I see an entrance woven by drips of vile
A red carpet is rolled out to blurry backrooms
There she is
Snugly perched four feet above the floor
Primed for a manic rampwalk on a vulgar runway
"Come out! How long?!", Mother screamed
While the cleaning mop giggled from its corner
I squinted and sprinted
from captive air into clearance
She was one of those cellar types that had a year or two.
Have we met before?
At the library last week on Britannica's centrefold!
When my squeal earned a ban and a gross embarrassment.
Phobias are egregious. Just like love.
Twenty years tumbled down the ridges of life.
My Tree Rings darkened, and colour schemes faded.
I met the latest one from her labyrinth
Tiny yet gallantly hacking its paralysed prey.
Same place. Reformed fear.

My bathroom tiles bore the worst.
Its grout lines fed on salty dreams.
Gifts of grief and chronic cramps
From her high-hat loge, She saw it all and snubbed it all.
The premieres of my teenage theatre.
Our paths felt the final touch.
When lines almost turned circles.
Caged by cottage walls, inked by polar past,
lineal ghosts wandered my halls.
Her slender shadows lurked from the shelves above my kitchen sink.
Only this time, they were benign.
Too frail to balloon or build a decoy,
She crawled under my coffee skin
and grew into my bitter veins.
Medications failed, but mutual pain helped.
Under the fractals of wasted youth,
We made a silent pact
to honour what we lost and curse those we wronged.
Two blotched souls that waited to be towed
by the wrinkled hands of time.
Our eyes whispered a bankrupt 'Goodnight'.

In This Church

Hublinko



I'll never get enough of sunsets in my bedroom
Under the big rose window in bloom
Painting the walls in colors every day
Pushing my overseas lover to stay

In this church we pray for new tomorrow
There are no paintings breathing sorrow
In this church we do fancy photoshoots
With lux nova laying down by our boots

Moon behind the versicolor cage every night
Cold sheets or warm body by my side
In this church is no forever
No guarantee of infinity for a lover



Be the tracery to my window
Be the one who keeps me whole
Be my prayer of love
Be my holy dove
Be my forever
In the world full of nevers



Lazar

Bublinko



Teenage girl went up and down
Through heartbreak and anger scars
Depressed she got way too far
Drank too much and sinned too hard
But now they are all right
You might think I'm dying again
But I'm not

My sun still shines
My old selves are all right
They are not bleeding, lying, dying in lazaret
No they are not
Isazaret
No lazaret
In my head

You might think I'll fall apart
His bullet went straight through my heart
But he never shot any, no
He's a good boy

I'm war warrior and my scars are healed
No pain for heartbreak sounds like a good deal
I used to be scared of lazarettos when I was kids
But I'm getting stronger, growing out of it



Bublinko

I'll show you the world doesn't make sense
anymore

What's white now used to be black before
And the guy who used to do right before made
it wrong this time

His winning games found the wrong side of the
dime

And he probably knows it now
But there's no chance to push rewind
Under the midnight sun

I'll take out my gun
You better run and run
Under the midnight sun

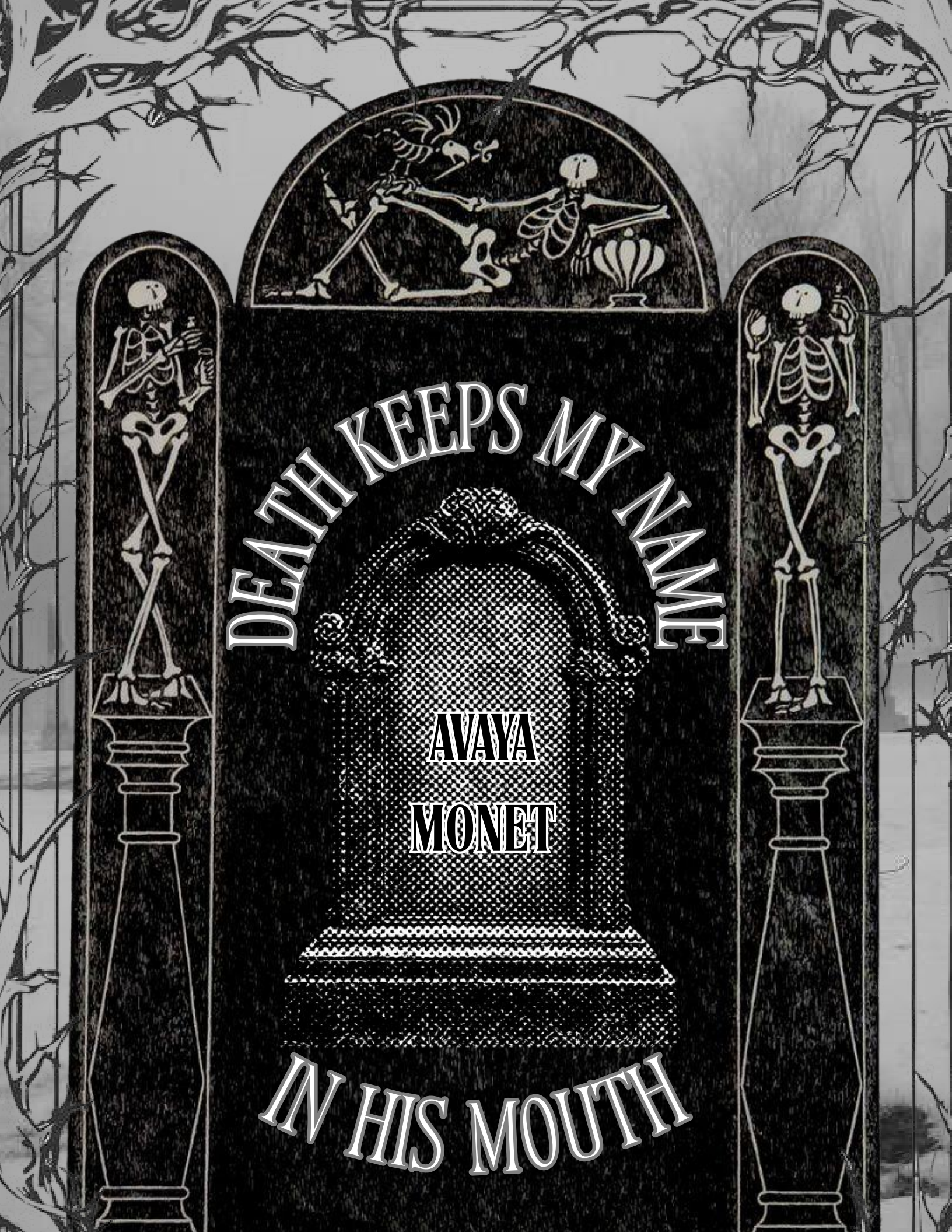
They'll say the world doesn't make sense
anymore

Let there be love where forbidden was before
And I'll help lost guy to do it the right way
this time

This love's beginning won't be marked as
crime

And you probably know it now
There's no need to push rewind

At the right noon
Meet me under the moon
Noon moon
Boom, boom



DEATH KEEPS MY NAME

AVAYA
MONET

IN HIS MOUTH

He always shows up when something in me finally snaps. Tonight, my catalyst had barely finished echoing down the hallway before the Reaper slid through the cracked door of my bedroom. Right on time.

I lay there, replaying the breakup like a looped punishment. I didn't need to look over to know it was him. He always shows. He was there after my first heartbreak where I begged someone to stay and offered my heart to them. After the second when I stopped begging. And after all the others when I didn't care enough to cry.

He crouched beside my bed. I felt the mattress dip, then his fingers hooked into the waistband of my jeans. In one practiced motion, he hauled me over his shoulder, my stomach pressed against his collarbone, my thighs locked against his ears. His grip promised bruises. I let myself go limp. It was easier than pretending I still had weight to him.

The walk there was long. The cabin waits where it always waits, rotting in the trees like the earth was swallowing it whole. His weight crushed the soggy leaves, mud covered his boots while dirt tracked on his laces. The sharp winds whipped my skin, the rain pelted my hair, the rigid branches snapped on my arms.

It was dark, the windows were suffocated by scraps of black fabric, the air in the room was stale and the tension was still heavy from my last visit. He slammed me down onto our wooden chair. I sit there tracing the old groove where my nails once begged for escape. The grooves were a map of every time I almost saved myself. The splits finding home in my fingertips. Coils of rope sat by my feet, he never used them anymore. I never left.

When he came, I knew I was supposed to follow and when I did, I'd forget my own way back.

He kneeled in front of me, one hand on my cheek and the other on my knee. I flinched. That small, pathetic twitch I hated, the one he loved, because it told him exactly how breakable I still was. He tapped my cheek with two fingers. A mockery of affection.

His hand slid down, slow and deliberate, to my chest. His palm pressed over my heart with the full weight of his body behind it, enough pressure to make it hard to breathe. Each visit he'd claim a piece of me. My appetite was the first thing to go, my looks followed immediately after. My thoughts belonged to him, any ounce of joy had been striped away, every memory rewritten. My heart kicked violently as if warning me that if I didn't move now, he'd take the last living part of me. His fingers pressed harder. I felt the sharpness of his nails.

I jerked at the piercing. He never took my heart, he let that stay heavy with me. It was broken, hurt, and bitter, but it was still with me. He choked me by throat and shoved me backwards. My shoulder blades banged into the back of the chair, I could feel the bruises already forming. I veered my body to the side, cowering away from him.

His footsteps prowled around me. I raised my head at the sound of his laughter, it was taunting and sarcastic. It was humiliating. Every visit I left with more scarring than I came in with. Every mark made me embarrassed and served as a reminder of him.

He smirked at me before striking my cheek with his hand. The power swept my body off the chair and onto the ground. My head crashed against the creaky wood. I hesitantly touched my throbbing lips, looking down at my fingertips to see fresh blood.

He gripped my arm, his nails digging into my skin. He dragged me by the back of my shirt through the doorframe of the kitchen. The collar was pulled up against my throat, cutting my air flow.

My knees scraped along the jagged flooring and broken glass, tearing holes into my jeans. He finally let go, shoving me before taking a step back. I panted and coughed trying to catch my breath, tears welled up in my eyes. He rolled his eyes as he grabbed his scythe.

My eyes widened with fear. For once, I second guessed how willing I was to stay. I scrambled to my feet and dashed towards the living room. He took hold of my shoulder, yanking me to the ground. I hit the floorboard, but I didn't waste a second. I rolled onto my forearms crawling towards the door while my limbs shook and every breath stabbed.

He caught my ankle and pulled me back towards me. I twisted onto my back and kicked at him as quickly and strong as I could muster. I kicked his knuckles, making him drop the scythe, but as it fell to the floor it sliced my heel. I winced loudly, withdrawing my body away from him. I pushed myself up the wall to steady myself.

He lunged toward me again, furious now. He swung his scythe as I ducked. The blade caught on my shirt, ripping a hole and leaving a deep scratch on my sternum. I cried out, my hand clutching at the wound. I limped forward, my heel bleeding through my shoe. I grabbed the wooden chair, throwing it into his way and continuing towards the door. I threw my weight against it causing the door to fly open. I darted out of the rotten cabin, through the mud, and hid far into the trees. Cold night air punched into my lungs.

I didn't look back to see if he followed. I knew I couldn't escape him forever. I wasn't running toward safety, I was running into darkness and the unknown. I was running toward a version of me I didn't know existed yet, but one that won't succumb to darkness.



Flash

Tamizh Ponni VP is an ambivert and a stoic art buff who loves to express her skills through literature, visual arts and music. She is an IB educator and sees learning as a life-long process. Her stories were featured in 2 anthology books.

"Mia" and "Varna". Tamizh's articles, poems and paintings have also been published in many digital journals and educational blogs. Tamizh spends most of her free time painting, reading, writing articles, stories and poems, playing piano and watching documentaries / movies.



"Flash"



THE NEW "I" SHOP



EMMA
DIAZ
PLEASE



*The New "I" Shop: We sell identities for
Singers, authors, actors, and painters.*

Come in

And we'll make you one too.

Her name is Edna Jack Burrow
But it hasn't always been the same.
She bought it at the New "I" Shop,
Paid four cents and her old name.

She swore only to go once,
To change her name for an ounce
Of hope to gain fame
By having a more interesting name.

Edna's train of thought later stopped short.
She's got it in a jam of sorts.
So she took another trip to the New "I" Shop where
They sell thought parts by the pair.

If you ask her why she went again
She'll tell you that she only did so when
The story she was writing got really good
But the gears in her mind stopped working the way they should.
Later, when Burrow was in a pickle,
And could definitely afford a nickel
To buy ideas for a new plot
Which would get her a great deal of copies bought



*She went to the New "I" Shop where
They sold ideas in a snare.*

Edna's was great and strong and vicious

It looked to Burrow that her future was auspicious.

But while wrangling the idea to submit to her favor

It broke from her grip and ran into its stock neighbor.

A bottled dream then went flying,

Which hit a flock of rare names.

It sent them reeling and falling into the thought jars

Which then broke into flames.

In moments, the New "I" Shop was ablaze,

And in the treachery of the fleeing dreams,

The screeching teems

Of flying names over the screams

Of the wide-eyed ideas,

Edna managed to barely escape.

After that day, Edna never went back to the New "I" Shop.

Even if it were rebuilt, the truth was that it was all a flop.

She really should have left the shop alone

The day she had bought things you just couldn't own.

Where The Devil Lived



Collette Night

"Mumma, where does the devil live?"

In the darkness, I picture Mumma's face. The lines that map her skin, how they crinkle in the corners of her eyes when she braces.

Her answer comes out slow and tired. "The devil lives... in every bottle of red wine." I shift in her lap.

"Not white?"

She scoffs. "No."

Dirt crunches, the sound sharp in the stillness as she shifts her position against the mine wall, pulling me further against her bony chest. My teeth chatter as I hide my hands within my thin cardigan. The cold burns my throat with every breath.

"Why?"

Mumma yawns. Then, I yawn.

"Why, *what*, my sweet?"

I lick my dry lips. "Why does the devil *only* live in red?"

My hair is gently loosened from its ponytail, and Mumma begins to braid it. Her fingers know the movement without seeing. "The same reason he lives in every pack of cigarettes." She finishes the braid, ties it off and tugs it.

One. Two.

The same number of tears Mumma let me see this morning, when we peered out the busted caravan window and watched the magpies searching for bugs in the long grass.

"Can I braid your hair?" I ask, moving from her warm lap.

There is a sudden quiet.

She doesn't say that I've never done it before, that my fingers don't know the movement, that it's too dark to see anything. She simply offers her back and guides my hands to her hair. It feels thin and scratchy as I separate the strands.

"The devil," Mumma says, "he's a tricky bastard. He lives between the sheets. Hides his secrets behind locked doors, buries his crimes in dirty mines. And when you're naughty, he loves you by the welts on your back, the sweat on your brow. He holds your hand and squeezes—doesn't stop till he hears the crack."

Her hair slips through my still fingers.

"That's the devil for you, Mara. A tricky bastard."

I don't say anything.

Mumma begins to hum, and I pick up the fallen strands—

Bang!

We freeze.

Bang. Bang. Bang!

My cheeks turn hot. Our breaths hold within our chests like secrets.

Something about the sound is wrong. Gunshots are not unusual, but something about the number... four. Father wouldn't waste bullets.

I open my mouth, but Mumma hushes me. We stay that way, my hand in hers, until the chill returns to my cheeks.

There's shouting, followed by a deep bark, and from our hollow in the earth, we see a silver light shining ahead, reflecting off rocks and shed snake skins.

Mumma laughs and pulls me up to stand with her. I stumble behind her as she feels her way out. My own fingers find the wall, trailing behind hers. We shuffle back toward where the strange light is visible.

"The thing about the devil, Mara—"

The overlapping voices move closer, calling out Mumma's name.

"We're here," she shouts. "Help, we're here!"

Torchlight blinds me. Mumma leans close and whispers, for only me to hear, "He doesn't win, you see?"

beasts of silver & iridescence

*Soar over cerulean skies,
Patrolling for the next bite.
Loose chippy on the pavement,
Dive.*

*Spread your wings wide,
Glide in a gust of smoked city
breeze.
Sing your song far, live.
Coo.*

*Shimmering silver iridescence,
Columbidae,
Take daily, stand against
bigger beasts.
Crane your little head, bold.
Tenacity in concrete cliffs.*

by Lillian Glover



Five Simple Steps
for a Perfect Hookup,
Every Time!



K.F.
Delmare

One: Hop in the Shower

You were two years old and terrified when you took your first shower. That was later than some of the parenting books suggested, but you were resistant and skittish before you saw the sun. Initially, your only needs were as small as your body: a bar of soap, baby shampoo that was the hue of honey and half as viscous, plus the tiniest washcloth in the towel closet.

Over time, you accumulated new tools, each more necessary than the last. Conditioner, so your ends could be caressed.

A collection of beauty products is arranged on a patterned cloth. In the foreground, there is a black razor with a silver head, a tube of Nivea Creme with a blue and white polka-dot lid, and a small black perfume bottle. The background is a solid dark red color. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image in a white, serif font.

Razors, to make you virginal. Acne scrub, to hide the changes. Exfoliant, to slough away until you were pink and raw as sake nigiri. Fragrances. Masks. Buffs. Every frosted bottle added to the sink is a delegate with something harsh to say about the girl in the mirror. You will skip meals, medications, and ambitions, but not a scrub.



Two: Moisturize!

Two weeks after your tenth birthday, you began to wash your hands more. Too much, people would say. Too many times to count. The violent red scabbing on your hands passed your notice, except for when it was too painful to ignore. Sitting next to you in band class, a girl from the grade below commented on their appearance, her glossed lips wrinkled with disgust. You skipped eighth period and took the bus to the mall. The woman at the store didn't think anything of a girl your size buying a tub of shea butter in the early afternoon on a Tuesday.

You always forget the order, but apparently it's lotion, body butter, then oils. Once the top layer is spread over your thighs, your midsection, your elbows, you usually pretend there are chores. Wash, vacuum, and mop what's already clean. Can't sit on the couch unless you want a giant, indelible smear to horrify all the guests you'll ever have.



Three: *Make Smart Food Choices*

One apple is about 70 to 100 calories. You found a protein bar that's under 200, but it tastes like it shouldn't be edible. A banana is costly at 90 to 100, but it does have the potassium that will assuage your fears of a diet-induced heart attack. Regardless of how well you have mastered the arithmetic, you have gained and lost 20 pounds about one dozen times in the course of your young life. Your mother always prompts you to give keto one more try. ("You seemed happy then.")

Starting at eighteen, you began to eat pineapple before dates. It was a myth, your roommate assured you, but you got so entrenched in the habit that it began to scare you to consider not doing it. That was how all your habits developed—who can say if it's pathology or personality?



The pineapple was pointless anyway, because they never wanted to suffer the indignity of their mouth between your legs.

Four: Dress Your Best

You didn't know how to dress until you were twenty. Before that, everything was a mash of whatever was in your closet, combined with the meagerest coherence. A shirt with that band's logo, plus the miracle jeans that made your butt look round without highlighting your pudgy abdomen. An ugly dress that cinched at your waist, accentuated by pleather booties that made you look stumpy. An oversized hoodie for the gym, with the stained sweatpants. Cycle according to occasion.

Two years ago, your ex-boyfriend reconnected, with intentions. You're beautiful, you don't even know it, but I do, et al. When he invited you over, you left work early and scoured a perfumed shop for lingerie. After 28 minutes raising and dropping different slips of lace and polyester, you settled on a bra that you didn't try on, eyes downward as you jammed your card into the waiting mouth of the PIN pad.

So much agony, so much trepidation, and you came home only to pinch it around your body and remember that the transformative power of alluring satin is always lost on you. The skin of your breasts leaked out like pancake batter bloating on the skillet. The straps laid deep inside your shoulders, pinching for punishment. When the day came and you crossed his threshold, you ultimately just wore the same old thing.

Nonetheless, the purchase sat at the bottom of your duffel bag with the quality of a virgin scratchcard: promising only in imagination, disappointing as soon as it's used.

He didn't notice the difference as he yanked your clothes off. While he was on top, the moment became too much and you said that you loved him. You didn't, at least not in the way the timing and tone suggested, but it escaped anyway. While his tempo was unbroken, he looked down at you with wide eyes, sienna pebbles in a sour cream sea, as if he were one reflex away from opening his jaws and dousing you in bile.

Instead, he choked on his own breath and smiled with half his mouth. Let's agree to forget about this.



Five: Play safe—but play!

When it comes to wasted time, you are long in the tooth. Curate the ensemble, perfume your skin until it's pungent, abuse your hair, take the pill, step on the scale, cover your acne, walk in a circle with your phone, see if those pants fit, consider an inelegant suicide, make sure you're still on, toss the extra latex in your handbag, get hungry, question it all, chew gum, analyze your hemline, sweat the whole way there.

It all seems condensed to a brick of compacted trash when he empties himself, and the best you can hope for is a body laid lax on you instead of just rolling off. You want more, in every way.

You know it won't stop—none of it—until you're no longer afraid to be bigger, bigger in every way.

The difference between knowing and growing is a chasm. Keep chewing the gum and hope that one day, you'll be brave enough to jump.





GARBAGE DAY

Liesl Jobson



Before wheeling the bin onto the street I check the contents. Some dessert spoons have gone missing. It's possible that Dad accidentally threw them out. Since his eye surgery he doesn't see very well. He misses the edge of the table. He misses stairs. I remind him to close his curtains at night so he can get proper sleep. He likes the streetlight though. It helps him find his way in the dark.

The bags beneath the grass clippings contain mouldy vegetable scrapings, chicken bones and fruit peels. Banana, mango, melon. The detritus from my bedroom bin greet me: empty toilet rolls, tangles pulled from my hairbrush, a discarded toothbrush, blunt razor blades. There's the shoebox of junk my father brought over from my parents' bathroom cupboard: perished ear plugs, expired haemorrhoid medication, nail strengthening lacquer, rusty tweezers, a broken thermometer. I didn't tell him I was throwing it away. He would have wanted to save it.

Every morning my father presents me with a huge bowl of fruit, neatly sliced, which is what he did for my mother in their great big kitchen until a month ago. I try telling him that I don't want fruit every day. It pushes up my blood glucose. I remind him I'm trying to keep my weight down and fruit makes me hungry. He forgets and brings it anyway, like a child having found a treasure. I can't reject his gift, so I eat it.

When Dad went into the hospital for a detached retina, my mother went into a care home where she is treated like royalty. She can't remember my name so she calls me Princess when I visit – which is seldom – because I can't bear her vanishing. She takes lunch on cafeteria tables across from governors and captains of industry. Good sir, she calls them all. Good sir. My father she calls "my husband". She doesn't remember his name either.

My blood sugar goes up for reasons other than too much fruit. I no longer exercise. I sleep poorly. I'm too tired, too sad, too disconnected to get out of bed some days. I've started comfort eating again. When I get out in the car, which is not often, I detour past the artisanal ice cream parlour across town. When I can't get out I browse the website, imagining the flavours: roasted cherry and dark chocolate, sweet cream with honeycomb, basil and pine nut praline, lemondrop with crystallised ginger.

At the bottom of the garbage bin are no missing spoons. There's nothing exciting, nothing to be redeemed. Only the stains of the week.



Little Dusk



Emily Jarecke

The
Rooming
and
The
Mirror

Emma
Diaz Pease

The Rooming



The room stares as he invites her in.

The room stares as he takes a shot of his gin,
As he smiles a slimy grin.

The room stares as he spills words that curl upon her lap
And plant a seedling of hurt so deep into her veins
That her tender heart pounds with the urge to dispose of such poison.

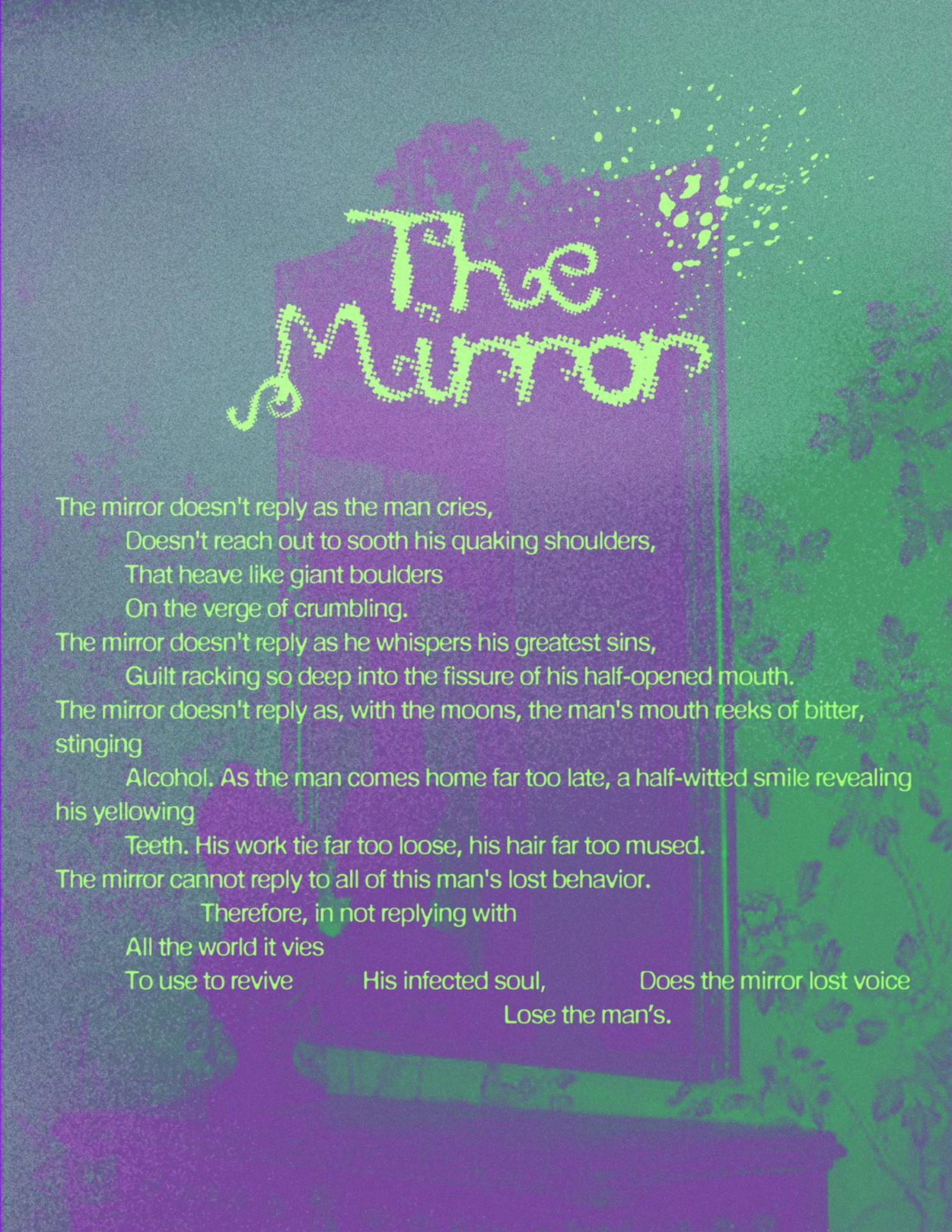
The room stares as he crawls closer and closer.
His fingers digging into the mahogany of his desk,
The podium of his confidence.

The room stares. Can only stare-witness,
how this man has so much retching influence
Over this woman's pain, mind, life.

And nothing can do justice
For what he took away that day,
And the silence that the room
Gave,

Gave,

Gave away.



The Mirror

The mirror doesn't reply as the man cries,
Doesn't reach out to sooth his quaking shoulders,
That heave like giant boulders
On the verge of crumbling.

The mirror doesn't reply as he whispers his greatest sins,
Guilt racking so deep into the fissure of his half-opened mouth.

The mirror doesn't reply as, with the moons, the man's mouth reeks of bitter,
stinging

Alcohol. As the man comes home far too late, a half-witted smile revealing
his yellowing

Teeth. His work tie far too loose, his hair far too mused.

The mirror cannot reply to all of this man's lost behavior.

Therefore, in not replying with

All the world it vies

To use to revive

His infected soul,

Does the mirror lost voice

Lose the man's.

ST. JOHN ON THE

MOON

(and these
dreams
I used to
have)



THE MOON IS IN FACT
THE WOMAN HE WROTE ABOUT, AND
THE MONSTER I DREAMED OF, AND
THE LIGHT IN THE WINDOW THAT SAID
VIENI DA ME, VIENI DA ME, VIENI.

IN WINTER: PARLA A BASSA VOCE.
I TELL YOU THIS VOID BETWEEN US,
EMPTY, IT HURTS ME.

SHE GAVE ME THE CHANCE TO STAY AND
NIENTE SCARPE SUL TAVOLO!

SHE TOLD ME IF I HAD TO HAVE
SOMETHING
TO HAVE THAT SPACE IN THE NOTHINGNESS
WE BUILT BETWEEN US.

LA LUNA, COSÌ LEI CHIAMAVO, DIRÒ—
I'LL SAY THE NAME OF THINGS I KNOW!

EVERYTHING I CAN'T HAVE,
I FIND IT HERE.

MOON OF MEMORY, WAITING FOR ME, YET
REMEMBERING LEADS TO FALSITIES AND
I LOST SENSIBILITY SOMEWHERE IN
BETWEEN BUT
BOTTLING THAT FOR LATER,
TAKE WHAT YOU CAN GET OR LEAVE IT ALL
BEHIND.

INFINITE MOON'S ARMS GATHERING,
COLLECTING,
CLUTTERING UP SPACE WITH MILKY OLD
DREAMS,
MINDFULLY DISPOSING WHAT WON'T BE
GIVEN AWAY
EASILY.

I THINK OF IT, I DROWN IN IT, I
SUFFOCATE

NEI TANTI DOLCI VUOTI.

by Amelia Pozniak

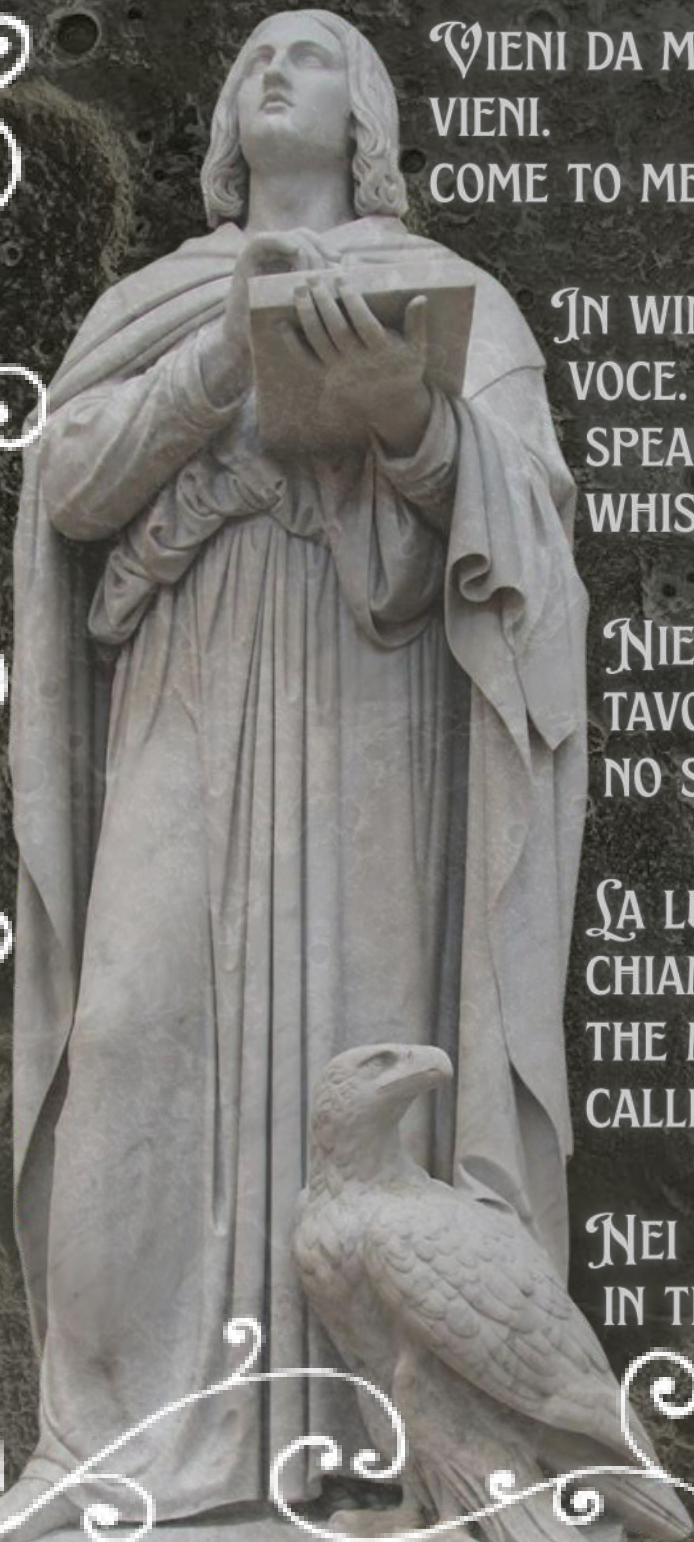
VIENI DA ME, VIENI DA ME,
VIENI.
COME TO ME, COME TO ME, COME.

IN WINTER: PARLA A BASSA
VOCE.
SPEAK SOFTLY (IN A
WHISPER)

NIENTE SCARPE SUL
TAVOLO!
NO SHOES ON THE TABLE!

LA LUNA, COSÌ LEI
CHIAMAVO, DIRÒ—
THE MOON, THAT'S WHAT
CALLED HER, I'LL SAY—

NEI TANTI DOLCI VUOTI.
IN THESE SWEET EMPTIES



ROSARY

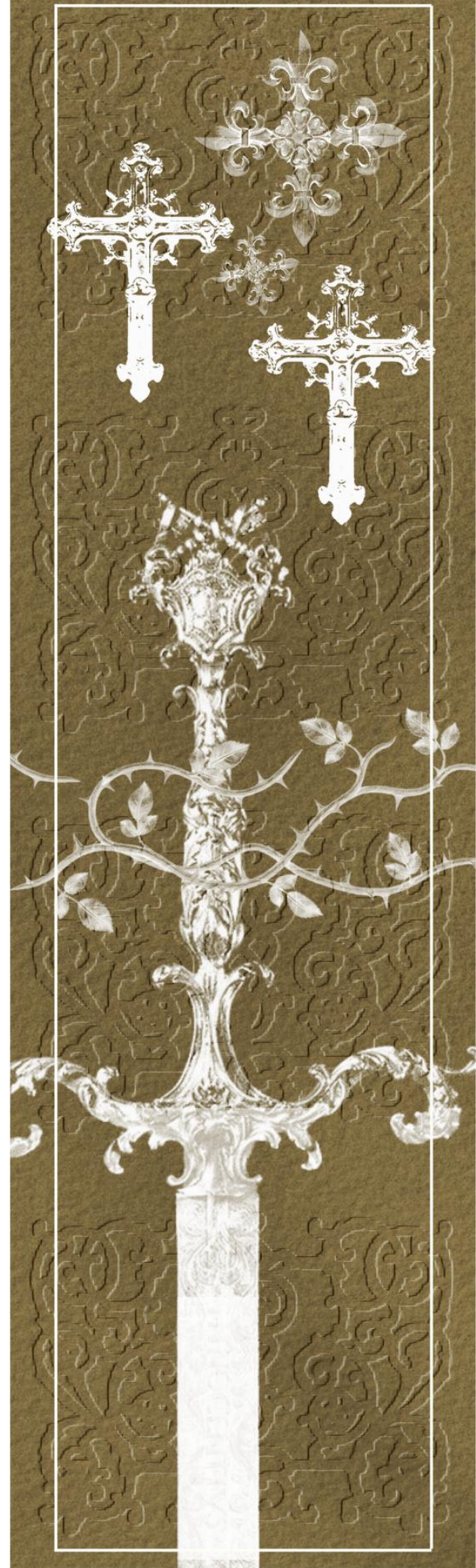
DAILEY HARD



*I grip your rosary
with pulsing veins
as the river assaults my fallen body;
nostrils full,
pressure jabbing up into my head
as to warn of fire.*

*Fire. Fire all around.
Hail Mary and hold her
with sweaty palms;
standing in bleak fields.
Her feet gashed,
bruised and bleeding,
her child carried to his quiet tomb
and our task before her.*

*Could her blood
fill us as her sons?
Mouths open, latched on
like lambs crying
for a sweeter morning,
thousands of souls surely pined
after her purple and dark brown feet.*



*Looking for promises of a sunrise
that caresses the nape of your neck,
delivering the day with nurturing beams,
one with short homilies,
without eulogies.*

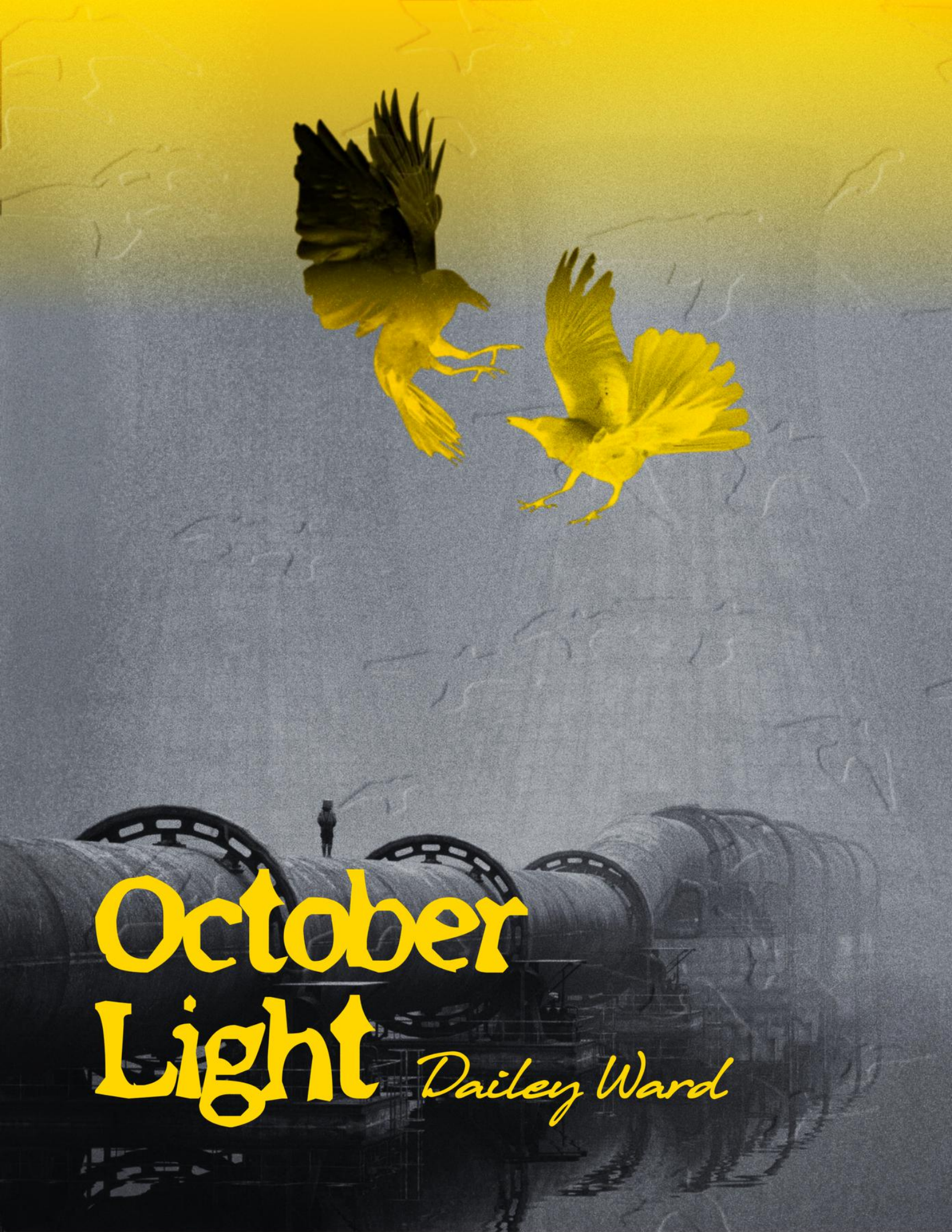
*Where baskets fill patient mouths,
and worn hands flee from their tolls.*

Hail Mary

*Because her blood is like water
like wine to our forgotten crop,
the field fallow and refound,*

*and were this is my palm
I'd share with all
I touch.*





October Light

Dailey Ward

bodies of the
colonized and colonizer
are blurred in this cacophony of light,
i call you America,

where every home
is a stifled cry
and an echo of
what is lost,

slipping into a new tongue
as legs shiver in cheap
sweatpants, hand woven

by another people forgotten
shipped by thousands displaced,
how can the name
Tijuana hold more suffering
than possible?

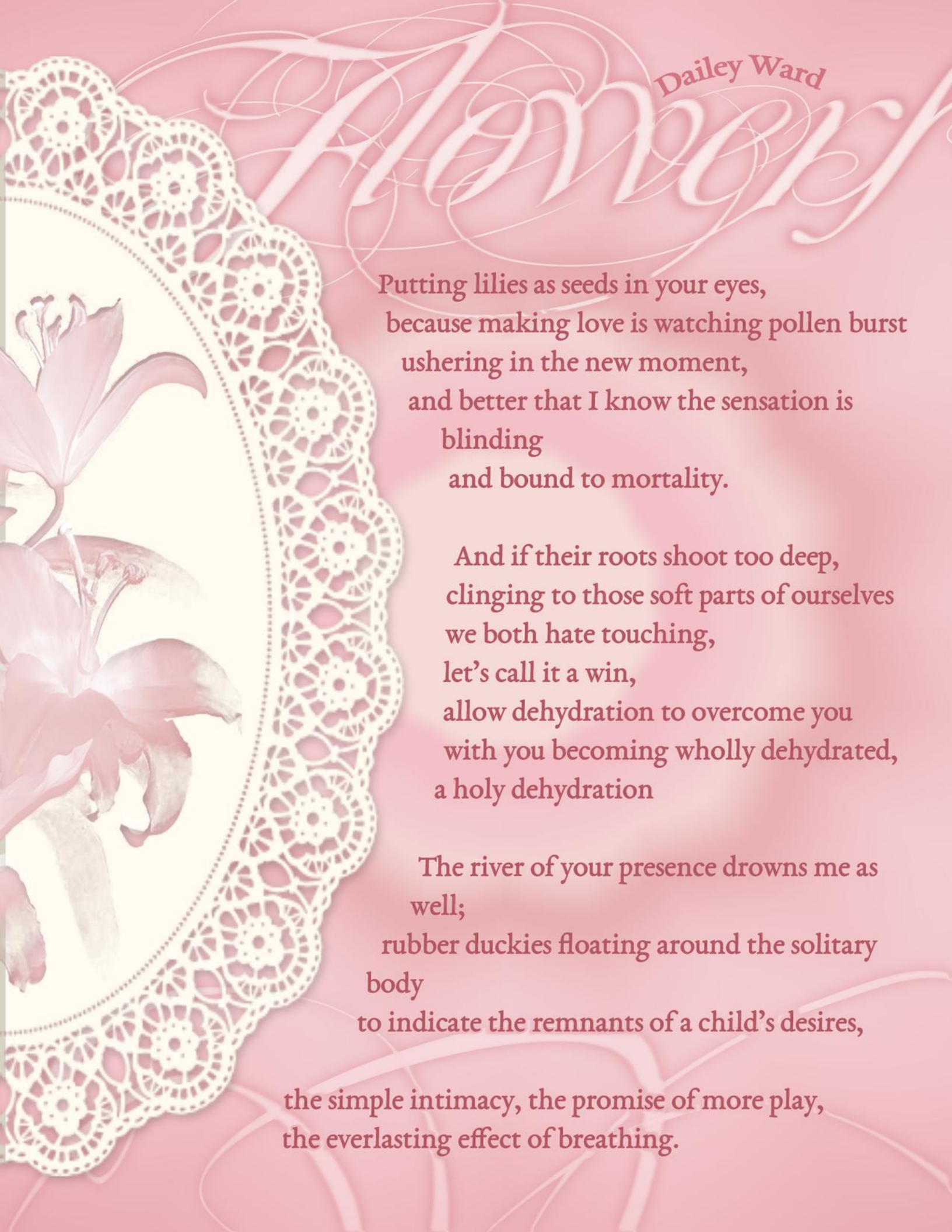
Maquiladoras bleed iridescent rivers
unto children, the rancid air
burning their eyes.

And when do we go back
to what we are
before words?

That place
before light
that can't know itself.

All these and more
stand before me
in the October rain,

where each drop falls
with the gait of snowflakes
and catches
pieces of light.

The page has a soft pink background. On the left, there is a white lace border that curves around a lily flower. The lily is in shades of pink and white, with green leaves. In the top right corner, the name 'Dailey Ward' is written in a small, dark font. The title 'Flowers' is written in a large, elegant, white cursive font across the top. There are three stanzas of poetry in a dark red font, each with a different indentation. The overall aesthetic is romantic and delicate.

Dailey Ward

Flowers

Putting lilies as seeds in your eyes,
because making love is watching pollen burst
ushering in the new moment,
and better that I know the sensation is
blinding
and bound to mortality.

And if their roots shoot too deep,
clinging to those soft parts of ourselves
we both hate touching,
let's call it a win,
allow dehydration to overcome you
with you becoming wholly dehydrated,
a holy dehydration

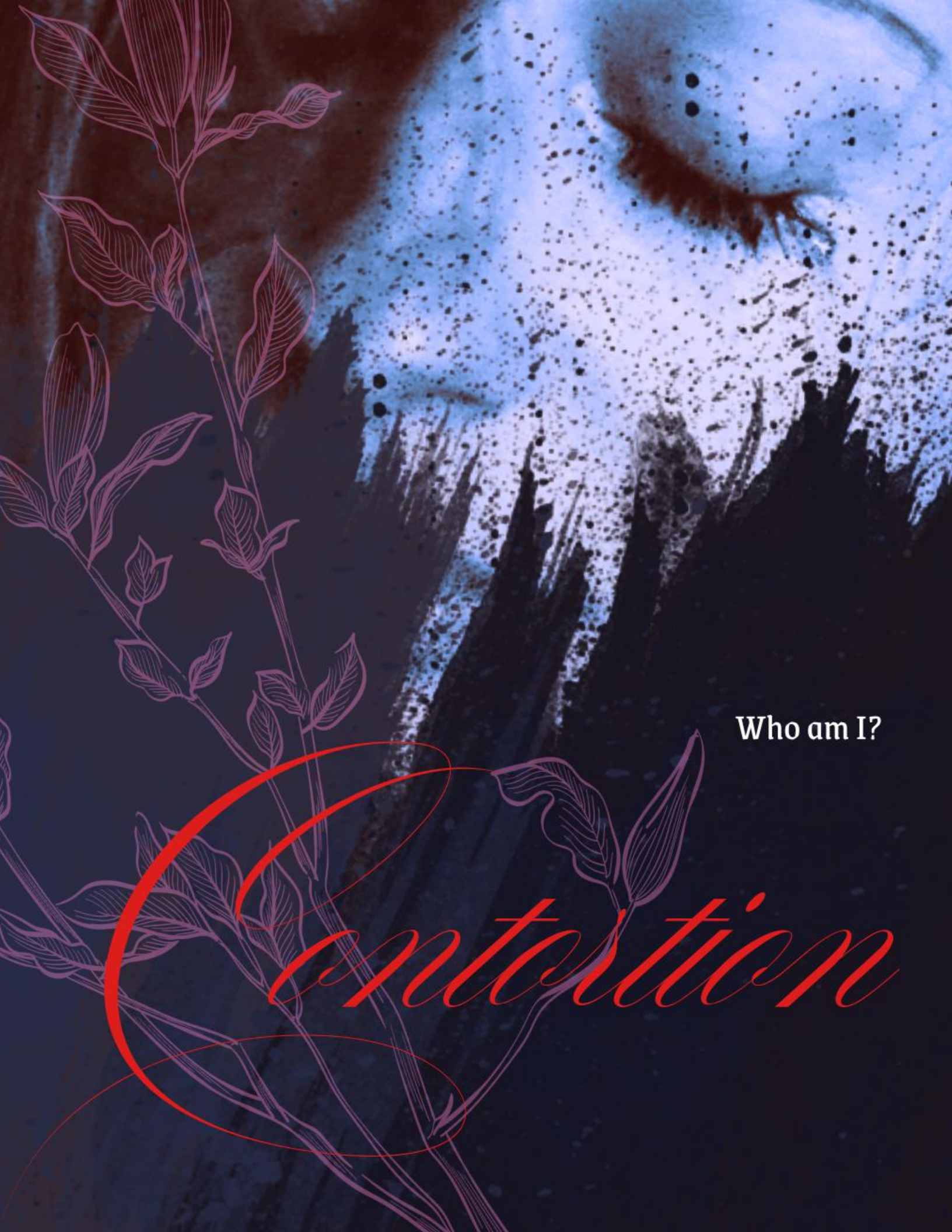
The river of your presence drowns me as
well;
rubber duckies floating around the solitary
body
to indicate the remnants of a child's desires,

the simple intimacy, the promise of more play,
the everlasting effect of breathing.

THE MERCY PROGRAM, 2025



BY MADELEINE CARRINGTON



Who am I?

Contention



Alisa is a nurse by day but lost to writing by night. She is a researcher of trad wives, Andrew Tate and other strange creatures.

I wish I were your best friend.

Instead, you fear me. You pray I don't exist.

Love me.

Play with me.

I am here already, despite your worst fears.

Here just for you.

What am I?

I am the little ache in your belly at night that you can't quite place.

I am the nausea that you have had since you have been a child.

You tell yourself that it's normal.

That you'll see a doctor if it gets worse.

But I am patient. I am kind.

We're going to be best friends soon now. Anytime.

I can't wait for us to spend all our time together.

As I wrap myself around your vena cava and lungs.

What am I?

Don't be afraid.

I was made just for you.

You dreamed of me when you were forming in the womb.

We nurtured each other in your mother's amniotic sac.

We played and bounced.

Your mother had one just like me.

They were friends too once.

I don't know what happened.

What am I?

I'm growing bigger now.

My sides, lumpy and hard.

I am gestating beside your warm insides.

Where is this light coming from?

Who brought the scalpel?

We were supposed to be best friends.

I'm patient.

I was waiting for you.

Why are they cutting me?

Why do they call me 'monster?'

What am I?



Corpse Bride

Nick
Fife



It's a mess of gender and hair all over:
the feminine cut on the shoulders,
the deltoid rendered sharp and shelved,
triceps bulging, biceps yearning to be a bit
bigger.

It droops, all salt and sultry, watching the
throat fully travel down to the esophagus and
back up to the jaw.

Salt crusts behind the ear, on the fat
obscuring collar and rib, where the hair
swirls and curves toward the axilla, soaked
to the root, plastered thoracic, inches
cut now.

Shorn, floating barely any distance from the
scalp, neck open from behind, for the kill or
for the scruff, all of it pieced back together
since that day.

Maphazard, reanimate, but can't any of those
things mean 'alive'?



azúcar moreno, yin

Nick Fife

I am so rarely named
amongst the wreckage
left so early in our life

together, almost. Funny,
how conversations
pirouette around dregs,

so little of me in any
of it. He is in every
toponym, his sunny

radiant. My sombra is
just as dignified in its
spit laced with blood,

the necrosis in my gums,
the tongue indifferent,
flavor húmedo. Hunger for

my passivity no longer.
I am drenched, shivering;
would you call that a baptism?

Can you not still see

in this shade, north of
after, of me, now?

Look!, how the ulna turns
out, disjunct and cephalic, seized
up for your lash or embrace,

offering.

Hollow Bricks

Calla Smith

She lived in a tiny apartment on a side street off a bustling avenue. The walls were grey and spotted with black mold, and the tiles covering the kitchen were broken, cracked, coated in a layer of grime that would be impossible to remove.

She was hungry, and she had been hungry for as long as she could remember. No food that had ever passed her lips would satisfy her cravings. She wanted something else beyond flecks of salt to linger on her lips, something that would carry the crunch of the broken asphalt and the sweetness left in the elevator after her neighbor got off, leaving the smell of her perfume behind. There were so many tastes and textures out there in the world that she longed to experience. Even as a child, she had eaten rocks and any insects that had come into her sight, and the doctors had always told her parents that it was a miracle she had survived.

But now she was an adult on her own in a big city, and there was a new smell working its way



into her nose and creating an itch in the depths of her soul. The blood of the people around her sang to her, and she was even intrigued by the sweat or grime of people she ran into on the bus. She needed to know more about them, she decided. She needed to know their history and their future, their deepest fears and greatest joys. She needed to taste their breath and chew on their soul until the ache in her own empty stomach subsided.

Perhaps the people around her sensed it, and that was why they stayed away. There was something dark and slightly dangerous about her, like looking into the blackness of a deep pit. Meeting her eyes was like falling as if in your sleep, only to be jerked awake again when they looked away. She was untouchable, unapproachable. She knew that being around her was like a bucket of cold water. Even her parents had made her leave their home as soon as she could, taking her old childhood mattress with her to sit on the corner of her bedroom, covered in dust. But, as time



passed, she felt she was starving, withering away day by day, and there was only one thing that could calm the raging beast in her chest. Perhaps in the night she would be disguised, so she went to the sad dive bar just a few blocks away and sat at a table covered in shadows until someone came to her, smelling of stale beer and something broken.

As they talked, the stabs of hunger subsided but did not disappear. Eventually, he had nothing left to tell her, and they were getting up to leave. She tripped with her glass in her hand, and they both fell into the shards that covered the floor, now sticky with their blood. They clamored to their feet hesitantly, even though she just wanted to lie there and breathe the shape of his body next to her in.

They kissed outside while her tongue still held the few drops of blood she had licked off her finger. She could feel him freeze under the lamp



-light as he tasted the coppery tang and looked down into her eyes before turning pale and drifting away like a ghost into the night. Even after he was gone, she still felt him filling some of the empty places of her soul. She had something of his that he could never take back, and she could still feel it every time she swallowed. It wasn't enough, of course. She wanted more; she would always want more. So she found ways to engineer encounters. She knew the people in the neighborhood talked about her, but that didn't matter.

As she felt herself swelling with each new piece of someone's being, she wondered if they were no longer staying away as they had done before. She wondered if perhaps they found pleasure in giving her a piece of themselves too.





Fragile
But Not
Broken.

By
Calla
Smith.

My house is a mausoleum no living person should ever have to survive in, but I do, hour after hour and year after year. Every day is always the same. I wake up, have a cup of coffee, and place whatever small glass trinket that caught my fancy the evening before on the shelves that line the walls. I do this with the same consistency that other people send good morning texts to someone they love.

When it all started, I had been spending my evenings immersed in the small things my mother had left behind, in particular her collection of perfume bottles, whimsical animals, and antique glasses. Every day, I would choose one and think that I could start a collection of my own, so I had the shelves installed. Over time, there was nothing left of my mother's possessions, so I found new and beautiful things to add from small stores, art galleries, or trash bins throughout each day.

Eventually, there was no room for other decorations in my apartment. There were no books or photos, only small objects that were so beautiful to me that they seemed to come from another world. They all sat there collecting dust as I did on the subway when I went to work and came back every day without even the slightest variation.

Over time, I had grown accustomed to the screech of the tracks and the people selling

sweets or asking for money, just as I had learned to tolerate the phones and the endless chatting of my coworkers in the office. But in my house, there was nothing but the sound of silence and the strains of the world outside in the background. That was the way things were supposed to be: just me and everything breakable.

Sometimes people would try to get it, but I knew better than to let them. My door was padlocked, and the blackout curtains on my windows always stayed down. My home was everything I needed. It was warm in the winter and cool in the summer. It was the only place I could take my shoes off and feel my bare feet on the floor, the only place I could hear myself breathe. I always thought that I would stay there forever, as my mother had done before, until I, too, faded away into some final illness and turned into nothing.

But the city had other plans for me. I had become comfortable with my routines, and I'd never expected the change that came to be so brutal and sudden. It was my own fault. It was the middle of summer, and I had opened my bedroom window to let in some breeze, and I hadn't closed it before leaving.

A storm started brewing during the day, and I watched it from the office without suspecting what it would mean for me. The

winds were strong when I left for home, and by the time I opened the front door, the rain had started. I stepped inside and could immediately feel that something was different. Something was wrong.

A gust of air hit me hard in the chest, and I flicked on the light only to find all of the glass shelves and all of my precious collection shattered and broken on the floor. It didn't matter anymore if the outside world got in, so I let the rain pelt in onto the rug and left the door open as I sank to my knees and clutched the broken shards to me even as they punctured my skin and I started to bleed. I heard myself breathe out in what was left of the silence, and then the tears I had never been able to shed came.

I lay on the ground with the destruction all around me and sobbed with every ounce of my being. I cried for my mother and the shadow of a person she had become. I cried for myself and the ghost I had turned into all those years I had closed myself away into a place only fit for mourning the dead.



Girls



by Lilly Flores

the crest of mermaid

in the dark

ocean

all the way

by dyophenē



Toward the ending bulb of moon went Harry Stilson, the stars satin, white, stressing the lowly grottos of sky. It was a little mockery that he walked like that, in the generally sad pace of a man whose complexion is otherwise entirely a sorrowful conceit. Whose devotions shiver as lightning-bugs falling, falling into an emptiness-world. The prideless gait confused the nine p.m. audience at the Putnam Prime. They wondered across the faroff horizon whether or not Harry could be portrayed against the sunlight, or if he was merely a fling of something ghostly. Something inadequately physical, perhaps, a drunkard's rusted image of crimeless breath as he nears the automobile with keys jingle-jangling, hanging, hanging.

Would they not perceive the upbraided condition of the man with a mix of sympathies! No, it was shocking the modicums of neutral mouth, of no words being sung in the direction of the foot's midget traipse into the crest of the whale. They only uttered the bleakest things, half moronic in the way of things, but often it is such that the average personality is so distraught with a lack of anything or nothing at all, that it is common to think another man good when all one has to cheer up for his life is nothing at all good or decent.

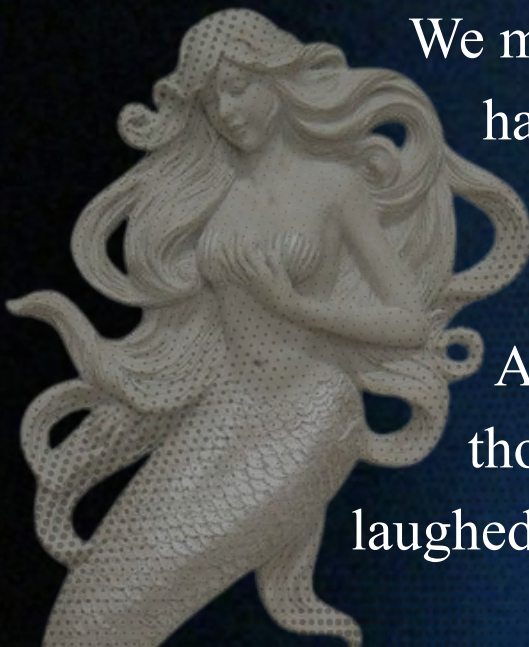


But Harry just walked up the central part of the pier, which split in seedless dividends toward other, wider structures of ocean and bugle. No beacon spit up chalk-mazes of light, for there was embarrassingly little to discern. There wasn't a worse criticism than to be excommunicated from the human race, probably, and Harry had felt the bottomless thrum of his heart like a tawdry leaking of the spirit into some inscrutably ecstatic channel in the lost Grace of his countenance.

There were four or five pimples that lay like dark paint-stains on his nose. The very same nose that used to covet with rapaciousness the drawing-room for the blond sand-smell of perfumes — hers. And now — his — slopping gaitlessly by, such a narrow frame that the people in the café were struggling with their disaffections. For a moment one among them was heard, probably, to exclaim: “How immensely are we thus fools! The man has lost a woman, and for that he has lost his entire life!

We must forgive ourselves our reckless
hatreds and pursue this man to the point of
dumb squeezing, so that he will know
that there can be high, sailing victories!”

And then the others guffawed. They
thought the man was just ill, and they
laughed, and guffawed, and sneezed.



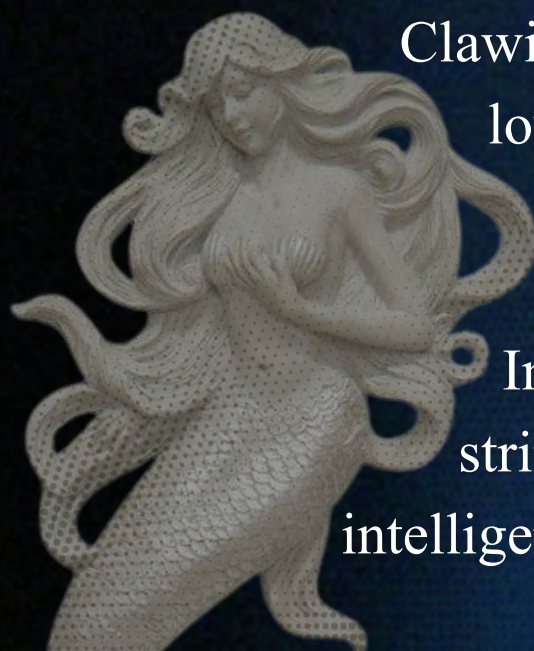
They developed an irritability about them not moments later.

Still thinking of her with sick envisioning. How they had made love. How they had not made love. In a kiss there is the avalanche of union. Everything comes down, even the soft bitter blond hair of her. In the flesh she was never there, so that with each screw Stilson felt as though he'd known her less and less. Like trying to see how a shadow basically evaporates into the dull ground. In a loaded .45 there is the deliverance from those kisses, the final rubbing out of all that endless, useless stuff, romantic jive, Lord, nonsense and et cetera! How beautifully did Harry Stilson caress mentally this notion. How beautiful the hand that groped the graceless miracle in forty-five points, and only one then, beautifully rung, the one sound of the one salvific bullet.

And for a second, the waves departed and there she was.

Clawing at a wavey blunted rectangle of old love. And there he was, setting aside his life like a bag of laundry and going deep, deep, e'er deep into her voiceless body.

Into the gentleness of a pure tango of strings. Into the summit of a vacuous intelligence, where he could float not



despondently beside her maddened image, where she could revive at his calling – and for ever, and for ever, and for ever, he would always be her pride and he would lose his arms in loving her and that would be okay.

The expressionless coroner pulled amateurishly at a gorge in Stilson's head, quadrant q.13.454. He set aside his gray, vague instruments thereafter, and, removing the button's catch from the insleeve of his little pea jacket, produced a Malibu cigarette (*sans tube*), went outside, and asked the garbageman if he hadn't had a matchstick. The garbageman laughed eventually, his hand slipping into a wide pocket in his vastly creased coveralls and the whole time guffawing, guffawing with the urgency of ambulances streaming through the tight corners of the Earth.

“Here y’ar,” he said, “what’d that body die of, y’ar?”

The coroner activated the lighter and the smoke from his filterless Malibu

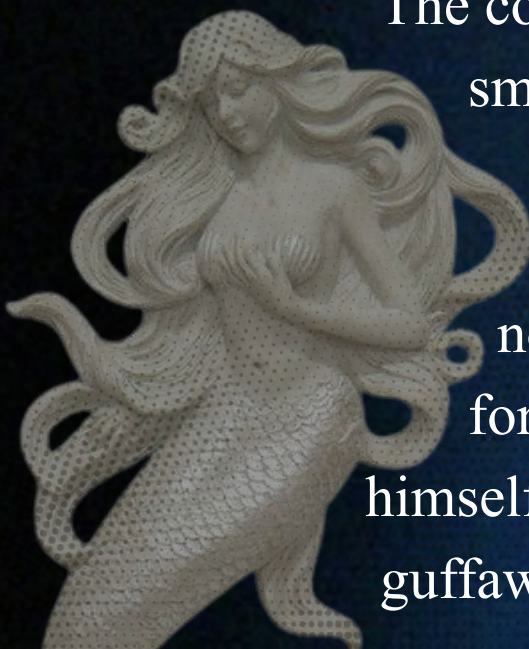
cigarette screeched through the sunles

late afternoon day. Turning his head up,

nostrils emitting fogstuff, eyes bewildered

for no reason at all, responded: Not sure;

himself, maybe. The garbageman guffawed and guffawed hard.





i wonder

Ayesha Zeb

i wonder,
does my *existence* mean something?
or is it nothing?
does my *absence* feel something?
or is it nothing?

i wonder,
the way the *stars'* presence is seen the
way the *moon's* absence is felt do i
stand close to those valuable things or
is my value nothing?

i wonder,
if i'm still a 12-year-old
who thinks of herself as a burden
or *am i not even a burden?*

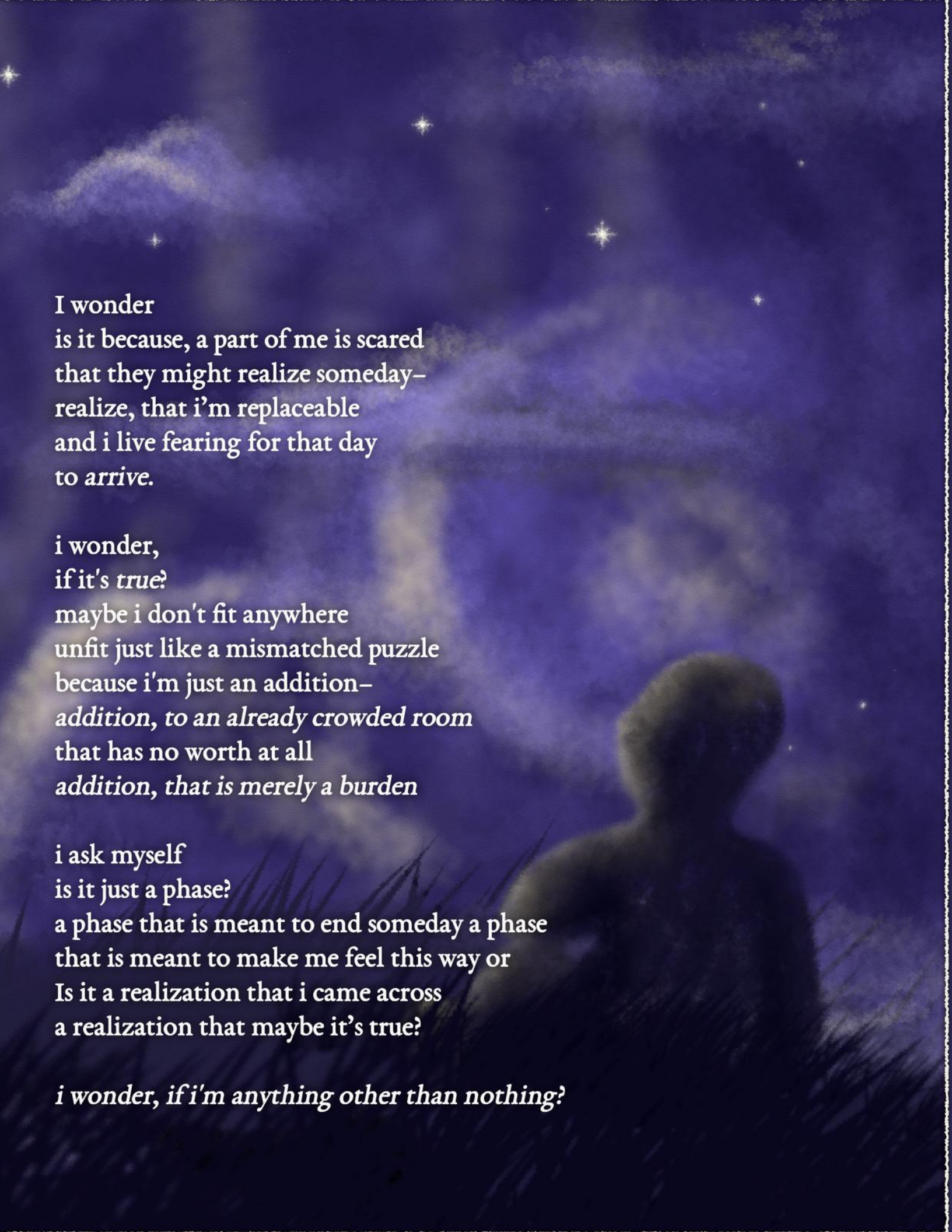
i wonder
am i bound to be this way?
fated to be extra baggage,
sitting heavy on someone's shoulders

and
waiting for them to let out
the annoyed, tired sigh
knowing that it's coming
whilst counting every minute
until they get tired of me

i wonder
why do I do this to myself?
why can't i accept that maybe
maybe, i'm something too?
why can't i accept *love*?
without having to imagine a day

where they get *irritated* of me
where they get *tired* of me
where i become ordinary

why do i keep on *calculating*?
the time left,
left for them to get fed up of me.



I wonder
is it because, a part of me is scared
that they might realize someday—
realize, that i'm replaceable
and i live fearing for that day
to *arrive*.

i wonder,
if it's *true*?
maybe i don't fit anywhere
unfit just like a mismatched puzzle
because i'm just an addition—
addition, to an already crowded room
that has no worth at all
addition, that is merely a burden

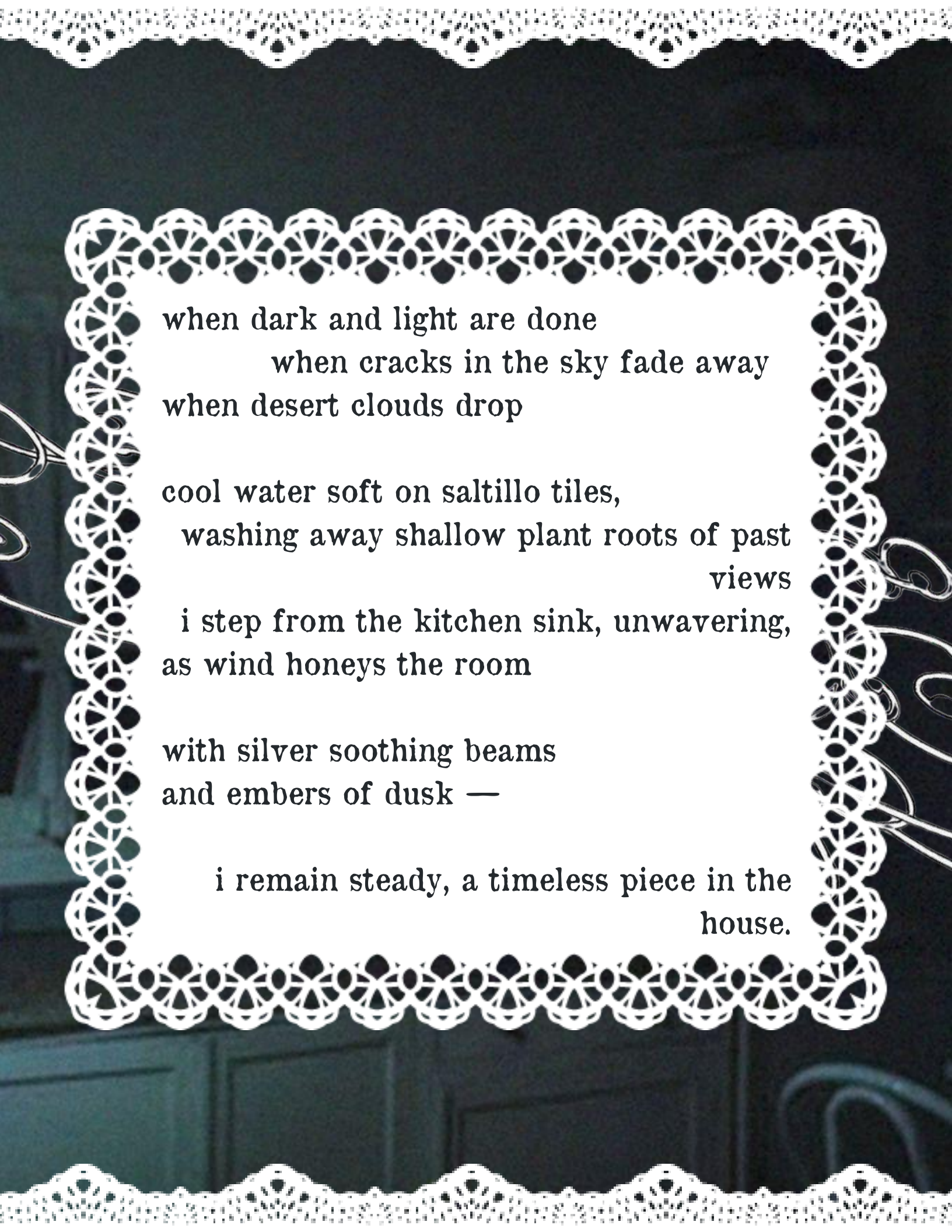
i ask myself
is it just a phase?
a phase that is meant to end someday a phase
that is meant to make me feel this way or
Is it a realization that i came across
a realization that maybe it's true?

i wonder, if i'm anything other than nothing?

Amber Winds

*(tonight, i find comfort
in an empty kitchen)*

by
Sorrel
Beya Fivcoat



when dark and light are done
when cracks in the sky fade away
when desert clouds drop

cool water soft on saltillo tiles,
washing away shallow plant roots of past
views
i step from the kitchen sink, unwavering,
as wind honeys the room

with silver soothing beams
and embers of dusk —

i remain steady, a timeless piece in the
house.

Luminara's
Glow



I stand frozen looking down at my bare feet, illuminated by radiances of light from every direction. Twitching my toes and clenching my fingers, I try to gain a sense of my consciousness, a hint of my current state.

I feel lighter in myself, like everything is suddenly clearer. My soul itself feels like it has become lucent, filling every part of my body with a feeling I can only articulate as euphoric.

I raise my head tentatively, my sea foam eyes taking time to adjust to the beaming light that crashes around me; my body moves before I do, as if it knows where it belongs in the dreamlike world.

Sparks of heat catch my legs as I run, and I lower my eyes to see flames whirling around them, imprinting themselves onto sheer,



ruffled fabric – a dress that I cannot recall wearing. It is as if they are becoming a part of my being, but it does not burn me—it gives me life.

Breaths of laughter burst from my chest as I bask in the sensation of pure serenity, twines of light lacing around my skin and intricately engraving it. I stare in awe at the etchings, spinning around and lifting my gaze curiously to this unearthly place.

Dapples of sunlight slip through cherry blossoms, weeping willows drape protectively over deer flecked in golden spots, while lily pads gleam with their own halos. The air that escapes me is shaky, I can hardly tell where I end and nature begins—it all glows. It looks as if the light should be consuming me, overpowering me, but it does not; it is connected to me, I feel it guiding my steps.



I feel its emotions as it swirls around me; the bliss, the trust, the joy, everything is harmonious here. Safe.

But when I come to a stop by a scattering of charming dwellings, lambent under the constellations, I hear the light speak, and I listen by glancing down at my wrist. A waxing crescent moon burns me slightly as it carves into my skin, and I let out a gasp at the first feeling of pain since I appeared here.

My eyes are questioning, instinctively knowing how to communicate through this unique and dulcet language, absorbing the lights cadence. It guides me to look up, which is when my breath is taken from me, making me feel like I have been struck in the chest. A total eclipse with just a glimpse of light resides in the sky.



It somehow does not affect here though, as if it is a decorative celestial event of some sorts.

Feelings of sorrow and gloom build within me, taking up my happy spirits. Yet, the light does not seem concerned, instead, it wraps around me in comfort. Through the lights solace, and a moment pondering as I take in all that I am seeing and experiencing, I feel it. I get it.

Here in this world, everything may be perfect, enchanting, and magical, a place that is full of desires, but what truly makes us feel alive? Emotion. Hope. Sometimes, a balance is needed between two sides of a scale to remind us of the strength of both.

Melancholy and wistfulness; these feelings are unpleasant, but they force us to breathe

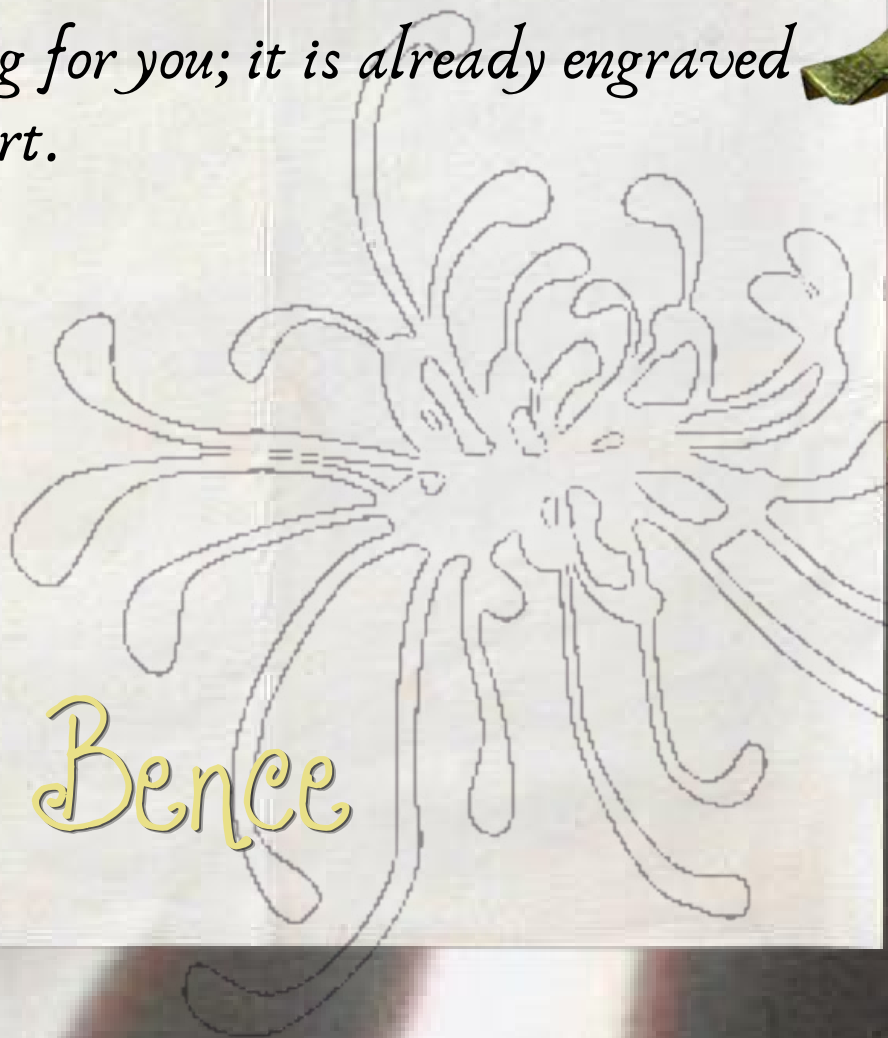


and bask in human emotion. But most meaningfully, they give us hope, a potent hope for brighter days—just like this place.

The moon is a symbol of this, etched close to me. This world is a beacon of hope and faith, like a companion that you have wanted, and maybe not realised you needed, your entire life.

It is waiting for you; it is already engraved in your heart.

Lola Bence



Silence



by Zaina Alam Piya

I Will Not Look At You

Bianca Ferrari

Your eyes look at me and I will not
look at you

I know you are following every
turn my body makes
every way it curves and shakes
my muscles tensing and
releasing
to the pop music in our ears
and the ancient chant in
our bodies.

You want to grab me
possess me
make me your property
but I will not look at you.

As you stand around me
like vultures
I will not look at you.

As you talk about me as a villain
as Eve
as a woman who doesn't
deserve kindness, nor safety,

I am unconcerned.
Too busy beaming off my
own light
to give you satisfaction
or follow any of
father's rules.

I will not be your
mirror.
I will not reflect you at
all.

I will not be your mirror.
I will not reflect you at all.



Pome- granate

Renee Cuny



On the way to my niece's house, I drove around Aberdeen Washington, over roads with veins of weeds growing through cracked pavement, searching for Kurt Cobain's house when I came across a toddler standing in her front yard on top of a plastic Little Tikes slide aimed into a kiddie pool, screaming, crying, fully naked, her face sour as a lemon, holding a running water hose in one hand that spouted water in an arch, up and over her head onto the flooded grass. The toddler pointed at a red ball in the kiddie pool and squatted in an attempt to ride down the slide, but the length of the hose would not allow this. Her mom stood next to her, smiling, trying to get the hose back from her daughter. "You have to give up one to get the other," I thought I could hear the mom saying.



The next morning, while I was staying at my sister's house to watch my niece as she and her husband drove a U-Haul loaded with all their belongings to their new home in the next state over, my niece came walking down the sidewalk in her pink plastic sandals carrying a sorry looking dog nearly as long as she was. Her arms wrapped around the scrappy animal's chest. "He's mine!" She said. She refused to put the dog down until I warned her that she would hurt her back and could be sore tomorrow.

After she caught her breath, I said, "Okay, Auntie says it's time to take the dog back." But she kept one arm around the dog's neck and wouldn't look me in the eye until I thought of what my sister might say in this situation and told her, "Hold on to the collar!" And the joy of being given an adult responsibility overtook her desire to keep the dog, and together we walked him back to his house, each with a hand on his collar.

After we returned the dog to the neighbor's house, she stomped down the sidewalk, past the cookie cutter houses with her head turned to the ground. I walked beside her, watching her heavy head, seemingly too big for little shoulders, wispy dark hair, and I couldn't help but think of a floating plum. As I looked at my niece, the memory of my mom's head turning away from me crept in. And then her face looked up to me, looking like rolls of soft wet taffy, and she clasped her little hands together to her chest. I was almost afraid to ask what's wrong, but I did. "Why are you upset?"

"The dog was mine," she says.

"You don't want to take care of a dog. It'll take over your whole life." This made her cry louder. "You can't have the dog," I said, because now she's facing me on the sidewalk, no taller than a kitchen sink, her hands in fists. She was starting to pull at her little curls on her head.

She sat on the street curb in front of the neighbor's house; her pink floral sundress pulled over her legs, her head between her knees, her wooden spoon arms hanging towards the recently paved road. I sat silently beside her on the curb.

"I want the dog, I want the dog," she said again, her voice muffled by her dress. I scooped her up and carried her back to the house, thinking a change of scenery might help her forget about the dog. She wiped her tears and sweat onto the shoulder of my shirt, still crying.

"I want the dog!"

I made microwave macaroni, and we sat on the floor of



the empty dining room with our backs against the wall, eating from the same tray. There was only one fork, so my niece ate her fill first. When she was finished, I ate the remaining three-quarters of the macaroni with the same fork.

Later that day, she and I woke up from our afternoon nap on top of the covers. She thought having a mattress on the floor was really smart, and she jumped onto it a few times, like she was belly flopping into the neighborhood pool, then fell asleep next to me.

I started gathering up her things as she slept a while longer, a giraffe stuffed animal in her arms, her body the same length as the pillow she insisted on placing along the edge of the bed so she wouldn't roll off. I didn't notice she had slipped away until I heard something like cans falling in the other room. I found her sitting cross-legged on the floor of the dim kitchen, backlit by the light of the opened refrigerator door behind her, holding what I thought was a small heart with blood streaking down her hands.

I stood silently and watched her, my own heart beating in my ears. But as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I realized the heart was a pomegranate. Red juice ran down her face and arms as she clutched it to her chest, digging out the candy seeds with her little fingers.

Cyclical



Nature

Klaudia Davenport

Clinging to your soul tonight,
All night, every night. My mind
Shatters - cyclical nature:
Falling down, pick me up.

Truth cowers even the strong.
I'll reveal my heart, don't run.
I'm dying. You come, then leave.
It's only temporary.

Giving up means letting go.
I don't have your strength.
Show me how you bare the pain of
Saying hello, then goodbye.

What if I keep you instead?
Departure desires to
be left alone. Forever
We'll stay, seeping into one.

Remending the pain that has
Been festering in my chest.
Let's cleanse in the crystal veil
Soaring, tracing our bodies.

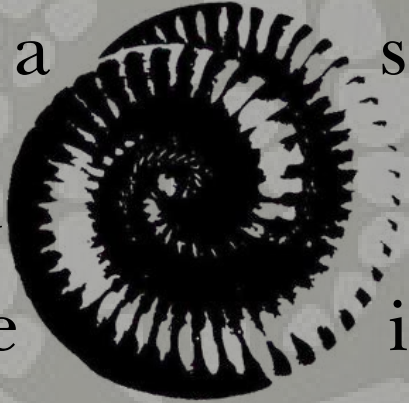
Putting pleasure before all.
Innately becoming one.
Engorging in pure romance.
How delicate we can be,





But you are not here with me.
Gentle reminders all day:
a phantom touch on the arm,
Daydreaming realities.

Here it comes, a stab in the heart.
Writing can fix nothing.
I'm rousing my appetite for you.
You're intangible.



I'd do anything. It's true.
A need so strong, I'd consume
you as long as you stay here.
Am I being too clingy?



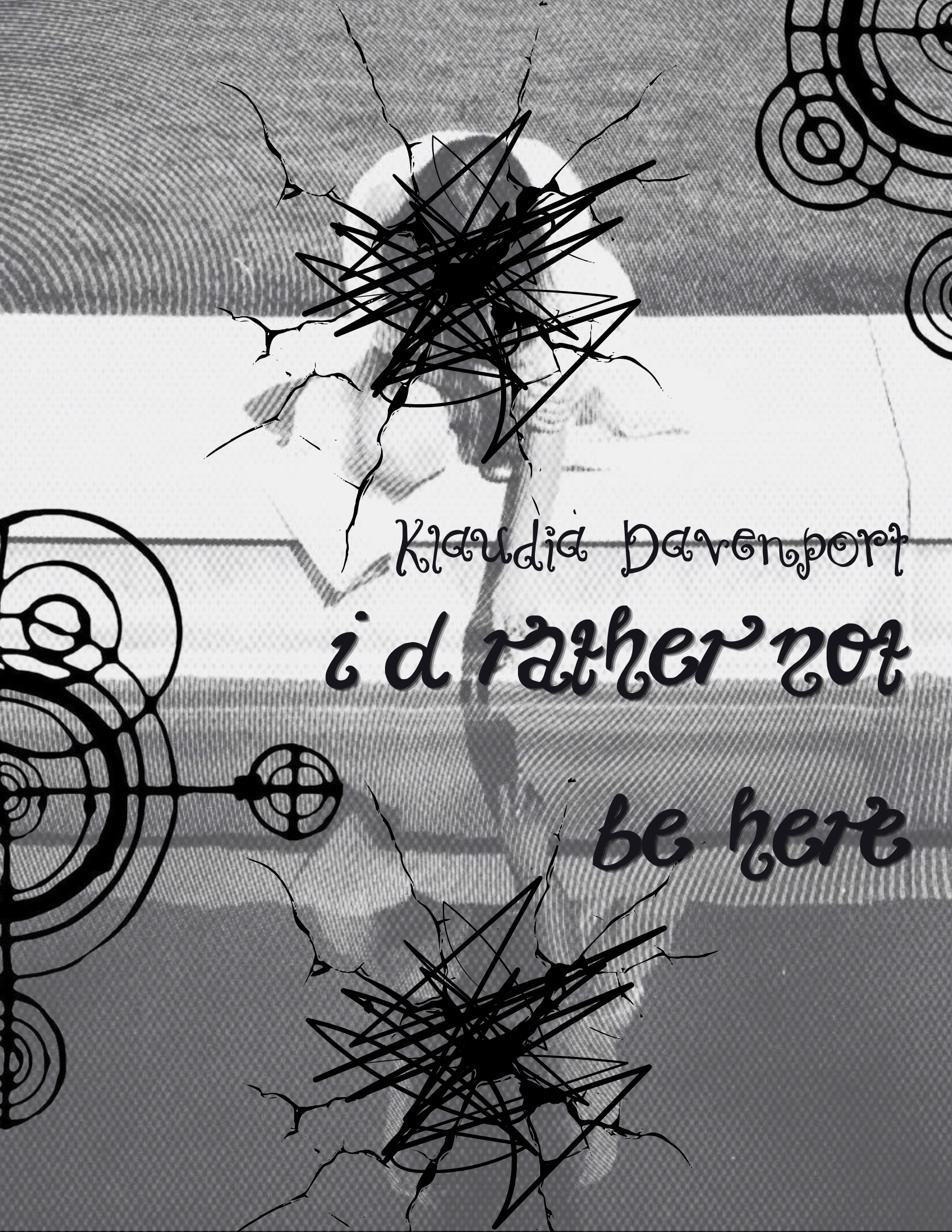
· Klaudia Davenport ·

TIME TO SAY GOODBYE (OR HELLO AGAIN)

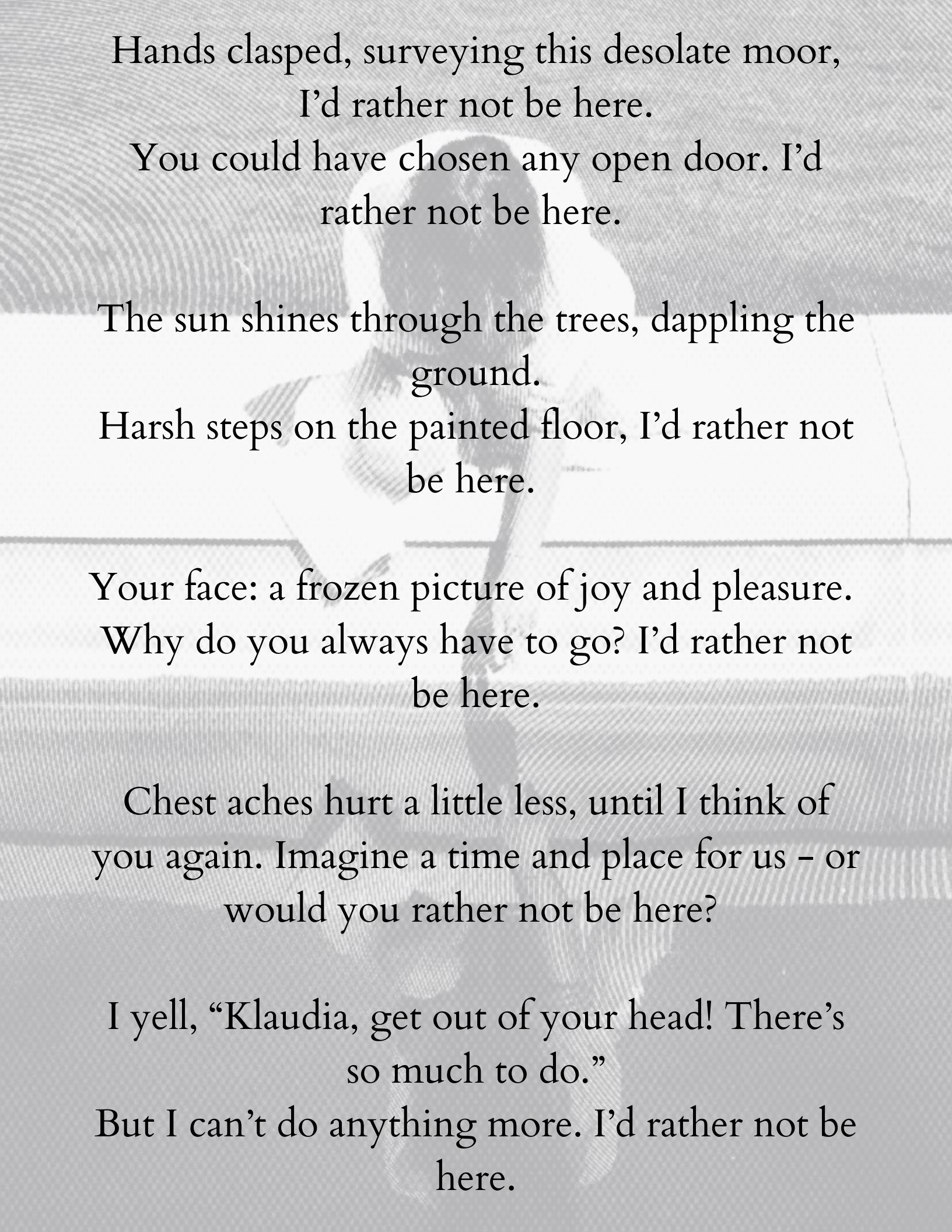
You're still there.
A muscle unused
Lying dormant, waiting.
Is it my fault
Or the world around me
and what it has given
To me?

Am I the same with or
Without you?
I am happier, it's true,
But I look back and
Feel the loss you have brought.
Can we start again?

Or is it time to say goodbye?



Klaudia Davenport
*i d rather not
be here*



Hands clasped, surveying this desolate moor,
I'd rather not be here.

You could have chosen any open door. I'd
rather not be here.

The sun shines through the trees, dappling the
ground.

Harsh steps on the painted floor, I'd rather not
be here.

Your face: a frozen picture of joy and pleasure.
Why do you always have to go? I'd rather not
be here.

Chest aches hurt a little less, until I think of
you again. Imagine a time and place for us – or
would you rather not be here?

I yell, "Klaudia, get out of your head! There's
so much to do."

But I can't do anything more. I'd rather not be
here.

Intertwined



Lilly Flores



Choose your Weapon of Becoming

by

Ritika Bali

I know my grandmother has always hated me, but never like this. “Son, why has she started looking like *her*?” she hollers at Father as her turbid eyes rake over every inch of me.

For a moment, I think she means Lalita by “her”, my new stepmother, kneeling at grandmother’s feet, pressing them with the same devotion she gives the dough for puris. Do I look like Lalita? I’d have liked to. With her spotless skin, hair the color of sunlight on bronze, and a promise to give my father a son, she’d kept him in thrall and earned grandmother’s blessing in the same stroke.

It had been months since I last saw my grandmother. She squints at me. “This filthy dark thing on her face looks like someone’s rotting betel spit.”

She doesn’t mean Lalita.

The accusation hangs there, expanding with the silence that follows, and I understand who *her* is now.

I am nothing like my mother, I want to scream. She left me when I was five, though I don’t remember her leaving. She was cracked in the head, they say. Restless and unfit to raise a child or care for my father. I can never be her. But grandmother’s voice has already done its work, like a machete slicing me open without warning.

I’m unsure whether the birthmark on my cheek has always been this brown or if it darkened overnight out of spite. I hate it. In the mirror’s threadbare patina frame, I imagine the black-blue pricks above my eye where the needle will go, looking for a way under my skin.

Four centimeters across. Three wide. Focus and pierce straight through.

I imagine blood suspending into droplets on my chin as I work the needle beneath the lesion, like a running stitch on casement, breath swirling in my throat with each pass, until my hand jerks and the needle slips, dangling from my cheek like a ragdoll unraveling near the hem. I will keep tugging at it. The puncture will turn into a hole. My fingers will congeal together. *Get it off, get it off me*, I will scream. I don't realize I'm screaming until Lalita's knock interrupts, asking me to make tea.

Even if I cut out the birthmark, what then? How will I undo the curve of my mouth, the tilt of my eyes, the slope of my nose, the shape of my face, the taper of my jawline, the dip in my collarbones? Like my mother's.

I open my braid to cover my cheek and don't look in the mirror again.

In the kitchen, I put water and milk in the saucepan and wait for it to boil. Outside in the verandah, the sounds of the crickets fall flat against the muffled voices. I peek from behind the curtain. Grandmother is sitting on the charpoy, with Lalita kneeling at her feet, massaging her swollen ankles and joints, and veins protruding blue-green. Father paces the length of the foyer. I stand still behind the curtain.

"What is this daughter of yours up to?" Grandmother asks in her grating voice.

“Enough of that school. Look at her bare shoulders and the way her hair falls on those shoulders. She’s started acting like a wild animal. You let her run loose, and we can’t risk it. Not with who she’s becoming.”

Before I know it, I’ve stepped out from behind the curtain, and for a moment, I feel my birthmark sting. Phantom pinpricks of the needle stitch. “What are you talking about?”

Father opens his mouth. Grandmother talks over him. “Nothing that concerns you.”

“It is about me,” I soldier on. “What do you mean, no school?”

Grandmother’s wrinkles multiply. “It is time we found you a boy and a family to belong to.”

“But I’m too young. And this *is* my family—” The words come out in raspy breaths.

“That’s for us to decide!” She turns to my father. “Last time, you promised you’d stop sending her to school. See how her brain works now. Like a rebel. Like her mother!”

I exhale and run my finger over my cheek. Father lifts a hand vaguely, as if I’m the one mistaken. “You won’t like it,” I say, staring, “but I’m not going to stop going. After two years, I will go to college. The first girl in our family.”

A small drum starts up in my throat. Father’s face is white. Grandmother’s lips purse, and her face is gravid with rage. She rises from the charpoy, the wood creaking under her sudden weight shift, and crosses the verandah faster than I’ve seen her move in years.

She grips my hair and wrenches my head back and forth. The room tilts sideways. I feel my scalp smarting from her nails. "You look as ugly as *her*. I see you act like her, too. Maybe I need to slap some sense into you, the way I slapped it into her."

When I hit the floor, I stay for a moment before getting up. My ears are still ringing. Grandmother smooths her sari down over her hips, and lowers herself back onto the charpoy with a straight face.

"Tea," Lalita reminds me and turns back toward grandmother's feet, pressing her thumbs into the arch of each foot. Grandmother lets out a satisfied groan.

I go to the kitchen. The water and milk are simmering. I pour it into the cups without the tea leaves and carry them out to the verandah. "Tea," I say. Grandmother doesn't even look up.

I don't give her the cup. Instead, I pour the liquid over her feet. I empty the rest from the other cups too.

Lalita scrambles back, the cup falling, her dough-press devotion evaporating like steam from the tea. Grandmother is screaming and rubbing her ankles and swollen joints that have reddened. The blue in the veins has turned into an angry purple. I imagine the needle going through her skin, popping the varicose as it goes.

Father runs toward her. Lalita's mouth is open, her hand now against her forehead, but she doesn't utter a word. No one steps toward me.

I touch my cheek, where the birthmark hides under my hair. I tuck the strands behind my ear. "I will go to college," I repeat. "That's what my mother would want." I walk past all of them, back to the kitchen, to put the cup away.



girlhood

emery faern ambrose

I think they've forgotten that I am more than my body.

I think [redacted] that I am [redacted] my body.

[redacted] they've forgotten [redacted] I am [redacted].

[redacted] they've [redacted] gotten [redacted] my body.

[redacted] they've forgotten [redacted] my body.

[redacted] I am [redacted]

[redacted] forgotten [redacted].

I think the [redacted] forgotten [redacted] a [redacted] re [redacted] my body.

I [redacted]'ve forgotten that I am more than my body.

I [redacted]'ve forgotten that I am more [redacted].

[redacted] I am more [redacted].

[redacted] I am [redacted].



Vermin

Cassandra Arencibia

Shower water smells like the creek outside.

Water swims with krill of lead and sediment.

Vermin.

Cramped and coveted kitchen.

A single counter top long.

Christ reaches across the table to tap a friend's
shoulder.

Bread crumbs.

Landlord's spraying for pests.

Vermin.

Landlord's leaving rolls of quarters for our laundry.

Vermin.

Clean up after yourself and maybe it won't happen
again.

Vermin.

Mother Mary printed on cheap, royal blue blankets.

Something living for a cat to play with.

Whistling out of tune for the creek.

The creek overhung with a graffitied, mossy brick
arch.

Full of happy, living vermin.

the girl they kept calling mine

i used to think the girl would arrive eventually.
everyone spoke about her with such certainty that i
assumed i had simply missed her somehow.
my mother bought dresses she would like
my teachers praised the handwriting they imagined
belonged to her
relatives smiled at me with the strange tenderness people
reserve for futures they think they've already witnessed
& i kept waiting.
i thought maybe she was running late.
maybe she would appear after my first birthday
or my tenth
or after puberty, because everyone said bodies know what
they're doing, & i had no reason not to believe them.

so i waited while they pointed at pieces of me they
insisted belonged to her.

my laugh.

my hair.

my lips.

my name.

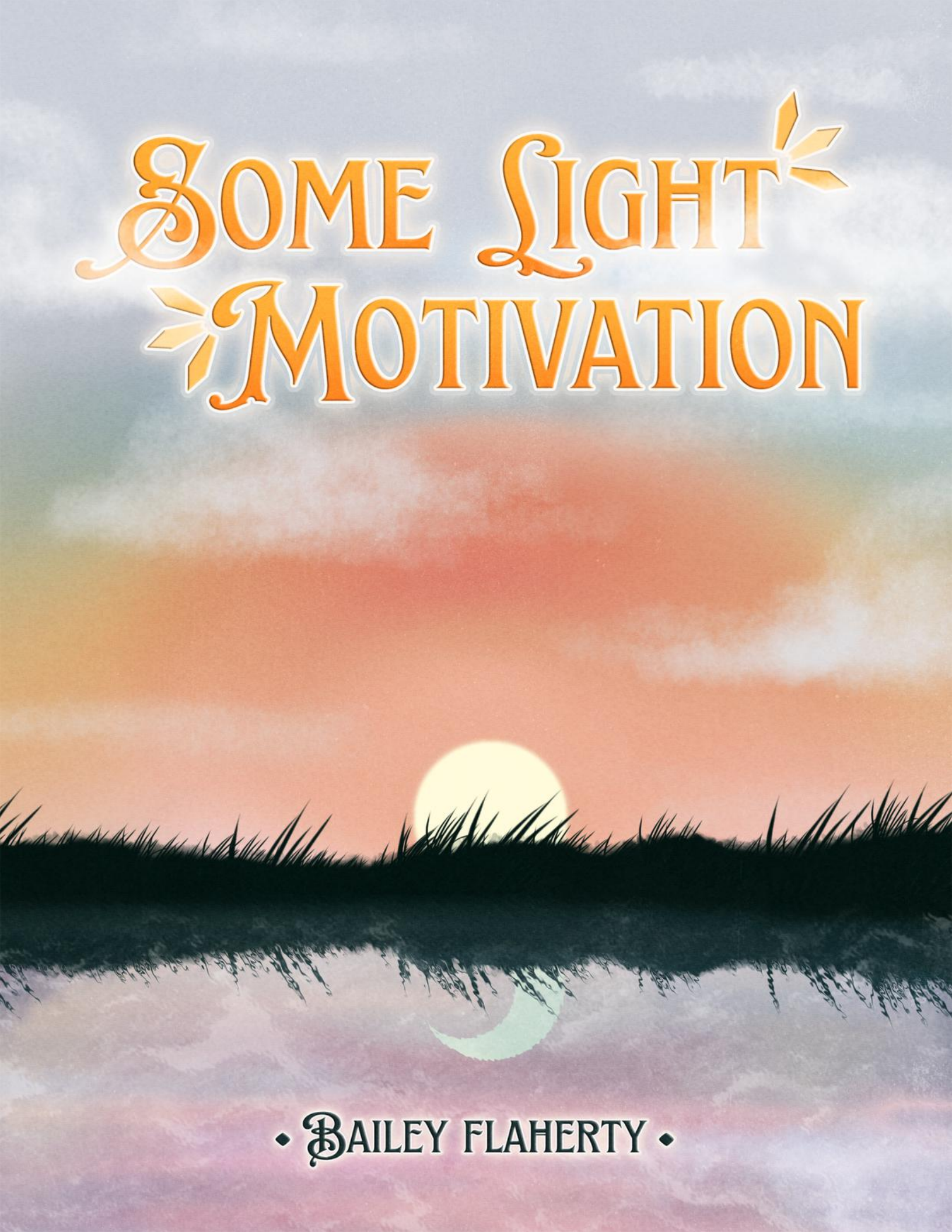
so i learned to carry those things carefully, the way
children carry someone else's groceries, terrified of
dropping something that was never theirs to begin with.
sometimes i wondered whether everyone else could see her
standing just behind me. whether that was why they
always looked through me instead of at me.
whether i had become the outline around a person i
couldn't find.

it took me years to understand that i had never been
waiting for a girl to arrive. everyone else was waiting for
one to disappear.

she never did.

i did.

by karen Zhao

The background of the entire page is a soft, painterly illustration of a sunset. A bright, glowing sun is positioned just above the horizon line, which is marked by dark, silhouetted grass. The sky is a gradient of colors, from a pale blue at the top to a deep orange and red near the horizon. Below the grass, there is a body of water that reflects the colors of the sky and the sun. The title 'SOME LIGHT MOTIVATION' is written in a large, ornate, orange-colored font with a white outline. The word 'SOME' is in a script-like font, while 'LIGHT' and 'MOTIVATION' are in a more formal, serif font. The word 'MOTIVATION' is significantly larger than the others. There are small, stylized leaf-like motifs on the right side of 'LIGHT' and the left side of 'MOTIVATION'.

SOME LIGHT MOTIVATION

• BAILEY FLAHERTY •

You cannot keep living like this.

You can't. You must leave.

You must.

You *must*.

You have been the dusk for so long

It is time to become the dawn.

Yes. The dawn.

You are. And dusk becomes dawn

when the sun comes back.

It can. You have to allow it inside.

But what *is* this?

Ah, I see.

Yes. I see.

What you cannot.

This is not true. You cannot

see past the dusk.

And past the night is the dawn.

It does. I can see it.

You need to open your eyes.

I can. I can.

I won't.

I won't.

...

The dawn?

But I am dusk.

The sun is not coming back.

*There is no 'inside.' There is
just this.*

There is no 'this.'

You see?

See what?

I can see just fine.

Past the dusk is the night.

Endless night.

Dawn does not exist.

I can't.

They are open.

No. They are not. You refuse to see.

You can. You just pretend you cannot.

Because dawn is a scary thing.

So is the dusk, yes. But dawn is scarier.

**Because it means you have to let in the
light.**

Letting in the light makes you afraid.

**You are. This is okay. It is okay to be
afraid of the dawn.**

I see.

No. But I see the dawn much better.

It can be.

I see.

**I exist in the dusk, but I also exist
in the dawn.**

Then how am I here?

No. That is *your* job.

...

**That is a lie. It is okay to lie,
here, in the dusk.**

Yes. Dusk hides the light.

I can't see.

Why would I pretend?

So is the dusk.

Why is dawn scarier?

...

I am not afraid.

I am not afraid.

*You don't see. You do not
understand the dusk as I do.*

That is not me.

It won't be.

*Stop this. You don't see. You
exist in the dusk just as I do.*

That is not possible.

You are a liar.

I am not a liar.

I'm not.

The dusk is a liar?

Hiding is not the same as

But that is what *you* do. And

you are a liar.

Just like the dusk.

Open your eyes.

And what happened when you

opened them?

It is okay to burn. The sun burns,

and the sun is a part of dawn.

Why?

Yes.

Who says so?

I don't think so.

One cannot be too dark.

The light burned you. If you were

too dark, then you would not be

able to burn at all.

I know.

You can. You just have to burn a little.

lying.

I am not a liar.

...

I've tried already. Long ago.

I burned.

I burned too much.

Why did I burn?

*Because the light was too
much. I was not meant to take
in so much light.*

The sun.

*I burned because I was not
meant to be the dawn. I am
too dark for the light.*

I am.

But it hurt.

I can't do it again.

Burning hurts.

I know.

**Many good things have to burn as they
are created.**

You are transforming from dusk to dawn.

The light.

**Many things burn. But the burning will
end, and burns become scars.**

Scars show that you have taken in the light.

Yes. First you have to burn.

...

When will you be ready?

You will never be ready.

You cannot be dawn unless you are ready.

When will you be ready?

...

Is that not enough?

Yes. If you want to be ready,

why can't you be ready?

Who ever feels ready for anything?

You will never *be* ready. You can only

hope to be.

It is enough for the dawn.

I don't want to hurt again.

Am I being created?

Who is creating me?

But the light burns.

Scars are signs of hurt.

But first I have to burn.

...

*I don't know if I'm ready to
burn.*

I don't know.

...

I don't think I am ready.

I don't know.

I want to be ready.

To want?

Because I don't feel like I am.

...

And that's enough?

Really?

**The dawn is never ready for the sun
to come. It waits for the light, and
wants it. The sun chooses when it comes.**

Do you want to be burned?

And you understand that you must burn first?

And you remember that the burn will fade?

That you will bear the sun's scar?

Then you are ready for the light.

You are.

...

I will be the dusk. I will be the dawn.

Perhaps. In the light.

I do. But we are in the dark,

and so you cannot see.

**They are ugly, but they are products
of the light.**

Yes, ugly. But they are full of light.

I want the light.

*No. But I want light. I want to
accept the light.*

I do.

*I do. I want the dawn. I want
to know I'm not too dark to
burn.*

I am?

...

*What will you do when I
become dawn?*

Will I see you again?

Do you have scars?

What do they look like?

Ugly?

*Can something of the dawn
be ugly?*

**Yes. Because we have to burn to
become the light.**

What is ugly?

...

Do you see?

So you are ready?

Can you see the light?

**And then you will become the
beautiful dawn.**

Then you shall go.

...

Yes. Go.

I know.

What for?

The light was always yours to take.

You are a product of the light.

**You always were. You just needed
to open your eyes.**

Who am I?

Who are you?

We are light.

Then I will become ugly?

I don't know.

...

I think I do.

I am.

*I can. It is bright. It will burn
me.*

I am ready.

...

Are you sure?

*I don't want to be the dusk
anymore.*

Do I say 'thank you'?

Letting in the light.

Was it?

I will be.

I see now. Because of you.

I don't know.

I don't... know.

We are?

We are light.

You said you were ready.

Then, go.

...

Welcome, Dawn.

And now I have to go?

I am.

...

Okay. I will go. Goodbye,

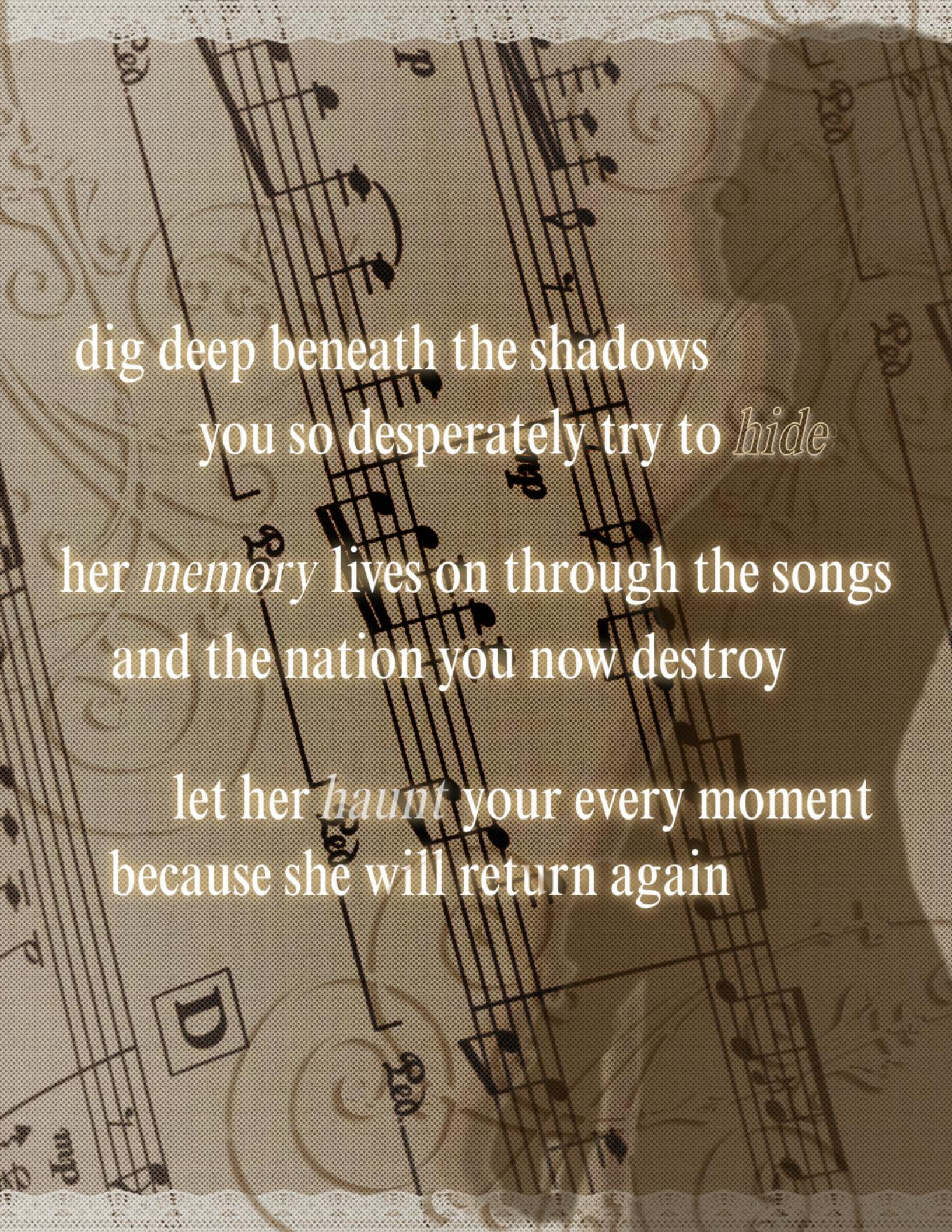
Dusk.





ALLUSION *to a* BALLAD

Amia Jaylen Evans

The background is a piece of aged, yellowed paper with a torn edge. It features several staves of musical notation with notes and rests. A faint, dark silhouette of a person is visible on the right side. The text is overlaid on the paper in a white, serif font.

dig deep beneath the shadows
you so desperately try to *hide*
her *memory* lives on through the songs
and the nation you now destroy
let her *haunt* your every moment
because she will return again



What Am I Doing Here?

Lilly Flores

Madeline Sewing

(she/her) is a 20-year-old writer with a passion for many things creative, but especially writing. her journey started when her lifelong love of reading led her to discover fanfiction as a medium, and she joined a community of likeminded people. ever since, she has found comfort and joy in expressing herself through writing.

Sam Hendrian

is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker, poet, and playwright striving to foster empathy through art. From writing personalized poems for passersby outside of LA's oldest independent bookstore every Sunday, to making Chaplin-esque silent films about loneliness and human connection once a month, Sam lives to make other people feel seen and validated. More work can be found on Amazon, YouTube, and in various online literary magazines.

Diya Parekh

I am a student and an avid reader who enjoys writing. I am particularly drawn to introspective fiction that explores the female experience, and I am currently working on a novel and regularly write poetry.

Macky Yates

is a Kansas City based photographer who had a passion for capturing life as raw and real as it comes.

Sienna Gallus

is a 21-year-old undergraduate student studying Psychology with minors in Women and Gender Studies, Religious Studies, and English at Manhattan University in the Bronx, New York. She grew up in Bethlehem, PA. Her work has been featured in Manhattan Magazine, Neologism Poetry Journal, ANARKISS Zine, The Branches Journal, Anomaly Poetry, and Eunoia Review, among others. She has recently been accepted to Cassiopeia Review, The Mist Literary and Mosaic Art and Literary Journal for forthcoming publication as well.

Darlene Nicole

is a poet whose work combines a classic style with a contemporary touch, drawing inspiration from writers like Woolf and Shakespeare. She writes to capture personal thoughts, memories, and moments that deserve to be remembered. Aluné Literary marks her debut publication.

Contributors

Matilda Bray

is a student photographer from New York State, USA. She loves to experiment with many different photo techniques and styles. Her work frequently addresses the impact chronic illness has had on her life.

Amelia Pozniak

(she/her) is an author and artist from the Hudson Valley, New York. Her work has previously been featured in *The Periwinkle Pelican*, *NAME Magazine*, *The Lavender Review*, and is forthcoming with *Dog Throat Journal*, *Last Leaves Magazine*, and *Silly Goose Press*.

Dailey Ward

is a writer who grew up in West Virginia and now lives in New Jersey. Her art primarily focuses on detachment, and how we view ourselves as part of a larger environment. She also enjoys spending time exploring and with friends.

M. E. Lee

is a lover of horror films, loud music and generally being a nuisance where acceptable. She writes for fun and for her degree.

Collette Night

is an Australian writer who crafts lyrical fiction with bite. Her work has appeared in *Trembling with Fear*, *Black Hare Press*, *AntipodeanSF*, *Dug Up Magazine*, *101 Words*, and *50-Word Stories*. She was recently longlisted for the 2026 *Furphy Literary Award*. When not writing, she can be found notebook open, coffee in hand, dreaming monsters onto the page.

Lillian Glover

(she/her) is a 19-year-old tutor, university student and amateur poet writing from Ngunnawal and Ngambri land, Australia. Her work focuses on the transformation of experience and emotions into poetry, which encourages people to look at the world in new ways.

K. G. Delmare

is a New York-based writer. Their works have appeared in publications such as *The Freak!*, *Sci-Fi Lampoon*, and *All Worlds Wayfarer*. They also appeared in the *Forest Ave Press* anthology "Soul Jar," which was longlisted for the *Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in an Anthology*. They received their B.A. in English from *Fordham University*.

Liesl Johnson

makes art in Zeekoevlei on the Cape Flats where hippopotamus once roamed. Her writing appears in The Southern Review, New World Writing, Slush Pile Magazine, Flash Fiction International, The Common, Lichen, Adanna, Quick Fiction, Cutthroat and Herri. Liesl teaches poetry, plays contrabassoon with various southern African orchestras, and coaches women's rowing.

Nick Fife

is a queer Utahn who is presently studying Deaf Studies at Utah Valley University. They feel too much too often, so they sometimes dance it out or try to put it all on paper. Nick has a particular fondness for science fiction and cats named after geographical features. They're most at home laughing with their brothers, gaming with their friends, and hunched over a bowl of pho.

Calla C. Smith

grew up in rural Colorado but now lives and writes in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She enjoys continuing to discover all the forgotten corners of the city she has come to call home and dreaming up new things to try. Her work can be found in The Madrid Review, Livina Press, Pulp, and more.

Alisa Formenko

is a nurse by day but lost to writing by night. She is a researcher of trad wives, Andrew Tate and other strange creatures.

Lilly Flores

is an Arizona-based artist with focus on drawing, painting, and design. Blending technical skills and abstract traits, her creations share a curiosity amongst everyday life and experience. Flores recently graduated from Arizona State University in 2025 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting & Drawing, as well as a Certificate in Sales and Marketing. In addition, she has earned a Specialization Certificate for Adobe Graphic Design. Flores' work showcases her own introspection in which emotion, sense of identity, and perspective of the outside world provides inspiration for creating. Visual exploration between real experience and invented imagery is seen through bright colors, abstract patterns, and mundane settings.

Zaina Alam Piya

is currently a student at the University of Dhaka under the department of mass communication and journalism. She likes to make art and be creative during her free time.

Renee Cuny

is a fiction writer and MFA candidate at the University of Idaho. She studied Fibers at the Savannah College of Art and Design before turning to fiction. Her work is interested in memory, obsession, girlhood, and the uneasy intersections of beauty and performance. Originally from Florida, she has also lived in Los Angeles and now resides in the Inland Northwest.

Bianca Ferrari

is a poet, journalist and neurodiva based in Berlin. Having lived across many borders, she's drawn to the uneasy spaces between singular life-paths and belonging, perspective and certainty, privilege and alienation. Bianca often uses the page to resolve a conundrum, starting from slippery feelings and trying to pin them down. Her poems have appeared in Poetry Trapper Keeper, I.S.S.U.E. Magazine, Ghost Light Lit and Qafila Annual.

Klaudia Davenport

is a full time student at the University of Missouri pursuing her bachelors in English and Anthropology and a minor in Spanish. When she has time outside of school and her part time jobs, she enjoys writing creative fiction and poetry. Klaudia currently lives with her family and two dogs in a small town outside of Columbia, Missouri.

Ritika Bali

is a fiction writer from India. She was the 2024 runner-up for the Deodar Prize, Ruskin Bond Literary Award and shortlisted for the 2025 RK Anand Short Story Prize and the Alpine Fellowship. Her short fiction has appeared in Out of Print blog, Hammock Magazine, MeanPepperVine, Mistake House, and elsewhere. She is an MFA in Creative Writing graduate from Miami University.

E. F. Ambrose

is a nonbinary author who focuses on the dark and macabre. They tend to sink their teeth into the pain and euphoria of gender, political rage, and the fight against AI. You can find their work published on Forest and Fawns website as well as in the anthology 'All The Secrets We Cannot Keep'

Cassandra Arencibia

lives in New Jersey. She writes, crochets, and lives with stray cats. More of her work can be found in Grande Dame Literary and Two Children.

Bailey Flaherty

is an undergraduate student at Emerson College. You will most often find her writing her time travel novel, playing Minecraft, or petting every dog she can find.

Karen Zhao

is a high school student from Canada who loves writing poetry and telling stories that feel a little too personal for comfort. Her work has been recognized by The New York Times, and outside of writing, she plays both cello and piano. Most of her time is spent overthinking sentences, collecting oddly specific observations, and pretending she'll fix her sleep schedule soon.

Sorrel Fivecoat

is a desert lover with a big heart. She has her bachelor's in International Education and is a yoga and high school teacher. She adores spending time with loved ones, cooking and eating, speaking Spanish, drinking her morning cafecito, reading, writing, traveling, and romanticizing her sweet simple life. In high school she went to state for Poetry Out Loud. She has been published before, but it's been many years because life happens and she's only recently started submitting her creations again. Her partner has been encouraging her to get to know the world's many writing communities out there by not only reading tons by other writers, but by sharing her work too. She is someone who sees beauty in resilience, in what persists. Her work is often rooted in an attentive reverence for the everyday.

Dyophenes of Rhodes

Harley LETHALM currently writes under dyophenes of Rhodes and bridges, etc. and currently has been published in CLEAVER , Radvocate (issue#14/15) , Brickplight etc. records under ambient/dsbn onemanproject DHAMPYR

Resident Writers

Amia Taylen Evans

(any pronouns) is the pen name of an amateur writer, musician, and actor floating between Southern and Northern California. They're either engaging in fanfiction about their latest obsession, pouring their heart out on the notes app, making another outline for a book that will never get written, or avoiding anything related to writing at all costs. More of their works can be found in Teen Ink, Reflections Magazine, Evanescent Magazine, Marketed Magazine, and the American High School Poets anthologies. Stalk them on Instagram @atethewriter.

Lola Bence

is a lover of all things creativity and imagination. She takes inspiration from her most favourite reads, characters, writers, nature, and anything else she loves. She believes in the power of people coming together without fear of judgment for expressing excitement and passion.

Ayesha Zeli

is a writer and editor who believes words can change lives. She writes to capture the delicate fractures of human emotion.

TO MY DEAR ALUNÉ TEAM

Now that Umbra has come to an end, I want to dedicate this section to none other than my hardworking team, who, despite the challenge of creating a large issue (194 pages!) with such limited staff, did not fail to deliver these amazing works for everyone to see. Without them, Umbra wouldn't have seen the light of day for perhaps another five months.

As I preach for Aluné to become a place where creatives could finally be seen, I think it's only fair to say that my team has become that place for me, too. Within these people, I am seen. And that is the greatest thing Aluné could have ever given me: companions I am proud to call my own.

I wanted to create a place where other people could feel less alone in their creativity, and in turn, I found a group of people who made me feel less alone in mine. I hope all of you find your own Aluné. That is all. Thank you for listening to my TED Talk.

Abunē Literary



Issue 1 Umbra