



Volume 25

the liar

The Liar

2025

UNLUCKY 2025

The Liar 2025

Metamorphoses

The Liar is an annual anthology primarily featuring the work of Capilano University students. The collective considers all work anonymously. The Liar publishes poetry, prose, micro-fiction, and art in one annual issue.

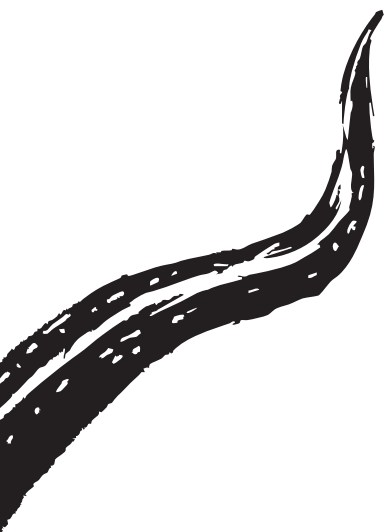
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Apples and Crows

Jade Wong Levesque

She was little, only this tall and this wide,
tiny melons sat in her rosy cheeks.
He was little — triple her age, but only this allowed and this
worn, tiny sticks sat in his hollowed arms.

They were little together, like beads on the same string.
Like two flowers, growing under a sun lamp
like two bumblebees,
 floating in a garden
like two words stuck on the same tongue.

She sang sweet songs that were really shrill songs
but he listened, and never
ever
ever
stopped smiling —

 until he did, when crows held open his mouth,
and apples lodged in his throat.
When worms wiggled their way through arteries
and purple dusted his cheeks.

They were little together, went on trips
to discover and explore fresh air before
he went away, gasping with his mouth closed.

She was a Birch tree. Hardy, strong, pale.
He was —

was he growing?

She didn't think so. Other people's big brothers were big.
His limbs ached and stretched, but her head towered above his.

They were little together. Their final trip
wasn't to a faraway land,
but to a castle nearby.

Towering and blue, she felt like a princess
only she was not the one being carried in.

It was drying soil housed with wiggling worms,
where ravens call and pluck them loose,
where she sang a final song that fell on deaf ears.

The apple lodged in his throat grew worms.
They crawled all the way down,
and grew a nest inside.

They were little together until she was enveloped
by a flock of screams and cries and
cold embraces
until she heard that guttural choking sound —
not from him.

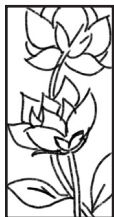
She'd never heard her father cry before.

Until all was silent.

Until when she stumbled over to have a look at him
nestled in his own cloud of soft,
and touched his chilled blueberry skin.

They were little together.

Now, she is big.



As the Grass Covered Us

Jade Wong Levesque

She willed herself to calm. Dirt scraped against her skin as she gripped blades of grass and desperately begged the earth. Like a sore, the loneliness scarring over threatened to bleed. She couldn't imagine a world without him. She supposed she could be selfish, do what she wanted, and never be forgiven. Or she could do as he wished and never forgive herself. She struggled to understand how the day had turned so quickly.

Just hours ago, they had been dancing in the meadow. The sun was warm, and their cheeks had turned pink from laughter. Dirt had snuck between their toes, butterflies fluttered through their hair, rabbits and frogs jumped between their legs. The creek had splashed to the rhythm of their dance. They twirled, bent and laughed until their cheeks pressed against the damp earth. And then they came for her, and he had been struck.

A twitching finger touched hers, and she was thrust back into the present. Now, the forest was silent. Looking down with a tense brow and a stabbing pain in her eyes, she tried her best to smile at the man whom she held so tenderly. When a drop of something landed on his cheek, she raised a shaking hand to wipe it away, unfamiliar with the feeling of sorrow. She did not know that the drop had been a tear, and she could not remember when she had ever shed a tear.

“I want you to live. Let me help you live,” she begged.

With every wet tickle down her cheek, something else crept into her veins; she shook with more than sorrow now. She did not notice.

“Magnolia. My Magnolia,” he mumbled.

Comfort was but a whisper brushing against her skin, hearing the name her lover had given her when they were children — named for the flowers that sprouted when parts of her returned to the earth.

“*I want* to live. I just can’t live like you. I can’t,” he continued.

Magnolia was less comforted by this; she couldn’t understand why he would not want to be like her. They could spend an eternity together. Shushing him, she raised her hand and placed it on his chest, trying to heal his stuttering heart. Stubbornly, she did not notice that the burning of her skin was not simply because the fear of losing her lover was burning her alive — or even because they had been out in the sun all day. Whispering with her eyes firmly shut, she whispered, “Please.” The soil beneath them quivered — a daisy began to blossom nearby.

Her lover raised a hand, desperately attempting to shake Magnolia’s hand off. She couldn’t see that his eyes were wider now. He was scared she would succeed. He blinked up at her and desperately choked out a plea for her to open her eyes. She refused.

"Please. I want you to see that I want this."

Magnolia didn't answer. She felt it now. She felt how the innocent burn had been a stern warning. She knew now that she would soon give herself to the land. Opening her eyes, she took in the sight below her: her love, laid across the grass, a halo of Magnolias sprouting around his head, his torso. An overwhelming wave of *something* crashed through her, and she buckled. "Please don't go." She whispered against his damp neck.

"I have to go, my love." He was struggling to breathe now, and every stuttered gasp made her heart shatter into smaller and smaller pieces. Her arms twitched as the grass around her began to bend towards her. In a futile attempt to barter for time, she twined her fingers through his and kissed his knuckles, hoping a kiss would lend him just a few more minutes. She knew she could not hold off nature for long. She couldn't save him and live without regret, even if she currently could not fathom regretting saving him.

The same drops of liquid that had fallen from his eyes that day they had reunited, were falling again. She choked at the sluggish nature in which they tickled his cheeks, at the glimmer of hope fading from his eyes.

"Please stay with me. Promise me you will stay." His eyes slid shut as he caressed her one last time.

"I will."

And so, they lay there together, one still, one shaking, when it began. Slipping a hand from his loosening grasp, Magnolia touched the earth. But the evening dew did not comfort her fingers; it burned.

Pain stabbed through layers upon layers of skin. Flesh molted, fat quivered, muscles tightened. Though she dared not move, she shuddered at what was to come. Grass twined with her fingers, burrowing underneath her nails. She tried to fight the anguish of letting him go. She tried to imprint the face that had haunted her

dreams for years as she wandered the forest, alone, into her soul. The chill of autumn that tenderly soothed him burned her aching flesh. Every hair on her body became alive, standing alert and sharp as knives. The breeze caressed her skin in agony, every stroke a symphony of pain. The stinging blades of grass wormed upwards towards her and grazed her lover's skin — though he did not feel it.

Magnolia's entire being fought for her to open her eyes to have one last look at him — the man who had brought her so much joy and saved her from herself. The soil underneath them began to dip, and she felt her skin sink into the chill. Her lover gasped, but she didn't hear it because something was budding in her ear. As hard as she tried, she knew it was futile. She could do nothing but give up and welcome the warm embrace of Mother Nature. When she finally went limp and surrendered, a rush of peace overwhelmed them. The grass began to cover them. They both felt pain, but it did not matter. It never did.

After a long moment, the already silent forest seemed to take a breath. And then it exhaled, and the leaves rustled, and the birds began to chirp. He was dead, and she was asleep until spring.

Lord of Three Worlds

Max Alserda

3 weeks of hypnosis
3-eyed gods of Mt. Brahmagiri
3 karmic rebirths



Hell's helmsman
soften Yama's blows
Bludgeon of gold
Sealant of sins
Dip hoofs in water
like bronze camel
Endless stream of
perished Pretas
screwed scorpions
cracked exoskeletons



Xiao Huo
 Alien baby with
 genetic disorder
 ethnically ambiguous
 Spiderweb cures
 fungal wounds
 Listen to cicadas
 diagnose love
 feed trees
 cook congee
 comfort geckos
 on West Avenue
 safe from hurricanes



Egrets unite
 innate path
 Nymphs shed
 Instar
 Time for jubilee
 Jangle pop
 Break a soul
 Retro-city café swing
 Commune with
 sea people
 Dry scabs on
 cotton candy
 Gum surgery
 Chocolate deity
 & remedy
 & charity

My name incinerates —
 whiplash to ashes

Hell is Summer Pt. 2

Max Alserda

2 Flamingos out of 12,700 international students

Cool 3x Buldak w Melona sticks

10 days of morning calls at 12 midnight

12 days of soft tofu in Gangneung

Nameless island hibernation for 3 weekends

Lay down 15 cities' weight in company

40% of grasslands occupy earthly aches

1972 is the mouse's gift to eggy horses

17 million light years from vermillion stars

1200 deg^2 birthday wishes in braided night rivers

8227.46 km East of Namsan Tower

Babyface on black sea 38 m deep

Cross China Border for up to 90 days

Fly South w 500,000 won BCD aflame

Miss Mt. Halla's crystal crater like Dong-Seok on 21/12

Both Temp Resident Permits expired on 31/7

Bring me back to 07/03

fill Kafee Kind w 20 more coasters of Maltese dogs

Call +82 070 777 7777

Inyeong, where should we go next?





Soft Belly, Cleft Chin, Big Glasses

Livia Pica

We do this once a month, give or take. There's me (soft belly, cleft chin, big glasses) and my dad (soft belly, cleft chin, small glasses), wrapped in soft, white bathrobes, lounging on the wooden sun-beds of a sauna's ante-chamber. He's listing all the times he let me fall.

One time you got on a wet slide.

His mouth is downturned, pulling his whole face into a cartoonish expression of guilt.

It was too fast and you hit your head on the ground.

He looks ridiculous, like the whole of him might just collapse & pool in wrinkles. I smile, pull my skin taut, enjoy the soreness of the bruises on my chin.

I'm sure that's the source of all my problems.

He turns toward me, like the most plausible explanation for my absurd mix of neurotic anxiety and mild cruelty is the fact that I fell, once, as a child. He stares at remnants of glue the band-aid left. I laugh, loud.

C'mon. We established with Dr. Galli that the issue's with the premature delivery.

He nods, murmurs around his cup of tea.

I know, I know. You're right. Traumatic birth, and so on.

His voice stumbles on the end of his sentence, trampled under the sound of Mom's heavy steps down the stairs. We both turn just in time to see the door open, and feel the cold air rush in, startling the mellow, hazy warmth of the room. Mom stands rigid, bright and sour in the middle of the empty door frame. She's wearing the heavy, smothering thing she calls her *nice winter pyjamas*, beige flip flops, and pearl earrings. She is — everybody agrees — a white tooth in a dark mouth.

I'm going to bed.

I let her glance wash over my body (soft belly, –, –).

Your chin is bruising already, Erica.

I hum, press my lips together. Today, again, I stumbled on limbs too long; folded in on myself in a vain attempt to regain control, collapsed, hit my chin on my knee. I bled some. Dad was convinced that I had bitten through the skin below my lip, looked at me stricken the whole way home. Over dinner, he described in detail my terrifying fall, the resulting grievous injury, and his admiration for my incredible courage.

She didn't even cry!

Mom assumed an expression of such incredulity at his earnest, childish statement that I couldn't stop myself from laughing. Out of my mouth gushed big gurgling gulps, hiccups like boiling water overflowing.

Alessandro.

What?

She's a grown fucking woman.

On the way to the sauna, I'm still not breathing right, belly aching from the last rivulets of laughter. Dad looks at my smile. He starts his list.

One time, you fell and bled your sock red while I was watching.

One time, you fell on your back — there's a fissure in your vertebrae now — while I was watching.

One time, you fell — passed out — because I was watching and thought you were fine.





No Solicitors

Kai Leung

I've spent my entire life expecting Change. They sit outside on my porch, waiting until I'm happy and settled before knocking on my door. No matter what I'm in the middle of doing, I always answer, I have to. Even though I only ever stand directly in front of them, I never seem to remember what they look like, but I've never been good at eye contact anyway, so I don't think they mind. Despite this, I'll always know its them, and I ask:

"What do I have to know today?"

I can feel their unwavering stare, not filled with contempt or malice, just the uncomfortable warmth of someone who has seen and will continue to see me. Their voice is otherworldly, an operatic choir condensed into a normal voice. Every time they visit, I look different. I'll do something new with my clothes, hair, or body, and they always point it out.

"The new haircut suits you."

I politely smile, but that response never feels natural. I'm not

good at taking compliments and I don't think I ever will be. They know this, of course, but they still do it. It's oddly nice of them. Even with this I can tell they're avoiding my question, so I stand there in silence until they give in. They've said hundreds, thousands of things to me over the years. It's never anything outright positive. Always announcements of my current karma, or at best, fleeting comments on my psyche. But today they say:

"Things are better now."

I'm already halfway through closing the door when I stop in my tracks. I open it back up, a long creak cutting through the air. Against my own logic, I look into their eyes, gazing at a kaleidoscope of colours. Their body contorts wildly, unnaturally bending with every ray of sun. Their clothes flip shades, textures, styles, all within milliseconds of each other. It's overwhelming, my brain failing to place a single identity onto them. As I'm filled with the grief of forgotten names, I accept that I will never know who they are, and this thought seems to calm their movements. Their form still oscillates, but I try not to think too hard about it. And at that moment, as our eye contact becomes passive, I realize that they've never seen the inside of my house.

I welcome them in, and they are immediately greeted with my living room. The walls are filled with scattered picture frames, hung up in no specific order. They're all empty, I took out all the pictures and put them somewhere I forgot a long time ago. The collection of furnishings is eclectic, even though I wish I could have matching wood tones. None of this furniture is mine anyway, all borrowed. An old couch I was never allowed to sit on as a kid, a glass bureau displaying someone else's achievements, a TV broadcasting the news in a language I can barely understand, all things that I simply use, but never own. I don't dare pull the couch closer or turn the volume of the TV up.

"These things aren't yours," Change points out.

"I know," I reply.

"Why is that?" they ask.

"I don't know," I answer.

We move onto the kitchen, despite the difficulty of leading someone I'm intentionally avoiding eye contact with. I love cooking, but I haven't used the stove-top or oven in years. The fridge

is almost empty, except for some take-out and a few frozen meals I've stacked in my freezer. The sink is dry save for some soapy residue splotching the area around the drain. The drying rack holds the same plate and bowl I wash and use every day, and I don't dare use the collection of large dinnerware sitting in my cupboards collecting dust. The pantry has no shelves or storage structure, just stray cardboard boxes full of canned tuna. There's one can opener resting on top of one of the boxes, an old claw one my mom left with me a while ago.

"You never use this kitchen," Change points out.

"I know," I reply.

"Why is that?" they ask.

"I don't know," I answer.

They ask for the washroom, so I show them the way. I lead them to the guest washroom, pristine and clean as always, but they insist on the one I primarily use. It's a strange request, but they just seem curious. I guide them up the stairs and around a corner, the wood flooring transitioning to worn carpet. There are only two doors in this narrow hallway, one next to the stairs and one at the end.

I open the first door in the hallway and flick on the light; the bathroom's messy. Not the semi-regularly cleaned shower and toilet. Not the misted mirror, spotted with grime from the several times I've forgotten to turn on the fan during hour-long, thinking showers. Not even the impressionistic, red and blue hair dye splatters on the walls that I have allowed to permanently stain. But the countertop sink, surrounded by a chaotic mess of self-care products I've failed to use regularly. Lotions for my eczema that I still haven't gone to the doctor for, face masks for the blackheads on my nose that I only care about what I'm too close to a mirror, those weird skin-lightening creams your aunts give to you as a "suggestion," most of them generally unnecessary. Some are full, most of them being basic gifts given to me a long time ago that have accumulated dust in the corner I leave them in. Others are empty containers I can't seem to throw away, even though the last of its product has been squeezed out with vigour.

"You can't seem to throw away things you don't need," Change points out.

"I know," I reply.

“Why is that?” they ask.

“I don’t know,” I answer.

We finally reach my bedroom. I briefly look at Change, their form still as unplaceable as before. I figure that whoever they are, it probably won’t matter how they view the state of my room. Most of the people who’ve previously been close to me tend to also have messy rooms. There’s probably something poetic and meaningful in that statement, but since I don’t like how my bedroom looks, I don’t think that’s a good thing.

I open the door and have the sudden thought of how empty yet full my bedroom feels. The eggshell walls are bare, save for a few old post-it notes pasted on the wall behind my desk. Scribbled on them are reminders, their context forgotten. There’s a bundle of old posters I say I haven’t had the time to put up, but I’m just embarrassed by my past interests and haven’t replaced them. My desk holds old things, my half-filled sketchbook from when I still thought I could draw, a scattering of guitar picks saved from my dryer, plastic straws from God knows when they still gave those out. The ground isn’t free either, as the few clothes I forgot to scoop up are pushed to the side, giving some walking room. Leaning against a wall are several guitar cases, holding my most valuable possessions, though I haven’t really been practicing or writing lately. My closet is full of clothes I never wear, the chair next to it holding the three rotating outfits that I wear consistently.

I wait for Change’s question. They take longer this time, the silence trying to entice me to look at them. I stare at the ground instead.

“Is this really what you are?” they finally ask.

The question throws off our rhythm. I resist the urge to physically react, still looking away from them.

“What do you mean by that?” I question back.

“Surely this can’t be what you actually want your bedroom, your house, to look like, right?” they elaborate.

“Oh, God no,” I quickly answer.

There’s another silence, both of us scanning the bedroom again. I try not to think too hard about how embarrassing it feels to be seen.

“Then why does it look like this?” they then ask.

"I don't know. Never had the time, life gets in the way," I explain half-heartedly.

"Why does your life get in the way?" they ask, prodding further.

I look at them, wondering if they don't understand the shit they've put me through. They look at me back, their face pulling and squishing like clay with every blink, but every set of eyes that stares back at me only brings more questions. I concede.

"Bad news about things I can't control, usually. Done by people, places, things, nouns, proper nouns. Your basic nightmare. Sometimes I don't need to do much, but other times I have to completely wrap myself around it so it doesn't explode back and hurt me or worse, other people. Usually it happens so quickly that I can only react, you know? Then another thing happens, then another, and next thing you know it's been a year and you're in the same place you started in. So you know, life." I monologue to them.

"I see," they breathe out as a sigh. I can feel their inquisitive attitude shrink.

"What? Were you expecting something more profound?" I ask them.

"Maybe," they say.

"Maybe?" I repeat back.

"Do you not remember the last time I came?" they question me.

Honestly, I can't even remember what I did yesterday, let alone the last time they knocked on my door. They take my silence as a hesitant but real no.

"I told you the same thing I said today almost 8 months ago, remember?" they tell me.

"Oh" is all I'm able to let out. Pitiful, even if undeserving.

"I just came around again to remind you. I had a feeling you'd still be on edge. I assumed you were inviting me in to show the changes you've made," they admit, a new sadness coating their voice. Disappointment, even if mild.

"What is this, a test?" I chide.

"No, I just thought you were proud of yourself." Their words ring. Shame, just shame. Shameful warts and all. I walk over and sit on

my office chair, leaning back to rub off the grief painted on my face.

“Well I’m not, okay? You got me! When my life isn’t actively trying to kill me, I don’t know what to do with myself. I can’t sleep, but I hate being awake. My body finds being alone at home all week unbearable, but my mind can’t stand going outside. There’s no normal for me to go back to, this is it! This messy room, the empty fridge, my goddamn sink that’s so full of clutter I can’t put anything down on it, that’s what I’ve done for myself since things got better. The exact same things I did before, and the exact same things I will do later. So yeah, I’ve spent the last eight months living like nothing fucking matters because I don’t know what else to do! Is that the answer you want? That I know it’s pathetic to live like this?” My words come out louder and angrier than I intended; it’s a bad habit. I’m not looking, but I can tell that Change is staring at me, thinking.

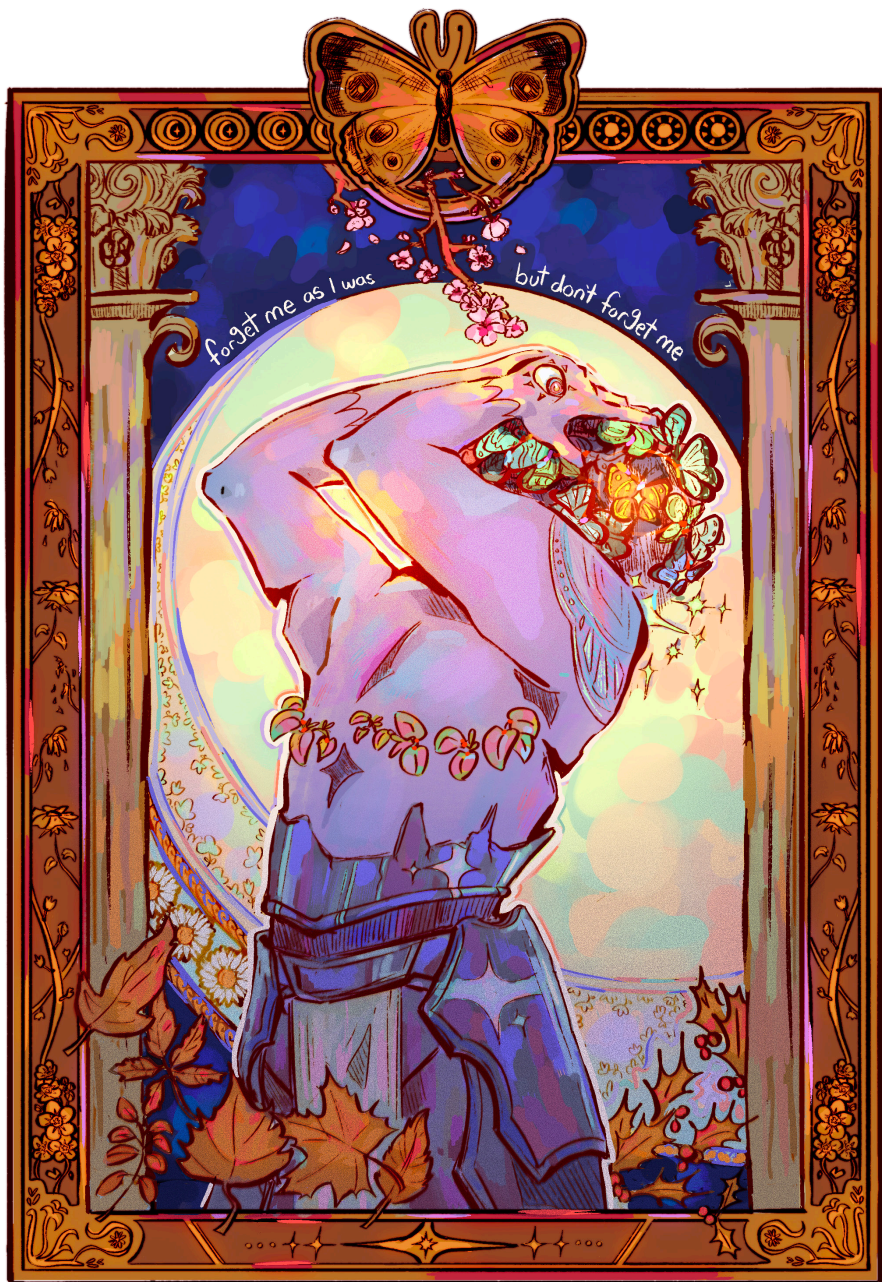
“Why would it be pathetic to live?” they finally ask. I start crying into my hands, it feels violent, unnatural. I feel like I can’t breathe, my lungs suffocating myself. Change wraps their arms around me, it’s awful, but I melt into them because no one’s held me in so long. At some point, I fall onto the floor but I don’t seem to care. It’s a blur, but I can still feel them around me. My mind goes blank.

When I wake up, Change is nowhere to be found. I feel different. The sun’s going down by the time I stand up, dizziness setting in as I catch myself on the wall. It’s from hunger. I slowly walk towards the kitchen, the sunlight cascading through a window and painting the room orange. I don’t dare turn on the overhead light, I stand and watch the dust particles reflect like stars in the air. My subconscious moves my feet, my body, to stand in front of the oven, basking in the warm light. I’m still thinking about their embrace when I turn the stove-top on.



Unlucky

Lauren Howard



For Now, Until

Max Stutman



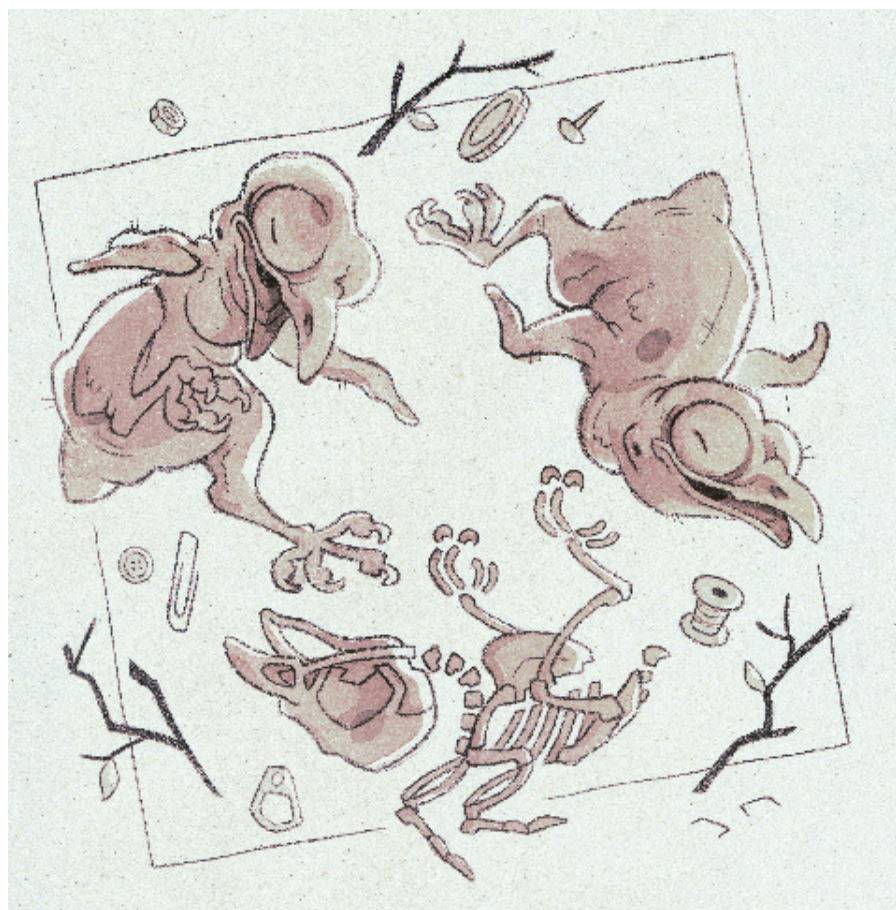
Dance

Millie Beatch



Shedding Season

Jonas Kemecey





Metamorph and the Void

Joy Lin







My Cousin Frida's Quinceañera

Isabella Austin-Sacristan

*Content Warning: blood, spiders, Catholic ideas of virginity
and womanhood, monsters, alcohol*

My cousin Frida has always been a little obsessed with beauty.

When we were little, we would go out to the field behind the schoolyard where the other kids would play *futbol*, sit in the shade, and pick wildflowers together. One day, our friend Analisa taught us how to make a flower crown.

Frida took it a step further and made flower bracelets and anklets and rings.

Once, in the summer I turned ten, we went out on a Sunday afternoon and got ice cream. We were chasing each other back home when my ice cream fell out of my cone and onto the sidewalk. I was trying so hard not to cry, but then Frida smiled and dumped her own ice cream onto the sidewalk. She knelt down and began swirling the colors together with her fingers, pink and brown, melting and marbling together in the summer heat.

Frida always stays up to watch the sunset, and always gets up way too early to watch the sunrise. Our shared bedroom is covered in her drawings of the sky, of flowers, of people she sees walking on the street below our window. Frida got her first makeup palette last Christmas, and every day since then, her eyelids and lips and nails are a new blend of colors.

When Frida was about to turn fifteen, it was time to throw her a Quinceañera.

For the most part, the planning was easy. Mass would be held at the same church as cousin Imelda's Quinceañera. It was no trouble finding a sizable court — there were more than enough cousins and neighbor kids, although some of the boys would have to be bribed. Frida didn't care much for the time and place, and she had always been a social butterfly, so she was fine with however many people her parents wanted to invite. Soon they had a venue booked, a date and time set well in advance, and all of us cousins who were close to Frida spent our evenings making invitations, planning the decor and music playlist, and, of course, deciding on what to wear.

And for Frida, that was the only problem: she couldn't pick a dress.

We accompanied her to just about every dress shop, tailor, and seamstress in town trying to find her perfect dress. And it had to be perfect, she insisted. As our mothers had always said, "you only turn fifteen once".

Shopping with her was fun at first, but as the weeks passed and the day of the celebration grew ever nearer, Frida smiled less and less. The corners of her mouth would twitch every time she glanced at her closet. Her dark brow furrowed, even in her sleep, a strange sight on her round-cheeked face. Her undereyes grew dark and heavy as she complained to me, over lemonade and arepas in the backyard, that there had to be something. She didn't know what she was looking for, but she knew it must be out there somewhere. She had to find that perfect dress.

She just really needed to find it before it was too late.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help but overhear you, miss," came a low, shy voice from behind us. "Did you say you were looking for a dress?"

We turned to see an elderly woman, out for a stroll with a basket of cosmos in one hand and a simple wooden cane in the other. Her white hair was thin and wispy, her skin spotted and tanned by the sun, and an intricate veil of wrinkles across her face lifted as she smiled at us, waiting for a response.

"I am," said Frida slowly. "My Quinceañera is only a week from now and I still haven't found the dress I wish to wear."

"I see. Then might I humbly offer my services, dear?" Asked the old woman. "I am a retired seamstress. I haven't made anything in, oh, a good ten or so years. But I used to make some of the finest Quinceañera dresses in my hometown."

"Truly?" Frida leaned over the fence, her bright brown eyes sparkling with hope.

"Truly," said the seamstress. "I don't usually take commissions anymore, not since my daughters took over the business, but I can tell that this is an urgent matter for you. If you like, I will make you a perfect Quinceañera dress."

And so the old woman led Frida and I back to her house. I insisted on going with them, just to keep an eye on things. A chance encounter with a stranger who could make her the perfect dress in the nick of time? It seemed too good to be true.

As Frida stood in the old woman's kitchen, the biggest room in her house, getting her measurements taken, I looked around the place. It was tidy, not a spoon out of place, but dust and cobwebs covered every surface. The old woman's sewing equipment seemed to consist only of her measuring tape, a couple of safety pins, and a long roll of thin white gauze. The only remarkable thing about her house was the garden, in which the biggest, most vibrant flowers I have ever seen were growing, tall and proud and staring the sun in the face. Dahlias, roses, marigolds, lilies...

The old woman caught me staring at her flowers and smiled. "My pride and joy," she said. "My flowers find their way into every dress I make."

I almost laughed. What, was this old woman going to make the perfect Quinceañera dress out of flowers and gauze? But when I glanced at Frida, she was staring open-mouthed at the flowers as

though she had never seen anything more beautiful. And I realized I could not blame her.

A strange tickling sensation made itself known on my calf. I absently rubbed my itchy leg, then felt something drop down, brushing past my ankle. I jumped away and shrieked as a leggy spider, no larger than a silver dollar, ran out from under my skirt.

“Oh, dear,” the old woman muttered. She bent down and allowed the spider to run into her hand, cradling it delicately as she carried it to an open window. It crawled out of her hand and into a windowbox filled with marvelous marigolds. She turned back to me and smiled apologetically. “Such mischievous creatures, aren’t they? I’ve always had a soft spot for the little ones.”

Almost every day for the next week, Frida went back to the seamstress. I went with her once or twice, but my own business — my chores, as well as some of Frida’s, and putting the final touches on my own outfit — kept me too busy to go every time. I would worry about Frida when she went to that old woman’s house. Sometimes she was gone for hours at a time, and I couldn’t help but wonder, what on earth does she need to be there for? When she came back, though, Frida would gush about the old woman as though they were best friends. Apparently, they would talk for hours about dresses, Frida’s art, the old woman’s daughters, and, of course, her flowers.

“Aren’t they just the prettiest things you’ve ever seen?” Frida sighed to me one night. And though I was tired, and a little annoyed, I couldn’t help but reply honestly: “they are.”

Finally, the afternoon before Frida’s Quinceañera, the dress was done. Frida insisted I come along to see it, and I went quite willingly. Though I still felt uneasy about the old woman, for reasons I couldn’t quite explain, I was also deeply curious about her. And I really wanted to see the dress that had finally won Frida over.

It was... truly magnificent. It was not the most elegant or pretty dress I had ever seen. It was not the sparkliest, the laciest, or the frilliest. It was, in fact, a dress made out of gauze, dyed a myriad of colors and decorated with real flowers. I glanced out the kitchen window into the old woman’s garden, and to my surprise, all of her flowers were gone. They had been sewn into the dress, and still they

shone, as rich and bright as if they were still alive.

When Frida put it on, she looked like a statue overgrown with nature. She looked like a goddess of summer. It was the perfect dress for her.

“How much do we owe you?” Was all I could manage to say to the old woman.

She tutted and shook her head. “Frida is a joy to talk to, and her dress was a joy to make. I won’t ask for money.”

But Frida insisted, and I insisted — weird or not, the old woman had gone out of her way for us, and it really was a beautiful dress — and so finally she relented. She did not ask for money, though. Only for a cup of wine from the party.

She glanced at Frida when she named her price, inclining her head a little, almost hesitant. I watched Frida’s dark eyes widen. Then she laughed and said alright. I looked to her, confused, but Frida only gave me a wink and a shrug in return. I supposed that, if this meant that we didn’t have to shell out what a normal Quinceañera dress cost, I was alright with it too.

Morning came, and Frida donned her divine dress and led us all into the church for Mass. The flowers — still somehow ageless — were captivating amid rays of stained-glass light as she sat before the priest, delivering consecration and a bouquet of cosmos to the Madonna. As she turned to face us, the blessed tiara atop her head, she looked every bit like an angel come to life.

The priest told us to welcome her as a young woman. He had Frida vow to stay true to God and to protect her virginity. We hid it well, but she, I, and all the damas in Frida’s court were trying not to laugh.

And then the party was on.

Cousins Penelope and Conchita had really gone all out with the floral arrangements, which was perfect, because that was exactly what Frida would want. The music was a mix of traditional and modern, courtesy of cousin Theadora. Everyone was dressed to the nines, and I soon forgot all my worries and ate, drank, and danced the night away.

About half an hour before midnight, Frida excused herself to

the powder room. Everyone continued partying, but as the minutes ticked by, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck standing up. I could not explain it, but I felt that I had to go and find her.

I went to the powder room and knocked on the door. I called Frida's name, but it was pointless — even if she had screamed for me to come in, I wouldn't be able to hear over the heavy thrum of bass and the cheerful cacophony of the dance floor. So, I simply opened the door and prayed she was not on the toilet.

She was, but thankfully, the lid was down. She sat there with a shawl over her beautiful dress, a deep bluish green under the neon lights from above the sink. She smiled at me when I came in, but I could tell there was a strain to it. Her forehead glistened with sweat.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

Frida nodded. "I'm fine. I just needed a break, that's all. How is the party?"

"Loud. Everyone's drunk. It's awesome." I leaned against the wall, half-falling over as I did so. "Are you going to come back out soon?"

"I am," she said, though she sounded hesitant. "I'm feeling a bit woozy. Too much alcohol, I think. I might end the party soon just so I can get to bed."

Before I could protest that *this was her Quinceañera, she should enjoy it, she'd only turn fifteen once*, Frida added: "Oh, that reminds me. My favorite cousin, would you do me a favor?"

I knew what those words meant. Frida only ever called me her favorite cousin when she was about to ask me to do something she knew I wouldn't want to. I steeled myself for whatever it might be, only to be caught off guard when she reached for a cup of wine sitting on the counter. Only then did I remember the old woman's request.

"I was going to take it to her myself, but I'm not feeling well enough. Would you take it to her?" She gazed up at me with her big brown eyes, pleading with me.

I pretended to be annoyed with her as I took the cup. It wasn't a big deal, of course I could take the cup to the weird old woman. I just couldn't understand why Frida wouldn't go herself, until I

brushed her fingers while taking the cup. They were trembling.

I asked again and again if she was alright, and again and again she insisted that she was. And in fairness, the longer I stayed with her, the better she seemed. The slight shaking in her hands, which I could not pretend I hadn't seen, went away after a few minutes. The shawl, at first drawn tightly around her, fell to her elbows as she sat up straighter. I almost asked if she wanted to take the cup of wine to the old woman after all, but I didn't. It was her Quinceañera, after all. Even if she was well enough to deliver the wine herself and party for several more hours, she had asked me to go for her.

I left her in the powder room, reapplying her lipstick and brushing herself off, and set off down the road to the old woman's house. She lived no more than ten minutes away, and I had walked along this road several times, even before I knew that she lived nearby. Still, there was a strange feeling in the air as I walked, the silence hanging heavy above my head. At first I thought it was simply that most people in town were either asleep or partying it up back where I had come from, but the longer I walked, I noticed that even the alley cats and dogs and the crickets that sang at night were quiet. Perhaps they were scared off by all the noise?

I found myself breathing slow and quiet, practically tip-toeing the last block. When I got to the door, I hesitated to knock. I didn't want to be the only sound in that silence. But it was then that I realized, inside the old woman's house, it wasn't silent. There was a faint whirring, almost a brushing noise, like fabric rubbing back and forth over itself. There was a steady tick-tick-ticking, and every now and then, the sharp and satisfying snip of scissors.

I couldn't believe it. Was she making another dress?

And then the door opened.

The old woman smiled down at me. Whatever it was she was doing, she was doing quite a bit. Two hands pinned down the fabric at an old-fashioned sewing machine, while two more held down another square on her kitchen table, and a fifth hand cut them into little shapes with the scissors. Her sixth and seventh hands were mending an old shirt made of white gauze. I searched for her eighth hand for a few moments before I realized it was right in front of me, held out expectantly.

My own hands shook as I raised the cup of wine and placed it in that hand. Bony, wrinkled, but still soft, like the spine of a well-loved book.

Her hands never stopped working as she raised the glass to her mouth and drank. Once it was all gone, she blinked hazily, adjusting to the flow of it into her system. All eight of her eyes, misty at the edges with age, smiled into crescents as she handed the cup back to me.

“Enjoy the party,” she said. “And tell Frida I said thank you.” And the door closed.

The next morning, I awoke the only one in our room, and discovered a horrible sight: Frida’s dress, once filled with as many colors as that old woman’s garden, had withered. The gauze was dull brown and black, splotchy and moth-eaten. The flowers, those wonderful flowers, had finally succumbed to death. They drooped and stank faintly of rot, and several had already fallen to the floor.

I ran out of our room to find Frida. She was going to be so miserable, I thought. What would I tell her? Was this the old woman’s doing? How did those fresh-looking flowers that bloomed so perfectly last night turn so lifeless this morning?

I found Frida sitting in the breakfast nook, with a glass of juice and a bowl of arroz con leche, reading a magazine. She waved at me as I entered, out of breath and wide-eyed. “What is it?”

“Your dress,” I panted. “It’s — it’s all gone.”

Frida nodded. “I know.”

“You know?”

“I saw it this morning,” she explained, her smile a little sad around the edges.

“I thought you’d be devastated,” I told her. “I didn’t know how to break it to you.”

“Who says I’m not devastated?”

I sat down next to her and watched her fill out a few squares of Sudoku in her magazine. As I stared at her face, I realized that she looked different. There were wrinkles in the corners of her eyes — small, hardly noticeable, but there. The furrow in her brow was gone, but a mark had stayed there, a reminder that stress now

had a home on her face. Even the veins on her hands seemed more pronounced than I remembered. Though, as always, her nails were perfectly manicured and polished — yellow, her favorite color.

Yesterday, they had declared my cousin a woman. That's what the Quinceañera is for, a rite of passage into adulthood. I knew it wouldn't be long until my own Quinceañera. What would I do the morning after? All this planning and leading up to the big event, and then once it's over... then what?

"Are you hungry? You've been staring at my breakfast. There's more in the fridge, you know."

I went and got myself a bowl of *arroz con leche*, and a glass of milk. I sat back down with Frida, who put away her magazine and grinned tiredly at me.

"What are you going to do about your dress?"

She shrugged. "Compost it, I guess."

"I'm sorry."

She reached over and took my hand. "Me too," she sighed. "But, my, wasn't it beautiful last night?"

She swung my hand around, playing with it. I watched her eyes crinkle as she smiled, and caught sight of the bandage on one of her wrists.

"Was it worth it?" I asked.

She blinked at me, confused for a moment before she followed my gaze. Then she grabbed her juice and held it up in the air.

"Worth it."

I clinked my milk against her juice. "Welcome to womanhood."



Serpentongue

Christian Laurian

You said
they would
eat me
up alive.

“They will chew you
up and spit you out.”
Verbatim. You smile, but
I can count the # of times
that you’ve lied. You have
no power here. Now I am
the grinner marching dust
roads in the winter. If only
you would listen. If only a
whittled song, water-sharp,
could reach you. If only we
could starve off the growth.

But truth has no bounty, as it
whistles skyward on a tattered
wing. It should be burrowing
into your skin. Meanwhile a
pen curls again and again, a
promise, a dream. Scratches
it out. Again and again. Time
is a curious thing, as it wades
back into a treacly grave until
star-hair is all we can see. I've
always thought that the cosmos
looked tangled. Someone needs
to give it all a good brush. O, but
what sacrifice would your god(s)
ask for in exchange to straighten
out the world with a whalebone?
+ I don't believe the universe to
be so prude; self-organizing its
own self. It's too horny for chaos.
You aren't any different, wriggling
your way into a new one. I wonder
when my time is near: will I recall
your name? What letter will it start
from again? No reply, so I snap back
from my death-bed. Back to the war-
warmth of now. I tend to my torch. I
cut my hair. The month smells like a
sunset. Without a tie that binds, I
walk forward through fallen leaves.
Five thousand fireworks — crimson
curse words — bomb my feet. You
won't submit. Your harpy wings
blast mouthfuls of musty air my
way. I alternate between psalms
and exorcisms. I surrender to my

sighs. I shake fist, bow down, bite
the earth. Just do what needs to be
done. The trick is learning to love
what's in your mouth. The other is
tasting everything. Bitterness does
not frighten me. Refusal? How *délice*.
I've turned my palette into a power —
plant for disappointment and disgust.
Burn it down. Grease me up. To think,
I laugh, to think I haven't shed my skins,
haven't sprung a thousand eyes? As if
my name and bones were short, as if
my heart don't shake the ground. Of
course, I say nothing to you. My eyes
watch yours as they roll. You can't see
the tooth-scars all on me. Can't sense I
have crawled out of bellies and won.
That I have learned the language
of bleeding, or touched my
soul and been stung. So
please, say think what
what you say think
about me. But I
know who's
the eater,
and it's
moi.

Perfect Time to Fall

The seed of transformation is hidden
in a thunderclap.

Cast your grains to the wind, let it
strip you of your riches.

Someday the Atlantic will vomit its
dead, and then, what then?

How will justice be fed to a million
fish-heads?

A child quakes in the night, a closet
door groans.

Soon the heart and the brain will
move as one.

There is nothing in evil
but more evil.

Christian Laurian

Perfect Time to Fall

There is nothing in hate but
meek love.

Trunks split, shells break, a jaw
loses to cement.

The words you are looking for have
already given birth.

Their children are scattered like ashes
beneath the great houses.

No-one can raise a spade, code a bomb,
crack the crypt alone.

So take my hand. Call a friend. We are
dancing in the fields tonight.

We are summoning the rapture
by Christmas.

We are taking back the names of the dead.





Grounded

Grantham Passmore Cole

Late October came with the swampy scent of lily pads slowly decomposing in Burnaby Lake, the sweet stench of detritus and stagnant water. It came with the screech of the Millennium Line in the early mornings, followed by lonely walks across rugby fields and through a network of trails to my practicum position at the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC. I had completed my Bachelor of Science in Applied Animal Biology at the University of British Columbia the previous May, and after I sought out the practicum position to gain experience in the emerging field of Animal Welfare Science. It was a month where I learned that wildlife rehabilitation wasn't just online posts of successful releases. It was a month where I learned that the most impactful, selfless and honest gift that I could give was the gift of death.

The first lesson of the gift came through the life and death of a single Mew gull, *Larus canus*. It was young, maybe second-year. As all young gulls are — it was mostly brown. When gulls mature, they molt their colour and solid swaths of white, grey, and black emerge. My mew gull was spotty, its primary covert feathers dotted with whites and browns, its tail staring to develop definition

between the dappled mid-section and the posterior border. Many of the primary wing feathers were broken partway down the shaft, jagged and ruffled. Intact wing feathers are important for flight, as their intricate structure helps generate lift. Interlocking Velco-like barbs create the delicate matrix of the feather, a knitted surface area in which air pushes up upon, and severe damage to them will disrupt the air as it flows across its surface. Feathers do not repair themselves after breakage; so, they must fully regrow. Prior to its admittance in the rehabilitation center, the Mew gull was grounded for weeks.

One of my first assignments in my practicum was to ‘fly’ the gull, encouraging it to try using its muscles, in case it could generate enough lift through strenuous flapping to overcome the disrupted air flow. It lived in the larger half of the ‘raptor pen’ — a pre-release flight enclosure reserved for gulls, ducks, and herons. I would approach the gull with a large towel, and often it would tilt its head and stare at me with unblinking eyes until I got too close. Just before I could drape the towel over the bird, it would run across the enclosure again and again — surprisingly fast for such a small being. It would stumble and trip over the logs and branches placed in the enclosure for enrichment until it grew too tired to continue. I would loosely wrap it up for a quick transport to a tower of milk-crates nearby, all the while dodging its quick bites and attempts to ward me off. Sometimes I couldn’t hold it far enough away from my body, and it would use its strong beak to latch onto my arm, my chest — and it hurt. Sessions with the gull would often leave me with dark red and purple welts across my upper body that bruised for weeks.

I would unwrap and dump the gull on the milk crates, piled two, three, four high on the gravel floor. Occasionally, the bird would jump off on its own accord. It would flap once or twice, attempting to stabilize itself, but the descent would always result in a semi-controlled fall. Other times, I held the uppermost milk crate as it stood on top. While dodging its bites that came way too close to my face, I would quickly raise the crate into the air, enticing the gull to self-preserve and fly. It would usually crash land in the gravel after its initial jump. I tried and tried with the gull until it started to show signs of stress, usually open-mouth-breathing akin to the panting of an anxious dog. At that point, I would stop. I flew it daily,

keeping detailed notes of any attempt to flap, any intention to try to flap for weeks. The feathers were too damaged to generate any lift, and the bird needed to complete a full moult of the primary flight feathers so it could fly free one day. It would take months for the feathers to fall out, one by one.

Every few days, I would give the Mew gull a physical examination. On top of the notes on its flight dis-ability, I would ensure that it was eating well through records of its weight, that there were no indications of negative well-being such as incessant pacing or plucking out its feathers, and that there were no new injuries. Birds that are grounded on unchanging substrate often develop pressure sores, or pododermatitis. These sores are often characterised by small scabs on the load-bearing areas of the digits and can often be quite painful, leading to further infection. As the gull failed to gain lift or flight, these sores started developing.

In the beginning, the pressure wounds would not be particularly painful, akin to an annoying light scrape. The gull was not displaying any negative effect in its behaviour, any signs of distress. It wasn't lying down all the time, it was still eating, and it was still bright, alert, and responsive. These were good signs — the bird wasn't suffering. However, it was inevitable that these sores would outpace the development of new feathers. It would be too stressful to move the gull from enclosure to enclosure to change the substrate under its feet, since the stress of constant change would worsen the sores. Personally, I had become quite attached to the gull as I worked with it daily, so it was with deep sorrow and responsibility that I wrapped the gull in a tight towel-wrap for the last time and brought it into the wildlife hospital for humane euthanasia. We gave the beautiful gift of death to the gull, as there was no ethical or moral justification for the continuation of its life.

The cedar hut stood at the left of the admissions building for over a year, and still the untreated timber retained its fresh scent. I was the only person on-site taking the Introductory Rehabilitation course run by the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council course that day, though it felt like I had stolen half of the organization's heaters to fend off winter's cold seeping in. By the end of the course,

my fingers felt as cold and brittle as the limbs of the deceased animals I was working with. Before me was a table with three precious plastic-wrapped bundles, a kidney dish a third full of shallow tap water, an array of syringes, and a half-foot long rubber gavage tube for force-feeding a liquid diet straight into the animal's stomach. I had bandages, paper feather tape, vet wrap, and an array of syringes at my disposal. I set up my laptop behind this assortment. Six faces glanced at their own cameras, mirroring my own awkwardness as we waited for the Zoom course to start.

In the first bag, there was the Mew gull. It had been frozen, thawed, then frozen again four times over as different people used the gift of its body to learn proper rehabilitation techniques: physical examinations, gavage-feeding, wing-wraps, and emergency intradermal rehydration. It was strange to work with the Mew gull's body after spending so long trying and failing to avoid the swipes of its bill. I still bore the scars from the gull's resistance to my previous assignment. I don't know if I looked at the bird fondly, or with despair. I didn't know how I was supposed to feel, pulling at stiff bones and tissues, injecting boluses of saline, and forcing the gavage tube down the stiff esophagus all the way into the crop. Murky colored water that reminded me of lake sludge bubbled from its mouth after removing the tube. Part of me found the experience interesting from a strictly scientific standpoint, but I also remember how sorrow seeped through me like how the gull's diluted stomach contents slowly leaked onto the feathers around its bill.

"Based on the injuries, what do you think happened to your specimen?" the instructor asked after the section of the lecture on intake examinations. Most of my other classmates were brand new to the wildlife rehabilitation world, but me and a few others were just getting the certification for skills that we already knew. They checked their animals over, feeling for the feeling of crepitus — bone against bone, shards in the wrong places, angles that seemed not quite right. I ran my fingers over the thick calluses on the gull's ventral toes, broken open by jagged welts.

When the round robin came to me: "I know mine, I was in the room when it was euthanized. I took him to the hospital. Foot sores."

One by one, the Zoom class's participants signed off after the promises of a fancy printed certificate coming in the mail, signifying that the course's completion. I gathered my materials and unceremoniously wrapped the Mew Gull up in its respective plastic bag and brought back to the freezers behind the Wildlife Hospital. The freezers were in a chicken-wire wrapped double-doored corner called the "Shed Brooder," next to three large tubs that could be filled half-way with water. In less than 6 months, the Shed Brooder would be filled with life. Starting mid-March, the first ducklings would arrive, signifying the start of the spring.

These ducklings would face many of the same problems to the Mew gull. We would rate each duckling on their feet condition daily and would delicately spray any small abrasions with aerosol antiseptic. If needed, we'd bring the ducklings into the hospital to wrap their tiny, webbed toes with antibiotic cream-smeared bandages and keep them in a separate dry enclosure until their tiny wounds healed. The ducklings would grow and heal quickly, cycling through multiple enclosures as they grew and grew through many different stages of development, different substrates with more diversity, so large wounds weren't as common.

We kept the juvenile ducklings in the raptor pen — the largest pre-release enclosure and the same enclosure that the Mew gull was housed in, until the tips of their primary feathers just barely touched each other. The ducklings would be ready for release at that point. One at a time, we would prepare them for release, loading them five at a time in large dog crates. It would be strenuous, as they ran fast with child-like energy to evade our attempts of capture. With a towel covering the crate, they'd be loaded into the back of a waiting volunteer's vehicle, carrying them to the release site. Each bird that was successfully rehabilitated and released, was cared for with knowledge gained by death. We learn from these experiences, of what is and isn't possible to heal, and at what point is too far gone to save. We learn from these mistakes and successes, so more birds can be rescued, their welfare improved — if that is through rehabilitation, or if it is through the gift of death.



A Collection of Hidden Beauty

Trin D

Seashells and sea glass disregarded on the beach, thrifted teacups with hairline cracks, postcards from cities I've never seen, tiny glass animals frozen mid-motion, pressed flowers faded to near-translucence, loose beads in mismatched colours, stones with rough scars, small carved figurines, worn ticket stubs, Hot Wheels cars with chipped paint and warped wheels, lace remnants, foreign coins, and fragments of forgotten handwriting — all quietly waiting, as if they're still hoping to be held in careful hands.

They lie tucked away in cluttered drawers and mismatched boxes, an organized chaos of overlooked beauty. The thrifted teacups

are cool to the touch, thinly cracked from years of holding warmth; they still carry faint hints of floral paint and scars from circling spoons, like memories refusing to fade. My postcards are soft with age, their edges frayed as though they've traveled through the lands pictured. The seashells feel both smooth and jagged, still holding the whispers of the oceans. Pieces of sea glass glint, dulled by sand and salt yet bearing faint scratches from the tides. Scattered among these boxes and drawers are small Hot Wheels cars, chipped but bright. Their tiny wheels turning as though they too carry a memory of races once imagined and tracks long gone.

I remember pocketing a piece of sea glass while hearing screams of joy across the hot sand. Further down a tiny version of a 1973 Camaro discarded among the trash of people and the ocean. I remember holding these treasures in my hand, hiding them from anyone who might take them away. One was smoothed by water, the other worn from play. I thought both were too beautiful to leave behind; I couldn't imagine who would depart with such a beautiful toy. It was bright, full of old memories and even though its paint was chipped I could only imagine being behind the wheel, with wind in my hair, and a smile as I sped. I kept both, hoping that someone, someday might feel the same about me. It was a thought I carried silently, like my car and sea glass, hoping that someone might see beauty despite my chipped paint and worn edges.

If my collection was all that was left behind as proof of my existence to an alien species. If it was held in an alien museum where they gather to learn about what was — though the “who” would be forgotten. The exhibit, carefully arranged, would state:

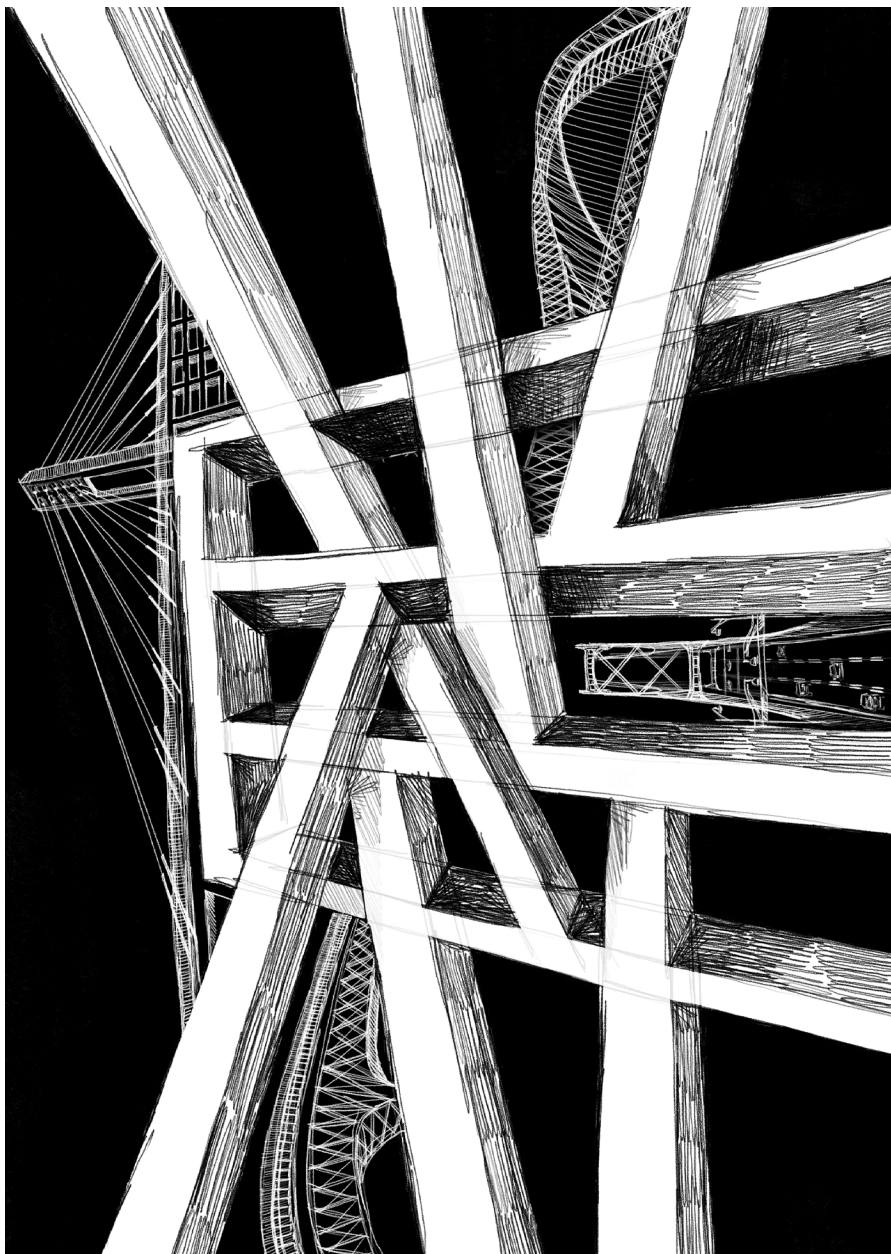
This assortment of earthly relics tells of a collector who found beauty in the discarded, the small, the imperfect. Seashells and pieces of sea glass washed ashore, teacups laced with fine cracks, postcards from prehistoric cities, tiny glass animals, flowers pressed, stones marked by time, and toy cars with chipped paint and warped wheels — all chosen not for perfection, but for the stories the flaws tell.

From these items, we glimpse a being who saw beauty not in the polished but in the forgotten — gathering things

that others left behind as fragments of memory. The collection suggests that beauty was, to this collector, a matter of connection: an invitation to hold and cherish the little things, however rough or faded. Through this collection, they may have sought to understand and preserve the world, leaving behind tokens of quiet resilience and wonder.

In the absence of their name, we remember that through these objects, each one evoking the memory of a spirit drawn to overlooked beauty—leaving behind a legacy of things worth keeping.





Permanent Temporariness

Laura Morales Padilla



Light Unburied

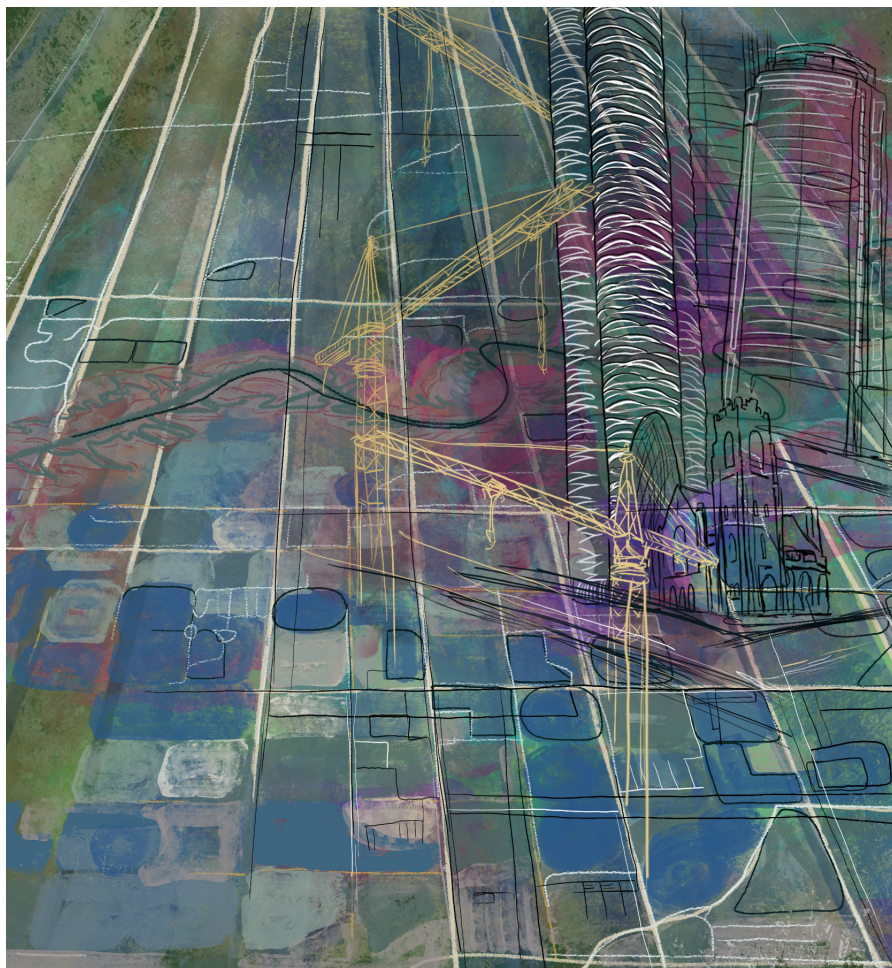
Emma Ghanem



Veil of Shadows

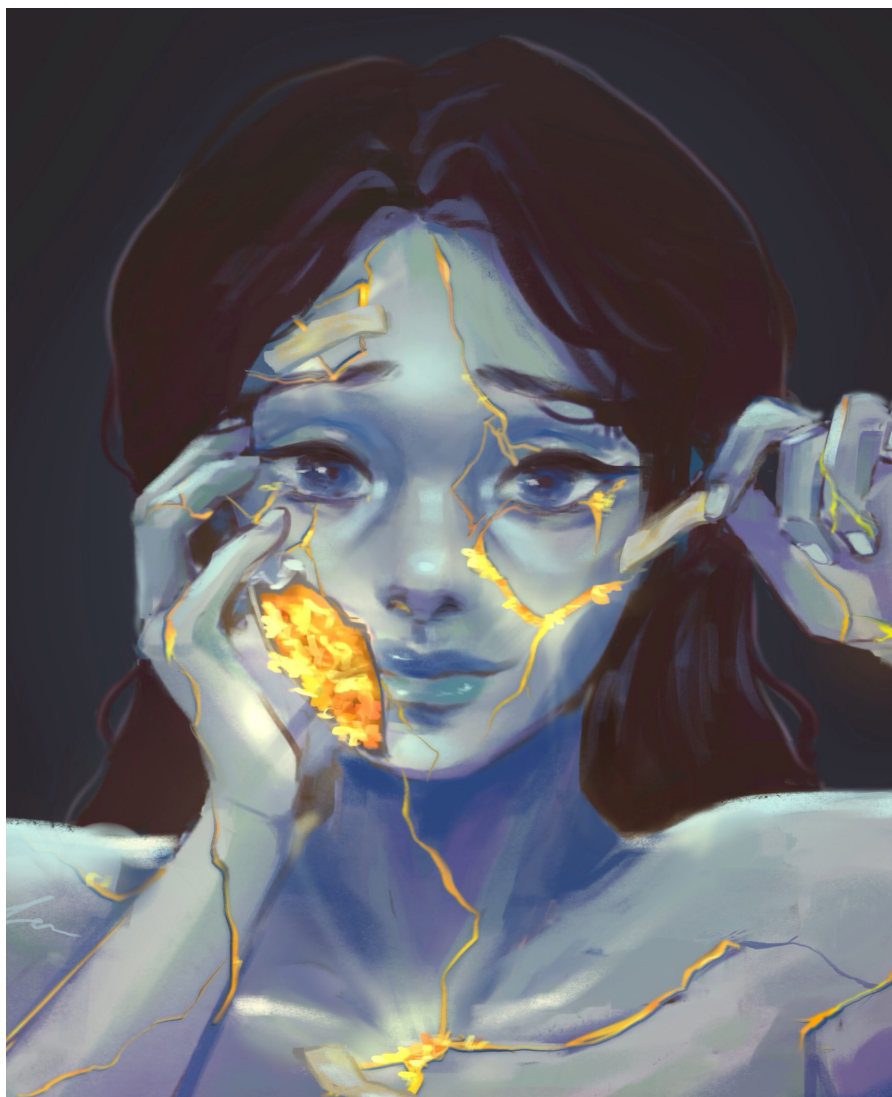
Angel Dai





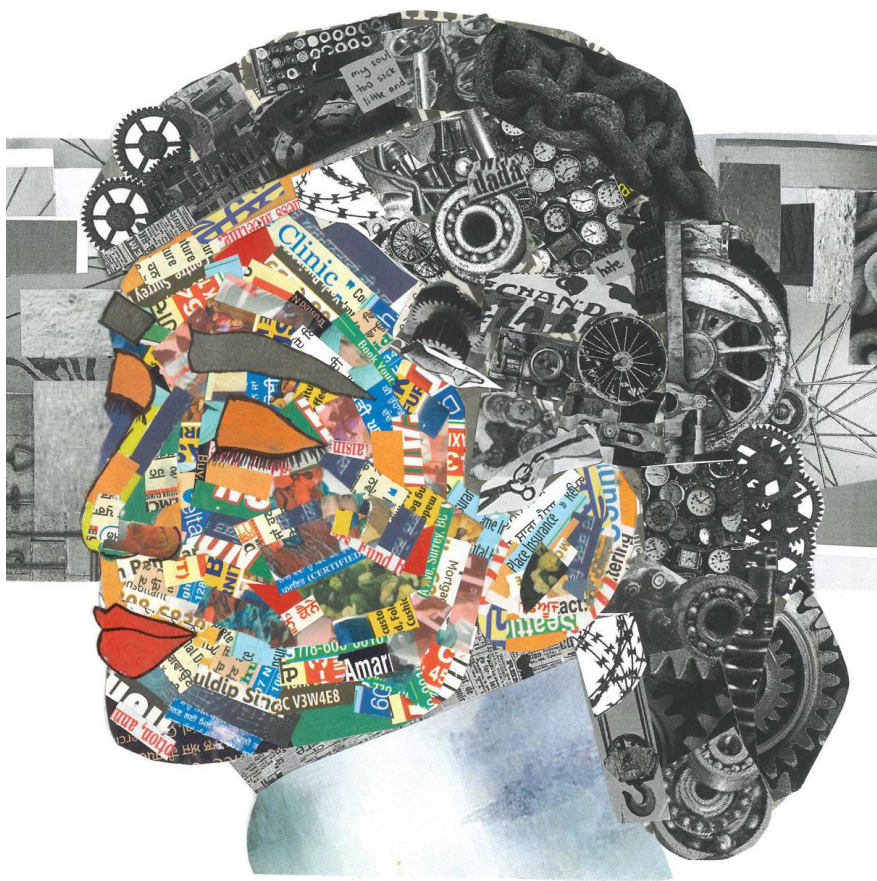
Development

Emmah Farrell



The Beauty in Breaking

Zoe Lam



Duality of Existence: Serenity and Turmoil

Gurleen Kaur



The Taste of Loss

Trin D

Can you describe the smell or the taste of death? Or how it fills every crevice of your nose, making it impossible to find another scent? The taste never quite disappears, no matter how many times you brush your teeth; it just turns into a minty fresh version of decay.

Death won't start to follow you everywhere until you start to walk the hidden path from the hospital to the hospice house across the street. The building will try so hard to leave the hospital appearance behind; however, it never passes as a home. The entrance has glass doors that lock from the inside; you'll see empty hallways with the occasional nurse doing their rounds. Right in front of the doors is the check-in desk — clearly a spare table covered with sign-in sheets, medical masks, and hand sanitizer. As you wait in the cold for the volunteers to grant you access from their makeshift desk, you will always think that it isn't too late to turn back and run — run so far away from the fake home, the hospitals, the people, the cards, and the pity; run until you reached the space in time where your mum

was still “Mama” to you, where she could hold you, make you laugh and tell you that everything works out in the end. But you will never get to run away.

When you walk through the outdated halls, searching every room number, you can’t help but experience the lives of those around you. The older folks have often made peace with the time they’ve had; surrounded by their living testaments of lives that were lived. You’ll hear the crying of those trapped between the present and the prisons of their fading minds, calling out to people both present and past. The most haunting are those who remain in empty rooms, facing the end on their own; no sounds escape those spaces. The hallways bounce the sounds of those laughing, moaning, and sobbing almost to a deafening level. It’s all you hear, until you step through your own door, where the familiar sounds of dying echo as the life of someone you love quietly fades.

The first time I visited my mom in hospice she was still my mama — laughing, joking, and filling the room with her smile. The room was sterile, furniture added only for the grieving guest. The lights above shone a fluorescent glow that made my skin look green and pale, but my mom was covered in soft light, making her look full of life. Hospices seem to love irony. The room slowly crowds with people, flowers, and cards — all personal testimonies of how many people my mom had touched with her kindness and smile. The air was heavy, it continued to always be heavy with words forever left unsaid, and the scent of countless flowers that filled every surface. The big windows overlooked well-maintained greenery, thick bushes and thin trees shielding anyone who might accidentally look into someone’s last moments. Yet, each room my mom occupied had a clear view of a playground that was often used, taunting those dying with the joy and innocence of new life.

It’s a strange feeling to watch someone that I’ve come from and known my whole life turn into a shell with vague similarities of the person who was once filled with life, while my relationships with my family changed under the scary circumstances. Being an older sister

comes with the responsibility of caring and protecting your siblings, no matter the cost. It's strange to think in those few months, my baby brother took on the role as *my* protector, my rock — the only reason I could work up the strength to step into that building of decay. My mom's final room seemed to always be filled with flowers that shifted and changed depending on the day, with there always being room for more cards and more flowers. The names and thoughts carried by the flowers were long forgotten as my mom's world turned from the present into memories of the life she had lived.

I could never tell how long I had been there as the dying don't have much use for time. My hours would feel like seconds and minutes felt like I'd been there for hours. The few moments alone with my mum were often filled with silence as I watched, trying to guess what memories were playing behind her eyelids, giving her absent mind a break from the crowds that would come parading in and out throughout the day. I'd fill my time listening for the footsteps of someone who would take my moment with her away or watching her chest rise and fall, painfully aware that it could stop at any moment. Those are the times the room was calm, and the presence of death politely waited on the other side of the door.

The air seemed to relax as it no longer held the weight of everyone's unspoken thoughts and feelings. I could hear how the silence blanketed the sounds of the medical devices, that always beeped to keep me from holding onto a thought or feeling too long. It muffled the sounds of the snow and the rain falling, no matter how focused you were on trying to hear the weather. The only sounds that would break through the cone of silence that grief placed around the room was the laugh and joyful screams of the children that played outside the window — souls still filled with overflowing youth, still not tainted with the painful experiences of the world just yet.



Liam Payne is Dead and All Anyone is Talking About is the Death of their Childhood

Emma Tedman

and his first verse in *Story of My Life* is taking you to more distant places than this rain-beaten car ever could as the trees beyond the shoulder blur into night-darkened green across your window sprinting from in front of you to behind you faster than you can run

to the backseat when it was summer and your view of your mother's hair up front was blotted with blinding yellow spots from looking at the sun for too long while *What Makes You Beautiful* played multiple times on the radio during that long road trip to California where you would be

too short to go on that roller coaster at SeaWorld and too young to see growing up as anything more than being big enough to go on scary rides and maybe you were right but what you didn't know was that

your dad would always be there to carry the weight of your life

like he did that night in Disneyland when on his shoulders you sat above the mantle of heads lit burning violet under the blooming fireworks or the way he did when you fell asleep on the shuttle ride back to the hotel and woke up in his gargantuan arms still strong enough to carry you the way he did

when you were first diagnosed with GAD or the way he did when you were seventeen and shaking on graduation night or the way he does now after you made it home to this chilled concrete tomb of a parking lot with cheeks that will never be as dry as they were before tonight

as your phone trembles and quivers again and again against the tear-stained cuffs of your sweater under the weight of your friend's messages sending you back to distant 1D concerts and how we're all so glad we caught one before Zayn left and how they will never be together

as five ever again and it dawns on you like the quiet blue of an early morning after a night you just couldn't sleep that childhoods are more like ghosts screaming from unearthed graves than lifeless bodies mangled by falling from high places as they haunt and impossibly tug you back

to watered down memories about summers in booster seats and stinging sun burns or Halloween dances with cheap costumes of tulle grating your thighs in a creaking elementary school gymnasium where Liam's voice reverberating through the dark awoke electric goosebumps all over your tired limbs the same way they do now in an older vessel

and we all hope it was an accident but what we know for sure is that fans stepped up and over each other at that hotel in Buenos Aires the night Liam fell

to love something best only when it's gone.



The Climb

Mattias Henry

Content Warning: Death and Gore

The mountain was a foreboding, impassive face. Its beard of trees towered overhead. Its dirty, porous skin an onslaught of brambles and detritus. Its acne of protruding boulders only navigable for the path carved through the midst. The path itself was far from perfect, composed of roots, dried mud, and stone. It was steeper somehow than the mountain itself.

At this point, only a lone pair of travellers was willing to expose themselves to the path. Breathing heavily as they trekked farther and farther up, they felt the glare of the mountain making them hunch, almost to the point of crawling.

The leading figure looked similar enough to the boy behind him

that any onlooker would have easily been able to draw a swift connection to his parentage.

"Remind me again," said the trailing figure. "Where are we going?" He was a rather unremarkable looking boy, who appeared to be a rather unremarkable, if not slightly miserable age. Just old enough to start thinking about the world, yet far too young for anyone to take him seriously in any aspect.

"Up." Unlike his son, the man was never much for using more words than necessary.

"And why are we still doing that?" the boy panted, as roots from the trail ensnared his ankle with seemingly palpable intent.

"Because you told me you wanted to go on a hike with a view."

"The river near the parking lot was close enough to what I had in mind, very spectacular."

"It's not a hike unless you're climbing."

The boy considered this. He concluded that the view was more what he had in mind than the hike itself and was not entirely sure what compelled him to include the word hike in the first place. This was not mentioned to his father. Instead, a silence fell over the two, as they both kept their heads down, scrutinizing every foothold as if it would try to betray them. Which of course it would at the soonest opportunity. The face didn't care about the well-being of those who climbed it. It wore a permanent smirk, dripping with arrogance, which illustrated that fact perfectly. As fate would have it, the crooked and jutting top lip of the smirk was where the duo were about to find themselves.

"Hold tight to the left. Use the chain." This was the first thing said by either of the duo in several minutes. Breaking the sanctity of silence was, however, most definitely a necessary evil. Over the lip of the right-hand side of the path was a quick plummet sure at least to break bone.

"Don't need to tell me twice." If the boy was panting before, he was now gasping. He took full advantage of the momentary pause granted by his father's warning to gulp down air.

The pause was brief. The man figured his boy was ready enough. The boy hesitated, glancing up and down the chain. He didn't think it was worth trusting his life to.

His father shared none of his apprehension. He pressed onwards, grabbing the chain bolted to the rock, and scuttled alongside the mountain face. The boy edged out onto the thin rock path, clutching the chain with far more trust than he had originally planned to. He dared at most to shuffle his feet.

As the boy shuffled, he could not help but feel the pull. The pull of the edge. He froze. Halfway across the chain. He gripped the rusted metal. White knuckled. Sweaty. His feet slipped on the slick rock. He gripped harder. He peered over the edge. He couldn't help it.

As soon as he could see it, he could smell it. The sight was hardly an improvement on the smell. A deer, or rather what once was a deer, lay at the bottom of the rock face. The abdominal meat was rotten just enough that it seemed to be almost dripping through the ribs. Flies swarmed the corpse, dancing between the opened rot and the head, feasting on the meat wherever they could gain access.

"Get moving," the man said after watching his son stare for a few moments. The boy jumped at this unexpected remark. He felt his grip loosen. Fear bubbled up inside him. He saw his body tumbling down the rock face, bones snapping, skin tearing, all to stop with a wet thud accompanied by the sickening crack of his skull against the ground. His lifeless body lay within the stone maw adjacent the deer.

He quickly managed to regain himself. The momentary fear morphed itself into annoyance.

"Give me a damn second," the boy hissed, shooting a glare that any parent of a child of that age is all too familiar with. The boy recomposed his body, his mind still racing with fear. Slowly, he inched the rest of the way to the end of the chain, avoiding the helping hand of his father. They once again continued in silence.

Much time passed, spent in silence. Not the prior peaceful silence. An uncomfortable silence that both wanted broken, but neither wanted to break. The boy was the first to have his desire overpower his resolve.

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“What do you think dying feels like?”

“Well for the deer you’re probably thinking about, I’d say it unfortunately probably hurts quite a lot.” It was true. The image of the rotting corpse was at the forefront of the boy’s mind. The image of his own accompanied it.

“No, I don’t mean like that — ”

“How do you mean then?”

The boy thought about this. As hard as this question may be to answer, it seemed harder to ask.

“I think I mean more like, right after you die.”

“Not much feeling to do when you’re dead. You’re done with your journey. You go wherever it is you go next.”

“There’s got to be SOMETHING. In that exact moment. Some kind of feeling.”

“Like your mind shutting down?”

“I guess that. Maybe soul.”

The man took a deep sigh and turned to look to his son.

“Well, I’m not one for believing in that kind of thing. But I can tell you what my father told me when I asked a similar question at a similar age.”

The boy looked at his father with eager anticipation.

“He told me that his best friend died. Peanut allergy. Didn’t have the slightest clue he even had one till then. Was dead for eight minutes. They brought him back and he sat up like a meerkat, a little rattled, but all there.”

The man let the words hang, just long enough for the boy’s patience to expire.

“Well, what did he feel?”

“He said it felt something like waking up after one of those hard sleeps.”

The boy nodded his head slowly, not satisfied with the answer. The man saw the dissatisfaction in his eyes, and continued before the chance to interrupt was taken.

“I believe his exact words were more along the lines of ‘It felt like

trying to remember a dream in those few moments after waking up from one of those sleeps and feeling the memory of that dream slip away. No matter how hard you try to grasp it, it just pours through your fingers like water. But there is no despair, worry or fear. You're far too tired to even begin to register that."

"Sounds like you remember it pretty well."

"Some things just stick with you. That was one of them. That's enough rest, we have more ground to cover. Next chunk is damn near vertical."

The trail had still not improved. The roots grew ever denser, nearly entirely enveloping the path. They pressed on.

"Eyes down, watch the path. Don't fall now." The man had seen many an injury on a path like this.

"Can't we stop and look around?" The boy said this after already stopping, rendering the request more of a declaration. He was tired. His head was hot but would not sweat. His second wind was fleeting. His eyes, no longer downward, roamed across the landscape. The surrounding area was far less foreboding than the path.

A lake, blue and pure as a nazar. Its surface glimmered in a way not even an ocean could mimic. Its shore was of beautifully geometric rock. It called to the boy, in a way few things could. Almost akin to staring into a lover's eyes.

To the right of the lake was a cave. It bore straight into the smooth rock face of the mountain. Lashes of stone protruded from the top and bottom of the entrance to the cave. It held an aura of foreboding and intrigue, beauty and fear, wet and dark. This also called to the boy, albeit a different part of him. Without a doubt, the boy knew the cave went deep. Straight into the soul of the mountain.

"The view's not here," said the man, his eyes on the trail. "We're almost there. Catch up."

"I don't know if I can. I'm tired. I like it here. This is a view."

"It's not the view we came for. I'm not stopping here." The words of the man tore his son from his scenery-induced trance. Maybe he

was right. What's the point in not doing what you came to do? The boy started after his father. The lake and the cave pulled at him. But it was not enough to ween him off his course.

They were near. They could feel the wind ripping into them now that they were out of the trees. A flat plane of rock and a short scramble awaited them.

A shroud of fog blanketed the bald and pockmarked rock, veiling the world below and above. The boy lost sight of his father.

"Where did you go?" the boy called.

"Just here, try and keep up. The top is close."

"The top?" the boy asked, exhausted.

"Yes, it's right there. Just through the fog. Careful with your step. Many places to fall."

One step, one fall. Could be anywhere. Fear crept into the boy's voice. He tried to disguise it as anger. "What top? What the hell are we even doing here? There's no way this is what either of us want. Where's the view we came for? There's nothing here!"

The man maintained his forward gaze. "We made it to the end. That was why we came. To finish the hike."

"That might be why you came. I just wanted a view. I just wanted to spend some fucking time with you!" The boy was shouting at this point, the beginnings of tears trying to break free of his eyes. But he was not done.

"So yeah, just keep marching along the trail, head down until you get to a nonexistent view. Sure dad, that's how I'll do things. It clearly works out." The boy's tears broke. But he had made sure his back was also turned by then.

The man turned and saw the back of his son retreating into the fog down the trail from which they came. He felt a feeling only a parent could feel: a mix of guilt, love, exasperation, and regret. His boy was right. He was just too old to see it in the moment. Too stuck in his learned ways. Too far away from what he used to be. Too driven to get to the end. He sat.

What even was at the end?

Not much of a view for damn sure. Nothing here worth rushing to. Just a throne of clouds.

After several minutes, the reality of those facts made themselves comfortable in the man's mind. His son had changed. His son had grown.

In some ways even wiser than I am. With that realization, he got up. With the dream of his young and helpless boy shattered, the man followed the other man back down the face of the mountain.

Meltwater

Jack Shipley

When I saunter alone along the creek
Or lay in bed at night,
I cling to a habitual devotion
And resist a fog of division.
This time consumes attention
And loosens my grasp.
It brings on a pattern of self-doubt, and
Feelings of depletion.

Without discrediting Nature's symphony,
Their ongoing rotation and song cycle
May be the root of this uncontrollable suffering.
The drab snow and rain produce electric shivers
Curling my body around every neighbourhood corner.

My longing for the glimmer of the sun to soak through my skin
Grows with each passing moment.

I forget my essence
and transform into a thin piece of ice,
Sticking to my hardwood bedroom floor.
I am waiting for the seasons
to melt me free.

The days grow shorter and leave me no pleasure,
No answers and no measures.

Wide awake with a restless heart,
Terrified of what may happen in the night
I'm not dead yet; I'm only bleeding
And the blood I've shed hasn't dried over.
I made a mistake, tethering myself to those ideas
Like boats across the harbour
Down the beach yonder.

Losing grip on the ladder of memory,
I fall down the pit of self
into total concealment.
The darkening reaches the tail end of being;
The light that reveals my poem has gone out.

Something arises from the ashes:
Time abandons me;
I bear separation from a necessary unity
And become meltwater.

The only thing left is a thought.
The ground of which is primitive.
It is the sun in my world's sky,
And shines into real life.

Truth will emerge
In the persistent and passionate pursuit of this thought;
My first thought.

Home is Two Arms and a Head

Nel Synoradzki

I am not man, nor am I person. Woman is completely out of the question. I feel menial a lot of the time, cause I'm bad with my hands but good with my head. But people don't see my head, only my face, and sometimes I'm bad at that, too. To get the head out — trepan. To get the heart out — wane. Tamper with the hands: learn, knit, purl. Tamper with the alarm, miss the bus, the chance, the train. Back to the head. I like the realm in between words where we finally get to meet. Air becomes pliant, voice bending space. Then, in head, word becomes world, and I love you again. Heart is a shallow dish, the old pool in Moscow. Evaporating, the nearby walls turn patina green. Head runs after leftover string. Hands don't follow. Send empty mail to the ones I love, love letters to their empty houses. I'm trying to be plain again, just to see what comes back. So far, I have a lamp and an altar.



Don't Ask for Permission to Read This

Andy Chau

If I am my body, then I am trying too hard.

Imagine we are at a house party and we are high schoolers. You want to show me something, C'mon, just for fun. Okay, I laugh and go along with it. You spin me around and tell me to count to three. When I turn back around, you have your hands behind your back. Right or left, choose one. I ask if there is a correct one, if I win with a certain choice. Yes, you will know if you chose the right one. I point to your left side and you pull out your arm. What comes out gently cradled by your left hand is my body. You've dressed her up in a powder blue summer dress and her red hair falls just barely below her shoulders. When I ask if this was the right choice, as I am not quite sure, you tell me how pretty I look, how the dress fits my curves just right, how my hair carries the summer breeze, and you ask if you can kiss me. I say yes but I don't know if you are talking to my body or to me. I want to ask you again if I chose correctly but you lean your face into mine and

all I can do is bite my tongue until my mouth is filled with blood and hope that you will notice. You press my head against yours harder. When we pull apart, you tell me how beautiful the red stains look on my lips, that I look just like a doll.

If my body is me, then there is something she refuses to tell me.

There is only so much you can see when there's a sheet of paper over your face at all times, with only two holes for eyes. It's stifling. I don't know where I am most days because the air under the mask is all the same all the time. At some point, I can't remember when, it's suffocating to the point where I turn blue and purple. I can't remember why, but there are scissors in my hand. I can only remember how I cut out a hole to breathe. Only, I've never done this before and now the hole is way too big, too disproportionate, so I cut a bigger hole to even things out. I go bigger and bigger until the scissors meet the end of the sheet. There is a spiral starting from the center of my face that exits off into my neck. She's come back now, my body, and she's looking right at me, at the spiral I've made. Her eyes twist and turn, trying to follow the line but it's nauseating, all too confusing so she looks at the ground instead, an unmoving, constant surface. Normally it would be OK and I would prefer it if people don't look. But she is my body, so I challenge her to catch the glimpses of light that desperately crawl out from the cuts and hold onto them like fleeting memories. Mostly, I wouldn't care but she is my mother and my sisters and I ache for the same warmth they once shared with me before the twists on my face.

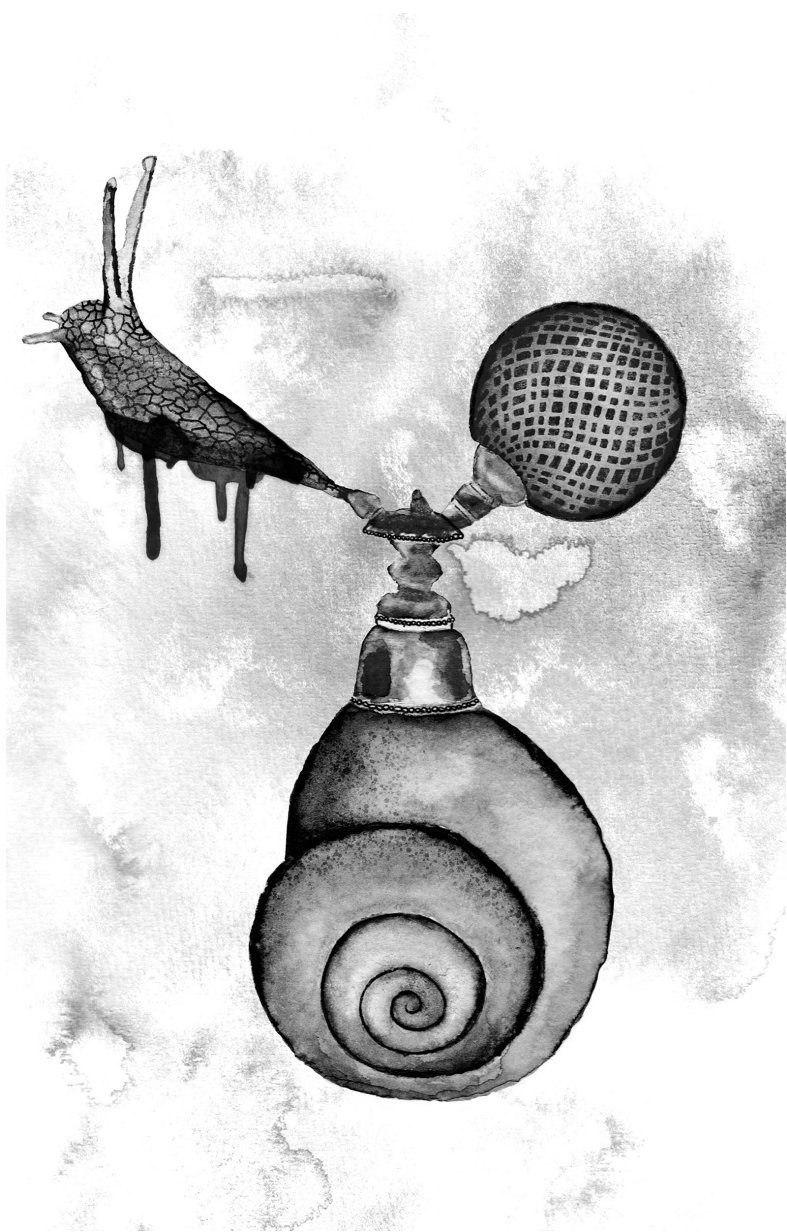
If my body is my own, then I owe my mother.

Several months of meticulously carving me out of her own flesh and years of breathing her life into me. She gave me such a body and it only makes sense that I owe her it. I owe her waist-length hair, mascara-filled lashes and a bright, lively voice. I owe her sisters-only nights, sharing each other's clothes and complaining about boys. What kind of daughter would I be if I were to gnaw on my hair and rip at my dress? Who am I to wrap my chest so tight that it kisses my

bones and pierce needle after needle to rewrite my code right in front of the very woman who shaped me? What am I to her, now that I reek of my father? And when it is too late, could I show her that I hold the same laugh as before, the same gentleness, the same appreciation? If I could embrace her without our limbs or skin in the way and show her that I love the same way I did before, would she still want to have partaken in the creation of my body?

If I cannot ask for the blooming fondness I am familiar with, the one where you see yourself in me, then would it be acceptable to ask for one of tenderness, of consideration for what I went through and a soft eagerness for what I can become?

But, no, it's not realistic, not at all what will happen, and frankly, you're tired of listening in on what happens inside my head. You crave for something you can hold, touch, something you can reason with. You want me to name names and only then you can put the blame on somebody. All right then, I'll give you something real. Something you can dig your teeth in and deliciously tear me raw. And while my body is bare to you, tell me what lays scarred on the curves of my chest. I'll tell you the name that is carved there is at fault. Say it again, but this time, say it like it has a story, like it isn't a hollow shell housing barren beliefs. I will take no offence, if you even need my permission, because this way you will believe me when you see a barely visible lump pulse deep in my chest. Stick your hand down my throat, would you, get past the artificially thickened vocal cords and testosterone-filled spit and grab ahold of the rock lodged in between my ribs. That is what's left of its story and yet please don't laugh when I say that I still can't swallow it down. You will give me that look, the one of guilt mixed with hesitance, and will ask me what I prefer to go by instead and with your hand down my throat I will selfishly tell you to call me anything that doesn't make your mouth sore. Something that doesn't ache your gums or leave a bitter aftertaste or lock up your jaw.



Shedding Fleas

Ethan Sauer

These boys try so hard, clinging to my cat hair;
successful 'till they shed with it — so nostalgia-stricken, so forgotten.

How you can ponder with an album
over god's existence — but never a man.

How the universe knew to build me
with peroxide-skin — ready to slaughter a billion bugs.

I am shedding off his taste in music
faster than the universe expands,

quicker than a quantum bond
has time to prepare for sorcery,

sipping the singularity from my coffee
and calling it breakfast.

Always bumming off a paradox to fuel my day
the way a cat outshines Christ nine times

and still mess your couch with their fur; I am slowly
shedding off my taste in insects,

in search of permanent impermanence —
a new flea to forget.

The Liar 2025

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The Contest

The Liar is a student-run literary magazine. Each issue of The Liar has two recurring contests; writing and design, with a \$500 prize each. While general submissions are encouraged from all writers, the contest is only open to students of Capilano University.

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