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THIS CITY IS YOURS



BLANK IS YOURS

ISSUE ONE

honorable

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letter from the editor in chief

this issue exists because of every person who gave something to it: their contributions, their time, their effort, and their trust in an idea that didn't have a shape yet.

hello friends,

welcome to the very first publication with blankisyours, 01 thiscityisyours. its hard to explain what it means to publish something to a platform of 10,000 people that began as a stray thought. at a time marked by uncertainty and upheaval among young people, blankisyours began with a simple question: what would happen if we made space for people to share what they carry, what they notice, and what they feel?

at the very beginning, when blankisyours was still thisisyours, it was a long conversation on the 6th floor of a library with who is now our head of editorial. we wondered whether people would take on an open call to share, whether they would be willing to put part of themselves out into the world, and whether a space built around listening could mean something to a generation trying to make sense of itself.

what came from that idea is more than what kristen and i could have ever imagined. over the past 8 months, our team has grown from 19 to 46, and extended far beyond the borders of toronto. from over 100 countries, encompasing over two thousand submissions, blankisyours has grown into something no one who had to bare with my initial outreach pitches expected :')

people are unique. the contributors in this issue come from over 100 countries, each from different cities, speaking different languages, and living lives shaped by their own experiences. and yet, they all viewed the same prompts, responding to them in ways that could only really be their own.

the questions put forward were by no means simple. they touched on issues that shape people's lives in vastly different ways, with no single answer or shared experience to draw from. but perhaps that is where understanding begins: in the willingness to listen, to remain curious about lives beyond our own, and to recognise that young people's voices deserve not only to be heard, but to be taken seriously.

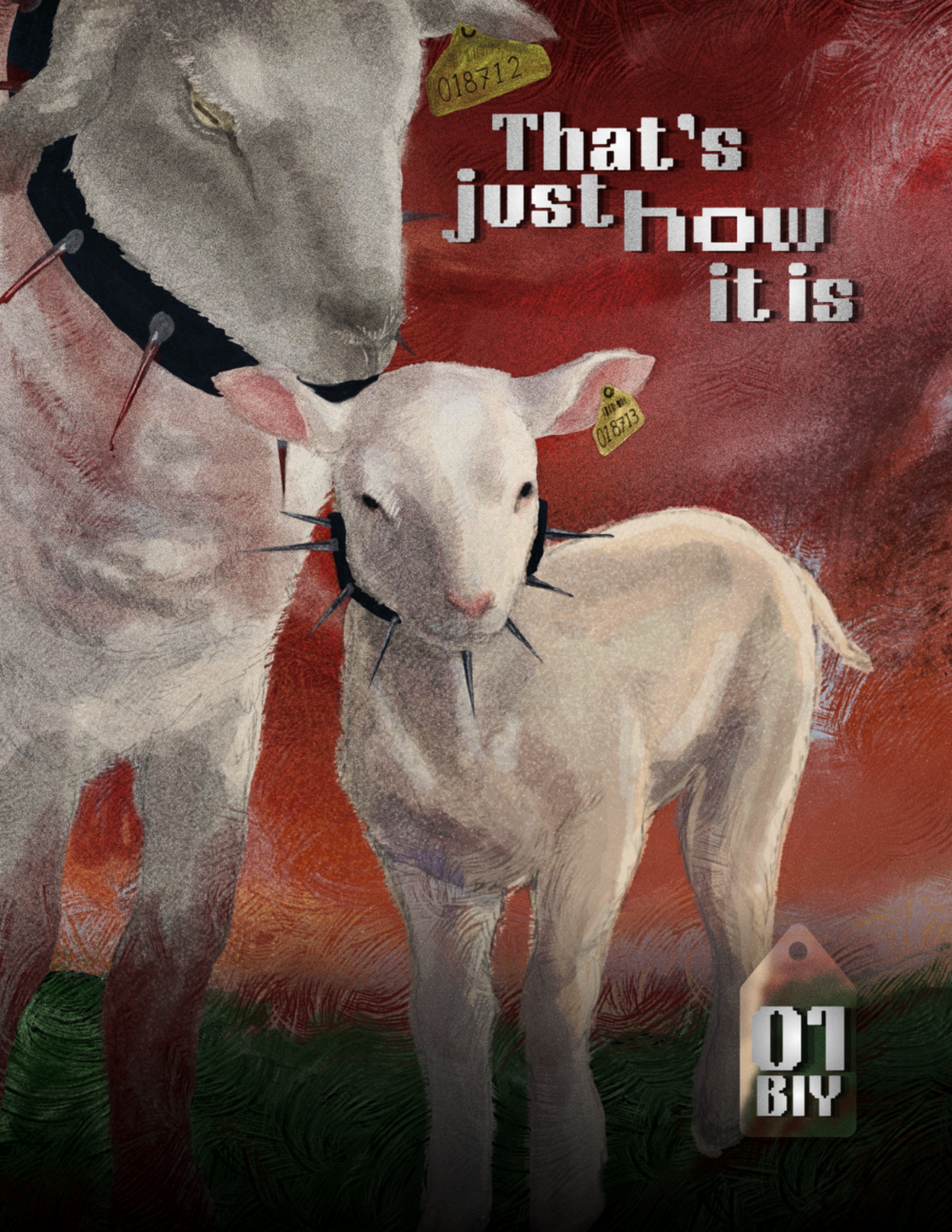
the pages that follow are full of people answering that call to share. young people who are passionate about the issues shaping their cities and communities, who showed up to the prompts we put out with stories and thoughts they hadn't shared anywhere else. ideas that couldn't be put into words were drawn onto paper, recorded in film, or taken on camera. problems we usually meet as headlines and statistics are told here by the young people who live alongside them, first hand.

above all, this is yours.

sincerely,

jaleen
editor-in-chief, blankisyours

a special thank you to: kristen yip, daniel chu, aya tileubay, rey oh, amy zhu, andrew fan, claire shi, ruisi fu, alexa roque, annie xiong, avery yuen, sam qu, and jun lee for believing in the concept of what we could build to be.


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THE ARTIST BEHIND THE WORK

01

I am a high school artist, writer, and poet living in Richmond, BC. My art explores how memory, culture, and personal growth shape the way we see the world. I love mixing visual art with writing to capture subtle emotions and everyday stories that often go unnoticed. Over the years, my work has been recognized with a Scholastic Art & Writing National Gold Medal, as well as awards from The New York Times and the Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition. Through painting, illustration, and poetry, I hope to spark meaningful connections and invite viewers into quiet moments of reflection.

Lila Vianna is an artist based in New York currently studying Illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design. She works in digital and mixed media to illustrate concepts such as ideas, feelings, and dreams. She is inspired by comic art, bright colors, and patterns.

02

03

Cherri sometimes feels like the world moves a little too fast. "Why does adults seem to drop unreachable standards on us youth and just leave us to stray? Did the last few generations lack all forms of basic common sense?" Though the world could be on the brink of an apocalypse Cherri hopes that in the mist of this chaos, they can bring a small little light in the end of the tunnel for anyone who is lost. They hope to grow into a person who finds the whimsy and hope in everything.

A BELATED ATTEMPT

CREATED BY **JESSIE LI**



DESCRIPTION

A Belated Attempt reflects the quiet tension between doing what we are told and the sudden realization that we need to break free. Surrounded by unspoken rules and inherited expectations, the figures are trapped in a world where "that's just how it is" has been accepted for far too long. This piece marks a fragile, delayed moment of questioning—an overdue step of resistance that asks: is it ever really too late to challenge what felt inevitable?

01

DIGITAL ART

SOGNO

CREATED BY **LILA VIANNA**



DESCRIPTION

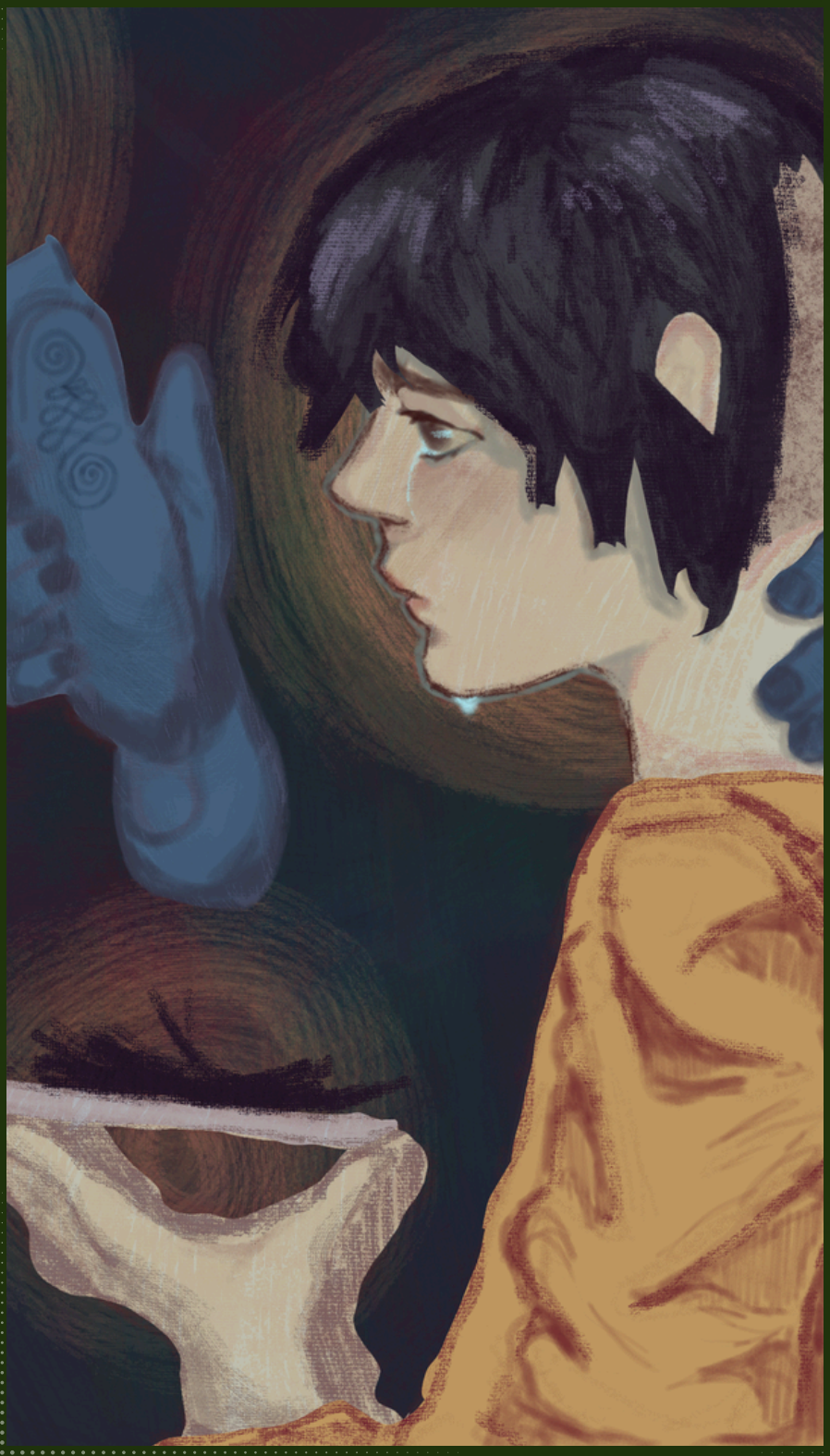
If I could, I'd stay in a dream forever. One where I, the dreamer, could control every aspect and every story beat while also being the entertained watcher. Back when I created the first version of this piece in my freshman year of college, my dreams were coming true. I got into the school I wanted, I belonged enough to be there, and I was about to begin the rest of my life. That's when it hit me. I was about to begin the rest of my life. Since then, I've created numerous colored versions of *Sogno*, and even as I get older, I realize parts of me have never changed. I'm still a dreamer, someone floating along through life waiting to wake up.

02

DIGITAL ART

ORDINATION

CREATED BY PANYATHIP



DESCRIPTION

This was based off my experience a few years ago when I had to practice being a monk in my birth country. In my culture it is very common and urged upon that every single boy must practice being a monk at least once in their lives. I however did not want to partake in this practice since at the time I did not have a stable self image of myself and my hair was one of the only things I had control of (nor did I believe in any religion either). But my mother still forced me and told me that if I didnt I would be cursed with bad karma for the rest of my life and bring the entire family down. "It is something that everyone must do for their own life and most importantly, family." Sometimes it felt like she cared more about "cleansing me" than the actual me.

THE ARTIST BEHIND THE WORK

04

Yaqeen Khalili is a Pakistani-Chinese-Filipino, 15 year old girl. Through street photography and travel, Yaqeen has learned to appreciate the small details that often go unnoticed. Reminding her how small she is in this temporary world. Fields of Work was taken in Ubud, Indonesia. It focuses on a worker roaming the rice fields. Aimed to express how society often forgets to thank the people that help sustain these beautiful areas, leaving them as shadows behind the leaves.

05

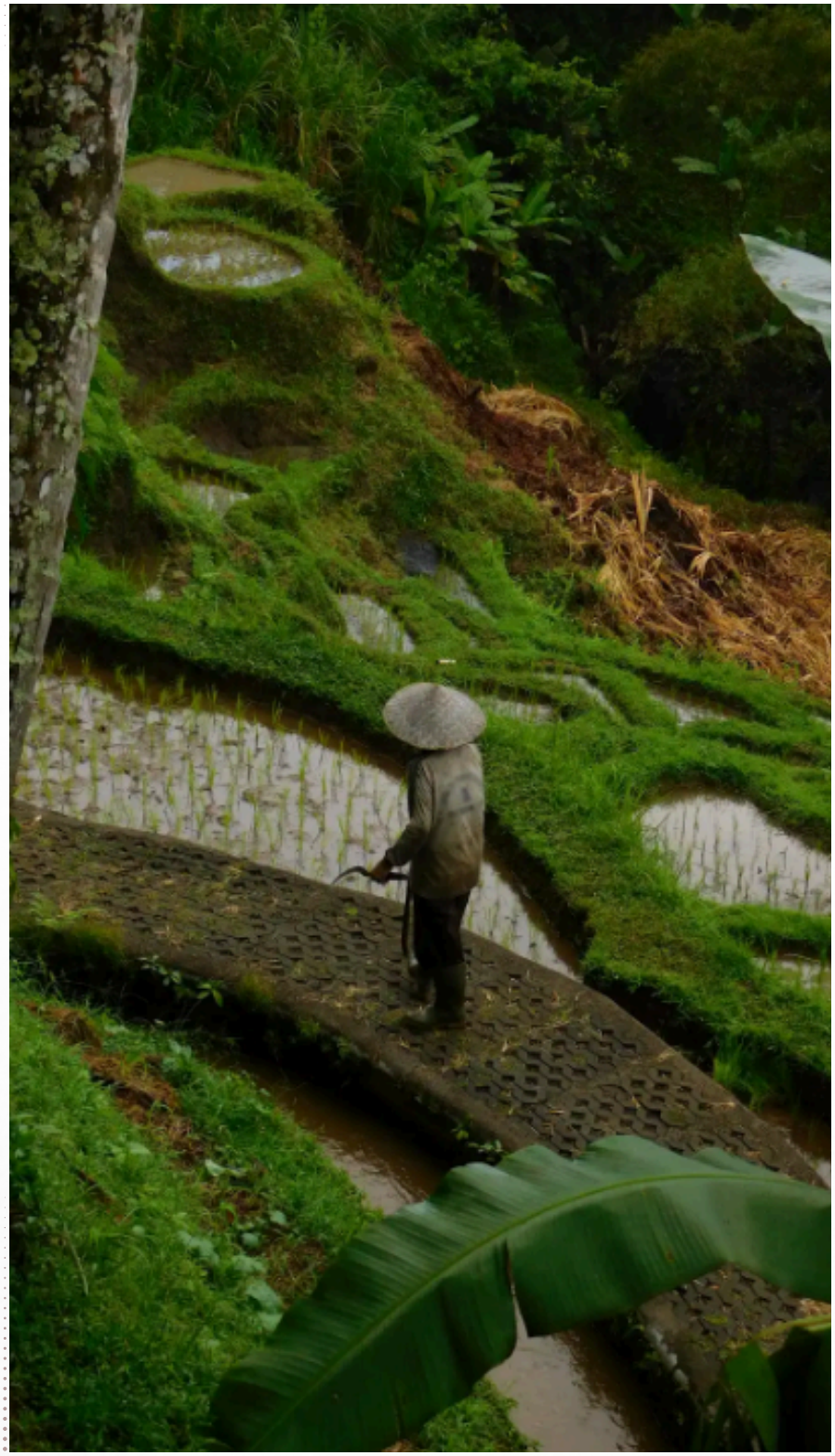
Hi! My name is Carolina Morales and I was born and raised in Panama. I am currently 18 years old and am taking a gap semester before university. I am both a traditional and digital artist, and am completely self taught by lots of practice and art books. I enjoy art because it is both a creative and emotional outlet for me, that allows me to explore my interests and emotions all at once. I enjoy drawing people, nature, and animals and my preferred medium are graphite pencils. I am more creative with colors digitally but I feel as though my skills with physical acrylics are still not at a par. I hope you guys enjoy me piece as much as I enjoyed making it!

PHOTOGRAPHY

FIELD OF WORK

CREATED BY

YAQEEN KHALILI



Whom does our land sustain, if those who tend it are forgotten?

04

DIGITAL ART

THE VALUE OF ART

CREATED BY **CAROLINA GOMEZ**



DESCRIPTION

The main idea of this artwork is to bring emphasis on the value that society gives money and consumerism rather than creativity and craft. In a way art is devalued because society tends to focus on its monetary worth rather than the emotional, creative, and physical effort put into it. This piece explores this in a tangible way, through a scale, where despite the art supplies clearly weigh more than a dollar bill, it is still lighter because it does not receive as much importance as the cash.

05

THE ARTIST BEHIND THE WORK

06

Hello, my name is Vivian Sui. I am from the Bay Area, but right now I am a currently a sophomore studying business economics at the University of California, San Diego. When I'm not crying over calculus or grabbing boba at Molly Tea with friends, I looove to draw. In my art, I love to explore identity, the beauty of the world, and the search for meaning in the one life we get to live. Although I study economics, art continues to be an important part of understanding who I am and the world around me. My ultimate dream in life is to explore the world and connect with interesting people from all over! Through my work, I hope to create pieces that highlight universal themes that are part of the human experience, and ultimately invite people to pause, reflect, and perhaps see a familiar feeling from a new perspective.

07

Allie Ma is a Chinese-American oil painter currently studying at the Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. She explores the feminine experience and how it transfigures traditional ideas of power through cultural symbolism in her portraits of Asian women. Ma enjoys integrating soft, realistic human forms with shape language and flowing patterns, with one of her great inspirations being Gustav Klimt. Ma has received various awards for her paintings, such as a National Scholastic Silver Medal and Best in Show for her School District for the Houston Rodeo School Art Competition. As the 2025 Congressional Art Competition winner for her district, her artwork has been exhibited in the U.S. Capitol for a year.

OVERFLOW

CREATED BY **VIVIAN SUI**



DESCRIPTION

“Overflow” is significant to me because it reflects a pressure many people, including myself, experience to suppress parts of themselves that do not fit within society’s expectations. We often hide our dreams and emotions out of fear of failure or judgment, but continually suppressing them can leave us feeling like fish out of water. Through this painting, I hope to encourage viewers to consider the dreams they may have pushed aside and how the expectations surrounding them have shaped what they allow themselves to pursue in their lives.

02

PRAYER IN BLUE

CREATED BY **ALLIE MA**



DESCRIPTION

This piece explores the construction of the "ideal woman" across cultures, comparing Confucian social hierarchies and returning perceptions of femininity in the United States. Patriarchal systems have long turned dependence and self-effacement into virtues, revering women figureheads while limiting their real-life autonomy.

07



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SHORT STORY

HAIRCUT

01

ARYAN NARAYANSWAMY

"It's probably been over fifteen minutes."

Minghao was definitely right. They didn't make any move to get up, though, so Aditya didn't either.

Instead he leaned his head back against the cool glass of the large window, stretching his legs out in front of him.

He chose not to think about the dozens of boots that would have passed down this stairwell a few hours ago, or about what kinds of things the seventh graders might have stepped in before rushing up to class in the morning.

He chose not to think of all the sticky fingers that had grabbed the metal railing his back was now pressed against. He chose not to notice that the bright red of the railing clashed horribly with the dull grey of the tile.

He chose not to look at the harsh neon ceiling lights that washed the whole scene in a somehow more unpleasant colour, quiet and sterile. He chose not to listen to the low eerie hum of the generator, the silence otherwise so loud in this little corner that Aditya and Minghao might as well have been the only people in the whole school.

He chose not to think about the band practice that would surely be resuming a few hallways down, the fifteen-minute break Madame Martin had given them undoubtedly over by now. He chose not to think about how his whole section would sound horrible without him to compensate, and about the fact that the music teacher would definitely notice the absence of her only competent bassists.

He chose not to think about the fact that it was his last year here.

"It probably has."

Aditya ran a hand through his hair. It had started getting long again. He pushed it back in an effort to forget about it, but it was no use. The overgrown mane fell forward once again, settling in a perfectly awful triangular shape.

The silence should have been awkward. He and Minghao were not very close, he thought instinctively, but it wasn't really true anymore. He wasn't sure when the shift had happened, from acquaintances to whatever they were now. He chose not to think about that either.

"I'd like to be a director," Minghao said slowly after a moment. "Make movies. If the deal was I could do anything?"

Aditya nodded. "That was the deal."

"Something indie, you know. Shot on film, and it would have super artsy camera angles
and an incredible soundtrack."

"Wes Anderson style," Aditya added, nodding again. "Bright colours, crazy sets, witty
dialogue..."

"Of course. I wouldn't know about the plot, though. I guess that's more your thing, anyway."

"Yeah, I guess it is." Aditya laughed. "It's certainly not Wes Anderson's thing. Well, it's settled then, I'll write and you'll direct. We have half a movie already."

Minghao laughed too, and they seemed far away for a moment, but only for a moment.

"I'll probably go into civil engineering, in any case," they finally said, shrugging slightly. "Architecture and the like."

Aditya smiled a small, dry smile, and he huffed softly. “Hm. It’s almost art, yeah?”

Minghao’s expression mirrored his. “Almost.”

Somewhere in the distance, the horns could be heard blaring the opening to “Whiplash”.
The vibration of the kickdrum found its way through the floor from the music room to the seventh-grade hallway stairwell.

“Well anyway, that wasn’t the question,” Aditya retorted, smile back in place. “Deal was you could be anything. Me, I’d be a rockstar.”

Minghao’s eyebrows shot up as they let out a snort of laughter. “Oh please, you would not.”

Aditya’s grin widened. “Why not?”

He threw an arm up into the air, curling his other hand into a fist to replicate a microphone, mimicking Freddy Mercury’s iconic pose.

“You don’t see the vision?”

Minghao shook their head as they knocked their shoulder against his. “You wish you were that cool.”

Aditya gasped in mock offence, shoving them back. “Fuck you!”

The tuba and euphonium were both out of tune, the low dissonant frequencies painfully grating, even as faint as they were from across the school.

“Seriously though, you want to be a writer, right? You’re joking about the rockstar thing?”

Aditya shrugged, fiddling with the frayed ends of his shoelaces. The battered black Converses had seen better days. They were hardly two years old, but already the soles had been rubbed smooth by friction and there was a gaping hole right at the left heel, large enough to fit two whole fingers. Aditya figured he finally had an excuse now to get new ones in red.

“I don’t know. Anything creative, I think.”

He scooted forward a little so he could lean back more comfortably, stretching his arms above his head. “I want to be extraordinary.”

Minghao didn’t laugh this time. They just looked at him with something strange in their eyes, admiration or envy, perhaps, or just pity.

“Maybe we will make that movie, then. We can be the next Matt Damon and Ben Affleck.”

Aditya glanced up and cracked a smile. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Whiplash” was not an easy piece. 7/4 rhythm at a tempo of 220, it was a disaster if you lost count. Unfortunately, from the sound of things, a significant portion of the band couldn’t count to seven.

Aditya had struggled with “Whiplash” too, at first. He had known all the notes, all the sounds and exactly how to produce them, but his fretting hand had refused to move as quickly as his brain. He had stayed after school three days over the past two weeks, practicing until his fingers bruised.

It had paid off in the end. He was the only bassist in the band who could play the riff. Minghao was alright, but they had started later. Aditya derived an unreasonable amount of pride from carrying the section through the hardest piece in the repertoire. The teacher had beamed at him the week before, praising him both to the band and in private.

Some of that respect was surely lost now that he was missing for the fourth or fifth time since the start of the term. Aditya chose not to think about that.

“I need a haircut.”
Aditya tugged at his dark curls again with a dull grimace.
Minghao looked at him. “I’ll cut yours if you’ll cut mine.”
He raised his eyebrows and paused for a moment before speaking again. “Short?”
Minghao nodded slowly.
Aditya’s lips twitched as he tried not to smile. “*Short* short?”

Minghao nodded again, looking down. They didn't explain, but they didn't have to.

Aditya failed to contain his grin, letting it spread across his face. "I fucking called it. Welcome to the club."

Minghao chuckled softly, then stayed silent for a moment. "I'm not… like you, I don't think," they finally said. "Not completely. Or maybe I am, I don't really know. I guess this is more your thing, too."

Aditya shook his head and shrugged easily. "You don't have to know. I'll cut your hair. We'll go from there."

"I don't think it goes anywhere for me," Minghao muttered. "With my parents, and all that. It's a line I don't think I could cross. You know how it is."

Aditya opened and closed his mouth a few times before looking down and exhaling slowly. "Yeah, I know how it is."

Minghao glanced at him, then down at the laces of their faded blue Converses (low-tops, the inferior kind, Aditya had often reminded them). They both spent a long moment staring at their shoes. The sun had set some time ago, the orange glow of the streetlamps the only source of light on the outside. The glass of the windowpane had grown cooler with the frost brought on by the wintry night air.

In the other room, the piece ended rather anticlimactically, each of the three melodic lines — woodwinds, horns, and bassline — assertively finishing one beat off from the other two. There was a momentary lull before two saxophones began obnoxiously blaring "Careless Whisper" in different keys.

"I can't talk to the others like this." Minghao said it softly, a shameful confession. "We don't really talk at all, not in the ways that matter."

Aditya didn't say anything.

"I've known them forever, but it's different with you. You're like me."

He laughed, then, instinctively, bringing his arm up to his face and raising his eyebrows as if shocked to discover its brownness.

Minghao snorted and rolled their eyes. "You know what I meant."

Aditya schooled his expression. "Yeah, I know," he confirmed, turning his face to the high ceiling. "We are the same. In the ways that matter, anyway. Though I'd say you're like me, because I'm the original, cooler version."

Minghao glanced at him and huffed out a laugh, then followed his gaze up.

"Should we head back?"

Aditya closed his eyes.

"Five more minutes."



SHORT STORY

MEETING IN THE SAND 02

QURA TUL AIN

"So your father died too?" His knitting needles do not stop for once.
"No" I look at the tablecloth he is knitting. "Why do you ask?"
"You are working with those big train men." He continued. "In our village,
children don't work unless their father dies. They only play."
"My father says playing is for rich children only." I murmur hesitantly, brushing
off the sand from my shirt.
He continues, both knitting and talking. "You should come to my village someday;
my friends will be very happy to meet you. They will teach you reading too."
"I don't want to read." I look back at the train.
"Why? Reading is fun! We can all sing poetry together." He adds excitedly.
"How can anyone sing pottery?" I ask looking up at the sky.
"Not pottery, Idiot!" He giggles. "Poetry"
I look back at him, seeing his face brightening up. His hands don't stop moving
those needles in perfect rhythm.
"Poetry are small lines. We all sing them together. My mother doesn't know about
them. She is always at home. But me and my friends sing them. They are written
on street walls. We sing them together." His hands stop for a moment and he looks
up at me, "Why do you not want to read?"
"Reading is not good in our town." I look at his hands waiting for those needles to
move again.
"Why?" He doesn't continue his knitting.
I remain silent as the train manager passes by. I look at the big boot prints on the
sand and say, "In our town, when someone's father reads a letter, they have to work
on Sundays too."
He nods and continues knitting. "Then you shouldn't read. Otherwise, you will
have to work on Sundays too."
I look at his hands again, "Why are you making a pink tablecloth? This table is in
the desert."
He doesn't look up from his knitting needles. "This table has all the keys of the
building. I keep watch for these keys. My Mom says this is not just a table. This is
our family's purpose and this is why people give us food."
"But it's still in the desert!" I try to make him see the sand.
"So what? It is mine now" he smiles, his hands moving even swiftly. "And I will
keep it beautiful, even in this desert."
After a while, he looks up at the men locking the building and asks me, "What do
you do with those big train men? You are so small like me. Even the tanks of fuel
in the building are bigger than you!"
I point to the small case above the train, "I stand there, looking for sand storms"
"So, you keep watch too?" He speaks excitedly, "We are same then!"
I look at the train as all men start entraining again.
"Will you come back?" He speaks excitedly. "My tablecloth will be complete till
then."
I shake my head slightly, "They won't keep me on that case if I grow up"
"Then don't!" He adds excitedly again. "If you don't eat much, you won't get as big
as them. Then you can continue to work on this case and meet me next year!"
I nod slightly.

"Promise me you will come back to see my tablecloth!" he speaks enthusiastically.
I sigh, "Alright, I promise!"
The train's journey continues, just as his knitting and our watch.

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

A COMA IN THE MEKONG 03

NGUYEN KIM BINH

In my hometown of Ba Chuc, near the Cambodian border, the air is thick with the smell of sun-baked earth and river water. The rhythm of life is set by the distant chug of fishing boats on the Hau River and the rustle of wind through the thot not palms that stand like patient sentinels over the rice paddies. It is a landscape that breeds a certain kind of peace, but also a quiet resignation. When the crops failed, or the floodwaters rose, or a student decided to drop out and cross the border for factory work, the elders would sigh and offer the same benediction: “That’s just how it is.” It was a full stop, an invisible wall built from generations of enduring. I heard it often, and for the longest time, I accepted it as the natural order of things.

The most formidable expression of this wall for me was the English language. It felt like a distant, glittering city I could only observe from across a vast, impassable river. My first English lessons were a recitation of sounds from an old cassette tape, the voice distorted and tinny. My peers and I would repeat after it, parroting syllables that held no meaning for our lives. We knew the names of things in a textbook world, but not how to feel them. The consensus, whispered in the shade of the schoolyard's ancient tamarind tree, was clear: that world belonged to city kids with their language centers and foreign teachers. For us, English was just a subject to pass, a chore before we returned to the familiar cycle of the fields and the river. That was just how it was.

But a quiet rebellion began to stir within me, sparked not by grand ambition, but by a simple act of listening. I started borrowing old English music tapes from a cousin who worked in the city. The static was terrible, but through it, I could hear something more than grammar rules. I heard rhythm, emotion, stories. I spent my evenings hunched over a tiny, hand-me-down laptop with a cracked screen, waiting for a single webpage to load on our sporadic internet connection. I read blog posts, song lyrics, anything I could find. The words were no longer just sounds; they became keys. Each new idiom, each perfectly crafted sentence, was a small victory against the wall of "that's just how it is." I was not just learning a language; I was gathering the tools to build my own bridge.

The first time I understood a full sentence in an English movie without subtitles, it was like a light switch flipping in a dark room. I remember the exact scene, a character talking about the ocean, a concept both familiar and impossibly distant for a child of the delta. In that moment, the wall didn't just shrink; it cracked. I began to see that my reality,

with its muddy riverbanks and golden sunshine, was not a limitation, but a unique perspective. My English wasn't a mimicry of a textbook; it was flavored by the earthy humor of my neighbors and the quiet resilience of my grandmother's stories. The language began to live in me, not as a foreign object, but as a new skin I was slowly growing into.

Last year, our village was hit by an unseasonal storm that threatened the rice harvest. The usual response was resignation. But I saw my chance. I gathered a few younger students and, using my English, we found a short-wave radio broadcast from an agricultural program in the Philippines discussing post-flood rice recovery methods. We translated the key steps, wrote them down in simple Vietnamese, and shared them with a few farmers. It wasn't revolutionary. It was a mall, practical application of a skill that had been deemed useless for our lives. But the sight of my own father, a man who had spent his life accepting the river's whims, carefully studying my notes, was a profound shift. He didn't say much, just nodded, but in that small gesture, I saw the wall begin to crumble for him too.

An Giang shaped who I am, with its patient sun and its enduring people. But it does not limit who I can become. The phrase "that's just how it is" was never an absolute truth. It was merely a story we had been telling ourselves for so long that we had forgotten we were the authors. My journey has not been about escaping my home, but about rewriting its narrative. I am learning to write a new sentence for myself, one that begins with the smell of the river and the shade of the thot not trees, but ends not with a period, but with a comma, leading onward to an unwritten future. The story, I have found, was never finished. It was just waiting for someone to pick up the pen.

POETRY

PLASTIC

04

BERION

Last week I suffered from the inauthenticity of things
Today I suffer from the artificiality of the world we have built
My friends today are ones and zeroes glowing on a screen, wounding my retinas
Retinas that cannot see without a transformed lens

I do not walk upon grass, beneath my feet there are tiles or asphalt
And if there were grass, it would be planted in the spring that passed
Only to be torn away and replaced in the spring to come

I do not swim in water, only in chlorine
There is no air in my lungs, only smoke from one of my country's factories
At all times there is fabric upon my skin
Of countless colors, sizes, and materials

At all times there are products upon my body, in my hair and on my flesh
Being myself another one of these products in my own right
Walking barefoot hurts my feet
Sleeping on the floor, my back

I fear the dark, yet there is always light, always
My whims are indulged, miles become minutes, cold and hunger no longer exist within my
spectrum
There is nowhere I can find the original, the authentic, the natural
There is not a single millimeter that has not been touched

Like an intruder who ruins a house, moving everything and leaving it upside down
Everything has been cut, crushed, smashed, burned, frozen, melted, erased, mixed, fused,
and lost in dust

Who gave the fire to man, who set the apes free, who let us become gods
There are no secrets, for there is no one left to uncover them
No one is watching us, the stars have already died in the sky
And the shape of truth is a dry leaf upon the ground

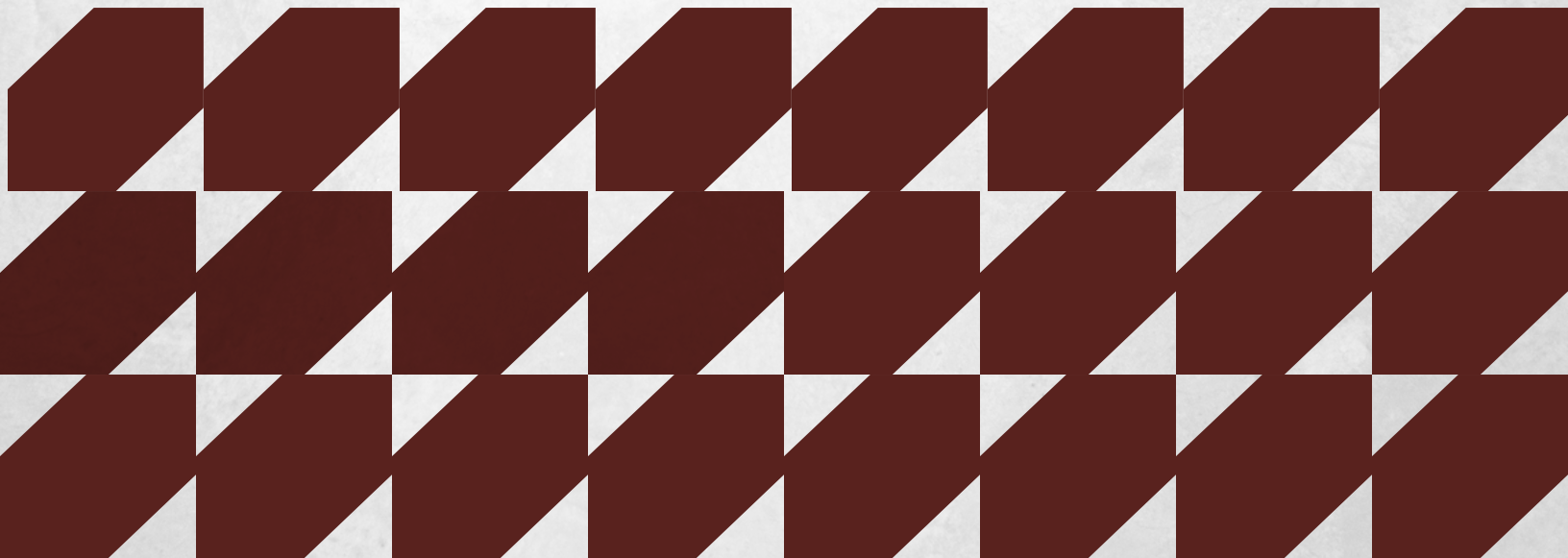
In our new world, there is nothing that has not been allowed to exist
There is nothing spontaneous, impulsive, guttural, or unpredictable
Only the misery of our children, in an artificial and empty world

I fear the well inside me, growing deeper and deeper
It imprisons me with the thought that this part of me may no longer be a part, but the whole

I am trapped inside this avatar of flesh, in a plastic world
Where there is no soil, only floor
Where my hands type without looking, where my ears bend to headphones
And my heart races when I am not connected

I want to feel a pure breeze, I want to feel the cold
I want to howl upon a beach on a deserted island
To feel blood running from the corner of my mouth
And be fed by the placenta of the Earth

It is truly a foolish simulation of what it means to be human
When one no longer knows what it means to truly live



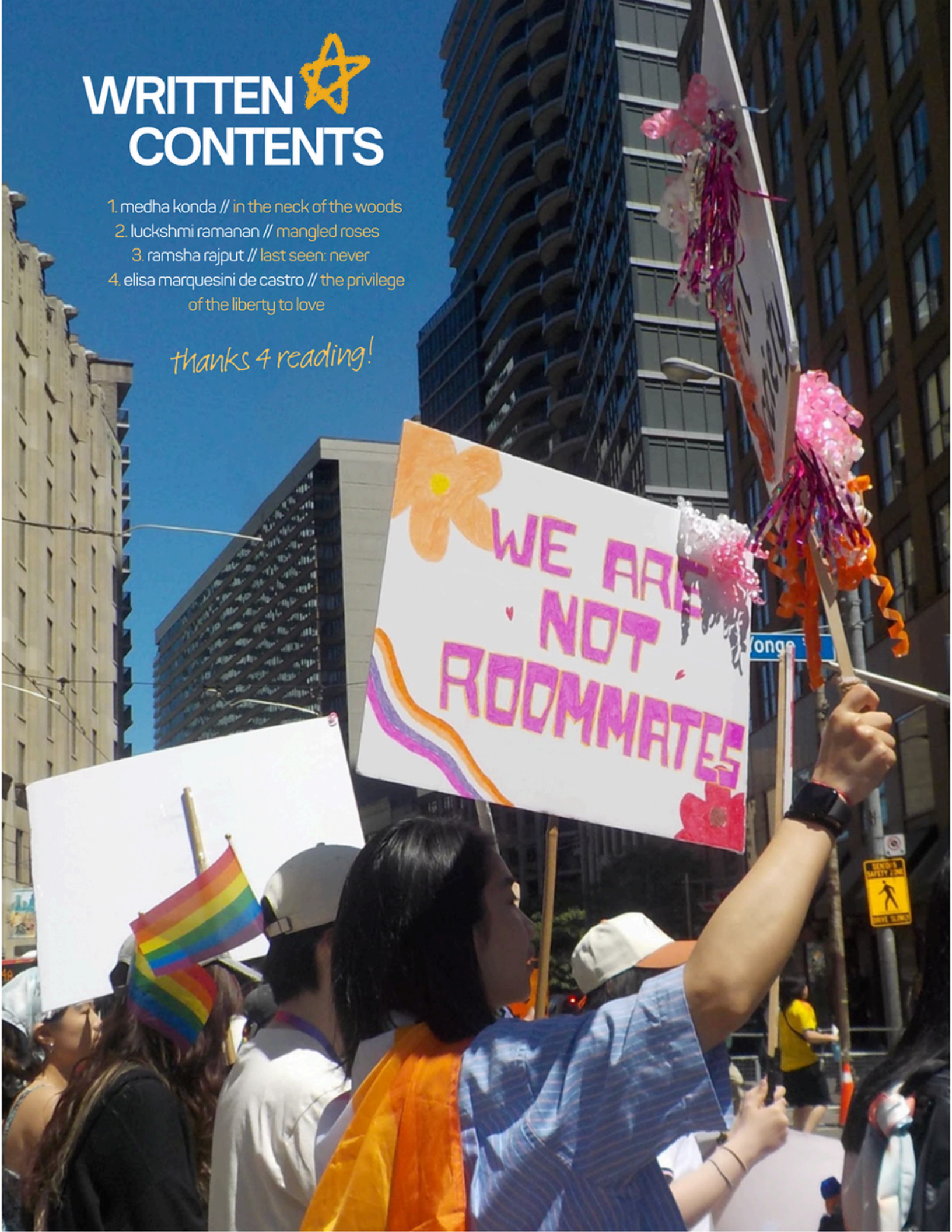

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the liberty to love
BIY 02

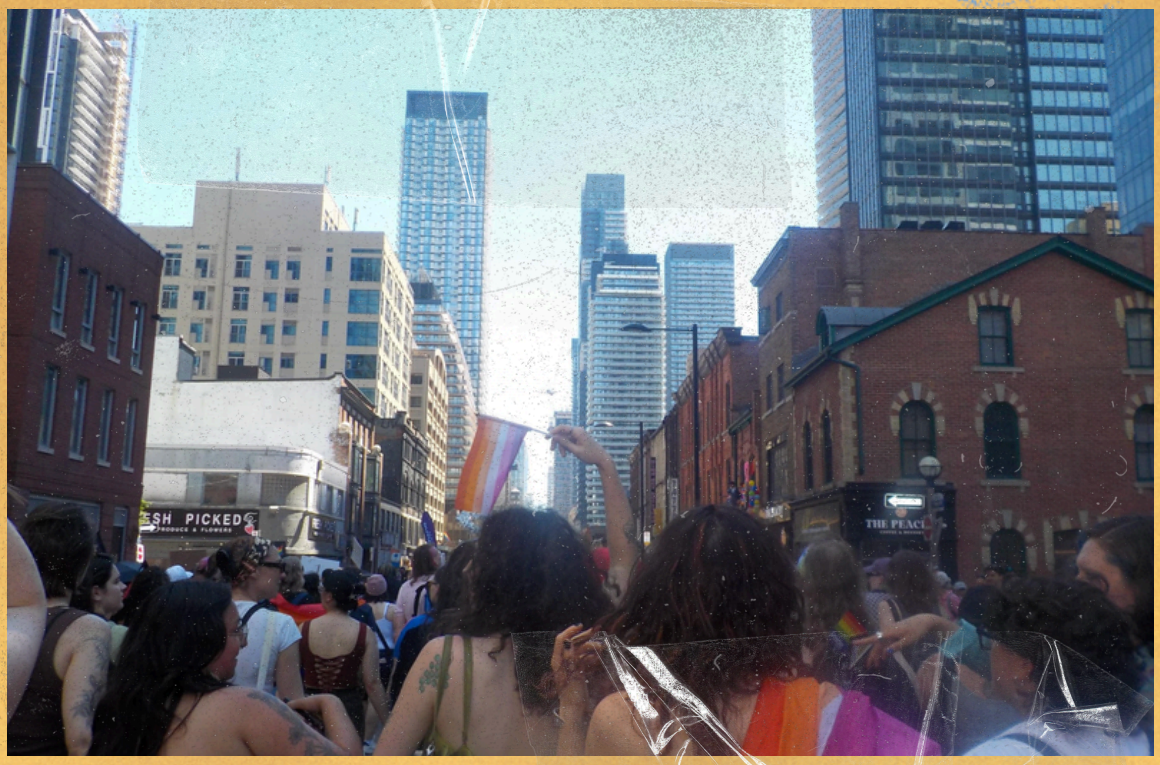
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3. ramsha rajput // last seen: never
4. elisa marquesini de castro // the privilege of the liberty to love

thanks 4 reading!



the author
behind the work



An avid reader from a young age, Luckshmi Ramanan loves books. When she doesn't have her nose in a novel, she's either plotting her next story or studying. In her free time, Luckshmi likes to play the clarinet, paint watercolour flowers, and bake cookies with her friends.

Mangled Roses

By: Luckshmi Ramanan

"Promise me that you'll never tell anyone about us."

It's the pleading in your eyes that hurts me more than your request. But I nod, and you smile, and I'm just happy to be holding your hand.

A timid love. I think that is the best way to describe it. Like a rose's petals unfurling to light for the first time. It's slow and delicate and oh so gentle. Your love brushes against me in such gentle ways; in breaths before dawn when you whisper my name, in the way you always wear that silver necklace I got you, in the quiet hours by the fireplace, your head on my shoulder. My world is painted with the tender pinks of your lipstick kisses and mellow blues of our shadows combined, a pastel palette of hues I never knew I could feel. I wonder if you feel it the same as I do.

I don't know when it started, only that once it was there, it had grown too big to kill. Tendrils snaking up my spine and settling deep in my chest, tightly woven around each of my ribs.

A tangled, knotted mess

leaves fluttering every time I breathe

And I've tried mangling the roses that bloomed–they do not look the way roses should–but now the mutilated petals sit in heavily the pit of my churning stomach,

and as they burn, I hear them begging

louder every day
to be stitched back
Louder every day
to be known
LOUDER every day
to stop existing in all the quiet, unloved, spaces of my mind

Know me, understand me, accept me, know me, understand me, accept me, know me–
But somewhere on a thriving pine, out in a vast forest, drip

Know me, understand me, accept me, know me, understand me, accept me, know me–
But somewhere on a thriving pine, out in a vast forest, drip

drops

of dew

Slowly, softly, without a care in the world. It made no effort to hide when the Sun rose; only shined brightly, refracting the rays of gold into the ever fading unknown of forest shadow. I envy the morning dew that can sit at ease on any leaf. So beautifully obvious, but never hated for its existence.

"You're visiting your mother today, right?" Though you've never let me meet the woman, I know you two have never really got along. I hope that today goes well for you.

"I'm not scared." You say it more to convince yourself. But I notice that same small shrink in your stature that you are.

I run my finger along your necklace, a rose pendant on a silver chain, the necklace I got you so many years ago and that you've worn ever since. "I can come with you if it'll make you feel bette–"

"No."

For a short while, all I can hear are the cars that drive by outside our house and the silent plea that I won't ask you again. So I kiss you goodbye and you kiss me back and I think to myself that you're carrying a bit of me with you when you wear that necklace. The thought makes me smile, and I hope the same one crosses your mind and provides you with some sort of solace.

ᛉ

I can only hear the drumming of my own heart in my ears growing louder against the speech of your twisted tongue

The vile vitriol you spew

It is as though you spit at me with an acid in your breath

corrode my

skin

and burn my

Soul

Leaving behind a body raw and red and racked with ache

The biggest lie you've taught me, Mother, is that sticks and stones may break our bones but

words will

never

hurt us

Because words do far worse than hurt

They kill

The dagger that dives into the dying heart and carves it further into its grave It's familiar though, the damp of dirt and stench of rotting roots that wrap around my cadaver Like the tendrils tangled in my chest

ᛉ

When you get back from your mother's place, there's a nervous energy that was not there before. You pick at your fingers, chew your lip, fiddle with the hem of your sleeve over and over. I take your hands in mine, hoping to ground you, to let you know that I'm here. "What happened when you went to visit her? Are you okay?"

You're quiet for a while before you pull your hands away and say, "It's fine. I'm going to sleep."

It's only as you're turning away that I see the little rose pendant on its silver chain coiled on the dresser behind you. You've taken off your necklace for the first time since I got it for you.

The Author *Behind The Work*

I'm Ramsha Rajput, an English Literature student, a writer, a devoted reader, and a professional overthinker. I have an unreasonable fondness for cats, including the ones who have decided I am probably not worth their time. I write because my thoughts rarely know when to be quiet, and writing is the easiest way I've found to make sense of them.

I'm interested in the strange little things that make people who they are; the stories we inherit, the things we carry without meaning to, the conversations we replay in our heads, and the feelings we sometimes struggle to name. I like writing about people trying to understand themselves while the world around them is busy telling them who they should be.

When I'm not writing, I'm usually reading, thinking too much about something completely ordinary, or trying to befriend a cat that has already made it very clear that we are not friends.

By: Ramsha Rajput

Last Seen: Never

My grandfather has been dead for six years, and he still has more opinions than anyone else in the family.

The group chat is called *THE FAMILY* (*do not mute*), thirty-eight members deep. His photo is still that lake, grey-blue, a little out of focus, taken by a hand that was probably laughing when it took it. His last message, from the spring he died, says only "*ok*," an answer to some question nobody remembers asking. It sits at the bottom of the thread like a stone at the bottom of a river. Nobody has ever had the heart to move it. Six years gone, and he is still, without contest, the loudest person in the room.

Grandpa would've hated the tattoos, my aunt typed last week, forwarding it straight to me, like I was being handed evidence in a trial nobody had told me I was standing trial in.

Two days later, my cousin announced she was eloping, and a different aunt reached for the same dead man like he was a light switch: *Grandpa always said, love finds its own way.*

Same man. Opposite verdict. Nobody in this family has ever let a small thing like contradiction, or death, get in the way of winning an argument.

I used to picture him as a kind of neutral country, a Switzerland made of one grandfather, invoked by whoever needed the extra vote that week. Grandpa says wait till you're settled. Grandpa says don't overthink it. Grandpa, apparently, contained multitudes, and every single one of them happened to agree with whoever was currently talking.

I was seeing someone my mother had Concerns about. Capital-C. Not bad-person concerns, he held doors, he called his mother back every Sunday without being asked, he cried once at a dog food commercial and didn't bother hiding it. Just *not what I pictured* concerns, folded into softer words so they'd sound like wisdom instead of what they were.

What nobody tells you about loving someone your family hasn't signed off on is that it doesn't feel like defiance. It feels like editing. I mentioned him in installments, a little at dinner, a little more the following week, watching my mother's face the way you watch a sky before deciding whether to bring an umbrella. I left his name out of stories where it didn't strictly need to be there. I loved him in a smaller font, just in case.

That's the part nobody warns you about. Not the fights. *The rehearsing.*

Some nights he'd call for no reason, just to tell me the guy at the coffee shop got his order wrong again, and I'd lie there in the dark with the phone warm against my ear, smiling at nothing, at the ceiling, and somewhere under the smiling a small cold arithmetic kept running anyway. *How much of this is mine. How much of this do I get to keep before someone decides I don't.* I hated that part of myself. The part that couldn't just be happy without one eye on the door.

And when my mother finally reached for the ultimate authority, your grandfather would be so *disappointed in you*, something in me went very still, the way a room goes still when you realize you've been afraid of a sound the whole house was making, not just one door.

I didn't answer her. You can't argue with a dead man's disapproval without sounding like you're arguing with grief itself, and I have never once won an argument against grief. So I nodded, the way I'd nodded my whole life, and went to my room, and sat on the edge of the bed with my chest doing that tight, folded thing it does when I've agreed to something out loud that I haven't agreed to anywhere else in me.

I am so tired, I thought, *of loving people through a translator*.

When did I start needing a dead man's permission to feel something that's just mine?

Underneath that, a bigger question, one I'd never let finish before: why does it take anyone's permission at all.

It wasn't like my family had invented this. My mother had been questioned once too, I knew that the way you know a fact you've never sat with. Someone had looked at her choice and found it wanting. Grandpa himself, apparently, had once sat in some room being told he wasn't enough. Every person currently interrogating my life had, at some point, had their own life interrogated by someone just as certain, just as sure they were only protecting them.

So why did nobody ever break it. Why does the questioned become the questioner, first chance they get, like it's a debt passed down instead of paid off, like the only way to survive being doubted is to make sure someone else gets doubted too. Nobody in this family invented the permission slip. They just kept renewing it, each one swearing they'd never do to their kids what was done to them, and doing it anyway, in a slightly different hand.

I didn't have an answer. Only the question, sitting loud in the dark, and under it, quieter: *maybe nobody in this family has ever actually been free to love without a verdict attached. Maybe that's the real inheritance. Not a rulebook. A wound, passed hand to hand, mistaken for wisdom because it hurt them too.*

What did he actually say. The real thing. Before we turned him into a mascot.

It was that blue hour when the streetlight starts buzzing and the whole street forgets it's supposed to be asleep. I sat cross-legged on the bed, phone too bright in my face, and scrolled up. Past the forwards. Past the funeral photos, everyone in black, a toddler asleep on a folding chair. Past six years of a man performing opinions he never held, until the messages got shorter, and older, and the group he was in got smaller, until it was just the two of them.

A private thread. Him and my grandmother, back when she was alive, back when he apparently typed like a man in a hurry to get something honest out before his nerve caught up with him.

She told her mother today, it read. *Her mother says I'm not what she pictured. Not the right family. Not enough behind my name. She's not wrong, probably. I keep waiting for your mother to change her mind and some days I don't think she ever will and I don't know what a man's supposed to do with a love everyone's decided is a mistake, except love her anyway, and hope to God it isn't.*

My hands weren't steady. I noticed that the way you notice rain only once your shoulders are already wet. My thumb hovered, refusing to scroll further, like some part of me needed to sit inside that one message a little longer before the world got it back.

I read it three times, slower each time, like it might rearrange itself into something that hurt less.

Love her anyway, and hope to God it isn't.

Under the relief, and it was relief first, a loosening in my chest I hadn't known was clenched, there was something closer to anger. Not at him. At every year spent asking a ghost for permission he'd never withheld. At every small edit I'd made to keep the peace. At my mother, a little. Mostly at myself, for how easily I'd handed my heart to a jury that was never real.

You don't get those years back. Nobody hands you a form to reclaim the version of you that flinched.

He'd never once, in his whole life, waited for anyone's permission to love someone. He'd waited for courage instead, which sounds almost the same as permission but costs an entirely different kind of person to gather. The disapproving portrait my family kept dusting off and hanging back on the wall, it wasn't even a good likeness. I'd made a fence out of a man who'd spent his life climbing over one.

I thought about my mother, reaching for his name like scripture. I wondered if she'd ever read this thread, or if grief just does that to people, sands them down smooth, into whoever is most useful to quote.

I thought about the boy asleep across town who cried at a dog food commercial, who was, by every measure my family kept score with, not what anyone had pictured.

I typed a message into the big, loud, thirty-eight-person group. Deleted it. Typed it again, slower this time.

Found something Grandpa actually said. Not a forward. The real thing.

I pasted it in, eleven years old, never meant for an audience, written by a man in a hurry to say something true before he lost his nerve, and I put the phone face-down before I could watch the message land.

It buzzed once, a while later. My aunt: *Where did you even find this.*

Then, after a longer silence than I expected: my mother. Just one word. *Oh.*

I didn't stay to see what came after that. My hands were still shaking, and my chest had that loose, unfamiliar lightness of a held breath finally let go. I called the boy instead, past midnight, and he picked up half-asleep, faintly worried, the way people do when a call at that hour could mean anything.

I didn't explain the group chat, or the thread, or the eleven years, or the man who'd waited for courage instead of permission. I just said, *hey, are you free this weekend, I want you to meet my mom.*

Not because anyone had cleared it. Because I'd finally stopped needing them to.

I didn't check anyone's face first, after that. Not my mother's. Not the version of Grandpa I'd built out of other people's forwards. Just my own, steady, for once, and mine.

Here's the part I keep turning over, even now. It took his words to let me feel what should have never needed anyone's words at all. I'd waited for a man six years dead to hand me a permission I was always allowed to take for myself. That's the joke underneath it, the one that isn't funny so much as it's honest, I thought I'd found freedom in his message, when really I'd just found a witness. The freedom had been mine the whole time, sitting unclaimed, waiting for me to stop asking the dead, the living, the whole loud group of them, whether I was allowed to feel what I already felt.

Nobody should need a grandfather's ghost to say love doesn't require a verdict. The tragedy was never that he disapproved, he never did. It's that I needed someone's approval at all, and it took a dead man's words to show me the need itself was the cage. Not the family. Not the disapproval dressed up as concern. Just the quiet, learned belief that my heart owed somebody an explanation before it was allowed to feel anything.

I don't want to hand that down. Not to whoever comes after me, not to some future version of this same loud thread, running long after I'm the blurry photo somebody's too sentimental to delete.

Some things you inherit without asking. The rest, you have to scroll back far enough, in the dark, to find.

the author *behind the work*

Medha Konda is a writer from the sunshine and swamps of Florida. She enjoys writing short fiction about the daily routines humans form and the fears they harbor, for which she has been recognized for by the Scholastic Awards. In addition to such, she writes op-eds as well as foreign-affairs articles in her school's newspaper's. Outside of writing, Medha has a strong passion for the outdoors and is an avid hiker, environmentalist, and advocate.

By: Medha

in this neck of the woods

branches in the woods crack with fickle pressure. like that, when the gentle dissatisfaction of society taps you on the shoulder, they snap. the etching of initials in wet sand, was our forever. you drew me out of the woods, into the city. before they found us, we stared up at the sun; then each other. in the rare moments, books in our hands; legs between one another.

i used to watch tragic movies; ones where they'd spend a moment laughing in the woods, and the next repenting in the pew. my mind was then splattered with images of innate relationships; more natural than husband and wife. the soft streets of a small town didn't agree. teachers sang the gospel and the students were their messengers. i'd rather stay in the forest, lie under the shade of the branches, protect them in turn. so long as these thoughts are not found, the forest stays strong. but in time, i left that winding forest. those thin branches and messy brambles faded away. instead i faced the city.

in the city, i caught you on a window sill, drawing in full color. the small town branches were lost in my mind, the crisp snaps and faint rustlings, now ringing to no one. we shared our names. this is me, who are you? pleased to meet you. and when you said my name with the devotion of saying grace, i grew scared. the patrons around us all saw our exchange. flush already washed over me; they'd know. the chatter grew loud and immeasurable. you only smiled in return.

now we split sandwiches in the apartment and pore over new books. as the night accompanies us, we place a calm hand into one another's. outside these doors, we are but strangers. if my thoughts lie dormant, it can seldom be dangerous. there are no witnesses to my curling finger tips, trying to develop a quiet heat. i let my hands run along your hair, your own tangled in mine. but there are witnesses to our conversations, glances and even whispers. the scornful eyes rise in our wake, and the branches quiver. and each time they do, it's me who you grow frustrated with. you don't hear the whispers of the branches. you don't know the safety of the woods. you don't know how to keep it sacred, and preserved from those who destroy it. you've been born from the city, but the country calls me back. it's not just their stares, but your hair, battered by the wind, standing against my forest. your hands are prying apart the trees, snapping the branches. and each friend who now reads between the lines, breaks the branches one by one.

you watched me pack shirts and drying sheets into my suitcase. we didn't share words, but the branches spoke for me. now ragged, beaten, they only have despair. the people must know by now, sharing to each other the horrors they saw. whatever you might say, the trees speak louder. your gaze alone is now enough; they're fallen down.



the author behind the work

Elisa Marquesini de Castro is a Brazilian high school student who spends most of her free time writing about identity, memory, justice, and, above all, fantastical worlds in which she cannot live. Currently, she dreams of studying journalism abroad and seeing the world doing what she loves most: writing.

The Privilege of the Liberty to Love

The liberty to love. I don't think I truly understood what that meant until recently, when I had my first romantic experience with another girl.

She took my breath away. The gentle sway of her curls left me dizzy, while the melody of her voice bewitched me like a siren's song. Like metal drawn to a magnet by nothing more than its own pull, I was drawn to her—overwhelmed, helpless, and utterly unable to resist.

I never had the choice not to fall in love with her. Just as no one can hold their breath forever, because sooner or later, the desperate need for air will overcome them. Fighting it was futile. All that remained was to surrender.

It began with gentle touches, so innocent they could have been mistaken for nothing more than friendship. But as they evolved into touches of a more unmistakable nature, I began to notice the way we seemed to unconsciously hide ourselves more and more. Suddenly, holding hands felt like a revolutionary act that would place us squarely in the sights of a sniper poised to pull the trigger. Without realizing it, we became more careful, more watchful, more... afraid. All the time. On a mundane, pale Sunday afternoon, we came to carry the devastating weight of a life shaped by fear.

Suddenly, I found myself longing for the mediocrity of an ordinary life. I didn't want a love story worthy of some epic romance film. I wanted to kiss the girl I loved in public without feeling as though we were standing in the middle of a battlefield. I wanted to take her on a date to some tacky restaurant on Valentine's Day without being scorched by confused, judgmental stares. I wanted to wake beside her and watch the first light of dawn bathe her features, as though the gods themselves had carved them from stone, without fearing that her parents might catch us and disinherit her for sharing a bed with another girl.

It was then that I understood that the liberty to love was a privilege reserved for a particular group—a group I would never belong to. My love, therefore, was confined to the safety of four walls, hidden from attentive ears and smoldering eyes. I was condemned to never know a world in which every part of my essence, every part of who I am, could be accepted without question, anywhere in the world.

And so, I grieved. I grieved for Saturday afternoons spent doing laundry. I grieved for Sundays spent sleeping in together. I grieved for the song that would have played at our wedding and become our song. I grieved for the inside jokes we would have accumulated over decades together. I grieved for the home we would have built together, and even for the arguments we would have had over how to decorate it. I grieved for the children we would have adopted and raised together. I grieved for the life that was torn away from us before it had even been born.

More often than I should, I find myself thinking of her. What she's doing, whom she's loving, and where her dreams have taken her. The pain of not knowing is almost unbearable, especially because I should know—and if I don't, neither of us is to blame. Sometimes, I wish we were. Perhaps it would be easier if I had someone to blame, somewhere to cast all my frustration. Instead, I bury it in the overflowing chest of my grievances, beside the memory of the softness of her lips against mine.

By: Elisa Marquesini de Castro

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The Alchemy of Self-Interest



Jia Yue Lin

Jia Yue Lin is a multimedia artist who created commentaries on the "normalities" in life. From topics about cultural and societal pressures to creating satirical commentary, Lin portrays her understanding of the world as a multicultural teen still exploring what life has to offer.

My piece hopes to direct the viewer towards thinking of their approaches towards their own liberty to love. The piece makes us all consider the effects of love on others and how the ideals of love and care were shaped in the first place by societal expectations and constraints.

The Society



This painting depicts a young man whose skin and clothing burst with vibrant colors, a powerful symbol of identity and LGBTQ+ diversity. Behind a heavy green veil, his intense, guarded gaze reveals the quiet fear of being seen and the social pressure to conceal what makes us unique. The piece captures the tension between the desire for visibility and the instinct to protect oneself from rejection. Submitted under the "Liberty to Love" category, this artwork serves as a reminder that identity should never be hidden in the shadows, and that true freedom to love begins with the courage to exist authentically.

Luisa A. Galicia

My name is Luisa Alejandra Galicia Constantino, a PrepaTec student driven by leadership, social impact, and the arts. I earned a 50% socioeconomic scholarship at PrepaTec and graduated as middle school valedictorian.
I serve as Vice President of She Leads, empowering women, and as Finance Director for Step Up, supporting animal welfare. My passion for international relations led me to direct logistics for OJNUM Tampico 2026 and win overall Best Delegate at zeroMUN 2026.

Additionally, I am a member of Tec's Ensemble, co-founder of the local Theater Club, and winner of Best Song at VibrArt 2026 (Local). Balancing academics, leadership, and the arts has developed my resilience, discipline, and empathy. Currently, I am applying to the Medical School (MD program) at Tecnológico de Monterrey, Monterrey Campus.

Acceptance Through Pain

By: Anonymous

I'm a hobby artist who enjoys long naps on the beach and making things. Mostly for the love of the game, but it's a way I like to show love for the people n things I find important.

Unspoken Affection

By: Loc Le

My name is Loc Le, a senior high school student based in New Zealand with a passion for traditional medium art, particularly watercolor and detailed graphite portraiture. Coming from an international background, art has always served as my primary language to process complex internal emotions, personal reflections, and questions of identity. My creative journey is heavily driven by human connections, quiet observations of high school life, and the subtle emotional distances that exist beneath surface interactions.

In my practice, I enjoy blending realistic portraiture with visual metaphors, such as symbolic fruit motifs and intentional color schemes, to explore themes of queer identity, silent affection, and social conformity. Drawing inspiration from artist models like Jung Hun-sung, Gabriel Moreno, and Vincent van Gogh, I aim to merge precise technical craftsmanship with atmospheric storytelling. Through my work, I hope to create space for quiet vulnerability and offer a voice to the hidden experiences of young people navigating their own paths toward self-acceptance and love.

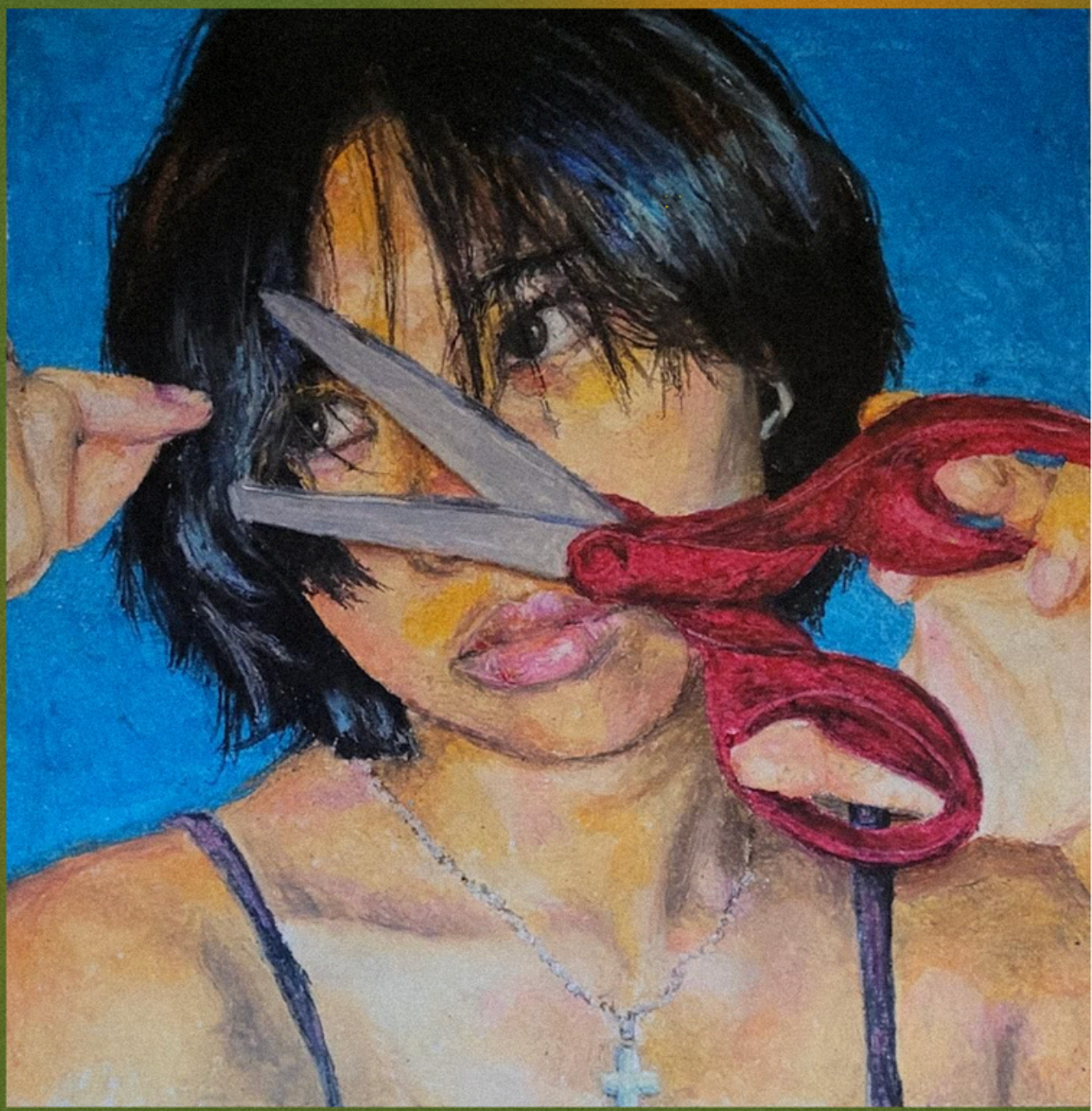
Created under the prompt "The Liberty to Love," this artwork carries a deeply personal yet universal message: no matter who you are or how you identify, everyone inherently deserves the freedom to love and to experience genuine happiness. By contrasting the quiet conformity of the masked crowd with the unmasked, raw vulnerability shared between the two boys, the piece highlights that true liberation comes from embracing every form of affection. It stands as a testament to the belief that no one should ever be forced to live in the shadows or feel unworthy of love, advocating for a world where individual happiness and authentic connections are celebrated as fundamental rights for all.





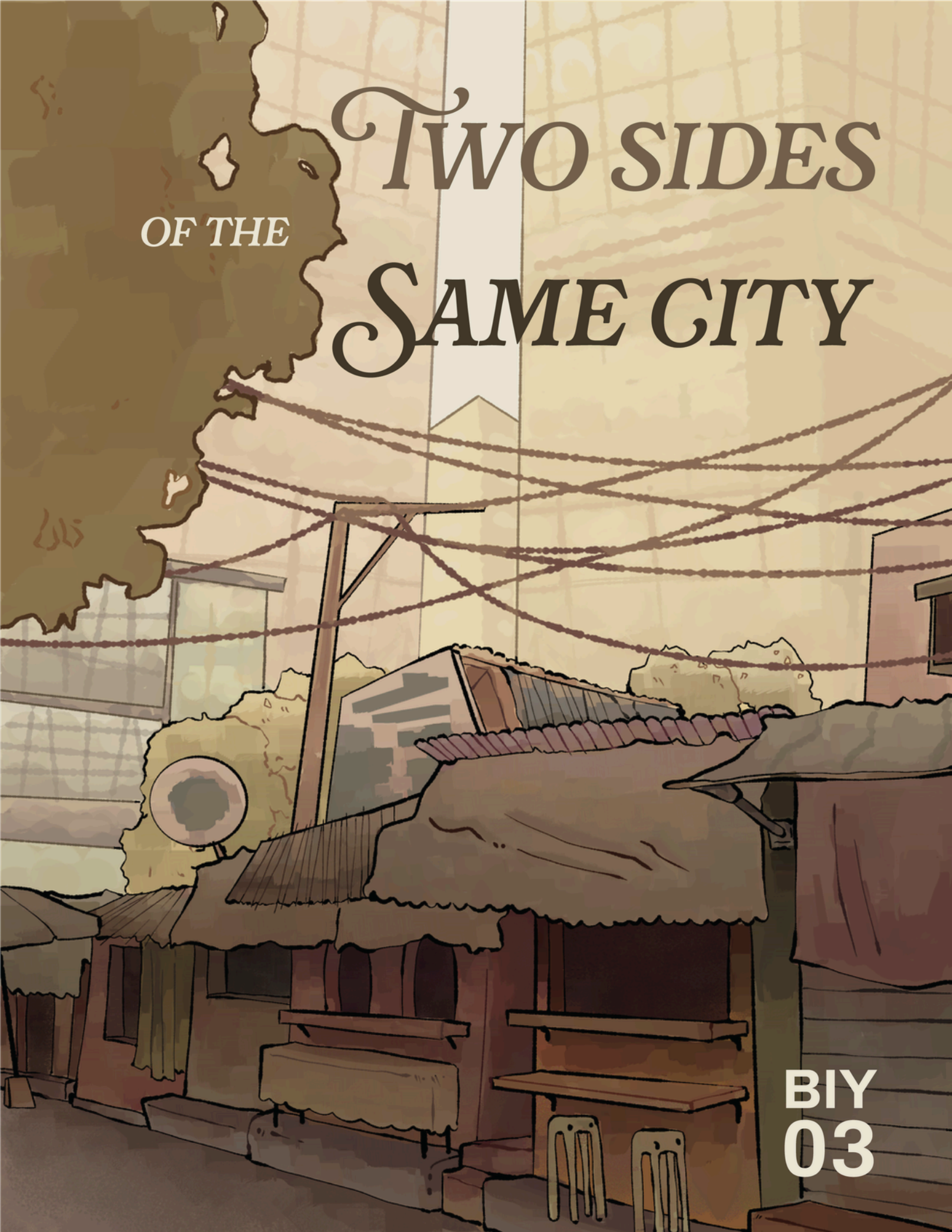
Haircut

By: Yael Ignacio



Queer identity is a complex thing, something many young people struggle to exactly define for themselves. This is especially true for trans youth, who are often invalidated not just for their romantic preference as queer people, but for their gender identity itself. To be queer is to find the greatest reciprocation of love inside yourself, to find the confidence in your own identity and how you choose to outwardly express it---sometimes, as simply as a haircut.

A young aspiring artist from California who loves her closet, her creations, and her community. @s0larflesh on Instagram


TWO SIDES
OF THE
SAME CITY
BIY
03

ART Contents

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The Artist behind the work

Mahie Sharma

My name is Mahie Sharma and I am pursuing B.tech CSE.

I have always been passionate about art and even joined my school's magazine art section but my love for technology has always collided with my interest in art,but ever since the existence of open AI, even if it have made life awfully convenient it has limited the bursts of creative rush which used to once run through the veins of people (regardless of how over dramatic it sounds).

I also play football and love to swim. I am also a cat lover (I send my love to all the animal lovers out there).

01 THE BEAUTY OF HUMAN CONTACT
lost in the wry art of technology



The main idea behind my piece, is the contrast between the modernized world and, a book store symbolising the olden times and , the peace and serenity it comes along with and how time seems to slow down while being surrounded by a bunch of strangers bonding over the beauty of reading, while in the other piece there are no people spotted showing how technology and advancements have helped in making daily life easier but, it has minimised human contact and have left people to live in the devoid and continuous circle of loneliness,also I wanted to portray the irony of how both settings co-exist with each other.

Digital Art *by Mahie Sharma*

The Artist behind the work

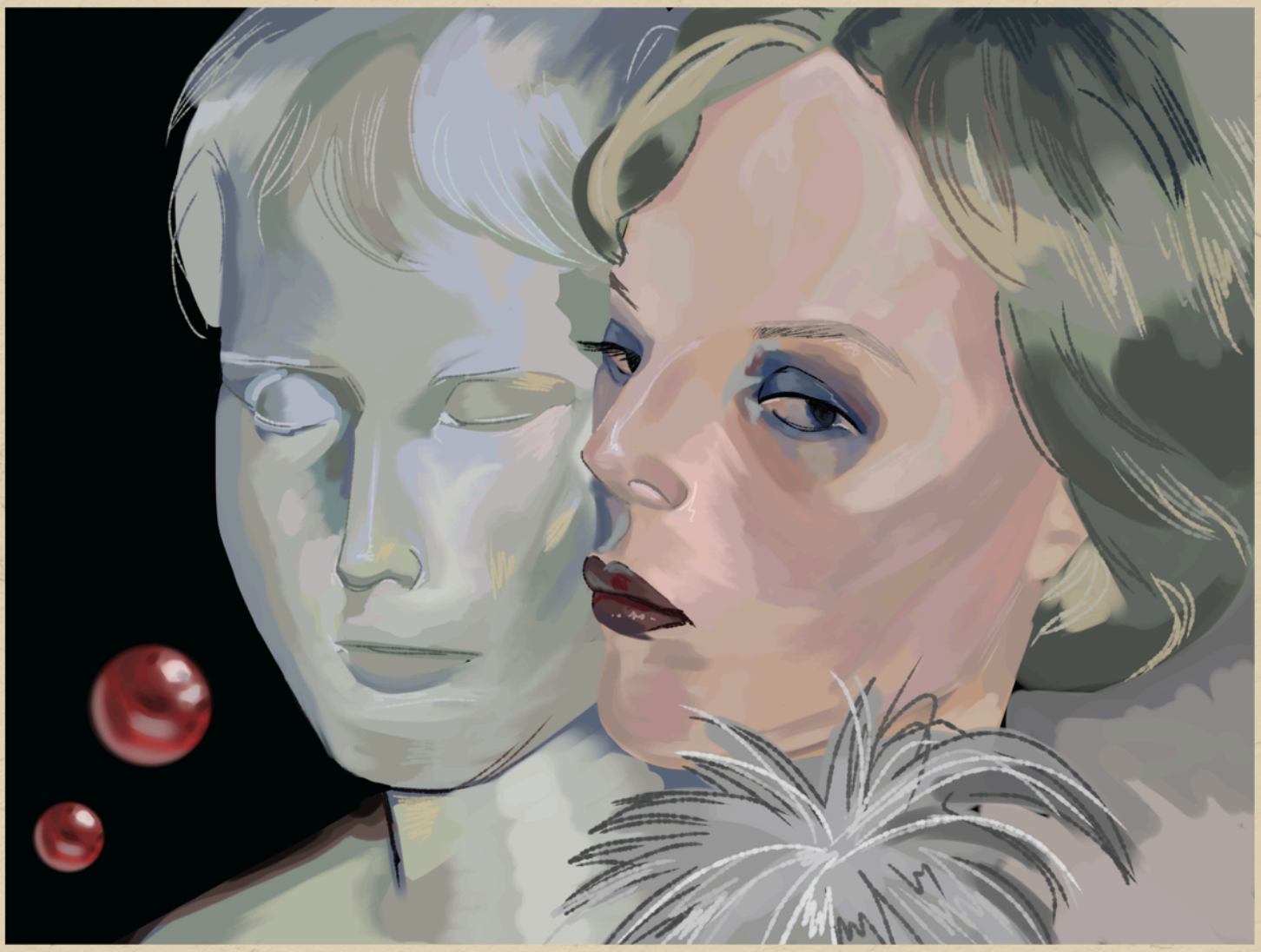
Hamna Musharaf

Hi I am hamna and I have been working as a freelancer for around 4 years now. I take commisions in many mediums.

My passion for art has taught me to see deeper into the meaning of our world and I am hopeful to encapsulate that into my art.



02 Two Faced



Digital Art *by Hamna Musharaf*

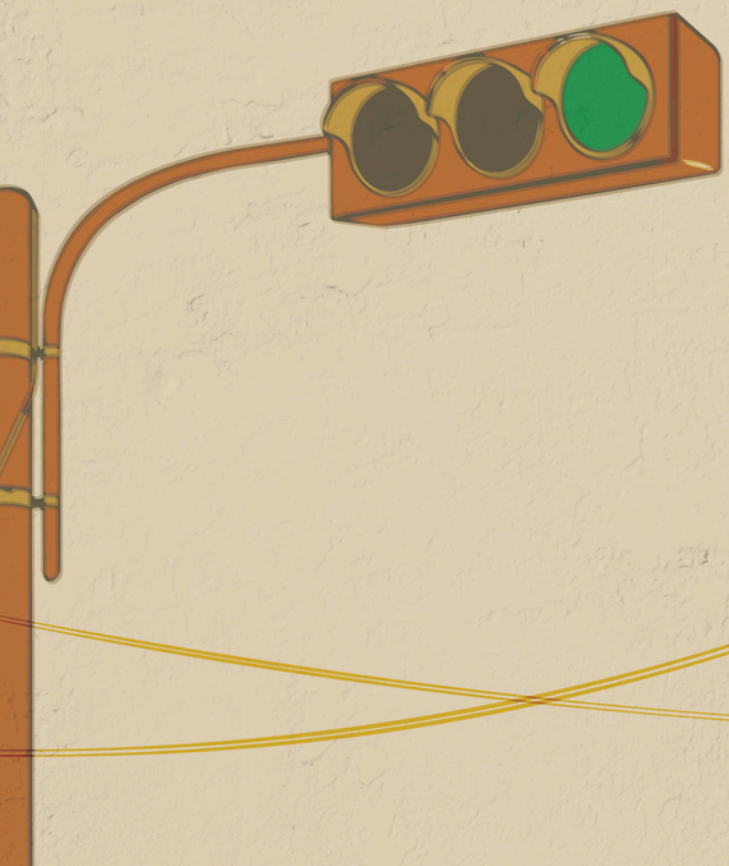
The main idea is two show the two sides of a city in the form of humans.
The grey statue is supposed to show the side of the world that uses AI and is constantly incorperating it in their lives, this symbolises the death of real art.
The woman beside it shows the need for real art to survive. this piece is a protest against AI.

The Artist behind the work

Kayla Kwon

My name is Kayla Kwon, and I am a rising senior at International School. My portfolio primarily explores the theme of identity, examining how growing up has shaped my perspective over the years and influenced both my personal and professional relationships.

Through my work, I reflect on self-discovery, growth, and the ways our experiences shape who we become.



03 A GLIMPSE of Reality



not mentioned *by Kayla Kwon*

The significance of my piece lies in its exploration of the desire to escape the pressures of societal expectations and seek a world where one's identity is fully accepted and embraced. It reflects the universal longing to belong without the need to conform.

The Artist behind the work

Inga Hargraves

Yo.... My name INGA HARGRAVES, Wait, an introduction? Hey! Let's say I go the traditional route and tell you where I'm from and what I do. In short, it's easy and gets the job done, but that is exactly what I strive not to be. I guess you could say this gives a little glimpse into who I am. But I still need to start this somewhere so here I go.

So Hi! I'm a 21 year-old Australian artist that has a vast passion for art. To me there is nothing in the world that could describe the feeling of creating and sharing one's own self expressions through art.

Art is like an ongoing war, war in writing/creating concepts, war against yourself and everchanging new interests and ideas and finally the war against the publication and the judgements of others. My work can be described as whimsical surrealism, this style is deeply rooted in ideals. You know when you have a weird dream and there is so much going on that you need to sit in silence just to understand what the hell is going on, that kind of work I love to make the one with a not so straight answer. And the collusion you come to right or wrong but it yours.

My current themes you could say are a little cheeky, As my aim is outwitting pompous authority.

Outside of art, I love the outdoors hiking, camping and have the urge to do anything for an adventure.

04 *THEY DON'T SPEAK FOR US*
(The Working Class VS The Government)



A small disclaimer about this work: I know speaking in political terms. can become a bit complicated.
I understand that the themes explored in this piece are some glimpse into certain lives, and we all experience life differently and not all the same way. This piece aims to raise an eyebrow about the topic. I would rather address these themes imperfectly than not at all.

Digital Art *by Inga Hargraves*

That being said, I would like to address this as my interpretation of the surrounding issue: The Government and the Working Class.

Although we might live in the same city or country, our lives are very different. The mere idea that the most privileges of all people are the one they run the country. The same people that do not yet have the slightest glimpse into the same lives they lead, not only with their lack of understanding they choose to continue to try and make us feel small, marks us as the slums, and oppresses us. This piece talks about the idea that we have no political representation.

I chose to represent the theme through my use of colour and the positioning of the characters. Although the situations we face in these pieces may seem obvious through the appearance of the characters, I also wanted to explore the choice behind the "standoff position." This reflects a current situation we face in real life, where neither party, whether choice to or not, takes official action against one another.

The choice of blue-grey represents oppression, while the red bird border represents the idea that freedom and unity are just outside the characters' reach if one or both parties took action. The red tree symbolises strength and endurance. Trees can stand for hundreds of years, witnessing the world and generations change around them. For me, the tree represents the relationship between old and new generations and the changes that happen between them.

I chose the bright colour red to represent blood. Although we may all look different and be divided by titles, status, and social classes, at the end of the day, we all share the same red blood. In that sense, we are all equal.
That being said, I love seeing people interpret this piece through their own ideas and experiences. There are no wrong answers.
Creating these pieces is that I believe we need more representation of our individual ideas and perspectives, rather than having everything shaped or decided by one person or a small group of people who lead us.

The Artist behind the work

Akim Svisva

Akim Svisva is a 16-year-old artist and student based in Harare, Zimbabwe. Alongside his art, he focuses heavily on computing, mathematics, and the physical sciences at Oakwood Academy, earning top awards at competitions like the Zimbabwe Science Fair and the Africa Science Buskers Festival. His love for computers and STEM directly shapes how he works in the studio. Rather than sticking to a flat canvas, Akim treats art like an engineering project, constantly pushing the physical limits of a piece by combining custom 3D printing, wood, mechanical parts, and layered cardboard relief with traditional acrylics, oil pastels, and alcohol markers. His work centers on people, exploring human identity, youth mental health, and the social pressure to perform in an automated world. By pairing hands-on technical fabrication with honest storytelling, Akim creates tactile, multi-layered works that invite viewers to reflect on how technology and modern systems are reshaping our everyday lives.



05 THE WORLD OUTSIDE
The Car Window



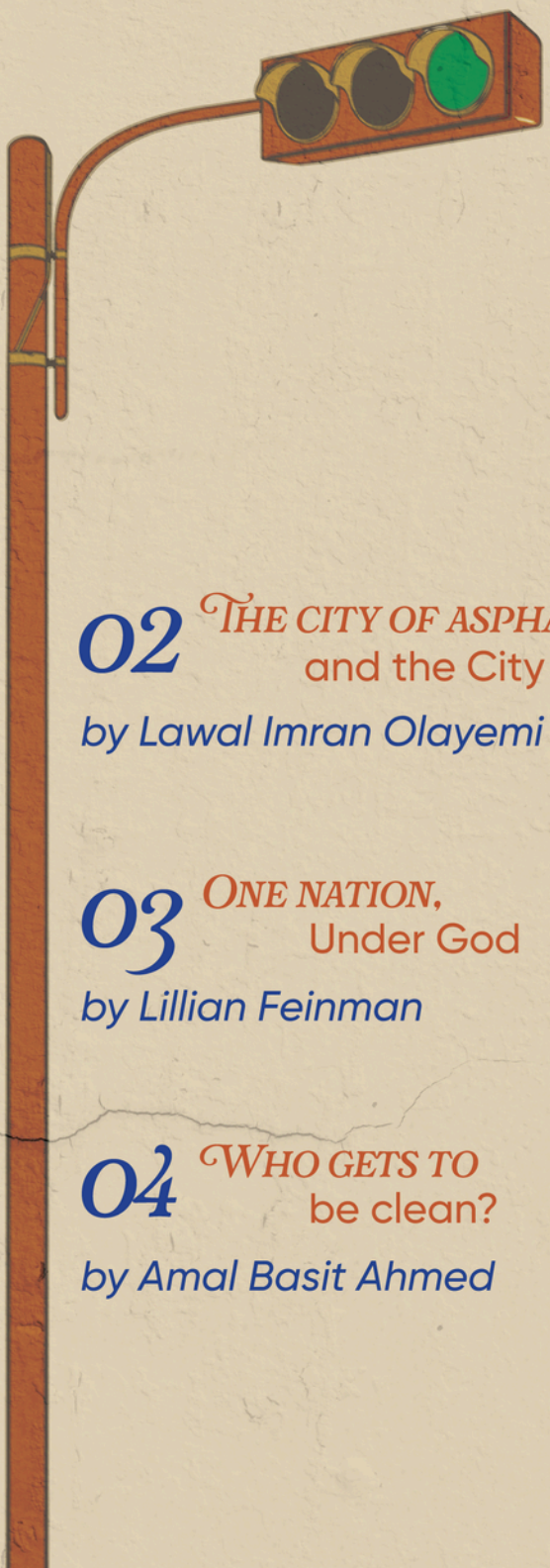
The World Outside the Car Window is a dimensional mixed-media piece exploring urban street life and social contrast in Harare.

The focal point is a High end vehicle's side-view mirror constructed with layered cardboard and textured relief. Reflected inside the mirror is an intimate street market scene: a mother carrying a baby wrapped on her back, walking past informal market stalls built with real miniature wooden skewers, painted awnings, and hand-lettered vendor signs.

not mentioned *by Akim Svisva*

Surrounding the mirror, the composition captures the broader movement of pedestrians navigating the pavement under colorful umbrellas and corrugated storefronts

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by Amal Basit Ahmed

01 *The Gospel according* to a Dominican Judge

1st

By Leticia S. Rivas M.

Content Warning: Death, violence, and themes of injustice.

1:1 And the soul of a prosperous mortal appeared before the Lord. And his purgatory came to be.

1:2 For beneath the fall of an establishment he owned, many had been crushed. Even when aware of the wounds in its walls, he deemed their healing too costly.

1:3 Thus the souls congregated at the gates of the courtroom cried incessantly: “May the Almighty's will be to condemn this soul. For he knowingly favored opulence before protecting sacred life.”

1:4 And a number of Angels stood beside the transgressor. For the Guardian Angels of the wealthy are many and manifest in many ways.

1:5 And they took the stand, and pleaded his case before the Lord, singing promises of influence and *pesos*[1] into His ears, and summoning all those who owed him favors to the witness stand. Thus, they reached Him.

1:6 Therefore the multitude of souls erupted in lamentations that reached throughout *Quisqueya*[2], yet ultimately couldn't reach the Sovereign.

1:7 And the Lord looked upon him. And behold, he was free.

2:1 Now the Lord appeared before the soul of a lowly mortal. And his purgatory came to be.

2:2 For in multiple *atracos*[3] he appropriated his neighbor's belongings.

2:3 Yet most souls passed by, and regarded not the spectacle. For on *calle San Judas Tadeo*[4] purgatories routinely manifest.

2:4 And no Angels stood beside the transgressor. For the lowly have few to advocate for them.

2:5 And behold, the Lord's companions seized the sinner, and with violence heavier than his transgression, closed the cuffs upon his wrists.

2:6 And the soul cried out, and those there cried with him: “Mercy! You're going to kill him!” Yet their voices ultimately couldn't reach the Sovereign.

2:7 And the miserable soul pleaded, but none stood before the Lord to plead for him, none who could reach Him.

2:8 And the Lord looked upon him. And behold, he was condemned.

2:9 For a Dominican God's will only spares those who can reach Him.

[1] Dominican Currency. [2] Traditional Taíno name for the island of Santo Domingo. [3] Colloquial Dominican term for robbery or mugging. [4] “street Saint Jude Thaddaeus”, fictional but inspired by common street names in the Dominican Republic.

02 The City of Asphalt and the City of Anatomy

By Lawal Imran Olayemi

Forget the cartographer's map, and forget the tired sociologists' boundaries drawn between the affluent north and the sprawling south. A city's deepest duality is not geographic; it is existential.
It is the divide between the city as it is lived, and the city as it is diagnosed. There is the City of Asphalt, the loud, kinetic metropolis of commerce, traffic, and ambition. And there is its silent, stark mirror: the City of Anatomy, found behind the sliding glass doors of its emergency rooms and clinical wards.

In the City of Asphalt, invincibility is the default assumption of the privileged, while raw survival drives the rest. Here, the urban environment is a sensory overload of motion. It is a place of unyielding friction where tradition aggressively meets change. Ancient marketplaces, vibrant with the haggling of indigenous dialects and the smell of street food, are compressed beneath the shadows of modern concrete overpasses. Wealth and poverty exist in a state of chaotic choreography. The gleaming, air-conditioned luxury sedans share the exact same potholed bottlenecks as the battered commercial minibuses and the weaving, overloaded motorcycles.

On the asphalt, momentum masks vulnerability. Safety is perceived through the accumulation of metal and glass, and private security gates. For the hawker and the rider, momentum is simply the desperate arithmetic of staying alive. The citizens of the pavement are defined by what they do. They are bankers, hawkers, politicians, and artisans. Their titles and their bank accounts shield them, navigating a metropolis that feels entirely subject to human will.

But the metropolis is an organism, and organisms bleed.

The transition between these two cities occurs in the span of a siren's wail, a sudden physical collapse, or the microscopic breach of a pathogen. When a citizen crosses the threshold of triage, the City of Asphalt vanishes, replaced instantly by the City of Anatomy.

Inside the clinical walls, the city is stripped of its romance and reduced to pathology. Here, the urban landscape is not mapped by neighbourhoods, but by epidemiological vectors and mechanisms of injury. The sprawling periphery is no longer defined by its vibrant hustle, but by the prevalence of blunt-force trauma, respiratory distress from construction dust, and the delayed presentation of preventable diseases. The wealthy epicentre is mapped by cardiovascular events, the diseases of sedentary affluence, and the silent, isolated battles of mental health.

In the City of Anatomy, the glaring economic disparities of the asphalt are translated into a brutal new currency. It is no longer about the horsepower of the vehicle you arrive in, but who has access to the oxygen cylinder, who can afford the MRI scan upfront, and who is left waiting on a plastic chair in an overflowing public corridor while the golden hour ticks away.

The vulnerability that was so carefully hidden on the streets is laid entirely bare beneath fluorescent lights. The titanium pins of the orthopaedic surgeon exist right alongside the irreversible damage of the traditional bone-setter: tradition and change colliding, this time within the confines of the human skeleton.

Under the triage lights, the illusion of safety shatters. The reinforced gates of the private estate cannot keep out the failing myocardium; the tinted windows of the SUV cannot absorb the kinetic energy of a high-speed impact. On the asphalt, a motorcycle is a vector of economic survival for a young man trying to feed his family. In the trauma bay, that same motorcycle is merely a predictable mechanism of orthopaedic catastrophe.

To the outside observer, the hospital is a place separated from the city; a place where people go to be fixed before returning to "real life." But the profoundly overlooked truth is that the hospital is the most honest reflection of the city itself. Every policy failure, every neglected pothole, every systemic economic disparity, and every triumph of public health eventually washes up on the sterile floors of the emergency room.

You cannot understand the city by only walking its streets. You must also know how its people break, and how they heal. These two realities are not separate worlds, but a continuous, rhythmic exchange heard most clearly at three in the morning, when the sliding glass doors of the trauma bay part, and the steady, solitary beep of a cardiac monitor synchronizes perfectly with the distant blare of a commercial minibus navigating the dark.

03 *One Nation* Under God

By Lillian Feinman

Content warning: Gun violence

I.

For those with eyes closed, it is a beautiful city.
For those with eyes closed, it is a beautiful nation.

Coming down the block, here is Chris;

His eyes have been shut for so long that he forgets they can be opened.

Today he will walk in the city. How long, he wonders, has it been since he had a chance to simply mill about? When was the last time he noticed the sun's warmth upon him, the laughing birds, the ever-blue sky? Feel that breeze! Simply wonderful. Oh, how he loves the little things, those idiosyncrasies of human experience. Why, just look! Look there at the coffee shops, the museums, the bikes, all adorned with smiling people. Look at the children, how they wildly run;
look at the older gentleman, reading the paper, sipping his tea. Does he do that every day? Surely he must. And, look there! Look at this beautiful day in the city.
Look; a beautiful day in our nation.

Chris adores this city, though he seldom gets to experience it when Congress is in session; when he must meet some ambassador, cast some vote, shake some hands. How trivial that life is compared to this grand city! How dull, stark against such livelines!

However, he must not get ahead of himself. He had a tendency to do so. Of course, sometimes-and this is a valuable thing-he must be reminded of the work still left to do.

Like today, as he walks, Chris is approached by a homeless man. He is, presumably, one of the vagabond addicts, worn ragged by the street. Chris won't look at him. Doesn't it just bring your heart down into fear, seeing someone in such a state?

Naturally, you must feel bad for him, the poor man! To get them off the streets is the best course of action, though some will refuse to go. But you must consider, must imagine, his daughter of eleven, walking to school, seeing such horrible things. Imagine all the good people, staying inside, just to avoid ruining their day with the terror. Imagine our dearest men and women, attacked and berated, simply for walking down the street.

This is what Chris is working against in Congress; he must not forget it. For what is it, other than his God-given responsibility, to keep this lovely city beautiful? Is it not up to him to do his very best to instill peace?

The work has begun already. Across the street, Chris sees a group of three men. Yes, there they are: our National Guard, the very best of our nation. As Chris walks past, he gives them a friendly hello and points out the man across the block who had intimidated him. They will take the congressman's word to heart.

Perhaps, Chris thinks he is the savior of a life. Our men will get him off the streets, whip him into shape. You can see it so vividly, can't you? What a lucky day for that man; his life is to be turned around, finally flipped right side up!

What a beautiful day in the city. What a beautiful day in our nation.

Chris walks on.

II.

For those with eyes open, it is a plundered city.
For those with eyes open, it is a plundered nation.

Crawling through the ruins, here is a man;

He has a name, though he has long forgotten it, and has
been chasing after it ever since.

They call him the patron saint of wanderers, and
through this city his mind may wander day in and day
out.

Today, his wandering comes to a halt: he has visitors.

Above him tower three uniformed men, their hands
cowardishly quivering towards their guns. Speaking with
one voice, thinking with one mind, the armed men ask;

Did you threaten that man?

And before a tide can turn, before a match can be struck,
the armed men answer;

Did you know the man you threatened was a congressman?

The wanderer makes no acknowledgement. How could
he, how would he? Lover of all things as he was; he
would threaten no man, and he would surely falter to no
gun.

The wanderer looks through the men, and behind them.
And there-well, there is the entire world.

Notice: how the light hits the trees (a thousand lives are
created); how the shallow green
becomes engulfed in warmth (the wind is dancing now).
Behind the noise, here it is: the low hum
of summer. What a life! Here it is, for those who drink it
up!

He tells the armed men,

Isn't this a beautiful city?

For he truly believes it to be.

There must be some kind of miscommunication. The armed men don't reply. They move in closer.

The smallest of the men draws up his gun. Here comes the dreaded question, the pernicious threat.

Is this where you are living? He gestures toward the wanderer's tent.

The wanderer hasn't been here for long, not in this lonely spot. He used to live with others; in the beautiful city, all together in a community of their own. There the sun would rise into glorious day, and there they would be; falling in love with the wind, and the birds, and each other. There it was that each night they would go to sleep cold and hungry; but full of the warmth of love.

Now they have been separated, scattered so that they may appear sparse. Now the wanderer sleeps cold, and hungry, and empty. But he remembers. Oh, how he remembers! And for as long as he remembers, he will sleep with his eyes open.

Is this where you are living? The man repeats himself, harsher now.

The wanderer, of course, has lived many lives; he has seen the destruction of many empires. He has seen when the encampment was pillaged, and those who were taken, and promised hope, and given none of it. The wanderer would like to tell them, I will not leave. The wanderer would like to tell them,
This is my home, as true as your own, because this is my city, as it is yours.

The wanderer begins to speak.

As he does so, he lifts his hand to point toward the sky.

The smallest man repositions his gun, in haste.

In haste,
his finger oh-so-subtly slips,
In haste,
an unfortunate blunder,
Oh!
the bullet wraps and rings through the wanderer's head,
slow enough to hear the wind,

slow enough to sit still for a moment before slumping,
before his body falls to the ground,
before the passersby look away,
before the bustle again begins.

somewhere a bird sings,
somewhere a hurricane brews,
somewhere Congress adjourns,
but here, on this block;
A man dies with his eyes open.

04 *Who gets to* Be clean?

By Amal Basit Ahmed

The word Maila (میلا) in Urdu is used to describe something that is dirty or unclean. When I lived in North Nazimabad (a suburb in Karachi, Pakistan), maila was an ordinary word in my childhood vocabulary. After a long day at school, the white of my uniform would be marked with chalk dust, my shoes would collect the dirt from the walk home, and by the time I returned, my mother would point at my clothes and call them maila. It was a word associated with physical dirt, something visible. But there is another meaning to the word. In certain contexts, maila can also be used to describe someone as uncultured and ill-mannered. I discovered the second meaning of the word when I moved to DHA (a suburb in Karachi, Pakistan). When I was ten years old, I was referred to as 'Maila' because I spoke Urdu more than English. I remember the word not because I understood its full meaning at the time, but because I understood that it was being used differently. My clothes were ironed, and my shoes were clean, so they couldn't have referred to my appearance. They referred to me; maila was being used to describe me.

At the time, I did not understand why the language I had spoken for most of my life made me feel almost alienated. I had simply moved to a different part of Karachi, not a different country. Yet something as ordinary as the language I used to express myself had become a signal of social standing. I began learning the unspoken rules of fitting in: when someone asked, *"Which school do you go to?"* I understood that my answer said something about me before I had said anything else. The school you attended was a social signal, your accent said a lot about your class, and the more you spoke your mother tongue you had grown up with, the more you felt yourself diverging from the other children. I became conscious of how I pronounced certain English words, and I found myself switching into English halfway through a sentence even when Urdu came more naturally to me. I was learning which parts of myself were considered acceptable to display.

The judgement did not always come directly from the children around me. Sometimes, I heard the same attitudes reflected in the comments of their parents. These ideas had existed long before I arrived. The children were not necessarily inventing these distinctions themselves; they were repeating what they had heard and learnt at home. The more openly I spoke Urdu in my natural accent, the more I was reminded it did not carry the same social value in this new environment. It was something I felt I had to hide in order to belong.

Urdu has been Pakistan's established national language since the 1973 constitution and is a language spoken by millions, including myself. It is the language in which I feel most comfortable conversing and expressing myself, so what does it mean for a language spoken by millions of people to become something that, within certain social circles, people are embarrassed to be associated with? Especially when both sides inhabit the same city and country.

It's strangely ironic because Urdu itself is celebrated when it is presented as art, not only in Pakistan but also around the world. Its poetry is studied for its philosophical depth, its music is performed and admired internationally, and its language is romanticized in Hindi and Urdu cinema, where its subtleties of emotion can elevate an ordinary scene. Yet the same language can become a social liability when spoken by a child who is considered too 'Urdu-speaking'. The poetry is renowned for its sophistication; the music is beautiful; but a child speaking the language is maila.

For the more affluent side of Karachi, English and Westernized forms of speech and culture become markers of education, sophistication, and status. Meanwhile, the same city contains neighbourhoods where Urdu is spoken naturally in homes, schools, markets and streets, and where families may have fewer economic and social privileges due to unequal access to education, housing, and social opportunities. People experiencing the same city through vastly

different circumstances are often reduced to assumptions about their class, education, culture, or manners by those on the other side of the divide.

The divide extends beyond language. Features that are ordinary within South Asian communities—darker skin, naturally textured hair, and other aspects of our appearance—can be disapproved or looked down upon when they do not fit the Westernized culture the affluent side of the city has adopted. In Karachi, colourism and classism intertwine, making appearance another marker of social status. Lighter skin is associated with beauty and privilege; matrimonial advertisements often specify a preference for a 'fair' complexion; naturally textured hair can be treated as something to straighten before it is considered presentable. Even Western clothing and English-speaking mannerisms can become associated with sophistication, while more traditional South Asian features are unfairly seen as 'less refined', or maila.

I became conscious of these standards through my own appearance. My naturally textured hair, which is common in my family, became something I wanted to get rid of due to societal pressure. Being constantly told to straighten it or get a keratin treatment to simply look more 'refined' and 'presentable' also made me realize that my natural features were also interpreted as social markers of where I came from.

These are social expectations that both the different sides of the city abide by, but they manifest differently. For those with greater economic privilege, conforming to these ideals can become a way to distinguish themselves from the communities which they associate with lower social status. The ability to afford particular clothing, beauty products, schools, and lifestyles can turn appearance into a deliberate social signal. For those with fewer economic opportunities, the same standards still shape how people perceive themselves and others, but conforming to them is far less accessible. Hair straightening, using skin-lightening products, or other attempts to fit an accepted standard can become

ways of avoiding assumptions attached to their own community rather than simply expressions of personal preference.

For one side of the divide, conformity displays status; for the other side, it is a way of distancing themselves from the stigma attached to not conforming. In both cases, appearance becomes another language through which Karachi's invisible class boundaries are communicated.

When I moved from North Nazimabad to DHA, despite never leaving Karachi or crossing any sort of border, I still struggled socially due to the huge cultural differences. The children around me had different experiences, expectations, and ideas about what was considered normal and 'proper'. The norms that I knew and understood made me stand out in a negative way. My relationship with my language caused me to be labelled as dirty, maila. I became conscious of what I brought in my lunchbox, how I greeted teachers, the way I spoke, and the cultural habits I had grown up considering completely ordinary. My language and accent became markers of my identity, despite the fact that I was still living in the same city that had shaped those habits.

The strangest part of how different these two sides are is that they are still deeply interconnected. Both sides share the same roads, electricity grids, heat, monsoon floods, and have the same national language. In many DHA households, children grow up spending much of their day with nannies, cooks, drivers, and other household workers who commute from different parts of Karachi. Urdu may be the language through which these everyday relationships are formed—the language that a child first hears from the people caring for them—yet it can later become the very language that the child is taught to associate with being 'less refined'.

The contradiction becomes difficult to ignore. They rely on one another in ways that are often invisible, while still maintaining social boundaries that make them seem worlds apart. Both sides still belong to the same city; the difference lies in how differently that shared city is experienced.

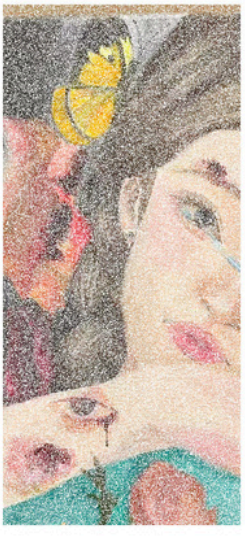
TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE



big 04

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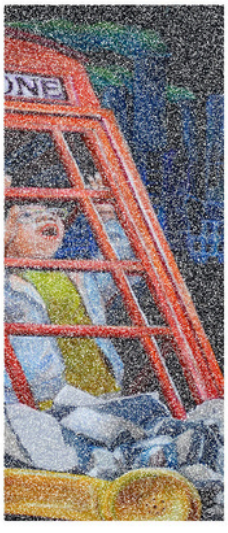
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REACHING OUT

ARTIST BEHIND THE WORK

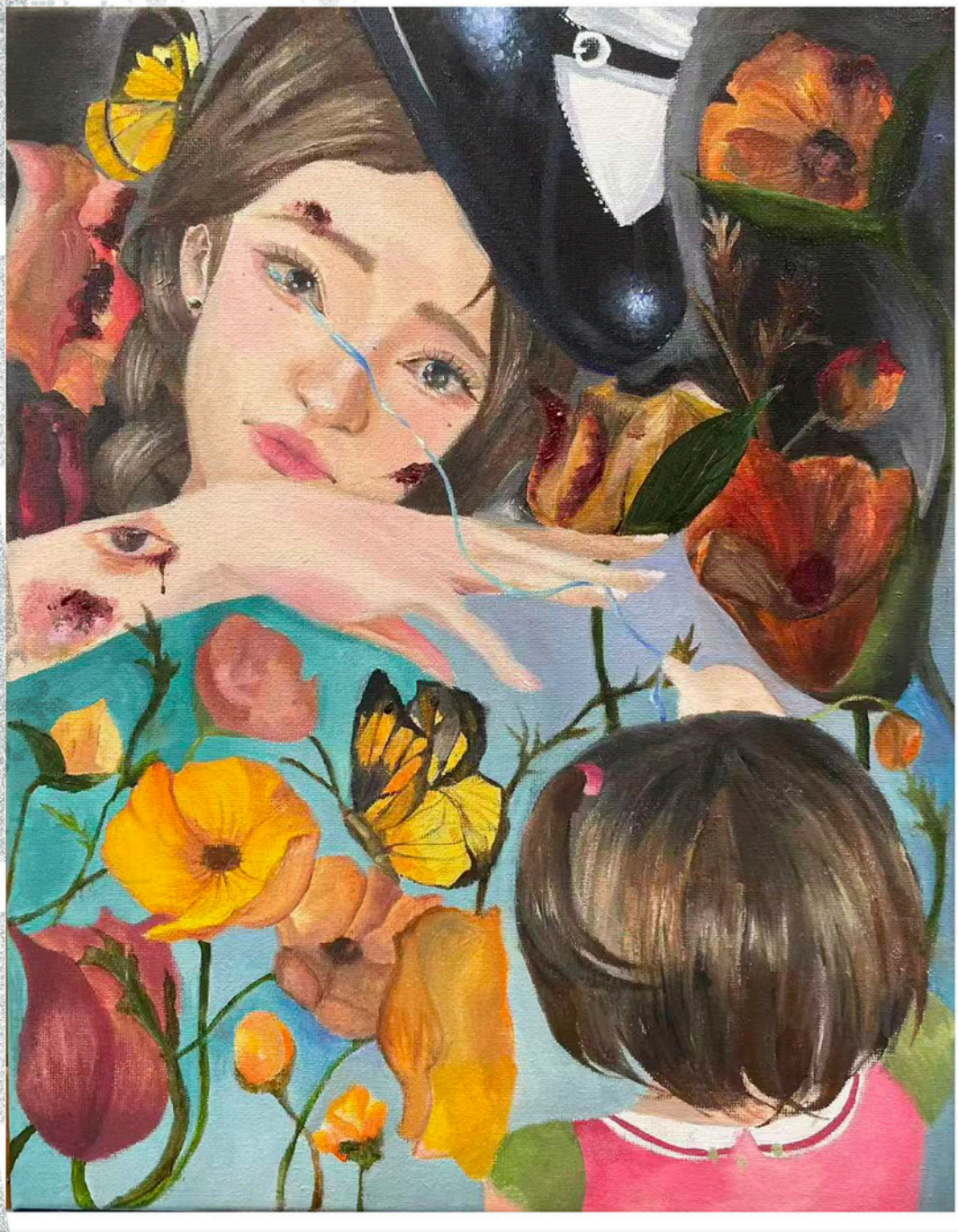
MARCY CHEN

01

I'm a Chinese-American student who values creativity, culture, and self-expression. My art explores identity and mental health, especially the contrast between difficult experiences and the hope of reconnecting with my younger self.

THE REACH FOR LIFE

by: *Marcy Chen*



A painting of a girl with braids lying on her arm in the top left corner crying. She has bloody bruises and brown hair. Her ethnicity is Chinese and her hands a reaching out the younger version of herself who is also pointing to her. Towards the top the flowers are withered and stained with blood. Near the child, the California poppies are blooming and a California native butterfly is flying around the freshly bloomed poppies. A shoe is pressed onto the older girls head.

My identity as a Chinese girl shapes how I understand myself, my family, and the pressures I experience. The older girl represents my struggles with mental health, while the younger girl represents the hope and innocence I still carry within me. The flowers and butterfly symbolize healing and growth,showing that even through difficult experiences, I can continue to reconnect with myself and my identity.

ARTIST BEHIND THE WORK

LAKSHA RAMNIHORA RA

02

Hi I'm Laksha, an 18 year old art student currently working on my art portfolio for my HSC exams.I'm situated in Mauritius, a small island that is very often unknown to many.

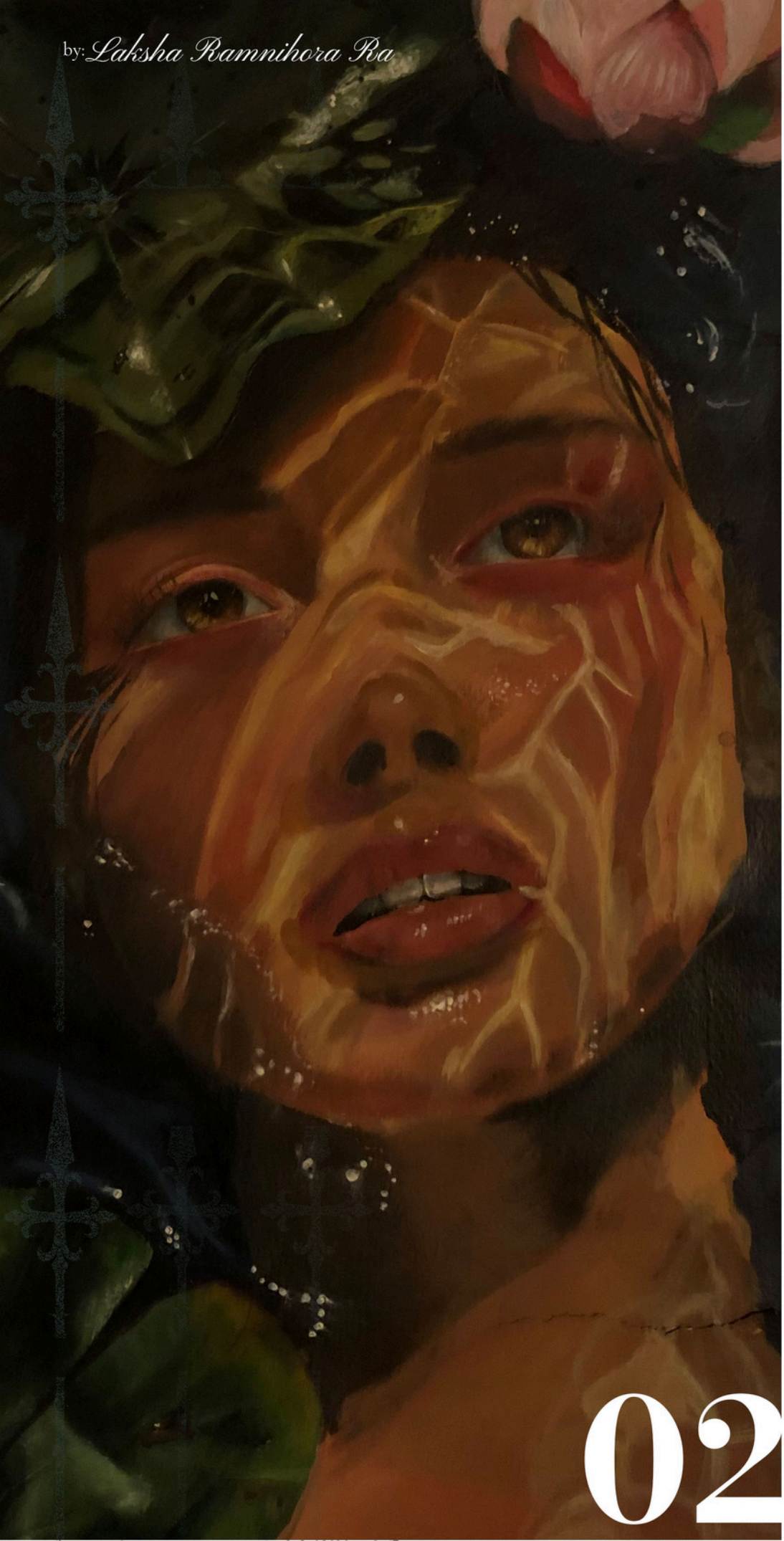
I've been drawn to arts since kindergarten and have never gave up on it. Constant practice has made my passion for art grow deeper and I would be described as 'creative' by people who know me ever since i was a kid.I am very in touch with my emotions and feel deeply so i try to incorporate that into as many artworks as i can.

I can't wait to finish school and travel the world with my camera.

Regards,
Laksha.

by: *Laksha Ramnihora Ra*

UNTITLED



I made this artwork is to depict those feelings of loneliness,confusion, regret and mental fog that i came across as a teenager.

*T*his entry will perhaps help me in gaining more confidence as a young artist,so I couldnt miss the chance of participating in this competition even though I live on the other side of the world lol! I think that the message behind this painting is worth pondering on & is open to interpretation but the main reason

02

ARTIST BEHIND THE WORK

WILLIAM PHAM

03

I am a 2026 International Youth Honor Award winner, recognized in Skipping Stones Magazine, and utilizes visual storytelling as a sanctuary and a universal language.

I was born into a Vietnamese immigrant family, and often felt alienated by rigid societal labels, finding solace in the vast cosmos of creative expression. For me, art begins where words fail. It acts as the unfiltered voice of my internal struggles and my journey through an isolating world. My pieces attempt to transcend traditional definitions of identity, serving as a raw, honest canvas for my lived experiences.
As a student researcher and global health advocate I infuse my creative work with profound empathy. I share my art not just as self-expression, but as a beacon for others who feel out of place, bridging profound isolation with deep human connection to remind every viewer that they are not alone..

CAGED IN FUTILITY

by: *William Pham*

"My submission details a self portrait encased in a telephone booth, as wreckage and the telephone itself lies outside my grasp."

My piece, titled "Caged in Futility" encompasses one modern paralysis: the inability to affect your surroundings despite an ever-increasing compulsion to do so. In our contemporary day, countless societal and environmental issues boil; from worsening climate change to systemic racial discrimination, numerous issues affect our world,

"Caged in Futility" encapsulates this feeling. My figure, encased within a classic British telephone booth, witnesses the degradation of the surrounding environment, but is powerless to intervene. The mechanics of the booth serve as a cruel irony: the telephone handset, the ultimate tool for communication and awareness, lies stranded in the rubble outside. Calling

However this piece also has another theme: isolation. When individualefforts feel entirely inconsequential, a profound loneliness sets in, creating a quiet belief that no one else hears the ring.

Yet, as the severity of these issues upticks, our abilities to resolve them remain stagnant.Even voluntary efforts to 'make a change'just feel like a drop in an indifferent ocean. No matter what we do, or how much we want to help, the true resolutions to these problems seem so closely out of grasp.



The booth suggests an unyielding truth: even if the door were to open, or if the phone outside were to suddenly ring, the figure would remain abandoned in the wreckage, met only by the solitary, indifferent beep of a dead dial tone.

ARTIST BEHIND THE WORK

JOCELYN CHAN KIT EE

04

Jocelyn spends her free time (which, to be honest there isn't much) drawing places that don't exist. Self-taught and working digitally, she creates stories through fantasy landscapes inspired by her search for escapism and catharsis. Unfortunately, these places would be rather hard to visit.

When she isn't drawing, she is usually over thinking and second-guessing her chosen career path, which involves paying a small fortune to learn how to legally stab people with needles.

This is her first time entering a real art competitionso she is currently pretending to be very calm about it.

REACHING OUT

Digital Art

by: *Jocelyn Chan Kit Ee*

"I wanted to reach out to you.
I wanted to talk to you.
I wanted to solve the problems between us.

I felt like I was being led to the gallows instead.
I felt like I was drowning.

Perhaps I didn't do enough.
Perhaps I acted too late.

I wonder at what point we became irreparable."

04

1ST



ARTIST BEHIND THE WORK

NGUYEN MINH HAN

05

This artwork began as a traditional drawing on paper, which I then photographed and digitally edited using Adobe Illustrator. I created this posterto communicate the message "**Save the Earth,**" with "TRASH" as its central theme. The artwork explores the growing impact of waste & human consumption on our environment.

The visual concept was inspired by the manga Gachiakuta, particularly its use of discarded objects and waste as important elements within its world...

DIGITAL ART

TRASH LANDING



Save the Earth - "We made the mess. Now we have to live in it."

by:
Nguyen Minh Han

WRITTEN *Submissions*



1. Slice Of Cake

Izma Zahra Shafary

2. Untitled

Daniel Olmert

3. Boiling Frogs

Claire Jiang

4. What The Sink Was Saying

Mahiba Shahbaz

5. The Taste Of Bugs

Maeko Veda Cordelia

SLICE OF CAKE

IZMA ZAHRA SHAFARY

content warning: death and grief

My father's skeleton washed ashore. Or maybe it was the dignity that died long before him.

My mind traveled back to my home. No. My house.
The chairs looked brand new. We only ever needed one. The candles went out before he
even came home. I don't blow them. It was my birthday, and I'd saved a slice of cake for my
father. I didn't pray that night; I begged.
"Why, god?" I whispered, banging my fists until they turned the colour of the sea.
The sea in which my father devoted his whole life.

The flowers died on Monday. But my father never knew.
He wasn't there to see them.
He wasn't there to admire them.
This isn't about flowers.

"Ma'am," a hoarse voice sounded behind me.
I turned around.
"Is this your dad?" It was a police officer, in a blue suit, with a gold badge.
I don't like those colours.
"He's my father."
"His boat must've sunk."
I nodded, looking down to see scabs peeling off my feet.
"You guys must've been close."
I shrugged.
I looked over my shoulder.
The tide kept moving.
I love that about it.
But...
I hate that about it.

“He was a fisherman, right?” He cleared his throat.
I nodded.
“Where’s your mother?” He asked.
I shrugged.
“Officer,” I whispered.
“Bury him in the sand.”

He gave me a puzzled look.
“I can’t do that, ma’am.” He whispered. “But we’ll bury him.”
I nodded.
“Where is his funeral going to be?” I asked.
“We’ll take care of it, don’t worry. I’ll tell you once it’s taken care of.”
“No,” I whispered. “I’m not coming.”

“Why?” He asked.
“One funeral. 18 birthdays.”
“What?”
“I’m not coming.”

I walked back to my house before he said a word.
I’m tired of words.
I need…
A hug.

His words repeated in my head.
S’ok bud, I’m here for you.
Ironic thing to say while you’re half out the door.
Flinging his arms open to give me a hug.

That’s too little, and too late.
The sand stuck to the webs of my feet.
I walked back home.
A torn photograph lay on the steps.
A picture of a family that could’ve been.

The sun was an angry gold coin, burning through the smog-filled sky.
Somehow it was morning.
My fish breath remained. I don't think I brushed last night.

I walked back to the beach to see if they're moving my father.
He's gone already.
I saw the torn photograph again.
I remember that day.

It was Christmas Eve, and I'd been ripping apart the presents under the Christmas tree.
He sat with me.
Hands on my shoulders.
I wish we'd stayed that way.

I flipped the photograph again.
I love you, Livelle.
I smiled.
And wherever he is, I hope he's smiling too.

I wish I'd pick up his calls.
I wish I'd dance with him under the moon.
I wish I'd hugged him before he left.
Because the truth is, I love him.
But he doesn't give me much to love.

I stuffed the photograph in my left pocket.
My feet were slightly grazed by the sharp shells.
I looked behind me.
The tides were still moving.

I walked back to my house.
No, wait... to my home.

The sun was an angry gold coin, burning through the smog-filled sky.
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I walked back to my house.
No, wait... to my home.

-Izma Zahra Shafary

UNTITLED

DANIEL OLMERT

Tracy used to murmur she'd be gone before too long
Wrote her name on lampposts like the world had done her wrong
She dressed in borrowed jackets, walked the streets alone at night
Said she liked the way the silence made the city feel polite

She carved her little promises in notebooks by the bed
Crossed the days in scarlet ink until the paper bled
Her father said she worried him, her mother called her wild
But Tracy only smiled like an obedient child

I remember evenings sitting with her by the tracks
She taught me how to listen to the hum the night wind cracks
She asked if I would miss her if she vanished in the dark
I swore I'd hold her memory like a candle with a spark.
She laughed and said, "That's sweet of you, but promise me one thing:
Don't follow where I'm going, you deserve a different wing"
Later I caught her in a moment when her laughter disappeared
Her gaze was heavy thunder, and her voice was barely clear
I asked her what she wanted, if she meant to turn away
She said, "The stars are calling me, they'll take me home someday"

The news reduced her story to a caption and a frame
They printed out a number, never once wrote out her name
But I remember Tracy, how she swore she wouldn't stay
Her absence left a hollow that I try to fill with song
A silence that reminds me she was never here for long
And how the sound of saying it still echoes here today
Her voice is in the lamplight, her breath is in the rain
And every time I speak her name, it cuts me back again

And fragile hearts with heavy hands
And clocks that no one understands
And songs that end before they're done
Can steal away a daughter young

-Daniel Olmert



BOILING FROGS

CLAIRE JIANG

I know it seems strange to say, darling,
but the feeling of the cold against one's skin is that of a blessing.
The sting, and the chill, and the numbing
as it starts to pick at your bones is the ultimate luxury.

Let us say that it is warming—
slower, and slower yet, incremental as anything,
but it is certain that the temperature is rising. The blood in your veins is beginning to re-circulate.
You adore it, love, the sensation of no longer being frozen shut— how sweet it is to preen in the warmth of your own self,
measured rhythm of your pulse.

Say it is even warmer now—
and the sun kisses all your winter-wounds better;
you welcome it full-bodied— lounging entirely beneath it.
It is becoming ever so hot—
you are burning outwards, faster, and faster still. Perspiring at your brow, you cannot quite blink away the salt of your sweat stinging your eye.
In this way, you have been prepared for consumption—
a boiling frog.

The walls of your pot— although boiling— are metal.
Soft skin collapsed flat, you press yourself to its sides. Pray the metal be your saviour—
Pray that it will cool you. Pray that you forget it is conducting the fire towards you, never away.
Your deliverance, it seems, will be that of a timely passing
falling upon you lightning-swift.
leap! here, the grand inconvenience of the horrible swell of muscle may save you.

I am scared for you— I know well enough you will not, that the possibility of effort kills you quicker than any water.

Forgive me, darling, for saying this—
but I hope you never learn the pleasure of warming up..

-Claire Jiang

WHAT THE SINK WAS SAYING

MAHIBA SHAHBAZ

It was raining the day I turned up at your door,
soaked through, shoes squelching down your hallway,
and you laughed and threw a towel at my face
before I'd said a word.

I remember your kitchen like evidence now.
The sink stacked with plates gone soft and furred,
mugs with tea rings dried to small brown moons,
laundry heaped on the chair like it had given up
on being clothes.

And I said, Look at you, you absolute slob,
and snapped a dishtowel at your arm.
You said, Yeah. It's been a week.
I said, Lazy, and grinned, and went upstairs
to raid your wardrobe for something dry.

That's it. That's everything I did.
I never asked what a week of unwashed plates
was saying, or whose voice it was borrowing
because yours had gone quiet.

I had my own weather then.
A whole season of it, sitting on my chest.
I came to yours to get out of the rain
and never looked up to see
it was coming through your ceiling too.

Now I go through us like a lost property box.
The voice note from March I played at double speed.
The meme at 3 a.m. I hearted and never answered.
The night I typed you alive? as a joke
and you sent back a skull, and I laughed,
and put my phone face down, and slept.

The last time you hugged me at the door
you held on a second too long
and I said, okay, okay, get off, I'm freezing.
I have turned that second over
so many times it has worn smooth as a stone,
and I still can't find the edge to pry it open.

Understanding came the way the post does
after someone has moved out.
Correctly addressed. Perfectly on time
for nobody.

I would give anything. I mean it
the way you mean it at three in the morning,
the whole house asleep, bargaining with a ceiling.
Give me the rain again.
Give me the towel, the hallway, the stairs.
I would stand in that kitchen and wash every cup,
dry them, put them away one by one,
and ask, with my hands still wet,
how long has it been like this?
and then I would stay for the answer.

The jumper is grey and too long in the sleeves.
It smelled of your washing powder, and under that
of your hallway, and every week there is less.
I stopped washing it. I sleep in it.

I press my face into the collar and cry
until it smells like me, and that is what I can't bear,
that you are leaving it slowly, one tear at a time.

Outside it's raining again.
I go and stand in it with the sleeves pulled over my hands,
waiting for someone to laugh
and throw a towel at my face..

-Mahiba Shahbaz



THE TASTE OF BUGS

MAEKO VEDA CORDELIA

CW: Insect consumption, body horror, addiction, disordered eating, psychological distress.

I wanted to be normal. But all I eat is bugs.
The first time I ate one, it felt oddly satisfying.

Crawling.
Scrambling.
Crushing.

It felt nice to hear the crackling sounds.
The bigger they were, I learned, the more juice they had.
The smaller they were, I learned, the more crunch they had.
My favorites were beetles.
Big enough to savor, tough enough to crunch.
I thought everyone had eaten a bug at least once in their life.
That was until they looked at me strangely.
They will never know how nice it feels.
My parents started to notice that I had gained weight.
My partner started avoiding me in disgust.
So I stopped.
Well, not really.
I tried to stop.
But it wouldn't stop scratching my tongue.
It felt itchy.
I only lasted about three days. No one applauded for me.
It became worse once I came back.
It sucks.
Everyone seems to be obsessed with the way I look.
Sad isn't it?
I swallowed another bucket of bugs.

Crunch.

Crunch.
Crunch.
Crunch.

How could anyone resist the charm?
My classmates started making fun of me.
My partner was ashamed to be around me.
My family said that they failed me.
They took away my bugs.
A strict diet, they said.
The first day was horrible.
My tongue itched even worse.
I tried chewing a stick.
They called me a dog.
The second day was agonizing.

The itch went down to my throat.
My voice was hoarse for the whole day.
I refused to talk to anyone.
The third day felt wrong.
Today.
My whole body itched.
It was itchy.
It itched.
Why wasn't anyone helping?
I ran away.
To the woods.
They screamed and called my name.
I couldn't hear them.
It was so itchy.
I ran 'til it was dark.
The itch didn't go away.
My clothes were soaked in rainwater.
I felt disgusted.

Damp.
Dirty.
Unforgiven.

Why did I run off?
By the bushes,
I found a beetle.
I'm sorry.
Don't look at me like that.

-Maeko Veda Cordelia


Behind Closed Doors
05
BIY
REFLECTION | ACCEPTANCE | OPENING

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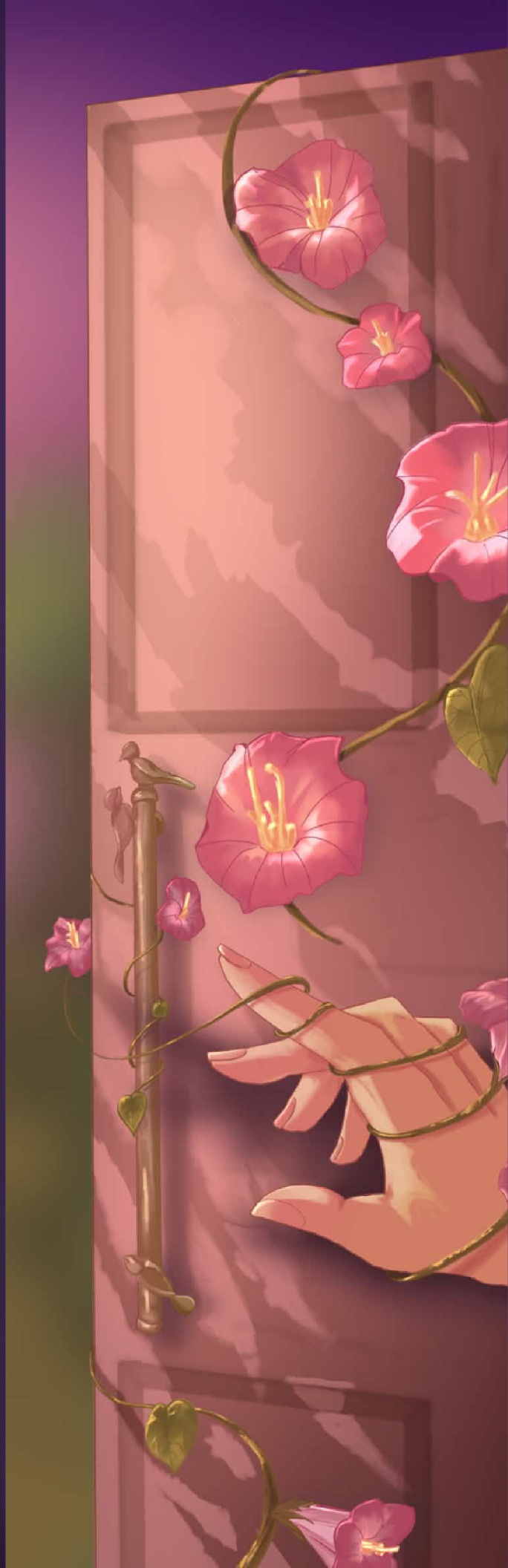
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The Artist

BEHIND THE WORK

My name is *James Tumaliuan*, a 16-year-old artist from the Philippines. I am an art enthusiast who enjoys exploring different forms of visual expression, particularly illustration and editorial cartooning. For me, art is more than just creating something visually appealing—it is a way to express ideas, tell stories, and communicate perspectives that words sometimes cannot.

I am also the Editor-in-Chief of our school publication, where I get to combine my interests in writing, journalism, art, and design. As a cartoonist, I use humor, symbolism, and creativity to portray issues and observations from everyday life and society.

I continue to learn and experiment with different artistic styles while developing my skills as an artist and storyteller. Through my work, I hope to create art that makes people think, feel, and see things from a different perspective. Being young, I believe there is still so much for me to discover, create, and share.

01

DIGITAL ART

The Weight of Silence

BY: JAMES TUMALIUAN



Description

The weight that many people don't see us endure—physical burden, a silent, invisible accumulation of expectations, anxiety, and unvoiced struggles. Day after day, we carry the pressure to perform, to remain strong for others, and to maintain a composed exterior while navigating internal storms.

The Artist

BEHIND THE WORK

Hi, My name is *Tove Turner*. I'm an 18 girl from Ireland and I've loved art since I was old enough to hold a crayon. It's always been my way of expressing things that words can't quite capture.

Gretchen Virgadamo is a high school artist in Georgia. She works with mixed media and symbolism to create artwork exploring identity, perception, and relationships. A fun fact about Gretchen is that she was named after a Bravo Housewife character.

My name is *Anais Chan*, I am a 17 year old student living in Wales, UK and am hoping to study music in university next year. I took art for GCSE's and the first year of A level and enjoy persuing digital art as a side hobby. I feel especially in this fast-paced digital age, young people should never stop creating art to express themselves, simply because the feeling of seeing, reading, and listening works that resonates with us at a personal level is irreplaceable and timeless.



02

DIGITAL ART

Stretch Marks

BY: TOVE TURNER

Description

I painted this as an expression of how I can sometimes put on a front of being cheerful, whilst while I'm actually struggling "behind closed doors" out of a desire to not inconvenience others.

03

PAINTING

A Council of your Peers

BY: GRETCHEN VIRGADAMO



Description

The piece explores the disconnection between who we are and who we present to others. From a distance, the group appears intense and judgmental, reflecting the social dynamics of real life. Yet behind closed doors, each person carries insecurities and struggles that remain hidden beneath their colored masks. The newspaper reveals fragments of these private experiences, while their body language communicates what their masks can't. The audience is meant to feel the figures' individual pain behind closed doors while still sensing the fear and intensity of the group as a whole. The painting explores how the person we present to the world can feel very different from the person we are when no one else is watching.

04

PAINTING

Paralyzed in Creative Confinement

BY: ANAIS CHAN



Description

What if adulthood becomes so bleak and rigid that the only source of colour and expression is compressed within yourself and your inner corner of the world? Can we still call it creative liberation?

The Artist

BEHIND THE WORK

I'm *Edward*, I'm 20 years old, and I'm a cinema student and photographer based in Naples, Italy. Over the past two years I've moved from shooting for personal pleasure to something more serious. I'm drawn especially to candid photography, portraits, event and concert photography. I'd describe my work and style as experimental and raw

Trinity is a student and artist from San Francisco.

05

PHOTOGRAPHY

This is Home

BY: EDWARD FESTA



Description

the quiet intimacy of a friendship where trust is so natural it needs no words, two friends doing something ordinary and vulnerable together. It's the domesticity of a bond that doesn't need to perform.

home isn't a place, but the people you can trust to be completely yourself with.

06

PAINTING

Family Portrait

BY: TRINITY JOA



Description

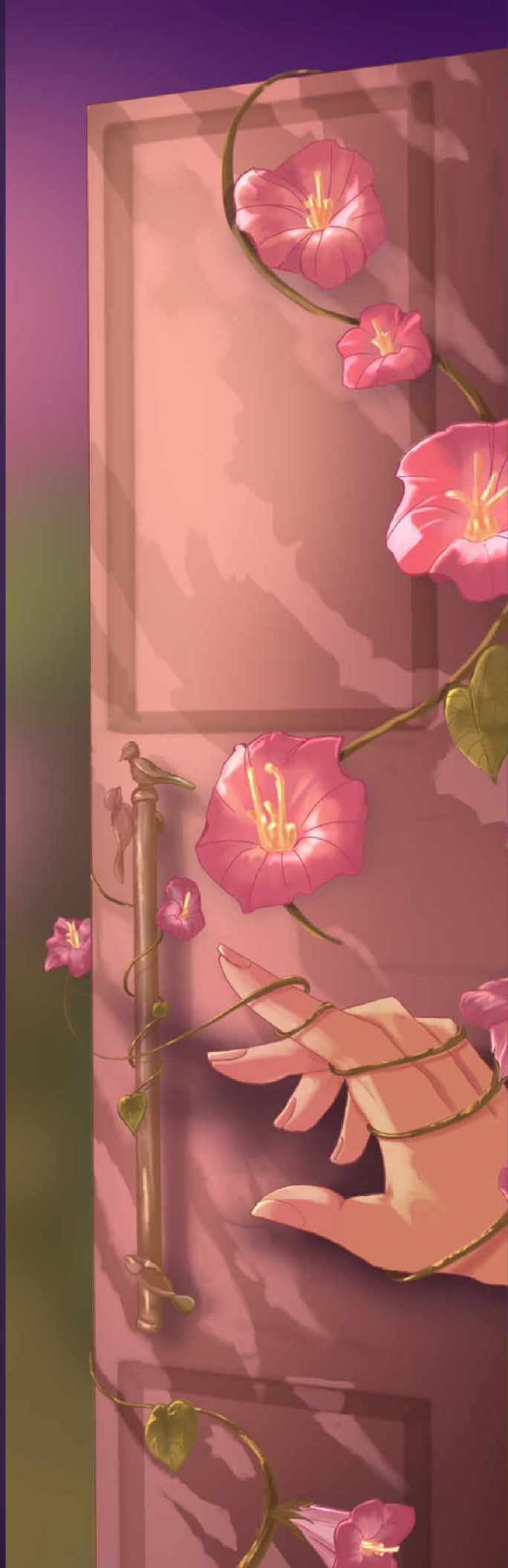
Although the shoes have changed, this shoe rack has always been a constant in my family and in my life. Each level of the rack belongs to a different member, giving a glimpse into how we present ourselves. My sibling moved out since I last drew the rack, so I wanted this to be a sort of “portrait” capturing my family/home life in its constantly changing state, as well as be a celebration of an immigrant household where shoes, as well as the social concerns of day to day life, are left at the door as we step into a family oriented space. The school I go to is predominantly white and rather privileged, and many of my friends don't have the practice of taking shoes off in their house when I visit them; it's just not in their culture. My hope is that this piece is a little celebration of my family's habits, and a reminder that not everyone is living in the same culture or reality behind closed doors.

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01

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

The Girl I know

BY: BELLA ZHANG

Content Note: This piece includes references to self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and disordered eating.

There's a girl I know.
The girl who walks into school every morning with every piece right in place, her outfit planned down
to the jewellery she's wearing, and a big smile that stretches from one side of her face to the other. The
girl with outstanding grades, a place in every conversation, and an Instagram feed full of friends,
laughter, and memories. The girl who always seems to have somewhere to be and someone to be with.
People think she's confident.
People think she's happy.
People think she has everything figured out.
She is me.
And I am her.

Sometimes, someone might ask me, "Are you doing okay?"
"I'm fine."
I've said those two words so many times they barely feel like an answer anymore.
Because there is another version of me that exists behind closed doors.
She doesn't look like the girl everybody knows.

She sits on cold bathroom floors on nights when her heart is heavier than usual, tears streaming down her face.
She stares at herself in mirrors for a little too long, picking herself apart. She feels too much and tries to numb it. She carries things she has never learned how to put into words.

And the strangest part is that neither of the girls is pretending.
They're both me.

I don't remember the exact moment I decided that needing people was a weakness. Maybe it wasn't a moment at all. Maybe I have always been like this.

I yearn to be understood, yet I never explain myself.

Because deep down, I have convinced myself that there is nobody in this world that I can ever fully
trust or rely on, even if they have no bad intentions. I would rather expect nothing than give myself
false hope, because hope creates expectations, and expectations create disappointment.
But I have tried.
I really have.
I've spent hours talking to people, letting conversations stretch deep into the night, slowly handing
over pieces of myself and convincing myself that maybe this time would be different. Maybe this
time, someone would stay after seeing me, the whole me.

"I'll always be here for you."
I've heard those words before.
And for a while, I believed them.
Then one ordinary Saturday afternoon, the messages stopped.
No warning. No explanation. Just a silence where their voice used to be.

Maybe they didn't mean to leave. Maybe life got in the way. Maybe they had their own reasons that
had nothing to do with me.
But that is what almost makes it worse.

Because it taught me that someone doesn't have to stop loving you to stop being there.

People can love you so deeply in ways you'll never understand and still fail you. They can care about
you and still not understand you.
So why would I hand someone the parts of me I don't even understand myself?
It is easier to say "I'm fine."
Easier to shoot them a smile.
Easier to shut the door.

I tell myself that keeping people out is protection. If nobody knows where I'm hurting, nobody can
hurt me there. If I never depend on anyone, I can never be disappointed when they aren't there.

But somewhere along the way, I stopped knowing whether I was protecting myself or simply making
myself impossible to reach.

But what exactly is hidden behind the door everyone seems to overlook?
It isn't just a couple of tears. It isn't just bad days or moments when I feel like I can't keep up.

It is the parts of myself I have spent years learning to hide ever since I was a little girl.

It is the girl who steps onto a scale and lets a number decide whether she deserves to eat that day. The girl who can stand in front of a mirror for twenty minutes and somehow finds a new reason to hate herself more than she already does.

It is the daughter who swears she'll never marry a man like her father, yet finds herself screaming just
to feel heard. It is the daughter who promises herself she'll never hurt anyone with words like her
mother, yet says things she never means. It is the angry daughter who gets into arguments then just
ends up back upstairs, closing the same door behind her, wishing she knew how to express herself.
And sometimes, it is the girl who doesn't know what to do with herself at all.
There are nights when the silence behind the door becomes louder than anything happening outside of
it.

Moments where she was so tired of the heavy feeling in her heart, everything went numb. Moments
where the weight of everything became unbearable, when she became so desperate to feel anything
other than the numbness that she turned pain against herself. Moments where she wondered what it would feel like to simply stop, and find the end of it all.

Those are the parts she has hidden the deepest.
Not because they are the only things that make her who she is, but because they are the things she is
most afraid someone might see.

"I'm fine."
"I'm fine."
"I'm fine."
Eventually, "I'm fine" stops being an answer and becomes a reflex.
People stop asking how you are doing.
You stop reaching out.
Your friends only know you through what you choose to show them.

Your family sees anger as your one emotion.
And soon, you become so lonely without necessarily being alone. You can sit at a crowded lunch table
and still feel like you are the only one there.
Maybe that is the cruellest part of all. I spend so much of my life wanting to be understood while
making myself impossible to understand.
I want someone to notice without having to ask.
I want someone to understand without having to explain.
I want someone to love all of me without having to beg them to stay.
But people aren't mind readers.
And that's when it dawns on me: the door isn't only keeping bad things out. It's keeping good things
out too.

There's a girl I know.
She's still there.
She still gets dressed every morning like that's all she cares about. She still laughs
with her friends
until she can't breathe. She still posts the Instagram pictures that everyone envies.
She still says she's
fine when someone asks.
And when the day ends, she still goes upstairs to her bedroom and shuts the door.
I wish I could tell you what happens next.
That she has learned how to trust people, how to ask for
help, and how to stop being afraid.
But I can't.
She doesn't know how to open the door yet.
Maybe she doesn't have to.
Maybe for now, she can open the window just a little. Enough to let some air in, without having to
throw the whole door open at once.
Sometimes she can look into the mirror and see more than just the insecurities she has created for
herself. Sometimes she remembers that the number on a scale does not decide whether she is worthy
to eat. Sometimes she chooses to put the things that once hurt her out of reach.
She is not healed. She is not fixed.
She is still learning.
I know the girl behind the door, and for the longest time, she has treated herself like someone she
needs to hide.
But she is me.
And I am her.

02

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Putrid Cabbage Hair

BY: KEVIN LIU

Content Note: This piece contains visceral descriptions of bodily sensations, depictions of self-harm, whether physical or psychological, unorthodox and obsessive behaviors, and themes of depression or anxiety disorders,

which may trigger some readers. Impact may vary by person.

To my friends, whose ears I ring with how shirt hems chafe my skin,
I know we're one hour away from each other, and we can't trip on our legs like in middle school. I am writing to part address you all and also to part address him. If you still know who he is. Life lately has been my summer job and workshop and college class looming, and they petrify me to bed at night like a car speeding off on an orange light, and I am still thinking about him. Can you believe it? I leave my glasses on the windowsill, and the blue light glares into my face. I know I text a lot, but you never do so first. Maybe I should stop. Maybe it's a boundary that I need to break. As full and arresting as the red light is, it must go, so the cabbage can have a chance. But we must start by remembering.

Marian, I know you're going abroad soon. Enjoy the summer.

My hair was a hydrophilic cabbage. With it, we met as volunteers. It's all you seem to do these days. We've been volunteering for that nonprofit since last year. I walked with you down the middle of the pavements. Yellow-vested after the health workshop, we sauntered; the overcast sky grayed us. Our hands clawed through the cardboard boxes of books left out on the tables. I sizzled my palms together after I'd decided that the covers weren't for my age, but you waddled beside me because I drawled out that the park was having a cleanup. Sticking out of your secondhand jacket's pocket was a hardcover of "Diary of a Wimpy Kid," blue and taped.

By the time we'd gotten there, there were no shovels or yellow vests. We saw, or I saw, the building he went to: his elementary school.

"Look!" I shrieked.

Your toe boxes scraped through the concrete. It was not until we'd stopped—we had been halted by the traffic light—that I brought it up again. Clumps of black-and-white mesh tangled together and they surmounted the storm drain. The overcast. Or maybe you brought it back because you did call out, "This was the building where we got our awards."

And maybe I did blurt out, cheeks mucking my glasses, "He went there for elementary
school."

"Who?" You sounded like an owl. Because

after, you had to repeat that over and over. Because my
cheeks were lifted, splitting open the intact skin of my lips, without moving.

"Binson," I finally said with the rows of teeth not opened wide enough to explode the b, nasal. I pulled out my phone and scrolled.

"Binson?"
"Binson."
"Who's Binson?"
"You know, Binson!" I looked up.
Your eyes were smudged up together, so that they looked like they were pouting.
"Oh! Benson!"

His ultima drawn out, the tongue in your mouth, so that you could taste his name, the part that I couldn't yell to hear the stress. Maybe there wasn't one at all. Parsing how that syllable would marinate with mine. The two syllables stilled in the air, a plank. Do you know why a son becomes a sin when he's with Ben?

When I say I want sin, I also mean I want Ben.

Do you get it? The two whole syllables.

"I found that out when I was scrolling through his following list, and he was following this school."
"O.M.G., stalker!"

My line ever since Aimee called me one in seventh grade, back when I'd preached sin in the group chats. Maybe Aimee made me pronounce Ben as bin. As in the storm drain. Or all of you did. I don't know where it came from.

"Do you still like him? Benson?"
I don't remember what I said, but I feel that I did. *I do.*

I hope by telling you all these things that he'd somehow meet me in the streets like he once did. Because I'm exercising them with my lips, the fingers that I write them with. Because repetition causes hope.
Do you understand?

The dented soles of my Nike are rebounding back on the shoe rack tenuously, where I strewed them after volunteering. You took a picture of me, Chloe. The nape of my hair stuck out. A year before, when they were taking our photos for the volunteer book, I told you, pressing down my hair, that hell was my style. You said it wasn't, but I knew it was. When windy, its fake curtains would cover my forehead, and my eyes would open big and white, snapping pictures on my bed. But it does not stay. My dad waddled into my room, permeated with cologne. I stared up from my phone and told him that something stunk. His cologne. Too much. But he retorted that it was my hair. That it was like a cabbage, having sucked up so many nutrients and water in the soil that it was about to explode at any given moment.

When we met in those jaundiced vests, could you smell my hair next to you? I couldn't find the right time or guts to get a haircut.

My head squeezes on the memory foam of my pillow. I rummage through blanket folds for my phone between my searches on Amazon for Latin study books. Whenever Greco-Roman stuff comes up,

you always look to me—but it's only its syntax that I wrestle with, like how I hiss at my fingertips when translating him. Chloe, you said you like writing. So I'm telling you this: writing doesn't happen because of desire, but because it's an escape hatched by necessity; I wanted you to stay the day I was late for our cleanup at ten, Aimee. In texts, your voice clamored because you thought I was early—I was texting.
You rang, "We're leaving you."
And I rang, "No, stay."

Tap-water-combed hair, I found you all raking landscapes by tree guards, the leader standing by my side. He told me to follow him, emptying and lining the bins. Only then could I stay, a verb meaning temporary permanence, its irony, dispersed like soda, blossoming in my mouth.

We fought over messages, Chloe. That was when I saw him, whom I did not follow. Going to volunteering, I saw him. Chloe, I saw him. The collar of my t-shirt refused to stick onto the bone that it was conceived for. A dove, pecking seeds, flew by my head, cooing my eardrums wet. Under the houses, the sun would set, and the London planes' leaves fanned our streaky skins, padding off my and his sweat. The ACs buzzed jealously, their sounds staggered. Their arms and leaves blanketed our street. Envelopes under trees. Our pigeonless road.

Down there on that concrete, my soles pounded toward the curb cuts. He peered through his street, reaching his apartment, shoehorned with a restaurant downstairs, and families bantered beneath his room; his hair, a bulldozed quiff and a produce shoot. Another time, he pranced and mouthed his headphones through the streets. I didn't like it any less. By his buzzcut's limen, the specious connotations, its edges jigsawed like a cracked plank. My body, dog-toothed, lurched, floundering on his street, over the zebra crossing, the one that was more his than mine. He did already step inside. On his street, on our street, the overhanging trees, it was yours because it was mine. It was more mine because of you. Did you lift your curtains to our street by the traffic lights? Did you—does he—did you only amble to the pigeons flocking across our street? Their shadows blotted his face. The blue light flashes against mine. Marian, you wrote about boundaries, that they are the things between people:

A bit about you,
is all I ever hear.
A bit about me,
is all I'll ever share.
…
Can I say I know you,
if my words are like rain on a rock?

But do you think that it exists in ourselves too, where time erodes our islands? Among the pigeons and doves? Isn't it strange how limerence is the only place where things that incentivize us to vomit are considered soothing? And my stomach escaped and veered into my chest. Isn't this a cliche? Wrapping our hands around others' rejuvenate us. When he talked, he ached my body into one, and the entire human process was trafficked and collided into a thing called eating-breathing-loving. His words ached my heart open first.

They came earlier than hands, then the constellations in soda, engulfing my mouth. The miniscule air-filled bubbles stroked my cheeks until they finally exploded and escaped as new air. Then hands.

In elementary school, I'd gaze at clouds, foams of liquids, from the windows before I realized dogs cache their teeth with tongues. His hands, calloused, mock-roughed on my skin, I imagined. The more I peered into them, the more my hands trembled, and they'd caress my forearms as they'd skew past my elbows' crazed skins, hiss, hiss, so more and more that my palms would pound into, but then when it was beside me, their tenderness would indurate, spoil, and it could only meekly throb anew when it was wrung to demonstrate that it indeed was still culpable of love, desirable. Aimee, is repetition entrapment?

Tomorrow, his birthday. Before we were extracted into wombs, cradling the clouds' limens, I said that I
would come three days after he'd been conceived to him. The slickness of a thing badgers me to crave

until I don't; it has transfixed me to the sprouting of an avocado seed. Google says two to eight weeks
to burrow out of the shell, but some require months. Two to ten.

When will you come?

Peering up at the antennae, shoehorned in the bashful shoot. The fridge hums. My chin pressing its freezer door until it bruises.

You won't come.

Now my neck throbs on my pillow. It scouts for a faint sound of the crack, tell-tale that the stems would peek out sooner than later. But I crane my neck as sweat, dredged up from my hair, ricochets throughout the floor by the humming throat. His eyes flaked red, his nostrils whirled the air around him. I tug open the windows of the room sprayed with so much cologne, a street corner.

With my skin, I'm staring up at the seed. Overcast February, when my clothes aren't poetry lines, secondhand from you. The sun in orange July. In Latin, his name means "son of the blessed."

He clangs open the metal door, and rattles in his hands, the plastic bags. Popeyes, he sets by my bedroom floor.

In Cantonese, it's capitalized: "God of Dumb."

Into the asterisk, I stab the plastic straw, and the constellations of carbohydrate gush into my mouth. Some beads slither about the lid. I sip over the summer, t-shirts spilling over my silhouette.

Marian, is your country covered with plants? On Spotify, Staten Island, his playlist is a
backyard.

Stay. Wait.
Do you call these boundaries?
I want to gaze at you a little longer.
Across my arms, draw the lines there.
But we must continue: green light.

All the best,
Your friend

03

POETRY

A Dam to Deceive

BY: JOANNA LASINI

The dam is built with bricks of falsehoods.
It has been there 30 minutes – been there since I opened my wooden door, since I saw the yellow
wood oil drip onto the floor.
Stepping into the cold cold room with blazing blazing lights,
prying eyes are watching.

A crack in the dam leads to water spilling out,
and water spilling out leads to more prying eyes.

No one needs to know.

Sitting down at a blue desk and hanging my bag on the blue plastic chair,
I see them watching me.
They see me *everywhere.*

I sit with them and laugh laugh laugh.
I tell myself I hide it well,
they shouldn't know.

But they *always* know.

They stare into windows and watch as the water splashes on the other side.
They are always observing.

How many more cracks will appear as minutes tick by?
How much longer can I keep the dam from bursting?
How will I keep up this façade?

Hours blur.
I can see the brown door I have longed for since I had built the dam.

Their gaze is still latched onto my skin.
It burns.
It is imprinted onto my flesh,
it is in my blood.

The river cries and cries and cries.

Water breaks through the dam.
No one watches me.
The rapids burst through; I curl in to protect the water.

Protect the water.

Protect.

Protect myself.

5 unread messages.
'What are you doing?'
'Can you help with my homework?'
'Pls its due tmr'
'U need to help me'
'wru'

They do not deserve to know me.
They do not deserve to know the way I sit myself on my couch by the window as I read my books.

They do not deserve to know my favourite food and drink and dessert is.

They do not deserve to know my favourite food and drink and dessert is.
They do not deserve to know my favourite shirts and pants and jackets.
They do not deserve to know my favourite bands and songs and lyrics.

They do not deserve to know that I love taking pictures and selfies.

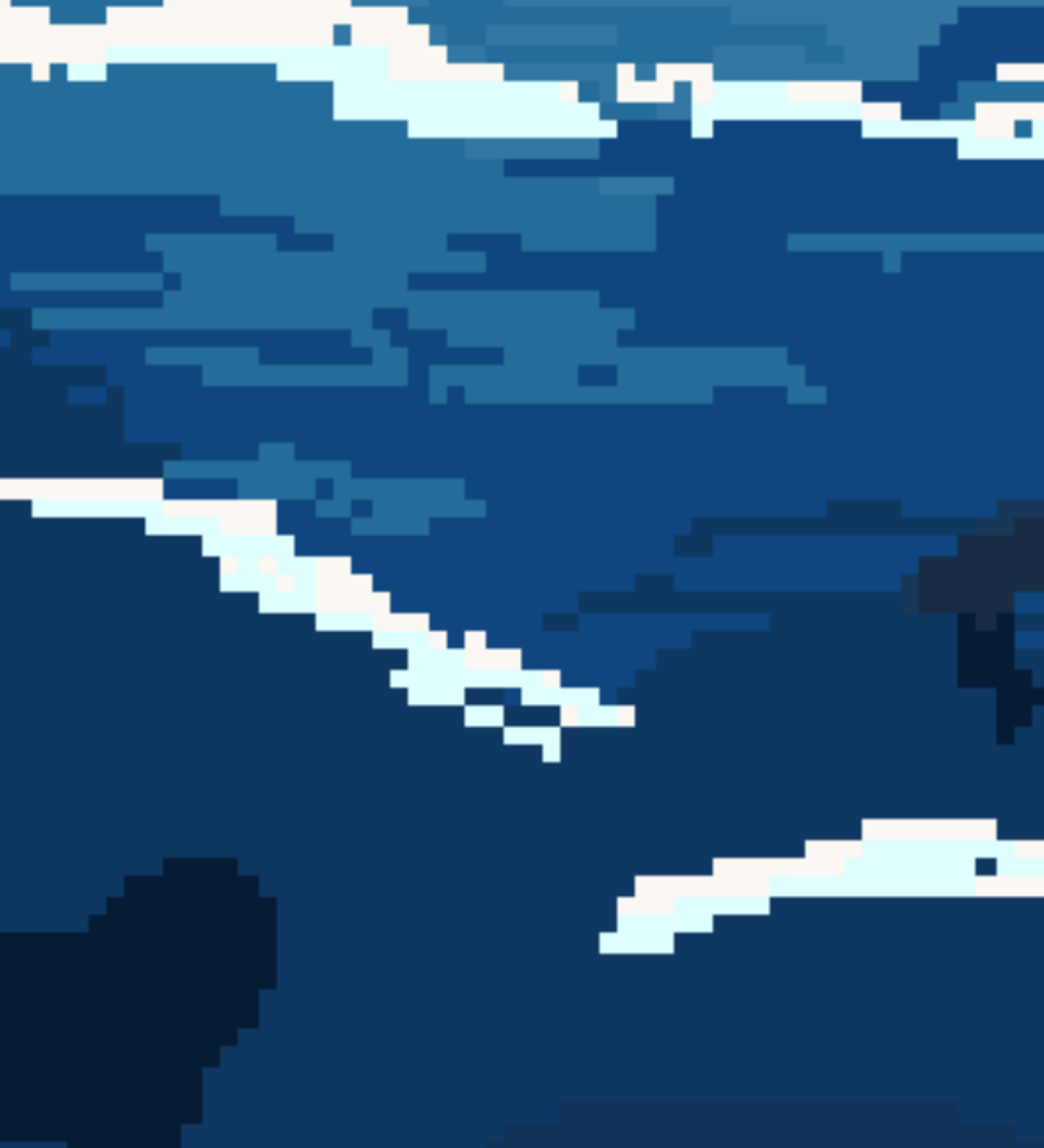
They do not deserve to know my hobbies, what I do for fun.
They do not deserve to know my favourite stuffed animal.
They do not deserve to know my love.
They do not deserve to know anything.
They deserve nothing.

As I read my books into the dead of the night,
as the sun rises and I hear the car start up,
the dam is built anew.









Designed by the shared work of Aya Tileubay, Carla Igual, Manasi Ingale, Narmeen Junaid, Rey Oh, Jaleen Lin, Avery Yuen, VeRy, Lily De Vera, Angel Ian Exley, Andru Florea, and Kaiya Tran

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thank you for reading!


why are you
still here...?

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VOL.
01

BLANK IS YOURS

THIS CITY IS YOURS



Two Sides of the Same City

One city can hold many different realities within. This prompt invites creators to explore the dualities and disparities that shape our urban experience. The spaces where tradition meets change, wealth contrasts with poverty, and safety exists alongside vulnerability. Through any medium, we encourage you to highlight overlooked perspectives, challenge dominant narratives, and reveal the complexity of city life by showing how seemingly opposing realities coexist.

The Liberty to Love

There's a quiet defiance in holding the hand of someone the world tells you not to. This prompt invites you to explore the lived experiences of queer youth today. In a world where identity is scrutinized, and the simplest gestures of affection can carry the weight of risk, secrecy, or resistance. We invite you to honor these acts of love and courage. Through your chosen medium, show the complexity of queer existence and confront how the fundamental right to affection and love must often coexist with social resistance.

Too Little, Too Late

Far too often do we only pay attention after the damage has already been done. This prompt invites you to capture the moment when realization finally arrives, but reversal may no longer be possible. From climate change to personal regrets, what is something we've neglected for far too long? Through any medium, explore what it truly means to act too late and reflect on how these actions, or lack thereof, shape our future.

Behind Closed Doors

Desc: Who are you when no one else is watching? What unfolds in the moments behind closed doors that we never share? This prompt invites you to explore the hidden side of everyday life. How does the gap between public appearance and private reality shape who you are?

That's Just How It Is

Desc: Sometimes the most powerful forces shaping our lives are the ones we accept without question. "That's just how it is" becomes a justification for inequality, silence, and systems that persist simply because they've always existed. This prompt invites you to challenge that mindset. What have we normalized that should be questioned? What truths go unspoken because they're too deeply ingrained? Through any medium, explore the tension between acceptance and resistance. Examine the cost of complacency, the weight of tradition, and the moment when we begin to see that things don't have to stay the way they are.

City /ˈsidē/ • noun

A city is a permanent, large, and densely populated human settlement with a high concentration of non-agricultural activities, complex infrastructure, and a distinct local administration