

# ayaskala

2021



*ayaskala*

2021

Inside the Journal

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## Mother, o mother! by Akрати Mehrotra

mother, o mother, come sit beside me!  
let me make you some tea today.  
shall we grieve, dear mother, your father  
whose spirit still haunts you when father asks  
you for a glass of water at three in the morning?  
I have felt how his imagery flickers when you blink,  
when a time-worn soul brushes  
his shoulders walking past you.

mother, o mother, let me do some laundry today!  
I watch you removing every stain your son  
smears as he follows his father's legacy.  
I twitch at how blindly you want the  
red, blue, brown, yellow and grey begone  
from white,  
how you stand in despair with your hands on the rolling pin:  
a mind ever so clouded with unease that sometimes your rotis turn black and crisp.

mother, o mother, let me command the morning prayers tomorrow!  
I promise I shall rise with birds,  
chant your mother's favourite hymns,  
pray for you, for you never do, I know.  
I know I have seen your lips muttering,  
*"dear god, don't let my son's life be in vain,  
let him understand his opposite kind. let him never treat us like my father.  
dear god, let my husband be what his sisters dreamed him to be,  
and let my daughter rise above every man in her life".*  
however shallow, I shall pray for you today and for you only, dear mother.

mother, o mother, come sit beside me!  
let me make your hair, caress your scalp today,  
let me adorn you with flowers father never brought you,  
show you the affectionate words brother never wrote to you,  
sing with you the songs grandfather deemed as vulgar, inhumane, hellish ignitions;  
let me show you what you hide from yourself.

## **ABOUT THE POET**

Akrati Mehrotra (she/her) is a high-schooler from India. Apart from being part aspiring writer and part warrior, she is also a Mitski enthusiast and can be found contemplating various dinner-table conversations at any given time. Reading Emily Dickinson out loud and confessing to the evening winds are her forte. More of her writing can be found on Tumblr /@ akратиisalive and Instagram /@akratimehrotra.

## Hours (ft. you) - a slowdeath by Bidisha P. Kashyap

Dawn — whimpering fragile silhouettes, satin laces wrapped around wine-stained sheets, the streetlights flicker slowly, "What is it like to love someone till every single breath is just a reminder of how you have to get through another day alone" — I stare at the sticky note beside my bedstand, deafening silence creeps up my spine, yet I find a home somewhere in between, somewhere far amidst the first ray of sun a lone bird sighs, I tell myself that I don't need you, my words comes out in series of stutters, please come home.

Noon — old typewriter keys clash against tired fingers, I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear as the clock tower strikes one, the sky looks like a pastel patchwork of metaphors today, I hope the winds on your side of the town are gentle on your freckles, inside my third drawer, somewhere carefully tucked inside some envelopes, and I try so hard to not reach out for your smile, I have survived two Octobers alone since you left and I am not sure if I can take the third one.

Dusk — I run my fingertips around the edge of the ceramic cup and watch my date flash me a smile, his long brown locks are similar to yours but yet home feels so far, long slender fingers run over my knuckles; he looks outside the window, a tint of shyness kisses his cheeks, I smile and shift my gaze to the sky, have you found a different heartbeat to call your safe place now love? (I hope you still think about me)

Midnight — thunder whirls past the city as I spend another sleepless night with empty arms, the wooden box where we kept our promise rings, now serves as my ashtray, you left me like an unfinished poem after feeding me with a very promising ending, I smile to myself and then laugh and then choke on my own sobs, how am I now supposed to finish the poem in me if your thoughts keep on breaking me over and over in every passing hour?

### ABOUT THE POET

19 y/o aspiring writer, Bidisha P. Kashyap hails from Assam, India. As a part time poet and full-time lover of art, her works has been published in various anthologies, along with poetry soup's first-ever issue, local dailies, virtual literary community pages and youth magazines. Other than trying her best to come up with something new and pleasing every time, out of all the unsaid rants in her journal and her notes app, she admits that she has a slight obsession with tea, art supplies, books and winters.

Instagram - @bidishaa

## Yellow by Constance Bacchus

on everything dust  
makes it look old  
a million cigarettes  
were smoked here  
by renters as they  
sprayed for roaches

### ABOUT THE POET

Constance Bacchus currently lives in eastern Washington state with her daughter. She often writes about the wildlife in the area. Her work can be found in various literary journals including Cirque, Dreich Broad Review and Salmon Creek Journal. Her newest book is *Divorcing Flowers* (Alien Buddha Press, 2021) although she does have others including *Secret Dam Things*.

## Soliloquy by Dale Booton

I look in the mirror and see the face of my father staring back smiling faintly he's twenty-two and getting ready for a night out check shirt on hair slicked back his face is my face but I'm not there not even a thought in his mind yet I'm not his not yet the boy he would drag up to his shoulders giving a better view of the world just as he wasn't mine yet not yet the man who would recount the stories of my childhood over and over again like the time he held me over my half-brother's head four months old as if an offering to god kicking my little legs at the air until my half-brother felt the warm dribbles of my piss run down his face or the time I bust my bottom lip open on the neighbour's concrete block was told I had been running wild in the garden on a fine summer day I didn't moan then didn't cry nor when I split my head open a year or so later so I've been told had my head bandaged in cheap tea towels died red my scalp dangling by the mere threads of what skin remained so I've been told and I didn't whimper didn't say anything at all just sat still and quiet on the bed while the doctors stitched me up glued down the fleshy crown told me I was brave gave me a smile told me to be careful in future more seriously than how my father told me when we got home amidst my mother's vicious tongue lashing out about one thing or another how he had not done as she had wanted how she was tired of his shit he smiled at me then too I remember that the slow tug of the muscles of his cheeks and again when my mother launched a pint of milk across the caravan watched it spray against the hoary walls then groaned that she would have to go out and get more and then when my sister and I shuffled into the hallway barely twenty years held between us to the sound of their artillery words her volatility his departure a glance back the tugged muscles a faint smile a look with no need for words and I imagine it is how he smiles in the mirror before me now just as I smile to bury unhappiness behind the lips

### ABOUT THE POET

Dale Booton is a twenty-six-year-old queer poet from Birmingham. His poetry has been published by Verve in their Diversity anthology and The Young Poets Network. Most recently, his poetry has been featured by Ligeia, Queerlings, Fahmidan, Tealight Press, Spelt, Dreich, and The Adriatic. He is currently working on his first pamphlet.

Twitter: @BootsPoetry



## "The doctor told me to keep a migraine diary" by Dimasilaw

so here it is. Today, the pain held me like a lover.

I swear to God, migraines are a far more common fixture in this house than my *dad*. I know because this is the 20th day in a row I've gotten out of bed with my teeth feeling like they're curling out of my mouth, needles shot into my eyes, but it's at least the 30th day in a row that I haven't seen my father. Does it matter? Never mind. Sorry. This isn't about my dad. If anything, I have more migraines when he's around. When I woke up and walked down the stairs, it was kind of like wading through a flood's knife-edge.

Foam gathered around my feet as my knees crashed down the steps, stumbling down like a runaway minecart. In a way, the steps were like stalagmites. Or was it stalactites? Doesn't matter. What I know is that wounds speckled my lead-filled legs like paint splattered on a wall as graffiti. Sorry again.

It would have been a lot easier just to write: "I had a migraine, and it was a 10 on the pain scale". But I don't *get* pain scales.

It's much more accurate to say that when I got up on my feet, I mumbled through the distorted hall as the walls caved in.

The room was closing in on me, cutting through my blood and searing itself into the grit of my bones, and the pain was standing at the end of the twisted hallway, calling out:

*Come here. I think you're beautiful.* And without question I came into its arms and didn't let go.

### ABOUT THE POET

Dimasilaw (he/him) is an artist and writer from the Philippines who loves wizards, the Bible, and history. His work has appeared in Indigo Literary Journal, Warning Lines, and others; he been nominated for Best of the Net and is the editor-in-chief of Provenance Journal. He would do anything for his dogs. See @dimasiilaw on Twitter.

## A day in the life by Divyanshi Dash

morning

there are only five days in a week.  
my cup of chai is full of drowned biscuits.  
I don't remember what day it is today.  
I don't own a calendar.  
my neighbours are my parents. I think  
they have invited me for dinner tonight.

afternoon

I haven't forgotten the other two days of the week.  
I just don't consider them as days. I don't even  
open my eyes on Saturdays and Sundays.  
my home is my bed. the windows are always shut.  
work from home means work from bed.  
I don't have to make dinner tonight.

night

the fireplace at my neighbour's slash parent's  
place is unkempt. I came here for warmth.  
I am not wearing socks and there are no carpets.  
the food on the table is microwaved:  
leftovers from lunch, soft parathas and aloo bhaja.  
they want me to sleep over.  
but I'd rather cry at home. on my bed.

### **ABOUT THE POET**

A monochromatic leaves enthusiast, Divyanshi Dash (she/her) believes in poetry as a prayer. Her work has appeared in The Walled City Journal, Sapphic Writers, and Cathartic Youth Literary Magazine among others. She is currently based in New Delhi, India. You can find more of her at <https://divyanshidash.carrd.co!>

## Solo traveller by Gaia Thomas

dear solo traveller,

I am composing by line as she told me.

Each capital being either the surface of the water or a head of state places to begin or end or places that end you or where the infinity of self becomes an infinity of many. Soft thud of a traffic light on snow in the middle of the night, a firetruck blush that stops and starts. Ashes in the bread. What it means to escape with guns and without anything else. If your bed is an inversion table, and your blood is a clatter of hoofbeats over cobblestone streets.

dear solo traveller,

let me begin again.

What I meant to say is that the bridge is two things at once: available to two dimensions, two ways of seeing. The narrative itself begins a narrative. And yet the narrative's narrative is not about triumph or defeat, because both sides are its own. Begin the web in the middle of open space. We can either do this dead or living. So many bridges crossed without ever a thought as to what was underneath them. *I need enough bodies with stones in their pockets so that I can walk across them*

she thought.

And yes as you said, this is just the right vantage point to watch the water cross me. Maybe you were not paying attention when the boat was turned into a bed. Or what mirrors are used for (navigation, signalling) in the language of the bridge everything is a verb something done in relation to one arbitrary point in space which is a birth. as arbitrary as birth

dear solo

The stars travel in relation to each other at great distances.

Think of a moment as something that expands as a pool of dye does in water.

Think of us as the recorder of echoes these the evidence of laws and life. Think of my conception in the splashdown pool of a waterfall, think of the blood expanding

Imagine that all this time the water have also been moving on.

And that there have been people trying to stops it. Imagine wind also does not give a fuck about triumph. Then imagine you in the not too distant Take this idea and fold it under

your idea of present like a napkin. Do a trick in which I think I am holding the ears but end up holding the tail.

Take my socks off without noticing.

s o l o

Here in Washington Square Park there is a fountain. Water cycles upward and down. As it has for over a century. And underneath this park they used to bury people like us. When I wrote in Victoria an orange cat sat on the porch across from me. A man wanted to jump from a nearby building but they talked him down. From a nearby powerline crows lit and flew lit and flew as if a string of code against infinity.

## **ABOUT THE POET**

Gaia Thomas holds an MFA from Mills College and is a 2019 Zoeglossia Fellow. Her work appears in the anthologies *Writing for Life*, *We Are Not Your Metaphor*, and *Godiva Speaks*. Her chapbooks include *Aloft Alight* and *Cut from the Body*.

She lives in California with her girlfriend and a well-respected cat.

Twitter: @GaiaCThomas

Wordpress: [gaiaceleste.poetry.blog](http://gaiaceleste.poetry.blog)

## Death is a shallow pit by Hetvi

Dadi, through her wrinkled eyes  
and tired voice sings a song of  
longing, whenever she speaks-  
she swears by god, her body  
is a battlefield, only god knows  
how scars can be so gentle. she  
strokes a broken hair's nest aside,  
and when i ask her of life- she forgets,  
like a gramophone on loop, she  
tells me about the time she woke  
up and felt as if something had  
eaten her up from the inside;  
she doesn't speak; i hear-  
imagine, child: the universe is  
an ice cream truck, and god, an  
invisible hand within it; imagine,  
a silver scoop dive headfirst into you,  
imagine a juxtaposition of amavas  
and poonam, dream, child; on her  
cheek, humbling hydrology, it is no  
wonder her voice cracks- the silence  
that we share is a reminder, and  
she tells me, one day she woke up and  
felt like an ominous telegraph, and  
how the bile swirling inside her felt  
like the economic hand of god, trying  
to prophesize at an anna per word, and  
how, later that day, she received a  
messenger, and how her brother's death  
got lost in a prescribed transliteration.  
  
how is she so calm, i think as i dunk an  
oreo in a glass of warmth- beyond  
the cacophony of her pushing me to

eat one more, i see oreo; oreo is wild,  
she is brown sandwiched between white, i  
see barks interrogating her, i watch  
her walk up to me, i see her mesmerised  
by my shoelaces, i pick her up and make  
a new friend. she never comes inside, but  
i watch her memorise my timetable, and  
one day, i wake up feeling like i've swallowed  
a smartphone, i feel its phantom vibrating, the  
number looks ominous, truecaller says it's  
god, and when i pick up- god gives me a  
number plate, and tells me not to call the police,  
i think about how later that day, i received  
a messenger, i think about how the intensity  
of pixels doesn't do justice to despair;

despair- it is a censored day-dream,  
it is civil, it doesn't barge in and become an  
unwanted guest not open to arbitration, it  
is about as civil as vacuum could be. an  
ice cream truck approaches, but we are unable  
to listen to its sound- there is no medium but despair.

in memoriam, we dunk and eat  
and drink up to wash away.

## **ABOUT THE POET**

Hetvi is an undergraduate student based in India and the co-founder of hariandhetu - an art & lit zineletter, interested in the relationship between art and technology, amongst other things. Her work has appeared in Backslash Lit, the Narrow Road Journal, etc. You can find hetvi on twitter @vuisnotabot and instagram @cosmicbhejafry.

## **Its summer & Lorde has just released a new single by Montana**

& i swear i have never felt  
so small so permeable stuck  
within the heat of this night.

i listen as she sings  
about wishbones about sunlight  
& all things *Warm*

& all the while i'm begging  
the cloud-coated sun above to come  
out & allow me to shrivel  
into something less  
than this.

### **ABOUT THE POET**

Montana lives in Montreal, Quebec with her pet, Crocodile. Her work has been featured in CP Quarterly, Ghost City Review, ENTROPY, & others. Find her on twitter: @montanaLjackson or at montanaleighjackson.com

## Google, How Many Times I Can Google Poetry Prompts? by Shufei Ewe

I mean, seriously — in the 3.5 seconds spent scouring the nearest search engine keywords, I've already killed off seven more ideas. six pages of irrelevant results later i gulp up a glimmer of courage — startle my keyboard into a sputtering start. good idea “ bad idea”, this sounds great, this goes to the gutter. i stutter to string some rhythmic run-on lines that risk the horrors of docx formatting, leveraging the 'lilt' in alliteration. i assertively slash lines, i append slash lines, my start-stop pace races my backspace bouts. i stash the rest for another aggravating attempt at a piece which i prophesize to be marginally better than this piss-poor effort. i will applaud the day i finally pour conscious streams into a single coherent stanza, scraping the asinine excess off. right now, i'll read it, weep and close tab.

### ABOUT THE POET

Shufei Ewe is a copywriter by day, an insomniac by night, and an overthinker all times in between. Her work has either been published or is forthcoming in The Adriatic Mag, Capsule Stories, HAD, Yes Poetry, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Versification and more. You can usually spot her in small, secret hideouts across the internet, or find her at @ewe\_too on Twitter instead.



## Why is Poetry the Way it is? by Sumedha Sengupta

Even with the dwindling perfume of  
the candle, and the tinge of orange on the  
horizon, there is hardly any poetry  
twirling on my lips-

Why is poetry most often about  
book-bound, dried up leaves,  
and the rays of the sun slyly  
iridescent on shimmering glass beads?

Why are corpses always shrouded?  
with crisp white sheets?

The autumn roads are lachrymose,  
covered in bright scarlet and yellow leaves,  
And the path to happiness is twisted and turned,  
if not broken into divergent streets.

Decisions are always to the rhythm  
of the wind, and sorrow set  
to hackneyed old tunes.

How can poetry be good or bad,  
when it's merely a metaphor of our  
woes painted in bright pastel hues?

How does the smile of a beautiful maiden,  
cast slanting rays of hope, and why are flowers  
a symbol of freedom when they dance only to  
the whim of the powerful westerlies?

Why does love appear as flutters in the chest,  
and how is the simple off-white of the moon,  
a cornucopia of a Forlorn lovers' dreams?

How does the night sky give one hope,  
that dark empty spaces can exist?

Why do we study rhymes written by broken souls?

My courtyard was never adorned with  
withered tulip petals. My home has the stench

of dried-up fish, and my nights just reserved  
for spinning whimsical stories.

But poetry is aesthetic without vanity I'm told-  
It's finding rhythm in the blink of an eye.  
It's narrating stories not meant for headstones,  
stories that perhaps have already been told,  
but you and I, we set it to verses and it  
becomes our tale, one that hasn't existed before.  
It's about seeing faces in clouds, and  
souls in the stars. Maybe crisp white  
bedsheets are, after all, just shrouding the  
words that were never said aloud.  
Maybe, it's about finding shades  
of colour in an inconspicuous grey path.  
Maybe it's the sound of people who  
would otherwise drift away into oblivion.  
Wonderfully so, even rejected poetry is a  
powerful sound to the perceptive heart.  
Most of all, maybe it's just simply about  
asking things that have never asked-  
Then maybe, just maybe,  
I have a poet's heart after all?

## **ABOUT THE POET**

Sumedha Sengupta (She/Her) is a 21-year-old student and writer residing in New Delhi, India. Her work can be found in *Twist&Twain*, *The LiveWire*, and is forthcoming in a few anthologies. On a good day, she can be found obsessing over chemical reactions, painting contorted faces, or listening to classical music. One day, she hopes to discover something extraordinary!

## Devastation is on its way by Zeena Abbas

this much I have always known.  
and you have too, haven't you?  
*matchstick girl, mercurial mouth,*  
you know these are the makings of death  
or death as we know it:  
the kind that cools into your body,  
an electric splinter haemorrhage.  
we used to fear it once, I think (but I'm not sure)  
when we existed in the spaces between  
things happening,  
when time was ample and warm and  
tasted like a mouthful of blood.  
sometimes I think about what I'd see  
if I looked into the past —  
us, different but still us.  
us, paralyzed by tendrils of longing,  
held in place like the ocean tethering itself to land,  
like man tethering himself to damnation.  
us from ages ago,  
when our bodies were baptized by sunlight  
that didn't feel cruel and miserable,  
when our breaths blossomed  
instead of staggering,  
instead of stopping midway,  
saying *this is enough*.  
do you recognise us now?  
when we've shed inhibition like a second skin,  
made a home out of fear's sharp teeth,  
her wanton growling.  
I don't know how much of me is me  
and how much of you is you,  
but I know some things well:  
your feathery touch rooting us to our makeshift home,

I know the music that wakes us up from  
these half-alive states and shakes us anew,  
I know there are always more reasons to not do something,  
I know we won't always see the same shapes in the bathroom tiles,  
I know that I forgive myself for everything.  
devastation is on its way (but I know)  
we could die right now and it would be beautiful.

## It's the night before my birthday, and I'm feeling nostalgic by Palaces

I got to talk to my friends today and get an Arizona and a lollipop.

Blake's been trying to sext Connor. If she cooperates, it won't end well (proves that guys only want one thing).

But then, Jonah came on the subway with us because he was going to meet Chloe F., who he's been Facebooking for a while.

The truth is, I'm confused as to whether or not I like him.

I still can't find my iPod!

I just realized this has a key.

Rachelle doesn't watch Buffy so going to Comic Con with her wouldn't be logical.

It's perfectly normal for me to not like it when Mom talks shit about me, makes fun of me, laughs at me, etc.

Last night I had a dream that Dean from Gilmore Girls (❤️) was my boyfriend. I was sick and was vomiting a soup-like substance (ew), so I went to the hospital and they said I had a mental disorder (who vomits because of a mental disorder?). Then Dean and I hugged, and it all became all too real in that moment. Realization came over me, life was amazing. I didn't need Jonah, I had better, I had somebody to love me.

I wrote a deep parody of Lady Gaga's new song "Hair" today.

I kind of like Kenny now. More than a bit. But he's the most popular guy in school...

(lol I almost wrote just then that he was the most popular on goSupermodel...!)

Friday by Rebecca Black? Worse than I thought it would be.

Today it has been 40 days since I've been on YouTube, btw, because I gave it up for lent.

I woke up Saturday very calm and serene

because I was very comfortable and I had a nice dream about exploring a sunny day, being in a hotel, and then being Jackson from Hannah Montana (I know right?)

I haven't really written about it, but this year has had me really thinking I might need to see a psychologist.

I got 79 likes on my witty comment under Jessie J's video!!!  
Mom and I had a huge fight tonight (she called me a bitch)  
It's going to be my first birthday at school since Grade 4.  
I'm not evil.

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Palaces is the Editor-in-Chief of Wrongdoing Magazine. She is the author of *EROTECAY* (LUPERCALIA Press, 2021) and *Folktales for the Diseased Individual* (2021) and has placed work in *Juked Magazine*, *Eclectica Magazine*, *Gingerbread House Magazine*, and many others. She has a BAH from Queen's University. Find her at [pascapotvin.com](http://pascapotvin.com) or @pascapalaces (Twitter).

## City of Water by Darren Ryding

*Thank you for travelling on the Shinkansen. This is the Nozomi Super Express bound for Shin-Osaka, Kyoto, Shin-Kobe, Nagoya, Shinagawa, and Tokyo.*

The bullet train cuts through southern Honshu like a scythe through maize. You're going home to Gifu and I'm returning to Tokyo. The odds are stacked against us because of distance and circumstances. But we have to try. Don't we?

Hiroshima, the City of Water. The journey from Tokyo takes four hours by Shinkansen. As I wait in the foyer, an elderly Japanese lady ventures up to me. Her buttercup-yellow bib reveals that she is a tourism volunteer worker.

"Are you lost?" she asks, beaming kindly.

"No, I'm just waiting for a friend. *Arigatou Gozaimasu!*"<sup>1</sup> I reply.

"Where are you from? Germany? Many Germans visit Hiroshima."

"I'm from Ireland," I respond.

A look of bemusement crosses her face. My tiny island is barely a speck in the consciousness of most Japanese.

"*Airulando*," I say, giving the katakana form.<sup>2</sup>

"Ahhhh *Aisulando!* Very cold" she nods enthusiastically, before ladening me with tourist brochures.

I've given up explaining to the Japanese that I'm not from Iceland. Nor do I have the heart to tell her that heavy snowfall is rare in my country and that we're lacking in volcanoes.

Then you tap me on the shoulder. You're here! We stand awkwardly for a moment before hugging. The last time we met was the first time. You came to Tokyo to visit a mutual friend. A group of us went out for *nomihodai*<sup>3</sup> and on to a nightclub. We kissed on the dancefloor. The next day you had a few hours to kill before your train home.

"Do you want to grab some lunch?"

We went to an Italian restaurant outside Shinjuku-Sanchome station. You laughed at my struggles to eat spaghetti without using a spoon. Since then we kept messaging until finally we agreed to meet here, in Hiroshima.

Hiroshima Peace Park. A ruined dome remains, a harrowing relic of the atomic bomb. The searing heat scorched a human being's shadow into a set of concrete steps. Sculptures pay somber tribute to affected innocents: school children, Korean comfort women, people living their lives under the shadow of empire and war. Peace cranes bespeckle the ground like bird seed. It is deeply moving and after we walk along one of the rivers in somber silence.

That night we lie side by side on the futon in the darkness. I'm unsure of your desires, your expectations. I'm afraid of misreading the signs and making the rest of this trip awkward for both of us. I don't want to scare you away but then I see your outstretched hand and I reach for it.

Bodies intertwining, midnight-black hair cascades down your slender back, magnetized lips, we are one, we are one.

Afterwards, our bodies glisten with sweat under the moonlight. We listen to the low hum of the air conditioner and a chorus of cicadas. As we cool, we edge our naked bodies closer again and fall into an entangled slumber.

Miyajima Island lies just outside the city boundaries. After six months in Japan, I thought that the novelty of temples had worn off. However, Miyajima is spectacular. A vast orange torii gate rises from the water in front of the island's temple complex. I wonder if our ferry will pass through the Giant Torii into a higher realm.

As we wander around the tiny island we hold hands. We didn't do that yesterday. Miniature deer roam around the island, scavenging food from tourists. We laugh as one tries to enter a noodle shop before a harassed waiter shoos it away. Then we follow a path up to higher ground where we sit and gaze out at the shimmering bay.

I like Hiroshima. The streets are wide and calm, a far cry from the frantic hustle and bustle of Tokyo. Trees line the paths and the pace of life is a relief after the overwhelming rat race of the capital city. I feel like opening my arms wide like an albatross and running down the path. Then I notice you are gone.

A lady spots my confusion and points down a pathway.

"Your girlfriend went down there."

My girlfriend. The words are jarring in the morning air. Are you my girlfriend? I go down to the Ota River one of six waterways in Hiroshima. You grin teasingly at me when I find you. Then we silently embrace.



Now we're sitting side-by-side on the Shinkansen. I love these trains because of their futuristic aesthetic and their amazing legroom.

"Can we take a picture together?" I ask you.

A shadow crosses your face.

"Really? *Nande?*"<sup>4</sup>

"Well I've had a really nice time and I'd like to have a picture with you," I say.

You think about it. I can see the turmoil inside you. It's not long since you ended your last relationship and now I'm trespassing upon your affections.

I hold the camera in front of us and you stick your tongue out. It's not the most flattering photo of either of us. We're both exhausted after successive late nights and early mornings. But I don't care.

"Are we going to see each other again?"

The words hang in the air as though above a bed of nails. But I need to know because these feelings are too intense. We need to act on them or put them away and stop hurting ourselves.

You take my hand in yours and smile before you disembark.

<sup>1</sup> Thank you.

<sup>2</sup> A Japanese linguistic form used to Japanify foreign words eg: hamburger becomes *hanbuga*

<sup>3</sup> Many Japanese bars (*izakayas*) offer all-you-can-drink deals for a set time and price.

<sup>4</sup> Why?

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Darren Ryding is from Ireland. He currently lives in Vietnam. His writing features in *Dissonance*, *The Madrigal*, and *Ink, Sweat and Tears*.

## If I had to by Maia Kowalski

If I had to, I'd go back to April. I'd ask to see that picture you took of me, when we went to the Art Gallery of Ontario. We're on the fifth floor with all the contemporary art. There are wide open spaces filled with sculptures the size of elephants. Flashing lights are strung lazily on the walls. Tapestries are strewn across the floor and spotlights dance across the patterns. I look up at the skylight, a tiny rectangle that brightens the whole room in white, and you say *stop, stay there, keep looking*, so I stop, stay there, keep looking. In the corner of my eye I see you lift your phone to take a photo, then lower it back down. I don't ask to see it because I know you'll send it to me later. You never do.

If I had to, I'd go back to March. You never liked it when I put on lipstick in front of you. We're eating matching breakfast sandwiches at that little cafe down by the waterfront, and after we pay our bill, I spot a mirror on the wall and say *wait*. I pull out a black tube, pop the cap and swivel up a cylinder of pomegranate pink, a shade called *Punch*. As I swipe the colour on my lips, I see you in the corner of my eye, making a face and turning away. I only ask what the matter is after I finish. You shake your head and smile at me, but it doesn't make that look burn any less.

If I had to, I'd go back to February. We're sitting on your bed and talking about you, your depression, your family back home, your ex-girlfriend. You get upset, start having an episode, put on a playlist of just two songs that stay on loop for the next hour. You lay your head in my lap and I run my hand over your face, over and over, the way my grandmother did whenever I was upset. Your breathing slows; you wipe your nose on the back of your hand. I wonder if you love me.

If I had to, I'd go back to January. Your grandmother has just passed away, you can't fly home for the funeral and you need me, you're grieving. We walk to the big park with the best view of the ocean and sit there for a while, even though there's snow on the ground and the wind is icy. I don't remember what we said to each other. We stare out at the ocean until I can't feel my cheeks.

If I had to, I'd go back to December. You can't wait to go back home for Christmas break but you hang back a few extra days just to spend more time with me. I take you on an hour bus ride to my favourite place: a little fishing village full of brightly-coloured saltbox houses. We walk along the boardwalk and you take photos of the ocean, the rocks, and me. I post

one of the photos on Facebook. You take your new girlfriend there in the summer, after I move away.

If I had to, I'd go back to November. Your grandmother is sick and the worry wraps itself so tightly around your depression that you can barely finish your schoolwork. I sit with you in the common room to encourage you to study; we edit each other's assignments and watch bad movies. No one else knows how twisted up you feel inside, the way the darkness rolls in like a slow fog. One night, we swap stories about our grandmothers: a night of folklore about the strong Chinese women we know and knew. *My grandmother bought me a red bean bun every time she came to visit*, I say, and the next day, you buy me a box of four from the Chinese bakery, *to keep the tradition going*. We sit on my bed and break them in half. We watch the red bean paste ooze out of the middle and salivate at the incoming sweetness. I tell myself that my grandmother would have liked you.

If I had to, I'd go back to October. I'd tell you I loved you right away.

If I had to, I'd go back to September. I wouldn't sit next to you in the hallway during the school's welcome party, nibble on pizza and ask why you moved here. I wouldn't get drunk in the second week and trip into you as we walk with our roommates to a house party. I wouldn't walk to the waterfront with you in the third week, listen to you tell me about your mom, how she died, that you miss her every day. I would ignore your texts in the fourth week and tell you I'm just too busy to hang out when I see you in class. I wouldn't feel bad about it.

If I had to, I'd go back to August. I'd tell the school to transfer me to another dorm, to rearrange my classes, so I'd only see you in the hallways that year and nothing more. But only if I had to.

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Maia Kowalski (she/her) is a writer from Toronto, Canada, and has degrees in journalism and creative writing under her belt. She has been published in *Yolk Literary* and *Montreal Writes*. She is currently putting together her first short story collection.

