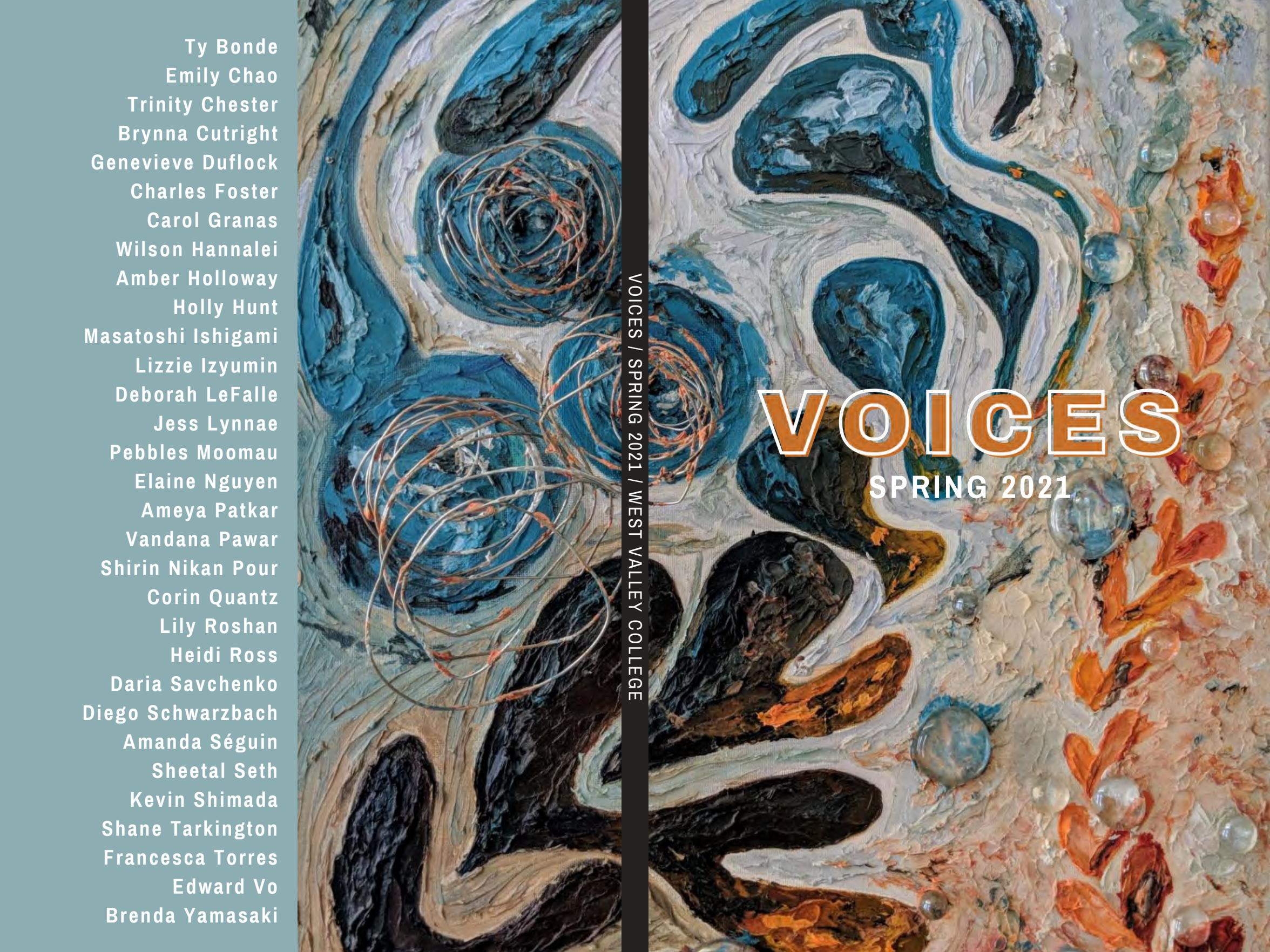


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VOICES / SPRING 2021 / WEST VALLEY COLLEGE



# VOICES

SPRING 2021

*VOICES*

SPRING 2021  
WEST VALLEY COLLEGE

*Voices* is a literary and arts magazine that showcases the diverse voices of West Valley College. It is published once every spring, and is produced by the members of the Voices staff and English 80 & 81. Current students, alumni, faculty, and staff of West Valley College are invited to submit their works of original fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, and art for publication.

Opinions and views expressed in *Voices* do not necessarily reflect those of West Valley College, of the *Voices* editors and staff, or of the students of English 80 & 81. All included works belong to their creators, and may not be replicated without express permission.

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# VOICES

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LIZZIE IZYUMIN

## A PAINTING

I know a painting everyone should see.  
A piece that reigns over my bedroom wall  
and brings a floppy grin to each observer's face.

A pointy, grey-black cat  
buzzing through a jagged field,  
beneath a frosted cookie sky.

The whiskered bumble bee's adventure  
was captured on a Summer's day.  
The proof is in the sunny corner,  
no sunglasses were painted on this time.

Up close, there are forgotten markings.  
A piece of sky that used to be a tree  
Is now the darkest blue I think I've ever seen.

This painting is my portal to the day .  
The artist found me sinking in the grass  
with no more pointy, grey-black, buzzing, whiskered, friend.

I like this painting, though the artist disagrees.  
My portal is a visionary's puddle.  
He shrugs and asks if I would tie his shoes.



And every night, Ben looked out the little round glass in his telescope. He used his telescope to gaze at the world above: comets cascading down an inky canvas, planets nestled snugly in their orbits. Living echoes of dying stars.

Ben's world was neither of those things. Ben's world was this: bed and bath and bookshelf and two chairs and nobody, nobody, nobody to sit at one of them. He was alone in his tower, and he had been alone for a very long time.

## II.

Once, a girl named Anusha went on a quest for revenge.

That day, the waves had grown bored with lapping timidly at the shores and leaped hungrily into the streets of her village instead. The sun had fallen from her perch and the color from the sky, because Anusha's violin was destroyed. Water damage.

She wanted to *avenge* her violin, which meant she would push some of her grief onto someone who wasn't carrying their fair share. (She'd learned the word from a movie her mother was watching.) So she went backwards. The water flowed steadily and she was exhausted by the time she reached the end of things, which was an old lighthouse that might have been white once but was now beige. Anusha could clearly see that the torrent began inside; it cascaded from the little round window above.

The door at the bottom of the lighthouse came open with a kick, and a great wave rushed out and sent Anusha sprawling into the mud. Raincoat ruined, she marched into the lighthouse and began painstakingly to half-climb, half-swim up the spiral stairs. At the top, she found a little round room with a bed and bath and bookshelf and—boy.

(That was not quite the word. It stuttered in her mind.)

Anusha thought of the deep, blushing hue of soil as the setting sun kissed it; this was the boy's skin. She thought of the pitch-black gaps between the stars, which were vast despite looking small; these were the boy's eyes. His hair burst from his head like a supernova, in thick coils of black and indigo.

Even drenched in tears, he was so lovely that it was difficult to look at him directly, but Anusha looked anyway. She had always been brave, and more importantly, she was polite.

And their conversation went like this:

### III.

ANUSHA: Hello. My name is Anusha. It means star.

BEN: Hello. My name is Ben. I don't know what it means.

ANUSHA: Why are you crying?

BEN: Because I'm alone.

ANUSHA: Why are you alone?

BEN: Because I fell from the sky and I can't get back up.

ANUSHA: Have you tried coming down instead?

### IV.

Ben kept crying as they descended the stairs and began the trek to the village. He was accustomed to it and didn't shake or sob.

Earlier, when Anusha sat briefly in the chair that had been empty for two harvests, she understood that Ben's loneliness was an ocean in a bathtub—far more than his fair share. She'd gotten her quest the wrong way around. She didn't speak of the violin, or tell him to stop crying.

“You’ve been very brave,” she said instead.

“I didn’t have a choice,” Ben replied. His voice was even, but his eyes were wide and he kept staring around at the swaying trees as they waded past. “So what?” Anusha retorted. “My mother forces me to but the doctor always calls me brave.”

This seemed to satisfy Ben. He was stricken to see the ruinous flood he’d wept, but Anusha insisted that he was wise to cry. She wouldn’t have found him otherwise.

V.

Years later, the fishermen and their kin would say,

*Once, a star fell to earth.*

*Once, a princess lived trapped in a tower.*

*Once, there came a mighty flood.*

*Once, a violinist struck her bow through the heart of a dragon.*

None of it was false, really. But none of it was true as this: Once, Anusha turned to Ben and said, *When you’re ready, I’ll cry for you, so you can rest.* And as he rested, Ben crafted her a violin.



*DARIA SAVCHENKO*  
RED AND BLACK SERIES 2

*DIEGO SCHWARZBACH*  
TO ARGUE

When I am mad at you  
I can taste red  
My bones start to shiver and dance

Words are thrown  
and some weigh more than others

Those words never seem to fall  
out of my mouth

Cursing is easier  
It weighs nothing  
and hits you just as hard

Then there is a shift in your tone

I can see the water break from your eyes  
My blood turns cold  
My chest crushes inward  
and my ears start to ring

I am there left thinking  
about your red cashmere sweater  
And how you used to lay with me in bed  
Every night  
Because of the monsters in my closet

I cry too

But I can hear you say  
Tears strengthen us because we  
are pisces  
You're right  
It makes me strong  
Strong enough to say  
the words that weigh the most



*EMILY CHAO*  
THE BRIDGE



*EDWARD VO*  
PRYING EYES

*KEVIN SHIMADA*

# LITTLE ME AND MY HIGH GROUND

A desert area filled with canyons  
A place I have never been to  
Mind blown  
Start exploring the desert canyons

Crinkle and crunch crunch crunch  
Pant pant pant  
Pant pant  
Pant

On top of the highest peak  
Endless views of endless canyons  
The wind breathes in my ear  
The canyon's long history  
Eagles swoop and hawks squawk  
The breeze echoes  
Mesmerizing clear air  
Hard, stony, dry and warm granite  
In the air, on top of the world  
My high ground

Pant  
Pant pant  
Pant pant pant  
Crunch crunch crunch and crinkle

Lower views of the endless canyons  
Dead grass, dead bushes, dead heat  
Living land, creatures crawling, walking

Ack-ack-ack-ackawoooo-ack-ack-ack  
Click roll poop, click roll poop  
Hiss slither slither hiss  
Dust like spilled flour  
Pebbly, leafy, branchy dirt  
To the tall walls, close to the wild  
Little me

*WILSON HANNALEI*

## CALIFORNIA SUMMERS

I've been knee deep in ash  
These past two weeks.  
The sun comes through my windows a blood red  
And I guiltily find it beautiful  
Because that is all she has done to me today.

Now I wake up again.  
It is halfway to 5pm,  
And the world is yellow  
Stained like an old photograph  
Just as still and quiet.

The trees do not move.  
The mountains are gone.  
I can't see past the smoke—  
I can barely see at all.

Every streetlight is just a slight  
More yellow than the smoke,  
Every single one of them,  
On in the dark.

Still my windows are closed.  
Still I sleep with two blankets.  
Still I sit back on my bed,  
Because I know the extent of the threat  
Is what swirls just beyond my thin windows.

My windows are orange,  
Dimly lighting my room in  
diluted citrus juice and smoke.  
I close the blinds and return to bed.  
I do not sleep.



*HOLLY HUNT*  
UNTITLED



weeks earlier with reports of mangled ancient items being turned up by their grazing sheep, or by their plows. She didn't foresee that the excavation would be anything too difficult for the troupe of inexperienced young historians under her supervision, so it had been easy to get the trip approved by the Society Board.

It was an unusually crisp November, so the four research employees she'd chosen to go with the dig team were told several times to pack extras of all their clothes. Saoirse had grown up just a few miles south of the empty, wild country where the bog was located, and she took great delight in educating the rest of the party on the likelihood of rainfall, exactly which coat would keep them warmest, and how to net the rarest birds inhabiting the lowlands.

"You know we're going for artifacts, don't you?" Winston remarked, while he and Daisy threw cases of gear and provisions into the back of their truck.

"It's beautiful country," she snapped back, blushing a little. "Who's to say we shouldn't take a bit of rest from breaking our backs over a few spearheads and go birdwatching every so often?"

Daisy tossed her travel-worn personal suitcase on top of the box of excavation tools and sighed. "Let's get done what we've been sent for, but I'm not opposed to having a little fun if we can. Perhaps we can lend out our catches to a natural history museum."

Blaze was told he wasn't allowed to smoke, but of course he sewed a pack into his pants anyway. Nobody noticed until a few days into charting and excavating the site, when Saoirse decided to do everyone's laundry on a whim and he fought her over that one particular pair of trousers.

Winston promised not to report him if he'd share half with him.

He looks far too young to be allowed to smoke,” was Saoirse’s only comment, to Daisy, after everyone had calmed down and both young gentlemen had divided the rationed cigarettes evenly between them.

It wasn’t so much his youth, as his apparent physical weakness, that led her to remark on it, but neither of them wanted to say so. Blaze’s eyes were empty and sunk deep into his skull, and he hardly ever smiled unless sufficiently distracted. Daisy often had to poke him out of distant hazes, where he’d stare into a tree or at the ground or into the sky for ten or twenty minutes at a time without realizing it.

Of course, they also quickly learned that giving him a sip or two to drink usually broke him out of his apathy. None of them pressed him about it, but Saoirse found herself wishing she’d packed a bit more whiskey. Nobody knew much about him, really, aside from who his father is and the fact that he’d been Celia’s ward since he was very small. The only time he’d ever really speak at length, when he was sober, was if somebody asked him a question about an obscure Greek text.

That was part of the reason Daisy began a campfire game of truth or dare that night. They’d been on the lowlands for a week now, and although they’d turned up several iron implements of various sizes through their efforts, the physical toll of the labor and the freezing weather was starting to wear on them all. Even Saoirse started speaking wistfully of fire and home at least once a day. Blaze shivered incessantly-- he was so very thin-- but never once complained even when his lips were blue with cold.

For Daisy, it was the emptiness that wore on her the most. She had grown up mostly in the cities, and although the novelty and the relaxation of open country was soothing for the first few days of their trip, the sheer expanse of the land and the loneliness of the

terrain was grating-- as was the feeling that they weren't quite as alone as it seemed. She found herself glancing over her shoulder at empty shrublands and empty overcast sky at least five times a day, thinking someone was approaching from behind.

Nighttime was worse.

"Truth or dare," Daisy commanded, without any introduction, one night as the four of them were huddled around their designated campfire.

Saoirse poked the flames with a stick. The light cast ghostly shadows on the treetops behind them.

"That's a kids' game."

"I'll play," Blaze interrupted. He pulled his furlined blanket around his shoulders as a breeze drifted through the campsite. (The blanket was a gift from Saoirse, for his nineteenth birthday that October). "Truth."

"... what's the most valuable thing you've ever broken?" Daisy asked, grinning and biting at her thumbnail.

He hesitated a moment. "A marble tabletop. At a party when I was seven." Blaze dipped his head and smiled into the blanket. "I threw a rock at it."

Winston snorted into his soup.

"Since you think that's so funny-" Blaze raised an eyebrow at him. "Truth or Dare?"

"Dare."

Blaze thought for a moment, resting his chin in his hand. "Dare you to recite the *paternoster* in a single breath. If you can't do it, you've got to take a drink." He gestured at the bottle of malt whisky by the tent.

Glaring at him and taking a deep gasping breath, Winston sped his way through the prayer. He finished with a desperate wheeze at “sedliberanosamalo.” Then, he leaned off the log he was sitting on to launch into a dramatic coughing fit.

“Ought I dock him points for failing to use Ecclesiastical pronunciation?” Blaze glanced at Saoirse and grinned wickedly.

She sighed. “He’s been through enough, leave the poor man alone.”

“Remind me never to play this game with you again,” Winston huffed, still trying to get his breath back.

The next few runs around the circle weren’t quite as exciting: Daisy painted her face with some of Winston’s stockpiled jam preserves (he insisted they shouldn’t be classed as ‘non-essential’, because “essential is subjective”. Celia didn’t want to argue the philosophical point over jam, so he was permitted to bring them.), Saoirse was instructed to make a crown out of marsh shrubbery and wear it the duration of the game.

Eventually it got back around to Winston. He leered at Blaze, like a good-natured but revenge-hungry cat.

“Blaze- Truth or Dare?”

“Dare.”

He swept his gaze out at the bog off to their right. “Dare you to walk five feet out there and scream as loud as you can for ten seconds. If you raise your hands to the sky, I’ll be especially pleased. A tribute to the old gods, mm?”

“I don’t think he ought to do that--” Daisy interjected.

“Come on, don’t be a spoilsport. It’s just five feet, we’ve been out

there all week and nothing has happened. Worst case is he'll be soaked a little to his knees." She frowned, looking between Blaze and Winston.

"I'll do it," Blaze announced, standing up and putting his blanket aside. "The point of the game is to look a bit stupid, yeah?" He took a lengthy swig of whiskey as he got to his feet. "You're free to do what you will," Daisy replied. She was fidgeting a little, even so, as the three of them watched Blaze carefully step out into the bog.

With each step he took, Blaze felt miles away from his colleagues by the treeline and the fire. The sound of the crackling flames faded into the back of his mind, and he let the suffocating silence of the marshland engulf him.

Blaze always felt a bit small, but the endless sky and the endless bog were terrifyingly open, so much so that the scream that ripped from his throat was not only a gesture of obedience to Winston's dare, but a genuine cry to be heard in an infinite, cold, and uncaring universe. That was the moment his foot slipped and his head went under.

Saoirse, watching from the edge of the forest, leapt to her feet when she saw him sink below the surface. Swearing loud enough to wake the other archaeologists in their tents, she ran for the coil of rope she kept by her sleeping bag. Daisy screamed and dashed, with Winston on her heels, out into the bog herself. Blaze's left hand alone was grabbing wildly at the plants above the peat. She came as close as she dared, and caught it in hers.

In less than a minute, Saoirse was at her side with the rope.

Blaze wasn't sure what was happening to him. The peat choked him and made it impossible to breathe, and he knew he didn't have long if he couldn't get out. But how was he supposed to get out if he didn't know up from down? He stretched his hands out

different directions, wildly grabbing at anything solid he could feel.

His left hand burst through the ground and he felt somebody pulling him up by it. His right hand closed around an ice cold cylindrical object. He wasn't sure what was real anymore, so he didn't let go of either.

Winston, pale and looking terrified out of his mind, grasped Blaze's upper arm as it emerged from the bog. Saoirse instantly threw the rope around his torso and all three of them hauled him several feet away onto dry land, a camp full of archaeologists and dig employees looking on in shock.

He sat up weakly, coughing and spitting and reeking of bog water. His clothes were soaked through and what had once been white fabric was now a murky brown. In his right hand, he held a sword.



*EMILY CHAO*  
SUNRISE AND THE BOATS

*HOLLY HUNT*

# HIGHWAY 1 REVELATION

Take me back.  
I passed my destination,  
but I chased that  
sunset.  
It led me here.  
I climbed to the  
highest peak.  
Proved that I can  
manifest anything:  
waves,  
connections,  
strength and  
peace.  
Take me back  
to find Me.



my aches and imperfections  
are her fault.

the JUNK weighing down my mind  
is not to blame.

nor is the GUNK on my face  
that I am too tired to wash off.

I see it now:  
I'm her recurring nightmare.

if only I could get  
a good night's sleep...



*BRENDA YAMASAKI*

# NIGHTLY TOY INTERMISSION

*JESS LYNNÆ*

## OF HEAVEN'S TOUCH

In the sun's ceasing is a light so vibrant  
A reminder, to which is owed a great deal  
One is found lost and desperate  
Now caught by the moment's steal

A glimpse so short, one could almost miss it  
Yet breathtaking is the beauty quickly seen  
Through the day's cold embrace, listless  
And into the night a darkness clings

What fortune to be reminded through  
pinks and yellows and subtle blues  
Of heaven's touch and warmth therein  
A sweetness found in hushful bliss



*VANDANA PAWAR*  
**ORANGES**



just that – Portia. As Portia regains her composure she sets the hot beverage aside to cool and sheepishly looks around to see if anyone witnessed that awful face she just made. Her back is to Raven, who attempts to minimize her presence when she sees Portia’s head turn. Portia reaches for her shoulder bag and pulls out a tablet. No, it’s not an Apple iPad. It’s a yellow paper tablet – legal pad is what they used to call it. She rambles in her shoulder bag to find a pen and pulls one out, only to discover it is out of ink. Portia tosses the pen in a nearby trash bin and starts rambling through her shoulder bag again to find another. Eureka – she’s found one, and it writes!

Intrigued by Portia, Raven starts observing her more intently. She notices Portia has fixated her eyes on an older woman with salt-and-pepper dreads at another table. She’s wearing loose-fitting, natural fiber clothes and comfy-looking rubber sole shoes, which to Raven silently speaks of her sage persona. We’ll call her Shae. Portia begins writing on her tablet, and every once in a while she looks up to try to get an inconspicuous glance at Shae. Raven ponders, *Who is this 20-something Portia? What is she doing? Where does she live? What is she about? Where is she from and who are her peeps? What are her values? Her beliefs? Her dreams? Her worries? Her misgivings? And why is she here at 2 o’clock in the afternoon? Most importantly, what character and story will I create around this woman?*

Portia picks up her coffee cup and takes swig. The temperature is apparently just right now because she keeps on swigging until the beverage is all gone. She writes some more, glances some more, writes some more, glances some more; then just sits in contemplation. A full hour passes. Raven has a few pages of notes in her journal, but will it be enough? It will have to be because Portia is gathering her stuff to leave. Portia stands up and is about to walk away when Raven sees her scarf fall from her lap. Raven rushes over to retrieve it and get Portia’s attention to give it to her. Portia thanks Raven, letting her know how appreciative she is of her graciousness. This brief exchange speaks volumes about Portia,

the person. Raven waits until Portia is out of sight before preparing to leave herself. As she takes her first few steps to walk away, she catches Shae staring at her. Shae abruptly averts her eyes elsewhere, picks up her device and holds it close so as to conceal what's on the screen. Raven thinks, What are the odds?... then smiles and lets out a playful but subdued chuckle as she heads toward home.



*LILY ROSHAN*  
CATIE'S FACES



AMANDA SEGUIN  
HEROINES

*BRYNNA CUTRIGHT*

WHERE DIRT AND  
COMPANY IS APLENTY

One day a maiden came across a fern growing out of a crack in the sidewalk.

“Lady Fern!” She began, “Whatever are you doing here? Wouldn’t you rather sprout where the dirt and company is aplenty?”

And the fern replied, “As you can see, I have no arms to pull me from where I stay.” her leaves danced in the breeze, fragile and fleeting beauty.

“Well,” the maiden said, kneeling in front of the fern. “If you wouldn’t mind, I could move you to the field where dirt and company is aplenty.”

“I’m weary. My roots are weak and my leaves may crumple! That may not be a journey I can partake.”

“Fair enough, but I shall come by at dawn and give you tender care so your roots may grow strong and your leaves may not crumple and you can live where dirt and company is aplenty.”

The fern resisted and resisted but in the end, she agreed to the maiden’s care. Day after day, the maiden tended to the fern and in return, the fern brought great joy upon the maiden. One week the maiden stopped visiting the fern, for she had fallen ill. The fern, unknowing of this, believed to have been abandoned. Just as she was about to give up, the maiden arrived one morning under the pink sunrise with a pail of water.

“How could you!” The fern yelled in a fury. “For a week I was alone and I might have lost my chance to live where the dirt and company is aplenty!”

“But look around you, Lady fern! Since I have been gone, with a fever mind you, others have sprouted up!” The maiden was right, for all around Fern were thousands of small sprouts reaching for the sunlight. “When I did not water you, the rain still came, and with it brought an entire forest!”

“But I still need your help! I must not be alone!” cried Fern.

“You no longer need my help! Your roots are strong and you have company, and this you did yourself. You are capable, but you do not need to be alone. I do enjoy your company oh so much.”

And so, the maiden came back day after day to shower not water, but love upon the fern, and the two were happy.

*TRINITY CHESTER*  
MORNING

My eyes blink open to see  
fingers of sharp golden  
sunlight trace across my wall.  
I breathe the smell of my mother's coffee, hear a fragile aria of  
birdsong,  
as warm thoughts begin to percolate. This is the hour of  
possibility,  
when the things that will be tease us like the words that hide—just  
out of reach—on the tip of your tongue. As my dreams ebb away  
they are replaced by hope  
for a new day—hope that waits  
to store up tears and laughter  
in her box of treasures,  
the imperfect sanctified by a  
wounded God. The dawn rushes to meet me and I feel my heart  
shot through with rays of colored light. How can breaking  
be so beautiful?



*SHEETAL SETH*

# THE VIEWPOINT

*TY BONDE*

# AS MOTHER EARTH WEEPS

When you,  
the first humans,  
were born,  
I wept at the beauty and possibility of you.

I watched as you grew and changed.  
I smiled as you learned to walk on two legs,  
was proud when you learned to use tools,  
and looked on in amazement when you spoke your first words.

I helped you grow.  
I gave you fire to warm yourselves at night,  
and food to eat when you were hungry.  
I provided water for you to quench your thirst,  
and shelter to keep you safe during my ever changing seasons.

You loved everything I provided for you.  
The many animals to keep you company,  
the rivers and oceans to swim in,  
and the valleys and fields of flowers to play in.  
You especially loved the shining stars I sent to you each night.

And though you rarely expressed your gratitude,  
I knew you loved me as much as I loved you.

I had never anticipated how you'd thrive,  
or the beautiful things that you'd create.  
Music, art, theater,  
then science, mathematics, and philosophy.  
With each passing age,  
you grew smarter and more capable.

And just as I had not foreseen your prosperity,  
I did not foresee the destruction you would bring.

You waged wars so brutal,  
I could barely watch.  
You used me for countless battlefields.  
Men, women, and children laid dying upon my breast.

But that was not all.  
You enslaved others of your kind,  
persecuted and killed many more.

That innocent light I saw in your eyes,  
at the beginning of your creation,  
turned dark with fear and hatred.

Through the years of suffering and death,  
you became harder.  
You continued to maim and kill each other,  
and then you turned on me as well.

Despite the chaos,  
you continued to thrive.  
As the few of you turned into many,  
you used up more of what I'd given you.  
You took from me with each passing year,  
and the rivers and valleys grew smaller.  
Even the stars grew dimmer in the light of your destruction.

Some of you gorged yourselves on my food,  
while others were left to starve.  
You burned and cut my forests  
to make room for your civilizations.  
And to amuse yourselves,  
you hunted my animals for sport.

And as your civilizations grew,  
so too did your filth.

The sky turned black with smoke from your machines,  
and the ground became covered with a constant layer of trash.  
My remaining rivers were poisoned with waste  
that ran into my oceans.

Even my tears became polluted  
and fell back to me as stinging acid.

I grew sick from all your pollution,  
became feverish and erratic.  
My seasons grew more unpredictable.  
Great storms I had no control over raged across my seas and shores  
while drought scorched my land in other places.  
Fires I could not stop decimated more of my forests  
and floods drowned your cities.

You seemed so determined to destroy what you had created  
and what had created you.

Some of you fought for me,  
to undo the damage that had been done.  
But I was already dying.

Despite all you'd done,  
I still loved you.  
You,  
who I had helped to create,  
who had changed so much throughout the centuries.  
But you still have more to grow,  
and I can no longer help you.

Now it is your turn to nurture and care for me.  
To replant my flowers and trees,  
clean my rivers and oceans,  
and protect my animals.

And though you have lost your way,  
I still have faith in you.  
Hope is not lost,  
it only needs to grow.

*LIZZIE IZYUMIN*  
ODE TO SLOTH

Hanging from the tree tops;  
Lounging, smiling, floating.  
Years are spent devoting  
spirit to climbs and stops.

Poor creature's unaware  
their name alone is sin.  
Regardless where they've been,  
men fear their lack of care.

But Sloth does care - it's clear!  
We see it through their smile.  
Though movements take a while,  
each action is sincere.

Sloth takes the time to love  
each meal, each dream, each day.  
The smile won't fade away!  
Sloth's grateful up above.

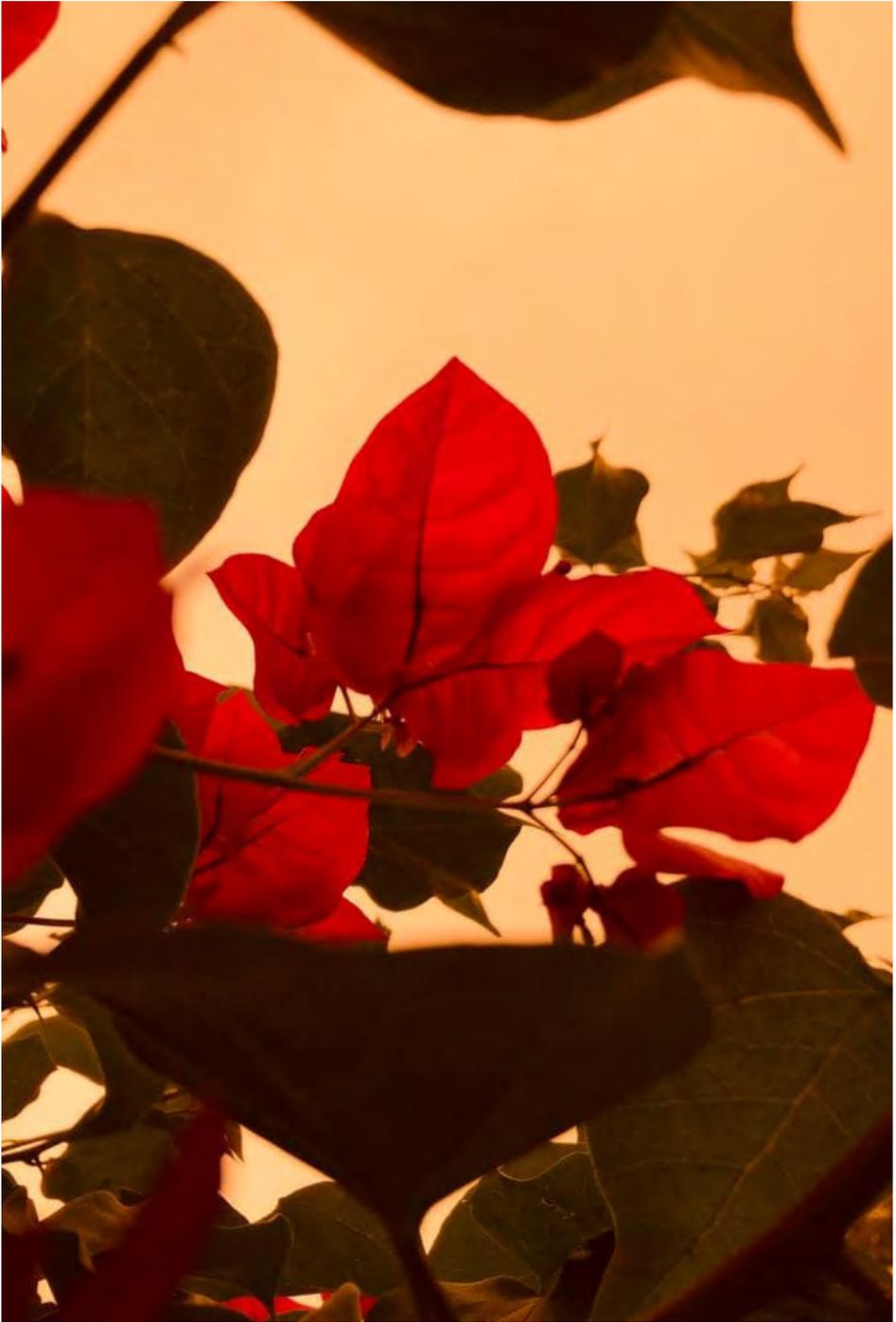
While others rush, Sloth glides.  
They would not want to miss  
a moment of pure bliss.  
Sloth's constant as the tides.

To be like sloth would mean  
to live a life in awe,  
in spite of any flaw.  
Sloth makes their world feel seen.



*AMEYA PATKAR*

WILTING AGAINST AN  
ORANGE SKY



*AMEYA PATKAR*  
BURNING BOUGAINVILLEA



I reach out to touch but always falter.  
Never reaching first,  
I wonder if they saw my eyes lingering?  
Surely felt it—  
We hug as if it would be the last in the world,  
Imprinting a body against the outside of our ribs,  
The inside of our hearts,

My hands are frozen,  
cold and empty  
under trickling summer water.

Something I feel,  
I feel keenly.  
(Or maybe not at all.)

I will never be tactile.

*CHARLES FOSTER*

EPITAPH FOR A SMALL  
TOWN

The piercing scree of tortured brakes announced our arrival into town. Survival reflex sent my hand flashing to the door handle just in time. Like every other week, I knew that when Aunt Ruth turned right at Franklin, she would be going faster than any rational person would consider reasonable. She didn't disappoint.

With great effort, she wrestled the antique pick-up to the curb bringing it to a stop in her usual spot which meant taking up two parking spaces.

"Don't you go anywhere," she threatened, pointing her cigarette stained finger at me for emphasis. Aunt Ruth's ability to relate to a 15 year old girl was on the same level as her understanding of space aliens.

“I’ll be right back.” She leapt from the cab slamming the door in her haste. I was livid as she walked away. When my parents died the court sent me to live with Aunt Ruth. It became clear that she didn’t want me here any more than I wanted to be here. The only solace I had was knowing that in 127 weeks I would turn 18. On that day I would flee to the Carnegie Academy and take refuge in that safe haven.

And so the Saturday morning dance began. The same as last week and which was certain to repeat itself again next week. I knew by now that she wouldn’t be right back. She would enter Pearson’s market under the pretense of getting groceries. She would walk straight through where she would exit the back door and immediately enter Lou’s through its rear door.

Lou’s was a popular bar in town - popular because it was the only remaining bar in town. The fact that it was busy at 10AM laid testament to the economy here in Dry Fork. To some, Dry Fork was on its way to becoming a ghost town. For some it was already there.

I knew from past experience that Aunt Ruth would be gone for about an hour and a half. On her way back through Pearson’s she would grab a six-pack and a bag of chips and our errands would be complete. That would give me ample time to wander around town – which I always did. I never stayed in the truck. I knew her secret. Whether or not she knew mine – I didn’t care.

I wandered across the street knowing that it was meaningless to check for traffic. Except for Aunt Ruth, most everyone with a vehicle that ran had long since moved away. I headed to Style Mart on the chance that there might be something new in the window. There wasn’t. The door was still locked even though it was 30 minutes past the opening time hand-written on a faded sign inside the door. I continued aimlessly down Franklin noting all the vacant store fronts.

As I looked around, the town looked so...tired...so defeated. A far cry from the bustling town it had been in the 50's when the mine was still operating. It was getting increasingly more difficult to kill the hour and a half while she would be "getting groceries."

I headed down Franklin as I had done so many other Saturdays. This time, I took a right at Porter – a street pretty much unfamiliar to me; yet, a street as tired, as defeated and as deserted as Franklin. Perhaps there would be something different to look at. As my gaze extended down the street, past the few remaining store fronts, I saw something unexpected. A sight so foreign that it took a while to fully register. A stranger. A woman.

What surprised me first was her beauty. More than that, she had a quality about her. Her grace and her poise were in stark contrast to her provocative dress. I stared – spellbound. Strange. She seemed nervous – very nervous. As she leaned against the wall, she constantly shuffled her weight from one foot to the other; hands always in motion as if unsure where they should rest. Her head darted left to right, back and forth, as if she were waiting for someone. Perhaps, someone is coming to save her. Someone who was disturbingly late.

She looked slightly familiar. Where had I seen her? My pace slowed as I continued down the street. She had not yet noticed me. Where had I seen her? Perhaps the Carnegie Academy? No, in spite of the rumors I can't imagine the girls at Carnegie would ever dress like that. Where?

Three men suddenly appeared from around the corner. Everything seemed perfectly normal. Is this who she was waiting for? Soon their posture turned menacing. My pace slowed again. It was clear she was being confronted. I shot into the shelter of a nearby store front to avoid being seen. My heart was racing. At that moment any thoughts of running to her aid vanished.

Through the glass of the display window I watched the scene unfold. There were no other people on the street. The men drew closer. One appeared to do all the talking. The others stood ominously on either side. Apparently, the one talking was in charge. The other two supplied intimidation. The woman's body language showed she was now petrified. At a signal from the first man, the goons grabbed her arms. She struggled furiously but futilely. I watched as talking escalated to shouting. The leader stopped shouting and slapped her across the face. She cried out in pain and he slapped her again ... and again – harder each time. Slapping turned to punching and as he gave her one final punch in the stomach the young woman slumped over, head bowed down, her body trembling. Only the men's firm grip on her arms kept her upright. The leader took something from his jacket. I couldn't recognize it at first but soon made out that it was a syringe. Without hesitation the man drove the needle deep into her thigh. She thrashed at the attack and screamed to an empty town for help. The men's grip did not budge. Gradually her body went limp.

Had they killed her? I gasped at the thought, my hand involuntarily rising to cover my mouth. Perhaps she was just unconscious. I watched in horror as the vile men raised the piteous rag doll over their heads and heaved her body callously into a nearby dumpster. I recoiled at the sight, backing deeper into the shelter of the store front. Mid-stride I unexpectedly hit something. I spun to see that it was a man ... another stranger. He stared straight into my eyes and put his finger to his lips signaling me to not make a sound. I stood stunned as he slowly pulled something from his pocket. A badge? A badge! I looked harder, reading each word.

What was a federal agent doing in a town like Dry Fork?

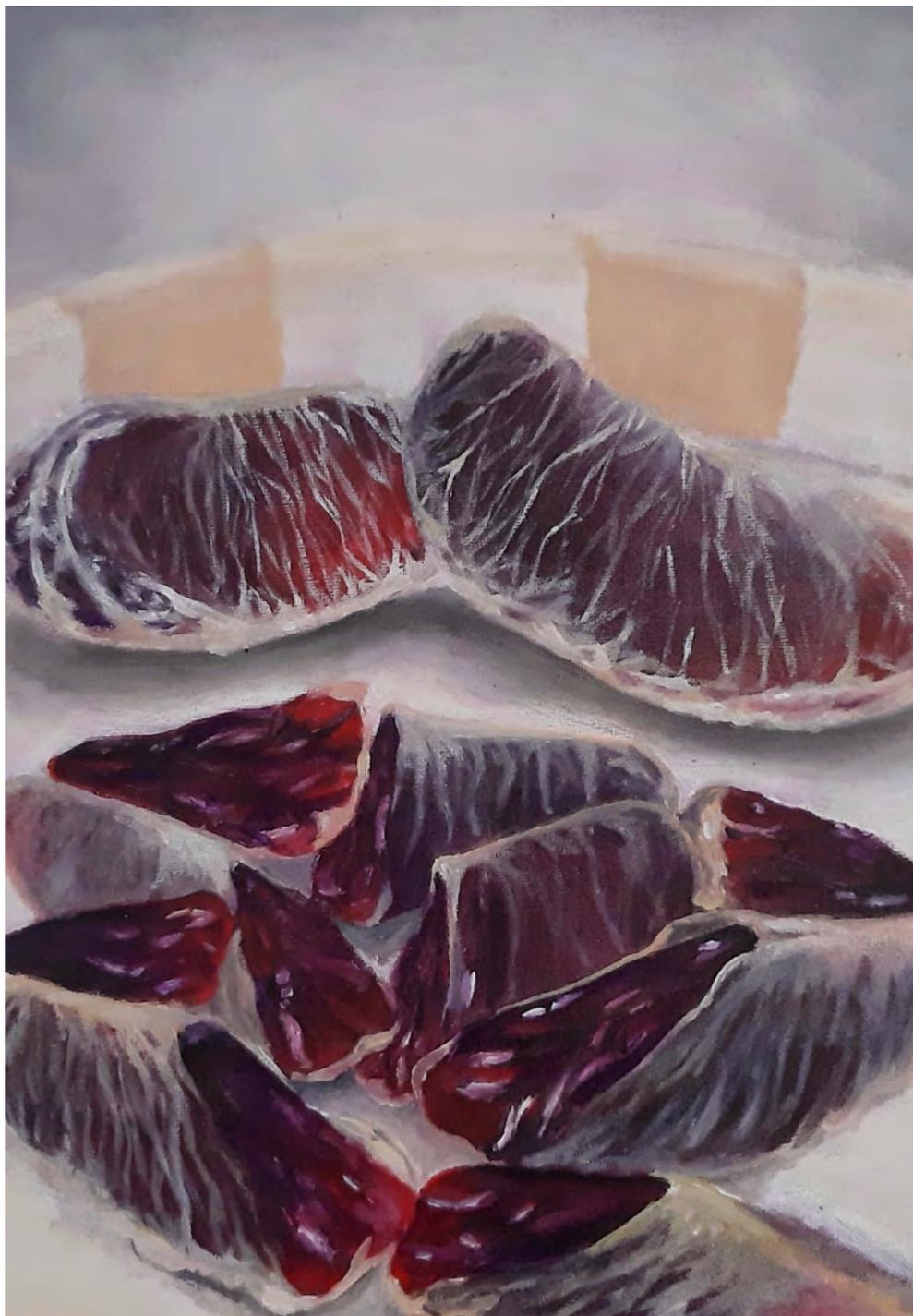


*DIEGO SCHWARZBACH*

2

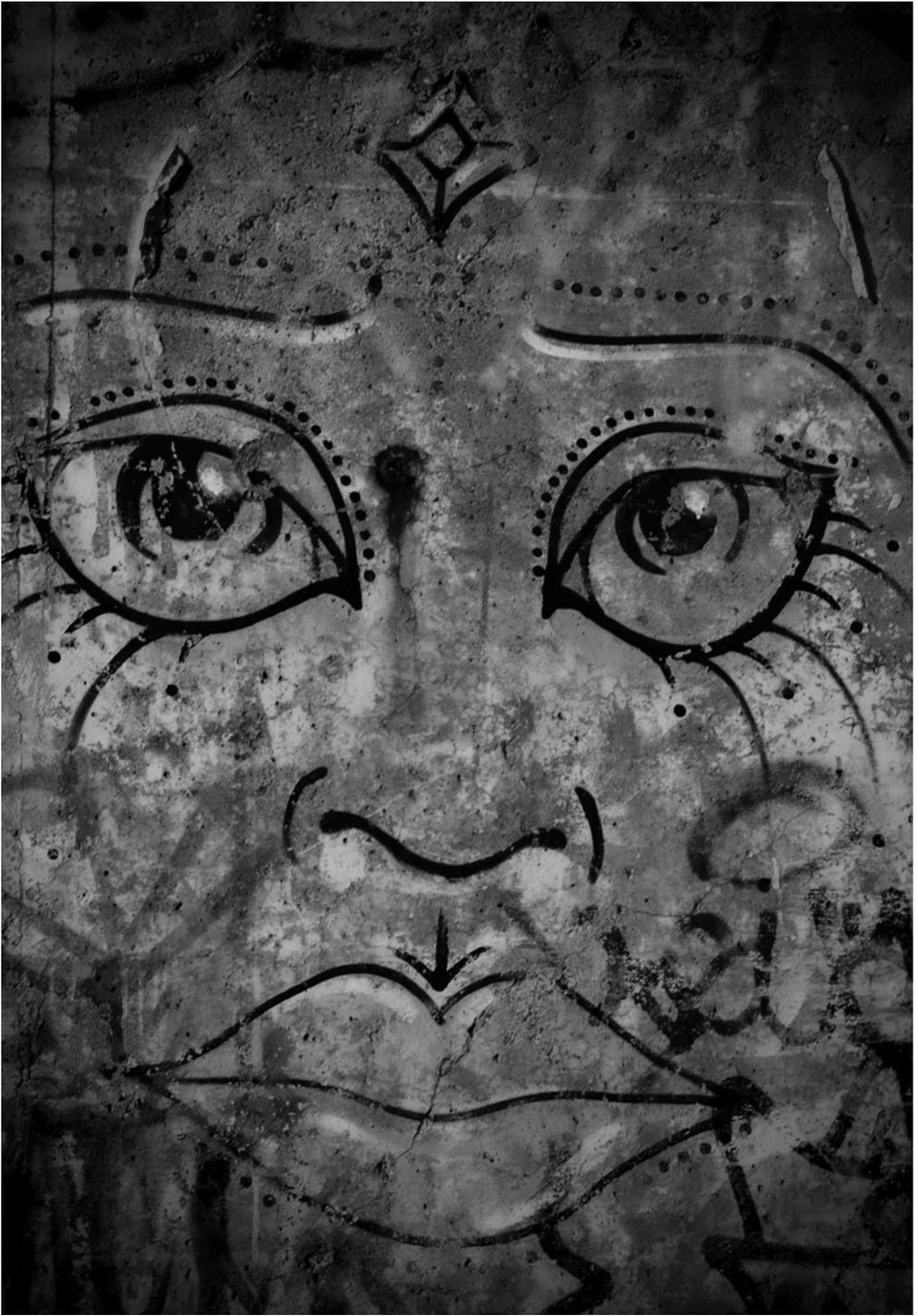
To love, to feel, to create  
Too happy, too sad. To hate  
To love to love, than cry  
To live for love, then die  
To butterflies, to goosebumps, to pain  
To knowledge that is shared and gained

To goodbyes that never were  
To goodbyes that were never heard  
To new doors that shouldn't be open  
To open doors that you never shut  
To being human, a creature of habit  
To falling back for you after it all



*DARIA SAVCHENKO*

RED AND BLACK SERIES 1



*TY BONDE*  
GRAFFITI IS ART TOO

*FRANCESCA TORRES*

## BEAUTIFUL IS A WORD

You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen  
It's written on your face  
How you're thinking constantly  
I still see you in my dreams  
If a symbol is its own reality  
Then this is what you mean:

Your skin is warm with the radiation  
You've borrowed from the sun  
A flower, for the pollinator, needs to grow  
Shy is the butterfly, so you bloom slow

Your profile speaks volumes  
Of your pride and your honesty  
I am in awe of your clever machinations  
In love with your devotion to imagination

Your hands were smoothed like river stones  
That were crafted by time itself  
Long and skilled and delicate  
Creative, ingenious, all of this

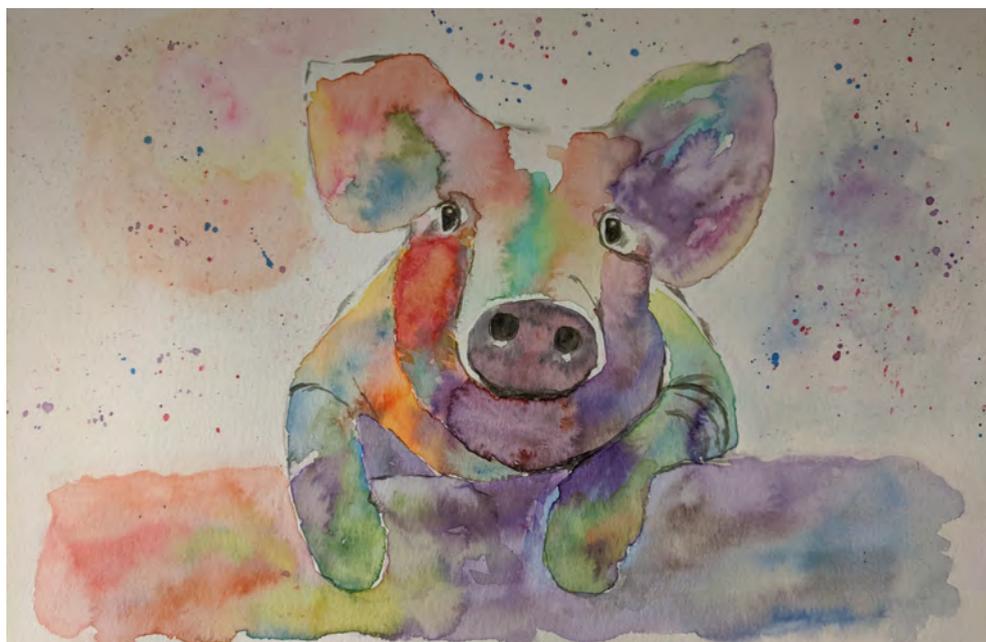
Your smile is my ideal perfection  
Open and wide in invitation  
Pink like the love that you implore  
Sweet like the affection you adore

And I've told you a thousand times already  
Your eyes are electricity  
Energy to recreate a universe you alone observe  
A utopia of which we do not deserve

Every imperfection, pattern, and structure  
Of your person is a testament  
To the beauty you're composed of  
Like a century in a symphony  
If a word can conjure fantasies  
Of its definitions  
Then we are defined by letters and appearances  
And you are even more gorgeous in translation



*SHIRIN NIKAN POUR*  
**GREEN PLANT LADY**



*CAROL GRANAS*  
**PSYCHEDELIC PIG**



PEBBLES MOOMAU

## NASAL CURVATURE

I hang and hold,  
befriending the oils  
in the pores next door  
and the mucus from the night  
where the winter wind stung—  
*Hello.*

Bending and curving,  
twisting and spinning.  
Glistening.  
I replaced who resided here.

I hang and hold a grudge  
cursing a no-longer lover.  
My home flares,  
I mimic the rhythm.

Don't tell anyone,  
but I heard through the vein-vine;  
Ears whispered—  
*What did we expect?*  
She can't keep her thoughts quiet.

How can I be out of place  
when the needle swooned so hard for me,  
A tear streamed down my cheek  
but I'll let the silver strand believe  
it was out of infatuation.

The oils sent me a welcoming card,  
the ocean water stayed away.  
Ears whispered to me—  
said I looked  
*great.*

*TRINITY CHESTER*

A HAIKU

Awake, O sleeper!  
Rise from dreams of darkness and  
rejoice in being.



*SHANE TARKINGTON*  
PURPLE BLOOM

*LIZZIE IZYUMIN*

## A LIBERATING HAIRCUT

The yeti wandered through the woods.  
His aching hooves and buried eyes  
(weighed down by his potential)  
kept him searching  
for a friend with  
shiny shears.

Soon came the rescue. They removed  
eighty pounds of dirty, matted wool.  
Imagine: closets overflowing with  
grimy, slimy scarves &  
mucky, yucky socks &  
soiled sweaters.

Through fluffy hell broke through a lamb.  
Many sheep before him prayed  
the children would adapt  
& prove convenient  
& productive  
to Them.

Adaptation seems to have a sense of humor.  
Growing safe from the slaughter,  
but reliant on the butcher,  
Yeti the lamb thanks  
all his lucky stars  
He's in a pen.



*MASATOSHI ISHIGAMI*  
**JELLYFISH**





*VANDANA PAWAR*  
CONTEMPLATION



the house. 115 Maple Street. A bowl of candy was sitting on its front steps but the lights inside were off. A perfectly innocent sight, unless you happened to know better.

And Kendra knew better.

As she walked up the steps a black cat in the bushes caught her eye. Its pupils narrowed into slits and it hissed at her. Damn it but she'd always had a soft spot for cats. Her father didn't understand it. She knelt down and held out a hand. The cat hissed again, its back arching, before cautiously making its way over. It nosed at her hand and then relaxed, twining around her ankles with a purr.

"That's it," she murmured. Kendra stroked its back a couple of times before rising to her feet. She reached out a hand to the door and pushed it open.

The inside was remarkably unremarkable. A kitchen with childish drawings taped to the refrigerator, a living room scattered through with Legos, soccer cleats near a back door. Your typical nuclear family household. If only the rest of the family knew the truth.

Kendra moved soundlessly through the house and into the study. The rug on the floor was rolled aside revealing a trap door which she opened just wide enough to slip herself through. She needn't have worried about making noise though. One of the occupants was unconscious and the other was wearing large headphones.

Steve Whittaker cheerfully hummed along to the music as he spread plastic tarps on the ground. The blonde girl lying drugged against the wall was Annie Lincoln, a high school junior who had gone missing last week. He never held them for more than a week.

Kendra leaned against the wall and pulled out her list to doublecheck. Similar to Santa's Naughty or Nice list in concept, a

Reaper's list said who was going to die next. It didn't list everyone in the world of course, not with over seven billion people on the planet. Kendra's list was limited to her zip code.

She glanced at the top and sure enough, Steve and Annie's names were still side by side.

This was Fate's least favorite type of encounter, one where luck would factor into the mix. Tonight either Steve would kill Annie or she would kill him, and he was unable to predict who. It would be Kendra's job to observe only (she screwed up her face as her father's patronizing voice rang through her head) and reap whoever was dead at the end. Scenarios like this vaguely reminded her of the Harry Potter prophecy. 'Neither can live while the other survives.' One of them would be dead very soon.

Eyeing Steve distastefully, Kendra knew who she hoped she'd get to kill. But then again she rarely got what she wished for.

She tensed up as Annie stirred. The sedative was wearing off.

Steve, still humming, didn't notice.

Annie stirred again. Kendra would've held her breath if she had one, willing Steve to stay busy, for Annie to lie still until she regained her senses.

Annie blinked a few times and made to lift a hand to her head, only to see that her wrists had been zip-tied together. Kendra watched as recognition flooded through her and she slumped back to the ground as Steve looked over at her. Seeing her apparently still out cold, he returned to braiding the rope he would use to strangle her.

Kendra itched to wrap her fingers around his throat, to snuff his life out, but forced herself to be still. That wasn't the job. She wasn't meant to kill humans before their time.

Annie opened her eyes once more and got to her feet as she looked around, hopefully for a weapon. She wouldn't be able to easily climb the ladder with her hands like that. There was a pair of scissors, the rope Steve was braiding, a screwdriver. She could maybe smother him with the plastic on the ground though Kendra had a hard time picturing how that would play out.

Swaying slightly, Annie darted across the room and placed her hands over Steve's head and around his neck.

Kendra raised her eyebrows as Annie jumped up to ride Steve piggyback style, trying to strangle him with her bare hands. *Well I suppose I have to give her points for originality, though I would've gone with the scissors.*

Steve thrashed around, trying to get Annie off but her tied wrists worked to her advantage, keeping her hold in place. Overcoming his surprise Steve backed up and rammed Annie into the wall. Her legs loosened and he threw her hands off of him. Annie fell to the floor with a thud. Mozart was playing from the fallen headphones, something Kendra didn't feel fit the mood at all.

Steve swung at Annie but she ducked and ran to the other side of the room, trying to climb up the ladder. But she couldn't get a grip and Steve wrapped his arms around her from behind, pulling her back.

Annie started screaming, bucking and thrashing about like a wild animal. Her head connected with his face and Kendra heard something snap. Steve yelled as blood from a newly broken nose coated his lips. He dropped Annie as he brought his hands up to cup his face.

Steve was a grown man in his thirties, at least twice Annie's weight and almost half a foot taller. But Annie was fueled by desperation

and adrenaline and fighting for her life, and sometimes that could make all the difference. Or at least give her enough of a chance that it would come down to luck.

Kendra pulled out her list again. Still both names.

Steve was now trying to talk Annie down, taunting her, telling her it had been a week and still no one had found her, that no one was even looking for her. When this didn't seem to work he ran at her and Annie dove under his arm but not fast enough. He wrapped his grip around her chest but she leaned over and bit him on the arm hard enough to draw blood.

Steve roared and dropped her, backing away. Rage flickered in his eyes as he promised to kill her, to end her, to make it painful. Blood dripped down Annie's chin as she shifted back and forth before charging straight at him.

Her shoulder rammed straight into his chest and normally it wouldn't have worked but Steve was wounded and caught off guard and Kendra swallowed a cheer as she knocked him backwards onto the work bench. Annie brought her bound hands up and drove them into his face, again and again as Steve flailed his arms behind him.

No, not flailing. Searching.

He grabbed the noose he'd been braiding with one hand and pulled Annie into him with the other before rolling them both over onto the floor. He brought the noose around her neck and began to pull.

Annie thrashed beneath him, bringing up her hands to pry at the rope as she strained for breath.

Fingers shaking, Kendra once more unfolded her list. Both names.

Steve had his full body weight bearing down on her, his hands pulling the rope as Annie fought to escape, fought to live.

She glanced down again. Both names.

Annie's eyes started to bulge as she reached her hands above her own head and found Steve's, digging her nails into his cheek.

Both names.

Steve yelled, still pulling at the rope.

Both names.

Annie's face was starting to turn blue, spittle forming at her mouth.

Both names.

Annie's hands started to go slack.

Both names.

Her eyes began to droop.

Steve's name began to fade from the list –

Kendra lunged forward and forced her hand into Steve's chest, wrapping her fingers around his heart.

He gasped, eyes widening, and collapsed.

Kendra immediately withdrew, hardly able to believe what she'd done and pulled her list back out with shaking fingers. Steve Whittaker was at the top in bright black letters, and Annie's name was nowhere to be seen.

Kendra's knees nearly gave out as Annie pushed his body off of her. She tore the noose from her neck as she stared at him. It would admittedly be a shock if the man trying to kill you suddenly dropped dead from no apparent cause but thankfully Annie was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth because she ran back to the ladder and climbed up haphazardly, wrapping her elbows around the rungs. Annie reached the top and rammed the trap door open with her shoulder before staggering away, screaming for help at the top of her lungs.

Kendra sank to her knees.

"You shouldn't have done that."

She couldn't bear to look at her father. "Oops."

She could feel his gaze burning a hole in the side of her head as he glared at her. "I'm serious Kendra. If you hadn't gotten to him before his name disappeared from the list—"

"Kill the murderous douchebag sooner next time. Got it."

"Kendra."

She glared up at him defiantly. "Well there's not much we can do about it now is there? Besides, I did get to him before he disappeared off the list."

Her father removed his glasses to rub at his eyes. "Sometimes I worry this path isn't for you."

"If only," Kendra replied, her voice dripping acid, "there were plentiful opportunities for half-Grim Reapers half-humans. If only I could pick a different career without throwing the cosmos into disorder."

“You could work with Charon. Be one of his workers, ferrying souls into the next life.”

She looked over at Steve’s bloodied corpse. Mozart was still playing from his headphones in the corner. “Charon likes his employees to refer to him as Your Most Magnanimous Unholy One, and the last time I saw him he threatened to burn me alive in the fires of hell for looking at him funny.”

“You were looking at him funny,” he pointed out.

“He was naked and covered in beeswax. How was I supposed to look at him?”

Her father sighed. “I know the job is difficult. But we cannot interfere in the affairs of humans. You know the consequences.”

Ah yes. Consequences. Kendra was intimately familiar with those. She was a consequence herself after all. “I know.”

He placed his glasses back on and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. Well, as close to comforting as he ever got anyway. “Don’t forget there’s a car accident on Sixth and Magnolia in twenty-two minutes. I’ll see you later.”

Between one blink of her eyes and the next, he vanished.

Twenty-two minutes later, Kendra reaped a seventeen-year-old boy who blew past a stop sign. Unable to sate her own curiosity, she headed back to 115 Maple Street afterwards. The trick-or-treaters had cleared out and been replaced with police cars and an ambulance. Annie was sitting in the back with a thick blanket wrapped around her shoulders, her freed hands clutching at the edges. Most of the blood had been cleaned off of her but there was a heavy line of bruising around her neck. Kendra felt her throat close up at the sight.

There was a squeal of tires to her left as a gray suburban came rocketing around the corner. It slammed to a stop and a woman in a soft green shirt and grey sweatpants bearing a striking resemblance to Annie leapt out from the driver's side. A harried-looking man with salt and pepper hair came out of the passenger seat and a young boy in dinosaur pajamas emerged from the back.

"Annie!" The woman's cry was more of a disbelieving sob.

Annie's lips parted in a gasp, her green eyes widening. "Mom!"

The three raced towards Annie as she slid out of the ambulance and nearly fell to her knees. The paramedic caught her and helped her stand as Annie's family crashed into her. Her parents were sobbing and Kendra felt tears brush up against her own eyes at the sight. Annie's parents couldn't seem to keep hugging her, they kept drawing away to stare at her, to brush her hair out of her face, to touch her cheek, to reassure themselves that their daughter was alive and real.

Annie leaned down and picked up her brother. He threw his arms around her neck and she clutched him tightly, as though she never planned to let him go ever again.

"You did a good thing you know."

Kendra turned to see her mother behind her, the only human who could always see her. Some moms had a sixth sense for when their children had broken the rules, Kendra's mom had a sixth sense for when she needed emotional support.

"Dad doesn't seem to think so."

Her mom snorted. "Your father couldn't tell a good deed if it gave him an ear infection." Kendra didn't reply, still watching the

reunion before her. “It’s after midnight so you’re off the hook for a couple of days. Let’s go home. We can eat ice cream and watch movies with happy endings.”

Her mom placed cautious arms around her and Kendra leaned into the embrace, inhaling the familiar scent of lemon soap. “Home sounds perfect.”

*AMBER HOLLOWAY*

SCARS

I watch the scars grow and grow  
    A mark here,  
    A scrape there,  
On my face, and on my arms.  
    Upon my legs,  
    And mostly on my heart.  
Like subtle stabs of unkind words  
    With no remorse of forethought  
    Who can see the lines they leave?  
    With no broken skin to grieve  
Like sudden jabs when a moment hurts  
    When you leave and I fall to the dirt  
    That stabbing ache from what you said  
I can never forgive forget the deep line you left  
    But as the time grows on and on  
    Some of the pain does begin to ebb away,  
And yes, some of the scars do begin to fade.  
    Some are callous and hard  
    Another protection aid  
    But others I feel on rainy days  
All alone and left to my thoughts  
    The words come back  
    And once again I feel  
    the ache upon my heart

*WILSON HANNALEI*

## EX-BEST FRIENDS

I slept three hours  
And woke up hungry.  
This is the standard.  
Everyone's standard,  
I'd like to think.  
I lie in the warmth of my bed  
and argue the pros and cons of leaving it.

I sleep three hours  
And I'm craving waffles.  
There are three ways to make them that I know.  
Normal. Chocolate. Pandan.

I slept three hours  
And I'm thinking about the girl  
I used to love.  
Her mother made the best pandan waffles  
I've ever had.  
Sweet and chewy.  
Salted with butter.

I slept three hours  
And I'm thinking,  
Desperately,  
How do I bargain that piece of me back.  
It was never mine—  
But wasn't it?  
Wasn't it?

I slept three hours  
And stayed up two.  
I never wanted to have any regrets.  
I can't taste anything  
But coconut and butter,  
Can't think of anything  
But the give of sweet flesh under my teeth.



*MASATOSHI ISHIGAWA*  
SHROOMWHALE



*VANDANA PAWAR*  
ROOM AT MANTECA