

# ayaskala

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*The* **STOLEN HEIRESS**  
*or* **The Cost of a Kiss**

...ed her, behir  
"Miss Danel ho  
instructed how to  
inquired in an icy  
with swift, easy  
"Some ten thou  
returned lightly  
the words of repr  
tongue, for there  
present, and the  
that if she ventu  
gust self would  
"Madame L'ES  
stead, "allow me  
Neddy started,  
bright eyes fixe  
steady stare. St  
ish, yellow elin

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*ayaskala*

2022

Life in Adornment

**Guest Editor**

Kashvi Chandok

**Editors**

Vaishnavi Sharma

Mehr Bahl

ayaskala.com

Instagram: @ayaskala

X (Formerly Twitter): @ayaskala

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## **Adorning in Solidarity by Priyam**

The history and politics of clothes have always been a part of the bigger socio-political picture, albeit underrepresented in the pages of history and the walls of museums. Societal norms have governed styles of clothing and other ways of adornment for ages. These patterns and trends in clothing have continued to influence people's perceptions of themselves and those around them. They have also been the basis for the construction of notions around beauty, grace and morality. With time, the notions have changed and so have the norms. Regional codes have played a significant role in determining the way people dressed, majorly depending on the materials available in those regions. Author and journalist Seema Goswami writes, 'In the days before India was divided in the name of religion, wearing a sari or salwar kameez wasn't a function of which God you worshipped. What you wore pretty much depended on where you lived. In Punjab, women wore the shalwar kameez irrespective of whether they were Hindu or Muslim. And in Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and Bihar, they wore the sari, whatever their religious persuasion. Clothing styles were also an indicator of status in the social hierarchy. Dalit Christian women could be distinguished from their unconverted counterparts.'<sup>1</sup>

History has seen clothes becoming the expression of ideologies and change. Women's clothing, in particular, has been at the heart of various popular movements in Europe and America in the 19th century. Many European women stopped wearing opulent clothes and jewellery after the two world wars.

India, since the time of the Harappans, had a rich legacy of traditional garments, but with increasing western influence and colonisation, there was a shift in clothing trends in India, especially of the elite. Men who considered western clothes a sign of affluence and modernity switched to trousers and coats while others saw this as a threat to their traditional identities. Some adopted new styles while trying to keep the old ones alive, like many Bengali bureaucrats who wore western clothes to work and Indian clothes at home. French chiffons and laces were now imported for the elite women. That is when the practice of attaching a fall strip to these lightweight saris and wearing petticoats under them began. These were not required with traditional handwoven ones.<sup>2</sup>

In 1905, when Lord Curzon decided to partition Bengal to enfeeble the growing patriotism, the 'Swadeshi Movement' and 'Boycott' became a major part of the anti-

Partition agitation. Thus, began the narrative of adorning in solidarity. ‘The Bengali youth addicted to wearing British coats and trousers started appearing in dhotis and shawls.’<sup>33</sup> The movement gained popularity across India. This was a prelude to a much larger movement that would be launched by Gandhi in the coming decades.

British goods were cheaper as compared to their swadeshi counterparts; people had started returning to European dresses. For the rich, the British-like way of life had become a status symbol. The ‘memsahibs’ wore chiffons and georgette sarees from Paris with sleeveless blouses, high-heeled sandals, and European make-up. The real change began as Gandhi returned to India, entering the political scene with thriving nationalism and determination. He gave up his British suits and Swiss watches for Dhotis in 1921, setting an example for the many Indians who would soon follow suit. Khadi became the fabric of Indian Independence; ‘Clothing for Liberation’ as Peter Gonsalves called it. A symbol of Indian unity against British Rule, it was more than just a cloth now; it was a revolutionary idea propagating ‘simple living and high thinking’. Gandhi wanted the entire nation to wear Khadi to blur the lines between religions and classes of the society. It not only made a strong political statement but also aimed at empowering women by involving them in cloth weaving and in the freedom movement as a whole. Since the styles of draping sarees varied across India, an attempt to devise a common one was made, and the Nivi Style was born and adopted by ‘Satyagrahi’ women. But not everyone could wear Khadi. A woman from Maharashtra once wrote to Gandhi saying that wearing a nine-yard Khadi Saree was unaffordable, and the elders wouldn’t accept a reduction to six yards. For young college-going women drawn towards the freedom movement, fashion choices reflected nationalistic sentiments. In her book- *The Lost Homestead- My Mother, Partition and Punjab*- Marina Wheeler, a British lawyer with roots in West Punjab (Present-day Pakistan), describes the scene at Kinnaird College, Lahore in the pre-partition days. Kinnaird was undivided Punjab’s most prestigious women’s college and that is where Marina’s Aunt-Anup studied in the early 1940s. She would talk about many students having joined the congress movement and the agitation on the streets. “Anup wore Khadi to show solidarity with the freedom movement”. “Before the Quit India Movement, all well-to-do girls wore French Chiffon Sarees. Anup did too. She loved expensive fabrics! Plenty of her friends continued to wear Chiffon, but she didn’t.” Newspapers now carried advertisements of cosmetics produced by Indian women. A Gandhi cap, a khadi jhabba or kurta along with churidar or dhoti became the uniform

of a freedom fighter. ‘The Nehru jacket and the Jodhpuri coat became the style barometers.’

In the days leading to independence, the Swadeshi attire played a major role in representing the unity of Indians and crippling the British textile Industry and their hopes for a future in India. But clothes bringing out the ‘Desi’ in one is not just a thing of the past. Wherever in the world, we are, as soon as we get into our traditional, we carry India within ourselves. And this way, despite the distance, we feel one in our belongingness. Quoting Marina Wheeler again, “Trips to India in childhood were rare, so my sense of being Indian emerged in other ways. Dip (her mother) didn’t dress like other mothers. She wore a Sari. In America, friend’s moms slouched in sweat pants while Dip glided in colourful silk.”

That’s the beauty of adornments. They don’t just beautify, they bring together.

### **About The Author**

Priyam is an independent researcher and writer. She documents narratives of the Partition diaspora. She is a history buff who loves to read about South Asian history and culture. Her work is an attempt to find the umpteen stories around us, waiting to be told.



## A Hundred Embroidered Stories by Zobia Alam

I remember the gentle rat-a-tat of my tiny feet against the cool steel surface of the almirah. How I'd make my way up to the top shelf, balancing on my toes with my heart throbbing in my chest and all the way up to my ear drums. I could hear my breath, rapid but soft, rhythmically tuned to my heartbeat. The almirah's rusty hinges creaked as I clambered up, giggling to myself as adrenaline flooded my system. Now balancing in between two shelves, I'd stare up at the wooden box draped in silk. Almost involuntarily, I'd reach out for it with trembling hands, slightly afraid of being caught one more time. But I was unapologetically rebellious. After all, the heart wants what it wants and I was not the type to give up.

Before I knew it, my mother would be standing right behind me and I'd immediately come scampering down the cupboard. She would glare at me as I'd trace my steps back to the ground. I had only ever seen the embroidered saree in photographs. Some scattered in a random box in the cupboard and others kept neatly filed in gold-studded albums. *It is sacred*, so I had been told more often than ever. *A rite of passage. It was only ever meant for something auspicious like holy communion and I was barely seven years old.* Eventually, my curiosity faded and so, I stopped trying to climb up the rusty almirah. I almost even forgot about it.

Until a few years later, I reached out for the wooden box again. This time, with my mother's permission. Eight yards of unwrinkled, dull gold silk curled up against my fingertips as they dipped in and out of the meticulously embroidered motifs. Eight yards of my family's matrimonial ensemble in my arms. One stitch delicately interspersed with the next, adorning the fabric in perfectly embossed geometrical patterns. Mosaics and lattices. Floral and paisley. The intricacy was hypnotising. It made my head spin with adoration.

I went back to look at the photographs. Four generations of women in my family elegantly draped in the paisley-patterned silk fabric. Each one, carrying the roots of our heritage with unwavering pride. Weaved in-between the Lucknowi embroidery, are a hundred love stories that bind my family together, and more than a million that

describe those fostered by the Indians and the Mughals. An amalgamation of timeless endearment.

Sometimes, I like to imagine wearing it myself. Wrapping the soft silk fabric around my waist, pleating it and letting it uncoil towards the floor. I imagine myself beaming in printed photographs that cradle a love story of their own. And all I do, is wonder if I too will carry the embroidered legacy with the same charm and poise as my ancestors once did. A feeling of pride and euphoria doused in elegance and grace engulfs me. A small, yet powerful sense of individuality tucked in between a hundred embroidered love stories from history.

### **About The Author**

Zobia is a 19-year-old student and writer currently living in Vancouver, Canada. She writes to reflect, express and share her view of the world through what she believes is the most versatile form of self-expression. Her writing ranges from discovering the little pockets of joy in life to profound phenomena and wholesome poetry.

## Aquarium Haze, Dandelion Memory by Kate Koenig

TW: Childhood Sexual Assault

When I think of him, I think of his aquarium.

Refracted light shines blue-white ribbons onto the den ceiling while tropical fish circle within glass walls. The steady bubble of a water filter murmurs in the background as I watch the neon fish, taken from countries whose names have yet to sit on my lips. I press my nose against the tank, splay my fingers out, and watch them swim in infinite loops around and around and around. Never going anywhere.

When I think of him, I think of those fish, swimming the same endless stretch of salt water. Green plants wave, celebratory in their path.

Like them, I'm always swimming in circles.

I remember dying underneath the sun-white burn of hospital lighting.

At midnight, when the quiet Midwest sky has nestled into a blanket of stars and half-moon clouds, my lungs will seize up again. I bolt up, clutch my chest with eyes wide and searching. I'll know the shades of death.

*Gasp.*

*Wheezing.*

*Rasping.*

The rattlesnake corkscrewed around my wilted lungs sends out a death rattle. Stethoscopes blanket me, but I can't feel their cold touch against my chest. I only know the blistering burn above.

My first prayers are sent here, not to heavenly creatures but to my own frail body.

In this hospital, I return to myself, flood back into my chest as the whistle slows, then fades entirely. Tonight, I'll breathe.

Fearing death as a child feels like being afraid of monsters made in the dark that no adult can see. There are edges, wisps of shadowed creatures creeping up walls. But a flick of a light and that vision disappears.

Two years later, I encounter a monster that dwells in daylight.

Stuck between an army of brothers, I grew up with fists raised and scabs like prized stickers collaged on my knees. I vacillate between dolls and scavenging the nearby woods for anything that can be shaped into a medieval sword. In my land of make-believe, I am king. A fearless lightning strike of a girl ready to wage war, I find kinship with the neighbourhood boys, who dutifully comprise my court. We are ready for battle against the combined reaping crops in the fields.

In this world of play, my brothers are the only ones who treat me differently.

They remind me whenever I rise too high in our Midwest sky, luminous and golden like autumn prairie grass, that I am a girl—inferior, they mean to say—even if I can keep up with them in a race.

Someday my lungs will catch up to me and I'll learn my place.

This, they say, is a truth I can't outrun.

When I think of him, I can't see his face.

His features are obscured, a dandelion fluff has bloomed there. He exists in memory, faceless and haunting. He's older, maybe the age of my oldest brother. But like his name and appearance, his age is a water ripple. I can't quite catch it in my hands.

My best friend, Colin, played with us that day, in the clearing behind my house. Far enough away where we can't see smoking chimneys. Faceless leads us there, turning around to set the rules for the game. I'm ready to play anything until my stomach growls and light leeches from the sky.

"We're going to play house," he says. I beam because a boy wants to play my favorite game and I don't have to suggest it. "Colin is our son. You and I can be the mom and dad."

Here's where it starts.

The loop around the aquarium, the turn at the end of their world.

Around and around again merry-go-round without end.

He is the one who outruns me.

A midnight creature in daylight.

Colin's hair illuminates like hospital lights, a plea to return to myself. His sneakers balance on a thick upper branch as he scales a tree, no longer watching as Faceless herds me into the woods, deeper until Colin's spark disappears with everything else.

Hair as bright as those fluorescents vanishes out here.

I'm wearing cotton shorts, pink as bubble-gum and the cotton candy I tasted at Wrigley Field last summer. Woodland decomposition crunches under my dirty sneakers, as Faceless points to our destination.

He says Mommies and Daddies have games just for them, and if we play house, we have to play those too. Curiosity fireworks up my neck, makes my straw-yellow hair stand on end. I don't have words for this and my inhaler can't make this tightness dissipate from my chest.

It's us. Just us.

Then he stops to face me and tells me it's time for—.

White noise crackles in my ears. I don't know this word. I'm swimming faster, but his words waterlog in my skull. My ear pounds from the current sweeping me away.

Here in the woods of make-believe, Faceless says it's time to make real.

Dirt blots the legs of my shorts, no longer neon pink fins. It's clear at first. The glass of his aquarium is see-through before it fogs over.

I'm swimming at this moment.

My pants are down and I'm unsure. I don't have words for this unknown. It shadows up my petaled wallpaper. It's growling, hungry, needy from inside the closet. My inhaler can't save my lungs when I'm face-down in a fish tank.

Then he reaches his hands out—not nervous, not shy. He knows this. Has done this.

But haven't.

The dandelion of his face puffs up, billows in the vision until there's a whiteout, crinkled static all around while my thighs burn. A snowstorm pelting my memory until I loop back around to the beginning.

When I think of him, I think of the fish.

Who will free them from their tank?

Why do they keep swimming?

When will I stop?

When I think of him, I hear his final words to me.

*Don't tell anyone.*

I never do.

### **About The Author**

Kate Koenig (She/Her) is a queer writer and photographer living in Houston, TX. She is a recent MFA graduate of Creative Writing from The New School. She earned her BA in English and History at the University of Pittsburgh. Born in the Midwest, Kate refuses to give up her prairie heart. Find her on Twitter here: @KateK\_Writing

## A Reverie by Isha Jain

The dust settles at the moon's feet. There are several acres of yearning cultivated along their arms. They are wearing my grandmother's *Dabur Gulabari* rose water gleaming on the stretch marks that procreate on their thighs. This is my moon's body: Udaipur's silver biscuit back stuck between golden headlines of a wedding, Pallava's carved lion necks, and tangled roots of a Cochin mangrove peering through its antiquated eyes. This is my moon's body. Saline rinsing of their soul every morning, when a copper pot greets Suryadev, the sun god and then he responds with wisdom that encloses in a *bahi khata*, the financial ledger of moon's transactions with my mother. She is the sole earner of spirituality in this house, but my father speaks in *humus*, this humble Latin earth. They hold the ground from below, like a cosmic turtle bearing the weight of my moon's dust and swim across an ocean of space. I watch everything take place, an observer in a sixty-year-old amethyst temple behind my house's lane. White marble floors rifle in a chant here, they melt my grief. I am in the process of meditation in a crystal temple and my moon's feet lend me a feather of a bird I am yet to recognise. A voice wakes me, a priest with a palm full of mishri and the face of the man I had seen in my dream.

### About The Author

Isha Jain (she/her) is originally from Delhi, India. She completed her graduation from the University of Sheffield in English Literature. She is now pursuing a Master's in English that primarily focuses on cinema and creative writing. She enjoys taking countless pictures of the sky and everyday spaces around her.

## A Sense of Memory by Margo Griffin

I feel an electric current of memories run through my fingertips, up into my arm until it finally hits my brain. In my hand, I hold two old, partially faded photos that I found in an envelope at the bottom of my mother's overstuffed keepsake drawer. These pictures are just some of the many treasured images of my maternal grandmother scattered about the house.

My grandmother was born in Mexico City and came to America in the late 1920s when she was about twenty-three years old. She met my American grandfather while enjoying an outdoor church bazaar in California with her aunt. Although she learned to speak English and eventually became an American citizen, Nanny always retained her heavy Spanish accent and often times expressed herself in broken English, especially when under stress.

It's well established that the tastes and smells of food trigger memories. Whenever I have the pleasure of eating Spanish rice, I immediately think of Nanny. Her rice was like no other comfort food to me. And although no one's rice is an equal substitute for my grandmother's recipe with its own unique flavor and texture, I am instantly transported back to my grandmother's kitchen table. And Nanny's dinner wasn't complete without her accompanying chicken noodle soup. So, every Winter, I try recreating the taste and *feeling* of my grandmother's soup. I imagine blowing on a pool of golden hot liquid as it sits on my spoon, both steam and smell wafting off of my bowl. My senses quickly recall the taste of Nanny's soup, made possible by the savoury stock and leftover meat from the chicken she slow-boiled for her rice.

Sometimes I call up my grandmother's scent and the olfactory memories quickly inhabit my nostrils and brain as if Nanny were sitting right here in the room. My nasal passages fill with traces of Ponds face cream, Jean Naté spray, and a fragrance belonging to an Avon roll-on deodorant my grandmother used. The combination of scents never fails to bring up images of my grandmother as I remember seeing her most. I see her downy white-silver hair, the large black-rimmed eyeglasses, and her bright, almond-shaped brown eyes peeking out from behind her lenses. I picture her multi-coloured patterned housecoats, Nanny's preferred house attire, well worn but never tattered. And I see Nanny dressed impeccably on Sundays despite her usual and more casual household attire, always wearing one of her many lady-like beige, navy blue, or grey skirts to the local Jehovah Witnesses Kingdom Hall, much to my



Catholic grandfather's chagrin. And as these visions become vivid, I feel an ache in my heart too as I picture Nanny in her mid-seventies through her early eighties, barely four feet and eleven inches, insistently moving her painful arthritic knees down her steep front stairway for her doctor appointments, shopping, or congregation service.

Filled with Nanny's scent and image, I am reminded of times when my Nanny protected and saved me from tremendous pain as I was growing up. I think of weekends and school vacation weeks spent in her home where I occasionally hid from my own mother, who struggled with untreated depression. I wince as I recall a night at age seventeen, showing up at her back doorstep, drunk and unkempt. Nanny hid my condition from my grandfather and parents, undressed me, and put me to bed. The shame I felt over distressing and disappointing my grandmother that night ensured I never did anything similar again. But the pain I feel from this memory is soon replaced with deep love and gratitude for a grandmother who understood me and loved me unconditionally despite coming from a different culture and generation.

As I pick up and touch my own children's gameboards and decks of cards, I pull up happy snapshots in my mind of Nanny and me playing raucous rounds of Old Maid, Go Fish, and Aggies. I laugh out loud as I remember the sound of her infectious laughter each and every time she left me with the Old Maid card or bumped me home with one of her Aggie marbles, racing me around the wooden board for the win.

Finally, I remember what it felt like to rest my head upon Nanny's soft bosom and doughy belly when she comforted me. I remember the look of her round, smooth face and the precious space that existed between her two front teeth. My senses are filled with memories of my grandmother, bringing me nothing but joy.

The grandmother I knew barely looked like the woman in the old photographs that I held in my hand. Instead, this woman appears much younger, perhaps in her mid to late twenties. The first photo is of a woman and a man standing next to an elderly couple. The younger woman is clearly pregnant in the picture. The young woman's chin is slightly tilted up; she looks proud and almost serious, with just a hint of a smile as she holds the hand of the more solemn and fair-skinned man standing next to her, who I know to be my grandfather. The woman's thick dark hair is pulled back into a loosely tied bun, and she doesn't wear the familiar glasses I remember. The second photo depicts an even younger woman whose beautiful dark eyes seem to flirt playfully with the cameraman. She is dressed glamorously, wearing pearls, a fur stole, and lipstick. At first, I thought this vivacious woman couldn't possibly be the same

sweet, older, rounder Nanny from my memory. But as I look closely into the face and eyes of the woman in the photo, I see my Nanny's familiar eyes looking back at me, and I immediately feel an intimacy I have missed over the last thirty-five years.

Maria Teresa was my grandmother, my sweet Nanny, and I loved her. She is always within my reach, tucked away until I need her, lovingly waiting for me to sense her in my memories.

The End

### **About The Author**

Margo Griffin is a Boston, MA area public school educator and has worked in urban education for over thirty years. She is the mother of two amazing daughters and to the love of her life and the best rescue dog ever, Harley.

## **I am searching for home by Paridhi Poddar**

I have been searching for home  
I came close to finding it as a child  
when I saw my mother put on a sari  
I could see her bare stomach which  
at one point had been where I took up  
all the space that I wanted in this world  
there were remnants of my time there in  
the form of marks growing up like roots  
I lay in her lap and was home for a while  
I looked up from there at her waist expanding  
after she birthed me, almost edging to form a  
stretch mark riddled galaxy with infinite stars

I have been searching for home  
I came close when I tried placing my  
grandmother's bindi between her eyebrows  
I could not count the wrinkles on her forehead  
like clouds in the sky during kalbaisakhi every year  
after trying very hard to place it correctly she told me  
that it was okay to have it a little tilted like the moon  
which hangs obliquely lighting the darkest of nights  
sometimes when she forgets to wear it I can feel an  
emptiness edging to consume her whole like that of  
outer space which is accustomed to swallowing lives

I have been searching for home  
I came close when I saw the alta lining  
my art teacher's feet, she left her hometown  
to come all the way to the city awaiting her  
with its jaws unhinged to guzzle all hope,  
all art she wanted to share when she was young  
her feet were red like hibiscus, as if she had walked  
through gardens and some thorns had pricked her  
the wounds had healed but the scars were prominent

making her stand taller than all the skyscrapers  
the ones that made her feel endlessly distant  
from the home she had left behind in rebellion

I have been searching for home  
and I have come close to home  
when I wear my mother's polki earrings  
even though I cannot drape a sari  
when I place the bindi correctly  
on my own forehead and feel an  
emptiness drains out of me  
when I put alta every puja and feel  
the soles of my feet unwinding  
coursing with blood as the alta dries  
urging me to keep going

i don't think i want this search to end

## Bandhani by Paridhi Poddar

N

↑

the steps, not worry if I am lost instead I have to ask for directions.

But this time, I have to travel back, trace

It was only in the	if one breaks, start over
second grade	made of the same thread
that I had lost	born from stubborn knots
a pink dupatta	set in beautiful patterns
of bandhani	one riddled with magenta dots
unaware of its	when I told her wanted to wear
significance during	like those in mother's eyes
school play practice	to form illuminated rings
my role wasn't great	being dyed and painted
I told my mother	like expanding blackholes
she was disheartened	cared to undo themselves
later in the tenth grade	my mind that had not
I saw bandhani again	knots like those in
in a topography sheet,	it was made after tying
of my hometown Ajmer	dots in the middle
the little settlements and	with and without
wells, scattered, in ribbons,	in clusters,

Key: begin at It

Then follow North, west, south, east...

## **About The Author**

Paridhi Poddar (she/her) hailing from Kolkata, India believes that words begin to form deltas here, carefully silting into poetry and, sometimes she manages to collect a verse or two. Her work has previously appeared in the Verse of Silence, Gulmohur Quarterly, Zine for Her and elsewhere.

## Beautiful Memory Grave by Aabha Deshmukh

A memory:

Trees in the yard beside stand tall, heavily adorned with mangoes in April's raw daylight. Aamras does the work of sleeping pills and I've the entire house to myself for the afternoon. I tip-toe in the hallway in my white chikankari frock making my way to the dressing room. I sit in front of the mirror with a red pouch Mumma always takes out whenever we head outside. The pouch is full of things I know will make me look more beautiful but don't know how to use. After years of observing the process of makeup, I open the pouch. I use red lipstick that smells very much like Swiss chocolate with glittery pink eyeshadow that I apply hesitantly and put on blush a little too enthusiastically, pocketing a few blush balls that I had plans to draw with. Slowly closing the door behind me I happily jump around the house that has somehow turned into an endless Broadway stage. Twirling my decked body midst summer with the usual hum of crickets I realize it isn't impossible to look like Barbie, feeling proud of myself I bow and exit the stage.

a home no more:

"you've grown up", I say to myself as I stand at the gates of a building, my school. It is very much like any other building with the same standard embellishments. I stand here at the gates in my best dress with my hair done and make-up on, to say goodbye. 10 years, of going to the same place every day in a set uniform that we'd try to give our own touch cautiously under the scanning eyes of the staff. Girls would never leave a chance for one pony and boys for long spiked hair. Instant pen tattoos, matching friendship rings, everyone had their own identifier, a way of adorning. As students who now very much feel like family walk in, in a way you haven't seen them before, you think to yourself how different we all are. Years of going through it all together doing the same thing had created this invisible safe circle that I was about to walk out of. I had no idea how the simple act of adorning could either create a sense of unity or the sense of uniqueness. We all stand together, a tight-knit group of kids, dressed in their own skin, laughing while reminiscing. Moist eyes and dolled up selves, that evening is when I left home. I will never forget what I wore nor how everyone and everything looked, this is how I will piece together a puzzle of the evening I will never forget.

a new home:

2 nights ago, I was in my room looking for an escape and here I am now, at the ghats in Varanasi. An unplanned trip that has very much left me thirsty for another visit. Rowing along the banks you get to see it all, a very concise visual of what the city stands for. Temples with pagoda architecture and intricately carved shikhara architecture, masjids with captivating domes, ruins that still stay alive through tales, endless bodies burning as death keeps hovering and age-old trees weaving through walls portraying an enthralling sight. It is true, you get to see the entirety of life at the ghats. The living, the dead, past, present and future. I sit with my sister in front of BrijRama Palace planning to go to the local Japanese Café for katsu don and ramen. It felt too cinematic to be true, Ganga in the front, perfect orange-like sun setting and finding calm amidst the crowd that didn't stop. I watch strikingly decorated sadhus walk by as my sister tells me about the bookshop, we ought to visit on Assi Ghat. Home is a place you build up with little things that you've collected over the years and somehow, this city feels like it and I hope to decorate it with memories.

Sitting on the hills watching the city lights glimmer I wondered why my colleagues asked me so, "Why do you dress like a writer?" all I could come up with was, "Well....". But I think there's always a part of us ornamenting ourselves into the skin we think is us at that moment of time and that becomes our identifier. The girl with the wide smile, uncle with huge soda glasses, that house with a Bougainville archway, that song about 24k gold? These details teleport you in time and to that specific memory that adorns your life so far. Listening to a finely curated playlist overlooking the city that looks marvelous I realize, life in fact is in adornment.

## **About The Author**

Aabha Deshmukh is an 18-year-old human residing in India. On good and bad days, you'll find her obsessing over music, movies, dramas and books. Aabha loves submerging in art of all forms and hopes to make something extraordinary herself.



## Being a Man, Draft IV by Matthew Nisinson

My gender is a necktie.  
At 10 it was all dictates  
from others: teachers, parents  
the whole system of school, my  
classmates' understanding of Will  
Smith, as Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.  
High School and I was too cool in black  
jeans, trenchcoat, and ten-sided dice.  
These days, seems no one wears ties.  
Now, when I choose, my ties are  
for myself. I have amassed  
quite a collection.  
I like  
my ties  
textured—  
knit silk,  
raw silk  
wool, linen,  
stiff cotton,  
stiffer silk  
brocade;  
dark colors,  
muted but,  
also, vivid  
colors with  
flowers, or  
embroidered  
with foxes.

## **About The Author**

Matthew Nisinson (he/him) is a proud New Yorker living in Queens, NY with his wife and daughter and their two cats. He studied Latin at Vassar College and earned a J.D. from The George Washington University Law School. Each summer he grows chili peppers. By day he is a bureaucrat. His poetry has or will appear in *Ayaskala*, *en\*gendered*, and *Hyacinth Review*. You can find him on Instagram @lepidum\_novum\_libellum and on Twitter @mnisinson.

## Bejewel by Rebecca Dempsey

TW: Allusions to cancer/surgery scars

Give me a necklace of painted  
potsherds wrapped in wire.  
Love's baked into ancient detritus,  
in the lumpen clay, fired,  
broken, but remade.  
In the discarded restrung.  
Twisted tight.  
Like my heart.

### **About The Author**

Rebecca Dempsey's works are forthcoming or featured in Elsewhere Journal, Ligeia, and Miniskirt Magazine. Rebecca lives in Melbourne, Australia and can be found at [WritingBec.com](http://WritingBec.com).

## Blue Topaz and Black Polyester Lace by Asha

One of my favourite earrings has been with me for almost half of my life. I picked it up from this boutique store called Levitate. The store was a scented curio shop. In the orientalist Indian sense; not the Dickensian. A curated passion project of a pierced biker chick who amassed silver and silks and semi-precious stones along her rugged trails, lit by the glamour of belonging to a gender minority.

The earring is set off by the triangular convergence of three bevelled rectangles of blue topaz held together by a curlicue frame and lengthened by three tinkling cylinders of the same mettle. The blue is icy and graceful, and kind to have lent itself to topaz in place of the more common yellow. Of course, that was part of the attraction for a twiggy teenager with British teeth. I wanted a *silver* earring made of *blue topaz*. I could tell my friends when they asked me like I'm telling you. I didn't like to buy silver inlaid with pretty precious stones if the seller couldn't identify them to me. The power that must have moved royal cartographers to undertake stormy, sea-tossed voyages to places yet unlisted, unnamed on their maps also animates diffident girls searching for a claim to omniscience in bazaar conquests.

Maybe I fancied myself reflected in the earring. A luminescent, reserved core with excitable, dangly ends. Maybe I thought silver was the only metal that was really suitable for dark, discounted skin tones. It commanded attention but did not actively seek it like goldigold. It was not worn on temple outings and family photos like time-honoured gold. Silver was more street without being allergy-inducing junk. Gold would have looked better on my warm undertones but we didn't even know such a thing existed in our four-shade card world. Plus the earring was 480 rupees. I had 480 rupees in my pocket and I gladly traded it in for a pretty reused silk pouch containing my Discovery.

We went to that store many more times. I bought a sexy, mossy green fishtail skirt made from some woman's old silk that made my lower body look like a half-chewed lollipop. Another excellent find. The silk was so delicate and smooth that I hated wearing it with a simple cotton top from Westside, although the restrained blue and green machine embroidery curling around the V of the top made it one of the more suitable pairings for the suspicious skirt.

Delicate exteriors forged in rough sweatshops and abandoned in their country of origin by the export quality control police was very much the theme of my teen cosplay. And there was just the store for

such refined taste-Gurlz. The spelling didn't bother me because that's how I spelt it as well! Even before I bought this earring, I think I bought this one black, translucent top from their store. The shoulders were too tight. But the back didn't have any lining. The front had a panel to cover whatever growth had popped out from the cavity of my chest but the midriff was unlined. The sleeves ended in a flourish of black lace, along with one side of the hip. It topped my high school dance experience. My friends were admiringly disbelieving. I said it was nothing. In fact, I was a little disappointed that I hadn't come up with a way to wear it without leaving the purity of the transparent back uncompromised.

That top was not rebellion. There was really nothing to rebel against except drab principals and uninspired parents. No, the top affirmed my arrival as a person, with a heart laced with courage and a mind twinkling to a billion dancing quarks. I don't know where that top is now. Polyester is not my favourite fabric even in black. Even though I don't wear them often enough, my wardrobe does have a few beautifully woven cotton and silk sarees from the timeless looms of our states. I check the tags and manufacturing information of seductive articles of clothing before zipping to the billing counter, or page.

The blacktop may not have been a perfectly woke companion to my adolescent Declaration of Existence, but it continues to represent my need to catch creativity in a fishnet stocking and present it to the world as proof of my singular genius. Oops. Genius. The store that housed my silver earring moved onto a grander upmarket location, rubbing bared shoulders with organza curtains and lavender candles. The friends who would accompany me there are spinning in other orbits. How many more friends, jobs, geographies, and daydreams will drift in and spin out as the clear blue stones outshine them with assured grace in my up-purposed Ferrero Rocher box?

## **About The Author**

Asha has studied literary and cultural studies at EFL University, Hyderabad and public administration at Columbia University, New York. Her first story has been published by Kitaab.

## Board Makers and Unnavigable Roads by Poorvi

TW: Mention of anxiety

For some time now I feel like I have been trapped in a pool of my own anxiety, not quite drowning yet, but just flapping my tired little limbs to keep myself from sinking. Which basically means I have been pacing every free minute I have; trying to stay afloat; in a constant state of caffeine overload or withdrawal without even being able to differentiate between the two anymore.

I have no idea why, in this state of chaotic anxiety, I ask my friend to ride towards the crowded city market. Was overstimulation my idea of masochism? I don't really know. Or maybe it's just that the way to the market happened to be right through one of my favourite roads in this city. It is the road from Gandhi Circle to the city market. It passes by the Army Farms and beautiful colonial houses but for the most part, both sides of the road are covered with meadows of baby-green grass. The sun is setting and we can see the moon, about an hour or so before it gets dark. It feels calmer than most other roads in the city. Here, I too, feel calmer than in most places in the city.

I start to see the Nandi Flames as I get closer to the main city. Nandi Flames are these tall trees with beautiful dark green leaves, strong bark and for a few months in winter the most beautiful fiery orange-red flowers. I like thinking about them. They are beautiful and I love them and they seem to be everywhere in the city.

The chaos in the market didn't do what I thought it would, it didn't hurt me. I sit here, on the bike, with my friend riding, making his way through the crowd. I feel calm. For the first time in a while, the commotion of the environment around me seemed to match the commotion inside of me. The market is full of people and cycles and bikes and the few unfortunate cars that dared to venture into the narrow street where the vendors and their mats take up a fourth of the street, they sell fresh fruit for half the price they do in the suburbs. Good produce too. We pass by the intricately cut-up guavas, the apples arranged in pyramids, and pomegranates torn apart to look like bleeding flowery organs.

I see the old food stall our parents used to take us to as kids. There they serve great benne dosas that you can eat late at night under the orange glow of the streetlamps after having finished your errands. We used to love that place, then I think my mother

saw a rat around there and we stopped going. The rat still thrives there, I think, like it always did; unbothered by our boycott. Only I lost something.

My calm fades as soon as we sit down in our usual place at our favourite restaurant, which is usually quiet but today it is filled with people, so many people it becomes hard to hear my thoughts even. We drink the coffee and eat the idli and when the bill comes we realise that this place without it quite seems overpriced and useless. We pay for privacy.

When we were out, my friend asked if we could walk around for a while. I look at my phone, it's 7 pm, I have time, so I nod. As we walk I spot in the streets a small, old shop selling frames and I quickly fall in love with its board. It was a painted board that must have been at least 50 years old. It had the name of the shop embossed in raised wooden lettering, painted in what must have been bright red that is now a deep maroon and in need of a fresh coat of paint. It had these antique-looking small spotlights at the bottom of the board, projecting two beams of slightly yellow light over it. It stood out as a clear superior when compared to the flashy backlit printed banners all around it.

If you think about it, around 50 years ago, this city surely looked radically different and was not sprawling with suburbs as we know it now, when most of the neighbourhoods that we will occupy now used to be just trees and grazing lands but the market area was bustling back then too, as you can see old photographs and also in the 50-year-old documentary "A Case for Justice" that *can* be seen as mild propaganda, if not in its mere existence, then in its re-release in 2021. It is Maharashtra's case for its claim over this city. Either way, it is delightful to be able to see old footage of the city.

I think, maybe in those days they had a very skilled board maker that everybody loved, who was known for his beautiful handwriting and creative layout, who made the best-embossed lettering and got you the brightest colours. You can still see a lot of these old-time-y boards in the market if you look closely. I wish I could trace them back to their makers. They all have a distinct personality, it literally is a person's handiwork, and it contains a little bit of their soul.

After walking we came across this shop selling Diwali decorations, in my struggle with anxiety I had forgotten how near the festival was. We see diyas and rangoli and I was taken back to the time when my mother used to get us here to select rangoli colours. I would always ask for black



and I would always be refused. It's not auspicious. In the process of coming to terms my queer identity, I realise, I had started to hold close to my heart everything tradition seemed to disapprove of and felt a sudden urge to buy some black rangoli.

We walked around for a while until it was time to go back. We traced our path back. The roads that seemed unnavigable in cars and scary on bikes seemed alright on foot. Maybe these roads are meant for walking.

### **About The Author**

Poorvi is a queer filmmaker, writer, and content creator. They are the co-founder of Stogies Zine, a student magazine reporting on local stories and films. They also founded the Half Way to the Hill Production House, producing, writing and directing animated films and documentaries-que videos.

## Broadway Night by Syd Vinyard

*After Nights on Broadway by the Bee Gees*

TW: Familial abuse

The radio was all we had after the divorce, and I was all my dad had. After 18 years, my mother and sister were finally free from the man that held them captive. They weren't bound by physical chains and locks but from something stranger and more robust. The the court battle left me with my father and a house with bills he could no longer afford. We lived on borrowed time, and the bank statements and unpaid electric bills that were stained in claret ink were watching. One afternoon my dad emerged from my sister's room with her old Bose radio. Later that day, he went to the local Dollar Tree and came back with several packs of D Cell batteries, and for the first time since my mom and sister left, we felt as if there was life in the house again.

That night, by the light of the candles, my dad and I sat together on the couch in front of the radio, which was placed on the coffee table amidst an audience of various take-out menus. I watched as he scrolled through static waves before landing on FM 95.7. Then out came the voice of Barry Gibb. Suddenly, the man before me, whose excitement was only invigorated by the opening of a beer can, softened into the teenager that he was in his youth.

"It's Nights on Broadway by the Bee Gees," he remarked in disbelief. Setting his Bud Light down, he began to sort of groove in his seat. The motion started at his feet, and it rippled up through him to his arms, to his hands that were now raised, but not towards me.

*"Blame it all on the nights on Broadway. Singing them sweet sounds...I will wait, even if it takes forever... Somehow, I feel inside you never ever, ever left my side, make it like it was before. Even if it takes a lifetime, even if it takes a lifetime."*

Even if it takes a lifetime. I think about how 18 years was a part of my mom's lifetime. I recall the nights she'd beg for deliverance from my father as he embraced her face with his palm, and how I'd retreat to safety upstairs in my sister's bedroom. We'd sit and listen as they danced out their differences below us. Unlike what Barry Gibb sang, there was no way of making it like it was before, as this night on Broadway was just him and me. My eyes drifted to the candles burning next to the radio, and I thought about how they would eventually extinguish like the time my father and I had left in

our house. But at that moment, the stage lights were on us, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like I could see my father.

### **About The Author**

Syd Vinyard is a poet, prose writer, and undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where they currently serve as the Editor-in-Chief for Furrow. This is their debut nonfiction publication

## Rainbow Drape\* by Zahra

a flower blooms  
in the mustard field  
the girl next-door  
draped  
in a rainbow

**NOTE:** This five-line poem is a contemporary English-language Tanka. If I may, it refers to the colours of a classical Punjabi Chunri (Dupatta) known for its vibrant colours.

## Carvings\* by Zahra

curved bamboo  
carvings  
on the front door

**NOTE:** This three-line poem is a contemporary English-language Haiku. It has a reference to traditional woodwork patterns in Pakistan, done on both traditional furniture and doors/windows.

**\*This form of poetry generally doesn't have titles but titles have been included for readers' and editors' convenience.**

## **About The Author**

Spellbound by the magic of words, Zahra is a Haiku poet from Lahore, Pakistan. She started her poetry journey in 2019. Her verses have been featured in a few international journals of English-language Haiku and Micro-poetry.

## Chemise by Emily Benson

TW: allusion to death, mention of needles

Cool white cotton  
Bridal  
Suffragette  
Burial shroud  
Older than my grandmother would have been  
On her birthday next month  
White as the whites of eyes  
Soft as albumen  
Delicate pin tucks like  
The fold of my baby's ear when he was born  
Wrapped in layer after layer of white flannel  
After they pricked him with a dozen needles  
Pressed bottles of white un-milk  
Into my trembling hands as he wailed  
Pale forehead scar from the brick corner  
Divot on the eyelid from the wasp sting  
Seams and pulls in the fabric  
Clean as white rose petals  
Light as milkweed down  
I have been taken up and  
Let out  
Fall around myself in loose folds  
I will wear it with flowers  
On May Day

## **About The Author**

Emily Benson (she/her) lives in Western New York with her husband and two sons. Previous publications include Blue River Review, Five Minute Lit, Hecate Magazine, High Shelf Press, Moist Poetry Journal, Paddler Press, and The Dillydoun Review. Her work can be found at [www.emilybensonpoet.com](http://www.emilybensonpoet.com).

## Christmas China by Bailey Vandiver

There are 79 Tiffany windows in the dining hall at Flagler College.

I've never seen them from the inside, but every historical red trolley tour guide in St. Augustine mentions those windows. When I was eight, old enough to visit Gram and Pop in nearby Jacksonville on my own and choose whatever I wanted to do, we rode that trolley, day after day.

In the years since I've seen Tiffany engagement rings in New York City and a Tiffany lamp in the art museum at my own college in Kentucky. The placard next to the Tiffany lamp identified the creator, Louis Comfort Tiffany, as “a son of the famous jeweller.”

*Oh, I thought at the time, he took his father's success and made it into art.*

...

Gram pulls me into my parents' room, away from the rest of the family eating Christmas dinner— soup, grilled cheese— on paper plates. She needs to talk to me about her surprise. She has told all the women and girls of the family to wear or bring white shirts, and now she wants me to set up a video chat so those who hadn't come in person could also watch her “presentation.”

“You know what this is, right?” she asks. I shake my head.

...

There was only one pair of stud earrings, and my best friend Arden had seen them first, so I kept to myself that I wanted them, too. She was our guest— her first visit with me to Jacksonville, so Gram and I took her to our favourite spots. After a local cup of coffee, we went to an eclectic boutique called The Red Daisy, in the beachside community where my grandfather worked.

Just beside the register was a display of jewellery— necklaces, dangly earrings that looked heavy, the one pair of studs— made from broken china, the kind that belongs in grandmothers' kitchens. Arden bought the studs, with gold flowers and a gold-and-



maroon swirl.

“I’ll have to do this with my mother’s china,” Gram said, “for all the girls in the family.”

...

In an orbit around my grandmother, on the floor and in chairs, are my two sisters and me, our mother, aunt, great-aunt, and second cousin. Watching via FaceTime is another aunt and three more cousins.

Gram hands each of us a bag; red daisies dot the tissue paper poking out of the bags. Then she pulls a small notepad out of her pocket, and I read the handwritten name of her mother, Helen Pauline Blanford Lovelace.

“I have a special present for you all,” Gram begins.

She tells us about Christmas 1963 or 1964, when she was a young teenager. The congregation at the country church where Helen’s husband Kermit was the pastor gifted a blue-and-white set of china to the Lovelace family. Gram and her younger sister, my great-aunt Gail, remember pulling out the china for every special occasion.

I’m struck, as I listen to Gram, by how much I’m like her. Other family members say it all the time— I have her eyes, I have her tendency to hoard any item that has family significance. My dad sent her balloons in 2006 to tell her my youngest sibling would be a boy; Gram still has the clip that held the balloons together. I imagine one day I’ll be in her position, telling younger generations about her and passing out vintage photos that hung in her house or seashells she collected at the beach.

I’m anxious to open the bag and see what’s inside, though Gram warns me it’s not exactly what I think it is. I feel surprised and maybe even a little left out that she pulled this off without me— since Pop died, I’ve often been Gram’s co-conspirator. But most of my surprise is pleasant, happy to be a recipient rather than a planner.

Gram explains the breaking and silvering process that turned the china into jewellery, then she says the jewellery is “now being presented to you to wear as a reminder of your heritage and a legacy left by Helen.”

I reach into my bag, digging around in tissue paper until I feel something with weight. It isn't stud earrings but a pendant— a unique pendant had been designed for each of us, in shapes from rectangular to teardrop to circular, largest for Gram and smallest for my youngest cousin.

Mine is a teardrop, smaller than my mother's but bigger than my younger sisters', with a dominant blue rose in the centre, surrounded by leaves and smaller buds.

The china passed through decades, states, continents, and forms, all to become a gift on another Kentucky Christmas.

“Wear it proudly and with love,” Gram says to us all, with tears in her throat.

...

I think I misunderstood the father-son relationship, looking at that Tiffany lamp for the first time. Though Charles Lewis Tiffany founded the jewellery company in 1837, the brand was made famous by his son's art.

The senior Tiffany gave his son his company and his name, though he spelt it differently: L-E-W-I-S became L-O-U-I-S. Then in the third generation came L-O-U-I-S-E, Louis Comfort Tiffany's daughter.

Names change. Glass gets repurposed, china gets broken. The family continues.

...

In our white t-shirts— a neutral background to showcase the pendants— we gather in front of the hearth and Christmas tree. Gram hands a framed picture of Helen to one of the women to hold, and we smile for a photo.

Maybe Helen, Grandma, would have been offended that we ate our Christmas dinner on paper plates rather than china. My mom has some in a cabinet somewhere, I'm pretty sure. But mostly, I think, Helen would have been happy, her china hanging from the necks of each of the women who came from her.

## **About The Author**

Bailey Vandiver is a writer, reader and Kentuckian. She writes most about her home state and fellow Kentuckian Alice Dunnigan. She is working on her MFA in creative nonfiction at the Bluegrass Writers Studio and is raising two cats, Leo McGarry and George O'Malley.

## Collections by AJ

She collects things  
in a portrait of mystery  
like her father did, so long ago.  
Bureaus, of empty dusted drawers  
she packs nonsense within  
tin sewing boxes her mother gave her,  
covered in lace doilies,  
her grandmother gave her.  
Or that she earned in penny-dreadfuls

for taking my father's hand-  
robbing her clean  
so she collects things.  
Things that are not hers,  
the yellowing photographs she replaced with Bowie posters  
the bad memories of what she was left with.  
To hold her chinese fan  
and speak to me of being a princess again,  
Objects we dance beneath to live out our dreams.

She and I-  
but I never knew the meaning  
of the endless dishwear and linen clothes,  
Teapots of green sullen whipsers  
and candles and jars of jelly,

the sweet taste on her lips.

Does she remember,  
who she used to be,  
or has she forgotten?

But its too much  
to have the china packed into boxes

for the ghost children that never came home.

And the murky gemstones  
that have broken their borders by smashing time,  
surrounded in their void golden casings  
wrapped in ripped silk scarfs.

She was like them now-  
laying before the Tibetan Buddha  
or the stones collected from mid-german streams  
untouched and caked in dust  
or trapped in unbreathing boxes.

She sits alone in that desolate home

Beside her collections

I wonder...

When she would fade into

one of her things

Along the captured stones and behind broken bureaus

Mother, terra-cotta sorceress

talk to me again before

you fade into the memory of

All the things you've collected

### **About The Author**

AJ is a senior at Hamline University and receiving her BFA in Creative Writing. She is also published in Sharkreef Magazine. She was an editor on Hamline's undergraduate literary magazine "Runestone" for the 2021 issue. Her inspirations are sci-fi and fantasy literature, as well as historical fiction and non-fiction.

## Corn Medicine by Enna Horn

Grandmother Corntassel, an Indian woman who wears beads formed from glass, delicate drops of colour dripping from the lobes of her ears, who speaks in a dialect long since deadened to tongues who forget to whisper *elohi* and know it means earth is a mother too, to whisper *waya* and know it means the manner in which the wolf grows its fur.

She walks in dreams as the wolf stalks the deer, woman through the straw mane of the wheat fields, hair woven in a black plait like a basket, corn tucked within, namesake.

Outside the dream, Grandmother Corntassel wore a dress made of tears, bloodied tears creating a trail that her brothers, sisters, mothers, aunts, fathers trod, roses growing from tears like those quiet fits of weeping in the unsettled darkness. White smoke rising from a distant fire, ghosts that called out to her to dance, called out to her to wear a garment made of torn fabrics, which were a white man's replacement for soft buckskin. Indian women, brown-skinned, red-blooded, daughters to the Corn Mother Selu, who smells like frybreads, corn flour in popping oil; like yellow roses at a funeral, like linen and cotton are affordable when you're poor in pocket.

Have you ever danced at the pow-wow? I did once. Proud, strong nose, column of her neck thus adorned in layered glass beads, woven together with white thread, turquoise crowned, agate mantlepiece. Quills in her ears within this forest-dream where she sits on the log, flattened with the blunt edge of a tomahawk. Quills bone-solid, bone-hollow, shed from the back of the porcupine. Give thanks to the animals who adorn you. We all walk in skins, we all wear skins.

So she asked Dreamer, have you ever danced at a pow-wow? as she wore quills, dangling beneath ocean-blue, fire-yellow, blood-red beads.

Lean elbows against the flat log. Dreamer answers: No, I've never danced at the pow-wow. I've torn apart afghans looking for your face in the ripple of the stitch, shredded up patchwork quilts in the desperate, endless search of your name to be written in the

colours, touched a thousand carvings of wooden animal totems made by men who are not Indians to seek out your guidance. Fire crackling; Dreamer's garments mixed together from the smoke; otherwise, dressed in their skin. Great, tolling deep of the drums; great cries of the warrior men, eagle feathers draping through their still-long hair, hair not sheared like sheep's wool, bodies that have not been desecrated; into animals, when animals should be sacred.

Dreamer asks: How can I dance at the powwow?

Grandmother Corntassel answers: By remembering.

Dreamer sits beside the fire even though it's the hottest place, the place that fogs up your vision when the heat of the flames makes a little halo against your cheekbones and bakes them brown. Corn fields waver behind the dance, the dream. Inside the dream, there are no garments made of tears, but soft buckskin, deer-gift. In the dream, Indian women are not crushed like glass, but wear glass and do not weep. Dream: to be baked brown and wear a skin that arouses no questions, wear buckskin that rouses animals to bring guidance, wear beaded earrings that rouse the beating heart within.

Dreamer, wear glass beads, a buckskin dress. Tear a patchwork quilt back into squares, and make that sobbing blouse. Wear it to be wed to the ghost, the dance, the dream. Knead the corn flour, and let the grit bite beneath your fingernails like porcupine quills. Poor in pocket, but not poor in spirit. Rise up from your endless search, rise up, Indian woman. Remember the womb, folded around you, green leaves around yellow corn. Like your name is Selu. Woman. Corntassel, halo in the heat.

### **About The Author**

Enna Horn spends most of their time putting their pen to paper, or their hand to the plough. They speak five languages and enjoy exploring the maddening, mysterious strands of identity. They live in midwestern America with livestock, crops, and the forest for company.



## **'Cos You Wear It Well by Pam Knapp**

When I met Friendship for the first time, oh the excitement, I just couldn't get enough of it! It was exactly what I'd been looking for. I tried it on for size and just loved it. So perfect, something new and not tried before. It was thrilling just to wear it. It transformed me – or rather, it made me happier than usual to be myself. It was in every sentence I spoke, every thought I had. Everything was exciting, a discovery.

When Friendship burgeoned and grew, it was sometimes a little less easy to carry around and just slip into at a moment's notice. It was definitely worn in, but it wasn't used to being worn for very long and it certainly seemed uncomfortable to be in all day. It had the habit of pinching a little tightly, sometimes its seams chafed soft skin and caused a bit of irritation. But it still had an irresistible pull to be taken out and tried on again and again.

Ah, but now that Friendship is old, it has the shape of me. It's a wardrobe staple. No need to keep checking to see if it fits or whether it suits me. In fact, it's so light that I only notice it if I have to check that it has all its buttons. How naked I'd be without it; bare to the world with nothing to protect me from the chill.

### **About The Author**

Pam Knapp lives in the UK's rolling countryside of the Sussex Downs. Optimism is her greatest asset. She plans to market it as soon as she can find a promoter. Her writing can be found in Green Ink Poetry, Owl Hollow Press and Sledgehammer Lit, and others.

## Entangled Life by Mikal Wix

Since my parents died,  
every death, the wilting of flowers, the ladybugs  
in the vacuum bag, even historic deaths  
of monarchs, celebrities, or neighbours,  
hits like a siren stuck—  
an empty vase falling . . . falling, displacing the air  
in my ears with ringing in a withering murmur  
of wretched families in limbo,  
before touching the marble floor never  
to be whole or rounded again,  
no golden joinery here,  
the same stone that sits above them,  
their ashes now,  
from the stifling afternoons of summer  
to the icy blacks of winter—  
an imperfect eulogy for the ones  
who gave me this life, this ink,  
this set of begrudging tears.  
The wet face disabusing me  
of the illusion that I can still reach them,  
maybe through prayer, or palace intrigue,  
or the white tilt of the bishop's proper mitre.  
Mourn her,  
who reflects us in the whiskey's grenade decanter.  
Mourn him,  
her gaffer and keystone since high school.  
Mourn me,  
her tree climber, a beachcomber, their fruit,  
but who's adrift  
to watch the effervescence of beauty now,  
always high,  
always from a discrete distance—  
as far as needed

to obscure the truth  
about the iron black and gold filigree  
spilling words out from the crypt:  
*forever together everlasting*  
that everything around me is moving  
toward the undersea waterfall,  
a colossal cataract  
of urges trying to find, trying to stay,  
trying to be wherein no one knows  
the swirling and inviolate words spoken to me  
by their upswept, enraptured tongues.

### **About The Author**

Mikal Wix has the vision of a revenant from the Appalachian closet. He has degrees in literature and creative writing and has words in the Berkeley Poetry Review, Beyond Queer Words, Tahoma Literary Review, Adelaide Literary Magazine, Angel Rust Magazine, & others.

## Estimates from Voyagers 1 & 2 by Michael Brookbank

Saturn is losing its rings.  
I know the feeling.

Another hundred million years,  
and the leftovers  
she left  
will still be in the freezer.

I wait for ancient alchemy.  
But nothing seems to

keep. A medal of Saint Christopher  
shines with unbelief and the moon is rusting.

Maybe someday, gold might change too.

### **About The Author**

Michael Brookbank is a writer just across the river from Cincinnati, OH. His work has been published in Sugared Water and Loch Norse Magazine. When not writing, he likes to rock out around the house with his toddler. Find out more about him by visiting [michaelbrookbank.com](http://michaelbrookbank.com)

## Fran's Lace by Robin Sinclair

I was thirteen when Fran kissed me,  
told me I was beautiful,  
saw me not  
*in spite of or because of* –  
gave me gifts of lace and self-acceptance.

I was eighteen when I first vanished,  
the kind where you grab what fits in a backpack  
and leave in the night, no  
*farewells or someday's* –  
with Fran's lace and an ashy bridge behind me.

I was twenty-two when I disappeared again,  
breaking everything if only to break free  
bringing lace, not  
*food or something sellable* –  
with me into the next life, lived on couches and in cars.

I was twenty-five when I sobbed before a closet,  
broken and rearranged into what someone else needed,  
dropping lace into a garbage bag, whispering  
*she loves me, she loves me not* –  
thinking these were the sacrifices we make for love.

I was thirty-five when I cried again,  
now with a smile as I twirled in a hand me down,  
my partner peeking their eyes over a book  
*that's beautiful, will we need more hangers?* –  
their only concern as I thought of lace.

## **About The Author**

Robin Sinclair (they/them) is a queer, trans writer of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Their debut full-length poetry collection, "Letters To My Lover From Behind Asylum Walls" (Cosmographia Books, 2018), discusses themes of identity, gender, and mental illness. Find Robin at [RobinSinclairBooks.com](http://RobinSinclairBooks.com).

## Generational party by Clarice Lima

on the catacombs i invite

put on your necklaces and put on your trousers  
and turn on the jazz we are dancing tonight  
my ancestors are ravishing tonight

can you hear their rags  
shuffling against each other  
on the tombs tonight  
it is called a party

and they are trying it for the first time

my sister swings in silk  
my mom sweeps in silver  
my aunt skips in serge  
my grandmother scurries in scandium  
we love with no price

excuse the bill time

we don't mind we bury the patches  
we steal from the houses on top of the hill  
we don't mind we call it a zest  
we sip and savor from the barrels of rum  
until we numb the guts we were given  
until our mothers' hands caress our sides in ways we cannot name because  
we never had them  
in apologies we dismiss because there is no memory for the history of us  
on the streets we rage  
call the ugly names and cry in the snot my livings are to allow the dead one grace one  
last wrath

can you hear their haunting voices  
striking against the walls as enemies  
on the rich fizz of daylight

it is called a dissent  
and they are trying it for the first time

### **About The Author**

Clarice Lima is a young bilingual writer and Literature undergraduate based in Brazil. With a lifelong love for stories and all things warm, they mostly want to be kind. Her words can be found published or forthcoming in Riverbed Review, Horse Egg Literary, Violet Indigo Blue, Etc. and elsewhere.



## For Golden Girls When The Going Gets Golden by Salonee Verma

TW:mentions of death, light body horror

If you grew a garden of roses on the moon, I think you would dig up golden ore soil. That's a stunner. Bone white giving way to gold, gold, gold. Would you like that? I'll build a greenhouse on the moon for you, full of orange roses growing out of soil of gold. When they tell our story, I wonder what they'll call us. I like companion, because I'm terrible and old-fashioned like that-- radical in everything except dreams. Under the new moon, I dream of the only truth I know: that I love you.

I come from a long line of sun-worshippers. Did you know that? Every year, I feel itchy when Chhath comes around because there is no river near us to bathe in. It's supposed to be one of the oldest festivals in the world. We're grateful to the sun for giving us life. I think they should have specified which deity they wanted me to worship. I'm not sure I can tell the difference between the two suns anymore.

If you cut us, we'll bleed golden, ancestors upon ancestors of ichor. We'll melt so brightly that they'll need sunglasses to mourn us. Do they make white sunglasses? Probably not. That's okay. We've always been a little radical. The way your laugh sounds in the sunlight is my own revolution. Maybe it's supposed to feel like this. Maybe we're inventing something new. Maybe I don't care & I'm happy beside you, watching you shine & change the entire goddamn world. Maybe that's most likely.

You gave me golden infinitude when I turned fourteen. Sometimes, I wake up screaming

& put on that necklace, letting it touch skin. It's calming. The necklace turned out to be silver wrapped in gold. Fitting that you gave it to me. We're the real golden infinitude, I think.  
We'll either change the world or end it. My bet's on metamorphosis.

I heard a story once about how each avatar had the face of their last great love. I'm well versed in avatars. I am the last in a long line of people who have loved the sun so ardently that they became sunbeams in perpetuity, reaching up towards the sun, eternal heliotropes. We are generation after generation of golden girls, painted shimmering silver like the moon. Imagine that. Imagine being part of something so grand that you turn to solid gold underneath all that skin.

I don't know if they'll have the words for us in the future, but they might. When they cut me open in the biopsy, they'll find two roses sprouting out of my blood, yellow and deep red. Where do you think I found the originals to hybridize out in space?  
They're yours anyways. You watched me plant them between my lungs and watched as I let them twine around my ribs. Making you a legend of the least I can do.

I've turned the moon golden so the entire world has to remember who we were.

### **About The Author**

Salonee Verma is a Bihari-American writer and the co-founder of antinarrative, a collaborative zine (@antinarrativeZ on Twitter). Her work is published or is forthcoming in Backslash Lit, Pollux Journal, zindabad zine, Dishsoap Quarterly and more. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Find her online at [saloneeverma.carrd.co](http://saloneeverma.carrd.co).

## Harmonia, reimagined by Amanda Williams

She passed the locket down to me, wildflowers blooming from her décolletage. One day she told me it was my turn. So she draped the trauma gently around my neck while I held up my hair.

*Sit up straight or your back will stay that way*, she'd say  
as I twirled the silver heart between my fingers  
a pendulum swinging from one calamity to the next.

I remember wondering how she got our faces to be  
so small  
partial fingerprints  
inside the Haephestian chambers  
cold and doomed

I see your smile  
warped by gentle flames  
of birthday candles  
and remember  
how first-class flight risks  
are all a little Icarian

You snuff out the candles  
with the pads of your fingers  
I've always been afraid of fire.

You scratched out Elysium  
from all the maps  
in your glove compartment.  
You were never one to ask for directions.

But secretly you just hoped  
I'd never find it.

I am Atlas  
the burdens of women before me  
yoked around my throat until

the shears of Atropos  
cut me loose

I just think it's interesting  
how *atrophy*  
and your name  
linger caustic in my tired  
mouth.

### **About The Author**

Amanda Williams is a neurodivergent American writer based in the UK. Her work appears in Hecate Magazine and will soon be featured in upcoming issues of The Levatio and Re-side Zine. She is an amateur podcaster, bearer of useless pop culture factoids, and a dog mom, working on her first poetry collection.

## Head to the north, feet to the south by Varun U. Shetty

TW: Death

Sunlight streamed through the windows making every wall look whiter than it was, and there was a flurry of activity. After over a year of staring into space, walking into neighbours' apartments, forgetting to chew, and eventually lying in a rented hospital bed in my 200 sq ft. bedroom for months, my grandmother had finally died. My mother and aunts bathed and dressed her; they laid her on the cool marble floor, head to the north and feet to the south, decorated the space around her with rice grains, flowers, incense sticks stuck in bananas, and eventually covered her with garlands of marigold. In the stress of finding just the right flowers and fruits, I forgot my grief while still engaging with her death. When we were done, she had her best Kanjeevaram saree on, and her nostrils were stuffed with cotton- my grandmother looked like a dead bride.

I had reached home earlier in the day and confirmed that my grandmother, cold and covered in beads of sweat, was indeed dead. I was relieved. I remembered the woman she was- the hymns and Kannada folk songs she'd sing for us, her devotion to her alcoholic, abusive husband, her children and us, and her obsession with us getting a good education; in my afternoons filled with fear, whenever my angry young mother picked up the belt, she was a fount of patience, like a warm home in winter. As her dementia progressed, fragments of herself remained- they came back to her for brief periods and left, and the intervals got longer and longer until one day she was truly gone. I realized then that dementia, in its essence, was death.

We carried her body on the makeshift bamboo stretcher toward the van; her nostril-packed face peeked out of the cocoon made of a white shroud. We walked in silence. I don't remember the drive to the cremation ground, but I remember the pyre we laid her on. My father, her oldest son, lit the stack of wood on fire. And we watched her burn, right down to her skull.

## **About The Author**

Varun U. Shetty is a writer, critical care physician, environmentalist, animal lover, and almost vegan. He grew up in Mumbai and lives in Shaker Heights, Ohio, with his two amazing partners and a loving, stubborn dog. His work has appeared in Complete Sentence, The Wire, Literary Cleveland's Voices From the Edge online anthology, Olney Magazine, The Bangalore Review, and others. Find him on Twitter @shettyvu.

## **Huipil by Melody**

The colors, they've left a mark on my memory  
When I see the glistening head of the red-bellied woodpecker  
or the crimson as the sun sets this evening,  
the blue of the iris,  
the green of the papaya you're tending to till ripe  
I think of you in your Huipil  
The fabric so lush, so colorful  
Abuelo says you look beautiful, I agree  
I can't help but notice how the light of the sun catches  
Shadow play before my eyes  
The truth is you'd look beautiful in anything you wear,  
but this is how I want to remember you always —  
smiling in your Huipil

### **About The Author**

Melody's passion is teaching and empowering others by sharing what she has learned. She helped launch an arts and crafts program at a children's hospital and also taught at San Quentin State Prison. Melody hopes to inspire youth to explore and expand their creativity through web development, writing, and art.

## Hung Gospel by Mitt Ann

(i)

The charms do not fly on earth  
and heaven is a golden tile, corroded,  
washed by the azure sea, salty tears of men who said,  
“I love you God, but you promised riches that glitter  
only weakly, against the tireless sun on earth.”  
Heaven refracts a different sky.

(ii)

No, here, the heavens are a blanket of blue, stench-ed  
by the deeds on a land: once-garden, removed, now, dull  
rubbish. Fed birds sing discordantly their happy morning song  
for lilacs that cannot wake;  
the wind caresses the crumpled lilies  
who sing hallelujah only for men  
who gripped onto those flowers,  
day and night, looking for a whisper:  
they hear one, and they say it is a broken hallelujah.<sup>2</sup>

What stirs me is not the marching wars of Israel,  
walking across rotten bodies,  
the sour carcasses of men, once me, like me,  
lying around. The majesty of the Lord  
carries a bloodied scent. I brood on the  
righteous majesty of the Lord but lilies don't grow  
on dry stones of teachings.



(iii)

I try to live to the Word --  
yet, at heart, all rage is an attempt to engage  
a God, unsimplified; a reddened source of fire,  
hung gospel, burns hard,  
into fertilizing ashes for an Eden, anew: gold is its accessory,  
not its tender skin.

## **I found the earth, pressed between my palms by M. G. Doherty**

TW: animal death, brief mention of a mentor's death

“Careful,” Margaret warned. “Don’t force the milk or he’ll aspirate.”

I held a syringe of milk formula to an orphaned squirrel’s mouth, his baby whiskers twitching around a rubber nipple. My left hand trembled so hard I thought he would slide right out of his swaddle. But Margaret didn’t notice this and moved on to another new volunteer, and I fed squirrels, hands steady, until one escaped his swaddle and scurried up to perch on my shoulder. There he swayed, claws gripping, like he was unsure what to do now that he’d escaped like he smelled the city on my skin beneath the wildlife centre’s green apron.

Margaret brought an injured pelican in from the intake desk, a large fishing hook snarled through his beak and neck. The vet techs hustled him into an exam room, and I unlocked the aviary — temporary refuge of uninjured birds — its occupants cooing at the rattling door.

I had been on the other side of the intake desk before, injured birds trembling in a towel-lined cardboard box, handing them over to someone who knew better. Now I was the one who knew better. Hands that once scared wildlife now clasped around a grackle’s wings, soft, cautious, and moved it so its cage could be cleaned. Somewhere, Margaret and our most experienced vet techs were x-raying the injured pelican. I knew its brothers and sisters by their silhouettes above the seashore, fish hooks glittering just beneath the surface, and the smell of rotting plants.

This coast is their home, too. We remade ourselves modern and shimmering behind paned windows, but the natural world will not let us forget, twining between the outstretched fingers of our streets.

When the pelican died two weeks later from a persistent infection, I remembered the way he looked last time I cleaned the critical care ward – his fuzzy brown feathers, the gauze around his neck, head down. I knew then he’d die, smelled the future on him like he smelled the metal on me, and promised to do better next time, because there would always be a next time. I promised to let his brothers and sisters live gently on our skin.

When a squirrel is young, their skin is so perilously thin you can see the opaque line of milk in their stomach. More than anything, I remembered seeing the milk inside them, the way my hands trembled at the sight, and hearing Margaret tell me, over and over, “don’t aspirate them.”

\*

Only locals know they’re here — two horses, one brown, one speckled beige and tan. I saw them once, two teenagers on their backs, galloping down the esplanade. Sometimes I even spotted the stables through the trees, overgrown branches hiding a roof that’s been caving in as long as I remember.

It’s so improbable, it must be seen to be believed, but this is a city of improbabilities. When you crash through the rotting backyard fences and almost fall into a still-wild creek flush with turtles, and hear whispers of the neighborhood overrun by peacocks, you start to believe. We feed the squirrels by hand on university campuses and in Menil Park, the pigeons alight in our bird seed palms. This city never learned to leave its fauna behind, our earth still clinging to us, vines like strings of pearls, and no matter how many bayous we pave over, the turtles and squirrels still settle on the knobs of our urban spines and breathe.

\*

The corner of Harley Street was deafening with the scream of car horns and rush hour traffic; less a hundred feet to the west was the 610 Loop, one of our busiest freeways. But inside, Ambrosia taught me to play the harp, taught me the names of the seashells in her collection. Sometimes she gave me one if I played particularly well. One time she gave me a starfish, no bigger than the buttons on my jumper, and I treasured it like it was my own baby.

Ambrosia’s bookshelves, encrusted by shining piles of shells and brittle coral, and her yard, a memory of flowers past. When she died, I gathered my angel wings, my pear whelks, and my bay scallops; poured them into a vase where they held all I had left of her. She follows me still: in the moon snails that dot my bathtub, the conch on my windowsill, the cat’s paws that encircle my desk lamp.

But before she died, I was alone in her front yard after a lesson, filling the red pocket of my school uniform with crushed pecans and wrapping dandelion bracelets around my wrists, fingertips golden with pollen. Cars thundered into my ears while I cooed to the squirrels, brought palmfuls of pecans up to them; they ran from me. The insides of my

ankles were gasoline-perfumed and I was not gentle enough to let something so small, skin so thin, rest upon my shoulder — not yet.

There are ghosts embossed upon this city's natural artifacts, a city that has never once forgotten its roots, though it has tried. Every surface of me is as crusted over with natural artifacts and their ghosts as my city is. Squirrels swaying upon my shoulders, whiskers twitching; yellow-flowered vines ringing around my knuckles; ankles dusted with autumn leaves; and pelicans like jewels, like memories, like tears, spilling out my eyes. I wear them all while walking over the paved-over roads over the ghosts of forests long-gone. I reach out, soft, for Houston's flora and fauna, and when it reaches back and covers me with loam, I know we are all home.

### **About The Author**

M. G. Doherty is a Latina speculative fiction writer and visual artist who has lived in four states and counting. Her current work is centred on isolation, queerness, and the forging of emotional connections across vast distances. She holds a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the California Institute of the Arts.

## Inherited Defiance by Urvie Bhattacharya

TW: Suicide, Allusions to Fire, Implied Abuse.

India's rich cultural ecosphere comes to exist through the diversities of its sub-cultures. At a time when arranged marriage was the norm and those propelled by love were considered morally averse, my parents' cultural crossover came to be through subduing these challenges presented. It allowed me to experience my youth within a sphere comprising of an intersection between Delhi and Kolkata heritages, and explore my ethnicity in a way that people seldom get to.

As a child, there was nowhere I preferred more than Kolkata during Durga Pooja. My father's home would be brimming with excitement and the general sort of eager preparation that marks the oncoming of significant festivals. I watched with admiration the women decked in their red and white sarees, and all I wished for was a beauty, so one day I'd be worthy of adorning myself with the same.

The highlight of this vibrant city, however, was my grandmother. I was of that particular age where maturity starts developing; I was considered young enough to be impressionable, but wise enough to know what I should be receptive towards. Her kindness, especially then, shaped a lot of who I am today. My memory of her has weakened over time, but the photographs I have of her remind me with striking accuracy of her love, and this one emerald necklace that she prized highly, yet rarely ever wore.

Being the eldest daughter of her oldest son, I stand to inherit her jewellery. As my age crossed numbers faster than we seemed to be able to comprehend it, my visits to Kolkata decreased in frequency, so much so that I had not been there for eight years. The last time I saw her was six months before she passed, all dressed in that traditional saree and with that precious gem around her neck. Then, I didn't even consider that there would be a day when I wouldn't hear her voice anymore.

My grandmother had doused herself with gasoline and struck a match. I didn't receive the specifics of her death at her funeral; neither was I privy to it until a couple of days before my sixteenth. The necklace was presented to me as a gift on that milestone in my life. Only then was it that in casual conversation, my mother let slip this demise. My heart, in tandem with all the memories I had of her; sunk in a way it never

recovered from. That one piece of jewellery was all that was now left untainted by reality's misery. It reminded me of what was happy in my childhood and represented the connection of half my lineage with the woman that attached me to it.

Men have always suffocated women, in modernity and tradition alike. That necklace was a part of the jewellery given to her by her in-laws, as is commanded on the occasion of marriage. It functioned as a sort of compensation for her in what would prove itself to be a regrettable match. My grandfather was a controlling man, whose misogyny never filtered into his public persona. That necklace alone can speak of her history, for none cared to listen when she lamented for her future.

That gem hung heavy over her chest, pressing her voice into the corner of her heart where defiance brewed, so harshly that it came to exist as a piece of her struggle. Culture awarded her that ornament, in the same manner, the custom had used to pass it through the hands of innumerable women before her. It has borne witness to their grins and laughter, their cries and suffering; becoming the culmination of their ancestral resistance. This jewel embodies her scream, and I felt her rage when I wore it as if saying, "Scream, for you have the strength of those before you; so that there may be mercy for the fate of those that come after you."

### **About The Author**

Urvie is a first-year literature student currently enrolled at Delhi University. An avid lover of books, she enjoys reading while listening to old bollywood songs.

## Is Toshifumi Hinata Alive? By Seeking

“Have you ever written a poem about hope?”—Manny Montesino

I checked online. Google doesn't have an answer. There are some unsourced articles that claim he lives in Tokyo. He turns 66 on February 23, 2021; that's 6 days from now. The life expectancy of a Japanese male born in 1955 is 64.7, but there are 72 children for every 1000 born that year who did

not live passed their 5th birthday. I don't think that there is a particular reason I should believe that Toshifumi Hinata is not alive. But the algorithm told me to ask this question soon after I'd discovered him and so it's remained on my mind. You died tomorrow, three years ago. You were 63, you were also born in 1955. I remember that Kanye West was in the news one of the last times I saw you. You asked me if he really was some sort of prodigal, an artist of a lifetime. I said, “more or less, you should listen for yourself.” You listened to all sorts of music. Whenever you came to my house, I would make sure that something interesting was playing sometimes it was African Jazz, sometimes it was early reggae. At the time you were asking me about Kanye, you were already well into losing your vision. Increased cortisol can increase eye pressure and that can result in blindness. Around the time when the progression of your illness was the fastest, I had my jaw surgery. I spent 40 days and 40 nights with my jaws wired shut. It was the closest I've felt to Jesus. Of course, it was Kanye West who recorded “Through the Wire.” I went with a friend to a recording studio and texted him criticisms. It was your granddaughter's birthday, we sat on the couch together, she ran around the pool. We joked that we could see no evil and speak no evil. Who could hear no evil? Now, I speak confidently; I have a perfect smile. The last time I saw her, I spoke about you; I'll always do that. My grandmother is sick now. I think whenever something goes wrong, she thinks about you and how slowly a catastrophe can happen. First, it was just a loss of vision. Then, a doctor identified your illness and there was a course of treatment. We missed each other by hours at the National Institutes of Health, we were both patients. Our morbid sense of humour was always just far enough from death, we joked about who was the sickest, like Y2K battle rappers. You had brain surgery. You were kept for observation for weeks until your wife convinced them to let you go home. You died, covered in blood. You had the chance to see your son, but not your daughter. I was in Colorado when my mom

called me in the middle of the night. A year can crumple like a car in a collision, you cannot uncrumple it. You cannot go back and search for details you did not pay attention to, a missed turn signal, a slick stream of water on the asphalt, hi-beams ignoring the red glare of a traffic light. I am searching for a metaphor that explains what it is like to know and not believe for an entire year that someone you love is dying. Ignoring death for that whole year was supposed to be a testament to our hopefulness. Now, it feels like a lie that you get stuck repeating for the rest of your life. You gave your sister an orchid before you died. It almost died this year. It survived. I want nothing more than to hear what you have to say about Toshifumi Hinata's Reality in Love or his Broken Belief. I write more serious poems now. This is supposed to be a poem. But I am writing as if you can hear me and so why would I stop myself? The thing about death is that we hide the bodies, sometimes burning them. If you are physically missing, I can pretend that the silences you would have filled have always been there. I don't know if you listened to My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy. Kanye hasn't really been in the news for a while. Donald Trump got banned from twitter. V is always smiling and still loves running in the grass. Your son got divorced and remarried. Your mother passed away. Some of this you must already know. This is supposed to be about hope. All I can say is that your death already happened, and tomorrow will happen again a year from now. Can I cobble together some image that inspires hopefulness? I am surrounded by the remnants of flowers:

Do you see what I mean?

There is a particularly sad song on Reality in Love called "End of the Summer." I imagine that in most places it is a sad affair, the slow encroachment of a frazzling winter beginning, but in Miami the declaration is either existential or vastly overstated. But consider that Hibiscus flowers only bloom for a day before closing and falling off, preferring their own demise to the possibility of an 'end.' Consider all the times you saw something and took a picture. Consider that for millennia people had to trust themselves or the world to preserve something they wanted to see again.



## **About The Author**

Seeking is a graduate student in Data Science living in Washington D.C. Seeking is interested in unconventional form, interpersonal connection, and the process of remembering (or forgetting).

## It Hangs in My Closet by Saroya

I never wanted to wear white.  
I know it's what most do  
— It's what all my friends did  
regardless of length or style —  
But white was for purity and innocence  
And I'd waited too long  
To be called such things anymore.  
I'd always imagined  
There would be splashes of color  
— Scarlet red, or maybe sky blue in the  
bodice or the skirts —  
Or I'd dye the train in a rainbow,  
A perpetual kaleidoscope  
Glittering in the sun  
As I walked down the aisle.  
That was more my style.  
I never knew,  
What exactly my dream gown  
Would be, what it would look like,  
I never had visions of the perfect day  
growing up.  
Going to that boutique  
I just thought I'd know it when  
I saw it,  
Or at least I hoped I would  
For a gown that would cost so much  
And be worn for so little,  
It really had to be something special  
Something I could love and cherish  
And make an eternal promise in.  
A different kind of suit of armor.  
Funny that it happened just that way:  
A drop waist gown

With lace and pearl beading,  
Long sleeves with a sweetheart neckline,  
And in ivory with champagne petticoats.  
Not white. Off white. Like me.  
A match made at first sight.  
It felt strange putting it on that first time  
Like it was and wasn't meant for me,  
  
So regal and chic, fit for a princess,  
And not my barely together 30-year-old  
self,  
But there wasn't another choice for me.  
It was decided  
My heart invested  
My soul in agreement.  
Now it hangs in my closet  
In its pristine wardrobe bag  
Waiting for a day  
That may never come;  
the original occasion  
cancelled with a single e-mail and the click  
of a mouse.  
I'm not sure what to do with it,  
This beautiful gown made for love  
A gown I chose and it chose me.  
What does one do with such an expensive  
piece of fabric,  
That was tailored to be your second skin  
On the happiest day of your life?  
I can't open it and look at it yet  
I know if I do too soon,  
It'll split my heart in two  
Just as its begun to stitch its broken pieces  
Back together,  
But I have no interest in giving the gown  
away.

So for now it'll stay  
A reminder of what was had  
Maybe even a hope,  
For what may yet still come.

### **About The Author**

“What are you?” is a question Saroya gets asked since she's ethnically ambiguous, and wears the occasional wig, whether it be black, grey, or green (like a mermaid). She is a biracial, bisexual feminist born and bred in the Golden State of California who writes about the challenges of identity.

## **Last Rites by Anil Petwal**

The frail nerd on her smartphone  
Typing furiously to solve an algorithm  
Inside a rented room in Berlin  
Her ancestral bangle on her right arm  
Designed a century back by a now-dead craftsman  
Somewhere in an old Delhi bazaar.

She doesn't know a thing about her great-grandmother  
The first woman who passed this superb piece to another woman  
Beginning what she imagined was an unbroken chain  
Of memory and desire, a continuity of shared emotions  
Passed on from woman to woman, like some mythic baton  
Transcending its metallic value, becoming folklore.

If you observe the girl's immersion keenly you will know  
Between tradition's memory and technology's sorcery  
She loves the latter much more.  
Between a smartphone's endless inventiveness  
And an ancient bangle's fading sheen  
A rationalist like her favors the smartphone  
And in so doing announces herself as the family rebel.  
Someday soon she will part with the bangle  
Probably to buy a set of new ear pods or an electric blanket.  
Ease is her thing, and it's not suggestive of a moral lapse

Even if it hastens the death of a tradition,  
The collapse of an imaginary unbroken chain.  
There's no one with her to celebrate or lament  
The death of an idea once conceived in a Delhi duplex  
Being laid to rest in remote Berlin  
Amid sellers of wonderful beer and makers of great machines.

## Tehri— In Memory by Anil Petwal

(Tehri, a princely estate of Garhwal region in North India was submerged under the waters of Bhagirathi and Bhilangana rivers in late 1990s to make way for Tehri dam, the tallest dam in India.)

Trapezium on a white sheet

Drawn free hand

Buildings half submerged in a river

My friend mimics a dead city's map on a blank page

He gets it all wrong, the shapes and contours

Making obelisks of minarets, flat roofs where slopes existed.

The way a city begins is the same everywhere

Water comes first, potent enough

To make men dream, invent, breed, destroy,

To make a place soar before it begins to fall.

By the river my city was born

By the river it flourished

A farrago of new and old

Of rice fields and rhododendrons

Runners at dawn, drunk men around bonfires at dusk.

Nothing significant about it

Nothing of note you say.

When you remember a dead city

Are you feeling things that others are not in touch with?  
Some days memory is just a ruse  
Summoning sights mangled by imagination's thick sauce  
But as we said water comes first,  
Potent enough to breed and destroy  
It is where civilizations begin without fanfare  
In odd cases it is where cities breathe their last.

### **About The Author**

Anil Petwal is a writer and a civil servant residing in Dehradun, India. He is working on a novel and a book of poems. He self published a book of poems titled 'A boy's Juvenilia' in his college years. His writing explores the nature of self in diverse milieus, shaped and reshaped constantly by a mix of circumstance and choice. You can follow him @IamAnilPetwal



## Let Us Adorn Ourselves by Mike Turner

Let us adorn ourselves  
With the beauty of the world around us  
Realizing our place in the natural order  
Architecture as extension of nature's line and form  
Calm stillness of stream and glade  
Rich woods running with grain  
Burnished to glowing sheen  
Stone glinting with flecks of quartz in morning sun  
Greens, browns, tans, rust

Let us adorn ourselves  
With the beauty of the world around us  
Realizing our place in the natural order  
Clothing as adopted plumage  
Unique statements of self  
Tactile spinnings of soft fibers  
Warped and woven to garments and covers  
Dyed as rainbows after a gentle rain  
Reds, golds, blues, greens

Let us adorn ourselves  
With the beauty of the world around us  
Realizing our place in the natural order  
Ornamentation as reflection of perception  
Contemplations real and imagined  
Carved stone, metalwork, jewels  
Chiseled, hammered, polished  
Formed as tangible feeling and wonder  
Onyx, pewter, turquoise, jade

Let us adorn ourselves  
With the beauty of the world around us  
Realizing our place in the natural order

Words as verbal expression  
Of that known to our hearts  
Poetry, literature, song  
Recited, written, composed  
Etched in stone, inked on parchment  
Verse, sonnet, lyric, melody

Let us adorn ourselves  
With the beauty of the world around us  
Realizing our place in the natural order  
Community as togetherness  
One in our common humanity  
Support, encouragement, empowerment  
Equality, harmony, compassion  
Embellishing ourselves and the Earth  
With hope, peace, joy, and love

### **About The Author**

Mike Turner is a songwriter and poet living on the US Gulf Coast. His poems have been published in numerous journals and anthologies; his book, "Visions and Memories," was published in 2021 by Sweetycat Press.

## Life Stored in Boxes by Kelli Lage

Digging through boxes, packed by hands who decided  
memories were meant for storage, rather than picture frames.  
Artwork I created at five years old.  
Dried paint and construction paper still clutches the smells of my preschool classroom.  
Days of my youth, waiting for twenty years to bound into my nose  
and grip the throat of my senses.  
I trace my fingertips over glitter and surrender my worries to the melting sun.  
I'm dominated by warm colors, and a craving to smear my palms in paint.  
  
I discovered a letter from my grandmother addressed to me.  
Her writing shaking, yet the ink steadied me.  
I smelled the letter she wrote  
and pretended it smelled like her,  
but really all I could come up with was stale flatlines.  
  
I'm mad that childhood art projects can last  
but my grandma's perfume can evaporate.  
  
And I'm happy that I can crawl into *Winnie the Pooh* decorated innocence,  
but sad that her sweater is missing.

### About The Author

Kelli Lage is earning her degree in Secondary English Education and works as a substitute teacher. She is a poetry reader for Bracken Magazine. Awards: Special Award for First-time Entrant, 2020, Iowa Poetry Association.

Website: [www.KelliLage.com](http://www.KelliLage.com).

## **Brief Meditation On The Life of Maggie Pollitt by Lauren Suchenski**

this rose quartz chinadoll; this sunken chunk of flesh and sex; this four-poster bed draped in southern wind, the little traces of sunlight blinking through the lilywhite + cream curtains – the peak, the sneak, the garter belt, the rotation of heels and earrings ; the pearls; the diamonds cascading through fingertips still silken at the skin,, still soaked in sin, still flashing tumbler whiskey dry , high time , high noon , Memphis heat boiling over the ice cube coldness – bitter fringe of society; the society we live in; the rolled up pant leg to expose / to expose; the exposition of timelessness; of ankles broken, twisted, mangled words hulked on top of one another like a hawk-cries' promise \\ It's just a mechanical thing, this love ; or the magical disappearing act of it \ it's just a mechanical thing, this heart or the wild feet I race back and forth in circles / This blue satin love, a sash around the waist, a dash of haste stealing around your chaste angled brow upwards,, the disdain, the rotating glass chiming clock chimes in the hallway, endless hours of saturated sun ; croquet balls flung mid moon air suspended ; never hitting the target through the delicate wire frame the ball is supposed to chime through ; the delicate wire frame ; the endless succession of words, the postponement of pleasure, of honesty, the bravery of standing on your own two feet, and barking into the moonlight

## When the hair was snipped by Lauren Suchenski

When the hair was snipped  
the panic rose on the back of my neck  
like a pair of traps releasing on each foot /  
I liked to hide behind this tiny patch - this little  
window shade from the world;;  
The air on the side of my face  
was nothing short of terrifying –  
all of the new light the sun could splay on me;  
all of the imperfect pores that could feel the atmosphere //  
the nakedness felt immense –  
And my rapturous heart knew nothing else  
but the kind of fear that approaches you from behind  
(this had come from the front - with my consent, no less)

I sat with the mounting anxiety as it traced me  
home, down the NJ transit line, little train plodding slowly  
(too slowly) and me and my little heartbeat thudding endlessly

I sat with the fearful residue sliding over my body --  
approached it like a small animal  
and began to call it pet names ;  
It began to comfort me - the radiant terror  
transforming into something resembling release --  
The courage of follicles tossed to the  
ground like some sort of ancient foliage  
gone free -- the bliss of winter branches reaching

I wondered about the radical resistance of our bodies;;  
the way that my projection of sliding cells  
curls my little name into an image -- how the grace  
of giving away your identity

rattles out the little neurons waiting  
in the back of my brain to be called on;  
Waiting to be forced to stand up /

And here comes the army of new selves  
rushing from the last row - here comes the maraca of my brain;  
shook  
and surrendering  
to the agony of fearlessness  
you force yourself to allow yourself to grow into  
by pulling up the weeds keeping  
the soil  
together

## Lighter by Lauren Suchenski

I kept your lighter  
grabbed it in an instant  
tucked into the folds of  
my coat and bumbled my way  
home ---

when a memory folds itself  
like cupped hands under a  
tucked chin, I always gape at it;  
laugh and wave my hands  
like it is a friend that has come  
to console me -- but  
here there is only the end of the  
telephone wire, and a chunk  
of ones and zeros  
that line up to make your face;  
and the dropped conversation  
that sits like a pair of  
folded hands with  
no memory of itself;  
folded paper that leaves no crease

I kept your lighter,  
maybe to set this paper on fire,  
watch it burn in the afternoon light;  
tuck the ashes under my pillow;  
make a few wishes on them and pull  
a few teeth out, hoping a fairy or two  
will leave me something  
in the morning;  
something more concrete of you –  
like copper or scratched silver;

or a flame and  
something to set ablaze

### **About The Author**

Lauren Suchenski (she/her) has a difficult relationship with punctuation. She has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and four times for The Best of the Net. Her chapbook “Full of Ears and Eyes Am I” (2017) is available from Finishing Line Press, and a full-length collection “All You Can Measure” as well as a chapbook “All Atmosphere” (Selcouth Station 2022) are forthcoming. You can find more of her writing on Instagram @lauren\_suchenski or on Twitter @laurensuchenski.



## Lost Scent by Evan Burkin

I want to speak jazz with you.

Django and Art

Billie and Miles

The sound of France

Two hours into

The first of November

When the cobble stones

Keep the light

And police wagons

Are the second hand.

Past the vinyl?

A clock face for the tower.

It's almost noon.

That sound of bass

That sound

We need to clean

Of high socks parting

Of high socks on wood.

Let's speak like two Greeks.

We need to clean

Come back to bed.

Do we have any food?

Come back to bed.

Sock hems

Inches from the shirt

Fingers on leather

Fingers coming undone.  
If I gave you a globe  
Your fingers would trail gypsy cloth.  
  
Is anyone still alive?  
Only us.  
  
It's the other way.  
  
Then you take Graciela  
I'll be Bill.  
  
We have a Sophie Alour.  
  
Light Alour.  
And hand me your pack of Benson & Hedges.

### **About The Author**

Evan Burkin (he/him/his) has been published in the Los Angeles Review of Books, Analogies & Allegories Literary Magazine, Feral: A Journal of Poetry and Art, The Madrigal, Sur, Inklette, and Rain Taxi.

## Mama's Dupatta by Adenah Furquan

I am 5. Against a backdrop of flickering lights and early 2000s Bollywood, I drape the delicate fabric around my waist and over my shoulder, vehemently twirling on the carpet with the sort of feverish urgency that makes the world make a little more sense. Here, life is simple, and life is sweet — and to breathe is not to ache. Imagination goes a long way, they say — so I sit back as fluorescent bulbs metamorphose into sumptuous chandeliers and bedrooms into vast bungalows and studs into radiant *jhumkay* (earrings) too big for my ears. And little old me? I'm Aishwarya Rai — or so my brain whispers at least. I am not a little girl; I am a woman. I watch as the corners of the room glisten and pulsate with life — a cacophony of sitars and drums unabashedly reverberating around the room and encapsulating my adolescent body in a vibrant reverie. It's just me and my silk against the world, I think, as I bask in the glory of the cascading cloth. Maybe it's the room that's fervidly spinning on its axis, paying no heed to the utter monotony of its surroundings — or maybe it's me. I find it difficult to tell. I am a coalescence of emulated dance moves and makeshift sarees, relishing the feel of the gossamer on my skin and officially deeming it my most prized possession. But then a timid voice in my head threatens to rain on the parades of felicity I've concocted so lovingly: shh, keep it down. We don't want Mama to find out. Mama says these songs [giggles] are for big girls. So I reluctantly enclose the echoes of laughter inside my silk-clad silhouette, continuing to spin like the records Mama window-shops on a daily basis. I am every toddler's dream come true — and I harbor the feeling in my butterfly belly with all I've got.

I am 21. You seldom realize the ephemerality of a moment until it's been replaced with a profound stillness, leaving in its wake the remnants of a life that once was. I am a fatigued amalgamation of under-eye crescents and calloused heels, yet another casualty at the hands of fate — but then I adorn myself with the exquisite fabric of the yesteryears, and for a minute there, I am alright. It still smells like 2005 — like the nostalgia that swallows you whole among wide-eyed strangers in the middle of a seemingly normal summer afternoon, transporting you to the memorable fields of ebullience you fervently yearn to run through one more time. I am not a little girl; I am a woman — but I wish I wasn't. It's a soul-sucking realization, this one. I am a woman — a pacing mishmash of sleepless, caffeinated nights and one-too-many deadlines, a bottomless chasm and a vacant shell. That Aishwarya Rai song now sits in a

throwback playlist, but we'll still pretend it's the 2000s for that semblance of normality — the burning pining for something unattainable. And there's a little tear on the upper right of the cloth — but you know the deal, right? Don't tell Mama. We don't want to disappoint Mama. On days that require deep breathing and the counting of tiles to go to sleep, the pastel blue tenderness envelopes me in its humanlike embrace, covering me with the silken blanket of sentiment — of love, of simpler times and of Her scent. And then it's okay again. It's okay. As long as I have Mama's *dupatta* (scarf), it's okay.

### **About The Author**

Adenah Furquan is a 21-year-old with an earnest passion for writing and feminism. When she's not brainstorming ideas for new pieces or trying to dismantle the patriarchy, Adenah can be found listening to indie rock, watching or reading psychological thrillers, and gushing over scented candles.

## **My Mother Was 28 Years Old When My Shoe Size Was 28 by Ecem Yucel**

It was around the ages five and a half, and six, that I first started to step into her chic, pointy, cream white stilettos, trying to balance myself in them as my tiny feet slipped forward and squished inside the pointed-toe, leaving half of the shoes behind my soft heels empty. My mother would warn me against the possibility of spraining my thin ankles or breaking them if I continued to wear the shoes, but a girl starts young in adoring her mother thus adorning herself with her possessions: nothing more like the thrill of uncovering a pirate's treasure.

Once, people adorned colorful beads and flashy feathers and danced to the rhythm as they felt beautiful, dazzling others, and becoming one with the world. Mimicking your ancestors to understand and reach beauty must be a uniquely human condition embedded in our code since I didn't care about breaking a leg as I wobbled on those shoes, nor being scolded whenever I donned one of my mother's shoulder-padded blazers she wore for work, her bead necklace dangling under her silk scarf wrapped around my neck, and her round, mother-of-pearl, clip-on earrings covering the lower half of my ears. But my favorite item was a silver ring, with a big, oval, black hematite stone at its center. Her lucky ring, not expensive, but precious, and bigger in size even than my thumb. I was never able to wear it, not even when I turned twenty-eight: Not being stored properly, with all those move-ins and outs over the years, it fell apart badly inside the corner of an old, worn-out makeup bag. I was sad, but by that time I had a completely different fashion sense, and my mother's taste appealed to me no more. As she got older and a bit bitter from fighting against the continuous hardships of her life, along with the lucky ring, everything she possessed fell apart, discolored, ripped, and got lost. She couldn't care much nor

replace them when all she could do was work, work, work, to get by, to feed the people and the animals that looked up to her to survive, so, if she shed a secret tear every time a colorful pantsuit from the 80s became ruined, or when she saw her precious ring in pieces, I wouldn't know. I did buy her a new silver ring, with a black onyx stone this time, and though disappointed a little since the stone was not hematite, she smiled and thanked me, and wore it on a couple of occasions. It was all I could do to give her back at least a tiny portion of those memories, without travelling in time and dragging that wardrobe, along with her little peacock, back.

### **About The Author**

Ecem Yucel is an Ottawa-based Turkish writer, poet, and translator. Her writing has recently appeared or is forthcoming in Wine Cellar Press, Cypress Poetry Journal, and Alien Buddha Press. Her poetry book "The Anguish of an Oyster" is on Amazon & Kobo. Find her at [www.ecemyucel.com](http://www.ecemyucel.com) or on Twitter @TheEcemYucel.

## Naked Fashion by Ai Jiang

TW: Implied sexual harassment

At birth, all arrive naked into the world; small bodies meet the skin of their mothers before they're swaddled in white cotton, then placed in confinement behind plastic screens. But not you. Your mother refuses the swaddle, clutches onto your newborn body, still red and sticky, to her naked breasts for so long those around you thought the two of you had become one. She says the cotton is unnatural, it's better to be naked.

When the other newborns arrive at home, their parents abandon the cotton for clothing less protective, more colourful, more 'adorable'. But not you.

At five years old, your mother reveals a large garbage bag hidden behind her. The dust on its wrinkled surface floats into the air, causing you to cough. You ask, what's that? With only a smile, your mother unties the bag, pulling out a pair of overalls with its straps missing. They're hand-me-downs from your cousins, she says, then ruffles your hair.

You wear the overalls like pants: tie a belt around your waist and let the top of the overalls flap forward. The flap pools, scrunching up where the hoodie you pull over it ends. It is always uncomfortable and bulky, but for some reason you still like it because it keeps you warm in the winter.

Although they're oversized, you can't wear them past thirteen.

When other teens enter high school, they become the fabrics that cover their bodies. They warp, take on the personalities their clothing portrays. You, too, even though your mother never lets you buy anything short and anything with holes. She tells you that it's safe, but you don't listen. You abandon the overalls and the other hand-me-downs and cover yourself in leather, translucent mid-waist down shirts, shorts two times too small like the other girls.

But the holidays, of course, the winter holidays always have you running through the door in a thick, oversized Christmas sweater shouting, "Family! Family! Family!" until there is no home to return to and no one to celebrate holidays with. Then, you toss the Christmas sweater into the black garbage bag and hide it at the back of your closet.

Like other adults, you leave with the same high heels from last night, making you seem much taller, more confident, than you are. Without them, you feel no taller than a toddler barefooted. Your boss at Fortune Fashion, the one who always smells like rotten lime, offers to buy you a new pair of heels when yours break. Instead, you decline, resign. What he wants in return for the heels isn't a something you're willing to offer.

You abandon the heels, then slouch; slouch until your head is so low that you can't see in front of you because if you cannot be taller, you can at least be different. But even then, there is someone else so bent over that their forehead brushes the ground.

You can't do that.

No, your mother has taught you better.

No matter how far you bend to please the world, your forehead can never touch the ground because touching the ground means surrender. You don't want to surrender. It's not an option—losing face, your traditional pride. Bowing with respect is different from bowing in defeat. Bowing to the dead is different from bowing in submission. You don't do things that harm your pride. Never, never, never. Why is it that you only listen to your mother now?

Your mother calls, asks how you're doing. You tell her you got a new job, a better one, one where your boss doesn't make you bow—at least not in public. Fortune Fashion is the name. Mother seems both worried and relieved. You reassure her: it's fine. Really.

But your new boss's kindness doesn't last long. It's only a facade. You should have known. Since when was your luck so good, anyway? He walks past your cubicle. You stiffen. Today isn't your turn. Let your breath go. His hand connects with the back of your coworker's head. She flinches but doesn't move otherwise. Work faster, your boss says, rapping his knuckles against your coworker's sewing machine. Work faster.

You notice the black garbage bag at the back of your closet when you open it and pull out the freshly pressed shirts you recently purchased at full price. Your coworkers can smell bargains, and you don't want to smell like bargains even though your bank account has long since entered the negatives. Your ex-boss calls you up, offers a raise and something else. No.

You spit at the receiver when the line goes dead.



He made, makes, everyone fall to their knees, unwillingly willing, rip holes where their pants scrap against the ground. As long as everyone suffers, he is happy. As long as everyone is below him—

After your last day at Fortune Fashion—the horrid place they try to call your “second home”, where everyone only seems to lose their fortune rather than gain success—you rip your pressed shirts from their hangers and ball them up in your hands. You toss the wrinkled white cottons, an imitation of the soft hospital towels, across the room.

You want to hide under sweaters and sweatpants because, in all honesty, you miss your overalls and hand-me-downs. Much more than the pressed shirts with the collars that will choke you, like they have many others. Only ghosts can handle dressing in clothes so tight.

You drag out the black garbage bag from the back of the closet in your new apartment and dig out the overalls and Christmas sweater. Though you no longer fit the overalls, you pull the Christmas sweater over your bare body and clutch the overalls close.

At ninety-seven, you tell your children and their children who stand next to your hospital bed that you want to be naked when they bury you—without makeup and beautiful fabrics. That is how you entered the world, and that is how you want to leave it.

### **About The Author**

Ai Jiang is a Chinese-Canadian writer, an immigrant from Fujian, and an active member of HWA. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in F&SF, The Dark, PseudoPod, Jellyfish Review, Hobart Pulp, The Masters Review, among others. Find her on Twitter (@AiJiang\_) and online (<http://aijiang.ca>).

## On Beginning & Ending by Dean Boskovich

TW: self-harm, religious domestic abuse

On beginning  
as we usually do  
in the early morning;  
on rising early  
to gather the eggs,  
garner the harvest;  
on gathering  
long locks of hair  
sewn tightly into bonnets;  
on sewing  
quilts adorned with  
lifeless geometry & paltry paisley; on adorning,  
secretly, the bonnets with  
blossoms pruned from grow;  
on pruning  
feverish thoughts  
& mindful wandering;  
on wandering  
what lies beyond the creek  
or wondering;  
on lying  
the view from the middle row  
of the pastor's daily preach;  
on preaching  
pastures that we sow  
the laborious fruit we reap;  
on sowing  
a stray & frayed thought  
sprouts quietly from seed;  
on straying

fingers clutched & wet, touch,  
the ringing of a mother's mourn; on mourning  
eyes raw with penitent begging  
for straw sky forgiveness;  
on forgiving  
yourself  
this small act of rebellion;  
on acting  
browbeaten contrition, retribution--  
it is endless;  
on ending:  
maybe this is how  
angels are made

quietly,  
in the space between worlds.

## Letter for a boy named Aubrey by Dean Boskovich

Aubrey,

You will never know the house  
in L.A. with the 1975 Camaro in  
the driveway and the mold on  
the ceilings where your Great Grandfather  
spent the last years of His life yelling at  
your Great Aunt through cottage cheese  
dinners and post stroke dementia. Or the  
bonnets and single color  
dresses to the ankles and the  
washing the hair in the sink and  
the chickens and the ducks in  
the back yard and Mr. Ugly Nasty  
who always got bullied by the  
other ducks or the dead cow  
we found floating in the creek  
or the deer that said hello in the  
back window while we were eating  
dinner. And your earliest memory  
probably won't be hiding in the  
tall grass on the farm, while your  
mother rang the bell and called  
your name and you sat there  
alone in the grass, looking for just  
a moment of peace.

Oh, Aubrey.

You will never get to break into your  
childhood home to show a realtor the  
birds that have nested in  
the kitchen cabinets or the secret drug  
den in the attic and the love that did  
not echo through the yellow living

room with the striped wallpaper and  
the kitchen with the birds and the trees  
and the long hallway.

You will not grow up with the woods  
in your backyard that separated you  
from all those tanks of gas waiting to  
explode which will not end up being  
a metaphor for the marriage you  
were born into.

Oh, Aubrey.

Good for you, bud.

### **About The Author**

Dean Boskovich is a cook. His work has appeared previously in T.G.I. Friday's, continental breakfasts, and various food delivery apps. Dean hopes your friends don't think he was being too awkward the other day.

## ONE LETTER EACH DAY by Shrutidhora P Mohor

In the land of letters, there used to come a letter every afternoon.

The envelope would be light yellow.

A sheet of paper would be there inside, folded, thin, crisp.

It would be delivered to each one by turn, to one today, to another one tomorrow, to an uncle the day after, to his brother the next day, to their cousin the week thereafter, to her mother the following day, to her sister the next week.

Each one of them would receive it from the postman, hold it close to their chest for a while, and then drop it inside a large, rusted trunk kept at the far end of a hall.

What did it say?

One would ask the other.

There would sometimes be an answer to the question, sometimes not.

The large iron trunk with its mighty bolts had been a deposit bank for hundreds and thousands of such letters received by the inhabitants of this land for ages.

No one had ever seen the sender, yet everyone had a clear vision of him.

Grandparents had initiated their grandchildren into receiving the letters when their turns had come; great-grandparents had watched silently as toddlers had curiously peeped into the yellow envelopes.

One day when the enemy soldiers arrived and laid siege on the land their attention fell upon the trunk, immobile, mysterious, suspicious.

What's there inside?

Letters, said a dozen voices.

Letters? Why aren't they kept as personal items? Separately in each household?

One of the dozen voices said, that's because they belong to all of us.

Interesting! Who writes them?

There was silence. Then a young woman, blond and tall, said, Our North Star.

Who?

As the war progressed and the victory of the opponent became clear, the soldiers, weary and homesick, wanted to have some fun. They broke open the trunk and flipped through the huge mass of yellow envelopes. Their blood-stained fingers tore through the pile. They dragged out some of the letters and held them before their ugly eyes. And then their vulgar laughter subsided as they stared at the nearly blank pages

inside each envelope. Not a word was written on them. Only a few lines and designs, incomplete and asymmetrical, peculiar and provocative, lay as drawings on them. Half a tree, the torso of a man, the half-hidden face of a woman, a child's fingers, a triangle, a trapezoid with two flowers on top...letter after letter revealed stories which the soldiers could not read.

Enraged and insulted, the commander ordered an inquiry.

What does this figure mean? The interrogator asked, grinding his teeth.

Oh, this one? The senior man's unexcited response agitated him further. It shows our daily

routine. His calm response did nothing to convince the battalion.

And this? Another interrogator shook the table in front of him hoping to terrify the respondent.

Which one? Oh, that one? That bears the lyrics of the lullaby which our women sing for the babies.

Lyrics? The battalion heads yelled. Impossible! These are only a few curved lines.

That's how we write our lyrics.

Liars!

What about this? One soldier tossed a letter across the table.

The senior man glanced at it and smiled.

What makes you smile, you fool?

I am sorry, officer. He straightened his face. This is the direction to our treasury where the real jewels are. In our community we preserve all valuables together, all passwords collectively. Our stories are written in parts by all of us. Our memories are also woven together. You see the advantage, officer? We don't have to remember precious secrets alone.

Real jewels? The soldiers sat up. Where? Give us the direction. Immediately.

Umm, that's difficult.

Kick him with the end of the rifle! He will be able to tell us then. The commander's mouth glistened with imminent cruelty.

No, officer. You didn't get me. No one of us alone can give you the direction. The route is revealed to all of us by these letters bit by bit, gradually. None of us knows it fully. See, for example here, this path which passes by the brook turns right and then there is a...

Oh shut up! When will you get all the letters? The commander's impatience was palpable.

Before the senior man could speak, the tall young woman with the eyes of a hawk, said, it will take time. One letter each day. The direction communicated one day at a time. The commander walked up to her and encircled her a couple of times, looking threateningly at her neck.

You say it's your treasury and yet you do not know where it is. How is that possible? His moustache vibrated with every breath.

In our land, perfectly possible. The young woman looked back at him. The valuables of one age vary from those of another age. The treasury shifts from one place to another. But no

matter where it relocates, we hold it together. All. Of. Us. Collectively.

Some of the soldiers jumped up to pounce on the woman. The commander stopped them with a show of his hand. Narrowing his eyes he asked, And why are the letters without a single word? Why is nothing written in them?

The woman scratched her chin and replied, So that we can write our own story and then read them for ourselves. It's for us to write and read. Not for you. You write your History, some write their Herstory, we write Ourstory.

Did the letter come today?

It did.

What does it say?

The same as always.

Can I have a look at it?

No.

## **About The Author**

Shrutidhora P Mohor is an author from India who has a love for odd, quirky characters. Her writings are mostly of the literary fiction variety and she has published stories and novellas with Ukiyoto Publishing Company since 2019.



## Parade by Sylvi Stein

We bake horrible pies. Our mothers say  
they taste so great. Our brothers come home  
from school, and we see the fathers  
we hate on the street. We fall in love  
with girls who feel ambivalent toward us.  
We join sororities, or we don't. We remember  
all the jokes we've ever told by accident.  
We love the dog. We scale  
bunk beds like mountains to find old stuffed animals.  
We are missing our mandatory online meetings.  
We lose to our uncles in Wheel of Fortune,  
but we win when Jeopardy comes on.  
We got nose piercings. We dyed our hair  
colors that make our mothers mad. We get  
our butts handed to us in Mario Kart. We wear  
unbearable holiday sweaters for the pictures.  
We watch the parade balloons inflate  
like lungs. We take so many photos. We miss lots  
of stuff. We like each other's haircuts.  
We almost break a lot of fragile things. We are crying  
laughing. We are getting home late tonight.  
We'll see each other again sometime, probably.  
We are still in denial about some things.  
We wear our college sweaters to sleep.

### About The Author

Sylvi Stein (she/her) is an undergraduate at Columbia University. Her writing has been published by Surgam, Eunoia Review, and The Decameron Project. In her spare time, Sylvi can be found wandering the aisles of used book stores, even though she has more than enough to read at home.

## **Paua by Kallie Tan**

TW: Alludes to domestic violence.

It watched us from the wall, its opalescent eyes deeply embedded in its distorted grinning face, a scrawny figure carved into cheap stained wood. The Tiki was a cheeky reminder that we had filthy kiwi blood, that our heritage formed the basis of the sheep jokes Dad levelled at Nanna, which she graciously laughed at. She was as cheeky as the Tiki, a real character, old and wrinkly and cute.

I later found out that she was only cheeky when we were there for Christmas. For the rest of the year, she was a prisoner in her own home, hours spent on the edge of her bed, staring at the golf course across the road through lace curtains. She was oppressed, with no agency of her own except what she secretly scrounged from between the chair cushions to fund her love of the horses and buy us little trinkets.

We were blissfully unaware of her life and the violence in that house, unashamed of our filthy kiwi blood. Ignorant, we played the kid version Squatter under the Tiki's abalone shell gaze, hundreds of thin, plastic sheep rounded up by the Monopoly terrier on the scratchy moss carpet tiles. We inhaled the naphthalene atmosphere of Nan and Pop's weatherboard home and exhaled laughter and copped abuse when Mum or Dad stepped on a broken sheep.

One point five decades later, as dust caught the sunlight and sparkled in shafts through the broken blinds, the Mother Who Gave Me Life showed me Mother of Pearl, a jar full of pearlescent slivers, the stuff of Tiki's eyes, only prettier. The shells were every shade of blue and scavenged from piles of hoarded junk—ninety years of bowerbird treasures, cockroach poo, and drums of legacy pesticides. Aging children had gathered in the empty home and sorted through the mountains of stuff, fuelled by fabrications their father had told them about hidden coins, borrowed money, and magpie partners stealing his things. Stories intended to make them fight once he was gone.

Everyone agreed they were all a bunch of lies. But my uncle still pulled out the oven.

My cousin inserted his hand into the bum of a huge chook from the deep freezer. Great grandchildren peeled up the carpet tiles. No coins were found so yeah, it was probably a bunch of lies (deep down, though, the siblings suspected their sister cleaned out the joint before they arrived, and they wondered how much of Poppa's ravings were the paranoid ramblings of dementia, the lies of a trouble maker, and the actual truth). I found a white opal cabochon, all milk and fire, half buried in the filth on the itchy carpet. It was more valuable but less beautiful than the jar of sea snail slivers Mum took home. The council of siblings took it as evidence the stories may have been true, but no golden stash was uncovered.

Another decade nearly past, and I was home alone with a baby on my own. Anger at my partner for going to the Land of Sheep and Clouds, the land of my blood, turned to worry when there was news of an island exploding, engulfing tourists in its ashy jaws of rotten egg smoke and steam. My partner was fine, nowhere near the island. He returned home and appeased my wrath with an iridescent ring made from Tiki's eyes, plucked from the waters of Mordor. I was easily mollified, finding worth in something with little more than sentimental and aesthetic value, a bowerbird attracted to shiny blue snail shells.

### **About The Author**

Kallie Tan lives in Melbourne, though she is originally from the sand dunes and floodplains of inland Australia. An ecologist, she has previously published her research in scientific journals and is now having adventures in creative writing.

## Pindi Puja by Venkat Kollati

Tomorrow, she would be a person again. Tomorrow, if she survived, today would never have happened.

Today, however, she is a tool. An ornament forged in the flames of a shrine, then cold hammered over the years by its priests, mocking its original purpose. That this was not blasphemy spoke of the empty pantheon her people now worshipped. Empty, uncaring, or unseeing.

The air is full of memories. Remembrances of long-dead ancestors and recently-passed relatives. Blood kin, one and all, and today they live once more, in the minds of those who survived them.

Today is an occasion to celebrate their lives, mourn their deaths, and appease their restless spirits. Food—a feast for the family—to celebrate, flowers and incense and ritual powders to mourn. And her, to appease.

She sits facing the firepit, memories and lives—indistinguishable—dancing on the flames. They speak to her in whispers, in a tongue lost to time. A priest sits across from her, a well-thumbed verse book opens in his lap. He coughs, and the spirits hum in anticipation.

The first harsh note leaves the priest's mouth, to find itself being played by her voice. An instrument once, capable of spellbinding melody, reduced to a rough implement that repeats guttural intonations. Each word of each verse is hammered into the air around them, into the fire between them, and into the spirits surrounding them.

The spirits whisper no longer. Their tongues are still alien, they start to scream. She would weep for their fate if they were not tormenting her so. With each verse, the screams grow louder. She is kneading dough—flour, black sesame seeds, cow milk, and cow piss. Amid a haze of incense, she looks on at her family, coughing and screaming. These screams she can understand, and she rues their shared tongue.

She has formed three balls of dough: food for the spirits, whose screaming abates. The ritual has ended, the firepit is snuffed out, and the priest ceases his barking. And the feast begins.

Not yet for the tool and her spirits. She must feed them herself now. When the gods still smiled they would, as cows, accept offerings on behalf of the spirits. They do so no

longer. She must instead breach a god's unwilling and ailing body and fling her offerings into its maw.

The ocean is too far away, as are the holy rivers. For today, something smaller would have to suffice. Other tools with their offerings to their spirits gather in a fell convergence at the nearest lake. In a silent moment of unity on a cacophonous day of inhumanity, the tools drop their offerings into the brackish green water. Let the spirits salvage what they can. Let their screams join with the lake's.

In a final act of perversion, the tool pays the priest for the privilege of being used, of being adorned by her family on this holy day. A wage that would make the gods weep, if they still had tears or eyes. The priest collects his bounty and departs to his next ritual.

The family leaves next, having thoroughly gorged themselves at the feast. Some of them had been tools themselves, once, yet they had not lost their appetite. Should she hate them? Or pity them? Compassion is a hard currency to part with, today.

The tool, then, alone, strips to her skin. Garments of white, once holy, sloughed off in disgust. Her fingers are a blur of red and yellow, the colours bleeding into her nails. No amount of scrubbing today will cleanse her.

But tomorrow, broken as she may be, she becomes a person again.

### **About The Author**

Venkat Kollati is a 28-year-old who used to teach maths before the pandemic. Maybe he'll go back to it again one day, but in the meantime he begins and abandons various artistic projects—stories, games, and music.

## Progress by Jason de Koff

The wood of the whistle-stop platform  
grew right where the track now lay  
and its ancestors powered the engine  
that fuelled towns along the way.

The stare of the vacant windows  
reflect the missing sounds,  
the bustling, rustling muster  
that used to enchant the town.

It's moved just miles away now  
festooned with imported grace, a  
spur of the mainline railroad to  
keep up with the quickened pace.

The angled rays of summer sun cast the  
flowered fields aglow, while the verdant  
forest and nearby hills speak softly  
down below.

Meanwhile, decay has settled  
on the bones of winter dreams  
though not upon this broken town  
but the one with the platinum gleam.

## **The Bookseller's Bouquet by Jason de Koff**

There is an invisible curtain  
pulled aside  
upon entering a house of books.  
The lifted veil provides  
a potpourri of pages,  
an intense incense of the old  
with its earthy musk  
of ancient spines,  
an aphrodisiac for the written word.  
They are the forgotten firecircles  
with the dark spaces for stories  
passed from mind to soul.  
Each home and hearth  
possess their own  
but always yearn for more.

### **About The Author**

Jason de Koff is an associate professor of agronomy and soil science at Tennessee State University. He lives in Nashville, TN with his wife, Jaclyn, and his two daughters, Tegan and Maizie. He has been published in a number of journals including *Ayaskala*, and his chapbook, “Words on Pages”, is currently available on Amazon at <https://amzn.to/3eookJk>.

## **Remembering My Time in Delhi: How the Place Breathes in My Heart by Diksha Arya**

Everyone sees a different version of a polis, and people who have dreamed about a specific one learns that the city stays no matter how far they are from it. It is said that to remember everything is not a boon, but maybe bane. There are many ways of reminiscing about something, but I remember the history of Delhi in how I held my best friend's hand in the Hauz Khas fort that is mostly now in ruins but still breathes its story in the vicinity of a modern restaurant and old houses. I can imagine the inhabitants coming out in their balconies and thinking about how love stays in different forms, and I am sure they will blow a sigh of relief when they see the moon shining just above the lake, making them believe that there is some part, if not all, of heaven on this earth. There is a certain comfort in familiarity. And that is why I like talking about my best friend more than anyone else, especially when she comes from the city I am talking about here.

When you love something too much, you grieve about it more. Leaving Delhi felt like that, like getting something you have always wanted but leaving everything behind because of things you cannot do anything about. It is also true that the greater you grieve about something, the less you talk about it. So, I try not to mention how my heart aches for the city and its architectural beauty, like if there is something more beautiful than the moon and the shining sun on a rough day, it is the city's monuments. But it is not something that you talk about on the best days. Instead, I try to memorise all of the good days and keep them in my pockets, like how I miss seeing Humayun's tomb. Not many of us know that the same architectural masterpiece was a saviour for refugees in the partition times. As a student, I have always been fond of reading history. So, my tongue fluently remembers who built this astonishing piece of art. Every historical place has its memoir and a tragedy if you think of it. Dilli (Delhi) is no different. Rather, if you see it, the city has seen ruins and is getting built into the modern sphere better than anyplace else.



## Words of Power and Resistance by Diksha Arya

I will only lie if I say that I do not have a clear picture of my every visit to a place in Dilli that speaks about itself while writing this, and how my heart aches not to appreciate the beauty of the city enough, that only tells stories like it is full of it, and yet if you look at it from outside, it seems empty. I remember going to the streets of Chandni Chowk in the month of April, and these streets shout their history. You do not have to do anything else but observe and listen. At times, the adornment of a place is not always about what used to be there but also about what is left still. And what is still left in Purani Dilli (Old Delhi) are stories, are its future to preserve itself, learn from the ruins and still make everyone fall in love with its history and resistance during the times of the modernity that the other party of the city is witnessing with every turning page. I have never had the chance to visit the gigantic Jama Masjid and experience the peace there. But I have read in the books about it, and every book reads that the red sandstone and the white marbles make it what it is. Sometimes when we visit someplace, it leaves imprints in different ways. That is what these books say about one of the most beautiful mosques in the country. Ghalib had a profound love for Delhi, and everyone who has an attachment with the city somewhere deep inside their hearts will feel this when he said, "I asked my soul, 'What is Delhi?' It replied: "The world is the body, Delhi its soul."

Maybe I miss Delhi a little too much with every passing day because of the history that it tells. The place just grows on you, and sometimes, you need to just let it happen. Let yourself feel the words of writers and poets who have stayed in there, who have brought revolutions and who have brought changes. As I write this piece, I remember all the places that I have been in the city in the four months that I had the opportunity to be a part of its history. I carry them in my mouth so that when someone asks what Delhi looked like for me, I could tell them that if you can come close to loving a city and if you love words, and someone who knows to appreciate history, you will always long for it even if you have not lived there for a long time. The city finds its identity every passing day, with people on the streets raising their voices for what they believe in. Maybe it has always been like that. Perhaps that is why the city speaks about power, about *inquilab* and everything in between, and that too in its art, in its words, and in its togetherness with, "*awaaz do, hum ek hai*" (*Call out together, We are united*).

## **About The Author**

Diksha Arya is a third-year student who writes poems, listens to sad songs, and loves to make people laugh. She is a cricket and football lover and daydreams about watching Lionel Messi play live in Barcelona. She loves having conversations, so if you have anything to talk about, ping me on Insta.

## Salt and Pepper by Nikki

Trudy Charles-Kingman touched her salt and pepper temples and frowned. A spruce up was long overdue. Switching from jet-black to burgundy was a bit drastic, especially at her age, but she'd made up her mind about the dye job. Plus she was already sold on the colour, a rich Basque Red. Her choice had only been part vanity anyway.

Honestly, she couldn't stand Steve's silent treatment any longer.

She couldn't fathom why after twenty-six-years, her husband had chosen now to start with the theatrics. She thought of her maiden name and chuckled; all along it'd been warning that she'd one day turn into Chaplin. As if humour would help her; Steve hadn't laughed in what seemed like forever. But if he thought he would break her with wistful sighs and silence, she would show him a different side of her.

Who knew? The new might even fix the pinched, flinty features that stared back at her in the mirror lately.

If it went well, it might even convince Kylie that her mother wasn't so old fashioned after all, maybe she'd hear from her more. Trudy's relationship with her own mother had been strained until the bitter, gin-soaked end. She hoped she'd always be close to her only child, but the more she clung to that thought, the more it felt like she was being ghosted.

Every year on Arbor Day since Kyle was eight years old, they'd volunteer to plant a tree in a different part of the city. This year marked thirteen years; Trudy knew she was lucky it had lasted that long, that eventually there would be solo tree-planting trips. It seemed like that time had finally come; the text reminders she'd sent to Kylie were still unanswered. Not wanting to seem pushy, she decided to wait one more day, shuddering as hungry high school years harked back to memory.

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Days later, Trudy was reading *Southern Living* in the study when she heard a car pull into the driveway. She didn't know whether to be angry or relieved when Kylie's head popped out of the sedan until she saw that she'd brought company, a modestly dressed, middle-aged woman.

As they crossed the porch, Trudy heard Kylie telling the woman about Scarlett, the stray tabby they'd taken in years ago, despite the fact that they'd found her below the deck with Trudy's missing garden mobiles.

"The look on Mom's face when she saw them was priceless," Kylie said laughing, mimicking the reaction.

Trudy furrowed her brows, wondering why the stranger was being regaled with family anecdotes.

Trudy flipped the magazine shut and sat on the sofa arm listening. She would meet her guest and flay her daughter for scaring her silly soon enough.

"How's your father been coping?" the woman asked Kylie as they sat down in the sunlit living room.

"Coping?" Trudy whispered, rising suddenly.

"Not good," Kylie sighed. "He was really coming around these last few weeks, but we had an Arbor Day family thing like I told you and I'm pretty sure it's why he's out of it now. He got so mad when I told him I called you again," she said lowering her eyes. She picked up a framed photo of her and Steve at Disneyland. "You know how he feels about...this," she said.

Trudy couldn't see the medium's small eyes flit around the space, then back to Kylie. "And what about you, dear," the medium asked, leaning forward.

Trudy wondered whether Kylie had left the room, then heard the sniffing, broken sobs that bounced off the living room walls. "I miss her so much," Kylie said in short gasps.

"I ran into someone from high school the other day," she paused, clutched her chest. "When they asked about her, I just couldn't..." Kylie's voice trembled then trailed off.

She'd been clutching her parents' wedding photo in her vein-roped hands. Despite the dark rivulets staining her cheeks, Kylie was a dead-ringer for the slender bride in cloud white.

Behind the raised wooden panelling, Trudy's face was translucent, confused.

"Sometimes I wish it had been me instead," Kylie said, blinking rapidly as she recalled the accordion-pleated, mangled SUV, the scorched asphalt.

"I just wish I could hear her voice again. I'd tell her..." Kylie said, tears pouring out.

Trudy took a step back, wavering on the balls of her feet. Her chest tightened from the white-hot wave of revelation.

“I can feel her here,” the medium said. “Right here in this room. She knows Kylie, your mother knows how much you miss her. It’s ok to let go...” Wracking sobs drowned out the rest of her words.

Sunbeams bleeding through the study’s only window brought no warmth to the woman on the other side. Squinting through salt, Trudy gazed fixedly at the flocks that peppered the April sky.

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### **About The Author**

Nikki is a multimedia journalist and writer. Her work appears in The Citron Review, Ellipsisazine, Sublunary Review, LEON Literary Review, Sky Island Journal, Literary Yard, PreeLit and is forthcoming in New Pop Lit. She munches trail mix and takes stunning photos when not busy writing. She tweets: @ohsashalee / See more: [linktr.ee/writenowrong](http://linktr.ee/writenowrong)

## Sapphire by Nicole Callräm

your silver sparked hair is messy  
in that stylish way I can't pull off  
clearly foreign in Shanghai moving through the most quotidian of spaces  
I see you  
can't tell how old you are  
all curls, dark perfume  
and earrings...two sparkly swallows taking flight on line 10  
I gasp at the giant sapphire ring on your ring finger  
perfect. you sigh blink a rainstorm gathering turning and turning the band a woman  
with crimson lips raises one eyebrow at me  
intimating my same questions did she pass away?  
  
do you still love them?  
  
are you thinking of leaving him?  
  
but you only see light and blue  
  
& I realize that life is this beautiful woman  
on a Wednesday train  
blind to how an entire world becomes  
mesmerized by faceted pain  
glinting in the light of the ordinary

### About The Author

Nicole Callräm (she/her/她) is a nomadic bureaucrat and disciple of existence in all her life-affirming and confusing manifestations. She adores rideshare bikes, red wine, and Osmanthus flowers (preferably a mix of the three...all at once). Nicole has been published in Full House Literary, Nude Studio, Kissing Dynamite, and Rat's Ass Review. You can find her on Twitter at @YiminNicole.

## Second Best Jewellery Box by Tracey Foster

Perched like a kingfisher on a broken stool  
a balancing act on 3 legs, one leg missing.  
Peering into a mirror as flat as a lake  
fixed in the contemplation of my complexion.

Constricted in the arms by too tight sleeves  
a Butterwick pattern with a rick rack neck.  
Hair pulled back by elastic and grips  
off-white socks cover purple patches.

My aunt's second-best jewellery box  
a treasure trove of cast-off delights.  
Paste broches sparkle and shimmer  
grown up clip-ons leave dents behind.

Millefiori beads like gobstopper sweets  
a thousand stars pressed into a barrel.  
Once used to ballast the hold before returning with live cargo  
now weighs down my neck with a coolness of touch.

Marcasite set rings that fracture the light  
fool's gold aping diamonds to mourn the dead.  
Dangling bunches of grapes taste musty and cold  
squash the flesh of my earlobe and pinch very tight.

Paisley paste necklace with a broken clasp  
interlocking teardrops imitate Cleopatra's hoard.  
All piled around my neck my jewels in the crown  
catching tints off the single lightbulb above.

## **About The Author**

Tracey Foster has been teacher of Art and Design for over 30 years. She took part in the Comma Press short story course in 2019 and had a short story published in a collection, Tales from Garden Street. She had a poem about Covid published by BusPoetry Magazine and has since commenced MA in Creative writing at Leicester University. She regularly writes book reviews in 'Everyones Reviewing.'



## Should Never Be Seen by Claire

### **Hemostasis**

My daughter has a scar on her forehead. She tripped and crashed, headfirst. The sharp edges were covered with corner guards: she wasn't the first. The words 'it could have been worse' were little comfort – we had other plans.

It was the first morning of a much-needed holiday. I wasn't prepared for the hospitals, for the babble of foreign words, for doing it all alone. I held her flailing arms down while doctors stitched her perfect skin, her desperate eyes staring up at me pleading, not understanding why I was assisting. Tears fell for each of the many things around her that I was too weak to put right.

Afterwards, told to avoid water and the playground, we built sandcastles and rebuilt our lives.

### **Inflammation**

Maybe I should have done more to support the healing. I tried, but exhaustion, then emptiness, took over. I neglected the wound, and then it became forever: each deep and ragged white line so visible, where once was flawless youth and innocence. I hoped she wouldn't hold it against me; I prayed she would understand.

### **Proliferation**

I imagined she would hide it behind hair or makeup, but she wore her hair tied back, only ever making up her eyes, her teenage skin still clear but for that one mark. When the questions began, I was honest but careful not to break her heart. I hid inside myself, covered in warpaint.

### **Remodelling**

'You're wearing those colours together? You look like a tomato!'

'I know, I look bright and fruity; fabulous, isn't it?'

A rhetorical question, she doesn't expect or want an answer, she thinks she looks fabulous; therefore, she does. She doesn't care for the 'shoulds' or 'should nots'. I can imagine her friend's face on the other side of the door: gobsmacked. But something else too: admiration. The way I feel each day. How did she grow up so confident?

#

'Mum, Dad's wife,' she pauses briefly.

'You can say her name, Ailith,' I laugh, finally at ease with the permanence of his other woman.

'She said she could get my scar lasered for me.'

'Well-'

'I know, what a cheek.'

'I'm sorry, love,' I say, stroking the point on her forehead that marks the change in our lives.

'I think it hurt you more than me, Mum. I remember your tears falling on my face. I remember thinking it must be bad if she's crying – you're the strongest person I know. Anyway, I told her to keep her money and asked Dad to get me a car instead – we can get the shopping easier then.'

My daughter has a scar on her forehead, proud for all to see; I have just realised, that is down to me.

## **About The Author**

Claire lives in Austria and escapes back to her mother tongue through her fiction writing. She has short stories published or upcoming in print and online at places including Funny Pearls, Fudoki Magazine, Blinkpot, Grindstone Literary and Reflex Fiction. She has been shortlisted and longlisted in various international competitions.

## Shringaar<sup>1</sup> by Shreya Khobragade

TW: Touches upon body image/beauty

When my mother told me to learn Bharatnatyam<sup>2</sup>, the only place I knew as well as home was the paediatrician's office. Surrounded by smiling lion stickers and the smell of disinfectant, a woman in a white coat would ask me if I had difficulties breathing that week. It was the first time I felt betrayed by my body. The second was when, during paediatrician-mandated exercise, I couldn't run two laps in tennis class without needing a break. The third time, I tripped while tumbling in gymnastics, and refused to go back. Dance was the last resort: it was either that or an inhaler all my life.

So it began. Twice a week, I went to a building that smelled like ghee to learn *bastas*—hand movements—from a teacher I don't remember now. I do, however, remember girls my age in class calling me 'The Statue', a reference to how I didn't move or talk. I envied how easily they could do both. My girlhood was nothing but an oppressive stillness.

On the other hand, my mother seemed to envy me. She'd been a sickly child too, getting injections every other week while her siblings went dance class. At least I got to do what she never did, she'd say, as she drove me home. I was later to learn that any good Tamil Brahmin girl had to be trained in either Carnatic music or Bharatnatyam. Because of where my father was from, I would never be Tamil or Brahmin enough, but I could get pretty damn close to good if I wore a white salwar and struck my feet on a wooden floor.

Mama was so ecstatic about me dancing that I never told her I only did it for her. Even when we moved two hours away and my lungs were fine, I agreed to find a new teacher. The first four years—the rhythmic chime of the teacher's *nattuvangam*, the half-sitting posture we'd get scolded for not having, the special braid Mama would put my hair in—passed by in a haze. For four annual exams, I was the only one in class with a mere passing grade.

When Fifth Year came around, we were to graduate from *nritta* to *abhinaya*, from simple movements to acting out stories as we danced. Our teacher sat us down in an enraptured semi-circle and told us about the nine *rasas*, how each one signified a different emotion, how we were expected to do justice to each one's depths. To

perform *Hasya* or laughter, we would play children giggling at someone who fell down. A make-believe intruder would induce *Bhayanaka* or fear, and an adversary on the battlefield *Raudra* or anger. She said this year would be special, and we should take it seriously. I refused to believe her.

The week after that lecture, we began with *Shringaara*. A quick Google search will tell you that it is the *rasa* of divine love and beauty. For that class, we were not lanky, awkward preteen girls—we were women of grace, holding our left hands up as mirrors, pretending to put on kohl and earrings with our right. We got to flit in imaginary gardens to weave imaginary flowers into our hair, waiting restlessly for an imaginary lover who would appreciate it all. There were small smiles, blushes, and looks of satisfied admiration at our hand mirrors: we were, by the end of this performance, worthy of desire.

It was the first year I got an A+ in the exam. I knew the need for beauty well enough by then—the fourth time I felt betrayed by my body, it was when a boy at school called me an ugly monkey. Every *Shringaara* performance was a reassurance. I began pulling front strands out of my braids, wearing the slightest hint of real kohl, asking Mama for tinted lip balm. Every Sunday, I'd wake up before my alarm, and come back humming what we'd danced to. The music sounded like “beauty is not out of your reach”.

I took the newfound enthusiasm as a love for Bharatnatyam—finally!—and declared that I wanted to be a dancer. When I made my stage debut, I'd practised for a whole year, and I danced for an hour with no interruption. I remember nothing about daily after-school rehearsal, the dizzying exhilaration of performance, or how much my parents had invested in it. All I can recollect are the outfits. The larger-than-life hair, with flowers hanging on by 50 bobby pins. My skin paling under foundation and bright red lips. The rich purple, pink, yellow silk sarees, flared out as I knelt. My first facial, waxing, bleaching—none of which I've done since.

When I told my parents I didn't want to dance anymore, I said the costume was too much effort to put on. They never argued. When I told them I wanted to learn jazz-funk instead, they paid my fees and came to my shows and applauded when they saw me dance to Britney Spears.

The days of pretend hand mirrors are long gone, and I joke that my body isn't built for them anymore. I think of how I've learnt to arch my back, tilt my neck up, and pose like I'm in a music video. How I perform best in a tight crop top and loose pants,

because just enough of me is visible to feel sexy. How every time I think something's missing from my dancing, I put lipstick on and let my hair loose, and I'm suddenly doing ten times better. I know enough about love and beauty to love myself only when I'm beautiful. *Shringaar* dances around me, both to haunt and to comfort, a choreography I slip into. I come out bruised and dive right back.

<sup>1</sup>Sanskrit term, means “decoration” or “adornment”

<sup>2</sup>An Indian classical dance form that originated in Tamil Nadu

### **About The Author**

Shreya Khobragade is a second-year student of English and Creative Writing at Ashoka University, India.

## Silver Thread Snapshots by J. Rohr

TW: Implications of abusive upbringing, no outright descriptions

Cracks along the walls suggested centuries, but only witless eyes believed. The gullible desperately sticking the blame for decay on decades rather than three years neglect. Granted, paint chips and plaster exaggerated the ruin. Solid wood still stood, though a sense of the place being shattered permeated any passing impression.

A shockwave must have ripped through the rooms. This couldn't be the natural wreckage passing through time. Otherwise, the question of how flesh endures possesses a terrible answer. Better to suppose psychic torment burst from a mind on the brink of nuclear explosion; or consider the concussive force of a military device unleashed on the small house; anything except evidence of neglect.

But truth stood evident in the obvious state of the place: no one lived here anymore. The little house abandoned to the erosion existence inflicts. Zero occupants to repair simple faults which blossomed into necrosis. One room's rot spreading to another; decay eating the past in the process.

Pencil marks on the wall noting the growth of children lost to water stains from a weeping roof. Cracks in the drywall hiding where angry fists proved a cycle had reached repetition. Ceiling plaster shed onto the floor, covering scuffs where a fire poker struck hardwood instead of a skull. Buried under fallen drywall, the dark stain showing a second swing didn't miss. Burn marks in the basement blending with mold into shapes reminiscent of ghost stories. Dust everywhere hiding the presence of ashes.

Whatever restorative medicine handywork could apply sternly refused. Already inclined to hospice, never mind medical procedures involving hammer, paint, and nails—the hospital work of handy-people meant nothing now. Doomed, not by destiny but by desertion, the house was left to die.

Yet, even as the place trudged towards collapse a presence lingered. A specter who never really left sometimes manifested on the property. Anchored here by the past, it circled back now and again. Riding rocket skates through empty halls, starry eyes explored recollections. Shit memories growing mushrooms, not all edible but delicious enough to always risk consumption.

The second inside gooseflesh pimpled skin with Braille saying, “Stay away.” Ignoring the warning—through the maw of a broken door. Clad in black as if the shadows won’t know the alien in their midst. Wicked tattoos helped hide the shuddering child within inked skin. Though not in the dark where all cats are grey.

Skeletons in the closets sing of falling sconces. Creaking floorboards whisper of descending hammers. The remains of broken lamps tell of ragdolls thrown across rooms. Meanwhile, the shuddering child whimpers at every implication until finding glittering gems.

Little better than stick figures, crayon cave paintings on a bedroom wall. Though a bit worse for wear, they’ve never stopped dancing. Take a picture—flash of light harvesting decayed beauty. In the remains of the kitchen, see signs of mother in yellow wallpaper. Snapshots catch another pretty piece of the past. Something to callback baking cookies, and a velveteen voice reading soothing stories.

Here a thousand times before but the joy only seen in a certain second. It’s all a matter of the light really. Today, sunset shades warm an otherwise clichéd horror show. Instead of the ugly around the fur, where the soft stops and turns to dead skin, the beauty shines through.

However, despite the glittering gems gathered, there’s only so long a body can linger in the depths of such a mine. So, quick return to the car with a treasure chest full of images. Poured into a transparent tower as ones and zeros, digital photos soon find themselves reborn as tangible prints.

Considering each, the photographer regards filler for a square mold. First the resin, but into it then an assortment of trinkets to highlight the picture. Tiny plastic notes from Chinatown giving the crayon dancers some semblance of music. Charm bracelet pieces reminiscent of pastries help the yellow wallpaper imply baking with mother. Into both frames, shreds of crinkly plastic which any touch of light turns to shimmering rainbow shards. For a touch of solidity, bits of wood from the decaying house. Tools retouch those bones into solid framework, and when the resin is hard enough, it all holds the images.

Then onto the wall. Eventually the photos’ clones would go to the art gallery. Bought to add interest to otherwise empty walls, they’d become whatever their buyers believed. Images offering details beyond words. After all, there’s more to the world

than vocabulary can illuminate. Only the first two, always on the photographer's wall, would remain one thing: proof positive—silver threads can strangle nightmares.

### **About The Author**

J. Rohr is a Chicago native with a taste for history and wandering the city at odd hours. In order to deal with life's more corrosive aspects he makes music in the band Beerfinger and writes articles for Horror Obsessive and 25YL Media. His Twitter babble can be found @JackBlankHSH.



## Sister Sonnet 1 by Cosima Smith

TW: Water/swimming, crying, insects

I hold the paper underneath my chin / as a sister traces my taut top lip / with a pair of  
hair scissors. Silver / shines, but my eyes are closed: scared of a slip / of the only hands I  
really trust to / cut crisp into me an artful kinship. / Teach me to see myself in the  
mirror / with love. Create me a discipleship: / Each meeting of the blades to free me:  
some / gnarled voice that sings from bow of sunken ship.

/

/

The moon hangs high and full and uneclipsed.

We sit side by side by side painting nails. / I cry so sweet the water lets me float.

21.11.19//22.1.30

### About The Author

Cosima Smith is a creative exploring life through writing, visual art, and body work. As a rural queer with city experience, they once considered themselves a polyglot but language unused is language lost. Find them hiking, doing yoga, or trying to understand and be understood.

## **The Ancestral Hall of Languages by Booi Carlyn**

When we left the land where the gods spoke our language, we thought we would return. We slipped our language in the crook under our tongues for safekeeping as we swam away from the coast. As we swam further and further, we acquired the languages of the gods of the new lands on the tips of our tongues. We were secured in the knowledge that the old language was always underneath, nestled safely. But the old language was not content with the gloomy cave it had to take refuge in. It threatened to escape at the most inopportune times- in times of concaving anger, flattening sadness and expanding joy.

When we brought forth new life to new lands, we released the old language to the young ones. We were delighted when we found that they could hold two languages on their tongues at once. They conversed with the old gods and the new gods with equal ease, sometimes all at once. They spoke to the new gods in ways we never could, of things we never had and that is why they were able to keep swimming, further and further.

As they swam further and further, the space underneath their tongues overflowed with the old languages while the new languages washed in with the seismic waves of their lives. The tremors were felt all the way over here - the shores from which they swam a long time ago.

Hold on! we said to the old languages. But the old languages could not hold on. The interference was far too strong. The old languages, which might have formed roots of the young ones, was not to be. And so, they were rooted out from within and voided, further and further into the ancestral hall of languages.

Dari sini kami berseru  
*It is from here that we speak to them*

Dengan kata-kata dari bayangan  
*With words that they no longer can imagine*

Hari ini hari yang mulia  
*But it is a fortunate day*

Karna dewan ini telah dilengkapi  
*For the ancestral hall of languages*

Dengan sarikata  
*Provides subtitles.*

### **About The Author**

Booi Carlyn writes from the confluence of cultures that is Kuala Lumpur. She hopes to harness the chaotic energy of her wonderfully frustrating city to generate stories. Her short stories have been published in Ricepaper Magazine and Touchstone Literary Magazine. She was nominated for the Best of the Net 2021.

## The Collection of Memories by Anup Adriym

CW: Death

Every breath was a reminder of the silhouettes of memories that clung to me like the sonorous sounds of temple bells whose reverberation refuses to leave and envelops everything in the vicinity.

People, interactions, things—what else? People come, stay, and leave.

Interactions are like abstractions that keep replaying to fine tune themselves—why did it happen that way... If only it were different... adjusting words, sentences, situations, expecting non-existent responses.

But things? I can have them, possess them. Possession gave me a sense of the truth of my existence.

The nose stud was a prized possession. My mother never allowed me to pierce my nose, but relented when I passed college and even gifted me a nose stud. It was small in size, but a victory, a coming of age, a recognition of my freedom, my body, my decisions. It was small, shaped like a little flower. The meenakari colors infused life into that little piece of gold, and that flower exuded the freshness of bloom. Always. Looking at it, adoring my nose always filled me with optimism.

And how can I forget those earrings? Those were made by remelting my mother's old jewelry. It was a few months after she gifted me the nose stud. By this time, I'd started to work. One evening when I returned home from the office, she placed those shining chandelier design earrings in front of me. I was shocked. Where did you get the money to buy this? I asked. Then she told me about the old pieces that she gave to the jeweler who took only the making charges. She said she was preparing for my marriage. Marriage? I laughed. Who's interested in marriage? Tears rolled from my eyes. What's the need for all these? I protested.

Working in a dream company was the icing on the cake of years of education. I felt as if I got wings and was flying to conquer the world.

At work, I met this handsome guy— at least I found him handsome. He was shy, didn't talk much, except the usual greeting. What drew me to him was his silence and his smile. That smile was something to die for... maybe, I should say... live for.

We started to date. It was bound to happen. In fact, I was the first one to ask him out on a coffee date, in the cafe near the office corner. And we hardly spoke! Our conversation of silence had more powerful bonds than if we had spent time chatting. We understood each other. Over the weeks we opened up, but speaking was never the priority, it was just the presence, the awareness of being together, of holding hands.

Maybe it was my mother's prayers, or a matter of destiny. One evening when office was over and we were still at the staircase landing, and there was no one around, he went down on his knees and took out a little box from his pocket. The choice of the setting where he proposed made me cackle with laughter. He got up quickly, held my hands and as we came out from the building, whispered "Marry me."

It makes me sad that now, I don't have the ring in my possession. I've searched for it a lot, sometimes spending hours trying to get a glimpse of it.

But whatever, it was a few more months and we got married. It was a small ceremony— whatever we could afford, with a little circle of relatives and few friends.

There are so many memories of marriage —the bright sarees, the designs of the zari works that gave a sparkle to the shine of the silk, the aroma of food, and the tastes of various sweets.

One important part of the marriage was the mangal-sutra, the thread of celestial bond between two souls. And this one had a pendant with an image of us together.

I happened to find this after so many years that I was overcome with emotions. I was holding it, and had just opened the pendant to see that image.

Our happiness of marriage did not last. A few months after marriage, one evening, when it was late and we were walking through a dark stretch, I felt a sharp, heavy thud on my head. As if a thousand Suns shone their brightness in my eyes, and then, with intense pain, the brightness receded to darkness. It was so sudden.

"See that hawk on the wall..." Someone shouted.

Yes, they could easily spot me perched on the wall with the mangal-sutra necklace. Before anyone could come near me, I clutched the necklace in my claw tightly and flew away. No one could stop me this time. No one could snatch away my memories, my things.

I saw a hawk follow me, and I dodged it on the flight.

I flew high, till those people were forgettable dots on the earth. I soared high in happiness. I could overlook the regrets and just be happy. Sometimes, we need to forget the bad memories and remember just the good ones. I flew until I reached my nest on the tall tree by the river.

There lay my little collection of the nose-stud, and ear-rings secured under a layer of hay and twigs. And now the mangal-sutra joined them.

That hawk seemed to have found me and was hovering over the tree. I was ready. I could fight for my memories, for my possessions. It flew down and sat on the other end of a long branch of the tree. It removed something from its claw, held it in its beak, and then slowly came near and laid down whatever it was, then it took a few steps back and waited.

The hawk didn't look threatening, and I went near to see the thing. It was the same finger-ring. I could feel it was him. We had found each other.

### **About The Author**

Anup Adriym is a Fantasy and Speculative Fiction writer. He likes to write stories that are entertaining as well as thought provoking. You can follow him @AnupOnTheNet.

## The Green Bench by Tejaswinee Roychowdhury

I'm here for the funeral of the green bench. *The* green bench who used to sit by the Hooghly. To someone who has never struck up an affair with this side of my city, she must mean nothing; just another generic green bench amongst a sea of green benches by a river flowing through the plains of Bengal.

Picture it: two branches carved out of wood. Sounds paradoxical, doesn't it? Yet there is not much the universe offers without lyrical riddles inscribed in all things, dead or alive. What is so unsullied about all things alive anyway? Once, they were all dead. And funerals are but rituals to reawaken them.

Four planks in twos, sandpapered at the edges and the corners. They sit, nailed to the wide-mouthed two-legged and bent over Y's — the branches carved out of wood. Two planks to sit on, two planks to lean on. Then the woodworker emptied a bucket of green, the fern kind, on her — the green bench — and other green benches; sisters in design.

I was twice bitten in her bosom: once by a fire ant; once by love. Others have stories too — friendships made, lovers betrayed; moneys earned, lessons learned. All because the green bench sat in a banyan shade and bestowed upon her tribe the *crème de la crème* riverscape. I wonder if her sisters were ever jealous, wasting away as options. Nobody likes being an option. Not us, not green benches.

She will be replaced by one just like her. But the new green bench won't have the chipped paint from time's reign, the scritch-scratch from squirrel nails, and the initials of fools etched into her framework. She will be a green bench, but she won't be *the* green bench; not without the banyan shade lifting her to glory.

Banyan shade from the banyan tree: home to squirrels with trust issues, perennially angry mynas, and smelly fruit bats. It is almost poetic; the green bench being delivered to death by the very banyan tree that protected her from the wrath of the summer sun and the curse of the monsoon rain.

Unintentional, of course. One can tell by the twisted leaf stems and the tiny splintered branches that he fought. He fought the savage cyclone with all his might. He fought like a warrior. But sometimes warriors do not survive *rakshasas*. Sometimes, he

uproots and crashes into the princess he swore to protect. And they reunite on the other side.

This funeral isn't the traditional kind with tuberose garlands and sandalwood incense sticks. There are no teary friends, no scurrying for priests, no fragments of gold, and no slathering of ghee. It is mostly rumbling wood chippers and caterwauling chainsaws amidst the crisp scent of tree sap. And perhaps, a few wistful goodbyes from the other green benches.

### **About The Author**

Tejaswinee Roychowdhury is an Indian writer and lawyer. Her words are published/forthcoming in Roi Fainéant Press, Gutslut Press, Bullshit Lit, Storyteller's Refrain, The Birdseed, Third Lane, Kitaab, Borderless Journal, Active Muse, Funny Pearls, and elsewhere. She has also been featured and interviewed in Issue 2 of Alphabet Box.



## The Tyranny of Beige by Alex Ashley Fox

The walls of America are always painted beige. Whether in raucous hospitals, anonymous hotels, or quiet, striving homes, we Americans do our work of living surrounded by the silence of this non-color, this tone emptied of meaning. What can we be, in places so vacant of spirit, so empty, so unadorned? We can be like each other, or like the colors we spy in the background of the TV, so often our only window to the world outside our mute and featureless prison walls, these private oubliettes of the soul.

Beige is a color so faceless, so elusive, even its own color swatches cannot nail it down. It comes in a thousand barely-distinct hues, like a thousand broken piano keys with no hammers hitting home, only the disappointing clack of key against wooden frame. Walk the halls of your local home improvement store (itself a peculiarly American institution) and you'll find it papered with many-hued beige paint chips bearing not even halfway clever names: the wanderlust of Dusty Trail, the misleading Crushed Silk, the prescriptive Agreeable Gray. It's a color best described with words ending in "-ish": grayish, yellowish, whiteish, brownish. It has no fixed address, no point of contact, no door you can pound upon to demand the answers you so richly deserve. Beige is a smooth, featureless wall. No entry is permitted here.

Beige is not really a color. It's an assignment of neutrality. It's a space to fill, a first draft to be overwritten, a blank stare in place of the response you were promised. It is a personality emptied of personality, a hole that leaves no void, a light that illuminates nothing. It is infirm of purpose, one of the sleeping dead without even a picture to mark its place. It is the absence of nothing, but little else, a contradiction in terms. It is the color of no color, the voice of no voice, somehow deafeningly clamoring for all its professional distance, all its untouchable intimacy.

It surrounds us, each and every day, slim against our minds like a dagger, like a dream. It stalks us through the avenues, through the offices, out into the starry skies. Our lives are papered beige, not just our walls. It is a clinging color, one we cannot escape. It is, in essence, us. Beige is accepting no visitors. Beige is taking no calls.

And these last years we have all spent locked away from each other, isolated for our health, we have spent more time soaked in beige than should be safe. We are starting to feel the deadening effects, the poison it slowly imparts. It leeches from us our spirits,

our souls. It steals what we hope to maintain. And in return, it grants us nothing, no escape. It simply stares, and waits. Beige, we fear, is our fate.

### **About The Author**

Alex Ashley Fox is a neurodivergent writer living in LA making poetry and prose about how our brains let us down.

## **The Yarn That Had Come Loose by Kasturi**

We, the Cavaco's have this strange tradition. And by strange, I mean unorthodox and immensely creative. A death in the family means the ladies coming together to stitch a shroud - the last gift, an adornment for the departed soul. But this is no ordinary burial attire. It is made whole with gifted pieces of fabric from every other member of the household. Each piece embraces the kin's sentiments towards the dead. This is a major coping mechanism; bidding goodbye and finding closure.

When my cousin Sasha left us, my mother and her sisters stayed up all night to bring her shroud to life. In total, twenty pieces of fabric were used- some brightly coloured, some not so much, sequined, dyed and self-printed. Kuki had even hand-painted her piece, while George had her's bejewelled. As a kid, I remember wishing for a similar one when it would be my turn to die.

It's been years since her death, yet the mention of her name surges mixed emotions in everyone's heart. The clothes my aunt keeps locked inside the wardrobe have long since lost the lingering scents of her flesh. The sweater she had worn as a teenager, the green polka-dotted frock she loved, the Tom and Jerry t-shirt - are ceremoniously aired every cleaning season but smelled more often. Old birthday cards and handwritten letters were framed and hung in her room. The desperate need for a change in decor was evident, yet emotion condescended logic.

Last Saturday was Sasha's birthday. Like every year, her room was thoroughly cleaned - the curtains changed, floors and rugs vacuumed and bed freshly made. But this year, something felt different. By the end of the day, revelation knocked on the door and proclaimed itself in full glory. While cleaning, my aunt had discovered that one of Sasha's sweaters had a loose piece of yarn. In her desperation to mend it, she had invited in a disastrous effect; the sweater came undone and was left as a ball of wool.

"Blue was her favourite colour. I had it made especially for her. Now it's all ruined. Just like her, this sweater had a short life."

Humans are attached to non-living things, if not materialistic then emotional. My aunt wore the expression of someone who had experienced loss all over again. Noticing the pang of sorrow hit her baby sister, my mother smiled at her lovingly and said, "Vala, remember the shroud we made for our Sasha?"

“I do, irmã. Your piece was the most prominent amongst them all, white.” “And do you know why I chose that colour?”

“Well, was it not because it was Sasha's favourite colour?”

“Well, partly but also because it represented our Sasha in essence. The seven colours of the rainbow mixed together gives us white. Sasha was a rainbow. And rainbows are a beauty that aren't meant to last. They will be born again and bring joy to people's lives everywhere. And that is what Sasha was and always will be.”

My aunt's hollowed-out tired eyes gazed past me and her trembling lips remained sealed. Someone had screwed open the sluice gate within, tears streamed down tia's face as she gripped the ball of wool and bawled her soul out. In a way to pacify her broken heart, the words oozed out even before I could enunciate, “Tia Vala, you're taking it the wrong way. It has served its purpose. Why not give the yarn a new meaning, a new form?”

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Today is her twenty-first death anniversary. The entire family is huddled by the fireplace, sipping hot chocolate and recalling fond memories of Sasha. Tia Vala has been receiving many compliments for her looks, going around adorning her new blue and white scarf with the widest of smiles.

Yes, we celebrate our dead, but despite the warm atmosphere, one could easily note that it is hardly the most joyous family gathering when it comes to Sasha. However, maybe soon time will ease our hearts and we will be able to truly let the ache soothe down. This year, my aunt had taken a part of her daughter and merged it with her own. Smiling seemed a bit easier for her now. Humans are attached to non-living things, if not materialistic then emotional; and at times this attachment heals.

## **About The Author**

Kasturi is a blogger who lends her voice as a creative and content writer on multi-professional websites.

## Things I Inherit From My Mother by Annie Marhefka

When I birth our child, my husband gifts me a pair of small crystalline studs set in a subtle 14-karat gold backing, which I love because they are the opposite of what my mother would have worn. He knows that I prefer simple accessories, dainty, intimate, modest; but we never talk about why.

If I coveted delicate strands with charming pendants and thin watches with plain faces, it was because my mother wore heavy links and a watch made of braided black ropes encrusted with an overabundance of tiny diamonds. She obsessed over elaborate baubles, sparkling with opulent gems and dazzling chains.

She mostly preferred emeralds, which made me grit my teeth, a tense grinding of molars hidden behind upturned lips, because it was my birthstone, not hers. I wasn't angry because I was jealous though; I was angry because she loved to talk about how she was collecting all this jewellery so that she could bequeath it to me upon her death. She often made a scene in the jewellery store, making a point of checking with me to ensure I approved of her newest selection, proclaiming to the salesperson behind the glass counter, "this will all be hers one day," with a flick of a wrist in my direction. She made it clear that she was building this treasure trove of opulence for after she was gone, and all I wanted her to do was focus on just being here now.

My father and I obliged her cravings: the dangling amethyst earrings for her birthday that fell almost to her petite shoulders, the opal tennis bracelet for Christmas that was custom fit to her tiny wrist, a rare black pearl pendant on Mother's Day.

And Mother's Day was always the worst, because it was always the same week as my birthday, so we shared the celebration. She would dangle her latest treasure at eye level, beam as she told me that although it was hers now, it would one day be mine, so it was my birthday gift, too. But I only ever wanted the newest Barbie doll, or the fancy embossed copy of Little Women I had asked for, or her attention.

She wasn't extravagant in other parts of life, just with the jewelry. The car she drove

was a standard, beige sedan, our house was always under repair, our vacations were simple road trips. I never knew what it was that motivated her—the allure of donning the shiny ornaments, the fact that she grew up with nothing, often shoplifting her clothing from the Salvation Army, the illusion that we were better off than we were? Or perhaps the jewelry was the opposite of what her mother would have liked, and that was reason enough.

Then my brother died, and without warning, she cast aside the diamonds and rubies and my emeralds and replaced them with a simple silver locket with his name and date of death engraved on the front, his picture captured within. The jewels were stowed away into pretty carved boxes and velvet bags, to await their passage from mother to daughter.

It was that way for the rest of her years; she joked that the locket resting on her chest was her way of wearing her heart on her sleeve, but it wasn't funny, not to me. I thought it was morbid, tacky even, to start every encounter with his death date emblazoned across her chest as if his loss had branded her, burnt into her flesh, and her being. I missed him too, but I told her I didn't want my grief to define me, define her. Newcomers to her presence would say, "oh what's on your locket," and she would respond, "he was my son." Meaning: I am grieving, I am without him, I am a childless mother.

I pleaded with her to swap the locket out for another pendant, or perhaps tuck it in, hide it under a flowy blouse. She never would; the necklace never left its residence around her neck until the day we sent her body off for cremation, carefully unfastening it, for she wouldn't have wanted it to burn.

And now, all I have left of her is this painted jewellery box filled with traces of her, and I can't bring myself to wear them. There is only one that leaves the box, one simple ring that I had gifted to her one Mother's Day in my youth. I wear it on my right hand, my ring finger the exact same size as hers had been. I wear it while I sleep, when I swim in the ocean, and when I travel. I refuse to remove it, even when my hands have swelled during pregnancy and the gold band cuts into my circulation, even during the agony of labor, even during the birth of my own daughter.

It is a simple gold band, its tiny prongs snugly gripping an oval-shaped onyx gemstone. Atop the black stone, a simple word is overlaid in gold script: *Mom*.

I allow her to be my first encounter with others, let her define me, let her brand me. Strangers will comment, "what a beautiful ring," and I respond, "it was my mother's." Key word: *was*. I am without her. I am motherless.

### **About The Author**

Annie Marhefka is a writer in Baltimore, Maryland, where she spends her time writing, boating on the Chesapeake Bay, and hiking with her kiddos. You can find Annie's writing on Instagram @anniemarhefka, Twitter @charmcityannie, and at [anniemarhefka.com](http://anniemarhefka.com).

## **This is How We Care by Halle**

Hands intertwined,  
words imprinted on skin  
like sleeping on an uneven mattress,  
the patterns of the sheet fabric  
dancing within your arms  
that you'll find  
when you wake,  
wondering how they got there  
only to realize  
our pasts and  
words and  
care  
follow us like obedient dogs.

### **About The Author**

Halle (she/her) enjoys writing short stories and poetry and gets her ideas from random life experiences. When she's not writing, she's either watching YouTube or playing Animal Crossing. Her Twitter handle is @YaTheatreNerd You can check out more of her work [here](#).



## Uninhabitable by Rachel

to the uninhabitable  
skin scorching desert  
body crumbling mountain range  
climbed, excavated, marked as conquest  
I don't know how to nurse landmine back to health  
without getting caught in it.  
I am used to crashing waves  
to full lungs & dried salt spilling from my body for days,  
but it is never enough to float upon.  
to the conflict  
a body split right down the middle  
not quite down the middle  
haven't learned how to make the pieces fit, yet.  
but I am still whole  
maybe mangled  
maybe the side of the mountain left untouched  
not perfect, still holy, loved even without footprints.  
to the body unsure  
every great discovery began with a question mark  
most of them ending with peace or not ending, yet.  
to the body uninhabitable  
this is not true  
you just need a more forgiving climate  
to the seeds that will grow  
tall, protecting, dripping the red  
of ripe fruit  
this is the sweet ending that you were promised  
but it is not fully grown, yet.  
be patient  
you & the land are not going anywhere

## **About The Author**

Rachel is a 21-year-old student and poet who writes and learns in the pursuit of justice. Her identities as queer / jewish / chronically ill inform her work and drive her to seek out, or create, a more whole world.

## what you got there by Casey Law

I tuck the pendant with six points and ten sides, under my crochet sweater, I  
Had sworn to never let the silver chain leave my skin  
And I keep my promises.  
Hiding away in the soft fabric lay a star ashamed, and  
Me afraid,  
to dishonor it.

I let the passengers pass, and  
Receive a vast glance from the officer  
Who most definitely, due  
To the obvious tuck-away, knew  
I was hiding something...

He waltzes to my seat on the vacant bus,  
Plants himself beside me, I  
Watch his body language shift towards me, lay  
Down his hands quite awkwardly  
His knees now see,  
My own  
Only the thin sides of my chain had shown

He indicates towards my shirt  
"What you got there"  
I put a stop to my blinking  
Keep fixated on the ground  
Lift my arms, allowing him to pat me down  
After his hands search my sides,  
And the only thing he finds  
Two blue patterned tampons in my pockets  
His face glows red  
His eyeballs wide in their sockets  
And I receive the sincerest of apologies.

I look around, admiring the loose and free crosses  
Hung so proudly from passengers necks  
Laughing my shame and tears away  
None of their identities turned them to recks  
Yet here I am.

My eyes glassy, a guilty nausea rising deep in my core  
lift my chain, cleaning the small gems with precision  
Ignore the streams from my eyes, the pointless cries for,  
The only thing that I was hiding was my religion

I know not to do that anymore.

### **About The Author**

Casey Law is a 15-year-old queer, neurodivergent, female, and Jewish poet who was born and currently resides in New Jersey. She has published a teenage mental health poetry book and her work has been published in [Brownbag.online](http://Brownbag.online) and [cultofclio.com](http://cultofclio.com). She has upcoming work in [poetrynation.com](http://poetrynation.com) @writenowlit @bullshitmag @gencontrolz @\_intersections @deaths\_dormant and @inertiateens. She is on Twitter: @cjlaureate:

## Wheel Upon The Stairs by R. M. Phyllis

“She’s going to lose the house,” I said,  
“My granddad did up that house:  
“The back door is the original front door,  
“The stained-glass ships in the window are handmade,  
“The wood panelling came from his boat,  
“So did the wheel on the turn of the stairs.  
“We’re gonna lose everything.”

I said this like I don’t have his watch,  
His poetry books,  
The lantern he was too sick to open,  
The letters he sent me, each signed with  
His signature.

But the house wasn’t mine, it was ours.  
It was where we grew up,  
Counting the stairs,  
Navigating early life with a map of his stories,  
Reciting poetry and always mixing up at least two of the lines.

And houses cost money –  
Don’t I know it.  
South bound alone  
To grow.

I realise I don’t want the house, it’s too big for me alone.  
But a builder wouldn’t know that the back door was the original front door.  
Wouldn’t keep the Henry Wadsworth plaque that’s black with mould but matches the  
pattern in the  
window when you clean it.  
Wouldn’t know that the panelling and the ship’s wheel mounted on the wall came  
from the same  
boat.

Maybe the wheel would stay.  
Maybe it’s too big and cumbersome to take down, and it’d leave a hole in the wall too

big and  
cumbersome to fill.  
Maybe they'll leave it to match the pattern in the window.  
Maybe a new generation of kids, a family I won't meet, will grow up under her wise  
stare.  
They won't know that the man who put it there used it to steer his real boat.  
Maybe it's okay to let them dream about it. It never felt real to us either, this old man  
with his  
poetry books used to battle the weather on open water.  
I pick through the letters kept in a biscuit tin until I find one where his signature is  
clear,  
Each letter perfect.  
I consider doing this by the light of his lantern,  
But decide this little lantern is as much use as a ship's wheel mounted to a brick wall.  
We brace against the cold northern wind of growing up,  
Our faces in lantern light that is fading with old memories  
Aware that soon we will have to let go.  
Thy comings and thy goings be upon the bosom of life's sea.

### **About The Author**

R. M. Phyllis (she/her) is a reading glut who procrastinates reading by writing and writing by reading. No book finds the DNF pile on her shelf, much to her own frustration.

## Whitman's Grandson. By Bupinder Singh

I first met Walt Whitman in his Leaves of Grass, though I had known him for quite a while. My grandfather quoted him a lot, translating him to our mother tongue, Pahari, a dialect of Punjabi usually spoken by the hill people in Northern India.

At 82, he used to read without any spectacles, walk faster than me, while his agetates leaned heavily on the cane. As children, we called him *tough-papa*, for he used to do everything with his bare hands. While my parents used a pestle, he would break a walnut by smashing his fist on it. He once pulled out iron nails from the old cupboard with his fingers. And in his clothing and styling, there was a unique blandness, he wore white kurta-pyjamas, properly creased, a turban dipped in starch to impart a crispness, and a black leather shoe—jutti.

His tone was harsh, yet to me, it was always mesmerizing, for he told me things which were incomprehensible yet funny. I credited that to him being uneducated.

*'Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes'* It was quite funny when he spoke it in Pahari.

Only when I grew up, when I gained enough education, I was able to find meaning in his dumb, funny lines.

He had this tattered 1892 copy of Leaves of Grass, sans cover, yellowed over the time, swollen with moisture, kept on his window pane. He was not a learned man, neither an educated one. He had merely done five years of formal education for the nearest middle school was three hours from his home.

He knew English, for he served food to some of the finest Englishmen in Gulmarg, Kashmir. When the white left, they left Whitman to him; that's how he came into possession of this book. He picked up his English, his book, and other possessions when in 1947's gory Partition, the hotel he worked in was razed in arson.

He was severely ill before his death, and he was giving away all his belongings to his three sons, the bigger apple orchard to the eldest, two paddy fields and four trees of walnut to the other, and to my father, who was the youngest he left the smaller apple orchard and a cherry garden which had three trees of walnut.

I was fifteen years old when he died. To me, he said, *'For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you'* and then handed over the Whitman.

In two years preceding his death, he was a part delusional part philosopher. When he took to bed due to his illness, I kept him company after school. I moved to his bedroom, for someone needed to keep an eye on him.

I was reading the Indian Partition for my school essay when I asked him about his experience. He was a first-hand source—a survivor.

He would narrate to me stories from his childhood, his struggle to establish himself as a big farmer from a mere waiter at a hotel, his ambitious dream of educating his children, breaking them into non-linear-timelines, and then all of a sudden forgetting what he was telling. His memory had grown weak, his narration pale and his sorrows grey.

He had marked the book at several places; after every story, he would tell me to do something for him in return—read a passage from the book.

When he told me how he came to settle at this place, he told me to read a specific passage that echoed his story.

*And whence and why come you?*

*We know not whence, (was the answer,)*

*We only know that we drift here with the rest,*

*That we linger'd and lagg'd—but were wafted at last, and now here,*

*To make the passing shower's concluding drops.*

At places, the text of the book had faded into oblivion. When I read it and didn't know what came next, he would recite it from his memory. He who had forgotten the names of relatives, the faces of his cousins, he who was delusional for the world was a philosopher to me.

After his death, Whitman became my grandfather. He consoled me. He echoed my sorrows. He told me not to lose myself in grief and gave me hope.

*Nothing is ever really lost, or can be lost,*

*No birth, identity, form—no object of the world, .....*

*... .. Ample are time and space—ample the fields of nature.*



To this day, Whitman sits on my windowpane, and I go to him every now and then—sometimes to validate an experience, sometimes to remember my grandfather and sometimes to find hope in the dark times.

### **About The Author**

Bupinder Singh is an educator based in Kashmir, India. He teaches English to high school students. He also works as an Associate Editor for The Universe Journal and as a Reader for The Masters Review. His works have been published in The Week, The Delacorte Review, Non-Binary Review, The Antihumanist, Sirius Editorial and several others. He is currently working on his first novel. He can be reached at Twitter on @fidoic.

## Wonderland (For Viola) by Sally Toner

I am the beginning and the end of time.  
Shoji slides between this world and  
the next. I, the good daughter, steal your  
breath as my birth water kisses stone over  
stone over stone.

My rocks are skin not sand,  
flesh and blue, cracked and smooth.  
Today's sun feathers behind the pines,  
and I know the earth tilts, and the days are as  
tiny as you feel standing on my shore.

But for now, twilight is eternal, and I,  
the good daughter, show you starfish,  
five limbed roses dancing just beyond  
your toes. I help you save a crab, barnacle  
clad, slow your breath to match the moon.

It's a baptism blessing a carpet of mussels you wouldn't  
dream of eating. In your haunted state, I tour you  
through this haunted place. I help you keep your  
balance. Cast your eyes to the sky, and we'll learn  
the language of silence.

I, the good daughter, tutor you to fluency with  
alien life predating us both. I paint my shore, so  
beautiful it hurts, in every corner of your  
mind that grows like land when  
the ocean recedes.  
Flesh and blue, cracked and smooth, stone over  
stone over stone. In that breath where night arrives

and you take fright—take my hand instead.  
I will leave a sliver of sun to guide you to the  
corner of your heart. I'll whisper promises of salt.

Tomorrow's sun will feather up on Wonderland—  
again and again and again.

### **About The Author**

Sally Toner is a High School English teacher who has lived in the Washington, D.C. area for over 25 years. Her work has appeared in Northern Virginia Magazine, Gargoyle Magazine, Watershed Review, and other publications. She lives in Reston, Virginia with her husband and two daughters.

## Yarns, fabrics and covers by Garima Mishra

The needle passes through the cloth-once, thrice until eight petals are formed around an orange-red pistil, encasing it completely. My mom sells them for four hundred bucks. I want to buy one, but they are all scattered around me. I have slept on such fabrics. We call them *pillow covers*. They came into existence when my mom was new to the craft. Now we use them as *covers only*, to cover the bed, shelves, old photographs, and our old bodies lurking within the new ones. My mom wraps her wet hair with a fabric. The rolled-up cover is a canvas for *the bird and her huge eggs*. My mom's hair has turned grey. I have developed breasts. I see myself floating within those eggs, drenched in the yellow yolk, glowing and curdling in the sunshine. I hatch very often. She lubricates the sewing machine with some oil. The smell of clothes has changed a lot through these years. We wrap ourselves in the worn-out threads and smell like cold kerosene. Now the customers pay five hundred bucks and their hands and wallets smell like repellants. I add the prices, I count changes even when there's no reason for me to go back.

Once, I found some woollen socks. I used to wear them during my childhood days. We have his muffler and mom's wedding photographs. He might have a beard, purple lips, yellow canines, a speckled chin, a hefty body. These are my comprehensive understandings of my father. There's a big wedding ring on mom's hand. It's on her finger, completely covering a part of her skin. It has seen her twisting the yarn, sewing buttons, cocooning my infant body with an entire ball of woollen yarn. *My father is alive*, somewhere, even if not on the big rhinestone. But my mom didn't want to stay with my father. We changed the house. She had knitted a pair of gloves. I see a big antique clock patch worked on it, it says nine o'clock. It's random, *something not meant to show the time*. My mom twists her hair and pushes the strands into a bun. I see her scalps with brown lesions. Something similar to rancid machine oil, a slag iron, a blister, a big patch on my left hand. On the gloves, there are some black hairs. It must have been when they were together.

When I talk about my mom's ordeal with relationships, our relatives tell me that she must have had an affair. I remember my mom moving a pointed needle through a rayon cloth in the shape of a circle. She created a sparrow inside it with a brown body. It wasn't alluring enough to be articulated on a piece of cloth. It had a sharp beak, to feed her children, I suppose. I have also seen an antique painting in the storeroom. It's

spotted with lizard's poo. It's black and white. I see her black mole. Her face doesn't induce that contrast. She has no entomophobia. She asks me to drive out lizards. Sometimes, she is carefree about it.

That isn't enough to write something about how much they loved each other. I can't say if they loved enough. What's the scale to define love? My birth is the scale? My smiles whisk rapidly when I think that I'm still named after my father. No fabric tells me that I floated for the last time when my mom's water broke. Were they together when my mom was expecting? They aren't together anymore. I sneeze on a beautiful peacock. That muffler is coiled up inside my mom's old saree. It is blue. She wears the saree with another blouse, a yellow blouse.

I see the matching blouse, without buttons. It's been altered so many times that it appears to be an unstitched mass. I see her painting the garden pots. She sells the pots for two hundred bucks and tells me that my father wrote her name on the wall of a fort. But she doesn't love him anymore.

\*

Dear

I know we have to raise our child. But my parents want me to get married to a Catholic girl. I can't tell them that you and I have a daughter.

The rest of the letters are on the cracks and folds in the paper, between the lines. It is there with me. My mom never reads it, neither through my eyes nor through the big working area in the hall, where we sleep on fabrics and eat yarns, My mom has stitched so many handkerchiefs and mufflers since that day. Perhaps this single room where we live is somewhere they didn't fall in love. Maybe my dad is also an artist. Maybe he was my mom's first customer. Maybe they got married when I was with them. Maybe he loves my mom and maybe he is driving out lizards through the smell of repellants. My mom has sold the last piece for the day, a customized piece. She has written on it in Urdu, the only language she knows. Then, she told me that the marigold plants were planted by my dad. The flowers wilt once every three days. *They are alive*. I cut their stems, my mom tells me to do that and throws the earthworm into the moist soil outside. The soil in our backyard is rich in ore. I don't want to mine it further. I cut off the stems, she never looks at them before throwing them into the dustbin, full of yarn, expired machine oils, finished woollen balls and blunt needles. She believes they will regrow. She keeps her glasses inside a box, the unstitched pile of fabric lying there to be

picked up the next morning when she will sew them into clothes, or use them as covers for our body and head.

### **About The Author**

Garima Mishra (She/her) is a creative writer and storyteller residing in India. Her works have appeared or are forthcoming at Inertia Teens, Vagabond City Lit, Borderless Journal, Cathartic Lit and elsewhere.

