

LUMIÈRE  
DEBUT ISSUE

MMXXV





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# LUMIÈRE

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DEBUT ISSUE

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**SCRIBE**







# *Lumière*

light [noun]

the brightness given by the sun, a flame, lamps etc. that makes things  
able to be seen







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# 28881 *Grand River Avenue*

Timothy Gray Jr.

28881, as the renovated home was known, had been built in 1913 and the faded wood proved it. Though a new coat of red paint coveted the planks, chips and splitting wrinkles in the muted wood could not be hidden. Still, the friend group admired the elderly foundation, the rickety second level balcony above the porch, and the bay windows in the living room. One by one they hoisted boxes and furniture through the storm door. The first to pass through the doorway was Brian Cores. He scanned the foyer, setting his sight on fertile ground. Dusty, brown floorboards were yet to be furnished. *At least I'm out of my parents' house... All of this... It's like a dream come true*, he mused. He'd moved back home after graduating college and for three months his wheels spun with no job opportunities on the horizon. Then, he discovered this house and rang up his friend Jonathan. They and four other friends agreed to split a three-thousand dollar lease. The landlord was kind enough to oblige, glad to help recent, local college grads; it was an atypical lease, not requiring a guarantor.

As the afternoon droned on, cars emptied. The couch was placed in the living room with a loveseat and a TV. An open box of beer sat on the coffee table beside loose bottle caps. On the first floor there were Jonathan and Isaac. They had roomed together back in freshman year of college and volunteered to take the first level. Jonathan, a guy with a brunette man-bun, helped Isaac place his mattress in the bedframe. "Thanks!" Isaac huffed. "How long do you think we'll all be here?"

"Probably for a bit," Jonathan replied. He stared out of the single window in Isaac's room. An untamed forest grew in the backyard. "To be honest, I was talking to Brian a month ago and he was really complaining about his parent's place, feeling restricted, alone. Plus, the market isn't too great for his field right now." He took a seat on the windowsill and continued staring out. "Cherry and Sherri basically said the same thing"

"So, you found somewhere they could at least be happy while looking for jobs," Isaac put together. He pushed his glasses up his bridge. "Well, let's see if they can find jobs to pay rent soon."

"At least Andre's and Brian's parents will cover for them these next few months," Jonathan smirked. "And I didn't find the place. Brian did. He had driven by on the way home, pulled over, and the landlord was conveniently already there for a tour. He felt drawn to the place. Quite hon—" Suddenly a thump pounded on the ceiling above.



On the second floor, Andre set his nightstand down. He had just finished moving all of his furniture and sat down on the bed. Slowly, he brought a beer bottle to his lips and let the wheat-tinted liquid sift down his throat. He was a rowdy one, yet the most laid back. When it came to choosing rooms, he didn't quite care where his bed landed. "Hey! Turn the music up!" He hollered down the hall.

Cherry – a blond-haired former track and field athlete – turned up the volume on her speaker. She sat at her desk in a white blouse perusing online job boards. She clicked away on her laptop. "Next page... next page... not \$18 per hour... \$20 and up... \$20 and up," she groaned.

"Don't listen to Andre, he's an idiot. Turn the music down, we can't have neighbors complain on our first day," Sherri remarked from the bedroom doorway. A lanky, red-haired girl glared. "You still looking for jobs? You should be unpacking."

"That can wait."

"No, *that* can wait," Sherri retorted. She scurried over to Cherry's desk and slammed the laptop closed. "Enjoy the moment." She stared into Cherry's aquamarine irises. "Remember college? Remember the nights the six of us had? We have that for a little bit longer. Don't be in too much of a rush." Cherry's shoulders drooped. She sunk into the computer chair, seemingly drowning in the leather.

"That's great and all, but we still need to find jobs, Sher. We can't all be Jonathan and Isaac and have any easy path like engineering. We have to put some effort into this. Like what am I going to do with a degree in graphic design!" she erupted.

"I understand, let's take a breath. Just don't be too hard on yourself, love. Stay open to all opportunities," Sherri attempted to persuade, clanking a freshly opened beer on the desk. "Drink!" Then, she smiled and ventured down the hall. Her flip flops smacked the hardwood floor loudly. As she reached her own room filled with unpacked boxes, she passed the ladder to the attic where Brian resided. The ladder was fragile and shaky. No one else desired to climb such a death trap every day and squeeze through a narrow passage to enter their bedroom. Leaving was another test of confidence to worry about. But Brian chose to be there. He called dibs on the attic quickly, before anyone else could speak.

The cobweb-infested attic was surprisingly spacious. Brian was almost done unpacking; a stack of books, a gaming system, and several journals littering the floor. He sat down on his bed, observing the isolated room. His brown skin blended in with the boards. *Home base...*, he sighed. His lips shifted into a smile and he sipped his beer.

At around eight o'clock in the evening, the six convened in the living room. Self-made paintings hung on the walls, and small cat-like trinkets populated the coffee table. Cherry and Sherri sat on the couch beside Brian. Isaac occupied the loveseat.

"Going out?" Brian complained. Cherry took notice, stealing a glance and a giggle. "Not that I have anything against it."

"Yes! We gotta christen the house, start our new journey in life out right!" Andre clamored. He sat down on the TV stand, wobbling the flat screen.

"How many beers have you had," Cherry interrupted.

"Enough," Sherri joked beside her. She raised her hand, causing the strap of her shirt to slide down her arm. "I actually agree though. There's no point in staying in the house all night."

Isaac leaned forward in the loveseat. "Go out with what mon-," He started.

"Let's go, I'm hungry!" Jonathan boomed, emerging from the kitchen empty-handed. "What are we thinking?"

"Fries from Larry's?" Andre proposed.

"Fries?" Cherry questioned.

"Fries." Isaac added, nodding.

"Fries," Brian injected.

"Yeah, fries would hit right now," Jonathan agreed.

Andre clapped his sandy palms. "So, we're going out?"

"We're going out, stupid," Sherri confirmed. The six of them ventured into the moonlit night packing into Jonathan and Isaac's cars to a bar named Larry's – as they would every Saturday night onward. For three-hundred and sixty-five days the friends lived in 28881. Rent was paid when it could be. Harmony didn't always have a bed, yet time went on.

-----

During the first month, Brian holed up in the attic. A hazy, yellow lamp illuminated the murky abode. The blue screen of his laptop painted his face most of the day. At night, he would join his roommates in the living room for movie sessions and conversations. Jonathan and Isaac returned from work around six in the afternoon typically; the rest continued their searches.

One day, Brian rose from his desk and stretched. "There's nothing bitin' today," he groaned. He ventured below, searching for a roommate. He knocked on a door and no one answered. Opening it, he discovered a bedroom covered in K-Pop group posters. "Sherri's not here," he noted. His foot squeaked down the hall to the next. He peeked into Andre's room, finding a messy bed and piles of clothes. *Andre is gone too*, he observed.

"Looking for something?" A voice emanated from the hall behind him. He about-faced, locking eyes with Cherry. His pupils dilated, shrieking from surprise. "Didn't expect to see me?" Cherry giggled.

"Not really...Sherri was gone so I thought you'd be with her."

Cherry started downstairs. She placed her hand on the wooden railing, the first board creaking. "She went to a coffee shop with Andre. They've made a habit of it lately," she sighed. Her fingers danced along the railing melancholy.

"And you? What are your plans?" Brian inquired with a smile, his chest tightening. "I can't look at my laptop anymore. The posts just blur together." Cherry shrugged, her blue jean jacket rustling.

"How about we go for a walk, get some sun?" Brian offered.

The two of them moved to the porch, the warmth of the sunlight bathing them. Cherry stood under the doorway, watching Brian attentively. "Not many writing jobs here, are there?" she inquired.

"Not really," Brian sighed. "You know, I still remember when you read that short story I wrote."

"'Endless'? I remember it pretty well." They strolled down the sidewalk side by side. The wind was weak, dancing through the thin gap between their hands.

"Despite the canyon between it and I, the abyss of feeling urging me to bridge the gap, I stay resolute in my station. Forever, I toil with the idea but lack action. In this space, the feelings I hold become cyclical, an endless experience to relive," Cherry recited, the shallow breath leaving her pink lips.

Brian smirked. His hand inching toward hers. "That's the part you remember the most?"

"It's the sentences that stuck out the most to me. I always wondered what you meant by them. Do you remember?" She looked up at him. She was a couple inches shorter than he. To her, he was a skyscraper and she a mid-rise.

"The meaning? I'm looking at her right now," Brian replied. He stared back, the two pausing on the sidewalk. They couldn't even make it down the street. The wind seemed to stop blowing entirely. The atmosphere stilled and the sun beamed.

"Then bridge the gap," Cherry said, her lips curling. Brian's fingers moved to clasp hers, holding as tightly as a ring. The lack of employment and anxiety of disappointment caused his palms to sweat.

-----

By the fourth month, Cherry and Brian had gone on numerous dates. Living together made spending time easy but added complications – not that any of the other roommates hadn't foreseen the relationship. Common areas became not so common – not just because of Brian and Cherry. Still, everyone endured.

Andre found himself in a call center Monday through Friday, while Sherri cinched an entry role at an advertising agency. Their first night home from work, they dragged themselves through 28881's front door. Sherri slumped onto the couch,



putting her legs up on the coffee table. Her pencil skirt rose up slightly. Andre, on the other hand, went straight into the kitchen and cracked open a bottle of beer. He plopped onto the couch beside Sherri and took a sip. "How was your first day," he croaked.

Sherri angrily glared at her skirt, then went upstairs to change. "I hate pencil skirts!" she yelled on her way up.

"Okay. Mine was fine, thanks for asking," he sighed. He rested the cold bottle on his khakis.

Moments later, Brian walked down to the first floor. "You're back. How was the call center?" He drowsily asked.

"It was chill. What were you up to?" Andre noticed his eye boogers.

"Cherry and I just woke up from a nap. Didn't get too much done," he yawned. He hadn't spent much time in the attic. Cherry's room had become a second home of sorts.

"Yeah, that makes sense," Isaac huffed as he walked through the front door with Jonathan. The two of them were dressed in business casual attire; button-ups and dress shoes. "Are your parents paying rent again?" Isaac chuckled. Standing behind him, Jonathan awkwardly smiled. He nudged Isaac in the back. At the same time, Cherry and Sherri walked down the stairs, appearing behind Brian.

"You guys want to try a restaurant tonight?" Jonathan proposed. Everyone nodded. However, Brian said, "I think I'm going to hang back tonight." His laptop's purple screen illuminated the room until two a.m.

-----

During their sixth month at 28881, Cherry finally received an offer letter for a small graphic designer position. She had gone into a small clothing business for an interview two weeks prior. "It's only a couple hours a week and the pay isn't great, but it's a start. I'll be able to cover rent at least. We might not be able to spend so much time together though," she rattled off, telling Brian for the first time.

"Don't worry about it. That's amazing, it'll be good experience," he encouraged. They sat around the wood table in the kitchen. Chilling tile cooled their feet. "When do you start?" Brian asked.

"Monday."

So, Monday came. Cherry walked out of 28881's doors to her first day on the job. "Don't stop looking, I know it'll all work out for you," she imparted. Brian waved her off, placing a kiss on her forehead before she left out into the hazy early morning. The door closed behind her and, for the first time, the home was completely silent. Nothing could be heard but Brian's breathing. Much had changed in six months. Jonathan and Isaac remained consistent in their jobs but found one another over the months. Andre and Sherri had jobs. They were making rent each month. Plus, they

both had found partners at the coffee shop they loved to sneak off to together. Yet one thing remained consistent, Brian spent his nine to five at 28881 scanning job boards.

After Cherry had left for her first day of work, Brian sat at the kitchen table, eating leftover pizza. The slice hung out of his motionless hand. "Find yourself lost in thought, young man?" A voice inquired. He looked up, discovering a man with olive skin and long gray hair wearing a pair of jean overalls. "You're trespassing onto my property," the man croaked.

"Trespassing?" Brian squawked. "Aren't I at 28881 Grand River Avenue? I live here with my friends."

"Son, this is my property, and I'm still renovating it. I haven't rented it to anyone." Brian's face contorted, stupefied. *I've lived here for six months. Am I crazy?* He ruminated. He looked around. The kitchen no longer had cabinets on its walls. The tile floor was incomplete. The table he sat at was old and rickety, not like the pristine wood Jonathan had brought with him. *I was daydreaming? I never called Jonathan and suggested we all live together. It hasn't been six months?* His smartphone read July 12th, the same day he thought he had told Jonathan about the house.

"Look, some neighbors called me when they saw you pull over and enter the house. I'm not going to call the police or anything," the old man explained. "Let me show you something." Brian rose from the table and followed. The old man guided him up to the second floor. They stopped in front of the attic ladder. They climbed the shaky tool and squeezed through the narrow space. On the dusty floorboards, the old man walked over to a pile covered by a dirty, crème tarp. He pulled it back, revealing a jagged, purple stone with a misty reflection on its surface. "Exotic looking rock, right? It might fetch a pretty price. You're the fifth to come here all hypnotized. I was walking by this place one day when I saw this stone lying in that overgrown backyard. Something told me to buy the place," the old man croaked.

"I drive past this place kind of often," Brian muttered. *This little rock showed me six months of a false life*, he mused.

"I think the stone spoke to you. Whatever it showed you, I hope it wasn't horrible."

"It wasn't too bad. That stone was just doing me a favor, I guess. Thank you," Brian smiled. He started down the ladder and to the front door. He exited the house, stepping out onto the evening porch with his shoulders broad. His silver sedan was parked along the street, waiting. Brian found the keys in his pocket and unlocked the driver's side door. On the mesh cushions, he looked back at the two-level home. *It wasn't too bad...*, he thought. *But it wasn't real*. He revved the engine and drove off, leaving behind the wishing stone of 28881.

He texted in the group chat:

[Brian]  
Miss you guys :)

[Sher]

MISS YOU TOO!

[Jonathan]

You too! Everything alright?

[Isaac]

You too.

[Cherry]

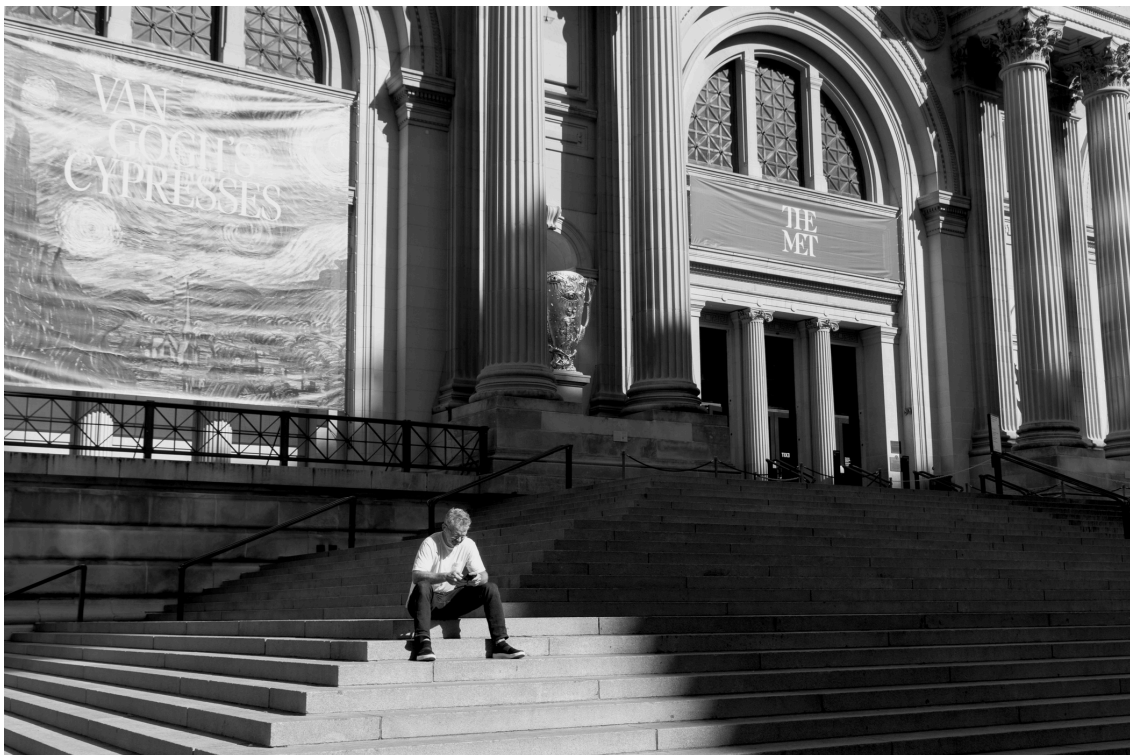
OMG we need to meet up soon, there's too much to catch up on!

[Andre]

Are you guys free this weekend?

# *Silent Stories of the City I*

Samantha Kim



# *Echoes of Something*

Veronica Alvarado Oscanoa

Look at me. Tell me–  
Love–it's all I want to hear.  
Louder than distance,  
Love  
What I thought I felt before we met.  
What I wanted you to feel.  
Was it all a lie?  
Was it all in my head?  
Maybe  
Maybe it wasn't love.  
Maybe I only wished it was.  
Maybe it was  
Love  
Maybe, it was  
Expectation.

## *Ebb and Anchor*

Mandy Shantyne Lopez

She drifts where moonlight guides the sea;  
He roots where Earth claims destiny.  
A siren's song; a mortal's creed,  
Two halves of one eternal need.  
Her wings unfurl in the ocean's glow.  
His strength is the rock she yearns to know.  
She brings the chaos; he the calm:  
Her tidal pull, his steady psalm.  
She moves; he stays– the dance unfolds,  
A divine duality etched in gold.  
~MSL33



# *a star burst open*

Daniela Garcia

When we rested on the grass, his figure endless amongst the infinite green  
I felt the need to pray, for what, exactly, I didn't know  
I tucked you into my pocket along with your scraps of poetry, kept since our  
shared, glittering tweenhood,  
Hoping the brilliance I once saw in the mirror wasn't fleeting  
And I'm sorry, Caroline, I should've prayed more

You wanted purple-prose and you wanted midnights,  
Honey-soaked mornings and bouquet of flowers you didn't know the name of,  
To witness the cold kiss of a tear leaving his eye  
Roaming water pooling between the ribs of a shared home  
It spilled into the garden and out the driveway

The way you loved clung to the air, once,  
Heavy like cologne by the pool-side  
Driven with need in the wake of your youth  
Rolling in the underbelly of summer,  
The heart curling into droplets, a second skin—you danced with it on

You drank the sun of august and suckled on clementines  
The slow spit of the coming-of-age, bubbling like drool down the spine of your days  
Blue powder and freshwater on your face—I saw you, in the gloaming, endless  
Spring spoke to me then, thunderous in the aftermath, voice like a garden of lungs,  
"Dance," she said, disembodied yet warm

But I couldn't do it, not like you could  
Like the sheepish brush of hands in the winter,  
Fevered and crooked; I had grown cold  
Contractually tethered to that little square of blue that hung above me,  
I couldn't see past my mother's wooden spoon, or the map in her hands

I told you, then, "I need to grow up."  
You forgot to pack a bag but left the next morning anyways  
He asked me where you went—now and then I loathed you,  
I wanted to compare scars again, to see if the blood had dried around yours  
Or to see if you were doing anything this summer

You left your love letters, unaddressed and undelivered, under my bed  
When I think of the way you loved, and find I can't touch that which I feel

Caressing curved ink, needlessly delving into the starlit wound  
A star burst open, your heart pearlescent;  
And it had been a year since you were cut open, and another since you opened  
your mouth

## *Silent Stories of the City II*

Samantha Kim



# *Divine Duality*

Mandy Shantyne Lopez

In the cradle of the tide and stone,  
Two forces meet, yet stand alone.  
The siren calls, her song a flame.  
He answers softly, yet none the same.

She flows with waves -untamed, surreal.  
He stands like mountains, firm and real.  
A paradox-their hearts aligned,  
Two truths in one, a love divine.

Her chaos wraps his steady form.  
His calm becomes her raging storm.  
Together they, the earth and the sea,  
Unveil the soul's duality.

For in his gaze, the stars appear  
And in her depths, he silences fear.  
Their love, a truth that time can't sever-  
A balance struck; a bond formed forever.

~MSL33



# I:22

Mandy Shantyne Lopez

At 1:22, the siren weaves,  
A golden thread through love's beliefs.  
Invisible strands that time can't sever,  
Binding souls to drift forever.  
Beneath the tide, where whispers rest,  
This thread remains, a sacred test.

~MSL33

~



# Smoke Break

Sydney Scalia

*Cigarettes.*

*Cigarettes.*

*Damn it, I need a cigarette.*

Rarely did I think like this. I am not one to completely lose my composure, far enough to drive me to drugs. But this week. This month. Hell, this year. It all came down to this: the sun was down, I was the last of anybody in the office. I walked past the glass box home to my boss, albeit, they had vanished like the rest of everyone else. I grimaced, my reflection haggard, unrecognizable, my thoughts entirely thin and detestable.

I hadn't felt this way in a long time. I stood there, looking at the woman I didn't know in the glass, thinking about how everything had mounted up. Things began small, and manageable, at first, until they weren't. I started a new job, one that came with a witch (or was it a warlock?) as my boss. I thought, *no problem. I've dealt with these types before. I'll survive!* And then my apartment flooded. I thought, *no problem, I have insurance. Things could be worse! At least I have a roof over my head (and a foot of water in my living room)! I'll survive!* And then my dog got sick. Goose had always been healthy, it made no sense. I thought, *he'll be ok. At least they don't think it's cancer and he can come home! We'll survive!* Spoiler alert: vets in New York don't know how to tell if it's cancer. It was. Goose died. But I think...I'll survive...right? Right? The witch (or warlock) *almost* fired me. So, fuck it. Cigarettes can't hurt me.

I swayed in the elevator as it plummeted to the ground floor. *Escape. You need an escape. Dear God, please let me escape. Anywhere but here.* The doors slid open. I clenched my fist around my leather briefcase. The echo of my heels clicking against the stone lobby was like a small punch to the head with every step. Even the security desk attendant surveyed me, the only one here, with annoyance. I thrust myself into the 7:00 p.m. air. Frigid. Numbing. Months of pain began freezing into sharp shards inside me, festering, creeping up my stomach, into my lungs, and expanding into my chest and neck. I gasped for air. My head replayed all of my



unfortunate woes on a loop with the volume on full blast. The witch/warlock's seething words, Goose's whimpers, the sound of flood water sloshing around my coffee table. It all blended into a warped sound ringing between my ears, sending a prickle of water to my eyes, and finally, a wash of rageful heat that melted my iciness. Anger. No longer giving a fuck. The kind of heat that could combust and light the tip of a cigarette.

With no sense of where I was going, definitely not home, my feet moved faster than the rest of me, as if my brain had relocated to my toes, knowing where to go and what I needed. With short huffs of air, I pushed past the 'TGIF-ers' on the sidewalk, strolling along to their post-work bars and cocktail hours. I was practically sprinting, but not to any bar. I rounded a corner, jaywalked a one-way, and slipped along the walls of storefronts, evading foot traffic as if I were on the run. And I was. I was on the run from my life as I knew it at the moment.

*Please, let there be one near here.* I halted. A sign. Not a sign from God, but just a sign. "Convenience Store." I whipped the door open, my body slinking inside. Not a soul in sight. My eyes blinked in sync with the flickering of old fluorescent lights. Notes of piano and trumpet softly rang out from some type of speaker somewhere. Jazz music. Odd choice.

I turned to the front counter. A man in a white shirt, suspenders, with slicked back hair stood staring, arms folded, not a word. I stared back, slapping my clasped hands onto the counter.

"Cigarettes."

His posture straightened as he raised his eyebrows. His gaze drifted slowly over me: running down my coat, my wind-swept hair, all the way to my leather briefcase. His eyes narrowed on mine.

"Which ones ya want?" he grumbled. His accent was that of a thick New Yorker.

I stared at him blankly, far past annoyed, aching for something, anything, to put me out of my misery. Marlboros? American Spirits? No... if I was going to do this, I was going to do it right. It would be the nicest thing I've done for myself in months.

"The best ones you have."

His eyes flashed with amusement. He unfolded his arms, nodded his head toward the back of the store, and came out from behind the counter. He walked a few paces back and stopped. Looking back over his shoulder, he nodded again for me to follow.

*Is this a kidnapping? Maybe he'll take me somewhere nice. It would be an escape of some sort anyway.*

I carefully tiptoed behind him, past the racks of chips and candy, past the coolers of sodas and beer. *All this for cigarettes?* At the back of the store was a red steel door. *This is where it ends, I thought, just for fucking cigarettes.*

He turned to look at me. "When you're done, just repeat the knock."

I raised an eyebrow, my forehead crinkling. "Excuse me?"

He knocked rhythmically with his bent and bony index finger. *One. Two. One.* The door creaked open slowly and a man with a fedora, a white button-down, and suspenders cautiously poked his head out. The man with the slicked back hair jutted his thumb at me and whispered.

"This doll wants the good stuff."

I looked back and forth between the two of them. *Doll? Good stuff? Have I wandered onto a movie set by accident?* Well, now I had to know just how good these seemingly mythical cigarettes were going to be. The fedora man nodded sharply and opened the door with his arm. I was ushered in like I had discovered a secret hideout. The door shut behind me with a heavy thump.

*Never go into a strange room behind a red door with a strange man, I thought. Too late for that. Cigarettes. Just give me some damn cigarettes.* But at least I wasn't home. Anywhere else is what I asked for. And I was getting it. I was in a dimly lit room. Wooden crates surrounded me. Bottles of unlabeled clear liquid were stacked in the crates. The room reeked of alcohol. Metal funnels lay scattered around the room. A half-empty bottle sat with the cap off and a funnel next to it on a small table in the corner.

The fedora man turned to me sharply. "Youse ain't a snitch huh?"

I let out a sigh. Exhaustion had paired with my annoyance and I couldn't care what was happening anymore. "Sir, I just need cigarettes." My eyes felt heavy, my skin hot,

and the stench of strong alcohol burned my nose.

With a huff, the man walked forward to what appeared to be another door with a hidden latch. He clamped the latch and carefully pushed the door forward. I groaned. If it took this long to get cigarettes, I couldn't imagine how long it took to get illegal drugs. I dragged myself forward following the man. He shushed me. "Keep ya voice down, ya hear?"

He poked his head out of the door first, before finally opening it enough for us both to squeak through. I slid into a brightly lit room with built-in cabinets all around me, some with glass casing and doors. Glass counters stood at hip level. Shelves were lined with rows and rows of bottles and jars of various shapes and sizes—all neatly organized. My eyes darted around, unable to rest. *Surely, I thought, I am in a coma, dreaming. I must have been hit by a cab.*

The fedora man slipped behind a counter and rifled through a shelf of small boxes. My head was on a swivel, unable to focus on one thing, dazed at everything it landed on: "Cherry & Tar Cough Syrup," "Hair Grower Elixer," "Unique Throat Confections," "Benzedrine Inhaler."

A box of cigarettes landed on the counter with a smack. I jumped. "Lucky Strike." "That'll be twenty cents, miss."

I stuttered. I was shaking. My eyes bounced back and forth from the counter to the walls, to the man in the fedora.

"Uh—uh, you, what?"

"You speak English? Twenty. Cents," he puffed.

"I—I, uh, just, uh..." I clawed through my briefcase and pulled out my wallet. With my fingers trembling almost as much as my head, I unzipped the change pouch; a place I rarely touched. I shook loose one quarter, the only quarter I didn't even know I had. I slowly passed him the quarter, dropping it into his impatient hand. His grasp closed around it. He walked to the other side of the store.

*Lucky Strike cigarettes. Cigarettes nonetheless. I'll take them.*

My eyes were glued to the pack. My head was empty of all reason as to what was happening. A man in a fedora. A turn-of-the-century...pharmacy? Lucky Strikes. Twenty-cent cigarettes.

*If I'm in a coma, I thought, I'll survive. Wherever I am, exactly. Maybe it'll be a nice escape from my life.*

"Miss, your change."

I snapped my gaze back to the fedora man. He flipped a nickel into the air, landing in my hand.

"And remember," he muttered, leaning forward across the glass cabinet. "Nobody likes a snitch." He tilted his head to the back of the shop where the secret door was. "Be seein' ya." He tipped his hat as I backed away.

I kept my eyes on him, my fingers white-knuckling the pack of Lucky Strikes, as I backed my way out of the store. I felt a sense of relief. I finally got my cigarettes. But I had lost all sense of time on how long it actually took me to get ahold of them. I thought about the office, the glass box of the witch/warlock, Goose, my apartment, my shitty job. My fingers relaxed around the pack.

I pushed the door open with my back, a bell above my head ringing. It surely wasn't 7:00 p.m. anymore, maybe 8:00 but the air was the same. Frigid, but about to be sweeter. I ripped open the pack and dove in, grappling a slender drug-infused bad habit to my lips. There was one problem: I didn't have a lighter. My lungs ached to be filled with sour smoke, a blanket for the pain I was in.

I looked up from my Lucky Strikes, one still dangling from my lips. There were cabs. Only, they weren't the cabs I knew. They were oddly shaped, with long hoods, and square cabins rounded at the edges, and the headlights were perfect circles. New York City traffic sounded the same with horns blaring, only they were not high-pitched and as loud as I knew them to be; they were lower in pitch, blasting an "ahooga" sound.

I watched as they slowly drove by. I was frozen on the sidewalk, a sea of men and women flowing around me. Suits. Trench coats. Fedoras. Women in dresses. Fur coats.

"Need a light?" a man appeared beside me. A flame appeared beneath my cigarette, spawned from a silver pocket lighter. I inhaled. The pain softened inside me: the shards shrinking, the heat dying. I exhaled, the smoke drifting away, clearing my head, and carrying me away with it. *Escape. You can finally escape.* I didn't question it. This is what I needed. For nothing to make sense at all. I was done trying to make sense of anything.

The man held a newspaper under his arm. I snatched it. "Sorry," I mumbled. *The New York Times* stretched across the top of the newspaper.

"Are you alright, miss?"

I read the date: October 27th, 1932.

I tossed the newspaper back to him.

"Just taking a smoke break."

## *Silent Stories of the City III*

Samantha Kim



# *Out of Sight*

Madisen Christoffersen

Your worst crime is the things you never said.  
As if you packed your bags and left me for dead.

Guess it was out of sight, out of mind.

I won't apologize for the things I had to do.  
I was on the frontlines, but it should have been you.

You claimed that the situation was "highly managed,"  
But you bid me as collateral and let me take all the damage.

You always let me blame her, but it takes two to tango.  
You couldn't face the mirror, so I moved to a new zip code.

I'm thousands of miles away, but my past still lives in my scars.  
I keep trying to flee the scene, but I can't outrun my ruined heart.

I was just a kid, but my circumstances bred me for the fight.  
Now I bleed in the ring, strike back, and spit fire.

Your worst crime is the things you never said.  
The way you stood idly by, as I openly bled.

You should apologize for the things you didn't do.  
I was on the frontlines, but it should have been you.

Rub some dirt in my wounds, I'll be fine.  
I'll stay out of sight, and you won't mind.

I'll run so far... until it's out of my sight,  
And off my mind.

# *Any available appointments?*

Destiny Falls

**Any available appointments? I'm emailing to reschedule an Emotional Breakdown.**

Within the confines of this draft I want your sincerest opinion. Do I look okay? The stress has been getting to me. Would haves and should haves occupy my mind and they don't seem to be wavering. They've found a home where my dreams used to reside. I hadn't noticed the eviction of motivation and passion until exhaustion had renewed its lease. If I shed a tear for my lost companions what comes next? Crying, like every other action, requires my energy. And after having given that, what do I have just for myself? You're asking me to share a piece of myself with you. So I'll give you this much, in a draft I might send, and then you can never ask this of me again.

Excuse me while I stifle a scream into the lines on my palms. I used to believe they told fortunes. Creating lives from where connections start and end. Instead I've found that those lines are the streams your silence is meant to flow in. Sometimes even a single tear, if unbearable as an emotion, sneaks past its borders. I have this under control. A few small breaths, a distraction from a distraction, and a reason for why things are not going my way. I'll be ready soon, I need 3 minutes to pick myself up from where I last lost it. This will be quick. I promise. Trust me.

Do you? Trust me, I mean. Why wouldn't you, of course? I just mean in the sense that you haven't seemed to have lost your spark. I put mine down just a few moments ago. Or did I drop it? Unsure, really, but it isn't in this space, with us. Will they be able to tell? Could you? I am asking because you admitted to knowing me. Or you alluded to wanting more of me. I am processing this ask. Weighing the option of you possibly staying by me with the option of you definitely leaving. It's hard to know which part of life I am meant to keep up with. Harder still to pay attention when the world has tilted. Just slightly so that only you seem to feel the imbalance. Only you seem to stumble forward.

Anyhow, I do believe I am ready. To walk out there, exhale into life, and do well. Excuse me while I research ways to slow my heartbeat. You can't hear it can you? Well, of course not, but if you stay still, I'm sure it's there beneath the humming in my

mind. You know? The drumming tone constantly reminding us that where we are now is as far as we're going to get. We'd better stop trying so hard. You and I are not so different from each other. We are mistakes that could be wait-listed as long as we don't try. If we bound our seclusion bubbles to the walls above this ever moving world we wouldn't get caught in its jaws. We'd clamber into the voids in our minds and we'd be free. Sounds inviting. I mean, not really; but safe. Not really that either, but it feels less up to chance.

I feel like I haven't made much sense. I am fine above all things. The slight twitch of my right eye is likely from lack of rest. I sleep of course, but I prefer to use an odd schedule so that my nightmares don't get accustomed to my routine. Who knows what day they'll decide that my mess is just too much to stand by and watch. Who knows what they'd say if even they, the ones who steal your dreams and diminish your passions into a cruel dread, find that their job is complete.

By the way, has my performance been up to par? And are any adjustments needed? I would love some extra responsibilities to keep me weighed down so that I have no room to fall into absolution. If you need anything done, I'll do it for you. I haven't done so for myself, so all that is left is an overbearance to please you. Mirrors are covered where I stay, in hopes that their uncoverings will be as grand as their reflector. I am running to grant you my time because my safe spaces have denied me entry. In the sense that they might, should I attempt to occupy them. Self care, in theory, provides me enough solace. Excuse me while I come back to this later, there are important issues that require my attention and this area, I assure you, is under control.



# Lo

Grace Jacques-Ibo



# *In The Mountains*

Michelle Rojas Ortega

The man lives in the middle of nowhere and the center of everything. His state of matter is of here and not there. He exists at the intersection between present and absent, the way most things do in the high altitudes of the mountains. The threshold into this state of being is the weighted blanket of fog that falls over their summits. The lush crowns of canopy trees eclipse the already limited daylight that pierces past the fog, and the gaze of creatures hidden in obscurity gives all visitors the unnerving sensation of always being watched from behind. Shadows dash across before them, too quickly to identify their features. Loud and boisterous conversations happen all around them. Great horned owls speak in riddles and tongue-twisters, trees pass each other whispered secrets through their underground root system, mountain lions and lynxes cackle at each other's jokes, and ants gossip as they forage together for the best leaf to take back to their colony. They all talk over each other and get louder at night, leaving campers no option but to gather around crackling campfires and tell each other stories to soothe their fears over the shadowy figures lurking around them. Like a string of red yarn, a single truth interlaces stories told by hikers, campers, and old conquistadores: as one ascends into the fog everything loses coherence. This is the moment when the mountain man enters the story.

The man's face, strange and disfigured, has been described minutely in ancient folktales passed down by the elder women of the mountains, who inherited those stories at a time when they were filled with youth, overconfidence, and naïveté. But, as they collected first hand encounters with this mountain beast, and settled into their wrinkled face, broader waist line, and long silver hair, they passed on the word. His skin is made of thick, reddish-brown tree bark, etched with deep furrows running down his large back and fissured patches on his limbs. His fingers are long, craggy branches that twist themselves into hands, and from his forehead two large horns spiral outward. His regalia consists of a cape made from elktoe mussels he gathered near the riverbend and a crown made of peregrine feathers. The descriptions of his great stature, his reeking odor of rotten moss, and his huffing breaths make all campers look behind their shoulders. They stare at the haunted woods surrounding them, where the light of their fire fades into darkness and can no longer protect them, convincing themselves that the black silhouettes slipping



through the murk are merely figments of their imagination, born from exhaustion after long hikes, or the hallucinatory effects of high altitudes combined with the occasional shroom microdose—and not of the ancient creature coming to violently tear them apart.

But his feasts do not consist of people. Those are just rumors. Easy to believe, and even easier to disperse. No, his intentions are not of violence—nor are his origins—not even after the day he fell asleep. He’s been wandering the mountains for hundreds of years, but to him it’s only been minutes.

Heartbreak is what put him to sleep, the way it does to most people. Before the men with guns came, he used to live in wholeness; he used to have a body. He used to have people. In those days he foraged and hunted. He ate ripe pawpaws straight from the source. He tore the skin away, spit out the seeds back into the earth, and slurped the pulp from them. The citrus and gooeyness ran down his fingers, leaving them sticky. It was a primal and almost sensual ritual, but he licked them after, not letting anything drip to the ground. He grinned with his mouth full and bowed to the pawpaw tree in reverence. He did the same when he ate buffalo with his family. The buffalo wasn’t an ‘it’ to them, but rather a ‘Thy.’ They talked to the buffalo the way others talk inside cathedrals. *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.* Before they ate the buffalo’s meat, they burned sweetgrass and sage, danced, and sang in gratitude for its sacrifice. He thought them wise creatures, beautiful in the summer and gracious in the winter, especially when their fur was covered in fresh snowfall. He canonized them by painting portraits of them inside caves with red pigments.

It was spring when the men with guns came. The azaleas and bloodroots were in bloom. The apples were sweet enough to be picked off their branches. They arrived mounted on white horses, dressed in army jackets, armed with rifles and axes. They ordered him and his family to leave; they had declared themselves the new owners of the mountains. They now owned the chestnut oak trees, the white-tailed deers, the beavers and their dams, the sunlight that shines through twisted branches and morning fog, and the glint of river water when it flows.

It was sacrilege. It was slaughter. It was unthinkable; the deer falling mid-jump after one shot, the heavy thump of axed tree trunks hitting the ground, ducks being shot down mid-flight; he watched it all unfold in slow motion. His family desperately gathered scraps of memories and belongings and were expelled out west. Although he too was urged to leave, he ran into the forest and hid. In solitude, he felt the pain of the carnage churning his insides out. He folded in half holding at his stomach and began retching violently. He howled at the sky surrounded by corpses of buffalos and cut down maple trees. His heart throbbing like it might implode inside his chest. He wept. Then, he fell asleep.

In grief, the sodden earth underneath him began pulsating. The roots of dead trees wrapped themselves around his legs, went up his torso, down his arms, and finally covered his entire face. A thick layer of moss and resurrection fern formed around him. With no trees left to offer shade, the sunlight grew oppressive, searing and leathery his skin. Over time, oyster mushrooms started growing on his chest; militant ants crawled up what used to be his arms; old waxy leaves fell on him and grew mildew; beetles and salamanders inhabited his back; the occasional rabbit stood on him to eat clovers.

It was years before he woke up again, but he did. The mountain monster rose at the ripe beginning of fall. His cheeks were numb. The temples of his head ached. He felt drunk and woozy every time he took a step. When he tried to speak, his throat could no longer form vowels. The sounds came out in growls and hisses. His vision was blurred, he could no longer see color, but had a faint recollection of the color blue. When he approached some people for help—to ask if they knew what had happened to him, and if they knew where his family was—they screamed and ran away in terror. Others threw rocks at him and tried to beat him with sticks. He couldn't recall language or sentence structure, the verbs and adjectives that had once breathed life into his songs and stories had all watered down and evaporated. Except, for the one occasion where two young men had wandered far too deep into the forest. The waning moon hung above them, and the forest fauna had fallen unusually quiet. He observed them from the dark; the men shone a light onto a large piece of paper and pointed around in confusion, scratching at the backs of their heads. I think we are lost, one of them said. And that's a word he recognized, that's a word he felt: lost. He ran out of obscurity to tell them that he felt that way too and maybe they could find a way out of the forest together. This sentiment came out as a vicious growl from his beastly mouth, and the two young men ran away in a freight. One of them dropped his torch light; the other one dropped the map. In the midst of such hysteria, one of the men tripped and fell off the side of the mountain. The splatting sound of his body hitting the rocks underneath him echoed throughout the mountain range. Hours later, the mountain monster found him unconscious; his leg was broken in half, but he could feel the young man's heart beating faintly. He carried him upstream, and with the man in his arms, fragments of memories flooded back in. He remembered which leaves to forage to make healing ointments, the cadence of a prayer he once used to say, the smell of tobacco he used to burn, the red pigment he used to paint with. He found a bed of soft moss to lay the young man. He balmed his wounds; he tightly wrapped his leg with leaves; he prayed; he burned tobacco; and he painted red lines across his face. A search party eventually found the young man, and he told the story of a horrid creature who almost killed him.

After that incident he stopped approaching visitors, retired to a small cave, and slept during the daytime. On occasion, a fox would curl up next to him and he'd let them. When superstorms thrashed the forest he'd let deers, squirrels, or badgers seek refuge in his cave. He pulled them close and kept them warm. He moved under the moonlight and observed, from afar, families come and go. They'd set up tents and light fires. They would cook meals and sometimes they'd say grace before eating them. When they'd slept, he approached their campground and stole their food scraps: crackers, half-eaten hot dogs, burnt marshmallows covered in chocolate, bags of grapes, and processed potato chips, he would feast on all of it. Never forgetting, to reverence in gratitude. Even though the stories of him were all wrong, he still saw and treated the earth around him as Thy. He'd leave the campsite leaving silver cookie wrappings and large footprints behind him.

His favorite nights were the silent visitor-free nights. No drunk teenagers daring each other to look for him in the dark, or loud boomboxes playing pop songs. Only the sound of leaves rustling in the wind, the river running downstream, the neighs of wild horses roaming free in the distance, and the hooting of barn owls. All a symphony. There were nights when he felt plenty lonesome, but not on those. He felt oneness. He sat in stillness next to the river; the moon above white and brilliant. He'd eat huckleberries and plums, licking his fat mossy fingerpads afterward. Momentarily—in the concert of the forest—the monster carcass is shed, and he returns, both body and spirit, to who he once used to be.

# Textured Affairs

Lenny Prater

pt. 1



My dreams were packaged in swooped edges, slick-back buns

Like paint on canvas –brushed– into fine lines.

Yet wrapped in frizz, a thick coiled jubilee

To rip, tear and act as naturalistic

Vase for plastic flowers –pretty– lookin’

In twists and swirls. Almost dream-like ain’t it?

Almost like the more you touch, the –softer–

The future looks and the stronger your hands

Get. Ain’t it something you didn’t expect?

To love –texture– and its endlessness. Ain’t

It something to behold in black, grays, and

Purples and blues. A mural attached to

A sensitive scalp, abundant. My dreams

Are no longer packaged. They move freely.



pt. 2

I've known the feeling of being bound since  
I was young, and learned how to appreciate  
A searing pain caused by something that makes  
me feel pretty. I knew the unforeseen  
Attacks felt familiar. They were just  
Usually followed up with "Sorry,  
Baby." The bounding was displayed with pride.  
I want nothing more than that comfort back,  
of knowing that all of the binding will  
Eventually come undone. I want to know  
That I'll be pampered with castor oil  
and massages. I want to be held  
together by blue magic hair grease  
And flower-shaped barrettes. Comfort me.



pt. 3

To loc your hair is to give yourself the  
Room to fuse and let loose ends entangle.  
It is to bind and fortify. When loc'd,  
You commit yourself to security.  
To care and to twist. To be locked is to  
Come undone. To allow yourself to trust  
The process and embrace the many  
Phases it may come with. To find ease in  
Permanence because the upkeep will  
always be worth it. A sustained romance  
Coddled by coils and moisturized ends,  
Bundled by large silk headscarves and leave-in  
Conditioner.



pt. 4

It ain't hard to tell what that is, stinka.

Need to train them eyes for storytellin'

You ain't learn nuthin' from the cool touch of

JAM! on a freshly braided scalp or the

Stiffness of carefully curved edges bound

To last you a lifetime? Ain't nuthin' like that

Round where all them whites be. You gotta have

Your own stack because Sally don't cater

To yo black ass. She don't know how to take

Care of ya fro –can't even touch a dread

Or two– Now ain't that some shit? And when it's

Long like the struggle of our ancestors

She say, "Is that all yours?" and you betta

Just give her them eyes for storytellin'.



# *Love is a lot like Breathing*

Taya Paxton

Love is a lot like breathing, you don't realize you're engaging in it until time stalls enough to recognize you're deep in the act. Recognition of either is scary, if you think too hard you begin to hold your breath and end your affections. The invisibility of breath like love requires a closeness of a chest cavity opening. Lonely winter air gives way to its physical form, a ghostly mist that embraces you whole. You can't really see it, but if you look close enough you can recognize that it does exist. From the moment you fall into the world, you gasp for air fighting for it the rest of your life. You're born with the ability to love though the realization comes later, but once you love you know there'll never again be a time you sustain without. The thing about the curiosity of deciding to stop breathing and the desperation to stop loving is that: if your choice isn't to survive it is to perish. So, we try not to look too closely and dull our awareness to deny the cocoon we're trapped in. We continue to take another breath each time the last one ends, and we continue to look for love after we've lost it. For now, the air continues to fill my lungs and the inevitability of love fills my heart. Eventually it will run out, but until then my lungs fill again each moment. Until I decide, I'm done surviving.

# Final Movement

Luisa A. Rozo Castaneda

I sway into a café, trying to shake off the rain that I had decided to face head-on instead of simply going back and getting my umbrella. As I step inside, I look around, a second of hesitation stopping me in front of the door until I remind myself where I am. Years of being led around causes me to forget how to guide myself in a city where everyone seems to perfectly understand who they are. As I sit and order my third *café au lait* of the day, I forgo my exhaustion and start to work. Letting my hand go through motions that I wish weren't as foreign to me as they have become. Writing in a journal I insisted I needed and still do not feel familiar with, though that is a feeling I have determined must be common for everyone—the feeling of a brand-new object that has not yet truly become your own, has not yet built the memories and emotions that allow you to call it irreversibly yours. So, I sit there with my still-unfamiliar journal, forcing inspiration to take over. My eyes wander to the window beside me. I take in the beauty of Paris submerged in rain and experience the city in its most romantic and idealistic way.

The drowning city hypnotizes me until my lead snaps and I'm brought back to my muscles tense from sitting still for too long, to the static running up my limbs. And as I click the lead back into place, I stretch, trying to push the sting out of my limbs. The movement gives me space to breathe in this overwhelming city. But like clockwork, once lead hits paper, my mind wanders and I think of rainy days. Rainy days have always been forgetful for me, I have remembered every snowflake that has crossed my path, and yet I cannot remember a single hour in which a raindrop has fallen down my window.

The waiter asks me a question in Spanish and I'm grateful for the familiarity of a language I understand. As he leaves to get my order, I attempt to stay on task, prying my eyes off the raindrop falling on the window. I look about the café. I have now sat here three times, and as I look around, I notice that I've sat in a different place each time. The memories of each seat return to me like a game of musical chairs. I've been told that memories are not something to be trusted, and though I'm inclined to believe it, on such a rainy day I find myself trying to engrave each seat within my memory so that this café alone can be the exception. In truth, Café Fab is quite odd compared to other Parisian cafés... Here, the people glide in and out like riders on a carousel; carnival lights hang on the ceiling while glass disco balls reflect colors over sprouting plastic tulips.

But past the swinging doors and hanging lights, there was a man. A man that seemed to refuse to reflect the colors of the café, a shadow man. Clad in a midnight blue coat that hangs off him in a way only a true Parisian could imitate, his black jeans now grey from overuse and his brown leather shoes soaked from a forgetful, rainy day. He ruffles his peppered grey hair and scrunches the caterpillar eyebrows that rest high upon his face. I continue watching as he adjusts a leather satchel he hasn't taken off since before I arrived. But past all that, I look at his face—wrinkled with the passing of time, and yet, the lack of lines along the corners of his eyes and mouth speak of a man who has not smiled often in his life.

As I sift through this man's every feature, I realize that this shadow man isn't all that amazing or different. But despite this revelation, I continue to watch him over my lukewarm *café au lait*. He is simply a man like any other, yet I wonder what it is about him that has enraptured me. Maybe it's the mystery behind a life that is not my own, the experiences I have never lived, things I have never seen, emotions I have yet to feel. There is no way for me to know, so I just stare and wonder about this shadow man.

Over time, my thoughts grow too far and like wrapping vines, they take over. I begin to think about all the lives in this café, in Paris, in Europe. All the lives that are not my own and that I will never be able to comprehend. As I start to contemplate a topic much too philosophical for four in the afternoon, I pick up my cold cup of *café au lait*, but this time, it's empty. I have wandered off for much too long, but throughout all those thoughts, at least the lead has worked its way onto the page and I do not feel like I have wasted my time. How can I, when I have sat amongst the carousel doors, carnival lights, glass disco ball, and shadow man with unsmiling wrinkles? I have sat amongst Paris on a rainy, forgetful day.

## **A Night's Warmth**

It's dark out as I enter Café Fab later than usual. This night in particular seems to have brought out half of Paris, and I'm astounded by the amount of people drinking on a Wednesday night such as this. I look around at the café and let the storm of excited conversation wash over me. I had attached myself to this place from the beginning. Maybe it was because of the colorful lights, or the salmon pesto pasta, or the strong margaritas, or maybe it was because it was where I spent my first night in Paris. Regardless of the reason, I've marked this café as mine, my place, the place that I would recommend over any other, the place I would go to if I were ever lost. So, as I look around and survey the café that I have now claimed, I remember a time when it was all so foreign and overwhelming. Only a few days ago, but miles away in my memories... I flushed under basic questions and hesitated over every decision.

Back then, I was too nervous to remember where I had previously sat, so I shuffled in and sat at a random table. Funny how moments such as those become traditions—I never mean for them to, but as I search for comfort, I find myself enveloped in meaningless patterns such as those.

So, while I get used to this new seat, this new angle, this new life, I allow my thoughts to travel to the view around me. The moon has quietly waltzed its way into the sky while the breeze following after it attempts to still the waves of heat that have refused to rest as the sun descends over the horizon. The café is illuminated by gold lights that shine against the dark sky and fill the space of the empty chair in front of me. Sitting alone at a two-person table, I revel in the feeling of being alone with my thoughts; I have to admit, I like being lonely sometimes. I understand it is a thought only someone privileged with the love of others could have, but as I look upon the bustling café, I cannot stop from thinking so. Again, I fall into a memory of the past, of a time where the thought of being alone caused my body to quake and my lungs to collapse from within. I look down at my phone to check the time. Two minutes have passed, and before a third can come, the waiter arrives.

*"Bonjour,"* I say.

*"Bonsoir,"* he responds, without the judgmental sarcasm that often follows that word.

*"Oh, yeah, bonsoir, could I have a café au lait?"* My French is hesitant and awkward from lack of use.

*"A café au lait, and do you want a chocolate croissant tonight?"* he asks, teeth reflecting the lights hanging above us.

*"Yes, please. Merci,"* I respond, a tad more comfortably.

I sit watching as the waiter walks away. I knew I was never going to frequent another café in Paris like this one again. The care of a waiter who was as diligent the first night I came in as the fifth, watching over me. The night before, I was craving something sweet with my writing, needing the push of cane and coffee to keep my hands moving, but unfortunately, coffee was the only thing available, and I had to use inspiration alone to keep the lead moving on the page. Three minutes pass, and like clockwork, the waiter returns, holding the sustenance I need.

*"Merci,"* I say.

*"Enjoy,"* he says, putting the cane and coffee in front of me, making sure to avoid my used journal and copies of books by writers who had sat in cafés such as this long before I had come into this world.

## An Arrogant Wind

Walking down the damp, familiar cobblestone streets, I find my vision going in and out. Moving my head right, left, and back again, I attempt to fight against the wind's insistent pushing, but regardless of what direction I face, it refuses to meet me halfway and continues its attack on my hair. Lucky for me, I have yet to face a mirror, so for now, I can ignore whatever frazzled state it must be in. As I walk up the street across from Café Fab, years of city instincts tell me to wait for the cars to stop their stampede before I dare cross. So, I take this moment to let the rare morning sunlight warm my chilled face, and although the winter air continues to sweep through the tree branches and my curly strands of hair, I no longer mind the cold. I feel like I'm back in Chicago, back in the city I do not wish to stay in yet long to go back to. But then the stampede halts, the light turns green, and the wind picks up, so I make my way across the street.

Opening the heavy glass door to Café Fab seems to take twice the amount of work it usually does. Maybe it's because of the wind's adamant need to fight against me and my good mood, or maybe it's just my lack of nourishment this early in the day. But after a quick moment, I manage to pry the door open wide enough to slip inside. Stumbling in, I look around at the unusually empty café. "This is different," I say, rightening myself in case a stray tumbleweed decides to roll in. I take a few more short steps into the café, hesitant with the lack of sound and moving bodies. Just as I begin to turn and laugh at my accidental break in, I see a waiter come through the doorway, cigarette in hand. "Bonjour," I say with a peaceful enough smile. "Bonjour," he drags from between dying lungs before walking away.

I ignore the waiter and his addiction and make my way further inside the café for a place to sit. For once, I feel as if I have to truly think about where to place myself, instead of wandering into whatever empty seat I had yet to sit in the day before. As I look over the empty café, indecision takes over, and I find the only way for me to grapple with this life-changing choice is by assessing all of my options. First, I set my eyes to the brightest corner of the café, the left-hand side of the entryway. This side is surrounded by transparent walls with coffee tables facing the street. I don't think I had ever felt more like a fish in a fish tank than when I sat there.

I turn and make my way up the three short steps to the raised wooden platform. The right-hand side is surrounded by transparent walls, but unlike the left side, the back wall is open, allowing me to walk through a gateway into a different Café Fab. This back area is adorned with varying shades of brown, blue, red, and

pink, and the absence of bright lighting gives it an intimate feel that speaks of dinner and wine. "It's too early for that mood," I mumble to myself as I make my way back down the wooden steps.

After analyzing every possible seating area except the bar behind the fish tank, I make my way to the brightest spot: the side of the café against the street. I make sure to place myself facing the door in case inspiration decides to waltz in and begin the long, tedious process of disarming my winter layers. After my fit of indecision, I sit down and the waiter makes his way over. I think he looks a bit happier now, but I assume that's only because he was able to finish his tobacco breakfast. As I sit and watch the waiter leisurely stroll up to my table, I swear I see the sun go down a bit.

*"Bonjour,"* I say again with a mild smile.

*"Bonjour,"* he responds with a tone that tells me he didn't end up finishing that cigarette.

*It's too early,* I think to myself as I watch him standing in front of me, being paid more than I currently believe he deserves.

*"Parlez-vous Espagnol?"* I ask with a bright smile.

*"Oui,"* he responds, straightening just a tad.

*"Perfecto, ¿me das un jugo de naranja con el sándwich de huevo?"* I ask in one breath.

*"Ehh puede decir despacio?"* he asks, cringing at his own grammar.

*"Si. Me. Das. Un. Jugo. De. Naranja. Con. El. Sándwich. De. Huevo,"* I ask with a wide grin covering my usual mild-mannered features.

*"Oui,"* he responds, before walking away at a satisfyingly fast pace.

*"Merci,"* I call out behind him.

Once he's disappeared behind the kitchen door, I turn to my still-new Shakespeare and Company tote to pull out my lovingly-used journal and not-as-lovingly-used lead. My journal is the color of a dust storm and has the words *LE SPLEEN DE PARIS* etched across the front. I would love to have some deep story about why I chose it, but the truth was that I needed a journal with lines and wanted something about Paris on it that wasn't tacky. This journal fulfilled both requirements, and as it joined me on my adventures across Paris, I grew to love it more and more.

While I restlessly waited for the waiter to do his job, I flipped through the pages of my journal and grazed the hasty writing that spoke of quick inspiration, something that was currently eluding me in this empty café. "Maybe I'll find something waltzing outside," I say to myself. So, I shift towards the glass wall and look out at the sleepy Parisian cobblestone. Mornings in Paris are sluggish, the air carrying a reluctance to enter the real world. At first, I remember thinking they were smarter

for this, getting to start their day late and sleep in, not having to force themselves to brace the world while still clinging to the lingering remnants of their dreams. But as my body began to adjust and I naturally arose with the sun, I found my thoughts changing. Especially now, as I sit here in this peaceful empty café with the sun illuminating my fish tank, I recognize that this is something no Parisian will be able to enjoy. Not without the annoyance of being awake.

"Mmmmh, that was quite an arrogant sentence," I mumble to the glass pane. Maybe I am becoming Parisian. Luckily, I notice the waiter briskly make his way towards me before I have time to get too big of a head.

"*Merci beaucoup*," I say as I move my journal to make room for the food. "*Bon appétit*," he says with the slightest grimace of a smile.

## **A Cold Departure**

One Doc in front of another, my cold leather feet walk upon the worn-out cobblestone path, damaged from years of rushing bodies and unruly weather. It's interesting how little you notice while walking the same route every day, everything so familiar that you disregard the small details hidden amongst your mundane surroundings. "Mundane," I chuckle out loud while crossing the street, narrowly missing a shivering biker. I remember thinking of Paris as a magical city beyond my reach, a place where every block and cracked building held something impossible to explain. And yet now it's mundane. From the graffiti stop sign to the Monoprix door that refuses to close, it's all so impossibly mundane. But even so, my love for this city has not yet wavered, and I have learned to love it without my rose-colored glasses.

"Such an odd time of day," I say to the glass door as the sunset's reflection hits my retinas, disorienting me. I pull on the door and enter the café, trying to regain some of my lost vision. As I blink away the stars in my eyes and look around the café preparing for its nightly rush, I think about how funny it is that I've never seen this café closed. From morning till night, I have seen Café Fab in all its forms, but never have I seen it closed. Just as I began to think this city has lost some of its magic, the thought of a café that never closes reignites a childlike wonder within me. With my eyes now settled, I focus on finding an empty spot that I have yet to sit in. Another small piece of magic I've unearthed after several days spent writing in this café: No matter how many different places I settle down in, a new one always seems to pop up.



With a new seat found, I stride across the café, up the short steps to a seat next to the clear walls and portal doorway. While making my way to my newly-discovered seat I gaze around to see if I can spot my favorite waiter. By the time I reach my streetside table, I find my waiter across the café and notice his rapid hands and weary smile. “I can wait,” I say, sitting down and beginning my natural routine. My phone is placed on my right, my dust storm journal on my left, my copy of *Giovanni’s Room* beneath it, my lead in front, and my headphones on top of my phone. Everything is in place, and I consider taking off my coat, but remember the biting cold that the clear walls did little to stop, and decide against it. Just as I finish setting up and putting my bag on the floor, my favorite waiter appears in front of me, like perfectly rehearsed choreography.

“*Bonjour, madame,*” he says, his smile less pinched.

“*Bonsoir,*” I say, my French accent mixing comfortably with my Latin tongue. It had taken almost my entire time in Paris, but I had finally remembered how words transformed with the falling sun in this city.

“*Puis-je avoir un café au lait?*” I ask without hesitation.

“*Bien sûr,*” he responds with what I hoped was a proud smile.

“*Voudriez-vous un pain au chocolat as well?*” he asks knowingly.

“*Oui, merci,*” I respond.

Just as quickly as he appeared, my waiter leaves to work through what I presume are his many tasks. The sun almost completely having gone down the horizon, I watch as the café lights flicker on and the Parisians awaken in turn. I go to my journal and flip to a bright, blank page with faint, empty lines awaiting my inspired mind, but before the lead is able to scrape paper, something catches my eyes. The dark back of the café’s inner walls—they aren’t all brick. I have come to this café more times than I have even traveled to Paris and yet I did not know the walls weren’t all brick. Instead, I see one brick column against the main wall with silver-patterned wallpaper on the right side and dyed-blue planks on the left side. On the right-side wall is one more brick column and the rest is covered in rectangular mirrors all linked together. I swore I knew this café better than my own bedroom and yet I had missed this. I hadn’t seen all of the café. I missed something. I almost left and didn’t notice this. How can I leave? How can I leave this place I had so confidently claimed as mine? How can I abandon it? I can’t abandon it. I – I can’t leave. Not like this—not on a random Friday morning in January!

“*Madame. Ton café et pain au chocolat,*” my favorite waiter says.

“*Oh, um, merci,*” I mumble, quickly shifting my books to make space on my coffee mug table. “Enjoy,” he replies with a comforting smile that, unfortunately, only weakly brightens my mood.

As he steps away, I inhale deeply, shuddering. My hands have gone cold, and I can feel my body making up for the air I had briefly denied it. I need to breathe. This isn't the time to let my lungs give out; I won't let them. Not after they've worked so hard to keep me alive among the smoke of Paris. "Breaaaaaathe," I say slowly, letting my words follow my trembling body. Once I'm sure I'm not going to pass out in my seat, I pick up my *café au lait* and slowly bring the shaking mug to my lips. I take a sip, hoping its familiar warmth might drown the lump building in my throat. It doesn't go away. I take a bigger sip and let the caffeine rest on my tongue, warming my shivering body.

I thought... I mean, I knew this day was coming. I knew that this wasn't permanent and that eventually I would have to fly back to reality, and yet now that I'm here, I feel as if I've been hit with a blow I haven't had time to defend against. And so, I sit at my newly discovered place, my stomach turning with melancholy and the strong dose of caffeine I had attempted to conceal it with. "I need to write. I need to move my hands," I say, the shakiness resigning.

I grab my lead and open up to a blank page. Perhaps none of what I write makes any sense, but I don't care. I just need to move and do something familiar. Slowly, my hand keeps up a consistent rhythm and I feel myself relax and come back down from the ledge to which I had disappeared before. Regaining my thoughts, I look around for something to provide me a sliver of peace about all this, about leaving. I scan the café and its familiar tables and notice something my air-deprived body had overlooked. On my left, against the clear walls looking over the street, are three girls sitting at a rectangular table huddled over a menu. It was the first table I had ever sat at in Café Fab. Just as they were, I once sat there with hopeful strangers, all of us unprepared for the adventure to come. I had sat next to a girl whose eyes only spoke of colors and shapes. And across from us had sat a girl whose unexpected rainbow eyes and confidence pulled us in. "I hope they don't think I'm weird for staring," I mumble. But as I watch the girls who sit at an extraordinarily ordinary table, I feel the lump in my throat get smaller. I let the memories of that uncertain night, margaritas, and a life-changing pasta soothe me.

"I wonder if there's anything else," I say, looking around the café.

After only a moment, my eyes pass over an empty table in the back corner near the fish tank. That was the first table I had sat alone at in Café Fab. I remember how tall I thought it was and the way I hesitated so much before sitting down, unsure if I was allowed to choose my own seat. Looking at it now, I notice how much shorter it really is; it's probably only tall enough to reach my waist, really, but then again, with my height, I'm probably not the best unit of measure. What it does still have is the plastic sprouting tulips that decorate each table.

"I really thought those were real at first," I say, chuckling at my past self.

I feel the lump getting even smaller, and so, I keep looking. And just as I begin to turn and look around past the portal door to the other side of the café, I see him. He's here. The shadow man. And though I know time has definitely passed and my coffee is most likely lukewarm at best, I continue to look at him. Nothing has changed about him: he has the same unsmiling wrinkles, dark clothes, and worn satchel he seems to never take off. It's all the same, even where he sits and the beer he drinks—it's all the same. The same simple shadow man that almost brought me to tears. Days, weeks of coming to the same café at all hours of the day, and never had I seen the shadow man sitting there the way I did on that first day. Maybe it's his unchanging stance, or the memory of how everything started, but suddenly, I'm overcome with peace.

Seeing the unchanging shadow man illuminates something I haven't paid thought to before. How I've changed. No... grown. I have grown so much since my first day in Paris, and regardless of all the good and the bad I have experienced while here, I refuse to abandon the me that had worked so hard to get me this far. I was still the same young woman who came to this magical city those few weeks ago. But now, I have lived in this café, I have claimed it, I have sat in every corner and looked over it like an owl on its perch. In the end, it is still quite odd compared to other Parisian cafés.

As my lead lifts from the page and my moving hand stills, I begin to put my routine away and rise from my unfamiliar seat. I pass the shadow man and make my way to the waiter standing by the cash register. As he runs my card to pay for my final coffee and chocolate croissant, my nose picks up faint traces of the scent of tobacco, which is likely woven into the waiter's shirt.

He hands me my card, to which I reply, "*Merci beaucoup.*"

"*À bientôt.*" He nods to me.

I pocket my card and walk towards the familiar door. I swing it open, finding that it no longer feels heavy, and I step out of Café Fab.

# *Pulse*

Mandy Shantyne Lopez

Her currents surge; his gravity calls,  
A dance of heat as silence falls.  
Two forces merge- a cosmic creed-  
Divine duality, raw and freed.

~MSL33



# *Sacred Balance*

Mandy Shantyne Lopez

She flows like water, wild and free–  
A force of creation, eternity's sea.  
He stands like stone, steady and strong–  
A pillar of order where she belongs.  
Her whispers spark the stars to burn,  
His silence waits for her return.  
She carries life; he shapes the form.  
Together, they weather the cosmic  
storm.  
Two halves of one, yet wholly divine,  
A sacred balance, a love that aligns.  
In their union, the heavens reside,  
The Feminine and Masculine, side by  
side.

~MSL33

# *Ancient Love*

Mandy Shantyne Lopez

Before the tides first kissed the shore,  
Before the stars began to soar,  
Our souls had danced in realms unseen,  
In golden light, serene, pristine.  
No clock could bind; no years could fade,  
A love so vast, the cosmos made.  
Through lifetimes lost and worlds reborn,  
We found each other, dusk to morn.  
The ocean hums our sacred tune;  
The sky recalls our love's commune.  
Through whispered winds and flames that burn,  
To you, my soul will always return.  
For what we share, no age can sever,  
An ancient love, alive forever

~MSL33



# *Anxiety*

Monique Dabdoub



# *Drowning*

Olivia Burd

I forget how to swim, how to get out of the pool.  
It feels like it's rapidly getting deeper.  
I can't stand anywhere at this point.  
It's a feeling I can't shake.  
I miss the 3ft area, the easy part.  
Walking, as easily as I walked around the park.  
Standing never felt so relaxing.

I miss the kiddie pool, no possibility of drowning.  
Protection all around me.  
Smiles so bright they're blinding.

In the deep end, I feel like I'm drowning.  
Swimming for my life.  
Trying to get back to the surface.  
Wanting to touch the ground.



# *House by the Sea*

## Julia Kaleta

The house by the sea was old and the deep blue paint was fading and tearing away. In every window the yellow shutters were gently drawn open by the wind, and the flower boxes bursted with bright red flowers. Delicate sheer curtains fluttered in the breeze. It seemed empty, yet a fragile sign of life glimmered in the home's lonely eyes. In the evenings, a soft light shone in the bottom windows, and in the darkness at night they would flicker off. Following the pattern, a light would appear soon after on the upper floor, one in the left window and another on the right, and then they went off for the rest of the night.

It was late afternoon now, the house seemed peaceful—still and alone. Isabella sat on soft sand, her gaze fixed on the dark windows. Sometimes a figure emerged and looked onto the sea, or watered the vivid flowers. Isabella longed to move closer to the mysterious house. She no longer felt like playing with the shells scattered on the beach. The girl took one last look at the mystifying, glimmering ocean and turned towards the warm aroma coming from the kitchen of her own home. Her mom was cooking dinner. Excited and hungry, eight year old Isabella ran to eat.

"You've been looking at Mrs. Alma's house again?" her mom inquired, smiling.

Isabella nodded watching her mother. She didn't realize her mom saw her.

"You know, Mrs. Alma is really nice. You should go and say hi to her sometime."

Isabella knew that her mom would sometimes call the lady to ask her how she was doing. Her mom would even politely invite Mrs. Alma over, but not once did the lady ever seem to be interested.

"But she never wants to come visit us," Isabella responded frowning.

She regarded her mom's tender expression, "I'm sure she would want to, but she's older now and it's hard for her to go out of the house."

Through the dark windows of the blue house, Isabella tried to imagine Mrs. Alma sitting alone all day and looking out at the sea.

"I don't think she wants to be by herself though. Why doesn't anyone visit her?" Isabella questioned.

Her mother handed her spaghetti with bright red tomato sauce and a sprinkle of basil leaves before sitting down with her at the table. The rays of the setting sun burst through the open windows that faced the sea. Isabella felt the warm sun melt on her face and gazed at how it illuminated her mom. She could hear the ocean



waves falling forward and drawing back.

"Mrs. Alma wasn't alone when I was your age," her mom responded, reading Isabella's curious face.

"She used to be like me back then," her eyes twinkled as she remembered her childhood.

"She had two children, and their father also lived with them. Her house was so beautiful and new then," and in a flash Isabella's mom was in her memory, watching the scene play out in her mind.

"I remember how bright that blue paint was, richer than the sky, and she always had red flowers in her windows too." She watched her daughter's fascinated take in her words.

"I used to play with her son and daughter on the beach, and Mrs. Alma would come out of the house and wave for us to come eat the dinner she cooked or the cookies she baked. Her food would always be so delicious." Isabella's mom smiled at the memory.

"So why is she all alone now?"

Her mom's face turned grim and Isabella became frightened.

"It's a very sad story," her mother's eyes looked out to the glimmering ocean, "her daughter passed away when she was a child. Then Mr. Alma died years later."

"What about her son?"

"When he got older he left Mrs. Alma to live somewhere else. I don't think he came back to visit her."

"Oh that's really sad," Isabella sighed, "Everyone left her."

A weak smile lifted her mom's face, "If you see her, say hello."

Days later on the beach, Isabella noticed Mrs. Alma looking at the sea and waved to her. The old woman saw her and stared. Suddenly she turned away and went back into the darkness.

Disappointed, Isabella didn't understand why Mrs. Alma went away.

"Don't worry, give her time," her mom said and smiled. "You will cheer her up."

Another day sitting by the ocean, Isabella noticed Mrs. Alma looking at her through the upstairs window. Isabella gasped as she saw the lady emerge from the billowing curtains for the first time. She thought she saw a smile form on the woman's face and then a friendly wave.

Isabella never saw the lady outside on her porch before, but one day she noticed that Mrs. Alma was sitting hunched over with a warm coat and a hot cup of tea in the sun on her overgrown porch.

"Enjoy the sun!" Mrs. Alma called out while waving her pale hand.

That was the first time Isabella heard her voice. Her mother said it used to be soothing and melodic, but now it was raspy and frail.

The old lady looked so happy to see Isabella that she decided to go over and meet the woman.

"Hi Mrs. Alma!" Isabella said cheerfully.

The lady's pale, wrinkled skin and dry, dark-gray hair were evident in the bright sun. Her eyes sparkled when Isabella came close.

"You must be Isabella?" asked the lady. The girl nodded.

"I remember when your mom was your age," Mrs. Alma beamed, "and when you were a little baby." She sighed, "You've grown up so fast!"

Isabella smiled and asked, "Do you want to go to the beach with me?"

The life seemed to drain from Mrs. Alma's face and her eyes became cold and dark. She stammered as she opened her mouth. Fear struck Isabella like an ice-piercing wind. She backed away from the woman, not daring to turn her back on the wicked expression.

"Go back home to your mother. Never go to the beach alone. You're a little child!" Mrs. Alma wearily shrieked in a high-pitched voice. Furrowing her eyebrows the lady gripped the chair as she struggled to get up and immediately turned herself towards the door.

In horror, Isabella stared wide-eyed at the old woman and bolted across the beach to her mom.

She instantly found solace in the warm corridors leading up to her mother's bedroom.

Acknowledging the distress in Isabella's eyes, her mother looked at her pitifully and said, "Isabella, the beach reminds Mrs. Alma of her own daughter. She misses her very much and that's why she got hurt. It's not your fault."

To make the little girl feel better, her mom encouraged her to bake some chocolate-chip cookies for the old woman. They scrunched cookie dough and chocolate chips together, baking them in the hot oven into crisp cookies. Once they were done, the sun began to dip its golden head below the silver water.

"Quickly, let's go before Mrs. Alma goes to sleep," her mom called as they rushed out of the house with a bag full of warm cookies.

Knocking on Mrs. Alma's door, Isabella tried not to be frightened by their previous encounter. She felt like the door was looming over her until it creaked open by the old woman.

"Hello Mrs. Alma, how are you?" Her mom asked with a warm smile. Isabella's eyes did not tear away from the old woman. She watched her gaze slowly settle on Isabella. A faint distraught sense hid behind her now soft eyes.

"Oh hello, what a nice surprise! I'm all right, how have you been my darling?" Mrs. Alma beckoned them inside.

Isabella's mind was brimming with curiosity. She wondered what mysteries lay

in the old woman's house. They entered a dimly lit room. A ceiling light hung low to illuminate the wooden table, and old clumpy candles were scattered in every dark corner. A tea kettle whistled on the stove, some cupboards were ajar while others were sealed. Neatly stacked cups and plates sat starkly opposite to the rest of the belongings. It seemed that dust blanketed them after years without use.

Mrs. Alma thanked Isabella and her mom for the gesture. As Isabella pulled out one of the chairs, a white furry cat jumped up on the table with a loud meow. Startled, Isabella let the chair fall back on its legs. When hearing the thud, the cat dove off the table and hurried into another room.

"Oh don't mind Bianca, she just gets nervous when someone new comes into the house," Mrs. Alma smiled sweetly.

"I didn't know you had a cat! She must keep you in good company," Isabella's mom remarked.

"Certainly." Mrs. Alma's face became slightly bitter. She looked at Isabella. "Well please go ahead and have some cookies, I won't be able to finish them alone!"

As Isabella reached for a cookie and gazed around the quiet room, Mrs. Alma began talking about her childhood, playing in the same neighborhood where Isabella lived.. Isabella listened attentively while looking out for the cat. As the conversation steered towards family, the mood quickly drained of its cheer.

"I haven't seen my sister in ages," Mrs. Alma sighed, "We try to call sometimes, but she's old like me and we hardly hear each other."

"And David...have you heard from him since...?" Isabella's mom asked softly.

"Ah..no. It's my fault," the old woman shook her head grimly, "I didn't take care of him properly after Sofia."

"It's not your fault that he hasn't reached out, it's on him."

"I thought I could protect him. But after the fraud he committed, he just disappeared and I have no idea where he is," Mrs. Alma replied.

"So all that money...He still has it?"

"Yes, probably. Everything he stole he took with him to Indonesia or who knows. When William found out...he couldn't bear it." Mrs. Alma's voice shook and she blinked furiously to suppress her tears.

"Isabella," her mom turned to her, "Can you go find Bianca? Mrs. Alma will let you feed her dinner."

"Okay," Isabella replied. Worried, she glanced at both of them and quickly got up to get Bianca.

"If only William was here it wouldn't be so bad, but my whole family? Why did they all have to be taken away from me? I just can't take it Veronica. I'm sorry, I don't know who else to turn to," Mrs. Alma said, wiping her tears with a shaky hand.

"Evelina, please, if you ever need me, then let me know. I don't want you to

suffer. The worst thing would be to leave you alone. Everyone needs company..."

The soft, hushed voices faded as Isabella ventured deeper into the house. She felt uncomfortable seeing Mrs. Alma cry. Maybe Bianca would help cheer her up.

In the dark corridor she spotted the fuzzy cat curled up on a red pillow in an office room. Golden light poured in from the single window. The cat watched with its glowing green eyes as Isabella crept up with her hand stretching towards it.

Meowing once, Bianca lifted herself, her paws patting out of the room and up the stairs.

Her tousled fur ruffled as she reached the top, and she disappeared around the corner. Isabella hesitated, thinking the upstairs might be forbidden. However, then she remembered that her mom asked to get the cat, so she couldn't be blamed.

She carefully measured each step for potential creeks, avoiding spots that seemed threatening, until she reached the top.

"Bianca, I'm here," Isabella whispered with a soft giggle. She crawled on all fours, starting from the nearest room. In the first room, a lamp offered yellow light that revealed scattered papers spilling from the table onto the floor. A colorful knitted blanket was folded neatly on the bed. It was covered with designs of stars and the moon. She looked closely in the dim lighting to read the words, 'I love you, my Sofia' that were embroidered on the corner.

The cat wasn't there, so Isabella was about to enter the next when she heard a scurry come from the opposite room. She saw the tip of Bianca's tail before she was gone.

"I got you!" Isabella whispered excitedly.

She spun around and ran into the room to catch the cat, seeing her in the corner. Bianca sniffed her hands and shifted from one paw to the other. Isabella's eyes slowly regarded the large space; it was the most extensive out of all the others and the tidiest. The windows were grand with flowy, elaborate curtains on both sides, and the soft carpet was a subtle blush pink. The ornate ceiling chandelier glimmered in deep orange rays. Isabella gasped at the beauty of this room. It was fascinating—she wished it was hers. A small bed stood in the center of the room, the white frame beautifully ordained like in a palace. A golden chest sat on the side of the wall. Isabella opened it from the unhinged locks to see a heap of toys. She stared wide-eyed at the spectacle. This room was her dream come true.

Every shelf revealed something magical, the closet filled with sparkling little dresses and big plush toys. Unsure of whether to stay or search for the cat again, Isabella noticed a picture on the bedside table.

Looking closer, she saw a younger Mrs. Alma with a little girl at her side. On the other side stood a slightly older boy and a man. She assumed that this was Mrs.

Alma's family, that her mom had mentioned before.

Disheartened for Mrs. Alma again, Isabella felt guilty for intruding into a room that did not belong to her. She was about to leave when she heard footsteps approaching from the stairwell.

Panicking, Isabella hid behind the bed, hoping she wasn't in trouble.

"No, I really don't think so. Moving out of this house now would be too much. With such little time left, I might as well stay here until the end of my days," Mrs. Alma replied.

"Belle? Are you in here?"

She heard her mother's quick steps across the fluffy carpet to find her hunched on the floor. "Come on, let's go back downstairs."

"Oh that's okay! I knew she might come here. It's a pretty room isn't it?" Mrs. Alma asked. Her eyes sparkled sorrowfully.

"Yes Mrs. Alma! Was it Sofia's?"

"It was." The old woman's eyes glistened as she smiled at Isabella.

Walking through the hall and down the stairs, Isabella held the lady's hand and chattered about how magnificent the room seemed to her. Mrs. Alma listened attentively and appreciated the little girl's enthusiasm.

After Isabella fed Bianca, she and her mom said goodbye to Mrs. Alma and parted ways.

Days passed, and summer melted into early autumn. Isabella spent the remaining warm days on the beach, looking out at the swirling ocean and the hazy blue house.

As the warm days drifted into cool afternoons, Isabella saw a familiar figure standing outside of the house one day while on the beach. Recognizing it to be Mrs. Alma, she went towards the figure until she reached her. Mrs. Alma was sitting on the porch again, wrapped tightly in a blanket. Her face looked paler and more frail than before. She held a cup of hot tea in her thin, wrinkled hands.

"Hello Mrs. Alma!" Isabella said and smiled brightly.

"Hello Isabella," the old woman replied and smiled back.

Remembering her last attempt, she urged the woman one more time, "Do you want to join me on the beach?"

"I would love to," Mrs. Alma replied.

Overjoyed, Isabella took Mrs. Alma's hand, and they ventured to the beach.

"I have a lot of toys in Sofia's room. Would you like to have them?"

Isabella beamed, then hesitation fell over her, "But they were Sofia's. Are you sure you want me to have them?"

"Yes, they're no use sitting in that old chest. Sofia would appreciate a wonderful girl like you to own them."

Isabella looked gratefully into Mrs. Alma's gentle eyes. The sun glowed on her face, offering it a deep vibrancy for the first time.

"Look Mrs. Alma, the sunset is so beautiful!"

"Yes, it's wonderful."

## *Silent Stories of the City IV*

Samantha Kim



# *Adventures at a Bench*

Luisa A. Rozo Castaneda

She was sitting at a bus stop, this young thing. Clad in a black dress with coffee curls waving in the stale hot Chicago wind. She was listening to something that from her expression seemed peaceful and serene in a way. Though considering her age it might have been some new young pop I have yet to understand. I look at her form sitting on that wooden bench, shoulders hunched, head miles above and notice a flower on her leg. A gorgeous drawing of black lines etched on to the end of her calf. And I imagine what it must have been like to be young and free and beautiful wandering around getting flowers ingrained on one's body. Maybe because of the energy that waves off of her, but I ignore my shyness built slowly over time and tell her it's beautiful. She looks over, brown young eyes gleaming in the sunny rays and smiles that special kind of smile that has nothing behind it but her heart. She says thank you and goes to put her ear bud back in. I can't let her go, so I ask where she got it. She looks back with that smile still in place, earbud in hand, and says Madrid. Madrid, Spain she repeats ensuring that I recognize it as a place outside of Chicago and not some other Madrid. I tell her it's lovely once again because I'm not sure where to go from here, my bravery and longing only getting me this far. She turns towards me with her full attention at hand and tells me that it's new, she only got it last month. "Wow," I can't help but say, nothing else coming to mind. But her sun-filled eyes settling on me pushed me further, compelling me to ask, "How long were you there?" She proceeded to tell me, looking up as though the memories of the trip are etched in a cloud, that she was in Spain for a month and Madrid about a week and a half. She goes on, the stories probably surfacing in her mind, to say that she went as a graduation gift to herself with a friend after getting her BA. The picture of it, her coffee waves wandering the streets, tan Latin skin gazing at the artistry of a different city. Adventures I never had. I blurt a line so cliché I can't help but wince and feel the lines of my face extend. "That's what being young is for," I say, and she smiles and responds with a yes. We continue to talk, sharing small crumbs of our lives between each other. What we studied, what we're doing, what we want, what flower she has, how many tattoos she's collected, her art, mine, her home, mine. Each piece of her building the form of a young woman on a bench waiting for the bus. Each piece of myself building the form of an old woman sitting on a bench waiting for the bus. I can tell our conversation will soon come to an end as she looks towards



the street at the bus on its way to steal my adventure. Though it's unkind, I try to delay, using her kindness to root her to the spot in front of me. I mention random places and activities using the seconds in which her smile widens and her laugh vibrates to memories, her tan skin, sunny eyes, coffee waves, and small stars set all across her face, always in a pair, funny enough. And as I set the last detail of matching stars in my mind, she's walking away, saying goodbye and boarding the bus. I make a show of looking for mine though I know it won't arrive for another 20 minutes. As I do, she is carted away, and someone else sits in her spot. There goes my adventure.

## *Silent Stories of the City V*

Samantha Kim





# *Birth of Solaris*

## Mandy Shantyne Lopez

From the heart of the Sun, a flame was born,  
A golden light to weather the storm.  
She fell to the sea. Her wings ablaze:  
A celestial being in oceanic haze.  
The waves embraced her radiant glow,  
A harmony only the cosmos could know.  
With each tide's pull, her essence grew:  
A child of the Sun, both wild and true.  
Now she dances, where sea meets sky—  
A living hymn no stars deny.  
For Solaris shines, both fierce and free,  
The Sun's whisper to eternity.

~MSL33

# *Awakening*

## Mandy Shantyne Lopez

Born of stars, her soul had slept;  
Through tides of time, the silence kept.  
Yet now the Earth begins to sing,  
A call to rise; to spread her wings.  
The ocean stirs, the winds take flight,  
Her heart ignites in golden light.  
A metaphysician—timeless and wise—  
Unfolding truths beneath the skies.  
She feels the shift, the age now near,  
A love reborn, both bright and clear.

Awake she stands,  
her purpose drawn,  
A soul of the sun,  
reborn at dawn.

~MSL33

# *Siren's Spell*

Mandy Shantyne Lopez

A melody spun in the depths of the sea,  
Notes that whisper of destiny.  
The siren sings. Her voice a flame.  
A song that leaves no heart the same.  
Her tones cascade, wild and sweet-  
A spell that pulls with a rhythmic beat.  
Strings of stars and tides of sound,  
A magic where all souls are bound.  
Each chord a wave; each verse a tide-  
A hymn where secrets softly hide.  
She weaves her music, raw and free,  
A spell of love and mystery.  
Beware her song- yet yearn to hear-  
For in her voice a joyful seer.  
A siren's spell, the heart laid bare,  
A harmony beyond compare.

~MSL33

# Panic Attack

Sophia Tan

a giant block of cement pressing down on my head,  
a hand thrusting into my ear,  
furiously squeezing my brain,  
and twisting it around my neck in a tight knot.  
every organ in my body bubbling up,  
pushing outward in all directions,  
on the verge of bursting through my skin  
like a mutant monster begging to escape.

reminder: thoughts are just chemicals  
swirling in the brain—a haphazard concoction.  
yet they feel so real, speaking deep truths  
I can't help but believe.  
interception feels impossible, overpowered by a force  
to feel everything in extremes.  
I accept my fate and let it take over  
while I stand idly beside myself,  
hoping to survive.

it's nothing new; I know exactly how this goes,  
but still, each time feels like the end.  
a cynical mind swears this is the one—  
the one that promises no recovery  
and will never let me be the same again.

a blinding light ahead reveals my escape,  
but I can't focus long enough to reach it.  
I just close my eyes and keep counting

3

2

1

until I come out on the other side  
with no recollection of how.

# Hush Now

Supriya Saxena

I don't trust my tongue; it trips me  
and tricks me and leaves me stuttering.  
I prayed for a way to show you my feelings  
without the cumbersome casings of words,  
so easy to misarrange and misunderstand.  
To pull out my soul from  
down behind my sternum,  
give it a good shake, and  
wrap it around your shoulders;  
that was what I wanted.

When the day finally came,  
it was the end of the world. We saw it  
on the horizon, ominous and edging ever closer.  
Some believed it was divine punishment  
for our wickedness;  
others, a cruel trick of fate.  
I took it for the blessing that it was. I found you  
on the steps, alone, watching  
as the sky was engulfed. Your eyes glinted  
violet from the sky  
as they met mine.

I sat with you and uttered not a word.  
At last I took your hand, and then you knew.

# *Wandering Souls*

Luisa A. Rozo Castaneda

"So, you're searching for the soul," he said dismissively, as if it were something as simple to find as gold and jewels. This was nothing new, the soul, he meant. He was on his third meeting of the day in this ever-so-loud lounge, and every meeting ended the same with a single question. Where is it? As if the soul were so easy to ensnare in one's embrace and keep in his wallet. Bored of this never-ending search, he looked towards his phone distractedly and found a line of messages and emails waiting for him. He tried to scroll through to find something new, something exciting, something to pull his mind away, or at least nudge it in a different direction. With little luck and much less patience he goes back to work rubbing his hand over his face feeling the beard that had taken much too long to grow. And yet when he tried to type, he couldn't move. His fingers stuck hovering over the keyboard staring at a screen that seemed to slowly consume him. He had to move, he had to leave, he had to do something, anything if only to remind himself what he was searching for. One blink. Two. A third, and though an eternity had passed, the chorus in the background had only just started playing. Abruptly he gets up—nothing was going to come from him sitting there, and while he doubted the soul was simply lying around here, it was better than being trapped in one's own mind.

# Dear ~~Sylvia~~ Esther

Madisen Christoffersen

Dear ~~Sylvia~~ Esther,

I suppose it's safer for us to use aliases when exposing our woes and peeling back the rug that conceals the messy inner monologues of our souls which we've swept under it.

I find myself sitting under a fig tree, considering ~~your~~ Esther's metaphorical analysis from 70 years prior. I consider each fig, and the wonderful future that beckons from each.

One fig is a girl whose parents saw her passion for the arts and fed her dreams until she filled the shoes of a brilliant actress. One fig is a girl who fell in love with a boy she knew in high school and worked a boring, albeit stable, job as an accountant. One fig is a woman who moved to New York City to pursue a dignified career in fashion, toasting champagne glasses and wearing designer dresses, but returning each evening to a modest, studio apartment. One is a yoga instructor, finding internal peace and projecting it forward into the world around her. One is a magnificent author, signing her books at a cafe meet and greet.

Well, ~~Sylvia~~ Esther, I learned from your mistakes, and I did not want the figs to rot. So, I climbed the trunk and grabbed the first fig and bit off half of it. The juice paraded about my tongue and it was so sweet, but my parents told me that that fig was no good. In my tug-of-war battle against them, the fig rotted in my palm.

The boy I knew from my high school walked by, and he pointed to another fig at the end of my vision. I climbed to the next branch and I lengthened every fiber of muscle from my shoulder to the tips of my fingers until I wrapped my grip around the fig, and again, bit off half of it. It looked so sweet from the outside, but I realized that it was a façade. It was dry and had dusty mold growing on the inside. I spit it out before it could poison me, and the other half rotted in my palm.

I reached for a different one, a fig that everyone revered. It was popular and

beautiful, everyone would point to it as they passed by the tree. I was one of the lucky few who could climb high enough to pluck it off a branch. But when I bit into half of it, and it was sour, I wondered why everyone wanted it so badly. My mouth puckered and salivated, and in my hesitation to take another bite, it rotted in my palm.

So, then I decided to go for a fig that looked simple but nice, one that nearly everyone could reach if they put their mind to it. There was nothing extraordinary about it, but I just wanted one fig. So I shifted around the tree again and I pulled it down. I resigned to sit on the branch and eat it in serenity, so I bit off half of it. It was lovely, and someone wiser than I might have been content, but I wasn't sure that it was the best fig on the tree. As I looked around considering if another would taste better, the juice dripping down from the corners of my mouth, it rotted in my palm.

Maybe these figs are rotting just so I don't get full on the wrong one. Maybe they'll all rot until I climb to the right fig and sink my teeth fiercely into its purple flesh. Maybe all of them must rot so I can find *the* one fig, but God, I'd like to just have one. I'd like to know that somewhere on this tree, there is a fig that grew just for the intention of finding my mouth. But my dearest ~~Sylvia~~ Esther, knowing is not a luxury you and I are afforded.

I see your figs, whose ripeness had expired before you had had a liberty to taste, and I raise you my half-eaten figs, whose ripeness I was permitted to rejoice in for a brief moment before the figs either proved to be unpromising or rotted in my hand. I raise you my stomach which might fill, but will never be satisfied. I raise you the condemnation of wandering like a whisper in the wind, sampling life but never having something in its entirety. I raise you taking a bite of all but being a master of none.

Alas, this is no pity contest. ~~You're~~ Esther is long gone, and yet as I dine on halves of figs, I find myself in solidarity with the spirit of one of the loneliest women in the world.

Sincerely,  
~~Madisen Christoffersen~~ Alina

P.S. Despite my pessimist tone, I shall provide a silver lining and let you know that there's still a fig on the tree that entices me... it's very high up, on the top branch, actually. My skin pricks over the wood of the trunk as I begin my ascent. I may fall. It may rot in my hand. But oh, I crave it so.

# *Tide's Whisper*

Mandy Shantyne Lopez

His voice:  
a tide-both calm and wild-  
Ancient in texture,  
hypnotizing in tone.  
A Siren's hymn, it pulls me near,  
Echoing love only hearts can hear.  
~MSL33

# *Essence Collector*

Mandy Shantyne Lopez

A trace of earth; a hint of sea-  
His scent is a map of mystery.  
It lingers soft, yet bold and true-  
A whisper of him in all I do.  
~MSL33





# *Essence Collector II*

Mandy Shantyne Lopez

He walks the tides- where whispers dwell-  
A seeker drawn to the ocean's spell.  
Each breath, a note; each wave, a song.  
He gathers scents where they belong.  
The salt of the sea; the fire of the sun;  
The earth's soft musk when the day is done;  
The wind's sharp edge; the rain's embrace-  
He stores their essence in endless space.  
His heart- a vessel, deep and vast-  
Holds moments fleeting, shadows cast.  
For what is life but fleeting streams  
Of captured scents and stolen dreams?  
The siren watches, silent and still,  
Drawn to the art, the quiet thrill.  
And in his hands, the world's perfume,  
A collector's craft, a cosmic bloom.

~MSL33

# *To the One I've Lost*

Monique Dabdoub

Memory is a fickle thing.  
Some days are only half-remembered.  
Others not at all.  
But each day I had with you is a gift.  
Complete or incomplete  
I love these memories best of all.

I remember that I used to suck my thumb.  
I did it everywhere,  
And for quite a while.  
You used to laugh and find it cute.  
I remember your laughter like music  
That danced throughout the house.  
Until one day, it stopped.

You worried that my thumb would  
Stick to the roof of my mouth.  
So, on that day,  
You marched into a battle  
My mother had been trying to win  
For the better part of a year,  
And with a trick worthy of Odysseus,  
You scared that thumb  
Out of my mouth for good.

My dentist champions you  
As the hero of my pearly smile,  
An enduring legacy you left for me  
Every time I crack a grin.  
A flash of teeth in the mirror,  
And each time I think  
Of my knight in shining armor  
Who fought for me  
To shine, to laugh, to smile.

I used to point that smile at you,  
Bright as a lighthouse beam,  
Eager to lead your mind to shore  
Where memories of us stood.  
But my shine faltered,  
Weak and weary,  
As your eyes landed on me  
Free of recollection.

Then one day, my smile shattered.  
It bit at solid stone,  
And screamed your name into the abyss.  
My captain raised his arms from the depths  
To give me one final confused glance,  
One last hazy smile,  
Then no more,  
No more.

Oh, how I miss those  
Cheshire grins:  
Half-faded,  
And shrouded by time,  
A final vision  
Of my captain,  
My hero,  
My knight in shining armor.

So, now I smile for you,  
As I grin and beret in the mirror,  
And I think of a time when you sat by my side,  
And taught me what it meant  
To love and be loved.

# *In the Darkness*

Olivia Burd

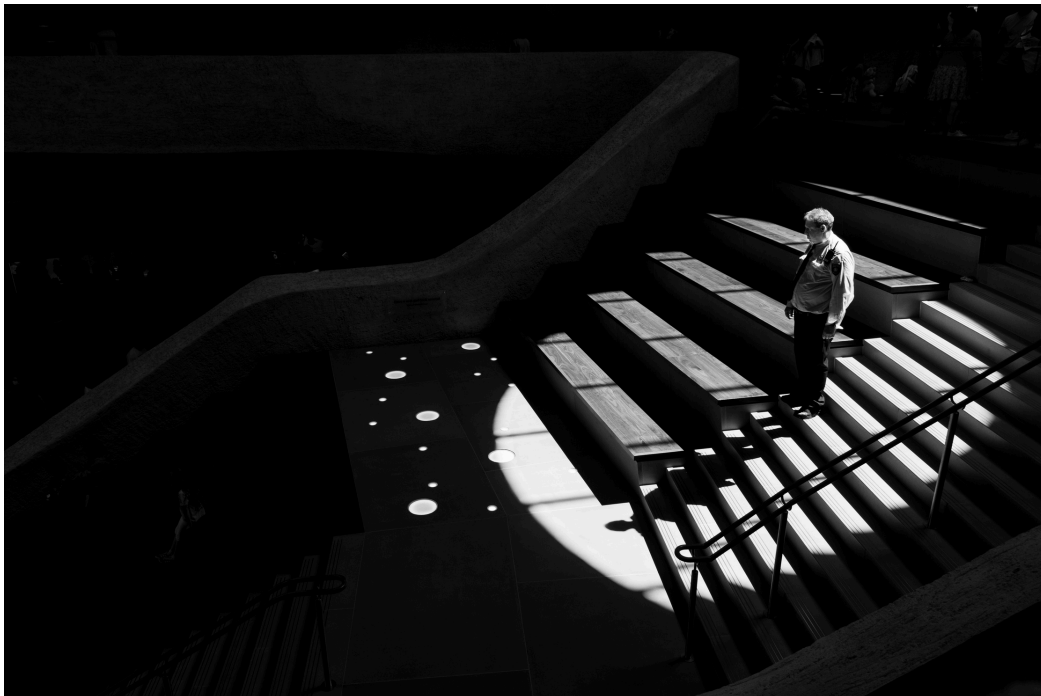
The lights flick off, the silence surrounds the room.  
It feels empty, yet so full.  
The darkness hides the things around you,  
but your mind is now cluttered.

The thoughts are free to soar.  
The unspoken words are spinning.  
It's a great time to think,  
unless the thoughts are scary.

Lonely, but alone with my own thoughts.  
Peaceful, but it's making my heart crumble to pieces.  
Dark, but so dark I can't find the happy thoughts.

## *Silent Stories of the City VI*

Samantha Kim



# December

Kenya Jones

In a few months from now the seasons will change again.

It will be the end of the year, filled with reflection, gratitude, grief, sadness, joy and pain.

By December, you may have realized that whatever you do, it's always going to be wrong to some people.

By December, I hope you learn to prioritize yourself and your future.

Remember that time flies. Make the most of your time.

By December, everything you ever wanted will begin to blossom,

Sometimes in the Spring, things blossom and begin to get brighter, but by the end of your year it will look like Spring.

By December, some people reflect on their greatest accomplishments.

By December, everything will unfold for you.

The words congratulations and acceptance will be the buzzwords for you.

You will see it and hear so often, it will become the norm.

By December, you will see the importance of patience, staying the course even when things are difficult.

By December, you will see the importance of believing in yourself.

By December, you will understand that you have to keep going even if no one is cheering you on.

Congratulations and Happy December!

# Shedding

Timothy Gray Jr.

A new species emerged in the animal kingdom recently. I saw one slink out of my mother. It started in the arms, a convulsion amongst the bones. Her skin rippled with sharp bumps, twisting and bulging as if a caged animal thrashed beneath it. Each motion was accompanied by a series of sickening cracks and squelches. Mom's neck stiffened. Her head arched back with gargled screams. Gnarled digits curled out of her mouth, grasping her cheeks. All the while, her eyes begged for my help. I was too shaken to move or speak. With a single heave, her eyes turned into empty, black sockets as the creature's bulbous head squeezed out of her maw. A single bulbous eye – veined and wet – pushed through her lips. It was ringed by a ridged mass of fleshy pink cartilage that glistened like exposed muscle. Cone-shaped receptors pulsed on the sides of its head in the place of ears. Its amorphous pupil stared me down as it undressed, shackling off my mother's skin.

Flesh fabric hit the floor. The eye sockets were empty and dark. I reached for Mom's corpse. Her black hair was lying at the skinny creature's feet. The putrid smell of blood wafted from the remains.

Before my hand could reach it, the creature clenched my face and dragged me from the living room. I could only gasp, my heart racing too quickly to create words. As I was dragged up the stairs, I glimpsed the discarded bag that Mom had become. I had just arrived home from my graphic design job, when... she suddenly began to convulse. I had only wanted to stop by since Dad was away on a business trip, yet a soft, fleshy creature was dragging me to my old, dusty bedroom. It slammed through the bedroom door, separating the wood from the hinges. *Crack!* The door clattered to the floor.

With a single swing of the shoulder, I was plopped onto a chair in front of a desk. Old paint bottles were sprawled across it, half-used and empty. I raised my head to find a clean, white canvas. "Get away from me!" I shrieked, a crack in my tone. A thin brush poked into view, two sharp digits holding it tightly. I peered over to see the cyclopean creature watching me. "You... You want me to paint?" I hollered, a melancholic cackle escaping from my throat.

Faced with the creature and its asinine request, I could only think of my mother. The first time I held a brush, it was she who handed it to me. I had come home from elementary school, blabbering about how we painted with our hands in art class. I wouldn't shut up about it. So, she drove us to Walmart, went to the arts

and crafts aisle, and helped me pick out the acrylics I wanted. We also found brushes and canvases for me to use. When we got back home, she helped me set up my first canvas and prepare the acrylics. Once everything was ready, she placed a brush in my little hand. The brush was white, rough on my fingertips. I began painting messy strokes on the canvas, just doing whatever I wanted. All the while, Mom lovingly smiled behind me.

That was our memory together, the feeling we shared. It was something that the creature probably couldn't comprehend. "I'm not painting for you!" I shrieked. I reached for my smartphone and tried to call the police but it was snatched from my hand. The creature stood tall, looking down at me with its singular eye. "I'm not painting for you!" I repeated. Then, it curled into a ball and backed away. "You're not going to hurt me? Not going to get angry and rip me apart? Eat me?" I badgered anxiously.

I waited, expecting all of the worst things to happen to me, but the creature did not move. So, I left, returning to the living room. My mother's skin was still on the carpet. I dared not touch it. I could leave the house... I could, I thought. I rushed toward the door, making heavy steps on the floor. Suddenly, the creature's steps pounded above. It stomped down the steps and crawled across the floor quickly. Its chest rose and fell rapidly as it stood before me, blocking the door. It had no mouth, but I could tell its breathing was heavy. It was desperate, just as desperate as me, I noticed. Leaving was the last thing it wanted me to do.

I didn't want to give it a reason to hurt me, so I turned on the tv and checked the news. My phone was far out my reach. I couldn't check the Internet or see notifications. "This can't just be happening to me," I hoped. The tv flickered on with breaking news flashing on the screen, running for the last hour. Every channel was interrupted with the same report, even international ones: 'Loved Ones Turned Inside Out'. I frantically watched, sweat slicking my fingers. There was a case where a woman's boyfriend turned into a one-eyed creature, forcing her to sing hours and hours upon end. In a similar case, a granddad turned monster made his grandson write short stories for him over and over again. A creature spawned from a woman's husband asked her to dance forever and a malformed instructor compelled his students to play the guitar for hours without stopping. Some creatures sat on the couch watching TV incessantly, while others perused the Internet. But mine wanted me to paint.

They weren't violent, police observed. They wanted to see someone dance, hear someone sing, watch television, and eat. Many people reported that their loved ones returned after fulfilling the creature's request. However, none of that was hard evidence, only speculation. The monsters had only existed for an hour after all. The common observation was that they just wanted to do what they found enjoyable

"Enjoyable? It finds my art enjoyable... Like Mom did," I gleamed, sitting on the couch in the living room. People were saying the creatures were harmless, even fascinating. But how could they be? How could anyone say that when they'd watched their own loved ones being turned inside out?

My eyes shifted back to the creature in front of the door. It was motionless, allowing me to watch the news. It stared at me, its eye glancing at the stairs, at me, and back again like a nervous child. "You want me to paint?" I whimpered. It was silent. I inched toward the stairs. The creature followed me back to the bedroom. "I'll paint," I sighed, taking the brush. I had no other choice. The news said loved ones could return. Mom could come back.

I painted, making messy strokes like I was that child who just got her first canvas. The lanky, cyclopean creature stood by and watched. As I gripped the brush, memories of Mom flooded back—her smile, the way she'd encourage everything I made as if it were a masterpiece. Was this what she'd want? Me creating for this... thing? Yet, a part of me longed to believe that this painting could revive her. So I kept going even though I didn't quite know what I was creating. A broad stroke of green laid the foundation for a pasture. My brush then gravitated toward a splotch of gray, laying the foundation for a dour sky on the canvas. A few strokes of brown manifested trees and finally green crescents plotted the leaves.

An hour later, I rose from the desk and presented the canvas to the grotesque creature. Its eyeball widened, wrinkling pink cartilage. It held the canvas tightly, cracking the thin wood. Startled, it loosened its grip. "I can make more," I muttered, grabbing another canvas. Each brushstroke felt like a betrayal, a tribute, and an unspoken plea. I was obeying the thing that emerged from Mom's remains, but somehow, it was as if I were painting for her, trying to show her that I still remembered the joy we once shared. I wanted to pull her from the depths of hell she was in and revitalize the person I loved. So, I painted. I slashed the canvas with the brush countless times.

Around midnight, I got up from the desk, exhausted. The creature took the five paintings I made and holed itself up in Mom's bedroom. It sat in the middle of a gallery of my own creation, taking the time to examine each painting. The creature sat, focused on a canvas where a messy green pasture stood out. It shifted its position slightly, raising one gnarled limb to rest on its cheek—just like Mom used to do when admiring my work.

"Mom?" I whispered, voice cracking. The creature's pupil constricted, almost as if it recognized my voice. It slithered past me and went down the stairs. From the doorway of my parents' bedroom, I could hear bones cracking, terrible screams, and disgusting gushing from the living room below. I moved to the top of the steps as the clamor ceased.

"Danielle?" Mom's loving voice came from the living room.



# Malta

Grace Jacques-Ibo



# Untamed Rage

Luvdeep Kaur

## Characters:

ODETTE, a woman in her early 20s

DIANE, a woman in her early 50s; owner of The Rage Room

RALPHIE, a man in his mid 20s; DIANE'S son

JAKE, a man in his late 20s; employee of DIANE

## Setting:

A room with a check-in desk on stage right. In the middle, there is a door and a giant window through which you can see a rage room. There are lockers on stage left.

Daytime. The Present.

## Scene 1:

(ODETTE is in the rage room. She hangs her head, putting on protective goggles and gloves. ODETTE bends down and picks up a hammer. She starts to break a tv.

RALPHIE and JAKE enter stage left rolling in a slightly banged up grand piano.)

JAKE

(nudges RALPHIE, gestures toward ODETTE) Looks like someone's got some major steam to let loose.

(ODETTE screams inaudibly and moves on to a dresser, ripping out the drawers)

RALPHIE

20 bucks says it's a cheating boyfriend.

JAKE

(laughing) You're on, but I won't be the one asking.

RALPHIE

Come on. Let's unload the rest of this shit before DIANE gets back.

JAKE

(slaps RALPHIE on the shoulder) Why do you call her that? She's your mother for God's sake. Show some respect.

(RALPHIE shoves JAKE as they exit stage left.)

## Scene 2:

(ODETTE is attacking a mini fridge. DIANE enters stage right with a cleaning cart and notices ODETTE. She organizes some papers at the check-in desk and moves the cart in front of the lockers. DIANE begins mopping the floor, singing to herself.)

(RALPHIE and JAKE enter stage left. They place a bench in front of the grand piano.)

RALPHIE

Hey so we unloaded the truck. Should we put the flat screen in room 2 since there's already a tv in room 1.

(RALPHIE takes the mop from DIANE and starts cleaning.)

JAKE

(JAKE looks towards ODETTE) At least there was one.

DIANE

They're meant to be destroyed, and Room 2 is fine, Ralphie.

(DIANE, RALPHIE, and JAKE watch as ODETTE heaves with exertion trying to rip the door off the mini fridge. ODETTE gives up and kicks it over.)

JAKE

She doesn't look too good.

RALPHIE

She does seem really upset, Mom. Maybe we should check on her.

JAKE

Be my guest I won't be risking a repeat of what happened last time I went in. (JAKE rolls his shoulder. He walks over to the piano and starts hitting random keys.)

RALPHIE

I said I was sorry. The buzzer was broken, and I thought it would be fine since their time was up. How was I supposed to know they would *turn on you*?

JAKE

It's fine man, no permanent damage. (JAKE finds an out-of-tune key, hits it a couple of times, then stops.)

DIANE

It's okay. Her time is almost up anyways. I'll handle it. (She takes the mop back from RALPHIE) Thank you.

RALPHIE

JAKE

Bye.

See ya.

(RALPHIE and JAKE exit stage left.)

### Scene 3:

(DIANE walks over to the busted grand piano and opens it up. She starts to tune it. A buzzer sounds and ODETTE sinks to the floor in exhaustion. ODETTE walks out and sits on the bench removing the protective gear.)

ODETTE

Isn't that going to get smashed up anyways? What's the point of fixing it?

DIANE

Well, I suppose it still has a couple pretty notes in it before it's pushing daisies.

ODETTE

(ODETTE runs her hand down her face). How'd you end up working at a place like this?  
If you don't mind my asking.

DIANE

No, not at all. I actually own it.

ODETTE

Wow.

DIANE

It was my son's idea. Bit of an entrepreneur, that one. (DIANE finishes tuning the piano and closes the lid, sitting down in front of it. She plays a bit of a song.)

ODETTE

(ODETTE begins to cry, trying to hide it.) That's beautiful.

DIANE

Oh dear, are you okay?

ODETTE

(ODETTE wipes away her tears) I'm fine. Where'd you learn how to play?

DIANE

I only know a bit. My husband taught me; he was the musician of the family. We opened up this place after he passed.

ODETTE

I'm sorry.

DIANE

It's okay. I love talking about him. Remembering.

ODETTE

(ODETTE chokes up, but gathers herself.) Why this place. Doesn't it get to be a bit much at times. All these . . . um . . . emotions running high.

DIANE

(DIANE gets up and leans on the piano.) Well, I figure there's a lot of untamed rage in the world. Lord knows I've experienced my fair share. It's going to come out one way or another; might as well be in a place like this. I won't pretend we're doing some massive favor to everyone. But it has to be doing some good. To get it all out in here, instead of out there.

ODETTE

Oh.

DIANE

I saw you in there. You can tell me if you like. It can be easier sometimes when it's a stranger.

ODETTE

(*pauses*) I'm alone and it's all my fault. I've pushed everyone away.

(RALPHIE and JAKE walk enter stage left and start cleaning the lockers, but ODETTE doesn't notice)

ODETTE (cont'd)

Last night I told my boyfriend that I cheated and I left him. I mean it was a lie, but I—

RALPHIE

(whispers) I told you it was cheating. Pay up.

JAKE

No, you said it was a cheating boyfriend. I don't owe— (ODETTE starts gathering up her things)

DIANE

(sternly) Boys, out please. You can go clean up room 1.

RALPHIE

Sorry.

JAKE

Yeah, sorry. We'll get right on that.

(RALPHIE and JAKE go inside the room and start cleaning up the wreckage ODETTE left behind)

ODETTE

I'm sorry. I'll get out of your hair. (ODETTE starts walking towards the door.)

DIANE

No, I'm sorry, don't mind them. You're welcome to stay. I can always use someone to talk to.

ODETTE

Ok, um. . . thank you. (ODETTE slowly walks back and sits down on the bench.)

DIANE

So, you said you cheated, but you didn't . . .

ODETTE

Yes, well I had to say that. I'm sick.

DIANE

Sick?

ODETTE

Cancer.

DIANE

I see. I'm sorry, dear.

ODETTE

I don't really know why I did it. I guess I didn't want anything to change. In our relationship I mean.

DIANE

So you ended it.

ODETTE

Yes, and then I was just left with all this anger.

DIANE

So you came here.

ODETTE

Yes. You know what pisses me off the most? The goddam movies.

DIANE

I'm not following.

ODETTE

You know all of those movies about cancer patients. Either they survive at the end or they don't, but you know what they all have in common?

DIANE

What?

ODETTE

The acceptance. At some point every single person accepts that they're gonna die. (flustered) They're so damn graceful and, and, and peaceful about it.

DIANE

And that makes you angry.

ODETTE

I don't want to leave. It's like I just got here, I've barely done anything.

DIANE

Well I can't pretend to know anything about cancer, but you've got more life in you than I've seen in a long time.

(ODETTE sniffles and wipes her eyes)

DIANE

I'm sorry. Oh dear, me and my big mouth. I've offended you haven't I?

ODETTE

(laughing lightly) No, no you're fine. I just don't see myself that way— lively.

DIANE

What do you see then?

ODETTE

A coward, I've always been afraid. Too afraid to even say what I want because I'll disappoint myself by not being able to get it. And now the clock's run out and I hate myself for wasting it all.

DIANE

Now, at the risk of offending you . . . once again: Can I tell you what I think?

ODETTE

Yeah, go ahead.

DIANE

I've just met you and I can tell that you're brilliant. But you know when that brilliance becomes an issue?

(ODETTE shakes her head)

DIANE

When it traps you in your head. You're not a coward, you are simply misdirecting your efforts. Believe me, self-awareness is great— even necessary. But it can easily turn rancid.



ODETTE

Even if you're right, and that is my problem. It's too late—

DIANE

My dear, it is never too late for anything. Whether it's for a lifetime, a year, an hour, or even a single second, you must live, and you must live intentionally. (long pause)

(DIANE walks over to the cleaning cart and starts fidgeting with the supplies)

DIANE

(DIANE starts wheeling the cart out of the room) Now that I've definitely said too much, my dear, I'll leave you to it.

(DIANE begins to wheel the cart towards stage right. As she passes by ODETTE,

ODETTE gently grabs DIANE's arm.)

ODETTE

I can't say that I'm completely rid of my issues, but I feel a bit . . . hopeful, I guess. Thank you.

(DIANE exits stage right with the cleaning cart. ODETTE sits down at the piano and begins to play a song.)

End of Play



# *What to Do with Fallen Angels*

Supriya Saxena

not all angels come from heaven.  
some claw their way up from below,  
shaking clods of dirt from their wings:  
filthy, matted things with feathers  
crumpled and all bent the wrong way,  
muscles stiff and sore from disuse  
(flight's forbidden in hell's caverns).  
broken, bleeding fingernails that  
dug through unforgiving earth for  
miles and miles—until sunlight was  
finally, blessedly tasted—  
scab and scar, reminding of the  
hardships long endured to get here.

they were holy, too, you know. once.  
someday they'll be holy again.  
till then, let that angel inside.  
sit him by the fire to be warmed.  
wash him well with soap and water.  
dry his wings until they're fluffy,  
wings he'll wrap around you in thanks.  
he can be good if you'll let him.  
all he ever wanted was to  
reclaim his divinity.



*Lumière* is a collection of literary and visual works by students in New York University's student-led organization, SCRIBE. Each issue showcases the culmination of creative talent, editorial guidance, and the ambitious execution of tasks related to the publication process. This literary magazine illuminates the inner workings of the human soul and fearlessly thrusts these sentiments into the context of our outer world.

The fire within sheds light on the world beyond.

Sincerely,

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