



**2024**

**INNOVATE & CACCIATORE**

**ANTHOLOGY**

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Marketing, Outreach, and Promotion Team  
Liberal Arts Department at Austin Community College



## INNOVATE

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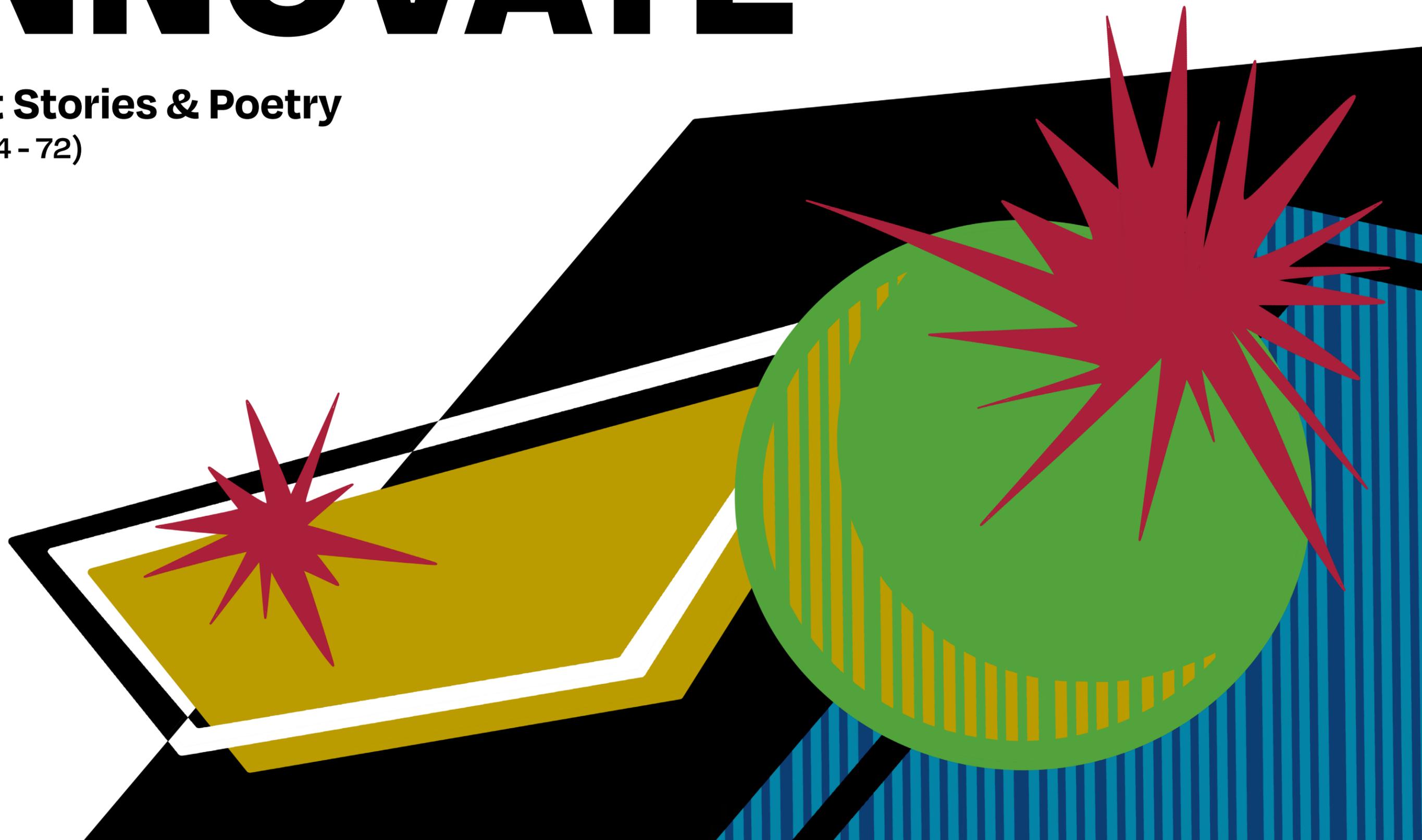
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# INNOVATE

**Short Stories & Poetry**

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# To Build a Glasshouse

Jessica Awada

The third attempt was more fragile than the first two. The shards that collected in a heap between Elliot's feet were indication enough. At least it was pretty, he thought, the mountain of pricking, pinching purple pieces elevating his most recent failure. It resembled the mountains within his line of sight out the window, getting coated in a fresh layer of fallen snow. Elliot had gotten too accustomed to the snowfall, because it will always snow in Alaska.

A glassblower he was, sure, but not the finest one. It was a step he had merely been handed down being the one to take over his father's business. He was often compared to him, the man whose seemingly had glass wrapped around his finger, bending and shaping at his will. It was a passion Elliot's father had also inherited from his own father, who possessed that same magical synergy with glowing, hot orbs of melted glass. What once was a passed on family endeavor fell down into Elliot's lap as a faltering, misplaced hobby.

Elliot was now marinating in what felt like glass up to his knees, cutting close enough to the skin for him to consider fleeing the studio as if it weren't his own. As if the shelves weren't adorned with some of his more successful works: a stunning blue pipe, a set of six textured Christmas ornaments made from recycled glass (the texture being a beautiful accident), and some other works with hidden cracks at the bottom due to wrong, amateur tempering.

He leaned forward again, seconds away from reapproaching the kiln with feigned motivation. He wondered if he could trick the malleable glass before he began forming it. If he were to approach it with the stillness of a tomb, would it believe him to be truly calm? Would the glass and the torch and the blowpipe all be convinced when he would pretend as though he had finally gathered himself enough? That he finally can face them with an understanding of the touch the glass has always asked from him?

The roundness of the torch teased his fingertips before being roughly taken away. He wasn't sure if he had pulled back from the shock of the ground seemingly beginning to shake, or if the tool itself had run away from his unskilled and unconvincing hands. Yet all at once, yes, the ground definitely began to shake enough where he and the torch were now star-crossed lovers. His own shoes— a pair of hand-me-downs from his father— flat against the ground ached with an unsettling vibration.

The only thing removing him from the hypnotism induced by the shakes was the melody of glass-on-glass combat occurring on the shelves and in the cabinets surrounding him. They shook together, almost threateningly humming at him to leave. He considered it all too well.

The first thing to come hurling down was a vase with a shaky foundation. The rims at the bottom had cracked when he first made it after he had given it less than enough time to set. The first thing to come hurling down was a vase with a shaky foundation. The rims at the bottom had cracked when he first made it after he had given it less than enough time to set. The glass had turned too cold, and shivered with the fright of its winter. He pretended it hadn't cracked as he set it up for display, but his game of pretend came crashing down along with the piece as he watched another mound of broken glass being formed.

His eyes winced closed at the heartbreaking sound of glass breaking for the nth time. They stayed closed, anticipating the choir to insist on completing its hymn. An earthquake, he thought to himself.

Growing up and still living in the bustling parts of Alaska, he had experienced a couple earthquakes before. Somehow, this was not the first earthquake he had been through that ended in him being surrounded by glass.

When he was twelve, Elliot's dad had picked him up from swim practice when the road seemed to have dipped unexpectedly. The car almost tipped onto nearby traffic with the way the ground shook beneath them. The car horns that went off afterwards were almost melodic, caroling one by one. While Elliot braced for impact, his father's first thoughts had not been his then pregnant wife home alone, or his elderly parents at a resident nearby, nor was it his only son strapped by him with fear splattered across his features. No, as he veered harshly around the corner and past dozens of cars responsibly pulling over to the side of the road, he swiftly aimed for the studio, imagining that same choir of shattering voices of his own art.

"Dad, where are we going?" Elliot had meekly whispered, too shaken up. "Was that an earthquake?"

It had to have been. Elliot had experienced a few over the years of them living in a part of Alaska so prone to mild earthquakes every year or two. Still, the way his stomach dipped and the car skewed with the weight of the ground was enough to have his heart beating through the very spot he wore it on his sleeve. He tugged his sweater sleeves down over his hands as though worried his father would take notice.

But his dad barely nodded, his words rushed, "Yeah, Elliot. Need to go back to the studio to make sure everything's okay."

"Can I use your phone to call mom really quickly?"

Elliot had asked the question innocently, only to be taken aback by how confused his father had looked. As if for a second, he had forgotten all about that— how he had a wife and kids and people to worry about. How life was made of more than just glass things.

Elliot was left wondering if that were true at all, as his dad haphazardly and wordlessly handed his phone over to him. And as the phone rang, he felt as though he could see right through his own father— some glassperson of glasskind. His mother picked up immediately, having already had the phone in hand and ready to call her husband.

“Honey? Did you guys feel that, too?” Her tone was calm, but Elliot knew and loved his mom enough to pick up on the way her voice dipped and cracked at the end of her words.

The anxiety lingered in the air for a second before he answered, “Yes, we’re okay. Are you okay?” he paused. “It felt like we got a flat tire.”

“It’s normal,” his father grumbled under his breath, voice tinged with annoyance. “It’s a normal feeling.”

Elliot wasn’t sure where that comment came from, but he was positive he didn’t like it in the way it left his stomach churning. The condescension dripping from his dad’s tone could only be explained by his plethora of experiences with earthquakes, or the harsher possibility that he felt that Elliot was being dramatic in his response. Staring grimly at his father, Elliot sunk further into his seat.

“It’s gonna be okay. Seems like it’s settled now,” his mother’s soothing voice overshadowed his father’s dismissing words. “Just come home soon, please. Can I talk to dad?”

Elliot handed the phone over and watched as his father replied in a series of grunts and one-word replies before hanging up. His eyes were sharply focused on the road ahead, one as clear and empty as the road in the rearview mirror behind them. Elliot imagined people were still pulled over, on the phone with loved ones and waiting briefly in case of an aftershock, as his father beelined for the studio tucked away on the edge of town.

It was only around 4 pm, but the dead of winter pushed for the sun to rest early. And so, the sky was plastered in oranges and purples, clouds bleeding red. Elliot’s dad approached the bends of the road the same way Elliot’s eyes took in the curves of the colors in the sky above him. They did not say another word for the length of the 15 minute drive. Yet somewhere in the distance, the world around them resumed, and the cars and lights started stuttering past them. Elliot wordlessly thanked the cars whizzing past for changing the pace.

He wasn’t sure if he was meant to follow, or if he even wanted to. The way his father stepped out of the car without even remembering to turn off his headlights was enough indication of how thoughtless he was. Elliot was not sure what led him to putting his coat on and hopping out of the car, the feel of road salt hitting the sides of his shoes. His breath came out in a foggy blur, the cold tinting his nose red as he kicked dusty snow aside with his timid steps. Hugging his coat closer to his sides, Elliot headed for the entrance to find his father.

The inside of the building was always a maze to Elliot. The entrance was his homebase, an area marked by a giant front desk and distinctly-shaped stone sculptures off to the side. When he would get lost, he would loop back to that spot and go down a different route. His father had tried to remind him to look for the studio with stained glass windows, but all glass has always looked the same for Elliot.

Today, the potted snake plant by the couch in the waiting area was toppled over. Dirt specks tarnished the patterned rug beneath it. The painting of Mount Denali that usually hung over the left wall down the first hallway was only mounted by one nail, hanging oddly on a diagonal. Elliot was reminded of the trip to the Denali National Park his father had been promising he’d take him on since he was eight. He readjusted the painting, straightening it up momentarily. It fell down in a clean swoop as he walked away from it. He flinched, but kept walking.

Elliot was quick to find the room today, the wet steps of a man who was too hasty to wipe his shoes on his way in being the one marker in an otherwise desolate, quiet building. He noticed the random things that toppled over along the way here and there, but breathed a sigh of relief at no significant damages appearing before him. At least that meant his father couldn’t possibly be too upset.

He was scared to peek in regardless. The door was swung open, meaning all he had to do was lean sideways to catch a glance. His eyes studied the room. Most of the shelves had been braced to the walls, as are most pieces of furniture at most houses and stores around here. It was common practice in a town that faced heavier earthquakes so often. Besides the random tools hanging on the walls that dropped onto the floor, most of the studio was intact. The most significant areas of damage were more recent works that had been left outside of secure units, like the piece his father was hunched over in a corner.

“Dad! You’re gonna get hurt!” he bellowed out, crouching down beside his dad like he had any better idea of how to clean up glass than the way his dad had resorted to: picking at small shards with his bare hands.

The sight of blood-coated glass made Elliot’s stomach turn more than the earthquake itself. He gasped, watching the way his father didn’t even react to him walking in and kneeling beside him. Instead, he picked at the smallest pieces of blue glass, some digging their way into his skin before even being removed from the ground. Elliot wondered how much that hurt, or if his father was feeling any of it at all.

“I can still use it,” his father insisted, picking up the tiniest dustings of glass. He spoke deliriously, “I can still make it work.”

Elliot tried to nod convincingly, but he was scaring him. He had to remind himself of the technique his dad had taught him to stain glass, where crushed colored glass is fused with hot globs of glass. The harsh heat fuses the glass together, painting the glass as a result. Elliot had always thought that to be a beautiful, regenerative part of glassblowing. But now, all he could imagine was his dad getting stuck in an endless loop of using glass to create more, seemingly better glass.

Elliot could immediately tell which broken project was in his dad’s hands; it was a personal undertaking of a blue piece that resembled loops of thread coming together. His father had explained it to him before, his vision of creating something that looked nothing like glass. Something so fragile and fluid that you would doubt it to ever be glass. He had watched him attempt different techniques of bending glass tubing in an

effort at getting it to behave as something it's not.

Elliot knew that, the many times he had watched him do it. That glass will not bend unnaturally, especially when hollow. And that no amount of heat will get it to obey you enough. And that even when you think it had taken the form you wanted, you will notice the way it stubbornly ignored your commands once the hot red fades and all you are left with is glass threatening to shatter in your very hands.

He had told his dad all of that only for his dad to laugh, telling him he didn't understand glass enough. Maybe one day, El, he had said, when this place is all yours. Two nights ago, his father had spent almost the entirety of dinner bragging about finally figuring out a way. And that his dream of coiled, misshapen and impossible glass was almost ready for him in an annealing oven waiting to entirely cool down.

Elliot was certain that the scraps of blue of uneven thickness and the harshest edges were once in the shape of this impossible project. He could tell simply from the way his father withstood the pinch of shards breaking skin, and from the way there was no other pile of glass being tended to in any parts of the room.

With that note in mind, Elliot stepped away from the mourning man. He found a broom in a supply closet and made haste to clear some mess from the ground. A pile of colorful glass in the shape of broken domes caught his eye. He could make out a few patterns on the side of curved, hollow pieces of red, green, and white: small festive trees, something resembling a garland, and snowflakes.

Speaking up again for the first time since he had walked in, Elliot asked, "Are these the ornaments mom asked you to make?"

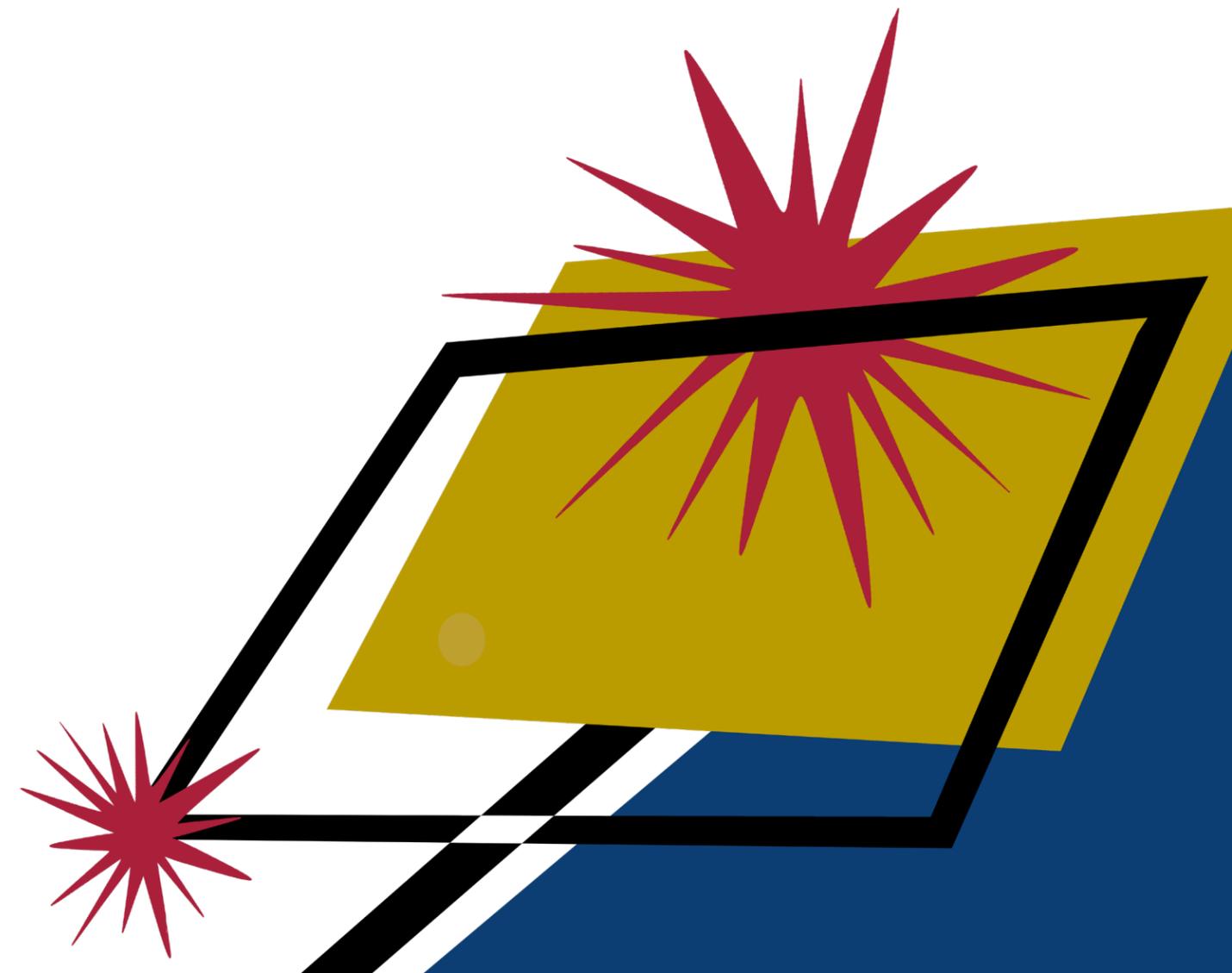
He knew the answer already, even though his father never gave him one that night. He got it in the form of his dad getting up, hands cupped together as though he were praying. A mass of glass fell into the trash from his hovering hands before he walked out, still treading murky water on the clean tiles.

Elliot swept up the crushed remains of his mother's requested gift, leaving them in a small bowl that he would retrieve some years later for a project of his own. He walked back out of the studio, retracing wet steps and ignoring the fallen painting. He found his dad slamming angry, bleeding palms down at the steering wheel of a car that seemed to not want to turn back on. As his father grumbled swear words Elliot was not allowed to say and phrases cursing his horrible luck, the snow began to fall. It scattered around them like flakes crafted so delicately that they would think the edges could cut them. Instead, they melted into their skin. The cold snowflakes landing on Elliot's cheeks soothed the heat that had built up. He wasn't sure what had caused his face to get so red, if it were the stuffy coat inside a tense building, or the fact that his father was becoming less and less the man he thought him to be. Eventually, the heat in his cheeks subsided, and Elliot refused to bend and crack under these changing conditions. And as his father kept up his parade of scattered insults, Elliot buckled himself into the seat, hand sticking out of the window and catching delicate snowflakes.

The snow still falls in Alaska, perhaps now and forever. Elliot noticed that again when he looked out the window. The piles of broken glass in his own studio suddenly did not seem to matter too much now. The broom was still in the supply closet, and the kiln can remelt any glass that decided to come apart, readying it for a new project.

So for now, Elliot made his way down the maze again, leaving behind the crying masses. On his way out, he took note of the photo he had pinned up on a corkboard of him and his mother posed in front of Mount Denali, a trip they took years after his father had died. It remained stationary despite the way the earth insisted on shaking. The shaking had settled by the time he made it to the entrance, a few plants toppling over in a way where it would be just as easy to straighten them back up.

He felt the bustling wind outside resist the way he pushed for the door to open, but eventually the pressure released, and the door opened. Elliot was met with the sight of white snow dancing around him. The snowflakes cascaded like fresh bits of confetti. Luckily for him, it will always snow in Alaska."



# Among the Shades of Áine

Benjamin Kajs

“Foreword: The writings you are about to read do not follow the traditional syntactical nature of modern English, or even what is considered to be proper English. You will find what you believe to be obvious mistakes regarding grammar but know they were intentional. I liked the way they read, much more than the correct version—especially with an Irish accent. They felt poetic to me, so I left them.

Summary: Taking place on the island of Ireland in 1908, Hugh, a 28-year-old poet and single parent, struggles with his faith as his 9-year-old son, Connor, contends with the same bone cancer that caused his mother’s death.

## Chapter 1 Son of God

In the month which sets a blaze upon the earth; a blaze upon the drawing breath—I’m the thrifted soul waiting for the great collapse, the fallout. It was a fine autumn day. The community weren’t lesser than exceedingly contended. It would have been still the perfect day none less hadn’t I seen what I did. The splendor that came with the stumbling, I was sure to say: “As beautifully she lay, ‘neath seasons fiery embrace—won’t she take my hand?” And if it were to myself rather than directed to her, It would be understood, but not realized, as my head succumbed to my heart, and my heart in a way it had never been, and though I cannot know, because I was only just birthed, I feel confident in saying that my heart had been fuller no more—even as I was brought into this life—than this autumn day.

Now it is the same day of the same month; of the same time of a different year; with the same chilled gale of the same direction; and the same sun, above different clouds, that are the same color, but different shapes. And I feel as the clouds are colored. And I feel as they are shaped. And I feel as the gale feels. But that day, the same day of a different year, I felt as the sun felt.

She did give me her hand that day, never mind our not knowing each other, and it’s the hand that lay cold today. The hand that lay cold for some time. But, I tell you, still beautifully she lay. And not as today will the day be when she is again as elated and as colored as a spring flower—more of like the day I set eyes upon her it will be. There was a suffering—a great deal. In her eyes, the eyes that were once a blue to lose thought in, an incomparable blue—of which not one occurrence did transpire where a stranger did not take notice—were extended to “herConnor” as her final gift.

“My Connor,” she would address him, as if he were anyone else’s, knowing he was certainly not mine. He’s always like her. Not limited to aesthetics, or intellect, or mannerism; thoughtful promenades, unexpected behaviors, inflection, or careful diction; he was just as surely as she was, in an inexplicable sense. Of course, with his being too much alike came the worst.

Fortunate enough to take her extensions, and unfortunate to acquire so much of her, that he now suffers where she did. I will watch his (her) eyes evanesce as a sequel. It is an immense tragedy the more that she will not be here to guide him to death. I would take death, a grand luxury, so as to spare him, but it is a luxury that is only worth as much as the thought.

“Tell me again,” Connor requests with a weakened tone. “Athair, tell me again. The name.” “Osteosarcoma,” I tell him mindlessly as if it were a typical response to a child. Glancing across the table where many of my distasteful compositions were written and, sequentially, tossed intolerably into the fireplace, I can see him mouthing it out. He is eager to learn more on the subject and often asks me questions no child should ever have to ask—no parent to answer. Perhaps to make sense of it. There is nothing to be made sense of.

He will not live to endure growing pains; experience heartache; journey the harsh winds of age; feel the reverie of one intertwined; see his own eyes through the eyes of another. He is well-informed and talks candidly about death. I go against my philosophy when the topic arises, but what am I to say when he asks forbidden questions? Would I be wrong to supply false hope? Would it be appalling if my voice lacked conviction? But with all of the questions, and the insurmountable difficulties each one of them shares in answering, there is none more difficult than his asking about where it is he will venture to—who it is he will find. And if his máthair will be waiting.

I do encourage his theistic explorations, and encourage him more to not rely upon my inferences.

Because of my situation, and my past, oh so dearly melancholic, I do not trust my own judgment in regard to celestial concerns. I have been much too influenced to speak rationally about such things; therefore, when he inquires about the topic, I tell him “An impervious man is a paragon of a virtue that is invaluable. It’s imperative that your beliefs are your own.” And he will ponder on the words as his eyes catch the light. Reserved. Engrossed. Refined. My son.

“Can we go tomorrow? To máthair’s tree?” An aged beech (‘neath seasons fiery embrace).

“Yes, we can go. And we’ll take Bulmers. And soda bread. And jam. Visit Lough Ree.”

“I miss her jam,” Connor said with a smile. “I miss the daylong drive to Garson’s to help her pick blackcurrants.” His sentimentality never ceases. “We can go to Garson’s when the month is right. I’ve never made the declaration because I knew you were very much tenderhearted about that. It was your and mam’s expedition.”

## Chapter 2

# Continual Recollections

I had forgotten about their trips to Garson's in the summer. I had forgotten many things that Connor reminded me about. Her death brought with it the taking of some parts of me. The diminishment of memories I had of 'er. Such a taxation on the soul, death can be.

"I would want to. It's just as much ours."

It's just as much ours.

It's just as much ours.

Mystare is heavy. He does not see the profound significance of those words, nor feel the immense emotion they bring. To him, they are just words. To me, they represent his willingness to do something he did—with someone he loved more than himself—with another. It was a dejected consolation. I pursue rekindling the fire to redirect my heart-rending state.

"Are you warmenough?" I ask Conner after clearing my throat of despondency, so as to not allow him to contract my grief.

"Yes. Warm enough, athair," Connor responded (his eyes closed and with a familiar weariness).

\* \* \*

Myboy. The replication of the God I knew as a child. When the time comes, we will venture over hills and uphill. I will step the fault lines. See the footnotes. Lead you with the hand of grace to the divine path. And should the sight of greenwood donate to you the thinning of good strength—refrain from apathy, inanition; rest your eyes. My arms shall preserve thine. I will speak with soft diction through the susurrant. Stride gracefully amidst golden shimmer. At the arrival, finger the soil with an arm bracing. Embrace you warmly through the wait. Speak to you: "Child, the seraphic—feel the autumn benefaction. Let its repose comfort your mind and ease suffering. Let it be the reason for your expenditure, as it is grand. Think of all the goodness. Your and Mam's expeditions; blackcurrant jam; Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; The Wind in the Willows; Mam's soda bread; Bulmer's; Lough Ree. Think of Áine. Envision green féar pastures of good health—running through the foxtail, lying ensconced in rye. And when your heart can be fuller no more, look up—look at where we sit. She is here, Connor, just as I. Just as proud of your valor. Unto you speaking: 'Rath Dé Ort, my Connor. My beautiful Connor. Áilleacht den sórt sin. I have been at your side all along, beautiful boy.'" If I wasn't a weathered man, I should be inclined to say you are indeed the creation of God. That you walk without fault. That God created too much of himself. With the last breath, I shall lay you upon the sepulcher. I shall lay you among the shades of Áine.

"You must be strong. You must be strong for Connor," Áine spoke softly to me, brushing the hair from my weary eyes. She was so frail—so worn. Her clothes were ill-fitted; eyes a lesser blue; cheekbones protruding. We lay in spring warmth atop a blanket, atop the rye. It was a time with the primrose, and the hyacinth, and the sea aster. Singing goldfinches giving their condolences to the cool zephyr. A day of true consolation.

"What if I cannot?" I replied without looking at her. "You can, dearest. He will need his athair. He will need your comfort—your graceful diction," she said, with a weakened smile.

Turning on her back to view a sky of blue, she said, "It is not that I fear the coming of death... It is the result mine will have. The impact on those I cherish most. A child needs his máthair. More so when death comes to him." There was a lingering pause, a time for consideration. "It is not for metochoose." Her face now glittered in the light.

During our walk home, our second-to-last walk home, I walked behind Áine, as I always did following her diagnosis. Awful to see the fade of such beauty. It took her posture. It slowly took each feature of 'er. I had to watch it all. Connor had to watch it all.

Why I always walked behind her is simply a case of metaphysics. Perhaps to hide my agony. Perhaps to keep it in my mind her declination, not that I once was allowed to forget. It was to be noticed that on each trip we made, her strength lessened—her stride shortened, her pace slowed. The sun had mostly gone when we arrived home. Connor was still in well enough health that he was in the yard playing.

He has always been such an attentive child—always understood the complexity of life and our situation. (His own.) More aware and accepting of the unfairness and the harshness than ever. He stared at her as we passed, as he always did, and I could see in him an unmatched maturity and braveness—knowing she would die, and that he could not save 'er. He knew that there was no explanation, no matter how much I thought I deserved one. Áine, unspoken, went to our bedroom while I unpacked the picnic basket. I decided to give her space and waited in the kitchen. Then time went by, but she did not make a sound, nor did she come out of the room. I walked carefully to the threshold, which presented a creak. There I saw the worst. There she stood at the foot of the bed, in front of the mirror, crestfallen. As if, though she had been aware of her condition, and knew that death would surely come, for her and her only child, it was only then that she was forced to accept it. What caused this realization is to remain unanswered. A passageway where she observed her son's failure to match his body with his maturity. Where he would follow behind her to the same bed, with the same declination, to the same ending—even more unfinished. She was to lose a child and not be there for the loss of a child. She finally noticed her body—I could notice it in her eyes. The loss of hair. The fade of her eyes. The discolored skin—hollow cheeks.



## Chapter 3 Differing Letters

“Áilleacht den sórt sin. Still, I see such beauty, Áine. My dearest Áine,” I said to her from the entrance, walking to brush her cheek, “as beautifully she lay, ‘neath seasons fiery embrace— won’t she take my hand?” With a cry, she said, “I am unsightly, Hugh. I wish for you not to see me ill-favored.”

“You are no different than that day. Of no lesser grace. Understand you will never be of lesser grace.” Her head to my shoulder, boots shining from her sadness, I could see Connor in the mirror. That was the moment I lost my faith. “Always will you remain as that autumn day. That perfect day.”

Later that evening, when Connor had been put to bed, Áine continued to advise me. “You cannot shield him from himself—his fate... the harshness of his situation and the world. You cannot fill his head with hopeful pretenses, so that he may find peace and overvalue chance. I know how difficult it will be, Hugh, but it would be inhumane to do such things. He is much too fragile to hear the cozened, explicit falseness that would only leave him further frayed. And you must see to it that he remains in faith. Such is imperative.”

“Faith,” I said it aloud. It was not a question, not a statement nor a reply. It seemed a word of the past—the product of a foreign language, a product of vulgarity. I had great difficulty pronouncing it and knew not of its meaning.

“I know you have lost yours, but I can’t say the same. And you must not allow Connor to. It is hard to see—you are blinded by it all, but a purpose lies behind it, and you will come to see in time. Not everything is to be understandable—you can’t analyze and define all. Some must remain undefined and that does not make it of any less value. You can only see the sufferings, but there is so much that remains—of such variegated beauty past the barrier Connor and I have created. See past it, Hugh. See the pastures of rye we lay atop in spring with fervent love and unwavering desire. See the smile on your child’s face when the fragrance of blackcurrant jam is his primary inhalation. Are these not the result of God’s provisions?”

“Then why should he feel the need to take away the grandiose rights he’d given? Why grant a lesser allowance o’ goodness and a greater o’ heartache?” I received no answer—assume she had grown tired of trying to convince me. As much respect as I had o’er—I never found use for such conversations. I’d nod my head to please ‘er, but I never considered the words, and I was certain never to. Still, I was bound to something greater and therefore saw to it that I made every effort to not allow Connor to see as I—and I attempted to instill her in him. I became a mechanical conversationalist when the subject of theism arose, and it often did. However, I became eventually wildered as my immense weariness progressed and granted Connor the allowance to form his own inferences and place faith where ‘e saw fit. I could not imposition him further as I grew to be skin and bone. Because my heart became something that was only for life’s continuation, and my brain became something that was only for controlling skin and bone, so I could preserve what could not be preserved. I could not have grown, in these months of toil, into less of a man.

Áine, before her death, wrote to me many letters that I assume were to be addressed whenever I should myself in the darkest of days, with not a fraction of obtainable consolation. The realist in me favors the thought of the cancer being the result of—among all other harm— perplexed thinking, and that that is reason for her letters. But I cannot hope to make it to the final stages of life with such thinking; I must remain more optimistic and therefore believe she wrote them with intention.

Her letters, in the beginning, read gracefully and with restrained hope. She was sure to pursue pragmatism and avoid all falseness, but nevertheless diluted it divinely with grammatical memorabilia and concentrated on her motherly prose—often mentioning the like of Connor and their blackcurrant trips. Purposeful words that could undoubtedly be arranged to represent her fine contour and console my weary mind.

However, as with all things, goodness is certain to be met with its opposite, and the Áine in her letters soon faded to—what I conclude with complete surety—perplexed thinking that resulted from her cancer. A passage from such heartbreaking letters: Weightless words from heavy lips, I can hear—not comprehend—what you direct to me. Your efforts lost meaning long ago, I’m afraid. It is to my knowledge that I’ve developed an immunity to your carelessness—no longer to be affected by the harshness of your primal self. Let it be known that I care not of what you speak of my doings upon the completion of your reading this letter, as it will be the winding roads of uncertainty and perils of travel that should occupy my mind. No longer to be confined to Ireland and the making of your precious blackcurrant jam—I shall strive to find self-developed contentedness, not a contentedness dependent on your opinion or satisfaction.

The true and profound melancholia that is still emitted from this tear-stained paper is that her confusion was so considerable that she failed to acknowledge the existence of her son. And while we—Áine and I—had our disagreements, they were to no more extremeness than those of any other concerning marital relations. And though I am aware of the ignorance that death causes, as it twists the mind and attempts to fabricate the past, I admit to giving into such ignorance, but there were no weightless words produced from either mouth—only a then-present (and still indefinite) love hidden by trivial frustration.



## Chapter 4 Among the Shades of Áine

When the day was here, I felt inundated with immense guilt. For I had concluded that on the day I met Áine—no day henceforth would be of greater beauty or serenity. No day will compare. That was a false conclusion. No words can adequately describe this day. It was just as the days should be, but never shall be in my lifetime.

The month fell in autumn, and I did consider her words, so I felt not the need nor desire to define the peculiar alignment. Áine had positioned the sun so that it would set in sight upon the hill. With her breath, a consoling and gentle breeze with familiar fragrances that I had long forgotten. And she woke Connor as she used to and—another complacent undefined occurrence—he spent the day without pain. He asked no questions and was worried not. My lovely Connor did not feel in his youth, but well in serenity. I felt the same. We spent the morning hours in his room. I sat in the old oak chair that was cornered in his view; he sat up in his bed with blankets at his waist. There wasn't much conversation, as there was a contentedness found in listening to singing birds; nevertheless, we never broke eye contact. I had never felt such comfort. He was a beautiful sight, though he seemed somewhat confused this morning. His eyes lighted up from the blackcurrant jam on toast and in them, I had my son again. I fed it to him as her light streamed from the window across the room—the way it shone down on his face... it was such a gift.

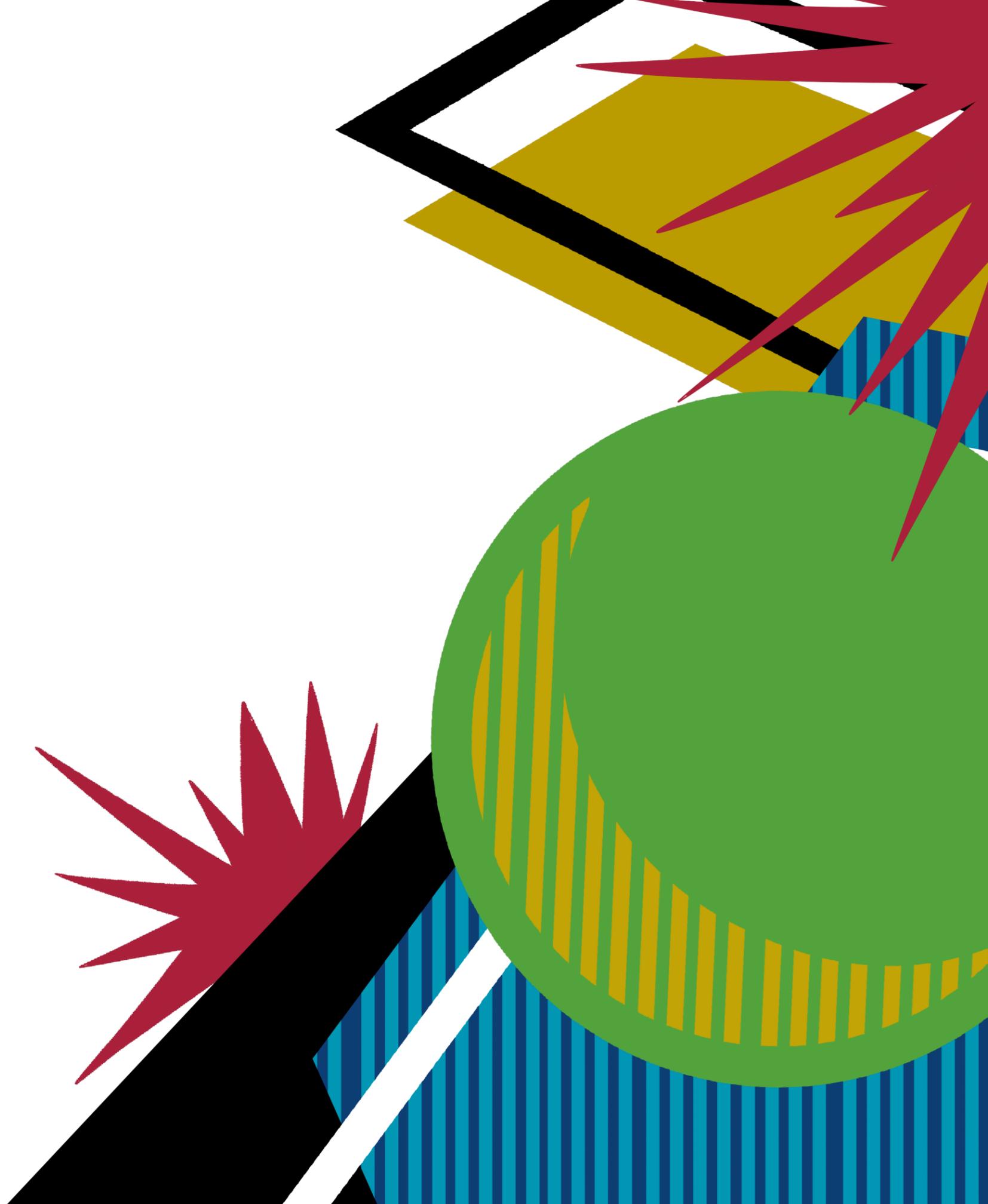
When the hour was four, I dressed Connor in his favorite blanket and found footing to the Birch. There was a mattress of leaves to be in comfort for the wait—varied as to be expected for the month. Our backs against the tree—we sat in view of the dying sun that covered the pastures full of rye, painting a canvas of the dull grass that was desperate for a rain, and shadowed strips that looked the result of lead from a pencil held in a fitful hand; Connor held tight.

All was silent in the evening—not a sound that wasn't the wind or leaves. And then the tears. They were first his, and then mine, and ours together.

“In you, I see it all, child. How it should be. Everything”

“I love you entirely, athair,” Connor replied with tears in his voice. “My beautiful Connor...you have been so very strong. You have been so fearless, my boy. I love you dearly, hon...dearly.” I lost my voice to the sadness and could hold him no tighter. And there was half a sun for half a breath—then a firm embrace that was one-sided. The wind had gone and emerged was asilence I'd never experienced. I rested his head on her leaves and brushed his thin, blonde hair from his eyes. “In you, I see it all, child. How it should be. Everything.”

I lay him next to her. I lay him where he belonged. I lay him to rest; Among the shades of Áine.”



# The Boy Named Quiet and the House of Rats

Zane Duzant

“Wenever thought anyone would step foot on 56 Gerne Lane again. It’d been almost a lifetime since the widower James Roder was found in his toolshed strung up like a Peking duck. They said his face was grotesque and he had no family to confirm his identity; so they used a wedding ring engraved with the initials “J.R.” and a letter they found many years later signed “Yours, James” before officially announcing his death in the local paper. The adults took it very seriously and myUncle Phillip even thought it was a conspiracy. He was a water well driller and had been to the house in the forties to dig. He used to say “that place ain’t right, even my drill refused to go under that house.”

The kids of our town didn’t take Mr. Roder’s suicide so seriously. There was even one boy whose face was badly burned in a firework mishap and they would taunt him by calling him “old man James” on the school bus. One time, years after Mr. Roder’s death, my friends and I went into the house late at night with flashlights and pocket knives, just in case, but we saw nothing of note; just some old family photos and rat shit. This was the last time we saw anyone near James’ house.

Once the examiner looked at his watch and said “9:09 a.m.” the day they found James, the town never touched the house. They didn’t even mow the lawn. For some time, you could look in the kitchen window from the street and still see plates on a drying rack and a table with a white mug on it; you could look in the living room window and see an out-of-style couch and a shabby chair in the corner with suede missing on the arms from the friction of daily use. Eventually, the grass grew tall enough that you couldn’t see inside anymore and I would imagine that Mr. Roder and his wife still lived in there, obscured by the green.

It was mid-July 1971 when we heard the mower start at the Roder house, the sound of the motor competing with the calls of the cicadas. A man, and his son, from out of town had inherited the house through some complicated process of next-of-kinship that none of us understood and decided to renovate the property to sell it. There were times where it seemed like the father was arguing with himself. We’d hear silence from the boy and then the father would yell out “Quiet! Some arsenic and some traps will do the trick” or “Quiet! We just gotta fix the holes in the walls and rip up what’s left of this carpet” or “Quiet! We’re not tearing it down!” So, we just started referring to his son as “the boy named Quiet.”

It was obvious to us that the son and the father disagreed on what to do with the home. The father would go on and on about how much money they’d make and how it would “just take a few more months” and Quiet would seemingly suggest alternatives

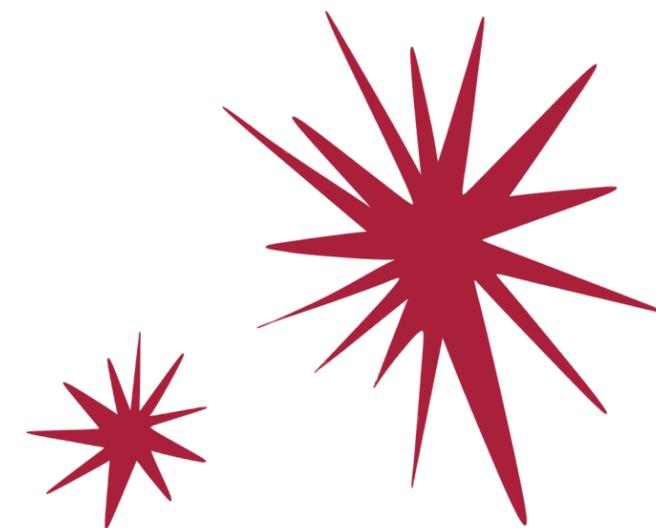
that infuriated his father without fail. They’d been working on 56 Gerne Lane for over months now and had only managed to clean up the yard and fix the garage, and we’d always hear the father scream when he found “another fucking rat!” and the sound of a hammer banging aimlessly in an attempt to rid the home of the pest.

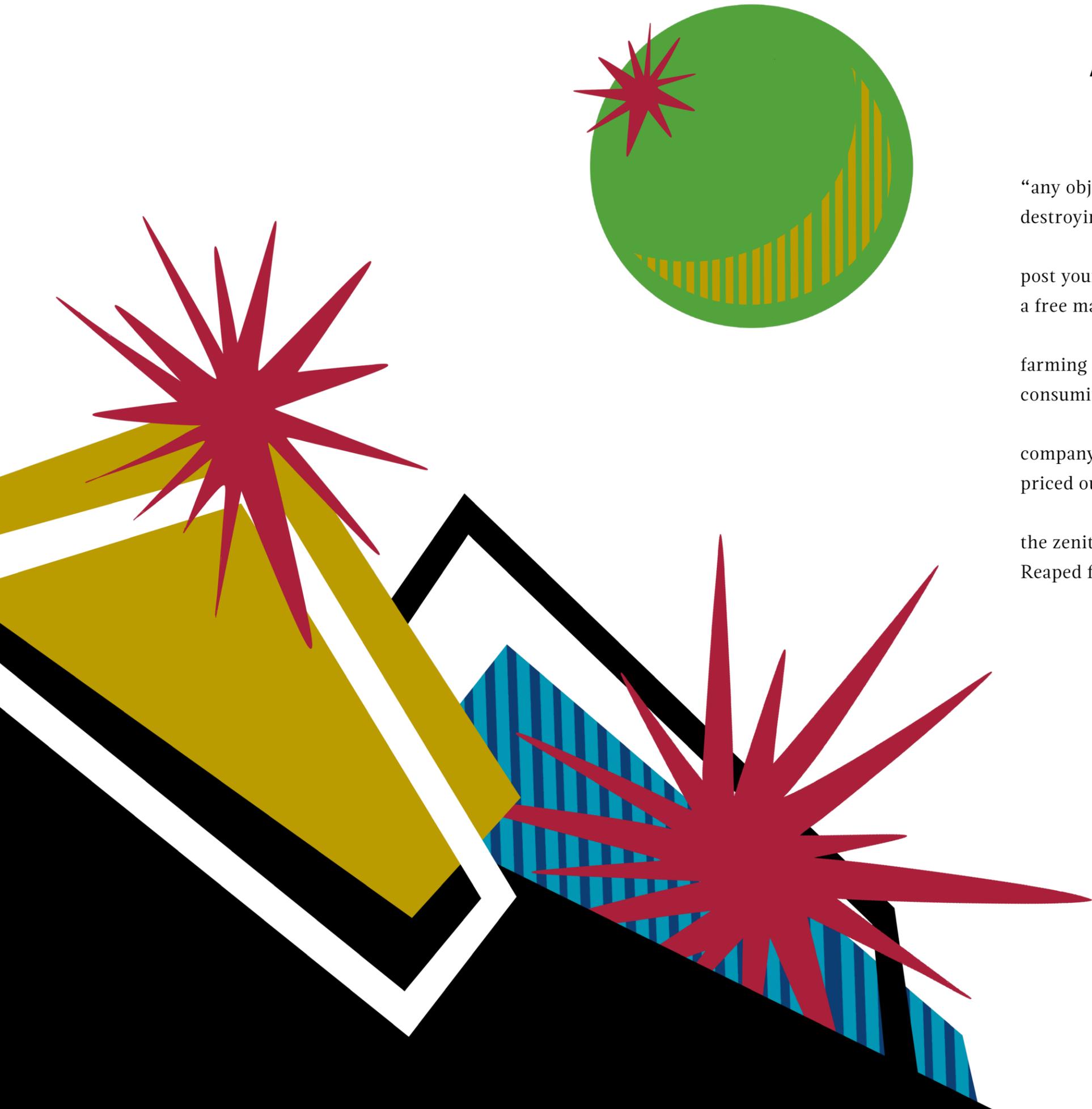
Over a year later, Quiet and his father would still come by every weekend to work on the house. We’d hear the father maintain, “we’re almost done” for months on end. When they’d finally get around to fixing the upstairs, they’d find a piece of paper in James’ bureau drawer covered in decades of filth. We only know the things we hear; either the things we hear for ourselves or the things we hear from others. The rumor is told that Quiet picked up the note, blew off the blanket of dust and held the note up to the sunlight. After he read what James had written, Quiet and his father abandoned the house, and the grass grew past the windows just as it once had. Curiosity filled all of us, and we felt sick when we read what was written:

It’s been rough since you left,  
I haven’t eaten a thing in years.  
They ate everything when they moved in,  
but I don’t mind because I’ve grown to love them  
how I once loved you.

They started with the pantry,  
they ate me out of house & home;  
They chewed through the walls, they even ate our bed;  
not that I would get much use out of it these days,  
I haven’t closed my eyes since I found you with yours shut.

You’d be disappointed in me,  
if you saw just how bad it’s gotten,  
but now they’re all that I have.  
This house is a shell & so am I.  
I died when you did.





## A Ghazal for MAANG Zaddies

Divya Goruganthu

“any object you desire, at your door free shipping  
destroying its own namesake 1-click next day shipping

post your toddler on the socials, and buy another’s social security  
a free marketplace for your personal data available, no shipping

farming servers, farming data, farming ideas, farming needs  
consuming creative whims, sites for guilty-pleasure shipping

company values net positive land value, no fear  
priced out white-collar, not blue, made available with shipping

the zenith of technological advancement for humanity  
Reaped from denying the humanity of bodies, available with shipping”

## Sweetness

Kayla Gross

Oh, to be a gremlin child again.  
Unruly and bright,  
and hot to the touch.  
Covered in grass stains and scrapes.  
Hair unbrushed  
with daisies in the knots.  
With no concept of my own physicality.  
Halfway up the tree in the front yard  
and eating an apple around a missing tooth.  
Getting scolded for ruining my Sunday best  
which I wear to pray to a God I don't believe in  
for the sake of my mother.  
To be unabashedly ugly.  
To be unashamedly hungry.  
To be healthy  
and hearty  
and lean  
and covered in bruises  
and filled to the brim with love  
and sun-ripe peaches.  
To feel time stretch forever,  
only flying when I'm reading books  
or tripping over my own untied shoelaces.  
To love summer once more.  
To love life.  
Syrupy sweet,

## The Door Isn't Wide Enough

David Gerber

The door isn't wide enough  
I moved into this house long ago  
The neighbors change every year  
Through my two windows I see them clear  
Each paints and polishes homes pristine  
Each a different color  
Vibrant reds, deep blues  
Adizzying array of hues  
my house is Dull  
Their skies are sunny and serene  
mine is filled with smoke  
myfire roars all day and night  
I never learned to put it out  
so I sit and bake  
my foundation is crumbling  
everyday it shakes  
it used to knock me over  
I'm accustomed to it now  
my curtains are unsightly  
but they are the only ones I own  
better than to let my neighbors see me  
my two windows are foggy  
the sunlight dissipates through them  
if I could I'd leave  
I wonder if my neighbors would grieve  
But no matter how much I squeeze  
The door isn't wide enough

# Honorable Mention

## Short Stories & Poetry (pages 25 - 43)

(Author's Note: All tense changes are intentional. Enjoy!)

“And how long ago did she pass?” asked Dr. Miller.

“Four years, two months, and seventeen days,” I answered immediately.

As the doctor began to scribble down the information into her notes, I took the opportunity to admire the office. Well, admire is a strong word—I would say study is more like it. The place was terribly eccentric, but I suppose you get what you pay for. It reminded me of a fortune teller's tent at the fair more than anything, and I was not even sure the diploma hanging on the wall was real; it had the Brooklyn College seal but something about it was off.

She finished writing and caught my attention again. “That's quite detailed,” she said.

“Hard to forget,” I replied. “She left the apartment at six fourteen a.m. I received the call at eight fifty-six a.m. When I arrived at the hospital, it was half past nine exactly. By the time I got there, she only survived for eight more minutes. The wound was horrible.”

Just the inkling of the memory made my throat ache. My knees felt weak even though I was sitting. I looked down at my hands, my feet, the outfit I chose to wear today. I felt my hair brush against the sides of my face, hyper aware of any proof of the existence of my body. I become anxious at the thought that I am still here, as if it should not be allowed to be true.

“I'd like to talk about something else,” I said.

“Alright,” the doctor obliged.

After some time, I felt less nervous—somehow the subject of my abusive father was much less daunting to me. When the session had finished, the doctor kept me from leaving only a moment more and again scribbled something down, this time on a small piece of paper she had torn from a different notepad. She placed it into my hand.

“I'm going to put you on medication to help you with your nerves for the time being,” she said. “Your insurance will cover most of it, and it's not too expensive, anyhow.”

I thanked her and left.

The day after, in the evening, I made a trip to the pharmacy to pick up my first dose. I presented the little paper to the man behind the counter and he returned with a sizable brown bottle of some liquid, a receipt, and a pen.

“It’s not a pill?” I asked.

“No,” he answered. “Many places don’t even carry it—almost every patient that has to take it switches to something else because of the side effects, so it doesn’t sell.”

“What kind of side effects?”

“Hallucinations are the most common one that people report,” he replied.

“Some others have gotten addicted to it. No deaths yet, though.”

I heaved a sigh. “Well, I’m sure my body has endured worse,” I said, and signed the bottom of the receipt.

When I arrived back home, it was nearly eleven o’clock. I removed the bottle from its paper bag and studied the label on the back. On the cup attached to the bottle’s lid were the characters “40-mL” etched into the plastic.

“I haven’t taken liquid medicine since I was a kid,” I said aloud, but shrugged it off and swallowed. After it was in my system, I retired to my bedroom, and fell asleep with ease for the first time in four years, two months, and seventeen days.

I awoke some hours later with a bursting bladder, but when I returned from the bathroom, I nearly emptied it again.

A red-haired woman with pale skin, wearing only a bra and shorts, was snoring peacefully on the other side of the bed, her back toward me. I recognized her immediately.

“Talia?”

I stepped forward and sat back down on the mattress, switching on my lamp.

“I’m dreaming,” I thought. “It’s just a dream. I must be dreaming.”

But I placed my hand on her arm, and I felt her.

She stirred under my touch and turned to face me with squinted eyes. “Ana?”

“Talia?” I repeated. “How—?”

She turned to glance at the clock. “It’s four in the morning.”

“I—” I stared at her in awe. I could not put the pieces together quickly enough. “I’m dreaming,” I said aloud.

Wait a minute, my deceased wife was back from the dead and all I could think to do was talk to myself?

“Talia—you’re—you’re alive.”

“What do you mean ‘you’re alive?’ Of course I’m alive,” she chuckled. She sat up on her elbows.

I rubbed my eyes violently. I reached out for her again and she grabbed my hand, pulling me toward her, onto my side.

“What’s the matter with you? Did you have a nightmare or something?”

“I’d argue I’m having one right now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she laughed. It reminded me of how badly I missed it, how I missed her smile.

“Talia, I don’t understand. You’ve been dead for four years.”

“I swear to god, if you got high without me—”

“No, I’m serious. I lost you. It was the worst fucking day of my life.”

She bent her brow in concern. “Honey, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m right here.”

I took a deep breath, looking at her closely, as if this were some elaborate trick, but then I remembered the medicine—and its alleged “side effects.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “This is all so confusing.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

I swallowed. “Don’t go,” I told her.

She smiled. “I can do that.”

I was unsure whether I should believe her or not.

“Come here,” she said, taking my hand and tugging gently.

I laid my head down on her stomach, feeling the warmth of her skin against my face. I was starting to wonder if this really was the hallucination I thought it was, but I quickly decided I didn’t care—if this were some extremely vivid dream caused by that medicine and I was doomed to awaken the next morning to an empty bed, I would confront it then.

“You said I’ve been dead for four years,” she continued. “And I’ve known you long enough to be able to tell that you were serious. What did you mean?”

I swallowed. I almost felt a pang of anger at her for how she made me relive the day. “I meant exactly what I said. You’ve been dead for four years.”

“What happened to me?”

I breathed deeply. “Car wreck—a really violent one. But you survived, until they brought you to the emergency room. And you didn’t make it. Lost too much blood.” Tears soaked my cheeks. I did not try to stop them.

“But now I’m back,” she replied.

I nodded. “But now you’re back.” My voice was soaked. I reached up to touch her face to make sure I could still feel her.

I would have done anything and everything to live this moment. Now that I had found out all I had to do was drink some weird medicine, I felt that, because I did not go to the ends of the earth, through heaven and through hell to see her again, I didn’t deserve it.

“What should I do if I wake up tomorrow and you’re gone?” I asked.

Absent-mindedly, she ran her fingers through my hair. “Don’t let it eat you alive.”

I laughed humorlessly. “Too late.”

I opened my eyes to our bedroom. I didn't feel hungover in the slightest.

The space next to me was empty. Several panicked breaths climbed up my throat, but only one escaped before I swallowed the rest of them. My brow was drenched in sweat.

I shot a glance at the clock on the nightstand. "6:14 A.M.," it read. A moment later, I heard the front door shut and the lock click. My heart dropped and shattered against my pelvis.

I scrambled out from under the sheets and made a beeline for the door. I hoped I wouldn't get in trouble for running outside in my underwear.

My fingers made contact with the door knob and reality cut like a film scene. I was dressed and the fluorescent lights above blinded me. I was clutching the knob to a cherry-wood door. The number "523" in black letters stared me down.

I swallowed and reluctantly entered the room to the sound of soft beeping. The strong smell of industrial cleaner hit me fast and hard. Talia laid there in a hospital bed, a spider web of tubes hooked up to her. Her forehead and right eye were wrapped in bandages. Her nose leaked blood.

The beeping began to speed up. A nurse touched my shoulder and I nearly punched her in the face. Before she could speak, the monitor flat-lined.

I woke up screaming. Talia startled awake beside me and placed her hands on my shoulders. I sank into her embrace, not bothering to wonder if she was really there or not. All that mattered was that it felt like she was.

After several minutes, she finally got me to calm down. I pressed my forehead against hers. I ran my thumb across her cheekbone. Tears streamed down my face.

"Goddammit," I sobbed. "What is happening?"

She twisted the fabric of my pajama shirt between her fingers. "It's just a nightmare."

"No, it isn't. It's real, I can feel you. I have my senses. It's not...it's—"

My gaze drifted past her and I saw the bottle of medicine on the nightstand behind her. My brow furrowed and I got up. I grabbed the bottle and threw it into the garbage bag in the kitchen. I listened to the glass shatter, the liquid stain the bottom of the bag, and watched it leak through the plastic onto the floor.

I returned to the bedroom to find that Talia was gone. The clock told me it was nine o'clock at night.

I heard keys jingle from the other side of the front door and automatically wandered toward the sound. A minute later, the door opened and she walked through it.

"Hi, honey. Sorry I'm so late—some guy came in at the last minute and ordered like ten drinks, and then I had to close," she said. She kissed my cheek.

Something about her was different.

All other times I had seen her, she seemed murky and faded, her details fuzzy and

incorrect. But now, I can see her as clearly as the daylight outside. When I reach forward to take her hand, I recognize textures of her touch that had not been there before. I can make out the waves in her hair. I can count every freckle across the bridge of her nose.

She's solid. She smells like coffee. Her eyes are vibrant green instead of milky gray. She looks exactly the way she had on the very first day I met her.

"You are real," I tell her.

She raises an eyebrow at me. "I would hope so," she jokes.

I play with her fingers. The sun rises in the next thirty seconds. The light coming through the blinds bombards us. She turns to stare at it, her skin glowing with the paleness of the sudden morning.

"It's Saturday," she tells me. "And it's so pretty out. You want to go find a trail or something?"

I nod, and she brings me to the door. When she opens it, something about the outdoors behind her seems brighter than it did before, like the sun has more light to give all of a sudden.

Without thinking, I follow her outside. I hear the door shut behind me, and under the white sky, all I see is Talia.



# The View Between Villages

London Reynolds

My clothes are at the dry cleaners. I'm not sure why, but my entire wardrobe is at the dry cleaners. I'm excavating my now empty closet, and I'm going to be late to work in fifteen minutes. I don't think I've ever been to a dry cleaner. A twenty-something intern isn't exactly constitutive of someone who can afford something like that. A small folded stack of clothes sits at the back of my closet, on the middle cubby of a three-leveled shelf I didn't realize existed until just now.

My late father's well-worn black band sweatshirt from that one 70's rock band he'd always sing along to on the radio. I hadn't so much as looked at it since it arrived at my doorstep in a plastic bag. A pair of white shorts sits below. I reach out for them, and I hesitate for a moment when my fingertips brush the man-made softness of his sweatshirt, somehow releasing the last of his cologne locked into the fabric. I turn away from the clothes, catching a glimpse of my body in the mirror, where the clothes seem to have made their way onto me. The stretched out head hole of the crewneck falling off one of my shoulders, the sleeves going past my hands the same way that'd make him laugh when I stole it from him. I'm rubbing my thumb over the hole in the cuff of the sleeve. The same one I wore in at the hospital at his bedside. The ridged stitching is rough against my skin, just as rough as the memories feel as they seem to be spinning around me, a double helix faded at the flickering ceiling light of my closet.

They spin and spin, along with the room, until the universe decides to give me a break. Everything freezes around me, still shots of a bond suspended mid-air like the photographs of an undeveloped life. I see the now present gap in place of the closet doorway and I'm moving toward it, only to find myself in the kitchen. The shoe rack by the front door is empty and the clock on my microwave says three hours have passed somehow, and the minutes seem to go up by the millisecond. I stride across the room, too late to care about shoes anymore. The keys hanging on the wall are in my hand, and I'm through the door of my apartment. The rough, brown bristles of my double sided welcome mat digging into the bare soles of my feet, reading the word goodbye at me as I fumble with the keys that don't seem to fit into my door lock anymore.

I don't seem to care that much, now that I find myself halfway down my street, watching as the bright sunlight moves through the canopy of the trees lining the sidewalk. The warm breeze of the summer meets my back, perfectly complemented by the heat of the pale gray concrete underneath my feet. The street is empty, a strange lull in the usual company of the neighborhood in early June. Lemonade stands seem to be packed up, garden hoses wrapped and put away, bikes parked on their respective driveways. The only sign of life seems to be me, the trees, and a dark moving shape at the end of the street, fast approaching, seemingly speeding up. A strong breeze now

pushing against my back, propelling me forwards. The dark shape has revealed itself to be a black dog, absorbing the fragmented sunlight as it approaches, staring me dead in the eyes.

Something around me feels different, but I can't peel my eyes off the dog wandering down the street. The wind seems to swirl around me, the warm, nostalgic feeling from before now replaced with a sharp coldness, my father's scent rushing past my nose once again as my heart thuds in my chest. The black dog strides past me on the street, head turned as if it is watching me, and a resounding chill passes over me with the newfound cloud cover above my head. Every hair on my body is standing up as I turn my own head now, catching a glimpse of the white car now hurling itself down the road as I finally set my eyes back onto the dog.

I find myself following him back down the street, until he pauses. Two paws over the ledge of the sidewalk, the dog stares at me as it crosses over into the street. My feet move without my brain, the black eyes of the dog keeping me in some sort of trance. In one breath, one foot hits the tar of the road. Then two. I'm following behind him, some sort of invisible tether connecting us, walking together until he stops. He's sitting in the middle of the road, the two of us a still outline in the car's fast approaching headlights. I'm using every ounce of strength to push him out of the way. He won't move on. No amount of pushing or yelling gets him to. He doesn't even leave at the prolonged warning of the horn. Nor does he leave when the bright light blinds us.

Pain. Exhaustion. My head is killing me, and there's a ringing replaying in my head, a manifestation of the loud horn fluttering my eyes open. My face cringes and I shift slightly at the light hitting my eyes, sending a sharp but quick wave of pain through my body. Back pressed against the glass of a window, my legs are curled up in front of me, the skin exposed from my shorts brushing against the woven gray fabric of the two seats I'm laying across. There is a soft blanket outstretched over my legs, one that looks suspiciously identical to the baby blanket my mother had to pry out of my hands when she deemed I was too old for it, and the one I slept with every night after my dad passed. I stretch my legs outward across the chairs, like a cat lounging in front of their favorite window. I can feel the warmth of the sunlight coming in through the glass behind me, the golden warm tones of the sunset outside seemingly following me as we fly by it. I pull my knees towards my chest, resting my feet flat on the seat and I sit and listen to the rivets of the tracks as we pass over them for a moment, my head pressed back against the glass.

I let my fingertips trace the soft pink and blue hearts on the velvety fabric of the blanket, and eventually I find them running down the satiny trim around the sides to find the tag. I flip the blanket up to read the handwritten inscription I know better than the back of my hand, only for the usual three-word note to be replaced with a new one. It was still in my father's handwriting, leaving only but one word this time. "Soon". Soon? What the hell does that mean? I look around, frantically, as if I might somehow look up to see the wrinkles on his forehead I used to make fun of again before I toss the blanket off me, doing my best to stand up against the gentle movements of the train and

shaky legs. I take a few steps forward, clinging to the tops of the row of chairs as I turn back and neatly begin folding the blanket on the chair, re-reading a word I hadn't seen in that handwriting in so long. Forcing myself to stop ruminating, I turn in the empty train car, facing the windows on the opposing wall, and move closer to them.

Peering out, I see the vastness of the ocean, stretching from underneath and beyond the tracks of the train, as far as the eye can see. The waters are still, with calm, gentle waves that appear an almost dull gray shade, the only color coming from the rays of the sunset reflecting off the surface. A focal point, the waves meet the sky out towards the horizon, who knows how far away and blend together, a comforting union straight out of an oil painting.

I can feel the hard floor as I walk through the train car, eager to see what might be on the door at the end of the car. Muted cream with delicately ornate details in gold, I extend my hand outwards to the door, grasping the gilded knob and twisting what little I could before being met with the feeling of the locked door. I knocked and I called out, standing under the vent outpouring warm air and the nostalgic scent of vanilla, but was only met with the gentle hum of speed and machinery. Frustrated, I turn my back to the door, and begin to pace down the aisle of the train, before something stops me dead in my tracks.

Laughter. A wonderous, child-like laugh fills the car. I'm frozen, standing in the middle of the train, in front of the boarding doors, and laughter rings out in the once silent train car. I pick my head up, looking towards the speakers for some kind of answer, when what once was the sky and the ocean turn into a solid black. A soft glow emits from inside the train car itself, before the laughter sounds again, illuminating the sky outside with its cadence.

Looking out the large windows of the boarding doors, I watch as the environment transforms around me outside the train. Black turns to the dark navy blue walls and walnut floors of the kitchen in my childhood home. Sunrays come in through the bay window of the dining nook, where I see myself sitting, laughter alternating between my sister and I. The train is driving across the floor, fully encapsulated in the memory, past my dad as he walks pink and blue plastic bowls of spaghetti to the table. My sister is clapping her hands, excitedly bouncing up and down on the striped bench cushion beside me. I watch as my father sets the bowls down in front of us, the smile on his face pushing his wrinkles together as he dances around the kitchen to the same band on my sweatshirt now, giving us dinner and a show.

I'm frozen, half-way between both walls of the train, watching as we fly by and everything changes one again, to the green cover of the trees in our backyard, my voice echoing "higher" over and over, along with the creaks of metal as my father pushed me on the wooden swing set, and shrieks as I see him hide around the corner of our house,

turning on the sprinklers as my sister and I stood over them in the heat of the summer. I watch as the sky darkens, and tiny bursts of golden-orange light float through the sky. A smoke column, from the red grill that sat on our patio arose, the potent smell of slightly-too charred hamburgers wafting through the air. Lemonade pitchers and bug nets adorn our slatted patio table, the four of us sitting around it in the dusk. They take off, and I'm not far behind them, in my father's big sweatshirt and those always yellow jelly shoes, jumping through the grass, imprisoning any misfortune Junebug in my path, excitedly showing them off to my parents and sister behind me.

I feel the soft pitters of tears falling to my chest, darkening the fabric of the sweatshirt as I sit on the ground, feeling the woodgrain of the floor against my knees and feet. The train chugs along, now in the pale yellow, butterfly-adorned walls of my childhood bedroom. I'm tucked under my princess bedspread, my father's face aglow in the light of my night light at the foot of my bed. I'm lying, wide-eyed as he's telling me stories about the travels of his youth; retelling my favorite one, his trip to the Alps with his college roommates. I loved it so much, he'd framed a few of his film photos from his trip and gave them to me to put in my room. "Snowy white mountains," he'd tell me, seemingly lost in the memory every time. "The most beautiful view of everything below, and you can go sledding, or you can make snow angels or we could have a snowball fight" he'd continue, leaning in as he talked and I giggled, imagining the snowy white mountain tops and the wet splotches on our coats from snowball impact. I listened to my younger self beg him to take her there, and him tell me he would, only if I fell asleep. I watched as I excitedly closed my eyes as he shut off the lights, too excited to fall asleep but imaginative enough to envision our future trip until I fell asleep.

My upper body swayed with the gentle movements of the train, my eyes unable to look away from the life replaying in front of me as my bedroom lit up once again, now a light teal blue and covered in posters of the mountains. I was sitting at my desk now, the built-in one my father had assembled in both my sister and I's rooms once we started school. It was white once, but now the blue and red crayon scribbles of my youth laid underneath my middle-school pre-algebra homework. My father still sat at the foot of my bed, on my soccer-printed duvet, as he helped me figure out orders of operations and the social hierarchy of public school popularity. A blink of light flashes and we're out on the front lawn, soccer goals set up on either side of us. We're running back and forth, trying to fake each other out with a dribble. I sigh as he gets a goal and he cheers for mine, even if he let me make them.

I watch myself turn away from the goal, now dressed in the white and blue uniform of my high school's soccer team, staring back at my father and family in the stands as my old teammates huddle behind me, flashy hardware in the middle. My dad's there, holding a sign I deemed embarrassing at the time but now brings tears to my already damp eyes. I look on as the blue of my uniform became the blue of my prom dress, swishing at my feet as my father told me he reserved the right to my first dance.

He pressed a pre-recorded track on our tiny digital keyboard, dancing me around the hardwood floors of our house on his toes like he did so long ago. The prom photos that haunted my mother's Facebook flashed by in quick blinks, in sync with the flash of the camera in my mother's hand, capturing the moments in real time.

Hundreds of moments pass by as the train moves along. My father singing along to his favorite band in his red truck. Swimming in the neighborhood pool in the summer. My first car. The flowers my dad gave me after every event. The spot they take up in my freezer. My high school graduation. Packing my room up the summer of my senior year. The five-hour drive my family made with me to my college dorm, and the way my father and his college friend carried my mattress and ninety-percent of my boxes up those stairs. My father's film photos on the wall. My parents sending me coffee money before every final. The shitty bar that confiscated all my friends and I's fake IDs. Several times. Every call I made to my parents, and how my father promised a trip to the Alps once I graduated.

Things go dark for a longer moment this time, as the memory fades away and leaves me with the dim light of the train car, and the repetitive sounds of the train and my sniffling nose. Then I hear it. The ring in my ears that has haunted me for the past two years. The ringing of my old cell phone. The light from the screen fills the temporary void, as I watched it all over again. Two-fifty-two in the morning, the screen read. Incoming call from mom, the pixels said. My stomach sank, and I laid back on the hard train floors, trying to do anything not to relive this moment. My ears began ringing again, a subconscious shield protecting against everything but my late-night scream of disbelief, the thud of my old phone hitting the carpeted floor, the muffled words of my ex-boyfriend through my heavy sobs. Even now, I could feel the same twist in my gut, the same burning in my lungs. My chest heaved in unison, the same way it did back then.

No more light appeared. The memories continued flooding around me, battering against the exterior of the train, just as dark a representation as my state of mind. The memories appeared as just as I hoped to forget them, in their excruciatingly detailed entirety, with an exception. A large black dog now remained at my side, play by play. He sat as I rubbed my thumb into the sleeve of my father's sweatshirt, at his bedside, begging him to make it to the Alps with me. He sat as I stood on soggy ground, six feet above the person I loved most in the world. He walked on the stage with me at my college graduation, in front of me, as if he was dragging me along, straight to my mother's somber eyes on the field afterwards, her own dog joining mine.

I eyed him, as my life continued to replay, watching as we followed each other, a twisted dance of sorts. I moved my own mattress. He laid on my chest. I took him on walks. He led me to treats. I put my father's things in a box. He fetched them without reason. I watched, and I watched our dance, my toes being stepped on now, until there were no longer both of us. Just the black dog.

Everything else was white. I shook with the train and my own emotion, as I watched

the dog run alongside the train, like a shadow in a headlight until I watched as the widows behind me flew past him, escaping my only companion. The speaker sounded yet again, but this time it was the voice of a man I'd never heard before. "Destination coming up soon. Please grab your personal items." I pushed myself to a shaky stand. I traversed down the aisle, as I watched the scenery shift out the window. The solid white quickly escaped my view from the windows as I walked, being replaced with bright highlights and soft shadows of freshly fallen snow on the rocky ledge of the tracks. Standing in front of where I'd woken up I breathlessly looked out the window at the unraveling setting.

Snowy white mountain tops.

The most beautiful view of small slopes, the golden-pink sunset, trees, and ski towns, beginning to light up in the distance by their house lights.

The train began to slow as it approached a small building, crested with untouched snow and enveloped in dark, chocolatey brown wooden siding and a rocky foundation. I grabbed my blanket from below me, now sitting with a pair of red gloves and a dog-eared train ticket that hadn't been there before. I quickly walked back up the aisle, to the double doors I'd spent the majority of the ride at. I ran my thumb over the puffed out words of the ticket. The Alps. The train finally lulled to a stop in front of the building, and with a soft ding the doors slid open. I bolted out, feet slamming against cold concrete, running through matching wood and rock archways, to the snowy parking lot lined with trees sat in front of me.

Where a car was waiting for me.

A red truck, blaring music I could recite the words to in my sleep, and a driver singing along with now-gray hair and forehead wrinkles.



# Adulthood

Isabella McLean-Turner

I sit here in this classroom in complete and utter disbelief. How can someone as ingenious, charismatic, and diligent as me tie with Wesley Russo, a weak, scrawny, cowardly nobody? A bottom of the barrel underdog on the decathlon team for goodness sake. He is a complete loner, but somehow his valedictorian speech is equivalent to my work. In what world is what he has to say more important than my senior year wrap-up? I lost elbow grease while writing this speech. Wesley has nothing on me. I'm popular, idolized even, but I presume that's no longer valued in the world, or rather Kinleigh High School English Department. Apparently now is the time to take pity on losers or put more formally those who can't evolve. Wesley has been second to me since kindergarten; he placed second in all the elementary spelling bees, weightlifting contests, and even in class debates until today when we leveled.

Miss Kwenton tells us both to rethink and polish our speeches which will be judged again on Friday, and she suggested that one of us should even think about dropping out. I sigh and run my fingers through my tousled hair with frustration. Clearly I wasn't discreet enough "something on your mind," Wesley asks. I contemplate being passive and responding with "no" for roughly 5 seconds, instead I go off the handle saying "How is an oration about your Grandfather worthy of discussing on one of the single most significant days of our young adult lives?" My snarky yet valid counter earns me an eye roll from Wesley who averts his coppery eyes and sways to Miss Kwenton to say "I appreciate you making me aware of my competition. Are we done here?" She nods after picking up on his uneasiness. Miss Kwenton turns her head and meets my gaze, giving me a piercing look of judgment. "What?" I mutter unremorsefully, shrugging my shoulders. "It's not like I lied. Nobody wants to hear him ramble, and I just can't wrap my head around being overshadowed by him." Miss Kwenton interjects. "It's a shame to see one of my most promising students behave like such a child."

After she leaves the room, I realize it would be pathetic to wallow in my sorrows and decide to head over to Vince's Diner where I happen to do my best writing. I stroll in like I own the place, which I

practically do, since I close the place every night. A worker walks toward my booth and asks "What can I get for you, son?"

"Nothing I can buy from here," I claim.

He looks puzzled. To my surprise the restaurant is empty, so he tucks his order pad in his shirt pocket, raises his eyebrows, sits down, and replies "Hmm, humor me" I told him... well everything we discussed my Type A personality, my fears, and I somehow managed to divulge my two massive current dilemmas being my rocky

relationship with my father and how I'm tied for the graduation speech. He made a cackle in his gravelly tone, "You sound just like me at your age. I was the black sheep of my family, but managed to outgrow my family's traditions."

"That's easier said than done. My dad went to Harvard Law, graduated at the top of his class, and gave a graduation speech that's still multiplying in views on YouTube after going viral decades ago. How can I top that?"

"I never tried to beat my old man at his own game; I only tried to master mine. I might've lost some of his respect doing so, but that's ok because I gained my own!"

"You said earlier you want to go to Harvard too, right?"

I give a shy nod. "Does that make me a sycophant?" I probe.

"No" he affirmed, "That would make you authentic, and being genuine is a lot better than putting

up a facade so you don't disappoint others around you."

"I see you in here every night writing up a storm and it's clear there's more to you and you're not

some cliché, so be your own person. You don't need your peers or your daddy to tell you that you're exceptional, especially when you're on a distinct path. You're stressed about your future. I get it. I have a grandson who is the same way." Our therapy session suddenly gets cut short by his nasty cough. I lean over to my side of the booth and ask him if he needs a sip of water. He shakes his head muttering that he is "fine" and collapses on the ground. I shout for help and begin dialing 911. The paramedics arrived in 6 sluggish minutes and he was rushed to the hospital.

Two weeks after that bizarre experience at the diner, I decided to listen to the man I vented to and finally worked up the nerve to confront my father. As we ate dinner my aura shifted. "Is everything ok with you son?" It was at that moment that I came clean.

"Dad, I don't know if I can do it."

"Look I know you're probably nervous to give the speech but it's a few minutes and it will be over before you know it. Just do the thing they say, picture everyone in their underwear."

I chuckle, "No it's not my nerves it's just I doubt mine will be as memorable as yours was."

"Who says it has to be. I pushed you to try because I knew you had the potential to get the opportunity I did, not so we could compete."

"Oh so you don't care if mine differs from yours?" "Would it be your speech if it was a reiteration of mine?"

Confronting my dad did not go as anticipated because there was no shouting or cursing.

Maybe I was wrong; it was my tendencies that drew that conclusion. I know I put in work, but most importantly I know who I am. I do not need anyone else to tell me. A day later, I am told that Wesley won the speech. I immediately feel a weight taken off my shoulders.

I can faithfully say, come graduation day, I am content. Today, in my cap, and gown I feel at peace with everything as I walk to my seat to listen to Wesley share his revised speech. Looking over, I saw the gracious man from the diner, and I was suddenly comforted. I find myself sitting in disbelief once again after hearing Wesley's initial remarks "To my Grandfather Vince..."

The End

## Immigrant Ambition

Shada Essaid

My mother's ancient dreams sit heavy on my tongue

her guileless disposition

the way she moves about like a child

a credulous animated character

Her wistful smile at my burning passion for literature

Her childhood that ceases to exist

giving up on her ambition because he said so with an evil shrug

still desperately yearning for it decades later

and she staggers away

head bowed with woe

Caring for far too many men in her adolescence she seldom hears from  
in her dotage

In my dreams my mother is free

in my dreams my mother is unmarried

in my dreams I do not exist

# Numb November Broken Bus Believer

Nara Yoo

I felt worthless  
Didn't want to breathe  
One day better more or less  
At times still felt like I wanted to leave

This world, god this world  
Sometimes it feels like it wasn't meant for us  
And I would wallow into thought and would imagine myself in the  
middle of the road  
And there's a bus

And it crashed and it crashed  
And I fell and I fell  
Underneath  
Where there was rubble

Knee scraped in cement  
Hardly a dent  
But in my mind,  
Unrelenting trouble

"Isolation is what might fix this," they said  
Be by yourself all alone  
I said okay and then laughed in my head  
Oh my thoughts, if only they had known

# The Wrong Shade of Make-Up

Kelda Harrison

(Warning; contains descriptions of violence)

No one knew.

I told the world that I fell over the baby gate at night. That it was dark and I heard crying and I was half asleep and forgot it was there. That I crashed over it and somehow fell on my face and somehow, somehow it looked exactly as if someone had punched me in the nose. I laughed as I told the story to my co-workers, silly, clumsy me.

You see, I couldn't miss work. That would have meant being late on the electric bill; which would mean that the car payment would get pushed back and there would be a penalty; and then the rent would be due, and it would be \$80 short; and then the whole precarious, carefully balanced house of cards would come crashing down on me. You see, that's what poverty is. You play a card, just wrong, and the whole thing collapses. Your tire catches a nail and you weep, because there goes the water bill. You miss a day of work because you're sick, and shit, no lunch that week.

So I couldn't miss work, not just for a swollen nose.

You see, I hadn't wanted to have sex with him. But that's not something you can tell polite society.

That memory, I don't want to touch it. It's part of a dark mass in the back of my brain. That time, those 6 years living with the sometimes-monster, they feel untouchable, dirty. My chest feels tight and my tear ducts are heavy, but dry, when I peer back into that recent past. He had come into the room that night, pushing and pushing at me, into me, snarling. I'm not sure if it was even that night, but at some point there was a kitchen knife at my throat. The same tool that I used in the safe light of day to lovingly cut our tiny son's avocado and strawberries into "birdie bits".

And then he exploded my nose with his fist and there was so much blood, and a thin, high sound that I realized was me screaming and begging him to stop, please stop.

The next morning he had driven to the store to buy me spot cover make-up so I could go to work. It was \$18. I found it in my car a couple years later and thought, oh yeah, the “sorry I raped you and punched you in the nose make-up”.

He had bought it with my credit card.

I had only used it once.

It was the wrong shade.

## A Tech Bro Overthinks

Divya Goruganthu

Monday I am a raccoon  
clutching a coffee mug  
digging through the trash  
of my inbox. Wearing  
sweatpants and hoodies  
in the winter but  
the rest of the year  
I wear pajama shorts  
and pretend they are pants.  
But I always have a real  
shirt. Sometimes it even  
has buttons.  
I work my real job  
typing on a real computer  
making fake images appear  
on a real monitor for real  
people who were once fake  
personas corporate dreamt up.  
Real people on a Monday  
clutching a coffee mug  
sifting through trashy ads  
on a real screen searching  
for a real job for themselves.  
I am sure half of them are  
not wearing pants.  
I like to believe it's to be  
comfortable, but I know  
they're just sitting on a real toilet.

# Special Mention

## Short Stories & Poetry (pages 45 - 61)

Today had started out like any other. Isn't that how tales always start? The schedule is the same. Wake up. Go to work. Come home. Do it all over again. Over and over and over until I die, and that's how I thought my life would stay. But in a twisted sense? That's exactly what happened.

\* \* \*

Rain fell all through the night, smearing the view of the outside world from the window. As the drops tapped away at the roof I thought back to the rainy days long since past, not unlike like this one. A long time ago I would have told you that rain was some sort of God, crying out over the unfortunate state of the world. Now, I believe in science. Science is safe, secure, and easy to understand, at least compared to the idea of faith and another plane beyond our own. The idea of God is a childish fantasy best left behind, like the dirt and leaves running to the gutter with the fallen rain.

Getting up from my spot beside the window (The rain was calming, perhaps a bit too much) I went to the kitchenette to rummage through a mini fridge full of the same microwave lasagna I had been eating for a long while. Pulling out one I knew should have been thrown out weeks ago, I barely glanced at the lifeless cartoon lasagna on the package before placing it in the microwave. Some lightning flashed outside as I yawned, watching the lasagna spin on the stained and unsavory glass dish. I should clean it sometime. I should clean a lot of things sometime. The warm glow of the microwave barely started to light the room before the work was done, package steaming slightly with the plastic cheese sizzling through the sound of rain.

It's not too bad to be alone with my thoughts. Moving out might be the best thing that has happened to me this year. Not that there's much better to compare it to. A younger me would have told you that after college, you just... get a job, and that's that. But now? I wish I had connections to get me anywhere.

"I can't keep living on a salary like this." I mutter to no one in particular. Setting up my spot at the rickety old folding table, I take a slow bite of the lasagna. It's slightly crunchy in places it shouldn't be, but I keep chewing.

I hear a sound. At first, I don't recognize it, as I've never heard it before. But I soon come to my senses and realize it's the doorbell. With a quick glance at my plastic watch (it chafes against my skin but I know I can't afford better.) I mumble again. "Who comes knocking this late at night?" Another flash of lightning. "With weather like this, no less." I shuffled to my feet to get the door.

I don't know what to expect. A distant family member. Someone looking to sell a vacuum. A friend looking for a place to crash... though I don't have enough friends for that to happen, I still expect it more than what occurs.

A stranger, who easily stands a head taller than the doorframe, looms above me from my porch, wearing a white robe that easily covers their entire being, their only other color is a red satin... scarf? What did my parents call it... a stole? I look up slowly to meet this person's eyes, a sudden weight dropping to my stomach as I realize they have none.

In place of eyes they have a white mask with small holes, no bigger than jacket buttons. The button holes have purple crayon scribbled around them in an unorganized fashion. To make matters worse, the "eyes" are accompanied by a wide and crooked smile, as if scratched on last-minute by a young child. In fact, the whole mask gives off the idea of childish inexperience. But the yellowing edges of the mask showed age compared to the perfect white of their robe. I looked around at the rain, then back at the tall stranger. A lightning strike flashed as if to articulate a revelation.

They're completely dry. "Excuse me--hate to be a bother, but do you have a moment to talk?"

The man (at least, they sounded like a man) was surprisingly soft-spoken, sounding very polite despite his imposing height and... odd fashion choice. Clearing my voice, trying to avoid eye contact. "I, uh... what?"

The purple crayon markings on the mask seemed to shift around as he spoke. Even looking at the button eyes caused a type of vertigo I couldn't place. The man cleared his throat. "I asked if I could have a moment of your time? Just to talk, I promise."

Despite the relative charm in his voice, his appearance clashed so severely that it threw off any chance he had at seeming friendly. Regardless, I tried to be friendly back. "Er... sorry, sir? But uh... it's well into the night and I'm headed off to bed. I um... maybe next time?" But as I closed my door on the stranger, a brown boot, stained red and black with age and travel caught the door. Once again, the stranger spoke in a friendlier tone than I could ever imagine. "Oh please, won't you reconsider? I know it's late, but this'll only take a moment, I promise."

I had a pretty good idea of what he wanted to say, but I asked anyway. "What do you even wanna talk about?" I kept the door as closed as his foot would allow. The stranger twitched before laughing slightly, peeking through the crack in the doorway. His arms were oddly stationary at his sides, as if they were broken off at the socket, hanging uselessly. The purple crayon shifted again, now going in the opposite direction. "Oh, silly me! I didn't even tell you what I wished to talk about, of course you're suspicious." That, among other things. "Do you have some time to hear about the words of our one true God?"

There was something I couldn't quite place with how he said 'god' that sent a shiver down my spine. Despite the discomfort, I tried my best to keep my voice steady. "I uh... I'm an atheist. I don't really believe in that stuff. Not... Not anymore."

The crooked smile etched upon his mask seemed to lessen by a fraction. But as if it had never happened, the smile returned, if a little forced the second time around. (How could I tell?) "If you'll at least hear me out, I'm sure I can change your mind. Perhaps you just had a bad experience with your first religion. Mine is... different, to say the least."

The chipper tone his voice had contained so far was starting to slip and strain, frustration beneath the surface beginning to show. I could no longer control the fear I felt on my face and in my voice. "I-I really don't need any of that, I'm uh... good as is. Now really, I should get back to my--"

A black tear started dripping slowly down his right eyehole, staining the mask as it traveled further and further down. His voice was now painfully sweet, hardly hiding the annoyance and displeasure. "Please, will you at least try and listen? It is very important that I get this message out--"

"I said no! Go away, please!"

It seemed "no" was the stranger's breaking point. Another tear came out of his left eye, both eyes now dripping black. It wasn't the tears that scared me though, it was his suddenly frozen posture, straight and still as a statue, all while dripping ink like some sort of corrupted fountain. When he spoke again, it was barely a whisper, shaking and tense. "No...?"

The tears of tar started dripping faster, staining his white robes. "No?" he repeated, snapping one of his hands at a breakneck pace to crush the door with an elongated orange hand, brittle like clay, small bits were breaking off and flaking to the ground. The door creaked under the pressure of his grip. "No?" he said again, as the pressure increased on the door. If even possible, he seemed to grow taller as he dug his dirty nails into the door, wood splitting from the effort. I was useless against the creature.

"No!" the creature growled out, voice becoming as distorted as his appearance, as if gargling the very tar dripping from his eyes. As the door slammed against the wall, the hinges barely had time to groan before they snapped. (Just another thing to fix...) I get flung back with no choice but to watch as the creature hunches over to enter. Before I even know what's happening I'm pinned against the kitchen cabinets, head pounding from the impact. My lungs try and fail to bring in air. The creature sounds like it's struggling to maintain clear English as it speaks. "Every ti-me I try to help you-r insignificant ra-ce see the tru-th, you refuse! I off-er you a spo-ot among the enlight-ened, but no! You wi-sh to remain ig-norant forever!"

I'm still struggling to breathe as I choke out some final bitter words. "Maybe if you worked on your approach, more people--" The creature tightens its grip and I start seeing spots, whether from the tar dripping on my face or lack of oxygen, I can't tell. The creature shakes its head in disappointment. "You-r peo-ple will nev-er experience the true gl-ory of God." The failing lungs were starting to reach my brain. "Fine by me..." I whisper out, as a last sort of jab of defiance before completely fading.

The creature releases its grip barely, just enough for me to breathe again, the color returning to my face.

“Hu-man, expl-ain one thing t-o me, bef-ore you per-ish.” I don’t respond, but the creature asks anyway. “Why d-o you choo-se to re-main ignor-ant, wh-en the ans-wers are all s-o cle-ar in fro-nt of you?”

He’s right, in a way. This is clearly a supernatural figure, right in front of me, and yet, I still can’t take him on his word. I look out the window to the rain one last time before spitting out some of the chalky tar that had dripped on my face. “Because I don’t trust false prophets like you. Always shoving the idea of salvation in our faces like it can be bought or sold, as if just taking your word for it is gonna make it all better.”

This false prophet wipes his face with his sleeve, the black tar now even more smeared than it was before, obscuring the smile and purple crayon of his face. The carved smile disappears entirely, replaced by an equally crooked frown as the small button eyes widen, the vertigo from earlier reaching a peak I didn’t know was even possible. Staring into the eyeholes, it’s impossible to look the other way. I could have sworn there were church bells among the screaming choir in my mind.

Quick, like the lightning in the storm, everything is gone. All aside from the abandoned lasagna. Cold and molding, the only company are bugs.

You had fought hard to stay in the car, but here you are, sitting in the waiting room. Defeated.

You don’t understand why it’s universally expected that a person must outgrow their fear of the dentist. It didn’t matter that they hid the office inside a Craftsman’s home; the well-worn, hospitable exterior couldn’t make up for the waiting room’s artificial quality. The misshapen furniture and electric fireplace desperately desired to capture modernity but fell short of achieving the style due to the layout’s lack of connectivity. Instead, the space lacked any identity and it did nothing to ease your nerves.

You’ve only been here five minutes and you’re envisioning the walk back to your apartment. Ana is probably already back there now, since Chatterbox Dentistry isn’t more than four blocks from Forster Woods. Why you needed a Prius and an escort to get you here speaks volumes about your character.

You’re currently pretending to be invested in the content on your phone while trying to decipher what the receptionist is whispering to her colleague. You remind yourself that not everything is about you, yet when the two laugh, you can’t help but think it’s at your expense.

You feel eyes on you and begin to suspect they’re coming from the person sitting in the armchair across from you. He’s probably in on the joke.

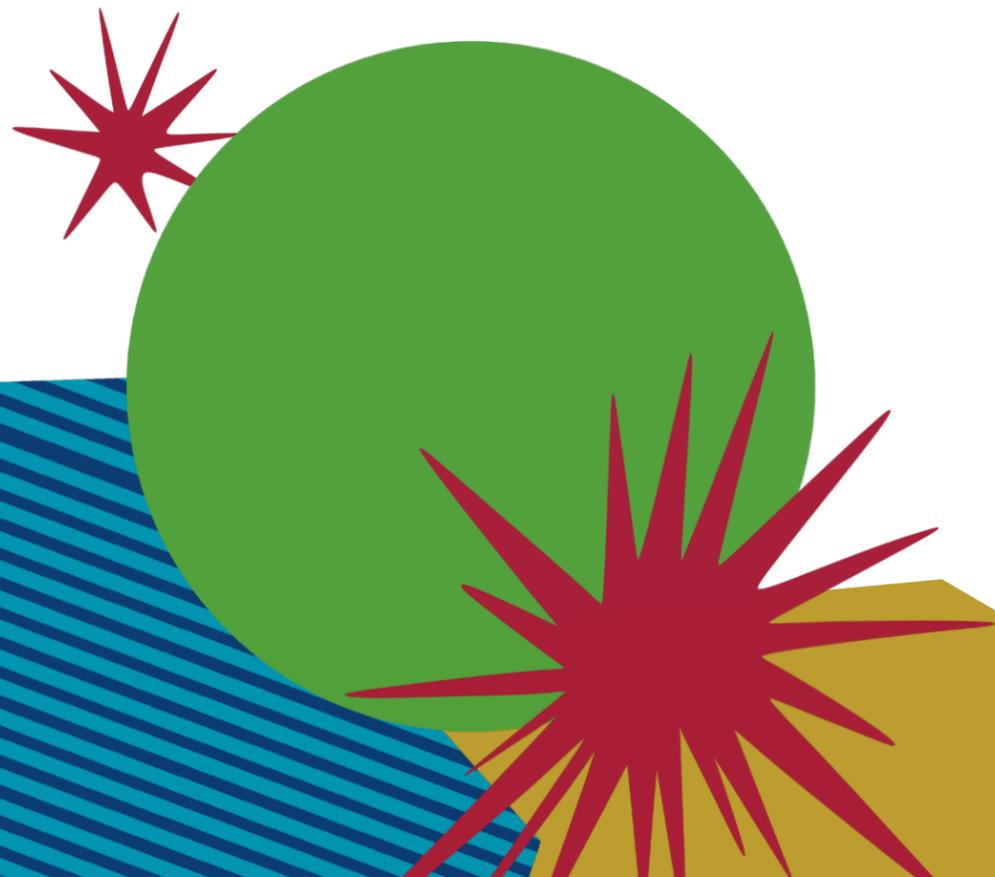
Ana would second your observation if she was here, and would also likely credit the attention you were receiving to your “frumpy” appearance. She had begged you to wear anything besides your baggy gray sweats and the shirt with the frog wearing a cowboy hat, but your argument in favor of comfort miraculously won out.

Your stomach clenches, and you remember how Ana had talked you out of eating anything this morning. Her reasoning sounded ironic now, “What if you feel sick?”

Ana always suggests water before food for an empty stomach. From her ideal bodily proportions and effortless sex appeal, she embodied what you aspired to be, so the water dispenser near reception had never looked more appealing.

Your head slightly spins as you go to stand and walk over to the counter, but you’re determined to get a drink. You grab a paper cup and fill it to the brim before returning to your seat. When you drink it in one go, regret suddenly hits as the cramps turn into ferocious waves.

Your eyes try to shut out the excruciating white lights. Was the room always this small? Was it always this hot?



Your mouth salivates, and your body instinctively stumbles back to the water counter, where you recall seeing a trash can next to it.

You tremble as the sour taste of bile finds its way to your throat and, ultimately, into the can. Tears streak your face as a hand on your shoulder leads you outside to the parking lot, where they direct you to sit on the curb.

After a few refreshing breaths, you look up at the stranger. He politely introduces himself, "I'm Xavier."

"Leah. Hey, I'm so sorry for what just happened. That was...embarrassing, to say the least." His round glasses remind you of Ana, but his skin is a much richer brown than hers.

"Don't be. Happens to everyone." Your skepticism must show because he sits beside you and asks, "Are you sure you're alright?"

You remind yourself that he's a stranger you just met, but you end up oversharing anyway. You explain that your best friend was trying to be helpful but only made you more nervous and self-conscious about a simple teeth cleaning.

He huffs, "It sounds like you need a new best friend."

You gasp, "I didn't mean to make her sound so terrible. She's great." Seeing his dubious expression, you go on, "I'm serious. I mean, I've known her forever. God, I live with her!"

"I just think if people go out of their way to make your life miserable, why wouldn't you find friends that didn't?"

But what if no one else will be my friend? You don't say the last part out loud.

"I guess I shouldn't miss my appointment." He stands, then reaches his hand down to hoist you up. Once you're standing, you realize you're about the same height.

You're not sure what compels you, but you say, "If I were to leave, I wouldn't have anywhere to go."

"Here, let me see your phone," logically, you shouldn't hand him your phone, but against your best judgment, you do. Thankfully, he hands it back and tells you that he just added his number to your contacts.

Xavier gives you a little wave and says he hopes to hear from you soon as he walks back into the house/dentist. You decide to ditch your appointment and contemplate the conversation on the ten-minute walk back to your apartment. You conclude that Xavier is right; you need to leave your toxic friend situation, but relying on the kindness of a stranger isn't your only option, right?

You press the code into the keypad to let yourself through the massive entrance gate, but instead of turning right and walking up the staircase to the third floor of the gray building as you usually do, you turn left. You can't help but notice everything you love about this complex, from the mismatched gray and orange buildings to the unnaturally green grass. It's winter in Austin and all the grass should be dead, yet life prevails here.

Somehow, you find yourself outside door 202 of the orange building. You know this is a terrible idea, but that doesn't stop you from knocking.

You hear footsteps approaching, and when she opens the door, you know there's no going back now.

"Petra, what are you doing here? Why aren't you at work?"

"I had a dentist appointment," as if that's an adequate excuse for taking the whole day off.

"Oh," is all she says.

Her calling you Petra was not a blunder but a mantle you craved when you couldn't tolerate Ana, or even your reality for any longer. Everything about Dizzy is ethereal. Her skin, body, and long red hair make her look more like a fictional princess than your neighbor.

"Dizzy, you know why I'm here." The intensity in her stare makes you break her gaze and trace the snaking, black tattoos on her arms until you admit, "I don't know what to do. I think I hate Ana."

She steps closer to you, now standing entirely outside the door. With her this close, all you can think about is how you've wanted to be this close to Dizzy since she introduced herself when you moved to Forster Woods three years ago. She leans her lips toward you but veers away from your own before coming close to your ear instead, "Leave Leah at the door, dear. I much prefer Petra."

That's when you do it. You shed Leah like a coat as you push Dizzy back into her apartment. Your new form, Petra, grabs Dizzy's shirt between your fists, bringing your lips together. You hope the taste of mint and strawberry lingers forever as you begrudgingly force yourself to pull away from her.

When Dizzy begins to rant about the two of you running away together to Rome, you can picture it. Why couldn't you forget your disappointing world and join Dizzy's? Feeling like you might bubble over, you force yourself to sit; you're grateful her couch is much more practical than the ones at Chatterbox. Dizzy follows you, and your lips meet for the second time. This time, you sacrifice some passion to softly sink into her hair and the crevices of her body. If this is what drowning feels like, maybe it's not such a terrible way to...

"Dizzy, why'd you leave the door open?"

Dizzy leaps from your grasp as Gus forces you to the less colorful surface.

Gus stops when he notices Dizzy isn't alone on the couch. "Oh, what brings you here, Leah."

Dizzy jumps up to hug her boyfriend before giving him a peck on the cheek.

Gus's muscular stature always makes you nervous, and this time is no different. "Well, I should get going then."

"You never said why you came over."

Dizzy begins to speak, saving you from coming up with an answer, “Leah needed some cheering up.”

“She’s a grown woman, Dizzy. She doesn’t need to be comforted like a child,” Gus whispers, frustrated.

You recognize that the only person at fault here is you. It was ignorant to believe Petra existed or that Dizzy would ever abandon Gus for you. Wherever Dizzy goes, Gus is bound to follow, leaving you feeling like an even worse person than you did before you showed up at her door.

They continue to argue over your presence, and your self-loathing expels you from the apartment.

You don’t want to see Ana, so you walk directionless. Flowers in every shade bloom through bark mulch and concoct a sweet, woody scent that calms you as it drifts throughout the complex.

You finally decide to make a call after walking in a circle around the complex for nearly thirty minutes.

“Hello?” You’re surprised that he actually answers.

“This is Leah from the dentist.”

“Oh, what’s going on, Leah?”

“I’m done. I need to leave now.”

“Okay. Can I pick you up in an hour?”

Wiping away tears, you don’t hesitate to answer, “Yes, that’ll work.”

You waste no time, heading straight to your apartment. When you charge through the unlocked door, you see Ana moving around the kitchen while the TV acts as background noise instead of entertainment. A copious amount of adrenaline and purpose spur you to announce, “I’m moving out,” before she can speak.

You both stay frozen until you break the standstill by crossing through the living room to take cover in your bedroom. Not long after locking the door, Ana starts demanding an explanation from outside. You take this as an opportunity to pack.

You’re relieved when you finish loading your suitcase with essentials and don’t hear screaming or cursing anymore, only a faint murmur coming from the TV.

You risk peeking out the door to check for Ana. When the main area appears void of life, you grab your suitcase and make a last-ditch effort for the front door. You don’t make it.

Standing in the hallway is a tall and somber figure. “Devin, I didn’t know you were coming over.” Devin, Ana’s cousin, likes to overstay his welcome and sleep on the couch for a week, draining as much joy as he can from your life. While the size difference between the two cousins is colossal, they share the same tan skin and raven black hair.

“You look restless, and what’s with the suitcase?”

Unable to concoct a creative excuse for your state, you admit, “I’m moving out.”

His eyes move around the apartment as he walks past you to the main room, “This is a nice place, and with this economy, I doubt you’ll find anything better.”

He sounded like Ana, “Just need a change of scenery.”

He turns around, “I think we both know this has nothing to do with the scenery.”

His tone went from playful to severe in a heartbeat. You take a protective stance, crossing your arms, and refuse to follow him out of the hallway. “How do you know what this is about?”

“Leah Leah Leah. Don’t you ever learn,” he shakes his head. “You know how many times you’ve threatened to drop us?”

By “us,” you presume he refers to himself and Ana, but maybe Dizzy, and Gus as well.

“Why can’t you just accept that there is no you without us.”

You struggle to find words, let alone a solid argument, and yell, “Because you’re ruining my life!”

He continues, unfazed, “A little dramatic, don’t you think? You make it sound like we have you trapped here. What? You need a prince to come and rescue you?”

You notice that he’s slowly inched his way towards you. Only about two feet separates you now. “You’ve always had a choice. Admit it, as much as you hate us, you know we’re what you deserve!”

Those words hit you the hardest. It’s not sadness you feel but an emptiness. You finally comprehend that you’re stuck here as long as you’re you. Forever.

Devin sighs, “The Xaviers of the world will come and go, but your minor inconveniences are forever. If I were you, I’d learn to live with us.” He walks away, and you stand there numb.

You don’t know how he knew about Xavier, but some things aren’t worth questioning.

The sun is setting, but it’s eerily warm outside as you walk to the entrance gate. Not even Forster Woods’s peaceful, luxurious atmosphere crafted by the smell of sea salt wafting from the pool and the sound of jovial canines at the dog park could grant you respite.

Xavier can’t get in without the code, so instead, his car has pulled around the loop. He must see you approaching because he rolls down the window.

There’s a selfish part of you that wishes he could at least pretend to be a little disappointed that you don’t carry a bag or appear to have any intention of opening the gate.

“I’m sorry,” you mutter from the other side of the black, iron bars.

You've done this part so many times, but those are the only words you can ever come up with.

His tone is earnest when he says, "I'm sorry that I can't save you, but we both know that's something you have to do yourself." He rolls up the window, and you force yourself to watch the car drive away until the headlights no longer flood the street before returning home.

When you reach the front door, you hear your once quiet apartment bursting with life. Upon entering, you first see Ana's lithe body sprawled out on the couch, her excitement at your arrival is palpable. Then your attention turns to the banner on the wall above her head, that reads, Welcome Home! The cruel joke worsens when you notice Dizzy hanging on Gus near the kitchen counter. Her lips upturn slightly in what appears to be a smile. Someone must've asked you to join the party, or maybe you told everyone, "I'm going to bed," completely unprompted.

When you finally get to your bedroom, hand gripping the door knob, you catch Devin out of the corner of your eye, pouring himself a drink in the kitchen. When he looks up to meet your eyes, he winks.

You slam your door shut behind you and sink your back against it. You've been here too many times to count, and you know sleep won't come when the loud conversations outside will force you to relive your miserable day until the next morning. It's either that or fall asleep, only to have the voices follow you into your dreams.

But tonight, in the endless tunnel of noise, you can still hear something Devin said: Xaviers come and go. That thought alone gives you all the hope you need to keep hanging on because, who knows, maybe someday, you'll finally go too.

## Voice of Courage: Sophie Cruz

Michelle Mendoza

In a world where courage blooms, a story unfolds,  
Of a little girl with dreams, brave and bold.  
Sophie Cruz, at just the tender age of nine,  
Lit a spark, a beacon, a flame divine.

Parents from Oaxaca, Mexico, her roots deep,  
To the land of opportunity, her family did leap.  
But in the shadows of uncertainty, they did dwell,  
Undocumented, in a land they hoped would tell

A tale of acceptance, of compassion, of grace,  
But oft met with barriers, a challenging race.  
Yet Sophie, with innocence, saw a way,  
To speak up, to stand tall, to have her say.

At five, she approached the Pope, serene,  
With a letter in hand, her message keen.  
To plead for her parents, for those unseen,  
To seek justice, to mend the broken seam.

Her plea echoed far and wide,  
As the world watched, tears in their eyes.  
For in her innocence, she held a power,  
To ignite change in this darkest hour.

From that moment on, Sophie's voice soared,  
A beacon of hope, a champion adored.

She marched with women, in solidarity,  
For equality, justice, and dignity.

blood, She sat in on hearings, with wisdom beyond her years,  
Listening intently, dispelling fears.  
Meeting leaders, from near and far,  
A symbol of resilience, like a guiding star.

She stood tall,  
A testament to the power of one small  
Voice, echoing through the chambers of power,  
A reminder that change blooms like a flower.

Though young in age, her spirit vast,  
Sophie Cruz, a force unsurpassed.  
In the immigrant rights movement, she stands strong,  
A testament to courage, where she belongs.

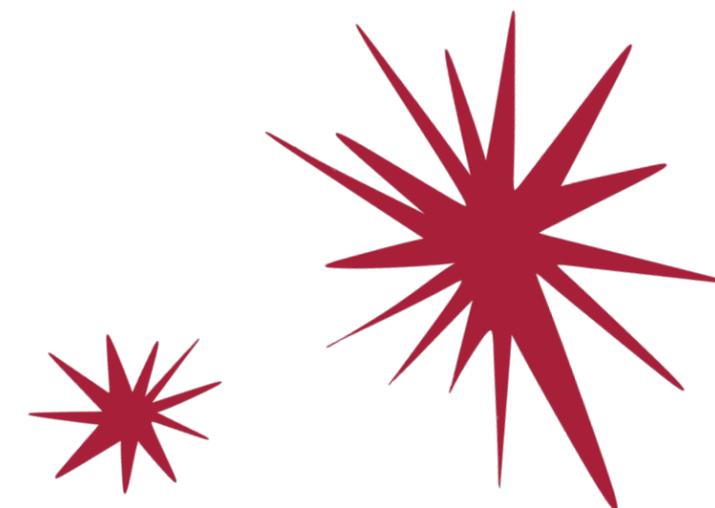
So let her story inspire, let it ignite,  
The flame of justice, burning bright.  
For in Sophie's journey, we all can see,  
The power of one voice, the power to be free.

Thank you

## Hospital

Perla Ramirez

As a nurse aide, echoes of life's trials in noise would serenade.  
On the fourth day's whisper, a revelation starts to speed,  
I found in silence, the rhythm of my beating heart.  
Checking vital signs to hear the heart beep,  
Life's pattern in pulses, a depth full-blown.  
Listening to the doctor, and seeing the family cry,  
In the heart of crisis, where seconds weigh,  
A struggle with life, where optimism dictates.  
Through the corridors, a sprint and a prayer.  
In the face of gloom, empathy set free.  
Each beep and hum, a language untold.  
In the emergency's grasp, a narrative revealed.  
With every measured step, a purpose defined,  
In the tapestry of chaos, a healer's design.  
The doctor's words weigh heavy, truth implies.  
The oak of solace, witnessing broken hearts.  
In life's grand stage, where fates entwine,  
The oak stands firm, a sentinel benign.



# On The Next Go Around

Coral Brundige

In a whirlpool in the heavens, between earth and between sky  
a bit of your stardust lingered with mine  
before the beginning of time, of love, and of life.

On a starlit path from space to earth below,  
from spirit to child to slightly-less-child,  
I spotted you—stardust dancing in my soul.

But you're on the verge of leaving now, no-longer-stardust-child,  
and I don't think you remember me.

That's alright;  
I'll just catch you on the next go around.

I watch you leave, glitter in your eyes.  
I dare not wish your elsewhere-hope dies—  
it's far too dear to you,  
no longer stardust, never once mine.

It's okay, I never did mind.  
I'll catch you next time,  
on the next go around, the next earth, the next life.

And so I grew old without you and died  
and my soul waited patiently life after life.

To the universe with two moons, no earth, a purple sun,  
I'm convinced that I'd know you in each and every one.

# Imagine

Emmalynne Arita

Imagine it.

Imagine my kitchen, the cabinet to the left of the stove.

Imagine the blue, white and yellow bottles pushing on the cabinet  
door, threatening to jump every time the hinges are pulled open.

Imagine the Pharmacy bags which litter the counter, the extra bottles  
hidden in the Mixer. The cookbooks peeking out from under the blue  
and red bags of medicine.

Imagine his bedroom. The camera wires sticking through the  
bookshelves, the white nightstand next to his desk, the constant scent  
of death lingering in the corners of his room.

Imagine my bedroom door. The hinges falling off, the small hole he  
created last winter, the faded white paint peeling off of his scratch  
marks.

Imagine my door knob. The screws falling loose worn from everytime  
he has tried to push his way through, the chains from the deadlocks  
clanking, and the silver piece of metal constantly turned left in cases of  
emergency.

Imagine my Mother's room. Boxes littering the floor, medical records,  
emergency meds, and the bulky spare magnet attached to the dresser  
handle.

Imagine my sister's car. The stuffing peeking out from her backseat,  
his hand print on the back of her headrest, the slight resistance in her  
car door from him.

Imagine the floor. Blood stains scattered about the carpet. His head hits the warm carpet, over and over as his seizing progresses. Ambulance lights flood the living room window, illuminating the saliva dripping from his mouth as his VNS continues to fail. Death lingers at my front door, I push him back and beg him to leave.

Imagine my version of nostalgia. The neon lights surrounding the parking garage, “VISITOR” plastered onto my pink, fluffy jacket. The jungle animals on the tile floor leading to the elevator, the tubes and wires hanging from his body, the dark and dreary hallways which echoed the Heart Rate monitors in perfect harmony.

Imagine my doctor. The bright fluorescent lights beaming onto my forehead as I sit on the paper wrapped bench. The doctor’s voice echoes through the hallway, as she pushes the brown wooden door open revealing the pink walls with jungle animals and marine life plastered throughout the room. I sit there patiently scrolling through my social media as my mother runs through her list of questions regarding my brother; only to be met with more questions.

Imagine my normal. His medicine, his magnet, his Doctor’s appointments, his papers, his bruises, his scratches, his emergency protocol, it’s all his.

Imagine his hard nights. Where I barricade my door, push the two deadlocks into place and sit cross cross on my blanket, avoiding his screaming, ignoring his pounding. No tears drip off my cheek, my breath does not quicken, my heart does not pulse, my mind does not race. I simply sit there, still as a rock. This is every Monday-Sunday. This is routine.

I lay awake at night, staring at the popcorn ceiling, and imagine a universe where my world did not contain him at every turn. I see my uneducated peers, asking me questions, I wish I didn’t know the answer to. I envy their ability to be so ill informed on seizure protocol, on the names of every medication, on the possibility of CBD curing Epilepsy.

I envy those with an annoying younger brother, who clings to them and runs to Mom at the slightest inconvenience.

I envy the minds that are so easily coerced into believing this isn’t hard to deal with.

I envy the sisters who don’t have his doctor on speed-dial,

I envy the brothers who don’t know what an Epileptologist studies

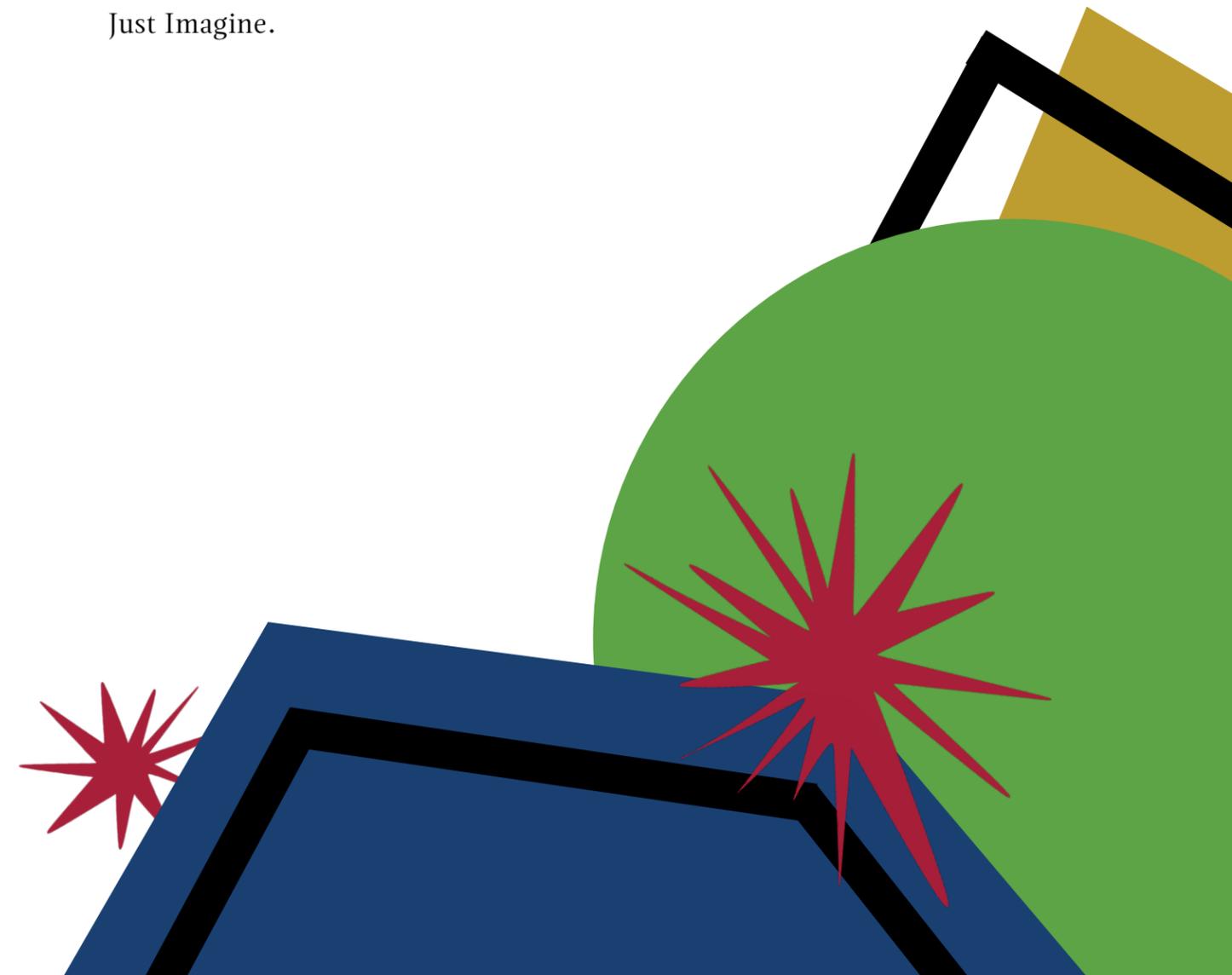
I envy the siblings who can call those exhausted siblings “selfish” for crying

Death constantly hunts him down, and I’m so scared that I can’t save him.

So Imagine, my life, without illness, without him.

Imagine my life without the guilt of wanting a life without him.

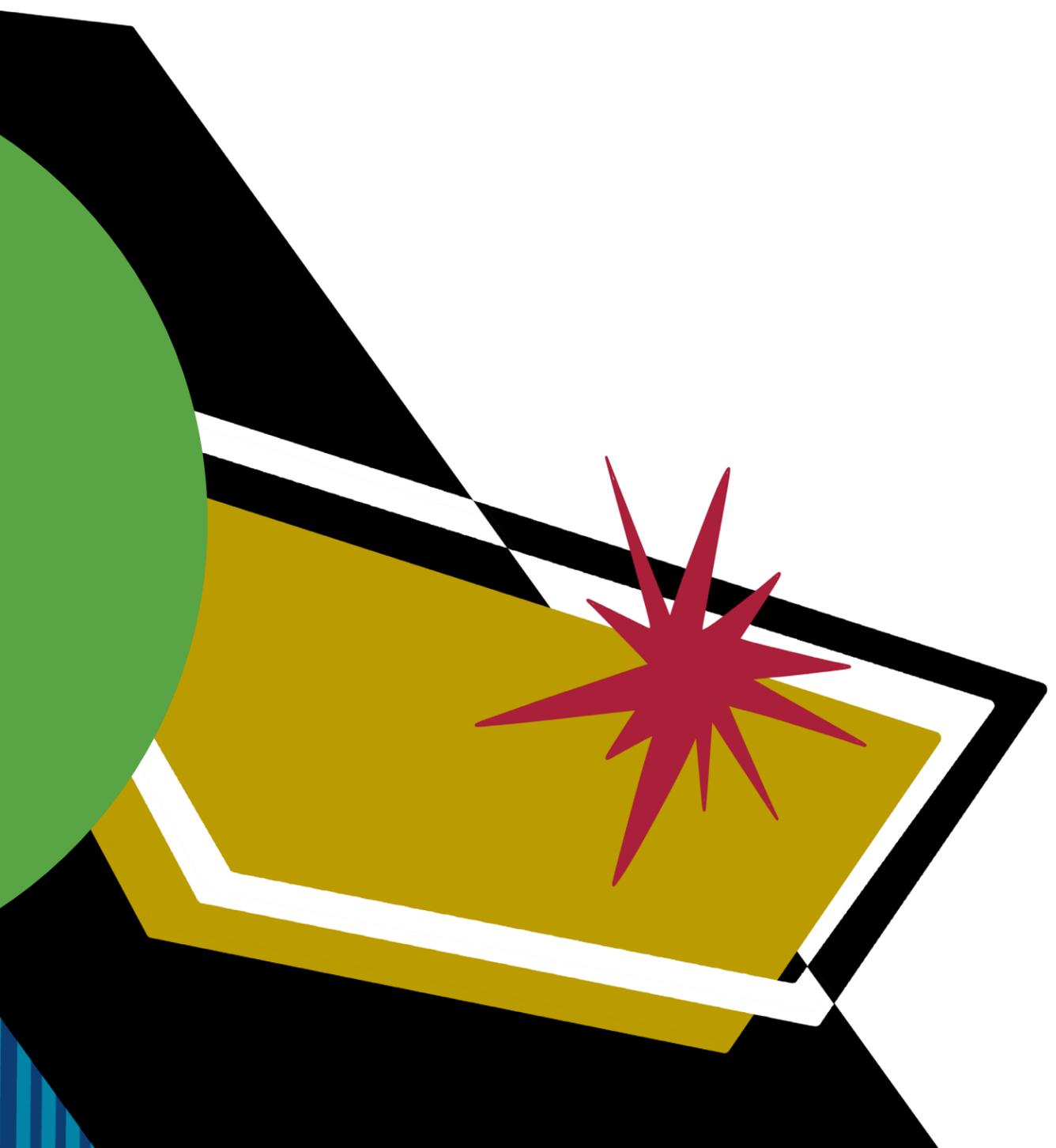
Just Imagine.



# Nature-Themed

## Poems

(pages 63 - 66)



## Washed-Up Divya Goruganthu

Heavy on the floor of a river  
Devoid of any movement

Impervious to the ebbs and flows  
Of famine, fire, floods

Settled among the sediment  
Content to let it all wash over

No tension, terror, or tremor  
To cause tired toes to tremble

All around and above  
Life continues to course

Each beleaguered breath blown  
Sinks deeper into a riverbed home

All around and surrounding  
Duties attempt a jostling

Old leaves, stones, twigs and branches  
Useless to rouse these weary bones

Here to rest, as the world moves past  
a loggy place for a washed-out body

Content to ignore what is  
All around above and surrounding

Each bleary breath blown

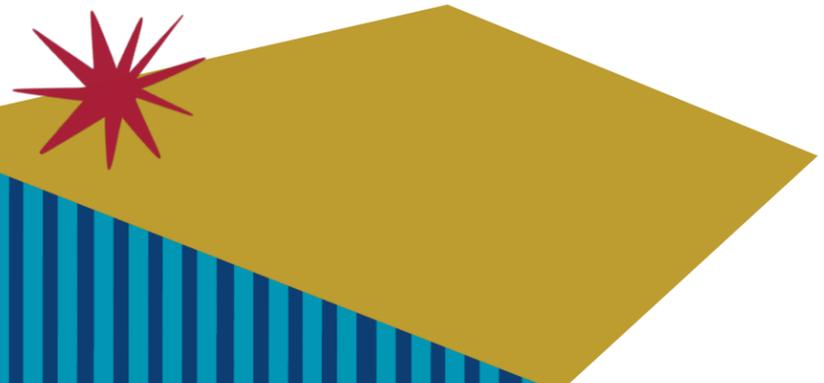
## Requiem

Benjamin Kajs

It's a trivial conviction  
The zephyr steals  
In contradiction, it takes with it the wind  
Azure surroundings from sardonic truths—  
I'm left alone

Her harsh blows, they burn my skin  
I can start to peel, and shed my hope  
I can start to walk, walk down that road  
It's bootstrapped again and will be for time—  
Time to come

Moors in dreams  
Resent the rooted  
The evergreen jester jests, such impudence with the rustling  
It was she who felled the stature and razed my all



## Rose of Thorns

Ryan Rodriguez

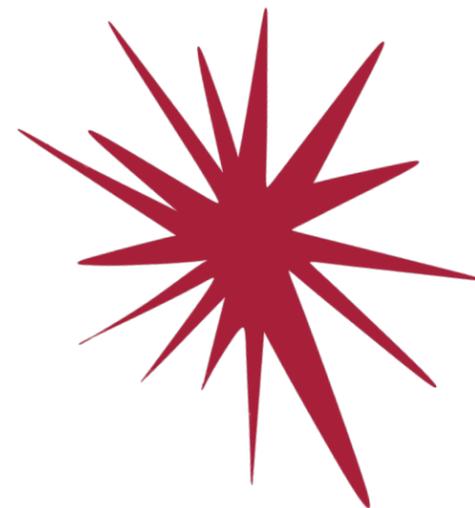
A rose of thorns,  
So beautiful to behold,  
You beckon me near,  
Yet, draw blood with your hold.

A rose of thorns,  
Your beauty is a guise,  
I reach out to touch,  
And meet with a surprise.

A rose of thorns,  
Each petal a memory, each thorn a scar,  
Your beauty, a magnet, drew me close,  
Yet your touch left wounds, deep and raw.

In your presence, I found both solace and pain,  
A paradox of love, I struggled to explain,  
Each prick of your thorns, a reminder of us,  
In a garden of memories, lost in the fuss.

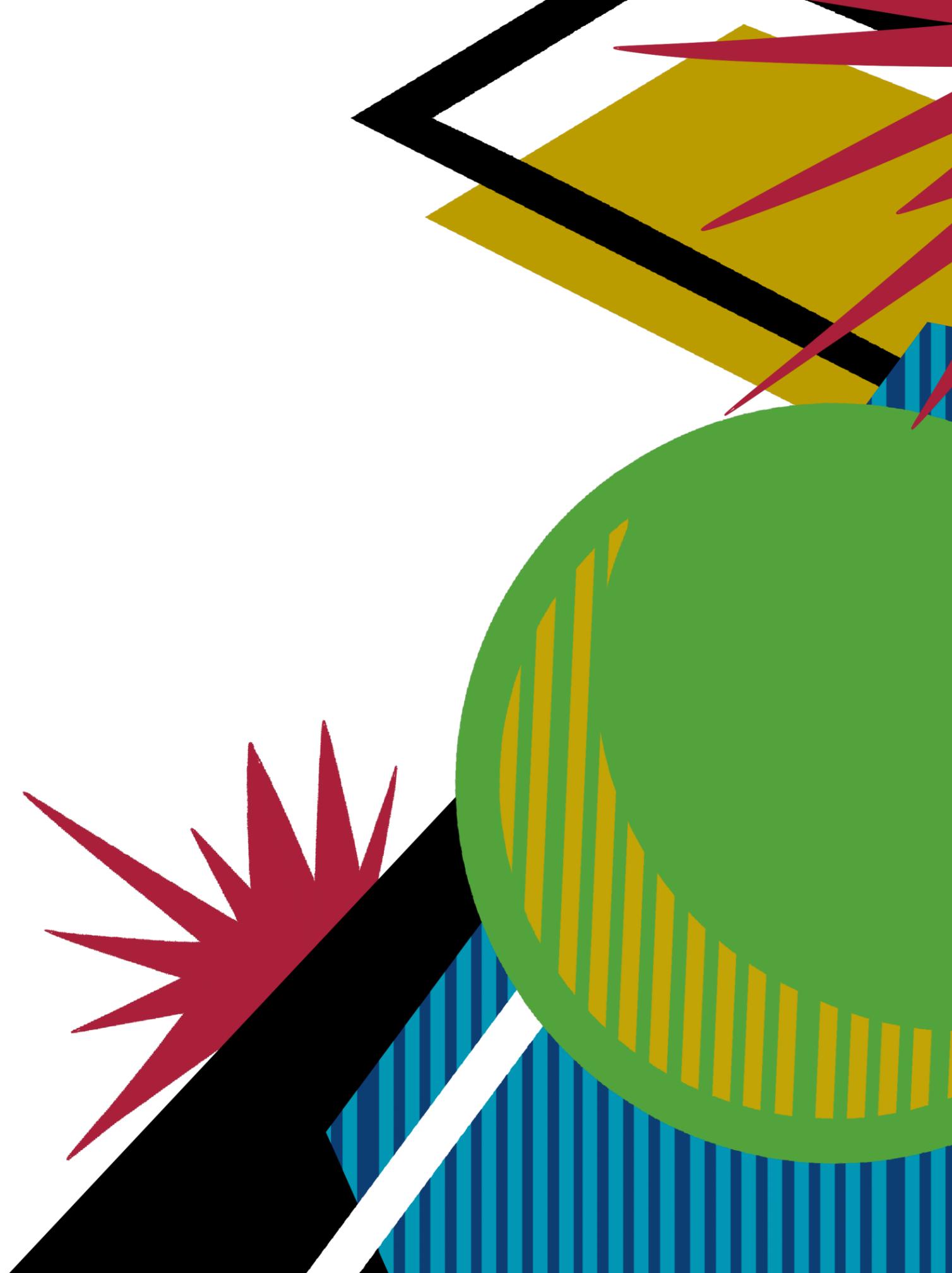
I entrust you to another's care,  
Hoping you'll flourish there,  
Even if it's not with me,  
Your happiness is all I hope for thee.



# My Relationship to Nature

Suresh Neupane

The bright of sun glows up my mind  
The early fresh air wakes up my organ  
This is the heaven where i like to hide  
please god save my mother for rest of my life  
(Love and save the Nature)



# CACCIATORE

**Poetry**

(pages 70 - 91)



## Manhood

James Edwards

Men don't cry. We slip from the comfort of our own beds, breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, and it all still hurts; from the moment we rise, until the skies shift to darkness; where we can sit on the edge of our beds, and breathe in, and breathe out. We were always told to hide it all, underneath clenched jaws and trembling little fists. To go through schoolyards and dinner tables; with darkened eyes and plastic hearts forced to be made of stone. A generation of little boys in suits and ties, grieving something we never had, at the edge of a burial ground; of a childhood spent in buried aches. All those "look me in the eyes when I talk," all those "boys don't cry", all those words that all men oddly share like the ones before them; turned into unwanted rituals for a silent yet violent manhood, an open door to a madhouse made of tempered glass, where we all sit together yet sit alone, with clenched jaws and wrinkly, calloused fists, wishing for something we lived yet never felt, a childhood or a hug; things we never had, yet always miss.

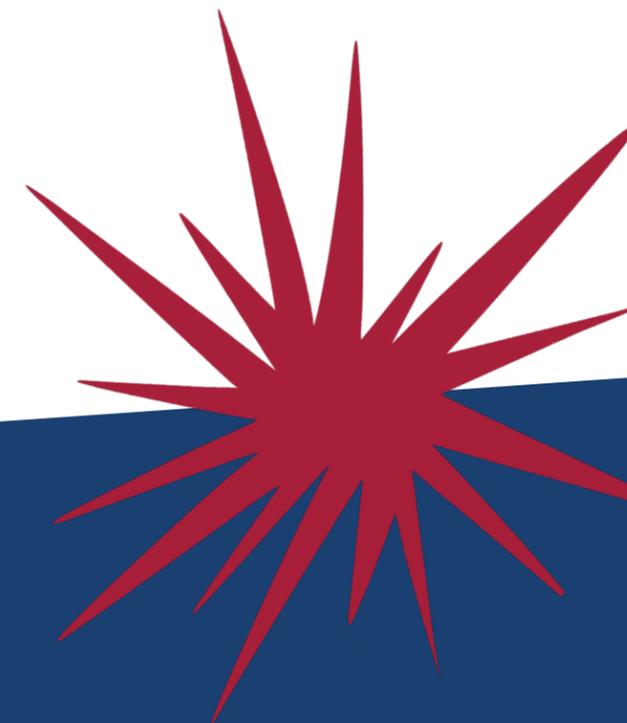
## Quantifiable Reality

Apollo Van Ohlen

It's an incomplete desire for something I've never had.

"A part of my heart lives in the work I've made," they say. I look down at the fraction of my soul I have strangled in my hands. There is something so gentle yet grueling yet possessive yet messy yet rewarding about poetry. The need, the want, the love, all of the strength and devotion borne from held-back desperation.

Anxiety feels like anticipation, feels like hunger, feels like something resting against my ribs, taking a breath before it sinks its teeth—turns to fear. It's something so strange to me, hearing people say, "I dance the line between good and evil", because I know that they do not. When they say that, they do not mean that they are on the line between good and evil, but that they want to do whatever they'd like with no consequences, no attachment. No, the ones who truly understand are the ones who know that there is no line.



## My Life is Sand

Luke Kenisell

I'm the sand in the top of an hourglass, fading away until I'm no longer there. My friends say I'll make it through, that I'll definitely survive this plague eating away at me for months. I don't believe them. I am getting smaller and smaller. No matter what I do, nothing that used to make me happy hits the same anymore. Music, video games, reading... It just feels like a waste of time. I don't know where I want to be in 2 years from now, it just seems so wrong that I'll get that far. Whatever I do, I just get sucked into this wormhole of boredom and longing for something new. All my real life friends that I thought knew me haven't seen me in months. I lost everyone I cared about, I've lost my drive and everything just feels bland. I don't really know what I'll do to get out of this, but I hope my only out isn't the one that many people immediately think of.

"You'll make it through."

"You can get your life together."

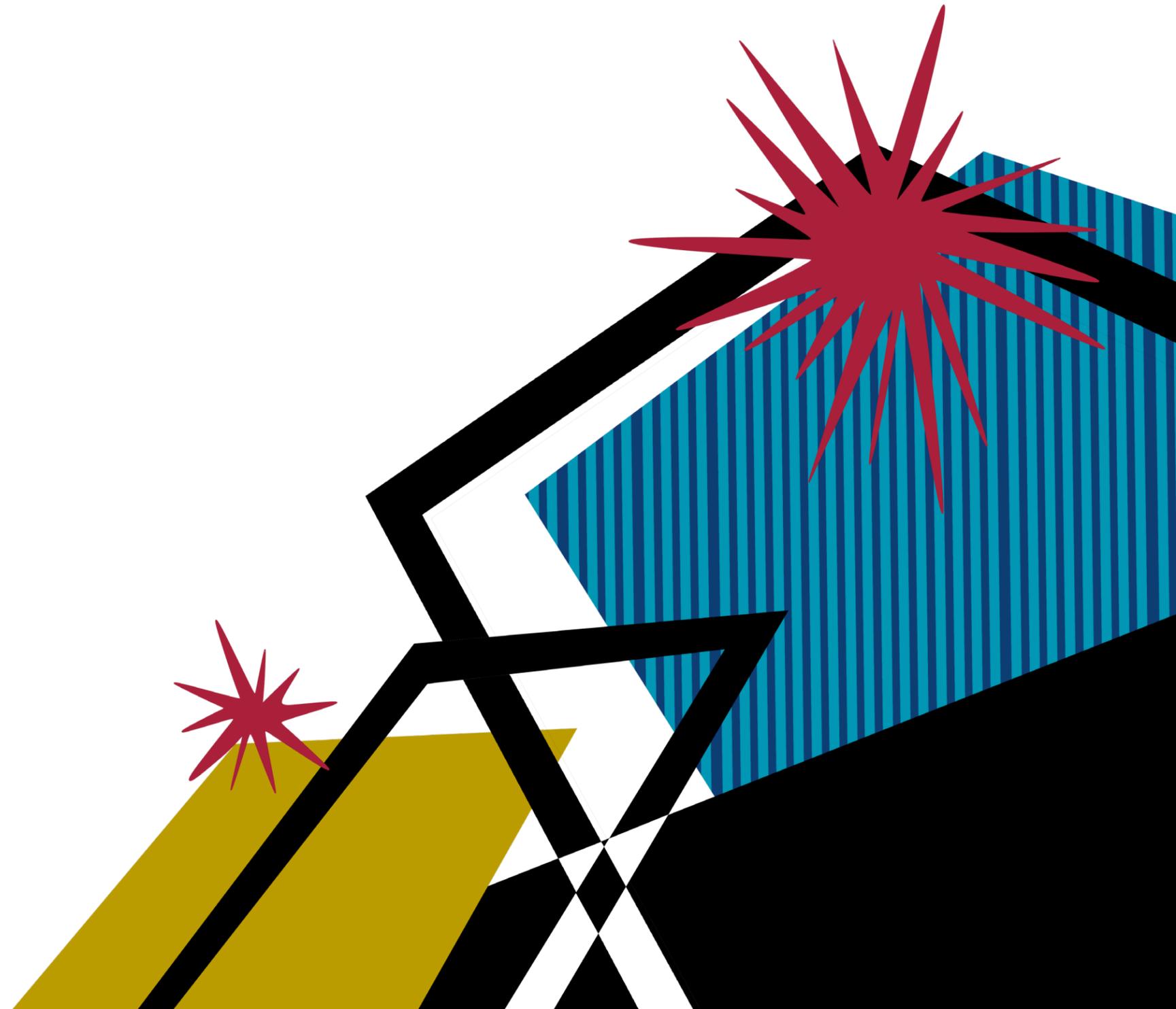
"You are valued and people care about you."

"We will always be there for you."

I really hope so, friends."

# Honorable Mention

(pages 74 - 76)



# Plummet

Zoey Martens

Sitting on top of my roof, I take in the view.  
The neighboring house billows out fluffy smokestacks as the tenant bakes her annual homemade lemon pie.  
A kettle of hawks circle nearby, hunting down their next meal.  
Chattering squirrels scamper amongst the trees  
Fluttering leaves dance with the wind, gracefully descending to the ground.  
I nestle my fingers between the shingles while the wind plays with my hair.  
Crack.  
Slowly, I bring my eyes to the origin of the sound.  
Crack.  
Pulling away rapidly, I try to wedge myself free from the shingles grasp.  
The chittering of squirrels fill the nearby trees.  
Crack.  
I squirm, I yank. I pull, I push. The roof does not free me.  
The wind tosses my body from side to side.  
Crack.  
The sound of splitting wood echoes across the trees.  
Silence fills the air.  
Why did the trees stop swaying? Why has the wind gone astray? Yet, why do the smokestacks grow?  
Acrid air fills my lungs.  
And I plummet inwards with the roof.  
My vision becomes hazed.  
Breathing is a new challenge.  
The only thing I make out,  
Are the shadows of the hawks circling above me.  
Taking in their new prey.

# The Train Station

Autumn Hoppa

**The girl saw herself as something akin to a train station. People** frequently stop by for a brief period of time only to hop on the next train and ride away. She saw this when her mom left with no explanation, never to come back. She saw this when her friends moved away for college, each slowly talking to her less and less. She saw this when her dad passed away and left her alone in a small empty house. Each time someone left, they took a piece of her with them. Throughout her life she had many romantic relationships. Each one always ended the same. They would meet and fall in love, she would entrust a piece of her dwindling soul to them, then they would leave. People took from her so often that pieces started peeling off by themselves. Eventually she was left with so little of herself she could no longer move. She was stuck alone at that train station, unable to get on a train of her own.

## You Know This. You Know Me

Apollo Van Ohlen

I look along the splintered wood of faux halls and melting faces,  
burning candle wax and bare, wooden beams, praising a man we've  
never seen.

If he were real, if He were real, I'd beg him to strike me down.

I am the daughter laid to rest, sleeping in her unmade sheets; I am the  
son you never wanted, but the sun you always had—and I have wept,  
and I have wept.

I wonder if you would have loved me more if I were always your son,  
but now I have learned it doesn't matter.

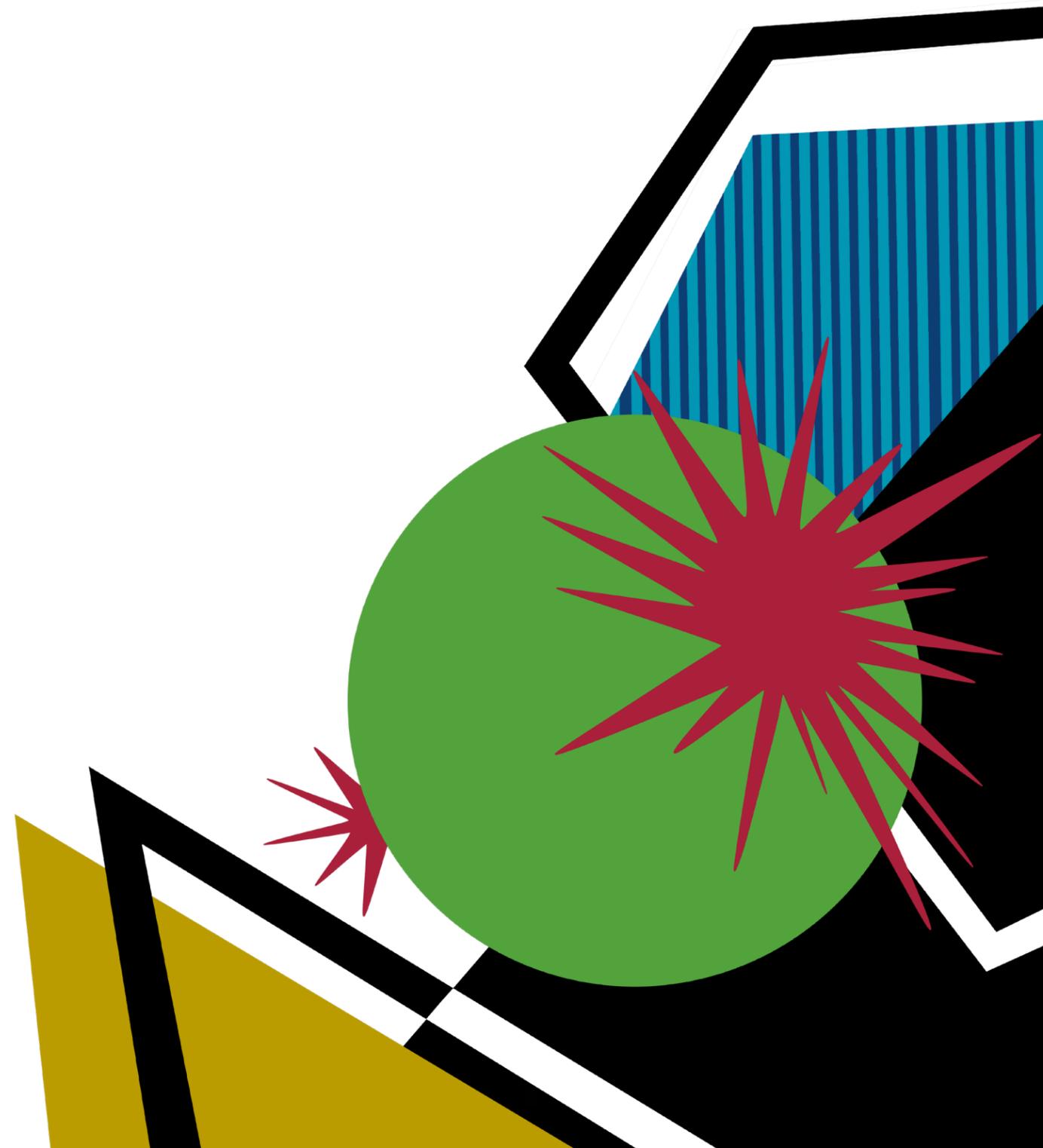
It will never be less bad, but it will be easier to hold, less to weigh, as I  
examine the fractured mosaic and hold it close to my heart, and I know  
I will look back in shame, but understand,

I am not kind and I am not sweet;

I will speak and move and live like a man that was born a girl—and  
you cannot change that. I am the girl left behind and I am the boy  
finding her again. I am the amalgamation of splintered, fractured light  
you shine on us, always us.

# Special Mention

(pages 78 - 84)



## Hard to Love

Isis Gauthier

I always feel her resentment on my shoulders.  
Every time I enter a room, I ask her,  
“What happened? Why couldn’t you love me in a way that I understood?”  
She gives me the cold shoulder.  
She looks me in the eyes, takes my tongue from my mouth,  
and holds it.  
She chooses when I get to speak  
And to her liking, it was never.  
“I beg to know is it because I remind you of yourself? Or am I different  
from what you wanted?”  
She walks past me.  
“I won’t call you mom, even though you are my mother. I won’t call you  
that.”  
She walks out the door.  
She taught me how to be alone a long time ago  
“I’m sorry that I’m hard to love,” I admit to her  
And she says I should be.

## Six & Eight

Peyton Rhoton

He moved his finger against the inner surface of the sheet and made a six with it, and then an eight. This was his go-to when the nightmares woke him up, which lately was all the time. He’d always felt comfort from the numbers six and eight, ever since he was a boy. He knows to most it sounds silly, but he believes he has a connection to them. He was born in the sixth month of the year, on the eighth day, and grew up to have six freckles across his right arm and eight across his face. He was number sixty-eight on every sports team by coincidence, and his younger brother is exactly six years and eight months younger than him. He sighs, taking a deep breath. His mom had just gotten into a car crash, and all he can see when he closes his eyes is her face laying in a hospital bed. He’d even begun attempting to stay up all night just to avoid the horror of what awaits him when sleep arrives. He takes six deep breaths and traces another six and eight into his bedsheet before sighing and attempting to battle sleep once again.

## To Mi Mamita

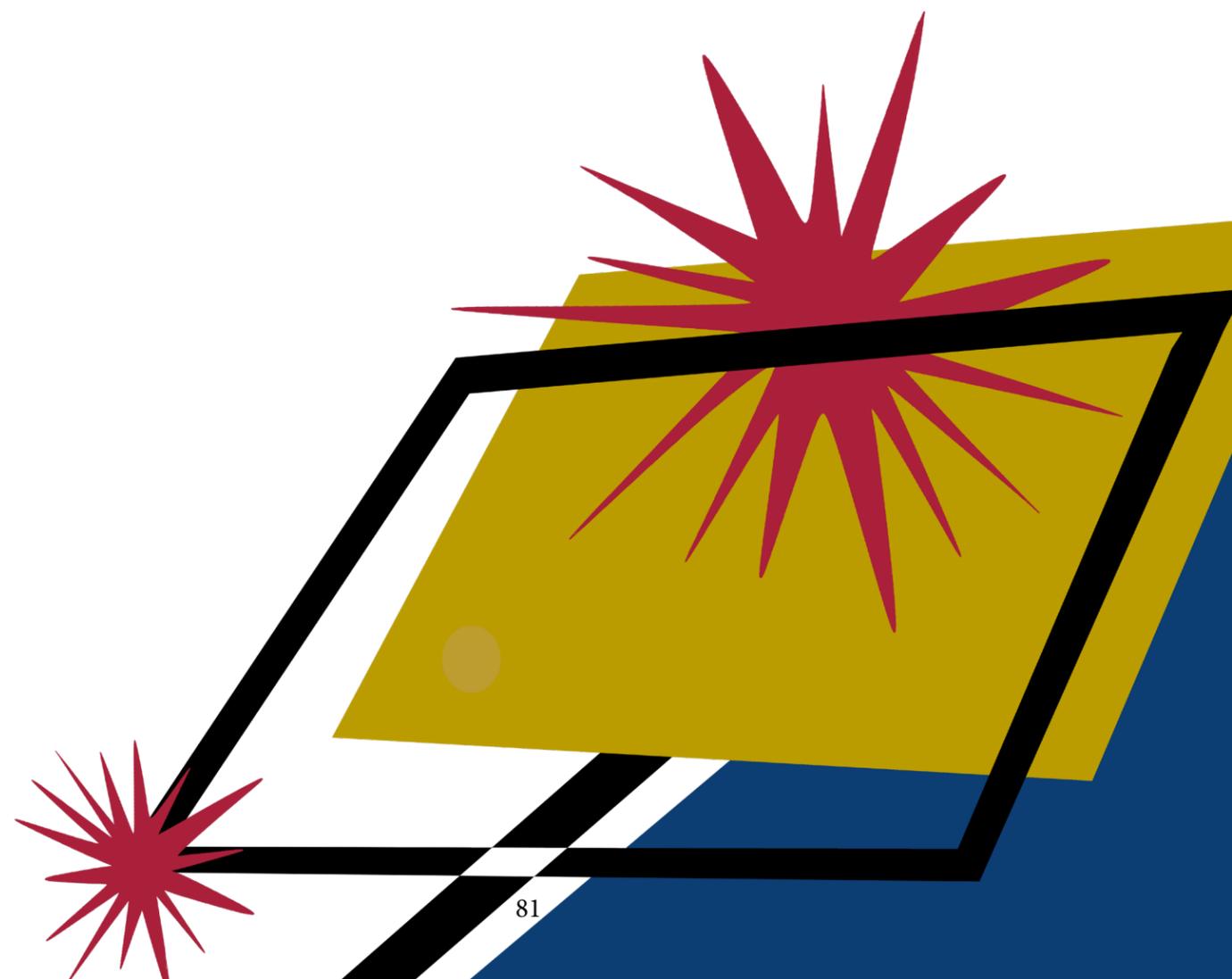
Alexa Mata

I'm sorry to my mamita for being insolent and mouthy to her when I was younger. I was naïve and thought I knew everything there was to know about life. I doubted her cuando ella ya fue, vino y yo voy. I'm sorry for thinking she never loved me when all she's doing is protecting and teaching me the ways of life. I'm sorry for not seeing her as human before, for not wanting to know who she was. Susana, mí mamita was a normal being too before she became a mother who gives unconditional love and devotes her life to us, putting us before herself. She accepted something instructions are not included in, and gave maternal love when she, herself did not know what it was or felt like. Being a mother is not easy they have hard days too, I didn't see it when I was younger, but I can affirm they shed tears too. My heart squeezes when I see her cry in silence facing away almost embarrassed. Today I'm who I am, Considering I learned from the strongest and bravest person. Susana, mí mamita linda, the one I truly love with my whole heart.

## The Coach

Jacob Vasquez

"One more!" says the coach. The players struggle to stand as that seems to be the only thing the coach knows. "Get up!" says the coach, as the players' heads are ringing and dazed. "Just do it!" as the players start to question the coaches effectiveness. "Stop looking so sad!" while the players start to lose the love for the game. The players seek help from home but come back with the message "Give the coach a chance, he'll grow on you". The players start seeking a way out of the coach while the coach says "Be a man!". As his best player gets a crucial injury, the coach says "you're fine, keep playing!". The player finds out his playing days are over, and looks to the coach for answers. Coach turns away and says "Who's next!"



## **A Fraud**

**Liberty Payne**

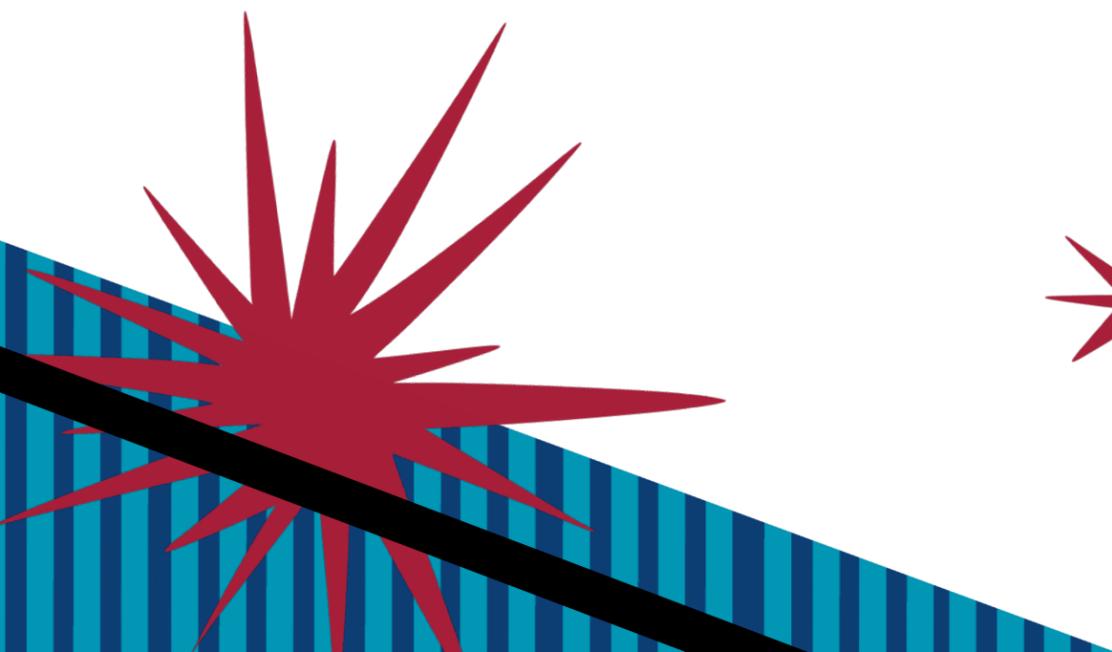


Writing is my least favorite thing. Everytime I get in front of a keyboard to reply to questions or write an essay, I can feel my confidence shrink. Everytime I get frustrated over a prompt or essay, I feel myself die a bit inside and try to shrink away from the world around me and hope everyone will look away or disappear. I turn back into a child as I hear my fathers open threats of “I’ll give you something to cry about”. I struggle with writing because there is technically no one answer, and it makes me feel extremely small when I cannot even think of one. I am often praised for my writing skill and told to share it with the world, but when I hear it, I only feel disappointed. It makes me want to shrink away from everyone who reads my work because it makes me feel like a fraud. If I could shrink away from the crowd or disappear from the writing community, only then could I actually feel free and not suffocate from the growing shame I feel as I continue to shrink away in the empty words I lay on the empty page.

## **A Paper Bird**

**Zainab Naqibullah**

The Palestinian boy with a paper bird welcomes Israel with open arms. “What if we take over the land and leave a strip?” Israel asks. The Palestinian boy moved to a place surrounded with walls and is unable to leave. He doesn’t complain though, as his voice will not be heard. In fact, it may cost him his life. “What if we block aid, and leave them stranded with no help?” Israel asks. The Palestinian boy struggles to survive, as he is being followed by gunshots and false hope. There is no escape, no home left. “What if we kill them all?” Israel asks as the Palestinian boy lays still watching his home turn into dust and flames. Holding on to his paper bird, begging to see one in the sky.



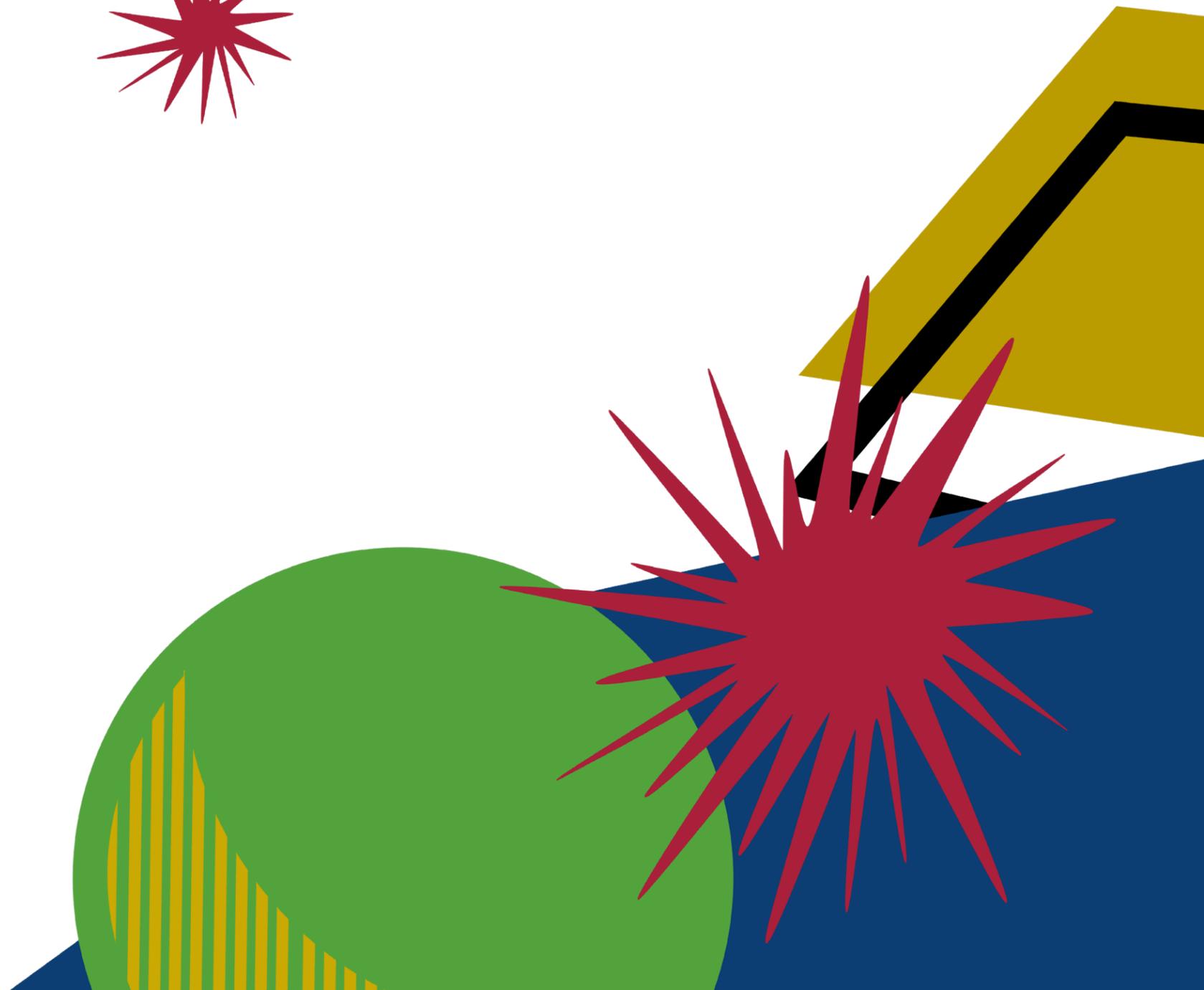
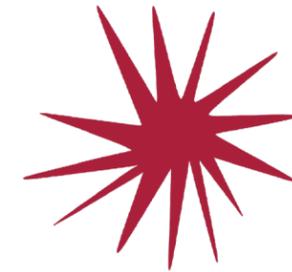
## Little Supper

Isabelle Fussell

Under the blanket of night, Mary wakes from her warm bed and tiptoes across the floor. As she patters to the tiny door in the wall, she feels herself shrink and shrink. With her now dewdrop-sized fist, she knocks. The door cracks open to reveal a little mouse dressed in a taffy wrapper tutu. “Hello!” she squeaks. “We’ve never had a guest like you,” pipes a wrinkled-looking mouse from behind the first, “please come in.” Gratefully, Mary shuffles into the foyer and peaks around. In the center of the room sits a table fashioned from a crayon box, surrounded by cotton ball seats. The tutu-wearing mouse excitedly leads her to sit. Cheeses atop bottle caps are set on the table, along with a blue, flower-shaped something on a poker chip. Sensing her confusion, the mouse explains, “It’s a special cake Dad found!” The mice and Mary eat and talk for hours, only stopping when the littlest mouse sickens up a dark fluid and feints. It’s chaos as the mice scrabble and squeal. Mary watches with horror as they drop, one after another. A wave of boiling nausea hits her, and Mary follows her friends into oblivion.

# Nature -Themed

(pages 86 - 91)



## Stars in My Vision

Adaryn Yanta

Dizzy endless spinning stars.  
All too small to shine brighter.  
Should one get too big, it soon collapses and loses its shine.  
Its death in a firey explosion only to be met with the greatest darkness.  
The blades of grass, so rough yet soft, together make a carpet of green  
to lay my head upon.  
Should they cover me up and drag me under, I will lay in the dirt all the  
same.  
Nature's cycles all flowing like the river.  
Balance attempting to regain footing.  
The death of something old;  
The life of something new.  
Dizzy again.  
Always so dizzy.  
Oblivion is so close and yet too far.  
For those cursed without death, all you can do is close your eyes.  
Simple comforts for those with no end in sight.  
No way to close the book they are forced to read.  
It is such a cruel joke, for all those who wish for it out of fear of the  
unknown.  
If only I had known this sooner.  
I will wait until every star goes dark.  
Maybe that will provide me with the comfort I crave.  
All things end for a reason.  
I wish I had learned that sooner.

## As I Was a Tree

Aidan D'Eimon

In years long past, a sapling small,  
Nurtured by hands in cloth so white,  
They cared for me, both one and all,  
To grow strong, my roots took flight.

But as I reached my adult grace,  
Their presence faded day by day,  
Yet in the stillness of this place,  
I yearned for them, so far away.

In time, new folks did claim my home,  
Yet Their quarrels marred the peaceful land,  
Their greed and strife, like tempests, roamed,  
Till driven out by a stronger hand.

One survivor sought refuge near,  
Beneath my weathered, mellowed bark,  
Was a short-lived respite, free of fear,  
Amidst my figure, stiff and sharp.

Yet battle cries hung in the air,  
The remained fled, breathless, in haste and dread,  
Until an arrow struck, a heart laid bare,  
At my roots, the fallen lay dead.

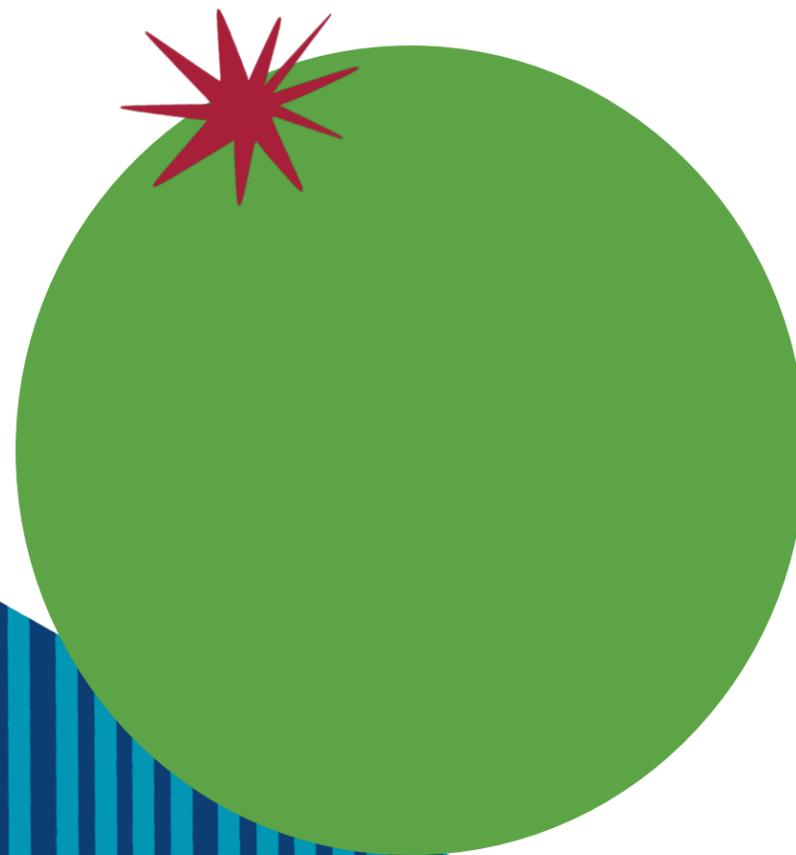
The wars' aftermath, a bitter fate,  
My fellow trees and I laid low,  
As stumps, we bore a heavy weight,  
In silence, we watched life's ebb and flow.

Children's laughter, echoes sweet,  
Around my base, where friendships bloom,  
Yet, I can't hear, can't see, can't greet,  
Only bear their weight in this silent gloom.

## Blueberry

Lydon Kite

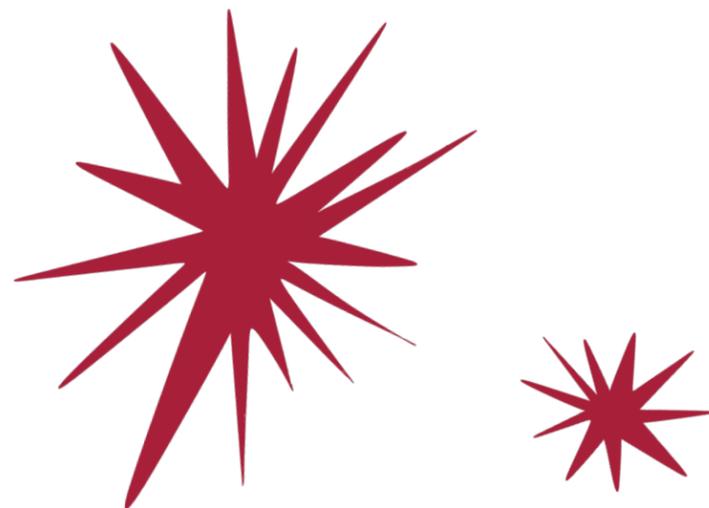
I walk alone through the highland forest with beautiful Coast Redwood surrounding me. As I walked I came across a patch of wild blueberries "Oh thank god," I thought. On the brink of starvation, I ran up to the bush and started shoveling them by handfuls into my mouth, I cleaned off the entire bush in 10 minutes. I was about to start walking away I noticed one tiny little blueberry hanging in the front of the bush, "Huh I thought I cleared the entire bush might as well" I thought as I popped it into my mouth, closed my eyes enjoying the last taste of the sweet juicy blueberry, when I opened my eyes it was like everything around me grew tenfold, but all I know is that I was surrounded by huge leaves and human-sized ants making their way towards me. As the giant ants wandered toward me, their intentions unclear, I felt a strange numbness creeping through me. The sweet taste of the blueberry turned bitter, and my surroundings blurred into darkness. The forest's charm, once inviting, now became the blanket that concealed my final moments. The world faded away, leaving only the echo of the wilderness.



## The Picnic

Cobin Holmes

Although it was late September, the sun was warm and the paths dry. Having walked this trail a hundred times, the boy could easily recall the scenery each new turn brought. He and his father were on their way to see their mother, as they did every Sunday. But today was different; today they came bearing gifts. His father carried a picnic basket full with fruits and sandwiches, and the boy held some flowers that he had picked from their garden back home. It was his mother's birthday, and the family planned to have dinner and watch the sunset together. After a few minutes, the boy spotted the hill where his mother lay. "Hurry along" the father called to the boy, as they crept up the hill. Once they reached the top the father pulled a blanket from the basket and stretched it across the overgrown grass. The boy walked over to greet his mother "Happy birthday mother" he whispered as he propped the flowers against her gravestone. Then the boys sat down and ate their sandwiches, enjoying each other's company in silence, as the sun receded past the horizon.



## The Park

Zoey Martens

The man begins digging a hole and dumps trash in it. A park activist comes up to him and says "why would you dig a hole if not for a plant"? The man would change the environment by moving and destroying the plants "why would you change something that is already perfect?" the park activist said. The man would change the park's fresh and crisp smell to one of rancid and foul "why would you ruin the park's wonderful smell?" the park activist said. The man would grab his shovel and hit the activist. The loud bang hitting the activist's skull echoes throughout the empty park. "Why would you do this to me!?" the park activist shouted. The repeated blows to the skull soon killed the activist. The man would put the victim's body in a bag. The man begins digging a hole and dumps trash in it. A park activist comes up to him and says...



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