



STUCK IN THE LIBRARY

BROOKLYN COLLEGE'S
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PARTING WORDS FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Readers,

Even words of Hemingway could not construct the emotions running through my veins. My Stuck in the Library chapter is shy a few pages of coming to an end.

The Stuck in the Library I joined in 2015, was a freshly seeded garden—planted by Yaakov Bressler, and resourced by Brooklyn College. The ones who watered it and provided sunlight for growth were Brooklyn College’s talented writers, editors, artists, and contributors. Stuck in the Library is now a lively, blossomed garden of art and literature.

It wasn’t an easy journey to get to where we are today, but it was a worthwhile one. Three years ago I adopted this magazine with the goal of creating a community for artists and writers to come together, and to use their voices as a vessel for positive change. But, inevitably, Stuck in the Library became way more than just a community—it became a home for those thirsty for innovation.

When we were first granted an office space in James Hall, my instant thought was to create a clubhouse for creatives to do what they do best—create. From paint nights, to writing workshops, our clubhouse gave space to hundreds of Brooklyn College students. I will always remember a cold Wednesday evening back in 2016—we posted a Facebook event inviting members to join us for coffee and a writing circle. I was shocked and in awe when over thirty students crammed inside the clubhouse, writing until 10 p.m. while sharing good company, Oreos, and coffee. That was my first ah-ha moment with Stuck in the Library—I had come to realize that we were contributing to the growth and change of Brooklyn College.

My undergraduate career was filled with moments like these. From brilliant collaborations with photographers who exhibited their photos in Stuck in the Cafeteria in Boylan Hall, to Competitive Compositions by Whitehead Breezeway, to a retro-themed open mic night. These moments are puzzle pieces to the masterpiece I call creative leadership.

And now the key to constant creative growth and community is in the hands of the incoming and continuing students of Brooklyn College. On that note, I want to welcome Stuck in the Library’s incoming president, Mary Halabani. Mary is an engaging leader filled with passion and I have no doubt that with her leadership, the Stuck in the Library community will continue to increase by number, outreach, and impact. Aaron Guyette, my partner in crime since 2015, will continue as Vice President, and proceed to facilitate our biweekly Write the Night workshops.

I have been blessed to work with wonderful colleagues, whom I will miss very much. It would take an entire publication of its own to say the thank yous to the individual staff members and friends who made Stuck in the Library what it is today—so I urge you to remember and appreciate that this is being published because of a team that I now call family. Thank you to the wonderful staff, thank you to the administration of Brooklyn College, and thank you—the reader. As we all know, leaders come and go, but it is the readers who pass along the flame.

For the last time, cheers!

Paulette Gindi

President of Stuck in the Library

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PROMPT 1

SONNET

PROMPT 2

MEMOIR

PROMPT 3

TO BE CONTINUED...

PROMPT 1





SONNET

ALONE, BUT NOT LONELY

Madeline Columbus

A far away place, the end of my map
Rare are warm embraces of my old love
In sore need, no support steadies my back
Sounds of heavy rain haunt dark skies above.

Oh, pictures show only a glimpse of proof
How I really feel, day in and day out
Not seeing and believing mere half truths
Won't describe what my move was all about.

A City of Eternal Spring, busy
Such foreign a tongue, no sympathy here
Home, the only place for those who miss me
Enough to reason a justified fear.

Regain my solace in knowing only
Even though alone, my soul's not lonely.



Gabriella Christen

MELANCHOLY, A SONNET...

Autumn Aldain

I am the moth flew away from the flame
The wondering soul who has no prime name
each goal I might have is stranded by sea
mane faded, ashen, agnate a burnt tree

Daylight forsaken darkness is my shield
Deserted, desolate, settled and sealed
All hope I might gather is grey rubble
further ventures, and ache waxes double

the locus where pain is done and decayed
coincides with a demise, day I fade
if I had my druthers I'd start anew
as an innocent baby, child of two

To change the balance, I've zero control
virtue as rare as a heart that is whole

COME AND GO

Saelly Alvarez

Certain things you may never know,
Why in life you wonder so,
Just up and leave they come and go,
But it is life and that's how you grow.

Relationships and friendships, as you can see,
Sometimes things come to an end,
Don't think that you should have any accountability,
It's a life lesson we all must comprehend.

In life we realize things do change,
We can't hold people who refuse to stay,
Your mind and heart may go deranged,
It would poison you for those you force to stay.

Many things and people do come and go
Just like the wind, just let them all blow.



Alexandra Altamirano

HABANERO

Elijah Blumov

A nugget of dawn in harem-folds of green,
voluptuous pulpy fire there concealed.

A tropic sun with tantalizing sheen,
that drips from dryad limbs within the field.

My palate gushes at your very thought—
the gems of pain that sparkle on the tongue.

The supple flesh of nature, rich and taut,
your sinful Adam aching to be stung.

O orange child, O nymph upon the vine,
that glimmers so resplendent in the sun,
speak to me your burning truth divine,
until the happy tears merrily run.

Oh that we could so learn from paradise,
to recognize all pain as precious spice.

IN MEADOW'S AUTUMN

Michael Martinez

Sing of the muses that frolic so free,
At which the meadow winds sound their voices.
Alarmed is the sun, dancing at time's fee.
Harken are green grass, ground for muses' poises—

Hear and behold our spring's glad tidings.
Hushed are flowers that have bloomed with glee,
Leaves' colors celebrate and once more rejoice.
Ground goes cold, yet animals see me.

Sing once more of those who see life's choices.
Behold, they are still singing.
Winter winds that sing of death won't be heard.
In meadow's autumn, muse's songs will bear.

Come our chosen spring that births our new herd.
Song of the muses that brings beauty once more.



Gabriella Christen

CLOAKED COLONELS

Mary Halabani

Then my heart ultimately stops beating,
as you remove the dagger from my chest.
Thoughts rise of that so-called “friendly meeting,”
the one I showed up for upon request.

Smiles and giggles—what a blast we had,
exchanging gossip and secrets kept dear.
Porcelain dolls directed, ‘twas a fad,
and delicate hands were told to adhere.

Then word got around of the confession—
the one I swore to tell no living soul.
Checking on you became my obsession,
and avoiding me became your only goal.

Now lay me in the casket, let me rest,
for shattered hands tell me I failed your test.

FIGHT

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string
With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note
With hurting love; the music that they wrote
Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing
Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing
For the dear instrument to bear. Devote
The bow to silks and honey. Be remote
A while from malice and from murdering.
But first to arms, to armor Carry hate
In front of you and harmony behind.
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.
Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late
For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with grace.

FIDDLE

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string
With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note
With hurting love; the music that they wrote
Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing
Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing
For the dear instrument to bear. Devote
The bow to silks and honey. Be remote
A while from malice and from murdering.
But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate
In front of you and harmony behind.
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.
Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late
For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with grace.

Editors Note: The above poems are excerpts from Gwendolyn Brooks' sonnet "First Fight, Then Fiddle".

Creatively Directed by Felicia Elbert.

A photograph of a two-lane asphalt road with yellow double lines, curving through a dense forest of tall green trees. A utility pole is visible on the left side of the road. The sky is overcast and grey.

PROMPT 2

**TO BE
CONTINUED...**



ASPHODEL

Kali Norris

How do I explain that I am the garden,
and I am also the fire that burned the garden,
and I am also the charred remains?

The whole of the year like this,
Spring is an empty space,
and she goes.

She goes, and I watch—
taking her bloom to good earth,
and it is not enough, it is a better world,
that gets to have her.

Half my life.
Half my heart, pouring through my fingers.
And she goes.

And she goes.

UNSURE

Mariam Esa

The wind blows softly,
whispering in my ear.
Tall blades of grass sway
in any direction
the wind ordained.
I look out into the sea,
the endless blue.
I look to the horizon
to where the sky meets the sea
and it calms me.
I begin to shake slightly,
as my thoughts overwhelm me.
I am afraid,
far more than I've been.
I don't know which way to go
at this point,
utterly alone.
The sun sets at the joining
of the sky and sea
and I still stand there,
feeling unsure.

A SONG STILL SONG

Michael Raymond

This song's not over
Nothing I can leave behind
I can't tell you where I'm going
Just one thing I've got in mind

I've gone away
To another place
But my body's here
With my sullen face
And you begged me, "Please,
Won't you look at me?"
And my eyes met yours
But I couldn't see

That your eyes were red and pleading
For the man that you once knew
You needed me awake to see
What you were going through
I hear you say, "My every day
Can be made
Bright and blue
Because of you"

You brought me home
And made it clear
I just left you alone
With all your woe and fear
You could be strong
But could not abide
How I did you wrong
While still right by your side

You said you weren't asking
Much of me
Only what you were due
I leaned on you so many times
Now you needed it too
You'd torn your hair right out and
screamed
"I don't know what to do,
Because of you"

I was feeling mighty dead
And just destroyed out of my mind
Awash in sweat and sorrow
Sleeping so long, I near went blind
The only reason that I'm here
Is that you were so kind

A swell of voices in my head
Make me uncertain what to do
Yet despite their efforts to make me dead
I'm here and standing true
In times before, dark paths I tread
Now I'm heading to light
Because of you

No, it's not over
It's still only begun

UNREQUITED PIXELS

Christine Stoddard

the weight of a camera
feeds my hungry hands
i can feel the lens breathe
and the shutter beat
like a prudent heart

photography is slow
to love me
but my love races
through valleys
and up mountains
to golden vistas

pinning is my pace
my philosophy
i wake up in love
i fall asleep in love
and i shoot in love

my memory card
carries portraits
and landscapes
from my soul
to the world

i do not take photos
i give them
as i always give
in love

FOR ANOTHER DAY

Tzivya Steinhardt

He had known, from the moment he'd bought it, that the gift was far too expensive. He had nearly returned the record player multiple times since he'd picked it up that morning on his way to work. It was only once he saw his wife's face light up with joy at the sight of the gift that he was confident he'd made the right decision.

He managed to plaster a smile on his face just before she opened the door. The sparsely furnished room was lit only by a dimming bulb. He hoped it would last. He didn't know how long it would be before he'd be able to replace it.

"Happy anniversary," he said as he placed the box on the wooden table in the middle of the room. He wrapped his arms around her, holding on for a few minutes and then letting go to push the box to her. "For you," he said.

She opened the box and pressed a brief thank you to his lips before turning her attention to the gift once more.

Unsure of what to do with his empty hands, he shoved them into his pockets. As he did, his right hand grazed against the crumpled mess of paper that he had shoved in there as he left work. He had to tell her.

But he found that he couldn't. Not yet.

He wouldn't ruin the awe that had crept into her features as her fingers skirted over the record player's polished wooden surface. He couldn't help but compare the wood of the new record player to that of the pitiful table underneath. The flawless finish of the family's newest addition highlighted every scuff and crack that marred the surface of the table beneath it.

He shifted his gaze to the floor, no longer able to look at the evidence of his failure. He found, however, that the floor was in worse condition than the table. Its surface was scratched, punctured in one spot, and lined with grime too stubborn to yield to their measly mop. This was not the life he had promised her.

"Maybe I should've gotten her something more practical," he thought. "Something we need, not a luxury. Even if just a new table." But all thoughts of shame and practicality were wiped from his mind when he heard the soft gasp.

Inside the player lay a record. Beethoven. He had made sure of it. It was the first music they'd ever danced to. Back then, when he was still a soldier and she was struggling to live in what remained of her country. For a few minutes, the music had blocked out the nearly constant shouting and shell fire, the echoes of which were imprinted on both of their minds, just waiting to be played back on days worse than this one. At that time, money hadn't been an issue. He'd had a steady paycheck, and the real challenge had been living to see it.

He crunched the pink slip in his fist and shoved it as far down as it would go before taking her hands in his.

"I'll tell her tomorrow," he thought, "but for tonight let's just dance."

CONFESSIONS OF A PROCRASTINATOR

Bethany Friedmann

I'm sitting in my closet, not because it's comfortable, not because there aren't fleas crawling in the carpet (there are). I'm sitting here because I had a great idea earlier today. Step 1: Take everything out of the closet. Step 2: Sort through the massive pile. Step 3: Get rid of all the pointless things that have piled up over the years (yes, years). Step 4: Enjoy life. I didn't make it past step 1. Why? Because I remembered that I had homework. But I didn't do my homework because I was overwhelmed by the pile of stuff in the middle of my floor. Then I remembered that I needed to write. So, here I am. At least I'm doing one thing right.

The problem is, I don't feel like I'm accomplishing anything because there will always be a pile of tasks looming in the distance, an endless to-do list. But is it truly "endless?" What if I just took the time to complete the tasks instead of worrying that I won't be able to? What if I let out my creativity instead of pining over artsy projects on Pinterest? What if I spent less time writing things in my planner and more time doing what I planned? What if I cleaned my room instead of Snapchatting my best friend about the fact that I haven't made any progress? Would I then have a moment . . . to breathe?

Nonsense. The time for questions has passed. I've already wasted it. So, I sulk on my closet floor. I never noticed before how wide this space is. It's large enough to liberate but confined enough to comfort. With my back against the wall, my feet barely touch the wall in front of me. If someone finds me here, I will feel ashamed. But while I'm alone I only feel safe. There's something about sinking to your flea-infested closet floor that's refreshingly humbling. This is one of my weaker moments, the time immediately after the tears threaten to burst out, the mess threatens to weigh me down, the fear of failure threatens to hold me back. This is the moment where I begin to come to my senses and mechanically do whatever it was I was afraid to try. I am numb. I try not to think about the fact that I'm accomplishing something because then I will freeze. I am a machine. I try not to think about the effortlessness with which I work because then effort will be required. I type to a rhythm. I try not to think about the rhythm because if I do I will skip a beat. I am hungry. Drat. But I've accomplished something! There are words on the page! I take a break to celebrate. I relish the moment. It will never happen again.

This is why I took everything out of my closet instead of catching up on homework. This is why I'm writing in my closet instead of sorting through my wardrobe that seems only to consist of sentimental items. This is why my closet was full in the first place: I've completed step 1 countless times. Sometimes I've even made it through step 2. But the thought of letting go paralyzes me. The thought of feeling trapped in a project too big to complete ensnares me. The thought of boredom drags me to the internet where I can only scroll through so many pictures of cute dogs before I realize that it is more boring than homework. This is why I procrastinate. This is why I find peace on my closet floor: where life is on hold and every endeavor that could improve my life is . . . to be continued.



Seher Akram



Gabriella Christen

A BORING STORY

Maryam Choudhary

At a party. They were standing close to the radiator, her beau carefully removing lint from his Islanders snapback while she silently questioned if they parked too close to a hydrant. Soon he placed the hat backwards on his head and a nearby friend—witness to this action—playfully came over to remark on his typical white boy behavior. She gave the friend an amused frown, and looked up at her beau who—despite having the dejected, self-pitying expression of one getting over a cold—looked oddly pleased. Weird, she thought.

“Do you have Advil in your bag?” he asked her, and rubbed his temples indicatively.

“Sorry, no.”

To friends, she described him as a tall Turkish boy with thick brows and sort of a big nose but who definitely still classified as cute. Who knows, she said, maybe they were for the long term. He would work the night shift in the emergency room, and she would prepare waffles in time for him to breakfast with their three biracial children—two girls and a boy. Then he would doze while the kids were at school as she supervised project plans at the firm. In ten years he would offer to upgrade her engagement ring and she would suggest a family trip to Turkey instead—you know, so the kids could learn about his culture.

You never know, she said, maybe it’ll work out. Maybe not. This is how she described him, and that was how the friend described him. Definitely weird, she thought.

“Are you white?” she asked. His brows arched and his chin wrinkled.

“Well my parents are from Turkey,” he said.

“Yes, I know,” she said, “but do you think you’re white?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not into labels. Didn’t know you were.”

“Relax. I’m just wondering if that’s what you call yourself,” she said, “if that’s what you want people to call you.”

“What else am I? My parents were born in Turkey, but they didn’t teach me anything.”

She stared at him bug-eyed—she hadn’t noticed how sweaty he was. Gross, she thought.

“Are you Muslim?”

“Dude,” he said, “why do you care? Why is that your business?”

“Well it’s not supposed to be some big secret like you’re making it out to be. These are questions central to your identity. Don’t you want me to understand?”

He rolled his eyes, and lingered with his mouth open, waiting for some words to come to him—but he felt unexpectedly overcome with a strange stiffness, and then he was just in terrible pain—his jaw locked in place.

“Well?” she said expectantly.

To be continued...

OFF THE CUFF

Robert Feinstein

This story is true ... well most of it is, anyway. There was this character for whom things never seemed to work out. He was, to use the polite vernacular, “between jobs” approaching four months, and there seemed no prospects in sight. An interview had not even been garnished for weeks, and then in typical style, he found himself having two on the same morning. So there he was, resumes in tote, riding the subway and feeling none too calm. The first interview was set for 9:10 AM, and aware of conductor pronouncements along the lines of: “Attention passengers, we regret the delay, but there is congestion ahead ...,” “this fellow allowed himself plenty of time. Sure enough the train halted between stations by dint of congestion, the type of which- it is probably needless to point out- had nothing to do with sinusitis.

Let me tell you, it was one particularly time consuming pit stop. He had embarked early enough to have avoided the sardine scene of subway rush hours, and had even obtained that much sought after commodity ... a seat. And as he lingered there listening to the loudspeaker declare: “We hope to be moving shortly,” he happened to glance down at his feet. Suddenly, his already frazzled nerves were jolted by the sight of a loose thread, defiantly taunting him from the base of his right trouser cuff.

The challenge was immediately accepted, and he tugged at the offending filament with determined fervor. But what he thought would be the simplest of tasks, was TO BE CONTINUED as a seemingly endless tug-of-war. It was as if he was trying to reel in a barracuda. He kept pulling, but the thread held fast, eventually reaching a foot and a half before snapping off. Things appeared better after that. The train reached 34th Street, giving him time to hop into a department store for a quick doughnut and decaf. Moreover, he figured he had won the war of the weave!

But as he paid the tab, he felt something wrong beneath his right heel. The exorcised cord had taken its revenge, leaving the bottom of his pants unraveled and beneath his shoe. While in a state of panic, his desperate inquiries revealed that, at this still early hour, only the shop’s snack bar was open for business. He would be unable to purchase a sewing kit before the quickly approaching interview.

A waitress helped by retrieving a threaded needle from her purse, but she did not have the time to complete the rescue. It is a good thing this fellow did not study to be a surgeon. He never was much good at sewing, although he hastily put in a few stitches before returning the needle, thanking his benefactor, and dashing off. Well, he was now so much on edge that he almost ran into the wrong office building, ended up leaping up the stairs instead of taking an elevator, and arriving at his destination with only three minutes to spare.

He was questioned by a lady from the firm's human resources unit, personnel offices being anachronisms in trendy Manhattan even back then. The interview did go well for a while, and a definitely great chemistry radiated through the milieu. She was impressed by the resume, as well as his paradoxical quick wit and seriousness. Consequently, she felt a bit guilty when she suppressed laughter to remark: "Are you aware that you're stepping on your pants?" In fact, he had not been aware, as he had become so focused on her. He replied, with a mortified: "Oh no! And I've got another interview uptown, after this one. I guess you wouldn't have some paper clips, or maybe something to sew with, would you?"

"I don't think clips will work, and I've never been much of a seamstress," she replied, with sincere compassion. As an afterthought, she suggested discreet use of a stapler, and helped him to mend what was surely a most intractable cuff. And it turned out to be a very good day ... a fantastic one, although he did not get the job. Oh, she wanted to hire him, but others in human resources ultimately decided to fill the spot via an internal promotion. She was sad while dialing his number to tell him, but was happy to learn that his next appointment went well, the staples held fast, and he would be employed before the week's end.

By the way, they eventually got married and it has been a terrific match. Their daughter's wedding is next week. And there is just one more thing. If a garment needs to be sewn, they send it out for professional tailoring!

WHOSE OUR MAMA & PAPA?

FSHK

Once upon a time, there lived a little girl in a place called Alphabet City, where her mother, father, brother, sister, and her cat all fit in a very small apartment. Because her mother and father woke up early in the morning and came home late in the evening, she never saw them to say “hello,” “good morning,” or “good night.” So, every single day, the little girl along with her sister, brother, and cat would wake up, eat the breakfast that mother would’ve already freshly prepared, brush her little teeth, and walk to and from school with her backpack strapped on. Yellow, blue, and pink, everyone in the big city would see the three children walk down the streets hand-in-hand, with their cat by their side.

Every day they would cross Avenue A and A Street, then cross Avenue B and B Street, and turn the corner to arrive to their school. However, due to construction on B Street, today the three children decided to take C Street instead. As they crossed C Street the little girl’s sister suddenly froze and pointed at something across the street.

“There. It’s them,” she whispered.

The little girl and her brother turned their faces and also froze and pointed.

“Mommy? Daddy?” they all screamed.

The little girl, her sister, brother, and the cat crossed C Street as fast as they could to where their parents, and two other people who looked exactly like their parents, were standing. As they were arriving to the place their parents and the other couple were standing, all four of them started to run D Avenue. Their short legs sprinted through the next three avenues down D Avenue until the four adults disappeared from the children eyes.

The little girl’s brother went down on his knees and picked up something like a small photo with both of his little hands. The little girl, her sister, her brother, and the cat stared at the photo for what seemed like a long time, but it was actually only two very long minutes that had passed.

The little girl’s brother opened his mouth, but nothing came out. The little girl’s sister started to cry. The little girl stood there staring out in space.

Who was this couple who looked exactly like their parents standing right next to their parents? And why were they all holding multiple children that looked exactly like them?

TUESDAY

Aaron Guyette

“So, Eugene, what made you want to come see us?”

He stares into space for a few moments.

“Nothing physical.”

The doctor glanced through Eugene’s medical files. “I see here that we originally recommended a psychologist, we-“

“I don’t want someone else poking around in my head, at least not someone specialized in it. It’s enough that I’m stuck in there, two of us might not get out.”

“We’ll see what we can do. First, you have to tell me why you’re here.”

“Well, it all started last Tuesday.”

Everything starts on Tuesday. It’s undetermined if Tuesday is a blessing because it’s the day after Monday, or a disaster because it forces you to recover from Monday, leaving you with no innate excuse for feeling shitty during the day. I woke up feeling like it was another shitty day, but my couch disagreed.

I arose and performed my routine. I grabbed pants, underwear, and a shirt- because sleeping naked is liberating. I showered, stepped out, and stared at the mirror. People forget the true purpose of a mirror: to remind ourselves that we’re real. And I have to every morning. I put on boxer-briefs, black dress pants, a leather belt, and a white button-down shirt. That exact order, every morning. After that, it’s socks. I’ve never understood why people take socks into a tile bathroom. Your feet will get wet.

I was thinking about that routine as I sat on my couch.

“I wonder if I wish I was dead,” I said to myself.

“Do ya really?” A high pitched, happy tone said. I thought about shitting myself, getting the gun I don’t own, grabbing the baseball bat I do own, and who might get my possessions in the will I haven’t written. Somewhere in between those thoughts I jumped up, ready to do any and all of them. I spun to erase my blind spots; I know what I’m doing!

I couldn’t find anyone to fight, kill, or submit to. I realized what I had been sitting on, my couch, now had eyes and a mouth of its own. I took this in stride with a false calm. My couch smiled.

“Are ya sure ya wish ya were dead?”

I failed to see what I would lose from making conversation. When does one get this opportunity?

“What do you know, you’re just a fucking couch,” I wanted to hurt its feelings. “Do you know what it’s like? Doing what we have to do?”

“Eug, I could kiss ya! Buddy, ya gotta do a bit better than that. Imagine if you were a couch!”

“NO RESPONSIBILITY!!!”

“Oh, boohoo, I’m rubbing my cushions together, ya know what that is? It’s the world’s smallest violin.”

I was furious. I lost most of my rational thought; I walked into my kitchen to reclaim what was left of it.

“OH! BIG MAN! WALK AWAY! TOO TOUGH TO TALK ABOUT WHAT HE’S FEELING!!”

Couch’s (as he had not told me his name) words did not bother me. At that point, I had appeared from the kitchen with a steak knife. There’s no legislation to prevent crimes against couches.

He stared at me, and the seconds went slower. I cut the Velcro and foam padding as gently as possible, to reduce any guilt. He stared again.

“You idiot! I don’t feel that. I’m a couch; there aren’t any nerve endings in the cloth! Well, we can feel fire...”

I dropped the knife, and collapsed down on his left cushion, avoiding the right back cushion where his face was.

I covered my eyes and rubbed them until they were sore.

“I’m sorry; I’m just having trouble grasping this right now.”

“It’s okay Eug, hell, I was half worried you were gonna grab the gasoline.”

“No, I’m done. Just tell me how you’re talking,” I paused, “or how you’re thinking.”

Couch’s voice hastened, “Listen Eug, don’t worry about any of that, pay attention to my words, not the fact that I’m a couch. Ya’ve crossed over into some shit! Another dimension maybe! What do I know?! I’m just a couch! All I know is this is a problem! You’re sick of something! Depressed! I don’t know! Taking the good shit for granted! This is something we can’t fix in one day. Listen, here’s what I think ya should do-“

“Why should I listen to you? I don’t even know you. Christ! You’re a fucking couch.”

“Oh, I’m sorry? Who the fuck else you gonna listen to?! Huh?! Gonna ring up your mah? Tell her you just made a suicide joke and that your fucking couch is talking to you?! Eug! That might raise some eyebrows!”

I sat in true silence for a moment, when you can’t hear the tick of the clock or the ringing in your ears. I rested my back against couch and stared at the blank television screen.

“I’m listening.”

“Simple. Call outta of work today, make up some bullshit, you’re smart. Then go on a fucking walk, get away from these walls, Jesus Christ Eug, I feel like I’m in a zoo.”

“I can’t miss work, I-“

“What? What would ya like to hit me with? How you need the money? How this one day is gonna be the make or break? People are relying on ya? How they won’t be able to handle the one day without ya? Or will ya feed me some integrity bullshit on your honesty? Eugene, you’re talking to a couch, you were never able to hear me before! Calling out sick isn’t a lie. Just shake the truth up, cook it, season it a little, I’ve heard that changes how food tastes, whatever the fuck food is, right? Eug, imagine my comforting hand on your knee.”

I took Carl’s advice – Carl is Couch’s name. I asked because I had grown tired of how informal it all felt. I picked up the phone and called the office.

I imagined myself picking up the phone in my cubicle.

“Hey-llo, Eugene here.”

“Hey Eugene, this is Eugene.”

“Oh, hi! How’s it goin’ Eugene?”

“Well Eugene, not that good. I hate to say it, but I’m not going to be able to make it in today.”

“Oh, Eugene, is everything alright buddy?”

“My uncle passed away last night.”

“You’re a fucking liar.”

He/I hangs/hang up.

Luckily, my boss didn’t know my family, so my lying capabilities were not compromised.

“Oh, Eugene, I’m terribly sorry. Why don’t you take the day? Get some rest, piece yourself together.”

“Thank you sir, I’ll be back at it again tomorrow.”

I removed my jacket from the closet, silently glad the closet didn’t add it’s two cents about the occurrences of the day. I walked by Carl and he didn’t say a word, which was okay with me. Once the apartment door slammed behind me there seemed to be a second of clarity in the brisk winter air.

After a long and silent walk, with the exception of people, cars, and all other natural noises, I decided it would be best to get some fresh air at a park. A small grocery stop came between me and my objective. I quit smoking years ago; apparently it is bad for your health. The TOBACCO sign looked appealing, perhaps because I’m an addict or because of the promise of self-destruction. Advertising won once again, and I purchased a pack of cigarettes. I arrived at my park, eager to rest and smell the famous frankincense and myrrh. I found a bench and inspected it for facial features. It was a calm evening, although that couch ... Carl ... had really gotten under my skin. Carl said couches consider themselves partly responsible for the decline of human ambition-makes you wonder if the bench felt the same way.

Fuck him. Not Carl - the bench. I was tired, and I was going to sit down on Mr. Fucking Bench and take three minutes to smoke a cigarette. I sat and slid the cigarette out of the pack with ease, as if it was meant to be smoked, wanted to be smoked. I lit that single cigarette and the taste of ambrosia touched my lips. I blew the smoke from my lungs, amazed how far the smoke traveled on this windy winter evening. I’d like to get as far as the smoke did, my life that is, amassing into something greater than itself.

I watched the sun set, and simultaneously my evening started to come to a close. The stressful day caused me to appreciate it just a little bit more than usual. I found irony in that sliver of enjoyment. How easy are these things to enjoy? How many sunsets do we have the opportunity see in our lifetime? We don’t really use either of those things, so why do we have them? Spare me the scientific answer. I wonder what the sun would say if it could talk. There would be nothing to hide behind. You would have to kiss your dream of having sex on a beach goodbye.

I finished the cigarette as the event came to a close, and I tossed it on the ground, as though it were my ticket and I was disappointed by the show. I stood and started to make my way back to my apartment. I left the rest of the pack on the park bench, abandoning it like a saint, hoping I earn some fucked up karma for leaving someone the gift of 19 cigarettes.

CURSE WORDS

Romel Martinez

Toby cursed in secret. He made sure no one around him heard the dirty little word. His father always told Toby that cuss words are the cancer of language. Whatever that meant to a seven-year-old boy. But the caution proved effective. Toby always made sure to curse or swear in private.

His soccer ball gently rolled down the stream, joining the crimson waves of the water. Toby knew he would never see his ball again. He cursed again.

How can he be such an idiot? His father told him countless times to never play by the stream. It's dangerous. And look what happened. You lost your favorite soccer ball. How could you be such an idiot, Toby muttered to himself.

"I don't think that's nice," a little voice said. Toby quickly turned around. Another little boy, roughly around his age, was sitting by the tree. Strange, Toby thought. He never saw the kid hanging out there.

"What's not nice?" Toby looked up.

"The swear words," the kid replied, "I hear them words are not so nice."

"They're not. That's what Poppa says. Poppa says it's 'cancer for the mouth.' Poppa says if I say the words, I might get cancer and die."

The stranger boy nodded. "Do you believe that?"

"Of course, I do. Poppa wouldn't lie to me."

"Then why did you say them words if you know they gon' hurt you?"

"I kicked my ball down the stream," Toby pointed to the bobbing ball. "I've lost it for sure." Then Toby paused. And reflected his situation. "Please don't tell Poppa about me using the 'cancer' words."

"I won't," the boy said. He got up, jumped down from the trees, and walked over to the stream.

Toby's eyes lit up with surprise and alarm. "Wait! You're not supposed to go there. It's bad."

"It's not so bad," the kid smiled.

With immense horror, Toby saw the thin boy dive into the stream. The boy swam as if it was natural to him. The warnings from Toby dissipated. The kid swam effortlessly to the bobbing ball.

Poor Toby's jaw was gaping. He couldn't believe what he was witnessing. At this moment, he wished desperately to utter a curse word. But he knew better.

The boy scooped up the ball, and held it up like a newborn. "Is this your ball?" Toby closed his mouth. Nodded, and tried hard to fight the urge of the cancer words.

The boy swam onto shore with the soccer ball under his left arm. If Poppa ever saw this show, he would have fainted or had a heart attack. What little Toby didn't know was that, back home, this kid would have made a decent life coach.

"Here." The stranger handed the ball to Toby.

"Thank you. You didn't have to. You could have gotten into trouble."

"No, not really." The boy shrugged. "I felt really bad seeing you like that. I didn't want you to get into trouble."

Feeling elated, Toby started to kick the ball around. The boy only stood and looked at Toby. Smiling with satisfaction.

"Do you want to play with me?" Toby stopped and asked.

"I can't." The boy sighed. "My family is waiting for me. It's time for us to go back home."

Toby frowned. His excitement drained. "Oh, okay."

"Hey! Maybe we'll see each other again?"

"Yeah! Sure." Toby spirits returned. "Then we can play."

"Yeah!"

The strange boy waved his hand and ran off. Maybe to his family or where he lives, Toby thought. And for a very long time, Toby stood by the stream. Not playing with the soccer ball. But lost under deep reflection. Too deep for a seven-year-old.

Then he looked at the beautiful crimson sky. Smiled at the two moons, and thought about luck. Toby had to be the luckiest kid alive. The stars were out, and the newly launched rocket was making its way back home to Earth.

Toby waved at the rocket. And thought about how nice it would be to join his new-found friend onboard that ship, and travel back to Earth.

But his Poppa wouldn't like it. Wishful thinking like that was the same as saying those disgusting 'cancer words.'

END

DIVORCE

Mrittika Deb

“How are we gonna tell the kids?” She is standing in front of the stove, waiting for the coffee water to boil. Her eyeglasses become foggy from the steam. It’s hard to tell if she’s sad or angry.

He’s pacing back and forth just outside the kitchen. “Please, no sugar in my coffee,” he says in a low voice, almost ashamed that he still needs something from her.

“No sugar! I’ve been making coffee for you for thirty years now. Never heard that before.” She puts down the kettle on the table and arranges the cups and plates with a clatter.

“My doctor said they found glucose in my urine.”

She stands staring at his face. He hesitates, and looks away. “I thought you wouldn’t wanna know. I thought it wasn’t important.”

“You thought I wouldn’t wanna know. You thought it wasn’t important.” She repeats to herself.

“What time the kids are arriving again? Noon?” He asks.

“How are we gonna tell them?” She asks, remembering that they needed to tell their children.

“They’ll be fine. They’re adults now.” He turns from her, takes his cup of coffee, and walks into the kitchen to microwave it.

“What kinds of parent’s divorce in their sixties?” She raises her voice so that he can hear her. Long silence. “They’ll be so ashamed of us.” She lets out a sigh.

After dinner, they sit in the living room with their son. Their daughter couldn’t make it. She had to be with her in-laws for a family vacation. The daughter-in-law and grandchildren didn’t make it either. This is the first holiday without the grandchildren. “She just got busy with some job related stuff. The children wanted to stay with their mom,” the son says hesitantly.

“Don’t worry. We understand. Busy life in the city,” she says, relieved that they don’t have to break the news in front of the daughter-in-law and grand kids.

“Mom, dad, I need to tell you something.” Their son stands up, and sits back down again.

“What’s the matter?”

“What is it?”

“We’ve been fighting a lot lately. Ashley and I. Over money.” Their son’s eyes are grave all of a sudden. “I had to borrow some money from her for my start up and she insulted me couple of times for it in front of her colleagues.”

“Borrowed? What’s the matter with you kids these days? I never had to borrow money from your mother. She just gave me whenever I needed,” he says.

“I gave him whenever he needed without a question. He did the same for me.”

“We never thought it as borrowing.” He stands up and paces back and forth.

“Never. His money was mine. Mine was his,” she says. “It was our money. It was our family.”

“Nothing was hers, nothing was mine. It all were ours. We were a team.”

“Things have changed. People don’t do things like you guys anymore. People have separate bank accounts nowadays.”

“Separate bank accounts! That’s preposterous,” he howls.

“Absurd. One family, two bank accounts! Who has ever heard of such thing?”

“Mom, almost everyone.”

“How much money do you guys earn?”

“What do you mean?”

“How much money do you and your wife earn?”

“Dad, I don’t know. It depends.”

“When your mom and I got married, I was unemployed and looking for a job. She earned \$800 a month. We were more than blissful with that,” his voice trembles.

“Yes, we were blissful!” She remembers it as if it was yesterday. It never mattered to her that he didn’t have a stable income. They were in love.

“You guys are not making me feel any better.”

“Whatever happened in our life, your mother and I always faced it together.” He puts his hand on hers and holds it gently.

“Always. Together,” she says with a firm voice.

“I get it. I get it.” He becomes irritated. “I’m glad you guys found the love of your lives in each other.

I’m glad you guys have a happy marriage. But I failed. Okay? I failed.” He waits for a response from the parents, but none comes. They remain quiet, holding hands. “Ashley and I decided to split.” He stands up and strides toward the door.

She looks out the window. It’s dark outside. “We were never like them,” she says, still holding his hands.

“Never. You would never insult me for money, for anything,” his throat constricts. “You gave me so much. I’m so sorry. I failed you.”

“You can never. We have a happy marriage.” She rests her head on his shoulder.

THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE

Zainab Iqbal

We, as humans, think we are so relevant. We have a system of power and hierarchy and rules and money. Take me, for example. I am a girl who walks on this campus. I am one. But there are seventeen-thousand other people surrounding me. Seventeen-thousand is a lot of people. This campus is in Flatbush. Flatbush is an enormous area with lots of people living and breathing on the streets. Flatbush is in Brooklyn. Brooklyn is fucking huge. It has Williamsburg and Bed-Stuy, and Bushwick and Crown Heights. Brooklyn is in New York. There's Manhattan and the Bronx and Staten Island and Queens. And then there's Albany and Syracuse and Long Island and one-half of Niagara Falls. I am still one.

New York is on the east coast. But there's also New Jersey and Maine and Connecticut and North Carolina. There's the west coast. It has California and Washington. There's the mid-west and it has North Dakota and South Dakota. There are fifty states in the country. Each of them beginning with one person on one campus out of the hundreds of campuses in the state, in one neighborhood, in one city. That's fucking huge already. Do you see that? I am still one.

Then there's Canada which is even more huge. There's Puerto Rico and Haiti and Cuba. There's Tokyo and Sicily and Greece. There's Ireland and Ecuador and Mount Everest. Each beginning with one person on one campus out of the hundreds of campuses in the country, in one neighborhood, in one city. All over the world. Do you feel the enormity, yet? I am still one.

Then there are the oceans. There are the fish and coral reef and the crabs and the sea turtles. A billion sea animals with their own lives under the water while we live our own up here. Each fish lives with her kind of fish in her own community, and each community gets bigger and includes other types of fish, in every ocean, in the whole entire world. Put that under one person on one campus out of the hundreds of campuses in the country, in one neighborhood, in one city. All over the world. Did you include the sea life? I am still one.

The earth is fucking enormous. Do you feel it? There's Jupiter. It's way bigger than Earth. If humans could live up there, there would be one person on one campus out of the hundreds of campuses on the planet, in one neighborhood, in one city, in Jupiter. But there would be more because Jupiter is fucking huge. There's also Saturn and Uranus and Mars. And Pluto. Who the fuck cares if it "really" is a planet or not? It exists and that is enough. Because I am still one.

There are the million and billion and trillions of stars in the sky. There is my moon, and there is Jupiter's moon, and Saturn's moon. There are meteors. There is a galaxy. But take all of this together and imagine there are tens of thousands of other galaxies just like this. Some are even bigger. There are more planets and more stars and more light. Can you feel it? Can you feel the enormity of the world? Can you feel how fucking ginormous it is? I am still one.

I am that girl who goes to this campus in Flatbush in Brooklyn in New York in the East Coast in the United States in the world with hundreds of other countries and sea life in earth alongside planets and stars and the moon and the Milky Way and the other galaxies I would never get to meet.

And I am one. Just one little speck of a dot in this entire universe. And there are a billion other specks of dots just like me in the universe with a billion other universes. We are just specks of dots. Yet we think we are the world. But we are just specks of dots in this gigantic universe. How fucking incredible is that?

And I am just one.



Elvir Ali

EVERLASTING CURIOSITY

Sandy Mui

An electrical engineer. A statistician. An environmental chemist. Those are all professions I've wanted to become at some point in my life.

And now, a journalist.

When you're young, it's so easy to become transfixed by literally any line of work. The way I fell in love with an occupation was by being good at a particular subject. Easily absorb the binary code without breaking a sweat? Great, I'll be an electrical engineer. (That only lasted for about two weeks.) Love math a little too much, but only statistics and not the confusing world of calculus? Awesome, I'll be a statistician. Want to combine an expertise in chemistry with a love of community service? Look no further: there's environmental chemistry for that.

As you can imagine, for much of my life, I anticipated that I'd enter a STEM field. I never expected writing to become my forte. Even now, it startles me. (It probably haunted me the most when I got a C+ on a paper in an English class in my first semester of college.) More than that, I never thought reporting and feature writing would be the aspects of the journalism industry that sparked my curiosity.

I got my start in journalism by covering sports — specifically, NBA basketball. Before I continue, let me break down where sports falls in all the different journalism beats. To put it kindly... it's probably the least respected beat. Perhaps sports journalism has never been completely valued because sports is such a niche subject, but the proliferation of blogs hasn't exactly helped sports journalism's case either.

It's one of those subjects where everyone has an opinion, and reporting isn't absolutely necessary to maintain interest in the material.

Still, because of sports' niche subject nature, covering sports is also one of the easiest ways to build your brand as a journalist. After all, you rarely (if not never) see someone becoming highly popular through their coverage of campus news. That's why most people who are familiar with my work are going to remember me for my coverage of the Brooklyn Nets.

I hope to move beyond that, though.

When I've spoken to veteran sports journalists, many of them suggested that I expand my coverage to multiple sports. (To this day, I've still only covered basketball. Unless you count a men's volleyball recap.) For a while, this became ingrained in my mind, and it made me feel like I wasn't doing enough.

Well, my hunch was right — I wasn't doing enough. Eventually, I would deviate in journalism in a different way.

Sports. Features. Opinions. Entertainment. I've covered them all.

Writing. Reporting. Social media. Podcasting. I've done them all.

I don't know where exactly I'm headed, but sports or not, I'll remain a journalist.

To be continued...

FLIPSIDE FAITH

Damon Lee

“Samuel, it’s 60 degrees and you’re sweating bullets. Are you ill?”

“I’m alright, Father. It’s just that-” Samuel’s voice quivered.

“What will you do about... your guest?” His eyes had a look in them that the priest hadn’t seen in years – eyes of a child afraid to witness another loved one being seized by the system. The priest took the boy’s face in his hands and spoke to him in earnest.

“Be calm, Samuel. The lord does not forsake those who do His work. I will take care of our guest and send him on his way.” He assured. He handed the adolescent a Mickey Mouse bag and a pair of lens-less glasses.

“How do I look, Father?” Samuel asked as he tried his best to lower the blinds on the doubt perched behind the two windows to his soul.

The priest took a long glance at him. The pale boy was twelve now but he hadn’t hit his growth spurt yet. His small stature was the perfect canvas and they had done well to paint it with baggy clothing but the glasses were the defining stroke to their masterpiece – the boilerplate child.

“Invisible.” The priest answered warmly. Doubt had begun to evaporate from Samuel’s eyes and a closer gaze revealed what was boiling it away: the white-knuckle faith that came with carrying out God’s will. Samuel and the priest flashed each other a grin that almost reached their ears before the boy departed. As he watched Samuel venture through the streetlights, into the sacrilegious world outside their little church, the arc of his smile caved under the weight of his mind and he found himself scowling into the distance long after the boy left his sight. He took the opportunity to light a cigarette and smoked it quietly. When he was finished, the priest took a seat on a nearby stool and sat there for a while before taking out another cigarette.

Returning to his living quarters, the priest locked the door behind him and moved silently in the dark. He had always felt that darkness had a certain sensation to it as if something had escaped the body when there was no light to contain it, much like air leaving a sponge in space. He’d been spending much of his time in the dark lately, interacting with its numerous residents; how much had escaped from him? Spitting distance from the basement door, he slowed to a stop when the thought surfaced: *and what if it runs out?* The priest stood there, imagining himself shriveling in pitch black, before turning his attention to the kitchen on his right. Taught

to mind his manners under any circumstance, he grabbed the loaf of bread on the counter and walked to the cupboard to withdraw two plates.

The stairs leading to the basement creaked as if to complain of their senility; their cries for refurbishment had awoken Kaufman from a deep slumber uncharacteristic of a captive but then again, nothing about the situation was “characteristic.” He was bound to a roller chair by rope but his captor had taken the liberty to pad him with pillows so the coarse fibers wouldn’t dig into his body. In all honesty, the detective was actually quite comfortable. He turned his head to lock eyes with the priest entering the room holding a tray. The holy man gestured the detective to lower his feet from the stool serving as an ottoman and the detective complied, freeing it to serve as a table. Resting the tray on the stool, the priest freed one of Kaufman’s arms and patted his shoulder as he apologized.

“I’m sorry but the best I could do was turkey, just turkey.” Kaufman watched as the man pulled a chair up to the makeshift table, rolled his sleeves, and began devouring a sandwich. Eventually, hunger took over and Kaufman peeled the duct tape from his mouth to follow suit, practically inhaling his cold cut on rye. With his plate clean, the priest sat back and removed his clerical collar, observing the detective. Kaufman was hard at work taking massive bites when he spoke with his mouth full.

“It’s a damn shame, Father Rosado.”

Crowbars of confusion and concern pried Rosado’s eyes wide open and the priest immediately pursued the remark.

“What is?”

“Sandwiches without bologna? Should have just saved the bread.”

“B-but you’re Jewish, aren’t you? Your last nam-” Rosado’s voice dripped with horror at his failed hospitality.

“Jewish, yes. But I’m as secular as the hair on my head not covered by a yarmulke.”

“I’m so deeply sorry. There’s bologna upstairs; I can fix you another sandwich if you’d like”

“How ‘bout a smoke instead? Haven’t had one since I got here.” Rosado granted his request and sat down to light one for himself. A solemn silence filled the room, more so than the smoke.

“Is the kid gone?”

Rosado nodded.

“Does he know what you’re about to do?”

Rosado shook his head.

“Can I ask you something, Rosado?”

Rosado lifted his head from his hands to look at the detective in the eye.

“How does a priest, of all people, get into counterfeiting?”

“My cellmate taught me.”

“Cellmate, meaning you were in prison.” Kaufman laughed. “What’s a priest doing in prison?”

“I castrated a child molester. He’d come to confession every Friday with new material.” Rosado paused to fill his lungs with smoke. “And every night, I’d see his daughter in my dreams.”

“You ever wanted kids of your own?”

“I had a son, actually. Wife too.”

Judging by the emerging look on Rosado’s face, Kaufman knew not to continue with the topic.

“You think they’d be proud of me? Doing God’s work on the flipside of the law, counterfeiting for criminals to afford as many foster kids as I can.”

“I think they’d want you to release me, Robert. I can promise you much less time if you cooperate.”

“I see you still don’t understand. I’m not in this for me; I died with my family a long time ago. I’m in this for all the children I can save, God willing.” Rosado reached into his cassock pocket to pull out the detective’s revolver. Kaufman watched attentively as Rosado removed a single bullet from the six-shooter and spun the chamber before closing it.

“God reveals his will to us all the time, detective. It’s a damn shame that non-believers use ‘coincidence’ to continue hiding from him.” Rosado pulled the hammer on the revolver and raised the barrel to his head.

“What are you doing?” Kaufman asked alarmedly.

“Only God has the right to decide whether you should live or die. I’ve a 1/6 chance of surviving when I pull this trigger. If I do, I intend to shoot you so that I may continue His work. If I don’t. Well, then He’s still got plans for you.” Rosado explained calmly, smiling somberly.

“Put the gun down now! You don’t have to do this!” Kaufman shouted as he struggled to break free from his restraints.

As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, Rosado closed his eyes, for you are with me, and pulled the trigger.



PROMPT 3

500 WORD MEMOIR



BE PATIENT, PATIENT

Kathleen Conlon

I sat on a very uncomfortable bed that felt as though it were made of thousands of Legos. Two other women were in the room with me, seeking refuge under thick hospital blankets to hide from the blinding light—a light that made you feel as though you were being interrogated. From the TV in the lobby of the ER, you could hear “Danny Boy” being played on bagpipes. My eyes took the form of a river as the sad tune passed through my ears. The other two women had the right idea of hiding under the blankets. They gave you the illusion of being able to escape this nightmare. I asked the nurse if it were possible to leave and my request was denied; I’d have to wait until morning when the psychiatrist was in. She gave me a light green pill to go to bed and I drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

The next day, I awoke to breakfast at my feet, deeply regretting my choice to come here. After hours of staring at a wall, my name was called. There were three EMT workers in the lobby with a stretcher. I thought nothing of it until one of the worker’s asked me, “Do you know where you’re going?” An impending doom washed over me. I shook my head. She answered, “You’re going to Long Island.” Clearly, this was a mistake. A doctor came over me saying that it was for the best, that it’d be for only three days, and that the facility was “great.” Panic set in, causing me to burst into tears. The choice was made for me. There was no way out. My voice was silenced as they wheeled me through the hallway to the ambulance.

Two hours later, we arrived at the other hospital. Three days turned out to be ten. I never imagined how life altering this experience would be. The people I met changed my life, helping me heal. Laughter turned out to be more of an effective treatment than the medicine they gave us. We helped each other in a place that offered no help. Ten days felt like ten months; however, it turned out to be exactly what I needed. Maybe everything really does happen for a reason.

After leaving the hospital, I was enrolled in a program to help with my bipolar disorder and it also helped me get sober. Nine months later, I finally was able to graduate from Kingsborough with an associate’s degree. During this time, my acceptance letter to Brooklyn College came in the mail! A year and a half later, I’m still sober and pursuing my love for writing. Not only has writing been a catharsis, it’s helped me raise awareness for mental health and mental illness.

Kate Podias

When we were young,
My sisters and I
Played in a sprinkler
Shaped like a gopher.

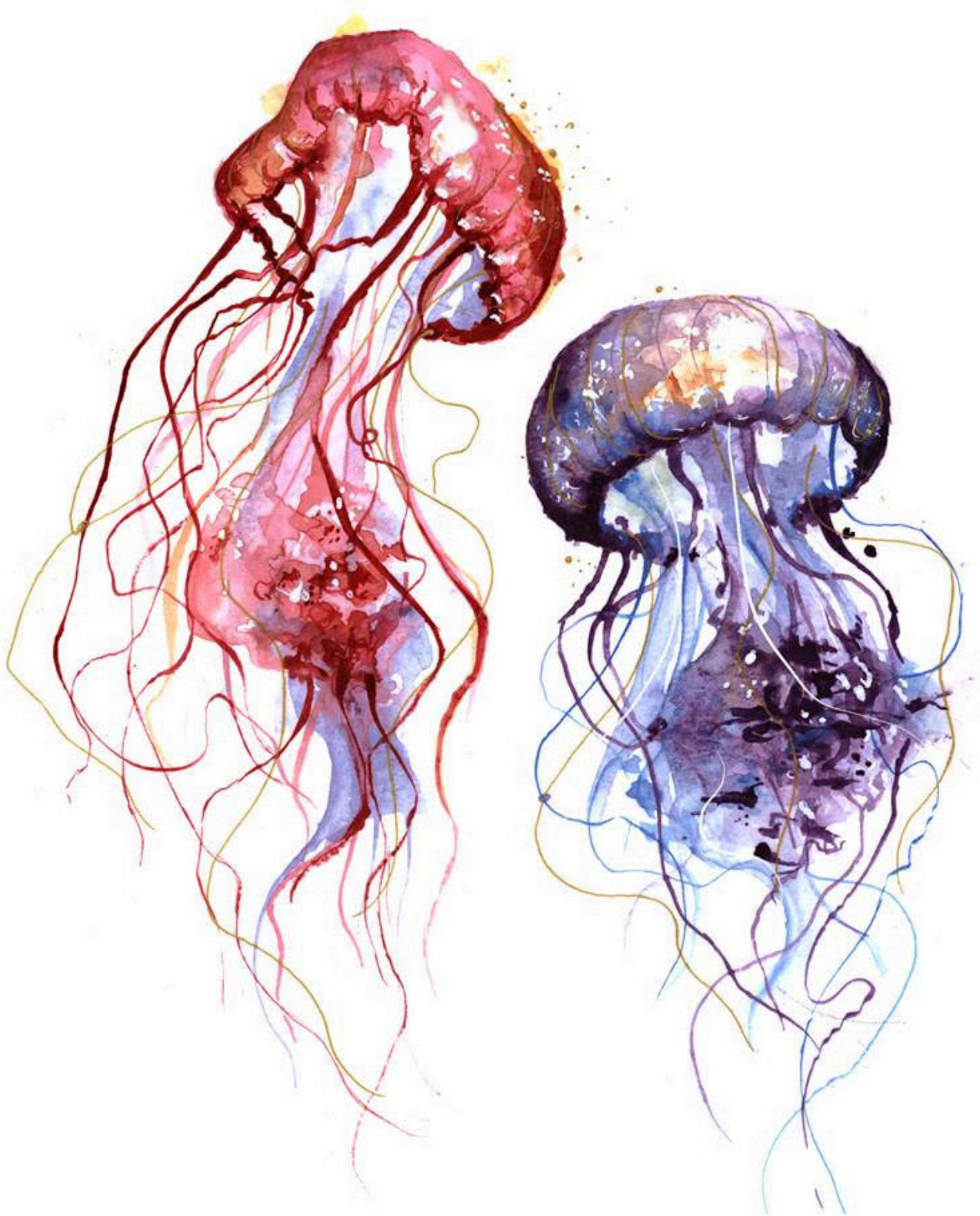
Our dad wouldn't let
Our mom pave a driveway
So that we could play
On the grass.

We shared bubblegum cigarettes,
And chocolate kisses,
And pretended to be mermaids
In our blow up pool.

We built forts out of bed sheets
And grandma's couch cushions.
And we searched for Christmas presents
In the back of mom's closet.

Now we're all grown,
And we all want a driveway.
We're ready to move out.
Leave our home town behind.

And yet here we sit
On our sofa,
Sharing wine,
And bubblegum cigarettes.



Veronika Vajdova

IMMIGRATUITY

Raisa Alexis Santos

Naïve, newborn babe, there's so much in life that she will wholeheartedly crave.

She doesn't know there's an invisible weight that's placed on her shoulders, a translucent shadow that follows her at every turn. She's just the first-born daughter of immigrants, with so much to gain and everything to lose.

Her parents once had dreams that disappeared when they flew across the sea. They believe in achieving this 'so-called' American dream, so when she is born, their dreams become hers.

So they dote on her and love her; they give her swimming lessons and the latest toys. She's none the wiser – how can the girl say no to becoming a doctor when she has it all?

She parrots back “doctor” when teachers ask her about her dreams and the shadow that follows her assumes corporeality.

Ignorant, innocent girl, soon enough her desires for something greater seek to unfurl.

But the pen and paper call out to her, like sailors lost out at sea. While books envelope her in their pages, that allow her, for once, to dream different dreams.

She reads about wizards and princesses but writes about time travel and spelling bees. Strange as it sounds, the girl appears to be happy. Her shadow agrees, and is nowhere to be seen.

Recalcitrant, rebellious teen, she'll come to understand what her parents mean.

If her parents brought her the world, her friends helped her explore it. She discovers the beauty of the humanities – history and its intricacies, and foreign languages that are filled with cacophonous melodies.

She takes a step into English, the world of creative writing, and her mind doesn't want to leave.

But her parents have done so much for her that her body tries to depart this dream.

She's left at a crossroad that widens with each passing year. On one side, the shadow is fully formed, grinning maniacally. The other is lighthearted and fills her with peace.

Her parents only ask for one thing in return, for their love, their labor, just one small gratuity.

They hope that their perfect, eldest daughter's hands will one day have a medical degree.

When she makes her choice, her shadow may threaten to engulf her whole.

The woman will reap what she sows; for medicine is what ultimately knows.

A MEMOIR ABOUT MY LOVE LIFE

Zoey Parkes

he told me that i don't need to take my clothes off~~
that i'm pretty enough when i cry

so i promised him i'd donate a w

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l on the condition that he is my life vest

he agreed~

so i took off my clothing and jumped into the rocky waters

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YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE

Emily Cotler

You always told me that I was your sunshine
That I shone bright, and nothing could ever take me
away

What I never got the chance to tell you
Was that you were unequivocally mine

You radiated down
And around me,
Encompassing me
I thought your light would never go out

But then it began to flicker
And slowly dim
Slowly but surely
Your sunshine went away

So what good am I
As your sunshine
If you can never see me again?
How can I be your sunshine
When you've faded away?

“WHO’S THAT GIRL?”

Cynthia Ly

Who’s that girl?

Dressed like a chic pearl

Crazy hairstyle; uneven strands

Always mischievous; shaking strangers’ hands

Picture perfect, nicely polished

No sense of hate can get this girl demolished

Cô gái Đó là ai?

Never dared to cry

Always smiling like the sun

Silly faces, having fun

Overly confident and proud

Sassy and loud

Who’s that girl?

Face like a pearl

Wearing a floral dress

God bless

Legs crossed

Lips glossed

Cô gái Đó là ai?

Sweet talkin’ like warm apple pie

Trying on her mama’s boots

Fitting herself into her daddy’s suits

Hands on her hips

Oh snap! She trips...

Who’s that girl?

As cute as a pearl

She’s not worried about her looks

She’s showing her crooked teeth

Where’s that girl?

Who didn’t have a care in the world?

Who lived a fairy tale childhood

Cô gái Đó ô Đâu?

This girl has said her goodbyes; Tạm biệt;



Photograph sent in by Cynthia Ly

MY LIFE: IN 500 WORDS

Jessica Drigun-Lara

‘She came into the world at seven pounds and two ounces. With the fairest skin and piercing purple orbs as eyes, that change into blue later on, and platinum hair. She lived happily ever after. The end.’

This is the story that I wish I could tell you. While the opening sentence is true, the rest is not. I cannot say I had a terrible life. I do believe that people have had it harder than I, but I do believe I had some pretty dark things happen to me. I grew up in a pretty decent household, a mother (bipolar/depression), father (alcoholic), brother, and some relatives on my mom side. Dad’s side not so much, as his mom left him when he was young and his dad was an abusive alcoholic that died before I was born.

My grandparents were nice- my grandfather was the typical strict Jewish man. Well, that’s what I associate him with anyway. He always tutored my brother. At first, I used to make fun of him because of it but in the later years I’d come to regret not letting him tutor me; I realized that it was a sign of love. His interpretation of love, anyway.

And my grandmother- the most precious woman I have ever known. She was the one I’d run to if I was having trouble at home or just to find solace in her presence. My aunt spoiled me and my brother while we were younger. As we got older, she used that leverage to make us do things for her. Last but not least, my mother’s brother. I will not waste my remaining word count on him. Fast forward to high school: the dread of my existence.

I went to John Dewey High School in Brooklyn, NY and I graduated from Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow with my G.E.D. I cut class a lot, due to following people who, in hindsight, weren’t even decent friends. And of course, boys. I will not blame drugs or alcohol for anything because I was of sound mind when I made some of my decisions. High school was a turning point for me. It would have been my Sophomore/Junior year if I really attended classes when my dad died; stage 4 cirrhosis of the liver shortly after ringing in the New Year (2009). His doctor prescribed the wrong meds and BOOM, dead.

A week later, my grandfather died, exactly a day after we buried my dad. We got evicted from our apartment a few months after their death. A year later, my grandmother died. While the last 439 words were depressing, I assure the latter will not be, but how I wish the word count was bigger. I recently got married to my soul mate (cheesy, yes) and I’m now getting my B.F.A in English/ Creative Writing. In what little left I have to say, I will leave you with this; “Even the most damaged people can find happiness.”

THE INNOCENCE OF A CHILD

Le Cielle

November 7th 1999, a fresh gift of innocence was birthed into this world. October 11th 2000, this gift of innocence was stripped away. I was born on November 7th. I had no idea that my gift of innocence was stripped away. It took majority of my life up until now before I could realize that my gift was taken away. My childhood was filled with questions that no one seemed to be able to fully answer. I was fed half truths. At least that's the only way I could put it because all my sooth-sayers believed that what they were telling was the actual reality. Yet after each story, I grew more and more confused. I didn't know who to believe. What story was the actual lie, what was the actual truth? In my teenage years I finally began to understand my predicament. I began to realize I lost my innocence.

You see, I was forced to become an adult at 11 months old. Yes this may seem strange to some because I was still a baby. I couldn't even walk and I barely could have even talked at that age. Nevertheless, I was forced to become an adult at the age of 11 months. This made life miserable for me and growing up I was oblivious to this fact. Due to my loss of innocence, life wasn't filled with rainbows and unicorns. Instead it was filled with oversea calls, routined I miss you, the warmth feeling of emptiness, being Switzerland in really complicated situations, being hurt in the process of all the situations I had to be Switzerland, and most importantly it was filled with the solace of my fortress of solitude. Her lie, the source of my predicament in my teenage years.

Life was never simple for me as a child. My parents split when I was still a baby. My mum left and came to America. I grew up with my dad. I never really cared for either of them. My light on the horizon, my older sister was always in my reach yet still out of my reach at the same time. I knew no comfort, I had no one to confide in and to bear my hurt. I had lost my innocence. I bore witness to the adage all is fair in love and war. I was the spoilage of the war and also the prize. My parents split caused me to lose my innocence. My innocence that couldn't be replaced. I was always spread thinly between both. I always heard both parties' reasons for the split. I was always forced to be a judge and I would always throw the case out, only for each party to cleverly find a way to appeal the case. This has been my story from birth until now. I had 11 months to enjoy the innocence of a child and then it was stripped away.

THE DAY I ALMOST DIED

Lordy Belance

July 8, 2006- 9 years old (going on 10)

It was my best friend Cassidy's sixth birthday party. Almost all her friends and family were invited, including me. I was wearing this fabulous sundress with pink flowers on it and white sandals. The party was set up outside of the lavish apartment building, with a humongous swimming pool and a table full of snacks.

"Ooh, I would like to go for a swim," I said.

"Okay," said Cassidy. "Come inside and you can borrow one of my swimsuits."

"Yay!"

Before we went back inside, we had some fun pouring water on Cassidy's other friend, Ashley.

I changed into one of Cassidy's swimsuits, and then headed back out.

"But, Lordy," Nicola's mom called out as I was going back outside. "You don't know how to swim!"

Being the stubborn kid that I was, I ignored her and walked down the steps of the pool. But as soon as I got in, I started sinking. I was going up and down, up and down. It was as fun as getting a shot. If it wasn't for the lifeguard and Nicola's mom, I would not be here writing these words.

"This is why I told you not to go in," Nicola's mom said as she rescued me. She put her hand to her head. "Oh, soak me now. Soak me up right now!"

When she escorted me back inside, she told Cassidy's mom Darlene what happened and Darlene yelled at me. As Nicola was helping me change back into my dress, she told me that I should have listened to her mom.

After the party, I got in trouble with Mom not only because I went into the pool, but also because I painted my nails.

"When you get home, you're going to take it off."

Before I went to bed that night, my big sister Alynda and I had a talk.

"No more parties for you because of what you did."

In sum, it was a bittersweet day. It had been a fun party, but I got in trouble, plus Cassidy's cousin and I did not really get along.

A MEMOIR TOLD THROUGH APPEARANCE

Maya Garcia

My mother's eyes are blue, not the electric blue of the neon lights outside of the roller rink I used to go to as a child or the deep blue the lake I used to spend my summers in, but the pale blue of the sky on the nicest day you can imagine, the kind of day where not even the most introverted people can stand to stay indoors, the kind of blue you would paint your newborn baby's room because a psychologist told you it was calming. My mother's eyes are beautiful, and so is she.

Me, on the other hand, I take after my father who has deep brown eyes. I can describe them as a million and one things: almonds, chocolate, the coffee grounds we all survive on, but none of those things can adequately describe the comfort that comes from when a Garcia says good morning, the understanding of I'm sorry, or the hope that comes from we will try again tomorrow. My eyes are not brown como chocolate, but a deep brown simply because they are.

I spent years hating my hair. I know I am not alone in this struggle, but this struggle can still make me feel very alone. All the hours wasted trying to straighten it into submission, but my hair will always grow the same - like trying to cut down wild flowers, my hair will somehow find a way to survive. No, you cannot touch it, I am not a petting zoo, what I am is very kind but those tides will turn like a tsunami if you so much as think about putting your fingers near my curls.

A woman at a coffee shop told me and my younger brother that she loved our freckles, and I agreed.

A classmate from the South Bronx told me I had teeth that look como chiclets, the small square pieces of gum that burn your mouth with mintiness, I smiled and said thank you because I won't ever forget the year and a half of braces that caused them to be this way.

It's strange to think that I could ever exist in a body that I did not like, that I could ever see myself and see anything other than resilience; today I adorn my wild hair with roses and smile. And while I have and always will exist so deeply for and by myself, I am the way I am because of the long line of people who have come before me; that even in the moments of despair, of anger, of sorrow, or when I feel alone, I never actually am.

MY HOME IN JAUHARABAD

Asmaa Fatima

The assignment was to think of something from the past that I would never feel, touch, hear or smell again. As pens began scribbling on paper and silence ensued, my mind wandered through the familiar terrain of the country I had left behind. Rain drops fell on the cemented floor of our courtyard – each drop darkening the floor in quarter sized holes. The hens were huddled in the coop with their newly hatched chicks tucked under their wings. The earthy fragrance of freshly fallen raindrops on soil, bookshelves filled with messages of the past and carried it all in itself, my childhood home in the town of Jauharabad. One out of the five houses we had lived in after my father immigrated with us to America.

It was within the safety of those four walls that I had seen my family intact, whole, before we separated, reunited, separated, and reunited until finally coming together in America. After the first trip, it was decided that we were to stay in Pakistan and my father would earn money in America. In years to follow, his presence was like that of a ghost or an urban legend, spoken to only on the phone and seen a few times a year like a guest.

Like a box of old photographs opening, various memories began to surface in my mind's eye. As if I were a traveler in time, I reached out, one moment in time: the sound of my mother's voice telling me the story of a girl's birthday. She called that girl, Asmaa; I can still see the gifts she opened, and feel her disappointment when the electricity went out. Mother told me how the girl, leaving her presents unopened, left to play with her friends. I traveled with her across time, a companion in her adventures, yet for the longest time I couldn't tell the difference between the memory and the story, thinking it was actually my birthday and not of a character.

I was introduced to the magic of storytelling in that house. My father's love for books transferred to me, as I leafed through the hoards of books he would buy for me. I was nine when my father applied for the visa lottery. It took a year to process the application and in the year of 2000, I left my home. I watched my house becoming empty, the books either gifted to someone else or donated to the library of the college where my father taught as a professor of Social Work. My mother's jewelry which she brought with her as a newlywed bride, our furniture, the crockery and utensils in the kitchen- all sold.

Everyone stopped writing. The page upon which I have written, tucked safely inside my folder, a tiny window in my heart through which I accessed my house today.

I STILL GET CARSICK

Matthew Cummins

The four years of my life that I spent in Albany with my mother, Donna, and my stepfather, Ron, are a blur. Little Matthew spent a lot of that time simply surviving; I can't blame him for having small lapses in memory, considering what he went through. Often when I look back at my past, I'm not confronted with a cohesive string of memories, linking one event to another, but a series of scenes precisely frozen in time, floating in the ether of my skull with no apparent ties to one another.

In one scene, I can remember the cool inside of my mother's beat up Toyota, sitting in the parking lot of the Stewart's convenience store she worked at. It was a perfect summer day. The AC recycled a tepid atmosphere of old cigarettes into a slightly cooler, but still cigarette scented breeze. The stained fur of the grey car seats felt fuzzy beneath my fingers, and next to the buckle of my seatbelt was a piece of gum that had long since hardened into a dull amber. I had spent much of the car ride over picking at it and trying to pry it off the car seat, but was unsuccessful.

Right now, though, younger me was looking rather incredulously at a camera my husk of a mother was attempting to hand me. She wanted me to take pictures of the bloody blotches on her back and face that Ron beaten into her the night before. Being a child somewhere between the age of four and eight years old I remember being filled with the apprehension that, one, somehow I was in trouble, and two, I was going to have to do a thing that I really did not want to do. My mother tried coaxing me further, and by this time in my life I had already learned that little boys who displeased their parents got hit, or locked outside for a night, or hit and locked outside for good measure. So I took the camera, and my mother awkwardly undressed in the front seat of her car.

As I sat there snapping away at each mark- even at the time- I was struck by the thought that other children my age were not doing similar things with their own mothers. After the photos had been taken to her satisfaction, my mother took me inside the convenience store and bought me my favorite snack: Yodels. I even got to keep the change - a single penny - which younger me thought was a much more life-altering occasion than the events that had preceded it only a moment before. The Toyota, Little Matthew happily inhaling his Yodels in the back seat, returned to my home, and to the haze of my childhood memories.

I don't even remember what she used the photos for.

LEAF FLOATING LONE STAR

Andrew Sokulski

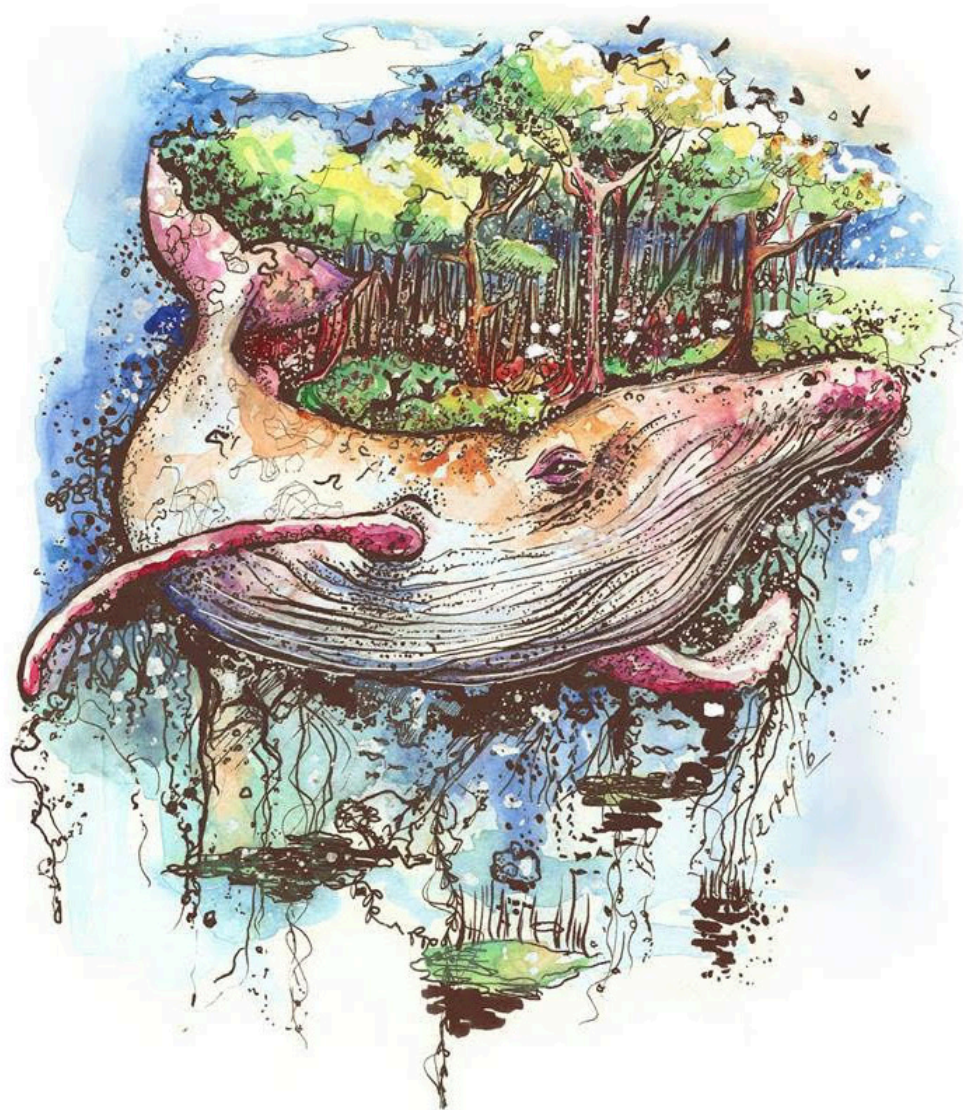
A leaf floating swiftly along gusts carries with it the drops of the fog birthed by time's passing. Born in Houston, Texas, to immigrant parents in 1996, I am a Lone Star who has been soaring along constellations ever since the first glow. Having been introduced to many languages at home, my first words were a mix of Spanish, English, French, and Portuguese. However, I had a hearing issue which resulted in my listening to and speaking English only. Nevertheless, memories of the other languages stayed.

Montessori school was primary for me. While there, everything seemed new and complex. Sitting for hours at a time, the objects of the room would be analyzed. Teachers worried that no learning would occur since there was little to no physical movement. What a spectacle is the movement of minds. One time a leaf floated to the ground while I was playing outdoors. From this leaf, poetry came to mind. Word by word, I matured.

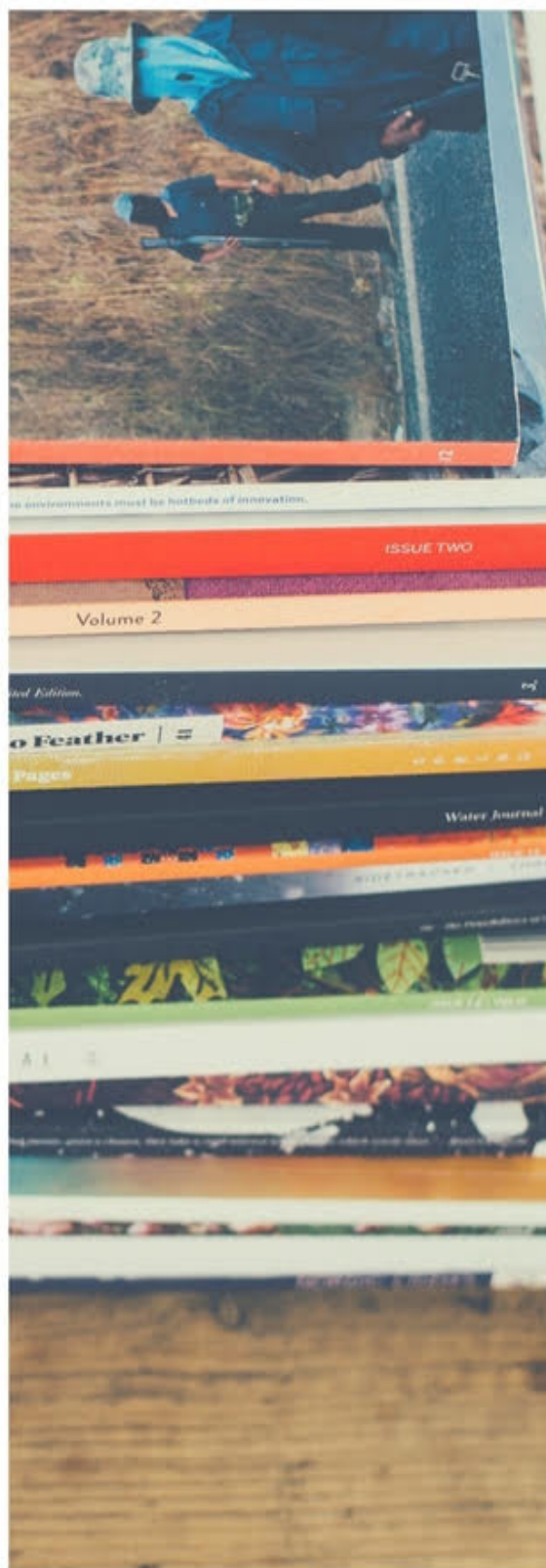
During second grade of elementary school, my parents divorced. I came to realize the different emotions I had. Life was not only a dream - nightmares existed too. From then until the end of high school, as a diver trying to bring a gem up from a sea's bottom, I strove. Fire and ice may be each other's vice, cats may kill mice, yet unexpected unity is a path suitable for futurity. Having been the receiver of much bullying in middle school, each day another tear seemed to instill fear. Despite this, I kept my mind focused on the light of my soul, the star of positivity in a time of negativity in order to keep my vision clear. Writing and reading became most rewarding. My heart would brighten at every word written. One lesson from these days is: do not let darkness become your words' ink. Keep your mind focused on the core essence of all within life and do not let the impermanent make a permanent trap.

Passed by fear, making sense of the clear, soaring into the expanse. After high school I went to university in New York City at the New School. Glass doors greeted me, creativity existed powerfully, ideas led to much poetry and moments of sympathy. To feel at home in a new place, however freeing, is also drastically disorienting. I met many friends, had various and different jobs, and learned about many topics. The presence of a social self in the world came to mind for the first time. Having spent most of my Texan days within family and concerned about family troubles, I did not hang out with many people outside of my family. Basically, live in tune with different tunes of the universe's melody. Live kindly and harmoniously and with change. Live poetically.

I am studying abroad in Japan, seeing leaves from preschool. When I return, I will graduate. 4 years of a century passed, more to come. Float on everyone and live by our soul's uniting, beautifying, melodious and poetic glow.



Veronika Vajdova



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