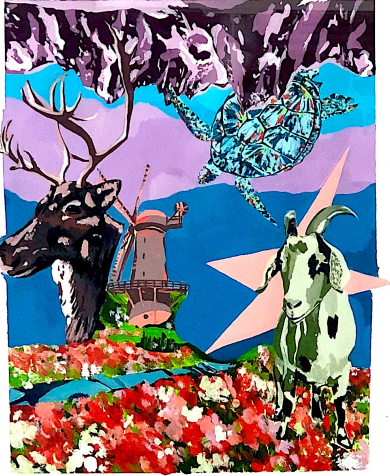


It's Lit

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DVC 13th Annual Literary Contest Winners

CREATIVE NONFICTION

First Place: "The Sound of My City" by Anushree Bhattacharya

Second Place: "A Thousand Teddy Bears" by Anna Browett

Third Place: "Work in Early January" by Lauren Halbrook

Honorable Mention: "Robbers" by Julia Maeding

POETRY

First place: "The Farmers of Phantoms" by Julia Maeding

Second place: "Warm Blues" by Healyn Anicete

Third place: "When Ophelia Drowned" by Chloe Starczewski

Honorable mention: "I Reach for a Thought" by Parker Stewart

Honorable mention: "Exodus" by Ileia Thomas

PROSE — Fiction and Play

1st place: "A Través Fronteras" by Diana Segundo

2nd place: "Observatory in the North" by B.W. Brown-Webster

3rd place: "Scarred" by Jenn Keohane

Honorable mention: "Moth Dust" by Jackie Abells

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CREATIVE NONFICTION



Ni Ni "Lucky Bamboo," Water Color

“The Sound of My City” by Anushree Bhattacharya

All cities have a sound, a souvenir. The sound of campus at 10 pm after finishing a late-night class. The sound of the cold breeze at night after rain. The clinking sound of my keychains. The sound of my hasty footsteps slowing down upon touching the wet trail. Walking down to the campus gate, I could hear the soft sound of the cherry blossom petals withering. The vision of subtly fragrant blooms under the full moon sky was beautiful, and the sound of silence the moment I stopped. The sound has memory, and for a moment, I go from the East Bay Area, California to the Western Coast of India, Mumbai, shifting geographical coordinates to a day when quarantine was over.

A shrill jarring noise rang and woke me up at 3:00 am. It's my own fault. I set the most annoying sound for the alarm, a high-pitched tone with repetitive buzz. Alarms are always unpleasant to hear, even the sound of a soft lullaby sounds like a bellbird's call. The end semester of my college made me sweat twenty-eight hours a day. Overworked the last night, the previous nights. Tired, exhausted, and stressed as a pile of unfinished work hanging over my head. I have been waking up at three for long enough, but it has forever been a futile one-sided battle. In the pitch-dark dawn, I could see only one window lit up, our kitchen window “Wasn't she up late at night working right next to me?” “How is she hugging me with such an energetic smile?” It was midnight even for the birds, but my mother was up to get my lunch box ready, daily. My father was up, too. A hug from him and I snuggle to sleep. He was making a hot cup of lemon ginger honey tea for us, three cups, and a one-liter thermos. He makes the best morning tea, an antidote to fight sleep. That summer morning was cold but weirdly humid as well. In one hour, I left the house hastily to catch the first local train of the day, from Kharghar to reach my college in Vile Parle.

Mumbai is a busy city. In the past 16 years, I have never seen this city fall asleep. I have never walked on a road with just me. It was always with ten unknowingly known faces. Local train is a part of Mumbai as much as a cup of coffee in our lives. Around seven million people use trains for their daily commute, and so did I. Hop on to one such train you will find multiple two rows of three seats facing each other, leaving a narrow space to walk within. It has open windows on either side and entrances with unclosed sliding doors. An early morning station is empty of crowds, but not people. There were always men who sorted morning newspapers, bundled to be delivered to different locations. “The Hindustan Times”, “The Times of India”, and the Marathi newspaper “Saka” were a few of the names that looked familiar in that pile. Employees who traveled long hours to reach their offices also boarded this train, along with college students like me. I was sitting in my usual spot right next to the window, sipping the hot ginger tea, a white smoke diffusing out of the thermos flask, and a distinct lemon aroma. Feeling the cool breeze on my numb face as the train moved, and simultaneously checked my to-do list for the day.

Voluntarily taking up more work on my plate is a disorder I have developed over the years. I overestimate my organizing cells to get it done, completely ignoring the world surrounding me. Every morning for college (except Sundays) I took the first train, sat on

my usual seat, and plugged in my earphones with upbeat Korean pop songs to oppose the power of Hypnos and Morpheus. During my two hours of commute each way from Kharghar to Vile Parle, I pulled out doable assignments aiming to check things off from my to-do list. This was my daily routine, but that first morning of April had a different plan. I had left my soulmate called AirdopesANC on my study table. On this breezy morning, if I did sit to study “The pathway of Galactose Biosynthesis” without the ignition of music, I would be summoning all the gods of sleep. I needed an excuse to escape from books and convinced myself to use this as one. I decided to listen to the playlist of Mumbai locals - the rhythm of the running train, the fading sound of silence as more people boarded in, and eavesdropping on others’ gossips. I was unintentionally overhearing all sorts of personal conversations. I vaguely remember any, except for one - “I convinced my parents to skip school yesterday...I faked having a fever using onions.” My ears perked up, focusing all my brain cells to spotlight that conversation fading all other. “I used a peeled onion and kept it under my armpit.” said the boy. My brain reflexes shouted internally “What? Yikes! Eww!” I had a disgusted look on my face. My clean conscious mind hoped he did take a shower and threw the onion right away after the job was done. The world indeed is a den of maniacs.

Forty-five minutes had passed. I was blankly snoozing the ten billion alarms I had set for myself so that I don’t doze off. As the morning light started filling in, more passengers kept boarding in at different stops. Chembur and Kurla are a few of the stops that have people pouring in all the time. I who started with all three seats for myself was now squeezed into one corner to adjust 3 more passengers excluding me. Adjacent to me sat a high school girl, who wore an ironed school uniform, hair tied with white ribbons into two braids, and eyes focused on her notebook labeled Biology in big bold cursive writing, repeating the same lines again and again. “Everyone is on the same ship called ‘stress’ with no lifeboats.” is what I thought. She was a known face; she took this same train to her school. We often had one-line conversations, but not deep enough to know each other’s names. “Do you have exams today?” I asked. “Yes, I have my biology finals. I hate Biology,” she said. I asked “Which subject are you interested in?” “Neuroscience” she replied. “That’s a perfect field to choose when you hate Biology” I replied, and we both giggled. That day I spoke to her the most. Now I know her name was Meera, an eleventh-grade high school student, who liked crocheting, lived with her mother, and her father worked overseas in Dubai.

One unique thing we notice in Indian local trains is vendors. Every morning starting from seven to night eleven, vendors sell snacks, drinks, and other commodities changing train cars in every station. Snacks would be small sealed packets of fried chips, spicy fried peanuts, and many more peppery options that could be munched while traveling. These vendors also sell accessories like wallets, bags of different sizes, magazines, etc. I particularly looked for the old stout lady who carried a large box of distinct designer earrings and dangling bracelets. I never heard her voice, just saw her speaking, and enthusiastically showing her items. I used to glance at her collection, maybe liked a few, but focused on my books again. That day I wished she had come so that I could look at the accessories, the colors, and the designs in detail, but I never saw her again. Not that day, not any day later.

My two hours of one-way commute was done and I reached my college gate. Entered the huge crowded hallway and obtusely decided to climb up nine stairs knowing that I am not athletic enough to celebrate this achievement without being annoyed. I was panting heavily, felt foolish, and promised to use the human invention called 'an elevator.' Two minutes into my lecture room and I see no one. I then checked the student portal and saw an unread reminder, that I could have gotten earlier –

Reminder!

Our department will have its annual lab inspection tomorrow therefore all the classes and lab are canceled.

- Department of Biotechnology

I wished I could time travel back to yesterday and read the announcement and woke up not at least at 3:00 am. The checklist pinned to my phone home screen did not get anything checked off so far. I was getting frustrated by the alarms that I had set as timers to get things done. I took a pause and a thought crossed my head "What's the point of exhausting myself so much? My life is not stressful, I am making it stressful" I took a minute to slow down. I decided to put a one-day comma and breathe.

I could have taken the next train back home, but instead, I walked in the opposite direction, following the signs to a beach. A beach five minutes away that I could have seen earlier if I hadn't declined my friend's offer to join them. As I walked, I listened to the sound of the city. Everyone on the street had an untold story, be it the pregnant woman with a trolley bag, the good-looking tall guy on a bike who passed by, or the middle-aged man in a suit smoking cigar. A huge crowd of college students savoring delicious Mumbai Chaats, Pani puri, and Dosa made live in front of them, hot, and sizzling. A few minutes away, I saw rows of colorful bougainvillea flowers on the curb of the street, while a bunch of plucked roses sold in a florist shop right next to it.

I walked five minutes to find a relatively empty beach because the extreme heat deters visitors. I sat under a shade, completing my Lab report. The sound of the waves, the sand, the coconut trees, and me in colorful frills of red could have been a beautiful picture if clicked. I sat there for hours, writing, eating my lunch, and observing. At the beach I saw seagulls playing, a couple walking leisurely, an old man and his grandson walking their Malinois named Dora, a man on his phone yelling about wanting to sue someone, three fisherwomen in their traditional Maharashtrian attire called 'Nauvari' (people of Mumbai are Maharashtrians like people here are Californians) and four happy kids eating popsicles while walking back from school. I felt relaxed escaping from the routine of set timers and fulfilling expectations I had set for myself. On the way back from the beach, I noticed a popsicle shop. Walking with a mixed-fruit-flavored popsicle, the world looked happy to me. After two hours I reached home and smiled, spotting my charged headphones on the table "I am glad I left you behind today," putting them in my backpack.

I felt the wind of the city. Listened to the sound of my city.

Stepping back into the rain, I open the door to my car at the end of a long night of college. When I look back a year ago to that day, I wish to meet the guy again who used

an amazing tip to skip school and teach him a few better ones, I wish to ask Meera today if she still hates biology. I wish to meet the old lady again who sold earrings, listen to her, and tell her that I liked her collection. I wish to say Hi! to the unknown good-looking guy on the bike. Visit the same beach with my friends, enjoy Mumbai Chaat with them. Pat the Malinois named Dora. I wish to ask myself "did you regret spending that day with yourself in your city?" I would reply, No. I miss Mumbai. I miss the essence of that city. I miss the sound of my city.

ark briefly before turning away and treading past my parents toward my bedroom.

“A Thousand Teddy Bears” by Anna Browett

We stood at the base of the steps, staring out at the world before us, trying to make sense of what we saw.

Last Fall my mom and I went to Canada to visit my dad’s side of the family. We took two planes, one car, and thankfully not a boat. We were traveling to Victoria, at the edge of Vancouver Island. I love living in the Bay but Victoria is just as much my home. The misty trees, cold air, old books and tea, with totem poles at every corner and hidden alleyways filled with mystic shops. It was always magical being there but one morning in downtown Victoria at the Legislative building stairs, the magic slipped away and I felt a sadness surround my heart. Teddy bears lined the steps up and up and up. I couldn’t count them all. Crosses were balanced next to the bears and pairs of shoes were propped up next to the crosses. My mom and I looked at each other and wandered around the base of the steps. There were no signs, no explanations for the thousands of teddy bears. We finally asked someone what they meant.

Not long after we got to Victoria, my grandfather, who is a child at heart, suggested we go to the Malahat Skywalk. He explained what it was, that there was a spiraling slide going down the center and there were no walls just open air, 1000 feet above the water. A few days later my grandparents, my mom and I jumbled into the van and drove off, up into the trees of Victoria and past that. We drove and drove as the weather kept changing its mind and finally, we arrived. We opened the car doors and the air that flooded in was cool and immediate. The wind was certain and it blew us forward across the gravel lot and to the main entrance. We had our tickets and started to walk. There were two paths, a walkway in the trees and a dirt path below.

The teddy bears and crosses and little pairs of shoes were a memorial. They were for the First Nation children.

Over more than 100 years, 160,000 Indigenous children in Canada were forcefully taken from their families and put into boarding schools. Boarding schools that beat the children’s language, culture, and individuality out of them. There were over 100 schools throughout Canada that operated this way, five on Vancouver Island. The kids at these schools faced physical abuse, sexual abuse, torture, starvation, and experimentation; this was happening on the Island until the 1980s. 202 known Indigenous kids were sent to these schools on Vancouver Island, and they deserve to be remembered.

Of the two paths, we chose the walkway in the trees. The path was made of smoothed wood and glittered like ambrosia. The misty clouds floated low above our heads and the trees were green with life. The world was vivid, it was alive. We slowly walked step by step, taking the world in, struck with awe. The Douglas Firs and Arbutus trees held us up as we made our way to the base of the skywalk.

On Meares Island was Christie Residential School. In 1955, the school gave a job to Martin Saxey who had just been released from jail for manslaughter. He sexually abused multiple children at Christie and is said to have targeted one student for 5 years. It wasn’t uncommon at these schools for children to be sexually abused and targeted by the adults who worked at them. One former student of this school, Brian Lucas, who explained he was beaten for smiling at a friend, had his hair pulled out by four of the

Sisters and had a towel wrapped around his neck until he passed out. He survived Christie, but many didn't. Here are their names:

Anderson Sye, Clara Andrew, Adolph Maurus, Lawrence Thompson, Joseph Ignace, James Louie George, Stanley Joseph, Andrew Tom, Cecil Williams, Alice George, George Johnson, Jessie Lucas, Catherine Marshall, Rose Johnson, Moses Tom, Lorena Thomas, Mary Vincent, Samson Mclean, Joan Manson, Agnes Amos, Dolores George, Thomas Campbell, Pearl Michael.

We stood at the base of the skywalk. I tilted my head back and looked up at the spiraling structure. Its shape reminded me of a toy slinky, and you would walk around the coils, making your way to the top where a net stretched across you could float on. People looked like colorful ants as they walked up and down the spiraling ramp. Others sat below at picnic tables, some took pictures, and people of all ages were lined up at the top to go down the twisting slide at the center.

Ahousaht Residential School was named for the First Nation they took children from. Ahousaht chiefs petitioned the school but the Canadian government turned a blind eye. It was this school that arranged arrests of people who took part in potlatches as well as other cultural events that were banned. It was this school that was a fire hazard and burned down in 1916, killing a young girl. Later in 1938, another boy was blamed of carelessness for losing one of his arms in the school's laundry facilities. It was not his fault, but they said it was. Those in charge didn't care about the students, here are the names of those who died at this school:

George Quisot, William Maquina, Dora Noshkepy, Tillian Mckay, Edward Arnold, May Harris, Bella Peter, Katie Manulth, Sophie Noothlenu, Arthur, Carrie George, Emil Howard, Frank Ubaldus.

We started to walk up the circling ramp. To the left was the bay, flowing in between the mountains and tree covered hills. The clouds were still grey but a glimmer of sunlight peaked through for a moment then hid away again. We kept walking.

At St. Michael's Residential School, many of the children faced constant hunger. The kids there were assigned a number and that was how they were identified. A hereditary chief of the Gwawaenuk First Nation, Robert Joseph went to St. Michaels when he was only 6. While he was there, two dozen children planned a mass escape which brought attention to the realities at this school. As a kid at St. Michael's, Joseph was repeatedly cuffed on his ear, leading him to suffer hearing loss later in life. Many of the children were subject to beatings and starvation. When Joseph finally left the school, he explained feeling broken, without a purpose, without value. Here of the names of the known children to have died at St. Michaels:

Mona, Samson Harris, Thomas Mason, Alfred McKay, May Nysok, Lucy Gordon, Sophia Edgar, Samson Edgar, Eva George, George L. Humchitt, Reggie Allan, Molly Irene Moon, Andrea Helen Alfred, Douglas Benson, Jackie Archie James.

Level by level, we made our way up. My grandmother stopped to take pictures; she matched the bay with her blue watercolor scarf. My grandfather stayed with her, glancing at the slide. My mom and I kept walking higher and higher. 20 more steps, 10 more steps, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, we were at the top, 1000 feet above the water, 100 feet above the ground. Balanced on the side of a mountain, we were taller than the trees and the water danced below our feet. I leaned over the railing and looked at the world below me.

I remember thinking what it would be like to fly down through the trees and across the bay like the birds do, inches from the surface of the icy water. I could've dipped my hand into the ocean and soared like Icarus before he flew too close to the sun.

Alberni Residential School was one of six across Canada that forced children into being the subjects of government malnourishment experiments in the 40s and 50s. Blood samples were taken from children whose ages ranged from 5 to 16. Letters written by the children later proved they were given injections with unidentifiable substances. Alberni was infamous for being extremely violent; punishment was given for the smallest of reasons. The kids there faced being punched, whipped, and choked. In the 60s at this school, a staff member named Arthur Plint decided to conduct his own experiment. He lured a 10-year-old boy to his room with promises of contacting the boy's family, but instead, Plint sexually assaulted him. The boy tried to speak up and tell someone about what happened but Plint found out and beat him. Here are the names of known children who died at Alberni:

Yinnito Taylor, Jack Williams, Taylor Santo, Mary Taylor, Maud Jackson, Katie Taylor, Bertha Fred, Mary Bob, Violet Mckay, Theodore Mckay, Dalton Silver, Norman Bob, Lilly Peal Smith, Edward Thompson, Virginia Moses, Cyril Mussel, Maisie Shaw, Ramona Taylor, Herb Robert Green, Gary Ross, Shirley Leslie Williams, Mary Elaine George, Mitchell Joseph, Gerald Wilson, David Thomas, Gary Hopkins, Gary James Hopkins, Ivan Wilson, Nellie Kiutesi, Annie Jack.

It was Alberni Residential School that was made the milestone in First Nations' fight against the Residential School System. As of 1973, the West Coast District Council of Indian Chiefs succeeded in closing Alberni.

As I stood at the railing on the top of the world, the clouds broke apart and the sun shined down, lighting up the fjords stretching out towards the horizon. The water sparkled and you could see little houses in the distance. The mountains woke up and the trees waved at us. We were happy to simply be in the golden rays of the sun. As I walked around, I could feel the structure below lean one way and then another. The wind was fast and you could hear echoes of vibrations from the swaying beams, holding us up. My grandparents met us at the top and my grandfather and I walked across the net together, 100 feet above the Earth.

Kuper Island Residential School was the fifth on Vancouver Island, nicknamed "Alcatraz" due to its location on a small island in the bay and multiple escape attempts by students and staff. The school had many outbreaks of different sicknesses and was described as ruinous. There was very little food and some boys were put in confinement for stealing apples. In 1939, six boys were able to escape Kuper Island by using a canoe after they suffered continual "unnatural acts" by a priest at the school. Many of the students here were sexually assaulted by teachers and other staff members. One of the staff members who was caught and found guilty of sexually abusing the boys at the school was Glenn Doughty, but he faced only a few months of jail time. The boys he abused were ages 8 to 14.

There were sixteen students on the basketball team at Kuper Island, only four survived. One boy at the school in 1966 hung himself in the gym. There are 121 known children who died at Kuper Island. Here are their names:

Cosmas Ya-Epoutle, Felix Antoine, Eline Frenchie, Amanda Frenchie, Caroline Jacob, Catherine Jacob, Samuel Anghame, Simon Gontek, Simon Tom, Francois Johnny, August Tseleokanum, August Jimmy, Modest Kosteinagant, Samuel Whonock, Theophane Johnny, Josephine Jacob, Jules Tseleskampten, George Baptist, Ellen Moses, Josephine Norris, George George, Johnny Jack, Frank Johnny, Herbert Gabourie, Celina Thomas, Eliza Page, Adelina Paul, Clothilda Willie, Ida Tom, Angus Crocker, Eliza Louis, Amos Johnson, Thomas Jim, Mary Agnes Johnston, Margaret Louis, Emile Keith, Ellen Casimir, John Baptist Jim, Etienne Harry, Edgar Basil, Alfred William, Amanda James, Annie Pappenburger, Philip Jack, Lucy O'Sheam, Catherine Tom, Catherine Johnny, Sophie Joseph, Patrick Joe, Annie Tommy, Henry Willie, Adeline Celestine Jones, Veronica Classetow Canute, Anna Amie, Lena Ruben, Delphina Theoqualt, Lucy Peter Norris, Rosalina Johnny, Caroline Williams, Aloysius Wilson, Eva Hall, Aloysius Daniel, Joseph Jacob, Mary Josie Siah, Rosalie Moses, Harold Araneda, Jasper Mitchell, Lizzie Johnny, Maria Mclean, Mabel Moses, Emma Williams, William Jones, Elmer Hardy, Donald Philip, Peter Siah, Martha Philip, Lizzie Joseph Edward, Mildred James, Lilly Leo Charlie, Elizabeth Smith, Verneda David, George Moses, Stanley Frank, Andrew Joseph, Everest Alex George, Raymond A. Brown, Allen Jameson, Rosy Michael David, Stanley Paul, Bernadette Thomas, Norma Pauline Frank, Marie Thorne, Beverly Joseph, Nelson Sophy, Patricia Marilyn Joseph, Caroline Felix, Richard Thomas, Belinda Marie Jack, Norman Clarence Aleck, Bob Pierre, Charlie Bob, Christine Harry, Eddie Bob, Emily Peter, Harry Johnny, Henry Johnny, Jeannen Joe, Jim Baptist, Joe Edwards, Joseph Basil, Louisa Williams, Maggie Bob, Moise Jim, P. Williams, Pierre Bob, Sophie Baptist, Sophie Casimir, Tommy Aleck, Vera Underwood, William Peter, Willie Henry.

Kuper Island Residential School was only an hour north of Malahat.

After hours at the skywalk, we began our journey back down. We made friends along the way, two girls whose names I can't remember, only that one had an Instagram for her dog and the other had bright purple hair. We all took a picture together at the base of the skywalk and instead of taking the path through the trees back, we walked below on the dirt trail, looking up at all the excited people about to start their own journey to the top. We sat at a picnic table and I drank a Malahat fog latte, which is just a London fog latte but I prefer the name change to Malahat because while at the top, once the clouds cleared, you could see the misty fog rolling down the mountains into the bay. It was fitting to have a hot drink named after one of the most beautiful places I had ever been in my life. The sun loomed above, offering little warmth to the icy air and I clutched onto my paper mug as though it were trying to evaporate and join the rolling fog of the Saanich Inlet.

When I went to the Malahat Skywalk, I didn't know a lot about the First Nations of Canada or their history. It was this experience that made me want to educate myself. We think of Canada as this place full of nice people who love nature, but we shouldn't allow the stereotypes of an entire country to mask its horrific history. The United States' treatment of Native Americans is barely recognized, but it's still recognized far more than Canada's treatment of the First Nations. History is meant to make you uncomfortable, that's how we learn and grow and promise to never repeat the mistakes of the past.

We stood at the base of the steps, staring out at the world before us. I now know what a thousand teddy bears mean.

“Work in Early January” by Lauren Halbrook

I am just through the doors when the bitter smell of coffee hits me, familiar, yet still abrasive. Matt’s steaming milk creates a distant hum, the smashing of his portafilter drums against my ears. There is a sleek marble countertop island where our machines are placed that hints at the shop imitating a popular new age coffee shop, but the outdated wood paneling and overuse of warm toned decor interrupts the illusion of complete modernization. The wood tables and their accompanying Ikea chairs house the usual early morning crowd, and the window to the sidewalk reveals a bench in which people congregate around drip coffee, their cups are held by their gloved hands while their words puff out in front of them: politics, arguments, football. Everyday when I pass the two men seated at the table, they blurt out “good morning Lauren!” . Everyday, I curse myself for not knowing their names.

As I pass by the counter to drop my bag in the back room, everyone laughs at the state of me, as they always do, a byproduct of my routine being built around sleeping the absolute most that I can. My manager begs me to caffeinate and feed myself before showing up to work, and I argue with him; “Why would I do that when it’s free here?”

The early hours of the morning are slow, but the flow is consistent, and my work on the espresso machine is sharp and measured, my shots are precise and I create the perfect microfoam. My latte art is the best at this time. When the number of people that come filing in grows larger, so does my bad mood. The lack of thank yous leads to me slamming milk pitchers and rolling my eyes out of their sight. I try to think of other things; the essay I will soon have to write, and the hike I am itching to go on. It is no use though; I feel my irritation in my calves, rising to my stomach. I take it out on the knockbox; smashing my portafilter way too loudly.

When John walks through the glass door promptly at 7:50 in the morning and gets in line, wearing shorts and a collared long sleeve shirt, I know my mood will relax for his presence. When he reaches the register, he greets the employee with a gentle friendliness that is difficult to feign, addressing them by name, always. John orders a medium almond milk chai latte in a metal commuter mug for himself, and a large decaf almond milk latte with three splendas for his wife, in a paper cup. After his order is finished, he walks over by the bar to wait, and on his way says “Hi Henry. Hi Ilya. Hi Matt. Hi Lauren.” When he reaches the bar, he settles into easy conversation, catering the subject to each of us. Here, he waits, in absolutely no rush at all, with a kind of patience that should be afforded to us, but usually is not. It is here that asks me what I am reading in school, discusses football with Matt, and asks about business with the manager. He tells me about a Shakespeare festival in Oregon that he is attending with his wife, asks for my opinion on Pride and Prejudice, and imparts little shards of wisdom to each of us. “What did you think of Wuthering Heights?” and “How’s your fantasy team doing?” are both asked in the short five minutes that he spends by the bar. John leaves with careful care to thank each of us, and is out the door, the first regular of the day.

The pace is quick to pick up, and before we know it, we are slammed. People that I do not know call out “Thank you Lauren!”, and others do not award me a thank you at all. My customer service smile hurts my face, cracking against my dry winter skin, and

eventually I give up feigning excitement at being here. At 8:45, I anticipate Karen and her usual order of a small half-decaf coffee in a medium cup, so that there is plenty of room for cream. Or, if she is feeling decadent, she might get a small dark chocolate mocha, with whipped cream of course, and will refer to the mocha as “deluxe” when I sprinkle chocolate over the whipped cream. I do not tell her that this is the standard, instead I tell her “only the best for you.” Where John lingers, Karen is in and out, swift and calm, with a similar kindness, but far less patience. She always has a gift card, and never wants to know what is left on it. She compliments my smile but aptly observes that I do not do it very much when I am here. Karen has a one track mind, so focused on getting to her coffee that sometimes she does not answer my “how are you”, and instead blurts out her order. Somehow, when she does that it does not bother me.

My mood afterwards is in flux, unfortunately dependent on the treatment that I am afforded. In between regulars, Henry, Ilya, and I talk about *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and discuss who would win “Survivor” if the whole store went and played against each other. Ilya has a distaste for the play as it is not grounded in reality, and asserts that he would win “Survivor”. I vehemently disagree with him. We manage to agree that Henry would quit and Jesse would lose patience for it. Ilya creates a million reasons to run pointless errands for the store, and I make fun of his managerial pose that he takes up when he is about to announce that he is leaving to get milk, or lemonade, or cups, or another thing that we do not even really need. These debates occur amid the transactions and service, and are sometimes annoyingly interrupted by unpredictable rushes. Sometimes the customers laugh at our passion for the topics, and other times they raise their eyebrows and sigh too loudly to indicate their agitation.

At noon, Mahi makes her way in and orders a medium almond milk latte and a small steamed almond milk with cinnamon. She will also ask for hot water and an extra medium cup, and be overjoyed when I remember to provide those things before she gets the chance to ask. Mahi is an older French woman, and always says thank you in French, clasping her hands together and bowing her head as she says “merci, merci, merci”. When I give her the drinks, she will always compliment my face, telling me that she loves it. After she receives her drinks, she walks them over to the table by the window in the far corner, where she sits watching black and white French films on her phone for hours, absorbed and unspeaking. At this table, she mixes the latte, hot water, and milk in the extra medium cup, making a concoction that I have tried, and failed to understand the appeal of. When I left for three months to work at summer camp, she brought me a silver charm necklace as a goodbye gift, and told me that she believed in me.

Shortly after Mahi comes Jano, at 12:30 she arrives bundled in layers of clothes that make her already small frame even smaller. Jano orders a large soy milk matcha with no simple syrup and no foam, and a medium decaf soy milk latte with extra foam for her wife, Kate. The pace of the morning has slowed by this time, and oftentimes we are distractedly working on tasks that involve the movement to the back of house, a welcome change when the customer flow has become exhausting. She appears out of thin air, coming in without a sound, so quietly that we often do not notice her presence at the register, her big eyes stare with patience as she waits for our greeting. Jano does not attempt to hide her disappointment when I am there instead of Jaylien, her favorite,

and I try not to act like her order is sometimes my last straw. She waits at the counter for her drinks, and stares again, somewhat awkwardly offering a hello. Jano stares, and watches my swift work with an implied agitation. Her voice is soft, quiet, and scratchy when she thanks me graciously, and I realize with relief once again that her staring does not imply frustration. I am always reminded that multiple things can be true at once; her order can be tedious and her staring bothersome, and I can also adore her presence and her awkward nature, even though she does not conceal that she wishes I were Jaylien.

Oftentimes regulars are easy to pin down to a specific time. Their appearance at our coffee shop is a precise time that is carved out into their schedules, a distinct part of their busy routines. Tashi is nothing like this. His booming voice and long white hair walk through our doors at erratic moments. Tashi could come at 5 o'clock in the morning when the doors are unlocked and the pastries are the freshest. Or, he could waltz in at 9:30, in a T-shirt when he should definitely be wearing a jacket. Or, at 5 in the afternoon when the pastries become rocks and the coffee is definitely burnt and bitter. Regardless of the time of day, Tashi is the calm after the storm. His words soothe the bitterness of the morning rush, and in those moments when everything seems to be going wrong, his habit of smiling and nodding at us while he waits in line becomes a beacon of kindness. Tashi orders a small dark roast in a medium cup, and a scone of rotating flavor. He will ask me if there are any broken scones that will be thrown out that his dog could have, and I always lift up a perfectly whole scone and tell him "this one looks broken to me". To this, Tashi will put his hand over his heart and tell me his dog will be so grateful. Tashi used to be a professional poker player, wears a newsboy cap everyday, and could make vivacious conversation with a brick wall. That is about as much as I know about his life, but when he calls me family and says he loves us, I nod and tell him that we love him, too.

When I wave my hands goodbye at all of them, there are calluses from gripping the portafilter, burns up and down my arms from the oven, and my lower right arm has a unique muscle defined by the pulling and twisting of the espresso machine. I wonder if they can see these things, if they notice the marks that exist from serving them everyday. It does not matter if they can, because I would gladly burn my hand for John's chai, or let Tashi steal scones, or not charge Mahi for her steamed milk. And even as I write this there is something so intangible about this intimate space that we exist in together. These small moments of entering each others' lives for a few moments each day. That space of not knowing one another hardly at all, yet knowing so much, like touching each other's soul, just briefly.

“Robbers” by Julia Maeding

I remember the exact day I decided to be hot. I was friends with this girl—let’s call her Doris, she’d hate that name—and she was like a female leprechaun, always nosing her way into something. Her house was palatial and mostly marble. Her laugh was a snicker.

At eleven, she had committed to stretching the invisible elastic of our social contract to its nauseous limit. The contract is different, depending on who, what, where you are. In sixth grade, it included some fascinating addendums. Don’t ask what a “Whole Foods” is. Don’t acknowledge your acne, which is now furiously charging up from the depths. When someone asks why you’re so tired today, blame Twilight or Youtube videos about surfing dogs or something. Don’t ever talk about your family in any real way.

Of course, there are the basics. Common-sense precludes the notion that we, as a people, will do our best not to break and enter. I’m sure Doris would say, well, what did we break? In retrospect, the only answer is me. The classroom door wasn’t locked. Our teacher, a white woman with a genuine, beach-autographed California tan, was nowhere. We didn’t even have to sneak.

Their desks were disgusting. I didn’t want to stick my hands inside the rectangular metal hollows, so Doris did that part. I kept an eye on that door. It had a window with some kind of fishnet layer pressed between panes of fingerprinted glass. Tiny metal threads crossed over each other—a most delicate version of the rusted fences wrapped around campus, as if to keep us from seeping into the streets.

“Found it,” she said, stashing something away. I had never seen her so happy.

They had done a shit job folding up the paper, but they were boys, so we weren’t surprised. Once we got it un-crumpled, we went in with forensic scrutiny. Doris was able to trace all the scribbling to its first line. Her stubby, manicured finger traced one message to the next. Things were mundane at first.

wats up?
Bored. U?
hungry lol
same haha

To us, their male minds were not unlike a glistening attraction at the waterpark Doris and her family had brought me to. It was called the Lazy River, and it moved at a pace one could easily walk against.

I don’t know how Doris knew what we would find. She just had a sense of her own power. An early feminist, maybe. Or a sociopath.

Her hand flew to her mouth.

“Fuck,” she said, grinning. “Oh, fuck, I’m sorry.”

This was a curse word we had recently decided to take part in, and it still sent little zaps up my spine. But after that day, I went on a swearing hiatus. It didn't seem fun anymore.

I went home. I looked in the mirror and saw only the word they had given me. It was such an obvious, meaningless insult, I said. I was a reader, and I thought myself above all this. It didn't matter that I had watched my favorite movie, Goldie Hawn's *Housesitter*, and imagined the boy as Steve Martin's character. It didn't matter that my journal swelled with entries about the shape of his left shoulder—the one my desk angled towards. In glittering gel pen, I wrote and smeared what seemed like thousands of fluttering things. I'm sure it was more like five. None of them mattered, I insisted. Between me and the mirror, a sheet of energy was buzzing. I can now identify it as anger. At the time, it just seemed like magic. It rippled and hissed at me.

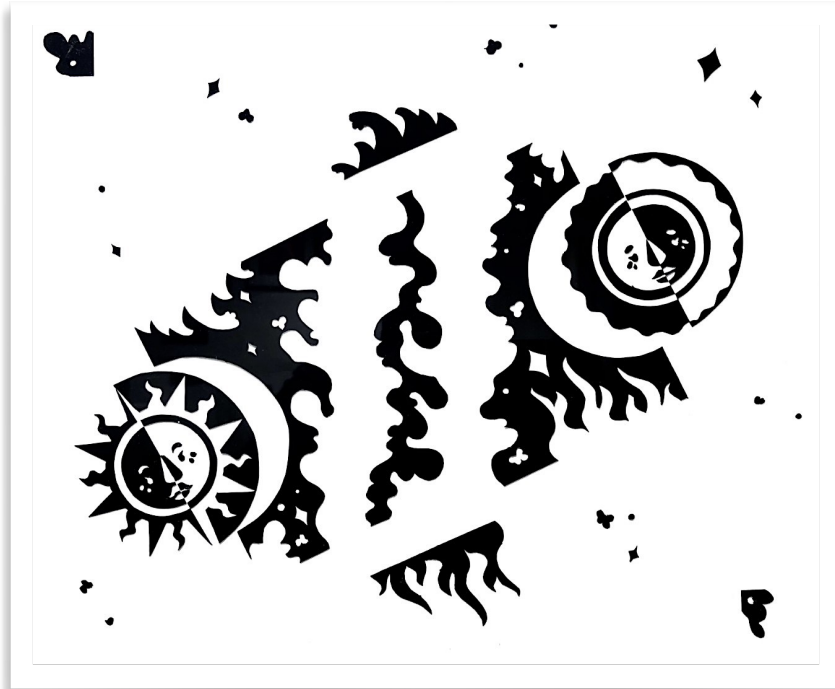
Ugly.

I made a pact. I thought, I will drown that word. I would Drown Doris's word, too, just for the hell of it. I would do it in her swimming pool. The water there was like a pan of blue Jell-o. It tasted salty and never tangled my hair.

Doris apologized again and again. But I could tell she was thrilled at her own word. She wore it tucked under her clothes, glowing quietly. There was another girl mentioned in the note—exceedingly polite. She only dressed in pink. I guess she told her mom, and once parents got involved, it blew up. The boys were forced to say sorry to her. Not to me. I hadn't told anyone. Soon, though, everyone knew what they had written. Even those who somehow had not heard the news could read it on me, printed in clear, searing ink.

I wish I could say that, since then, I have gathered myself into what they call a strong woman. That would be dishonest. I still write the same loopy journal entries. I still pine for people who would sooner call me ugly than stroke my cheek. I still try. My pact worked out, to some extent. I overcame my childhood awkwardness. I cultivated my own quirky aesthetic sensibility and wrestled my acne down. These days, it's not my looks I'm self-conscious about. The truth is, I think that word was less of a label and more of a prognosis. I think those boys knew about the memories rotting inside me, that they could smell the rinds of everything I'd tried to smother. I wasn't very good at it back then. I didn't have a lot of material to do the smothering with. I didn't know about the mystical and dumb distractions one can pursue when they are set loose in the world. A woman who is reasonably clever and reasonably attractive can come up with all sorts of things to pile on. I certainly have.

POETRY



Lexie Oswald, "Celestial Bodies" Not an

“The Farmers of Phantoms” by Julia Maeding

nights, days, hours—they toil
(knock feathery chips of
rice off the stalk)
soaking their knees in heat, in green

(sift between each strand)
they look—
one silvery wing can spoil the crop.
the air is peppered with pricks of heat

voices curl up from the soil
(wax your palms
after work, they are raw from the screams)
the twisting howls
are raked and bundled
and piled in beds of
trucks,
like wheat

“Warm Blues” by Healyn Anicete

Ah, the smell of gasoline in the air
Is something I do not miss
But I do miss the warmth
The sound of crying babies
and my nieces and cousins
Shushing away their unhappiness
With bottles of milk and attention

I miss the dirty ice cream (street ice cream) and Taho (tapioca pearls, silky tofu, and brown sugar) passing our house— their carts ringing and their carriers have bells that jingle,
Singing of their presence

I do not miss being bitten by mosquitoes
But I do miss my diabetic uncle
who would tell me to wear socks so the mosquitoes stop biting me
And in return, I tell him to eat more veggies and stop drinking alcohol

I miss being in the Philippines— even if it's just to be on the plane ride
Because it's so fun
But the view of the mountains there is imprinted in my mind.
And I see the way we all sit and talk
Even though I didn't actively contribute to the conversation— just listened.

I see them on the mixed stones in front of our house or laying in bed because it's their nighttime.
For me, it's my morning
Instead of the gasoline smell in the air, the fresh air
But it's cold
The sky feels bluer here and sometimes I do too.

“When Ophelia Drowned” By Chloe Starczewski

She fell from the branch of a willow true (a rue for you and a rue for me)
She filled her lungs with riverbed
She saw her father's eyes
She may have cried out once or twice but underneath Laertes' cries
nobody heard a sound.
Get thee to a nunnery, Ophelia, heal thy broken mind!
You must not grieve so much, Ophelia, a woman must not cry
Blade to blade sweet to sweet, the bodies hit the ground
Nobody spoke of a woman's grief
When Ophelia drowned.

“I Reach for a Thought” by Parker Stewart

I reach for a thought
Among the stuffed, crammed junk
Rummaging through nothing

My fingers graze paper
Neatly folded, cradled among it all
I know written on it is what I seek

The note does not come alone
Wads of tissue, wax wrappers
Spilling out, following my answer

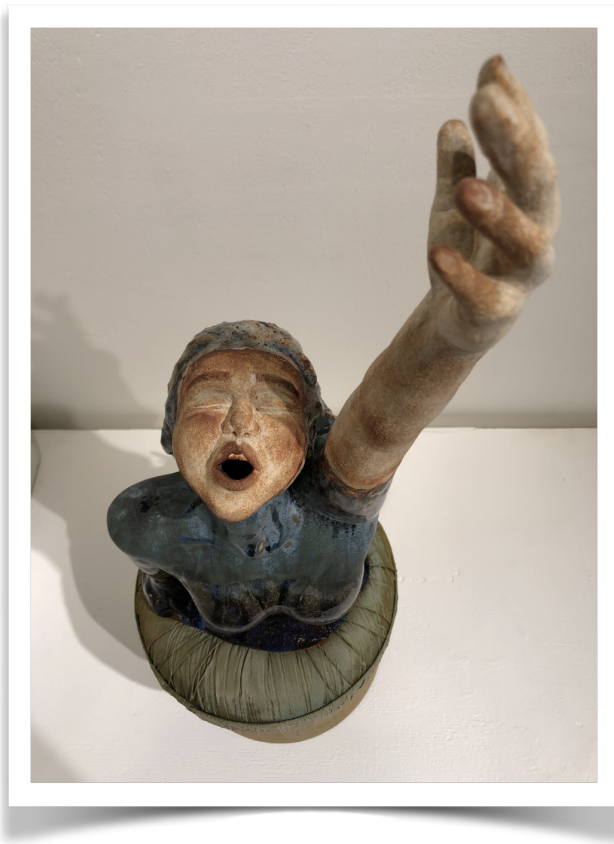
Startled, the note escapes my grip
Sinks in the sea of thoughts scattered on the floor
The right words ripped from my tongue

I retrieve the junk, and through crumpled handfuls
Cram them back into a box
Where I am sure they will remain
Until I reach for another

“Exodus” by Ileia Thomas

We want an exodus.
We're trying to exit this.
I'm sick and tired of living in a strange land.
Lord...,
Give us the power,
Give us—the time,
Give us—40 acres and a mule.
I'm trying to exodus.
I want to exit this.
I'm sick and tired of living in a strange land.
We want to exodus.
Bring them chariots,
So, we can exodus,
So, we can exit this.

FICTION



Alexandria San Miguel, "The Unattainable," Sculpture

“A Través Fronteras” by Diana Segundo

Alejandra was sure a guardian angel protected her husband when left in search of a better life. She longed to be in the arms of her husband José once again. After José's long journey, his back seemed engraved with the scorching sun's heat and the little boys' legs that were wrapped around him strained his back. He had crossed the desert with nothing except for a small bag and the clothes on his back. The soles of his feet would never forget the unending hike through the treacherous Arizona desert, and this memory would remain forever engraved in a spot where his brain would shield him from the trauma. They say heat stroke makes you go insane and imagine things, but all José could see was the image of his wife who was waiting for him in the heat waves ahead. With this story stuffed in the back pocket of his paint-stained jeans, José would grant Alejandra's wish on his terms. José worked tirelessly 20 hours a day to bring his wife to El Norte with him. He paid a coyote with sweat, tears, and blood to bring his querida Alejandra into his arms again. Thus, Alejandra set forth in pursuit of her own American Dream.

Alejandra left her family behind in the green fields of Veracruz to start her own in the promising United States. Unfortunately, the land of the free and home of the brave would not take Alejandra with open arms. Alejandra took a plane to Tijuana where she would cross north. Once in Tijuana, Alejandra took a bus to the address she was given. She stepped in and received a key to her hotel room where she would practice her speech to La Migra. The coyotes inspected her facial features closely and held up different cards trying to find the best match. They ensured that the details in Alejandra's speech were perfectly matched to her new identity as a green card holder. She memorized these new facts of herself; her new address, new name, and new purpose. Her name was now Veronica, and she was going to the United States to do some shopping. Alejandra drilled this new persona deep in preparation for her acting debut.

The day arrived where Alejandra turned into Veronica and joined the line of men and women who belong in the U.S. Alejandra's palms started to become clammy. Her heart skipped a beat for every person that moves up in line. Her heart was racing so fast it had already crossed the border and left her behind. She was next. Alejandra handed her ID over with trembling hands. She wondered if they could smell the scent of fear on her skin. Que mensa, what a stupid thought, they weren't not dogs. The border patrol agent held her new identity up to her old face. He looked at her up and down slowly and Alejandra felt like he could see the drop of sweat that began to trickle down the side of her face to her ear. She was caught. Her wrists were locked with cold metal handcuffs in front of all the señores and señoras. In their eyes, Alejandra saw her own parents. She had never been in trouble before, not even suspended from school and much less a detention. But now there she was with her hands behind her back being escorted to a station where she would become yet another statistic of a caught pollo. And so, she was sent back to Mexican territory with her fingers stained smudged black, and her hope broken. Alejandra called José on the nearest payphone after being detained for over six hours.

“José I can't do this, I'm going home”

“C’mon Ale, you already traveled all this way, try one more time mi amor”

Having heard her husband's voice of reassurance calmed Alejandra and reminded her of her end goal. Being caught once in Tijuana was enough. The coyote decided they would try again but this time at Mexicali and they would travel and cross by car. Alejandra was joined by a young man, who was on the same journey and search as her. His figure was tall with a side of chub. His skin pale with orange undertones while his hair was dark as tar, and his wide brown eyes complemented his light skin. Alejandra saw him as one of those big friendly bears you see in cartoons. He had made this trip times before and knew the journey like the palms of his dirt-stained hands. On their drive from Tijuana to Mexicali they drove through la Rumorosa. The roads were curvy and swayed back and forth while adjacent to the road was a straight drop down from the cliff. They reached the gas station, and the coyote offered them Gatorades as if they were his cubs. Alejandra and the young man enjoyed their refreshments as it stained their tongues red with every sip. The gas pump jumped and clicked indicating that the van was full just like the man and Alejandra's bellies with Gatorade. They headed back on the road and right when Alejandra was beginning to feel better, she noticed a pair of cars following them. Before her mind could begin to spiral, the cars blocked their road and stopped them. La policia.

“Que hace Don?”

“What are you up to sir?” asked the officer in all black while holding his vest. El coyote tries to brush them off.

“Ahí van los pollos?” the officer questions with malicious tone as he looks at the Gatorades in their hands

The Gatorade made the gears of the officers' brain turn; Gatorades could mean that they would be walking through the hot desert. The coyote tries desperately to brush them off and reassure them that they are family members riding back home with him, there are no pollos here. The officers don't believe him for one second and take them to a secluded spot. Alejandra would never know what that place was. It wasn't a station nor an official building. The officers ordered Alejandra and the young man to sit in an old torn up seat of a car. The seat was reclined against a gray wall, the fabric of the seat was stained and peeling. Alejandra and her bear friend would then be held hostage until the coyote paid a ransom to get them back. El coyote left and returned with a stack tied with a rubber band. Once paid, Alejandra and the young man were free to go back to their coyote.

El coyote knew the police were on to them now. He could not risk his safety and losing more money, oh, and the lives of Alejandra and the man. The two pollos were dropped off at a safety house in Mexicali filled with many other immigrants, where another coyote would take charge of the flock of pollos. Alejandra felt dirty yet unreal. Alejandra grasped the fact that she was a transaction to these people in this modern-day form of human trafficking. She could feel her insides twist, her stomach sinking, and the Gatorade seeking escape through her mouth. She slept in a vacant room, her bed being the carpet floor. She was surrounded by other travelling men and for a second she feared for her own safety. How crazy was she to travel with these stranger men. Her tall and big friend made sure to keep her safe from the other men, no one would take advantage of Alejandra. In a desperate attempt to get some rest, Alejandra balled up

her sweater to form a clumpy nylon pillow. Just as her mind was slipping into a deep sleep the lights turned on and penetrated through her closed eyelids.

“Rápido vámonos!” shouted the coyote, now was the time

Everyone scrambled like ants to put on jackets and hustle out. They squeezed into an old chevy truck that had a cap on the bed that acted as a roof. The coyote organized them into the vehicle carefully squeezing them like sardines. Alejandra and four others were placed lying flat in the bed of the pickup, while the other four sat inside riding alongside the coyote. The roof on the bed had small windows that Alejandra would look out of. Her sight changed from night stars to the lights of the border. El coyote held a walkie where a guide was telling him which lane to go into. Alejandra felt the truck moving left, right, left again, and back to right. Alejandra’s heart was beating faster than the first time. They came to a halt. She had to be quiet. She was scared they would hear her loud heart pounding on the walls of her chest. Murmurs between el coyote and La Migra. The agent shined a flashlight into the front seats and moved down to the bed of the truck where the five were laying in hiding. Alejandra was in sight of the small window. She held her breath. The white pale light shined on them through the cap and Alejandra knew she was caught yet again. She could feel her eyes beginning to swell with tears. Right before bursting, the pickup rattled to a start and moved. Was it true? Was this nightmare finally over? She turned to her small window once again and when she looked up, she saw a flag-colored red, white and blue pass as they drove by it. She was in. Alejandra was in a rush, she did it. She was within the boundaries of her future. Alejandra didn’t sleep the whole car ride, not out of fear but pure excitement that she was hours away from seeing José again. As the ride went on, person after person hopped out at their cities. She eventually made it out of the pickup’s bed and into a seat next to her male friend. She was one of the last three and the tall brown eyes young man whom she had shared this journey with was hopping out of the old chevy.

“Gracias por todo, cuidese” Alejandra wished him well in her warm tone of voice

“Tenga, para usted” he hands over a bill.

“Gracias Ángel” were Alejandra’s last words to the young man whom she’d never see again.

And so, Ángel who had been traveling with her and protected her the whole way, gave Alejandra her first piece of U.S currency, a single hundred-dollar bill. Alejandra would later joke in the future about how Angel lived up to his name and reputation.

Alejandra stayed awake the rest of her drive through Southern California. She hadn’t slept since she crossed and the adrenaline in her blood wasn’t any help. The details in the moments between dropping off Angel and when José picked her up, would blur in her memory as years went on. The moment that would remain engraved was when she saw her husband again surrounded by an aura of hope. The old chevy truck reappeared in front of Alejandra. It pulled up and the headlights lit the ground exactly how the flashlight lit Alejandra’s face in the back of the truck hours prior. Except this chevy had José on the passenger side pushing the door open with one thick and brown work boot stepping out. Alejandra grabbed her sweater and ran out full charge towards José, where he was holding his arms open for her to crash into. She fell into his white t-shirt like a cloud and inhaled his musty paint scent. They embraced each other for the first time in months although it had felt like years to Alejandra. Her heart raced again, but

this time out of love, happiness, and most of all relief. Tears flooded her eyes and pooled until they broke and streamed down her cheeks all the way to her neck, relieved that she made it. And with both feet on the ground, Alejandra and José started to build their own sueño Americano.

“Observatory In The North” by B.W. Brown-Webster

Touching the sky. I'm touching the sky.

Filled with daring awe and wonder and anticipation I stared up at the stars so bright and full of life, from the ground. Those stars infinitely beautiful and complex, painted against the dark of the night sky reminded me of the city. Its bleak comparison made me think of all the things I'd gotten the chance to see from the window in the back of my room. Our building, perched unassumingly on Denard Ave., near the intersection on Meridian Blvd., let me see across the way to The Southside. I loved looking out across the streets with the telescope OG got me. It was sleek and clean and paper white, with my name, “Gin” debossed right there on its side. Somedays, when I got home from school and finished my schoolwork early, and OG didn't make me clean up, and Big Sis YaYa wasn't breathing down my neck, I would just sit and watch the White people on The Southside.

OG had once told me that from where we were, you could see the CBD - that's central business district - and the residential district. She wished YaYa and I could've went to school over there. Sometimes, I did too. The Southside was just hella pretty. Its buildings that poked up into the atmosphere, towers of glass and concrete, towered over its tidy houses, new and uniform. Verdant lawns with even-cut grass and trees that never grew out of control. Even the dang sky was clean and crisp over there. When the fluffy white clouds paused in the air and the midday sun hit The Southside just right, it was amazing to look at, making it easy to ignore that manufactured feel it had. That odd, plasticky uncertainty and lifelessness about it that I couldn't help but notice. Brilliant and picturesque, but in a stock photo sort of way.

OG don't like White people all that much, but I've never minded them. I liked watching them through my scope. But as clean as The Southside was, there were a lot of dirty folk there. Plumbers, The PG&E people, construction workers, car guys. I liked watching them work. They always seemed to enjoy it. I especially enjoyed watching the clean people though. The guys that dressed in suits and stuff. Like the kind of stuff we'd see at Old Navy or H&M sometimes, when OG took me and YaYa school shopping. I've always wondered what kind of work they do. In the mornings before school, I would watch them hop in their shiny cars and trot off to the big shiny buildings in the CBD, where they would disappear behind shiny walls and shiny windows. I told OG that one day I would have a job where I could dress like that every day. Clean and crisp and shiny like the stars in my scope. I'm good at science, but OG and YaYa always say scientists don't get to dress like that. They wear lab coats over plain clothes, tucked off in the far corners of society, unseen, doing “God-knows-what.” I told them that when I become a scientist, I'll wear what I like, and dress like the White people on The Southside. The clean ones. The suited and booted shiny ones. “Even though I'm from The Northside!” I'll exclaim with weighty pride.

Even though I'm from The Northside. It always comes out with a ragged sigh. I'm proud of where I'm from, but it don't always feel like something to be proud about - especially when you're like me. Kids up in school try to talk shit about how I dress. Say I talk like a Southside Square. Dress like one too. 'Spose I do, but OG didn't raise them

ones that turn the other cheek. I can roast, and I can fight too, and I do. 'Spose it's a shame that I have to, just because I'm not into wearing Jordans and prefer looking at stars and clouds and people to watching the 17's zoom through the block on Slingshots. Why watch gangsters on motorbikes, when there's beauty in its purest form, just over our heads every night?

In The North, the freight trains at the northern edge of the city are always close enough to be heard, and a number of them pass through every day. Just past the train yard is the industrial area, and the refineries don't help the city's smell. The air in The North is often thick and smelly, and I can hardly take a step without a bit of trash meeting my shoe. Its streets are busy and crowded and dangerous. We studied the Industrial revolution in class not too long ago. The North feels like a modernized remnant of that.

That's not to say The Northside ain't beautiful. It is, in its own way. There are so many different races and cultures here. People of all creeds and colors. Winny, the owner of the corner store is Vietnamese, I think. OG doesn't appreciate that so many shop owners 'round here are Asian. She's not too happy there's a lot of Latinos, too. There's also a few Caribbeans - the Jamaican and Trini street performers and street vendors. But most of us here on The Northside are just Black. Dark skinned on the darker half of the city.

Beautiful in its own way, in The North, street vendors peddle assortments of jewelry, clothes, and other things. Food carts and trucks dot the street, flavoring the air with all sorts of enticing smells. The OG's drive the funky, colorful old-school cars. The 17's, gangbangers draped in black and green, parade colorful motorbikes up and down the grimy, jet-black streets. Performers sit on busy street corners, like Futura or Madison, exciting passersby. Music booms, flooding from the souped-up speakers of the motorbikes and the old-schools and the street performers' portable speakers, filling the streets with wide varieties of colorful emotion. Painted art graces the walls of the once monotonously gray and beige concrete towers with intricate designs and lettering. On Futura, The North's shopping center. YaYa's worked there since before she turned nineteen a few months back. On Madison, bars, restaurants, nightclubs, and dance halls. More color. The colors of the long acrylic nails on girls in colorful, skimpy neon outfits that YaYa told me to stay away from. The deep greens that the 17's wore were accompanied by their polished Slingshots and motorcycles and dirtbikes. Everyone in The North was sporting the newest sneakers all bursting with color. Beautiful in its own way.

In The Northside, where it was dangerous to be out at night, where kids only a few years older than twelve-year-old me grew accustomed to carrying Glockes and selling tree, where few people ever got the chance to truly leave, and even fewer from The Southside dared to go, the colors mimicked the Northern Lights. Here, where the dusty, graffiti-marked trains rode through and young boys bled out in the street, we had our own beauteous aurora, flickering in the starlight and the indigo sky. And tonight, for some reason, with my hand outstretched, I was looking at it. I 'spose it's the black of night that makes a star glow so incomprehensibly bright. Maybe the grossness of The Northside only made The South seem prettier. Safer.

Nah. That's a stretch. Even for me. You don't even need my telescope to see the difference. As lively and colorful as The North is, it's half as dirty and twice as dangerous. "Especially in this new age." as OG often comments. Park that colorful old-school on the wrong block, you'll return to it without windows. Step on someone's colorful shoes while walking down Futura or Madison, you might not get the chance to make a mistake like that again. Eye the 17's too hard, and it won't be motorbikes they send your way. And even before I had my telescope - before I set up my private observatory at the window in my bedroom, that much was plain to see.

As I lay there staring up at the wonderful night sky from the ground, contemplating how it mimics the city, my thoughts returned to me - to the present. How did I get here, lying on the filthy concrete, hand in the air?

I tried to piece together what happened. I remembered that we had left the house. YaYa asked me if I wanted to "go the sto" with her. Winny's Lighters and Liquor, the corner store at the intersection of Meridian and Denard. With the go-ahead from OG, I grabbed my telescope and we slipped on our puffers and left. We walked up Denard Ave. The street was congested with parked cars in front of all the apartments. As we walked, we ran into Gela and Mickey. Mickey rode his bike and Gela carried that basketball of hers. They were cousins, same age as me, and we all went to middle school together. They walked and talked with us for a bit, but didn't follow us all the way up the street. As YaYa and I approached Winny's, a large mass of figures in black crowded on the corner. A group of young men with green bandanas hanging from their pockets and bound around their limbs stood near the doors to Winny's. 17's. Another large group of young men stood opposite them.

I felt a sliver of tension between them but YaYa didn't seem pressed, so I ignored them too. Then they got louder, louder, and louder still. A fanatic bickering came from at least a dozen heads, so I couldn't really make anything out. A resounding clap filled the air. Followed by another. And then another. And then more I think. I'm not sure. And then I felt the heat.

A searing heat filled my upper body. It felt like I was standing beside a space heater. Unnaturally warm. And then I saw the stars. I heard a piercing shriek. And more claps. I looked away from the stars for but a moment, to the left. My telescope had rolled away from me, leaving my hand empty. OG got it for me a few months ago. My twelfth birthday. I reached for it. My telescope. It was no longer that pristine white I'd worked so hard to keep clean. It was something else now. Dark. Stained. I looked back up at the sky, and the stars were brighter. They were so bright it was hard not to close my eyes. More of those awful cries. I sensed something move beside me. It knelt beside me and hunched over me, backlit by the stars. I think it's YaYa but I'm not sure. She hovers over me, but her face and her clothes are obscured in shadow. The light from the stars is too harsh. Was that her screaming? I could hear sirens in the distance now. No more colorful music. "Gin? Gin, what's wrong? Traejen! Traejen! Just..." The sound of her shaking words fades away, muffled and muddied, but as she yelled my name colorful streaks of light followed her words, sparking even more life into the sky above. Sparkling hues of green and violet and blue danced between the stars, an aurora. And then the pain followed.

One hand clutching my abdomen wet with scarlet, the other outstretched, I no longer reached up at the stars and night sky, breezily fawning over them. I clawed at them, again and again, with every ounce of strength left in my body, gasping for air and growing ever frail.

Touching the sky. I'm touching the sky.

“Scarred” by Jenn Keohane

I slump onto a kitchen stool and reach for the silver teapot, catching my distorted reflection. I shudder and look at the floor.

“I’ve been praying to the gods. I couldn’t forgive myself if…” Mama’s fingers brush the discolored, fibrous skin on my left cheek. “The treatment is helping.”

I hand Mama the invitation I’ve been clutching. Her eyebrows rise.

“Lakshmi is getting married. Before you!” Mama tugs at her sari. She has been eating too many fried pakoras during our cooking lessons. She says I must learn to nourish my future husband.

“What has Lakshmi got? A bright mind, maybe. But her father’s scandal.” Baba folds his newspaper and bites into a chapati with jam. “No boy wants those problems.”

Mama nods. “Why her and not you?” I tap my shiny scar.

My parents exchange worried glances, then the room erupts. My mistakes — missed opportunities, failed matches, a broken engagement — spill onto the table, and I make no promises to clean them up.

“Parvati, you only have a few fertile years,” Baba says.

The air suffocates me. I unwind my scarf and lay it on the tablecloth. It’s rainbowed, each color an exclamation point against the white lace. “Enough. I’m not a heifer.”

I pour myself a second cup of tea.

Mama clears the table and returns with my younger sister’s wedding album. “Beautiful pairing. Now I have two grandsons.” I mouth that last part with her. She places a veiny hand over her heart.

“Daughter, you’ll find someone too. Let’s review the matches Auntie sent over.”

“Now? I’ve got yoga soon.”

“You and yoga. What’s the hurry?” Mama leans in to present the prospects.

“Handsome guy. Straight teeth. Good family. Chairman of an industry group!”

I pull the dossier over. “Co-chair of an association for utensil makers? Next!”

“Don’t be picky,” Mama replies. “Number two studied in America. He’ll probably want a modern marriage.”

She hands me a headshot of a man with overly styled hair and a big gap between his front teeth. “Auntie says he’s ready to settle down.” Mama points to a handwritten note clipped to his résumé.

“Mama, these people aren’t my type, and you know their mothers won’t accept my flaw.” I check my watch. If I leave now, I can still make it to yoga. I hope Aanya will be there.

“Okay, how about this one? Vegetarian, like you. Thirty-six. Master’s degree in psychology. He’s even got a birthmark.” She points to a pea-sized spot on his chin.

“Mama, please. I am only here for a few months on a consulting assignment. I’m not moving back. My life, my career, are in New York.” I squeeze her hand and softly add, “I don’t want these men.”

“Okay, the co-chair is out, but choose between the other two—just one chaperoned meeting.”

I shrug. “You don’t understand me.”

"You want to live with a roommate forever?"

"Lola moved out last year." I cross my arms and take a deep breath. "I'm alone now."

"Yes, you did mention it. You've been sad."

"She was... a special friend, and I miss her." Holding back tears, I kiss Mama on the cheek and catch a light scent of ginger chutney. "Tell Auntie no more matches."

Confusion floods Mama's face. She spreads out the dossiers, looking for selling points. "So many good choices. Healthy bank account. Own property."

I hide behind Baba's newspaper, feigning interest in fluctuating oil prices.

"Pakorras are his favorite food!"

I don't look over; these matches will never taste my fried dough.

"The only thing I choose right now is yoga," I bound forward, bouncing on the balls of my feet. I want to unroll my lavender mat next to Aanya's, and my pulse quickens at the thought. Maybe, after a few warrior poses, I'll invite her to coffee to see if we click.

"Parvati, be serious."

"It's too soon." I placed my teacup next to the sink and wrapped my colorful scarf around me. "My... scar... needs time to heal."

"The Last Two Fingers" (word count: 1214)

"A squashed insect was the first thing I brought back to life," I share.

Lola nods. "Me too, when I was six."

"I held the ladybug to the soul reflection mirror. Her tiny soul snagged on her crushed legs and couldn't escape. I nudged it back into her body," I say. "She lived but favored her left side."

"First time I tried that with an animal, I pulled the soul right out." Lola shakes her head. "RIP, squirrel."

"Enough reminiscing about your early superpowers. Any reaper encounters? People pissed about being revived?" Our Soul Saver instructor checks her notes.

A deep voice volunteers. "Last week. Thai restaurant. The manager, Gary, clutched his chest and fell. His soul saw the tunnel of light and wanted to get the hell outta Dodge."

"Or, in this case, Gary," I add.

The baritone Saver winks at me. "I shoved his soul back while pretending to do chest compressions. Now I get free curries for life!"

I smile, nudging Lola.

The session ends. We exit the room, pass the vampire meet-and-greet, and head to the lobby, where a werewolf vaccination clinic is underway.

"Rabies shot?" asks a woman holding a clipboard. I shake my head.

"Turning into a hairy beast every month sounds horrible!" says Lola, shuddering.

"Worse than cramps." I grimace and rub my stomach.

"Katie, guess what? It's my early days, but I'm dating a werewolf-in-training, Walter."

I lean in. "Tell me more. I want a warm body too...but is that even safe?"

Lola gushes about Walter as we walk to the hospital for our clinical rotation. No sorcery is allowed in medical facilities, though fame-seeking Savers flout the rules. That always ends with whispers of witchcraft or pokes and prods. Best practices instruct us to act discreetly.

“My save rate averages one mammal a month.” My shoulders slump over my middling revival stats. “I’ve never saved a human. Even cute curry guy has done that!”

“Don’t worry! You’ll improve when you can work without a mirror,” Lola assures me. She’s reached that milestone already.

A horn blasts, and tires screech. We approach the intersection, and I see a motionless shape near a half-eaten burrito. Bloody mouth, dirty orange tabby fur, rainbow collar. “Mr. Bojangles,” says the tag. No number.

“Be a hero!” Lola says.

Sweat beads on my upper lip. I kneel, checking for signs of life with my pocket mirror, but the body is empty. A Grim Reaper scurries away with a cat soul tucked under his arm like an old newspaper.

Suddenly an enormous dog races past me to a scent smorgasbord—rotting food, poo piles, freshly faded feline. “Stop! Slow down,” cries the dog walker, bouncing down the sidewalk like a skipping stone. She slams into a lamppost, splitting open her forehead, and crumples to the ground.

“I’m a nurse,” Lola announces, and she leaps to the unconscious woman. Blood pools on the ground.

“...technically, we’re student nurses!” I add.

The accident attracts attention, and the opportunistic reaper is back for a bigger bounty. He’s slung Mr. Bojangles’ cat soul around his bony neck like a winter scarf.

I blink three times, helping my eyes adjust to the scene. I see the dog walker’s faint soul, from the waist up, fluttering in the breeze—my confidence surges.

The reaper dashes forward, hoping to pull her soul out quickly. He grabs the semi-translucent form from behind and leans back, a classic tug-of-war position. Lola digs in, but the soul inches out of the body like it’s shimmying out of skintight jeans.

“Katie, get over here!” Lola says. The dog, dragging its leash, circles.

“Is that all you’ve got, you pint-sized shitty soul snatcher?” I snort and rush to Lola’s side.

The reaper is not wearing the typical flowy black robe. Instead, he dons a smelly black hoodie, and flesh hangs from his cheeks. He releases one side of the soul as his metatarsals reach behind him for a weapon to cut it free. I roll my eyes when he swings a small sickle, not a scary scythe. He’s only a junior reaper!

The agitated dog snaps in his direction.

Nothing makes my nostrils flare more than streets littered with ghostly body parts, especially feet. They get hacked off if a soul gets stuck in snug boots. But, once I saw an ear and thought, now that’s just sloppy.

“Oh no, you don’t, you wretched trainee.” I straddle the woman, pushing on her soul. The left shoulder and arm snap into the body, which begins to flail. Her skin warms.

The reaper changes tactics, grabbing her soul’s right hand. Her essence, pliable like rubber, stretches toward him. The body’s grip loosens its hold on the soul, and the woman’s skin grays like the sky before a light rain.

“Lola, hold on!” I slam into the soul’s right side and wrestle the dog walker’s soul back in as far as the elbow. My hair clings to my sweaty face like strands of soggy spaghetti and my feet kick at my bony nemesis.

Finally, the reaper slinks away, defeated. There's a rat nearby, circling a trap—an accessible prize. Plus he still has the soul of Mr. Bojangles.

Lola grabs the dog's leash and ties it to the lamppost while I slip each soul digit—one by one—back into its dedicated space in the dog walker's body. Pop, pop, pop. Just two more.

"Oh my god!" The woman's eyes open. "Get off me!"

"What? Oh, okay...we're trying to..." I panic and step toward Lola, who is rubbing the dog's ears.

"Assault me?" She shrieks. "Help! I'm being attacked!" She eyes several people, but they look just as confused over what just happened.

"No, it's not like that. You were injured—" I stammer.

She puts a hand on her bloody forehead, and her eyes widen. "You tried to kill me!"

A larger crowd of nearby shoppers gathers around us, drawn in by the commotion. My pulse races. But Lola? She is giggling, preoccupied with the dog humping her leg.

I break through the bystanders and run like my feet are on fire.

Lola catches me down the block. "No good deed goes unpunished!" We're giddy and high-five, panting with excitement. "Oh, by the way, that dog is Walter."

"Your werewolf crush?" My brows shoot up.

"He's a newbie. His first transformation was to a chihuahua! Next year, he'll turn into a wolf and begin full-moon training."

"We all start somewhere."

She checks her phone. "C'mon, we're late."

Three months later, a wet nose nudges the back of my thigh.

I smile at the dog walker, a purple scar across her forehead. A piece of her soul flaps, like a miniature flag, near two flaccid fingers.

"Are you taking new clients?" I ask.

"Small dogs only."

I extend my hand and smile. "I'm Katie."

"Hey...you look familiar..."

Without pausing, I grab her hand. Pop, pop. She winces.

"I should go, but be good to this guy." I stroke the dog. "My friend loves this furry creature."

Now that I've restored the dog walker's entire soul to her body, my heart sings. I text Lola, "Pop, pop. The last two fingers! My third save this month!"

"Congrats! Celebrating tonight?"

"Yes! Fifth date with cute curry guy!"

"Have fun! Maybe he's your soulmate."

“Moth Dust” by Jackie Abells

The subway screeched out of the tunnel, and dull daylight fell on the stranger’s ragged clothes. Like everyone else on the train, she wore a gas mask. To compensate for her lack of facial expression she exaggerated her body language while speaking to Pepper. She was telling them something about her family. Pepper had difficulty following. The conversation was prompted by the stranger, after all. While it wasn’t unwelcome, Pepper did feel a paralyzing inability to add anything. They didn’t enjoy feeling so small.

“Have you ever moved far from home?” the stranger asked with a filtered voice.

Pepper was caught off guard by this sudden question. They felt as though the woman before them was reaching out across a vast chasm. Before they could stammer a response, the incomprehensible announcer interrupted them, alerting them they were approaching their stop. The two awkwardly parted ways and wished each other luck, silently knowing they would never see each other again.

Pepper’s boots stepped out of the train. They had been wearing these decaying boots since they were a teenager, having purchased the pair with one of their first paychecks. They chose to buy the pair in white, not foreseeing how quickly they would become scuffed and gray.

Emerging from the concrete station, they saw the city skyline blurred by smog. The old brick buildings clashed with the newer ones built over them. Metal roots ran over the city, all leading to Pepper’s destination. It stood inhaling the city air with a wheeze. The towering wall was effectively a giant air filter for the district, but it was audibly exhausted. Machines like this one always broke down. It was a matter of when, not if. And it was Pepper’s sisyphian job to fix it.

Pepper and their coworkers converged on the edifice. They all wore mechanics’ jumpsuits, silver with reflective highlights. The crew split up as they went inside to scan the machine. Pepper wore their mask tight as they traversed the toxic air. With their short stature they slipped between wires and pipes, following the machine’s hum. Its veins were singing. Pepper listened for the cracks in the melody, and found the root of the machine’s ailment.

They clicked a small switch on their gas mask, and turned on their night-vision goggles. Through a viridian haze Pepper could see the machine’s tangled guts. Toxic chemicals had clotted the pipes. The machine was groaning under the pressure that had built up. Pepper carefully opened a valve, and compressed air began hissing out. The air was thick with dark dust. The tiny flecks of it surrounded Pepper, and their ears quickly fell deaf. One moment the hum of wires were omnipresent, the next they were gone. Pepper could not even hear the filtered sound of their breathing through the mask. They had never known such silence.

Pepper removed a small device from their belt, and tried scanning the dusty compound around them. The device picked up nothing. It was as though the compound weren’t there. Pepper was baffled. They had never seen anything like it. They tried to reach their coworkers by transceiver, but couldn’t even get a signal through the dust cloud.

Pepper closed the valve, and eventually the dust dissipated through the filters. They held the transceiver up to their mask again. Before they could get a word out, they heard a deep metallic groan from the pipes. The pressure broke, and the valve flew from the pipes and collided with Pepper's face.

They were on the ground. As the numbness cleared, Pepper felt throbbing pain and a strange sense of exposure. They tried focusing their eyes, and saw their gas mask on the ground in front them. Pepper quickly drew it back to their face. The air still felt too raw. The mask's filters were broken.

Pepper had no strength to lift themselves. Their eyes were bloodshot and blurred. A crimson puddle was forming on the ground by their face.

The transceiver crackled, "What was that sound?"

The blood reached the transceiver before Pepper could. They were left gasping for poison.

The sound of subways screamed in the distance. Pepper clutched a blanket tighter around their ears. They thought they would be used to that sound by now, but they just wanted to muffle its volume.

It had been a month since the accident. It didn't take long for Pepper's coworkers to find them and bring them to a hospital. The concussive injury itself didn't take long to recover from. The problem was what they breathed in.

Pepper's wounded mouth was exposed to the air for too long. The chemicals in their lungs couldn't be removed. They were in need of medication to fight the infection, and went into debt. They had lost their home, their job, and now their health.

They lowered the blanket from their ears, and could once again hear the hum of machines. This subway station had been abandoned, but the wires and pipes could still be heard in the walls. With their repaired mask, Pepper navigated the dark tunnels. They broke open a vent in the wall, and cut apart the tunnel's veins. Leaching out was a thin liquid, which Pepper quickly harvested in a bottle. They mixed it with several other reagents they had been collecting. The liquid was absorbed and formed a dust, which billowed in front of Pepper.

They quickly grabbed the scanning device from their old job. The small dust cloud appeared as though a void on the scanner. It was like a vacuum that nullified signals.

They had found it. They figured out how to recreate the chemical reaction from that day. Pepper was ecstatic. They wished they could share this moment with someone. But Pepper was alone, and more importantly, desperate to live. They had no way of selling this discovery, but they knew how to use it.

The scanner was not the only thing Pepper had saved from their old job. They had a bag of tools and their silver jumpsuit. They removed the reflective highlights from the suit, leaving tiny holes in the seams. Pepper created more of the dust compound, mixed it with water, and used it to coat the jumpsuit. It went from silver to a speckled gunmetal gray. They put the remaining dust in a little packet.

Pepper let go of the blanket they were clinging to, tightened the black mask before their long white hair, and donned their jumpsuit. Tonight they would take flight.

Pepper stood in the alley between skyscrapers. Cars flew past in the adjacent street. The height of the building before Pepper gave them slight vertigo. Its peak was not visible through the low-hanging smog of the starless night sky. All that could be seen were the building's lights up above.

Pepper had repaired this building before, and they knew how easily they could break it again. They took a deep breath through their mask, and began scaling the side of the building. High above the ground, Pepper felt a sense of masked confidence in the clouds.

They reached a vent, and carefully unscrewed it for entry. Crawling through the thick air of the ventilation shaft, Pepper saw into the rooms below. Security were roaming the halls with scanners at their waist.

Using their own scanner, Pepper located what they were searching for. It was a phosphorescent power cell, and it was extremely valuable. Something that could be sold for medicine. Despite the weight of this moment, Pepper had to resist chuckling upon realizing how much the cell looked like a lava lamp. Once removed, they knew it would take security about a minute to restore backup power.

Pepper removed the power cell, threw it in their bag, and began counting.

60, 59, 58, 57,...

They dropped out a vent into a now-dark room, and turned on their night-vision goggles. The guards were frantically holding flashlights and scanners as they looked for Pepper, who was silently weaving between them.

30, 29, 28, 27,...

Pepper came to a large window overlooking the smoky rooftop of the adjacent building. They threw the spare packet of dust at the window, and it broke into a cloud of silence. Pepper took a wrench from their satchel and threw it into the cloud.

15, 14, 13, 12,...

The shattering of glass, if there was any, made no sound. Nor was the outside visible through the cloud. Pepper would have to take a leap of faith.

10, 9, 8, 7,...

Pepper stood at the other end of the hall, and began running. They strode into the cloud, and leap forward. Blind, deaf, and without the ground beneath their boots, it was as though they were flying through a void in that moment. It was almost serene.

As quickly as it came, that moment ended, and Pepper was flailing in the darkness between buildings. They tumbled onto the rooftop. Before they could even look back, Pepper saw the lights from the skyscraper return. With dust still trailing them, Pepper disappeared into the smog.

By the time Pepper had gotten on the subway, their heart was still racing. With each heavy breath they felt worn thin. They opened their jumpsuit a little, and directed the scanner at their chest. The plastic blood in their lungs was festering. With shame, Pepper was coughing.

Despite Pepper's efforts to quiet the coughs behind their mask, another passenger noticed.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"I-" Pepper wanted to say they were fine. "No," they answered weakly. "I'm very sick."

“With what?”

Pepper shrugged. “I was without my mask for too long.”

The passenger softly nodded behind her gas mask. “I see,” she said. After a pause she added, “Y’know, sometimes it feels like we’re expected to forget about everything but that.”

Pepper’s mask obscured their confusion. “What do you mean?” they asked.

“I know it feels like a while ago now, but don’t you remember what the air used to be like?” she responded. She looked out the window of the subway. “The city is almost unrecognizable now, but we’re expected to act like things are exactly the way they were before. The only exception is these gas masks. If the air weren’t so noticeably poisonous, we’d be expected not to abandon them too.”

Pepper had nothing to say in response, but they were okay with that. It was strangely comforting to hear the other passenger say something so dreary.

“I’m sorry, I was rambling,” she said, feeling awkward about the silence. “Will you be okay?”

“I hope so,” Pepper said with a hand over their satchel. “But if not, at least I got to soar above it all, if only for a moment.”

The two watched the city lights beneath a starless sky. The city disappeared from view as the train entered a tunnel. Pepper’s heart rate had slowed.

“You don’t have to apologize for rambling,” Pepper said. “People on the train or on the street are always really talkative with me. I don’t know why that is.”

The fellow passenger smiled from behind her mask. “Maybe you just have one of those faces.”

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



Augusta Dorman, "The Old Heart is Blue," clay

Jackie Abells is an English major at Diablo Valley College, planning on transferring to a 4-year university. Previously, she has written mostly journalism articles throughout high school and college. They hope to write more creative fiction in the future.

Healyn Anicete is a DVC student and poet.

Anushree Bhattacharya is a Biological Sciences Major at Diablo Valley College. She is from Mumbai, a city in India. She has a Bachelor's degree in Biotechnology from the University of Mumbai. Apart from her major, she is an enthusiastic artist and wants to explore her side of creative writing. Anushree is committed to excelling in both fields of Science, and Art and is eager to explore the endless possibilities that her diverse skill set presents.

Anna Browett is an aspiring writer and professional artist, majoring in Political Sciences at DVC. She uses her knowledge of the political world to create art, whether it be paintings or written works, to educate her audiences of the stories we've forgotten. She is currently writing her first book that seeks to answer the question: If Mother Nature was a man, would we still treat the Earth this poorly?

A Bay Area native, **B.W. Brown-Webster**, a student of business marketing, photography, and creative writing, has always had an eye for aesthetics and a way with words.

His signature is painting vivid mental images that are busy with detail, yet create a calm, somewhat somber atmosphere and tone. These are right in line with his mellow and introspective, yet high energy, ADHD addled personality.

His short stories are Black American fiction with elements of surrealism. With tales that put image before plot, surrealist imagery adds depth to his stories about Black adolescents allowing readers to find multiple meanings and metaphors in otherwise straight forward stories.

Lauren Halbrook is an English Major from Oakland. She has been studying at DVC for 2 years, and will be transferring to UC Berkeley in the coming fall. She enjoys hiking, reading, mountain biking, writing, and playing music.

Jenn Keohane grew up in Brazil and Mexico and later returned to the USA for college, earning a BA in Political Science. She has worked in finance and real estate and is now a substitute teacher at a local high school. After taking three creative writing classes at DVC during the pandemic, Jenn fell in love with writing contests as it's fun to create under a deadline! She and her husband have two young adult children and a naughty dog.

Julia Maeding is an English major and a compulsive diarist who will be reading a poem titled "The Farmers of Phantoms." She tutors English, Psych and Communications at the San Ramon Campus. She hopes to transfer to a UC this fall. In her free time, she scoops litter.

Diana Segundo is a first-year student at DVC majoring in English. She is a 19-year-old first-generation Latina college student. She plans to transfer within two years to a 4-year University with an Associates for Transfer in English. With the support of the Puente team, she hopes to get into a career in teaching to inspire other Latinx and first-generation students. Her cultural roots are a big part of her identity, and that inspiration can be seen in her writing. She will be reading her fiction piece titled A Través Fronteras.

Chloe Starczewski is an english student at Diablo Valley College who has always loved to write, but struggles to share that writing with others. Ey placed in the Lafayette Town Hall Festival's Young Playwright's fest and has had poetry published in the Acalanes High School Blueprint literary magazine 'Azure'. Ey will attend Berkeley in the fall for english, and hope to continue learning and growing on eir path to become a writer.

Parker Stewart (He/Him) is a full-time student and English Major at Diablo Valley College. On his free time he likes to write and read, as well as play trombone in a community Jazz band. He also enjoys the outdoors, and likes to spend any free weekends he has hiking or camping in new places. This fall, he plans to travel abroad with DVC's program to Barcelona, where he hopes to improve his writing and study the humanities.

Ileia Thomas (stage name is Lyrics Of The Art) is a spoken word artist that is currently studying sociology at DVC with plans to transfer to a California state college. She has been writing poetry and preforming since she was 14 years old. She first starting preforming with Youth Speaks in Oakland, CA making it to the second round of the semi-finals in Berkeley. As of recently, Ileia has been featured in the October 2022 episode of the Bay Area "Viewless Wings" poetry podcast. During her spare time, she loves to use an app on her iphone that allows her to write her poetry as raps or songs on vibrant beats from other music creators online. And, when she can she showcases her songs or poetry at open mics across the Bay Area.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Want this to be you?

The 14th Annual DVC Literary Contest will take place in Spring 2024. Stay tuned for updates and info, or check out the DVC Literary Contest [webpage](#) or the DVC Submittable [page](#) or contact Literature Week and Literary Contest coordinator [Rayshell Clapper](#).

Many thanks to all those who submitted to the DVC 13th Annual Literary Contest! We love your work, talent, and courage. Keep writing. Keep submitting.

